

FUTILE FANTASY CREATIONS PRESENT

OUTCAST

THE CHERRY WROXFORD STORY

In the nation of Kastanie, many decades ago, an elderly king had been overthrown and then hung for blasphemy having claimed that whoever created this world was quite clearly drunk at the time. The fated monarch had merely been pointing out how a man finally acquires the knowledge of how to change the world for the better when he's too old and frail to do anything about it. His poor way of stating that youth is wasted on the young, costing him dear. Had he been given the chance to explain his comments, he'd have gone on to make several valid points about how with age and wisdom gained over time, he'd thought of a way to tackle the problems facing the world. Instead, his body was thrown in a cheap coffin and catapulted off a cliff.

The point the king wanted to allude to was the fragile peace between three countries on the mainland, Auland, The Rothman Empire and Kastanie and the island nation of Araminta. All four nations were very secretive about their innovations and paranoid about espionage. All too often there were diplomatic incidents and the threat of war was forever looming large. Tensions between the nations had been high and their relationships strained for well over a century and nothing looked set to change any time soon.

The latest dispute was over Auland's acquisition of steam power. Araminta had kept their invention a closely guarded secret, flaunting their steam ferries in the face of the Auland people every time their ferries travelled between the two nations. The angry dispute that followed was only settled when Auland agreed to pay it's much richer and far more powerful neighbour a hefty sum of compensation. The aforementioned doomed king would have been keen to make the point that trading technologies was the way forward, thus ending the cycle of espionage followed by compensation. Araminta, however, would have been especially against this idea as being the most advanced of the four nations they doubted the other three had anything worth trading for anyway. As a result of this kind of arrogance, the other three nations resented them and a culture of secrecy had developed in the entire region.

Sadly, espionage and resentment were not the only disputes between these nations. They disagreed on border controls, ownership of waterways and pretty much everything their neighbouring nations did or planned to do. The most worrying dispute of all, however, was the heated disagreement that had raged for centuries over the Croxton Peninsula. The thin piece of land that joined Kastanie to the Rothman Empire was currently under the governorship of the Rothman people, something the Kastanie nation would never be happy about. For centuries this disputed region had been the cause of many a battle and numerous incidents of insurgency from the factions that lived within. Those who dwelled within the log cabins of the region were of equal Rothman and Kastanie descent and bad feeling between them was rife.

With the steam age dawning, all four nations were seeking to manipulate the new technology to create the ultimate weapon and give themselves the upper hand. Swords and shields, the current weapons of both choice and necessity looked far from being replaced any time soon, however. With tensions at a permanent high and new

disputes arising all the time, blacksmiths were doing a roaring trade, swords selling like proverbial hot cakes. Each homestead owning several, it's occupants in constant fear of a conflict coming to their door.

Had anyone bothered to listen to the warnings of the doomed king, maybe the disputes would have been settled via negotiations and the regions would have learned to trust one another and trade as a block, thriving together. Unfortunately for those who lived in the cobbled towns and cities of these nations, they did not.

East Dock, Ardenmouth, Republic of Auland.

Nobody saw it coming. Just like any other summer night on the dockside, everything was still. There was no more than a gentle breeze filtering from the sea and the moon was bright. To the seven guards on patrol that night, everything seemed to be in order. All was calm. Even the human freight, enslaved in the wooden, prison containers were silent. Knowing all too well that protest was a futile and often painful gesture, they'd rarely make a fuss and were resigned to whatever fate their slave master would bestow them. The men would almost certainly become slaves, while the women would either be entered into the seedy world of prostitution or merely sold to become wives. They hoped for the latter. The children would become forced adoptees to childless parents.

For these poor, captured souls, there was no point in fighting their fate. The few who had tried had been barbarically slaughtered before their peers as an example. Their only option was to accept the life they were given and try to survive it. Their spirit had been well and truly broken.

For the seven guards, this was the perfect shift to be working. The night shift carried with it an excellent salary and on a warm, relaxing summer night with nothing stirring, it was the easiest money they'd ever earn. Making simple patrols around the thin line of containers every now and again, hardly made for taxing work. Despite the simplicity of their job description, however, the seven guards took their job very seriously. Their boss, human trafficker and all round psychotic villain, Foxton Hamler was not a man to ever risk angering. Knowing the consequences would be extremely dire should any of the captives escape; they were all rigidly professional in their task.

The foreman that night, a 45 year old muscular, ex-soldier, Alvarez Dowd was especially regimented about his duties. Hailing from the neighbouring kingdom of Kastanie, where he spent twenty years as an army officer, he was very much a strict disciplinarian. He would set a timetable for the other six guards to follow and force them to follow it to the letter. If he said they had a ten minute break at midnight, they had ten minutes at midnight. Not nine or eleven minutes but ten. Not five to or five past midnight, but on the stroke of twelve sharp. Being an extremely accomplished fighter with a short, violent, temper, none of his men ever failed to comply with his orders. If they did then they might just feel the wrath of the sword he kept every faithfully in the scabbard at his side. Nobody argued, nobody answered back and nobody would ever dare dishonour his strict timetable. Until tonight. Standing with his back to the sea, facing the row of containers in which the slaves were housed, he held his timepiece in his hand and snarled. Seated on a row of crates behind him, five

of his men chatted and joked together, oblivious to the fact that their foreman was getting angry. Unable to see his face they recited amusing stories about their pasts, unaware that Alvarez's infamously short fuse was burning away quickly. As he watched the second hand rhythmically tick onwards around the face of his pocket watch, he gritted his teeth and breathed angrily through his nose. Looking increasingly agitated, he glared across the row of containers and back at his timepiece, time and time again expectantly. He despised being kept waiting and it didn't take him long to snap. Wearing a look of bitter rage, he spun around and barked at his five subordinates, his deep authoritarian voice startling them into paying attention.)

ALVAREZ: Where in the hell is he???

(Swiftly rising to their feet, the five guards all looked across to the containers opposite.)

ALVAREZ: It should take no longer than four minutes to make his round; he's been gone for six.

(He gestured to the guard in the centre of the five.)

ALVAREZ: Maurice, go and find him. Tell him to get back here right now!

(The guard nodded.)

GUARD: Boss!

(As he started to jog over to the crates, he glanced over his shoulder.)

GUARD: My name's Clive by the way.

(Alvarez merely raised a scornful eyebrow. He didn't care for his subordinates names and never even asked what they were. He didn't care whether your name was Clive, Albert or Humphrey, if you looked like a Maurice to him then that's what he'd call you. Realising it'd be unwise to anger the big man, the guard, Clive, offered no further protest and raced between the first two crates on the far left of the row. Shaking his head, Alvarez watched him dash into the pitch black gap between the two containers and then turned back to face the four remaining guards.)

ALVAREZ: Which one of you is on tea making duties next? I'm parched.

(His guards all looked to one another then back to Alvarez and spoke in unison.)

GUARDS: Clive!

(Alvarez smiled.)

ALVAREZ: Then when *Maurice* comes back, he can make us all a brew.

(He folded his arms and took a relaxed stance.)

ALVAREZ: During my days in the Kastanie army, we rarely used to drink tea, you know. We were stationed on this small island in the South Marlboro Sea, the tea always tasted like piss. We blamed the water but it didn't seem to matter how much we boiled it, it was always the same. Pungent as hell. We tried all sorts of things to improve matters but nothing seemed to work.

(He chuckled.)

ALVAREZ: Then one night we found out why. I was having trouble sleeping, what with the heat and all, and as I was laying there I saw my commanding officer climb out of bed. He was half asleep and mistook the boiling pot for his commode.

(The guards all laughed.)

ALVAREZ: Silly old sod couldn't see a thing without his glasses on. Turned out, he'd been pissing in our boiling pot every night for two years without even realising he was doing it.

(One of the guards shook his head as he chuckled.)

GUARD: That's absolutely disgusting.

ALVAREZ: Indeed. Anyway, if I tell you something tastes like piss, believe me, I know what I'm talking about.

(With that, he turned to face the containers again and his jocular disposition evaporated.)

ALVAREZ: What's going on? He should have at least come back round the first container by now!

(One of the guards sighed and started to walk toward the containers.)

GUARD: I'll go!

ALVAREZ: Wait!

(The guard stopped in his tracks and looked to Alvarez, as did his three comrades.)

ALVAREZ: People don't just disappear into thin air.

(He then drew his long sword from its scabbard.)

ALVAREZ: Ready your weapons, men. Something isn't right here.

(Immediately his men about turned and grabbed their swords from where they'd rested them against the crates. One of them mumbled to his work mate as he did so.)

GUARD: Sounds serious.

(The guard he'd spoke to spat into the sea and swiftly turned back towards the containers before replying.)

GUARD: I know.

(Seeing his subordinates armed and ready, Alvarez nodded and spoke in no uncertain tone, a dark scowl crossing his brow.)

ALVAREZ: Either those two have a death wish and are doing this to piss me off or someone's back there.

(A guard looked his way. He was visibly psyched up and eager to go.)

GUARD: What are we waiting for then? Let's kill the son of a bitch.

(Belying his hothead reputation, Alvarez calmly waved a hand towards the guard and slowly looked across at the containers and up into the sky. Wearing a thoughtful expression, he then lowered his head and spoke calmly across to his men.)

