

FUTILE FANTASY CREATIONS PRESENT...

SILLY SHORTS

PONYTAIL

The tiny Lenthom town of Birdstone had existed in peace for over five hundred years. Since its very foundation it hadn't been drawn into a single wartime dispute. To the townsfolk, war was something they merely read about. It was an alien pastime they had absolutely no interest in. Despite the fact that Lenthom had actually been at war with neighbouring Nawsland for over five years, they'd never once come close to being involved.

A major reason for the town's success in evading conflict was its geography. It was situated on a plateau, halfway up a mountain. Invading armies simply never bothered with it. Making such a climb to attack a town with less than a thousand people and nothing worth stealing would have been pointless. And so, it had always been left alone to flourish in peace.

Five hundred years without a single blade raised in anger. Five complete centuries without bloodshed in the king's name. Not a single battle cry, and not one easily avoidable death at the behest of a leader who'd failed to keep the peace. It had been a war-free zone from day one. All that, however, came to an abrupt end on one awful, fated day that would forever be known as The Day of Darkness.

It had been an ordinary peaceful morning with the townsfolk going about their business as usual. The miller was grinding grain to make flour, the fishmonger was setting up his overnight catch from the river and children were heading to the town's one and only school. All was calm and nothing seem out of the ordinary. Then it happened. Hell descended. In a split second peace turned to chaos as a squadron of one hundred heavily-armed Nawsland soldiers smashed their way through the town's gate. Designed to keep out bears, it didn't stand a chance against a battering ram, and within seconds they were through it. They didn't even hesitate. As soon as the gate went down, they went on the rampage.

Having been walking through the centre of town with her two young daughters, housewife Eleanor Warren had very much been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The first person in the invader's line of sight once they broke through the gate, she didn't have a hope in hell of avoiding them. Before she could even really understand what had happened, three of them had made a beeline for her with their blades aloft. With murder in their eyes, they descended upon her and her children, screeching words that went beyond proving their thirst for blood.

INVADER 01: Easy pickings, boys!!!

INVADER 02: Never mind, kids; becoming an adult is shit anyway!!!

INVADER 03: What say we rid of you of that burden???

INVADER 01: Don't worry! Mummy's going to the afterlife with you!!!

(Scared witless, Eleanor screamed in terror. Instinctively, she then turned her back and thrust her arms around her children in a bid to shield them from the incoming death.)

INVADER 01: Ambitious!

INVADER 02: Loving though!

INVADER 03: Loving, yet pointless!

INVADER 01: I like it!

(He smirked.)

INVADER 01: From the right angle, we can get our blades through all three of them at once!!!

(Fearing the imminent sting of death, Eleanor and her children all screamed out in anguish. It was one last desperate plea for a salvation that they knew would never come. All Eleanor could reasonably do now was hold her children tight and pray that death would be quick.)

ELEANOR: I love you, girls!!!

(She then screwed her eyes up tight. The icy pain of cold steel passing through her body, however, never came. Instead, she heard the muffled screams of dying men followed by footsteps racing away. At once, she glanced up and spotted a black ponytail zoom out of sight around the corner.)

ELEANOR: Who...

(She then turned her neck to glance behind her. The three invaders who'd promised her a gruesome death were themselves, lying dead in a pool of blood with their throats cut.)

ELEANOR: How did...

(Coming to her senses, she then stood up and hurried her crying children away down a side street. She'd been given a second chance and she wasn't about to waste it.)

ELEANOR: Thank you, whoever you were.

Eleanor may have had a last minute reprieve, but six other villagers hadn't been so lucky. They'd been chased down outside the flour mill and carved to pieces by ten marauding invaders. Delighted with their handiwork, the murderous invaders shared a series of devilish smirks then turned to face the mill. The miller, Frank Evans and his two grown up sons, Roy and Graham were backing away from them, around the side of the mill. It was the only place left to retreat to. They'd never get past the ten heavily-armed men. Unfortunately, behind the mill there was nothing but a steep cliff face. As a result, they very soon found themselves hemmed in; their backs literally against the wall as the invaders homed in on them.

FRANK: Boys?

ROY: Dad?

GRAHAM: Yeah?

FRANK: Which one of you fancies being a hero?

(His sons both glowered at him.)

ROY: *You're* the patriarch!

GRAHAM: Yeah! *You* take them on!

FRANK: What? With *my* bad back and dodgy knees?

(He sucked his teeth.)

FRANK: I couldn't possibly. Fighting is a young man's game!

ROY: Yeah. Young men with swords!

GRAHAM: We haven't got any swords!

ROY: Because when we were growing up, *someone* said swords are for thugs and forbid us from having them.

GRAHAM: We won't *need* a sword anyway, he said.

ROY: That's right. Because there's *never* any trouble in Birdstone anyway. It'd be a waste of money, he said.

GRAHAM: Yeah.

(He glowered at his father.)

GRAHAM: Who was that, I wonder? Who was it who said that?

ROY: Yeah! Who was it, dad?

(Their father glanced at them both then ruffled his neck.)

FRANK: I may have miscalculated.

GRAHAM: You think?

FRANK: I do, yes. But rather than berating me for that, don't you think our time would be better served thinking of away out of this mess???

ROY: Good point.

(He nodded.)

ROY: I'll try asking for mercy!

(He then threw an urgent glance to where the invaders were stomping menacingly towards them.)

ROY: Please, be merciful and spare us!!!

INVADER: No!

ROY: Shit.

(He glanced to his father.)

ROY: You're just gonna have to fight them!

FRANK: What? No! We've been over this!

GRAHAM: Well, someone needs to do something because...

(He then screamed in terror. The ten invaders had begun their charge towards them. Their hate-filled eyes told the tale of men who delighted in human butchery and would gleefully slice them asunder with a song in their heart. Panic stricken, all Graham could do was hop around in circles and cry. He had no idea how to fight and had never felt so helpless. His brother and his father, however, just stood there, ashen-faced, resigned to their doom.)

FRANK: I love you, boys. You know that?

ROY: We love you too, dad.

GRAHAM: I don't wanna die!!!

FRANK: Yeah... sucks, doesn't it?

(He then snarled at the incoming invaders.)

FRANK: Go on then, do your fucking worst!!!

INVADER: Oh, we will! Don't you fucking worry about that, you...

(The invader then fell to his death in a pool of blood, almost as if he'd been killed by a passing gust of razor-sharp wind. Frank and Roy couldn't believe their eyes. Dumbfounded, they had to blink several times before they could comprehend what was actually happening in front of them. The invaders were being set about by a stranger with a long, black ponytail. Moving at speeds that seemed to defy physics, this most welcome third party, was carving through them, making mincemeat of them before they could even begin to face in the right direction and offer up a challenge.)

FRANK: Who's that bloke???

ROY: Bloke? It's a woman, isn't it? Or is it?

FRANK: I dunno. It won't standstill long enough for me to tell!

(They then stood there agog as the stranger chopped and slashed through the panicking hoard of invaders until every last one of them was dead. The stranger then zoomed away at break neck speed and leapt onto the roof of a single story house in one bound.)

FRANK: Fucking hell! He was incredible!

ROY: She!

FRANK: Are you sure?

ROY: Well... no. But they had blue streaks in their ponytail; I noticed that much. That's a girl thing.

FRANK: *I* used to put dye in *my* hair as a teenager. Am *I* a girl?

ROY: Right. Maybe not then. I dunno. Whoever it was just a blur!

FRANK: Well, yeah.

(He then glanced at Graham.)

FRANK: You can stop running in circles now, son!
(Way too far gone, his son ignored him and continued to panic.)
GRAHAM: But I've got so much to live for!
ROY: Yeah...
(He drew a sigh of relief.)
ROY: And thanks to whoever *that* was, you just might get to do that.

Just across town, a short while later, the town's wealthiest citizen, Morris Mortimer, was racing down a side street, dragging his crying, ten year old son behind him. They were currently being chased by the biggest man they'd ever seen. Built like a brick shed, he had muscles so large they'd actually split the sleeves on his military tunic. Outrunning such a colossus would not be easy and they knew it.

MORRIS: Get a move on, boy!!!

(His son screamed at him at he staggered along behind him.)

WILLIAM: You're gonna pull me over!!!

MORRIS: Not intentionally! And besides, that's mild compared to what that big ape behind us is planning to do to you!!!

WILLIAM: But why? Why is here? What did we do wrong???

MORRIS: Nothing, son. Some people are just... well, they're bad people.

(He furrowed his brow then proceeded to drag his son around a corner.)

MORRIS: Hurry!

WILLIAM: But, dad...

MORRIS: I said hurry!

WILLIAM: Not down here!!!

MORRIS: Why not?

WILLIAM: It's a dead end!!!

(Morris came to a screeching halt then gulped. Sure enough, he'd raced into an L-shaped street, where all the houses were joined, leaving no means of escape other than the way they'd come in.)

MORRIS: Bugger! That can't be good!!!

(He then turned around and gulped. The man mountain who'd been pursuing them was standing at the end of the road, blocking the exit. He quite clearly *knew* this was a dead end, because he didn't even bother to pursue them. He just stood there, beckoning them forth with a dastardly smile on his face.)

MORRIS: Right. I won't lie you, my lad. This was a mistake!

WILLIAM: I know!

(Morris sighed.)

MORRIS: Oh, well. There's only thing left to do then.

(He smiled into his son's terrified eyes.)

MORRIS: That house in the corner. Crawl underneath it and hide.

WILLIAM: Not without you!

MORRIS: Yes! Without *me*!

WILLIAM: Dad...

MORRIS: No, son. You listen to *me* for a change. I'd never fit under there!

(He nodded.)

MORRIS: Luckily, nor will swordy boy over there!

(He nodded to the snarling Nawsland soldier.)

MORRIS: You'll be safe there! Now go!

WILLIAM: Dad...

MORRIS: Go!!!

(William just sighed then slowly headed for the gap.)

MORRIS: Good lad.

(He smiled.)

MORRIS: Never forget me, son. And tell your mum... well... tell her I did my best.

(William sighed.)

WILLIAM: I will.

MORRIS: Excellent! Now, go on; hurry up. I've got work to do. Extremely unsuccessful and undoubtedly fatal work.

(He then turned to face the smirking soldier and sighed to himself. There was a house to his right, a house to his left, a dead end behind him and nothing but death at the end of the street in front of him.)

MORRIS: Shit.

(He gave a resigned sigh.)

MORRIS: Oh, well. Let's get this over with, shall we?

(With that, he flexed his arms then took a single step in the giant man's direction. In that very moment, however, a black blur zoomed in front of the snarling menace then vanished out of sight again. Almost instantaneously, the muscle bound warrior collapsed to the ground. Blood was spraying out from his neck, creating a deep red puddle on the ground.)

MORRIS: Oh. Right. Well... that was...

(He scratched his head in bewilderment then turned to where his son was stooping to crawl under the house.)

MORRIS: Change of plan, son.

(His son glanced back at him.)

WILLIAM: What?

MORRIS: I won!

WILLIAM: Won?

MORRIS: Yes! Look.

(He pointed to the end of the street. At once, his son hurried over to him and glanced in astonishment at where the giant stranger lay dead on the ground.)

WILLIAM: How did you do that?

MORRIS: Well, you know how it is.

WILLIAM: No, I don't. You didn't even go over there!

MORRIS: I did!

WILLIAM: I didn't hear you.

(Morris scratched his neck innocently.)

MORRIS: Well... of course you didn't. I always was somewhat fleet of foot.

WILLIAM: Dad...

MORRIS: No, need to thank me, boy.

WILLIAM: What really happened.

MORRIS: Oh... you *weren't* thanking me.

WILLIAM: Well?

(Morris looked to his son and grimaced.)

MORRIS: Honestly? A blur happened!

WILLIAM: A blur?

MORRIS: Someone zoomed past the end of the road and killed him. Without even breaking their stride!

WILLIAM: What? Who?

MORRIS: I don't know, lad.

(He grimaced.)

MORRIS: It all happened so fast, I didn't really see much. He had a black ponytail; that much I *did* see.

(He mused to himself.)

MORRIS: He wasn't what you'd call overdressed either. A lot of bare flesh on display, but what he *was* wearing was black. Oh, and he wasn't very tall.

WILLIAM: And what was his name?

MORRIS: Brian!

(He furrowed his brow.)

MORRIS: How the hell am I supposed to know that?

WILLIAM: You said you saw him!

MORRIS: No, son; I said I saw a blur. He was underdressed, short and had a ponytail, other than that I have no idea.

(He bit his lip.)

MORRIS: But it certainly wasn't anyone local. At least, it wasn't anyone *I've* met before.

(He nodded.)

MORRIS: Not that it matters. That hero has done us as favour we'll never be able to repay. He's given us a second chance. So what say, we bugger off and hide somewhere?

WILLIAM: Good idea. And I know just the place.

MORRIS: All those years of playing hide and seek are about to bear fruit, are they?

WILLIAM: Yup.

MORRIS: Then lead the way, son; lead the way.

Several streets away, at this time, the Rhodes family, were very much in disarray. They'd barricaded themselves in the family barn in a bid to thwart a group of invaders, but they'd overlooked one small detail. The invaders had a battering ram. Trapped inside the barn they could only whimper and scream as the door took hit after hit. Knowing it was only a matter of time before the door came crashing down and the invaders poured into the barn, the father of the family, Arthur, nodded solemnly.

ARTHUR: It's no good. There's no way we're *all* making it out of this alive. One of us needs to open then the door and accept their wrath while the rest hide amongst the hay.

(He smiled then patted his eldest son on the shoulder.)

ARTHUR: And as the head of the family, well... I nominate you.

(His son, who'd officially been elected to the post of village idiot six times in a row, looked to him and nodded.)

PORTMAN: Very well, father. Which hay bail shall I hide behind?

ARTHUR: No, no, son. Listen to me for once. *We're* going to hide, *you're* going to be massacred.

(Portman grimaced.)

PORTMAN: Won't that hurt? It sounds painful.

ARTHUR: Of course not. Don't be silly. It'll be over in an instant and you'll be free of pain forever.

PORTMAN: Really? Cool!

(He beamed.)

PORTMAN: So who's coming with me?

(His mother, father and younger brother all smiled ruefully.)

PORTMAN: Nobody?

ARTHUR: We're not qualified.

(He gestured to his wife.)

ARTHUR: *She's* just a woman.

BARBARA: All *I* can do is cook and clean.

ARTHUR: As for your brother...

(He gestured to his youngest son.)

ARTHUR: Well, we like your brother. So it's best if you go it alone.

(His youngest son smiled.)

CHARLTON: Good luck, big brother. I always knew we could rely on you.

PORTMAN: You did?

CHARLTON: Absolutely.

PORTMAN: But you've always told me I'm a useless moron.

CHARLTON: Well...

PORTMAN: You nominated me for village idiot. Six times!

CHARLTON: And you *won* six times.

(He smiled warmly.)

CHARLTON: That's how much I believe in you!

PORTMAN: Right. Well... I suppose.

ARTHUR: Excellent. Okay. We'll just go and hide, and when we're in position, we'll give you a shout.

PORTMAN: Okay. And what am I doing again?

ARTHUR: Opening the door and going outside.

PORTMAN: To get massacred? Like I did at school

ARTHUR: If you like, yes.

PORTMAN: Right...

(He beamed.)

PORTMAN: We can have tea and sausages around an open fire once it's over though, right?

BARBARA: Oh, there's definitely going to be fire in your future, son; yes.

PORTMAN: Great! I love it when we all eat outside together.

ARTHUR: Lovely. Off you go then.

PORTMAN: Right!

CHARLTON: Wait! We haven't hidden yet!

ARTHUR: Shit!!!

(With that, Arthur, Charlton and Barbara all scampered towards the hay at the back of the barn. Portman watched them go then nodded.)

PORTMAN: Right. Let's get this shoe on the road!

CHARLTON: Show!!!

PORTMAN: What?

CHARLTON: Nothing! Just... go!

PORTMAN: Oh. Fair enough.

(With that, he headed for the barn door, cast the wooden door-plank to one side then bounded outside.)

PORTMAN: So? Who's up for a good massacring then?

(The Nawsland invaders who'd been trying to batter the door down, looked at him blankly for a moment then threw their battering ram down.)

INVADER: Let's have him!!!

(They then charged at him with their blades aloft.)

PORTMAN: Make it quick! We're having sausages for breakfast!

INVADER: This blokes an idiot!

(Just then, a black blur zoomed among the invaders. Portman could only watch on with a baffled expression on his already gormless face, as blood splattered up the barn and the invaders dropped down dead one after the other. Bearing witness to it all, he could barely keep up. The blurry figure never stopped moving.)

PORTMAN: You're making me dizzy!

(He then stepped back in astonishment as the blur zoomed away via a nearby rooftop. All he caught sight of was a black ponytail with blue streaks in it.)

PORTMAN: Blimey. That fella... that fella was a woman. I think. No. I dunno.

(He shrugged then poked his head inside the door of the barn.)

PORTMAN: You can come out now!

(An angry voice rose up from the hay.)

ARTHUR: Silence, you idiot! You'll give us away!

PORTMAN: I doubt it. They all died!

(His father replied in a quiet, baffled voice.)

ARTHUR: What?

PORTMAN: Some bloke came. No. A woman. No. A bloke. I'm not sure.

(A few seconds later his family members emerged from the hay then slowly exited the barn. Sure enough, all six invaders were lying a pool of blood. Several had had their throats cut.)

ARTHUR: Good god. What happened?

PORTMAN: A ponytail.

CHARLTON: A ponytail?

PORTMAN: Someone with a long ponytail did it.

BARBARA: One person???

PORTMAN: That's right.

ARTHUR: But... but... they've been absolutely massacred!

PORTMAN: Yeah, they...

(His brow then furrowed over.)

PORTMAN: Massacred?

CHARLTON: Well and truly massacred!

PORTMAN: Massacred means killed, does it?

ARTHUR: Yes. Why?

PORTMAN: You sent *me* out to be massacred!!!

(He snarled.)

PORTMAN: I thought it meant a beating!!! I used to get them everyday at school, that's why I didn't mind.

(He pouted.)

PORTMAN: So you sent me out to die??? In a pool of blood???

BARBARA: Um...

ARTHUR: Of course not, son. We sent *you* out because, we *knew* that person with the ponytail was nearby.

PORTMAN: What?

ARTHUR: Think about it. You were the obvious choice. By sending *you* out, we knew the hero would come to rescue us all.

(He shrugged.)

ARTHUR: After all, *you* have standing in this town! You're the official village idiot! That's an important post! The hero wouldn't have come out to save just anyone, you know? It *had* to be you.

(Portman stared at him blankly for a moment then beamed.)

PORTMAN: Blimey! I had no idea I was that important!

ARTHUR: Well, of course you are! Every town needs an idiot so everyone else can feel good about themselves.

PORTMAN: Blimey. That's made my day.

(He then stood there beaming proudly.)

PORTMAN: And to think that idiot headmaster said I'd never amount to anything.

(Watching him exhaling joyfully, his family shared a series of unimpressed glances then headed back into the barn.)

ARTHUR: Come on. Let's hide again until we get the all clear. More invaders could come at any time.

PORTMAN: In that case, I'll wait here to lure out the hero again.

CHARLTON: Um... actually, Portman.

(He then dragged him into the barn.)

CHARLTON: You'd better hide with us. Just to be on the safe side.

(He then took one last look at he massacred invaders and drew a sigh of relief.)

A short distance away, at this time, the town's head of security, Desmond James was having a torrid time. As one of only a few citizens who owned a sword, he'd taken it upon himself to lead the resistance. His call to arms, however, had fallen on deaf ears. Everyone he'd tried to recruit to assist him had either scarpered or gone into hiding. Understandably, being unarmed, they didn't fancy challenging bloodthirsty soldiers in a battle to the death. This left Desmond with the nightmarish task of going it alone. It was fair to say, he'd got off to a terrible start and things didn't look like improving any time soon. Fired up and ready to give his all, he'd charged the entire length of one of the town's longest streets, towards a Nawsland soldier, with his teeth gritted and a determined glint in his eye. Upon reaching the soldier, however, he'd made a horrifying discovery. Owning a sword is one thing, knowing how to use it is quite another. Despite his initial gusto, he'd spent the rest of the time backtracking, all the way back to where he'd charged from, crying like a baby.

DESMOND: I want out!!!

INVADER: And *I* want you to die!!!

DESMOND: But you don't even know me!!!

INVADER: Why would I want to???

DESMOND: Because I'm actually a really nice guy!!!

INVADER: That may be so, but there's *no point* in me getting to know you now is there?

DESMOND: *Why* not?

INVADER: Because you're about to die!!!

(Desmond gulped as he continued to back away, flailing his sword desperately in the hope he could parry the soldier's next swing.)

DESMOND: Why can't we all just get along???

INVADER: Because I've got a job to do! Killing *you*!

(He snarled.)

INVADER: So, if you'd kindly stop flailing that sword at me, I can get on and earn my crust!

(He furrowed his brow.)

INVADER: That's four times you've had a lucky parry!

DESMOND: Really? Feels like more!

INVADER: No, it was four! There *won't* be a fifth!!!

(He then swung his sword with such ferocity, it knocked Desmond's blade out of his hand.)

DESMOND: No!!!

INVADER: See? No fifth for you, sonny boy!!!

DESMOND: Actually... technically, that *was* the fifth!

INVADER: Shut up!!!

(He snarled then raced forth at his unarmed pray.)

INVADER: Any last words???

(Just then, a black blur zoomed in front of the soldier and vanished from sight again. Almost instantly, the invader fell to earth, gargling as blood oozed from his throat. Watching on with

his jaw on the floor, Desmond blinked in astonishment for several seconds then smirked arrogantly.)

DESMOND: That's what you get for messing with *me*!!!

(He then swaggered away to retrieve his sword. Having done so, he scooped it up and snarled.)

DESMOND: So... do I count my lucky stars and quit now, or do I keep trying to make a difference?

(He nodded heroically then stood tall.)

DESMOND: I'll quit now, I think.

(He then hastened away around a corner. Having done so, however, he instantly came to a screeching halt; his face turning a sickening shade of pale. He'd just stumbled across a sight he could have quite happily lived his *entire life* without seeing. It was a sight so horrendous, he had to turn around and vomit.)

DESMOND: Nope. No, no, no. That's a barbarity too far for me.

(Two women then approached him from behind.)

CASSIE: Get us out of here, Desmond!

ELLA: Please!!!

(Desmond glanced over his shoulder then dry-heaved.)

DESMOND: Sorry, ladies, but I'm a little too queasy to move right now.

(He gestured to where two soldiers were lying in pools of blood. One of them was bleeding from his groin.)

DESMOND: I didn't need to see that.

ELLA: The fact they're dead is a *good* thing!

CASSIE: They tried to rape us!

DESMOND: Yes, but... chopping his knob off was a bit much don't you think?

(He shuddered.)

DESMOND: Oh, god, he just moved. He's still bleeding out. I don't even want to think about how much pain he's in.

ELLA: He's the bad guy, Desmond!

DESMOND: Yes, but chopping off his doodah? Too much, ladies! Too much!

CASSIE: *We* didn't do it!

ELLA: The blur did it!

DESMOND: The blur?

ELLA: It's hard to explain.

DESMOND: Yes, well, luckily you won't have to. I know exactly what you mean.

(He whimpered.)

DESMOND: That blur fights dirty.

CASSIE: They were rapists, Desmond. They deserved everything they got.

DESMOND: Even that?

ELLA: Even that!

DESMOND: I see. If *that's* your take, remind me never to get on your bad side.

ELLA: Fine. Now get us out of here!

CASSIE: Before more rapey little fuckers come.

ELLA: And you're forced to see *another* invader bleeding from his...

DESMOND: Say no more!!! Let's go!

(He then charged away with the two women hot on his heels.)

DESMOND: I'm never going to be able to unsee it, am I? Every time I close my eyes, that image will be right there; taunting me. The blood gushing from his groin. His erect phallus on the cobbles six feet away. I'm going to be traumatised for life.

(He whimpered.)

DESMOND: I'll never be able to eat a sausage ever again!

A few minutes later, as the terrified citizens of Birdstone cowered and trembled in their respective hiding places, a familiar sound rang out. It was the town's bell. Normally it was used to signify the all clear if bears had been spotted nearby. The bell would ring to let the people know the bear had been dealt with and it was safe to go outside the town again. Today it signified the end of the invasion. It was a moment that none would celebrate. The only feelings the townsfolk could muster were those of horror, despair and bewilderment. Why had the Nawsland army attacked their peaceful little town? And how could they kill people so indiscriminately? This town had never even been involved in its nation's war efforts, so why single it out for an attack? These were the questions people asked as they began to emerge from where they were hiding. Nobody had any answers.

For many, this was a time of extremely dark emotions. It was a time of great sadness; a time of mourning. There was also a great deal of anger in the air. Hatred. A deep despicement of all things Nawsland. Even the sense of relief from the survivors was tainted with darkness. Being happy to have survived just made them feel guilty about those who hadn't. Almost as if their joy was a slap in the face of the dead. As a result, a deeply gloomy atmosphere hung over the place. It was small wonder that this ugliest of days would forever be known as The Day of Darkness.

Eager to do his bit to aid in the aftermath, Frank the miller filled up his cart with the citizens who'd been slain outside his mill, then took them to the town square where a temporary morgue was being set up. He then returned for the bodies of the dead Nawsland soldiers. Having unceremoniously slung them in his cart, he then returned to the town square where a bonfire was being set up to burn them at the far end. He unloaded them with a snarl, making sure to treat their corpses with as little respect as possible. Having unloaded the last one, he then kicked it in the head and spat on it.

FRANK: Fuck you.

(He was promptly applauded by a passer-by.)

MORRIS: Nice work, old chap.

FRANK: Yeah...

(He sneered.)

FRANK: I'd piss on them if I needed to go.

MORRIS: Really? Well, allow me.

(He then stepped up to the pile of corpse and proceeded to urinate on them.)

FRANK: I wasn't serious about that, you know?

MORRIS: I fucking am!

(He snarled.)

MORRIS: The fuckers made me face my mortality this morning!

FRANK: Yeah?

MORRIS: This horrible fucker chased my son and I into a dead end. I thought I was a goner.
(He grimaced.)

MORRIS: Then something odd happened.

FRANK: Oh?

MORRIS: I was saved by a lightning fast short-arse with a ponytail.

(Frank's jaw dropped. Before he could reply, however, one of the women who'd been helping out at the morgue hurried over to him.)

ELEANOR: Did you say a short-arse with a ponytail?

(Morris shrieked.)

MORRIS: Not now, woman; I'm peeing!

ELEANOR: You have your back to me; it's fine.

MORRIS: Right. Well... yes, I did say that.

(Eleanor clutched her hand to her heart.)

ELEANOR: I saw him too!

FRANK: So did I!

ELEANOR: Really?

FRANK: There was about ten of the fuckers bearing down on me and my boys. We were fucking done for. Then... I've never seen anything like it.

MORRIS: Like a blur, right?

ELEANOR: A blur with a black ponytail!

FRANK: Exactly.

MORRIS: We *all* saw him?

FRANK: Looks that way.

(He grimaced.)

FRANK: Though, when I say I saw *him*, there's actually some debate about that.

ELEANOR: Oh?

FRANK: My son's convinced it was a woman. He wasn't sure at first, but now he's quite insistent about it.

(Morris slid his manhood away then turned to face them.)

MORRIS: No. No way. It couldn't have been a woman. I mean, the power alone... there's no way.

ELEANOR: Hmm... I don't know about power so much. From the glimpse I caught it was all about speed and agility.

FRANK: Well, there's was plenty of that on display, that's for certain.

(He shrugged.)

FRANK: But I tend to agree with Morris here. There's no way a woman could take out all those soldiers in one go. They were big fellas. Huge.

ELEANOR: Well... maybe.

(She smiled.)

ELEANOR: I'm grateful either way. That blurry stranger spared me and my girls from a certain death.

FRANK: Same for me and my boys.

MORRIS: And my son and I.

(A shocked voice then rose up from behind them.)

CASSIE: Did you say *blurry stranger*?

ELEANOR: That's right.

CASSIE: He saved you too, did he?

ELEANOR: Yeah. I really thought my number was up.

FRANK: You saw the blur too, did you, Cassie?

CASSIE: Yeah. He saved Ella and I from two Nawsland wankers who were trying to force themselves on us. Just swooped in as quick as lightning and killed them both.

MORRIS: Then vanished again?

CASSIE: Yeah!

MORRIS: Same as what happened with me. Zoom; gone. Like a ghost. Vanished.

FRANK: He didn't vanish from outside my place. He jumped off over the rooftops. Sped away like the wind. Fast, agile, powerful. Nothing magical like vanishing into thin air though.

ELEANOR: I agree. He ran. Fast! That's why all I could make out was the black ponytail.

FRANK: With blue streaks!

ELEANOR: That's right!

MORRIS: Maybe he's so fast it just *looks* like he vanishes.

CASSIE: Yeah. You're probably right.

(A wailing sound then rose up from a bench at the side of the square. At once, everyone turned and grimaced at the sight of the town's head of security whimpering and sobbing.)

CASSIE: Aw. Poor Desmond.

FRANK: Did he lose someone close to him?

CASSIE: No. Nothing like that.

(She grimaced.)

CASSIE: He saw the aftermath of the blur's handiwork. I've been counselling him ever since; poor guy. He's struggling to cope.

FRANK: Why?

CASSIE: Sorry, Frank. But judging how Desmond reacted, it's probably best if I don't tell you.

(Morris grimaced.)

MORRIS: Bit squeamish, is he? Only it's understandable if he is. The blur did leave a bloody mess behind. At least he did so in my case.

CASSIE: No. It wasn't the blood that bothered him. It was more where it came from.

(Frank mused to himself.)

FRANK: Where it came from?

(He then winced and held his groin.)

FRANK: Not... downstairs?

CASSIE: Yup. I don't think the blur likes rapists very much.

MORRIS: Who does?

ELEANOR: Right?

(Just then, Portman happened past with a dead soldier over each shoulder.)

PORTMAN: Morning, Frank. Morning, Cassie. Morning, Mark. Woman I don't know.

ELEANOR: Hi. I'm Eleanor.

MORRIS: And I'm Morris, for fuck sake. Why do you always call me Mark?

PORTMAN: Because it's your name, Morris.

(He then threw the two dead bodies on the pile and paced over to them.)

PORTMAN: So, you won't believe what happened to me this morning?

MORRIS: You put your shoes on the right feet?

PORTMAN: At the third attempt, yes, but that's not what I'm not talking about.

(He nodded.)

PORTMAN: This gang of blokes attacked me. The blokes I just threw on that pile, actually. And some of his mates. And I beat them all without having to lift a finger.

MORRIS: How?

PORTMAN: Someone else did it for me. A blur.

(Everyone nodded knowingly.)

PORTMAN: You don't believe me, do you? I recognise that nod. You're saying, *oh here we go, the official village idiot read the situation wrong again.*

(He pointed to his chest.)

PORTMAN: I know what I saw. A woman with a black ponytail!!!

FRANK: A woman?

PORTMAN: At least I *think* it was a woman. Or not. I don't know. But I know what I saw. Quick as flash she was. Or *he* was. I can't recall. Just zoomed in and killed them all then bugged off over the rooftops. I don't care if you don't believe me. I saw...

CASSIE: We believe you!

ELEANOR: We saw it too.

MORRIS: He was as fast as lightning.

FRANK: And just as deadly.

PORTMAN: Blimey.

(He exhaled.)

PORTMAN: I'm so fucking happy right now. I'm pretty sure my family think I'm lying!

MORRIS: You're *not* though. We can *all* vouch for that!

(He started to chuckle.)

MORRIS: Not that part about it being a woman though. It was quite clearly a bloke. A little bloke, but a bloke nonetheless.

(Just then, one of the town's elders spoke up from behind them with his arms folded.)

CHARLES: Are you fucking kidding me?

MORRIS: Sorry?

CHARLES: How gay are you?

MORRIS: Gay?

CHARLES: That blurry person was quite obviously a woman!

FRANK: Saved you too, did he?

CHARLES: *She!* *She* saved me.

MORRIS: Wait, wait, wait. What makes you so sure it was a woman?

CHARLES: Are you fucking serious right now? What makes me so sure she was a woman?

MORRIS: Yes!

CHARLES: She had tits like a fucking goddess, that's what!

(He beamed.)

CHARLES: I haven't seen a pair that size since my big fat wife was eight months pregnant!

FRANK: Right. Very colourful.

CHARLES: World class milk pillows they were! Superb.

CASSIE: And you're sure about that, are you, Charles?

CHARLES: Of course, I am. I'm old! I don't get any sex *at all* nowadays. All I have *left* is ogling pretty women. And I'm a dab hand at it! I can spot a sexy woman from a hundred miles away. And let me tell you... miaow. She went *beyond* sexy! These days I can barely get a semi at the best of times, but after one look at her I had a full-on power boner. She was the tastiest bit of crumpet I've *ever* seen!

(Frank and Morris shared an uncertain glance.)

FRANK: This isn't a wind up, is it?

CHARLES: Of course not. If anyone's having a wind-up it's you clowns. How could you not tell it was a woman?

MORRIS: Well... it all happened so quickly.

CHARLES: Blind bastards.

(Just then, Desmond staggered over with a mortified expression on his face.)

DESMOND: A woman? Did you say it was a woman?

CHARLES: I did, yes.

DESMOND: Well, that's great.

(He palmed his forehead.)

DESMOND: So there's a psychotic woman going round town, chopping off penises. Well, that's just fucking perfect.

FRANK: Mate, that's not what she was doing.

ELEANOR: She was saving people!

MORRIS: Wait. So we're settling on it being a woman now, are we?

CASSIE: Charlie the pervert doesn't miss these details, I'm afraid.

CHARLES: Yup.

(Desmond sighed.)

DESMOND: Of course it was a woman; of course it was. It all makes sense now. I thought his lips were an odd colour.

CHARLES: Dark red lipstick.

DESMOND: And there was so much black around the eyes.

CHARLES: Smoky eyeshadow and black mascara.

(He exhaled.)

CHARLES: Just like the whores at The Crooked Bell in the capital. Perfect.

DESMOND: Like a demoness, you mean! It's the penis culling monster from hell!!!

(He then ran away screaming. Cassie just watched him go then shrugged.)

CASSIE: I tried.

ELEANOR: That's the main thing.

(Charles nodded.)

CHARLES: Anyway, I'm off home for tea and biscuits.

(He then glanced at Morris and scoffed.)

CHARLES: Massive jugs; thigh high boots with stiletto heels; full make-up... and you couldn't tell it was a woman?

(He then walked away laughing heartily.)

MORRIS: You... why, you...

FRANK: Leave it, Morris. After what he said there, I'm not sure he wasn't bullshitting all along.

CASSIE: Oh?

FRANK: Stiletto heels? Like anyone could fight like that in high heels.

CASSIE: True.

ELEANOR: I can barely *walk* in them.

MORRIS: I can, but...

(He gasped.)

MORRIS: I mean my wife can!

(Everyone took a step back from him.)

MORRIS: Hey! It was a slip of the tongue.

FRANK: If you say so.

(He nodded.)

FRANK: So what are we saying?

PORTMAN: Mark wears high heels!

MORRIS: No, I... my name's Morris! Also, no I don't!

FRANK: I was referring to the blur. Do we listen to Charles or continue to assume it was a dude?

ELEANOR: I really don't know.

MORRIS: Being a woman would explain the lack of height.

FRANK: Yes, but stiletto heels would surely negate a lack of height.

CASSIE: Then we're back to square one.

ELEANOR: Completely in the dark.

PORTMAN: Like a shovel.

(Everyone gave him a sideways glance.)

ELEANOR: Like a shovel?

PORTMAN: Yeah. I keep my shovel in the shed. There's no windows on my shed.

(Everyone rolled their eyes then continued their conversation.)

MORRIS: So we just don't know.

CASSIE: Nope. I just know I'm grateful.

FRANK: Yes! One hundred percent. Whether it was a dude or a bird, that blur has my utmost gratitude and respect.

(They all then stood there nodding. If ever there was one thing they could all agree on, this was it.)

That evening, as the sun began to set, almost the entire population of the town gathered in the main square for a ceremony in remembrance of the fallen. The only absentees were the town's six-man police force. They were all doing lookout duty on small makeshift watchtowers; essentially stacked boxes that allowed them to see over the fence that surrounded the town.

Content that, should the Nawsland army try their luck again, the police would manage to warn everyone, the town's chief, Chester Woods kicked the ceremony off with a rendition of the town's anthem, Mountain Pride. It made for quite the uncomfortable beginning to proceedings. He'd started to sing in full expectation that everyone would place their hands on their hearts and sing along. Instead, they all just stood there and stared at him. Feeling quite the fool, he had to continue all by himself, praying he didn't forget any of the words. It was three minutes of hell for the chief, that felt more like an hour. Mercifully, he managed to get to the last word without making a mistake. It was a final word he sang with as much passion as he could put into it.

CHIEF: Town!!!

(He then bowed his head and waited for a round of applause that never came.)

CHIEF: Right...

(With a sigh, he then glanced up at the silent gathering and forced a smile.)

CHIEF: So... clearly you enjoyed that as much I did.

(A token chuckle came from the assembly.)

CHIEF: Thank you.

(He nodded then cleared his throat.)

CHIEF: Today has been the darkest day in this glorious town's history. War finally came to our doorstep. Butchery. Merciless and meaningless killing. The truest of horrors. It's been the day we prayed would never come. The day we *believed* would never come. Today we lost twenty-eight of our own. Thirteen men, ten women and five children, all of whom were unarmed, struck down by vile cowards.

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: Our town is going to feel empty without them. Each and every one will be sorely missed. But by golly, we're going to make sure they're never forgotten. Every name will be immortalised on a memorial stone, so at least in some small way, our dearly departed friends will live on.

(A mumble of approval rose up from those in attendance.)

CHIEF: It's the every least we can do to honour them.

(He shook his head.)

CHIEF: I never once dreamt I'd be standing here making a speech like this. It breaks my heart, it truly does. But as your chief I mustn't dwell. As much as I want to delve into my sadness and wallow for a while, I have no time to mourn. Why? Because as your chief it's time to act! And act I shall! Whatever it takes to make sure that today is never repeated.

(He nodded sternly.)

CHIEF: I'm going to double the size of the police force, build proper watchtowers, and petition the powers that be in our nation's capital to help us fund a wall. A wall capable of keeping invaders at bay.

(Everyone nodded approvingly.)

CHIEF: Until the wall is built, however, I must ask for your patience. I may even ask for your assistance in getting it finished. Together we *all* need to protect this town!

(He stood tall.)

CHIEF: Starting with increased vigilance. From now until the wall is complete, the police will be on high alert!

(An angry voice then rose up from the audience.)

GILES: About bloody time too!

CHIEF: Sorry; what?

GILES: It's about time *some* bugger woke them up! Rumour has it, all six of them were still in bed when the attack happened!

(The chief was most taken aback.)

CHIEF: They'd better not have been! The dayshift starts at six!

(Another audience member then chimed in.)

ELIZABETH: You could have fooled me. My neighbour's on the police force. When *he* does a dayshift, he doesn't even leave his house until gone ten!

CLARENCE: Oh, I can believe it, Elizabeth! When I went to the police station at nine o'clock the other morning to report my wife's bracelet missing, there was no bugger there!

(Everyone started to boo and jeer.)

CHIEF: Wait! What? What's going on?

(He then yelled across to the side of the square, where his head of security, Desmond was slowly shrinking.)

CHIEF: Is this true???

(Desmond gulped.)

DESMOND: Um... is... um... what true, chief?

CHIEF: Were the police all in bed when the attack happened? Well?

DESMOND: Um... well... *I* wasn't in bed, sir!

CHIEF: But were the police?

DESMOND: I don't know, sir!

(The boos and jeers instantly doubled in volume.)

DESMOND: *You're* booing me too, sir?

CHIEF: Sorry. Got carried away.

(He flinched.)

CHIEF: Actually, I'm *not* sorry! As my head of security, you're supposed to oversee those men!!!

DESMOND: Um... I oversaw the *night*shift!

CHIEF: You're *supposed* to oversee the transition *between* shifts! It's pretty much your only fucking job!!!

DESMOND: Well...

(He hung his head.)

DESMOND: Yes, sir.

CHIEF: Twat!

ELIZABETH: What *he* said!

CLARENCE: With fucking bells on it!!!

GILES: Quite! As head of security, the police turning up to work is *your* bloody responsibility!

ELIZABETH: Yeah! Because of your *poor* organisation, the police slept through the entire attack!!!

GILES: How could you let that happen???

(The chief shook his head then called out over the crowd.)

CHIEF: Now, now, people. This is not the time to attack Desmond! This is the time to grieve!

(He snarled.)

CHIEF: I'll attack Desmond in my office, later.

(Desmond could only gulp.)

CHIEF: Anyway, let's return to the point of this gathering, shall we? Mourning our twenty-eight sadly departed brothers, sisters and children. May their souls find peace in the afterlife.

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: The twenty-eight.

(Everyone replied solemnly.)

ALL: The twenty-eight.

(Giles then shook his fist at Desmond.)

GILES: We should make it twenty-nine!

DESMOND: Well that's hardly fair. I was out on the streets this morning, facing the buggers down. I took up my sword in defence of this town! Did you?

GILES: Um...

(He glanced away.)

GILES: That's none of your business!

CHIEF: Calm, please, everyone. This is a time for mourning, not bickering. In fact bickering is the last thing we should be doing. Now, more than ever, we as a town, need to be united.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: Because together we can get through this. Friends, colleagues, people of Birdstone. I share your pain as you share mine. We're grieving together. So let's not fight. Let's lean on one another, prop one another up and come out of this stronger than ever, together!

(Much to his surprise, he received a mild round of applause.)

CHIEF: Oh. Okay. I'll talk it.

(He then took a deep breath to calm himself and resumed.)

CHIEF: People, as your chief, I say to you that our sorrow will *not* defeat us!

(He sneered.)

CHIEF: Just like those weaklings from Nawsland couldn't defeat us!

(He then stood tall and beamed with pride.)

CHIEF: That's something that should *never* be overlooked. Not even *downplayed*. We lost twenty-eight good people today, but those invaders lost ninety-nine!

