

Doorways

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Chapter 1

The city of Soluna banqueting hall was one of the most aesthetically pleasing constructions in the whole System. It was a huge, white and silver jewel set in the middle of the Major Sector, which was a beauty in its own right. Soluna itself was a place of sharp contrasts, very distinct contrasts. The Major sector was well named as it was the biggest sector, and the one that contained all the most important amenities. The seat of government was in the Major Sector, as was the Great Library, the University, the Military headquarters and just about every form of legal trade there was. The contrast to this was obvious and stark. The Minor Sector contained nothing official or legal at all. The Major Sector had gleaming white buildings and lush green lawns, the Minor Sector had dingy, ramshackle huts and dark, dirty streets. The Major Sector had politicians and businessmen, the Minor Sector had gang leaders and illegal traders. The Major Sector had a comfortably numbered, educated population, the Minor Sector was overcrowded and self-educated. Three quarters of Soluna's population lived in the sector that was only half the size of its rich cousin.

The banqueting hall held quite an important selection of people. The Education board and the University staff were celebrating a one hundred per cent pass rate for the end of year. This actually wasn't as remarkable as it seemed, in fact it was a forgone conclusion. The Major Sector only had its own affluent and knowledgeable population to cater for. Highly educated parents putting their already highly educated offspring through the established educational system. It was merely a routine procedure. These offspring, in turn, passed exams and went on to fill jobs in the Major Sector vacated by the aged portion of the population.

“Young Tyson Block has already forwarded his application to the Military.” Dean Archibald Figgis said proudly. “He'll go far, will that lad.” Naturally he would. Tyson Block senior was already a very respected part of the Military, as his father had been before him.

“Juliet Styles has all but sealed that job in Health and Education.” Professor Shania Twigg added. Juliet Styles whose father was in the Chamber of Commerce. “You'll have her brother, Toby, in your group next year, Daruis.”

Darius Hawk was the youngest person there and this was his first celebratory banquet. Darius taught a bit of everything to the younger students, before they opted for their specialised fields.

“I'm sure he'll do every bit as well as his older sister.” Darius was sure he would. He looked at Dean Figgis, who was wading his way through half a pheasant and wondered if he'd ever end up like that. The Dean was fifty five, twenty five years Darius' senior. He always reminded Darius of images of Emperor Nero. He had curly hair that had been silver for as long as Darius could remember and his portly frame accentuated his short, five feet three height.

“Oh he will.” Dean Figgis said, pouring himself more wine. “Runs in the family.”

“If it was all genetic, we'd be out of a job.” Daruis smiled.

“Not necessarily. They still need nudged in the right direction.”

“So you think their intelligence and success rate is innate?”

"I think they have something that marks out the quality, Hawk. That's why they're here and not down there with that rabble." The Dean waved a fork full of fowl around, indicating the Minor Sector. "There are those who are teachable and those who are not."

"Interesting." Darius mused. "So the rabble down there don't actually have the capability to learn. Is that what you're saying?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Dean Figgis nodded. "If the capability was there, then so would be the curiosity and the motivation to fulfil it. Do they look motivated? No, Hawk. They're down there and they'll always be down there."

"Doesn't opportunity come into it?" Darius asked. "I mean, if one of them had the opportunity to learn, would he be capable of doing so?"

"Doubtful. They're genetically incapable of advanced education. All their environmental surroundings do is compound it. You can't develop what isn't there." The Dean said flatly.

"That's a huge generalisation, Dean Figgis." Darius smiled. "Imagine if we could get one of them through our educational systems and into our society. Just one of them. Now that would be an achievement."

"Achievement? It would be a miracle!" Dean Figgis roared with laughter. "It can't happen, Hawk. Not now, not ever. Those people made their own society, we made ours."

"The society could be responsible for making the people." Darius shrugged. "Supposing I could get one up to our standards."

"Oh you jest!" Dean Figgis guffawed. "Pass one of that lot off as one of our own? Impossible."

"Nothing's impossible, Dean Figgis." Darius said brightly. "I'll wager you ten gold credits that I can bring up a complete illiterate from the Minor Sector and have them pass as one of our own at the Governmental banquet in nine months time."

"I'd be taking your gold, lad." The Dean rumbled another laugh.

"Oh I'm sure I can risk ten gold credits." Darius laughed too. "That jug of wine you have there cost fifty."

"You'll never do it." The Dean shook his head.

"Then you have a free bottle of wine for certain, sir." Darius shrugged.

"Up it to two bottles, that's twenty gold, and I'll humour you." Dean Figgis grinned.

"We have a deal." Darius grinned back.

"Nine months, Hawk. This gutter-rat has to convince the entire senior Government of Soluna that it's a fully educated, fully integrated member of our society. The board will be completely unaware, and therefore not open to prejudice." The Dean said.

"Agreed. Would an honorary dignitary of the University suffice as a fully educated, fully integrated member of our society?"

“Oh now you do jest.” Dean Figgis laughed. “A graduate student will do.”

“I already have a hundred per cent turnout of those.” Darius shrugged.

“I have to admire your self confidence, Hawk. OK, University dignitary it is. Remember that was your stipulation, not mine. No backsliding when the time comes.” The Dean nodded. Darius smiled and raised his glass.

Zachary Perrin just looked at his fellow lecturer in disbelief as they sat in the University staff rooms.

“You did what?” He blurted eventually. “Where you drunk or something?”

“Not outrageously so, no.” Darius said casually. “I've nothing to lose except two bottles of Orlay '87.”

“And face. The old duffer will use this as a party piece forever.” Zach pointed out.

“And what if I win?”

“Are you serious? An illiterate from the Minor Sector?” Zach laughed.

“Oh I'm serious. If I pull this off, I'll be recognised for it all over the System, let alone Soluna. Let's call it a very definite jump up the career ladder, rather than a step.” Darius rubbed his hands together.

“Do you really think they're teachable? I think evolution would contradict that, Darius. That's why the dividing line now is so obvious.” Zach said.

“Evolution? That's a new one.” Darius laughed. “Have you noticed how the Minor Sector's state and that of it's people is blamed on every wretched reason imaginable? Maybe the wretchedness applies, generally, but I don't want them generally. I only want one and I know just how to go about getting one. Coming?” Darius asked Zach.

“Where to?”

“Military Offices.”

Sergeant Frazer Bowles was at the front desk of the Military building dressed in his smart, Soluna uniform.

“Good morning Master Hawk, Master Perrin.” The big soldier gave them both a wide smile.

“Sergeant, I need you to contact that farce down there in the Minor Sector, that passes itself off as a law enforcement agency.” Darius said politely.

“Farce is right, sir. Whatever for? They're every bit as bad as the rest of them down there, and certainly not to be trusted.” Bowles said seriously.

“I'd not trust them as far as I could throw them, Sergeant, don't worry.” Darius assured him. “I'd like video details of a few reprobates. No hardened criminals, no violent psychopaths, no mental abnormalities. I need a small selection of petty criminals. Habitual pickpockets or something. You

know the type I mean?" Darius was aware of Zach looking uncertainly at him.

"I hear you, sir. No nutters. Would a round up of whoever they'd locked up for the night do? That type of rabble?"

"That sounds ideal." Darius nodded. "Oh and they must be illiterate."

"Huh?"

"Illiterate. Unable to read or write." Darius clarified.

"Yes I know what it means, sir. It might help if I knew why you wanted such a person." Bowles said in bewilderment.

"I'm sure it would." Darius smiled. "How quickly could you do this, Sergeant Bowles?"

"Oh it shouldn't take too long. Give me an hour and I'll have a few lined up for you, Master Hawk." Bowles nodded.

"Fantastic." Darius said enthusiastically. "Your efficiency is quite remarkable, Sergeant." He nodded and left the Military building, Zach following.

"Is this wise, Darius?" Zach asked in concern. "Someone from the Minor Sector is dodgy enough without going for a criminal too."

"Don't worry. I've given this a lot of thought. I'll choose one from Bowles' line-up, then I'll run checks myself. They're the only ones I could check satisfactorily, Zach, they're on record. There'll be no danger. I've already decided on certain criteria. I want a female for a start." Darius nodded and Zach looked at him in surprise. "Don't you dare. I mean, I'll choose a girl to minimise the aggression and rebellion factors."

"You really are a nerd. What if you get an aggressive, rebellious girl?" Zach laughed.

"Then I'll hide and get the Sergeant to come and get her." Darius shrugged. "Yes, I'm a nerd." He laughed too. Darius had never been successful on the romantic front. He'd had a few goes, and even tried quite hard a few times. He always ended up disappointed, mainly due to his inability to 'talk plastic' as he put it. Light banter and surface conversation didn't come easy to him at all. Darius might have made for quite a catch if it did. Basically, his inept personality simply couldn't follow up on what his physical appearance projected. Six two, athletically built, dark hair, blue eyes and the personality of a mop bucket. Darius Hawk was a nerd. "I'm quite looking forward to this, Zach. When was the last time you were involved in anything stimulating?"

"Last night. Brigit Walker ..."

"Mentally stimulating."

"Um ... well that's different." Zach sniggered. "Ah it does get a bit mundane round here." He looked round at the beautiful surroundings they were in. Clean, white paving, tidy lawns and neat hedges and this was the Military building grounds! "Have you ever been to the Minor Sector? I haven't."

"No, but I've flown over it. It really is a foul place." Darius said sadly. "Tiny maze-like streets and people scurrying around like so many ants. No wonder the place is disease ridden. There again, they have no hospitals, only makeshift dwellings converted to suit whatever epidemic is raging at the

time.”

“Overpopulated, that's the problem, Darius. Why the hell do they reproduce and bring children into such a sad and sorry society?” Zach shook his head.

“Lack of education, probably. Lack of awareness, lack of amenities, lack of contraception, lack of hope.” Darius shrugged. “That's what's perpetuated down there, Zach. Passed down through the generations, just like our occupational positions.”

“So they know no different, do they?”

“They've lost the will to imagine that there is a 'different'. So have we. Can you pick locks?” Darius asked.

“What? No of course not.” Zach laughed.

“Why?”

“Eh? Well because I've never needed to learn. I wouldn't have a clue.”

“If the need was there and you had to learn, you could pick locks. The need for just one of them to better their life, and myself as a way to teach them how, is all that may be needed.” Darius reasoned.

“Yes and maybe it maybe it won't too. Just be careful Darius, OK? Don't put yourself at risk and don't flog what isn't there. If it's not going to work, accept that.” Zach advised.

“Oh don't be so pessimistic!” Darius sniffed. “Now then. Because I intend to choose a female pupil, I need a full time housekeeper on the premises.” Darius rubbed his hands together.

“You're really getting into this, aren't you?” Zach laughed. “I could make a suggestion regarding that one, if I may?”

“Yes of course. I'd appreciate it.”

“Netty Ling. She's a good friend of my mother's. She lost her husband a few months ago after caring for him many years of sickness. She worked in the Bright Port Hotel before she had to leave to tend her husband. She misses being occupied, I know she'd find this beneficial.”

“She sounds just right!” Darius said eagerly. “My rooms are easily large enough for everyone so she'll have all the privacy she needs.”

“I'll get on with it. She'll be delighted, Darius.” Zach set off towards the stone pillared gates.

“Master Hawk!” A Cadet came dashing down the path. “Sergeant Bowles would like to see you, sir.”

“Thank you.” Darius followed the cadet back into the building.

“What a foul collection of horrors.” Bowles tutted as he lead Darius to a small side office. “The law enforcement crew, I mean. Anarchy in motion, I tell you.” He loaded a disc into a computer. “Peter Horseman, aged forty eight, drunk and disorderly. Valerie De Witt, aged twenty two, prostitution.

Harry Webster, aged thirty two, unnatural acts with a ... with a what?! Well I think we can ignore that one.” Bowles snorted and hit his 'delete' key. “Alexandria Rayne, aged nineteen, vehicle theft. Malcolm Duggen, aged nineteen, breaking and entering. Penelope Sharp, thirty two, causing an affray whilst armed with a cudgel. Derek Hornseby, thirty one, inciting a riot.” Bowles turned round the screen so Darius could see the profiles.

“OK Sergeant, discard Horseman, Duggen and Hornseby.” Darius frowned at the screen. “Leaves us with De Witt, Rayne and Sharp.”

“The prostitute, the car thief and the thug with the club. All illiterate, as you requested.”

“Sharp is thirty two, plus she has violent tendencies, which is not what I want. Cudgel, indeed.” Darius rolled his eyes. “So discard her. Twenty two year old prostitute, nineteen year old thief.” Darius mused. “Are prostitutes supposed to be even vaguely attractive? It may be advantageous if she scrubbed up all right.”

“I dread to think what you're up to, Master Hawk.” Bowles said warily. “Do you want the visual files on those two?” Darius nodded. “Agh!”

“Good grief. What a visage.” Darius winced at the flat faced, flat nosed mugshot in front of him. “I think the prostitute wins.”

“No sir, that *is* the prostitute. Valerie De Witt.” Bowles informed him.

“You're having me on?” Darius said in surprise. “Men actually pay to ... to ... well she is a bit earthy, isn't she?”

“Face like a welder's bench, sir. Here's the other one ... oo! Hey not bad for a toerag.” Bowles cast his opinion.

“That's a vehicle thief?” Darius was surprised again. Alexandria Rayne was predictably grubby faced and feral-looking but she only looked about twelve! “Recheck the age please, Sergeant. It's very important. I can't afford to make the mistake of using a minor for a scientific project.” Bowles nodded and ran a recheck.

“Nineteen, sir. Adult enough. Parents unknown, no fixed abode. There again, that applies to just about everybody down there. First arrest for pickpocketing, aged eight then breaking and entering when she was ten. She has a host of charges here for petty theft and fighting, but no serious convictions. That's more or less what you were looking for, isn't it?”

“That's exactly what I was looking for.” Darius beamed at the green-eyed petty thief on the screen with her mass of red ringlets bouncing out in all directions. “Have the law enforcers deliver her to you, Sergeant, then I can talk job terms with her.”

“Job?” Bowles blinked at Darius a few times. “You're giving her a job? But why?”

“Because no one else will.” Darius shrugged.

“Yes and probably for a good reason, Master Hawk. She's a petty thief!”

“You have my word that if she gives me even a hint of trouble, you can come round in person and remove her from the Major Sector.” Darius nodded.

“And don't think I won't.” Bowles said firmly. “OK I'll get the wheels in motion. It's your funeral.”

Chapter 2

“De Witt, Duggen, Hornesby! Out!” Barney Cope banged on the cell bars with his baseball bat. “Take it as a caution and piss off, the lot of you.” Three tired individuals trudged out of the cell, followed by a fourth occupant. “Not you, Rayne.”

“Huh? Why? Oh come on Cope! All I did was sleep in the pissing tram! I didn't even nick it!” Alexandria protested.

“Out of my hands, Rayne. Orders.” Barney closed the cell door and locked it.

“Oi! Orders? What are you blethering on about? No one gives orders in this crap hole!” Barney ignored her and sauntered back up the corridor. “Creep!”

“Bitch!” Barney yelled over his shoulder. “Shit!” He made a complete mockery of standing to attention when two smart uniformed officers walked into his smelly office. Smart, gold braided uniforms, complete with peaked caps and gleaming black boots.

“Good god.” Bowles wrinkled up his nose in disgust. “I'm Sergeant Bowles, this is Sergeant Hector. Are you Cope?”

“Sergeant Cope.” Barney grinned and nodded. “So she in for the chop?” He jerked his thumb towards Alexandria's cell. “I can't believe I collared a real criminal! You sure you got the right one? She's nothing but a pain in the arse, always has been. What's she done?”

“I can't discuss it with you, I don't have the authority.” Bowles said shortly. “If you'll just allow us to sign the necessary paperwork, we have a shuttle waiting outside.”

“Paperwork?”

“Just ... just bring the girl, Cope.” Bowles said testily and Barney scampered off down the corridor. “I never want to come here again, Hector.”

“It is nauseating isn't it?” Hector agreed.

“Lethal injection for you, you little hag!” Barney crowed and prodded Alexandria along with his bat.

“Don't talk bollocks. They've stuffed up somewhere, that's a ... a ... hell.” Alexandria stared at the two Major Sector Sergeants in astonishment. She actually felt a bit scared. If they had stuffed up, no one would listen to the side of a worthless nobody from the Minor Sector. “I think you got the wrong person.” She said to the two soldiers.

“Alexandria Rayne, aged nineteen. Right?” Bowles nodded.

“Yes but I've not done nothing that bad! Cope's got it all in that desk, have a look. I never even

nicked that tram, just slept in it. I never even damaged the locks! If ...”

“Shh!” Bowles scowled horribly at Alexandria. “You aren't under arrest. Do you understand?”

“I'm not? So why do you want me for?” She asked warily.

“I've been asked to escort you to the Major Sector to meet with a very important person there. You are not under arrest and you have my word as a Military Officer of Soluna that you are safe. I do have that in writing but I thought you'd prefer a verbal explanation.” Bowles found himself smiling at the look of total suspicion on the girl's face. Darius Hawk had been right, she was only a scrap of a thing and no taller than five feet. She was also as wild and tangled looking in real life, as she was on her mugshot. Alexandria glanced at Hector, then back to Bowles.

“What if I don't want to go?” She asked warily.

“Then you'll be missing out an opportunity to meet with some of the most educated professors in the System.” Bowles shrugged. “I don't have specific details for you, Miss Rayne. I'm just the armed guard. If you don't want to come, then you're free to go and look for another street tram to sleep in tonight.”

“So it's all writ down that I'm not being done and I can leave if it gets a bit dodgy looking?” Alexandria asked suspiciously.

“In triplicate.” Bowles nodded. “A copy for me, one for Cope and one for yourself that I'll help you to verify independently.” Alexandria frowned at the soldier. It was fairly obvious that he knew she couldn't read, he'd alluded to it twice already but not openly criticised her, or even spoken condescendingly. Alexandria appreciated that. “No one can force you, it's your choice.” Bowles nodded encouragingly. “Take your time. We don't mind a late lunch.” He muttered sarcastically.

“What do you have?” Alexandria looked up quickly.

“Have ... where? Lunch?” Bowles said in confusion. “Er ... I'm not sure. Hector?”

“Whatever's going in the canteen.” Hector shrugged. “Beef pasta today, I think.” Alexandria made a noise that was a cross between a groan and a slurp and Bowles had to look at his boots to hide a laugh.

“And lemon meringue pie. There's always piles of that left. It doesn't seem to be a favourite with the soldiers.” He added, trying to keep a straight face.

“Here! Sod her! I'll go with you.” Barney butted in. “At least I can read your bloody forms!”

“Piss off, Cope!” Alexandria snapped. “As if they want a rancid little stoat like you in their canteen!”

“I'll have you back in that cell, you scraggy witch!”

“Up yours!” Alexandria hopped backwards as Barney grabbed for her. “Oh no you don't, you midden.” She waved her form at Barney. “It says here that Mr Bowles will have your tatty arse in a sling if you touch me.”

“Does it hell!”

“Yah! It *so* does. Safe, it says. What's safe about your armpit stench half gassing me? Go boil your head.” Alexandria darted behind Bowles, who's insides were aching with pent up laughter. “Tell you what. Cope! I'll eat so much, I'll puke. Then I'll bag it and send you it. Ha-ha! Come on Mr Bowles.” Alexandria darted out of the lockup. Bowles and Hector looked mildly disgusted, then followed her. Two more Officers were standing with the Military shuttle, mainly to protect it, and it's peripheral parts, from the Minor Sector's population.

“So what does Master Hawk want with a rough lot like that?” Hector asked quietly.

“I've no idea.” Bowles shrugged. “I have University endorsed papers to say I've to escort her around safely, if and when needed. That's all I know. She's funny isn't she?” He sniggered when he saw Alexandria helping herself to the wristwatch of one of the officers. He didn't even notice.

“She's horrible! Oi! You give that back!”

“Well there's thanks for you.” Alexandria sniffed. “He'd have lost that if I hadn't saw it was loose. There you go mate. The catch is faulty on it.” She returned the watch and bounced into the shuttle.

“OK. Strap yourselves in and sit on your hands.” Bowles barked, sitting in the pilot's seat. Alexandria nodded and did so. She was feeling apprehensive and excited, all at the same time. She had an official, armed bodyguard!

“Sit on your hands?” Hector looked at his colleague in confusion.

“Do you want her pilfering half the ship?”

“Oh. Good point.” Hector sat on his hands, and the other two officers followed his example.

“So do you often sleep in static street trams, Miss Rayne?” Bowles asked, manoeuvring the shuttle.

“Sometimes.” Alexandria answered casually. “They aren't as easy to open as the miniskis but they're worth it just for the room. I didn't damage it, you know. If that lard-arsed dope of an officer hadn't seen me, they'd never know I'd been in it.”

“I told you, it isn't an issue.” Bowles answered her. “So I take it you have no alternate accommodation?”

“Not just now, no. The Bright Port Hotel is fully booked.” Alexandria rolled her eyes. “No, I don't live nowhere, if that's what you're asking. I never have.”

“Not even as a child?” Bowles asked.

“Just drifted from group to group, camp to camp. Nothing fixed.” Alexandria shrugged. “That's group, not gang. Never was into the gang shit.” Bowles nodded, he already knew that. “So who's this here bloke I'm going to see?”

“Professor Darius Hawk. Master Hawk. He's a lecturer at the University.” Bowles told her.

“So what the buggery does he want with me?”