ALVAREZ: The moon is bright tonight. If we go walking over there into the darkness between the containers, we won't be able to see a thing until our eyes adjust. And if there *is* someone back there they'll have a perfect sight. We'd be sitting ducks.

GUARD: So... what then?

(Without acknowledging the question, Alvarez raised an eyebrow and folded his arms before loudly calling out towards the containers.)

ALVAREZ: Show yourself!!!

(He then looked to his comrades.)

ALVAREZ: Because of the moonlight, whoever's over there has the advantage.

We're not going to charge into the dark with moonlight behind us. We'll be blind and they'll see us a mile away.

(Some of the slaves in the containers who'd been awakened by Alvarez calling out, came to the front of their wooden prisons to peer through the gaps in the wood and were quite baffled by what they saw. Alvarez and his four subordinates, armed and worriedly scanning the containers with their eyes. It had caused quite a stir and mumblings started to arise. They knew something was afoot. Well aware that the commotion could be troublesome, Alvarez called out once again, eager to end the situation and resume normality as soon as possible.)

ALVAREZ: What's the matter? You a poof or something? Come out and face us!!!

(Just then, the body of the first guard to disappear thudded down from the roof of one of the containers. Immediately the remaining guards looked alarmed and strengthened their fighting stances. They'd seen nobody throw the body down and felt extremely intimidated. In stark contrast, Alvarez nodded calmly and raised his voice towards the containers once more.)

ALVAREZ: So, you've got a bit of strength and some stealth. What else have you got?

(The answer came in the shape of the second guard, Clive, thudding to the ground from the container next to it, striking even more fear into the already spooked guards. Hearing footsteps on the roofs of their containers, the slaves were becoming excitable. As their heartened voices became audible, Alvarez knew he had to act.)

ALVAREZ: We have to end this!

GUARD: How many are there?

GUARD 2: And how the hell did they get them up on the top of the crates in the first place? They were hardly little blokes!

(Hearing panic in his men's voice, Alvarez bellowed at them.)

ALVAREZ: Enough!!!

(The guards looked to him nervously.)

ALVAREZ: Are you men or mice?

(There was no reply.)

ALVAREZ: Now listen. Whoever he or they are, they don't seem to have a projectile weapon or one of us would be dead by now. They're waiting for us to come to them so they can take us on from close up. While we're blind, no less. Clever. So, they've got the advantage of visibility in terms of lighting *and* vantage point.

(He gestured to the tops of the containers.)

ALVAREZ: We have to take the advantage back.

(The guards listened silently and attentively, knowing their lives depended on it.)

ALVAREZ: There!

(He pointed to a crate adjacent to the containers.)

ALVAREZ: Climb on that and get on the roof of the end container. Leap across all the containers and if you find anyone up there, kill them. If you don't then leap off the *back* of the containers. That way when you come back here between the containers, you'll have the light advantage. Oh, but if you *do* end up running into the dark...

(He smirked.)

ALVAREZ: Ever heard of a berserker?

(The guards looked to one another.)

ALVAREZ: Just chop and slash like a butcher with a new cleaver, okay?

GUARD: Okay!

GUARD 2: And what are you gonna do?

ALVAREZ: If you flush someone out, I'll be waiting for them. Now go!

(Immediately the four guards rushed off to scale the crate and climb onto the end, container. Watching them go, Alvarez folded his arms and sneered.)

ALVAREZ: And once he's made short work of you lot, he'll probably come out here and take a shot at the first team. Me. That will be his downfall.

(This was Alvarez in his pomp. He was a soldier. As soon as the second guard had failed to reappear, he'd instantly recognised the danger and took action. The hot-headed rages he was known for were down to his inability to suffer fools. In his well disciplined world, people should do as they were instructed without asking questions first. Any failure to do so would bring forth his anger. In situations like the one he was faced with now, however, he had the coolest head of all. He was quite simply in his element.

Having clambered atop the containers, the guards immediately readied their weapons and scanned the container tops with their eyes. Seeing nothing, they looked to each

other and nodded before sprinting to leap across to the next container. Clearing the five foot gap between the two large wooden housings, they landed in crouched positions and once again looked about themselves.)

GUARD: Nothing here.

(As the guard next to him looked across the entire row of containers, straining his eyes in the darkness, he frowned coldly.)

GUARD 2: What are we waiting for then?

(With that, they raced towards the next five foot gap. Just as they were about to leap, however, a darkened figure seemed to leap out of nowhere at them from the container opposite.)

GUARD: What the...

GUARD 2: Take him out...

(Determined to put an end to the intruder as soon as possible, the two guards closest to him leapt up to take him out in mid air. The other two could only leap the gap and hope their comrades got him. Seconds later, all four landed on the opposite container. Two landed on their feet, the other two landed on their backs with all signs of life drained from their bodies. Immediately, the two survivors rushed to their side. There was no sign of any kind of wound other than their horribly twisted necks. There were no flesh wounds and no sign of blood. Naturally, the two guards were terrified. It had all happened in the blink of an eye. This foe had snapped two men's necks as they jumped without even slowing their leap. Had they collided with any force, surely at least one of them would have fell down the gap in the containers. Instead, they'd leapt alive and landed dead as if they'd been killed by the wind. This was clearly no ordinary adversary. This was clearly a well-trained, ruthlessly effective killing machine of a man. And to make matters worse for the surviving guards, he'd vanished from sight immediately as if he'd never even been there. In a split second, half their number had been snuffed out by a lightning quick shadow.)

GUARD: Shit.

GUARD 2: Shit aint the word. Who the fuck *was* that?

GUARD: Who or what, you mean?

(They gave each other worried looks.)

GUARD: Look, we've gotta get this guy before he gets us.

(His comrade nodded.)

GUARD 2: Yeah, for sure.

GUARD: Well we know he aint up here any more. Come on.

(As he headed for the back end of the container, his ally followed on.)

GUARD: Jump well clear, remember.

(With that, he leapt from the back of the container and landed in a roll on the ground. As his comrade did the same, he jumped to his feet and raised his sword.)

GUARD: Okay, you check the containers on the left, I'll go right.

GUARD 2: Right. And if you find him, call me. For fuck sake don't take him on by yourself.

GUARD: I don't intend to.

GUARD 2: Let's do this.

(By now, all inside the containers were awake. They were well aware something strange was happening and many were jockeying and barging one another to get a peek through any holes in the wood they could find. The two guards were only too glad of the commotion. They knew a cold blooded stealth assassin, such as the one they were currently dealing with, thrived on silence. At least now, the sound of their footsteps wouldn't give them away. Slowly, they both sidled along the ground behind

the containers to get a peak down the gaps, the moon providing just enough light to allow them to see.)

GUARD: This one's clear.

(The second guard yelled back.)

GUARD 2: Clear.

(And again, they sidled apart to check the next gap.)

GUARD: Nothing here.

(There was no reply.)

GUARD: I said...

(As he turned to scowl at his ally, immediately his heart was filled with fear. His comrade lay on the ground, his neck horribly twisted in an all too familiar reminder of how his other two comrades had met their end. Knowing he'd be next, sweat poured from his forehead and he spun around with eyes on stalks, his sword trembling in his hand.)

GUARD: I know you're there.

(His heart raged like an unstoppable avalanche forcing him into endless short, terrified breaths.)

GUARD: Show... your... self...

(Shaking all over, unsure which way to spin next, his breathing became more and more erratic, turning into panicked whimpers. Seconds later, he'd breathed his last.

Standing ever patiently, waiting to play his role in the proceedings, Alvarez coldly scanned the gaps between the containers with his eyes. Showing absolutely no sign of emotion whatsoever, he changed his standing leg and took a deep, relaxed breath. He'd wait all night if he had to and never drop his guard, not even for a moment. Right now, he was a soldier again.

Moments later, his wait was at an end. As a silhouette slowly formed between two containers, a wry smile developed on his lips. Holding his smile, he watched as the darkened figure casually stepped from the shadows between the containers and out onto the dockside before him. As the moonlight revealed the stranger's face, Alvarez shook his head with mocking disdain.)

ALVAREZ: I can't even act surprised. I knew you'd be trouble from the minute Hamler hired you.

(Stopping and folding his arms, the stranger, a man of equal age and stature to Alvarez replied emotionlessly in a Kastanie accent.)

ARKANE: What's with those four guards? You like sending lambs to the slaughter these days do you, Alvarez?

(Alvarez mocked.)

ALVAREZ: Don't try to claim the moral high ground, Arkane. You're the wolf who slaughtered them.

ARKANE: There *is* no moral high ground here, Alvarez. There's nothing moral here whatsoever.

(He gestured to the containers.)

ARKANE: We used to fight together against this kind of thing, what happened to you?

(Alvarez looked cold and distant.)

ALVAREZ: A man has to work and nobody's paying good guys any more.

(Arkane shook a solemn head.)

ARKANE: So you align yourself with the kind of scum you always used to deplore?

ALVAREZ: Foxton Hamler might well be scum but like I told you, a man's gotta work. The army no longer have a use for an old man like me.

(Arkane shook his head and sighed.)

ARKANE: We fought together in the army for over fifteen years, Alvarez. You were strong, you were principled and I respected you. For the sake of friendship, I'll give you a choice. Do you want to step aside or do I *have* to kill you? Either way, I'm freeing these people.

