



Dark Lords

Book One

Shadows

BY

T. MASTERS-HEINRICH

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Chapter One

Breath In, Breath Out

Onboard the HFSS Orion Class Heavy Dreadnought, *Gufur*
Guāng (Invincible Light)

I volunteered to save lives... Those words had gotten him here. Shutting off the low oxygen alarm from his wrist comm, Lieutenant Alex Hunter sipped oxygen from the tank around his neck. Then continued his struggle through the refugee filled room toward the damn machine.

Even as he reached it, another alarm sounded. He opened the maintenance hatch. It opened like any server station, the screen popped on showing everything in the red. He turned off the alarm. The hatch itself became a work bench with a touch pad. He'd already tried to fix the atmosphere scrubber via his work station.

He pulled his cutter from the tool belt around his waist. With his left hand on the Proprietary Seal, he cut the metal. Another alarm sounded. The voices, female, warned him that he was risking legal action if he continued. He swung the small door fully open as the computer stated that he would be sued and most likely face incarceration.

Around him people tried to pull away, their voices hushed, but they had no where to go. Many were staring at him, wide eyed, as he ignored the computer's warnings. The program had identified him from his ID badge and was stating his name and rank *for the record*. Angrily, he tapped the screen and shut off the computer's increasingly threatening words.

He had to work by touch. The auxiliary atmosphere scrubber had never been intended for maintenance in the field. The opening was only big enough for his arms. The machine had stopped pumping breathable atmosphere

through floors C-18 to C-38. There were well over a thousand lives at stake.

The sudden silence startled him, then the refugees began to whisper. Their voices rose through the room, a soft tide of wordless sound. They didn't have enough oxygen for more.

Alex saw those along the wall and at his feet looking up at the screen across the front of the port engineering room. The screen covered almost a third of the wall. Someone had left the feed on auto display—perhaps it was intentional.

Craning his neck, he could see almost all of the four by eight meter three dimensional display. His body tightened, as the screen's image seemed to rush toward him. He choked, as the display zoomed onto the aft section of the alien, yet familiar triangular wedge shaped ship, finally centring on it's bow. Sudden recognition making him light headed, his fingers slipped on the sensor relay as his lips grabbed the straw of the small oxygen tank hanging from his neck. He took a deep breath as his fingers again found the cracks in the casing.

Hunching down to see, his right foot slipped on the floor. He sucked in the foul thin air, the smell no longer making him gag. Alex tried to clear his throat. Somewhere nearby, a bowel had released. He looked along the wall. *How many had they jammed in here? Fifty, sixty? More?* The buckets lined up under the screen were all full. This was an engineering room. Facilities were down the hall. A hall nearly impassable, lined with more refugees.

At least everyone here was human. Alex hadn't known that you couldn't mix Hominid and Gu'Keg excrement. Apparently the effect was like mixing bleach and ammonia. The warning over the intercom hadn't come soon enough for the refugees in the two aft side storage rooms. Those doors would remain sealed until a hazard team could get in.

The ship on the screen suddenly had red circles glowing at various locations. The display that ran down the side of the screen read weapons active. *And I thought it couldn't get any worse.*

“We’re so fracked.”

Alex flinched. Private Furuta’s voice wasn’t quite a whisper, her face only centimetres from his right ear.

“If we don’t get this scrubber working, then we’re fracked.” Alex pulled the sensor from the machine, hoping to be wrong, but his fingers hadn’t lied.

An old man spoke in a broken voice. “It’s a snake ship.”

Alex turned his head. The old guy, a professor of what Alex couldn’t remember, was sitting between two wounded. The man at the Professor’s feet, Alex was sure, had already died. *At least he’s not breathing.*

There was no way to get to the professor, to tell him not to cause a panic. Everyone needed to stay calm, to use less oxygen. Alex willed him to shut up. He shook his head at the professor’s face.

“Vampires.”

“Shit.” Furuta dropped her wrench. “Shit. I’m not going out like that. I’m not.”

“Shut up.” Alex said through clenched teeth.

He turned his head toward her. “We are getting this scrubber up. And we’re doing it now.”

“They’ll hand us over!” Furuta whispered words sounded loud. The effort making her cough and suck at her own straw. “To save their asses. They’ll hand us over.”

“Frag it! Furuta! Focus!”

Furuta's large dark eyes were full of hurt. Alex tried to sigh, but started choking. *She followed you in. They're threatening to shut the doors and she followed you in.*

“Hey.” Alex gave her his best smile. “At least we’ll be clean.”

Furuta blinked, confused.

“The way we smell? They’ll be showering us for a week.”

Furuta nodded, her eyebrows rising. Her short barking laugh turned to a gasp.

Around them more people were coughing, many trying to get lower.

Too many lungs. Alex thought, but it’s fracking carbon dioxide! There’s enough oxygen if this damn thing would just work.

The screen was a magnet and every eye was drawn to it. The ship floated, a shadow against the stars. Alex looked at the ship. The burnished gold of its hull dully glowed in odd patterns of reflected light. *Kind of a pretty design.*

He pulled out the sensor panel and stripped connections. “We’re going to bypass the sensor. I need some L3 wire.”

“We’re out. There’s nothing in the console but glass or carbon fibre.”

“Then get me something fracking conductive. Now.”

“It holds over a hundred.” The Professor was nodding to himself. “Ouroboros class, they call them. Serpent. They always come in threes, or sixes, or nines.”

Alex spun toward the old man. He choked on the scream building in his chest.

Somewhere on the other side of the atmosphere scrubber someone started wailing. The sexless voice lacked strength or reason.

Alex stared down at the front of the scrubber. A woman had begun rocking, holding tight to small shapes huddled around her. One face was turned toward him. The child’s dark eyes watched Alex. Did he see fear of being traded for

safe passage, of becoming cattle? No, fear could take nothing more from them, from any of them.

He turned back to the sensor harness and tore it from the machine. He began pulling wires. He'd volunteered to save lives, not watch them die. He remembered his cousin Louis' words, *if you're going to frack the rules, make it count.*

"I need conductive metal."

"We don't have-"

"Anything conductive!" Alex began popping out the sensor fuses. "Just get me anything that will pass a fracking current."

He heard Furuta move away. Heard her swear as she stumbled over the bodies. Too many bodies, not enough room. Already they had no path out. At least they were all laying or sitting on the floor. They'd last longer.

Alex pulled off his watch, his graduation gift and put on the hatch. Dizzy, he took another sip of oxygen. His cutters made short work of his inheritance. *Shouldn't be wearing the damn thing anyway.*

Prying out the connectors, he freed the CO2 converter. The ceramic Bolovene filter had shattered. It crumbled, slivers of black carbon penetrating his hands like a thousand needles. He cut the watch's antique silver into to rough diamonds and forced the pieces into the groves where the feeds into Bolovene filter had been.

"I got the cover off the old comm, and about a meter of some kind of wire, but that's-"

The beep in their ears silenced Furuta.

More time, just a few more minutes.

He tapped the receiver with his chin as he broke the sensor apart, the brittle pieces scattered across the access door, many falling to the floor.

“This is Major Teng. Lieutenant Hunter, you and your staff need to go to the port forward holding area. We’re sealing the doors.”

“I’m almost done here.” Alex the stripped wire. His meter showed current flow. *Yes!*

“...Do you understand.”

“Please repeat.” Alex began winding the wire around the connectors.

“You’re done now. We have to close those doors. Security will escort you and your people out.”

“I’ll have it in ten minutes.”

“Security will be there in five to escort you out.”

“Seven, give me-” But the connection was gone.

The old silver of the antique watch fell out of the insert, Alex found himself gasping for breath. He took another sip of oxygen.

“We need gold, silver!” Alex turned, the professor was quiet, his eyes closed. “We need gold! Silver!”

Private Furuta turned, her dirty hands held up. “We don’t-”

The necklace stopped her. A woman held it up, it dangled from her dirty fingers. Then it was moving toward them. Hand to hand. More hands joined in. Rings, bracelets, other necklaces quickly passed to Furuta or to those closest to Alex.

“Come on,” Alex said as he pulled his soldering gun. He dumped the bits from the sensor housing and began melting gold directly into the sensor panel.

As Private Furuta handed him a handful of jewellery, she glanced up at the screen. Alex refused to look at it.

“We can do this.” Alex whispered. With burnt fingers, he reached into the machine.

* * *

On board the UKS Ouroboros Class Ship, *Baldulf*

Daniella stared at the ship on their main viewer. *How could this Admiral claim he didn't need help?*

"How bad is it?" Lord De La Roche raised hand silenced the non-officers on the bridge, silenced Daniella.

"It's actually worse than it looks. They're losing life support. The *Gufur Guāng*, is carrying about twenty-five thousand bodies over it's limit, when it was at full operational capability." Science Officer Pellean, her scanner reflecting in her eyes, shook her head, the tips of her canines showing her disapproval. "Idiots. More would survive if they'd taken less."

All eyes in the room glanced at the leviathan displayed before them. Around it buzzed swarms of smaller ships in tight formations. This close, the thing appeared to be a floating city or more accurately, the ruins of one.

Daniella noted the huge guns pointing toward them. *We are but a speck, a flea to this giant, dying beast.*

"It is an Orion Class. They haven't made them in over a hundred years," Pellean was shaking her head. "They were a fools undertaking then. Now the fools will die in it."

"How many humans?" Lord De La Roche asked.

Pellean adjusted something at her display, "The ship was designed for mass troop, equipment movement and colonisation. I'd say, three hundred and approximately seventy-five thousand. They are jammed in so tight readings are overlapping."

Daniella gasped as she looked up at the battered ship. Her stomach tightened. The memory of the stock vessel, *Caroon*, flashed before her. Opening the containers. The hundreds of dead. Her heart beat faster. But not hundreds

now. No. Now there will be *thousands!* In her mind, the hundreds of the *Caroon* vanished, and it was only one face she saw. *His face.*

“Daniella?” Lord De La Roche stared at his daughter.

Daniella blinked, her hands were painfully gripping the edge of the navigation console. Her nails hard against the metal. She pushed *his* face deep, buried under the bodies on the *Caroon*. He, like them, was nameless.

Sir Marcus Kaherdin, the pilot, was looking at her, his eyes filled with worry. He gently squeezed her arm. “Daniella?”

‘I’m okay,’ she mentally sent him, but still her stomach turned, *such desperation.* “How? How have they fit so many?”

“They’ve put bodies everywhere. Those formations must be the *Gufur Guāng’s* fighters, because they have refugees packed into the launch bays. I believe a Carillon Slave Shipper could take lessons.” Pellean sat, her eyes still engrossed in her sensor displays. “They’ve left most of the main hangar open and appear to be rotating ships through for fuel and supplies. Fools.”