(He pointed to the pile of dead bodies across the square.)

CHIEF: Each and every one of them slain in their prime, by ordinary citizens such as yourselves. It truly was a gargantuan accomplishment that will undoubtedly go down in history. A momentous success that future generations will take extreme pride in. Our humble town of ordinary, unarmed civilians defeated a unit of nearly a hundred men and only lost twenty-eight of our own.

(Just then, he became acutely aware of a series of uncomfortable murmurs from the audience.)

CHIEF: What? What gives? Why are you mumbling?

(Frank glanced up at him.)

FRANK: It wasn't our citizens, sir. The ponytail did it! The blur.

CASSIE: Who *is* the blur, chief? Does he work for you in secret?

(The chief furrowed his brow.)

CHIEF: Stop it! No! I've heard that rumour several times today and I'm not having it!

FRANK: Sir?

CHIEF: The idea that some mysterious all-powerful outsider saved us is fanciful nonsense.

MORRIS: But, chief...

CHIEF: No! I mean it! That nonsense needs nipping in the bud right now! It's an insult to the real heroes!

FRANK: What real heroes?

CHIEF: The people who *actually* killed those invading scumbags!

(Frank furrowed his brow.)

FRANK: Name one!

CHIEF: What?

FRANK: Name one!

CHIEF: Fine.

(He pointed to Desmond.)

CHIEF: *He* went out and fought.

CASSIE: He went out *to* fight. I'm pretty sure he didn't kill anyone though.

DESMOND: Do you mind???

CASSIE: Well, did you?

DESMOND: Um...

(He ruffled his neck.)

DESMOND: I *wanted* to, but the blurry ponytail beat me to it.

FRANK: Ha! See! *He* saw it too!

CHIEF: Poppycock! Stop it! It was our home grown heroes that saved the day! The great people of Birdstone saved us and I won't hear otherwise!

FRANK: Again, like who?

CHIEF: Don't make me come over there, you...

CASSIE: He just wants you to name *one*!

CHIEF: Oh, put it sock in it! The simple fact of the matter is, our citizens defeated a squad of ninety-nine heavily armed men, and...

(Just then, the town's most accomplished huntsman, Rex Townsend strode into the square.)

REX: Make that one hundred!

(Much to everyone's astonishment, he had a live Nawsland soldier in a headlock and he was leading him into the square. This wasn't something any ordinary man could have done.

Nawsland soldiers were big, powerful men and man-handling them wasn't easy. Rex, however, was six feet, five inches tall and built like a colossus.)

REX: I found this little fucker hiding in one of my hunting cabins!

(Everyone in the assembly started booing furiously.)

REX: You'd better not be booing *me*!

CASSIE: We never would!

REX: I see. Carry on then.

(He then threw the Nawsland soldier down onto his knees in front of the chief.)

REX: Well? What have you go to say for yourself?

CASSIE: I love him! He truly is a gift to women's eyeballs!

(Everyone glowered at her.)

CASSIE: I meant Rex!

(Everyone gave enlightened nods then glowered at the Nawsland soldier again. Desperate to flee, he tried to get up again, only for Rex to kick him down then place a heavy foot on his back.)

REX: I'm pretty sure I asked you a question!

CHIEF: Maybe he's hard of hearing. Hit him again.

REX: Okay.

(The Nawsland soldier spoke up in a panic.)

SOLDIER: I'm sorry!!!

CHIEF: Sorry??? Do you seriously think sorry *means* anything right now???

SOLDIER: Well...

(He forced a nervous smile.)

SOLDIER: To be fair, *I* didn't attack or kill anyone. I sent my *men* in to do it.

CHIEF: You're the leader???

SOLDIER: Shit. That was a stupid thing to say.

(He flinched.)

SOLDIER: I mean no!

CHIEF: He's lying. Slap him, Rex!

SOLDIER: Fine! Yes! I'm the leader of the unit.

CHIEF: Right. Now we're getting somewhere.

(A few calls then came from the audience.)

WARREN: String him up!

ERIC: By his bollocks!!!

CHIEF: Now, now! *We're* not the barbarians!

(He pointed to the captured soldier.)

CHIEF: His lot are!

SOLDIER: But I swear, *I* didn't attack *anyone*.

(He grimaced.)

SOLDIER: I mean... I was tempted to, truth be known, but when I saw what was happening, I fled.

CHIEF: When you saw you were losing?

SOLDIER: When I saw that ponytailed psychopath killing all my men!

CHIEF: Oh, don't *you* bloody start!

(He rolled his eyes then placed his hands on his hips.)

CHIEF: Let me make this clear once and for all, people. There *is* no ponytailed hero flitting around; that's just a silly rumour.

SOLDIER: But I *saw* it! He was like a blur!

CHIEF: Nope! I'm not having it! This ponytail person isn't real!

(He snarled.)

CHIEF: Now listen closely, invader! This can go one of two ways. You won't be a fan of either, but let me assure you one is far worse than the other. I'm going to give you a choice, a quick and relatively painless death by poisoning, or an extremely prolonged and painful death by whatever cruel and unusual method we can conspire to concoct. Pick one!

(The soldier whimpered.)

SOLDIER: I choose freedom!

CHIEF: Pain?

SOLDIER: Freedom!

CHIEF: Poisoning then!

SOLDIER: Um... no. Perhaps I'm not making myself clear. I choose freedom. And to that effect, I hereby resign my commission from the army.

CHIEF: You...

SOLDIER: No, no! Hear me out! I'm quitting this war with immediate effect, and as such, if you even harm *one hair* on my head, you'll be in violation of all sorts of military codes of conduct. It's illegal to attack civilians.

(The chief, very much like everyone else gathered there, snarled angrily.)

CHIEF: You attacked an entire town *full* of innocent civilians!

SOLDIER: No, I didn't!

CHIEF: You ordered your men to though!

SOLDIER: That was the *old* me.

CHIEF: Excuse me?

SOLDIER: I'm a civilian now. I can't be held responsible for what my old military self may or may not have done.

(He nodded.)

SOLDIER: Yup. That horrible old war and any crimes committed during it are nothing to do with me; not anymore. Now if you'll just show me to the town's exit, I'll be on my way.

(Unsurprisingly, Rex kept his foot on his back and his attempts to get up were thwarted before they could even begin.)

SOLDIER: No? Um... you're not gonna let that one fly, are you? No reprieve for little old me then?

CHIEF: Correct! Now I'll give you five seconds to choose. Painless death or a slow and excruciating one??? You have until I count to five. One...

(The soldier whimpered.)

SOLDIER: Fine! Painless!

(He started to sob.)

SOLDIER: You people are barbarians.

REX: Wow!

CHIEF: I know. It's taking every ounce of restraint I have not to attack the bugger myself.

(He then took a deep breath in a bid to calm himself down.)

CHIEF: Okay... listen up, soldier boy. If you tell me the truth, I'll grant your request for a painless death. If you lie to me, however... what can I say... your death will *redefine* the word agony.

(The soldier pouted.)

SOLDIER: Fine.

CHIEF: Good lad. Now tell me, why the fuck did you attack Birdstone?

SOLDIER: The truth?

CHIEF: If you've got any sense, yes.

SOLDIER: Okay.

(He nodded.)

SOLDIER: I *didn't* attack Birdstone, my men did.

CHIEF: But why?

SOLDIER: Because I told them to.

CHIEF: Yes, but *why* did you tell them to?

SOLDIER: Because *my* boss told me to. There's a whole chain of command, you see, and...

CHIEF: Enough!!!

(He snarled.)

CHIEF: Stop being obtuse!!!

SOLDIER: I wasn't, I was being honest like you asked.

CHIEF: Fine, then I'll rephrase. Why did the Nawsland Army decide to attack Birdstone?

SOLDIER: That's classified.

CHIEF: I'm gonna kill you!!!

SOLDIER: But it is!

CHIEF: I don't care! I told you to tell me the truth, not the classification status of the mission!

SOLDIER: I see.

(He sighed.)

SOLDIER: That's a good point.

(He grimaced.)

SOLDIER: But so is this. That information really *is* classified; even to me. So I have no idea why we had to come here. They just told me to kill as many people as possible and make sure the chief was among their number.

CHIEF: Me? Why?

SOLDIER: I don't know.

(Everyone booed.)

SOLDIER: I don't! I really don't! I can only assume attacks on civilian towns are more effective in terms of demoralising the population if you kill the leader. I can't say for sure.

CHIEF: And that's the truth, is it?

SOLDIER: That's everything I know.

CHIEF: Okay.

(He raised a distrusting eyebrow.)

CHIEF: But how did you even know about this town's existence? This is a tiny backwater; not even marked on maps!

SOLDIER: My boss told me obviously.

CHIEF: Not this again.

(He snarled.)

CHIEF: How did your *army* know!!!

SOLDIER: Oh. Again. I have no idea.

(Everyone in attendance started booing and howling again. His lack of useful information was irritating them beyond words.)

FRANK: He's no bloody use!!!

WARREN: Yeah! Fuck him! Let's kill him the painful way!

SOLDIER: Well that's hardly fair! I can't tell you things I don't even know, can I?

WARREN: You don't know any fucking thing!

ELEANOR: But *we* do! We know you're a bastard!!!

CASSIE: Right? Behead him!!!

ARTHUR: No! Tie him to a tree and let the bears eat him!

ERIC: Bollocks. Let's just knock his block off and be done with it!!!

(At once, an anguished scream rose up from where Desmond was standing.)

DESMOND: No! No, no, no!!! Why would you even *suggest* that???

(He then burst into tears and fled from the square.)

DESMOND: You don't just chop someone's cock off! You people are savages!

ERIC: Cock? I said block, you twat!

(He cringed.)

ERIC: Right. He's gone.

(Having *watched* Desmond flee in distress, the chief grimaced at Rex uncomfortably.)

CHIEF: What was that all about?

REX: I have no idea!

CHIEF: I see.

(He shrugged.)

CHIEF: Anyway, as useless as your information was, prisoner, you did at least make an effort, I suppose. Therefore I'm happy to honour our agreement. You shall be put to death by poisoning.

SOLDIER: Right...

(He furrowed his brow.)

SOLDIER: You'll forgive me for not thanking you.

CHIEF: I'll forgive no such thing.

(He then looked to Rex.)

CHIEF: Take him to the forest and feed him some of those nice red mushrooms.

REX: Very well, sir.
(With that, he took his foot off the soldier's back and allowed him to rise to his knees.
Having done so, however, Rex then pulled his sword and chopped his head off in full view of everyone. It was a move greeted with much cheering and jubilation.)
REX: Whoops. I slipped.
(He shrugged.)
REX: Still, job done.
CHIEF: For fuck sake, Rex. I mean, really?
REX: He led an attack on our town, Chief!
(He furrowed his brow.)
REX: Then had the cheek to hide in one *my* cabins!!! Cowering like a little girl! Wanker!
(The chief simply nodded.)
CHIEF: Fair enough. Sling him on the pile then. He can be burnt with the others.
REX: Now that I can do.
(With that, Rex grabbed the corpse by its collar then dragged it off towards the fire.
Disturbingly, a eight year old girl, carried the head for him. Watching them go, the chief grimaced then glanced to the crowd.)
CHIEF: Now where was I?
ERIC: You'd finished!
CHIEF: I had?
(He gave him a distrusting glance.)
CHIEF: Or was I boring you and you just want it to end?
ERIC: I refuse to answer that on the grounds that you'll feel bad.
CHIEF: I see.
(He sneered.)
CHIEF: You're an asshole, Eric.
(He then smiled at the assembly.)
CHIEF: Okay, I'll draw things to a close then.
(Everyone cheered.)
CHIEF: Except to say a final few words.
(Everyone groaned.)
CHIEF: Right... yes... I love you too.
(He sighed then stood tall.)
CHIEF: I'll just end by saying this. Today was indeed our day of darkness. But it wasn't by any means a day of defeat. As a community, and as a town, we'll get past this and continue to thrive. Those twenty eight deaths may have hurt our hearts, but they won't even put the tiniest dent in our spirit. Birdstone lives on!!!
(Appreciating his sentiment, the entire assembly applauded passionately.)
CHIEF: Thank you, thank you. You may now return to your homes.
(At once, everyone started to leave except one of the men at the front.)
ERIC: Not until you sing the town anthem again.
(The chief glanced at him coldly then grinned.)
CHIEF: Really, Eric? Sometimes I think you only come to these things to heckle me.
(Eric just smirked then walked off. Watching him go, the chief furrowed his brow.)
CHIEF: He does! He *does* only come to heckle me!
(He snarled then headed away.)
CHIEF: Next time we have a town meeting, he can sit at the back!

As the bulk of attendees hurried for the exits to the square, Frank hastily approached Eleanor then stopped her in her tracks. At the same time, he reached out to pull Morris closer to himself. Neither of them were impressed.

ELEANOR: You're in the way, Frank.

MORRIS: Hey! Don't manhandle me!!!

FRANK: Calm down. I just want a word, that's all.

(He then glanced up and called out across the square.)

FRANK: Cassie! Over here!!!

(Cassie gave him a baffled glance then headed over to him.)

CASSIE: What is it?

MORRIS: Quite. Spit it out, man. The wife's bugging off home without me.

ELEANOR: As is my husband!

FRANK: Good. *Let* them go.

ELEANOR: What?

(Frank glanced from side to side nervously.)

FRANK: We need to talk.

MORRIS: About you manhandling people?

FRANK: No. Get over it, for pity's sake.

(He rolled his eyes.)

FRANK: Look, we all saw something this morning.

CASSIE: The blur?

FRANK: Yeah.

(He glanced from side to side.)

FRANK: Well, I'm thinking about looking into it.

CASSIE: Looking into it?

FRANK: Yeah. I mean, it's a mystery. Who the hell was it? *What* the hell was it?

MORRIS: I see. And how does that involve us?

FRANK: Well... aren't you curious?

ELEANOR: I am actually.

MORRIS: I suppose.

FRANK: Then meet me in The Nest in ten minutes. I have a proposal.

MORRIS: Nest? There's a nest?

FRANK: The pub.

MORRIS: Oh... The Nest. Gotcha.

FRANK: Cool. See you soon.

CASSIE: Wait. If we're all going there, why don't we just walk together?

FRANK: Because I really need a pee.

(He then scampered away, leaving the others behind. They all wore baffled expressions.)

MORRIS: Moron.

CASSIE: He's alright.

ELEANOR: Yeah...

(She smiled.)

ELEANOR: So, are we going to The Nest?

MORRIS: Might as well.

CASSIE: Yeah, fuck it. Why not? I'm really curious who that ponytailed blur was and if we can shed some light on it, that'll be great.

MORRIS: Indeed.

ELEANOR: Let's go then.

(Just as they started to head away, however, Portman spoke up from behind them.)

PORTMAN: Where are we going?

MORRIS: We? Were *you* invited?

PORTMAN: What? No.

MORRIS: I see. Then *we* aren't going anywhere. Come along, ladies.

(He then headed away with Cassie and Eleanor. Portman watched them go for a moment then shrugged.)

PORTMAN: Fuck it.

(He then hurried after them.)

Some ten minutes later, Morris, Eleanor, Cassie and Portman gathered at a quiet table at the back of The Nest Public House. The smaller of the town's two alehouses, it was quiet and bore a friendly ambience. It was a good place to meet for a drink and a chat. The other alehouse, The Birdstone Tavern was often rowdy, full of drunks and conversation was only achieved by shouting above the rabble. Quite the opposite of what Frank had in mind.

Delighted to see the others arrive, although a little bit baffled in Portman's case, Frank ordered a pitcher of ale and a carafe of wine from the bar. He then headed over to join them as soon as he'd been served. He was delighted to see them all. He had an idea to pitch to them and he couldn't wait to get started. As such, as soon as he sat down, he offered everyone a smile then got straight to the point.

FRANK: So...

MORRIS: Who's this wine for?

FRANK: Whoever wants it. I brought five wine goblets and five beer tankards, so just help yourself to your preferred tippie.

MORRIS: I'm a whisky man.

FRANK: I see.

(He stared at him blankly then shrugged.)

FRANK: You know where the bar is.

MORRIS: Charming.

(He sighed.)

MORRIS: I suppose ale will have to do.

FRANK: Help yourself.

ELEANOR: Nothing for me. I need to get back to my husband.

(She gave Frank a smile.)

ELEANOR: So? What's this meeting all about? Do you know something about the blurry ponytail that might sate my curiosity?

FRANK: Nope. I don't know a fucking thing.

ELEANOR: Then why are we here exactly?

FRANK: Because...

(He ruffled his beard.)

FRANK: I want to start a top secret committee.

MORRIS: A *top secret* committee?

FRANK: That's right.

CASSIE: What *kind* of committee?

MORRIS: He can't tell you that, it's a secret.

(He then shrunk in his seat, defeated by Frank's scowl.)

MORRIS: Right. Sorry.

CASSIE: So? What kind of committee?

FRANK: An investigative one, Cassie!

(Cassie, Morris and Eleanor shared a thoughtful glance. Portman just stared into space.)

ELEANOR: We're listening.

FRANK: Cool. Thing is...

(He furrowed his brow.)

FRANK: *Portman* isn't listening.

MORRIS: Good. He'd only forget half of it and misconstrue the rest.

FRANK: Right. Yeah. Good point.

CASSIE: So? Come on then, Frank. What are you proposing?

FRANK: I want our committee to investigate Ponytail.

CASSIE: Yeah, we'd gathered that, but how do you propose we go about it?

FRANK: I don't *know* how to go about it, Cassie; that's why I suggested forming a committee. A brains trust, so to speak.

(They all glanced at Portman briefly.)

FRANK: Of course, some brains will be more valuable than others.

MORRIS: You can say that again.

FRANK: So? What do you think?

CASSIE: Sure. Might be fun.

MORRIS: Might be dangerous.

ELEANOR: Which is exciting. I'm in.

(She shrugged.)

ELEANOR: Don't judge me. I'm a housewife; I've been bored for years.

MORRIS: You're also a mother, Eleanor. Doesn't the danger worry you?

FRANK: What danger?

MORRIS: The danger one would *associate* with investigating a blade-wielding psychopath.

CASSIE: A blade-wielding psychopath that's on our side. We'll be fine.

MORRIS: Well... I suppose. I guess I don't mind *helping out*.

FRANK: Cool. Cheers, guys. I'm glad to have you on board.

(He sat back and sighed.)

FRANK: I just can't get it out of my head, you know? Who the hell *is* Ponytail? And where did he spring from all of a sudden?

ELEANOR: That's what I'd like to know.

FRANK: Right? I mean, it's just so bizarre! All five of us, in five separate incidents, were seconds away from being slaughtered. We were goners; done for. Then... he appeared.

CASSIE: The mysterious blur.

FRANK: Yeah.

(He nodded.)

FRANK: But let's call him Ponytail.

MORRIS: We already do, don't we?

FRANK: Not everyone does. Some call him the blur.

MORRIS: Which is fine. Both are fitting.

FRANK: Yeah, but let's go with Ponytail.

CASSIE: Why?

(Frank furrowed his brow.)

FRANK: Because my wife's maiden name was De Blur and she was a cunt; as you well know.

CASSIE: Gotcha. Ponytail it is then. It sounds much cooler anyway.

MORRIS: Cooler than The Blur? Are you insane? The Blur is mysterious; almost mystic.

ELEANOR: It's also the result of having terrible eyesight. And if people keep insisting on referring to him as The Blur, people who *didn't* see him will just accuse us of needing glasses.

MORRIS: I suppose. Ponytail it is then.

FRANK: Excellent.

(He smiled.)

FRANK: We just agreed on our first point as a committee.

ELEANOR: Oh, yeah.

(She smiled.)

ELEANOR: We're really good at this.

MORRIS: Yes, well, that remains to be seen. We still need to discuss how to *go about* investigating The Blur.

CASSIE: Ponytail!

ELEANOR: Yeah, keep up!

MORRIS: Fine. Ponytail then.

(He rolled his eyes.)

MORRIS: But that doesn't alter the point I was trying to make. If we can agree how to *go about* investigating, then and only then, can we say we're a good committee.

FRANK: A fair point.

(He sat forwards and glanced across at his fellow committee members.)

FRANK: I think we need to start to asking around.

MORRIS: Yes, well, we wouldn't be investigating if we didn't.

FRANK: I'm aware of that, Morris. I'm just saying... I'm pretty certain that *someone* in town knows something. They have to.

ELEANOR: What makes you so sure?

FRANK: Well... it's just common sense, really. Ponytail came into town, saved our arses then vanished. Why would someone do that if they had no affiliation with the town?

MORRIS: That's an excellent point.

CASSIE: So... Ponytail could even be a citizen in disguise.

ELEANOR: Really? Like someone we might just pass on the street?

CASSIE: Yeah! And ordinary bloke with a heroic secret.

ELEANOR: Wow. That's *really* exciting.

CASSIE: Yup. And kinda hot.

ELEANOR: Right?

CASSIE: But then again... no, it's not. The men of this town are *not* sexy!

ELEANOR: Good point. Hopefully it was a stranger from out of town then.

CASSIE: Agreed.

FRANK: Um... excuse me? As a man of this town, I'm offended by that statement.

MORRIS: As am I.

CASSIE: Why? Did you two think you were sexy?

MORRIS: Well... my wife certainly seems to think *I* am.

FRANK: And *my* wife *definitely* thought the men of this town were sexy. She slept with three of them then left me for a fourth!

ELEANOR: I see. Maybe we should change the subject.

CASSIE: And quickly!

(She smiled.)

CASSIE: So, what do we know about Ponytail?

ELEANOR: He has a ponytail!

CASSIE: Other than that!

MORRIS: He's a short-arse.

ELEANOR: Okay.

MORRIS: A scantily clad short-arse.

(Portman then averted his gaze from the ceiling and smiled.)

PORTMAN: Got it. I've figured it out.

FRANK: What? Already?

PORTMAN: Yeah. It was obvious, really. The reason the ceiling fan doesn't work is because there isn't one. Look.

(He pointed to the ceiling. Nobody looked.)

FRANK: Portman?

PORTMAN: Yeah?

FRANK: You're a cock!

PORTMAN: Because I like to get up early, right?

(Frank just stared through him then groaned in defeat.)

FRANK: Doesn't matter.

MORRIS: Quite. So what *else* do we know? We know he's short and has a ponytail, but that's not much to go on. And my clue about being scantily clad is meaningless, because he might have got changed right after the incident.

(Everyone wracked their brains.)

CASSIE: Um... we know he's a man?

FRANK: Yup. That's another thing we know.

ELEANOR: Unless Charles the pervert was telling the truth.

MORRIS: Yes, but what are the odds of that? The man lives in a perverted fantasy world and only sees what he *wants* to see.

CASSIE: True.

(She sighed.)

CASSIE: We've got so little to go on.

FRANK: Yeah.

(He nodded.)

FRANK: And that's why we need to ask around. Carefully. We don't want to give away the fact that we're secretly a committee, after all.

MORRIS: That's simple enough. We can just mention Ponytail in passing and listen to what people have to say.

FRANK: Exactly. And you never know, someone might have seen something that leads us in the right direction.

MORRIS: Or indeed the wrong one.

CASSIE: Well, we'll investigate it anyway.

ELEANOR: Yup. False leads are just a risk we'll have to take.

FRANK: Agreed.

MORRIS: So that's the plan then, is it? To ask around. Stealthily.

FRANK: Yup.

MORRIS: Very well. I'll go to the Birdstone Tavern tomorrow then, and ask around in there.

FRANK: And I'll subtly try to get information from my customers while I'm doing my flour deliveries tomorrow.

CASSIE: Cool. I'll just ask around town. Find out what the young people saw.

ELEANOR: I'll do the same.

(She shrugged.)

ELEANOR: But with people in general. Not young people. I'm often out and about chatting after I've dropped the girls at school, so everyone will think I'm just being myself.

FRANK: Perfect.

(He nodded.)

FRANK: Now we all know our roles, all that's left to do is toast our new committee.

PORTMAN: Wait, what? Roles? We all have roles? What's mine? And what's a role?

MORRIS: A job, you idiot!

PORTMAN: Oh. Okay. And what's my job?

(Everyone glanced his way uncomfortably. They didn't want him involve at all, but none of them were cruel enough to tell him. They *were* cruel enough, however, to send him on a wild goose chase.)

FRANK: I actually have a very *specific* job for you, Portman.

(Portman gulped.)

PORTMAN: Is it easy? Only, if it isn't, I'm ninety nine percent certain that it'll all end in tears.

FRANK: Don't sell yourself short.

PORTMAN: I'm not. My mother asked me drop a note to the chief once. I got lost in the woods for three days.

FRANK: What? The chief lives a hundred yards from your cottage!

PORTMAN: Yeah...

(He sighed.)

PORTMAN: Dark times. The wind blew it out of my hand, so I chased it... and the rest was misery.

FRANK: Wow.

(He shook his head then forced a smile.)

FRANK: I need you to check out women's feet tomorrow.

PORTMAN: Check them out?

FRANK: Yeah. Look at them closely.

PORTMAN: Um... why?

ELEANOR: That's what we're wondering.

FRANK: I want you to see if they're wearing high heels or not.

PORTMAN: Oh. Cool.

(He grimaced.)

PORTMAN: Why do you want me to do that?

FRANK: Because it'll be helpful. Charles the pervert said Ponytail was a woman wearing stiletto heels remember? So if any of them *are* wearing high heels, they might be Ponytail.

PORTMAN: Right...

FRANK: But if *none* of the women are wearing heels, it'll go a long way to *ruling out* his ridiculous theory.

MORRIS: But we *already* ruled out...

(He then looked enlightened.)

MORRIS: Oh, right. Got it. You're sending dumb arse there on a wild goose chase.

(He gasped in horror.)

MORRIS: I said that out loud!

(He then looked to where Portman was scratching his head in bewilderment. He was so focussed on understanding his new job, Morris's words had gone right over his head.)

PORTMAN: So... just walk around all day...

FRANK: And stare at women's feet.

PORTMAN: And if she's wearing heels... I should... what?

FRANK: Make a mental note.

PORTMAN: That wouldn't end well.

CASSIE: Write it down then.

PORTMAN: That'd end worse.

(He sighed.)

PORTMAN: I'll try the mental thing.

FRANK: Just do your best, Portman.

PORTMAN: Yeah. Okay.

(He then raised a baffled eyebrow.)

PORTMAN: So why am I looking at feet again?
MORRIS: To help identify Ponytail.
PORTMAN: What? Surely her Ponytail will be on her head! Or her arse. I mean, if she's *actually* a pony.
FRANK: Wow. He's so...
PORTMAN: Look, I'll be fine. I don't get it, but I'll do what you asked.
FRANK: Excellent. With your help, we'll find out who he is in no time.
PORTMAN: Who?
FRANK: What do you mean, who? The person we came here to discuss.
PORTMAN: Who was that?
CASSIE: Seriously?
PORTMAN: Well, I don't know, do I? I was busy trying to figure out what was wrong with the ceiling fan.
(He nodded with self-satisfaction.)
PORTMAN: A mystery I have now solved by the way. Did I tell you there isn't one?
(Eleanor, Cassie, Frank and Morris just stared at him blankly.)
ELEANOR: Hmm... maybe we should arrange the next meeting in secret.
MORRIS: In an idiot-free zone far, far away.
CASSIE: Uh-huh.
FRANK: Indeed.
(He then nodded knowingly.)
FRANK: Anyway... nice one, guys. The committee is formed and we all have roles to perform. Not bad for ten minute's work.
ELEANOR: Yup. And in the morning, Operation Ponytail commences.
MORRIS: Ooh, I like that. Operation Ponytail.
FRANK: I think our committee just got its name.
CASSIE: It most certainly did.
(She then raised her glass. An exchange of the word "cheers" ensued followed by a hearty swig of alcohol. It felt nice to be part of something and they couldn't wait to get started first thing in the morning.)

The following morning, as planned, all five members of Operation Ponytail set to work on their investigation. Eleanor was the first one out of the blocks. She dropped her children off as soon as the school opened then set about questioning the other parents. The mothers always stopped for chats in the morning, so it was the perfect place to fish for information. Hoping she could glean something she hadn't heard before, she started with the usual group she nattered to; three other mums by the name of Angela, Rochelle and Sherry. Unfortunately, however, getting a word in edgeways was difficult at first.
ANGELA: Have you done something with your hair, Rochelle?
(Rochelle shrugged.)
ROCHELLE: I washed it.
SHERRY: Don't you normally then?
ROCHELLE: In the evening, yes, but there's rarely time in the mornings, so I end up coming here looking like I've just crawled out of a bush.
ANGELA: Hmm... the struggle is real.
ELEANOR: Terrible, isn't it?
(She smirked. This was her chance.)
ELEANOR: You know what else was terrible?
ROCHELLE: The chief's singing.

SHERRY: Oh, god, yes. Why he chose to sing the anthem alone, I'll never know.

ELEANOR: Yes, but...

ANGELA: He sounded like my dad. He was a terrible singer too.

ROCHELLE: Most dads are.

(Eleanor sighed with frustration.)

ELEANOR: Yes, but...

SHERRY: He should have got Runcorn to sing it. He has a nice voice apparently.

ANGELA: Does he?

SHERRY: So rumour has it.

(Eleanor's eyes lit up.)

ELEANOR: Rumours, eh? There's a lot of *them* about right now. Like that Ponytail rumour.

(Sherry, Rochelle and Angela all glanced at her emptily.)

SHERRY: Ponytail?

ROCHELLE: Whose ponytail? You'd better not be talking about mine. I only wear it like *that* normally, because I don't have time to wash it in the morning; like I told you.

ELEANOR: No, not *your* ponytail.

(She gave them a knowing glance.)

ELEANOR: I'm talking about the ponytailed hero.

(All three of her fellow mums looked enlightened.)

ROCHELLE: Gotcha.

(She scoffed.)

ROCHELLE: What a load of bollocks.

SHERRY: No, it's not.

ROCHELLE: What?

SHERRY: My Richard says he saw him!

(Rochelle scoffed.)

ROCHELLE: He's lying.

SHERRY: My Richard doesn't do that! That's more something *your* fella would do!

ROCHELLE: Piss off. *My* Richard is as honest as the day is long.

(Eleanor smiled.)

ELEANOR: I forgot you both married a Richard.

SHERRY: Not now, Eleanor.

(She snarled.)

SHERRY: *Your* Richard wouldn't know the truth if he fell over it!

ROCHELLE: Rubbish. *Your* Richard is the one who tells lies; like saying he saw Ponytail.

SHERRY: He did!

ROCHELLE: Bullshit.

SHERRY: Rochelle, you're being absurd. If he says he saw it, then he saw it. *I* married the honest Richard.

(She glanced away nonchalantly.)

SHERRY: And the better looking one.

(Rochelle gasped.)

ROCHELLE: That's outrageous! *My* Richard is much better looking than yours! He has a better body too!

SHERRY: Nonsense! When *my* Richard has his shirt off, he turns heads. When *your* Richard has *his* shirt off, he turns stomachs.

ROCHELLE: How dare you? Everyone *knows* my Richard is far sexier than yours!

SHERRY: No, mine is! He's smarter too!

ROCHELLE: Now you're just being ridiculous!

(Having heard enough, Angela rolled her eyes then headed away, gesturing for Eleanor to come with her. Eleanor quickly hurried after her.)

ANGELA: Honest to god, Eleanor. I've heard it all now. Two women arguing over who has the most impressive Dick.

(Eleanor chuckled then continued onwards at her side, towards the main part of town.)

ELEANOR: I love how you put that.

ANGELA: Thanks. Honestly, those two are so childish.

ELEANOR: Yeah...

(She glanced away innocently.)

ELEANOR: So what's *your* take on this Ponytail rumour?

(Angela glanced at her uneasily.)

ANGELA: Um... well... that's an awkward one, actually.

ELEANOR: Oh?

ANGELA: Yeah... *normally* I'd say it's poppycock like the chief seems to think, but... my old mum is adamant she saw her.

ELEANOR: Her?

ANGELA: Ponytail.

ELEANOR: What? Ponytail's a woman?

ANGELA: So my mum says.

(She sighed.)

ANGELA: Trouble is, my mum's a bit dotty, so it's a kinda hard to take her word for it. But... I mean... she's adamant. And she *was* lucid when she told me.

ELEANOR: Wow. That's... wow. So what did she see exactly?

ANGELA: Well... she told *me* she was up in her attic room, folding some sheets, when she noticed someone crouching on her roof, just outside the window.

ELEANOR: Really?

ANGELA: Yeah. She only saw her bottom half, but it was enough to know it was a woman. Thigh high boots with six inch stiletto heels on them. Oh, and very long hair.

(She gave a stifled laugh.)

ANGELA: She was also at pains to point out that she was virtually naked. Ponytail, I mean; not my mum.

ELEANOR: I gathered.

ANGELA: Right. Apparently, her arse cheeks were on display to the entire world. My mum thought she was completely naked at first, then she noticed a thin strip of material going from the small of her back, down between her bum cheeks.

ELEANOR: Blimey.

ANGELA: Yeah. Well, you know what my mum's like. She's wasn't just gonna stand there and tolerate some barely dressed stranger kneeling on her roof, was she? Actually... she might have done if it was a man. In fact, she'd have invited him in, the randy old goat, but she wasn't about to stand for a young woman doing it. So she went to say something. But before she could yell at her, she jumped off the roof. Jumped off! That's a long way up!

ELEANOR: Yeah, it is!

ANGELA: Right? Naturally, my mum feared the worst so she ran over to the window see if she was alright.

(She winced.)

ANGELA: Apparently, she was a lot *more* than alright. She arrived at the window just in time to see Ponytail zoom up to a bunch of soldiers at the speed of light then... how did she put it? That's right... treat them to several brand new air vents.

ELEANOR: Air vents?

ANGELA: Puncture holes. Wounds. Within seconds the house next to them had a very different colour door. Blood red! It was a massacre she said. Then Ponytail zoomed away again so quickly, she didn't even see where she went!

(Eleanor was aghast.)

ELEANOR: Wow... I mean... that's... it kinda fits with what *I* saw. The speed and the blood, I mean.

ANGELA: You saw her too?

ELEANOR: I did. She saved my life.

ANGELA: Right. Well... *you* I'm more inclined to believe. At her worst, my mum hears things *other people* have said and starts to think they're *her own* memories. But, yeah, if you saw her, she *must* be real.

ELEANOR: Yeah... well... I never doubted her realness. It's the gender I wasn't sure of. It all happened so fast, I couldn't *tell* if she was male or female.

(She shrugged.)

ELEANOR: I *had* convinced myself Ponytail was a guy, but now I'm not so sure. Maybe Charles the pervert was right.

ANGELA: Charles? That old leech sees what he *wants* to see. He's not reliable either.

ELEANOR: I know. Meaning the only the eye witnesses who are *certain* Ponytail's female as wholly unreliable.

ANGELA: Looks that way.

(She smiled sincerely.)

ANGELA: So you were attacked, were you? That must have been horrifying.

ELEANOR: It was the worst moment of my entire life. And I genuinely thought it was the *last* moment of my life.

(She shrugged.)

ELEANOR: That's why I'm so interested. If I can find her, I can thank her. Or him.

ANGELA: Could be either, to be honest. I wouldn't take my mum's word as gospel. Her words *are* compelling, but like I said, she's a bit doolally, so I'd take it with a pinch of salt.

ELEANOR: Oh, I will. Thanks, Angela.

ANGELA: For what?

ELEANOR: Sharing.

(She smiled.)

ELEANOR: Anyway, I'd better get going. I was so engrossed in what you were saying, I've walked completely the wrong way.

ANGELA: So you have.

(Eleanor smiled.)

ELEANOR: Thanks for the chat. I'll see you when we pick the kids up I expect.

ANGELA: Count on it.

(Eleanor then headed away. Angela simply continued on for a moment then turned and called out to her.)

ANGELA: Eleanor?

ELEANOR: Yeah?

ANGELA: For what it's worth, I'm eighty percent sure my mum's telling the truth.

ELEANOR: Yeah?

(She smiled.)

ELEANOR: Me too.

(She then headed away, nodding to herself thoughtfully.)

ELEANOR: Interesting. That's definitely worth looking into, I think. Could Ponytail really be a woman? I'm just not sure.

(She shrugged.)

ELEANOR: Still... that was a good start. And with four of us investigating, by the end of the night, we might have a better picture. Yup. Encouraging.

A few streets away, at this time, Frank hauled a bag of flour from the back of his cart then strutted up to the bakery. Wearing a warm and friendly smile, way in excess of usual welcome, he paced up to where the owner was washing his hands at a small basin then beamed with exaggerated delight.

FRANK: Flour's here, Stan!

(Stan looked him up and down suspiciously.)

STAN: Are you retiring or something?

FRANK: What? No.

STAN: Did you come into some money then? What are you so happy about?

FRANK: I'm *always* happy.

STAN: You could have fooled me. You usually stomp in here with a face like an angry haddock.

FRANK: Hardly.

STAN: You do! And it's great, because we then spend ten minutes slagging off our former wives. It's the highlight of my day, so I'd like you to revert to default, please.

FRANK: Right...

(His brow furrowed.)

FRANK: Why did you have to mention that cunt of a woman?

STAN: There he is. My old mate, Frankie boy.

FRANK: No, seriously. Why ruin my good mood?

STAN: Because misery, namely me, loves company.

(Frank gave a stifled laugh.)

FRANK: Fair enough. I am *kind of* in a good mood though. Or I was.

STAN: How come?

FRANK: Well... cheating death changes thing. I have a new perspective now. You very quickly realise life aint so bad when you've almost lost it.

STAN: I see. Attacked in that invasion, were you?

FRANK: Yeah, mate. Thought I was a goner.

STAN: Shit. That sucks.

(He gave him a dagger glance.)

STAN: Wait. You're not gonna tell me a mysterious blur saved you, are you?

FRANK: Ponytail?

STAN: *Whatever* you want to call it. I'm sick of people spreading that bollocks.

FRANK: What makes you think it's bollocks?

STAN: The obvious. There isn't a fairy in the woods, waiting to pop into the town to give children treats when they lose their teeth. There isn't a god inside the mountain, spewing out hogs for us to eat either. And there most certainly isn't a mysterious superhero who appears out of thin air to save us all from enemy soldiers. It's bloody ridiculous.

FRANK: Um...

STAN: Um, what?

FRANK: You're wrong.

STAN: Aw, for fuck sake, not you too.

FRANK: I know what I saw, Stan.

(He grimaced.)

FRANK: Well, actually I don't. Not exactly. It was just a blur. A ponytail moving at a million miles per hour. But I am gonna *find out* who Ponytail is, no matter what it takes.

STAN: Are you now?

FRANK: Absolutely.

(He flinched.)

FRANK: Not that I'm part of any top secret committee *dedicated* to finding out who he is. God, no. That would be ridiculous.

(He then scratched his head and giggled unconvincingly.)

STAN: Right, well... I never said you *were* part of a committee.

FRANK: Good. Because I'm not.

STAN: I know. You're really shit at working with others, mate. The idea of you on a committee is laughable.

FRANK: I see.

(He ruffled his neck.)

FRANK: A bit harsh, but okay.

(He stood tall.)

FRANK: Alright then, Stan, if it wasn't a mysterious stranger, moving faster than my eyes could keep up with, who the fuck saved me? Answer me that.

STAN: I dunno, mate. I just know it wasn't a magical faery with daggers.

FRANK: I never said he was magical.

(Just then, Stan's second wife, Natalie entered from the back of the bakery.)

NATALIE: *Who* isn't magical?

FRANK: Oh. Morning, Nat.

NATALIE: Hi. Who isn't magical?

STAN: Ponytail. He's fallen for all that nonsense, hook, line and sinker.

NATALIE: Oh?

STAN: Yeah. Reckons he's gonna find out who it is an' all.

FRANK: Just for my own personal gratification, Natalie.

(He then wiped sweat from brow and grimaced.)

FRANK: Not because I'm part of any secret committee. Absolutely not. A committee? What? Behave. I'm not on one of them things!

NATALIE: Of course, you're not. You on a committee? That'd be a coach-wreck.

FRANK: Yeah... cheers.

NATALIE: So what makes you think this ponytailed person is real?

FRANK: I saw him with my own two eyes. He saved me and my two sons from a certain death.

NATALIE: I see. And what did he look like?

FRANK: Well... dunno... he was just a blur.

STAN: And that's where your argument falls down, mate.

NATALIE: I have to say, it does seem a bit off, Frank. You say you saw him, but then you say you didn't because he was just a blur. Which one is it?

FRANK: I saw a blur, okay. The blur saved me. And all I could make out was a ponytail. Is that really so hard to believe?

STAN: Yes!

FRANK: Stan...

STAN: Because it's bollocks.

(Just then, one of the local milkmaids, Fifi, strolled into the bakery.)

FIFI: What's bollocks?

NATALIE: Ponytail.

FIFI: The blur?

STAN: Yeah.

(Fifi wagged her finger.)

FIFI: It's not bollocks at all. I saw him!

(Frank's eyes lit up.)

FRANK: You did?

FIFI: Yeah!

FRANK: Awesome! What did you see? Tell me everything you know!

FIFI: Why?

FRANK: Because I'm interested.

(He ruffled his neck innocently.)

FRANK: Certainly not because I'm on a secret committee charged with finding out who he is or anything. That'd be ridiculous. Such a committee doesn't even exist. Why, it's outrageous even to suggest such a thing.

(He then stood there sweating while Fifi eyed him blankly.)

FIFI: Right...

(She shrugged.)

FIFI: I didn't see that much to be honest. I just heard screaming and looked out of my window. Four of them invaders were getting turned into diced idiot-meat by the fastest warrior I've ever seen. So fast, in fact, all I could make out was a long, black ponytail with blue streaks. Then he vanished. Left a right mess behind. One of them was still spouting blood like a fountain.

(Frank exhaled.)

FRANK: Now do you believe me?

STAN: Nope!

FRANK: Stan!

FIFI: So you think *I'm* lying too?

STAN: Absolutely not. *You*, I believe!

FRANK: What? Why believe her and not me?

STAN: Because, my friend, the customer is always right.

(Frank sneered.)

FRANK: Yeah, right. You're *my* customer and you're *never* right.

(With that, he stomped out of the bakery and climbed back on his cart.)

