

Futile Fantasy Creations Presents...

FUTILE FANTASY FOUR

THE CURSE OF AURORA

Darkness prevailed along the north continent coastline. The midnight hour had long passed and all was quiet except for the sound of the waves gently lapping against the shore. Making the most of the mild summer night, an elderly gentleman lay back on the beach a mile to the west of the beautiful kingdom of Guevina. With a fishing line tied to his wrist, he dozed off in the sand almost as if tranquilized by the peacefulness of it all. His snoring was slow and relaxed and a little smile crossed his face as he dreamt.

Suddenly, his expression changed. His eyes flashed open and he swiftly sat bolt up right. Very much awake, he gasped in horror then quickly climbed to his feet, gaping in bewilderment at the sight before him. The sky to the east was burning yellow from the flames leaping upwards from the east wing of Guevina castle.

While the old fisherman gaped in utter helplessness, the people of the kingdom were very much in action. A human chain leading from the castle to the sea, hurriedly passed buckets of water along in an attempt to defeat the inferno. They yelled desperately to each other for more haste and more buckets as the crackle of the growing fire increased to near deafening. Clearly out of control, the fire venomously issued its wrath on the castle with a heat so intense people could hardly get near it. The desperate men in the bucket chain however, continued to do their utmost despite the stinging of the fiery heat on their sweaty faces. With desperate determination, they fought with everything they had to try and save their precious royal castle from the fire's unyielding assault. Even as the rapidly spreading flames began to illuminate right down the beach as far as the sea, they refused to accept defeat.

Inside the castle the raging inferno rampaged its way through room after room, destroying everything in its path, the walls glowing from the heat. Inside one particular thin corridor, flames carpeted the roof heading towards a large wooden door at the end. Flames flew from both its windows as the fire kept up its attack, unchallenged in the empty corridor. Just then, the door burst open with a vengeance and there stood the brave Lefiat with a heroic glint in his eye. Determined to save the day, he stepped forward purposefully just as the door swung back, spamming his face like a hammer before gently falling back open again. Somewhat dazed, he shook his head in an attempt to clear his vision then strode through the door like a man on a mission, with his fiancée, princess Mandika slung over both his shoulders.

LEFIAT: Fear not my princess... I'll save you!

(And with that, he raced down the corridor hunching to avoid the flames overhead. Still ducking, he raced around the corner just missing the edge of the wall with the princess' head.)

MANDIKA: Careful, you stupid...

(Bravely, he rushed down the corridor as her words were drowned out by the thudding of the roof caving in behind them. Without even looking back, he determinedly raced on. Oblivious to the meaning of fear, he leapt chairs and barged his way through

doors as the princess screamed out in terror. Onwards to safety he went until they reached the door of a guest bedroom which was locked from the inside. The princess, always prone to premature panic, whimpered like a schoolgirl as Lefiat took two steps back and kicked open the door. Immediately, his eyes bulged and he cried out in terror.)

LEFIAT: Shit!!!

(Using every ounce of strength he could muster, he leapt powerfully to one side as a huge back-draft raged out of the door, missing them by inches.)

MANDIKA: Are you *trying* to kill me???

(With the back-draft safely avoided, Lefiat stood tall, completely disregarding her constant condemnation of him. Desperate to save them from the blaze, he snarled to himself then put his head down and hurried forth into the flame filled room, hitting Mandika's head on the door frame and knocking her out cold.)

LEFIAT: Sorry!

(Cringing to himself, well aware she'd chastise him remorselessly for his mistake once she recovered, he raced over to the window.)

LEFIAT: Almost there, Mandika.

(As he looked down and saw a fifty foot drop below, however, his heart sunk.)

LEFIAT: What the hell? Wrong bloody floor.

(Undeterred, he nodded sternly.)

LEFIAT: The stairs! Leave it to me, Mandika! I'll save us.

(With that, he about turned to head for the door when, with a loud crash, the roof caved in around them, blocking the doorway completely. Desperately, he looked around the blazing chaos for another way out when his eyes lit up.)

LEFIAT: That ought to do it!

(He gently laid Mandika's unconscious body down on the floor then headed to the guest bed where he grabbed some sheets and hurriedly started to tie them together. The unbearable heat around him flustering him greatly as he anxiously went about the task. Once the sheets were finally tied together, he rushed to tie one end to the bedstead before casting the other end out of the window. Confident there was no other way to save her; he then puffed out his chest and rushed over to retrieve the slowly reviving princess. As he bent down to pick her up, however, she opened her eyes and screamed.)

MANDIKA: No!!! My hair's on fire!!!

(Realising he'd left her too close to the flames, Lefiat immediately proceeded to stamp on her burning hair, accidentally stomping on her head as he did so, knocking her back out again.)

LEFIAT: Oops!

(Well aware that he was already going to be in trouble with her and that this latest mistake wasn't going to make much difference; he scooped her up and slung her over his shoulder. Taking one last look at the flames, he then scrambled from the window and down the line of sheets he'd made. Almost immediately, the people in the bucket chain below spotted their descent and a large group raced over to assist.)

MAN: It's Sir Lefiat, he's rescuing the princess!

LADY: What a hero!!!

(Careful not to drop his beloved Mandika, he slowly descended further until he reached the bottom of the sheets, still ten feet from the ground.)

LEFIAT: Oh, that's bloody typical that is!

(Not quite sure what to do, he looked around for options when he felt the princess begin to slip through his fingers.)

LEFIAT: Uh-oh!

(In his desperation to grab her, he swung both hands at her midriff, completely forgetting to hold onto the sheets and they both plummeted towards the ground. Much to his relief, Lefiat landed safely on his feet. The princess, however, landed face first in a crumpled heap. Unable to come to terms with dropping her on her face, he immediately threw himself down at her side and stared at her in horror. As a crowd began to gather around them, he looked to them and flapped desperately.)

LEFIAT: She's unconscious!!! I need water!

(In a panic, he jumped to his feet and raced to grab a bucket of water from the nearest person in the bucket chain then rushed back to revive her. Looking extremely tortured, he swiftly fell to his knees, rolled her onto her back, then raised the bucket over her head, holding it tightly with a hand on either side. Watching him uneasily, one of the onlookers sucked his teeth.)

MAN: I'd hold the bucket by the handle if I was you, mate!

(Annoyed at the man's interference, Lefiat gave him a scornful look then started slowly pouring the water onto Mandika's head. There was much relief as she coughed and slowly raised her head.)

MANDIKA: What happened...

LEFIAT: Princess!!!

(Almost inevitably, in his excitement at her awakening, he immediately lost concentration and the bucket slipped from his grasp. As it landed squarely over Mandika's drenched head with something of a thud, the onlooker coldly rolled his eyes.)

MAN: Like I said, mate... the handle!

(Ignoring the stranger's scornful comment, Lefiat swiftly removed the bucket from Mandika's dazed head, then scooped her up and raced away with her. Once he was satisfied they were at a safe distance from the flames, he then set her down again and the two of them watched in horror as the east wing of the castle was disintegrated to nothing by the fire.)

FOUR HOURS LATER

(By the time sunlight emerged from over the horizon creating a haze in the morning mist, the people's desperate attempts to halt the blaze had proven futile. Defeated, a crowd of tired citizens sat upon the sand with despair etched into their faces as the charred remains of the once proud east wing smouldered on.

While the final streams of smoke blew across the beach and into the morning dew, Lefiat and Mandika stood, looking on heartbroken. Dazed from her fall and several blows to the head, Mandika had been half asleep for the last four hours and was only now able to take stock of the disaster.)

MANDIKA: Complete obliteration!

LEFIAT: There's nothing left!

(He shook his head then turned to see Mandika pouting sorrowfully at her feet.)

LEFIAT: Mandika?

(Mandika sighed miserably and offered no reply.)

LEFIAT: Um...

(Hating seeing her so down, Lefiat sighed to himself then also looked at his feet.

Wanting nothing more than to see happy again, he then nodded to himself firmly and

resolved himself to raising her spirits. With this in mind, he stood tall and shrugged, before speaking up in a dismissive tone.)

LEFIAT: Oh well, what's done is done. No point dwelling on it. Let's look on the bright side...

(Before he could finish, Mandika threw back her head and launched into him furiously.)

MANDIKA: The bright side??? What bright side?

(As she stood perfectly rigid before him, fuming with rage, Lefiat whimpered and glanced away uncomfortably.)

LEFIAT: I just wanted to cheer you up a bit.

(Offering him a sigh of concession, Mandika then relinquished her stance and her shoulders sunk.)

MANDIKA: Yeah, okay. I didn't mean to bite your head off.

LEFIAT: That's okay!

MANDIKA: It's just...

(She went to flick back her hair but her hand just swiped at air.)

MANDIKA: Eh? Where is...

(At once, Lefiat's eyes bulged in terror.)

LEFIAT: Uh-oh!

(As Mandika frantically felt her hair, Lefiat swiftly started to sidle away. On one side of her head, her hair was perfectly normal, on the other however, it was crispy and much of it had been burned away. Unsurprisingly she was absolutely beside herself.)

MANDIKA: My... my...

(Unfortunately for Lefiat, he hadn't managed to sidle more than ten feet when Mandika's scream filled the cold morning air, sending a chill through his entire body. He was in deep trouble and he knew it.)

MANDIKA: My hair!!! My beautiful hair!!!

(Trembling all over, Lefiat stopped sidling and whimpered at her apologetically.)

LEFIAT: It was an accident!

MANDIKA: You bastard!!!

(Wearing an almost psychotic snarl, she stormed towards him furiously.)

LEFIAT: I accidentally left you too close to the flames and...

(Not even allowing him the opportunity to finish making his excuses, as soon as she reached him, Mandika threw a powerful left hook at him, sending him crashing to the ground via his chin. Mandika's hair was her pride and joy and having it damaged had transformed her into a pillar of rage.)

MANDIKA: You... you...

(As Lefiat stared up at her from the ground, trembling all over, she stood over him and bellowed at him furiously.)

MANDIKA: You useless pillock, you did it again!!! How can anyone be *that* bloody useless? Have you ever lived anywhere that you *didn't* burn down???

LEFIAT: I didn't *mean* to burn it down, Mandika!

MANDIKA: No, you didn't *mean* to burn down the *west* wing a few years back either, but you still did it! You're a bloody liability!

(She then started to cry uncontrollably.)

MANDIKA: I always knew living with you was a risk but I never thought you'd damage my hair. My hair! You've killed my beautiful hair!!!

(Riddled with guilt, Lefiat immediately jumped to his feet and attempted to console her with a cuddle only to find an elbow fly violently into his ribs.)

MANDIKA: Keep away from me!

LEFIAT: But, Mandika...

(He then stopped dead and gaped in horror. At the other end of the beach, he'd spotted Mandika's father, the king, approaching to examine the remains of the east wing with his aide, Kayfu.)

LEFIAT: Um... Mandika, I'll see you later!

(With that, he shot off in the opposite direction as quick as he could.)

MANDIKA: Yeah, you'd *better* run!!!

(Far more concerned with what the king might say to him, Lefiat ignored her threat and continued to scamper away, desperate not to be seen. Unfortunately for him, however, despite being quite some distance away, the king spotted him fleeing and immediately tensed up. Turning red with rage, he shook his fist then bellowed in Lefiat's direction.)

KING: Lefiat!!! You get back here you little prick!!!

(As the frightened lad disappeared from view, the king threw his hands in the air in defeat.)

KING: Fine, but you can't run forever.

(He then looked to his aide and nodded sternly.)

KING: See to it that that little pug-faced bell-end is present at breakfast.

KAYFU: Will do, sire.

KING: Let's see him explain his way out of this one.

(His aide looked a little curious and bit his lip.)

KAYFU: But... how can you be certain it was Lefiat who started the fire, sire?

(The king growled.)

KING: Because where's the smoke, there's Lefiat!

KAYFU: Well yes, there is that. Silly me.

KING: I'm gonna kill him, Kayfu! I mean really kill him. With my bare hands!

(When breakfast time came, the atmosphere in the dining hall was tense to say the least. Sat at one end of a long dining table, Lefiat, who'd been forced to attend by a large group of royal guards, couldn't have looked more uncomfortable. Sat at the other end, the king couldn't have looked more livid. Sitting at the centre of the right side of the table, almost like a mediator, Mandika was the only one paying her breakfast any heed.

While Mandika, who was sporting a new shorter hairstyle, sat tucking into her dish of fresh meat and fruit, the king sat perfectly still, leaning forward on the table staring hard at Lefiat, making him sink further and further into his seat. Neither of them had eaten a single mouthful. The king was getting more and more irritated at the sight of Lefiat, and Lefiat became more and more uncomfortable the longer he stared.

The silent tension between them continued for a good ten minutes by which time, Lefiat was almost hiding under the table; such was the extent of his embarrassed slouching. Eventually, however, the king could hold his tongue no longer and leapt to his feet, thumping the table with his fist.)

KING: Why, Lefiat? Why?

(In terrified panic, Lefiat leapt up and stood behind his chair.)

LEFIAT: I couldn't help it!!!

(The king retorted furiously.)

KING: You couldn't help what? Being a knob head?

(Lefiat whimpered.)

LEFIAT: That's a bit strong.

KING: Strong? Strong???

(He snarled then thumped the table with his fist again, causing Lefiat to flinch.)

KING: Look, never mind that!!! Tell me why! What happened this time? Have Guevina's builders put you on a commission or something??? Do you get twenty percent of the profits every time they have to rebuild part of the castle??? If so, you must be the richest man in all of Guevina by now!!!

(He snarled.)

KING: Or was it something far simpler than that? Maybe you just wanted to improve the castle's ventilation by burning off the roof! Why, man, why???

(Lefiat's lips quivered but nothing came out.)

KING: Say something, you bumbling halfwit or by golly, I'll punch you on the noggin, I will!!!

(Very much in a panic, Lefiat finally managed to blurt out a few words.)

LEFIAT: It tasted like cheese!

(Utterly dumbfounded by his response, the king froze to the spot and glared at him in disbelief.)

KING: Cheese?

(Terrified of incurring the king's wrath any further, Lefiat took a deep breath then desperately tried to explain himself.)

LEFIAT: It was horrible...

KING: You burned the east wing of the castle down because it tasted like cheese?

LEFIAT: Not the castle, the whisky!

(Becoming less and less patient by the second, the king retorted angrily.)

KING: What the hell are you talking about, boy???

(Fearing the king was likely to explode any moment now, Lefiat spoke up apologetically.)

LEFIAT: You don't understand, sire. Bonson's whisky tasted like cheese...

KING: So you burnt down the castle??? What sort of...

(Getting increasingly flustered, Lefiat pouted and flapped his arms desperately.)

LEFIAT: Let me explain!

(Utterly enraged by the interruption, the king thumped the table again and bellowed.)

KING: Don't you tell *me* what to do! I'll speak when *I* bloody well want to. *I'm* the king, not you!!! Me!!! Are *you* wearing a crown, Lefiat???

(As Lefiat trembled and hung his head, the king snarled and raised his voice.)

KING: Well, are you???

(Lefiat whimpered.)

LEFIAT: Um, no... but... nor are you.

(The king felt his head then snarled.)

KING: I could if wanted to though! *I'm* the king!

(He ruffled his neck defiantly and stood tall.)

KING: And now we've established that, I'll allow you to explain.

(He then sat back on his seat, never removing his eyes from Lefiat's shameful face.)

KING: This had better be good!

(Seeing the king relax his furious stance, Lefiat took a deep breath then solemnly began to relay the events prior to the inferno.)

LEFIAT: Right... thanks. Well... see... Bonson's been making his own whisky and he gave Mandika some bottles...

KING: It's "her highness" to you!

LEFIAT: But she's my...

(One look at the king's furious expression told him he wouldn't be wise to argue and he hung his head.)

LEFIAT: Yes, your highness!

(Angrily, the king leapt to his feet once again.)

KING: Majesty!!!

(Almost having a heart attack, Lefiat stepped back and cowered behind his hands.)

LEFIAT: Sorry!!! I can't handle all this pressure... I'm getting all confused!

(The king watched Lefiat tremble and shook his head despairingly.)

KING: How did I end up with *you* as my royal knight?

(He looked to Mandika and sighed.)

KING: I went from having Sir Flaxley, a veritable fighting machine with skills and refinement befitting of *any* royal household to this quivering buffoon. He faints at the first sign of danger and he looks like a broom handle with a perm.

(He then looked to Lefiat and snarled.)

KING: Let's face it, Lefiat... you're a pointless waste of space!

(As Lefiat hung his head and whimpered, Mandika rolled her eyes and spoke up calmly.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat, just tell him what happened, will you? And father, please hear him out.

(At once, they both looked to her and smiled. The king doted on his daughter and Lefiat loved her with all his heart. Their love for her was very much the only thing they had in common.)

KING: Very well, my precious. For you.

LEFIAT: Okay.

(He nodded firmly then turned to face the king.)

LEFIAT: Sire...

(Unimpressed, the king raised his eyebrows to allow him to speak.)

KING: This had better be *really* good!

(As the king slowly took his seat, Lefiat cleared his throat then nervously resumed his story.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, um... as I was saying... Bonson gave Man... her highness some bottles of his homemade whisky. Well, we were relaxing in the drawing room and M... her highness said she fancied a glass... so I went and got a bottle. Anyway, when I got back, she scolded me for forgetting the glasses. I'm so forgetful sometimes. Honestly, I'd forget my own name if people didn't keep yelling it at me.

MANDIKA: Cut to the point, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: Yeah, just like that.

MANDIKA: Just tell him how the fire started!

KING: And quickly! My patience wears thin, Lefiat!

(Lefiat gulped then swiftly resumed.)

LEFIAT: Right, so whisky... well, I poured us both a glass, you see.

KING: Drinking on duty?

MANDIKA: Father, no!

KING: Sorry, darling!

LEFIAT: Um... where was I?

(As sweat started to drip down his forehead, he paused for a moment then looked enlightened.)

LEFIAT: Oh, yeah... whisky! It was horrible, it tasted like cheese...

KING: I think we've established that!

LEFIAT: Yeah, okay... anyway, it was so bad I threw mine on the fire!

(The king winced.)

LEFIAT: I don't know what was in it...

(The king muttered under his breath.)

KING: Try alcohol.

LEFIAT: But the fire got really big, flames went everywhere and to make things worse, some idiot had stuck a bloody carpet on the wall of all places. Before I could do anything, it was burning like crazy and the fire just took off. I only just managed to rescue Man... her highness in time!

(Lost for words, the king just stared agape at the half-wit before him.)

LEFIAT: I mean, what a stupid place to leave a carpet!

(Snapping out of his trance, the king then rose to his feet and proceeded to stride towards his hapless knight in a rage. Terrified to his core, Lefiat paced quickly backwards away from him. Not about to let him get away, the king then stepped up his pace and Lefiat did the same until eventually the king was chasing him round and round the table. Having never seen such an exhibition in all her life, Mandika pushed her platter away from herself and spammed her forehead while the two men continued their heated conversation as they ran.)

KING: That carpet, as you call it, was a priceless ornamental rug!

LEFIAT: Even so, carpets go on the floor! Any idiot knows that!

KING: Anyway, stupid, that rug had been there for over a hundred years, no-one else managed to set fire to it!!!

LEFIAT: It was an accident waiting to happen!!!

KING: You mean *you* are!!!

LEFIAT: That's not nice!

KING: I'm not nice, now come back here so I can punch you!

LEFIAT: But it was an accident!

KING: You're an accident!

LEFIAT: Look, I'm sorry!

KING: Then let me pulverise you!

(Just then, Mandika climbed to her feet and bellowed.)

MANDIKA: Stop it!!!

(At once, they both froze to the spot and stared at her nervously.)

MANDIKA: Now can we sit down and discuss this like adults please?

(Looking absolutely livid, the king ignored her request and glared at Lefiat, placing his hands on his hips as he tried to regain his breath. Lefiat remained poised and ready to run.)

MANDIKA: Please, gentlemen?

(Always eager to appease his daughter's every whim, the king looked into her eyes for a moment then stood tall.)

KING: Yes, forgive me, Mandika, how undignified!

(As he started to return to his seat, Mandika then turned to Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: *And* you. Sit!

(Not about to defy her either, he too returned to his seat and sat down.)

MANDIKA: That's better!

(She then sat down, pulled her platter to herself and resumed her breakfast.)

MANDIKA: Now talk.

LEFIAT: Look... I really am sorry, your majesty!

(The king sat back and snarled at him bitterly.)

KING: It's too late to apologise, Lefiat. That fire was the last straw! It's over for you.

(Set on edge by his words, both Mandika and Lefiat sat forward anxiously.)

KING: This is how it's going to be from now on. You, Lefiat, you pointless, gangly, halfwit... are fired!!!

(For a few seconds, Lefiat felt dazed as his entire world collapsed around his ears. The king's words had carved out a giant hole in his being. Being fired from the job he adored had sent him spiralling to the lowest ebb the human spirit could reach. Getting much overdue satisfaction out of watching him squirm, however, the king continued to twist the knife.)

KING: You're *beyond* pathetic, Lefiat. You're an embarrassment to our species. An insult to Mother Nature. In fact, your father should be found and immediately neutered before his sperm can do mankind any further disservice.

(He sneered.)

KING: You're not fit to be a cleaner, let alone a knight!

(He then nodded to affirm his thoughts.)

KING: I've tolerated you for my daughter's sake for far too long. You're an accident waiting to happen, Lefiat, therefore you're a danger to Guevina and everyone within. The longer you stay, the more danger you put people in and I'm not willing to tolerate you anymore.

(He then glanced at Mandika briefly before staring back at Lefiat again.)

KING: And as far as the princess is concerned, you're not worthy of her. I therefore declare your relationship with her null and void.

(He nodded.)

KING: Now, seeing as you no longer have a reason to hang around, I want you out of here. And I mean out of my *kingdom*, not just my castle, my kingdom. And I want you out by nightfall. Now go!

(He then pointed to the door, adding to Lefiat's shame by not even looking at him. Slowly and with an aching heart, Lefiat started to get to his feet, when Mandika cut in wearing an embittered frown.)

MANDIKA: You stay right where you are, Lefiat!

(Fearing the worst, the king looked up in horror as Lefiat stared at the floor miserably.)

MANDIKA: Now, I'm having *my* say!

(She turned to face her father with one arm resting on the table.)

MANDIKA: Father, I know you're upset...

KING: Upset?

MANDIKA: Hey! I'm talking!

(Not about to argue with her, the king hunched his shoulders and listened humbly to his beloved daughter's words.)

MANDIKA: Yes, you *are* upset. And yes, Lefiat, you *are* an idiot...

LEFIAT: Eh?

(She ignored him and continued.)

MANDIKA: But the point is, *I* choose who I feel is worthy of me, and I have! I love Lefiat despite his seemingly endless shortcomings. He protects me well and I feel safe with him around...

KING: Safe? He set fire to your hair! And two wings of the castle!!! And...

MANDIKA: Despite that... and all his other numerous mistakes... I love him, and if he goes, I go! If I've learned anything about this world, father, it's that love and happiness far outweigh riches and power. In fact, love is the greatest power of all.

So, if you kick *him* out of the kingdom then you'll have to kick me out too. We're a couple, we belong together and if that means relinquishing my claim to the throne then so be it. Find another heir. And another daughter, because I'll disown you. (As she sat back and folded her arms defiantly, Lefiat gazed at her with a heart full of love. Snarling ferociously, the king glared at Lefiat with equally strong emotions then leapt to his feet again.)

KING: Fine, he can stay!

(With that, he stormed out of the dining hall with his fists clenched, mumbling angrily as he went. Watching him go, Lefiat and Mandika never spoke a word. As soon as he slammed the door behind him, however, Lefiat turned to Mandika and gushed lovingly.)

LEFIAT: Thanks, Mandika! You'd *really* leave with me if he kicked me out? I had no idea you loved me *that* much!

(Looking furious, she spun her head in his direction and replied coldly.)

MANDIKA: I don't!

(Clearly confused and a little upset, Lefiat pouted and said nothing.)

MANDIKA: Don't get me wrong, I *do* love you but if I had to choose between you and my claim to the throne, you'd come second every time!

LEFIAT: So... you lied to him?

MANDIKA: Well spotted!

(Lefiat sat down in a something of daze.)

LEFIAT: So... if he hadn't changed his mind about firing me, you'd have let me leave? And not come with me?

MANDIKA: I'm a princess, Lefiat. I was born to royalty. Sure, I'd miss you if you went, but it's my destiny to become queen and I won't give that up for *anyone*. You're just lucky my dad believed me and let you stay.

LEFIAT: I see!

(Mandika then offered him half a smile.)

MANDIKA: Look, don't be upset. As long as my dad *thinks* I'd leave with you if you were fired, your position as my knight is totally secure.

LEFIAT: I don't know what to say, Mandika! I'm kinda hurt!

(As he stared at the table looking glum, Mandika's nostrils flared angrily.)

MANDIKA: Hurt?

(She leant forward and raised her voice.)

MANDIKA: Hurt??? Why? Because I wouldn't choose our love over becoming queen?

LEFIAT: Well, yeah... it's not one of your good points that's for certain.

MANDIKA: Well I'm sorry my *one* bad point upsets you, Lefiat, but I've got news for you, you're hardly the perfect partner either.

(She sneered.)

MANDIKA: Most women would have put a mace through your head by now, in fact! Have I done that though? No! I've stood by you through thick and thin despite *all* your shortcomings!

LEFIAT: I can't help being thick and thin!

MANDIKA: I said, I've stood by you *through* thick and thin.

LEFIAT: Oh... right... gotcha.

MANDIKA: Seriously, Lefiat, all the messes you've got me into and you get upset over *my* one tiny bad point? You're unbelievable!

LEFIAT: Sorry!

MANDIKA: Sorry isn't good enough sometimes! After all I've put up with, you should be grateful I didn't kick you out long ago. Most women would have!

(She then smiled softly and relented her anger.)

MANDIKA: Look, I do love you! Really! Why else would I put up with everything? That's the second wing of this castle you've burnt down. And you almost got us killed by evil witches once, remember? Why, only last year, you tried to bugger off on a mission with Flaxley and palm me off on, Bonson, a grumpy old fart who doesn't even like me. *Now* you've burned my precious hair off... honestly, there's only so much a girl can take!

(He looked into her eyes and whimpered.)

LEFIAT: I know, I'll *try* to be less useless in future.

MANDIKA: Please do. You protect me well and you make me feel loved. Like I told my dad, you make me feel safe and that means everything to me. I believe in you! I wouldn't have agreed to marry you otherwise. I love you.

(Accepting her words, Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: I love you too, Mandika.

(He then smiled and gestured to her shoulders.)

LEFIAT: And for what it's worth, I like your hair like that!

(She snarled.)

MANDIKA: Don't push it!!!

(In the royal throne room at this time, the king sat with a long face; slouching in his seat. His face bore the expression of a man with all the world's woes carried squarely on his shoulders.

As he sat going over all his problems in his head, his long serving aide, Kayfu, approached and knelt before him.)

KAYFU: You sent for me, sire?

(The king looked up and forced a smile.)

KING: Ah, Kayfu, I'm glad you're here!

KAYFU: If I may say so, sire, you look a little glum.

KING: That'd be an understatement, old chap! Please, sit down!

(Kayfu immediately bowed then sat himself down on the seat next to the throne. Having made himself comfortable, he then leant towards the king and smiled warmly.)

KAYFU: Is there anything I can do to help, sire?

KING: I wish there was, Kayfu, I really do!

KAYFU: Then, may I enquire why you sent for me, your majesty?

(The king sighed emptily.)

KING: I just needed to talk to someone!

KAYFU: The fire getting you down, sire? Losing another wing of the castle must be devastating.

KING: It is, but that's only a fraction of the problem.

KAYFU: I see....

(Kayfu mused for a moment then offered the king a sympathetic smile.)

KAYFU: I haven't seen you this depressed since the *other* wing of the castle was burnt down.

KING: Exactly!

KAYFU: Then the crux of problem must be Lefiat. Considering it was *him* who burnt down *that* wing as well.

(The king sighed.)

KING: He's precisely the problem, Kayfu!

(The king raised his head then shrugged in defeat.)

KING: I don't understand it, Kayfu. I mean... I've been a good king, haven't I?

KAYFU: Why yes, sire. The people adore you!

KING: Then why? What did I ever do to deserve Lefiat?

(There was silence.)

KING: He's a curse I tell you!

KAYFU: Well... if he's getting you down that much, maybe it's time you sacked him, sire.

KING: I just tried that, actually. Mandika said that if *he* goes, so will *she*!

KAYFU: I see!

KING: Not only that, but as you well know, there's a million reasons why I can't sack him!

KAYFU: It's true, the people adore him. They'd never forgive you!

KING: Exactly. I believe we've had this conversation before!

KAYFU: At least once a week, sire.

KING: I even contemplated having him killed once. No-one would take the contract. All the would-be assassins that I hired thought he was some kind of fighting legend with the strength of seven men and turned it down.

KAYFU: A fighting legend with the strength of seven men? Lefiat?

KING: I know. He doesn't have the fighting strength of seven dead pigeons.

(He sighed.)

KING: He's no Sir Flaxley of Tifaeris, that's for sure. Now *he* was a knight. He was strong, brave, loyal... the polar opposite of Lefiat!

(Kayfu nodded in bewilderment.)

KAYFU: How did that idiot Lefiat ever achieve such a reputation?

KING: It's too depressing to think about.

(Kayfu sighed then looked thoughtfully to the ceiling.)

KAYFU: There must be something we can do to get rid of him, surely.

KING: Well, I've been trying to think of one for years now, Kayfu. I'll be damned if I can think of anything though. I've even given up sending him on pointless missions in the hope he won't come back. He keeps returning a hero!!!

(Kayfu looked thoughtful as the king continued to air his sorrow.)

KING: If only I hadn't knighted him... but how was I to know?

KAYFU: You know, sire... there might just be a way.

(The king's eyes immediately lit up.)

KING: Don't joke with me, Kayfu. Please tell me you've thought of something.

KAYFU: Well... I think so. You said to me once, "If only the people could see what an idiot Lefiat really is."

KING: I remember.

KAYFU: Well... what if we held a tournament? He wouldn't make it past the first round. He'd be disgraced in public and everyone would see just what a hopeless buffoon he is. With his reputation destroyed, you could fire him easily.

KING: You're forgetting... what about Mandika? If I fire Lefiat, she'll be absolutely livid and I can't afford to lose her, Kayfu, I really can't.

KAYFU: I don't think you would.

KING: No, forget it! It's too risky.

(He sighed.)

KING: If she had to marry a knight, why couldn't it have been Flaxley?

(Kayfu gave a stifled laugh and shook his head.)

KING: What's so funny, Kayfu?

(Kayfu looked worried for a second then bit his lip and leant closer to the king.)

KAYFU: Okay, but she'd kill me if she knew I'd told you!

KING: Told me what?

KAYFU: Well... her highness used to have a crush on Flaxley as wide as the ocean. She used to try to seduce him left, right and centre!

(The king looked horrified.)

KING: What? When?

KAYFU: When she was sixteen...

KING: Sixteen??? She was trying to seduce her knight when she was only sixteen???

(He bit his lip uneasily then glanced nervously into Kayfu's eyes.)

KING: And did Flaxley...

KAYFU: He turned her down flat every time, sire. True professional.

(The king drew a sigh of relief then sat back comfortably.)

KING: Good old, Flaxley. Mandika's a pretty girl, you know? Must have been hard for him to resist.

(his face dropped and a snarl appeared on his face.)

KING: Wait a minute... my innocent little girl would never behave like that!!!

(Kayfu leant back uneasily and held out his palms.)

KAYFU: She was young, sire. She was developing... you know... feelings towards the opposite gender... that can be a confusing time for a young lady. They act out of character. She's over it now, of course.

(The king eyed him distrustfully for a moment then nodded with understanding.)

KING: Well, seeing as you have four daughters yourself, I'll take your word for that.

(He sighed.)

KING: So... attracted to Flaxley then, was she?

KAYFU: Very much so.

KING: And this when she was sixteen? Just before she met *that* idiot.

(He then sighed and mumbled to himself in frustration.)

KING: So close. If only Flaxley *had* been interested, we'd never have been lumbered with that bumbling halfwit.

KAYFU: Yes, but if Flaxley *had* taken her up on her advances, you'd have had him hanged.

(The king looked thoughtful for a moment, then laughed to himself.)

KING: No, I'd have ordered him to be hanged then watched in horror as my soldiers all failed miserably to arrest him. He was a one man army, that chap.

(He then sighed in defeat.)

KING: The sort of bloke my Mandika *should* be with.

KAYFU: Precisely. Which brings me back to my point. I think I know how we can get rid of Lefiat and get the princess with Sir Flaxley.

(The king looked to him, his eyes once again filling with hope.)

KING: If you can do that, Kayfu, I'll give you half my kingdom! Well, maybe not half, but you certainly won't regret it.

(Kayfu nodded sternly then sat forward.)

KAYFU: I'd never regret serving you, whatever the reward, sire.

KING: Never mind kissing my arse, what's the plan?

KAYFU: Well, first of all we need to get rid of Lefiat, right?

KING: Yes, and?

KAYFU: And you can't fire him because the people falsely think he's a tremendous knight and adore him. And if you staged a tournament to *prove* he's actually useless, you still couldn't fire him because you'd lose Mandika.

KING: Exactly. A tournament would be perfect to show the people he's not the great knight they think he is but I still couldn't fire him because Mandika would leave with him!

(Kayfu then bit his lip uneasily, briefly having second thoughts about airing his idea. He was absolutely certain his plan would work but wasn't sure how the king would react to what he had to say. Realising he'd said too much to backtrack now, however, he nodded to himself then looked into the king's eyes.)

KAYFU: Sire?

KING: Yes?

KAYFU: Hear me out, here. A tournament *will* work. A tournament in which every kingdom or republic sends one entrant to take part. Lefiat's bound to come last!

(Fearing he'd be stuck with Lefiat forever, the king was finding it hard to be enthused.)

KING: Of course he'd come last, but as we already discussed, I still couldn't kick him out because Mandika would leave with him. She's my only child, Kayfu. I can't risk that!

(He sighed, resigned to defeat.)

KING: The tournament idea is a non-starter, Kayfu. I'd still be stuck with him. Mandika loves the idiot! She even intends to marry it! The tournament may well get the public to stop adoring him but as long as Mandika loves him, I'm stuck with him.

(Hoping the king wouldn't react badly to what he was about to say, Kayfu sat up straight and cringed.)

KAYFU: Um... sire? May I be blunt? Please.

KING: Please do.

KAYFU: Well, and I mean this with the utmost respect, sometimes your love for that girl blinds you to reality. Princess Mandika is probably the most vain and superficial person on the planet...

KING: That's my daughter you're insulting!!!

KAYFU: I don't mean to insult her, sire, my point is that... well, when she says that if Lefiat goes, she'll go too, I believe she's bluffing. I honestly believe she'd rather die than give up her right to the throne.

(The king looked at him with uncertainty and raised an eyebrow.)

KING: Really? You think so?

KAYFU: I'm absolutely *certain* of it. I honestly believe that if you sacked Lefiat, she'd wave him goodbye and thank her lucky stars she's still a wealthy princess.

(As the king sat back, deep in thought, Kayfu continued.)

KAYFU: And if I'm right, the only real obstacle to firing Lefiat is the public's fondness for him, something we could easily remedy by holding that tournament.

(As the king thought over his words with the beginning of a smile appearing on his face, Kayfu added the icing to the cake.)

KAYFU: And if we can convince Sir Flaxley to represent Tifaeris in the tournament, when it's over and he's won it, which I have no doubt he will, we can offer him the secret bonus prize. Princess Mandika's hand in marriage.

(With the colour slowly returning to his cheeks, the king looked to Kayfu with joy in his eyes.)

KING: So let me get this straight. You think Mandika won't *really* stand by Lefiat if I fire him?

KAYFU: I do.

KING: Meaning all we need to do is humiliate him so his adoring public turn on him too?

KAYFU: Exactly.

KING: And by staging this tournament, not only can we humiliate Lefiat, but we can also get Mandika to marry Flaxley!

KAYFU: That would be the plan, sire.

(The king exhaled merrily at the very thought.)

KING: No more Lefiat... and to have Sir Flaxley back as royal knight... reminds me of a much, much happier time.

(He then sighed miserably and shook his head.)

KING: Who am I kidding, Kayfu? It won't work! Sir Flaxley already has a wife. A bloody tasty one too by all accounts.

(Kayfu gave the king a knowing smile.)

KAYFU: We'll fix *her*, don't you worry about that! I think I know just the way to separate Flaxley from this wife of his.

(The king looked thoughtful.)

KING: You do?

KAYFU: I do.

KING: Hmm, in that case... a tournament it is. We'll offer up a prize of say... ten thousand Lig to get people to take part, then when Flaxley wins, we'll offer him Mandika's hand in marriage as a secret bonus.

KAYFU: Sounds good to me, sire.

KING: Yes, but it all hinges on Mandika. If, as you suspect, she wouldn't be willing to give up her claim to the throne just to be with Lefiat, we're in business!

KAYFU: I'm certain that will be the case, sire!

(The king nodded firmly.)

KING: Good! Then we'll fix it so that Flaxley wins the competition and his wife disappears!

KAYFU: I doubt we'd need to fix it, sire. Who's going to beat Sir Flaxley?

KING: Even so... if there's anyone who looks capable of defeating him, we'll see to it they get... waylaid.

KAYFU: Fair enough.

KING: And you're sure you can get rid of Flaxley's current wife?

KAYFU: Leave that to me, sire.

(The king exhaled merrily.)

KING: At last I can see a light at the end of the tunnel, Kayfu. This tournament is a superb idea.

KAYFU: I agree! People will finally see that Lefiat is actually a terrible knight!

KING: Then I can sack him and run him out of Guevina!

KAYFU: Precisely.

KING: And you're certain Mandika won't go with him?

KAYFU: I'd bet my life on it!

(The king nodded.)

KING: You kind of already have, Kayfu. I'm mean if you're wrong and she goes...

(Kayfu gulped and rubbed his neck at the thought of a painful beheading.)

KING: Okay, let's get this show on the road. I'll go and sack Lefiat then make some arrangements for this tournament. I'll leave the business with Flaxley and his wife in your capable hands, Kayfu.

(Having regained the will to live, the king then sprung to his feet and floated on high out of the door.)

KAYFU: Don't worry about Flaxley, sire. I know just the chap to help me.

(Having followed the king out of the throne room, Kayfu veered off down a different corridor in the castle wearing an urgent expression. Looking determined, he marched past the servant kitchens and up a flight of stairs, stopping outside the large wooden door of a guest bedroom. Wasting no time whatsoever, he immediately hammered loudly on the wooden panels then crossed his hands patiently behind his back to wait for an answer. With no answer forthcoming, he knocked again thirty seconds later then rubbed his chin with curiosity.)

KAYFU: Where can he be?

(Just then, he heard Bonson's angry voice rise up from behind the door.)

BONSON: If that's you, Lefiat, I'm going to pee on your shoes!

(The door then flew open and there stood a rather hung-over looking Bonson with bloodshot eyes and fly away hair poking out from the sides of his head.)

BONSON: Oh, it's you. What do you want?

KAYFU: I have an urgent matter to discuss with you, Bonson.

(Bonson stared coldly into his eyes for a moment then groaned.)

BONSON: Fine. You'd better come in then.

(Wearing only a sheet to cover his dignity, he then stepped back and hurriedly ushered Kayfu into his room.)

BONSON: Hurry up!

(In his impatience to close the door again, he then slammed it into Kayfu before he'd finished walking through it and sent him sprawling sideways to the floor.)

KAYFU: Hey!

BONSON: Well I did tell you to hurry.

(Looking somewhat peeved, Kayfu got to his feet and sat himself on a chair near the door, much to Bonson's annoyance. Slamming the door, he stared down at Kayfu and furrowed his brow.)

BONSON: Make yourself at home, why don't you?

KAYFU: I see you're in a good mood as usual!

BONSON: You woke me up. I was having a lovely dream.

KAYFU: I didn't mean to, old chap.

BONSON: Didn't mean to? You almost pummelled the door off its hinges!

KAYFU: I think you exaggerate...

BONSON: I thought a herd of cuddyfinkles were trying to get in!

KAYFU: Okay, well I'm sorry.

BONSON: Saying sorry won't bring my dream back!

(Kayfu rolled his eyes.)

KAYFU: Look, Bonson... I came here for a reason.

BONSON: Usually I dream about stupid things like trees falling on me or my ex-wife trying to strangle me, but not this time, no! The one time I get to dream about Kritz's nymphomaniac twin sister getting locked in my room, you decide to smash the living daylights out of my door!!!

(He then sat down angrily upon his bed.)

BONSON: Git!

(Kayfu shook his head then gave him a belittling glance.)

KAYFU: Like I said, Bonson...

(He looked stumped.)

KAYFU: Wait... who's Kritz?

BONSON: Not like it's any of your business, but she's Flaxley's wife!

KAYFU: Interesting. That's actually what I came to talk to you about.

BONSON: Kritz?

KAYFU: Yeah, and Flaxley!

(Bonson looked suspicious.)

BONSON: Wait a minute, did Mandika send you?

KAYFU: No, this comes from the king.

BONSON: Good! Only I'm sick of Mandika whinging about Kritz. She only hit her once!

KAYFU: Kritz hit Mandika?

BONSON: Indeed. Right on the chin. Sent her flying, it was most amusing!

(Kayfu looked extremely narked.)

KAYFU: May I remind you, Princess Mandika is the heir to this kingdom. One day she'll be our queen!

BONSON: I don't care. That's what she gets for booting my arse.

(He chuckled to himself.)

BONSON: Priceless it was. She was livid.

KAYFU: Anyway, here's the thing... Bonson, the king needs you.

BONSON: I needed my dream but you can't win 'em all!

KAYFU: I'm serious.

(Bonson looked him dead in the eye.)

BONSON: So am I!

(Kayfu sighed then looked to the floor and shook his head. Talking to Bonson when he was a bad mood was hard work and he knew he'd have his work cut out. Not about to give up, however, he nodded to himself then looked into Bonson's eyes.)

KAYFU: Listen, Bonson, the king has a job for you.

BONSON: Tell him I'm retired.

KAYFU: Please, will you just hear me out.

BONSON: I can't guarantee it.

(Kayfu sighed and shook his head.)

KAYFU: You love annoying me, don't you?

BONSON: You know... I really do.

(Realising he'd have to *force* Bonson to pay attention, Kayfu snarled and raised his voice angrily.)

KAYFU: Look, this is important business and if you don't co-operate... I'll let the king in on your little secret!!!

(At once, Bonson's cocky demeanour evaporated and his bottom lip quivered uncontrollably. Threatened with having his secret revealed, he immediately became putty in Kayfu's hands.)

BONSON: You... you wouldn't!

KAYFU: Will you listen now?

BONSON: Okay, okay.

(Kayfu nodded then sat back comfortably on his chair.)

KAYFU: Good man. Now... Lefiat's gonna be sacked as royal knight.

BONSON: No way, the people will revolt!

KAYFU: No. That's where you're wrong.

BONSON: Wrong??? I'll have you know...

KAYFU: You're destined to be a wise man, yes; I've heard it all before. Except you're not are you? That was all a lie. Derek told the king and I all about Daman Siria's lies.

BONSON: Why that snitching little...

KAYFU: Bonson! If I was you I'd shut up and pay attention. Derek isn't the only one who can tell the king things, you know?

(Bonson immediately clammed up and sat back.)

BONSON: Fine. The floor's yours.

KAYFU: Thank you. Now, there's to be a tournament, a tournament to see who truly is the greatest knight in the world. Lefiat will be representing Guevina. He won't stand a chance!

BONSON: He'll be killed!

KAYFU: Probably.

(Hating Lefiat with a fiery passion, Bonson exhaled merrily.)

BONSON: Superb!

KAYFU: Anyway, there's to be a secret prize. The winner will get Mandika's hand in marriage.

BONSON: What? You can't *force* a marriage on her! Especially not to a stranger.

KAYFU: I beg to differ. When she was free to choose her own man, look what she picked!

BONSON: Well, there is that, I suppose.

(He then raised a baffled eyebrow.)

BONSON: Wait... Mandika would never allow such a tournament to go ahead. The king does whatever she tells him to do and she won't let Lefiat take part. She loves the idiot.

KAYFU: Not as much as she loves money and power. Given a choice between Lefiat or being heir to the throne, she'd pick the throne every time.

BONSON: Well, true...

(He then scratched his head uneasily.)

BONSON: So, what are you saying exactly?

KAYFU: I'm saying, once Lefiat's been humiliated in the tournament and lost his reputation, the king will be free to kick him out of the castle and there's no way Mandika will give up her royal position to go with him.

(Bonson raised an enlightened eyebrow.)

BONSON: I see! By publicly humiliating him, there'll be no public revolt if the king fires him. That's clever. And like you say, there's no way in hell Mandika will go with him once he's kicked out.

(He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.)

BONSON: Lefiat will lose everything. He'll lose his reputation, his job... everything!

(He then sucked his teeth and looked to the ceiling.)

BONSON: That's all assuming he survives the tournament, of course.

(Kayfu rolled his eyes.)

KAYFU: Yes, well, whatever. Bottom line is, Lefiat will be gone and we'll all be better off for it.

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Absolutely.

KAYFU: Anyway, as I was saying. Mandika will marry the winner and Guevina will once again have a competent knight.

(Bonson stared upwards as he thought the plan over then raised a doubting eyebrow.)

BONSON: Hang on... you said this tournament is to decide who truly is the world's greatest knight. Well, Sir Flaxley of Tifaeris is easily the greatest. What are you going to do if *he* wins? Which he would easily, by the way. He's already married.

KAYFU: I'm glad you asked that 'cause we're gonna make sure he *does* win.

BONSON: Wait, that makes no sense. *He* can't marry Mandika. He wouldn't either. Kritz is bloody fit. He'd have to be gay to give *her* up!

KAYFU: That, my friend, is where *you* come in. We're well aware that he's already married and we need this wife of his out of the picture!

(Bonson gave him a sceptical glance.)

BONSON: You want Kritz out the picture? If you're suggesting I seduce her and run away with her... I'm in!

(Kayfu sneered.)

KAYFU: Can't you take *anything* seriously?

BONSON: I don't know, I've never tried!

KAYFU: Then maybe it's time you started, 'cause if you don't find a way to split Kritz and Flaxley up by the time the tournament ends...

(He leant forward and stared into Bonson's worried eyes.)

KAYFU: I'll inform his majesty how you helped the queen with her dilemma that time.

(Bonson could but gape at him in abject horror.)

BONSON: You wouldn't! It'd kill him!

KAYFU: It'd kill who?

(Bonson shook his distraught head and sighed.)

BONSON: So you want me to go to Tifaeris and split them up or you'll betray me?

KAYFU: That's about the shape of it.

BONSON: Then I have no choice; I have to betray my friends.

(He shook his head in despair.)

BONSON: I'm not happy about this.

KAYFU: Well consider the alternative.

(Bonson sighed in defeat.)

BONSON: Okay, I'll leave for Tifaeris this morning.

KAYFU: No, you'll leave a few days before the tournament begins. I'll be sending you in a carriage with one of my men. That way, if you decide to pull a fast one and let Flaxley in on the plan, I'll know about it. It's not that I don't trust you... well, actually it is.

BONSON: Why you...

KAYFU: And that's another thing. Flaxley hates tournaments. I don't think the king is aware of that though so if he doesn't turn up, I'll make sure you're held entirely responsible.

BONSON: Now hang on a minute.

KAYFU: No, I won't hang on. Your job is a simple one, Bonson. You just have to make sure Flaxley takes part in the tournament, I don't care how. And at the same time, you have to drive a wedge between himself and that wife of his. Got it?

(Bonson just stared at him blankly.)

BONSON: I can trick him into enter the tournament, no problem, but the other bit... that's ridiculous.

KAYFU: Is it now?

BONSON: Yes! You want me to split them up and you're giving me a few days to get it done? Are you insane? Kritz was expecting twins last I heard. She's the mother of his children. And she has enormous jugs!

KAYFU: I'm sure you'll do your best.

BONSON: Didn't you hear me? Enormous jugs? No man alive would give those two lovelies up, especially not for Mandika. Hers are adequate at best.

KAYFU: Maybe Flaxley isn't as shallow as you, Bonson.

BONSON: Shallow?

KAYFU: Yes, there's more to a woman than just her breasts, you know?

BONSON: I agree. She has a superb arse too. And she never wears underwear even though her skirts barely protect her modesty. She's... perfect. And you're giving me a few lousy days to get Flaxley to fall out of love with her?

KAYFU: Like I said, I'm sure you'll find a way. You don't have a choice.

BONSON: Fine. It's an impossible task but I'll do what I can.

KAYFU: I'm sure you will, Bonson.

(Satisfied he'd said all he needed to say, Kayfu climbed to his feet.)

KAYFU: Well, thanks for your hospitality. I'll see myself out.

BONSON: Yes you will, and it was hostility not hospitality!

KAYFU: To you, Bonson, it's the same word.

(With that, he exited the room leaving Bonson feeling flustered and angry. For several minutes, he paced up and down and swore to himself, knowing for certain he was damned no matter what he did. Splitting up Flaxley and Kritz would be a horrendous thing to do but having the king informed of his secret would be a thousand times worse.)

(Upstairs at this time, the king was just reaching the princess' game room, where she spent most of her mornings with Lefiat, having stopped for a whisky to calm his nerves. His heart was filled with trepidation as to how Mandika would react to Lefiat's impending dismissal. He knew that if she was as superficial as Kayfu thought, the tournament could go ahead and his ambition of removing Lefiat could become a reality. He also knew, however, that if Kayfu was wrong all his hopes would be dashed.

Having psyched himself up for a moment, he slowly approached the door and raised his hand to knock.)

KING: Wait a minute, am I the king or am I the king?

(With that, he burst into the room and snarled. Somewhat startled by his forceful entrance, Mandika and Lefiat looked up from their chess board as he paced over to join them, swaggering arrogantly. He was determined to make sure they knew he meant business and sneered down on them both accordingly.)

KING: Who's winning?

(They both gave him a sideways glance.)

KING: Stupid question!

LEFIAT: Stupid game!

KING: Anyway, listen up you two. I've changed my mind.

(At once a horrified expression crossed Lefiat's brow.)

KING: You're fired, Lefiat! Dismissed, terminated, sacked, given the boot. Pack your bags, stick boy, you're out of here!

(As Lefiat's whole world caved in on itself again, he could only whimper and say nothing. Mandika, on the other hand, wasn't so easy to silence.)

MANDIKA: I already told you, father, if *he* goes *I* go!

(The king nodded forcefully.)

KING: Indeed you did. You'd better get packing too then, young lady.

(He offered her a rueful smile then sighed regretfully.)

KING: I'll miss you, sweetheart, but you have to go where your heart leads you.

Write me a letter when you get settled and I'll send you a housewarming gift.

(With her bluff well and truly called, Mandika's hair almost stood on end and she started to sweat heavily.)

MANDIKA: Um... um... steady on, father... You can't mean that.

KING: Of course I can.

(He gestured to Lefiat.)

KING: This clown is a danger to my kingdom and everyone within it. He has to be removed for the good of the people. And if that means losing you as my heir then, well, it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

MANDIKA: But...

KING: I tell you what I'll do; I'll get my horseman to give you a lift to whatever town you decide to settle in. I can't say fairer than that, now can I?

(He then clapped his hands together excitedly.)

KING: Right, run along then, you two. The sooner you get packed and go, the sooner I can convert your rooms into guest quarters. We need the space now the east wing is no longer with us.

(Stunned into silence, Mandika could only gape in horror. Barely able to muster a sentence himself, Lefiat could only spit out his words through panicked breaths.)

LEFIAT: But you can't fire me... the people love me!

KING: They'll get over you.

LEFIAT: But...

KING: Oh don't whine, boy. At least you'll still have Mandika. She's going to give up her life of luxury and the chance to become queen to shack up with *you* in some mangy backwater.

(Lefiat gaped at him uneasily for a moment then bit his lip.)

LEFIAT: Um...

(He then offered Mandika an uncertain glance. Much to his dismay, she turned her back on him and whimpered tearfully.)

MANDIKA: I'm not going, Lefiat. I already told you this morning, I'm a princess. I belong here.

(Unsurprisingly, Lefiat was mortified.)

LEFIAT: But... we're betrothed!

MANDIKA: I'm sorry... it's just...

(Unable to look into Lefiat's pain filled eyes, she then leapt to her feet and sprinted out of the room, crying her eyes out. Watching her as she disappeared out of the door, Lefiat pouted and his bottom lip quivered miserably.)

LEFIAT: Mandika...

(The king could barely contain his joy at this point. Mandika's reaction had been like all his dreams coming true. Kayfu was right, Mandika *had* been bluffing. Practically dancing on the spot, he grinned from ear to ear then glowered at Lefiat.)

KING: Oh dear, Lefiat. Well aint that a shame.

(Lefiat looked like a broken man. His heart ached and his head was swimming with anguish.)

LEFIAT: Mandika doesn't want me!

KING: She's not unique in that, I can assure you.

LEFIAT: But, I love her.

(Eager to get the rest of his plan under way, the king stopped dancing and gave Lefiat a pitying smile.)

KING: You know, there *is* a way to get her back. A chance to prove yourself worthy, so to speak.

(Lefiat looked up at him through tearful eyes.)

LEFIAT: I'd do anything!

KING: Anything?

LEFIAT: Whatever it takes.

KING: Very well. Then I'll give a chance.

LEFIAT: Thank you, Mr King, sire.

KING: Don't thank me yet, Lefiat. It won't be easy.

LEFIAT: I don't care; I'll do anything to have Mandika back.

KING: In that case... I'm going to be hosting a tournament for knights right here in Guevina in the near future. If you win that and prove yourself the best, you can have your job back and the princess is all yours.

LEFIAT: The best knight? But... I'm crap!

KING: Yes, I know. Just one of many reasons why I'm firing you.

LEFIAT: I won't stand a chance.

KING: Oh, you never know. Maybe the gods will be smiling on you that day.

(The king was singing inside.)

KING: It has to be worth a try, surely.

(Lefiat looked thoughtful for a moment then nodded solemnly.)

LEFIAT: Like Flaxley says... never underestimate anyone!

KING: Is that relevant?

LEFIAT: Yeah, I shouldn't underestimate *myself*. I'll do it, I'll win her back, you'll see!

KING: Excellent! In that case, you'll represent Guevina at this tournament. Do *not* let me down!

LEFIAT: I won't.

KING: Good, good. In the meantime, you can go and stay at that inn near the main gates. This castle is too flammable to have you *inside* it. I'll give you half an hour to say your goodbyes.

LEFIAT: But...

KING: Half an hour, Lefiat.

(With that, the king upped and left, dancing with joy as he went. His heart had gone from sunk beneath the waves to flying among the clouds. With Mandika unwilling to give her up position as princess, all he had to do now was prove to the people that Lefiat was incompetent and then he'd have no reason to tolerate him anymore. The tournament would surely do this in some considerable style. And so, he skipped away dreaming of how, one day soon, he'd open the gates and have Lefiat ejected from Guevina via a very large catapult.)

(Having been crying to herself in the corridor, Mandika saw the king leave then started to return to her game room. She thought her heart would explode. She loved Lefiat but becoming the queen someday meant the world to her. Knowing she couldn't have both, the choice had been easy.

As she entered the room she saw Lefiat sitting at the chess table looking thoroughly miserable. Feeling horribly guilty about it all, she watched him for a few moments then slowly turned and closed the door behind her. Not knowing quite how she'd explain her decision to him, she then turned to face him nervously.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat?

(As he looked up at her with tears in his eyes, she slowly made her way to his side.)

MANDIKA: Please don't hate me!

LEFIAT: Hate you? I love you!

MANDIKA: Don't say that!

LEFIAT: But I do!

MANDIKA: Don't make this any harder than it already is!

LEFIAT: How could I possibly?

MANDIKA: Please, Lefiat. You have to accept that it's over between us. We tried but... I guess it wasn't meant to be.

LEFIAT: You're wrong, Mandika. It aint over yet! The king's given me a chance. All I have to do is win a tournament and prove myself the world's greatest knight then I can have you back!

MANDIKA: Oh, is that all?

(Her sarcasm cut deep.)

LEFIAT: Don't you think I can do it?

(Not about to make him feel any worse than he clearly already did, Mandika forced a smile.)

MANDIKA: Of course, you can do it. I believe in you, my love!

LEFIAT: I'm glad someone does, Mandika.

(He then nodded sternly.)

LEFIAT: I'll repay your faith in me, you see if I don't. The king is making me move out soon. I've only got half an hour to say goodbye. But, don't worry, I'm gonna win that tournament and be back at your side before you know it.

(Although she very much doubted his claim, Mandika forced a smile.)

MANDIKA: You promise?

LEFIAT: I promise! We won't be apart for long.

MANDIKA: Good. The shorter the better.

(With that, they fell into one another's arms and held each other lovingly while trying to force back any tears. Well over a minute later, Mandika finally broke the embrace by stepping back and looking into his saddened eyes.)

MANDIKA: In the meantime, seeing as we're alone... let's enjoy this final half an hour together in the greatest way possible!

(She then looked down his body and licked her lips in a seductive manner.)

LEFIAT: You mean?

MANDIKA: Yeah... baby's hungry for some loving.

(With that, she knelt down and slowly started to pull his shorts down to his ankles.)

LEFIAT: Score!!!

(As his manhood popped free, Mandika raised a knowing eyebrow.)

MANDIKA: Well, what do we have here?

LEFIAT: That's my...

MANDIKA: I know what it is!!!

(She rolled her eyes then looked up at him knowingly.)

MANDIKA: It looks pleased to see me.

LEFIAT: You have no idea!

(He then looked on in delight as Mandika slowly brought her head towards his manhood. As she did so, however, the door burst open and six guards rushed into the room.)

GUARD: Sorry, Sir Lefiat, king's orders! We're to escort you from the castle immediately and put you up at the inn until further notice.

(Lefiat was mortified.)

LEFIAT: What???

(As Lefiat yanked his trousers up, Mandika leapt to her feet furiously.)

MANDIKA: This is an outrage!!!

GUARD: Sorry, but the king's word is final!

(With that, the guards proceeded to drag the screaming Lefiat out of the door.)

LEFIAT: He told me I had half an hour!!! Half an hour!!!

MANDIKA: Yeah, that was barely half a minute!!! Bring him back!!!

(Ignoring her demand, the guards continued to drag Lefiat away. Not about to let them get away with such an appalling indignity, Mandika growled then started to pace after them only to have the door slammed in her face.)

MANDIKA: Why, you...

(Much to her horror, she then heard the key turn in the door, locking her in.)

MANDIKA: You bastards!!!

(As Mandika fumed wildly behind the door, the guards continued to drag Lefiat down the corridor. Feeling horribly hard done by, he pouted at the leader of the guards and furrowed his brow.)

LEFIAT: You're loving this!

GUARD: I'm not hating it. All my stuff was destroyed in the east wing. You're a bloody disgrace. How you managed to fool everyone into thinking you're a great knight is beyond me.

(He then shook his head.)

GUARD: And how you ever managed to get a woman like the princess, I'll never know.

(Lefiat sneered at him bitterly.)

LEFIAT: Oh, I see. Like that, is it? You're just jealous!

GUARD: Rubbish, I've had the princess loads of times.

LEFIAT: Eh?

(The guard looked shifty and glanced away.)

GUARD: I meant I've had my own princess. My wife, she's my princess. I love my wife, I do. Unconditionally.

(Lefiat whimpered at him desperately.)

LEFIAT: Then if you understand true love, please let me go back and have one last good time with *my* true love!

(The guard just looked at him and shrugged.)

GUARD: Sorry, can't. The king's orders are to throw you out immediately.

LEFIAT: But... but... can't you just give me five more minutes to... you know?

GUARD: Sorry, more than my job's worth.

LEFIAT: Not it isn't. You're just being horrible.

GUARD: Look, I wouldn't complain if I were you. You're lucky you got to be intimate with her at all. The king thinks she's still a virgin!

(At once, the other guards all had coughing fits.)

LEFIAT: Why does everyone always do that?

GUARD: You of all people ought to know that!

(And before he even knew what had hit him, Lefiat found himself being led away from the castle towards the inn near Guevina's main gates, overlooking the main square.

Upon entering his hotel room, he found his money and belongings were already on the bed waiting for him. It seemed the king had wasted no time whatsoever in removing any trace of him from the castle.

His life disintegrated, as soon as the guards left, he sat down on the bed and looked to the tree tops from his window before lying curled up and sobbing for all he loved. It had all happened so quickly. Yesterday he was the king's knight and Princess Mandika's fiancé, now all of a sudden, he was nothing.)

(As the next two weeks passed, word of the tournament in Guevina began to spread like wildfire. With a ten thousand lig prize on offer to the winner, it rapidly became the talk of towns all around the world. With such generous prize money on offer, it seemed that every well built citizen with a modicum of sword skill expressed an interest in taking part. Unfortunately, however, with entry to the tournament restricted to one person per nation, the vast majority were left disappointed. Eager to prove their nation's worth, kings and presidents from all over the world carefully selected their best fighter and ordered him or her to take part on their country's behalf.

From Wendigo to Tang Yul, Ashrin to Trepe Village, fighters were sent to Guevina to register until finally a tally of fifteen was reached and entry to the tournament was closed. The king was hoping for a knock-out tournament where sixteen became eight, then four, before the last two slugged it out in a grand final. As soon as the tally reached fifteen therefore, he closed the entry books on a promise from Kayfu that Sir Flaxley of Tifaeris would definitely attend.

With so many towns and cities having their own entrant involved in the tournament, excitement continued to grow; and as the days ticked down even those who'd previously shown no interest in it, started to get caught up in the excitement. The tournament had very much captured the imagination of citizens worldwide. In nearly every tavern, bar and inn all over the world, books were being run and a lot of money was changing hands. Upon the north continent, most of it was being bet on the living legend, Sir Lefiat of Guevina.

With the tournament now only four days away, excitement was approaching fever pitch in Guevina. Shops cashed in as tourists arrived in their droves and talk was of little else. Guevina had quite literally gone tournament mad.

Many miles south in the beautiful seaside town of Tifaeris however, it was a very different story. The tournament had had no impact whatsoever. People went about their daily business as normal and never even mentioned events in Guevina. Their lack of interest very much influenced by their beloved leader's scornful attitude to such contests. Sir Flaxley had always seen tournaments as no more than a waste of a good man's time and honour and he wanted nothing to do with it.)

Township of Tifaeris

(It was early afternoon in Tifaeris and the sun was high. It was the kind of scorching day where many a citizen would either hide in the shade or take a nap until it cooled down later on. Sir Flaxley, however, was braving the stifling heat to give his part-time army a much needed lesson in armour maintenance. Pacing up and down in full battle armour, outside the large wooden home he shared with his beloved wife, Kritz, he looked the very picture of professionalism. The same, however, could not be said of his men. Despite having been ordered to stand in a well disciplined line, the twenty strong unit very soon bunched into a group and stood watching him with all the enthusiasm of an atheist at a holy communion. More than used to such displays of indifference from them, however, the muscular Flaxley maintained a positive aura and spoke to them forcefully, hoping against hope that at least one of them might learn something.)

FLAXLEY: Freedom of movement, you see, is essential. If you put your armour on wrong, you *will* die!

THIN: What? From just putting armour on wrong?

(Flaxley stopped pacing and glared at him.)

FLAXLEY: Shut up! You know very well what I mean! You'll be vulnerable.

(Looking very much lost, one of his men turned to the man next to him and frowned.)

HARRIS: He doesn't explain it very well, does he?

GRANGER: A man of few words, you see. Knights are like that!

(Although Flaxley had got used to tolerating a fair amount of indiscipline in the ranks, he wasn't about to put with up people taking among themselves while he was trying to make a point and yelled at them accordingly.)

FLAXLEY: Pay attention!

(Not about to argue with six foot, six inch, man mountain before them, the men flinched then stood to attention.)

HARRIS: Right... sorry!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes then continued.)

FLAXLEY: Now. It can take a while to don your armour properly but it's worth doing right. If you put the armour on wrong, you might as well not be wearing any!

THIN: I'd rather *not* wear any than put it on wrong and die!

HARRIS: Aye!

(Starting to get more than a little frustrated, Flaxley furrowed his brow.)

FLAXLEY: This is serious, you lot! What's up with you?

GRANGER: Nothing wrong with us, Flaxley, it's you! You keep talking a load of twaddle about crap we don't understand!

FLAXLEY: No, I don't!

GRANGER: Flaxley, last week you spent two hours talking about curved hilts and didn't even bother telling us what they were!

HARRIS: Aye, I'm still none the wiser now!

(Flaxley looked flabbergasted.)

FLAXLEY: And it didn't occur to you to ask me???

HARRIS: I tried to! You told me if I kept interrupting you'd stick that sword so far up my backside you'd be able to roast me on the spit.

THIN: Like they do when they cook pigs you mean?

HARRIS: Aye!

THIN: Oh, I like a bit of roast pork, me!

(Angry at the lack of concentration from his troops, Flaxley bellowed.)

FLAXLEY: Hey!!!

(His men all looked thoroughly startled and took a step back.)

THIN: Calm down, Flaxley! Bloody hell, you nearly woke me mother and she's been dead for seven years!

FLAXLEY: Never mind that! Look, just remember to put your armour on properly!

HARRIS: Like we hadn't thought of that already!

(Flaxley sighed with frustration for a moment before looking baffled and frowning at Thin.)

FLAXLEY: Thin, I spoke to your mother only yesterday!

(Thin nodded.)

THIN: Aye, I know. She looks well considering, don't she?

(At once all his men proceeded to chuckle like naughty little schoolboys. Watching them do so with empty eyes, the deflated knight, Flaxley, shrugged to himself.)

FLAXLEY: Why do I even bother?

(A rather excited Thin then spoke up from the ranks.)

THIN: Hey, Flaxley! Show us that move again; the one you do with the sword round your back!

HARRIS: Oh, aye. Yeah, I like that one!

FLAXLEY: Bollocks, will I? I've had enough of you lot for one day.

GRANGER: Oh, go on!

FLAXLEY: No, bugger off. You lot are even more hopeless than normal today and I can't be bothered with you! Go on, clear off.

GRANGER: Aye, fair enough. It's too bloody hot for this anyway.

(As his men started to disperse, Flaxley took off his helmet and threw down his sweaty gauntlets, mumbling to himself as he did so.)

FLAXLEY: Well, you're not wrong; it *is* too bloody hot for this!

(Just then, the tallest member of his group stepped up to him and nodded firmly.)

ALVAREZ: Thanks for another fine lesson, Flaxley! I'll be sure to double check my armour from now on.

(Flaxley looked up and smiled to acknowledge him.)

FLAXLEY: Good man.

(He nodded.)

FLAXLEY: You've made an impressive start to your army career, Al. Keep up the good work!

ALVAREZ: Will do, sir!

(As Alvarez saluted then turned and headed away, Flaxley watched him go and sighed to himself. Of all the men under his command, Alvarez was the only one he had any real faith in. Whereas the others were of mediocre to average build and thought the army was just a bit of fun, Alvarez was very much like Flaxley, same height, same build and same dedicated demeanour.)

FLAXLEY: What a top chap!

(As he stood there wishing the rest of his men were more like Alvarez, two of them approached him wearing excited smiles.)

HARRIS: Coming for an ale, Flaxley?

THIN: Aye, we've earned one!

(Offering them an apologetic smile, Flaxley ignored his tongue in cheek comment and shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry, chaps, can't today, I've got things to do!

(Just then, the front door of his home flew open and Kritz stepped out onto the porch.)

KRITZ: Oh, good, you've finished the lesson, have you?

(Looking mortified, Flaxley swiftly turned to face her and spoke up desperately.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, now get back inside and don't say a word about... anything.

THIN: Anything?

(As Thin and Harris shared a baffled glance, Kritz scoffed at him playfully.)

KRITZ: Yeah, right! Look, seeing as you're all done, I'm gonna head off.

FLAXLEY: Fine, just don't mention...

KRITZ: If the little ones get hungry, there's some goats milk on the side. Just don't forget to burp them!

(Flaxley looked mortified.)

FLAXLEY: Not in front of...

KRITZ: You'll be fine!

(With that, she trotted off down the road leaving the front door wide open. As she raced away in her skimpy leather miniskirt, the cringing Flaxley swiftly made a beeline for his front door. Men didn't look after children, especially babies in this day and age and he knew the two men would wind him up something rotten. His only hope was that Kritz's sexy attire would grab their attention long enough for him to get indoors before they even noticed he'd gone. Alas, it did not.)

HARRIS: Flaxley?

(Having only made it half way to his front door, Flaxley froze and grimaced to himself.)

FLAXLEY: Bugger!

HARRIS: Are you looking after the children, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Um...

THIN: Are you a woman, Flaxley?

(He spun around to face them and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: I'll have you know...

(Knowing it'd be unwise to anger Flaxley any further, the two men just walked away laughing, leaving him seething.)

FLAXLEY: Why does she embarrass me like that? It's bad enough expecting me, a man, to watch the kids, but to tell everyone!!!

(He then stepped inside the house and slammed the door before approaching the twins, one boy, one girl, as they lay in their wooden playpen.)

FLAXLEY: You don't want *me*; you want your mother, don't you?

(Unsurprisingly, they didn't answer.)

FLAXLEY: That's right! Your silence says it all. This is a woman's job. I'm not a woman... I'm a man!

(Feeling extremely aggrieved about having to look after his two children, Flaxley spent the next two hours pacing up and down bitterly. This was something men simply didn't do and he resented it greatly. To make matters worse, Kritz had also announced what he was doing in front of his part-time soldiers. Convinced he'd now be the laughing stock of the town, he snarled as he paced about the room, looking forward to giving Kritz a piece of his mind as soon as she returned.)

FLAXLEY: Stupid woman. Like *I'd* know what to do if one of them suddenly caught fire or something. It's not my place. I don't ask her to do any of my manly chores, so *she* shouldn't expect *me* to raise her children.

(He sneered.)

FLAXLEY: Next time I set foot in the inn, they're all gonna rip the piss out of me like there's no tomorrow. It's not on.

(Just then, the door eased open and Kritz stepped inside. Looking extremely livid, Flaxley immediately paced over to her and proceeded to protest angrily at her before she even had a chance to close it again.)

FLAXLEY: Two hours, woman. Over that, in fact.

(Kritz smiled to him and shrugged apologetically.)

KRITZ: Yeah, sorry about that. It went on longer than I expected.

FLAXLEY: Don't apologise to me, apologise to the children. They're the ones you were neglecting!

(Kritz was stunned.)

KRITZ: What?

FLAXLEY: Don't you know *anything*? If a child's away from its mother too long... um... well... it might die! Or catch fire!

(Kritz couldn't help but chuckle.)

KRITZ: What? Spontaneously? For no reason?

FLAXLEY: It's not funny, Kritzeveltia.

KRITZ: My god... you're serious!

(He nodded in defiance.)

FLAXLEY: You're damn right, I am!

(He furrowed his brow then pushed the front door shut.)

FLAXLEY: Where have you been anyway?

(Kritz looked extremely marked and furrowed her brow.)

KRITZ: Where do you think I've been?

FLAXLEY: I don't know. You mentioned nipping out this afternoon, you never said where to. And if you ask me, two hours is a bloody long nip.

(Kritz looked somewhat aghast and shook her head.)

KRITZ: I told you I'd be gone over an hour and I told you exactly where I was going and why. I also told you how much I was looking forward to it.

FLAXLEY: And I heard, appreciated and respected every word.

KRITZ: Yeah, sounds like it.

FLAXLEY: I did, but I'm so tired from all the child care, which men are not equipped to do, by the way, that it's slipped my mind. So, where were you while our children were struggling by without their mother?

(Kritz was gobsmacked.)

KRITZ: Struggling by without...

(She shook her head then glanced away angrily.)

KRITZ: Like I told you, I was giving martial arts lessons at the school. Something I've been looking forward to doing for weeks, and something I've mentioned frequently.

FLAXLEY: Yes, well, maybe you whispered.

KRITZ: Whispered? You're unbelievable!

FLAXLEY: My greatness isn't the issue...

(He looked stumped then glanced her up and down.)

FLAXLEY: Wait... you went to teach martial arts at the school dressed like that?

(Not happy about him questioning her attire, Kritz raised a distrustful eyebrow.)

KRITZ: Yes, and...

FLAXLEY: And how old were the kids?

KRITZ: Teenagers, why?

(Flaxley gave her a suspicious glance.)

FLAXLEY: Attentive audience were they?

(Unsure as to why he was asking, Kritz shrugged indifferently.)

KRITZ: Yeah, some... the girls were kinda resistant but the boys were *very* attentive, why?

FLAXLEY: Just wondered. Did lots of high-kicks, did you?

KRITZ: Yeah, so?

FLAXLEY: Struggle to grasp it did they? Kept asking for you to show them how to do it again, over and over, did they?

(Kritz looked suspicious.)

KRITZ: Yes, actually. How did you know?

FLAXLEY: Because, Kritz, you're not wearing any underwear, are you?

KRITZ: No, but...

(She looked alarmed and stared at him in horror.)

KRITZ: Oh, shit!

FLAXLEY: Yes... so basically, while our children were laying here pining for their absentee mother, you were off out, repeatedly showing you beaver to bunch a teenage boys.

KRITZ: I didn't think!

FLAXLEY: An excellent use of your time, my love, well done.

KRITZ: How embarrassing. I can never show my face *there* again.

FLAXLEY: You'll be fine, it's not your face they were looking at.

(He rolled his eyes then shook his head at her with disappointment.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway, if you're quite done showing off your vagina to the world and his wife, we need to get something straight. *I'm* a man, not a woman. If you're not sure, check inside my trousers and you'll find an impressively large love truncheon. Point being, as a man it's *not* my job to look after children. It's yours! Leaving them for five minutes if you need to go to the toilet now and again, that's acceptable.

Abandoning your post for any longer than that, however, is purely neglectful.

(He nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Now, I suggest you take your parental responsibilities a bit more seriously in future before you end up raising two bitter, resentful halfwits who go on to become the town drunk and the village idiot. Because that's what'll happen!

(Completely and utterly dumbfounded by his outrageous comments, Kritz could find no words at this moment in time.)

FLAXLEY: I see you offer no defence... well, I'm glad. The first step to becoming a better parent is admitting when you've been a bad one. Good girl. Just don't let it happen again. And don't worry; I'll forgive you this time!