“I don't know, Miss Rayne. I was asked to assure you that you weren't in trouble and that you were

safe and that he'll explain the situation to you himself. He's a very nice man. I'm to take you to the Military building first, Master Hawk is meeting us there."

"Military building? Jail?"

"Not the part we're going to. You are *not* under arrest. How many more times? You're a guest of the Major Sector. Master Hawk decided on the Military building as a neutral location. He could hardly just cart you off to his quarters, now could he?" Bowles said patiently.

"How chivalrous." Alexandria laughed.

"Just polite and well mannered. Here we are." Bowles hovered the shuttle above the landing ground, behind the Military building. Alexandria's eyes were like saucers as she gaped out of the window. She'd never seen such a beautiful place in all her life! Bright sunlight, wide clean pavements, plants, clean air. None of these were present in the Minor Sector. She noticed several smartly dressed officers going about their business, then looked down at her grubby jeans and her ripped boots.

"Will there be many people in the canteen?" Alexandria tried to untangle her hair with her fingers.

"We'll go straight to the ante-room and have lunch sent up." Bowles said tactfully. "That way there's no risk of keeping Master Hawk waiting."

Alexandria sheared her way through two helpings of beef pasta and four slices of lemon meringue pie like a combine harvester. Bowles sat at a safe distance, in the splatter-free zone and drank a cup of coffee. The girl must have been half starved!

"Please tell me you won't be needing those vomit bags, as per promise to Cope."

"Ha-ha!" Alexandria wiped her mouth on her sleeve and left a clean patch. "He is an arse you know. He only nabbed that job because the other gonk drank himself retarded on absinthe. Hey that was a grand bit of grub, Mr Bowles! Say thanks to the cook for me."

"I will." Bowles smiled. He was quite surprised at how amicable Alexandria Rayne was. Of course she was a rogue and a petty criminal, but she was a thoroughly likeable one. He made a note to himself to compliment Darius Hawk on his judgement. To think, Valerie De Witt, the hammer faced lady of the night could have ended up sitting here. Bowles banished the thought. "Ah, Master Hawk." Darius knocked and walked in. "Miss Alexa ..."

"Good grief! You're perfect!" Darius laughed. Alexandria looked behind herself to see who he was talking to. "A bit rough around the edges, but we'll soon have those filed down."

"Huh?" Alexandria frowned in confusion and Darius looked even more delighted. "He simple or something?" She asked Bowles who snorted a laugh.

"Please excuse me, Alexandria. May I call you Alexandria?" Darius sat down and studied her face.

"I've answered to worse. Can I call you ..."

"Master Hawk." Bowles butted in, just incase, with a warning look to Alexandria.

"That'll do nicely." Darius said brightly. "I suppose you want to know why you're here?"

“Good a place as any I suppose. I wasn't doing much else.” Alexandria shrugged.

“I want to give you a gift.” Darius said and Alexandria eyed him suspiciously. “An education.”

“A ... who?” Alexandria burst out laughing. “Ah get off! I'm hardly a tribute to intellect, Mr Hawk.”

“I wouldn't know, I've not tried to assess your intellect yet.” Darius said casually. “You said 'Mister' was that intentional?”

“Yes.” Alexandria answered straight away. “You deserve a respectable tag, just like Mr Bowles does. I know I'm a snot but I've never called anyone master in my life, not going to start now. Sorry. Any more of that pasta left?”

“Mister is just fine too.” Darius was almost beside himself with delight. This was perfect!

“So how you going to educate me and what for?”

“Private tuition. One on one. Just you and I.” Darius nodded.

“Right. OK I can get my head round that. What for?”

“For what.” Darius corrected automatically.

“Because I just asked you.” Alexandria gave the professor a funny look.

“No, the correct ... nevermind. Because I believe in you. I believe that you want to, and are able, to learn. I believe that someone like you can't possibly be satisfied with life you have now.” Darius spouted. “You can't tell me you don't want to know how to read and write, Alexandria. It's the most beautiful form of communication there is. All you have to do is have the desire to learn.”

“So why me?”

“Why not? Your age, your inquisitiveness, your keen nature. That all points to an active brain that isn't being used to it's full potential. If you could have a job, any job in the whole System, what would it be?” Darius asked enthusiastically.

“One in that canteen would do me all right.” Alexandria said seriously.

“How ambitious.” Darius frowned. “So! Canteen, yes? So you'd need to be able to read the menu.”

“Why? I know what food looks like.” Alexandria shrugged. “Them's potatoes, that's rice, that's fish, that's meat. I'd hardly get it mixed up would I?”

“OK! So what if someone came into the canteen and asked you what was on the menu?”

“I'd point at it and say 'there you go mate'.” Alexandria said. Darius gritted his teeth. “What? Why you got folk in your canteen that can't read? They're in the Military aren't they?”

“I didn't mean this canteen in particular.” Darius said patiently.

“Well yes you did. I told you that when you asked me. Anyway if they couldn't read the menu, I'd send them to you. You could learn them to read too.” Alexandria nodded.

“Right! OK let's forget the menu!” Darius said testily. “How about following a written menu to prepare food?”

“They'd let me cook straight away? Don't they train them?” Alexandria said in surprise.

“Master Hawk.” Bowles' insides were aching yet again. “May I?”

“Please do.” Darius rubbed his temples.

“You get to stay here with Master Hawk while you're studying. He has the biggest apartment in the area. Two bathrooms and a fully stocked kitchen.” Bowles informed Alexandria.

“It does?” Now she looked interested. “And a bed?”

“Well it has more than one.” Darius offered quickly.

“Inside midden?”

“Lavatory. Yes. Heating and hot water too.” Darius sighed wearily and Alexandria beamed broadly. “Come on, I'll take you there.” Darius stood up and caught Sergeant Bowles smirking.

“Appeal to the immediate necessities first, Master Hawk. Basic Humanities Training, Cadet level.”

“Hmm.” Darius said dryly and left the ante-room.

Chapter 3

Alexandria tore through Darius' apartment like a dose of castor oil and Darius sat down in the lounge and let her.

"I don't think I thought this through properly." He muttered, watching a streak of red, tattered ringlets flash from the bathroom to the kitchen. A tone from the door had him sighing in relief. "Mrs Ling! Thank god ... I mean how nice to see you. Alexandria! Alex ... eek!" Alexandria came wandering in with at least four chocolate covered wafers crammed into her mouth. "Alexandria, this is Mrs Ling our housekeeper. Mrs Ling, this is Alexandria Rayne."

"Fleashed oo eet oo." Alexandria nodded, spraying crumbs all over the place.

"Netty, please." Netty smiled and looked like everyone's mother and grandmother rolled into one. She was only around the same height as Alexandria but she was twice as round and had lovely almond shaped eyes, her hair was tied back into a shiny, greying plait.

"Yes. Alexandria? Did you run the bath?" Darius asked brightly.

"Where to?"

"No, did you fill the bathtub with water?"

"No. Why?"

"Why? Well so you can get in the thing, of course." Darius said in exasperation.

"Huh?"

"Not 'huh', pardon. Bath, hot water, get in it." Darius nodded expectantly.

"In it?" Alexandria looked horrified. "You're shitting me?"

"I certainly am not. Go on." Darius shoo'd Alexandria towards the bathroom.

"Noooooo!" Alexandria wailed. "In it?"

"Alexadria, it's only a ..." Darius looked at the sheer horror on Alexandria's face. "Seriously? You've never taken a bath before?" Alexandria shook her head furiously.

"Oh I've washed and that, when I could. I'm not a dirty bitch or anything." She said defensively.

"No, of course not." Darius smiled. "Tell you what, just close the door here and see how it goes. Everything you need is in there."

"Come on sweetie, I'll do your hair. It's absolutely beautiful." Nerry bustled by and Darius almost

collapsed in relief. "Clothes?"

"I borrowed a Cadet uniform from the Military building." Darius went to retrieve the uniform. "Hmm. I think it may be a tad large. I didn't expect her to be such a squirt."

"Ack! Oo! It's OK, I'll clean the bugger up!" Alexandria's voice drifted from the world of the bathroom.

"It'll have to do, Netty. I'll pay someone to go and buy her some suitable clothes." He thrust the uniform into Netty's hands. "Good luck!" He smiled widely and closed the bathroom door, a fleeting image of Dean Figgis wetting himself laughing sprang across his mind.

Darius had to turn up his music to drown out the shrieks, yelps and curses coming from the bathroom and Zach had to push the door panel four times before Darius eventually heard him and let him in.

"What the hell was that?" Zach laughed at a particularly loud howl and thud.

"My pupil resisting hot water and soap." Darius grimaced. "Poor Netty's going to be worn to a frazzle with her. Zach she is the tattiest creature you ever laid eyes on!" Darius smiled. "Hair all over the place in wild tufts and the grimmest face and hands in existence. The only clean bit is where she's wiped the food dregs off her chin with her sleeve."

"Oh dear. What have you let yourself in for?" Zach laughed again.

"All part of the learning process."

"Hers or yours? It'll take more than a pass star on a certificate to take in the senior government on their own territory." Zach pointed out.

"I know." Darius agreed. "We actually take basic manners for granted here. We don't actually realise they're there until we see them *not* there." Darius cast a swift glance towards the bathroom.

"No! Abso-bloody-lutely no! Who's is it? Mr Bowles'? Hell no Netty. Mr Hawk's just done that to make me look like a knob." Alexandria came marching from the bathroom dressed in a pair of Darius' undershorts and one of his nightshirts.

"For crying out loud." Darius cringed and tried not to faint. "Knob, was it Alexandria? This is a colleague of mine. Master Perrin."

"Oh wow!" Zach stood up. "Tatty? You daft?" The transformation was, admittedly, quite remarkable. Alexandria had flawless white skin under all the grime. Netty had scrubbed, de-matted, and brushed her hair so it now hung in damp spirals down to her waist.

"Zach please." Darius gave his fellow lecturer a dirty look. "You look a lot more refreshed now, Alexandria."

"Well I'd have looked a right tit in that soldier suit. Where's my jeans?"

"Where *are* my jeans'. I burned them in the incinerator. They were a health hazard." Darius answered grimly.

"Well what's I supposed to wear now?" Alexandria demanded.

“What am I supposed to wear’. I’ve ordered out for you some new outfits. I got the size from your contagious jeans. Miss Stafford from the Hyperstalls is getting a brigade of women on the case.” Darius explained and Alexandria settled down a bit.

“Tea anyone?” Netty breezed out of the bathroom with an armful of damp towels, making Alexandria visibly flinch.

“Sadist.” She muttered. “So you going to learn me too, Mr Perrin?”

“Teach’.” Darius corrected automatically. “Are you going to teach me’.”

“Why? I thought you knew what you were doing?” Alexandria looked at Darius.

“I do. I was correcting your sentence.” Darius said, with only minimal grimacing.

“Well is he then?”

“Is who, what?” Darius said in confusion

“Mister Perrin! You’re a bit numb for a professor eh? Is he going to teach me as well?” Alexandria clarified loudly.

“No I’m afraid not, Miss Rayne.” Zach thought this was hysterical. “You’re solely Darius’ pupil.”

“Darius? That your name? It’s a nice name, I like it.”

“Thank you.” Darius replied politely. “You only have one teacher, Alexandria, and that’s me. I’m sure some of the others would be welcome to come here as friends. Wouldn’t they Master Perrin?” Darius looked pleadingly at Zach to share at least a tiny bit of the social burden with him.

“Zach. Of course.” Zach smiled.

“So how comes Zach says to call him Zach but you yatter on with all this Master twaddle.” Alexandria asked. “You great snob.”

“I am no such thing.” Darius said snobbily. “I just think it’s important to establish our roles here, that’s all.”

“Teacher pupil type tripe?”

“Alexandria it’s not tripe, it’s structure.” Darius explained patiently.

“Structured as me sitting here in your bloomers eh?” Alexandria guffawed and went to see what she could hunt down from the kitchen.

“She’s nothing at all like I imagined.” Zach said in fascination. “I imagined a typical bad-attitude, stereotype villain.”

“She’s actually providing the basis for another project, for another time.” Darius nodded. “Criminal behaviour is due to environmental influences in her case. Maybe not all criminals are born that way. She breaks the law from necessity. She needs shelter, she steals a vehicle to serve that purpose. Take away the need, take away the behaviour. It’ll be interesting to see if she displays any criminal

tendencies here.” He said eagerly.

“So does she know you're studying her like a lab-rat?”

“No, no. That would affect her overall behaviour in an unnatural way.” Darius said seriously.

“So do I have to go to school and that?” Alexandria was back with her own cup of tea.

“Mercifully, no.” Darius muttered. “Alexandria, you should have brought Zach his tea first, as a guest, then mine, then your own.”

“Oh.” Alexandria frowned. “Is this all part of it?” Darius nodded. Alexandria thrust her mug into Zach's hands then darted off into the kitchen, returning with two more cups. She hid her own behind the plants until Darius had his, then went to retrieve it.

“Thank you.” Zach smiled then spluttered and choked, spraying tea all over the table. “H ... how much sugar is in this?” He gagged.

“Five.” Alexandria glanced at Darius in case she was going to get told off. “Er ... there's five in yo ...” Darius began spluttering too. “Big spoon! I'll fix it.” She grabbed the cups and shot off back into the kitchen. She returned a second later when Netty decided to intervene and ordered her back out. “Right, well I'm shite at that.” Alexandria said brightly.

“It does need work, yes.” Darius agreed. “So does your language. Do you even realise you're swearing? It's every other word.” Alexandria looked at her bare knees. “It's really not necessary and quite vulgar.”

“Well I've not heard a very extensive vocabulary in my life.” Alexandria said quietly. “Was there any need to point it out in front of people?” Darius looked quite surprised. “I know Zach's OK and at least he realises I'm not vulgar on purpose. He didn't mention it, did he not?” Darius looked at Zach who shrugged his shoulders reproachfully. “I know I need taught this stuff, and making a public example of me is very hurtful.”

“So you're aware of these rough edges. If you're aware of them, then you can do something about them.” Darius reasoned.

“You missed the point on purpose.” Alexandria looked evenly at Darius. “I know I'm rough compared to the people here but you said you'd learn ... teach me. You brought me here, I didn't inflict my vulgar, rough-edged self on you. Stop trying to embarrass me and stop being a jackass and showing off in front of Zach!”

“Sh ... showing off?” Darius blurted.

“Yes! He made allowances for my bad language because I honestly do not know any different. You could have waited until later to criticise instead of pulling the 'look at me at work' balls in front of guests.” Alexandria folded her arms. “Oh I left the white undershorts in the bathroom because they're stained at the front.” Darius yelped in mortification. “Just stating the vulgar facts. Maybe I should have waited until Zach had gone.” She stamped off into the kitchen and Darius could hear her raiding the fridge.

“You asked for that.” Zach grinned. “Stains eh?”

“Maybe I should get her somewhere else to live.” Darius mused. “Wait, what am I thinking? As

though I could let her loose on the Major Sector.” He grimaced.

“You could always get Bowles to take her back. Let's face it, it's a monumental undertaking Darius, and it's far easier in theory than in practice.”

“Nonsense! It's challenging, that's what it is.” Darius argued.

“You won't have it beating you, you mean?”

“Same thing. Alexandria! Alex ... good grief.” Alexandria had a huge bowl of ice cream but hadn't managed to locate a spoon. Netty wandered past on her way to her rooms and stuck one in the bowl. “Thank you, Netty. Alexandria, I thought we could start your academic lessons tomorrow.” Alexandria nodded and shovelled ice cream into her mouth. “As for the ... rest of it ... well I can note points during the course of the day, then we can discuss them in the evening when we're by ourselves.” Darius nodded.

“You telling or asking?”

“T ... asking.” Darius winced at the mess the girl was making on his nightshirt.

“Sounds good.” Alexandria nodded and balanced her empty bowl on a bookshelf. “I think I'll go crash. I'm knackered.” Both men stood up and Alexandria eyed them suspiciously. “What have I done now?”

“Nothing.” Darius laughed. “It's manners for gentlemen to stand when a lady enters or leaves the room.”

“It is? Why?”

“Er ... I don't actually know. Zach?”

“Not a clue.” Zach laughed. “I should be going too. It was nice meeting you Alexandria.”

“Yes. Well I don't believe you. I'm manky.” Alexandria muttered. “But OK.”

“Just a 'thank you' would have done.” Darius said quietly, smiling.

“Thank you, Zach. It was nice to meet you too.” Alexandria nodded as Zach left. “I'm sorry about the underwear thing. That wasn't nice of me at all.” She said to Darius.

“Don't worry. I probably deserved it.” Darius said grimly, pouring himself a drink. “Would you like one before you go to bed?”

“What is it?”

“Slasko '92. Red Wine.” Darius handed over the glass and Alexandria knocked it back in one go. Darius cringed. “No one's going to take it from you. Here, sip it and taste it.” He poured another. Alexandria tried to sip and made a slurping noise like a drain. “You'll get used to the shape of the glass.” Darius tried not to smile too much.

“Not bad.” Alexandria nodded.

“It should be better than not bad at eighty credits a bottle.” Darius replaced the bottle on the shelf.

“How much?” Alexandria blurted. “Gold credits? Just for that one bottle?”

“Pricey but worth it.”

“How can you say that?” Alexandria put down her half full glass. “How can you say that one bottle of that is worth as much as a week's food for a family? I could have rented a bed for a month with eighty credits, and so could any one of those poor bastards down there! Maybe they wouldn't die in doorways from pneumonia then, eh? No, Mister Hawk, that's obscene.” Alexandria vanished into her room.

Chapter 4

Darius could hear whispering as he sat reading in his lounge, the following morning.

“No! No, Netty, you've got to announce me! Is my arse all flat?”

“You're beautiful, child. Don't be foolish.”

“What about this bit? Where's it go?”

“Tut. Come here.”

“Ouch!”

“There now. Ready?” Netty waddled into the lounge and Darius straightened his face and stood up. “Master Hawk, I have a very special guest for you. May I present, the transformed Miss Alexandria Rayne!” Alexandria came breezing into the room with a smile that almost bisected her pretty face. Her ringlets had been brushed and piled up on top of her head and she wore a green cotton dress and white plimsolls.

“Well, well, well!” Darius laughed. “Don't you look the part!”

“What about this posh frock eh?” Alexandria twirled round. “I've never had a frock before. My legs are cold.”

“It's beautiful.” Netty nodded, Darius did likewise. Actually it was just a plain, everyday dress that you'd see on a hundred girls anywhere in the Major Sector. To Alexandria, it was a fairytale ball gown.

“Hey I've got a bust too!” She stuck out the said bodily part and Darius coughed uncomfortably. “That's because I've got braziers now, you see.” She said seriously. “Bugger's taking lumps out of me but Netty says I'll get used to it.”

“You look very nice, Alexandria. Much better than my vest and undershorts.” Darius complimented.

“Well I can't be having my lessons in a bloke's undies now, can I?” Alexandria sniffed.

“Er ... no I suppose not.” Darius winced. “Shall we go and have breakfast?” Alexandria nodded and darted for the kitchen. “Alexandria? There's no need to run for it. Come here.” Alexandria wandered over to Darius, still looking at the kitchen door. “No one's going to beat you to it. It's not a race. OK?” She nodded. “Are you drooling?” Another nod and Darius handed her a tissue. “Now then. You walk with me to the door. Yes? Don't drag me! Walk nicely. Good. Now we stop here while I open the door for you and don't you dare dash through it!” Alexandria backtracked and rearranged her new bust. Darius let that slide. They walked into the kitchen where the table was set for breakfast. “Stay put.” He pulled out a chair for Alexandria, which she ran at slightly, and sat on

quickly. "Brilliant!" Darius also sat down and put his napkin on his lap, Alexandria copied him. "Would you like oatmeal or grapefruit?"

"Well actually I'd rather have a go at that fry-up over there." Alexandria nodded to the sizzling pans on the stove. "Er ... please."

"Yes, that's for us too." Darius nodded. "We have cereal to start, and fruit juice too if you like, then our cooked meal and all the toast you can eat."

"What? All of it?" Alexandria said in astonishment. "Can I have a bit of everything there is going?"

"Of course you can, child." Netty smiled and busied herself with the cereal bowls. "I'll keep some for later." Alexandria said seriously and sided off some toast onto a small plate. Darius began to laugh quietly.

"Alexandria, there's no need to. You don't have to store or stash food. Understand? It's eight AM now and we have lunch at one. I'm sure if you get hungry in between, we can sort out a snack."

"I'm ... I can't take this in." Alexander looked at all the food. "I'm used with automatically keeping some back because I didn't know how many days it would be before I'd eat again. It just doesn't feel responsible to eat all this in one go."

"That's actually very sad." Darius said gently. "Don't you look at me like that, I mean it. I didn't realise how out of touch we are up here until now."

"Well there's not much to get in touch for, is there? It's a shit-hole. Don't let it get you on a guilt trip, Mister Hawk. Even if you took everything from your cupboards into the Minor Sector, all they'd do is beat each other up so the greedy set would get it, then they'd sell it for treble it's worth. They'd do that even though no bugger's got any money. At least you shared this willingly with me, and free of charge. If it was the other way round I'd have charged you twenty credits for this lot and even then you'd have had to fight me for it." Alexandria laughed.

"I think I'd be missing breakfast, in that case." Darius said dryly. "Come on, eat your oatmeal before it gets cold. That bacon smells wonderful, Netty."

Alexandria was fighting to keep the food down as she waddled after Darius into the study. It was a light, airy room that was lined from ceiling to floor with books. Darius had appropriated a large wooden desk and two chairs to put in there, especially for Alexandria's lessons.

