

Futile Fantasy Creations

SILLY SHORTS - THE DARK RAGE

Lethernia Castle at night was a joy to behold. Constructed from solid marble, its walls would glow in the moonlight, creating a feast for the eyes. It was a welcoming sight that could be seen and enjoyed from miles around. Those lucky enough to have witnessed its glow had often told tales of the serenity they'd felt. A sense of inner peace. This had always been the legend. Peace unto all those whose eyes were lucky enough to bathe in its glory. This legend, however, was false. Right now, Lethernia was surrounded on all four sides by a barbarian army who were looking for the very opposite of peace. This army saw these glowing walls as nothing but an obstacle, standing between them and killing everyone who dwelt within them. These walls made them angry. For this beautiful city under siege, peace looked a very long way away.

Down by the river, just outside the city walls, at this time, a group of the besieging barbarian soldiers were sat around a fireside, chatting in the moonlight. Blockading a city for days on end was mind-numbing and they'd do anything to take their minds off of it. And so they drank and sang songs by the fire; anything to keep themselves busy. They could be there for weeks. Sieges were not quick affairs. And so they did what they had to do to stay sane. Had these men been paying attention to their surroundings rather than loudly passing the time with wine and song, however, they might have noticed that something wasn't quite right.

Just across the river from these drunken soldiers, three well-built Lethernian warriors and their blonde-haired, nineteen year-old, serving girl were creeping through the long grass; staying low to avoid detection. Having managed to smuggle themselves out of the besieged city, they were looking to evade the barbarians then seek help. They'd made excellent progress. Having crept away from the river without being seen, they were very soon scrambling through the darkness towards a nearby cove. It seemed to be going so well. All seemed quiet. Everything seemed to be going just right. They'd left the enemy soldiers behind and but for the sound of an owl hooting into the darkness nothing seemed to be around. Things aren't always as they seem. All was *not* well. Even the owl wasn't what it seemed. Its hoot was, in fact, a signal of attack from a unit of forty barbarian soldiers who'd been stealthily stalking them in the long grass from the minute they'd emerged from the river.

Heeding the signal to attack, the forty strong unit charged. Screaming for blood, they emerged from the darkness with their blades aloft, hell bent on cutting down the Lethernian warriors and their serving girl as soon as humanly possible. Left with no choice but to fight, one of the three desperate warriors turned sharply towards the serving girl and bellowed at her to run; to run for the cove for all she was worth. He then joined his two fellow warriors in trying to battle back the barbarians. It would be a futile undertaking. One that the serving girl would never see. Heeding the order to flee, she'd taken to her heels and hadn't looked back.

Fuelled purely by her fear, the serving girl was sprinting forth with everything she had. Unfortunately for her, six of the barbarians had given chase and she knew there could

only be two outcomes. She either escaped or succumbed to a horrendous, brutal death; slaughtered in her prime. And so, she fled with as much power as her legs could muster. She didn't even consider looking back once. She didn't even want to *think* about what was behind her, let alone see it. The snarling barbarians in her wake were making absolutely no secret about just how brutally they planned to savage her. That was terrifying enough. Looking at them would only make it worse.

Screaming in terror as she raced forth with the murderous men on her tail, she knew her choice was a simple one. Sprint or die. She couldn't afford to trip, slow down or deviate in any way. She could only keep going and pray for the best. Knowing that a stinging death by cold steel would greet her failure, she was very much inspired to do just that. As such, when she finally reached the end of the field, she managed to leap the fence in a single bound then keep going. Being young and in excellent physical condition shape had most definitely paid dividends. Having cleared this obstacle, a potential end to her run then came into sight.

Still screeching and crying as she powered forth, she very soon started to head down a steep incline towards a cove. Waiting in the cove, at the end of a jetty was a small fishing boat. This is where her group had been planning to flee to. The boat belonged to one of her own and was only there to smuggle her group out. Seeing it there lifted her heart. At last she had hope. Unfortunately, she still had quite some way to go and the hoard on her tail were gaining.

Praying that she could make it to the boat and escape, thus maintaining her precious life, the serving girl whimpered, cried and screamed at the top of her lungs as she forced as much speed into her legs as she could find. By now, her thighs were burning with the pain, but nothing was going to slow her down. Unfortunately, the same applied to the murderous fiends on her tail. Promising her pain of a horrendously violent nature, they were gaining ground at an all too alarming rate. This, however, simply spurred her on further. Nobody deserves to die the way *they* were threatening to kill *her*. And so, onwards she charged, focussing only on one thing. The boat.

This boat was her *only* hope. And hope is a powerful thing. Sadly, so is fear. And upon sighting this terrified serving girl, desperately fleeing from six maniacal pursuers, the boat-owner was swiftly overcome by it. With a screech and a declaration that he wanted no part in whatever was happening, he immediately set the boat in motion. He wasn't about to upset this hoard of barbarians and simply wanted to get himself out of there. He hadn't signed up to fight, he'd merely come to give them a lift. Risking his life was *not* part of the deal and he wasn't about to hang around; not even for a moment. Naturally, as soon as she saw the boat start to edge away, the serving girl was mortified. Rather than giving up, however, she put her head down and tried to run even faster.

By the time she reached the bottom of the slope, the terrified serving girl's lead was down to less than six feet. As a result, she could hear every gruesome threat her enemies were throwing at her. Every snarl and every growl was perfectly audible. She soon, however, drowned them out with her own screams of terror. Things were looking extremely bleak for her right now. The murderous hoard were right behind her and the boat was a good five metres away from the jetty already. She had

nowhere to go. At least the barbarians *thought* so. Clearly, they'd never heard of mind over matter. Fearing for her very life, the serving girl was about to achieve the athletic feat of her life. Just as the barbarians came to within striking distance of the desperate serving girl, she reached the end of the jetty. Before the barbarians could even think of striking, she then performed a majestic leap from the jetty's end. With bulging eyes and her limbs flailing, she screamed for dear life as she hung in the air for what seemed like at eternity. Moments later, having defied what she, herself, would have believed possible, she landed in the back of the boat. Astonished at herself, she gasped then spun around to see the barbarians come a halt at the waters edge; cursing the one who got away. Barely able to believe she'd managed to achieve such a thing, she gasped for breath, clenched a triumphant fist then fainted from all the excitement. Staring down at her, the boat owner simply rolled his eyes then guided his boat out of the cove and away to safety.

(Chapter One – Strangers.)

Situated at the far northern tip of the great southern continent, the sleepy, medieval town of Chiswell Point was unspectacular to say the least. Apart from one pub and a small market square, there was very little there worth mentioning. Half of the inhabitants were involved with either farming, fishing or hunting to keep the settlement fed. The rest worked at the textile mill; the town's one and only manufacturer. A hub of activity, it was not. Very often the younger inhabitants would leave for the big cities in the south and never return. There just wasn't enough there to keep them interested. Once a week, a ship would arrive from one of the big cities to collect the finished textiles and make deliveries to the pub. Watching it come and go was the highlight of many people's week. It truly was that lifeless. Living there wasn't without its perks however.

Chiswell Point may have lacked for excitement, but it most certainly didn't lack for aesthetic beauty. On one side there was a gloriously sandy beach, leading out into the crystal blue ocean. And to the other side, the town was surrounded by a sprawling forest that covered over 100,000 square miles of land. This vast woodland had completely isolated Chiswell Point from the rest of civilisation. It truly was a beautiful place and it could have made for an idyllic holiday retreat. Alas, visitors seldom came. Not only was it a long way away, but the forest through which they'd have to travel to get there, Ashbury Forest, held many hidden dangers. Over the centuries several townsfolk had wandered in and never returned.

The people of Chiswell Point were so worried about getting lost in this giant expanse of trees, mountains and meadows, they'd created a special hunting zone. It consisted of a six mile area of fence with gaps in it to allow wildlife through. Should a hunter go into the woods from Chiswell Point and get lost, he could always follow the fence and find his way home. This innovation had served the town well. Hunters getting lost used to be all too common, but since the day the fence was completed, none had entered the forest and failed to return.

There was very little else to say about Chiswell Point. It was an unspectacular place where nothing exciting ever happened to those who lived there. Until...

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

(Thrashing through branches as she raced forth like a girl possessed, seventeen year-old huntress, Candy, had only one focus. The wild boar she was chasing could not get away. Spear poised, she'd cut a good distance between herself and her fellow hunters; oblivious to anything but her quarry. Desperate to escape with its life, the boar scrambled furiously through the overgrown, woodland grass, squealing as it went. In Candy's eyes everything else was just a blur. She knew she had the pace and all she needed to do was to get close enough with her spear at the ready and the meat was hers. So engrossed was she in the chase, unfortunately, she didn't even notice the stunted perimeter fence that was designed to keep hunters safe. In total ignorance of it, she dashed straight through a gap in it and continued to bear down on her prey. Not about to race out into the unknown after her, the rest of the hunting pack stopped upon reaching the fence. Desperate to get through to her, they yelled out for her to come back but their cries fell of deaf ears. She only had one thing on her mind and was deaf to all else. As a result, she very soon raced out of sight; her eyes fixed upon the wild boar's fleshy rump. A rump that was now in range. Confident that success was imminent, she snarled then drew back her arm to fling her spear into the beast and claim her prize. Just as she was about to release it, however, she raced headlong into a stranger and sent them both sprawling to the forest floor with a thud.

Suffering from a combination of bewilderment, anger and concussion, Candy swiftly sat up and snarled at the one who'd foiled her hunt. Much to her astonishment, however, the stranger, a blonde-haired girl roughly her own age, scrambled to her feet then dashed off into the forest with a terrified look on her face. There wasn't a single word of apology or explanation. Not about to allow such an indignity to stand unchallenged, Candy leapt to her feet then yelled out an angry protestation in the girl's direction. She'd wasted her breath. The terrified girl had fled out of sight and was gone.)

CANDY: Fuck!

(Frustrated at losing her kill, she then scooped up her spear only to find herself surrounded by a group of armour clad barbarians; all of whom were pointing their swords at her. Scared witless by them, Candy threw her hands up in the air and screeched.)

CANDY: What the fuck?

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

SOLDIER: It's not her!

(Discounting her immediately, the barbarians instantly lowered their weapons then raced off into the woodland; leaving her be. Shaking like a leaf, Candy lowered her arms, drew a deep sigh of relief then ran her fingers through her long, brown hair.)

CANDY: Fucking hell...

(With that, she picked up her spear again then turned to face the way she'd come. Seconds later, however, a voice called out from up ahead that chilled her to the core. Bearing down on her from only a few feet away, her father was *not* in a good mood.)

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

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

CANDY: Shit!

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

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

(Candy could only offer him an apologetic grin.)

CANDY: But, dad...

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

(Candy tried but failed to cut in.)

SWAINE: That fence is there for a reason!

CANDY: I know, but...

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

(Candy gave a resigned sigh.)

CANDY: No, dad.

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

(Candy sighed emptily then offered him a rueful, apologetic smile. Upon sighting it, her dad, who was actually quite the softie at heart, relented his angry stance and shook his head.)

SWAINE: You know, part of me thinks you didn't see that fence 'cause you didn't want to, love.

(Candy gave him a questioning glance.)

CANDY: What?

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

(Candy simply shrugged then glanced away. She'd been avoiding the topic of her desire to get away from Chiswell Point for months. She knew they'd have to talk about it sooner or later but it never felt like the right time. Having pondered on it for a few moments, she just smiled then looked into her father's eyes.)

CANDY: We can discuss that when we get home.

(Her dad nodded acceptingly.)

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

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

SWAINE: Didn't catch the boar then?

(Having not been paying attention, Candy looked to him enquiringly.)

CANDY: What?

SWAINE: The boar you were chasing! Didn't catch it, I see.

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

CANDY: Yeah... odd that!

SWAINE: What was?

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

(She looked up at her dad and was instantly silenced by his less than amused expression.)

CANDY: Um...

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

(Candy was most offended.)

CANDY: I'm not!

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

(He glared at his shrinking daughter.)

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

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Yeah, okay!

(Her father conceded her a loving smile.)

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

(Candy smiled warmly.)

CANDY: Thanks, dad.

(Swaine placed his arm around her and gave her a gentle squeeze.)

SWAINE: You know, love, you get more and more like your mother every day!

CANDY: Really?

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

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

(They chuckled together for a moment then continued on back to the hunting zone.

As they did so, Candy constantly looked back towards where she'd seen the mystery girl and allowed her mind to run riot. Who was she? What was she doing out there?

And more worryingly, why was she being chased? With no answers to any of these questions, her inquisitive young mind was likely to be distracted for quite some time.)

(Long after the hunt was done for the day, Candy and her father sat down to eat at the table in their log cabin. Having worked up quite the appetite, her father couldn't wait to tuck into his meal. Candy, on the other hand, just stared at her plate emptily. Her mind was very much elsewhere. The incident with the girl in the woods had given her a lot to think about. Despite the fact that she'd been staring into space like this a lot since the incident happened, it was only now that her father noticed her unease. As he chewed on a large turkey leg, he looked across at her picking at her food then raised an inquisitive eyebrow.)

SWAINE: Something on your mind, girl?

(Candy shrugged dismissively as she continued to stare at her plate.)

CANDY: Sort of...

(Her lack of a proper answer prompted her father to ponder some options.)

SWAINE: Hmm... is it a bloke?

(Candy could barely believe what she was hearing. She was an extremely good looking girl and in a small town like Chiswell Point, a beauty like her was in much demand. At the tender age of seventeen, she'd had more male attention than most supermodels would get in a lifetime.)

CANDY: Since when was getting a bloke a problem?

SWAINE: Fair comment!

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

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

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

CANDY: Yes, dad.

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

(Candy sighed nonchalantly.)

CANDY: Oh, it's nothing.

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

(Candy sighed emptily.)

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

(Her father instantly shuddered. Getting into such a deep conversation with her felt like a very bad idea. He'd been down that road before with her mother and never did understand the absurdities of the female mind. He was extremely reluctant to go there again. Eventually, however, he succumbed to his natural urge to help his child and sat back nervously.)

SWAINE: What do you mean?

(Fearing he'd opened a door that he wouldn't know how to close, he gulped then resumed nervously chewing on his turkey leg.)

CANDY: Well... see... you showed me how to hunt, so I became a hunter...

SWAINE: Huntress!

(Candy scowled, displeased at the interruption.)

CANDY: Whatever!

(She shook her head.)

CANDY: What I'm saying is, I'm a huntress... so I hunt. Is that it? Is that all there is?

(Her dad was entirely baffled.)

SWAINE: Well, what else are you gonna do? Raise baby aardvarks and race them?

You're a huntress, lass! You hunt! What more do you want?

(Candy sighed loudly.)

CANDY: I knew you wouldn't get it!

SWAINE: Sorry, love, but you've lost me!

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

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

(Her dad nodded with enlightenment.)

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

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: I just said that!

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

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

(She bit her lip.)

CANDY: It *kind* of is...in a way!

(Swaine nodded acceptingly.)

SWAINE: Well... you've completely lost me already.

(Candy shook her head.)

CANDY: Doesn't matter!

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

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

(Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: A while!

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

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

(Her dad nodded.)

SWAINE: But?

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

(She then proceeded to elaborate liberally.)

CANDY: I don't want to be stuck here forever. I want to see mountains and those big tall buildings you hear about. I want to roam in a wilderness and see lakes and that; like that guy from the pub talks about. Anyone who's ever been anywhere has a story to tell and I want to do it all. They talk about these beautiful places and I really want to see them for myself. The flora and the fauna, the landscapes, everything! There's

a whole world I'll never see 'cause I'm in the woods every day doing the same old thing and the thought of missing out is driving me nuts, dad.
(She then looked across at her father and her enthusiasm withered and died. He was sitting there, staring at his plate, with a saddened expression on his face.)
CANDY: Oh, dad; I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you; you know I'll stick by you!
(Her dad looked up sharply.)
SWAINE: No! No, no! It's not that, Candy! I agree with you!
(He allowed himself a sorrowful sigh then related his feelings to her solemnly.)
SWAINE: I taught you to hunt so you'd know how to survive if anything ever happened to me. I never intended for you to live out your whole life *here*. By god your mother would come back and haunt me if she thought I planned to do that.
(He offered her half a smile.)
SWAINE: Fact is, love, I always knew one day you'd want to move on and now that time's come I'm a little sad, that's all. I'd never stand in your way... but I won't half miss you when you go!
(Candy whimpered then climbed to her feet. His words had touched her heart. With tears in her eyes, she hurried to his side then threw her arms around him lovingly. Her father reciprocated with a proud glint in his eye. Having enjoyed a tender hug with her beloved father, Candy then sat down again to resume her meal. As she did so, Swaine smiled at her lovingly then bit his lip.)
SWAINE: Wait... did you say something happened outside the fence?
(Candy nodded as she gulped down the food she'd at last found an appetite for.)
CANDY: Yeah. I already told you. This oddly dressed girl was there and she looked really, really scared. I didn't get to talk to her though, because she fucked off... and the next thing I knew these soldiers had surrounded me with swords!
(Her dad looked sceptical to say the least.)
SWAINE: How come *I* never saw this?
CANDY: Well, it all happened really quickly. The soldiers said they didn't want me and shot off into the woods. They must be after that girl I ran into.
(Her father glared at her coldly while he chewed on his food.)
SWAINE: What did I tell you about eating those purple mushrooms?
CANDY: I didn't touch the mushrooms! I tell you; it happened!
(Swaine raised a disapproving eyebrow.)
SWAINE: Of course it did!
(Candy just shook her head.)
CANDY: Suit yourself. I don't care if you believe me or not. But I tell you, it happened and it was really weird!
SWAINE: Right... so, this is today in a nutshell... you ate the funny mushrooms and hallucinated, and the hallucination has made you want to leave town.
(Candy just tipped her head and scowled at him.)
SWAINE: I've said it before and I'll say it again, you women are bloody mystery to me!!!

(Just like every night in Chiswell Point, the sun set at 7 pm precisely and darkness fell on the sleepy town. At this time, a single torch was lit outside the town hall. This was the only street light. Elsewhere in the town, only moonlight and the glow from people's windows kept the settlement from the black gloom of night.

A few hours after darkness had descended the only noise that could ever be heard was the sound of drunken laughter from “Chiswell Inn”, the town’s one and only public house.

Every night for the past year, Candy would head for the inn at about 9.15 pm; looking gorgeous. The same routine would then play out. She’d swagger in looking sexy and all the men folk would lose it. In all the time she’d been passing away her evenings at the inn she’d never once bought her own drink. Although a tough huntress by day, Candy was herself hunted at night. A fox in a den of hungry hounds. Tonight would be no different. Wearing a skirt and top that left very little to the imagination, she pushed open the inn doors as soon as she arrived and a murmur of excitement immediately crossed the room. Enjoying the attention, she then swaggered up to the bar, working her hips for all they were worth.)

CANDY: Hi, guys!

(In a pitiful display of lusty shamelessness, all the men at the bar struck manly poses then greeted her in their deepest voices. Not only did the men of Chiswell Point have no style or charisma, they also had no sense of embarrassment. As soon as Candy reached the bar, the usual ritual began.)

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

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

PATRI: No, no, I’ll get these in!

MORELEY: Please; allow me!

(Milo was most incensed.)

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

PATRI: Well wait you turn!

MILO: Turn?

MORELEY: Seriously, guys? Just let *me* get her one, will you?

(They glared at one another distrustfully for a brief moment then the three of them spun to face the bar at the same time. Desperate to be heard they then yelled at the barmaid in perfect synchronicity with one another.)

ALL 3: Raspberry wine please!!!

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

ALL 3: Barmaid!!!

(The barmaid looked to them from the other end of the bar and scowled, much to Candy’s amusement.)

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

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

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

(She muttered under her breath.)

BARMAID: Slut!

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

A few minutes later, as so often was the case, Candy found herself sitting at the bar with three drinks in front of her. Allowing them all to buy her a drink was pretty much the only way to avoid a punch-up. And so, with the drink problem solved, the

men in the inn were now free to flirt unashamedly with the much desired young huntress before them.)

MILO: Catch much today?

CANDY: No more than normal, you?

(Milo looked straight through her in bewilderment.)

MILO: I'm a carpenter!

CANDY: What? Are you saying you can't catch?

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

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

CANDY: What about you guys? Anything special happen today?

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

CANDY: Yeah? What special thing is that?

BARMAID: Once you come in we don't have trouble keeping flies off of the food anymore.

(In that moment, everyone in the bar fell about laughing. Knowing she'd been well and truly caned, Candy just froze and stared straight ahead of herself in dismay. It was an excellent put down and deserved an equally excellent retort. Unfortunately, she didn't have one. All she could do was coldly reminding the barmaid of one minor detail.)

CANDY: You don't even sell food!

(The barmaid shrugged.)

BARMAID: Who cares? I made *you* look stupid and that's all that matters!

CANDY: You...

(Just then, the inn doors burst open and two burly men, dressed in heavy battle armour, stepped into the room. At once, the entire bar fell silent and everyone stared at them in astonishment. It was extremely rare to see strangers in town, let alone ones in battle armour. They made for quite the intimidating sight. As such, everyone just sat there and watched on nervously as the two men scanned the bar with their eyes.

Hoping these two men weren't looking for any trouble, the barmaid bit her lip then mumbled to herself. Deciding it might be better for everyone if she welcomed these two strangers, she then opened her mouth to speak. Before a single word could pass her lips, however the two men swiftly about turned and marched back outside again. It was a move that brought about a mass sigh of relief from all in attendance.)

PATRI: What the hell was that all about?

MORELEY: I have no idea, mate.

(A bewildered mumble then rose up as people tried to make sense of what they'd just witnessed. Candy, however, didn't say a word. She was utterly dumbfounded. She may have only seen them briefly, but she knew for a fact that they were two of the soldiers she'd seen in the woods earlier. Again her curiosity was piqued. Who were they? What did they want? Allowing that curiosity to get the better of her, she then headed to the bar doors to take a quick look outside. Seeing nothing but an empty moonlit square out there, she sucked her teeth then she slowly paced back to her friends; deep in thought.)

MILO: What do you think they wanted?

PATRI: How the hell would I know?

(Lost in her thoughts, Candy mumbled to herself.)

CANDY: Something funny's going on!

MORELEY: Funny, Candy?

(Roused from her thoughts Candy looked to him then shook her head.)

CANDY: It's nothing!

(She bit her lip.)

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

(Unsurprisingly, the men folk were devastated.)

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

MILO: Stay for one more; come on.

(The barmaid sneered sarcastically.)

BARMAID: Oh no, the slut has to leave. What a shame.

(With nothing but disdain for the barmaid, Candy just shook her head.)

BARMAID: Got a date with a married man, have you?

(Candy glared at her coldly for a moment before allowing herself a devilish smirk.)

CANDY: As a matter of fact, I have. I promised to pop round there while his ugly wife is away working at the inn!

BARMAID: Why, you little...

CANDY: Uh-oh!

(She then took off towards the door like a rocket. Thankfully she was an agile little thing and somehow managed to bundle her way outside before any of the beer jugs that the barmaid propelled in her direction could do her any damage.)

CANDY: Psycho!!!

(The barmaid's angry voice could then be heard, yelling at her from inside the inn.)

BARMAID: And *stay* out!!!

(Candy just scoffed.)

CANDY: Yeah, right; like you *own* the place.

(Having afforded herself a grin, she then headed towards her home keeping an inquisitive eye out for the soldiers as she went. Seeing them again had awakened something inside her. She really wanted to know who they were and what they wanted. They'd frightened her half to death that afternoon and she wanted answers. How she'd go about getting those answers, she had no idea. She just knew that she wouldn't be able to sit in the bar all night without worrying about it. Something odd was going on and she wanted to get to the bottom of it. Her enthusiasm for finding answers, however, soon began to wane.

As she strolled forth along the town's main thoroughfare, a strong breeze started to gust through the town towards her. At once, the front of her skirt pushed into her legs and her ponytail billowed out backwards behind her.)

CANDY: Stupid wind!

(Moments later, the wind simply died, leaving behind an eerie silence. It was a silence that chilled her to the bone. It was as if she could sense something unsavoury in the air. She didn't know if it was intuition or just her own paranoia but something felt very wrong. It was as if someone was watching her. Freaked out by it, she gradually quickened her steps until she finally broke into a run. Thoroughly spooked, that run very soon turned into a sprint. By the time she reached her house, she was panicking profusely; so much so that she charged headlong into her front door then bounced back off it again; landing on her backside.)

CANDY: Ow!!!

(She then leapt to her feet and proceeded to struggle with door handle. Such was the depth of her panicking, however, her fingers became more and more useless by the minute.)

CANDY: Why won't you open???

(Just then, the door flew open, courtesy of her father. At once, she whizzed straight past him then dashed to the far side of the table, where she felt safer.)

CANDY: Thank fuck for that!

(She then placed her hands on her hips while she tried to get her breath back.

Watching her, her father could only roll his eyes.)

SWAINE: Who are you running from this time?

CANDY: I...

SWAINE: Have you upset that bloody barmaid again?

CANDY: No!

(She shrugged.)

CANDY: Well... yes, but *that's* not why I was running.

(She ruffled her neck.)

CANDY: I just got a little spooked, that's all. It's dark out there and I'm a lone, sexy female. It can be scary sometimes.

SWAINE: Right...

(He nodded.)

SWAINE: Okay. Listen, love. I'll be next door if you need me; Edmun has a new supply of home brew ready.

(He then winked at her and left. Quite out of breath still, Candy just sunk onto an easy chair and puffed out.)

CANDY: Get a grip, Candy; more than likely there was no-one out there.

(She then sat back and attempted to relax. Just a few seconds later, however, she noticed a movement in the corner of her eye. Startled by it, she instantly jumped up and stared in horror at the door to the side of the room. That particular room was her bedroom and she'd seen a shadow move beneath the door. Trembling all over, she slowly sidled over to the fireplace then grabbed hold of an iron fire poker. Hoping she'd imagined it she then started to approach the door on tip-toe. Suffice to say, she was terrified. How she wished her father was home. At the back of her mind, she knew she really ought to run and get him, but for some reason, she felt compelled to open the door. And so, with trembling hands she reached for the handle when a shadow moved on the threshold once again. It was only the briefest of movements but the moonlight that flooded her bedroom had definitely produced a shadow. She was certain somebody was in there.

With her heart beating at the rate of a bullet train she braced herself then raised the poker aloft in readiness to attack whoever was inside. Sweat oozed from her forehead as her trembling hand grabbed hold of the door handle. Bracing herself one last time, she gritted her teeth to attack then flung open the door. As the door flew open, however, she was confronted by the silhouette of a girl standing right in front of her. Instinctively, she threw the poker into the air then screamed for all she was worth. Several seconds into her terrified screams, however, she noticed the stranger before her doing exactly the same thing. In that moment, they both stopping screaming in perfect synchronicity with one another then proceeded to stare into each other's eyes. Candy couldn't believe what she was seeing. The blonde girl she'd crashed into that very afternoon was standing in her bedroom.)

CANDY: You!!!

(Easily the more scared of the two, the girl then tried to flee but Candy was having none of it. Like a true athlete she leapt on her and pinned her to the floor.)

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

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

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

(In a panicked voice, the girl replied desperately.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: Please, I'm not a thief! Don't turn me in! Please!

(Candy just glowered at her coldly. She could accept that this girl might *not* have been a thief, but that didn't explain anywhere near enough. Sitting on her midriff, pinning the girl's wrists to the floor, she demanded explanations.)

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

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

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

(Candy contemplated her words as she continued to hold her down.)

CANDY: Why are they after you then?

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

(Candy was not impressed by her answer.)

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

SOPHIRA: No, please!!! Please!

(Something of a softie at heart, Candy released Sophira's wrists then sat up a bit.)

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

(Sophira whimpered.)

CANDY: I may even be able to help!

(Calmed slightly, Sophira nodded reluctantly.)

SOPHIRA: Well... okay!

CANDY: Good.

(With that, Candy climbed to her feet then offered her hand to Sophira to help her up. Still extremely wary of her, however, Sophira chose to scramble back a little and get up herself.)

CANDY: Whatever!

(She put her hands on her hips impatiently.)

CANDY: Well?

(Before Sophira could even mutter a word, however, there was a loud pounding on the front door. Sophira's eyes immediately bulged in terror.)

SOPHIRA: It's them!!!

(Candy furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: Calm down, silly. That could be anybody.

(She rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: Look, just relax, will you? Whoever it is, I'll get rid of them then we can have a little chat.

(She pointed to her bed.)

CANDY: In the meantime you can hide under there if you're scared.

(She then hurried away to the main room, closing her bedroom door behind her. Moments later, she yanked open the front door then gasped in horror. One of the soldiers was standing right there on her porch. Trembling all over, she stared into his eyes then whimpered.)

CANDY: Um... yes?

(The soldier offered her a friendly smile then spoke up in the most bizarre accent she'd ever heard.)

SOLDIER: Aye, hello there. I was just wondering... while on my patrol a moment ago, I heard a terrified scream coming from this direction. Did *you* hear anything?
(Candy gaped emptily for a moment then suddenly looked enlightened.)

CANDY: Oh, right... yes! That was me!

(The soldier nodded.)

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

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

(The soldier nodded then turned to go, only for Candy to stop him in his tracks.)

CANDY: It was a big one!

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

(He then turned to leave for a second time.)

CANDY: I hit it with a fire poker!

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

CANDY: It's dead now.

SOLDIER: Excellent. Bye!

(The soldier then hurried away, desperate to escape the conversation. Having watched him go, Candy offered up a smile then pushed her front door shut.)

CANDY: Result

(Delighted with her efforts, she then hurried back to her bedroom.)

CANDY: That got rid of...

(Her brow then furrowed over. Sophira was desperately trying to climb out of her window in a bid to flee.)

CANDY: Hey!!!

(With a face like thunder, she grabbed her then pulled her back into the centre of the room.)

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

(Sophira stared into Candy's eyes imploringly.)

SOPHIRA: Please; I have to go. That was them, wasn't it? I need to get out of here!

(Candy scowled at her bitterly.)

CANDY: Hey! I just lied my arse off to a guy with a massive sword for you. He could have chopped my limbs off! And my boobs! The *least* you can do is explain yourself.

SOPHIRA: But...

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

(Calming down slightly, Sophira offer her half a nod.)

SOPHIRA: Well... okay... that makes sense, I guess!

(Candy rolled her eyes.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: Do you want that explanation now?

(Candy looked to her then shrugged.)

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

(Sophira was astonished.)

SOPHIRA: Eat? You want to give me food?

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

(Dumbfounded by her kindness, Sophira just stood there and said nothing. Taking her silence as a sign of shyness, Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Look, just sit on my bed for now. I'll get you some bread or something. Oh, and some water!

(Sophira sat down in a daze.)
SOPHIRA: Um... thank you!
CANDY: You're welcome, Miss...
(Sophira looked uncertain for a moment then forced a smile.)
SOPHIRA: Call me Sophira!
(Candy nodded.)
CANDY: Candy.
(She beamed.)
CANDY: It's a pleasure to meet me.

(A short while later, as Sophira tucked into what was quite obviously her first decent meal in quite some time, Candy sat at her side rubbing her chin thoughtfully. She couldn't even begin to imagine what this poor girl had been going through. Being hunted down like a dog by heavily armed soldiers must have been hell. No wonder the poor thing was a nervous wreck.

As she pondered the situation further, Candy could only be certain of one thing. She wanted to help her in any way she could. With this in mind, as soon as Sophira had finished her meal, she passed her a blanket to wrap herself in. Extremely grateful for her kindness, Sophira offered her a warm smile. The compassion Candy was showing her had warmed her heart. She was being a friend just when she needed one the most.

With the ice between them well and truly broken, Sophira very soon resolved herself to telling Candy exactly what was going on. Having broken into her house and scared her half to death, it was the very least she could do, after all. And so, as they sat side by side on the bed, using the wall as a backrest, she took a deep breath then started to relate her sorry tale.)

SOPHIRA: So, my story...
CANDY: In your own time.
SOPHIRA: Right.
(She grimaced.)
SOPHIRA: I don't know where to start, to be honest!
CANDY: The beginning is always a good place!
(Sophira nodded thoughtfully.)
SOPHIRA: Well... okay. I'm from the Lethernia clan; I don't know if you've heard of us...
CANDY: Nope!
SOPHIRA: We're from the great north continent!
CANDY: There's a great *north* continent?
(Sophira looked straight through her.)
SOPHIRA: Well, yeah. If there wasn't, this one wouldn't be called the great *south* continent, would it? It'd just be the great continent.
CANDY: I see. Cool. You learn a new thing everyday.
SOPHIRA: Right... well... yeah. The great north continent is actually twice the size of this one. It's huge. But it's quickly being overrun by this barbarian clan known as "the Gregon".
(She sighed.)
SOPHIRA: The Gregon clan have run amuck over the whole continent; destroying villages and invading townships. Killing anyone who gets in their way.

(She shook her head solemnly.)

SOPHIRA: Three days ago they attacked Lethernia, my home city, and completely blockaded it from all sides. Besieged it. Nobody can get in or out. I think they want to starve us all to death. Either that or starve us half to death then attack while we're weak. I can't say for sure. I just know they want us all dead.

CANDY: Bastards.

(She shook her head.)

CANDY: Them soldiers out there... are they...

SOPHIRA: Gregon soldiers? Yes, they are.

CANDY: Damn.

(She grimaced.)

CANDY: Okay, but why are they after *you* specifically?

SOPHIRA: They...

(Candy beamed.)

CANDY: Is it because you're a princess???

(Sophira looked most perplexed.)

SOPHIRA: What? No! Why would you think that?

(Candy ruffled her neck.)

CANDY: Well, you might have been. Why else would they go to all the trouble of hunting *one person* down when they've got your entire city under siege?

SOPHIRA: Because they want us *all* dead. Every last *one* of us! Our entire race!

(She sighed.)

SOPHIRA: They consider my people dangerous, you see?

CANDY: Dangerous? How are you dangerous?

SOPHIRA: We're not. They just *think* we are because...

(She winced.)

SOPHIRA: We can do magic.

(Sophira then closed her eyes and waited for Candy to mock. She would not be disappointed. One thing Lethernian people knew all too well was that people from other continents didn't believe in magic and considered those who practiced it to be somewhat deranged.)

CANDY: Magic, huh?

(Sophira sighed and awaited the inevitable sarcasm.)

CANDY: So, you're from a clan of witches, are you?

SOPHIRA: No!

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

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

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

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

(Sophira pouted.)

SOPHIRA: Yes, it does!

(Candy looked to her blankly for a moment then shook her head with annoyance.)

CANDY: Seriously? Despite the fact you broke into my home, I got rid of those soldiers for you, fed you and give you water... and *you* can't even give *me* the truth.

SOPHIRA: It *is* the truth!

CANDY: Bullshit! Who the fuck are you, Sophira? If indeed that *is* your real name!

(Sophira climbed to her feet and sighed.)

SOPHIRA: Look; I'll just go! If you don't believe me, there's no point...

(Candy was quick to leap to her feet.)

CANDY: You can't go out there, you silly sod; them soldiers are out there!

SOPHIRA: That's a risk I'm going to have to take!

CANDY: Bollocks!

(She then pushed Sophira back down onto the bed.)

CANDY: Tell me the truth this time!

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I did!

CANDY: No, you didn't.

SOPHIRA: But I did!

(Candy furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: I'm not asking for much here, Sophira. You've brought a load of heavily armed soldiers to my village and I just want to know why!

SOPHIRA: And I *tried* to explain...

CANDY: Well try again! Truthfully this time.

(Sophira sighed then looked Candy in the eye.)

SOPHIRA: Look, you've been wonderful to me. I'm a total stranger and you've really helped me no end. I want to be straight with you but if you don't believe me what can I do?

(She nodded.)

SOPHIRA: How's this? Just let me just spell everything out, and when I'm done you can choose whether to believe me or not!

(For the want of any other suggestion, Candy shrugged.)

CANDY: Fine!

(Sophira nodded then continued her story.)

SOPHIRA: See, I can do white magic; I'm a healer. All my people are.

CANDY: Right...

SOPHIRA: Let me finish.

(She rolled her eyes.)

SOPHIRA: We Lethernians have a tradition, you see? We use our magic to heal the sick and our elders use their wisdom to do whatever they can to resolve conflicts. That's how we are. We're peaceful people.

(She sighed.)

SOPHIRA: The tribe besieging us right now, however, the Gregon tribe, don't see us that way.

CANDY: They think you're lying too?

SOPHIRA: No, silly. The bad blood with the Gregon dates back to an incident a few hundred years ago. One of my people found a wounded man dying in a ditch. So they healed him. Little did we know, that man, Zameses, was an enemy of the Gregon people. They'd beaten him and left him to die.

(She grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: Well... having been healed by a Lethernian, he then went on take revenge against the Gregon; razing three quarters of their territories to the ground.

(Candy sucked her teeth.)

CANDY: Nasty!

SOPHIRA: Yeah! Well, the Gregon have never forgotten that Zameses was healed by us Lethernians. Now they're on a quest for vengeance. They want to destroy Lethernia and wipe every healer off the face of the planet. That includes me.

CANDY: Shit!

(Sophira gave her a sideways glance.)

SOPHIRA: You swear a lot!

CANDY: Bollocks!

(With a sigh, Sophira continued.)

SOPHIRA: Anyway, that's why the Gregon attacked us. And that's why they want me dead. They want to destroy white magic and do to Lethernia what Zameses did to them! Only worse!

(Candy mused to herself.)

CANDY: Gotcha. You're here because you're running away.

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: No...

(She sighed.)

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

(She looked nervously at an intrigued Candy.)

SOPHIRA: One of the soldiers told me run. So I did. We had a fishing boat waiting for us in the nearby cove, you see? I didn't argue, I just sprinted for the cove. I didn't look back; I daren't. A group of them chased me, promising me all sorts of horrible things. I just ran and ran until I got to the cove then leapt off the jetty and into the boat. I barely escaped with my life.

(She grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: I had no idea I could jump that far. I must have jumped a good six metres!

(Candy beamed.)

CANDY: Cool!

(Sophira gave her a sideways glance, which she returned with a cheesy grin.)

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

SOPHIRA: Yeah...

(With yet another sigh, she then continued.)

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

CANDY: Did you let him?

(Sophira was not amused.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

CANDY: What?

(Sophira shook her head with distain.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: I know...

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

(Sophira looked at her feet.)

SOPHIRA: To find a guy named Arterian and get him to come back to Lethernia. Trouble is, all I know is that he lives in the forest somewhere. It's not much to go on but apparently he's an old friend of our grand elder and he's an extremely powerful dark mage. Without him, Lethernia is doomed. So what can I do?

(Candy grimaced.)

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

(Sophira hung her head.)

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

(A tear ran down her cheek.)

SOPHIRA: If I don't find him and soon... there's only a few days worth of food left and Lethernia is completely sealed in and blockaded. And they might die even sooner if the Gregon manage to invade the city. God, it's so hopeless!!!

(Taking pity on her, Candy gave her a reassuring smile.)

CANDY: Hey, it'll be okay!

(Sophira's bottom lip quivered.)

SOPHIRA: Will it? The likely scenario is I'll be killed by those soldiers before I even get to start looking for this Arterian person. I've been running round this town all day hiding from *them*. I haven't even *started* looking!

CANDY: That sucks, Sophira. It really does.

SOPHIRA: It really, *really* does.

CANDY: And that's your story, is it?

(Starting to get more than a little emotional, all Sophira could do was nod. Eager to reassure her, Candy gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder and smiled.)

CANDY: You know, apart from the twaddle about magic, I believe you.

(Sophira shook her head.)

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

(Candy shook her head.)

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

SOPHIRA: I have to, Candy. It may be a million to one chance but I'm my people's only hope!

CANDY: Then your people *have* no hope!

(Sophira whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: How can you say that???

(She burst into tears.)

SOPHIRA: Way to make me feel better, Candy!

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

(Sophira looked up at her coldly.)

CANDY: Hey; don't be angry! I'm just telling it as it is. If those soldiers don't kill you, the forest will. I mean, do you have any survival skills for a start?

(Sophira hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: No!

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

(Fearing she was right, Sophira held her head in her hands and whimpered.)

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

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

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

(Candy then raced from her bedroom to greet him.)

SWAINE: Hello, sweetheart; how you doing?

CANDY: You're drunk!

(Her father grinned a toothy grin, quite proud of that fact.)

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

(Her dad gave her a knowing wink.)

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

(Candy rolled her eyes then retorted sarcastically.)

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

SWAINE: Wahey! Get in there, girl!

(Ignoring his exuberance, Candy then returned to her room. Sophira was still sitting on the bed looking miserable. Upon sighting her, Candy sighed to herself then pushed the door closed behind her. As she did so, however, she caught her finger on the latch and grazed the skin.)

CANDY: Ouch!

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

CANDY: Hey, cheer up, Soph.

(Sophira sighed then looked up at her, wearing a thoughtful expression.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah...

(She bit her lip.)

SOPHIRA: Can I ask you something, Candy?

CANDY: Sure; anything!

SOPHIRA: Why are you being so nice to me?

(Candy shrugged.)

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

SOPHIRA: You feel like it?

CANDY: Well... yeah.

(She puffed out.)

CANDY: You're being hunted down by soldiers. What sort of monster would I be if I *wasn't* nice to you?

(She shrugged.)

CANDY: Besides, nothing exciting ever happens around here normally. Then you appeared. This curious, exotic stranger. Befriending you just made sense. To me, anyway.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: I understand.

CANDY: So... umm...

(She paused and shook her painful finger.)

SOPHIRA: You've hurt your hand!

CANDY: Nah, it's no big deal!

SOPHIRA: Let me see!

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

CANDY: It's nothing.

(Sophira reached up to her.)

SOPHIRA: May I?

(Seeing no harm in it, Candy shrugged then held her grazed hand out in Sophira's direction.)

CANDY: See, it's just a graze!

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

SOPHIRA: Not for long.

CANDY: What?

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

CANDY: What are you doing?

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: All better.

(Baffled by her comment, Candy gazed down at her finger then performed a double take. The graze was completely cured. Unnerved by it, she leapt to her feet and gaped.)

CANDY: How the fuck?

SOPHIRA: I told you I was a healer!

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

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

CANDY: I... holy shit!

SOPHIRA: You're welcome!

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

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

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: Aw, crap!

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

CANDY: Hey, seeing as you have that magic, maybe things aren't hopeless after all.

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: Right...

CANDY: I mean it. If you can heal, you have hope, missy. You really do.

(She then grimaced uncomfortably.)

CANDY: All you have to do is elude four soldiers who want to kill you, find that Arterian person; a needle in a haystack if ever there was one; then hope you can convince him to come with you. Piece of cake!

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

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

(Candy mused for a moment.)

CANDY: I don't know. Finding that Arterian fella won't be easy.

(She bit her lip.)

CANDY: We might be able to do something about them soldiers though. We should talk to my dad!

(Far from thrilled by the idea of including other people in her misery, Sophira bit her lip.)

SOPHIRA: Um... it's kind of you offer an' all, but this mission is *my* burden, Candy. I can't involve...

CANDY: Oh, behave!

SOPHIRA: Behave?

(Candy glanced at her sternly.)

CANDY: You heard. If you want to save your people, you're going to have to accept whatever help you're offered, missy.

SOPHIRA: Well...

(Realising she was probably right, Sophira gave a resigned sigh then offered her a warm smile.)

SOPHIRA: You're right. Thanks, Candy!

CANDY: You're welcome, babe.

(She then paused, before raising an enquiring eyebrow.)

CANDY: There is one other thing I want to ask about before we go, actually.

SOPHIRA: Oh?

CANDY: Did you say Lethernia only had three warriors? Three?

SOPHIRA: Yeah. We didn't have *any* before. Those three were paid mercenaries; soldiers from another country who happened to be holidaying in Lethernia when the siege broke out.

CANDY: So like... no army?

SOPHIRA: None. We're a peaceful people, like I said.

CANDY: I see. Wow.

(She then shrugged it off.)

CANDY: Anyway, let's go and talk to that dad of mine, shall we?

SOPHIRA: Okay.

CANDY: That's the spirit. Come on.

(A few moments later, when Candy and Sophira stepped into the living room, they found Swaine laying back in his easy chair with his eyes closed. As soon as Candy had opened her door, he'd gasped in horror then pretended to be asleep. Meeting his daughter's conquests tended to involve several minutes of uncomfortably awkward conversation and he was desperate to avoid it. Being the curious type, however, he couldn't help but take a sneaky peak to see if she'd been with anyone he knew. And so, he half opened one eye to take a stealthy glance at her conquest. Upon sighting Sophira, however, he screeched then leapt out of his chair. It was safe to say, he'd had the shock of his life.)

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

(He then stood there agape, repeatedly performing double takes in Sophira's direction.)

SWAINE: I had no idea!!!

CANDY: Right... okay... I'm not sure what you think's going on, but... dad, this is Sophira!

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

SWAINE: Yes. Right. Of course. Pleased to meet you!

(He nodded firmly.)

SWAINE: And don't worry. I'm fine with it. However you choose to live your life is fine by me, Candy. I'm not the judgemental sort! You girls have my full blessing!

(He then hunched his shoulders and looked directly in Candy's eyes.)

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

(Candy was understandably baffled.)

CANDY: What the hell are you on about?

(Deciding it was best to ignore his ramblings, she then shrugged it off.)

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

SWAINE: I see...

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

SWAINE: Ladies! Please; join me.

CANDY: Cool.

(With that, she headed to the opposite side of the table from her father then pulled out two chairs; one for her and one for Sophira.)

CANDY: Soph?

SOPHIRA: Um... right.

(Sophira then made her way nervously to the table.)

SWAINE: Excellent.

(Once they were all seated, Candy nodded to her father then proceeded to relate Sophira's problem to him. All the while, Sophira stared at feet; highly embarrassed about asking a stranger for help. As his daughter went through the entire story in great detail, Swaine spent much of the conversation rubbing his chin in contemplation. He was normally quite the resourceful chap, so had every confidence that he could find a way to help.

For several minutes, Candy spelt out Sophira's problem to her father in great detail, only pausing now and again to allow to Sophira to correct her on minor points. All the while, Swaine hung onto her every word.

Moments later, having covered all the points, she sat back then glanced to Sophira.)

CANDY: So, yeah. That's the problem in a nutshell, right, Soph?

SOPHIRA: Um... yeah.

(They then looked to where Swaine was quietly musing to himself.)

SWAINE: I see...

CANDY: Well, dad? What do you reckon?

(Swaine nodded.)

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

(Sophira hung her head.)

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

CANDY: So what *would* you do?

(Mulling over his thoughts again, Swaine said nothing.)

CANDY: Dad?

SWAINE: Right... yes... okay...

(He sighed.)

SWAINE: Well, personally I'd find someone who knows all there is to know about survival and take them with me. Someone who desperately wants to see the world rather than being stuck in the same old routine for the rest of her life!

(Candy's jaw dropped.)

CANDY: Are you suggesting what I think you are?

(Swaine nodded solemnly then looked into his daughter's eyes.)

SWAINE: I am, actually. *You* could help her survive and see some of the world while you're at it. If you find this Arterian guy then that's wonderful. If you don't... well... I know you're more than adept enough at survival to make it home safely. So it kinda makes sense.

CANDY: Wow!

(Candy scratched her head in total bemusement.)

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

SWAINE: Which is a shame. You absolutely *should* have faith in yourself, love. I mean, I don't see you eating poisonous berries or provoking the wrong creatures.

You *know* what's what out there. In fact, I don't see any dangers out there that you're not *more* than adept to handle!

(Sophira raised her hand.)

SOPHIRA: Like four sword wielding maniacs?

(Swaine grinned conceitedly.)

SWAINE: A-ha. See, that's where *I* come in. Such a task requires someone with cunning and guile. Someone who can hold them up while you girls get going.

(Candy nodded excitedly.)

CANDY: You're gonna fetch Edmund from next door!

(Swaine frowned bitterly.)

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

CANDY: Oh!

(Swaine rolled his eyes.)

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

CANDY: Yeah... this is a pretty lame town!

(Too shy to say very much, Sophira spoke softly and quietly.)

SOPHIRA: So what's the plan then?

SWAINE: The plan is, young lady, for you two to get going at first light and leave the swordsmen to me!

(Candy was dumbfounded.)

CANDY: First light?

SWAINE: The sooner, the better, love; her city's besieged, remember?

(He nodded.)

SWAINE: But you'll need some rest before you go, so first light it is!

CANDY: Right...

(She gulped.)

CANDY: Well... okay...

SWAINE: Good girl. Now get some sleep you two. Candy?

CANDY: Yes?

SWAINE: Fetch...

(He paused.)

SWAINE: Never mind.

CANDY: No, what were you going to say?