FRANK: I'll try asking elsewhere. Somewhere where the proprietor *isn't* an idiot.

(He then nodded determinedly before immediately jumping back out of the cart.)

FRANK: Right after he's paid me for that flour.

(He snarled.)

FRANK: Somebody knows *something*. I'm *sure* they do!

Very much in alignment with Frank's belief that someone in town had to know who Ponytail was, Cassie had set out that morning with a determination in her step. She'd promised herself that she'd quiz everyone in the entire town if she had to. If there was even the tiniest glimmer of information out there, she was going to find it. Ten minutes into her crusade, however, her resolve completely vanished. Rex had just walked past her with his shirt off. At once, her eyes glazed over and she forgot about her mission entirely. Far more interested in her fantasy about developing a relationship with the dreamy huntsman, she about turned then hurried to his side.

CASSIE: Hi, Rex.

(Rex glanced at her coldly and strode onwards.)

REX: Oh, goody. A woman.

CASSIE: Yeah...

(She fluttered her eyelashes at him as she struggled to match his pace.)

CASSIE: That I am.

REX: I know.

CASSIE: Right.

(She then grimaced uncomfortably.)

CASSIE: You walk too fast.

REX: If you don't like it, file a complaint with the chief.

CASSIE: No, it's not that...

(She flinched then picked up the pace.)

CASSIE: You've sped up.

REX: Whatever it takes to get rid of you.

CASSIE: That's not very nice.

REX: *I'm* not very nice. Get it? Good. Now go away.

(Cassie sighed sorrowfully.)

CASSIE: Why, Rex? Why are so mean to me? I'm a good-looking woman, damn it. You could at least flirt with me a little.

REX: I could, yes. I could *also* pick you up by your hair, swing you around my head then throw you back down the high street. Fortunately for you, I've decided just to walk off and leave you behind.

CASSIE: That's so mean. I haven't even recovered from the trauma of being attacked by Nawsland soldiers yet, and here you are threatening me with violence.

REX: I did no such thing! I just said what I *could* do.

(He then eyed her suspiciously.)

REX: The Nawsland soldiers attacked you, did they?

CASSIE: Yes! And they were feeling rapey!

REX: Bastards!

(He nodded.)

REX: Fine. Look... here's a concession, seeing as you've had a rough week. I'm glad you're not dead. Now go away.

(Cassie virtually swooned.)

CASSIE: Really? You're really glad I'm not dead?

REX: Yes. Or at least I *was*, but if you're going to make a big deal out of it...

CASSIE: Please don't ruin the moment. I'd hate that.

REX: Go away then. If you go somewhere I'm not, I won't be *able* to ruin your moment, will I?

(Cassie sighed.)

CASSIE: I suppose not.

(She forced a smile.)

CASSIE: I'll get out of your way then, Thank you for being glad I'm not dead.

REX: You're welcome.

(He nodded.)

REX: Don't get too excited though. I'm relieved for *all* the survivors, not just you.

CASSIE: Great. Moment crucified. Thanks a bunch.

REX: Well, I did warn you. If your moment's ruined, it's your own fault for not going away in time.

(He snarled.)

REX: I just wish there'd been *more* survivors. Fucking Nawsland scum make me sick.

(He sighed.)

REX: I also wish I'd been in town when the attacked happened, because I'd have killed the fucking lot of them.

CASSIE: Yeah...

(She smiled.)

CASSIE: Thankfully, Ponytail did that anyway.

REX: Ponytail?

CASSIE: Yeah, the mysterious...

REX: Go away!

CASSIE: But, Rex...

REX: No! No more. Go away for real this time. Talking to women is nauseating enough without having to listen to ridiculous fairy tales.

CASSIE: Fairy tales?

REX: You heard me! Mysterious strangers don't just materialise out of thin air, save the world then fuck off again. It's a nonsense on a scale not seen since Runcorn started wearing a wig and tried to convince everyone his hair mysteriously grew back in the night. Now get out of my sight, or I *will* pick you up and throw you somewhere!

(Cassie instantly came to a halt then stood there pouting as Rex stormed off.)

CASSIE: Meany!

(She sighed.)

CASSIE: He's a non-believer. That's just not sexy.

(She then exhaled adoringly.)

CASSIE: But I still would.

(For a few moments, she stood there allowing herself to fantasise before finally snapping out of it.)

CASSIE: Oh, well... back to work. What was I gonna do this morning?

(She bit her lip.)

CASSIE: Oh yeah! I was gonna get my hair done.

(She then skipped off down the road. Her mission had slipped her mind entirely.)

Despite being insulted and threatened by the town's foremost male heartthrob, a man she worshipped and idolised, Cassie was by no means the committee member having the worst morning. That dubious privilege went to Portman. Having got carried away performing the pointless task he'd been assigned, he'd just been arrested. Feeling more than a little harshly treated, as he was being frogmarched towards the police station, he desperately remonstrated with the arresting officer.

PORTMAN: These handcuffs are a bit much, don't you think, Desmond? I was only doing my job!

DESMOND: Your job?

PORTMAN: Yeah!

DESMOND: As the duly elected village idiot, your job is to mingle with the public, say stupid things and let everyone laugh at you. It's not your job to molest women!!!

PORTMAN: I wasn't molesting women!

(He ruffled his neck.)

PORTMAN: Anyway, that's not the job I was referring to.

DESMOND: What?

PORTMAN: I meant my *other* job!

DESMOND: What other job?

PORTMAN: I'm a special investigator for a top secret committee.

(Desmond stopped and scowled at him.)

DESMOND: You're a special investigator for a top secret committee?

PORTMAN: Yeah.

DESMOND: Right...

(He nodded.)

DESMOND: Let's get those cuffs off.

PORTMAN: Really?

DESMOND: Absolutely. It's poor form to beat someone black and blue while their hands are tied.

PORTMAN: Why would you...

DESMOND: Yes, I know, police brutality is a terrible thing. Normally, I refuse to be part of it. No, no, you carry on, lads, I say, then go about my business. But for you, I'm going to make an exception. Top secret fucking committee indeed! I'm going to knock you into the middle of next week! And when next week *comes* I'm going to knock you back here again. Honestly, how dumb do you think I am?

(Portman grimaced then answered the question far too honestly.)

PORTMAN: Very. My dad says you're the dumbest copper he's ever met.

DESMOND: Oh, does he know?

(He snarled.)

DESMOND: You can take a beating for *him* too then!

PORTMAN: Yeah... that's usually how he deals with adversity.

(He smiled.)

PORTMAN: Every time he's in trouble. Don't hit me, I'm old; hit my son. So they do!

Wallop. I've had *so many* wallopings over the years, I've lost count. Not that I *can* count.

(He exhaled.)

PORTMAN: Where would my dad be without me?

DESMOND: Yes, you're truly an asset to your family.

PORTMAN: I truly am.

(Desmond then yanked him free of his handcuffs and raised his fists.)

DESMOND: Right. Let's get beating you then,

PORTMAN: Righto.

(Just then, Julia, the town's hairstylist stepped up to them with an enquiring expression on her face.)

JULIA: Sorry, Desmond, but am I seeing this correctly? Do you plan to beat this man with your fists?

(Desmond scratched his earlobe nervously.)

DESMOND: Well... like... I know police brutality is frowned upon these days, but yes. Yes, I do.

JULIA: Cool.

(She snarled.)

JULIA: I'll start!

(She then set about Portman, walloping him repeatedly with her handbag. All Portman could do was cower and whimper.)

PORTMAN: Why???

JULIA: Fucking molesting my feet when I'm trying to walk to work; what sort of pervert are you???

PORTMAN: It's my job!!!

JULIA: Your job is to be an idiot, not a pervert!!!

PORTMAN: My *other* job! I have to investigate high heels! You've got high heels on!

JULIA: No, I haven't!!!

PORTMAN: Yes, you have!

JULIA: No, I haven't!!!

(Desmond quickly interceded.)

DESMOND: Actually, they are *kind of* high.

JULIA: Not for a hairdresser!

DESMOND: Good point! As you were.

(He then stood there and beamed at the glorious sight of Julia bashing the living daylights out of Portman with her bag.)

DESMOND: Priceless.

PORTMAN: That hurts, Julia!!!

JULIA: It's meant to!!!

(She growled.)

JULIA: You jumped in front of me and grabbed my foot. Scared me half to death. Then you stood there staring at it like a lustful idiot and wouldn't let me go!

PORTMAN: I just wanted to check if you were wearing high heels!

DESMOND: And you couldn't tell just by looking?

PORTMAN: I *was* looking! Just really close-up!

JULIA: Well, you shouldn't have!!! I didn't appreciate that, Portman and nor did the others!

DESMOND: There were others?

JULIA: Yeah! Look!

(She then gestured over her shoulder to where a queue of women was forming. They were all scowling at Portman and pounding their fists.)

DESMOND: Hmm... this is going to take a while!

(Portman cried out in anguish.)

PORTMAN: I don't want to *be* on a committee anymore!!!

DESMOND: No...

(He smirked.)

DESMOND: I don't suppose you do.

(He nodded.)

DESMOND: In your own time, ladies. I'll book him when you've finished.

(He then went and sat down on a nearby bench.)

DESMOND: I love my work; I really do.

In Birdstone Tavern, at this time, Morris was propping up the bar with a tankard of ale in his grasp. Confident he could glean a few nuggets of information about Ponytail from the punters in the main saloon, he was raising the subject at every opportunity. It had proven to be an excellent location for someone on the hunt for information. Everyone who came to the bar seemed to have an opinion on the matter and none of them were afraid to *share* that opinion. The two men he was *current* talking to, Kenny and Barry Mullins, the butcher's sons had very strong opinions on Ponytail indeed. Their opinions, however, were very much polar opposites.

BARRY: Just stands to reason, doesn't it? *Someone* killed them cunts from Nawsland and nobody *here* is taking the credit, so it *must* have been an outsider.

KENNY: No, no, no. That's bollocks. Outsiders don't just appear from out of nowhere and randomly save other people's towns; they just don't. It was obviously a local fella who doesn't want any publicity.

BARRY: Oh, yeah? Like who? Who's tough enough to do that?

KENNY: Well... Rex Townsend maybe.

BARRY: He doesn't have long black hair!

KENNY: His hair's shoulder length! I'd call that long!

BARRY: Not black though, is it?

KENNY: Maybe he dyed it!

BARRY: Are you fucking serious?

(Kenny sighed.)

KENNY: Alright, maybe not Rex then.

BARRY: Then who?

KENNY: I dunno. Someone I haven't met yet.

BARRY: Like who? This is very small town, mate.

KENNY: I dunno. I just know that random passers-by don't stop in, save a town from invasion then wander off again. It's ridiculous.

BARRY: Well *somebody* saved us!

KENNY: Now that we can agree on.

(They gave each other a frustrated sigh then both headed away from the bar. Watching them go, Morris was not impressed.)

MORRIS: What? Hey! You...

(He sighed to himself.)

MORRIS: I paid for their beer on the understanding they'd stop and talk to me. Not have a brief argument then bugger off again. They didn't even thank me.

(A young, blond gentleman at the end of the bar shrugged at him.)

CLIVE: Gratitude is a rare commodity these days, my friend. As is politeness in general, it seems. The whole world is going to hell.

MORRIS: Sadly, true.

CLIVE: Quite.

(He then exhaled and nodded to the ceiling.)

CLIVE: But there's still hope. The big man upstairs clearly hasn't deserted us yet.

MORRIS: The landlord?

(Clive glanced at him through unimpressed eyes.)

CLIVE: Further upstairs!

MORRIS: The attic?

CLIVE: Heaven! I'm talking about god.

(Morris rolled his eyes.)

MORRIS: One of those religious types, are you?

CLIVE: Proudly so, my friend. And before long, so will you be.

MORRIS: Seems unlikely.

CLIVE: Does it? Tell me, what more does god have to do to convince you he's watching over us still?

MORRIS: Well... he could start by not letting Nawsland soldiers come into our town to butcher us all.

CLIVE: Oh, but he did.

MORRIS: What?

CLIVE: Ponytail.

(Morris raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

MORRIS: Go on.

CLIVE: Isn't it obvious? He was a divine emissary sent from the heavens.

MORRIS: Right...

(He sighed.)

MORRIS: That was *my* fault for asking.

CLIVE: It's true. Who else can move at speeds that defy logic? It's not a mortal trait, is it? It's beyond human capability. Therefore it can only be a heavenly act. Twenty eight may well have perished, but because of the big man's intervention, the rest of us were saved.

(He exhaled.)

CLIVE: Blessed be.

MORRIS: Yes... you're a crank.

(He then upped and headed to a nearby table to sit down.)

MORRIS: Divine emissary, my arse.

(Sitting nearby, one of the other drinkers leant towards him.)

JAMES: Religious nut.

MORRIS: Who?

JAMES: Clive.

MORRIS: Right. Yes. I noticed.

JAMES: But...

(He glanced from side to side.)

JAMES: Maybe he wasn't a million miles from the truth.

MORRIS: Oh, god. You're not *another* religious nut, are you?

JAMES: Far from it, mate.

(He nodded.)

JAMES: But I know what I saw.

MORRIS: Oh?

JAMES: I was looking out of my upstairs window when I saw her arrive.

MORRIS: Her?

JAMES: Ponytail.

MORRIS: Ponytail's a woman?

JAMES: Yup. Blonde.

MORRIS: No. I'm gonna stop you there. He has black hair. I saw it myself. You're just making up a story.

JAMES: I'm not! As real as I'm sitting here, she flicked her hair and it *turned* black!

Daggers then grew from her fingers.

(He shuddered.)

JAMES: It was terrifying. Whoever she was, she wasn't human.

MORRIS: Nonsense.

(He furrowed his brow.)

MORRIS: I don't like having my time wasted, listen to windups.

JAMES: It's not a windup!

(The man drinking with James chuckled.)

GARY: Oh, it is. He's notorious for it.

JAMES: Now why would you tell him that?

GARY: Because he's been asking people about Ponytail all morning and all he's heard is nonsense. The man deserves a break.

JAMES: Fine.

(He shrugged.)

JAMES: Tell him what you reckon *you* saw then. Not that I believe it.

GARY: Very well. I actually *did* see her arrive.

MORRIS: Did you? Did you though?

GARY: I did. Seriously. Long black hair. And yes, she's a woman.

(Morris looked to him distrustfully.)

MORRIS: Go on.

GARY: She flew in on a white unicorn.

MORRIS: Oh, for fuck sake.

GARY: She did! She left it outside then summoned her dragon to aid in the fight.

Unfortunately, her dragon ate her unicorn then flew off again, so she had to fight without it.

(James and Gary then roared with laughter, leaving Morris scowling coldly.)

MORRIS: I'm going to sit elsewhere.

(He then upped and headed away to a table near the corner.)

MORRIS: Idiots. At this rate, I'll never find out who Ponytail is. People just make stuff up. It's all been baseless theories, outrageous lies and windups.

(He sighed.)

MORRIS: I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.

(The man sitting at the table opposite him then started to chuckle.)

PETE: Looking into Ponytail, are you?

(Morris glanced up at him.)

MORRIS: Sorry, what?

PETE: You looking into Ponytail?

MORRIS: I... I'm just interested that's all.

PETE: I see. Then you're talking to the right fella. I know who Ponytail is.

MORRIS: Right. What is it this time? A theory? Conjecture? A rumour you've heard? Or just more silliness?

PETE: No, mate. I know *exactly* who the ponytailed hero is.

MORRIS: Oh?

PETE: Yeah.

(He bobbed his head arrogantly.)

PETE: Me!

MORRIS: Oh, fuck off!

PETE: It's true!

MORRIS: Is it? You're as bald as a fucking rock!

PETE: Well... yeah... the ponytail was a wig, obviously.

MORRIS: Oh, was it now? And do you still *own* this wig?

PETE: Um, no... I lost it.

MORRIS: Well, what a surprise.

PETE: It's true!

MORRIS: No! It's not! Ponytail was short and slim. You're six foot three inches tall at the very least! And roughly the same width!

PETE: Fine. Don't believe me then!

MORRIS: Excellent suggestion.

PETE: Cunt.

(He then upped and stormed out. Left behind, Morris shook his head then sipped from his flagon.)

MORRIS: Maybe coming to a pub full of losers wasn't the best idea.

(Just then, a gentleman his own age sat down before him.)

RAY: If it was intelligent conversation you wanted, no, it wasn't.

MORRIS: Well... yes. Sorry, who are you?

RAY: Ray.

(He sighed.)

RAY: You've been asking people about Ponytail all morning, but you never got round to me.

(He furrowed his brow.)

RAY: It was annoying because I really wouldn't mind talking about what I saw.

(Morris sighed bitterly.)

MORRIS: Let me guess? Ponytail is a half man, half goat hybrid called zaboing.

RAY: No. I'm not on the windup, mate. I'm serious.

(He shook his head.)

RAY: I came out of my house yesterday morning and these two big bastard soldiers came charging right at me. I hate to say it, but I shat myself... not literally. I squealed like a little girl and covered me head. I thought I was done for.

(He forced a weak smile.)

RAY: But nothing happened. They didn't attack. And when I peered out from under my arms I saw them both lying there in a pool of blood. I couldn't believe it. Then I heard screams from up the road.

(He sighed.)

RAY: As ridiculous as this sounds, I saw a blur setting about two other soldiers. A fucking blur! All I could make out was black boots and a ponytail. Then whoever it was shot over the next rooftop and vanished out of sight.

MORRIS: That's... that's really similar to *my* experience.

RAY: Is it?

MORRIS: Very much so.

RAY: Yeah, well, be careful who you tell.

(He furrowed his brow.)

RAY: They either mock you or get angry. Those who don't believe it, think giving the blur all the credit is an insult to the real hero.

MORRIS: Just like the chief *told* them it was.

RAY: Yeah. So people like you and I who went through something terrifying can't even tell our stories.

MORRIS: Well, to be fair, I've been telling mine.

RAY: Then maybe have you classier friends.

MORRIS: No doubt about it.

RAY: I just get insulted, called a liar or threatened. And I mean threatened, the doubters are starting to get kind of hostile.

(He sighed.)

RAY: It's best not to say anything.

(He nodded.)

RAY: But having you here to talk to... this has helped.

(Morris gave him a reassuring nod.)

MORRIS: I'm glad.

(He then grimaced uncomfortably.)

MORRIS: But if what you say about people becoming hostile to those of us who saw Ponytail is true... that's worrying.

That lunchtime, the chief was joined by his advisor, Runcorn, in the town's meeting room. They had urgent matters to discuss. For the first time ever, Birdstone was on high-alert. Unfortunately, merely being on the alert was the best the town could muster. It didn't have the ability or the equipment to be on a war-footing, but the chief was determined the change that.

CHIEF: Right. Item one on the agenda... did you...

RUNCORN: There's an agenda? I thought this was just an informal chat.

CHIEF: Right now there's *no such thing* as an informal chat. We're on high alert! *Every* meeting is an official one until I say otherwise.

RUNCORN: Understood. So this agenda of yours...

(The chief pointed to a sheet of paper with two items written on it.)

CHIEF: I wrote it up just now.

RUNCORN: I see. And did you really need an agenda for just two points?

CHIEF: Yes!

RUNCORN: Right...

CHIEF: Item one. Did you send that message to the capital last night?

RUNCORN: What message?

CHIEF: Runcorn!!!

(Runcorn chuckled.)

RUNCORN: Just kidding. Of course, I did!

CHIEF: This is not the time for kidding, arse-face!

RUNCORN: Arse-face?

CHIEF: Sorry. That was most unseemly of me. But still; no kidding around. This is serious. You definitely sent my message, did you?

RUNCORN: I did, yes. I wrote everything down in great detail, then took it to the messenger-bird chap in person. I even stayed and watched it fly away, just to be sure it was on its way.

CHIEF: Excellent. Nice work, Runcorn.

RUNCORN: Thank you, Chief.

(He beamed arrogantly.)

RUNCORN: Seeing as it was urgent, I did the entire job *myself*, just to make sure it was done swiftly and correctly.

CHIEF: Right. I see.

(He glowered at him suspiciously.)

CHIEF: You know, it sounds to me like you want kudos for merely doing your own job. As if you'd *normally* have delegated it.

RUNCORN: Well... you did *say* I could hire an assistant.

(The chief glowered at him.)

CHIEF: No, I didn't. I expressly told you that you *couldn't*.

RUNCORN: Then I must have misheard.

CHIEF: Convenient. I trust you'll be firing him in the morning.

RUNCORN: On his birthday? What sort father would I be if I did that???

CHIEF: You hired your son?

RUNCORN: Well... yes.

CHIEF: Sack him at the end of the week. You know damned well that this town doesn't generate enough money for my assistant to have an assistant. And you don't have a big enough workload to *need* one!

(Runcorn sighed.)

RUNCORN: I suppose that's fair. Sorry, Chief.

CHIEF: Call me Chester.

RUNCORN: Right, yes. Thank you.

CHIEF: You're welcome. Now back to the agenda.

RUNCORN: Ah. Item two.

CHIEF: No. Item one still.

RUNCORN: Oh?

CHIEF: In that letter to the capital, I requested enough support to turn this place into a fortress. If we only get a third of it, we'll *still* be okay. A wall will be built across the front and sides of the town and the rear is defended by nature herself; the mountain. To invade from the rear, they'd have to abseil down it and we could pick them off as soon as they land. So we'll be covered. But there's more to our defence than building a wall.

RUNCORN: Indeed. We need to train up some troops.

CHIEF: Troops?

RUNCORN: Battlers, sir. We don't have any. So, if invaders *were* to abseil down the mountainside, *who'd* pick them off?

(He sighed.)

RUNCORN: All we have for our defence right now is six lazy police officers and Desmond, none of whom are trained soldiers. Or even skilled fighters.

CHIEF: That's not *all* we have! Clearly *someone* in this town is *extremely* well-trained. I'd even go as far as saying they're bewilderingly excellent.

RUNCORN: Who?

CHIEF: Whoever polished off all those Nawsland invaders yesterday. They killed a hundred of them with only twenty eight casualties.

(Runcorn grimaced uncomfortably.)

RUNCORN: Right. And what makes you so sure it was someone from the town?

CHIEF: Excuse me?

RUNCORN: I'm just saying, what if it wasn't? What if it was an outsider? I mean, it's not an idea *entirely* without merit. I mean, the police didn't fend them off; they were all in bed when it happened. And Desmond didn't kill anybody. So who did? Apart from Desmond, the police and Rex, does anyone else even own a sword?

CHIEF: Well they must do, mustn't they? They wouldn't have been able to defeat the invaders otherwise!

RUNCORN: And maybe they didn't! Maybe it *was* an outsider.

CHIEF: Runcorn...

RUNCORN: How can you be so sure it wasn't this Ponytail person we've been hearing about, Chester?

(The chief furrowed his brow furiously.)

CHIEF: Call me chief!

RUNCORN: I see. I've angered you.

(He sighed.)

RUNCORN: But let's look at it logically, shall we?

CHIEF: Fair enough. Let's hear it then. Let's hear your *logical* story about a mysterious superhero who just swept into town on the breeze then promptly vanished again. Come on. I'm really looking forward to it. Are there elves and pixies in it too?

(Runcorn hung his head.)

RUNCORN: You're just not interested, are you?

CHIEF: Bloody right, I'm not! The idea that we were saved by a phantom blur who just happened to be passing is as far-fetched as it gets.

(Runcorn furrowed his brow.)

RUNCORN: And the idea of our unarmed citizens fighting and killing a hundred heavily-armed soldiers *isn't* fat-fetched???

CHIEF: No. It's not.

(He ruffled his neck.)

CHIEF: And if you even *suggest* Ponytail is real ever again, your son can have his job back and *you* can be fired!

RUNCORN: Understood.

CHIEF: Thank you.

(He ruffled his neck.)

CHIEF: You're a moron sometimes, Runcorn. But I did like your idea about training up some more men to defend the town. Doing that just makes sense. We should also get the blacksmith to make some swords.

RUNCORN: Sounds good.

CHIEF: Indeed. Now can you think of anything else we might need defence wise? If not, we can move onto item two.

(Runcorn mused to himself.)

RUNCORN: Shields. And watchtowers, of course.

CHIEF: Already requested as part of the wall.

RUNCORN: No then.

CHIEF: Okay. Item two it is then.
(He nodded.)
CHIEF: We're having dinner tomorrow night at Louise's restaurant.
RUNCORN: I can't, sir; it's my son's birthday and...
CHIEF: It's a dinner *for* his birthday. Prime steak on me for you and all the family.
RUNCORN: Really, sir?
CHIEF: Absolutely.
RUNCORN: Wow. Thanks, Chief.
CHIEF: Please, call me Chester.
RUNCORN: Right...
(He chuckled.)
RUNCORN: You're a fickle bugger sometimes, Chester.
CHIEF: Indeed. But not *that* fickle. He's still fired at the end of the week.
RUNCORN: Shit.
CHIEF: Anyway, now we've finished here, let's get to work. I'm going to visit the injured this afternoon. What about you?
RUNCORN: Me? I'm pretty much done for the day.
CHIEF: I see. Done for the day. At noon.
RUNCORN: Well...
CHIEF: And you had the cheek to hire an assistant.
RUNCORN: Yes, and he's *why* I'll be done for the day.
CHIEF: Runcorn...
(Runcorn gulped.)
RUNCORN: Chief?
CHIEF: You're a prick.
RUNCORN: Right.
(He then threw him the world's cheesiest grin.)

That evening, the second meeting of the committee, codenamed Operation Ponytail, commenced in Frank's living room. Frank, Eleanor, Cassie and Morris were all in attendance. Portman was not. Frank's sons, Roy and Graham were also in the room. They were, however, resting on the sofas, out of earshot of the table where the committee had gathered. Eager to start proceedings, Frank didn't even offer anyone tea or coffee. Instead, as soon as he sat down, he called the meeting to order.

FRANK: So. What have we learned?
(Cassie scratched behind her ear.)
CASSIE: Not much.
(She blushed.)
CASSIE: I got distracted.
FRANK: You didn't investigate?
CASSIE: I started to. Then...
(She sunk in her seat.)
CASSIE: I'll do better tomorrow.
FRANK: Right...
(He shook his head.)
FRANK: What about you two?
MORRIS: Two sugars, please.
FRANK: What?
MORRIS: When you invite people over, Frank, it's customary to offer them tea or coffee.

FRANK: Sure. If you have a wife.

CASSIE: Wow!

ELEANOR: No, you did not!

FRANK: What?

CASSIE: Unbelievable!

FRANK: *I'm* unbelievable? *You* didn't do any investigating!

CASSIE: And *you're* rude. That makes us even.

FRANK: Fine.

(He rolled his eyes.)

FRANK: Who wants tea or coffee then?

CASSIE: No, thanks.

ELEANOR: Not for me, thank you.

MORRIS: I don't want any either, I just resent you not even bothering to ask us.

(Frank blinked at him nonchalantly.)

FRANK: Right... well... now I have.

MORRIS: And it was appreciated.

FRANK: Groovy. Now what did you find out?

CASSIE: Wait! Where's the dipshit?

FRANK: Portman?

MORRIS: That'd *better* be who she was referring to.

ELEANOR: Of course it was, the rest of us are here.

MORRIS: Right. Of course. Please forgive my paranoia.

FRANK: It's done.

(He sighed.)

FRANK: Portman won't be coming. He's in jail.

MORRIS: Jail? What for?

FRANK: Perverted behaviour.

CASSIE: That doesn't sound like Portman. He's an idiot not a pervert.

FRANK: What can I tell you, Cassie? When I knocked on his door to tell him about this meeting, his mum said he hadn't been home all day. So I asked Desmond if he'd seen him. He told me he was in jail.

ELEANOR: What did he do that was perverted?

FRANK: He was molesting women's feet.

(He grimaced.)

FRANK: They gave him quite a pummelling for it.

ELEANOR: The police?

FRANK: The women.

MORRIS: Wait. Did you say molesting women's feet?

FRANK: Yeah!

MORRIS: We sent him out to *look* at feet. Maybe it was because...

FRANK: It was. I went to see him in his cell, and that's *exactly* why. So he won't be coming back. He's quit. He says committee work is too dangerous.

ELEANOR: Wow. He really is this town's truest idiot.

CASSIE: Yup. He certainly doesn't take the role lightly, does he?

MORRIS: Um... by the way, Frank. When you came to *my* house to invite *me*, did you *have* to tell my wife we were just meeting for a beer, and definitely *not* for a top secret committee meeting?

FRANK: What? Why?

MORRIS: Because now my wife's convinced I'm in in a top secret committee.

FRANK: But I said you weren't!

MORRIS: I know. And she never suggested I was. So why even mention it?

FRANK: To throw people off the scent obviously.

MORRIS: Are you serious? If you didn't keep mentioning it, there wouldn't *be* a scent!

ELEANOR: He's right.

CASSIE: Yup. Just never mention it to anyone. Except us.

FRANK: Fine.

(He ruffled his neck.)

FRANK: I didn't invite you all round so you could have a go at me, but if you've nothing better to do then please, go ahead.

MORRIS: Very well...

ELEANOR: No, no. Let's get on and discuss what we heard.

FRANK: Now there's an idea. Who wants to start?

ELEANOR: I wouldn't mind.

(She smiled then sat back.)

ELEANOR: There might have been an eyewitness. Not an eyewitness like us, but someone might have seen Ponytail close up. And stationary.

MORRIS: Really?

CASSIE: When you say *might have*, what do you mean?

ELEANOR: It was an old lady, so her testimony might not be that reliable.

FRANK: Bugger.

ELEANOR: But then again, it might. It's impossible to be certain. But what she said was extremely interesting.

MORRIS: Go on.

ELEANOR: She said Ponytail is a woman.

(Frank and Morris glanced at one another.)

FRANK: What do you think?

MORRIS: Sounds like this old woman needs to be put out to pasture.

FRANK: Yeah...

ELEANOR: Hey, don't dismiss it so easily. She described the woman in question as wearing thigh high boots with high heels and wearing a really skimpy outfit. And we've heard that before.

MORRIS: From another old fool. Or maybe even the same one! Was this old woman Charles in drag?

ELEANOR: No! It was Angela's mum.

(She rolled her eyes.)

ELEANOR: She said Ponytail was crouching on her roof then leapt off and attacked some invaders. Blood went everywhere, and we all know *that* fits. We've all seen *that* part. So it's not an outrageous account by any means.

FRANK: No... no, it's not.

(He bit his lip.)

FRANK: Maybe we should keep an open mind on Ponytail's gender then.

CASSIE: Makes sense.

MORRIS: I suppose.

FRANK: What about you, Morris? What did you find out?

MORRIS: That people who *didn't* see Ponytail think it's bullshit. And some of them aren't afraid to backup their disdain for the idea with threats of violence. It's getting so that people like us, people who witnessed it, had better keep their mouths shut.

(Frank sucked his teeth.)

FRANK: Yeah. I experienced similar. I got mocked a lot too.

MORRIS: Buried under an avalanche of sarcasm?

FRANK: Pretty much.

MORRIS: Same.

(They both sighed.)

FRANK: Troubling.

ELEANOR: It is, yes. I don't fancy getting threatened.

CASSIE: Nor do I.

(She forced a weak smile.)

CASSIE: We're going to have to be careful who we talk to in future, aren't we?

FRANK: Yup.

MORRIS: Or we can just be even more careful how we word things. Rather than asking if people *saw* Ponytail, we should ask people what they think of the rumour. If they get *angry* about the rumour, we'll know not to pry any further.

ELEANOR: Yeah... that should work actually.

FRANK: Good idea, Morris.

MORRIS: It's the only kind I have.

FRANK: Modest.

MORRIS: To a fault.

(He nodded then climbed to his feet.)

MORRIS: Anyway, I'm going home.

FRANK: What? But you've only just got here.

MORRIS: Yes, and the only reason I came here was to tell you what I found out. And I've done that, so there's no point in me staying, is there?

ELEANOR: Actually, I'm gonna go too. My husband will want his dinner soon.

CASSIE: I'm gonna go too. My shift at the tavern starts in half an hour.

FRANK: Oh. Okay. So we're done, are we? There's nothing anyone would like to add?

MORRIS: Just that, in future, make your guests a drink.

CASSIE: What he said,

ELEANOR: Yeah, pretty much just that.

FRANK: Fine. Right... I'll see you all out then.

(He then headed into the hallway with his three guests. A minute or so later, once he'd said his farewells, he returned to the living room and sat down on an armchair. Deflated, he released a long sigh. Curious as to his father's melancholy, Roy glanced his way.)

ROY: You alright there, dad?

(Frank sighed.)

FRANK: Yeah. I'm just a little frustrated, that's all.

ROY: Why?

FRANK: It's nothing major, son.

ROY: Dad, if it's bothering you then...

FRANK: People are denying Ponytail's existence. And getting uppity if you tell them otherwise. It's not right! That bloke's a hero, but he's not getting the credit he deserves. And I can't even set them straight for fear of getting mocked like a brand new contender for the village idiot role. Or worse; thumped.

(He shook his head.)

FRANK: Why does it have to be like that? We saw what we saw and we *should* be able to tell people about it.

(His son offered him a rueful smile.)

ROY: I know exactly what you mean, dad. I got the piss ripped out of me at in the pub earlier. As soon as I mentioned that I'd seen the blurry Ponytail in action, they all fell about laughing and mocked me remorselessly.

(He grimaced.)

ROY: And the ribbing got even worse when I told them it was a woman.

FRANK: Why would you tell them that? The jury's still out on that one.

ROY: Because, dad, when I play the incident back in my mind, I feel like we were looking at a woman. I don't know *for sure*, obviously, but when I think back on it, that's the feeling I get.

FRANK: And when *I* think back on it, *I* feel like it was a dude.

(Roy gave a stifled laugh.)

ROY: Mad, isn't it? We both have strong feelings about what we might have seen when in reality all we saw was a blur. There was no way of telling *what* she was.

FRANK: *He* was!

ROY: She!

(He chuckled.)

ROY: Let's just stick with The Blur, shall we?

FRANK: Absolutely not, no.

ROY: Dad...

FRANK: Sorry, son, we can disagree on the gender, that's fine, but not the nickname. Forget The Blur. It's Ponytail!

(His other son then glanced up from where he'd been perusing a book.)

GRAHAM: Ponytail?

FRANK: Yeah!

GRAHAM: Are you talking about that ridiculous urban legend going around about a village saviour?

(Frank and Roy glowered at him.)

FRANK: Ridiculous???

ROY: Urban fucking legend???

GRAHAM: Yeah. Why? What's wrong?

FRANK: You saw it with your own two eyes, you cock!

ROY: Actually, he didn't. He missed it because he was panicking and running around in circles.

FRANK: Even so.

(He glowered at Graham.)

FRANK: You were there, Graham! You *saw* that throng of soldiers charging at us. We were right royally fucked! On the brink of death! A matter of seconds later, however, all our assailants were lying dead in a pool of blood! How do you explain that? If a mysterious third party didn't rescue us then who did?

GRAHAM: I don't know, dad! I have no idea.

(He smiled.)

GRAHAM: But I'm not going to invent a superhero in order to try to rationalise it and make myself feel better.

FRANK: You cunt!

ROY: Easy, dad.

FRANK: Right. Sorry. I'm just frustrated, that's all.

(He shook his head.)

FRANK: How can people be so bloody dismissive? Ponytail is real for fuck sake, and we shouldn't be belittled and threatened for knowing that.

ROY: Yeah... but we're gonna be.

(He grimaced.)

ROY: So unless she announces herself and *proves* her existence, I feel we're gonna be in for a rough ride.

FRANK: Yeah...

(He then glanced away nonchalantly.)

FRANK: He!

ROY: Dad?

FRANK: Hmm?

ROY: Behave.

At just before midnight, when Portman returned from jail, his mother greeted him with a cup of tea and several clouts around the head. He'd been given a court date and would be tried for the crime of public indecency towards women. It had been the last straw for his father. He'd always despaired of his dim-witted son, but for the first time ever he was truly ashamed of him. He couldn't even bear the thought of looking at him right now. And so, he'd locked himself in his attic to sulk. And there he sat, upon an old armchair, with a glass of whisky in his hand and a sorrowful pout on his face.

ARTHUR: Why did it have to be like this? My own son, the fruit of my very loins, on the brink of being convicted for a perverted crime.

(He sighed.)

ARTHUR: I should have drowned him at birth. But no.

(He forced a rueful smile.)

ARTHUR: We had such high hopes for him back then. A talker after only four months and walking long before he was one. He was so advanced for his age. We could have had no idea that he'd actually peaked. Learning to walk and talk was literally all he'd go on to achieve.

(He shook his head.)

ARTHUR: How did I ever spawn such a buffoon? His tomfoolery is relentless. Every week there's a new silliness to crush my spirit just that little bit further into the ground.

(He furrowed his brow.)

ARTHUR: But this week... this week brought about a new low. First he gets rescued by a brave villager, but was so bewildered by what he saw, he somehow convinced himself he was saved by a mysterious, ponytailed superhero. And started telling all our neighbours that! They were laughing at me all day. Hey, Arthur, has you son seen any mermaids and unicorns this afternoon, they cried. I've been belittled all day because of his silliness.

(He sighed.)

ARTHUR: Little did I know... that was just the beginning of my misery.

(He hung his head.)

ARTHUR: Right in the middle of being mocked by my neighbours, a policeman comes up and tells me my son is in jail for perverted behaviour. Well... the neighbours weren't laughing anymore. They were booing. Hissing. Spitting at me. How can I ever show my face again?

(He took a sip of his whisky then sighed.)

ARTHUR: Why couldn't he just be normal?

(He then glanced across the attic at where his telescope was pointing out of the window. Giving it the once over with his eyes, he then climbed to his feet and headed over to it.)

ARTHUR: I'll do some stargazing, I think. That always cheers me up.

(With that, he placed his whisky down then peered through the lens. Liking what he saw, he afforded himself a smile.)

ARTHUR: Ah, that's nice. The stars are extremely bright this evening. They look incredible, actually. Good old stars. They never let me down. Unlike that twat I fathered.

(His brow then furrowed over.)

ARTHUR: What the hell? There's a dirty fingerprint on the lens. How did that get there?

(He snarled.)

ARTHUR: Fucking Portman again, no doubt.

(With that, he stepped away from the telescope and reached onto the shelf for his lens cloth. Maintaining his embittered expression, he then stepped up to his telescope, lowered it and proceeded to wipe the lens clean.)

ARTHUR: How many time do I have to explain to people that there's no reason whatsoever to touch the lens? Ever!

(Having scrubbed the lens clean, he then placed the cloth back on the shelf before heading back to the other end of the telescope.)

ARTHUR: Right. Try again.

(He then peered into the lens. Having lowered it to clean it, however, it was now pointing at the street below.)

ARTHUR: Well that's no fucking good.

(With that, he proceeded to raise it again. In the brief few seconds that followed, he gazed across the entire town and the forest beyond, before finally managing to point it at the stars again. Rather than being delighted, however, he flinched in bewilderment.)

ARTHUR: What the fuck???

(He then lowered the telescope again so it was facing into the forest.)

ARTHUR: I saw it, I know I did. It was a fleeting glimpse, but I'm absolutely certain...

(He then flinched.)

ARTHUR: A-ha!

(In that moment his entire jaw dropped.)

ARTHUR: Oh my...

(He could barely believe his eyes. Standing in the trees, looking out over the forest, with her back to him, was a woman with a long, black ponytail.)

ARTHUR: Who the hell is...

(He then zoomed in a little and fell deathly silent. He'd inadvertently zoomed in on her backside and he absolutely loved what he was seeing.)

ARTHUR: That's the nicest arse I've ever set eyes on! And she's barely even covered. I can see both her arse cheeks. Oh, my...

(Much to his disappointment, she then turned around.)

ARTHUR: Shit!

(He then zoomed out a little and raised the telescope slightly. At once, his eyes lit up and he started to drool. The sight before him completely demolished every last hint of misery he'd been feeling.)

ARTHUR: She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen!

(He then zoomed in slightly and started to purr.)

ARTHUR: Biggest and best tits I've ever seen too.

(He drooled.)

ARTHUR: I've no idea who you are or why you're there, but thank you for coming.

(A stunned expression then crossed his brow.)

ARTHUR: Wait a fucking minute. I *do* know who you are! You're that Ponytail! You're real??? Well I never! This is just...

(His brow then furrowed.)

ARTHUR: Never mind all that, Arthur, just enjoy the moment.

(He then zoomed in even closer on her breasts. At once, his heart starting racing. As far as he was concerned, her chest was a glorious work of art; a thing of beauty. Thoroughly excited by it, he drooled even harder then thrust his hand down his trousers.)

ARTHUR: Sorry, Barbara; no sex for you tonight. This is gonna be a good, good wank.

(Going to town on himself as he stared through the telescope, he started going red in the face. Such was his joy, he even started cackling like an escaped mental patient.)

ARTHUR: She's fucking fantastic!

(He then yanked his hand out of his trousers and zoomed out a little before resuming his act of self-pleasure.)

ARTHUR: Perfect. I can see it all. Gorgeous face; world class knockers; hips like a bottleneck beneath a tiny waist... the perfect woman!

(Just then, much to his absolute horror, the woman swiftly turned her head in his direction and stared right at him with an angry scowl on her face. With a shriek, he jumped backwards then tumbled onto the floor.)

ARTHUR: What the hell? She saw me???

(He then upped and hurried to the window. Glancing out of it, he could only grimace.)

ARTHUR: No way. She can't have!

(Sure enough, the trees she'd been standing in were well over a mile away.)

ARTHUR: That's not even possible.

(He then hurried back to the telescope and peered through the lens again.)

ARTHUR: It was just a coincidence, surely.

(Much to his disappointment, however, she'd vanished.)

ARTHUR: Fuck.

(He whimpered.)

ARTHUR: Did she move because of me? Is she pissed off at me? If she's really the one who butchered all those enemy soldiers, I've made a mistake pissing *her* off!

(He then shook his head.)

ARTHUR: No, that's insane. There's no way she saw me.

(He placed his hands on his hips and grimaced.)

ARTHUR: So Ponytail is real. Well, well. I guess I owe Portman an apology.

(His brow then furrowed over.)

ARTHUR: But then again, no I don't! There's absolutely no excuse for perverted behaviour!