(Unsurprisingly her words came back to her very quickly at this point.)

KRITZ: Forgive me? You forgive me?

(Flaxley was taken aback by her anger.)

FLAXLEY: You have a problem?

KRITZ: You bastard, they're *your* children too!

FLAXLEY: Well I don't remember giving birth!

KRITZ: No but...

(Convinced he'd won the argument, Flaxley stood tall and nodded arrogantly.)

FLAXLEY: A-ha! Gotcha! No answer to that, is there?

(Looking absolutely furious, Kritz bellowed at him.)

KRITZ: Let me finish!!!

FLAXLEY: Don't raise your voice at me, woman! By golly, I'll punch your best male friend right in the kisser, I will.

KRITZ: Look, arse face, just because the female bears the children doesn't mean she's solely responsible for them!!!

FLAXLEY: Yes it does! I'm the man, I'm their provider. You... you're their mother!

KRITZ: You're the what?

FLAXLEY: The provider!

(Kritz scoffed at him dismissively.)

KRITZ: Oh, *I'm* sorry. See, I was under the misguided impression that we were still living off *my* card game winnings from *my* trips to Azagotse back before the little ones were born!

(Flaxley tried to speak but just raised an accusing finger at her and stood there open mouthed.)

KRITZ: Provider, my arse!

(Flaxley flapped and shook his fist at her.)

FLAXLEY: I've got a town to run. Tifaeris won't run itself, you know!

(Opting to take a more mature approach to the disagreement, Kritz stepped back and smiled to him calmly.)

KRITZ: I know, and I understand that, my love. And that's *why* it's a good job *I'm* a capable provider too! Once the money runs out, you can carry on running the town and I'll go to Azagotse and win us more. It just means we'll both have to take our turns in looking after the little ones, that's all.

(Failing to ascend to Kritz's mature approach, Flaxley flapped furiously.)

FLAXLEY: Wrong! You'll have to take them with you!!! For pity's sake, haven't you heard a word I've been saying? I'm a man. And not just *any* man, I'm a world leader! I have standards to uphold. People look up to me. I can't be seen looking after small children! That's *your* job.

(Kritz looked flabbergasted.)

KRITZ: You can't expect me to stay with them all my life!

FLAXLEY: Why not? Other women do!

(At this point, Kritz abandoned her adult approach to the disagreement and promptly sunk to her husband's level.)

KRITZ: I'm not other women, you moron!

FLAXLEY: So I see! *Other* women respect their men's wishes!

KRITZ: Other women *obey* their men like slaves, you mean!

FLAXLEY: Then maybe it's time you did the same!!!

(Utterly infuriated by his words, Kritz offered no reply other than to grab a tankard from a nearby shelf and throw it at him then storm into the kitchen. Having ducked to avoid the flying tankard, Flaxley took her angry gesture as a sign of victory and stood tall. He didn't actually want Kritz to be his slave; he just wanted to win the argument to the point where he didn't care what he said.)

FLAXLEY: That told *her*.

(Almost immediately, she stormed back in and glowered at him bitterly.)

KRITZ: And that's another thing, you can cook your *own* dinner tonight!

FLAXLEY: Good! Decent cooking for once then!

KRITZ: Oh, you really are pushing it!

FLAXLEY: I can afford to! We both know I'm winning and it's only a matter time before you admit I'm right.

KRITZ: Eat my faeces!!!

FLAXLEY: Eat your own!!!

(Just then, there was a heavy knocking on the door.)

KRITZ: *I'm* not answering it. As much as you'd like me to be, I'm not your slave!

FLAXLEY: I know! Slaves don't complain even half as much as *you* do.

KRITZ: That's because they're not married to *you*!

FLAXLEY: Witty!

(With that, he paced over to the front door and threw it open. Much to his amazement, Bonson was standing the other side with a well dressed gentleman who was sporting Guevina's royal tie.)

FLAXLEY: Bonson???

BONSON: Hello, Flaxley.

(Immediately, Flaxley became extremely flustered and turned to Kritz urgently.)

FLAXLEY: Quick! Put the breakables away, Kritz!

(Bonson allowed himself a grin then slowly proceeded through the door.)

BONSON: It's okay, Lefiat isn't with us!

FLAXLEY: Thank heavens!

BONSON: Indeed.

(He then nodded across the room to Kritz.)

BONSON: Hello there, beautiful.

KRITZ: Hi, Bonson.

(Bonson gave her a warm smile then looked to Flaxley and gestured to the gentleman in his company.)

BONSON: This is Shankstone, by the way. He gave me a lift.

(Flaxley nodded and shook Shankstone's hand.)

FLAXLEY: I think we've met actually. Don't you work in Kayfu's department at the castle?

SHANKSTONE: I do, yes. Nice to meet you again, Sir Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Likewise, Shadberry.

SHANKSTONE: Shankstone.

FLAXLEY: Quite.

(Looking exhausted from his long journey, Bonson sauntered over to the sofa and sat himself down.)

BONSON: Anyway, don't mind us, you carry on insulting each other! When you're done we can have a little chat.

(He then puffed out tiredly.)

BONSON: Didn't get a wink of sleep in the carriage last night.

(As Shankstone sat himself beside Bonson, Kritz and Flaxley grimaced uneasily at one another then looked to Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Heard us arguing, did you?

BONSON: I did, and I must say, Kritz... superb language for a lady!

KRITZ: I give as good as I get!

FLAXLEY: Anyway, never mind that, what brings you here, Bonson?

BONSON: I'll explain over coffee!

KRITZ: Subtle as ever I see!

BONSON: Subtlety never won fair heart... or a cup of coffee come to that!

KRITZ: Fair enough.

(With that, she headed to the kitchen, turning to Flaxley as she went.)

KRITZ: I'm not making *you* one!

FLAXLEY: Good, your coffee's weak and unimpressive.

KRITZ: Bit like that comeback really.

(As Kritz rolled her eyes and left the room, Bonson looked to Flaxley and raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

BONSON: It's not like you two to argue! What gives?

(Flaxley just waved his hand at him dismissively.)

FLAXLEY: Nothing, really. It's all her fault; she's being unreasonable!

BONSON: Funny that, I suspect she'd say exactly the same thing about you!

(A couple of minutes later, Kritz returned and the four of them convened around the wooden table in the centre of the room. Kritz, Bonson and Shankstone enjoying a coffee.)

BONSON: Tifaeris is as beautiful as ever I see!

FLAXLEY: Well, we work very hard on keeping it that way, Bonson!

BONSON: And Kritz, you look as ravishing as ever too!

KRITZ: Thank you!

BONSON: I half expected you to bloat up like a walrus after having children but you're as slim as ever.

(Kritz smiled at him warmly.)

KRITZ: Thank you for noticing.

BONSON: When I was outside just now, I kind of feared that your weight might have been what you two were arguing about. You know, you getting fat and Flaxley not wanting to do you without a blindfold on. The usual marital problems.

KRITZ: Bonson, that was never an issue.

BONSON: Only because you *haven't* got fat. Put on fifty pounds and there'll be no more sex with the lanterns still lit, I can assure you.

FLAXLEY: Bonson, Kritz's weight has never even been an issue.

KRITZ: And why would it be? My weight is fine. Always has been.

FLAXLEY: Exactly. You put on a few pounds when you were pregnant but that's to be expected. It didn't bother me in the slightest.

BONSON: Well, a few pounds or not, I bet you looked ravishing. All radiant and that. Personally, I probably wouldn't have even noticed any weight gain, what with you having such a pretty face.

(Kritz couldn't help but smile.)

KRITZ: Aw, thank you, Bonson.

(She then sneered and gestured at Flaxley with her head.)

KRITZ: *He* noticed I'd put weight on.

(Bonson sighed regretfully.)

BONSON: Yes, yes, I heard him.

(Flaxley furrowed his brow at him coldly.)

FLAXLEY: Did you come here just to shit stir, Bonson? Or is there a point to your visit?

BONSON: Actually...

KRITZ: He wasn't shit stirring, he was giving me credit where it's due!

FLAXLEY: This is Bonson, remember? He doesn't do that!

BONSON: Hey, I didn't travel half way around the world just to be insulted, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Then why *are* you here?

KRITZ: I apologise for my husband, Bonson, you'll have to forgive his terseness. He hasn't had sex for a fortnight.

(She then looked thoughtful and glanced towards the ceiling.)

KRITZ: No, wait. My bad. That's what I'll be saying two weeks from now!

FLAXLEY: I beg your pardon!

KRITZ: You can beg all you like, you still aint getting any! And you won't get any ever again unless you start treating me more like a wife and less like a bloody live-in nanny.

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Look, woman, it's not *my* fault nature gave you the ability to bear children. That's just how nature works. The women have the babies. So, just accept your motherly duties as women always have done!

KRITZ: There's more to me than *just* being a mother!!!

FLAXLEY: I know that, but you have to be a mother *first*!!!

(Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Look, can't you put this argument to one side, I didn't travel half way across the world to listen to you two squabbling either!

(They gave each other a filthy look then turned to face him.)

BONSON: Thank you!

(Just then, he heard a gurgling sound from the playpen in the corner. Looking a little surprised, he turned to face the playpen and smiled.)

BONSON: Is that... are they the twins?

FLAXLEY: No, we rented those two, ours are at the amphitheatre taking in a show.

(Bonson glared at him coldly.)

BONSON: Flaxley, may I remind you it's not *me* you're angry at?

FLAXLEY: Quite. Sorry.

BONSON: Apology accepted. Plus an apology of my own. I don't think I congratulated you both. Well done, you two.

KRITZ: Thank you.

FLAXLEY: Cheers, old chap.

BONSON: So, what are their names, Flaxley?

(Flaxley beamed.)

FLAXLEY: We called the boy 'Arden'. My idea. Partly it's a pun because we hope he'll be a bit of a 'hard one' when he's older. Hence, Arden.

BONSON: You named your child after a pun?

FLAXLEY: Well, not entirely, but it fits because he'll be an all powerful swordsman one day.

BONSON: I see. But... Arden? I'd thought you'd call him something more befitting of a knight. I mean, what kind of ridiculous name is that?

(Flaxley glared at him coldly.)

FLAXLEY: I was my father's name!

(Bonson grimaced uneasily.)

BONSON: I see. Nice name. So... um, what's the other one called?

FLAXLEY: The girl's name is...

(He looked stumped.)

KRITZ: Oh, for pity's sake. Her name's...

FLAXLEY: Anoka!

(He gave Kritz a bitter glance.)

FLAXLEY: I do know my daughter's name!

KRITZ: Yeah, given a moment to think.

FLAXLEY: Oh, be quiet.

(He then looked to Bonson and raised a curious eyebrow.)

FLAXLEY: You okay there, old chap.

(Bonson was staring at the playpen looking somewhat rueful.)

BONSON: Yes, yes, I'm fine. Lovely name, that.

KRITZ: We named her after Mandika's mother. A bit of a peace offering after I socked her in the face last time we saw her.

BONSON: It's a lovely gesture.

FLAXLEY: What? No witty retort?

BONSON: Not a one. Like I said, it's a nice name. I'm sure Mandika will be thrilled.

(Just then Shankstone cut in wearing an approving smile.)

SHANKSTONE: Bonson and I both worked with Mandika's mother. Queen Anoka was a wonderful woman, and for you to name your daughter after her, Flaxley, I'm sure the king will appreciate that.

FLAXLEY: Well, let's not get all mushy and weird now. It was Kritz's idea.

(Bonson looked to Kritz and smiled.)

BONSON: Lovely stuff, Kritz. I bet you wish you'd named them both now.

FLAXLEY: Hey!

BONSON: I'm kidding Flaxley. Arden is a lovely name.

(He then mumbled under his breath.)

BONSON: For a golden retriever.

FLAXLEY: Bonson, unless your point for coming here was just to insult my baby son, I suggest you move on.

(Bonson looked to him uneasily for a moment then sighed.)

BONSON: Actually, I came because there's trouble afoot in Guevina. It concerns Lefiat!

FLAXLEY: What's the idiot done now?

BONSON: Well, did you hear about the wing of Guevina castle burning down?

KRITZ: That was a couple of years ago!

BONSON: No, that was the west wing; he burnt down the east wing a few weeks back!

FLAXLEY: That's unbelievable!

KRITZ: Yet believable!

BONSON: Well, let's just say it's typical!

FLAXLEY: So, what's up then? What sort of mess is he in and how can *we* help?

BONSON: He's in a *big* mess, Flaxley.

SHANKSTONE: The king's had enough. At the end of his tether, he is.

BONSON: Quite. And well, Shankstone and I, we fear Mandika is going to get hurt.

FLAXLEY: Hurt? Physically?

BONSON: No, no. Emotionally.

KRITZ: How?

(Bonson sighed then shook his head.)

BONSON: Let me explain what's going on and then if you don't get it, I can fill in the blanks.

FLAXLEY: Fair enough.

BONSON: Well, the king knows he's stuck with Lefiat because for some reason the people adore *him* and think *you're* the incompetent buffoon, Flaxley. It's turning out just like that book you stole from the future predicted it would.

(Flaxley looked peeved.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, I'm well aware of that, thanks. Why, only a few months ago, some tourists came down from Guevina and started hurling abuse at me.

(He rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: I didn't abandon Mandika in the middle of nowhere and leave Lefiat to save her. God only knows why they all think that.

BONSON: Quite, well, stupid people or not, Guevina folk worship Lefiat as if he was a god. So, the king can't sack him. But, he's found a way around that. He's going to hold a tournament, you see.

FLAXLEY: Yes, I've heard. Damn tournaments. Like showing off makes the man!

BONSON: Yes, I know how you feel about tournaments, but the trouble is, Mandika is part of the prize! All part of making sure Lefiat is right out of the picture. Now, don't get me wrong. I don't give a hoot about Lefiat. It's Mandika I'm worried about. This tournament is all about getting rid of Lefiat, sure... and I can't disapprove of that, but I fear Mandika's going to get hurt in the process.

(Flaxley and Kritz both looked appalled.)

FLAXLEY: You're joking, right? The king's giving Mandika away as part of the prize?

SHANKSTONE: I wish it *was* a joke, but no. Mandika's hand in marriage is part of the prize.

KRITZ: But... I heard the prize was ten grand.

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: It is... officially. The prize is ten thousand lig *plus* Mandika's hand in marriage, only nobody knows about that bit yet. No joke. The winner will get Mandika. Or the runner-up will get her up should a woman win it... not that that's likely. Basically the highest ranked male will get to marry Mandika.

SHANKSTONE: And the poor bugger doesn't know a thing about it. Mandika's hand in marriage is the *secret* prize. Secret even from *her*.

KRITZ: But what about Lefiat? I thought Mandika was marrying *him*.

BONSON: The king's thrown him out. He says he has to win the tournament to get her back. Of course, he only wants Lefiat in the tournament to make a fool of himself so he can fire him.

FLAXLEY: He got thrown out? And Mandika accepted that?

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Well, yeah. The king made her choose between her life as a princess or Lefiat.

SHANKSTONE: She wouldn't give up her entitlement to the throne, so Lefiat was out on his ear.

BONSON: And now the king knows that all he has to do is show Lefiat up to be an incompetent buffoon at the tournament and he'll be free to kick him out of the kingdom and appoint a new knight. The winner of the tournament.

SHANKSTONE: Mandika's soon to be husband.

(Kritz sucked her teeth.)

KRITZ: Poor Lefiat!

BONSON: Anyway, that's the dilemma.

FLAXLEY: Right. And what do you expect *us* to do about it?

(Knowing he was about to ask a lot of Flaxley, Bonson sat back and folded his arms before taking a deep breath.)

BONSON: I want you to enter the tournament, Flaxley.

(He was appalled by the mere suggestion of such a thing.)

FLAXLEY: What? Never!

BONSON: Look, if *you* win, which you will, you can get Lefiat and Mandika back together. But if some *other* knight wins *he'll* marry her and Mandika will be stuck with an unwanted marriage. You helped raise the girl, Flaxley, I'm sure that's not what you want to see.

(Flaxley mused to himself then shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: To be honest, Bonson. If Mandika's that superficial, why should I help? If she wanted Lefiat that badly she'd have chosen him over her title. By choosing money over her true love, she's kinda brought this on herself.

KRITZ: I hate to say it, Bonson, but he's right.

SHANKSTONE: She *hasn't* brought it on herself though. Fine, she chose power and wealth over love, but when that love is Lefiat, who wouldn't? She certainly didn't chose to be lumbered with a husband she didn't want. She could end up with any abusive bastard.

BONSON: Quite. You know what kind of weirdoes tend to enter these tournaments, Flaxley. Imagine what she could end up married to!

(Flaxley mused to himself uneasily for a moment then shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: To be honest, Bonson, I can't imagine *anyone* being a worse suitor than Lefiat.

KRITZ: I can! What if she ends up with someone who beats her?

FLAXLEY: Well, yes... that's true. .

BONSON: Yes well, it's not about Lefiat. It's about Mandika being free to choose her *own* husband and not being saddled with someone she doesn't love.

(He then folded his arms indignantly.)

BONSON: Which quite frankly is something her sworn protector and friend would never allow to happen. That's you, by the way, Flaxley.

(Flaxley bit his lip and looked to the ceiling uneasily.)

FLAXLEY: The knight's code does stipulate that I'm eternally responsible for any of my former charge's liberties, I suppose.

BONSON: Exactly.

FLAXLEY: But it also says that I must remain loyal to the king who knighted me.

BONSON: Yes, well, we can overlook that bit.

(Flaxley gave him a horrified glance and scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: You can't overlook parts of the knight's code!

BONSON: Of course you can, you don't work for the king anymore, so you can ignore that bit.

FLAXLEY: I don't work for the princess anymore either.

BONSON: Yes, but she's still your friend.

FLAXLEY: The knight's code doesn't care about friendship; it's about duty and loyalty.

(Kritz looked to Flaxley and shrugged.)

KRITZ: Sounds to me like the knight's code is contradicting itself somewhat in this case.

BONSON: Just a bit, yes. I mean you can't just ignore Mandika's problem but you can't work against the king either. And you have to do one or the other.

FLAXLEY: Yes, well... not to worry. There's also a section on what to do when such conflicts of code arise. It says I should use my discretion.

(He then nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Then it's my call.

BONSON: Indeed. And I'm sure you'll do the right thing.

SHANKSTONE: Quite. Returning to Guevina to win the tournament and save Mandika is the only logical option.

FLAXLEY: You'd think so, wouldn't you?

KRITZ: What do you mean?

FLAXLEY: Well, when you weigh things up, it's not a simple choice at all. The argument for me *going* is that I could save Mandika from a loveless, abusive marriage. The argument *against* is, I'd have to go to Guevina to do it. Let me tell you, so far the argument against is winning. I really don't want to go there.

BONSON: Not even for Mandika?

SHANKSTONE: You can't be serious, surely?

(He looked deeply disappointed and shook his head.)

SHANKSTONE: I thought the people of Guevina were insane when they doubted you, Flaxley, but now I see they have a point.

BONSON: Steady on, Shankstone, teeth don't just grow back, you know.

SHANKSTONE: No, I won't steady on. A lot of us at the castle have always had every faith in you, Flaxley. Well, when I get back I'll be informing them they were all mistaken. You're not just *or* noble.

(Looking absolutely furious, Flaxley leant over the table and grabbed Shankstone by the collar.)

FLAXLEY: Listen here, chummy. I didn't say I *wouldn't* go, I said I didn't *want* to. How dare you doubt me? Of course, I'm going to help Mandika.

(He released Shankstone from his grasp then sat back down and ruffled his neck muscles.)

FLAXLEY: I just wanted to register my disdain for having to go to that ridiculous place to do it!

BONSON: Ridiculous?

FLAXLEY: Yes, ridiculous. Why do those idiots in Guevina believe Lefiat's a sword fighting legend and think *I'm* the bumbling buffoon? I was their royal knight for years, Bonson, they worshipped me. As soon as I came back to Tifaeris though, I suddenly became this figure of ridicule! It's bloody infuriating.

BONSON: But despite that, you'll definitely come and win the tournament, right?

FLAXLEY: Yes I will. I'll come to Guevina and I'll set the record straight while I'm there. I'll win that tournament and make those idiots eat their words!

BONSON: Fair enough, so long as you come! I knew you would.

FLAXLEY: And entry is still open is it? I mean we won't get there and find out the tournament is full and I can compete?

BONSON: No, no... I knew you'd do the right thing so I made sure they left a space open for the Tifaeris representative. It's one person per nation, you see.

(Flaxley glared at him coldly.)

FLAXLEY: That was bit presumptuous of you.

BONSON: Maybe, but I know you, Flaxley. You're a man of honour and you always do the right thing. I didn't doubt you'd come even for a moment.

FLAXLEY: I see. Got brown-nosing off to a fine art there, haven't you, Bonson?

BONSON: Well, you don't spend half your life as a butler without picking up a thing or two, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: So it would seem. Anyway, I'm in.

BONSON: Excellent.

(He then rubbed his hands together gleefully.)

BONSON: Righto, grab your stuff then. No point dawdling, is there? Let's go.

FLAXLEY: Right now?

BONSON: Absolutely. Time's wasting, Flaxley. It's a long trip and the tournament starts in a few days.

FLAXLEY: Right... well, just give me time to polish my blade and we can get going then.

(Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: Cool, I'll come too.

(Flaxley was outraged.)

FLAXLEY: *You* can't go! What about the kids?

KRITZ: They'll be alright without us for a few days. I'll see if Phisele's mum will look after them.

(Flaxley snarled bitterly.)

FLAXLEY: Good idea. I mean, it's not like kids *need* their parents or anything. In fact, let's just dump them in the woods and let the wolves raise them instead.

KRITZ: Alright then, if *that's* how you feel, *I'll* represent Tifaeris in the tournament while *you* look after the kids!

FLAXLEY: That's not my job!!! And like *you* could win the tournament anyway!

KRITZ: Excuse me?

FLAXLEY: You heard me. Sure you can fight a bit, but we're talking about the cream of the crop here, people like *me*.

(Kritz just stared at him coldly.)

KRITZ: You arrogant...

FLAXLEY: I'm not arrogant; I'm just bloody exceptional at what I do.

(He then nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: And anyway... *you* shouldn't fight *anyone* anymore. You've got children to raise. You can't go taking risks.

KRITZ: Nor can you then!!!

FLAXLEY: Fighting isn't a risk when *I* do it.

KRITZ: You conceited...

(Flaxley then stood tall and raised his voice.)

FLAXLEY: Besides, as leader of Tifaeris, I choose *me* to enter the tournament. Not *you*, me! End of discussion.

KRITZ: Whatever. I was only making a point. I don't want to take part anyway.

FLAXLEY: Only because you can't.

KRITZ: Actually, as it's one person per nation, as leader of the Tifaeris and Treppe alliance, I could probably take part as the Treppe Village entrant, but I don't want to.

FLAXLEY: Good.

(Kritz then sneered at him defiantly.)

KRITZ: I'm still going on the trip though!

FLAXLEY: Oh are you, now?

KRITZ: Yes!

FLAXLEY: Fine. You do that.

KRITZ: I will!

FLAXLEY: You'd better take the kids to Phisele's mum then, hadn't you? And while you're doing it, you can explain to them why you don't love them.

KRITZ: Oh, shut up.

FLAXLEY: And if they grow up to be backward then you know who's to blame.

KRITZ: Seriously, shut up before I lose my temper.

FLAXLEY: Fine!

KRITZ: Fine!

(Feeling somewhat uncomfortable, Shankstone sat back and spoke in an uneasy voice.)

SHANKSTONE: What *is* the Tifaeris and Treppe alliance, anyway?

(Kritz gave him a sideways glance then shrugged.)

KRITZ: We formed after we made peace with the Treppe. We just hold meetings every now and again to discuss ways to forward the interests of both townships.

(She smiled.)

KRITZ: It's going really well actually. They've given up all their sexist ways and they're thriving now. In fact, the population is growing at a rapid rate now men are allowed in.

(Bonson looked mortified.)

BONSON: What? The Treppe are allowing men to live there? Why wasn't I informed???

SHANKSTONE: You didn't know?

BONSON: No! If I'd have known *that* I'd have moved there long ago.

SHANKSTONE: You wouldn't get a paid retirement if you did that.

BONSON: No, I'd get something far more valuable.

KRITZ: Well, you *could* move there Bonson, but I wouldn't recommend it.

BONSON: Oh, and why not?

KRITZ: Well, there's a lot younger men than you...

BONSON: Say no more.

(He rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Young people ruin everything!

FLAXLEY: Anyway, let's get ready to leave, shall we?

KRITZ: Okay.

FLAXLEY: I'll pack our stuff; you take the kids to Phisele's mum.

KRITZ: I can pack my own stuff, thanks.

FLAXLEY: Fine. But *you're* taking them to Phisele's mum. I'm not doing your dirty work for you.

KRITZ: Dirty work?

FLAXLEY: Yes! If you want be a neglectful parent, fine; just don't expect me to aid and abet you.

(Kritz was furious.)

KRITZ: I'm not a neglectful parent!!!

FLAXLEY: Says the woman who's about to palm her kids off on a complete stranger.

KRITZ: Complete stranger??? We've known her for three bloody years! She was my maid of honour, for fuck sake.

FLAXLEY: Even so.

KRITZ: And she's only going to be watching them for a few days.

FLAXLEY: Yes well, that's not the issue.

(He ruffled his neck muscles then glared at her indignantly.)

FLAXLEY: You should *want* to be at their beck and call every minute of every day. It's your duty as decreed by the gods themselves.

KRITZ: Oh, is it now?

FLAXLEY: Yes! You're their mother!!!

(Fed up of his constant criticism, Kritz just gave him a belittling glance and answered him with extreme coldness.)

KRITZ: Yes. And you're *probably* their father!

(With that, she minced into the bedroom leaving him fuming. Desperately seeking validation, Flaxley snarled as she slammed the door behind her then turned to Bonson, making the most of this opportunity to ask his wise friend's opinion while Kritz wasn't there to defend herself.)

FLAXLEY: Why, Bonson? Why won't she be a regular mother?

(Very much aware of Kayfu's orders to drive a wedge between Flaxley and Kritz, Bonson sighed sorrowfully then offered Flaxley a pitying glance.)

BONSON: What can I say, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Just tell me... am I wrong, Bonson? Am I expecting too much from her?

(Knowing he had no choice but to do as Kayfu demanded, Bonson sighed to himself then proceeded to give Flaxley the worst advice possible.)

BONSON: No, actually. Not at all. You're perfectly right this time! There's certainly no room for compromise. You persist, she'll see!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Okay, thanks, Bonson; you're a great friend!

(Bonson hated doing it, but having been given a choice of splitting them up or having his secret revealed to the king, he knew he had no other option.)

BONSON: Well, you know me, Flaxley...

(He then winced and looked away.)

BONSON: I'm a top bloke.

(Having seen the depth of Flaxley and Kritz's anger towards one another, he felt splitting them up would now be an easy task and he was far from happy about it. Especially when he knew a few simple words of advice, contrary to those he'd given would more than likely solve the problem. Normally such a thing wouldn't have bothered this most heartless of miserly men, but Flaxley and Kritz were two of only five people in the world he could stand and he resented being put in such a position.

Not about to suffer in silence, as Flaxley set about polishing his sword for the tournament, Bonson nudged Shankstone then gestured towards the front door. Curious as to what the old man wanted, Shankstone raised an eyebrow then climbed to his feet.

Moments later, Bonson led Shankstone into the street outside then, when he was satisfied they were out of earshot, he made his feelings known.)

BONSON: Kayfu is a c...

SHANKSTONE: Don't say that word!

BONSON: How else can I describe the c...

SHANKSTONE: Bonson!

BONSON: Don't Bonson me! You're just as bad. You're also a c...

SHANKSTONE: Stop that!

BONSON: Fine!

(He shook his head then sighed.)

BONSON: Kayfu is a female sex organ.

SHANKSTONE: Yes, well, I know this can't be easy for you, but...

BONSON: Not easy? Not easy? Flaxley is a top bloke and considering I think everyone is a git, that's quite the statement. And Kritz, well... she's a world class bit of totty and you know what, she doesn't even mind me making perverted advances.

(He then scratched behind his ear nervously.)

BONSON: Mostly because she thinks I'm joking, but that's beside the point.

(He snarled.)

BONSON: I've been surrounded by wankers most of my life...

SHANKSTONE: You've been surrounded by royal household!

BONSON: That's what I said. And when I finally meet two people I can actually tolerate, you wankers make me destroy their lives! It's not on, Shankstone.

(Shankstone shrugged.)

SHANKSTONE: Bonson, it's not *my* fault. I'm only following orders.

(He nodded.)

SHANKSTONE: Kayfu told me to come with you and make sure you got Flaxley to enter the tournament... and to make sure you didn't tell Flaxley about our plans to get him to marry the princess. Both of which you've done in some considerable style, by the way. I'm impressed.

BONSON: Impressed?

SHANKSTONE: Absolutely. You've been brilliant. You didn't even have to lie to him that much. You just omitted the fact that we plan to get him and Mandika together. Everything else you said was the truth, or at *least* very plausible. Superb work.

BONSON: Well, you know how it is...

SHANKSTONE: Letting him think we were worried Mandika might be forced to marry some abusive stranger was inspired. He's bound to fight at his optimum to win the tournament now, just to ensure that doesn't happen. Fantastic stuff, Bonson.

(Bonson rubbed his chest with pride.)

BONSON: Well, what would you expect from...

(He then remembered he was supposed to be angry and furrowed his brow.)

BONSON: Hey, stop pandering to my ego!

SHANKSTONE: I wasn't.

BONSON: Bloody were!

(He snarled.)

BONSON: Point is, I'm livid. Yes, the king has a problem with Lefiat, but that's not *my* bloody fault! Why am *I* the one who has to suffer??? How can it be right that all you aides and dignitaries can happily make *my* life a misery just to get the king what he wants? What did I ever do to you lot?

SHANKSTONE: Well...

BONSON: I tell you, upper class butt wipes like you lot, make me sick. Going around acting all high and mighty, claiming you have standards and that your shit doesn't stink. Well, let me tell you, it does stink. It stinks to high heaven! If one of you has a problem, you devious underhand scumbags trample all over anyone in your path to get your own way. You make me sick.

SHANKSTONE: Right. Are you quite finished?

BONSON: No, I'm bloody not. I was nothing but a loyal servant to that stupid household and how do you repay me? Just to get your own way, you hold my secret over my head and force me to do a miserable, despicable thing to two people I don't dislike. And you dragged me out of retirement to do it too! This is an outrage.

SHANKSTONE: Now are you finished?

BONSON: For now, yes.

SHANKSTONE: Right.

(He rolled his eyes then looked Bonson calmly in the eye.)

SHANKSTONE: Now tell me, are you angry at *what* you're being expected to do? Or are you just angry at being expected to do *anything*?

BONSON: Both! But mostly the despicable bit.

SHANKSTONE: I see. Well, if it makes you feel any better, I refused to accompany you when Kayfu first told me the plan. I thought what he was doing was highly immoral, so I refused.

(Bonson looked uncertain.)

BONSON: You did?

SHANKSTONE: Yes, but then he told me he'd tell the king about my son if I didn't comply. So you and I are in the same boat, Bonson.

BONSON: Why, what did your son do?

SHANKSTONE: Mandika!

BONSON: I see. A guard is he?

SHANKSTONE: Yes, he is.

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Still, that's nowhere near as bad as my secret.

SHANKSTONE: No, so I've been told.

(Bonson looked to him blankly.)

BONSON: You mean, you don't know what it is?

SHANKSTONE: No, Kayfu wouldn't tell me.

BONSON: Well, that's something.

SHANKSTONE: So, anyway, don't be bitter at *me*, Bonson. I don't like this any more than you do. In fact I agree, Kayfu is a king-obsessed kiss arse, and I'd love nothing more than to chuck him over the battlements.

BONSON: I see.

SHANKSTONE: So, it looks like you're stuck with me, I'm afraid. My job is to make sure you don't tell Flaxley we're trying to pair him off with Mandika, and my son's life is depending on me doing it. So, what can I do?

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: Not a lot. We're *both* screwed. *My* job is to be a complete bastard to my friends or Kayfu will tell... terrible things to the king. I hate Kayfu.

SHANKSTONE: You're preaching to the choir here, Bonson.

BONSON: I prefer it that way. At least choirs listen.

(Shankstone nodded then puffed out in frustration.)

SHANKSTONE: You know the really annoying part?

BONSON: I can think of several.

SHANKSTONE: If we both told Flaxley how we're being blackmailed he might even help us find a way to get through everything without Kayfu even finding out.

BONSON: Yes, but do you want to take that risk?

SHANKSTONE: No, not with my son's life at stake. That's why it's annoying.

BONSON: Yes, I agree. I don't fancy risking it either. I'm just gonna do as Kayfu asked and hope everything works out well.

SHANKSTONE: Me too. It's the only sensible way.

(They both sighed despondently then glanced towards the house.)

SHANKSTONE: Anyway, shall we go inside? It's bloody hot out here.

BONSON: Good idea. With any luck, Flaxley will pour us an ale.

SHANKSTONE: That would go down extremely well right now.

BONSON: Don't get ahead of yourself, old chap. We're talking ale in inverted commas here.

SHANKSTONE: I see. Maybe I'll ask for a cup of coffee then.

BONSON: It might be safer, yes.

(Within the hour, Flaxley and Kritz's twins were at Phisele's mum's house and Bonson, Flaxley, Kritz and Shankstone started making the final preparations for the trip to Guevina. The roof of the carriage was packed with armour and weapons in readiness for the tournament and Kritz had even packed a large hamper full of Sandwiches that Flaxley didn't like. Now all that remained was for Bonson and Kritz to give the carriage a final inspection while Flaxley locked and secured all the windows in the house.

With Flaxley out of sight and Shankstone waiting inside the carriage, Bonson followed Kritz as she stepped the other side of the carriage to check the back wheel, wearing a troubled frown. Satisfied, Flaxley wouldn't overhear him, he then nodded to himself and spoke up.)

BONSON: The carriage is fine.

KRITZ: Yeah, I agree.

(Bonson then checked to see Flaxley was still inside and stepped closer to her.)

BONSON: Um... Kritz, as I've finally got you alone, I'd like to offer you some advice.

KRITZ: You would?

BONSON: I would. It's about your disagreement with Flaxley.

KRITZ: Right... okay...

BONSON: Seriously, Kritz. You can't afford to back down on this one. In this case, you're in the right and he's very much out of order.

KRITZ: Well, *I* think so too.

BONSON: Then it's important you stand your ground. There's certainly no room for compromise. You persist; he'll see sense in the end!

(Kritz absorbed his words and nodded gratefully.)

KRITZ: I will. Thanks for the advice, Bonson!

BONSON: Hey, it's nothing. That's what friends are for...

(He then bit his lip and mumbled under his breath.)

BONSON: Apparently!

(With that, he shook his head in shame at what he'd just done then climbed into the carriage.)

BONSON: I so hope karma is a myth.

(Just then, Flaxley paced out of his house and locked the door behind him. Rubbing his hands together he then paced towards the carriage. Seeing Bonson and Shankstone sitting inside it, he then stopped and furrowed his brow.)

FLAXLEY: *I'll* be coachman then, shall I?

(Bonson leant from the window.)

BONSON: If you wouldn't mind.

FLAXLEY: Why would I mind? It's not like I'm going to take part in a tournament or anything. Why would *I* need to be well rested?

BONSON: Then let Kritz drive if you don't want to.

FLAXLEY: Don't be silly; god only knows where we'd end up.

KRITZ: He's right, I've never driven before and it could only end in Lefiat style calamity.

BONSON: Well, Shankstone and I drove all the way down here, we're knackered, Flaxley. Old and knackered.

(Flaxley rolled his eyes then headed straight for the drivers seat.)

FLAXLEY: Fine, but if I go too fast and damage your carriage, you've only yourselves to blame.

BONSON: Fine by me. It's Kayfu's carriage, damage it as much as you like.

(As Flaxley clambered atop the carriage, Kritz glanced longingly towards Phisele's mum's house then climbed inside. As soon as she was sat down opposite Bonson, the troubled former butler nodded then spoke up.)

BONSON: Right... all set, Kritz?

(Kritz crossed her legs and nodded to him firmly.)

BONSON: Well, are you?

KRITZ: I nodded, Bonson. My face is up here.

(He swiftly averted his gaze from her chest and gave her a cheesy grin.)

BONSON: Right. Noted.

(He then tapped on the roof and leant out of the carriage window.)

BONSON: Ready when you are, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Righto!

(And with that, Flaxley flicked the reigns and set the carriages in motion. Like many other knights and their entourages from towns and cities all over the world, their journey to the Guevina tournament had begun.)

(From coast to coast all over the continent, every township with a competitor involved in the tournament became thoroughly absorbed by it. Hailing their competitor as a hero, they all sent them on their way to Guevina with a farewell fit for a king. Even the towns that didn't have a warrior taking part couldn't contain their excitement. Many of them picked the competitor from the nearest town to whole-hearted support and cheer on. Even though the result of the tournament would take a few days to reach their towns, few could contain their excitement. The tournament had become a multi-national phenomenon for every township and every citizen to behold. Every township with the exception of Tifaeris... and one other.

In a small township, thirty miles to the west of Guevina the tournament wasn't being viewed as something to behold. In this strangest of settlements it was being viewed as an opportunity for something extremely sinister. Malk was a small, fishing community whose portly leader, Stifer, had his own dark agenda for the tournament. He'd personally seen to it that the people of Malk had been kept in the dark about the excitement in Guevina. Having his people excited about the contest would interfere with his own underhand plans for the tournament. As a result, besides Tifaeris, Malk was the only township not currently decked in bunting and buzzing with excitement.)

Malk Township, Presidential Palace.

(In the plush main chamber of Malk's palace, President Stifer sat in a large leather chair with his arms folded, discussing the forthcoming tournament with his head of espionage, Sandark. Something of a mysterious fellow, the tall, muscle bound, Sandark sat on the other side of a small table from him, wearing a large hood which obscured his head entirely. Upon the table between them, sat a fine glass decanter, filled with a black mist that emitted a green aura.)

STIFER: Well, Sandark... this is it, we finally have our opportunity!

(Sandark replied, in a deep, gravelly voice.)

SANDARK: Opportunity, Stifer? This is no mere opportunity. *This* is destiny!

(Stifer looked impressed.)

STIFER: Destiny, you say? I have to say, I admire your confidence!

SANDARK: I believe, Stifer! My mission will undoubtedly be a complete success.

(He clenched a fist then turned his hooded head in the direction of the decanter.)

SANDARK: The king of Guevina, so open, so unprotected, that doesn't happen every damn day. I will take his life with both speed and style.

(He then bowed to the decanter.)

SANDARK: And when it's done... it will only be a matter of time before those fools in Guevina unknowingly complete our mission *for* us. Then, once again, I will be able to serve *you*, Queen Aurora!

(The decanter glowed a brighter green then a sultry female voice projected from it.)

AURORA: And your many years of flawless service will be well rewarded, dear Sandark!

(Stifer looked to Sandark then bit his lip uneasily.)

STIFER: Look, I hate to break up this show of mutual admiration, but what will happen if you *fail* to kill him and get caught trying, Sandark?

SANDARK: Fail?

STIFER: You heard me. There's going to be a *lot* of great warriors in attendance at the tournament. What if one of them catches you and they torture you? Can we trust you to keep Queen Aurora's name out of it?

(Sandark laughed beneath his hood.)

SANDARK: You don't know me very well, do you, Stifer?

STIFER: Indeed. That's why I'm asking.

SANDARK: Fear not, fat one. That will never happen, but if it did, my silence is assured.

AURORA: It's true. I trust Sandark with all I hold dear.

SANDARK: So there you go. You have nothing to fear.

STIFER: Well... good.

SANDARK: I will *not* fail however! I *will* kill the king and trust me... I *will* escape!

(Stifer couldn't help but give an impressed chuckle.)

STIFER: You know, if any *other* man said to me that he could enter Guevina and kill the king then successfully escape, I'd laugh at them. But you, Sandark... you, I believe!

(With that, the decanter glowed bright again.)

AURORA: Then it begins. Go, Sandark! Kill King Falbury, so that I may arise from this curse.

(Sandark immediately stood up.)

SANDARK: As you wish, my queen.

(With that, he bowed and headed for the door.)

STIFER: Good luck!

SANDARK: Luck is for the weak!

(As he disappeared out of the door, Stifer raised a curious eyebrow then glanced to the decanter.)

STIFER: If he fails, Queen Aurora?

AURORA: Sandark *never* fails! The king *will* die, his daughter *will* ascend to the throne and as a female sovereign I *will* be able to possess her.

(The decanter then glowed brightly as Aurora allowed herself a despicable laugh.)

AURORA: And the three of us *will* rule the world, as I was so cruelly robbed of doing all those years ago.

(Stifer smiled and sat back, nodding with satisfaction.)

STIFER: Good things come to those who wait, I suppose.

AURORA: Great things, Stifer, *great* things.

City of Guevina

(On the day before the tournament was due to begin, the sun rose in Guevina to reveal a glorious display of bunting and banners all over the city's main plaza. At the centre of which, a twenty foot square gladiatorial arena had been erected. Those in charge of arranging the tournament had worked through the night, desperate to make sure nothing was left to the last minute. Thanks to their efforts, the preparations were almost complete with an entire day to spare.

At around 9am on this most sunny of summer mornings, Flaxley, Kritz, Bonson and Shankstone's carriage headed from out of the nearby woodland and began heading towards the main entrance gates, set in Guevina's vast city wall. Inside the carriage, Shankstone and Kritz were fast asleep. Sitting opposite Kritz staring merrily up her skirt, Bonson, on the other hand, was wide awake. Atop the carriage, leading the horses forth, Sir Flaxley was also wide awake. Unlike the others, he'd been left no option *but* to stay awake. Exceptionally tired from having driven through the night, he wasn't sad to see Guevina finally come into sight. As much as he didn't want to go there, he was looking forward to stretching his legs and taking a welcome break from driving.

As he continued leading the horses forth, he mused to himself. It had just occurred to him that meeting up with Lefiat and Mandika again would probably be a bizarre experience. Their previous meetings had all been orchestrated by a higher being named Daman Siria, who'd manipulated everything from their personalities to their actions since the day they were born. Having lived very much as puppets of this mystic wise man, Flaxley realised he had no idea what Mandika and Lefiat were really like. Kritz and Bonson hadn't seemed any different since they'd been freed of the mystic burden but he couldn't help wondering how they might have changed. He then allowed himself a smile. There was one silver-lining to the dark cloud that filled his mind when he thought about Guevina. His good friend, Derek, the three foot tall green alien from the planet Tryme 17 was still living there with his equally alien wife. Looking forward to seeing him again, he nodded with satisfaction then started to slow the horses down. A few moments later, they gently eased to a halt and the carriage came to a standstill just outside the tall wooden gates to the city.)

FLAXLEY: Excellent.

(With that, he leapt down from the carriage and approached the unimpressed looking guard on sentry duty.)

FLAXLEY: I am Sir Flaxley of Tifaeris...

GUARD: Then you sir, are a traitor and an idiot!

FLAXLEY: I... what?

(As the guard's disdainful words filtered into Flaxley's head, he became very annoyed, very quickly.)

FLAXLEY: You must be new! Any guard who knew me would never dare say such a thing!

(The guard shrugged.)

GUARD: Why, what are you going to do about it? Drop your shield on my foot?

FLAXLEY: I see! Like that is it?

GUARD: Yup! I've heard all about you, Flaxley. Clumsy, incompetent...

FLAXLEY: Is that so?

(He cracked his fingers and rolled his neck menacingly.)

FLAXLEY: Listen, son, I've been awake all night and I'm not in the mood for any lip. So, just shut your mouth and open the gate, okay? You've been warned.

(With that, Flaxley started to return to the carriage only to hear the guard scoff behind him.)

GUARD: Actually, mistake boy... that's your nickname, isn't it? It's up to my discretion who I let in. And, I don't like your face.

(Clenching his fist, Flaxley turned and stepped up to the guard angrily.)

FLAXLEY: Look, chummy, I happen to know for a fact that you're obliged by law to allow entry to a visiting world leader. Well, I'm the leader of the township of Tifaeris, so open this gate right *now* or I'll tell your king!

GUARD: And how are you gonna do that if I don't let you in? Didn't think of that, did you?

(Flaxley nodded calmly.)

FLAXLEY: I see. Just like *you* didn't think of *this*!

(With that, Flaxley scooped up the guard and threw him under his arm.)

GUARD: What the hell are you doing???

(Saying nothing, Flaxley paced swiftly towards the gate and snarled as the guard protested, his arms and legs flailing wildly in a desperate bid to make Flaxley drop him.)

GUARD: Put me down!!! I'll have you arrested for this!

(As he reached the gate, Flaxley calmly asked again.)

FLAXLEY: Are you going to let us in or not?

GUARD: Not until you...

FLAXLEY: Wrong answer!

(With that, he proceeded to use the guard as a battering ram, thudding him head-first into the heavy wooden gates three times in a row.)

GUARD: Ow!!!

FLAXLEY: How about now?

(In a fair degree of pain, the guard whimpered.)

GUARD: Okay, okay...

(With that, Flaxley dropped him and headed back to the carriage.)

FLAXLEY: Excellent! Oh, and any more grief like that from you or any other like minded buffoons while we're in this stupid city, I'll come back and personally disembowel you!

(In no doubt that Flaxley was serious, the guard yelled for the gates to be opened, his bruised face bearing a traumatised expression.

As soon as the gates parted, Flaxley drove the carriage through, grinning at the guard as he did so.)

FLAXLEY: See how much easier life can be when we all try to get along?

(He then snarled angrily.)

FLAXLEY: Now salute, you disrespectful little shit.

(Immediately, the terrified guard did just that.)

GUARD: Yes, sir!

(Flaxley just shook his head with contempt.)

FLAXLEY: You *bow* to other world leaders, you don't salute them. Bloody amateur.

(He then faced ahead, grinning to himself as the carriage headed into the city.

Inside the carriage at this time, having just woken up, Kritz yawned and rubbed her eyes then looked from the window at the vast sprawl of wooden buildings and the magnificent castle that dominated the skyline. At once, her jaw dropped.)

KRITZ: Wow, what an amazing view!

(Bonson nodded as he continued to stare up her skirt.)

BONSON: I know, I can't take my eyes off of it!

KRITZ: I had no idea it was so big!

BONSON: Big? Deep, maybe... I really haven't looked that closely.

(He then glanced up at her, just as she turned to give him a sideways glance.)

KRITZ: What are you on about?

(Realising he'd had a lucky escape, Bonson thought quickly.)

BONSON: What? Um... the sea!

KRITZ: You can't even see the sea.

BONSON: No, but... you could earlier. I was still thinking about that.

KRITZ: Oh. Right.

(She then resumed staring from the window. Having never been to Guevina before, Kriz was awestruck like a first time tourist. Alternatively, having been nothing but an effective and loyal knight for the city for many years only to become a figure of hatred, Flaxley was a lot less enthusiastic. Snarling as he led the carriage forth, he mumbled to himself bitterly.)

FLAXLEY: Bloody place. Village idiots, the bloody lot of them.

(Much to Flaxley's bewilderment, as soon as the carriage reached the centre of the cobbled main square, Shankstone leant from the window and asked him to stop. Obliging him, Flaxley called the horses to a halt then watched on agape as the three passengers all alighted the carriage.)

FLAXLEY: Where are you going?

BONSON: The inn!

FLAXLEY: Hey! If you think I'm going to park this carriage for you while you bugger off to the pub and get rat-arsed, you've got another thing coming. It's bad enough that you made me drive it all the way here!

BONSON: We're not *going* to get rat-arsed. The inn is where you tournament entrants have to check-in, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Oh... right.

SHANKSTONE: And we're not expecting you to park it. Just leave it *here* and come with us, Flaxley.

(Flaxley glanced around the open square at the large numbers of locals strolling about beneath the bunting and furrowed his brow.)

FLAXLEY: I can't just *leave* it here! For one, it's in the way and secondly, it'll get stolen.

BONSON: That's not your problem, Flaxley.

SHANKSTONE: Quite. It's Kayfu's problem. It's *his* carriage.

BONSON: And seeing as the man is a c...

SHANKSTONE: Bonson!

BONSON: Fine. Seeing as he's a ladies fun unit, just leave it there. If it gets stolen then... well, good. In your face, Kayfu.

(Flaxley glanced around the square then shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. He's *your* boss. If you want to piss him off, who am I to argue?

(With that, Flaxley swiftly climbed down from the carriage.)

BONSON: Just to be clear, Flaxley. He's not my boss, I'm retired. And besides, the king was my boss, not Kayfu.

SHANKSTONE: He is *my* boss though, and I say we abandon it here.

FLAXLEY: And you won't get into trouble?

(Shankstone shrugged.)

SHANKSTONE: I'll just tell him I parked it outside the inn so you could check-in for the tournament and while we were inside, thieves took it.

BONSON: Won't even be a lie.

SHANKSTONE: Exactly.

FLAXLEY: Well, if you're certain.

(Both Shankstone and Bonson replied at the same time.)

BONSON & SHANKSTONE: We're positive.

(Having listened to the entire conversation with a bewildered expression on her face, Kritz scratched her head uneasily.)

KRITZ: Say, what have you got against this Kayfu person anyway?

(Again, they replied almost as if they were one person.)

BONSON & SHANKSTONE: It's personal.

SHANKSTONE: We just don't like him, that's all.

KRITZ: Evidently.

(Flaxley nodded thoughtfully.)

FLAXLEY: If I recall, Kayfu always had his tongue firmly up the king's arse.

BONSON: That's right.

SHANKSTONE: He's spent his entire career kissing the kings behind.

FLAXLEY: Never was a fan of that chap.

(He nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Fuck him then. Let's go and sign me in.

BONSON: Absolutely.

(With that, they all headed across the sun-kissed main square on route to the inn, Bonson rubbing his hands together excitedly. Well aware that the ever quickening Bonson was practically on auto-pilot, lured in by the aroma of the ale, Flaxley and Kritz shared a highly amused smile then snarled at one another.)

KRITZ: Arsehole.

FLAXLEY: Bad parent.

(They shook their heads bitterly at one another then Flaxley glanced at Bonson. At once, a smirk appeared on his face.)

FLAXLEY: Thirsty, Bonson?

BONSON: Bloody parched, actually.

FLAXLEY: Going to grab a coffee then? Only, it's a bit early for ale!

BONSON: Don't be soft, Flaxley! An ale or two before breakfast never did anyone any harm!

(He then ruffled his neck indignantly.)

BONSON: Besides, it'd be rude just to go in there and sign in without stopping for at least one!

(Flaxley grinned to himself, then looked despondent and hung his head.)

FLAXLEY: I can't believe I'm going to enter a tournament! How undignified.

(Kritz glared at him for a moment then sighed outwardly, pushing away her anger.)

KRITZ: Don't be down-hearted, Flaxley. It's a good thing you're doing for Mandika.

(Flaxley glanced at her for a moment then forced a smile.)

FLAXLEY: Well... true! Thanks, Kritz.

(With Flaxley and Kritz sharing a smile, alarm bells immediately rang in Shankstone's head. He could tell from their eyes that despite their current animosity towards each other, the two of them loved one another dearly. In that moment he felt certain that Bonson's chances of splitting them up, especially with the tournament only a day away, were practically nil. He was convinced that Bonson would fail and Kayfu would spill his secret to the king. Having taken quite a liking to the grumpy, retired butler, it made him feel horribly uncomfortable. As far as he was concerned, Bonson was well and truly doomed. With this in mind, he swiftly started to hurry ahead. There was no way he could look Bonson in the eye and tell him what he thought, so he opted to give him a wide berth instead.)

SHANKSTONE: Right... I'll be in the bar. Come and join me when you've signed in.

(As he hurried towards the inn doors, the thirsting Bonson attempted to keep pace with him but was cruelly stopped in his tracks by Flaxley's raised voice.)

FLAXLEY: Don't *you* wander off too, Bonson. I don't know who I'm supposed to see. The landlord, the receptionist, who? I mean, is there a special room set aside? (Spinning to face him, Bonson held his palms out to the side and remonstrated with him desperately.)

BONSON: You can ask that when you get in there, can't you?

(With that, he about turned, only to find Shankstone had disappeared inside the inn.)

BONSON: Oh, cuddyfinkle farts!

(He then groaned bitterly.)

BONSON: Fine. Follow me.

(Furrowing his brow, Bonson then mumbled bitterly under his breath and led Flaxley and Kritz towards the small wooden door on the far right side of the inn. Looking pale and broken, he stared lustfully towards the two larger doors on the left as he did so. Despite having never been there before, Kritz was absolutely certain that they must have been the doors to the bar.

Upon reaching the small door on the right side of the inn, Bonson led Flaxley and Kritz through it and they emerged in a small square room with a reception desk at one side. As Kritz looked upwards and nodded approvingly at the chandelier, Flaxley and Bonson glanced at one another then stepped up to the desk and smiled at the woman on the other side of it.)

BONSON: Morning, beautiful.

(At once, the receptionist looked up at Bonson and smiled.)

RECEPTIONIST: Oh, hello, Bonson! How are you?

BONSON: All the better for seeing your deep blue eyes!

RECEPTIONIST: I have brown eyes, Bonson. That blue thing is my bra.

BONSON: And very nice it is too.

RECEPTIONIST: So, what brings you to this side? This is the hotel side. Get lost on the way to the bar, did you?

BONSON: No actually.

(He then gestured to Flaxley.)

BONSON: I have Sir Flaxley with me; he's come to sign in.

(As soon as Bonson mentioned Flaxley's name, the receptionist's face dropped and she scowled hatefully.)

RECEPTIONIST: I see.

(She then looked at Flaxley and sneered.)

RECEPTIONIST: Proud of yourself, are you?

(Flaxley looked most taken aback.)

FLAXLEY: What's that supposed to mean?

RECEPTIONIST: Oh, like you don't know.

(She snarled then reached under her desk.)

RECEPTIONIST: Sign this!

(With that, she slapped a piece of paper on the desk in front of him. Flaxley gave her a disbelieving glance for a moment then looked down and scanned the words on the paper.)

FLAXLEY: Hmm... okay... that all seems fine.

(He signed the sheet then slid it towards her.)

FLAXLEY: Thank you!

RECEPTIONIST: Whatever.

(As if Flaxley was the lowest of the low, the receptionist snatched the sheet from him then sneered at Kritz. Spying the tattoo on her arm, she then reached beneath the desk and pulled out another sheet of paper.)

RECEPTIONIST: Hey, you with the tattoo.

(Kritz lowered her eyes from the chandelier and glanced at her emptily.)

KRITZ: Me?

RECEPTIONIST: Yes, you. You must be the Treppe Village entrant!

(Flaxley scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: No, no. She's merely my wife and the mother of my children.

(Highly incensed by his words, Kritz glared at him furiously.)

KRITZ: Merely? Merely?

FLAXLEY: What? I didn't mean it in a bad way!

KRITZ: You said, merely!

FLAXLEY: I meant you're merely a spectator rather than a participant.

KRITZ: You said I'm *merely* your wife and the mother of your children. Like I'm nothing else.

FLAXLEY: Well... that's true, isn't it?

(She sneered bitterly.)

KRITZ: Right that's done it. I'll show you!

(Looking absolutely furious, she then stormed over to the reception desk and nodded sternly.)

KRITZ: Yes, yes I am. Treppe through and through. Where do I sign?

(She then snatched the paper from the receptionist and grabbed a pen.)

KRITZ: I'll give you "merely".

(Matching her fury, Flaxley snatched the form from her and screwed it up into a ball.)

FLAXLEY: *You* can't enter!!! What about the kids? You can't afford to risk your health by taking part in pointless tournaments, you're a mother now!

KRITZ: Oh, but you can?

FLAXLEY: Like I said, there's no risk when *I* do it! And even if there was, I'm a man, not a mother! *You're* a mother, damn it! Kids *need* their mother!

KRITZ: Oh, shut it! Sexist pig!

FLAXLEY: *I'm* a sexist pig? You were raised by the bloody, man-hating Treppe!!!

(As Bonson and the receptionist looked on uncomfortably, silence descended and Flaxley and Kritz glared at each other bitterly, both feeling the other one was out of order. As far as Flaxley was concerned, having been raised in a culture where mothers gave up everything they aspired to be, and devoted their entire lives to their children, he couldn't understand why Kritz seemed so resistant to the idea. In Kritz's case, having been raised in a female dominated culture where male slaves took care of the parenting needs, she couldn't even begin to understand why he expected *her* to do everything. The cultures within which they were raised were well and truly clashing and Bonson's advice that they were both one hundred percent right certainly wasn't helping matters. And so, the hateful glare continued for a full minute until, Kritz broke from their prolonged mutual scowl and looked to the receptionist.)

KRITZ: Give me another form, please!

(Much to Flaxley's annoyance, the receptionist immediately handed her another sheet of paper.)

FLAXLEY: You can't...

KRITZ: Shut up! I'm entering, now get over it!

FLAXLEY: Fine, but after you get killed in battle, don't come crying to me.

KRITZ: How can...

FLAXLEY: You know what I mean!!!
(He then ruffled his neck indignantly.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. If anything happens to you, I'll just tell the kids you died because you didn't care about them. Then I'll remarry and they'll learn to love their new mum, forgetting all about you. If that's what you want, go ahead and enter.

KRITZ: Whatever. You don't half talk shit sometimes.
(Giving the indignant looking Flaxley one last dagger look, she then turned her focus to the sheet before her.)

KRITZ: Right... name...
(Much to the receptionist's amusement, Kritz then proceeded to fill out the form, slowly sounding out what she was writing like a young child.)

KRITZ: Kritz... Trepe... Village ...
(She then scrutinized the sheet vigorously.)

KRITZ: Um... whereabouts do I sign?
(The receptionist scoffed.)

RECEPTIONIST: Where it says, "Sign".
(Bonson leant up against her then pointed to the sheet.)

BONSON: There!

KRITZ: Oh... that's how you spell that, is it? Thanks, Bonson.

BONSON: My pleasure. Any excuse to cop a feel of some side boob, you know me.
(Kritz grinned then signed the sheet.)

KRITZ: All done.

RECEPTIONIST: Congratulations!
(With that, the receptionist took the sheet from her and placed it under the desk.)

RECEPTIONIST: All entrants should assemble at the warriors enclosure at the side of the battle arena at noon tomorrow. If you're late, you'll be disqualified.

KRITZ: We won't be.

RECEPTIONIST: Whatever. Anyway... will that be all?
(Having given Kritz a prolonged shake of the head, Flaxley sighed in defeat then looked to the receptionist.)

FLAXLEY: Actually, no. Do you have any rooms free?
(Making no secret of her disdain for Flaxley, the receptionist scoffed.)

RECEPTIONIST: Don't be stupid, we've been booked solid for weeks! Idiot.

FLAXLEY: I only asked!

BONSON: Don't worry, we'll think of something!
(He then beamed gleefully.)

BONSON: In the meantime, seeing as the entry formalities are complete, let's relax and get some ale inside us, shall we? Follow me.
(With that, he headed excitedly around the reception desk and disappeared through a small interior door. Having exchanged a brief sneer, Flaxley and Kritz then followed on. Watching them go, the receptionist coldly scrutinised Kritz's incredibly short skirt, and shook her head disdainfully.)

RECEPTIONIST: So Flaxley really *did* abandon the princess to marry a barely literate, Trepe tart! What a loser.

(As Flaxley and Kritz followed Bonson through a small adjoining door into the bar, the sounds of laughter in the smoky air grew louder then fell silent as everyone

stopped and coldly stared their way. Undeterred by the icy greeting, Bonson headed straight for the bar.)

BONSON: Sit down, chaps! I'll get these!

(Somewhat miffed by the unfriendly atmosphere, Flaxley and Kritz watched him go then cautiously sat themselves at the nearest table as everyone continued to glare at them.)

KRITZ: Friendly place, Guevina!

FLAXLEY: Yes, wonderful.

(A few moments later, the noise level increased again and attention moved away from them as people resumed their drinking and conversations. Not in the best of moods with one another, Kritz and Flaxley didn't speak a word to each other, settling instead for tapping the table and glancing around the bar randomly. As he sat there, Flaxley couldn't help but marvel at the fact that the inn was so busy at such an early hour. Convinced it must have been as a result of the tournament being in town, he then shrugged and sat back. Having never been to Guevina before however, Kritz simply assumed people from Guevina had a drink problem and that it was always like this.

A few minutes later as Kritz continued to ponder how so many people in one place could possibly have become so reliant on alcohol, Bonson emerged from a crowd of drinkers and approached the table carrying three ale tankards.)

BONSON: You happy there or shall we join Shankstone? He's at the back with a couple of his drinking buddies.

KRITZ: Here's fine. I'm afraid we'll get stared at if we stand up again.

(Bonson set the ales down then took a seat.)

BONSON: You always get stared at, you sexy minx, you.

KRITZ: Yeah, but I don't normally get scowled at! Not by men, anyway.

BONSON: I wouldn't worry about that, Kritz. It's not *you* they're scowling at.

KRITZ: That's true.

FLAXLEY: Bunch of ingrate morons. I gave my all serving this city.

BONSON: Yes well, you know that, and I know that... more importantly, ale.

(Kritz smiled and reached for a tankard.)

KRITZ: Nice one, Bonson!

(Bonson grinned cheekily.)

BONSON: Nice one, my arse! These are my three; you can get your own!

(As the two of them chuckled, a man's voice piped up from behind Bonson.)

ROTAN: Well, if it aint Sir Flaxley of Tifaeris!

(Flaxley looked up and raised a curious eyebrow.)

FLAXLEY: Who are you?

ROTAN: Never mind who I am. You've got a fucking nerve showing your face around here!

BARMAN: Leave it, Rotan! He aint worth it!

(As Rotan scoffed and headed away, Kritz turned to face Flaxley.)

KRITZ: Bloody popular, aint ya?

(Flaxley furrowed his brow and looked towards Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: When did Guevina folk suddenly become so retarded? I used to be a national hero!

BONSON: Yes, well... you aint anymore!

FLAXLEY: I know that. I just want to know why they all think I abandoned the princess. How the hell did that rumour get started?

(Bonson glanced away and mumbled uncomfortably.)

BONSON: I don't know. Maybe, it was a good story and people with good stories get beer bought for them... I couldn't say...

FLAXLEY: What was that, Bonson? I couldn't hear you, you were mumbling.

BONSON: I said, I don't know... Lefiat probably started it.

(Just then, a pretty female drinker came over, wobbling in a drunken state.)

CERISE: You lousy asshole, Flaxley! I believed you were something special and all the while you just wanted to use me! I gave you my virginity, damn you!!!

(Unsurprisingly, Kritz was livid.)

KRITZ: Who's she???

(Flaxley grimaced uncomfortably and offered her a cheesy grin.)

FLAXLEY: Um... a past love? I'm sure you have past loves too. Let's just ignore her.

(Unfortunately for him, Cerise wasn't about to be ignored and shook her fist at him furiously.)

CERISE: I weren't the only one either, was I? You shagged most of my friends and didn't bother seeing any of *them* again either! Fifteen of them at the last count.

Bloody philanderer!!!

(Desperate to justify himself under the weight of Kritz's furious, burning scowl, Flaxley spoke up defensively.)

FLAXLEY: Hey, I was nothing but upfront and honest with the women in this town. I was a perfect gentleman!

(Much to his horror several dissenting voices then popped up from behind Cerise.)

MALE VOICE: Liar, you slept with my sister!

FEMALE VOICE: He slept with both my nieces at the same time!!

2nd MALE VOICE: He slept with my wife... and her mother!!!

FLAXLEY: It's a lie!

CERISE: Bullshit! You must have slept with almost every woman in Guevina who took your fancy! And not once did you stick around for breakfast!

(She sneered.)

CERISE: If only we knew now, what we knew back then...

(She looked baffled and scowled.)

CERISE: Wait, that's back to front. If only we knew what we knew now... wait, that's not it either!

BONSON: Hmm, correct me if I'm wrong but I think she might be a tad intoxicated!

(Feeling extremely awkward to be confronted with this while his wife was sat beside him, Flaxley spammed his forehead.)

FLAXLEY: Ya think?

(Hoping Cerise's drunkenness would exonerate him somehow, Flaxley then offered Kritz a nervous grin.)

FLAXLEY: Ignore her, my love. She's drunk.

(Sneering back at him furiously, Kritz leap to her feet and thumped the table with her fist.)

KRITZ: Drunk or not, she said enough for me!

(With that, she stormed out of the bar's front entrance in a wild rage. Having watched her go, Flaxley sighed in defeat then climbed to his feet.)

FLAXLEY: Perfect. Just bloody perfect.

(He then raced out of the door after her. Left on his own, Bonson raised an astonished eyebrow then took a sip of his ale.)

BONSON: Well, that was an unexpected bonus. At this rate they'll be divorced by lunchtime!

(He then bit his lip uneasily.)

BONSON: Right... I don't feel good about that.

(He then shrugged it off and took another large sip of his ale.)

BONSON: Superb.

(Just outside the inn at this time, Kritz stormed across the sunlit cobbles, swearing under her breath. Racing after her wearing a frustrated grimace, Flaxley looked fed up to the back teeth.)

FLAXLEY: Come back here, will you? This is infantile.

KRITZ: Get lost. Just leave me alone, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Will I, bollocks.

(With that, he reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her to a halt.)

FLAXLEY: Now...

(Before he could say another word, Kritz slapped him across the face then launched into him verbally.)

KRITZ: You never told me you were a user! Women are just objects to you! You abused your position as a respected knight to get women into bed, didn't you?

FLAXLEY: Hey, that's practically a lie! I was young and they were horny! What's a man supposed to do?

KRITZ: I thought *you* were different!

FLAXLEY: No, that's you!

(With that, they both stopped snarling and looked confused.)

FLAXLEY: Never mind that! Look, I was young and single. I don't have to justify my past to you, just as you don't have to justify yours to me!

(Kritz shook her head and sighed sorrowfully.)

KRITZ: You know damn well it's not about that! It's about *you* thinking women are just there to serve *you*! You think were only here for *your* fun and to look after *your* children!

FLAXLEY: That's nonsense! I don't think women are fun at all! You *are*, however, supposed to look after children! It's a *mother's* job and mothers are women. Now I'm sorry but I always thought *you* were a woman, therefore...

KRITZ: I am. And as a woman I hate being taken for granted by a pig like you!

FLAXLEY: Well... oink!

(As Kritz gave him a sideways glance, Flaxley immediately consigned his previous statement to embarrassing moments in history and continued.)

FLAXLEY: Look, I don't take you for granted. I just don't get why you resent being a mother so much.

(Kritz shook her head slowly and gritted her teeth.)

KRITZ: I don't. And you're really starting to piss me off by saying that all the time.

FLAXLEY: Why? It's true, isn't it?

(As Kritz stood there silently snarling down at the cobbles, trying her damndest not to explode, Flaxley shook his head disdainfully.)

FLAXLEY: Fine, say nothing. It's probably for the best. We can talk about it when you've grown up a little!

(Kritz looked at him and scoffed furiously.)

KRITZ: You'll be lucky if I *ever* talk to you again!

(They both knew that by "talk" she meant "have sex" and the conversation continued in that vein.)

FLAXLEY: Good, at least I won't have to put up with your incessant groaning, you snort like a pig! And quite frankly, I don't find that sexy!

KRITZ: Well, you sweat really badly, it drips all over me, it's disgusting!

FLAXLEY: At least I can last more than thirty minutes without getting cramp!

KRITZ: What about you then? Fancy biting someone's tongue when you're kissing them!

(Flaxley looked most confused.)

FLAXLEY: That was you!!!

(Kritz too, looked confused.)

KRITZ: Um...

(Then she placed her hands on her hips arrogantly and tried again.)

KRITZ: Well, what about you when you got back from the inn a few weeks ago?

You were so drunk you came in the bedroom and tried to put it up my arse, you useless tit!

(A bitter silence then ensued and Flaxley began to fume. Slowly turning red with rage, he shook his fist then spoke back at her through gritted teeth.)

FLAXLEY: That wasn't me either!!!

KRITZ: Yes it bloody well was, you came in and...

(A look of horror filled her face and she took a step back.)

KRITZ: I thought it was... well... maybe it...

(She then took to her heels and fled. Charging forth like a gazelle, she cleared the square then shot between two houses and disappeared from view. Having watched her go, Flaxley snarled then shook his fist in the direction she'd ran in.)

FLAXLEY: We *will* discuss this later!!!

(Feeling empty inside, he then turned and started to walk back to the inn with his shoulders hunched. As he approached the door, however, Bonson came out and blocked his path.)

BONSON: What happened there, Flaxley? I was watching from the window. One minute you were talking and the next, whoosh... she was off. Didn't threaten to hit her, did you?

FLAXLEY: Of course, I bloody didn't.

BONSON: Good. Only I don't care how big you are, if you did that I'd whack you one. Then I'd pray you made my death quick and painless.

FLAXLEY: Bonson, you know damn well, I'd never hit a woman. Especially that one.

BONSON: Quite. My bad. So what happened then?

FLAXLEY: None of your business. Now shift, I need a drink!

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Then come with me, Flaxley. I've got more whisky than you can shake a stick at, at home! And besides, I already drank your ale. I didn't think you were coming back, you see?

FLAXLEY: Well where else was I going to go?

(He then shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: I'll just order another.

BONSON: No, forget that, old chap. Come with me and have a drink at the castle. You can say hello to Mandika while you're there.

(Flaxley looked thoughtful.)

FLAXLEY: Well... she is why we're here, after all.

(He then nodded firmly.)

FLAXLEY: Good idea! To the castle it is then!

(With that, they both started to pace towards where the giant castle dominated the skyline.)

FLAXLEY: We might be able to end all this nonsense right now actually. If I can convince Mandika to stay with Lefiat no matter what the king says, she won't be under threat to marry some weirdo and I won't have to enter that silly tournament!

BONSON: So that's your plan, is it? Get Mandika to stay with Lefiat so you don't have to fight.

FLAXLEY: It would solve the problem.

BONSON: Yes but, getting Mandika to stay with Lefiat? You hate her that much do you?

FLAXLEY: This is no laughing matter, Bonson. Getting her to stay with Lefiat could well save her from a life of misery. I'd say it's imperative that we try.

BONSON: Well, fine... we'll try that then. It's a long shot, but if she were to agree, we could all forget this nightmare ever happened. You could go home and I could go back to enjoying a peaceful life.

(He then sighed miserably.)

BONSON: I doubt Mandika *will* change her mind though!

FLAXLEY: I don't know, Bonson, I have a way with women, you know! She might listen to me!

(Having seen Kritz storm off only a few moments earlier, Bonson gave him a sideways glance.)

BONSON: Yes, Flaxley.

(He then shivered.)

BONSON: Oh, there is just one thing, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: What? You okay?

BONSON: Well, Mandika doesn't know that her hand in marriage is going to be offered to the winner and I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention it to her.

(Flaxley gave him a sideways glance.)

FLAXLEY: You already told me that, Bonson. Though if she *did* know...

BONSON: If she *did* know, she'd go ballistic. And if she goes ballistic at the king, who do you think the king is going to blame? Me! Kayfu will make damn sure of that.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I see! Then don't worry, I won't say a word!

Guevina Castle

(From the moment he arrived inside the magnificent castle, a million old feelings returned to Flaxley. He remembered how he ruled the roost in these very corridors for a good few years, gaining respect from everyone in the kingdom. Allowing himself a sentimental smile as he headed down the main hallway at Bonson's side, he then cast any thoughts of his time as Guevina's royal knight to one side and focussed on the mission ahead. At once a look of concentration crossed his brow as he pondered exactly what he'd say to Mandika. Convinced the words would come to him, he then nodded to himself confidently as Bonson led him towards Mandika's games room.

Still angry at her father for kicking Lefiat out, Mandika had become extremely predictable and Bonson knew exactly where to find her. Every day, she'd wake, go to

her games room then not come out again until bedtime. She'd even taken her meals there, refusing her father's requests to join him.

A full ten minutes after entering the castle, Flaxley and Bonson finally reached her games room doors then looked to another. Sharing no more than a knowing glance they then pushed open the doors and stepped inside. Having been half-heartedly playing a game of skittles all by herself, Mandika spotted them and immediately rushed over, skipping like an over-excited schoolgirl who hadn't seen her father in years.)

MANDIKA: Flaxley!!!

(Gushing from every pore, she threw her arms around him and clung onto him for dear life. A tear rolled down her cheek as she squeezed herself into him. Without Lefiat around, she'd been extremely lonely and it showed. Spying her misery, Bonson gave her a consoling pat on the shoulder before availing himself a seat beside the drinks cabinet.)

BONSON: Come and sit down, you two!

(Having had to literally, prize Mandika off of himself, Flaxley gave her a smile then gestured for her to sit with Bonson. Obliging him, she sat herself down then Flaxley followed suit. Excited to finally have some company, Mandika beamed and looked joyfully to Flaxley.)

MANDIKA: Wow, it's been over a year! I'm so glad you're here!

BONSON: It doesn't feel that long!

FLAXLEY: No, she's right. Lefiat hasn't broken any of our belongings for a long time!

(Her initial joy at seeing him seemed to wither and die as a glum expression appeared on her face.)

MANDIKA: Poor Lefiat!

(Setting the plan to convince Mandika to stay with Lefiat into action, Bonson sighed regretfully.)

BONSON: Yes, poor Lefiat! What a complete buffoon he was to think that you actually loved him unconditionally!

(Taken aback by his comment, she immediately went on the defensive.)

MANDIKA: I do love him, I do... I can't help it if my father is a pig!

FLAXLEY: But surely, if you loved him...

MANDIKA: Why doesn't anyone understand?

BONSON: Because it doesn't make sense, ma'am!

MANDIKA: It's really quite simple; I've been groomed all my life to become queen of this nation someday. I'm happy to share my life with Lefiat, but I can't sacrifice it for him. I just can't!

(Still confident that the right words would come to him and she'd change her mind, thus negating his need to join the tournament, Flaxley tried to make her see otherwise.)

FLAXLEY: Look, Kritz spent her life training to be a warrior, she gave it up for love, why can't you?

MANDIKA: Because I'd be miserable!

FLAXLEY: That's nonsense!

BONSON: Really, Flaxley? Nonsense is it? So where's Kritz now?

FLAXLEY: What? Shut up, Bonson. This isn't about me!

