

# Futile Fantasy Creations

## DYSTOPIA - THE DARK RAGE

Creeping from the river bank into the meadow in the dead of night, just outside Lethernia Castle, the three warriors and their serving girl looked to have made it safely past the barbarian hoards. With eyes on stalks they scrambled towards the nearby cove looking cautiously around them as they went. All seemed quiet, all seemed well and but for the sound of an owl hooting into the darkness nothing seemed to be around. Things aren't always as they seem. All was not well. Even the owl wasn't what it seemed. The bird cry was in fact a signal of attack from the barbarians who'd watched them all the way. From out of the darkness a mass of twenty or more barbarians charged down at the warriors from both flanks. Knowing they'd have to fight, one of the warriors turned sharply towards the serving girl and told her to run, to run for the cove for all she was worth. With terrified eyes and an abject fear of being slaughtered mercilessly, she turned and ran with everything she had. Knowing she either escaped or died a horrendous death, she fled with as much power as her legs would allow her. As a barbarian cried out to kill her, she didn't even look back once. She knew her choice was to sprint or die. Fearing the cold steel that would greet her failure, she leapt a fence in one bound and raced down the embankment towards the cove. At the bottom of the slope she could see a fishing boat waiting by a jetty but she didn't even begin to consider the end may be in sight. She still had some way to go. Looking up from the boat, the fisherman aboard spotted the serving girl's desperate charge away from four maniacal pursuers and swiftly set the boat into motion. As the boat edged away from the jetty, he watched the barbarians gain swiftly on the desperate young woman and feared the worst.

As she neared the bottom of the slope, the terrified serving girl could hear the angry growls of the barbarians getting louder and louder as they bore down on her. Still without ever looking back, she raced from the slope and across towards the jetty. The boat was now a good seven feet away from the jetty and things were looking bleak. The fisherman grimaced as the barbarians came to within striking distance of the desperate girl just as she reached the end of the jetty. With a sick, almost evil glint in their eyes at the joy of striking her down, the barbarians flashed their swords at her back, only to be foiled by her majestic leap from the end of the jetty. With bulging eyes and flailing limbs, she hung in the air just long enough to land flat in the back of the boat. The barbarians were left on the jetty to rue the one who got away.

### (Chapter One – Strangers.)

*Situated at the far north of the great south continent, the sleepy, medieval town of Chiswell Point was unspectacular to say the least. The inhabitants were self sufficient with fishing and hunting and apart from one pub there was very little to do. Very often the younger inhabitants would leave for the big cities in the east and never return.*

*The town itself sat proudly with the ocean one on side and a sprawling forest that covered 100,000 square miles on the other. It was completely isolated from the rest of civilisation. Being a somewhat picturesque town it would have made an idyllic holiday retreat but alas, visitors seldom came. Not only was it a long way away, but the forest through which they'd have to travel to get there, Ashbury Forest, held many hidden dangers. Over the centuries several townsfolk had wandered in and never returned.*

*The townsfolk were so worried about getting lost in the giant expanse of trees, mountains and meadows; they'd created a special hunting zone. It consisted of a six mile area of fence with gaps in it to allow wildlife through. Should a hunter go into the woods from Chiswell Point and get lost, he could always follow the fence and find his way home. This had served the town well as since the fence was built, no hunter had ever been lost in the forest. There was very little else to say about Chiswell Point. The hunters and fishermen would sell their catches to the marketer and the local economy took care of the rest. It was a very unspectacular place indeed where nothing exciting ever happened to those unfortunate enough to live there. Until...*

### ***Chiswell Point - Forest Hunting Zone (One mid-afternoon.)***

(Thrashing through branches as she raced like a girl possessed, the youthful huntress, Candy, had only one focus. The wild boar she was chasing could not get away. Spear poised she cut a good distance between herself and her fellow hunters, oblivious to anything but her quarry. Desperate to escape with its life, the boar scrambled furiously through the overgrown woodland grass, squealing as it went. In Candy's eyes everything else was just a blur. She knew she had the pace and all she needed was to get close enough with spear at the ready and the meat was hers. So engrossed was she in the chase, she didn't even notice the stunted perimeter fence that was designed to keep hunters safe. In total ignorance of it, she dashed through and continued to bare down on her prey. The rest of the hunting pack stopped upon reaching the fence and yelled out for her to come back before it was too late but she only had one thing in mind. Their cries fell on deaf ears. She raced out of sight, eyes fixed upon the wild boar's fleshy rump. Feeling her success was imminent, she drew back her arm to fling her sharp spear into the beast and claim her prize. With a ferocious sneer she turned herself sideways slightly to improve her trajectory, but just as she was about to release the spear, she raced headlong into a stranger and sent them both sprawling with a thud to the forest floor.

Suffering a combination of bewilderment, anger and concussion, Candy swiftly snarled at the one who'd foiled her hunt. Much to her amazement, the stranger, a girl her own age, scrambled to her feet then dash off into the forest with a terrified look on her face. Demanding an explanation, Candy leapt to her feet and yelled out an angry "HEY" in the girl's direction. Frustrated at losing her kill, she then scooped up her spear only to be immediately surrounded by a group of armour clad barbarians pointing their swords at her. Looking utterly out of her depth, Candy held up her hands and grimaced.)

CANDY: What the fuck?

(The biggest barbarian growled angrily and looked to his comrade.)

SOLDIER: It's not her!

(Discounting her immediately, the barbarians lowered their weapons then raced off deeper into the woodland. Shaking like a leaf, Candy drew a deep sigh of relief and ran her fingers through her hair.)

CANDY: Fuck!

(She afforded herself another deep breath then turned back to face the way she'd come when a voice suddenly chilled her to the core. Bearing down on her from only a few feet away, her father was not in a good mood. He yelled furiously.)

SWAINE: Candice Kiena, I'm gonna gut you like a fish, missy!!!

(Candy hung her head and mumbled under her breath.)

CANDY: Shit!

(With a purpose about his stride, Swaine stepped up to her angrily.)

SWAINE: Do you think the rules of the forest don't apply to you???

(Candy offered him an apologetic grin.)

CANDY: But, dad...

SWAINE: Don't "but dad" me!!! You're in deep shit!

(Candy tried but failed to cut in.)

SWAINE: That fence is there for a reason!

CANDY: I know, but...

SWAINE: Do you have a death wish or something? Do you *want* to get lost, is that it?

(Candy hung her head and gave a resigned sigh.)

CANDY: No dad.

SWAINE: Well then, for fuck sake, girl. Hunt with your head not with your heart.

(Candy looked up and gave him a sorrowful smile. Her dad, who was actually quite the softie when it came to his daughter, relented his high stance and took a deep breath.)

SWAINE: Y'know, part of me thinks you didn't see that fence 'cause you didn't want to!

(Candy gave him a questioning glance.)

SWAINE: You know exactly what I mean! Wanderlust getting to you is it?

(Candy merely shrugged and looked away innocently. She'd been avoiding discussing her desire to get away from Chiswell Point for months. She knew they'd have to talk about it sooner or later but this didn't seem like the time. Having pondered on it for a few moments she just smiled and looked back into her father's eyes.)

CANDY: We can discuss that when we get home!

(Her dad nodded acceptingly.)

SWAINE: Fair enough, love. Now let's get back inside the hunting zone while I still remember which direction I came from.

(Together they turned and headed back towards the stretch of fenced off hunting territory from which they'd strayed. Still bemused by the strangers she'd crossed paths with, Candy kept looking back with a curious glint in her eye.)

SWAINE: Didn't catch the boar then?

(Only half paying attention, Candy swung her head in his direction.)

CANDY: What?

SWAINE: The boar you were chasing!

(Not sure how to explain, she mused for a moment.)

CANDY: Yeah... odd that!

SWAINE: What was?

CANDY: There was this girl in a weird blue and gold outfit. I ran into her and the boar got away, then these weird soldier types appeared from nowhere pointing swords at me...

(She looked up at her dad as she spoke and was suddenly silenced by his less than amused expression.)

CANDY: Um...

SWAINE: Candice, we all lose our intended kill from time to time, it happens! You just have to get on with it, don't make up ridiculous stories!

(Candy was most offended.)

CANDY: I'm not!

SWAINE: Don't worry; we'll catch something before the day's out.

(He glared at his shrinking daughter.)

SWAINE: And we'll do it from *inside* the zone!!!

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Yeah, okay!

(Her father conceded to her a loving smile.)

SWAINE: I promised your mother I'd keep you safe and I will!

(Candy smiled warmly.)

CANDY: Thanks dad.

(He mused for a moment.)

SWAINE: Y'know, you get more and more like your mother every day!

(She beamed happily.)

CANDY: Really?

(Her father's face then dropped and his voice took on a sarcastic tone.)

SWAINE: Yeah...I couldn't get her to do as she was told either!

(Wearing wide smiles they both chuckled and continued on back to the hunting zone with Candy constantly looking back towards where she'd seen the mystery girl and wondering.)

(Long after the hunt was done for the day, Candy was still unable to remove the terrified looking girl and the mysterious soldiers from her mind. As she sat down with her father to eat at the table in their log cabin, her father was quick to notice her distraction. As he chewed on a large turkey leg, he looked across at Candy picking at her food.)

SWAINE: Something on your mind, girl?

(Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: Sort of.

(Her lack of answer made him ponder some options.)

SWAINE: Hmm, is it a bloke?

(Candy looked up at him emotionlessly.)

CANDY: Since when was getting a bloke a problem?

(Trouble with Candy was, she was extremely pretty and she knew it. What's more, in a small town like Chiswell Point, a beauty like her was in much demand. At the tender age of 17, she'd had more male attention than most supermodels would get in a lifetime.)

SWAINE: Fair comment!

(He nodded confidently as he took another large bite of his turkey leg.)

SWAINE: You know, you get your good looks from me!

(Candy couldn't help but grin as he winked at her with bits of turkey sticking out of the gaps in his yellowing teeth.)

CANDY: Yes, dad.

SWAINE: So, if it's not a bloke, what's troubling you?

(Candy sighed nonchalantly.)

CANDY: Oh, it's nothing.

SWAINE: Bollocks! I know when my girl's troubled. Come on, what's up with ya?

(She mused momentarily.)

CANDY: Well...is this how my life is going to be?

(Her father paused. He was unsure whether he really wanted to get into such a deep conversation. He'd been down that road before with her mother and never really understood the absurdities of the female mind. He was very lax to want to go there again. Eventually he gave in to the natural urge to help his child and sat back slightly.)

SWAINE: What do you mean?

(Fearing he'd opened a door that he wouldn't know how to close, he sat back and listened nervously.)

CANDY: Well...when mum died you raised me to go to school and do my best, well I did that. Then you taught me to hunt and I became a hunter...

(Her dad cut in as he chewed.)

SWAINE: Huntress!

(Candy scowled, displeased at the interruption.)

CANDY: Whatever!

(She shook her head.)

CANDY: What I'm saying is, I was a schoolgirl so I went to school, now I'm a hunter...huntress and I hunt. Is that it?

(Her dad looked baffled.)

SWAINE: Well, what else are you gonna do? Raise baby aardvarks and race them? You're a huntress, lass! You hunt! What more do you want?

(Candy sighed loudly.)

CANDY: I knew you wouldn't get it!

SWAINE: Sorry love but you've lost me!

(Determined to make him understand, Candy leant forward on the table.)

CANDY: I get up in the morning, hunt, come home for dinner then go to the pub at night. That's my life, dad! Every damn day! Am I still going to be doing the same old crap everyday when I'm 40? There has to be more to life than this, surely!

(Her dad nodded with enlightenment.)

SWAINE: I get ya! You're worried your whole life is going to be like this.

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: I just said that!

SWAINE: If you're unhappy, love, you should have said!

CANDY: No, it's not that...well...

(She bit her lip.)

CANDY: Kind of is...in a way!

(Swaine nodded with understanding.)

SWAINE: Well you've completely lost me, already!

(Candy shook her head.)

CANDY: Doesn't matter!

(Swaine reached out and put his hand on her wrist.)

SWAINE: It does matter, love. You're upset and that matters to me. How long have you been feeling like you're in a rut?

(Clearly feeling a bit down, Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: A while!

(She looked up into her father's eyes.)

CANDY: I love you dad, and I'm grateful for everything. You've taught me so much. I don't want you to feel I don't appreciate it 'cause I do!

(Her dad nodded.)

SWAINE: But?

CANDY: But I'm scared I'll be here forever. I want some adventure. I was outside the fence for like 5 minutes today and more happened to me in that time than *ever* has in this town.

(Having finally been able to tell her father her concerns, she felt free to elaborate liberally.)

CANDY: I want to see mountains and those big tall buildings you hear about. I want to roam in a wilderness and see lakes and that, like that guy from the pub talks about. Anyone who's ever been anywhere has a story to tell and I want to do it all. They talk about these beautiful places and I really want to see them for myself. The florae and the faunae, the landscapes, everything! There's a whole world I'll never see 'cause I'm in the woods every day doing the same old thing and the thought of missing out is driving me nuts...

(Her enthusiasm was cut sharply as she looked across at her father and saw him hang his head with a saddened look on his face.)

CANDY: Oh, dad, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you; you know I'll stick by you!

(Her dad looked up sharply.)

SWAINE: No! No, no! It's not that, Candy! I agree with you!

(Candy's jaw dropped. Her dad took in a deep sorrowful sigh and related his feelings to her solemnly.)

SWAINE: I taught you to hunt so you'd know how to survive if anything ever happened to me. I never intended you to live out your whole life here. By god your mother would come back and kill me if she thought I planned to do that.

(He gave her half a smile.)

SWAINE: Fact is, love, I always knew one day you'd want to move on and now that time's come I'm a little sad, that's all. I'd never stand in your way, but I won't half miss you when you go!

(Candy's face dropped as her heart quite literally melted. With teary eyes she clambered to her feet and threw her loving arms around her dad who reciprocated with a proud glint in his eye. Feeling satisfied with each other, they both then sat to resume their meals. As they did so, Swaine suddenly looked thoughtful.)

SWAINE: Did you say something happened outside the fence?

(Candy nodded as she gulped down the food she'd at last found an appetite for.)

CANDY: Yeah, I told you. This oddly dressed girl was there and she looked well scared. She fucked off and next thing I knew these soldiers had surrounded me with swords.

(Her dad looked sceptical to say the least.)

SWAINE: How come I never saw this?

CANDY: Well, it all happened so quickly. The soldiers said they didn't want me and shot off into the woods. They must be after that girl I ran into.

(Her father glared at her coldly while he chewed his food.)

SWAINE: What did I tell you about eating those purple mushrooms?

(Candy rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: I didn't touch the mushrooms; I tell you, it happened!

(Swaine raised an eyebrow.)

SWAINE: Of course it did!

(Candy just sighed and shook her head.)

CANDY: Suit yourself. I don't care if you don't believe me, but I tell you it was damned weird!

SWAINE: So you ate the funny mushrooms and hallucinated and it's made you want to leave town?

(Candy just tipped her head and scowled at him.)

SWAINE: I've said it before and I'll say it again, women are bloody strange!!!

(Just like every night on the great continent, the sun set at 7pm precisely and darkness fell on the sleepy town. A few torches were lit in the main thoroughfare but other than that, only moonlight and the glow from windows kept the settlement from the black gloom of night. A few hours after darkness had descended the only noise that could be heard from the village was the sound of drunken laughter from "The Chiswell Inn", the town's one and only public house.

Just as she had done every night since she was 14, Candy arrived at the inn at about 9.15pm looking gorgeous. In what was, by now, a well worn routine, she'd swagger in looking sexy and the men folk would all lose it. In all the time she'd been passing away her evenings at the inn she'd never once bought her own drink. Although a tough huntress by day, Candy was herself hunted at night. A fox in a den of hungry hounds. Despite the apparent seediness of it all, Candy enjoyed her nights out. She enjoyed nothing more than socialising and having a good laugh with the friends she'd made there. Wearing a skirt and top that left very little to the imagination, she pushed open the pub doors and immediately a murmur of excitement crossed the room. Working her hips for all they were worth she swaggered up to the bar, smiling at the regulars.)

CANDY: Evening, guys!

(In a sorry show of masculine pride, the men at the bar all tried to look cool and gave her stunted waves and greeted her in their deepest voices. Not only did the men of Chiswell Point have no style or charm, they also had no shame. As soon as Candy reached the bar, the usual ritual began.)

MILO: Hey, Candy, let me get you a drink!

(Milo tried to wink and merely offered her a squint.)

PATRI: No, no, I'll get these in!

MORELEY: Please, allow me!

(Milo looked annoyed.)

MILO: Look, I just wanna buy the girl a drink, okay?

PATRI: Well wait you turn!

MILO: Turn?

MORELEY: Look, what's the big deal, just let me get her one!

(The three of them glared at one another distrustfully for a brief moment before all spinning to face the bar and yelling at the barmaid at once.)

ALL 3: Raspberry wine please!!!

(Candy's favourite drink, raspberry wine was a locally made speciality.)

ALL 3: Barmaid!!!

(The barmaid looked to them from the other end of the bar and scowled. Candy chuckled to herself.)

CANDY: Guys, guys, one at a time please!

(Upon hearing those words the barmaid looked up and sneered at her.)

BARMAID: Guys one at a time? That's not what I heard!

(She muttered under her breath.)

BARMAID: Slut!

(It was safe to say that the barmaid didn't like Candy very much. She'd taken a dislike to her a few months earlier when she caught her husband with his tongue in Candy's mouth. The barmaid was just relieved that she caught them when she did. Candy was just relieved she didn't catch them 10 minutes earlier. Needless to say, after that, Candy was always very careful to check her drink for spit.)

As so often happened, Candy found herself sitting at the bar with three drinks in front of her. It was pretty much the only way to avoid a punch-up. With the drink problem solved, the men in the inn were now free to flirt unashamedly with the much desired young huntress before them.)

MILO: Catch much today?

CANDY: No more than normal, you?

(Milo looked baffled.)

MILO: I'm a carpenter!

CANDY: Are you saying you can't catch?

MILO: I'd catch you any day, babe!

(He gave her a bizarre smirk. It could have been intended as a knowing glance but you'd never have guessed. Candy grinned to herself.)

CANDY: What about you guys, anything special happen today?

PATRI: Something special happens every time you walk in that door, Candy!

CANDY: Yeah? What special thing is that?

(From nowhere a voice piped up over her shoulder.)

BARMAID: Well, as soon as you come in we don't have trouble keeping the flies off of the food anymore.

(As everyone in the bar rolled about laughing, Candy stared straight ahead realising she'd been well and truly battered. She'd have done anything for a good comeback but could think of nothing but coldly reminding the barmaid of one minor detail.)

CANDY: You don't even sell food!

(The barmaid shrugged.)

BARMAID: I made you look stupid, I don't care!

(Before Candy could even begin to offer up any kind of retort, however, the inn doors opened and two men dressed in battle armour entered the room. Silence descended upon the bar as everyone stared at them in amazement. Candy couldn't believe her eyes. She may have only seen them briefly but she knew for a fact it was two of the soldiers she'd seen in the woods earlier. She let her mind run riot as the two soldiers scanned the entire bar with their eyes before stepping outside again. The whole place was left in a bewildered murmur. It was so rare to see a stranger in town, let alone ones in battle armour. Allowing her curiosity to get the better of her, Candy slowly stepped to the bar doors and took a quick look outside. Seeing nothing, she slowly paced back to her friends.)

MILO: What do you think they wanted?

PATRI: I have no idea!

(Lost in thought, Candy mumbled to herself.)

CANDY: Something funny is going on!

MORELEY: Funny, Candy?

(Roused from her thoughts Candy looked up and shook her head.)

CANDY: It's nothing!

(She paused.)



CANDY: Look, sorry guys, I've gotta go!

(They all looked devastated.)

PATRI: Come off it, you aint been here long!

MILO: Stay for one more, come on!

(The barmaid sneered sarcastically.)

BARMAID: Oh no, the slut has to leave! Bye now, don't hurry back!!!

(With distain for the barmaid, Candy just shook her head.)

BARMAID: You got a date with some married man have you?

(Candy grinned playfully.)

CANDY: As a matter of fact yeah, I'm going to pop round there while his ugly wife is away working at the inn!

(Thankfully, Candy had quick reflexes and managed to get outside the doors without being hit by the barrage of beer jugs that flew at her head. Affording herself a grin, she stepped from the inn towards her home keeping an inquisitive eye out for the soldiers as she went. Strolling forwards as the sea breeze blew the front of her skirt onto her legs and her ponytail backwards behind her like an ensign, she could sense something in the air. She didn't know if it was intuition or paranoia but something seemed a little odd about the town that night. Beginning to feel a little freaked out as if something or someone was watching her, she quickened her steps until she broke into a run. Utterly spooked, she sprinted the last stretch to her home and almost flattened the door in her desperation to get inside. Becoming somewhat panicked, she struggled with the door, her fingers becoming more and more useless by the minute. She was only too relieved when her dad yanked the door open from the inside and allowed her to rush in.)

CANDY: Oh, thank fuck for that!

(She put her hands on her hips to get her breath back. Her father rolled his eyes.)

SWAINE: You been fighting with that barmaid again?

CANDY: No!

SWAINE: Well okay. I'll be next door if you need me; Edmun has a new supply of home brew ready.

(He winked at her and left. Quite out of breath still, Candy just sunk onto an easy chair and took some deep breaths. Not sure why she'd been spooked, she mumbled to herself.)

CANDY: Get a grip, Candy!

(Trying to calm herself she sat back and relaxed when suddenly she noticed a movement in the corner of her eye. Sitting up startled she stared with horror at her bedroom door which led onto the main room. With quivering lips she grabbed hold of an iron fire stoker and gulped. Hoping she'd imagined it she climbed to her feet and started to slowly approach the door. How she wished her father was home. She knew she ought to run and get him but something seemed to be telling her to open the door. With trembling hands she reached for the handle when suddenly she saw it again. A shadow moved from under the threshold. It was only the briefest of movements but the moonlight that flooded her bedroom was enough to cast a shadow. She was certain somebody was in there. With her heart beating at the rate of a bullet train she braced herself and raised the poker aloft ready for whatever was inside. Sweat oozed from her forehead as her trembling hand grabbed hold of the door handle. Bracing herself one last time, she gritted her teeth to attack and flung open the door. As the door flew open she was immediately confronted by the silhouette of a person standing right in front of her. Instinctively she threw the poker in the air in terror and screamed for all she was worth only to find the person before her doing exactly the same.

Stopping their screams in perfect synchronicity the two stared at one another in dismay for a moment. Candy couldn't believe her eyes. The girl she'd crashed into that very afternoon was standing in her bedroom.)

CANDY: You!!!

(The girl look terrified and tried to flee but Candy was having none of it. Like a true athlete she leapt on her and pinned her to the floor.)

CANDY: Fucking burglar! So that's why those blokes are after you!!!

(The girl struggled desperately but Candy was too strong for her.)

CANDY: I'm gonna hand you to those guys myself, you thieving bitch!

(In a panicked voice the girl replied desperately.)

SOPHIRA: Please!!! Don't! They want to kill me, please!

CANDY: Right now, I want to kill you!!! What's the difference?

SOPHIRA: Please, I'm not a thief! Don't do this!

(Something about the girl made Candy believe her when she said she wasn't a thief, but that didn't explain anywhere near enough. Holding her wrists on the floor while she sat on her midriff, Candy demanded explanations.)

CANDY: What the hell are you doing in my bedroom then?

(The strange girl was in such a state she could only answer through heavy breaths.)

SOPHIRA: They were out there! They want to kill me! Your window was slightly open so I climbed in to hide from them. I didn't mean any harm, I swear!

(Candy contemplated her words as she held her down.)

CANDY: Why are they after you then?

(Sophira's face dropped.)

SOPHIRA: I...I can't tell you that!

(Candy was not impressed by her answer.)

CANDY: You either tell me or I assume you're a thief and hand you over!

(Sophira's eyes bulged.)

SOPHIRA: No, please!!! Please!

(Being way too soft for her own good, Candy grimaced, released Sophira's wrists and sat up a bit.)

CANDY: Well, I wasn't going to turn you in anyway but the least you can do is explain yourself!

(Sophira looked unsure.)

CANDY: I may even be able to help!

(Calming slightly, Sophira nodded reluctantly.)

SOPHIRA: Okay!

(Candy climbed to her feet and offered her hand to help Sophira up. Sophira chose to scramble back a little and get up herself.)

CANDY: Whatever!

(She put her hands on her hips impatiently.)

CANDY: Well?

(Before Sophira could even mutter a word, however, there was a loud pounding on the front door. Sophira instantly panicked.)

SOPHIRA: It's them!!!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: Just relax; I'll get rid of them!

(She pointed to her bed.)

CANDY: Hide under there!

(With that, she raced to answer the front door, closing her bedroom door behind her. As she opened the front door, sure enough one of the soldiers was standing there.)

CANDY: Yes?

(The soldier spoke with the most bizarre accent imaginable.)

SOLDIER: Aye, hello there. I was just wondering, I heard a scream a moment ago from this direction, did you hear anything?

(Candy nodded confidently.)

CANDY: Yes! It was me!

(The soldier nodded.)

SOLDIER: Aye...well okay, then I'm sorry to have bothered you!

CANDY: That's okay; I saw a rat, that's all!

(The soldier nodded then turned to go.)

CANDY: It was a big one!

SOLDIER: Aye, well I hope it's gone now!

(He went to leave again.)

CANDY: Yeah, I hit it with a fire poker!

SOLDIER: Aye, good for you! Thanks for your time, lassie!

CANDY: It's dead now...

(Candy watched as the soldier walked away hurriedly to escape the conversation.)

CANDY: Bye!

(Satisfied with her efforts she raced back to the bedroom.)

CANDY: That got rid of...

(She was most incensed to see Sophira trying to climb out of the window.)

CANDY: Oi!!!

(With a face like thunder she grabbed her and pulled her back.)

CANDY: What the hell do you think you're doing???

(The girl didn't seem any calmer and looked imploringly into Candy's eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Please, I have to go. Let me go!

(Candy gave her a harsh scowl.)

CANDY: Hey, I just lied my arse off to a guy with a massive sword for you. He could have cut my tits off! The least you can do is explain yourself.

SOPHIRA: But...

CANDY: And!!! Now I've got rid of them you should be safe here for the time being!

(Pausing briefly, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah...okay, I guess!

(Candy shook her head.)

CANDY: Shit girl, you're a nervous wreck! Look at ya!

(She grabbed Sophira's hand and held it up to watch it shake. Quite embarrassed, Sophira pulled her hand away.)

SOPHIRA: You want that explanation now?

(Candy looked thoughtful for a moment.)

CANDY: Nah, you look awful! First thing we need to do is get you something to eat!

(Sophira looked shocked.)

SOPHIRA: Eat? You want to give me food?

CANDY: Unless you'd rather eat firewood, yeah!

(Sophira seemed dumbfounded and just stood there saying nothing. Feeling a whole lot of compassion for her, Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Sit on my bed, I'll just get you some bread or something...oh and some water!

(Sophira sat in a daze.)

SOPHIRA: Thank you!

CANDY: You're welcome, miss?

(She looked uncertain for a moment then forced a smile.)

SOPHIRA: Call me Sophira!

(As Sophira tucked into what was quite obviously her first decent meal in quite a while, Candy could only begin to imagine what she'd been through and why she was being hunted down like a dog by soldiers. All she knew for sure was that the fear in Sophira's eyes was genuine and that she wanted to help. Having broken the ice between them, Sophira finished her meal and Candy passed her a blanket to wrap herself in. Feeling a lot better and very grateful for Candy's help, Sophira went on to relate her story to her as they sat side by side on the bed using the wall as a backrest.)

SOPHIRA: I don't know where to start really!

CANDY: The beginning is always a good place!

(Sophira nodded thoughtfully.)

SOPHIRA: Well...I'm from the Lethernia clan, I don't know if you've heard of us...

(Candy shook her head.)

CANDY: Nope!

SOPHIRA: From the great north continent!

CANDY: There's a great *north* continent?

(Sophira was dumbstruck.)

SOPHIRA: Wow, okay! Well, yeah there is. It's a pretty big place but it's being over run by this barbarian clan known as "the Gregon".

(Candy listened attentively.)

SOPHIRA: The Gregon clan has run amuck over the whole continent, destroying villages and invading townships. Three days ago they attacked Lethernia and completely blockaded it from all sides.

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Okay, so why are they after you specifically?

SOPHIRA: Well...

(She looked down solemnly.)

SOPHIRA: I'm...

(Candy beamed.)

CANDY: Are you a princess???

(Sophira looked most perplexed.)

SOPHIRA: No!

(Candy tried to hide her disappointment.)

CANDY: Well, you might have been, why else would they hunt you down?

SOPHIRA: Because... I escaped! And maybe 'cause I can do magic!

(Sophira clammed up in fear of mockery from Candy and wasn't even remotely surprised by Candy's scoffing reaction.)

CANDY: Magic, huh?

(Sophira sighed and awaited the inevitable sarcasm.)

CANDY: So, you're a witch?

SOPHIRA: No!

CANDY: Why don't you just turn them soldiers into frogs? Or even better, something edible!

(Not wanting to be humiliated, Sophira spoke up.)

SOPHIRA: I can't do *dark* magic!

CANDY: Well of course you can't, magic doesn't exist!

(Sophira looked mortified and protested.)

SOPHIRA: Yes, it does!

(Candy shook her head with annoyance.)

CANDY: I catch you in my home, I get rid of those soldiers for you, I feed you and give you water and you can't even give me the truth can you?  
(Sophira looked hurt.)  
SOPHIRA: It is the truth!  
CANDY: Bullshit! Who the fuck are you, Sophira? If indeed that *is* your real name!  
(Sophira shook her head and stood up.)  
SOPHIRA: I'll just go!  
(Candy was quick to leap to her feet also.)  
CANDY: You can't go out there, them soldiers are out there!  
SOPHIRA: Well, I'll just have to risk it!  
CANDY: Bollocks!  
(She pushed Sophira back down onto the bed.)  
CANDY: This time, tell me the truth!  
(Sophira sighed.)  
SOPHIRA: Why is it so important to you?  
CANDY: Well for one you've brought a load of soldiers to my village and I want to know why!  
SOPHIRA: I tried to explain...  
CANDY: Well try again!  
(Realising how insane her story sounded, Sophira sighed and looked Candy in the eye.)  
SOPHIRA: Look, you've been wonderful to me. I'm a total stranger and you've really helped me no end. I want to be straight with you but if you don't believe me what can I do?  
(Candy looked uncertain for a moment.)  
SOPHIRA: Let me just spell it out to you and when I'm done you can choose whether to believe me or not!  
(For the want of any other suggestion Candy nodded.)  
CANDY: Well, okay!  
(Sophira nodded and continued her story.)  
SOPHIRA: Now, I can do white magic, I'm a great healer...  
CANDY: Huh?  
SOPHIRA: Please let me finish...  
(Candy silently listened, desperate to see where she was going with it.)  
SOPHIRA: Look, it all dates back to a few hundred years ago when the Gregon were invaded by a warlord named Zameses. We Lethernians have always had a tradition of healing the sick and aiding humanity and when one of my people found a wounded man dying in a ditch they healed him. Little did we know that man, Zameses, would go on to take vengeance against the Gregon who attacked him and raze their entire civilization to the ground.  
(Candy sucked her teeth.)  
CANDY: Nasty!  
SOPHIRA: Yeah! Well the Gregon have never forgotten that Zameses was healed by the Lethernians. Now they're on a quest to destroy Lethernia and wipe every healer off the face of the planet. That includes me.  
CANDY: Shit!  
(Sophira gave her a sideways glance.)  
SOPHIRA: You swear too much!  
CANDY: Bollocks!  
(With a sigh Sophira continued.)

SOPHIRA: Well, that's why the Gregon are on the rampage, to destroy white magic and do to Lethernia what Zameses did to them!

(Candy held her hands to her to stop.)

CANDY: So, basically you're here 'cause you're running away?

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: No...

(She sighed.)

SOPHIRA: Lethernia is under siege. Nobody can get in or out. We had to do something, so in the dead of night a group of us, me and 3 warriors tried to escape down the river and get help. I'm just a humble serving girl. My job was to serve the warriors as they went about the mission, but we were spotted. There was a chase and the warriors all got embroiled in a fight.

(She looked nervously at an intrigued Candy.)

SOPHIRA: One of the soldiers told me run and get on the fishing boat that was waiting in the cove. I didn't argue, I just ran for the cove and I heard someone yell "kill the wench". I didn't look back. I just ran and ran until I got to the cove and leapt off the Jetty into the boat. I barely escaped with my life.

(Candy nodded excitedly.)

CANDY: Cool!

(Sophira gave her a stern glare. Candy returned it with a cheesy grin.)

CANDY: I mean...how awful for you!

SOPHIRA: Yeah!

(With yet another sigh, she continued.)

SOPHIRA: The fisherman told me the mission but he said he'd rather boil his buttocks than come with me. Reckoned he was a lover not a fighter and tried to fondle me!

(Candy rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: Did you let him?

(Sophira was not amused.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

CANDY: What?

(Sophira shook her head with distain.)

SOPHIRA: Anyway, they sent a boat after us and when we got near the shore here, the fisherman let me off and sailed away for all he was worth.

CANDY: Leaving you to be pursued by a gang of soldiers! What a prince, huh?

SOPHIRA: Precisely!

CANDY: So, what is this mission of yours then?

(Sophira looked at her feet.)

SOPHIRA: To find a guy named Arterian and get him to come back to Lethernia.

Trouble is, all I know is that he lives in the forest somewhere. It's not much to go on but apparently he's an old friend of our grand elder and he's an extremely powerful dark mage. Without him, Lethernia is doomed, so what can I do?

(Candy looked increasingly confused.)

CANDY: So, if I understand this right...there's a dark mage in the forest somewhere who can help you fight off this invasion. They failed to send a party and you ended up here all by yourself? A serving girl!

(Sophira hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: Yes! And I'm our last hope. I have to find this mage and get him to save my hometown or everyone I know and love will be killed.

(A tear ran down her cheek.)

SOPHIRA: If I don't find him and soon...there's only a few days worth of food left and Lethernia is completely sealed in and blockaded. That's providing they can hold off the invasion... god, it's so hopeless!!!

(Sensing her unease, Candy gave her a reassuring smile.)

CANDY: Hey, it'll be okay!

(Becoming emotional, Sophira's bottom lip quivered.)

SOPHIRA: Will it? The likely scenario is I'll be killed by those soldiers before I even get to start looking for this Arterian guy. I've been running round this town all day hiding from them soldiers.

(Candy gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder and smiled.)

CANDY: You know, apart from the twaddle about magic, I think I trust you. I believe you believe what you're saying is true anyway.

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not. I'll set off later into the forest and I won't trouble you again. I'll always be grateful though.

(Candy shook her head.)

CANDY: You can't go into those woods alone!

SOPHIRA: You don't understand, it may be a million to one chance but I'm my people's only hope!

CANDY: Then your people have no hope!

(Sophira looked horrified.)

SOPHIRA: How can you say that???

(She burst into tears.)

SOPHIRA: Way to make me feel better, cheers!

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: I don't want to make you feel better, Sophira. I just don't want you to step outside this door and get killed.

(Sophira looked up at her coldly.)

CANDY: Hey, look, don't be angry! If those soldiers don't kill you, the forest will. Do you have any survival skills for a start?

(She hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: No!

CANDY: You'd either starve to death or die of poisoning from eating the wrong thing. That forest is unforgiving if you don't know what you're doing.

(Fearing she was right, Sophira held her head in her hands and despaired. Not knowing what to say or do, Candy just stood over her looking uncertain. With her head still in her hands, Sophira spoke up softly.)

SOPHIRA: It's hopeless but thousands of lives are depending on me. If I fail then I fail but if I don't try...

(Just then, Candy's father bounded through the front door of the cabin laughing to himself. Sophira sat up looking alarmed.)

CANDY: Relax, it's just my dad! Wait a sec!

(Candy raced from her room to greet him.)

SWAINE: Hey, sweetheart, how you doing?

CANDY: You're drunk!

(He grinned a toothy grin, quite proud of the fact.)

CANDY: Whatever, look, don't come in my room!

(Her dad nodded and gave her a knowing wink.)

SWAINE: Getting lucky are we, love? Don't worry; you won't hear a peep out of me.

(Candy just rolled her eyes and spoke sarcastically in return.)

CANDY: Yes dad, I'm getting me rocks off, that's what I'm doing!

(He grinned.)