"Thank shit for that. I thought you were going to stick me in front of a computer." Alexandria said in relief.

"You don't like technology?" Darius asked, getting out a selection of pencils and paper.

"Oh I like it all right but I saw Mister Bowles whizzing around his computer. I'll never be able to do that."

"You will, in time. Obviously you have to learn to read and write first. My artwork is woeful, truly woeful, so I'll let you do the illustrations to aid your memory, as well as the writing." Darius smiled. They began with Alexandria's name, which she cursed and swore about because of the number of letters in it.

"Why couldn't I be called Dan or something." She frowned in concentration as she finished the final

'a'. "There now. Um ... it's a bit big." The word took up half a sheet of paper. Pretty soon, Alexandria had her letters scaled down and she'd mastered quite a few simple words, the name 'Darius' among them. She also drew all the cats, dogs, shoes, balls, cups and pens herself. Netty interrupted them just before lunch with a message from Dean Figgis.

"Blast." Darius swore. "I'd forgotten about that. Alexandria I have to go out for a few hours. I'd completely forgot about these wretched parent interviews."

"That's OK. I'll just practice my words here. If that's OK?" Alexandria nodded.

"It's better than OK, it's fantastic. Netty's around if you need her." Darius pulled on his jacket and disappeared. As it happened, Netty had to pop out too, grocery shopping, but Alexandria didn't mind. She was quite enjoying herself. Her studies were interrupted by the sound of the door tone and Alexandria answered it to see a tall, slim lady with lovely blonde hair tied up in a plait.

"Who the hell are you?" The woman asked rudely. Alexandria bristled straight away and did her best to control her temper. "You deaf? Simple? I said *who are you?*"

"I'm a guest of Mister Hawk's." Alexandria tried not to snarl.

"Oh you are, are you?" The woman tapped her foot. "Where is he?"

"Out. Can I give him a message?" Alexandria asked shortly.

"How old are you?"

"None of your sodding business." Alexandria snapped. "Look, girlfriend, he's not in, OK? He's at the University at a meeting." She went to close the door but the woman sidestepped and dodged into the room. "Mrs Ling will be back soon." Alexandria sighed. "She can deal with you. I'm busy."

"I asked you a question, kid." The woman said nastily. "Who are you and why are you here?"

"Nope. You just added that last bit on. I'm a guest here, I told you that. I'm not sure why you have your panties in a bunch, but Mister Hawk knows I'm here." Alexandria said confidently and praised herself for her self control. If she was back on the Minor Sector she'd have floored this bitch by now.

"Oh drop the Mister Hawk drivel." The woman heaved. "I know you aren't a student. You aren't old enough for grade University. I'm Vanessa Court and Darius Hawk is my man. Get it? You're both seriously going to regret this."

"Hey! Just back up a bit here. OK? If you'd said who you were I could have saved all this crap. I'm a guest, like I said, that's all." Alexandria said defensively.

"Do you think I'm completely stupid?" Vanessa snapped.

"Well, yes." Alexandria nodded. "I'm not after your bloke and that's not why he asked me here. Ask him."

"Oh I intend to!" Vanessa barked. "So? Why are you here?" She demanded.

"I'm having lessons." Alexandria explained and Vanessa started to laugh. "I'm not at the University, you're right, I'm having lessons by myself."

“Lessons in what, I wonder?” Vanessa snorted. “He's a thirty year old man! Don't be so naïve, girl. You're another kid with a crush and he's way out of order.”

“Hey! How about shutting the hell up?” Alexandria snapped. “Don't you go spouting that type of shit about people, it's dangerous. He's a teacher. You have no need to be pissed at him, nor at me. Understand? Get your bloody facts right.”

“You really are a foul-mouthed little scruff.” Vanessa said in disgust.

“Certainly am! More proof that your bloke wouldn't be interested in me, yes? Now if you get yourself down to the university you can sort this misunderstanding out with him very easily.” Alexandria said patiently.

“Who the hell are you to give me orders?”

“Shit woman you're nuts!” Alexandria flung up her arms. “OK stay here and wait for him. She rolled her eyes and went back to the study.

“What the hell?” Vanessa had followed her, and was now looking at Alexandria's work, spread out all over the floor so she could compare her letters properly. “Oh my word!” Vanessa hooted a laugh. “A retard?”

“Back the hell off, bitch!” Alexandria snarled, standing over her papers. “Retards sound like that do they?” Vanessa did step back a bit but she was still laughing.

“An illiterate, common slut and Professor Darius Hawk?” Vanessa taunted.

“I think you should leave.” Netty spoke from the lounge, which was just as well because Alexandria was just about to blow the lot and attack Vanessa Court. “If you have any questions regarding Master Hawk's house guests, or domestic arrangements, then I suggest you speak to him about it. Good day.” Netty held the door open and Vanessa marched through it with her nose in the air. “Bitch.” Netty muttered, throwing the door closed.

“Netty she's going to get Darius into trouble.” Alexandria stood in the study doorway with her alphabet papers in her hands. “She thinks I'm underage for a start.”

“Leave her to Master Hawk, child.” Netty hung her coat on the hook.

“She laughed at me Netty.” Alexandria said miserably. “What the shit am I doing here eh? I must be mental.” She trailed back into the study. She was sitting with her papers, her name scrawled on them in three inch letters, when Netty came through with a tea tray. “Waste of time, Netty.”

“No, never.” Netty poured the tea. “All this knowledge is a gift, sweetie. It should be available for everyone, sadly it isn't. Master Hawk is your doorway to what rightly belongs to you, as it does to all of us.”

“I'm nineteen, Netty. Nineteen years old and this is the level I'm at.” She pushed the word 'ball' towards the housekeeper. “I know what a bloody ball is and I've gone two decades without needing to spell it.”

“But you can spell it now. You couldn't two hours ago and I think you found it surprisingly easy,

didn't you?" Netty nodded.

"That doesn't alter the fact that Darius and his snobby girlfriend are probably pissing themselves laughing at me right now." Alexandria wrote 'bich' on a piece of paper and Netty smiled in amusement. "I'm an embarrassment here, and a laughing stock. He's going to have a go at me, isn't he? I called his girlfriend a bitch and swore at her." She said gloomily.

"That's rather odd, you know." Netty mused. "Master Hawk and Master Perrin are quite good friends, as you know, but so are myself and Maxine Perrin, Zach's mother. I've never heard any mention of a girlfriend at all, let alone Eliza Court's girl." She sniffed and rearranged her skirts. "There again, I wouldn't mention her either, she's a wrong one." Netty said knowingly, making Alexandria laugh. "Eliza was just the same at her age. She didn't settle her trouble-making ways until Ewen Court took her on."

"Have you always lived here?"

"I have yes, as did my late husband, Joe." Netty smiled.

"You not got no kids?"

"Ugh, child, even I could correct that double negative. No, no children, it just didn't happen. It doesn't matter though. I got all I wanted when I married Joe."

"Aw that's lovely, Netty. I've never heard words of love like that before. It must be nice to love someone like that, even though he's not here in person no more. There's nothing like that in the Minor Sector. People don't often get married because the registration officials charge too much. Usually, a family is some poor cow who's got knocked up by accident." Alexandria sight sadly.

"That's a tragic way to bring a child into the world, truly tragic." Netty was genuinely upset.

"It is and you're right." Alexandria picked up her pencil. "This is my doorway away from all that shite. If I can do it, then other people might look for doorways too." She wrote 'sod em' on a piece of paper.

"That's the spirit!" Netty laughed. "I'll go start dinner. Beef and broccoli in oyster sauce." Alexandria made her automatic groan-come-slurp noise that hearing the mention of such delicacies mentioned provoked.

"Yah I'm drooling again. I know."

Darius got home in a very unpleasant mood. The parent meetings had been dull, predictable, unnecessary, and over an hour too long overall.

"Evening Netty!" He threw his jacket on the sofa back. "Alexandria! I'm sorry I'm so late. How are you get ..." Darius looked round the empty study. "Where is she?"

"She was in there half an hour ago, I was talking to her." Netty went to check the bathroom while Darius looked in the bedrooms.

"Oh no. She'll end up deported." Darius winced. "Did she not say where she was going?"

"Obviously not. Poor mite will be lost in no time out there." Netty said in concern.

“True, but it was the rest of the population I was worried about.” Darius muttered, grabbing his jacket. “What was she thinking? She can't just wander off!”

“Well of course she can!” Netty exclaimed. “She's not a prisoner, is she? Oh no.” Netty froze at the study door when her eyes rested on the word 'bich' scrawled on a sheet of paper.

“What?” Darius pushed his way through. “What's wrong? What?”

“Vanessa Court?”

“What about her?”

“She needs a kick in the corsets, that's what.” Netty said stiffly. “Really, Master Hawk, you could do so much better.”

“Netty what are you talking about? Better at what?” Darius asked in confusion.

“OK, you did ask.” Netty sniffed. “Your lady friend came here this afternoon looking for you. She got Alexandria instead and jumped to the wrong conclusion completely. Not only that, but she said some very cruel things to the child, I heard her with my own ears, Master Hawk.” Netty set her jaw.

“Wait. Back up a bit, Netty.” Darius shook his head. “My lady friend? Vanessa Court? Netty have you been on the vodka? Vanessa Court is certainly not my lady friend, in fact I'd find it impossible to apply either of those words to her. She came round here and had a go at Alexandria?” He said desperately. “Oh ... shit. Is she still in one piece?”

“She was when I put her out.” Netty said aloofly. “So she's not your lady friend? She said she was.”

“Wishful thinking on her part, nothing more. So Alexandria didn't beat her up? What did she say to her?” Darius panicked.

“She called her a retarded slut.” Netty said bluntly and Darius almost collapsed. “She also presumed Alexandria to be a minor, and cast some very damaging aspersions on you too. Hopefully Alexandria's gone to kick her to bits.”

“Netty! Good grief! Kicking to bits is actually literal to someone of Alexandria's temperament! Bich?” Darius held up the paper. “She'll be arrested, I just know it.” He sat down heavily on a chair. “I'll throttle Vanessa Court myself. Damned pest.”

“Master Hawk?” Netty said quietly. “Aw bless her heart.” She handed Darius a folded sheet of paper. It had 'Darius' written painfully across the front and inside it was more writing in the same style. 'Too Darius tank yo for lernin me yor mi daway. Alexandria.' “Aw Master Hawk that must have taken her ages!”

“I'll have to go and look for her. I hope she hasn't done anything stupid, Netty. Vanessa Court! The woman's completely mad, utterly ... Alexandria!” Darius shrieked when Alexandria came out of the kitchen. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Oh don't take on so!” Netty tutted. “Are you OK, precious?”

“Oh course she's OK! Is everyone else OK?” Darius demanded.

“Stop yelling at me! I'm sorry! OK? This is your house and you have your own private life and I

shouldn't have started swearing. Stop bloody well shouting at me!" Alexandria felt herself crying for the first time in well over a decade. "Balls! I'll go see Mister Bowles tomorrow, he'll take me home."

"Master Hawk!" Netty came as close to a snarl as she could manage.

"Blast and bugger it!" Darius heaved a sigh. "Alexandria, no. Don't do that. Come here and sit down." He steered Alexandria into a chair. "Firstly, I'm sorry for yelling at you. I panicked when I saw you weren't home because I know you don't know your way around the city. OK?" Alexandria nodded and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her new dress. "Now please tell me you haven't been to see Vanessa Court?"

"No. Of course I haven't." Alexandria muttered. Darius deflated in relief.

"I love my card. Thank you." He smiled. Alexandria went very red and got a bit flustered.

"Well it was just to say thanks and all and I didn't want you on my case for cussing at your bit ... er ... Vanessa. It went all wrong. She got hold of the wrong end of the st ... um ... yes." Netty was standing in the kitchen doorway with a big bunch of flowers. "They need put in water. Maybe you could give her them, Darius. I don't think she likes me. Tell her I didn't mean to get on her nerves." Alexandria fiddled with the sofa cushion.

"You got Vanessa Court those flowers as an apology?" Darius blinked in complete surprise.

"Look, I like it here, OK? I'm on to a good thing and I nearly stuffed it up with my shitty attitude and nasty mouth." Alexandria stood up and took the flowers from Netty.

"Do something!" Netty rasped at Darius, who was sitting on a complete daze. "OK I'll take those flowers and ram them up Vanessa Court's ..."

"No! I'll ... do something, Netty. Don't distress yourself." Darius got to his feet. "Alexandria, you don't owe Vanessa an apology, she owes you one, and she owes me one too. Trust me, I'd not touch that with a barge-pole." He pulled a face.

"Not what she said." Alexandria mumbled.

"So she was talking tripe! She had no basis or reason to say that to you and she certainly had no right to insult you. Hell I thought you'd gone to give her a toeing." Alexandria started laughing at Darius' 'street talk' "The flowers stay here. They're beautiful."

"Scraggy cow." Alexandria huffed, now she knew she wasn't in trouble. "Tell her next time I'll punch her lights out."

"I'm speechless. I should tell you to handle this without violence but I threatened to throttle her myself."

"In my own defence, I did handle it without violence. If I'd learned to talk without swearing like an arena fighter, then I'd have handled that perfect." Alexandria nodded.

"Perfectly."

"See? Thanks." Alexandria sniggered and went to answer the door. "Don't worry, I'll only hit her

once! Oo! Hello Mister Bowles! You're looking a bit ... official." The big soldier filled the doorway and was dressed in his smart uniform. "OK I'll hit her twice."

"Sergeant Bowles! Come in." Darius shoved him into the lounge. "Alexandria, no hitting anyone. Come in here where I can see you." He hissed at his pupil.

"Nothing too serious." Bowles said. "Just see it as advice, Alexandria. OK?"

"Um ... maybe." Alexandria said warily. Darius went on the defensive straight away, mindful of Vanessa Court.

"What's she supposed to have done? Oh and what happened to 'innocent until proven guilty'? If wild accusations are going to be bandied about then they need substantial back-up."

"Well it was only a few flowers." Bowles said in surprise.

"Oh! Oh I see." Darius coughed awkwardly. "Er ... flowers?"

"Ferdinand Slater stood at his window and watched Alexandria helping herself to his prize blooms. He shows them, professionally, and you swiped his mature batch, numbers eighteen to twenty four." Bowles tried not to roll his eyes at the triviality of all this.

"Alexandria!" Darius tutted. "You stole them from a private garden?"

"No! Well yes, obviously, but I didn't know! I thought they were just growing there all wild. I didn't know he owned that bit." Alexandria objected.

"Well in all fairness, the plot isn't attached to his home property, it's about a hundred yards off. Like I said, I'm just here to help, not to charge you. I ..."

"Well isn't the wretched plot marked off?" Darius interrupted testily. "How can he expect his goods to go unmolested if they're in a public thoroughfare?"

"Ah. Well actually that's your fault, Darius." Alexandria muttered.

"What? How is it? What's my fault?"

"You hadn't taught me to read whatever was on those signs I ignored." Alexandria nodded seriously.

"I don't deserve this." Darius muttered. "OK! Tell Ferdinand Slater I'll pay him for the flowers and for any loss of earnings and the like. Send him my apologies, it was an error in judgement."

"Send him my apologies instead." Alexandria stood a bit closer to Darius. "Darius hasn't got nothing to apologise for."

"Has nothing. Thank you, Alexandria." Darius was quite touched at her sense of decency. "Will you stay to dinner, Sergeant?"

"No thank you, sir. My daughter is expecting me." Bowles smiled. "Have a nice evening and don't fret about Ferdinand."

Chapter 5

Alexandria was sitting in the lounge frowning at a sheet of paper the following morning, when Darius arose.

“Need a hand?” He asked, absently, wandering towards the kitchen.

“I've got some of it.” Alexandria followed him, then veered off to hug Netty and slurp at the breakfast she was cooking. “‘Miss Rayne’ it says on the envelope. I got that no problem. ‘Der Miss Rayne’ ... Dear? Yes. Dear Miss Rayne. Do ...ctor and Mers Samssoon ...”

“Dr and Mrs Samson? Earl Samson?” Darius interrupted in surprise.

“Probably. It says E Samson on the bottom.”

“Here, let me see.” Darius nodded.

“Can I try first?” Alexandria kept hold of the letter. Darius smiled and nodded. It was probably the first letter Alexandria had ever received in her life. “Doctor and Mrs Samson re ... re ... cow ... request! See? 'qu! Request yowr coom ... pany at three viler to kel ... erbatee the birth ... day of their son, Axel. Oo! Nearly the same as Alex! Only I don't like Alex. I once slapped a bloke silly for calling me Alex just to annoy ... OK don't glare at me! Weh look forrewarded tow meeting yow tong ... night at seeven, ac ... compan ...eyed by Master Hawk, off cowers. Yowrs sincerely, Doctor E Samson.” Alexandria beamed proudly at Darius. “That's half a page there and some big words too!”

“You did extremely well. I'm very impressed and very proud of you.” Darius nodded. “I'm very surprised, I do admit.”

“Oh well thanks, you git.” Alexandria said moodily. “Bubble goes pop!”

“No! No I didn't mean that. I'm surprised at the letter's contents.” Darius explained. Alexandria just looked blankly at him. “Do you know what it is?” Alexandria scowled at the writing, then handed it over. “Dear Miss Rayne, Dr and Mrs Samson request your company at their Villa to celebrate the birthday of their son, Axel. We look forward to meeting you tonight at seven, accompanied by Master Hawk, of course. Yours Sincerely, Dr E Samson.”

“A birthday party?” Alexandria's eyes opened wide. “Are you sure it's for me?”

“Your name is on the envelope. I'm just added as a guest.” Darius nodded. “Axel Samson will be twenty one this time.” He frowned at the invitation and glanced at Alexandria.

“I understand.” Alexandria saw the look of apprehension on Darius' face and it bordered on trepidation. “I can't go. I know.” She smiled weakly and went into the lounge to her books. Darius sighed heavily. He hadn't realised he was so transparent and easy to read.

“May as well get Bowles to stand guard outside the door.” Netty quietly commented from the stove.

“Netty I just don't think she's ready for a social function of that standard, not yet. I know the Samsons are very nice people but I don't think Alexandria would cope with it.” Darius tried to explain.

“Why? What do you think she'd do?” Netty asked, serving up the bacon and eggs. “She'll be fine at the table, you know that. She has the hang of all that now.”

“She has, I know.” Darius said absently. “I wonder why they invited her? I have to admit, I'm a bit suspicious.”

“Oh don't be so paranoid, Master Hawk.” Netty tutted. “You just said yourself that the Samsons were nice people. Have you ever thought that they may have invited her out of good old fashioned hospitality? She's a young stranger in town. I think it's very thoughtful of the Samsons to invite Alexandria.”

“And I think I'm being ganged up on. Is this a girl thing?” Darius frowned.

“It's a 'noticing when a professor doesn't want to risk losing face' thing, even though the risk is minimal if you ask me, which you did.” Netty nodded firmly.

“Did I?” Darius said in confusion. “You're starting to sound like her. Netty it's *her* I'm thinking of, not myself.”

“Tosh.”

“It's not tosh, it's true!”

“It's still tosh. Let her think for herself.” Netty bustled off with a tray for Alexandria.

“Is this OK Netty?” Alexandria handed Netty a note. 'Dear Doctor and Mrs Samson. Thakyo for yur invatishon. I carnt com sori bacuz mi stods ar mor impotit. Yours Sincerely. Alexandria Rayne.'

“Stods?”

“Studies. I'll fix that. Is the rest OK?” Alexandria asked seriously.

“Fix it to 'Thank you for your invitation. I'd be honoured to attend your son's birthday celebrations.’” Darius said from the doorway and Netty smiled.

“Can I?” Alexandria looked delighted. “We can go? I'll behave myself, I promise I will and I hardly drool at all now. I'll have a bit of cake or something before we go, just in case. I always remember my handkerchief too now so I won't have to wipe my nose on my sleeves. Sleeves! Netty I haven't got a party dress! Do we take a card and a gift Darius? Is there dancing? I don't think I can do that bit. I have three left feet, not just two. Darius will you write the notes while I wash my feet and armpits? If I do it I'll need a bit of paper the size of that rug.”

“I'll see to it.” Darius sat down and massaged his temples, which were starting to throb slightly.

“Yay! If you're ordering dresses I'm a 34B!” Alexandria shot off to the bathroom.

“She's a what?” Darius was now officially baffled.

“I'll sort that out, Master Hawk.” Netty tried not to laugh.

“I'll see you raised to deity status for this, Netty.” Darius shook his head and began the acceptance note.

Netty let Zach into the house, some hours later, and he just stood laughing at the scene before him. Darius was trying to teach Alexandria how to dance.

“Hey Zach! Look, I'm shite at this!” Alexandria guffawed. “Seriously, I'll just say no to the dancing. I'll teach them all how to play poker instead.”

“You certainly will not!” Darius said hotly.

“At least get her a decent teacher, Darius.” Zach laughed. “You have three left feet, not just two. May I?” Darius gave his friend a dirty look and got out of the way.

“It would be a pleasure.” Alexandria smiled. “Yah! We did that bit already. OK! This arm here, that one there, and legs all in the right order.”

“Just follow me. It's easy.” Zach nodded. “Head up. You don't need to look at your feet. I won't trip you up like Darius did.” Darius gave Zach another dirty look. “See? Piece of cake.”