Sir Kaherdin stood at attention, Lord De La Roche nodded at him.

“My Lord, The modern Hominid Federation of Star Systems heavy dreadnoughts are half this size, are much faster and have far more armour. But Lord. The Gu, this Orion Class ship might be old by Sapiens standards, but her guns are a serious threat as are twenty-one of her escort cruisers that we’ve identified so far. They’re still fully, or mostly functional—”

Sir Marcus’ eyes darkened at Dr. Hebron’s snort of disdain, but he continued, “There are over two thousand fighters, of various classes, more than a dozen non-military craft, whose capabilities are unknown and I believe, one of their new interceptors. Lord, these are not helpless prey.”

Lord De La Roche turned his gaze back to Pellean, “Any non-humans?”

“Yes, about fifteen thousand of them, mostly mixed with the humans in the upper levels, aft side. A couple small sections have been sealed, no life signs from within.”

Lord De La Roche raised an eyebrow, the fingers of his right hand, nails exposed, drummed his armrest.

“We can’t just leave them.” Daniella pushed past Dr. Hebron, ignoring him as she faced her father. “Please, we need to send them some aid. Scrubbers, something.”

Dr. Hebron cleared his throat. “These are not Cacarmwri, my Lord. Nor are they Servants. You have no obligation to them. They are in our space! Illegally! By the treaty they themselves have authorised. That these, these wildlings, dare demand-”

“*Quiet!*” Lord De La Roche slammed a mental fist as well as his physical one onto his arm rest. Dr. Hebron sputtered but like Daniella, lowered his gaze.

“Admiral Petrovich has requested safe passage, not demanded it.” Lord De La Roche shifted in his chair. “To York.”

“My math seems faulty, Sir Keherdin,” Daniella turned to Marcus, “how long is the journey to York? Will they make it?”

“With the shape that their engines are in?” Marcus was shaking his head as he spoke. “The Orion Class has taken a tremendous battering.”

Dr. Hebron cleared his throat, “They clearly have a plan. If we are not going to board-”

“And their ship, it appears that atmosphere is leaking at several locations?” Daniella saw Dr. Hebron’s fangs as she motioned toward the main viewer. At first glance the

white streamers floating away from the battered leviathan seemed festive.

“Their oxygen levels are very low. Dangerously so in most areas. I believe the port aft section environmental systems have been completely overwhelmed.” Pellean spoke without looking at any of them, her focus on her readouts. “They are starting to die.”

“There is no way they will make it to York before the aft engines fail, my Lady, I doubt even half their escort will make it that far.” Marcus looked down at the scanners beeping. “Those small ships are fighters, not long distance ships. They should be in their bays not...if anything hunts them, I doubt those pilots will be in any shape to defend in another twenty-four hours.”

Daniella noted Dr. Hebron scowl, as Armorum Bowie, head of Lord De La Roche’s security stepped forward.

Daniella looked at the ship on the screen, then turned to her father and dropped to one knee. She waited until Armorum Bowie deferred to her and stepped back, as she knew he would.

“They are alone in the dark, father, with no one to tend them.” Daniella looked up at her father. The green in her eyes muted, her face innocence itself. Her throat exposed. “As you say, father, we must lead by example.”

Dr. Hebron hissed his frustration. He cast about the bridge. The Lord’s Chief Armorum stood next to the security terminal, his yellow eyes hungry. Dr. Hebron quickly averted his gaze. Nearly hidden by the Armorum’s bulk stood the ship’s doctor.

“Dr. Kinkaid,” Dr. Hebron’s voice was filled with collegial respect, “surely the threat of disease to our beloved Servants outweighs any obligations we have to aid these, these, mad wildlings?”

“I would be remiss to allow them on board, of course. But what sorrow would we feel if salvation, nay, sustenance itself was denied to any of us, or ours, for want of what now dies in their holds?” Dr. Kinkaid said. “But they are far from either dead or helpless. We must all remember that though they may have short lives, they have long memories.”

Armorum Bowie nodded at Dr. Kinkaid’s words. He stepped forward and Lord De La Roche motioned for him to speak.

“It is wrong to let a wounded animal suffer, but a wise hunter does not corner a wounded beast. They have teeth and fight yet in them.” Armorum Bowie’s voice was a low tenor. “As Dr. Kinkaid has said, those that may yet live will find new pastures to graze. We are not hungry. Who here would eat from the dead? ”

“What possible tribute could they give?” Dr. Hebron’s lips were raised, his teeth fully exposed.

“It appears you have your answer, my friend.” Dr. Kinkaid’s smile was polite, as the Armorum’s snort drew a dark glance from Hebron.

“Prep a shuttle, from each ship.” De La Roche’s voice was firm. “Emergency scrubbers, oxygen tanks, medical supplies, whatever we can do without and fit. Send them unstaffed. Get the maintenance robots prepped. We can seal the worst of their leaks.”

Two officers snapped to attention then left through the lift.

“Thank you father.” Daniella spoke her head lowered.

De La Roche pursed his lips. “Connect me to Admiral Teng. They will not make landfall at York, but they will at New France.”

Hebron's face was filled with shock. He pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket and began waving it about his face.

Daniella stepped away from her father, so not to be in pick up range of his visage.

"We will assist you." De La Roche moved a finger and the Carrado and Drudwyn uncloaked along with six of the twelve escort ships. "You will be escorted to New France under the protection of my name, De La Roche. Lord De La Roche. We are sending un-crewed shuttles from each of our vessels. Maintenance crews are being dispatched to deal, externally only, with your leaks."

"We do not require your assistance."

"Nor I your permission. You are trespassing."

"We are on a humanitarian mission from Pentade."

Dr. Hebron snorted.

"We are aware from whence you've come, Admiral Teng."

"Your forgiveness, but trespass could not be helped, or we could not reach York."

"Then we are agreed. I acknowledge your humanitarian mission and you, that you are breaking our treaty." Lord De La Roche tilted his head.

Admiral Teng's dark skin grew slick, moisture beading at his temples, as the silence thickened. His voice was firm as he finally spoke. "Yes. We are agreed."

"I will level tribute only against the current crew of the Gufur Guān."

Admiral Teng hesitated before speaking, clearly listening to someone off screen. "Thank, you, Lord De La Roche. What, guarantee, are you requiring?"

"Your word will suffice, as well as a copy of your crew database."

The Admiral nodded. “Of course, but, less than ten percent is considered-”

“You are in no position to barter, Admiral.” De La Roche cut the feed.

Daniella felt pride and love for her father. With his nod, she hurried to join Dr. Kinkaid.

Chapter Two

Leaving

21 standard months later

Planet: New Canada, central continent, Birkir Valley
Hunter-Anderson Home

“I think you’re over reacting. I thought you’d be G-1 with this.” Alex put the salad fixings on the counter. His sister, Theresa, was still hauling in groceries. She put down the frozen turkey, a gift from him, and gave Alex *the look* over the island.

“When we were children, did we not read the same books?” She came around the island, eyebrows still raised. Theresa held up her hands slightly smaller than shoulder width apart. “Now I want you to listen to this, Alexis.”

Alex nodded.

“*Dark,*” Theresa then used her hands to box a second imaginary word. “*Lord.*”

She looked at her brother. She kept her hands held up and did it two more times, turning her head dramatically from left to right and back again to emphasize each imaginary word.

“Dark. Lord. Dark. Lord.”

“Well, when you say it like that.” Alex shrugged, thinking of Professor Bhaskara, his excitement that Alex had accepted Dani’s invitation, that he’d be representing the Assiniboine Uni Department of Social Sciences.

“Then there’s the, *come to my planet,*” she had lowered her voice and added an odd accent. “Hmmm. A planet controlled by, what, ten other *Dark, Lords.*” Theresa turned her head giving her brother the full on ‘not impressed’ look. With a tap on the switch the top of the island rose. She picked up the frozen turkey from the floor and slid it onto a shelf within the freezer unit. Another tap lowered the island top.

“Over fifteen thousand delegates, Theresa. Politically important people. Security everywhere.”

“Dark. Lord.”

“Twenty seven uni’s are sending people. Half the security is being supplied by the HFSS.”

“Alexis.” Theresa spread the salad fixings across the cutting board on the island. “Dark Lords, and, hmmm, *Vampires.* They drink human blood.”

“Maybe, in the past, that was true. But, I doubt that any more. Albion is a major beef, real beef, exporter. I don’t think they actually eat people.” *Vampires,* Alex ignored the shiver running down his spine. *Vampires, remember New Perth colony, actually, don’t think about New Perth colony.*

“What about New Perth Colony? Whole towns wiped out by Vampires.”

“Criminal Vampires. Rogues. And Trolls. Mostly Trolls. They said it was mostly Trolls doing the killing. And that was almost seven hundred years ago.”

Theresa tossed him the washed lettuce, dousing him with water droplets. He began tearing leaves apart.

“It’s not like I’d be staying at a Dark Lord’s Castle, off in the middle of nowhere. We’re staying in New Oxford. It’s a big city. There’s five people from the uni and Professor Bhaskara’s writing partner, Professor Dani Roche. He sponsored my work at New Oxford Uni.

Theresa, the guy's the high side of eighty. How much trouble could I get into?"

"Have you seen this *Danny*?"

"With what vid costs? Over that distance? How much do you think a full pension is?"

"So that Professor Bhaskara, he's the guy from the *Gigi*? One of the refugees?" Theresa pushed carrots his way as he nodded, but cut Alex off before he could speak. "Alexis, what if his friend is some dirty old man? What if he has a deal with the Vamps to keep himself young? He lives on a Dark world. Maybe he's a thrall of a Vampire?"

"A thrall?" Alex shook his head at his younger sister, *yeah right, younger*. Thanks to the joys of space travel he was physically twenty-seven and she was now twenty-eight.

"What Theresa, do you think they're going to jump me when I get through customs? I'll come back a long toothed psychopath?"

Theresa stopped cutting peppers. Keeping her face down she wiped at a tear.

"Hey, hey, hey," Alex said as he came around the island. He took hold of Theresa's arm and turned her toward him. "Little sister. What's up?"

"I know you hated it, when they discharged you. I mean, discharged over proprietary whatever. You altered a bloody scrubber and saved lives." She pulled away from Alex and rinsed the spinach. "You lost your commission, but a full pension? Full pension! Honourable discharge! These are gifts, Alexis. Gifts!"

Theresa slammed her cutting board and knife into the sink. She wiped at the tears on her face. The ding of the front door was all the warning they had before before the babble of children filled the entranceway.

Alex touched his sister's arm and she spun, hugging him tightly.

"Alexis, why don't you try staying? This thing with the *Jules Verne*—Why not just try living *here*? Just for a while," she whispered. Then she was stepping away, greeting her kids, his niece and nephew, her smile wide.