(As an excited cacophony rose from inside the crates, Alvarez tipped back his head and laughed.)

ALVAREZ: I see. Friendship, huh?

(Wearing a determined expression, Alvarez held his sword hilt at head height and gestured to it with his eyes.)

ALVAREZ: Do you see this blade, Arkane?

(Arkane looked on and said nothing.)

ALVAREZ: My wife, Mercedes bought me this. She'd been sick for months. She was dying, she was barely able to stay on her feet for long, she was weak. Despite her pain, however, she walked two miles to the smithy and back to buy this for me. And why?

(He looked Arkane dead in the eye.)

ALVAREZ: Because she wanted to give me a permanent reminder of how much I was loved by her. She died later that evening.

(He smiled proudly at the blade.)

ALVAREZ: That woman was my life, Arkane. This sword means everything to me.

(With that, his face dropped and he cast the blade into the sea.)

ALVAREZ: Now imagine how easily I can cast away this so called friendship you speak of.

(Arkane shook his head solemnly.)

ARKANE: That's not the act of the man I used to know. What happened to you?

ALVAREZ: That man died when Mercedes died. Now are we going to fight or aren't we?

(Arkane bowed his head.)

ARKANE: Very well.

(With that, they slowly approached one another before taking up fighting stances with open hands at the ready. Circling each other with concentration etched on their faces, both men blocked out all thoughts of anything other than finding an opening and striking their opponent. Inside the containers, expectant captives excitedly rooted for Arkane to be the victor. The wooden prisons literally rocked with the excited commotion. As both men lunged with unsuccessful strikes, a roar of exhilaration filled the air.)

ALVAREZ: You missed. It's not so easy to fight like a man when you're more used to hiding in shadows and jumping out on people, is it?

(Arkane said nothing, refusing to allow his concentration to be deflected, even for a moment.)

ALVAREZ: No answer to that, huh?

(As Arkane once again remained silent, Alvarez scoffed.)

ALVAREZ: Never were much of a talker, were you?

(Just then, with immense speed, Arkane lunged with his right arm, catching Alvarez square on the side of his head. Before he could even begin to react, Alvarez found himself flat on his back with Arkane's foot on his neck. Startled and angry, he could only snarl up at his victorious opponent.)

ALVAREZ: Finish me. Fucking finish me!

(Arkane shook his head.)

ARKANE: You're a fool, Alvarez. I'm not going to finish you.

(Alvarez snarled.)

ALVAREZ: I said...

ARKANE: I know what you said but you're hardly in a position to tell me what to do.

Now shut up and listen.

(Looking furious, Alvarez glared up at him and let him say his piece.)

ARKANE: I need you to give Hamler a message for me. Tell him his slavery days are finished. Oh, and tell him I said hello.

ALVAREZ: I'm not your messenger boy! Just finish me!!!

(Much to his amazement, Arkane took his foot from his neck.)

ARKANE: I can't do that, Alvarez.

(Alvarez sat up swiftly.)

ALVAREZ: You bastard. You beat me and yet you won't allow me to die with dignity?

ARKANE: If you die now, Alvarez, you won't die with dignity. You're nothing but a hired thug. You were a soldier!

(Alvarez gritted his teeth and snarled.)

ALVAREZ: I *was* a soldier. Was. My career and Mercedes were my life, now I have nothing. And you want me to be dignified? I lost everything, you bastard. If I can't be a soldier, I'm nothing!

(Arkane raised an eyebrow.)

ARKANE: Don't you read the town bulletin boards? The Kastanie army have invaded the Croxton Peninsula. All ex-patriot veterans are being asked to return to the country immediately.

(Alvarez looked stunned.)

ALVAREZ: What? The Croxton Peninsula? You mean we're finally going to stick it to the Rothman Empire?

ARKANE: Looks that way. All out war.

ALAVREZ: And they're looking for veterans?

(As Alvarez attempted to stand, Arkane swiftly punched him down again.)

ALVAREZ: Hey!!!

(Allowing no protest, Arkane then bawled in his face.)

ARKANE: Listen, Alvarez. Yeah, shitty luck to lose your wife like that. I sympathise but for fuck sake, you've got to get on and live. *You* didn't die. You had a crappy time but the world aint gonna stop so you can get off. Be somebody! Make something of yourself, something you can be proud of. Stop wallowing in misery, get over it! You're better than this and we both know it!

(They shared a hateful glare, both knowing these were words Alvarez needed to hear. Alvarez was first to break the eye contact as he hung his head and sighed.)

ALVAREZ: You're right.

(He looked up.)

ALVAREZ: I'll give Hamler your message, Arkane. Then I'm going to war for all Kastanie. But first, I'm going to help you free the captives.

(He nodded gratefully.)

ALVAREZ: Thank you, Arkane. You've made me see again. Hell, you've given me back my life.

(Arkane nodded to accept his words.)

ARKANE: You're welcome, Alvarez.

(And so, Alvarez joined Arkane in releasing the captives and pointing them towards dock three where a ship awaited them. Once the captives were released, they set about smashing up the containers. Using raw fist power to punch through the wood, Alvarez was getting rid of a lot of pent up aggression. As he smashed his fist through a large plank, he smiled to himself, proud to be doing the right thing. As he looked up to mention it to Arkane however, he found nobody there. Arkane, as he'd appeared, had disappeared into the night without a bye or leave.)

ALVAREZ: What a guy.

(All that remained now was for him to leave a message for Hamler and head off to join the war. Something he did with extreme urgency. He figured it best to leave a written message for Hamler as all too often the messenger had been the one to bear the brunt of the mobster's anger. In the small hours of that morning, he slipped a note under Hamler's door and was gone.

Seven hours later...

Hamler's rage couldn't have been more evident. The veins on his neck were throbbing and his face burnt a brilliant red. His fists were clenched together so tight, his knuckles turned white and he shook with undiluted fury. Never had he felt such hatred and anger towards one man. Arkane. The man he took under his wing and placed his trust in had betrayed him in a way he never thought anyone would ever dare. For twenty years he'd ruled the township of Ardenmouth with an iron fist. He alone controlled the underworld and manipulated the system to tailor his needs. Until now, he'd never been challenged. Some had threatened to challenge him and met their end, dying in extreme pain. None had dared to actually go through with the deed. Of all the people to perpetrate such an indignity, his trusted friend, Arkane.

When he visited the scene of the humiliation, flanked by four flunkies, he couldn't believe what he saw. As he paced among the many crates on the dockside that morning, his heart sunk. The vast crates that once housed his precious live imports were smashed apart and their contents gone. It looked like a war zone. As he stepped over the body of one of his fallen guards, his nostrils started to flare. Six of his men had been slain and his assets were nowhere to be seen. Nobody did this to Hamler Foxton. Nobody.

His flunkies, Jones, Evans, Griffiths and Lloyd watched him step through the broken planks that littered the ground as he surveyed the area and knew there'd be repercussions. This wasn't going to end here. Hamler would never let this lie. They watched as he knelt to pick up a broken plank then cast it out to sea with a loud growl of anger. Any moment now he'd be airing his feelings and he wouldn't be mincing his words. They braced themselves accordingly. When Hamler exploded, you'd better pay attention if you valued your life. Sure enough, moments later, with a face of fury, Hamler snarled in their direction and clenched his fists.)

HAMLER: I want him dead! Do you hear me???

(Immediately his flunkies all replied with a forceful, "Yes, boss".)

HAMLER: Fuck!!!

(He raised his fist.)

HAMLER: I trusted you, Arkane!

(He then started to pace back and forth angrily.)

HAMLER: It took me twenty years to build this and that bastard has destroyed it all in a matter of days. Twenty years!!!

(He kicked a broken plank and continued.)

HAMLER: The perfect human trafficking ring and he's ruined everything. Slaves, prostitutes, even spouses and babies, I could supply them all. And that bastard has released every single fucking one of them.

(He glared across the eyes of his flunkies and spoke with gritted teeth.)

HAMLER: Hunt him down. I don't care how long it takes or how much it costs. Find him and bring him to me. I'll show him a death *beyond* death.

JONES: Boss!

HAMLER: Arm yourselves and go!

GRIFFITHS: Yes, boss!

(He looked uncertain.)

GRIFFITHS: Where do we start looking, boss?

(Hamler growled furiously.)

HAMLER: I don't fucking know. Anywhere. Everywhere. Just go!

JONES: Yes, boss.

(Hamler sighed.)

HAMLER: Twenty years down the drain. And all because I let one rogue man penetrate my ring.

(He stood tall.)

HAMLER: I won't be defeated. I still have my contacts, I'll...

(Upon spotting his four flunkies, all helpless with laughter, he stopped and snarled.)

HAMLER: It amuses you, does it?

(Desperately trying to fight back their amusement, they all screwed up their faces as tight as they could. Unfortunately for the hapless Lloyd, he was too far gone to stop and just continued to laugh uncontrollably.)

HAMLER: Oh, dear.

(Fighting back tears of laughter, Lloyd tried to justify himself through his fit of giggling.)

LLOYD: You said... ha, ha... you let a man penetrate your ring... ha, ha...

(He wiped a tear.)

LLOYD: Sorry, I can't help it. I know I shouldn't but I can't seem to stop laughing.

(Hamler nodded acceptingly and stepped up to him.)

HAMLER: I can help you with that.