(Swaine blushed.)

SWAINE: Well... I was *going* to say get this young lady some pillows, but seeing as you two are... you know...

(He whistled suggestively.)

SWAINE: I'm assuming she'll be sharing *your* bed!

(Candy's eyes bulged.)

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

(Just then, Sophira started to cry, instantly drawing everyone's attention.)

CANDY: Huh? What's up?

(Sophira pouted.)

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

CANDY: Risk my life?

(Sophira then looked to Swaine.)

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

CANDY: Hey! I'm not risking anything. You heard my dad. I know everything there is about survival. I'll just be guiding you in the woods. Piece of piss!

SOPHIRA: But if those Gregon barbarians find us, they'll kill you too!

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

SOPHIRA: But it's dangerous.

SWAINE: Bollocks. I already told you, I'm going to use *cunning and guile* to get rid of the buggers; not brute force. I won't be in any danger, whatsoever.
(Sophira could only grimace. Taking her silence as a sign of acceptance, Swaine nodded sternly.)

SWAINE: Right. That's settled then.
(With that, he pushed back his chair then climbed to his feet.)

SWAINE: Get some sleep, ladies...
(He then swung his chair back under the table before slamming it down to the floor.)

SWAINE: You leave at dawn!

CANDY: Right!

SWAINE: Okay then...
(He nodded.)

SWAINE: Now, if you'll excuse me, I just slammed the chair down on my foot and I'd like to commence swearing with unquantifiable gusto and vigour.
(With a shriek, Candy jumped to her feet, then hurriedly ushered Sophira to her room before her father could explode into a tsunami of profanity and cursing. She just about made it in time. As soon as her door closed, he burst into a chorus of forbidden language that very quickly turned the air blue. Highly amused by it, Candy allowed herself a chuckle.)

CANDY: Half those words are entirely made up.
(She then glanced to where Sophira was eye-balling her nervously.)

CANDY: What? What's wrong?
(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I'm not sure about this, Candy. It's dangerous! I don't want to be responsible for you getting hurt.
(Candy waved a dismissive hand in her direction.)

CANDY: Hurt? Behave! Once those soldiers are out of the picture, this'll just be like a holiday for me! Sure, it's easy to get *lost* in that forest but *surviving* in it is a piece of piss. There's literally no danger involved, whatsoever. And anyway, if for some bizarre reason one of us *does* get hurt, *you* can just heal us!

SOPHIRA: Well... yeah, but...

CANDY: But nothing! It'll be fine! Better than fine, actually.
(She shrugged.)

CANDY: It'll be fun.

SOPHIRA: Right...
(Accepted Candy's words, Sophira offered her a wide smile.)

SOPHIRA: Okay. Thank you, Candy!

CANDY: You're welcome, babe. Now let's get some kip.

Sunrise – Chiswell Point Town Centre

(By the time the sun pierced the early morning clouds, Chiswell Point was already very much awake. Thanks to the local fishermen returning with their catch, this was when the town was at its busiest. Well aware of this fact, Swaine was up bright and early.

Trying his best to appear like a casual passer-by, just out for a stroll, he ambled along the main thoroughfare seeking out an opportunity to put his cunning plan into action. For his plan to work, he needed to blend in; to appear like an innocent, ordinary citizen just going about his business. Not used to seeing him up and about at such a time, however, the townsfolk were very quick to blow his low-key attempts at anonymity. Amazed to see him so early, one of his drinking buddies rushed over to him as soon as he saw him there.)

JENS: Swaine, you old bugger; what happened? Did you wet your bed or something? (Swaine looked about himself anxiously.)

SWAINE: Um...

(Remembering he was supposed to be acting casually, he then stood tall.)

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

(Jens laughed heartily.)

JENS: You're having a laugh, aren't you? The rest of your hunting pack can't normally shift you until noon!

(Swaine raised an angry eyebrow at him.)

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

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

(Without even flinching, Swaine pointed to his left.)

SWAINE: Go!!!

(Jens just shook his head and walked off; disappointed with his friend's attitude.)

SWAINE: Wanker!

(Relieved to have rid himself of the man so soon, he then strode onwards innocently. Moments later, however, he spotted a Gregon soldier standing on sentry by the beach road. It was now time to put his plan into action. With this in mind, he glanced either side of the Gregon soldier on the lookout for a passer-by he knew. Much to his delight, his good friend Chas, was standing a mere ten feet away from the Gregon soldier, watching the ocean.)

SWAINE: Perfect.

(He then strode up to him purposefully.)

SWAINE: Chas!

(Chas turned to face him then forced a smile.)

CHAS: Alright, Swaine?

(Having double checked that the Gregon soldier was definitely in earshot, Swaine replied in a raised voice.)

SWAINE: *I'm* alright, mate. How are you?

(Chas sighed miserably.)

CHAS: Actually, mate...

(Before Chas could relate his woes to his good friend, however, Swaine cut in.)

SWAINE: Marvellous, glad to hear it...

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

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

(Chas squinted at him in bewilderment.)

CHAS: You okay there, Swaine?

(Swaine gulped then lowered his voice.)

SWAINE: Why? Not sweating am I?

CHAS: Actually...

SWAINE: Oh, forget it; I've got things to do.

(He then darted off back the way he'd came, making sure to raise his voice as he scampered away.)

SWAINE: I've no idea why she went east, mate; I just know she did.

(Convinced he'd said enough to convince the Gregon soldiers that Sophira had gone east, he allowed himself an affirming nod then sprinting onwards. When he reached his house a few minutes later, however, rather than going inside it, he made a dash down the side, en route to the *back* of the house. Upon arriving, he then thumped on Candy's bedroom window.)

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

(Having had all night to get used to the idea of being away from home for the first time, Candy couldn't wait to get going. She'd spent much of the night convincing Sophira that she had incredible survival skills. It had set her new friend's mind at ease. She no longer felt guilty about involving her. In that time they'd very much bonded. Candy could tell that Sophira was a humble, kind and loving person. Sophira had come to virtually the same realisation about Candy. She may not have been entirely humble, but she was most definitely a good person.

With a good friendship between them beginning to blossom, all they wanted to do now was get their show on the road. Sophira was especially eager. She knew that the longer she took to achieve her task, the greater the risk was to her people. And so, not needing a second invitation they both leapt from Candy's window as soon as Swaine had knocked. They figured that if they sneaked out the *back* of the house, nobody in town would be see the leave. Therefore, should the Gregon soldier's return, the townsfolk would have nothing to tell them.

Having leapt down from the window first, Candy, armed with her hunting spear and dagger, turned then helped Sophira gain her balance as she landed. Having been about to trip, Sophira was extremely grateful for it.)

SOPHIRA: Thanks, Candy!

CANDY: Anytime, babe!

(Sophira then smiled at Swaine.)

SOPHIRA: And thank *you*, Mr Swaine!

SWAINE: *Mr* Swaine?

(He beamed.)

SWAINE: I like that!

(He then glanced to Candy.)

SWAINE: That's what you're gonna wear, is it?

CANDY: Why? What's wrong with it?

SWAINE: Brown leather jacket and matching mini-skirt? You're not going to the pub for a night out, love.

CANDY: I *know* that!

(She rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: This outfit is practical, dad! For a start, this skirt's really comfortable and allows for excellent ease of movement.

(She beamed.)

CANDY: The fact it matches my jacket and boots *and* I look damned sexy in it, is purely coincidence.

SWAINE: Right...

(He rolled his eyes.)

SWAINE: Just don't complain if your legs get cold.

CANDY: Yeah, right. When have I *ever* done that? It's like you don't even know me. When a girl *looks* hot, she *feels* hot. And right now, I look gorgeous. Getting cold isn't going to be an issue for me. Ever!

SWAINE: Right...

(He smiled.)

SWAINE: As long as you're sure.

CANDY: I am.

(She then looked to Sophira.)

CANDY: Ready?

SOPHIRA: Um... I was, but... my dress is as short as your skirt. I'm not gonna get cold am I?

CANDY: No! Like I literally just said, hot babes like us don't *get* cold! That was just my dad being...

SWAINE: Concerned!

CANDY: Annoying! Look, we'll be walking a lot and that'll keep us warm *enough*. And when we stop, we'll make a fire. Getting cold isn't going to be an issue. Trust me.

SOPHIRA: Right.

(She smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Then yes... I'm ready.

CANDY: Cool.

(She then wrapped her arms around her dad's midriff.)

CANDY: I'll miss you, dad!

(Swaine beamed with pride.)

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

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

SWAINE: Now go! And good luck!

CANDY: Right...

(She nodded.)

CANDY: Bye, dad!

(With that, she grabbed Sophira's hand then hurriedly led her round the side of the house. There was no long farewell or long-winded sentimental speech. She simply dashed around the corner and was gone. Their journey had begun. Having watched as his beloved daughter vanished from sight, Swaine gave a sadden sigh then nodded to himself. As much as it hurt, he knew he'd done the right thing. She'd wanted to get away and live a little and he hadn't stood in her way. This led him to muse about the job he'd done as her father. He was satisfied he'd done all he could. Presenting her with his precious sword that morning, as a token of his esteem, had merely been his crowning moment. It was at this point, however, that something dawned in him.)

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

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

(Looking forward to beginning her great, new adventure, Candy hurried across the town's main thoroughfare then darted in between two houses. With no option but to follow her, mostly because Candy had a tight grip on her hand, Sophira thundered along in her wake with a nervous expression on her face. She was terrified that a Gregon warrior might spot them before they reached the forest. She needn't have worried, however. Just a few moments later, Candy led her past the houses at the edge of town and onto the woodland floor. Delighted to be out there, Candy beamed with pride.)

CANDY: Yup. This is *my* turf now.

SOPHIRA: Turf?

CANDY: Yeah... you know... turf. I'm at home here.

SOPHIRA: But you live in...

CANDY: I mean spiritually!

SOPHIRA: Oh. Okay...

(They then raced on, deeper in the woodland; leaving the sleepy town behind. Well aware of the dangers of wasting too much energy too soon, however, after a few minutes Candy took the decision to slow down.)

CANDY: That'll do!

SOPHIRA: Right...

CANDY: I was only running because I was worried one of those big soldiers might see us. Or a member of the public with a big mouth. Thankfully they didn't. And now we're far enough into the woods not to have to worry about it.

(She nodded.)

CANDY: So it makes sense to walk now. We don't want to knacker ourselves out, after all!

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Gotcha.

CANDY: Cool. Now, let's find this Arterian fellow of yours!

(Excited yet a little apprehensive about what might lay ahead, they then proceeded forth into the wilderness together. For her part, Candy couldn't stop thinking about the wonderful things she'd heard about the forest from the town's elders. Mountains, lakes, waterfalls, ancient monuments; there was a plethora of amazing things to be seen out there. Sophira, on the other hand, couldn't stop thinking about her home town. She was her people's only hope and she'd wasted a lot of time. She'd left home two nights ago and was only now beginning her hunt in earnest. The knowledge that she had her new friend Candy to thank for finally getting her on her way, however, greatly lifted her heart.)

SOPHIRA: You're the best, Candy.

CANDY: What?

SOPHIRA: Just saying.

CANDY: That I'm the best?

SOPHIRA: Yeah!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: You're an excellent judge of character, Soph.

SOPHIRA: Right...

(Just then, a booming voice rang out from behind them, chilling them to the bone.)

SOLDIER 1: Stop right there, bitches!!!

(Frozen to the spot by the soldier's bellowing tone, Candy and Sophira could only shudder in terror. Feeling utterly tortured inside, they then slowly turned around to see all four Gregon soldiers lined up before them. It was a mortifying moment. Their journey had only just begun, and it was already in danger of ending in complete disaster. Sophira could only whimper.)

SOPHIRA: Candy? They've found us. Already!

(Candy trembled in terror.)

CANDY: I know...

(The truth was, however, that the Gregon soldiers hadn't even had to look for them. They'd staked out Candy's house from the minute they'd heard her and Sophira screaming the night before. Candy's claim that she'd seen a rat had fooled nobody. Nor had her father's cunning plan that morning. The soldier Swaine thought he'd found had actually been following *him*. Having *heard* her scream, the soldiers knew Sophira was in Candy's house, but had waited for her to leave rather than creating a scene by taking her forcefully. Making a scene in a foreign land, after all, could well cause an international incident and bring their military into disrepute.

In absolutely no doubt whatsoever that she was about to die, Sophira could only whimper and tremble on the spot. There was no way she could defeat these four big men and it all seemed so hopeless. Candy, however, wasn't going to give up hope just yet. Having psyched herself up to engage them, she held out her hands then offered them a smile. She was going to use her go-to move for every sticky situation she'd ever been in. She was going to attempt to charm her way out of it.)

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

(Wearing a scowl that would frighten the devil, one of the soldiers leaned forwards and barked at her.)

SOLDIER 1: Drop the fucking spear, bitch!!!

(Scared witless by his aggression, Candy's screamed then threw her hunting spear down without the merest hint of an argument. The fear in her eyes brought the four Gregon soldiers much in the way of amusement.)

SOLDIER 2: Women are fucking pathetic.

SOLDIER 1: Only fit to cook, fuck and clean!

SOLDIER 2: Aye, but not necessarily in that order!

(As the four soldiers stood there and laughed at them, Candy and Sophira grabbed each others hands and trembled.)

SOLDIER 2: Priceless. They're shitting themselves, look.

SOLDIER 1: Aye.

(He nodded.)

SOLDIER 1: But that's enough pissing about. We've got a decision to make.

SOLDIER 4: And what's that?

SOLDIER 1: Do we fuck 'em before we kill 'em?

SOLDIER 3: Before or after; either way is fine by me!

(Soldier 1 grimaced.)

SOLDIER 1: You're a sick bastard McClure!

SOLDIER 3: Bollocks. Every hole's a goal, don't forget.

(As she stared wide-eyed at the psychotic killers before her, Candy whimpered fearfully. Two seconds later, however, she spotted something and an enlightened expression crossed her brow. Reacting to it, she took a step back and made sure to pull Sophira back with her.)

SOPHIRA: What are you...

SOLDIER 1: Hey!!!

(He took two paces forwards, flanked by his three comrades.)

SOLDIER 1: Don't fucking move, bitches!

SOLDIER 2: Aye.

SOLDIER 1: Behave and we might just be nice and kill you quickly.

(Sophira put her hands over her face and trembled.)

SOPHIRA: Please... just let us go!

(The soldiers burst out laughing; not even bothering to dignify her request with a cocky reply.)

CANDY: That's a no, is it? You're going to kill us, are you?

(Sophira peered at Candy from behind her hands in disbelief at the question.)

SOLDIER 1: Aye, so don't bother begging!

SOLDIER 2: I thought we were gonna fuck 'em first!

SOLDIER 1: Aye, well... we'll see!

CANDY: Why would you do that? Nobody has to die. You *could* just let us join your group.

(Again, the soldiers all fell about laughing. Sophira, on the other hand, was far from amused.)

SOPHIRA: Join them??? They're murderous scumbags, Candy!

(Trying to be discreet, Candy whispered to her from the side of her mouth.)

CANDY: Just keep them talking!

(Choosing to trust her, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Well... okay.

(Having enjoyed quite the belly laugh, the lead soldier folded his arms and let his sword hang loose.)

SOLDIER 1: Join us, indeed. Like that'd ever happen.

CANDY: But, why not?

SOLDIER 1: I'll tell you why, you stupid bint. That fucking bitch you're standing next to is a Lethernian. The only good Lethernian is a *dead* Lethernian!

(Sophira scowled at him bitterly. Unsurprisingly, he was entirely unfazed by that fact and continued his explanation.)

SOLDIER 1: As for you... you'd be worth a fuck, I suppose, but like we've already established; that's *all* you're fit for. You and your entire gender. We certainly wouldn't let one join our fucking unit.

(He shrugged.)

SOLDIER 1: So that pretty much leaves killing you as our only option.

CANDY: Apart from just letting me go.

SOLDIER 1: Aye. But, to be honest, I'd rather just kill you. Killing is fun, you see?

SOLDIER 2: Aye, it's nothing personal, we just *enjoy* killing pointless bitches like you.

(The soldiers shared another hearty giggle. A few seconds later, however, one of the soldiers raised a baffled eyebrow.)

SOLDIER 3: Lads... am I imagining things or are those two girls getting taller?

(The soldiers all looked at one another then glanced to where Candy was smirking at them.)

SOLDIER 1: What are you so happy about, you cunt?

CANDY: Well, it's quite simple really. We're not getting taller; no! You four silly buggers are standing in a quagmire.

(Reacting to her statement, the soldiers all attempted to step forwards but couldn't even begin to move their feet.)

SOLDIER 2: What the fuck is this shit???

SOLDIER 3: I can't fucking move!!!

(Sophira looked to Candy with an enlightened expression on her face.)

SOPHIRA: So *that's* why you kept them talking!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Yup. It's a horrible death apparently!

(She shrugged.)

CANDY: Oh, well.

(She then offered the soldiers an extremely cocky wave.)

CANDY: Later, boys. Have a gruesome death. Say hello to Satan for me.

(She then glanced to Sophira.)

CANDY: Let's get the hell out of here, babe!

(Not about to waste a further second, they then turned and proceeded to march away. They hadn't got very far, however, when an angry voice rose up from behind them.)

SOLDIER 1: No, you fucking don't!!!

(At once, Candy and Sophira spun around then gasped in horror. One of the soldiers had somehow managed to step out of the quagmire. Whimpering in terror, the two terrified girls backed away from him; trembling from head to toe.)

SOPHIRA: How did that happen? How did he get out?

CANDY: Obviously, the bit he was standing in wasn't deep enough!

(Sophira quivered.)

SOPHIRA: Damn it. Why does god hate us, Candy???

(With a face like doom, the soldier bellowed at the top of his voice.)

SOLDIER 1: You can ask him in a minute!!!

(He then charged at them with his sword aloft. Scared half to death, Sophira instantly raced out of harm's way. Frozen with fear, on the other hand, Candy just stood there agape as the soldier charged towards her. Mercifully, however, she came to her senses just in time. Before his blade could quite slam down onto her, she managed to perform a desperate dive to the ground to evade it.)

CANDY: Fucking hell!!!

(Having landed right next to her spear, she scooped it up then pointed it at the soldier, with a trembling hand.)

CANDY: Stay back.

(The soldier scoffed.)

SOLDIER 1: Yeah, right; like that's...

(His words were then interrupted by his panicking comrades.)

SOLDIER 2: Hurry up and butcher the wench, will you???

SOLDIER 4: Then get your arse over here, you cunt; we're sinking!!!

(The soldier yelled back.)

SOLDIER 1: Don't worry, lads; this bitch won't last long!

(Whimpering fearfully, Candy jabbed her spear out in his direction.)

CANDY: Let me go, you horrible git. I'm not afraid to use it!!!

(The soldier scoffed then slashed his sword forth; cutting her spear in half and rendering it useless.)

SOLDIER 1: And *I'm* not afraid to use my sword!

(He then proceeded to step towards her. As he did so, Candy paced backwards in tears. She was in fear for her very life. Hiding behind a rock, Sophira couldn't barely watch.)

SOPHIRA: Oh no. What have I got us into?

(She then adopted praying hands and begged the gods to spare Candy's life from the merciless brute before her.)

SOLDIER 1: Stop backing away, you wimp. Come back and get killed like an adult. (Not about to take him up on his suggestion, Candy desperately fumbled for the hunting dagger on her thigh. It was the only hope she had of preserving her precious life. Moments later, she ripped it from its sheath then cast it at the soldier's face.)

CANDY: Take that!!!

(Much to her dismay, however, he simply caught it then just chucked it over his shoulder.)

SOLDIER 1: Would you like to make any further futile gestures while we're here or are you done for the day?

(Wanting desperately to help, Sophira looked all around herself for something to use as a weapon. Much to her delight, there was a pile of stones to her left. Without a second thought for her own safety, she immediately grabbed one then cast it towards the soldier. Sadly for her, however, it landed a mere three feet in front her.

Distressed by her ineptitude, she slammed her forehead aggressively.)

SOPHIRA: I throw like a girl!

(Candy, in the meantime, had run out of options. Well aware of that fact, the soldier stopped advancing and gave her a knowing smile.)

SOLDIER 1: Any last requests?

CANDY: Yes! Let me go!

(She then screamed her heart out.)

CANDY: Dad!!! Dad!!!

(The soldier just rolled his eyes.)

SOLDIER 1: Pathetic!

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

SOLDIER 4: Nicely done!!!

SOLDIER 2: Aye! Now come and get us!!!

SOLDIER 3: Quickly, you cunt!!!

(Enjoying himself immensely, the soldier ignored their cries and smirked at the sight of Candy's dying hands trying to grab the blade. The sight of blood beginning to trickle from her mouth was a joy to see as far as he was concerned. This most vicious of men loved nothing more than watching his victims die in agony. Such was the level of his enjoyment at seeing the pain etched on Candy's face, however, he didn't notice Sophira racing up behind him. Nor did he hear the warnings of his comrades. It proved to be a fatal error. Filled with a rage a hundred times deeper than anything she'd ever experienced before, Sophira scooped Candy's dagger up from the ground then plunged it deep into the back of the soldier's neck with all her might. His death was instantaneous.)

SOLDIER 2: Fuck!!!

SOLDIER 3: Aye!!!

(With their ally dead and no longer able to come to their rescue, the other soldiers despaired desperately. Their deaths were virtually assured.)

SOLDIER 4: I won't lie, lads; we're fucked. Properly fucked.)

(Caring very little for their woes, Sophira watched Candy's dying body drop to the ground then hurried to her side, lifting her head up as soon as she got there.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(With the sword still impaled inside her, Candy was shaking and dribbling blood; quite clearly in the last throes of passing away. She did, however, manage to splutter out a few words.)

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

(Sophira yelled at her furiously.)

SOPHIRA: I'm not telling him anything!

(She then yanked the sword out of Candy's stomach before placing her hands upon the wound.)

SOPHIRA: Because there's nothing to tell!

(Seconds later, Candy glanced from side to side in bewilderment. She wasn't in any pain whatsoever and the sensation of her energy slowly draining away had entirely evaporated. Sophira had healed her just in time.)

CANDY: Huh? What... huh?

SOPHIRA: You were right, Candy; I'm not as useless as I thought!

(They then shared a passionate hug. They were under no illusions about close Candy had come to meeting her maker. She'd been literally a matter of seconds away from leaving the mortal coil forever.)

SOPHIRA: That was too close. *Way* too close. I only just made it in time, Candy.

CANDY: The point is, you made it! You saved me, Soph. Thank you!

(They then burst out crying. Neither of them could even begin to put their relief into words. They just hugged out their feelings and thanked their lucky stars they'd live to see another day.

A minute or so later, once they were both finished crying, Candy and Sophira climbed to their feet then glanced towards the three panicking soldiers; now up to their midriff in the quagmire. For them, there'd be no reprieve. A gruesome death was a certainty. Offering them no sympathy whatsoever, Candy merely shrugged.)

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

(Glaring hatefully in their direction, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Good!

(She then turned away from them and placed a hand on Candy's shoulder.)

SOPHIRA: Come on. Let's take you home! This was a mistake, Candy. You've nearly died *already*! We've only been out here for five minutes.

(Horried at the suggestion, Candy stepped back.)

CANDY: No chance!

SOPHIRA: But...

CANDY: Now those Gregon idiots are gone, we're free and clear, Soph! We can start looking for Arterian without any kind of hindrance whatsoever!

(Sophira stared into her eyes sternly.)

SOPHIRA: And you're *sure* you want to, are you? I mean, if you want to go home, Candy, it's fine. I'll understand.

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: I'm positive, Soph! This will be a piece of piss now. I'm awesome at surviving.

SOPHIRA: Seriously? If it wasn't for me, you'd have died like two seconds ago!

CANDY: I meant I'm awesome at *survival*. Woodland stuff!

(She rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: But you knew that.

(She then bent down and picked up the soldiers sword.)

CANDY: And we'll take this with us. You never know; it might come in handy!
 (Sophira bit her lip.)
 SOPHIRA: Do you really need a sword *and* a dagger?
 (They then glanced down at where Candy's blood soaked dagger was poking out of the soldier's neck. Sickened by the sight, Sophira shuddered.)
 SOPHIRA: One seconds thoughts, the dagger can stay where it is!
 CANDY: Actually, Soph... I'm afraid not!
 (She then bent down and yanked her dagger free. As it withdrew from the soldier's flesh, it created a squelching sound that made Sophira dry heave.)
 SOPHIRA: Gross!
 CANDY: Yeah, but we're gonna need it. You can't skin a rabbit with a sword that easily, you see?
 SOPHIRA: Right.
 (She sighed.)
 SOPHIRA: You've lost your spear though.
 (Candy scoffed.)
 CANDY: Yeah, but seeing as I have a dagger, I can use it to whittle a new one in no time.
 SOPHIRA: You can?
 CANDY: I can, yes. It won't take long. I'm really good at that kind of thing. I'll whittle it while we walk.
 SOPHIRA: Oh. Okay.
 (Candy then nodded sternly.)
 CANDY: Speaking of which... let's go! Our adventure starts here!
 SOPHIRA: Uh-huh!
 (Candy then turned and waved at the panicking Gregon soldiers.)
 CANDY: Later, dead dudes!
 (And with that, they headed off into the forest convinced that their journey from hereon would be a simple one. It was a mistake many who'd entered the forest had come to regret.)

(Chapter Two – Amazons.)

There was nowhere in the world quite as tranquil as Ashbury Forest underneath the midday sun. Everything was as calm as it was beautiful. It was a delight for the senses to behold. It was lush, green and unspoilt. Best of all, the glorious views were accompanied by the whimsical melodies of a brightly-coloured menagerie in the treetops. It was the very picture of peacefulness and serenity. This was the world that Candy and Sophira had entered fresh from killing a man and leaving his friends to suffer a horrendous death in a quagmire. Having walked away unharmed from the incident and into this woodland paradise, they couldn't help feeling somewhat euphoric. As if they'd cheated death en route to the promised land.

Ashbury Forest – Early Afternoon.

(In one particularly splendid area of the forest there was a small clearing next to a gentle waterfall. The sound of water pouring softly into the crystal clear stream below was extremely soothing. Throughout the clearing, a carpet of grass had risen from the earth to thrive in the sunlight. At the edge of the clearing, sat a cave opening. Quite where the cave led to, nobody knew. It was just another of the many

spectacular features in this special part of the woodland. Deer would often come to this peaceful oasis to drink and to graze. To witness this part of the forest, was to truly understand the meaning of peace.

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

SOPHIRA: It's coming!!!

(She then sprinted onwards for all she was worth, being pursued by a six foot tall ostrich. With fear etched into her eyes, she yelled out as she ran with all her might.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(Responding to her cry, Candy leapt from behind a rock with the new spear she'd carved from a tree branch a short while earlier. Sophira's task had been to flush out some of the chickens that dwelt inside the cave, so she could leap out and skewer one when she re-emerged.)

CANDY: On it!!!

(Her face then dropped and she grimaced with bewilderment.)

CANDY: Eh? An ostrich???

(With a quick shake of the head, she then thrust her spear like a javelin at the giant bird as it rushed past in pursuit of Sophira. Being an accomplished huntress she was more than simply adept at using a spear. This was what she did for a living and she never missed. Until now. What she hadn't taken into account was the fact that her old spear weighed half as much as this new one. As such, she could only look on in horror as the heavy spear clattered to the ground without even reaching its target, let alone skewering it.)

CANDY: Oh for fuck sake; that was rubbish!

(Sounding utterly tortured, Sophira cried out as she continued to sprint away.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! Help!!!

(Candy could only gape in horror at the sight before her. Her miss had left Sophira entirely at the mercy of the enraged ostrich.)

CANDY: Shit!

(Scooping her dagger from out of the sheath on her thigh, she immediately gave chase; determined not to fail again.)

CANDY: Hang in there, Sophira!!!

(With little choice but to do anything else, Sophira didn't argue. All she had right now was her instinct to not get savaged. Being no match for the speed of the angry ostrich, however, all she could do was duck and dodge. She didn't have a hope in hell of outsprinting it after all. With fear in her heart and a quiver in her voice, she yelled out in distress as she continued to bob and weave.)

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

(In hot pursuit, Candy yelled back.)

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

(Sophira retorted angrily.)

SOPHIRA: Don't worry??? Don't worry??? Have you seen the size of this thing???

(Starting to get frustrated with all the dodging left and right that Sophira and the ostrich were doing, Candy yelled back.)

CANDY: If you'd stop bobbing about like that, maybe I could take aim!!!

SOPHIRA: Stop bobbing about??? Are you insane??? Bobbing about is the only thing keeping me alive!!!

(She whimpered.)

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

(As she raced forth behind them, Candy yelled back defensively.)

CANDY: Yeah, but...

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

(Candy bellowed back.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: It was dark in there!

(Fearing that the ostrich was gaining ever closer to her, Sophira then glanced over her shoulder. At once, her eyes bulged in terror as the furious bird thrust its beak at her face. Thankfully, with lightning speed reactions, she just about managed to swing her torso to the side in time. The ostrich's beak missed her by millimetres. Terrified by the close call, she then opted for a change of tactics. Wearing a mortified expression, she swiftly darted to the left and sprinted away in at a ninety degree angle.

Undeterred, the Ostrich followed suit. Racing along behind with her dagger aloft, Candy skidded to a halt then scowled.)

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

(Sophira, however, was oblivious to Candy by now. All she wanted to do was get away from the feathered fury that was chasing her. Matching her determination to put an end to the pursuit, and also rather keen to eat the Ostrich, Candy raced after them. Moments later, however, she fell over a protruding tree root and landed flat on her face. Somewhat dazed, she then sat up and waited for her blurred vision to clear.)

CANDY: What idiot left a tree root there?

(Racing forth, desperate to get away, Sophira very soon found herself running into the stream and coming to a swift halt. With panic in her eyes, she then spun around, only to be confronted by the ostrich snarling back at her. Instinctively she screamed then threw a left hook at the giant bird's head. With a crack, the bird rode the punch then threw its beak at her with full thrust. Instinctively, Sophira jumped backwards, only to fall on her backside in the shallow water. Sensing an opportunity, the ostrich then lunged again only to be met in mid air by Sophira's left boot. Making the most of her chance, Sophira swiftly leapt to her feet, punched the ostrich again then raced back past it. Her legs flailed erratically as she splashed through the shallows, whimpering and crying. Moments later, however, much to her relief, she made in back to dry land again. Not about to let her go any time soon, however, the ostrich was right back on her tail in no time.)

SOPHIRA: Leave me alone, you big bully!!!

(She then glanced up and saw Candy racing over towards her.)

CANDY: I'll get it this time!

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

SOPHIRA: Yeah, you do that!!!

(Having watched her race past, Candy paused for a moment then turned towards the ostrich and released a deafening scream. The ostrich was only a few feet away from her, bearing down at full speed. In sheer terror, she immediately dropped her dagger then ran away, screaming like a banshee. Having never been so scared in all her life, she overtook Sophira in a matter of seconds. Upon seeing her race by, Sophira also screamed then found some extra speed from somewhere. Very soon they were racing along, side by side, glaring at one another bitterly.)

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

SOPHIRA: And all *you* had to do was kill whatever came out of the cave! Some huntress you turned out to be!

CANDY: Don't blame me! My only mistake was assuming you were smart enough to tell a chicken from an ostrich!

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

(Holding an angry stare at one another, they then raced into the thickest part of the woodland and away from the clearing. Unyielding in its determined pursuit, the ostrich followed on, gaining all the while. Well aware of this, Sophira's face dropped and she started to panic again.)

SOPHIRA: It's gaining!!!

(Candy glanced back and her eyes bulged.)

CANDY: Shit!!!

SOPHIRA: What are we going to do???

(Candy could only offer her a terrified whimper.)

CANDY: I don't know!

SOPHIRA: Shit!

(Mortified, they then glanced back at the same time and released blood-curdling screams. The ostrich was almost upon them. Finding one last burst of energy they then sprinted away with everything they had, ducking either side of a large oak tree. Much to their astonishment, they then heard the bird cry out followed by a loud thudding sound behind them. Utterly perplexed by it, they shared a baffled glance then peered over their shoulders. The ostrich was no longer pursuing them. Mightily relieved by that fact, they slowed to a walk before coming to a complete standstill.)

SOPHIRA: Did it?

(Candy chuckled.)

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

SOPHIRA: Wow!

(They then proceeded to head back towards the stricken ostrich.)

SOPHIRA: I never knew they were that dumb!

(Candy gave her a wry smile in return.)

CANDY: I'm guessing it was male.

(They shared a cheeky chuckle together. Moments later, they stepped up to where the ostrich was lying stunned on the ground.)

SOPHIRA: Let's run away before it comes to.

CANDY: Counter offer...

(She then hurried back to collect her sword from where she'd left it.)

(Within a couple of hours Candy and Sophira were back in the clearing eating ostrich meat around a blazing campfire. It was a situation that filled Sophira with a lot of mixed emotions. While Candy chewed happily at the kill she'd prepared without a moments hesitation, Sophira picked at hers, her mind on so many other matters.

Eventually managing to drag her attention away from the succulent meat she was devouring, Candy spotted Sophira's frown then raised an inquisitive eyebrow.)

CANDY: What's up, Soph?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: It's nothing!

(Taking Sophira's words at face value, Candy's attention immediately straying back to the juicy ostrich meat before her.)

CANDY: Great! So we're cool then!

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: Well... no. It's just that...

(With a sigh, Candy let her meat rest on her palm then glanced across at her.)

CANDY: It's just what?

SOPHIRA: Everything seems wrong...

(Candy scoffed sarcastically.)

CANDY: Everything, huh? Is that all? Just everything?

SOPHIRA: Well, no. I mean, not literally *everything*. A *few* things.

CANDY: Oh?

SOPHIRA: I mean, we don't have much time, yet we're sitting here eating when we should be looking for...

(Candy interrupted calmly.)

CANDY: I already explained that, Soph, we have to eat. And we can't hunt at night because it's too dangerous! It needs to be done during daylight hours. As does eating lunch. That's why it's called lunchtime!

(Sophira grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: Well... yeah. That's fair, I guess.

CANDY: Thank you. So what else?

SOPHIRA: What?

CANDY: You said there was a *few* things.

SOPHIRA: Right... yeah. It's just that... hunting, killing...

CANDY: Go on!

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

(Candy was most confused.)

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

(She paused for thought.)

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

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

(Candy gave her a stern glance.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: Don't be silly!

(Candy shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: We eat what dies; we don't kill things. Meat is a rare treat and we'd certainly never kill something as big as an ostrich just to feed two people. We'll never eat all of it. It feels like such a waste of a precious life.

(Barely able to understand such a weird philosophy, Candy stared straight through her as she tried to get her head around it.)

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

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

CANDY: We didn't kill that ostrich though, it ran into a tree! I mean, I was going to but it was already dead when I came back with my sword.

SOPHIRA: Well...

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

(Sophira scowled at her.)

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

(Candy shrugged innocently.)

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

(Candy offered her a consoling smile.)

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

(Sophira gave a stifled laugh.)

SOPHIRA: I suppose so!

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

(Sophira smiled, touched by Candy's attempts to cheer her up.)

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

CANDY: Exactly! And don't worry about time. After this, we'll get searching for that Arterian person. We've still got a good many hours until the sun sets, after all.

(Sophira nodded.)

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

(Candy smiled back.)

CANDY: Now eat your ostrich!

(Comforted by Candy's words, Sophira then began tucking into her ostrich meat. Having been left slightly bemused by Sophira's description of her people's eating habits, however, Candy paused for thought before resuming her meal. Sophira clearly came from a place with an extremely different culture to hers. Thinking it over, she became more and more curious by the second. Wondering what other weird and wonderful habits or traits they might behold, she scratched her head then watched her attentively for a few moments. Unable to keep her curiosity to herself for long, the urge to ask then took over and she spoke up; resuming her meal as she did so.)

CANDY: Soph? What do you do in Lethernia?

(Sophira looked to her quizzically.)

SOPHIRA: What do you mean?

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

(Sophira shrugged.)

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

CANDY: Yeah I know that. I just wonder what it means!

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

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

CANDY: What things?

SOPHIRA: Whatever they request.

CANDY: Like what?

(Sophira blushed.)

SOPHIRA: Actually, I'm not sure. This is my first job, you see? And the people I was meant to serve got killed before asking me to do anything.

CANDY: Oh!

(She grimaced.)

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

SOPHIRA: No! First job. And it's all gone so wrong. I got smuggled down the river with the three warriors I was supposed to serve and we only got forty feet outside the castle! Now instead of serving them on their missions, I'm *doing* their mission! (She hung her head. Noting her sadness, Candy offered her a warm smile.)

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

(Sophira looked up at her and smiled.)

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

(She giggled.)

SOPHIRA: You also say the dumbest things!

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

CANDY: Hey!!!

(Sophira chuckled helplessly.)

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

(She placed her hands on her hips and glanced heroically to the skies.)

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

(In that moment, they *both* fell about laughing.)

CANDY: Oh my god, that's brilliant!

(Sophira replied through laughter.)

SOPHIRA: And you're not much better. We only set out this morning and you've nearly been killed already!

(They laughed hysterically.)

CANDY: I know, right? Then you mistook an ostrich for a chicken and it nearly killed *both* of us!

(Sophira had to hold her sides; she was laughing so much it hurt.)

SOPHIRA: Not bad for a morning's work, eh?

CANDY: Right? We're so gonna die!

(In that moment the laughter died a rapid death.)

CANDY: Wait! That's not funny!

(Silence ensued. It was an uncomfortable silence born out of the fact that they'd suddenly realised what a lucky escape they'd had to even get this far. In that moment, the need to find Arterian seemed all that much greater. The sooner he was found, the sooner they could get out of the forest. And so, without a moment's hesitation or any words to pre-empt it they both jumped to their feet.)

CANDY: This way?

(She pointed south.)

SOPHIRA: Why not?

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

(Having set out again, Candy and Sophira started off marching briskly forth, staring straight ahead of themselves determinedly. After an hour or so, however, fatigue started to set in and they slowed to nothing more than a casual strolling speed. Their intensity had vanished entirely. Naturally, this slowing in their pace made Candy feel a whole lot more relaxed and as such, she very soon reverted to her normal self; a chatterbox.)

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

(Having been lost in her own thoughts, therefore not quite paying attention, Sophira glanced at her emptily.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry; what?

CANDY: Your job! I mean you *say* you have no idea what it entailed, but you must have done some kind of training, surely.

SOPHIRA: Oh!

(She shrugged.)

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

CANDY: Naturally?

SOPHIRA: Yeah, my duties were just to clean what's dirty, cook when the soldiers were hungry and give them blow jobs when they want one.

(Upon hearing those words, Candy's jaw fell open and she stumbled forwards.)

CANDY: What???

(Managing to right herself, she then stopped and performed a double take in Sophira's direction that seemed to last forever. Baffled by Candy's actions, Sophira turned to face her and grimaced uncomfortably.)

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

CANDY: Blow jobs?

(Sophira just shrugged.)

CANDY: Blow jobs???

(Sophira scratched her head.)

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

(Candy tried not to laugh.)

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

(Thrown by Candy's laughter, Sophira was most perplexed.)

SOPHIRA: What's so funny?

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

(Sophira furrowed her brow.)

SOPHIRA: Don't laugh at me, Candy!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Oh, Soph; I'm not!

SOPHIRA: So, what *is* a blow job then?

(Candy gave a wry smile then stepped up to whisper in her ear. Sophira tilted her head to listen then her eyes bulged and she whimpered in dismay.)

SOPHIRA: What???

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: Yup, I swear to you!

SOPHIRA: That's disgusting!

(They then resumed their walk. Sophira did so with a horrified expression on her face. Candy, on the other hand, was sporting a highly amused smile.)

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

CANDY: I bet!

(She chuckled.)

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

(Candy gave her a sideways glance.)

CANDY: Why do you think?

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

(Candy stopped dead.)

CANDY: You're kidding, right?

(Sophira stopped and shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Well, what other reason is there?

(Candy's jaw dropped.)

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

(Sophira shrugged then walked on.)

SOPHIRA: So?

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

CANDY: Wow!

(She then headed off after her, wearing a baffled expression. The revelation that a pretty girl like Sophira understood so little about men had served to set Candy's mind racing once again. She couldn't figure out what sort of place Lethernia was. Any place where a beauty like her didn't know what a blow job was, was definitely not like Chiswell Point. Her mind boggled. Was it because of their culture? If so, what *was* their culture? Were men and women kept apart or something? How could this girl be so clueless about sex and yet live in a place where they'd send a girl off to perform sexual favours for warriors? Was it simply a case that nobody bothered to tell her about men? It didn't make sense.

As the next hour or so passed, Candy's mind covered a hundred potential reasons as to why Sophira knew so little about men, or indeed sex. Nothing she came up with, however, seemed even remotely logical. She just couldn't figure it out. Thinking about it, however, had been an excellent way to pass the time; albeit it not a sociable one. Pacing along behind the girl in question, she'd thought about little else and not a single word had passed between them. Candy was too busy trying to make sense of things to chat. For her part, Sophira was simply too embarrassed to converse. Having found out what a blow job was, and that she was expected to perform them, she was terrified that Candy might raise the subject again. She simply didn't want to talk about it. And so, they continued on in silence. Finally, however, after a further hour had passed, their silence was broken.

As they strode forth in single file, lost in thought, a sizeable flock of birds flew overheard, filling the air with a cacophony of shrill cries. Candy, in particular, received quite a start.)

CANDY: What the fuck?

(Sophira looked up at them in awe.)

SOPHIRA: Birds! So many of them!

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

CANDY: Hmm...I wonder...

(Sophira turned to face her.)

SOPHIRA: Wonder what?

CANDY: Come here! I'll show you!

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

SOPHIRA: What? What is it?

(Moments later, they raced into a clearing. As they did so, Candy let go of Sophira's hand then pointed ahead of them.)

CANDY: There!

(Before them, a steep hill was rising up from the forest floor. The great flock of birds they'd seen were heading for the trees atop its majestic peak. Wearing an awestruck smile, Sophira exhaled.)

SOPHIRA: It's beautiful!
(She then glanced at Candy in astonishment.)
SOPHIRA: How did you know it was here?
CANDY: Um... actually, I didn't. I expected to see a town, to be honest.
SOPHIRA: Oh.
(She scratched her head.)
SOPHIRA: Why?
CANDY: The fishermen are always saying how birds flock after their fishing boats. Apparently where there's humans, there's flocks of birds living off what they throw away. So, naturally I thought of a town.
SOPHIRA: Right... but, it's a hill.
CANDY: Yes, I can see that.
SOPHIRA: Not a town.
CANDY: Or at least we can't *see* a town. Yet.
(Sophira bit her lip.)
SOPHIRA: So... are you saying there could be people living on that hill?
CANDY: Could be; yes! Could even be your Arterian friend!
(Sophira beamed.)
SOPHIRA: Wow, Candy; you're the best!
(Candy blushed.)
CANDY: Oh shush!
SOPHIRA: No, no! You are!
(They shared a friendly smile then Candy gestured towards the hill.)
CANDY: Shall we?
(Sophira nodded.)
SOPHIRA: We shall!
(With a spring in their step they then made a dash for the hill.)

Kingdom of Lethernia

(Far away to the north at this time, the beautiful kingdom of Lethernia was in disarray. This glorious city of spiral rooftops and glossy white marble buildings was still completely surrounded by encampments of savage, barbarian soldiers, baiting for their blood. All the people had for their salvation were the city walls and time. Time, however, was quickly running out.

In the main tower of the central building that adorned the spacious main square, two of the city elders had met to discuss their increasingly desperate situation. Having spent their entire existence promoting peace and goodwill, they hadn't learned how to defend themselves when faced with hostility. As a result, things looked decidedly bleak. The people of Lethernia needed to fight back or they'd starve to death. Fighting, however, would result in them being slaughtered in no time by a vastly superior army. They were doomed either way. Looking out from the tower window at the desperate situation below, the elder's spirits had never been lower.)

FAITES: It doesn't look good, Yanada!

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

(He shook his head.)

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

(Faite's could only sigh.)

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

(Yanada matched his sigh.)

YANADA: I fear so too!

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

YANADA: Our only hope was for those mercenaries we sent out to reach Arterian, but all we could do was watch them being slaughtered within yards of these city walls. Now there *is* no hope! They were the only trained fighters we had.

(Faite's nodded.)

FAITES: We're done for.

(He sighed.)

FAITES: I'm just thankful that servant girl got away. It's scant consolation I know, but as long as *she* lives, Lethernian blood won't be *entirely* extinct.

(Yanada shook his head.)

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

FAITES: I fear so too!

YANADA: They'd have sent a boat after her, there's no doubt about that, my friend. The poor thing won't stand a chance.

(Becoming increasingly despondent they both hung their heads.)

FAITES: We only have enough food for two more days at the most!

YANADA: I know!

FAITES: And then what do we do?

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: I just don't know!

(He glanced to Faite's desperately.)

YANADA: Is it really too much to expect a mere serving girl to escape the Gregon long enough to find Arterian, Faite's? Because that's our only hope right now.

FAITES: Her job is to cook, clean and serve the sexual needs of soldiers, Yanada. Don't cling to such wild hopes. Such a person is beyond such a task. All we can reasonably do now is prepare to fight for our civilisation or die trying.

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

YANADA: Oh, my dear Faite's, though I see your point, I fear war is still not the answer! Let's consult the other elders before we decide.

(And in that moment they'd inadvertently articulated their problem in a nutshell. The peaceful nature of the Lethernian people was such that the Gregon army had had to literally bring them to the edge of starvation before they even *considered* fighting. Most civilisations would have mobilised their troops by now, but not Lethernia. They didn't have any troops. They'd have to gather up any ordinary citizens who were willing to fight then find something to arm them with. With the prospect of such a weak army coming against such a ruthless killing machine like the Gregon, things looked exceptionally hopeless. Even with healing on their side, a battle would be over in no time. Lethernia was looking doomed and the elders knew it.)

Ashbury Forest – Easter Ridge Hill – Late Afternoon

(Enthusiasm can be a wonderful thing. With an infusion of enthusiasm a person can endeavour to achieve a vast array of things they couldn't possibly imagine without it. The desire to go forward, powered by raw determination had been the driving force

behind all of mankind's greatest achievements. Unfortunately, however, enthusiasm alone is rarely enough. Candy and Sophira considered Easter Ridge Hill as an opportunity to find Arterian and had attacked it with hearts *full* of enthusiasm. Sadly, only thirty minutes later, that enthusiasm had begun to dry up in the face of an ever increasing incline; set upon a never-ending upward path. Despite tiring rapidly, however, the two brave heroines continued their climb. They were slowing all the while and would often stop to look back at the view while they caught their breath, but to their credit, they kept on going. It was no longer a case of being enthused, however. Their enthusiasm had been replaced by a gritty determination.

Utterly exhausted and aching all over, Candy stomped forth, spurred on in part by a fear of letting her new friend down. The climb was getting harder and harder by the minute, but she wasn't going to even consider quitting. She was, however, going to air her feelings on the matter. Never one to keep her unease about anything to herself, she puffed and panted her way up the incline, rolling her eyes as she went.)

CANDY: This hill just keeps on going!

(Struggling to catch her breath, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: I know! We keep going up but the top doesn't get any closer!

(Slightly downhearted, they glanced to one another silently then continued forth.)

CANDY: I've heard there are giant eagles up here, you know?

(Sophira whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: G-giant?

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

SOPHIRA: Oh okay!

(Sophira looked up at the peak again and sighed.)

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

CANDY: I don't know!

(She smiled.)

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

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

CANDY: Yeah... so am I!

SOPHIRA: And I'm starting to feel deflated.

CANDY: Yeah... same here.

(She smiled.)

CANDY: Luckily I know the perfect way to keep our spirits up.

SOPHIRA: Oh? What's that?

CANDY: Shit!

SOPHIRA: Eh? What do you mean? Like... doing one? I don't get it.

(Candy stopped then pointed ahead of them.)

CANDY: It was an exclamation of disappointment. Look!

(Sophira gave her a sideways glance then turned to face where she was pointing. Her heart sunk. Just through the trees up ahead, she could see a fifty-foot high, sheer rock face. Glancing up at it, they both turned pale. In that moment, every ounce of motivation they'd had, oozed out of them and trickled back down the hill. With a face as long as the coldest winter, Sophira sighed then sat on the floor. All Candy could do was hang her head.)

CANDY: Crap!

(The hope wasn't gone from Candy's heart for very long, however. Having stared at the ground despairingly for a mere three seconds, she swiftly raised her head again then sneered at the cliff before them.)

CANDY: I don't give up *that* easily!