Alex looked up and nodded to his brother-in-law, William. Perfect William. Genetically perfect William.

He noticed the package William was carrying. He glanced at his sister. Theresa was holding Diana, smiling. Alex saw her smile fall away at the sight of the large blue Foreign Affairs and Embassy envelope. Inside was his visa and travel permits. William placed the package on the kitchen desk.

Dinner was quieter than usual. Afterwards, Alex read to his niece and nephew then helped tuck them into bed. The package remained unmoved, untouched. Sitting on the patio, Alex watched the sun set. It lit the man made valley, pools of gold flooded between the trees on the far rise, then briefly haloed them in light. The darkness crept in, but then was sent scurrying back as the patio was suddenly flooded with yellow light from the upstairs overhang.

"Join me?" William asked from the patio doors.

Alex got up and stretched. Nothing could beat the smell of real planet air. Faintly he could hear the sound of insects. He turned and headed into the house and took a seat at the kitchen table with his brother-in-law.

William had a bottle of blended synth whiskey, not the really good stuff, that was for Thanksgiving, but it wasn't a cheap bottle either. On the table sat the thick blue envelope.

"You're going then?" William asked, putting three glasses on the table.

"Yes."

Theresa came to the table, hugging herself as she sat down. William poured a generous amount in three heavy glasses. The sharp scent of the amber liquid lingered in the air.

“They’ll be older when you get back.” Theresa reached for a drink and rested her elbows on the table.

“I know.”

“Just be careful.” She finished half the glass.

Alex watched William reach a hand over, entwining his fingers with Theresa’s. What they had was real. It was solid. It kept you on the ground. He took a sip of the liquid, it burned.

“Have you told Kyle?” Theresa.

“Oh, yeah. Big brother was his...jubilant self.”

William smirked. “Jubilant? You should be a lawyer.”

Alex saw a ghost of a smile on his sister’s face. “Alexis, what’s the...why are you going? What’s there?”

Alex and William’s eyes met. They spoke together, “Sex.”

“Oh, by the stars! Sure you weren’t talking to Louis!” But she was smiling at last. She slid her empty glass to her husband. “Pour, and you, drink.”

“I leave tomorrow at ten, Theresa.” Alex took another sip.

“Exactly. Tonight, I’m getting drunk with my husband,” She leaned over and kissed William, then turned to Alex, “and my brother whom I may never see again.”

“A toast to your happy return.” Their glasses clinked loudly then they all downed their drinks.

Alex coughed, wheezed, dramatically pounded his chest.

“I don’t get it,” William said as he poured, “I married her because she could drink me under the table, but you? I’ve seen Kyle’s pictures.”

“No! No! No! He said he got rid of those!” Alex could feel his face heating up. *Was it the ones on his first leave? With the cats? Or the ones from Frankie’s wedding?*

William leaned forward and motioned Alex closer.

“One thing, if you do turn into a long toothed blood and flesh crazed psychopath, just sent us a note, okay?”

“Deal.”

Chapter Three

Best Laid Plans

De La Roche Estate, Albion (Dark world), Realm

Dani knocked dust and sweat from her riding pants. As she walked along the white stained five board fence toward the path, the grooms turned out her mount, Gurgalan. She watched the pure black stallion as he whinnied to his pasture mates then galloped to join them.

The horses were a family indulgence going back to old Earth. Based on a breed called Friesians. But the head groom, Mulligan, had outdone himself. He had built upon the bloodlines, already so beautiful, until he'd achieved perfection. He could have retired at fifty, now at eighty, he still oversaw her father's breeding program.

As my father oversees his, Dani shivered. She brushed imaginary dust from her pants. Her eyes on Gurgalan, she let all other thoughts fade as she watched the stallion. He was loping and kicking up his heels, this after a four hour ride of galloping and jumping. The verdant pastures making the large English Oaks appear black as they rose from the ground. Their crowns of green complementing the rolling grass. The black horses moved in and out of the trees' shadows, seeming more a dream than real steeds.

Perfection imposed by order, Fredrick's words came unbidden to her mind. That she would think of him, now, of all times. With Fredrick's image came the young man's.

Shaking her head, Daniella looked toward the house. Built to look like a castle, the edifice rose from the land and towered over New Oxford. The black local stone had been cut and fitted by master masons. Like fine jewellery, grey and red granite, white sandstone, blue dolerite, black basalt and green soapstone had been used in finishing its construction. From here, each tower, each window, each balcony was etched against the black stone.

Then a layer of silica based dura-crete had been grown over the whole thing and deep into the ground. Like the roots of the great oaks, the foundation of Castle Cor, ran deep flexible fingers that entwined with bedrock. The silica, spun carbon and crystallised aluminium did more than stop oxidation of the sandstone and dolerite, more than stop moss or the growth of lichen. In was embedded deep into the stone, more than a foot. A membrane that had taken over a century to fully mature and still continued to grow. Now, not only did it have the tensile strength of the spiderweb that it's molecular design was based on, it was also so sensitive as to be almost self-aware.

Any attempt to scale Castle Cor's walls would be known. No ivy nor nano-tech could gain purchase on its battlements, no root nor deep penetrating missile could crack its foundations. It's towers doubled as shield generators. Even without them, it could withstand and more importantly absorb, keeping safe the inhabitants, radiation from aerial bombardments.

Though built by her great-great-great-grandfather, Dani knew that the silica based dura-crete was still the ultimate in high tech security for any building. Standing here, looking up at Castle Cor, she usually found that a secondary consideration. The silica dura-crete lent the whole structure a silkiness. With the sun beating down,

Castle Cor's dark stone appeared lit with an inner light. Close up, the carved granite became ruby; the white sandstone was mother of pearl; the soapstone emerald; the dolerite was deep glacial blue, all lit from within.

Looking up at the castle now, she felt a shiver.

Though still grand and imposing, Dani couldn't help but currently compare Castle Cor to an ant hill, one that had been disturbed. People and robots of every description were coming, going, flying, landing, cleaning, prepping, doing only they knew what. While overhead, it seemed a swarm of strange insects buzzed not only Castle Cor, but spread themselves over New Oxford below. Their shadows darting across the landscape. Could Castle Cor know an enemy, keep *him* out, now?

Again Dani gave herself a shake. Fredrick was not invited. If only she could have the castle turn away her betrothed. But what questions that would bring. Dani hugged herself, her sudden panic making her stop until her heart stopped racing.

She looked up at the activity. Perhaps she could go for a long, long walk. *Stop it! You have too many things to do to be sitting out here sulking!* She put purpose to her steps and headed up the flagged path.

Perhaps it was amazing that there had only been two minor accidents. One involving a shuttle and a window cleaner of all things. The other a fly over collision of a delivery of bedding plants for the town's main square and a load of cheese from the south province. Dani could still see robots picking flowers and the occasional hunk of dairy from the roof's various crenellations and gutter work. As for the poor swan, being buried in brie and blue cheese could give anyone a heart attack, at least no one else had died. As long as one didn't count unhatched eggs.

Tomorrow the first official guests would arrive for the Hominid Trade Summit and Technology Symposium. Hopefully, all the cottage cheese would be out of the duck pond by then. The various government and private security personnel had overrun New Oxford. Though her father had given them limited access to Castle Cor, he had still given them *access*.

Climbing the steps to the bottom gardens, Dani smiled. The little man from HFSS Department of Security had actually been serious when he asked if the collision could have been an assassination attempt or a political statement. *That's right*, Dani couldn't help the wry smile she felt lifting her cheeks, *our criminals are masterminds. Who would expect a kilo of Colby from the sky? Crushed by cheddar; murder by munster!*

Though the main road was now no more than twenty meters away, and behind a stone retaining wall, she could hear the traffic as she neared the garden entrance. Dani clearly discerned the soft hiss of tires, the faint squeaking of wooden wheels on the cobblestone, the affront of horses as the hum of anti-gravity vehicles passed them in the power lane, on the road to and from Castle Cor.

The closer she got to the doors, the more people Daniella had to get past. Every curtsy, every bow, had to be acknowledged. Slipping into the private dining room, she felt her shoulders relax. No ride was ever as tiring. The smell of fresh blood and baked bread made her stomach grumble. She kissed her mother's cheek and took her seat.

"Are you all set?" Claudette asked her daughter.

"Yes." Dani removed the second sweet bun from Abigail's plate. Her little sister frowned.

"I'm not a child any more," Abigail snapped about to spear the bun back.

“Do you want to be frightening our guests? Is that what a good host does?” Claudette asked her youngest child.

“Mother.” Abigail, resigned, reached for the silver plate on which the still warm crystal goblet sat. Daniella made a face at her sister then began sipping her goblet of blood. Abigail followed her lead, but finished her glass in a loud gulp.

“Abby. Please.” Claudette, frowned.

“So when does Alexis arrive?” Johanna asked from across the table.

“Tomorrow, I believe.” George looked to his oldest daughter for confirmation.

Daniella nodded, her mouth full.

“The mid-morning shuttle, my dear.” Claudette filled a small plate with fresh strawberries and clotted cream. From a silver bowl she added shredded raw meat dripping with blood. “I’ve confirmed, Alexis and Daniella, at the spa for the next three Sundays.”

“What does she look like?” Abigail asked. “Is she tall? Fat? I heard wildlings are often fat. Is she old? Will she smell funny?”

“Abby!” Claudette’s stern tone silenced her youngest. “If you wish to be taken seriously as a young lady, and not a child, you had better start acting like one.”

Dani turned to her sister, she still remembered being sixteen. “Well, first off, she likes to be called Alex, not Alexis. Only her sister and mother call her Alexis. And no, Abigail, I haven’t see her. She is twenty-seven, has never been to any world in the Realm. Never seen a real horse. Never seen a real castle and is very, very smart.”

“She’s staying here, isn’t she? We’ve saved her a room, haven’t we?” George asked, looking up from his paper. His PDA suddenly visible.

“George! At the breakfast table!” Claudette shook her head at her husband of almost four hundred years.

A servant stepped forward offering his silver tray. Frowning, George let the man take the PDA.

“I will have it taken to your den, Sir.”

“Yes, thank you.” He looked up at his wife.

“We’re ahead of you, darling. The university had made arrangements for her stay in a hostel by the river. They’re packing people in three, four to a room. So of course, we shifted her here. After all, as Daniella’s guest, she will be at all the same events, dear.”

“She has the spare room next to mine, father.” Abigail said, her fine white fangs showing fully in her smile. “Mother said it couldn’t be just in pink, so we added some green pillows. I hope she likes it.”

“I’m sure she will love it. You best drink up.” George nodded. “Good. The girl has spunk. I’ve been reading her ideas about power generation, dumping fuses for conduit and her redesign of transfer relays. I can’t wait till the meeting next Wednesday. Perhaps, I’ll show her the ship yards. She’s going to love the-”

“George. Please. She’s here as your daughter’s guest, not yours.”