(He then remembered that he'd been masturbating when Ponytail stared in his direction and grimaced uncomfortably.)

ARTHUR: On second thoughts... he's a chip off the old block, isn't he?

(And with a sigh, he headed for the attic door.)

ARTHUR: What a weird fucking day. Bollocks to it; I'm going to bed!

(He grimaced.)

ARTHUR: I can't believe Ponytail actually exists.

(He scratched his chin.)

ARTHUR: But who is she exactly? And why is she here?

(He then headed out of the door, puffing out in bewilderment.)

For several of the citizens of Birdstone, that night proved to be a difficult one. Every time Arthur closed his eyes, he'd picture Ponytail glaring at him and he'd sit up sweating. Her scowl had put the fear of god into him. Others around the town, couldn't sleep because they were still in mourning. For the families of the twenty eight who were killed this was an extremely difficult time.

The witnesses to Ponytail's antics also struggled to get any shut eye. The fact they were being ridiculed by a large number of their peers was hard to take. Frank spent the entire night tossing and turning, unable to let go off his frustrations. The chief, however, had no such difficulties in getting to sleep. He'd spent the last two days visiting the bereaved, comforting

the anxious and doing all he could to ensure that Birdstone's security would be as robust as possible in the future. Worn out from all his hard work, he dozed off as soon as his head hit the pillow and he slept soundly all night.

When dawn broke at seven o'clock the following morning, the chief started to stir. Bleary-eyed and half awake, he allowed himself a yawn then attempted to squint at his wall clock. A young woman, however, was obscuring his view. Not quite with it, he tried in vain to focus on her then gave her a dopey grin.

CHIEF: Morning, dear.

(He made a kissy face then patted the duvet next to him.)

CHIEF: Come on, get back into bed.

(He then heard the unmistakable chime of blades being drawn from their sheaths. Suddenly very much awake, he sat up and shrieked.)

CHIEF: What the fuck???

(Must to his astonishment, a sparsely dressed beauty with a long, black ponytail was standing next to his bed, chuckling at him as she put her daggers back in a small pack. Astonished, all he could do was gape at her as she finished putting her knives away. She then spoke to him in a cute, feminine voice.)

PONYTAIL: That woke you up.

(The chief rubbed his eyes in bewilderment then stared at her again.)

CHIEF: You have a ponytail! You *are* ponytail!!!

PONYTAIL. Um... sure. I've been called weirder things.

CHIEF: You're here.

PONYTAIL: Yeah. I'm aware of that.

CHIEF: Sorry, I'm just...

(He then furrowed his brow.)

CHIEF: Who the hell are you exactly? And what the hell are you doing in my room???

PONYTAIL: Both excellent questions.

CHIEF: Then give me excellent answers.

PONYTAIL: Very well.

(She then fished in her bag again and pulled out a small, metal identity card. She then handed it to the chief. Giving her a suspicious glance, he eased it from her grasp then read the engraving.)

CHIEF: Department of Military Intelligence. Agent Sixty.

(He gave her a baffled glance.)

CHIEF: That's your name, is it? Agent Sixty?

PONYTAIL: It's my identity.

CHIEF: I see.

(He scratched his head.)

CHIEF: And what do you want with me, Agent Sixty?

PONYTAIL: I...

CHIEF: Wait!

(He raised a suspicious eyebrow.)

CHIEF: Is the rumour about a lightning-fast, ponytailed warrior, true? Was it *you* who killed all those Nawsland soldiers two days ago?

PONYTAIL: Yeah. Sorry about that.

CHIEF: Why would you be sorry?

PONYTAIL: It was a bit messy really. Blood everywhere.

CHIEF: Yes, well, there would have been *even more* blood if they'd succeeded.

(He then attempted to get out of bed and quickly stopped.)

CHIEF: Um... would you mind turning around while I throw my robe on?

PONYTAIL: I wouldn't have it any other way.

(She then about turned. Delighted by that fact, the chief hurried out of bed, threw his robe on then turned to face her.)

CHIEF: So...

(Ponytail turned to face him and smiled.)

PONYTAIL: So?

CHIEF: Wait a god damned minute. How tall are you?

(He glanced her up and down.)

CHIEF: I'm not the tallest man in the world, but you only come up to my chin. And you're wearing really high heels!

PONYTAIL: Yeah...

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: I have *a lot* of positive attributes, but height isn't one of them. I'm just shy of five foot.

CHIEF: I see...

(He rubbed his chin.)

CHIEF: Hmm...

PONYTAIL: Why? Is that a problem? Do you have something against shorter people?

CHIEF: Not at all. It just makes me wonder how you managed to slaughter all those strapping Nawsland soldiers! The shortest one would have been a foot taller than you.

(Ponytail smiled.)

PONYTAIL: I'm fast. And very agile.

CHIEF: Yeah, right; nobody's that fast!

(He then flinched in bewilderment. She'd vanished in a flash.)

CHIEF: Where did you go?

(Ponytail replied from the other side of the bed.)

PONYTAIL: You were saying?

CHIEF: Right...

(He gave a stifled chuckle.)

CHIEF: Well *I'm* convinced.

(He then sat on the side of his bed.)

CHIEF: Now tell me, why are you here?

PONYTAIL: Very well.

(She then leapt over the bed again in one bound and turned to face him.)

CHIEF: Holy crap. Are you even human?

PONYTAIL: Of course.

CHIEF: Right. Sorry. That was a stupid thing to say.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: But let's move on. What do you want with *me*?

PONYTAIL: Well, recently Lenthom Military Intelligence obtained a document.

CHIEF: Obtained?

PONYTAIL: It was liberated from the Nawsland Army.

CHIEF: Right... liberated...

PONYTAIL: It stated that they have five spies operating inside Lenthom. One of them is located right here in Birdstone.

(The chief's hair almost stood on end and he jumped to his feet.)

CHIEF: What??? There's a Nawsland spy operating in my town???

PONYTAIL: I'm afraid so.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: I was despatched to investigate, but when I got here the place was already under attack. I have reason to believe that *you* were the target. I don't know why, but their spy here wants you dead.

CHIEF: What for? I haven't done anything! What possible reason could they have for targeting *me*?

PONYTAIL: I don't know. I just know they want you dead and don't care who they kill in the process of making it happen.

CHIEF: Yes, well, that was evident from the attack. Women and children were fair game.

PONYTAIL: That's Nawsland for you.

CHIEF: Yeah...

(He sucked his teeth.)

CHIEF: That's not good, is it? Seeing as their mission failed, there's a fair chance they'll come back. With more men!

PONYTAIL: It's possible. They won't be returning *immediately* though. I spent most of the last two days making sure there were no more enemy units in the area. And it'll be at least a week before the Nawsland military realise the unit they sent here isn't coming back.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: So don't worry. One thing I'm pretty sure of is, this place will be swarming with my fellow agents before long. Should they come back, the Nawsland troops won't stand a chance.

(The chief was utterly dumbfounded.)

CHIEF: Fuck. I mean, wow. I mean... that was mildly reassuring, but... good god.

(He shook his head.)

CHIEF: Agent Sixty? About this spy.

PONYTAIL: Sir?

CHIEF: If there's anything I can do to help, just say the word. I want the catch that fucker as soon as possible.

PONYTAIL: Good, because that's why I'm here.

CHIEF: Okay? And what do you need from me?

PONYTAIL: I need you to introduce me to the townsfolk. If I'm to find out who the spy is, I'll need the trust of the public.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: Being aligned with *you* gives me that trust.

CHIEF: Right, yes. That makes sense. I'll call a town meeting then.

PONYTAIL: Thank you. Tell the townsfolk I happened to be in Birdstone at the time of the attack because I'd been tracking that Nawsland unit. Whatever you do, *don't* tell them there's a spy in their midst.

CHIEF: Of course not! What do you think I am? An idiot?

PONYTAIL: Not at all. I just wanted to be clear.

(The chief gave her a suspicious glance.)

CHIEF: I believe you.

PONYTAIL: And you should, because it's true. I have the utmost respect for you, Chief.

CHIEF: Well... thank you.

PONYTAIL: You're welcome.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: Once you've established why I was here *during* the attack, you'll need to explain why I'm here *now*. Tell them I've stayed on to assess the town's security with a view to upgrading it. And that I'll be asking for people's opinions on the matter. That'll give me licence to interview people and nail down a suspect.

CHIEF: Right. Yes. That sounds like an excellent idea.

PONYTAIL: Thank you. Just make sure they know that I have your trust in full. Like I said, in turn *they'll* trust me and I'll absolutely *need* the trust the public for this to work!

CHIEF: Understood.

(He smiled.)

CHIEF: But you know, you already *have* the trust of a lot of people. Those who saw you in an action.

PONYTAIL: Yes, but I need the trust of *everyone*.

CHIEF: I see. Right. Well, you certainly haven't got *that*. Half the population think your heroics were entirely made up. They think you're a myth.

PONYTAIL: How come?

CHIEF: Well...

(He scratched his neck nervously.)

CHIEF: Um... because somebody told them so.

PONYTAIL: Who?

CHIEF: Never mind who! We should...

PONYTAIL: It was you, wasn't it?

CHIEF: That's not important right now. What matters now is introducing you to the townsfolk as soon as possible, so we should be focussing on that.

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: Okay.

CHIEF: Now if you wouldn't mind vacating, I need to get dressed.

PONYTAIL: Now that I can do.

(She then headed to the window.)

CHIEF: Where are you going?

PONYTAIL: I'm leaving the room.

CHIEF: Not through the window! There's a perfectly good door over there. Go through it and wait for me in the living room.

PONYTAIL: Right. Yes. Sorry. I came *in* through the window and thought...

CHIEF: Just use the door, Agent Sixty.

PONYTAIL: Good idea.

(She then headed for the door. As she did so, the chief offered her a smile.)

CHIEF: You're going to need somewhere to stay while you're here, aren't you?

PONYTAIL: I...

CHIEF: I'll have my assistant prepare the empty house at number twelve Swan Street for you. A huntsman is using it for storage at the moment, but I'll have his stuff cleared out and you can stay in there for now.

PONYTAIL: Oh. How very kind.

CHIEF: It's the least I can do, Agent. Just find that bloody spy.

PONYTAIL: Oh, I will.

(She then headed through the door.)

PONYTAIL: Count on it.

Over at the mill, a short while later, Frank was in the middle of a heated argument with his old friend and long-time customer, Geoffrey Bloom. Their interaction had *started* as just an ordinary case of a customer visiting his supplier. Within less than a minute however, the two of them had forgotten all about doing business. A difference of opinion on the town's current hot topic had seen them both fly into a fit of rage.

FRANK: I don't have to take that from you, you cunt!

BLOOM: Oh, I'm a cunt now, am I?

FRANK: Yes! You're the cuntiest cunt in all of cuntdom!

BLOOM: Says the deplorable dipshit who shouts at people for fuck all! If anyone here is a cunt its you!

FRANK: I wasn't shouting at you for fuck all, I was defending the truth!

BLOOM: No, you were trying to drag me into your weird fantasy world where the goblins and the faeries live!

(Frank sighed with frustration.)

FRANK: Why are you such a prick?

BLOOM: Why are you such a loony?

FRANK: Cunt! Admit it, you came in here *looking* to piss me off, didn't you? Ordering flour was just a flimsy pretext!

BLOOM: No, it fucking wasn't! I really *need* that flour!

(He sneered.)

BLOOM: What I *don't* need is to be belittled by a madman who lives on the Planet Fruitcake.

FRANK: Fruitcake? I know what I saw, damn it! It'll stick with me until the day I die!

BLOOM: Which can't come soon enough quite frankly!

FRANK: Why, you...

BLOOM: Face it, Frank, if you went any further round the twist, you'd be able to kiss the back of your own head!

FRANK: Oh, fuck off. You don't know any fucking thing!

BLOOM: Yes, I do. For a start I know there's no such thing as superheroes who zoom about rescuing strangers before vanishing into the ether again.

FRANK: Then who saved me and my boys??? Answer me that! Who?

BLOOM: I don't fucking know...

(He sneered at him coldly.)

BLOOM: Nobody, I expect. You're probably making it up like the rest of the lying fucks in this town.

(Frank had never been so incensed in his entire life.)

FRANK: Right! That's done! You and I no longer friends!!! In fact, get out! Go on! Fuck off! And if you *ever* think of coming back...

(He grimaced.)

FRANK: Actually, that'd be great. Your custom is really important to me.

BLOOM: Well tough shit! I *won't* be coming back! In future I'll buy my flour elsewhere!

FRANK: Yeah? Like where? I'm the only supplier in town!

BLOOM: I'll *find* somewhere! In the meantime...

(He snarled.)

BLOOM: I'll come back tomorrow to collect those two bags I ordered just now.

FRANK: Yeah? Well, I'll weigh them and bag them personally!

BLOOM: Good!

FRANK: Good!

BLOOM: Wanker!

FRANK: Cunt!

BLOOM: Fucking loony!

FRANK: Oh, piss off.

(Just then, the town bell started to ring. At once, the two of them froze and listened carefully. There were three consecutive chimes followed by a pause then three more.)

FRANK: Three and three...

BLOOM: The chief's called a town meeting!

FRANK: I know that, you cunt!

(Bloom scoffed.)

BLOOM: Yeah, right, you barely know what planet you're on. Fucking mental case!

FRANK: Oh, don't even bother! Take your insults elsewhere, shit bag; I'm going to that meeting!

BLOOM: So am I, obviously; attendance is mandatory! And I bet it get there a lot quicker than *you*!

FRANK: Yeah?

BLOOM: Yeah!

FRANK: Well, that's just...

(He then sprinted out of the door. Horrified by his actions, Bloom screeched then raced after him.)

BLOOM: You're a cheating bastard, Frank! I never did like you!!!

(Having witnessed the whole thing, Frank's sons, Roy and Graham, shared a sideways glance.)

ROY: Well that was different.

GRAHAM: Yeah...

(He shrugged.)

GRAHAM: To the meeting?

ROY: Let's go.

(They then headed for the exit in a civilised manner.)

Within ten minutes of the bells ringing to signify the town meeting, everyone in town had crammed into the civic hall. Frank and Geoffrey Bloom were both at the front, having sprinted all the way there. They were, however, a good twenty feet apart. Having had quite the falling out, they couldn't bear the thought of being any closer to each other. The last ones to arrive, including Eleanor, had to squeeze themselves in. The hall had been built some three hundred years ago when the town only had a population of six hundred people. At the time, it had accommodated everyone easily. Nowadays, however, it was way too small and those at the back would struggle to see anything because of the heads in the way.

Anxious to know what the chief had to say, everyone stared up at the curtain across the front of the stage, speculating among themselves. Some suspected he'd be announcing the funerals of the twenty-eight who'd died in the attack. Others feared he was going to warn of *future* attacks. None of them were expecting *good* news. This made for the quite the uncomfortable atmosphere. Mercifully, it wasn't long before the chief's voice rose up from behind the curtain to signify the beginning of the meeting; thus putting an end to the speculation.

CHIEF: Seriously? Who closed the fucking curtains???

(A stage hand's anxious reply then echoed through the aging rafters.)

STAGEHAND: I did, sir!

CHIEF: Why??? I can't address the people with *them* in the way, you idiot!

STAGEHAND: They were closed in readiness for tonight's play by the amateur dramatics society, sir.

CHIEF: They're doing another one? Why? They're terrible!

(All the members of the society, currently gathered in the hall, shrugged acceptingly. They were indeed absolutely awful.)

CHIEF: Look, just open the bloody things, will you?

(Somewhat amused by what they were hearing, several attendees started to chuckle. A few moments later, when the curtains started to open, however, they all fell deathly silent.

Whatever the chief had to say could well be of the utmost importance, and they didn't want to

miss a single syllable. And so, they watched on intently as the curtains crept aside to reveal the chief, standing at his lectern. A few seconds later, when the curtains opened fully, however, a gasp of shock and awe rose into the air. A petite woman in a skimpy black outfit was standing akimbo behind him with her arms folded. Frank and his fellow committee members couldn't believe their eyes. She matched Charles the pervert's description of the ponytailed blur to a tee. Large breasts; full make up; thigh boots with high heels; and a long, black ponytail with blue streaks. At once, a series of whispers started snaking around the hall.)

ELLA: Cassie, Cassie... blue streaks in her hair!

CASSIE: I know. It's... it's Ponytail.

(The gentleman behind them scoffed.)

ROGER: Nonsense. Ponytail is a dude! That's just some random woman with her hair up.

(All over the hall, similar conversations started to take place. Many were *convinced* that the mystery woman was most definitely the town's saviours. Many more, however, believed she was just a visitor from out of town who happened to have a ponytail. Speculation was rife and the mumbles and whispers were growing louder and louder. Mercifully, before anyone could cause an argument, however, the chief spoke up and drew their full attention.)

CHIEF: Morning, everyone. Welcome to the civic hall.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: I've called this meeting to report on the latest security update; and that includes introducing you to our new ally.

(He gestured to Ponytail.)

CHIEF: Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to meet Agent Sixty from the Department of Military Intelligence; someone we owe a debt of gratitude to. She was the one who fought off the Nawsland invaders two days ago. So, please...

(His words were then interrupted by a jubilant Frank.)

FRANK: Ha! See???

(Beaming with pure joy, he then turned to face Geoffrey and proceeded to dance; making obscene gestures with both hands as he did so.)

FRANK: Wanker!!! I fucking told you, didn't I??? Loser!!! In your face, tosser!!!

(Little did he know, however, Charles was standing twenty feet behind him doing the same thing to him.)

CHARLES: Suck it, you flour-milling Nancy boy! I told you she was a woman, didn't I???

(Greatly incensed by the interruption, not to mention appalled at their childish behaviour, the chief raised his voice angrily.)

CHIEF: Do you mind???

(At once, both Frank and Charles flinched then quickly stared at their feet. Silence was restored.)

CHIEF: Disgraceful behaviour! Never do that again!

(He ruffled his neck.)

CHIEF: Now. As I was saying, please give a warm Birdstone welcome to our new friend and ally, Agent Sixty!

(Several voices then rose up from the assembly.)

CASSIE: Hi, Ponytail!!!

ELLA: We love you, Ponytail!

FRANK: Welcome to Birdstone, Ponytail!

CHARLES: Nice tits, Ponytail!

ROY: Welcome, Ponytail!

GILES: You're the best, Ponytail!

CHARLTON: Ponytail!!!

(The chief laughed then leant towards Ponytail.)

CHIEF: I have a feeling that's going to be your name from now on.

PONYTAIL: Hmm... named after my hairstyle?

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: Good thing I don't have a bob really.

CHIEF: I'll ask them to call you something else.

PONYTAIL: No, it's fine. I actually kinda like it.

CHIEF: Oh.

(He shrugged.)

CHIEF: Fair enough.

(He then turned to face the audience again.)

CHIEF: Okay, calm down everyone.

(A dissenting voice then rose up from the front row.)

ERIC: Wait!

CHIEF: Oh, for fuck's sake, not you again.

ERIC: Are you *sure* she saved the town? I mean, look at her! She's tiny! And she's a woman! How do you know she hasn't just *dressed up* like the person people have been describing, so she can *pretend* to be the hero?

(A loud cheer suddenly went up from all those who'd mocked people for believing in the ponytailed hero. Being wrong was a humiliation they couldn't even bear to think about. If Ponytail *wasn't* a hoax they'd be eating humble pie forever)

ERIC: Well, chief? Well???

CHIEF: You know, Eric, you're a...

ERIC: No, no! Come on! If she's the hero, prove it!

(The chief snarled.)

CHIEF: Fine!

(He then pointed at Eric.)

CHIEF: Agent Sixty? Kill him!

(He flinched.)

CHIEF: Actually, you'd better not.

PONYTAIL: I'll prove it another way.

(She then vanished out of sight in the blinking of an eye, forcing a gasp from all in attendance.)

CHIEF: You were saying, Eric?

(Ponytail then zoomed back onto the stage and reappeared, leaning on the chief's lectern.)

PONYTAIL: Ta-da.

(At once, a loud cheer rose from the entire assembly. Even Ponytail's former doubters were now convinced. This wasn't about to stop Eric from baiting the chief, however.)

CHIEF: Well, Eric?

(Eric scoffed.)

ERIC: Nothing but a cheap magic trick.

BLOOM: Oh, shut up, Eric.

ERIC: Excuse me?

BLOOM: She just whizzed off the stage and back again before our eyes could even focus. She *was* a blur. Just as people described. We should never have doubted them, okay? So just stop it. We were wrong.

ERIC: *You* were wrong. I *always* believed. I just like giving Chester here a hard time.

CHIEF: Enough!

(He rolled his eyes.)

CHIEF: Now we've established that Agent Sixty here is the real deal...

CLIVE: Who's Agent Sixty?

(The chief sighed.)

CHIEF: Fine... now we've established that *Ponytail* is the real deal, let's get on with the meeting.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: Okay, then. Here's the deal, people. We got lucky the other day. *Ponytail* was only here because she spotted the unit that attacked us while she was out and about in the forest, scouting for enemy units to attack. I dread to think what would have happened if she *hadn't* been.

(He shook his head.)

CHIEF: But that's another matter. Now she's here, she's going to assess this town's security arrangements with a view to upgrading them to the fullest. And she's going to need your input. So if she asks you anything, give her your full cooperation.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: And don't be shy. She won't bite.

(Everyone chuckled.)

CHIEF: Unless you're a Nawsland soldier, of course. Those she *does* bite!

(Just then, the still traumatised Desmond whimpered from the centre of the room.)

DESMOND: Biting I can handle; did she really need to lop that blokes wang off though?

CHIEF: Desmond?

DESMOND: She did a terrible thing!

CHIEF: Hey! *Ponytail* here is our saviour, so show some bloody respect. She's a hero and I for one, have every faith in her! How dare you make disparaging remarks???

(He shook his fist.)

CHIEF: *Piss off!* Go on! Get out! Go and join those six idiots you call a police force on lookout duty!

(Desmond whimpered then headed for the door. Much to the chief's infuriation, so did the six members of the police force who should have been on lookout duty.)

CHIEF: What the hell??? Why are *they* here??? Desmond, you're fucking useless!!!

(Desmond just whimpered then sprinted out of the door. Having watched him go, the chief sighed then leant towards *Ponytail*.)

CHIEF: My *first* task in bolstering this town's defence is going to be sacking that idiot.

PONYTAIL: I think that might be wise, yes.

CHIEF: Indeed.

(He then cleared his throat and spoke to the assembly again.)

CHIEF: So, yes, *Ponytail*'s going to be about the town for a while, everyone. Make her welcome and give her all the help you can.

(He then glanced at *Ponytail*.)

CHIEF: Would you like to say a few words?

PONYTAIL: Um... sure.

(She then stepped forwards, threw out a girly wave and spoke up in the cutest voice imaginable.)

PONYTAIL: Hiya!

(A heartfelt "aw" echoed around the room.)

CASSIE: She's cute.

ELLA: Adorable.

CHARLES: *I'd* fuck it.

ELLA: Charles!!!

CASSIE: He's a disgrace.

(She shook her head then flinched. She'd just caught sight of something in the corner of her eye that had demanded her full attention. Portman's father, Arthur, was crouching behind the woman in front of him, desperately trying to avoid eye-contact with Ponytail.)

CASSIE: What's he doing?

ELLA: Um... hiding I think.

(Sure enough, Arthur was shrinking faster by the second, whimpering to himself as he did so.)

ARTHUR: Please don't make eye contact with me, please don't make eye contact with me.

(He then peered over the shoulder of the women in front, just as Ponytail glanced in his direction. At once, he shrieked and dived to the floor.)

CHIEF: Is everything okay over there?

(Arthur replied from down on the ground in a faked, deep voice.)

ARTHUR: Everything's fine. Carry on.

(He then whimpered at his wife.)

ARTHUR: I'm going to be staying at home for a few days, dear. Just until Ponytail leaves town.

BARBARA: You're a very odd man, Arthur. A very odd man.

CHIEF: Anyway, people. That draws the meeting to a close. I hope we can all show Ponytail what a kind and welcoming town this is.

(He then glanced at Charles.)

CHIEF: Is there any *point* in asking you to behave around her?

CHARLES: Nope!

CHIEF: I see.

(He grimaced.)

CHIEF: She's a trained killer, you know?

CHARLES: And that's a risk I'm willing to take.

CHIEF: Yes... I figured it might be.

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: Okay... dismiss, everyone!

(He then looked to Ponytail.)

CHIEF: Good luck. And remember... *every* town has its weirdoes. We just happen to have more than most.

(He then wandered off the stage, sighing repeatedly.)

Some five minutes later, Ponytail headed out of the hall's executive exit to be greeted by a throng of fifty villagers who stuck around to get a glimpse of their town's new heroine. Most of them watched on from a distance; too nervous to approach such an esteemed legend. Others *wanted* to approach her but didn't quite know how to go about it. They didn't want to inconvenience her or make fools of themselves. The committee codenamed Operation Ponytail, however, had no such reservations. She'd barely made it ten feet out of the door before they rushed up to her and blocked her path; gushing like teenage girls meeting their favourite boy band.

FRANK: Ponytail! We finally get to meet face to face!

MORRIS: You're the best!

ELEANOR: And you're so beautiful.

CASSIE: Yup. You're absolutely stunning.

(Having had to stop in her tracks, Ponytail smiled awkwardly.)

PONYTAIL: Okay...

CASSIE: We love you.

MORRIS: Absolutely we do!

ELEANOR: More than words.

FRANK: More than *anything*!

(He exhaled.)

FRANK: I'm so glad you decided to announce yourself. We were having a really tough time.

ELEANOR: Yeah. People keep saying you weren't real.

CASSIE: They accused us of making you up.

MORRIS: They came straight out and called us liars.

(Frank bobbed his head arrogantly.)

FRANK: *We* never doubted you though. Not even once.

CASSIE: Yeah, we knew the truth, because you saved each and every one of us.

(She furrowed her brow.)

CASSIE: Stupid chief; making us look like liars.

(Ponytail smiled warmly.)

PONYTAIL: Right... well... I don't know what to say about that. So...

(She nodded then tried to walk on.)

PONYTAIL: Bye.

(Eleanor, however, step closer and clutched her hearts to her heart, completely blocking off the gap she'd been aiming for.)

PONYTAIL: Right...

ELEANOR: You don't have to *say* anything, Ponytail. I just want you to know how thankful I am. You saved me and my two little girls from a brutal and painful death. We'd had it. It was over. Our lives were finished. Then *you* appeared out of nowhere... and in a flash our nightmare was over. Now my babies will get to grow up and hopefully live long and exciting lives.

(Tears welled in her eyes.)

ELEANOR: I can't thank you enough for that.

(Caught up in the moment, Cassie, Frank and Morris also started to sob.)

FRANK: You did the same for me and my sons.

MORRIS: And my boy and I.

CASSIE: You saved *me* too.

(Eleanor and Cassie then threw their arms around her and hugged her for all they were worth; crying their eyes out as they did so.)

ELEANOR: That's why we love you!

CASSIE: So very much!

(Rigidly standing there with a baffled look on her face while Cassie and Eleanor squeezed her with as much force as they could muster, Ponytail grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: Right... so... personal boundaries aren't a thing in this town... good to know.

(She then shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Fuck it. I've been known to enjoy a good hug or two *myself*, from time to time.

(She then hugged them both back.)

PONYTAIL: Aw. This is actually kinda nice. You two give good hugs.

ELEANOR: Only to people we love!

CASSIE: Dearly.

PONYTAIL: How sweet.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: But let's not overdo it. You can release me now.

ELEANOR: What? Oh.

(She then stepped back, encouraging Cassie to do the same. Reluctantly, she obliged.)

PONYTAIL: Right. Thank you. Anyway...

(Her eyes then bulged at the sight of Frank and Morris tearfully homing in for a hug.)

PONYTAIL: Nope!

(She jumped backwards and scowled.)

PONYTAIL: Easy, boys! The chief was mistaken when he said I don't bite!

(Frank and Morris froze.)

FRANK: Um...

MORRIS: Right...

FRANK: I see.

MORRIS: Well this is awkward.

PONYTAIL: No offence, guys.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: But the golden rule clearly states that group hugs are for girls only.

CASSIE: Because *men* have wandering hands!

ELEANOR: And they sniff you!

CASSIE: Right? I mean, what's that all about?

(Ponytail placed a limp hand on her chest.)

PONYTAIL: Girls, please. Don't even get me started. It's really creepy when they do that.

ELEANOR: So, so creepy.

PONYTAIL: Right? I mean the groping is maddening, but at least you can understand it.

The sniffing, however...

CASSIE: Gross! I mean, why?

(Frank ruffled his neck indignantly.)

FRANK: Because... sometimes women smell nice.

MORRIS: Exactly. It's a compliment.

(He folded his arms bitterly.)

MORRIS: And besides, I can assure you I had no intention of groping *or* sniffing you, Miss Ponytail. I merely wanted to express my gratitude. And quite frankly, I found your rejection rather rude.

(Ponytail's bottom lip quivered and fake tears welled in her eyes.)

PONYTAIL: Are you saying you don't love me anymore?

(Overwhelmed with guilt, Morris whimpered.)

MORRIS: What? No! Oh, good no! Of course not. I adore you!

PONYTAIL: Sweet. Bye!

(She then headed through them and walked on towards the centre of the town. At last, she was free of her little fan club. Or so she thought. Within ten seconds, they were back around her, almost as if they were giving her an escort.)

PONYTAIL: Oh... you're back.

(She sighed.)

PONYTAIL: Great.

ELEANOR: I figured you could use the company.

CASSIE: *I* figured that too.

FRANK: We figured it out together, actually. At the same time. Without even discussing it.

MORRIS: Or indeed mentioning it.

CASSIE: It's like we just knew.

ELEANOR: Yeah! But then, it wasn't *hard* to figure out. A lone-wolf like you must get extremely lonely sometimes.

(Ponytail gave her a sideways glance.)

PONYTAIL: Lonely? I've never been lonely in my entire life!

ELEANOR: Oh.

(She beamed.)

ELEANOR: And you won't be lonely *now* either, because *we're* here.

CASSIE: And we're entirely at your service. Right?

ELEANOR: Damned right.

MORRIS: One hundred percent at your service.

(He nodded.)

MORRIS: Whatever you need.

(Eager for them to leave her alone and let her get on with her job, Ponytail smiled politely.)

PONYTAIL: Right. Well... what I *really* need you to do is ...

(Annoyingly, just before she could ask them to leave, Eleanor quickly interceded.)

ELEANOR: Show you around?

PONYTAIL: No, actually. I was *going* to say...

FRANK: Consider it done, Ponytail! We'll be only too delighted to serve as your guides. In fact, we'd be honoured to perform that role for you. And as upstanding citizens who believed in you from day one while others denied your existence, I think we've earned that right.

(Ponytail couldn't help but chuckle. As annoying as these strangers were, she couldn't even begin to doubt that they had good intentions.)

PONYTAIL: That's very kind of you, guys, but I don't *need* guiding right now. I'm going to start my mission by speaking to that Desmond guy. He was sent to the makeshift watchtowers and I know exactly where *they* are.

(Morris sucked his teeth.)

MORRIS: Ah, see... rookie mistake.

(Ponytail glowered at him.)

PONYTAIL: Rookie?

(Morris whimpered and shrunk on the spot.)

MORRIS: Why? Why do I keep antagonising you? I don't *mean* to, I just...

(He sighed.)

MORRIS: Sorry.

(Ponytail giggled.)

PONYTAIL: I'm only teasing. You're fun.

MORRIS: Oh. Well...

(He pouted.)

MORRIS: I'm glad you're amused.

PONYTAIL: So why would going to the watchtowers be a mistake?

CASSIE: Desmond got sent there having been told off by the chief in front of everyone.

PONYTAIL: Okay...

ELEANOR: So knowing Desmond, he'll go home and sulk for an hour first.

MORRIS: What they said. That's what I meant by a rookie mistake. If you knew *Desmond*, you'd know *that*. If he's made to do something he'll do it, but not until *after* he's had a good long sulk at home.

PONYTAIL: Right. So you think he's at home, do you?

CASSIE: I'd bet money on it.

(She shrugged.)

CASSIE: And *I* never bet on *anything*. Gambling is for morons.

PONYTAIL: Okay. I'll head there first then.

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: Um... so... where does he live?

ELEANOR: We'll show you.

PONYTAIL: Or you could just *tell* me and let me handle it on my own. Please?

ELEANOR: What? Leave you out here in a strange town to cope with all that responsibility alone? That'd be cruel.

(Ponytail stared through her in dismay.)

PONYTAIL: I'm a serving government agent, affiliated to the Department of Military Intelligence. My training involved resisting torture; surviving in the forest in the middle of a harsh winter with no weapons or food; beating off large groups of men twice my size in the battle arena; all *kinds* arduous tasks. So I think it's safe to say I can handle questioning unarmed townsfolk on my own without having a mental breakdown, don't you?

ELEANOR: Absolutely. But just to be on the safe side.

PONYTAIL: Wow...

(She then spotted Frank giggling.)

PONYTAIL: What's so funny?

(Frank chuckled childishly.)

FRANK: You said you used to beat off large groups of men.

PONYTAIL: That's right. And?

(She then realised what he was giggling about.)

PONYTAIL: I used to fight them! Fight them off!

(She groaned in despair.)

PONYTAIL: For pity's sake.

(She then started to chuckle.)

PONYTAIL: That's quite funny actually. I love double-entendres.

(She then stood tall.)

PONYTAIL: But that's enough procrastinating. If you're going to insist on showing me where Desmond lives then fine. Lead the way.

(With a stern nod, she then started to head away. Morris, Frank, Eleanor and Cassie all nodded to one another then slowly paced after.)

PONYTAIL: Um... guys?

CASSIE: Yeah?

PONYTAIL: What part of *lead the way* confused you?

FRANK: What do you mean?

PONYTAIL: You're all standing behind me!

MORRIS: Ah. Right. Good point.

ELEANOR: You boys should lead the way.

FRANK: What? Why us?

CASSIE: Because that way, there won't be any eyeballs burning holes in Ponytail's bare arse cheeks.

PONYTAIL: They were staring?

ELEANOR: Yup!

FRANK: Lies!

MORRIS: Rubbish!

(They then hurried past and started to lead the way.)

PONYTAIL: That's better!

MORRIS: The fact we're leading or that we're no longer staring at...

FRANK: Not that we *were*!

ELEANOR: Oh, they were.

CASSIE: I know.

PONYTAIL: I mean it's better because we're finally on our way.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: They can stare at my arse all they like.

ELEANOR: You don't mind?

PONYTAIL: Would I wear this if I did?

CASSIE: That's a good point, actually.

ELEANOR: Yeah. Just be careful though, Ponytail. If you tell people they can stare at your bum all they like... well... there are *certain* people in this town...

PONYTAIL: Oh?

ELEANOR: Don't worry. You'll meet them,
(She grimaced.)

ELEANOR: Then you'll know *exactly* what I mean.

Having finally made it to Desmond's house with her fan club acting as tour guides, Ponytail knocked on his front door then stepped back. As she waited patiently for him to answer, however, she very soon started to feel uncomfortable. Unnerved, she about turned and raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Morris, Cassie, Frank and Eleanor had lined up right behind her and were grinning at her like religious fanatics hoping to sell her a holy text.

PONYTAIL: Right... um... guys? Could you give me a little more room, please?

ELEANOR: What? Oh. Absolutely.

MORRIS: Of course.

CASSIE: Sorry.

(They then took a single step back and continued to grin at her.)

PONYTAIL: Right. That's my lot, is it?

FRANK: You want us to go back further?

PONYTAIL: If you wouldn't mind.

CASSIE: But then we won't be able to hear your conversation.

PONYTAIL: You're not *meant* to hear my...

(Just then, the front door creaked open and Desmond poked an angry head out.)

DESMOND: What?

(Ponytail turned and smiled at him.)

PONYTAIL: Hi! I'm...

(Horried to see her there, Desmond screamed then grabbed his groin.)

DESMOND: No!!!

(He then slammed his front door shut. A tad bewildered, Ponytail stepped closer to the door and raised her voice.)

PONYTAIL: I just need to talk to you, Desmond; it won't take a minute!

(A whimpering voice rose up from inside the house.)

DESMOND: Go away! You're a terrible person!

PONYTAIL: Right...

(She turned and shrugged at Eleanor.)

PONYTAIL: Is he always like this?

ELEANOR: No.

(She sighed.)

ELEANOR: I think he's going through something.

CASSIE: Post traumatic stress disorder, I think.

PONYTAIL: Really? Did he lose someone in the battle?

MORRIS: He didn't lose *someone*, no. Just his marbles.

PONYTAIL: How come?

(She sighed.)

PONYTAIL: Was all the bloodshed too much for him?

CASSIE: Not exactly, no. There's was a *specific* incident he can't get his head around.

PONYTAIL: Oh?

(Cassie offered her a sympathetic smile.)

CASSIE: It was something *you* did.

PONYTAIL: Well, I gathered that. Why *else* would he scream when he saw me?

CASSIE: Good point.

PONYTAIL: So what exactly did I do that upset him?

CASSIE: He was there when... you know...

(She scratched her neck nervously.)

CASSIE: You chopped that fella's personal cucumber off.

PONYTAIL: Personal cucumber?

FRANK: She means his penis. She can't say *it* though because she's twelve, apparently.

CASSIE: I just didn't want to appear crass in front of our esteemed guest.

PONYTAIL: Wait.

(She raised a baffled eyebrow.)

PONYTAIL: *I* didn't cut...

(An enlightened expression then crossed her brow.)

PONYTAIL: Gotcha. I know the incident you're referring to.

CASSIE: It was when you rescued *me*.

PONYTAIL: I'll have to take your word for that. I was moving too fast and working too hard to take any notice of *who* I was saving. But I do remember the incident with the severed penis.

(She pouted.)

PONYTAIL: *I* didn't chop it off!

ELEANOR: Oh? Well... who did then?

(Frank, Morris and Eleanor all gasped at Cassie.)

CASSIE: Hey! *I* didn't do it either!

MORRIS: Why don't I believe you?

FRANK: It *was* you, wasn't it? You chopped it off and let Ponytail take the blame!

CASSIE: Don't be ridiculous! It wasn't me; I swear.

PONYTAIL: Relax, person whose name I don't I know.

CASSIE: Cassie.

PONYTAIL: Noted. Don't fret, I know it wasn't you.

ELEANOR: So you know who it was then, do you?

PONYTAIL: Absolutely. He did it himself.

FRANK: What?

PONYTAIL: I stabbed him in the side with a view to letting him bleed out. I'm trained to know how to find vital organs from any angle, you see? It makes me a more effective killer.

(She chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: He was so startled, he flinched and put his razor sharp blade straight through his own boner! Slice! Ouchies!

(Frank and Morris almost folded in half.)

MORRIS: How can you giggle at that?

FRANK: Right? Just thinking about it, I'm starting to understand Desmond's pain.

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Whatever. It wouldn't have happened if he hadn't had his knob out. Raping bastard deserved all he got.

CASSIE: That's exactly what *I* said!

(She exhaled.)

CASSIE: We're like sisters.

PONYTAIL: Well...

(Deciding to allow Cassie her fantasy, she smiled then turned to face Desmond's door.)

PONYTAIL: So he thinks *I* did it, does he? And now he's terrified of me?

ELEANOR: Yeah, pretty much.

PONYTAIL: I see.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: I'll come back to him then.

FRANK: Fair enough.

(He nodded.)

FRANK: So where would you like us to take you next?

PONYTAIL: Actually, I think I'd better go on alone from here.

MORRIS: Nonsense! Why would want to do that when you've got *us* to show you around?

FRANK: Right? We're entirely at your disposal. *I'm* free all day.

CASSIE: So am I.

PONYTAIL: Guys, that's very kind of you, but I'm going to have to refuse. I've got important work to do, and it's not really something you can help with, so...

MORRIS: Oh, don't worry about *that*. We won't get in your way.

ELEANOR: You won't even know we're here.

CASSIE: Yup. Apart from talking to you incessantly, we won't interfere in the slightest.

PONYTAIL: Seriously, guys, I'm gonna have to say no.

FRANK: And you can say it all you like, Ponytail, but I'm afraid we're going to have to insist.

MORRIS: Yup. You're stuck with us, I'm afraid; whether you like it or not.

CASSIE: Yup.

ELEANOR: We'll be with you every step of the way.

FRANK: So get used to it.

(He nodded.)

FRANK: Now tell me, where to next, Agent Ponytail?

(Ponytail looked at him blankly for a moment then smiled knowingly.)

PONYTAIL: Let's just walk around for a bit, shall we?

MORRIS: Sure! Whatever you need, young lady.

ELEANOR: Uh-huh.

PONYTAIL: Awesome. I'll lead the way.

(She then strode down the street with her four uninvited guests hot on her heels.)

CASSIE: You know where you *should* try next, Ponytail?

PONYTAIL: Enlighten me.

(She then turned the next corner.)

CASSIE: You should try...

(She then strode around the same corner and froze. Ponytail had vanished.)

CASSIE: Um...

FRANK: What the hell?

MORRIS: Where did she go?

ELEANOR: And how???

(They then glanced up at the rooftop above.)

ELEANOR: Do you think...

FRANK: That she ditched us by fleeing across the rooftops at ridiculous speeds?

ELEANOR: Um... yeah.

FRANK: Yes. Yes, I do think that.

(They all sighed.)

ELEANOR: Well that's...

FRANK: Rude?

ELEANOR: Disappointing.

(She furrowed her brow.)

ELEANOR: And stop finishing my sentences!

FRANK: Right. Sorry.

ELEANOR: It's fine.

(She gave a rueful shrug.)

ELEANOR: I guess we outstayed our welcome.

CASSIE: Yeah.

(She smiled.)

CASSIE: It was a pretty impressive trick though. I wish *I* could just turn a corner and vanish.

MORRIS: I think we *all* wish that, Cassie.

CASSIE: That I'd take a corner and vanish?

MORRIS: No, you daft cow. We all wish we were that *skilled*. Not to mention agile.

ELEANOR: Yup. She's one impressive girl.

FRANK: Indeed.

(He pouted.)

FRANK: She doesn't think much of us though, clearly.