“Not while I'm dancing, Zach! I'll pepper you with crumbs. Easy! Boom-da-da, boom-da-da.” Alexandria kept in time with the waltz and didn't trip once.

“Not bad, I suppose.” Darius sniffed.

“Better than you, Flat Feet!” Alexandria sat down. “So I doubt the Samsons know where I'm from, do they?”

“No, not many do.” Darius frowned. “Myself, Zach, Sergeants Bowles and Hector and Netty.”

“So what do I say? I'm not ashamed about being from the Minor Sector, I can't help that, but I don't think the Samson's party is the place to get into all that stuff. I'm a good liar.” Alexandria said seriously.

“That should be condemned, but I'll condone it.” Darius grimaced. This whole thing was based on a lie and Darius was starting to get niggling moral doubts nipping at his conscience. “How's this? You're from the West Point of the System. That's far enough away for the Samsons not to know the place in detail. Now how do we explain you being here with me?” Darius nibbled on his thumbnail.

“West Point of the System?” Alexandria laughed. “Shit Darius, out of town would do. I'm visiting Solunia for the first time and taking the opportunity to study with the scholars here. That isn't even a lie, is it? Just a bit ... vague. You said they were nice folks so if I give the impression that I have no family, which I don't, then they'll hardly be rude enough to go on about that. Trust me. It'll be fine.” She nodded.

“There's nothing more worrying than a woman telling you to trust her.” Darius grimaced. “Just keep the conversation light. OK?”

“Absolutely! Oo! Netty!” Alexandria darted at Netty as she came in through the door armed with several packages. “I could have helped you carry all this! Bloody dancing lessons. You manage OK? 34 ...”

“B. Yes I managed.” Netty laughed. Alexandria whooped and charged off to her room with her packages.

“I have huge misgivings about this.” Darius sighed wearily.

“Well you will start these things.” Zach nodded. “Look, Darius, this is obviously far bigger than you imagined it would be. There are so many other things involved that no one even thought about. The main thing being Alexandria's feelings.”

“Yes, I know.” Darius said glumly.

“Even if you do pass her off as a visiting dignitary, tonight, or at the governmental dinner, then what? What after that?” Zach said quietly and Darius squeezed his eyes closed tight. “Will she be expected to maintain that for fear of being found out? Are you going to help her maintain it? Darius, are you listening to me?”

“Yes I'm listening. I don't know.” Darius muttered.

“Well I'd get to know, if I was you. You can't create something then leave it to fend for itself completely. It's not you who's at risk of being shunned and victimised as a charlatan, it's her.”

“Maybe she'd be better off in the Minor Sector.” Darius said quietly.

“No one's better off in the Minor Sector. Alexandria now knows that there's better, you showed her that. I do not believe for one second you'd be comfortable with just taking it all away from her. She's in limbo. She isn't quite up to Major Sector standards but she's now far above Minor Sector standards. It's all down to you, my friend.” Zach said seriously.

“Stop lecturing me Zach!” Darius said in exasperation. “I know all this already! I can't tell her why she's here, Zach, come on! She thinks I picked her personally because of her character for a one in a million opportunity. How the hell can I tell her that it was for a bet for two bottles of wine?” Darius rested his head on the chair back. “She only got the part because she was better looking than the prostitute.”

Alexandria stood in the bedroom doorway, dressed in her new, red, party dress and blinked back the tears. A bet? She was only here to win a bet for Darius? Two lousy bottles of wine? Was she only worth twenty credits? Darius had made a choice between Val DeWitt and her for the sake of forty credits and his professional ego.

“What's wrong, child?” Netty came out of the bathroom with an armful of towels. Alexandria ground her teeth and marched into the lounge.

“Alexandria! You look ...”

“Can it, you great fanny!” Alexandria snapped. “Where's *my* invitation?” She snatched up the envelope. “*Mine*. I'm going on my own.”

“W ... what?” Darius got to his feet. “You can't!”

"I bloody well can! You dare follow me and I'll embarrass you so much, your grandkids will feel bad. You really don't want to test whether I mean that or not, trust me. Nice speech there too Zach. Pity you didn't have the balls to step up and tell me sooner. You knew it was all bollocks but you still kept all cosy with shit-for-brains here. Thanks for nothing. Netty? Pass me that hankie please. Thank you, you're beautiful. Remember, you, stay put!" Alexandria stormed out of the room and slammed the door.

"I think I should start panicking about now." Darius flinched.

"And writing your resignation, mine with it." Zach sighed wearily. "We can't blame her if she makes a noise about this, Darius. We were wrong, unforgivably wrong."

"I was wrong, Zach, not you." Darius rubbed his eyes. "I regarded her as a dispensable tool and didn't even think about her future."

"Master Hawk?" Netty was standing in shock. "I don't understand. You offered her an education, didn't you? I know it's none of my concern but I've grown very fond of the girl." Darius took a deep breath and told his friend and housekeeper about the wager he'd agreed on with Archibald Figgis.

"Obviously I didn't think it through very well." Darius finished miserably.

"No sir, you did not." Netty said stiffly. "I was employed here because Alexandria was here. If she leaves for whatever reason, I'll go with her, if she'll have me. Now, if you don't want anything else, I think I'll retire for the night." Netty vanished without waiting for an answer.

"I can expect that reaction from Bowles too. He's got quite attached to Alexandria too." Darius grimaced. "I have to go and keep an eye on her, Zach, even if it is discretely."

"It had better be discrete. She'll go berserk if she sees you." Zach said in concern. "I'm going with you. I'm as much responsible here as you are. Come on, we'll peep through the windows."

Alexandria felt around two feet tall as she stood in the massive, double doorway of the Samsons' Villa. The huge hall in front of her was like something out of a fairy tale, with its sparkling lights, glass adornments, and food-laden tables. The array of brightly dressed party goers added to this magical image and they were all thoroughly enjoying the party celebrations. That included the dreaded dancing to a sextet of musicians perched on a stage.

It had been Alexandria's temper that had propelled her up to now, but she'd cooled off a bit during the twenty minute march from Darius' home.

"I can't do this." She muttered to herself. "Sod it, I'll go home."

"Miss Rayne!" A middle aged man came walking towards Alexandria and she almost burst into tears. "Earl Samson. I'm so pleased you could make it. No Master Hawk?"

"Thank you for inviting me, Dr Samson." Alexandria replied, parrot fashion. "Master Hawk sends his apologies. He's been unavoidably detained." She said, rather smugly.

"Shame. Maybe he'll join us later. This is my wife, Helga, and ... where is Axel?"

"Fending off the Peartree sisters." Helga laughed. "It's lovely to meet you Miss Rayne."

"It's an honour to be here, Mrs Samson. This villa is absolutely beautiful." Alexandria said, truthfully.

“Mother!” Axel Samson came charging down the side of the hall like a speeding arrow. Axel was a tall man with fair skin and blonde hair that hung to his shoulders, as per Solunia fashion. He was an incredibly good looking man, but Alexandria wouldn't have described him as handsome. He lacked the look of hardened experience and Alexandria would have described him as beautiful, rather than handsome. “Mother, the Peartrees are nineteen next month. Please, please, please organise me a reason not to be there. Anything will do. Leprosy or something.”

“Do calm down, Axel.” Helga shook her head and smiled. “This is Miss Rayne.”

“Master Hawk's house guest?” Axel blinked a few times.

“Will you call me Alexandria, please?” Alexandria smiled. “Miss Rayne makes me sound like a fearsome old horror.”

“Well I thought you *were* a fearsome old horror!” Axel blurted.

“Axel!” Helga exclaimed. “What ever is wrong with ...”

“No! Ugh! That came out wrong. I'm sorry Miss ... Alexandria. I was under the impression that you were much older that you obviously are. Er ... so where you two so don't say you weren't surprised.” Axel looked at his parents. “Yes. Drink!” He steered Alexandria away from his parents in case the showed him up by telling him off. “I'm so sorry about that.”

“No worries.” Alexandria laughed. “What made you think I was old?”

“Well not old. Older. I had you down as mid thirties. You're a travelling scholar, right? Well they don't usually look like you.” Axel cringed as soon as the words came out. “I'm making a proper hash of this, aren't I? By the time the scholars in the system are at the stage to set off travelling to research, they're already in their late twenties. That's what I'm trying to say.”

“Well if you wait until you've learned everything then there wouldn't be anything to travel for.” Alexandria shrugged. And looked ruefully at the narrow necked glasses of wine. She still hadn't quite mastered drinking from dainty glasses without making a noise like a drain unblocker.

“That does make sense.” Axel nodded. “Master Hawk is a brilliant man and a fine scholar. I studied with him last year and I admire him more-so that I do the other professors.”

“Jisota homotabaa!” A grey haired lady who absolutely oozed elegance and refinement came gliding towards Axel from yet another doorway in the hall.

“Gra-ha!” Axel laughed. “This is Alexandria Rayne. Alexandria, this is my maternal grandmother, Lady Hexa Call.”

“Pleased to meet you, Lady Call.” Alexandria tried not to stutter and faint, not necessarily in that order. This woman may as well have been a goddess by Alexandria's standards!

“You too, Little-One.” Lady Call smiled. “Forgive me using my native tongue. I didn't see you standing with Axel.”

“No need to apologise, Lady Call.” Alexandria said politely. “Jisota homotabaa auf jek ausech, Axel.”

“You speak Al Kazik?” Axel laughed in pleasant surprise. “Oh and thank you. Yes I will have a happy birthday, I'm sure of it.”

“It's a very difficult language to learn to anyone not raised with it.” Lady Call was also quite impressed.

“Well I picked it up directly from native Al Kaziks, Lady Call, by ear for the most part, so it's probably far from perfect.” Alexandria explained. “Merchants and traders.” Fugitives and criminals, more like. The Minor Sector was a free for all for all manner dregs from a variety of societies.

“I have several classical works from Al Kazik itself.” Axel told Alexandria and her stomach lurched.

“Oh tut Axel.” Lady Call waved her hand at her grandson. “Alexandria does enough bookwork as it is without doing it in her leisure time too!”

“Of course.” Axel laughed. “May I have this dance, Alexandria?”

“Shi ... shirralium getali. Absolutely.” Alexandria salvaged her expletive and modified it to an Al Kazik blessing instead.

Chapter 6

Darius and Zach stood on a stone plant trough in order to peer through a window at the Samson's Villa.

“Shit.” Darius said miserably. “Look at her, Zach.” Alexandria was whirling round the dance floor, faultlessly, with Axel Samson. “Whatever made me think she was relying on me.”

“I think I can safely say that you've won your future bet.” Zach nodded.

“Oh that damned bet.” Darius heaved. “Yes, I've probably won that, but what have I lost?”

“Darius?” Zach turned to look at his friend in surprise.

“There's Jack Skatch.” Darius said quickly. “See him? He's one of my first graders. Come on you little toerag, turn round.”

“Why do you want him to see you? I thought we were meant to be being discrete?” Zach said.

“I want to give him an intimidating glare to get him out here. Ha! He's seen me.” Darius jerked his thumb at the boy, and gave him a glower that would melt diamond. “That should do it.”

“Darius, are you afraid of losing Alexandria?” Zach asked., climbing down from the window.

“What? Don't talk tosh, Zach. If she goes, I lose a huge source of professional research.” Darius sniffed. Zach smiled and shook his head. “Anyway, I don't want her going anywhere with a head full of temper. I want her where I can see what's doing, otherwise she'll have the lot of us hanged.” He wafted his hand around. “Skatch! Over here!” He hissed when he saw Jack looking round the gardens. “Skatch! Over here in the bushes! Good grief.” Jack scurried over and crawled under the bush to get to the two professors.

“Sir? I'm sure the Samsons won't mind if you've forgotten your invitations.”

“Nevermind that!” Darius said irritably. “Miss Rayne. You know who I mean?”

“Oh I'll say.” Jack beamed broadly. “The scholar, right?”

“Yes that's the one. What's she doing?”

“Huh? Well she's dancing with Axel.” Jack said in confusion.

“Yes I can see that.” Darius said patiently. “And? Is she OK in there? Are people OK with her scholar ... stuff?”

“Well they know she's a scholar, sir. Everyone does.” Jack nodded.

“And everyone's OK with that?” Darius badgered.

“Well why wouldn't they be?” Jack answered starchily. “Just because she isn't a Solunian scholar doesn't mean she's not one at all. Sir, we aren't as stuffy about that as they were in your day.” Zach snorted a laugh.

“Stuffy? I am not ... look that doesn't matter! What's she talking about in there?” Darius rasped, semi-hysterically.

“Oh she's getting along *just fine* with Axel, sir.” Jack winked conspiratorially. Darius flinched. “They were talking about structural engineering earlier. She certainly knows how things are bolted together. I don't know what they were talking about after that, I don't understand Al Kazik.”

“Al Kazik? Skatch, what in black buggery are you talking about? I want to know about Miss Rayne! OK? Alexandria Rayne? Red dress, ringlets, yay big? Yes?”

“Yes sir, I know who you mean. I told you so.” Jack protested.

“So she wasn't speaking Al Kazik! Axel, yes, his mother is Al Kazik. No one speaks Al Kazik except the Al Kaziks!” Darius shrieked. “I'm going in.”

“No!” Zach laughed and caught his friend by the arm. “She'll choke you. Jack are you sure Miss Rayne was actually speaking Al Kazik and not just listening to Axel?”

“She was speaking it very well, sir. Well enough for a conversation with Lady Hexa Call.” Jack said seriously. “Is she Al Kazik? Miss Rayne, I mean?”

“I have no bloody idea.” Darius said in a daze.

“She can't be.” Zach nodded. “She wouldn't have been in her last department if she'd been from anywhere else. She'd have had to report to her native sector.” She'd have been deported on arrest.

“Yes. Yes of course.” Darius gave himself a shake. “Skatch, would you do me a huge favour? There's a gold credit in it for you.”

“If you tell me what it is, then we can talk prices.” Jack said nodded.

“You little weasel.” Darius twitched his nostrils at the first grader.

“Yes sir.” Jack agreed.

“OK. I want you to keep an eye on Miss Rayne. Not spy on her, or bother her in any way. Just see that she's OK in there.” Darius turned over a gold credit. Jack looked at him with the utmost suspicion. “She doesn't know anyone in there, that's all.” Darius smiled. “I know what twenty first birthday parties are like. I wasn't born this old.”

“She'll be fine, sir.” Jack was satisfied. “She'll come to no harm with Axel looking after her. Pardon me sir, but I thought you'd be invited as her escort.”

“I was. I had an appointment I couldn't get away from and I have another soon. It didn't seem fair to deprive Miss Rayne of a night out because of my work commitments.” Darius sighed wearily.

“That's really decent of you, sir. Very decent. Don't you be worrying though. She's fine with Axel.”

“Oh good.” Darius said gloomily. “Go on then, shoo. I'm not paying you to loiter about out here.” Jack scampered off back to the party. “I can't speak Al Kazik.” He said in dejection. “Axel was born to it. How can he hold her attention with a language that sounds like one has a chest infection?”

“How does Alexandria know a language that sounds like one has a chest infection?” Zach said. He was certainly as impressed as anyone else would be.

“She'll have picked it up off the streets in the Minor Sector, Zach.” Darius shrugged. “Al Kazik has it's share of on the run riff-raff, just like anywhere else.”

“She obviously has a natural flare for languages, Darius.” Zach nodded.

“Yes so she can chit-chat with Axel Samson.” Darius grumbled.

“You are pathetic.” Zach rolled his eyes. “Listen, you aren't a linguist, Darius. If you helped her by getting her a teacher, then she'd know you're helping because you want to, and not because of your egocentric and devious bet.”

“I used to like you.” Darius said dryly. “I think the damage has been done, Zach. It's a great suggestion and thanks for making it. She was a bet and that's a solid fact. Nothing I can do can change that and anything I do do will never be enough to compensate. Apart from that, she wouldn't let me have any further say in her life, Zach. Would you? She'll never trust me again and I can't blame her. The Samsons are good people, as well as influential people. They'll get past Alexandria's background and she'll do just fine. She's far better off taking that path with them than she would be staying with me.”

“So you think she'll tell Axel where she's from?”

“Eventually, yes. She's already told them the truth, she is a scholar. All she needs is genuine backing from genuine people for genuine and compassionate reasons. My original motives nullify every one of those criteria.” Darius smiled sadly and left Zach at the end of the road to his home.

Alexandria was awake early the next morning. Darius found her in the study with her books.

“Don't say a thing, Darius. I don't want to hear it.”

“I wasn't going to. Did you have a good night?”

“Lovely, thanks.” Alexandria nodded and Darius bit his tongue. “I drew up eight sets of diagram plans for a water turbine next to the corn mills.”

“You've done ... what?” Darius blurted in astonishment.

“Structural engineering.” Alexandria shrugged. “Maybe I can't write, but I can draw.”

“So you're drawing up plans for Axel Samson? That's what he's specialising in, you know! His university pass will be in structural engineering.”

“I'm not helping him cheat, keep your bloomers on.” Alexandria said shortly. “The plans are nothing at all to do with Axel's university stuff. They're viable plans that are going to be presented to the Agricultural Chambers next week.” Darius almost collapsed in shock.

“No. Oh no, no.” He shook his head in a very condescending manner. “Think about it. You haven't though it through at all, Alexandria. Those plans will be presented as submissions from a contract worker. As a contract worker, you'll be expected to cough up more plans on a whole host of different projects. Plans, Alexandria, plans on paper.”

“So I'll still need you, eh?” Alexandria shouted angrily. “How about NO! The plans are to be submitted in Axel's name because he's a Solunia Major Sector citizen. I'm actually not legally able to submit civil project plans because I'm not from this Sector. Before you say anything, nor would Mrs Samson, or Lady Hexa Call, for the same reason. So I haven't embarrassed you by trying to label a full set of diagrams with pictures of balls, shoes and cats.” She gave Darius a very false smile and pushed past him.

“I know. I know Alexandria. You don't need me now and I know that.”

“But?”

“But ... but nothing.” Darius shrugged. “I'm sorry. What will you do now?”

“Something that doesn't involve people like you, Darius. Whatever it is, it'll involve people I trust.” Alexandria snapped.

“People like Axel Samson?”

“Yes. You know him better than I do. Is there anything about him that I shouldn't trust?”

“No. Nothing at all.” Darius mumbled. This was awful. He felt like running and never stopping, and screaming and never stopping, and the guilt was choking him. “He'll teach you to read and write, Alexandria, and in confidence. He's a good kid.”

“Yes. Yes he is. If my plans get accepted, I'll reimburse you for the two bottles of wine. You'll lose your bet if Axel teaches me to read and write.” Alexandria picked up her bag of books and pushed open the door. All Darius could do was watch her leave.

Vanessa Court sat in Dean Figgis' chambers and tidied her hair. Figgis handed her yet another glass of wine and planted a soggy kiss on her cheek. Vanessa now knew who the scruffy horror in Darius' rooms were, thanks to Archibald Figgis and his very forthcoming pillow talk.

“So she really is a nobody, my dear. No one at all.” The Dean smiled. So she *was* a pupil. Vanessa realised she'd jumped to the wrong conclusion but backing down simply wasn't an option.

“You're far too lenient, Archie.” Vanessa simpered. “Now I know you participated in that wager in good faith. You obviously trusted Darius Hawk to do likewise.”

“I'm sorry, my dear. I'm not with you.” Dean Figgis lowered himself into a chair.

“This is my point, Archie, you're too ... good.” Vanessa smiled warmly at the flabby professor. “You weren't to know how unscrupulous and tacky his teaching methods were going to be.”

“Unscrupulous? You've lost me totally, Nesity.”

“You really don't like to see bad in people, do you? All I'm thinking about is how it will affect the University. Archie, Darius Hawk has been using more than his professional teaching skills with that

dirty thief.” Vanessa dragged it out eventually.

“What?!” Dean Figgis barked. “She's his pupil! Our wager stipulated academic education, Vanessa! Academic!”

“Well it didn't stay that way Archie.” Vanessa said sweetly.

“What in damnation has got into him?! You're right, this will reflect on the entire Education Board. I don't know what's worse! The fact that he's her teacher, or the fact that she's a feral from the Minor Sector! How could he?” Figgis exclaimed in disbelief.

“Oh she is so nasty and violent too, Archie!” Vanessa blinked like a bimbo. “Darius Hawk bound to know she's uncontrollable but it seems his male drive is more uncontrollable. I think it's disgusting.” Vanessa nodded.

“Absolutely and he's still keeping up this teacher pretence to hide all this depravity?” The Dean ranted.

“He is, Archie. I'm not sure if this is important, but she looks so very very young. I know she isn't, I know she's nineteen, but I swear, Archie, she looks no older than a first grader here.” Vanessa simply had to get that in.

“Not important? Of course it is!” Dean Figgis sniffed. “It's time I informed Darius Hawk that our wager is invalid! Had I known that these were the methods he was going to employ, I'd have stamped on it immediately!” He stated and Vanessa smiled and nodded.

Zach sat in Darius' rooms and tried to think of something to say.

“Master Tomas covered your classes today.” He tried.

“Yes I asked him too.” Darius replied.

“Netty around? I'd love some tea.”

“No, Netty's gone too.” Darius sighed. “I'll get the tea.”

“Darius wait.” Zach shook his head. “Forget the tea. Look, you can't stay holed up in here for the rest of your life.”

“I'm not hiding.” Darius said. “I have no intention of running after anyone, even if I had the leverage, or the right, to do so. I'd have to have a bloody good excuse to approach the Samsons' Villa, wouldn't I? She knows where I am. I can't do anything else.”