“I’m just happy she’s coming.” Daniella cut in, then grabbed another sweet bun.

“It’s a long way,” George said.

“I doubt her family wants her to come here.” Johanna looked at her older sister. “You invited her to that meeting on Kelsor Three, didn’t you?”

“No, I did not.”

“Why wouldn’t she want to come?” Abigail asked.

“It’s a very long way to travel, especially when you don’t know anyone.” George cut in.

“Probably for the best, big sister.” Johanna finished her goblet.

“A lot of those who live outside our borders, fear us, Abigail.” Claudette smiled at her youngest daughter.

“I know that, mother.” Abigail took a deep breath. “Willow said that when she met people from New India they stunk of garlic. They had washed in it. So she wouldn’t eat them. I thought that was stupid. I love garlic.”

“Well,” Daniella looked at her little sister, “Then we’ll make sure Alex doesn’t wash in garlic.”

“Why haven’t you seen her?” Johanna asked.

“Your tour of the city is all arranged.” Claudette delicately wiped her mouth.

“Video costs are prohibitive.” Daniella took a bite of her sweet bun, enjoying the feel of her teeth tearing the bread.

“Who will be meeting her at the port?” George looked up from his red cereal.

“You mean, *she* couldn’t afford it.” Johanna’s voice was pleasant as she reached for the strawberries.

Daniella was also reaching for the plate. They both grabbed it at the same time.

“I didn’t want to seem pretentious.” Daniella refused to let go.

“So bringing her here, isn’t pretentious?” Johanna’s pull increased.

“I’ve arranged a boat tour for the weekend before she leaves.” Claudette’s voice had an edge. Daniella could feel the physic pressure of her mother’s disapproval pushing against her thoughts.

“She’s coming as part of the symposium. I want her to enjoy her stay, something she’ll always remember.” Daniella held tight to the plate.

“Then you should have Fredrick for your chaperone.” Johanna sat back, her lips in a tight smile. She popped a strawberry into her mouth, placing the bowl next to her plate.

Daniella put her hands on her lap. She could feel the tips of her nails. The blood in her mouth tasted old and clotted. She wanted to spit.

“I thought Marcus was your chaperone?” George asked.

“Daniella?” Dani could hear the concern in her mother’s voice, feel it wrap around her mind’s defences.

Daniella turned her head, she could feel her mother’s gentle question. Though she no longer verbally expressed it, she was still offering to listen as she had done since that night that Daniella had returned from Alexandria. As her mother’s gentle fingers reached for her arm, Daniella gave her a faint smile.

“Yes, Marcus will be our chaperone.” Daniella nodded.

“He’s staying here, isn’t he?” George asked.

“Did you even looked at the guest list, George? It was emailed to you. Twice! ”

“Yes, father,” Daniella said, cutting off his stammering. “Marcus is staying here. And we’ll all behave suitably chaste. He’s staying on the floor below us.”

“Speak for yourself,” Johanna said with a laugh as she ate another strawberry.

Abigail giggled.

Chapter Four
Expectations

Taw River International Port of Entry, New Oxford, Planet:
Albion

“Your first time to a Realm World?”

Alex nodded at the voice of the man behind him. Perhaps he should put a sign on his back, *Yes, my first time to a Realm World. No, I don't want to know your speciality in detail.*

“Mine too.” The line moved forward.

Alex looked back, their shuttle had barely cleared the landing space when the next one parked and began offloading. He looked up, way up. Through the huge leaf shaped skylights the bright blue sky was beautiful. The air was fresh with the hint of something light and flowery. But the building—*was it for real?*

The support columns looked like huge white tree trunks, with vines growing up to the ceiling at least thirty meters above them. The tree design continued up to branches that spread out in delicate patterns to support the roof. The windows ran from floor to ceiling in huge six metre ovals, that reminded him of raindrops. There were actual plants along the walls beyond the receiving booths.

Around him, people looked confused. Many were blinking, though it had been recommended, most had not turned off their uplinks to get used to being disconnected before the shuttle ride down from the transports.

“I’m staying in the Peach Tree Inn. Sounds sweet, doesn’t it?” The dark man behind him spoke again.

Alex turned and took a good look at the man. Forties, black eyes set in a kind, dark face on a fit body. Spacers usually were pale and thin, which meant this guy either spent a lot of time dirt side or was first generation to do a lot of space travel. Or, he had money to pay for tanning and conditioning, natural or otherwise. His dark curly hair was cut short, but not military short. Civilian.

“I’m staying at the Taw River Boarding House.” Alex replied.

“Perhaps you’ll have a view of the river.”

Before Alex could answer they moved forward enough that he could see out the large windows beyond the processing booths. “Wow.”

“You can say that again.” The man offered his hand. “How rude of me. I’m Charlie Girard.”

Alex took the hand, “I’m Alex Hunter. Power mechanics and social interactions.”

“What?”

“Sorry, everyone’s always...”

“I know, I was ready to scream if I heard another discussion on anthropodenial.”

“Ah, Dr. Kwan and Dr. Tomich.” Alex affected a Nippon accent. “Yes, are we truly blind to the humanlike characteristics of other hominid species.”

With a smile, Charlie put on a South Paris accent. “I say, we are blind to the animal-like characteristics and behaviour that governs ourselves.”

“I hope I’m not spending the next three weeks with them.” Alex shook his head, “I might have to see how deep the Taw river is.”

“Well, if it gets bad for you, we had two cancellations. Just ask for the Department of AgriTerrian Studies Liaison Officers, Section 42, at the Peach Tree Inn.”

“Thanks.” Alex shifted his carry on bag and dragged his duffel forward.

“We’re always looking for bright young minds.” Charlie smiled and motioned Alex forward. “Here we go.”

Alex stepped through the style and handed the woman his papers and id card through the slot. The idea that no one here had neural implants was odd. The Realm Worlds, as they were officially known, had extremely strict rules on everything from jacks to tweaks.

The woman looked at his papers then took an intense look at him. She double checked something on her screen.

“You are Alexis R. Hunter, Lieutenant Retired?”

“Yes.”

“Please roll up your sleeve and place your arm in the slot.”

Alex looked down and noted a small door open, the symbol above it was a hand. He rolled up his sleeve and put his arm in, palm down. There was a sensation of cold on his wrist.

“Please remove your arm.”

Looking at his arm, Alex could see no difference. He pulled his sleeve back down.

The woman seemed to come to a negative conclusion, her lips pursed and with her right hand, hit a button. A man in an orange and black uniform walked over. His buttons were shiny gold, the trim in white, with lots of gold braid. He was wearing a hat similar to ones Alex had seen on service bots at hotels, right down to the braided strap under his chin.

The man looked over Alex’s papers, then at the woman’s screen. He then stood smartly at attention.

“*Mr. Hunter.*” he paused, one eye-brow raised. “Come with me please, *sir.*”

“Is there a problem?”

“Of course not, *sir.*” He motioned with a white gloved hand. Alex picked up his carry on and slung his duffel over his shoulder. Another man, younger, dressed in a white pants with an ice blue jacket with silver trim offered to carry his duffel.

“I’m good, thanks.” Alex watched the blue boy look from him to the guard.

“As you wish, *sir.*” The guard said. With a smart snap of his heels, the guard spun. Alex followed the man through the open side doors. Looking back he noticed Charlie. He nodded at Charlie’s wave.

Alex realized that Blue Boy was following him. The young man again offered to carry his bag.

“It’s okay, thanks.”

Stepping through the doors, Alex slowed. Just beyond the curve of the building there were a line of coaches, or maybe they were carriages. Either way they were all attached to horses. Actual horses. Perhaps they were cloned? Or robots? The officer had slowed and he hurried to catch up. Blue Boy was still following behind them.

The cool breeze turned his face as a scent so light, so amazing that it stopped him. Alex stood, taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes letting the floral scent fill his lungs.

“What *is* that?”

“What is what, *sir?*”

“That smell?” Alex opened his eyes and looked at the guard.

“Apple blossoms, *sir.*” The man snapped his heels together, a note of pride entering his words, “New Oxford is famous for our apples.”

“Apple blossoms.”

The guard motioned him forward and Alex followed.

They were walking down the wide side walk with the carriages now on their right. He looked at the horses, many of the horses looked back at him. Their large equine eyes seemed as filled with curiosity as he was. He could smell them, an animal scent that wasn't unpleasant. It was a musky odour that reminded him of going to the zoo on New Canada with his niece and nephew.

Many of the horses were dressed up with feathers attached to their harnesses atop their heads and some had little belts of bells on their feet. One horse kept jingling it's right front leg. Some of the horses were shaking their heads, the feathers flopping about. One yawned as they passed and he could see a piece of metal in its mouth. He wondered if it hurt.

Each carriage seemed more surreal than the previous one. What could the delicate creations be made of? Did people really ride in them? A man or woman dressed as smartly as the guard leading him, or the young man following, were waiting by each one. Some appeared to have three people, all in different, but similar dress. Their outfits colours and trim matching their carriages.

Ahead of them a woman stood on the wide side walk her back to them. She was only a centimetre or two shorter than Alex and she was wearing low heeled boots. He ran a eye over her figure. Her hair fell down her back in a thick braided rope of blond hair with red highlights. *Don't go there, Alex, remember the last red head!*

He liked her shape. She didn't have a the freakish wasp waist that needed a titanium re-enforced spine. And her legs weren't two thirds of her body. He hated spider limbs, that's what Louis had called them. Too bad they were in vogue.

And her legs and hips were, well, not thick from super defined muscles.

She turned and he was pleasantly surprised by the natural appearance of her cleavage. Alex slowed, nearly bumping into Blue Boy.

The woman was speaking into a wrist com and as they neared, she looked at him without modesty. He felt more than a spark of interest, but pushed it away, he was meeting the professor. With no genetic mods, he should look old. *Where was Professor Roche?*

The guard stopped and again stood smartly at attention. *I'm glad those days are behind me*, Alex thought.

There were at least a dozen more carriages ahead of them, but he couldn't see an old man near any of them.

"Have to go, Abigail." The woman said.

"Lady De La Roche," the guard spoke clearly, "I present, Mr. Alexis R. Hunter, Lieutenant, retired."

Alex looked at the woman. *Professor Roche's wife? Daughter?*

The woman looked from him to the guard.

"Mr. Alexis R. Hunter," The guard motioned to the woman. "May I present, *Professor De La Roche.*"

"Ah...No." She said.

"I think—" Alex started.

"An error—"

"A misunderstanding."

They both looked at the guard. He stared straight ahead. A slight curl at the edges of his mouth.