(With a face of thunder he then ripped a dagger from his belt and stabbed Lloyd between the eyes, driving the dagger with the full force of his burning rage. In that moment, his comrades, Jones, Evans and Griffiths lost their desire to laugh and turned away.)

HAMLER: Anyone else fancy a chuckle?

(As Lloyd's body thudded to the ground, Hamler snarled.)

HAMLER: No?

EVANS: No, boss. Definitely not.

HAMLER: Then get going. Find him. Search the world if you have to. Leave no stone unturned. I don't care how long it takes; just don't come back without him! And kill anyone who gets in your way!!!

GRIFFITHS: Boss!

HAMLER: Go!!!

(As his three flunkies rushed out of sight, Hamler looked about the docks once more and sighed to himself.)

HAMLER: I'd better dispose of this guy.

(With a snarl, he bent and rolled Lloyd's body towards the sea before releasing a loud groan and kicking him over the dockside and into the water. As he watched the body splash into the sea, he shook his head and mumbled to himself.)

HAMLER: Don't get comfortable, Arkane, wherever you are. This is far from over.

(He then turned from the water's edge and spotted the bodies of two of his fallen guards and spanned his forehead.)

HAMLER: Oh, crap!

(Wearing a broken frown he yelled.)

HAMLER: Jones, Evans, Griffiths? I need a hand here!!!

(Knowing all too well that they were long gone, he shrugged.)

HAMLER: Fuck.

(And so he set about disposing of their bodies in the sea with his mood growing ever angrier. This was an indignity upon an indignity and when the time came, Arkane was going to pay dearly for it. It didn't even cross his mind to hunt down his escaped human traffic; his focus was solely on the one who'd betrayed him. Slaves could be replaced, torturing and maiming the one who crossed him was all he cared about now.)

9 YEARS LATER

The Kastanie invasion of the Croxton Peninsula had had dramatic consequences for all concerned. The Rothman Empire had struck back with tremendous force, triggering a strategic alliance between the Kastanie and Auland governments. Against their better judgment, the Auland army had been obliged to enter the dispute alongside the Kastanie army, thanks to an agreement signed over four hundred years before hand. Not about to be crushed by the might of the two armies, the Rothmans had called in an ally from a distant continent and an almighty war had raged. Lasting over eight years, the war had spread from the disputed Croxton Peninsula and taken a grip in Auland, Kastanie and the Rothman Empire themselves. Both sides invading the other in an attempt to destabilise their respective governments.

Having been in the grip of this conflict for such a prolonged period of time, the every day citizens had suffered greatly. With the nations concentrating all their resources into the war effort, food and other basic necessities had been in short supply. In the aftermath of it all, Auland and Kastanie, the losing side, had been left somewhat out of pocket. The people were hard up and often struggled to make ends meet. As a result, crime was rife in the streets. Rebuilding their lives would undoubtedly be a lengthy task.

In stark contrast to her three neighbours, the island nation of Araminta was thriving. Having refused to get involved in what they saw as a petty dispute over a twenty mile stretch of useless land, they'd concentrated all their efforts into technological advancements instead. While they'd gone forwards in leaps and bounds, war had seen their neighbours relapse. In Araminta they'd perfected techniques for combing cotton and mass producing fine fabrics whilst those just over the sea were reduced to wearing the most coarse leather or woollen garments. Such was the gulf in living standards between Araminta and her neighbouring nations, Araminta had been forced to issue passports to all her citizens. Those travelling from Araminta were greeted by their continental neighbours as a welcome boost to the economy. Those travelling to

Araminta weren't allowed in without a passport. Needless to say, many tried to flee to this land of plenty by stowing away on ferries or even swimming the ten mile stretch of water. As a result, drowned bodies washed up on the shores every day.

In both Auland and Kastanie, the education system had collapsed entirely while in Araminta it was thriving. While their peers on the continent received no state education whatsoever, young adults in Araminta were leaving school and heading for the many academies looking forward to a bright future. There was an academy for every profession from basket weaving to barrel making. There were even academies to supply their army with disciplined fighters. Northgate Unarmed Combat Academy being one such institution.)

Northgate Unarmed Combat Academy, Araminta.

(Defining moments. Those tiny incidents that occur once in a lifetime and come to signify everything we are in the eyes of our peers. Those unique episodes that burden us with a false perception of our personality from all those around us. Moments that either shame us forever or weigh us down with too much to live up to. Defining moments are a lie. No person can be defined in one moment or in a single instance. One split second of rage from a normally placid man should not saddle him with the tag of a madman for life but alas, this is what defining moments are. They are merely the moments, good or bad, in which we're noticed.

For one particular student of the Northgate Unarmed Combat Academy, her defining moment was about to come in the form of a final insult. Her class, 1-C, were having their end of year graduation test in the gym and she was up next. The whole point of the exercise was for the students to prove they'd mastered the basics of what they'd been taught before they moved on to the second grade. Unfortunately for the 18 year old student in question, Cherry Wroxford, she'd learned nothing. This blonde beauty was doomed to fail and all around her knew it. What is more, she knew it too.

Her time at the academy up until this point had been a disaster. She'd failed at every exercise and her ineptitude alone was to blame for her class setting a new record low score in every activity they took part in. Suffice to say, she was desperately unpopular with her classmates. Ever since the day the four forms that made up the first grade had competed in a test of agility, she'd been seen as a burden to her peers. The competition had seemed so simple. All the pupils had to do was avoid a succession of small leather bean bags as they were hurtled at them by the members of the other three forms. When the scores were totted up, Class 1-A had received 71 hits, 1-B fared even better, only receiving 52 hits. Class 1-D scored a respectable 74 hits but thanks to Cherry, class 1-C were on the receiving end of the worst score ever recorded at the academy. 203 hits. 187 of them hitting Cherry as she huddled on the floor in a ball. As soon as the first bean bag was cast in her direction, she screamed and threw herself to the ground before covering her head and screaming for them to stop it. Naturally, the members of the other three forms saw her as an exceptionally easy target and proceeded to pummel her accordingly.

Following the bean bag debacle, things had continued in a similar vain for Cherry. All year she'd stumbled from one failure to another, dragging her classmates down with her in the process. Nobody could even understand why or how she'd joined the

academy in the first place. Northgate, also known as N.U.C.A was a very exclusive establishment that selected pupils on the basis of their potential for unarmed combat. Many thought her inclusion was down to a mistake in the selection process while the cynics suspected her parents must have bribed the academy. There'd been much debate and numerous arguments among her classmates about how she'd managed to get selected with several wild suggestions bandied about. The only things they all agreed on and were certain about was that Cherry was useless, out of her depth and they didn't like her. She was blonde, beautiful and clueless and would forever be seen as nothing more than an airhead and a bimbo.

For over one hundred years pupils had arrived at the age of 18 and been granted a white belt. They'd progress through the four grades from a white to a blue to a silver and finally a black belt before leaving at the age of 21, adept at the ways of unarmed combat. The way things looked right now, Cherry would still be wearing the white belt when she was 40. Her endeavours thus far were, for many, a disgrace to the academy. Maybe in a less competitive environment, her shortcomings would have been accepted but in this academy, winning was all important and they had no time to tolerate an airhead, especially one that was bringing her class the indignity of defeat in every contest.

And so, there she was. Her time was about to come. She was about to be called into the middle of the gym in front of everyone where all could scoff at her ineptitude. To be tested fully on all the things she'd failed to grasp and sometimes even comprehend. To have her inadequacy made into an exhibition for all to see. Even sitting where she was, quietly waiting, she wasn't safe from scornful looks. It didn't help that her mother had ordered a gym kit one size too small. Rather than being a functional fit, the white t-shirt clung to her body and the tight shorts would disappear up the crack of her backside. It hardly helped her rid herself of the cruel perception that she was no more than a bimbo.

Having been informed all too often by her peers about their disdain for her general being, Cherry was naturally petrified. Knowing they'd all be staring hatefully at her as she took the floor, hardly helped with her already overwhelming sense of terror. As she sat amongst the massed ranks of first graders awaiting their turn around the edge of the gymnasium, she stared straight ahead like a startled rabbit. She was almost frozen with fear. Not knowing whether she wanted to scream, cry or run away, her bottom lip quivered, the only movement she could muster. Moments later, as a chill ran down her spine, she shuddered and released a barely audible whimper. She didn't know what was worse, waiting for the torture to begin or the actual event of being tortured itself. Trembling and barely able to control her swelling apprehension, she mustered a sigh and hung her head, a large pout forming on her lips. As she sat there feeling lost in hopelessness and despair, however, a hand gently rested on her shoulder and a kind feminine voice spoke softly in her ear.)

ANGEL: It'll be okay, just relax and do your best. Okay?

(Angel, Cherry's twin sister, was the one shining light in her life at the moment. Without her by her side she knew she probably wouldn't have coped with the calamities of the past year. Touched by Angel's kindness, Cherry leant her head on her shoulder.)

CHERRY: Okay.

(Although Angel's sentiments were well meaning, they didn't lift Cherry's spirit even a fraction. She was doomed and she knew it. How she wished she could be more like her sister. Angel was one of the stars of their class. She was adept at every discipline and immensely popular among their classmates. The absolute opposite of Cherry. Knowing she was due out on the gym floor at any moment to once again be shown up in front of her beloved twin, didn't make things any easier. She knew Angel would never mock or belittle her efforts but sometimes that just made things worse. Angel had achieved great things in her first year and yet due to Cherry's unceasing habit of bringing failure to her entire class, they'd seldom been acknowledged.