CASSIE: Well... yeah. Or not. Maybe. I don't know.

MORRIS: Well, at least you're decisive.

CASSIE: I'm just saying. I doubt it was anything *personal*. She just has a job to do, that's all. And we were in the way.

ELEANOR: Yeah... you're probably right. I mean, it's not like she *invited* us to go with her, we just imposed ourselves on her.

FRANK: Pretty much forced ourselves into her inquiry.

MORRIS: That's not how *I* remember it.

CASSIE: What?

MORRIS: We didn't *force* ourselves on her. We offered to help and she accepted. And true to our word, we led her here to Desmond's house.

(He furrowed his brow.)

MORRIS: And as a thank you, she ditched us. Which was bloody rude.

CASSIE: Well, you *say* that.

MORRIS: I *do* say that, yes..

CASSIE: It's not true though, is it? She just wanted *directions* to Desmond's house, but we *insisted* on escorting her.

ELEANOR: She's right. I even made up some pathetic excuse about feeling bad if we let her wander through the town on her own.

(She sighed.)

ELEANOR: In reality, I just wanted to spend time in her company.

CASSIE: Right?

(She exhaled.)

CASSIE: And we did.

FRANK: And it was awesome.

MORRIS: It was, yes, then she stabbed us in the back. Betrayed us! Drop-kicked us over the town fence like an unwanted pet tortoise.

(He glanced from side to side.)

MORRIS: Not that I did that to my son's tortoise, you understand.

(He then straightened his collar.)

MORRIS: Anyway... bollocks to her. Never meet your heroes they say and now I know why. They'll *always* let you down. Well forget it. I know when I'm not wanted. Forget Ponytail; I'm going home.

(He then wandered away despondently.)

MORRIS: I'm not always wanted there either, but at least I can be unwanted from the comfort of my armchair.

(As he headed away, Cassie, Eleanor and Frank watched him go then shrugged.)

CASSIE: And then there were three.

FRANK: Yup. Our committee is shedding members like Portman sheds brain cells.

CASSIE: Yeah...

(She then flinched.)

CASSIE: Speaking of Portman, I'm gonna do the right thing.

ELEANOR: You're gonna give his parents the name of that euthanasia doctor in the capital that she wanted?

CASSIE: No! Never!

(She nodded.)

CASSIE: I'm going to tell Desmond what really happened.

(She then strode back to Desmond's house and hammered on the door. Frank and Eleanor hurried after her.)

ELEANOR: What are you gonna tell him?

CASSIE: The truth. The *whole* truth. And... *most* of the truth.

FRANK: Right. Then what? Shall we go and look for Ponytail again?

ELEANOR: Of course.

CASSIE: What sort of committee dedicated to finding Ponytail would we be if we didn't?

FRANK: Well said.

(Just then, Desmond's voice rose up from behind the door.)

DESMOND: Go away!

CASSIE: Desmond? It's me; Cassie!

(There was silence for a moment then Desmond spoke up again.)

DESMOND: And is that penis chopping lunatic with you?

CASSIE: No!

DESMOND: Are you sure?

CASSIE: Just open the sodding door!

DESMOND: Not until you promise me she's not with you!

CASSIE: She's not with me! I promise!

(Eleanor rolled her eyes.)

ELEANOR: He's such a child!

DESMOND: Who was that??? That was her, wasn't it??? You lied to me!

CASSIE: That was Eleanor!

DESMOND: Rubbish! That was a *young* woman's voice!

(Eleanor almost burst into tears.)

ELEANOR: Why do people *say* things like that? I'm only twenty eight!

FRANK: Really?

ELEANOR: Yes! And what do you mean by *that*???

FRANK: Um... that... I thought you were younger?

ELEANOR: I'm quickly going off you, Frank.

(Cassie rolled her eyes.)

CASSIE: Just open the door, Desmond. I've come to talk about Portman!

DESMOND: Not until you promise me that Ponytail isn't with you!

CASSIE: I already did!

DESMOND: You did?

CASSIE: Yes!

DESMOND: Oh, yeah.

(The door then crept open slowly and Desmond peered through the gap.)

DESMOND: She'd better not be...

CASSIE: She isn't! Look! It's just us three!

(Slightly comforted, Desmond stood up straight.)

DESMOND: What do you want?

CASSIE: I'm here to exonerate Portman!

DESMOND: The pervert?

CASSIE: He's not a pervert, he's just stupid!

DESMOND: A dozen of the town's female folk will beg to differ on that one.

CASSIE: They misunderstood his intentions, that's all.

(Desmond scoffed.)

DESMOND: Is that so?

CASSIE: It is, yes.

(She sighed.)

CASSIE: My friends and I *asked* him to look at women's feet and he got carried away, that's all.

DESMOND: Why would you ask him to do that?

CASSIE: The same reason you asked him to count stones when he did a day's work experience at the police station.

DESMOND: To get him out of the way?

CASSIE: Exactly.

ELEANOR: He was just meant to *look* at feet, that's all, but as always he took it too literally. And way too far. Like idiots tend to do.

DESMOND: I see.

(He raised a suspicious eyebrow.)

DESMOND: He did *say* he was *asked* to do it. All part of his work for some top secret committee. Are you telling me there *is* a top secret committee?

(Frank held up his palm.)

FRANK: We can't confirm nor deny that.

DESMOND: I see. Well that confirms it!

FRANK: Um, no. I said we *can't* confirm that!

DESMOND: I know. But your refusal to deny it *does* confirm it!

FRANK: Not when we've flatly *refused* to confirm it!

DESMOND: On the contrary...

FRANK: There is no top secret committee, okay?

DESMOND: Yes, there is!

FRANK: No, there isn't! Operation Ponytail is entirely fictional.

DESMOND: So that's what it's called.

FRANK: Fuck!

CASSIE: Look! Does it matter?

(She rolled her eyes.)

CASSIE: Fine. You win, Desmond. We started a committee to try to find out who ponytail was, okay?

FRANK: Why would you tell him that?

CASSIE: Because the committee is irrelevant now anyway! We *know* who she is! We spent part of our morning with her!

ELEANOR: And she's awesome!

CASSIE: Right? But yeah, there was a committee. Portman kind of tagged along and was there when we formed it. So when we dished out jobs, we kind of sent him on a wild goose chase.

DESMOND: To look at women's feet?

CASSIE: Yeah.

ELEANOR: He must have thought he had to look at them close up.

FRANK: Clearly he did!

ELEANOR: Yeah. And that's how he ended up in that mess.

CASSIE: So please... can you just give him a warning and cancel his trial?

DESMOND: Hmm...

(He nodded.)

DESMOND: The best I can do is consult his victims. But I don't think it'll work. They were really angry.

CASSIE: No, the best thing you can do is clear his name.

DESMOND: Yes, but I don't want to. He's an idiot and I don't like him.

CASSIE: That's harsh!

ELEANOR: It's cruel; that's what is it!

DESMOND: Yes, but what are you going to do?

CASSIE: Well...

(She stared him hard in the eye.)

CASSIE: I could tell Ponytail you forced yourself on me! You *know* what she does to rapists!

(Desmond shrieked then held his groin.)

DESMOND: Anything but that!

(He whimpered.)

DESMOND: Fine! I'll exonerate him! Just don't tell Ponytail any such thing.

CASSIE: So do we have a deal?

DESMOND: Fine! Now go away! I need to lay down and cry.

(He then slammed the door in her face.)

CASSIE: There! Sorted!

FRANK: Wow. You went to a really dark place there, Cassie.

CASSIE: Had to be done.

ELEANOR: Did it?

CASSIE: Uh-huh!

(She then glanced up the road.)

CASSIE: That's Portman cleared. Now let's go and find Ponytail again.

ELEANOR: Ooh, good idea.

(The two of them then headed up the road. Left behind, Frank glanced at Desmond's door then shrugged.)

FRANK: They're evil things, women, mate. It's probably *wise* to hide indoors.

(He then headed off after Cassie and Eleanor.)

A short while later, inside the Birdstone Tavern, the ale flowed and boisterous chatter echoed through the rafters. The cornerstone of Birdstone's social scene, it was a permanent hive of activity. All day, every day, it was filled to the brim with townsfolk. Today, however, it was even busier than normal. Word had very quickly got around that a certain black-haired beauty was in there and men had come flocking from all over town. Many did so with their tongues hanging out in excitement. The stench of aftershave from the desperate and ridiculously overambitious was almost overpowering. To most women this would have been an annoyance above and beyond anything they were willing to tolerate. For Ponytail, however, this was perfect. In order to sniff out the spy, she needed people to talk to her and there was no shortage of randy men willing to do just that. The fact that so many anxious wives had come along to keep an eye on them was also a bonus. The more citizens she could quiz, the better. It was, however, difficult to get a word in edgeways at times. Trying to appear suave and confident, several men kept trying to talk to her at the same time. They'd

then get niggled with one another. Able to handle such a sorrowful display of testosterone driven tomfoolery, however, Ponytail simply took it all in her stride. Sitting on a stool at the bar, she'd let several of them speak then answer *all* their questions with one universal reply that covered everything asked of her.

DAN: So, what made you decide to become a government agent?

DEREK: Are you gonna stay in Birdstone for long?

RICKY: Are *all* your outfits that revealing?

STEWART: Have you, like, got a boyfriend?

EDDIE: You must get chatted up *all* the time.

PONYTAIL: Well, you know how it is, boys.

DAN: Yeah, sometimes a job chooses you, I guess.

DEREK: I hear you. You'll stay for as long as it takes.

RICKY: Yup. If you've got it, flaunt it.

STEWART: Yeah. Work gets in the way, doesn't it? I can relate.

EDDIE: Of course you do. It goes without saying, really.

PONYTAIL: Uh-huh.

(Watching on, the town's blacksmith, Harry Blake, allowed himself a smirk then glanced at the ceiling.)

HARRY: Those five fools actually think they have her attention. Priceless.

(He then watched on again as the five fools in question continued their inquisition.)

DAN: So how come you opted for a ponytail?

DEREK: Did you travel from the capital on horseback?

RICKY: How's the job going, by the way?

(Finally, one of them actually *did* have her full and undivided attention. Until now, she'd be batting away their questions with a one size fits all, throw away cliché, but at last, she'd heard the question she'd been waiting for.)

PONYTAIL: I haven't really got started with the job yet, to be honest.

(She then glanced at Dan and Derek.)

PONYTAIL: I put my hair up to keep it out of my eyes, and yes, I came on a horse.

(She then looked to Ricky again.)

PONYTAIL: I'll have a look around and see what needs improving on the security front, but you guys know the town better than I do. What do *you* think should be done?

DAN: Well, for a start, need more people on watchtower duty.

DEREK: And a much a much bigger fence.

RICKY: Having a garrison posted nearby would be nice.

STEWART: If you ask me, we need *you* to move here permanently. And marry *me*.

EDDIE: Some sort of moat and drawbridge might be an idea.

(Ponytail nodded.)

PONYTAIL: All excellent ideas.

STEWART: Really?

PONYTAIL: Apart from the marriage proposal.

STEWART: Shit.

(He grimaced nervously.)

STEWART: We can still date though, right?

(Ponytail sighed.)

PONYTAIL: Well, you know how it is.

STEWART: You're too busy for personal relations. I hear you.

(He sighed.)

STEWART: Work really *does* get in the way.

(Ponytail just smiled at him then turned around on her stool. Very much getting the message, the five lads all sighed then retreated from the bar. Her gesture meant they'd *had* their turn and they'd failed. They never *really* believed they had a chance with her in the first place and her decision to turn away had very much confirmed that. And so they gave up, just as Ponytail knew they would. She'd been in full control of them all along. It hadn't, however, brought her any joy. She had no idea who the spy was, but one thing she knew was that, whoever it was, they wouldn't give her *good* ideas on how to bolster security. All five of them had, and thus she considered them a dead end. Being a member of Military Intelligence, she had no doubt whatsoever that the spy *would* approach her at some point, just to check her out, but she was confident that these five lusty lads were not the culprit.)

PONYTAIL: Oh, well. That's another five eliminated.

(She then smiled at the beautiful blonde barmaid.)

PONYTAIL: Can I have another pear juice, please, babe.

(The barmaid, Candice, smiled back at her.)

CANDICE: Of course you can, love.

(She grabbed a pitcher of pear juice then started pouring it in Ponytail's goblet.)

CANDICE: Thank you, by the way.

PONYTAIL: Oh? What for?

CANDICE: For taking away my burden. Their lusty advances are *usually* aimed at me.

(She sighed.)

CANDICE: Honest to god, it never ends. All day, every day, chat up line after chat up line. It gets so bloody tedious I just want to scream sometimes.

(She then furrowed her brow and placed the pitcher down on the bar.)

CANDICE: And that's when they're still sober! Once they'd have a few too many, it's a nightmare. Get your tits out, Candice. Get your gums round me plums. Fucking morons.

PONYTAIL: Yup, that's men for you.

CANDICE: Tell me about it.

(She smiled.)

CANDICE: Anyway, fair warning, they'll be throwing that smut your way before long.

PONYTAIL: Not if they know what's good for them.

CANDICE: Yes, but they don't. Men never do. Especially when they're drunk. They'll be all over you like a rash, love.

(She exhaled.)

CANDICE: Of course, they will. You're gorgeous.

PONYTAIL: Thank you. Coming from a cutie like you, that means something.

CANDICE: You're so sweet.

(She nodded.)

CANDICE: So yeah, be prepared. Those amazing boobs of yours are going to fair game later on. You may even have to deal with some gropers.

(She smiled.)

CANDICE: In fact, you definitely will. You're not even wearing a bra! Not that you *could* with an open front like that.

PONYTAIL: Well, no.

(Candice chuckled.)

CANDICE: Your boobs are half out already. This lot are *bound* to try to finish the job once they have a few more beers down their necks.

PONYTAIL: Hmm... maybe I should get changed then.

CANDICE: Nah.

(She winked at her.)

CANDICE: You look gorgeous. Why should *you* change? Just slap them about a bit; we both know you're capable.

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: Right?

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Nah; I'd better not. I still need the locals to advise me on the town's security needs. So beating up their friends and family members would be somewhat self-defeating.

CANDICE: True. It's not the best way to endear yourself to people.

(Ponytail nodded.)

PONYTAIL: It'll be fine. It's not like I plan to stay in here for much longer anyway. I've got other people to see. I will get changed later though. Quite clearly, my clothes *are* causing a distraction.

(They both glanced to where a group of men had gathered across the other side of the bar to drool at her.)

CANDICE: Yup. You should definitely change.

PONYTAIL: Right?

(She flinched before reaching out and grabbing Candice's hand.)

PONYTAIL: Hey, what happened?

CANDICE: What?

PONYTAIL: You have a scar on your hand.

(Candice gently stroked Ponytail's hand then eased her other hand away.)

CANDICE: It's nothing. Just another hazard of the job. Some drunken idiot threw an earthenware wine jug and it smashed against the wall. One of the pieces hit me.

(She smiled.)

CANDICE: It was pretty deep and it hurt like hell, but I'm fine now.

PONYTAIL: That's awful.

(She winked at her.)

PONYTAIL: Maybe you should find a safer and less annoying job. Plenty of places would be only too happy to hire a babe like you.

CANDICE: Aw, thanks, sweetie.

(They then shared a prolonged smile which was only broken when Candice caught herself in the moment.)

CANDICE: Um... anyway...

PONYTAIL: Right... yes...

CANDICE: I'd better get on.

(She walked away, blushing. Having watched her go, Ponytail smiled then headed further along the bar. It was moment that hadn't gone unnoticed by the man who'd asked Ponytail to marry him. Standing next to his friend, Wesley, he could barely believe his eyes.)

STEWART: Did you see that?

WESLEY: Did I see what?

STEWART: Ponytail and Candice.

WESLEY: What about them?

STEWART: I think they might be... into each other.

WESLEY: What?

STEWART: Lesbians, mate. They were flirting.

(Standing behind him, the blacksmith chuckled.)

HARRY: You've got a lot to learn, lad.

(Stewart turned to face him.)

STEWART: What's that supposed to mean?

HARRY: Of course they were bloody flirting. *Candice* always does. Her tip jar relies on it. She's flirts with everyone; always has.

STEWART: Yeah, but Ponytail...

HARRY: Works for military intelligence.

(Stewart stared at him blankly.)

STEWART: Right. And?

HARRY: Wow, you really *do* have a lot to learn.

(He rolled his eyes.)

HARRY: Her job is find out what security arrangements we need. That means talking to the public.

STEWART: So? Doesn't mean she has to flirt.

HARRY: Oh, but it does. I'm a former military man myself and I know about these things. If you want people to open up, you need to be extremely approachable. And flirting is an excellent way to go about it.

(He nodded.)

HARRY: *I* was taught to flirt with the ladies and be every man's best friend. Clearly it's different with female soldiers. *She's* been taught to flirt with everybody; women included. And it works. Women like to feel attractive, you see? So having someone flirt with them makes them feel good about themselves. And when people feel good about themselves they what?

STEWART: Um...

HARRY: They open up!

(He rolled his eyes again.)

HARRY: Cock!

STEWART: No. Sorry, Harry, that's bollocks.

HARRY: Is it now?

STEWART: Yes! You said she flirts with everyone, but she didn't flirt with me!

HARRY: Is that what you think, is it?

STEWART: That's what I *know*.

HARRY: You know nothing, son. You and those other lads asked her a lot of silly questions, all of which she deflected with a generic answer and you idiots didn't even notice. But did you notice how she *gave* those generic answers of hers?

STEWART: What?

HARRY: In her cutest voice. And she called you all "boys" in the same tone the Madame from the brothel uses when she's trying to entice you in.

STEWART: What? Is that... did she?

HARRY: Absolutely. It was a joy to see. She dismissed every question with a meaningless answer but did so in a way that kept you randy buggers interested. It's was brilliant.

(He nodded.)

HARRY: She's a professional, that one, my friend. *Extremely* highly trained. And a credit to our military. So, yes, you couldn't be more wrong. She doesn't fancy the barmaid one bit. She was befriending her full in the knowledge that barmaids overhear things. And if the barmaid overhears a good suggestion for our future defences...

STEWART: She'll tell her new friend!

HARRY: Bingo.

STEWART: Wow. So... she kind of *uses* people in a way.

HARRY: You could argue that I suppose. I mean, she certainly used your *hard-on* to get you to make a suggestion about our security, didn't she?

(Stewart grimaced.)

STEWART: She did, didn't she? I feel like a bit of a tit now.

HARRY: Well, it's too late to worry about that, lad. You *should* have worried about looking like a tit *before* you asked her to marry you. I mean, what was that all about?

STEWART: Yeah...

HARRY: Buffoon!

STEWART: Yeah, alright!!!

HARRY: I mean look at her! She's beauty personified and then there's you. She wouldn't date you if you begged, and yet you felt okay about proposing within five minutes of meeting her!

(He chuckled.)

HARRY: You really, really do have a lot to learn, my lad.

(Stewart just scowled at him then stormed off. Highly amused by it, Harry chuckled then glanced in Ponytail's direction.)

HARRY: Yup. She's at it again.

(Sure enough, Ponytail was sitting a table with two middle-aged men, leaning forwards so they could enjoy staring at her already sparsely covered chest. Having got their full attention she then sat back and pouted.)

PONYTAIL: Easy, boys; we've only just met.

(The two men quickly glanced into her eyes and gaped.)

TED: Oh, shit; I'm so sorry.

JOE: Yeah, sorry, love, that was no excuse for that.

PONYTAIL: Well... okay.

(She fluttered her eyelashes at them.)

PONYTAIL: I'll forgive you if you help me out.

TED: Of course we will.

JOE: What do you need?

PONYTAIL: Thanks, guys. Thing is, I've been asking around for people's ideas on how to upgrade the town's security. But nobody's been forthcoming. They just rudely stare at my chest. I was hoping you sweet boys would be different.

TED: We are!

JOE: Yeah! Everyone says so!

TED: Mostly because we like both whittling and play the flute.

JOE: Which is a different as it gets.

PONYTAIL: Then maybe you *can* help me after all.

TED: With the security thing?

PONYTAIL: Uh-huh.

TED: Hmm...

JOE: Honestly, I think everything needs improving. We don't *have* any security!

TED: He's right. And I'm not saying that just because he's my band-mate.

PONYTAIL: You're in a band?

JOE: Yeah.

PONYTAIL: Your band has two flutists?

JOE: Yeah.

(Ted grimaced.)

TED: And *just* two flutists. We've been a duo since Kerry moved to the capital.

PONYTAIL: And what did she play?

(Joe and Ted both blushed.)

JOE: The flute.

TED: We do okay though. We're playing at the civic centre a week from now. You should come.

(Confident that she'd have completed her mission and left town by then, Ponytail smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Sure; why not?

JOE: Cool.

PONYTAIL: Now, about the security arrangements...

JOE: Oh, yeah.

(He shrugged.)

JOE: Our police force is too small; our watchtowers are fake; the fence is way too inadequate to stop a soldier... it's everything.

TED: Everything! Like he said. About ten people in the entire town own a sword and most of them don't even know how to wield one. I'm not even sure our *tiny police force* have had any sword training. Everything needs doing. New fence; new gate; new policemen; new weapons; new watchtowers.

(He gave an exasperated sigh.)

TED: Our security is non-existent. I mean, this morning when I walked past, I noticed they hadn't even fixed the gate. Even bears can stroll into town right now. It's a disaster.

JOE: This town is gonna need a lot of investment. Or next time invaders come...

(They both shuddered.)

JOE: I don't even want to think about it.

(Satisfied that these two men were not the spies, Ponytail smiled.)

PONYTAIL: You guys have been great. Thank you.

(She then stood up and winked.)

PONYTAIL: I'll never forget you.

(She then turned and walked away, full in the knowledge that they were now staring at her bum cheeks.)

PONYTAIL: Right... should I keep trying here or move on to...

(She then noticed Frank and Cassie enter the bar. She could tell right away from the way they were glancing around that they were more than likely looking for her. At once, she gasped then zoomed away to the side exit.)

PONYTAIL: Not them again!

(With that, she whizzed out of the exit, only to find Eleanor standing there, raking through her handbag. Desperate not to be seen, she quickly darted to the right then leapt onto some rooftops to make good her escape.)

PONYTAIL: Close.

(Anxious to put a good distance between herself and her admiring fan club, she raced across the rooftops of twenty different houses then performed a majestic leapt to the building across the street. Satisfied she'd gone far enough, she then raced across it and leapt down to the quiet side-street beyond.)

PONYTAIL: Right. Well, that nipped *that* nonsense in the bud.

(She then started to walk away, only to cross paths with the one man the chief would rather she'd avoided. Of all the streets to land in, she'd landed in the street where Charles the pervert lived. A far from subtle man, as soon as he saw her passing his front door, he raced out and addressed her as only he could.)

CHARLES: You there! You with the long hair and awesome tits!

(Ponytail turned to face him.)

PONYTAIL: Excuse me?

CHARLES: So, we meet again.

(He then stepped up to her and doffed his cap. Normally this would have been seen as a polite gesture, but being uniquely himself, he'd doffed his cap to her breasts.)

CHARLES: So, how are my favourite two-man tag team?

PONYTAIL: Um... are you seriously trying to start a conversation with my boobs?

CHARLES: I am indeed. We've met before, you see?

PONYTAIL: What?

CHARLES: It was when you were charging about murdering people two days ago. You zoomed past me, but then you stopped and changed direction.

(He exhaled.)

CHARLES: When you skidded to that halt, those magnificent lady mountains of yours kept on going. Swung off to the right like two extra large grapefruits in a cloth sack being flung down the high street. I knew then that we'd be friends forever.

(Ponytail stared at him agog. She'd never heard such perverted rhetoric in all her life. And the fact he'd so boldly come out to *share* his filthy musings with her was mind-boggling.)

PONYTAIL: I...

(She then started to chuckle.)

PONYTAIL: Are you going to stop staring at them any time soon?

CHARLES: Probably not, no. I've been looking forward to saying hello to your pendulums of joy ever since I first clapped eyes on them.

PONYTAIL: Right...

(She chuckled some more.)

PONYTAIL: You're a very inappropriate man.

CHARLES: Indeed.

(He then looked at her face.)

CHARLES: And you're lovely.

(He then looked at her breasts again.)

CHARLES: Both of you.

PONYTAIL: Look, I don't know who you are, but...

CHARLES: My *friends* call me Charles.

(He nodded.)

CHARLES: *You* can call me daddy. And spank me as I beg for mercy.

(His eyes then glazed over.)

CHARLES: Harder you ponytailed vixen; that's it.

PONYTAIL: Um... I'm gonna go.

(Charles flinched.)

CHARLES: Wait! Sorry! Don't go. I'm not a bad person; really I'm not. I just get lost in my fantasies sometimes, you know? I've been lonely since my wife died and... well, from time to time, I get carried away.

(Taking pity on him, Ponytail smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Fair enough. You must really miss her.

CHARLES: Well... I miss the sex, put it that way.

PONYTAIL: Right...

CHARLES: Now where were we? Oh, that's right. Boobies.

PONYTAIL: I was just leaving.

CHARLES: Don't! Please don't. Not until I've thanked you for what you did two days ago.

(Ponytail threw out a dismissive wrist.)

PONYTAIL: It was nothing. I saw Nawsland invaders, so I simply did my job.

CHARLES: Oh, behave. How can you say it was nothing? It was *everything*!

(He exhaled.)

CHARLES: Thanks to you, I got an erection for the first time in years.

PONYTAIL: What?

CHARLES: It's true.

(He sighed.)

CHARLES: It was a living hell. I'd get aroused like any *other* man, but I couldn't do anything about it because Sergeant Boner was always asleep on duty. Nothing could wake the bugger up. Then you came along. You *saved* me. I love you for that.

PONYTAIL: Right... well... I'm glad I could be of service.

CHARLES: Me too. And what a service. You know, if there was more women like you in the world, erectile dysfunction would become a thing of the past.

PONYTAIL: I see...

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: You know we're complete strangers, don't you? Saying these things to me is beyond weird. Right now, you're setting a new standard in being creepy.

CHARLES: And I'm okay with it. I'm too old to worry about being popular anyway. So I speak as I find. And I find you delightful.

PONYTAIL: Yeah, that's...

CHARLES: Truly delightful. I mean look at you. You have such a beautiful face!

PONYTAIL: Thank you. See, that's better. That's a *nice* thing to say. The rest of it was...

CHARLES: Such a beautiful, beautiful face. The face of an angel adorned with stunning dark eyes and the sexiest lips I've ever seen. Lips created for sin. Lips that any mans cock would be only too delighted to be enveloped by.

PONYTAIL: Do you mind?

CHARLES: Such a stunningly gorgeous face. Like I said, it's that of an angel. An angel decorated with dark, scandalous makeup more akin to a demoness or a dominatrix. That contrast of innocence and sin alone is true wank material. And don't even get me started on your body.

PONYTAIL: I won't!

CHARLES: Too late!

(He exhaled.)

CHARLES: A perfectly symmetrical hourglass is *said* to be the pinnacle of feminine beauty, but no. Top heavy is the way to go and in that you set a new standard. Your juicy knockers are pure sacks of joy; a gift to the eyes. Blessed be the man who gets to cum on *them*.

PONYTAIL: I'm leaving now!

(She went to turn, but Charles quickly reached out and grabbed her arm.)

CHARLES: But I haven't even told you about your perfectly smooth hips yet! Or your peachy arse!

PONYTAIL: I don't want to hear it! Now let go of my arm.

CHARLES: Fine.

(He let go of her arm.)

CHARLES: I'll stop now.

PONYTAIL: Good.

CHARLES: Except to say that your hips look like they were crafted by a master bottle-maker, I'll be quiet.

PONYTAIL: Old man...

CHARLES: I'd also be remiss if I didn't mention your amazing legs.

PONYTAIL: Can you stop it?

CHARLES: Don't worry. I'm almost finished.

PONYTAIL: No! You're done!

CHARLES: But I haven't even mentioned your vagina yet!

PONYTAIL: Excuse me???

(Charles hung his head.)

CHARLES: Yes. That was too much. I realise that now. I mean, I haven't even seen it.

(He then tapped his fingers together nervously.)

CHARLES: I don't suppose we could remedy that could we?

PONYTAIL: You disgust me!

(She then turned and minced away. As she did so, Charles pouted bitterly.)

CHARLES: Fine! Go! Hate me if you must.

(He nodded.)

CHARLES: But know this! I don't hate *you*! I love you! You gave me back my manliness!

(He stood tall.)

CHARLES: Why, after years of nothing, I took one look at you and managed to bash one out solidly for a good ten minutes!

(He grimaced.)

CHARLES: There was semen everywhere! A good ten years worth! I'll probably have to replace that carpet, but it was well worth it! That's what you did for me, Ponytail. And I love you for it!

(He then watched her pace around the corner and smiled.)

CHARLES: Well, if *that* didn't endear me to her, nothing will.

(He then went back in his house. As he did so, Ponytail continued on down the road. She did so with tears of laughter pouring down her face. The old man had been so inappropriate, he'd somehow managed to tickle her funny bone.)

PONYTAIL: He's insane. Oh, my god. A new carpet? Hehe.

(She then turned and headed for the opposite end of town. She'd evaded Frank, Cassie and Eleanor in some considerable style. Rather miffed by that, the three of them sat on a bench outside the Birdstone Tavern, sulking like children.)

ELEANOR: And you're sure, are you? She was definitely in there?

FRANK: Yup. Apparently, she vanished a few seconds after we walked in!

CASSIE: Probably *because* we walked in!

ELEANOR: She hates us, doesn't she?

FRANK: Yeah. At least I'm starting to *fear* that's the case.

(They then sighed in perfect unison with one another.)

A short while later, having made her way to the far side of town, Ponytail stepped up to the perimeter fence then stopped to scrutinise it with her eyes. It was safe to say, she didn't like what she was seeing. Parts of it were rotten and there were several gaping holes in it. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the fence in this part of town had been severely neglected. It looked like it hadn't been maintained since it was first built. Greatly unimpressed with it, she could only shake her head.

PONYTAIL: This is meant to keep bears out, is it? A five year-old could have that thing over!

(She rolled her eyes.)

PONYTAIL: Oh, well, despite what I've been telling anyone, the state of their defences isn't my concern. I've got a spy to catch.

(She then turned and headed along the road at the very edge of the town. It didn't take a genius to figure out that this is where Birdstone's less affluent citizens lived. The houses were much smaller than in the centre of town and the majority of them were somewhat dilapidated. Saddened to see it, Ponytail sighed solemnly then strolled onwards until she came to an aviary at the edge of an open, cobbled square.)

PONYTAIL: Interesting.

(She then stepped up to the aviary where five birds were housed. Four of them were perched side by side, staring off to the east. The other was standing alone, gazing towards the north. Ponytail tipped her head to the side to scrutinise the odd one out then nodded.)

PONYTAIL: There's no shame in daring to be different, but...

(A friendly voice then rose up to her right. It was the voice of Selwyn Grainger, the man charged with taking care of the birds. A warm fellow by nature, he had something of a countryside vibe about him, including a slight twang in his voice.)

SELWYN: Well, hello there.

(Ponytail glanced towards him and smiled. She knew right away that he was the aviarist. His tatty waistcoat and worn out wellies were all the evidence she needed of that. He also just had that way about him.)

PONYTAIL: Hiya.

SELWYN: Come to see the birds, have you?

PONYTAIL: Not really. I was just looking around the town and stumbled across them.

SELWYN: I see. Well, that's no surprise really.

(He glanced towards the aviary.)

SELWYN: Nobody would come out of their way just to see *us*, would they, girls?

(He then smiled.)

SELWYN: It's nice to meet you, by the way. I'm Selwyn.

PONYTAIL: I'm...

SELWYN: Oh, I know who *you* are, young miss. Your name's Ponytail.

PONYTAIL: Well... it's not my *name*, but yeah... that's what everyone seems to call me.

SELWYN: Yeah. This town's like that.

(He furrowed his brow.)

SELWYN: They call me bird bloke.

PONYTAIL: Bird bloke?

SELWYN: That's right. And it's bloody insulting.

(He pointed to his chest.)

SELWYN: I only feed the birds as a favour to the chief. It's not like it's my job or anything! I'm a fucking accountant, for pity's sake.

(He sighed.)

SELWYN: It's the accent, you see? They hear me speak and assume I'm an idiot; at one with nature, but at odds with my brain.

(He smiled.)

SELWYN: Still... the joke's on *them* really. I do this town's accounts, you see? Including the tax! So I know for a fact, half of the buggers who make fun of me for being a penniless country bumpkin earn less than I do!

(He nodded.)

SELWYN: I should tell them that really. It'd be fun to watch them squirm. And it'd serve them right for listening to my accent and assuming I must be a bloody pauper.

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: It would, yes.

(She then bit her lip.)

PONYTAIL: But you know, in their defence... that waistcoat and wellies ensemble doesn't exactly scream financial genius.

(Selwyn glanced down himself then flinched.)

SELWYN: Oh, fuck me. I never thought of that. I really *do* look like a penniless country bumpkin.

(He grimaced.)

SELWYN: I throw *these* on before I tend to the birds because it's a messy job, you see?

Then I head straight to the pub of an evening from here. It didn't even *occur* to me to change first!

(He palmed his forehead.)

SELWYN: All this time, I've been going to the pub looking like a refugee from a scarecrow convention and I didn't even realise it. What an idiot.

(He then started to chuckle.)

SELWYN: Maybe I really *am* at odds with my brain!

(He then nodded towards the birds.)

SELWYN: Perhaps I should move in with them. All the birdbrains under the same roof.

(Ponytail laughed out loud.)

PONYTAIL: You're fun.

SELWYN: Why, thank you, young miss. You're very kind.

(He mused to himself.)

SELWYN: The very opposite of what I *imagined* you'd be like.

PONYTAIL: Oh?

SELWYN: I was in town the other morning. I saw you in action.

(He shuddered.)

SELWYN: I ran home that day to hide. Straight through a puddle of blood an inch deep.

You really didn't mess about, did you?

PONYTAIL: There was no time to. *They* had to die before innocent people did.

SELWYN: Bloody right too, young miss.

(He then turned to face the aviary.)

SELWYN: So? What do you think? Not the most impressive birds in the world, are they?

PONYTAIL: They're... um... stoic?

SELWYN: That's one way of putting it. They'll stay in one position all day and won't move until feeding time. That's why no bugger ever comes to see them. They're lazy and boring.

PONYTAIL: Yeah...

SELWYN: But that laziness is what makes them so useful.

PONYTAIL: Oh?

SELWYN: For messaging. They're messenger birds.

(He shrugged.)

SELWYN: I have no idea what the *real* name of their species is though. I just feed them. I don't know a sodding thing about birds.

(He furrowed his brow.)

SELWYN: Which makes my nickname all the more annoying.

PONYTAIL: Bird bloke?

SELWYN: Yeah, that one.

(He shook his head then pointed into the aviary.)

SELWYN: That one on the right of the four. I call him droopy. He doesn't fly down to the birdseed, he kinda flops down there. He's the laziest bugger of the lot. And that one at the back, facing a different way to the others, that's Blanco. To put it mildly, he's an idiot.

(He shook his head.)

SELWYN: On his first mission three months ago, he came back after half a day and hadn't delivered the message. Fucking useless bastard. He's definitely not all there. Like I said, I'm not a bird expert, but I *think* they usually face east for orientation purposes. They see the morning sunrise and know where they are. But no, not that daft bugger. He's always facing the wrong bloody way! Useless. His messaging days are over!

(Ponytail nodded.)

PONYTAIL: So that's how the chief get messages to the capital, is it? These birds.

SELWYN: That's right, young miss.

(He smiled.)

SELWYN: It's the best way by far. You see, *this* breed of bird is so bone idle, it can't be bothered to hunt. Too fucking lazy! They'd much rather be caged and fed. So they actually crave captivity. That makes them perfect messengers.

PONYTAIL: It does? In what way?

SELWYN: I'm *glad* you asked me that, because it's literally one of about three things I know about birds.

(He nodded.)

SELWYN: They're raised in the capital. Fed and taken care of every day. Then they're brought here in a cart, where they're fed and taken care of every day. They love it. What they *don't* love is being kicked out of the cage! When you do that, they panic. They don't want to be free. So they fly straight back to the last place they were in captivity. The capital. So when we have a message to send, one of us, myself or Runcorn, will strap the message to the bird then let it go. And off it flies. To the capital. They'll take it into captivity while they read the message then tag the reply to the bird and let it go again. And as always, it flies back to the last place it was in captivity. Here. Perfect, right?

PONYTAIL: Yeah, that's really clever.

(She glanced to him enquiringly.)

PONYTAIL: And how long does it take to them to fly there?

SELWYN: Under a day. So the good news is, the bird Runcorn sent out, reporting the attack, will have been seen by now. And the reply may well be on its way.

PONYTAIL: Wow, that's really interesting. So they just fly between their two cages, do they? Nowhere else.

SELWYN: Nope. They just live in one of the two places that'll feed them. They're lazier than bloody teenagers.

PONYTAIL: That's really fascinating. Thanks, Bird Bloke.

SELWYN: You're most welcome, young...

(His brow furrowed over.)

SELWYN: Hey!

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: I'm kidding. Thanks, Selwyn. That was really educational.

SELWYN: Any time, Ponytail. This town owes you a debt of gratitude that it can never repay. So boring you to death with facts about shiftless birds is a terrible way to say thank you.

(He shrugged.)

SELWYN: But other than doing your accounts for you, it's all I've got.

(They shared a chuckle then Selwyn headed for the door to the cage.)

SELWYN: Anyway, young miss, I must press on. I've gotta get these buggers fed then go back to work.

PONYTAIL: Okay. I'll head back to work too then.

SELWYN: Righto. Bye now.

PONYTAIL: Bye, bye.

(She then strutted away.)

PONYTAIL: Well, well. That *was* enlightening.

(Her brow furrowed over.)

PONYTAIL: *Very* enlightening.

Somewhere in the centre of town, a short while later, Frank, Eleanor and Cassie were seated together on a bench, looking decidedly glum. Having spent hours fruitlessly hunting for Ponytail, they were starting to fear they'd never find her. For Cassie, the thought of never

seeing her again was truly heartbreaking. Staring at the floor through empty eyes, she sighed repeatedly then held her head in her hands.

CASSIE: It's no good. I'm too sad to go on.

(Frank and Eleanor slowly craned their necks in her direction.)

FRANK: You're feeling suicidal?

ELEANOR: You can't throw your life away over this, Cassie. You're...

CASSIE: I didn't mean I'm too sad to go on living!

(She rolled her eyes then pouted.)

CASSIE: I'm too sad to go on searching. It hurts too much when we don't find her.

FRANK: It does, yes... but imagine how good we'll feel when we *do* find her.

CASSIE: *If* we find her.

(She sighed.)

CASSIE: I love her, you know? Not in a lesbian, massive disappointment to my mother kind of way. I love her like a sister.

(She glanced upwards.)

CASSIE: Which is ironic, really, because my sister *is* a lesbian, massive disappointment to my mother.

ELEANOR: Cassie?

CASSIE: Yeah?

ELEANOR: Hang in there, okay? We'll find her eventually, I know we will.

CASSIE: Yeah?

ELEANOR: Absolutely.

CASSIE: But what if we find her and she ditches us again?

FRANK: That would suck.

ELEANOR: Royally.

(She shrugged.)

ELEANOR: But I'm hoping that won't happen. I'm hoping she'll realise how devoted we are and accept our help.

FRANK: That'd be fantastic.

ELEANOR: Right?

CASSIE: Hmm... that *would* be pretty special.

FRANK: More so if she recruited us full-time.

ELEANOR: What? Why would she do that?

FRANK: Because every great hero needs a crew.

(Cassie and Eleanor stared at him blankly.)

CASSIE: That's a thing, is it?

FRANK: Well... I don't know. You don't meet many heroes living in Birdstone, but I'd like to *think* it is.

ELEANOR: Sounds a bit far-fetched to me.

CASSIE: Yeah.

(She smiled.)

CASSIE: But everything *about* Ponytail is far-fetched. Her beauty is off-the-chart ridiculous. And her speed and agility are mind-blowing. If someone *told* you about a person like her, you wouldn't believe them. She's *that* awesome.

(Frank looked to her then started to chuckle.)

FRANK: Are you *sure* you're not a lesbian type massive disappointment to your mother?

CASSIE: Excuse me?

FRANK: She's an unstoppable force, like a hurricane or a lightning strike. Superhuman almost. But you led with how beautiful she is. Are you sure that's not the reason why you love her so much?

CASSIE: Of course not, stupid! I have a boyfriend!

ELEANOR: You do? Who?

CASSIE: Um... you wouldn't know him. He lives in another town.

ELEANOR: You've never *been* to another town!

CASSIE: *He visits me!!!*

ELEANOR: Right...

CASSIE: Oh, fine. I *don't* have a boyfriend.

FRANK: We know.

CASSIE: But I'm not into girls! I just happen to think Ponytail is awesome.

ELEANOR: And that's fine. So do we.

FRANK: Absolutely.

(He nodded.)

FRANK: So let's get up and start searching again. That way, she can be awesome in our presence.

ELEANOR: Now *that* sounds like a plan!

CASSIE: Yup!

(Having regained the will to search on, they all nodded determinedly then climbed to their feet.)

FRANK: Right! Let's start by...

(His words were then interrupted by the sound of his son, racing towards him and calling out to him.)

ROY: Dad! Dad!!!

(Frank flinched then watched on as his son raced up to him.)

FRANK: What? What is it?

ROY: Why aren't you at the mill?

FRANK: Why aren't *you* at the mill???

ROY: I'm on my lunch break!

FRANK: It's lunchtime already?

ROY: It's *past* lunchtime! This is the first chance I've had to take a break though.

FRANK: How come?

ROY: Because we're a man short!

FRANK: What? Graham went home early???

ROY: I'm talking about you!!!

FRANK: Me???

(He shook his head despairingly.)

FRANK: Son, son, son, I raised you and Graham to *takeover* the mill one day. You've worked there since you should have been at school. So, if you don't know how to run it yourselves by now then, I don't know what to say.

ROY: We *do* know how to run it, dad. We could run it while standing on our heads. We know everything about the business back to front.

(He furrowed his brow.)