SWAINE: Wahey! Get in there, girl!

(Ignoring his exuberance, Candy returned to her room. Sophira was still sitting on the bed looking miserable. As she closed the door behind her, she caught her finger on the latch and grazed the skin.)

CANDY: Ouch!

(Trying to ignore the pain she sucked her finger for a second and offered Sophira a smile.)

CANDY: Hey, cheer up!

(Sophira looked at her with a curious expression etched into her face.)

SOPHIRA: Can I ask you something, Candy?

(Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: Sure, anything!

SOPHIRA: Why are you being so nice to me?

(Again Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: I dunno! I just feel like it I guess!

SOPHIRA: You feel like it?

CANDY: Well...yeah, I mean... since I ran into you this morning I've been wondering.

SOPHIRA: What about?

CANDY: See, nothing exciting ever happens round here and then you turn up being hunted down by soldiers. Maybe I just want something new to do. I'm not an angel or anything, Sophira. If I'm honest you're a welcome break from the norm!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: I understand.

CANDY: So... umm...

(She paused and shook her painful finger.)

SOPHIRA: You hurt your hand!

CANDY: Nah, no big deal!

SOPHIRA: Let me see!

(Feeling embarrassed to make such a big deal out of a mere graze, Candy held her other hand towards her.)

CANDY: It's nothing!

(Sophira gave her a sincere look.)

SOPHIRA: Please!

(Seeing no harm in it, Candy shrugged and offered Sophira her grazed hand.)

CANDY: See, it's just a graze!

(Sophira smiled warmly as Candy sat down beside her.)

SOPHIRA: May I?

(Candy looked baffled.)

CANDY: May you what?

(Without a word, Sophira held Candy's hand in hers and closed her eyes. Becoming increasingly convinced that Sophira was just a fruitcake, Candy raised an inquisitive eyebrow.)

CANDY: What's that all about?

(Sophira said nothing and just smiled. Feeling unsure, Candy gazed down at her finger and received quite a shock. The graze was completely cured. She leapt to her feet and gaped.)

CANDY: How the fuck?



SOPHIRA: I told you I was a healer!

(For once in her life, Candy was lost for words.)

SOPHIRA: Do you still think magic doesn't exist?

CANDY: Shit!

SOPHIRA: You're welcome!

CANDY: No I mean... thanks... and you have to teach me how to do that!

SOPHIRA: Not just anyone can do it. You have to be born to it!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: Aw, crap!

(Still in awe of the thought of magic, Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Hey, with that magic, maybe you're not so hopeless after all then.

(Seeing the joke, Sophira chuckled.)

SOPHIRA: Maybe I'm not!

CANDY: Now all you have to do is elude the four soldiers who want to kill you, find this illusive mage and just hope you can convince him to come with you. Piece of cake!

(Well aware of the extent of her task, Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I was only supposed to cook food and clean weapons; instead I have to do a mission that they sent 3 warriors out to do. What are the odds?

(Candy mused for a moment.)

CANDY: I don't know, but we might be able to do something about them soldiers.

We should ask my dad!

(Sophira didn't look keen.)

SOPHIRA: But...

CANDY: No, it'll be fine! You'll love him, he won't let you down!

SOPHIRA: Well...

(Candy looked her in the eye.)

CANDY: Trust me!

(Sensing the good in Candy, Sophira smiled and agreed almost immediately.)

SOPHIRA: Okay!

CANDY: Come on!

(As they headed into the living room from Candy's room, Swaine quickly closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep in his chair. He didn't want the uncomfortable silence associated with meeting one of his daughter's conquests and hoped she'd usher him out swiftly. Naturally, being the curious type, he half opened one eye to check and got the shock of his life when he saw Sophira. He leapt off of his seat almost having a coronary.)

SWAINE: Fucking hell!!! A girl???

(He stood agape while doing repeated double takes in her direction.)

SWAINE: I had no idea!!!

CANDY: Dad, this is Sophira!

(Belatedly trying not to make a fool of himself, Swaine tried to compose himself.)

SWAINE: Yes, pleased to meet you! I had no idea, but it's okay. However you choose to live your life is fine by me. I'm not the judgemental sort! I hope you girls have a wonderful life and you get my full blessing!

(He paused for breath then hunched his shoulders and looked directly at Candy.)

SWAINE: You might have warned me! I'm an old man; I could do without shocks like that!

(Candy looked understandably baffled.)

CANDY: What the hell are you on about?

(Deciding it best to ignore his ramblings, Candy continued.)

CANDY: Anyway, as I said, this is Sophira. She needs our help!

(Never one to turn down a damsel in distress, Swaine took a seat at the table, gesturing for the girls to do the same.)

SWAINE: Ladies!

(Once all seated around the table, Candy and a somewhat shy Sophira related the problem to Swaine. Taking it all in, he spent much of the conversation rubbing his chin and considering various options. He was normally a very resourceful chap so Candy felt pretty confident he'd come up with something. Once the explanations were over, Swaine looked uncharacteristically distant.)

SWAINE: Hmm...

CANDY: Well, dad? What do you reckon?

(Swaine nodded.)

SWAINE: Okay, well... my main suggestion would have to be, don't go 'cause you'll get killed. You're a serving girl not a survivalist or a soldier.

(Sophira hung her head.)

SWAINE: Having said that, if everyone I loved was depending on me I wouldn't take that advice either.

CANDY: Yes, so what would you do?

(Swaine looked deep in concentration.)

CANDY: Dad?

SWAINE: Yeah, well, okay...

(He sighed.)

SWAINE: Well, I'd just hope that I could find someone who knows all there is to know about survival and who desperately wants to see the world rather than be stuck in the same old routine for the rest of her life!

(Sophira looked baffled but Candy's jaw dropped.)

CANDY: Are you suggesting what I think you are?

(He shrugged.)

SWAINE: You could help her survive and see some of the world while you're at it. I know you'd be okay and if you find this Arterian guy then that's wonderful. If you don't, I know you'll make it home safely anyway!

CANDY: Wow!

(Candy scratched her head in total bemusement.)

CANDY: You've got a lot more faith in me than I have!

SWAINE: Well, I don't see you eating poisonous berries or provoking the wrong creatures and I don't see what other dangers there are that you're not more than adept to handle!

(Sophira raised her hand.)

SOPHIRA: You mean like 4 sword wielding maniacs?

(Swaine grinned conceitedly.)

SWAINE: For that you'd need to find someone with cunning and guile. Someone who can hold them up while you girls get going.

(Candy nodded excitedly.)

CANDY: You mean Edmund next door!!!

(Swaine frowned angrily.)

SWAINE: No! I meant me, you silly cow!

CANDY: Oh!

(He rolled his eyes.)

SWAINE: Ask anyone round here to help you escape a swordsman they'd slam the door in your face. People in this town faint at the *thought* of blood, let alone the sight of it.

(Candy nodded in agreement.)

CANDY: This is a pretty lame town!

(Nervous to say too much, Sophira spoke softly and quietly.)

SOPHIRA: So what's the plan then?

SWAINE: You two get going at first light and leave the swordsmen to me! I would say get her some pillows, Candy, but seeing as you two are...you know...

(He whistled.)

SWAINE: I'm assuming she'll be sleeping in your bed!

(Candy's eyes bulged.)

CANDY: Hey!!! We are not...

(Sophira started to cry and immediately drew everyone's attention.)

CANDY: What's up?

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: It's so, so nice of you to offer all this but I can't expect you to risk your life for me!

CANDY: Risk my life?

(Sophira then looked to Swaine.)

SOPHIRA: Nor you! I have to do this myself!

CANDY: I'm not risking anything. I know everything there is about survival. I'll just be guiding you in the woods, piece of piss!

SOPHIRA: If the barbarians find us, they'll kill you too!

SWAINE: Hey, you leave those iron clad fools to me!

(He nodded sternly.)

SWAINE: That's settled then.

(He got to his feet, stepped to one side then slammed his chair down on the floor as he pushed it back beneath the table.)

SWAINE: You leave at dawn!

(Candy gave him a loving smile.)

SWAINE: Right then, if you'll excuse me, I just slammed the chair down on my foot and I'd like to proceed swearing generously with unquantifiable gusto and vigour.

(Looking alarmed, Candy quickly ushered Sophira to her room before her father exploded.

Once inside the room, Sophira looked pleadingly to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Candy, I tell you, I can't let you come!

(Candy waved a dismissive hand in her direction.)

CANDY: Look, once those soldiers are out of the picture this'll just be like a holiday for me! Sure, it's easy to get lost in the forest but I can survive forever out there.

Stick with me and we'll be fine. And anyway, you can heal can't you?

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but...

CANDY: But nothing! It'll be fine!

(Nodding as she accepted Candy's words, Sophira offered her a wide smile.)

SOPHIRA: Thank you!

CANDY: You're welcome!

***Sunrise – Chiswell Point Town Centre***

(As the sun pierced the early morning clouds, Chiswell Point was already very much awake. The early hours were one of the busiest times as the fisherman returned with their catch. Well aware of this fact, Swaine was up bright and early. Trying his best to look cool and casual he strolled along the main thoroughfare seeking out an opportunity to put his plan into action. Not used to seeing him up and about at such a time, however, the townsfolk were very quick to blow his low key attempts at anonymity. Amazed to see him, one of his drinking buddies rushed over.)

JENS: Swaine you old sod you, did you wet your bed or what?

(Swaine looked about himself.)

SWAINE: Umm...

(Remembering he was supposed to be looking casual, he stood tall.)

SWAINE: Don't be silly, I always take my morning walk at this hour!

(Jens laughed heartily.)

JENS: You what??? The rest of your hunting pack can't normally shift you until lunchtime!

(Highly displeased by it all, Swaine raised an angry eyebrow at him.)

SWAINE: Jens, go away before I give you a slap! Twice!

(Jens stepped back.)

JENS: Yeah alright, mate! Good thing you don't normally get up this early if this is what you're like!

(Without flinching, Swaine pointed to his left.)

SWAINE: Go!!!

(Jens just shook his head and walked off.)

SWAINE: Wanker!

(And so, on he walked until he spotted one of the Gregon soldiers standing on sentry by the beach road. Nodding to himself he looked about for a passer-by he knew and upon spotting his good friend Chas, rushed up to him swiftly.)

SWAINE: Chas!

(Chas turned to him.)

CHAS: Alright, Swaine?

(Checking the Gregon was definitely in earshot, Swaine spoke up.)

SWAINE: I'm okay, how are you?

(Chas looked miserable suddenly.)

CHAS: Actually, mate...

(As Chas sighed in readiness to relate his woes to his good friend, Swaine cut in.)

SWAINE: Marvellous, glad to hear it...

(Having gone over what he'd say a hundred times in his head he then proceeded to recite it word for word to his aggrieved looking friend with all the acting talent of a dead budgie.)

SWAINE: Blimey, well I'll be, incredible it was, there I was minding me own business like the average bloke I am, never meaning no harm... when this young girl in a weird looking blue and gold outfit comes running by. "Here love, what's the hurry", I said innocently. "Sorry" she shouts, "I'm hurrying east" she says. "Not going to the forest then?" I said. "No", she shouted and proceeded to leave town to the east and not to the forest. Weird it was!

(Chas squinted at him.)

CHAS: You okay there, Swaine?

(Swaine looked worried and spoke quietly.)

SWAINE: Why? Not sweating am I?

(Suddenly feeling panicked, he looked about himself and darted off. Convinced he'd said enough to convince the Gregon soldiers that Sophira had gone east, he dashed round the back of his house and thumped on Candy's bedroom window.)

SWAINE: Okay, it's done! I've sent them in the wrong direction! You can get going!

(Having had all night to get used to the idea of being away from home for the first time, Candy couldn't wait to get going. She and Sophira had spent much of the night talking and comforting each other about the possibility of dangers ahead. As the night had wore on they'd convinced each other of one another's sincerity and integrity and now all they wanted to do was get their show on the road. Sophira was especially eager. She knew that the longer she took, the greater the risk to her people. Not needing a second invitation they both leapt from Candy's window as soon as Swaine knocked. The idea of sneaking out the back being that if any of the Gregon should come back and ask, nobody would be able to say they'd seen them. First, Candy leapt down through the window then looked back and helped Sophira gain her balance as she landed.)

SOPHIRA: Thanks, Candy!

CANDY: Anytime!

(She smiled at Swaine.)

SOPHIRA: And thank you Mr Swaine!

(He looked perplexed for a moment.)

SWAINE: Mr Swaine?

(He smiled.)

SWAINE: I like that!

(Next thing he knew, Candy had wrapped her arms round him.)

CANDY: I'll miss you, dad!

(He beamed with pride.)

SWAINE: I'll miss you too. Take care, love! I'll see when you return!

(He kissed the top of her head then stepped out of her hug.)

SWAINE: Okay, now go! And good luck!

(With no long goodbyes or long winded sentimental speeches, Candy grabbed Sophira's hand and immediately led her round the side of the house. With a quick glance and a final wave goodbye to Swaine, they raced out into the main thoroughfare and charged towards the woodland. Their journey had begun. As he watched his daughter go, Swaine beamed with pride. She'd finally set off without him to live a little. He then mused a little on what a great job he'd done as a father and how he was glad he'd given her his sword just in case. Then something dawned on him.)

SWAINE: Fuck, I forgot to give her my sword!

(Consoling himself with the fact she was at least equipped with her hunting spear and dagger, he headed round the front of the house, eager to get back into bed.

Checking ahead at every step, the girls darted through the last few houses, making a beeline for the forest. Moments later, with ever cautious eyes, they raced from the concrete thoroughfare and onto the woodland floor. The greenery around her making Candy suddenly felt a lot more confident.)

CANDY: This is my turf now.

(A nervous wreck, Sophira questioned her statement.)

SOPHIRA: Turf?

CANDY: Yeah, the woods are what I know best! C'mon!

(And so they raced deeper in the woodland leaving the sleepy town behind. Well aware of the dangers of wasting too much energy, they'd only been running for a few minutes when Candy took the decision to slow down.)

CANDY: That'll do!

SOPHIRA: You sure?

CANDY: Yeah! My dad sent the guards the other way, we'll be fine! We don't want to knacker ourselves out straight away!

(Sophira smiled.)

CANDY: Now, let's find that Arterian guy of yours!

(Excited yet a little apprehensive about what might lay ahead, they proceeded forth into the wilderness quietly. Not knowing what they'd find or where they'd end up they both filled their heads with creative ideas and thoughts about what they'd find and the many splendid things they'd see. The last thing they expected was the booming voice that rung out from behind them, chilling them both to the bone.)

SOLDIER: Not so fast, wench!!!

(Tragically, as soon as their journey had begun, it was immediately in danger of ending in disaster. The soldiers had staked out Candy's house from the minute they heard the scream the night before. The soldier Swaine thought he'd found had actually been following him. The soldiers had merely awaited them to make a move to avoid creating a scene and bringing undue attention to themselves in a foreign land. Frozen to the spot by the soldiers bellowing tone, Candy and Sophira shuddered in terror. Looking utterly tortured they slowly turned around to see the four Gregon soldiers lined up before them. Immediately panicking, Sophira gaped and shook her head, convinced she was going to die. Candy, on the other hand, tried to look brave and use her charm to talk her way out of it.)

CANDY: Umm, okay, let's not be hasty...

(Wearing a scowl that would frighten the devil, one of the soldiers leant forward.)

SOLDIER: Drop the fucking spear!!!

(Candy's façade disintegrated immediately as she screamed and threw her spear down without argument. The soldier laughed a dry laugh.)

SOLDIER: Fucking women!!!

(With no sign of the polite face they'd shown the night before, the others laughed with him.)

SOLDIER: Only fit to cook, fuck and clean!

SOLDIER 2: Aye, and not in that order!

(They all laughed as Candy and Sophira grabbed each others hands and trembled.)

SOLDIER: So, do we fuck 'em before we kill 'em?

SOLDIER 3: Before or after, both are fine by me!

(Soldier 1 grimaced.)

SOLDIER: You're a sick bastard McClure!

(As they stared wide eyed at the psychotic killers before them, Candy suddenly looked enlightened and bit her lip. Inexplicably, she grabbed Sophira's arm and started to pull her backwards.)

SOPHIRA: What the...

SOLDIER: Hey!!!

(Immediately the soldiers all stepped two paces forwards.)

SOLDIER: Don't fucking move!

SOLDIER 2: Behave and we might just kill you quickly.

(Sophira put her hands over her face and started to quiver.)

SOPHIRA: Please, just let us go!

(The soldiers just laughed and didn't even dignify her request with a cocky reply.)  
CANDY: So, you're just going to kill us are you?  
(Sophira peered at Candy from behind her hands in disbelief at the question.)  
SOLDIER: Aye, so don't bother begging!  
SOLDIER 2: I thought we were gonna fuck 'em first!  
SOLDIER: Aye, well we'll see!  
CANDY: Why don't you let us join you?  
(Again, the soldiers all laughed. Sophira looked appalled.)  
SOPHIRA: What are you talking about?  
(Trying to be discreet, Candy whispered.)  
CANDY: Just keep them talking!  
(Choosing to trust her, Sophira nodded. Having had a good chuckle, the lead soldier folded his arms and let his sword hang loose.)  
SOLDIER: I'll tell you why. For one, that fucking bitch there is a Lethernian slag. The only good Lethernian is a dead Lethernian!  
(Sophira scowled.)  
SOLDIER: And you? Well, you'd make a great fuck I suppose but I just want to enjoy killing you!  
SOLDIER 2: Aye, nothing personal, we just enjoy killing worthless bitches like you!  
(Soldier 3 suddenly looked baffled.)  
SOLDIER 3: Lads? Am I imagining things or are those two girls getting taller?  
(The soldiers all looked at one another as Candy smiled.)  
CANDY: No, we're not getting taller! You're standing in a quagmire.  
(The soldiers all looked horrified and tried to step out but couldn't move their boots.)  
SOLDIER 2: What the?  
SOLDIER: I can't move!!!  
(Sophira grinned.)  
SOPHIRA: Oh...so that's why you kept them talking!  
(Candy smiled.)  
CANDY: Absolutely! It's a horrible death apparently!  
(She shrugged.)  
CANDY: See ya!  
(She looked to Sophira.)  
CANDY: Let's get the hell out of here!  
(Immediately they went to turn and run only to make a horrifying discovery.)  
SOLDIER: No you fucking don't!!!  
(One of the Soldiers had easily stepped out of the Quagmire. The girls backed away from him in terror.)  
SOPHIRA: What happened?  
CANDY: He wasn't in deep enough obviously!  
(Sophira quivered.)  
SOPHIRA: Oh god!  
(With a face of doom, the soldier sneered and bellowed out at the top of his voice.)  
SOLDIER: Your god can't help you now!!!  
(With that, he raced at them with his sword aloft. Sophira may have been short on bravery and muscle but she more than made up for it with speed. In no time at all she took off like a rocket, leaving Candy to make a desperate dive to avoid the flailing sword blade.)  
CANDY: Fucking hell!

(Reacting swiftly, she scooped up her spear and pointed it at the soldier. Beginning to panic, the other 3 soldiers yelled to their comrade as he turned to face Candy with an evil look in his eye.)

SOLDIER 2: Hurry up and butcher the wench, will ya!

SOLDIER 4: Aye, then get your arse over here, we're sinking!!!

(The soldier yelled back.)

SOLDIER: Don't worry, this bitch won't last long!

(Looking petrified, Candy jabbed her spear out in his direction.)

CANDY: Let me go, I'm not afraid to use it!!!

(Without a word the soldier merely flashed his sword and cut the spear in half.)

SOLDIER: What else you got?

(As he bore down on her, Candy stepped back, close to tears and in fear for her very being. As she trembled, she spotted Sophira's head peer over a rock and wished she'd also had the good sense to run. Running out of ideas she reached desperately for the hunting dagger attached to her thigh in one final attempt to preserve her life.)

CANDY: Take that!!!

(She grabbed the dagger and threw it swiftly at the advancing, smirking killer before her. Much to her dismay, he caught it and just chucked it over his shoulder.)

SOLDIER: Next!!!

(Wanting desperately to help, Sophira looked all around her and noticed a pile of stones to her left. Without a second thought she grabbed one and thrust it towards the soldier. Sadly for her, it landed 3 feet in front of her. Distressed by her ineptitude she spanned her forehead.)

SOPHIRA: I throw like a girl!

(Candy in the meantime had run out of options. The soldier stopped advancing and gave her a knowing smile.)

SOLDIER: Any last requests?

CANDY: Yeah, let me go!

(Panicking like there was no tomorrow, Candy screamed out and cried.)

CANDY: Dad!!! Dad!!!

(The soldier just rolled his eyes.)

SOLDIER: I'm bored of you now!

(With that, he stabbed her through the midriff, his sword piercing straight through her and emerging out the other side. Candy's eyes bulged as the life began to drain from her body. Feeling no mercy, the sadistic soldier just laughed and started to twist the blade as his comrades cheered.)

SOLDIER 2: Now come and get us!!!

SOLDIER 3: Aye!!!

(In no hurry the soldier smiled at the sight of Candy's dying hands trying to grab the blade. The sight of blood beginning to trickle from her mouth was, for him, a joy to behold. Such was the level of his enjoyment at seeing the pain etched on Candy's face, he didn't notice Sophira race up behind him and scoop up Candy's dagger, nor did he hear the warnings of his comrades. In a rage like she'd never felt before, Sophira plunged the dagger with all her might deep into the back of the soldier's neck, killing him instantly. As the sinking soldiers despaired desperately, Candy and the one who'd impaled her both dropped to the ground. Shaking desperately, Sophira scooped Candy up in her arms.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! Speak!!!

(Candy could only close her eyes, cough and groan a few words.)

CANDY: Tell... tell my dad...



(Sophira yelled with an indignant refusal.)

SOPHIRA: No!

(Rushing for all she was worth, she yanked the sword out of Candy's stomach and placed her hands on her.)

SOPHIRA: You can tell him yourself!

(Seconds later, Candy opened her eyes.)

CANDY: Huh?

SOPHIRA: You're right; I'm not as useless as I thought!

(Allowing a brief moment to absorb the relief that she'd healed her in time, the two of them shared a warm hug and tried to stop one another shaking.)

SOPHIRA: That was too close.

(Candy took a deep breath.)

CANDY: How do you think I felt?

(Climbing to her feet, Candy looked over to the panicking soldiers, now up to their midriff in the quagmire.)

CANDY: Well, they won't be bothering us again in a hurry!

(Sophira nodded as she shared a hateful glance in their direction.)

SOPHIRA: I know!

(Turning away from them she placed her hand on Candy's shoulder.)

SOPHIRA: Let's take you home! This was a mistake. 5 minutes in and you nearly died!

(Horried at the suggestion, Candy stepped back.)

CANDY: No way!

SOPHIRA: But...

CANDY: Now these idiots are gone what's stopping us?

(She gestured to the soldiers.)

CANDY: Now we can start looking for Arterian without the fear of anyone trying to murder us!

(Sophira looked deep into her eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Are you sure?

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: I'm positive! Plus, now we have a sword!

(She picked up the soldier's sword.)

CANDY: Just in case!

(Sophira grinned.)

SOPHIRA: And a dagger!

(Still shaking like leaves, they both looked at the blood soaked dagger poking out of the soldier's neck and shuddered.)

SOPHIRA: Maybe not!

CANDY: Afraid so!

(She bent and yanked her dagger free.)

CANDY: You can't skin a rabbit with a sword that easily, you see!

(Sophira smiled.)

CANDY: Let's go then! Our adventure starts here!

SOPHIRA: Uh-huh!

(And so they headed off into the forest convinced that with the soldiers dead their journey would be a simple one. A mistake many who entered the forest had come to regret.)

# **DYSTOPIA - THE DARK RAGE**

## **(Chapter Two – Amazons.)**

(There was nothing as serene, as tranquil or satisfying as the glorious woodlands underneath the midday sun. Like echoes of a perfect dream, everything in sight was calm and beautiful. Deer strolled gently through the trees to the magnificent chorus of birdsong that filled the air with joy. It was a tremendous delight for the senses to behold. This was the world that Candy and Sophira had entered fresh from killing a man and leaving his friends to suffer a horrendous death in a quagmire. Having walked away alive and well from their near death exploits with the murderous men, they couldn't help but feel an air of invincibility about themselves. With confidence brimming they'd ventured deeper into nature's perfect creation and spirits couldn't have been higher. A feeling of self elation accompanied by such a wonderful environment being the perfect blend for the soul.)

### ***Ashbury Forest – Early Afternoon.***

(The near perfect silence in the forest on this glorious sunlit day was only split now and again by the whimsical melodies of the brightly coloured menagerie in the tree tops. All around, it was the very picture of peacefulness and serenity. In one particularly splendid area of the forest there lay a small clearing next to a gentle waterfall that poured softly into the crystal clear stream below. A carpet of grass had risen from the earth to thrive in the glory of the sunlight. A cave opening lead on to the clearing, quite where it lead to nobody knew but it added another element to the many spectacular features of this special part of the woodland. Deer would often come to this peaceful oasis to drink and to graze. It's not until a person witnesses this kind of natural beauty can they truly appreciate the meaning of peace.

As they did everyday about this time, several rabbits bounded into the clearing, heading for the river. Looking around them cautiously as they went, they saw nothing and hopped on towards the waters edge. All was calm. Now and again a gentle breeze would rustle the leaves and bend some shadows but nothing more. The birds continued to sing. Suddenly, the tranquillity was shattered by a blood curdling scream echoing from the mouth of the cave. Seconds later, Sophira raced from the opening into the clearing with a look of terror on her face.)

SOPHIRA: It's coming!!!

(She sprinted for all she was worth being pursued by the 6 foot tall Ostrich that had chased her out of the cave. With fear etched into her eyes, she yelled out as she ran with all her might.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(Looking like the cat who got the cream, the lady in question, Candy leapt from behind a rock with her new spear, carved from a tree branch, at the ready. Wearing a determined expression, she nodded thoughtfully and yelled back.)

CANDY: I've got ya!!!

(Suddenly her face dropped and she looked bewildered.)

CANDY: Eh?

(With a quick shake of the head, she returned to her concentration and thrust the spear like a javelin at the giant bird as it rushed past her in pursuit of Sophira. Being an

accomplished huntress she was more than simply adept at using a spear. This was what she did for a living and she never missed. Until now. What she hadn't taken into account was the fact that her old spear weighed half as much as this one and was much sharper. She looked on in horror as the heavy spear clattered to the ground without even reaching its target, let alone skewering it.)

CANDY: Oh for fuck sake, that was crap!

(Sounding tortured Sophira yelled from a good distance away.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! Help!!!

(Turning her head sharply in Sophira's direction she gaped in horror at the sight before her. Her miss had left Sophira running around desperately trying not to get bitten and mauled by the angry Ostrich.)

CANDY: Shit!

(Scooping her dagger from out of the sheath on her thigh, she immediately gave chase.)

CANDY: Hang in there, Sophira!!!

(With little choice but to do anything else, Sophira didn't argue. Unable to quite comprehend why this giant bird was still chasing her, all she had to rely on was her instinct to not let it catch her. Determined not to fail again, Candy raced after them. Being no match for the speed of the angry Ostrich, Sophira found herself ducking and dodging, knowing she could never out sprint it. With fear in her heart and a quiver in her voice, she yelled out in some distress as she continued to duck and weave.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! What are you doing???

(In hot pursuit, Candy yelled back.)

CANDY: I'm coming, don't worry!!!

(With a hint of disbelief, Sophira retorted angrily.)

SOPHIRA: Don't worry???

(Frustrated at the ducking in and out that Sophira and the Ostrich were doing, Candy stopped and yelled back.)

CANDY: If you'd stop running like that I could take aim properly!!!

(Sophira was far from pleased with that idea.)

SOPHIRA: Stop running? Have you seen the size of this thing???

(Giving a loud sigh, Candy resumed her pursuit of the Ostrich.)

SOPHIRA: Go in the cave and flush it out you said!!! You said you'd catch it when it came out!

(As she chased hot on their heels, Candy yelled back defensively.)

CANDY: Yes, but...

SOPHIRA: And if you ask me, this is a funny looking chicken!

(Frowning, Candy bellowed back.)

CANDY: It's an ostrich! You were supposed to flush out a chicken! Don't you know the difference???

(Sensing it may have also been quite a faux pas on her part; Sophira could only offer a slightly muted reply.)

SOPHIRA: It was dark in there!!!

(Feeling the ostrich gain ever closer to her, Sophira looked back as she ran.

Immediately, her eyes bulged as the furious bird thrust it's beak at her face.

Thankfully, with lightning reactions she managed to throw her shoulders the other way. The ostrich's beak missed her by millimetres. Terrified by the close call, she stepped up her escape and swiftly spun herself 90 degrees to the left and sprinted away. Undeterred, the Ostrich followed suit. Racing along behind with her dagger aloft, Candy skidded to a halt and scowled.)

CANDY: I was about to throw it then!!!

(Sophira was oblivious to Candy by now; all she wanted to do was get away from the feathered fury that was chasing her. Determined to put an end to the pursuit and also rather keen to eat the Ostrich, Candy started to race after them only to fall over a protruding tree root and land flat on her face on the ground with a thud. Somewhat dazed she sat up and waited for her blurred vision to clear.)

CANDY: Huh?

(Racing nowhere in particular, desperate to get away, Sophira found herself running into the stream and coming to a swift halt. With panic in her eyes she spun around and was immediately confronted by the ostrich snarling at her. Instinctively she screamed and threw a left hook at the giant bird's head. With a crack, the bird rode the punch and threw its beak at her with full thrust. Without a second thought, Sophira jumped back and fell on her backside in the shallow water. Sensing an opportunity, the ostrich lunged again only to be met in mid air by Sophira's left boot. Making the most of her chance, Sophira leapt to her feet and punched the ostrich again before racing past it and out of the water. Her legs flailed erratically as she splashed through the shallows and onto dry land again. Not about to let her go any time soon, the ostrich raced after her.)

SOPHIRA: Leave me alone!!!

(Having regained her senses, Candy raced over towards Sophira with a look of determination in her eyes. From a good few feet away she called out to her.)

CANDY: I'll get it this time!

(Staring straight ahead and sprinting for all she was worth, Sophira just charged past her.)

SOPHIRA: You do that!!!

(Watching her race past, Candy mused for a moment before turning towards the ostrich and releasing a deafening scream. The ostrich was only a few feet away from her, bearing down at full speed. In sheer terror she dropped her dagger and ran away screaming like a banshee. Having never been so scared in all her life, she overtook Sophira in a matter of seconds. Upon seeing her race by, Sophira also screamed and found some extra speed from somewhere. Racing along side by side they glared at one another.)

CANDY: All you had to do was find a chicken!!!

SOPHIRA: This was your idea! Some huntress you turned out to be!

CANDY: Well, the first rule of hunting is to never take some pillock who can't tell a chicken from an ostrich!

SOPHIRA: I told you!!! It was dark in that cave!!!

(Holding an angry stare at one another they raced through some trees and away from the clearing. Unyielding in its determined pursuit, the ostrich followed on, gaining all the while. Aware of this, Sophira's face dropped and she started to panic again.)

SOPHIRA: It's gaining!!!

(Candy looked back and her eyes bulged.)

CANDY: Shit!!!

SOPHIRA: What are we going to do???

(Candy could only offer her a worried expression and a whimper.)

SOPHIRA: Oh hell!

(Mortified they both looked back and let out a scream. The ostrich was almost upon them. Finding one last burst of energy they both sprinted away with everything they had, ducking either side of a large oak tree. Not knowing where they'd turn next, they were amazed to suddenly hear the bird cry out then a loud thudding sound behind

them. Looking back over their shoulders they both gaped with amazement and slowed first to a walk and then to a stop. Turning round to face the way they came, they looked at each other and shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Did it?

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: I think it did! It ran into the tree!

SOPHIRA: Wow!

(She shrugged at Candy.)

SOPHIRA: I never knew they were that dumb!

(Candy gave her a rye smile in return.)

CANDY: I don't care how dumb they are as long as they're tasty!

(Pursuit over, they walked cautiously back to the stricken ostrich to claim their quarry.

Within a couple of hours they were back in the clearing eating ostrich meat around a blazing fire. It was a situation that filled Sophira with a lot of mixed emotions. While Candy chewed happily at the kill she'd prepared without a moments hesitation, Sophira picked at hers, her mind on so many other matters. Eventually managing to drag her attention away from the succulent meat she was devouring, Candy spotted Sophira's frown and mused to herself briefly. Anxious to know what was bothering her, she spoke up.)

CANDY: What's up, Sophira?

(Sophira slowly raised her head and sighed.)

SOPHIRA: It's nothing!

(With her attention immediately straying back to the juicy ostrich meat before her, Candy grinned.)

CANDY: Great! So we're cool then!

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: Well...it's just that...

(With a sigh, Candy let the meat rest on her palm and listened.)

SOPHIRA: Everything seems wrong...

(Candy frowned sarcastically.)

CANDY: Only everything?

SOPHIRA: No, I mean, we don't have much time and we're sitting here eating when we should be looking...

(Candy interrupted calmly.)

CANDY: I already explained that, Soph, we can't hunt at night 'cause it's too dangerous!

(Sophira's face still bore a look of uncertainty.)

SOPHIRA: Well...that's not the main part, see...hunting, killing...

(She bit her lip.)

CANDY: Go on!

SOPHIRA: It's just, I know we have to eat but it's not the way my people do things!

(Candy looked confused.)

CANDY: You don't eat? What do you do? Starve to the point of collapse then heal each other or something?

(She paused for thought.)

CANDY: Hmm...you could do that actually!

SOPHIRA: No, it takes energy to heal. We eat but not like this!

(Candy gave her a stern glance.)

CANDY: You're not going to demand a knife and fork are you?

(Sophira returned her stern glance with a belittling scowl.)

SOPHIRA: Don't be silly!

(Candy shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: We eat what dies, we don't kill. Meat is a rare treat and we'd certainly never kill something as big as an ostrich for two people. We'll never eat all of it.

(Candy stared at her. Barely able to understand such a weird philosophy, she was almost staring through her trying to get her head around it.)

SOPHIRA: It's very different to what I'm used to that's all!

(Having thought long and hard, Candy replied with the only thought she'd managed to muster.)

CANDY: We didn't kill that ostrich though, it ran into a tree!

(Sophira sighed and started to reply.)

CANDY: And you were only supposed to find a chicken! Chickens aren't too big!

(With a scowl, Sophira's reply turned into snarl.)

SOPHIRA: You're not going to let me forget that, are you?

(Candy shrugged innocently.)

SOPHIRA: All I'm saying is, killing an animal, any animal is...well, I don't like it. I feel terrible about this!

(Candy offered her a consoling smile.)

CANDY: Well you don't have to feel bad. We didn't kill the ostrich, it committed suicide!

(Sophira gave half a laugh.)

SOPHIRA: I suppose so!

CANDY: And when we've finished this we can pack the rest and we'll have enough food for the next few days at least. It should stay fresh.

(Sophira smiled, clearly pleased by Candy's attempts to make her happy.)

SOPHIRA: So no more hunting for a few days then?

CANDY: Exactly! And...don't worry about time. After this we'll get searching for your Arterian guy, we still have a good many hours until the sun sets.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Okay! Thanks, Candy. That's reassuring!

(Candy smiled back.)

CANDY: Now eat your ostrich!

(Feeling quite comforted by Candy's words, Sophira began to tuck happily into her ostrich meat. Having been left slightly bemused by Sophira's description of her people's eating habits; Candy was getting more and more curious by the minute. Wondering what other weird and wonderful habits or traits they might behold, she scratched her head and watched her attentively for a few moments. Unable to keep her curiosity to herself for long, the urge to ask took over and she spoke up, still chewing a large piece of meat.)

CANDY: Soph? What do you do in Lethernia?

(Sophira looked to her quizzically.)

SOPHIRA: What do you mean?

CANDY: Well, I'm a huntress, you know what I do. What about you?

(Sophira seemed surprised by the question.)

SOPHIRA: I already told you, I'm a serving girl!

CANDY: Yeah I know that, I just wonder what that means!

(Following a brief thoughtful glance in Candy's direction, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Well, I just do things for people I suppose!

CANDY: What things?

(Sophira looked embarrassed.)

CANDY: What's up?

SOPHIRA: Well... thing is... this is my first job!

CANDY: Wow!

(Not knowing what to say next they both sat silently for a moment, Sophira looking red-faced and Candy simply speechless.)