Slowly but surely, waiting to be called was sending Cherry deeper and deeper into a depression. Fear had been replaced with empty despair and what little of her spirit remained was sinking without trace. That was when it happened. The moment she'd feared. Her name was called. Despite waiting for it for so long she was shocked to hear it and raised a fearful head towards the centre of the gym. Already mumbles were echoing from all around the edge where her peers sat, mocking. With a pat on the back from Angel, she slowly rose to her feet wearing a fixed, thousand yard stare. The walk to the centre of the gym would be a long one, especially with legs that felt like they were turning to jelly. And so, like a condemned soldier en route to face the firing squad, she nervously stepped towards the centre of the gym with terror in her eyes. The sound of a classmate humming the death march and the laughter that followed doing little for her already shattered confidence.

Beneath her feet, a mat stretched across the centre of the gymnasium, around which the rest of her school year were seated. Amongst them stood her teacher, Master Frank Rauchen. The only person *inside* this ring of disdainful looks with her was a third grade male student named Micalov, who'd be her opponent for the test. As soon as she reached the centre of the mat, she turned to face her opponent and immediately set about biting her fingernails in a terrified panic. Looking competent and prepared, the student she'd be facing ignored her nervous fumbling and stared straight ahead. Naturally, his eyes bearing down on her only added to her dread and caused her to start frenziedly biting the fingernails on both her hands at once as she whimpered like a neglected puppy.

All around the room, whispers and mumbles passed from side to side. Many were excited at the prospect of seeing Cherry get hit, some were sneering at her figure hugging gym kit and others were making bets on how long she'd spend in the infirmary this time. She'd been in there so often before they'd cruelly dubbed it "Cherry's Room". To say conditions were hostile would be quite the understatement. Wishing she could just disappear into thin air, Cherry looked towards her sister and pouted. Getting a loving smile in return, she then looked to her opponent. Suddenly, she didn't feel quite so bad. Her sister's smile had made her realise something. No matter how much those around her hated her, her sister would always be there for her. It didn't matter if she failed, her sister would help her through it. It didn't matter how long she'd be in the infirmary this time because her twin would visit everyday. Allowing herself a reassuring sigh, she closed her eyes and awaited her teacher's instruction. She didn't wait long.)

RAUCHEN: Right. Student 1103, Cherry Wroxford... are you ready?

(Cherry opened her eyes and gave him a nervous nod.)

RAUCHEN: I can't hear you.

(Had her nervous reply been any higher pitched, only dogs would have heard it.)

CHERRY: Y-yes, sir!

RAUCHEN: Stop giggling, you lot. I dislike gigglers!

(As silence fell, the teacher continued.)

RAUCHEN: Right. Student 209, Michael Micalov... are you ready?

(Standing to attention, he barked his reply at the top of his lungs.)

MICALOV: Sir!!!

(Immediately, Cherry flinched and cowered behind her hands. Naturally, her classmates erupted in howls of derisory laughter.)

RAUCHEN: Stop that!!!

(As the laughter died away, Master Rauchen folded his arms.)

RAUCHEN: Right, Miss Wroxford, I'll call out a defensive move and on the count of three, Mister Micalov will attempt to strike you. You will use the move I called out to block it.

(He paused and observed some of the mumbling.)

RAUCHEN: No, she *won't* block it with her face! Johnson, see me afterwards!

(Again, the noise died down and the teacher continued.)

RAUCHEN: Right, Miss Wroxford, you've just seen the others do it, now take a deep breath and relax.

(As instructed, she did just that.)

RAUCHEN: Right. On three. Left hand block! One...

(As the teacher started his count, Cherry's mind leapt into action. This move was the one she knew how to do. She'd hoped he'd call this one. With this, she had a chance. Relying herself and feeling a most unusual surge in confidence, she prepared her stance and focussed her eyes on her opponent's left hand. As the count reached two she repeated "left hand block" over and over in her head and kept her eyes fixed on his left hand. She'd never been so ready. There was no way she was going to fail this one, she thought. Her sister would be so proud.)

RAUCHEN: Three!

(As soon as the number three was called, her opponent leapt into action. As did Cherry. With a determined growl she thrust her arm up to block his left hand only for his right hook to thunder into her face. Immediately and with incredible speed, Cherry collapsed in a heap, dropping like a stone to the mat. As she lay there on her back, all she could hear was the deafening howls of hysterical laughter that echoed all around the gym. Feeling quite humiliated, she forced back a tear and lifted her head a little. Rubbing her painful cheek, she looked to the teacher and frowned. Matching her frown, the teacher yelled angrily to her over the laughter.)

RAUCHEN: Left hand block! Left! Don't you know your left from your right?

(As the laughter quietened, mostly because everyone wanted to hear her excuse, Cherry spoke up, feeling quite hard done by.)

CHERRY: I did do a left hand block, I did.

RAUCHEN: No, you bloody didn't!

CHERRY: I did! He cheated, he hit me with his right instead!

(Again, everyone fell about laughing at her.)

RAUCHEN: Cherry... left hand block. You're supposed to block with *your* left hand, not block *his* left hand!!! It's about *your* left!!!

(Watching on from the sides, Angel sighed to herself. She hated seeing her sister humiliated and didn't know how much more of it she could take. Trying not to scream at the laughing hyenas around her, she folded her arms uncomfortably and watched Cherry struggle to her feet and fix the back of her shorts.)

RAUCHEN: Right.

(He couldn't be heard for the mocking and laughing.)

RAUCHEN: Enough!!!

(Silence returned then he cleared his throat and began.)

RAUCHEN: Okay. Any more of that idiotic laughter and you can all wait outside until you're called!

(He flexed his neck muscles and then continued.)

RAUCHEN: Okay, this time. Block a roundhouse.

(Cherry instantly knew she was in trouble. She'd heard someone mention a roundhouse in class but at the time she was staring out of the window at the third grade boys playing Rugby in the field. As Rauchen started to count, Cherry started to panic. Was it a punch? Was it a kick? Was it an elbow? What would she do?

Desperately trying to remember what was mentioned when the word roundhouse came up, all she could picture was a boy playing rugby and sighing with joy at the sight of his well-toned backside. It didn't help. Desperately hoping it'd come to her, she jammed her eyes closed and tried to concentrate hard on remembering. Finally, it came to her! She knew exactly what a roundhouse was. What reminded her was the powerful kick to the head she received while she stood there like an idiot with her eyes closed. Naturally, the gym burst into raptures of laughter once more at the sight of her crumbling to the mat. All Master Rauchen could do was sigh and slap his forehead in despair.

RAUCHEN: For the love of god, she's useless!

(As Cherry sat up and hunched her shoulders to stare at her knees, Angel was tempted to run over there and drag her out of the gym. It was all getting too much to watch. For her part, all Cherry could do was stop herself from crying, she certainly didn't want them to see that. Being as strong as she could be under the circumstances, she climbed to her feet and looked to Angel. Seeing Angel's loving smile had turned to more of a sympathetic grimace, she sighed to herself. What humiliation would be next? The answer didn't take long in coming. Once the teacher had hushed the laughing students, he called the name of the next move in a subdued and despairing voice, well aware he was wasting his breath.)

RAUCHEN: Punch Swerve.

(Hoping he could somehow get through to the hapless girl, he sighed.)

RAUCHEN: Now... Cherry, pay attention this time. Come on.

(With a desperately unhappy look on her face, Cherry nodded and replied in a small voice.)

CHERRY: Okay.

RAUCHEN: Concentrate. Remember, use your head!

(Feeling quite confused and more than a little dazed, Cherry gave him a baffled look.)

CHERRY: You want me to head butt him?

(Immediately, she realised what he meant and grimaced at herself.)

CHERRY: Idiot!

(Of course, it was too late. Hilarity ensued. This time, Master Rauchen was true to his word and ejected the worst offenders before returning to continue the task in hand.)

RAUCHEN: Right. And if anyone else decides to have a laughing fit, they can go too!

(He cleared his throat.)

RAUCHEN: Right. Punch swerve! On three!

(Just like the roundhouse block, Cherry had no idea about this one either. Remembering Rauchen's advice to use her head, she nodded to herself positively and thought hard, this time keeping her eyes wide open. It clearly had to involve some kind of swerve. Hence the name, punch swerve. And so, ready to swerve, she awaited the number three with a look of determination in her eyes. She didn't want to get hit again, that was for certain. As the number three was called, as expected, a punch came in from Micalov. This time, Cherry was ready. As soon as she heard the number, she leant back as if to duck under the punch. Much to everyone's amazement, she nearly pulled it off. Unfortunately, her footwork was wrong and she didn't quite get her whole self out of the way in time. As a result, Micalov ended up punching her left breast.)

CHERRY: Hey!!!

(Before Rauchen could compliment her for a close one, however, Cherry instinctively slapped Micalov full across the face.

CHERRY: Pervert!!!

(The teacher was livid.)

RAUCHEN: Cherry!!!