Daniella looked Alex up and down. She put him at about five foot eleven. He was looking at her, his large dark blue eyes filled with confusion. She stepped forward, holding out her hand. "I *am* Lady Daniella De La Roche, Professor at New Oxford University."

Instead of kissing the back of her hand, he took it in an awkward shake. His hands were warm and a flush had come to his face, Dani could feel heat in her own face.

“Alex Roy Hunter, author of the paper on Inter-species Waste Management Conflicts Based on Biology and, ah, Societal Misunderstandings.”

They both smiled.

“I am pleased to finally meet you in person, Alex.” *Social misunderstandings, that’s an understatement.* Dani motioned Alex toward the waiting carriage.

“I’ll take those now, sir.” Blue Boy said stepping forward and holding out his hands. Dani saw Alex blush again as he handed over his duffel and carry on.

“We’ll get the rest of your luggage later.” Dani said as a woman dressed in white, ice blue with silver and lace opened the carriage door and Dani without any effort was up and in the open carriage.

“No.” Alex looked at the woman. Was she a footman? Were they still called footman when they were a woman? She motioned him forward.

“No?” Dani asked.

“I don’t have any more luggage.” Alex looked down at the tiny flimsy looking step barely large enough for the ball of his foot. He had an image of slipping and landing on his ass. The ‘foot-woman’ gently took his elbow and guided him forward. He gripped the hand hold and stepped into the carriage, it rocked. As he sat the ‘foot-woman’ closed the little door and snapped up the foot step. With nearly the same grace as Dani, the woman was up in front. She wasn’t the footwoman, but the driver. The young man riding in back must be the footman. With a clicking sound they were off.

The two white horses pulled out and set a smooth pace along the wide avenue. Dani tapped her wrist PDA. Alex seemed to be trying to see everything at once. His eyes were wide, his face full of wonder as he looked from the stone buildings, plantings and boulevards of trees in flower.

Her mother didn't respond to her query, so she tapped her father's id.

"This is amazing. It's like some history vid, or D&D game vid come to life." Alex turned to her, his cheeks red with another blush. "I'm sorry. Thank you for picking me up. I really wasn't expecting that, I mean you didn't have to—that bird just went onto the road and shi-*pooped!*"

Dani looked over. "Yes, geese will do that. They'll also chase you."

"Geese are allowed to—they're flying!" Alex was looking up as the geese flew over the road. "Are they programmed to do that?"

"Programmed? They're wild geese, they do what they want. And a lot of it, more even than the swans."

"Wild geese." He said quietly as if the idea was almost beyond belief. Alex leaned forward and to the right, to see past her. A smile of pure wonder spreading across his face. Dani found herself smiling as well. She turned to her right as they crossed the Taw River. Swans swam lazily upon the water, they're beautiful necks arched.

"Are they wild too?"

"Yes. They'll spend the summer here and then fly down to Bridgeport before crossing to Summerland. Actually, the marshes south of the city. That's where most of them spend the winter."

"That's beyond G1, beyond S.E.A., That's..."

"Yes, I guess it is kind of wow."

“Wow.” Alex sat back, his mouth saying ‘wow’ silently. He noticed her tapping her wrist electronic assistant. The little gold band was delicate, ethereal, just like the carriage.

“Dad, so great to have caught you. I’m heading up with Alex. *He’s* travelling very light.”

Alex looked at her, a mischievous smile on his face. Then his attention was switched to the river that they were now travelling next to. He was staring, amazement on his face at a barge being pulled along by two horses. They were walking along one behind the other, a young boy sat on the back of the first one. He was playing a silver flute. It flashed and sparkled like the water.

“That’s just like a vid. Can you hear that?”

Dani, smiling, nodded, half listening to her father.

“Yes, that’s what I said. Please make sure Marcus and the others are expecting us.”

“Guess I should have sprung for at least one vid conference before coming.”

“It’s okay. Not a problem.” Oh, *Blood!* She’d have to call the seamstress and the spa...no most of the men she knew loved the spa. Perhaps the mani-pedi...she looked at his hands. They were strong and masculine, a pianist’s hands. Dani blushed, she always had a thing for hands. “I’m sorry, what was that.”

“The Taw River?”

“Yes, we just crossed over it.”

“Will we be at the boarding house soon?”

“This,” Dani smiled, “mix up doesn’t stop you from being my guest, Alex. As such, my family and I couldn’t have you staying anywhere but with us.”

“Thank you, but you don’t have to put yourself out.”

“Not at all. Besides, they reassigned your bed weeks ago. We have almost an extra three thousand guests coming

in. Thanks to the Hominid Trade section of the Summit. In the last three months support for the Summit and Symposium has risen, both here and abroad. Your Hominid Federation of Star Systems is encouraging trade in technologies..." Dani realized that Alex had toned her out. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's my fault. I've been stuck on the *Volcana* for three weeks. There was nothing but talk about trade and science. The science of trade. Trading science and tech. And the scientists. The debates, the discussions. I was in a room with these seven other guys, unfortunately, non of them were into my geek, so..."

He motioned with his hands. He was pushed back as the horses picked up the pace.

"Your, geek?"

"You know, what we, my paper? Power plants. Recycling. Engines."

"Yes. And my father is very excited to meet you. I should warn you, his *geek* is engine power systems. Your paper on cycling feedback and the use of negative resistant solid state to replace variable state liquid crystal had him chewing his own arm. I'm really worried he's going to ambush you and drag you off to his lab."

"Chewing his own arm?" Alex asked, *drag me to his lab?*

"It just means he's very excited."

"So where do you live, Dani?"

"At Castle Cor." Dani pointed up at the castle still miles off.

Alex looked up. He looked way up. Rising up over the city of New Oxford a huge black edifice crouched over the valley. Alex could see what looked like hundreds of red eyes and mouths with white teeth staring down at them.

"Bwahaha."

“Excuse me?” Dani asked, surprised at Alex’s suddenly pale face. She touched his arm and for a moment the image of a strange creature with no hair, pointed ears, long finger nails and exaggerated fangs was in his mind, but she could get nothing else. It was as if she’d caught the image just before plopping into pudding. Dani removed her hand. Her stomach tight at her sudden feelings of discomfort, but she smiled at Alex.

“I should tell you a little about my family. My little sister is very excited to meet you...”

Chapter Five

Introductions

Castle Cor, Planet Albion, Realm

“Did you see, *Alex*?” George said to Thomas, his personal secretary. “Did you see *him*?”

“Indeed, Sir. I shall inform Sir Marcus, of Daniella’s imminent arrival with our guest.”

“Yes, of course, but you will not, I mean, we should...” George raised an eyebrow as he struggled to keep to a smile from his face.

“Sir, I would not dream of interfering with the natural order of things.”

“Good man.” George struggled to dislodge his smile. “You do not think any of the staff know, do you?”

“I am sure more than half, by now, Sir.” Thomas stopped by the door. “I will make arrangements with your tailor at once.”

“Blast, what about his room?”

“I doubt little can be done about that now, Sir. But I will check with Mrs. Findley.”

“Good, good. You’d best send in Rupert on your way out.” George found himself again chuckling. “Oh, and Thomas. I know I promised Claudette and Daniella, but perhaps we should look into *Mr.* Alexis Hunter’s background?”

“Very good, Sir.”

Rupert, his valet, entered as George headed into his dressing room.

“You seem pleased, Sir?” Rupert said as he helped his Lord on with his coat.

“Things have gotten off to an exciting start, Rupert.”

“Yes, Sir. Lady Daniella’s guest will be arriving soon.”

George noticed the smile on Rupert’s face. Blast, if Marcus found out.

“We are all looking forward to the introductions.”

George, looking in the mirror, let his smile grow. It would be easier to pry state secrets from the staff than the sex of Daniella’s guest. Heading down the stairs to the library, George took his wife’s hand and kissed it passionately.

“What has gotten into you, George?” Claudette laughed as George spun her on the stairs.

“Your beauty.” Taking her arm, they walked down the stairs together.

“Do you think, Alexis will open Daniella’s eyes? Do you think she will be okay staying here? Oh, George, maybe we are wrong. I mean that poor girl, she is not going to be expecting any of this. And Daniella, knowing her, it has not even occurred to her to tell poor Alexis, to ask her if she even wants to stay. And what about what happened on the Isle of Glass? Madeline’s arm? Her report? Why won’t Daniella tell us?”

“She will tell us when she is ready.” George said, holding his wife’s hands and her gaze. “As for Alex, well, I believe Daniella has already been surprised.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Marcus, what a beautiful bouquet.” George said as they entered the Library. Abigail was sitting, trying to hide her excitement as Claudette took a seat next to her youngest daughter.

Sir Marcus stood, bouquet in hand and George felt a momentary stab of guilt, but it vanished as Johanna entered the room and Marcus barely noted her. *If only he could see past Daniella.*

The downstairs butler, Ms. Freemont, stood in the doorway. “Lady Daniella De La Roche and Lieutenant Alexis Hunter, retired.”

Daniella walked in, the young man at her shoulder. It was clear he was a tad overwhelmed. George could not keep the edges of his mouth down as the ticking of the mantel clock became the loudest sound in the room.

‘Father!’ Daniella’s mental yell broke the tension.

“Alex, we are very happy to have you stay with us.” Claudette was up and stepping toward the young man. “I’m Claudette, Daniella’s mother.”

“Lady De La Roche, I’m very pleased to meet you.”

“Marcus brought you flowers!” Abigail jumped and pointed to the bouquet Marcus was holding.

“You must be Abby. I’ve heard lots about you.” Alex glanced at the man dressed in a military uniform, his cheeks red. Alex was pretty sure his were a darker shade.

“We thought you were a girl!”

Alex was nodding, “I thought Dani was a man...an eighty-seven year old man.”

“I am Daniella’s father, you may call me George.”

Alex felt a tingle and tightening behind his eyes when he shook hands with George.

As Marcus stepped forward Abigail took the bouquet from Marcus and handed the collection of orchids and lilies to Alex.

“They were bought for you after all. What is wrong with giving a man flowers?”

Johanna laughed. “We will talk about that later. Hello, I am Johanna, Daniella’s other sister.”

“Hi.”

“And this is Sir Marcus Kaherdin, who volunteered to be your chaperone.” Abigail cut off Marcus’ self-introduction, as she pushed him forward.

“Hello and thank you.” Marcus’ handshake was a little too firm.

“You do not smell like garlic?” Abigail cut in as she was activating her wrist PDA. “Alex is a guy!”

“Abigail!” Claudette snapped.

“Well, Marcus, your fears of two weeks of holding shopping bags was unfounded. Just think, you will be able to take Alex here to the clubs. Maybe even down Miller’s Road.” Johanna smiled wickedly at her sister. “Perhaps you two could see a show.”