CANDY: So, you've never done any work then?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: No! I got smuggled down the river with the 3 warriors I was supposed to serve and we only got 40 feet outside the castle! Now instead of serving them on their missions, I'm doing their mission!

(She hung her head. Noticing her sadness about the matter, Candy gave her a warm smile.)

CANDY: I guess that means you've been promoted to warrior then!

(Sophira looked up.)

SOPHIRA: Aw, Candy! You say the kindest, most thoughtful things, you're so sweet!

(There followed a cheeky smirk.)

SOPHIRA: You also say the dumbest things!

(She started to laugh out loud, much to Candy's annoyance.)

CANDY: Hey!!!

(Sophira chuckled helplessly.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry, but... me, a warrior?

(Candy couldn't help but chuckle too. Becoming animated, Sophira put her hands on her hips and looked heroically to the skies.)

SOPHIRA: The mighty Sophira, scourge of all evil! She fears nothing except soldiers and ostriches!

(They both fell about laughing.)

CANDY: Oh my god, that's class!

(Sophira spoke through teary eyes, still chuckling.)

SOPHIRA: We only set out this morning and you've nearly been killed already!

(Suddenly in a silly mood, they laughed wildly.)

CANDY: Yeah... then you mistook an ostrich for a chicken and it nearly killed both of us!

(Sophira had to hold her sides; she was laughing so much she wanted to die.)

SOPHIRA: Not bad for a morning's work!

(Again they laughed harder.)

CANDY: We're so gonna die!

(The laughter immediately died.)

CANDY: Wait! That isn't funny!

(The uncomfortable silence that followed was born out of the fact that they'd suddenly realised what a lucky escape they'd had to even get this far. Suddenly the need to find Arterian seemed all that much greater. The sooner they find him, the sooner they can get out of the forest. Without a moment's hesitation or any words to pre-empt it they both got to their feet.)

CANDY: This way?

(She pointed south.)

SOPHIRA: Why not!

(And without a word they gathered their things and headed off into the forest again.)

Marching briskly they both stared straight ahead looking determined. They marched like this for over an hour but before long a little fatigue set in and they found themselves slowing to a girly walk. With the intensity gone, Candy reverted to her normal self, a chatterbox.)

CANDY: So, serving girl huh? Did you have to train for that?

(Deep in thought after their silent march, Sophira wasn't expecting to hear any words. A little startled, she swung her head in Candy's direction.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry, what?

CANDY: Your job!

SOPHIRA: Oh!

(She shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: No! Apparently it's just a case of doing what comes naturally!

(Candy, as so often in her life, didn't get it.)

CANDY: Naturally?

SOPHIRA: Yeah, my duties were just to clean what's dirty, cook when they want food and give them blow jobs!

(Upon hearing those words, Candy almost fell over. With a double take that seemed to last forever, she stopped and stared in amazement. Feeling extremely uncomfortable, Sophira stopped and looked about herself in embarrassment.)

SOPHIRA: Why have we stopped? Why are you looking at me like that?

(Candy raised an eyebrow.)

CANDY: Blow jobs?

(Sophira shrugged.)

CANDY: Blow jobs?

(Sophira scratched her head.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah... I mean I don't even know what a blow job is but they assured me that the warriors would show me!

(Candy tried not to laugh.)

CANDY: I doubt they'd *show* you! Tell you maybe!

(Sophira looked perplexed.)

SOPHIRA: What's so funny?

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Seriously? You don't know what a blow job is?

(Sophira looked hurt.)

SOPHIRA: Don't laugh at me, Candy!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Oh, Soph, I'm not!

SOPHIRA: So, what is a blow job then?

(Candy gave a rye smile and stepped up to whisper in her ear. As Sophira tilted her head to listen her eyes suddenly bulged and she looked horrified.)

SOPHIRA: What???

(Candy nodded and chuckled.)

CANDY: Yup, I swear to you!

(Sophira looked sickened.)

SOPHIRA: That's disgusting!

(And so they walked on, Sophira looking horrified and Candy sporting a highly amused smile.)

SOPHIRA: If I'd known that, I'd never have taken the job!

CANDY: I bet!

(She chuckled some more.)



SOPHIRA: I mean, why would I need to do that anyway?

(Candy gave her a sideways glance.)

CANDY: Why do you think?

(Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: I don't know! To clean them maybe? Why can't they use a cloth though?

(Candy stopped dead.)

CANDY: You're kidding, right?

(Sophira stopped and shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Well, what other reason is there?

(Candy's jaw dropped.)

CANDY: You've never had a boyfriend have you?

(Sophira shrugged and walked on.)

SOPHIRA: So?

(Watching her go, Candy shook her head in disbelief.)

CANDY: Wow!

(And with one last shake of her head, she resumed walking too. The revelation that a pretty girl like Sophira had never had a boyfriend served once again to set Candy's mind racing. She couldn't figure out what sort of place Lethernia was. Any place where a beauty like her didn't know what a blow job was, was definitely not like Chiswell Point. Becoming very aware that Sophira and her people were very different to what she knew, her mind boggled. Was it the culture? What was their culture? Were men and women kept apart? How could she be so naïve and yet live in a place where they'd send a girl off to perform sexual favours for warriors? Was Sophira considered ugly in her home town? Candy's mind covered a hundred potential reasons as to why Sophira had never had a boyfriend and knew so little about men or sex. Her thoughts were entirely dominated by the subject as she strolled on a pace behind the girl in question. Candy was lost in thought but she had no idea why Sophira had also clammed up. Not a word passed between them for a good 10 minutes until a sizeable flock of birds flew overhead filling the air with a cacophony of shrills. Candy in particular received quite a start.)

CANDY: What the?

(Sophira looked up and watched them in awe.)

SOPHIRA: Birds! So many of them!

(Candy watched them with interest as they made their way purposely across the pale blue sky.)

CANDY: Hmm...I wonder...

(Sophira turned to face her.)

SOPHIRA: Wonder what?

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Come here! I'll show you!

(Breaking into a run, she grabbed Sophira's hand and dragged her forth with her.

Sophira was a little bewildered.)

SOPHIRA: What? What is it?

(Running into a clearing, she let go of Sophira's hand and pointed before her with a smile.)

CANDY: There!

(As Candy had suspected a giant hill rose up before them, the great flock of birds they'd watched heading for the trees at the top of its majestic looking peak. With an awestruck smile, Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: It's beautiful!

(Candy nodded in full agreement.)

SOPHIRA: How did you know?

(Candy smiled modestly.)

CANDY: The fishermen are always saying how birds flock after their fishing boats. Apparently where there's humans, there's flocks of birds following or living off what they throw away.

(Sophira didn't know whether to be stunned or excited.)

SOPHIRA: So you're saying there's people up there on that hill?

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: I reckon so! Could be your Arterian guy!

(Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: Wow Candy, you're the best!

(Candy blushed.)

CANDY: Oh shush!

SOPHIRA: No, no! You are!

(They shared a friendly smile before Candy gestured towards the hill.)

CANDY: Shall we?

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: We shall!

(And so with a spring in their step they made a dash for the hill.)

### ***Kingdom of Lethernia***

(Far north at this time, the normally beautiful kingdom of Lethernia was in disarray. Those who lived among the spiral rooftops and glossy white marble that served to make this such a picturesque city were completely surrounded by encampments of scruffy barbarian soldiers, baiting for their blood. All the people had for their salvation were the city walls and time. Time which was running out. In the main tower of the central building that adorned the spacious main square, two of the city elders had met to discuss their increasingly limited options. All their years of promoting peace and goodwill had sadly taught them nothing about defence in the event of an invasion. Cooped up in their city, the people either starved or went outside to be slaughtered by the ruthless soldiers of the barbaric Gregon army. Looking out from the tower at the desperate situation in the city, the elders spoke frankly about their dire situation.)

FAITES: It doesn't look good, Yanada!

YANADA: Tell me something I don't know, Faites!

(He shook his head.)

YANADA: There has to be something. There has to be hope. We've been too good a people to perish, haven't we?

(Faites could only sigh.)

FAITES: Sometimes I wonder, Yanada! I think the gods have forsaken us all!

(Yanada matched his sigh.)

YANADA: I fear so too!

(They both silently acknowledged their fears with reluctant nods of agreement in each others direction.)

YANADA: Our only hope was for those warriors we hired to reach Arterian and we could do nothing but watch them being slaughtered within yards of these very city walls. There is no hope!

(Faites nodded.)

FAITES: I'm just thankful the servant girl got away. As long as she lives, should anything happen to us, Lethernian blood will not be extinct.

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: They'll hunt her down and butcher her too, Faite!

FAITES: I fear that too!

YANADA: I have no doubt they'd have sent a boat after her, the poor thing won't have stood a chance.

(Becoming increasingly despondent they both hung their heads.)

FAITES: We only have enough food for 2 or 3 more days!

YANADA: I know!

FAITES: And then what do we do?

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: I just don't know!

FAITES: This could be the end!

YANADA: Is it really too much to hope a mere serving girl can escape the Gregon long enough to find Arterian?

(Faite shook his head.)

FAITES: Her job is to cook, clean and serve the sexual needs of soldiers, Yanada. Don't cling to such wild hopes. Such a person is worthless and beyond such a task. We must prepare to fight for our civilization or die trying.

(Yanada sighed, remorseful at the thought of a Lethernian *ever* going into battle.)

YANADA: Oh my dear Faite, though I see your point, I fear war is still not the answer! Consult the other elders and then we'll decide.

(The peaceful nature of the Lethernian people was such that the Gregon had to literally bring them to the edge of starvation before they'd even consider fighting. Most civilizations would have mobilised their troops by now but not Lethernia. Their next move would be to find volunteers willing to fight and die and then find something to arm them with. With the prospect of such a weak army coming against such a ruthless killing machine like the Gregon, things looked bleak. Initially healing the wounded would prove to their advantage in a battle but once people began to die, any battle would be over in no time. Healing only worked on the living. Lethernia was looking doomed and the elders knew it.)

### ***Ashbury Forest – Easter Ridge Hill – Late Afternoon***

(Enthusiasm can be a wonderful thing. With a little enthusiasm a person can endeavour to achieve a vast array of things they couldn't possibly imagine without it. That will to go forward powered by raw excitement and determination has been the driving force behind all of mankind's greatest achievements. Unfortunately, however, enthusiasm alone is rarely enough. Candy and Sophira had seen the foot of Easter Ridge Hill as an opportunity and attacked it with all the verve of two eager beavers chomping at the bit. Sadly, only 30 minutes later their enthusiasm began to dry up in the face of an ever increasing incline and what looked like a never ending upward path. Tiring rapidly, our brave heroines continued their climb, slowing all the while, often stopping to look back at the view and at how far they'd come. Catching a breath at every opportunity, they soldiered on, their earlier enthusiasm replaced by gritty determination. Never one to keep her unease about anything to herself, Candy puffed and panted along the incline rolling her eyes.)

CANDY: This hill just keeps on going!

(Trying to catch her breath, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: I know! We keep going up but the top doesn't get any closer!  
(Feeling slightly downhearted, they looked silently to one another then continued their climb.)

CANDY: I heard there are giant eagles up here!

(Sophira looked nervous.)

SOPHIRA: G-giant?

CANDY: Yeah, I mean bigger than usual, not elephant size or anything!

SOPHIRA: Oh okay!

(Again, looking up to the top, Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: How long do you reckon it'll take us to get up there?

(Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: I don't know!

(She smiled.)

CANDY: Guess we'll find that out when we get up there!

SOPHIRA: I hope it's not long, I'm knackered!

CANDY: Yeah... so am I!

(To their credit, neither of them had even considered giving up. Instead they continued to chat to keep spirits up and lean on each other as a team. Nothing was going to dampen their spirits to the point where they'd consider quitting. Nothing. That was until they came to a 50 foot high, sheer rock face about half way up. Stopping dead as soon as they walked over the ridge and saw it, they both turned pale. Every ounce of motivation they'd had, oozed out and trickled back down the hill. With a face as long as the coldest winter, Sophira sighed and sat on the floor. All Candy could do was hang her head.)

CANDY: Crap!

(The hope wasn't gone from Candy's heart for too long, however. Suddenly looking up at the cliff she sneered and quickly glanced at Sophira.)

CANDY: I don't give up that easily!

(Leaving a baffled Sophira in her wake, Candy raced at the cliff with a look of sheer determination etched on her brow. Giving it everything she had she threw herself at the cliff face and immediately started to clamber up it, grabbing onto any protruding rock to hold herself up. As has been mentioned before, however, enthusiasm can only get a person so far. Moments after her inevitable crashing return to earth, Candy found herself flat on her back, staring upwards with Sophira standing over her shaking her head as she writhed in pain.)

SOPHIRA: I knew that was going to happen!

(Candy only moaned in pain and offered no reply. Giving her a sympathetic smile, Sophira knelt over her and proceeded to heal her pains with a mere touch. As soon as the pain subsided, Candy sat up and gave her a sorry look.)

CANDY: I'm useless, aren't I?

(Sophira looked miffed and helped her up.)

SOPHIRA: Useless? No way! I'm the useless one! Your plan may have been rubbish but I didn't even think of *that*!

(Candy raised a bewildered eyebrow.)

CANDY: That's 'cause only useless people come up with stupid plans like mine!

(Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: It wasn't that stupid!

CANDY: Oh, it was!

SOPHIRA: No I mean, if we take our time we might be able to climb it. You just rushed a bit, that's all!

(Candy rubbed her jaw as she pondered the idea briefly.)

CANDY: I suppose we could give it a go!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: I think we have to!

CANDY: Hmm... okay! Let's do it then!

(And with no more ado they stood there in silence and didn't move a muscle. It was neither a case of waiting for the other to go first or pausing for thought, it was more a case of not knowing how to climb and being too shy to admit it. Looking extremely coy they afforded each other a brief chuckle then both fell silent and faced the cliff face. As they stared up at the daunting climb before them, neither of them could muster even the slightest bit of enthusiasm about it. Dreading the very idea, they just stared icily upwards as their hearts sank. The lack of motivation however, soon stopped being an issue as behind them a hungry wolf emerged from the thick woodland. Sensing the presence of an unfriendly being, Sophira and Candy both looked over their shoulders briefly and back at the cliff calmly.)

CANDY: There's a wolf standing right behind us!

(Trembling she looked to Sophira but saw nobody there.)

CANDY: Uh?

(She then did a double take at the sight of Sophira rapidly scaling the cliff like a seasoned mountaineer, staring back with terrified eyes at the wolf. Mildly amused by Sophira's speed in the face of danger she afforded herself a brief smile. It was then that the severity of the situation hit her. Wolf! With that, she too ascended the cliff face like a rocket. The wolf merely sat down and watched the two climb like their lives depended on it.

Surprising herself, Sophira reached the top pretty quickly. Gasping for breath she pulled herself over the edge and shook her fists with pride in her achievement. Having expected very little from herself, it meant a lot to her to have done something so bold. With a wide smile, she spun herself around and looked over the cliff edge at Candy as she too neared the top.)

SOPHIRA: I did it!

(Having been given quite a start, Candy jumped and her hand slipped from the rock she was grasping. Terror filled her eyes as she swayed one handed from the cliff face, clinging on for dear life. Sophira, of course, panicked.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(Dangling there with a death grip on the rock, Candy started to whimper. Noticing a potential free lunch, the wolf at the bottom stood up and licked its lips. Desperate to help, Sophira looked around herself. All she saw was trees and a steep path running between them. With nothing useful around her, she looked back over the edge with pleading eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Don't fall!!!

(In a panic, Candy yelled back.)

CANDY: Yeah, thanks! I hadn't thought of that!!!

(Knowing she couldn't hold on one-handed forever, Candy took a deep breath and used all her might to contort her body round and try to grab a hold of the cliff with both hands. With death the price for failure, she screamed as her whole body twisted and her other hand thrust towards the rock. Barely managing to grab it, she pulled herself into the rock face and took a deep breath. Sensing a world of relief, Sophira closed her eyes and drew a deep sigh. As she climbed up and over the ridge, exhausted and lucky to be alive, Candy could do nothing but lay face down and try to

catch her breath. At the bottom of the cliff, the wolf sat down frustrated. Overjoyed that her excitement hadn't killed Candy, Sophira gave her a hug as she lay on the ground panting. Slightly rejuvenated, Candy patted Sophira's waist just to let her know it was okay. And so, tired and relieved they both climbed to their feet.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Not your fault, I'm the dozy cow who let go!

(Sophira said nothing and gave her a hug.)

SOPHIRA: Well, thank heaven you're okay!

(And with that, they headed for the path between the trees with heavy legs and aching limbs. It had been a form of torture so far but they were making it. It was that pride that was carrying them along.)

(As girls so often do, Candy and Sophira had developed a habit of leaning on each other as they walked. Both being very tactile people, it was in their nature to help pull each other along. A bump here and a nudge there, nothing malicious, just a way to comfort each other that they weren't in it alone. They were too tired to say much but the mere presence of each other was enough to keep them going. The path they found themselves on headed through a brief strip of picturesque woodland and eventually lead out to a deep crevice. As they arrived from out of the thick wooded oasis and onto the edge of the crevice in question, they were amazed to see a rope bridge stretching across its length and a hand painted sign. Sophira was extremely excited. Candy was right; there was definitely human life on this mount.)

SOPHIRA: Candy, you're a genius!

(Beaming joyfully, she gave Candy an animated kiss on the cheek and ran to read the sign. Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: Hehe, what does it say?

(Immediately, Sophira's face dropped.)

CANDY: What? What is it? You okay?

(With a tremble, Sophira looked to her with trepidation.)

SOPHIRA: It says "turn back or die".

(Candy could only suck her lips and stare back at Sophira.)

SOPHIRA: I don't like this place, Candy!

CANDY: Hmm!

(Rubbing her chin as she pondered the words on the sign, Candy again said nothing.)

SOPHIRA: What are we gonna do?

(Looking far from certain, Candy rubbed her forearm nervously.)

CANDY: Well, we came this far, but...

(She sighed.)

CANDY: I don't know!

(Sophira's bottom lip dropped.)

SOPHIRA: Maybe we should just turn back!

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Of the two options, that certainly sounds the more favourable!

(And with heavy heart they about turned and headed for the cliff they'd just climbed.

Looking back all the while, Sophira mused to herself.)

SOPHIRA: I...

CANDY: What?

(Suddenly finding a resolved face, Sophira stopped and looked at the rope bridge.)

SOPHIRA: This is a hill!

(Candy nodded encouragingly.)

CANDY: You learn fast, Sophira!

(Ignoring her companion's sarcasm, Sophira continued.)

SOPHIRA: Nature built this, what right has some guy to tell us whether we can come up here or not?

(Candy said nothing, keen to see where she was going with her point.)

SOPHIRA: I say we cross the bridge, it's not like anyone can own a hill, right?

(Candy looked unsure.)

CANDY: Well... you'd be surprised what some people lay claim to!

SOPHIRA: Yeah but even so, it's not like we're going to rob anyone's home; we're just walking on a hill.

(Candy knew what she was saying but wasn't convinced.)

CANDY: True but if whoever made that sign is serious, they obviously don't see it that way!

(Sophira paused to absorb Candy's words of wisdom.)

SOPHIRA: Well, I say we cross and if anyone over there doesn't like it, we can run away. We're pretty much experts at that.

(Clearly amused, Candy chuckled outwardly.)

CANDY: I guess we are!

(Feeling confident, Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: So, we're crossing then?

(With a reluctant sigh, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Looks that way!

(Giving Candy a wide smile, Sophira immediately headed for the rope bridge.

Admiring Sophira's attitude, Candy followed on. It was clear from the condition of the bridge in question that it was either new or very well maintained. The wooden slats were sturdy and the rope itself was barely weathered at all. With no fear of the bridge collapsing they both stepped onto it with confidence. It was only a matter of feet however, before Sophira's resolve suddenly began to wane. Staring down, she muttered nervously to Candy behind her.)

SOPHIRA: Umm... it's a long way down!

(Candy peered through the slats and nodded.)

CANDY: Don't fall off then!

(Those were hardly the words of encouragement she needed. Typically, panic set in almost immediately.)

SOPHIRA: What if I *do* fall?

(Candy rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: You won't fall! Just keep walking!

(Unable to do anything but stare downwards, Sophira gripped the ropes for all she was worth.)

SOPHIRA: I want to go back!

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Make your sodding mind up, girl!

(As Candy went to turn, Sophira raised a terrified voice.)

SOPHIRA: Don't leave me here!!!

(Realising Sophira was too scared to go forwards or backwards and would probably stand there all day and all night, Candy started to think.)

CANDY: Umm...

SOPHIRA: Candy, I'm scared!

(Not sure whether to sympathise or encourage strength in her terrified companion, Candy mused for a moment before suddenly looking enlightened.)

CANDY: A-ha!

(Fearing Sophira would be disappointed in herself if she failed to cross; Candy opted to get her across the only way she knew how. By force. Looking determined, she strode up behind her with intent.)

CANDY: You'll thank me for this later!

(And with that she pushed her forwards. With her grip so tight on the ropes, Sophira's back arched but her arms never moved. Without a clue why Candy would be so mean, Sophira yelled out in a panic.)

SOPHIRA: What are you doing???

CANDY: I'm getting you across this bridge!

SOPHIRA: But...

(Before she could protest, Candy pushed her again, only this time, harder. With Sophira's grip and Candy's added force, she ended up falling onto her backside with a scream of terror.)

SOPHIRA: Stop it!!! I hate you!

(Looking resolved, Candy gave a dead pan reply.)

CANDY: Like I said, you'll thank me later!

(On the verge of screaming the mountain down, Sophira yelled out.)

SOPHIRA: No I won't!!! Let me go back!!!

CANDY: No!!!

(This undignified charade continued for quite some time. Sophira was absolutely terrified. She'd never been up this high before and had just discovered a morbid fear of heights. Candy for her part was hating every second of it. She felt cruel but was confident she was doing the right thing. She knew Sophira would regret turning back from the peak and would forever be wondering if Arterian was up there. As it turned out, Candy's plan was working. The constant nudging and Sophira's natural desire to not get nudged had inched her forward on her backside to just beyond half way.

Upon spotting this, Candy stepped back.)

CANDY: Sophira, it's okay, I'll stop!

(Tortured and terrified, Sophira sat there and cried.)

SOPHIRA: You're horrible!

(Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: Maybe so but you're over half way. You might as well carry on, it's longer to go back now!

(Struck dumb by those words, Sophira eased her neck round to look behind her and see if it was true. She was amazed. She hadn't noticed that she'd gone forward, partly because she'd had her eyes firmly shut. Nervously, she got to her feet, still holding the guide ropes extremely tightly.)

SOPHIRA: Half way?

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: You can do it, Sophira. I believe in you, girl!

SOPHIRA: You do?

CANDY: I do!

(Trying to calm herself, Sophira looked dead ahead and braced herself.)

CANDY: I'm right behind you!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Hold my hand!

(Candy frowned with derision.)



CANDY: We're in single file!

(Realising the stupidity of her request, Sophira nodded and tried to forget it.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry, I'm just...

CANDY: It's okay!

(And with a final gathering of bravado, Sophira nodded positively to herself and started stepping forth strongly. Candy afforded herself a smile for a job well done and followed on. What had seemed an impossible task was now almost done. Only a few feet from the other side of the bridge, Sophira drew a sigh of relief and nodded to herself.)

SOPHIRA: I did it!

(Unfortunately for her, it turned out to be something of a premature celebration. Before she could quite put her foot on the other side of the crevice a powerful pocket of gale force wind swept across the crevice and thrust the centre of the bridge up into the air. Thrown with it, Sophira and Candy clutched tightly to the ropes for all they were worth as the howl on the wind drowned their terrified screams. As quickly as it had arrived, the powerful wind swept down the crevice and away. In the aftermath of it's passing, Sophira was left flat on her face on the slats. Desperate to avoid a repeat, she sprinted for the end of the bridge to make a leap onto the terra firma the other side. Having never felt so elated about something as simple as hard soil, she fell to her knees just to be closer to it. Gasping for breath she looked up despairingly.)

SOPHIRA: That was...

(Much to her horror, Candy was nowhere to be seen. With fear struck into her heart she raced to the edge of the crevice and bellowed out in desperation.)

SOPHIRA: Candy??? Please!!!

(Her heart raced and a 1000 thoughts flickered through her mind all at once. None of them good. Candy was nowhere to be seen, probably thrown over the edge and it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't held up their crossing. All she could think was her cowardice had killed her friend. Her best friend. In fact the only friend she'd ever had in her whole 19 years on the planet. Devastated, she sunk to her knees and cried. With her head in her hands she mumbled softly through her tears.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry, Candy!

(Suddenly; a voice.)

CANDY: Don't be sorry, help me up!

(With a joy in her heart like never before she looked up and saw Candy's head peering over the crevice edge. Wanting to hold her and squeeze her until she exploded, Sophira grabbed her hand and yanked her up with all her might before leaping on her and kissing her repeatedly in absolute delight where she lay. As the bridge had twisted on the wind, Candy had managed to grab the bottom of the slats and had then used them as monkey bars to get to the edge. She was under no illusion about how lucky she was and matched Sophira's over excited affection with a strong, heart-warming hug. It felt good just to be alive. As they lay there holding each other tight, Sophira couldn't help but speak her mind passionately.)

SOPHIRA: I thought I'd killed you. I thought I'd killed you, Candy!

(Candy said nothing and squeezed her tighter.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry!

(Candy stroked her consolingly on the arms.)

CANDY: It's not your fault the wind blew!

SOPHIRA: Yeah but...

CANDY: But nothing!

(As the two of them climbed to their feet, Sophira continued to apologise.)

SOPHIRA: If I hadn't been such a baby...

CANDY: Some people are scared of heights, it's okay, Soph, really!

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: It's not okay. I've never had a friend before, Candy. I know we only met last night but in that time we've done so much, you've been so kind to me. You've almost died out here and you only came to help me.

CANDY: I came because I wanted adventure. I can't really complain now I'm getting it can I?

(Sophira gave her a warm smile.)

SOPHIRA: Well, I just want you to know, I could tell very early on after we met what a wonderful person you are. I'm so lucky to have you as my friend!

(Candy smiled and gestured down the path ahead. She didn't like admitting it but she wasn't exactly swamped with friends either. Most of the girls she'd grown up with had either left town or had started to hate her the day she became so popular with the men folk. She was too proud to admit it but a large part of the adventure for her was being with Sophira, someone she could tell almost from the moment they met was a very warm and sincere person.)

Feeling warm in each others company, the two friends soldiered on. The path wasn't as steep as before but still carried a gradient that required extra effort. Having spent the day giving everything to reaching the peak, they both prayed it wasn't much farther. Their prayers were answered. The path lead to a high wall, hand built from the heavy clay that was so prevalent around them. The unnatural barrier clearly meant they'd found human life. Sensing more than a little relief they swaggered up to it and stopped dead to catch their breath.)

CANDY: Must be!

SOPHIRA: It must?

CANDY: This is a wall, inside we'll find people, I'm certain!

(Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: Brilliant!

CANDY: I just hope whoever it is was joking when they wrote that sign!

(Sophira bit her lip.)

SOPHIRA: Hmm... hope so!

CANDY: In the mean time, we need to find a way over this wall?

(Sophira's head dropped.)

SOPHIRA: Obstacles? I'm too knackered!

(Candy had to agree.)

CANDY: Yeah, it's the last thing we need!

(Feeling as if they were so near and yet still so far from their goal, they both took the opportunity to sit down upon the ground and catch their breath. They were too tired to talk and so sat quietly and pondered a way over the wall. A combination of trepidation about what they might find and extreme fatigue giving them little incentive or indeed ability to think quickly.)

(After half an hour of silence accompanied by half-hearted contemplation, Candy managed to find the energy to sit up and speak. With a stunted yawn she looked to Sophira thoughtfully.)

CANDY: You okay?

(Half asleep Sophira stared back.)

SOPHIRA: Huh? Yeah, thanks!

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Good!

(Trying to rouse herself, Sophira rubbed her eyes.)

SOPHIRA: What about this wall then?

(Candy shrugged, still not absolutely awake either.)

CANDY: I dunno!

(They gave each other an empty glance.)

CANDY: We should take a look at it!

(Being devoid of any suggestion whatsoever, Sophira was quick to agree.)

SOPHIRA: Good idea!

(And so, wearily, they dragged themselves from the ground and trudged over to the wall. It was about 7 feet high and made from solid brown earthen clay. As they approached it, they both looked up to the top bearing less than confident expressions.)

CANDY: It's high!

SOPHIRA: It is!

CANDY: But then walls normally are!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Well, yeah!

CANDY: I mean, there'd be little point building them otherwise!

SOPHIRA: Oh absolutely!

(Suddenly Candy looked enlightened. Acting as if she always knew exactly what she was planning, she smiled and stood with her back to the wall, facing Sophira.)

CANDY: Come on, you!

(Sophira looked puzzled.)

SOPHIRA: What?

(Wearing a rye smile, Candy cupped her hands as if to give Sophira a leg up over her shoulder. Unfortunately, Candy had forgotten who she was talking to.)

CANDY: Up you go!

SOPHIRA: What you on about? Why you standing like that?

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: I'm gonna give you a boost!

(Sophira screwed up her face in confusion.)

SOPHIRA: A what now?

(Losing patience slightly, Candy growled.)

CANDY: Just climb up me!

(Sophira went to reply but was cut off in her tracks by Candy's irritated snarl.)

CANDY: Put your foot in my hands and I'll lift you!

(Looking enlightened at last, Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Oh right!

(Candy rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: Finally!

(And with no more ado, Sophira raised her foot and placed it in Candy's cupped hands. Allowing herself a brief moment to limber up, Candy then thrust her upwards. Being new to anything like this, however, Sophira forgot to grab her shoulders and climb. As a result Candy merely threw Sophira backwards onto the ground with something of a thud.)

SOPHIRA: Ouch!!!

(Candy was not impressed.)

CANDY: Can't you do anything right???

(Sophira looked hurt.)

SOPHIRA: Hey! It's not my fault, you were supposed to boost me upwards not throw me over here!

(Trying desperately not to lose her temper, Candy counted to ten.)

CANDY: 8... 9... 10... right, try again! This time, climb up me and onto the wall!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Gotcha!

(This time when Candy lifted her, Sophira grabbed her shoulders and clambered up her, stepping on her face to gain leverage as she clambered atop the wall. With a desperate struggle to remain up there, she leant forwards and held the wall as tight as she could before looking down at Candy.)

SOPHIRA: I'm up!

(She suddenly looked baffled.)

SOPHIRA: You okay?

(Stepping around in random circles with her face in her hands, Candy bellowed back in some considerable pain and exaggerated impressively.)

CANDY: You broke me bleeding nose!!!

(Sophira's bottom lip dropped.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!

(Stopping circling, Candy looked up at her as she held her nose with her left hand.)

CANDY: You've got to pull me up now, you realise that don't you!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Okay!

(Laying across the top of the wall, Sophira dangled her hand down for Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Here!

(Looking determined, Candy nodded and paced up to her.)

CANDY: Brace yourself!

(And with that, she grabbed Sophira's wrist and placed her foot on the wall.)

CANDY: Now pull!

SOPHIRA: Right!!!

(And with a grimace that would frighten the devil, Sophira snarled and pulled at Candy's arm as hard as she could. Unfortunately, she was hardly designed for lifting and went bright red in the face with absolutely nothing to show for it. Sensing it wasn't going to be that easy, Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Wait!

(She released her grip on Sophira's wrist and next thing she knew Sophira disappeared with a shriek over the other side of the wall, dragged by her own momentum from pulling at Candy. Candy looked mortified.)

CANDY: Soph? Sophira???

(There was no answer from the other side of the wall.)

CANDY: Oh shit! Sophira, answer me!!!

(Looking tortured she bit her lip and adopted praying hands.)

CANDY: What have I done?

(Following a few more self pitying whimpers she looked up at the wall and mumbled quietly.)

CANDY: Umm... Soph?

(Suddenly she felt a tap on the shoulder and almost had a heart attack. With a scream she spun around looking terrified only to see Sophira grinning at her. Scrambling to catch her breath, Candy gave her a quizzical look.)

CANDY: How did...

(Sophira beamed as she pointed along the wall.)

SOPHIRA: There's a gap in the wall over there!

(Wearing a face of sheer exasperation, Candy sighed inwardly.)

CANDY: There had to be, didn't there? That's just typical!

SOPHIRA: What do you mean?

(Candy just rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: Never mind. I'm sure one day we'll look back on all this and laugh!

SOPHIRA: Doubtful!

CANDY: Isn't it though!

(Feeling glad that she hadn't plunged Sophira to her death from the top of the wall, Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Come on, let's get going!

(She offered her hand to Sophira and they headed through the gap together nervously. Sophira had found the gap in a panic and hadn't even looked at what was really over there. As they emerged through the gap they were surprised to see a dusty plateau with a cave opening, a few trees and a sheer drop to the right of it. Open mouthed they both stepped up to the edge and looked out at the valley below. A great lake could be seen nearby and above it there was nothing but an expanse of trees and the odd meadow for as far as the eye could see.)

CANDY: Fuck me!!!

(Sophira looked shocked.)

SOPHIRA: Excuse me?

CANDY: What a view! It's beautiful!

(Sophira nodded whole-heartedly.)

SOPHIRA: It's heavenly!

(Allowing themselves the pleasure of admiring nature's greatness for a moment, they both took breaths of fresh air to wash their cares away. For all their struggles to reach this far, the view was most definitely worth it. Feeling a little cheered by the scenery, they turned and faced the cave.)

CANDY: I'm guessing whoever's here lives in there!

(Sophira looked nervous.)

SOPHIRA: I hate caves!

CANDY: You'll be fine!

(Sophira took a deep breath and nodded uncertainly.)

SOPHIRA: Let's just hope it's Arterian!

(This time Sophira offered her hand to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Let's go in then!

(Candy gave her a knowing smile.)

CANDY: We'll be okay, Soph!

(Sophira returned her smile and they started to head for the cave opening. They'd only travelled a matter of feet however, when a bizarre looking gentleman wearing just an animal skin waistcoat leapt from the cave entrance. Both Candy and Sophira screamed and jumped back having been given quite a start. The near-naked wild man looked furious and raged angrily as the girls trembled.)

HERMIT: Intruders!!!

(Desperate not to start any trouble, Candy interceded quickly.)

CANDY: Please, we mean no harm! We just...

HERMIT: Nobody disturbs me!!! Nobody!

(Gaping in horror, Sophira pointed at the hermit.)

SOPHIRA: I can see his thingummy-bob!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: That's not helping, Soph!

(Jumping up and down in a rage, the hermit fumed wildly.)

HERMIT: You must die for this intrusion!

(As the hermit leapt up and down, Sophira's head bounced up and down, her eyes transfixed to his bouncing penis.)

SOPHIRA: It's horrible!

(It turned out to be the least of her worries as the raging hermit was quick to point out.)

HERMIT: I shall kill you both!!!

CANDY: But... we're looking for Arterian, if he's not here we'll just go, please!

(The hermit said nothing and snarled.)

HERMIT: Fools, you shouldn't have come here!!!

(And with that he charged back into the cave. Not knowing what was going on,

Candy turned sharply to a traumatised Sophira.)

CANDY: What was that all about???

(Sophira turned her head slowly towards her.)

SOPHIRA: He didn't have any underpants on!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: For heaven sake, Sophira...

(Before she could continue, however, the ground began to shudder and a deafening roar echoed from the cave. Candy and Sophira gave each other a horrified look but before they could run away, a bizarre looking wolf-man-like beast appeared from the cave. Candy's jaw dropped.)

CANDY: He's set a creature on us!!!

(Before she could utter another word, the crazed beast rushed straight for her. Almost instinctively, she threw her back pack round herself and yanked her sword from it before throwing the pack to the ground.)

CANDY: Oh, shit!!!

(Immediately Sophira braced herself for combat and within seconds passed out at the very thought of it. More concerned with the raging beast that was bearing down on her; Candy raised her sword and tried to remember the sword skills her father had taught her. With deep red eyes the untamed killer wasted no time in leaping at Candy as soon as she was in range. Instinctively, Candy leapt to one-side in a desperate act of self preservation. Despairingly she narrowly managed to duck under the beast's flailing claw in time. As the creature landed, Candy turned swiftly to face it and lunged at it with her sword. As if it was nothing, the wolf-like fiend just batted it out of her hand with its paw, filling Candy with utter trepidation. If her sword was useless, what else did she have? As her sword landed with a clang on the soil, the beast snarled at her with an almost mocking tone.)

CANDY: Umm... nice doggie!