(Leaving a baffled Sophira in her wake, she then raced towards the cliff with sheer determination etched upon her brow. Giving it everything she had, she sprinted forth then threw herself at the cliff face as soon as she reached it. Having managed to secure a foothold, she then proceeded to clamber up it; grabbing onto any protruding rock to haul herself up. As has been mentioned before, however, enthusiasm can only get a person so far. Within moments, the inevitable crashing-return to earth became a reality. Feeling quite the fool, Candy found herself laying flat on her back, staring upwards, with Sophira standing over her, shaking her head.)

SOPHIRA: I knew that was going to happen!

(Whimpering with misery, Candy offered no reply. Right now, she didn't know what was worse; the physical pain she was in or the embarrassment. Luckily for her, however, Sophira was able to help her with the former. Giving her a sympathetic smile, she knelt over her then healed her pains with a mere touch. As soon as the pain subsided, Candy sat up then gave her a sorrowful glance.)

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

(Sophira scoffed then proceeded to help her up.)

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

CANDY: Of course you didn't. You're not stupid enough to come up with a plan as stupid as that!

(Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Your plan wasn't *that* stupid, Candy!

CANDY: Oh, it was!

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

(Candy rubbed her chin as she pondered Sophira's suggestion.)

CANDY: Take our time to figure it out, huh? I suppose we *could* give that a go!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: I think we have to!

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

SOPHIRA: But safely. Taking our time.

CANDY: Safely! Gotcha. Let's go!

(And with no more ado they turned to face then cliff then stood there in silence and didn't move a muscle. Neither of them had even the remotest idea *how* to climb it safely.)

CANDY: Um... what I did before was...

SOPHIRA: Scramble up about four feet then fall off.

CANDY: Yeah.

SOPHIRA: By randomly grabbing at rocks.

CANDY: Well...

SOPHIRA: Including loose ones.

CANDY: I...

SOPHIRA: And down you came.

CANDY: Sophira...

SOPHIRA: Splat. Landed right on your...

(Candy furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: I know that, Sophira; I was there!!!

SOPHIRA: Just saying, Candy; taking what you did before as a reference is a really bad idea.

CANDY: I wasn't going to suggest we do it again, Sophira, I was just wondering...

(She rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: If we're going to climb we need to hold onto rocks, but how we can *tell* if a rock can bear our weight or not?

SOPHIRA: Hmm...

CANDY: Only, using trial and error might turn out to be a bad idea.

SOPHIRA: Might? It is! It's a *very* bad idea indeed!

CANDY: Yeah, but...

SOPHIRA: Candy, no! We're not doing that!

CANDY: Fine! Then how?

SOPHIRA: I don't know. Let's take a look and figure it out, shall we?

CANDY: Right.

(They then fell silent and glanced up at the cliff face again. As they stared up at the daunting climb before them, however, neither of them could muster even the slightest bit of enthusiasm about the task ahead. They just stared icily upwards and their hearts sunk. This lack of motivation and knowhow, however, soon stopped being an issue.

As they stood there staring upwards, a hungry wolf emerged from the thick woodland behind them. Almost instinctively sensing the presence of a third party, Candy and Sophira both glanced over their shoulders briefly then calmly faced the cliff again.)

CANDY: There's a wolf standing right behind us, Soph.

(She then performed a double take at the sight of Sophira rapidly scaling the cliff like a seasoned mountaineer, staring back at the wolf with terrified eyes. Highly amused by Sophira's speed in the face of danger, she afforded herself a brief chuckle. In that moment, however, the severity of her situation hit her. Wolf! With that, she too ascended the cliff face like a rocket. Watching them climb like their lives depended on it, the wolf merely sat down and yawned.

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

SOPHIRA: I did it!

(Having been given quite a start, Candy flinched and her hand slipped from the rock she was grasping. Screaming in terror, she found herself swaying by one hand from the cliff face.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(Dangling there in terror, Candy's eye portrayed that of a tortured soul. Right now, she was in mortal danger and she knew it. As did the wolf. Noticing a potential free lunch, it stood up and licked its lips. Desperate to help, Sophira looked around herself. All she could see was trees and a steep path running between them. With nothing useful around her, she then looked back over the edge with pleading eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Don't fall!!!

(Candy yelled back bitterly.)

CANDY: Thanks! I hadn't thought of that!!!

(Knowing she couldn't hold on one-handed forever, Candy took a deep breath then snarled. Well aware that her next move would be do or die, she then used all her might to contort her body round in a bid to grab a hold of the cliff with both hands. With death the price for failure, she screamed as her whole body twisted and her other hand

thrust towards the rock. Barely managing to grab it, she then pulled herself into the rock face and took a deep breath. Sensing a world of relief, Sophira closed her eyes and looked to the heavens.)

SOPHIRA: Thank you!

(Moments later, once Candy had clambered over the ridge to join her, Sophira threw her arms around her excitedly. Exhausted and grateful to be alive, Candy accepted the hug then laid herself down to catch her breath. Frustrated, the wolf about turned then headed back into the woods again.)

Overjoyed that her excitement hadn't killed her new best friend, Sophira knelt at her side and stroked her hair tenderly. She felt absolutely horrible.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry I startled you, Candy.

(Slightly rejuvenated, Candy patted Sophira's waist just to let her know it was okay then climbed to her feet.)

SOPHIRA: I'm really sorry!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Hey, it's not entirely your fault. *I'm* the dozy cow who let go!

(Sophira climbed to her feet then smiled.)

SOPHIRA: I'm just happy that you're okay.

CANDY: Yeah. *I'm* happy about that too.

(She chuckled.)

CANDY: Come on. We've got work to do.

(She then headed off towards the path between the trees. Sophira nodded then followed on. She did so with a soft smile emanating on her lips. This climb had been a form of torture so far but they were still going. As far as she was concerned, they could both be extremely proud of themselves.)

(As girls so often do, Candy and Sophira had developed a habit of leaning into each other as they walked. It was the perfect way to comfort each other that they weren't in it alone. They were too tired to talk much, but the mere presence of each other was enough to help them keep going. And very soon, they'd be needing all the help they could get.)

Having passed through a brief strip of picturesque woodland they'd emerged at the edge of an extremely deep crevice. Mercifully, there was a rope bridge stretching across its length. There was also a hand painted sign next to it. Initially, Sophira was extremely excited. Candy was right; there was definitely human life on this mount.)

SOPHIRA: Candy, you're a genius!

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

CANDY: Hehe... what does it say?

(In that moment, however, Sophira's face dropped.)

CANDY: What? What is it? What's wrong?

(Trembling all over, Sophira looked back at her with trepidation.)

SOPHIRA: It says, "turn back or die".

(Candy could only suck her teeth and stare back at Sophira in dismay.)

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

CANDY: Yeah...

SOPHIRA: What are we gonna do?

(Far from certain, Candy rubbed her forearm nervously.)

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

(She sighed.)

CANDY: I don't know!

(Sophira's bottom lip dropped.)

SOPHIRA: Maybe we should just turn back!

(Candy nodded.)

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

SOPHIRA: Then?

CANDY: Let's just go back. Come on.

(And with heavy hearts they about turned then headed towards the cliff they'd just climbed. Unable to stop thinking about the sign, Sophira looked back continuously, musing to herself as she did so.)

SOPHIRA: I...

CANDY: What?

(Suddenly taking on a defiant stance, Sophira stopped and turned to face the rope bridge.)

SOPHIRA: This is a hill, for pity's sake!

CANDY: Correct. You learn fast, Sophira!

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

SOPHIRA: Nature built this, so what right does anybody have to tell us whether we can come up here or not?

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

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

(Candy grimaced.)

CANDY: Actually, you'd be surprised what some people lay claim to.

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but even so, they have no right. I mean, we're not doing any harm, are we? It's not like we're going to rob anyone's home; we're just walking up a hill. They've got no right to deny us that.

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

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

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

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: I guess we are!

SOPHIRA: So, we're crossing then?

(Candy nodded reluctantly.)

CANDY: I guess so.

(Sophira offered Candy a wide smile, then headed for the rope bridge. Admiring Sophira's attitude, Candy followed on. It was clear from the condition of the bridge in question that it was either new or very well maintained. The wooden slats were sturdy and the rope itself was barely weathered at all. With no fear of the bridge collapsing they both stepped onto it with confidence. It wasn't long, however, before Sophira's resolve suddenly began to wane. Staring downwards, she whimpered then glanced over her shoulder and pouted at Candy.)

SOPHIRA: It's a long way down, Candy; I don't like it.

(Candy peered through the slats then shrugged.)

CANDY: Don't fall off then!

(Unfortunately, those were hardly the words of wisdom and encouragement she needed right now. They were, in fact, quite the opposite. Absolutely terrified by the very *thought* of falling, panic set in almost immediately.)

SOPHIRA: What if I *do* fall?

(Candy rolled her eyes.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: I want to go back!

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Make your sodding mind up, girl!

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

SOPHIRA: Don't leave me here!!!

CANDY: What? Oh...

(Quickly beginning to realise that Sophira was too scared to go forwards or backwards and would probably stand there all day and all night, Candy grimaced to herself.)

CANDY: Uh-oh.

SOPHIRA: Candy, I'm scared!

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

CANDY: A-ha!

(Fearing Sophira would be disappointed in herself if she failed to cross, Candy had decided to get her across the only way she knew how. By being cruel to be kind. Looking determined, she strode up behind her intently.)

CANDY: You'll thank me for this later!

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

SOPHIRA: What are you doing???

CANDY: I'm getting you across this bridge!

SOPHIRA: But...

(Before she could protest, Candy pushed her again, only this time, harder. Claspings the ropes so tightly that they were imprinting themselves on her hand, Sophira screamed then fell on her backside; her hands reaching up, gripping the ropes for dear life still.)

SOPHIRA: Stop it!!! Why would you do that??? I hate you!

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

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

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

CANDY: No!!!

(Candy then pushed her again. Scared witless by it, Sophira subconsciously edged forward by no more than an inch; crying her eyes out as she did so. It was an undignified charade that continued for quite some time. Sophira was absolutely terrified. She'd never been up this high before and had just discovered a morbid fear of heights. Candy for her part was hating every second of it. She felt cruel but was confident she was doing the right thing. She knew Sophira would regret turning back from the peak and would forever be wondering if Arterian was up there. Mercifully, Candy's plan was working. The constant nudging and Sophira's natural desire to not

get nudged had inched her forwards on her backside to just beyond the half way point. Upon spotting this, Candy stepped back.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: You're horrible!

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

(Struck dumb by those words, Sophira eased her neck around to see if it was true. She was mortified. She hadn't even noticed that she'd gone forwards; mostly because she'd had her eyes firmly shut.)

SOPHIRA: Why would you do that??? I'm further from safety than ever now!!!

CANDY: To help you get...

SOPHIRA: Help me get what? Killed??? I'm too scared to go forwards *or* backwards, Candy!!!

CANDY: Soph...

SOPHIRA: Why do you hate me??? At least before I was only a few steps away from land, now I'm miles away!

CANDY: It's hardly miles...

SOPHIRA: You know what I mean!!!

(Candy furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: Listen, you silly sod; Arterian might be up here!

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but...

CANDY: So you'd never have forgiven yourself if you'd turned back and not found out.

SOPHIRA: But...

CANDY: So I nudged you along a bit. Now it's quicker for you to continue than to go back. So you might as well get up and keep going. The sooner you do that, the sooner you're misery will be over and we can see if Arterian is up here.

SOPHIRA: But I'm scared!

CANDY: Because you're on a bridge?

SOPHIRA: Yes!

CANDY: Get off it then, dumb arse!

(In that moment, Sophira fell silent again. Candy's words suddenly made sense. The sooner she was no longer sitting up there, the happier she'd be.)

SOPHIRA: So... I just have to...

CANDY: Get to your feet, stare straight ahead and walk.

SOPHIRA: Right...

(With that, she slowly and nervously, pulled herself to her feet, still holding the guide ropes extremely tightly.)

CANDY: That's it, Soph. You can do it.

(Sophira trembled.)

SOPHIRA: Look dead ahead and just walk, right?

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

SOPHIRA: You do?

CANDY: Absolutely I do!

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

SOPHIRA: I can do this...

CANDY: Yup. And I'm right behind you!

(Sophira whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: Hold my hand!

CANDY: No; I'm gonna hold the ropes like *anyone else* without a death wish.

(She rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: And I couldn't do that anyway, babe; we're in single file!

(Realising the stupidity of her request, Sophira winced.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry. I'm just...

CANDY: It's okay, Soph!

SOPHIRA: Right...

(She paused for a moment to psych herself up, then slowly proceeded to step forth, whimpering to herself all the while. Watching her go, Candy afforded herself a smile for a job well done. She then followed on. It had taken far longer than it needed to, but they were almost across. Gingerly stepping to within a few feet from the end of the bridge, Sophira drew a sigh of relief then mumbled to herself.)

SOPHIRA: I'm gonna make it.

(Unfortunately for her, however, her declaration turned out to be somewhat premature. Before she could quite put her foot on the other side of the crevice a gale force wind swept across the crevice and thrust the centre of the bridge up into the air. Thrown up with it, Sophira and Candy gripped the ropes for all they were worth; screaming blue murder as they did so. As quickly as it had arrived, the powerful wind then swept down the crevice and away. In the aftermath of the wind's passing, Sophira was left down on her knees on the slats.)

SOPHIRA: That was *not* fun!

(She then raised her head and stared hard at the end of the bridge. All of a sudden, the task of finishing the crossing didn't seem so bad. Walking on the bridge may have been scary, but the prospect of getting caught by another wind was a hundred times worse. As such, she jumped to her feet then sprinted for the end of the bridge before making a leap onto the terra firma on the other side of the crevice. Having never felt so elated about something as simple as hard soil, she instantly fell to her knees just to be closer to it.)

SOPHIRA: Never again. That was horrible, Candy.

(She then glanced behind her and gasped in horror. Candy was nowhere to be seen. With fear struck into her heart she whimpered then crawled to the edge of the crevice and bellowed out in desperation.)

SOPHIRA: Candy??? Candy???

(Her heart was racing and a thousand horrifying thoughts were flickering through her mind. Every horrid thought led her to the same conclusion. Candy must have been thrown into the crevice by the wind. And it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't held up their crossing. Naturally, she was devastated. All she could think was that her cowardice had killed her friend. Her *best* friend. In fact, the only friend she'd ever had in her whole nineteen years on the planet. Devastated, she hung her head then cried.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry, Candy!

(Just then, Candy's peeved voice rose up from just in front of her.)

CANDY: Never mind being sorry; help me up, Soph!

(With a joy in her heart like never before she swiftly glanced up and saw Candy's head peering over the crevice edge. Wanting to hold her and squeeze her until she exploded, Sophira grabbed her wrists then proceeded to yank her up with all her might.)

SOPHIRA: You're alive!!!

CANDY: I won't be if you let go! I've lost my foothold!

SOPHIRA: I won't let go! Ever!!!

(She then snarled determinedly and dragged Candy safely onto the crevice top with her.)

SOPHIRA: Thank the heavens!!!

(With that, she leapt on top of her and kissed her head repeatedly. Right now, she was overjoyed. When the bridge had twisted on the wind, Candy had managed to grab the bottom of the slats. Once the wind had passed, she'd then used them as monkey bars to get to the edge. It had been an extremely lucky escape and she was overjoyed merely to be alive. As such she matched Sophira's overexcited affection with a strong, heart-warming hug.

As they lay there holding each other tightly, Sophira couldn't help but speak her mind passionately.)

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

(Candy squeezed her tighter.)

CANDY: But you didn't.

SOPHIRA: Still... I'm so, so sorry, Candy!

(Candy stroked her arm lovingly.)

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

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but...

CANDY: But nothing!

(She then proceeded to climb to her feet, prompting Sophira to do the same.)

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

CANDY: Hey! Some people are scared of heights. It's okay, Soph, really!

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: It's *not* okay. I've never had a friend before, Candy. I know we only met last night but in that time we've done so much together. You've been so kind to me. So you almost dying out here when you only came to help me is *not* okay. Not in *my* eyes!

CANDY: Hey! No. Enough of that negative nonsense, you. Stop blaming yourself! I came because I wanted adventure. So I can't really complain now that I'm getting it, can I?

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Well... okay. But I just need you to know something before we carry on.

CANDY: Oh?

SOPHIRA: When we met yesterday... I could sense that you were a wonderful person virtually right away. So, I feel really lucky to have you as my friend! I just need you to know *that*.

(Candy smiled warmly.)

CANDY: Aw. Thanks, babes.

(Rather than say anything kind in return, she then gestured down the path ahead. She was too proud to admit it, but a large part of the adventure for her was being with Sophira; someone she could tell from the moment they met was a deeply warm and sincere person. She wasn't exactly swamped with friends because most of the girls she'd grown up with had either left town or had started to hate her the day she became popular with the men folk. Having a friend in Sophira meant the world to her. Fearing she might look a bit pathetic if she mentioned it, however, she kept her mouth shut and started to walk on. With a smile, Sophira, quickly followed suit. Their trek had resumed.

The new path Candy and Sophira found themselves on wasn't as steep as the previous one, but still featured a gradient that required them to make an extra effort. Having expended so much energy already, they both prayed that the peak wouldn't be much further. Those prayers were soon answered.

As the two intrepid young ladies proceeded forth, it was long before the path started to flatten out. The incline became so slight it was barely even noticeable. And just a matter of minutes later, they paced past the final trees on the slope and out onto a flat plateau. They'd arrived at the summit. Candy could barely contain her joy. Their arrival at the peak had revealed a seven foot high wall; hand-built from the heavy clay that was so prevalent around them. This unnatural barrier clearly meant they'd found a human settlement. Skipping up to it excitedly, Candy beamed with delight.)

CANDY: I was right!

SOPHIRA: About?

CANDY: A settlement. We'll find people behind this wall; I'm certain of it!

(Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: You're the best.

CANDY: Right?

(She chuckled.)

CANDY: That's the third time you've told me that.

SOPHIRA: And it probably won't be the last.

CANDY: Aw. You're so kind.

SOPHIRA: Thank you.

(She exhaled.)

SOPHIRA: It was a long walk but we made it, Candy. And now we've found a settlement like you said we would.

CANDY: Yup.

(She winced.)

CANDY: I just hope whoever lives here was joking when they wrote that sign!

(Sophira bit her lip.)

SOPHIRA: Hmm... yeah!

CANDY: I guess we'll find out in a minute, huh?

SOPHIRA: Yeah...

CANDY: Firstly, however, we need to find a way over this wall.

SOPHIRA: Right. Another obstacle...

(She sighed.)

SOPHIRA: But at least it should be the last one, right?

CANDY: I'd imagine so.

SOPHIRA: Cool.

CANDY: Right then. What are we waiting for?

(With that, they turned to face the wall then glanced towards the top of it.)

CANDY: It's high!

SOPHIRA: It is!

CANDY: But then walls normally are!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Well, yeah!

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

SOPHIRA: Oh absolutely!

CANDY: Still... easy peasy. A seven foot wall is no obstacle to brave adventuresses like us, right?

(She then turned to rest her back on the wall and cupped her hands in front of herself in readiness to offer Sophira a boost.)

CANDY: Come on, you!

(Sophira gave her a baffled glance.)

SOPHIRA: What?

(Candy nodded to her cupped her hands then smiled. Clearly, she'd forgotten who she was talking to.)

CANDY: Come on. Up you go!

SOPHIRA: Up I go? What are you on about? And why you standing like that?

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: I'm gonna give you a boost!

SOPHIRA: A what now?

CANDY: Just climb up me!

SOPHIRA: What do you m...

(She was then cut off in her tracks by Candy's irritated snarl.)

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

(Looking enlightened at last, Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Oh right!

(Candy rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: Finally!

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

SOPHIRA: Ouch!!!

(Candy was not impressed.)

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

SOPHIRA: Hey! It's not *my* fault. You were supposed to boost me upwards not throw me over here!

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

CANDY: Eight... nine... ten... right, try again! This time, climb up me and onto the wall!

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Gotcha!

(With that, she paced up to her then placed her boot in Candy's cupped hands.)

CANDY: Ready?

SOPHIRA: Yup.

CANDY: Use my shoulders to climb, okay?

SOPHIRA: Okay.

CANDY: And... go!

(With that, Candy snarled then boosted her upwards. This time, Sophira managed to grab her shoulders then clamber up her to the top of the wall. Unfortunately, however, she stepped on Candy's face in the process. Delighted to have made it, Sophira beamed with delight then cautiously turned to look down at Candy. The wall was only ten inches thick, so she was extremely careful not to fall off the other side.)

SOPHIRA: It's scary up here, Candy. I'm up though.

(She then performed a double take in her direction.)

SOPHIRA: What's wrong? Are you okay?

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

CANDY: You broke my bleeding nose!!!

(Sophira's bottom lip dropped.)

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

(Stopping circling, Candy looked up at her, holding her paining nose in her left hand.)

CANDY: *You've* got to pull *me* up now; you realise that don't you?

SOPHIRA: Okay!

(With that, she carefully laid herself sideways atop the wall then dangled her hand down to reach for Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Here!

(Candy nodded then paced up to her.)

CANDY: Right. Now brace yourself!

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

CANDY: Pull!

SOPHIRA: Right!!!

(Wearing a furiously determined snarl, Sophira growled then pulled at Candy's arm as hard as she could. Unfortunately, she wasn't designed for lifting. Despite her best efforts, Candy went absolutely nowhere. Sophira was giving it her all, even to the point of going bright red in the face, but she was failing to budge her even an inch. Quick to realise it was never going to work, Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Wait!

(She then released her grip on Sophira's wrist. Unfortunately, however, Sophira had still been trying to pull her up when she'd let go. As a result, Sophira sprung away from her then toppled over the other side of the wall. Listening to her shriek, Candy whimpered in terror.)

CANDY: Soph? Sophira???

(Alas, there was no answer from the other side of the wall.)

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

(Somewhat tortured, she bit her lip then adopted praying hands.)

CANDY: What have I done?

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

CANDY: Umm... Soph?

(Just then, she felt a tapping on the shoulder. Scared witless by it, she screamed then spun around to see Sophira grinning back at her. Struggling to regain her breath, Candy gave her a disturbed glance.)

CANDY: How did you...

(Sophira pointed along the wall.)

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

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

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

SOPHIRA: What do you mean?

(Candy just rolled her eyes.)

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

SOPHIRA: Doubtful!

CANDY: Isn't it though?

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

CANDY: Anyway, babes, let's get going!

(She then offered her hand to Sophira and they headed through the gap together. Candy couldn't even begin to guess what they'd find on the other side. Oddly, nor could Sophira. She'd found the gap whilst in a panic and hadn't even looked.

As they emerged through the gap they were surprised to find a dusty plateau before them and a cave opening at the far end. There was also a sheer drop to the right of them. Open mouthed, they both stepped up to the edge of the drop then looked out at the valley below. A great lake could be seen nearby and above it there was nothing but an expanse of trees and the odd meadow for as far as the eye could see.)

CANDY: Fuck me!!!

(Sophira was horrified.)

SOPHIRA: Excuse me??? I'll do no such thing! I couldn't even if I *wanted* to!

CANDY: It's an expression of exasperation, Sophira!!! Again!

SOPHIRA: Oh...

(She blushed.)

SOPHIRA: I didn't know that; I've never heard it before.

(Candy allowed herself a chuckle then exhaled.)

CANDY: What a view! It's beautiful!

(Sophira nodded wholeheartedly.)

SOPHIRA: It's heavenly!

(Allowing themselves a moment to enjoy the pleasure of nature's greatness, they both took several breaths of fresh air and allowed satisfied smiles to wash onto their faces. This view made all their struggles to get there seem well worth it. Greatly cheered by the scenery, they allowed themselves to absorb it for a good minute or so, then Candy turned to face the cave.)

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

(Sophira whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: I hope not. I don't like caves, Candy!

CANDY: You'll be fine, Soph. I doubt we'll come across an ostrich *this* high up.

SOPHIRA: I hope not, anyway

(Sophira took a deep breath then nodded nervously.)

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

(She then offered her hand to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Let's go inside!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Okay. And relax. We'll be fine, babes!

(Sophira returned her smile then they started to head for the cave opening. They'd only travelled a matter of feet however, when a bizarre, inordinately hairy gentleman, dressed in nothing but an animal skin waistcoat leapt from the cave entrance. Both Candy and Sophira screamed then jumped back having been given quite a start. It was clear to see that this near-naked wild man wasn't happy to see them. As the girls trembled before him, he growled furiously.)

HERMIT: Intruders!!!

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

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

HERMIT: Nobody disturbs my peace!!! Nobody!

(Sophira pointed at the hermit and whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: I can see his thingummy-bob!

CANDY: That's not helping, Soph!

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

HERMIT: You will die for this intrusion!

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

SOPHIRA: It's horrible!

(His penis, however, turned out to be the least of her worries as the raging hermit was quick to point out.)

HERMIT: I shall kill you both!!!

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

(The hermit snarled.)

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

(And with that, he charged back into the cave. Baffled by his behaviour, Candy turned sharply towards the traumatised Sophira.)

CANDY: What was that all about???

SOPHIRA: He didn't have any underpants on!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: For heaven sake, Sophira...

(Before she could continue, however, the ground began to shake and a deafening roar echoed from the cave. Fearing the worst, Candy and Sophira gave each other a horrified glance. A savage werewolf-like creature then raced from the cave.)

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

(Before she could utter another word, the crazed beast rushed straight for her.

Instinctively, she threw her pack on the ground then yanked her sword from the top of it.)

CANDY: Oh, shit!!!

(Not about to let Candy face it alone, Sophira braced herself for combat then passed out at the very thought of it. More concerned with the raging beast that was bearing down on her than her unconscious friend, Candy raised her sword and desperately tried to remember the sword techniques her father had taught her. She then recited them in a whimpering voice.)

CANDY: Don't just swing it; time it. My sword is an extension of me! I wish my dad was here!

(Out for her blood, the untamed killer then made its move. Wasting no time, whatsoever, it leapt at Candy as soon as she was in range. Instinctively, Candy leapt to one-side in a desperate act of self preservation. Mercifully, she just about managed to duck under the beast's flailing claw in time. As the creature landed, Candy swiftly turned to face it then lunged at it with her sword. Almost as if it was mocking her, however, the werewolf-like fiend just batted the sword out of her hand with its paw; filling her with dread. If her sword was useless, what else did she have? Whimpering, she glanced to where her sword had landed then back at the snarling werewolf.)

CANDY: Umm... nice doggie!

(The beast then leapt at her again. Unable to defend herself, Candy screamed then spun around and attempted to sprint away. Desperate not to be thwarted a second time, however, the werewolf stretched in mid-air and managed to slap the bottom of her boots as it came back down. Mercifully, despite tripping forwards, Candy somehow managed to right herself.)

CANDY: Too close!!! Too fucking close!!!

(She then sprinted off across the plateau. Whimpering and crying as she went, fearing the beast was right behind, she then threw a glance over her shoulder. At once, her eyes bulged in terror. Rather than chasing her, the beast was bearing down on

Sophira; now conscious and in desperate trouble. She hadn't even had a chance to get back to her feet.)

CANDY: Fuck!!!

(Trying her best not to panic, she looked around herself desperately.)

CANDY: What can I...

(She then spotted her sword, lying there upon the soil.)

CANDY: Right...

(Not about to waste another second, she then raced over it.)

CANDY: I have to save her... somehow!

(She then froze as an idea popped into her head, as if from nowhere.)

CANDY: Hmm...

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

CANDY: You can do it, Candy!

(As she edged away on her backside with terror in her eyes, Sophira could do little but whimper incoherent words. There wasn't a single sign of hope in her terrified eyes. Edging back desperately, she could feel it in her heart that her time was up. That feeling was then confirmed when her hand slipped over the edge of the sheer drop. This was as far as she went. It was now a choice of being mauled to death or falling to it from a great height. Defeated by the hopelessness of it all, all she could do was scream out in fear.)

SOPHIRA: No!!!

(All to aware that she had nowhere left to go, the beast snarled then raised its razor-sharp claws at her; almost as if it was making an exhibition of going in for the kill. Resigned to her fate, Sophira threw her arms across her face then screamed her last scream. Sensing the death blow would be imminent, her entire body tensed up. Rather than savaging her and taking her precious life, however, the beast suddenly rose up onto its haunches and cried out in pain. Bewildered by it, Sophira opened her eyes then gasped. Spying the beast standing on its hind legs, crying out, her face lit up.)

SOPHIRA: Chance!!!

(She then scrambled past it to the relative safety of the plateau and away from the drop. Having done so, she noticed Candy standing akimbo behind the beast, wearing a menacing expression. Bewildered by the sight, she then glanced at the werewolf. Candy's dagger was firmly impaled in its backside. Astonished by what she was seeing, she leapt to her feet then raced to Candy's side.)

SOPHIRA: Candy...

CANDY: Save it! We need to get the fuck out of here and I mean now!

SOPHIRA: Agreed!

(With that, they about turned then sprinted away. Desperately hoping they could make good their escape before the beast decided chase them again, they charged through the gap in the wall then scarpered across the plateau outside as fast as their tired legs would allow. As they did so, Candy reached behind herself then snatched

her sword from her pack. She was determined to chop down the rope bridge as soon as they were across it.)

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

SOPHIRA: Right? Being on this hill is *not* fun!

CANDY: It's the least fun thing ever!

(Unfortunately for Candy, however, that theory was about to be tested. Such was their desperation to escape as quickly as possible they hadn't noticed a shadow zooming in on them from behind them. Consequently, before they could even make it half way across the plateau, their feet rose off the ground and they started to ascend, high into the sky.)

SOPHIRA: No!!! What the hell's going on???

CANDY: Bird!!!

(Candy learned something that day. Contrary to what she'd previously believed, the giant eagles in this part of the world really were as big as the legends said they were. This was not, however, the way she'd have liked to have found out. With enormous claws skewering their backpacks, a colossal airborne giant had carried them off across the sky. Hanging from its talons by their backpacks, Candy and Sophira were panicking profusely.)

SOPHIRA: What are we gonna do?

CANDY: I don't know!!!

SOPHIRA: Oh, my god! High! High, Candy! I don't like heights!!!

(Candy whimpered.)

CANDY: I was wrong, Soph! *This* is the least fun thing ever!

SOPHIRA: Right? I miss that werewolf!

CANDY: So do... wait... what am I saying?

(Just then, an idea came to her and her eyes then lit up.)

CANDY: Soph! Soph; I've had an idea!

(She snarled determined then started to fiddle with the straps on her backpack.)

CANDY: We just have to take our packs off!

(Sophira was horrified.)

SOPHIRA: And fall down there???

(Candy glanced down then shrieked. In hindsight, her idea wasn't as brilliant as she'd thought it was.)

CANDY: I don't wanna!!!

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

SOPHIRA: What does it want with us, Candy???

(Candy whimpered.)

CANDY: To eat us!!!

(With that, they both burst out crying.)

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

CANDY: Nor do I!!!

(Moments later, as the magnificent flying beast flew out over the great lake, the tearful, whimpering duo looked to one another as they sobbed.)

SOPHIRA: I'm scared, Candy!

CANDY: So am I.

SOPHIRA: Hold my hand!

(She shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: Scratch that, I need a hug.

CANDY: Me too!

(Candy then contorted to reach out for her. As her arm swung in her direction, however, Sophira flinched then tipped her head back.)

SOPHIRA: Careful with that thing!!!

CANDY: What thing?

(She then flinched in astonishment. It wasn't until that very moment that she noticed she still had her sword in her hand. She'd been so busy panicking and crying, she'd simply forgotten all about it.)

CANDY: My sword! I have my sword.

(She beamed.)

CANDY: Well that changes things!

SOPHIRA: Does it??? How?

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

CANDY: You'll see. You can swim, right?

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

CANDY: Just answer me. Can you or can't you?

SOPHIRA: I can, yeah, but...

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

CANDY: Good!

(With that, she plunged her sword deep into the eagle's undercarriage. With a deafening squawk of pain, the giant bird's claws flexed wide and split through their packs; freeing them from its grasp. The injured bird then flew onwards, leaving Candy, Sophira and all their belongings to plummet from the sky. Their screams could probably be heard from miles around.)

SOPHIRA: Why, Candy??? Why???

CANDY: I didn't want to be eaten!!!

SOPHIRA: But...

(She then softened her tone.)

SOPHIRA: Actually, that's not a bad reason.

(A series of splashes then ensued as Candy and Sophira plunged into the lake, followed by the rest of their belongings. Splash followed splash until finally there was silence. The waters stilled themselves and all was once again at peace in the great forest. Moments later, however, Candy crashed back through the water from below, gasping for air. Her first reaction was to spin around and look for Sophira.)

CANDY: Sophira!!!

(Seconds later, Sophira then splashed back to the surface and coughed her heart out. Upon seeing her, Candy's face lit up; her relief was evident.)

CANDY: Damn it, girl; am I glad to see you?

(Sophira, however, offered no response. Gasping for air, she started to thrash about in the water desperately.)

SOPHIRA: When I said I could swim... I lied!

(Without a second thought, Candy quickly swam over to her only for Sophira to start treading water; giggling as she did so.)

SOPHIRA: Kidding!

CANDY: Hey!!! That's mean!

(Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: Not really. I just wanted you to come over here so I could hug you!

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: Wow. You're cheeky, you are.

(They then shared a friendly hug to signify what they hoped would be the end of their ordeal.)

(Two hours later. By the time Candy and Sophira had managed to complete the arduous task of fishing all their belonging back out of the lake again, the sun had started to sink over the horizon. And so, exhausted from their exertions, not to mention soaked to the skin, they'd opted to set up camp for the night. It had been an easy decision to make; continuing on at night in drenched clothes, after all, would have been foolhardy.

This was Candy's time to shine. Having gathered firewood and kindling, she'd used her survival knowledge to pick the perfect lakeside clearing to spend the night in. She'd then taught Sophira how to light a fire. She'd chosen an area twenty metres from the lakeside, next to a fallen tree. The tree would be perfect for laying out their clothes and allowing them to dry in the heat of the flames. Sophira was most impressed with her knowhow.

Once everything was set up, Candy stripped naked, laid out her clothes then laid herself down on her stomach, in front of the fire. Sophira opted to sit on the fallen log, next to her clothes. Finally they were able to rest and enjoy the serenity of their surroundings. Despite the softness of the breeze and the warming glow of the fire, however, Sophira was a little unnerved. She'd never slept outdoors before and had no idea what to expect. In stark contrast, Candy stared merrily into the flames. She felt at peace and sighed happily to herself. Wishing to share her happiness with her friend, she then glanced up at Sophira and smiled. Seeing her sitting there, cross-legged on the fallen tree, grimacing uncomfortably, she bit her lip then raised an inquisitive eyebrow.)

CANDY: Are you okay?

SOPHIRA: Yeah...

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: Liar!

(Sophira whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: Is it safe out here at night? I mean, what if an ostrich attacks us in our sleep?

(Candy couldn't help but giggle.)

CANDY: An ostrich?

SOPHIRA: But what if?

(Candy contorted slightly then gestured for Sophira to lay next to her. Nervously, she climbed to her feet then obliged. As soon as Sophira was at her side, Candy offered her a kind smile.)

CANDY: Relax, babes. Animals are scared of fire; they won't even come near!

(Sophira nervously started to reply only to be cut off before she could even begin.)

CANDY: Yes, that includes ostriches!

(Comforted slightly, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Well... okay!

(They shared a smile.)

SOPHIRA: Umm... are our clothes dry yet, do you think?

CANDY: They'll be a few hours yet, Soph; so we might as well get some sleep!

(Not sure if she'd be *able* to sleep, Sophira nodded unconvincingly. Noticing this, Candy offered her a reassuring glance.)

CANDY: Hey, it's okay! We didn't find Arterian but we'll keep looking. Try not to worry if you can help it!

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: But I *can't* help it. I just hope Lethernia hasn't been attacked yet.

CANDY: Hey, there's no point in worrying about things you can't control, okay? Come tomorrow, we'll resume looking and hopefully everything will work out fine.

It's all we *can* do, Soph.

(Candy followed her words with a reassuring pat on Sophira's shoulder. Sophira just looked her dead in the eye then gave a stifled laugh.)

SOPHIRA: How do you do it, Candy?

CANDY: How do I do what?

SOPHIRA: You know how to make me feel better every time. You're like an angel or something. I don't know what I'd *do* without you! I'm so lucky I chose to hide in your bedroom!

CANDY: I...

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

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Okay. Now let's get some sleep!

SOPHIRA: Sure.

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

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

CANDY: That's better. Night, Soph!

(Instantly experiencing a strange mix of excitement and fear, Sophira muttered a quiet "goodnight" then stared ahead of herself; wide-eyed. Something about their naked skin touching felt so wrong and yet so heavenly.

And so began their first night in the wilderness. The simple huntress and the serving girl thrown together by over-confidence and gross misfortune would for the first time go without the comforts of a warm bed under a secure shelter. This was to be their first night as true wild girls of the forest.

Once Candy had drifted off to sleep, Sophira opted to watch her for a while. She was in awe of her beautiful face. For a good hour or more she allowed herself to enjoy the fuzzy sensations she was experiencing then she too fell asleep with a smile on her face.)

(Chapter Three – Exile.)

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

At the campsite, aside the vast lake where Candy and Sophira had spent the night, the air was particularly moist and murky. In a constant stream, the mist rolled off the lake, creating a haze around the smouldering remnants of their camp fire.

Having slept reasonably well, Candy had woken up feeling sharp and alive; lifted by the glory of nature all around her. The same could not be said of Sophira. Excited by the sensation of Candy's naked skin touching hers, sleeping had been sporadic at best. The fact she was also afraid of her surroundings, didn't help. As such she'd awoken blurry-eyed and barely with it.

Unable to make sense of her feelings towards Candy, and stressed about the need to save her home town, Sophira climbed from where she'd slept then sat herself down upon the fallen tree where she'd left her clothes. She then proceeded to get dressed, anxiously. Quick to notice how unsettled her friend was, Candy climbed to her feet then paced over to her. Moments later, she placed herself down next to her then joined her in getting dressed again.)

CANDY: Cheer up, Soph! What's wrong?

SOPHIRA: I'm fine.

CANDY: Right...

(The two of them then continued to dress in silence. As they did so, Candy repeatedly glanced in Sophira's direction. During that time, she must have sighed a hundred times. Not about to let her new friend suffer in silence, as soon as she'd finished dressing, Candy turned to face her.)

CANDY: You're not fine at all, are you? What's wrong, babes?

(Sophira looked to her for a moment then whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: Everything. I'm scared and I'm out of my depth here, Candy. Even my hair's against me! It's all tangled and horrible! Just... everything.

(Not knowing quite how to respond to that statement, Candy grimaced.)

CANDY: I see...

(Feeling it was best to mention her confusing, erotic feelings for Candy, Sophira then hung her head. Not about to leave her friend feeling miserable like this, Candy mused for a moment then suddenly looked enlightened.)

CANDY: Hold on!

(As Sophira watched on enquiringly, Candy raced to her pack and grabbed her hairbrush before racing back again.)

SOPHIRA: What are you doing?

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

CANDY: Brushing my teeth!

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

CANDY: Now keep still while I sort your hair out!

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

SOPHIRA: Your... hands feel nice!

CANDY: Aw, thanks, sweetie.

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

SOPHIRA: Can I brush yours after?

CANDY: Of course!

SOPHIRA: Cool!

(Too nervous to think of anything else, she then proceeded to clam up and allow herself to enjoy Candy's touch. Candy herself had no idea of the emotions she was stirring up in her friend. Back in Chiswell Point when she was younger, she and her friends brushed each others hair all the time. To her it was no big deal but to Sophira it was something wonderful. So wonderful, in fact, she was devastated when Candy announced she'd finished. She needn't have worried, however. Now it was her turn to brush Candy's hair. It rapidly became her new favourite thing. As she sat there and caressed her dear friend's scalp, she forgot all about the mission and the terrible fate awaiting her people; such was depth of her feelings. Gently stroking Candy's soft hair as she brushed it, she started to become aroused by the sensuousness of it all. Slowly becoming lost in the moment, she exhaled romantically as her fingers gently ran down the back of Candy's head, following the hairbrush. The part she was brushing was long since finished, but she was enjoying it too much to stop.

Unfortunately for her, Candy knew. Satisfied that Sophira had done a decent job, Candy stood up then turned to face her. Stunned by her sudden movement, Sophira broke out of her trance and gaped.)

SOPHIRA: What...

(Candy smiled as she felt her hair.)

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

(Sophira gave her an inquisitive glance then upped and headed to the edge of the river to check her reflection in the water. Standing just behind her, Candy beamed arrogantly.)

CANDY: Well? What do you think?

(As Sophira peered into the water, a baffled expression crossed her brow. In the surface of the lake, she saw the reflection of a girl she didn't even recognise staring back at her. Scrutinising her closely, she then noticed the girl looked just like her except for one small detail. The girl in the reflection looked radiant and alive. This was when it dawned on her. She was happy. Her woes had vanished; defeat by Candy's affectionate touch. In this moment, she realised she was in love with her. Her new hairstyle was co-incidental. As much as she loved it, the revelation she'd just made had caused her heart to sore. It was a moment that would change everything. She knew this love would be forbidden but she didn't care. She wanted to shout it out and tell the world. Wearing a beautiful smile that was lit up by the glow in her effulgent eyes, she spun around to Candy then made a proclamation in a joyous voice.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! I love you!

(Candy beamed.)

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

(Sophira rushed up to her excitedly.)

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

(With a heart full of love, she gazed into Candy's eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Candy...

(Sensing a movement, she then peered over Candy's shoulders.)

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

(She then proceeded to back away. As she did so, Candy slowly turned around to see a snarling black cat skulking its way towards them with drool hanging from its hungry mouth.)

CANDY: Umm... nice kitty!

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

CANDY: Where did I leave my sword?

(She glanced to the fireside and spotted her sword protruding from her bag.)

CANDY: Aw, crap!

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

(Candy replied nervously.)

CANDY: They are!

SOPHIRA: Well someone forgot to tell this one!

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

SOPHIRA: Oh!

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

SOPHIRA: Now what?

CANDY: I don't know!

(Almost as if it was encouraged by their fear, the giant feline suddenly roared then charged towards them. Screaming out in terror, Sophira instinctively dived into the river. Candy on the other hand, decided to make a dash for it, in the hope she could retrieve her sword. It was an ambitious move but one she felt she had no choice but to make. Outpacing a wildcat wasn't going to be easy. Mercifully, its first lunge fell short of taking her down. It did, however, manage to rip into the flesh on her upper arm. Bloodied and in a great deal of pain, she screamed in agony, but to her credit, she managed to keep going. Self preservation had taken over. All she could think about in this moment was completing her dash for the backpack. She knew she had to reach her sword before the panther reached *her*. Looking on from the river, Sophira was severely distressed.)

SOPHIRA: Careful, Candy!!!

(Treating Sophira's ridiculous reminder with the contempt it deserved, Candy raced for her pack with a menacing intent in her determined eyes. With blood pouring from her arm, she sprinted towards it with gritted teeth. Unfortunately for her, while *she* was doing that, the panther was charging at her with *pointed* teeth. The race was on. Sophira could barely watch. She wanted desperately to do something but was utterly frozen by fear.)

SOPHIRA: Oh god. Come on, Candy; please!

(As she raced for her pack, Candy grimaced determinedly. Not looking back even for a moment, she then reached out for the protruding handle of her sword. At the very same time, sensing an easy kill, the panther charged into a wild lunge at her back. Well aware that the beast was close, Candy bent to grab her sword then spun around towards the panther. Alas, she was too slow. Before she could even raise the blade, she was flattened by its lunge. With the scream, she tumbled to the ground, dropping the sword behind her as she did so. She was then slapped unconscious by the flailing claw of the beast across her face. Horrified at what she was seeing Sophira, screamed out in desperation, then charged from the river. She had no idea what she going to do; she just knew that she had to help her stricken friend *somehow*. It didn't take her long to figure out, however, that she was already too late. She was too far away to do

anything and the snarling beast was about to gauge at Candy's neck and drain the life from her in one foul, bloody gnashing of its jaws. Mortified, tears welled in her eyes as she raced towards her with arms outstretched. She then watched on helplessly as the beast thrust its head down towards Candy's neck.)

SOPHIRA: No!!!

(Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a torch-wielding man leapt at the panther, clubbing it with his fiery baton. Terrified to its very core, the panther leapt from Candy then fled towards the woods. There was no defiant stand or attempt to fight; the panther simply fled in terror. Not about to let it get away so easily, however, the stranger gave chase with his burning torch; cursing furiously. Overjoyed by the reprieve, Sophira zoomed to Candy's side then cured her with her healing hands. Moments later, as the claw marks on her face vanished, she sat up with a start.)

CANDY: Huh? Beast! Where's...

(Sophira drew a deep sigh of relief then sat back to catch her breath.)

SOPHIRA: Thank heavens you're okay.

CANDY: I... panther... and... Sophira, what the hell happened? I...

(Before she could quite finish her sentence, however, the torch wielding man appeared at their side; standing over them with his hands on his hips. Clearly rather full of himself, he spoke in a deep, heroic tone.)

OSRIC: Interesting! What's a couple of fine looking fillies like you doing in a place like this?

(Candy and Sophira silently glanced up at the dashing, yet smug young man before them. They both wanted to say something but were a little in awe of his presence. As the shock wore off slightly, however, Sophira managed to offer him a shy smile before glancing away again. Candy, on the other hand, reverted to form. Rather taken with the dashing gentlemen, she gave him a warm smile and fluttered her eyelashes at him. Liking what he saw, he raised an interested eyebrow then nodded knowingly.)

OSRIC: Well, hello there, gorgeous.

(A short while later, Candy and Sophira sat themselves down on the fallen log to eat. Naturally, Osric was invited to join them. He'd saved Candy's life, after all, so the very *least* they felt they could do was let him join them for breakfast. Only too happy to accept their offer, Osric promptly sat himself in between them then beamed with devious delight. This man was extremely fond of the fairer sex, so sitting close to both of them was the perfect setup as far as he was concerned. He was now in the perfect place to get to know these two beauties better. Anxious to do so as soon as possible, he took one bite of his ostrich meat then re-iterated the question he'd asked them earlier.)

OSRIC: So? Come on. Tell me. What on earth *are* two fine looking fillies like you doing in these woods at night? This place can be extremely dangerous.

(Sophira said nothing. Still in awe of this heroic stranger, she just blushed then glanced away. Somewhat attracted to the handsome stranger, on other hand, Candy went into flirtation mode; flicking her hair and fiddling with her earrings. She wasn't about to speak yet, however, as her mouth had a tendency to make a terrible first impression. And so she fluttered her eyelashes, blushed, pouted and performed every trick in the book to make herself look cute instead. Only when she was satisfied he'd noticed her would she risk allowing her words to make a fool of her.)

OSRIC: Seriously. You could have been killed just now. These woods are no place for young ladies! Especially pretty ones like yourselves.

(Eager to justify their presence in the woods, Sophira swiftly glanced up in readiness to speak out. Before a single word could pass her lips, however, she spotted Candy making dough-eyes at the young man. At once, her brow furrowed deeply. She didn't like it one bit. Consequently, she decided in that very moment that she didn't like *him* either. As a result, everything about him very quickly became a negative. His confidence became arrogance and his friendly smile became an annoying smirk. And his words were abhorrent. Allowing her bitterness to overcome her, she chose to believe his question was belittling. As he if was suggesting they were weak. Thinking it over in her head, a scowl rapidly formed on her forehead. Candy, however, took his words as concern and offered him her warmest smile.)

CANDY: We're on a mission!

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

OSRIC: A mission, huh?

(Watching on disapprovingly, Sophira could only shake her head disdainfully. As much as she didn't like this man, she was too polite to say anything.)

OSRIC: So, what *is* this mission, cuteness?

(Sensing Sophira's coldness to one side of him, Osric then swivelled himself slightly more in Candy's direction to where the heat was coming from. He'd decided as soon as he saw them that he was going to try to sleep with them. Sophira's disdain had merely served to make his mind up about which one he'd hit on first. He'd made an excellent start. Candy lived for male attention and it showed. Keen to make the most of the attention she was receiving, she flicked back her hair then looked Osric in the eye.)

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

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

SOPHIRA: A *secret* mission!

(Unfortunately for Sophira, however, Candy was fully focussed on Osric and didn't hear a word she said. She might as well have declared that her father was a pigeon for all the good it did. Candy wasn't paying any attention to her whatsoever. She was lost in Osric's eyes. Sophira could have poked herself in the eye with a stick at this point and Candy wouldn't even have noticed. Osric, on the other hand, was well aware of Sophira's displeasure, but gleefully ignored it.)