ROY: Including the fact that dismantling the machinery to clean it is a three man job.

FRANK: Who taught you that???

ROY: You did!

FRANK: That's right! Now go and get a third man!

ROY: *You're* supposed to be the third man!

(Frank shook a disappointed head.)

FRANK: Shocking. You're not ready to take over at all, are you? If you *still* can't function without me... well...

(He sighed sorrowfully.)

FRANK: I'm never going to be able to retire, am I?

ROY: Dad, once you've retired we'll hire someone to help clean the machinery. But you *haven't* retired. You just haven't turned up for work!

FRANK: Yes, I did!

ROY: When?

FRANK: This morning, remember? I almost had a fight with Geoffrey!

ROY: Yeah, then you went to the civic hall and didn't come back!

FRANK: Yes... well... that's because...

(He nodded sternly.)

FRANK: Something important came up!

ROY: What? Hanging around with two women who are completely out of your league and miles too young for you?

FRANK: No, you...

ROY: Come on, dad. I know you're lonely, but this is pathetic. Eleanor's married, for pity's sake. And Cassie's not going to date you even if you beg; she's a pretty girl.

CASSIE: Fact!

(She flinched.)

CASSIE: The pretty part. I want no part in the insults!

FRANK: Nor do I!

ROY: I wasn't *insulting* you, dad. I just need you get over your midlife crisis and come back to work where you're needed!

FRANK: I'm not *having* a midlife crisis, you cock! I'm *trying* to find a stupendously gorgeous superhero in the hope that she'll let me become her sidekick!

(His shoulders then slumped.)

FRANK: Oh, fuck me; I am, aren't I? I'm having a midlife crisis!

(He swiftly sat down again.)

FRANK: Why didn't I see it before?

CASSIE: Frank, you're not having a midlife crisis!

ROY: Yes, he is!

CASSIE: No, he's not!

(She shrugged.)

CASSIE: He probably just feels like life has passed him by and he wants to have a little adventure for a change. You know, to feel young again. And as I say it, I realise I've just described a midlife crisis to a tee.

(She cringed.)

CASSIE: Frank?

FRANK: Yes?

CASSIE: You're having a midlife crisis!

FRANK: I know!

(Roy chuckled.)

ROY: Dad. Come to work!

(Frank sighed then climbed to his feet.)

FRANK: No!

ROY: Dad...

FRANK: Hire that Charlton fellow for the day. He's done it before and he wasn't too shabby, if I recall. I'm going to see this Ponytail thing through to the end with my two good friends here!

(Eleanor grimaced.)

ELEANOR: Not for long though. I just noticed the time on the town clock. I need to collect my girls from school soon.

(She then gasped.)

ELEANOR: Fuck! I didn't take them *to* school! After the meeting at the civic hall, I told my husband I just wanted to speak to Ponytail then I'd come right home and take them; but I got so swept up in what we were doing I just wandered off and didn't come back! My husband's going to be livid!

(She then charged away with panic in her eyes. Having watched her go, Frank sighed then looked to Cassie.)

FRANK: And then there were two.

CASSIE: Um... actually... without Eleanor...

FRANK: Without Eleanor what?

CASSIE: People are going to think something odd is going on if I keep going down alleyways with you to search for Ponytail. They'll think we're up to something.

(She forced a smile.)

CASSIE: So... um... I'll leave it in your capable hands for now, Frank. See you!

(She then raced away and darted around a corner. Left behind, Frank grimaced.)

FRANK: Um... son?

ROY: Yeah?

FRANK: Did you say we need to clean the machinery?

ROY: I did, yes.

FRANK: Then what are you waiting for?

(He then marched off towards the mill.)

FRANK: Mission aborted.

(He then sighed and continued on with his son at his side.)

A short while later, having just finished speaking with the vendors in the town market, Ponytail headed off down the road then turned a corner into a Swan Street. Trying to recall why the name sounded so familiar to her, she wracked her brains for a moment then looked enlightened. The chief had offered to let her use the property at number twelve for the duration of her stay. Deciding the very least she could do was check the place out, she nodded then headed forth. A few minutes later, she came to the open front door and paced inside. Much to her surprise, there was a muscular, shirtless gentleman in the main room, bending over with his backside towards her. Delighted to see it, she tipped her head to one side to enjoy the view, then stood up straight.

PONYTAIL: Oh, my. Chief, you shouldn't have.

(Startled, the man stood up and span around to face her.)

REX: What?

PONYTAIL: Do you come with the room or am I getting my hopes up for nothing?

(Rex just glowered at her. Highly amused by it, Ponytail smiled then stepped forwards with her hand out.)

PONYTAIL: Hi. I'm Ponytail, apparently.

REX: I know who you are.

(He then turned around and resumed what he'd been doing.)

REX: Just another fucking woman.

(Ponytail smirked.)

PONYTAIL: Right? Fucking women! Bitches, the lot of them.

REX: Yup!

PONYTAIL: Can't live with them, can't live without them.

REX: Oh, I can live without them, alright. Very easily.

PONYTAIL: Oh. Cool. Good for you, champ.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: So... and correct if I'm wrong here... but I get the feeling that you hate women.

REX: Like you wouldn't believe.

PONYTAIL: I see.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: That's okay. I won't judge you.

REX: Judge me?

PONYTAIL: Yeah, it's fine.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Some of my best friends are gay.

(Rex was far from amused. With a face like thunder, she stepped up to her and scowled menacingly. Towering over her with his fists clenched, he looked very much on the verge of exploding. Far from intimidated, however, Ponytail just grinned at him.)

PONYTAIL: You're very tall!

REX: And you're very small!

PONYTAIL: Touché.

REX: I dwarf you, woman! Remember that next time you decide to give me shit. I aint in the mood and sometimes, when I'm angry, I lash out.

(Much to his further annoyance, Ponytail started to giggle.)

PONYTAIL: I hope the chief isn't expecting us to share. You'd be a terrible housemate!

REX: I'm just clearing out my stuff.

(He then returned to what he'd been doing.)

PONYTAIL: So... how come you hate women so much?

REX: What's it to you?

PONYTAIL: Just curious.

REX: Well go and be curious somewhere else! I need another ten minutes!

PONYTAIL: Fine. I...

(She then performed a double take to her left. She'd left her bag in the chief's office and someone had kindly brought it over for her.)

PONYTAIL: Ooh, that's handy. I can get changed while I'm here.

(Rex mumbled under his breath.)

REX: Yeah, right. Women don't change.

PONYTAIL: Nice. That was very witty. You must be the town comedian.

REX: Do you want a slap?

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: No, thanks.

REX: Shut up then!

PONYTAIL: Ouch.

(She pouted.)

PONYTAIL: Such a mean, mean boy. You've hurt my feelings.

(She then chuckled to herself and turned around.)

PONYTAIL: Never mind me. I'll just get changed then I'll be out of your hair.

(With that, she paced over to her bag, yanked out a skirt and top then proceeded to remove the one-piece outfit she had on. Humming as she did so, she pulled it over her shoulders then let it slide to the floor, before stepping out of it. Wearing nothing but long gloves and thigh boots, she then turned to face Rex.)

PONYTAIL: So, come on. What's your deal? Why the misogyny?

(Rex swung his neck towards her angrily then froze.)

PONYTAIL: Well?

(Rex started at her bare chest then allowed his eyes to wander down to her exposed groin.)

REX: You... you're... put some clothes on!!!

PONYTAIL: Why? Does my body offend you?

REX: Yes!

PONYTAIL: But you said you *weren't* gay!

(She then mused to herself.)

PONYTAIL: Actually, no you didn't! You just stepped up to me angrily as if you were annoyed at being found out. I wonder...

REX: Fuck off, will you? I just don't like women, okay? You're all parasites who'll stop at nothing to get what you want. Including using your...

(He gestured between her breasts and vagina.)

REX: Bits and pieces! Now get changed and fuck off out of my face.

PONYTAIL: Wait!

(She then stepped up close to him and stared straight into his eyes. Unable to take them off her nakedness, Rex rapidly started to perspire.)

REX: Um... what are you doing?

PONYTAIL: Just checking.

(She then sauntered back to her clothes.)

PONYTAIL: Sweating; trembling; unable to blink... you're straight. *And* you think I'm hot.

REX: I never said you weren't! I did, however, say you're a cunt!

PONYTAIL: No, you didn't.

REX: Well I'm saying it now!

(He ruffled his neck.)

REX: Bitch!

(Ponytail chuckled then pulled her top on.)

PONYTAIL: Come on then. You're clearly attracted to women, so why? Why the hostility?

REX: I just told you, because you're a cunt!

PONYTAIL: No, no. Come on now. You were hostile *long* before I deliberately started getting on your nerves.

(She then started pulling her skirt on.)

PONYTAIL: Why is that? Who hurt you?

REX: You're going to be lying unconscious on the floor in a minute, wondering who hurt *you*! The answer will be me, by the way.

PONYTAIL: Meh. I doubt it.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Look, just tell me and I'll go.

REX: Go anyway. You said you'd be out of my way once you got changed and now you have. So feel free to fuck off out of my life forever.

PONYTAIL: Nah. You've piqued my interest now, so I'm gonna stay until you tell me.

REX: I'm not telling you anything.

PONYTAIL: Oh, but I think you should.

REX: Oh, do you now?

PONYTAIL: Absolutely. Otherwise, I'll just have to assume things.

(She then glanced at the ceiling and pretended to be thinking.)

PONYTAIL: I might even start to assume you have mummy issues.

(She gasped.)

PONYTAIL: I've got it!

(Rex glowered at her.)

REX: Got what?

PONYTAIL: Your dong doesn't work!

REX: Excuse me???

PONYTAIL: It all makes sense now! You can't get it up! And every time it happens, the woman you're with laughs at you. Or worse, she sympathises. Poor, Muscly Bonehead, she says; it'll be alright. We can try again tomorrow. Then you don't see her heels for dust. That's gotta hurt.

(Rex snarled then bounded towards her with his fist raised. Not even remotely fazed by his gesture, Ponytail shrugged and carried on.)

PONYTAIL: It happened so many times, in the end you started to hate women. Your failure to pleasure them made you feel insignificant and inadequate as a man and that's something you just can't forgive.

(She held out her palms.)

PONYTAIL: Right?

(Rex just bellowed then aimed at punch at her. Much to his astonishment, however, she zoomed out of the way and he missed her by a good six feet.)

REX: What the fuck???

PONYTAIL: I'm way too quick for that sort of thing to be effective! You'll have to drug me or wait until I'm asleep.

(Rex sighed in dismay.)

REX: Why won't you just go away?

PONYTAIL: Because you were rude to me for nothing.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: And I'm kind of petty. So now I'm going to stay here and annoy you until you explain yourself.

REX: I'm not going to explain *anything* to you.

PONYTAIL: You are!

REX: No, I'm not!

PONYTAIL: Explain!

REX: No!

PONYTAIL: Come on, tell me!

REX: Fuck off!

PONYTAIL: Tell me!

REX: No!

PONYTAIL: Why *do* you hate women so much?

REX: Go the fuck away?

PONYTAIL: Come on, out with it!

REX: No!

PONYTAIL: But why? Why do you hate women?

REX: Because they ruin your life!!!

(Greatly incensed, he paced across the room, kicked a box then came back to her.)

REX: Four years of my life I wasted on that bitch! Four years!

(He snarled.)

REX: I gave her everything she asked for! I even went without to make sure she lived like a fucking queen! And I was happy to do it! Then she left me!

(He shook his head.)

REX: The same day she moved in! Turned out, she never had any interest in me whatsoever; she just wanted the expensive heirloom I kept locked in my attic. I went to work in the morning and she was gone by lunchtime! And so was my heirloom.

PONYTAIL: Wow. What a bitch!

REX: You think?

PONYTAIL: I do. She sounds awful.

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: But to hate all women because of one gold-digging trollop is a bit much, don't you think?

REX: No, I *don't* think that. Because I know that if I ever get involved with a woman again, the same shit could happen all over again.

(He snarled.)

REX: I mean, do you think I'm the *only* bloke in this town who's been fucked over by an evil woman? Do you?

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Probably not.

REX: You're damned right I'm not!

(He took a deep breath then shook his head.)

REX: I'm just one of many. Alex the meat merchant, Frank the miller, the chief... to name but a few.

PONYTAIL: Blimey. Your ex was a busy woman!

REX: I'm talking about *different* evil women, dumb arse!!!

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: I know, I know, I was joking.

REX: Well, don't! Women aren't funny. Your gender have a lot to answer for.

(He shook his head.)

REX: Frank's wife embezzled money from the business for years then upped sticks and ran away with a younger man! Left him to raise the kids alone! Bitch! And the chief... his missus turned into a fruitcake!

PONYTAIL: A fruitcake?

REX: She went mental! I don't know exactly, because I was only ten at the time, but as the story goes, one day she started saying their daughters were a danger to themselves and everyone around them! Potentially violent psychopaths is the phrase she used, apparently. She kept saying they needed to be raised by some guru who specialises in that kind of thing. Then one night she skipped town with them and he hasn't seen them since! Poor bastard. And as for Alex...

(He sighed.)

REX: He woke up one morning to find his wife gone and his bank account emptied. His wife had sold his business behind his back and remortgaged the house without his permission. That was ten years ago and he's still in more debt than the average man could ever dream of paying off.

(He snarled.)

REX: That's what you women do to people. And that's why I keep them at arms length. And that's why I'd love you to walk out that door and fuck off out of my sight. Go on.

(Ponytail smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Fine. But before I go. I just want to say...

REX: Don't you dare apologise on behalf of your gender.

PONYTAIL: I wasn't going to. I was going to say you're a very silly person.

REX: Excuse me?

PONYTAIL: Alex married again, didn't he? I know that because I was chatting to him and his loving wife in the market just now. And the chief doesn't share your misogynist views either, does he? He's actually a really nice person from what I can tell.

REX: Yeah, well... the fact they're more forgiving than me means fuck all. That forgiveness could well come back to kick them in the arse.

PONYTAIL: True. But it could also mean they go on to find happiness.

REX: Like me then! *I've* found happiness.

PONYTAIL: I see.

(She chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: That would explain why you're so wonderfully chirpy.

REX: You don't have to be chirpy to be happy, arse face! *I* found happiness without all that smiling bollocks. I gave up working for the smithy and made *my own* happiness. Hunting. I'm out in the forest for most of the week, well away from women; enjoying the thrill of the hunt. Then I come home and rest. And I mean rest! Peace and quiet! No nagging bitch to make me run around after her all day, only to steal all my belongings! Because that's what you lot do.

(Ponytail rolled her eyes.)

PONYTAIL: Yup. Busted. You're right. We're *all* exactly the same. Every woman in the entire world. We actually belong to a secret club that men don't know about. Our goal is to marry every man in the world then steal his things. It's going really well, actually.

(She sighed.)

PONYTAIL: The uniform sucks though. Still, I can't complain. We have subsidised food in the canteen and our group outings to the annual misandry fayre in the capital are a hoot.

(Her face then cracked and she had to desperately fight back laughter.)

REX: Yeah... mock. Go on.

PONYTAIL: I am!

REX: Please! Be my guest! Pretend I'm talking bollocks, but the fact is, one day *you'll* do the same. Some poor bloke will give his heart and soul to you. He'll dedicate his entire life to making you happy. And you'll love it for a while. Then your magpie senses will kick in as soon as you meet someone with even *shinier* trinkets you can hoard. Then you'll be on your way, leaving him broken. Why? Because like *all* women, you're a cunt.

PONYTAIL: I see.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Well, this was fun. We should definitely do this again sometime.

REX: Or you could just fuck off out of my life forever, like I asked you to earlier.

PONYTAIL: Nah. What fun would that be? Teasing you is a joy.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: But as much as I'd love to, I can't stick around here all day. I have a job to do.

REX: Go and do it then.

PONYTAIL: I will. I have no choice. It's down to *me* to save this town, what with all the men here being so feeble an' all.

REX: Excuse me???

PONYTAIL: Whoops. Did I say that out loud?

REX: Yes! And I'll have you know...

(Ponytail then headed for the door.)

PONYTAIL: Bye!

REX: No! Hold on! You can't just say that then leave!!!

PONYTAIL: It was nice meeting you.

REX: Wait!

(He watched her head away then snarled.)

REX: We're not feeble! *You're* feeble!

(He then placed his hands on his hips and nodded proudly.)

REX: That told *you*! Town hero, my arse. You're no match for me!

(Having reached the doorway, Ponytail turned around then raised an eyebrow at him.)

PONYTAIL: You were out of town when the attack happened, right?

REX: I was out hunting.

PONYTAIL: So *you* were never in any danger.

REX: Well...

(Ponytail gave a stifled chuckle.)

PONYTAIL: Wow. You really *are* feeble.

REX: Feeble??? I was wrestling a wild boar!!!

(He ruffled his neck.)

REX: Then I captured the enemy leader. The one you missed! So fuck off with that!

PONYTAIL: Fair enough. Nice work.

REX: Thank you. Now fuck off! And in future, keep your clothes on in front of men you don't know. Fucking harlot.

(Ponytail afforded herself a smirk then whizzed over to him. A split second later she zoomed back again.)

REX: What? What the hell? What the fuck was that? You were like a blur!

PONYTAIL: I was just returning the favour.

(She then glanced down at his groin.)

PONYTAIL: You were blessed. The women of this town really are missing out!

(Rex gave her a baffled glance then looked down. A horrified shriek ensued.)

REX: You pulled my trousers down!!!

PONYTAIL: Yup. And it was awesome.

(She winked at him.)

PONYTAIL: See you later, handsome!

(She then blew him a kiss and walked away. Left behind, Rex yanked his trousers up then shook his fist at the door.)

REX: I hate you, woman!!!

(He then sighed in defeat.)

REX: And you couldn't give a shit, could you?

(Sure enough, Ponytail was mincing down the road in her change of clothing, giggling to herself gleefully.)

PONYTAIL: He's fun. I'll torture him again later, I think.

(She then continued on her way.)

As the day moved into late afternoon, Eleanor found herself sitting in a small park, watching her children play on some climbing rocks. She'd taken them there as an excuse to get out of the house and away from her angry husband. Because she hadn't returned from the civic centre that morning, he'd had to stay home with the children all day and had missed work. He'd been absolutely furious about it. With the passing of time, however, his anger had relented and he'd gone into sulking mode. Anger, she could handle, sulking she could not. Therefore, a trip to the park was very much in order. Sitting there on the bench, she couldn't help but sigh. A day that had started off so promisingly had ended up being a massive let down.

ELEANOR: I started the day with a loving husband and a mysterious hero to idolise. Now I've got a thirty year-old sulking teenager and my hero thinks I'm a moron. Probably.

(She shook her head.)

ELEANOR: I just wish I knew. Why did you ditch us, Ponytail? Were we really that annoying to be around? Was that hug we gave you too much?

(She mused to herself.)

ELEANOR: Or was it something else? Did Morris get on your nerves so much, you wanted away? I'll understand if it was. He has that affect on a lot of people. He can be a stuffy bugger at times. Comes with being wealthy, I guess. I'd like to *think* it was that... and not something *I* said or did.

(She then forced a smile.)

ELEANOR: Whatever the reason was, I'm sure you didn't do it out of spite. You're not like that. I can tell. But even if you were, I'd still love you.

(She glanced at her children.)

ELEANOR: You're the reason my two little angels are here now, enjoying life. And you're the reason I'm here with them.

(Her jaw then dropped. She'd just noticed Ponytail strolling down the road right next to the park.)

ELEANOR: I've found her! I should say something!

(She furrowed her brow.)

ELEANOR: No, I shouldn't; she'll think I'm a stalker!

(She scoffed.)

ELEANOR: No, she won't. That's ridiculous.

(She cringed.)

ELEANOR: Or is it? I should say something,

(She bit her lip.)

ELEANOR: But what would I say?

(She beamed.)

ELEANOR: I'll tell her I like her new outfit.

(She whimpered.)

ELEANOR: Or would that be weird.

(Her inner conflict continued for a few seconds more then, without even thinking it through, she raised her arm and called out.)

ELEANOR: Hi, Ponytail!!!

(She gasped.)

ELEANOR: What did I do that for? You idiot!

(As she sat there trembling with uncertainty, Ponytail glanced towards her then waved back warmly.)

PONYTAIL: Hiya!

(She smiled then nodded towards the children.)

PONYTAIL: Your kids are adorable.

(Eleanor's heart soared.)

ELEANOR: Aw.

(She exhaled.)

ELEANOR: Thanks! So are you!

(Her head then dropped into her hands.)

ELEANOR: I did *not* say that.

(Nervously, she glanced up and saw Ponytail smiling at her children still. Feeling quite the fool, she couldn't help but mumble to herself.)

ELEANOR: Please, please, please, tell me she didn't hear that.

(Ponytail then called out to her.)

PONYTAIL: Yup. Absolute sweethearts. You're so lucky.

(Eleanor could only smile nervously.)

ELEANOR: Yeah... I'm blessed.

PONYTAIL: Anyway... I've got to go. I'll see you around town soon, I hope.

(Eleanor's eyes lit up.)

ELEANOR: You do? I mean, yes! That'd be lovely.

PONYTAIL: Right? Bye... um... friend.

ELEANOR: Eleanor!

PONYTAIL: Eleanor! Noted. Cute name, by the way.

ELEANOR: Thanks. So is Ponytail.

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: Right... yeah...

(She then headed away.)

PONYTAIL: Later, Eleanor!

ELEANOR: Bye!

(Eleanor watched her head away and exhaled adoringly.)

ELEANOR: She's awesome. And she gets better every time.

(She then sat back and watched as Ponytail strode out of sight.)

ELEANOR: She's perfect.

(Heading onwards down the path, Ponytail was also thinking about their encounter. Musing to herself, she nodded then glanced ahead.)

PONYTAIL: She's nice. I like her. She's got a sweet, mumsy kinda of vibe going on.

(She then spotted another member of her fan club, Morris, heading in her direction. Wearing a warm smile, she nodded in his direction.)

PONYTAIL: Afternoon.

(Morris just scowled at her.)

MORRIS: Traitor!

(He then stomped on past her.)

PONYTAIL: Right...

(She chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: I'm guessing he took this morning personally.

(She then turned right and headed into the town's administration office. A small, single-room building, it was used to house the townsfolk's registrations as well as all of Birdstone's historical data. It was also where the chief's number two, Runcorn held office. Some would say he worked there, but right now, that would be debatable. Slumped across his desk, fast asleep, work was the last thing on his mind. Watching him snore, Ponytail could only shake her head at him. A devilish smirk then crossed her lips. Having allowed herself a brief chuckle, she then leant forwards and spoke into his ear seductively.)

PONYTAIL: Come to bed, Runcorn. I want you. Take me. Take me right now.

(Runcorn ruffled his neck and mumbled in his sleep.)

RUNCORN: Why, Candice... I thought you'd never ask.

PONYTAIL: I'm not *asking*. I'm *begging*. I need you.

RUNCORN: I see. You'd better get those knickers off then, hadn't you?

PONYTAIL: Oh, I will. Just promise you'll be gentle with me, baby; the chief's watching.

(Runcorn swiftly sat up with a horrified look on his face.)

RUNCORN: What???

(He glanced about himself in horror then flinched when he saw Ponytail standing there.)

RUNCORN: It's you! You! You're Agent... Ponytail?

PONYTAIL: Close enough.

(She then shook her head at him.)

PONYTAIL: Do you always make suggestive remarks to women you'd don't know?

RUNCORN: Um... what?

PONYTAIL: When I came in, you asked me to take my knickers off!

RUNCORN: I did? Oh, good god. I'm so sorry. I was dreaming, you see?

PONYTAIL: About Candice?

RUNCORN: Um... no?

PONYTAIL: You *said* Candice. Isn't that the barmaid from the Birdstone Tavern?

(Runcorn whimpered.)

RUNCORN: No, no, no, no, no. *Different* Candice! I was dreaming about my wife Fiona; her name's Candice too. Shit!

(He then sighed in defeat.)

RUNCORN: It was just a dream, okay? There's no need to make a big deal of it.

PONYTAIL: Fair enough.

(She then took a seat opposite his desk and smiled.)

PONYTAIL: So. Tell me, Runcorn. Do you know why I'm here?

RUNCORN: Of course. The chief tells me everything. You're here to review our security with a view to upgrading it.

PONYTAIL: That's what he told you, is it?

RUNCORN: It is, yes. Why?

PONYTAIL: He lied. I'm here because someone in town is a Nawsland spy and want to find out who it is.

(Runcorn looked at her blankly for a moment then his lips curled up at the edges.)

RUNCORN: A spy?

PONYTAIL: Yup.

RUNCORN: Right...

(He sniggered.)

RUNCORN: Nawsland planted a spy? Here?

(He scoffed mockingly.)

RUNCORN: Eager for the latest updates on how many scarves Mrs Braithwaite from Cheaverly Road has managed to knit this year are they? Or perhaps they want to be kept abreast of our thriving weapons industry. After all, Rex's personal arsenal of three hunting knives and a corkscrew make us quite the formidable foe. Why, once he's finished forging that pair of tiny scissors he's working on, we'll be unstoppable.

(He chuckled.)

RUNCORN: A spy indeed.

PONYTAIL: I not joking, Runcorn. There is a spy in town and *I* think it's *you*!

(Runcorn stared at her blankly, then once again, his lips curled up at the edges.)

RUNCORN: Yup! You've got me! Guilty as charged! I've been spying on the chief with a view to letting the Nawsland army in on all his secrets. Such as the fact he eats left-handed, wears socks to bed and keeps locks of his two baby daughter's hair in his draw. Why, armed with such information, the Nawsland army will be unstoppable! They'll march in and demand that he holds his fork in the *other* hand! That'll show him! Yup; the war is as good as won.

(He then sat there giggling.)

RUNCORN: A spy? Here? Are you serious? That'd have to be biggest waste of time in the history of global warfare. This town *does* nothing, *has* nothing and *asks* for nothing.

(He chuckled.)

RUNCORN: You're so silly.

(Satisfied that his answers proved he wasn't the spy she was looking for, Ponytail poked her tongue out playfully.)

PONYTAIL: You've got me. I was just pulling your leg.

RUNCORN: Obviously.

(He smiled.)

RUNCORN: Next time, try not to make it so obvious. A spy indeed.

PONYTAIL: Fair enough.

(She chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: You handled that superbly, by the way. That was some of the best sarcasm I've heard in a long, long time.

RUNCORN: Wasn't bad, was it?

(He grimaced.)

RUNCORN: I had to draw on literally *everything I know* about the chief to come out with that. All he does is work, you see? Work, work, work. He has no personal life, whatsoever.

PONYTAIL: No?

RUNCORN: No. He's been like that ever since his wife went doolally and bugged off with his baby daughters twenty years ago. He never did get over it. He just threw himself into his work. It seems to me he's just passing the time until he either sees them again or dies. It's tragic really.

(He grimaced.)

RUNCORN: And more than a little annoying. He gives *me* tasks to perform then goes and does them himself. Because of that, I sometimes end up sitting here for weeks on end with nothing to do.

(He shrugged.)

RUNCORN: So I hired an assistant.

PONYTAIL: What? You've got nothing to do, so you hired an assistant? How does that even make sense?

RUNCORN: Well... it's simple really. That way *my assistant* can sit here doing nothing all day while *I* get on and live my life. Living is important. I just wish I could make the chief realise that.

(He smiled.)

RUNCORN: Anyway, speaking of my assistant, it's his birthday today, so I'm gonna shoot off home soon. Therefore, if you need anything, speak now or forever hold your boobs.

(He gasped.)

RUNCORN: Peace! I meant peace!

(He palmed his forehead.)

RUNCORN: Sorry, dear; I got distracted,

PONYTAIL: Yeah? By what I wonder.

RUNCORN: Um... so...

(He grinned at her nervously.)

RUNCORN: How can I help you?

PONYTAIL: You know my mission. I need security ideas and I thought I'd ask what your take on the situation is.

RUNCORN: I see.

(He shrugged.)

RUNCORN: Well, that's easy. This town is defenceless. So if you're making a *list* of what we need, you'll only need to write down three words. Every, fucking and thing.

(He sneered.)

RUNCORN: No exaggeration, young lady, you can name any kind of security device you like. Any! And I can categorically tell you, we don't have it! We have *nothing*! But after that attack the other day, we damned well need it!

PONYTAIL: Yeah. A lot of people have said that.

RUNCORN: And they're *right* to say it. Our defensive cupboard is bare and the fucking doors have fallen off!

(He nodded.)

RUNCORN: Do right by us, Ponytail. I beg you. When you report to the high command or whoever it is you report to, please be sure to hammer home our needs in full. We need investment, a *lot* of investment, and we need it now!

PONYTAIL: I'll do whatever I can, Runcorn. I'll lay on how desperate things are with a trowel.

RUNCORN: Thank you. I'd appreciate that. We all would. You know...

(Suddenly, the town's alarm bell started to ring. At once, both Runcorn and Ponytail sat up dead straight.)

PONYTAIL: They're back!

(She then jumped out of her seat in readiness to sprint outside.)

RUNCORN: Calm down, young lady! That's the sequence to signify that a bear's nearby.

PONYTAIL: Are you sure?

RUNCORN: Of course I'm bloody sure. I've lived in this town all my life.

PONYTAIL: Right. Okay.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: You know best.

RUNCORN: I do indeed. *That* bell is to alert the huntsmen to the threat. When that sequence sounds, Rex and the lesser huntsmen all go charging off through the gate and...

(His eyes then bulged in terror.)

RUNCORN: The gate!

PONYTAIL: What?

RUNCORN: There isn't one! The invaders flattened it! That bear could stroll in at any time!

PONYTAIL: Fuck!

(She then vanished out the door so fast, Runcorn didn't even see her leave.)

RUNCORN: You need to get out there, Ponytail! Do to that bear what you did to the invaders! It's takes a huntsman far too long to kill a bear, and by that time several people could have already been mauled!

(He then blinked nonchalantly.)

RUNCORN: Right... you appear to have left. How the hell did you... damn, she's quick.

(Wasting no time whatsoever, Ponytail zoomed across the street then leapt onto the nearest rooftop. Having negotiated her way *across* the rooftops, she then jumped down again, just outside number twelve Swan Street. In a blinding hurry, she then charged inside and raced to where she'd left her bag. Having grabbed her daggers, she then raced outside again and leapt onto another roof. Twenty seconds later, having hastened across the tops of the houses, she jumped down again, close to the where the town gate used to be. Having done so, she called out to one of the police officers atop a makeshift watchtower.)

PONYTAIL: Where's the bear???

(The police officer whimpered and pointed to the other side of the fence, before screeching in a terrified voice.)

OFFICER: It's coming in!!!

(A deep, heroic voice then echoed down the street. The permanently shirtless Rex was charging forth with his blade at the ready.)

REX: Fear not, townsfolk! Help is at hand!!!

(At this point, the bear appeared in the gap where the gate should have been.)

REX: A-ha! Step back, everybody, I'm going to...

(His powerful, manly run then slowed to a jog and the heroicism in his voice rapidly faded away.)

REX: Watch on helplessly while that annoying, ponytailed nuisance steals all the glory.

(Sure enough, as soon as she'd set eyes on it, Ponytail had zoomed in and ended its life in the blinking of an eye. True to form, she'd sped in so fast and butchered it so rapidly, she'd been nothing more than a blur. Job done, she'd then nodded with satisfaction and started to pace away again.)

PONYTAIL: All done!

(She then threw an arm in Rex's direction.)

PONYTAIL: Muscly Bonehead will know what to do with the remains.

(Unsurprisingly, Rex was not amused. Red with rage, he stormed up to her and stepped in her path.)

REX: Stop calling me that! The name's Rex, you disrespectful bitch!

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: I say what I see.

REX: You...

PONYTAIL: And besides, if people can call me Ponytail just because I choose to wear my hair in one, then *I* can call you Muscly Bonehead...

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: On account of the fact that you're a muscly bonehead!

REX: You're really pushing it, you are! First you steal my kill then you insult my name???

(Ponytail just grinned at him.)

PONYTAIL: That wasn't your kill. You were nowhere near it.

REX: I was en route!

PONYTAIL: Meh. It's done now anyway. And done properly.

(She winked at him.)

PONYTAIL: By a professional.

REX: Professional?

PONYTAIL: Yes. Rather than a muscly bonehead.

REX: *I'm* the professional, you infuriating harpy! Killing bears and wild boars is what I do for a fucking living!!!

PONYTAIL: Sure. Eventually. If you ever get there.

REX: I was twenty paces away!

PONYTAIL: Which is a really long way in your case. You have a big stride!

REX: Yeah???

(He scoffed.)

REX: Well *you* have big tits!

PONYTAIL: I know.

REX: Right...

(He grimaced.)

REX: That wasn't the insult I was hoping it'd be.

PONYTAIL: Yeah, but points for trying. Attempted to be witty must be hard work when there's nothing but air inside your bony head.

(Rex growled then drew back his fist.)

REX: Right, that's done it.

PONYTAIL: Oh, stop.

(She rolled her eyes.)

PONYTAIL: Look... Brian, is it?

REX: It's fucking Rex!!!

PONYTAIL: Oh, yeah. Rex... you're a very sexy man. That shirtless thing you have going on suits you to a tee. Your six pack is more like an eight pack and...

(She licked her lips.)

PONYTAIL: Quite frankly, it's hot. Very hot.

(She sighed.)

PONYTAIL: Unfortunately for you, I prefer men who can stimulate my mind with intelligent conversation. So I'm gonna have to say no.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: I mean, sure... you're very, very sexy. You are! Extremely so, in fact, but I need a man with something going on *upstairs* as well. So, thanks for your interest, but you really should stop flirting with me now. I'm just not interested.

(She then grinned her most annoying grin. Rex was utterly outraged.)

REX: Flirting with you? Flirting???

PONYTAIL: That's right.

REX: I wasn't flirting with you!!! I fucking hate you!!! You're the most emasculating woman I've ever had the displeasure of enduring.

PONYTAIL: You say the sweetest things. But the answer is still no.

REX: The answer to what? I didn't ask you anything! And if I ever do, I'll be asking you to fuck off!

(He shook his fist at her.)

REX: For years, I've hated women with every fibre of my being. You're all cunts; every single wretched one of you! But you... you're on another level, you are! You're the *queen* of the harpies! Setting the standard for all the *other* evil witches to live up to! You're the worst of the worst, the lowest of the low, and I despise you beyond words.

PONYTAIL: Which is kind of you to say, but please, this is getting embarrassing now. No means no, Rex. I'm just not into you!

REX: I don't *want* you to be!!!

PONYTAIL: Stop it! Please! You need to get over me and move on!

(Rex shuddered with rage then gritted his teeth.)

REX: Right! That's it! You're for it now!!!

PONYTAIL: What are you gonna do? Swing and miss again?

REX: No! I'm gonna do this!

(He then threw a punch at her with all his might... and missed again. He then thudded to the floor under the weight of his own momentum. Watching him lying there on his face, from where she's quickly zoomed to, Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: That was fun. I enjoy playing with you.

(She then sighed.)

PONYTAIL: Sadly, I have to go. There's grown up work to be done.

(She then minced away giggling to herself. Feeling extremely small, Rex just sat up and watched her go.)

REX: The sooner that bitch leaves town the better.

(He sighed then got up and trudged over to the dead bear.)

REX: I suppose I'd better...

(His jaw then dropped. The bear had been obliterated with more stab wounds than he could actively count. Watching on, he blinked in astonishment then gulped.)

REX: She only attacked it for a second. She's a fucking psycho.

(He cringed.)

REX: Good thing I missed her really. If she'd come back at me...

(He then shuddered from head to toe.)

Having made her way to the end of the street, Ponytail turned right then headed forth, musing to herself. She found Rex a curious fellow. He was devilishly handsome and could have any woman he wanted. The chances are, she'd be so delighted to have him, she'd treat him like a king. And yet, after being let down by one woman, he'd decided to declare war on all of them. Thinking it over, she could only puff out in bewilderment.

PONYTAIL: What a ridiculous bell end.

(Just then, an old man's voice rose up from the side street she was passing. All she could do was groan. It was the unmistakable voice of the town pervert, Charles. Shaking his head with disapproval, he strutted up to her and wagged his finger bitterly.)

CHARLES: No, no, no. What on earth are you thinking, woman?

PONYTAIL: Excuse me?

CHARLES: That's just wrong that is. Explain yourself.

PONYTAIL: What the hell are you on about?

CHARLES: You've changed your outfit.

PONYTAIL: And?

CHARLES: That skirt!

(Ponytail glanced down herself.)

PONYTAIL: What about it?

CHARLES: It's wrong.

PONYTAIL: *Why* is it?

CHARLES: Because now I can't see your delightful arse cheeks.

PONYTAIL: And that matters to do you, does it?

CHARLES: Well of course it does. Your rear is sensational and staring at it brought me joy.
(He shook his head.)

CHARLES: But now it's gone.

PONYTAIL: No, no; it's still there, I can assure you. You just can't see it.

CHARLES: Yes, and that's the problem. Stupid skirt!

PONYTAIL: Hey! I happen to like this skirt, mister!

CHARLES: I'm sure you do. As skirts go, it's lovely. Very lovely. Tight and short, just how I like them.

(He nodded.)

CHARLES: On a normal day, seeing a sexy woman like you in a skimpy miniskirt would bring me joy. But when she's used it to cover up her delightfully peachy arse which was formally on display... no. That's just not right. Why, it feels like a downgrade.

(He folded his arms bitterly.)

CHARLES: I insist that you take it off immediately!

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: No. This has to be a windup, surely. This is a role you're playing, isn't it? Nobody can *genuinely* be that perverted!

CHARLES: Perverted? Me??? How dare you?

PONYTAIL: Wow. Really?

CHARLES: There's nothing perverted about me, you insolent little minx. That's an outrageous accusation. I demand you apologise immediately!

PONYTAIL: Do you now?

CHARLES: Yes!

(He folded his arms indignantly.)

CHARLES: And nothing says I'm sorry like a long, hard blowjob.

PONYTAIL: I'm leaving now!

(She then turned and walked away. Mortified to see her go, Charles stepped forward.)

CHARLES: Fine. Just a hand-job then.

PONYTAIL: Bye, old man.

CHARLES: A grope then! Give me ten seconds to hammer out a tune on you milky bongos and we'll call it even!

(Ponytail glanced over her shoulder as she headed away.)

PONYTAIL: I tell you what, you can watch my arse as I leave. How's that?

CHARLES: Like I'm not already doing that!

PONYTAIL: There you go then. Have fun.

CHARLES: Yeah, right. I'd be having a hell lot *more* fun if you hadn't got changed! I miss your sexy, bare arse cheeks.

(Ponytail then headed around a corner and out of sight.)

CHARLES: I said I'd have been having a lot *more* fun if...

(He sighed.)

CHARLES: *She* doesn't care.

(He grimaced.)

CHARLES: She's actually kinda mean!

(He then headed away sighing to himself. Delighted to have left the strange old man behind, Ponytail paced onwards grinning to herself. As annoying as it was to be in the old man's company, his words had amused her. He truly was the sort of quirky character you'd only meet in a quiet backwater like Birdstone.)

PONYTAIL: This town is full of crazy-types. But... I like it.

(She then paced onwards until she arrived outside the chief's house. With a nod, she then strutted towards the open front door.)

PONYTAIL: Now I've narrowed down my list of suspects to one person, I'd better update him, I guess.

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: When I tell him who the spy is, he's going to be astonished.

(Having been standing just inside the door when she spoke, the chief gasped then hurriedly poked his head out of the doorway.)

CHIEF: Really? You know who it is already???

PONYTAIL: Yup. And tonight I'm going to end the fucker.

That night, beneath the brightest of full moons, Birdstone switched from working mode to relaxation mode. At this time of year, the nights in this mountain township were a joy to behold. The temperature was always just right. Worn out from a long day's toil, the exhausted citizens would, more often than not, relax on benches outside their homes. Chilling out beneath a lantern in the cooling breeze was something the citizens very much looked forward to doing after an arduous day at work. Even those who'd rather wile away their evenings at the taverns tended to do so outside. The pub gardens were always heaving at this time of year. During the harsh mountain winters, when they were all at home, huddled around log fires, they'd pine for these warmest of nights to return.

Making the most of this splendid summer evening, like so many others, Arthur Rhodes and his wife Barbara were sharing a bottle of wine on their rear patio. They weren't just chilling out, however. They had something to celebrate. Their son had been cleared of his perverted criminal charge earlier in the day and they couldn't have been more relieved. He'd always be an idiotic embarrassment to them, but at least he wasn't a disgrace. Overjoyed by the news, Arthur had cracked open the antique bottle of wine his wife had been keeping for a special occasion. She'd promptly called him every name under the sun before throwing her shoes at him. This was not the kind of special occasion she'd had in mind. With the bottle now open, however, they had no choice but to drink it. Arthur did so while nursing a black eye. His wife, however, had no sympathy for him whatsoever.

BARBARA: I'm sure it *is* still sore, Arthur. In fact I *hope* it is. But whining about it isn't going to make it any better, now is it?

ARTHUR: I never claimed it would!

(He ruffled his neck.)

ARTHUR: I only keep mentioning it every ten seconds because I want you to fully understand the extent of my pain. Throwing shoes at people is dangerous, woman!

BARBARA: Then you should count your blessings, because if I'd been in the *kitchen* when I heard you open that bottle, you'd have been hit by something *far* worse!

(She ruffled her neck.)

BARBARA: And you'd have had far worse injuries than a black eye to cry about.

ARTHUR: I'm not crying! I'm merely making sure you understand that I'm very cross with you.

BARBARA: Yes, well, I'm hardly enamoured with you right now. That bottle's a hundred years old! It was for a celebration! A *big* celebration! Not to mark your relief that our pointless halfwit of a son isn't a pervert! He's not *meant* to be a pervert! The fact he's not one, therefore, could have been marked with an ordinary, cheap bottle. But no. You had to...

(She glanced upwards quickly.)

BARBARA: Black shadowy figure!

ARTHUR: What???

BARBARA: A black shadowy figure just raced across the rooftop opposite.

(She smiled.)

BARBARA: Ponytail must be on patrol or something.

(Arthur gulped.)

ARTHUR: Shit! Um... anyway, it's too hot out here for me, so... bye!