(Again the beast leapt at her, this time it was all Candy could do to run away. With fear etched into her eyes, she spun into a sprint to avoid the sharp claws of her enemy. Terrified, she tripped as the diving beast smacked at the back of her boot in it's desperation to catch her foot and bring her to earth. With no other option, Candy staggered out of her trip and just ran like hell had her. Not knowing what to do or where to go, she looked back and much to her horror saw the beast wasn't chasing her. Instead it was bearing down on a terrified looking Sophira, now conscious and in terrible trouble.)

CANDY: No way!!!

(Trying not to panic, she looked around her and saw her sword laying against a rock. Instinctively she raced over to it thinking it'd be her only hope when suddenly she

remembered her training. Nodding to herself she grabbed the sword then raced over to her backpack. In the meantime the snarling creature was standing over Sophira gnashing its razor sharp teeth at her. In abject fear for her life, Sophira's only option was to crawl backwards. Unfortunately for her, with her eyes fixed on the psychotic beast before her, she hadn't noticed that she was edging ever closer to the sheer drop. Desperate to halt the anarchy, Candy grabbed her backpack and yanked her dagger from it before slinging her pack on her back. With concentration etched deep on her face, she stared hard at the beast's rump.)

CANDY: You can do it, Candy!

(As she edged away on her backside with terror in her eyes, Sophira could do little but whimper incoherent words. There was little sign of hope in her terrified eyes. Edging back desperately her hand slipped over the edge of the sheer drop and she let out a deafening scream. This was as far as she went. It was now a choice of being mauled to death or falling to it from a great height. With the hopelessness of it all she could but scream out in fear.)

SOPHIRA: No!!!

(Knowing there was nowhere left for her to go, the beast raised its sharp claws and snarled at her once again, making a show of going in for the killer blow. Knowing her time was up; Sophira threw her arm across her face and screamed her last scream. Sensing the death blow would be imminent she was amazed to see the beast suddenly rise up on its paunches and cry out in pain. Not needing a second invitation, Sophira swiftly took the opportunity to scramble past it to the relative safety of the plateau and away from the drop. As she did so, the first thing she noticed was Candy standing akimbo looking mean and menacing. Not sure what was happening, she looked back and saw the beast snarling as it tried to remove Candy's dagger from its backside. Looking amazed, she raced to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Candy, you did it! You saved me!

(Candy gave her a determined glance.)

CANDY: Not yet I haven't! We need to get the fuck out of here and I mean now!

(Sophira nodded sternly.)

SOPHIRA: Let's go!

(Watching the beast struggle to grab the dagger from its rump, Candy and Sophira raced for the gap in the wall. Desperately hoping it wouldn't notice their escape; they said nothing and slipped through the gap, immediately breaking into a sprint as they came out the other side. Candy held her sword tightly in her hand as they fled, determined to chop down the rope bridge as soon as they were across it. Knowing that was still some way away they raced forth with intent showing in their eyes.)

CANDY: The sooner we get off this mountain the better!

(Sophira looked to her cautiously.)

SOPHIRA: We should be okay if that thing didn't see where we went, shouldn't we?

CANDY: Let's hope so!

(As always, they spoke too soon. Such was their desperation to escape as quickly as possible they hadn't noticed the shadow that was suddenly creeping up from behind them. Next thing they knew, their feet were off the ground and they were being raised high in the sky. In a blind panic they yelled out to each other.)

SOPHIRA: Candy???

CANDY: I know!!!

(Much to their horror, the giant eagles Candy had mentioned, really were as big as the legends said they were. With enormous claws skewering their backpacks, the colossal

airborne giant carried them off across the sky. Hanging by their packs, Candy and Sophira panicked profusely.)

SOPHIRA: What are we gonna do?

CANDY: I don't know!!!

SOPHIRA: Oh my god, high, high, I'm gonna throw up!!!

(Desperate to free herself, Candy tried to fiddle with her pack.)

CANDY: We've got to take our packs off!

(Sophira looked horrified.)

SOPHIRA: And fall down there???

(As she looked down, Candy suddenly realised it wasn't such a great plan after all.)

CANDY: Crap!!!

(Sophira whimpered in horror as her dangling feet brushed a tree top.)

SOPHIRA: What does it want with us???

(Candy whimpered.)

CANDY: To eat us!!!

(With that they both burst out crying.)

SOPHIRA: I don't want to be eaten!!!

CANDY: Nor do I!!!

(Heading over the great lake as they hung from the soaring eagle, they tried to hug each other. As Candy swung her arm towards her, however, Sophira flinched.)

SOPHIRA: Careful with that thing!!!

(Candy was momentarily baffled.)

CANDY: Eh?

(Due to their immense panicking, it was only then that she noticed her sword in her hand. Suddenly her whole demeanour seemed to change and she smiled at her terrified companion.)

SOPHIRA: What are you smiling about!

(Candy's smile turned into a toothy grin.)

CANDY: Can you swim?

SOPHIRA: Huh?

(Sophira was clearly baffled.)

SOPHIRA: What's that got to do with anything?

(Candy gave her a belittling glance.)

CANDY: Well can you or can't you?

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but...

(Before she could utter another word, Candy interrupted with a grimace and a snarl.)

CANDY: Good!

(With that, she plunged her sword deep into the eagle's undercarriage. With a deafening squawk of pain, the giant bird's claws flexed wide and split through their packs. As the dying beast struggled to fly on, Candy, Sophira and all their belongings plummeted through the sky. Their screams could probably be heard from miles around. There then followed a series of splashes as first Candy's bronze compass then Candy and Sophira themselves dropped into the lake followed by the rest of their belongings. Following the final splash there was silence. The waters stilled themselves and all was once again at peace in the great forest. Then, suddenly Candy crashed back through the water from below, gasping for air. Immediately she spun around to look for Sophira.)

CANDY: Sophira!!!

(Seconds later, she too splashed back to the surface and coughed her heart out.

Candy's face lit up upon seeing her, her relief was evident.)



CANDY: Damn, am I glad to see you!  
(Gasping for air as she did so, Sophira started to splash about wildly.)  
SOPHIRA: When I said I could swim... I lied!  
(Without a second thought, Candy quickly swam over to her only for Sophira to start treading water.)  
SOPHIRA: Hehe!  
(Candy looked extremely narked.)  
CANDY: Hey!!! That's mean!  
(Sophira beamed.)  
SOPHIRA: Nah, I just wanted you to come over here so I could hug you!  
(Candy grinned.)  
CANDY: Cheeky moo!  
(And with that they shared a friendly hug to signify the end of their ordeal.)

(Only a few hours later the sun had set and Sophira and Candy had set up camp around the lakeside from which they'd plunged into. Both were naked as they dried their clothes around the fire. It'd taken them a while to gather their things from the lake but finally they were able to relax and get some rest in the serenity of the summer forest at night. Despite the softness of the breeze and the warming glow of the fire, Sophira was still a little unnerved. She'd never slept outdoors before and had no idea what to expect. In stark contrast, Candy lay herself on her stomach and stared into the flames. She felt at peace and sighed happily to herself. With a smile she looked up at Sophira and saw her sitting cross legged on a fallen tree looking worriedly back at her.)

CANDY: You okay?  
SOPHIRA: Yeah!  
(Candy chuckled.)  
CANDY: Liar!  
(Sophira gave her a nervous grimace.)  
SOPHIRA: Is it safe out here at night? I mean, what if an ostrich attacks us in our sleep?  
(Candy couldn't help but giggle.)  
CANDY: An ostrich?  
SOPHIRA: But what if?  
(Candy contorted slightly and gestured for Sophira to lay next to her. Nervously she obliged.)  
CANDY: Relax, animals are scared of fire, they won't even come near!  
(Sophira nervously started to reply.)  
CANDY: Yes, that includes ostriches!  
(Comforted slightly, Sophira nodded.)  
SOPHIRA: Well okay!  
(They shared a smile.)  
SOPHIRA: Umm... are our clothes dry yet?  
CANDY: They'll be a few hours yet, we might as well get some sleep!  
(Not sure if she'd be able to sleep Sophira nodded most unconvincingly. Noticing this, Candy gave her a sincere glance.)  
CANDY: Hey, it's okay! We didn't find Arterian but we'll keep looking. Try not to worry if you can help it!  
(Sophira suddenly looked miserable.)  
SOPHIRA: I'm so far from home. I just hope Lethernia hasn't been attacked yet!

CANDY: Hey, there's still time and while that's the case we'll keep looking, okay?  
(Candy followed her words with a reassuring smile. Sophira just looked her dead in the eye.)

SOPHIRA: How do you do it, Candy?

(Candy looked baffled.)

CANDY: How do I do what?

SOPHIRA: You know how to make me feel better every time. You're like some angel or something; I don't know what I'd do without you! I'm so lucky I chose to hide in your bedroom or I'd never had met you!

(Candy went to reply but Sophira cut her off before she could start.)

SOPHIRA: Don't say anything! I just want to say thank you, can we leave it at that!

(Candy smiled and nodded.)

CANDY: Okay, let's get some sleep!

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Sure!

CANDY: Now huddle up; it can get cold at night especially as we've got no dry clothes. We need body heat!

(As the fire blazed, Candy shuffled up right next to Sophira until their naked bodies were touching.)

CANDY: Night, Soph!

(Feeling a strange kind of nice fear, Sophira muttered a quiet "goodnight" and half closed her eyes. Something about this felt so wrong and yet so heavenly. And so began their first night in the wilderness. The simple huntress and the serving girl thrown together by over confidence and gross misfortune would for the first time go without the comforts of a warm bed under a secure shelter. This was to be their first night as true wild girls of the forest. As Candy drifted off to sleep, Sophira watched her for a while, in awe of her beautiful face. For a good hour or more she allowed herself to enjoy the fuzzy sensation she was feeling about being this close to her before she too fell asleep with a smile on her face.)

# **DYSTOPIA - THE DARK RAGE**

## **(Chapter Three – Exile.)**

(Daybreak in the forest. Light dew dripped from every blade of grass and a hazy mist floated tentatively among the trees waiting for sunlight to chase it away. As always at this time of the day, a slight chill hung the air. Midday displayed the forest as a kaleidoscope of colour and by early evening it was an orange glow. Midnight saw a spectacular collage of various silhouettes and shadows but the earliest dawning of the day was simply grey. The treetops created an overcast ambience that rain clouds could only dream of. Once the sun rose higher in the sky, the forest would awaken into a festival of colour but for these first few moments of the day, it was cold and it was grey.)

(At their camp, aside the vast lake where Candy and Sophira had spent the night, the air was particularly misty. In swirls, the mist rolled off the lake creating a haze around the smouldering remnants of the camp fire. Having slept reasonably well, Candy had woken feeling sharp and alive, lifted by the glory of nature's freedom all around her. Sophira on the other hand hadn't slept too well, both excited by Candy's proximity and a fear of her surroundings. Stressed by her confused feelings and thoughts of home, she sat on a tree stump and fiddled with her hair while wearing a lost frown. Upon spotting how unsettled Sophira was, Candy placed herself next to her and offered her a smile.)

CANDY: Cheer up, Soph!

(Flustered by it all, Sophira flicked back her hair and sneered.)

SOPHIRA: I hate my hair!!!

(Not knowing how to respond to those words, Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: Okay!

(Feeling it best to say nothing about her erotic feelings for Candy, Sophira just hung her head. Not wanting to leave her friend looking miserable, Candy mused for a moment then suddenly looked enlightened.)

CANDY: Hold on!

(Sophira watched on enquiringly as Candy raced to her pack and returned bearing her hairbrush.)

SOPHIRA: What you doing?

(With a dead straight face, Candy sat behind her and quipped.)

CANDY: Brushing my teeth!

(Still bemused, Sophira twisted to face her but was immediately twisted back again by Candy.)

CANDY: Now keep still. Let's sort your hair out!

(Submissive as ever, Sophira said nothing as Candy slid Sophira's hair band from her hair and started to brush. Fancying herself as something of an expert, Candy brushed swiftly and licked her lips as she concentrated on the job in hand. Sophira for her part, stared straight ahead, afraid to admit to herself she was enjoying the feel of Candy's delicate fingers on her scalp. Struggling to understand the feelings that Candy created within her, she bit her lip and tried to start a distracting conversation.)

SOPHIRA: Your... hands feel nice!

(Deep in concentration, Candy replied softly.)

CANDY: Thanks!

(Hoping for slightly more than a two line conversation, Sophira tried again.)

SOPHIRA: Can I brush yours after?

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Of course!

SOPHIRA: Cool!

(Too nervous to think of anything else, she then proceeded to clam up and allow herself to enjoy Candy's touch. Candy herself had no idea of the emotions she was stirring up in her friend. Back in Chiswell Point when she was younger she and her friends brushed each others hair all the time. To her it was no big deal but to Sophira it was something wonderful and just when she thought it couldn't get any better, it was her turn to brush Candy's hair. In this brief moment she forgot all about the mission and the terrible fate awaiting her people, such was depth of her feelings. Gently feeling and stroking Candy's soft hair as she brushed it, she started to become moist with the sensuousness of it all. Slowly becoming lost in the moment, she ran her fingers gently down the back of Candy's head as they followed the brush and exhaled romantically, when suddenly, Candy stood up. Stunned by the movement, Sophira broke out of her trance.)

SOPHIRA: What?

(Candy looked down at her and smiled as she felt her hair.)

CANDY: Nice one, Soph. Now check yours out in the river!

(Looking curiously at her, Sophira raised an eyebrow and headed to the side of the river to check her reflection in the water. Beaming with pride, Candy spoke up.)

CANDY: What do you think?

(As she peered into the water she saw a girl she didn't recognise staring back at her. Scrutinizing her closely she noticed the girl looked just like her except for one small detail. The girl in the reflection looked radiant and alive. This was when it dawned on her. She was in love. Her new hairstyle was co-incidental. As much as she loved her new hair look, the revelation she'd just made had rocked her to the core. She knew this love would be forbidden but she didn't care. She wanted to shout it out and tell the world. Wearing a beautiful smile that was lit up by the glow in her effulgent eyes, she spun around to Candy and proclaimed in a joyous voice.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! I love you!

(Candy looked extremely smug.)

CANDY: I know, I'm a kick arse hairstylist!

(Excitedly, Sophira rushed up to her.)

SOPHIRA: No, you don't understand...

(Looking extremely passionate she gazed into Candy's eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Candy... there's a panther behind you!

(Immediately, Sophira backed away and Candy turned around to see the snarling black cat skulking its way towards them with drool coming from its hungry mouth.)

CANDY: Umm... nice kitty!

(Nervously, she joined Sophira in backing away from the panther, holding her hands out towards it as she did so.)

CANDY: Where did I leave my sword?

(She glanced to the other side of the fire and spotted her sword protruding from her bag.)

CANDY: Aw, crap!

(Sophira trembled.)

SOPHIRA: I thought you said animals were afraid of fire!

(Candy replied nervously.)

CANDY: They are!

SOPHIRA: Well someone forgot to tell this one!

CANDY: The fire is smouldering; they're afraid of blazing fire not smoke and ashes!

SOPHIRA: Oh!

(As they edged away from the snarling creature, they found themselves reaching the edge of the river. Terrified, they hugged each other and stared wide eyed at the advancing beast.)

SOPHIRA: Now what?

CANDY: I don't know!

(As if encouraged by their fear, the giant feline suddenly roared then charged at them both. At first all they could do was scream as their eyes bulged before Sophira dived in the river and Candy made a dash for it. Unfortunately, she couldn't quite out run the lunging beast. As it leapt at her, her desperate dive to avoid it fell short and the beast's paw ripped into the flesh on her upper arm. With a scream she was sent tumbling to the ground. As self preservation took over, Candy rolled and clambered back to her feet then made a dash for her backpack. She knew she had to reach her sword before the panther reached her. Looking on from the river, Sophira yelled out in horror.)

SOPHIRA: Careful Candy!!!

(Not needing such a reminder, Candy raced for her pack with a menacing intent in her determined eyes. As blood poured from her arm, she sprinted towards the pack with gritted teeth. Unfortunately for her, while she did so, the panther was charging at her with *pointed* teeth. Sophira could barely watch. She wanted desperately to do something but was frozen by fear and could only stare in horror. She muttered to herself nervously.)

SOPHIRA: Oh god, come on Candy, please!

(Snarling as she raced for her pack, Candy grimaced determinedly. Not looking back for a moment she reached out for the protruding handle of her sword. However, right behind her, sensing a kill, the panther picked up the pace and charged into a wild lunge at her back. Swiftly bending to grab her sword Candy snarled and yanked it from its sheath. Immediately she spun around towards the panther only to be flattened by its lunge. As she screamed, the sword flew from her hand and thudded to the ground behind her. As she crashed to the dirt with the panther on top of her she let out a loud cry only to be slapped unconscious by the flailing claw of the beast across her face. Screaming out in desperation, Sophira charged from the river. She hadn't considered for a moment what she'd do but she knew she had to do something to help her stricken friend. Alas, Sophira knew she was too late. She was too far away to help and the snarling beast was about to gauge at Candy's neck and drain the life from her in one foul, bloody gnashing of it's jaws. Tears welled in her eyes as she raced towards her with arms outstretched as the beast thrust it's head down towards Candy's neck.)

SOPHIRA: No!!!

(Suddenly, a torch wielding man leapt at the panther, clubbing it with his fiery baton. The panther leapt from Candy and growled before turning and fleeing as the man gave chase with his burning torch. Immediately, Sophira rushed to Candy's side and cured her with her healing hands. As the claw marks on Candy's face were erased, she sat up with a start.)

CANDY: Huh?

(Sophira drew a large sigh of relief and sat back to catch her breath.)

SOPHIRA: Damn!

CANDY: What in the hell...

(Before she could finish her sentence, the man returned and stood with his hands on his hips looking down at them. He spoke in a deep, warrior-like tone.)

OSRIC: Ha-ha-ha, so what's a couple of fit birds like you doing in a place like this?

(Silently Candy and Sophira looked up at the dashing yet smug looking young man before them. Both wanted to say something but felt a little in awe by his presence.

As the shock wore off slightly, Sophira could only offer a shy smile and look away but Candy, true to form, gave him a wide smile and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

Raising one eyebrow, Osric nodded calmly.)

OSRIC: Hey baby!

(Moments later, having thanked him profusely for saving them, the girls offered him some of their ostrich meat and the three of them sat around the fire to eat. Sitting tall in the middle, Osric looked from side to side at the two beauties beside him and reiterated the question he'd asked previously. Sophira remained in awe of him and struggled to speak whilst Candy had gone into flirt-mode. Both wanted to know more about the mysterious stranger but in very different ways.)

OSRIC: I said it before and I'll say it again. What on earth are two birds like you doing in these woods at night? You get could hurt.

(Sophira took that to mean he was accusing them of weakness and scowled. Candy took it as concern and smiled.)

CANDY: We're on a mission!

(Like a shy schoolgirl she blushed, bowed her head and looked up at Osric through her eyelashes. Reading the signs like a seasoned pro, Osric gave a conceited smile and turned his head slightly to look at her through the corner of his eye. A poser if ever there was one.)

OSRIC: A mission, huh?

(Watching on disapprovingly, Sophira could only shake her head and look away.

She'd taken an almost instant disliking to him but was too polite to say anything.)

OSRIC: So, what is this mission of which you speak, baby?

(Sensing Sophira's coldness to one side of him, Osric swivelled himself slightly more in Candy's direction to where the heat was coming from. He'd decided as soon as he saw them that he was going to try to sleep with both of them. Sophira's poorly hidden disdain had merely served to help make his mind up which one he'd hit on first. It would be no understatement at this point to say that Candy had missed male attention, even though it'd been less than 48 hours since she'd had some. Keen to make the most of it, she flicked back her hair and looked Osric in the eye.)

CANDY: We're on a mission to save Lethernia!

(Upon hearing those words, Sophira's polite stoicism came to an abrupt end as she cut in sternly.)

SOPHIRA: A *secret* mission!

(Focussing her attention solely on Osric, Sophira may as well have hailed cheese as the god of foodstuffs; Candy simply wasn't paying any attention to her. She was lost in Osric's eyes. It's safe to say Sophira could have poked herself in the eye with a stick and Candy wouldn't have noticed. Osric on the other hand was well aware of Sophira's displeasure but as any man would, he let his penis do the thinking and ignored it.)

OSRIC: I've never heard of this Lethernia but if you need any help...

(He leant closer to Candy and deepened his tone.)

OSRIC: I... Osric... I'm your man!

(Exhaling and almost drooling, Candy's heart fluttered and she leaned into him with a loving look on her face. Knowing that stealing a kiss was now a formality, Osric allowed himself a satisfied smile and lowered his lips towards hers. Closing her eyes firmly, Candy puckered up and did the same. Feeling a sense of delight at the speed of his success Osric glowed inside feeling he'd finally confirmed what he always knew, he really was a gift from god to the women of the planet. A sucker for romance, Candy was lost, almost floating as she sensed the imminent coming together of their lips. Anticipating the gentle sensation of his lips against hers she was somewhat startled when Osric suddenly cried out.)

OSRIC: Hey!!!

(She opened her eyes to see Osric fall back off the log and land flat on his back with his feet in the air. Not knowing what in the world had happened she looked up at a grimacing Sophira.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry, it was an accident!

(Glaring up at her, Osric frowned harshly.)

OSRIC: You pushed me!!!

(Feeling a bizarre mix of shame in her actions and justification at the outcome, Sophira looked at her feet and mumbled.)

SOPHIRA: I said I was sorry!

(Candy looked from one to the other with a lost look on her face.)

CANDY: What the hell happened there?

(Pulling himself to his feet, Osric explained.)

OSRIC: She pushed me off the log!

(Not wanting to upset Candy, Sophira lied expertly.)

SOPHIRA: I didn't! I just stood up and accidentally nudged you!

(Osric clearly wasn't impressed.)

OSRIC: Nudged me? With both hands???

(Sophira looked hurt.)

SOPHIRA: I wouldn't!

(Candy wagged her finger at Osric.)

CANDY: Hey, there's no way Sophira would do anything like that on purpose, she's a peaceful girl!

(Sophira smiled and looked away. She'd always been honest about everything and considered lies a terrible evil and yet they'd come so easily to her. She couldn't understand how it happened or why she wasn't ashamed, she just knew that Osric hadn't kissed Candy and that was all she cared about. Not wanting to analyse it any further, she sat down and said nothing. Osric for his part knew that arguing with Candy would seriously damage his route into her underwear and conceded begrudgingly. Wearing a forced smile, he climbed to his feet.)

OSRIC: I apologise, accidents happen!

(It killed him to say it but he knew he had to remain focussed on his mission, that mission being to have sex with both of them as soon as possible. Sitting himself back down, he sighed at the lost opportunity and started over.)

OSRIC: So, tell me about yourselves, ladies!

(Not needing a second invitation to do so, Candy was about to give a long and detailed account of her life story when Sophira cut over her.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, you know about our mission already, let's talk about you. What are you doing out here, lurking about and spying on people?

(Osric looked peeved.)

OSRIC: I wasn't spying!

SOPHIRA: So what were you doing then?

(With a sigh Osric sat back and shook his head.)

OSRIC: You don't want to hear about me!

(Still staring at him like a lovesick fool, Candy replied softly.)

CANDY: Yeah we do!

(Horried at the realisation that they really did want to hear about him, Osric sat bolt up right as trepidation flooded his senses. Not wanting to let on anything about his past for fear of incrimination he looked about for an excuse to change the subject. He'd rather they were attacked by another panther than be the centre of attention in *this* conversation. In a vain attempt to not draw attention to how he felt, he shrugged and spoke without any excitement.)

OSRIC: Nothing to tell, really!

(Curious at his rigid demeanour, Candy had snapped out of her almost hypnotic trance sensing something wasn't quite right. Sophira glared at him from the other side revelling in his discomfort, yet another feeling she wasn't comfortable with but was happy to tolerate as far as Osric was concerned. Jealously once again turning even the whitest soul black. Fearing a complete loss of any chance to achieve his goal if he didn't tell them at least half the truth, Osric sighed and looked to his feet.)

OSRIC: Aw, crap!

CANDY: What? What is it?

(Worried she wouldn't like what she heard, Candy pulled back from him while Sophira sat back with her arms folded, unable to hide her gleeful smile. Resigned to his fate, Osric looked from Sophira to Candy and began.)

OSRIC: The reason I'm out here is 'cause I was thrown out of my village!

CANDY: Thrown out?

SOPHIRA: What for?

(Sighing deeper, Osric continued.)

OSRIC: There was an incident with... umm... this girl...

(He slapped his forehead not knowing whether the truth would condemn him or save his mission. Sophira took the opportunity to interject.)

SOPHIRA: A girl huh? What did you do to her? Pervert!

(Osric looked up.)

OSRIC: Hey, don't convict me just yet; you haven't even heard the story!

(Not sure whether she wanted to hear it or not, Candy folded her arms as he continued.)

OSRIC: There was a celebration one evening in the town and this girl and I got a bit... you know... frisky...

(Candy said nothing; her blank expression said it all. Sophira, on the other hand listened attentively for something incriminating to pounce on.)

OSRIC: We're a humble forest village; people are very reserved you see. How was I to know this girl would take a quickie to mean a proposal of marriage. I was just unlucky that she was the elder's grand-daughter!

SOPHIRA: Quickie?

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: They had sex!

SOPHIRA: Oh!

(She frowned.)

SOPHIRA: So... you slept with this girl and then refused to marry her? You took her innocence and then cast her aside??? Animal!



OSRIC: Hey, how was I to know?

(Feeling Candy would be suitably disgusted; Sophira folded her arms in disgust and awaited her opinion keenly.)

CANDY: So you two had sex and she decided to trap you into marriage just 'cause she's the elders daughter?

(Having never thought of phrasing it so wonderfully in his favour, Osric nodded enthusiastically.)

OSRIC: Yes. That's exactly it! She trapped me and when I refused to play along her grandfather threw me out of the village!

(He gave a childish grin.)

OSRIC: I'm so innocent. Can't they see I was the victim in this?

(Candy gave him a pitying look.)

CANDY: Aw, you poor thing, that was a horrible thing to do.

(Sophira could only watch on agape. It was pretty obvious to her that whatever he said or did would be given the benefit of the doubt. She felt anger rise inside her at the knowledge that this stranger was coming between her and Candy and wearing a ferocious snarl, she leapt to her feet and without thinking, pushed Osric backwards off the log again. Candy was shocked to the core.)

CANDY: Sophira!!!

(As Osric landed with a thud, Sophira stopped in horror of her actions and placed her startled hands on her glowing red cheeks.)

SOPHIRA: Oh my god, I'm so sorry!

(Flustered to say the least she ran towards the river just to get away from the scene of her undignified act. Worried at her normally peaceful friend's behaviour, Candy raced after her. Watching them go, Osric sat up and grinned to himself. By simply forgetting to mention that he'd promised to marry the elder's grand-daughter just to get her into bed, he'd stumbled across the perfect scenario. Now Candy had sympathy for him and would be a certainty to fulfil his desires, he felt. To add to his glee, he suspected her jealous friend would do anything to split them up, including sleep with him. As far as he could see, it was all shaping up perfectly. Down by the river bank Candy slowly approached Sophira as she stood crying into her hands. Unsure what to say she spoke softly to the back of her head.)

CANDY: Soph? You okay?

(Fighting back the tears, Sophira looked upwards and sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I just... it doesn't matter.

(Candy said nothing.)

SOPHIRA: I just don't trust that guy; I don't like him at all!

(Candy looked sad.)

CANDY: I thought you'd be the last person to judge someone so quickly. And so harshly.

SOPHIRA: Yeah... so did I!

(Wanting desperately to make things work, Candy tried to brush the animosity aside.)

CANDY: Anyway, you heard what he said, right? A forest village.

(Sophira turned to face her.)

SOPHIRA: What?

CANDY: Seems like a good place to look for Arterian or at least ask about him, don't you think?

(Remembering her mission, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, it does! Oh my god, I've been so hung up on other things I forgot all about it. I'm so screwed up, Candy!

(Candy gave her a consoling smile.)

CANDY: Hey, it'll all work out in the end, Soph.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, I hope so. C'mon.

(With that she led Candy back over to where Osric was dusting himself down having been cast from the log twice by an angry Sophira. With purpose in her eyes she looked directly at him and spoke in no uncertain tone.)

SOPHIRA: This forest village of yours. Take us there.

(Osric stepped back defensively.)

OSRIC: No chance! I'd rather stick my cock in a beehive than go back there!

(While Candy marvelled at the imagery, Sophira retorted.)

SOPHIRA: You told Candy, you'd help! Or were you just saying that to get her to kiss you?

(Fearing he'd been rumbled he stared like a startled rabbit into Sophira's eyes before glancing at Candy and being chilled by her demanding scowl. Knowing he had no choice, he shrugged.)

OSRIC: Well... okay, I don't like it but I do want to help.

(He smiled at Candy.)

OSRIC: I wasn't just saying that, babe.

(As a love struck look returned to Candy's face, Osric smiled and turned away. He didn't want them to go to his village in case he was revealed as a liar but he was pretty confident nobody there would talk to them anyway and his secret would be safe. Satisfied that everything was still on course, he picked up his pack and gestured to the forest.)

OSRIC: No time like the present then. Shall we?

(As if he'd just tried to light a fire with a banana Candy and Sophira both scoffed immediately and sat down leaving him feeling quite bemused. Having been exiled for 6 months in the forest, Osric had briefly forgotten that women physically can't just up and leave. As men so often find themselves doing, he waited impatiently for another 40 minutes while the girls continued to get ready in no obvious hurry.)

(Eventually, the party of three, lead by Osric headed into the forest. With his lead, the pace seemed a little quicker than normal, plus there was the gooseberry factor. Not wanting to allow Osric any time to get personal with Candy along the way, Sophira kept herself between them as often as possible and kept the discussion away from anything personal. Osric wasn't the only one scheming. As much as he tried to chat to Candy, Sophira got in his way. Being at the centre of both their attention, Candy wasn't complaining. She was so used to the popularity this was just another day for her. Foiling Osric at every turn as they headed through the thick woodland, Sophira then put her own plan into action.)

SOPHIRA: I bet you miss home, Osric.

(Flustered and desperate to sidle up to Candy, Osric gave Sophira a stern glance.)

OSRIC: You what?

SOPHIRA: Home. You know; your village. I bet you miss it.

(Keen to know exactly what she was saying, he mused for a moment.)

OSRIC: In what way?

SOPHIRA: Well... it's home, isn't it?

OSRIC: I suppose.

(Disheartened, he again looked around the obstacle known as Sophira towards Candy and sighed.)

OSRIC: Well of course I do. It's no fun living in the woods on your own.  
(Frustrated that such a slender young lady could make such an effective barrier between himself and his goal, he threw his hands in the air and decided to engage her in conversation.)

OSRIC: I miss the tavern and my friends most.  
(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Well... what if we can help you get accepted again?  
(He gave her an uncertain glance.)

OSRIC: How can you do that?  
(Truth was that Osric would love nothing more than to be accepted again. He hated it in the wilderness. Sometimes he thought a kinder punishment would have been death. By banishing him they'd taken his life away and yet he continued to exist with nothing to live for. Sophira in contrast would do anything to get him accepted to the village again just to get rid of him. It was in both their interest for him to be reinstated to the village. Ideally for Osric he'd sleep with these two girls and then be accepted back. Ideally for Sophira, Osric would fall down a deep hole and never be seen again but for now getting rid of him would do just fine. Ideally for Candy, Osric would take her in his arms and proceed to love her for ever more. Unfortunately once she got something like that into her head, she was pretty much useless for anything else. Picturing herself and Osric surrounded by 6 fresh faced children in a picturesque woodland cottage, she too was convinced of the need to help him. And so, all three of them mused about possible plans for his reintegration to the village and all for very different reasons. They walked on in silent contemplation for a good few miles before Sophira finally broke the silence.)

SOPHIRA: Well... we could always put in a good word for you.  
(Osric raised an eyebrow.)

OSRIC: You what?

SOPHIRA: You know; we could say how you've helped us and we know you learned your lesson.  
(Osric shook his head.)

OSRIC: Old pineapple face won't care about that.

CANDY: Pineapple face?

OSRIC: The elder. He looks like a pineapple... never mind.

(He noticed the bizarre looks he was receiving from the girls and tried to redeem himself.)

OSRIC: The elder's really strict, he won't go back on his word easily, he's too proud to ever admit he's wrong. The guy's a complete twat.

(Candy chuckled to herself.)

CANDY: Maybe referring to him as a complete twat might not be the best course of action.

SOPHIRA: Yeah, you have to respect the elders... even if they are a bunch of morons.  
(Candy laughed out loud.)

SOPHIRA: I'm serious, Candy. The elders in Lethernia are out of touch and if you ask me, slightly deranged but they're still elders and you have to revere them for that.  
(Candy looked unimpressed.)

CANDY: Respect them for being old? Like giving them Kudos for not dying yet?

SOPHIRA: No, not at all.

(Osric sensed a chance to speak to Candy and leapt in.)

OSRIC: They're supposed to be the wisest, not just the oldest. Apparently it's a position gained from wisdom, not just from age.

(Giving Osric a brief sneer before she did so, Sophira elaborated.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, old people are just old people. Only old people with wisdom and knowledge get to be elders because they've gained so much know-how over all their years on the planet.

(Bored by the subject, Candy rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: Right, anyway, how are we going to get this old git to let him back in?

(As they rambled on forth desperate to think of a plan, there were lengthy periods of silence interspersed with useless, unproductive conversation and little in the way of ideas. An elder's word is more than often final and finding a way to change one's mind would be quite a task. Candy wasn't entirely sure about the role of an elder and was a bit slow in voicing any ideas in case she looked silly in front of Osric.

Knowing the truth about how he got exiled from the village in the first place, Osric wasn't entirely confident in any ideas either. Sophira for her part couldn't concentrate fully on the matter in hand for trying to keep Osric and Candy apart and a fantasy that she'd stroll into the village and find Arterian straight away. Finding him now would negate the need for Osric's help and bring the curtain down on their journey, quite possibly saving her people in the process. She knew in her heart of hearts that if she could save her people nothing else mattered, not even love.

After several hours of rambling through the thick forest, the spire of the village chapel finally came into view. It had been an extremely long trip and there were only a few hours of daylight left. As they edged ever closer to his village, Osric became uneasy and started to sweat. In contrast, Sophira stepped up a pace forgetting all about him having convinced herself that Arterian was near and the days efforts would bare a glorious outcome. Having been oblivious to Sophira's excitement and Osric's fear, Candy found herself being separated from them both as Osric slowed and Sophira sped up. Sensing their unease she stopped and looked around at the both of them.)

CANDY: Hey!

(Needing no second invitation to stop, Osric came to an abrupt halt. Sophira, on the other hand, slowed and looked behind her with a miffed expression on her brow.)

SOPHIRA: What are you waiting for?

(With a frown Candy gathered them together and made her point shyly.)

CANDY: We're here and I don't know what to do.

(Sophira was less uncertain.)

SOPHIRA: Let's just go in the village and ask about Arterian, that *is* why we're here isn't it?

OSRIC: I can't. If I set foot in there they'll arrest me and flog me.

(Wishing she was a better person and didn't find the thought of Osric being flogged so wonderful, Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Wait here then!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: Hey, we said we'd help him!

(Not wanting to let Candy down, especially with Osric likely to want to "comfort" her if she did, Sophira sighed and relented.)

SOPHIRA: Fine! So, what are we going to do?

(The girls both turned to face a baffled looking Osric.)

OSRIC: Huh?

(He frowned, more than a little put off by their attention.)

OSRIC: I don't know, do I?

(The girls looked equally lost.)

OSRIC: They won't even speak to me. I'm a total zero as far as they're concerned.

CANDY: Zero?

OSRIC: A complete nobody!

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Then we need to make you look a hero instead.

OSRIC: Easier said than done, babe!

(Seeing Candy go all gooey-eyed again at being called babe, Sophira rolled her eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Candy? Do you have a plan or not?

(Through glazed eyes she looked to Sophira.)

CANDY: Huh? Oh... yeah, right. Why don't we pretend you rescued us or something. We could pretend you're taking us to the village for our own safety after you saved us from a wild creature.

(Osric mused.)

OSRIC: I kind of did that anyway, didn't I?

CANDY: That's why I said it.

OSRIC: Hmm... but would they believe it? They think I'm a good for nothing sleazebag with no other thought than how to bed women.

(Suddenly he looked enlightened.)

OSRIC: A-ha!