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

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

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

(Entirely sucked in by his flirting, Candy's heart fluttered then she leaned towards him with a loving smile on her face. Knowing that stealing a kiss was now a formality, Osric allowed himself a satisfied smile then lowered his lips towards hers. Closing her eyes firmly, Candy puckered up then waited for her moment to arrive. Feeling a sense of delight at the speed of his success, Osric glowed inside. This moment confirmed what he always suspected; he really was a gift from god to the women of this planet. A sucker for romance, Candy was lost, almost floating as she sensed the imminent coming together of their lips. Much to her bewilderment, however, rather than kissing her, Osric inexplicably cried out in distress.)

OSRIC: Hey!!!

(Candy's eyes instantly flicked open, just in time to see Osrice fall back off the log and land flat on his back with his feet in the air. Not knowing what in the world had happened she then glanced up to where Sophira was standing over them with a tortured expression on her face.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry, it was an accident!

(Glaring up at her, Osrice frowned bitterly.)

OSRIC: You pushed me!!!

(Experiencing a strange mixture of shame in her actions but justification at the outcome, Sophira looked at her feet and mumbled.)

SOPHIRA: I said I was sorry!

(Candy glanced between them with a lost look on her face.)

CANDY: What the hell happened there?

(Struggling to pull himself back up, Osrice snarled.)

OSRIC: She pushed me off the log!

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

SOPHIRA: I didn't! All I did was accidentally nudge you when I stood up!

OSRIC: Nudged me? With both hands???

(Sophira pouted sorrowfully.)

SOPHIRA: I wouldn't!

(Candy wagged her finger at Osrice.)

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

(Sophira forced a smile then glanced away. Normally she hated lying, but right now she didn't care. Osrice hadn't kissed Candy and that was *all* she cared about. If she had to lie to justify making it happen then so be it. Satisfied with her thoughts on the matter, she nodded then sat down and glanced away innocently. Osrice, for his part, knew that arguing with Candy would seriously damage his route into her underwear and conceded begrudgingly. Wearing a forced smile, he pulled himself back onto the log then sighed.)

OSRIC: I apologise; accidents happen!

(It killed him to say it but he knew he had to remain focussed on his mission. That mission being to have sex with Candy as soon as possible. As such, he swiftly put the lost opportunity in the past then started over.)

OSRIC: So... tell me about yourselves, ladies!

(Candy's face lit up. This was her chance to give him a long and detailed account of her life story; sprinkled with the odd white lie to make herself appear a thousand times cooler than she was. Before she could even begin, however, Sophira cut over her.)

SOPHIRA: You know about our mission already, so let's talk about *you* instead.

What are *you* doing out here; lurking about and spying on people?

(Osrice furrowed his brow.)

OSRIC: I wasn't spying!

SOPHIRA: What *were* you doing then?

(With a sigh, Osrice sat back then shook his head.)

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

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

CANDY: Yes, we do!

SOPHIRA: Very much so!

(Osric could only whimper. These two girls weren't just making small talk; they really *did* want to hear about his life. At once, trepidation flooded his senses and he sat bolt upright. He had no idea what to tell them. There was no way he could tell them anything about his past. It had been chequered to say the least. And so, he looked about himself desperately as he tried to think of an excuse to change the subject. He would rather they were all attacked by another panther than be the centre of attention in *this* conversation. Unfortunately, no excuse came to him. All he could do was shrug then look away.)

OSRIC: Um... there's... like... nothing to tell, really!

(Set on edge by his nervous refusal to share, Candy snapped out of her lusty trance and raised a distrusting eyebrow. Something about his demeanour didn't sit right. She wasn't the only one giving him a distrusting glance either. Sat on the other side of him, Sophira matched Candy's disdain. She was, however, revelling in his obvious discomfort. Jealously once again turning even the whitest soul black. Knowing he couldn't leave things like this, Osric winced. He'd lose any chance he had of achieving his goal if he didn't tell them at least half the truth and he knew it.)

OSRIC: Aw, crap!

CANDY: What? What is it?

(Worried she wouldn't like what she heard, Candy pulled back from him and furrowed her brow. Sophira just sat back and folded her arms, struggling to hide her gleeful smile. Resigned to his fate, Osric looked from Sophira to Candy then shook his head.)

OSRIC: Fine...

(He sighed.)

OSRIC: If you must know, I wasn't spying on you. I just happened to be passing. I live out here in the woods now, because... I was thrown out of my village!

CANDY: Thrown out?

SOPHIRA: What for?

(Sighing deeper, Osric continued.)

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

(He slapped his forehead; not knowing whether the truth would condemn him or save his mission. If Sophira had her way, however, it'd most definitely condemn him.)

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

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

(Not sure whether she *wanted* to hear it or not, Candy folded her arms and implored him to continue with her eyes. With little choice but to do so, Osric ruffled his neck then did just that.)

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

(Candy said nothing; opting to hear him out. To give him a fair crack of the whip. Sophira, on the other hand, listened attentively for something incriminating to pounce on.)

OSRIC: I'm from a humble forest village where people are *very* reserved, you see? Ridiculously reserved, actually. A lot of them don't believe in casual sex. Well it turns out that that girl was one of them. She took our quickie to mean a proposal of marriage.

SOPHIRA: Quickie?

CANDY: They had sex!

SOPHIRA: Oh!

OSRIC: Yeah... she went ballistic and told everyone I *used* her. And they *believed* her. Of course they did; she was the head-elder's granddaughter. Anyway, to cut a long story short, because of that, he kicked me out of the village.

(Sophira scoffed in disgust.)

SOPHIRA: Let me get this straight; you slept with this girl then refused to stand by her? Stole her innocence and then cast her aside??? You're evil!

OSRIC: Hardly. I thought *she* wanted a one night stand as well!

(Convinced that Candy would also be suitably disgusted; Sophira folded her arms in disgust and awaited her opinion excitedly.)

CANDY: So she had sex with you in order to trap you into an unwanted marriage? Then used her status as the elder's granddaughter to punish you when you refused??? What a bitch!

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

OSRIC: Yes! That's exactly it! She trapped me and when I refused to play along, her grandfather threw me out of the village! That's exactly what happened and no mistake! Yup, spot on.

(Barely able to hide his glee, he looked to Candy then pouted.)

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

(He then pretended to wipe a tear, evoking a pitying glance from Candy.)

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

(Sophira could only watch on agape. It seemed pretty obvious from Candy's reaction, that whatever this guy said would be given the benefit of the doubt. In that moment, she felt a deep sense of anger rising up inside. This stranger was coming between her and Candy and she couldn't bear it. Letting her emotions get the better of her, she clenched her fists then snarled bitterly. Allowing those emotions to flood out, she then leapt to her feet and pushed Osric backwards off the log again. Candy was shocked to her very core.)

CANDY: Sophira???

(Watching as Osric landed with a thud, Sophira froze in horror at her actions then placed startled hands on her glowing red cheeks. Doing such a horrible thing just wasn't like her and she couldn't understand what had come over her.)

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

(Flustered to say the least, she then ran towards the river just to get away from the scene of her undignified act. Set on edge by her normally peaceful friend's behaviour, Candy raced after her. Watching them go, Osric grinned to himself. By simply neglecting to mention the fact he'd promised to marry the elder's granddaughter *before* getting her into bed, he'd stumbled across the perfect scenario. Now Candy had sympathy for him and would be a certainty to fulfil his desires. To add to his glee, he suspected her jealous friend could well do anything to split them up, including sleeping with him. As far as he could see, it was all shaping up perfectly.

As he sat there with a self-satisfied grin on his face, Candy slowly stepped up to where Sophira was crying into her hands. Unsure quite what to say to her, she spoke softly to the back of her head.)

CANDY: Soph? You okay?

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

SOPHIRA: Yeah... I just...

(She hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry about that, Candy. I just don't trust that guy, that's all. In fact, I don't like him one bit!

(Candy sighed inwardly.)

CANDY: You don't *like* him? You don't even *know* him yet! And I thought you'd be *the last* person to judge someone like that.

SOPHIRA: Yeah...

(Wanting desperately to make peace, Candy smiled then attempted to brush the animosity to one side.)

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

(Sophira turned to face her.)

SOPHIRA: What?

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

(Suddenly remembering her mission, Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, it does!

(She shook her head.)

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

CANDY: Don't worry, babe. We all have our dark moments.

SOPHIRA: I suppose.

CANDY: No, we really do. And when they happen, we just have to learn to power through.

SOPHIRA: Yeah... we do, don't we? Starting now! Come on.

(With that, she led Candy back over to where Osric was dusting himself down having been cast from the log twice by an angry Sophira. With a purpose in her stride, she marched straight up to him then spoke in no uncertain tone.)

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

(Osric stepped back defensively.)

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

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

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

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

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

(He smiled at Candy.)

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

(In that moment, a love struck expression returned to Candy's face. Satisfied that it could only mean his plan was back on track, Osric smiled then turned away. It was a smile that soon turned into a grimace, however. He really didn't want them to go to his village, just in case one of the locals revealed the *real* reason he was sent away.)

OSRIC: Hmm...

CANDY: Hmm? What's that supposed to mean?

OSRIC: I...

(A thoughtful expression then crossed his brow. If they went back to his village, someone was bound to call him out. That was a given. As long as they didn't speak to him in front of Candy and Sophira, however, he'd be fine. They'd never discover the damaging truth about him. All was not lost after all. His version of events would still stand and Candy would remain putty in his hands.)

OSRIC: Nothing! To the village it is!

(He then picked up his pack and gestured to the forest.)

OSRIC: Shall we?

(As if he'd just tried to light a fire with a banana, Candy and Sophira both scoffed at him dismissively then sat down; leaving him entirely bemused. Having been exiled for six months in the forest, Osric had briefly forgotten that women physically can't just up and leave. They need to be satisfied they look their best first. And so, as men so often end up doing, he found himself standing there for another five minutes while they set about fixing their makeup and double checking that their hair was perfect. To Osric, that five minutes was the longest eight hours of his life.)

(A short while later, when Candy and Sophira signalled their readiness to head off, Osric nodded sternly then strutted away into the forest, encouraging them to follow. Needing no second invitation, Candy and Sophira hurried after him. Their trek had resumed.

With Osric leading the way, the pace was much quicker than the girls were used to. Candy found it quite the refreshing change. For Osric, however, there was nothing refreshing about this walk whatsoever. Courtesy of the gooseberry factor, it was extremely frustrating. Not about to allow Osric the opportunity to get personal with Candy along the way, Sophira had positioned herself firmly in between them. It was the perfect place to be in order to deflect the conversation away from anything personal or romantic. Well aware of what she was doing, Osric furrowed his brow. *He* was meant to be the scheming one and her interference was maddening. Every time he tried to strike up a personal chat with Candy, Sophira would tell him how amazing Candy is. This served to feed Candy's ego and bolster her friendship with her while keeping Osric well and truly at bay. It was grinding his last nerve.

Delighted by her success in foiling Osric at every turn, as they headed through the thick woodland, Sophira smirked then decided it was time to move on to the second part of her devious plan. Wearing a friendly smile, she glanced towards Osric then spoke up in a sympathetic tone.)

SOPHIRA: I bet you miss home, Osric.

(Fed up to the back teeth with this blonde nuisance, Osric gave her a stern glance.)

OSRIC: You what?

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

(Osric gave her a distrusting glance.)

OSRIC: In what way?

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

OSRIC: I suppose.

(Thoroughly disheartened, he glanced around the obstacle known as Sophira, towards Candy, then sighed inwardly.)

OSRIC: Well, of course I do. It's no fun living in the woods on your own.

(Frustrated that such a slender young lady could make such an effective barrier between himself and his goal, he threw his hands in the air then decided to engage her in conversation.)

OSRIC: I miss my family and friends mostly.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Well... who knows? Maybe Candy and I can help you get accepted there again.

(Osric gave her sideways glance.)

OSRIC: What? How?

(Genuinely interested, he then leant towards her to listen to what she had to say on the matter.)

OSRIC: How would you go about that?

CANDY: That's what I'm wondering. How, Soph?

SOPHIRA: I don't know.

OSRIC: Right...

SOPHIRA: Let's think about it for a bit and see what we come up with.

CANDY: Hmm... good idea.

OSRIC: Yeah...

(Osric rolled his eyes then allowed himself a disappointed sigh. He'd genuinely thought she'd come up with a plan. He'd love nothing *more* than to be accepted to the village again. He hated it in the wilderness. Sometimes he thought a kinder punishment would have been death. By banishing him they'd taken his life away and yet he continued to exist with nothing to live *for*. Being accepted back would be a dream come true. Sophira felt the same way, but for a very different reason. She'd love to get him accepted to the village again just to get rid of him. This was her sole reason for mentioning it. It was what she considered her devious plan. It was in both their interests for him to be reinstated as a citizen, so she'd help in any way she could. And so, they paced onwards, thinking about little else. Rather than thinking of anything practical, however, they very soon started to fantasise about their *ideal* eventuality instead.

In Osric's ideal reality, he'd get to sleep with *both* of these young beauties before being accepted back. He'd then kick them back into the wilderness again once he'd had his fun. Ideally for Sophira, Osric would fall down a well and never be seen again. Simply returning him in the village then leaving without him would also work. In Candy's fantasy, however, Osric would take her to his quaint cottage in the village then proceed to love her for evermore. And that's as far as her thoughts on the matter went. She never once contemplated how to get him reinstated. She'd always been the same; once she had a romantic scenario into her head, she was pretty much useless for anything else.

In this moment, the three travelling companions had three very different visions, but one very big thing in common. Getting Osric reinstated to his village was a must. For all his thoughts on the matter, however, Osric couldn't see how it'd ever be possible. Candy wasn't even trying to. She was lost in her filthy fantasy. Sophira, however, had an idea formulating. Not sure whether it was worth airing without further consideration, she bit her lip then mused out loud.)

SOPHIRA: Maybe...

(Osric glanced at her urgently.)

OSRIC: Maybe? You've thought of something?

SOPHIRA: What? Oh... nothing brilliant, no.

OSRIC: I'll be judge of that.

SOPHIRA: But...

OSRIC: Oh, come on. We've been walking in silence for miles and *I've* come up with nothing. If you have something, just say it. No matter how lame.

(Sophira grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: Well... I suppose... Candy and I could always put in a good word for you.

(Osric gave her a condescending glance.)

OSRIC: What?

SOPHIRA: You know... we could say you've helped us no end; and that we know you've changed. Learned your lesson or something.

(Osric shook his head.)

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

CANDY: Pineapple face?

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

(He sighed.)

OSRIC: The elder's really strict. He won't go back on his word *that* easily. He's far too proud to admit he was wrong about me. The guy's a complete twat.

(Candy chuckled to herself.)

CANDY: I hope you didn't *tell* him that. Referring to him as a *complete twat* might not be the best course of action if you ever want to be reinstated.

SOPHIRA: She's right. You have to respect the elders, even if they *are* a bunch of morons.

(Tickled by the contradictory nature of Sophira's comment, Candy laughed out loud.)

SOPHIRA: I'm serious, Candy. The elders in Lethernia are out of touch and if you ask me, slightly deranged but they're still elders and you have to revere them for that.

(Candy was unimpressed.)

CANDY: What for? Being old? Like giving them Kudos for not dying yet?

SOPHIRA: No, not at all.

(Sensing a chance to speak to Candy finally, Osric swiftly cut in.)

OSRIC: They're supposed to be the wisest, not just the oldest. Apparently it's a position gained from wisdom, not just from age.

(Giving Osric a brief sneer before she did so, Sophira elaborated.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah, old people are just old people. Only old people with *wisdom and knowledge* get to be elders because they've gained so much know-how over the years.

(Bored by the subject, Candy rolled her eyes.)

CANDY: Right... anyway... if putting in a good word won't help, how are we going to get this wise old git to let him back in?

(A prolonged, clueless silence ensued. Desperate to come up with a plan, they ambled onwards, deep in thought. The silence was broken now and again with the odd pointless observation, but nothing in the way of an idea ever developed. The issue for Sophira and Osric was that an elder's word is often final. Backing down is something they've rarely been known to do. Even when an elder knows he's in the wrong, he'll very often stick to his guns, just to save face. Overcoming such alarming levels of stubbornness and nonobjectivity would be extremely difficult. They barely even knew where to start. Candy, on the other hand, had an entirely different issue. She wasn't entirely sure about the role of an elder. As such, she was reluctant to voice any kind of suggestion in case she looked silly in front of Osric. These, however, were not the only stumbling blocks. The three of them were also horribly distracted.

Osric was gravely concerned that, no matter *how* great a plan they came up with, the truth about how he got exiled from the village in the first place, might well ruin everything. Should the girls find out, they could well turn against him. They'd take the elder's granddaughter's side and his chances of *ever* being reinstated would be

damaged irrevocably. Just thinking about it made him anxious. Sophira, for her part, couldn't concentrate fully on the matter in hand for two reasons. One; trying to keep Osric and Candy apart. Focussing on coming up with ideas while also maintaining her status as queen of the gooseberries was extremely difficult. And two; she couldn't help fantasising that she'd stroll into the village and find Arterian straight away. Such an outcome would bring the curtain down on their journey; quite possibly saving her people in the process. And so, a lot of barely-focussed thinking transpired, but nothing that even resembled a plan was forthcoming.)

(Much to the Candy and Sophira's delight, following several hours of rambling through the thick forest in silence, the spire of the village chapel finally came into view. Upon sighting it, their faces lit up. It had been an extremely long trip and they were exhausted. Their relief was palpable. They'd been walking for so long, there were only a few hours of daylight left. Having feared they'd still be wandering about after dark, they could barely hide their glee. It was at this point, however, that Osric became uneasy and started to sweat. He was a hate figure in the village and without a plan to change the elder's mind, he'd never be allowed back in there. Worse still, should the sentries that guard the village spot him, they might well come out and give him a beating. Offending the village elder, after all, was a crime that offended everyone. As such, he started to slow down and scratch himself nervously. Sophira, on the other hand, picked up the pace. Excited by the thought that Arterian could well dwell inside the village, she was hopeful that their day's efforts would bear a glorious outcome. Oblivious to Sophira's excitement and Osric's fear, Candy quickly found herself being separated from them both. Osric had slowed behind her and Sophira had paced off ahead. More than a little miffed about being abandoned like this, she furrowed her brow then came to a standstill.)

CANDY: Hey!

(Osric instantly came to a halt and glanced towards her anxiously. Sophira, however, continued on, glancing back over her shoulder as she did so.)

SOPHIRA: What? What are you waiting for?

CANDY: Just come back here!

(Far from happy about going backwards, Sophira sighed then reluctantly paced back over to her.)

SOPHIRA: What's wrong?

CANDY: You're running off ahead and he's dropping back. What gives? Are we stopping or going in the village? What are we doing?

SOPHIRA: We're gonna go in the village and ask about Arterian; that *is* our mission after all.

OSRIC: But, I can't. If I set foot in there they'll arrest me and flog me.

(Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Wait here then!

(Candy frowned.)

CANDY: Sophira, we said we'd help him get reinstated into the village!

(Not wanting to let Candy down, especially with Osric likely to try to "comfort" her if she did, Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: Right... yeah... we did. So, what's the plan then?

(In perfect unison, Candy and Sophira turned to face Osric enquiringly.)

OSRIC: Huh?

(He furrowed his brow.)

OSRIC: I don't know, do I?

(He sighed.)

OSRIC: I tried to think of something but I drew a blank. All I know *is*, strolling in there, hoping to talk to them, isn't going to work. My word has no value in there anymore. I'm a total zero as far as they're concerned.

CANDY: A zero?

OSRIC: A complete nobody!

(Candy mused to herself.)

CANDY: Then we need to make you look a hero instead, me thinks.

OSRIC: Easier said than done, babe!

(Seeing Candy go all dough-eyed again at being called *babe*, Sophira rolled her eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Candy? Do you have a plan or something?

(Candy looked to her through glazed eyes.)

CANDY: What?

SOPHIRA: You paused for thought then said "me thinks". It sounded like you've thought of something.

CANDY: Huh? Oh... yeah, right. I *kind of* did.

(She shrugged.)

CANDY: Why don't we pretend Osric rescued us or something. We could pretend he's taking us to the village for our own safety after he saved us from a wild creature.

(Osric raised an impressed eyebrow.)

OSRIC: That's not bad, actually. I mean, I kind of did that anyway, didn't I?

CANDY: That's why I said it.

OSRIC: I see.

(He bit his lip.)

OSRIC: But would they believe it? They think I'm a good for nothing sleazebag with no other thought than bedding women. They'd never believe I'd heroically *save* anybody.

(An enlightened expression then crossed his brow.)

OSRIC: Unless...

(With that, he ripped a rope from his backpack and beamed.)

OSRIC: If they see it then they'll *have* to believe it! Come here, you two.

(At once, the two young ladies in his company paced backwards nervously.)

CANDY: Um... why do you need...

OSRIC: Hey, don't shy away; this is just a prop.

SOPHIRA: For what?

CANDY: If it's something kinky, you can... well... we can discuss it first.

OSRIC: It's not kinky.

(He beamed.)

OSRIC: Though I must say, I like the way your mind works.

SOPHIRA: Just explain yourself!

OSRIC: Oh. Yeah. Right. I was thinking. I could tie you both to a tree then make a commotion. And when people come rushing out to see what the noise is all about, they'll find me untying you. All you have to do then is thank me for saving you and I'll instantly become a hero. What do you reckon?

(In that very moment, the word 'silence' took on an all new meaning. As did the word 'inanimate'. Like a pair of extremely unimpressed statues, Candy and Sophira simply stared straight though him.)

OSRIC: Um...

(As if they were afraid he'd completely lost his marbles, the girls then proceeded to back away; smiling politely as if they were retreating from a wild bear. Somewhat taken aback by their lack of enthusiasm, Osric furrowed his brow.)

OSRIC: You said you'd help!

(Feeling it was only polite to say something, Candy offered him half a smile.)

CANDY: We'll help. Just not like that!

OSRIC: But it'll only take a minute, and once it's done, we'll be in there.

(Candy cringed. She didn't want to let him down but she didn't want to have any part in his plan either.)

CANDY: Um...

OSRIC: Babe... Candy... beautiful, Candy...

(He offered her his outstretched hand and looked her dead in the eye.)

OSRIC: Please? For me?

(Staring back into his imploring eyes Candy could only exhale adoringly. Love struck and going weak at the knees, she then staggered towards the nearest tree without question or hesitation. Moments later, she propped herself up against it then shrugged at her dumbfounded friend.)

CANDY: We kind of have to really, Soph. I mean, we did say we'd help!

(Desperate not to let Candy down and give Osric the chance to make a play for her sympathy, Sophira sighed in defeat.)

SOPHIRA: Oh... fine.

(She then stomped over to the tree and joined Sophira in leaning up against it.)

SOPHIRA: I love the way you said "we"! We kind of have to.

CANDY: We do! We'd said we'd help.

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but... oh, whatever.

(Delighted to see the girls willingly propping themselves up against the tree, Osric clenched his fists excitedly.)

OSRIC: Thanks, ladies; you fucking rule.

(He then hurried to wrap the rope around the tree before they could change their minds. Having wrapped in around twice, he then proceeded to tie it up; securing the girls to the trunk.)

OSRIC: You won't regret this!

SOPHIRA: We'd *better* not!

OSRIC: You won't.

(Satisfied he'd tied the perfect knot, he then stepped back and nodded.)

OSRIC: Okay... here's what we're gonna do. When I give the word, start screaming as loud as you can. Then, when someone comes out, I'll start to untie you. Just make sure you act all grateful and that, okay.

CANDY: Don't worry! We won't let you down.

(Osric stared into her eyes.)

OSRIC: Thanks, Candy. You're the best.

(A devious expression then crossed his brow. This was an opportunity far too good to pass up. It was the perfect time to steal a kiss from her. After all, if he couldn't steal a kiss while the obstacle known as Sophira was tied up and unable to interfere, when could he? Delighting in that thought, he gave Candy a knowing glance then slowly glided towards her with his lips at the ready. He truly believed that *nothing* could stop him now. Oh, how wrong he was. Horrified by what she was seeing, Sophira's eyes bulged and she immediately began to scream.)

SOPHIRA: Help!!!

(Somewhat startled, Osric jumped back.)

OSRIC: Not yet!

(While Candy continued to tremble excitedly, her lips puckered and ready for the kiss, Osric remonstrated with Sophira desperately.)

OSRIC: Not yet, damn it!

(With no kiss coming her way, Candy opened her eyes then frowned.)

CANDY: Hey, stop doing that! Stop teasing me, Osric; that's mean!

(Osric threw his hands out to the side imploringly.)

OSRIC: It's not *my* fault, Candy!

(Unfortunately for him, however, he'd overlooked one minor detail. Female logic dictates that it's *always* the man's fault, thus she proceeded to blame him entirely.)

CANDY: You're horrible! You still could have kissed me!!!

OSRIC: But...

(His words were then drowned out by Sophira's ever-loudening screams for help.)

OSRIC: Stop that!

(Paying him no heed, however, Sophira continued to scream. Each scream was even more piercing than the last. Like that wasn't hard enough to deal with, Candy was also chewing his ear off for not kissing her when he had the chance. As a result, it didn't long for him to reach the end of his tether. The screaming and the nagging were too much to bear. Going somewhat red in the face, he raised his fists then bellowed at them.)

OSRIC: Shut the fuck up, will you???

(It proved to be a costly error. Set on edge by his shouting, the girls instantly fell silent and stared at him with terrified eyes. As a result, the village sentries who'd come out to see what all the noise was about, got completely the wrong idea. To them, it looked very much like Osric had captured two innocent girls, tied them to a tree and had started to threaten them. Unsurprisingly, they promptly hurried over there and arrested him; ignoring his impassioned pleas of innocence.

As the majority of the sentries unceremoniously dragged Osric towards the village to stand trial for kidnapping, the two who remained proceeded to untie Candy and Sophira. They did so to a soundtrack of Candy pleading innocence on Osric's behalf. Her claims fell on deaf ears. As far as these were concerned, Osric was the lowest of the low, the biggest scumbag on the planet, and any claim to the contrary would go unheeded. Candy, however, was desperate to make them listen.)

CANDY: But that's not what happened, you tit!

(She was wasting her time. Having decided that she was just your "typical hysterical female", the sentries ignored her claims entirely; choosing instead to believe that the "poor thing was in shock". Sympathy for a captor, after all, was a well-known psychological side-effect after a kidnapping.)

(A few minutes later, having untied Candy and Sophira from the tree, the sentries led them into the forest village. Candy continued to make futile protests on Osric's behalf the entire time. The sentries continued to pay her no heed. All they were interested in doing was taking the girls to see the village sheriff. He would, after all, be handling Osric's trial. If they had anything incriminating to say about him, the sheriff would be delighted to use it against him. Any defence of him, on the other hand, would be ignored. Very much suspecting this would be the case, Candy was extremely miffed. Sophira, on the other hand, was struggling to keep the smile from her face. For her, everything had worked out exceptionally well. They were now in a

forest village where she might be able to find news of Arterian. And best of all, Osric had been carted off somewhere, and if her luck held out, might never be seen again. As far as she was concerned, it was the perfect outcome.

As they continued on through the village, Candy's protests started to wane. It had taken a while, but she was finally beginning to realise that she was wasting her breath. In the end, she fell silent and joined Sophira in surveying the sights before her. At once, her jaw dropped. The way the buildings blended with the nature of the forest was a joy to behold.)

CANDY: Holy crabsticks... it's... beautiful.

(Candy's assessment was not wrong. This village was breathtaking. A river gently flowed along the east side of the main thoroughfare and all the buildings opposite looked as if nature herself had put them there. Very often, woodland villages were a horrible blight on their environment, but that was not the case here. Every building was erected in perfect harmony with the woodland. The perfect blend of nature's glory and man's creativity.

Candy was especially taken in by the beauty of the place. She'd been fantasising about living happily ever after with Osric in a beautiful woodland utopia and this village perfectly matched her fantasy. Everything about it was aesthetically perfect. Her favourite feature being an elegant, wooden bridge over the river that led to what looked like a chapel and a rose garden. Gasping with excitement at the very sight of it, she couldn't help but picture herself in a wedding dress, crossing that very bridge with her new husband, Osric. Given the chance, she would have stared at it all day. Alas, it was not to be. They hadn't long *passed* the bridge when they were ushered into the jailhouse at the top end of the thoroughfare. Candy was distraught. With the bridge no longer in view, she released a pitiful whimper.)

CANDY: I want to see the pretty bridge.

SENTRY: All in good time, young lady. You're here to give evidence.

CANDY: What?

(Suddenly remembering why they were there, her brow furrowed. Osric, the man she'd decided she was going to marry, was in trouble and she needed to save him. With this in mind, she allowed the sentry to lead her before the Sheriff's desk, then instantly went on the defensive.)

CANDY: I demand justice!!!

(The sheriff, a portly man with a horseshoe moustache, glanced up at her from his seat then raised an inquisitive eyebrow. The sentries who'd brought Osric in had already informed him as to why the girls had been brought to see him and he was more than a little perplexed. Candy seemed positively hostile. Why she'd act this way towards the men who'd rescued her from the evil Osric, he had no idea. As such, he just continued to stare at them while failing to make a single utterance. Naturally, this made Candy and Sophira feel deeply uncomfortable. Fearing he'd never speak, they glanced to one another nervously. No sooner had they done so, however, the sheriff broke his silence.)

SHERIFF: Face front, please, ladies!

(Candy and Sophira instantly obliged.)

SHERIFF: Thank you.

(He then sat back in a relaxed manner.)

SHERIFF: So... what are a couple of fine looking fillies like you doing with the likes of Osric?

(Candy's bottom lip protruded sourly.)

CANDY: Osríc...

SHERIFF: Don't answer that. We all know what he's like. You just say the word and I'll see to it that he hangs!

(Even Sophira wasn't going to sit back and allow that to happen and she *hated* Osríc.)

SOPHIRA: You can't do that!

CANDY: He didn't do anything wrong!

(The sheriff furrowed his brow.)

SHERIFF: He tied you both to a tree. And he was shaking his fist at you aggressively, I'm told. You were in grave danger!

CANDY: No we weren't! It was just a game!

SHERIFF: A game???

CANDY: Yes! It wasn't real.

(She ruffled her neck then lied spectacularly.)

CANDY: We do that sort of thing a lot, you see? We're lovers! I love him and he loves me! So there!

(Sophira's heart broke there and then and she hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: Aw...

SHERIFF: Wait! Lovers?

CANDY: Yes! And we were only playing!

(The sheriff could only sigh. The desperation in her eyes told the sheriff all he needed to know. Her eyes also hammered home to Sophira that she was never going to win this one.)

SOPHIRA: Shit.

SHERIFF: Shit?

SOPHIRA: What? Oh. Nothing. Ignore me.

SHERIFF: Right...

(Wearing a sorrowful smile, the sheriff stood up and reached in his pocket for his keys.)

SHERIFF: Well, as much as I'd love an excuse to hang the little fucker, who am I to argue with victim of his alleged crime? If you say it was just a game, my hands are tied by law. He can go!

(He then furrowed his brow.)

SHERIFF: Just make sure that randy little twerp leaves the village and never sets foot here ever again. Because if he does, I'm going to chop off his gonads and feed them to my dog. You hear me?

(Candy shied away from him.)

CANDY: Loud and clear.

SHERIFF: Good. Take him then. Take him far. And if he falls off a cliff on the way, good. Just make sure you all bugger off and never come back! No offence, but any friend of Osríc's is, well, quite frankly a cunt. You're no longer welcome here.

(He then headed away towards the cells, leaving behind a mightily relieved Candy and her heartbroken friend.)

(Much to Candy's delight, within a minute of heading away to fetch him, the sheriff returned to the girls with Osríc in tow. Candy's first reaction was to run up to him and hug him. Before she could reach him, however, the sheriff ordered her to about turn and "bugger off". He then demanded that the three of them leave the village by the nearest exit and keep going until they're far, far away. Candy was only too happy

to oblige, but Sophira was utterly devastated. To have travelled all day to get there only to be ejected within five minutes was a disaster. She wouldn't get to hunt for Arterian here after all; in fact she wouldn't even get to ask about him. This waste of an entire valuable day was mortifying. Now, instead of seeking out Arterian they were going to head straight back into the woods where she knew Candy would break what was left of her fragile heart.

Not sure she could handle such a crushing blow, it crossed Sophira's mind to walk off in a different direction and carry on her search alone. She may not have understood why she was having these uninvited feelings towards Candy, but she *fully* understood that having them crushed would be mortifying. In that respect, going on alone just made sense. At the back of her mind, however, she couldn't help feeling that walking away might just make her feel worse. She'd not only be losing the chance to be Candy's lover, she'd be losing her from her life entirely. It left her with an unbearable choice to make. Stay and be crushed or leave with a broken heart. Feeling horribly torn, she followed on miserably as Osric and Candy headed back to the top of the thoroughfare. The fact they were walking arm in arm further served to crush her spirit.

In this moment, Sophira was decidedly gloomy. Her saddened pout was a mile long and she could barely lift her head up. It was the darkest moment of her life. And it was about to get worse. Almost as if fate had decided to add insult to injury, the sky suddenly darkened and torrential rain proceeded to thrash down on the village. In reaction to the sudden downpour, Candy and Osric immediately made a dash to find shelter under a tree. Sophira on the other hand, simply trudged onwards, finding comfort in the drenching she was receiving.

Having successfully completed her dash to the nearest tree, Candy about turned then flinched. The sight of her new best friend slowly stepping forth as if oblivious to the rain was more than a little perplexing.)

CANDY: Sophira!!! What are you doing???

(Sophira glanced up at her briefly but didn't even bother to answer. Her motivation to do anything was entirely drained. More than a little concerned by what she was seeing, Candy grimaced then raced back into the rain to grab her. Having reached her, she then proceeded to drag her back towards where Osric was sheltering under a tree by the river.)

CANDY: You'll get soaked!

SOPHIRA: I don't mind!

CANDY: Just get your butt over here, missy!

SOPHIRA: Fine...

(A few moments later, having managed to get Sophira to shelter, Candy looked to her and pouted.)

CANDY: Soph? What's wrong? You look miserable.

(Sophira shrugged unenthusiastically then dodged the question entirely.)

SOPHIRA: We need to get out of town. The sheriff said so.

OSRIC: Yeah, well, he can wait a few minutes until the rain dies down. It's not much to ask, after all.

(He then sighed in defeat.)

OSRIC: I can't believe we came all this way for nothing. Thrown out without a second thought.

(Silence then ensued. Their plan had ended in complete disaster. Reflecting on that fact, Candy and Osric watched the rain thrash down and shook their heads repeatedly. Compared to Sophira, however, they looked positively upbeat. In this moment, she could only wish she was somewhere else. Somewhere far away from here with Candy at her side. And only Candy.)

Great North Continent – Lethernia plains

(Inside Lethernia at this time, the midday sun was glowing brightly off of the marble city walls, creating a warm and welcoming ambience. The same however, could not be said of the area *outside* the city. All around the outer base of the wall, a virtual shanty town had sprung up and every free space was occupied with Gregon military tents. Such was their number, they spread like a blanket all around the mighty city for as far as the eye could see. It was a horrifying sight.

Outside the main gate to the besieged city, the largest tent of them all, luffed in the breeze. This was the tent which housed the generals of the Gregon imperial guard. It was also the base of their leader; the emperor himself. A somewhat angry and unforgiving gentleman, he was the sort of ruler who demanded absolute obedience at all times and would punish every mistake with extreme severity. Needless to say, when he spoke, his men listened well.)

EMPEROR: So? How long until we move in?

MCGOOGAN: We can go whenever you *decide* we go, my liege!

EMPEROR: That's not what I asked, knob end!

(He glanced to another of his generals.)

EMPEROR: Well?

MCDUGAL: It's like McGoogan says, my liege. We can go at any time.

Personally, I'd like to go *now*. My men are getting restless! I mean, do we really need to starve such a puny enemy? My men could slaughter them for fun in a matter of minutes!

(The emperor climbed to his feet then started to pace.)

EMPEROR: Aye, as I suspected, you've forgotten why we're doing this!

(The generals, too wise to argue, listened intently.)

EMPEROR: That was a trick question, numbskulls! I know we can go in at any time; of course we can. I just wanted find out if you understood why we're waiting.

(He shook his head.)

EMPEROR: Clearly, you've forgotten. You've forgotten what happened to our people all those centuries ago. You've forgotten how a mage healed the one that brought forth slaughter and ravaged our lands. You've forgotten that, for vengeance, these mages deserve to die *suffering*.

(He snarled.)

EMPEROR: Ultimately we *will* destroy every living mage. Like you, I grow sick of their conceit and lies. The way they claim to be people of peace even in the face of what we know. Our civilisation was brought to its knees by their so-called kindness. Good people, my arse. Fuck off! We almost got wiped out by their bullshit benevolence.

(He nodded.)

EMPEROR: So before we kill them, we must make them suffer. Don't get me wrong, the time for them to bleed is *near*...

(He then took a seat and folded his arms.)

EMPEROR: But for now, we must wait while they suffer and starve.

(His speech was greeted with silence. His generals simply indicated that they were in full agreement with him by way of nods of the head. They daren't speak unless they were spoken to. The emperor had killed men for far less, after all. Had the generals felt free to speak, however, none would have disagreed. It had been bred into them since childhood that a Lethernian had cured the man responsible for their downfall, many years ago. The passing of time had failed to lessen their deep-seated hatred. As such, it was safe to say that once the Gregon finally attacked it would be brutal and it would be merciless.)

Forest Village – Great South Continent

(As heavy rain continued to cascade down upon the woodland village, it quickly became apparent that this was no ordinary storm. The river had rapidly started to rise and the thoroughfare was disintegrating into mud. Such was the power of the rain, the tree that Candy, Sophira and Osric were using for shelter, offered very little protection at all. They were getting drenched. As a result, Candy and Osric had huddled together to keep warm. Despite several attempts to get her to join them, however, Sophira had silently kept her distance. By keeping her distance like this, she hoped they'd mistake her tears for rain water.)

OSRIC: Seriously, I know she's not my biggest fan but I'm worried about Sophira!
(Candy bit her lip.)

CANDY: So am I. She looks really sad.

OSRIC: About what though?

CANDY: Walking all this way for nothing, I expect. She was hoping to search this village for the guy who can save her people.
(She sighed.)

CANDY: She must be gutted about being sent away again. I can't even *begin* to console her if she's going to stand over there though, can I?

OSRIC: Well... no.

CANDY: Poor, Soph.

(Just then, a loud crashing sound rose up from behind them. At once, they all spun around then stared at the elegant, wooden bridge. The rainfall had turned the river into a raging torrent; the power of which had managed to snap one of the stanchions. As a result, the bridge had started to tilt on one side.)

CANDY: Shit! That scared the life out of me!

OSRIC: Me too!

CANDY: Oh, I know. You jumped so high, you almost head-butted the clouds.

OSRIC: No, I didn't!

(He ruffled his neck.)

OSRIC: That's a ridiculous exaggeration.

CANDY: Was it though?

OSRIC: Yes!

(As Candy giggled to herself, Osric shook his head then then quickly changed the subject.)

OSRIC: The river's turned into a rampaging deluge, look. It broke the bloody bridge, for pity's sake!

CANDY: And caused you to leap a hundred feet in the air like a startled cat.

OSRIC: Candy...

(He furrowed his brow.)

OSRIC: Stop that! I was just saying this rain is ridiculous, that's all. I haven't seen weather this bad for a *long* time!

CANDY: Me either. And there's no sign of it stopping either!

(As soon as she'd finished her sentence, however, the rainfall reduced to a brief patter for a few seconds then died off completely.)

CANDY: Nope, no sign at all!

(Osric chuckled.)

OSRIC: Right...

(He smiled.)

OSRIC: Come on. Let's get the hell out of here.

(Agreeing wholeheartedly with his sentiments, Candy nodded, flicked her hair away from her eyes then glanced to Sophira.)

CANDY: You ready, Soph?

(Sophira nodded solemnly.)

SOPHIRA: I guess.

CANDY: That's my girl.

(With that, they all started to trudge away along the boggy thoroughfare. They did so with mortified expressions on their faces. Having had quite the soaking, Candy's skirt was stuck rigidly to her thighs. Sophira had the same trouble with her dress. Osric's trousers had stuck themselves to his legs like a second skin. To say they were uncomfortable would be quite the understatement. Every step would be an effort in drenched clothes and they knew they were in for a thoroughly miserable walk. They also knew it'd be a brief one. They may not have communicated the fact, but all three of them were absolutely certain that they'd stop and make a fire as soon as they were away from the village again.)

CANDY: Sticky! When I step, my skirt keeps peeling off my thigh then slapping it again; making the water run down my legs.

(Sophira looked to her and pouted, indicating that she was suffering the same discomfort.)

OSRIC: Just be grateful you're not wearing trousers then. The rain's gone right though them. Trapped inside. My legs feel like blocks of ice right now.

(Candy rolled her eyes then allowed herself an amused grin.)

CANDY: Right... typical man.

OSRIC: What?

CANDY: *Your* pain is worse than *our* pain.

OSRIC: Well... it is! You're not wearing trousers.

CANDY: That's right. Trousers are for boys and lesbians. Instead we're wearing skirts... well... a dress in Sophira's case. Either way though, bare legs are way worse.

(Osric held up his palm.)

OSRIC: No. Sorry, but I'm going to have to stop you there. Right now, I'd *kill* to have bare legs.

CANDY: Oh, that's such a lie...

(Just then, a woman's voice rose up from the other side of the river; a voice that chilled Osric to the bone.)

AQUARIA: If it isn't Osric!!!

(Osric instantly tensed up and his eyes bulged.)

OSRIC: Oh fuck!

(Over the other side of the river, a beautiful maiden in an expensive white dress had emerged from where she'd sheltered from the rain. It was clear from the fiery glare she was giving Osric, not to mention Osric's own reaction, that this was the girl

who'd caused him all his woes. Desperate not to engage her, Osric just waved her away then started to hurry forth.)

OSRIC: It's okay; we're leaving!

(Looking more than a little peeved, the girl, Aquaria, rushed towards the bridge.)

AQUARIA: Oh no, you don't. I never got to tell you exactly what I think of you.

OSRIC: Umm... no need; I think I got the general idea! Let's go, ladies!

(Unfortunately for Osric, his anxiety to leave wasn't matched by Candy or Sophira in the slightest. This woman clearly had a very large axe to grind and they sensed that a domestic drama was about to unfold. Like a lot of young women, they found such dramas fascinating. As a result, rather than heading away with Osric, they both stopped and watched on with curious expressions on their faces.)

OSRIC: Candy, come on. We've got to go!

(Candy glanced at him briefly then glanced back towards the angry woman again.)

OSRIC: Candy! The other one! Let's get out of here.

CANDY: The other one?

SOPHIRA: He means me!

CANDY: I realise *that*, Soph.

(She grimaced.)

CANDY: That's so rude!

OSRIC: Never mind that, we've got to leave the village! Now!!!

(Not about to let him go until she'd had her say, Aquaria stormed onto the bridge with a face as black as thunder.)

AQUARIA: You stay where you are, you bastard!

(She growled.)

AQUARIA: You told me you loved...

(Suddenly, there was a loud snap as the slat she was standing on snapped in half.

Barely given time to scream, Aquaria dropped like a stone through the hole in the bridge and splashed into the river below.)

CANDY: Shit!!!

(As Candy and Sophira looked on in horror, Osric raced to the water's edge.)

OSRIC: We've got to help her!!!

(Agreeing with him wholeheartedly, Candy and Sophira then proceeded to flap about in a panic; whimpering and crying. They had no idea what to do, so simply went to pieces instead. Quick to realise they'd be completely useless to him, Osric frowned then leapt into action himself.)

OSRIC: Fuck it!

(With no more ado he then leapt into the river and swam towards where Aquaria was flapping and screaming in terror. Despite being named after a water goddess, she couldn't swim for love nor money. As a result, within moments of Osric diving in, she started to sink under the water. As she thrashed around and tried to stay afloat, the odd gurgled "help" could be heard now and again, but it was clear to see that it wouldn't be long before she went under completely.)

OSRIC: Hang in there, Aquaria!

(Horrifically, having thrashed about so violently for so long, Aquaria had lost a lot of energy and before Osric could even begin to reach her, she sunk under the water.)

OSRIC: Shit!

(He then dived beneath the surface and vanished from sight. Candy and Sophira were mortified. As were the crowd of villagers who'd come out to see what all the commotion was about. A crowd which included the sheriff himself. Having seen

Aquaria go under, all they could do was hold their breath and hope Osrice had it in him to save her.)

SHERIFF: Do it, lad. Fucking do it!

(Moments later, much to everyone's relief, Osrice crashed through the surface again. Their relief, however was short-lived.)

OSRICE: I can't find her!!!

(As the crowd gasped in abject horror, Osrice snarled then dived beneath the surface once again. Watching on, the sheriff snarled then stepped forward.)

SHERIFF: Arrest him as soon as he surfaces, men! First he takes her innocence then he tries to drown her!

(Too stunned to plead his cause, Candy and Sophira said nothing. Nor did the sheriff's men, on the grounds that they weren't even there yet.)

SHERIFF: Men? Where did they...

(Suddenly, Osrice splashed through the surface again, this time with Aquaria in his arms. At once, the entire crowd erupted with relief. Their reaction, however, was extremely premature. They were still in desperate trouble. Too exhausted to battle against such a powerful current, Osrice was struggling just to stay afloat.)

SHERIFF: Bring her ashore, boy!!!

OSRICE: I can't!!!

SHERIFF: What???

OSRICE: I've got no strength left!!! Help us!!!

SHERIFF: Fuck!!! How???

(In that moment, Candy's eyes lit up. At last she was in the game. This rescue required a skill she was actually rather adept at. At once, she reached into her pack then pulled out a lasso.)

CANDY: Leave it to me, everyone!!!

(With that, she rushed to the river bank, watched on by trembling townsfolk. They could clearly see that the current was starting to carry Osrice and Aquaria away and they feared the worst. Very much sharing the opinion that Osrice wouldn't be able to hold on much longer in the face of the strong current, Candy snarled then leapt into action. In something of a hurry, she tied one end of the rope around her wrist, then proceeded to spin the lasso to gain momentum. With pin point accuracy, she then cast the knot perfectly over Osrice's head. Extremely quick to spot a problem with Candy's tactic, however, Sophira stepped forwards.)

SOPHIRA: Candy...

(Her words were then drowned out by the shrieking crowd all around her. Osrice had rapidly started to drift away on the current with Aquaria in his arms. Determined not to let them get far, Candy snarled then pulled tightly on the rope. Moments later, however, both her feet left the ground and she ended up being dragged along the river bank via Osrice's neck. The current, combined with Osrice's weight were far too strong for her. Horrified by what they were seeing, Sophira, the sheriff and a group of sentries who'd just arrived proceeded to chase after them; watched on by mortified townsfolk.)

SHERIFF: That girl...

SENTRY 01: What about her?

SHERIFF: She's a fucking idiot!

(Bouncing along the embankment before them like a keel-hauled pirate, Candy yelped and screamed in terror.)

CANDY: This was a mistake, Soph!!! I'm really, really dumb!!!

(Her eyes then bulged and she proceeded to scream blue murder. She was rapidly being dragged towards a waterside cottage.)

CANDY: Why??? Help!!! I just want to go home!!! Sophira!!!

(Determined to catch her, the sheriff gave chase. He did so whilst growling bitterly to himself.)

SHERIFF: Osrice's a cunt and that girl's a fucking idiot. I should have stabbed them when I had the chance!

SENTRY 01: Then why didn't you?

SHERIFF: Never mind questioning me! Catch her!

SENTRY 02: Right...

(Racing forth beside the sheriff, Sophira's face bore a terrified expression. Fearing Candy would be drowned or killed by the collision, her heart raced. The sight of her beloved friend bobbing and bouncing along like a rag doll was almost too much to bear.)

SOPHIRA: Bad. Bad. Really, really bad!

(She then whimpered. They'd already had numerous lucky escapes since entering these woods and she feared that their luck had run out. All she could do now was pray that it hadn't.)

SOPHIRA: Save her!!! Please!!!

(Much to her delight, in that moment, the quickest of the sentries managed to make a despairing dive and grab Candy's foot.)

SOPHIRA: Yes!!!

(Alas, he'd caught her a split second too late to slow her momentum. As a result, he failed to stop her from crashing headlong into the cottage.)

SOPHIRA: No!!!

(With terror in her eyes she then raged forth in desperation to heal her. She was, however, the only one even remotely concerned about Candy. Thinking only of Aquaria, as soon as they arrived on the scene, the sheriff and his men swiftly untied the rope from Candy's wrist then started to drag Osrice back to the river bank. They ignored the unconscious Candy completely. Mercifully, Sophira managed to reach her and heal her injuries just in time.