“You stubborn mule!” Zach said in exasperation. “Back down a bit, eh? Some things are worth running after.”

“Not at the expense of what little dignity I have left. Tea?” Darius walked off into the kitchen.

Zach had a mental debate with his own dignity after he'd left his friend's rooms. His dignity lost, hands down.

“Master Perrin! How nice to see you!” Helga Samson let Zach into the Villa. “They're both in the library. I swear they spend day by length in there.” She laughed and showed Zach into the sitting

room.

“So they're getting along OK then?” Zach asked casually.

“Fabulously. She's a lovely girl. This is not my forte but the Board of Agriculture loved her plans! Axel is delighted. He's so lucky to have snapped her up.” Helga said proudly.

“Yes, isn't he.” Zach forced a smile as Helga headed for the library. This didn't look at all promising for poor Darius. Alexandria and Axel seemed to be on the up and up, rather rapidly. Zach knew that Darius only had himself to blame but he still felt hugely sorry for his friend. Alexandria had something that appealed to Darius and had had him hooked right from the start. That just didn't happen often in Darius Hawk's life. Zach had often joked about Darius' fabled type of woman, insisting that it would have to be a custom made cyborg. No wonder he'd never pinpointed a type. Darius' type simply didn't exist in the world Darius lived in, in the Sector he lived in.

“Hello Zach.” Alexandria was standing in the doorway dressed in typical fashionable jeans and a short shirt. Her hair was dragged back into a cascading pony tail that fell down her back.

“Alexandria.” Zach stood up. “Er ... congratulations on the engineering plans.”

“Thanks. I can also read and write enough to do basic descriptions now, using a dictionary, of course.” Alexandria smiled.

“That's fantastic.” Zach looked over an example of Alexandria's written work. “This would pass for just about any every day purpose, Alexandria. You've done remarkably well. You should be very proud of yourself.”

“I am, yes. Axel knows who I am, Zach.” Alexandria said quietly.

“I thought so. Yes.” Zach nodded.

“I honestly don't know if Dr and Mrs Samson do or not.” Alexandria shrugged.

“He's not a bad lad, isn't Axel.” Zach said casually.

“Far from it. He's wonderful.” Alexandria nodded, so did Zach. “Tell him I'm fine, Zach.” Zach went very red indeed.

“Darius didn't send me, I swear. He doesn't even know I'm here. I just wanted to see you were happy, Alexandria.” He said weakly.

“He was still my doorway, that can't change. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him.” Alexandria hung her head.

“I know. It wasn't done properly, Alexandria, we all know that now, especially, Darius. He ...”

“Zach, don't. It's done, over with, gone. Darius doesn't have to feel bad about me because I'm doing OK and it's still down to him, no matter how badly it was done.” Alexandria tried to smile.

“Master Perrin.” Axel wandered in and stood behind Alexandria. “It's great to see you here.”

“Yes I came to offer my congratulations on the water turbine.” Zach smiled brightly. “I'd better get

going. It's late." Axel opened the door for Zach.

"Zach? Is he OK?" Alexandria asked suddenly.

"He will be. Goodnight Alexandria, Axel."

Chapter 7

Darius was jolted awake by someone hammering on his door whilst simultaneously leaning on his doortone. He gathered his senses and peered at the wall clock. Four thirty in the morning! His panic peaked at hysteria level when he answered the door to Sergeant Bowles who looked very agitated and very exhausted. The big soldier pushed past Darius and sat down wearily on the sofa.

“You may want to get Dressed, Master Hawk.”

“What? Oh! Yes, of course. Is this call regarding me?” Darius sobbed.

“No. I received orders to deport Alexandria back to the Minor Sector.” Bowles said bluntly.

“D ... deport her?” Darius stammered.

“Orders from the Military Board and the Border Bodies. She's to be sent back, Darius.” The big man looked very upset and very angry.

“Why? Did they say why?” Darius asked, forgetting protocol and dressing in front of Bowles.

“She's classed as an illegal citizen.” Bowles replied.

“She's a student! Dean Figgis will verify it. Good grief, what a mess. This is all my bloody fault!” Darius ranted.

“Darius, er ... well it Dean Figgis who pushed for the deportation. Rather assertively too.” Bowles said awkwardly. Darius had to sit down. “He has reason to believe that she's no longer a student and therefore a ... free-loader.”

“Free-loader? Free-loader? Sergeant he *knows* she's a student. In fact, he's the only senior board member who knows of her circumstances. I have to go and talk to him.”

“Darius! Darius wait.” Bowles stood up. “That wouldn't be a wise move on your part. According to the Dean, her status as student was removed when she became ... became you lover.”

“Wh ... what did you say?” Darius felt the blackness edging in that threatened to cause a full blown faint. “Bowles! Sergeant Bowles she is not my lover!” He blurted. “Where in black buggery did that come from? You were there when I chose her! Did I say that I was looking for a prospective girlfriend?”

“No of course not.” Bowles steered Darius into a chair. “You chose a pupil, I know that. I helped you, remember? The Dean's pointing out that she isn't your pupil now, and hasn't been for some time.”

“This is bullshit!” Darius yelled. “Do they know she's not here?”

“They do now. I told them in no uncertain terms that your relationship with Alexandria was in no way, shape, or form, improper. I also pointed out that their comments made no sense. If she *was* your lover then she's be here, wouldn't she?”

“I don't believe this! So if they know she's not here at all, let alone as my ... partner ... then they've no grounds for their original assumptions. Yes?” Darius nodded.

“Exactly what I said. I was counteracted with ... Yes she is your partner. It moved from the platonic to the romantic and Alexandria moved out to avoid any scandal and to protect your job as a respected professor. Total tripe, I agree.” Bowles said wearily. He'd obviously been trying to stand their corner against the Dean and the Board and Darius knew from experience what that was like.

“I could rip holes a mile wide in that, let alone a trained legal representative.” Darius snarled. “She's at the Samson's for shit's sake! Do they honestly think that the Samsons would be a party to such a scandalous deception? Dr Samson? Lady Hexa Call?”

“They're assuming they don't know a thing about it, which isn't far wrong. The Dean pointed out that the Samsons won't know she's from the Minor Sector. They presume her to be a free agent and an independent scholar. They'd have no reason at all to disapprove of any contact with you, either in a romantic, or academic, capacity. As far as they know, she, and you, can do as you please, just like any other citizen. Darius, if she's lifted by the Military right in front of the Samsons, they'll know everything.” Bowles rubbed his aching temples.

“Oh shit.” Darius said desperately. “They can't do that to her.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Axel! Bowles no, that won't fit. The Samsons won't just sit there and accept an Alexandria and Darius relationship because she's already in one with their son!”

“Well that makes it no better really.” Bowles said in surprise. “We don't want it to seem she's using *that* to earn her her stay here. Alexandria and Axel Samson?”

“All above board too.” Darius said miserably. “The Board will drag it through the mud, Bowles. So many other people will be insulted and humiliated. Alexandria's studies are now being taught by Axel. The Board's rules and bending thereof don't apply to him because he's a student himself, and not an official teacher, like me. So in order for the Board to pursue this ... shite ... they'll badmouth and ruin Alexandria because she's the 'weaker' party, politically speaking. Manipulative riff-raff seducing tutors type of rot. Does that sound about right?”

“Yes it does.” Bowles said in dejection. “Darius they'll nail you too, as soon as they dispose of Alexandria.”

“I deserve to be nailed for many reasons. That is not one of them, however. Come on.”

Alexandria sat in a military cruiser and blinked back the tears. She'd been arrested in front of Axel, then swiftly moved from the villa to the Military Building and she now sat in a ship that was bound for the Minor Sector. She was being deported as an illegal citizen and a drain on Major Sector resources due to no income of her own. Alexandria had just nodded and gone with the officers. She knew nothing at all about laws and matters legal. She was told she wasn't an official student because she didn't have a recognised teacher. Alexandria couldn't even have begun to offer an explanation for anything without getting Darius and the Dean himself into quite a bit of trouble. The humanitarian lot alone would go wild.

“She'd better not be cuffed, or locked up.” Axel sobbed at Sergeant Hector. “Father!” Axel ran to Dr Samson. The doctor, and his wife had already been made aware of the situation.

“Axel, don't shout. I know, it's a mess.” Dr Samson put his hands on his son's shoulders. “She isn't cuffed and locked up is she?” He looked at Hector.

“No of course not. She will be guarded though, probably being held on a cruiser, not a cell.” Hector explained.

“Bound for the Minor Sector.” Dr Samson finished flatly.

“Dad I was going to tell you, we both were.” Axel babbled.

“I believe you. Axel we already knew. There's not a lot gets past me and Alexandria's street dialect Al Kazik certainly didn't get past your mother. It's fine, Axel, don't look so horrified.” The Doctor smiled.

“F ... fine? So you didn't mind her being here? Er ... well obviously you didn't. So if my parents didn't mind, how come you lot did?” Axel glared at Sergeant Hector.

“Us lot didn't.” Hector replied. “I've known Alexandria as long as Master Hawk and Sergeant Bowles. I went for her. We had orders son.”

“OK! Right, I know why she left Master Hawk's rooms and therefore his tutelage. I don't mind speaking out either.” Axel said firmly.

“You do?” Hector asked in surprise. “I'm not sure speaking up now would be a good thing, lad.”

“I didn't think you would.” Axel said sarcastically.

“That's enough, Axel. Manners.” Dr Samson nodded. Axel turned and left the room in complete despair. “I'm sorry, Sergeant, Axel's very fond of Alexandria. It isn't really Axel's place to speak out on anything to anyone. That's Master Hawk's job, I think.”

Master Hawk obligingly hammered on the Samson's Villa door and Bowles almost put his fist through it completely.

“She's gone.” Dr Samson told the two men.

“Hector!” Bowles shouted. “Could you not have stalled it?”

“Only for so long.” Hector replied. “I'm sorry, Bowles. I've had the Border Squads on my case as well as the Military Board.”

“Gone?” Darius looked at Dr Samson. “Gone back?”

“Yes.” Dr Samson said gently. “It's OK, Master Hawk, I know where she's from.”

“How could you let her go?” Darius half sobbed. “Couldn't you do something?”

“If I could have, I would have.” The Doctor said calmly.

“So you just stood there and let them believe Alexandria was my lover when you know for certain that she's not?” Darius raised his voice.

“Your ... what?” Dr Samson blinked a few times. “Is she? I mean ... was she?”

“No! No of course she wasn't! Dr Samson, they're working on the assumption that Alexandria is leeching off your family and maintaining some sordid little relationship with me behind your back.”

“What?” Dr Samson had to sit down. “Hector?”

“Just orders I received sir.” Hector glanced at Bowles.

“And what would those orders be?” Dr Samson asked evenly. “Gentlemen, I think I'm entitled to some enlightenment here. Alexandria has been a part of my household for quite a while now.” The soldiers still didn't look sure about discussing orders with a civilian. “OK, I'll speculate. I do stress the word 'speculate'. Alexandria is from the Minor Sector and she was brought here by some special arrangement and put in the care of Master Hawk as his pupil. The fact that the girl walked out of this arrangement suggests that it wasn't quite what she expected, or what she was lead to believe. That leads me to believe that the arrangement itself wasn't quite ... standard, Master Hawk.” Darius hung his head and slumped into a chair. “Only you can fill in those details. Something in that arrangement meant that she had no social standing at all, not even a scholarship. If she had, then she'd have sought a qualified tutor, instead of Axel. Or at least, as well as Axel. As for this ... lover ... business, I know nothing of that but I find it unlikely. I think I'd know if there were any clandestine affairs going on under my roof.”

“Dr Samson! How can you say you know nothing of it!” Darius said desperately. “Tell them I am not in a relationship with Alexandria! OK, look, Sergeant Hector, you did not arrest my lover, you arrested Axel Samson's lover.”

“Huh?” Hector said in confusion.

“Huh?” Dr Samson said in surprise. “Axel? My Axel?”

“Oh for pity's sake!” Darius flung up his hands. “The arrangement you mentioned, Dr Samson, was that I could raise an illiterate from the Minor Sector to our own standards. That was to be put to the test at the Senior Board dinner event. Despicable and unethical, I know. Alexandria was brought here because she was an illiterate ruffian from the Minor Sector, not because I was romantically interested in her. She was a bet, a wager. Yes I'm a shit. She found out and wasn't impressed, obviously. That's when she moved here with you and Axel. Sir, that is the only thing I'm guilty and ashamed of, the bet. Alexandria is not, and never was, involved with me in any other way.” Darius held his head in his hands.

“A ... bet?” Dr Samson erupted. “And who was the other party to this outrageous wager?”

“It doesn't matter at this point.” Darius said evasively. Throwing Archibald Figgis into the mix right now would not help at all, in fact it would muddle the whole mess into complete chaos by elevating it to a Board level. “It's me who's to blame here. I'm the one who was arrogant and short sighted.”

“Yes you are, you jumped up little snot!” Dr Samson barked. “As for Alexandria and Axel, that's just completely ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?” Darius looked up “Sir, I know they're under your roof and he's your son but ... but ... well he is an adult, Dr Samson. How is it ridiculous?”

"It just is!" Dr Samson snapped. "You'll just have to trust me on that one. OK?"

"I still don't get it." Hector spoke up. "Why did the Education Board push it? It was their weight that tipped the scales. Even I could have pulled their flimsy reasons apart, let alone a legal representative. Why are they so hell bent on getting rid of a student and discrediting one of their own professors? I'd have thought they'd pull rank and *help* by squashing the gossip, rather than being the ones to start it."

"The Education Board pushed for this?" Dr Samson said. "Because she was here by irregular means?"

"They knew that months ago." Darius sighed. "Alexandria's whole passage here was irregular from the start."

"So drop them in it!" Dr Samson shouted. "They're going to do just that to you!"

"All that would do is reduce the Board to a week or two of chaos and have me on the streets. They'll still see Alexandria as an illegal citizen and me as an old lech." Darius sighed.

"What a load of old twaddle." The men turned round to see Netty Ling standing in the doorway with Axel. "Yes I've been earwiggling. I've never heard such a lot of old tripe in all my born days." She sniffed. "Talking about the poor mite as though she was a portable trollop! First you, Master Hawk, then Axel here. Incidentally, I can rubbish both those accusations, Sergeants. I lived on Master Hawk's premises too remember?"

"Yes!" Darius whooped. "You can vouch for me Netty! What about him though." Darius pointed at Axel.

"Never you mind him." Netty nodded. "Poor Alexandria! She was brought here with a promise that she was exceptional." Holes glared through Darius, who visibly flinched. "Through no fault of her own, she had to leave your services, Darius. A nasty and vicious rumour was circulated in the right ears and you're naturally outraged, Master Hawk. So why in hell are you starting one regarding Alexandria and Axel? I could floor you, Darius Hawk!" Netty snarled.

"No! I really did think she was with him!" Darius objected, edging away from the irate housekeeper, just in case.

"You jumped to the wrong conclusion, just like Vanessa Court did with you." Netty paused for effect.

"Vanessa Court!" Darius yelped. "Vanessa Court? No Netty, she can't have brought all this about. She's vindictive, yes, and she hates Alexandria because she's a snob and I turned her down." He sniffed, then chewed his lip. "No, Netty. She has no connection to the Education Board."

"No but she has a connection to the headboard!" Axel said firmly. "Anyone's headboard, including Dean Figgis"

"Ew!" Darius wrinkled his nose, the blinked at Axel.

"Don't you look at me in outrage, Master Hawk. Your bet was with Dean Figgis so stop trying to protect him and his Board."

“How do you know about Dean Figgis' personal life, Axel?” Dr Samson looked as if he was going to cry.

“Jack Skatch is the biggest rat in the Sector. Master Hawk asked him to spy on Alexandria and he did.” Darius cringed.

“Look after, not spy.” He corrected.

“Well he overheard Miss Court using some rather unpleasant terminology regarding Master Hawk and Alexandria and, thinking he could get a few gold credits out of Master Hawk, he followed her. He followed her four times, straight to Dean Figgis' rooms.”

“The little harpie!” Dr Samson exclaimed. “Sergeant Bowles, we have new information now. Is there any way at all we can get Alexandria back here, pending an enquiry?”

“We have unpleasant gossip, sir.” Bowles sighed sadly. “The Education Board has made sure the whole thing is gossip-wrapped. The legal reason she was deported was the illegal citizenship and that would still stand. If we start wading among all this name-calling we'll do more dirt dragging than the board would ever need to. However we start by clearing a few names, I think.” Bowles set his jaw. “Netty is right, that poor girl does not deserve this, nor does Master Hawk, and even Axel and his family have been brought into speculation. That needs stamped on.”

“Absolutely.” Netty nodded. “Word of mouth started it so word of mouth can fix it and Sergeants have very loud mouths. Sergeant Bowles? I'll organise the gossips, you can do the legal stuff and we'll discuss them over dinner.”

“What?” Bowles looked around in surprise. “Er ... yes, yes OK. I was just about to suggest that. The plan of action, that is, not dinner. Not that dinner is a bad idea, I ... OK, yes. Come on Hector.”

“I'm going to talk with Helga and Lady Hexa.” Dr Samson stood up. “If there are any inter-system loopholes here, they'll find them.”

Darius exhaled loudly and rested his head on the back of the chair.

“What a bloody mess.”

“I can't believe this has happened.” Axel's voice startled Darius. He thought he'd left with his father.

“Me either. Axel I'm sorry. I made a very bad judgement call about you and Alexandria and it could have been quite damaging. I'm sorry. I'm a wretched danger zone! I hope you believe that I wasn't being vicious. I genuinely did think you were together.”

“Well you weren't the only one to think that, Master Hawk.” Axel shrugged. “Don't beat yourself up about it.”

“Thank you. I suppose it's not an impossible conclusion to reach, is it? I mean, you're both appealing people of a similar age.” Darius tried to sound casual to hide his unforgivable nosiness.

“Master Hawk.” Axel smiled. “I'm not in love with Alexandria. Honestly. If we ever get her back here, she's all yours.”

“Er ... well I'm not sure what you mean.” Darius coughed and got flustered. He'd questioned himself before on his own transparency. “I don't understand you at all, Axel. What's wrong with her?”

“Nothing.” Axel laughed. “She's absolutely perfect.”

“OK. So what's wrong with you?” Darius asked in bewilderment.

“She's not my type.” Axel smiled. “Not many 'shes' are.”

“Eh? Oh! Oh I see.” Darius nodded. He hadn't expected that at all! “That makes the conclusion I reached even more foolish. I'm such an ass.”

“She loves you.”

“I doubt it, Axel.” Darius sighed. “What's to love? My behaviour was unforgivable, I'm a geeky nerd and a snob, my people skills are non-existent. I'm completely socially inept.”

“And you can't dance.”

“No. I can't speak Al Kazik either.”

“Alexandria can swear in seven languages.” Axel smiled.

“Seven? I didn't know there were seven languages!” Darius laughed, then exhaled heavily. “I miss her.”

“She often wondered if you'd come here to see her. It soon became obvious that you wouldn't.”
Axel sat down

“I'd made a big enough hash of things, Axel. I thought she deserved a chance here with you and your respectable family. She was doing so well too with you. All she needed was time, even though it was unofficial time. She'd have got a scholarship, a legitimate one. I had no idea that rumour was being circulated about me and her the whole time. I made one blunder after another and messed it up for myself, her and almost for you and your family too. I certainly wouldn't expect Alexandria to forgive me for all that.” Darius rubbed his eyes.

“You're underestimating her understanding, and her compassion.” Axel nodded. “What you're seeing as a series of blunders could also be seen as series of circumstances that no one had any control over. Accidents, events, decisions.”

“Still doesn't make it all all right though does it? Poor Alexandria. She'll be back in that muck-pit doing goodness knows what by now.” Darius said miserably.

“She'll be OK, Master Hawk. She's as hard as nails. We haven't heard the last of Alexandria Rayne, not by a long way.”

Chapter 8

“Look I’ll be able to pay you soon.” Alexandria peered round a tall, scraggy man into a ramshackle, damp warehouse that housed around fifty or so piles of filthy, tattered rags that served as beds. “I’m qualified, see. I can read and write.”

“Yeah right.” The man drawled. “Get yourself down Cragg’s Square and turn a few tricks, then come back.”

“I can’t, your mother bet me to it.” Alexandria snarled before barging up the lane. “Arsehole.” It was getting dark and it was raining. The cruiser, manned by six guards, had simply dropped her off behind the jail-house and that was that. Alexandria darted behind the litter bins when she saw Barney Cope scuttling into the building. He’s have laughed himself silly if he’d seen her back here with the rest of the crap. She sat on the edge of the pavement and smiled as she recalled Bowles’ face when she offered Cope her bagged vomit. He’d ordered the rest of the soldiers to sit on their hands in the cruiser, the same as her, to stop her pilfering bits off it. Darius said she was perfect. She remembered how happy she felt wearing that plain, cotton dress that made her feel like a princess. She remembered catching Darius smirking at the look of sheer concentration on her face as she tried to scrawl her name across a sheet of paper. Her first bath, Netty’s scoldings, Zach’s dancing lessons, Axel, her work being recognised by the Major Sector Board of Agriculture. Had all that really happened? Alexandria looked down at her mud splattered jeans and felt the tears welling up in her eyes. “What happened?” She whispered to herself. “What did I do to stuff that up? How did I end up back here?” She looked up as a man and a woman walked past and threw her the end from a loaf of bread. “Thank you.” She smiled, but the couple ignored her.