(With that, he ripped a rope from his backpack and beamed.)

OSRIC: If they see it then they have to believe it!

(The girls stepped back looking nervous.)

OSRIC: Hey, don't panic. I'll tie you to a tree, make a commotion and when people come rushing out they'll see me untie you and how grateful you are! What do you think?

(At this point, if there was a word that meant even quieter than silence and even stiller than inanimate it'd probably be the ideal word to describe the girl's initial reaction to his idea. Following their early inertia, they looked at him as if he'd lost his marbles completely then backed away smiling politely as if retreating from a wild bear.

Somewhat taken aback by their lack of enthusiasm, Osric stopped and protested.)

OSRIC: Hey, you said you'd help!

(Feeling it only polite to say something, Candy offered him a polite smile.)

CANDY: We'll help. Just not like that!

OSRIC: Aw c'mon. It'll only take a minute and once it's done we'll be in there.

(Candy mused, not wanting to let him down but not wanting to have any part in his plan either.)

CANDY: Well...

OSRIC: Babe...

(He offered her his outstretched hand and looked her dead in the eye.)

OSRIC: You know you want to!

(Going instantly weak at the knees she found herself immediately agreeing without question or hesitation. As she leant herself against the nearest tree she looked to a dumbfounded Sophira and shrugged.)

CANDY: We did say we'd help!

(Sophira frowned and joined her in leaning against the tree.)

SOPHIRA: I love the way you say "we"!

CANDY: We did!

SOPHIRA: Oh shut up!

(Not willing to run the risk of letting them change their minds, Osric wasted no time in wrapping the rope around the tree and proceeded to tie the girls to it.)

OSRIC: You won't regret this!

SOPHIRA: We'd better not!

OSRIC: Okay, now when I give the word, start screaming as loud as you can. When someone comes out I'll untie you. Just make sure you're all grateful and that.

CANDY: We know the plan!

(Osric smiled lovingly.)

OSRIC: Cool. Thanks babe.

(Never one to miss a golden opportunity, he decided this would be a great time to make his move. If he couldn't steal a kiss while she was tied to a tree, when could he? Knowing Sophira was tied up and couldn't interfere, he slowly moved towards her with his lips at the ready. Watching on alarmed, Sophira's eyes bulged and she immediately began to scream out.)

SOPHIRA: Help!!!

(Somewhat startled, Osric jumped back.)

OSRIC: Not yet!

(While Candy stood there with her lips puckered and ready, Osric remonstrated with Sophira.)

OSRIC: Not yet, damn it!

(With no kiss coming her way, Candy opened her eyes and frowned.)

CANDY: Hey, stop doing that! Stop teasing me!

(Osric thrust his hands in the air.)

OSRIC: It's not *my* fault!

(Sadly for him, woman logic dictates that it's always the man's fault and naturally Candy blamed him entirely.)

CANDY: You're horrible! You still could have kissed me!!!

OSRIC: But...

(Unfortunately for him, his words were drowned by Sophira still screaming for help. Clearly at the end of his tether, he folded his arms angrily and bellowed.)

OSRIC: Shut the fuck up!!!

(As if fate was having a laugh at him, the girls fell silent with a terrified look in their eyes just as a security party from the village passed by to see what the fuss was about. Having heard Osric yell at the girls who were tied to the tree and seen the terrified looks on their faces, they immediately arrested him. Ignoring his protests and that of the girls as they untied them, they dragged him away unceremoniously to the village kicking and screaming. Looking on with saddened eyes as they dragged him out of sight, Candy immediately bellowed at a security guard as soon as she was free.)

CANDY: You tit!

(Deciding she was just your "typical hysterical female", they ignored her claims that Osric was innocent, satisfying themselves that the poor thing was in shock.

Not listening to a word either Candy or Sophira said, the guards lead them back to the village security office to meet with the sheriff. For Sophira, everything had worked out exceptionally well. The girls had arrived in the forest village and Osric's arrest was just a beautiful added bonus. For Candy, it was all a horrible mistake which she was determined to rectify.

As they were slowly lead into the village they were both amazed at the sights before them. The way the buildings blended with the nature of the forest was a joy to behold. A river wound its way along the east side of the main thoroughfare and all the buildings looked as if they were meant to be there. Normally a village or homestead

in the woodland stood out like a blot on the landscape but not here. There were no wild or erratic blends of wood grain, the whole place looked designed and organised. Candy was especially taken aback by the beauty of the place as it blended well with her fantasy that she and Osric would be happy together there. There was an elegant bridge over the river that led to what looked like a chapel and a rose garden. She pictured herself in a wedding dress on that very bridge and gasped merrily. The illusion was soon shattered however, as she and Sophira were lead to the jail building at the top end of the thoroughfare.

As they entered the jailhouse they were immediately lead before the Sheriff's desk. He was a portly man with a moustache that could only be described as a horseshoe hanging proudly from his top lip. Having been made aware of why the girls were there by the guards who'd brought in Osric, the sheriff looked the girls up and down wearing a thoughtful expression. As he leant on his desk in readiness to speak, Candy and Sophira looked at one another nervously.)

SHERIFF: Face front, please ladies!

(With complete respect for authority, they both did so immediately.)

SHERIFF: Thank you.

(Rubbing his chin deep in thought, the sheriff scanned them with his eyes a moment longer before sitting back in a relaxed manner.)

SHERIFF: What's a couple of nice looking birds like you doing with the likes of Osric?

(Candy's bottom lip protruded and she protested innocently.)

CANDY: Osric is innocent!

(The sheriff chuckled.)

SHERIFF: Why, he's far from innocent, darlin'!

CANDY: But...

(The sheriff gave them a kind smile.)

SHERIFF: You just say the word and I'll see to it that he hangs!

(Even Sophira wasn't going to sit back and allow that and she *hated* Osric.)

SOPHIRA: No way!

CANDY: It was just a game! He's my boyfriend!

(Sophira's heart broke there and then and she hung her head.)

SHERIFF: He was tying you to a tree and yelling at you, I heard!

CANDY: It was a game!

(The desperation in her eyes told the sheriff all he wanted to know. Her eyes also hammered home to Sophira that she was never going to win this one. With a kind smile the sheriff stood up and reached in his pocket for his keys.)

SHERIFF: Well, how am I to argue with such a pretty lady, you say it was just a game, I believe you. He can go!

(Candy drew a deep sigh of relief.)

SHERIFF: Just make sure that little twerp leaves town and never sets foot here ever again, 'cause if he does, I'm going to chop off his gonads and feed them to my dog. You hear me?

(Candy nodded, she'd have agreed to anything just to have him free.

Moments later, Osric was lead outside to join the girls. As soon as they were reunited they were then ordered to head out of town and keep going. Candy was only too happy to oblige but Sophira was devastated in so many ways. To have travelled all day to get there only to be ejected within 5 minutes was a disaster. She wouldn't get

to hunt for Arterian here; in fact she wouldn't even get to ask about him. The waste of an entire valuable day just added to her misery. Now, instead of seeking out Arterian they were just going to head back into the woods where she knew Candy would break what was left of her fragile heart. It crossed her mind to walk the other way and carry on alone from here. She never asked for the feelings she had for Candy and she certainly didn't ask to have them crushed so soon. Sadly, the only thing worse than losing all hope with her, would be not to see her at all. With this in mind she followed on as Osric and Candy headed back to the top of the thoroughfare arm in arm. Typically, to add insult to injury the sky suddenly darkened and rain proceeded to thrash down on the village. Osric and Candy instinctively hurried into a dash to find shelter under a tree but Sophira just trudged on, finding comfort in the drenching she was receiving. As she rushed for shelter, Candy looked back and spotted her friend slowly stepping forth as if oblivious to the rain and yelled back.)

CANDY: Sophira!!!

(Sophira heard and looked up but didn't bother to answer. Her motivation to do anything was entirely drained. More than a little concerned, Candy raced back to get her and practically dragged her along until they joined Osric in sheltering under a tree by the river.)

CANDY: Soph? You okay?

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: We need to get out of town.

(With genuine concern, Osric sighed.)

OSRIC: They can wait a few minutes until the rain dies down. It's not much to ask. (He sighed.)

OSRIC: We came all this way for nothing. Thrown out without a second thought.

(As the rain continued to pelt the ground, the three of them stood under the branches of the tree, Candy surveying the town with her eyes while Osric stood and reminisced about the good times he'd had there. Sophira could only muster thoughts of emptiness. All she wanted right now was to be somewhere else. Once again her thoughts turned to home and more now than ever she wished she'd never left.)

### *North continent – Lethernia plains*

(As the marble city wall that surrounded Lethernia glowed in the sunlight, all around its base a virtual shanty town had sprung up and every free space was occupied with Gregon warriors and their weaponry. Such was their number that they spread like a blanket all around the mighty city for as far as the eye could see. Inside the besieged city the outlook grew bleaker and bleaker by the minute, the situation far worse than even Sophira had dared to imagine. Standing proudly outside the main gate to the city, a large tent housing the generals of the Gregon imperial guard ruffled in the breeze, inside of which, the emperor himself sat patiently upon his throne addressing his assembled men.

EMPEROR: Well? How long until we move in?

MCGOOGAN: We can go whenever you decide we go, my liege!

EMPEROR: Not what I asked!

(He looked to another of his generals.)

EMPEROR: Well?

MCDUGAL: I'd like to go now, my men are getting restless! Do we really need to starve such a puny enemy? My men could slaughter them for fun in a matter of minutes!



(The emperor climbed to his feet and started to pace.)

EMPEROR: Aye, as I suspected, you've forgotten why we're doing this!

(The generals, too wise to argue, listened intently.)

EMPEROR: You've forgotten what happened to our people all those centuries ago. You've forgotten how a mage healed the one that brought forth slaughter and ravaged our lands. You've forgotten that these mages deserve to die in suffering. Ultimately we will destroy every living mage. Like you, I grow sick of their conceit and lies. The way they claim to be people of peace even in the face of what we know. Our civilization was brought to its knees by their so-called kindness and now we make them suffer. The time for them to bleed is near, my friends.

(He took a seat.)

EMPEROR: For now, we wait as they starve and suffer.

(Naturally the Gregon warriors would be disappointed by this decision but such was their hatred for the peaceful folk in Lethernia in regard to their mistake of centuries ago, they'd be content to wait. It had been bred into them since childhood that a Lethernian had cured the man who was responsible for their downfall. The time that had passed had brought no conciliation in the face of spiralling, inbred hatred. It was safe to say that once the Gregon finally attacked it would be brutal and it would be merciless.)

### *Forest Village – Great South Continent*

(As the rain continued to fall heavily it quickly became apparent that this was no ordinary storm. The river had started to rise and the thoroughfare had rapidly disintegrated into mud. Still shivering under the tree, Candy and Osric had huddled to keep warm but despite several attempts to pull her close, Sophira kept her distance in silence. All she knew was that in this storm they couldn't tell how much she'd been crying.)

OSRIC: Seriously, I know she's not my biggest fan but I'm worried about Sophira!

(Candy bit her lip.)

CANDY: So am I, but you know... she's not like other girls. She has powers; she's probably doing something mystical.

(Osric raised an eyebrow.)

OSRIC: Powers?

CANDY: Yeah... trust me, she has them!

OSRIC: I believe you; I too know a summoning spell.

(Candy was too cold to move her face and therefore didn't look surprised.)

CANDY: Really?

OSRIC: There's more to me that meets the eye you know!

(Suddenly there was a loud crash behind them and they all spun around swiftly. Such was the force of the river thrashing against the bridge, the stanchion had given way and forced the bridge to tilt, several slats snapping as it did so.)

CANDY: Shit! That scared the life out of me!

OSRIC: Me too! I haven't seen weather like this in a long time!

CANDY: Me either and there's no sign of it stopping!

(Almost as soon as she said it, the rain that had thudded down for so long slowed to a patter before dying out completely.)

CANDY: Nope, no sign at all!

(Osric smiled.)

OSRIC: Let's get the hell out of here!

(Agreeing heartily, she shook herself down and flicked out her hair before facing Sophira.)

CANDY: You ready, Soph?

(Forcing a smile, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, c'mon.

(Soaked to the skin they started to stride forth with limbs barely bending like poorly animated robots. Every step is an effort when your clothes are soaked through and they knew this would be a thoroughly miserable trip. They were all sure of one thing in their minds, it definitely wouldn't be long before they stopped and made a fire. They'd only made it 3 feet however when a woman's voice rose up from the other side of the river that chilled Osric to the bone.)

AQUARIA: If it isn't Osric!!!

(Osric immediately tensed up and his eyes bulged.)

OSRIC: Oh fuck!

(Over the other side of the river a beautiful maiden in an expensive looking white dress emerged from where she'd sheltered from the rain. It was clear from the sneer she was giving Osric, not to mention Osric's own reaction that this was the girl that caused him all his woes. Desperate not to engage her, Osric just waved her away and started to hurry forth.)

OSRIC: It's okay, we're leaving!

(Candy and Sophira looked on as Aquaria rushed towards the bridge.)

AQUARIA: Oh no, you don't. I never got to tell you exactly what I think of you.

OSRIC: Umm... no need, I think I get the general idea!

(Osric's anxiety to leave wasn't matched by Candy or Sophira at all; they both stood still and looked on with interest at the thought of the ensuing argument. With a face as black as thunder, Aquaria stormed onto the bridge ranting loudly.)

AQUARIA: You told me you loved...

(Suddenly there was a loud snap as the slat she was standing on snapped in half. With a scream, Aquaria then dropped like a stone through the hole in the bridge and splashed into the overflowing river below. Initially looking about himself in a panic as Aquaria thrashed and screamed in the water, Osric managed to calm himself and call out to Candy and Sophira.)

OSRIC: We've got to help her!!!

(As would be expected, Candy and Sophira's answer to the problem in hand was to flap wildly and panic profusely. Seeing they'd be completely useless to him, Osric frowned and took immediate action. He looked about himself briefly before rushing forwards and grabbing one of the slats that had washed up on the river bank. With no more ado he then leapt into the river and swam towards Aquaria. Despite being named after a water goddess, Aquaria couldn't swim and within moments started to sink under the water. The odd gurgled "help" could be heard now and again as she managed to force her head above water but it clearly wouldn't be long before she went under completely. As Candy and Sophira looked on with baited breath, Osric gained on the panicking maiden.)

OSRIC: Hang in there, Aquaria!

(Having thrashed about so violently for so long, Aquaria was quickly losing energy and before Osric could reach her, she sunk under the water.)

OSRIC: Shit!

(As a crowd gathered by the river bank, Osric instinctively dived beneath the water leaving those on the embankment holding their breath in terror. The Sheriff himself soon appeared on the scene, joining the others in watching the river and hoping.

Moments later, much to everyone's relief, there was a splash as Osric crashed through the surface. The relief was short-lived, however as he spun around looking mortified.)

OSRIC: I can't find her!!!

(The entire town was in disarray as once again, Osric dived beneath the surface.

Taking immediate control of the scene, the sheriff stepped forward.)

SHERIFF: Arrest him as soon as he surfaces! First he takes her innocence then he tries to drown her!

(Too stunned to plead his cause, Candy joined Sophira in holding praying hands to her face as they scanned the surface of the river.)

CANDY: Come on... come on...

(Suddenly, he splashed through the surface again, this time with Aquaria in his arms. The whole town erupted in premature relief as he thrashed about, struggling to hold them both afloat.)

OSRIC: Help!!!

(Stung into action, Candy immediately reached for her pack and pulled out a lasso.)

CANDY: I just hope this works!!!

(With intent in her eyes she rushed to the river bank as the townsfolk fell silence once again. Realising that the current was starting to carry them away, they gasped in horror and watched on helplessly. Knowing Osric couldn't hold on much longer in the face of the strong current, Candy was glad to finally be able to use a skill she was adept at. Hurriedly she tied one end of the rope around her wrist and with pin point accuracy, she span the lasso to gain momentum before casting it perfectly over Osric's head. First to notice a problem with her tactic, Sophira stepped forward.)

SOPHIRA: Umm... Candy!!!

(Before she could help her however, Osric slipped under the water and started to drift away with Aquaria in his arms. Determined not to let that happen, Candy pulled tight on the rope only for both her feet to leave the ground as the current dragged her long via Osric's neck. Gasping in horror the townsfolk looked on as Sophira and several guards chased after a screaming Candy as she bounced along the river bank.)

CANDY: Agh!!!

(Being dragged along the bank like a keel-hauled pirate, she yelped and screamed while attempting to untie the rope from her wrist.)

CANDY: I'm really, really dumb!!!

(As she screamed her head off she looked ahead and cringed before screeching out in terror. She was rapidly being dragged towards a waterside cottage.)

CANDY: Help!!!

(Determined to catch her, the guards gave chase followed by a terrified looking Sophira. Fearing Candy would be drowned or killed by the collision Sophira's heart raced and her mind ran riot, the sight of her bobbing and bouncing like a rag doll along the river bank on the end of a rope, almost too much to bear. She knew their luck had to run out sooner or later and she feared that time had come. Thankfully for her, the sheriff managed to dive and grab Candy's foot but not before she crashed headfirst into the cottage.

Thinking only of Aquaria, the sheriff and his men untied the rope from Candy's wrist and started to drag Osric back to the river bank ignoring the unconscious Candy completely. Sophira was only too relieved to reach her and heal her concussion from the collision in time. With Candy safe, they could only watch on helplessly as the guards tried to retrieve Osric. As they pulled the rope and dragged him from the river, Osric flailed his free hand wildly, slowly being strangled by the rope. With his

tongue hanging out and barely conscious, they'd just managed to pull him out in time. There was much relief. They knew that if they'd strangled Osric, Aquaria would have been lost to the river forever.

In a blind rush, Sophira instinctively healed Osric as the guards all raced to try and resuscitate Aquaria. As soon as he was healed, Osric sat up and joined everyone in watching the elder's precious grand-daughter and hoping against hope she'd be okay. Seeing their attempts at CPR fail spectacularly, Sophira tried to help.)

SOPHIRA: I can heal her!

(As if she was scum, a guard just bashed her back.)

GUARD: You fools will pay for this!

(Osric frowned.)

OSRIC: Fuck sake, I get the blame for everything in this town!

(Not about to give up so easily, Sophira frowned as the guards surrounded the prostrate Aquaria.)

SOPHIRA: Fine!

(Looking determined she then strode over to them and touched two of them on the neck. Much to everyone's amazement they both fell asleep on the spot. Wasting no time at all, Sophira dove into the gap and lay her healing hands on Aquaria.)

SHERIFF: What are you...

(Immediately, Aquaria sat up as if nothing had happened.)

SOPHIRA: Told you I could heal.

(She climbed to her feet and gestured to the guards on the ground.)

SOPHIRA: Don't worry, they're asleep.

(Expecting some sort of gratitude she was horrified to see nobody was impressed, in fact they were quite the opposite. As if they'd butchered half of the town or something the sheriff ordered their immediate arrest and looked to his second in command.)

SHERIFF: Prepare the gallows!

(Immediately, Candy and Sophira screamed.)

CANDY: We didn't do anything!

SOPHIRA: We saved her!

SHERIFF: Make your mind up!

(He glared at Osric.)

SHERIFF: As for you, Osric, you will die by my hand!

(Osric gulped as the sheriff drew his dagger and summoned him towards him.)

SHERIFF: Come on, boy!

(As the townsfolk applauded and egged the sheriff on, they were most surprised to see Aquaria jump in between them.)

AQUARIA: Stop this madness!!!

(The town square fell silent.)

AQUARIA: Osric?

(She stepped up to him slowly.)

AQUARIA: You robbed me of my chastity and lied to me...

(He hung his head.)

AQUARIA: But today you risked your life to save mine. Not many men would have done such a thing. I forgive you.

(She bowed to him respectfully and turned to face a startled looking Candy and Sophira. Stepping up to Sophira she smiled.)

AQUARIA: I don't know you but I sense an essence of purity from you. You healed me with love didn't you? How did you do it?

(Sophira offered her a kind smile.)

SOPHIRA: I just did it, I don't know how!

(Aquaria nodded and turned to address the assembled locals.)

AQUARIA: Osrice and his friends are heroes. Tonight I suggest we hold a street party in their honour.

(A fickle bunch to say the least, the townsfolk forgot their previous cries of derision and jeers and erupted into loud, jubilant cheers. With a smile Candy hugged Sophira, reinforcing Sophira's smile. Seizing the opportunity to get in tight with Candy, Osrice smiled and smarmed his way over towards her giving her his sexiest look only for Aquaria to step in his way.)

AQUARIA: Come; let's talk to my grandfather about removing your banishing order! (Having overheard, Candy smiled and looked to Sophira.)

CANDY: Hey, it's going great, isn't it?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: We still haven't found Arterian, Candy!

(With Osrice clearly interested in her and the plan to get him reinstated to the village a success, Candy could only see as far as her fantasy about living with him there in the village.)

CANDY: I mean apart from that!

(Sensing the urgency to find Arterian would soon be lost on Candy; Sophira smiled and made a decision there and then. She loved Candy, and as such she couldn't stand in her way. Silently she decided that once the street party got underway she'd slip out into the forest alone, leaving her friend to chase her dream.

In gratitude for saving the elder's precious grand-daughter, Candy, Sophira and Osrice were allowed baths and a hearty meal before being invited to join the evening's festivities. Aquaria offered to lend the girls evening dresses for the occasion to which Candy was extremely quick to accept. Sophira made the excuse that her costume had spiritual significance and kindly declined the offer. Having faced the elder and been received positively, Osrice was much relieved and determined not to make the same mistake again. There'd be no way he'd ever risk losing his home again and from now on he'd have to be a lot more careful about the women he chose to mislead. Delighted by the decision to reinstate him, he danced for joy as he left the elder's quarters, punching the air with unbridled joy. He almost felt as if he'd been born again.

As soon as darkness fell, the festivities began. The buildings had been bedecked with multi-coloured flowers and a band struck up just outside the inn to entertain the gathered mass of villagers. Amongst them all, feeling more than a little pleased with himself as he tapped his foot to the medieval rhythm from the harpsichords, Osrice leaned smoothly against a house holding a flagon of ale. With a glint in his eye, he watched Candy and Sophira chat in the middle of the thoroughfare. He couldn't take his eyes off of Candy for a second. With her hair done specially for the evening and the moonlight shimmering on her dress he allowed himself a rye smile and sipped his beer in readiness to make his move. The conversation the girls were having would come as no surprise to him, Candy doing all the talking.)

CANDY: He's so wonderful, Soph. Have you seen his eyes... I could die!

(Sophira smiled solemnly.)

CANDY: Oh my god, I think I love him!

(Sophira looked shocked.)

SOPHIRA: Love?

CANDY: I know I just met him and it's crazy to fall in love with someone so soon but I think I do.

(Sophira offered a stunted smile.)

SOPHIRA: It's not so crazy to fall in love so soon!

(Allowing Sophira's words to sink in, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Yeah, you're right!

(Fighting back a tear, Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Go to him! I just want you to be happy!

(Candy smiled back warmly.)

CANDY: Aw, Soph, you're one in a million, you know that! I love you, girl!

(Sophira cringed, full in the knowledge that the love she spoke of was purely platonic and although a beautiful thing would never satisfy her heart.)

CANDY: You okay?

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, now go!

(Looking excited, Candy grinned and skipped her way over to Osric who in turn looked delighted to see her. Watching her leap into his arms, Sophira sighed to herself and looked to the heavens. How she wished she hadn't been cursed with these feelings. As they disappeared mischievously into the inn, Sophira knew her chance had evaporated. She didn't know if there ever was a chance in the first place but knowing there definitely wasn't one was painful. Moments later, in the room of the inn, Sophira and Osric tore each others clothes off and took what they wanted from each others naked flesh. While Osric revelled in the stunning beauty he was sharing his body with, Candy let her heart go free and together they made love until the early hours of the morning. Little did they know as they lay gasping for breath, some time ago Sophira had bowed her shoulders and headed alone into the woods crying her heart out. She knew she had to find Arterian or die trying and the way she felt, she didn't really mind which one. In her heart she was doing what was right, she was making the supreme sacrifice. Sacrificing her feelings to allow her friend the freedom to love and possibly sacrificing her life to continue in search of Arterian alone.

# DYSTOPIA - THE DARK RAGE

## (Chapter Four – Broken.)

(Relationships are a strange thing. Of all the analogies, phrases and proverbs we use in the course of a lifetime, the one that always rings true is ‘familiarity breeds contempt’. What begins as a cute idiosyncrasy slowly becomes an annoying habit as a relationship ages and the novelty wears off. The person who you *chose* to share your life with disintegrates into the person who *stole* the best years of your life, and everything you once found unique and interesting becomes just another thing to complain about. The love always fades into friendship as the years wear you both down but you stick together because underneath it all you know each other too well and for better or worse, they simply make you feel at home and comfortable. This is why you must always cherish every moment in those fledgling years while the relationship blossoms. The down turn is inevitable.)

*Sunrise – Forest Village – Great North Continent*

(Savouring every second of her new love, Candy lay wide awake in the room at the inn she was sharing with Osric. While he snored like a wildebeest, she lay beside him, watching his eyelids flutter with every breath. Such was the joy of this new born love, she found the whole thing cute and exciting. In 10 years from now it’d make her want to hit him with a frying pan. His cute snore would become a nauseating cacophony and his eyelids fluttering would drive her to distraction but right here in this moment, she watched and sighed with a heart full of love. All she really knew was that she didn’t want to move, this was where she wanted to be. As she absorbed the sounds of a few drunken stragglers still revelling in the previous night’s festivities, she didn’t care if she never got out of bed ever again. Unfortunately for her, however, her bladder had other ideas.

Desperate to get back into bed for a cuddle as soon as possible, she leapt from beneath the covers, as naked as the day she was born and made a beeline for the en suite bathroom. Once inside, she pulled the door shut and backed towards the toilet seat, before seating herself upon the throne. Eager to get back to Osric, she tapped her knee impatiently with her fingers as she did her business.)

CANDY: C’mon, C’mon...

(Job done, she cleaned herself up and made a dash for the door, looking forward to leaping back into bed. With a wide smile and glowing eyes she yanked open the door and virtually skipped through it only to receive the most horrible of disappointments.)

OSRIC: Babe, I thought you’d gone!

(Osric had got out of bed and had almost finished dressing. Candy’s heart sunk.)

CANDY: Aw, I wanted to snuggle for a bit!

(Osric smiled.)

OSRIC: Yeah?

(Confident in the power of her sexuality, Candy gave him a sexy smile and slowly minced towards the bed before laying down in a sexy manner and looking him in the eye.)

CANDY: Are you sure I can’t tempt you to come back to bed?

(Osric could only gape, impressed by her show of raw sensuality.)

CANDY: Well?

(Shaking his head in an attempt to drag his eyes from Candy's nakedness, Osric puffed out.)

OSRIC: Damn, you're good!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: I'm the best, and I'm all yours!

(Clearly tempted, Osric stood back and held his hand out to her.)

OSRIC: Wow... you know, I'd love to but I have to see someone first!

(Candy was mortified. Until now, when she went into sexy-mode, men had been powerless.)

CANDY: What? I don't understand!

OSRIC: No biggie, I just need to see a mate about getting a room... oh and me mum, I'd better say "hi" to her I suppose.

(Candy was unimpressed to say the least.)

CANDY: Can't that wait? I mean, what's the hurry?

(Fortunately for Osric, the door knocked and saved him from a lengthy explanation that Candy would never even attempt to understand. When you hurt a girl's feelings in the bedroom department, it's a very long road back. Wrapping a robe around herself as she did so, Candy strode up to the door and swung it open, half expecting Sophira to be the other side. Much to her surprise a member of the inn staff bid her a good morning and passed her a small white envelope before heading off down the corridor. Looking bemused she closed the door and started to open the envelope.)

OSRIC: Who was it?

(She gave him a swift glance and ignored him as she pulled a letter from the envelope and proceeded to read it.)

OSRIC: Please yourself!

(As he pulled his boot on, Osric watched Candy scan the letter with her eyes. Almost immediately he could tell something was wrong. Candy's jaw dropped and her lips started to quiver uncontrollably.)

OSRIC: Candy?

(Pale faced and trembling, she slowly faced Osric and dropped the letter by her side.)

CANDY: It's Sophira. She's gone!

(Within minutes, dressed and looking determined, Candy strode from the inn being chased by a worried Osric.)

OSRIC: What do you mean, she's gone?

CANDY: She's gone, she's gone without me!

OSRIC: Gone where?

(As they made their way through the early dawn light of the thoroughfare, Candy stared straight ahead, weaving between the few remaining drunken revellers, barging them if she had to, as she made her way to the top end of town.)

OSRIC: Candy? Gone where?

CANDY: I don't know, do I? She's gone to find Arterian obviously!

(Osric looked a little uncertain.)

OSRIC: Are you sure? What did the letter say? Surely she wouldn't risk the forest alone!

CANDY: Yes, she would. And if I don't find her, anything could happen to her!

(Looking extremely unsettled, Osric grabbed both Candy's shoulders and brought her to a halt. As they stood face to face he was animated with his questions.)

OSRIC: Candy, what did the letter say? Tell me exactly!

(Glancing briefly to the forest before she did so, Candy looked him in the eye.)



CANDY: It said I shouldn't worry and she'll find Arterian... and that she hopes you and I will be happy together for eternity.

(Osric bit his lip.)

OSRIC: Hmm... so why are you worried? Sounds like she knows what she's saying and you said she had powers.

CANDY: Healing powers. She's about as useful at fighting as... well, me!

OSRIC: I see...

(Wanting to waste no more time, Candy headed for the forest again.)

CANDY: We have to find her!

(Having started to follow, Osric stopped.)

OSRIC: We? Yeah... about that...

(In utter disbelief, Candy spun around to face him.)

CANDY: You are coming, right?

(He bit his lip and said nothing forcing Candy's mouth to fall open.)

CANDY: No way!

(Osric shrugged.)

OSRIC: Hey, we had fun didn't we? It's not like we're betrothed or anything. We were horny and we made the most of it, let's not make a big deal of it!

(Candy's face screwed up with anger.)

CANDY: I love you, you prick!

(Osric shrugged.)

OSRIC: Yeah, see I'm not into all that. You were great though babe.

(Forcing back a tear, she shook her head.)

CANDY: You bastard!

(Osric just gave her a sorry smile.)

CANDY: Sophira's put her life in danger 'cause she thought we were going to be together and you were just using me!

(Osric frowned.)

OSRIC: Hey, you were just as up for it as I was! More so in fact. Third time round, I wanted to go to sleep but you insisted on going down there.

(Giving him serious evil eyes, she scowled hatefully into him.)

CANDY: You fucking bastard. If anything's happened to Sophira, I'm going to come back and kill you.

OSRIC: Hey! I didn't force her to go, that was her own choice!

(Candy nodded contemptuously.)

CANDY: Yeah, I guess you had us *both* well fooled.

OSRIC: Whatever, I wanted a fuck and you wanted a fuck. We fucked. So don't come all this crap with me. I never promised you anything.

(Candy snarled.)

CANDY: Well what I said about coming back to kill you, that *is* a promise. In the meantime...

(With hate etched into her face she took one step forward then toe-punted Osric as hard as she could in the privates. As he collapsed like a deck of cards to the ground, she spun around and headed into the forest forcing back tears as she went.

The rainfall of the previous day had left much of the forest floor boggy and sodden. Conveniently for Candy this would make tracking her absent friend that little bit easier. Having been well tutored in the ways of tracking by her hunter father, she immediately looked for signs of Sophira. After a few moments scouting the forest

floor around her, she spotted a footprint similar to Sophira's heading down a forest path and set off in pursuit.

At the forefront of Candy's mind as she followed Sophira's steps was how simple a task it would be just as long as Sophira had stuck to the path. The possibility that she may have been spooked by something and veered off the beaten track, however, was never far from her mind. The other factor she was all too aware of was that Sophira had had a very long head start. The truth was that she could have been anywhere and if Candy's tracking skills let her down like so many of her other skills had, Sophira would probably never be found. And so with her head down she focussed intently on the tracks and soldiered forth as fast as she could without losing the trail. The muddled pathway didn't help her mobility but it certainly made the tracks easier to follow. Trying as best as she could to keep a cool head, she mumbled to herself as she busied along.)

CANDY: Oh, Soph. Why'd you do it, girl?

(She sighed.)

CANDY: It's Osric's fault! Bastard!

(And with her eyes fixed to the tracks she proceeded to cuss him down impressively.)

CANDY: How could he do that? How could he use me like that? I should have known he was lying all along. Sophira sensed he was a tosser, why didn't I see it?

(A little way along the path, Sophira's footprints elongated and there was a large Sophira shaped imprint in the mud with a couple of handprints ahead of it. Candy scanned the messy shapes in the mud closely, deducing she'd slipped and fallen over at this point. Judging by the shape of the splat, she'd landed face first. Allowing herself a brief chuckle, Candy pictured her friend's mishap and a cold feeling swamped her heart. She really missed her. Osric had broken her heart and her friend wasn't there for her. Feeling more than a little broken, she continued on looking devastated.)

CANDY: Stupid Osric. Now Sophira's gone 'cause of him. I hate him.

(As she paced onwards, cursing Osric under her breath and staring down at the tracks, she didn't notice a rustling in the leaves to the left of her. So engrossed was she that she didn't even flinch when the bushes to that side of her started to flatten as if something was walking parallel to her.)

CANDY: Where are you, Soph? Did you stop to wash yourself or something? Please don't be too far away.

(Oblivious to anything but the ground, Candy still didn't seem to notice when the bushes between her and whatever stalked her started to thrash and thud to the ground. Sensing an easy kill; the same panther that had so nearly taken Candy's life the day before leapt from the deep growth snarling like a demon. Normally at this point, Candy would have screamed and tried to run. So far in her adventure she'd shown little to no skill whatsoever and put both her and Sophira's life in extreme danger on several occasions, but not this time. With lightning reflexes to match even that of the panther, she ripped her sword from her pack and thrust it towards the giant pouncing feline. With a pitiful yelp, the panther found itself impaled on Candy's sword. As the beast flopped to earth, Candy yanked her sword back and carried on walking as if it was nothing, briefly looking back at the dead panther as she did so.)

CANDY: Stupid prick, did you think I didn't know you were there?

(With complete disdain for the panther's stealth skills, she powered forward, picking up the pace. It was only now that her true ability was showing through. Rather than laughing and joking with her friend, she was actually focussed on what she was doing.

Her hearing was primed to alert her of dangers and her eyes were engaged solely on decoding Sophira's movements. A total heightening of her senses. Despite her dedication and concentration in the job in hand, however she still had a little left in the tank for slandering Osric profusely.)

CANDY: Blah, blah, blah... it's what you do with it that matters he says... yeah right! (She scowled.)

CANDY: You've got a tiny cock, dude. Deal with it! Smug git, what on earth was I thinking?

(As she motored forth, she allowed herself a sigh.)

CANDY: I was falling in love, that's what!

(And with a shake of the head she paced on.

A good few hours passed and there was still no sign of Sophira but as long as her prints were visible, there'd be no way Candy was giving up. Marching on without regard for her own tiredness, she followed a split in the road just as Sophira appeared to have done sometime earlier in the day. Not letting the tracks out of her sight for a moment, she carried on with hope in her broken heart. Hope, after all, was pretty much all she had left. Love had come and gone and the chance that she might find Sophira was her only inspiration. Without her, she'd have nothing. And with this as her fuel, she picked up the pace once more.)

CANDY: Damn it girl, you just kept on going didn't you?

(Only seconds after she said those words, the tracks came to an abrupt end.

Immediately Candy's hair stood on end and she looked about herself in a panic.)

CANDY: No way... this can't...

(Suddenly remembering her training, she calmed herself and looked for signs as to where she went. Just to her left some of the bramble had been trodden down and she could see white birds circling through a gap in the trees. Checking there was no other sign of movement, she then proceeded to head across the broken down brambles.)

CANDY: Ouch... why go through the prickles, Soph? Ouch!

(As she emerged from the prickles, she looked about herself and suddenly her heart leapt for joy. There to the left of her she saw the glimmering blue and gold of Sophira's outfit through a gap in some bushes. Jumping for joy, she thanked the heavens and raced over as fast as she could. Unable to control herself, she called out in an ecstatic voice.)

CANDY: Soph, Soph... I found you!!!

(And with that she leapt through the bushes towards her.)

CANDY: Soph...