Overjoyed that Candy was safe, Sophira drew a sigh of relief then glanced to where the sentries were attempting to retrieve Osrice. It didn't make for pleasant viewing. As they yanked on the rope to drag him from the river, Osrice flailed his free hand in some considerable distress. He was rapidly being strangled by the rope. Mercifully, they just about managed to pull him out before they choked him to death. There was much in the way of relief from all in attendance. They knew that if they'd strangled Osrice, Aquaria would have been lost to the river forever.

As soon as the two rescued parties were back onto the muddy thoroughfare, and away from the embankment, the sentries swarmed around Aquaria. She was unconscious and they were desperate to resuscitate her. This left Sophira free to swoop in and heal Osrice. Despite his heroics, the villagers couldn't have cared less about his well-being. All that mattered was the elder's precious granddaughter.

Having just been fully revived by Sophira's healing hands, Osrice sat up and glanced towards Aquaria in dismay. He didn't like what he saw. She was entirely surrounded by the sentries; one of whom was frantically performing CPR on her pale and motionless torso.)

OSRIC: Fuck!

(He then glanced up and spotted Sophira trying to bundle her way through the sentries to reach her.)

SOPHIRA: Let me in; I can heal her!

(As if she was nothing but pond scum, a sentry bashed her back and snarled.)

SENTRY 01: Fuck off. You ne'er-do-wells have caused enough trouble as it is!

(Osric furrowed his brow.)

OSRIC: Us???

SENTRY 02: You, mostly!

(Osric could only groan.)

OSRIC: For fuck sake. I get the blame for everything in this town!

SOPHIRA: Yes, well; let's worry about Aquaria before we discuss your paranoia issues, shall we?

(With that, she hurried forth and attempted to reach Aquaria again. This time, she was thwarted with a sideways barge and flew into Candy. Having been knocked onto their backsides, they immediately leapt to their feet again.)

CANDY: We're trying to help; damn it!

SOPHIRA: And help, we shall!

(She then pulled a ferocious snarl before diving through the legs of one of the sentries. Having broken their guard, she then lay her healing hands on Aquaria.)

SHERIFF: How the hell did she get...

(He then gasped in astonishment at the sight of Aquaria sitting up and glancing about herself. The colour had returned to her cheeks and she was entirely back to normal.)

SENTRY 01: How on earth did...

SOPHIRA: Told you I could heal.

(With that, she climbed to her feet then glanced away; folding her arms indignantly.)

SOPHIRA: Ne'er-do-wells indeed.

(Having been expecting some form of gratitude she then glanced back at the sentries. At once, her face dropped.)

SOPHIRA: Um...

(Rather than looking upon her apologetically, two of them were snarling at her and the others were glowering at Osric and Candy.)

SHERIFF: You three villainous fiends will pay for this atrocity! She could have died! Men, prepare the gallows!!!

(Candy and Sophira screamed.)

CANDY: We didn't do anything!

SOPHIRA: Yes, we did! We saved her life!

SHERIFF: See? Typical villains; can't even get your bloody story straight!

(He then glared at Osric.)

SHERIFF: As for you, Osric; you're getting a beating first!

(Osric could only whimper as the sheriff stomped towards him.)

SHERIFF: Come here, sonny boy!

(As the townsfolk egged the sheriff on with a chorus of jeering and booing, Osric proceeded to crawl backwards on his backside. As he did so, however, he was most astonished to hear Aquaria's protesting voice rise up from behind him.)

AQUARIA: Stop this madness!!!

(At once, the townsfolk fell silent and the sheriff turned to face her with a baffled look on his face.)

SHERIFF: Aquaria?

AQUARIA: Wait!

(She then stepped up to Osric.)

AQUARIA: Can you stand?

OSRIC: Um... yeah.

(He then scrambled to his feet.)

AQUARIA: Good.

(She shook her head then sighed.)

AQUARIA: Osric. Horrid, deceitful, philandering Osric. Not so long ago you robbed me of my chastity and lied to me...

(Osric gulped.)

AQUARIA: But today you risked *your* life to save mine. Not *many* men would have done such a thing. So, I forgive you. Wholeheartedly.

(She bowed to him respectfully then stepped up to Sophira and smiled.)

AQUARIA: Young lady, you *healed* me, didn't you?

(Sophira blushed.)

SOPHIRA: I did, yes.

AQUARIA: I thought so. I was unconscious, but I felt you. How is such a thing possible?

SOPHIRA: I honestly don't know how! It just something my people and I can do.

AQUARIA: I see.

(She smiled.)

AQUARIA: Well, I guess the how doesn't matter. Even though I don't know you, I sense a purity in you. Something inherently good.

SOPHIRA: Thank you.

(Aquaria then turned to address the assembled townsfolk.)

AQUARIA: Osric and his friends are heroes. Tonight I suggest we hold a street party in their honour.

(A fickle bunch to say the least, the townsfolk instantly forgot their previous cries of derision and jeers and erupted into loud, jubilant cheers. Candy, Sophira and Osric became instant heroes in that moment, purely because Aquaria wished it so. Only too relieved to be spared the gallows, Candy wiped sweat from her brow then hugged Sophira. Loving nothing more than being hugged by her, Candy squeezed her back and allowed herself a joyous sigh. Eager to get in on the action, Osric's face lit up then he proceeded to swagger his way over to them. Before he could quite reach them and hijack their hug, however, Aquaria stepped in his way.)

AQUARIA: Come; let's talk to my grandfather about removing your banishing order!

OSRIC: You mean...

AQUARIA: Reinstatement.

(Osric clenched his fist in delight.)

OSRIC: Yes!!!

(The two of them then headed away. Having overheard their conversation, Candy stepped back from the hug and smiled into Sophira's eyes.)

CANDY: We did it. We got him reinstated. Everything's worked out perfectly, hasn't it?

(Sophira furrowed her brow.)

SOPHIRA: Has it? We came into these woods to find Arterian, Candy. We haven't yet! So, no. Everything hasn't worked out *perfectly* at all.

CANDY: Right... I meant *apart* from that!

(She then looked away innocently. She'd been so engrossed in her fantasy about becoming Osric's wife, she'd forgotten all about their mission.)

SOPHIRA: *Apart* from that? Right... yeah... apart from achieving our *sole* objective. Literally the *only* thing we came here to do!

(Sophira then sighed inwardly. Candy's words had confirmed her worst fears. Every time Osric spoke, Candy's eyes would glaze over. In fact, she could barely even look at him without fluttering her eyelashes. Since the first moment Osric had shown interest in her, her head had been turned. Having witnessed it all, Sophira's heart sunk. It seemed pretty obvious right now that the urgent need to find Arterian would soon be lost on Candy entirely. She wasn't focussed on the mission at all. She just wanted to be Osric's girlfriend; nothing more.)

Not about to make an issue out of the revelation, Sophira just smiled. It was, however, a rueful smile. In that moment, she'd made a decision. She loved Candy dearly, and as such she wouldn't stand in the way of her dream. Instead, she'd use the party that night to ask people about Arterian, and if she found out he wasn't in the village, she'd slip out into the forest alone to complete the mission by herself; leaving Candy free to chase that dream.)

(A short while later, as a thank you for saving the elder's precious grand-daughter, Candy, Sophira and Osric were granted a free overnight stay at the village's finest inn. Osric's eyes had lit up like stars when he'd been informed. His first and only thought was jumping into bed with Candy as soon as they'd checked in. This, however, merely served to underline the fact that he hadn't had any female attention in quite some time. Soaking wet and covered in mud, Candy only had one thing in mind. It wasn't the same one thing that Osric had on his. She wanted to have a bath, wash her hair then put on dry clothes. Nothing else. Right now, she was a dishevelled mess and she absolutely hated Osric seeing her this way. And so, she opted to share a room with Sophira instead. Crestfallen, Osric trudged miserably to the separate room *he'd* been allocated, cursing under his breath all the way.)

An hour or so after they checked in, Aquaria stopped by to offer the girls the loan of evening dresses for the street party that night; an offer that Candy was extremely quick to accept. Sophira, on the other hand, declined to answer. Instead, she posed her own question of Aquaria. She asked if there was someone in town by the name of Arterian. Her answer disappointed Sophira greatly. Aquaria told her there was no such person in the village; and in her privileged position as the elder's grandchild, she knew *every* citizen by name. It was an answer that would decide her future. She went on to reject the offer of a dress; opting to make the excuse that her own dress had special, spiritual significance. As soon it had dried before the fire, therefore, she'd be putting it back on. This was of course a lie. There was no significance to her dress. She simply didn't have the heart to tell Candy that she planned to set off on her mission in it during the party.

At the opposite end of their corridor at this time, despite not having had his wicked way with Candy yet, Osric was in a joyous mood. He'd faced the elder and been positively received. The elder had even shook his hand. His citizenship had been reinstated with immediate effect. Consummately relieved, he'd vowed never to make the same mistake again. There'd be no way he'd ever risk losing his home a second time. From now on he'd have to be a lot more careful about the women he chose to mislead. Candy, he thought, would be a good place to start.)

Forest Village, Main Square. Early Evening.

(As soon as darkness fell upon the village, the evening's festivities began. The buildings had been bedecked with multi-coloured flowers and a band had struck up just outside the inn to entertain the gathered mass of villagers. Amongst them all, feeling more than a little pleased with himself, Osric leaned against a house holding a flagon of ale. Tapping his foot to a medieval rhythm from the harpsichords, he couldn't have looked more content. Just across the square from him, Candy and Sophira were chatting together quietly. He liked what he saw. The cut of Sophira's dress was such that it emphasised her every perfect curve and accentuated her long legs. He marvelled at that for quite some time then shifted his eyes to glance at Candy. He immediately had to adjust his crotch. Her hair looked amazing and her perfect body was packed into an extremely sexy dress. He could barely stop himself from drooling. Catching himself doing it, however, he very soon stood tall and ruffled his neck.)

OSRIC: Get a grip, you twat.

(He then took a sip of his beer and nodded to himself. He was psyched up and ready to make to his move. Any minute now, he'd step from the wall then set about wooing Candy with every romantic line and gesture in his entire playbook. Very much hoping this would be the case, Candy couldn't help smiling. Or talking. She was extremely excited. As such their conversation since leaving the inn had been very much a one-sided affair.)

CANDY: He's so wonderful, Soph. Have you seen his eyes... I could die!

(Sophira sighed emptily.)

CANDY: Oh my god; I think I love him!

(Sophira was mortified.)

SOPHIRA: Love?

CANDY: I know I just met him and it's crazy to fall in love with someone so soon but I *think* I do.

(Sophira forced a weak smile.)

SOPHIRA: Actually, it's not *that* crazy to fall in love so soon!

(Allowing Sophira's words to sink in, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Yeah. Perhaps you're right!

(Sophira nodded then hung her head.)

SOPHIRA: Go to him! I just want you to be happy!

(Candy smiled back warmly.)

CANDY: Aw, Soph, you're one in a million; you know that? I love you!

(Sophira cringed, full in the knowledge that the love she spoke of was purely platonic and, although a beautiful thing, would never be enough to satisfy her heart.)

CANDY: You okay? You look a bit down.

(Battling her sadness, Sophira managed to fake a warm smile.)

SOPHIRA: I'm fine, Candy. Now go!

CANDY: Well... okay. If you're sure.

(She then hunched her shoulders excitedly before turning and skipping her way over to Osric. Watching her approach, his face lit up. In stark contrast, watching her leave then leap into Osric's arms, crushed what was left of Sophira's spirit. She'd never felt a pain like it in all her life. That pain, however, was soon to escalate. Some ten minutes later, Osric grabbed Candy's hand then they raced into the inn together,

giggling mischievously. As innocent as Sophira was, even she knew what this meant. They were going to be intimate. For her fragile heart, it truly was the knockout blow.

A short while later, while Sophira sobbed outside, Candy and Osric raced into Osric's room then proceeded to tear each other's clothes off. Driven by lust, they then commenced taking what they wanted from one another's naked flesh. Fuelled by Osric's lust for her perfect body and Candy's desire to make him hers forever, they made merry until the early hours of the morning. By the time they'd finished, they were both utterly exhausted. So much so, they could only stare at the ceiling and gape in awe about how incredible it was. Little did they know as they lay there gasping for breath, however, quite some time ago Sophira had left a farewell letter at the hotel reception then headed into the woods alone; crying her heart out. Trying to put her heartbreak behind her, she'd resolved herself to either find Arterian or to die trying. And the way she felt right now, she really didn't mind which one.)

(Chapter Four – Broken.)

Forest Village – Great North Continent

(Sunrise. Forest Village Inn. Osric's room. Savouring every second of her new found love, Candy was lying in bed, watching Osric adoringly as he slept at her side. While he snored like a wildebeest, she just laid there, watching his eyelids flutter with every breath. In this moment, she found everything about him cute and exciting. In time, his snoring would undoubtedly make her want to hit him with a frying pan, but right now, she could only exhale with a heart full of love. For her, it was the perfect morning. This was where she wanted to be. In bed with her loved one. It was a moment she hoped would last forever. Her bladder, however, had other ideas. A trip to the toilet was in order and she couldn't put it off a moment longer.)

CANDY: Stupid biology.

(She then nodded sternly.)

CANDY: I'll be quick.

(Desperate to return to her loved one as soon as possible, she leapt from beneath the covers, as naked as the day she was born then made a beeline for the en suite bathroom. Once inside, she pushed the door shut then backed towards the toilet seat, before seating herself upon the throne. Eager to get back to Osric, she then tapped her knee impatiently with her fingers as she did her business.)

CANDY: C'mon, c'mon... oh hurry up, you stupid bladder.

(Once her task was complete, she cleaned herself up then made a dash for the door, looking forward to leaping back into bed again. With a wide smile and glowing eyes, she yanked open the door then hurried through it. Instead of jumping back into bed, however, she froze to the spot and looked on with disappointment. Osric had climbed out of bed and had almost finished getting dressed already.)

CANDY: But...

OSRIC: Babe? I thought you'd gone!

CANDY: No. I was coming back to bed.

(She pouted.)

CANDY: I wanted to snuggle for a bit!

(Osric smiled apologetically.)

OSRIC: Yeah? Well... it's a kind offer an' all, babe, but I'm almost dressed now, and I've got a lot to do today.

CANDY: What? Is that a no?

OSRIC: Well... yeah... it is. Sorry.

(Candy bit her lip.)

CANDY: I see...

(She then minced towards the bed before laying down and striking a sexy pose. Making herself as alluring as possible, she then ran her fingers across her breasts before looking deep into his eyes. He may have told her no, but there was no way she ever going to accept it.)

CANDY: And you *sure* I can't tempt you to come back to bed?

(She then licked her lips suggestively. Right now, she was playing the seductress; a tactic that had never failed her in the past. When she laid her sexuality on with a trowel, men were simply powerless to resist her and she knew it. It seemed to be working. Osric could only gape, impressed by her display of raw sexual magnetism.)

OSRIC: Wow...

CANDY: Well?

(Shaking his head in an attempt to drag his eyes from Candy's nakedness, Osric puffed out.)

OSRIC: Damn, you're good!

CANDY: Good? On the contrary, I'm very naughty. And I'm all yours!

(Despite being quite visibly tempted, Osric stepped back then held his hand out to her.)

OSRIC: Thing is, babe, I'd love to... I really would... but I've got stuff to do first!

(Candy was mortified. Before now, when she went into sexy-mode, men had always been putty in her hands; *incapable* of resistance.)

CANDY: What? I don't understand!

OSRIC: I just need to see a mate about getting a room... oh, and me mum; I'd better say hello to *her*, I suppose.

(Candy was unimpressed to say the least.)

CANDY: Can't that wait? I mean, what's the hurry?

(Fortunately for Osric, a loud knocking sound then arose from the other side of the door; sparing him from giving an explanation that Candy wouldn't even *attempt* to understand. When you hurt a girl's feelings in the bedroom, it's a very long road back and he knew it.)

OSRIC: Get the door, would you, girl? We can discuss the other thing later.

CANDY: Oh... fine!

(With that, Candy clambered from the bed, wrapped a robe around herself, stomped up to the door then swung it open. Half expecting Sophira to be on the other side, she was most surprised to find a member of the inn's staff standing before her. Before she could comment, however, the staff member bid her a good morning then passed her a small white envelope before heading off down the corridor again.)

CANDY: Right...

(She then closed the door and started to open the envelope.)

OSRIC: Who was it?

(Candy gave him a cold glance to make sure he knew he was in her bad books, then pulled a letter from the envelope and proceeded to read it.)

OSRIC: Please yourself!

(He then pulled his boot on, scowling at Candy while she scanned the letter with her eyes. Almost immediately he could tell something was wrong. Candy's jaw had dropped and her lips were quivering uncontrollably.)

OSRIC: Candy?

(Pale-faced and trembling, she slowly glanced to towards Osric then dropped the letter by her side.)

CANDY: It's Sophira. She's gone!

(Within minutes, fully-dressed and fired up, Candy strode from the inn being chased by a worried Osric. Once the words in Sophira's letter had sunken in, she'd frantically hurried her clothes on, focussing only on going after her. Such was her focus on the task, she'd not spoke another word to him. She was so frantic with worry, she'd ignored his every question.)

OSRIC: What's going on, Candy? Where are you going? And what do you mean, she's gone? Just tell me!!!

CANDY: She's gone, Osric; she's gone on without me!

OSRIC: Gone on where?

(As they made their way along the thoroughfare in early dawn light, Candy stared straight ahead, weaving between the few remaining drunken revellers, barging into them if she had to, in her desperation to reach the other end of the village.)

OSRIC: Candy? Gone on where?

CANDY: To search for Arterian obviously! All by herself!

(Osric grimaced uneasily.)

OSRIC: Are you sure? What did the letter say? Surely she wouldn't risk the forest alone!

CANDY: Yes, she would. And if I don't find her, *anything* could happen to her!

OSRIC: Nah. You're not explaining *nearly* enough here.

(He then grabbed both Candy's shoulders and brought her to a halt.)

OSRIC: Candy, what did the letter say? Tell me *exactly*!

(More than a little peeved about being delayed, Candy furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: It said I shouldn't worry and she'll find Arterian... and that she hopes you and I will be happy together for all eternity.

(Osric bit his lip.)

OSRIC: Right... so what are you worried about? Sounds to me like she knows exactly what she's getting into. And didn't you say she had powers?

CANDY: Healing powers. She's about as useful at fighting off creatures as... well, me!

OSRIC: I see...

(Not about to waste any more time, Candy then headed for the forest again.)

CANDY: We have to find her!

(Osric, however, remained rooted to the spot.)

OSRIC: We?

(He sucked his teeth.)

OSRIC: Right... yeah... about that...

(In utter disbelief, Candy spun around to face him.)

CANDY: You are coming, right?

(Osric just shrugged then offered her an apologetic smile.)

CANDY: No way!

OSRIC: Sorry, babe. That's sound more like a *you* thing. I'm going to stay here and rebuild my life.

CANDY: But... what about *us*?

OSRIC: What about us? We were just having some fun. I mean, it's not like we're betrothed or anything. It was just a shag.

(Candy pouted sorrowfully.)

CANDY: But, I love you, you prick!

(Osric shrugged.)

OSRIC: Yeah... but I'm not into all that romance nonsense. You were great though, babe.

(Candy shook her head.)

CANDY: You complete bastard!

OSRIC: Harsh, but whatever.

CANDY: Sophira went on alone, putting her life in danger, because she thought we were going to become an item, but that was never your plan, was it? You were just using me!

OSRIC: Using you? Hardly. You were just as up for it as I was! More so in fact.

Third time round, I wanted to go to sleep but you insisted on going down.

CANDY: Wow. Fucking... wow. You fucking bastard. If anything's happened to Sophira, I'm going to come back and kill you.

OSRIC: Yeah, right. Like it's my fault. I didn't *force* her to go, that was her own choice!

(Candy shook her head contemptuously.)

CANDY: You complete...

OSRIC: Oh, put a sock in it. *I* wanted a fuck and *you* wanted a fuck. We fucked. So don't come all this crap with me. I never promised you anything.

(Candy snarled.)

CANDY: Well, what I said about coming back to kill you, that *is* a promise. But in the meantime...

(With hatred etched into her face, she then took one step forward and toe-punted Osric as hard as she could in the privates. At once, he folded to the dirt like a sack of potatoes. Satisfied that she'd made her point, Candy then spun around and headed off towards the forest; forcing back tears as she went.)

(As she headed out onto the forest floor, Candy was mightily relieved to find that the previous day's rainfall had left much of the forest floor boggy underfoot. This would make tracking her absent friend a whole lot easier. Well-tutored in the ways of tracking by her father, she was in little doubt that she'd soon picked up her trail. Her confidence proved well-founded. Within seconds of scouting the ground around her, she spotted a cluster of footprints leading off down a forest path. Having identified them as female and satisfied herself that they belonged to a woman who was travelling alone, she then set off in pursuit. These footprints, after all, could only belong to Sophira. Women rarely ever trawled through these woods alone, especially when it was boggy. They simply *had* to be hers.

As she strode onwards determinedly, following the trail of footsteps, Candy couldn't help but feel somewhat anxious. If Sophira had stuck to the main paths since setting out, finding her wouldn't be too difficult. If she'd been spooked by something and veered off the beaten track, however, she was in for quite the challenge. She was also greatly concerned about the fact that Sophira had had a very long headstart. She could have been miles away by now. The greatest source of her anxiety, however, was self-doubt. If her tracking skills were to let her down, Sophira might never be found. It was a thought that chilled her to the bone. On the upside, however, it was a fear that heightened her focus no end.

Giving her all to the task, Candy bounded forth through the mud with her head down; focussing intently on the tracks in the mud before her. Right now, the rainfall that she'd cursed on the previous afternoon was proving to be quite the blessing. Not only did the mud make Sophira's tracks extremely easy to follow, but it offered her the advantage over Sophira in terms of speed. In her sturdy, huntress boots, the boggy ground offered no impairment to Candy's mobility whatsoever. That same boggy ground, however, would have slowed Sophira down no end. Her shoes were not designed for trawling through a muddy forest. This gave her hope. Clinging onto that hope as best she could, she very soon found herself mumbling as she busied along.)

CANDY: Oh, Soph. Why'd you do it, girl?

(She sighed.)

CANDY: It's Osric's fault! Bastard!

(With her eyes fixed to the tracks she then proceeded to cuss him down impressively.)

CANDY: How could he do that? How could he use me like that? I should have known he was lying all along. Sophira sensed he was a tosser; why didn't *I* see it?

(Receiving a great deal of solace from badmouthing Osric, she then proceeded to do so for the next forty minutes. She may even have continued for longer, had she not come across a disturbance in Sophira's stride. Her left footprint had become elongated and there was a large Sophira shaped imprint in the mud; accompanied by a couple of handprints ahead of it. Scanning the messy shapes in the mud closely, she could only deduce that Sophira had slipped and fallen over at this point. Judging by the shape of the splat, she'd landed face first. Picturing her friend's mishap she couldn't help but chuckle. Two seconds later, however, a cold, empty feeling swamped her heart. She really missed her. She missed her smile, her voice, her giggle, everything; even her angry side. But most of all she missed her company. Osric had broken her heart that morning and not having her friend to comfort her stung beyond words. Left feeling more than a little broken, she then continued on; pouting to herself.)

CANDY: Stupid Osric. Sophira's gone because of him. I hate him.

(As she paced onwards, cursing Osric under her breath, she felt very much alone. Abandoned by the entire universe. She felt numb. She wasn't about to quit, however. Far from it. She truly believe that the only thing that would lift her spirits would be finding Sophira. As such, her resolve to do so deepened. As a result, her brow furrowed and she picked up the pace focussing hard on the footsteps before her.)

CANDY: I'm gonna find you, girl. I've got to!

(She then clenched her fists determinedly and marched onwards. As she did so, however, there was a rustling of leaves to the left of her. Seemingly oblivious to it, she just snarled then continued on. She only had eyes for the footprints she was following. So engrossed was she, in fact, she didn't even flinch when the bushes to the left side of her started to flatten as if something was walking parallel to her.)

CANDY: Where are you, Soph? Just don't be too far away, okay?

(Paying no heed to anything but the ground, Candy still didn't avert her gaze when the bushes to her left started to thrash and thud to the ground. Something was out there and it was charging straight at her. Suddenly, sensing an easy kill, the same panther that had so nearly taken Candy's life the day before, leapt from the deep growth; snarling like a vengeful demoness. It proved to be quite the faux pas on the panther's part. With lightning reflexes to match even that of the panther, she ripped her sword from her pack then thrust it towards the giant pouncing feline. Unable to reduce its momentum, the panther ended up impaled on Candy's sword; its ferocious roar fading

into a pitiful yelp. At once, the life drained from its eyes then it flopped to earth. Offering it nothing by way of sympathy, Candy then yanked her sword free and carried on walking.)

CANDY: Prick! Did you think I didn't know you were there?

(With complete and utter disdain for the panther's stealth skills, she then powered forwards, picking up the pace. It was only now that her true ability was showing through. Rather than laughing and joking with her friend, she was actually focussed on what she was doing. Her hearing was primed to alert her to danger and her eyes were engaged solely on decoding Sophira's movements. A total heightening of her senses. Despite her dedication and concentration, however she still had a little left in the tank for slandering Osric profusely.)

CANDY: Blah, blah, blah... it's what you do with it that matters he said... yeah, right! (She scowled.)

CANDY: You've got a tiny cock, mate. Deal with it! Smug git; what on earth was I thinking?

(She then allowed herself a sigh.)

CANDY: That I was falling in love, that's what!

(And with a shake of the head, she paced on.)

CANDY: Idiot.

(After a good many hours of striding forth determinedly, Candy's started to feel a little frustrated. She was moving at quite the pace, but Sophira still hadn't come into view. As long as her prints were still visible, however, there wasn't a chance in hell of her slowing down. Ignoring her tiredness, she simply soldiered on, taking a right fork in the road, just as Sophira appeared to have done sometime earlier in the day. There was no way she'd let tiredness or frustration defeat her. She was desperate to find her. Not only was she fearful of Sophira's safety, but having had her heart broken earlier in the day, she needed someone to talk to. To hug her. To reassure her. With this as her fuel, she then picked up the pace once more.)

CANDY: Damn it, girl; you just kept on going, didn't you?

(Only a matter of seconds after she'd said those words, however, the tracks came to an abrupt end. At once, Candy's hair stood on end and she looked about herself in a dismay.)

CANDY: No way... this can't... where did you go?

(She then furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: Calm down, you silly cow.

(With that, she took a deep breath to refocus her mind then calmly glanced around the surrounding area for clues. Just to her left some of the brambles had been trodden down.)

CANDY: A-ha!

(Having checked the rest of the area for recent signs of human activity, she then proceeded to head across the broken down foliage.)

CANDY: Ouch! Why go through the prickles, Soph? Ouch!

(A minute or so later, sporting several fresh cuts to her legs, she emerged from the brambles then glanced about herself. In that moment, her heart leapt for joy. To her right, she could just about make out the glimmering pattern of Sophira's dress through a gap in some bushes. Having jumped for joy, she then charged forth excitedly.)

CANDY: Soph, Soph... I found you!!!

(Beaming with excitement, she battered her way through the bushes then charged out onto a patch of shallow grass, aching to hug her friend again.)

CANDY: Soph...

(Her eyes then bulged in terror and she let out a deafening scream. Before her stood a skeleton impaled on stake, dressed in Sophira's clothing. At once, she dropped to her knees then clasped her tortured head in her hands. Her discovery had torn her heart in two.)

CANDY: Soph... who did this to you? And how?

(She then burst into a flood of tears and threw her head toward to the heavens.)

CANDY: Why???

(Devastated, she then threw herself to the ground and proceeded to wail like a mortified widow.)

CANDY: No!!!

(In that moment, every second of their time together flashed before her eyes. Every smile, every giggle and every hug, hammering home the painful sting of knowing she'd never experience such beautiful moments again. It was as if her soul had been crushed. The pain was indescribable. Her dear, beloved friend had been struck down mercilessly in her prime. It made no sense. Who would do such a thing to her? Her head swirled in a tortured daze. Surely Sophira of all people didn't deserve this. Broken and defeated, she bashed the turf with her fists and wailed out in anguish. As she did so, however, a baffled voice rose up beside her.)

SOPHIRA: Candy?

(As naked as the day she was born, looking absolutely bewildered by her friend's behaviour, Sophira was standing at her side, using her hands to cover her exposed areas. Having convinced herself that Sophira had met her end, Candy could do nothing but stare up at her in a state of shock. She was frozen.)

SOPHIRA: Um... what are you... why are you... doing that?

(Candy slowly rose to her feet, whimpering like she'd seen a ghost.)

CANDY: Is... is it really you? I'm not dreaming, am I?

(Finding the question utterly ridiculous, Sophira could only offer her a bemused glance.)

CANDY: It *is* you! I'd recognise that baffled expression anywhere!

(Overjoyed that she hadn't been imagining her, Candy threw her arms around her. Sophira reciprocated immediately. They then proceeded to silently hold each other tight for well over a minute. Having almost squeezed every breath out of Sophira in that time, Candy then stepped back and proceeding to wail.)

CANDY: I thought you were dead.

(A sensitive soul, Sophira's face dropped and she also started to sob.)

SOPHIRA: I'm sorry!

CANDY: No, *I'm* sorry!

SOPHIRA: Why would *you* be sorry?

CANDY: Because you wouldn't have gone on alone in the first place if I'd been a better friend!

(They then proceeded to apologise profusely while they cried their eyes out together. It truly was a sorry display of feminine guilt and remorse.)

CANDY: I've been a *terrible* friend!

SOPHIRA: No, *I* have!

CANDY: I've been worse!

SOPHIRA: No, you haven't! *I* was the one who walked away on her own.

(Unfortunately, with so many unresolved issues between the two of them, this display of self-reflection and contrition was doomed to have a brief shelf life. Almost inevitably, it was only a matter of moments before the emotions they were releasing turned sour. Absorbing Sophira's admission that she was the bad friend, Candy stepped back then furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: Actually, yes; you *are* a bad friend!

SOPHIRA: Huh?

CANDY: How could you just walk off like that???

(More than slightly taken aback by her attitude, Sophira thrust her hands to her hips and scoffed.)

SOPHIRA: Because we were *supposed* to be on a mission! A *good* friend would have remembered that! But no, *you* forgot all about it and buggered off with lover boy!

CANDY: Forgot? Forgot??? I didn't forget any bloody thing!

SOPHIRA: Yes, you did! You turned in a drooling idiot and stopped caring about the mission entirely!

CANDY: Did I fuck!

SOPHIRA: Yes, you did!

CANDY: No, I didn't! That's cobblers! Seriously, Sophira, if you've got nothing sensible to say, just shut the fuck up!

(Amazed she'd have the audacity to talk to her in such a manner, Sophira gasped then retorted in kind.)

SOPHIRA: *You* shut the fuck up, you cheap slapper!

(Candy was outraged.)

CANDY: What did you call me???

SOPHIRA: A slapper! Or do you prefer the term, "morally challenged"?

CANDY: You bitch!

SOPHIRA: Cheap brazen hussy!

CANDY: I loved him!

SOPHIRA: Yeah right!

(She held her palm towards her.)

SOPHIRA: Whatever!

(Sneering wildly, Candy grabbed her hand then dug her fingernails deep into her thumb.)

CANDY: How do you like me now, bitch?

(Sophira's eyes bulged and she cried out in pain. Letting her go again, Candy snarled.)

CANDY: And there's plenty more where that came from, bitch!

(Sophira snarled back venomously.)

SOPHIRA: Right! You've asked for it!!!

(With that, she sprung forwards and yanked at Candy's hair with all her might. Taken by surprise, Candy screamed in agony. Not about let Sophira's actions go unpunished, Candy snarled then reached out and grab a handful of Sophira's hair in return. A sorry display of mutually childish hair-pulling ensued, accompanied by a cacophony of high-pitched screaming and growling. It was a sorry state of affairs that very soon degenerated even further. Using their free hands they set about putting on a shameful and quite frankly embarrassing exhibition of slapping and scratching. Kicking also became a feature. Embroiled in what passes for no-holds-barred violence in the female world, they circled for several minutes, crying and screeching.)

CANDY: I hate you!!!

SOPHIRA: I hate you more!!!

(As they spun around, refusing to let go each other's hair, however, Candy suddenly remembered something her father had taught her about how to deal with a wannabe assailant. With a snarl, she let go of Sophira's hair then used both her hands to twist the skin on Sophira's wrist in separate directions. It worked like a charm. Sophira could only scream in agony then let go of her hair. As soon as she'd done so, Candy then punched her squarely on the jaw sending her flying back to the turf on her naked behind.

In a man's world, this would be viewed as a victory or at least a sign of who was the better man. Candy would be declared the winner and claim the spoils. In the female world however, it's an entirely different story. The one who hits hardest is the villain of the piece; the aggressor; the one who went too far. The guilty party. Adhering to this logic, Sophira could only stare up at Candy in horror; mortified that she'd used such extreme violence. Sharing the same twisted outlook, Candy stared down at Sophira, whimpering in horror at her deed. The fact they'd been fighting with equal ferocity was neither here nor there. In the female world, the one who flattens the other is in the wrong; therefore, *she* has to do all the grovelling and apologising.)

CANDY: Oh my god; I'm so, so sorry!

(Sophira's lips quivered uncontrollably.)

SOPHIRA: You punched me!

(With nothing left but apologies, Candy burst out crying.)

CANDY: I'm sorry!!!!

(Having climbed to her feet, Sophira covered her nudity with her hands then joined in the chorus of tears.)

SOPHIRA: So you should be!!!

(Face to face, they then wailed like a pair of banshees for well over a minute.

Eventually, however, Candy managed to hold the tears back long enough to force out another apology and lessen the cacophony.)

CANDY: I really am sorry!

(They then fell into each others arms and resumed their sorry display of tears and remorse. It was a hug they very much needed. Candy needed to hug her to reassure that she still loved her. Having just been flattened by her, Sophira needed the hug for the very same reason.)

CANDY: I really am sorry, Soph! Please forgive me.

SOPHIRA: I will...

(She then stepped back from the hug and wiped a tear.)

SOPHIRA: Candy?

CANDY: Yeah?

SOPHIRA: I think it might be time we had a chat to clear the air.

(Wiping away her tears, Candy managed to forced a cheeky smile.)

CANDY: What gave you that impression?

(They shared a brief chuckle then Sophira reached her hand out.)

SOPHIRA: Friends?

(Candy smiled and took her hand in hers.)

CANDY: Friends!

(Following a brief, warm smile between the two, Candy then looked Sophira up and down before gesturing to the skeleton that was wearing her clothes.)

CANDY: They look better on you!

(Sophira blushed.)

SOPHIRA: I was drying them; I fell in some mud, you see?

(She pointed in the direction she'd first appeared from.)

SOPHIRA: There's a small pool down there. I washed them in there. Had to really; I was covered in mud from head to toe. I slipped and landed on my face.

(Candy couldn't help but grin.)

CANDY: I know. I saw the imprint you left.

(She pouted.)

CANDY: I saw your clothes and I thought I'd found you, then I came up here and saw this. I thought it was you.

(Expecting sympathy, Candy flinched at the sight of Sophira frowning back at her.)

SOPHIRA: This is a *male* skeleton!

CANDY: Huh?

SOPHIRA: And it's been here so long the bones have been bleached!

(Candy returned her frown.)

CANDY: How was I to know that?

(Realising she was being a little harsh, Sophira smiled then placed her hand on Candy's shoulder.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry. I was just teasing... kinda. You were really upset when I saw you. You must like me a lot!

CANDY: I do. Even if you do fight dirty. Hair-puller.

SOPHIRA: You pulled mine too!

CANDY: *I* was retaliating!

(They shared a grin for a moment then burst out laughing.)

SOPHIRA: What were we thinking, Candy?

CANDY: I have no idea. That was ridiculous! We fight like girls!

SOPHIRA: We *are* girls.

(Candy fought back her laughter then smiled.)

CANDY: That would explain it then.

SOPHIRA: Well, *I'm* a girl, anyway. You, on the other hand, you punched me like a savage barbarian.

CANDY: Yeah, well, *some* savage barbarians *are* girls!

SOPHIRA: Right...

(She burst out laughing again.)

SOPHIRA: Can't really argue with that, can I?

CANDY: Nope.

(Moments later, once the laughter died down, they shared another smile then Candy gestured towards the forest.)

CANDY: Shall we walk while we have our talk? Arterian won't get found if we stand here all day.

(Sophira beamed.)

SOPHIRA: Let's go!

(They then headed away, delighted to be back together again.)

SOPHIRA: I'm so glad you found me, Candy. It was horrible on my own!

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: It was no picnic for me either. I really missed you, Soph.

SOPHIRA: Sorry.

CANDY: Yes, well, that's in the past now, isn't it? Let's just make sure we stick together this time. We're gonna need each other's help and support if we want to get through this in one piece.

SOPHIRA: Definitely.

(She blushed.)

SOPHIRA: I should never have gone on without you, Candy. I'm not skilled enough or brave enough to be out here on my own.

CANDY: Not brave enough?

(She scoffed.)

CANDY: You're the bravest girl I know.

SOPHIRA: I am?

CANDY: Yeah...

(She chuckled.)

CANDY: Not *many* would be brave enough to strut though the forest butt-naked like you are.

SOPHIRA: What???

(Almost having a heart attack, Sophira jumped back and looked down herself.)

SOPHIRA: Oh my god!!! My clothes!!!

(Thoroughly embarrassed, she swiftly thrust her hands into place to protect her modesty then raced back towards the skeleton. Watching her backside as she rushed away, Candy couldn't help but grin to herself.)

CANDY: I wonder how far we'd have got before she noticed...

(As soon as Sophira was dressed and ready, she rejoined Candy then the two of them set off on their search once again. Heading down the mud strewn trail next to where they'd been reunited, they both felt somewhat warm inside. Being together again came as an almighty relief to both of them. Sophira had missed her friend dearly. She also knew there was little chance she'd survive the woods without her. Candy had *also* missed her shiny new friend. Osric had broken her heart and she needed somebody to be there for her. To comfort her; to reassure her. And so they talked. Naturally, they set the ball rolling by addressing the problem at the core of their dispute. Osric.)

SOPHIRA: So, he was just using you?

(Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Yeah... and I let him.

SOPHIRA: You let him? You mean you *knew* he was using you?

CANDY: No... well... no! Not at all. I had no idea. What I mean is, it was obvious, but, at the time, I refused to see it. I dunno. It's hard to explain!

SOPHIRA: Try me.

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Well... it's like... I had rose-tinted glasses on or something, so I couldn't see the reality that was right before my eyes.

(She shook her head.)

CANDY: He'd mention sex, but I'd *hear* "make love". Its pretty obvious now that when he mention being *with* me, he meant in the physical sense. I took it to mean as boyfriend and girlfriend though. I think I wanted him to love me so badly I just convinced myself that he did. I glossed over what he *actually* said and heard what I *wanted* him to say.

(Sophira lay her head on Candy's shoulder for a brief moment and sympathised.)

SOPHIRA: Aw, Candy...

(She lifted her head then continued.)

SOPHIRA: I *think* I know what you mean.

(Candy looked to her imploringly.)

CANDY: Really?

(Sophira nodded and offered her a smile.)

SOPHIRA: You deluded yourself. You're a bit like me, I guess. You're so blinded by hope sometimes, you never can spot when there really isn't any. You want things to work out so much you believe they will; *despite* what the evidence is telling you.

(Candy nodded then let out a saddened sigh.)

CANDY: Yeah. Pretty much. Finding out otherwise is a bitch, huh?

SOPHIRA: Yeah.

CANDY: I felt so crushed when he told me. All I wanted to do was talk to you, but you weren't there.

SOPHIRA: Sorry, Candy.

(She sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I thought you were so into Osrice you wouldn't want to come with me anymore. I knew it'd be hard for you to tell me that though, so I left. I thought it'd be easier on everyone that way.

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: Well, it wasn't.

SOPHIRA: Yeah. I guess that's what happens when people fail to communicate.

CANDY: Definitely.

(She nodded.)

CANDY: Let's not make that mistake again. Let's make sure we discuss things in future, yeah? And listen to what the other one has to say.

SOPHIRA: Agreed.

CANDY: Like I should have listened to you when you said you didn't like Osrice. I should have known you'd be able to sense a bad one.

(Sophira went bright red and glanced away.)

SOPHIRA: I didn't sense he was bad, Candy. Not exactly. I just didn't want him to have you.

(Candy gave her a sideways glance.)

CANDY: Eh?

SOPHIRA: I was jealous!

(Not sure how Candy would react to this news, Sophira was mightily relieved to see her smile.)

CANDY: That's so sweet. You didn't want to share your friend. I can respect that.

(Sophira nodded nervously. Candy had entirely misunderstood why she was jealous and she wasn't sure whether she wanted her to know the truth or not.)

CANDY: Just promise me one thing in future, Soph.

SOPHIRA: Anything.

CANDY: Don't just go off without telling me. If we ever have to part, I want the chance to at least say goodbye.

(Sophira smiled warmly.)

SOPHIRA: It's a deal!

(Having cleared the air between them, they then picked up the pace and sauntered onwards through the forest; hand in hand. They did so with wide smiles on their faces. Being back together again felt wonderful. Such was their elation at the reunion, in fact, they forgot all about Arterian for a while and simply skipped forth like two best friends having a fun day out in the park together.)

(As the sun radiated through the treetops that afternoon, Sophira and Candy strolled onwards; deep in conversation about pretty much anything that sprang to mind. Their

relaxed attitude was the polar opposite of Candy's focussed and determined approach that same morning. Right now, they were content to just keep strolling onwards, revelling in the humble joy of simply being together again. It was the happiest they'd been since they'd set out. The calmness in the hearts actually matched the serenity of the beautiful forest.

Making the most of their refound inner peace, Candy and Sophira strolled on together, long into the afternoon; chatting and laughing merrily. They were enjoying their stroll so much, they never wanted it to end. Unfortunately for them, however, geography had other ideas. Without warning, the path they'd strode down well into late afternoon, simply petered out to nothing. The dirt beneath their feet turned into grass; offering them no clues as to where to go next. In that moment, their march came to an abrupt halt.)

SOPHIRA: Um... Candy?

CANDY: Don't.

SOPHIRA: There's no path.

CANDY: I can see that.

(Somewhat perplexed they then stood there in silence, surveying their surroundings with their eyes. Before them, was a steep, grassy, downward slope. On every other side, there was nothing but thick forest.)

CANDY: Right...

(She then stepped up to the very precipice of the long grassy embankment. Logic dictated that they either headed down it or went back the way they came.)

CANDY: I'm not going back down that path again.

SOPHIRA: Then...

CANDY: We'll have to go down the slope.

SOPHIRA: Okay. Just don't laugh if I fall over.

CANDY: I can't promise you that, babes.

SOPHIRA: Yeah... it was unfair of me to ask really.

CANDY: Cruel, *some* might say.

(She then peered down the steep decline again with an inquisitive look on her face. The gradient of the slope remained reasonably constant until it smoothed out at the bottom. She couldn't see any further beyond the bottom, however, as the slope was strewn with trees; obstructing her view.)

CANDY: It smoothens out at the bottom, look. No rocks or anything.

SOPHIRA: Meaning?

(Candy smirked.)

CANDY: If you *do* fall down there, you won't hit a rock at the bottom. If anything you'll just be saving yourself a walk.

SOPHIRA: Unless, of course, I hit a tree first and die.

CANDY: Right... yeah. I'd avoid doing that if you can.

SOPHIRA: Thanks, Candy. That's good advice.

CANDY: Of course. I'm an *expert* survivalist, remember?

SOPHIRA: Right...

(They shared an amused chuckle then Sophira glanced at the treetops someway down the hill. Having done so, she placed a limp wrist on her chest.)

SOPHIRA: Oh, wow. If you look just above those trees, Candy, you can see the sea! Have we crossed the entire forest?

(She mused to herself.)

SOPHIRA: Or just walked down the coast?

(Candy glanced at her briefly before reaching into her pack and pulling out her compass. As she gazed down at it with concentration etched into her brow, Sophira looked to her enquiringly.)

SOPHIRA: Well? What's the verdict?

CANDY: Umm...

(She then proceeded to turn bright red.)

CANDY: I don't know. I can't remember which way we went when we set out!

(As Candy cringed with embarrassment, Sophira bit her lip.)

SOPHIRA: Umm... we headed south I think!

CANDY: Think?

SOPHIRA: Yeah... well... I'm *pretty* sure!

(Candy nodded then looked to the compass again.)

CANDY: Right, so the ocean there is to the north, that means we've crossed the forest!

(Sophira slowly turned to face her with an unimpressed expression on her face.)

SOPHIRA: No, it means we've headed along the north coast.

CANDY: Does it?

SOPHIRA: Yes. We headed south. *Away* from the ocean. Therefore the ocean was to the north when we left and it still is.

(Candy gave her a thousand yard stare.)

CANDY: Huh? What?

(Finding Candy's confusion most amusing, Sophira cheekily poked out her tongue.)

SOPHIRA: Don't worry about it, Miss Expert Survivalist. Let's just get down this hillside shall we?

(A little bit hurt by Sophira's quip, Candy gave a half sneer.)

CANDY: It's a bank, actually, but who's keeping score?

SOPHIRA: Touché! Come on!

(Now, pride can be a terrible thing. On a good day it can be the one thing that stops a person from giving up; a driving force behind success if you will. Normally, however, it's that little voice inside you that tells you asserting yourself is a good idea when you should just let things go. Pride is that voice that tells you to punch the seven foot tall heavyweight boxer who accidentally nudged past your girlfriend, just because she looks disappointed that you let it slide. Pride is that bitter little pill we all find so hard to swallow sometimes. Pride has consequences. Having been made to look rather silly as a trained tracker who can't understand directions even with a compass, Candy would have been better off to make light of it and let it go, but alas, no. Pride dictated that Candy had to prove herself adept at the ways of the forest at the first available opportunity.

Anxious to set Sophira straight and redeem herself as the queen of all things survival related, Candy glanced around herself urgently. She was in little doubt that she'd quickly spot something forest-related that Sophira was clueless about. She could then bombard her with knowledge and reinstate her reputation as a woodland expert. Alas, there was very little worth commenting on. Starting to get flustered, she scratched her head then whimpered.)

SOPHIRA: You okay there, Candy?

(Rapidly becoming desperate, Candy hurried her eyes across the scenery once again, then suddenly performed a double take. There was a fallen tree a few feet away to their right. In that moment, an idea started to formulate in her mind.)

CANDY: Hmm...

SOPHIRA: Hmm? You've thought of something?

(Candy offered her a smug grin then gestured towards the fallen tree with her eyes.)

CANDY: I have! Let me teach you an old forest secret.

(Sophira beamed excitedly.)

SOPHIRA: Okay!

CANDY: See that log?

(She pointed to the fallen tree in question.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah...

CANDY: The branches have long since been removed, leaving a smooth cylinder shape.

SOPHIRA: Ideal for using as a bench.

CANDY: Yes, but we're not going to doing that. Seeing as it's just sitting there, facing down the hill, we're going to ride it all the way down to the bottom of the slope!

(Sophira was astonished.)

SOPHIRA: Really?

CANDY: Yup.

SOPHIRA: And that's an old forest secret, is it?

(Candy glanced away innocently then lied through her teeth.)

CANDY: Absolutely!

SOPHIRA: Okay...

(She smiled.)

SOPHIRA Sounds good! You do this sort of thing a lot then?

(Candy nodded then proceeded to add to her lie with a purely fictitious backstory.

Anything to regain Sophira's faith in her; a faith she hadn't even lost in the first place.

Despite the incident with the compass, she still had Sophira's unconditional, albeit misplaced, trust in all things woodland. There was no need to be dishonest.

Completely unaware of Sophira's unwavering faith, however, she did it anyway.)

CANDY: Do we ride logs a lot? Are you kidding? We ride the logs near Chiswell Point pretty much everyday. It makes it easier to carry our catch home, you see?

There's even a special device to haul the logs back up to the top of the hill again for next time. It's a daily thing where I come from. Routine.

SOPHIRA: Cool.

(She smiled.)

SOPHIRA: That's really interesting. A clever and practical solution. And it sounds kinda fun!

CANDY: It's all that and more.

SOPHIRA: Awesome.

(Delighted to see that Sophira still believed in her, Candy exhaled then strutted over to the log.)

CANDY: Right then...

(With that, she straddled the front of the log, facing down the hill.)

CANDY: Hop on, Soph!

SOPHIRA: Okay.

(Looking forward to the ride, Sophira straddled the back end of the log then rubbed her hands excitedly.)