(Having reacted instinctively, Cherry covered her mouth and stared wide eyed at the angry looking Micalov before her. Rubbing his bright red cheek, he gritted his teeth and growled at her in a threatening manner. Feeling more than a little embarrassed as her classmates watched on, defying themselves to laugh, Cherry gave him an apologetic smile.)

CHERRY: Sorry about that.

MICALOV: Oh, you will be!!!

CHERRY: But...

(The truth was, not only was Micalov angry about getting slapped, he was also appalled that after three successful years of learning self defence, this hopeless girl had managed to hit him so easily. He felt quite foolish and was desperate to redeem himself. She'd humiliated him and made him question his ability, now she was going to pay. By now Rauchen was quite certain Cherry would be the first person in the academy's history to fail the first grade. Sensing it would be better for all to end this nightmare as soon as possible, he didn't even bother ejecting the gigglers and continued the lesson with a heavy heart.)

RAUCHEN: Okay. This time... forearm jab. On three!

(Eager to prove himself, Micalov gave her a hateful glare.)

MICALOV: Excellent. I'm *really* going to hurt you, Cherry Wroxford.

(Extremely scared by his snarling demeanour, Cherry pouted and looked desperately to Master Rauchen.)

CHERRY: He said he's going to hurt me!

(Rauchen frowned.)

RAUCHEN: He's supposed to! One...

CHERRY: But...

(Much to her horror, Micalov smirked and gave an evil laugh under his breath.)

CHERRY: But...I said I was sorry.

RAUCHEN: Two...

MICALOV: I'm going to enjoy knocking you out.

(Cherry eyes bulged with horror and she whimpered.)

RAUCHEN: Three!!!

(As Micalov grinned the widest of grins, Cherry panicked. She was genuinely terrified. This went beyond the feelings of dread she'd felt before, this time she was

in fear of serious injury. Having already forgotten everything she'd been taught, she immediately forgot where she was and how she was expected to conduct herself. None of that mattered to her right now. Self preservation took over. Without a second thought for anything other than stopping her furious opponent from damaging her, she swung her left leg with extreme urgency, finding power she didn't even know she had. With Micalov lunging forward, all the boys in the class and even Master Rauchen winced at her actions. As her foot swung between his legs, he rose several inches off of the ground, her front foot squashing into his testicles with tremendous force. In that moment, the gym was reduced to stunned silence. As she staggered backwards from the kick, Cherry fell on her behind and watched as Micalov swayed, barely able to stay on his feet, with his mouth wide open, shaking like a dying man. Fearing that any minute now he'd snap out of it and beat the living daylights out of her, Cherry swiftly started to clamber to her feet, determined to run away and never come back. She'd only managed to climb to one knee however, when Micalov collapsed, holding his private area and groaning in agony. As he fell, his forehead collided with her knee, knocking her back down. Immediately, the teacher rushed over looking mortified.)

RAUCHEN: Cherry! What have you done???

(Feeling equally mortified, Cherry spoke up in a small panicky voice.)

CHERRY: He said he was going to knock me out!

(As Rauchen rolled Micalov on his back, he shook his head and forced a stifled laugh.)

RAUCHEN: Well, one of you got knocked out. Him, he's out cold.

(Cherry hung her head.)

CHERRY: I'm expelled, aren't I?

(Rauchen chuckled.)

RAUCHEN: No actually. The rules of the test stipulate that it's over if one of you is knocked out. You passed.

CHERRY: Fine, I'll go and pack...

(She flinched.)

CHERRY: Wait! I... what?

RAUCHEN: You heard me. If he'd knocked you out, you'd have failed the test.

Well, the rules also stipulate that if *you* knock your opponent out, *you* pass. It's a bit daft considering this grade is all about self-defence but it's the same rule for all the grades. You pass.

(He shook his head and looked at the prostrate Micalov.)

RAUCHEN: He's in a bad way; we'd better get him to Cherry's r... the infirmary.

(Until now she had no idea that the teachers also referred to the infirmary as Cherry's room and frankly she didn't care. Let them insult her. Let them say what they liked.

She'd passed. Or had she? The truth was, Cherry had failed. Kicking him in his private area so that he passed out wasn't a valid move and she should have been assigned a new opponent. Having endured Cherry for a whole year, however, Rauchen was delighted to be given the opportunity to pass her on a technicality rather than have her fail and repeat the year. As the grade one instructor, another year of Cherry Wroxford was the last thing he wanted. And so, at the end of the lesson, she along with the rest of the first graders traded in their white belts for the blue of the second grade. A proud moment. Naturally the vast majority of her peers were outraged. They felt she should have been given a failing grade but now they faced another year of matriculating with this moronic girl. There was bitterness in the air and a lot of it.

Following a quick dip in the communal bath and the formalities of perfecting her appearance, Cherry found herself sitting outside in the yard under the old oak tree, eating apples with Angel at her side as usual. Now sporting the traditional blue and white tartan of the academy school uniform, she could finally relax, safe in the knowledge that her gym ordeal was over. Classes were finished for the day and the students were free to roam the campus. A formal event to celebrate graduation was to be held that evening and in the morning, those who wished to do so could go home for a long summer break. Cherry was especially looking forward to it. She wasn't looking forward to going home, as she and Angel would be staying on campus all summer due to the fact their mother would be working away. She was looking forward to everyone else going home and finally getting some respite from their sour looks and the name calling.

As she sat tucking into her apple, thinking of all the things she and her sister could get up to all summer, however, she very quickly started to feel uneasy. Angel was normally extremely chatty after class but since they'd sat down, she'd hardly said a word. Curious as to her sister's demeanour, she swallowed the chunk of apple she'd been chewing and turned to face her wearing a warm smile.)

CHERRY: You okay, Angel?

(Angel sighed.)

ANGEL: Yeah...kind of. I guess.

CHERRY: So, no then.

ANGEL: Yeah.

(Anxious to help, Cherry placed her hand on Angel's knee.)

CHERRY: It's 'cause I'm a gargantuan moron, isn't it?

(Angel chuckled.)

ANGEL: No. Well, okay it's sort of about that.

CHERRY: I thought so.

ANGEL: It's not that you're a gargantuan moron; you know I don't think like that.

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: Why not? I do.

(Angel turned her head and looked her in the eye.)

ANGEL: Well you shouldn't.

CHERRY: Ahem, you *have* met me, haven't you?

ANGEL: Oh, Cherry. It's just that... you've got to do better than that next year. If you fail we'll get split up.

(Cherry hung her head.)

CHERRY: I know. I tried, but... I just can't seem to do it. It's like they're speaking a different language or something. Nothing seems to sink in.

ANGEL: I know you tried; I really do, but...

CHERRY: Maybe there's no room in my head for knowledge, what with all the air in there.

ANGEL: Cherry, you're not an airhead.

CHERRY: Aren't I?

ANGEL: No! You were an 'A' student at our old school.

CHERRY: Well, I'm certainly not one now.

(Angel slipped her arm around Cherry's shoulder and gave her a loving squeeze.)

ANGEL: It'll get better, babe.

CHERRY: Will it?

ANGEL: Sure. It all goes back to that bean bag contest.

CHERRY: Do we have to discuss that?

ANGEL: If you'd just listened when they told us what was going to happen, you wouldn't have reacted like you did. You'd have known they were going to throw things at us.

CHERRY: I know. I thought someone was playing a prank.

(She grimaced.)

CHERRY: So I ducked and covered.

ANGEL: Yeah, and since then everyone's been on your case. No wonder you've lost all your confidence. If that hadn't happened, I reckon you'd have been okay.

CHERRY: But, Angel, I've messed up *every* contest, not just that one!

ANGEL: I know, and that's because after the first one, you convinced yourself you couldn't do it. That's what you have to get over now, your own doubts.

(She frowned.)

ANGEL: If these arseholes here had been a bit more supportive, that might have helped too.

(Cherry gave her a warm smile.)

CHERRY: I'm not bothered what they think any more, Angel. If I listened to them, they'd have crushed my soul by now. But look, big smile.

(She pulled an extremely wide and cheesy grin.)

ANGEL: You've got a bit of apple between your teeth.

CHERRY: Oh, crap!

(As Cherry set about picking her teeth with her nails, Angel sat back and looked up at the sky wearing a contented smile.)

ANGEL: Anyway, that's this year over. Now we can look forward to the formal.

CHERRY: Yeah, I can't wait to wear my new dress.

ANGEL: Nor can I.

(Cherry grinned.)

CHERRY: We can't both wear it.

(Angel returned her grin.)

ANGEL: Silly cow!

CHERRY: That's me.

(Adopting a serious expression, she placed her hand on top of Angel's and looked into her eyes.)

CHERRY: Look, Angel, don't worry about me, okay? I'll get there, I promise. As soon as I figure out where I keep going wrong, I'll be fine. I'm gonna try really hard next year.

(Ever faithful in her sister, Angel took a deep breath. She knew Cherry could do better and after hearing those reassuring words, she now had every faith in her to do just that next year. As a result, she felt a lot more at ease and allowed herself to relax.)

ANGEL: Thanks, Cherry, I needed to hear that. And whatever it takes, I'll help. Even if it means practicing all summer.

CHERRY: Okay, like you say even if it means practicing for half the summer.

ANGEL: *All* summer.

CHERRY: Yeah... half.