“Alexandria!” Valerie DeWitt would never change. She came darting over in the direction of Alexandria’s crust. “How long you been back? Here, what the shit did you do to get lifted by the Major Sector Military?”

“I didn’t get lifted.” Alexandria sniffed. “I was helping them with something.”

“Bollocks.” Valerie laughed.

“Yes I was! I stayed in a huge house with four bedrooms and a real bathroom with water and soap of all different colours.” Alexandria smiled sadly. “Real towels that were soft and fluffy. I had three meals every single day and the biggest bed in the world.”

“You were on dope, right?” Val helped herself to Alexandria’s bread.

“I had a wonderful man to look after me, Val. He was six feet tall with big blue eyes and long dark hair. He was a university professor called Darius Hawk.” Alexandria looked up through the drizzle. “I also had dinner with a proper, titled lady from Al Kazid. Lady Hexa Call. I stayed with her family and worked with her grandson for the Board of Agriculture. Axel Samson, one of the finest people I’ve ever met.”

“Ah well they’re not all bad down here.” Val shrugged. “Callum Murray’s quite fine when he’s

sober, and he pays up front. Need a word put in?"

"No thanks Val. Thanks for thinking of me. You got anywhere to go tonight? I could do with a put-up." Alexandria asked.

"I'll grab a few hours wherever I am." Val apologised.

"You don't believe me about Darius and the bathroom, do you?"

"Course I do." Val ruffled Alexandria's hair. "Keep out of trouble." Alexandria watched her amble off down the street.

Alexandria eventually found herself behind a gambling house, where a group of people of indeterminate genders had a fire going in an old tin bin.

"Hey I know you." A young man with grimy skin and matted hair smiled at Alexandria. "You're the one the Military lifted aren't you? The spy?"

"Do what?" Alexandria laughed. "There's sod all here!"

"True. I'm Con."

"Alexandria. I was helping some people on the Major Sector." She answered vaguely.

"Yeah, 'course you were." Con laughed. "Shift over a bit Shek, this girl is freezing over here. Got any food Alexandria?"

"Sorry, no. I've not managed to get anything yet." Alexandria apologised.

"No matter eh? What's a day or six between meals?" Con pushed Alexandria towards the fire.

"Rayne! Alexandria Rayne! I remember now?!"

"People know me?" Alexandria said in surprise.

"Course they bloody do! It isn't often one of our own gets lifted by real Sergeants and whizzed off in a Military issue jet!" Con laughed. Alexandria just nodded. That alone made it pretty certain that she wasn't 'one of their own' any more. The criminal element would shun her because of her 'ties' with the Major Sector, and the not-so-criminal would shun her because they'd see no smoke without fire and she *was* lifted by the Military. Apart from that, Alexandria knew within herself that she no longer fit in here. She sat and listened to the loud, profanity-littered conversations and her stomach growled with hunger. She was cold, stiff and both her feet were blistered due to soaking wet plimsolls.

"It bloody does!" One man raised his voice. "Murder on Fayle Street, it says!" He wafted a torn newspaper at another man.

"I was in Fayle Street and there was no bloody murder!" The other man shouted back. "That doesn't say Fayle Street, you prick. That probably doesn't even say Fayle street!"

"Number One Four Seven." Alexandria sighed wearily. "It says Number One Four Seven. It's the death toll by natural causes for this two weeks. It says so underneath."

"See? Bloody murder. You arse. It's the stiff count!"

“Oh and you believe her? Piss off, Grey, she's no better than the rest of us.”

“No, no I'm not.” Alexandria lay on a pile of damp newspapers and faced a cold, wet stone wall so no one could see her tears.

Darius sat at his desk in front of fifteen students, but he may as well have been by himself, for all the notice he was taking of them. Dean Figgis ignored him these days, but that was OK. Being ignored was better than being branded a depraved pervert, an angle which the Dean had mercifully dropped. Darius strongly suspected that someone had intervened here and reminded Dean Figgis that Alexandria's passage and presence in the Minor Sector may not have been solely Darius' secret. All in all, the whole sad situation had been swept under the rug, and the rug had been neatly rearranged during the course of the last six weeks.

“It was unanimous.” One of the students was on his feet, speaking to Darius.

“I'm sorry Frederick, what was? Forgive me, I was ill during the night.” Darius lied.

“Sorry to hear that, sir.” Frederick Fox said. “The literature for our final quarter exams, sir. The class voted on it, like you advised, and all fifteen of us chose this.” Frederick handed over a sheet of paper. *Romeo and Juliet*.

“Nice choice. That was the one I studied too, for my final quarter exam. It's been re-worked a thousand ways and it's still a classic.” Darius smiled.

“Classic love story.” A dark haired girl called Jeanette spoke up.

“It's often classed as a tragedy, Jeanette.” Darius nodded.

“Yes, sir, but *Romeo and Juliet*'s love wasn't tragic, the circumstances against them were.” Jeanette pointed out.

“That's right.” Another girl called Rose spoke up. “It was their separate societies that caused the tragedy. They were drowned by their own communities so their voices were unheard.”

“Hence the tragedy.” Darius looked at his desk. “No matter how advanced we think our societies are, no matter how much we tell ourselves that our societies benefit us all, underneath it all we're as bigoted now as we were when history began. We tell our own communities that we're doing everything we can to better their lives yet we ignore the fact that we're doing so at the expense of other people. The Montagues told *Romeo* that it was all for his own good and the Capulets told *Juliet* the same. They were told that they wouldn't be able to exist in each other's Houses. Two separate worlds with no doorways.”

“That won't apply now though sir.” Frederick said thoughtfully. “Obviously there are no Houses but we have no class distinction here.”

“That's because we only have one class, Frederick.” Darius sighed. “We're taught from a very young age that the Major Sector is the centre of the System and therefore the only one that counts.”

“Well that's not strictly true, sir.” Frederick nodded. “The Treaties we've formed with other peoples are proof of that. *Al Kazik* and *Zoran* were both once seen as hostile, but now people from there hold quite important positions that influence our own governments and economy.”

“You don't even realise you're doing it Frederick.” Darius smiled sadly. “*Inter-System Economics* is

taught right in this university routinely, systematically, and as compulsory. Every single person in this room knows not only our own political climate, but that of our neighbouring Zones. We sit here day in and day out complimenting each other on this advanced and civilised level that we've reached, and it is, indeed, praiseworthy. We honour and praise the successful, Frederick but we aren't taught how to notice, and work on, the not so successful. We're taught to ignore failure and that's wrong. We do that very, very effectively too. We don't see it as a huge problem because we have no failures to work on. Where are they?" Darius sat on the edge of his desk.

"Failures?" Frederick looked like he didn't know what the word meant. "We don't have any, like you said, sir. That's because of professors like you."

"Because of professors like me, the ignorant bliss is preserved." Darius corrected.

"I think Master Hawk is talking about the Minor Sector, Fred." Jeanette said quietly to her classmate.

"Ugh! Are you? I presumed you were talking about this Sector and the other Free Zones." Frederick pulled a face.

"The Minor Sector *is* another Zone, the closet one to here. It's a mere two hundred miles in that direction and it's huge." Darius shrugged.

"Yes but that's not the same at all, sir." Frederick said patiently. "That's the Minor Sector. They aren't like us."

"Oh Frederick." Darius laughed quietly. "Not too long ago I'd have offered you a wager on that."

"Fred!" Jeanette hissed and nudged Fred in the back. "Shut up will you?!"

"Huh? Why?" Poor Fred looked confused and terrified of Jeanette.

"Because I'll dig you in if you don't." Jeanette rasped. "Hush!"

"Thanks, Jeanette, but it's fine." Darius stood up and smiled at his student. "I believe Frederick has been away on Zoran for the best part of seven months." Frederick nodded. "I'm sure Jeanette will fill you in on the gossip at the end of class."

"I certainly won't." Jeanette said firmly. "I'll fill him on the truth at the end of class." She nodded, so did Rose, and a few others.

"Oh?" Darius asked suspiciously.

"Yes sir. Adults gossip, but that's not to say we believe, or agree with them, and there are more of us than there are of them." Jeanette nodded decisively.

"I'm sorry, Jeanette, you've lost me."

"Oh sir!" Jeanette said in exasperation. "We all know what the Education Board did to you!" Everyone except the confused Fred nodded. "I never met Alexandria Rayne but my brother and sister both did."

"Who?" Fred asked.

“Master Hawk brought her here to give her an education, Fred.” Jeanette glanced at Darius to see if he was going to stop her. He was far too curious to do so. “The Board laughed and said he'd never manage it, but Master Hawk knew that he would. He taught her from home and then when she needed a bit more, Master Hawk organised for her to stay at the Samsons' Villa. Alexandria and Axel designed that water turbine over by the farms. The Board were wrong and they didn't like it. Master Hawk was educating Alexandria brilliantly even though they'd laughed at him for even wanting to try. To save face, they had her arrested and sent away Fred.” Jeanette said angrily. “It stinks, sir. We all think so.” The class nodded their agreement and Darius was astonished at his class' knowledge of this, let alone their opinions on it.

“Er ... I'm not quite sure what to say.” Darius stuttered. “That's a very basic account, Jeanette. There was more to it than that.”

“Oh of course.” Jeanette said dryly. “Romeo and Juliet? They weren't going to sit there and have one of their Montague professors falling in love with a Capulet peasant from the Minor Sector! Pfft!” She snorted. “It's Draconian, sir.”

“You were in love with someone from the Minor Sector?” Frederick blurted, quite forgetting he was talking to a university professor. Darius opened his mouth.

“And what's wrong with that, Fred?” Rose joined in. “I saw her about three months ago and she was absolutely beautiful. She was acting as a translator for group of girls visiting from Al Kazik. Could you do that?”

“Well ... no.” Frederick said in bewilderment.

“No and I bet half the professors here couldn't either.”

“Me included.” Darius eventually interrupted. “Alexandria could already speak Al Kazik before she came here and yes, Rose, she was beautiful.” He found himself swallowing very hard. This support from his students was very touching and he hadn't even known he'd generated such backing. It also dragged all his memories to the surface.

“Sir? Why don't you go and get her?” Frederick asked. “I didn't know people like that lived in the Minor Sector. Why don't you go for her?”

“Duh!” Jeanette rolled her eyes. “What's he going to do, Fred? Just stride on back in with her? She was arrested and deported.”

“I don't see how they could have deported her.” Frederick said. “She was a student. Ah. I don't suppose she could be your student if you were in love with her. Right, I get it.”

“Like I said, there was more to it than that.” Darius smiled. “None of which effected the end result. Alexandria was here illegally, end of story. Now then! Shakespeare!”

“So was my dad at one time. He's Zoran, remember?” Frederick persisted. “He had to go back one time because his work permit was up. The government were indecisive about renewing it. My mum threatened to gatecrash Governor Maxim's dinner party and set fire to his elderberry bushes. She went and got him in the end. Scooted off in a mini-shuttle.”

“Yes, well I doubt that's an option for me.” Darius just looked at Frederick. His mother must have been unstable! “Your mother is obviously a very brave and a very fine lady, Frederick.”

“And Zoran isn't the Minor Sector.” Jeanette chipped in. “No Border Patrols and all that piffle.”

“Collect your copies of the play from the library and write your own interpretations of it, for now. It's not the easiest form of the language to understand.” Darius tried again to get his class back on course.

“I'm going to rename mine Darius and Alexandria and submit it to the theatre group.” Rose nodded firmly.

“Well I doubt my romantic failures are part of the curriculum.” Darius smiled weakly. “Excuse me please.” He nodded and left the classroom.

Darius not only left the claustrophobic classroom, he left the university grounds completely. He leant heavily against the wall of a coffee shop that ran along a narrow side street.

“You bloody loser, Hawk.” He sighed miserably to himself. “You spineless coward. Netty Ling has bigger balls than you, you invertebrate.” Netty was still making loud noises whenever and wherever she could, as was Axel Samson. Dr Samson and Sergeant Bowles were doing it more discretely and calling it research. Lady Hexa Call and Mrs Helga Samson were doing it officiously and calling it legal revision. Even Zach had combed every book in the Sector looking for anything at all that would help. Darius was the only useless element in the equation. Zach's book combing also extended to supporting his friend, and that in turn, extended to following him through the streets when he saw Darius darting out of the university looking less than calm.

“Lunch?” He said from the end of the alley.

“Are you following me?”

“Yep! Come on.” Zach headed for the coffee shop. Darius grimaced and followed on.

“Did you know the students have a 'Support for poor old Master Hawk' group?” Darius asked as they sat at a corner table.

“I did, yes.” Zach nodded.

“Great. So my rather feeble attempt at a love life is speculated even among a bunch of sixteen year olds.” Darius stared out of the window.

“Hey those kids care Darius. They aren't stupid either. They recognise a stink when they smell it.” Zach said reproachfully.

“I know, I know.” Darius sighed wearily. “I had my first graders comparing me to Romeo Montague.”

“Ah right, I see. No need to ask who your Juliet was.”

“Don't, Zach.” Darius stirred his coffee. “There's nothing I can do and as the days drag into weeks then there's not a lot anyone else can do either. It was a tragic mistake that should never have happened. She'll be fine.”

“Will she hell.” Darius snorted. “Bowles reckons she fencing stolen machine parts down there, Darius.” Darius winced. “I dare say she's obtaining a few of those parts too. She's living in a storage

bunker behind a loan-shark's den.”

“Bowles really shouldn't have to do that.” Darius muttered.

“No, he knows what he should and shouldn't do. He only gets scraps of information but he risks his job relaying what little he does find, to us.” Zach said bluntly.

“For shit's sake. I know, Zach, I know!” Darius said desperately. “All this is doing is prolonging everyone's pain, hers included. She isn't coming back Zach! She can't come back! She's gone. OK? Why can't people see that there is no way for her to come back? If there was, I'd have taken it. I love her, for shit's sake!” He flung down his teaspoon.

“You know, that's the first time I've heard you say that. Did you realise that? It's blatantly obvious but you've never, ever said it out loud.” Zach pointed out.

“What difference does it make?” Darius snapped suddenly. “I'm fed up to the back teeth of this. I'm fed up of feeling like this. I'm fed up with people treading on eggshells around me. I'm fed up with the pitiful looks I get as though I'm some sort of cripple. The ones that don't look at me in pity, look at me as though I'm a freak. The worst ones of all, the ones that make me want to scream, are the ones who look at me in contempt. Those looks on those faces betray how weak and useless they think I am. You know why they're the worst? Because looking at them is like looking at a reflection of myself.” Darius stood up and barged from the coffee shop.

Chapter 9

Darius was marking books in his study when he heard his doortone. He ignored it. He ignored just about everything these days, since he'd completely lost his composure that day in the coffee shop. Darius went to work, did his job, came home.

“Good evening Master Hawk.” Netty appeared at the study door and frightened the life out of him. “I used my key. Don't mind me.”

“Actually, I do mind, Netty.” Darius stood up and went over to persuade Netty to leave. “I'm very busy. Now if ... what the hell's all this?” His sitting room was full of people! Zach, Axel Samson and a woman who Darius didn't even know, plus Netty. “This isn't a public house! Look I'd appreciate it if you all left. I'm tired and I'm busy.”

“Busy driving yourself into a depression.” Netty said. “Please Master Hawk, there are a lot of people who care. People who are genuinely concerned about you.”

“Netty ... look, I'm very grateful, really I am.” Darius said wearily. “Thank you, all of you, for your concern but there's no need. I'm fine. I just need to be left alone to get on with things. Please?”

“Yours.” Zach handed Darius an envelope. It was his invitation to Governmental dinner, addressed to Master D Hawk and Guest.

“I think I'll give it a miss.” Darius glared holes through Zach. “Uncalled for, Zach. Below the belt.”

“I'm sorry, it wasn't meant to wind you up. You could always go to the dinner and show them who's boss.” Zach nodded.

“You know damned fine I'm not going.” Darius said menacingly. “My reason for attending that dinner no longer stands. Remember? Please leave, all of you.”

“Netty?” The woman who Darius didn't know, nodded at Darius' wall clock. “Once the Border Bodies change shift, it'll make it more difficult, even with Bowles' help.

“What?” Darius said suspiciously. “Never mind, I probably don't want to know. And you are?”

“Elizabeth Fox.”

“Darius we have a mini cruiser in my yard.” Alex spoke up and Darius had to sit down, rather heavily. “Oh don't worry, my parents are on Al Kazik.”

“Oh and that's meant to make me feel better?” Darius squealed hysterically.

“Listen!” Axel waved his hands at Darius. “The Border Bodies change shifts in forty five minutes and Sergeant Bowles has managed to hack into the rotas so it'll take them at least fifteen minutes to sort out where they're supposed to be. You can be over in the Minor Sector in that time, and Barney

Cope will meet you behind the jail house.”

“H ... h ... hang on!” Darius sobbed. “Axel are you mad? Just ... just ...no! Zach? Sergeant Bowles hacked the rotas?”

“He's worked very hard on it.” Zach nodded seriously.

“And I'm supposed to do what? Exactly? Please don't state the obvious, any of you.” Darius felt numb with sheer shock.

“You're to bring back that Princess and get to that dinner.” Axel firmly stated the obvious anyway.

“I can't!” Darius yelled. “Are you all mad? I'll be arrested as soon as I get back and Alexandria will be re-deported! All this will achieve is getting me, and definitely Bowles, in very serious trouble!”

“The Border Patrols won't stop you on return if you leave the Minor Sector in fifty hours exactly.” Elizabeth Fox spoke up. “That's not only a shift change, but it's a complete rota change too. The shift that are in that area now will move over to the south sectors and the whole line chain will be rearranged. Again, Bowles will throw a spanner in the works.”

“Who are you?” Darius frowned at Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth Fox.”

“Darius!” Zach interrupted. “Look, I've known you since we were kids and I can't sit here and watch you go on like this.”

“I don't believe this.” Darius rubbed his eyes. “You aren't listening! I can't bring her here! If she was an illegal citizen then, then she'll be one now! The only difference is that now she's a rather well known illegal citizen.”

“I'll have to go.” Elizabeth stood up. “I didn't get chance to tell Tony and Fred I'd be late. Radio if you need me, but I wouldn't leave it longer than thirty minutes.” She nodded and left.

“Fred? Frederick Fox?” Darius said in surprise. The woman who'd jetted off to Zoran to claim her husband.

“Qualified pilot.” Axel shrugged sadly and trailed out after her.

“I'll go and find Sergeant Bowles.” Netty's lip trembled and she fought with the tears as she left.

“Long shot, I know.” Zach smiled. “Sorry Darius. None of us meant to upset you and we didn't mean to be so overbearing.” Zach closed the door behind himself.

Darius stared at the door in utter disbelief. They'd all risked all that for such a hare-brained plan? It was something his students would hatch, but not fully grown, professional adults! Sergeant Bowles had carried out criminal acts towards his own Military, for crying out loud! Elizabeth Fox was risking her pilot's license! Surely she couldn't think this was the same as her own past situation? Her man had a legal entitlement, he was her husband.

“Shit.” Darius jumped to his feet. “Zach! Hang on, Zach!” He sped down the hallway after the others.

The mini cruiser was a reconditioned model that Elizabeth had 'borrowed' from a rental firm she worked for. It was looming, dormant, in the Samsons' Villa grounds and Darius just looked at it in despair.

"This is lunacy." He exhaled loudly. "Look, if this goes pear-shaped, you knew nothing about it. OK? I'm no pilot but I can manage basic flight controls." Darius said to his friends.

"I doubt it." Elizabeth laughed and looked very much like her son. "That crate's about ten years old for a start. I'll fly it."

"Elizabeth it's too dangerous." Darius tried.

"You crashing it into the nearest chunk of rock is dangerous." Elizabeth rolled her eyes and climbed into the cruiser.

"Sergeant Bowles! I can't believe you risked your job for this." Darius turned to the soldier.

"Pfft! What risk? I'm in charge, remember? I'm good anyway, no risk. Come on." Bowles nodded.

"What? Hey! Bowles you can't come too!" Darius exclaimed.

"Oh?" Bowles rumbled.

"I ... mean ... oh OK then." Darius watched the Sergeant climb the ladder. "No Zach. You're staying here with Axel."

"Yes sir." Zach smiled.

"We're responsible for lying through our teeth if anyone asks where you are." Axel said seriously.

"I will slap you if we miss this shift change." Netty's face appeared at the cruiser hatch.

"Netty! Netty come out of there!" Darius yelled. "This isn't a social outing!"

"Go jump!" Netty said rudely. "Poor baby is all alone down there. She'll need her Netty. Get over it." She ducked back inside the cruiser and Darius grimaced.

"Good god. This is a disaster waiting to happen."

"Just get her back, Darius." Axel nodded. "We'll figure it out after that. I'll hide her myself if I have to. We just need her here." Darius smiled weakly and boarded the cruiser.

Elizabeth Fox was indeed, an excellent pilot. Darius could see the flicker of patrol lights in the distance of space and a wave of hysteria seized him again.

"... padded brazier by the time she was fourteen." Netty was chattering away to Darius, who hadn't heard a word of it. "I can only think of one reason for that. Can't you? Did Eliza bother? Hell no she did not." She sniffed and hooped some red woollen yarn over Darius' hands while she rolled it into a ball. "That flat she's in is paid for by the University treasury, you know. That'll be to keep her quiet. It's scandalous, not to mention illegal. Isn't that right, Bowles?"

"It certainly is, my dear." Bowles nodded.