SOPHIRA: Ready!

CANDY: Okay, now kick off like I'm doing!

(With that, she proceeded to scoot against the ground in a bid to spark the log into action. Sophira immediately followed suit. Gripping the log tightly with their hands, they kicked away at the ground determinedly for a good minute or so, but all to no

avail. More than a little disappointed, Sophira stopped and pouted at the back of Candy's head.)

SOPHIRA: Why isn't it moving?

(Candy snarled back.)

CANDY: Keep kicking!!!

(Having made a fool of herself with the compass, she was determined not to be shown up again but the log simply wouldn't budge. Inspired by her friends determination, Sophira shrugged then joined in again. For a full five minutes, they kicked and pushed at the ground with their feet, desperate to spark it into action. It still refused to budge. Starting to get despondent, Sophira sighed then stopped again and tried to catch her breath.)

SOPHIRA: It's not moving, Candy!

CANDY: Keep trying!!!

SOPHIRA: But...

CANDY: But nothing!

SOPHIRA: Right... well... you know best.

(She then flexed her shoulders and tried again.)

CANDY: We can do this!!! I know we can!!!

(She then snarled determinedly. She was too proud to give up now. Pride, unfortunately, comes before a fall. As they kicked and kicked at the ground time after time, the log suddenly started to move. Sophira was overjoyed.)

SOPHIRA: We did it!

(That delight suddenly turned to despair, however, when she realised she was actually going sideways rather than forwards. The front end, where Candy was sitting, however, hadn't even budged.)

SOPHIRA: I'm going sideways!!!

CANDY: What???

SOPHIRA: The back end of the log is sliding to the left!

CANDY: What?

(Her eyes then bulged. She hadn't noticed it initially, but having been facing the bottom of the hill, she was very quickly turning to face the trees on her right.)

CANDY: It's twisting!!!

SOPHIRA: I know; I just said that!!! What are we gonna do???

CANDY: Just cling on for now!!!

(Very much in favour of Candy's suggestion, Sophira gritted her teeth then clamped her hands onto the log in front of her. Powerless to do anything else, she then sat there as the log continued to rotate sideways.)

SOPHIRA: Candy???

CANDY: What?

SOPHIRA: We're facing sideways now!!!

CANDY: I can see that!!!

SOPHIRA: And if it keeps on turning like this, we'll end up facing uphill!!!

CANDY: We'll just have to jump off and turn around then, won't we?

SOPHIRA: Right...

(She then gulped as her end of the log slid past Candy to suddenly become the front end.)

SOPHIRA: Now I'm at the front and I'm facing the wrong way!!!

CANDY: Look! Just stay calm, okay? As soon as it settles down we can jump off and...

(She then screamed in terror. Sophira's end of the log had slid far enough down the hill for the steep gradient to come into a play. As a result, the log started to slide down the embankment with Candy and Sophira facing in the wrong direction.

Unsurprisingly, they were scared witless.)

SOPHIRA: I don't like it, I don't like it!!!

CANDY: Help!!!

(Hugging the log with something of a death grip, Candy whimpered then contorted her neck to look over her shoulder. With the log thundering down the steep embankment at quite the pace, all she could see was a green and brown blur. The rest of the trees on the embankment were whizzing past at a blinding speed.)

CANDY: I'm not happy!!!

(Having also tried to take a peek at where they were going, Sophira shared her sentiments entirely.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! I wanna get off!!!

(The log then flew over a bump and landed with quite the thump, making Candy flop forwards and bang her head.)

CANDY: Ow!!! That really hurt!!!

SOPHIRA: Are you okay???

CANDY: No! You???

SOPHIRA: No! I'm gonna be sick!!!

(As if fate was looking down and mocking them, they then proceeded to zoom through three muddy puddles, a thorn bush and a rather large group of dozing mountain lions. Consequently, they zoomed onwards down the bank covered in dirt, soaked to the skin and covered in cuts, whilst being pursued by a pack of angry predators.)

SOPHIRA: I hate you, Candy!!!

(Staring in terror at the pursuing lions, Candy said nothing. She'd been struck dumb by fear. Right now, she didn't know what to think. She desperately wanted it to stop so she could get off, but at the same time, its downward momentum was the only thing keeping the lions at bay. Sophira on the other hand, felt so sick, she simply wanted the ride to end. She'd rather be eaten by mountain lions than endure another second. As such, she closed her eyes and made the futile gesture of imploring the log to stop. In contrast, with her eyes transfixed on the hungry beasts in pursuit of them, Candy implored the opposite.)

CANDY: Faster!!!

(She whimpered.)

CANDY: We're gonna die!!!

SOPHIRA: I know!!!

CANDY: What are we gonna do???

SOPHIRA: Die!!! You just bloody said as much!

CANDY: This is not the time to be pedantic, woman! We need to try something!

(Sophira then burst into tears.)

CANDY: Yeah, that'll help!!!

(She then burst into tears herself. It all felt so hopeless. The likely scenario was that they'd crash then be devoured by lions before they could even say "ouch". Fearing their end was nigh, all they could do was cling onto the log and cry uncontrollably.)

SOPHIRA: It's not fair. I had so much to look forward to!

CANDY: Same!!! I never did find love!

SOPHIRA: Or Arterian!

CANDY: We're rubbish!

SOPHIRA: The worst.

(She then pouted and glanced back over her shoulder, half expecting to see a tree in their path; one that would ultimately bring about their demise. Having done so, however, she got the shock of her life. They were hurtling straight towards a herd of goats. All she could do was brace herself and cringe.)

SOPHIRA: This is going to hurt!!!

(As she braced for impact, however, they whizzed straight through the middle of the goats completely unscathed.)

SOPHIRA: Huh?

(Much to their delight, the lions then proceeded to attack the goats and abandoned the pursuit. Watching on, Candy's face lit up.)

CANDY: We're saved!!!

(The ensuing scream from Sophira, however, begged to differ.)

SOPHIRA: We're doomed!!!

(With a face full of fear, Candy swiftly glanced back and made quite a horrifying discovery. The log was about to shoot off the edge of a cliff that they hadn't seen beneath the tree tops.)

CANDY: Dive off!!!

(Sophira yelled back.)

SOPHIRA: Okay!!!

(They then sat there clinging to the log; too scared to even move.)

CANDY: Okay, this time!!!

(Before they could even consider bailing out, however, the log flew over the edge of the cliff.)

CANDY: Daddy!!!

SOPHIRA: No!!!

(Their screams could probably have been heard for miles around. A cold hearted cynic might suggest "they should have cried 'Arterian' then" but he was the last thing on their minds. They were flying above a crevice, two hundred feet in the air. The price for falling would be certain death. Already terrified of heights, Sophira had literally turned white with fear.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!! It's a long way down, Candy!!! I don't want to fall down *there*, Candy!!!

(Just then, however, the log crashed down on the other side of the crevice. Having landed on extremely soft soil, it barely even bounced. It simply slid forth like a curling stone on ice. A softer landing wouldn't have even been possible. Astonished by their lucky escape, they both clung onto the log, whimpering and crying with relief.)

SOPHIRA: Oh, my god. We're okay!!! We're okay, Candy!

CANDY: I... oh, thank god.

(Much to their added delight, the log then began to slow down. Having started to push soil and turf up in front of itself, its momentum was vanishing rapidly.

Delighted by this, they both wiped sweat away from their brows.)

CANDY: Oh boy; I thought we were done for then!

SOPHIRA: Me too. I'm not doing that again! Ever! I don't care if it *is* a common practice among woodland folk; that was too much.

(Candy could only grimace with embarrassment. She'd only claimed that log riding was a common practice in an attempt to look like a true woodland genius. It was a prideful act that had nearly got them both killed again. Accepting that it was time to

finally swallow that pride, she turned to Sophira and blushed, just as the log finally ground to a halt.)

CANDY: I'm sorry, Soph!

(Sophira leapt from the log and raised a baffled eyebrow.)

SOPHIRA: Why? It wasn't your fault. The front of the log must have been stuck, causing the back end to slide away first.

CANDY: Well...

SOPHIRA: You'd know better than I would, of course. You are the expert, after all. (Starting to sense that Sophira's faith in her might well be limitless, Candy scratched her head nervously. Sophira's belief in her had created something of a moral dilemma. Half of her wanted to confess that riding fallen trees wasn't actually a thing, and that she'd made it up just to look knowledgeable. The other half of her, however, understood that telling Sophira she was actually out of her depth might just freak her out. The belief that Candy knew what she was doing, after all, was giving Sophira hope.)

CANDY: Um...

(Deciding it was best to keep quiet, she then leapt from the log and hugged Sophira for all she was worth.)

CANDY: Thank god you're okay.

SOPHIRA: Ditto.

(She then pulled back from the hug and sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I'm all caked in crap again!

CANDY: Yeah... sorry, about that.

SOPHIRA: Stop apologising, Candy. It wasn't your fault.

CANDY: Right...

SOPHIRA: Anyway...

(She then peered over Candy's shoulder and flinched.)

SOPHIRA: Hey! What's that?

(Candy turned around then raised a curious eyebrow.)

CANDY: I don't know!

(Before them, stood a thin stone entrance way leading beneath the ground.)

CANDY: Some kind of ancient temple, maybe?

SOPHIRA: Temple?

CANDY: Yeah. Could be. I mean, I've heard tales of ancient ruins in this forest.

SOPHIRA: Interesting.

(Sophira's then diverted her attention back to what had just happened.)

SOPHIRA: That log ride... damn. We almost died. Again! That's how many times now?

(She cringed.)

SOPHIRA: It's a good thing *you're* here, Candy. If I didn't have a survival expert with me, I wouldn't have lasted five minutes.

(Overcome with guilt all off a sudden, Candy could only whimper. In that moment, continuing to pretend she was an authority on all things woodland suddenly felt wrong.)

CANDY: Don't! Just stop. Stop being nice. I'm sorry, Soph. I'm a fraud! I thought this would be an easy trip, but... obviously I'm not as great at this survival lark as I thought I was.

(Sophira furrowed her brow.)

SOPHIRA: But you are. I mean, we're still alive aren't we?

CANDY: Yeah. Somehow! Not because of *me* though.

(She sighed.)

CANDY: There's a world of difference between tracking animals in an enclosed hunting zone and trying to survive out here on our wits alone, Soph. I just wish I'd realised it before. I'm really not cut out for all this.

(Sophira scoffed.)

SOPHIRA: Behave! Okay, we've *only just* survived at times, but I doubt *I'd* have survived at all without *you*. Your skills are the only reason we're still breathing, Candy. So stop doubting yourself. Fraud indeed; you're being ridiculous.

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: That's crap, but the fact you care enough to lie means a lot, Soph.

SOPHIRA: It's not crap. Without your intervention, I'd have been eaten by a werewolf, a giant bird or a cheetah by now. So stop putting yourself down.

(Candy looked to her blankly for a moment then smiled. Her ego had been fully restored.)

CANDY: You're right. I'm the best.

SOPHIRA: Definitely.

(They then shared a friendly smile before turning back to face the stone entrance way.)

CANDY: I know we shouldn't, but... the mere fact it's there makes me want go inside.

SOPHIRA: I hear you.

CANDY: Shall we?

SOPHIRA: Why not? I mean, there's no harm in looking, is there?

CANDY: Exactly.

(With that, they paced forth towards the narrow stone doorway. As they got closer, however, they both started to slow down. At the back of their minds they were both beginning to doubt that there really was no harm in looking. On closer inspection, the entrance had a foreboding look about it that made them feel more than a little apprehensive. Drawn in by an uncontrollable urge to be nosey, however, they continued on; albeit cautiously.

Upon reaching the entrance, Candy and Sophira shared a nervous nod then crept onwards, taking their first tentative steps down the stone stairs inside. They could see a stone floor at the bottom and it didn't seem to be too dark, but still their hearts began to race.

Moments later, when they reached the bottom of the steps, they stopped dead in their tracks and gaped at the sight before them. They'd arrived inside a large, square room with a break in its stone walls that led out to the crevice they'd just cleared on the log; allowing light to flood in. A set of large pillars held the roof in place and there was a small bath in the centre. In that moment, any sense of foreboding vanished. The walls were adorned with fine gold and blue paintworks which generated a most peaceful ambience. As they looked around in awe, Sophira could only exhale.)

SOPHIRA: Oh, wow!

CANDY: I know, right? Lovely.

SOPHIRA: It really is!

(She gave Candy a questioning glance.)

SOPHIRA: What do you think it is? Some kind of ancient bath house, maybe?

(Candy shrugged as she continued to stare wide eyed at the picturesque décor.)

CANDY: Maybe. I don't know.

SOPHIRA: Well, whatever it was, it's really nice!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Yup. And it seems like a great place to take a rest and clean up a little.

SOPHIRA: Definitely.

(With that, she paced over to where the broken wall led over the crevice then yelled at the top of her lungs.)

SOPHIRA: Arterian!!!

(Candy almost leapt out of her skin.)

CANDY: What are you doing?

(Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: What? You can literally see for miles, so there's no harm in trying is there?

CANDY: Well... I guess not.

(Candy then paced to her side.)

CANDY: Maybe we should both shout.

SOPHIRA: Under the circumstances, we'd be foolish not to. At least that's what a cold-hearted cynic might say.

CANDY: Fair enough...

(Just then, the echo of scampering footsteps rose up from behind them. At once, they both spun around with terror in their eyes. Scared witless, they then scanned all around the room with their eyes. Seeing nothing untoward, Candy gulped.)

CANDY: You... you heard that, right?

SOPHIRA: Yes!

(They then shared a terrified glance. It was a glance that confirmed they were both thinking the same thing. Their next move was obvious.)

CANDY: Let's get the fuck out of here!

SOPHIRA: Go!

(And with that, they took off for the entrance way. They didn't even consider for a moment that the footsteps may have been the result of something innocent or harmless. It was a spooky sound and that was more than enough to set alarm bells ringing.)

CANDY: Maybe coming in here was a mistake.

(Just then, the scampering sound filled the room again; this time, however, it was accompanied by a deep, sinister growl.)

SOPHIRA: Big, massive, huge mistake!!!

(Charging towards the door, whimpering and crying, they only had one thought in mind. Getting out of there, sprinting until their legs stopped working and never venturing into unknown ruins ever again. They'd only made it half way to the exit, however, when a shadow suddenly filled the space at the bottom of the stairway. Spotting it immediately, Candy grabbed Sophira's arm and pulled her to a halt.)

SOPHIRA: What are you doing???

(Uttering no words, Candy slowly looked up towards the ceiling above the doorway and gulped. Fearing the worst, Sophira did likewise.)

CANDY: Um...

SOPHIRA: Eek!

(Hanging above the door, wielding a massive axe was a bizarre hybrid half-man, half-scorpion creature wearing a devilish snarl on its face.)

SOPHIRA: Candy...

CANDY: I know!

(They then shrieked, as the creature dropped to the ground before them. It made for quite the horrifying sight. With a human-like head and torso, an insect's abdomen,

six pointed legs and a scorpion tail, it was clearly a formidable force. Most terrifyingly of all, what they'd thought was an axe, was in fact being it's left hand. Such a freak of nature they'd never even dared to imagine. Terrified to the core, Candy and Sophira could only pace backwards and tremble. What it was or where it came from they had no idea, but the look in its eyes made it abundantly clear that it meant them no good. Its lack of benevolence was then confirmed when it spoke up in a booming voice.)

GUADIAN: Who dare desecrate the tomb of Lunfar Miatta???

(Fearing for their very lives, Candy whimpered.)

CANDY: We didn't desecrate anything... sir. We're lost.

(The beast growled.)

GUADIAN: I care not! For I, Guadian, keeper of the tomb, am sworn to kill all who enter the sacred chamber!!!

(As fearless as ever, Candy and Sophira then commenced their tried and trusted routine of hugging each other and crying in the face of danger.)

SOPHIRA: But we didn't mean to. There was no sign outside or anything!

(Offering no hint of mercy, Guadian growled once again.)

GUADIAN: I shall desecrate your bodies as you have desecrated this tomb with your presence!!!

(Fearing the worst, Sophira cried out.)

SOPHIRA: But I don't want to be desecrated!

(Much to her astonishment, Candy then stepped in front of her with her sword in her hand.)

CANDY: If it wants to kill us then it's going to have a fight on its hands, Soph!

(Brushing aside her initial thought of 'not much of one' Sophira snarled then decided to join her in taking a more positive stance.)

SOPHIRA: Okay, you fight and I'll heal you!

CANDY: Right... thanks for the vote of confidence, Soph.

(Sophira furrowed her brow.)

SOPHIRA: Would *you* like to be the healer then?

CANDY: I'd rather not *need* a healer!

SOPHIRA: Ambitious.

CANDY: Mean!

SOPHIRA: No, it's not. Have you seen the size of that thing???

CANDY: Right... you make a good point, actually.

SOPHIRA: Thank you!

GUADIAN: Enough! Time to die!!!

(And with that, the beast charged for Candy; its pointed feet making a sharp tapping sound as it did so. Not knowing whether to avoid the flailing axe-like claw, the stabbing feet or the scorpion tail first, Candy dithered and shuffled on the spot.)

CANDY: What do I do? What do I do?

(Having retreated to a safer distance, Sophira yelled back.)

SOPHIRA: Avoid the sharp bits!

CANDY: They're *all* sharp!!!

(In that moment, with a look of sheer hatred, Guadian lunged forth to make the kill. Panicking profusely, Candy yelped then swayed backwards to avoid the claw, only to be impaled by the stinger on its tail as the beast ran her through.)

CANDY: Ow!!!

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(Without a moment's hesitation, Sophira snarled then rushed in to aid with her healing hands. Delighted that they were now in the same place, where it could kill them at the same time, Guadian then raised its axe-like arm. Before it could strike however, Candy and Sophira took swift evasive action. Whimpering and crying they shot off up the stairs like bats out of hell. Watching them go, Guadian growled venomously.)

GUADIAN: First you desecrate this sacred chamber with your presence and then you show me cowardice??? This isn't over!!!

(Candy and Sophira couldn't have disagreed more. As far as they were concerned it was well and truly over. Scared witless by the freakish beast they just kept on running as fast as their legs would allow them. Without even looking back, they charged through the wilderness like stampeding gazelles. It didn't matter where they went as long as it was far, far away from that tomb.)

Great north continent – Lethernia - Hall of the Elders

(Inside the besieged city of Lethernia, at this time, the situation was worsening by the hour. Citizens were falling ill in their hundreds; their families too weak to heal them. Hunger and a lack of sanitation was bringing them to the edge of despair. Factor in an impending invasion by the Gregon army and it seemed only a matter of time before their entire civilisation was obliterated.

Devastated by the desperate situation in the city, the wise men, Yanada and Faites sat slumped in their chairs in the hall of elders, staring emptily at the marble floor. They could see no way out and were simply awaiting death with rumbling stomachs.)

FAITES: Yanada, my friend; I feel my time is upon me. I can't hold on any longer. (Yanada turned to his weakened comrade.)

YANADA: Please, Faites; summon what strength you can to stay with me, I beg of you.

FAITES: It's no good, my friend. I've got nothing left to hold on *with*. (He sighed.)

FAITES: We made a mistake, Yanada. We should have tried to raise an army before it got to this stage. Now the people are too *weak* to fight.

YANADA: But even if they weren't, any Lethernian worthy of the name would rather die than take a life, Faites.

(He nodded.)

YANADA: Which is as it should be!

FAITES: No. I'm sorry, but I think you're wrong. I know peace and harmony are the very essence of our existence, but *this time*, I believe fighting would have been the *right* thing to do! I just wish I'd realised it sooner.

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: I'm weary, Faites. I don't have the energy to argue with you anymore!

FAITES: Good. I just want to be *heard* before I leave this mortal realm, anyway. (He sighed.)

FAITES: To strive for peace is a wonderful thing, my friend. It's what *all* nations should do. But we've taken it too far. *Our* people won't even fight for the survival of our civilisation. They would rather see their families perish. I can't help but feel we've been fools for...

(Despite declaring himself too weak to argue only a few moments ago, Yanada glowered at him.)

YANADA: Fools? We're fools for refusing to take part in barbarity?

(Faite's looked to him pleadingly.)

FAITES: It isn't barbarity to fight back against the threat of extinction!

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: No. I can't accept that, my friend. Fighting is *never* the answer. Not now, not ever. Especially for us. We're about peace. Since day one, we've nurtured the good in people; teaching them to shun the sword. To promote love over conflict. Having done all that, who are we to take up arms now?

FAITES: You're not making any sense right now, Yanada. If that's how you *really* feel, then why did you send for Arterian? The only living black mage? Was it not because you wanted him to fight for us?

YANADA: Fight? No. Arterian's powers could have stopped the Gregon *without* bloodshed. His power is limitless. He could have protected us and driven them away peaceably.

FAITES: No. He couldn't. It doesn't work like that. Black magic is the magic of aggression and death; that's why he was banished to a forest on another continent.

YANADA: Wrong. Black magic can still be used for peaceful purposes, as long as the user doesn't succumb to the dark rage.

FAITES: Yes, but against such a foe, he inevitably *would* succumb to the dark rage.

YANADA: You don't *know* that, my friend.

(Faite's could only offer up a weary shake of the head.)

FAITES: Yes, I do. And deep down, so do you.

(He sighed.)

FAITES: You need to accept that we made a mistake by not fighting, Yanada. I have. Now I shall go to my death knowing that I was nothing but a blind fool...

(He then passed away in his seat. Watching all signs of life vanish from his face, Yanada could offer only a sigh and hang his head. It wouldn't be long before everyone in the city, including himself, suffered the same fate. Despite this, however, he still refused to see the need to fight. He was glad they hadn't attempted to raise an army. Even with those dying words from his friend, he remained convinced that killing in any form was wrong. And so, he closed his eyes to rest and await death with dignity.)

Great South Continent – Somewhere in Ashbury Forest

(The cheetah is reputed to be the fastest sprinter in the entire animal kingdom. Though not as *fast* as cheetahs, ostriches are reputed to be able to run at extremely high speeds for exceptionally long periods of time. Having come face to face with a murderous, human-scorpion, however, Candy and Sophira had put *both* those creatures to shame. Utterly terrified, they'd literally sprinted for miles; screaming all the way. It wasn't until their desperate charge in a straight line brought them to a sandy beach that they even considered slowing down. In fact, if Candy hadn't declared they'd run far enough, Sophira would have tried to run across the sea.

Having been brought to a halt by the sprawling blue yonder, Candy's first act was to collapse to the sand while she gathered her breath. Feeling somewhat foolish, having almost charged into the ocean, Sophira paced back over to her then flopped to the sand by Candy's side. Drained of energy and with very little air left in their lungs, all they could do was puff and pant with exhaustion. As such, they didn't say a word to one another for a good ten minutes. They just laid there, gasping and wheezing until eventually, Sophira managed to muster the energy to prop herself up on one elbow.)

SOPHIRA: You okay, Candy?
(Candy gave a weak nod.)
SOPHIRA: What *was* that thing?
(Candy forced out a heavy breath then sat up slightly.)
CANDY: I don't know. I don't *want* to know!
SOPHIRA: Me either, but from now on we stay out of caves, caverns and ancient tombs, okay?
CANDY: I absolutely, one hundred percent, won't be arguing with that, Soph. Believe me.
(Delighted to hear Candy's reply, Sophira smiled then glanced around at their surroundings.)
SOPHIRA: Hmm... this seems as good a place as any.
CANDY: What?
SOPHIRA: It'll be dark soon, Candy, and we're knackered; not to mention caked in crap. We should set up camp here on the beach.
(Candy nodded.)
CANDY: Works for me, Soph. We'll just have to head into those trees quickly to gather the wood for the fire.
SOPHIRA: And *that* works for *me*.
CANDY: Cool. Let's do that then.
(With that, they wearily climbed to their feet then headed for the wooded edge of the beach.)

(Upon returning from the woods with kindling and logs for a fire, Candy and Sophira found themselves on a thin, secluded stretch of beach, cut off from the rest of it by grassy headlands that pointed out to sea on either side. They inadvertently strayed a hundred metres to the right of where they'd set off from and found the perfect spot to set up camp. Not only would this tiny cove be the ideal place to relax around a warm fire, but it would shield them reasonably well from any prying eyes. Delighted with their find, Candy wasted no time in starting a fire there. As soon as it was lit, the two of them then stripped naked and headed into the sea to cleanse themselves and wash their clothes; extremely grateful for the seclusion.

A short while later, once they'd finished bathing and cleaning their outfits, Candy and Sophira retired to the fireside to finish off what remained of their ostrich meat. Having worked up quite an appetite, they scoffed it down in minutes. Reinvigorated, they then sat back to relax in the heat of the flames. It had been a horribly long day and the chance to take a break was extremely welcome. Determined to make the most of it, they made themselves as comfortable as possible then stared up at the starry sky; entirely at ease with their nudity. Rather taken by the beautiful view in the sky, Candy exhaled then lowered her head and glanced towards the ocean before turning her head towards the fire. A smile then washed onto her lips. The glorious views, accompanied by the crackle of fire and the sound of the ocean made for the perfect ambience. This, she thought, would be the perfect place to bring a date. Eager to share her thoughts on the matter, she then glanced to Sophira.)

CANDY: Soph?
(Staring hypnotically at the stars, Sophira offered no reply.)
CANDY: Soph? You okay there, Soph?
(Knocked off of her train of thought, Sophira glanced to her in bewilderment.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry, what?

CANDY: I asked if you were okay.

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Sorry. I was looking at that beautiful sky. Yeah, I'm okay. You?

CANDY: Me? Yeah, I'm fine. Better than fine, actually. It's nice here.

SOPHIRA: It is. I really like it here.

CANDY: Right? This place is pretty much perfect.

(She then glanced skywards briefly.)

CANDY: It's just a shame my dad isn't here to enjoy it with us.

SOPHIRA: Is it though? We've got no clothes on, Candy. I really don't think he'd want to see you...

CANDY: Don't be pedantic, Soph. We wouldn't *be* naked if *he* was here!

(She then furrowed her brow at the sight of Sophira giggling into her hand.)

CANDY: I see. Mocking me, huh?

SOPHIRA: A little bit, yeah.

CANDY: Right. Cheeky bugger.

(They then shared a brief chuckle together.)

SOPHIRA: So... feeling a bit homesick, are you?

CANDY: No, not really. I just miss my dad a bit, that's all.

(Sophira sighed ruefully.)

SOPHIRA: Well... we can go back if you want to, Candy. I think we've both realised by now that coming here was a massive mistake. We're never gonna find Arterian in time; we're just not.

(Her face then dropped.)

SOPHIRA: I've failed. Lethernia's finished.

(Watching as a tear rolled down Sophira's cheek, Candy couldn't help but pout sorrowfully. She hated seeing her so down. Eager to cheer her up, she upped then plopped herself down at her side.)

CANDY: Don't be downhearted, Soph. If we set out early enough tomorrow, you never know... things might just work out.

(Sophira laid flat on her back then stared into the sky.)

SOPHIRA: Maybe. It's not very likely though, is it? I think I need to face facts here, Candy. The chances are, everyone I love will perish and I'll be left with nowhere to call home.

CANDY: Don't be defeatist, babes. There's still a chance.

(She shrugged then laid herself down slightly, making sure to lean over Sophira.)

CANDY: Oh, and you're wrong about that last part by the way. You *do* have a home. You'll *always* have a home, Soph. With me. And that's a promise.

(Lifted by Candy's kindness, Sophira turned her head to face her then smiled. Her lips then started to quiver. Candy's was smiling down at her from a matter of inches away and in that moment, she was captivated by her eyes. As such, she could only exhale lovingly.)

CANDY: You okay? You looked kinda stoned!

(Lost in the moment, Sophira stared back up at her then inadvertently said exactly what she was thinking.)

SOPHIRA: Kiss me.

(Candy flinched.)

CANDY: Excuse me???

(Realising what she'd said, Sophira gasped in horror then rolled on her side in embarrassment.)

CANDY: Did you ask me to kiss you?

(Thoroughly ashamed of herself, Sophira rolled into a ball.)

SOPHIRA: Leave me alone!

CANDY: Um...

(Glancing down at her red-faced friend, she could only grimace. Right now, she was having exciting thoughts that she couldn't make any sense of. Maybe it was the romantic setting or the heat of the fire on their naked bodies but kissing her felt like a wonderful idea. Not about to second guess herself, she shrugged then placed her hand on Sophira's shoulder. Casting any lingering thoughts about Osric aside, she then pulled her towards her. Moments later, Sophira landed on her back again and whimpered fearfully.)

SOPHIRA: Candy, I didn't mean to say...

CANDY: Yes, you did.

SOPHIRA: But...

(Candy then placed a finger to Sophira's lips to silence her.)

CANDY: Never fight your feelings, Soph.

SOPHIRA: I...

(She then clammed up and proceeded to tremble. Candy was staring back into her eyes lovingly. Sensing something special was about to happen, she could only gulp nervously.)

SOPHIRA: Candy? Are you...

(Before she could say another word, Candy then planted her soft lips against hers. At once, her heart skipped a beat. A few seconds later, however, Candy slowly pulled away again. Not knowing quite what to say, Sophira could only whimper. It was as if the entire world had become a wonderful blur.)

CANDY: Now kiss me back this time.

(Candy then lowered her lips to Sophira's once again and they shared several, lingering, gentle kisses. This time, when Candy pulled back again, she left the love-struck Sophira kissing the air in a daze.)

CANDY: Wow. I've never done this with a woman before! It's nice.

(Sophira opened her eyes and blushed. She didn't have time to reply, however, before Candy stooped to kiss her once again. Sophira was in heaven right now. Kissing Candy was a joy way in excess of anything she'd ever dared to imagine. And it was a joy that was soon to heighten. Eager to take things a little further, Candy nudged up even closer then proceeded to run her hand over Sophira's breasts. At the same time, their kissing intensified tenfold. This brought forth an increased wandering of hands and in no time at all, they became well and truly engaged in the deepest throes of passion. No more nervous pecks; they were actively into each other. For Candy, it was an extremely exciting moment. A brand new experience to add to her catalogue. She was the kind of girl who'd try anything once and never regret a thing. Exploring new avenues, after all, was half the fun. To Sophira, on the other hand, this was a revelation; a dream come true. The sensation of having Candy's tongue in her mouth was beyond her wildest dreams. To have a breasts teased and tantalised at the same time, therefore was almost mind-blowing.

As they writhed together on the sand, their nakedness bathed in the orange glow of the flames, Candy stepped things up once again. Slowly, she slid herself downwards then applied her tongue to Sophira's breast. Lost in ecstasy, Sophira could only muster an aroused groan of excitement and stroke Candy's hair adoringly. It was the greatest moment of her life. Little did she know, however, the best was yet to come.

Moments later, when Candy slid herself down Sophira's body then set to work on her femininity with her tongue, she could only squeal with pure, undiluted delight. This was a sensation on a whole other level. A pleasure beyond a pleasure. And to be experiencing it with the one she loved was a joy way in excess of anything she could have ever conceived possible. Her heart soared. The pleasure, the intimacy, the glorious expression of mutual love; a combination that served to convince her more than ever than herself and Candy were destined to be together forever. Groaning with ecstasy, she prayed it would never end.)

(For the next half an hour Candy and Sophira pleased each other generously with fingertips, tongues and each others womanhood until several orgasms later they were too tired to go on. Candy had enlightened her to a myriad of new erotic sensations and Sophira had returned every favour. She'd been desperate to make Candy feel as loved as she did. To assure her that the love they experienced went both ways. Loving Sophira's commitment to returning the pleasure she was passing on, Candy had had a joyous time. A veritable jamboree of erotic fun. But that was all it had been. Fun.

Blissfully unaware of Candy's casual take on their love-making, Sophira flopped onto her back then gasped with unbridled delight. Consumed with love, she then rolled onto her side and cuddled up closely to Candy again. She genuinely believed that her life had changed forever in that moment.)

SOPHIRA: Candy...

(Before she could continue, however, Candy gushed out loud.)

CANDY: Damn, Soph. That was amazing!

(Sophira exhaled.)

SOPHIRA: It was. It was beautiful. We're gonna be doing that a *lot*!

CANDY: We... what?

SOPHIRA: I'm so happy right now, Candy. I fell in love with you back at that lake, but I didn't really understand it. I mean, it's not what people talk about when they mention love, is it? A girl in love with another girl, I mean. So I didn't say anything. I was afraid you'd think I'm some kind of freak or something. I had no idea, you felt the same way about *me*! I'm so happy.

(At once, Candy's eyes bulged and she gaped in horror. She'd had no idea Sophira was in love with her. She'd thought they were merely having a bit of naughty fun.

Panicking and unsure what to say to her in reply, she could only grimace.)

CANDY: Yeah...

(She then proceeded to sweat. Thinking of a response that wouldn't break Sophira's heart wasn't going to be easy. Desperately trying to come up with something, she mouthed silent nothings for a moment then froze in dismay. In that moment, a dark realisation had come to her. The signs had been there all along. Sophira's hatred of Osric, for one. She hadn't been cold towards him because she sensed the bad in him; it was because she was jealous. Appalled at herself for not noticing it sooner, she could only cringe.)

CANDY: Oh, boy...

SOPHIRA: What?

CANDY: Um...

(Her bottom lip then proceeded to quiver. She didn't want to be in a loving relationship with another girl, therefore there was literally nothing she could say that wouldn't break Sophira's heart. Right now, she felt horrible. If she'd *known* how Sophira felt about her, she'd never have made out with her. Doing so would have been cruel. Despicable. Hurtful. Beyond mean. She knew how much it would hurt because Osric had literally just done it to her. He'd used her loving feelings to satisfy his own selfish desire for a sexual thrill. There was no way she could *ever* use Sophira like that. Not intentionally. And yet, there she was, laying in Sophira's arms, destined to hurt her in the exactly same way.)

CANDY: Shit!

SOPHIRA: Shit?

CANDY: Um... yeah. You know... shit, that was good.

SOPHIRA: It was mind-blowing.

CANDY: Yeah...

(She winced. Telling Sophira the truth was not going to be easy. Unfortunately, she had no choice. Sophira thought they were an item now and she had to set her straight.)

CANDY: Soph?

SOPHIRA: Yes?

CANDY: The thing is...

(Unable to bear the thought of hurting her, she then proceeded to chicken out spectacularly. Leaving the truth unspoken, she jumped to her feet and headed towards her clothes instead.)

CANDY: We'd better get dressed and have some kip. It's another long day tomorrow!

(Sophira watched her go then sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I guess so!

(She then climbed to her feet and headed after her. Moments later, having reached the spot where Candy was dressing, she puffed out then reached for her dress. As she did so, however, Candy flinched then jumped to one side to avoid any accidental contact between them. It was an action so deliberate, it instantly set alarm bells ringing in Sophira's head. She'd dodged her as if she was avoiding unwanted physical contact from a slimy, middle-aged pervert.)

SOPHIRA: What was that?

(Dressing as fast as she could, Candy forced an uncomfortable smile.)

CANDY: What? Nothing.

(Sophira watched on as Candy rushed her clothes on then raised a distrusting eyebrow.)

SOPHIRA: Are you angry at me or something? Did I do something wrong?

(Candy threw out a dismissive wrist then released the world's least convincing laugh.)

CANDY: Don't be silly! Of course not.

(Pondering Candy's sudden, aloof behaviour, Sophira wracked her brains for a moment then her mouth fell open. In that moment, the truth hit her like a lightning bolt. The love they'd made had just been sex to Candy. It was so obvious. She wanted to hold Candy in her arms and never let her go, thus affirming her loving feelings for her. Candy had done the opposite. She'd dodged her to avoid the merest contact. It was definitely not the act of someone in love. Unsurprisingly, her heart broke there and then.

Crestfallen, Sophira's shoulder's slumped. She'd never felt so betrayed. How could Candy use her like that? She felt exploited. Manipulated. And it made no sense whatsoever. Osric had broken Candy's heart that very morning, so she knew that

Candy understood the pain. And yet she'd done the same thing to her anyway. She couldn't even begin to understand it. What had she done to deserve such cruelty? How could Candy exploit her loving feelings then discard like this? Was love just a tool for one person to hurt another with? How could her friend do this to her? Why?

Unable to come up with any kind of rational explanation for Candy's betrayal, Sophira just stood there for a good few moments and allowed a stream of tears to flow down her cheeks. She was crushed. It wasn't long, however, before anger took over. A snarl developed on her face then she stamped past Candy to grab her clothes. Quick to realise that Sophira had figured everything out, Candy swiftly turned her back then continued to get dressed. Anything to avoid looking her in the eye.

A short while later, once she was dressed, Candy scampered back to the fireside then sat down on the far side where Sophira couldn't see her. A few moments later, when Sophira had finished donning her clothes, she also stamped back to the fireside, making sure to sit on the other side of it. As far away from Candy as possible. Their friendship, it seemed, was well and truly over.

Sitting there, silently staring into the flames, Candy was riddled with guilt. How she wished she'd realised what she meant to Sophira earlier. If she had, she'd never have allowed any intimacy to happen. Sophira, on the other hand, could only muster angry thoughts about being used. Her normally warm heart turned as cold as ice at the thought that she could never trust anyone ever again.)

(For the next twenty minutes, Candy and Sophira remained perfectly silent. Not one word passed between them. Sophira was hurt and angry. Candy was mortified and riddled with guilt. They were both in very little doubt that their one moment of passion had killed their friendship stone dead. And so, they just sat there, pouting miserably at the fire. How Candy wished she'd handled things differently. It was a thought process shared by Sophira. She also wished Candy had handled things differently. Sulking in sustained silence, they very much had that one thought in common.

As they sat there and stewed, neither of them could even bring themselves to sigh. They were too deflated even for that. They were so broken, they could barely even muster a movement. That, however, was about to change. As they sat there emptily staring into the flames, a deafening roar of anger rose up from the grassy bank by the trees. At once, Candy and Sophira leapt to their feet and glared in direction of the roar. Much to their absolute horror the scorpion-man, Guadian was standing before them snarling into the night air.)

GUADIAN: I told you this wasn't over!!!

(Terrified to the very core of their souls, Candy and Sophira shrieked then raced to the other side of the fire, away from the beast. Candy arrived last, having deviated away to snatch her sword from her pack along the way. Unimpressed by the move, Guadian scoffed.)

GUADIAN: Fools! You have nowhere left to run!!! And now, you shall die!!!

(It then charged at them, flailing its axe claw in the air.)

SOPHIRA: Run away!!!

(In a blind panic, they then charged headlong into one another, clashing their heads violently.)

CANDY: Ouch!

SOPHIRA: Stupid bitch!!!

(More than a little hurt by Sophira's coldness, Candy whimpered. She wasn't about to dwell on the moment, however; not while they were being rampaged upon by a murderous fiend. Setting her hurt feelings aside, she quickly stepped in front of Sophira then raised her sword at Guadian. Their only hope of salvation, after all, was for her to fend the creature off with her sword as best as her limited sword skill would allow.)

CANDY: Why can't you leave us alone???

(The beast scoffed as Candy tried vainly to poke it with her sword.)

GUADIAN: Puny human fool; you will pay for your crime!!!

CANDY: Crime? We didn't do anything!

(Not about to be swayed by her protests, the beast growled then stormed forth, raising its axe-like arm to strike her down.)

GUADIAN: I will destroy you!

(Almost looking competent for a moment, Candy followed the raised axe-arm with her eyes and snarled. A split second later, when the beast flailed the arm towards her, she ducked under it then jumped up again; instinctively swinging her blade as she did so. Much to her astonishment, she'd managed to slice the axe-arm clean off. At once, the beast reared up in agony then staggered backwards.)

CANDY: Yes!!!

(Delighted with her success, Candy beamed then glanced over her shoulder at Sophira.)

CANDY: Did you see that? Did you see it?

(Staring up in hypnotic horror at the foul creature before them, Sophira said nothing.)

CANDY: Right... tough crowd.

(Buoyed by her early success, Candy then stepped forwards and snared at the creature.)

CANDY: I can do this. You won't defeat me that easily... you.

(Her optimism very quickly drained, however. Sneering, the beast held its bloodied arm before its face then allowed another axe-hand to materialise in its place.)

CANDY: Fuck off! No way!!! That's cheating!

(Sophira could only whimper in terror. How anyone could overcome such a powerful foe, she had no idea. In this moment, she was absolutely certain that herself and Candy were about to die horribly. It was a sentiment very much shared by the creature.)

GUADIAN: Now to get on and kill you! Come here!!!

(Not about to grant such a silly request, Candy quickly fled to the opposite side of the fire from which the beast was standing; ushering Sophira to follow. She was hoping the flames would make an effective barrier between themselves and their foe. It was ambitious, but it was all she could think of.)

CANDY: No matter what, we need to keep the fire between ourselves and the beast, Sophira!!!

(Standing just behind her, Sophira grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: And that's the plan, is it?

CANDY: Yes!

(Sophira gulped. She knew it was a long shot, but it was all they had left.)

SOPHIRA: Aw...

(Far from impressed by their retreat, Guadian growled.)
GUADIAN: Is that your tactic? To hide behind a fire?
(Candy and Sophira said nothing; opting instead to remain poised and ready to flee around the flames when the beast gave chase.)
GUADIAN: Very well. I'll play.
(With that, the beast raced towards the left side of the fire. With a screech, Candy and Sophira immediately took off around the other side. The beast then proceeded to chase them round and round in circles around the campfire.)
SOPHIRA: Hurry up!!!
CANDY: I'm going as fast as I can!!!
SOPHIRA: Then go as fast as someone else can!!! Someone faster!!!
CANDY: What???
SOPHIRA: It's right behind me!!!
CANDY: Shit!!!
(She snarled.)
CANDY: We need a new tactic!!!
SOPHIRA: You think???
(Candy replied matter-of-factly.)
CANDY: Well, yeah. We can't keep this up forever, you know? We're gonna have to do something drastic!
(Sophira snarled coldly.)
SOPHIRA: Why don't you try sleeping with it? You're really good at that sort of thing.
CANDY: Seriously? You're gonna throw that at me now???
SOPHIRA: Of course I am! At this rate we're going I'm gonna be dead in a minute. It's probably my last chance.
CANDY: For fuck sake, Soph...
SOPHIRA: My name's Sophira!
(At this point, having grown tired of chasing them in circles around the fire, Guadian stopped then reared up on its hind legs.)
GUADIAN: Enough of this tom-silliness...
CANDY: Tomfoolery!
GUADIAN: Who cares???
(The creature snarled.)
GUADIAN: This ends now!
(Much to Candy and Sophira's horror, it then vomited on the fire from a great height, extinguishing it immediately. Mortified by the deed, Candy and Sophira screamed in dismay. Without their fire barrier, they were sitting ducks.)
CANDY: Shit!!!
(In one last desperate attempt to salvage the situation, Candy whimpered then pointed her sword towards the beast.)
CANDY: Back off!
(Far from impressed, the beast simply scoffed then batted the blade straight out of her hand. Watching as it clattered into some rocks, all she could do was scream.)
CANDY: No!!!
SOPHIRA: Why???
(She whimpered.)
SOPHIRA: That was our last hope.
(Taking great delight in their torment, Guadian allowed itself a devilish chuckle.)
GUADIAN: Correct. And now you shall die!

(With that it raged towards them with its giant axe claw aloft. Rooted with fear, Candy and Sophira could only scream and cover their heads with their arms. The sting of death would soon be upon them and there was nothing they could do about it.)

CANDY: Daddy!!!

(Suddenly, a deafening boom echoed across the sky. It brought with it a shockwave so powerful that Candy and Sophira were both thrown onto their backsides. It felt like fifteen volcanoes had erupted at once. Fearing it was a pre-slaughter party trick, performed by the beast, they swiftly glanced up in horror. At once, they froze in bewilderment. Guadian was now a blackened and charred mess.)

CANDY: What did...

(She then flinched as Guadian disintegrated into a pile of soot before her very eyes.)

CANDY: Huh?

SOPHIRA: How did...

CANDY: I don't... know.

(To say Candy and Sophira were gobsmacked would be quite the understatement. They'd been doomed to die at the hands of this merciless fiend only for the sky to explode and the beast to disintegrate. Such a thing couldn't possibly be. Unable to rationalise what they'd seen, they just sat there wide-mouthed and dumbstruck. As delighted as they were with their lucky, last-minute reprieve, they simply couldn't make any sense of it. A few seconds later, however, they had their answer. As she sat there scratching her head, Sophira noticed a hooded figure standing on the lip between the forest and the beach.)

SOPHIRA: There's a man!

(She then scrambled to her feet; a move swiftly emulated by Candy. They then watched on nervously as the man started to approach.)

SOPHIRA: Um...

(Just then, the man peeled back his hood to reveal a friendly smile. It was comforting to see. This greying, middle-aged gentleman had a reassuring aura about him. A reassuring aura that was soon reinforced by his polite and friendly voice.)

STRANGER: Forgive me, ladies; I didn't mean to startle you! I just saw you were having a little trouble with that awful beast and thought I'd come and help out.

(Candy and Sophira gave each other a baffled glance.)

SOPHIRA: Don't even look at me!

CANDY: Soph...

(Sophira scoffed at her then looked to the stranger.)

SOPHIRA: Was that you? Did *you* kill that thing?

(The stranger laughed most heartily.)

STRANGER: I must confess; that *was* me, yes. I can't bear to see young ladies in distress, you see? So, I figured it needed doing.

(Candy offered him a warm smile.)

CANDY: That's so amazing. How can we ever thank you, Mr... um...

STRANGER: Please... call me Arterian!

(He turned to face Sophira.)

STRANGER: I hear you've been looking for me, young lady!

(Chapter Five – Rage.)

(Normally, when a person is burdened with achieving the seemingly impossible, success is greeted with jubilation; maybe even fireworks. Bunting is sometimes put out and perhaps a ticker tape parade is in order. The very least you'd expect to see

from the successful party is a show of external emotion. On this day, in Ashbury forest, however, no such rejoicing took place. Having successfully found Arterian, her own personal miniature needle in a very large haystack, all Sophira felt was numb. She had no inclination to celebrate whatsoever. She knew she *should* have felt something but the emotion simply wasn't there. Maybe she was emotionally drained following a day of turmoil and heartbreak; maybe her achievement was yet to sink in. Either way, the celebration never materialised. As she stood before the man she'd hunted high and low for, she could barely even raise a smile. As such, Candy had to open the conversation on her behalf.)

CANDY: You're Arterian?

ARTERIAN: I am indeed!

CANDY: Cool. We've been looking for you everywhere!

(Arterian smiled.)

ARTERIAN: So I gather. I got bored of waiting though, so I decided to come and find *you* instead.

(Candy bit her lip.)

CANDY: What? *You* came to find *us*? But... how did you even know where to look? And how did you even know we were looking for you, come to that?

(Adding to his air of mystery, Arterian tapped his nose.)

ARTERIAN: Not much happens in this forest without *my* knowing it, young lady.

CANDY: What? No. I mean...

(Sick to death of the sound of Candy's voice, Sophira quickly butted in.)

SOPHIRA: Oh, shut up, will you? Like it even matters how he knew.

(More than a little hurt by Sophira's indignation, Candy took a sorrowful step back then watched on, ashen-faced, as Sophira took over the conversation.)

SOPHIRA: Thank you for coming, Mr Arterian, sir. I'm honoured.

(Arterian offered her a courteous bow.)

ARTERIAN: You're most welcome, Sophira.

SOPHIRA: You know my name.

ARTERIAN: I do, yes.

(He then flicked a finger at the fire and reignited it. Barely able to believe what they'd just witnessed, Candy and Sophira stared into the flames in amazement.)

ARTERIAN: You look impressed. Don't be! That was nothing.

(He then gestured to the sand.)

ARTERIAN: Anyway... shall we? We've much to discuss.

(He then took a seat at the fireside and patted the sand on either side of him.)

ARTERIAN: Sit.

(Always eager to appease her elders, Sophira swiftly took a seat to his right. Having watched her go, Candy then placed herself down on his left. This seating arrangement suited Candy just fine. With Arterian in the middle, it was easier to hide from Sophira's hateful scowl.

Having watched the two young ladies make themselves comfortable in the sand, Arterian smiled then glanced into the fire. He then proceeded to enlighten them as to exactly who he was and what he was capable of. Most of it went over Candy's head, however, and she very quickly lost interest. He was speaking in great detail about the intricacies of magic; something she knew absolutely nothing about. Therefore, his entire speech was impossible for her to follow. Sophira, on the other hand, was absolutely fascinated and hung onto his every word. She was so engrossed in what he

was telling her, she listened in perfect silence for well over ten minutes until Arterian prompted her to speak by way of a question.)

ARTERIAN: Ring any bells?

SOPHIRA: The dark rage? No. I've never *heard* of it!

(Arterian sighed ruefully.)