(Giving her sister a cheeky smile, Cherry took another bite of her apple before looking away innocently. Allowing herself a chuckle, Angel adjusted her backside to get comfortable and scoured the yard with her eyes. It was normally busier than this at this time of day but a lot of the girls had gone to their dorms to prepare for that

evening's formal. Something Cherry and Angel had every intention of doing once they'd eaten their apples. As her eyes scanned the faces of those in the yard, Angel frowned.)

ANGEL: Damn, you're getting some seriously evil scowls today.

(Cherry shrugged.)

CHERRY: So, what's new?

ANGEL: It's never normally this bad.

CHERRY: I don't mind. Let them scowl. They're not going to be here for a few months after tonight, they're just getting their scowl on while they still can.

ANGEL: Damn it, girl, I don't know how you put up with it.

CHERRY: You get used to it.

ANGEL: I don't think I could. It'd drive me mad.

(She raised her middle finger at a group of scowling girls. Immediately, they all looked away, pretending they hadn't been doing it.)

ANGEL: Bitches.

(Cherry giggled.)

CHERRY: I love they way they all act innocent if *you* catch them doing it.

ANGEL: Makes me sick.

CHERRY: They don't want to cross you, you see. You're really popular with the guys so they all want you onside.

ANGEL: I'm not popular with the guys.

(Cherry gave her a disbelieving glance.)

ANGEL: Am I?

CHERRY: Like you didn't know.

(Angel smiled.)

ANGEL: I know, I just wanted to look modest.

CHERRY: You failed.

(She sighed.)

CHERRY: I miss school. I used to be so popular with the guys.

(Angel thought back to their days at school and smiled.)

CHERRY: I haven't been asked out once since we came here.

ANGEL: Not like back then, you got asked out by a different guy everyday.

CHERRY: Yeah...

(She sighed.)

CHERRY: I need a boyfriend. Nobody's kissed me for over a year.

(Angel giggled.)

ANGEL: Nonsense, I kissed you goodnight yesterday.

(Cherry laughed.)

CHERRY: Yeah, less tongue next time though.

(They chuckled for a moment then released a simultaneous disgusted groan.)

BOTH: Ew!!!

ANGEL: Gross.

CHERRY: Sorry.

(A mischievous look then developed on her face.)

CHERRY: So... you hoping to get asked out at the formal tonight? You know, romantic music, nice dresses, dancing...

ANGEL: Doubtful. I'm going with *you*!

CHERRY: Even so, you don't have to baby-sit me all night.

ANGEL: I know, but...

(She shrugged.)

ANGEL: What about you?

CHERRY: What about me? I've got no hope. Nobody wants to go out with me.

(With that, they shared a synchronised sigh and stared at their feet. Allowing themselves to wallow for a moment they remained silent until Angel raised her head and nodded positively.)

ANGEL: Screw this. Let's go and get ready, there's...

(Before she could finish her sentence, however, a smooth male voice cut over her.)

CARTER: Angel, hi.

(Carter Hines was the handsome son and heir of a wealthy businessman and an extremely competent combatant. Whenever he walked past a group of girls, he was always greeted with a chorus of flirting and sighs. Almost every girl in the first grade dreamt they'd be his date for the formal and Angel was no different. As he looked down on them from where he stood in his famous, arms folded stance, Angel blushed and smiled back at him.)

ANGEL: Hi, Carter.

CARTER: So...

(Much to their surprise, at this point he seemed to lose his trademark cool and became extremely flustered.)

CARTER: Like...I was wondering if, you know, if kind of...

(Cherry smiled to herself and leant forward to grin at him, she loved these moments.)

CARTER: Oh... hi, Cherry.

(Cherry beamed and continued to grin at him.)

CHERRY: Hello!

(Normally, Cherry was either being teased or treated like an invisible entity, but when somebody wanted to chat her sister up, they had to be nice to her. She enjoyed watching them squirm and seeing the resentment in their eyes at having to acknowledge her politely.)

CHERRY: How're *you*, Carter?

(He scratched behind his ear.)

CARTER: Um... yeah, fine thanks.

CHERRY: Good, good.

CARTER: So, Angel... I was just...

ANGEL: Yes?

CARTER: I was just wondering if you'd, you know, come to the formal with me... I mean, you don't have to... I just thought it'd be nice...

(He sighed to himself, dismayed by his lack of cool.)

CARTER: Pratt!

CHERRY: She won't go with you if you call her a Pratt, Carter.

(Carter's eyes bulged.)

CARTER: Not you, me. Me a Pratt!

(He frowned.)

CARTER: Oh, for fuck sake, do you want to go or don't you?

(Angel frowned, shocked by his coarseness.)

ANGEL: Actually...

CARTER: No. Look, sorry. I made a mess of that. Forget I asked.

(He pointed over his shoulder.)

CARTER: I'm just going over to there to self flagellate, then I'll come back and ask you again. Excuse me.

(As he started to turn, Cherry pulled an overly cheerful, squinting face and gave him an exaggerated wave.)

CHERRY: Bye!

(Giving her a half-hearted, stunted wave in return, he then wandered away with his head in his hands.)

ANGEL: What the hell was that all about?

CHERRY: Guys get nervous around you.

(She chuckled.)

CHERRY: And they hate being polite to me.

ANGEL: Somewhere in all that waffle, he asked me to the formal, didn't he?

(Cherry nodded happily.)

CHERRY: Yup.

(Angel sighed.)

ANGEL: I can't go with him; I already said I'd go with you.

(Cherry was not amused.)

CHERRY: Oh, piss off!

ANGEL: What?

CHERRY: You've liked that guy for ages; now he's asked you out, you want to turn him down?

ANGEL: I guess so, yeah.

CHERRY: No way. I'm not having that. I don't want you missing out because of me.

ANGEL: I won't be missing out. If I wanted to go with a guy, I'd have said yes to one of the other four who asked me. I enjoy spending time with you.

CHERRY: Bollocks, you've got all summer for that. You're going with Carter!

(She looked extremely peeved.)

CHERRY: You've turned down guys for my sake before?

ANGEL: Yeah...

CHERRY: I wish you'd told me that before. I'm not having that. Just because I'm a social outcast, you don't have to be one too.

ANGEL: Cherry...

CHERRY: Cherry, nothing. You're going with Carter! If you don't go with him, then I won't go at all. So you either go with him or you go on your own.

(Angel pouted.)

ANGEL: You won't go with me?

CHERRY: I'd love to, but this is a great opportunity for you to get with the guy you like. What kind of sister would I be if I got in the way of that?

ANGEL: Well...

CHERRY: That's settled then. Go with Carter.

(Seeing Cherry's resolved face, Angel knew she wasn't bluffing and nodded.)

ANGEL: Okay, but on one condition.

(Cherry gave her an enquiring glance.)

ANGEL: On the condition you'll still go.

CHERRY: Of course I will. I can't wait to wear my dress, I already told you that. Just promise me you'll talk to me while we're there.

(Angel scoffed.)

ANGEL: No chance. I aint having you cramp my style.

(As Cherry started to laugh, Angel gave her a hug.)

ANGEL: Thanks, sis. I love you.

(Cherry hugged her back.)

CHERRY: I love you, too.

(Just then, Carter returned and stood before them in his favoured stance, looking down at them with a chivalrous glint in his eye. Desperate not to forget the speech he'd rehearsed, he immediately launched into it.)
CARTER: Darling... oh, for fuck sake! Darling? Where the hell did that come from? (As Cherry sat and chuckled to herself, Angel smiled.)
ANGEL: It's okay, Carter.
CARTER: Sorry, I'm usually pretty good at talking to girls, it's just... I really like you and the thought of you turning me down is reducing me to a gibbering idiot. (Hearing his declaration of admiration, Angel exhaled lovingly.)
ANGEL: Oh my, *I'm* all flustered now.
(She fanned her face with her hand.)
CARTER: So... um, will you go with me?
(Looking star struck, Angel nodded.)
ANGEL: I will!
(Carter clenched his fist triumphantly.)
CARTER: Yes!
(Finding the situation too delicious to ignore, Cherry allowed her dark side to come to the fore and beamed.)
CHERRY: I'm coming too. We'll be a three.
(Carter looked horrified.)
CARTER: What???
CHERRY: What? We're twins, where she goes, I go!
CARTER: But...
CHERRY: Pick us up at 8. And we'll be expecting flowers!
(Carter was gob smacked and said nothing.)
ANGEL: She's kidding, Carter.
(Carter looked most relieved.)
CARTER: Thank fuck. No offence, Cherry.
CHERRY: None taken. Now sod off. Pick her up at eight. We've got to go and make ourselves look even more beautiful.
CARTER: Right. Eight. Got it. I know where your room is, so yeah... eight, then.
ANGEL: Later.
CARTER: Later.
(As Carter strutted away feeling rather pleased with himself, Cherry giggled to herself.)
CHERRY: That was fun. Now, come on, we'd better hurry. If we're going to make you look beautiful we've got our work cut out.
(Angel laughed.)
ANGEL: You really are a cow sometimes, Cherry.
CHERRY: I love you too. Come on.
(And so, excited about the formal, they climbed to their feet and marched away arm in arm towards the dorms.)