(He then sprinted indoors.)

BARBARA: What the hell? Where are you going?

(Arthur called out from indoors.)

ARTHUR: Nothing!

BARBARA: Nothing?

ARTHUR: That's right! I haven't used that telescope for weeks! So it must have been someone who looks like me!

BARBARA: What the hell are you on about?

ARTHUR: Nothing, dear!

(He cleared his throat innocently.)

ARTHUR: But if Ponytail ever tells you I was ogling her and touching myself, I want you to know she's lying.

BARBARA: What? You... you did what???

(She then jumped out of her seat and raced inside with the wine bottle.)

BARBARA: I don't care how old this bottle is, I'm gonna clobber you!!!

ARTHUR: No!!!

BARBARA: Bloody looking at women at touching yourself; whatever next? Then you had to gall to act all horrified when everyone thought our *son* was a pervert!!!

ARTHUR: I did no such thing!!! Ponytail's lying!!!

BARBARA: She didn't say anything!!!

ARTHUR: Yes, but if she had, I've no doubt...

(A thudding sound ensued then Arthur fell silent.)

BARBARA: And stay there! Crumpled in a heap! Unconscious bastard!

(She then stepped outside again, placed the bottle down and took a seat.)

BARBARA: Idiot!

(She took a sip of her wine then glanced up at the opposing rooftop.)

BARBARA: Where was Ponytail off to in such a hurry I wonder.

(She then shrugged it off.)

BARBARA: Doesn't matter. As long as she doesn't try to steal my wine, she can go wherever she likes.

(Little did Barbara know, however, the person she'd seen dashing across the opposing rooftop wasn't Ponytail. It was in fact, a nefarious third party, urgently trying to reach a specific destination without being recognised. Sneaking around Birdstone on a summer

night, however, wasn't easy. With so many people out and about in so many different places, remaining unseen was an almighty challenge. Having run this frustrating gauntlet many times, however, the black-cloaked figure knew exactly how to *meet* this challenge. It required a lot of patience to hide in the moon's shadow then dart across the rooftop when whoever was below looked away, but patience was something the shadowy figure had in abundance. It didn't matter if the trip took ten minutes or three hours, as long as the trip was made. On this particular night, however, it only took an hour. Delighted to have reached the intended destination, the cloaked figure jumped down into the darkness beside the aviary then swept back her hood to reveal a head of long blonde hair. Satisfied nobody was about, she exhaled with relief then reached for the door of the aviary. Before she could quite open it, however, a friendly voice spoke up from behind her.)

PONYTAIL: Hello, spy.

(Given quite the start, the cloaked woman swiftly about turned.)

CANDICE: What the...

PONYTAIL: Up to no good again, are we, spy?

(She tutted.)

PONYTAIL: Honestly, you're such a degenerate.

(Candice giggled innocently.)

CANDICE: What are you talking about, Ponytail? Why do you keep calling me a spy?

(Ponytail smiled and leant forwards.)

PONYTAIL: Because you're a spy.

CANDICE: What? Seriously?

PONYTAIL: Yup!

(Candice giggled into her hand.)

CANDICE: You're crazy. What makes you think I'm a spy?

PONYTAIL: The fact you're a spy.

CANDICE: Right...

(She gave a stifled laugh.)

CANDICE: This is a joke, right? Look at me. I'm all sweet and girly. How can I *possibly* be a spy?

PONYTAIL: Quite easily. I'm *small* and girly and I'm a government agent. There's nothing a girl can't achieve if she's crazy enough.

CANDICE: I see.

(She chuckled.)

CANDICE: Crazy is definitely the word. I'm just a humble barmaid, Ponytail. All blonde, cute and innocent. And a bit slutty, if I'm honest, but in that skirt, you're not in a position to judge.

PONYTAIL: I wasn't going to. A girl should be allowed to dress as slutty as she likes. *I* certainly do. But that's not the issue here, is it? The issue is that you're a Nawsland spy

CANDICE: Ponytail, you've got it all wrong. I'm just an ordinary girl about town. As cute and innocent as they come.

PONYTAIL: Is that so?

CANDICE: Yes.

PONYTAIL: Interesting. Because you didn't *look* so cute and innocent when you dashed across the rooftops, all dressed in black as if you were trying to remain hidden from sight.

CANDICE: Ah, but looks can be deceptive. That was all *extremely* innocent.

(She shrugged.)

CANDICE: I just came to feed the birds, that's all.

PONYTAIL: Via the rooftops?

CANDICE: Yes! I have a reputation to uphold. I can't be seen caring for manky messenger birds, can I? Do you have any idea how *uncool* bird keepers are?

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: I've met Selwyn, yes.

CANDICE: Who?

PONYTAIL: Bird Bloke.

CANDICE: Then you know. It's seriously uncool.

PONYTAIL: Right. So that's your story is it? You sneaked across town all stealthily in the dead of night because you're a secret bird lover?

CANDICE: That's right.

PONYTAIL: You loitered among the shadows on people's rooftops, desperate to remain hidden, just so you could feed some overgrown pigeons on the quiet?

CANDICE: Absolutely.

(She nodded to affirm her words then suddenly started to laugh.)

CANDICE: Imagine if that was true. Like someone was *actually* like that.

(Ponytail also started to giggle.)

PONYTAIL: Right? Innocent librarian by day; clandestine bird feeder by night.

CANDICE: Ridiculous! Honestly. What was I thinking *there*? That was a terrible excuse.

(She exhaled.)

CANDICE: Bugger. You've caught me.

(She shrugged.)

CANDICE: Now what?

PONYTAIL: That's up to you. I can either take you *in* or take you *out*. Which one is entirely your choice.

CANDICE: Hmm... interesting. Just those two options, huh?

PONYTAIL: Yup!

CANDICE: Or is there a hidden third option where I get to fight and kill you?

PONYTAIL: That very much doesn't exist.

CANDICE: Unless I decide to *make* it exist, of course.

PONYTAIL: No, that'd just lead to me taking you out.

CANDICE: But not on a date, right?

PONYTAIL: Funnily enough, no.

CANDICE: Bugger. I'm not normally into girls, but for you I'd have made an exception.

PONYTAIL: I'm flattered.

CANDICE: You should be. I'm very sexy.

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Meh. I could do better.

CANDICE: Is that so?

PONYTAIL: If I was *into* girls, definitely.

CANDICE: And are you?

PONYTAIL: Not particularly.

(She flinched.)

PONYTAIL: Stop talking bollocks and decide. Incarceration or death; what's it gonna be?

(Candice mused to herself.)

CANDICE: Can I confer?

PONYTAIL: Who with?

CANDICE: Good point.

(Ponytail sighed.)

PONYTAIL: Stop stalling!

CANDICE: Fine. Fine... you win.

(She shrugged.)

CANDICE: Just tell me. How did you figure out it was me? And how did you know I'd come here tonight?

PONYTAIL: It wasn't *difficult* to figure out that the spy would come *here* tonight. The chief announced the town is strengthening its defences this morning. It was obvious the spy would try to let her bosses know that. Nawsland's plan was to kill the chief, and that's gonna be much harder if the town strengthens its defences.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: So I'm guessing whatever message you were going to send via these birds was along the lines of telling them to hurry up. To send more men and get the job done *before* the town is reinforced!

CANDICE: Nope! Wrong! A swing and a miss for the sexy, ponytailed assassin!

PONYTAIL: Oh?

CANDICE: Rather than asking them to attack the town again, I was going to ask for their permission to kill the chief myself. It's risky, obviously. Getting caught would ruin everything. For my plan to work, I need the chief to die, but I also need to continue innocently living here as a barmaid.

PONYTAIL: *Your* plan? What plan?

CANDICE: Wow. Really?

(She grimaced.)

CANDICE: So you figured out I'm the spy and that I was going to send a message, but you have no idea why?

PONYTAIL: I don't *need* to know why. I just have to stop you. Though I am curious.

CANDICE: You're bound to be.

(She smiled.)

CANDICE: I tell you what then. Before we fight, let's make a deal. I'll tell you why I want the chief dead, and *you* can tell *me* how the hell you figured out I'm a spy.

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Okay. I'm game.

CANDICE: You first.

PONYTAIL: Okay.

(She folded her arms.)

PONYTAIL: The scar on your hand gave you away.

CANDICE: What?

PONYTAIL: That's not a scar from a broken bottle. That's a scar from being pecked by an angry bird. And these messenger birds get very angry indeed when you try to take them out of their cage. They don't *want* to come out of captivity.

(She gestured to the cage.)

PONYTAIL: Kudos on the bird thing by the way. That was very clever.

CANDICE: Bird thing?

PONYTAIL: Slipping *your own* bird into the cage. Blanco.

CANDICE: Ah! Spotted that, did you?

PONYTAIL: Of course, I did. I know all about messenger birds, so it was bloody obvious.

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: To me, anyway. Not to Selwyn. Honestly, listening to him telling me what he knows about birds was hard work. He doesn't have a clue.

CANDICE: I know, right?

PONYTAIL: *He* thinks they naturally face the rising sun and that Blanco is an idiot for facing the wrong way. He's not though, is he? Messenger birds always face in the direction of the

last place they were in captivity. In Blanco's case, the nearest Nawsland army base, where you've been sending your messages.

CANDICE: Wow. Well done. Nice detective work, Ponytail.

(She smiled at Blanco.)

CANDICE: He's awesome. I let him go at night and he's back in the morning before anyone even knows he's been anywhere. It's perfect.

(She grimaced.)

CANDICE: Or it was. Now you've gone and ruined it.

(She sighed.)

CANDICE: Shame really. I really thought we'd end up being friends. Or better still, lovers.

PONYTAIL: Right...

(She rolled her eyes.)

PONYTAIL: Can you stop hitting on me, please? You don't even mean it.

CANDICE: Sorry. I can't help it. Flirting with everyone is all part of my spy training. As *you* well know. In the pub earlier, you flirted your arse off. You had all those losers eating out of the palm of your hand. You even flirted with *me*.

(She glanced to her enquiringly.)

CANDICE: Are you *sure* you're not into girls?

PONYTAIL: Candice...

CANDICE: Yeah, yeah, you like men; I know. But variety is the spice of life and...

PONYTAIL: Stop it!

CANDICE: Fine. But my offer remains on the table.

(She then made a kissy face at her. Ponytail just rolled her eyes again.)

PONYTAIL: Anyway... I kept up my end. You know how I knew you were the spy, and how I knew you'd come *here* tonight. So now you need to keep up *your* end!

(Candice swept back her cloak and poked out her backside.)

CANDICE: You like my end?

PONYTAIL: You can't help yourself, can you?

CANDICE: So they tell me.

(She then stood tall and nodded.)

CANDICE: Fine. I'll tell you what you want to know. It's the least I can do seeing as I'm going to kill you afterwards.

PONYTAIL: Right... creating your own third option, are you?

CANDICE: Like you didn't expect me to.

PONYTAIL: Touché. A fight to death it is then. But first...

CANDICE: You want to know why I want the chief dead, right?

PONYTAIL: That's right.

CANDICE: It's pretty simple really. If he dies, his number two will take his place.

PONYTAIL: Runcorn?

CANDICE: Yeah.

(She chuckled.)

CANDICE: He's so in love with me it's ridiculous.

PONYTAIL: Yeah, well... I gathered he has a thing for you. That much was apparent when I whispered in his ear earlier, but isn't he married?

CANDICE: Yeah, but I'm happy to overlook that fact.

PONYTAIL: Of course you are.

(She shook her head.)

PONYTAIL: So you want Runcorn to be the new chief, do you? Why???

CANDICE: Because I have him wrapped around my little finger. I can make him do whatever I want him to do. Or, more importantly, get him to show me whatever I want to *see*.

(She smiled.)

CANDICE: And town chiefs get briefings on all Lenthom's latest military tactics. All I'd need to do is give him a few glasses of wine and a blowjob, and he wouldn't be able to resist showing them to me.

PONYTAIL: Then you'd report it all to Nawsland.

CANDICE: Correct.

(She sighed.)

CANDICE: It's a shame the chief has to die to make it happen though. I kinda like the guy.

(She shook her head.)

CANDICE: Originally, I wanted *him* to be the source of my information. But no matter what I tried, do you think I could seduce him? I had Runcorn eating out of the palm of my hand within five minutes, but the chief? Nope. I tried everything to get him under my spell, but he just didn't want to know. It's like he's made of stone.

(She grimaced.)

CANDICE: Somewhere in his past, a woman must have *really* hurt that guy, because I couldn't get into his underpants with a hammer and a chisel.

(She shrugged.)

CANDICE: So I went to Runcorn instead. I figured his number two would know just as much as he does. Nope! The chief doesn't even tell *Runcorn* about the military updates!

(She held out her palms.)

CANDICE: So here we are. If the chief wasn't impossible to seduce. Or if the chief only confided in his second in command, we wouldn't be in this situation. But alas...

PONYTAIL: Candice?

CANDICE: Yes, cutie?

PONYTAIL: Are you telling me twenty eight civilians died the other day just because *you* couldn't get the chief into bed?

CANDICE: That's one way of looking at it.

PONYTAIL: And what's the other?

CANDICE: Twenty eight people died the other day, because I *can* get his replacement into bed.

(She grimaced.)

CANDICE: Which sounds really bad when you think about it. It makes me sound like a right slut.

(She furrowed her brow.)

CANDICE: But then who are *you* to judge? *You're* an intelligence officer! A *female* intelligence officer. How many men have *you* sucked off for information? It's what we're trained to do!

PONYTAIL: Maybe...

(She then raised her blades.)

PONYTAIL: But mostly we're trained to kill.

CANDICE: Yup. That too.

PONYTAIL: Still want that fight to the death? *Your* death.

(Candice smiled then yanked a sword from under her cloak.)

CANDICE: I don't plan to die today, sweetie.

PONYTAIL: Nor did the twenty-eight civilians you indirectly murdered.

CANDICE: That's different.

PONYTAIL: How?

CANDICE: I don't care about them.

(With that, she cast off her cloak then charged at Ponytail with her blade aloft. As always, Ponytail's first instinct was to zoom away and change the angle, before zooming back again. Having done that, however, she found herself flailing at air.)

PONYTAIL: What the hell?

(Standing some ten feet away, Candice chuckled.)

CANDICE: What? You didn't think you were the *only* person in the world who knows how to zoom, did you?

PONYTAIL: I didn't, no.

CANDICE: Well, you're not.

(She clicked her fingers with annoyance.)

CANDICE: Fuck. You were supposed to say yes.

PONYTAIL: I'd have been lying if I did.

CANDICE: Whatever.

(She pointed her sword at her.)

CANDICE: You're about to learn a very futile lesson in a minute, Ponytail.

PONYTAIL: Futile?

CANDICE: Yes! What you're about to learn is going to be useless to you, because you'll be dead. But you'll die knowing three things. One, I'm quicker than you. Two, I'm more skilled with a blade than you. And three...

(She gestured down at the tight, red, one-piece leather outfit she was wearing.)

CANDICE: My outfit is infinitely sexier than yours.

(Ponytail bit her lip.)

PONYTAIL: Damn it. That's really is a sexy outfit. But...

(She then charged away as fast as she could and leapt onto the nearest rooftop. Not about to let her get away, Candice raced after her.)

CANDICE: Come back here, you coward! Hey!!!

(She gave an exasperated sigh.)

CANDICE: So annoying. I thought she was tough. I even thought fighting her was going to be a challenge! I can't believe she's running away!

(She then charged onwards with a determined snarl in her face, bounding from rooftop to rooftop in pursuit of Ponytail. A few moments later, she watched her jump down into a well-lit street in the centre of town. Not about to let her get away, she hastened after her then jumped down into the same street, before performing a forward roll. Having jumped to her feet, she then spotted Ponytail staring back at her, poised and ready to fight.)

CANDICE: What did you run away for, you coward?

PONYTAIL: I didn't run away. I've moved us to where *I* want to fight.

CANDICE: In the high street? Why?

PONYTAIL: Because it's lighter here.

CANDICE: I see.

PONYTAIL: Plus, I told the chief that if you resisted arrest and decided to fight me, this is where we'd do it.

CANDICE: What? Why?

PONYTAIL: So they can all *see* us fight.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: The chief and all the towns other VIPs are watching from behind one of these windows, you see?

CANDICE: I see. We'd better make it bloody then. I do like to entertain.

PONYTAIL: Oh, me too.

CANDICE: Good, good.

(She raised an enquiring eyebrow.,)

CANDICE: *Before* we go at it, though; tell me why? Why did you want an *audience* for this fight? Are you *really* that much an attention whore? Couldn't you just be satisfied with knowing you caught the spy? Why make such an exhibition of it?

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: I just like being thorough. To leave no loose ends. Fighting here does that.

CANDICE: Does it now?

PONYTAIL: Absolutely. You've come here to fight *me*; a member of military intelligence! That *confirms* beyond any doubt to everyone watching that you *are* an enemy agent.

(She chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: So any fantasies you may have had about simply killing *me* then continuing with your ridiculous plan to exploit randy Runcorn have well and truly gone up in smoke.

(Candice shrugged.)

CANDICE: Meh. I had no such fantasies anyway.

(She smiled warmly.)

CANDICE: But I do plan to giggle fiendishly while I'm ripping out your spleen.

PONYTAIL: Yeah? Care to give it a go?

CANDICE: Yes; yes, I do.

(She then zoomed towards Ponytail at immense speed. Capable of matching her speeds, however, Ponytail deflected her sword with her blades then came back at her. Much to her annoyance, however, Candice's defences were every bit as effective as her own. As a result, the two of them spent the next minute or so trading lightning-fast, thwarted blows and screaming like angry wildcats, while they zoomed back and forth from one side of the street to the other. Watching on through one of the windows that faced out into the street, the chief couldn't help but grimace.)

CHIEF: Come and watch, she said. If she fights me, then you'll know she's the enemy, she said. Well, I've no doubt she's the enemy after what she said, but how the hell can anyone watch *this*? They're just a bloody blur! I haven't got the bloody foggiest what's going on! It's like a whirlwind gusting down the high street with hair and blades caught up in it!

(He glanced at Runcorn.)

CHIEF: Can *you* tell what's going on?

(He then furrowed his brow.)

CHIEF: Runcorn!!! Pay attention!!!

(Cowering in the corner while his wife battered him with a shoe, Runcorn whimpered.)

RUNCORN: I'd love to chief, but I'm rather busy right now!!!

WIFE: You complete bastard!!! I should have known something was going on!

RUNCORN: But, babe...

WIFE: Randy Runcorn, she said! What have you and that filthy barmaid been up to exactly???

RUNCORN: Nothing!

WIFE: Liar!

(The chief furrowed his brow at them.)

CHIEF: Am I to assume your son's birthday celebration is cancelled?

WIFE: Yes! Randy Runcorn here will be busy packing his suitcase!

CHIEF: Fair enough.

(He then glanced out of the window again.)

CHIEF: Yup. Still fighting. And I *still* can't tell who's winning!

(Sure enough, the ultra fast battle in the high street had shown no sign of abating. It had, in fact, grown in ferocity. Blessed with immense agility, the two battlers were bouncing off of walls and leaping unfathomably high into the air, whilst clamped together, desperately trying

to skewer one another. At one point, they leapt upwards thirty feet then descended in a spin that was accompanied by a rapid series of chimes from their blades. Still there was no deciding blow, and the swirling fight went on; descending down the high street in a blurred cloud. To the naked eye of the average spectator it was quite simply impossible to keep up with. The two fighters *inside* the intense swell of rage and murderous intent, however, had perfect clarity. A little too perfect. Able to clearly see each other's attacks coming, deflecting them hadn't even been a challenge. They were thwarting one another time after time. They were completely cancelling one another out and neither one of them had even come *close* to making a breakthrough. Getting somewhat sick of it, after a full three minutes of fighting, Candice took it upon herself to somersault backwards, out of the fray. Ponytail instantly struck a fighting stance then glowered into her eyes.)

PONYTAIL: You had enough?

(Candice scoffed.)

CANDICE: Of fighting you? No! Of being stuck in a stalemate? Yes!

PONYTAIL: Then what do you suggest we do about it?

CANDICE: I really don't know. But right now, we're too evenly matched and it's getting kinda pointless.

PONYTAIL: I see.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: You could always chop one of your legs off, I suppose. *Then* we wouldn't be even.

CANDICE: Interesting. It'd definitely make it less even, like you say, but *I'd* rather chop off one of *yours*.

PONYTAIL: Hmm... I'll pass.

CANDICE: Fuck.

(She gave her an almost respectful glance.)

CANDICE: You're good, Ponytail. Very good. I've never met anyone with the same skillset as *me* before. I thought I was a freak.

PONYTAIL: You are. Just not in the sense you meant.

CANDICE: How very witty.

(She shrugged.)

CANDICE: But you know exactly what I mean. How often do people like us meet our match? I mean, have you ever met anyone like us before?

PONYTAIL: I have, actually.

CANDICE: Oh? How many?

PONYTAIL: Just the one.

CANDICE: Did you kill her?

(Ponytail furrowed her brow.)

PONYTAIL: No. Why would I?

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: Last time I saw her, I gave her a hug and wished her luck.

CANDICE: Right...

(She shook her head.)

CANDICE: Well that was a mistake. People like us need to eliminate our rivals before they decide we're a threat and eliminate *us*. That's just the way of the world.

PONYTAIL: Your world, maybe. Not mine. I don't see her as a threat and she doesn't see me as one.

CANDICE: Then you're an idiot. Like I said, people like us...

PONYTAIL: Candice... sweetie... there's no such thing as people like *us*. You and I are not the same.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: For one, I couldn't live in a nice town, full of innocent people, and pretend to be their friend while simultaneously calling forth an army unit to kill them all. I just couldn't.

CANDICE: Then you're weak.

PONYTAIL: No, I'm just *not* a cunt.

CANDICE: That's how you see me, is it?

(Ponytail shrugged, matter-of-factly.)

CANDICE: I see. Then I guess the time for conversation is over. I mean, if you're just going to be rude...

(She then charged forth with her blades at the ready. At once, Ponytail firmed her stance then the two of them collided in a massive blur of dust and rage once again. Screams and chimes ensued as they zoomed down the street, locked together in fierce, hateful combat. This time, however, they broke apart after only fifty seconds.)

PONYTAIL: Hey! No!

(Candice shrugged.)

CANDICE: What?

PONYTAIL: You fucking kissed me!!!

CANDICE: Uh-huh.

PONYTAIL: Why???

CANDICE: I was just taking the piss, to be honest. There's no hope in hell of you besting me, so when the opportunity arose, I figured why not rub it in.

(She fluttered her eyelashes at her.)

CANDICE: How was it, baby?

PONYTAIL: Horrible! You slobbered!

CANDICE: I did not!

PONYTAIL: Yes, you did! You're a lousy kisser!

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: And quite frankly a second rate spy!

CANDICE: Second rate?

PONYTAIL: Yeah, you got caught!

CANDICE: Hmm... good point. Maybe I *am* a shit spy.

(She snarled.)

CANDICE: But how dare you criticise my kissing skills???

(Just then, a horrified voice rose up from around the corner. Rex had just been strolling towards the high street and he'd heard everything.)

REX: What??? Candice is a spy???

PONYTAIL: Aw, crap, it's bonehead.

CANDICE: Go away, muscles, this doesn't concern you!

PONYTAIL: Yes, she's a spy, but I'm dealing with it! Now bugger off.

CANDICE: Yeah, you're interrupting our battle to the death. Ponytail's death!

PONYTAIL: Now's she's fantasising.

CANDICE: That remains to be seen, but let's stick to the matter in hand, shall we?

(She wafted her hand towards the other end of town.)

CANDICE: Fuck off, Rex, this is none of your business!

(Rex growled.)

REX: Actually, woman, as the toughest fighter in all of Birdstone, I think you'll find it's *very much* my business!!!

(He then yanked a hunting knife from his belt and charged at her.)

REX: Prepare to feel pain, you weak and feeble woman, you!!!

(Highly amused by his ridiculously misplaced confidence, Candice allowed herself a brief chuckle. She then zoomed to her left, before zooming straight at him with her blade at the ready. It all happened so quickly, he didn't even see her go; let alone have time to react. In the blinking of an eye, she was upon him and her sword was flying towards his neck at immense speed. Only now did he notice she'd moved.)

REX: What the...

(Before Candice could quite decapitate him, however, Ponytail zoomed to his rescue. Snarling desperately, she just about managed to deflect Candice's sword away in time. If she'd arrived even a microsecond later, his neck and his head would have gone their separate ways. To *complete* the move, however, Ponytail had had to compromise *her own* safety. In order to get her blades in between Candice's sword and Rex's neck, she'd had to charge through the pair of them. In doing so, she'd tripped over Rex's toes. Moving at a ridiculous speed and unable to stop herself, she stumbled forth then banged her head on the support beam of the nearest house. Stunned, she dropped to the floor and let go of one of her blades.)

PONYTAIL: Ow.

(Not about to pass up such an opportunity, Candice squealed with delight.)

CANDICE: Chance!!!

(She then launched herself at her dazed foe with a gleefully murderous glint in her eye.)

CANDICE: You lose!!!

(With as much force as she could muster, she then lunged for Ponytail's heart. Still somewhat disorientated, Ponytail didn't even react. In that brief moment, she had no idea where she was, and was powerless to defend herself. Candice was literally singing inside. Rex's buffoonery had surely won her the fight. For the second time in a row, however, she didn't manage to land her blow. Once again, her sword was deflected by a pair of daggers. Knocked backwards by the rebuttal, she staggered a good ten feet, before managing to right herself. Having done so, her jaw dropped. Her killer blow had been thwarted by an unexpected third party. An unexpected party that was an exact, carbon-copy of Ponytail; albeit with red hair-streaks rather than blue.)

CANDICE: What??? What the... what the fuck? Two of you??? What is this? You can split into two entities??? Or is it some sort of weird cloning technique??? What the hell am I looking at???

(She snarled.)

CANDICE: Either way, you know that's cheating right?

(Ponytail scowled at her then allowed her doppelganger to pull her to her feet.)

PONYTAIL: Nice timing, Aya.

AYA: Perfect, some would say.

(She smiled.)

AYA: You okay?

PONYTAIL: Yeah. I was just dazed for a second, that's all.

CANDICE: Hey! I asked you a question! What the hell's...

(Suddenly Rex charged at her with his daggers aloft.)

REX: Die, you evil...

(Without even looking, Candice jumped and threw her leg out in his direction. One set of crushed testicles later and Rex was flat on the floor, entirely out of the fight. Not paying him any further heed, Candice then resumed.)

CANDICE: Well? What am I looking at here? What sort of weird technique are you using to create another you?

AYA: Who is this idiot, babe?

PONYTAIL: She's the spy.

AYA: I see. A bit dim, is she?

CANDICE: Excuse me?

AYA: We're identical twins, dipshit!

CANDICE: Oh...

(She giggled.)

CANDICE: Well that's tragic then. When I thought you'd cloned yourself somehow, I was seriously impressed. But no. Twins. Wearing matching outfits. That's so pathetically childish, I can't even find words for it.

(Aya looked to Ponytail.)

AYA: What's wrong with wearing matching outfits?

PONYTAIL: I have no idea.

AYA: And its not like it was deliberate. I just felt a sudden urge to change into this one this afternoon.

PONYTAIL: So did I. Just after lunch.

AYA: Same.

(They shrugged at Candice then spoke at the same time.)

BOTH: It's a twin thing.

CANDICE: That's creepy.

AYA: Meh. Nobody cares what you think, arse face!

CANDICE: I see.

(She looked to Ponytail.)

CANDICE: Your twin's kinda rude.

PONYTAIL: It runs in the family, arse face!

CANDICE: Ouch.

(She nodded then sunk into a fighting stance.)

CANDICE: Right. So now I have *two* of you to kill, do I? Two people who can zoom like me.

(She glanced at Ponytail.)

CANDICE: I'm assuming this is the person you referred to earlier, the one who can zoom like us. The one you hugged.

PONYTAIL: Yup.

CANDICE: Thought so.

(She nodded to herself.)

CANDICE: Well, I won't lie to you, this is going to be difficult for me. But *not* impossible.

PONYTAIL: Actually, impossible *would* be an apt description.

AYA: You're about to feel pain.

PONYTAIL: Immense pain.

AYA: To the point where I actually pity you.

PONYTAIL: I don't. Because of *her*, twenty-eight innocent civilians were killed.

AYA: Fuck. Really?

PONYTAIL: Yeah. I *thought* I could make it, but by the time I got here, the invasion had already started.

AYA: Shit. Just tell me the chief's okay.

PONYTAIL: He's fine. *That* part of her mission failed. And now she can pay the price for her actions.

AYA: I concur.

CANDICE: Wow. Twins are *seriously* creepy.

PONYTAIL: Thanks.

AYA: We get that a lot.

CANDICE: I'm sure you do.

(She smiled.)

CANDICE: Anyway, let's get started shall we? The sooner your army get busy writing those condolence letters to your parents, the better.

(She then zoomed forth into them. It was the last voluntary action of her entire life. Aya deflected her first and only strike while Ponytail set about her with her blade. Within seconds, she was paralysed from a series of precise wounds to her neck and spine. From that point onwards, all she could do was stand there and take whatever the lightning fast duo dished out. It was a death that redefined the word pain. Free to go to town on her, they did so with gusto and venom. Candice's screams were bloody-curdling. Right now, death would be a sweet relief. Mercifully, she didn't have to wait long for it. Performing a leap in perfect synchronicity with one another, they hoisted Candice twenty feet in the air, spun her upside down then speared her downwards again. They'd done so with a telepathic understanding of each other's intentions. No discussion required. Entirely on the same wavelength, they instinctively knew what they wanted to do and performed the move together with pinpoint precision and flawlessly accurate timing. Luckily for the citizens who'd gathered to watch, it all happened with such speed that they couldn't be sickened by what they were witnessing. The sound of Candice's skull shattering on the cobbles when they came back down, however, did make a few of them feel queasy. Job done, Ponytail and her sister then stepped back and let her corpse fall to the floor.)

AYA: That ought to do it.

PONYTAIL: I'd say so.

(The two of them then shared a loving hug.)

PONYTAIL: I missed you.

AYA: Same. It was horrible not having you around.

(They held their embrace for a good twenty seconds then Aya stepped back from the hug.)

AYA: That's everything then, is it?

PONYTAIL: The chief is alive, I ended the invasion and we've killed the spy; so yes.

AYA: Perfect.

(She grimaced.)

AYA: But now for the *bad* news...

PONYTAIL: How long?

AYA: About half an hour, I reckon.

PONYTAIL: Fuck. I'd better get organised then.

(She then strode towards the door of an adjacent house. Before she could reach it, however, it opened up and the chief came out, dragging Runcorn behind him.)

CHIEF: You can have him back when I'm finished with him, woman. Now take a breather, will you? You're going to wear that shoe out!

(Runcorn wife's replied furiously.)

WIFE: I don't bloody care! It that happens, I'll just have to hit him with the other one! Why do you think they come in pairs?

CHIEF: Because people generally have two feet. Now stay there, will you?

WIFE: Nope. I'm going home to make a start on changing the locks.

CHIEF: Jolly good. Come along, Runcorn.

RUNCORN: I'm one giant bruise.

CHIEF: Well... you should have thought of that before you started boning a sexy spy.

RUNCORN: I didn't know she was a spy.

CHIEF: Yes... but you knew she wasn't your wife.

(He then dragged him over to Ponytail and glanced over her shoulder to where Candice was laying in a pool of bloody.)

CHIEF: Is she?

PONYTAIL: Dead? Extremely so.

CHIEF: I see. Good, good.

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: This whole nightmare has been unbearable. A spy. A spy for pity's sake! We accepted her into our town, befriended her and treated her as one of our own, and all the while she was plotting against us.

(He shook his head.)

CHIEF: People like that are worse than vermin.

(He then nodded towards where Aya was smiling at him with wide-eyes.)

CHIEF: So... sisters, are you? Hello, there.

AYA: Hiya.

(The chief looked to Ponytail again.)

CHIEF: Let me tell you, I did not see *that* one coming. A surprise appearance from your double, just in the nick of time. I thought you were in deep trouble for a minute.

PONYTAIL: I was.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: But when the shit hits the fan, you can always rely on your family to come running.

(The chief furrowed his brow.)

CHIEF: Not in my experience! *My* family ran *away*!

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: But I won't burden you with my sadness, young Ponytail.

AYA: What? Young Ponytail?

PONYTAIL: It's a nickname. The *townsfolk* started calling me Ponytail and it kinda stuck.

AYA: Why? Why did they call you *that*?

PONYTAIL: Because I zoomed around thwarting the invasion then spent two days trying to investigate the spy from the shadows while I made sure there were no more Nawsland soldiers were in the area. All they ever saw was a blur and a ponytail then I vanished.

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: So my existence became something of an urban legend. The mysterious and elusive Ponytail.

AYA: Wow. An urban legend *and* a cool superhero name? You're so lucky.

PONYTAIL: Not really. This morning, I decided to make myself known; to flush out the spy by getting in among the townsfolk. The die was cast by then though. Most of them think my name is *actually* Ponytail.

AYA: Which is awesome if you ask me!

(She pouted.)

AYA: Jealous! I want a cool nickname now.

(The chief chuckled.)

CHIEF: Then tie your hair differently. *You* could be Twin Tails.

(They laughed together for a moment then Ponytail sighed.)

PONYTAIL: It's been fun, chief, but we have to go.

CHIEF: What? So soon?

PONYTAIL: We're needed elsewhere.

CHIEF: Bigger. But what if more Nawsland soldiers come?

AYA: Don't worry. Other agents are on their way.

CHIEF: Oh.

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: But I was rather fond of the one already here.

PONYTAIL: Ones. Plural. Meet Agent fifty-nine.

AYA: At your service.

CHIEF: Two of you? Fantastic. The powers that be *do* care about small towns after all.

PONYTAIL: Yeah...

(She sighed.)

PONYTAIL: Thanks for everything, Chief.

(She then swept forth and gave him a hug.)

CHIEF: Oh, well that's... that's against protocol... but... I'll allow it.

(Much to his bewilderment, Aya then swooped in and hugged him as well.)

CHIEF: What?

AYA: It's a twin thing.

PONYTAIL: What I do; she does.

AYA: And vice versa.

PONYTAIL: Yeah, that.

(They then stepped back and saluted him. The chief stood tall and saluted back.)

CHIEF: For the everlasting grace of Lenthom.

(Ponytail and Aya replied in unison.)

BOTH: The everlasting grace of Lenthom.

(They then nodded at the chief before racing away, deeper into the town.)

CHIEF: Where are they going? I thought they were leaving town.

(He shrugged.)

CHIEF: She's probably gone to fetch her bag.

(He then glowered at Runcorn.)

CHIEF: Now... you and I need to have a brief chat, mister!

(Runcorn could only gulp.)

RUNCORN: Yes... I figured that would be the case. I'm fired, aren't I?

CHIEF: Not quite. But you *are* skating on very thin ice! So don't let it happen again!!! In future, think before you take your underpants off! If a sexy, young woman comes onto you, there has to be a reason for it. And it's *not* because she can't resist you! Women find *you* very easy to resist! She'll only come onto you if she wants something.

RUNCORN: I realise that, sir. I do. And what can I tell you? I feel like a fool.

CHIEF: Yes, well, just consider yourself lucky nothing came of it. You *had* no secrets to share. But one day you might become chief! And you can't go telling all our nation's secrets to every floozy with big tits who happens to tickle your fancy! Now get out of my sight!

RUNCORN: Sir!

(He then started to pace away.)

CHIEF: Now come back again!

(He shrugged.)

CHIEF: You and I have work to do.

Having left the scene of her victory behind, Ponytail was racing down Swan Street with her sister at her side. Aya thought they were heading for a back exit to the town and was happy to follow her lead. When Ponytail slowed down then raced into the house marked number twelve, however, her brow furrowed.

AYA: What are you doing? We haven't got time to piss about!

(Ponytail then re-emerged with her bag over her shoulder.)

PONYTAIL: Calm down, will you? I was just collecting my bag. Now we can leave.

AYA: Thank fuck.

(Ponytail smiled.)

PONYTAIL: We just need to make one more stop first.

AYA: Seriously?

PONYTAIL: It's important!

AYA: I'd better fucking be. We need to get out of here, missy!

PONYTAIL: And we will. Just as soon as I'm done.

(With that, she raced off back up the road again. Aya followed on with a furrowed brow.)

AYA: Wherever it is you're taking me, can we at least take the short route?

PONYTAIL: Fine!

(She then jumped up onto the nearest rooftop. Aya swiftly followed suit. The two of them charged forth, across dozens of rooftops, before leaping an entire street in order to reach the rooftops opposite. It was a process they repeated several times until they made it to the top of a medium sized house at the back of the town. At this point, Ponytail jumped down then nodded towards the back window.)

PONYTAIL: In here!

(Aya leapt down then threw her hands to her hips.)

AYA: What for?

PONYTAIL: Because...

AYA: Forget it! I don't want to know. Just hurry up! We need to get out of town!!!

PONYTAIL: And we will. Just... stop moaning and let me do what needs to be done!

AYA: Oh... fine.

(She sighed.)

AYA: Who's house is this anyway?

PONYTAIL: The chief's. I need to leave him a message. There's something I need to say to him that I *didn't* want to say in front of Runcorn.

(Aya looked enlightened.)

AYA: Right. Gotcha. That's fair.

PONYTAIL: Thank you. Now, come on!

(Ponytail then hurried to the window, forced it open and climbed inside. Aya swiftly climbed in after her. They remained inside for a full minute, at which point, Ponytail hurried back out of the window again. Hot on her heels, Aya leapt out of the window, rolled then leapt to her feet again.)

PONYTAIL: Okay. Now we can go!

AYA: And you're sure, are you? That's everything, is it? No more loose ends to tie up?

PONYTAIL: Nope. We're good to go.

AYA: Cool.

(She nodded.)

AYA: Then lead the way.

PONYTAIL: Now that I can do.

(She then charged forth, leapt on the nearest rooftop and took off across the town. Within seconds, they were half way across Birdstone, having leapt across streets and zoomed along the top of terraces at immense speed. Just when the town's perimeter fence came into sight, however, Ponytail slowed to a halt again. Getting rather annoyed, Aya stopped at her side then pouted at her angrily.)

AYA: Why have we stopped? What possible reason could...

(Ponytail glanced at her briefly then smiled.)

PONYTAIL: I just need thirty seconds.

AYA: What the hell for???

PONYTAIL: Just... be patient! I'll be back before you know it!

(She then leapt down from the rooftop, landing beside a group of four people who'd gathered on the street corner below. Watching on, Aya rolled her eyes then sat down.)

AYA: I'm gonna wallop her one day.

(Down below her, at this time, Ponytail was smiling warmly at the four townsfolk before her. None of them were smiling back at her, however. Having not expected her to drop from the sky unannounced, they were all clutching their chests and gasping for air.)

FRANK: You scared the crap out of me!

CASSIE: New knickers, please!

ELEANOR: I've never been so scared in all my life. And I thought I was gonna die two days ago.

MORRIS: Right? I very nearly soiled myself.

(Ponytail grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: Sorry, guys.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Look, I don't have long. I'm needed elsewhere. I just wanted to thank you for escorting me today.

(Morris furrowed his brow.)

MORRIS: Yes, because nothing says thank you quite like ditching someone at the first available opportunity.

PONYTAIL: I was hunting for a spy. Of course I ditched you. The *last* thing I needed was an entourage travelling with me. If she'd attacked me in the middle of my investigation, you'd all have been in mortal danger.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: It was something I had to do alone to keep everyone safe.

MORRIS: Yes, well, if it's forgiveness you're looking for, you can forget it. Come on, chaps.

(He then strode away. Alone. The others stepped forward to engage Ponytail.)

CASSIE: We understand.

FRANK: Absolutely. That makes perfect sense.

ELEANOR: It does. So there's absolutely no need to apologise.

MORRIS: Traitors!!!

(He then stormed off.)

FRANK: Forgive him, he's highly...

CASSIE: Unintelligent.

FRANK: Strung. I was gonna say strung.

(He shrugged.)

FRANK: But yeah. For a wealthy, well-educated fella, he's a bit of a cock.

PONYTAIL: Right...

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Anyway, before I go, I just want to you know that your kindness was appreciated. As a stranger in town it was nice to be so readily accepted. Thank you.

CASSIE: Aw...

(She beamed.)

CASSIE: I feel another group hug coming on.

ELEANOR: Can we?

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: Sure. Why not?

ELEANOR: Yay!

(Cassie and Eleanor then zoomed in and hugged her. Frank, on the other hand, took a step back.)

FRANK: I know my place. Group hugs are a woman only affair.

(Ponytail smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Just get in here, you.

FRANK: What? Really?

ELEANOR: Come on, Frank.

(Wearing a wide smile, Frank hurried in then joined in the hug.)

CASSIE: This is nice.

PONYTAIL: Yup. But if there's any groping, Frank's going to feel pain.

FRANK: Frank knows!

(Everyone chuckled then Ponytail pulled away from the hug.)

PONYTAIL: Anyway, let's not prolong things. I have to get going.

(She looked to Frank.)

PONYTAIL: Make sure those sons of yours don't work you too hard.

FRANK: They wouldn't dare.

(Ponytail then looked to Cassie.)

PONYTAIL: I hope you find the man of your dreams soon, love.

CASSIE: I already have. But he hates me.

FRANK: She means Rex.

PONYTAIL: Really?

(She placed a loving hand on Cassie's shoulder.)

PONYTAIL: That's the bonehead, right? All muscles, no brain.

CASSIE: Pretty much.

PONYTAIL: You can do better. A million times better. In fact, I'm hard pushed to think of anyone worse. Find a *nice* guy instead, yeah? That's my advice.

CASSIE: Well... maybe.

(Ponytail then looked to Eleanor.)

PONYTAIL: Next time I come to Birdstone, I'm gonna look you up, Eleanor. I want to see how awesomely your kids turn out.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: If they're even *half* as nice as you then you've done okay.

ELEANOR: That's so sweet. Thanks, Ponytail.

PONYTAIL: You're welcome.

(She nodded.)

PONYTAIL: Anyway...

(Just then, Portman dived onto the scene and grabbed Ponytail's foot.)