“Oh and all this here is above board is it?” Darius dipped his hands so the wool wouldn't tangle. “Are we past the patrols yet? I need the bathroom.”

“Just about.” Elizabeth nodded. “That's thanks to the Sergeant. Well done sir. They're all over the place.”

“As though it takes much.” Bowles rolled his eyes. “You have the co-ordinates for the jail house on screen?” Elizabeth nodded.

“And the Officer there is meeting us?” Darius checked.

“Well I'd not describe him as an Officer, but yes.” Bowles grimaced. “He really is a foul specimen, Netty. I'll knock his block off if he gets offensive.”

“Yes, why not?” Darius shrugged. “Add assault to our list of charges.”

“Landing now.” Elizabeth informed them and Netty unhooked Darius from the yarn.

“Sergeant, surely we aren't expecting the ladies to wander around out there?” Darius said apprehensively and Elizabeth turned round. “I didn't mean that in a condescending manner, Elizabeth.” He nodded discretely at Netty. Even if the much younger and more travelled Elizabeth wasn't daunted by the Minor Sector, Darius was pretty sure that Netty had rather a naïve idea of the place.

“No someone has to stay with the ship.” Elizabeth said. “I need the ... gauges reset. Could you help me with that please Netty? It's a two person job.” Elizabeth smiled.

“Oo! Yes, if you show me what to do.” Netty looked delighted as she threw her knitting into her bag. “Come on Bowles, out of the way. I need to be in there.”

“Yes, of course, my dear.” Bowles obliged.

“Do I detect an air of familiarity there Sergeant?” Darius asked as he descended the ladder. The Sergeant had been tragically widowed at a fairly young age, leaving him with two teenage daughters. This had been five years ago and Bowles had earned a lot of respect in the way that he coped so very well.

“She's an admirable lady.” Bowles answered stoically. “Cope!” Barney Cope came scurrying out from behind the litter bins. “What are you doing behind there?”

“That hunk of junk ship was belching dust everywhere!” Barney had the nerve to dust down his manky tunic. “Nice to see you again.”

“It would hurt my tongue to reply likewise.” Bowles muttered and Barney nodded proudly. “This is Master Darius Hawk.”

“Gerrout!” Barney gaped at Darius. “So you're real then?”

“What?” Darius scowled at the grubby man. “Of course I'm real.”

“Well bugger me! I thought it was just Rayne talking bollocks. So She wasn't banged up in the Major Sector? She really was with you?” Barney said in utter amazement.

“She's told you about me?” Darius said in despair.

“Last week when I lifted her for vagrancy.” Barney shrugged.

“Vagrancy?” Darius said in disbelief. “Cope, every one here is a vagrant! How can you consider it a criminal offence?”

“Hey I got to get my numbers in!” Barney objected. “I'll not have no job if I don't get no criminals, will I?” Darius just looked at Bowles, who shrugged his shoulders. “So why you boot her out on her arse?” Barney asked and Darius flinched. “Not that I blame you. She's a bloody pest.” He lead them round to the front of the jail house.

“I didn't boot her out.” Darius muttered. “I didn't want her to leave. That's why we're here. It was a mistake.”

“She's one big mistake is Rayne.” Barney said knowingly.

“Where's this one going?” Another tatty man was escorting a woman into the jail house.

“Same old same eh?” Barney heaved dramatically for the benefit of his visitors. “Chuck her in cell four with Billy Cowan.”

“Hang on.” Darius stepped forward. He'd recognise that visage anywhere, so would Bowles. “Ms DeWitt?”

“Maybe.” Valerie DeWitt edged away from Darius. “Who's asking?”

“Oh give over Val.” Barney guffawed. “As though he'd be interested in the likes of you. He's after Rayne. Where's she at?”

“Dunno.” Val shrugged.

“Please Ms DeWitt, if you know where she is, I have to find her.” Darius said urgently.

“Cope, how much is Ms DeWitt's bail?” Bowles asked.

“Her who?” Barney bellowed a laugh. “Oh shit knows. Um ... let's see. About ten credits?” Bowles heaved a sigh and delved into his pocket.

“Here! Not so fast pal! Who are you trying to buy me off?” Val asked suspiciously.

“DeWitt! For shit's sake you're a proz!” Barney hooted with laughter. “You've been bought off since you were thirteen!”

“Cope, shut the hell up please.” Bowles boomed. “Ms DeWitt, if you help us find Alexandria Rayne, I'll pay you for your time.”

“That's it? No funny shit?”

“None whatsoever.” Bowles shuddered at the thought of 'funny shit' with Val DeWitt.

“Something dodgy here.” Val wandered away from the jail, Barney trotting on after. “Yes?” She

snapped at him.

“What? I want to know what she's done now. All that tripe about her helping you is bollocks. She's escaped hasn't she?” Barney grinned at Bowles.

“Has she?” Val stopped walking and looked at Bowles. “You going to lift her? You can go do one, pal. I'm not helping you collar her.”

“Cope!” Bowles snapped. “For god's sake shut your mouth! I didn't lift her the first time and I'm not here to lift her this time. Why we want her is none of your affair so don't concern yourself with it.”

“OK keep your hair on.” Barney sniffed. “I'm still coming though. You might need me.”

“I doubt it.” Bowles muttered. “Miss DeWitt I'm not here to arrest Alexandria. If I was I'd be here in uniform, in a Military shuttle, with official paperwork, and with at least two other officers.”

“So who's he then?” Val asked warily.

“Darius Hawk.” Darius said quietly and Val's jaw almost hit the ground.

“Darius Hawk! You're real?”

“Very much so. I presume Alexandria's mentioned me.” Darius smiled weakly.

“Oh has she ever!” Val said in amazement. “We all thought she was making you up to cover for being banged up! Hey, so what's your problem? What's with throwing her back down here with the shit? Not good enough for you?”

“Do you know where she is? Ms DeWitt, it's me who's not good enough. I doubt I ever will be.” Darius sighed miserably.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Val asked .

“Means he's taking the piss.” Barney explained.

“OK!” Bowles said loudly. “Bugger this. Come on Master Hawk, we'll find her by ourselves. Good night, you two.” He strode off into the general squalor of the Minor Sector, Darius trailing on behind him.

“Behind a loan-shark's den, wasn't it?” Darius looked around at the varying levels of poverty and despair.

“Doesn't narrow it down much, does it?” Bowles sighed wearily. “What an utter shit-hole.”

“It's awful.” Darius agreed sadly. “How can all this be existing so close to what we have up there? It's an exact, horrific opposite to the Major Sector. Oh my god, look at that.” A painfully thin woman was desperately begging on the street corner in the pouring down rain. She had a tiny baby in one arm and a scrawny, wide-eyed toddler by the other hand. A big, rough looking man lumbered over to her and she nodded eagerly. “Shit! No, no she can't. The kids!” Darius ran forward and the big man did not look impressed at all. “Here. Go and get some food for you and the kids, miss.” Darius handed the woman a handful of credits.

“Sir?” The woman blinked at the credits. “I can come back?”

“No. No that's OK. Go on.” Darius nodded. The woman looked completely bewildered as she vanished into the shadows.

“Who the shit do you think you are?” The big man swayed on the spot. “I'd have paid her enough. You little shit.”

“I'm a bigger one.” Bowles stepped forward in front of Darius. The drunk snarled and lurched off into the darkness. “Darius I know this place grates against every shred of decency and compassion we have, but we have a job to do for know.”

“I know, Bowles.” Darius sighed. “Where do we start? It's like a maze!”

“We look and we ask.” Bowles shrugged.

“And get nowhere.” Val was back with Barney. “Lock-up behind Macca's warehouse. This way.” She headed off into a side alley that was so narrow, the big Sergeant had to rotate his shoulders to go along it. “This better be up front Hawk.” Val warned. “She loves you. If you're pissing about here, and I'm helping you, I'll have the whole Sector on your case.”

“And I'll get you sacked.” Barney smirked at Bowles who glared at the scruffy man horribly.

“Clear off Val!” A voice shouted from the other side of a small yard. “If Macca wants laid, he'll send for you.”

“I'm not here for that, Joe. I have people here looking for Alexandria.” Val shouted back.

“Sod all to do with us. She just rents the shed out back.”

“Well I know that, dipshit! We have to get across the bloody yard though eh?” Val rolled her eyes. A thin man with spectacles perched on his nose, walked out of the shadows. He was a runt of a man, but renowned for his ability to take care of himself.

“Cope!” Joe snorted. “Well you can piss off for a start.” Barney yawned and stayed where he was. “I don't know if she's in the shed, do I? Macca won't like you traipsing through here. Who are you two?” He nodded at Darius and Bowles.

“Friends of mine and friends of Alexandria's. Cope doesn't count. Can we get through here? Stop being hard work Joe!” Val heaved.

“No chance.” Joe sneered.

“Arse. Come on lads.” Val took a step forward and six men appeared to stand next to Joe.

“They just got a shit load of drugs dropped off here.” Barney said quietly. “Hence the stubbornness. We're not getting through Val, come on.”

“Drugs?” Darius said in surprise. “Can't you do anything? You're a police officer!”

“I could go and ask them to hand it over, I suppose.” Barney said sarcastically. “No one cares here, Master Hawk, no one. If anyone did, they'd have sorted Macca's arseholes out years ago.”

"I refuse to believe that Alexandria has anything to do with this Macca person." Darius shook his head.

"She doesn't, you're right. She rents the shed off him. At least she's not breaking into trams anymore." Barney shrugged. "Come on, we'll try Margot. She sells a lot of Knock-off and Rayne's one of the best fences in the game."

"She has no choice. It's different." Darius said moodily.

"Hark at you." Barney raised his eyebrows at Darius. "And who's fault's that?"

"Will you stop arguing?" Bowles said wearily. "This Margot person?"

"Is tired and on her way home so this better be good." Darius and Bowles had to adjust their eye level to around the four foot eight mark to focus on the hunched figure of a woman who was at least seventy years old. "Well? Shit, my bloody knees are butching me."

"We're looking for Alexandria Rayne." Darius told the grimacing old lady.

"Macca's shed."

"We can't get to it, ma'am." Bowles said.

"Ma'am?" Margot cackled. "Oh you are a pretty boy. Ah I doubt she's in it anyway. How much time would you spend in a ten by six tin hut?"

"Have you any idea where she is, Margot?" Darius said desperately. This place was depressing him something awful and his own guilt was adding to it a hundredfold. "Please? It's very important."

"You could try Bessie Cowall's scrub house." Margot suggested.

"Eh? Rayne doing laundry?" Barney sneered. "Margot you're senile."

"Aye and you're ugly." Margot sniffed. "She helped Bess with her books. Poor cow couldn't add up to save herself and the Cotters were ripping her off left right and centre. Alexandria helped her sort it and showed Bess how to do it too. Bugger knows where she learned all that, but she put the Cotters in their place."

"Oh get a grip Margot." Barney scoffed. "Rayne's as thick as a plank. All she's doing is fleecing Bess and the daft old boiler deserves it if you ask me." Darius was rapidly running out of patience with Barney and his opinions on everything, especially on Alexandria.

"Cope, when Alexandria mentioned me, who did she say I was?" He snapped.

"Huh? Some boffin from the university." Barney shrugged. "Not my concern who her fancy man is."

"So given that you know I'm a boffin, and her ... fancy man ... does it not strike you as odd that I'd ignore the fact that my ... fancy girl ... couldn't read or write? Think before you make such asinine comments, Cope, and think more before you make any more insulting comments. OK?" Darius snarled.

"She told us you'd taught her to read and write." Val smiled. "Poor Alexandria. We didn't believe

her. None of us did. All those stories about dancing and hot baths and soap and warm food! Well that just doesn't happen to us here, Master Hawk. Don't be too hard on Barney. The Alexandria you want just never existed here, that's all. Come on, we'll go to Bessie Cowall's."

"Well if she's not there, we go hole up somewhere." Barney nodded.

"Hole up?" Bowles frowned. "Cope we don't have the time for that."

"The gangs round here are night-crawlers. You'll have even less time if that lot catch you out in the open. Suit yourself." Barney shrugged. "We'll walk with Margot to Bogg's corner, go see Bess, then I'm going back to the jail house."

Chapter 10

Alexandria scaled the ladder to the cruiser and banged on the hatch.

“Bowles!” She hissed. “Bowles, open up! It's Alexandria! I know you piloted this, you've been seen.”

“Alexandria!” Netty hauled open the hatch with the strength of a man, and almost dragged Alexandria's head off, hoisting her into the cruiser. “Oh Precious! Are you OK? Oh my god, you're all skin and bone!”

“Netty!” Alexandria hugged her friend and housekeeper. “What in blue buggery are you doing here?! Where's Bowles?” She looked at Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth Fox.” Elizabeth introduced herself. “Bowles is out looking for you.”

“I knew it.” Alexandria nodded. “Netty I can't go back. I'm not going back to be hauled through the legal system. I knew the cruiser was here and I knew Bowles was in it. I ... well I just wanted a message passed on, Netty, that's all.”

“Child ...”

“I'm fine Netty.” Alexandria swallowed hard. “Tell Darius I'm just fine. I'm teaching other people to read and write down here. Tell him I have a job and ... and a flat to live in. Um ... what else. Oh tell him that I haven't been lifted since I got back and that I've met some new friends. Nice friends, not scummy ones.”

“Alexandria ...”

“Please Netty.” Alexandria begged, tears streaming down her face. “Tell him I'm doing OK and that I looked happy.”

“Open the bloody door!” Barney hammered on the hatch. “OK ladies! Move this crate and do it quickly! Bowles said ... Rayne! You tatty little tart! This is all your fault.”

“How dare you!” Netty slogged Barney one with her knitting bag. “You nasty little man! Don't you dare speak to her like that!”

“Barney!” Alexandria grabbed him by the tunic. “What's my fault?”

“Bowles said to take the cruiser and hide up by the second zone limits. He said if they weren't back in forty hours, to head back to the Major Sector because you'll miss the rota change. That make sense?” Barney tried to wriggle free from Alexandria.

“No.” Alexandria said.

“Yes.” Elizabeth said.

“Take off?” Netty sobbed.

“Don't you dare.” Alexandria said to Elizabeth. “Barney, where's Sergeant Bowles?”

“In deep shit, thanks to you! All over the bloody Sector looking for you! Bessie Cowall said you'd left her two hours ago. I said to lay low at this time of night! I tried, Rayne, I honestly did. Me and Val set off back here but we couldn't just wander off eh? We got back to Bogg's Corner just in time to see Bowles' fat arse squeezing down Dollit Backs.” Barney heaved a sigh.

“To Macca's yard?” Alexandria sobbed. “He's gone to Macca's yard?”

“How else can anyone get to that bloody shed you sleep in? They've just had a big drugs drop off and Macca will certainly not appreciate intruders. I tried to explain that, Rayne. Ask Val, I really did.”

“Damn blast and bugger it!” Alexandria cursed. “Damn it to bloody hell! So Bowles thinks the cruiser may be in danger?”

“Just a precaution I think. Macca might want to know where the strangers come from. Bowles will tell him you all left to keep a deadline.”

“I could get the cruiser just over the zone barriers.” Elizabeth suggested. “Will there be room to land it?”

“Who cares?” Netty shrieked. “It's a space ship! Make room!”

“She's right.” Barney nodded. “If there's anything in the way, land on the bugger. Don't worry, I'll blame anarchists.” Alexandria headed for the hatch as Elizabeth started the engines. “Oi! You get back in here where I can see you Rayne!”

“How does 'NO' grab you? He's a very good friend of mine and he wouldn't be out there if it wasn't for me. Go do one, Barney.”

“I hate you, Rayne. You're a pissing pest.” Barney heaved.

“I warned you.” Netty got active with the bag again. “Get off our spaceship, you horrid little person.”

“Not a chance.” Barney wedged himself between two seats. “Macca's mob know I was with them earlier, they saw me.”

“If he starts, knock him out with your bag, Netty.” Alexandria nodded. “Elizabeth? I know I don't know you, but thanks. Right. I'll ...” She turned round slowly to look at Barney, who flinched.

“Whatever it was, no I didn't.”

“Macca's lot know you were with them earlier?” Alexandria felt her colour draining.

“I was helping! Me and Val both were!” Barney said defensively.

“Barney, who's 'them'?” Alexandria glanced at Netty who was scared stiff. “Shit. Netty is Darius out there?” Netty nodded. Alexandria sprang at the hatch and disappeared in a flash of red hair.

“I've already told you.” Darius spoke to the big, muscular man in front of him. “Alexandria Rayne, that's all. Anything else is of no interest to me at all.”

“Bad timing.” Macca sniffed.

“Coincidental timing.” Darius said. “We're on a deadline. Our cruiser is returning for us.”

“What do you want her for?” Macca leant against the wall.

“She isn't your responsibility is she, Mr Macca?” Darius asked heavily. “I mean, she rents you shed, but that's it. Why I want her can't possibly effect you. OK? She belongs with me. She used to live with me and now I want her back. That's all. I honestly don't care about anything you're involved here, Mr. Macca. I couldn't give a rat's arse. I don't live here.”

“I like you.” Macca grinned at Darius. “You, however, have 'soldier' stamped all over you.” He looked at Bowles. “I don't like soldiers.”

“Well I'm not here officially, obviously.” Bowles said irritably. “We want Alexandria to continue her education and life with Darius here. Nothing ... what's that?” He wrinkled his nose. “Ugh I feel awful.”

“Me too.” Darius rubbed his watering eyes and leant against the wall.

“Huh?” Macca looked suspiciously at the two men. “Shit! Morton!” He screamed. “Morton the stash is on fire!” The whole warehouse burst into activity as a thick, choking smoke filtered through the room. Dozens of men were choking, then reeling, then came the giggles.

“Wha'?” Darius blinked at Bowles.

“Oof.” Bowles replied. “Um ... I want to go home.”

“Yah! Guh I can't see properly.” Darius grinned stupidly at Bowles, who began to chuckle. “This way, I think.” Darius pointed then headed off in a completely random direction. “Excuse me please.” He wafted his hands around to disperse the floating drug dealers.

“Wide Load!” Bowled boomed, then giggled as he flapped his arms like a bird. “Um ... I think we're lost, Darius.”

“Nah! I don't get lost. I have a very high IQ you know.” Darius nodded. “Oh will you stop shouting!” He got right up in Macca's face, who was howling and sobbing uncontrollably.

“My stash.” He wailed.

“Oh it really isn't so bad.” Darius tutted. “Don't be such a baby. You need to chill a bit. This way is it?” Darius and Bowles drifted out into the yard and Bowles got wedged in the narrow alleyway.

“Ooof! Well knickers.” He huffed, wriggling around. “Oo! Hey look!” He flexed his muscles then lifted his feet off the ground.

“Ha-ha!” Darius hooted and tried to do it too, resulting in him falling in a heap on the ground. “Oh. OK. Down here.” He crawled out of the alley on all fours. The entire area was lurching about and grinning inanely and Darius thought it looked beautiful! The lights reflecting in the dirty puddles were beautiful! The artistically constructed piles of rubbish were beautiful!

“Darius!” Alexandria jumped down from a roof top, a heavy, damp cloth covering her nose and mouth. Despite that, she still felt disturbingly spaced out. “Darius, get up!” She hauled at him so he lost what little balance he had and rolled into a puddle.

“Alexandria?” Darius blinked up at her.

“Darius please get up.” Alexandria tried to get him to his feet. “Macca ...”

“Princess!” Bowles dislodged himself and catapulted out of the alley. “Dance?”

“Shite.” Alexandria couldn't help but laugh. “Not just now, Sergeant. We have to get out of here.”

“Hey! How you mean, dance? Just you go dance with Netty.” Darius stumbled to his feet and grabbed Alexandria. “Hiya.”

“Yes! Come on, we'll go and find her and we can all dance together.” Alexandria nodded. “Darius, get out of my cleavage! Shit man, the University would sack you on the spot!”

“Oh bollocks to the University. They have no cleavage.” Darius went for another go.

“What the hell's happening?” Val came towards them, her own damp face cloth in place. “Free high or what? Cheers Macca, you arsehole.”

“Val! Val you have to help me.” Alexandria now had Darius the groper on one side, and Bowles trying to pirouette her under his arm on the other side.

“Come on, big boy.” Val waltzed in front of Bowles, literally, and 'cut in' The pair tangoed off up the street and Bowles shouted 'cha-cha-cha.'

“Netty'll batter him.” Darius said seriously. “Have you always had a nice bust?”

“Gah! Never mind that! Come on.”

“OK! What's your hurry?” Darius grinned. “You really do look sexy.”

“What a change!” Alexandria burst out laughing.

“What? You do! Come here.” Darius leered.

“No! Darius no!” Alexandria prised Darius' hand from inside her jacket. “You dirty nerd. Come on, Darius, we have to get out of this haze before everyone gets sickened with it and starts spewing.”

“Can I have a feel later?” Darius begged.

“I could blackmail you for eternity, Darius Hawk.” Alexandria shook her head and dragged him down the street.

“What the frig's going on?” Barney squinted out of the cruiser window. Elizabeth had dropped the

ship behind the ground border and the city was way off in the distance. "It's on fire! The bloody Sector's on fire. Christ, Rayne, what have you done?!"

"That little angel would never commit arson. It's dangerous." Netty said firmly, looking out of the window with Barney.

"I don't think you've had the same Rayne as the rest of the system, lady." Barney rolled his eyes. "But actually you're right. She's a bad swine and no mistake but she wouldn't endanger people."

"Of course she wouldn't!" Netty said hotly. "I do hope she's all right."