MANDIKA: Yeah, that's a point... where is she?

FLAXLEY: Hey, look, never mind that. The point is, without Lefiat, you're already miserable, Mandika!

MANDIKA: Yeah, but at least this way I'm miserable *and* rich!

BONSON: That's a good point actually. Hard to argue with that, in fact. You win. (Flaxley winced and held his forehead in his palm.)

FLAXLEY: You're really not helping, Bonson.

BONSON: Well, who are we kidding? Who *wouldn't* pick being royal over shacking up with Lefiat. Name me one person.

(In that moment, Flaxley's face lit up. It was as if the words he'd been looking for had been handed to him by the goddess of love herself. Sitting up straight, he looked Mandika straight in the eye.)

FLAXLEY: One person who'd pick shacking up with Lefiat over being royal, you say?

(He nodded firmly.)

FLAXLEY: His true love would, that's who.

(As he looked into Mandika's eyes daring her to deny it, and with every confidence that she'd crumble to his way of thinking, Bonson opened his mouth and killed the moment like only he could.)

BONSON: His true love? What a load of old bollocks.

FLAXLEY: Bonson!

BONSON: I mean, come off it. Life isn't a fairy tale, Flaxley. There's no such thing as this fabled 'one true love', you just find someone you can happily tolerate. That's all love is.

(As Flaxley hung his head in despair, his efforts shot to pieces, Mandika sighed.)

MANDIKA: I can't claim Lefiat was my one true love anyway... I just know I was happy with him around.

(She then hung her head.)

MANDIKA: And I know I'll be happen again some day. When I become queen. That means everything to me.

(She then looked to Flaxley and forced a smile.)

MANDIKA: I just need to take the time to get over Lefiat.

(She then started to sob.)

MANDIKA: It's hard that's all.

(Watching on as tear rolled down her cheek, Flaxley gave Bonson a furious glance then gave Mandika a hug.)

BONSON: What? Why are you glaring at me?

(He ruffled his neck muscles.)

BONSON: You should know by now, if you say stupid things like "one true love" I'm going to point out what a cock you're being. Like Mandika's stupid enough to fall for that.

(Reacting to his words, Mandika pulled back from the hug with Flaxley and looked to Bonson.)

MANDIKA: One true love *is* a nice idea. It's comforting, but... my one true love *is* the thought of becoming queen.

BONSON: See, Flaxley? Your idea was a non-starter from the beginning, now I suggest you apologise.

(Flaxley gave him a sideways glance then shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: It was worth a try.

BONSON: Was it though?

(Flaxley glared at him.)

FLAXLEY: I don't hit women, but infuriating old men...

BONSON: Fair point, I'll be quiet.

(As Bonson glanced away innocently, Mandika looked to Flaxley and smiled.)

MANDIKA: So, where is Kritz anyway?

(Just then, her eyes filled with hope.)

MANDIKA: Was she too embarrassed to come because she's put loads of weight on after having her babies?

(Flaxley furrowed his brow at her.)

FLAXLEY: Don't be ridiculous! She just... went for a walk!

(Bonson gave him a sideways glance.)

BONSON: You mean she ran off after you upset her!

FLAXLEY: You just don't learn, do you???

BONSON: Apparently not, no.

MANDIKA: She ran off? Were you mean about her weight gain?

FLAXLEY: For pity's sake, Mandika!

MANDIKA: What? I was only asking.

(As Flaxley shook his head at her, Mandika sighed and looked to the floor wearing a sorrowful pout.)

MANDIKA: You know... it hurts... everyday. I think about Lefiat all the time. I just want to see him, you know?

BONSON: Why don't you then? You can come with us to the inn!

(At once her face lit up but she also looked deeply unsettled. Watching her, Flaxley immediately sensed there was hope. Bonson had redeemed himself. A few seconds ago he'd been on the verge of picking him up and physically ejecting him into the corridor outside, but now he was grateful for the old man's presence. Hoping he could convince her to go, he sat back and watched on as Mandika shuffled uneasily in her seat.)

MANDIKA: Do you think I should?

BONSON: No, not all. I only suggested it to raise money for charity!

MANDIKA: What?

(She looked horribly lost and pouted.)

MANDIKA: I'm all confused now! I don't know what to do.

BONSON: So, what's new? C'mon princess, let's go and see your Lefiat!

(She smiled and rose to her feet.)

MANDIKA: I will. Thanks, Bonson!

(Flaxley smiled and gave Bonson a grateful nod.)

FLAXLEY: Nice save.

BONSON: Well, you know me. I get there in the end.

(And with that, Flaxley and Bonson rose to their feet and the three of them started to head for the door.)

MANDIKA: I love you guys. You're always looking out for me.

(She beamed as they headed out of the door and off down the corridor.)

MANDIKA: You, Flaxley, always making sure I'm out of harm's way. Standing between me and danger.

(She then looked to Bonson.)

MANDIKA: And you, Bonson... you're okay too.

BONSON: Sorry?

MANDIKA: You're a mean guy, Bonson. But... I just get the feeling that you love me... and that makes me happy. You may not say it; in fact you vehemently deny it. Actually, you insist it's the complete opposite but I know you care about me.

BONSON: Well... I'm good like that!

MANDIKA: You are! No matter what happens, you'll always be my special Bon-bon!

BONSON: Thank you, ma'am. But if you ever call me *that* again, I'll take you to the top of the tallest tower and throw you over it!

(As Mandika giggled, Bonson glared at her coldly.)

BONSON: Seriously!

(As they headed from the corridor and into the main hallway towards the exit, with Mandika in the middle, she looked from side to side and beamed.)

MANDIKA: This is lovely. Escorted by my two favourite men!

BONSON: That bodes well for Lefiat!

MANDIKA: You know what I mean!

BONSON: I just hope the king doesn't object to you visiting him!

FLAXLEY: Don't worry, Bon-bon. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

BONSON: Stop it!!!

(He fumed.)

BONSON: If that name catches on... I'll come to Tifaeris and burn it down!

(As they walked on, both men flanking the princess, arm in arm down the corridor, Bonson snarled to himself bitterly for a while then raised the subject once again.)

BONSON: How would you like to be known as Sir Flaxley-waxley or something?

Well? You wouldn't, would you?

(Flaxley grinned.)

FLAXLEY: Let it go, Bonson!

BONSON: I'm just saying!

(With that, they carried on in silence down the corridor for a few moments, but alas Bonson just couldn't let it go.)

BONSON: In my day, people respected their elders!

(At once, Mandika and Flaxley both stopped and chuckled.)

BONSON: Well, they did!

MANDIKA: Alright, we get the picture!

FLAXLEY: Yeah. Please, Bonson, just let it go!

(Shrugging indignantly, Bonson scoffed then walked on.)

BONSON: If you ask me, it's typical that you two both found that amusing. I always said you'd make the perfect couple!

(He then strode away purposefully, leaving Mandika and Flaxley looking at one another wearing highly embarrassed expressions. Reminders of a time when Mandika used to try to woo Flaxley incessantly flooded back to them and they both felt extremely uncomfortable. Mandika immediately went bright red and let go of Flaxley's arm, while Flaxley stood tall with his arms folded trying to pretend that those days never happened.)

FLAXLEY: Right... let's go shall we?

MANDIKA: Okay!

(Pacing ahead, Bonson felt extremely proud of himself yet riddled with guilt at the same time. Sowing a seed in Mandika and Flaxley's minds that a romance between them wasn't impossible had been inspired, he felt. Doing so, however, was stabbing Kritz in the back and made him feel horribly uncomfortable. He felt like an evil genius who'd just realised he'd gone too far.

Not about to let on how he felt, Bonson waited for Mandika and Flaxley to catch up, then paced onwards down the corridor with them. Not a word was spoken. Bonson

didn't want to cause any further damage, nor did he want to accidentally repair the damage he'd done and so he just stared ahead and said nothing. Mandika and Flaxley were simply too embarrassed to speak.

Moments later, as the three of them approached the castle's exit to the main square, Mandika gushed excitedly. Looking forward to feeling the sun on her face, she broke her silence and bounced excitedly.)

MANDIKA: I can't wait to see...

(Unfortunately for her, her words were interrupted by two guards blocking their path.)

GUARD: Halt!

BONSON: Halt? You're stopping me??? What's the meaning of this? I've never stolen any cutlery and I certainly haven't sold it to my friends at the inn. This is an outrage.

GUARD: It's not about that, Bonson! Though, thanks for the confession...

BONSON: Bugger.

GUARD: The princess is confined to the castle until after the tournament! She knows that.

MANDIKA: But... that's unfair!

GUARD: Sorry, ma'am. King's orders, as you well know!

(She started to sob then turned to Flaxley.)

MANDIKA: Flaxley, help me.

(Having been trained by Sir Flaxley, the guards both gulped. Much to their relief, however, Flaxley turned to Mandika and placed a loving hand on her shoulder, showing no sign of any desire to make them step aside.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika, I'm going to help you more than you realise.

MANDIKA: Cool. Just don't kill them.

(At once, one of the guards fled and the other pressed himself against the wall wearing a terrified expression.)

FLAXLEY: I'm not going to help you in *that* way. If the king says you have to stay here, then we'll have to respect his wishes.

(As the guard drew a sigh of relief, Mandika pouted.)

MANDIKA: But... you said...

FLAXLEY: I said I'd help, yes. You see...

(He glanced to Bonson then looked back at Mandika.)

FLAXLEY: I can't say much right now, but once the tournament is complete, you'll know. I'll see to it that you're happy again.

(Mandika gave him a baffled glance.)

MANDIKA: You've lost me.

FLAXLEY: Just, trust me, okay?

(Mandika sighed then offered him an accepting smile.)

MANDIKA: Okay.

FLAXLEY: Anyway, I should be off. I need to find that wife of mine.

(Mandika nodded sorrowfully then gave him a questioning glance.)

MANDIKA: How is she, anyway?

FLAXLEY: She's... in good health.

MANDIKA: Just a bit chunky, right?

(Flaxley just glanced at her coldly then headed out of the castle.)

FLAXLEY: I'm leaving now.

MANDIKA: Okay... well, come and see me after the tournament.

FLAXLEY: Presenting the trophy are you?

MANDIKA: Probably.

FLAXLEY: I'll see you there then.

(As Flaxley slowly paced away, Mandika smiled at Bonson.)

MANDIKA: When he says he's going to help me...

BONSON: I'm not your informant.

(With that, Bonson headed through the exit and paced after Flaxley.)

MANDIKA: You're going too?

BONSON: Things to do, Mandika.

MANDIKA: Okay, but... could you do one thing for me? Stop off at the inn...

(Bonson grinned playfully.)

BONSON: I'm sure I can find time to do that.

MANDIKA: Just tell Lefiat... just tell him... I miss him.

BONSON: Right. Will do.

(He then mumbled under his breath.)

BONSON: If I can be bothered.

(Watching them both head off towards the main square, Mandika's shoulders dropped and she sighed emptily. Fighting back a tear, dejected at seeing her friends leave as quickly as they'd arrived, she called out as they went.)

MANDIKA: I love you, guys! Oh, and Bonson, wish him good luck and tell him I hope he wins!

(Flaxley turned and yelled back.)

FLAXLEY: Thank you! You know I'll do what I can.

(As Flaxley strode on again, Bonson stepped to his side and scoffed.)

BONSON: Not you! She means Lefiat!

FLAXLEY: Oh, sure. I knew that... I was being sarcastic!

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: Yes, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: I was! You're not the only one who can be sarcastic you know!

BONSON: Sometimes I wonder about you, Flaxley!

(Flaxley looked narked.)

FLAXLEY: Did I ask for your opinion? Bon-bon!

BONSON: Stop that!

(Watching as Flaxley and Bonson wandered away, glaring at one another angrily, Mandika clutched her hand to her heart then looked to the guard.)

MANDIKA: You're so lucky I'm in a good mood.

GUARD: Sorry, ma'am, but you know how it is. I have to do as the king says.

MANDIKA: Whatever.

(She then stared out of the door and beamed.)

MANDIKA: Three times I asked if Kritz has got fat and three times Flaxley didn't answer. You know what that means?

GUARD: He didn't want to dignify the question with an answer?

MANDIKA: No, you idiot. It means she's got fat!

(She then allowed herself a devious laugh.)

MANDIKA: That means *I'm* the sexy one now. You wait until I see her.

(She then about turned and paced deeper into the castle with a wide smile on her face.)

MANDIKA: I may have lost Lefiat, but Kritz has lost the only attribute she had. Her body. Perfect. That's what she gets for punching me. Bitch.

(She then picked up the pace and skipped back to the games room, humming merrily to herself. She may have had a broken heart but right in this moment, it was hard to tell.)

(Out in the square a short while later, Flaxley and Bonson looked somewhat lost. With no idea where to start looking for Kritz, they'd stopped half way to the inn and spent several moments shrugging and scratching their heads.)

BONSON: It's not like we can even suggest places that she's likely to go, she doesn't know this place.

FLAXLEY: Exactly.

BONSON: We could always ask people if they've seen her. I'm sure all the blokes would have noticed her, except the gay ones.

(Flaxley looked to him and nodded.)

FLAXLEY: That seems like our only option.

(He then shook his head sorrowfully.)

FLAXLEY: Things aren't going brilliantly, so far, Bonson. Kritz has disappeared, we've got nowhere to stay for the night and Mandika didn't change her mind about giving up her crown.

BONSON: Well, we knew she wasn't going to.

FLAXLEY: I thought she might.

BONSON: Yes well, why you thought that I will never know.

(Flaxley shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: Still, we *tried* to convince her. That was the right thing to do at least.

(He then nodded firmly.)

FLAXLEY: Looks like the *only* way to stop the king marrying her off to some stranger is for me to win the tournament then.

(Bonson gave him a sideways glance.)

BONSON: Which was always the case anyway.

FLAXLEY: Well... true. I was just hoping she'd realise she loves Lefiat too much to let him go and opt to run off with him instead, saving me the trouble.

BONSON: A futile fantasy if ever there was one.

FLAXLEY: I guess so.

(He then sighed emptily.)

FLAXLEY: All this standing around isn't going to get Kritz found, Bonson. Let's head for the northern suburbs and take a look around there.

(Confronted with the prospect of a long walk, Bonson looked horrified.)

BONSON: That's miles away.

FLAXLEY: Yes, but if we start at the back of the city and work our way back here to the centre...

BONSON: Forget that, chummy. I've got things to do.

FLAXLEY: Such as?

(Bonson looked stuck for a moment then blurted out his reply.)

BONSON: Lefiat!

FLAXLEY: What?

BONSON: You heard me. Mandika asked me see him over at the inn. Think I'll get on it right away, in fact. Have fun in the suburbs.

(As Bonson started to head away, Flaxley watched him go then sucked his teeth.)

FLAXLEY: Screw it.

(With that, he started to pace after him.)

FLAXLEY: Wait up, Bonson. I might as well come with you. Looking for Kritz in *this* city, would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

(Bonson stopped and nodded his way.)

BONSON: Well, you're not wrong.

(They then headed for the door on the far right of the inn. As they did so, however, Shankstone raced from the bar doors and headed towards Bonson's remonstrating angrily.)

SHANKSTONE: Where the hell did you bugger off to? I'm supposed to be watching you at all times.

BONSON: I went to see Mandika.

SHANKSTONE: At the castle?

BONSON: No, at the circus. Where do you think?

FLAXLEY: What do you mean; you're supposed to be watching him? What's going on?

(Bonson and Shankstone both looked to Flaxley uneasily and grimaced. There was no way they could possibly tell him about what Kayfu was making them do and they had to think quickly.)

BONSON: Well... you know...

SHANKSTONE: I was appointed Bonson's bodyguard.

(Flaxley scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: That's new. You need a bodyguard, Bonson?

BONSON: Apparently.

FLAXLEY: Well, no harm done. He's with *me* now, you can go.

(Knowing perfectly well that he couldn't let Bonson go off with Flaxley unattended, Shankstone bit his lip.)

SHANKSTONE: Actually...

BONSON: It's fine, Shankstone. We're going in the inn. You can wait in the bar.

(Shankstone nodded.)

SHANKSTONE: Right... that'll work.

(Well aware that Kayfu would never go into the inn and check they were together, Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: I'll see you in a bit.

SHANKSTONE: And if I'm sober enough to see straight, I'll see you too. I've been in there all bloody morning.

(With that, he about turned and headed back into the bar.)

FLAXLEY: Has to be said, Bonson, as a bodyguard... he's a bit... long in the tooth. And you left the bar with me earlier and he didn't even notice. Not very professional.

BONSON: Yes, well... true... anyway... let's go.

FLAXLEY: Indeed.

(As they headed for the inn door, Flaxley glanced over his shoulder and raised an interested eyebrow. It was over an hour from midday still and the square was slowly but surely filling up with people, looking forward to the following day's festivities. For such a large crowd of enthusiasts to turn up so early, just to take a peek at the venue, he was left in little doubt that this tournament was a huge deal.)

(Once Bonson and Flaxley reached the inn, they took Lefiat's room number from the receptionist then headed upstairs to see him. Upon reaching his door, Bonson knocked then stood there silently with Flaxley at his side. Moments later, the door opened slowly and a sad looking Lefiat poked his head through the open gap.)

LEFIAT: Hello?

BONSON: Let us in, will you?

(With that, he barged Lefiat out of the way and bundled into his room. As Lefiat fell on his backside and protested, Flaxley rolled his eyes then followed Bonson in. At once, he froze on the spot and staring in amazement at the sight of Kritz sitting on the bed.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz?

(Kritz glowered at him coldly.)

KRITZ: What?

FLAXLEY: What are you doing here?

KRITZ: I...

(Fearing Flaxley might put two and two together and come up with seven, Lefiat instinctively panicked.)

LEFIAT: It isn't how it looks, Flaxley! I looked but I definitely didn't touch!!!

(Flaxley just stared at him blankly and pushed the door closed behind him.)

FLAXLEY: What?

LEFIAT: I saw her from the window and invited her in, we're not having an affair, I swear.

FLAXLEY: I never said you were.

LEFIAT: Yeah, but... me and Kritz, all alone in my room... me with nothing on my feet an 'all... you must have been at least a little suspicious.

BONSON: No, but he will be if you keep on.

LEFIAT: What?

FLAXLEY: Lefiat, it's fine. I know nothing was going on.

(Lefiat looked most relieved.)

LEFIAT: Well... good. Shows you trust me.

BONSON: It shows he knows you're butt ugly and Kritz wouldn't touch you with a fifty foot lance, you mean.

LEFIAT: Yeah, that too.

(He then shrugged in bewilderment.)

LEFIAT: So... nice to see you, Flaxley. This is so weird. I hadn't seen a soul since I was kicked out of the castle and now, all of a sudden, almost everyone I know turns up in my room.

(Flaxley looked to him then nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Nice to see you too, Lefiat.

LEFIAT: Cool. Like I said to Kritz, make yourself at home, you too, Bonson.

BONSON: Thanks for the afterthought.

LEFIAT: You're welcome. I would offer you a coffee but I can't heat up the water. The king told the hotel owner not to let me near fire, so they took the stove away.

BONSON: I see. Your reputation precedes you.

(He then sighed heavily.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, looks that way.

(As Lefiat sighed despondently and placed his backside down on an long seat beneath the window, Flaxley raised a defiant eyebrow at Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway, seeing as you're here, Kritz, I think we need to talk about a certain incident, don't you?

(Kritz glanced up at him then looked away.)

KRITZ: Not in front of our friends, we don't.

FLAXLEY: Fine. Bonson, leave the room.

BONSON: Excuse me?

FLAXLEY: You heard me.

KRITZ: Bonson, stay where you are.

BONSON: Hey! I'm not a bloody dog. I don't stay, go, beg *or* roll over on command.

FLAXLEY: No, but I need to talk to Kritz and she doesn't want to discuss it in front of friends, so...

KRITZ: I mean we can discuss it later! Or even better... never.

(Wearing a disbelieving expression, Lefiat shook his head at Flaxley.)

LEFIAT: So your friends have to go, but I can stay? Is that it, Flaxley? Thanks, mate. You're a pal.

FLAXLEY: You're different, Lefiat.

BONSON: That's quite the understatement.

FLAXLEY: Anything we say would go right over your head, so it's fine if *you* stay. (Lefiat looked somewhat heartened and forced a smile.)

LEFIAT: So, I'm still a friend?

FLAXLEY: As much as you ever were, yes.

LEFIAT: Cool.

FLAXLEY: Now clear off, Bonson.

BONSON: Like hell I will.

KRITZ: Flaxley, we can discuss it later or when we get back to Tifaeris. Now... just drop it.

FLAXLEY: But...

KRITZ: Drop it!!!

FLAXLEY: Fine.

KRITZ: Thank you.

(As Flaxley and Kritz glared defiantly at each other, Bonson rolled his eyes then sat down beside Lefiat.)

BONSON: Well... Lefiat... sorry I haven't popped over before now...

LEFIAT: It's fine.

BONSON: So, how are you?

LEFIAT: I've been worse!

BONSON: Really? You have? When?

(He paused and gave Bonson a troubled glance.)

LEFIAT: Haven't I?

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: You tell *me*! No home, no job, no woman! How bad does it have to get?

(Immediately, Lefiat's already glum expression became further depressed and he buried his head in his hands.)

LEFIAT: My god! I've hit rock bottom!!!

(Flaxley averted his angry gaze from Kritz and turned to Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Nice work, Bonson. You're quite the counsellor!

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: I only asked how he was!

(Taking pity on the lad, Flaxley sat the other side of the distraught Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Don't worry, Lefiat! We'll get Mandika back for you, don't you worry!

LEFIAT: We will? How?

FLAXLEY: Leave it to me, old chap! It'll be easy. I'll win the tournament and after I collect my prize... which is Mandika, of course... I'll simply give her to *you*. The king will be furious, but more importantly she'll be with the man she desires.

(Lefiat looked utterly alarmed.)

LEFIAT: Mandika's the prize???

FLAXLEY: You didn't know?

LEFIAT: Of course I bloody didn't. Since when? I heard it was ten lig.

KRITZ: Ten thousand.

LEFIAT: Holy crap!

FLAXLEY: Ten thousand lig plus Mandika's hand in marriage as the secret prize for the winner.

(Lefiat was gobsmacked.)

LEFIAT: But... does Mandika know?

BONSON: No, she doesn't.

LEFIAT: That's terrible.

FLAXLEY: Yes, but don't worry. That's why I'm here.

LEFIAT: It is?

FLAXLEY: Yes. I didn't travel all this way just to see you, or watch some silly tournament. I came to *win* it so Mandika would be spared an unwanted marriage.

(He nodded proudly.)

FLAXLEY: You see, the king may think he's got this one all figured out, but he really hasn't. He'll be in for a one hell of a surprise when *I* win the tournament, accept Mandika's hand in marriage then delegate my prize to you, Lefiat. He won't see that one coming, oh no.

(Much to Flaxley's annoyance, Kritz tutted loudly then mumbled under her breath.)

FLAXLEY: Excuse me? Problem?

KRITZ: Arrogant sod!

FLAXLEY: What?

KRITZ: You're so convinced you're gonna win the tournament without even breaking a sweat, aren't you?

FLAXLEY: Well, who's going to stop me? You?

KRITZ: I might!

BONSON: With respect, Kritzeveltia...

KRITZ: Belt up, grandpa!

BONSON: Righto!

(Bonson sank in his seat.)

KRITZ: Honestly, if Mandika wasn't so dependant on you, I'd want you to lose just to knock you off that pedestal you've put yourself on.

FLAXLEY: Never going to happen! Fear not, Lefiat... I shall win your fair maiden tomorrow!

BONSON: Failing that, Mandika!

(He received three filthy looks and immediately clammed up.)

KRITZ: And don't even begin to pretend you're doing this for *him*. Partly you're doing it for Mandika but mostly you're just looking forward to showing Guevina that you really *are* the best!

FLAXLEY: So, you admit I'm the best?

KRITZ: I never said...

FLAXLEY: Yes, you did. We all heard it. And you're right. I am the best.

(He then grinned so conceitedly that Bonson just couldn't resist winding him up.)

BONSON: Well, nobody round here thinks so. Here you're just the bloke who abandoned their beloved princess and left Lefiat to rescue her!

FLAXLEY: That never happened though!

BONSON: Then you tried to take the credit for Lefiat liberating Tifaeris!

FLAXLEY: Crap! That was me!

(Kritz leapt up furiously.)

KRITZ: That was all of us!!!

FLAXLEY: Well... except you, the enemy captured *you*!

KRITZ: Why, you...

FLAXLEY: But that's irrelevant! Tomorrow they'll all see that I am in fact the greatest and Lefiat will have his woman.

(To everyone's surprise, Lefiat then leapt to his feet angrily.)

LEFIAT: No! Don't you get it? *I* have to win her back!!! It's about a knight's honour! *My* honour.

(He shook with anger, much to Bonson's amusement.)

BONSON: Ha-ha...

LEFIAT: What?

BONSON: You look even sillier when you're angry!

LEFIAT: Shut up.

FLAXLEY: Lefiat, I understand what you mean about a knight's honour... I'm a little shocked that *you* do, but nevertheless, your honour will be intact if you fight your damndest for her tomorrow. Even if you fail. And when you do... worry not, I'll be there fighting on behalf of Mandika too.

(Lefiat absorbed his words then slowly sat down again.)

LEFIAT: Right... thanks, Flaxley.

(Watching him from where she sat, Kritz rubbed her chin the raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

KRITZ: Can I ask you something, Lefiat?

LEFIAT: What?

KRITZ: Why are you even bothering?

LEFIAT: Eh?

(He seemed astonished by the question.)

KRITZ: I mean... if she doesn't love you unreservedly, why bother with her?

(Curious to know what he'd say, silence immediately descended as Lefiat slowly rose to his feet to answer. Eager to get an insight into the young lad's thinking, they all watch on as Lefiat paused in thought for a moment then spoke with passion in his voice.)

LEFIAT: What does unreservedly mean?

(Bonson groaned and shook his head.)

BONSON: She means, if Mandika won't love you no matter what, if she won't give her whole self to you, why are you so desperate to keep her?

(Lefiat seemed amazed that he needed to ask.)

LEFIAT: That's obvious, isn't it? I love her!

(Kritz exhaled at the romance of it all and allowed herself a smile.)

FLAXLEY: What a tit!

KRITZ: Flaxley!!!

FLAXLEY: What? Did I say that out loud?

(Lefiat pouted at him defiantly and folded his arms.)

LEFIAT: Think what you like, Flaxley. It's *my* life and that's how I feel!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, you're quite right. It is. I apologise. Though, personally if I thought *my* woman wasn't by my side one hundred percent I'd let her go... but all to their own, I suppose.

BONSON: No offence, Flaxley; but Kritz *isn't* one hundred percent as your side, you've been arguing solidly for two days.

KRITZ: That doesn't mean I'm not one hundred percent committed to our relationship.

FLAXLEY: Exactly! And so am I. Given a choice between being leader of Tifaeris or living in a cave with Kritz, I'd choose the cave every time.

KRITZ: Exactly.

FLAXLEY: That's what love is.
(Lefiat nodded sarcastically.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, cheers, guys. Thanks for coming to cheer me up.

BONSON: We didn't come to do that, we came with a message from Mandika.
(Lefiat's face immediately lit up.)

LEFIAT: What was it?

BONSON: Something about shoes, I think... I forget.

LEFIAT: Bonson? How could you forget???

FLAXLEY: She said she misses you and wishes you good luck.
(As Flaxley shook his head at the chuckling Bonson, Lefiat smiled warmly.)

LEFIAT: Really? That's cheered me up no end, actually.

FLAXLEY: Happy to help, Lefiat.
(Kritz looked thoughtful.)

KRITZ: Speaking of help. Lefiat, *we* need *your* help!
(He looked at her through bewildered eyes then shook his head with extreme reluctance.)

LEFIAT: You don't want my help, trust me. I might set fire to you or something!
(Bonson laughed and immediately received three filthy looks.)

BONSON: What? Oh, fine!

KRITZ: Don't be so tough on yourself, all we need is your help to find a place to stay! Being local, I just wondered if you knew of anywhere we could bed down for the night.

LEFIAT: It's not even lunchtime.

KRITZ: I mean later!

LEFIAT: Oh. Well... like where?
(An enlightened look then crossed his brow.)

LEFIAT: Hang on, how about my mother's house? She'd be only too happy to put you up!
(Bonson couldn't help but smirk.)

BONSON: I bet she would!

FLAXLEY: Your mother? Madame Leatherclad, right?

KRITZ: That'd be great, Lefiat! Let's head over there!

LEFIAT: Okay... it's a bit of a way though... did you come by carriage?

FLAXLEY: No, we walked from Tifaeris!

LEFIAT: Really?

BONSON: Ignore him, Lefiat. He thinks he knows sarcasm!
(He rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: We ditched our carriage, remember?

FLAXLEY: Crap, so we did.

BONSON: It's fine though. If it hasn't been stolen yet, which I doubt, we can take that one. If it has, I'll just nip in the castle and get another one.

KRITZ: Thanks, Bonson.

BONSON: You're welcome.

FLAXLEY: Right then, what are we waiting for? Let's go.

The Villages, Guevina

(As luck would have it, when the four of them left the hotel, they were amazed to see Kayfu's carriage still sitting where they'd left it. Delighted by the sight, they all swiftly made a beeline for it before the local thieves changed their minds. Upon reaching it, Kritz, Lefiat and Bonson scrambled inside and Flaxley climbed on top to take the reins. Two seconds later, Lefiat flew out of the carriage again with Bonson's boot mark on his backside. Having been informed that he needed to sit with Flaxley to show him where to go, Lefiat then looked enlightened and scrambled atop the carriage to join him. With everyone in place, the horses then got moving as they made their way out of the city centre towards the villages.

As they headed through the dirt track avenues on route to Lefiat's mother's house, the horseman, Flaxley, sat thinking long and hard about how Lefiat's mother had convinced her son that she was a dance instructor, when actually running a knocking shop. He then considered Lefiat's I.Q. and thought no more about it. At his side, Lefiat spent the journey deep in thought about his lost love and repeatedly forgot to give Flaxley's directions. Inside the carriage, Bonson, seated opposite Kritz, spent the entire trip staring up her miniscule leather skirt again.

Upon arriving outside Lefiat's mother's abode, having taken an extremely scenic and inordinately long route, courtesy of Lefiat's failure to give directions, Lefiat, Kritz and Flaxley alighted the carriage and immediately headed for the front door. Bonson, however, opted to stay inside it, staring indignantly at the seat in front of him.)

LEFIAT: Are you coming, Bonson?

(Bonson yelled back from inside the carriage.)

BONSON: No. Absolutely not. I won't be seen in such a place!

LEFIAT: What? Why... oh, suit yourself!

(He sighed and shook his head.)

LEFIAT: Miserable sod.

(Upon reaching the front door, Lefiat turned the handle then paced inside.)

LEFIAT: Mind the step.

(With that, he promptly tripped forwards and staggered through the door. Not even remotely surprised by his mistake, Flaxley and Kritz just rolled their eyes then paced inside after him. There was no step and never had been.

Having managed to stop himself from falling, Lefiat stood tall and beamed across the room to where his mother was washing her hands in a basin. Ignoring the three half naked men who were sitting lined up on a sofa just inside the door, he placed his hands on his hips and raised his voice.)

LEFIAT: I'm home!

(At once, his mother, Alpina, glanced over her shoulder and her face lit up. Clearly overjoyed to see her son, she swiftly dried her hands, grabbed her whip from the side and then paced over to him, slipping it into the top of her leather skirt as she approached him.)

ALPINA: Darling, you're home!

LEFIAT: Hello, mum.

(She immediately gave him a loving hug and patted his back.)

ALPINA: Always nice to see my boy.

(She then stepped back from the hug and stared nervously into his eyes.)

ALPINA: Everything okay? Not planning on moving back in are you? Only I've just this minute got used to having fragile ornaments out on display again.

(Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: Don't worry; this is just a social call. Everything's great. Perfect, in fact. I haven't been thrown out of the castle and in no way will I be begging you to let me move back in after everything goes tits upwards in the tournament tomorrow.

(Having not quite caught what he was saying, his mother gave him a baffled glance.)

ALPINA: What was that?

LEFIAT: Don't worry... so, how are you?

ALPINA: I'm fine, thank you.

(She then glanced to Flaxley and Kritz and smiled. Interested to know who his guests were, she then gestured towards them politely and looked at Lefiat.)

ALPINA: Are you going to introduce us then?

(Lefiat looked most confused.)

LEFIAT: You're my mother.

ALPINA: Not to each other! You're guests.

LEFIAT: Guests?

(He looked enlightened then turned sideway and gestured to Flaxley and Kritz.)

LEFIAT: Oh... yeah. Sorry. Mum, this is Flaxley and his wife, Kritz!

KRITZ: Not necessarily in that order!

(She then shook Alpina's hand.)

KRITZ: It's a pleasure.

ALPINA: No, no. The pleasure's all mine.

(As Kritz stepped back and smiled, Flaxley then offered her his hand.)

FLAXLEY: Delighted to meet you!

ALPINA: Yes, it's...

(She looked highly suspicious and raised her eyebrows.)

ALPINA: Wait. Haven't we met before?

(Flaxley was highly alarmed.)

FLAXLEY: What? Never!!!

ALPINA: Are you sure?

FLAXLEY: I'm positive.

ALPINA: Oh, okay!

(She turned to her son then smiled warmly.)

ALPINA: So son, to what do I owe the pleasure?

LEFIAT: Um... yeah, can these two kip here for the night? The hotel's full and they need a place to stay!

(Alpina grimaced and offered him a regretful glance.)

ALPINA: Actually, I'm a little busy today!

LEFIAT: That's okay. They can have my old room! They won't be any trouble.

(Alpina looked uncertain for a moment then shrugged acceptingly.)

ALPINA: Yeah, okay, why not? That should be fine.

(She then looked to Kritz and smiled apologetically.)

ALPINA: You'll have to come back after seven though; I've got a busy day ahead of me!

KRITZ: After seven? Yeah, that's cool.

FLAXLEY: Not a problem at all!

ALPINA: Right. That's settled then.

(She nodded.)

ALPINA: Anyway, I hate to be rude, but I'm rather busy right now, so if you don't mind...

(She then gestured towards the door.)

LEFIAT: Don't mind what?

(Flaxley and Kritz backed away towards the door, offering Alpina grateful smiles.)

KRITZ: Of course we don't mind.

LEFIAT: What don't you mind?

(He sighed.)

LEFIAT: Nobody tells me anything.

ALPINA: I'll see you out!

(With that, she led them from the house then half closed the door, pausing to speak through the gap.)

ALPINA: I'll just be a minute, boys.

(She then pulled the door to and gave Lefiat another hug.)

ALPINA: Bye, son.

LEFIAT: Bye mother.

(As Lefiat and Kritz started to head up the path, Alpina quickly grabbed Flaxley's arm and spoke quickly but quietly.)

ALPINA: Solstice day, six years ago, against the wall of the flower mill, down by the river.

(Flaxley just glared at her in dismay.)

FLAXLEY: No, for heaven's sake.

(He then glanced to see if Kritz was in earshot and mumbled quietly.)

FLAXLEY: It was the oast house wall.

ALPINA: I knew it.

(With that, she beamed and started to wave as Flaxley skulked swiftly up the path to catch up with Kritz.)

ALPINA: See you after seven!

KRITZ: Okay. Thanks again!

(She smiled.)

ALPINA: You're welcome!

(With that, she turned to go back indoors when her eyes caught sight of the carriage. At once, a delighted expression appeared on her face and she merrily rushed past Kritz, Lefiat and Flaxley. As the three of them looked on, she then stepped up to the carriage door and spoke through the open window.)

ALPINA: Hello, Bonson, sweetheart. What brings you here? Your appointment isn't until tomorrow!

(Bonson immediately went red and became extremely flustered.)

BONSON: I've never seen this woman before in all my life!!!

(Alpina laughed heartily.)

ALPINA: Always a joker, no wonder you're my favourite customer!

(With that, she blew her son a kiss then returned to the house, leaving Bonson burning red in the carriage. Well aware of his discomfort, Flaxley and Kritz smirked to themselves then stepped up to the carriage window and peered through it at him, grinning insanely.)

BONSON: One word bloody from any of you.

LEFIAT: Wow, Bonson. I didn't know my mum was teaching you to dance!

(As Both Flaxley and Kritz burst out laughing, Bonson hung his head and cringed.)

BONSON: I'm never going to live this down.

LEFIAT: Why? I don't see what's so funny. Lot's of blokes take dancing lessons, my mum gives lessons to seven or eight blokes a day. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

BONSON: Just go away, Lefiat. And go far.

LEFIAT: Suit, yourself, I was trying to be nice.

(He then looked to Flaxley and nodded.)

LEFIAT: Can you take me back to the inn?

FLAXLEY: Of course.

(Sure enough, a few moments later, the carriage headed away again. Up top, Flaxley guided the horses forth towards the inn, having memorised the route. Having travelled there with Lefiat for company, he didn't fancy tolerating him all the way back as well, so insisted he travelled inside the carriage. Happy to do so, he accepted without complaint. *Also* in the carriage, Bonson sat opposite Kritz with a horrified expression on his face. Utterly embarrassed by the incident with Alpina, he couldn't even bring himself to look at her and stared sheepishly out the window instead. He never uttered another word all the way back to the inn.)

(As midday arrived, Guevina's main square absolutely heaved with excited tourists and enthusiastic locals taking a look at the tournament venue. The square was so busy, in fact; it took Flaxley a full fifteen minutes to drive the last 400 metres to the inn.

Looking peeved, having had to move at a rate of inches to avoid hurting any pedestrians, he pulled up twenty feet from the inn door, then called out towards the carriage.)

FLAXLEY: Lefiat! Get out!

(At once, hundreds of excited locals stared towards the carriage. When Lefiat poked his head out of the window, however, they all groaned and went about their business, convinced this gangly looking buffoon couldn't possibly be their royal knight.)

LEFIAT: Why? What did I do wrong this time?

FLAXLEY: Nothing, you chimp. We're here.

LEFIAT: Oh... right. Thanks then.

(With that, Lefiat slowly climbed from the carriage then stared up at him.)

LEFIAT: What are you going to do now?

FLAXLEY: Park this thing in the inn's carriage park. If I can ever get through this crowd.

LEFIAT: Right.

FLAXLEY: The way I see it is, nobody cares if Kayfu's carriage gets stolen, so we might as well hang on to it and use it to get home after the tournament.

LEFIAT: So, *you're* gonna steal it then?

FLAXLEY: That's a very negative way of looking at it, Lefiat.

(Just then, Kritz and Bonson also climbed down from the carriage.)

FLAXLEY: Where are you two going?

KRITZ: We overheard your plan and we figured that if you're just gonna park up, we might as well wait for you in the bar.

BONSON: It was my idea.

FLAXLEY: Obviously.

(He rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. I'll meet you in there then.

(With that, he sat up straight, stared ahead then growled at the people chatting in front of the carriage.)

FLAXLEY: Move you silly fuckers, or I'll mow you down.

(As the troubled group rushed out of his way, he snarled at them then set the carriage in motion again. Unsurprisingly, however, he soon had to slow again and it took him a full five minutes to travel the next twenty feet.)

FLAXLEY: Wankers.

(While Flaxley continued to toil in the sun, hindered by hundreds of ignorant tourists and locals, Lefiat and Bonson found themselves sitting in a cosy booth inside the pub with Shankstone, enjoying a nice refreshing drink. Kritz, however, was standing at the bar on her own. Having opted for a fruit juice cocktail rather than an ale, she'd had to return to the bar to order it herself, in light of Bonson's stubborn refusal to order such a feminine beverage. He'd bought her an ale and told her to like it. Far from amused by his actions, she snarled at him then headed back to the bar to get it herself. Having been served first despite being twentieth in the queue, she then returned to the table with five drinks, all paid for by drooling men at the bar. As she sat down, she beamed at Bonson then crossed her legs.)

KRITZ: They were free. I thought, being married to Flaxley, they'd charge me extra.

BONSON: Like they even *know* you're married to him.

KRITZ: I guess.

LEFIAT: You're so lucky, I never get free drinks.

(Kritz looked at him like he was insane.)

KRITZ: Rubbish, the first drink is always free.

(At once, three pairs of eyes glared her way.)

SHANKSTONE: Yeah, right.

BONSON: If only.

LEFIAT: They're never free.

(Kritz bit her lip then shrugged.)

KRITZ: Maybe I'm just lucky then. I always get free drinks. Sometimes it's not just the first one... in fact, come to think of it, I hardly ever have to pay.

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: Not that I'm complaining. Though I do wonder how some of these pubs make any money.

SHANKSTONE: They make money by selling drinks. You didn't think the barman just gave you those out of the goodness of his heart, did you?

KRITZ: Didn't he?

SHANKSTONE: Of course not. Some other bugger *paid* for them.

KRITZ: Who?

SHANKSTONE: I don't know, I wasn't there.

KRITZ: Then how do you know?

SHANKSTONE: Because it's classic. When women like *you* appear at the bar some randy bloke *always* wants to buy her a drink. *Five* randy blokes in this instance.

KRITZ: Wait, what? Seriously?

SHANKSTONE: Of course. Pubs aren't charities, you know.

(She nodded in astonishment for a moment then shrugged.)

KRITZ: Well, that was nice of them.

(She took a sip then gave Shankstone an angry glance.)

KRITZ: Hey, hang on a minute. What do you mean, “when women like me appear at the bar”? Women like *me*?

BONSON: He means tasty ones with jaw-dropping cleavage. Men just can’t resist buying women like you drinks.

(He sighed heavily.)

BONSON: You’re so lucky. I wish *I* had enormous tits.

(Lefiat looked at Bonson’s chest and started to chuckle.)

LEFIAT: Actually, Bonson, you kinda do.

(Bonson was livid.)

BONSON: Fuck you. This is all muscle.

KRITZ: Very flabby muscle, if you ask me.

(Bonson scowled at her.)

BONSON: Fine, you mock, but you won’t be laughing when your tits go all saggy a few years from now. You won’t me making any jokes about flabby baps *then*, I can assure you.

(Kritz just scoffed at him coldly.)

KRITZ: If that happens, I’ll just wear tighter tops to hold them up.

LEFIAT: You should try that, Bonson.

(Bonson looked extremely peeved.)

BONSON: Lefiat, I’m going to punch you in a minute. Making jokes at my expense, whatever next? It’s like the entire world is back to front.

LEFIAT: You can’t punch me! It’s against the law.

BONSON: No? You just watch me.

SHANKSTONE: Now, now, chaps, there no need for violence.

(Just then, a pair of hands with painted fingernails slapped down on the table and a bitter young woman’s voice rose up.)

SAHARA: I beg to differ!!!

(Somewhat startled, Kritz glanced up at her then beamed.)

KRITZ: Sahara! Oh my god, I haven’t seen you in years.

(Bonson looked at the leather clad, large breasted, blonde beauty and beamed.)

BONSON: A friend of yours?

KRITZ: Yeah, we grew up together in the Treppe tribe.

SAHARA: I’m not a friend of yours, Kritz. Far from it, bitch!

KRITZ: What?

SAHARA: You heard me!

(Kritz stared up at her uneasily for a moment then bit her lip.)

KRITZ: I see. Like that, is it?

(She then offered her a smile and shifted along her seat.)

KRITZ: Tell you what, why don’t you sit down and we can talk about whatever I did to piss you off. Help yourself to a drink, I’ve got five.

SAHARA: I don’t want one of your pathetic looking drinks.

KRITZ: Then what *do* you want to drink? I can probably get five of *them* too.

SAHARA: I don’t want a drink! I want my place in the tournament back!

(She then glared at Lefiat.)

SAHARA: And it’d be nice if *that* freak would stop staring down my top.

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: I know, he’s a disgrace, we can’t take him anywhere.

SAHARA: You’re just as bad and so is your mate.

BONSON: Hey, I resent that.

SHANKSTONE: And so does his mate!

(Sahara snarled and looked to Kritz.)

SAHARA: How do you put up with these three latches?

KRITZ: You learn to ignore it after a while.

SAHARA: I see. Anyway, that's not the point. I was sent to represent Treppe village in the tournament and when I tried to sign in I was told we already had an entrant. Someone named Kritz. You stole my place.

(Kritz looked enlightened and smiled apologetically.)

KRITZ: Okay, well... totally my fault. I'll go and opt out so you can take your rightful place. I only signed up because I was mad at my husband anyway.

(Sahara slammed her fist on the table and growled, causing her breasts to bounce, much to the delight of the three leering men.)

SAHARA: No. I want justice!

KRITZ: I think you'll find me opting out so you can take your rightful place *is* justice.

SAHARA: Not just for that, for everything.

KRITZ: Everything?

SAHARA: Remember when we were fifteen, Kritz? Jazzu held a tournament to see who was the most promising upcoming warrior?

(Kritz looked thoughtful.)

KRITZ: I don't recall.

(Sahara looked horrified.)

SAHARA: You don't recall??? You won! You kicked my arse in the final, beat me black and blue. You damn nearly killed me.

KRITZ: I did?

SAHARA: That defeat has haunted me ever since. The humiliation of it scarred me so badly, I went on to fail my warrior exams. It destroyed my life and you don't even recall???

(Kritz gave her an uneasy smile.)

KRITZ: Maybe you took it too seriously; those little tournaments we had were only meant to be a bit of fun.

SAHARA: Fun? Fun???

(She shook her head angrily then stood tall.)

SAHARA: We were training to be warriors; it wasn't supposed to be fun.

(She nodded sternly.)

SAHARA: I've hated you ever since that moment. And now I want payback.

KRITZ: You hate me? We were best friends!

SAHARA: I hid it well, but trust me, I hated you. And now you've stolen my place in the tournament, I demand the chance to set the record straight.

KRITZ: How?

SAHARA: I'll fight you for it. Winner gets to take part in the tournament.

KRITZ: There's no need for that, I don't even want to take part really.

SAHARA: What's wrong? Scared?

KRITZ: No, I just don't want...

SAHARA: Fight me! You owe me!!!

(Just then, the barman came over wearing a delighted expression and tapped her on the shoulder. As she turned around and glared at him, he rubbed his hands together and beamed gleefully.)

BARMAN: Do forgive me, but I couldn't help overhearing. It seems you two ladies have a dispute to settle.

SAHARA: Yeah, she stole my place in the tournament.

KRITZ: I didn't mean to, you can have it back, gladly. Like I told you, I only entered in the first place because I was angry at my husband.

SAHARA: No! I demand the chance to fight you for it.

BARMAN: And that's exactly what I want to offer you.

(At once, everyone at the table glanced at him suspiciously.)

SAHARA: You do?

BARMAN: Indeed. We have the perfect venue already set up for it out back.

(Bonson looked overjoyed.)

BONSON: You do, don't you?

KRITZ: Wait, what are you suggesting?

BARMAN: Five rounds of naked water wrestling. You fight in three feet of water.

First to hold the other one's head underwater for five seconds, wins the round.

(Sahara nodded sternly.)

SAHARA: We're in.

BONSON: Score!

SHANKSTONE: Result!

KRITZ: Hold on a minute...

SAHARA: I said we're in.

KRITZ: You don't speak for me, Sahara. I'm not doing it. I don't want to.

BONSON: Kritz, you must.

KRITZ: Why?

BONSON: Well, it's a matter of honour.

SHANKSTONE: Plus giving Sahara a chance to seek justice would be the right thing to do.

LEFIAT: I just wanna see your boobies.

KRITZ: Well, tough. I won't.

SAHARA: You will!

(With that, she knocked Kritz's drink over and folded her arms bitterly.)

SAHARA: What do you think of that?

KRITZ: If you're trying to piss me off, don't bother. That drink was free and I have another four anyway.

SAHARA: You *will* fight me, Kritz, you mark my words.

(Bonson beamed then climbed to his feet.)

BONSON: Allow me to assist.

(He then whispered in Sahara's ear.)

SAHARA: Really?

BONSON: Trust me.

(With that, Bonson sat back down and Sahara adopted a cocky stance.)

SAHARA: Kritz?

KRITZ: What?

SAHARA: You dress like a tart.

(At once, Kritz's face burned red and she glared at her hatefully.)

KRITZ: Bring it on, bitch!!!

(At once, Lefiat, Shankstone and the barman all beamed at Bonson.)

LEFIAT: Nice one.

SHANKSTONE: Bonson, you're a star.

(When Flaxley made his way into the bar some two minutes later, he was most perplexed to find the place empty except for two barmaids. Furrowing his brow, he glanced around the bar then looked to the nearest barmaid and shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: Where is everyone?

BARMAID: You shagged my sister!

FLAXLEY: I shagged *you* too, but that's not the point.

BARMAID: Whatever. I don't like you.

FLAXLEY: No?

BARMAID: No!

(He paused for a moment then offered her a knowing smile.)

FLAXLEY: Wanna go again?

(At once, the barmaid gasped and clutched her hands to her heart.)

BARMAID: More than anything!

FLAXLEY: Then stop complaining and tell me where everyone went.

BARMAID: And then you'll do me?

FLAXLEY: Nope. I was just making a point. Stop acting hard done by when you clearly wanted it.

BARMAID: You're an arse.

FLAXLEY: Again, not the point. Where did everyone go?

BARMAID: I'm not telling you.

(Just then, a loud cheer arose from the door at the back end of the bar.)

FLAXLEY: And now you don't have to.

(With that, he paced around the bar and headed through the door at the back. Upon emerging into the special room beyond the doors, his jaw dropped. A hundred excited, cheering men were gathered on the steps down to a large, square pool of water. In opposing corners of the pool, his naked wife and another naked woman were glaring at one another, aching to come out punching.)

FLAXLEY: What the...

(Just then, his voice was drowned out by the sound of the landlord, speaking through a cone shaped funnel.)

LANDLORD: Gentlemen, welcome to another round of naked, water wrestling.

(At once, everyone erupted into a frenzy of cheers.)

LANDLORD: In the blonde corner, hailing from Trepe Village... it's Sandra!!!

(A loud cheer erupted then swiftly died down, just in time for Sahara's protest to be heard by all.)

SAHARA: It's Sahara, you prick.

LANDLORD: Right... anyway... in the brunette corner, also hailing Trepe Village, it's Kritz!!!

(Wondering exactly how Kritz had managed to get herself involved in such a thing during the five or more minutes he was gone, Flaxley puffed out in frustration then glanced across the crowd. Upon spotting Bonson cheering excitedly, he then furrowed his brow, sensing he knew exactly how she'd ended up in this situation.)

FLAXLEY: I'll kill him.

(With that, Flaxley barged his way through the crowd and stepped aside Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Bonson, you shit. What's going on here?

BONSON: Naked water wrestling, you know that. We used to come and watch every Sunday.

(He then sneered coldly.)

BONSON: More often than not, you'd go home with the winner. And the loser. I hate you, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: I know what it is, Bonson. How is Kritz involved???

BONSON: That girl she's in the water with, she's the actual Treppe representative.

FLAXLEY: What do you mean?

BONSON: Kritz accidentally stole her place in the tournament.

FLAXLEY: Then she should give it back.

BONSON: She tried to but the other girl was determined to fight her for it. So here we are.

(Flaxley gave him a seriously distrusting glance.)

FLAXLEY: And you're sure *you* had nothing to do with it?

BONSON: Nope. That other girl, Sahara, just called her a tart for no reason, and without prompting. Kritz got mad and well... this is the outcome.

FLAXLEY: So this Sandra person knew exactly what to say to piss her off, did she?

BONSON: Indeed.

FLAXLEY: That's a bit of a co-incidence, don't you think?

BONSON: Not really, they used to know each other, they were friends. She was bound to know how to upset her.

(Reluctantly accepting Bonson's assessment, Flaxley nodded then glanced towards Kritz. Delighted to have explained his way out of trouble, Bonson smirked then glanced between both sets of breasts excitedly.)

BONSON: Perfect.

LEFIAT: I love tits, Bonson. Especially ones like these two have got. Mandika's are...

FLAXLEY: Finish that sentence, Lefiat, and I'll kill you where you stand.

LEFIAT: I was just gonna say...

FLAXLEY: And I'll just kill you if you do.

LEFIAT: Fine, I'll shut up then.

FLAXLEY: A wise choice.

SHANKSTONE: Here we go, chaps, it's starting.

(Sure enough, the landlord was standing poolside with a whistle held firm to his lips.)

LANDLORD: Let battle commence!!!

(With that, he blew his whistle and the two naked beauties immediately waded towards one another growling furiously. Delighting in what they saw, everyone in the crowd started to shout and call out excitedly, a few of the more business minded ones taking bets on the outcome, including Shankstone.)

SHANKSTONE: I'll give you three to one odds on the blonde. Any takers?

(As several men raced over to him, he beamed gleefully.)

SHANKSTONE: Good, good.

(As Shankstone set about taking the first punter's money, Lefiat bounced excitedly.)

LEFIAT: This is great! Who do you want to win, Bonson?

(Bonson scoffed.)

BONSON: Like that matters. As long as there's two naked lovelies down there, battling it out, we're all winners, I say.

(Lefiat looked stumped and bit his lip.)

LEFIAT: Right... what about you, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: What about me?

LEFIAT: Who do you want to win?

(Flaxley gave him a sideways glance.)

FLAXLEY: Who do you think?

LEFIAT: I don't know.

FLAXLEY: Kritz, obviously. Though why she'd even want to take part in such a debauched exercise, god only knows. Angry or not, there's far more honourable ways to settle a dispute.

(He then shook his head bitterly.)

FLAXLEY: Disgraceful. Kritz should be ashamed. Every man in Guevina ogling her body... it's just not on. We'll be having words about this.

LEFIAT: Right, okay. So... you want Kritz to win?

FLAXLEY: Of course.

LEFIAT: Do you reckon she will?

BONSON: Of course she will.

LEFIAT: How can you be so sure?

BONSON: Her nipples are a nicer shade of pink than the other girl's.

(Lefiat looked stumped.)

LEFIAT: Eh?

BONSON: I'm joking, you tit. You know damn well why I think Kritz is going to win.

LEFIAT: Do I?

(Bonson glared at him and raised his voice.)

BONSON: Well you ought to, Lefiat, you were sitting right there! Last time they fought, Kritz beat her black and blue. Almost killed her, she said! It barely a contest.

GAMBLER 1: What?

GAMBLER 2: Really???

(With that, all the people who'd been queuing to place bets with Shankstone, immediately raced away to place their bets with a man at the back offering two to one odds on Kritz instead.)

SHANKSTONE: Bonson, you bastard! I was on a nice little earner there!!!

(Bonson looked to him uneasily for a moment then shrugged.)

BONSON: Yes well, you were cheating anyway, you had inside information.

SHANKSTONE: Exactly!!!

(In the pool at this time, having waded out to the centre to meet her opponent, Sahara immediately came out punching. Determined to settle her old score, she looked the very epitome of rage. Having been called a tart, however, Kritz matched her fury and also came out full of aggression.)

SAHARA: I've waited a long time for this!!!

KRITZ: Me too! Over ten minutes! Nobody calls me a tart and lives that long normally!

(With their movement very much hindered by the water, their battle then descended into farce. Having both thrown and landed a single punch, they were unable to help floating into one another and ended up grappling, too close to each other to throw any punches.)

KRITZ: Move back!!!

SAHARA: *You* move back!!!

KRITZ: You!

(Sahara grabbed Kritz's hair then snarled.)

SAHARA: No! You!!!

KRITZ: Bitch!!! That's my hair!!!

SAHARA: Move back then!!!

KRITZ: I can't, you've got my hair.

(Sahara then screeched.)

SAHARA: Ouch!!! Now you've got mine!!!

KRITZ: Now you know how it feels!!!

SAHARA: Yeah? Well, how do you like how this feels???

(With that, she dug her nails into Kritz's shoulder.)

KRITZ: Ouch!!! Bitch!!!

(Not to be outdone, Kritz then scraped her fingernails down Sahara's arm.)

SAHARA: Bitch!!! That stings!!!

KRITZ: Get back where I can punch you then!

SAHARA: You!

KRITZ: You!!!

(With that, Kritz attempted to punch Sahara on the head. Being far too close to get any momentum in her swing, however, her effort ended up as no more than a weak thump.)

SAHARA: You're feeble!

KRITZ: Fuck off!!!

(With that, Kritz scratched Sahara's arms again and snarled.)

SAHARA: Hey!!!

(Having never seen Kritz fight in the style known commonly as "like a girl" before, Flaxley's jaw dropped. Surrounded by a crowd of over-excited, randy spectators, he could only shake his head and sigh.)

FLAXLEY: That's just not right.

BONSON: Looks right to me, two fit lovelies groping one another... perfect.

FLAXLEY: You're a sick man, Bonson.

BONSON: Am I now? You didn't think it was that bad when you used to come with me every week.

FLAXLEY: Oh... be quiet, you.

(Blissfully unaware of her husband's presence, Kritz continued desperately trying to land a punch. Trying her damndest to push Sahara back so she could take a decent swing at her, she was starting to turn red with the strain. With Sahara matching her tactics and determination, however, all they ended up doing was pushing harder into one another until they ended up spinning in circles, stuck together like glue. With their arms wrapped around one another, and each with a fistful of the other one's hair, they made a lot of noise but that was about all. The crowd, of course, were loving it. Two naked women screaming and grappling, with their sizeable breasts bouncing and swinging around, was a joy to watch.)

KRITZ: Let go of me, for fuck sake!

SAHARA: *You're holding me!!!*

KRITZ: I'm trying to push you away!!!

SAHARA: By pulling my hair???

KRITZ: You're pulling mine!!!

(Sahara snarled and her face distorted with rage.)

SAHARA: Fine! Wanna play dirty, do you???

(With that, she threw her neck downwards and bit into the top of Kritz's breast.)

KRITZ: Bitch!!!

(Kritz immediately let go of her and pulled back in agony.)

SAHARA: Chance!!!

(With that, she released a powerful punch in Kritz's direction. Rubbing her sore breast, Kritz swerved to avoid it then threw a punch of her own.)

KRITZ: You'll pay for that!!!

(At once, Sahara's eyes bulged and she too, swerved sideways to avoid the punch. Having successfully evaded it she swung up straight and bounced forward to bellow into Kritz's face.)

SAHARA: That all you've got, is it?

KRITZ: Not even remotely. I'm gonna beat the shit of you and I won't even have to resort to fighting dirty.

SAHARA: Yeah?

KRITZ: Yeah!

SAHARA: Yeah?

KRITZ: Yes, for fuck sake!!!

(They then stared hatefully into one another's eyes for a few moments when, completely out of the blue, Sahara pulled Kritz close and planted a powerful kiss on her lips. Looking terrified, Kritz immediately tensed up and stood there with bulging eyes as Sahara made merry on her mouth. The vast majority of the crowd were unsurprisingly overjoyed and cheered with sheer delight. There were, however, two people in the crowd who were far from overjoyed.)

LEFIAT: I don't like it. This is too violent for me. She's biting Kritz's lip!!!

(Flaxley was livid.)

FLAXLEY: If only!!!

LEFIAT: Eh?

FLAXLEY: Do I mind if she finds women attractive? Not at all. Do I mind her making out with other women? No, that's fine... but not in bloody public!!! In our room where I can see it, yes... even if I'm not there, in private, fine... but this... this is undignified!!!

(Lefiat looked much, much happier.)

LEFIAT: Making out? You mean... kissing?

(At once his worries all faded to nothing and he joined the rest of the crowd in their joyous adulation.)

FLAXLEY: Disgraceful!!!

(In the pool at this time, the terrified Kritz had snapped from her trance and was determinedly trying to pull away from Sahara. Much to her frustration, however, Sahara had her held firm and was showing no sign of relenting. Her lips remained firmly on Kritz's and her kissing action was rapidly intensifying. Fearing Sahara's tongue would soon follow, Kritz trembled all over then doubled her efforts to break free. Tensing up, she focussed all her energy into the palms of her hands then finally managed to push her away. Looking stunned, Sahara splashed back several inches, then steadied herself. At once a horrified expression washed over her face and she gaped into Kritz distressed eyes.)

SAHARA: I... I kissed you.

(Kritz whimpered at her.)

KRITZ: I know!!!

SAHARA: I don't know why I... I didn't mean to... I...

(She then stopped whimpering and stood tall to compose herself. As the excited crowd called for them to kiss again, she then clasped her hands together passionately and stared into Kritz's eyes.)

SAHARA: Fine. There's no use me denying it any longer. I don't hate you, Kritz. Quite the opposite!

(Kritz whimpered.)

KRITZ: The opposite?

SAHARA: Yes, the *very* opposite.

KRITZ: You mean...

SAHARA: Yes, I love you.

KRITZ: Oh good god, no!

SAHARA: It's true. I tried to deny it. I even convinced myself I hated you but I don't. Not one bit...

KRITZ: Not even a little bit?

(Looking somewhat exasperated, Sahara shook her head then raised her voice.)

SAHARA: Of course not! I love you, you fool!!!

(At once, all the cheering fell silent and everyone watched on in amazed silence.)

SAHARA: After you beat me up that time, I realised you were someone special and I tried to be just like you. You became my hero. I even drew pictures of you to keep myself warm on lonely nights. Sometimes... I thought of you and touched myself...

BONSON: Bloody hell!

GAMBLER 1: Shut up, Bonson, this just got interesting.

BONSON: Quite, sorry.

(Thrown by the voices, Kritz swiftly glanced at Bonson. Upon sighting Flaxley standing next to him, she then whimpered before staring fearfully back into Sahara's loving eyes.)

KRITZ: I'm scared!

SAHARA: Don't be. I'm just telling you how I feel. How I've always felt. I used to watch you all the time, to try to be more like you, I admired you so much. In the end, I knew I was falling for you... then came that night when you and I were sent to patrol the beach together, remember?

(At once Kritz's eyes bulged.)

KRITZ: No, no, no... I get the point, be quiet.

(Sahara shook her head defiantly and raised her voice.)

SAHARA: I can't! I've kept this in for far too long.

KRITZ: Oh, hell!

(With that, the panicking Kritz swiftly turned and started to wade frantically away, desperate to be somewhere else. Undeterred, Sahara paced after her projecting her voice to the back of Kritz's head.)

SAHARA: I was so happy to be partners with you for that patrol. I dreamt what amazing things might happen...

KRITZ: It's a lie!!!

SAHARA: And you made my dreams come true. I may have led you on, but you responded to my advances and...

(As Kritz started to scramble out of the pool, Sahara then gushed lovingly and stared upwards.)

SAHARA: When we made love under the stars that night, I knew...

(Almost in tears, Kritz froze and looked to Flaxley wearing a sorrowful pout.)

KRITZ: I don't think my husband needed to hear that, Sahara!!!

(Sahara snarled and waded after her.)

SAHARA: I think he did! Because I know you feel the same way about me. I felt it when you caressed my...

KRITZ: No!!!

(Just then, a woman's voice bellowed out from just inside the door to the bar.)

SUKIA: Enough!!!

(At once, the entire bewildered room turned to face her. Sahara was horrified. The last person she'd expected to see was the president of Trepe Village.)

SAHARA: Sukia???

SUKIA: Sahara, you've brought shame on our village!

SAHARA: But...

SUKIA: But nothing! I picked you to represent our people in a world class tournament and what do I find when I get here? *You*... scratching, pulling hair and biting! And as for your confession of love... that's one disgrace too many!!!

(She shook her head then glared at the still frozen Kritz as she remained propped, half in and half out of the pool.)

SUKIA: I thought *you* were better than that too, Kritz.

(She shook her head.)

SUKIA: Anyway, it's over for you, Sahara. Get dressed. I'm taking you back to Trepe Village. It's prison duties for you. I'll be waiting outside! Hurry up. And Kritz... don't embarrass us in the tournament tomorrow!

(With that, Sukia turned and left the room. Not about to disobey her orders, Sahara sighed then headed for the edge of the pool. Realising the fight was over, a series of frustrated groans then rose up from the crowd.)

GAMBLER 1: If there's not going to be a fight, I want my entrance fee back!

MAN 1: Admission was free.

GAMBLER 1: That's... true. Damn it.

(Watching as all the men proceeded to boo and jeer at both Sahara and Kritz, Flaxley snarled and clenched his fists.)

FLAXLEY: Bastards. Only *I'm* allowed to boo my wife. I'm not having this.

(With that, he paced over to where Kritz was climbing sheepishly from the pool and offered her his hand.)

FLAXLEY: Come with me, Kritz.

KRITZ: Please... go away... I'm too embarrassed.

FLAXLEY: Then we can be embarrassed together.

KRITZ: What? How does that work?

FLAXLEY: Just... come with me.

(Twenty minutes later, fully dressed again, Kritz found herself sitting on a grass slope, somewhere out in the quiet suburbs, with Flaxley at her side. Bonson and Shankstone, under threat of Flaxley's blade, had been made to wait for them in the inn. Bonson could only hope for the sake of his secret that they didn't make peace while he wasn't there to mess it up.

Alone together for the first time since they'd left Tifaeris, they sat quietly staring down the slope, Flaxley trying to think of exactly what to say, and Kritz praying he simply said nothing. She was in no mood to talk and just wanted to be left alone. Unfortunately for her, however, Flaxley had a lot on his mind and they hadn't been sitting there long before he broke the silence.)

FLAXLEY: You have to laugh really.

(Clearly disagreeing, Kritz pulled a disgusted face and continued to stare ahead of herself.)

FLAXLEY: Looks like I'm not the *only* one who used to take advantage of women who had a crush on me.

(Kritz winced and looked away as Flaxley chuckled.)

FLAXLEY: You womaniser, you. Oink.

(Failing to see what was so funny, Kritz glared at him.)

KRITZ: Did you bring me all the way out here just to laugh at me?

(Flaxley allowed himself another chuckle then gave her a warm smile.)

FLAXLEY: Not at all.

(Kritz rolled her eyes then looked away.)

KRITZ: You've no idea how embarrassed I am right now.

FLAXLEY: I have a fair idea.

(Kritz looked to him and pouted.)

KRITZ: No you haven't. Everyone in that room knows...

(She winced.)

KRITZ: That I did it with a woman.

(She then hung her head.)

KRITZ: I know how you men hate that kind of thing. Did you hear them all booing?

FLAXLEY: Yes, but...

KRITZ: And they don't even *know* me. *You* must think so little of me right now.

(Flaxley laid back on the grass and chuckled.)

FLAXLEY: Because you took pleasure in another woman?

KRITZ: Yes... that.

FLAXLEY: Kritz, that was the past. Something I have no right to judge you for. I'm more interested to know about what you meant when you said I tried to put it my thingy up your arse. That wasn't me!

(Kritz glanced at him uneasily then replied in a less than convincing voice.)

KRITZ: It was something I dreamt... and I'm still uncomfortable about it, so... leave me alone.

(Flaxley eyed her suspiciously.)

FLAXLEY: Are you sure about that?

KRITZ: Why? Do you think I was being unfaithful?

(Flaxley looked into her eyes then sighed.)

FLAXLEY: No, actually. That's why I'm so confused.

KRITZ: Then if you trust me, let it go.

FLAXLEY: Fine... for now.

(Kritz glanced at him sternly for a moment then bit her lip nervously.)

KRITZ: So, you're not angry about me, you know... with Sahara when I was younger?

(Flaxley just shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: What you did before we met is none of my concern. Just like what *I* did back then is none of yours. I was a womaniser, you made out with women. That's the past. And I won't judge you for that.

KRITZ: Do you mean that?

FLAXLEY: Of course. Our relationship is based on everything that's happened since we became a couple. Not a moment before. I had a threesome with two busty blondes the night before we met. That's got fuck all to do with you though. If I'd done it the night *after* we got married... different story.

(Kritz slowly nodded.)

KRITZ: Well... seeing as we're sharing... just before I met you, about an hour before that fight, I was in bed with a well tanned body builder.

(She then glanced to the sky and smiled.)

KRITZ: His penis wasn't the biggest but by golly he knew how to use it.

(Flaxley glared at her coldly.)

FLAXLEY: I didn't need to know that!

KRITZ: Yeah, but...

FLAXLEY: Point is, that was before my time. You weren't being unfaithful, you didn't even know me. So it can be left in the past. Far in the past!

(Kritz looked at him uneasily for a moment then sighed.)

KRITZ: You're right.

(She then shook her head.)

KRITZ: And you're not disgusted with me... you know for... with a woman and that?

FLAXLEY: Kritz, I...

KRITZ: I mean, I was in an all female tribe and I didn't have my own... sex slave...

(She then hung her head.)

KRITZ: Be a lesbian or a find a sex slave, those were my choices.

(She then looked into Flaxley's eyes and pouted.)

KRITZ: I'm so glad I met you. What an existence that would have been.

(Flaxley couldn't help but smile.)

FLAXLEY: On the bright side, a beauty like you wouldn't have had any trouble finding a sex slave.

KRITZ: I know but...

(She then offered him a smile.)

KRITZ: Thanks for being so good about all this. I thought you'd be livid.

FLAXLEY: I'll never be livid about your past, my love. Unless you make a habit of telling me about your past conquests.

KRITZ: There's not *much* to tell anyway. I'd never even been with a guy until I left Trepe Village at the age of twenty one. I went straight to Azagotse and I met *you* four months later.

FLAXLEY: Right, I see.

KRITZ: So, I've only ever been with fifty seven guys.

(Flaxley looked horrified and sat bolt upright.)

FLAXLEY: Fifty seven??? In four months???

KRITZ: Yeah... lame isn't it?

FLAXLEY: Lame??? Even *I* didn't get through that many conquests and I was Guevina's royal knight, a warrior of international repute! Women fell at my feet. I even had women climbing into my bed in the middle of the night, women I'd never met before! And even *I* couldn't have done fifty seven in four months! That's almost one bloke every two days, Kritz!!!

(Kritz looked somewhat miffed.)

KRITZ: Not really, it's not like I always did them one at a time!

FLAXLEY: What??? You had threesomes???

KRITZ: No. Never.

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: I almost did but their friend came round and we became a four. I had a few of those. And a five.

(Flaxley gaped at her in astonishment for a moment then looked away.)

FLAXLEY: Let's not discuss this anymore.

(He ruffled his neck indignantly for a moment then allowed himself a single laugh.)

FLAXLEY: That's why the past should be left where it is.

KRITZ: I agree. The past is the past. *Now* I want to be with my one special man for the rest of my life. There's no need to sleep around because nobody else even begins to compare to my man anyway.

(She then offered him a sorrowful glance.)

KRITZ: I love him and I'm sick of fighting with him.

(Flaxley returned her glance and nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Come here.

(Kritz sidled up to him then placed her head on his shoulder.)

FLAXLEY: We're not going to agree on the issue of the kids any time soon so for this afternoon let's just rest up and say nothing more about it.

KRITZ: I'd like that.

(Flaxley kissed her head then exhaled warmly.)

FLAXLEY: Well, I didn't sleep all night and this grass verge is oddly comfortable. And seeing as it's in the shade I fancy taking a quick nap.

KRITZ: Well, in that case...

(With that, she pushed him back on the grass then laid down at his side.)

KRITZ: Let's take forty winks.

FLAXLEY: Good plan. I'm sure Bonson will be happy waiting at the inn.

KRITZ: Yeah, there's a fair chance he won't mind.

(With that, they both took soothing deep breaths and closed their eyes to take a well earned rest.)

(Having slept for several hours on the grass verge, when Flaxley and Kritz returned to the inn, late in the afternoon, they were both thoroughly refreshed. For Flaxley especially, the break had been a much needed one. Almost looking like a new man, he strolled up to the inn doors with Kritz holding his arm and beamed.)

FLAXLEY: I'm really looking forward to an ale.

(He then looked shifty and glanced away from her.)

FLAXLEY: I do need a pee though. Would you be the perfect woman for me and get the drinks in while I use the facilities?

(Kritz gave him a sideways glance.)

KRITZ: Sure, okay... but... how come you *always* do that?

FLAXLEY: Do what, my love?

KRITZ: Find an excuse not to go to the bar? You do it every time we go into a pub together.

FLAXLEY: I do?

KRITZ: You do!

FLAXLEY: What can I say...

(He then mumbled under his breath.)

FLAXLEY: It's much cheaper when *you* go to the bar.

KRITZ: What?

FLAXLEY: I said I like ogling you when you're at the bar. You sexy thing, you.

(Kritz smiled then paced ahead.)

KRITZ: Like watching my bum, do you?

FLAXLEY: Yes, I bloody well do.

(Giggling to herself, Kritz pushed open the inn door and they both paced inside.

Before Kritz could head to the bar, however, Bonson and Shankstone immediately appeared before them looking somewhat peeved.)

BONSON: Where the bloody hell have you been all afternoon?

SHANKSTONE: We were worried sick!

BONSON: Didn't kiss and make up, did you?

FLAXLEY: Excuse me?

BONSON: Nothing!

KRITZ: We were just taking a nap. Poor Flaxley hadn't slept all night.

BONSON: Poor Flaxley?

(He hung his head and sighed despondently.)

BONSON: So, you did make up.

(Flaxley glowered at him coldly.)

FLAXLEY: That a bad thing, is it?

BONSON: What? No. I was just sighing and... agreeing. Poor Flaxley.

SHANKSTONE: Anyway, you're back now, that's what matters.

KRITZ: Why? What's so important?

(At once Bonson and Shankstone shared a troubled glance. Explaining that they wanted to keep Flaxley and Kritz where they could see them with a view to keep them at odds with one another wasn't an option.)

SHANKSTONE: Actually...

BONSON: We missed you, that's all.

FLAXLEY: Bonson, that's the weirdest thing you've ever said.

BONSON: It's not so weird. Nobody likes you here, remember?

SHANKSTONE: Yes, we just want you to be safe, that's all.

KRITZ: You don't have to worry.

(She gestured at Flaxley.)

KRITZ: Unless Dim Lee comes back to life, who's even *capable* of harming *this* big chunk of manliness?

BONSON: Oh, good god, I'm doomed.

FLAXLEY: Doomed? What are you on about, man?

(Just then, a royal elite guard in full uniform paced through the door and stopped beside them.)

GUARD: Ahem.

(At once, they all turned to face him.)

GUARD: Sir Flaxley, Bonson... and you're Kritz, I assume.

FLAXLEY: Who wants to know?

GUARD: It's the king, sir. He's requested your presence, Sir Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: I see.

GUARD: And Shankstone, Kayfu wishes to see you.

(Shankstone looked horrified.)

SHANKSTONE: He does? Oh, crap.