ARTERIAN: Well, that doesn't surprise me. It's not Lethernia's *proudest* creation, after all. They like to pretend it never happened actually.

(Sophira bit her lip.)

SOPHIRA: So... what is it exactly? I mean what does it do?

ARTERIAN: Well, my dear, to understand that you have to understand the history.

SOPHIRA: Okay, so tell me...

(She blushed.)

SOPHIRA: If you don't mind that is, sir.

(Arterian smiled.)

ARTERIAN: It'd be a pleasure!

(He shuffled his backside to make himself more comfortable then continued.)

ARTERIAN: Many centuries ago the elders of Lethernia took the unpopular decision to bind all black magic. Even though spells such as fire, wind and ice had their practical uses, they decided on a blanket cull. And not just *elemental* black magic either. All of it. Telepathy, conjuring, even incantations and spells. It all had to go. You see for all its practical uses, black magic was also known to corrupt from time to time. Too much of it could turn a man into a power-crazed psychopath. A killer. So rather than *accept* the odd bad egg, they sought to nip the problem in the bud by using the binding option. To remove black magic from the world altogether.

(He nodded.)

ARTERIAN: In order to do so, they had to gather the source crystal of each magic type and encase them all in a sealed gold box. A box from which they thought they could never escape. It took them years to complete the gathering. As I'm sure you can appreciate those in possession of the source crystals were reluctant to give them up. But after much hard work and persuasion, the task eventually reached a successful conclusion. Every type of black magic was sealed away, they hoped, never to be used again.

(Sophira nodded, totally engrossed in the story.)

ARTERIAN: It proved to be a massive mistake. A few hundred years ago an unfortunate palace servant entered the chamber where the box was stored and accidentally released the magic. He didn't mean to, and I'll spare you the boring details about *how* he did it, but suffice to say the magic consumed him whole. Every type of black magic! Every type of black magic concentrated into a single person! Gathering them together like that, as it turned out, was a disaster waiting to happen.

(He shook his head.)

ARTERIAN: That poor fellow. Every time he felt a slight anger, the darkness within the magic would send him into a wild rage. Many died and as a result.

(He shook his head.)

ARTERIAN: Riddled with guilt, he exiled himself from Lethernia to live as a hermit until the loneliness drove him insane. It's believed, that he eventually leapt into a volcano to escape the immortal hell.

SOPHIRA: Immortal? Seriously?

(Arterian sighed.)

ARTERIAN: Sadly, yes. Black magic serves to protect its bearer, you see? Even to the point of holding back time. The current bearer being me. I've been infected with the dark rage for fifty years now and I'm the same age now as I was then.

SOPHIRA: Wow!

(At this point, Candy sat up and started to pay attention again. This part of his story was a whole lot easier to follow and like Sophira, she found it fascinating. Well aware that he'd regained her as a participating audience member, Arterian nodded to acknowledge her then continued.)

ARTERIAN: So, yes; immortal. Killing the bearer of the dark rage is nigh on impossible. Unless you can make him leap into a volcano, of course. See, the dark rage includes a barrier against attack. A virtually impenetrable one. The only time I'm vulnerable is if I willingly lower that barrier. And I only need to do that to unleash the most powerful of spells. So, yeah. I'm virtually immortal, eternally youthful and powerful beyond words.

(He grimaced.)

ARTERIAN: The dark rage would truly be a blessing if it wasn't for the risk of killing everyone close to me.

(Unnerved by this revelation, Candy and Sophira both edged away slightly.)

ARTERIAN: Hey, it's okay. You're perfectly safe; I like to sedate myself, you see? There's quite a few, shall we say, happy-making mushrooms in these woods.

(Comforted slightly, they then listened as he resumed his tale.)

ARTERIAN: Anyway, when a bearer *does* die, the dark rage is passed onto the nearest living person. Geographically, that is. Not their closest relative. I was unfortunate enough to be that person.

(He sighed solemnly.)

ARTERIAN: Having contracted it, I got the Lethernian elders to try to bind the magic again, but despite several attempts, nothing worked.

SOPHIRA: So, you're stuck with it?

ARTERIAN: I am.

(He nodded.)

ARTERIAN: Anyway, that's my story. I agreed many years ago that I'd live alone in this forest and keep the dark rage safe. As others did in the past. Only *I* plan to do so *forever*. Should I die, somebody else will have to carry my burden and I can't accept that. So the dark rage will remain within me until the end of time.

(Looking up at him with a hero-struck glint in her eye, Sophira smiled warmly.)

SOPHIRA: You're a wonderful person, Arterian.

ARTERIAN: Thank you, young lady. Your kind words are appreciated.

(He then bit his lip.)

ARTERIAN: So... as I said, I *had* planned to remain in this forest *forever*, but now I'm wanted back in Lethernia it seems.

(Sophira performed a double take in his direction.)

SOPHIRA: How did you know that?

ARTERIAN: Why else would *you*, a Lethernian, be here looking for me?

SOPHIRA: Right...

ARTERIAN: Though I have to say I'm astonished that they only sent two young girls out here to find me. These woods can be deadly.

SOPHIRA: They didn't send *two* girls. They didn't send *her* at all, in fact.

(She threw a half-hearted thumb in Candy's direction.)

SOPHIRA: There were soldiers with me...

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: It's a long story, actually!

ARTERIAN: We have time.

SOPHIRA: Right. Well... okay... in that case...

(She then proceeded to fill Arterian in on how much danger Lethernia was currently in. Enlightening him to every detail of the siege right from the very beginning, she was determined to make sure he understood just how severe the danger was. Only once she was satisfied that he understood the depth of Lethernia's plight, did she even *mention* her mission and how she'd ended up in the woods. Unfortunately for Candy, however, she didn't end her story there. She also went into great detail about how her good friend had subsequently abused her trust and used her for sex. It was a damning explanation that ended with her hammering home the point that they're *not* friends *anymore*. So damning was her discourse, in fact, that by the end of it Arterian was scowling at Candy with utter disdain.)

CANDY: What? Hey! That's not fair! She left out all my good points! Like the fact that I only came here in the first place to help her out.

(She then pouted at Sophira.)

CANDY: It's not nice to cherry pick the bad bits. And what about *my* woes? It's been no picnic for me either! For a start, *I* got used for sex too.

SOPHIRA: Yeah, then did it to me less than twenty four hours later, despite knowing full well how much it hurts.

(Unable to argue with that point, Candy could only whimper then huddle into herself in a bid to look small. Unimpressed, Arterian threw her one final scowl then turned to face Sophira.)

ARTERIAN: You've been to hell and back it seems, young lady. You have my sympathy.

SOPHIRA: Thank you.

(She looked desperately into his eyes.)

SOPHIRA: So will you come? Lethernia needs you.

(Arterian climbed to his feet then placed his hands on his hips.)

ARTERIAN: Normally, I'd refuse. My going to Lethernia could be dangerous. Not for me; for Lethernia. The dark rage is unpredictable, you see? You never know who might end up getting killed. It's possible that thousands of innocent Lethernians could get caught in the crossfire and die. If I don't go, however, they're all going to die anyway, aren't they?

SOPHIRA: Exactly.

ARTERIAN: Then it's not even a question. I must go, and I must go now!

(Delighted to hear it, Sophira finally acknowledged her success by shaking a triumphant fist and smiling.)

SOPHIRA: Yes! Thank you, Arterian! The sooner the better.

(Greatly lifted by the sight of Sophira smiling again, Candy drew a sigh of relief then looked to the heavens. Her jaw then dropped in dismay. It had just dawned on her that they could well be parting on bad terms. The last thing she wanted was for Sophira to leave hating her. Mortified by the very thought of it, she flinched then looked to Sophira.)

CANDY: Wait!

(She glanced at her with imploring eyes.)

CANDY: Please don't leave like this, Soph! Not while we're at odds.

(Seeing a less than welcoming glare coming back at her she hung her head.)

CANDY: Fine.

(She then gasped in horror as a second realisation came her way.)

CANDY: Wait! You can't just leave me here on my own!

(She burst into tears.)

CANDY: I'll die if you leave me here by myself! We've ended up in mortal danger a million times because of my clueless fuckwittery! Please; don't make me go through it again on my own! At least help me get home! I don't even know where I am.

(Taking control of the situation, Arterian stood tall and interjected.)

ARTERIAN: There's no time to take you home, young lady. I must go to Lethernia right *now*!

(He nodded.)

ARTERIAN: And I'm taking you both with me!

(Unsurprisingly, those words were a great relief to Candy.)

CANDY: Phew. So how are we getting there? Do you have a boat?

(Arterian scoffed.)

ARTERIAN: A boat? I'm the most powerful mage in the world! If I want to go somewhere, I simply go there.

(Suddenly, the entire world went out of focus. As if they'd taken some kind of disorientating drug, Candy and Sophira felt extremely ill at ease. Everything before their eyes became an indecipherable blur. Moments later, however, the world snapped back into focus again. At once, Candy and Sophira collapsed to the floor, suffering from a bout of vertigo. Dazed and bewildered, they both rubbed their eyes then glanced around themselves. They'd arrived in the middle of a picturesque, marble, town square. Sophira could barely believe what she was seeing.)

SOPHIRA: Lethernia? I'm home!

(Looking down at them from where he was standing, Arterian smirked.)

ARTERIAN: Like I told you. When I need to go somewhere, I just go there!

SOPHIRA: That's amazing...

(She grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: But... I don't get it. It was night time when we left. How come it's day time here?

ARTERIAN: Because we're on the northern continent where it gets dark much later, this time of year. Not to mention the fact there's a two hour time difference!

(He smiled.)

ARTERIAN: But I'll allow you the blonde moment. Clearly, you're still dazed from the trip.

(He then knelt and held Sophira's trembling hand. As he did so, she glanced up at him respectfully.)

ARTERIAN: Thank you, Sophira. It's been a pleasure meeting you. Now I must see the elders immediately.

(And with that, he headed away towards the hall of the elders with a purpose in his stride. Left behind, Candy climbed to her feet then glanced around the square in astonishment.)

CANDY: So this is Lethernia!

(Making no secret whatsoever of wanting nothing more to do with her, Sophira just scoffed.)

SOPHIRA: Whatever!

(She then upped and headed after Arterian, leaving Candy protesting in her wake.)

CANDY: Soph? You can't just leave me here, Soph! Sophira? Please!

(Making no effort to acknowledge her whatsoever, Sophira simply carried on walking then disappeared through the door to the hall of the elders. Left alone in the quiet town square, not knowing what to do or where to go, Candy hung her head and

allowed a tear to run down her cheek. She'd didn't get to wallow in self pity for long, however, before Sophira came marching back out of the hall of the elders and called out to her.)

SOPHIRA: Fine! Come with me then!

(Mightily relieved, Candy grinned from ear to ear then hurried towards her.)

CANDY: Thanks, Soph!

SOPHIRA: Just don't talk to me! Ever!

CANDY: Right...

(They then headed into the hall of the elders together in total silence.)

(By now, Lethernia was well past crisis point. Starvation and disease were rife and much of the surviving population were bed-ridden. Rather than fight the Gregon army, they'd simply resigned themselves to their doom and allowed the horrors to happen. In their culture taking up arms was simply out of the question; even now. Even those few who still retained the *capacity* to fight, absolutely refused to do so. No matter how desperate things got, they'd never spill the blood of another living creature.

Clueless as to how desperate things in the city had become, Candy and Sophira continued on, deeper into the hall of the elders. Candy made sure to stick to Sophira's side like glue every inch of the way. She had no idea where she was going and knew all too well that her angry friend wouldn't be giving her directions any time soon. Mercifully, it wasn't long before they reached their destination. The main chamber. Having approached the entrance, Sophira frowned at Candy, told her to shush then eased the door open. More than a little miffed at being told to be quiet, despite not talking anyway, Candy pouted then followed her inside.

Having entered the long, marble room, Candy glanced about herself then shrugged. It was not an impressive chamber. The ceiling was high and everything was made of marble, but there was hardly any decor. Other than a red carpet down the centre of the floor and a raised platform at the far end with a few chairs on it, it was entirely barren. Caring very little for it, she followed Sophira to the centre of the room then joined her in watching Arterian converse with a dying Yanada.)

ARTERIAN: How many times, Yanada? No! You're not hallucinating. It's really me. Arterian. A pretty, young serving girl told me I was needed back here in Lethernia.

YANADA: And you're certain, are you? I'm definitely not hallucinating?

ARTERIAN: No. I'm right here with you, in the flesh.

YANADA: Yes... that's what Elder Goodbrook said not five minutes ago.

ARTERIAN: What? Elder Goodbrook passed away forty years ago.

YANADA: Exactly. So you can forgive me for being sceptical. Only, the idea that a lone serving girl found you and convinced you to come is more than a little far-fetched. An absolute fantasy. So, I think we both know you'll vanish again in a minute, as soon as this hallucination is over.

ARTERIAN: Right...

(Just then, Sophira raced to Yanada's side and proceeded to heal him. She'd been so sickened by his pale and sickly appearance, she hadn't hesitated before taking the necessary action. She'd reacted so quickly, in fact, she'd taken Candy completely by surprise and left her standing in the middle of the room by herself.)

CANDY: Um...

(She then performed a double take in Yanada's direction. Just a few moments ago, he'd been at death's door. Within seconds of Sophira racing to his aid, however, the colour had returned to his cheeks and he was able to get to his feet.)

YANADA: You... you... you healed me! Where did you get the energy from to...

(He gasped.)

YANADA: Wait! You! You're that serving girl!

SOPHIRA: Um... yeah. I am.

YANADA: You healed me!

SOPHIRA: Well... yes...

(Yanada exhaled.)

YANADA: I'm saved! Saved by our nation's healing grace!

(He then grimaced at Arterian.)

YANADA: Though come to think of it, why didn't *you* heal me, Arterian? Healing is second nature to us Lethernians!

ARTERIAN: You wouldn't let me! You said I was a ridiculous figment of your imagination and refused to let me come near.

YANADA: Right...

(He ruffled his neck.)

YANADA: Never mind that.

(He looked to Sophira again then smiled.)

YANADA: Despite overwhelming odds, you found Arterian, I see.

SOPHIRA: Well...

ARTERIAN: She did, yes.

YANADA: Fantastic. I owe you much in the way of gratitude, young lady. You'll be well rewarded for your deeds.

SOPHIRA: I...

YANADA: But first I must speak with Arterian! Alone.

SOPHIRA: Oh...

YANADA: Wait outside. You can come and see me when we're done.

SOPHIRA: Right. Okay.

(She then bowed and headed for the exit.)

SOPHIRA: Come on, Candy. We have to leave. You'll just have to come back and seduce him later!

(More than a little hurt by her entirely unnecessary insult, Candy scowled as she followed her out of the room.)

CANDY: I said I was sorry, didn't I? Stop treating me like a piece of shit.

(The two of them then shared a hateful scowl all the way out into the corridor.)

Having watched them leave, Yanada and Arterian shared a determined nod then immediately got down to business.)

YANADA: Our civilisation stands on the brink of destruction, Arterian. Can you help us? Can you make the Gregon leave?

(Arterian nodded.)

ARTERIAN: I can, yes. Permanently. By making them die!

(Yanada shook his head.)

YANADA: No! This is not our way. We're a peaceful people!

ARTERIAN: Yes, and look where it's got us! Our kind are on the brink of destruction. Sometimes you *have* to fight.

(Having heard similar sentiments from his recently deceased friend, Yanada sighed.)

YANADA: Faites passed away earlier. The last thing he told me was that we were fools. Fools for refusing to fight back. Was he right, Arterian?

(Trying to be tactful, Arterian mused to himself for a moment.)

ARTERIAN: That you're fools? No!

(Yanada nodded, happy to accept the validation.)

ARTERIAN: But your *vision* for Lethernia is *extraordinarily* foolish.

(He shook his head.)

ARTERIAN: What is the use of being a peaceful people if you're extinct?

YANADA: But we won't be a peaceful people if we fight!

ARTERIAN: Yanada, old friend, let me give it to you straight. The only way you'll be able to continue the great work of Lethernia is to let me loose on the Gregon. An all out, full-frontal assault.

YANADA: Oh, my...

ARTERIAN: Let me finish! If you're worried about your reputation, don't be. I guarantee that once people learn how you only used the world's most phenomenal power as a last resort, it'll *enhance* your reputation as a true icon of peace. Any other nation would have unleashed their most powerful weapon straight away.

(He shrugged.)

ARTERIAN: Not only that, but once the rest of the world find out you possess such a power, nobody will ever dare to attack you again. That'll leave you free to continue all the great work you've done in the name of world peace forever.

(Yanada rubbed his chin as he absorbed Arterian's words.)

YANADA: What you say makes sense, Arterian. What Faites said made sense too. And yet... it feels so wrong. I'm starting to fear you might be right but I just can't see it!

(Arterian nodded.)

ARTERIAN: Well, if it makes you uncomfortable then give me no orders whatsoever. Just leave me to act unilaterally. That way the blood won't be on Lethernia's hands. Just mine.

(Yanada sighed in defeat.)

YANADA: I fear there's no other way, my friend. Personally I'd rather go to my grave than fight, but that attitude might just kill us all.

ARTERIAN: Absolutely it would.

YANADA: Very well. Then I give you no orders whatsoever. My conscience will remain clear.

ARTERIAN: Consider it done, Yanada. Now get ready to heal and feed the people. I'm going to smite the Gregon and you can use their supplies.

(He grimaced.)

ARTERIAN: Unless you have a problem with theft as well.

(Yanada sighed in defeat.)

YANADA: Just... do what you have to do!

ARTERIAN: Understood!

(With nothing left to discuss, Arterian then about turned and marched purposefully to the door. As he yanked it open, however, Sophira fell through the doorway. She'd had her head to the door, trying to listen in on their conversation. Watching her from across the corridor, Candy chuckled inwardly then swiftly turned away. Being caught laughing at her, after all, would only alienate her further. Feeling quite the fool, Sophira nervously climbed to her feet then grimaced at Arterian. Offering her nothing but a disdainful eye roll, he then headed off down the corridor. Before she could start to head after him, however, Yanada called her over. Summoned by the mighty elder,

she gulped then stepped inside the room, closing the door behind her; leaving Candy in the corridor by herself. She then stepped up before Yanada, blushing with embarrassment.)

SOPHIRA: About that just now... falling through the door... I was... um... sorry. I tripped.

YANADA: I see.

SOPHIRA: Umm... anyway... how can I be of service, your worship!

(She bowed sheepishly.)

YANADA: Please, call me Yanada. You've earned that right!

SOPHIRA: Thank you!

(She then bowed to him a second time. Having been raised to believe that elders were men above approach she was very much in awe of him.)

YANADA: What is your name, young lady?

SOPHIRA: Sophira, sir!

(Yanada nodded.)

YANADA: Sophira, should Arterian be successful in helping Lethernia survive these dark times, our nation will be indebted to you forever.

SOPHIRA: Thank you, sir.

YANADA: On the contrary, thank *you*! You, young lady, will be revered throughout the nation as the heroine of Lethernia. As such a place in these hallowed halls will be yours.

(Sophira was openly moved by the gesture. To be offered elder status at such a young age was truly and honour indeed.)

SOPHIRA: Why, thank you, Yanada, sir. I don't know what to say!

YANADA: Then say nothing. The very survival of Lethernia may well be down to you, and you alone. Thanking me for merely offering you gratitude, therefore, is a bit redundant, don't you think? You owe me nothing.

SOPHIRA: Still... thank you.

(Having allowed herself a moment to absorb the magnitude of the offer, Sophira exhaled with pride before looking to Yanada modestly.)

SOPHIRA: To be fair though, it wasn't just me, Yanada, sir. I couldn't have done it without Candy.

YANADA: Well, no. There's nothing like a sugar rush to start the day is there?

(Hiding her amusement as to not to offend the elder, Sophira waited a moment for the temptation to laugh to subside before setting him straight.)

SOPHIRA: Actually, sir, Candy is a girl I befriended.

(Yanada chuckled.)

YANADA: Well, don't I feel a fool?

(He nodded.)

YANADA: You must introduce me to this friend of yours. As a fellow heroine of Lethernia, she should *also* be rewarded accordingly.

SOPHIRA: Yeah...

(She then scratched behind her ear nervously. Thinking about Candy had made her feel more than a little uncomfortable. The two of them were at loggerheads right now and it was hurting her heart. Quick to spot her unease, Yanada raised an enquiring eyebrow.)

YANADA: Sophira? Is everything okay?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah... it's just that... I've been pretty mean to her actually!

YANADA: I see.

SOPHIRA: What had a falling out, you see? And... never mind. Things are just awkward between us right now, that's all.

YANADA: I see.

(He smiled.)

YANADA: You know, Sophira, one thing that I've learned in all my years on this planet is that communication is all important. If you and your friend have issues, you should talk to her and work them through.

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: I know, but she really...

(Sensing it was best not to be too honest at this point, Sophira clammed up.)

SOPHIRA: It doesn't matter!

(Keen to help the troubled young lady before him in any way he could, Yanada spoke up softly.)

YANADA: I'm here to help you, Sophira. If you need any advice, now's the time!

(Knowing in her heart that an elders wisdom could be just what she needed to hear, Sophira nodded to herself then opened up to him.)

SOPHIRA: Well... I love her you see, but she did a terrible thing!

(Yanada smiled.)

YANADA: Oh, Sophira, sooner or later our friends are *bound* to do things we don't approve of. That's a given. That's no reason to stop loving them though. Even if you don't always love their actions.

(Sophira could only offer a sigh.)

SOPHIRA: It's not like that.

YANADA: Then how is it?

(Realising that honesty would be the only route to assistance, Sophira swallowed her pride then told him the truth.)

SOPHIRA: I love her, Yanada. I mean I *really* love her. When we made love on the beach it meant everything to me but it was just a cheap thrill to her. She used me for sex and it broke my heart. I gave her my soul and I feel like she played with it then threw it away. How can I ever make things right after that?

(She then glanced up to Yanada imploringly; desperately hoping he had answers for her. As she did so, however, a deep sense of foreboding washed over her. His kindly smile had evaporated to be replaced by a baffled grimace.)

YANADA: You *love* her? You had *sex* with her? Is that even possible? Neither of you have a willy!

(He shook his head.)

YANADA: But that's beside the point. You're disgusting!

(Sophira could only whimper as his tone grew increasingly bitter.)

YANADA: She's a woman like you!

SOPHIRA: I...

YANADA: Are you seriously telling me you took pleasure in another woman?

SOPHIRA: But... I love her, Yanada!

(Yanada was truly appalled.)

YANADA: Love? You can't love those of the same gender! Did the gods not sanction intercourse for the sake of procreation? What were you hoping to achieve without a single penis between you??? That's not love; that's not sex; that's just doing filthy things with an incompatible object!!!

(Set on edge by his angry reaction, Sophira leant back from him and bit her nails.)

YANADA: You, Sophira with your sick adaptation of love are nothing but a deviant; a pervert. You disgust me. As soon as this is over, you must leave Lethernia and

never return. We can't have your filthy ideals fouling up our city; you are quite simply a disgusting human being.

(He then pointed at the door furiously.)

YANADA: Now get out of my sight!!!

(Not about to hang around for a moment longer than she had to, Sophira immediately turned around then scampered for the door. As she did so, Yanada continued to assassinate her character liberally.)

YANADA: Filthy deviant!!! People like you are a blight on humanity!!! The lowest of the low!!! You're just... disgusting!!!

(Having always been a meek and placid young lady, Sophira had always been slow to defend herself. As his stinging comments continued to fly, however, something snapped inside of her. In that moment, anger filtered throughout her body until the urge to defend herself consumed her whole. Maybe it was Candy's influence, maybe it was down to her tiredness, maybe she'd simply reached breaking point; she wasn't about to be spoken to like that any longer. Wearing a ferocious snarl on her brow, she stamped back towards Yanada then bellowed at him furiously.)

SOPHIRA: Whore? Whore??? You're calling me a whore? You sent me away specifically to suck warrior's ding-a-lings and you have the cheek to call me a whore???

(Yanada tried to respond but Sophira wasn't going to be pausing for breath any time soon.)

SOPHIRA: Listen, you doddering old fart, in order to save Lethernia, I've been chased by wild beasts, carried off by giant birds, hunted by soldiers and had more dices with death than you could even conceive of! So I deserve some respect! Got it? (Finally able to reply, Yanada did so angrily.)

YANADA: Respect? You defile yourself with other girls! If you hadn't done what you've done for Lethernia, I'd have you locked up in jail like all the other filthy, deviant scum!

(Sophira was stunned.)

SOPHIRA: You what?

YANADA: That's right. It's only out of respect for what you did that I'm letting you get away with being banished. Your sort deserve locking away!!!

(Shocked by the revelation, Sophira spun around and headed for the door.)

SOPHIRA: I'm not wasting any more time on you; you're not wise, you're a bigoted Neanderthal.

(Watching her go, Yanada snarled.)

YANADA: You should be careful who you're talking to!

SOPHIRA: Whatever. One minute I'm a hero and the next I'm scum just 'cause I'm attracted to a girl. You're a fucking moron, Yanada!

(And with that, she thrust open the door and slammed it behind her, leaving a seriously grumpy elder in her wake.)

(Just outside of Lethernia, at this time, the Gregon emperor's tent was a hive of activity. Since the siege began, the emperor and his generals had assembled every six hours to decide whether or not to begin their massacre. So far, the emperor had insisted on prolonging Lethernia's agony. That, however, was about to change. This time, when his generals arrived for their six-hourly meeting, they immediately knew that something was different. The emperor had donned his chest plate and was standing before his throne with his sword under his arm. Upon sighting him, they

knew. The time to attack had arrived. It was a fact the emperor wasted no time in confirming as soon as all his generals had assembled.)

EMPEROR: Gentlemen. Thank you for coming. I think you all know what I'm going to say so I won't beat about the bush.

(He nodded sternly.)

EMPEROR: It's time to prepare our attack. As soon as the men are mobilised we'll go straight through the main gate here and slaughter everyone inside the city. And I mean *everyone*. We won't be leaving until I'm satisfied we've killed every single one of the bastards.

(He sneered.)

EMPEROR: Any questions?

MCGOOGAN: Just the one. You mean women and children too, right?

EMPEROR: Aye! Even their pets. Anything with a fucking heartbeat!

MCDUGAL: Then raze the city to the ground, my liege?

EMPEROR: No!

(He smirked.)

EMPEROR: This place is solid marble. We're not going to destroy it, we're going to move in! Make it a colony! Call it the spoils of a successful siege, if you like. We're fucking keeping it. Any *other* questions?

(With no further questions forthcoming, he nodded firmly.)

EMPEROR: Okay. Good. Now, listen up, you lot. This will be our finest hour. At last, Lethernia will fall and their foulness will never stink up this land ever again.

(He sneered.)

EMPEROR: Just make sure they all die in considerable pain. Now...

(He clenched his fist.)

EMPEROR: Mobilise your men and get ready to attack. When all fifteen units are in place and ready to go, I'm giving the order! We've got a couple of hours until nightfall, by which time I want each and every Lethernian to have met their maker!

(He then pointed to the exit with his sword.)

EMPEROR: Go!

(Excited about the slaughter they were about to perpetrate, his generals cheered with delight then raced from the tent, barely remembering to offer up a salute. Having been longing for the invasion to start for several days now, this moment couldn't have come soon enough. To a man, they truly believed that Lethernia had wronged them at some point in history and they couldn't wait to unleash their bloodlust.

In this situation, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that Yanada was placing an enormous amount of faith in Arterian. The Gregon were a formidable foe and their army of over ten thousand well-trained troops were champing at the bit to go into battle. Lethernia, on the other hand, only had him. One mage against a massive army. Even though Arterian was no ordinary man, the odds were still very much stacked against him. He couldn't be everywhere at once, after all. Should the Gregon army get inside the city and spread out, they could well run amuck in the backstreets and thoroughfares, butchering thousands before he got round to tackling them. Arterian's presence could well make all the difference, but it in no way made things even.)

(Having just emerged from the hall of the elders and into the deserted city square, Sophira stopped and glanced around at the empty spaces where bustling market stalls used to be and gave a sorrowful sigh. Seeing the place deserted like this, mercilessly

hammered home the desperate state Lethernia was in. This square was usually a hive of activity, a hub; full of life. Now it was abandoned. People had stopped going about their lives and it was painful to see.)

SOPHIRA: How did it come to this?

(Just then, Candy crept out of the door behind her. Upon spotting Sophira, standing just a few feet away from her, she flinched then glanced away innocently. It was all part of her feeble attempt to pretend she hadn't been following her.)

CANDY: Um... didn't expect to see *you* here...

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: Yes, you did. You followed me out. Of course, you did. Where else would you go? You don't know anybody else.

CANDY: Well...

(Sophira then turned and offered her a half-hearted smile.)

SOPHIRA: It wasn't always like this, you know? This square I mean.

(Overjoyed that Sophira was finally being polite to her, Candy's face lit up. She very quickly opted to hide her smile, however. Being overfriendly too soon might come over as a lack of contrition and she wasn't about to risk upsetting her again. Instead, she replied wearing a deadpan expression.)

CANDY: No?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: No.

(She then shook her head solemnly before looking deep in Candy's eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Look, Candy; I didn't *mean* to be nasty before. You just really hurt me; that's all!

(Candy sighed and looked to her feet.)

CANDY: I'm sorry!

(She then looked into her eyes imploringly.)

CANDY: But I wouldn't have done it if I'd known how you felt. I'd never hurt you on purpose, Soph. I just thought you were looking for some naughty fun, like me. A harmless bit of passion with a good friend.

(She pouted.)

CANDY: I'm so sorry, Soph.

(Sophira nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah. I actually know all that, Candy. I was just hurting so much that I lashed out.

CANDY: It's fine. I was the one in the wrong. And if could go back to the past and do things differently, I would.

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but you can't.

CANDY: I know.

SOPHIRA: And now we've got an elephant in the room.

(Candy was astonished.)

CANDY: What? Where? An elephant?

SOPHIRA: It's a phrase, Candy. It means there's something between us that we urgently need to discuss or we'll never get rid of it.

CANDY: Oh. Right. I've not heard that one before.

SOPHIRA: Evidently.

(She nodded.)

SOPHIRA: Anyway, there's no time like the present is there?

CANDY: I guess not.

SOPHIRA: Then here it is.

(She nodded sternly.)

SOPHIRA: I'm in love with you, Candy! That's how it is! It didn't ask for it happen, it just happened and now we need to find a way to live with it.

(Candy whimpered.)

CANDY: Right. Well.... okay... so... in the spirit of being totally honest with each other... I know it's not what you want to hear but... I love you too; just not in that way!

SOPHIRA: I realise that, Candy. I do. I just need to know if my feelings are going to become an issue between us.

(Candy gave her a baffled glance.)

CANDY: Why would they? Whether you love me like a girlfriend or love me like a sister, I just want you in my life. You're my best friend.

SOPHIRA: I see. You know... that was pretty much the perfect answer.

(Sophira smiled.)

SOPHIRA: That's exactly how I feel too. Friends?

(Candy's face lit up.)

CANDY: Friends!

(She went to hug her but Sophira stepped back.)

SOPHIRA: Whoa, hey!

(A little hurt by the rejection, Candy pouted.)

CANDY: Right... I understand!

(Sophira shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: It's just that we're not *really* friends are we!

CANDY: We're not?

SOPHIRA: No. We're *best* friends!

(An icy silence then descended from the heavens.).

CANDY: Would you like extra cheese with your cheese, Sophira, or will you be sticking with the cheese for now?

SOPHIRA: Cheese? I was being, what's the word?

CANDY: Cheesy!

SOPHIRA: No. Cute!

(She then started to chuckle.)

SOPHIRA: It just happened to *come out* really cheesy.

CANDY: And then some.

(She then threw her arms around her.)

CANDY: We'll be best friends for life, you and me. And don't you forget it!

(Hugging her tightly, Sophira allowed herself a cheeky grin.)

SOPHIRA: Cool. Just don't get angry if I decide to grope your boobs now and again.

(Candy stepped back from the hug, chuckling to herself.)

CANDY: My god, Soph; you're terrible!

SOPHIRA: Not really? It'll just be some *harmless passion with a good friend* as you called it.

(She then poked out her tongue and chuckled.)

CANDY: Throwing that back at me already, are you?

SOPHIRA: Sure. Why not?

(Candy giggled.)

CANDY: Fair enough.

(She then looked into her eyes calmly. In order to stave off any resentment later on, she wanted to take this opportunity to confirm their situation there and then.)

CANDY: And you won't be hurt if I get a boyfriend, will you? I mean it won't ruin our friendship, will it?

(Sophira smiled warmly.)

SOPHIRA: Of course not, silly. I *will* get over you, Candy. You ain't *that* special, you know?

(Borrowing Sophira's cheeky grin, Candy held out her palms.)

CANDY: Are you kidding? I'm hot stuff, missy! A veritable goddess among women. You must have heard the saying, once you've had Candy, you'll *always* be randy!

SOPHIRA: Wow!

CANDY: What?

SOPHIRA: Just how vain are you?

(Then they fell about laughing. It was a laughter partly born out of the joy of having their friendship back.)

SOPHIRA: Priceless.

(She then looked to Candy and grimaced nervously.)

SOPHIRA: Anyway, there's no point in hanging around here all day. Let's go back to *my* house and hide from the Gregon!

CANDY: I was hoping you'd saying that!

(Just as they went to leave however, Sophira spotted Arterian on a balcony near the top of the city wall. Curious to know what he was planning, she rubbed her chin thoughtfully.)

SOPHIRA: Do you mind if we just see Arterian first, Candy? I just want to wish him good luck!

(Candy scoffed.)

CANDY: Yeah, right. You just want to poke your nose in and find out what he's got planned.

SOPHIRA: No, I don't.

CANDY: Soph...

SOPHIRA: What?

(She then sighed in defeat.)

SOPHIRA: Fine. Yes. That. Still... can we? I'm really curious. He's just one guy and their army is huge. So I really, really want to know how he plans to defeat them.

CANDY: Right...

(She sighed.)

CANDY: It's going to bug the shit out of you if we don't at least ask, isn't it?

SOPHIRA: Yup. I'll be unbearable. All night!

CANDY: In that case, lead the way.

SOPHIRA: Yay! Now that I can do. Let's go.

CANDY: Okay.

(And with that, they head off the across the square together, side by side; chatting excitedly to one another as they went. Eager to reaffirm their refound closeness, they both had much to say. The desire to talk, however, was soon to wane. In order to reach the balcony, they had to walk down a long corridor then take what felt like a never ending spiral staircase. By the time they were half way up it, they were worn out. As a result, the talking ceased and the only sound was that of their own footsteps echoing through the stairwell.

After what had been an exhausting climb, Candy and Sophira eventually emerged from the stairwell and stepped out onto the balcony. Having never been up there before, Candy looked on in awe at what was essentially a large shelf that adorned the

entire length of the wall above the gates. It had originally been erected for the citizens of Lethernia to use a viewing platform; a vista point from which to view the world outside. Consequently, it made the perfect base for Arterian to mount his attack.

Psyching himself to launch his attack, Arterian had slipped into what he liked to call meditation mode. Thinking calming thoughts in order to focus his mind, he was oblivious to any and all distractions. As a result, he didn't notice Candy and Sophira approaching from just along the balcony. His focus was so strong, in fact, he didn't even begin to sense them until Sophira spoke up from a mere two feet away.)

SOPHIRA: Hi, Arterian!

(Given quite the start, Arterian flinched then turned to face them, angrily.)

ARTERIAN: Careful, you silly girl! You shouldn't sneak up on people like that; especially ones with a tendency to fire a million volts of electricity at you when they feel threatened.

SOPHIRA: Yikes!

CANDY: Ouch!

ARTERIAN: Ouch? You wouldn't say ouch, love. You wouldn't have time. You'd dissolve within a second. It's not a pleasant sight; believe me! I've seen it!

(He sighed.).

ARTERIAN: And I really loved that cat!

(Shaking the thought away, Arterian then smiled.)

ARTERIAN: Anyway, what can I do for you lovely ladies?

(Sophira smiled nervously.)

SOPHIRA: We just wondered what you were planning to do!

ARTERIAN: You came all the way up here for that?

SOPHIRA: Pretty much!

CANDY: And to see if we can help, of course!

(Arterian chuckled.)

ARTERIAN: I see! Well...

(He peered over the top of the wall towards the Gregon encampment below.)

ARTERIAN: You could always pop outside for me and ask them to move the emperor's tent. I can't get a clear shot at it from here 'cause it's right outside the gate.

(Candy and Sophira whimpered fearfully.)

SOPHIRA: Pop outside?

CANDY: But...

(Arterian laughed out loud.)

ARTERIAN: I'm joking! They'd butcher you where you stand. They're...

(Suddenly, his smile evaporated and a bitter snarl appeared on his face. It was a wholesale change in his demeanour that instantly set Candy and Sophira on edge.)

SOPHIRA: Um... Arterian?

CANDY: You okay there?

(They looked at one another nervously.)

ARTERIAN: Crap! They're mobilising!

SOPHIRA: What does that mean?

(Arterian growled.)

ARTERIAN: It means they're going to attack. And soon!

(Shocked by the news, Candy gasped then placed praying hands to her lips. Sophira just froze in fear. Arterian on the other hand, instantly became animated.)

ARTERIAN: You want to help, do you?

(Breaking out of her stunned trance, Sophira nodded enthusiastically.)

SOPHIRA: What do you need me to do?

ARTERIAN: Find people willing to fight and heal them. As many as you can! We're going to need a second line of defence just in case any Gregon bastards manage to slip past my magical defences.

SOPHIRA: Okay...

ARTERIAN: There's over a thousand ceremonial swords in the great hall; arm them with those.

(He faced Candy.)

ARTERIAN: Try to get everyone to pool what little energy they have into healing the ones willing to do battle.

CANDY: Me?

ARTERIAN: *Both* of you! We need as many healed and armed men as we can get. Get everyone who's unwilling to fight to use their remaining energy for healing those who are, Sophira. Don't try to heal them all yourself.

(He snarled.)

ARTERIAN: Now go!!!

(Sprung into action by Arterian's urgency, Candy and Sophira immediately ran back towards the stairwell from whence they'd come without question or hesitation.

Sophira wasn't sure *how* she'd get people to take up arms, but she knew she had to try. It wouldn't be easy, however. The Lethernian people were already resigned to their fate. They'd given up. Devoid of any will to fight back, they were content to rest at home or spend their final hours drinking in bars while they waited for the inevitable slaughter to happen. Getting them to change their minds now, having already accepted death, would be a nigh impossible task. And yet, she felt oddly confident that she'd find a way. After all, everyone thought it would be nigh on impossible for a lone serving girl to track down Arterian too. She'd achieved *that* miracle, so why couldn't she achieve this one?

A short while later, having successfully negotiated the lengthy stairwell, Sophira raced back out in the main square with a determined expression on her face. She then charged off towards the suburbs. Racing forth just behind her, Candy looked somewhat ill at ease. She had no idea where Sophira was leading her.)

CANDY: Where are we going, Soph???

SOPHIRA: To find people!

CANDY: Yeah, but where?

(Fully focussed on getting where she was going, Sophira charged onwards without replying.)

CANDY: Soph? Where? Where *are* these people?

SOPHIRA: Nonsense, we'll be fine!

CANDY: Right... you're not even listening.

SOPHIRA: Yes, I am!

(Just then, Sophira skidded to a sudden halt.)

SOPHIRA: What the hell? Where is everyone? How am I supposed to find people to fight when I don't even know where anyone is?

(Having come to a halt at her side, Candy furrowed her brow.)

CANDY: That's what *I* was asking!

(Thinking on her feet, Sophira slapped herself softly on the cheek then mumbled.)

SOPHIRA: There has to be...

(Her face then lit up.)

SOPHIRA: That might work! Come on.

(And with that she raced towards a narrow thoroughfare to the right. None the wiser as to where they were heading, Candy followed on looking somewhat miffed.)

CANDY: Where are we going, Soph? Talk to me!!!

(Staring straight ahead, Sophira replied as she raced onwards down the thin passageway.)

SOPHIRA: Just follow me!

CANDY: But...

(She then sighed in defeat.)

CANDY: I give up.

(With that, she raced on after her in silence. She was desperate to know where Sophira was leading her, but asking had long since proven futile. And so, she was resigned to finding out when they got there. Mercifully, she didn't have a long wait. Just thirty seconds later, Sophira darted to the left then charged through a double doorway. Candy followed on determinedly. The two of them then came to a swift halt. They'd arrived in a sizeable inn, packed with depressed and sickly looking patrons. Having not expected to see energetic new arrivals, every single one of them stopped what they were doing and stared at them through empty eyes. Taking their silence as an opportunity, Sophira's face lit up. This was a perfect chance to get her message across. Determined to do just that, she stood tall then raised her voice.)

SOPHIRA: Arterian is here!!!

(Much to her dismay, there was no reaction whatsoever. With the exception of one drunken old man in the corner, they just continued to stare at her blankly.)

DRUNK 1: Who?

(So drunk he could barely stay on his seat, another old man then chimed in from near the bar.)

DRUNK 2: Are they strippers?

(He then burped and fell off his seat. Undeterred, Sophira rolled her eyes then tried again.)

SOPHIRA: Arterian; the bearer of the dark rage is here! He needs our help!

(To her further dismay, the patrons then resumed drinking, clearly assuming she was just another drunk or hallucinating from one of the many illnesses that were spreading through the city. Not knowing what to say next, she could only look to Candy for inspiration.)

SOPHIRA: Well?

CANDY: I dunno!

SOPHIRA: Right...

(Just then, an enlightened expression appeared on her face. She'd thought of the *perfect* way to motivate everyone. Lie.)

SOPHIRA: Listen! The great wise man, Yanada wants your help, everyone!!!

(As soon as the patrons heard Yanada's name, the mood in the place instantly changed and she finally had everyone's full attention. Desperate to know what to do they awaited her instructions impatiently. It was a terrible time for Sophira's shyness to make a comeback.)

SOPHIRA: Um... I don't know...

DRINKER: Well? What does he want us to do?

(Having watched Sophira whimper and struggle for words, Candy rolled her eyes then climbed up onto a table.)

CANDY: He wants all those who can do battle to go to the great hall.

(She then leant to Sophira.)

CANDY: It *was* the great hall wasn't it?

(Sophira nodded nervously; embarrassed by her own ineptitude.)

DRINKER: That's all very well, but do battle with what?

CANDY: The Gregon, obviously!

DRINKER: I didn't ask *who* we'd be fighting against, I asked what we'd be fighting *with*, you daft cow! We don't have weapons!

(Anxious to regain some self-esteem, Sophira spoke up.)

SOPHIRA: The ceremonial swords from the great hall! Go there and grab a sword then go to the main square.

CANDY: What she said! Sorry if I wasn't clear on that; I'm a huntress not an orator. Oh, he also said that those who *can't* do battle should use their power to heal those who can.

(She looked to Sophira.)

CANDY: Right?

SOPHIRA: Right!

(They then glanced across all the patrons of the bar with determined scowls on their faces, to reinforce the fact that they were extremely serious. As they did so, an uncertain murmur started rise up all around them from patrons mulling over the idea. Feeling a little put out by the inertia, Candy scowled.)

CANDY: Hey! Chop, chop!!! Less talk, more action!!! Go!!!

(Sprung into action by her words, a mass exodus commenced. Almost the entire population of the inn began racing towards the door to do their bit for war effort. Watching them go, Sophira nodded sternly then climbed onto a table next to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: Remember! If you can fight then fight! If you can't then use what energy you have to heal those who can!

(Moments later, as the last few stragglers disappeared through the doors, Candy beamed with delight.)

CANDY: Well, look at that! We did it! We motivated them!

SOPHIRA: Good and proper!

(She exhaled.)

SOPHIRA: We make quite the team, Candy!

CANDY: Yup! We're the best.

SOPHIRA: Your fib helped, of course.

CANDY: Fib? What fib?

SOPHIRA: Yanada didn't ask them to fight; that was Arterian.

CANDY: I know. You said the great wise man, Arterian wants their help.

SOPHIRA: I said *Yanada* wants their help!

CANDY: You did?

SOPHIRA: Yes. Then you took over and told them what Arterian had said instead!

CANDY: Oh...

(She winced.)

CANDY: Whoops.

SOPHIRA: Meh. Don't worry about it. It all worked out perfectly in the end.

(She smiled.)

SOPHIRA: I hate that old bastard, Yanada; especially after the way he treated me earlier, but I'm glad his word carries such weight.

CANDY: Right? Making them think *he* wanted them to fight was all it took to convince them to go and do it.

(Pondering that thought, Sophira grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: Makes you think really, doesn't it?

CANDY: What does?

SOPHIRA: Had the elders been in favour of fighting in the first place, Lethernia might not be in this mess. We might have had an army to defend ourselves with.

CANDY: Well, yeah. Obviously. Any nation that doesn't try to defend itself is asking for trouble. *Everyone* knows that.

SOPHIRA: Except the Lethernian elders.

CANDY: Yeah...

(She then glanced to Sophira wearing a quizzical expression.)

CANDY: Okay, so now what?

(Sophira shrugged.)

SOPHIRA: Now we repeat the process until we run out of bars and inns, I guess.

CANDY: Agreed.

(They then scrambled down from the table and hurried towards the exit.)

(Thanks to all Candy and Sophira's hard work, it wasn't long before the great hall of the elders started to overflow with volunteers. In all, well over five hundred citizens had been recruited. Half of them to do battle; the other half to heal. Their mission to gather a small army had been an overwhelming success.

Greatly looking forward to sharing their success with Arterian, Candy and Sophira could barely contain their excitement. He'd asked them to perform what they'd thought would be a nigh on impossible task and yet they'd achieve it some considerable style. It was an outcome that deserved much in the way of kudos and they couldn't wait to receive it. As a result, upon returning to the square, they briefly checked the hall of elders to admire their handiwork then raced off across the square again. The all-powerful mage was bound to praise them to the hilt for their efforts and that moment couldn't come soon enough for them. As such, they cleared the square in no time, then raced off up the lengthy stairwell, beaming with joyous anticipation.)

SOPHIRA: That was amazing! Amazing, Candy!

CANDY: I know, right? So many of them!

SOPHIRA: Many, many, many! Arterian's going to be so pleased!

(She grimaced.)

SOPHIRA: But if Yanada ever finds out about the fib we told to get everyone there, he'll kill me!

CANDY: Nah. Deny everything; that's what *I* do when *I'm* in trouble! Or just say Arterian *told* us to say it!

(She beamed.)

CANDY: So we did! And didn't we do it well? Shit, Soph, we raised a *massive* army in like under two hours!

(Sophira matched her beaming smile.)

SOPHIRA: Right? Like I said before; we're an awesome team!

CANDY: Yup! And we're damned sexy too, don't forget!

SOPHIRA: Uh-huh! Go, Team Gorgeous!

(They then shared a boisterous chuckle together. Right now, they were elated. Raising what they considered to be "a massive army" had been an outstanding achievement as far as Candy and Sophira were concerned. Had they been able to see the gathering on the other side of the city wall, however, they'd have found out what a *massive* army really looked like. The five hundred or so untrained men they'd managed to gather for battle was a drop in the ocean compared to the thousands of

battle hardened warriors they'd be up against. Oblivious to their truth, however, they raced on excitedly.

Despite being exhausted from the lengthy climb, upon reaching the top of the stairwell, Candy and Sophira raced out onto the balcony, positively glowing with excitement. They had no doubt whatsoever that Arterian would lavish them with all the kudos he could muster. After all, receiving much due validation from their peers was the least they deserved. After everything they'd been through, they'd earned every kind word. And so, without hesitation, they raced up to him then both of them proceeded to speak at once.)

ARTERIAN: Stop!

(Candy and Sophira instantly fell silent.)

ARTERIAN: How did you get on? One of you!!!

(Much to Candy's disappointment, he looked to Sophira.)

SOPHIRA: There's over five hundred men on their way now. Over five hundred!

You see, we told them Yanada said...

(Arterian then thrust out his palm and interjected.)

ARTERIAN: Good work, ladies. Now get down, they're about to invade!

(And there endeth the kudos. "Good work, ladies." That was all the thanks they received. Candy was crestfallen.)

CANDY: Is that it? Good work???

(She then glanced to where Sophira was whimpering in terror.)

CANDY: What's wrong with you all of a sudden?

(Only now did the second thing Arterian said finally filter into her mind.)

CANDY: Wait! They're about to...

(She then shrieked.)

CANDY: Invade???

SOPHIRA: Invade!!!

(Suddenly, the deafening boom of a cannon firing echoed across the sky. Absolutely terrified, they dived onto the balcony floor then scrambled to wall and clung onto each other for dear life.)