PORTMAN: Got her!!! I've caught the shoe thief!!!

(Everyone groaned.)

PORTMAN: Call the police!!!

PONYTAIL: Um... strange bloke... why are you hugging my ankles?

FRANK: Leave it to me, Ponytail.

(He knelt at Portman's side.)

FRANK: You weren't looking for a shoe thief. You were looking for high-heels that *might* have just belonged to the town's saviour.

PORTMAN: What?

FRANK: Just let the nice lady go, will you?

(Portman grimaced.)

PORTMAN: But... you told me to find the person in high-heels... who... come to think of it... wasn't she on *our* side?

FRANK: Yes. Yes, she was. You got it all mixed up in your brain again, didn't you?

PORTMAN: Um...

FRANK: Now let her go.

PORTMAN: Right...

(He let go of Ponytail's foot then glanced up at her from the ground.)

PORTMAN: Sorry, miss.

(His eyes then glazed over.)

PORTMAN: She's got no underwear on.

ELEANOR: Portman!!!

PORTMAN: But she hasn't! I can see her cun...

CASSIE: Tree!!! He meant country...um... side! He can see the countryside.

PORTMAN: I can?

FRANK: Just get up, will you?

(Portman slowly climbed to his feet.)

PORTMAN: Um... so... is she the criminal or not? I don't get it.

ELEANOR: Does it matter? You quit the committee anyway.

FRANK: So your shoe-related mission was cancelled.

PORTMAN: Oh.

(He sighed.)

PORTMAN: Fuck it. Might as well go home then.

(He then proceeded to wander off.)

FRANK: Right...

(He sighed.)

FRANK: Sorry about that, Ponytail. He really is an idiot.

CASSIE: Yeah...

(She then glanced at Ponytail enquiringly.)

CASSIE: So... are you really, like... lacking underwear?

PONYTAIL: Not at all.

(She chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: I have underwear in my bag.

(Everyone giggled together then Ponytail nodded.)

PONYTAIL: But before you assume anything kinky, I'm likely to be out and about in the wilderness for a while and I didn't bring a spare pair.

(She shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: And if my last training exercise taught me anything, it's that when you're away for weeks and weeks on end and keep the same pair knickers on the entire time, they start to get a bit...

ELEANOR: Crusty and horrible?

PONYTAIL: Exactly. I won't be making *that* mistake again.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Anyway, I'd better get a move on. I'm *actually* in a bit of a hurry.

ELEANOR: Oh? Well, if you're in a hurry, love, I could always lend you some flat shoes.

PONYTAIL: That's kind of you, Eleanor, but no thanks. I can't walk in them things.

ELEANOR: Eh?

(Ponytail shrugged.)

PONYTAIL: I'm not like other girls.

ELEANOR: Right...

PONYTAIL: Anyway... once again... thanks for everything, guys. You're all lovely people and I really hope we can meet again soon.

FRANK: And I...

(He then hung his head in defeat. At the same time, Cassie and Eleanor sighed. Ponytail had leapt on the roof and vanished from sight. Having completed her goodbyes she was now charging towards the edge of town at her miffed sister's side. Trying to tune out her complaints, she leapt the fence then the two of them sprinted off down the mountainside.

Whether they'd ever return to Birdstone remained to be seen. Left behind, Frank, Cassie and Eleanor sighed repeatedly then offered one another consoling smiles.)

FRANK: So... she's gone.

CASSIE: For how long I wonder.

ELEANOR: Well... she did say next time she comes to Birdstone she'll look me up, so... not forever.

FRANK: I hope not anyway.

(He smiled.)

FRANK: I'd have liked to have done something for her, you know?

CASSIE: Like what?

FRANK: I don't know. I mean, what can you give the person who gave you a second chance at life? You can never fully repay something like that. It would have been nice to give her something though. I feel like I owe her.

ELEANOR: You do. We all do.

CASSIE: We owe her everything. And I mean everything. Think about it, guys. We shouldn't even be alive right now. We were done for, but we've got another chance because of her. So every moment of happiness we'll *have* from now until we die is down to her. I mean, that's huge.

ELEANOR: Right? It's just... well it's everything.

(She exhaled.)

ELEANOR: She really is the *true* definition of a hero. Not like the ones you see in those silly books with the drawings.

FRANK: Oh, definitely.

(He smiled.)

FRANK: I guess the saying about heroes is spot on. They don't *all* wear capes.

CASSIE: Yup.

(She smirked.)

CASSIE: Or indeed underwear.

(The three of them shared an amused chuckle before heading away up the street.)

FRANK: Let's go to The Nest and drink a toast in her honour.

CASSIE: Sure.

ELEANOR: Why not?

(She nodded.)

ELEANOR: And hopefully, one glorious day, she'll be able to come back and have a drink *with* us.

FRANK: I'll drink to that, Eleanor.

(He smiled.)

FRANK: I'd like nothing more.

Twenty five minutes later, on the moonlit high street, the citizens of Birdstone found themselves engaged in a clean up operation. Ponytail's fight with Candice had resulted in dozens of dented and broken walls; all of which needed to be attended to. There was also a lot of blood to clean up. Not about to shirk away and let his citizens do all the work, the chief was busy overseeing the operation. As part of his punishment, Runcorn had been given the unenviable task of disposing of Candice's body. It was a task he was struggling to complete. He'd found a stretcher and a willing volunteer to help him carry it, but getting her corpse onto the stretcher in the first place was proving quite the chore. Unable to look at her dented and smashed head without throwing up, he'd spent longer cleaning up his own vomit than he had

performing the task he'd been assigned. Not about to let him off any time soon, however, the chief barked at him from across the road.

CHIEF: If I have to come over there and do it myself, Runcorn, you *will* be fired! You're on your final chance remember!

(Runcorn whimpered at him.)

RUNCORN: Yes, chief!

CHIEF: Good! Now hurry up.

(He then folded his arms and glanced to where Rex was painting the wall next to him.)

CHIEF: Painting, Rex?

REX: You have a good eye, Chief.

CHIEF: Don't be facetious, man.

REX: Sorry.

CHIEF: I was only remarking on it because it seems like a waste of your talents. You should be *fixing* the walls, not painting them.

REX: And normally I'd be delighted to fix them, but...

(He grimaced.)

REX: Woodwork can be strenuous and I have an injury.

CHIEF: Injury?

(He looked enlightened.)

CHIEF: Oh, that's right. From where Candice kicked you in the cock.

REX: It was a dirty, unfair move!

CHIEF: Well, yes. No more than you deserved though. You almost got Ponytail killed.

(He furrowed his brow.)

CHIEF: Idiot. She was doing perfectly well, then *you* came along acting like the hero. In saving *you*, she almost lost *her own* life! Twat. In future, stick to fighting bears.

(Rex growled under his breath.)

REX: I'll fight *you* in a minute!

CHIEF: I'm not deaf, Rex! You...

(Just then, everyone on the high street gasped in awe. At once, the chief glanced up then performed a double take. Five burley men, one of whom was dressed in a Lenthom Army officer's uniform had entered the town. Wary of strangers, the townsfolk all watched them nervously as they strode forth down the high street. Not about to let them unsettle the people any further, the chief furrowed his brow then stepped forwards.)

CHIEF: Excuse me...

(The leader of the men, Commander Croxley glanced at him sternly.)

CROXLEY: Who's in charge here???

CHIEF: That would be me!

CROXLEY: Incorrect! That would be me! Now listen up!

(He nodded sternly.)

CROXLEY: I'm looking for two women! Tiny in height, ample in the breast department and sporting very long hair.

(The chief raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

CHIEF: Tiny and large-breasted with long hair? Do you mean Ponytail?

CROXLEY: What? Oh. They may have *had* ponytails, yes.

CHIEF: Sorry. I meant, do you mean Agents Sixty and Fifty-Nine?

(Croxley stepped right up to him.)

CROXLEY: That's exactly who I mean! Where are they? Are they here somewhere?

CHIEF: Well... they *were*.

CROXLEY: How long ago? And where did they go?

(The chief pointed to a side street.)

CHIEF: They ran that way about half an hour ago, but...

(Before he could explain that the two women in question may well have left town by now, Croxley barked out orders to his four burley subordinates.)

CROXLEY: They're in town somewhere! Hunt the bitches down, boys! Let's end this fucking nightmare.

(The chief grimaced. Quite obviously something wasn't right. Ponytail and her sister were Birdstone's heroes, they were very much on his side; the side of Lenthom; and yet this army officer was making them sound like the enemy. In that moment, he resolved himself to not telling the army officer anything else until he knew *exactly* what was going on. As such, he folded his arms and glowered at Croxley.)

CHIEF: What's going on, officer?

CROXLEY: Commander!

CHIEF: The question still applies!

CROXLEY: I don't have to explain myself to you!

CHIEF: Actually, according to section one hundred and seven, paragraph six of the military code of conduct, you do.

CROXLEY: Excuse me?

CHIEF: When conducting an operation in a town not currently under the military's jurisdiction, the chief has to be kept informed at all times. And I mean informed! Of everything!

CROXLEY: Does he now?

CHIEF: Yes!

CROXLEY: That's a thing, is it?

CHIEF: Yes!

(Croxley sighed.)

CROXLEY: Fine. Why not?

(He then went and sat down on a nearby bench.)

CROXLEY: Please. Join me. I don't care what the law says. I wouldn't *normally* share anything with a town chief unless I absolutely had to, but in this case I'm willing to make an exception. Not out of respect for you, you understand.

(He sighed heavily.)

CROXLEY: I just feel like a damned good rant might do me good.

(The chief took a seat then glanced to where Croxley was shaking his head.)

CROXLEY: It's a mess chief. A mess like you wouldn't believe.

(He flinched.)

CROXLEY: But before we get into that, I have to warn you, old chap, the Nawsland Army plan to send a unit here to bump you off. You'll also be horrified to hear there's a spy in your midst.

(The chief grimaced.)

CHIEF: Another enemy unit coming? Agent Sixty only polished one off two days ago.

CROXLEY: Wait. What?

CHIEF: You heard me. Agent Sixty defeated a Nawsland unit two days ago. By herself! And she already killed the spy.

(He nodded across the high street.)

CHIEF: See that pale looking fellow throwing up over there?

CROXLEY: Yeah.

CHIEF: That's the spy's corpse by his foot.

(Croxley glanced at him emptily.)

CROXLEY: Agent Sixty did that?

CHIEF: Yes.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: Actually, Agent Fifty-Nine helped her with that one. Agent Sixty defeated *the invasion* single-handedly though.

CROXLEY: I see.

(He offered him half a smile.)

CROXLEY: Ignore my warning then. It seems the enemy's plans have already been thwarted.

CHIEF: So there isn't an imminent *second* wave of invaders coming?

CROXLEY: Not that I know of, no.

(He then sat back and sighed.)

CROXLEY: Well, that's something, I suppose. At least Agent Sixty completed the mission. It doesn't make *my* life any easier though. I should have locked those little bitches in the brig when I had the chance.

CHIEF: Um... captain? May I *call* you captain?

CROXLEY: Only if *I* can call *you* Lady Jemima.

CHIEF: What?

CROXLEY: I'm a commander!

CHIEF: Oh. I apologise.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: Commander, if you don't mind me saying, I'm a little confused here. You seem to be absolutely livid that the agents you sent us have done their job with the utmost professionalism and excellence. What gives?

(Croxley furrowed his brow.)

CROXLEY: I'll tell *you* what gives, Lady Jemima.

CHIEF: Chief!

CROXLEY: I know. I was feeling petty and vengeful.

CHIEF: Fair enough.

CROXLEY: Allow me start over.

CHIEF: Very well.

CROXLEY: I'll tell *you* what gives, Chief.

(He seethed.)

CROXLEY: I didn't send *those* two!

CHIEF: What?

CROXLEY: You heard me.

(He shook his head.)

CROXLEY: Three days ago, an assignment was put up on the board at HQ; defend Birdstone from an enemy unit then seek out a spy living in the town. As always, several of my agents asked to have it assigned to *them*. Including Agents Fifty-Nine and Sixty. Of course they did. Those two little buggers apply for *every* bloody job. They were especially keen to get *this* assignment, however. They practically begged me for it!

(He scoffed.)

CROXLEY: Obviously, I told them to bugger off and assigned it to Agents Twenty-Three and Forty-Seven instead. I mean, like I was going to send *women* to do it. Good god no. Could you imagine? Imagine being the chief of a town like this...

CHIEF: I *am* the chief of a town like this.

CROXLEY: Let me finish!

(He rolled his eyes.)

CROXLEY: Imagine being the chief of a town like this, and in your time of need, when you're crying out for military assistance, they send you a pair of tiny, large-breasted bimbos! You'd be fucking livid!

(The chief just scowled at him. He didn't like the commander's rhetoric one bit. These two young ladies were the heroes of his town and hearing them being besmirched by the man who was meant to be their leader was infuriating. Blissfully unaware of the scornful glance he was receiving, however, Croxley glanced skywards then continued.)

CROXLEY: Saying no was a forgone conclusion. Of course it was. There was no way I was going to give the job to *those* two.

(He sighed.)

CROXLEY: So, like I said, I chose Agents Twenty-Three and Forty-Seven. And *that* should have been the end of the matter. It was over. The decision had been made.

(He gritted his teeth.)

CROXLEY: But no. Those two little shits had other ideas.

(He shook his head despondently.)

CROXLEY: Four hours after assigning the task, I asked Agent Forty-Seven why the hell he hadn't left yet! He said he couldn't find Agent Twenty-Three! So I helped him search. Another two hours later, we found him unconscious in a cupboard! Agent Fifty-Nine had promised him a fumble before he left. Rather than delivering, however, she'd knocked him the fuck out!

CHIEF: You're kidding!

CROXLEY: No, I'm fucking not. The little bitch did it to delay him! And so began a misery than went on for the next three fucking days!

CHIEF: Misery?

CROXLEY: Sabotage, chief! Fucking sabotage!

(He shook his fist.)

CROXLEY: Clearly Agents Fifty-Nine and Sixty got sick of being overlooked and decided to take matters into their own hands. They deserted!

(The chief was astonished.)

CHIEF: What???

CROXLEY: You heard me! They stole some horses and fucked out of out of the base.

Clearly their plan was to complete the Birdstone mission themselves, just to prove to me they're capable of such tasks.

(The chief shrugged.)

CHIEF: Job done then. They were excellent.

CROXLEY: Shut up, you!

CHIEF: Excuse me???

CROXLEY: Sorry; that was uncalled for. I'm just angry, that's all.

(He growled.)

CROXLEY: From what you're telling me, Agent Sixty came straight here as soon as possible to do the mission.

CHIEF: It would seem so, yes.

CROXLEY: While Agent Fifty-Nine...

(He pounded his fists furiously.)

CROXLEY: That little fucker stayed back just to piss in my beer!!!

CHIEF: Oh, god. Not literally I hope.

CROXLEY: Of course not!

(He sighed with frustration.)

CROXLEY: When I realised they'd deserted, I brought in my two best agents, Agent Six and Agent Seven. Their orders being to retrieve the nauseating little bitches as soon as possible. So we set out. Myself and four agents. Two to do the mission in Birdstone and the other two to retrieve the deserters with myself as a witness. Well, seeing as we were all heading for Birdstone it made sense for us to travel together in a carriage.

(He sneered.)

CROXLEY: That little shit sabotaged us every step of the way! Three days it took us to get here!!! It *should* take half a day!

CHIEF: Blimey. How did she manage that?

(Croxley sighed.)

CROXLEY: Skills, chief. Bloody skills. Weird, unconventional skills.

(He gave the chief a sideways glance.)

CROXLEY: Did you know it's possible to loosen a cartwheel, just by throwing a stone at it?

CHIEF: I didn't, no.

CHIEF: Nor did I. But I fucking do now. That little cunt did it four times! Honest to god, she used every tactic at her disposal to slow us down. I'm guessing she kept riding ahead of us and waiting for us to catch up, so she could do it again. And every time she did something, Agents Six and Seven charged into the woods to find her. Nothing. No sign. She's just too fucking quick!

CHIEF: Sounds like you had a torrid time.

CROXLEY: Torrid doesn't even begin to describe it. After thirty excruciating hours of delays and petty annoyances, all caused by that boob-heavy nuisance, we decided to set up camp for the night. We were exhausted.

(He groaned.)

CROXLEY: Well that was a mistake.

(He clenched his fists.)

CROXLEY: We woke up sealed in our tent! We had to cut our way out! And guess what?

CHIEF: No horses?

CROXLEY: That's right! During the night, she freed the horses, secured the front of our tent and... and...

(He pouted.)

CROXLEY: Scratched "you suck" into the side of our carriage.

CHIEF: Wow. Cheap shot.

CROXLEY: It was, yes, but what did you expect? Cheap girl.

CHIEF: Not cool, commander.

CROXLEY: I don't care. She deserves every insult I throw at her! We had to walk miles to the nearest stables and my feet were bloody killing me.

(He shook his head then glanced at the chief.)

CROXLEY: Tell me, when did Agent Fifty-Nine arrive *here*?

CHIEF: Less than an hour ago, I'd say.

CROXLEY: I see. Before that, she was probably keeping vigil outside the town waiting for us to get close, so she could come in and warn her sister.

(He snarled.)

CROXLEY: That streaky-haired tart ran a sabotage operation on us every step on the way, just to allow her sister time to complete the mission. Bitch!

(He then sat back and smirked.)

CROXLEY: But if those two think this is going to improve their standing, the joke's on them. As impressive as they've been, I'm not going to say well done and start giving them missions, am I? They deserted! That's jail time. And I'm going to make sure they serve a lot of it! They've humiliated me, chief. Unforgivable!

(The chief looked at him blankly.)

CHIEF: Hmm... you know... I kind of feel like you're missing an opportunity here.

CROXLEY: What?

CHIEF: You said Agents Six and Seven were your best agents.

CROXLEY: That's right.

CHIEF: Yet Agent Fifty-Nine made you all look like idiots!

CROXLEY: Steady on!

CHIEF: I'm serious. Clearly Agents Six and Seven aren't your best agents, are they? If they were they'd have bested her.

(He shrugged.)

CHIEF: Seems to me, Agents Fifty-Nine and Sixty are your best agents.

(Croxley scoffed.)

CROXLEY: They're women!

CHIEF: I had spotted that, yes.

CROXLEY: With boobs.

CHIEF: Correct.

CROXLEY: Bereft of penises.

CHIEF: I should imagine so, yes.

(He shrugged.)

CHIEF: But they also have immense skills. Skills you could use to our army's advantage.

CROXLEY: Well... not really. It's too late for that now, you see?

(He shrugged.)

CROXLEY: I already reported their desertion and there's an arrest warrant out on them. The only place they'll be going is jail.

(He gave a stifled laugh.)

CROXLEY: So this plan of theirs to prove themselves in the field by ignoring my orders and doing the job I denied them, has backfired somewhat. They've made themselves fugitives; not heroes.

CHIEF: Well...

(He smiled.)

CHIEF: After what they did for this town, they'll always be heroes here.

CROXLEY: Then you're all cunts.

CHIEF: Seriously?

CROXLEY: Yes! Those two bitches might have well have ruined my career!

CHIEF: They saved a whole town, commander. That's way more important than your career!

CROXLEY: To you, maybe.

(He then sat back and forced a smile.)

CROXLEY: Such a shit situation. If I don't recover those two little buggers, I'm done for. I really should have...

CHIEF: Treated them better?

CROXLEY: Worked harder to break their spirit.

CHIEF: Right...

(Croxley ruffled his neck.)

CROXLEY: Besides, I didn't treat them *that* poorly. Not really.

CHIEF: Why do I find that somewhat hard to believe?

CROXLEY: Because you're an asshole.

CHIEF: Hey!

CROXLEY: What? If you don't like it, don't say horrible things. I treated them very well compared to *some* people.

(He nodded then offered the chief a smile. His shoulders then slumped.)

CROXLEY: Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? I treated them appallingly. I didn't respect them one iota. I just saw them as women with weird speed skills. Nothing more.

(He pouted.)

CROXLEY: This trip has really opened my eyes, Chief. I missed all the signs! All of them! And as the leader of the special agent unit that's appalling. Why did I not see it?

CHIEF: Well...

CROXLEY: You were right. Fifty-Nine and Sixty *are* my best agents! By far! And I didn't even fucking notice. And yet... the signs were there in abundance!

CHIEF: I should imagine they were.

CROXLEY: They were! They really were! Good god. What a prick. If *I* was my boss, I'd fire me right now! I really would.

(He whimpered.)

CROXLEY: They came to me at the age of fifteen from a military school. Apparently, they'd *had* to be raised in a disciplined environment, because with their powers, a lack of discipline might have been dangerous. So they were given a disciplined upbringing from a very early age. Well, because of that, *I* inherited two polite and well-spoken young ladies. The only two females in an all male army base. Well you can imagine, can't you? Two cute girls in a sea of randy soldiers! They were considered fair game. By the end of the first day, they were cornered by a group of eight blokes, eager to help themselves.

(He grimaced.)

CROXLEY: All eight of them ended up in hospital.

CHIEF: Really?

CROXLEY: Yes! I wasn't there, but by all accounts they fought together like a well-oiled machine. Two brains working as one. They were coordinated! Synchronised! They beat those eight morons savagely, working telepathically almost, at great speed. No man has ever *dared* to get amorous with them since.

(He palmed his forehead.)

CROXLEY: That's what they're capable of! And yet somehow I still didn't realise their potential! It's taken for them to desert and humiliate me in the course of duty for me to wake up and realise what incredible soldiers I had.

(The chief nodded.)

CHIEF: Tragic.

CROXLEY: Too tragic. The worst being, *they're* the fuckers who deserted and *I'm* the one who's going to get in deep shit for it.

(The chief grimaced.)

CHIEF: Yup. And yet, none of that would have happened if you'd just given them a mission to do now and again.

CROXLEY: Well...

(He ruffled his neck.)

CROXLEY: I *did* give them a mission once. Just one, mind you.

CHIEF: Oh?

CROXLEY: There was a rumour that a Nawsland spy had penetrated the kingdom of one of our allies; the Saumur nation. So, I sent them along to investigate from inside the palace.

(He grimaced uneasily.)

CROXLEY: What I *forgot* to mention to them was... they'd be working in the harem there.

CHIEF: Wow. You didn't!

CROXLEY: I'm afraid I did. They got rogered relentlessly for seven straight days for nothing. It was a false alarm, you see? When they returned from that mission, if looks could have killed... well, I wouldn't be here now.

(He groaned despairingly.)

CROXLEY: I wasted them. And now their careers are over... as is mine. They'll be fugitives for evermore and I'll be fired.

CHIEF: Probably. When the higher-ups find out that what you *thought* were your best men were thwarted by what you *thought* was a useless woman, *you're* going to look like an incompetent gimp.

CROXLEY: I know that, thank you!

(He shook his head.)

CROXLEY: Like I said, it's a fucking mess. I just hope my men can catch her, so I can save face a little bit.

CHIEF: They won't though, will they?

CROXLEY: Right...

(He furrowed his brow.)

CROXLEY: You know... you're not very comforting!

CHIEF: And I make no apology for that.

(Just then, one of Croxley's agents ran up to him and saluted.)

AGENT SIX: Sir, I have a report from an eyewitness. A mister Arthur Rhodes.

CROXLEY: Oh?

AGENT SIX: Via his telescope, he witnessed Agents Fifty-Nine and Sixty sprinting up the eastbound mountain trail about twenty minutes ago.

CROXLEY: I see.

(He snarled.)

CROXLEY: We'd better get after them then! My career... I mean, our unit's reputation depends on it!

AGENT SIX: The others are already waiting for you at the gate, sir.

CROXLEY: Excellent.

(He nodded.)

CROXLEY: Not that Agent Twenty-Three is going anywhere! Nawsland may well try their luck again, so *someone* has to stay here and watch over after the place. *I've* chosen *him*. The rest of us, however...

(He snarled.)

CROXLEY: We've got work to do! Come! Let's hunt those bitches down!

(He then glanced at the chief bitterly.)

CROXLEY: You're a bad friend.

(With that, he sprinted away towards the exit to town where his subordinates were waiting. Having watched them leave, the chief climbed to his feet and snarled.)

CHIEF: That fucking Arthur is going to get a piece of my mind! Snitching on our town's saviours like that is unforgivable!

(He then proceeded to stomp forth. Ten seconds later, however, Arthur poked his head around the nearest corner.)

ARTHUR: Have they gone?

CHIEF: You!!!

(He stomped over to him.)

CHIEF: Why the hell would you tell those agents you saw Ponytail fleeing up the mountain trail?

ARTHUR: Well that's obvious, isn't it?

(He shrugged.)

ARTHUR: I told him *that* because when I looked they were running *down* the trail. The western one.

CHIEF: What?

(He gave him a sideways glance.)

CHIEF: You lied to him?

ARTHUR: Of course I fucking did. I've pissed Ponytail off enough for one lifetime. There's no way I'd compound things by dropping her in it!

CHIEF: I see...

ARTHUR: So... um... if you *happen* to see her around, would you mind telling her what I did?

(He glanced away innocently.)

ARTHUR: Also... tell her it wasn't what it looked like. I was scratching it, that's all. I had an itch, you see?

(He nodded sternly.)

ARTHUR: It just looked bad from a distance.

(Feeling quite the fool, he then took off back to his house. Watching him go, the chief couldn't help but grin.)

CHIEF: This town...

(He then glanced towards the gate and bit his lip.)

CHIEF: Good luck, girls. The people of this town don't agree on much, but you can rest assured that we're *all* thinking of you.

(He then glanced at Rex.)

CHIEF: Those of us who matter anyway.

(He then headed back up the high street to resume his supervisory role.)

One hour later, once his part in the clean up was complete, the chief returned to his home then headed to his office with the sheepish Runcorn in tow. It was extremely late in the day by now, but he had a few more things to attend to before calling it a night. Yawning, he paced into his study then slowly made his way to his desk before taking a seat. Runcorn followed him in then sat himself down opposite.

CHIEF: Right then, Runcorn, before you get comfy, living out the rest of your life on my sofa, we need to establish a few house rules.

RUNCORN: Yes, Chief.

CHIEF: Rule one, you pay your own way. If you break it, you fix it; if you eat it, you replace it. Agreed?

RUNCORN: Sir.

CHIEF: Excellent. Rule two, under no circumstances are you to share this town's secrets with enemy spies. Oh, wait, that's not a *house* rule, that's just common sense!

(Runcorn pouted.)

RUNCORN: I didn't share our secrets with *anyone*, Chester!

CHIEF: Only because I didn't *tell* you any! If I had, Candice would been privy to every single one of them, wouldn't she? Randy Runcorn she called you! Well, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that she'd been seducing you for information. It *also* doesn't take a genius to figure out therefore, that she wanted me dead so *you'd* become chief. That way she could wean *all* this town's secrets out of you, including the national security updates from the capital!

RUNCORN: Well... yeah... that *seems* to have been her plan.

(He sighed.)

RUNCORN: And now my life is ruined. Why couldn't she just seduce you directly and leave me out of it?

CHIEF: Actually, she tried.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: *I* rejected her advances.

RUNCORN: You did? How??? Her breasts were hypnotic and that voice...

(He drooled.)

CHIEF: Runcorn?

RUNCORN: Chief?

CHIEF: You're an idiot. A ridiculous randy idiot! In future, think with your brain, not your bollocks. As the administrators of this town, we have a reputation to uphold.

RUNCORN: Yes, sir. And for what it's worth, I apologise.

CHIEF: Yes, well, save the apologies for your wife.

(He nodded sternly.)

CHIEF: Now. Before we turn in...

(He then glanced at his desk and raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

CHIEF: Hello... what's this, I wonder.

(With that, he picked up an envelope from his desk and proceeded to open it.)

CHIEF: Just a minute, Runcorn. This might be important.

RUNCORN: Righto.

(The chief chuckled as he slid a sheet of paper from the envelope.)

CHIEF: It's probably your wife asking me to give you a rock hard pillow.

(He then glanced at the sheet of paper and perused it with his eyes. Moments later, his jaw dropped and he turned somewhat pale.)

RUNCORN: Chester? What's wrong?

(With tears welling in his eyes, the chief pouted then handed the sheet of paper to Runcorn.

Overcome with emotion, he then buried his head in his hands. Baffled by the chief's emotional state, Runcorn glanced at the sheet of paper then bit his lip.)

RUNCORN: Hmm...

(The sheet in his hands contained a big, red love-heart, drawn in lipstick. Underneath it there were two names. Aya and Kaya. In brackets next to Kaya's name was the word "Ponytail".

Staring down at it, Runcorn scratched his head.)

RUNCORN: Aya and Kaya... where do I know those names from?

(He then jumped up, gasped and pointed at the chief in absolute astonishment.)

RUNCORN: *Your* little girls were named Aya and Kaya!!!

(He flinched.)

RUNCORN: Ponytail is your daughter!!!

(He then sat down again and gaped.)

RUNCORN: Chief... I... I mean... I don't know what the fuck to say!

(The chief slowly glanced up at him with tears rolling down his cheeks. It was quite plain to see, however, that they were tears of happiness.)

CHIEF: Twenty years, Runcorn. For twenty long years, my first thought every day involved those two. Are they happy where they are? Are they safe? Do they even know I exist? It's been so hard. My heart ached every single day for twenty fucking years. I woke up missing them and went back to bed the same way. The only thing I ever wanted in all that time was to *see* them again.

(He exhaled with joy.)

CHIEF: And then, out of the absolute blue, when my life was in danger, they came. They came, Runcorn. When I needed them, they came to me.

(He sat back in his seat and gasped for air.)

CHIEF: I don't know what to do. I don't even know what to say. I forgot what being happy felt like. They came!

RUNCORN: They did! They really fucking did!

(He placed the sheet of paper on the desk.)

RUNCORN: Chief...

(He growled with frustration.)

RUNCORN: I *still* don't know what to say!

(The chief sat forward and smiled.)

CHIEF: I do. Open the fucking brandy.

RUNCORN: Ah, now that's an excellent idea.
(He then upped and headed over to the drinks cabinet. The chief watched him go and allowed himself a brief chuckle.)
CHIEF: You know, earlier on, Ponytail said to me...
RUNCORN: Kaya, sir.
CHIEF: Right. Yes. Kaya.
(He smiled.)
CHIEF: She said, when the shit hits the fan, you can always rely on your family to come running.
RUNCORN: Really?
CHIEF: Straight up. And I thought nothing of it.
(He then grimaced.)
CHIEF: Fuck. No, I didn't. I told them *my* family ran away.
(He winced.)
CHIEF: I must have come over as a right sour bastard.
RUNCORN: No! Don't do that to yourself.
(He then headed back from the drinks cabinet with a bottle of brandy and two glasses.)
RUNCORN: Don't second guess what they thought of you, Chester; that's fucking dumb.
CHIEF: Well...
RUNCORN: And besides, you ought to *know* they didn't view you negatively. The *last* thing they did before they left was *hug* you.
(The chief mused to himself.)
CHIEF: Hmm... they did, didn't they?
(He then gasped with realisation.)
CHIEF: So *that's* why Aya hugged me despite having never spoken to me before. She wasn't just *doing what her sister does*. It wasn't a *twin thing* at all!
RUNCORN: Yeah. She just wanted to hug her daddy.
(The chief seemed to grow a foot in height at his point. Looking decidedly smug, he bobbed his head arrogantly as he watched Runcorn sit down again.)
CHIEF: Her daddy?
RUNCORN: Yup.
CHIEF: That's me! *I'm* her daddy.
(Runcorn proceeded to pour the drinks with an unimpressed expression on his face.)
RUNCORN: Yes... I know.
CHIEF: They're both *my* flesh and blood.
RUNCORN: Yup.
(He smiled as he continued to pour.)
RUNCORN: You must be so proud right now.
CHIEF: Proud? That's the understatement of the century. My little girls grew up to be heroes. They're strong, quick and deadly!
(He nodded.)
CHIEF: While also being friendly and caring. *Good* girls, you know?
(Runcorn finished pouring then beamed with fiendish delight.)
RUNCORN: More to their point though, they're fucking fit!
(The chief glowered at him.)
CHIEF: Excuse me?
RUNCORN: Nice arses, lovely thin waists, tits like sandbags and gorgeous faces that...
CHIEF: I'm gonna punch you in a minute!
RUNCORN: What?

CHIEF: I was *trying* to point out that they've grown up to be powerful yet morally decent. Good, well-balanced individuals. And you want to sit there reducing them to body parts???

(Runcorn sunk in his seat.)

RUNCORN: Well... yeah... but... *sexy* body parts.

(The chief growled.)

RUNCORN: I see. That didn't help, did it?

(He sighed.)

RUNCORN: Now I really *am* fired, aren't I?

CHIEF: Anymore outbursts like that and you'll be beyond fired, sonny boy!

RUNCORN: Understood.

CHIEF: Good.

(He ruffled his neck.)

CHIEF: I don't mind you pointing out that they're beautiful. But that was *always* going to be the case. Why, back in the day, I was a bit of a looker myself, as was their mother. Even if she *was* a cunt.

RUNCORN: No comment.

CHIEF: And that's the wisest thing you've said all day.

(He then mused to himself.)

CHIEF: But then, come to think of it, maybe she *wasn't* a cunt after all.

RUNCORN: No?

CHIEF: No.

(He smiled.)

CHIEF: In fact, it's possible that *I* was the one in the wrong.

RUNCORN: Oh?

CHIEF: Yeah. You see, when my wife started on about our babies being potential future psychopaths, I just thought she was a lunatic. Well, you would, wouldn't you? So I stopped taking her ranting seriously. That's where I went wrong. What she was *actually* trying to tell me was, they had powers. Powers that might well have made them dangerous if they weren't nurtured properly. And she was right. But the more hysterical she got, the less seriously I took her. And the less seriously I took her, the more dramatic her language became. In the end, she was raving about having murderous babies on the loose. Yet all I ever saw was two little ones crawling about on the floor, giggling like normal infants.

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: So I get it now. I get why she took off. She wanted to enrol them at a military school so they'd grow up disciplined. Which she subsequently did. And that's probably why they've grown into the decent people they are today. So fair play to her. She's still a cunt for ruining my life, but I understand her better now.

RUNCORN: I hear you.

(He then winced with discomfort.)

RUNCORN: It's all turned to shit *now* though, hasn't it?

CHIEF: What? What has? What are you on about?

RUNCORN: She fucked off with your kids so they'd be raised in a disciplined environment. To nurture their skills whilst giving them a sense of decency and morality. An ingrained urge to do the right thing.

CHIEF: And how is that shit?

RUNCORN: Because, Chester, thanks to that urge to do the right thing, they came running when they heard their dad was in danger.

(The chief beamed.)

CHIEF: Yup. That's my girls.

RUNCORN: Yes. And *your girls* are now on the run from the army! They're fugitives!

(The chief whimpered.)

CHIEF: Shit. I hadn't thought of that. Because of me, their whole lives had been turned upside down!

RUNCORN: And that's my point!

CHIEF: I hate your point!

RUNCORN: I'm not a fan of it either. I'm right though, aren't I?

CHIEF: Unfortunately...

(He sighed.)

CHIEF: Yes, you are.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: But I have a feeling they'll be okay.

RUNCORN: Oh?

CHIEF: Yeah... having met their commander, I get the feeling they weren't happy in the army anyway. And now they're free.

RUNCORN: Free to do what?

CHIEF: Whatever they bloody well like. They have skills, Runcorn. Aya was out in the forest for days on end, sabotaging what her commander referred to as their best men. She did all that while also having to survive outdoors on her own. And Kaya spent the two days between saving this town and catching the spy, out there in the wilderness by herself as well.

(He smiled.)

CHIEF: Think about that for a moment. My girls are formidable.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: Allow me to say that again. My girls are formidable. I just like pointing out that they're *my* girls.

RUNCORN: Apparently so, yes.

CHIEF: Point being, Runcorn, I have no doubt whatsoever that whatever they do and wherever they go, they'll be absolutely fine. Better than fine.

(He nodded.)

CHIEF: They'll be winners.

RUNCORN: Well... you know what, Chief?

CHIEF: Enlighten me.

RUNCORN: Only a fool would bet against it.

(They then tapped their glasses together and took a sip of brandy.)

RUNCORN: So... do you think they'll ever come back here, Chester?

(The chief sighed.)

CHIEF: I don't know. I hope so. There's so much I'd love to say to them. I'd love the chance to hug them again too. This time I'd know who I'm hugging and it'd be fucking awesome.

(He exhaled.)

CHIEF: I'd also tell them all about the song I used to sing to them when they were babies.

(He chuckled as he started to recall some amusing memories.)

CHIEF: It was so out of key, they'd just stare at me like I was a nutcase. *And* I'd tell them about how much their mother and I panicked over Kaya's name. The poor thing didn't have a name for the first week of her life! We didn't realise we were having twins, you see?

(He chuckled.)

CHIEF: We'd decided on Aya for a girl and Chester Junior for a boy. Then a second girl came along.

(Runcorn giggled.)

RUNCORN: And what made you go with Kaya?

CHIEF: It rhymed with Aya.

RUNCORN: Right...

CHIEF: It was either that or Aya Two, which believe it or not, we actually considered.

(Runcorn laughed out loud.)

RUNCORN: Maybe it'd be better if you *didn't* tell them that.

(The chief chuckled.)

CHIEF: Come to think of it, you may well be right.

(He then nodded sternly.)

CHIEF: But one thing I definitely *will* tell them is this. Day or night, summer or winter, whenever they're ready to stop running and need a place to call home, I'll throw open my door and welcome them back with open arms.

(He shrugged.)

CHIEF: Of course I will. They're my girls.

(He smirked.)

CHIEF: I don't think I've mentioned that before, have I?

(Runcorn chuckled.)

RUNCORN: No, Chief. Not once.

(They then shared a giggle and tapped their glasses together once again.)

Two months later...

Seven hundred miles north of Birdstone, Croxley and his three subordinates were battling their way forth through a blizzard. Their relentless pursuit of Ponytail and her sister had led them high into the Ledgrey Mountains. It was not a place for the feint-hearted. Even on a calm day, danger was ever-present. In harsh conditions such as these it was a living nightmare. The wind was ice cold and relentless; and visibility was so poor, there was a risk of falling down a crevice by simply failing to see it. Despite the harshness of it all, however, Croxley battled onwards heroically. There was no way he was going to be beaten by two deserters and he wanted the world to know it. As such, he stamped forth through the thick snow with his forearm across his face, sneering determinedly.

CROXLEY: I know this isn't pleasant men, but's it no picnic for those two runaway bitches either. Naturally weak like *all* women, and dressed in those skimpy outfits of theirs, they'll be faring far worse than we are, I can assure you!

(He allowed himself a devilish chuckle.)

CROXLEY: I mean it, chaps! Once we catch up to those ailing fuckers, they'll be so tired, they'll *beg us* to arrest them. They'll get on their knees and cry before us; that's what they'll do. And it's imminent! I can feel it my bones, men. By the end of the day, we'll finally have those bitches right where we want them!!!

Two thousand miles to the south, at this time, Ponytail and her sister were relaxing in the sunshine next to an oasis in the Haruaru Desert. Having trekked in the exact opposite direction to Croxley and his men, they'd arrived in the Haruaru nation several weeks ago. They'd then made their way to the oasis-adjacent town of Shivaha where they'd remained ever since. A settlement consisting purely of tents, it was the home to the Shivah tribe; a community of merchants and farmers. At first, the people had been wary of these two pale-skinned strangers. On their second day there, however, the town had been attacked by a rival tribe. The Wanzah tribe. During this attack, the two ponytailed assassins had obliterated the Wanzah ranks entirely. Not one of them was left alive. From that moment on, they'd been

revered as divine saviours. Rather enjoying such a lofty reputation, they'd decided to stay forever.

Savouring yet another perfect day in the shade of a palm tree, with her toes dunked in the oasis, the bikini clad Ponytail sipped from a coconut then glanced to where Aya was lying in the sun at her side.

PONYTAIL: I love it here.

(Aya glanced at her.)

AYA: Me too. My tan is really coming along.

PONYTAIL: Same. I've never had a proper suntan before.

AYA: Well, no. Imagine trying to sunbathe at the army base.

(Ponytail chuckled.)

PONYTAIL: I'd rather not.

(She grimaced.)

PONYTAIL: We couldn't even have a *bath* in peace.

AYA: Right? No facilities for women whatsoever.

PONYTAIL: Not even female dorms.

AYA: It really wasn't designed with women in mind, was it?

PONYTAIL: Nope. They just shoved us in with the blokes.

AYA: Wankers.

(She sighed.)

AYA: I hated it there, Kaya. You couldn't pay me to go through that shit again.

PONYTAIL: I know.

(She smiled.)

PONYTAIL: But that's all behind us now. We'll never have to go to Lenthom ever again.

AYA: Yup. We can stay here and be worshipped forever.

PONYTAIL: And never have to wear a coat ever again.

AYA: Heaven.

(She nodded.)

AYA: Now get your butt back into the sunshine, missy. You're missing valuable tanning hours.

PONYTAIL: Sure. Why not?

(She then upped and headed out of the shade before laying down next to Aya. She then stared straight up into the sky.)

PONYTAIL: Aya?

AYA: Yeah?

PONYTAIL: There's a group of randy tribesmen about twenty feet away, drooling at us.

AYA: I'd be amazed if there wasn't, Kaya.

PONYTAIL: Right...

(She then forced a rueful smile.)

PONYTAIL: We *will* return to Lenthom one day though; you know that, right? No matter how much we like to pretend we won't.

(Aya stared straight ahead then replied with a sigh.)

AYA: I know.

(She smiled ruefully.)

AYA: I miss mum. And it'd be nice to meet dad properly one day too.

PONYTAIL: Yeah.

(They then glanced at one another as if they telepathically knew to do so.)

PONYTAIL: But that can wait.

AYA: You're damned right it can. I love it here!

PONYTAIL: Me too!

(They shared a smile then slowly glanced at the sky again.)

AYA: This place is paradise. We can be ourselves here and everyone accepts us. We really are blessed, Kaya.

(Ponytail held her hand then smiled.)

PONYTAIL: Yup. In every conceivable way!

(She then closed her eyes to relax in the glorious sunshine without a care in the world.)

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