Daniella’s face went white then dark.

“Alex is my guest Johanna, not to mention a respected engineer in his own right. How dare you—”

“Johanna. Daniella. Enough.” Claudette’s voice was iron. “Alex has just had a long journey, a very long journey. He needs to freshen up before lunch. As Johanna has pointed out *in her own way*, we have some plans to shuffle.”

“I will take him!” Abigail had a smile from ear to ear.

Alex started at the fangs that had appeared in Abby’s mouth. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. They were all staring at him.

“I am sorry, Alex,” Abigail said, her hand going to her mouth. Her voice was soft, her eyes reddening. “I did not mean to frighten you.”

“Startled,” Alex managed to get out. “As your mother has said, its been a long journey and I’m actually more tired

than I thought. I would be honoured if you showed me to my room.”

Abigail’s smile was tentative. Alex offered her his right arm. She smiled again, fangs and all from ear to ear. Taking his arm she led him through the door.

As the door closed a very loud, ‘*George!*’ could be clearly heard in the hallway.

“Did father know?”

“Dani, I mean Daniella commed him on the way here. When we were in the carriage.” Alex tried to ignore the fangs. They were like Cat teeth, looked just like them. But he kept hearing Theresa’s voice, *Vampires*.

Abigail’s smile turned into a giggle. Alex was smiling as well. They stopped at a huge elevator and Abigail hit the button for the fifth floor.

“Am I in a tower?”

“No, sorry. All the tower rooms were already booked. And Keith, that’s Lord Keith Morgan, they are Dark Lords from Olwyn, he took the best one. On the north side. So he could set up his telescope. He wants to be an astronomer when he grows up. Of course, that will not happen until he is old.”

“What do you mean, until he’s old?” They were walking down a wide well lit hallway. Everywhere was art of one sort or another. The wood work, the ceilings, all were ornate in a crazy over the top history vid sort of way.

“You really do not know anything, do you?”

“This is my first time on any Realm world, Abby. All I have to go on are stories and most of them aren’t very nice. I know they can’t be true, or the symposium wouldn’t be happening.”

Abigail stopped in the corridor and faced Alex.

“What kind of stories?”

“Just the kind with Vampires in them.” Alex tried to smile.

“Oh, well, that makes sense. We are Vampires of course.” Abby laughed.

They were nearly eye to eye. At sixteen, Alex could see the woman that Abigail would become. Her dark auburn hair, large mauve eyes and full mouth was framed in a heart shaped face. He didn't envy George or Claudette.

Abigail's gaze was intense. Alex again felt that feeling of tightness behind his eyes. Theresa's words suddenly ran through his head, *Vampires, Alexis...long toothed psychopath...*

“And you came here...anyway. Wow.”

“Yes.” Alex blinked.

“Sorry, but your head is weird.”

“What?”

“I just took a look, that's all. You should not even have noticed. I need to practice more. We are here.” Abby pushed open a door the size of an airlock. She giggled. “This is your room.”

Alex followed her into a room bigger than the largest apartment he'd ever been in. The opulence of the room wasn't just in it's size but also in the ornate furniture. From the sitting area chairs to the side tables, everything looked very expensive, historic and big, especially being that everything in the room was a shade of pink, with more lace and frills then he thought possible. The walls were a cream with dark wood trim. There were two fireplaces right out of a fantasy game, with real cut and split wood stacked beside them.

The huge four poster bed had a larger footprint then most personal transports he'd driven in. *Was there a bed size past king?* Then again, he'd never actually seen a king sized bed.

Lacy pillows were piled to the middle of the bed. The posts were draped in metres of material, all trimmed in more lace. Everything was in pink or rose or 'lightish red'

as Louis would call it. Lacy pink throws covered the chairs. A pink chair cover was on the desk chair and the blotter was pink to match.

There was four huge matching carved wardrobes. An ornate chandelier in the central area and curved lights for reading or whatever were placed about the room. The ceiling was arched upwards at least four metres with amazing trim and paneling. Painted around the ceiling, above the trim where the wall curved, was a mural. The walk in bathroom was actually the same size as his last apartment, the one he'd shared, with two other people. The bath was large enough to drown in. There was a separate shower that could easily fit six people. The shower area was bigger than his kitchenette had been. The whole bathroom was tiled. A large pink robe hung behind the door. He noted the drain in the floor. *Better for clean up after exsanguination?*

Abigail hadn't actually stopped talking since they'd entered the room. Alex tried to keep up, as Abigail went on about dogs and cheese and flatulence and not going too near the duck pond because of brie, and something about cottage cheese. And a Mrs. Findley would fix the pillows and we really did think you were a girl and just ask her any question. Anything at all.

"Abigail, what do you mean when you said you just took a look?"

"In your head." Her smile was faltering as she opened the wardrobes. "Where's your clothes?"

"Are you a telepath?" Alex felt the hair on his body rise. *Great telepaths*, he made a note to pick up some migraine medication.

"Yes, all Vampires are. But we are not like homo sapiens telepaths. They are open, we are closed. Past four feet, I can

not get anything.” She swung open the last armoire. His suit jacket, two pairs of pants and three shirts had been hung up. The rest of the six feet of space was empty. “Where is the rest of your clothes, Alex? Did they lose your suitcases? Are they coming later? Where are your shoes? Whose your favourite designer? Do you have clothing designers?”

“Hm-hmm.” Came from the doorway.

Both Abigail and Alex looked over. Marcus was standing in the doorway coughing into his hand.

“Abigail, your mother requires your presence in the dining room.”

“Thank you, Sir Marcus.” Abigail turned to Alex and gave a little bow, then spoke slow and carefully, “I will see you at lunch, Alex.” With that she walked sedately to the hall, once past Marcus she let out a loud squeal and they could hear her run off.

Alex stood for a moment relishing the silence.

“My apologies for Abigail.”

“Not needed, I have a younger sister. Well, she used to be four years younger than me, now she’s older than me.”

Marcus tilted his head then looked at the contents of the armoire. “You do not have formal wear?”

“I have a jacket?” Alex looked around the room then back at Marcus. “I wasn’t expecting...is there anyway for me to, I mean, I thought I was staying at the boarding house and...”

“To refuse the hospitality of any person of the Realm is an insult, but to refuse the hospitality of a Lord of the Realm is a grave insult not just to the Lord but to all.”

“I was just...” Alex took a deep breath and slowly let the air out as he ran both hands through his hair. “Okay. No, I have no formal wear. A lunch, or two with Dani, that was all I was expecting.”

“Then Daniella will still get to do some shopping with you. As guests of the De La Roche’s you will be attending the formal dinners, the first of which, is tonight.” Marcus watched Alex’s face pale. “I am afraid that Daniella, in her enthusiasm has quite an itinerary planned for the next three weeks.”

“Right. Of course.” *Because nothing can be simple.*

“Lunch will be ready in twenty minutes. I will wait for you in the hall. You have ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes for what?”

“To freshen up and change to your,” Marcus gave the armoire's contents a disapproving look, “jacket.”

Marcus closed the door. Alex looked around the room. He took another deep breath and let it out. He walked to the double doors that led to a huge balcony. It was right across from the hall door.

Through the large mullioned glass squares he could see New Oxford and the two rivers that flowed through the city. The Taw River looped north. The New Thames looped south and ran, according to the visitors guide, almost a thousand miles before it emptied into the South Sea. The rivers never actually touched. Obviously there had been a Thames River somewhere else. *Old Earth? New Earth? Was Thames someone famous? Maybe he'd invented the screwdriver.*

Alex looked over to the other side of the room. There were elegant wooden book shelves with what appeared to be actual books, the two chairs, the desk. His heart sped up. His carry on bag was sitting next to the desk on a little table. He rushed over. It was empty.

“Frack!” Heart pounding he looked around the room. *Where would they have put the stuff from his bag?*

He ran to the armoire where his clothes hung. Except for his military issue socks and undies and a sweater that was a

gift from Theresa, the thing was empty. Then he looked back at the desk. *Was it that simple?*

He pulled open the drawer. Laid out neatly was his PC, phone and DataBox sitting on an universal charging plate, ready to go. The other half of the drawer held his papers, including the free travel guide to Albion and his id card.

Alex picked up his PC and tapped the screen. His security program waited for his code as it scanned his thumbprint. As far as he could tell, neither his project nor any of his files were missing, damaged, or copied.

He flipped his personal computer to recorder mode.

“Hi Theresa, William, Thomas and Diana. So I’m here on Albion. It’s beyond G-1. Wow is what they say here. Now, Theresa, William, I know you’re going to laugh. You kept telling me to do a vid link, not keep going through the uni servers. Take a look.”

He held up the camera and scanned the room.

“It’s like I’ve stepped into a historic vid but it’s real.” He walked to the mullioned doors and swung them open. “Theresa, I can already hear you saying you told me so. But, hey, the views from the dark and extremely large Dark Lord’s Castle is *wow*.”

He turned the recorder and took a tour around the room. “She wasn’t the only one surprised. Yes, I said she. Turns out Dani is not an eighty-seven year old man, but an eighty-seven year old Vampire. This whole place, especially Dani is so not-photonic. Everything feels old in a good way. Its weird, though, I keep expecting a *holo-guide* to pop up. Oh, and eighty-seven in Vampires years means you’re pretty five star. Love from big brother and uncle Alex.”

He clicked the PC off and put it back in the desk. *At least the power was the same.*

There was a sharp knock on his door.

“Coming!” He grabbed his sport coat and closed the armoire's doors.

Chapter Six

Lunch is Served

Castle Cor, Planet Albion, Realm

“It’s not funny, George.” Claudette said to her husband’s chuckle.

“You know he knows absolutely nothing about Vampires?” Abigail cut in. “Nothing.”

“Actually, it was funny.” Johanna smiled, then laughed. “I mean, the look on Marcus' face.”

That was it for George. He was gripping the edge of the table to keep from falling, tears running down his face. Abigail was giggling and Claudette was having trouble keeping the smile from her own face.

George was still laughing when Thomas handed him a tablet. George flicked it on. He tapped the screen. Claudette caught George’s sudden frown.

“George?” Claudette leaned over.

“It would appear that our *Mr.* Alex Hunter is whom he appears to be. And he travels extremely light. *That* comes from a military background.”

“Father!” Dani snapped. She had changed into a relaxed pant suit.

“Minister Clarion will be attending our dinner. She has security concerns.” George looked at his daughter. “And Clive is available at one. Dale has offered to be Mr. Hunter's valet.”

Daniella sighed. “Thank you, father. I did not think, did I?”

Claudette patted her daughter's hand as she leaned over his tablet. "It is all right—oh, that is interesting. No wonder he came."

"Six times." George remarked, "That's perseverance."

"What did he do six times?" Abigail asked.