(Suddenly, she let out a deafening scream that frightened away every bird in the vicinity and her eyes bulged with horror. Before her stood an impaled skeleton dressed in Sophira's clothes. Holding her tortured head, Candy fell to her knees and gasped. After such a rollercoaster of emotions, first thinking she was lost, then finding her only to discover what she had, her heart tore in two.)

CANDY: Soph... who did this to you? How?

(Unable to control herself, she burst into a flood of tears and threw an angry head to the heavens.)

CANDY: Why???

(And with that she threw herself to the ground, wailing like a mortified widow.)

CANDY: No!!!

(Devastated to her very core, she pictured every moment they'd spent together, their friendship flashing before her. Thoughts of how it should never have happened hit

her like hammer blows. It was as if her soul had been crushed. Her beautiful, wonderful, beloved friend, struck down so mercilessly in her prime. Who could do such a thing to her? In a daze, her head swirled and she failed to come to terms with what she'd found. Surely Sophira of all people didn't deserve this. As she bashed the turf with her fist and wailed out in anguish, however, a small voice rose up behind her.)

SOPHIRA: Candy?

(As naked as the day she was born, looking absolutely bewildered by her friend's behaviour, Sophira stood a mere few feet away using her hands to cover her exposed areas. As a thousand differing thoughts ran riot in her mind, Candy could do nothing but freeze and stare up at her in a total state of shock. Puzzled and somewhat stunned by Candy's action, Sophira wasn't long in breaking the silence. With a raised eyebrow she enquired sedately.)

SOPHIRA: What are you...

(Too gobsmacked to finish her sentence, she watched wide-eyed as Candy slowly rose to her feet looking at her like she was a ghost.)

CANDY: Is it really you?

(Sophira could only look bemused.)

CANDY: It is you!

(Recognising and finding instant comfort in Sophira's frequently used blank expression, Candy cast aside her disorientation and leapt forward to throw her arms around her friend. Reciprocating immediately, Sophira squeezed Candy tight as she invited her into her open arms. Such was Candy's relief she almost squeezed every breath out of Sophira before stepping back and proceeding to wail.)

CANDY: I thought you were dead.

(Being too sensitive for her own good, Sophira's face immediately dropped and she too started to sob.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry!

CANDY: No, I'm sorry!

(And in a sad show of feminine remorse they proceeded to apologise profusely and cry their eyes out.)

CANDY: I was a bad friend!

SOPHIRA: No, I was!

(Unfortunately, with so many unresolved issues between the two of them, the show of verbal self flagellation was destined to have a brief shelf life. Sure enough it was only a matter of moments before the emotions they'd released upon their reunion turned sour. Absorbing Sophira's admission that she was the bad friend, Candy shook her head briefly then suddenly looked thoughtful.)

CANDY: Actually, yes, you are a bad friend!

SOPHIRA: Huh?

CANDY: How could you just walk off like that???

(Looking more than slightly taken aback, Sophira placed angry hands on her hips and adopted an attitude.)

SOPHIRA: Oh right, says you! What happened to lover boy?

(Returning her scornful stance, Candy stepped back and wagged her finger towards Sophira.)

CANDY: Don't you bring him into this; he didn't force you to go!

(With a scowl, Sophira retorted.)

SOPHIRA: I never said he did!

CANDY: Shut your fucking trap then!

(Amazed she'd have the audacity to talk to her in such a manner, Sophira went red with rage.)

SOPHIRA: You shut the fuck up, you cheap slapper!

(Candy was outraged.)

CANDY: What did you call me???

SOPHIRA: A slapper! Or do you prefer the term, "morally challenged"?

CANDY: You bitch!

SOPHIRA: Cheap brazen hussy!

CANDY: I loved him!

SOPHIRA: Oh right...

(She held her palm towards her.)

SOPHIRA: Whatever!

(Sneering wildly, Candy grabbed her hand and dug her fingernails deep into her thumb.)

CANDY: What do you think of me now, bitch?

(As her eyes bulged, Sophira cried out in pain. Letting her go, Candy snarled.)

CANDY: Plenty more where that came from too!

(Having never been treated in such a way, Sophira snarled back venomously.)

SOPHIRA: You asked for it!!!

(And with that, she sprung forwards and yanked Candy's hair as hard as she could. With a scream, Candy slipped back before swinging her hand round to grab a handful of Sophira's hair. There then followed a shameful and quite frankly disgraceful display of slapping, scratching and kicking. Almost ripping each others hair out, they circled several times while crying and screeching like small children. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that they looked like a poorly choreographed ballet as they rotated aggressively.)

CANDY: I hate you!!!

SOPHIRA: I hate you more!!!

(As they spun around, both refusing to let go, Candy remembered some of the things her father had taught her about how to get rid of a wannabe assailant. Without really thinking it through she let go of Sophira's hair and used both hands to twist the skin on Sophira's wrist in separate directions. It worked like a charm as Sophira could only scream and let go of her hair. As soon as she did so, Candy then punched her squarely on the jaw sending her flying back to the turf on her naked bottom.

Now, in a man's world, this would be viewed as a victory or at least a sign of who was the better man. In the female world however, this was a time to stop and reflect on what had just happened. Sophira could only stare agape up at Candy, mortified that she'd use such extreme violence. Sharing the same twisted logic, Candy stared down at Sophira thinking exactly the same thing. The fact they were having a fight was neither here or there at this point. In a man's world, the man who flattens the other is the winner. In the female world, the one who flattens the other is the aggressor and therefore has to do all the grovelling and apologising. As her bottom lip quivered, Candy stepped forward slowly.)

CANDY: Oh my god, I'm so, so sorry!

(With her lip also quivering uncontrollably, Sophira backed away.)

SOPHIRA: You punched me!

(With nothing left but apologies, Candy burst out crying.)

CANDY: I'm sorry!

(Climbing to her feet, Sophira covered her nudity and joined in the chorus of tears.)

SOPHIRA: So you should be!!!

(Face to face, they wailed like a pair of banshees for a moment before holding the tears back long enough to look one another in the eye.)

CANDY: I really am sorry!

(And with nothing else left to say, they fell into each others arms and resumed their sorry show of tears and wailing. Eventually stepping back from the hug, Sophira wiped her eyes and gave Candy an apologetic smile.)

SOPHIRA: I think it might be time we had a chat and cleared the air.

(Wiping away her tears, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: What gave you that impression?

(They shared a brief chuckle before Sophira reached out her hand.)

SOPHIRA: Friends?

(Candy smiled and took her hand.)

CANDY: Friends!

(Following a brief, warm smile between the two, Candy looked Sophira up and down then gestured to the skeleton that was wearing her clothes.)

CANDY: They look better on you!

(Sophira blushed.)

SOPHIRA: I was drying them; I fell in some mud, you see?

(She pointed towards the direction she'd first appeared from.)

SOPHIRA: There's a small pool down there and I was covered in mud from head to toe. I landed on my face.

(Candy grinned.)

CANDY: I know, I saw the imprint you left.

(As Sophira blushed deeper, Candy suddenly gave a sorrowful pout.)

CANDY: I saw your clothes and I thought I'd found you, then I came up here and saw this. I thought it was you.

(Expecting sympathy, Candy was a little surprised to see Sophira frown at her.)

SOPHIRA: This is a male skeleton!

CANDY: Huh?

SOPHIRA: And it's been here so long the bones have been bleached!

(Looking somewhat miffed, Candy returned the frown.)

CANDY: How was I to know that?

(Realising she was being a little harsh, Sophira relented her frown and placed her hand on Candy's shoulder.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry. I was just teasing... kinda. You were really upset when I saw you, you must really like me!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: I do. Even if you do fight like a retard.

(They shared a grin for a moment before both laughing out loud.)

SOPHIRA: What were we doing, Candy?

CANDY: I have no idea. Oh my god, we're so silly sometimes!

(As the laughter died down, they shared another smile before Candy gestured towards the forest.)

CANDY: Shall we talk while we walk? I'm sure we'll find Arterian sooner or later!

(Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: Let's go!

(Candy held out her arm and Sophira immediately took it. And with no more ado they went off together down the path arm in arm with a smile on their faces.)

SOPHIRA: I'm so glad you found me. It was horrible on my own!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Well, let's make sure we stick together this time. Things might get tricky...

(Sophira nodded in absolute agreement.)

CANDY: ...especially with you being butt-naked and all.

SOPHIRA: What???

(Almost having a heart attack, Sophira jumped back and looked down herself.)

SOPHIRA: Oh my god!!!

(Looking thoroughly embarrassed she thrust her hands into place to protect her modesty before spinning around and racing back towards the skeleton. Watching her backside as she rushed along, Candy grinned to herself.)

CANDY: I wonder how far we'd have got before she noticed.

(Once Sophira was dressed and ready, the two of them set off once again to follow the nearest trail. Feeling a warm sense of relief at being back together again, they made the most of the opportunity to share their feelings. They both knew they were speaking to caring ears which made it so much easier to clear the air. Holding Candy's arm as she walked, Sophira began to address the problem at the core of it all. Osric.)

SOPHIRA: So, he was just using you?

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Yeah... and I let him. I don't know why.

SOPHIRA: You let him? You mean you knew?

CANDY: No... not as such. It's hard to explain!

SOPHIRA: Try me.

(Candy sighed, not sure if she even knew herself exactly what she meant.)

CANDY: It's like... I had some sort of vision that was blinding me to the truth...

(Sophira looked baffled already but listened on.)

CANDY: He'd mentioned sex and I kind of heard "make love". If he'd have told me I was a conquest, I'd probably have only heard the word "girlfriend". I think I wanted him to love me so bad that I just convinced myself he did.

(Sophira lay her head on Candy's shoulder for a brief moment and sympathised.)

SOPHIRA: Aw, Candy...

(Lifting her head, she continued.)

SOPHIRA: I think I know what you mean.

(Candy looked to her imploringly.)

CANDY: Really?

(Sophira nodded and gave her a smile.)

SOPHIRA: You deluded yourself. You're a bit like me, you're so blinded by hope sometimes you never can tell when there really isn't any. You want things to work out so much you believe it will.

(Candy nodded and let out a saddened sigh.)

CANDY: I felt so crushed when he told me and all I wanted to do was talk to you but you weren't there.

(Sophira hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry.

(They both sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I thought you were so into Osric you wouldn't want to come with me anymore. I knew it'd be hard for you to tell me so I left. I thought it'd be easier on everyone.

(Candy shook her head.)

CANDY: Well, in future we need to talk about things. If I'd listened to you when you said you didn't like him this wouldn't have happened. I should have known you'd be able to sense a bad one.

(Sophira went bright red and looked shifty.)

SOPHIRA: I didn't sense he was bad; I just didn't want him to have you.

(Candy gave her a sideways glance.)

CANDY: Eh?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I was jealous!

(Not sure how Candy would react to this news, Sophira was much relieved to see her smile.)

CANDY: That's so sweet. You didn't want to share your friend, I get that.

(Sophira nodded, unsure whether she really wanted Candy to know her true feelings or not.)

CANDY: Just promise me one thing in future, Soph.

SOPHIRA: Anything!

CANDY: Don't go off without me. Ever. If you ever go, I want the chance to come or at least say goodbye.

(Sophira nodded and smiled happily.)

SOPHIRA: It's a deal!

(And so with the tension between them lifted, they picked up a pace as they sauntered through the forest holding hands and laughing together. Having almost lost their friendship, having it back meant more to them both than ever. Such was their elation at the reunion; they almost forgot about Arterian and skipped forth like two friends having a walk in the park.

As the sun echoed through the treetops that afternoon, Sophira and Candy marched on deep in conversation about pretty much anything that sprang to mind. Their disorganisation was almost the direct opposite of Candy's concentration and dedication that very morning. The glow from the leaves and the sound of bird song added to the sense of a care free occasion as they marched on a high well into the early evening. It wasn't long however before that lack of thought came back to haunt them. The path they'd so merrily strolled down without a care in the world came to an abrupt end and they found themselves stepping up to the top edge of a large grassy embankment. As they peered down the steep decline with inquisitive looks on their faces, they noticed the gradient remained reasonably constant until it smoothed out at the bottom. As she gazed above the tops of the trees that rose from the embankment, Sophira noticed the ocean and raised a quizzical eyebrow.)

SOPHIRA: I can see the sea! Have we crossed the entire forest or just walked down the coast?

(Candy looked to her briefly before reaching into her pack and pulling out her compass. As she gazed down at it with concentration etched into her brow, Sophira spoke up.)

SOPHIRA: Well?

CANDY: Umm...

(She looked embarrassed.)

CANDY: I can't remember which way we set out!

(As she hung her head and blushed, Sophira thought to herself.)

SOPHIRA: Umm... we headed south I think!

CANDY: Really?



SOPHIRA: Yeah, I'm pretty sure!

(Candy nodded and looked to the compass again.)

CANDY: Right, so the ocean there is to the north, that means we've crossed the forest!

(Sophira thought to herself momentarily then frowned.)

SOPHIRA: No, it means we've headed along the north coast.

(Candy looked unsure.)

CANDY: Does it?

SOPHIRA: Well we headed south, away from the ocean, therefore the ocean was to the north when we left and it still is.

(Candy gave her a thousand yard stare.)

CANDY: What?

(Allowing herself a grin, Sophira poked out her tongue cheekily.)

SOPHIRA: Doesn't matter. Let's just get down this hillside shall we?

(Feeling a little bit hurt by Sophira's amusement, Candy gave a half sneer.)

CANDY: It's a bank actually but who's keeping score?

SOPHIRA: Touché! C'mon!

(Now, pride can be a terrible thing. On a good day it can be the one thing that stops a person from giving up, a driving force behind success if you will. Normally, however, it's that little voice inside you that tells you asserting yourself is a good idea when you should just let things go. Pride is that voice that tells you to punch the seven foot tall heavyweight boxer who accidentally nudged past your girlfriend, just because she looks disappointed that you let it go. Pride is that bitter little pill we all find so hard to swallow at times. Pride has consequences. Having been made to look rather silly as a trained tracker who can't read a compass, Candy would have been better off to make light of it and let it slide, but alas, no. Pride dictated that Candy had to prove herself adept at the ways of the forest at the first available opportunity. Feeling an edginess inside of her to set the record straight, she looked about the top of the embankment for something intelligent to remark about and redeem herself as an expert of the forest. Sophira watched on curiously. As her eyes scanned the scene around them she spotted a fallen tree and mused to herself deeply. Wearing a perplexed expression, Sophira spoke up.)

SOPHIRA: You okay there, Candy?

(Giving her a smug smile in return, Candy nodded and gestured towards the log with her eyes.)

CANDY: Let me teach you an old forest secret.

(Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: Okay!

(It was lost on Candy that she still had Sophira's unconditional, if misplaced trust in all things woodland.)

CANDY: See that log?

(She pointed to the fallen tree in question.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah!

CANDY: We're going to ride it down the embankment!

(Sophira looked surprised but nodded happily.)

SOPHIRA: Okay, sounds good! You do this sort of thing a lot then?

(Candy nodded and proceeded to lie spectacularly.)

CANDY: Sure, pretty much everyday we ride the logs near Chiswell Point!

(Sophira smiled excitedly.)

SOPHIRA: Cool, sounds fun!

(Feeling confident, Candy led her towards the log and took a seat at the front facing down the hill.)

CANDY: Hop on!

(Looking forward to the ride, Sophira straddled the back end of the log and rubbed her hands excitedly.)

SOPHIRA: Ready!

CANDY: Okay, now kick off like I'm doing!

(As Candy proceeded to try and kick the log into action, Sophira followed suit. They both gripped the log tight with their hands and kicked away determinedly for a good 30 seconds or so when Sophira suddenly stopped.)

SOPHIRA: Why isn't it moving?

(Candy snarled back.)

CANDY: Keep kicking!!!

(Having made a fool of herself with the compass she was determined not to be shown up again but the log simply wouldn't budge. Sophira joined her in trying to kick start it into action but they got nothing. After a few minutes, Candy stopped and took a deep breath. She was too proud to give up now. Pride comes before a fall. As Candy took another deep breath and flexed her legs in readiness to give it another try, the log suddenly started to twist. Sophira looked delighted.)

SOPHIRA: I did it!

(That delight suddenly turned to despair however when she noticed the back end of the log was twisting round with the gradient and the front still hadn't moved.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(Before Candy could do a thing about it, the log started to slide down the embankment backwards with both the girls facing the wrong way, screaming with terror.)

SOPHIRA: I don't like it, I don't like it!!!

CANDY: Help!!!

(Hugging the log with a death grip, they both contorted their necks to look over their shoulders as the log thundered down the steep embankment. All they could see was a green and brown blur as they whizzed past trees at a blinding speed.)

SOPHIRA: I wanna get off!!!

(To make matters worse, the log went over a bump landing with quite a thump, making Candy bang her head as she flopped forwards.)

CANDY: Yeow!!!

SOPHIRA: I'm gonna be sick!!!

(As if fate was looking down on them and mocking, they then proceeded to zoom through 3 muddy puddles, a thorn bush and a rather large group of dozing mountain lions. Filthy, soaked to the skin and covered in cuts, they continued on down the bank, picking up speed as the lions gave chase.)

SOPHIRA: I hate you, Candy!!!

(Staring back at the pursuing lions, Candy could say nothing having been struck dumb by fear. Wanting it all to end as soon as possible, Sophira closed her eyes and made the futile gesture of imploring the log to stop. With her eyes transfixed on the hungry beast in pursuit of them, Candy implored the opposite.)

CANDY: We're going to die!!!

SOPHIRA: I know!!!

(As always, they panicked like it was going out of fashion.)

CANDY: What are we gonna do???

(Sophira started crying.)

CANDY: That'll help!!!

(And with that, she too burst into tears. Feeling certain they could crash any minute only to be devoured by lions if they survived, they both proceeded to wail and mumble in terror as they cried uncontrollably. Looking back with hunched shoulders, Sophira tried again to see where they were heading only to receive the shock of her life. They were hurtling out of control towards a herd of goats. She braced herself and cringed.)

SOPHIRA: This is going to hurt!!!

(Much to her amazement, they whizzed through the middle of the goats unscathed. To make things even better the lions then proceeded to attack the goats and abandon the pursuit. Watching on, Candy drew a sigh of relief.)

CANDY: We're saved!!!

(The scream from Sophira begged to differ.)

SOPHIRA: We're doomed!!!

(With a face full of fear, Candy looked back and made quite a horrifying discovery. The log was about to shoot off the edge of a cliff that they hadn't seen beneath the tree tops.)

CANDY: Dive off!!!

(Sophira yelled back.)

SOPHIRA: Okay!!!

(Too scared to move they both did nothing.)

CANDY: Okay, this time!!!

(Before they could do anything however, the log flew from the cliff edge.)

CANDY: No!!!

SOPHIRA: Mummy!!!

(Their screams could probably have been heard for miles around. A cold hearted cynic might suggest "they should have cried 'Arterian' then" but he was the last thing on their minds. Fearing imminent death they both screamed their hearts out until the log crashed down on the other side of the crevice. Amazed at the lucky escape, Candy hugged the speeding log and took a deep breath while Sophira looked to the heavens.)

SOPHIRA: We're okay!!!

(They both regained their breath for a moment and before they could renew their wild panicking, the log started to slow. In utter relief they both looked around themselves and wiped sweat from their brows.)

CANDY: Oh boy, I thought we were done for!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Me too. I'm not doing that again!

(Candy said nothing, knowing only too well that her attempt to look like a true woodland genius had made her look a complete fool and nearly got them both killed again. Finally swallowing her pride, she turned to Sophira just as the log finally ground to a halt.)

CANDY: I'm sorry, Soph!

(Leaping from the log, Sophira yelled back to her.)

SOPHIRA: It wasn't your fault the log slid backwards.

(Not knowing how Sophira could still have so much faith in her, Candy looked baffled for a moment. Shrugging it off, she too leapt from the log and hugged Sophira for all she was worth. They didn't know how exactly, but they were thankful just to be alive.)

SOPHIRA: I'm all caked in crap again!

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Sorry.

SOPHIRA: Stop apologising...

(Suddenly she looked bewildered and gazed over Candy's shoulder.)

SOPHIRA: What's that?

(Candy turned around and stepped back in bewilderment.)

CANDY: I don't know!

(Before them stood a thin stone entrance way which seemed to lead down underneath the ground. Having stared at it briefly, Sophira's attention was soon diverted back to what had just happened.)

SOPHIRA: I'm so sick of almost dying.

(Candy nodded solemnly.)

CANDY: Me too. Y'know, I thought this would be easy but I guess I'm not as great at this survival lark as I thought I was.

(Wearing a sincere expression, Sophira placed a kind hand on her shoulder.)

SOPHIRA: Oh but you are. We're still alive aren't we?

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Yeah, despite me. There's a world of difference between tracking animals in an enclosed hunting zone and trying to survive out here on our wits. I just wish I'd realised it before.

(Not wanting to be unsupportive even for a moment, Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, it's been scary, terrifying even, but we're okay and I couldn't have done this without you. So, we barely survived, I doubt I'd have survived at all without you.

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: That's crap, but the fact you care enough to lie means a lot, Soph.

(They shared a friendly smile before turning back to face the stone entrance way.)

CANDY: I know we shouldn't but...

SOPHIRA: I hear you. The mere fact it's there makes you wanna go inside.

CANDY: Exactly.

SOPHIRA: Well, there's no harm in looking.

("There's no harm in looking". "What's the worst that can happen?". "At least things can't get any worse". All things a person should never say unless they really want to tempt fate. Fate is far too easily tempted to risk saying such things, surely. Drawn almost hypnotically to the narrow stone doorway, Candy and Sophira crept forwards with eyes on stalks. Their demeanour clearly showing their doubt that there really was no harm in looking. They both felt apprehensive but were drawn by an uncontrollable urge to see inside. Was it the lure of the unknown? Was it the chance that Arterian might be inside? All they knew was that they were going in. As they reached the entrance, they both trembled before taking their first tentative steps down the stone stairs inside. They could see a stone floor at the bottom of the stairs and it didn't seem to be too dark but still their hearts raced. As Candy first reached the bottom of the steps, she stopped dead in her tracks and gaped at the sight before her. There was a large square room with a break in its stone walls that lead out to the crevice they'd just cleared on the log, allowing light to flood in. Large pillars held the roof in place and there was a small bath in the centre. The walls were adorned with fine gold and blue paintwork patterns which generated a most peaceful ambience. As they looked around in awe, Sophira gasped.)

SOPHIRA: Oh, wow!

(Candy nodded, clearly impressed.)

CANDY: I know!

SOPHIRA: What is it? Some kind of ancient bath house?

(Candy shrugged as she continued to stare wide eyed at the picturesque décor.)

CANDY: Maybe, I don't know.

SOPHIRA: It's lovely!

(Snapping from her trance, Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Seems like a great place to take a rest and clean up a little.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah it does.

(Giving the room a final once over with her eyes, she looked up and shouted out.)

SOPHIRA: Arterian!!!

(Candy almost leapt out of her skin.)

CANDY: What you doing?

(Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: No harm in asking is there?

(Allowing herself a brief chuckle, Candy took one step towards the bath when a sudden sound of echoing, scampering footsteps made both her and Sophira spin around in fear. With eyes on stalks they scanned all around the room but saw nothing.)

CANDY: You heard that, right?

SOPHIRA: Y-yeah!

(Having already been in enough danger for one day, the next move was obvious to both of them. Needing no second invitation they both made an instant decision.)

CANDY: Let's get the fuck out of here!

SOPHIRA: Uh-huh!

(It may have seemed lame to some that they were so easily spooked by something as trivial as footsteps but after all Candy and Sophira had been through, even the potential thought of danger was more than they felt they could bare. Hurrying along with terror etched on their faces they both broke into a sprint towards the stairway from which they'd entered.)

CANDY: Maybe coming in here was a mistake.

(Once again the scampering sound filled the room, only this time it was louder and accompanied by a deep growl.)

SOPHIRA: Big, big mistake!!!

(As they charged for the door, determined to get outside and never venture inside again, a shadow suddenly filled the space at the bottom of the stairway. Spotting it immediately, Candy grabbed Sophira's arm and pulled her to a stop.)

SOPHIRA: What are you doing???

(Uttering no words, Candy slowly looked up towards the ceiling above the doorway and gaped in horror. Fearing the worst, Sophira did likewise.)

CANDY: Oh my...

SOPHIRA: Cripes!

(Hanging above the door, wielding a massive axe was a bizarre hybrid half man, half scorpion creature wearing a devilish look on its face. As it dropped to the ground they could see all too clearly it's human like head and torso, pointed extremities, scorpion tail and razor sharp teeth. The axe, in fact being it's left claw. Such a freak of nature they'd never even dared to imagine. Terrified to the core, Candy and Sophira stepped back with horror in their eyes. What it was or where it came from they had no idea but the look in its eyes made it abundantly clear that it meant them no good. As they paced back, the menacing freak gnashed it's teeth and spoke in a booming voice.)

GUADIAN: Who dare desecrate the tomb of Lunfar Miatta???

(Fearing for their very lives, Candy spoke up while Sophira trembled.)

CANDY: We didn't desecrate anything... sir. We're lost.

(The beast growled.)

GUADIAN: I, Guadian, keeper of the tomb, am sworn to kill all who enter the sacred chamber!!!

(As fearless as ever, Candy and Sophira once again began the old routine of hugging each other and crying in the face of danger.)

SOPHIRA: But we didn't mean to. There was no sign outside or anything!

(Offering no hint of mercy, Guadian growled once again.)

GUADIAN: I shall desecrate your bodies and souls as you have desecrated this tomb with your presence!!!

(Fearing the worst, Sophira cried out.)

SOPHIRA: But I don't want to be desecrated!

(Much to her surprise, Candy then stepped in front of her with her sword in her hand.)

CANDY: If it wants to kill us then it's going to have a fight on its hands!

(Sophira's initial thought of 'not much of one' was soon swept aside as she too decided to take a more positive stance.)

SOPHIRA: Okay, you fight and I'll heal!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: Yeah, thanks for the vote of confidence, Soph.

(Sophira shrugged.)

GAUDIAN: Enough! Prepare to die!!!

(And with that, the weird beast charged for Candy, its pointed feet making a sharp tapping sound as it did so. Not knowing whether to avoid the flailing axe-like claw, the stabbing claw or the scorpion tail first, Candy dithered and shuffled on the spot.)

CANDY: What do I do? What do I do?

(Jumping behind a pillar to hide, Sophira yelled back.)

SOPHIRA: Avoid the sharp bits!

CANDY: They're all sharp!!!

(With a look of sheer hate, Guadian immediately rushed in for the kill. Panicking instantly, Candy swung to avoid the claws only to be impaled with precision by the stinger on its tail as it ran her through.)

CANDY: Yeow!!!

(Without a moment's hesitation, Sophira leapt from behind her pillar and rushed to her aid with her healing hands. Confident of a swift success, Guadian spun around to attack again only to see Candy and Sophira charging up the stairs. Having expected a kill, it growled venomously.)

GUADIAN: First you desecrate the sacred chamber with your presence and then you bring cowardice here. This isn't over!!!

(Candy and Sophira couldn't have disagreed more. As far as they were concerned it was well and truly over. Scared witless by the freakish beast they kept running as fast as their legs would take them. Without even looking back they charged through the wilderness like stampeding gazelles. It didn't matter where they went as long as it was far, far away from that tomb.)

### *Great north continent – Lethernia - Hall of the Elders*

(Inside the besieged city of Lethernia things were going from bad to worse. Citizens were falling ill in their hundreds, their families too weak to heal them. Hunger and a lack of sanitation bringing them to the edge of despair. With the impending slaughter

from the Gregon army that camped outside an inevitability, all were convinced it was only a matter of time before their civilization was obliterated entirely in a bloody massacre. In the hall of the elders, two of the robed wise men sat tiredly in easy chairs awaiting death with rumbling stomachs as they discussed their latest failure.)

FAITES: Yanada, my friend, I feel my time is upon me.

(Yanada slowly turned to his weakened comrade.)

YANADA: Please Faite; summon what strength you can to hold on, I beg of you.

FAITES: It is no good. We are too weak to fight and those few with the strength would rather die than take a life.

(Yanada nodded.)

YANADA: As they were raised to do!

FAITES: But don't you see? This time fighting would be the right thing to do!

(Yanada sighed.)

YANADA: I grow weary, I can not argue any longer!

FAITES: Our people will not even fight for the survival of our civilization. They would rather see their families slaughtered. Are we such fools...

(Having declared himself too weak to argue only a few moments ago, Yanada must have got a second wind from somewhere.)

YANADA: Fools? We are fools to refuse to take part in barbarity?

(Faite looked to him pleadingly.)

FAITES: It isn't barbarity to fight against extinction!

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: We brought peace to this world, Faite. We nurtured the good in people with our healing and banished black magic. Who are we to now take up arms?

FAITES: Did you not send for Arterian? Was it not you who sent those warriors in search of the only living black mage? You did that for our survival, did you not?

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: This is not the same. Arterian's powers could have stopped the Gregon. There doesn't need to be slaughter.

FAITES: You're a fool, Yanada. I go to my death knowing that my mentor, the one man I trusted in all the world was nothing but a blind fool...

(As Faite passed away in his seat, Yanada could offer only a sigh and despair to himself about Lethernia's impending doom. He would never be convinced of the need to fight and made no secret of being glad that they'd failed to raise an army. Even with those dying words from his friend, he remained convinced that killing in any form was wrong. And so, he closed his eyes to rest and await death with dignity.)

### *Great south continent – Somewhere in Ashbury Forest*

(The cheetah is reputed to be the fastest sprinter in the entire animal kingdom while ostriches are reputed to be able to run at high speed for very long periods. Having come face to face with the killer scorpion-man, Candy and Sophira almost put them both to shame. Looking terrified and screaming all the way they literally sprinted for miles. It wasn't until their desperate charge in a straight line brought them to a sandy beach that they even considered slowing down. In fact, if Candy hadn't slowed and declared they'd run far enough, Sophira would probably have run across the sea. Confident they were safe; Candy fell to the ground as soon as she stopped. Having heeded her words, Sophira walked back over to her and also collapsed in the sand. Panting wildly with no energy or breath left in their bodies, they didn't say a word to

one another for a good half an hour until Sophira mustered the energy to prop herself up on one elbow. Looking somewhat concerned, she leant over Candy.)

SOPHIRA: You okay?

(Candy gasped for breath and gave a weak nod.)

SOPHIRA: What *was* that thing?

(Forcing out a heavy breath, Candy sat up slightly.)

CANDY: I don't know. I don't want to know!

SOPHIRA: Me either, but from now on we stay out of caves, caverns and ancient tombs, okay?

CANDY: I won't argue with that.

(As they continued to gather breath, Sophira looked about herself at their surroundings.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, this seems as good a place as any.

(Candy looked uncertain.)

CANDY: For what?

SOPHIRA: Look at us. It'll be dark soon; we're knackered and caked in crap. Let's set up camp here on the beach.

(Looking around herself, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Okay, let's just head down the coast a bit and gather wood for the fire.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Sounds like a plan!

(And so, they climbed to their feet wearily and headed for the wooded edge of the beach. Saving their breath, they took in the cool fresh sea air and tried to relax as they gathered firewood. They'd both had quite a scare and just wanted to rest up peacefully for the evening.

By the time darkness descended, they found themselves on a quiet bit of beach, cut off from the rest by grassy heads that pointed out to sea. The tiny cove making the perfect serene setting for relaxing around the warm fire they'd got blazing. It also shielded them pretty well from any potential prying eyes as they headed into the sea to cleanse themselves and their clothes. Having feasted heartily on the remaining ostrich meat around the blazing camp fire, they both felt a lot easier about the days events and stared up at the sky completely at ease with their nudity. Feeling at peace finally, Candy looked up from where she lay in the sand at her clothes drying on a rock and turned to face Sophira.)

CANDY: Soph?

(Staring silently into the sky and she lay flat on her back, Sophira said nothing.)

CANDY: Soph?

(Knocked off of her train of thought, Sophira was disorientated for a moment.)

SOPHIRA: Huh?

CANDY: You okay?

(Giving her a warm smile, Sophira replied in a soft voice.)

SOPHIRA: Yes, you?

(Candy looked shy.)

CANDY: Yeah, I'm okay... I just feel a bit homesick!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, me too!

CANDY: I mean, don't get me wrong, this is nice and everything but I miss my dad and my friends.

(Sophira sighed.)



SOPHIRA: We can go back any time you want, Candy. I think we both know this was all a big mistake. We'll never find Arterian.

(Her face dropped.)

SOPHIRA: Then I'll have no home to miss anyway.

(She sighed and looked away. Hating to see her feel bad, Candy moved closer and leant over her head to see her face.)

CANDY: Hey, you have a home. You'll always have a home with me, Soph.

(Feeling lifted by Candy's kindness, Sophira turned her head back to face the sky only to be immediately captivated by Candy's eyes as she stared down at her from above.

Lost in her eyes, Sophira could only exhale lovingly.)

CANDY: You okay, you looked kinda stoned!

(Without thinking, Sophira mumbled quietly up at her.)

SOPHIRA: Kiss me!

(Candy looked more than a little startled.)

CANDY: Excuse me!

(Realising what she'd said, Sophira covered her mouth and rolled away in embarrassment.)

CANDY: Did you say kiss me?

(Feeling ashamed, Sophira brought her knees up to her chest to roll into a ball almost.)

SOPHIRA: Leave me alone!

(As she looked down on her red-faced friend, Candy's mind run riot. Maybe it was the romantic setting or the heat of the fire on their naked bodies but the idea of kissing her seemed wonderful. Any lingering thoughts of Osric were quickly dismissed as she placed her hand on Sophira's shoulder and pulled her back towards her.)

SOPHIRA: Huh?

(Sensing something special in the air, Sophira was immediately thrown and mumbled in soft bewilderment.)

SOPHIRA: Candy?

(As she landed on her back, she stared wide-eyed up at Candy's beautiful face before closing her eyes half expecting a lecture only to feel Candy's soft lips brush against hers. Slowly she opened her eyes to see Candy pull away. It was as if the whole world had become a blur, her head spun and she could barely make a coherent sound. It felt like a living dream. Her eyes focussed slowly on Candy smiling down at her lovingly and her heart jumped for joy.)

SOPHIRA: I...

CANDY: Sshh...

(Slowly Candy lowered her lips to hers once again and they shared several lingering gentle kisses. Moments later Candy pulled back and smiled as Sophira kissed the air in a daze.)

CANDY: Wow, I've never done this with a woman before!

(Sophira opened her eyes and blushed as Candy lowered herself again, this time laying herself half across her and running her hand over her breast as they kissed passionately. To Candy this was exciting and new, she'd try anything once. To Sophira it was a revelation and a dream come true. The feel of Candy's tongue in her mouth was better than any sensation she'd ever dreamt of. As they writhed together in the sand and the fire reflected an orange glow onto their nakedness, Candy slowly slid herself down to apply her tongue to Sophira's breast. She gave a soft groan of excitement and stroked Candy's hair as she allowed herself the pleasure of Candy's sweet touch on her erect nipple.

Little did she know, the best was yet to come as moments later, Candy slid herself down Sophira's body further. With a groan of pure, undiluted delight, she tensed all through her body as Candy's tongue set to work on her already moist vagina. If she wasn't in love before she most certainly was now. Until now she'd had no idea how much pleasure one woman could receive from the mere touch of another. She writhed out of control under the myriad of sensations she never knew existed. Groaning in ecstasy she prayed it would never end. For the next few hours they pleased each other generously with fingertips, tongues and each others womanhood until several orgasms later they were too tired to go on. As they lay together cuddled up, gasping for breath in the heat of the burning fire, Sophira knew her life had changed forever. Candy stared into the flames with her head on Sophira's shoulder and gushed out loud.)

CANDY: That was amazing!

(Sophira smiled and stared into the starry sky.)

SOPHIRA: It was. We definitely have to do that again.

(Looking a little uncertain, Candy bit her lip.)

CANDY: Sure.

(Although it had been amazing and she loved every minute of it, to Candy it was a new experience, something she'd been curious about. She'd discovered the touch of a woman and she was satisfied. To Sophira it had meant everything, this was what she was. She knew it was strange and not what people talked about when they mentioned love but she knew how she felt. As Candy lay there staring into the flames everything suddenly became clear and the truth about Sophira hit her like a thunderbolt.

Sophira's jealousy of Osric and hundreds of other signs suddenly came together and made sense to her. She was the only one experimenting, to Sophira this was the real deal. Feeling extremely uncomfortable about it all, Candy leapt to her feet and walked over to her clothes. Visibly disappointed, Sophira watched her go and pouted.)