GUARD: And Bonson, the king has requested, nay demanded, that you give Miss Kritz a tour of the castle on his behalf, as a courtesy.

(Bonson was livid.)

BONSON: Fucking king!!!

(As a myriad of alarmed expressions came his way from all the drinkers in the bar, Bonson straightened his tie and growled.)

BONSON: I'm supposed to be retired!

(Flaxley gave him an angered glance.)

FLAXLEY: Don't be ridiculous, you're not retarded! Honestly, any excuse to get out of doing things!

(Bonson growled back.)

BONSON: I said retired!!!

(He sighed.)

BONSON: Why should I have to cart all over the castle for her bloody benefit? I've already seen it for fuck sake!

(Needless to say, Kritz was not amused.)

KRITZ: Do you want a black eye, Bonson?

(Bonson reeled back and shuddered.)

BONSON: Excuse me??? Are you threatening me???

KRITZ: Yes!!!

(In no doubt whatsoever that she was serious, Bonson stared into her eyes in horror for a moment then hung his head in defeat.)

BONSON: Fine, I'll take you then!

KRITZ: Good. 'Cause I really, really wanna see it.

FLAXLEY: Right! Now that's sorted... to the castle!

(And with nothing else said, they all followed the guard out of the inn and headed towards the castle. Having been sitting at a table expecting everyone to join him for a drink, Lefiat watched them go then pouted miserably.)

LEFIAT: Right... I'll be here then! You know, if you need me!

(Hanging his head, he released a broken hearted sigh then mumbled almost apologetically.)

LEFIAT: Bye!

Guevina castle...

(Ten minutes later, having bid farewell to Bonson, Kritz and Shankstone in the castle's foyer, Flaxley soon found himself pacing down the long corridor from the main hall to the royal throne room. Heading forth down the majestic looking corridor, he glanced from side to side then allowed himself a smile. As much as he hated Guevina, being in the castle was again bringing back some wonderful memories. As he neared the door to the royal throne room, however, he swiftly cast those thoughts aside and proceeded to conduct himself in accordance with Guevina's royal protocol. Sticking rigidly to tradition, he knocked loudly and clearly on the door three times then pushed it open and paced inside, making sure to keep his hands behind his back as he approached the throne. As he marched forth imperially, the king looked up from where he was slouching, deep in thought, and smiled joyfully.)

KING: Ah, Sir Flaxley! Wonderful to see you. Please, join me!

(He gestured to the seat to his left and Flaxley immediately sat down beside him, dipping his head to bow in accordance with royal protocol. Pleased to see his old employee, the king nodded in return.)

KING: So, Flaxley, how are you, old boy? It's been a long time!

FLAXLEY: Yes, yes it has. Many years, sire!

KING: I must say, you look well, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Thank you, sire.

(The king then raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

KING: Married life treating you well?

(Flaxley thought about his current disagreement with Kritz regarding the children and sighed sorrowfully.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, we're blissfully happy.

(Trying to hide his delight at Flaxley's unconvincing reply, the king glanced away innocently.)

KING: You don't exactly sound sure about that, old chap.

(Flaxley nodded to him.)

FLAXLEY: Everything will be fine, sire. You know how it is, sometimes couples don't always see eye to eye. We'll work it out.

(The king sneered with annoyance for a moment then looked to Flaxley again.)

KING: Well, let's hope not.

FLAXLEY: Sire?

(The king flinched.)

KING: I meant to say hope *so*, Flaxley. Sorry.

(Flaxley gave a stunted laugh.)

FLAXLEY: I see.

(He then nodded gratefully.)

FLAXLEY: Thank you for granting my wife a tour of the castle, by the way. Most kind of you.

KING: Oh, don't mention it. I hope she enjoys it.

FLAXLEY: Me too, sire. I just hope Bonson gives her the proper tour and not a shortened version.

KING: He wouldn't do that, would he?

FLAXLEY: Maybe. He didn't like the idea of showing her around one bit.

KING: No?

FLAXLEY: Well, you know Bonson. He's retired and as he resents being asked to do anything.

(He allowed himself a grin.)

FLAXLEY: Unfortunately for him, my wife is a typical woman in many ways. She loves shiny and expensive things and couldn't wait to take a look around, so he had no choice but to take her. She can be very persuasive when she's angry.

KING: Right. Well... that's good then. No harm done.

(The king then shuffled uneasily in his seat. Noticing his discomfort, Flaxley raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

FLAXLEY: Are you okay there, sire? You seem a little ill at ease, if you don't mind me saying.

KING: I am, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Anything I can do?

(The king offered him a warm smile.)

KING: Actually, yes. That's why I sent for you. I was going to ask you to do me a small favour.

FLAXLEY: I'm listening.

KING: Thing is, I kicked Lefiat out...

FLAXLEY: Yes, I know.

KING: Well, Lefiat may have made my life hell when he was here, but at least Mandika could take her early evening walk on the beach safely when he was around!

FLAXLEY: I see!

KING: Well, that's why I requested you. I knew you were in town and I kind of hoped you wouldn't mind helping me out. You know how much she loved taking her evening walk.

(He sighed.)

KING: Well she hasn't been able to go since I booted Lefiat out; and as a father I feel bad about that. So, would you mind escorting her this evening?

(Flaxley paused for a moment then nodded firmly.)

FLAXLEY: Certainly, I'd be honoured!

KING: Thank you, Flaxley. I knew I could rely on you!

FLAXLEY: Any time, sire.

KING: Top chap. She means the world to me and if taking her stroll this evening makes her smile then I'm a happy man.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: You adore that girl, don't you?

KING: Absolutely, I do.

(Flaxley nodded then raised a curious eyebrow. Wondering just how this doting father could do such a thing as give his only daughter away as a prize in a tournament, he bit his lip then sat back looking flummoxed.)

FLAXLEY: Speaking of her highness, sire...

KING: Yes?

(Remembering that he wasn't supposed to know about Mandika being the secret prize in the tournament, he scratched his head and glanced away.)

FLAXLEY: I just wanted to say, she's a lovely girl. She's a credit to you and her late mother.

(The king smiled.)

KING: Indeed she is. Now, please join me for a drink before you head off to see her.

FLAXLEY: Oh... okay, don't mind if I do.

KING: Good man.

(With that, the king headed for the drinks cabinet and smirked to himself. As far as he knew, everything was falling into place perfectly. Just like Flaxley, however, he was a man who only knew half the story. The king wrongly thought Flaxley knew nothing of Mandika being the secret prize in the tournament. And Flaxley had no idea that the plan was actually to get Mandika married off to him. And so, with both of them knowing far less than they thought they did, they shared a drink wearing arrogant smirks, convinced that they had the upper hand on the other one.)

(While Flaxley and the king enjoyed a drink, Shankstone found himself being led out onto the balcony of the castle by a guard, where Kayfu awaited him. Standing by the wall at the edge, he stared down into the square below with his hands behind his back, sneering coldly as Shankstone was led to his side.)

GUARD: Mr Shankstone is here, sir.

(Without even turning to look at them, Kayfu replied emotionless.)

KAYFU: Thank you. Leave us.

GUARD: Sir.

(As the guard headed away, Kayfu gestured towards the busy square and puffed out.)

KAYFU: Look at them all. I've seen two muggings since I've been standing here. We're going to need all the guards out in force tomorrow. These tournaments are such magnets for crime.

(Shankstone furrowed his brow.)

SHANKSTONE: Skip the polite conversation, Kayfu. What do you want?

(Kayfu looked to him and raised an eyebrow arrogantly.)

KAYFU: I want an update, of course. Has Bonson been behaving himself?

(Shankstone scoffed.)

SHANKSTONE: No. He's been every inch the bastard you told him to be.

KAYFU: Excuse me?

SHANKSTONE: He's got Flaxley here and he didn't tell him what the king has planned.

KAYFU: I see, good then.

SHANKSTONE: Flaxley is determined to win the tournament because he thinks the king will marry the princess off to whoever wins and he doesn't want some evil scumbag winning her hand.

KAYFU: I see.

SHANKSTONE: And yes, he's driving a wedge between Flaxley and his wife. They've been arguing like angry chefs for days.

KAYFU: Good. So all is going to plan then?

SHANKSTONE: We've done everything you asked, if that's what you mean.

KAYFU: Glad to hear it.

(He smiled then started to pace up and down.)

KAYFU: You know, the king has arranged for Flaxley and the princess to spend some time alone together this evening. He's even orchestrated a way to get that Kritz person out of their way.

SHANKSTONE: I know. A tour of the castle.

KAYFU: Exactly. My idea. Inspired, don't you think?

(As Shankstone sneered at him, Kayfu stopped pacing and stared back down into the square.)

KAYFU: So everything's in place. Flaxley has come to win the tournament and he and his wife are at loggerheads. A perfect time for him to notice the lovely Princess Mandika, don't you think?

(Shankstone started to chuckle.)

SHANKSTONE: He wouldn't notice her if she was naked and covered in beer.

KAYFU: Excuse me?

SHANKSTONE: You've never seen Kritz, have you?

KAYFU: Oh, shut up. You sound like Bonson. All this Kritz person is, is a set of large tits from what I'm hearing. The princess is so much more. She's the daughter of great man, for one.

SHANKSTONE: Kiss arse.

KAYFU: Excuse me?

(He furrowed his brow.)

KAYFU: You're in no position to give me grief, Shankstone.

SHANKSTONE: Yeah... fine.

KAYFU: Consider yourself lucky the king hasn't heard about your son yet.

SHANKSTONE: You bastard.

KAYFU: Yes, I am. Remember that tonight when you're watching Bonson. I want you to watch him right up until the tournament starts, you hear me?

SHANKSTONE: Yeah, fine.

KAYFU: Good.

(He snarled.)

KAYFU: And if either of you put one foot wrong...

SHANKSTONE: I get it!!!

KAYFU: Good. Glad you do.

(Shankstone looked to him bitterly for a moment then bit his lip.)

SHANKSTONE: Say, what did Bonson do anyway?

KAYFU: Excuse me?

SHANKSTONE: What have you got on him? What *is* this secret?

(Kayfu grinned at him knowingly.)

KAYFU: You really wanna know?

SHANKSTONE: I do actually.

KAYFU: Very well...

(With that, he checked nobody was in earshot then stepped up and whispered in Shankstone's ear. At once, Shankstone's eyes rocketed open and he gaped in horror.)

SHANKSTONE: Fuck off! No way.

KAYFU: I know, right? Now keep it to yourself.

SHANKSTONE: That's... that's... holy shit! If the king knew that he'd chop Bonson into tiny fragments, dunk them in horse crap then set fire to them. Wow.

KAYFU: So now you know.

SHANKSTONE: I tried to guess what his secret was and I came out with several extreme, awful things. That though... I never even dreamt of anything that bad. (As Shankstone shook a disgusted head, Kayfu, hid his face, highly amused that Shankstone had believed his lie so easily.)

SHANKSTONE: Bonson used to do *that* to camels??? Really? To the kings favourite horse too?

KAYFU: Yup. Now tell nobody.

SHANKSTONE: I won't. They'd never believe me anyway. The man's sick.

KAYFU: Quite! Anyway...

(He stood tall then looked away.)

KAYFU: When you're done with my carriage I'd like it back, please. I checked the castle parking area earlier and it wasn't there.

(Shankstone looked to him and sneered.)

SHANKSTONE: There's a good reason for that.

(Kayfu looked to him and frowned.)

KAYFU: Oh?

(Shankstone faked a sympathetic smile and sighed.)

SHANKSTONE: Some bugger stole it while Flaxley was registering for the tournament.

KAYFU: What?

SHANKSTONE: Like you said, these tournaments attract a criminal element. Shocking really.

KAYFU: And my horses? They took my horses too?

SHANKSTONE: Well, yeah? What sort of carriage thief would unhook the horses then *push* the carriage away?

(Kayfu shook his head.)

KAYFU: Quite... silly question.

SHANKSTONE: Silly person.

KAYFU: I'd better sort this out I suppose. You can go.

(Shankstone nodded then started to head away.)

KAYFU: Just remember, if Bonson tells Flaxley the truth and you don't inform me straight away... your son is going to regret ever meeting the princess.

(Shankstone clenched a furious fist then headed away, leaving Kayfu sneering at his back. Watching as Shankstone disappeared from sight, he shook his head then mumbled under his breath.)

KAYFU: As for my carriage...

(He then turned and glanced over the balcony again.)

KAYFU: The cost of replacing it is coming out of your wages.

(Half an hour or so later, as afternoon turned to early evening, Flaxley proceeded to carry out his promise to the king. Having met up with Mandika at the castle's rear exit, he found himself accompanying her on her evening stroll along the castle's secluded stretch of private beach. The fading sun was starting to disappear into the sea, leaving an orange reflection on the water. The darkening sky and long shadows making for a perfect romantic scene. Slowly stepping forth, he walked tall and

glanced around at the picturesque scenery as the princess at his side, pouted and ambled forth with a saddened look in her eyes.)

MANDIKA: This walk won't be the same without...

(She bit her lip and sighed.)

MANDIKA: Him! My Lefiat.

(Her shoulders sunk then she glanced out to sea.)

MANDIKA: Am I doing the right thing by choosing my title over love, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Who am I to judge, Mandika? That's entirely your call. It's not something *I'd* do though.

(Mandika pouted at him.)

MANDIKA: So you think I'm doing the wrong thing?

FLAXLEY: I didn't say that. You have to be your own judge of what's right and wrong, Mandika. All I can tell you is, you're doing an *understandable* thing. As for whether it's the right thing or not, look into your heart. What's it telling you? I mean, would you feel so guilty if you thought you were doing the right thing?

MANDIKA: I don't feel guilty. I feel sad for *me*.

(She shook her head.)

MANDIKA: Wow, that sounds awful. You must think me a terrible woman!

FLAXLEY: Well... that last statement didn't reflect brilliantly on you, it has to be said.

(They continued on in silence for a few moments then Mandika glanced at him nervously.)

MANDIKA: You see my point though, right? I mean, you understand why I chose my title over him?

FLAXLEY: Oh I understand it, of course I do.

(He offered her a warm smile.)

FLAXLEY: But now you've made that choice, you have to find a way to live with it. Fact is, you were given the choice to be with Lefiat and you didn't take it. So you can't really expect sympathy where he's concerned.

(Mandika nodded solemnly.)

MANDIKA: I suppose not.

FLAXLEY: Though if you want my opinion...

MANDIKA: I do.

FLAXLEY: He's not good enough for you anyway.

MANDIKA: Flaxley... I know that. I always have, but... the heart wants what it wants, you know?

FLAXLEY: And yours doesn't want Lefiat, it wants to be queen someday.

MANDIKA: It wants both. It just wants one slightly more.

(She sighed then looked to Flaxley imploringly.)

MANDIKA: Do you think we'll still be friends after all this blows over?

FLAXLEY: Of course we will, Mandika. What an absurd question. According to the knight's code, I'm contractually obliged to be your friend for life.

MANDIKA: I meant Lefiat and I. Not that I deserve his friendship!

FLAXLEY: Don't you worry about that, Mandika. Like I told you earlier, I can't say much right now, but... if I have my way, it's not quite over yet between you and Lefiat.

(Mandika's eyes immediately filled with hope.)

MANDIKA: Really?

FLAXLEY: I can't say anything, so don't even ask. Just... don't give up on your love just yet, okay?

(Mandika beamed and glanced away.)

MANDIKA: Okay... thanks, Flaxley.

(Flaxley then glanced towards the sea and shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: That said, if my plan goes pear-shaped, it's still not the end of the world. You'll soon forget about Lefiat. Give it a few months and you'll be amazed you even looked at the annoying halfwit twice.

(She then stopped walking and stood up straight.)

MANDIKA: Please don't say mean things about him. For all his faults, I love him and hearing you say that kind of thing right now, hurts me.

FLAXLEY: Too soon, eh?

(She sighed and started to walk on.)

MANDIKA: Way too soon.

FLAXLEY: Fair enough.

(Unbeknown to them as they strolled innocently along the seemingly peaceful seafront, they were not alone. In one of the lower rooms of the castles main towers, the king watched on from a carefully chosen vantage point with a knowing glint in his eye. Standing excitedly in the window he nodded to himself menacingly.)

KING: Okay, chaps, it's time... release the grendith!

(The king's men immediately did as he ordered without question. Upon a single pull of a lever, a cage door leading to the beach crashed open and three scaly, dog-sized creatures with enormous fangs, charged from it. Heads down and drooling with a lust to kill, they headed straight for Flaxley and Mandika snarling venomously. Much to his men's amazement, the king, who'd planned the whole thing, looked mortified and flailed his arms furiously at them.)

KING: Three of them???

(The guard beside him nodded knowingly as he watched on excitedly.)

GUARD: Yes, sir. Three ought to do it!

KING: Idiot! There's only supposed to be one!

GUARD: There is?

(The king clasped the sides of his head in his anguished hands.)

KING: They could be killed!!!

GUARD: I thought that was the idea!

KING: The whole idea is for Flaxley to save her from it and become her hero, you cock!

GUARD: Well, nobody told *me* that!

KING: Idiot!!! You're fired!!!

(The guard was crestfallen.)

GUARD: You can't sack me! This was all *your* doing.

(He stood tall and snarled defiantly.)

GUARD: If you do, I'll tell the princess everything!

KING: Fine, I'll have you executed instead then!

(Defeated, the guard grimaced and trudged away.)

GUARD: Bloody kings have an answer for everything!

(Meanwhile, at the oceanfront, Flaxley and Mandika were both oblivious to the incoming foes and continued their conversation in what they thought was the tranquillity of the empty beach at sunset.)

MANDIKA: But, there's a chance Lefiat can win!

FLAXLEY: Is there though? Let's be honest, if the other fifteen entrants all got food poisoning and died in the night, he'd still manage to find a way to come second. The boy's useless.

MANDIKA: Maybe.

FLAXLEY: Mandika...

(He paused for a moment and looked uncertain. Set on edge by his sudden change of demeanour, Mandika stopped walking and turned to face him.)

MANDIKA: You okay, Flaxley?

(Well aware that he could save her from the dangers of being married off to some man she'd never met by just telling her what her father was up to there and then, Flaxley bit his lip. He was visibly tempted to tell her but having promised Bonson he wouldn't he swiftly resolved himself to not doing so. If he told Mandika, she'd throw a hissing fit at the king and the whole thing would end up coming back to Bonson for having told him. He couldn't put his aging friend in that position, not when there was another way. If he didn't know it already, he became absolutely certain in that moment that the only way to save Mandika without causing grief for anyone else was for him to win the tournament himself and give Mandika to Lefiat. That way, only the king would lose out and if he made any protest, his plan to marry Mandika off to a stranger would be revealed and Mandika would be livid at him. He knew the king wouldn't want that. And so, convinced it was best to say nothing, Flaxley just gave Mandika a kind smile.)

FLAXLEY: I'm fine.

MANDIKA: Are you sure, you looked a bit...

(Just then, she stopped mid-word and started to gape in horror.)

FLAXLEY: Looked a bit what?

(Wearing a troubled expression, he glanced over his shoulder and saw three savage beasts approaching at great speed.)

FLAXLEY: Grendiths!!!

(With that, he yanked his sword from its sheath and jumped in front of the princess, ready to defend her from these vile foes. Perfectly still, he stood there in full battle mode when a confused look enveloped his brow.)

FLAXLEY: Grendiths? On a beach?

(He shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Oh well!

(With that, he leapt forward and slashed at the first grendith, sending it sprawling back, yelping out in pain.)

FLAXLEY: God, I'm good.

MANDIKA: Flaxley, Flaxley!!!

(He swiftly turned and saw another grendith pounce towards the princess he'd been asked to protect.)

FLAXLEY: Not in this life time!!!

(With that, he lunged forwards as if on springs and plunged his sword through the side of its head, seconds before it could sink its teeth into her.)

FLAXLEY: One down, two to go!

(Having thought her number was up, the princess fainted to the sand.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, you lay there, Mandika, I'll do all the work!

(Clearly enjoying himself, the brave knight then leapt forward with his massive blade aloft and decapitated the grendith he'd earlier wounded.)

FLAXLEY: And then there was one.

(Urgently glancing from side to side as he stood over the princess, he gritted his teeth forcefully.)

FLAXLEY: Where the hell did it go?

(Just then, the final beast charged him from behind. With a full extension of its powerful hind legs, it leapt onto his back and sent him sprawling forwards.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!!!

(Desperately, he tried to scramble back to his feet as the hefty beast stood on the back of his chest plate and sunk its teeth into it.)

FLAXLEY: Bastard!

(Snarling furiously, he continued to struggle, desperate to get back onto his feet. Face down with a sizeable foe standing on his back, however, lifting his torso was proving nigh on impossible.)

FLAXLEY: I can't get up!

(He then allowed a smirk to appear on his face.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. I'll kill you from down here then.

(With that, he thrust his arm out to the side then twisted the sword around in his hand before stabbing the blade towards his back where the snarling foe continued to nuzzle at his armour. Engrossed in the potential meal that Flaxley would be, the grendith did nothing to stop the sharp blade poking into its eye. With a deafening howl of pain, it reared up and fell from his back.)

FLAXLEY: A-ha!

(And with that, Flaxley leapt to his feet and plunged his sword through its eye again, the blade embedding itself deep in the grendith's brain)

FLAXLEY: That's one in the eye for you.

(As the watching king drew a sigh of relief, Flaxley shook his head and winced.)

FLAXLEY: Did I really say, "That's one in the eye for you"?

(He shook his head again then approached Mandika as he caught his breath.)

FLAXLEY: One in the eye for you indeed, I'm so glad nobody heard that!

(With that, he knelt down and lifted the princess' head onto his knee.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika?

(Mandika opened her eyes and exhaled.)

MANDIKA: You saved me!

FLAXLEY: Well... yes.

(He then smiled to her warmly.)

FLAXLEY: I'm just glad you're okay.

MANDIKA: Thanks, Flaxley. Both for saving me and being so kind. Oh, and, yes I did hear you! One in the eye for you, was it?

FLAXLEY: Tell no-one and we're even!

(Mandika laughed.)

MANDIKA: Deal!

(Inside the castle, the king was beside himself with glee. The sight of Flaxley cradling the princess' head as she lay in the sand was like a dream come true.)

KING: If that doesn't endear them, nothing will!

(Utterly oblivious to the fact that Mandika and Flaxley had faced many such dangers before, he was convinced that after Flaxley's moment of heroism, it was now only a matter of time before he won Mandika's heart. Also convinced that no man alive would be able to resist his beautiful daughter, the two of them falling in love, he felt was inevitable.

Unfortunately for the king, he'd still never set eyes on Kritz and had no idea just what Mandika was up against. He'd never seen the love and pride in Flaxley's eyes when he stood beside her. He had no idea how beautiful she was and how although pretty,

Mandika came a poor second in the looks department. He had no idea of the tribulations and difficulties that Flaxley and Kritz had been through and survived together. Most of all, he had no idea that no matter how much Flaxley and Kritz fought and argued, their love and their bond always remained strong. All he knew was what he'd been told; they were arguing and about to break up. Such is the burden of kingship; people only tell you what you want to hear.

As a result of his ignorance and much misinformation, the king was deliriously happy at this moment. As far as he was concerned, his daughter and Flaxley were on the verge of falling in love and after Flaxley had won the tournament, they would be wed. He'd be rid of Lefiat forever and have a competent knight once again.)

Guevina Inn

(Having taken the princess back to her quarters and reassured her that he'd do whatever it takes to make her happy again, Flaxley bid her goodnight then headed from the castle. The sun had long set and the square was now plunged into darkness. Despite this, however, several hundred tourists still remained on the scene, excitedly discussing the upcoming tournament.

Glancing up at the moon as he made his way among the revellers, Flaxley allowed himself a smile then headed for the inn. He was in no doubt whatsoever that Bonson would have done a half-baked job of giving Kritz her tour and that'd they probably returned to the inn quite some time ago. With Kritz having no option but to go where Bonson took her, he was in no doubt whatsoever he'd find her there.

Sure enough, as he paced into the inn, he spotted Bonson, Kritz and Lefiat sitting in a booth and allowed himself a smile. Bonson was not a difficult man to figure out. Chuckling, he then stepped up to the bar. As he stood there waiting to be served, a bewildered voice rose up from his side.)

SHANKSTONE: Oh, hello there, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Ah, Snodgrass. How are you?

SHANKSTONE: It's Shankstone.

(Shankstone then nodded to the barmaid.)

SHANKSTONE: Two please.

FLAXLEY: My apologies. Names aren't my strong point.

SHANKSTONE: I'm well aware of that, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: So, are you going to join us? I'm just getting myself an ale and then...

SHANKSTONE: Going to sit with Bonson are you?

FLAXLEY: Of course, he is sitting with my wife, after all.

(Shankstone shuddered.)

SHANKSTONE: I'm fine here, thanks. Bonson is a bad person.

FLAXLEY: Well, he's no angel, I know...

SHANKSTONE: Trust me, Flaxley. He's a bad, bad man.

(As the barmaid laid two tankards on the bar, Shankstone handed her some coins then smiled.)

SHANKSTONE: That one's for you, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Really? How very kind.

SHANKSTONE: Well, you'd be here all night otherwise, Flaxley. Nobody here is going to serve you. I heard them discussing it earlier.

(Flaxley furrowed his brow.)

FLAXLEY: I see.

(He then picked up his tankard and nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Are you sure you won't join us?

SHANKSTONE: And sit near that freak? No, thanks. I'll be staying here.

FLAXLEY: Well, okay. Thanks for the ale.

SHANKSTONE: You're welcome.

(With that, Flaxley headed over to join Kritz, Lefiat and Bonson. Having taken a seat next to Kritz and shared a greeting with everyone, he took a sip of his ale then glanced around the bar. The place was extremely packed. All the regulars were out in force, and they'd been joined by an excited crowd of tournament entrants and spectators. It had rapidly become something of an unofficial pre-tournament party. The smoky air was filled with laughter as a vast assortment of people from various backgrounds revelled in the boisterous atmosphere. Having observed them all for a moment, Flaxley took another sip of his ale then exhaled and set his tankard down on the table.)

FLAXLEY: I must say, Bonson... Guevina still makes a fine ale!

BONSON: I concur, old chap. That muck you call ale in Tifaeris would never do!

FLAXLEY: Hey, I'll have you know I help make that muck!

BONSON: Then shame on you.

(Kritz shrugged in bewilderment.)

KRITZ: I don't see why Guevina's beer should taste any different, to be honest. It's made the same as it is back in Tifaeris!

(Rather surprised by Kritz' claim to have knowledge of Guevina's beer making technique, Flaxley gave her a baffled look.)

FLAXLEY: How do *you* know how they make beer *here*?

KRITZ: Well...

(She gestured towards Bonson with a flick of her head.)

KRITZ: I spent almost two hours this afternoon wandering around the brewery with *this* clown!

(Bonson wasn't impressed to the say the least.)

BONSON: Clown???

FLAXLEY: Never mind that! You were supposed to give her a tour of the castle not the brewery!

BONSON: I did! The brewery's *in* the castle!

KRITZ: No it isn't!

BONSON: That's not the point! You had a good time, didn't you?

KRITZ: Not really, no!

BONSON: Well at least you learnt how to make beer!

KRITZ: I already know how to make beer; I help make the beer in Tifaeris too!

(Looking more than a little peeved, Bonson looked her in the eye.)

BONSON: Either you know how to make beer or you know how to make that muck you call beer in Tifaeris, you can't claim both!

KRITZ: Hey, we like our ale in Tifaeris!

FLAXLEY: So does he when he's there!

BONSON: Look, point is, you can't complain. I *did* show you the castle...

KRITZ: Yeah, for about ten minutes. Mostly from the outside, pointing at it as we headed to the brewery.

BONSON: Well, nobody forced you to come with me.

KRITZ: I didn't know where you were taking me!!! I thought you were going to show me a separate royal annex or something. And besides, I *did* have to go with you; I couldn't very well wander round the castle on my own, now could I?

BONSON: Not with your notoriously light fingers, no.

KRITZ: Excuse me?

(Bonson rolled his eyes then sat back nonchalantly.)

BONSON: Look, we're getting off the topic here. Fact is, your beer in Tifaeris is an affront to all that's civilised. End of discussion.

KRITZ: Unbelievable.

(Still feeling deeply saddened about losing Mandika, and rather intimidated by the atmosphere in the lively bar, Lefiat hadn't said a word to either Kritz or Bonson since they'd returned to the inn. Finally however, he plucked up the courage to speak.)

LEFIAT: I think all ales are horrible!

(Bonson glared at him furiously.)

BONSON: How dare you???

LEFIAT: What?

BONSON: Never speak again, arse face. That was almost blasphemy! Guevina's ale is the finest beverage on the planet

(Lefiat looked peeved and retorted sarcastically.)

LEFIAT: Yeah well, you said your whisky was nice but it tasted like stale cheese!

(Half expecting Bonson to explode they were amazed to see a grin appear on his face.)

BONSON: Yes. I rather made a mess of the first batch, why do you think I gave it to Mandika?

(Just then, the bar doors flew open and a hooded man strode purposefully through them causing everyone in the bar to turn and stare his way. Unperturbed by the looks he was receiving, the stranger paced up to bar and waved a beckoning hand to the barman. Impressed by the confidence of the hooded man, Lefiat turned to Flaxley excitedly.)

LEFIAT: Hey, who's that?

(Flaxley shrugged and watched as a drunken reveller approached the hooded stranger.)

DRUNK: What's with the hood, mate? Is it raining outside?

(He reached for the hood but as quick as a flash, the hooded man caught his arm.)

SANDARK: Fool! Men have died for less!

(With that, he released the drunkard's wrist from his grasp and pushed him away before grabbing a bottle of whisky from the barman and heading along the bar.

Rolling his eyes, Flaxley related his feelings with a sigh.)

FLAXLEY: See, that's the thing I hate most about these tournaments. Every weirdo from here to eternity comes crawling out of the woodwork. For some reason, freaks and oddballs can't get enough of the things. You get one or two knights and the rest are all just nut-jobs who think they can fight a bit.

KRITZ: Really? I thought *most* of the competitors would be knights.

FLAXLEY: If only.

(He then pointed to the far side of the bar.)

FLAXLEY: See that chap with the earring and the leather studded sash?

KRITZ: The one with the nervous twitch?

FLAXLEY: Yeah! That's Ornet the tall!

KRITZ: Who?

FLAXLEY: He's a regular tournament fighter. He's not a knight though. He's head of security at Port Shehi. Quite handy with a dual-edged staff, apparently... and a complete nut-job.

KRITZ: I see.

(She then pointed to a man who was resting his elbow gingerly against the bar and gesticulating with a limp wrist as he spoke to the man next to him.)

KRITZ: It bet he's taking part too. At least, I've seen him somewhere and I've fallen foul of a lot of security people in my time.

BONSON: Well, what with your light fingers and all...

KRITZ: Shut up, Bonson.

(She rolled her eyes then pointed to the clean shaven gentleman in question.)

KRITZ: Does he look familiar to you, Flaxley?

(Eyeing the inordinately effeminate gentleman she was referring to, Flaxley shuddered.)

FLAXLEY: Never seen *that* weirdo before. He's wearing a tutu... I tend to avoid blokes who do that.

(Kritz's face lit up.)

KRITZ: Oh *that's* where I know him from; he was playing cards in Azagotse once!

(She then looked confused.)

FLAXLEY: What's up?

KRITZ: Actually, he wasn't playing cards... he was part of the all singing, all dancing cabaret show.

(Bonson gave her a disturbed glance.)

BONSON: I think you've had enough ale for one evening, Kritz!

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Actually she might be right. There *is* a dancer with immense dagger skills who likes to try his luck on the tournament circuit. So, if his reputation is anything to go by, that might be Niskane, the dancing assassin!

BONSON: That's enough ale for you too, Flaxley!

(He chuckled into his glass.)

BONSON: Dancing assassin...

FLAXLEY: You can laugh, old chap, but we faced his brother once. You were there.

KRITZ: Yeah, he even mentioned his brother, the dancing assassin.

BONSON: I don't remember this.

KRITZ: You, Mandika and Lefiat were hiding behind a rock.

LEFIAT: Oh, is that the one who...

(He felt his stomach and fought off a sick feeling.)

KRITZ: That's him; I put an axe through his head.

BONSON: Oh, that skull collector fellow.

FLAXLEY: That's him. Their parents named them both Niskane.

(Kritz gave him a sideways glance.)

KRITZ: Flaxley, he told you at the time, Niskane is their surname.

(As the memory of that moment came to him, Flaxley grimaced.)

FLAXLEY: Right, yes.

(He then nodded firmly.)

FLAXLEY: But it just goes to prove my point. Tournaments attract weirdoes!

(He then nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Still, weirdoes or not, I'd be foolish not to check out the competition while I have the chance. I won't be a long, I'm going to mingle and see what other oddballs I can recognise.

KRITZ: Okay, good idea.

(With that, he rose to his feet and stepped two paces away from the table when a youthful, oriental man stepped into his path and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Excuse me, old chap! Coming through.

(Much to his bewilderment, the man just stared up at him and snarled.)

CHUM LEE: So, Flaxley... I have found you!

(Thrown by the man's demeanour, Flaxley raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

FLAXLEY: What? Sorry? Who are you?

CHUM LEE: You do not know me, but it appears you knew my father well!

(Flaxley paused for a moment then looked enlightened.)

FLAXLEY: Are you the son of...

CHUM LEE: That's right...

(He stood tall and puffed out his chest before announcing his father's name with dramatic pride.)

CHUM LEE: Dim Lee!!!

(He stared into Flaxley's eyes furiously for a moment then furrowed his brow.)

CHUM LEE: Why are you laughing at me?

FLAXLEY: Well, judging by your puny build, you obviously take after your mother! Look at you. When the apple fell from the tree it must have bounced, rolled down a hill then plopped into a river and got carried away on the current. You father's son, you are not!

(He then gave the young man a patronising smile.)

FLAXLEY: I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, I'm sure you're very tough, son.

(He then chuckled and tried to walk past him.)

CHUM LEE: Not so fast!

(With that, he blocked Flaxley's path with an outstretched arm. In two minds whether to just barge through or take the young man outside for a beating, Flaxley gave him the evil eye in return.)

CHUM LEE: Finally, I have your attention!

(Flaxley spoke quietly, but in no uncertain terms.)

FLAXLEY: You, young lad, are lucky that I don't believe in unnecessary killing!

CHUM LEE: Is that so?

FLAXLEY: Yes! Now, unless you want to die screaming, as your father did...

(He put his face to Chum Lee's and sneered.)

FLAXLEY: Step aside!

(Showing no sign of fear whatsoever, Chum Lee nodded then stepped aside.)

CHUM LEE: I am a man of honour. I do not brawl in bars. I will take vengeance on you honourably in the battle arena tomorrow... and you will see who is the true warrior!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes then just walked on.)

FLAXLEY: Twat!

(Having failed to intimidate the mighty Flaxley, Chum Lee watched him saunter off then clenched his fists with rage.)

CHUM LEE: Soon, Flaxley, soon!

(Upon reaching the middle of the busy inn, Flaxley scoured around the room with his eyes, then allowed himself a smile. As the hooded man he'd seen earlier slipped out of the side entrance, a known tournament fighter he recognised came in. In little doubt he could defeat the warrior with his eyes closed, he smirked then headed deeper into the pub.)

FLAXLEY: This tournament will be a doddle.

(Back at their table in the meantime, Bonson was struggling to cope with the sight of ale going to waste as Lefiat sat there emotionlessly cradle his flagon in his lap. With a frown, he looked him in the eye and leant forward.)

BONSON: You know, a lot of time and effort goes into making that ale, Lefiat!

(Lefiat looked up blankly.)

LEFIAT: Eh?

BONSON: That ale! It's not going to drink itself you know!

(Lefiat sighed and put the ale on the table before pushing it towards Bonson.)

LEFIAT: You have it; I don't feel like ale anyway.

(Bonson looked most put out.)

BONSON: What do you think I am? A charity?

(With that, he lifted Lefiat's flagon to his lips and took a long swig before pouring the rest into his own tankard.)

BONSON: Here!

(He pushed the flagon back towards Lefiat then turned to face Kritz.)

BONSON: You okay there, Kritz? You look a little... lost.

(Kritz shrugged.)

KRITZ: I was just thinking about the twins!

(Just then, a loving expression appeared on her face and she sighed happily.)

KRITZ: The boy tried to talk yesterday, it was so cute...

(She held her hand to her heart and gushed excitedly.)

KRITZ: He puckered his little lips up and...

(With a face as black as thunder, Bonson quickly glared at Lefiat.)

BONSON: Now see what you've done! Thanks to you and your stupid silence, we've now got to listen to *her* talking about babies!

LEFIAT: Don't blame *me*!!!

KRITZ: Excuse me???

(Looking far from apologetic, Bonson scowled at her coldly.)

BONSON: With respect, Kritzeveltia, the only people who give a toss about what their babies do are their parents! Quite frankly, I'd rather hear about your menstrual cycle and you know how I feel about *that* topic!

(Kritz said nothing and growled under her breath.)

BONSON: Now seeing as I'm probably *not* their father, I'll kindly ask you to refrain. Quite frankly I don't care what colour their poop is, and if I wanted to hear about some funny looking infant who nearly spoke once, I'd ask you about Lefiat!

(In no mood to just sit there and tolerate being insulted by Bonson all night, Lefiat jumped to his feet and shook his fist at him furiously.)

LEFIAT: Right, you asked for it! You're *always* picking on me and I aint gonna take it anymore.

(Bonson reeled back and gaped.)

LEFIAT: I've had enough of you, I'm going to bed!

(He went to leave but Kritz quickly grabbed his arm.)

KRITZ: Sit down you fool!

LEFIAT: But...

(He then sat back down sheepishly and sighed.)

LEFIAT: Fine.

(As Lefiat pouted at the table, Bonson raised an impressed eyebrow at him.)

BONSON: Well, well, Lefiat, I've always doubted you as a warrior, but maybe I was being a little hasty.

(Lefiat gave him a doubting glance.)

LEFIAT: Really?

BONSON: Yes. And after what just happened there, I'm thinking you may have a chance in the tournament, after all!

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Here we go again!

BONSON: No, no. I mean it. Once he gets into battle tomorrow, that "I've had enough of you, I'm going to bed" tactic might just bag him the trophy! His opponent won't see it coming!

(As Bonson chuckled to himself, Lefiat hung his head and sighed inwardly, sick of the constant belittling. Spotting Lefiat's sadness, Kritz decided it was time to be kind and boost his ego a little. She figured it was the least she could do having stopped him from going to bed and getting away from the aging bully.)

KRITZ: Bonson, you're so wrong!

(Immediately, Bonson sat back and glared at her as if she'd just stabbed his favourite puppy.)

BONSON: How dare you? Me? Wrong?

KRITZ: Yes! You're in for a surprise, I think. Lefiat's fighting to win back his love! I won't be at all surprised if he does really well!

(Lefiat gazed at her in astonishment.)

LEFIAT: Wow! How pissed *are* you, Kritz?

(As Bonson laughed heartily, much to Kritz's annoyance, she shook her head and sighed.)

KRITZ: Believe in yourself, Lefiat! You've overcome worse, after all.

(She then glared at Bonson and spoke through gritted teeth.)

KRITZ: You'll be laughing on the other side of your wrinkly face if he *does* make it through a round or two, you silly old git!

BONSON: How rude.

KRITZ: Well stop being a git! I'm trying to gee him up, for pity's sake.

(She then ruffled her neck and snarled.)

KRITZ: Just accept it. Lefiat's got every chance of doing pretty well tomorrow, you horrible old bastard.

(Before Bonson could scold her for her comments, a drinker who'd been standing in earshot turned and faced their table.)

DRINKER: Doing pretty well? Doing pretty well?

(They all looked up at him as he nodded proudly.)

DRINKER: Sir Lefiat's the best! He'll do more than pretty well. He's going to kick some serious warrior arse tomorrow.

(Lefiat looked greatly lifted.)

LEFIAT: You think so?

DRINKER: I know so! The rest are only here to make up numbers. Nobody can defeat Sir Lefiat.

(Lefiat beamed.)

LEFIAT: Thanks, mate! You know I'll do my best to make Guevina proud!

(The drinker looked baffled.)

DRINKER: You? You're entering too?

LEFIAT: Yeah. *I'm* Lefiat!!!

(The drinker laughed hysterically, much to Bonson's amusement.)

DRINKER: Whatever, mate. Sir Lefiat is seven foot tall with forearms like tree trunks. You're a stick man!

(And with that, the drinker wandered off down the bar laughing loudly. Watching him go, Lefiat pouted and looked to Kritz.)

LEFIAT: A stick man? He didn't believe I'm Lefiat!

(Kritz offered him a pitying smile.)

KRITZ: Maybe he just didn't recognise you!

(Bonson looked to her and scoffed.)

BONSON: Of course he didn't recognise him, why would he? It's been years since the people saw him waving from the balcony after we retrieved the key of peace and from down on the ground they probably couldn't tell how puny he is.

(He nodded then looked at Lefiat.)

BONSON: Fact is, nobody is going to believe you're Lefiat, not even for a moment. Thanks to your horribly exaggerated legend, *they* all think Sir Lefiat is a giant of a man with the body of a god and the looks of...

(He mused for a moment.)

BONSON: Another god! Imagine how disappointed they'll all be when a stick man steps into the battle square!

LEFIAT: Eh? You're just being mean again!

BONSON: Am I? Think about it!

(With a sceptical look on his face, Lefiat pictured himself walking out on the square to the sound of stunned silence and horrified faces. His face dropped as he imagined whispers starting to spread around the square as he stepped into the battle arena to be confronted by a muscle bound, axe-wielding maniac. Seconds later he pictured his head flying off its shoulders and sat bolt upright gasping for air before bellowing out in panic.)

LEFIAT: Oh crap!!!

(As several pairs of eyes turned his way, the flustered Lefiat leapt to his feet and bolted out of the door. Watching him go, Bonson laughed hysterically.)

BONSON: Money can't buy entertainment like him!

(Despairing of the mean old man, Kritz shook her head.)

KRITZ: You're a despicable human being sometimes, Bonson.

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: I'm sure you wouldn't have me any other way!

KRITZ: Fucking would!

BONSON: No you wouldn't. Anyway, that's enough out of you; I've got things to do!

(With that, he picked up his tankard and took an extra long swig of his ale, slowly shuffling sideways on his seat as he did so. With Flaxley and Kritz now on speaking terms, having decided to put their argument on hold, he had work to do. If they weren't bitching and sniping with one another by the time the tournament started, Kayfu would reveal his secret to the king and he could never allow that nightmare to become a reality. Fortunately for him, he had a plan to reignite their animosity. And so, eager to cause friction between them as soon as possible, thus saving himself, he slammed the tankard down on the table, took one last quick check of his fading conscience, then rose to his feet.)

BONSON: Excuse me one moment, will you?

KRITZ: If you need a pee, just go!

(He gave her his most unimpressed look.)

BONSON: Yes... thanks for the advice!

(And with a shake of the head, he left the table and made his way to the back end of the bar. As he paced away, Kritz shook her head, when much to her surprise, Lefiat sheepishly returned to the table and sat down again.)

KRITZ: There you are!

LEFIAT: Yeah.

KRITZ: You okay?

LEFIAT: No. I've lost my room key.

(Kritz gave him a pitying glance then glanced in the direction Bonson had left in.)

KRITZ: Lefiat? Am I being paranoid? I don't know why, but I get the feeling Bonson's up to something.

(Lefiat scowled.)

LEFIAT: I *always* get the feeling he's up to something! And he usually is.

KRITZ: Yeah... you're right. It's probably nothing then.

(At the other end of the pub at this time, the innocent looking Bonson made his way through a crowd of people then stopped before one of the far tables. Sitting against the wall, on the other side of the table, a rather attractive and well dressed lady in her early thirties was enjoying a fine wine. Smiling down at her, Bonson adjusted his tie, cleared his throat then spoke up)

BONSON: Excuse me, ma'am?

(As she looked up from her chalice, Bonson placed his hands behind his back respectfully.)

BONSON: Lady Verona of Melucitia, isn't it?

(The lady couldn't help but smile and replied in an almost angelic tone.)

VERONA: Why, you know damn well who I am, Bonson.

BONSON: Indeed, I do, ma'am. Just my way of being polite.

VERONA: Please, why don't you join me for a moment?

(She then patted the empty seat at her side.)

BONSON: Thank you. Don't mind if I do, ma'am!

(As he edged past her table to sit himself down at her side, Bonson grinned to himself. He couldn't believe his luck. Among the aristocracy, Lady Verona was notorious for her nymphomania and when it came to prizing married couples apart, she was the perfect crowbar. She'd come between many a duke and his duchess over the years. She had a way of making men go weak at the knees and was very much the perfect seductress.

Whenever this most noble of women had visited the castle, Bonson had been saddled with the responsibility of keeping her midnight liaisons with the king a secret. As a result, he'd got to know her quite well. He knew exactly how much she lusted for sex and how far she'd go to get it. He also knew she found knights irresistible. Very much hoping he could convince her to use her feminine wiles on Flaxley, Bonson made himself comfortable at her side then offered her a friendly smile.)

BONSON: So, milady, still battling away, eh? You do enjoy a tournament or two, don't you?

VERONA: You know how it is, Bonson, one must take time to enjoy one's self.

(Bonson was almost tempted to close his eyes and enjoy the seductive tone of her beautiful voice.)

BONSON: Ah, Lady Verona, you know, to look at you or to hear your sweet voice, no-one would ever guess what a cold-blooded, bare-knuckled killer you can be!

VERONA: Only when need be, Bonson, only when need be. There is such a thing as etiquette you know? I'd much rather be a lover than a fighter, as you well know.

(They both chuckled.)

VERONA: Anyway, did you want something? Or did you just come over just for a chat?

(Bonson grimaced.)

BONSON: I wish I could say I'd just come over to chat, but alas...

(He sighed.)

BONSON: Well I did promise him...

VERONA: Promise who, Bonson?

(Bonson gestured to where Flaxley was scrutinising all the drinkers, some thirty feet away at the side of the bar.)

BONSON: Thing is, ma'am, do you see the chap over there by the bar, the tall one in the body armour?

VERONA: Sir Flaxley?

BONSON: Yes.

VERONA: What about him?

(As Lady Verona sat licking her lips lustfully, her eyes glued to Flaxley, Bonson couldn't help but smile.)

BONSON: Well, being a gentleman, he didn't want to approach you himself and make you feel uncomfortable, therefore, he asked *me* if I'd ask you to share a drink with him this evening.

(Lady Verona gave Bonson a sideways glance.)

VERONA: He needn't be so formal; I mean it's not as if we've never shared bodily fluid before.

(Bonson did a double take in her direction.)

BONSON: You have???

VERONA: Don't sound so shocked, Bonson. After all, any woman will tell you Flaxley's quite the embodiment of all things rugged and manly you know!

(She exhaled.)

VERONA: He's hung like a horse too.

BONSON: Yes, well, I...

VERONA: I told your king I had a headache once and went to see Flaxley instead. We were up all night doing it. Backwards, forwards, upside-down, you name it we did it. I could hardly walk the next day.

(She ran a lusting hand over her chest and licked her lips excitedly.)

VERONA: He pleased me like I'm a goddess.

(With that, she got to her feet and started to approach Flaxley. As she paced away, Bonson grinned to himself. His plan was finally underway.)

BONSON: Right, that's the first part sorted.

(He then paused for a moment as he wondered who else Lady Verona might have she'd slept with on her visit to Guevina. Disappointed yet hardly surprised that he wasn't one of them, he sighed and then resumed his scheming. With a grin, he sidled along the seat until he was sitting next to a well turned out gentleman, dressed all in black. Setting the next part of his plan in motion, he nodded to himself then tapped the stranger on the shoulder. At once, the man turned and glared at him before speaking in a deep, booming voice.)

DARK PSYCHO: No-one touches "The Dark Psycho"!!!

BONSON: I see. Fruitcake, are we? Perfect.

DARK PSYCHO: Excuse me?

BONSON: Nothing. Look...

DARK PSYCHO: Go away, old man.

BONSON: Yes, quite. Will do. But first, I just thought it only fair to tell you...

DARK PSYCHO: Tell me what???

(Bonson gestured to the far end of the pub.)

BONSON: See that beautiful brunette over there? The one sitting next to the curly haired idiot?

(He gestured to Kritz, forcing a smile from the Dark Psycho.)

DARK PSYCHO: The busty hot one in the leather skirt? Of course I see her!

BONSON: Well, she can't take her eyes off you!

(The self proclaimed "Dark Psycho" turned to face him and raised an excited eyebrow.)

DARK PSYCHO: What?

BONSON: It's true, I know so, she told me!

DARK PSYCHO: She told you?

BONSON: Yes, I'm her... butler! She hoping you'll to go over there and make a pass at her.

DARK PSYCHO: Really?

BONSON: Or my name isn't Charles Cumberland.

(The Dark Psycho beamed.)

DARK PSYCHO: Superb.

BONSON: Yes well, she can be quite shy, so she'll probably play hard to get at first. Just be persistent and you'll be well rewarded... if you know what I mean.

DARK PSYCHO: I do!

(Wearing a lusty smirk, the Dark Psycho then leapt from his seat and headed towards Kritz excitedly. With part two of his plan now complete, Bonson allowed himself a smile then nestled comfortably into his seat.)

BONSON: Now to sit back and enjoy the fireworks, I suppose!

(As Bonson watched on praying his plan would succeed, Lady Verona finished pushing her way through a crowd of drinkers and stepped up behind Sir Flaxley. Wearing a knowing smile, she then regally tapped him on the shoulder with one finger. Looking somewhat baffled, Flaxley turned his neck to see who it was and his jaw dropped.)

FLAXLEY: Lady Verona?

VERONA: Good evening, Sir Flaxley.

(Seeing another of his former conquests staring back at him, he instinctively turned to see if Kritz was watching. As soon as he set eyes on her, however, his brow furrowed and a snarl appeared on his face.)

FLAXLEY: What the hell?

(Much to his displeasure, he saw the handsome "Dark Psycho" slide himself next to her and he growled inside. Not used to being ignored, Lady Verona raised her voice slightly.)

VERONA: Sir Flaxley?

(Still staring with hateful eyes at the young gentleman with Kritz, Flaxley gave an inattentive response.)

FLAXLEY: Hmm?

(He then turned to face her with a baffled look on his face.)

FLAXLEY: Right, yes... you...

(A dark cloud then washed over him and a sinister glint appeared in his eye. Seeing Kritz chatting and laughing with another man had brought out the jealous halfwit

within. Unable to think straight, rather than heading over there to mark his territory and see the man off, he decided that if she could flirt, so could he.)

FLAXLEY: Well if it isn't the beautiful Lady Veronica!

(Unimpressed, she corrected him immediately.)

VERONA: Verona!!!

FLAXLEY: Exactly! You look amazing!

VERONA: Thank you.

(He turned again and saw Kritz was still talking to the young man.)

FLAXLEY: Bloody flirt, I'll show her. Two can play at that game!

(Already put off by Flaxley's half hearted attention, Lady Verona sighed and answered disinterestedly.)

VERONA: What game?

(The dark cloud over Flaxley thickened as he gently reached out and lifted one of her hands with his.)

FLAXLEY: Beautiful Lady Verona, you and I are like wild horses, roaming free.

Now I don't know what games I want to play, I only know I want to play them with you!

(He looked deep into her eyes as she clutched her hands to her heart.)

VERONA: Oh my... that was... utter drivel!

(Flaxley couldn't believe what he was hearing.)

FLAXLEY: I'll have you know, that was bloody brilliant!

(Verona merely shrugged.)

VERONA: Whatever. Look, I'm horny and I'm offering you first refusal on my body. If you want to fuck me, let's go upstairs, if not then...

(Again, he gazed across at Kritz and saw her laughing with the dashing gent beside her. For a brief moment, he lost all sense of rationale and flapped furiously.)

FLAXLEY: I'm in!!!

(Delighted by the response, Lady Verona took his hand then started to lead him away, only for her arm to raise upwards until she came to a standstill. Flaxley had stood his ground. Looking somewhat miffed, she raised her eyebrow at him and sneered.)

VERONA: You've changed your mind, haven't you?

(Flaxley looked to her and nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I just wanted to flirt with you because my wife is flirting with someone. I'd never be unfaithful to her... unless I have to be... which actually happened once, but that's not the point.

(Lady Verona nodded then stepped up close to him.)

VERONA: Found true love, have you?

FLAXLEY: I have.

VERONA: Then you're very lucky.

(She smiled.)

VERONA: What are you waiting for then? If some guy is flirting with your wife, you've got a face to rearrange.

(Flaxley nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, yes... you're right.

(With that, Flaxley put his head down and bounded through the pub, ploughing through drinkers as if they weren't even there. As several protests came Flaxley's way, Bonson stood up and raised an interested eyebrow. Part one of his plan, getting Lady Verona to seduce Flaxley seemed to have failed miserably, but part two, getting a stranger to hit on Kritz under the delusion that she was a open goal, seemed to be about to bear fruit.)

BONSON: Sorry, bloke, it was either *your* teeth or *my* life. And I've grown fond of me over the years.

(As Flaxley bounded towards the table, the self-titled Dark Psycho continued to try talking his way into Kritz's complete lack of underwear. Grinning knowingly, he informed her of the location of his hotel room then made the biggest mistake of his entire life. With Flaxley only a few feet away from him, he leant towards Kritz and stroked her cheek then informed of her his plans for the evening.)

DARK PSYCHO: I wanna make sweet love to you, beautiful.

(Kritz looked horrified.)

KRITZ: What???

(Her cry, however, was barely heard over Flaxley's.)

FLAXLEY: What???

(Like a man possessed, he almost crushed the table leaning over it to grab the offending man by the collar.)

FLAXLEY: That's my wife you're talking to!!!

KRITZ: Yeah, I'm a married woman, you sleaze bag!!!

(As Flaxley lifted the panic stricken man into the air by his neck, Lefiat sat perfectly still in the same place he'd been all evening, looking glum and staring into his empty flagon. While he sat there oblivious to everything, the Dark Psycho stared into Flaxley's eyes, terrified by the very thought of what this furious giant might do to him.)

DARK PSYCHO: I didn't know she was your wife!!!

FLAXLEY: Well, she is!!!

DARK PSYCHO: She said she was single!!!

KRITZ: No, I bloody didn't!!!

DARK PSYCHO: Yes, you did!!!

FLAXLEY: Are you calling her a liar???

DARK PSYCHO: I swear!!!

KRITZ: You asked if the seat was free and I said "yes".

DARK PSYCHO: See? She admitted it!!!

(Flaxley took a deep breath.)

FLAXLEY: Look, stupid, I'm holding you two feet above the ground with one arm... do you really want to argue?

(The Dark Psycho could barely manage a whimper.)

DARK PSYCHO: Um...

(He gulped.)

DARK PSYCHO: No.

FLAXLEY: Fuck off then!!!

(With that, Flaxley dragged him to the doorway and threw him out into the night, where he rolled like a football then scrambled to his feet before scarpering into the darkness.)

FLAXLEY: Yeah, you'd *better* run!

(Having watched him go for a moment with a ferocious snarl on his face, he nodded to himself then paced back into the inn. He didn't get very far, however, when the landlord called out to him from just behind the bar.)

LANDLORD: Aye. And *you* can leave as well, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: What?

LANDLORD: We don't want you 'ere. You or your wife!

(Kritz looked stunned.)

KRITZ: What did *I* do?

LANDLORD: You married *that* traitorous wretch.

FLAXLEY: For pity's sake...

LANDLORD: I just wish we'd all known you were his wife earlier. If we had, these lads wouldn't have plied you with freebies all night.

(At once, several dissenting voices rose up, bemoaning her choice of husband.)

KRITZ: Oh, whatever. This is a shit pub anyway.

(Furrowing his brow at her, the landlord then pointed to the door.)

LANDLORD: Leave!

FLAXLEY: Fine!

(With that, he mumbled under his breath then paced out of the door, closely followed by Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: Fucking Guevina.

(Having exited the inn, they then stopped on the cobbles outside and shrugged at one another.)

KRITZ: Where to now?

FLAXLEY: We could always find another pub, or have you flirted enough for one evening?

KRITZ: What?

FLAXLEY: You heard me.

KRITZ: I wasn't flirting. He asked if the seat was free and I said it was, that's all.

FLAXLEY: Rubbish. I saw you laughing and joking together.

KRITZ: Yeah, so? He told us a funny story.

FLAXLEY: Us?

KRITZ: Yes! Lefiat was there too, remember?

(She rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Now stop being a moron.

FLAXLEY: Never!

(He looked shifty then folded his arms.)

FLAXLEY: I mean, I'm not being a moron. No story is *that* funny, you were flirting.

(Kritz adopted a cocky stance then looked him casually in the eye.)

KRITZ: No? Last time he stayed at that inn, he went into reception to ask the receptionist a question. As he leant against the front desk, however, he accidentally elbowed the woman next to him on her breast. They were both shocked but being a humble sort he told her, "Ma'am, if your heart is as soft as your breast, I know you'll forgive me." To which she replied, "If your penis is as hard as your elbow, I'm in room 83."

(At once, Flaxley's lips curled upwards and he had to battle the temptation to laugh.)

KRITZ: See?

(She chuckled.)

KRITZ: Made *me* laugh too. That was all it was! Then we talked about the tournament instead. There was *no* flirting involved until he said... well, you heard what he said.

(She snarled.)

KRITZ: Before that it was all fighting talk. The arrogant git reckoned he could beat me. I can't remember his exact words, but he basically said if he got me, he'd throw me down and do me...

(As Flaxley's nostrils started to flare, Kritz paused then rethought his words in her head.)

KRITZ: Wait...

(At once, she snarled and shook her fist at Flaxley.)

KRITZ: That's disgusting!!! He was flirting with me right from the word go!!! I'm a married woman!

(With that, she growled then attempted to run off into the night after him.)

KRITZ: Flirt with me, you filthy...

(Thankfully, Flaxley had seen her rage coming and had already restrained her.)

KRITZ: Let me go! I'm married now; nobody's allowed to proposition me like that anymore!!!

FLAXLEY: Well they're going to, aren't they? You look like...

(Kritz immediately froze and glared at him.)

FLAXLEY: A carefree young woman rather than a wife and mother.

(Kritz's rage immediately relented.)

KRITZ: Right... thought you were going to say... never mind.

FLAXLEY: Right. On that note, let's get to Lefiat's mother's house.

KRITZ: Okay, you get the carriage.

FLAXLEY: The carriage would get stolen if we left it in the suburbs all night. We'll need that for getting back to Tifaeris.

KRITZ: You mean...

FLAXLEY: Let's walk.

(Kritz sighed then started to head away.)

KRITZ: Fine.

(As Flaxley paced along side her, he gave her a sideways glance then rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: By the way, when I said you looked like a carefree young woman rather than a wife and mother, it wasn't a compliment!

KRITZ: Excuse me?

FLAXLEY: It should be obvious you're a mother by the fact you've got the kids with you.

KRITZ: Oh, not this again. I thought we were gonna say no more about it for now.

FLAXLEY: Yes, you'd like that wouldn't you?

KRITZ: Oh, shut up. If you're gonna be like that, I aint talking to you!

FLAXLEY: Good!

KRITZ: Good!

(And so, they continued on in silence, their difference of opinion festering on inside them both. Watching them through the pub window, Bonson sighed and shook his head, feeling more guilty than ever about what he'd had to do.)

Watching on as Bonson took a solemn sip of his ale, Shankstone shook his head. Flaxley and Kritz had left and Bonson couldn't now tell them anything he wasn't supposed to, but he was under strict orders from Kayfu not to let him out of his sight. Knowing Bonson wouldn't be leaving the inn until he was thrown out, he couldn't help but feel more than a little hard-done by. For him, it would be a long night.)

(As midnight came and went, the city of Guevina slept as erratically as a child on Christmas eve. Many tossed and turned, unable to contain their excitement. The following day promised to be filled with dramatic battles, tactical swordplay and dancing sideshows, not to mention feasts of cake and spit roast. If the tournament was only *half* as good as most people expected, it would still be the civic event of the century.)

For Lefiat, however, this was just another night without his beloved Mandika. Feeling empty inside, he lay upon his bed and stared, half asleep at the ceiling, thinking solely of her. He was blissfully unaware that at this time she was also laying awake thinking of him.

Flaxley and Kritz, tired from a long day and a lot of travelling, slept reasonably well on the floor of Lefiat's old room despite the hard wooden surface. Initially, Kritz had a little trouble sleeping. Having spent the previous night travelling, she hadn't had time to reflect until now and she was missing the twins horribly. At one point, she sat in the corner where Flaxley couldn't hear her and allowed herself a little cry. Once her tears had been shed, she laid herself down again and Flaxley cuddled up tight to her, telling her in no uncertain terms, that everything would be alright. His support, even though she suspected it was only temporary, had meant a lot.

For his part, Bonson, slept like a baby having plied himself with booze, unable to face a long night of guilty thoughts.)

Guevina, Main Square

(As the sun rose on the following morning, Guevina buzzed with excitement as organisers and volunteers rushed all over the main square adding a few final adornments before the day's activities got underway. Cake stalls, pie stands and souvenir tents were erected then quickly stocked up to serve a growing crowd of excited spectators who'd arrived early to get a better vantage point. At such an early hour, normally the square would be empty but excitement about the tournament was such, it seemed half the city had woken with the cockerel and arrived way ahead of time.

Excitement about the tournament wasn't enough to make *everyone* in Guevina wake up early, however. When the first pie stall opened for business in the square at shortly after eight am, over at Lefiat's mother's house, Flaxley and Kritz were still fast asleep in one another's arms. Flaxley was very much an early riser normally but due to a lack of sleep the night before, there was absolutely no chance of *him* waking with the cockerel. Instead, he woke long after nine when Kritz sat up and removed his hand from her breast. They weren't in the best of moods with one another but for Lefiat's mother's sake, they set their differences aside and headed down to breakfast together pretending all was right with the world. It was a breakfast they wouldn't forget in a hurry. Having headed into the main room, they were immediately invited to sit at the table then served with a bowl of porridge. Before they could even say thank you, Lefiat's mother, Alpina, then sat down and proceeded to talk their ears off.)

ALPINA: It's been a long time since I cooked for other people, you know? That son of mine hardly ever visits. Not that I can complain, my repair bill is way down and I have time on my hands now to explore other interests. That lad caused so much extra work, I hardly ever sat down... unless I was on top of a client, of course, but that was hardly restful.

(As Kritz and Flaxley shared a smirk, Alpina sighed and then continued.)

ALPINA: Since he moved into the castle, at least I can relax of a evening... I do miss him though.

(She sighed.)

ALPINA: You see, I worry. Especially about his state of mind. He was never very popular, you see? I mean, look at him... built like chair leg, naturally curly hair, nerdy voice, thick as two planks... he was never likely to go far.

(She shook her head and cringed.)

ALPINA: Takes after his father's side, you see.

(Kritz and Flaxley glanced at Alpina's appealing torso and pretty face and nodded, accepting this must have been the case.)

ALPINA: His father was actually quite handsome, but his father's father... he was gangly, curly-haired and gormless. Sound familiar?

(She shook her head then bit her lip.)

ALPINA: Sorry, I'm talking way too much. I haven't had company in quite a while; not people I can talk to anyway. I can't really chat with my clients, they didn't come here to listen to me talking, after all. It's nice to have company like this.

KRITZ: And it's a pleasure for us to be here.

FLAXLEY: Quite. And don't worry about talking too much, if you've something to get off your chest, feel free to tell us about it. We owe you that much at least for putting us up last night.

(Alpina nodded warmly.)

ALPINA: Thank you. In that case... where was I?

KRITZ: Lefiat's father.

ALPINA: Ah, yes. I digressed a bit there. What I was saying was, I worry about that boy of mine. You see, what with his clumsiness and lack of intelligence, he was always going to fail at whatever he aspired to be.

(She then looked Kritz in the eye.)

ALPINA: He's got pride though, you see. He doesn't want me to know he's a failure. So whenever he comes here...

(She hung her head in shame.)

ALPINA: Some of the lies he tells me... I'm actually insulted that he thinks I'll believe them.

FLAXLEY: Such as?

ALPINA: Well... and please don't laugh; I'm really worried about this because I think he might have some kind of delusional disorder.

KRITZ: We won't laugh.

ALPINA: Well, it all started four years ago when he got that job at the castle. He sent his friend round here dressed as a royal guard, telling me...

(She winced then glanced away.)

ALPINA: That he'd saved the king's life and was to accompany Princess Mandika on a trip.

FLAXLEY: Actually...

ALPINA: It didn't end there either. Next time I saw him, he told me he'd been knighted and was dating the princess!!!

(At this point she started to cry.)

ALPINA: I didn't know what to do. There he was telling me these bare faced lies and looking so damn proud of himself. He'd snapped.

(She sighed then stared down at the table.)

ALPINA: I still don't know what he does at the castle every day, I'm guessing he mucks out the stables. All he could break doing that is a shovel or two. Probably ten. Anyway, the lies have kept coming ever since.

(She whimpered and wiped a tear from her eye.)

ALPINA: So far he's told me he helped liberate Tifaeris, helped a little green man from another world rescue his wife and helped take down the queen of all witches! Oh... and he can use lightning magic too, apparently. Magic indeed, like that's a real thing.

FLAXLEY: You know...

ALPINA: What do I do? My son has clearly had a breakdown and I'm at my wits end.

(As Alpina sat and wept, Flaxley and Kritz shared an uncomfortable grimace.)

KRITZ: Um... Alpina?

(Alpina looked to her and pouted.)

ALPINA: Yes... Kritz, was it?

KRITZ: That's right.

(Alpina then looked to Flaxley.)

ALPINA: And you're...

FLAXLEY: My friends call me "Flaxley".

(Alpina paused for thought.)

ALPINA: We have a knight called Flaxley. Sir Flaxley of something, Guevina's royal knight.

(Once again, Kritz and Flaxley shared an uneasy glance as Alpina continued to sob.)

ALPINA: So, sorry about this. I'm ruining your morning.

KRITZ: No, it's fine.

(She bit her lip then sat forward.)

KRITZ: Alpina?

ALPINA: Yes?

KRITZ: How up on the latest news would you say you were?

(Alpina gave her a baffled glance.)

ALPINA: Not very, why?

KRITZ: Sir Flaxley quit as royal knight to Guevina over three years ago.

ALPINA: He did?

KRITZ: Yes. Sir Lefiat is royal knight now.

(Alpina replied unenthusiastically.)

ALPINA: I did hear there was a knight with the same name as my boy.

KRITZ: It's not just the same...

(Flaxley looked alarmed and spoke up.)

FLAXLEY: Any chance of some coffee, Alpina?

KRITZ: Hey!

(In something of a daze, Alpina rose from her seat and headed for the back door.)

ALPINA: Sure. I'll just get some water from the butt so I can boil us up a brew.

(As soon as she disappeared from the back door, Kritz rounded on Flaxley angrily.)

KRITZ: What the hell? I was talking! You can't be *that* thirsty.

(Flaxley looked to her and replied urgently.)

FLAXLEY: You were going to tell her everything Lefiat said is the truth and that *he's* the royal knight! Well, you can't, not *now*.

KRITZ: Why not?

FLAXLEY: Because things have changed. Tell her that *now* and she'll get all excited and head off to the tournament just in time so see him get beaten to a pulp or killed in the first round.

(Kritz bit her lip.)

KRITZ: Oh... that never occurred to me.

FLAXLEY: Clearly.

KRITZ: We have to tell her something though; she thinks her son is insane, poor woman.

FLAXLEY: Like what?

KRITZ: I don't know.

(Flaxley looked thoughtful.)

FLAXLEY: Well...

(Just then, Alpina came back in with a pail of water.)

ALPINA: The butt is running a little dry; I'll have to take a trip to the river later.

(She smiled.)

ALPINA: Anyway, you were saying, Kritz?

(Kritz stared at her uneasily then glanced away.)

KRITZ: Doesn't matter.

FLAXLEY: Alpina, about your son. Well... *I'm* Sir Flaxley, the former royal knight...

(Alpina looked stunned.)

ALPINA: You are??? You mean... I did it with a royal knight???

(Flaxley could only gape at Kritz in horror at this point.)

KRITZ: Did you meet anyone you *didn't* shag?

FLAXLEY: If we went to Azagotse tomorrow, I could say the same to you, miss fifty seven.

(Kritz snarled at him then clicked her fingers in defeat.)

KRITZ: Damn it. I knew I should have kept that to myself.

FLAXLEY: Yes, we both know that, but seeing as it's out, my past conquests are off the list of things to nag me about.

(Kritz sighed.)

KRITZ: Yeah, okay.

FLAXLEY: Anyway, as I was saying, I'm Sir Flaxley and your son brought me here with him because I needed a place to stay overnight before the tournament.

ALPINA: What tournament?

(Flaxley was astonished.)

FLAXLEY: Really? Have you ever read a notice board, talked to a stranger, a friend, anyone, in fact?

ALPINA: I told you, I don't get out much and clients only want to talk about one thing.

KRITZ: Dance lessons?

ALPINA: If you like, yes.

FLAXLEY: Well, look... point is, I'm the former royal knight and he knows me, right?

ALPINA: Well... yeah.

FLAXLEY: So, as a former high ranking member of the royal household, trust me when I say, your son is doing fine. He's not employed to muck out horses and he's well known in the castle, loved by some... well one, but even so, you don't have to worry.

ALPINA: Yes, but if they heard some of the crazy, delusional stories he's told me...

FLAXLEY: They'd forgive him. Trust me on that. Lefiat is doing okay and you have nothing to worry about. And anyway, even if he *is* crazy like you say, so what? All *you* have to do as his mother is love him unconditionally and everything will work out, you'll see.

(Silence descended as Kritz and Alpina both clutched their hearts and sighed at him.)

ALPINA: Thank you, Flaxley. That puts my mind at ease somewhat.

KRITZ: Yeah, that was lovely.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: No, it was obvious. It's a mother's job to love and stand by her children until her dying day. Something you'd *both* do well to remember.

(At once, Kritz's loving smile descended into a snarl.)

KRITZ: You wanker!

FLAXLEY: Truth hurt, did it?

KRITZ: That's done it; I'm not talking to you again until we get back to Tifaeris.

(With that, she angrily dipped her hand into her porridge and started to eat it from her fingers.)

ALPINA: Would you like a spoon, Kritz?

FLAXLEY: Woman, you're a disgrace.

(With Alpina a little happier about her relationship with her son, she fetched three spoons and they all finished their breakfast in silence. Shortly afterwards, Flaxley and Kritz bid her farewell then headed off towards the square to find the warrior's enclosure. Looking utterly livid, Kritz didn't say a word all the way there.)

(Flaxley and Kritz weren't the only ones who'd slept later than normal on this most important of mornings. Bonson had taken his own sweet time waking before reluctantly climbing out of bed at long gone eleven. Having got himself dressed, he then headed unenthusiastically down to the square to watch the debacle of a tournament unfold. Tournaments were regarded by many as contests between men of honour, organised by men of honour who believed in the glory of an honourable victory. Knowing how this tournament was riddled with lies, manipulation and ulterior motives, however, he couldn't help but think it'd all end in tears, and that somehow he'd end getting all the blame.

Lefiat for his part, didn't wake with the cockerel either. He was actually pouting, wide awake and staring at a cockerel from his window when it started to crow. Having been scared half to death by it, he'd then spent the morning psyching himself up for a battle and trying to put the image of his head being sheared clean off by an axe, far out of his mind. For him, the morning dragged. All he wanted was for the tournament to get underway, so he could begin his battle to win Mandika back. Finding the wait quite impossible, he was first to arrive at the warrior's enclosure in the square, turning up over an hour early. He then had to sit there as the crowd stared at him, wondering exactly who this puny fellow was. Most of the locals hoped the mighty Sir Lefiat would draw him in the first round and make mincemeat of him.

Inside the castle, the king had woken shortly after the cockerel crowed and had spent the entire morning with a song in his heart and a spring in his step. This would be the day he would finally rid himself of Lefiat forever. He couldn't have been happier. Mandika, on the other hand, had woken early and spent much of the morning crying. Flaxley had promised her she'd be happy again, but right now, she couldn't see it. All she could think about was how this might be the day her hopes of ever holding Lefiat in her arms again were dashed. To say the royal household was split on the issue would be quite the understatement.

For the citizens and tourists among the crowd, those who'd come early were in for a long and uncomfortable wait. It was a warm day and with more and more people

arriving by the minute they were started to get packed in like sardines. Those who arrived later, however, envied them greatly. The view from the back would be a poor one and they'd miss most of the action. They would, however, never forget the atmosphere. With every passing minute as the morning flew by, the excitement grew and just being there was something special.)

(As midday approached, Guevina's main square became awash with colour. In addition to all the bunting and floral adornments, the smiling spectators also brightened up the usually grey, cobbled square by wearing their finest and smartest clothing especially for the occasion. There were men in a variety of smart coloured tunics accompanied by ladies in their finest pastel or floral dresses. Children too, were dressed to the nines to watch the potential bloodbath.

With the 12.30pm start time creeping ever closer, all the entrants to the tournament assembled in the warriors enclosure. Erected at the far corner of the square, to one side of the castle's royal balcony, it was basically a fenced off area with an awning above it. The tournament was now imminent. Well aware of this fact, the crowd's joy rose to fever pitch as they cheered, waved and called out for their hero, Sir Lefiat.

Unrecognised by the crowd, Lefiat stood between Flaxley and Kritz shaking like a leaf, fearing for his life in the face of such intimidating opposition. In stark contrast, Flaxley tucked into a pie without a care in the world. Kritz merely stood at ease, trying to focus her energies into her agile fists. Bonson, who had found himself a decent viewing point further out in the square, kept rubbing his forehead unable to get his head around just how wrong everything could go. As Shankstone watched him from the inn window, Bonson's mind constantly thrust him images of Lefiat being mercilessly slaughtered in full view of his beloved Mandika. He was in no way an advocate of Mandika dating Lefiat but for her to see him slaughtered would be beyond cruel. Resting against the wall, with his hood shrouding his face, the powerful Sandark spoke to no-one as he too, prepared himself for the job in hand.

With the time almost upon them, Lefiat looked around at the warriors, knights and trained killers in his midst and started to fend off a sick feeling inside. Before he could worry himself to death, however, there was a loud roar from the ever swelling crowd around him. Gulping in dreaded anticipation of what lay ahead, Lefiat looked up to the royal balcony knowing the time had finally arrived.