Julianne, the family's head waiter, hemmed into her fist. They all looked up as Marcus led Alex into the private family dining room.

Two attendants immediately moved forward and pulled out chairs.

"Sit next to me, Alex!" Abigail patted the chair that an attendant had pulled out.

Alex, a nervous smile playing on his lips, sat between Abigail and Johanna.

"I told them how you have no clothes. Dad's made arrangements with Clive, that is his tailor. He is one of the best on Albion. He is going to fit you at one. That is one this afternoon. And Dale, that is Mr. Snider's dad, he is going to be your valet. He will get a bonus for that. And—"

"Abigail, child, breath. And yes, we have made arrangements for your wardrobe, Alex." Claudette smiled. "I am sorry about all the confusion."

"As am I, Alex." Dani said from across the table.

Marcus had sat next to her. He continued to scrutinise Alex's appearance with anything but approval.

Johanna turned and placed a hand on Alex's arm as she said, "Sometimes the big things slip my sister's mind completely. Like informing you that you are staying as the guest of royalty. Or that she is a woman. The little things, she tends to be good with. We are very happy you are here. Was there anything *you* were planning on doing while you were here, Alex?"

“Actually, yes. Mr. Williams from Saturn Systems, the Elite Industrialist, he’s holding a meeting on Thursday, next week. I’ve been trying to get to see him. Donald Phillips, from Military Procurement Services, has gotten me a display place on the floor and fifteen minutes with Mr. Williams.”

“May I ask why?” George asked.

“I’ve been trying to get interest going in my power plant redesign. Everyone says solid state is dead, its all liquid crystal and bio packs now, but negative resistant carbon has become so cheap that it doesn’t make sense to go with larger less efficient systems. I’ve managed to get into six tech symposiums, that’s how I met Donald Phillips and I’ve actually done a demo for Senator Charli Chow. She’s on the Senate Military Subcommittee.”

“Wow!” Abigail said, “I bet we could use your power plant stuff! Dad?”

“What about the harmonics issues, when you are talking carbon beyond a few millimetres?” George leaned forward.

“Harmonics are just as big a problem with liquid crystal, but nobody wants to admit it. Harmonics are another form of power, if you draw off the energy in static charges it becomes an asset. Especially when dealing with scrubbers. Going to conductive and negative conductive will give you more juice and more O₂ while lowering draw, and forget Bolovene, once carbon has built up it has no advantages. Instead use a conductive metal in a silica substrate, feed back the static charge—”

“That would create a negative charge. Can the silica handle it?”

“Yes. I’ve run it for forty days under low load and it worked fine, Then I ran it for fourteen days under extremely heavy load and it worked. I—”

“What are you two talking about?” Daniella asked.

“Power systems and environmental scrubbers, Dani. Have you been paying attention?” George had been nodding. “This heavy load, when did you test it?”

“You might have heard about it, the *Gigi*, we were hauling refugees.” Alex shrugged. The images that flooded his mind drained his enthusiasm. Johanna pulled her hand away.

“That is when Alex lost his commission, father.” Daniella said.

“The *Gigi*? Never heard of it.” George looked from Daniella to Alex.

“Sorry, that’s what us grunts called her, we also call her the Battle Axe, but officially she’s the *Gufur Guāng*.”

“Did Gigi have lots of fighters on board?” Abigail asked.

Daniella was staring down at her plate, eyes wide. Alex had been on the *Gufur Guāng*! He could have died and she never would have known...

“Are you alright?” Claudette asked her oldest daughter.

Dani nodded.

“We know about the *Gufur Guāng*, Alex.” George’s voice had gone grave. “And we are all *very happy* you are here with us.”

“What happened to the *Gigi*?” Abigail looked from her parents to her sisters.

“Something that is not lunchtime conversation, Abigail.” Claudette’s use of her mother voice ended the topic. Abigail sighed.

Johanna, who’d pulled her hand from Alex’s arm, now placed her hand over his and gave it a squeeze. “More importantly, Alex, I am sure we can make sure you get your fifteen minutes with Mr. Williams.”

“Thank you. But there's no need. It’s all been arranged.” Alex said. “Just as long as I make it there in time to set up.”

All of them sat back as the servers came out with their first course. Alex watched them place goblets in front of each of the De La Roche and Sir Marcus. The thick crystal was beautiful and gave the liquid within the appearance of ruby.

As his waiter poured him a glass of wine, Alex noticed the smell. The coppery sweet scent was just suddenly there. Two trays of sliced fruit were placed on the table.

“To new friends.” George raised a toast.

Alex picked up his wine glass. When they clinked he noticed how much thicker and redder their drinks were. He smiled and drank even as the smell closed his throat. *Vampires, Alex*, he could hear Theresa saying, *Vampires*.

As the first course was placed in front of them, Alex kept his eyes focused on his leafy greens and the shrimp in some sort of fruit glaze that topped his salad. He tried not to see what topped the greens of those around him. The coppery smell thickened. *Just like on the South Tahoe, Alex, you’ve worked with raw eaters before*, he reminded himself.

“Not hungry, Alex?” Sir Marcus asked from across the table as the main course of very rare beef was placed in front of them.

“Space lag. My body thinks it’s three am.”

“Ah.” Marcus’ smile made it clear he did not believe Alex.

Chapter Seven

Trappings

Castle Cor, Planet Albion, Realm

Dani rubbed the bridge of her nose. She wanted to wash her face but then she'd ruin her make up. Guilt tugged at her for leaving Alex alone with Lord Glendon. No doubt the old Vampire was putting Alex into a coma brought on by boredom. She just needed to breath.

It was all very fine for her father and mother, and of course the ministers to put together a three week Technology Symposium and a two week Trade Summit. What she really wanted was to sink her teeth into the throat of the idiot who'd decided to combine them. She felt like she could barely breathe in the the bloody dress. Why had she picked Vanya instead of one of Te Liao's pants suits? She tried to take a deep breath.

Why had she picked Alex! *Why!* Dani leaned on the counter and looked at herself in the mirror. You know why you picked *her*.

"How hard could it be, Dani, to show them all how capable you are of dealing with people from outside the Realm? You're not an isolationist. *No*. You see the big picture." Right. It was supposed to be all so simple. Alex was to come here, be suitably impressed and voila. See, everyone? I'm more than capable of taking on the role of a

Dark Lord. More than capable of bridging the growing gap between the Realm Worlds and the rest of the Human universe. They didn't even call themselves Humans anymore. They, *we are*, all Hominids now.

Dani looked down at her nails. Great, on top of everything else, she'd chipped her pinky. *How do you chip fakes?* She was surprised the knock at door hadn't come sooner.

"My lady, is all well?" Madeline, her personal maid, asked from the hall.

Dani turned and opened the door. "I've chipped a nail."

"With me, my Lady." Madeline took her arm and they glided through the hallway past the west door out of the main kitchen. Madeline ducked them into a little sitting room, it's patio doors open, for the serving staff to catch their breaths and takes their breaks.

Dani sat down off to the side, tucked behind the door, out of the way. She watched the servers coming and going. Envious of those sneaking out to the patio for a quick imbibe of cannabis or a sip of wine. Turning her head, Dani could hear bits of the conversations from the kitchen behind her.

For a moment a woman's voice rose above the cacophony of kitchen sounds. "I'm sorry, but how does someone not notice? I mean, I know a man when *I* see one."

There was laughter. What ever else was said Dani missed it, but she knew it was insulting. She shifted, cheeks red, who wouldn't be talking about her gaff?

Twenty-eight times in the last two years she'd communicated with Alexis R. Hunter regarding the various papers he'd written or his rebuttals. All she would have had to do was read his complete profile on the uni server. At least he had an excuse, her own profile was restricted for

security reasons. Communicated? Be honest, Dani, one or two lines of criticism or support was not communication.

“My Lady.” Madeline was back, the castle manicurist with her. The lady sat on a chair next to Dani and immediately slid Dani’s finger into the little nail box. Dani felt pressure on her finger. When the box was removed the nail was perfect.

I could have done that, Dani thought. “Thank you.”

“Of course, my Lady.” The woman gave a short bow then vanished up the servants stairs.

“*Did you see him?*” The words were clear as they drifted through the open door to the patio.

“Couldn’t miss him. I’m not that old.”

“He certainly cleaned up well!”

“*We’re all the same to her, dears!*” Laughter drowned out the rest.

“My lady, ignore—”

“The truth? That’s never a smart thing to do, Madeline. You’ve told me that many times.”

Madeline raised one eyebrow.

“Remember why I brought him here? To impress my parents. Well, they are definitely impressed. You know I didn’t even ask him why he came, why he said yes? It didn’t even occur to me to ask him, Madeline. Johanna asked him. You know why he’s here? To meet up with some industrialist.”

Madeline reached forward and held Dani’s hands. “This is not the time or place for this conversation, my Lady. And even fake nails can only take so much flexing. Right now you must put all that aside. You are Lady De La Roche, next in line to be Dark Lord of Black Country, the Northern Isles and all of Exeter.”

“And if I fail to rise to the occasion?” Daniella looked through the doors at the crowd.

“I doubt that eleven million people could be wrong.”

Daniella caught sight of Alex. Lord Glendon still had him cornered by the west fireplace. She could still smell his masculine yet nervous scent. “You’re wrong, Madeline, we haven’t reached eleven million yet. We’re still ten and counting.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Madeline?” Dani asked as they stepped out of the sitting room, her personal maid at her side.

“Yes, my Lady?”

“He does clean up well, doesn’t he?”

Madeline smiled. “Yes, my Lady.”

Chapter Eight

Perspective

Castle Cor, Planet Albion, Realm

Entering his room, Alex just wanted to drop. Thank Old Earth, Claudette had shown up. It had felt a little awkward to be sent to bed at the same time as Abigail. At least she'd had a fan to cover her yawns.

“Sir.”

Alex jumped. “Frack, Dale. You nearly scared the reason out of me.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Alex, call me Alex.” Dale was behind him, sliding the tuxedo jacket off.

“Of course, sir.” Dale said as he took the cummerbund off Alex's waist.

“This outfit is sleek, isn't it?” Alex started to undo his buttons as Dale tisked and took his right hand to remove the cufflinks.

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you have a tuxedo, Dale?” Alex had never heard of cufflinks that weren't a form of a communicator.

“Three, sir.”

“Gee-1. That must have cost you a fortune.”

“My wardrobe is covered by my employer, sir.”

“Medical? Education?”

“Yes, sir.” He had Alex’s shirt off and was folding it. Alex was feeling the buzz he’d picked up from the hundred year old hand made whiskey Lord Glendon had plied him with. But the old guy was right, the stuff was ‘*civilised*.’ He kicked off his shoes and sat heavily on the edge of the high bed. When the room stopped wobbling, he took his trousers off and lay back on the bed.