CANDY: We'd better get dressed and get some kip. It's another long day tomorrow!

(With a sigh, Sophira nodded and pulled herself to her feet.)

SOPHIRA: I guess so!

(As she approached her clothes, Candy moved aside nervously as if to avoid her. Immediately sensing something wasn't right, Sophira looked to her uneasily.)

SOPHIRA: Are you okay?

(Dressing as fast as she could, Candy forced a smile.)

CANDY: Of course. Why wouldn't I be?

(Saying nothing, Sophira watched on as Candy rushed her clothes on.)

SOPHIRA: Are you angry at me?

CANDY: Don't be silly!

(Suddenly Sophira's face dropped as she realised the love they'd made had just been sex to Candy. All she could think was that after what Osric had done to her how could Candy then do the same thing to her. Was love just a tool for one person to hurt another with? How could her friend break her heart like this? Why? As a tear flowed down her cheek, she brushed past her to grab her clothes and started to hurry them on. Sensing Sophira's realisation, Candy turned her back as she finished dressing just so she didn't have to look her in the eye. With a coldness between them that would send shivers down ones spine, they finished dressing and sat either side of the fire ignoring each other. Candy's head was filled with thoughts of regret and wishing she'd realised earlier what she meant to Sophira. Sophira, on the other hand could only muster angry thoughts about being used. Her normally warm heart turning as cold as ice at the thought that she could never trust anyone again.

Almost an hour had passed and not a word had been spoken between them. One thing they both sensed in their hearts was that they'd killed their friendship in that one moment of passion. The sound of the sea gently lapping the shore offered no comfort as they sat in silent contemplation. Moments later, however that silence was split by a sudden deafening cry from the grassy bank near the trees. In sheer terror, Candy and Sophira both leapt to their feet and glared in the direction of the cry. Much to their horror the scorpion-man, Guadian stood before them snarling into the night air.)

GUADIAN: I told you this wasn't over!!!

(Terrified to the core, Candy and Sophira stared at one another and both raced to the other side of the fire from the beast, Candy snatching her sword from her pack along the way.)

GUADIAN: Nowhere to run!!! Tonight you die!!!

(And with that, it charged for them flailing its axe claw wildly in the air!!!)

SOPHIRA: Run away!!!

(In a blind panic, they ran into each other, thudding heads violently.)

CANDY: Ouch!

SOPHIRA: Stupid bitch, Candy!!!

(It was then that Candy realised they weren't a team any more, the closeness that had somehow got them through every sticky situation was gone. Right now though, she had a bigger worry. With nothing left but to try to avoid death, Sophira could only duck and dive. Candy for her part, tried to fend the creature off with her sword as best as her limited sword skill would allow.)

CANDY: Why can't you leave us alone???

(The beast scoffed as Candy tried vainly to poke it with her sword.)

GUADIAN: Puny human fool, you will pay for your crime!!!

(Looking furious, Candy swung her sword and missed again.)

CANDY: We didn't do anything!

(Again the beast laughed and raised its pointed claw.)

GUADIAN: I will crush you!

(Almost looking competent for a moment, Candy eye's followed the raised claw and she instinctively swung her blade at it. Much to her amazement, she sliced the tip clean off.)

GUADIAN: Agh!!!

(As the beast reared up in pain, Candy raced over to a terrified looking Sophira.)

CANDY: Did you see that? Did you see it?

(Sophira offered no reply as she stared up in hypnotic horror at the foul creature before them. Sensing there was hope, Candy stepped forward again mumbling to herself nervously.)

CANDY: Okay, I can do this...

(Her optimism soon drained, however, when the beast held its broken claw aloft and another sharp edged claw instantly grew in its place, only this time bigger.)

CANDY: Fuck off... no way!!!

(Sophira could only whimper.)

GUADIAN: I've wasted enough time!!! Let death become you!!!

(Being specialists in cowering and hiding, both Candy and Sophira desperately tried to keep the fire between themselves and the beast. They both knew it was all they had left.)

CANDY: We can't keep this up forever! We have to do something!

(As she danced around the fire, Sophira sneered.)

SOPHIRA: Why don't you sleep with it? That seems to be all you're good at!

CANDY: Fuck sake, Soph, you're not helping!

SOPHIRA: My name's Sophira!

(Clearly growing weary of chasing them in circles around the fire, Guadian stopped and reared up on its hind legs.)

GUADIAN: This ends now!

(Much to Candy and Sophira's horror, it vomited on the fire from a great height, extinguishing it immediately. As the last hissing sounds from the fire disappeared into the air, they looked up at the beast and screamed out in horror. With nothing to protect them, surely their time was up. In one desperate last attempt to salvage some hope, Candy whimpered and cast her sword towards the beast's head.)

CANDY: Please!

(They looked on in horror as the sword missed by quite some way.)

CANDY: No!!!

SOPHIRA: Oh my god, we're gonna die!

(Guadian laughed, clearly taking delight in their torment.)

GUADIAN: And now, you die!

(With that it raced towards them raising its giant axe claw. Screaming and crying out, both Candy and Sophira cowered before their impending doom. With an evil snarl distorting its vile face, Guadian then began to swing its mighty claw at them. As the girls stared through bulging eyes at death approaching, it suddenly and inexplicably stopped. As they slowly peered through their hands, the beast incredibly melted away into a pool of nothingness on the ground. To say Candy and Sophira were gobsmacked would be an understatement. Having been so convinced they were going to die, they looked on in amazement and didn't say a word. Such a thing couldn't be! As they stood there wide-mouthed and dumbstruck, with no rational explanation for their latest lucky escape, Sophira suddenly noticed a hooded man standing on the lip between the forest and the beach. Stepping back nervously, she pointed him out to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: A man!

(Shaking like leaves, they watched as the man slowly approached them and removed his hood to reveal a friendly looking face.)

SOPHIRA: Umm...

(With a warm glow about him, the slightly greying middle aged gentleman spoke up in an educated manner.)

MAN: Forgive me, I didn't mean to startle you! I just saw you were having a little trouble from that awful beast.

(Remaining bewildered, Candy and Sophira gave each other a sideways glance.)

SOPHIRA: Don't even look at me!

CANDY: Huh?

(Sophira smiled to the man.)

SOPHIRA: Was that you? Did you kill it?

(The man laughed.)

MAN: I must confess; that was me. I do hate to see a lady in distress!

(They gave him a warm smile.)

CANDY: How can we ever thank you, Mr... umm...

MAN: Please... call me Arterian!

(He turned to face Sophira.)

MAN: I hear you've been looking for me, young lady!

# **DYSTOPIA - THE DARK RAGE**

## **(Chapter Five – Rage.)**

(Normally when a person is burdened with achieving the seemingly impossible, success is greeted with fireworks and jubilation. Bunting is sometimes put out and perhaps a ticker tape parade is in order. The very least you'd expect to see from the successful party is a show of external emotion. In Ashbury forest, this was not the case. Having found her own personal miniature needle in a very large haystack, all Sophira felt was numb. As she stood before Arterian in the glow of the moonlight, going home was her only concern. She knew she should have felt something but the emotion simply wasn't there. Maybe she was all cried out from a day of turmoil and heartbreak, maybe her achievement was yet to sink in. Either way, the celebration never materialised. As she stood before the man she'd hunted high and low for she could barely raise a smile. Feeling a mix of guilt and surprise at Sophira's lethargy, Candy opened the conversation on her behalf.)

CANDY: You're Arterian?

(He nodded.)

ARTERIAN: I am!

CANDY: We've been looking for you everywhere!

(Arterian smiled kindly.)

ARTERIAN: Indeed you have!

(Candy looked uncertain.)

CANDY: How did you know where to find us? How did you know we were looking, come to that?

(Adding to his air of mystery, Arterian tapped his nose.)

ARTERIAN: Not much happens in this forest without my knowing it, young lady.

CANDY: So...

(Sick to the back teeth of Candy's incessant questions, Sophira butted in.)

SOPHIRA: Oh shut up already, will you? Enough with the dumb questions!

(Hurt by Sophira's obvious indignation, Candy pouted as Sophira took over the conversation.)

SOPHIRA: Thank you for coming, Mr Arterian, sir. I'm honoured.

(Arterian offered her a courteous bow.)

ARTERIAN: You're most welcome, Sophira.

(She looked impressed.)

SOPHIRA: You know my name.

ARTERIAN: Indeed I do.

(Stepping past her, Arterian flicked a finger at the fire and reignited it. Startled to say the least, Candy and Sophira stepped back and stared into the fire in amazement.)

ARTERIAN: Shall we ladies?

(Moments later, they found themselves seated around the fire. Being the focus of attention, Arterian sat in the centre with Candy and Sophira either side. This seating arrangement suited Candy just fine as she could hide from Sophira's permanent scowl. Knowing she'd wronged her tremendously and it'd be best to avoid her for the time being, she sat back a little and left them to do all the talking.)

SOPHIRA: The dark rage? I've never even heard of it!

(Arterian nodded knowingly.)

ARTERIAN: Well, it's not Lethernia's proudest creation. They like to pretend it never happened.

(Sophira looked thoughtful.)

SOPHIRA: So... what is it exactly, I mean what does it do?

ARTERIAN: Well, my dear to understand that you have to understand the history.

SOPHIRA: Okay, so tell me...

(She suddenly looked coy.)

SOPHIRA: If that's okay with you, sir!

(Arterian smiled.)

ARTERIAN: It'd be a pleasure!

(He shuffled to make himself more comfortable then began.)

ARTERIAN: Many centuries ago the elders of Lethernia took the unpopular decision to bind all black magic. Fire, wind, ice, they all had their practical uses, as did the telepathy and many of the more bizarre incantations and spells. Unfortunately, black magic was also known to corrupt from time to time. Too much of it could turn a man into a power crazed killer. So rather than accept the odd bad egg, they nipped the problem in the bud and took the binding option to remove black magic from the world altogether.

SOPHIRA: What do you mean by binding?

ARTERIAN: Binding means trapping, they gathered the sources of the magic using a spell and encased it a sealed gold box from which it could never escape. Ironically, they used a black magic spell to do it.

(Sophira nodded, totally engrossed in the story.)

ARTERIAN: Unfortunately, a few hundred years ago an unfortunate palace servant entered the chamber where the box was stored and accidentally released the magic. He didn't mean to and I'll spare you the boring detail, but suffice to say the magic consumed him whole. Every time he felt a slight anger, the darkness within the magic would send him into a wild rage. Many died and as a result he exiled himself from Lethernia to live as a hermit until the loneliness drove him insane. It's believed he leapt into a volcano to escape the immortal hell.

SOPHIRA: Immortal? Seriously?

(Arterian sighed.)

ARTERIAN: Sadly yes, the black magic serves to protect the bearer. I've been infected with the dark rage for 50 years and I'm the same age now as I was then.

SOPHIRA: Wow!

(By now Candy too was enthralled by the story and sat listening attentively.)

ARTERIAN: Dying is a very hard thing to do for the bearer of the dark rage. A leap into a volcano being the preferred method. See the dark rage includes a barrier against attack while also preventing one from aging. It would be a true blessing were it not for the risk of killing everyone close to you.

(Sophira and Candy were both unnerved by this revelation and edged away slightly.)

ARTERIAN: Hey, it's okay. You're perfectly safe; I like to sedate myself you see.

(Comforted slightly, they sat still and listened as he resumed his tale.)

ARTERIAN: Anyway, when a bearer dies, the dark rage is passed onto the nearest living person. I was unfortunate enough to be that person. We tried on several occasions to rebind the magic but it never worked.

SOPHIRA: So, you're stuck with it?

(Arterian nodded solemnly.)

ARTERIAN: I am. I agreed many years ago that I would live alone in this forest and keep the dark rage safe. Should I die, somebody else will have to carry my burden

and I can't accept that. I have vowed to keep the dark rage forever. My suffering is a small price to pay.

(Looking up at him with a hero-struck glint in her eye, Sophira smiled warmly.)

SOPHIRA: You're a wonderful person, Arterian.

(Arterian smiled back.)

ARTERIAN: Thank you. But now I'm wanted back in Lethernia it seems.

(Sophira looked shocked.)

SOPHIRA: How did you know?

ARTERIAN: Why else would you be here?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: That's a long story too!

ARTERIAN: Well, I'm listening!

SOPHIRA: Okay...

(She too went on to relate a long story about how Lethernia was in danger and how she came to be in the forest. She also went into detail about how a friend had helped her and then abused her trust and used her for sex. By the time she finished bringing Arterian up to speed they were both scowling at a worried looking Candy.)

CANDY: Hey, no fair to pick on me.

(She huddled herself up to look small. Throwing her one final scowl, Sophira turned and looked to Arterian.)

SOPHIRA: So will you come? Lethernia needs you.

(Looking thoughtful as he did so, Arterian climbed to his feet and put his hands on his hips.)

ARTERIAN: If I go it could be dangerous, not for me but for Lethernia as a whole. However, if I don't go and Lethernia is destroyed...

(He nodded.)

ARTERIAN: There is no choice. I must go, and I must go now!

(Finally, Sophira showed some emotion about her success by shaking a triumphant fist.)

SOPHIRA: Thank you, Arterian!

(At this point it dawned on Candy that herself and Sophira could well be parting on bad terms. The last thing she wanted was for Sophira to leave hating her, especially as she didn't have a clue where in the world she was.)

CANDY: Wait!

(They both looked to her.)

CANDY: Please don't leave like this, Soph!

(She looked to her with imploring eyes, receiving a less than welcoming glare in return from Sophira.)

CANDY: You can't just leave me here on my own!

(Taking control of the situation, Arterian stood tall and interjected.)

ARTERIAN: There's no time to take you home, I must go to Lethernia now and I'm taking you both with me!

(Those words were a great relief to Candy.)

CANDY: Phew. So how are we getting there? Do you have a boat?

(Wearing a broad smile, Arterian scoffed.)

ARTERIAN: A boat? I'm the most powerful mage in the world, if I want to be somewhere, I merely go there.

(Next thing Candy and Sophira knew, the entire world seemed to go out of focus as if they'd taken some very dizzying drug. When the world came back into focus they

found themselves collapsing from dizziness on a picturesque marble town square. Looking up in a daze, Sophira proclaimed in amazement.)

SOPHIRA: Lethernia? I'm home!

(Looking down at them from where he was standing, Arterian nodded purposefully.)

ARTERIAN: Like I told you. When I need to be somewhere, I just go there!

(He knelt and held Sophira's trembling hand as she looked up to him respectfully.)

ARTERIAN: Thank you, Sophira. It's been a pleasure meeting you. Now I must see the elder immediately.

(And with that he headed away towards the hall of the elders with a real purpose in his step. Looking stunned and lost, Candy climbed to her feet.)

CANDY: So this is Lethernia!

(Wanting no more to do with her, Sophira just scoffed.)

SOPHIRA: Whatever!

(And she too headed away leaving Candy protesting in her wake.)

CANDY: Soph? You can't just leave me here! Sophira? Please!

(And pretty soon she was left alone in the quiet town square not knowing what to do or where to go. Having never felt so lost, she hung her head and a tear ran down her cheek. As she wallowed in self pity, she didn't notice the shadow of someone approaching her on the gleaming marble.)

SOPHIRA: Fine, come with me!

(Feeling a great relief, Candy smiled from ear to ear.)

CANDY: Thanks, Soph!

SOPHIRA: Just don't talk to me!

(And in silence she led Candy towards the hall of the elders with her. Lethernia by now had reached crisis point. Starvation and malnutrition was making most of the surviving population either bed-ridden or too weak to even consider fighting. Such was their bizarre resolve not to fight back they'd already resigned themselves to their doom. As Candy and Sophira arrived slowly and silently inside the marble main room of the hall of the elders, Arterian was already deep in discussion with a dying Yanada.)

YANADA: Make them go, Arterian old friend. I'm not going to make it but please...

(Upon seeing the elderly gentleman's desperate condition, Sophira rushed over and immediately proceeded to heal him. Candy watched on as the rejuvenated wise man climbed to his feet.)

YANADA: You... you healed me!

(He squinted at her as his vision returned.)

YANADA: You! You're the serving girl!

(He bowed.)

YANADA: I owe you much gratitude, young lady, but first I must speak with Arterian!

(Taking the hint to leave, Sophira bowed and headed for the corridor outside.)

SOPHIRA: Come on, Candy, you can sleep with him later!

(Hurt by her unceasing anger and constant baiting, Candy scowled as she followed her out of the room.)

CANDY: Look, Soph, I'm sorry okay. I've apologised and there's fuck all else I can do so either accept it or grow up and stop treating me like a piece of shit.

(And thus they shared a vile scowl all the way out into the corridor. Left behind in the main chamber, Arterian and Yanada discussed proceedings intensely.)

YANADA: Our civilization stands on the brink of destruction. What can you do, Arterian? Can you make them leave?



(Arterian nodded.)

ARTERIAN: I can make them die!

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: No! This is not our way, we are a peaceful people!

ARTERIAN: Yes, and look where it's got you!

(Yanada sighed.)

YANADA: Faites passed away earlier; the last thing he told me was that I'm a fool. Is that true, Arterian?

(Trying to be tactful, Arterian mused for a moment.)

ARTERIAN: You sir, are not a fool!

(Yanada nodded, happy to accept the validation.)

ARTERIAN: Unfortunately your vision for Lethernia is the most foolish thing I've ever heard.

(Yanada looked dumbfounded.)

ARTERIAN: What is the use of being a peaceful people if you're extinct?

YANADA: But we won't be a peaceful people if we fight!

ARTERIAN: Yanada, old friend, the only way you'll be able to continue the great work of Lethernia is to let me loose for a full frontal attack on the Gregon. I guarantee that once people learn how you only used the worlds most phenomenal power as a last resort, you will be seen as a true icon of peace, plus nobody will dare attack you and you'll be able to continue everything you've done.

(Yanada rubbed his chin as he absorbed those words.)

YANADA: What Faites said has troubled me, Arterian. I fear you may be right and I just can't see it!

(Arterian nodded.)

ARTERIAN: Well, if it makes you uncomfortable then give me no orders and leave me to act unilaterally. I don't need orders to be effective, Yanada. This way the blood isn't on your hands

(Yanada nodded thoughtfully.)

YANADA: I fear there is no other way. I would personally rather go to my grave but by doing so I'd be taking so many others with me. I already have.

(He nodded.)

YANADA: Very well. I give you no orders other than to do what you think is right. My conscience will remain clear.

ARTERIAN: Consider it done, Yanada. Now prepare to heal and feed the people. I'm going to smite the Gregon and you can use their supplies.

(He looked unsure.)

ARTERIAN: Umm... you don't have a problem with theft as well do you?

(Yanada conceded a smile.)

YANADA: Do what you have to do!

(And with nothing left to discuss, Arterian marched purposefully to the door and yanked it open. As he did so, Sophira fell through the doorway having listened in on their conversation. Watching her from the corridor, Candy chuckled inwardly knowing any outward sign of amusement would only alienate her further. As Sophira climbed to her feet, Yanada called her over. Having closed the door behind her, she approached him nervously.)

SOPHIRA: Umm... this is an honour your worship!

(She bowed sheepishly as she approached him.)

YANADA: Please, call me Yanada. You have earned that right!

(She beamed.)

SOPHIRA: Thank you!

(Upon reaching him she bowed and looked respectfully up at him. Having been taught that elders were men above approach she was very much in awe of him.)

YANADA: What is your name, young lady?

SOPHIRA: Sophira, sir!

(Yanada nodded.)

YANADA: Sophira... should Arterian be successful and Lethernia overcomes these hardships, we will all owe you a great debt. You shall rightly be revered and a place in these halls will be yours.

(Sophira was openly moved by the gesture. To be offered elder status at such a young age was truly and honour indeed.)

SOPHIRA: Why, thank you, Yanada, sir. I don't know what to say!

YANADA: I don't need words or gratitude, Sophira. The very survival of Lethernia may well be down to you, and you alone.

(She allowed herself a moment to feel proud before looking to Yanada modestly.)

SOPHIRA: Not just me, Yanada, sir. I couldn't have done it without Candy.

YANADA: Ah, yes. Nothing like a sugar rush to start the day is there?

(Hiding her amusement as to not to offend the elder, she waited a moment for the temptation to laugh to subside before setting him straight.)

SOPHIRA: Actually, Sir, Candy is a girl.

(Yanada chuckled.)

YANADA: Well, don't I feel a fool!

(As Sophira mused for a moment, she seemed to shuffle uneasily on her feet.

Spotting this, Yanada enquired into her well being.)

YANADA: Sophira? Is everything okay?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah... it's just that I've been pretty mean to her!

(Yanada nodded.)

YANADA: I see. Is Candy the girl you came in with a moment ago?

(Sophira nodded.)

YANADA: Sophira, when you get to my age one thing you learn is that communication is so important. If you and your friend have issues, you should talk to her and work them through.

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I know, but she really...

(Sensing it was best not to be too honest at this point, Sophira clammed up.)

SOPHIRA: It doesn't matter!

(Keen to help the clearly troubled young lady before him, Yanada spoke up softly.)

YANADA: I'm here to help you, Sophira. If you need any advice, now's the time!

(Knowing in her heart that an elders wisdom could be just what she needed to hear, Sophira nodded to herself and opened up to him.)

SOPHIRA: Yanada, I love her you see, but she did a terrible thing!

(Yanada smiled.)

YANADA: Sometimes our friends do things we don't approve of; that's no reason to stop loving them. Even if you don't always love their actions.

(Sophira could only offer a sigh.)

SOPHIRA: It's not like that.

YANADA: Then how is it?

(Feeling honesty was the only route to assistance; Sophira swallowed her pride and told him the truth.)

SOPHIRA: I love her, Yanada. I mean I *really* love her. When we made love on the beach it meant everything to me but it was just a cheap thrill to her. She used me for sex and it really broke my heart. I gave her my heart and soul and I feel like she played with it then threw it away. How can I make things rights?

(She looked up at Yanada for answers but was most taken aback by his stunned expression.)

YANADA: You love her? You had sex with her? Is that even possible?

(Sophira looked embarrassed and said nothing as Yanada's voice grew bitter.)

YANADA: She's a woman like you!

(Somewhat shocked by his tone, Sophira looked to him nervously.)

YANADA: You took pleasure in another woman?

SOPHIRA: But... I love her, Yanada!

(Yanada looked appalled.)

YANADA: Love? You can not love those of the same gender! Did the gods not sanction intercourse for the sake of procreation? What were you hoping to achieve?

(Devastated and hurt by his cruel words, Sophira leant back from him and bit her nails as he continued to object liberally.)

YANADA: You, Sophira with your sick adaptation of love are nothing but a deviant, a pervert. You disgust me. As soon as this is over, you must leave Lethernia and never return. We can't have your filthy ideals fouling up our city, you are quite simply a disgusting person.

(And with that he threw an angry point at the door.)

YANADA: Now get out of my sight!!!

(Rearing back fearfully, Sophira turned and scampered for the door as Yanada continued to assassinate her character.)

YANADA: Filthy whore!!!

(Where it came from she didn't know, but Sophira suddenly felt an urge to defend herself. Anger rose through her body and she stopped and turned to face Yanada. Maybe it was Candy's influence, maybe it was tiredness, maybe it was the lack of gratitude, but she wasn't about to be spoken to like that. Wearing a determined look on her angry brow, she stepped up to Yanada and made herself perfectly clear.)

SOPHIRA: Whore? Whore? You're calling me a whore? You send me off to suck warrior's ding-a-lings and then you have the cheek to call me a whore???

(Yanada tried to answer but Sophira wasn't going to be pausing for breath any time soon.)

SOPHIRA: Listen you doddering old fart, I've been chased by beasts, attacked by god knows what and had more dices with death than you could even conceive of! I deserve some respect. Got it?

(Finally able to reply, Yanada did so angrily.)

YANADA: Respect? You defile yourself with other girls; if you hadn't done what you did I'd just have you locked in the jail like all you other filthy, deviant scum!

(Sophira was stunned.)

SOPHIRA: You what?

YANADA: That's right. It's only out of respect for what you did that I'm letting you get away with being banished. Your sort deserve locking away!!!

(Shocked by the revelation, Sophira spun around and headed for the door.)

SOPHIRA: I'm not wasting any more time on you, you're not wise, you're a bigoted Neanderthal.

(Watching her go, Yanada snarled.)

YANADA: You should be careful who you're talking to!

SOPHIRA: Whatever. One minute I'm a hero and the next I'm scum just 'cause I'm attracted to a girl. You're a fucking moron, Yanada!  
(And with that, she thrust open the door and slammed it behind her, leaving one grumpy elder in her wake.)

It wouldn't have been incorrect to suggest that maybe the Lethernian hierarchy were putting a giant amount of faith into Arterian, after all the Gregon army that had entrapped them were a somewhat formidable foe. Their army of over 10,000 well trained troops were chomping at the bit to go into battle while Lethernia had just one mage and possibly a few reluctant pacifists. In the emperor's tent, located just outside the main gate, the emperor and his generals had assembled every 12 hours to discuss the situation and decide whether to end Lethernia's misery. So far the emperor had persisted in keeping the Lethernian's suffering but he knew that sooner or later the troops would become restless. With this in mind, he called a meeting. As soon as his generals arrived, they knew something was different. The emperor had donned his chest plate and was standing before his throne with his sword under his arm. As soon as all the generals had assembled, he wasted no time in beginning his speech.)

EMPEROR: Gentlemen. Thank you for coming. I think you know what I'm going to say so I won't beat about the bush.

(He stood tall and looked straight ahead with a proud grimace on his face.)

EMPEROR: We should prepare ourselves to attack. As soon as the men are mobilised we'll go straight through the gate and slaughter everyone inside. And I mean everyone. We won't be leaving until I'm satisfied we've killed every single one.

(He looked down to his men.)

EMPEROR: Any questions?

(One general mused for a moment.)

MCGOOGAN: Women and children too my liege?

(Emperor nodded.)

EMPEROR: Even their pets.

MCDUGAL: Do we raze the city to the ground, my liege?

EMPEROR: No!

(He looked across their faces sternly.)

EMPEROR: This place is solid marble, we're not going to destroy it, we're going to move in! Before this decade is out, this whole continent will belong to the Gregon empire. Any other questions?

(His men said nothing.)

EMPEROR: Okay. Remember, this isn't like the other invasions; this one will be our finest hour. At last, Lethernia will fall and their foulness will never stink up this land ever again. Make sure they die in considerable pain. Now...

(He looked proud and stared ahead again, this time wearing an evil smirk.)

EMPEROR: ...get your men mobilised and ready to attack. When all 15 units are in place and ready, I'm giving the order!

(Looking menacing he pointed to the exit with his sword.)

EMPEROR: Now go!

(Immediately his generals exited, excited about the slaughter they were about to perpetrate. As far as they were concerned, they'd been waiting far too long for the invasion to start and this day couldn't have come quickly enough. To a man, they believed the common propaganda that Lethernia had somehow wronged them at some point and this only served to fuel their bloodlust.)

Inside Lethernia, of course, they had no idea that the invasion was imminent and the knowledge would probably have made very little difference. The vast majority of people in the town were still very much confined to their homes by illness or the desire to spend every last available moment with their loved ones. Whether the attack came sooner or later, they were already resigned to their fate. As a result, the main square remained deserted and an eerie silence hung over the place. As Sophira emerged from the hall of the elders into the aforementioned square, she stopped and looked around at the empty buildings and spaces where market stalls used to be and gave a sorrowful sigh. Following her out nervously, Candy stopped and looked at her feet in a feeble attempt to pretend she wasn't following her. Upon spotting her, Sophira sighed to herself and forced a half-hearted smile.)

SOPHIRA: It's not always like this, you know?

(Overjoyed that Sophira had finally spoke to her, Candy stepped forward purposefully before deciding it was best not to push her luck and tried instead to look unfazed.)

CANDY: No?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: No!

(They stood in silence for a moment before Sophira shrugged and stepped up to Candy looking sincere.)

SOPHIRA: Look Candy, I didn't mean to be nasty before. You just really hurt me!

(Candy sighed and looked at her feet.)

CANDY: I'm sorry!

(She looked her in the eye imploringly.)

CANDY: I wouldn't have done it if I knew how you felt. I'd never hurt you on purpose.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah. I actually know that, I was just hurting so much.

(She shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: No point my denying it. I'm in love with you, I can't help it!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: I know it's not what you want to hear but I love you too, just not in that way!

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Friends?

CANDY: Friends!

(She went to hug her but Sophira stepped back.)

SOPHIRA: Whoa, hey!

(A little hurt by the rejection, Candy pouted.)

CANDY: I understand!

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: It's just that we're not really friends are we!

(Candy sighed.)

SOPHIRA: We're best friends!

(Delighted by her words, Candy threw her arms around her.)

CANDY: Best friends for life, and don't you forget it!

(As they shared the hug a cheeky grin swept over Sophira's face.)

SOPHIRA: Just don't be mad if I grope you now and again!

(Stepping back, Candy laughed.)

CANDY: My god, Soph, your terrible!

(Sophira poked out her tongue and chuckled. Wanting to set the record straight immediately, Candy took the opportunity to affirm their situation there and then.)

CANDY: You won't be hurt when I get a boyfriend will you? I mean it won't ruin our friendship will it?

(Sophira smiled kindly.)

SOPHIRA: Of course not, I *will* get over you, Candy. You aint that special, y'know.

(Borrowing Sophira's cheeky grin, Candy held her hand out to her.)

CANDY: Are you kidding? I'm hot, missy!

(They both laughed, more out of the relief to be friends again rather than anything else.)

SOPHIRA: Okay, now let's go to my house and hide from the Gregon!

CANDY: I was hoping you'd saying that!

(As they went to leave however, they spotted Arterian up on a balcony near the top of the front, city wall. Curious to know what he was going to do, Sophira rubbed her chin.)

SOPHIRA: Mind if we just see Arterian first? I want to wish him good luck!

(Candy scoffed.)

CANDY: You mean you want to poke your nose in!

SOPHIRA: You know me too well!

(After a tiring 5 minutes or so of climbing winding staircases and following long corridors, the girls eventually found themselves coming out on the balcony. Having never been there before, Candy looked around in awe at what was essentially a large shelf that adorned the entire length of the west wall and the wall above the gates. It was erected originally for citizens of Lethernia to enjoy the view of the world outside but now it'd make a perfect place for Arterian to attack from. As he beavered away in the corner, he didn't notice Candy and Sophira approaching along the west wall behind him. As they reached him, Sophira spoke up.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, Arterian!

(Given quite a start, Arterian turned around and frowned.)

ARTERIAN: Careful! You shouldn't sneak up on people, especially ones with a tendency to fire 20,000 volts of electricity at you when they feel threatened.

(The girls both cringed.)

CANDY: Ouch!

ARTERIAN: You wouldn't say ouch, you'd fry and melt away before you could even do that. It's not a pleasant sight.

(He sighed.)

ARTERIAN: And I really loved that cat!

(Shaking the thought away, Arterian smiled.)

ARTERIAN: So, what can I do for you lovely ladies?

(Sophira grinned nervously.)

SOPHIRA: We just wondered what you were doing!

ARTERIAN: You came all the way up here for that?

(She shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Pretty much!

CANDY: And to see if we can help!

(Arterian chuckled.)

ARTERIAN: I see! Well...

(He looked over the top of the wall towards the Gregon encampment below.)

ARTERIAN: ...you could always pop outside for me and ask them to move the emperor's tent. I can't get a clear shot at it from here 'cause it's right outside the gate.

(Candy and Sophira look horrified.)

SOPHIRA: Pop outside?

CANDY: Um...

(Arterian laughed out loud.)

ARTERIAN: I'm joking! They'd butcher you where you stand. They're...

(Suddenly his whole demeanour changed and he fell silent, his dramatic change of attitude sending a chill through Candy and Sophira.)

SOPHIRA: Um... Arterian?

CANDY: You okay?

(They looked at one another nervously.)

ARTERIAN: Crap! They're mobilising!

SOPHIRA: What does that mean?

(Looking menacing and determined, he stood tall.)

ARTERIAN: It means they're going to attack real soon!

(Shocked at the news, Candy gasped and put praying hands to her lips while Sophira just froze to the spot. Arterian on the other hand, knew exactly what to do.)

ARTERIAN: You wanna help?

(Breaking out of her stunned trance, Sophira nodded enthusiastically.)

SOPHIRA: What should I do?

ARTERIAN: Find anyone willing to fight and heal them. There's over a thousand ceremonial swords in the great hall, arm them with those.

(He faced Candy.)

ARTERIAN: Get everyone to pool what little energy they have into healing the ones willing to do battle.

(Candy looked terrified.)

CANDY: Me?

ARTERIAN: Both of you! We need as many healed and armed men as we can get. Get everyone to give their energy for the healing Sophira, don't try to do it all yourself. I don't know how long we've got until they'll attack but when they do, I'll try to hold them off as best I can. Now go!!!

(Sprung into action by Arterian's urgency, Candy and Sophira immediately ran back towards the corridors and stairwells from whence they'd come. Sophira wasn't sure how she'd get hold of people as there was nobody around but she knew she had to try. As they raced back down towards the main square, Candy tried to understand and make sense of where they were heading.)

CANDY: How are you going to find people, Soph?

(Concentrating on getting where they were going, Sophira wasn't exactly paying her full attention.)

SOPHIRA: Huh?

CANDY: There's nobody about? Where are we going?

SOPHIRA: Nonsense, we'll be fine!

(As they raced into the square, Sophira suddenly skidded to a halt.)

SOPHIRA: Damn, where is everyone? How am I going to find people to fight when I don't know where they are?

(Stopping behind her, Candy shared her sense of frustration.)

CANDY: That's what I was saying!

(Thinking quickly, Sophira slapped herself on the cheek softly and mumbled.)

SOPHIRA: There has to be...

(Suddenly she looked enlightened.)

SOPHIRA: That might work! C'mon.

(And with that she raced towards a narrow thoroughfare across the square. Unfamiliar with where they were heading and clueless as to Sophira's idea, Candy followed on looking lost and unnerved.)

CANDY: Where we going, Soph?

(Staring straight ahead, Sophira replied as she raced onwards down the thin passageway.)

SOPHIRA: Just follow me!

(Moments later Sophira took a swift turn and raced from the passageway through a large double doorway to the left. Candy followed on quietly as only a few seconds later they burst through another set of double doors that lead into a large inn full of depressed and sickly looking drinkers. As they all stopped what they were doing and stared at the energetic new arrivals, Sophira wasted no time in getting her message across.)

SOPHIRA: Arterian is here!

(There was complete silence until an old man who was sitting nearby spoke up in a drunken voice.)

DRUNK: Who?

(Struggling to stay on his seat, the old man's drunken friend squinted at them.)

DRUNK 2: Are they the strippers?

(As the old man burped and fell off his seat, Sophira rolled her eyes and tried a different approach.)

SOPHIRA: The bearer of the dark rage is here and he needs our help!

(Slowly the patrons of the bar resumed drinking, clearly assuming she was just another drunk or hallucinating from one of the many illnesses that were spreading through the city. Not knowing what to say, she looked to Candy.)

CANDY: I dunno!

(With a sigh she tried again.)

SOPHIRA: Look! The great wise man, Yanada wants your help everyone!!!

(As soon as she mentioned his name, the mood of the place immediately changed and she had everyone's full attention. Desperate to know what to do they awaited her instruction impatiently. Unfortunately, Sophira's shyness had chosen a bad time to make a comeback.)

SOPHIRA: Um...

DRINKER: So... what does he want us to do?

(As Sophira shrugged and struggled for words, Candy rolled her eyes and climbed up on a table.)

CANDY: He wants all those who can battle to gather in the great hall. Those who can't should use their power to heal those who can.

(She leant to Sophira.)

CANDY: It was the great hall wasn't it?

(Sophira nodded nervously, embarrassed at her ineptitude.)

DRINKER: That's all very well but fight with what?

(Anxious to regain some self-esteem, Sophira spoke up.)

SOPHIRA: From the great hall, use the ceremonial swords!

(Looking to the assembly Candy smiled.)

CANDY: What she said!

(An uncertain murmur arose from the inn as the patrons mulled over the idea. Feeling a little put out by the inertia, Candy scowled.)

CANDY: Less talk, more action!!! Go!!!



(Thrown into action by her words, almost the entire population of the inn spilled past them in a rush to do as she asked. As they shuffled past, Sophira climbed on a table as Candy had and addressed them as they left.)

SOPHIRA: Remember, if you can fight then fight, if you can't then use what energy you have to heal.