The king, with his arms raised aloft to celebrate his glorious being, appeared on the balcony followed by a less than enthusiastic looking Princess Mandika. Flowers landed all around him as the public showered their king with devoted affection. Milking the moment for all it was worth, the king bowed to them and received a deafening cheer in return. He nodded to them in acceptance of their adoration for well over a minute then started to speak. At once, everyone ceased their adulation and listened proudly as he addressed them in a regal tone.)

KING: Ladies, gentlemen, boys and girls of Guevina...

(He smiled.)

KING: And indeed, the rest of the world... I, King Falbury, welcome you to...

(He paused for dramatic effect.)

KING: The Royal Guevina Tournament!!!

(Immediately, the crowd erupted into a frenzy of cheering and celebration at the king's words.)

KING: For your entertainment we have sixteen of the best fighting men and women from all across the world, each one personally representing their king, president and even their emperor...

(He paused for breath as Mandika took a seat and glumly peered over the balcony, scanning the crowd below for a glimpse of Lefiat.)

KING: The contest will be held in a knockout formula, sixteen becoming eight then four and finally the last two, who will slug it out for a prize of ten thousand lig!!!

(Again the crowd made their love for the monarch clear with more jubilation.)

KING: Thank you, thank you... the battle is over when a contestant either dies, leaves the ring or is judged incapacitated by my medical man down there.

(He pointed out the medical man in question and he too, received rapturous applause from the people. Once the sound level dipped, the king then continued his introduction.)

KING: So, with no more ado, I shall draw the names of the first two contestants from this hat, being held by the lovely Princess Mandika!

(Hating every second of it and very much resenting having to be there, Mandika sighed, oblivious to the crowd's acknowledgements, then passed her father the hat without even looking at him. Somewhat peeved with her behaviour, the king looked down at her and frowned.)

KING: At least try to look interested!

(Frowning bitterly, she deliberately turned her back on him and scoffed as he drew the first name from the hat.)

KING: First we shall have...

(He unravelled the screwed up note and read it out with a smile.)

KING: It's Chum Lee... of Tang Yul!!!

(With a bow of acceptance, Chum Lee started to make his way from the warriors enclosure to the battle square as the crowd erupted in his honour.)

KING: And he will face...

(The king drew another piece of paper then beamed with delight.)

KING: Why, it's our old friend... Sir Flaxley of Tifaeris!

(At once, the air was filled with a cacophony of jeering, booing and derogatory comments.)

KING: Stop that!!!

(As the crowd continued to jeer, boo and hiss at Flaxley, the king rolled his eyes then glanced at Mandika.)

KING: Can you believe these idiots?

(Once again, Mandika elected to ignore him.)

KING: You can't ignore me forever, you know!

(As he scowled at her, Mandika sniffed back a tear and wiped her saddened eyes; the whole occasion too much for her fragile heart to bear. Watching her, the king became riddled with guilt for a moment then shook his head vigorously.)

KING: No, no way... this *is* happening!

(In the warrior's enclosure down below, at this time, Flaxley flexed his arms and stepped forwards.)

FLAXLEY: So I'm up first. Chum Lee got his wish. Oh well... wish me luck!

(In no mood to entertain him, Kritz ignored him and looked away. Quaking in his boots, Lefiat tried to at least force a smile but failed miserably.)

FLAXLEY: Don't overdo it, will you?

(With that, he strode towards the battle square to be greeted with huge disapproval from the watching public.)

MAN 01: I hope he kills you horribly!

MAN 02: Yeah... die, traitor!

FLAXLEY: I hate this city!

(Having made his way to the edge of the warriors enclosure, he pushed open the gate then paced the short distance to the edge of the roped off battle square. As he did so, he saw Chum Lee standing perfectly still inside it, focussing a hateful stare at him. Far from intimidated, Flaxley simply rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: It's rude to stare!

(With that, he stepped cautiously over the rope and into the battle square before looking up at the king. Staring down at them from above, the king held out his arms majestically then projected his voice excitedly.)

KING: Chum Lee? Are you ready?

(Chum Lee averted his gaze from Flaxley for a moment and bowed to the king. The king acknowledged his bow then looked to Flaxley)

KING: Sir Flaxley...

(At once, his words were drowned out by more furious booing from the crowd.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, shut up!

(As the howling faded, the king continued.)

KING: Are you ready?

(Responding to the king with a firm thumbs up, Flaxley drew his sword then stared hard at Chum Lee.)

KING: Then let the battle commence!!!

(At last, the moment people had been dreaming about for weeks had come. The tournament was underway. A boom of excitement and aggressive battle cries filled the air and everyone in attendance proceeded to scream and shout; the vast majority of them calling for Flaxley's blood to be spilled. Finding the whole situation horribly undignified, Flaxley rolled his eyes then slowly paced towards the centre of the battle square to begin the contest. At the opposite side of the battle square, his opponent, Chum Lee, slowly started to draw his sword.)

CHUM LEE: This is for my father!!!

(As he continued to slowly pull the sword upwards, however, it stopped coming. Having been pulled at too much of an angle, the edge of the blade had penetrated the top of his metal scabbard and was well and truly stuck.)

CHUM LEE: What the?

(Looking more than a little flustered, he stared down at it then yanked at it with all his might. At once his hand slipped off the handle and he punched himself in the eye.)

CHUM LEE: Stupid!!!

(As Flaxley watched on wearing a bewildered expression, blocking out the sound of the baiting crowd, Chum Lee snarled then tried again. Wrapping both hands around the handle, he growled then yanked at the blade once more as sweat started to pour down his forehead. Turning red with the strain, he gritted his teeth when his arms flew upwards and the sword came flying free of its sheath.)

CHUM LEE: Finally!!!

(With that, he lashed the sword aggressively across himself before adopting a cocky stance. He then flicked the tip of his blade down towards the cobbles at his side, in readiness to engage Flaxley in a war of words. Having taken the decision to adopt an arrogant stance before he poked the sword downwards, however, he missed the cobbles and imbedded it in his foot instead.)

CHUM LEE: Holy fuck!!!

(As Flaxley continued to stare at him bewilderedly, Chum Lee hopped backwards in agony then fell out of the battle square, cracking his head open on the cobbles.)

FLAXLEY: Are you sure you're related to Dim Lee, son?

(Laying totally still on the cobbles, Chum Lee offered no reply. Moments later, as the crowd continued to yell and call out for Flaxley to be killed, the medical man rushed over and swiftly knelt at Chum Lee's side. Checking his pulse, he grimaced to himself uneasily then glanced up at the balcony.)

MEDIC: He's dead!!!

(At once, the crowd launched into a frenzied chorus of disapproval, their anger very much aroused by the hated Flaxley being victorious. Unfazed by their rage, Flaxley shrugged then sheathed his sword and headed back to the warriors enclosure. They could boo all they liked; all he cared about was that he'd made it into the second round without even expending any energy.

Having never seen such a debacle in all his life, even when Lefiat lived at the castle, the king grinned to himself.)

KING: Even that buffoon Lefiat could have won that fight.

(He chuckled to himself then looked down at Mandika.)

KING: Did you see that?

(Spotting a tear rolling down her cheek, he furrowed his brow then placed his hands angrily upon his hips.)

KING: Oh, look... don't bloody cry. Silly girl!

(As he glared at her harshly, she whimpered at him then turned away and openly cried her heart out. At first, he continued staring at her coldly then of all a sudden, his demeanour changed. Seeing just how much pain her heart was in, a pout swiftly formed on his lips and a wave of guilt washed over him. In that moment, he remembered how he'd promised her mother on her death bed that he'd never let anyone hurt her, and yet here he was ripping her heart out by denying her the one she loved. It was at this point that he finally realised how close he was to losing his beloved daughter. By driving away the one she loved, he was also driving away her trust and respect; two things he may never be able to get back. Chilled by that prospect, his bottom lip dropped and he sighed with acceptance.)

KING: Mandika?

(Heartbroken, she ignored him and continued to cry. Unable to bear seeing it, the king shook his head then placed his hand on her shoulder.)

KING: Very well... you can marry Lefiat!

(At once, she stopped crying and turned to gaze up at him, wearing a look of wonderment.)

MANDIKA: You mean...

(The king just nodded; finally realising he had no choice but to allow her to follow her heart.)

KING: What can I say? I realise now, if *you're* not happy then *I* never will be!

(Mandika said nothing and looked up at him with a heart full of love.)

KING: Let's withdraw him from the contest before he gets himself killed!

(With that, Mandika threw her arms around him and gushed lovingly.)

MANDIKA: I love you, father. I knew you'd do the right thing eventually!

(Little did they know as they embraced in reconciliation on the balcony, tempers in the square below were starting to get frayed. A large section of the crowd had started angrily pushing and shoving one another to get a better view of Chum Lee's corpse,

while several others were kicking and elbowing each other in a bid to scavenge his sword. Urgently trying to calm the situation, four of the king's elite guards had swiftly had to intervene in a bid to keep the peace. Watching the undignified course of events from the warrior's enclosure, Kritz looked consummately baffled.)

KRITZ: What the hell's that all about? Idiots! They're behaving like savages.

(Unable to take his mind off of how badly things might turn out for him once he was called to fight, Lefiat shrugged sorrowfully.)

LEFIAT: I dunno!

(At this point, Flaxley returned to them looking fed up to the back teeth.)

FLAXLEY: Bloody Guevina. They boo me like I'm some sort of infidel then fight each other to have a look at a dead body. Next time you burn down a wing of the castle, Lefiat, try to make sure it spreads and burns the whole sodding place down!

(Kritz furrowed her brow at him.)

KRITZ: Would you like to say that a bit louder? Only, there's a few townspeople at the back who didn't quite catch it.

(Sure enough, several pairs of angry eyes were staring his way. Feeling somewhat peeved by their scornful expressions, Flaxley stared back and drew his sword.)

FLAXLEY: Just give me a reason; go on!

(Fearing Flaxley might well go on the offensive, Kritz swiftly placed a hand on his gauntlet and raised her voice.)

KRITZ: Put it away, you fool. These idiots aren't worth the effort!

(With that, the eyes that had previously been on Flaxley, all turned to glare at Kritz. Immediately becoming aware of their hateful glances, she sneered and thrust her hands to her hips.)

KRITZ: What? What do you think you're looking at?

(Flaxley sneered.)

FLAXLEY: Feel free to deck as many as you like, Kritz!

(Fearing a fight was extreme likely if Flaxley and Kritz carried on baiting the crowd, Lefiat flinched then swiftly paced away.)

LEFIAT: I aint with you two!

(Keen to get away from them as soon as possible, he stepped from the warrior's enclosure and tried to make his way through the thick numbers of spectators in front of him. He had no idea where he was going, he just knew he didn't want to be in the warriors enclosure if a fight broke out.)

LEFIAT: Excuse me, let me through!

(Making slow progress, he stopped and scowled.)

LEFIAT: Let me through!!!

SPECTATOR: Wait your turn, stick boy!

LEFIAT: Stick boy? You can't call me that; I'm one of the warriors!

(Hilarity then ensued from the many spectators around him.)

LEFIAT: Shut up, I am!!!

(Up on the balcony at this time, oblivious to the fracas below, the king had his arm around Mandika, desperately trying to reassure her.)

KING: It shouldn't be too difficult, my sweet. We'll just have to tell everyone that Lefiat injured himself fighting a dragon or something and has had to pull out. No need to cancel the tournament.

MANDIKA: Yeah, but a dragon? Um... dragons don't actually exist, father!

KING: Well, we'll think of something; perhaps we can say he had to go to rescue a "damson in distress" as he likes to call them!

(Mandika smiled.)

MANDIKA: Let's just say a herd of cuddyfinkles, yeah?

KING: Yes, true... that does sound more likely, doesn't it?

(He nodded.)

KING: I tell you what; I'll send a guard down there to find him shall I?

MANDIKA: Yes, please!

KING: That's my girl!

(Offering her a kind smile, he then leant over the balcony and scanned the crowd below. At once, his jaw dropped.)

KING: What in the world is going on? They're fighting over that Chum Lee's corpse on one side and there's another fight down by the warrior's enclosure! Or is it *inside* the warrior's enclosure???

(As she looked over the balcony, Mandika was amazed to see people in large numbers scrapping violently over the dead body of Chum Lee at the side of the battle arena.)

MANDIKA: That's disgraceful!

(As she turned her head to look at the fighting down by the warrior's enclosure, she was amazed to see Lefiat slowly making his way through the bustling crowd below.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat!!! Up here!!!

(Unfortunately for her, with the roar of the angry crowd below becoming increasingly loud, there was no way Lefiat was going to hear her.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat!!! Hey!!!

(Satisfied she was wasting her breath, she sighed then averted her gaze to the warrior's enclosure. Despite the fact she could only see her head, she instantly recognised Kritz from her hair and couldn't help but laugh.)

MANDIKA: She'll never change!

(True to form, Kritz was engaged in a fist fight with several members of the crowd who'd foolishly disrespected her dress sense. Unlike on previous occasions when she'd seen red, however, Flaxley was making no effort whatsoever to calm her down. On the contrary, seeing her whale on the Guevina public, it was all he could do not to join in. Instead he stood, arms folded, wearing an expression that said "that's my girl" as he watched her with a heart full of love.

With the fights in both areas rapidly spreading, the king started to get extremely worried. The tournament had brought forth a great deal of enthusiasm for violence and the public were so pumped up with excitement about it they weren't needing a second invitation to join in. As a result, the disorder spread like wildfire. Within minutes, those who hadn't fled the scene were soon involved in what can only be described as a full scale riot. Cake stalls were upturned, windows were smashed and even some of the king's guards had run for cover. At the back of the square, Bonson watched on agape at the chaos before him. He feared the tournament would descend into farce but even he hadn't anticipated a riot.)

BONSON: I'd love to see how Kayfu's gonna try and make *this* my fault.

(Deep in the middle of all the chaos, Flaxley stood perfectly still and nodded to himself, satisfied that this sort of thing would never happen in Tifaeris. Refusing to join in, he simply stood there feeling superior. As he did so, however, the drunken reveller who'd threatened him on previous afternoon, rushed up and punched him in the face before running away again, screaming about his broken fingers.)

FLAXLEY: Only in Guevina!

(He then allowed himself a smile. As far as he was concerned, if the people of Guevina wanted to knock seven bells out of each other, he was happy to let them do it. To his mind, they all deserved a sound thrashing anyway.

In stark contrast to Flaxley, the king was greatly concerned by what he was seeing. Knowing he had to do something to stop the chaos, he leant over the balcony and bellowed from the top of his lungs.)

KING: People!!! Stop this atrocity!!! People of Guevina, I implore you!!!

(As she sat herself on a seat and leant her elbow on the balcony to support her head, Mandika looked up at him and smiled.)

MANDIKA: You could just let them slog it out and give the trophy to the last one standing.

(The king just gave her a bewildered look.)

KING: They're not stopping, Mandika!

(Knowing he had to keep trying, he then looked out to the crowd and called out to them once again.)

KING: People of Guevina!!! People!!! Subjects!!!

(His words, however, continued to fall on deaf ears as the out of control crowd started to destroy everything in sight. They'd even smashed the lanterns in nearby buildings and used the flames to set fire to the souvenir tents.

Having casually leant against a wall at the side of the square since the tournament began, the hooded assassin, Sandark allowed himself a smirk. With all the chaos and confusion in the battle square, he knew his time to shine had arrived. Guevina's guards were all busy trying to contain the riot and the king was practically a sitting duck. Well aware that he'd never get an opportunity like it ever again, he stepped from the wall then set his plan into action.

Head bowed, he paced through the rioters, batting them aside with ease as he made his way to the castle wall to one side of the balcony. With a final check over his shoulder for guards, he then looked up at the king trying desperately to remonstrate with the crowd before turning to face the wall again. With the strength of many a bison in his forearms, he then leapt up at the wall and scaled it like a spider to the height of the balcony. Checking his bearings he then looked to the balcony before doing a sideways somersault and landing on the edge of it. Impressed with his own incredible agility, he smirked with satisfaction then leapt down onto the balcony, drawing his sword as he landed.)

SANDARK: It's time, King Falbury!!!

(Spotting him, Mandika let out a deafening scream. Her scream was so loud and distressed it immediately drew the attention of much of the rioting crowd. Looking shocked, they turned and looked up in horror to see the hooded Sandark charge for their king.)

MANDIKA: Father!!!

(With incredible speed, Sandark didn't even hesitate for a moment as he barged past Mandika to thrust his sword deep into the king's torso and clean out the other side. It all happened so fast, the king never even saw him coming. Down in the square, the alarmed onlookers screamed in horror as Sandark yanked the sword back out of their king's torso. Instinctively, Flaxley left Kritz behind and made a dash for the castle entrance to get up to the balcony while a terrified Lefiat scaled a fallen cake stall in a desperate panic to get up there and protect Mandika. He could hear her anguished screams as blood sprayed from both sides of her father's torso and his body collapsed to the ground.

In a blind rush, Lefiat reached the top of the cake stall and leapt for the balcony, just about managing to grab a hold of the ledge. His desperation to protect Mandika had taken over and in this moment, the incompetent halfwit was gone, replaced by his capable alter ego. With athleticism he didn't even know he was capable of, he then pulled himself onto the balcony. Having done so, he could only look on helplessly as Sandark leapt majestically from the balcony edge onto an upturned stall, then across to the roof of a bungalow. Watched by hundreds of pairs of bewildered eyes in the main square, Sandark then stopped and thrust two triumphant fists into the air.)

SANDARK: Too fucking easy, Guevina!!! Ha!

(He then jumped to another roof before leaping to a third and using it to leap clean over the city walls and out of Guevina altogether. More concerned with the woman he loved than pursuing the assassin, Lefiat slowly approached the kneeling Mandika. Her eyes bulged with anguish as she gaped in bewilderment of it all. Nursing her father's dying head, she shook with disbelief and tried to speak.)

MANDIKA: Father? I..

(She looked up at a horrified Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: He...

(Dazed and confused, she looked back down as a helpless Lefiat knelt beside her. With a cough and a gasp for air, the king strained his eyes to look at Lefiat and mumbled.)

KING: Take care of her, son... she's the greatest treasure the gods could ever bestow...

(He coughed again then fell silent.)

MANDIKA: Father... father?

(Moments later, he was gone. There was a wintry silence in the square as those who remained looked up towards the balcony. Shell-shocked but unable to see, most of them prayed to their deity as they waited for some kind of sign. Up on the balcony, Lefiat looked to his knees while Mandika gaped and shook her head, unable to accept what had happened. As rain started to gently fall on the square, the people stayed and waited until a guard approached the edge of the balcony and shook his head to them. With many tears shed, they then began to disperse in respectful silence while Mandika continued to defy the truth.)

LEFIAT: Oh, Mandika, I'm *so* sorry!

(Defiantly, she shook her head and waved her arms around, desperate to say "no" but unable to speak through her pain.)

Moment's later, as the skies opened and the rains began to rage, Flaxley and Bonson arrived on the balcony, Bonson having taken a short cut through the servants quarters. With heavy hearts, they too knelt with Mandika as her acceptance finally brought forth her tears. As she lay her father's head down to cry into Lefiat's tunic, Bonson placed his hand on Mandika's shoulder.)

BONSON: Mandika, I promise you... you'll never be alone! We'll always be here for you, you highness, always.

(His gesture at this time meant nothing as she continued to cry in the rain.)

Watching from the doorway of the inn as the people headed solemnly away, slowly getting drenched by the downpour, Shankstone sighed in memory of the king then grinned from ear to ear.)

SHANKSTONE: Well, fuck you, Kayfu. Looks like my boy's in the clear.

(With that, he strode into the bar rubbing his hands together gleefully. Right now he was the only happy citizen in the whole of Guevina.)

(The following day, dawn broke in Guevina to reveal a city in the throes of sorrowful mourning. The flags on the castle towers flew at half mast in honour of the late king and those who'd woken at first light went about their early morning activities with heavy hearts. The passing of their beloved monarch had left the entire city heartbroken. Why anyone would chose to kill such a well loved and respected figure simply made no sense to them. His death was hard to accept and the period of mourning could well prove to be a long one. This fledgling day, Guevina's first day without King Falbury, would be one of grieving and very little was likely to get done.

There were some citizens, however, who didn't have the option of taking time out to grieve. With the continuation of the monarchy of the utmost importance, the lights in the castle's administrative offices had burned brightly all night. Urgently arranging Mandika's succession to the throne, the royal dignitaries had worked tirelessly overnight preparing her coronation. This was the way of Guevina's monarchy. Heirs would succeed to the throne as soon as possible, usually within twenty four hours. This traditionally hasty approach to replacing monarchs being the aristocracy's way of reassuring the people that nothing had changed and that life must go on. This practice was, however, hard on the grieving heir to the throne.

Having lost her beloved father within a minute of making peace with him, the world seemed like a harsh place to Princess Mandika right now. Having left the scene of her father's assassination, she'd returned to her quarters and begged just to be left alone. Only allowing Lefiat into her room to keep her company, she simply wanted to be left in peace. Respecting her wishes, those in charge of arranging her coronation decided to leave her to grieve and tell her about the ceremony when she woke up in the morning. She was an emotional wreck and they understood that the last thing she wanted to hear about so soon after her father was killed, was a mandatory, formal ceremony that confirmed his passing.

Having cried herself to sleep the night before, Mandika had woken up that morning feeling empty inside and still wanted nothing but to be left alone to grieve. Unfortunately for her, royal protocol dictated that she had to be crowned as soon as the preparations were complete. She would have no choice but to attend her coronation that very morning. Upon being informed of this, however, she'd offered no complaint or resistance. Feeling empty and somewhat broken, she simply accepted her duties with a defeated sigh. Said duties included informing the organisers who'd she'd like to attend the coronation and which member of Guevina's household she'd like to be her chosen assistant for the ceremony. She answered those questions quietly and with little enthusiasm. She was ghosting her way through the morning very much in a daze.

As several attendants descended on her boudoir to dress her, prepare her hair and apply her make-up, she could barely muster an expression. She simply sat, ashen-faced and let them do their jobs. She was very much a far cry from the bossy and cantankerous princess they knew. She was broken and had neither the energy nor the inclination to make any complaints.

Having never seen her like this before, Lefiat also felt empty inside. As her confidant, he'd spent the night giving her a shoulder to cry on and absolutely hated seeing her so down. Knowing there was nothing he could do about it, he felt useless and angry at himself. Little did he know, however, he'd been exactly what she'd needed. Well aware that he was far from a genius when it came to reassuring people, he'd opted not to talk her through anything, but just to be there for her to lean on, or to shout at if she needed it. Determined not to let her down, he settled for being her rock and her friend. He didn't even give celebrating their reunion as a couple a second thought.)

Guevina castle, royal throne room...

(Come the eighth hour of the morning, Mandika found herself being led into the packed royal throne room. Wearing a long black dress with a veil over her face and clasping a wreath before her, she looked every inch the grieving daughter. At once, a sympathetic groan filled the air. Wishing she could be somewhere else, she whimpered pitifully as she slowly made her way down the aisle to within fifteen feet of the royal throne; at which point one of the royal dignitaries politely asked her to stop. Doing as she was told, she sighed heavily then glanced from side to side, looking miserable. To her left, sat the royal dignitaries and the castle staff, and to her right, the group of friends she'd requested. Kayfu had opted not to attend, choosing instead to arrange the king's funeral. The truth was, he loved the king so much, he simply couldn't bear the thought of Mandika being sworn in as queen so soon. He was not the only one. Also struggling to cope with her immediate succession, Mandika stared emotionlessly at the empty throne before her and sighed sorrowfully. As she did so, her chosen assistant, Bonson, stepped before her with the book of Guevina's constitution under his arm.

Silently, a royal attendee brought forth a lectern and without a word, Bonson rested the book upon it and opened it to the first page. Gently smiling to her, he then cleared his throat and projected his voice to the room.)

BONSON: Ladies, Gentlemen, dear friends of Guevina... in the sad event of the king's death...

(At once Mandika gave a saddened whimper, causing Bonson to pause. Offering her a reassuring smile, he then continued.)

BONSON: We come here to bear witness to the beginning of a new era.

(Trying to be as comforting as possible, he looked to Mandika and winked lovingly. Unmoved, she continued to glumly look at the empty throne behind him.)

BONSON: Princess Mandika... please repeat after me...

(He then began to read sentences from a passage and fall silent as Mandika repeated them word for word in a deeply saddened voice.)

BONSON: I promise to serve my people...

MANDIKA: I promise to serve my people...

(As this process of read and repeat dragged on and on for what felt like an eternity, Flaxley yawned and whispered to Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: How long does this go on for?

(With a sigh, she whispered back tiredly.)

KRITZ: Dunno, much longer and they'll have to swear Lefiat in when Mandika dies of boredom.

(And still, it dragged on.)

BONSON: And without prejudice...

MANDIKA: And without prejudice...

(Until finally, some forty five minutes later, they came to the last line of the passage.)

BONSON: And may the truth be my guide!

MANDIKA: And may the truth be my guide!

(With that, he slammed the book and woke at least six people up.)

BONSON: By the honour of your pledge, I dub thee, Queen Mandika the First of Guevina! Long may you reign!

(With the ceremony finally complete, everyone in an attendance climbed to their feet and gave out a collective sigh of relief before proceeding to serenade their new queen with a generous standing ovation. Feeling horribly unsettled and anxious to be elsewhere, Mandika slowly turned around and forced a smile. All she wanted to do at this point was flee from the room, but in strict accordance with the royal codes of conduct, she stayed where she was and allowed the guests to shower her with affection. Protocol and the correct etiquette had always been of the utmost importance in Guevina castle and she'd been raised to adhere to it steadfastly. Kritz, however, had no such formal upbringing. Determined to show Mandika her support the only way she knew how, she strayed from her seat and marched up to Mandika to give her a warm, friendly hug, flying in the face of regal formality. As she threw her arms around the new queen, Kritz beamed.)

KRITZ: Well done, babe, you're gonna be an awesome queen.

(As all the attending dignitaries gasped in horror at her lack of decorum, Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: The concept of etiquette is completely lost on you, isn't it, Kritz?

KRITZ: Concept of what?

(Mandika stepped back from the hug and waved a dismissive hand at Bonson.)

MANDIKA: Leave her alone!

(She then looked to Kritz and smiled for the first time since her father's passing the day before.)

MANDIKA: That hug was just what I needed.

(She then glanced to all the dignitaries on the other side of the room.)

MANDIKA: Dismiss. I'll be along shortly.

BONSON: Actually, Mandika...

MANDIKA: I said, dismiss!

(At once, all the clapping dignitaries glanced to one another then shrugged and headed for the doors. The formality was supposed to be to form an orderly line behind the queen at this point, then retire to the ballroom for a wine and cheese buffet in the new sovereign's honour. Mandika, however, was in no hurry to celebrate and was happy to let the dignitaries and guests leave for the ballroom without her so she could spend some time with her friends.

As the last of the dignitaries filed out of the throne room, Mandika watched them go then placed her hands excitedly on Kritz's upper arms. Apart from catching a brief glimpse of her head from the balcony, she hadn't seen Kritz for over a year. With a devilish glint in her eye she stepped back and looked her up and down joyfully, as if all her misery had evaporated in the blinking of an eye.)

MANDIKA: Let's take a proper look at you. Since having those babies of yours... you've...

(Her smile evaporated and her nostrils twitched.)

MANDIKA: You haven't gained a single ounce!
(At once, her misery returned in full force and she growled at her hatefully.)
MANDIKA: You're still gorgeous!!!
(Kritz glanced nervously from side to side.)
KRITZ: Am I supposed to apologise for that?
(Mandika sighed in defeat then pouted at Flaxley as he stepped behind Kritz with Lefiat at his side.)
MANDIKA: You lied to me!
FLAXLEY: What do you mean?
MANDIKA: You told me Kritz was fat!
KRITZ: He did what???
FLAXLEY: I told you nothing of the sort!
MANDIKA: Yeah, but you didn't deny it when I asked you three times, so I just assumed. And besides, you did lie. You promised me I'd be happy again.
FLAXLEY: And you thought Kritz putting on weight would make you happy?
KRITZ: Damn, Mandika, that's really mean.
(Mandika pouted indignantly.)
MANDIKA: Of course, I didn't. Now you're twisting my words. Two different things. You didn't deny Kritz was fat, and you promised me I'd be happy.
(She then glanced away and pouted.)
MANDIKA: So... when am I gonna be happy then?
(Flaxley sighed.)
FLAXLEY: We planned to get you back with the man you chose to love, which of course you are...
(Lefiat beamed.)
LEFIAT: Yeah, she is.
FLAXLEY: That's how we planned to make you happy... we never expected... that.
(Mandika hung her head and sighed.)
MANDIKA: I know...
KRITZ: Mandika, do you really wish I was fat? Do you hate me that much?
(Mandika looked to her and pouted.)
MANDIKA: I don't hate you. I'm just not very nice. You're really beautiful and I'm jealous. I wish I was as pretty as you, I always have.
(She then burst into tears.)
MANDIKA: Forgive my honesty; grieving makes people do silly things.
(Eager to comfort her, Kritz held Mandika tight and stroked her hair.)
KRITZ: Mandika, babe, don't worry. It'll be hard, but things will get better over time. I know that doesn't help much now...
(She then smirked to herself and attempted to make Mandika smile.)
KRITZ: I know what'll cheer you up, let's go upstairs and make out.
(At once, Mandika leapt back from the hug and glared at her.)
MANDIKA: Even grieving won't make me do something that silly!!!
(Spying Kritz chuckling she then started to giggle.)
MANDIKA: I thought you were serious for a minute, you silly bitch.
(She then hugged her again, clearly forgiving Kritz for the black eye she'd given her the summer before.)
MANDIKA: You're an amazing friend, Kritz. You've cheered me up no end.
(Kritz stepped back from the hug and smiled.)
KRITZ: So... you're a queen now. That's so cool. We should make *me* Queen of Tifaeris!

FLAXLEY: Yes, dear!
(Mandika couldn't help but force a smile.)
MANDIKA: I love you guys!
(Kritz looked awestruck.)
KRITZ: Whoa! Hey, Mandika? What's that thing?
(She pointed to a two foot tall solid gold statue of an eagle that sat proudly above the throne.)
MANDIKA: That? It's the Guevina eagle; it's probably our finest national treasure.
KRITZ: I want one!
MANDIKA: Yeah well, it's a one off. It's like 400 years old and priceless.
KRITZ: That's *why* I want one!
(Flaxley looked worried.)
FLAXLEY: The sooner we get you out of this castle the better, Kritz, before you go getting any ideas!
KRITZ: Too late! I was just thinking, we run Tifaeris, how come *we* don't have a castle to live in?
(Fearing the worst, Flaxley just looked at her with a blank expression.)
FLAXLEY: What the hell are you saying, woman?
(Kritz winked at Mandika.)
KRITZ: I want a castle!
(Seeing Flaxley struck dumb by Kritz's comical demand, Mandika felt much easier about proceedings.)
MANDIKA: Guys, it's going to be hard for me this next few weeks, but it means a lot to me that you're here!
KRITZ: Aw!
(Once again, Kritz hugged her, much to the amazement of the two guards who remained on duty.)
GUARD: She keeps doing that? Isn't hugging the queen forbidden?
GUARD 2: I would have thought so, yes!
(Noticing the mumblings from the watching guards, Bonson spoke up, anxious for Mandika to get used to the idea that as queen, she'd have to behave a lot differently to how she used to.)
BONSON: Um, Kritz? Etiquette! You're hugging her again!
KRITZ: Whatever!
(She let go of Mandika and poked her tongue out at Bonson.)
BONSON: That's better! Right, now that's sorted... who fancies an ale?
(Mandika gave him a sideways glance.)
MANDIKA: You ought to know, it's wine after a coronation, or is the concept of etiquette alien to you too?
(Utterly defeated, Bonson could only gape at her in stubborn refusal to face the indignity of not being precise.)
BONSON: But... you know... the fact of the matter is...
(Luckily for Bonson, Flaxley then said something that deflected the scornful looks from him, directly onto himself.)
FLAXLEY: Speaking of things being aliens...
(At first they all looked at him like he was drunk, until they noticed he was looking to the doorway.)
BONSON: Now there's a pleasant surprise!
(They all smiled, especially Mandika, to see their three foot tall green alien friend from the planet Tryme 17, Derek, strolling through the door towards them.)

DEREK: Did I miss it?

(Excited at the presence of another friend, Mandika knelt and hugged him as soon as he reached her.)

MANDIKA: It's great to see you!

(Kritz frowned.)

KRITZ: I see you're not moaning about *him* hugging her, Bonson!

BONSON: Well, ma'am, he's an alien, the etiquette book doesn't cover him!

(As Mandika stepped back and stood up from hugging Derek, he looked up at her with a saddened expression on his face.)

DEREK: I'm sorry for your loss!

MANDIKA: Thank you, Derek!

KRITZ: Where have you been, anyway? You only live down the corridor; I would have thought you'd have been the first one here!

DEREK: I've been in East Edea at the herb festival for a few days, searching out magic herbs with my significant...

(He smiled.)

DEREK: With Zanne. I came as soon as I heard. Luckily news travels fast.

BONSON: I'll say, Derek.

MANDIKA: You five, I'd just like to say thank you for being here for me.

(She smiled.)

MANDIKA: Seriously, you lot are the best friends I could ever have asked for. I mean it, if it wasn't for you five... well... today would be a struggle.

(She hugged Lefiat briefly then sighed sorrowfully.)

MANDIKA: I can't believe I'm the queen. I always thought this would be a happy day, but... I miss my father! Just before he died he gave Lefiat and I his blessing, he was going to pull him from the tournament.

(She smiled.)

MANDIKA: You know... just talking about it makes it a little easier. Thanks again...

(Just then, a black pulse of light smashed through the window and thundered into Mandika. Instinctively, Flaxley drew his sword and Bonson dived for cover as she bent double and collapsed to the ground. As Flaxley rushed to the window to investigate, Kritz and Lefiat leapt down to their knees to tend to Mandika.)

LEFIAT: Mandika???

KRITZ: You okay?

(Holding her stomach, she sat up and glared hatefully at their concerned faces.)

MANDIKA: Get the fuck away from me!

(With that, she jumped to her feet and thundered out of the throne room.)

LEFIAT: Mandika?

(He scratched his head.)

KRITZ: What the fuck's got into her?

LEFIAT: She's grieving.

BONSON: Don't be such a cock, Lefiat! It's clearly far more than that.

(He then glanced swiftly to Derek.)

BONSON: What's up with her all of a sudden, Derek?

(Normally, Derek could read a person's thoughts as clearly as hearing the words spoken. For some reason, however, Mandika's thoughts had become impossible to read as soon as she was hit by the pulse of energy. Looking quite perplexed he shrugged and held out his palms to the side.)

DEREK: I have no idea!

BONSON: Don't be silly, of course you do!

DEREK: Seriously, I tried to read her mind... but... she doesn't appear to be in there!

BONSON: What?

(They all looked confused.)

KRITZ: This is freaky, one minute she's all pleased to see us, then...

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: And what was that magic looking thing that hit her?

(Standing by the window, Flaxley looked baffled.)

FLAXLEY: I've no idea, there's nothing out of this window except sky. There's nowhere anyone could have fired magic *from*!

DEREK: Maybe it wasn't magic.

FLAXLEY: I don't know what the hell it was then...

(He then nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: But I intend to find out!

LEFIAT: Yeah, we should go after her!

BONSON: Damn right.

(With that, they all swiftly paced out of the throne room then hurried down the corridor after her, determined to find out what had knocked her down and affected her mood in such a way. With Mandika having had quite a head start of them, however, they feared she might be hard to find. Thankfully, as they neared the end of the corridor, Flaxley glanced through an open side door and spotted her.)

FLAXLEY: Well that was easy. Stop, chaps. I've found her.

(At once, they all came to a halt behind him as Flaxley gestured toward the open door.)

FLAXLEY: She's in here.

BONSON: She's gone into the guest reception room?

LEFIAT: She might be trying out the throne.

KRITZ: How many thrones are there?

BONSON: Too many!

KRITZ: I thought kings and queens only had one each!

BONSON: You've been... someone's been reading you too many fantasy books.

KRITZ: Remind me to thump you for that later.

BONSON: Like I'm that stupid.

FLAXLEY: Never mind that. I want to know what's up with Mandika. Now come on!

(With Flaxley taking the lead, they all marched through the door, Kritz pausing to marvel at its plush décor. It was a large, airy room with several majestic looking pillars propping up a finely sculpted ceiling. One side of the room consisted entirely of several vast panes of glass, each one adorned with the finest silk curtains.)

KRITZ: Wow... now I really *do* want a castle.

(Glancing back at her with a disturbed expression on his face, Flaxley shook his head then turned to face Mandika as she sat sideways across a throne at the end of the room.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika?

LEFIAT: You okay, Mandika?

(Wearing a hateful sneer, Mandika pivoted on her backside then sat up arrogantly.)

MANDIKA: You five fools again? Come to grovel at my feet have you?

(Stepping aside Flaxley, Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: I knew being made queen would go to her head!

(Mandika looked to her and scoffed.)

MANDIKA: Who said *you* could speak, tart?

KRITZ: Tart???

(Instantly flying into a rage, Kritz snarled and charged at her with her fist clenched, ready to punch her lights out.)

KRITZ: Grieving or not, you know damn well that nobody calls me that and gets away with it!!!

(As Flaxley raced after her in a bid to save Mandika's teeth from extinction, the scowling new queen simply scoffed and raised her palm at her, sending her flying backwards into Flaxley using some kind of unknown force magic. Looking mortified, the two of them crashed to the floor in a heap then sat up and joined the others in staring at her in horror.)

MANDIKA: Interesting!

KRITZ: What the fuck, Mandika? Where did you learn to do that?

MANDIKA: Silence, you.

(She mused to herself for a moment then snarled down at Kritz again.)

MANDIKA: Let's see if this one's any better.

(With that, she thrust out her hand at her and unleashed a bolt of lightning.

Thankfully, Guevina had gained notoriety for the fact that magic simply didn't work properly inside its city walls. Nevertheless, the blast left Kritz in agony.)

KRITZ: You bitch!!!

FLAXLEY: Kritz!!!

KRITZ: That fucking hurt, Mandika!

(Unsurprisingly, Flaxley, Bonson, Lefiat, Derek and Kritz were extremely alarmed. For Mandika to even consider doing such a thing made no sense at all. Not about to lay there and let her have another go, Flaxley swiftly pulled the paining Kritz to her feet and led her back to the others, while Mandika mused to herself calmly.)

MANDIKA: Weak. But then this *is* Guevina I suppose!

(With that, she smirked at Lefiat and unleashed a jet of ice in his direction. Much to her annoyance, however, it stopped several feet short of him then dropped to the ground and shattered.)

MANDIKA: How disappointing. Guevina makes a mockery of my skills. I'll have to kill all my detractors from close range at this rate.

(Having thought his number was up, Lefiat gaped at her in horror.)

LEFIAT: She tried to kill me! For nothing!!!

BONSON: This isn't good! If she kills someone the key of justice will...

(He then remembered Daman Siria's angry words after Flaxley had thrown the highly corrosive key into salt water.)

BONSON: Oh yes, we broke it! Panic over.

LEFIAT: Panic over??? She tried to kill me!

(Bonson beamed.)

BONSON: She did, didn't she?

(Ignoring the old man's glee, Lefiat looked to Mandika imploringly.)

LEFIAT: Mandika?

(Mandika just snarled at them all coldly.)

MANDIKA: I have no more use for you right now; go away! Once, I've figured out how to amplify my magic, don't worry...

(She allowed herself a deathly smirk.)

MANDIKA: *I'll find you.*

(Flaxley snarled then looked towards Bonson urgently.)

FLAXLEY: That's not Mandika!

BONSON: Who is it then? My uncle Cuthbert? Of course it's Mandika; I can see her from here!

DEREK: He's right, Bonson! Whatever hit her... possessed her!

(Lefiat looked mortified.)

LEFIAT: Possessed her???

BONSON: That's bollocks; she's just being a stroppy little bugger. It happens all the time. Don't worry though, she'll listen to me!

(With that, Bonson stepped forward.)

BONSON: Now, see here you cantankerous little mare, we've all had enough of your big head. It's been a stressful morning, I admit...

MANDIKA: Insolence!!!

(With that, she fired a lightning bolt at him. Having barely managed to dive out of the way in time, Bonson sat up and shook at his fist at her furiously.)

BONSON: Mandika, you little shit...

MANDIKA: That name means nothing to me... now, go!!! Don't make me tell you again!!!

FLAXLEY: Do as she says; quickly!

(With that, he yanked Bonson to his feet then rushed from the room.)

FLAXLEY: Hurry!

(Following his lead, the paining Kritz practically had to drag the crestfallen Lefiat out of the room behind her. Thankfully, Derek was there to help.

As they all assembled in the corridor outside, Lefiat immediately thumped the wall in frustration.)

LEFIAT: Ouch!!!

(As he proceeded to pace around in circles, ruefully rubbing his painful hand, he couldn't help but pout sorrowfully. The thought of his beloved Mandika being possessed was too much for him to bear. He'd only just got her back and to lose her again was devastating. The crushing part being that he could see the face he adored, he could see the body he longed to hold and yet the soul he loved wasn't in there.

Finding it all too much to cope with he slid down the wall and pouted in misery as Flaxley, Kritz, Derek and Bonson convened at his side.)

DEREK: Her magic's phenomenal... I mean, from close range she could blow any of us to smithereens... in Guevina! I can just about muster a spark here!

BONSON: It doesn't even seem possible!

(Just then, a visibly distressed Lefiat stepped to his feet and joined them.)

LEFIAT: What they hell are we gonna do?

KRITZ: First we're gonna check my back and see if somebody tattooed the words "please attack me with lightning magic" on it! Four times now some bugger's struck me with lightning and it's starting to get annoying!

(Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: Okay, *then* what are we gonna do?

(At once, all eyes turned to Flaxley.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, typical!

(He shook his head then held his chin as he started to think of their next move.)

LEFIAT: Hurry up!

(Flaxley gave him a ferocious glare for a moment then looked to Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Look, the only thing I can think of is, you chaps distract her somehow and I'll try to overpower and restrain her!

LEFIAT: Okay, then what?

FLAXLEY: Hopefully we can find out who possessed her!

KRITZ: And you're sure she's possessed?

FLAXLEY: Well, that's clearly her body in there, but that isn't her. So, yes!

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Righto. Good plan. So how do we distract her?

FLAXLEY: I dunno, try grovelling to her or something, appeal to her ego! Must I think of everything?

DEREK: Okay, we'll try that. Just... be gentle with her, Flaxley!

BONSON: It'll never work!

FLAXLEY: Have some faith will you, Bonson? And Derek, Mandika will be fine. I have to restrain Kritz at least twice a week. If anyone knows how to handle a woman with a firm hand without harming her, it's me!

(Incensed by his arrogance, Kritz frowned harshly his way.)

KRITZ: Yeah, right! Like the time you accidentally stood on my...

FLAXLEY: Not now, my love. You can whinge until your heart's content when we're done. Right now we have to save Mandika!

KRITZ: Yeah, fine, you keep being mean to me. That'll end well for you.

FLAXLEY: Yes, well... whatever. You lot go and grovel to her and I'll use the pillars to sneak up on her. Let's go.

(With that, he stepped up to the door and peered inside the room. Moments later, he glanced back over his shoulder and nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Excellent, she's not looking. Give me a few seconds to stash myself behind a pillar then come in and keep her busy.

(With that, he disappeared inside the door. Having watched him go, the others eyed each other uneasily for a few moments then headed inside after him.)

As Mandika sat slouched, inattentively across her throne, Flaxley crept from the pillar at the back of the room to one slightly closer. He then nodded to the others as they approached Mandika nervously. In this moment, Lefiat couldn't help but pout. Struggling to comprehend how the girl he recognised as the one he loved could possibly be someone else, his heart ached.

As Flaxley watched on from around the pillar, Bonson, Derek, Kritz and Lefiat slowly and humbly continued to edge ever closer towards Mandika. As they did so, she raised her angry head towards them and snarled bitterly.)

MANDIKA: Do you fools have a death wish or something???

(Scared witless by the evil that had invaded Mandika's body, everyone stopped and stared at her in horror.)

BONSON: Um... no?

(Doing his best to remain focussed and stick to the plan, Derek bowed to her nervously.)

DEREK: Actually... we've come to revere you.

LEFIAT: Yeah... we wanna... offer you our respects and that.

MANDIKA: Interesting!

(She swung herself around and climbed to her feet.)

MANDIKA: On your knees!

LEFIAT: My knees?

MANDIKA: All of you!

LEFIAT: All of us on *my* knees? What?

(Bonson rolled his eyes then clouted him about the head.)

LEFIAT: Ouch!

BONSON: She wants us all to kneel, you tit.

LEFIAT: Oh.

(With that, Derek, Bonson and Lefiat all got down on their knees. Kritz, however, scoffed and glanced away.)

KRITZ: I aint kneeling before *her*! Possessed or not, Mandika would *love* to see *me* grovel. She's looked down on me since the day I met her.

(Derek snarled then projected his thought directly into her mind.)

DEREK'S THOUGHT: Kritz, come on, it's just part of the plan! It's not like we mean it.

KRITZ: Yeah, okay... fine.

(Reluctantly she joined the others in kneeling.)

MANDIKA: Good! Now bow down before me!

(Kritz gave her a defiant look.)

KRITZ: Yeah, as if!

(Not about to let Kritz's pride scupper their plan, Derek raised himself up and pushed her head down.)

DEREK: Just do it!!!

KRITZ: Hey! Watch it you stupid green...

MANDIKA: Silence!!!

(As they bowed to the ground, Mandika stepped forward again then started to circle them wearing a thoughtful smirk. As she did so, Flaxley took the opportunity to rush from pillar to pillar every time her back was turned. Keeping himself pressed to the pillars he felt sure she wouldn't notice him, such was his confidence in his own stealth abilities.)

Considering himself every inch the ninja, it wasn't long before he slid himself against the pillar closest to Mandika and peered round it, looking for the optimum opportunity to make his move. Seemingly oblivious to his presence, Mandika continued to circle Bonson, Lefiat, Derek and Kritz with a devilish glint in her eye.)

MANDIKA: I'm going to need some kiss-arses around me, I think you four might be a good start... you!

(She thrust a pointing finger at Kritz, giving her quite a start.)

KRITZ: What?

MANDIKA: Kiss my feet!

(With that, she stuck her foot out from the bottom of her dress. Kritz looked horrified.)

KRITZ: Kiss your feet???

MANDIKA: Yes, kiss my feet! Or would you rather defy me and face the consequences?

(Kritz paused for a moment then sighed to herself. She knew they could all be in trouble if she didn't stick to the plan and had no choice but to do as she was told.)

KRITZ: Okay, but I can't believe I'm doing this!

(With that, she crawled forwards and reluctantly puckered up, looking very much like she wanted to be sick.)

MANDIKA: Stop!

KRITZ: Gladly!

MANDIKA: That was a test of your willing!

(Just then, she spotted something in the corner of her eye and spun around to her right.)

MANDIKA: You!!!

(Her accusing arm pointed squarely at Flaxley as he peered from around the nearest pillar. With a gasp, he swiftly thrust his head back and pushed himself tight to the pillar, desperately hoping she'd think she'd imagined him.)

MANDIKA: Idiot. Why even try to hide? I've already seen you! And besides, you stick out either side of the pillar, you halfwit!

(Knowing his plan had well and truly failed, Flaxley stepped coolly from behind the pillar and grimaced at her uneasily.)

FLAXLEY: Well, don't I feel a fool?

(Mandika stared coldly into his eyes and took three steps in his direction.)

MANDIKA: You didn't attempt to sneak up on me to talk about your obvious foolishness, did you?

FLAXLEY: Well, I... um... no!

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: So much for that plan!

(As Mandika snarled at Flaxley, his four kneeling allies proceeded to whisper to one another desperately.)

DEREK: Now what?

KRITZ: I suggest we charge at her!

BONSON: Good idea! Or alternatively, as we're feeling generous, we could just leap to our deaths from the highest tower and save *her* the bother of killing us!

KRITZ: Have you got a better idea then, you bolshy old fart?

BONSON: No, but I'll bet you don't have a worse one! Even if you live to be three thousand years old!!!

MANDIKA: Silence!!!

(Such was the bitterness in her tone, everyone flinched.)

MANDIKA: I'm still waiting for this fool to answer me!

(As she snarled coldly into his eyes, Flaxley stood tall then proceeded to lie through his teeth in a bid to hoodwink her.)

FLAXLEY: If you must know, I was hoping to apply for the job of royal knight; I figured that if I impressed you with my stealth skills, you'd hire me!

MANDIKA: I already have a...

(She paused and gave him an exasperated look.)

MANDIKA: What stealth skills???

FLAXLEY: Well... I admit... it could have gone better!

(Finding Flaxley's excuse more than a little laughable, Mandika chuckled to herself then about turned and stepped towards his four kneeling allies again. At once, Kritz's eyes lit up.)

KRITZ: She's coming this way. Derek, you cast sleep magic on her and I'll jump on her!

(With that, she took it upon herself to charge. Like a cheetah she sprung into action, heading straight for Mandika. The fact that Derek's magic barely worked in Guevina had quite obviously slipped her mind briefly. Well aware that her plan was a non-starter, Derek twisted desperately to grab her and stop her charge. Unfortunately, Kritz had taken off with such momentum that he only managed to grab her foot and make her trip. Struggling against gravity as soon as her lunge began, her attempt to launch into Mandika turned into a drunken stagger before she fell and hit her head on the floor at Mandika's feet. Somewhat baffled by Kritz's actions, Mandika snarled down at her unconscious body and raised a distrusting eyebrow.)

MANDIKA: Would any of you pathetic lowlifes care to explain what was this foolish bint was trying to achieve?

FLAXLEY: Um... nothing. She just needed to lay down for a bit. Didn't sleep too well, you see? Poor thing!

(Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Nice work, Derek! Whose side are you on, exactly?

DEREK: Look, she rushed me. And anyway, my magic doesn't work in Guevina! Her plan was ridiculous!

BONSON: A pathetic excuse. Face it, Derek, you fucked up!

MANDIKA: Enough!!!

(She growled hatefully.)

MANDIKA: I see what's going on here... I knew I'd face some kind of resistance... that must be you five fools!

(Bonson rose to his feet.)

BONSON: I'm no fool, I *knew* it wouldn't work! In fact I said as much!

(Derek and Lefiat also climbed to their feet giving Bonson filthy looks.)

MANDIKA: So, you've come to challenge me?

(Well aware that their plan was long beyond repair, Flaxley sighed to himself then stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: There's no point denying it any longer, I suppose. Yes, we have!

(Mandika couldn't help but laugh.)

MANDIKA: You fools have no idea who or what I am, and obviously no idea of what I'm capable of.

FLAXLEY: That too is the truth! But you also seem to have no idea about *us*!

MANDIKA: Mere mortals, there is nothing you *can* do!

FLAXLEY: We shall see!

(A fiendish grin then appeared on her face and she placed her hands on her hips.)

MANDIKA: Then I accept your challenge. You may outnumber me five to one...

BONSON: Make that three to one. Kritz is unconscious and I'm out of here.

(He then started to head for the door.)

MANDIKA: Stay where you are, old man!

(Looking more than a little hard done by, he stopped and turned to face her.)

BONSON: What good would fighting an old man like *me* do?

FLAXLEY: He's right, let him go!

MANDIKA: Don't tell *me* what to do, *I'm* your queen!

(Having said nothing up until now, Lefiat shook his fists at her angrily.)

LEFIAT: No, you aint; Mandika's the queen!

MANDIKA: Insolent fool! You shall all die by my hand!

FLAXLEY: Wait!

(He stared straight into her empty eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Fight *me*!!! One on one! Just you and I!

(Mandika grinned, highly amused by his audacity.)

MANDIKA: You're that intent on dying, you'd face me alone?

(He stood tall and gave no reply.)

MANDIKA: Very well. Then here's the plan. *If* you win, your friends can live... *when* I win, they'll die horribly!

FLAXLEY: Don't be so confident!

MANDIKA: Why not? I tell you what... I won't even use magic!

(Flaxley's face immediately lit up.)

FLAXLEY: That sounds fair!

MANDIKA: And *you* won't use your sword!
(Unsure of the wisdom in laying down his weapon, he stroked his chin as the others all encouraged him to reject her idea.)
FLAXLEY: Okay! A fist fight then!
BONSON: Cock!
DEREK: Pillock!
LEFIAT: Oh, for pity's sake, Flaxley.
MANDIKA: Very well! Fisticuffs it is. Whenever you're ready.
FLAXLEY: Sounds good to me.
(With that, he slowly drew his sword then paced over to the side of the room to rest it against the wall. Having set it down, he then looked to the others.)
FLAXLEY: Leave it to me, and don't jump in or you'll get us all killed! Oh, and can you revive Kritz for me, Derek?
DEREK: I'll do what I can, Flaxley.
FLAXLEY: Good, now stand back everybody.
(As Derek and Bonson backtracked, dragging Kritz along with them, Lefiat bit his lip nervously.)
LEFIAT: Flaxley, are you sure about this?
FLAXLEY: Of course I'm sure. A fist fight against Mandika? How hard can it be?
BONSON: That isn't Mandika, you twat!
LEFIAT: Just don't hurt her, Flaxley! Mandika's in there somewhere.
FLAXLEY: Relax, this'll be easy.
(With that, a right hook from the young queen sent him sprawling to the floor, landing on his back.)
FLAXLEY: See?
(Shrugging it off as a fluke, he leapt to his feet and they both took up a boxing stance.)
FLAXLEY: You'll wish you hadn't done that!
MANDIKA: What? This?
(With that, she did it again. Floored with ease for a second time, he sat up looking rather irritated.)
FLAXLEY: Okay, I'm starting to get cross now!
(Snarling ferociously, he then leapt to his feet and skipped up to her with his fists at the ready.)
FLAXLEY: Nobody hits *me* twice and gets away with it!!!
MANDIKA: I already have!
FLAXLEY: Yeah? That's what you think.
(With that, he thrust the entire length of his arm at her with immense power, then grimaced as she caught his fist and squeezed.)
FLAXLEY: Yeow!!!
(Looking the picture of innocence, she smiled at him kindly.)
MANDIKA: What's the matter? Is the little lady hurting the big bad knight?
FLAXLEY: Ow... no! Can't feel a thing! Ow!
MANDIKA: Good, I didn't think so!
(At this point, Kritz started to rouse. Her eyelids gently fluttered then sprung open and she performed a double take in Flaxley and Mandika's direction. As she looked on in utter bewilderment, Derek swiftly made sure she knew not to join in the fight then resumed watching on in amazement as Mandika continued to taunt the battle hardened warrior, twice her size.)
MANDIKA: Now, be a good chap and bow down!

(With no visible sign of effort, she pushed him to his knees, still gripping his fist.)

FLAXLEY: I could get out of this easily if I wanted to!

MANDIKA: Go on then!

FLAXLEY: No, I don't want to!

MANDIKA: Didn't think so!

(Her demeanour then changed and she spoke down to him with authority in her voice.)

MANDIKA: Now pledge your allegiance to me!!!

FLAXLEY: What?

(She squeezed tighter.)

FLAXLEY: Yeow!!!

MANDIKA: Pledge your allegiance to me, knight!

FLAXLEY: My allegiance has *always* been to you, Mandika!

MANDIKA: Who???

FLAXLEY: Ow!

MANDIKA: This Mandika person means nothing me, pledge your allegiance to *me*, Queen Aurora!!!

FLAXLEY: Who? Ouch!

MANDIKA: Do it! I could crush your hand like a straw hat!

FLAXLEY: I'm beginning to believe that! Ow!

(As the others looked on from a mere ten feet away, Bonson gaped like a fish.)

BONSON: Queen Aurora...

KRITZ: Who the fuck is Queen Aurora?

LEFIAT: Who the... what she said.

(Still gaping, he turned to face them.)

BONSON: Aurora's curse!

KRITZ: What?

BONSON: Aurora's curse, I read about it in my urban legends books, but I never...

(He puffed out in astonishment then glanced towards where Mandika was taunting Flaxley.)

BONSON: I've got it! Lefiat, come with me... and find a couple of guards!

LEFIAT: But...

BONSON: Come on, stupid, we have no time to lose!

(With that, he grabbed Lefiat and the two of them sped out of the door. Left behind, Kritz and Derek shrugged to one another then turned back to see Flaxley turning redder and redder with pain.)

FLAXLEY: Okay, you win! Queen Angela was it?

MANDIKA: Aurora!!!

FLAXLEY: Very well... I pledge my allegiance to you, Queen Aurora!

(His pathetic gesture of crossing the fingers on his other hand didn't seem to matter as she released him and stepped back. In great agony, he rubbed his painful hand.)

MANDIKA: You're a weak and feeble man!

FLAXLEY: And you're a bitch!

(Mandika chuckled.)

MANDIKA: True, now stand up and take your beating like a man!

FLAXLEY: Very well!

(He clambered to his feet and took up a defensive stance.)

FLAXLEY: I won't go down so easily this time!

(Mandika smiled. Quite obviously enjoying herself she stepped towards him arrogantly slapping her fist with her free hand.)

MANDIKA: I've always wanted a knight's tooth necklace!

FLAXLEY: Next birthday, I'll buy you one!

MANDIKA: That'd be a neat trick considering the dead can't shop!!!

(With that, she proceeded to pummel him around the room. Kritz and Derek could only look on in despair as he desperately tried to defend himself against her ceaseless, violent onslaught.)

Outside in the corridor at this time, a small group of Guevina's youthful, trainee guards paced past the door then froze in bewilderment. Several of them rubbed their eyes just to check they weren't seeing things. Much to their amazement, their eyes did not deceive them. Their queen was indeed beat the living daylights out of the giant of a man, Flaxley whom they'd booed in the tournament the day before. To say they were overjoyed at the sight would be quite the understatement. Flaxley bashing had become something of a national pastime in Guevina and for these trainees, this was priceless. Barely able to contain their glee, they shared a series of delighted smiles then excitedly raced away to convey the news to the people of the city. Their queen was beating up the traitor Flaxley with her bare hands. Once again, Flaxley's reputation in Guevina was going to take a mauling. The people there had already given Lefiat credit for all his achievements and blamed him for all Lefiat's disasters and now his name would be dragged even deeper into the mud.

At this moment in time, however, his reputation was the least of Flaxley's concerns. Mandika was battering him senseless and he couldn't do a thing about it. She'd punched and kicked him from wall to wall then back again and he hadn't managed a single counter.)

FLAXLEY: Ow!!! Lucky punch!

MANDIKA: Fortieth lucky punch in a row, isn't it?

FLAXLEY: Like I was counting!

MANDIKA: No? Well count this...

(With that, she scored a perfect uppercut to his chin and he folded to the floor. Somewhat punch drunk, he remained on his back and stared up at her looking utterly exhausted.)

FLAXLEY: This isn't real...

(Mandika rolled her eyes.)

MANDIKA: Oh, come on, get up. I'm just getting warmed up!

FLAXLEY: Who are you? And how are you getting such strength from a body that small?

(Faking a smile, Mandika crouched beside Flaxley's weakened frame and petted his head.)

MANDIKA: Who am I? I, my friend, am the one who will remodel this world to her own design. The future is mine and damned will be all who resist.

(Some twenty feet over Mandika's shoulder at this time, Derek was desperately trying to restrain a jealous Kritz. Angry at seeing her man petted, she was determined to batter Mandika into the floor.)

KRITZ: I won't have it, Derek!!!

DEREK: Stop it. You'll get him killed!

KRITZ: Not if I kill her first!!!

DEREK: And how will you do that? She just beat Flaxley up like he's a nine stone, Lefiat. What makes you think you can do any better?

KRITZ: I'm angry! Haven't you heard, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. That phrase was invented to describe *me*!

(She snarled.)

KRITZ: Besides, we can't just stand here and do nothing while she makes mincemeat out of my husband!

DEREK: Yes, we can. We have to! If we jump in she'll kill us all.

(As Derek, the three foot tall green alien, continued desperately restraining her, which was quite the feat for someone his size, Flaxley stared hatefully into Mandika's eyes as she continued to stroke his head lovingly.)

FLAXLEY: So you're just a power mad lunatic, out for world domination.

MANDIKA: How you choose to see me is irrelevant.

FLAXLEY: And you'll damn all who resist? Who are you to play god?

MANDIKA: Who are *they* to resist?

(She then snarled angrily and her entire demeanour changed to that of a vengeful psychopath.)

MANDIKA: Anyway, enough of this!!! Your time has come. This is your damnation!!!

(With that, she jumped up and lifted the exhausted Flaxley to his feet via his neck in one single movement as if he weighed nothing.)

MANDIKA: Such a waste of a handsome man!

(Squeezing the back of his neck as she held him up with one hand, she then drew back her free fist to punch his throat and kill him in one final blow. Too weak to resist Flaxley could only stare at her in horror.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, crap... that can't be good.

MANDIKA: Goodbye, oh feeble one!

(As Mandika's powerful fist homed in on Flaxley's throat, Kritz screamed and battered Derek out of her way then charged towards them. Fearing for both of their lives, Derek raced after her looking mortified. Flaxley, however, showed no signs of fear or panic. Instead he closed his eyes in acceptance of his fate, ready to receive the deathblow and die with honour. Alas Kritz's desperate attempts to reach them in time proved futile and she could only watch in horror as Mandika's fist clashed with Flaxley's neck. Beside herself with grief, she immediately threw herself to the floor in severe distress, convinced he was dead.)

KRITZ: No!!!

(While Kritz poured out her grieving heart, Mandika leapt up and down holding her paining hand.)

MANDIKA: Yeow!!!

(Had Kritz not thrown herself down so quickly, she'd have noticed Mandika's limp punch barely make any impact on her husband's throat whatsoever. It was very much the feeble punch of the Mandika they all knew and tolerated. Instead, she wailed in heartbroken torment upon the ground, oblivious to the fact her husband was very much alive and staring with horror into Mandika's bewildered and terrified eyes.)

MANDIKA: Why am I hitting you?

(Equally bewildered by it all, Derek stared at them in amazement when a black mist suddenly floated out of Mandika. Almost instinctively he chased it, firing a weak ball of inferno magic at it while seething through gritted teeth. Much to his annoyance, the tiny flame floated straight through the black mist and hit the curtain the other side. Realising the futility of firing such a pathetic flame in the first place, he relented and shook his head.)

DEREK: What am I doing?

(Utterly frustrated, he watched the mist seep through the window then turned to see a traumatised looking Flaxley glaring at Mandika while Kritz cried on the ground. Thoroughly baffled by the morning's events, he rushed over to Mandika, determined to get to the bottom of what he'd witnessed.)

DEREK: Mandika?

MANDIKA: Derek? What's going on?

(She looked utterly baffled.)

MANDIKA: And what's up with *her*?

(She pointed at the crestfallen, crying Kritz.)

MANDIKA: And why are you staring at me like that, Flaxley?

(Upon hearing her husband's name, Kritz's jaw dropped and she looked up with tear-filled eyes.)

KRITZ: Flaxley?

(Flaxley averted his tormented gaze from Mandika to glance at her briefly, then instantly looked back at Mandika.)

KRITZ: You're alive!!!

(With that, she leapt from the floor and into his arms in a single bound, one that a gymnast would have been proud of.)

KRITZ: I thought you were dead!!!

(She peppered his face with kisses while he continued to glare in horror and Mandika.)

MANDIKA: Why are you staring at me like that, Flaxley?

(A scared look crossed her face.)

MANDIKA: And how did I get in here?

(Looking lost and confused, she bit her nails and whimpered.)

MANDIKA: What's happening?

(At this point, Bonson and Lefiat rushed back in looking desperate.)

BONSON: Did it work?

LEFIAT: Mandika?

MANDIKA: Lefiat!!!

(They ran to each other and embraced, much to Bonson's relief.)

BONSON: Excellent. It worked.

(He beamed.)

BONSON: That's the last we've seen of Aurora!

DEREK: Are you sure?

BONSON: Positive. Unsurprisingly, my genius has saved us all.

(He held the lapels of his jacket and beamed with pride.)

BONSON: It's over, Flaxley. You can stop staring at Mandika like that now.

(Flaxley turned his head nervously towards Bonson, then gently released Kritz from his arms and bit his lip.)

FLAXLEY: What the hell's going on?

(Kritz placed a loving hand on Flaxley's chest and drew a deep sigh of relief.)

KRITZ: Who cares? I'm just glad you're alive!

FLAXLEY: As am I! What the hell happened, Bonson?

(Bonson, who was looking worriedly at the ceiling, grunted back.)

BONSON: Uh?

FLAXLEY: What did you do? What the hell's going on?

(Bonson turned his head towards him.)

BONSON: I'd love to explain but first we'd better get going! The bloody ceiling's on fire!

(They all slowly looked up and sure enough, the ceiling was burning away and the curtains were dissolving around them.)

DEREK: Oops!

(Naturally, Mandika assumed Lefiat was responsible and glared at him accordingly.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat!!!

LEFIAT: It wasn't *me* this time!

(Well aware that the flame he'd fired at the black mist had started the blaze, Derek hung his head in shame.)

DEREK: Actually, Mandika, it's *my* fault, *I* started the fire.

(Mandika smiled to him warmly.)

MANDIKA: It's nice of you to try and take the blame for him, Derek, but we both know the truth, don't we?

(She then shook a despairing head at Lefiat again.)

LEFIAT: Oh, that's bloody typical that is. I get the blame for everything!

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, the ceiling's on fire, for pity's sake. We need to get out of here!

BONSON: I already bloody said that, but no bugger listens to *me*!

MANDIKA: Whatever, Bonson!

(Spurred into action, Mandika pointed towards the door and looked to her companions urgently.)

MANDIKA: Follow *me*, everyone!

(Desperate not to get caught up in yet another castle fire, Mandika hurriedly led them out into the corridor outside.)

MANDIKA: Down here!

(In a blinding hurry, she guided them round the nearest corner then raced on, past two guards towards the end of a brightly lit corridor. Before reaching the end of the corridor, she then bounded through a door on the left which led into a thin, stone passageway.)

MANDIKA: Come on!!!

(Bringing up the rear, Flaxley looked thoughtful.)

FLAXLEY: Wait a minute!!!

(Everyone except Mandika stopped in the entrance to the passageway and watched as Flaxley raced back the guards who were standing on sentry in the corridor.)

FLAXLEY: Give the word to evacuate. The castle's on fire!

(Paying his words no heed, the guards continued to stare ahead of themselves, blanking him completely.)

FLAXLEY: Hey!

(Realising what Flaxley was attempting to do, Bonson yelled to the guards.)

BONSON: He's telling the truth! Evacuate the castle!

(Having heard it from Bonson, the guards then leapt into action.)

GUARD: So there *is* a fire? For fuck sake, Lefiat!!!

(And with that, they raced off to tell the other guards, leaving Lefiat looking sore and irritated.)

LEFIAT: So that's how it's going to be is it?

BONSON: Well, with all due respect, Lefiat, can you really be surprised?

(Lefiat shrugged in defeat.)

LEFIAT: No, not really!

FLAXLEY: Just be grateful, Lefiat. He didn't even acknowledge my existence!

(Having raced into the thin passageway by herself, Mandika re-emerged looking more than a little miffed.)

MANDIKA: Are you lot coming or what???

BONSON: Bloody right we are!!!

(With that, they raced after her and followed her down the entire length of the thin passageway. After a good fifty seconds or so of racing down the dimly lit and claustrophobic thoroughfare, they finally emerged on a stretch of the castle's private beach, the bright morning sun almost blinding Bonson as he stepped from the darkness.)

BONSON: Shit! Stupid bloody daylight!

(Rubbing his sore eyes, he brought up the rear as everyone raced towards the sea to get as far away from the blazing castle as possible. As soon as they were at a safe enough distance, Flaxley then called them to a halt. At once, Mandika swiftly glanced back at the castle and yelled out in distress.)

MANDIKA: No!!!

(Sharing her dismay, they all gazed despairingly at the castle. Mercifully, the fire hadn't spread but a large section of the north wing roof had caved in on itself.)

LEFIAT: Oh Mandika, you don't deserve this crap!

(She sighed despondently.)

MANDIKA: I'm not meant to have a castle, am I?

LEFIAT: Yeah you are. It's just that, with me around you need to start with a *massive* castle and hope I don't destroy it all before you grow old and die with nowhere to live!

(Mandika gave him a sideways glance then burst out laughing.)

MANDIKA: It's funny because it's true.

(She then fell to her knees and head-butted the sand.)

MANDIKA: My castle!!!

Malk Township

(Thirty miles down the coast from Guevina, in the meantime, in the normally quiet township of Malk, guards paced around the palace very much on the look out for any sign of danger. They'd been placed on high alert ever since Sandark had returned triumphant from killing King Falbury for fears of a backlash by the Guevina army. Although they knew it was unlikely that anyone in Guevina would be able to link Sandark to Malk, they weren't about to take any chances.

While they patrolled and double checked every noise with extreme paranoia, the ever-hooded Sandark sat slouched on a chaise lounge inside the palace chamber, feeling thoroughly at peace with the world. His co-conspirator, Stifer, however, was far from relaxed. Pacing up and down nervously, he was unable to take his eyes off of the empty crystal decanter on the table beside Sandark.)

STIFER: I hate this waiting! Don't you, Sandark? The waiting?

(Sandark scoffed.)

SANDARK: Ha! Why do you panic so, Stifer?

(Stifer bit his nails and glared at him.)

STIFER: Panic? I don't panic! I never panic. I just don't like waiting. Hate waiting!

(He paced a little harder.)

SANDARK: For a man who doesn't panic, you sure panic a lot!

STIFER: Oh, be quiet!

SANDARK: You even have your army on high alert.

(Stifer stopped pacing and stared at him.)

STIFER: That's just good housekeeping! Until Aurora gets word to us that she's taken the Queen's body, keeping an eye out for vengeful Guevina soldiers just makes sense.

(Once again, Sandark scoffed.)

SANDARK: Fool. The people of Guevina have no idea that Malk is involved!

STIFER: How can you be so sure?

SANDARK: I already told you! I didn't enter the tournament, I didn't tell anyone my name and I never showed my face. I'm just a man in a hood with a gravelly voice!

STIFER: A man in a hood with a gravelly voice who assassinated their king, no less! They're bound to investigate, you know?

(Sandark could be heard chuckling from his hood.)

SANDARK: Nobody even noticed me until I did the deed and I was out of Guevina again within seconds. They didn't even have time to chase me and yet here you are panicking!

(Stifer fumed.)

STIFER: I told you! I never panic!

(Again, he paced up and down and bit his nails.)

STIFER: I don't know how you can be so calm anyway. There's a lot riding on this, you know?

(Sandark sat up.)

SANDARK: The way you're behaving, I'm beginning to feel you have no faith in our beloved queen!

(Stifer jumped up and down, infuriated by the suggestion.)

STIFER: How dare you, Sandark? I've worshipped her darkness since long before you were even born! I don't mean served either, I mean worshipped! I'd give my life for her if I had to!

SANDARK: Then have a little faith...

(Just then, the window smashed, making Stifer leap out of his skin. Jumping to his feet with a look of extreme urgency, Sandark was horrified to see a black mist zoom into the decanter by the throne. Holding his heart and gasping for air, Stifer raced up to it looking mortified.)

STIFER: My queen?

(Sandark stood tall and watched on silently.)

STIFER: Queen Aurora? What happened?

(There was no reply. Stifer looked to Sandark with a distressed look on his face.)

STIFER: I don't understand!

(Again, Sandark said nothing as he stared at the spirit decanter.)

STIFER: Something must have gone horribly wrong!

(Just then, the decanter emitted a green glow and Aurora's voice rose from inside it.)

AURORA: The knight!

(Stifer and Sandark shared a baffled glance.)

STIFER: The knight? Tonight, ma'am?

AURORA: Flaxley they called him! Did he do this to me?

(Sandark rubbed his chin.)

SANDARK: Did he do what, my queen?

(At first the decanter offered no reply, but after a few moments it glowed green once more.)

AURORA: I was inside their queen. It was a success. I was killing this knight and now I'm here!

(Stifer looked bewildered.)

STIFER: They ousted you, ma'am?
(Aurora said nothing for a moment then uttered a blunt one word answer.)
AURORA: Yes!
(Stifer and Sandark, again, shared a baffled glance.)
STIFER: I don't understand. How can this be?
(Sandark stood tall.)
SANDARK: It's obvious! Aurora can only possess a sovereign queen, they must have removed her by demoting Mandika back to a mere princess!
(Stifer looked enlightened.)
STIFER: Bastards. I didn't see that coming!
SANDARK: You have a plan, my queen?
(The decanter glowed once more.)
AURORA: There can *be* only one plan. Our next move is obvious!
SANDARK: I concur.
STIFER: Right... obvious, is it?
AURORA: Rest assured, Stifer. I shall take her body for my own and I don't care who you have to kill to make it so!!!
STIFER: Absolutely, my queen! So this plan...
AURORA: They've left us no choice, Stifer. If we have to conquer Guevina to swear Mandika back in as queen then so be it. That's what we'll do.
(She allowed herself a frustrated sigh.)
AURORA: For just a few minutes I felt what it was like to make mere mortals tremble, just like old times. I had power... and I was beautiful again.
STIFER: I bet you were, my queen. That princess Mandika is a pretty little thing.
AURORA: You've seen her?
STIFER: I saw her briefly when I visited the king of Guevina on my presidential duties, yes. She was out in the courtyard talking to a weird looking gangly fellow. Like I said, pretty like thing. She knows it too. I saw about 15 different portraits of her while I was there, she commissioned eleven of them herself, apparently.
(As Stifer chuckled to himself, Sandark snarled from under his hood.)
SANDARK: Why do you waste our time with pointless anecdotes?
STIFER: I was just saying, pretty soon that pretty little face will belong to the lovely Aurora here.
AURORA: And not a moment too soon. Prepare the army to invade Guevina as soon as possible.
SANDARK: Consider it done, my queen. Though it may be a day or two before we're ready. Because of Guevina's city walls we'll need to invade via the sea and ships take time to prepare.
AURORA: Very well, just makes sure it gets done.
SANDARK: As you wish, my queen.