“Kind of like being in the military. How late will the party go to?” Alex looked up at the four posts. There was something different about the room.

“Three a.m., sir.”

“What time is it now?” Alex yawned, again and rubbed his face.

“Nine-thirty, sir. You’ve been up for approximately thirty-one hours.”

“Oh. Here I thought I’d been run over by a transport. Do the vampires really drink blood, Dale?”

“Yes, sir.” Dale hung up Alex’s tuxedo.

“I mean human blood?” Alex looked around the room.

“Yes, sir. Would you like a bath or a shower, sir?”

Sometime since he’d changed into his new tuxedo for supper and just getting back everything pink and frilly had been removed. The new colours were a royal blue with a dark brown trim.

“Shower sounds great. The pink is gone.”

“Yes, sir. Mrs. Findley was able to see to your room after supper.”

“About the blood thing, Dale...”

Dale came out to get pyjamas for Alex to change into after his shower, but his charge was already asleep. After pulling off Alex’s socks, Dale covered him with the blankets, then turned off the steam shower.

The hidden door opened and Thomas entered with Alex's PC and DataBox.

"Any problems?" Thomas looked over at the sleeping man.

"None, sir." Dale replied taking the PC and DataBox and placing them in the desk in the same position they had been before their removal.

* * *

In her own room, Abigail was just coming out of her shower. Her com beeped faintly. Her maid, Eleanor looked toward the hidden door, but Nana, didn't appear. She handed Abigail the tiny device and began gently brushing the girl's wet hair.

"Abby! He's so cute!" Olyona Morgan giggled, her voice tinny from the small com speaker.

Abby's reply was a hushed giggle and, "I know!"

"I bet your sister likes him!"

"She didn't even notice he was a guy! Besides, she's too old for him!" Abby giggled. "He's only twenty-seven, that's eleven years difference between us."

"Ten for me!"

The door swung open and Nana's stern form appeared. "It's time for bed, young lady."

"Bye, Oly."

"Night, Ab!"

Nana sighed. This was Abby's third crush. In eight months she would be seventeen years old. Soon, very soon, Bonita Smith, would be unemployed. Retired to the cottage she had selected by the South Sea with a life pension. Bonita refused to cry as she hugged Abby. She shoed away Eleanor and took the com.

"Nana?"

"Yes, Abby?"

“What does it mean not needing kneepads to get a promotion?”

Eleanor and Nana both stopped and looked at each other. Eleanor covered her mouth with her hands and shook her head.

“Where and in what context did you hear that, child?” Nana’s voice was stern.

“Father and Thomas were talking. Thomas said that before losing his commission, Alex had made it to Lieutenant without using kneepads. I thought it was a compliment?”

“It is, dear. It just means he did not...” she looked to Eleanor, but the girl wore her usual blank expression and shook her head. “He didn’t curry favour with his superiors or those...in a position to help him...in an inappropriate way. He earned his rank through skill.”

“Being smart.” Eleanor cut in.

“Applying himself.”

“Eating well.” Eleanor offered.

Nana stopped tucking in Abigail and looked at the maid. Eleanor dropped her gaze.

“Yes, quite.” She finished tucking Abby in. “Alright, lights out. Sweet dreams, Abigail.”

* * *

Dani walked slowly up the stairs, she had kicked off her shoes and was carrying them in her right hand. Madeline had appeared as usual from nowhere.

“Madeline?”

“Yes, my Lady?”

“Could you please, request a *very* private meeting with Sir Frederick?”

“Of course, my Lady.”

Chapter Nine
Chalice Lake

Castle Cor, Planet Albion, Realm

Alex smiled nervously as he ate breakfast. He had become used to the coppery smell. His body was still dealing with space lag and he'd forced himself up at five am. He needed to shift his body's rhythms to local time so he'd be at his best for Thursday. With all the security concerns he was surprised to be allowed a morning run. Dale had even given him a paper map.

He'd felt awkward, bringing up the blood thing to Dale. But they weren't drinking fruit juice! Who was the blood coming from? Or was it synth? And the meat, usually beef, true, but it was *raw*!

Not that it bothered him. Alex reminded himself that he had and most likely would again work with Thisska and Poks. Even felonoids, when he'd had too. Dale had explained only that the 'bite' was reserved and not something to be belittled. His attitude implied to be bitten was an honor.

Abby, her friend Oly beside her, went on excitedly about the ride they'd planned.

"We have to go today, Alex!" Abby said. "Tomorrow the Symposium starts. Then you're gone home! If we don't go today we won't get a chance!"

Alex had found Dale with riding gear waiting for him in his room. Then he'd walked down to the barns with Dani and Marcus. The flagged trail was a good half kilometer from the castle, yet, he'd been assured still part of the estate. Dani explained that the whole estate was one entity through the growth of the silica based dura-crete. Alex was stunned, the *cost!* The *centuries!*

By the time they'd reached the setting out area, between the guests going riding and the chaperones, there were at least seventy people. The horses had been beautiful from a distance, but close up they were intimidating, somehow even more alive and fantastical. By the time Alex finished his first riding lesson he was sore and more than half the riders had gone.

As they ate a picnic luncheon, Abby and Dani argued about the route. Both Morgans had joined them. Keith, Lord Keith, Alex reminded himself and his sister, Abby's best friend, Lady Oly. Unfortunately, Oly wasn't her actual name, but try as he might, Alex couldn't remember the girls proper first name.

He'd made the mistake of addressing her as Lady Morgan when they sat down to eat. The two girls had burst into giggling then, as they ate cucumber and cress mini sandwiches. They gave him a crash course in Realm etiquette at about light speed times seven.

The horses were waiting, saddled. He was the last one to mount and then they were off. Dani rode quietly beside him, her only words were to correct his seat in the 'Australian' saddle. Alex had been to Australia on his first tour, it had been a dry, arid world. There was lots of political tension, but there'd been no horses and no saddles.

But the ride! The land was beautiful in a wild, crazed green way. They'd only gone a short distance along the

north trail, when Dani, realising his discomfort had told the younger more experienced riders and their chaperones that they were free to take the more advanced Woodpecker Trail. With whoops and hollers, the twenty some riders had been off. Abby's horse had reared and she'd waved. Then her horse had exploded into a gallop and she vanished in among the trees. Alex had no idea that the beasts could run so fast.

Dani and Marcus kept the speed slow as they took the Blue Butterfly Trail around Chalice Lake. There were beautiful stone and crete homes that they referred to as cabins. Through the trees and past the cabins, Alex could see squares floating on the water. Marcus explained the squares were called 'docks.' Groups of children played various games or swam, often leaping from them with squeals of delight as water splashed those still somewhat dry. The lake echoed with sounds of joy and laughter.

Alex wished he could bring Theresa, Diane and Thomas here. With the biological restrictions, he wondered if William would be allowed? *Weird*, he realized, there were so many places that as a stock or flat human, he wasn't allowed to go, yet here, in this verdant paradise, he was welcome.

Many adults were also enjoying the lake or hiking the trails. They also passed many riders on their own horses. Some of the horses were small and called ponies. As a white spotted one passed them, Alex had to wonder at their variation. Anyone, apparently on most Realm worlds could ride if they desired. Crossing the 'stem' on the horse bridge, Dani explained that Chalice Lake really did look like a cup. Netly Marsh spread from the east side of the lake for nearly three hundred miles with the river Taw running through a part of it. Power craft, except for the Rangers, were not allowed in any of the great marshes.

As they stopped on the bridge and looked out over the lake, Alex felt like he was in an old Earth history vid. None had ever smelled so amazing, nor had so many sounds. How, he wondered could the people of Old Earth have been so greedy and selfish to have taken all this from their decedents?

In the distance Alex spied a small red boat. Marcus called it a canoe. He seemed generally baffled by Alex's lack of experiences.

"What do you do for enjoyment, Alex?" Marcus asked.

"I game, role playing, mostly. D & D, S & S."

Both Dani and Marcus raised eyebrows.

"Dungeons and Dragons, Science and Starships. I do a lot of fencing, with swords."

"Really? Well we'll have to see if an opportunity comes up for a match at the Oxford Sports club." Marcus glanced at his wrist-com. "I am afraid we must pick up the pace. There is yet another formal dinner this evening."

Many trails, some for hikers only, ran through the whole area. Alex had learned to rise for the trot and how to turn. Bluebell, his horse, was gentle and forgiving.

And the people they'd met! No one, not a single one, from adults to children seemed in the least afraid of the Vampires. If anything, they were greeted like old friends, many asking after their parents, but most just waved.

Chapter Ten

Layers

Castle Cor, Planet Albion, Realm

Dani stood, looking in the full length mirrors. She was wearing Kalunna. The sun dress was a delicate Egyptian cotton hand printed in small rosettes along the bottom and bust line. The lace sown to the edges of the sleeves, and bust was spun silk with small pearls. Dipped silk, gossamer thin, spilled from the cuts running up the skirt. The back was longer than the front. Her sandals continued the pattern, the pearls catching the light upon her feet. She let out a long sigh.

Madeline shooed her maid away and helped her into a delicate lace knit sweater.

“The matter we discussed has been seen too. The time and place set.”

Dani felt her heart start racing. Her stomach clenched for a moment she was afraid she’d be ill.

“My lady?”

“I’m fine.” Dani turned as Madeline tapped her data assistant. The woman, only thirty-eight gave her a stern look. “Madeline. Thank you.”

“The cars are out front, my lady.”

* * *

Alex couldn't believe that anything could top his first three days on Albion. Being honest, he mused, most of it *was* a blur. He'd met more people *way* above his pay grade than he'd ever dreamed he would.

Bending over he touched his toes, trying to stretch the stiffness from his body. He eyed the tuxedo set out for this evening's Official Opening Dinner. Doing lunges, he stretched his inner thighs. It was five a.m. local, and their first engagement was at seven a.m. Dale was brushing his new 'casual' jacket. It was an actual soft hide called suede, with a texture so silky, Alex had assumed it to be synthetic.

The steam shower had loosened his muscles, but Alex had to admit he was looking forward to another visit to the spa. By the time they'd returned to the barn yesterday, he could barely walk. The evening meal had been difficult, sitting had stiffened his muscles and he'd started yawning before the final course.

"Dale?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you ride?"

"Of course, sir. As a valet, I must be ready for all contingencies."

Alex wondered what sort of contingencies happened when riding. Perhaps, valet, didn't mean what he thought it meant.

"The other night, you said that the Vampires actually drink blood, *human* blood?"

"Yes, sir."

Alex looked at Dale.

"Synth blood?"

"*Never*, sir. We must hurry, the cars are out front." Dale had the light blue cotton shirt ready. "You must be at the school for six thirty, Sir."