(As the last stragglers disappeared through the doors, Candy beamed.)

CANDY: God we're good.

SOPHIRA: We certainly are!

(Sophira may have hated Yanada intensely for his despicable treatment of her but right now she was glad his word carried such weight. Maybe if he'd been in favour of fighting in the first place, Lethernia wouldn't have been in the mess it was. As they paced from the bar, Candy looked to Sophira wearing a quizzical expression.)

CANDY: Okay, so now what?

(Looking determined, Sophira gave a positive glance and rubbed her hands together.)

SOPHIRA: Now we do it again until we run out of bars and inns!

(And after sharing a knowing smile they raced off together down the passageway.)

After all Candy and Sophira's hard work, the great hall soon became overflowing with volunteers to fight or heal. When Candy and Sophira arrived an hour or so later, they were more than a little surprised at the extent of their success. Quite clearly the word had spread and people were arriving from all over the city. Part of the hall was filled with people too weak to move from using their final energies to heal and the other was filled with the strong and healthy wielding swords. How the mention of Yanada's name could have made such a difference was absolutely lost on Candy. When he told them not to fight, they didn't want to fight but when he said they should they were only too happy to. Unsure what to do next, Sophira shrugged to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Okay, so now what? What do we tell them?

(Candy looked unsure.)

CANDY: Um... how about 'good luck'?

(Sophira frowned at her sarcastically.)

SOPHIRA: I mean what do they have to do? Go and fight or stay here?

CANDY: Oh!

(She shrugged.)

CANDY: I dunno, just tell them to go to the main square once they're ready I guess. Arterian can shout orders down from the balcony.

SOPHIRA: Candy, you're a genius. We'll do that!

(Having passed those orders on under the pretence that they were Yanada's orders, Candy and Sophira raced back to the main square to tell Arterian what they'd done. Feeling more than a little pleased with themselves they chatted excitedly as they ran.)

SOPHIRA: That was amazing but if Yanada ever finds out he'll kill me!

(Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: Deny everything, that's what I do when I'm in trouble! Besides, why would he mind? Arterian told us to do it!

(She beamed.)

CANDY: Shit Soph, we raised a massive army in like under two hours!

(Feeling extremely proud, Sophira matched her beaming smile.)

SOPHIRA: I know. It's amazing.

(If they'd looked over the city walls for even a moment, however, they'd be under no illusions of what a massive army really looked like. The six hundred or so untrained men they'd managed to get equipped for battle was nothing compared to the

thousands of battle hardened warriors they'd be up against. Upon reaching the main square, Candy and Sophira kept running as they headed for the balcony to tell Arterian the news to his face. They knew in their hearts they'd achieved something special by raising this army and although they'd never admit it, they felt that Arterian would give them the credit they craved. Despite everything they'd been through they were just two normal girls and receiving much due validation from their peers was the least they felt they deserved. Upon their arrival on the balcony, Arterian spotted them and raced back to meet them half way. He looked shift and worried.)

ARTERIAN: How did you get on?

(Dying to be the one who told him first, they both gave animated explanations at the same time.)

ARTERIAN: One of you!!!

(Much to Candy's disappointment, he looked to Sophira.)

SOPHIRA: There's over 500 on their way now, we told them Yanada said...

(Looking determined, Arterian interjected.)

ARTERIAN: Good work, ladies. I just hope it's enough. Now get down, they're about to invade!

(As Arterian raced back to his vantage point, Candy and Sophira looked to one another with a feeling of dread in their hearts and could only muster almost catatonic speech.)

CANDY: They're about to invade!

SOPHIRA: Invade!

(Suddenly the boom of a cannon firing sent them both diving to the ground with a scream. Looking terrified, they scrambled back against the wall and clung onto each other for dear life.)

CANDY: Oh crap!!!

(Taking a quick peer around Sophira at Arterian before she did so, Candy grabbed Sophira's hand and they both huddled into one another, fearing for their lives.

One thing you could always guarantee from the Gregon is that when they attacked it was always a brutal, full on assault. This vast army had no concept of taking prisoners, you were either one of them or you were killed. Eager to obliterate the Lethernian civilization with ruthless efficiency, they peppered the outer wall with cannon balls while pounding the gate with several battering rams in their eagerness to get inside and begin the slaughter. Knowing the time had come, Arterian growled to psyche him self up and closed his eyes tight. As he reopened them, all but the whites of his eyes glowed a fluorescent yellow and his mouth contorted into a devilish snarl. With his first course of action obvious to him, he flexed his muscles and clenched both his fists before slinging his hands over the wall to fire powerful lightning bolts at the cannons. Almost as if conducting an orchestra, he threw out his hands time and time again, knocking out the cannons with pin point accuracy. As shrapnel flew from the exploding cannons, the first Gregon casualties were claimed but with their vast number those few deaths were insignificant. Practically smelling Lethernian blood, the Gregon continued to hammer at the gate violently. Standing at the entrance of his tent, the Emperor watched the early events and turned to his second with an angry look in his face.)

EMPEROR: Have these clowns never seen a battering ram before? And what the hell happened to the cannons? Why are they not firing? McGoogan, I'm not impressed!

(McGoogan nodded.)

MCGOOGAN: Understood, my liege.

(With no more said, he rushed to the leader of the battering ram unit and punched him full in the face.)

MCGOOGAN: The emperor wants this gate down, now!!!

(Angered by the demeaning punch, the leader of the battering ram men bellowed at his unit to get the job done. Being disgraced before the emperor was pretty much the biggest insult one man could receive and he was determined it wouldn't happen again. As McGoogan returned to the emperor's side, he received a nod of approval.)

EMPEROR: Nice work, but if that gate isn't down in the next 30 seconds, kill him.

(McGoogan nodded sternly.)

MCGOOGAN: It'll be a pleasure!

(With the cannons neutralised, Arterian set about his next move. Forming an alpha triangle sign with his thumbs and forefingers, he held it before his face then pointed it upwards and looked at the sun through the gap. Chanting seemingly incoherent words, he then threw his arms down and out to the sides as if aiming at the Gregon that covered the plain like locusts. To the naked eye it seemed to have failed but every Gregon soldier knew something was amiss. Suddenly they all felt much weaker for no apparent reason, Arterian's spell to half their strength and stamina working like a charm. He knew that should anything happen to him, this spell was essential if the weak Lethernian soldiers were to stand any chance at all. Unfortunately, those not in Arterian's view were immune to the spell, including those in the battering ram unit. Having made heavy weather of the task in hand they were only too relieved to see the gates splinter then smash away leaving Lethernia open and defenceless against their hands on invasion. As soon as the gates smashed away, the emperor bellowed.)

EMPEROR: Destroy them!!!

(And with a deafening roar, thousands of warriors charged for the gateway. Looking down from the balcony as the gates disintegrated, Candy and Sophira panicked profusely.)

SOPHIRA: The gates are gone!!!

(Heeding the warning immediately, Arterian leapt into action. Rushing aside Candy and Sophira to get a view of the gate, he thrust his fist in its direction and held his other hand above his head twisting it wildly in circles. This was when the girls first noticed his glowing yellow eyes pulsing and radiating. As soon as he weaved his bizarre spell, a high pitched whooshing noise arose and he rushed back to his place in the corner. As the first wave of Gregon soldiers raced menacingly through the gap where the gates used to be looking set on causing death and destruction, they were immediately blown straight back out again by a mysterious force. Candy and Sophira looked on agape.)

SOPHIRA: That explains the windy noise!

(Quickly burying her head in Sophira's hair to hide behind her from Arterian, Candy whimpered.)

CANDY: I wanna go home.

(Horried by the Gregon's inability to do a simple task like walk through a gap without getting blown back out, the emperor despaired vehemently.)

EMPEROR: What is this??? What's happening!

MCGOOGAN: It looks like... magic, my liege!

(The emperor snarled.)

EMPEROR: This isn't healing, they're using black magic. McGoogan!

MCCOOGAN: My liege?

EMPEROR: We need to take out their mages, find a way. Go!

(Without a word, McGoogan rushed out to find out what was happening.)

EMPEROR: Okay, new tactic!!!

(With the wind magic holding the Gregon at bay temporarily, the Lethernian soldiers that had finally amassed could only stand and stare with nothing to fight against. Arterian was doing a fantastic job. As much as they just wanted to bury their heads and pray for a swift end to the fighting, Candy and Sophira couldn't take their eyes off of Arterian as he went about his business. Their eyes followed him everywhere as he raced along the balcony firing various magic types at groups of soldiers. Outside in the plain, Gregon soldiers were combusting, freezing to death and frying at his whim as he himself started to emit a turquoise glow. Only Arterian knew what this meant, he was starting to lose himself in the dark magic he was calling upon and he might possibly lose any sense of perspective and start killing everything in his path including those he was fighting for. Knowing it was a risk he'd have to take, he continued on unabated.)

Getting nowhere fast, the Gregon emperor had run out of patience some time ago. Determined to begin the cull of Lethernian life, he'd brought forth his archer units to pepper the main square with arrows. He could see there were soldiers there but the frustration at their futile attempts to go through the gap left by the gates was almost too much to bear. Wearing a deathly snarl, he ordered them to commence firing immediately. Finally, his efforts started to bare some fruit. As arrows rained down on the main square several of the bewildered Lethernian army were impaled or skewered on their sharp tips. They now knew what war involved and a few of them scarpered. Those who remained found themselves dodging the arrows for their very survival. Upon the balcony, a rogue set of arrows thrashed into the wall above Candy and Sophira. With a scream they dived aside and stared up at marks left in the marble.)

CANDY: Fuck!

SOPHIRA: I hate this, Candy!

(Unfortunately for them, the arrows were relentless. Several seemed to hit Arterian and ricochet off him as if he was made of solid steel. Too frightened to cower in case an arrow hit them, Candy and Sophira bounced on the balls of their feet in readiness to avoid the next wave.)

SOPHIRA: Ashbury forest doesn't seem so bad now does it?

(As once again a hail of arrows darkened the sky above on its way into the main square, Sophira dived onto her stomach and covered her head.)

SOPHIRA: Oh my god!!!

(As she leapt to her feet, she turned to face Candy.)

SOPHIRA: They just keep on coming...

(Much to her horror, Candy stood there shaking with her mouth wide open, her hands slowly reaching for the arrow that was sticking out of her thigh.)

CANDY: Soph!

(With extreme urgency, she raced to Candy's side and yanked out the arrow.)

CANDY: Yeow!

SOPHIRA: It's okay!

(Immediately she healed Candy's thigh and spun around to face Arterian looking furious.)

SOPHIRA: Isn't there some spell to just kill them all???

(She knew that if the arrow had been a little bit higher Candy would have been dead and there'd be nothing she could do about it. Looking frustrated, Arterian spun around to face her, a move that frightened her half to death.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry!

(She cowered behind her hands.)

ARTERIAN: Sorry?

(Looking purposeful, Arterian stepped up to her making her cower some more.)

ARTERIAN: Look...

(Without thinking, Candy instinctively stood up for her friend.)

CANDY: Leave her alone you big bully!

(Getting quite annoyed, Arterian bellowed.)

ARTERIAN: Shut up!

(Immediately they both cowered and offered him an apologetic grin.)

ARTERIAN: Listen. The wind barrier is getting weaker and all I'm really doing here is holding them at bay. In the meantime, those soldiers are getting picked off with arrows at an alarming rate. There's too many of them.

(Neither Candy nor Sophira knew what to say and hung their heads.)

ARTERIAN: Sophira? I need your help!

(She raised her head.)

SOPHIRA: Me?

(As another shower of arrows passed over, Arterian held out his arms to shield them and allow the arrows to bounce off him. Without a flinch, he lowered his arms as soon as they passed and continued.)

ARTERIAN: Yes, you. What are you willing to do to see to it your people survive?

(She shrugged nervously, more than a little daunted by his pulsating yellow eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Well... anything I suppose!

(Candy looked nervous.)

CANDY: Soph?

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Don't worry, Candy!

(Failing to see how she could fail to worry, Candy bit her lip and listened.)

ARTERIAN: I can take out thousands with one sonic boom but that'll still leave a good 1000 or so beneath the wall that I can't reach. They've been slowed but I need someone to take up the mantle.

SOPHIRA: The mantle?

ARTERIAN: Look, the sonic boom takes so much power I'll have no shield or barrier and if they hit me with those arrows I'm done for. If that's the case I need you to take charge.

(She looked lost.)

SOPHIRA: Me? I don't understand.

(Suddenly she looked enlightened.)

SOPHIRA: Oh wait, I get it.

(Arterian forced a smile.)

ARTERIAN: Excellent. Just come and sit by my feet, you'll be safe there.

CANDY: What about me?

(Arterian sighed.)

ARTERIAN: Okay, but sit further away!

(With a scowl she sniffed her armpit and followed both he and Sophira back to the corner Arterian was fighting from. As he placed himself back in position, Sophira sat by his feet and shrugged to Candy as she sat a little way down the wall feeling left out.)

SOPHIRA: It makes sense, Candy. He wants me to heal him ASAP if he gets hit.

(Candy smiled realising it was actually a very wise move to have her close enough to restart his heart within seconds should he be harmed in any way.

Sensing a wind of change in their favour, the Gregon emperor kept calling for more arrows while watching his men start to make some headway against the weakening wind in the gateway. He felt it only a matter time before they breached the barrier and now he was more determined than ever to make them suffer. As he watched on anticipating a breakthrough, McGoogan, his second in command raced over to him.)

MCGOOGAN: My liege!

EMPEROR: Ah, McGoogan. Looks like we're getting somewhere!

MCGOOGAN: Aye.

EMPEROR: So, what did you find?

MCGOOGAN: Well, my liege, it looks like there's just one mage up in the top right corner. We can't see any others anyhow!

(The emperor nodded.)

EMPEROR: Okay, good work, aim all the arrows in his direction, swamp him. We must break through!

MCGOOGAN: Already done, my liege!

(The emperor allowed himself a wide smile, convinced the end of Lethernia would soon be within his grasp.

As arrows flew towards him in their hundreds, Arterian braced himself for a great deal of pain. He knew his spell was essential to the campaign and he had no choice but having lived the last 50 years without sensing pain he was more than a little apprehensive. And thus with his dedication to duty at the forefront of his mind, he began the spell. Standing tall, he held his arms out to the side and looked to his feet like a gymnast preparing himself mentally. Slowly he turned his hands upwards and started to mumble in a strange forgotten language. Feeling a great deal of apprehension, Candy and Sophira leant away from him as they watched on with fear in their eyes. Starting to growl as he mumbled, Arterian raised his head slowly, his previously pulsating eyes now flashing as bright as a thousand stars. And with a howl, he clapped his hands before him and released. As he did so, a hail of arrows lashed into his head and torso. Out in the meadow, the emperor could only watch in horror as the wake of the energy field created by Arterian sent his tent flying across the meadow as it passed overhead. Little did he realise at this point, he was one of the lucky ones. Those unlucky enough to be a few yards behind were blown apart and swept away by the thrusting pulsation of energy. Arms, legs and heads were simply ripped off by its sheer force. Having covered the meadow like locusts a few moments earlier, bits of their bodies became strewn for miles around and the land almost turned red with their blood as the energy blast demolished everything in its path. Over 8000 men obliterated in one giant blast. As human body parts and broken weapons rained down on the field behind him, the emperor covered his head in horror, unable to take his eyes off the destruction. Whereas most leaders would have regarded this situation as leaving them with no option but to offer an unconditional surrender or make a complete retreat, it only served to incense the emperor further. With a burning red face he raged and shook his fists.)

EMPEROR: Destroy them!!!

(Immediately the 1000 or so remaining soldiers charged for the gap once more. The ever weakening barrier seemed to be fading and they knew it was only a matter time

before they'd make it inside. Desperate to avenge the death of vast hoards of their comrades, the Gregon soldiers bellowed as they pushed against the dying wind barrier. Sensing the time to fight was imminent, the nervous Lethernian soldiers prepared themselves for battle.

Up on the balcony at this point, Arterian lay flat on his back with Sophira leaning across him shouting her heart out.)

SOPHIRA: Wake up!!! Come on, heal!!! Please!!!

(Watching her from a few feet away, Candy sat with her bottom lip protruding, knowing her friends efforts were in vain. Arterian had been dead the moment he hit the floor and she knew it. Knowing all too well her efforts had been in vain, Sophira finally relented and hung her head. With a sigh, Candy tried to offer her some support.)

CANDY: You did your best, Soph. There was nothing you could do.

(A tear rolled down her cheek.)

CANDY: You gonna be okay, Soph?

(Sophira said nothing. She just leant over Arterian's body breathing heavily and slightly rocking back and forth. Taking it as a sign of Sophira's grieving, Candy moved as if to crawl towards her when suddenly a loud battle cry erupted from down below. In a blind panic, Candy crawled forward and peered over the edge.)

CANDY: Oh my god!!!

(Beneath her the Gregon army had finally breached the barrier and made an instant charge for the Lethernian soldiers that awaited them. Fearing the end was on it's way, Candy spun her head around to face Sophira.)

CANDY: Soph, we're in deep shit!!!

(Saying nothing, Sophira just raised her head, revealing pulsating yellow eyes and a violent snarl. Mortified by what she saw, Candy placed her despairing hands on her head and whimpered.)

CANDY: Soph!

(Still without uttering a word, Sophira climbed to her feet and walked to the edge to look into the square below. Watching her nervously, Candy bit her nails and whimpered. Hearing the whimper, Sophira looked to her with a sneer.)

SOPHIRA: It ends now!

(And with that, she jumped down into the square below. Candy gasped and peered over the edge to watch as Sophira landed among a group of Gregon warriors and thrust her arms out sending them all sprawling. With the snarl permanently fixed on her face, she looked about herself and saw the Gregon soldiers cutting through the Lethernian's like butter. As the Lethernian's dropped like flies in the face of a far too powerful foe, Sophira knew exactly what she had to do. Slowly she walked towards the broken gateway as Gregon soldiers tried vainly to scythe her down with their swords. In their tens they attempted to slash her but their swords would break before they even got close to hitting her, such was the power of the force field that protects the bearer of the dark rage. Staring straight ahead as the Gregon continued in vain to bring her down, she headed through the gap and on towards the remains of the emperor's tent. In no doubt whatsoever where she was heading, the Gregon ceased the slaughter immediately in desperation to save their leader, as any well trained army would. Pouring back through the gate they continued to vainly attempt to cut her down. Making no effort to hurry, she stared the emperor in the eye as she slowly stepped forth. Looking about himself fearfully, the emperor held his hands out to his side.)

EMPEPOR: Are you fucking pansies gonna kill this bitch or what???

(Having been startled by the Gregon exiting the square in pursuit of Sophira, Candy pulled herself up to the top of the wall to get a view of what was going on. Seeing her edge closer to the emperor and that nobody could stop her, she mumbled to herself.)

CANDY: Go on, Soph. Kick his arse!

(It would have been far wiser for Candy to just sit tight rather than make such efforts to peer over the wall, especially in light of what happened to Arterian. She needn't have worried though, every soldier in the entire army was now engaged in trying to stop Sophira reaching their emperor. Hitting an invisible wall at every attempt they were powerless to prevent her stepping up to him and grabbing him by the throat. Looking terrified, he stared into her yellow eyes and threatened her desperately.)

EMPEROR: Harm me and I swear, my entire army won't rest until you're dead. You and all your kind.

(Sophira didn't even dignify his pathetic threat with an answer. Killing every Lethernian was always their intention anyway. The emperor quite simply didn't want his men to know he was on the verge of wetting himself. Offering him no words whatsoever, Sophira instead tilted her head from side to side as she stared at him, almost as if examining his head for signs of wear and tear.)

EMPEROR: What you looking at?

(Again she said nothing and dipped her head to look at his chin. Getting increasingly desperate the emperor trembled and tried to belittle her into giving up.)

EMPEROR: You can't do anything to me, you're weak. You've been squeezing my neck for an age and I can't feel a thing. Let me go before I do something you regret! (He implored to McGoogan with his eyes to help him but McGoogan could only offer a desperate shrug. He was beat. The soldiers had all given up trying to stop her by now and the emperor only had his wits to help him as his entire army fell silent and looked on in helpless horror.)

EMPEROR: So, nothing to say huh, lassie? Then fuck off!

(He tried to grab her wrist but found his hand bouncing off the protective shield.)

EMPEROR: What the?

(He fumed.)

EMPEROR: So is this it? You just going to hold my neck and bore me to death? Say something!!!

(Regretfully for him, she did.)

SOPHIRA: Separate!

(As soon as she finished uttering the word, the emperor's body from the neck down fell to the ground, blood gushing from the remains of his neck. All around there were gasps of horror as Sophira continued to stand there holding his severed head. A few tried to avenge their leader with the futile gesture of attacking her again but for the most part they started to back away. Looking somewhat psychotic she threw his head on the ground and looked around at the soldiers as they backed off.)

SOPHIRA: Who's next?

(Her words brought forth a cry of retreat from several quarters and wasting no time at all, the Gregon warriors fled as fast as they could. A wise move considering the amount of lightning bolts and fireballs Sophira then proceeded to blast at them. Of the entire mighty Gregon army, maybe only 200 managed to escape with their lives. As the last Gregon disappeared in the distance, Sophira strolled back inside the gap and received a deafening ovation from the citizens. Upon on the balcony, Candy yelled down and waved excitedly but Sophira didn't heed anything. Without a word, she headed into the hall of the elders leaving a bewildered Candy behind.



Free at last, the people of Lethernia wasted no time in gathering what was left of the Gregon food and medical supplies that lay abandoned among the human remains and pools of blood outside. It would take a while to get back on their feet but at last they could begin the recovery. Within minutes, fruit gatherers headed for the forests and farmers returned to the livestock that'd been unavailable to them during the siege. The war was over and Lethernia had survived... and hopefully learned its lesson.

Inside the hall of the elders, Sophira headed straight for Yanada's chamber. Her eyes still glowed yellow and the snarl hadn't faded one bit. Without knocking, she crashed through the door giving Yanada quite a start. Looking extremely irritated he pulled up his trousers and yelled at her.)

YANADA: Knock damn you!

(As soon as he calmed down he recognised Sophira and scowled.)

YANADA: It's you. The pervert!

(Once his eyesight came into focus he noticed the glow in her eyes and stepped back in fear.)

YANADA: The dark rage!!! So... Arterian?

(Offering no emotion, Sophira almost stared straight through him.)

SOPHIRA: Dead!

YANADA: And the Gregon?

SOPHIRA: Dead!

(He looked stunned.)

YANADA: You mean... we won?

SOPHIRA: No! Lethernia won. You're going to live in exile!

(Putting angry hands on his hips he remonstrated vehemently.)

YANADA: Excuse me? I'm doing what, you say?

SOPHIRA: Going to live in exile. You're a fossil with out-dated bigoted ways, I'm in charge now!

(Yanada was furious.)

YANADA: Now you listen here young lady...

SOPHIRA: Exile or death, it's entirely your choice!

(With that she flicked out a hand and set fire to his robes. In a blind panic he cast them off and threw them to the floor to stamp on.)

SOPHIRA: Oops, I slipped! Good thing it wasn't lightning!

(With terror in his eyes, Yanada looked to her and whimpered longingly.)

YANADA: Please don't kill me!

SOPHIRA: You had a choice!

(Yanada sighed.)

YANADA: Exile or death? Exile please!

SOPHIRA: Exile please, my queen!

(Begrudgingly he nodded.)

YANADA: Exile please, my queen!

SOPHIRA: I'm not your queen, you're banished, exiled, kicked out. Now fuck off!

(And with that she pushed him aside and went to sit in his cherished chair.)

SOPHIRA: Now run along!

(Hanging his head as he did so, Yanada trudged out as Candy raced in.)

CANDY: Soph? Soph? You okay, Soph?

(As she spotted Candy approaching, the yellow faded from her eyes and she suddenly felt a great deal calmer inside. With a spring in her heart, she leapt from her seat and

ran over to give her a hug. As she threw her arms around her however she felt a tenseness about her and stepped back looking uncertain.)

SOPHIRA: Candy? What's up?

(Candy sighed and looked her in the eye.)

CANDY: What's going to become of you, Soph? You have the dark thingy!

SOPHIRA: Rage!

CANDY: Yeah!

(Sophira shrugged and tried to offer her a reassuring smile.)

SOPHIRA: I'll be fine!

CANDY: But will you?

(With a sigh, she dropped her shoulders and hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: I don't know! I wasn't expecting this!

(Candy shared her despairing demeanour.)

CANDY: Nobody was!

SOPHIRA: Arterian was. When he asked how far I'd go this is what he meant. He knew he was going die, that's why he wanted you to sit further away. It had nothing to do with healing him.

(Candy suddenly looked enlightened.)

CANDY: Oh, I was gonna say, considering everything I think I smell fine!

(Wearing a cheeky smile, Sophira giggled and shook her fist triumphantly.)

SOPHIRA: Candy, we won!

(As a wide smile crossed Candy's face they embraced tightly. Everything they'd risked their lives for had worked out perfectly. The brushes with beasts, the near fatal encounters with gravity, everything suddenly seemed worth it. Releasing a world of tension from their bodies they allowed themselves a much deserved pat on the back. It was over and they'd been spectacularly successful as well as making a wonderful friend in each other in the process. They could be excused for feeling more than a little pleased with themselves. Grinning like a naughty schoolgirl, Sophira chuckled to herself.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, remember when we first met you asked if I was a princess?

(Candy giggled.)

CANDY: Yeah, what a wally, eh?

SOPHIRA: Not really. I've just declared myself queen of Lethernia!

(Candy looked baffled.)

CANDY: Really? What do the elders think of that?

(Sophira chuckled out loud.)

SOPHIRA: Outwardly they approve!

(There was no way Candy could have understood why she was laughing. If she'd been in the main square she might have. Desperate to stop Sophira from taking control, Yanada ran from group of celebrating citizens to group of celebrating citizens, protesting vehemently.)

YANADA: Sophira is our queen spread the word.

(Anger rose in his body every time he said it. The words he wanted to say were something along the lines of stopping the power hungry dark mage from taking control but every time he spoke the above phrase came out. The power Sophira had over him was such; he could do nothing about it. Eventually, he climbed up on a ledge in the square and made a declaration.)

YANADA: The elders are no more; long live queen Sophira the first!

(Following that unwanted declaration he declared his love for defiling farm animals before stripping naked and skipping out of the gate singing a song about how pretty

he looked in a tutu. The dark rage really did hold the ultimate power to do anything. All the dark magic in the world rolled into one. Sophira could even make Candy fall in love with her if she wanted to, but she didn't. She loved Candy too much to inflict that on her. At this moment in time, Sophira didn't know what she'd do. The downside of the dark rage was such that she could well end up being lonely forever if she didn't want to kill everyone she loved every time she was in a bad mood. And so, with her best friend by her side, she decided to enjoy the evening and leave the decision making for later.)

(As soon as they emerged from the hall of the elders, the citizens that had gathered in the main square erupted into a frenzied show of adulation. They'd seen Sophira in action and after Yanada's commendation they were excited about having her as their queen. As a result, the joyous celebration that took place that evening was held very much in her honour. Also hailing Candy as a true hero of Lethernia the people made sure they both had a wonderful evening. The overwhelming sense of freedom that swept the town was hard to imagine. They hadn't realised what they'd had until the Gregon took it away. Just being alive was a wonderful thing on this night. Candy and Sophira had been to hell and back on a rollercoaster of joy, blood and tears but their friendship had brought them through. After everything that had been sent to test them, their faith in each other had survived and together they'd go down in history as true icons of peace. The relentless adulation they received was no more than they deserved.

By the time they managed to get some much deserved sleep the sun was almost up on the following morning. With no signs of it ending any time soon, the party in the main square went on. As the girls snored deeply in the comfort of luxurious beds, a far cry from the forest floor, neither knew what was to come. Sophira had some massive decisions to make about how to handle the dark rage and Candy was anxious to know what would become of her. For now though, they slept. The mission they'd set out to accomplish had been accomplished in style and that meant everything. The future would just have to take care of itself.

### *6 Months later*

(Lethernia had never had it so good. Queen Sophira 1<sup>st</sup> had been a revelation. No more bigotry, no more out-dated values and no more repressing people's freedom of expression. Lethernia was truly free. The healing faith remained as did an army, trained both to kill and to heal. They wouldn't allow themselves to make the same mistake again.

Gregon's once notoriously mighty army had gained fame for being destroyed by a group of pacifists and a serving girl, as a result, every territory they'd invaded en route to Lethernia had been taken back in a very short time as other nations took advantage of their reputation for being weak. It would probably be only a matter of time before Gregon itself fell into enemy hands. Lethernia on the other hand had gained a reputation for being extremely powerful and yet retained its sense of innocence just as Arterian had predicted.

The dark rage had as of yet, had no ill side effects on Sophira whatsoever. She'd never been so happy. With her chief aide Candy by her side she was enjoying being a

positive influence on people's lives. Maybe Sophira's kind nature was strong enough to suppress the rage, nobody knew, but so far so good. Maybe that would change in time but right now everything was looking decidedly rosy.

After a long six months away, Candy finally took time out to visit her father. Sophira used her dark magic to transport them there. She'd been away so long she was nervous about seeing him again. She'd grown up a lot since she left and she didn't know how he'd react. At 6pm, the time they'd normally sat down for dinner, Sophira and Candy emerged in Candy's bedroom. Initially collapsing from dizziness, Candy climbed up Sophira and looked around.)

CANDY: Nothing's changed!

(Sophira's expression begged to differ.)

SOPHIRA: It smells a bit!

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: That's my dad's approach to cleaning stuff. If the door's shut and you can't see it, it doesn't exist.

(After sharing a brief grin, Sophira gestured to the door.)

SOPHIRA: Shall we?

(Psyching herself up, Candy took a deep breath and nodded.)

CANDY: Let's go!

(And with that, they stepped from her bedroom into the main room of the house where her dad was fast asleep in a chair. Stopping to watch him they couldn't help but laugh as he snored uncontrollably.)

SOPHIRA: Aw, your dad's so cute!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Yeah, let's scare him!

(Wearing a cheeky grin she crept round the table and kicked him in the shin.)

CANDY: Police, wake up!!!

(In a blind panic he leapt to his feet.)

SWAINE: I know nothing about any dodgy beer!!!

(As soon as his brain switched on, he saw Candy before him and his jaw dropped.)

SWAINE: Candy?

CANDY: Hi, dad!

(With a tear welling in his eyes he threw his arms around her.)

SWAINE: Oh my god, I thought you were dead!

(Candy was stunned.)

CANDY: What?

(Stepping back, he placed both hands on her shoulders.)

SWAINE: My god, it's really you!

CANDY: You thought I was dead?

SWAINE: We even had a service for you!

(He threw his arms around her again.)

SWAINE: Candy, I've flogged myself everyday for letting you walk out into those woods!

(Knowing she could have come home any time in the last six months just to let him know she was safe, a wave of guilt swept through her and her bottom lip pouted.)

CANDY: I'm so, so sorry dad!

(Wearing a broad smile, he smiled at Sophira.)

SWAINE: Ah hello, Sophira!

(Much to their surprise, he grabbed a cane and used it to approach her.)

SWAINE: Good to see you again!  
(Looking mortified, Candy quizzed him about the cane.)  
CANDY: What happened, dad?  
(Swaine looked uncertain what she meant for a moment.)  
SWAINE: What, love? Oh this!  
(He held up the cane.)  
SWAINE: Entirely my fault. I had a little hunting accident, I wasn't paying attention!  
(Candy's heart sunk.)  
CANDY: 'Cause of me, right?  
SWAINE: No, don't be silly!  
(He gave a wide smile.)  
SWAINE: Are you staying long?  
(Knowing he was imploring her to say yes, Candy nodded.)  
CANDY: Sure, dad.  
(Watching on, Sophira rubbed her chin thoughtfully.)  
SOPHIRA: Have you been able to hunt, sir?  
(Swaine sighed.)  
SWAINE: No, but I do okay, the others bring me food now and again.  
(Looking across at Candy, Sophira could see she was desperately trying not to cry.)  
SOPHIRA: Mind if we just pop out, sir?  
(Swaine looked baffled.)  
SWAINE: Why would...  
(Suddenly he looked enlightened.)  
SWAINE: Oh, you mean you two!  
(He chuckled.)  
SWAINE: Sure. Be my guest. Just remember to wake me up when you come back, I don't want to miss a second with my girl here.  
(He winked at Candy.)  
CANDY: Aw, dad!  
SWAINE: Don't mind me, I tend to sleep a lot these days, I'll be fine!  
SOPHIRA: Let me just fix that leg for you before we go.  
(Before he could question her, Sophira reached down and placed her hand on his left thigh. Feeling a cooling sensation as the pain died down, Swaine allowed himself a relieved groan.)  
SWAINE: Wow, bloody hell girl, that's fantastic!  
(Standing up straight, Sophira acknowledged his gratitude with a smile.)  
SWAINE: Now can you do the other leg?  
(Horried by her father's behaviour, Candy frowned in disgust.)  
CANDY: For pity's sake, dad!  
(He shrugged innocently.)  
SWAINE: What? You can't blame a guy for trying!  
CANDY: On that note, we'll be back later!  
(She chuckled.)  
CANDY: You never change, dad!  
(He smiled warmly back.)  
SWAINE: Well, I've only got the one pair of socks, you see.  
(Petrified at the thought of listening to any more of his jokes, Sophira rolled her eyes.)  
SOPHIRA: Let's go!

(Reaching for the door as she did so, Sophira gestured for Candy to follow her. Giving her dad another hug on the way, she followed her out solemnly. As they headed down the deserted main thoroughfare, Candy looked miserable.)

SOPHIRA: Your dad was in a bad way!

(With that Candy burst out crying forcing a caring response from Sophira.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, hey...

(She placed a consoling arm around her shoulder.)

CANDY: I should have come back sooner. I only had to let him know I was okay and I didn't even do that.

(As they headed towards the main centre of town, Sophira stopped and faced her. Feeling guilty and miserable, Candy looked at the ground.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, I asked you to come out here for a reason.

(Candy looked up at her.)

SOPHIRA: You know what you have to do, don't you?

(Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: Do I?

(Sophira sighed and nodded acceptingly.)

SOPHIRA: You have to stay and take care of your dad for a bit. I may have healed him but I think he needs you around for a bit.

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: I know, but I want to be with you, it's been so wonderful these last six months! And I left in the first place so I wouldn't be stuck here!

SOPHIRA: You won't be. And anyway, I'll visit once a week, I promise, but you've got to make sure your dad is going to be okay before you come back. Even if it's just for your own peace of mind.

(Knowing she was right, Candy nodded reluctantly.)

CANDY: I know! And I really do want to spend some time with him; I just don't want to be stuck in a rut again.

SOPHIRA: Candy, that's not going to happen. As long as I'm around you'll always have somewhere to go when need be.

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: You're right. And it works both ways you know, if you ever need a break from being worshipped and adored by your subjects, you know where I am.

(With a tear rolling down her cheek, Sophira hugged her tight.)

SOPHIRA: I'm really going to miss you, Candy!

CANDY: I'll miss you too, Soph!

(Stepping back from her, Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: I'll see you soon okay, I promise! Now go and see your dad!

(Wiping a tear, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Okay, I love you remember!

(And with a smile, Sophira disappeared into thin air. Suddenly feeling very much alone, Candy looked around herself and smiled. Her friend was gone and she was right back where she started from. For a moment, she felt like the world had ended, until she heard a loud chuckling from one of the buildings in the town. Suddenly a wry smile crossed her face.)

CANDY: Hmm... dad's asleep and surely one won't hurt!

(And with no more thought on the subject she headed for the double doors of the inn with a spring in her step. Upon reaching them she took a deep breath and flung the doors open. Just like old times, her entrance was greeted with a deafening cheer and a chorus of wolf whistles.)

CANDY: Hi boys, guess who's home!

(As another cheer erupted she knew this was where she belonged. For all the grandeur of her life with Sophira, her heart belonged in Chiswell Point. Knowing she was no longer in a rut and her friend would never be far away, Candy felt truly free. She wanted tales of foreign sights and lands and now she had them. Unbeknown to herself at the time, the thing she craved most was a friend and in Sophira she had the best friend she could ever have. A friend for life who'd risk anything for her. Filing her life in Lethernia under 'pending', she picked up her glass of raspberry wine and gave a silent toast to Sophira and proceeded to flirt with the boys as she'd always done. Knowing she wasn't trapped this time, everything felt glorious. It had all been a great adventure but at last she was home.

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