Guevina Castle – Private Beach

(Having escaped from the burning royal chamber only a few minutes ago, Mandika, Lefiat, Bonson, Flaxley, Derek and Kritz remained on the beach in a state of shock. Stunned and bewildered by the strangeness of the morning's events, all but Flaxley knelt upon the sand, struggling to come to terms with it all. Looking somewhat devastated, Mandika clung onto Lefiat while Bonson lay in the sand, still trying to catch his breath from the long run.

Reading all their troubled thoughts as they knelt there upon the said, Derek looked thoroughly miserable. Matching his sorrowful expression, Flaxley stood silently amongst them staring at the castle with frustrated hands on his head.

As she watched yet another rafter collapse into the castle from the burnt out roof, Kritz bit her lip nervously.)

KRITZ: Say, you don't think anyone got hurt, do you?

(They all looked her way wearing worried expressions.)

MANDIKA: Oh, hell, I hope not!

DEREK: Hopefully the guards got everyone out.

(Looking somewhat aggrieved, Flaxley paced forwards then turned to face his companions wearing a frustrated scowl.)

FLAXLEY: What the hell's going on here??? I thought our days of battling evil entities were behind us... and then *this* happens. I mean, what the hell? This was supposed to be a simple tournament! Turn up, win it then go home, that was the plan. Easy. Next thing we know, the king's being murdered and then his daughter gets possessed by an evil psychopath!!! She beat the living crap out of me! What the fuck is that all about???

(Mandika stood and paced up to him looking equally annoyed. With her hands out to the side, she shrugged in utter bewilderment.)

MANDIKA: I beat the living crap out of you? Me? That isn't physically possible!!! What the hell's going on???

(Sounding extremely cold about it, Bonson spoke up.)

BONSON: Actually, I can explain!

(All eyes turned to Bonson as he climbed to his feet and paced forwards to stand before them and offer them his explanation. Normally in a situation where his knowledge was in demand, he'd beam with pride and remind everyone that he was extremely wise and therefore better than them. Not this time, however. As Flaxley and Mandika stepped back to their allies, allowing him the floor, he spoke up, sounding somewhat despondent and more than a little daunted.)

BONSON: There's an urban legend, regarding an evil queen and her curse, I'm pretty certain we've stumbled right into the middle of it.

FLAXLEY: An urban legend?

BONSON: Yes, a tale that's been passed down through the years which nobody really knows is true or not.

FLAXLEY: I know what an urban legend is, Bonson. Normally they're a load of codswallop though!

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: There's always an element of truth in them somewhere, Flaxley!

MANDIKA: So what *is* this urban legend then?

BONSON: I was coming to that!

(He glared at Flaxley.)

BONSON: Before I was so rudely interrupted!

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: The floor's yours, Bonson!

BONSON: Thank you!

(He straightened his bow tie then continued.)

BONSON: Well, there *is* a tale about a Queen Aurora and everything we've seen today seems to fit...

(Just then, Kritz climbed to her feet and started to wander off towards the sea.
Bonson was most offended.)

BONSON: Hey! I don't do that while *you're* talking!

(Kritz shrugged as she walked away.)

KRITZ: I don't need to hear your legend. I just need to know if we'll be kicking anyone's arse over it.

(As Kritz stopped to admire her view of the sea, Flaxley nodded to Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Carry on, Bonson.

MANDIKA: Yeah, come on. *I* want to know what's going on even if *she* doesn't!

(Bonson nodded in acceptance of their words.)

BONSON: Quite! Well, legend has it that Queen Aurora used to rule her Kingdom with an iron fist...

LEFIAT: What kingdom?

(Bonson sneered.)

BONSON: The kingdom of Malk, it's thirty miles west of here.

LEFIAT: West?

(Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Don't make me stab you, Lefiat!

(He hung his head.)

LEFIAT: Sorry!

BONSON: So you should be. Now shut up and let me speak, you fool!

(With that, he continued to relay his knowledge.)

BONSON: Anyway, Aurora was a nasty bugger. Her magic had a strength like you wouldn't believe, and physically... well, thanks to years and years of casting power enhancing spells on herself... as you saw, she made Flaxley look like Lefiat!

LEFIAT: Hey!!!

BONSON: No offence, old boy! Anyway, Queen Aurora taxed the heart and soul out of her people and invested the proceeds in her army. She'd then send her army out raping and pillaging nearby settlements.

MANDIKA: Even Guevina?

BONSON: No, Guevina was too big. I'm sure she'd have worked her way up to attacking Guevina eventually, but at the time her fledgling army could never have taken a city like this!

MANDIKA: Oh, that's a relief then!

BONSON: Let me finish!!!

(As he stood and counted to ten, Kritz came back and listened to him finish his tale.)

BONSON: Anyway, ten years or so ago, Aurora became ill. At first she suffered from coughing fits and breathlessness, 'til eventually she was bedridden. Well, it soon became obvious that she was dying, but instead of sending for someone to help her repent, she sent for Corinthius, the world's most powerful mage.

KRITZ: That's understandable, perhaps she wanted a cure.

BONSON: You'd think so, wouldn't you?

KRITZ: Then what?

BONSON: She asked him for a spell to give her a nomadic soul!

(Everyone looked blank.)

BONSON: A soul that can travel from person to person, possessing them!

(As realisation crossed the faces before him, he rolled his eyes and groaned.)

BONSON: It's like talking to infants!

(With that, he continued.)

BONSON: Naturally, Corinthus refused her request so she had her army threaten his family!

FLAXLEY: Sick woman!

BONSON: She was, Flaxley! And of course, the mage had no choice but to comply. Anyway, when the time came and she took her final breath, as she anticipated, her soul didn't move on to the after life, but neither did it become nomadic. Corinthus had added his own little addendum to the spell. Aurora could possess people, yes, but only those of an equal social standing, in other words... sovereign queens of royal blood. Hence, Aurora's curse.

MANDIKA: So, when I became queen it became possible for her to possess me?

BONSON: Exactly!

MANDIKA: So how did you vanquish her?

(Bonson's previous burning desire to do all the talking then withered and died.)

BONSON: Um... you tell her, Lefiat!

(As she watched Bonson start to perspire, Mandika swiftly raised a distrusting eyebrow and glared at Lefiat furiously.)

MANDIKA: Tell me what?

LEFIAT: Um...

MANDIKA: Well???

(He leant back defensively.)

LEFIAT: It was Bonson's idea!

MANDIKA: What was?

LEFIAT: Um... we kinda used the constitution to... declare you unfit to rule and demote you back to princess!

(Awaiting her wrath, he cowered behind his hands, trembling all over.)

MANDIKA: Princess???

(Looking utterly livid, she swiftly grabbed Lefiat by the collar and pulled him close.)

LEFIAT: Don't hit the face!

(Immediately her demeanour changed and she murmured lovingly to him.)

MANDIKA: Thank you, darling. You saved me!

(Upon realising Mandika wasn't angry and there was kudos to be had, Bonson immediately cut in.)

BONSON: Actually, it was all *my* idea. As your assistant for the ceremony, I just needed him and two guards to be witnesses! I can dethrone you at any time in the first week you see, so long as three of the castles employees are present. I know my constitution, you see. I'm educated, don't you know?

(Ignoring Bonson's attempt to claim all the credit, Mandika gently kissed Lefiat's shivering lips.)

MANDIKA: I can never thank you enough.

(Greatly lifted by her affection, he sat up and beamed with pride.)

LEFIAT: It was nothing. Someone had to stop you beating Flaxley up!

FLAXLEY: Hey! Less of that, you little shit!

(At this point, Kritz swiftly cut in.)

KRITZ: Right, so whose arse are we gonna be kicking then?

(She turned to Bonson.)

KRITZ: Well?

BONSON: Don't look at me; you're not kicking *my* arse!

(She frowned.)

KRITZ: What, so that's it? You tell us some myth and that's the end of it?

BONSON: It wasn't a myth, it was a legend. Two different things entirely!

LEFIAT: In what way?

(Trying not to growl, Bonson raised a scowl in his direction.)

BONSON: What part of “entirely” didn’t you get?

(Lefiat looked blank.)

BONSON: Good god, man! Listen. A legend is a story left behind, got it?

KRITZ: I thought that was legacy!

(Turning red with fury, Bonson slapped his forehead.)

BONSON: No, a legacy is the things that are left behind, you dozy bint!

KRITZ: Hey!

LEFIAT: So what’s a legend then? I’m confused!

(Dropping his shoulders in defeat, Bonson looked at Lefiat and spoke in a condescending tone.)

BONSON: I just told you. A legend is a story left behind!

LEFIAT: And a myth?

BONSON: A myth is something made up. A complete flight of fantasy like underwater cities, unicorns and female orgasms!

(Kritz and Mandika grinned at one another.)

MANDIKA: Actually, Bonson...

(Before she could continue, however, Bonson flapped erratically and bellowed at her.)

BONSON: Can’t you even allow me that *one* little fantasy???

(Enjoying a hearty chuckle, Kritz rubbed her hands together and smiled.)

KRITZ: Anyway, if we’re done here, we ought to get back to Tifaeris!

(Looking thoughtful, Flaxley nodded towards her sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, you should. You’ve been away from the kids long enough as it is!

I, however, should stick around; I don’t think this is quite over yet!

(Folding her arms angrily, Kritz glared at him.)

KRITZ: Excuse me?

FLAXLEY: You’re excused.

KRITZ: Listen, you arrogant piece of...

(Much to her annoyance, Bonson interrupted.)

BONSON: Wait, Kritz! Flaxley, what do you mean this isn’t quite over?

KRITZ: I hadn’t finished!

(Much to her disgust, they all hushed her and continued to look at Flaxley.)

KRITZ: Fine!

BONSON: Well, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: I’m just saying, I have a feeling we haven’t heard the last of this Aurora, so I’d better stick around!

(Mortified at being overlooked, Lefiat spoke up in a protesting voice.)

LEFIAT: Hey, what about me? If Mandika’s in danger I’m sticking around too!

(Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: You already live here, you tit!

LEFIAT: Oh yeah!

(As Lefiat hung his embarrassed head, Flaxley elaborated.)

FLAXLEY: From what Bonson says, Aurora needs a sovereign queen to possess, right?

BONSON: That’s right!

FLAXLEY: Therefore it’s safe to assume that the hooded assassin who killed the king, did so knowing Mandika would ascend to the throne. Clearly he was acting on Aurora’s behalf.

BONSON: Indeed. In fact, he may even have acted on her *orders*.

FLAXLEY: Her orders? She's just a spirit though, you said.

BONSON: Yes, but rumour has it, her spirit or her soul, if you like, is contained in a decanter and can still communicate.

(Flaxley mused to himself for a moment then nodded.)

FLAXLEY: So, she basically lived on but with no corporeal form?

BONSON: Pretty much.

FLAXLEY: And her cronies know how powerful she'll be once resurrected, right?

BONSON: Of course.

(He raised a curious eyebrow.)

BONSON: Where are you going with this Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: The township of Malk!

BONSON: Right... what? Physically?

FLAXLEY: Of course not... well, not yet. But it all makes sense now.

BONSON: Thanks to me.

FLAXLEY: I'll bet her cronies have just been waiting for the chance to kill King Falbury and that tournament made him a sitting duck.

(Mandika whimpered.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry, Mandika, but unless I'm missing something, I'll bet Aurora passed away and her cronies merely carried on regardless, building their army and repressing the people, knowing full well Aurora would rise again some day. Her death was a mere blip in her plan. That assassin wasn't a mere Aurora crazed fan who happened to stop by. I'll bet he's based in Malk and serves her like she's an ordinary living leader still.

(He then nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Chaps, the way I see it is this, I doubt he'll stop after one failed attempt. After all, it'd only take five minutes to swear Mandika in as queen again and Aurora's back in business! Therefore, I wouldn't be at all surprised if they were planning to attack Guevina at some point. If they could take the castle, they could swear her in as queen again at any time.

(As everyone pondered Flaxley's theory, Mandika's fear was plain for all to see.)

MANDIKA: Do... do you really think they'd do that?

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: That's what I'd do, Mandika!

(Mandika looked deeply hurt.)

MANDIKA: Why? I thought we were friends!

FLAXLEY: I mean if I was *them*, that'd be my plan!

MANDIKA: Oh... right, silly me.

FLAXLEY: Therefore, I recommend we attack them before they attack us.

(Bonson looked mortified.)

BONSON: You want us to go into battle again?

(Bonson looked absolutely furious and snarled.)

BONSON: Oh, I bloody get it, now! Suddenly it all makes sense.

(As he paced furiously up and down looking wild with rage, everyone looked at him with extreme concern.)

KRITZ: Calm down, Bonson. You can't risk another heart attack at your age!

(Waving his arms erratically, he snarled back.)

BONSON: It's not funny, young lady!!!

KRITZ: I wasn't joking!

FLAXLEY: Bonson, what is it? What's wrong with you?

(He stopped and glared at Flaxley.)

BONSON: I'll tell you what's wrong with me, shall I?

(Getting angrier by the second he stormed past Flaxley then turned to face him.)

BONSON: Fourth time the six of us have met up, fourth time we've ended up in deep shit! Isn't it bloody obvious what's going on here???

(As his words began to register with his comrades they all started to look extremely uneasy.)

KRITZ: You mean, Daman Siria's behind this?

(Bonson scowled.)

BONSON: Exactly! The lying little shit!

(While the others let the revelation sink in, Bonson paced in a circle, looking up to the sky, yelling furiously.)

BONSON: Show yourself, Siria, you dirty, back-stabbing arse wipe!!! Come on!!! I know you're listening to me!!!

(Just then, from out of nowhere, the mysterious higher being himself, Daman Siria, appeared at Bonson's side. Spotting him in the corner of his eye, Bonson yelped and scrambled away, startled to his very core.)

BONSON: Are you *trying* to give me a heart attack???

(Last time they'd met Daman Siria he'd admitted exploiting them all their lives and his arrival was far from welcome. He'd also assured them that they were no longer under his control and wouldn't be led into any more battles against evil. For him to turn up now was extremely suspicious. Unsurprisingly, he was greeted with a procession of scowls and a gnashing of teeth.

As the greying mystic wise man, surveyed their angry scowls, he rubbed his chin and tried desperately to think of a comforting way to start the conversation. Not about to hold in his feelings any longer, however, Bonson beat him to it.)

BONSON: You told us we were free of your manipulation. No more being tricked into battle you claimed, and yet we meet up again and look what happens! What the hell are you up to?

(He snarled.)

BONSON: Explain yourself!

(Daman nodded then stood tall and cupped his hands in front of himself give off a friendly aura.)

DAMAN: All in good time, old boy. First, Bonson, I owe you an apology.

BONSON: Yes. Yes you bloody well do!

DAMAN: I lied to you about joining the council of the wise and that was wrong. But, you must understand, I had a higher purpose!

(Bonson flapped.)

BONSON: Wrong? Wrong? It was more than just wrong!!! Because of you, I told everyone I ever met I was going to become a mystic wise-man! A neo-god! I bragged about it for 2 bloody years!!! Do you have any idea how much this lot took the piss when they found out it was all a lie?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: Yes I do. Your friends were nothing but supportive!

BONSON: That's not the point!!!

(Having completely lost his temper, he then turned to face Flaxley and snarled.)

BONSON: Do you want to punch him or shall I?

FLAXLEY: Don't tempt me!

BONSON: I'm not trying to tempt you, I was hoping you'd let me do it.

(Fearing the conversation would descend rapidly into a childish argument if he didn't take control, Daman raised his voice authoritatively.)

DAMAN: Listen, I said you were free and you are! None of this is *my* doing!

BONSON: Bollocks!

DAMAN: It's true. Whether you believe me or not is up to you!

FLAXLEY: *Can* we believe you? You said our personalities and quirks were given to us deliberately as part of your manipulation. Well if that's true and we're free now, how come nobody's changed one bit?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: An excellent question! I can only assume you've become accustomed to being the way you are. But I assure you, you're no longer under any mystic thrall whatsoever!

BONSON: No? Then why are you here? What do you want?

DAMAN: What do *I* want? *You* called *me*.

(Bonson glared at him coldly then turned his head away and growled.)

BONSON: Yes, well, even so... I don't trust you.

(Daman sighed.)

DAMAN: Look, I can assure you the council of the wise have no involvement in your personalities any more, or indeed your current predicament. If you'd like I can help clarify a few things, but then you're on your own. As I promised!

(Flaxley looked deeply suspicious.)

FLAXLEY: Wait! How do you know about our current predicament if you haven't planned it all?

(At once everyone nodded at Flaxley to acknowledge his question then glared at Daman, demanding an answer.)

DAMAN: That's obvious, I'd have thought. There's evil afoot and we're the council of the wise, we've been watching for quite some time. Long before you lot even became involved, in fact.

(He then nodded sternly.)

DAMAN: So, anyway, it's up to you. If you like, I'll sling my hook but if you'd like me to clarify things for you, I'd be happy to.

(Far from overjoyed by the idea of being in Daman's presence any longer than they had to be, they all looked to one another uneasily.)

FLAXLEY: If there's a chance he knows something useful then I suppose it makes sense to listen to him!

BONSON: I disagree. I say we kill him!

FLAXLEY: Bonson, he might be able to help.

BONSON: In that case, let's punch him a few times, hear him out *then* kill him.

FLAXLEY: Bonson, look... no. Let's just hear him out shall we? Then we can discuss killing him.

MANDIKA: Fine! Makes sense.

KRITZ: Whatever!

LEFIAT: I'm lost already.

(Derek rolled his eyes.)

DEREK: Just listen to Daman, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: Eh? Okay!

BONSON: Fine.

(Relenting from his angry stance, Bonson stood easy and nodded.)

BONSON: Let's hear it then, arse face.

(Eager to help but looking forward to getting away from their hateful glares, Daman began.)

DAMAN: Well, firstly... are you familiar with Aurora's curse?

(Bonson sneered arrogantly.)

BONSON: Of course we are. These five didn't have clue, but I filled them in on everything.

DAMAN: Well, good. So you know all about her past and her current predicament then? Stuck in a decanter, hoping for a sovereign queen to possess.

BONSON: No, I just told them about her favourite foods and how she liked her tea in the morning.

(With that, he flapped furiously then stepped forwards to bellow at him from a mere six inches away.)

BONSON: Of course we do!!! I just bloody told you, I told them everything!!! How dare you doubt my story telling skills???

(Immediately losing his temper again, Bonson started to peel off his jacket.)

BONSON: Someone hold my jacket, I'm going to teach this jumped up little shit a thing or two about pain.

(As Bonson threw his jacket to Kritz and took up a boxing stance, Daman raised a knowing eyebrow, then spoke quietly so only Bonson could hear him.)

DAMAN: You know, Bonson, when people threaten me, I tend to panic and accidentally reveal things about them.

(At once, Bonson's determination to fight seemed to wane dramatically and he pouted at Daman uneasily.)

BONSON: Reveal things?

DAMAN: Dark, horrible things!

BONSON: Oh my!

(With that, Bonson hung his head and skulked back towards the others.)

BONSON: Carry on!

(As he took his jacket back from Kritz and proceeded to get dressed again, Daman stood tall.)

DAMAN: Anyway, as I was saying, you know about her past life and her current predicament...

(He sighed.)

DAMAN: However, her future is yet to be decided!

KRITZ: Her future?

DAMAN: Yes. You see, like it or not, my friends, Aurora's future is linked to Mandika... meaning Mandika's life is very much in your hands!

(At once, Lefiat stood tall, determined to listen well. Flaxley too, tilted his head with interest and Kritz, Bonson and Derek stood to attention while Mandika trembled on the sand. Noting their apparent readiness to listen, Daman continued.)

DAMAN: Aurora's spirit decanter is looked after by her faithful sidekicks, Stifer and Sandark...

FLAXLEY: Sandark? As in "Sandark the slaughter"?

DAMAN: Yes, he was the one who killed King Falbury!

BONSON: You know him, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: I know *of* him, yes! Legend has it that Sandark has sword skills to rival even my own...

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

FLAXLEY: And an agility to put Kritz to shame!

KRITZ: Oh, so he rivals *you*, but he puts *me* to shame!!!

(Flaxley sneered.)

FLAXLEY: Look, woman, if I wanted a parrot I'd buy one!

KRITZ: You conceited...

MANDIKA: Shut up!!!

(They both glared at her.)

MANDIKA: This is important!

DAMAN: It is!

(Shaking his head at Flaxley and Kritz, he continued.)

DAMAN: When the three of them heard of this tournament, they realised that not only would the city be open to foreigners but King Falbury would be present in the square.

BONSON: I see!

DAMAN: Effectively, whereas King Falbury has always been well protected from the outside world, this tournament made him vulnerable! Knowing this, they decided to take their opportunity!

DEREK: So, Flaxley was right. They were *looking* for a chance to kill him all along.

DAMAN: Indeed. You see, besides Mandika there isn't likely to be another sovereign queen for centuries.

MANDIKA: Well, not *anyone* can be a queen, you know! You need a certain quality. (Ignoring Mandika's deluded comment, Daman continued.)

DAMAN: Anyway, by hosting that tournament, the king essentially signed his own death warrant! It was just the opportunity Stifer and Sandark were looking for!

(With that, Mandika burst into tears.)

LEFIAT: Did you have to be so blunt?

FLAXLEY: Quite. As a wise man you ought to try learning a little something about subtlety

(With tearful eyes, Mandika looked up and pouted.)

MANDIKA: No, it's okay. It's hard to hear it, but we need to understand what's going on! I'm really scared, guys!

(Hating seeing Mandika so terrified, Lefiat stood tall.)

LEFIAT: Daman, how can I protect her from this?

BONSON: Do what you always do. Run around like a headless chicken while Flaxley saves her.

FLAXLEY: Bonson!

BONSON: What?

FLAXLEY: Let Daman speak.

BONSON: Yeah, fine, whatever.

(As Bonson growled under his breath, Daman resumed his lecture.)

DAMAN: Okay, here's the thing. Sandark and Stifer plan to return with an army in a few days time. They'll try to get into what's left of the castle, threaten some dignitaries and swear Mandika back in as queen. She doesn't even have to be there!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Just as I suspected!

(With a sneer, Kritz mimicked his words in a mocking tone.)

KRITZ: Just as I suspected, look at me, I'm mister smarty pants!

(Using a tone normally reserved for Lefiat, he sneered down at her.)

FLAXLEY: Silence, halfwit!

KRITZ: Hey, fuck off talking to me like...

(Determined to say his piece, Daman spoke a little louder making Flaxley and Kritz fall back into line and pay attention.)

DAMAN: Anyway... Mandika, once they've sworn you in as queen again, Aurora *will* find you, even if you've gone into hiding. She's half witch. It won't be difficult. She'll possess you again and use Guevina as her new base to wreak havoc on the world!

(Mandika gulped.)

MANDIKA: And what will happen to me?

DAMAN: The same thing that happened to you when you she took you over before.

MANDIKA: Nothing happened. I just lost time.

(Daman shook a sorrowful head.)

DAMAN: That's because you were still in your own body, but Aurora took over your consciousness. You'll just exist inside her, stuck in a dark, empty limbo. Alive but without any knowledge of it.

(As Mandika shrunk and whimpered in terror, Flaxley shook his fist.)

FLAXLEY: I'll never allow that to happen!

LEFIAT: Me either! So how do we stop them?

DAMAN: That's simple. Go to Malk and try to get into the palace. If you can find and destroy Aurora's spirit decanter, her soul will perish! You should leave immediately.

MANDIKA: And then I'll be safe?

DAMAN: The world will be safe. But you must leave immediately, before they come to you!

FLAXLEY: Right, get in the palace, smash the decanter, got it.

DAMAN: Just be careful of Sandark... and don't take Stifer lightly either, he's not above making the supreme sacrifice whereas Aurora is concerned.

FLAXLEY: Don't worry; it's a rule of mine never to underestimate anyone.

DAMAN: Very wise.

FLAXLEY: Anything else we should know?

DAMAN: No, no, that's everything.

BONSON: Right.

(He looked to Flaxley then gestured towards Daman.)

BONSON: Can we kill him now?

(As Daman threw him a furious glance, Bonson skulked away.)

BONSON: Just kidding.

DAMAN: Oh, there is one piece of advice I can give you. Don't go by yourselves. Malk's army have been recruiting a lot lately therefore it'd make sense if there were more of you.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Well obviously we'll take the Guevina army with us, it'll be like having one and a half of me there!

KRITZ: Arrogant, bloody...

(Flaxley then stood tall and cut her off in mid sentence.)

FLAXLEY: The sooner we go the better, if you ask me. Who's in?

LEFIAT: I am! I'll do anything to protect my princess!

DEREK: After what you guys did for me last year, there's no way I could possibly refuse. Zanne will wonder where the bloody hell I've got to, but what can I say?

BONSON: Where is she anyway?

DEREK: I left her in East Edea looking at herbs.

BONSON: I see.

(Just then, Kritz turned smiled to Mandika.)

KRITZ: Mandika, I won't stand idly by while some bugger tries to steal your soul.

MANDIKA: Someone's trying to steal my soul?

KRITZ: Aren't they?

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: Well, steal your body then. I'm in.

(As Mandika smiled back at her, Flaxley furrowed his brow angrily.)

FLAXLEY: No, you're not! We told Phisele's mum we were leaving for Tifaeris today. You need to go and collect the children!

(She seethed.)

KRITZ: They'll be fine!

FLAXLEY: They'll be emotionally scarred for life, you silly old bat!

KRITZ: Don't call me names! The kids will be fine! You can't stop me going!

FLAXLEY: Oh, really? Is that a challenge?

DAMAN: Flaxley, your children are in safe hands. Kritzeveltia... you should go to Malk!

KRITZ: I was going to, whether he likes it or not.

FLAXLEY: Daman, I'm going to kill you.

BONSON: And I'm going to applaud!

(Just then, Mandika stood tall and nodded firmly, causing everyone to freeze and stare in her direction.)

MANDIKA: I'm going with you!

LEFIAT: No way! What if something...

(Mandika looked him in the eyes and smiled.)

MANDIKA: Relax, they need me alive. I'm as safe as houses. Besides, I wanna be there when you kill Sandark.

LEFIAT: Um... you're looking at *me*, but it feels like you're talking to Flaxley.

MANDIKA: I kinda was, but you never know.

(As they shared a loving glance, Flaxley stood tall and nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Right, that's sorted then. Seeing as we're *all* going...

(He sneered at Kritz then continued.)

FLAXLEY: Let's get ourselves prepared.

BONSON: Hey! Who said we we're *all* going? If you think *I'm* going to hike all the way up the coast just to let some bugger shove a sword in my face, you can forget it, chummy.

FLAXLEY: Well, fair comment, Bonson. At your age nobody can expect you to fight really.

BONSON: Thank you.

(With that, Bonson stepped up close to Lefiat and shook his hand.)

BONSON: Good luck, Lefiat. Guard Mandika with your life, old chap.

(Looking most surprised that Bonson was being nice to him for once, Lefiat smiled warmly.)

LEFIAT: Always.

(Bonson then checked nobody was looking and squeezed Lefiat's hand as tightly as he could.)

BONSON: I can't abide Mandika half the time, she annoys me more than words could ever express, but at the same time I adore that infuriating little harpy and if anything happens to her as a result of your witless buffoonery, I'll tie you to the tallest tower, spread jam on your gonads and leave you to the wasps!

(As Lefiat winced in pain, Bonson snarled and squeezed even harder.)

BONSON: Understand?

LEFIAT: Yes!!! Ouch.

(With that, Bonson released his hand then glanced towards Mandika. Seeing her nervously chatting to Kritz, his heart immediately sunk.)

BONSON: Oh no, not now. Why does my conscience always have to kick in at the worst possible moment?

(He then groaned in defeat and raised his voice.)

BONSON: Fine, I'll go. I'll only be worrying if I don't.

(He then kicked the sand and sighed.)

BONSON: Being a thoroughly good bloke can be such a burden sometimes.

(As Bonson shook his head and puffed out, Daman spoke up over everyone.)

DAMAN: Just remember, chaps, you may be taking an army with you, but make sure you don't declare war or the key of peace will strike you all down where you stand, and you don't want *that*.

BONSON: How dumb do you think we are, Daman?

DAMAN: Don't worry about the keys of justice and liberty though, they've been lost forever!

BONSON: I knew you'd have to bring that up!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I know! Like it's *our* fault. If he was *that* wise he'd have told us not to throw them in the sea in the first place!

BONSON: Exactly!

(Sensing they'd not be apologising any time soon for their error, Daman smiled acceptingly.)

DAMAN: Very well. Good luck, my friends, but hurry! You don't have much time!

FLAXLEY: We're not your friends!

BONSON: Quite the opposite in fact! Thanks for the tips though. Now sod off!

DAMAN: Very well.

(With one last smile, he then looked to Mandika.)

DAMAN: I'm sorry that you all feel so aggrieved by what happened in the past. But I mean what I say when I tell you, you're free. Princess, I'm truly sorry about your father's passing and I hope you find the strength in your heart to get through this.

(With that, his image faded away then disappeared.)

BONSON: Wanker!!!

DAMAN: Less of that, Bonson!

(With a flinch, they all glanced around to see where the voice came from but saw nothing.)

LEFIAT: That was weird.

FLAXLEY: Yes, well... let's get ready to go! Come on.

(As always, preparing for battle was much easier with Flaxley in the ranks. Despite everybody's obvious fears, his professional attitude was always an inspiration. His positivity made it that little bit easier to accept the thought of journeying into battle against an unknown, yet seemingly formidable foe. Bonson, however, always had the opposite effect. Unable or resist a joke or pointing out everyone's flaws, he was more than capable of killing morale with one lash of his poisonous tongue. To stop this from happening, Flaxley sent him off to prepare his own pack and keep him out of everyone's way.

Deeply in love with Mandika, Lefiat was as eager as anyone to stop the threat that was hanging so precariously over her head. As such, he needed no further motivation

and couldn't wait to get going. He was, however, a hapless halfwit and extremely clumsy, therefore Flaxley packed *him* off on a pointless errand just to make sure he didn't make any screw ups and slow them all down. This left Kritz, Mandika and Derek to prepare supplies for the journey while Flaxley rounded up the some of the elite guards he used to train and command back when he was Guevina's knight.

As he rounded up the guards, Flaxley couldn't help but wonder whether or not it was a co-incidence that Daman had confirmed what he was thinking. Was the pre-emptive strike they were planning on Malk, his own idea or had Daman planted it in his mind? He couldn't be sure. All he knew was that Daman's tips would make things a lot easier. The plan was simple. They'd march to Malk, get inside the palace, find the spirit decanter in which Aurora was contained and destroy it. Carrying out the plan wasn't going to be as simple as it sounded, however. Malk would obviously be well defended, as rogue settlements always are.

As always, Flaxley checked and rechecked the plan in his mind, scrutinising any faults in it until he was satisfied it'd work. Eventually, he decided it would be best to attack Malk just before dawn and let his soldiers cause a distraction, allowing himself and his comrades to get inside the palace and search for the decanter. Should they encounter Sandark or Stifer along the way, they'd deal with it at the time. Satisfied with this choice of tactics, he then focussed on the upcoming task of marching to Malk.)

(Within the hour, the preliminaries and the preparations for the trip were complete. Mandika had ordered her elite guards to fall under Flaxley's command and they were ready to go.

Baffled and confused as to why he'd had to deliver a bucket of sand to the local cobbler, Lefiat returned to the beach and found Flaxley, Bonson, Kritz, Derek and Mandika standing in line, packed and ready to begin the march along the coast to Malk.

As he approached them, a bewildered look appeared on his face. Behind Flaxley and the rest of his allies, a group of forty or so swordsmen in black armour were silently standing in formation. Realising they must be the elite guards, he looked them up and down as he stepped up to Flaxley.)

LEFIAT: How many are there?

FLAXLEY: About time, Lefiat! We've been waiting for you!

(Lefiat scratched his head.)

LEFIAT: Sorry, um... why did the cobbler need sand? He was as baffled as I was when I dropped it off for him.

FLAXLEY: Um... never mind that, Lefiat! There's about forty elite guards there!

KRITZ: What's so elite about 'em, and why black armour?

MANDIKA: They're the ones Flaxley trained when he was my knight!

(Not in the best of moods with her husband, Kritz scoffed.)

KRITZ: Are they *all* sexist pigs then?

FLAXLEY: The black is for night time camouflage! Also, shut your face!

KRITZ: Whatever!

(She sneered then glanced out to sea.)

KRITZ: Tosser!

DEREK: You're not going to argue all day, are you?

KRITZ: Probably, why?

(Fed up with just standing there listening to Flaxley and Kritz bitch at one another, Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Are we gonna stand here all day, or are we going to get going? Only, I for one can't wait to commit suicide!

DEREK: Suicide? This isn't suicide!

BONSON: Not for *you* maybe, you're not in your sixties, frail and decrepit!

MANDIKA: *You're* only frail and decrepit when it suits you!

BONSON: Are you saying I play on my age to gain sympathy?

(She put her hands on her hips and gave him a look that challenged him to deny it.)

BONSON: If you are then... I didn't think you'd noticed.

(He forced a cough and started to head off.)

BONSON: Can't hang around here all day, places to go, people to kill!

(Highly amused by his actions, the others all chuckled and started to head off with him. The elite guards on the other hand, looked to one another in bewilderment and stayed put as the six allies headed towards the horizon together. The march to Malk had begun.)

DEREK: So, Flaxley, how far is this Malk again?

FLAXLEY: About thirty miles!

(Bonson groaned bitterly. As always, despite having volunteered to come along, as soon he'd had to exert himself, his mood has soured and all the world's problems became everyone's fault except his own.)

BONSON: My poor feet are going to be so sore. At my age...

MANDIKA: Pack it in. You'll get no sympathy from us!

BONSON: I wasn't even looking for any! Not that offering me some would hurt.

LEFIAT: Cheer up, Bonson, it could be worse!

BONSON: How?

LEFIAT: Um... at least it's not *forty* miles.

(Bonson glared at him coldly.)

BONSON: We should just gag you then we wouldn't have to keep wasting our energy telling you to shut up.

LEFIAT: I was only trying to help!

DEREK: He has a point, Bonson. Your being miserable isn't going to help anyone!

BONSON: Nor will it hinder them!

DEREK: Yes, but...

(Bonson raised his voice.)

BONSON: Look, if I *have* to accompany you on this futile mission, you could at least allow me the dignity of not liking it!!!

(With that, he scoffed bitterly then walked ahead to catch up with Kritz, who'd gone on in front so she didn't have to talk to Flaxley.)

FLAXLEY: Have to? Who said he *had* to? He's unbelievable.

MANDIKA: I know, right? It seems the older he gets, the grumpier he becomes!

LEFIAT: And the grumpier he becomes the more he picks on *me*.

DEREK: I had noticed that actually.

MANDIKA: Still, he's alright. As long as he's around should we need some wisdom, everything's fine!

(Flaxley gave her an approving glance.)

FLAXLEY: You seem very calm, Mandika.

MANDIKA: Do I?

FLAXLEY: Yes, you do!

(She shrugged.)

MANDIKA: Maybe I just feel safe with you guys!

FLAXLEY: And so you should!

LEFIAT: Um... Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Yes, Lefiat?

LEFIAT: What are we gonna do when we get to Malk? Are we just gonna charge in there as soon as we see it?

FLAXLEY: No, that'd be insane.

(He rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: We'll find a safe place nearby then set up camp for the night.

LEFIAT: Right... then what?

(Flaxley gave him a sideways glance then puffed out.)

FLAXLEY: Then we'll camp, obviously.

LEFIAT: Right...

FLAXLEY: Look, not that you'll remember any of this, but I'll take a sneaky look at Malk in the night and providing the terrain is suitable, we'll start a battle there at dawn. The plan is to use the commotion to sneak into the palace. Once inside, with any luck it *might* just be a case of finding then destroying the spirit decanter.

LEFIAT: Okay... and how do we do that?

FLAXLEY: What?

LEFIAT: How do we destroy the decanter?

FLAXLEY: Same way you'd destroy any decanter.

LEFIAT: Which is?

MANDIKA: Lefiat, you've accidentally smashed about *fifteen* decanters since I met you, you should be an expert at it by now.

LEFIAT: Yeah, but I've never smashed one on *purpose* before.

(Mandika gave him a sideways glance then looked to Flaxley.)

MANDIKA: We will find the decanter, won't we? Only, I really don't want to spend eternity in a dark, empty limbo.

DEREK: Well, who would?

FLAXLEY: Fear not, Mandika. With the six of us and a squadron of soldiers trained by *me*, they won't stand a chance!

(Having heard his boast from up ahead, Kritz threw up her arms and stopped walking, turning to face him in readiness to chastise him for his arrogance. As soon as she was facing him, however, her angry demeanour evaporated and a sinister smile enveloped her brow.)

KRITZ: Oh, really? Good *your* guards, are they?

(Not about to entertain her scoffing, he walked past her arrogantly.)

FLAXLEY: They're the best!

KRITZ: Really?

(Taking up a cocky stance as she watched him march forth, she retorted in a highly amused voice.)

KRITZ: Well, where are they then?

(Unimpressed, he turned back towards her to offer up a smarmy comment when he noticed her point. His elite guards were nowhere to be seen. At once, his face turned to one of utter disbelief and embarrassment.)

FLAXLEY: Where are they?

(He scratched his head in bewilderment as everyone turned in the direction of Guevina.)

BONSON: Brave bunch, aren't they?

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, no!

KRITZ: You should be proud, Flaxley, my love, they're brilliant!

(Flaxley retorted angrily.)

FLAXLEY: It's not their fault. No-one gave them the order to move out, that's all!

(She nodded in wholehearted agreement.)

KRITZ: So you agree, it's your fault then?

FLAXLEY: Oh, shut it you!

(Smirking from ear to ear, she sat down on the ground and flicked back her hair.)

KRITZ: We'll wait here for you!

(Groaning, Flaxley then started to head off back to Guevina.)

FLAXLEY: Bloody woman!

KRITZ: Same to you... but, you know... the opposite.

BONSON: Good come back.

KRITZ: Oh, shut it, Bonson.

(Having collected the elite guards, Flaxley re-joined his allies several minutes later, looking rattled and angry. Defying anyone to laugh, he stormed past them then headed on along the coast.)

FLAXLEY: Let's go!

(And so, the march resumed. As the elite guards brought up the rear, Derek caught up with Flaxley intent on discussing battle strategy while Kritz and Mandika ambled along having a girly chat just behind them. Over their shoulder, Lefiat and Bonson strolled side by side in perfect silence. As much as Bonson would have loved to have moaned about the prospect of his feet getting sore, with only Lefiat for an audience, he saved his breath.)

KRITZ: No, I think your hair looks nice!

MANDIKA: Oh, I agree, but it used to look better than nice. I loved my hair!

KRITZ: It'll grow back!

MANDIKA: I suppose so!

(She smiled.)

MANDIKA: I could have killed him when I realised what he'd done. My precious hair of all things!

KRITZ: It's good to see you can smile about it though. If someone did that to *my* hair they'd be dead by now.

(She looked to her and smiled warmly.)

KRITZ: All things considered, the fact you can smile at all is a miracle. You're a lot stronger than people give you credit for, babe.

MANDIKA: Really? Thanks, Kritz, it means a lot to me that you think that. You're a good friend!

KRITZ: Thanks!

(Mandika then proceeded to chuckle.)

KRITZ: What's so funny?

MANDIKA: It's just that... it's hard to believe I was going to have you arrested for hitting me if you ever set foot in Guevina!

KRITZ: You're not still bitter about that are you?

MANDIKA: I *was*, I cursed you for weeks. The black eye you gave me hurt like hell!

KRITZ: Sorry... but you *did* ask for it!

MANDIKA: That's the thing, you see. That was the one time I *didn't* ask for it. I guess you did owe me it though; I used to be so mean to you. I can't afford to be childish like that anymore. Father's gone, so it's down to me to be a good queen, not a petulant brat.

KRITZ: Good for you!

MANDIKA: It *was* unfortunate though. I was actually trying to be nice, but I picked the wrong word.

(Kritz grimaced.)

KRITZ: I wasn't to know that though, was I? As far as I was concerned, you'd called me a tart for the five hundredth time and I snapped!

MANDIKA: Yeah... sorry about that.

(They kindly smiled to one another.)

MANDIKA: Um... Kritz?

KRITZ: Hmm?

MANDIKA: Why *do* you get so mad when someone calls you a tart?

KRITZ: I dunno.

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: Maybe deep down I hate being questioned.

MANDIKA: What?

KRITZ: I dress this way for several reasons. Not only is the south bloody hot, but I was raised wearing skimpy leather by the Trepe, I just feel comfortable this way. Not to mention the fact that skimpy clothes give me freedom to move and you *need* that when you're a fighter. And underwear is... just uncomfortable. 28 days of the month, you can forget it!

MANDIKA: I see.

KRITZ: Mostly though, I dress like I do because I look damned sexy!

MANDIKA: Thought so!

KRITZ: That's the way I am, Mandika. And if someone criticises my choice of attire, they criticise my very being! That's how *I* see it anyway.

(Mandika looked away and rubbed her eyes innocently as she mumbled to herself.)

MANDIKA: And there I was thinking you were just a loony with a short fuse.

(As they resumed their girly chat, Flaxley and Derek strode on up ahead discussing what Flaxley knew of Sandark's reputation.)

DEREK: What? Surely not *all* his limbs?

FLAXLEY: Yup, first he removed his legs with his sword then he pulled the bloke's arms off with his bare hands!

DEREK: Sounds like a nice bloke!

FLAXLEY: Well, that's Sandark for you!

DEREK: Is that a true story?

FLAXLEY: I don't know. But if it is, one thing's for sure, that bloke will never spill Sandark's ale again!

DEREK: Eh?

FLAXLEY: I know. Trivial, eh?

DEREK: Where do you hear these tales?

FLAXLEY: I've travelled. There's a *lot* of stories like that out there, my three-foot tall, green alien friend!

DEREK: Hmm... some truer than others, I suspect!

FLAXLEY: I'm only telling you what they told me. We saw how agile Sandark is. Maybe it's true, maybe it isn't!

DEREK: Hopefully... well, probably not!

FLAXLEY: Don't be so sure...

(As he glanced forwards, he was thrown by the sight before him and performed a double take.)

FLAXLEY: What the...

(As he stopped walking and scratched his chin, the others came to a standstill around him and joined him in observing the bewildering sight before them.)

LEFIAT: So... which way?

(The last thing they'd expected to see on what was supposed to be a simple march along the coastline was a lagoon. Faced with either continuing along the thin strip of sandy beach or walking around the lake that had formed behind it, Flaxley paused to consider the better option. Moments later, nodding to his own thoughts, he turned to face the others.)

FLAXLEY: Let's keep to the beach, chaps. I've no idea how far out of our way the other side of this lagoon will take us! It could add miles to the trip if we walk around it.

(They all looked along the thin piece of sand that stretched across the water before them.)

BONSON: It's very thin, Flaxley. What if the tide comes in?

FLAXLEY: The tide *is* in!

BONSON: I see. Good answer!

LEFIAT: It's only about four foot wide though.

(Flaxley turned and frowned at him.)

FLAXLEY: Only? That's plenty! Or were you planning to roll there sideways?

LEFIAT: Eh?

FLAXLEY: Buffoon.

BONSON: Forgive his reluctance, Flaxley. With water on *both* sides you know he's bound to fall in at some point.

FLAXLEY: Stop picking on the lad, Bonson. I don't care how grossly incompetent he is, he's still one of the team!

(Lefiat beamed.)

LEFIAT: See, Bonson?

BONSON: My god, you actually thought that was a compliment!

LEFIAT: Eh?

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, let's get going!

(With that, he started to head for the thin strip of sand, then stopped and turned.)

FLAXLEY: Umm... move out, guards!

DEREK: Well remembered!

FLAXLEY: Only just... I told them to stop when we do and march when we do, but it's best not to take any chances. Kritz would have had a field day in we left them behind again!

DEREK: You know she loves you really!

(His words were greeted with a cold silence.)

DEREK: I see.

(As they resumed walking, Derek cringed uneasily, listening to Flaxley's peeved thoughts about Kritz. Not wishing to get involved, he glanced from side to side then fell back to chat with Mandika and apologise once again for missing her coronation.)

With Mandika deep in discussion with her minuscule green house guest, Kritz glanced out to sea to admire the sun reflecting on the ocean and started to fall behind.

In the middle of them all, Bonson was starting to look irritated. Walking on sand was hard work and his urge to complain was starting to become overwhelming. Such was his frustration; it wasn't long before he could no longer contain his grievances. Even if it meant striking up a conversation with Lefiat, he simply couldn't keep it to himself any longer.)

BONSON: How much further for Pete's sake? I'm in no condition to hike long distances!

(Lefiat looked stunned.)

LEFIAT: Are you starting a conversation with me?

BONSON: Yes, I am! Don't get used to it though, I'm desperate.

LEFIAT: Yeah, but *I* aint. If you think I'm gonna walk about listening to some whinging old codger who hates my guts, you can think again!

(Bonson was furious.)

BONSON: I'm not forcing you to listen, you adolescent ingrate!

(Lefiat looked blank.)

LEFIAT: What does that mean?

BONSON: Bloody hell, you make Kritz look educated!

LEFIAT: That's not fair! Flaxley's been tutoring her on big words!

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: Good god you're a halfwit!

LEFIAT: Yeah, so you keep telling me!

(Bonson snarled at him then shook his head.)

BONSON: This walk is killing me... I thought I knew hell, but this...

LEFIAT: You know hell?

BONSON: Well, I was married once, you know?

(Much to Bonson's annoyance, Lefiat started to giggle.)

BONSON: Are you laughing at me?

LEFIAT: No, no, it's just... I can't imagine *you* having a wife!

(Bonson turned his head with displeasure.)

BONSON: What are you implying?

LEFIAT: What am I what?

BONSON: Implying!!! What does that mean?

LEFIAT: Dunno, you said it!

(Flapping like a demented seagull, Bonson bounced with rage.)

BONSON: I don't mean that!!! What do you mean, you can't imagine me having a wife???

(Leaning back on the defensive, Lefiat replied nervously.)

LEFIAT: I just mean... you don't seem the type!

BONSON: Don't seem the type? To what, have a woman???

LEFIAT: Well...

BONSON: Are you suggesting I'm a poofa???

LEFIAT: No!

BONSON: Better bloody not be either!!!

LEFIAT: I wasn't... it's just women make you... enormous? Um... no!

BONSON: Nauseas?

LEFIAT: Yeah!

(Circling his shoulders, Bonson took a deep breath.)

BONSON: Yes... well nothing can annoy you quite like a woman can... at least I used to think so until I met *you*!

LEFIAT: Hey!

BONSON: Still, annoying as they are, we men need women. Nobody will *ever* need *you*!

LEFIAT: I aint talking to you!

BONSON: Finally some good news!

LEFIAT: You're a mean...

(His words were then interrupted by the sound of Kritz yelping from behind them. Fearing she'd been hurt, everyone spun around to face her.)

FLAXLEY: What's up? You okay?

(She stood there vigorously rubbing her cheek, with a confused look on her face.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz?

KRITZ: What?

FLAXLEY: You yelped, what's up?

KRITZ: Well...

(She looked up and saw everyone waiting for her to speak.)

KRITZ: Um... as crazy as this may sound... I could've sworn a fish jumped out of the sea and slapped me!

(At once, her face turned bright red as everyone fell about laughing, except Flaxley who just stood there, hands on hips, glaring at her.)

KRITZ: What? It did!!!

(As everyone laughed louder, Flaxley shook his head. Immediately assuming she was playing up on purpose and deliberately inciting the laughs she was receiving, just to annoy him, he stared down at her with belittling eyes.)

FLAXLEY: You do realise we're on an important mission here, don't you?

(She looked mortified.)

KRITZ: Don't you dare talk down to me like that! I'm telling the truth!

FLAXLEY: I expect better from you.

(He turned to face the others and raised his voice.)

FLAXLEY: No more bugging about!!! This is a serious mission and we'll treat it with the respect it deserves!!!

(With that, he flexed his arms then continued to walk, leaving Kritz gobsmacked and rejected as everyone marched away after him, grinning.)

KRITZ: Bastards!

(With that, she too started to proceed, head down, complaining to herself.)

KRITZ: Bunch of dip-shits, what do they know? And as for that bloody husband of mine, he'd better get used to sleeping in the spare room.

(She yelped again.)

KRITZ: Yeow!!!

(As she held her open palm to her cheek, everyone spun around to face her.)

FLAXLEY: What now?

KRITZ: It happened again!

(As everyone started to hide their faces and giggle, Flaxley gritted his teeth.)

FLAXLEY: Look, Kritz, I've had enough of this! I don't know what's got into you today, but...

(Looking fed up to the back teeth he then paced up to her angrily.)

FLAXLEY: Listen...

(His words were then interrupted by the sound of Lefiat screaming out.)

LEFIAT: Yeow!!! That stings!

FLAXLEY: What?

LEFIAT: A fish!

(Starting to lose his temper, Flaxley fumed and scowled around at everyone in the party.)

FLAXLEY: Right! If anyone else wants to join in and make a fish joke, do it now! Get it out of your system then perhaps we can continue on like adults!

(Just then, a huge school of fish leapt from the sea, in the direction of the deep lagoon on the other side of the sand. In a huge panic, everyone dived for cover and covered as a million fish flew overhead. As they lay in the sand, covering their heads, Kritz scowled at Flaxley.)

KRITZ: I think someone owes me an apology!!!

FLAXLEY: What's Bonson said now?

KRITZ: Not him! *You!!!*

FLAXLEY: Me?

BONSON: Look, never mind arguing. Think of something.

(As the fish continued to fly overhead, blocking out the sun, Flaxley mused to himself.)

FLAXLEY: Hmm... how about inferno magic?

DEREK: Flaxley, forget your stomach, we've gotta get out of this mess.

FLAXLEY: I wasn't thinking about food, Derek. I meant...

(As Derek glared at him defiantly, Flaxley sighed.)

FLAXLEY: Oh... read my mind, didn't you?

DEREK: Yes!

(Just then, Lefiat spoke up enthusiastically.)

LEFIAT: Besides, surely lightning magic would be better for that. I've got lightning magic!

BONSON: I'm pleased for you, Lefiat, really I am!

FLAXLEY: Actually, that's a good idea, Lefiat. Inferno magic would only blast a hole in their number; with lightning you can spray it back and forth and block them outright, can't you?

DEREK: I can try.

FLAXLEY: Okay, Lefiat, Derek, prepare your lightning magic! Just be careful.

(Laying several feet away, Mandika called out to them desperately.)

MANDIKA: Care to tell me what you've got planned, you lot? I'm scared.

FLAXLEY: I'd love to, Mandika, but right now we've got bigger fish to fry!

(A depressed look washed over his face and he fell silent.)

DEREK: Flaxley?

BONSON: Leave him, Derek. Just concentrate on creating an electric barrier to block the fish and leave Flaxley alone to rue his pun!

(With a subdued voice and miserable expression to match, Flaxley then spoke up.)

FLAXLEY: Go for it, men.

(As soon as he said it, the deluge of leaping fish ceased and the sun broke through once again. Lefiat was most disappointed. So rarely was he called up to help, he was devastated that he never got the chance. For the others, there was much relief. They had no idea how long it would last and were beginning to fear they'd be laying there for quite some time. Slowly, they climbed to their feet feeling a little perplexed by the phenomenon. Some thirty feet behind them, the elite guards followed suit. With a face of misery, Flaxley was the last to rise.)

FLAXLEY: Did I really make that pun?

MANDIKA: Not the first time is it, Flaxley?

(He shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry everyone.

BONSON: Hey, snap out of it. Someone's supposed to be leading us!

FLAXLEY: True!

(He lifted his head.)

FLAXLEY: Then let's... move out.

(Slowly, they moved on as the odd straggling fish continued to leap across.)

KRITZ: This is awkward, I hate fish!

DEREK: Just try to be conscious of them, it could be worse!

FLAXLEY: Yes, it could, you might be an intelligent person inflicted with the curse of making pathetic puns every time you get into a scrape!

KRITZ: How do you think *I* feel? I married the idiot!

(He gave her an unimpressed glance.)

FLAXLEY: You're an evil woman, Kritzeveltia!

(Just then, a straggling fish leapt from the sea and slapped the hapless Lefiat full on the side of his face then plopped to the sand, making him stumble and fall over.)

LEFIAT: Ow!!!

(Looking deeply concerned, Bonson rushed over towards him. Lefiat was most surprised and raised his hand for Bonson to help him up.)

LEFIAT: I'm okay, Bonson, but thanks...

BONSON: Forget you...

(With that, he blasted the fish with a heavy dose of inferno magic.)

BONSON: I'm hungry!

LEFIAT: Eh?

(Looking like the cat who got the cream, Bonson scooped up the hot fish and juggled it as he made his way back to the others leaving Lefiat with his hand raised in the air.)

LEFIAT: I should have known you were going to do that!

(As Bonson sauntered off ahead, happily tucking into his freshly cooked fish, the others watched him go and grinned to themselves.)

MANDIKA: You've gotta love that guy!

(Lefiat's frown begged to differ.)

(As the day wearied on, the forty or so travellers continued their determined march, edging ever closer to the township of Malk. With beautiful golden sand ahead, a shimmering sea on one side and a gleaming lake stretching to the horizon on the other, it would have been easy to let their minds wander and allow themselves to enjoy the tranquillity. With the burden of saving Mandika from possession and the consequences should they fail, however, they all remained focussed on the objective in hand. The elite guards who were marching behind the main party of six, were too professional to show any emotion about what might lay ahead, but they too knew the importance of the task they were duty bound to undertake. And thus, they followed on, marching in line like a well oiled unit. Mandika herself, started to feel a little nervous. She knew that every step was a step closer to a battle that would determine her very existence. With complete faith in her friends and allies however, she soldiered forth, determined not to let her anxiety show. Maintaining a straight face, she paced between Kritz and Flaxley staring dead ahead while Bonson trudged just behind, complaining about his aching feet all the while.)

MANDIKA: I'm not scared, you know?

(Kritz gave her a sideways glance.)

KRITZ: You scared, babe?

MANDIKA: A little bit!

(Flaxley put an arm around her.)

FLAXLEY: Try not to fret, princess. We won't let you down!

(Comforted slightly, she smiled.)

MANDIKA: I know!

(A little way behind, Lefiat spotted Flaxley with his arm around Mandika and gestured to draw Derek's attention to it.)

LEFIAT: Look at that!

DEREK: What about it?

LEFIAT: What do you mean, "what about it"? What do you think he'd do if I put my arm around Kritz?

(Derek frowned.)

DEREK: Well whatever he'd do, it'd be nothing compared to what Kritz would do to you!

(Hoping he'd get a sympathetic ear, Lefiat groaned under his breath.)

LEFIAT: I knew you'd take his side!

DEREK: Side? He's consoling her, you idiot!

LEFIAT: Yeah well, first time I tried to console her, he threatened to cut my testicles off! What's to stop me doing the same to him?

(Derek gave him a disbelieving look.)

DEREK: You want me to make a list?

LEFIAT: Eh?

DEREK: Well, for starters, he's bigger than you and would you pummel you into the sand for even suggesting it!

LEFIAT: What are you saying?

DEREK: Anyway, what's this all about? You're supposed to protect Mandika from harm, not protect her being consoled by her friends!

(Lefiat sighed and gave him an accepting smile.)

LEFIAT: I know it's just that...

DEREK: I know, Mandika's in terrible trouble and you're worried you can't do enough to help her on your own; I read your mind!

(Lefiat looked at his feet.)

LEFIAT: Yeah... I guess that's it!

DEREK: Well, you're not on your own, Lefiat. We're all here for her. Having everyone by my side when Zanne was in trouble was priceless. Letting everyone share the burden helped no end. Let us share yours!

(Lefiat nodded to his words of wisdom.)

LEFIAT: Thanks, Derek. That's great advice. Bonson would have said that with me for a knight, Mandika has every reason to be worried or something mean like that.

DEREK: Well you know, there's actually a very easy way to avoid him being cruel to you when you go to him for advice!

LEFIAT: Really?

DEREK: Yes. Don't go to him for advice!

LEFIAT: I don't. But sometimes, I air my feelings out loud and...

DEREK: He appears; forked tongue at the ready. Yes, yes I know.

(Up ahead of them, the miserable old man in question was living up to his reputation. Having walked for hours and hours, he ached all over and his feet were extremely sore. It was a misery he wasn't about to keep to himself for long.)

BONSON: I've got blisters the size of cabbages on my feet! How much further for fuck sake?

FLAXLEY: Actually, Bonson, not that far!

BONSON: And when you say, "not that far", you mean what exactly?

FLAXLEY: I mean not that far!

BONSON: Right... "not far" like the time you told us Wendigo wasn't that far, despite the fact we were still days away? Or do you mean not far as in actually not far?

MANDIKA: Come off it, Bonson, it can't be much further, you know that. Try to keep your pecker up!

(Determined not to cheer up, no matter what anyone said, Bonson snarled.)

BONSON: My pecker's fine! It's my feet that hurt!

KRITZ: Big baby!

FLAXLEY: He's not a big baby. He's far worse. Even babies don't cry that much. (Mandika found Flaxley's comment highly amusing, much to Bonson's annoyance.)

BONSON: Oh that's right. Mock the *old* chap! May I remind you, I didn't *have* to come? I did so out of the goodness of my heart!

FLAXLEY: Make your mind up. Earlier you tried to claim we forced you to come.

BONSON: That's not how I remember the conversation going, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: No, I don't suppose it is.

(Bonson shook his head and sighed.)

BONSON: Honestly, I give up my free time to help and what do I get? Mocked and belittled.

MANDIKA: We're not mocking you, Bonson. On the contrary, I'm extremely grateful.

BONSON: Yes, well... so you should bloody be.

(With a face as black as thunder, he then folded his arms and continued on, mumbling bitterly to himself.)

BONSON: Young people these days have no bloody respect...

(As he continued to rant under his breath, Mandika rolled her eyes then looked to the lowering sun and sighed.)

MANDIKA: Not much daylight left, guys!

(Glancing towards the sun, Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: You're right!

FLAXLEY: Well as I said, it's not much further now!

BONSON: It was different in my day; people didn't dare disrespect their elders...

(As Bonson continued to grumble to himself, Kritz stared at him astonishment then spoke up in a bewildered voice.)

KRITZ: You weren't kidding, Flaxley. He really *is* worse than a baby. Even the twins didn't complain that much when they both had nasty rashes.

BONSON: No bloody discipline, that's their problem.

(Flaxley gave Bonson a sideways glance then looked to Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: You're right, they didn't. And those were bloody nasty rashes.

KRITZ: Yeah, poor buggers cried all night!

FLAXLEY: And all day!

KRITZ: That seaweed balm worked wonders though; it was nice to see the smiles come back to their little faces. Within hours they were gurgling, laughing and...

(Much to her infuriation, Bonson then sped ahead with his fingers in his ears, yelling at the top of his voice in protest at her choice of topic.)

BONSON: Blah, bloody, blah... nobody gives a shit... blah, blah, blah!

(Kritz screeched at him.)

KRITZ: Hey!!!

(Wearing a ferocious snarl, she rushed at him and pushed him over. Looking equally as furious, he rolled in the sand before defying his age and leaping to his feet to face her down.)

BONSON: Hey, you assaulted me!

KRITZ: Well, how dare you do that when I'm talking???

(Feeling quite assured that violence wasn't likely to ensue, Flaxley and Mandika stopped to watch them argue. Derek and Lefiat soon caught up and the elite guards halted behind them. The entire march at a temporary stand still so Bonson and Kritz could have it out.)

KRITZ: I've never been so insulted in all my life!

BONSON: Even so, that doesn't give you the right to violate my being like that! I could have been killed!

KRITZ: Killed? Hardly!

BONSON: Okay maybe not killed, but you still shouldn't go round physically assaulting frail old men!!!

KRITZ: I don't *go round* assaulting frail old men!

BONSON: You just bloody did! It's a poor old showing when a man my age can't express his right to freedom of speech without being beaten to a pulp by the likes of you!!!

KRITZ: I pushed you! And I'll do it again if you ever behave like that again!

BONSON: I wouldn't expect anything less from you! The only one here you haven't at least *tried* to physically assault is Derek!

KRITZ: Hey this isn't about me!

BONSON: It is now! I'm making it so! According to Flaxley you tried to deck him when you first met him, then you beat Lefiat unconscious in Marlboro and last summer you gave Mandika a black eye. Now you've added *me* to the list! Psycho! (Biting her lip in an attempt to restrain her anger, Kritz tapped her foot and stared at the floor.)

KRITZ: Keep talking, Bonson. Just give me an excuse, go on.

(At this point, he noticed her tapping her thigh in the same irritated way Flaxley did when he was trying to remain calm and it dawned at him that she was about to explode. Shuddering at the thought of being on the end of Kritz's fists when she went into a rage, he gulped and tried to back down. Unfortunately, his over-inflated ego made the simple task of not being confrontational quite the challenge.)

BONSON: Yes, well, anyway... I forgive you.

(Far from impressed with his words, she snarled and proceeded to tap her thigh even faster.)

BONSON: Oh, crap... um... I think we should... you know... put this in the past and move on.

(The sight of a nervous, stumbling Bonson was a joy for his allies to watch. Having all been on the receiving end of his vile tongue on numerous occasions, they watched on wearing highly amused smiles as he continued to try to back down.)

BONSON: Thing is... you see, there's no need to get upset. All I was saying was...

(Still facing the sand, Kritz coldly looked up at him with the top of her eyes.)

KRITZ: Yes?

(Wearing a cheesy grin, he softened his tone and hunched his shoulders.)

BONSON: I was just saying... nobody wants to hear about your babies!

(Immediately, he reeled back as Kritz lifted her head and replied in a condescending tone.)

KRITZ: You mean *you* don't!

(Desperate to clarify his point without losing any teeth, Bonson tried to elaborate.)

BONSON: Well, no actually. What I mean is... and don't take this the wrong way, you're a great lady, whom I greatly respect...

(He paused to see if his endearment had gained him any kudos. Seeing it clearly hadn't, he gulped then continued.)

BONSON: I was just saying... nobody *ever* wants to hear about somebody else's kids. Other people's kids are a mind-numbing subject!

(Kritz relented her angry stance and scoffed.)

KRITZ: That's crap, Bonson!

MANDIKA: Actually, Kritz... he has a point!

(She gave Mandika a filthy look when much to her amazement she noticed Flaxley nodding in agreement with her.)

KRITZ: Flaxley???

(Flaxley shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry, darling, it's actually kinda true!

KRITZ: No it aint! You're all being ridiculous!

(Mandika sighed.)

MANDIKA: Are we?

KRITZ: Yes!

MANDIKA: My little cousin, Lily, she's 3 next year, her little fingers are so cute and when she smiles she gets these tiny dimples...

(Kritz immediately shuddered and reeled away with a disturbed look on her face. The reality then then hit her like a thunder bolt.)

KRITZ: Wow! Other people's kids really *are* tedious to hear about!

MANDIKA: Yup!

KRITZ: Sorry guys. I'll never mention the kids again!

FLAXLEY: Spoken like a true neglectful parent!

KRITZ: Oh, go fondle yourself!

FLAXLEY: Charming!

(Kritz then turned to Bonson.)

KRITZ: You could have just told me that, you know? There was no need to be so bloody rude about it.

BONSON: I already did. I told you in the pub two days ago.

(Kritz stared at him blankly for a moment.)

KRITZ: Fine, whatever. I still think you were out of order, but I'm sorry I pushed you over.

(Bonson nodded acceptingly.)

BONSON: And I'm sorry you didn't fall over with me and land with your boobs in my face.

KRITZ: Friends?

BONSON: Seeing as lovers is off the menu, I guess it'll have to do.

(Smiling warmly, Kritz then gave him a warm hug. As she did so he smelt her hair then squeezed her bottom.)

BONSON: Ooh, firm!

(Kritz slapped his hand away then paced away, chuckling out loud as she resumed her march.)

KRITZ: Bonson, you're a disgrace.

BONSON: Yes, but I'm a loveable one.

(At this point, he noticed a fuming Flaxley glaring his way.)

FLAXLEY: Bonson...

BONSON: Oh shit! Um, never mind that, Flaxley! We ought to get going, important mission ahead, don't you know?

(And with no more ado, Bonson set off at a blistering pace. Literally. Having copped a feel of Kritz's backside he certainly wasn't going to stand around and discuss it with Flaxley. With Kritz and Bonson leading the way, the journey then resumed once more.)

(With determination to do right by Mandika as their inspiration, over the next six or seven hours, the determined party from Guevina made exceptional progress. Marching forth, keeping their minds occupied with conversation, they barely even stopped for a breather and soon found themselves at the point where they were keeping an eye out for the township of Malk on the horizon. It had been quite an outstanding achievement to cover such a distance in such a short time, but with the exception of an exhausted Bonson, they'd done so without complaint.

Also worn out from the day of relentless marching, Lefiat and Mandika had long since started to struggle but they carried on regardless. The importance of their mission too great to even suggest stopping prematurely. Derek, Flaxley, Kritz and the elite guards, on the other hand, continued forth with ease. Their superior fitness levels coming to the fore.

As dusk set in, and the last few shreds of sunlight evaporated, the silhouetted tower atop Malk's palace finally came into view above some treetops. A welcome sight for the tiring party from Guevina. Flaxley took a special interest in the landscape at this point. The lagoon to their side ended 50 feet or so in front of them to be replaced by a lush meadow. Between the meadow and what they could see of Malk, stood a densely forested area. He surveyed the scene with his eyes for a few moments before mumbling out loud as he marched in the moonlight with his comrades.)

FLAXLEY: So that's Malk!

BONSON: Thank heaven for that! Did I mention my feet are killing me?

(He breathed a sigh of relief.)

LEFIAT: It looks kinda scary!

BONSON: Yes, well, it doesn't take much to scare *you*. Though, old buildings always do look kinda spooky in this light!

(Mandika glanced up at the moon then looked to Flaxley.)

MANDIKA: Seeing as it's dark, shall we light a torch, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: No. Sorry, Mandika, that'd give away our position!

MANDIKA: Of course. Man, I'm silly sometimes.

(Just then, Derek yelled out in a blind panic.)

DEREK: Fish!!!

(At once, everyone stared at him in bewilderment.)

KRITZ: Fish?

(With that, they all looked at one another then quickly dived to the ground as once again, an enormous school of grey fish leapt over their heads. This time they were leaping from the lagoon, back into the sea. Frustrated at having to stop, having got so

near to the end of the golden strip of sand, they laid and waited for the fish to pass with peeved expressions on their faces.)

MANDIKA: I don't believe this!

DEREK: How often do they do this?

KRITZ: Too often!

BONSON: I should imagine they do it whenever they're hungry. They probably live in the lagoon and feed in the sea. Or vice versa, of course.

MANDIKA: Thanks for the lesson, professor. Flaxley, what should we do?

BONSON: You can start by not calling me professor!

MANDIKA: Is your name Flaxley?

(Bonson grinned.)

BONSON: It could be. I mean, if Kritz lost her eyesight and was fumbling in the darkness calling out for her husband to come and give her a seeing too, yes. Flaxley would most definitely be the name I answered to.

KRITZ: I'd need to lose more than my bloody eyesight, Bonson.

BONSON: Well, fuck you.

(He snarled then glanced away.)

BONSON: That's bloody nice, isn't it?

MANDIKA: Will you shut up?

(Furious at being spoken down to, Bonson shook his fist at her.)

BONSON: Don't you take that tone with me, young lady! By golly, Mandika, I swear, any more lip from you and I'll go back to Guevina and swear you in as queen again right now!

FLAXLEY: Bonson!!!

BONSON: What?

(Noticing the furious snarls he was receiving, he shrunk and lowered his head.)

BONSON: Right. Inappropriate. My bad.

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: In answer to your question, Mandika...

MANDIKA: Which was?

FLAXLEY: What we're going to do.

MANDIKA: Oh, right.

FLAXLEY: Well, we'll wait. Don't worry, they'll pass!

MANDIKA: Right, okay!

(She rolled her eyes then glared at Bonson.)

MANDIKA: Why do you have to make even the simplest conversation hard work?

BONSON: I don't *have* to! It just do.

MANDIKA: Silly sod.

(With that, they all made themselves comfortable in the sand as the hoards of scaly fish carried on their seemingly incessant sortie overhead. Feeling powerless and yet completely unthreatened by the event, they used it as welcome opportunity to get a few minutes rest.

Just as it had before, after a good few minutes passed, the sounds of clashing scales and constant splashing stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Sensing much relief, everyone looked up at the welcome sight of the night sky above before slowly climbing to their feet and dusting the sand from themselves.)

BONSON: Bloody stuff gets everywhere!

FLAXLEY: Right, now that's over, let's get off this ridiculous sandy plateau before anything else can go wrong!

(He took one step forward then stopped in his tracks.)

FLAXLEY: Too late!

(They all looked on in horror at the incredible size and amazingly muscular bulk of a colossal whale crab, thirty feet ahead of them. With pincers the size of horses and a shell as hard as iron, it completely blocked the sandy path ahead. To have walked such a distance down the thin stretch of beach, only to have their way blocked so near to the end, didn't do much for Bonson's mood.)

BONSON: Fucking marvellous. Absolutely no way around it.

(He then glared at Lefiat.)

BONSON: Why can't it be *you* Aurora wants to possess? I wouldn't have bothered coming if it was *you* who was in danger. I'd be at home right now with my feet up. Chuckling.

LEFIAT: That's just plain nasty, Bonson!

BONSON: Suck it up, mistake boy, the truth hurts sometimes.

(Kritz gave Bonson a disbelieving glance then looked to Flaxley.)

KRITZ: So, what do we do now? We're trapped.

FLAXLEY: Yes, yes we are.

LEFIAT: Um... we could always go back and walk around the lagoon instead!

FLAXLEY: *You* can! It's taken us all day to cross this thing! And besides, Malk is right there!!!

(He pointed to the top of the tower they'd spotted earlier.)

DEREK: Maybe it'll just leave now the fish have gone!

FLAXLEY: Maybe... or it might decide *we'd* make an even *better* meal!

MANDIKA: Don't say that!

(They then watched it silently for a few moments as they pondered their next move.)

FLAXLEY: We can't just stand here and do nothing. Derek?

DEREK: Yeah?

FLAXLEY: Try frightening it away with inferno magic!

DEREK: Okay!

FLAXLEY: But be careful, those pincers can rip a tree in two!

DEREK: What? Fuck that! You go!

FLAXLEY: I haven't got magic.

(Derek glared at him coldly for a moment then sighed despondently.)

DEREK: Fine... but you'd better be grateful for this!

FLAXLEY: Derek, just fire at it, it'll retreat and we can finally get off this beach. Nothing to worry about.

DEREK: I hope you're right!

(With that, he slowly approached the motionless giant crustacean, stopping fifteen feet away.)

DEREK: Um... good crab... shoo!

(He then raised his hand and flicked out his fingers.)

DEREK: Inferno!

(Everyone watched on as a huge flame raged from his fingers towards the enormous foe. Keeping up the continuous fiery attack, he focussed hard as Flaxley hurried to his side, sensing his magic might just do the trick.)

FLAXLEY: Nice one, Derek!

(With another flick of his wrist, Derek lowered his hand and watched the end of his flame peter out against the giant crab.)

DEREK: Um...

FLAXLEY: Derek? Why isn't it retreating?

(Before Derek could answer the furious creature stood tall on its pincers, completely unscathed by the burning flame, and turned to face them.)

FLAXLEY: I'm no expert on whale crabs, but I don't think this is a good sign!

(Derek turned to Flaxley.)

DEREK: Now what?

(Flaxley looked down to him but before he could even begin to reply, Kritz bellowed out in terror.)

KRITZ: Look out!!!

(Heeding her warning, they both spun round in horror to see the crab edging its way towards them furiously.)

FLAXLEY: Back, Derek!

(He drew his sword and stood firm as Derek slowly backed away, gaping.)

FLAXLEY: Take this!!!

(With that, he raced at the crab and swiped at its pincer with his giant blade, barely scratching it.)

FLAXLEY: Uh-oh!

(With a roar, the giant crab then swiped back at him with its other pincer. Looking mortified, Flaxley desperately dived backwards, barely avoiding its razor sharp attack. Desperate to get out of harms way, he then scrambled to his feet and ran back to the others as the crab continued to advance towards them.)

LEFIAT: What are we gonna do?

KRITZ: Think of something!!!

BONSON: I don't know about you, but I'm swimming for it!

(Flaxley grabbed him before he could make a desperate dash for the water.)

FLAXLEY: The creatures in there will devour you in seconds!

BONSON: And this crab only wants to play chess I suppose?

(Glancing back at the creature, Flaxley then called out to his elite guards.)

FLAXLEY: Don't attack it with your swords, it's a futile gesture. I'm just lucky mine didn't snap!

(He then snarled at the advancing crab.)

FLAXLEY: Which begs the question, what the hell *can* we attack it with?

(At first, they all stood their ground as the giant crab edged ever closer. Before long however, they found themselves pacing backwards, still devoid of ideas on how to defeat it or at least make it retreat so they could head in the right direction.)

FLAXLEY: This is ridiculous! We'll end up back in Guevina at this rate!

(No-one answered. They just continued to backtrack, with their eyes fixed on the crustacean foe.)

FLAXLEY: Why didn't the inferno magic work?

MANDIKA: Maybe it was the shell!

KRITZ: I doubt it, he didn't even singe the pincers either!

FLAXLEY: Then why?

MANDIKA: Come on, Bonson? You're wise!

BONSON: Thank you!

MANDIKA: Well? Why didn't the inferno magic work?

BONSON: Maybe it's fireproof, I don't bloody know, do I?

(Mandika looked back at the sizeable crustacean and gulped.)

MANDIKA: Then how the hell *are* we going to defeat this...

(She scrutinised it closely then shuddered.)

MANDIKA: Giant enemy crab...

(Bonson shrugged desperately.)

BONSON: I dunno! Try hitting its weak point for massive damage!

MANDIKA: We don't know its weak point!

(Bonson looked enlightened.)

BONSON: Actually, maybe we do!

(He then looked to Flaxley urgently.)

BONSON: It *is* kind of fireproof, right now, Flaxley. It just came out of the sea.

(Flaxley looked to him then pointed at him solidly to acknowledge he'd made a good point.)

FLAXLEY: That's right! It's fresh out of the sea and soaked through! Of course inferno didn't work! Excellent thinking, Bonson.

BONSON: I don't do any other kind.

(Flaxley then turned to the backtracking Derek urgently.)

FLAXLEY: Derek?

DEREK: What?

FLAXLEY: Try wind magic!!!