"Ah she'll be fine ma'am." Barney nodded. "She's a gutter-rat. Knows the place inside-out."

"He's right, Netty. She'll be fine." Elizabeth smiled. "Whatever all the commotion is, it'll be ... well a smokescreen." She shrugged.

"So where do you fit in with all this. Miss?" Barney asked Elizabeth. "I know you're the pilot and all, but even so. Big risk coming out here for a toerag like Rayne."

"That was the general opinion of her in the Major Sector too, with the exception of a few close friends." Elizabeth smiled at Netty. "I first heard of her from my son. He told me such a tragic tale of how Master Hawk had lost the love of his life just because she was from here."

"Love of ..."

"Hush!" Netty glared Barney into silence.

"One of the other students in Master Hawk's class wrote a play based on Romeo and Juliet and blatantly called it Darius and Alexandria. They produced it themselves for a parent's evening, even though the University tried to have it barred. It was fantastic!" Elizabeth nodded. "All the University did by trying to have it censored was make it ten times more popular. It's heading for cult status. I heard a group of girls chatting about it in the market square. One of them was rather outraged at the production and reckoned such a depraved and sordid situation should never have been glamorised."

"Vanessa Court." Netty said angrily.

"Vanessa Court." Elizabeth nodded.

"Who's ..."

"Hush." Another glare for Barney.

"I naturally wondered why the concern. Master Hawk does teach my son after all so I thought it my business to poke about a bit myself. What I found was not the vulgar little tart that Vanessa was gossiping about, but probably the most inspirational woman I've ever come across. She's what most women in the Major Sector want to be, and probably the Minor Sector too, if they'd only realise it. She was dumped on from a very great height, Barney, and couldn't do a thing about it. The Boards and Bodies set out to get rid of what they didn't understand and couldn't control, yet again. The Major Sector doesn't need a Hero, you see. That would disrupt the soft cushy life they all have. Vanessa Court's basic, ordinary jealousy over Master Hawk set the snowball rolling and the Boards and Bodies made it avalanche."

“You jest?” Barney blinked in astonishment. “So she's some sort of celebrity up there? Gerrout!”

“A rather underground celebrity, but yes.” Elizabeth nodded and Netty looked almost as surprised as Barney. “She's wanted back there for so many reasons by so many different people, but the most important one is Master Hawk. The Hero worship means absolutely nothing to him. He's probably not even aware of it.” Netty nodded her confirmation of this. She hadn't been aware of it either.

“Well bugger me stupid.” Barney said in amazement. “I've lifted her since she was ten years old! How she get to be a superstar in the Major Sector? She's a car thief and a fence!”

“Oh do be quiet.” Netty snapped. “Did she have a choice down here? You grotty individual. She's a scholar and a trainee engineer. Did she get any thanks for doing those farm turbines? No she did not! Poor lamb. All she wanted to was make everyone happy, and Mater Hawk proud of her. She asked for nothing from no one.”

“No she just probably went out and nicked it.” Barney muttered.

“Not her fault. Slater should have had his wretched plants in a sensible place.” Netty sniffed. “Elizabeth? What do you think will happen when we get back?”

“I've no idea Netty. She'll still be classed as an illegal immigrant until she proves her 'value to society' on paper. What tripe eh?”

“Fine bloody hero.” Barney wriggled himself between two seats for a nap. “Wake me up if anything heroic happens.”

“Why? So you can hide?” Netty said nastily. “Oh go to sleep you snot-bag.” She glowered at Barney, who closed his eyes very quickly. “I'm so worried about her, Elizabeth. I know she's a tough-nut and she can look after herself but it isn't just herself is it? Master Hawk is bloody useless.” Elizabeth snorted a laugh. “Oh he is! He curls up and hides! The man's clueless, Elizabeth, How the Education Board could even hint at misconduct like that is totally beyond me. He wouldn't know where to start!”

Chapter 11

“No Darius!” Alexandria pushed Darius onto his back for the hundredth time. The foursome had found a tumbledown shed on the outskirts of the urban area. Macca's fumes weren't quite as strong here, and the haze over the town was starting to lift of its own accord.

Bowles had given the foxtrot up as a bad job and was now lying flat on his back, legs akimbo, snoring like a dying bison. Val was sitting propped up against the wall, quietly trying to drift through the effects of the air-born drugs.

“Just give him one and have done with it.” Val laughed, her eyes still closed.

“Isn't he hard work?” Alexandria smiled and poked Darius in the chin. He grinned up at her stupidly. “You would not believe how different he really is, Val. This is a man who gets flustered if he's not wearing socks in his own house and I'm there.”

“I can't help it!” Darius whimpered. “You're gorgeous.”

“Do you know that you have complete memory retention after a trip on cocholi Z?” Alexandria let Darius keep his arm at her waist. “You're going to remember every little bit of this.”

“Pfft! Don't care.” Darius nuzzled into her neck.

“Sleep it off Darius.” Alexandria stroked the back of his head. “Why did you come here? You silly, silly man.” She whispered. “It hasn't changed, has it? I still don't belong anywhere.”

“What you going to do?” Val asked.

“Bugger knows.” Alexandria exhaled noisily. “If this lot get caught smuggling me back, they'll all be for the high jump.”

“Well you can't be considering going back there to all that shite.” Val nodded towards the town.

“This lot can think for themselves. No one made them come for you. Ah you'll sort it girl, you always do, and then you can come back for us lot.” Val smiled. “I'm sure Barney would cheer Big Lad here up no end.” Bowles muttered in his sleep, right on cue. “Or he could use the little shit as target practice.”

“What would you do, Val? If you could have any job in the system, what would you do? Darius asked me that when I first met him.” Alexandria smiled and ruffled his hair gently. “I said I wanted a job in the Military canteen because I was starving.”

“I wouldn't want a job on the Major Sector.” Val shrugged. “We have a Sector right here. I know it's a dump but it shouldn't be. If we had backing and help it could be run properly. No, I don't want a paid job, Alexandria. I want a home on Chipper Street. A house to myself, not just a room with ten other people. I want a fine strong man who loves me and looks after me. I'd have the house clean and loads of food ready for him coming in from work and I could have a hot bath, with soap, every day. I'd have a son called Mikey and a daughter called Jodie and a soft pink carpet.” Val smiled and

Alexandria was almost in tears. All poor Val wanted was the only thing she'd never had in her life. Love.

"I'm going to get on the Government." She nodded firmly. "Oh yes I am! I'll start with the Board of Agriculture and make more turbines. The Board of Trade and Commerce! I can swear in seven languages, Val! I'll get on every damned Board I can and I'll order then to legalise this dump. I'll make them take the Minor Sector into their own jurisdiction just like they did with Diatrix when it's economy collapsed. I'll send police and food and councillors and advisers. I'll build a bloody turbine on every corner and I'll write instructions on how to use them. I'll build roads and schools and hospitals and decent houses. I'll convert that big corner one on Chipper Street, Val, and I'll carpet the whole thing in pink for you and your husband and kids." Alexandria paused for breath. "I can do it, Val. All I need is a chance. A second chance." She kissed the top of Darius' head.

"Cope!" Netty prodded Barney with her toe. "Oh wake up man before I give you one upside the face with my bag!"

"No!" Barney cowered in the corner. "Er ... I mean ... what?"

"We need a sensible and accurate prediction." Netty informed him. "Alexandria knows that Elizabeth was parking the ship over the border. OK?"

"Docking." Barney corrected. "You dock ships, not park them."

"Would you like me to dock that toolbox in your mouth?" Netty asked sweetly. "I didn't think so. Anyway! Given the location of the ship and the location of this Macca person's house, which way will Alexandria have gone? Any silliness and Elizabeth and I will stuff you out of that hatch." Elizabeth had to turn round to hide her laughter. Netty Ling would have made an excellent Sergeant.

"Hell! Ease up a bit lady." Barney got to his feet and straightened his grubby tunic. "Let's see. Rayne would know she couldn't make it to the border in one go. They'll need to rest and she's not daft enough just to park her arse out in the open."

"Or dock it." Elizabeth sniggered.

"Ha-ha!" Barney guffawed.

"Elizabeth, please." Netty said sternly.

"Sorry. Go on Barney."

"She'll head for either the old gas works, or the waste-fields." Barney nodded.

"So which one?" Netty badgered.

"I don't know." Barney shrugged. "Hey! Lower the linen, lady! I don't know! Hell I've narrowed it down to two!"

"OK I suppose so." Netty said stiffly. "Right, we go that way." She pointed out of the window.

"Shouldn't we ..."

"We go over there, Cope! Away from whatever it is that's exploding behind those trees! We don't

want blown to bits do we?"

"Nitrogen flares?" Elizabeth looked at Barney.

"Ha! Nice one Rayne! You thug." Barney grinned.

"Excuse me?" Netty asked in confusion.

"Nitrogen cylinders." Barney nodded. "Chuck them up in the air, aim a flaming oil rag at it and BOOM! Very illegal, by the way. I'll have a word with her about that."

"You'll do no such thing! It's a distress flair!" Netty said hotly. "Oh she's so intelligent! Come on then, let's move out!" Netty pushed Barney towards the hatch.

Alexandria had almost had kittens when she saw what Bowles had been using as a pillow. Several nitrogen cylinders. Her and Val had constructed a see-saw and Bowles was now perched on a stack of crates, awaiting the signal.

"Bombs away!" Alexandria yelled and Bowles jumped onto the raised end of the see-saw. "Whoosh!" She then executed a perfect hand grenade launch of a Molotov cocktail. "Heads down ...EEK!" Everyone dived to the floor and covered their heads.

"I can't believe we're doing this." Darius cringed and squinted up at the flair. "Those are the last two so I hope they see them."

"Barney will know what they are."

"Of course he will, they're illegal." Bowles nodded.

"Um ... are they?" Alexandria grinned and sauntered outside. All that was left of Macca's burning stash was a dull smog.

"What a blast eh?" Val sat next to Alexandria on the grass. "The whole bloody Sector! You're mental, Rayne."

"I needed a diversion." Alexandria smiled. "Me and my box of matches."

"Alexandria? I ... well I need to talk to you." Darius was fidgeting and hopping from one foot to the other.

"I thought you might." Alexandria winked at Val, then followed Darius round the side of the shed.

"Firstly, I'd like to apologise." Darius nodded.

"Ah it was quite nice." Alexandria smirked.

"I didn't mean that, I meant ... well ... everything." Darius said weakly.

"No need. I wouldn't have missed it for the world." Alexandria smiled.

"This whole bizarre thing here is the most irrational thing I've ever done. Hell we'll all be thrown in jail." Darius exhaled loudly.

“Darius, what do you want us to do?” Alexandria asked quietly. “You don't want me here in the Minor Sector with all the crap. That's not hard to understand. I can't live as a fugitive from zone to zone through the system, Darius, nor can I hide in the Major Sector for the rest of my life. I don't deserve that, I've done nothing criminally wrong.”

“I know, I know.” Darius rubbed his eyes. “Listen, Alexandria, I ...”

“Foxtrot? And you are?”

“Netty!” Alexandria ran round the corner and leapt at her friend.

“Oh sweetie!” Netty stopped glaring at Val and almost crushed Alexandria's ribs. “Are you OK? Master Hawk!” Darius came wandering into view. “Are you OK? I know Bowles is, he's been dancing, apparently.” She gave the squirming soldier a dirty look.

“I'm fine Netty.” Darius smiled. “We did it eh?”

“We certainly did!” Netty beamed. “Now can we please leave? If I have to swipe at Cope again with my knitting it'll be in knots.”

“Yep! Anyway, me and Val are off.” Barney nodded.

“Yes, quite.” Netty agreed

“We'd never have done this without your help.” Darius told Barney and Val. “You've not seen the last of us, I'm sure.” Netty didn't look to pleased at that prospect.

“Just get sorted, for shit's sake.” Barney sniffed. “You behave your bloody self, Rayne. No giving him grief.”

“Pink carpet, remember?” Val winked at Alexandria, then left with Barney.

“Elizabeth, how much time do we have?” Darius asked.

“Darius we still need to talk.” Alexandria tugged on Darius' sleeve.

“Hush. Elizabeth?” Darius flapped his hand at Alexandria who looked mildly outraged.

“Three hours.” Elizabeth answered.

“Oodles of time!” Darius rubbed his hands together and hauled Alexandria towards the cruiser. Zach was out of breath by the time he'd ran all the way to the Samsons' Villa.

“Set of glitches on my University computer.” He panted to Dr Samson. “I ignored it for twenty minutes because I didn't know what it was. Morse code from Alexandria.”

“Good grief!” Dr' Samson blinked in shock. “So they made it? I'll go and tell Axel and Helga.”

“Hang on a minute, Sir. There was more. Sir they want the Senior Education committee delayed tonight. They don't want the senior members at the governmental dinner for an hour or two.” Zach shrugged and tried to catch his breath.

“W ... what?” Dr Samson blinked. “I don't like the sound of that, Master Perrin. That really isn't the time nor the place for a scene.”

“I know that and I agree with you.” Zach nodded. “Darius will too. He'll know that isn't the place to drop embarrassing bombshells. Sir I have no idea what he's up to, none at all but I know that disgracing the Board in public isn't an option. He'd have done that months ago if it was his way.” Zach said.

“How the hell can I stall the Education Board for two hours?” Dr Samson said desperately.

“By asking me.” Lady Hexa Call came breezing into the room. “Which is how the Little One will be thinking, I bet you. I'm an Ambassador. I'm entitled to call a meeting of whichever Board I think necessary if I need clarification on discrepancies.” Lady Call nodded.

“Lady Hexa.” Dr Samson sighed. “I can't allow you to call a false meeting under false pretences.”

“False? I'm never false.” Lady Call sniffed. “The Education Board sidestepped my request for an emergency budget for our languages school on Al Kazik. As you know, I leave the Major Sector tomorrow. I need this addressed.”

“You can do that, Lady Call?” Zach was hugely impressed.

“Two hours, was it?” Lady Call waved a fist full of figures at Zach and grinned.

The Annual Governmental Dinner and Dance was a very gaudy and very high profile affair. All the senior Boards were there with one exception. Dean Figgis and his seniors had been unavoidably detained, apologies sent. Anyone who was anyone was there and that included visiting dignitaries and guests from Al Kazik, Zoran, Diatrix, among others. It was a fully blown snob-out.

“I can't stand this.” Axel looked at the clock for the hundredth time. “I'm going to snoop in the conference rooms. Maybe they're there.”

“No Axel.” Zach shook his head. “If Darius had wanted us in the conference rooms, he'd have said so. I know how you feel. I'm a nervous wreck.”

“Are we just meant to mingle?” Dr Samson asked, leading his wife from the dance floor. “I have huge misgivings about this, Zach.”

“I know and I understand, sir.” Zach sighed. “You and your family have gone to considerable risks over ... over ... oh shit.” He blinked at the huge double doors that lead to the Banquet Hall. Darius was there dressed smartly in a fine silk shirt and on his arm was Alexandria. She looked like something straight from a palatial ball. Her lovely red hair hung to her waist and was dotted with tiny blue flowers that matched her floor length ball gown. Zach, Axel and Dr and Mrs Samson walked as quickly as they could towards the doors and were just in time to hear the door staff announcing the new guests.

“Master Darius and Mrs Alexandria Hawk.” The Usher read from a card. Zach almost fainted.

“Oh no!” Axel almost sobbed. “They'll be found out within minutes! What's he playing at?”

“Zach!” Darius wrung his friend's hand. “Hello Axel. Dr Samson, Mrs Samson. You've met my

wife, Alexandria.”

“D ... Darius!” Zach stammered in sheer shock at Darius' audacity!

“So are you with the University, Mrs Hawk?” One of the Zoran ambassadors asked.

“No sir. I'm a travelling scholar studying languages and culture.” Alexandria replied, accepting a glass of Orlay '97. Smit peraftay gimit omez.” She smiled and the ambassador looked delighted at the switch to his native tongue.

“So you're Zoran?” He sounded quite impressed.

“I'm a professor's wife.” Alexandria deflected. “Feydoo baal Mrs Samson.” She switched to Al Kazik.”

“”Ak-ha ausech.” Helga replied politely. Darius winked at Zach and Axel, who both looked dangerously close to collapsing.

Alexandria socialised with everyone from the senior Government to the ambassadorial guests. She danced with at least four senior Governors as well as a whole host of other suitable charmed males. Darius conversed politely and graciously with anyone who wanted to converse and Zach and Axel did their utmost not to cry. Zach eventually got Darius by himself.

“Darius! Are you mad? I had no idea what to expect but it certainly wasn't this. Darius you can't try and pass her off as your wife! It's a disaster waiting to happen.” He said pleadingly. Darius put his finger to his lips.

“Shh. Listen.” He whispered. Two Governors were talking about Alexandria.

“I'd swear to it, Lucette. Definitely Zoran. Judging by her elegant features and her colouring, I'd say she was related to the Pi'Andres.”

“Quite possibly.” Came the reply. “Obviously a well educated family.” Darius grinned and nudged Zach in the ribs.

“Well I'd say we had that little mystery sorted.” Another man rumbled a laugh. “So the Major Sector professors do know how to pick the ladies after all and that one is definitely a Lady.”

“I can't believe you went this far Darius.” Zach shook his head. “You'd have proved your point without overtly announcing a fake mar ... crap. Darius here's Figgis. Darius!” Darius darted off towards the Dean, hand outstretched. Zach groaned loudly and followed him.

“Master Hawk.” Dean Figgis mopped his brow. “I trust you held our corner?”

“Yes. They both did, Dean Figgis.” One of the dignitaries laughed. “So come on then, Hawk, confirm it.”

“I'm sorry?” Darius asked innocently.

“Are we right? We have it down to either an ambassadorial family or a hereditary title. Definitely Zoran though, in any case.”

“Who?” Dean Figgis looked around the hall. “What have I missed? Dratted budget meetings.”

“My wife, Dean Figgis.” Darius nodded to where Alexandria had her back to them while she laughed and chatted with a party of ladies.

“Your what?” The Dean blinked. “Hang on! Isn't that ...”

“Alexandria. Yes.” Darius nodded and Alexandria turned round when she heard her name mentioned. Zach grimaced and covered his eyes with his hand.

“Axel.” He warbled. “Go grab two jugs of wine for me and you.”

“Good idea.” Axel nodded. “Wait for the bang.”

“Gentlemen!” Dean Figgis roared with laughter. “This is the Zoran Lady you were discussing?”

“Well we were speculating.” Governor Lusette smiled. “Please forgive us for that, Mrs Hawk.”

“She is not Zoran!” The Dean erupted.

“Well actually, I never said I was.” Alexandria smiled. “Good evening, Dean Figgis.” She held out her hand and Dean Figgis just looked at it.

“I think that's two bottles of Orlay '97 you owe me sir.” Darius said quietly.

“This is absurd!” The Dean shouted. “She is no Zoran lady” She has never been to Zoran in her life and she is certainly *not* his wife!”

“This should be good.” Zach flinched.

“She is to be apprehended until this is looked into further.” The Dean barked. “I don't know how you have the nerve Hawk! She's an illegal citizen. You!” He pointed to the Usher. “Go and get Sergeant Bowles immediately!”

“Alexandria has dual citizenship, sir.” Darius said calmly. “She *is* my wife.” He handed the Dean a sheet of yellow coloured paper. “We were married five hours ago on Diatrix. I think you'll find everything in order.”

“W ... what did he say?” Axel went to sit down on a chair, only to end up on Zach's lap because he'd had to sit down too.

“Married on Diatrix.” Zach said in a daze.

“Oh congratulations!” Lusette beamed. “A wedding banquet to boot!”

“This is ridiculous!” The Dean said desperately. “She's a criminal from the Minor Sector and she was deported from here nine months ago!”

“Actually, she's not.” Darius smiled. “No documentation of any criminal acts at all. She's no such thing. Ask Bowles. And as for deportation? Well if it was up to me, I'd look into such things, she is my wife after all. But I think Mrs Hawk would rather forgive and bribe ... I mean forget. Isn't that

right, Princess?"

"Absolutely." Alexandria smiled widely.

"Figgis, old friend." Lusette laughed. "Minor Sector indeed. Come on, share a jug of wine with me."

The Samsons' drawing room was put to very good use, as was Lady Hexa's ability to order copious amounts of alcohol at short notice. Darius and Alexandria were both there, as was Netty and Bowles, Elizabeth Fox and her son, Fred, Rose and Jeanette from the University, and Zach, Dr and Mrs Samson, of course, and Lady Hexa.

"It was beautiful!" Netty exclaimed.

"It was farcical." Bowles laughed. "We just dumped the cruiser in the middle of a public thoroughfare and charged into the Registrar's office! The poor chap almost keeled over."

"Well he did when Darius ran at him screaming 'Marry me!'" Alexandria laughed with everyone else. "Sergeant Bowles got all official with him and Netty got the knitting at him."

"Yes, well he was being difficult." Netty said defensively. "Do you think they'll get word to ... those people?" Her opinions of Barney and Val were only improving marginally.

"I sent backups just in case." Bowles nodded. "Let Border Patrols dare argue with a Major Sector emergency seal."

"This is fantastic! Isn't it Fred?" Jeanette squealed. "Rose! You'll have to put an appendix to your play!"

"An 'all lived happily ever after.'" Darius smiled. "OK! See these two bottles of Orlay '97? This is where it all began. Drink up!" He got to his feet. "To me, my beautiful wife, to all of you, and to the next Doorway."

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