CANDY: I'm scared, Soph. I should have stayed in Chiswell Point!

SOPHIRA: And I should have stayed there with you!!!

(They then burst into tears and huddled into one another; fearing for their very lives.)

(One thing you could always guarantee from the Gregon army is that an attack would come in the shape of a brutal, full-on assault. An assault intended to leave no enemies alive at the end of it. This vast army had no concept of taking prisoners; you were either one of them or you were killed. And right now, they planned to obliterate the entire Lethernian civilisation with that same ruthless disregard. It started with them peppering the outer walls with cannon balls while pounding the front gate with battering rams. Every action was accompanied by a chorus of furious war cries from thousands of foot soldiers, standing by, anxious to begin the slaughter. It was truly terrifying sound.

Determined to stop them at all costs, Lethernia's one great hope, Arterian growled to psych himself up then closed his eyes tightly. When he reopened them, all but the whites of his eyes glowed a fluorescent yellow. He'd become one with the dark

magic within and a feeling of euphoria flowed through his body, causing his mouth to contort into a fiendish smile. He was ready.)

ARTERIAN: It begins!

(Without a moments hesitation, he then slung his hands over the wall to fire off powerful lightning bolts at all the cannons. Almost as if conducting an orchestra, he threw out his fingers time and time again, knocking out the cannons one by one with pin point accuracy. As shrapnel spewed out from the exploding cannons, the first Gregon casualties were claimed. It was a fantastic start. Unfortunately, that's all it was. A start. To an army this size, a few dozens deaths meant nothing. Barely even acknowledging the deaths of their cannon teams, the Gregon warriors continued to hammer at the gate violently.

Standing at the entrance of his tent, watching early events unfold, the emperor turned to his second in command with an angry expression on his face.)

EMPEROR: Have these clowns never seen a battering ram before? And what the hell happened to the cannons? Why are they not firing? I'm not impressed, McGoogan! (McGoogan nodded.)

MCGOOGAN: Understood, my liege.

(He then charged over to the leader of the battering ram unit and punched him full in the face.)

MCGOOGAN: The emperor wants this gate down now, fuck face!!!

(Angered by the demeaning and violent reprimand, the leader of the battering ram unit bellowed at his men to work harder and faster. Being disgraced before the emperor was pretty much the biggest insult a man could receive and he was determined it wouldn't happen again.

Moments later, when McGoogan returned to the emperor's side, he was greeted with an exasperated expression.)

EMPEROR: What the fuck? You hit him!

MCGOOGAN: Well, you know... it just seemed easier than giving him a pep talk.

EMPEROR: I see... nice work. But if that gate isn't down in the next 30 seconds, kill him.

MCGOOGAN: Happily!

(Inside Lethernia at this time, having already neutralised the cannons, Arterian set about his next move. First, he formed an alpha triangle sign with his thumbs and forefingers, then pointed it towards the sun and peered through the gap. Having chanted a few incoherent words, he then faced the Gregon warriors and threw his arms out in their direction. It was a move designed to ensure that the magic was cast in the direction of every single Gregon warrior in sight. It was a spell that made no sound and cast no light show. To the naked eye, it looked like it had failed to work. Every single Gregon soldier in its way, however, felt its effects. They all felt a great deal weaker. Arterian's spell to half their strength and stamina had worked like a charm.

Unfortunately, those not in Arterian's view were immune to his weakening spell, including those in the battering ram unit. They went about their business unhindered. As a result, it wasn't long before they finally made the breakthrough they'd been working towards.

Having made heavy weather of the task in hand they were only too relieved to see the gates splinter then smash away leaving Lethernia open and defenceless against their hands-on invasion. Delighted to see it, the emperor bellowed furiously.)

EMPEROR: Destroy them!!!

(And with a deafening roar, thousands of warriors charged for the gateway. Having heard the gates shatter, Candy and Sophira shrieked then crawled to the edge of the balcony to peer over the ledge. Upon sighting a hoard of Gregon soldiers charging into the square, they panicked profusely.)

SOPHIRA: Arterian!!! The gates have gone and some Gregon soldiers have got in!

CANDY: Horrible, sweaty types!!!

SOPHIRA: What?

CANDY: You know... the Gregon!

SOPHIRA: Right... Arterian!!!

ARTERIAN: On it!!!

(He then leapt into action. Having dived down beside Candy and Sophira to get a better view, he thrust a fist in the Gregon soldier's direction then held his other hand above his head; twisting it wildly in circles. This was when the girls first noticed his glowing yellow eyes pulsing and radiating.)

CANDY: Um... Soph?

SOPHIRA: Yeah... I see it.

(Just then, a high-pitched whooshing noise rose up and the first wave of Gregon soldiers were immediately sucked straight back out of the gate again by a mysterious force. A web of electricity then formed across the gap where the gate used to be, blocking them out again.)

ARTERIAN: That ought to do it for now.

(He then hurried back into position, leaving Candy and Sophira staring agape at the square.)

SOPHIRA: They got sucked out. That explains the windy noise.

CANDY: Yeah...

(She peered right over the balcony until she could see that gate beneath her.)

CANDY: And the fizzing...

SOPHIRA: Yes, well, don't lean over like that, you might fall.

(Realising she was right, Candy pulled herself back up then whimpered.)

CANDY: Sophira, I'm scared and I wanna go home.

SOPHIRA: Yeah... but for now let's just go back over to the wall, yeah?

CANDY: Agreed.

(They then scampered back to nestle themselves against the wall.

(Outside Lethernia at this time, McGoogan was outraged. How his men could fail to achieve a simple task like passing through a gap in a wall was beyond him.)

MCGOOGAN: What the fuck am I seeing here? They went in then flew out again!!!

I mean, what the fuck? How hard can it be to stay in there for fuck sake! And why haven't they got back in there yet???

(The emperor snarled.)

EMPEROR: Because they'll get burned to a crisp!

(McGoogan gave him a sideways glance.)

MCGOOGAN: What?

EMPEROR: Look! Magic, McGoogan! And no, that's not your new nickname!

MCGOOGAN: I...

(The emperor clenched his fists furiously.)

EMPEROR: Magic! They're using black magic.

MCGOOGAN: That... that's a thing, is it?

EMPEROR: Aye! It is! And it means we need to take out their dark mages.

(He sneered.)

EMPEROR: Now find a way! Go!!!

(Without a word, McGoogan then hurried away. Left behind, the emperor snarled.)

EMPEROR: Fucking Lethernian bastards!

(Inside Lethernia at this time, all was quiet. With the electric gate holding the Gregon at bay, the Lethernian soldiers that had amassed in the square could only stand there and stare ahead in bewilderment. They had nothing to do and nobody to fight against. Arterian was doing a fantastic job. As much as they just wanted to bury their heads and pray for a swift end to the fighting, Candy and Sophira couldn't take their eyes off of him. Their pupils followed him everywhere as he raced along the balcony firing various magic types at groups of soldiers. His art was hypnotic to watch. It was also extremely effective. Outside in the plain, Gregon soldiers were combusting, freezing to death and frying at his whim. As Arterian continued to work at a pace, however, he very soon started to emit an orange glow. An orange glow that only Arterian himself understood. He was starting to lose himself in the dark magic. It was a perilous state of being. Should he immerse in the magic entirely, he could well lose any sense of perspective and start killing everything in his path including those he was fighting *for*. This was the very essence of the dark rage. Magical overkill; the magic consuming its host and unleashing itself on all and sundry. Well aware that it was a risk he'd have to take, however, he continued on unabated. He had no choice. The Gregon were still a long, long way from giving up on their murderous goal.

Determined to try every tactic at this disposable, the emperor soon called forth his archer units and ordered them to pepper the main square with arrows. He could see there were soldiers in the square but none of his men could get inside to kill them. Ranged weapons, therefore, had become the only option left open to him. Wearing a deathly snarl, he ordered them to commence firing as soon as they were ready. In that moment, his efforts finally started to bear fruit. As arrows rained down on the main square, several of the bewildered Lethernian army were skewered on their sharp tips. They now knew what war involved and a few of them scarpered. Those who remained found themselves dodging the arrows for their very survival whilst trying to heal their comrades.

Upon the balcony, at this time, a low flying set of arrows skimmed the wall above Candy and Sophira's heads then plopped down in front of them. With a scream they both jump to their feet then stared up at the top of the marble wall.)

CANDY: We should be safe from the arrows here, Soph.

SOPHIRA: Yeah, but we're not! I hate this, Candy!

(Unfortunately for them, however, the arrows were relentless. Hundreds at a time we're flying overhead and dozens of them kept hitting Arterian and ricocheting off him, every time he leant over the wall to fire his magic. Too frightened to even cower in terror, just in case an arrow hit them, Candy and Sophira could only bounce on the balls of their feet in readiness to avoid the next attack.)

SOPHIRA: Ashbury forest doesn't seem so bad *now*, does it?

(Just then, another hail of arrows scraped across the top of the wall. With a shriek, Sophira dived onto her stomach and covered her head.)

SOPHIRA: I don't like it!!!

(She then winced in terror, praying that no other arrows would be forthcoming. A few seconds later, when she was satisfied that the latest sortie had passed, she then leapt to her feet again.)

SOPHIRA: They just keep on coming, Candy, and...

(She then gasped in horror. Candy was standing before her, shaking in pain; her hands slowly reaching for an arrow that was sticking out of her thigh.)

CANDY: Soph...

SOPHIRA: On it!

(She then snarled venomously and yanked out the arrow.)

CANDY: Ow! That fucking hurt!!!

SOPHIRA: Sorry!

(She then healed Candy's thigh before spinning around to face Arterian with a furious snarl on her face.)

SOPHIRA: Isn't there a spell you can use to just kill the fucking lot of them in one go??? I've had enough of this shit already!

(She was speaking with an anger born from the fact that if the arrow had been a little bit higher Candy could have died. She couldn't heal death.)

SOPHIRA: Well???

(Matching her ferocious snarl, Arterian spun around to face her, angrily. It was a move that frightened her half to death.)

SOPHIRA: Um... I'm sorry!

(She then cowered behind her hands.)

ARTERIAN: Sorry? Why are you... never mind.

(He then stepped up to her, making her cower even lower.)

ARTERIAN: Look...

SOPHIRA: I said it was sorry.

CANDY: Yeah! Leave her alone, you big bully!

(Starting to get somewhat annoyed, Arterian bellowed.)

ARTERIAN: Shut up!

(Immediately, they both reeled back then offered him apologetic grins.)

ARTERIAN: Now listen. The electrical barrier is getting weaker and all I'm really doing here is holding them at bay. In the meantime, our soldiers are getting picked off with arrows at an alarming rate. There's too many of them.

(He nodded sternly.)

ARTERIAN: I need to change tactics. And for that, Sophira, I need your help!

SOPHIRA: Mine?

(They then watched another sortie of arrows pass harmlessly overhead before continuing from where they'd left off.)

ARTERIAN: Yes. What are you willing to do to see your people survive?

(Sophira shrugged nervously; more than a little daunted by his pulsating yellow eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Well... anything, I suppose!

ARTERIAN: Excellent. That's good to know. You see, I can take out thousands with one sonic boom, but that'll still leave a good thousand or so beneath the wall that I can't reach. So I might need someone to take up the mantle for me.

SOPHIRA: Okay...

ARTERIAN: The sonic boom takes so much power, I'll have no shield or barrier when I cast it, you see? Therefore, if they hit me with those arrows I'm done for. If that's the case, if I die; I'm gonna need *you* to take charge. To be my heir.

SOPHIRA: Heir?

(Her eyes bulged and an enlightened expression crossed her brow.)

SOPHIRA: Oh, wait. You mean... that! You'll need a new vessel!

(Arterian forced a smile.)

ARTERIAN: Yes. And I know it's a lot to ask, but I think you're a good candidate. You're strong and I sense a lot of good in you. *I* think you could handle it.

(Sophira nodded solemnly, wholeheartedly accepting his judgement.)

SOPHIRA: I don't like it, but... if you believe it's right then... I'm in. Anything to save Lethernia.

ARTERIAN: Good girl. Now come and sit by my feet; you'll be safe there.

CANDY: Um... what about me? Can I come? I want to be safe too.

(Arterian sighed.)

ARTERIAN: Okay, but sit further away from me than she does.

(With a scowl, Candy sniffed her armpit then followed Sophira and Arterian back to the space Arterian had been fighting from. As he placed himself back in position to attack, Sophira sat by his feet then shrugged to Candy.)

SOPHIRA: It makes sense, Candy.

CANDY: Not to me. Not a word. Why do I have sit further away? Do I smell or something? And what did he mean by you being his heir?

(Sophira just smiled.)

CANDY: Sophira...

(She then gasped in horror.)

CANDY: He meant the heir to his powers. If he dies and you're nearest...

SOPHIRA: He won't! Just relax, Candy. Everything's gonna be fine. Trust me.

(Candy looked to her anxiously for a moment then sighed.)

CANDY: Well... fine. Okay. I trust you. Just keep him healed so he *doesn't* die.

SOPHIRA: Deal.

(Watching proceedings from the entrance to his tent, the Gregon emperor was becoming increasingly flustered. He'd thought the invasion of Lethernia would be over in no time with very few casualties on his side. It had been anything but. Lethernia was still yet to be breached and he'd lost hundreds of men. Rather than accepting that he'd underestimated the enemy, however, he chose to believe his men simply weren't battling hard enough. Determined to make them step up their game, he bellowed furiously at his generals to increase the number of arrows and double their efforts to push through the electrified gateway. He could see the electric was weakening and figured that the more his men were electrocuted, the weaker it would become.)

EMPEROR: Stop being sissies!!! You're lives are shit anyway, so do us all a favour and make the sacrifice!!! Go on, jump in there!!! Electrocution is a small price to pay in servitude of our clan, after all!!!

(Just then, his second in command raced over to him, having just returned from his investigations.)

MCGOOGAN: My liege!

EMPEROR: Ah, McGoogan. What did you find out?

MCGOOGAN: Well, my liege, it looks like there's just one mage up there; somewhere near the middle. We can't *see* any others anyway; and that *is* where all the magic is coming from!

EMPEROR: From one bastard, you say?

MCGOOGAN: Aye!

EMPEROR: I see.

(He nodded.)

EMPEROR: Okay, here's the plan. Aim all the arrows in *his* direction. Every single fucking one. Swamp the bugger. One of them is bound to hit him.

MCGOOGAN: Sir!

EMPEROR: Oh, and round up all the members of the army marching band. Quite frankly they're a waste of fucking space. Throw them into the electrified gateway; with any luck it might weaken the fucker enough for us to break through.

MCGOOGAN: Right! Consider it done, my liege!

(He then raced away to carry out his orders.

As a result of the emperor's decision to single out the lone mage, within minutes, Arterian found himself being utterly bombarded with arrows. So much so, he could barely even see his hands in front of him. Mercifully, because of his protective barrier, they were making no impact whatsoever. As soon as he unleashed the spell he was planning, however, that would change. He'd have to drop his barrier to cast it. He'd then become a sitting duck, destined to die in a hail of arrows. Having lived the last 50 years without experiencing pain, it was safe to say that he was more than a little apprehensive about it. Having also lived those fifty years without experiencing a single moment of pleasure, however, he didn't even think twice. Bearing the dark rage had brought him nothing but loneliness and regret. If anything, death would be a sweet release. And so, he just gritted his teeth then began the casting. Priming himself, he stood tall then held his arms out to the side, before looking to his feet; very much in the style of a gymnast preparing himself mentally. He then turned his hands upwards and started to mumble in a strange forgotten language.

Moments later, his mumble became a growl. He then raised his head. His eyes were now glowing brighter than a thousand stars. He was psyched, charged and ready to unleash. He didn't hesitate. Allowing himself one final howl of rage, he clapped his hands before him and released the full force of his power. Within seconds of him doing so, however, a hail of arrows lashed into his head and torso and he fell to the ground.)

SOPHIRA: Arterian!!!

(Scared witless, she dived towards him and desperately tried to heal him. Fully focussed on doing so, she had no idea about what was going on outside. Arterian's spell had been devastating. Mortified, the emperor could only watch in horror as Arterian's energy blast sent his tent flying across the meadow. He, however, was one of the lucky ones. Those unlucky enough to be a few yards behind were blown to smithereens. Arms, legs and heads were ripped off by its sheer force. Bits of the Gregon soldier's bodies were strewn for miles around; the land almost turning red with their blood. The energy blast had demolished everything in its path. Over eight thousand men were obliterated in one powerful casting.

As human body parts and broken weapons rained down on the field behind him, the emperor could only gape in dismay; unable to take his eyes off the destruction.)

EMPEROR: I... I mean... I... what the...

(His face then turned red with rage and he roared furiously. Most military leaders would have regarded a devastating attack like this as the perfect time to beat a hasty retreat, but it had only served to heighten his quest for vengeance even further.

Shaking with rage, he clenched his fists then bellowed.)

EMPEROR: Destroy them!!! Every last fucker in there!!!

(Reacting to his cry, the thousand or so remaining soldiers all screamed for vengeance then charged for the gap in the wall. They'd be subservient to their emperor right to the very end. The first few to arrive were fried alive instantly. Those behind, however, merely received burns or painful shocks. The barrier was weakening.

Delighted by this fact, they kept on charging into it. It was only a matter of time before they made it inside and they knew it. Watching them from the square, the surviving Lethernian soldiers could only gulp then psych themselves up for imminent battle.)

(Up on the balcony at this time, Arterian remained flat on his back. His eyes were closed and he was displaying no signs of life whatsoever. Refusing to accept the obvious, however, Sophira was leaning across him, shouting her heart out as she tried to heal him.)

SOPHIRA: Wake up!!! Come on, heal!!! Please!!!

(Watching her from a few feet away, Candy was slumped against the wall, pouting miserably. Her friend's efforts were in vain and she knew it. Arterian had died before he'd even hit the floor. Finally beginning to realise it too, Sophira eventually relented and slumped backwards. Desperate to reassure her, Candy tried her best to force a smile.)

CANDY: You did your best, Soph. You really did. But there was nothing you could do.

(A tear then rolled down her cheek.)

CANDY: Are you gonna be okay, Soph?

(Sophira said nothing. She just slumped even further and hung her head. Taking it as a sign of grieving, Candy started to edge towards her, when suddenly a loud battle cry erupted from down below. In a blind panic, she shrieked then crawled forwards to peer over the edge of the balcony and into the square.)

CANDY: Fuck!!!

(The Gregon army had finally breached the barrier and were charging at the Lethernian soldiers. Fearing the end was on its way, she whimpered then spun to face Sophira.)

CANDY: Soph, we're in deep shit!!!

(Suddenly, Sophira thrust her head back violently. It was a move that scared Candy witless. Sophira's eyes had turned yellow and were pulsating violently. Her face was also contorted into a venomous snarl.)

CANDY: Um... Soph...

(Offering no response, Sophira just climbed to her feet then walked to the balcony edge to peer into the square. Watching her through terrified eyes, Candy bit her nails and whimpered.)

CANDY: Soph, your eyes have...

(Cutting her off in mid-sentence, Sophira spun to face her then snarled.)

SOPHIRA: It ends now!

(She then jumped down into the square below.)

CANDY: Soph???

(Desperately fearing for her friend's life, she watched on, wide-eyed and trembling as Sophira landed among a group of Gregon warriors below. Her jaw then dropped at the sight of Sophira thrusting out her arms to sending them all flying. She'd cast a wind spell so powerful, it had blown them all fifty feet into the air.)

CANDY: Um... right... I'll leave you to it then.

(She pouted.)

CANDY: Just... be safe.

(She then watched on anxiously as Sophira stepped up to where a pack of Gregon soldiers were cutting through the Lethernian's like butter.)

SOPHIRA: I don't think so.

(She then blasted a quick-fire series of electricity bolts into well over forty of them, killing them outright. Such was their vast number, however, it made very little difference. Gregon soldiers just kept pouring in to take their place. Outnumbered and out-powered, the Lethernian's didn't have a hope in hell of defeating them. Quick to realise this, Sophira snarled bitterly.)

SOPHIRA: Fine. Let's finish this another way, shall we?

(With that, she turned to face the broken gateway then strode towards it purposefully. As she did so, dozens of Gregon soldiers tried vainly to scythe her down with their swords. One after the other they raced in to end her but their swords would break before they even got close to hitting her; such was the power of the force field that protects the bearer of the dark rage. The protection is absolute and she was in no danger whatsoever. Well aware of this, she stared straight ahead and simply kept on going; ignoring their continued attempts to bring her down.)

GREGON 01: What's the fucking girl made of???

GREGON 02: Not sugar and spice and all things nice, that's for fucking sure!!!

GREGON 01: Aye!!!

(The two of them then converged on her, furiously swinging their blades. As if she was merely swatting flies, Sophira just slapped them aside then continued on. Fully focussed on her destination, she marched through every Gregon warrior in her path. Powerless to stop her they could only watch on in dismay as she passed through the gateway and strode towards what remained of the emperor's tent.)

GREGON 03: Well that can't be good.

GREGON 04: Aye!

(It was a sentiment shared by every Gregon warrior in the proximity. In no doubt whatsoever that she was making a beeline for their emperor, they immediately called a halt to their invasion and charged back to defend him. Like any well-disciplined army they believed their commander-in-chief's safety to be paramount. As such, Sophira was instantly swarmed upon by hundreds of them. They were wasting their time. Within a split second, they were all flying through the air in various different directions, defeated by another powerful wind spell. There was literally nothing they could do. Sophira knew it, the emperor knew it and having found out the hard way, so did the Gregon warriors.)

GREGON 05: He's fucked, mate.

GREGON 06: Aye!

(Watching Sophira pace towards him with a murderous glint in her eyes, the emperor gulped then glanced about himself fearfully.)

EMPEROR: Are you fucking pansies gonna kill this bitch or what???

(This time, nobody came to his aid. His men were brave and loyal, but they weren't suicidal. Attempting to attack this girl would be a futile gesture that would undoubtedly end in death. There was literally nothing they could do other than watch

on in dismay; praying the emperor somehow managed to escape. That was their only option now. To watch and hope. It was a tactic also employed by Candy. Watching and hoping that Sophira killed the emperor horribly. Having seen her head for the gate, she'd pulled herself up to the top of the wall to see what was going on outside. Seeing her good friend edge ever closer to the emperor, she clenched her fist then mumbled excitedly.)

CANDY: Go on, Soph. Kick his arse!

(It would have been far wiser for Candy to just sit tight rather than make such efforts to peer over the wall, especially in light of what had happened to Arterian. Fearing for Sophira's well-being however, she'd decided to take the risk. Mercifully, she wasn't in any danger. Every soldier in the entire army was now engaged in watching through empty eyes as Sophira approached their emperor.)

EMPEROR: Are you cunts going to...

(Just then, Sophira raced up to him and grabbed him by the throat. Outraged by the indignity, the emperor instantly tried to pull her hands away. Due to the protective shell around her, however, his hands couldn't even come close to touching her. Quick to realise this, he then attempted to head-butt her instead. It was a move that merely resulted in him hurting his own head. Utterly frustrated, he then opted for verbal abuse; the only remaining avenue of assault.)

EMPEROR: Fuck off! Harm me and I swear, my entire army won't rest until you're dead. You and all your kind.

(Sophira didn't even dignify his pathetic threat with an answer. Killing every Lethernian was always their intention anyway. His words were nonsense, born out of pure bravado. The emperor quite simply didn't want his men to know he was on the verge of soiling himself.)

EMPEROR: I said fuck off!!!

(Offering him no response whatsoever, Sophira just tilted her head from side to side, almost as if examining his head for signs of wear and tear.)

EMPEROR: What the fuck are you looking at?

(Again she said nothing. She just dipped her head to look at his chin. Becoming increasingly desperate the emperor snarled. All he could think of was trying to belittle her into giving up.)

EMPEROR: You can't do anything to me; you're weak. You've been squeezing my neck for an age and I can't feel a thing. Let me go before I do something you regret! (He then implored McGoogan to help him with his eyes, but McGoogan could only offer him a desperate shrug. Like the rest of his men, he was out of hope and out of ideas. They'd long since given up trying to stop her by and he only had his wits to help him.)

EMPEROR: So, you've nothing to say, huh, lassie? Then fuck off! Go on!

(And still, Sophira failed to utter a word. She just looked coldly into his eyes.)

EMPEROR: Stop staring, you cunt! Tell me what the fuck you want or get the fuck away from me!!!

(He fumed.)

EMPEROR: So is this it? You're just going to hold my neck and bore me to death, are you? Speak, woman! Fucking say something!!!

(Regretfully for him, she then did just that.)

SOPHIRA: Separate!

(As soon as she finished uttering the word, the emperor's body from the neck downwards, dropped to the dirt; blood gushing from the remains of his neck. At once,

the air was filled with shrieks of horror and dismay. Some battled-hardened warriors even threw up. It made for quite the horrendous sight.)

MCGOOGAN: She... she... she fucking killed him. Without doing anything!!!

What the fuck is she???

SOPHIRA: What *am* I?

(She then turned around; a move that struck fear into every Gregon warrior out there. Her face bore the kind of spine-chilling smirk you'd *expect* to see on a murderous psychopath. They could tell from the look in her eyes that she wanted to kill every single one of them and they knew she was more than capable of doing so.)

MCGOOGAN: Oh, shit...

SOPHIRA: So, who wants to go next?

(She then nonchalantly dropped the emperor's severed head onto the ground. It was a move that brought forth absolute panic. From all angles, cries to retreat echoed out across the meadow and every single Gregon warrior fled as fast as he could. Reacting to the cries, even those who'd been battling inside Lethernia charged back out of the gate and attempted to head for the hills. Very few made it that far. As they fled for their very lives, an endless torrent of lightning bolts and fireballs zoomed in their direction; unleashed by Sophira's hands. The chances of surviving this onslaught were extremely slim. In fact, out of the entire, mighty Gregon army, maybe only a hundred men made it home alive.

A short while later, when the last surviving Gregon warrior disappeared into the distance, Sophira relented her assault then sighed. Even one survivor was too many as far as she was concerned. Satisfied that she'd done all she could, however, she shrugged it off then headed back into Lethernia. She was greeted with a deafening ovation from overjoyed citizens; not to mention an overexcited Candy. Staring down from the balcony, she was calling out her friend's name and bouncing up and down, joyfully.)

CANDY: Soph!!! Soph!!! You're the best, Soph!!! Yay!!!

(She then stared down at a group of girls her own age.)

CANDY: She's my best mate, she is!!!

(She then punched the air with delight. Sophira, however, didn't even acknowledge her. Without a word, she simply marched on through the crowd then headed into the hall of the elders. More than a little disappointed, Candy could only sigh to herself. She then shrugged it off and raced towards the stairwell.)

CANDY: I'll come to you then, Soph. You've worked hard enough for one day anyway.

(A short while later, when Candy returned to the square, she found herself struggling to get through a bustling crowd. The citizens of Lethernia had wasted no time whatsoever in getting organised. The Gregon army had abandoned all their food and water supplies; both of which were currently in great demand. As a result, hundreds were racing outside the city to plunder them from amongst the human remains and pools of blood out in the meadow. Others were setting up food banks in order to distribute the bounty. It was an operation carried out with much in the way of joy and relief. Their recovery from the brink of extinction was already well underway.)

(Inside the hall of the elders, at this time, the brand new hero of the people, Sophira, was heading straight for Yanada's chamber. Her eyes were still glowing yellow and

her snarl hadn't faded one bit. The Gregon may have been defeated, but she still had one more enemy to deal with. As such, rather than knocking, as soon as she arrived at Yanada's chamber, she crashed through the doors then strode up to him menacingly. Given quite the start, he jumped to his feet, yanked up his trousers then cast his robe back over himself; whimpering in distress.)

YANADA: No, *you* were masturbating!!!

(Upon recognising the caller, he then flinched with annoyance.)

YANADA: It's you! That nasty little pervert!

(Only now, however, did he spot the yellow glow in her eyes. Having done, so he instantly took a fearful step backwards.)

YANADA: The dark rage!!! So... Arterian...

(Showing no sign of emotion whatsoever, Sophira coldly stared into his eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Dead!

YANADA: And the Gregon?

SOPHIRA: Dead!

(Yanada's face lit up.)

YANADA: You mean... we won?

SOPHIRA: No! *Lethernia* won! *You're* going to live in exile!

(Yanada thrust his hands to his hips angrily)

YANADA: Excuse me? I'm doing what, you say?

SOPHIRA: Going to live in exile. You're a fossil with out-dated and bigoted ideas. There's no place in Lethernia for people like you anymore. Leave! *I'm* in charge now!

(Yanada was furious.)

YANADA: Now you listen here, young lady...

SOPHIRA: Exile or death; it's entirely your choice!

(With that, she flicked out a hand and set fire to his robes. With a shriek, he desperately cast them off then threw them to the floor.)

YANADA: You're insane!!!

SOPHIRA: Pipe down, fossil! Next time it'll be lightning!

(In no doubt whatsoever that she meant it, Yanada looked to her and whimpered nervously.)

YANADA: You'd kill me?

SOPHIRA: Yes! Now I gave you a choice! What's it gonna be?

(Yanada pouted.)

YANADA: Exile or death? Exile please!

SOPHIRA: Exile please, my queen!

(Yanada hung his head.)

YANADA: Exile please, my queen.

SOPHIRA: I'm not your queen; you're banished; exiled; kicked out. Now get lost!

(And with that she pushed him aside then sat herself down on his cherished seat.)

SOPHIRA: Go on; bugger off!

YANADA: But... fine...

(He then headed away, pouting and sobbing. Defeating the bearer of the dark rage was beyond him and disobeying her would be fatal. And so, as much as it broke his heart, he had no choice but to oblige. Crestfallen, he sobbed all the way to the door. Watching as he passed through it, Sophira couldn't help but smile. After the way he'd treated her, she truly believed that justice had been served.)

SOPHIRA: Perfect.

(Her day then got even better. Just as Yanada vanished from sight, the door opened up again and Candy came racing in.)

SOPHIRA: Candy!!!

(In that moment, the yellow faded from Sophira's eyes and she felt the rage melt away.)

CANDY: Oh my god, Soph! You did it!!!

(With spring in her heart, Sophira leapt from her seat then ran to meet her in the centre of the room. Upon coming together then they shared a joyous hug. Just a few seconds into the hug, however, Sophira sensed an uneasiness in her friend's heart.

Anxious to get to the bottom of it, she stepped back and looked lovingly into her eyes.)

SOPHIRA: Candy? What's wrong? Something's bothering you; I can tell.

(Candy sighed then offered her a rueful smile.)

CANDY: Isn't it obvious? What's going to become of you, Soph? Arterian gave you the black plague!

SOPHIRA: The dark rage.

CANDY: Yeah... that.

(Sophira shrugged then offered her a reassuring smile.)

SOPHIRA: I'll be fine!

CANDY: But will you?

(Sophira looked to her emptily for a moment then sighed.)

SOPHIRA: Honestly? I don't know! I mean, it's not like I had much time to prepare, is it?

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: I guess not.

SOPHIRA: When Arterian asked me to be heir, I just agreed. It was chaos out there and I didn't really get any time to think it through. To think about what it meant for *me*. I still haven't.

(Candy smiled at her sympathetically then cracked a cheeky smile.)

CANDY: When he asked me sit further away, I genuinely thought he was saying that I smell.

SOPHIRA: You do!

CANDY: Hey!

SOPHIRA: You smell really nice.

CANDY: Right...

(They shared a giggle then Sophira clenched a triumphant fist.)

SOPHIRA: We won, Candy! Lethernia won! We did that! Us!

CANDY: Yup. Did I mention that we're the best?

SOPHIRA: Yes. Yes, you did.

(A wide smile then crossed their faces and they embraced lovingly. Right now, they could be excused for feeling more than a little pleased with themselves. They'd been to hell and back on their journey, but everything had worked out perfectly. Suffice to say, they couldn't have been happier. Their struggle was over and they'd been spectacularly successful. Best of all, they'd made a wonderful friend in each other in the process. Delighting in their success, they hugged for well over a minute until Sophira stepped back and grinned at Candy like a naughty schoolgirl.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, remember when we first met? You asked if I was a princess.

(Candy giggled.)

CANDY: I did, didn't I? What a wally.

SOPHIRA: Actually, no. It wasn't that far-fetched after all. I've just declared myself Queen of Lethernia!

(Candy looked to her blankly for a moment then scratched her head.)

CANDY: Really? What do the elders think of that?

(Sophira chuckled.)

SOPHIRA: *Outwardly* they approve!

(She then fell about laughing, much to Candy's bewilderment. There was no way she *could* have understood why Sophira was laughing. If she'd been out in the main square at this time, however, she might have. Desperate to stop Sophira from taking control, Yanada was running from group of celebrating citizens to group of celebrating citizens, protesting vehemently.)

YANADA: Sophira is our queen; spread the word.

(Anger rose in his body every time he said it. The words he *wanted* to say related to stopping the power hungry dark mage from taking control, but every time he spoke the above phrase came out. The power Sophira had over him was such, he could do nothing about it. And yet, he kept on trying. Determined to be heard, he eventually opted to climb up onto a ledge and make his declaration to one and all. It didn't quite go to plan. His goal was to order the people to defy Sophira the tyrant. That, however, wasn't what passed his lips.)

YANADA: The elders are no more; long live Queen Sophira the first!

(Following *that* unwanted declaration, he then declared his love for defiling farm animals before stripping naked and skipping out of the gate singing a song about how pretty he looked in a chiffon dress. The dark rage truly was the ultimate power of manipulation. All the dark magic in the world rolled into one. If you knew someone personally, you could use it to manipulate them into doing anything you liked. Had Arterian known the Gregon emperor personally, he could have simply made him surrender. Alas, he did not. War had been the only answer and now Sophira was in possession of the power instead.

Had she been inclined to do so, Sophira could easily have *used* the power to make Candy fall in love with her. The thought, however, never crossed her mind. She loved Candy way too much to manipulate her like that. That was one thing she'd *never* do; not even in her darkest moment would she even consider it.

As Candy stood there in the hall of elders chuckling with her dear friend, she felt extremely optimistic about the future. She'd achieved great things on her adventure and her confidence was sky high. It was ever present at the back of Sophira's mind, however, that the future was very much uncertain. The down side of possessing the dark rage was that she could well end up killing those she cared about every time she was in a bad mood. It was a horrendous downside that would undoubtedly lead to a lifetime of loneliness, just like the one Arterian had suffered. Not about to dwell on such a dismal prospect, however, especially during their moment of celebration, she decided to cast those thoughts aside for now and revel in their success. Lethernia's future had been assured and she was going to enjoy every second of celebrating that fact.)

(A short while later, when Candy and Sophira emerged from the hall of the elders, the citizens that had gathered in the square erupted into a frenzied show of adulation.

Having witnessed Sophira's heroics first hand they were only too delighted to rubber-stamp Yanada's glowing recommendation and accept her as their queen.

To mark the moment, a joyous celebration took place in Lethernia that very night in their new queen's honour. During the celebrations, Candy was also hailed as a national hero and bestowed with the title Lady Candy, Defender of the Realm. It was a title she knew she couldn't possibly live up to, but was only too happy to accept.

It was a night neither Candy or Sophira would ever forget. The people were absolutely euphoric and bestowed them more kudos than they ever could have hoped for. Accepting every kind word that came their way they couldn't help but share a warm smile. They'd been to hell and back on a rollercoaster of terror, blood and tears but their friendship had seen them through. And now, after everything that had been sent to test them, they'd go down in history as Lethernia's greatest ever heroes.

The overwhelming sense of joy that swept the town that night was hard to quantify. The people had been hours away from death. Their entire civilisation had been on the verge of destruction. To have returned from the brink like that wasn't a feeling that anyone could even begin to put into words. The joy upon their faces, however, said it all.

By the time Candy and Sophira managed to get to bed that night, the sun was almost up on the following morning. The party in the main square, however, continued on unabated. It was a safe to say that some people would be celebrating for quite some time yet. Despite the noise they were making, however, Candy and Sophira slept like babies. On the morrow, Sophira would have some massive decisions to make about how to handle the dark rage, and Candy was anxious to know where she'd fit in to the new queen's life. For now though, they just wanted to sleep. The mission they'd undertaken had been accomplished in some considerable style, and their hell was over. At last, they could rest. Everything else would just have to wait.)

Six Months later

(Lethernia had never had it so good. Queen Sophira the first had been a revelation. During her brief reign, she'd pressed for kindness, love, tolerance and acceptance. To put an end to bigotry, out-dated values and the repression of people's freedom of expression. Her charter had been accepted by one and all. As a result, for the first time ever, Lethernia was truly free. Her sexuality, and that of those like her, would no longer be a rod to beat people with. Sophira's biggest policy change, however, was an alteration to their defence structure. Lethernia now had an army; a force made up of citizens trained to heal the suffering, but also to kill whenever called upon to do so. She wouldn't allow Lethernia to come so close to destruction ever again; at least, without a fight. It would be no exaggeration to say that, thanks to their new queen, Lethernia had never been so strong. The same, however, could not be said of the Gregon nation.

It hadn't taken long for word to spread around the world about how the Gregon's once mighty army had been virtually wiped out by one lonely old man and a cute nineteen year old girl that he'd befriended. As a result, their empire crumbled. Quick to take advantage of the fact they had little to no army left, every nation who'd had territory taken by The Gregon, mobilised to take it back. One particularly bitter nation who'd previously had their capital city sacked then took things a step further. Striking while the Gregon army was at its weakest, they invaded every single Gregon settlement and

wiped them off the face of the map. The Gregon nation would now go down in history as a failed civilisation that overreached then suffered the consequences. They'd go on to become a footnote in history and nothing more.

So far, during her six month reign, the dark rage had had no ill-effects on Sophira whatsoever. In fact, she'd never been so calm. Lethernia's leading scholar had suggested that Sophira's kindly nature could well be so dominant that it was able to suppress the rage. In reality, however, nobody knew the truth. Maybe the rage would rise up and show itself at some point, but right now everything was looking decidedly rosy.)

(A few days after Sophira marked her first six months as the Queen of Lethernia, Candy came to her with a request. During her six months away, she'd missed her father terribly and wanted to take time out from her duties to visit him. Not only did Sophira grant her request, she offered to use her magic to transport them both there. Candy literally danced for joy. Delighted to see it, Sophira chuckled to herself then asked if she wanted to leave there and then. Candy didn't hesitate to say yes. And so, at six o'clock that evening, the time Candy and her father had normally sat down for dinner together, Sophira and Candy teleported into Candy's bedroom. Within seconds, Candy collapsed to the floor, suffering from dizziness. Being teleported was something she'd never get used to. Upon recovered from the brief bout of vertigo, she then climbed to her feet and glanced around the room.)

CANDY: Nothing's changed.

(Sophira's expression begged to differ.)

SOPHIRA: Are you sure about that? I'm *sure* it didn't smell this bad before.

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: That'd be my dad's approach to cleaning stuff. If the door's shut and you can't see it, it doesn't exist.

(They shared a brief chuckle then Sophira gestured to the door.)

SOPHIRA: Shall we?

(Candy took a deep breath then nodded.)

CANDY: Let's go!

(And with that, they stepped from her bedroom and into the main room of the house where Candy's dad was fast asleep in a chair. Stopping to watch him, they couldn't help but giggle. His head was tipped right back and he was snoring extremely loudly.)

SOPHIRA: Aw, your dad's so cute!

(Candy smiled.)

CANDY: Yeah... let's scare him!

(Wearing a cheeky grin, she then crept round the table and kicked him in the shin.)

CANDY: Police; wake up!!!

(In a blind panic, Swaine leapt to his feet.)

SWAINE: I know nothing about any dodgy whisky!!!

(His brain then switched on and his jaw dropped.)

SWAINE: Candy???

CANDY: Hi, dad!

(Tears welled in his eyes, then he threw his arms around her.)

SWAINE: Oh my god, Candy!!!! My little girl!!! I thought you were dead!

CANDY: What???

(Her dad then leant back and placed his hands on her shoulders.)

SWAINE: It's really you!

CANDY: You thought I was dead?

SWAINE: Yes! We even had a service for you!

(He then threw his arms around her again.)

SWAINE: Candy, I've flogged myself everyday for letting you walk out into those woods!

(Knowing she could have come home any time in the last six months just to let him know she was safe, a wave of guilt swept through her and her bottom lip drooped.)

CANDY: I'm so, so sorry dad!

SWAINE: It's...

(He then spotted Sophira and pulled out of the hug again.)

SWAINE: Hello, Sophira.

SOPHIRA: Hiya.

(Much to their surprise, he then grabbed a cane from beside the chair and used it to approach her.)

SWAINE: Good to see you again, love!

SOPHIRA: Likewise.

(Mortified by what she was seeing, Candy whimpered anxiously.)

CANDY: What happened, dad? Why the cane?

SWAINE: This?

(He held up the cane.)

SWAINE: Don't worry about it, love. Entirely my fault. I had a little hunting accident. I wasn't paying attention, you see?

(Candy's heart sunk.)

CANDY: Because of me, right?

(Swaine just smiled then lied through his teeth.)

SWAINE: No, don't be silly!

(He gave her a wide smile.)

SWAINE: So... are you staying long, Candy?

(It may have been an innocent enough question, but it was clear to see that was he was imploring her with her eyes to say yes. Not about to let him down, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Yeah. Sure. Whatever you need, dad.

(Watching on, Sophira rubbed her chin thoughtfully.)

SOPHIRA: Have you been able to hunt, sir?

(Swaine sighed.)

SWAINE: No, but I do okay; the others bring me food now and again.

SOPHIRA: Well that's something, I guess.

(She then glanced towards Candy. As much as she was trying to hide it, it was plain to see that she was trying not to cry.)

SOPHIRA: Hmm...

(She then looked to Swaine and smiled.)

SOPHIRA: Do you mind if we just pop out for a minute, Mr Swaine?

(Swaine stared straight through her in bewilderment.)

SWAINE: You and me? Why would...

(He then looked enlightened.)

SWAINE: Oh, you mean you two!

SOPHIRA: Yeah.

(He chuckled.)

SWAINE: Sure. Be my guest. Just remember to wake me up when you come back. I don't want to miss a second with my little girl here.

(He winked at Candy.)

CANDY: Aw, dad!

SWAINE: Don't mind me. I'll just return to taking a nap for now. I'll be fine!

SOPHIRA: Okay. Let me just fix that leg for you before we go.

(Before he could question her, Sophira reached down then placed her hand on his left thigh. Experiencing a warm and fuzzy sensation as the pain faded to nothing, Swaine allowed himself a relieved groan.)

SWAINE: Wow, bloody hell girl, that's fantastic!

(He then stood up straight for the first time in months and gasped in amazement.)

SWAINE: Bloody hell, you fixed me.

SOPHIRA: I did yes.

SWAINE: Thanks, love. That's... well it's bloody incredible

(He then glanced towards the ceiling.)

SWAINE: It felt bloody nice too.

(He then lifted his right thigh.)

SWAINE: Can you do the other leg, as well? A little higher this time.

SOPHIRA: You injured *that* leg too?

SWAINE: Nope.

(Horried by her father's behaviour, Candy frowned in disgust.)

CANDY: For pity's sake, dad!

(Swaine shrugged innocently.)

SWAINE: What? You can't blame a guy for trying!

CANDY: Right... on that note, we'll be back later!

(She chuckled.)

CANDY: You never change, dad!

SWAINE: Couldn't if I wanted to. I've only got the one pair of socks, you see?

(Petrified at the thought of listening to any more of his jokes, Sophira shuddered.)

SOPHIRA: Um... let's go!

(She then opened the door and headed outside. Before following her out, Candy stepped forth to give her father another hug. She then turned and headed outside to join Sophira.)

SOPHIRA: Let's take a walk, shall we?

(She then headed off down the deserted main thoroughfare. Seconds later, Candy arrived at her side, looking extremely downbeat. Right now, she was riddled with guilt.)

SOPHIRA: Are you okay?

(Candy just shook her head.)

SOPHIRA: Yeah... your dad was in a bad way, wasn't he?

(Candy then burst out crying, prompting Sophira to step in and hug her.)

SOPHIRA: Hey, hey... he's gonna be fine, Candy.

CANDY: I know that. It's just that... I should have come back sooner. I only had to let him know I was okay and I didn't even bother do that. I really let him down, Soph. I feel so guilty. He thought I was dead, for pity's sake. And then there's his injury. He was grieving for me and he couldn't even work to support himself. He must have been to hell and back.

(She whimpered.)

CANDY: And while he was going through all that, I was elsewhere, living like a princess.

SOPHIRA: I know, babes. I know. And you feel terrible about it. That's why I asked you out to come outside. So we can talk.

(She smiled.)

SOPHIRA: You know what you have to do now, don't you?

CANDY: Do I?

(Sophira sighed.)

SOPHIRA: You have to stay and take care of your dad for a while. I may have healed him, but I think he needs you around for a bit.

(Candy sighed.)

CANDY: I know that... but I want to be with you. It's been so wonderful these last six months! And I left in the first place so I *wouldn't* be stuck here! I'm so torn.

SOPHIRA: Candy, you *won't* be stuck here. Not at all.

(She smiled.)

SOPHIRA: It's just temporary. This isn't goodbye, Candy. For a start, I'm gonna visit you every few days. I just think you need to be here for a while. For your own peace of mind if anything. And you can come back whenever you're ready.

(Sensing she was right, Candy nodded reluctantly.)

CANDY: That makes sense! I really want to spend some time with him, Soph. I really do. I was just worried I'd end up stuck here again.

SOPHIRA: Candy, that's never going to happen. Like I said, you can come back to Lethernia anytime. And you know what, your dad can come too.

CANDY: Really?

SOPHIRA: If that's what you want; yes. I do have like twenty spare rooms, after all.

(Candy chuckled.)

CANDY: That's just greedy, that is.

SOPHIRA: Rubbish. I deserve each and every one of them. More even. I'm even tempted to commandeer *your* room.

(They shared a chuckle then Candy smiled.)

CANDY: It works both ways, you know? If you ever need a break from being worshipped and adored by your subjects, you know where I am.

SOPHIRA: I do. And I meant what I said. You can come back any time. Both of you.

CANDY: Babes, if I thought he'd be willing to move into the palace, I'd go and collect him now. He's really loves this town though, for some reason, so he'll take some persuading.

SOPHIRA: And persuade him you will, I expect.

CANDY: Oh, I'm gonna start nagging as soon as I get back.

SOPHIRA: I thought so.

(They chuckled together then Sophira hugged her tight; allowing a tear to roll down her cheek as she did so)

SOPHIRA: I'm really going to miss having you around all the time, Candy!

CANDY: I'll miss you too, Soph!

(Sophira smiled then stepped back from her.)

SOPHIRA: But it's only temporary, remember? I'll see you soon, okay? I promise! Now go and see your dad!

(Wiping a tear, Candy nodded.)

CANDY: Okay. I love you, remember!

(And with a smile, Sophira disappeared into thin air. Left feeling very much alone, Candy glanced around herself then sighed. Her friend was gone and she was right back where she started from. For a moment, she felt like the world had ended.

Before she could even begin to dwell on it, however, she heard a loud cry of laughter,

echoing down the thoroughfare from centre of town. In that moment, a wry smile crossed her brow.)

CANDY: Hmm... dad's asleep... so, surely *one* won't hurt!

(And with no more thought on the subject she headed for the inn with a spring in her step. Upon reaching it a short while later, she took a deep breath then flung the doors open. Just like old times, her entrance was greeted with a deafening cheer and a chorus of wolf whistles.)

CANDY: Hi, boys; guess who's home!

MILO: Candy??? You died!!!

CANDY: Meh. It's nothing a raspberry wine won't fix! Set me up!

(Another cheer then erupted, and in that moment, she knew everything was going to be fine. She'd miss living in Lethernia, but being here in Chiswell Point would be okay too. She loved her father, she loved hunting and she loved her nights at the inn. For now, they'd be enough to keep her going. After all, she wasn't returning to the old life that she wanted to escape from. In her old life, she'd craved an exit but had nowhere to go. She'd felt stuck. That was no longer the case. She could leave whenever she wanted to. As she sat down at the bar, surrounded by lusting young men, Candy pondered that thought for a moment then allowed herself a smile. She'd made quite the realisation. She'd craved a new life *away* from the town, and yet that hadn't been what she'd *really* wanted at all. What she'd actually craved was a friend to enjoy her life with. And in Sophira she had the best friend a girl could ever hope to make. A friend for life who'd sacrifice anything just to make her happy. It was a warm thought that brought the widest of smiles to her face. And so, filing her life in Lethernia under 'pending', she picked up her glass of raspberry wine, gave a silent toast to Sophira then proceeded to flirt with the boys as she'd always done. Her great adventure was behind her and she was back where she belonged. For now.

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