DEREK: No point, that thing's far too heavy!

FLAXLEY: How about glacier then?

DEREK: Hmm... okay. I'll give it a go!

(As they continued their worried retreat, Derek once again thrust his hand forward.)

DEREK: Glacier!!!

(At once, a huge icy jet crashed into the hungry beast making it rear up then instinctively scramble into the deep lagoon for its own safety.)

FLAXLEY: Excellent!!! Now quick, let's get the hell out of here.

(With that, they all immediately started to charge for the end of the strip of sand, staring at the ripples from where the crab had submerged. Eager to feel the turf from the meadow under their feet, they wasted no time in sprinting from the sand to the relative safety of the grassy pasture beyond it.

As soon as they were a good thirty feet from the sandy strip, Flaxley, Bonson, Kritz, Lefiat, Mandika and Derek came to a halt then turned and stared back at it while they caught their breath.)

MANDIKA: I'm knackered!

LEFIAT: Yeah, same here!

(Watching as the last few elite guards raced from the sand, Flaxley nodded with satisfaction, when much to his dismay, the whale crabbed swiftly emerged from the water behind them.)

FLAXLEY: Look out!!!

(Everyone gasped in horror and looked on helplessly as the crab grabbed one of the guards with its pincer and ripped him in two like a breadstick.)

MANDIKA: No!!!

(While the rest of the elite guards sprinted to safety, she covered her head with her hands and fought off a sick feeling swelling inside her throat.)

FLAXLEY: Come on, we need to get out of here!

MANDIKA: What, just go? But, that's callous! A man just died, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: It may seem callous, Mandika but, whatever his name was, there's nothing we can do nothing for him now!

(With that, he put his arm around her and swiftly directed her away. Glancing backwards uneasily, the others raced after them, anxious to put as much distance between themselves and the crab as they could.

Very much aware of Malk's proximity, Flaxley hurriedly led them down the side of the forested area that stood between themselves and the town, all the while keeping his eyes open for the best place to set up camp in readiness for a dawn assault.

Looking back as he raced forth, Derek couldn't get his mind off of the whale crab.)

DEREK: Have we lost it?

FLAXLEY: I should think so! It's unlikely to stray from the beach, old chap!

DEREK: Good, 'cause if we go much further, we'll end up in Malk, and we don't want that!

LEFIAT: Not yet we don't anyway!

(Flaxley was incensed.)

FLAXLEY: No we won't, Derek. Why do you think I led us this way?

(Derek read his mind then grimaced.)

DEREK: Right. I thought we were just running away from the crab!

FLAXLEY: No, that was *you*! I led us this way for a reason. We're running parallel to Malk. Which means that by my estimation it's *still* a good half a mile away!

(He rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway, keep your eyes open chaps, we'll find a suitable clearing then set up camp for the night!

(Five minutes into their dash around the edge of the forested area, Flaxley spotted what he considered to be the ideal place for a campsite and called everyone to a halt. His order to set up camp was music to everyone's ears. He'd chosen a spot along the edge of the woodland where the trees circled round to form an alcove. With trees on three sides and a spectacular view of the sea on the other, it was as scenic as it was practical.

Being close enough to Malk to allow them to attack at full strength at dawn and yet far enough away to make it highly unlikely they'd be spotted in the night, Flaxley was more than happy with his choice. From here they could stealthily advance to Malk in the morning under the cover of the trees to launch a surprise attack. They'd also have a clear escape route through the gap in the trees in the unlikely event that any Malk soldiers should patrol this far out of town and happen across them. No campsite was ever going to be one hundred percent risk free, but Flaxley was more than satisfied that this alcove would make as safe a campsite as they could possibly have hoped for.)

Woodland clearing outside Malk Township...

(With Flaxley's order to set up camp and the confirmation that their march was at an end, an air of relief had swept across everybody present. They knew the hard part was yet to come but after such a tiring trek, they were only too glad to finally be able to get some rest. Bonson especially. As soon as Flaxley had confirmed the alcove as their campsite, he'd sat down on the spot and made his feelings known. Having turned the air blue, he'd then flopped onto his back and refused to budge as the elite guards erected shelters and built campfires around him. He was totally and utterly drained of energy and could barely muster a groan. When the food was about to be handed out by the elite guard's catering officer a short while later, however, the frail old man was swiftly back on his feet and first in the queue.

Standing in front of his comrades, Bonson was practically drooling at the thought of getting a hearty meal inside him. His stomach was rumbling somewhat violently and he couldn't wait to pacify it. Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long. Sixty seconds later, the caterer served him up a large bowl of chicken legs, easily his favourite meal, and he could barely contain his delight. Such was his joy, in fact, he didn't even make a big deal about having had to wait a whole minute in line to receive it.)

BONSON: Ah, chicken, I love chicken!

(As he took a step back from the line and proceeded to stuff his face, Lefiat looked to him and sighed.)

LEFIAT: I bet I get fish; I hate fish!

FLAXLEY: I don't care what I get, as long as it consists of the flesh of a beast!

KRITZ: You animal!

FLAXLEY: Why? What would you prefer?

KRITZ: I dunno. Beef probably.

FLAXLEY: I see. Vegetarian, are you?

(He rolled his eyes.)

LEFIAT: Beef's a vegetable?

BONSON: No, that was another of Flaxley's attempts at sarcasm.

LEFIAT: Right... so what is beef then? What animal is it from?

BONSON: A cow, you tit.

LEFIAT: Oh, okay. And where does pork come from?

BONSON: Pigs! Don't you know *anything*?

LEFIAT: Not about meats, no!

BONSON: Or anything else for that matter, eh?

LEFIAT: So, what about chicken then? What animal's that from?

(Bonson gave him a disbelieving look.)

LEFIAT: What?

BONSON: Take a guess!

LEFIAT: Um... antelopes?

(The old man sighed and shook his head.)

BONSON: Yes, Lefiat! Chicken meat comes from antelopes!

(Having been half listening in to their conversation, Kritz turned to Mandika and raised a disturbed eyebrow.)

KRITZ: Did you hear that? Bonson thinks chicken meat comes from antelopes!

(Looking somewhat livid, he turned to her and snarled.)

BONSON: No, I...

(In defeat, he stopped and tossed up his free hand.)

BONSON: I give up on you lot, I'm going over there...

(He nodded to his left.)

BONSON: To eat my chicken in peace! Can't waste it, after all. An antelope gave its life for this meal, apparently!

(And with that, he sauntered away angrily.)

KRITZ: What's eating him?

(Half an hour later, following a hearty, and well deserved meal, Flaxley set about ensuring their defences were in place for their evening. On his orders, while the rest of the soldiers rested in their shelters, two elite guards headed off to patrol the perimeter to give warning of enemy sightings or animal attacks. Having ordered another guard to make a rota for the night-watchman's duty he then joined Kritz,

Derek and Bonson as they sat around a fire talking. Satisfied he'd done all he could to ensure their safety and make sure everyone would be at their optimum come daybreak, he was looking forward to a well earned rest.

Just inside the entrance to the alcove at this time, taking the opportunity to spend some time alone together, Lefiat and Mandika stood side by side, looking out at the sea as it shimmered under the light of the silvery moon.)

MANDIKA: The sea looks really nice in the dark!

LEFIAT: That's 'cause you can't see it!

MANDIKA: Eh?

LEFIAT: There's all sorts of nasties in there!

(Mandika smiled.)

MANDIKA: Father loved to watch the sea. We used to sit out on the beach for hours sometimes.

LEFIAT: Yeah?

MANDIKA: It's hard to believe those days are gone forever now.

(Lefiat gave her a sympathetic smile.)

LEFIAT: Don't upset yourself, Mandika.

MANDIKA: I won't, I just miss him that's all.

LEFIAT: Yeah I know... it's hard to believe it was only yesterday!

(She looked at him and pouted.)

MANDIKA: I'll never forget it, it was horrible.

(Doing his utmost to console her, he hugged her close and kissed her head.)

LEFIAT: He'd be so proud of you going off to battle again!

(Mandika glanced to him then allowed herself a smile.)

MANDIKA: It's kinda bewildering to be honest. The royal household has spent a fortune protecting me from harm and shielding me from danger, and yet I've ended up in so many dangerous battles.

LEFIAT: Yeah, I guess there's not much you can do to shield someone from harm when trouble keeps looking for *them*!

MANDIKA: And it always has a way of finding me!

(They pondered Mandika's oddly impressive battle record for a pampered young princess for a moment then Lefiat stepped back and looked into her eyes.)

LEFIAT: I did try, Mandika. I just couldn't make your father like me!

(She gave him a half smile then glanced out to sea again.)

MANDIKA: I think he liked you deep down!

LEFIAT: Yeah, *very* deep down. He arranged a huge tournament with a monumental prize all in the hope that someone would kill me!

MANDIKA: I know it sounds bad when you look at it that way... or any other way, but he was a good man; he just lost sight of his priorities for a while.

LEFIAT: Meaning?

MANDIKA: You drove him to the verge of insanity!

(Lefiat looked ashamed.)

LEFIAT: I'm such a klutz!

MANDIKA: Excuse me???

LEFIAT: I said I'm a klutz!

MANDIKA: Oh... right. Misheard.

LEFIAT: Look, I know I'm dangerous to be around and all that, Mandika.

Everything I do goes arse upwards and I can't even act surprised that your father

didn't like me. I wouldn't like me either if I was in his shoes... I just hope he knew how much I love you.

MANDIKA: I hope he did.

(She smiled.)

MANDIKA: If it helps, just before he died he finally realised how much *I* love *you*. He'd changed his mind and was going to withdraw you from the tournament and then... it happened. If only he'd changed it sooner.

(She sighed then hung her head sorrowfully.)

LEFIAT: If's don't work, Mandika. If "ifs" and "ands" were pots and pans, names would never hurt me!

MANDIKA: What?

LEFIAT: My mum used to say that to me!

MANDIKA: Drink a lot did she?

LEFIAT: What?

MANDIKA: Nothing, I just need you to know, my father had forgiven you for all the disasters and castle fires and such. So you've no need for guilt.

LEFIAT: Thanks, Mandika; that means a lot.

(She smiled then hugged him tight.)

MANDIKA: I just can't believe my father's gone.

(She sighed.)

MANDIKA: All we have is each other now, Lefiat. Just like you, I've lost *both* my parents now.

(At once, Lefiat's eyes bugled and he stepped back to glare at her.)

LEFIAT: I've lost *both* my parents??? What happened to my mum???

(He then sunk to his knees and cried out in despair.)

LEFIAT: Why wasn't I informed???

MANDIKA: Um...

LEFIAT: She was perfectly fine two days ago. What happened to her?

(Mandika looked to him and bit her lip uneasily.)

MANDIKA: Actually, Lefiat... I just assumed...

LEFIAT: Assumed what?

MANDIKA: Well, you never mention her or anything, so I just assumed she was dead.

(Looking mightily relieved, Lefiat climbed to his feet.)

LEFIAT: You scared the crap out of me then.

MANDIKA: So your mother's alive?

LEFIAT: Well she was two days ago, yeah.

MANDIKA: Wow. You know, for me not to know that is kinda bad.

LEFIAT: Yeah, but I won't hold it against you.

MANDIKA: It's not my fault, it's yours!

(Lefiat sighed then glanced away in defeat.)

LEFIAT: Here we go again. Blame Lefiat.

MANDIKA: Well it *is* your fault. I'm your girlfriend; the least you can do is introduce me to your mother.

LEFIAT: But, she's a peasant, you'd hate her.

MANDIKA: Even so. I thought she was dead, Lefiat. That can't be right.

LEFIAT: Yeah, we already established that. You were wrong.

MANDIKA: No, I mean... you should have told me she was alive.

(Lefiat scratched his head uneasily.)

LEFIAT: Well, maybe, but that'd be a weird way to start a conversation. Hello, Mandika, how are you? My mother's alive by the way.
(Mandika rolled her eyes.)
MANDIKA: Look... when this is over... providing I'm not lost in some dark, eternal limbo, bring her to the castle to meet me.
LEFIAT: Okay. That's a good idea actually. And if you two hit it off, next time I go to her house for a visit, you can come with me, if you like.
(Shuddering at the thought of visiting the suburbs where the peasants livid, Mandika nodded enthusiastically.)
MANDIKA: Or you can go on your own.
LEFIAT: Yeah, either way is cool.
(He glanced to the heavens and smiled.)
LEFIAT: It'd be great for you two to meet, actually. I told her we're dating but... you know, sometimes I get the feeling she doesn't believe me.
(He then looked her lovingly in the eyes.)
LEFIAT: Maybe she just can't believe I'd be that lucky. I know I certainly can't.
MANDIKA: Well, that's understandable. I could do *so* much better after all.
LEFIAT: Yes, yes you could. Thanks for that.

(Watching Lefiat and Mandika from a distance as she sat comfortably on a log beside a warm fire with Derek, Bonson and Flaxley, Kritz couldn't help but smile.)
KRITZ: You know, despite being poles apart in every way imaginable, Lefiat and Mandika are kinda made for each other!
BONSON: Bollocks. I can see why *he* likes *her*; when you look like Lefiat you have to take what you can get. But what the hell does *she* see in *him*?
KRITZ: He'd die for her and he does as he's told. And he *can* protect her well, bizarrely. And feeling safe is important to a girl.
BONSON: Yes well, how anyone can feel safe with *that* walking fire hazard is beyond me. Let's just say love is blind and leave it at that. Blind, deaf and stupid in their case.
(Kritz chuckled.)
KRITZ: Fair enough.
(With that, Bonson stretched and allowed himself a yawn.)
BONSON: I'm gonna sleep like a baby tonight, I reckon.
(As he lowered his arms and nestled his backside into the log to make himself comfortable, he noticed Derek scowling at him.)
BONSON: What's the matter with *you*, Derek? You look like you just won a raffle only to discover the prize is a kick in the gonads.
(Having read Bonson's mind several times throughout the day, Derek shook his head in abject despair of him.)
DEREK: Bonson, you're an arse! You've got some serious explaining to do.
BONSON: I have?
DEREK: Yes...
(He gave the old man a thoroughly disappointed glance.)
DEREK: After what Kayfu made you do, you can't just leave it like that without telling the victims what you did.
(At once, Bonson's remaining hair stood on end and he gaped in horror.)
DEREK: The king is dead, so you're in the clear with Kayfu now. Therefore you've got no excuse not to come clean *right now*.

(Terrified to his very core of what Flaxley and Kritz would do to him if they knew about his arrangement with Kayfu, Bonson desperately attempted to look innocent.)

BONSON: What? Sorry? Me? Who?

(As sweat poured from his brow, he tried to disguise the fact he was saying “sshh” to Derek behind his hand and succeeded in only making himself look more suspicious.)

FLAXLEY: What’s going on?

BONSON: Um... I was just leaving!

(As Bonson started to struggle to his feet, Derek scowled with annoyance.)

DEREK: Flaxley, he seriously needs to explain himself to you. I’ve read his mind and quite frankly, I’ve never been so appalled in all my life.

BONSON: All in good time. Right now, I need to run away.

DEREK: Bonson, *you* can either tell them or *I* will. You can’t just leave things as they are!!!

(Well aware that at least if he told the story himself, he could embellish it to make himself look less guilty, Bonson sat back down and sighed in defeat. Feeling very much like a condemned man, he then let Derek know exactly how he felt about him.)

BONSON: Stupid pile of green horse droppings, what did you have to say anything for? You low down snake in the grass! Nasty green thing that you are!!!

(Derek sat back and shook his head.)

DEREK: Yes, well, insult me as much as you; at least I’m not a two-faced backstabber.

BONSON: No, you’re a green-faced shit-stabber and that’s far worse.

FLAXLEY: Never mind that. Bonson, what have you done?

(Bonson turned to see Flaxley glaring at him and sunk in his seat.)

BONSON: Uh-oh!

FLAXLEY: Well???

KRITZ: Leave the old bugger alone!

(Ignoring Bonson, Flaxley and Kritz then tore into each other instead.)

FLAXLEY: Don’t tell me what to do, you shouldn’t even be here!

KRITZ: Yes, I should, I’ve as much right as you. Anyway, don’t change the subject, how dare you pick on a frail old man?

DEREK: His explanation concerns you too, Kritz!

(Immediately, she glared at Bonson mercilessly.)

KRITZ: Why, you old bastard!!! What have you done???

BONSON: You’ve changed your tune!

(Derek shook his head then hollered.)

DEREK: Shut up!!!

(Stung into silence, they all stared at him in a state of shock.)

DEREK: That’s better!

FLAXLEY: Shout a little louder please, Derek. Alert the enemy, why don’t you?

DEREK: I yelled directly into your minds actually!

(They all looked around and saw the camp as peaceful as before.)

FLAXLEY: Fair enough. So, what’s this all about?

(Bonson sunk in his seat again and whimpered.)

BONSON: Oh cripes, you tell ‘em, Derek. I have a feeling I’m going to need to preserve every breath I can for running away any moment now!

DEREK: Very well!

(Derek looked into the two pairs of interested eyes staring back at him then began.)

DEREK: Before this tournament began, Bonson was faced with a dilemma...

(Bonson hung his head.)

DEREK: He was placed in a no win situation, with one set of consequences only less dire than the other. He was put in a position where he either betrayed you two or his secret would be exposed!

FLAXLEY: Betrayed us?

KRITZ: Secret?

DEREK: I'll never tell you his secret, but suffice to say, it's so large that if it ever got out, there'd be anarchy in Guevina, so he had no choice but to betray you.

BONSON: That's right. I had no choice. I don't think I can emphasize just how important it is that we focus on *that* part. I had no choice.

KRITZ: Or your secret would be exposed?

BONSON: Exactly.

KRITZ: And what *is* this secret?

BONSON: It's something I'll never tell another soul. My secret dies with me. Any minute now, I expect.

DEREK: You *can* tell them what you were forced to do to them though, Bonson. Don't worry, they'll understand!

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, do tell!

(As Kritz and Flaxley glared at him angrily, Bonson lowered his head then began.)

BONSON: I hate you, Derek!

FLAXLEY: Never mind that! Relate!

BONSON: Okay, okay! The king's aide, Kayfu, he knows my secret. Well, to get me to comply with the king's plan, he threatened to tell my secret to the king!

KRITZ: What secret?

FLAXLEY: Stop fishing, woman!

BONSON: Quite.

KRITZ: Whatever.

BONSON: Anyway, the king's plan wasn't really to marry Mandika off to the winner, regardless of whom it was. His plan was for *you* to win the tournament, Flaxley then to offer you Mandika's hand in marriage as a secret bonus prize...

FLAXLEY: But I'm already married! The king knew that.

BONSON: That's the thing you see, I was sent to try to split you two up. You were already arguing, so instead of offering you some obvious advice, I...

KRITZ: You what?

BONSON: I told you both that you were right and not to back down!

(With that, he quickly cowered behind his hands, unable to see but very much aware of angry, heaving breathing.)

BONSON: You're going to kill me now, aren't you?

DEREK: Kritz, Flaxley, I can see you're angry, but you have to believe him, he had no choice.

(There was no answer as they continued to seethe.)

BONSON: Oh, fuck it!

(With that, he came out from behind his hands and sat up straight.)

BONSON: You can kill me later, I deserve that much, but before you do, at least let me give you the sensible advice I would have given you if Kayfu hadn't stitched me up.

(Kritz and Flaxley sneered at each other then glared at Bonson again.)

FLAXLEY: Fine, let's hear it!

KRITZ: Yeah, go on!

BONSON: Okay...

(He took a deep breath then looked to Flaxley.)

BONSON: Flaxley, Kritz is a unique woman. And big tits aside, the reason you fell in love with her was because she *wasn't* a giggly wannabe homemaker. She's not about cooking and sewing, she's lively and outgoing and even an idiot could tell you loved that about her. And you need to preserve that side of her to keep the woman you fell in love with. Well, to do that you have to allow her a little freedom and let her be more than just a mother. She needs to retain her free spirit.

KRITZ: I keep telling him that!

BONSON: But Kritz, you also need to realise that Flaxley was raised differently to you. In his world, women raise the kids almost exclusively. For you to want a life beyond that isn't something he can't come to terms with overnight.

KRITZ: I guess...

BONSON: Kritz, he's a man whom people rely on. He needs to be out in the world, doing things; not babysitting. If you turn him into a doting homebody, you'll lose the outgoing action man you fell for in the first place.

FLAXLEY: Exactly!

BONSON: But don't *you* see, Flaxley? You could be an excellent father *and* a great leader! Look after the kids at least twice a week, that way people would see you do it and probably follow suit. Like I said, they admire you! If *you* do it, it must be manly! (Flaxley looked thoughtful.)

KRITZ: Only twice a week?

BONSON: Or whatever suits you. Talk it over and find a compromise. You both love being with the children and this way you can both be free to be yourselves *and* enjoy watching the kids grow up.

(They both looked thoughtful as Bonson continued.)

BONSON: Best part of all for you, Flaxley, most of us don't remember much about our fathers except being punished by them. You could be different. With a strong woman like Kritz at your side, willing to take up the slack, you could be the best damned father then world has ever known.

FLAXLEY: I like that sound of that!

(He then shook his head regretfully.)

FLAXLEY: So, rather than doing all this fighting, all we had to do was compromise?

BONSON: Exactly!

(He then bit his lip and glanced away.)

BONSON: That and ignore *my* advice. You weren't both in the right; you were both being petulant and childish.

(As Bonson watched on, hoping desperately that they'd forgive him, Kritz and Flaxley shared a warm smile.)

KRITZ: I'm willing to give compromise a try, darling. You mean the world to me.

FLAXLEY: Then that's what we'll do, my love.

(As they stared lovingly at one another, Bonson drew a sigh of relief.)

FLAXLEY: Don't think *you're* off the hook yet though!!!

KRITZ: Damn right!

(Bonson sighed and offered them both an apologetic grin.)

BONSON: Look, I'd do anything to make it up to you, believe me!

KRITZ: Really? Then tell us your secret!

BONSON: Except that!

FLAXLEY: He'll never tell!

KRITZ: Oh yeah? Five minutes alone with me and I'd have him singing like a canary!

DEREK: Torturing an old man's beyond even you, Kritz.
(She gave him a seductive smile and raised a knowing eyebrow.)
KRITZ: Who said anything about torture?
DEREK: Why, that's obscene.
FLAXLEY: Behave yourself, woman!
BONSON: Wait, I think we should hear her out.
FLAXLEY: Don't make me punch you, Bonson.
KRITZ: And besides, I was kidding.
(Flaxley allowed himself a smile then climbed to his feet.)
FLAXLEY: Right, I'm gonna get some kip, busy day tomorrow. You coming, my love?
KRITZ: Of course. I can't sleep very well without you there holding my boob.
(With that, the two of them got to their feet and headed away. Left behind, Bonson glared at Derek for a moment then shook his head and sighed.)
BONSON: Derek?
(Derek turned to face him and raised an enquiring eyebrow.)
DEREK: Yes?
BONSON: Thanks for making me do that, old chap! I feel much better now I've got that off my mind.
DEREK: I know. I can hear your thoughts, remember? Inside that head of yours it was utter chaos *all* the way here. Your feet hurt, you're told old for this, Kayfu is a bastard, Flaxley and Kritz will kill you if they ever find out... and that was just *between* your fearing for Mandika and wishing nasty things on Lefiat.
(He chuckled.)
DEREK: So, trust me; I didn't help clear the air just for your benefit. Your guilty conscience was giving *me* a headache.
BONSON: I see.
DEREK: And now I've helped you clear the air, you don't have to worry about Flaxley and Kritz. It's down to *them* to make this right between themselves now. Your conscience is clear!
BONSON: Hmm, just how I like it!
DEREK: I suspect you'll sleep a lot easier tonight now.
BONSON: Like sleep was ever going to be an issue.
(He then climbed to his feet and headed away.)
BONSON: Speaking of which... night, Derek.
(Derek watched him go then allowed himself a chuckle. Feeling the urge to yawn, he then decided to call it a night and headed off towards the shelters.)

With a clear sky and a full moon, the night was one of the brightest for years and as midnight came and went it remained reasonably warm. Despite the heat and everyone's apprehension about the following morning's battle, however, the tiring march they'd all endured that day ensured the group from Guevina an excellent night's slept under the watchful eye of their two sentries.)

(In Malk Township just after 2am, two soldiers paced towards one another on the cobbled plaza outside the palace, checking the adjoining fringe of the woodland. Sticking rigidly to their patrol route, they'd walked around the palace in opposite directions, passing one another every ten minutes since their shifts began at midnight.)

Dressed in full battle armour, they approached each other for the umpteenth time that night then stopped to take a well earned breather.)

MALK GUARD 1: Anything?

MALK GUARD 2: No, you?

MALK GUARD 1: No. Well, nothing unusual. Except the soldiers loading up the ships!

MALK GUARD 2: Yeah, loading them *both* up, I noticed.

MALK GUARD 1: Yeah.

MALK GUARD 2: So, Lord Stifer's really going through with invading Guevina tomorrow night?

MALK GUARD 1: Looks that way. Not going in light-handed either from the looks of things. There's enough room for two hundred men on those ships, not forgetting Sandark.

MALK GUARD 2: Wow, I'd hate to be in Guevina come tomorrow!

(As the two guards then saluted each other and marched on, a well concealed figure in the trees beside where they'd stopped, whispered quietly to himself.)

FLAXLEY: Hmm, so Daman Siria was right.

(He nodded to himself then mumbled some more.)

FLAXLEY: Of course he was, he would be. He knows everything!

(Satisfied he'd devised their route for the morning and delighted with the nougat of information he'd just overheard, he sneaked back away from Malk towards the base camp. Slowly, he crept under bushes and ducked branches as to not rouse any suspicion. Once safely out of range, he then stood tall and strode away quickly. As he did so, however, a woman's voice spoke up from in front of him giving him the shock of his life.)

KRITZ: What are you doing?

(Giving quite a start, Flaxley leapt backwards and drew his sword. A split second later, Kritz stepped from the pitch black shadows before him and pointed at his blade.)

KRITZ: You can put *that* away!

(Flaxley frowned then stepped before her as he sheathed his blade.)

FLAXLEY: Silly cow. You almost gave me a heart attack!

KRITZ: Sorry.

FLAXLEY: What are you doing out here anyway?

KRITZ: I woke up and saw you wander into the woods, so I followed you! What are you doing out here?

FLAXLEY: I was just planning a route to Malk for the morning.

KRITZ: I see. All done?

FLAXLEY: Absolutely. Hence, my coming back this way.

KRITZ: Right. Silly me.

FLAXLEY: Anyway, let's get back to camp. We'll need our sleep!

KRITZ: Okay!

(With that, they started to walk away together, Kritz clutching Flaxley's arm.)

KRITZ: So, um... this compromise? Do you think it'll work?

FLAXLEY: I hope so, I really do.

KRITZ: So do I!

(She then stopped in her tracks, causing Flaxley to follow suit.)

FLAXLEY: What's up?

KRITZ: I love you, Flaxley!

(He smiled and held his arms out.)

FLAXLEY: Come here, my love.

(With that, they smiled and held each other tight. Feeling warm in her lovers arms, Kritz closed her eyes and exhaled lovingly. Moments later, she pulled back from the hug and smiled.)

KRITZ: I'm sorry, darling. I've acted like an idiot these last few days!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, yes you have!

KRITZ: Hey, so have you!!!

(With a sigh, Flaxley conceded.)

FLAXLEY: I can't deny it, Kritz, my love, I've been a complete cock!

KRITZ: Yeah, you have!

(Accepting of their share of the blame, they looked solemnly to the dirt for a moment before Kritz looked back into Flaxley's eyes.)

KRITZ: We need to communicate more I think!

FLAXLEY: Well, they do say that's the key to a successful relationship!

KRITZ: And maybe we should do more stuff together. Pretty much the only thing we do when we're together is get down and dirty! Not that I'm complaining, mind you.

FLAXLEY: No, no, I agree! I mean, we don't have to take our clothes off to have a good time!

KRITZ: Oh no?

FLAXLEY: We could dance and party all night... and drink some cherry wine!

KRITZ: A-ha! I see your point!

FLAXLEY: Then after that we can get down and dirty!

KRITZ: Damn right!

(Flaxley nodded then reached out to hold one of her upper arms.)

FLAXLEY: Yeah, I think you're right! Communication is the key.

(His face clouded over.)

FLAXLEY: And you can start by explaining how you came to think I got drunk and tried to do you up the backdoor!!!

KRITZ: Backdoor?

(She looked alarmed then attempted to flee again. Unfortunately for her, Flaxley was still holding her arm and wasn't about to let go any time soon.)

FLAXLEY: Not so fast!!!

(In no hurry to hang around and discuss it, Kritz continued to dig her heels in until she started to pull him along.)

KRITZ: Let me go!!!

FLAXLEY: Fuck me, you're strong!

(It wasn't long however, before she realised the futility of her attempt to flee and relented. With a sigh, she looked him in the eye with a hard done by pout forming on her lips.)

KRITZ: What do you want to know?

(Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Well, what the bloody hell happened would be a great place to start!

KRITZ: Well...

(She sighed.)

KRITZ: As far as I knew, I mean I'd been sleeping...

(She looked nervously to the ground as she continued.)

KRITZ: I woke up and saw your shadow in the door. I could tell from the smell that you'd been drinking but I didn't mind. Anyway, you came in, burped and rolled me on my tummy. Well that usually means you wanna do me from behind. I mean, I'm not gonna turn that down, am I?

FLAXLEY: Not normally, no!

KRITZ: Well, thing is. It was weird. I lifted my knees to get ready, obviously, you know, like I do. So, there I was bent over, waiting for you to do that thing you do when instead...

(Feeling extremely embarrassed, she mumbled quietly.)

KRITZ: You tried to ram it up my bum!

(She looked him in the eye.)

KRITZ: Anyway, I yelled at you and for some reason you ran out of the house.

FLAXLEY: Kritz, that never happened! Are you sure it wasn't you who was drunk?

KRITZ: Well...

(She looked desperately into his eyes.)

KRITZ: You came home again about an hour later and you were stone cold sober. I thought that was odd at the time. Anyway, I was really annoyed with you so I pretended to be asleep but you just kissed me on the head and said goodnight then went to sleep, like nothing had happened. So I let it go. It wasn't until I mentioned it the other night and you said it wasn't you that it dawned on me... the first guy who came in *wasn't* you!

(She hung her head and trembled as she awaited his furious reaction. Amazingly, it never came. Not sure what sort of expression she was expecting to see, she looked up and caught a glimpse of his bewildered frown.)

FLAXLEY: How could you not know it wasn't me?

KRITZ: I...

FLAXLEY: Even if you did only catch my shadow, I'm pretty distinctive! I mean there's only one person who's even remotely my... height and... build...

(His nostrils flared.)

FLAXLEY: Alvarez!

KRITZ: Hmm, well, maybe. He does tend to pop in without knocking at all hours of the day, doesn't he?

(Naturally, Flaxley was enraged.)

FLAXLEY: I don't believe this!

(Kritz hung her head as Flaxley paced up and down.)

FLAXLEY: Why only the other day I was thinking it'd be great if all my troops were like him! I mean what the hell? A whole army of blokes who get drunk and try to do my wife up the bum??? I mean that'd be useful if an invading army were hiding out up there but that's hardly likely is it?

KRITZ: I'm sorry!

(As she stood there looking miserable, Flaxley approached her and placed his hands on her shoulders.)

FLAXLEY: It was an honest mistake, my love!

(She looked up at him and smiled.)

KRITZ: Thanks!

FLAXLEY: But Alvarez! That's not an innocent mistake. When we go back I'll introduce him to my sword and see how he likes things shoved up *his* arse!

(Kritz said nothing as Flaxley looked to the heavens and fiddled innocently with his gold neck chain.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway, can *I* do you up the arse?

KRITZ: No!

FLAXLEY: Righto. Forget I asked.

(He sighed.)

FLAXLEY: So, compromise, eh?

KRITZ: Yup.

FLAXLEY: How do we even start with something like that?

KRITZ: Well, you can start by tell me you love me. And *I'll* tell *you* that you'll always have my unconditional love and affection forever, no matter what! Then we can figure out the rest from there.

(He nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I can do that. I love you, Kritz!

KRITZ: And I... meant that long sentence I said just now.

(Flaxley grinned.)

FLAXLEY: Forgotten it already, huh?

KRITZ: Yeah, but you can't say anything about *my* memory. I mean, what's the name of that guy Bonson came to Tifaeris with?

FLAXLEY: Shadwell, you mean?

KRITZ: I rest my case.

FLAXLEY: Touché, my love.

KRITZ: And besides, my memory aint that bad. I remember more and more about being a kid in Tifaeris every week. You know... the things Vooda's magic made me forget?

(Flaxley gulped uneasily then scratched behind his ear.)

FLAXLEY: Such as?

KRITZ: My sister mostly. And I remember playing on the beach once... and you know, just little things about my house. It's coming back to me. Slowly, but it's coming. Who knows, there may come a time when I remember everything.

FLAXLEY: Good god, I hope not.

KRITZ: Excuse me?

(Realising he'd spoken out loud, he flinched then offered her a cheesy grin.)

FLAXLEY: Um... because thinking about the past is a waste of time, my love. I'd much rather we passed our time thinking about the future. A future spent together. A future with *you* on my arm. I didn't have that back then, so as far as I'm concern, the past can piss off.

KRITZ: Aw, that's so lovely.

FLAXLEY: Yes well, like I said, I love you.

KRITZ: I love you too.

(With that, they hugged each other tight and allowed their love to wash over one another. Suffice to say, they wouldn't be going anywhere for a while as they lost themselves in the moment.)

(Back at the Guevina army's campsite meanwhile, the night had been a difficult one for Lefiat. Never the bravest of men, he lay awake shivering with fear at what dawn may bring. The only warrior from Malk he'd ever seen was Sandark, and in his mind, every single one of them would be equally as deadly. Armed with only a girl's sword and burdened with the responsibility of saving Guevina's beloved heir to the throne from such a mighty army, his nervousness was forgivable. The fact he was afraid of the dark and whimpered in terror at every hoot from an owl, mistaking it for the cry of a cuddyfinkle, however, was not. Luckily for him, all those under the shelter with him were all fast asleep or one of them would most definitely have picked him up on it.

As he lay there, curled up in a ball with his head on his pack, whimpering and trembling, a shrill cry rose up from the woods nearby. Having never heard such a terrifying noise in all his life, he swiftly sat up and proceeded to whisper loudly to Derek, who was sleeping at his side.)

LEFIAT: Derek? Derek, wake up!

DEREK: I'm already awake!

LEFIAT: Did you hear that shriek?

DEREK: Yes... that's what woke me.

LEFIAT: It was probably a cuddyfinkle! We should wake the others.

MANDIKA: That's if you haven't already, you noisy bugger.

LEFIAT: Mandika, you're awake.

MANDIKA: Of course I bloody am. How can I not be with you two yapping in my ear like a pair of old ladies?

BONSON: Will you lot shut up? I'm trying to get some shut eye!

LEFIAT: I heard a noise, Bonson!

BONSON: So did I. It was you!

(Just then, the cry filled the air once more and they all sat up sharply.)

BONSON: What the blazes was that???

LEFIAT: It was a cuddyfinkle!!!

MANDIKA: It sounded nothing like a bloody cuddyfinkle!

BONSON: Everything sounds like a cuddyfinkle to him.

(Derek looked thoughtful.)

DEREK: It sounded like a person doing a bird impression, if you ask me.

LEFIAT: What do *you* think, Flaxley?

(At once, they looked around to gauge Flaxley's reaction, but he was nowhere to be seen.)

LEFIAT: Flaxley?

MANDIKA: Okay, now I'm scared!

LEFIAT: You don't suppose the cuddyfinkle got him, do you?

DEREK: It wasn't a bloody cuddyfinkle, Lefiat!

BONSON: Indeed. I know exactly what it was.

MANDIKA: You do?

BONSON: Well don't sound so surprised.

LEFIAT: What was it then?

BONSON: Well, seeing as Flaxley isn't here and that was the sound of a person doing a bird impression, I'd say it was obviously Flaxley signalling from the woods for us to go and join him.

(With that, he rolled over and closed his eyes, much to Mandika's annoyance.)

MANDIKA: Then don't you think we should go?

BONSON: I can't. I'm asleep.

(Sensing their angry eyes burning into him, he then sat up and growled.)

BONSON: Fine!

(With that, he reluctantly joined the others in climbing to their feet.)

LEFIAT: It sounded like it came from that direction!

(He nodded ahead of himself. Glancing in the direction Lefiat had nodded, Mandika bit her lip.)

MANDIKA: Right... thick woodland in the middle of the night... we should take my army with us.

DEREK: Don't be silly, Mandika, they've got a battle to fight in the morning. They'll need their rest.

MANDIKA: But what if Flaxley *wants* us to bring them? His bird noise could have meant anything.

(Derek paused to think then nodded sternly.)

DEREK: Good point. Well, if he wants the soldiers then we'll just have to come back for them. In the meantime, let's just find out what he wants.

MANDIKA: Yeah, right... okay.

DEREK: Let's go.

BONSON: You lead. We'll be right behind you, Derek!

LEFIAT: Hey! I'm a knight I'll have you know! I should be leader.

BONSON: Fine. If you want to lead us into the pitch black woods, go ahead.

LEFIAT: On second thoughts, no chance. Not a hope in hell, actually. We're right behind you, Derek.

DEREK: Whatever. Let's go.

(With that, he grabbed an unlit torch from his pack then led them out of the campsite and into the woods, towards the sound of the shriek. Barely able to see, they crept forth nervously with their eyes on stalks as every shadow in the darkened woodland swayed with the gentle breeze.)

LEFIAT: This is spooky!

DEREK: Sshh!

(Slowly creeping forth, carefully pushing aside any low branches, Bonson, Mandika and Lefiat remained tightly behind Derek, very much relying on his magic skills to save them should anything jump out on them.)

LEFIAT: I don't like this.

MANDIKA: Nor do I.

DEREK: Be quiet, will you?

BONSON: I can't believe we're doing this. He could be anywhere. These woods are enormous.

(Just then, a mere hundred feet into the woods, Derek spotted something through the trees up ahead and immediately held his arms out for everyone to stop. Having already seen what Derek had seen, however, they'd all stopped some five feet ago. Looking somewhat on edge, Derek bit his lip then crept back to them.)

DEREK: What the hell is it?

(Squinting at what looked like a large silhouetted beast, thudding itself against a tree, they all shared a baffled glance and spoke in whispers.)

BONSON: Is this wood a secret asylum for deranged bears?

MANDIKA: Maybe that's the thing Flaxley was signalling to warn us about.

BONSON: In that case, he'd have been signalling the elite guards, not us. Derek, you're a tit.

DEREK: Excuse me?

BONSON: You said, "Let's not bring the guards, they need their sleep." Idiot.

DEREK: Look, Bonson, I'm a master of magic, we'll be fine.

LEFIAT: So, what now?

MANDIKA: Half of me wants to run, but half of me wants to know what the hell that thing is. And the other half is scared witless that when we find out what it is, we'll wish we hadn't.

BONSON: You have three halves, do you?

MANDIKA: No. I was telling you Lefiat's opinion.

BONSON: Oh, that kind of other half.

MANDIKA: Yeah.

(With that, they looked on harder as the strange creature continued to thud into the tree.)

DEREK: This is no good, it's too dark. I can't tell *what* it is from here.

BONSON: I still say it's a bear.

DEREK: Well it could be, can't really tell with this lack of light.

MANDIKA: Light the torch then!

(Derek glanced to her then nodded.)

DEREK: Wait, let's get closer. If it attacks us, I want to use inferno on it.

LEFIAT: You could do that from here.

DEREK: Yes, but if I miss I could end up starting a forest fire.

BONSON: Quite. And that might just give away our position somewhat.

MANDIKA: Somewhat, yes.

DEREK: Okay, chaps. Quietly now. Let's go.

BONSON: Let's get ready to run you mean, bears can be bloody ferocious!

(With that, they slowly crept forth through the lower branches, keeping whispering to a minimum.)

BONSON: Has it dawned on anyone that that might be one of Sandark's minions?

LEFIAT: Why would one of Sandark's minions be thudding itself into a tree in the middle of the night?

BONSON: I dunno, maybe it had a conversation with you once and can't get over the lingering nausea!

DEREK: Sshh, you two. Let's just see what it is *then* we can deal with it. I doubt Flaxley would have called us out here for no reason, so it has to be something. Let's deal with it then we can find Flaxley.

BONSON: Okay, here's the plan then. *I'll* light the torch, *you* get ready to fire inferno at the bear.

DEREK: Okay.

(He then nodded and stopped walking.)

DEREK: This is close enough.

(With that, Derek passed Bonson the torch then stepped back and fixed his stance, ready to unleash his magic on the creature. Satisfied Derek was ready, Bonson then held out the torch. With trepidation, he gulped then pointed his hand at it and looked to the others.)

BONSON: Here goes. Flaxley had better be grateful for this.

(He then flicked a small flame onto the torch and thrust it forwards to light up the immediate area. Preparing to flee, they all tensed up for a moment but upon sighting the creature, they all froze to the spot and their jaws dropped.)

LEFIAT: Whoops.

BONSON: That's not a bear.

(Burning red with embarrassment, they stared at the sight of Flaxley and Kritz standing face to face against the tree, him with his trousers around his ankles and her with her skirt raised and her breasts exposed to the world. More than slightly alarmed, Flaxley and Kritz stared back at them in utter bewilderment. Naturally, an uncomfortable silence prevailed for quite some time. First to snap out of the horrified trance, almost a full minute later, Flaxley withdrew his manhood and quickly rushed his trousers up. Almost dying of shame, Kritz then pulled down her skirt and hid her face behind her hands.)

FLAXLEY: For fuck sake, you lot!!!

(While Derek tried vainly to stop Lefiat giggling, Bonson continued to stare at Kritz and Mandika grinned like a dazed, lottery-winning hyena.)

MANDIKA: Wow, she wasn't exaggerating after all! If *anything*...

(As happy thoughts continued to fill Mandika's head, Kritz grabbed Flaxley's arm.)

KRITZ: Can we go please?

(Looking extremely uncomfortable and trying desperately to avoid any eye contact, she tried to hurry him along.)

KRITZ: Let's go, please!!! I don't mind people seeing me naked, but not while we're doing the filthy. I'm so fucking embarrassed.

(Delighted to find out that Kritz did at least have one inhibition to her name, Flaxley looked to her and nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Quite!

(He then grimaced at her uncomfortably.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz!!! Your breasts!!!

KRITZ: What about them?

FLAXLEY: For heaven's sake, put them away!

KRITZ: Put them away?

(With that, she looked down at her exposed chest and shrieked.)

DEREK: That's the noise we heard.

FLAXLEY: Bonson, stop staring!

(As Kritz pulled her top down, Bonson pouted miserably.)

BONSON: No, keep them out!

FLAXLEY: What?

(Realising his error, Bonson looked mortified.)

BONSON: Did I say that out loud?

KRITZ: Yes you did, but let's go! I'm so bloody embarrassed I wanna die.

(And with no more ado, she hurried off towards the camp blushing like a red rose. As she raced away, Bonson beamed and called after her.)

BONSON: Don't be embarrassed, Kritz. You should be proud, actually. You've made an old man very happy!

(Flaxley couldn't help but notice the obvious bulge in Bonson's trousers and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Looks to me like she's made an old man very horny!

BONSON: What???

(With that, he turned bright red and sprinted away. Running as fast he could under the circumstances, he whizzed past Kritz then charged back to their camp so he could pretend to be asleep before the others got there. As the others followed on, Kritz very much at the front, Flaxley could barely contain his anger.)

FLAXLEY: I swear, one of these days, I *will* kill you lot.

DEREK: We were coming to help.

FLAXLEY: Help? I didn't need help, Derek. I can service my wife perfectly well on my own thanks.

MANDIKA: We thought you were in danger. We heard a bird like cry from the woods and thought it was *you* calling for *us*.

FLAXLEY: Oh, right. Superb logic. If I was in mortal danger, it's only natural that I'd call for a gangly halfwit, a spoiled princess and a retired butler to turn up and save me.

DEREK: You're overlooking me.

FLAXLEY: Easily done. You're very short.

DEREK: Cheap shot, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: If I was in danger, I'd have come back and got the elite guards. Okay, *you* as well, Derek, but I certainly wouldn't stand in the woods making dumb quacking noises.

LEFIAT: Actually, it was more of a squawk.

MANDIKA: I'd have called it a hoot.

FLAXLEY: It was neither. It was Kritz's impassioned squeal of delight, which for future reference, isn't a cue for you four biffs to come charging at us like a herd of elephants, all fired up to start shooting magic at us!!!

(He snarled.)

FLAXLEY: I want to be perfectly clear on that. If I'm being attacked by a swarm of fifty cuddyfinkles, feel free to charge in at any time. Bring some friends if you like. Go nuts. Blast away, by all means. Make it a magical extravaganza if you like, with guest mages from all over the world taking part. Bring some ale and make a weekend of it, if you want to. If I'm making love to my wife and she happens to groan, however, I'd be grateful if you'd just leave me to it.

DEREK: I think you're overreacting somewhat, Flaxley. Okay, maybe we were silly to assume you'd call us like that, but it's been a long day and we're tired. We genuinely thought we were helping.

FLAXLEY: Overreacting? Overreacting???

MANDIKA: Totally!

FLAXLEY: I just don't want to get back to Tifaeris in a few days, lay Kritz down to make love to her, then have a bunch of gormless halfwits blast the bedroom door off its hinges and blow the bed to smithereens. Is that too much to ask?

(With that, he stormed off ahead to catch Kritz up. Having shared an uncomfortable grimace, Derek, Mandika and Lefiat then paced off after him.)

A minute or so later, once they'd all made it back to camp, they all laid down their heads for the night. Not another word was spoken. Flaxley and Kritz, were too angry to speak, and the others were horribly embarrassed.

Before long, there wasn't a soul awake in the camp, except for the two sentries keeping a sharp lookout. Even the terrified Lefiat had managed to doze off, tired from the exhausting walk they'd endured that day.)

(At 5.30am that morning, the morning of the battle, Flaxley found himself pacing before his immaculately turned out troops with a determined glint in his eye. The time for resting was over and the fight for Mandika's salvation would soon be upon them. In such moments, Flaxley was not a man to be trifled with. Dedicated to his duty, he was the consummate professional and he expected the same levels of commitment from all those around him. Doing battle was, after all, not a thing one should take lightly.)

And so, determined to make sure his men were one hundred percent focussed on the task ahead, he paced before them giving them a motivational speech as Mandika, Lefiat, Derek, Kritz and even Bonson listened intently from the side.)

FLAXLEY: I cannot stress too highly the importance of this mission!

(Bonson rolled his eyes and mumbled to himself indignantly.)

BONSON: Nobody expects you to stress it *too* highly, highly enough will do.

(Having overheard him, Flaxley glared at Bonson coldly.)

FLAXLEY: Did I *ask* for your input, Bonson?

BONSON: Not that I recall.

FLAXLEY: Shut up then. If I ever want a critique on my speech, I'll ask for one.
Until then, put a bloody sock it.

(As Bonson furrowed his brow and glanced away, annoyed at being talked down to, Flaxley shook his head then looked to his troops again.)

FLAXLEY: Our mission objective is to retrieve an artefact...

(Lefiat looked baffled and leant to Mandika.)

LEFIAT: I thought we were after a decanter.

FLAXLEY: Shut up, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: I was only saying.

MANDIKA: Lefiat, he told you to shut up.

LEFIAT: Right... sorry!

FLAXLEY: Good. Now, no more interruptions! We don't have time to bugger about!

(With that, he stood tall to give off a menacing aura and placed his hands on his hips.)

FLAXLEY: Right...

(He cleared his throat then began.)

FLAXLEY: Listen up, chaps, I'll start by describing our destination. Just through the woods there is the township of Malk. As you emerge from said woodland, you will come to a main square, behind which there's a flight of steps up to the palace...

(Lefiat raised his hand.)

FLAXLEY: If you say you need to pee, I'll stab you right here, right now!

LEFIAT: No, it's not that. What about the city walls?

FLAXLEY: Lefiat, with the exception of Guevina, Tifaeris and Kazoo, places generally don't have a defensive wall!

(Lefiat looked stunned.)

LEFIAT: How careless!

FLAXLEY: Yeah well, now you know!

(He drew breath then continued.)

FLAXLEY: The plan is to create havoc in the square by staging an invasion to keep their guards busy. I can't state this too clearly, the battle is a distraction to keep their guards busy. We're not going there to occupy the town. This isn't an invasion, okay? Anyway, during aforementioned battle, the six of us...

(He gestured to where Bonson, Lefiat, Kritz, Derek and Mandika were standing.)

FLAXLEY: We'll take the opportunity to head up the stairs and into the palace!

(He then stood at ease and held an open palm out before him.)

FLAXLEY: Any questions?

(Unsurprisingly, Lefiat raised his hand first.)

LEFIAT: Um... what will we do in the palace?

(Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Find the decanter obviously! We discussed this only yesterday!

LEFIAT: Yeah, but... whereabouts in the palace?

FLAXLEY: How the hell should I know?

LEFIAT: Then how will we find it?

(Flaxley sighed and stared through him coldly.)

FLAXLEY: Well... I thought, perhaps, maybe... now stop me if I'm being obtuse here, but I figured we could always try...

(He hardened his stance and raised his voice.)

FLAXLEY: Looking!!!

(Lefiat flinched and leant back.)

LEFIAT: No need to shout!

FLAXLEY: I disagree.

(Fearing Lefiat may well have forgotten the plan entirely, Flaxley sighed to himself then looked him in eye.)

FLAXLEY: Look, it's very simple, Lefiat. While these elite guards here keep the battle going outside, we'll go into the palace and hunt for the decanter. We *must* destroy that decanter at all costs. Even if we have to burn down the palace to do it. (Bonson grinned.)

BONSON: Wow. It's your lucky day, Lefiat. A royal residence you're *allowed* to burn down! You must think all your birthdays came at once.

LEFIAT: Shut up!

FLAXLEY: You can both shut up!!!

(As Bonson chuckled to himself, Lefiat raised his hand again.)

LEFIAT: But what will we do if we there's people *inside* the palace who want to fight us?

FLAXLEY: Obviously, we'll surrender unconditionally then join them for tea and sandwiches by the lake.

LEFIAT: Right... I detect a hint of sarcasm in that reply.

FLAXLEY: There was more than a hint, Lefiat.

BONSON: True, for once, that was pretty good sarcasm, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Bonson, I'm gonna deck you in a minute.

(As Bonson grimaced uneasily then glanced away innocently, Flaxley snarled at Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Look, Lefiat. It's not difficult. If there's people inside the castle, be they ordinary soldiers, Sandark or that Stifle bloke...

KRITZ: His name's Stifer, my love.

FLAXLEY: Stifer... yes, him. If we run into any of them and they want to fight then we'll fight them. Is that simple enough for you?

LEFIAT: Right, yeah... got it.

FLAXLEY: Finally! So... any other questions or are we good to go?

(At once, the guards stood to attention and saluted to signify their readiness.)

FLAXLEY: Excellent! I trained you well!

(At this point, he spotted a nervous hand go up and his nostrils started to twitch.)

FLAXLEY: What now, Lefiat?

LEFIAT: Um...

(He grinned.)

LEFIAT: Can I go for a pee now?

(Flaxley gazed to the heavens.)

FLAXLEY: Give me patience, oh great ones!

(Kritz looked bewildered.)

KRITZ: Religion?

BONSON: Well Kritz, with Lefiat about you either find religion or you slowly go insane! Thankfully I had ale as *my* salvation!

LEFIAT: Get lost, Bonson.

BONSON: No, *you* get lost. I was a casual drinker, two or three pints twice a week until you moved in to the castle. Now look at me.

(Looking fed up to the back teeth, Flaxley stepped up aside Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Take your piss, Lefiat! Then get back here... the time to eradicate the threat to Mandika, thus liberating Guevina, has come!!!

(As everyone smiled proudly, he quietly murmured to Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: And I bet Lefiat will get all the credit!

KRITZ: Oh, absolutely. I guarantee it!

(A minute or so later, when Lefiat returned from relieving himself in the woods, Flaxley turned to face his troops and nodded to them sternly. The time for action had arrived. Holding his sword aloft, determined to head off to battle on a high, he tipped back his head and spoke up with a passion in his voice.)

FLAXLEY: Okay, men...

MANDIKA: And women, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Fine. Okay, men and women of Guevina...

BONSON: And Lefiat!

(At once, the man mountain span around, his eyes portraying a violent storm brewing inside of him. Bonson looked terrified)

BONSON: Oh, shit!!!

(With that, he ducked behind Kritz and hid his face.)

KRITZ: Hey!

FLAXLEY: I'm sick to death of you, Bonson!!!

(Bonson peered around Kritz and grimaced uncomfortably.)

BONSON: Well... that's understandable, I suppose. But I think it's important for the morale of all concerned that you let it slide and forgive me.

FLAXLEY: You'd like that, wouldn't you?

BONSON: You know, I really would.

(With that, Flaxley spun back around to face his men, determined to have his say.)

FLAXLEY: Right... okay, men...

(He paused for a moment then continued.)

FLAXLEY: People, rather... it's time to fight with everything you have. Whether Mandika is your future queen or merely your friend, let's do this for *her*.

(At once, the elite guards all snarled and nodded aggressively, determined to do their utmost to save their beloved soon-to-be queen. Their support for her moved Mandika greatly.)

MANDIKA: I'm so amazing.

FLAXLEY: Right, let's march. I'll lead, you chaps bring up the rear!

(With nothing more to be said, Flaxley then paced towards the woods with Kritz, Derek, Mandika, Lefiat and Bonson racing to his side. Following their lead, the elite troops immediately proceeded to march confidently along behind him, ready to play their part in the imminent battle.)

As they headed from the clearing and paced into the woodland, Flaxley then decided to take the opportunity to double-check one last minor detail. Stepping aside Mandika, he offered her a warm smile then shared his thoughts with her.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika, are you *certain* this is what you want? I don't like the idea of taking you into battle again.

MANDIKA: I'm positive, Flaxley. I'm terrified, yeah, but... they killed my father and given half a chance they'll take over my body and I'll be as good as dead too. I *have* to do this.

FLAXLEY: No, you don't. You have a choice.

MANDIKA: Then I choose to fight. I want to be there when you get revenge for my father. And besides, where else would I go? I'm not waiting in the woods and I'm certainly not walking back to Guevina on my own.

(She nodded sternly.)

MANDIKA: I know I always complain about getting dragged into our battles, but this time, I *want* to be right there with everyone. I feel like it's *my* fight. Besides, with so much at stake, I think I'd go nuts waiting around hoping you succeed. No, I have to be there.

FLAXLEY: Very well.

(He then glared at Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Protect her with your life.

LEFIAT: I always do.

FLAXLEY: I mean it. Focus. Your charge's life is worth far more than your own, never forget that.

LEFIAT: Flaxley, it'll be fine. You *know* how I suddenly learn to fight when Mandika's in danger. I'll guard her with my heart and soul.

FLAXLEY: Good, because if anything happens to her...

LEFIAT: Yeah, I know. You'll tie me to the tallest tower, smear jam on my naughty bits and leave me to the wasps.

(Flaxley gave him a deeply trouble glance.)

FLAXLEY: No, I'd just kill you. Who'd be *that* disturbed?

(As Lefiat glanced at Bonson, Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: I might have known.

(He then looked to Mandika and smiled.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway, now that's decided let's keep our voices down. We don't want the enemy to hear us coming, now do we?

(And from that moment on, they continued forth in silence.)

(Pacing aside Flaxley, Lefiat held his head up high and tried to force a confident expression. Under the mistaken illusion that he was the only one apprehensive about what lay ahead, he desperately wanted to appear fearless. Little did he know, however, each and every person in his party shared his sense of foreboding. There had never been a battle in the history of mankind where an army hadn't suffered a single fatality and they knew that some of them would not be coming back. As with all battles, however, all concerned refused to allow their inner angst to bubble over. Silently psyching themselves up for the coming death or glory, they all stared dead ahead, trying to give off a positive vibration to their comrades.)

(Following a brief half a mile march in total silence, Flaxley raised a hand to halt his comrades, still a good few feet from where the woodland ended and Malk began. He then raced ahead and stooped to peer through the same gap in the bushes that he'd peered through the night before. Given quite a start by what he saw, he then raced back to his troops and whispered urgently.)

FLAXLEY: This is the place. Just through those bushes there's a square with a set of steps into the palace on the far side...

KRITZ: Okay, so what are we waiting for?

FLAXLEY: Patience, Kritz. Let me finish my explanation, *then* we can get going.

(He rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: As I was about to say, there's roughly fifty troops assembled in the square.

(Mandika looked worried.)

MANDIKA: Hey, you don't think they're gathering to invade Guevina do you?

BONSON: Or because they know we're coming! That'd be a bit shit, wouldn't it?

FLAXLEY: I can't be sure, but I'd imagine they're there to be inspected! I used to inspect the troops every morning at 6am when I was Guevina's royal knight.

(He nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Not that it *matters* why they're there. Their presence is a real bonus. We wanted to cause a commotion and with fifty guards already out there that won't be difficult!

DEREK: Absolutely. It doesn't matter *why* they're there, I'm just glad they *are*!

FLAXLEY: Indeed. And with there being a mere fifty of them, that makes us about even in number. So with *me* on our side, they don't stand a chance.

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: The arrogance...

FLAXLEY: Right, remember the plan. It shouldn't be *too* difficult to stall fifty or so wallies with swords while we sneak inside the palace.

KRITZ: You? Sneak? You tried sneaking up on Mandika yesterday and look what happened there!

(Mandika offered him an apologetic grin.)

MANDIKA: Yeah, sorry about that, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Look, it'll be *easy* to sneak into the palace while their guards are busy fighting our troops out on that square! And once we're inside, there'll be no need to sneak about anymore because hopefully we'll have drawn all the guards outside. Got it? That's why we're going to help with the fighting first! To draw the guards out!

BONSON: Yes, yes. We get it. Nothing to do with you wanting to kill and maim is it, Flaxley? It's all about drawing the guards out!

FLAXLEY: Exactly. Now, come on, we've got a battle to win!

KRITZ: Right, so we're starting now, are we?

DEREK: I should hope so. It's about two minutes to sun up. If we don't go now, those elite guards of yours will lose the advantage of having black armour.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: In that case let's hurry up. Okay, everyone, I hope you've all made wills 'cause here we go!!!

(With that, he leapt out of the bushes and into Malk's cobbled square, drawing his sword as he did so. Looking extremely determined, Lefiat, Kritz, Derek, Mandika and a somewhat reluctant Bonson then leapt from the bushes after him, magic, fists or sword at the ready.)

FLAXLEY: Let's orphan some children!

(He then went to step forwards only for Bonson to entirely steal his thunder.)

BONSON: Wait!

FLAXLEY: What?

BONSON: Your allegedly elite troops, Flaxley.

(Much to his embarrassment, his troops, once again, remained dormant as they awaited his command. Luckily, in the early morning dank, the Malk soldiers hadn't spotted them yet. Rolling his eyes, Flaxley turned to face the bushes in which they were awaiting his word and raised his voice.)

FLAXLEY: For fuck sake, guards, attack!!!

(His yell immediately drew the attention of the fifty or so Malk guards on the other side of the square and they all stared towards him in a state of shock. Their stunned inaction didn't last long, however. As the Guevina elite guards poured from the bushes and into the square, the Malk soldiers charged at the invading party like a swarm of war-crazed locusts. Flaxley, an impatient man at the best of times was not

about to wait for them to come to him, however. With a venomous snarl etched on his face, he raced forward intent to kill. Hurrying to a safe spot behind the Guevina troops, Bonson looked somewhat disturbed by Flaxley's eagerness.)

BONSON: When it comes to battlefields, he's like a fat boy in a cake shop!

(Sure enough, Flaxley got straight down to business, skewering one soldier and shattering another one's ribs with his iron shield.)

FLAXLEY: Weak fools.

(In just a matter of moments, the entire party from Guevina were engaged in a fierce fight. Bonson fended off assailants with inferno magic while Derek set about them with his lightning. Lefiat guarded Mandika like a true hero, stopping every attack that came her way and Kritz kicked and punched as if violence was going out of fashion and she still had some tokens to cash in. In the dim light of a not quite risen sun, the elite guard's black armour truly did provide a healthy degree of camouflage where as the silver of the Malk army made them shine like a beacon to their enemies. Taking full advantage of this, Flaxley chopped and sliced at everything in silver armour. With a joy in his heart, he cut through Malk soldiers as though they were made of paper.)

FLAXLEY: A-ha... die, shit bucket!!!

(Despite the initial success of the Guevina army, however, more Malk soldiers kept appearing from either side of the square to swell their ranks. Spotting this, Derek looked mightily concerned.)

DEREK: What the hell? How many are there?

(Bonson answered in a panicked, sarcastic voice.)

BONSON: I don't know, Derek. Silly me, I forgot to bring my abacus. What the hell does it matter???

DEREK: Calm down, Bonson!

BONSON: Calm down? We're in the middle of a battle, Derek. There's swords flying everywhere!!!

DEREK: Relax! Flaxley asked me to protect you and I will.

(Bonson looked horrified.)

BONSON: He asked you to protect me??? Like I'm some kind of feeble octogenarian???

DEREK: Pretty much.

BONSON: Excellent. I always said Flaxley was a top bloke.

(Just across the square in the meantime, Flaxley was still in his element. Having scythed down the biggest Malk soldier in their entire ranks, he snarled then thrust his sword in and out of the nearest one.)

FLAXLEY: You low grade sword novices are no match for me!

(As soon as he'd finished speaking, however, he felt a sword poke into his backside.)

FLAXLEY: Ouch!!!

(At once, he spun round and glared at his red-faced assailant.)

LEFIAT: Sorry, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Lefiat??? What did you do that for???

(Still glaring at Lefiat, he slung his hand to his left and impaled another enemy.)

FLAXLEY: Well???

LEFIAT: I thought you were one of *them*! You're wearing silver armour!

FLAXLEY: Pillock! Concentrate.

(He looked deeply disturbed.)

FLAXLEY: Wait a minute!!! You thought I was the enemy and *that* was your attack?

LEFIAT: Um... yeah, I'm not very good at this sword fighting malarkey!

FLAXLEY: Great, I'm sure Mandika finds that very reassuring! Remember, if she gets so much as paper cut, it's curtains for you!!!

(With that, he leapt gleefully away to continue his killing spree. Lefiat watched him go then grimaced at Mandika in embarrassment.)

LEFIAT: Um... I'd better just concentrate on guarding *you*!

MANDIKA: Yes, I think you should, for all our sakes!

(Kritz in the meantime, was enjoying herself immensely. Having made short work of several guards, she'd then picked a fight with the biggest soldier she could find.)

SOLDIER: So, a wench who thinks she's tough, eh?

KRITZ: You mean a wench who knows you're not!

SOLDIER: Yeah, right. We'll soon see about that!

KRITZ: Yawn! Look, are we gonna fight or what?

(Just then, the soldier lowered his sword and looked thoughtful.)

SOLDIER: We could! Or we could get the hell of out here!

KRITZ: Eh?

SOLDIER: Y'know, we could grab a few drinks maybe... perhaps grab a bite to eat then... who knows?

(Kritz looked somewhat thrown.)

KRITZ: Wait. What? Are you hitting on me?

(He gave her a knowing glance.)

SOLDIER: Don't be so shocked, baby. You're the best looking one here!

KRITZ: Wow! What can I say?

SOLDIER: Say yes. You *know* it makes sense.

(Kritz was utterly baffled.)

KRITZ: Are you that sexually frustrated, you've been reduced to chatting up women in the heat of battle?

(The soldier gave a frustrated sigh and looked down at his sword.)

SOLDIER: Well, our leader, Sandark... he likes us to avoid having sex a week or so before we invade anywhere. Apparently it helps our aggression.

(With the raising of a smarmy eyebrow, he then looked squarely into her deep brown eyes and attempted to charm her with his best baritone voice.)

SOLDIER: I don't buy into that though, so why don't we slope off and find somewhere quiet where I can do us *both* a favour? What do you say, sweet cheeks?

(She paused for a moment, almost as if she was giving his idea serious consideration.)

KRITZ: I would, only I'm a married woman...

SOLDIER: Doesn't bother me.

KRITZ: *And* seeing as I'm neither blind nor desperate and my sense of smell is in good working order, I can safely say I'd rather be eaten by a cuddyfinkle!

(At once, the soldier's face dropped and he snarled at her venomously.)

SOLDIER: You fucking bitch!!!

(With that, he raised his sword and lunged for her heart with a furious look on his face. Reacting with extraordinary agility, Kritz threw herself backwards, almost bending herself in half to avoid the blade then sprung up again to perform a high kick to the underside of his chin, breaking his neck.)

KRITZ: Ha! You're rubbish.

(As she grinned down at his corpse, a look of enlightenment crossed her brow.)

KRITZ: Sexually frustrated are they? That gives me an idea!

(As she raced away looking pleased with her kill, a watching Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: Those two are made for each other. Psychotic, the bloody pair of them.

(He then turned and saw Flaxley racing up to two silver clad soldiers. With a violent shunt from his shield, he thrust one of them back onto the others sword, then decapitated the other.)

FLAXLEY: I know you two were close, but there's no need to lose your head...

(With that, his entire aura drained and his shoulders slumped.)

FLAXLEY: How many times? Tell me, how many times?

(He pleaded to the heavens.)

FLAXLEY: Won't someone please rid me of these puns!!!

(Spying his momentary lapse in concentration, a Malk soldier charged at him from behind, drooling that the thought of making a kill.)

BONSON: Behind you, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: What?

(Reacting to Bonson's warning, Flaxley quickly spun around and spotted the bloodthirsty foe advancing. Without even changing his expression, he jumped forwards and slashed his sword at incredible speed twice, removing both the man's arms. As the man cried out in pain, Flaxley scoffed then pushed him away.)

FLAXLEY: Now go, I can not fight an unarmed man!

(Instantly, he spammed his forehead and started to trudge towards the wall of the palace.)

FLAXLEY: What is it with me??? I just can't seem to help myself!!!

(Looking lost and depressed, he then slumped himself against the wall as the battle raged on in front of him. Well aware that a brilliant warrior like Flaxley could well mean the difference between winning and losing this fight, Bonson yelled at him desperately.)

BONSON: Flaxley, snap out of it!!!

(Thoroughly dejected, Flaxley offered no reply.)

BONSON: Oh... shit. Now what do we do?

(Suddenly, there was a loud, sexy female cry from several feet above everyone's heads.)

KRITZ: Hiya, boys!!!

(Kritz had made her way into the branches of the trees that overhung the battle square from the woodland and was making quite the exhibition of herself. Immediately, the battle came to a complete stand still as every single soldier involved stared upwards, drooling as she waved her top at them, wiggling her bare breasts from side to side.)

KRITZ: Check out *these* puppies!!!

(Looking utterly perplexed, Flaxley managed to drag himself out of his bout of depression and climb to his feet. As all those around him stared upwards lustfully, he paced forwards and called up to her.)

FLAXLEY: What on earth are you doing, woman???

(Realising her plan hadn't quite worked as she'd expected, she rapidly lost all her gusto and started to look extremely sheepish.)

KRITZ: Um...

(Covering her breasts she offered him a cheesy grin and no explanation as the soldiers all continued to watch with interest.)

FLAXLEY: Well?

(Nervously looking about herself she spoke up in a small voice.)

KRITZ: See, I thought they'd be distracted... and you know, while they were looking at me you... you know... you could strike them down.

(Her bottom lip quivered as Flaxley spammed his forehead at her.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz, Kritz, Kritz.

(Pouting, she spoke up in her defence.)

KRITZ: It would have worked if *our* troops hadn't stopped fighting as well!

FLAXLEY: Look, put your top on a get back down here! Some of us are trying to do battle, my love!

(As she slipped her top back on sheepishly, Flaxley looked around at the watching soldiers from both sides and gave them the thumbs up.)

FLAXLEY: As you were!

(And with a shrug, battle resumed as if nothing had happened, Flaxley returning to the wall to sit and sulk about his own inadequacies.)

BONSON: Oh shit! Don't do that, Flaxley!

(Fearing how his allies might fare without Flaxley driving them on, he swiftly looked about the square to take stock of the situation. Initially, he was a little encouraged by the lessening in enemy numbers.)

BONSON: Hmm... seems we're winning. Excellent.

(As soon as he spoke, however, nature intervened to throw the Malk soldiers the advantage. The sun dramatically appeared from over the top of the trees reflecting brightly on the silver Malk armour, dazzling the Guevina soldiers battling them. Well aware that the Guevina troops would need all the help they could get at this time, a sudden sense of duty washed over Bonson and he stepped forward looking determined.)

BONSON: Right! No more mister nice guy!

(He then looked around at the orgy of maiming, death and misery before him and swiftly changed his mind.)

BONSON: Well, perhaps just a little more mister nice guy wouldn't hurt!

(And with that, he stepped back again.)

BONSON: You're a coward, Bonson. A genius but a coward.

(Watching on as Flaxley continued to sulk and Kritz remained in the tree, too embarrassed to climb down again, he then sucked his teeth uncomfortably.)

BONSON: Oh, boy, those two have given up the ghost and we haven't got inside the palace yet. That can't be good.

(Much to his relief, however, Flaxley then climbed to his feet. Having managed to get a grip on his self-loathing for a moment, he was back in the game.)

FLAXLEY: Just fight, Flaxley. Kill and go, no more puns.

(With that, he raised his sword and attempted to march back into the fray when a familiar male voice rang in his ear.)

KURIK: Well, well, Sir Flaxley of Tifaeris.

(Looking somewhat shocked, Flaxley spun around and saw a Malk soldier, heavily armed and poised for a duel.)

FLAXLEY: I know that voice!

(Careful not to let his guard down, the soldier slowly lifted his helmet to reveal his identity.)

FLAXLEY: Kurik. So it *is* you.

KURIK: It is indeed, Flaxley!

(Flaxley looked most confused.)

FLAXLEY: But Kurik, I thought...

KURIK: That I was dead?

(He laughed.)

KURIK: No, not I, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Actually, I was going to say I thought you were in Guevina! I specifically asked for you when I rounded up the rest of the elite unit. They told me you were on leave.

(Feeling quite the fool, Kurik spoke up.)

KURIK: Um... well... they were wrong! I work for Sandark now!

FLAXLEY: I don't understand!

KURIK: It's really quite easy, Flaxley! Old Falbury paid a pittance, Sandark on the other hand, rewards a man for his endeavours.

FLAXLEY: But, Sandark's a...

(His words were then interrupted by a Malk soldier charging at him, screaming like an incoming Kamikaze pilot. Before he could react, however, Kurik thrust his hand in the little man's direction.)

KURIK: Halt!!!

(The man screeched to a standstill.)

KURIK: Now go away! Can't you see we're talking?

(At once, the over enthusiastic soldier grimaced with embarrassment then turned away.)

SOLDIER: I do apologise. How rude of me!

KURIK: Sorry about that. You were saying, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Kurik, you were the best student I had. Your sword skill was second only to my own. It was surely your destiny to be a knight, not a hired thug!

KURIK: Nobody's hiring knights, Flaxley! I simply needed a better challenge.

(He nodded sternly.)

KURIK: And I guess this is it! A pupil can not be the best until he's capable of vanquishing his master and mentor. I guess this is my final exam, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: You want to kill me?

KURIK: It's fate, Flaxley!

(While Kurik stood ready for immediate action, Flaxley merely held his sword loose in his hand and shook a disappointed head.)

FLAXLEY: So, you've forgotten the code?

KURIK: Code?

FLAXLEY: The knight's code! Without it your sword can never bring you fulfilment.

(Kurik retorted angrily.)

KURIK: I live by that code!!!

FLAXLEY: Then why do you work for the man who slaughtered King Falbury? A man who wishes to resurrect an evil soul to possess Princess Mandika and use her to wreak havoc around the world?

KURIK: You lie!

FLAXLEY: I've *never* lied to you, Kurik. Why would I start now?

KURIK: King Falbury has turned evil. Sandark only wants to destroy what is evil!

FLAXLEY: Fool!!! He's already killed King Falbury. Now he wants to invade Guevina to make Mandika queen just so an evil soul can possess her.

KURIK: Wrong! Our job will be to secure the castle while Stifer and Sandark negotiate with the king about ending his evil ways.

FLAXLEY: The king is already dead. Killed by Sandark two days ago. He lied to you!

KURIK: He'd never lie, but you will pay for yours!

(Seeing that Kurik was sweating, not quite sure who or what to believe, Flaxley raised his sword.)

FLAXLEY: Very well, I will fight you, but if you ever trusted or believed in me, stop this bloodshed and let us do what needs to be done. You may now attack me!

(Uncertain about his feelings, Kurik snarled then came at Flaxley with a volley of sword swings, all of which he defended with ease.)

FLAXLEY: Hmm... I taught you well!

(All over the cobbled plaza at this time, there were sounds of metal clashing against metal and screams of pain as both sides continued their unrelenting struggle. Both sides were convinced that they had the moral high ground. With Malk's entire army now present, however, the Guevina army's task of defeating them looked bleak. With some men down and others injured, Bonson could see they were starting to struggle and turned to face Derek urgently.)

BONSON: It's all going tits up, Derek... and if we die out here, the whole world will suffer at Aurora's hands. We have to go inside the palace and find that decanter *now*!

DEREK: I agree. Come on!

(Carefully but with extreme urgency, they ran the gauntlet of flailing swords and charged over to where Lefiat stood guard over Mandika.)

BONSON: You two, follow me!!!

LEFIAT: What for?

BONSON: Just do it!

LEFIAT: No! My orders are to guard, Mandika.

MANDIKA: Lefiat, just follow him will you?

LEFIAT: No, you're not the boss of me...

(Upon noticing a minor inaccuracy in his last statement he then paused for thought.)

LEFIAT: Actually...

MANDIKA: Just go!!!

(With that, they raced after Bonson and Derek, carefully negotiating their way through the battle. Unable to find Kritz, the four of them then raced over to where Flaxley battled Kurik. Stopping a few feet away, Derek yelled to him urgently.)

DEREK: Flaxley!!!

FLAXLEY: I'm busy!!!

DEREK: Flaxley, numbers are dwindling. Let's go while there's still a battle out here!!!

BONSON: If we leave it much longer, Flaxley, the soldiers could all be dead and well... so will we be!

(Having parried Kurik's blade, Flaxley swiftly glanced across at the battle then back at Kurik again.)

KURIK: Ignore *them*! This fight is my destiny!

(Never once relenting his battle stance, Flaxley sighed.)

FLAXLEY: Remember, Kurik, trust your old master! Sandark is evil; it's *him* we need to destroy! I'm ending this right now.

(With that, he jumped forwards and clapped his clenched fists around Kurik's head. As Kurik folded unconscious to the ground, Flaxley leant over him and sighed apologetically.)

FLAXLEY: That attack was cheap, tacky and flew in the face of everything the knight's code stands for. You challenged me to a duel and you deserved a fair fight, therefore I can only apologise. An honourable move it was not... but you left me no choice. The mission must come first.

(He then turned to face his waiting allies.)

FLAXLEY: Let's go!

DEREK: Wait! Where's Kritz?

BONSON: Um...

(He pointed up into the tree where she was still sitting and pouting like a schoolgirl up to her neck in trouble with her headmistress.)

FLAXLEY: Oh crap, I recognise that look! Wait here! Derek, keep them safe!

DEREK: Will do!

(And with that, he charged through the battle, batting enemy soldiers aside with consummate ease. The others could only watch on as he made it across the square then disappeared into the bushes beyond. Moments later, he reappeared climbing out onto the branch behind Kritz. As he approached her, he spoke in a soft, loving voice.)

FLAXLEY: Darling? Are you coming down?

(Looking thoroughly miserable, she shook her head and mumbled.)

KRITZ: No!

FLAXLEY: Well, you can't stay up here, my love, there's a battle going on and we need you.

(With her bottom lip almost touching her chin, she carefully turned herself to face him and stared down at her right knee.)

KRITZ: I'm not coming down ever!

FLAXLEY: Please, for me?

(Almost in tears, she looked into his eyes and whimpered.)

KRITZ: But... they'll tease me and laugh at me!

(Desperate to raise her spirits, he gave her a loving smile.)

FLAXLEY: Hey, I'll beat them up if they do, okay? Really violently.

(Disturbingly, she looked enthused.)

KRITZ: You promise?

FLAXLEY: I promise!

KRITZ: Okay.

FLAXLEY: Come on then, my love! Let's go.

(Looking somewhat desperate, Kritz reached out for his collar.)

KRITZ: Wait. Give me a hug first!

(Flaxley groaned with exasperation.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, for...

KRITZ: What?

FLAXLEY: Nothing, darling.

(With that, he reached forward to hug her and patted her back gently.)

FLAXLEY: Come on, darling, everyone's waiting for us!

(Accepting his request, she sat back and nodded happily.)

KRITZ: Okay!

(With that, she lifted her legs, spun herself around then leapt down from the tree onto the heads of two Malk soldiers at the perfect angle to snap their necks before racing over to her waiting comrades. Watching her go, Flaxley shook his head despairingly. The last time she'd regressed to a self-conscious child was just before she'd given birth. He'd had to spend two hours promising her he'd give birth too before she'd come out of the bathroom. Wondering just how she'd managed to snap from such a trance and revert to her old self so quickly, Flaxley also leapt from the tree and rejoined his comrades.)

FLAXLEY: Right, we ready?

DEREK: Let's go!

(Holding a bloodied tissue to his nose, Bonson answered angrily.)

BONSON: Actually I think I'd rather take my chances out here than go anywhere with that bloody psycho!

(He pointed at Kritz angrily.)

FLAXLEY: Had to tease her about it didn't you, Bonson?

BONSON: Well, you know I can't resist a joke!

(Derek gave him a belittling glance.)

DEREK: You'll get no sympathy from us. You know better than to piss off Kritz.

(Having only heard the last three words of Derek's sentence, Kritz raised her fist at Derek furiously.)

KRITZ: You want some an' all, do ya?

DEREK: I was defending you!

FLAXLEY: Look, never mind that, we've got a palace to break into, come on!

KRITZ: Fine, let's get this over with then.

(And so, as the battle raged on behind them, they raced up a set of stone steps that led to a platform overlooking the battle. A large wooden door was set in the middle of the platform. With extreme urgency, Flaxley paced up to the door before turning to face his allies.)

FLAXLEY: Okay, as soon as we get in there, we've got to find that spirit decanter!

DEREK: So we need to find Sandark and Stifer then. I can't imagine it's left unattended, one of them probably keeps it on them at all times.

FLAXLEY: I expect so, yes.

BONSON: Well, which one first?

DEREK: Who cares? Hopefully the first one we find will have it!

BONSON: You know it's never that easy!

FLAXLEY: Never mind that; is everyone ready?

(At once, he received four firm nods and a nonchalant shrug from Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Good! Now forget everything else, we're not here to pilfer or admire the curtains, let's just find the decanter... in other words, focus. Oh and, Lefiat, don't touch anything!

(Lefiat sneered furiously and shook his fist.)

LEFIAT: You've been dying to say that all day, haven't you???

FLAXLEY: Silence, Lefiat! Let's go!

(With that, he kicked the door off of its hinges then leapt back with a yelp as an arrow came flying back past him.)

KRITZ: What the???

(Instinctively, they all dived for cover either side of the door. Flaxley, Kritz and Mandika one side, Derek, Lefiat and Bonson the other. Clambering to his feet first, Flaxley crept to the side of the door and rubbed his chin.)

FLAXLEY: What on earth was that?

(Bonson gave him a quizzical look from across the open doorway.)

BONSON: Was that an arrow?

FLAXLEY: I think so!

(As the battle raged on just a few feet below the platform, the allies crouched either side of the doorway.)

KRITZ: What's an arrow?

BONSON: It's a new weapon, Kritz. Projectile!

KRITZ: Great! Now what?

(Everybody paused for thought.)

FLAXLEY: Just a minute!

(Bravely, he poked his head around the door then quickly retracted it as an arrow flew from the doorway, missing him by inches.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!!!

(He breathed a sigh of relief at the near miss.)

BONSON: Got any other brilliant plans?

FLAXLEY: No, but it sounds like you have!

(Much to Flaxley's annoyance, Bonson shrugged indifferently.)

FLAXLEY: No. Come on, big mouth! Let's hear it. Always first with the smart arse remarks but you've never actually got anything constructive to say, have you?

(Realising Flaxley was actually extremely angry with him, and had a million reasons for being so, Bonson mumbled something incoherent then glanced away.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry, what was that? Did you burp, Bonson?

LEFIAT: Leave it, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: No, I won't, if he's got something to say...

DEREK: Flaxley, you can't be bitter at him forever, you know! Giving you awful advice to keep you and Kritz fighting was a dreadful thing to do, yes. Then to try to set you up with Lady Verona... well, that was outrageous! But you have to let it go and move on.

(Bonson winced and bit his lip.)

BONSON: Oh thanks, Derek!

(As Flaxley turned red and seethed, Bonson could physically feel himself shrinking.)

FLAXLEY: That was *his* doing???

DEREK: Don't act so shocked, Flaxley. We discussed it last night.

(He looked mortified and bit his lip.)

DEREK: Or did I just hear you think it, Bonson?

BONSON: I hate you, Derek, I really do.

KRITZ: Wait? Who's Lady Verona? What's going on, Flaxley?

(Flaxley turned his head at her at lightning speed.)

FLAXLEY: I'll tell you what's going on...

(He glared at the trembling Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: I'm going to kill *him*!

(With that, he stepped across the doorway, arms outstretched to strangle him.)

MANDIKA: Careful!!!

(Just then, an arrow whacked into his shield, creating almighty pinging sound.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!!!

(He then leapt back and pressed himself against the wall.)

MANDIKA: Are you *trying* to kill yourself?

FLAXLEY: I was *trying* to kill that old bastard!

(Bonson looked over at him desperately.)

BONSON: Why the hostility, Flaxley? I apologised, didn't I?

FLAXLEY: No! You didn't! Not once! For anything!!!

DEREK: Stop it!!!

(Everyone looked at him.)

DEREK: Time's not on our side, you lot. We need to get inside, preferably before those Malk soldiers down there spot what we're doing. It's actually a miracle they haven't already.

KRITZ: Okay, but how?

DEREK: I don't know, but arguing isn't going to get it done.

MANDIKA: We've got magic, let's use it!

(Determined to redeem himself, Bonson nodded sternly.)

BONSON: Excellent idea, ma'am! Leave it to me.

(With that, he stepped into the doorway and pointed his hand inside.)

KRITZ: Pratt!!!

(With extreme agility, she dived at him and sent them both flying to the ground as another arrow whizzed out of the door.)

BONSON: Rape!!!

KRITZ: You should be so lucky!

BONSON: Yeah right, we both know you want me.

(They climbed to their feet and shared a chuckle, Bonson promptly stopping upon noticing Flaxley's cold stare from across the doorway.)

BONSON: Uh-oh.

FLAXLEY: I swear, Bonson, one of these days...

DEREK: Stop it! We still need a plan!

KRITZ: Yeah, Bonson. One that doesn't involve standing in the doorway with arrows flying at you!

BONSON: Yes, it was rather silly of me!

(Flaxley sighed.)

FLAXLEY: Why did you come?

(Greatly incensed by the question, Bonson furrowed his brow and placed protesting hands on his hips.)

BONSON: You all insisted!

FLAXLEY: No we didn't! We left it up to you! Which on reflection was a stupid idea; we should have made you stay behind!

(Bonson shook his head disdainfully for a moment then looked up wearing an enlightened expression.)

BONSON: Reflection... that's it!!!

MANDIKA: Reflection?

BONSON: Yes. Flaxley, the arrow was useless against your shield, was it not?

FLAXLEY: Well I don't use any old rubbish you know!

BONSON: And we know lightning magic reflects off of steel...

(Flaxley looked enlightened.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, I get it!

BONSON: You do?

FLAXLEY: No!

BONSON: It's simple, hold your shield at an angle in the doorway and we can use it to reflect lightning magic at whoever's shooting at us!

LEFIAT: Hey, I get it!

BONSON: See, it's so simple even an idiot can understand it!

(Lefiat beamed with pride.)

BONSON: Well?

KRITZ: Reflected lightning is weak, I should know!

(She glared at Derek.)

DEREK: What? That was three years ago, get over it!

(Kritz scoffed.)

KRITZ: Yeah, whatever.

BONSON: Well, Flaxley?

MANDIKA: Shall we go with it?

FLAXLEY: It's definitely worth a shot.

(Flaxley looked across the doorway at Derek.)

FLAXLEY: I'll hold out the shield, Derek, you fire the lightning at it!

DEREK: Gotcha!

(Lefiat looked enthused.)

LEFIAT: Can I?

FLAXLEY: No!!!

MANDIKA: Derek's a better shot than you, love.

(Lefiat nodded in acceptance and sighed.)

LEFIAT: True, I'd probably manage to blow us all up or something!

MANDIKA: Oh, more than likely!

(Eager to give Bonson's plan a try Flaxley knelt and held his shield at a forty five degree angle across the doorway, taking care to keep his arms behind it.)

FLAXLEY: Miss and I'll kill you, Derek!

DEREK: If I miss, I'll kill *you*, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Good point.

(Looking closely at the dim reflection of an archer in the shield, Derek moved his hand around directing Flaxley to get the perfect angle.)

DEREK: Left... bit more...

(While they continued to be precise in their physics, arrows pinged and bounced off the shield, making Lefiat, Kritz and Bonson dance around to avoid them. Derek, on the other hand was showing immense bravery and continued to focus as rebounded arrows thudded all around him. Safely crouching behind Flaxley, Mandika watched on nervously, hoping against hope that nobody would be hurt.)

BONSON: Hurry up will you? Whoa!

LEFIAT: Look out!

KRITZ: Come on, it's raining arrows over here!

FLAXLEY: Relax; they lose their strength when they hit the shield!

KRITZ: Relax? You stand here and let's see how relaxed *you* feel!

(Derek then raised his voice.)

DEREK: Stop! Perfect, Flaxley. Hold it there.

FLAXLEY: You dare even move, Lefiat!

(Derek stared hard at the jelly-like reflection in the shield for a moment then flicked his wrist.)

DEREK: Lightning!!!

(With a blinding flash, a high voltage streak of energy flew into the shield and around the corner, sending Flaxley and the shield, flying in the process.)

DEREK: Quick!

(Immediately, Derek, Kritz, Lefiat and Bonson raced inside the palace while Mandika helped the dazed knight to his feet.)

MANDIKA: You okay?

FLAXLEY: Do I look okay?

(His helmet fell from his head, revealing the spiky hairdo from hell.)

MANDIKA: Bloody hell!

(Wobbling, he bent down to pick up his helmet then stood up placed it back on his head.)

FLAXLEY: Whoa!!! Head rush!

(Gathering himself, he shook his head then the two of them raced inside to join the others.)

MANDIKA: Did you get him?

DEREK: You could say that!

(He pointed to the charred body of the archer lying on the floor.)

MANDIKA: Gross!

KRITZ: That's what *I* said!

(They looked at each other then beamed.)

BOTH: Cool!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes, determined to get on with the mission as planned.)

FLAXLEY: Come on, let's find this decanter!

BONSON: Shouldn't we split up?

FLAXLEY: No. Remember what happened last time we split up?

MANDIKA: *I do. Disaster!*

DEREK: So which way?

(Out of the blue, Lefiat turned to Bonson and scowled.)

LEFIAT: Hey, what do you mean, "so simple even an idiot can understand it"?

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, follow me! We need to search every room and leave no stone unturned. Come on.

(As Bonson grinned to himself, Lefiat snarled bitterly then joined the others as they raced off down the corridor after Flaxley.)

LEFIAT: I hate you, Bonson!

(And so, the search began. Looking determined to the extreme, they thrust open every door as they raced down the corridors of the palace, frantically searching for either Sandark or Stifer. No room was left unchecked as they hunted desperately, heading up and down stairs constantly for the source of all Guevina's troubles until they had no idea what floor they were even on. As they searched room after room, thrashing open one door after another, Kritz couldn't fathom why royal houses needed so many empty and pointless rooms in the first place. Having been raised in a log cabin, it all seemed extremely excessive. She approved.)

Determined to find either Sandark or Stifer as soon as possible and put an end to their threat, Flaxley had taken to kicking the doors in to speed up his search. His eagerness to complete the mission not about to be hampered by the formalities of turning door handles.

Having become accustomed to slinging open doors to empty rooms and rushing away disappointed, Mandika hastened ahead, thrusting open the door to a large dining room. With a crash, the door flew backwards and she raced in purposefully.

Expecting to see nothing, her face bore no expression whatsoever. Just seconds later, however, her eyes bulged and she screamed at the top of her lungs.)

MANDIKA: Argh!!!

(Alerted by her scream, her allies swiftly charged into the room just as she attempted to charge out again with an alarmed look on her face. In her desperation not to be there, she crashed into Lefiat then clung onto him for dear life just inside the doorway. Staring back into the room, her lips quivered and she spoke up in a deeply troubled voice.)

MANDIKA: I found a person!

(Sure enough, sitting at the end of a long dining table in the thin, elegant hall, an overweight gentleman stared back at them all in utter bewilderment. The last thing this portly gent had expected while he sat there filling his already bloated stomach with yet more food was an intrusion from five mismatched strangers and a giant frog.

As he continued to sit there looking perplexed, Flaxley glanced from side to side at his allies then took a step forward.)

FLAXLEY: Lord Stifer? I assume.

(Looking most displeased, the overweight nobleman pushed back his chair and stood up from the table. Grabbing a chicken leg from his plate he then sneered at the unwelcome visitors and paced around the table waving it at them angrily.)

STIFER: What the hell's this?

BONSON: It's a chicken leg, obviously!

(Unimpressed, he threw the chicken leg back on the table and bellowed.)

STIFER: Guards!!!

(With nothing but contempt for the man's angry demeanour, Flaxley rolled his eyes and stepped forward.)

FLAXLEY: Are you Lord Stifer or aren't you?

(Stifer just scoffed at him at stopped to fold his arms arrogantly, still a good thirty feet away from Flaxley.)

STIFER: What if I am? What's that got to do with you, *boy*?

(He shook his fist and raised his voice once more.)

STIFER: Guards!!!

(Delighted to have found one of the men he was looking for, Flaxley held out his blade and sneered.)

FLAXLEY: Give it up, Stifer. Your guards are busy. Now give me the spirit decanter!

STIFER: What do you know about the...

(He then froze in horror as he recognised who'd burst in on him.)

STIFER: You're Princess Mandika! You're... you're here!!!

(Mandika trembled and swiftly stood behind Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: Go away!

BONSON: If you want to hide, Mandika, stand behind *me*. You stick out either side of bean pole boy. You look like Flaxley trying to be stealthy.

(Letting Bonson's comment slide, Flaxley stepped forward once again.)

FLAXLEY: Stifer, I demand you hand over the spirit decanter this instant!

(Stifer flapped.)

STIFER: Never!!! Guards!!!

FLAXLEY: I told you, they're busy!

STIFER: Guards!!!

FLAXLEY: It's over Stifer; nobody's coming, now give us the decanter!

(Beginning to realise that Flaxley was right about nobody coming to his aid, Stifer started to sweat.)

STIFER: I... know nothing about any decanter!

BONSON: Oh, just kill him, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: I might as well!

(Before Flaxley could move another step, however, Stifer thrust out a hand.)

STIFER: Stop, I haven't got it!

FLAXLEY: Then who has?

STIFER: Um... I don't know!

FLAXLEY: Sandark, perhaps?

STIFER: You know of Sandark?

FLAXLEY: And of Aurora, now stop this madness and hand it over!

STIFER: I can't, I really don't have it!

FLAXLEY: I'll just kill you and search you then!

STIFER: You can't do that!

FLAXLEY: Oh, and pray tell, why not?

(Stifer's face dropped then he snarled furiously.)

STIFER: Because I will never betray my queen!!!

(With that, he threw himself to his knees and bellowed at the top of his voice.)

STIFER: Guardian of immortal hell, Infestus, awaken!!!

(As soon as he yelled the words, his eyes bulged and he thrust back his head before casting his arms out to his sides and speaking in tongues.)

BONSON: What a weird bloke!

DEREK: You're not wrong!

BONSON: I'm *never* wrong, fact!

KRITZ: What's he doing? And who's this Infestus?

(Unimpressed by Stifer's antics, Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Look! Let's just kill him and get going, Sandark can't be too far away! I've got no time for some sissy who falls on his knees and cries at the first sign of danger. Infestus indeed!

(With that, he raised his sword and sneered coldly to where Stifer was kneeling.)

FLAXLEY: Prepare to die, Stifer!

(Flaxley took one step forward to scythe him down, however, when from absolutely nowhere, a strong wind started to force him back. Bowing down to try and make headway against the bizarre force, he started to slide backwards as the wind began to howl aggressively.)

FLAXLEY: What the fuck???

(Bewildered by the sight, his comrades looked on in amazement. The harder he tried to advance, the harder the wind pushed him back.)

KRITZ: What the hell? Where's that wind coming from??? You okay, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: I can't seem to...

(Before he could utter another word, the floor started to vibrate and Stifer's skin began to glow orange. Unable to get close to him, Flaxley snarled, more determined than ever to run him through with his sword as soon as possible. As he continued his desperate attempts to make headway, however, the ground started to shake violently, forcing his watching comrades to grab a hold of each other just to retain their balance.)

KRITZ: What the hell's this?

MANDIKA: I'm scared!!!

(At this point, Stifer started to beam red and his angry staring eyes began to glow a fluorescent crimson. Horrified by the sight before him, Flaxley relented in his attempts to surge forward for just a second and was immediately blown back to his allies with a tremendous force. With a scream, his feet left the ground and he buzzed through the air, thudding into the wall just beside them. Before any of them could see if he was okay, however, Stifer shook violently and bared his teeth before releasing a vile roar that made the whole room shudder like an earthquake, throwing them all to the ground. At once, they all looked up from where they lay in abject horror as the tremor continued and the cacophony of growls screams and roars from Stifer, became almost deafening. To make matters worse, the howling wind then started to gust at them with extreme ferocity, pinning them where they lay. Fearing the worst, they shouted to one another to be heard over the noise.)

BONSON: Screw this! If I could get to my feet, you wouldn't see me for dust!

DEREK: Be strong, Bonson!

BONSON: Bollocks!

MANDIKA: Lefiat, what is it? What's happening to him?

KRITZ: I don't like this, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Nor do I! But judging by all that screaming he's doing, he doesn't seem to be having too much fun either!

LEFIAT: How can you joke at a time like this?

KRITZ: Yeah, do something!

FLAXLEY: I can't, I'm as stuck here as you are!

(Stifer's already deafening roar then grew deeper and yet more violent.)

MANDIKA: I wanna go home! I'm going to wet myself in a minute!

LEFIAT: You wouldn't be the only one!

FLAXLEY: What the hell's going on?

BONSON: I've got a nasty feeling he summoned a demon to take his place in the world!

FLAXLEY: He sacrificed himself for Aurora? Can he do that?

BONSON: Apparently he can! Urban legends can be extremely vague, but I'm fairly certain that's what he's done!

(Despite the hideousness of the situation, Flaxley was actually quite impressed with Stifer's actions. To have sacrificed himself and laid down his life for his queen was very much in keeping with the knight's code. To die for your charge was considered singularly the most noble act a knight could ever perform.)

FLAXLEY: See, now that's loyalty!

BONSON: Such is Aurora's hold on people!

FLAXLEY: So, how do we defeat this demon? What do the legends say about that?

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: I don't know, Flaxley. Maybe I'm not as wise as I think I am!

FLAXLEY: Well, *I* could have told you that.

(Stifer then let out a scream so loud, the full length windows behind him smashed, sending millions of tiny glass fragments out into the grounds of the palace. At once, everyone turned away to shield their faces, only to find the howl of the wind, the harrowing screams and the violent shaking of the floor beneath them stop without warning. Able to move again, they immediately swung their heads around to where Stifer had been, and there it stood. The demon, Infestus.)

FLAXLEY: Oh shit!

(They could only gape in horror at the ten foot tall scaly beast that stood before them, having taken Stifer's place in the world. With claws like daggers, a sharp forehead horn and a thick spiky tail, it made for quite the terrifying sight. Looking utterly horrified, they all leapt to their feet immediately and started to backtrack towards the door as the beast disintegrated two dining chairs with one swing of its enormous fist.)

FLAXLEY: Lefiat, get Mandika and that old git out of here!

BONSON: Hey!!! No, I take that back, let's go!

LEFIAT: But, Flaxley...

FLAXLEY: Run, Idiot! It's imperative we protect Mandika, and Bonson won't stand a chance!

BONSON: I agree, come on, Lefiat!

(With that, the three of them raced for the door.)

MANDIKA: Please... don't get yourself killed!

(They then fled from the room leaving Flaxley, Kritz and Derek, staring down the barrel of a loaded demon.)

KRITZ: I can't help but think *we* should have run too!

FLAXLEY: It'd only chase us!

DEREK: True! And look on the bright side; now that wind's gone we can attack whenever we're ready!

(With that, Flaxley raised his sword and Kritz and Derek took up a fighting stance. As the beast snarled back at them from the other end of the thin dining hall, however, they couldn't help but feel more than slightly intimidated by its sheer bulk. Not about

to allow the intimidation to get the better of him, Flaxley took a step forward and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Okay, beast, let's see what you can do!

(As Kritz and Derek looked on with trepidation, Flaxley charged the beast, swinging his sword towards its neck with all his might.)

FLAXLEY: Back to hell with you!!!

KRITZ: Go on, my love!

(Much to her dismay, she could only watch and squirm as the mighty beast gently flicked at his blade with its claws, cutting it in half, almost as if it was mocking him.)

KRITZ: What the...

DEREK: It... did you see that?

KRITZ: I wish I hadn't, Derek!

(Utterly thwarted, Flaxley stood before the beast staring in disbelief at his broken stump of a sword.)

FLAXLEY: Why??? That was... my faithful Louise! How??? Like a knife through butter!

(A red mist then descended over him and he looked up with hatred boiling up inside of him.)

FLAXLEY: My precious sword!!!

DEREK: No, Flaxley!!!

(Realising what Flaxley was about to do, Derek leapt forward but was too late to stop him springing forward and punching the beast on the chin.)

FLAXLEY: My sword!!!

(Before he could even begin to deliver another blow, however, the beast thrust its paw forward, smashing Flaxley back across the room. Derek and Kritz were powerless to stop him as he flew back past them and thudded into the wall again.)

KRITZ: Darling!!!

DEREK: You okay, Flaxley?

(Dazed and disorientated, Flaxley clambered to his feet.)

FLAXLEY: I'll be fine!

(He tapped his chest plate.)

FLAXLEY: This is an inch of solid steel, you know!

(With that, the chest plate split down the middle and crashed to the ground.)

FLAXLEY: How in the hell?

(He glared at the beast in utter disbelief as Kritz and Derek continued to stare in horror at the pieces of chest plate on the ground.)

DEREK: Now, I'm scared!

(Kritz gulped then looked to the beast.)

KRITZ: Um... it gets worse!

FLAXLEY: Worse? It broke my precious sword? How can it possibly get worse???

KRITZ: We can get your sword fixed... that thing, however, we can't do anything about!!!

(As the beast reared up on its hind legs and smashed the thick mahogany dining table into tiny fragments with its fists, Flaxley gulped and conceded to her point.)

FLAXLEY: Right. True. I need to focus, we can fix my sword, so I need to calm down and think like a knight.

KRITZ: Flaxley, I think you've really pissed it off!

FLAXLEY: Um... good, hopefully it'll make a mistake!

DEREK: What? Any only eat two of us?

(The creature then released a deafening roar and charged straight at them.)

KRITZ: Panic!!!

(In a desperate attempt at self preservation, the three of them scattered in different directions about the dining hall, Kritz left screaming as it singled her out for punishment. Growling and frothing at its toothy mouth, the beast bore down on her as she scarpared around the room as quickly as she could, screaming like a baby.)

KRITZ: Go away!!! Piss off!!! Leave me alone!!!

(Infuriated by what he seeing, Flaxley clenched his fists and bellowed out.)

FLAXLEY: Hey! Get away from her!!!

KRITZ: Like that's gonna help!!!

(Stuck for ideas, Flaxley raced over to Derek with his arms out imploring him to make a suggestion.)

DEREK: I don't know; that thing's phenomenal!!!

(Determined to find a way to help her, Flaxley glanced about himself desperately.)

KRITZ: Flaxley!!! Help!!!

(Seeing the great demon closing in on her fast as she raced in circles about the room, Flaxley panicked and threw the first thing that came to hand at the beast's head.)

DEREK: Hey!!!

FLAXLEY: Shit! Sorry, Derek!!!

(He grimaced in dismay as his loyal friend flew towards the creature's head.)

DEREK: I hate you, Flaxley!!!

(Desperate to avoid the demon's razor sharp teeth, Derek thrust out his arms to grab onto its horn and slammed his feet down over its eyes as he landed on its head.)

FLAXLEY: Derek??? You okay???

DEREK: You bastard!!!

(Unable to see, the creature reared up, allowing Kritz to run over to the relative safety of Flaxley. Feeling nothing but distain for his actions, Flaxley cringed as he willed his little green friend not to get hurt.)

KRITZ: Wow, Derek's so brave!

(Desperate to regain its vision, the beast shook its head violently, sending Derek flying across the room.)

DEREK: Argh!!!

(Luckily for Derek, he managed to roll and jump to his feet unscathed. Mightily relieved, Flaxley yelled across the room to him.)

FLAXLEY: Are you okay?

(Derek flapped angrily.)

DEREK: Bastard... that pasting Mandika gave you was nothing compared to what I'm going to do to you!!!

KRITZ: Look out!!!

(Derek turned quickly and noticed the beast's spiky tail flying towards him.)

DEREK: Whoa!!!

(As if on springs, he leapt up and barely managed to clear the tail as it swiped beneath him. As soon as he landed, he raced over to the opposite corner of the room and as far away from the tail as possible. Looking flustered, he bellowed across to Flaxley and Kritz.)

DEREK: What are we gonna do?

(Unable to stand still, Flaxley thought on his feet.)

FLAXLEY: It didn't like being blinded!

KRITZ: So, we fire magic at its eyes?

FLAXLEY: It's worth a try!

(Derek's cry then filled the air.)

DEREK: Look out, it's coming!!!
(In blind terror, they looked up and saw the beast's scaly, horned head bounding towards them at great speed.)
KRITZ: Agh!!!
FLAXLEY: Away, beast!!!
(With that, he thrust his shield into its face as it bent down to devour them.)
FLAXLEY: A-ha, success!!!
(Sure enough, when the beast swung back its head, Flaxley's shield was impaled on its horn.)
FLAXLEY: Run!!!
(With that, he grabbed Kritz and dragged her away as the beast reared up and growled, trying desperately to remove the shield from its horn. Seeing the beast temporarily disorientated, Derek rushed over to his allies looking tortured and lost.)
DEREK: Now what?
KRITZ: Magic! Aim for its eyes!!!
DEREK: Has to be worth a try!!!
FLAXLEY: What will I do? I have no magic and it stole my weapons!
KRITZ: You act as a decoy and we'll fire at it!
FLAXLEY: A decoy?
(He shook his head.)
FLAXLEY: Okay, just make sure you don't miss!
DEREK: We'll try!
KRITZ: Go on, love, we're counting on you!
FLAXLEY: I can't believe I'm gonna do this!
(And with a gulp, he braced himself to act as human bait.)

(Elsewhere in the palace in the meantime, Lefiat, Bonson and Mandika were running down a long corridor, on their way towards what they hoped was the exit.)
LEFIAT: Are you sure it's this way?
BONSON: I'm positive!
MANDIKA: You said that about the other way!
BONSON: Trust me, this is the right way.
MANDIKA: How can you be so sure?
(Bonson rolled his eyes.)
BONSON: Well for one...
(With that, he slowed to a jog then stopped. Looking somewhat miffed, Lefiat and Mandika then came to a halt beside him.)
MANDIKA: For one, what?
BONSON: There's that bloke!
(With that, he pointed down the corridor at the charred body of the archer they'd killed on their way in.)
BONSON: See? This is where we came in!
(Mandika cringed and turned her head.)
MANDIKA: Gross!
LEFIAT: Hey, at least we know where we are now!
MANDIKA: True! So what are we waiting for?
(Feeling much relief they then hurried towards the exit when there was a loud smashing sound and a man cried out in pain from the other side of one of the doors in

the corridor. Immediately they all span around to face the door from where the sound had emanated from with nervous looks on their faces.)

MANDIKA: What was that?

BONSON: Forget about it, we need to get out of here!

LEFIAT: Wait! What if it was Sandark?

BONSON: Then we need to run even faster! Let's go!

(Mandika bit her nails.)

MANDIKA: But, we looked in there when we came in, there was nobody in there!

BONSON: Mandika, this is insane, let's just do as Flaxley told us and get the hell out of here! If it *is* Sandark in there, there's naff all *we* can do about it!

MANDIKA: I guess you're right! Come on!

(Unfortunately for Bonson and his anxiety to get as far away as possible, Lefiat hadn't listened to a word they'd said. Before they could even begin to head out of the castle, Lefiat nervously pushed open the door of the room and poked his head inside. As he did so, a baffled expression covered his face.)

LEFIAT: Eh? The window's been smashed!

(With that, he paced deeper inside the empty room and strutted up to the broken window. Outside in the corridor in the meantime, having watched Lefiat head into the room, Mandika started to follow his lead, much to Bonson's annoyance.)

BONSON: This is ridiculous, we have to get you out of here!

MANDIKA: Get *you* out of here you mean!

BONSON: I don't deny I want to leave, no!

(Inside the room, Lefiat stared through the airy gap where the window used to be and surveyed all around with his eyes.)

LEFIAT: What was...

(He then shuddered with rage as he spotted a hooded man with bare feet racing away towards the beach with a decanter tied to his waist. There were trails of blood behind him leading right back to the broken glass just outside the window.)

LEFIAT: So it *was* Sandark!!!

(With that, he raced out into the corridor to where Bonson was still remonstrating with Mandika.)

LEFIAT: Bonson, take care of Mandika, I've gotta go!!!

BONSON: What?

LEFIAT: I saw Sandark, I have to stop him!

BONSON: But he'll kill you!

LEFIAT: You wouldn't understand, Bonson! I'm a knight, it's my duty!

BONSON: Hey, I wasn't complaining.

(Looking deeply troubled Mandika stared into Lefiat's eyes.)

MANDIKA: You can't go after Sandark on your own.

LEFIAT: I can't let him get away either. He holds the key to destroying you, Mandika.

MANDIKA: I don't care! What if he kills you?

(Lefiat smiled and gently stroked her hair.)

LEFIAT: Don't worry about *me*. As long as I have *you* to love, I don't intend to die just yet!

(With that, he about turned then raced back into the room and out of sight.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat!!!

BONSON: Let him go, Mandika.

MANDIKA: But...

BONSON: But nothing, he's gone now. And so should we. Besides, chances are he'll never catch him anyway.

(He then glanced away and mumbled to himself.)

BONSON: And if he does, I'll be happy whoever wins.

(Quite taken by Lefiat's uncharacteristic moment of bravery, Mandika nodded then exhaled lustfully.)

MANDIKA: Fine... he's *so* getting some tonight!

(Desperate to get as far away as possible, Bonson rolled his eyes then ushered her towards the door.)

BONSON: You can sleep with Lefiat and yet bestiality is illegal. It's a crazy mixed up world, Mandika. Now, come on, you, we need to get you to safety!

MANDIKA: Okay, but be careful out there, there's a battle raging outside remember?

BONSON: Don't worry. I'm sure we can find a safe route through it!

(With that, they charged for the exit. With their eyes on stalks in fear of running into the battle at the worst possible moment, they raced out onto the platform then stopped dead and stared with amazement at the scene below in the square.)

MANDIKA: What's going on?

BONSON: I have no idea!

(In the square before them soldiers from both sides raced around tending for each others wounded and passing food and ale amongst themselves. Mandika was overjoyed at the sight of such unprecedented peace and clasped her hands to her heart.)

MANDIKA: This is... amazing.

(Just then, a large Malk soldier approached the bottom of the stairs and bowed to her.)

KURIK: Princess?

(He knelt.)

KURIK: Forgive me!

(Mandika looked at Bonson and received a shrug in return.)

MANDIKA: Forgive you?

(Kurik looked up.)

KURIK: Sir Flaxley spared my life so that I might see the truth. I have not been loyal to the knight's code. I followed the path of riches and it made me blind to the obvious. Please, forgive me!

MANDIKA: Um... okay.

KURIK: I see you're confused. Let me explain. I realise now, Sandark is evil, my men and I were blind to that but Flaxley opened my eyes. So we called a truce!

MANDIKA: Um... thank you... I guess!

KURIK: Princess, I offer you my condolences on your fathers passing!

(She smiled.)

MANDIKA: Thank you.

KURIK: Then it's true! Sandark killed King Falbury!

(She bit her lip and nodded.)

KURIK: Then my men and I will do all in our power to help you.

BONSON: Then would you help me keep Mandika safe? Dodgy things are afoot in the palace and her safety is paramount.

KURIK: It would be a pleasure. Please, allow me a few moments?

BONSON: No! Now!

(Mandika glared at him.)

MANDIKA: Bonson!!!

(She rolled her eyes then looked to Kurik.)

MANDIKA: Ignore him, I normally do. Thank you knight, I can wait!

KURIK: Ma'am!

(He bowed and turned away. As he walked out of sight, Mandika looked thoughtful.)

MANDIKA: Hey, we should have got him to help the others actually!

BONSON: Flaxley will be fine, especially with Derek and Kritz there!

MANDIKA: But Lefiat... we must get them to help Lefiat with Sandark!

BONSON: Hmm... I suppose! Let's find that knight again!

(And so they carried on down the stairs and crossed the square in search of Kurik.)

(Back inside the castle at this time, Bonson's optimism about Flaxley, Kritz and Derek was proving totally unfounded. The beast, unable to remove Flaxley's shield from its horn was becoming increasingly distressed, therefore more aggressive.)

In accordance to their plan, Flaxley danced like a lunatic in front of it as it growled and hissed his way. Trusting his two allies to fire their magic at the opportune moment, he growled through his teeth at the ferocious killer before him.)

FLAXLEY: Come on, demon boy, I'm right here!!!

(Angrily, it leapt forth and thrust a powerful clawed paw at his head. With stunning agility, he dived beneath the claw then leapt to his feet and ran to where Kritz and Derek were poised to fire their magic into its eyes from side on.)

FLAXLEY: Why didn't you shoot???

DEREK: I wasn't ready!

KRITZ: Get back over there, we'll try again.

FLAXLEY: Oh, for fuck sake!!!

(As he spun around to have another go at taunting the vile beast however, he saw its giant head charging straight at them.)

FLAXLEY: Crap!!!

(With terror etched on their faces, Flaxley and Kritz immediately fled, in fear for their very lives.)

FLAXLEY: This was a stupid plan!!!

KRITZ: You aint kidding!!!

(In stark contrast to Flaxley and Kritz's actions, Derek held his ground as the beast charged forth. Staring hatefully into its eyes as it gained swiftly, determined to run him through, he then snarled and sprung into action.)

DEREK: Inferno!!!

(The beast squealed with pain as the intense fireball from Derek, impacted hard into its eye, paralysing it like a statue. Seeing the beast freeze to the spot, Derek leapt for joy.)

DEREK: It worked!!!

(Upon hearing his delighted words, Flaxley and Kritz raced back over to him.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!!! I've got nothing to stab it with!

KRITZ: Let's punch it!!!

DEREK: Great idea!

(They all took one pace forward to pummel it when the beast shook violently. As before the ground started to shake and Kritz and Derek had to hold onto Flaxley just to remain upright.)

DEREK: I knew I should have stayed in East Edea with Zanne!

(Frozen with fear, they stared up the beast, not knowing what to expect but fearing the worst, when right before their eyes, the demon monster swelled in size, gaining another two feet in height and a might more muscle.)

FLAXLEY: What the?

DEREK: Um... I guess that rules out magic!

KRITZ: Now what?

FLAXLEY: Magic's useless and we have no weapons. I suggest we run for it!

KRITZ: But what if we accidentally lead it to the others? We could get everybody killed!!!

DEREK: That's a risk I'm willing to take!

FLAXLEY: Me too!

(They went to run only for Kritz to bellow at them and stop them in their tracks.)

KRITZ: Stop!!!

FLAXLEY: Kritz, be sensible. We stand no chance!

KRITZ: Malk is a normal town, guys. It's not just a military power base. There are families out there, children, do you want them to die?

DEREK: They'll die anyway. Once that thing's killed us, it'll attack the next thing it sees! It's not gonna take a carriage to Azagotse and retire to a life in the cabaret, you know?

FLAXLEY: No, no! She's right... we have to stop it somehow!

DEREK: How?

KRITZ: I don't... look out!!!

(Having grown even more powerful, the enormous beast proceeded to lash out violently at them with its claws and its spiked tail, smashing everything in the room and rapidly bludgeoning holes in the walls. It was all Flaxley, Kritz and Derek could do to stay alive. Watching it like hawks, they ran, dived and rolled out of harms way as the violent demon kept up a constant, vicious onslaught. From all points around the room as they dodged and weaved just to stay alive, they yelled to each other in a panic.)

FLAXLEY: It's too bloody quick!!!

DEREK: What can... careful, Kritz!!!

(He and Flaxley looked on in horror as the beast backed her into a corner by the wrecked frame of the window.)

KRITZ: Help me!!!

(Without a second thought for his own safety, Flaxley raced up to the beast and leapt onto its back.)

FLAXLEY: Yeow!!!

(He leapt off immediately and bellowed in pain.)

FLAXLEY: Its skin's red hot!!!

(Having been distracted slightly, the beast took its eyes off of Kritz for the briefest of moments. Seizing the opportunity, she put her head down and attempted to charge past it and make good her escape. In its eagerness not to let her go, however, the creature lashed out and managed to slap her back towards the window with its huge, muscular forearm. Dazed and disorientated she landed flat on her face and slid, head first towards the splintered window frame, stopping a foot short of going through it.)

KRITZ: Shit!!!

(Looking alarmed, Derek remonstrated with Flaxley.)

DEREK: Do something, Flaxley!!!

FLAXLEY: I'm thinking!

(In desperation he picked up what was left of a chair and threw it at the angry giant.)

FLAXLEY: Over here!!!

(At once, the beast spun around and immediately charged at him instead, its glowing red eyes showing its murderous intent.)

FLAXLEY: Now what?

(Down on her hands and knees, Kritz glanced back to see the beast running away from her and drew a sigh of relief. She then climbed to her feet when something curious out of the window, caught her eye.)

KRITZ: Lefiat?

(Sure enough, down below, Lefiat was in hot pursuit. Running faster than he ever thought he could, he was chasing the fleeing Sandark through some broken glass and over a wall towards the beach.)

KRITZ: You go, Lefiat!

(Just then, a shrill cry from Derek made her spin around and scream out in fear.)

DEREK: Kritz!!!

FLAXLEY: What are you doing???

(Derek and Flaxley watched in horror as the vile demon raced towards her. In a panic, she looked around for a way out, wishing she'd remained focussed on the beast and not Lefiat. Terrified and quaking all over, she stepped back, gaping.)

KRITZ: Oh no... my god!!!

(Determined to make the kill, the beast flashed its tail from side to side at a tremendous pace to keep Derek and Flaxley at bay behind it as it charged towards her. With Kritz isolated and terrified it then raised its paw to strike her down.)

KRITZ: No!!!

(Too terrified to remember her location, she stepped backwards from the edge of the window and slipped out.)

FLAXLEY: No!!!

(Screaming, Kritz desperately tried to grab hold of the ledge then plummeted from sight.)

DEREK: Oh, no!!! This is too bad; this is too, too bad!!!

(At once, they both held their devastated heads in their hands convinced that Kritz had fallen to her death from the window. Clearly going to pieces, as the beast spun around to face them, Flaxley snarled at Derek.)

FLAXLEY: This thing has to pay, Derek!!!

(With that, he stamped towards it furiously, his face contorted with rage.)

DEREK: No, Flaxley!!!

(Derek pulled him back.)

FLAXLEY: Let me go, I have to do this!!!

DEREK: No, Flaxley! You've got no chance!!! You'll die!!!

FLAXLEY: Kritz has gone, what does it matter?

(Just then, they heard the sound of a female groan as Kritz climbed back in through the window. Flaxley's face lit up.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz?

(She yelled back.)

KRITZ: I'm okay!!! It was only a six foot drop. This whole place is built on a six foot platform; we're actually on the ground floor.

FLAXLEY: That explains the stairs up to the door.

(With that, he wiped the sweat from his brow then refocused his attention on the snarling beast.)

FLAXLEY: Right, here we go again!

DEREK: Here it comes!!!

(Sure enough, once again the angry savage charged forth, this time flailing its sharp claws randomly.)

FLAXLEY: Oh shit!

(As the heartless beast gained at great speed, the two of them looked around in desperation.)

DEREK: Which way???

FLAXLEY: You go left, I'll go right!

DEREK: Gotcha!

(And with that, they parted in the middle, running for all they were worth. Unsure which way to run, the beast flailed out in both directions, missing them both by inches.)

FLAXLEY: Shit! That was close!!!

(They both ran to Kritz as the beast spun around and snarled, seemingly taunting them before it charged again.)

DEREK: Now what?

FLAXLEY: I don't know.

KRITZ: Shall I try to get our soldiers to help?

DEREK: They're kinda tied up with the battle, don't you think?

FLAXLEY: There'd be no point anyway. We're totally out powered here. The only way we're gonna be able to fight fire with fire is if one of *us* becomes a demon, and I'm willing to bet none of us know how!

(Just then, an enlightened expression crossed Derek's brow.)

DEREK: Flaxley, you're a genius.

FLAXLEY: Hardly!

(Just then, the violent fiend roared then charged at them once again.)

KRITZ: Fuck!!!

FLAXLEY: Run for it!

(With that, Flaxley and Kritz ran to the widest edges of the room. Derek, however, just stood staring coldly at the beast.)

FLAXLEY: Derek? What are you doing???

KRITZ: Hey!!! Run, damn it!!! Derek!!!

(They both watched with despairing faces as the foul creature homed in on their tiny green friend.)

KRITZ: No!!!

(With the power of a hundred horses in one paw, as soon as it reached Derek, the beast lashed out at him and bared its enormous fangs. Fearing Derek's number was up, Flaxley swiftly looked away and winced. Kritz for her part, watched on anxiously as a smirking Derek pointed his trembling hand at the advancing paw of doom.)

KRITZ: Oh, god no.

(With a whipping sound, the giant claw flew towards Derek's head at a phenomenal speed. Unmoved, he continued to point at the claw then flicked his fingers out at it.)

DEREK: H2O!!!

(Instantly, the air was filled with the sound of heavy splashing as Derek released what sounded like a tsunami of water into their demonic foe. Flaxley and Kritz could only look on in amazement as the beast began to shiver and whine.)

FLAXLEY: What's he doing?

KRITZ: Magic only helps it doesn't it?

FLAXLEY: Well, *I* thought so!

(They watched on agape as Derek casually circled the paralysed beast, soaking it from head to foot.)

KRITZ: Derek? What are you doing?

DEREK: Our mistake was to *literally* fight fire with fire!

FLAXLEY: Eh? What?

DEREK: It's a demon; its life force is fire-based. There was no problem with magic, except the one magic I happened to choose.

FLAXLEY: So will this kill it?

DEREK: I don't know...

(The water stopped and he lowered his hand.)

DEREK: But this will!!!

(He then thrust open his fingers and released an extra powerful bolt of lightning magic into its soaking wet head, causing it to shake violently and literally dissolve before their very eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Man, that smells revolting!

KRITZ: Now you know how I feel when you leave your boots on my side of the bed!

(With that, they smiled and hugged one another as they watched the creature continue to waste away.)

DEREK: His life force is long gone, come on, let's go!

(Wearing faces filled with relief and the joy to be alive, they then headed merrily for the door. As they did so, however, Kritz stopped and gaped in despair.)

FLAXLEY: What's up?

KRITZ: Sandark!!!

(Looking frantic, she then threw her hands up in dismay.)

KRITZ: Lefiat was chasing Sandark, we have to save him!

DEREK: Does it ever end?

FLAXLEY: End? That was never the end anyway! We came here to smash the decanter, not fight *that* twerp. So far, we've achieved nothing.

KRITZ: At least we know where Sandark *is* though, that's something right?

FLAXLEY: Only if we make it count, my love. Let's get out there, find Sandark and smash that bloody decanter to smithereens.

(If Lefiat's allies were worried that he'd caught up with Sandark and got himself killed, they needn't have been. Despite starting to chase him well over ten minutes ago Lefiat was *still* in pursuit of him.)

Having cut his feet to smithereens when he'd charged across the glass, Sandark's feet were bleeding so heavily they were leaving a red trail in his wake and every footstep was causing him immense pain. Most men in this situation would have given up running long ago. Sandark, however, was no ordinary man. Unfortunately, when it came to stamina, Lefiat was no ordinary man either. He was entirely sub par and didn't look like catching the limping Sandark any time soon.

As the minutes wore on, the muscular Sandark, limped constantly onwards down the sandy coastline, turning occasionally to see if Lefiat was gaining. Slowly but surely, the cuts on Sandark's feet were finally causing him to lose his lead. Lefiat was indeed gaining.

Realising he wasn't going to out run the plucky halfwit, Sandark then stopped, drew his sword and waited, catching his breath as he did so. Lefiat, also out of breath, saw him stop and slowed to a walking pace. Puffing and panting for some fresh sea air as he neared the equally as exhausted Sandark, he stopping a mere six feet shy of him and gasped for breath. Then, the two men faced each other bitterly and silently for a moment until Lefiat spoke up. With his love for Mandika driving him on, the trembling buffoon had gone and for once in his life he sounded confident in his words.)

LEFIAT: So... you've got the spirit decanter!

(Sandark said nothing.)

LEFIAT: You'll never harm Princess Mandika, I'll see to that. Now hand it over!

(The hooded Sandark laughed.)

SANDARK: Pathetic fool, I'll never betray Queen Aurora!

LEFIAT: She's evil! She needs to be destroyed!

SANDARK: So, you say. We'll have to put *you* top of our punishment list once Queen Aurora has risen!

LEFIAT: She won't rise, you've lost! Give it up, Sandark!

SANDARK: Fool!!! I do not lose!!! You Guevina fools may have thwarted us this time but as long as I have the spirit decanter, Aurora *will* rise again someday!

LEFIAT: So, Mandika will *never* be safe unless I destroy it!

SANDARK: Then I guess we have a problem!

(With that, he pulled back his hood to reveal a pair of flaming red eyes. Lefiat was horrified.)

LEFIAT: What *are* you???

(Sandark held his sword to his face and smirked at it coldly.)

SANDARK: You've never heard of a dark knight? As a protector of evil, I bring death and suffering in the name of my charge. You will experience both.

(Feeling more than a little daunted, Lefiat shook his sword in Sandark's direction.)

LEFIAT: Good always triumphs over evil!!!

SANDARK: Not today it won't!!! I am the mighty Sandark...

(Lefiat looked confused.)

LEFIAT: Mighty? You were running away from *me*! Nobody ever does that!

(Sandark looked extremely peeved.)

SANDARK: I wasn't running from *you*, I was merely running and *you* started to chase me.

LEFIAT: Eh?

SANDARK: To survive, Aurora needs a vessel, either a body to possess or her decanter. As her protector, keeping her decanter safe is my highest duty. So when you fools brought your army into my domain, I took it and fled. With one lucky swing of a blade or even a mistake, her decanter could be destroyed. I couldn't take that risk.

LEFIAT: So you ran away?

SANDARK: So, I took her to safety!!!

(He sneered.)

SANDARK: But you mark my words, had the decanter been safe elsewhere, I would not have fled and none of your so-called soldiers would now be breathing. Let me shown you what I mean.

(With that, the all powerful Sandark proceeded to swing his hefty iron sword at Lefiat as if it weighed nothing. No match for his opponent's sheer strength, Lefiat could only block and obstruct the blows without any thought of a counter swing. Clearly

terrified, he desperately struggled to retain his balance as the mighty Sandark embarked on an unrelenting assault on his person.)

SANDARK: First time with a sword, oh feeble one?

LEFIAT: No, I'm a knight! I can handle you!!!

SANDARK: Is that so?

(With that, Sandark stopped swinging and grabbed Lefiat's sword right out of his hand.)

LEFIAT: Hey!!!

(As Lefiat gaped in horror, Sandark smirked and placed his own sword back in its sheath.)

SANDARK: Prepare to die by your own sword... or is it your little sister's?

(With his eyes on stalks, Lefiat backtracked looking utterly terrified.)

LEFIAT: So... you'd kill an unarmed m-man?

(Clearly enjoying himself, Sandark nodded thoughtfully.)

SANDARK: You're right, that wouldn't be fair!

(With that, he held Lefiat's sword in front of him then bent it in half over his knee.)

SANDARK: Here!

(He then threw it down into the sand in front of Lefiat and reproduced his own sword.

Trembling all over, Lefiat scooped up his semi-circular sword and whimpered.)

LEFIAT: I can't fight with this!!!

SANDARK: Then you'll have to die without it!

(With that, the red-eyed protector of evil, launched into Lefiat once again, unleashing a sortie of powerful slashes from his colossal blade.)

LEFIAT: Help!!!

(By now, Lefiat's misplaced confidence had evaporated entirely. Sandark was making all the moves, slashing at his blade time and time again, sometimes high, sometimes low, but each time Lefiat somehow managed to block it with his stumpy bent sword or leap out of the way.)

SANDARK: Your defensive skill is impressive!

LEFIAT: That's because I'm shitting myself!

SANDARK: And so you should be! For you, death is inevitable.

(Despite wearing a mocking grin as he continued his assault on the mortified Lefiat, Sandark was starting to get annoyed. It simply beggared belief that he hadn't struck him down by now. Every move he made was being second guessed by the gangly young lad, one complete fluke after another. He knew it was only a matter of time before the lad's luck run out, however, so he kept up his unwavering assault with every confidence that a breakthrough was imminent.)

SANDARK: Why don't you just bow to the inevitable, you nauseating fool?

LEFIAT: Never!!!

(In that moment, Lefiat's luck ran out. As he threw his arm to the left to block the incoming blade, Sandark's hit his stumpy sword with such ferocity, it flew straight out of his hand and rocketed towards the sea.)

LEFIAT: Hey!!!

SANDARK: A-ha!!!

(As Lefiat stared in horror at his rapidly departing sword, Sandark beamed with psychotic delight.)

SANDARK: It's time for you to join your king, weak one! On your knees!!!

(With terror in his eyes, Lefiat backed away, scared witless by the merciless freak before him.)

LEFIAT: I aint gonna make it easy for you!!!

SANDARK: Fine!

(With that, Sandark leapt forward and grabbed him by the throat.)

LEFIAT: Help!!!

SANDARK: Nobody can save you now, boy!

LEFIAT: You don't know that!!!

(Sandark shuddered furiously.)

SANDARK: Enough! The sound of your voice is enough to drive a man to insanity, you annoying little freak!!!

(Knowing he'd receive no mercy from such a cold killer, Lefiat gaped in horror and started to hyperventilate.)

SANDARK: Now I shall kill you and take Aurora to safety!!! You will go to your death knowing that you failed!!!

LEFIAT: No!!! Please!!!

(With hatred burning in his eyes, Sandark threw him to the floor violently then knelt across his upper torso, pinning him firmly to the sand.)

SANDARK: I only wish I could say you were a worthy opponent!

(With that, he raised his sword to slit Lefiat's throat.)

SANDARK: Goodbye, fool!

(Convinced he'd breathed his last breath, Lefiat's eyes bulged in abject horror when much to his amazement Sandark tensed up and cried out in agony. Quivering from head to toe, he then watched on in shocked amazement as Sandark fell forwards into the sand with a heavy spiked mace sticking out of the back of his head. Shocked and trembling, Lefiat looked up in utter bewilderment then performed a double take.

Before his very eyes, Mandika was standing over him, staring hatefully at Sandark with blood splattered all over her dress.)

MANDIKA: That's for my father!

(Absolutely stuck for words, Lefiat then sat up and saw Bonson, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek racing over with a large band of soldiers. Sandark was wrong. At the last minute, he'd been saved. Feeling an overwhelming sense of relief, he looked up at Mandika and gushed with joy.)

LEFIAT: You saved me!!!

(Much to his dismay, she offered no reply. Ignoring him completely, she stepped over him to pluck Aurora's spirit decanter from Sandark's belt, very much in a world of her own.)

LEFIAT: Mandika?

(Still without offering Lefiat any acknowledgement, she then walked towards where the sea lapped the shore clasping the decanter tight in her hand. Watching her closely Lefiat's face bore a miserable expression and he looked to his knees. He could feel Mandika's pain and seeing her so lost cut him deep.

When the others reached him a few moments later, Lefiat continued to stare solemnly downwards, only wishing he knew how to lift Mandika's spirits.)

FLAXLEY: Up you get, Lefiat.

(Offering him a kind smile, Flaxley pulled Lefiat to his feet then looked towards Mandika and sighed emptily.)

FLAXLEY: Is she okay?

(Lefiat just sighed and remained silent.)

FLAXLEY: Lefiat?

(Without raising his head, he then answered in a depressed voice.)

LEFIAT: She's sad.

BONSON: She's devastated, poor thing.

KRITZ: But why is she cradling that decanter? I'd have thought she'd have smashed it as soon she got hold of it.

BONSON: It's not that simple, Kritz. She knows that once she smashes that decanter it'll all be over. No more fears, no more worries. There'll be nothing left for her to do but mourn. She knows it won't be easy.

KRITZ: That makes sense.

LEFIAT: I hate seeing her this depressed.

BONSON: Yes, so do I.

(He nodded.)

BONSON: We'll just have to make sure we support her every step of the way.

LEFIAT: Count on it.

(Kritz nodded then looked to Flaxley.)

KRITZ: I never thought she had it in her to smash someone's head in with a mace.

FLAXLEY: No, nor did I.

DEREK: Shows how powerful grief can be, doesn't it? That fiend killed her father before her very eyes and well... that'll change a person.

BONSON: Yes, yes it will.

(Silence then descended as they continued to watch Mandika standing motionlessly and silent near some rocks on the beach. Feeling her pain, everyone from Bonson to the band of soldiers they'd brought to help, watched her with heavy hearts as the wind blew across their solemn faces.)

BONSON: It makes you think doesn't it?

(Everyone nodded in solemn agreement.)

As Bonson stood there watching her, he started pondering all the relationships he'd had in his long life, the hearts he'd broken, the wife he'd driven away and the friends who'd long passed. In that moment, he started to feel guilty. Having had a hand in raising and nurturing the young princess all her life, he couldn't believe he hadn't once let her really know how much he loved her and how grateful he was to have her in his life. As he stood there rueing that mistake, he then thought about his part in Kayfu's plan. At once, his feelings of guilt started to swell until he could stand it no longer. Knowing it was high time he acted like a man and faced up to what he'd done, he nodded to himself then looked to Flaxley.)

BONSON: Flaxley, Kritz, I can't apologise enough for what I did to you!

(Flaxley gave him a sideways glance.)

FLAXLEY: How do you know? You've never tried.

BONSON: I'm trying now! I had my reasons for doing what I did, but at the end of the day, I wronged you both, for which I apologise unreservedly.

(Kritz and Flaxley both gave him distrusting glances.)

FLAXLEY: Are you taking the piss, Bonson?

KRITZ: Yeah, is this some kind of butler humour, we don't get? You never apologise for anything!

(Bonson furrowed his brow at them and snarled.)

BONSON: Yes, and I'll never apologise again if *that's* how you're gonna react. That apology was sincere, damn it.

(Flaxley looked impressed.)

FLAXLEY: Right... well... apology accepted, Bonson.

KRITZ: Yeah. Forget about it. We forgive you.

(Accepting their words, Bonson nodded gratefully.)

BONSON: Thank you, both of you. You make me feel really quite humble!

KRITZ: So, this secret of yours...

BONSON: I'm not feeling *that* bloody humble!!!

(Just then, Lefiat started to pace towards Mandika, glancing back at them as he did so.)

LEFIAT: Excuse me a minute.

(Casting his tin pot helmet down on the sand, he then hurried to Mandika's side. Not even acknowledging his presence, she said nothing and stared down at the decanter in her palm.)

LEFIAT: Mandika... darling?

(Without even looking up, she then spoke up in a saddened voice.)

MANDIKA: My father died because of this thing!

(Wearing a heartbroken expression she then raised her head and held the decanter out to Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: Will you destroy it for me?

LEFIAT: Don't *you* want to?

MANDIKA: I can't, I don't know why, I just can't do it!

(Lefiat nodded and took the decanter from her hand.)

LEFIAT: Leave it to me!

MANDIKA: Don't take the stopper out. I did briefly and it called me every name under the sun.

LEFIAT: Right... okay.

MANDIKA: Thanks, Lefiat.

(She then offered him a loving smile before heading for the others with her head bowed. Letting his fury about what had happened to his beloved come to the fore, Lefiat shook his head and quietly growled through gritted teeth.)

LEFIAT: Never again!

(With a full extension of his arm, he then thrust the decanter into the rocks, smashing it into tiny fragments. At once, a black mist floated into the air, screaming out like a wild banshee. Immediately, Lefiat screamed like a schoolgirl and raced to the others to watch it fizzle out and die in the air.)

LEFIAT: W-what was that?

BONSON: That was the sound of *you* screaming like a little girl!

(Mandika shook her head.)

MANDIKA: How dare she scream after all she did? I just hope it was a *painful* death.

(Doing his best to console her, Bonson put his arm around her and smiled.)

BONSON: It's over now, let's just go home!

MANDIKA: Okay.

(She forced a smile then looked across to all her allies.)

MANDIKA: Thanks, everyone. I'll try to repay you by being the best queen I can possibly be.

KRITZ: Repay? You don't owe anybody anything, babe!

MANDIKA: I do though. Well, maybe not *you*, I already let you have Flaxley so we're even. Everyone else though...

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: You're unbelievable. Let me have him indeed.

MANDIKA: I know, right? That was *so* nice of me.

(Heartened by her friend's support, her smile widened greatly.)

MANDIKA: The rest of you, when we get back to Guevina, the ale's on me!

(Bonson looked extremely excited.)

BONSON: I'll race you!!!

(And with that, he took off down the beach like a speeding torpedo.)

MANDIKA: You guys are great... you always know how to cheer me up.

(Feeling lifted to see her smile, Lefiat drew a sigh of relief when he caught sight of the large band of soldiers in the corner of his eye. Doing a double take, he scratched his head and shrugged to Flaxley with a bewildered expression on his face.)

LEFIAT: Hang on, how come we've got more soldiers than we started with?

FLAXLEY: If I told you it was because the people of Guevina are extremely fertile, would you believe me?

LEFIAT: Dunno. I have no idea what fertile means.

(Mandika chuckled.)

MANDIKA: I hired some of the guards from Malk, Lefiat! The ones Sandark stole from Guevina in the first place.

FLAXLEY: They won't let you down either, ma'am, Kurik and the boys are the best! (Watching as Bonson became a speck in the distance, Derek grinned.)

DEREK: Chaps, I hate to break up this happy moment, but we should get going.

Bonson's half way home already!

MANDIKA: I agree. Let's go home. Guevina needs a queen and I know just the girl for the job!

(And with that, they all headed off down the beach. With a renewed optimism for the future, the tired journey home was a happy one. Keeping a sharp eye out for leaping fish and giant crabs, the victorious friends caught up with Bonson within the hour, and with pride in their hearts, they all marched on high back to Guevina together.)

Guevina Castle – Throne room.

(Early the following morning, safe in the knowledge that the threat from Malk was no more, Mandika was official reinstated as the sovereign monarch. Following a short ceremony in front of all the dignitaries and her closest friends, the new Queen Mandika the First of Guevina then sat on her official throne for the first time.

Bestowed with her royal powers, her first act as queen was to order the after coronation party to be held right there in the throne room where she felt closest to her father. She was breaking a long standing tradition but she simply didn't care. It was her special day and she was determined to celebrate it her own way.

As the party got underway, Mandika watched on from her throne with a joyous smile on her face. Before her, Kritz, Derek and Flaxley were chatting together over a glass of wine. They'd all risked their lives to save her without a second thought, and she couldn't have been more grateful. Think about their actions, she'd never felt so loved. Exhaling merrily, overjoyed to have such wonderful friends in her life, she then looked up at Lefiat as he stood proudly by her side.)

MANDIKA: Thanks, Lefiat!

(Standing tall, almost as if on sentry duty, Lefiat looked straight ahead.)

LEFIAT: What for?

MANDIKA: For standing by me even though I was gonna sacrifice you for my wealth!

LEFIAT: Well, where else would I go? I had to stand by you; no other woman would have me!

MANDIKA: More fool them then!
(He looked completely bewildered.)
LEFIAT: Eh? Um... thanks. That *was* a compliment, wasn't it?
MANDIKA: Of course!
LEFIAT: Cool! Thanks, Mandika.
MANDIKA: You're very welcome!
(Once again she looked out to her friends.)
MANDIKA: Where's Bonson?
LEFIAT: He had to pop out for a while, apparently!
MANDIKA: Oh well! Come on, let's mingle!
(As she rose from her throne then stepped down from the raised platform, carefully holding up the bottom of her long dress, her guests turned to her and warmly applauded. Watching Mandika take such care not to trip on her hem, Kritz mused to herself.)
KRITZ: If she'd just wear a skirt like mine, she wouldn't have that problem!
(Flaxley frowned.)
FLAXLEY: No, she'd have *that* problem!
(He pointed behind her to a lustful old man who was bending over forwards to drool at her legs. With bulging eyes and his tongue almost on the floor, he was quite unaware that his monocle had fallen in his wine glass.)
KRITZ: He's harmless! Weird but harmless!
(As Mandika arrived beside them, Flaxley quickly changed the subject.)
FLAXLEY: Never mind that! Hello, Mandika!
MANDIKA: Hi, guys. I'm so glad you could stay for the ceremony!
KRITZ: It was our pleasure!
(Mandika looked uncertain and gestured over Kritz's shoulder.)
MANDIKA: Um... Kritz, is that chap bothering you?
KRITZ: What?
(She glanced behind her to find the randy old man who'd been admiring her legs was now standing right behind her, smelling her hair.)
KRITZ: Hey! Sod off, you pervert!
(Much to her annoyance, the upper class dignitaries in attendance immediately glared in utter disdain at her, considering her nothing but a foul mouthed lowlife.)
KRITZ: And you lot can piss off an' all!
(Mandika then cringed as the dignitaries made very little effort to disguise their conversations about their new queen's dubious choice of companions.)
FLAXLEY: I can't take you anywhere!
KRITZ: Yes you can, you can take me home. We were supposed to be back ages ago!
FLAXLEY: That's true; Phisele's mum will be spitting chips by now!
DEREK: If you're leaving, can you give me a lift back to East Edea? Zanne will be spitting chips too.
FLAXLEY: Of course, Derek.
(He then looked to Mandika and smiled.)
FLAXLEY: When you see Bonson, tell him no harm done!
MANDIKA: Will do!
FLAXLEY: Farewell, Lefiat!
LEFIAT: Yeah, take care!
KRITZ: And you take care of *her*!
(She pointed to Mandika.)

KRITZ: See you, babe!

(Just then an angry, short, fat man approached her wagging a finger.)

GILES: I say, you little whippersnapper, you! It's her majesty to you, and you never point at the queen!!!

(Kritz shook her head.)

KRITZ: She isn't *my* majesty, mate, and I'll point at who I like. Come on, Flaxley, sod this!

FLAXLEY: Thank god for that, there's been enough bloodshed already!

DEREK: Shame Bonson isn't here, I'd have liked to have said goodbye before we left.

KRITZ: Where exactly *did* he go, anyway?

(While the upper classed royal dignitaries watched Kritz, Flaxley and Derek leave, staring at them as if they were something a cuddyfinkle wouldn't step in, Mandika clutched her hands to her heart, feeling truly blessed to have them in her life.)

Lefiat's mother's house

(Having made his feeble excuses to miss the after coronation party, a bare-chested Bonson found himself standing face to face with a corset wearing Alpina, alias Madame Leatherclad, AKA Lefiat's mother. Like a romantic on a mission he pulled her into his arms and beamed.)

BONSON: I hope you realise I feel inspired today?

ALPINA: Good, 'cause I'm really gonna work on you!

BONSON: I'm glad; don't go easy on me because of my age!

ALPINA: Don't worry; I intend to give you a sensation *worth* paying for!

BONSON: Jolly good, let's do it then... baby!

(With that, he proceeded to waltz her around the room.)

BONSON: I wonder what the others would do if they knew you really *are* a dance instructor?

ALPINA: I can't believe you didn't set them straight!

BONSON: I can! If they knew I was having dancing lessons... well put it this way, I'd rather they thought you *were* a prostitute!

(He smiled.)

BONSON: But as a matter of interest... how much is it for a nice long shag?

(With an iciness to freeze the sun, Alpina stopped dead in her tracks and stared silently, straight into Bonson's eyes.)

BONSON: Well?

ALPINA: About thirty lig normally!

BONSON: Thought so! I'll take two.

Guevina Castle

(Back at the royal reception at this time, Mandika was standing by her throne with Lefiat, watching all the dignitaries quaff their way through complimentary snacks and free wine. Having treated her friends so coldly, she had nothing but disdain for them at this moment in time.)

MANDIKA: Vultures!

(Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: Yeah!
(With a sigh, she turned to face him then raised a curious eyebrow.)
MANDIKA: You look nervous!
(He turned to face her with terror in his eyes and bit his lip.)
LEFIAT: I am!
MANDIKA: Oh my god, what's wrong?
(He looked about himself then smiled at her innocently.)
LEFIAT: Um... Mandika?
(Fully expecting him to confess to another dim-witted mishap, she raised a distrusting eyebrow.)
MANDIKA: Yes?
LEFIAT: Um... you know you said you'd marry me before the king kicked me out?
MANDIKA: Yeah?
LEFIAT: Um... you still want to don't you?
(Mandika's heart then melted and she gave him a loving glance.)
MANDIKA: Hey, of course, I do! The sooner the better!
LEFIAT: Phew!
(With that, she gave him a long, lingering hug and snuggled her head into his neck.)
LEFIAT: I love it when you do that!
(As she continued to snuggle him, she opened her eyes and looked up above the throne. Having done so, she received an almighty shock.)
MANDIKA: Oh my god!!!
(Lefiat stepped back and looked to her urgently.)
LEFIAT: What is it?
(Seeing her eyes transfixed above the throne, Lefiat slowly raised his eyes to see what had made her react in such a way.)
LEFIAT: Holy crap!
MANDIKA: The Guevina eagle!
(She gaped.)
MANDIKA: It's gone!

Plain lands outside of Guevina

(As Flaxley led the carriage out of the gates of Guevina to take Derek back to East Edea, he allowed himself a sigh of relief. Looking forward to dropping his little green friend off and heading for home, he promised himself that'd he'd never set foot in Guevina ever again. Reading his mind, Derek sat beside him, nodding along to his sentiments.)
DEREK: You really hate that place, don't you?
(Having been deep in thought, Flaxley was a little startled.)
FLAXLEY: What? Sorry?
DEREK: Guevina!
(Flaxley shook his head and winced.)
FLAXLEY: You have no idea, Derek!
DEREK: I do, Flaxley! You hate it with a fiery passion!
FLAXLEY: Yes, of course... you read my mind! Arsehole!
DEREK: Hey!
(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry, old chap. Forgive me; that was most uncalled for. I'm just a little tired, that's all. As soon as we get back to Tifaeris, I'm going to take Louise to the master blacksmith then go to bed and sleep for several days.

DEREK: Actually, you'll go to bed then get woken by a crying baby shortly afterwards, I expect.

(Flaxley looked to him uneasily for a moment then sighed in despair.)

FLAXLEY: Bugger.

DEREK: Still, if you and Kritz share the load, it'll be fine, I'm sure.

FLAXLEY: Yes, well, we'll see.

(He grimaced.)

FLAXLEY: Hmm, this carriage seems a little sluggish today!

DEREK: Really?

FLAXLEY: Yeah, it seems to be dragging a bit! Those little shits in Guevina had better not have tampered with it or I'll go straight back and chop their gonads off!

DEREK: And I'll help you do it.

FLAXLEY: So, anyway, Derek, what are you going to do after the herb festival, old chap? Going straight back to Guevina or do you fancy coming to visit Kritz and I in Tifaeris for a few weeks?

(Derek sighed.)

DEREK: Nice of you to offer, Flaxley... even if you *were* just looking for a mug to help with the babies... but after the herb festival, Zanne wants us to resume looking for a homestead! We've searched half the world already but the only place we *really* feel at home so far is Tifaeris!

FLAXLEY: Then maybe that's your answer!

(Derek nodded in acceptance.)

DEREK: *I* know that and *you* know that, Flaxley. Unfortunately Zanne is a female. She'll keep me looking for the next five years then decide Tifaeris was the right place all along!

FLAXLEY: I hear you. Then she'll try to claim moving there was all her idea!

DEREK: Exactly.

(Once again, Flaxley frowned as he pulled on the reins.)

FLAXLEY: This is really odd, Derek! Maybe there's cracks in the wheels or something! I mean the horses are prepared properly from what I can tell and the carriage looks okay, I have no idea why it's dragging like this!

DEREK: Not carrying any extra weight are you?

FLAXLEY: Not that I know of!

(With that, he leant over the edge and yelled down to the carriage.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz, my love, are we carrying any extra weight? Only the carriage feels extremely sluggish for some reason!

(Sitting inside the carriage, grinning from ear to ear, Kritz looked inside the deep compartment beneath the seat opposite her. Beaming excitedly at the gleaming golden eagle nestled inside it, she then tilted her head towards the window. Trying not to laugh, she replied in her most innocent voice.)

KRITZ: No, darling! Not a thing!

(She then closed the compartment before sitting back and putting her feet up on it. She chuckled to herself all the way back to Tifaeris.)

Guevina, city walls.

(A short while later, Looking like the cat who got the cream, Shankstone beamed as he helped a group of six guards lead a protesting Kayfu towards the main gates. As if his whole world was in ruins, Kayfu was almost in tears.)

KAYFU: What do you mean, the queen insists??? I've worked at the castle all my life.

(Shankstone beamed.)

SHANKSTONE: Yes, well, now you don't.

KAYFU: But... I don't understand.

SHANKSTONE: It's not that difficult, Kayfu. You worked for the king and now the king is no more. We have a queen now and, well, she doesn't like you.

KAYFU: But I've always got on so well with her.

SHANKSTONE: Yes well, now you don't.

(He beamed.)

SHANKSTONE: You see, it seems that the queen is rather fond of Bonson, remember him? She trusts him. And when he told her about your involvement in the plan to oust Lefiat... well, she wasn't amused.

KAYFU: Why you...

SHANKSTONE: She was actually rather peeved and as a result you're hereby banished from the kingdom forever. Call it good housekeeping if you like.

(As soon as they reached the gates, they cranked open and Shankstone beamed.)

SHANKSTONE: Eject him when ready, chaps.

(He then gestured to the guard on Kayfu's right.)

SHANKSTONE: Oh, before you go, Kayfu. I'd like you to meet my son.

(Kayfu gulped as the sizeable guard grinned at him.)

GUARD: It's a pleasure.

KAYFU: Oh, my.

SHANKSTONE: Righto, chaps. Now... kick.

(With that, the guards charged for the open gates then threw Kayfu through them with all their might. As he bounced and rolled on the grass outside, Shankstone waved at him then folded his arms.)

SHANKSTONE: Try not to get eaten by any monsters, old boy. Good luck.

(Watching from a castle window as the gates slammed shut on Kayfu, Mandika looked to Lefiat and nodded firmly.)

MANDIKA: That's one traitor brought to justice...

(She then fumed furiously.)

MANDIKA: Now we just need to find the thieving bugger who stole my eagle!!!

With the threat of Aurora lifted, life would now go back to normal. Flaxley and Kritz returned to Tifaeris, determined to work things out in their relationship and Derek returned to Zanne to continue their work in setting up a homestead. Bonson resumed his life of Reilly and Lefiat remained a danger to himself. For Mandika, however, the world would never be the same again, the burden of being responsible for her subjects would, from hereon in, always weigh heavily on her shoulders. A burden made easier for her by knowing her friends would always be there for her. No matter how hard things might get, she would always gain strength from the events that surrounded the lifting of... **The Curse of Aurora.**

THE END.

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