The dormitories in which the girls were staying consisted of a series of square rooms, along each side of a thin connecting corridor. Each block consisted of two floors with 20 rooms and a toilet block. The toilet blocks featured rows of cubicles with high cisterns; the flushable toilet yet another innovation invented by the Araminta scientists. Initially, each room contained just two beds and a table; the rest of the décor to be supplied by the room's inhabitants. Angel and Cherry had adorned their ground floor room with a bookshelf and of course, a vanity table and mirror. Cherry

in particular never wanted to be seen without her make-up on. They'd also acquired a small table, upon which sat a pot plant and a picture of their mother that Angel had once drawn in an art class. This tiny room may not have looked like much, but to the girls, this was home. After a long day's being snarled at and insulted, Cherry was especially grateful to have it. To her it was a sanctuary.

That evening, with the formal rapidly approaching and Carter Hines' arrival imminent, Angel and Cherry were greatly excited. Angel had tried not to expect too much from her date with Carter, but with Cherry even more excited about it than she was, it hadn't taken long for her to be swept away by her sister's waves of optimism for the evening. One thing nobody could ever accuse Cherry of lacking was infectious energy. All throughout getting ready for the evening out, they'd chatted excitedly, hardly pausing for breath. Between them, they'd pretty much covered every potential outcome for Angel's date and neither of them wanted to wait much longer. Thankfully, they knew they wouldn't have to. As Cherry sat before the vanity mirror, allowing her sister to run a final brush through her hair, she half expected to hear a knock on the door any second now. Looking stunning in her red and black evening dress, she looked Angel up and down in the mirror and sighed happily. Angel was sporting a knee length, black cheongsam, embroidered with a golden silk dragon, a gift from Cherry on their birthday. It had cost her a small fortune but she figured it was worth every penny. After all, it isn't everyday that the person you love more than anyone else in the world turns eighteen. Satisfied she'd done a perfect job on Cherry's hair, Angel smiled and looked to Cherry in the mirror. Upon seeing the loving look she was receiving in return, she couldn't help but smile.)
ANGEL: There, all done.

(Cherry felt her hair and smiled.)

CHERRY: Thanks, sis. You look amazing in that dress.

(Angel grinned.)

ANGEL: I know.

(She stooped and gave Cherry on quick hug.)

ANGEL: You look amazing too.

CHERRY: Yeah, but you look sensational. You really do.

ANGEL: Thanks.

(Cherry chuckled, her sense of humour never far from the fore.)

CHERRY: I mean it. You look almost as hot as me.

ANGEL: Oh, really?

CHERRY: Don't feel bad, that's good going considering the head start I had.

(Angel laughed.)

ANGEL: Now I know you're joking.

CHERRY: Hey, less of that, Angel. Unless you want me to tell Carter some of your best kept secrets, you should be very nice to me right now.

ANGEL: Yeah, right. Even you aint that low.

(Rising to her feet, Cherry chuckled and gave her a playful slap on the arm.)

CHERRY: What do you mean, "even I aint that low"?

(They then stepped into each others arms to share a warm hug.)

ANGEL: Well done, babe. We got through this year together.

CHERRY: Yeah, somehow. Thanks, Angel. I couldn't have got through it without you.

(Thankfully before they could get over emotional and ruin their mascara, their warm and tender moment was interrupted by a soft knock on the door, followed by a less than confident, male voice.)

CARTER: It's me... me, Carter!

(As the word "Pratt" followed, Angel chuckled and went to open the door. Much to her surprise, Cherry bundled past her.)

CHERRY: Wait.

(With that, she flung open the door and gestured towards Angel with a full extension of her arm, accompanied by a triumphant "ta-da". Upon sighting a blushing Angel, Carter's mouth fell open.)

CARTER: Um... Ooh.

CHERRY: Well said.

CARTER: Huh?

(As he entered the room, Cherry closed the door behind him.)

CHERRY: Don't have her back too late.

(Carter was still numb from sighting Angel's beauty to make a coherent sentence and shook an astonished head.)

CARTER: Beautiful.

ANGEL: Thanks.

(As Angel turned to pick up her bag, Cherry smiled at her before standing on tip-toe and putting her face to Carter's.)

CHERRY: If you so much as even think of hurting her, I'll hunt you down and kill you, got it?

(As Cherry sunk to her heels again, Carter was bewildered. He'd never seen Cherry's resolved face before. He'd seen her scared face, her pained expression and her bewildered frown, but never such a warrior-like look of evil. Mostly he was bewildered because that kind of look coming from a girl like Cherry was far from intimidating. She'd strike fear into nobody and he had no idea why she did it. Oblivious to his thoughts, Cherry was satisfied she'd scared him into respecting her sister and smiled to herself with contentment. As Angel returned with her bag, Cherry then thrust open the door and beamed.)

CHERRY: Have a nice time, kids.

(Eager to be anywhere that Cherry wasn't, Carter swiftly exited. Before passing through the door, Angel stopped and gave her sister a lecturing look.)

ANGEL: Now don't be long. I'll see you there, okay?

CHERRY: Relax; I'll be like... five minutes.

(Angel smiled.)

ANGEL: Good. See you in a bit then.

CHERRY: Sure, and don't worry. If things go well later, I'll be sure to make myself scarce.

(She winked.)

ANGEL: Cherry, it's not likely to come to that.

(Allowing herself a quick glance to see if Carter was in earshot, she then returned the wink and smiled.)

ANGEL: Thanks, sis. I owe you one.

CHERRY: Yeah, you do. Now go on. Can't keep lover boy waiting.

(And following a brief mimed kiss to each others cheek as not to mess up their lipstick, Angel passed through the door. As she took Carter's arm and headed away down the corridor, Cherry rested her head on the door frame and watched them go. Seeing her sister saunter away, looking beautiful, she felt like she finally understood

why her mother had gushed when she watched them enter the academy together a year ago. Even though Angel had had dates before, this was to an academy formal and it was a big deal to girls their age. It was a proud moment.

As Carter and Angel rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, Cherry slowly closed the door and looked about their room. A horrible thought then struck her. What was she going to do for a whole five minutes? Now, for most people this wouldn't have been a problem. For one as hyperactive as Cherry, however, killing five minutes would be like a slow torture. She started by sitting on her bed and counting. She only made it to nine, however, before getting up to look out of the window instead. Immediately realising the futility of trying to see anything interesting on a dark night like this, her shoulders hunched. How she wished she'd said three minutes. Eventually, she pulled a book from the shelf and read the last page to see how it ended. Screwing her face up as she perused the page, it didn't take her long to start rolling her eyes. Deciding it was a stupid ending without ever considering what the story might have been, or even finishing the entire page, she groaned and threw the book on the bed.)

CHERRY: Load of rubbish.

(Unable to sit still, even for a moment, she then headed over to the mirror. Having checked out her dress and heels in various different poses, she let out a beaten sigh.)

CHERRY: All dressed up and nowhere to go... for five whole minutes!

(Being driven slightly mad by her own impatience, she placed herself sideways on the chair in front of the vanity mirror and proceeded to tap her knees and look about the room again. Only ninety seconds had passed and already the strain was becoming too much.)

CHERRY: That's must be five minutes by now.

(She climbed to her feet then sat back down again, admitting to herself it had been nowhere near five minutes.)

CHERRY: For pity's sake.

(Then, she had an idea. To kill time she could use the block of toilets on the upper level. By the time she'd been there and came back to collect her bag, five minutes were bound to have passed. Pleased with her ingenious plan, she upped and headed out of the door towards the stairwell. Lifting the bottom of her long dress, she gingerly tip-toed up the stairs being careful not to catch her heels on the steps before darting down the upstairs corridor and into the toilet block. She'd never been up there before and that in itself just added to the adventure. The fact it looked exactly like the toilet block downstairs, was neither here or there, Cherry was just delighted to be passing the time by doing something new. Having slid herself into a cubicle and closed the door behind her, she lifted her dress and slipped her underwear down to her ankles before taking a seat. Wearing a big smile, she then read the words that were etched into the door as she went about doing her business.)

CHERRY: Cherry Wroxford is a slag!

(Her brow instantly furrowed. To make matters worse, a voice then piped up from a few cubicles away.)

GIRL: Oh my god, she so totally is.

CHERRY: What?

GIRL: I heard she's sleeping with Master Rauchen, that's why he passed her.

(Cherry was far from amused and replied most indignantly.)

CHERRY: I can assure you...

GIRL: I wouldn't be surprised, you know. You can tell from the slutty way she acts, she's had a few cocks in her time, that one.

CHERRY: Hey, I'm a v...

(Her brow then furrowed deeper.)

CHERRY: When? When did you *ever* see her act like a slut?

(There was a brief silence before the reply came.)

GIRL: Well... she must do. It says so on this cubicle door.

(Realising this girl clearly had no idea what she was saying and was merely jumping on the Cherry hating bandwagon, she frowned then sat there silently, wondering exactly what else was written about her on the cubicle doors.)

GIRL: I feel sorry for her sister. I can't believe those two are related.

(With a scowl, Cherry tilted her head to listen.)

GIRL: I certainly don't believe they're twins. Angel's hair is a lighter blonde and she's three inches taller!

CHERRY: Not all twins are identical, you know?

GIRL: Yeah, well those two certainly aint. Cherry's a fucking idiot.

(Ignoring the comment, Cherry finished her business then fixed her clothing as the girl continued.)

GIRL: Were you there this afternoon when she got punched? Oh my god, it was so funny.

(At this point, a dark look crossed Cherry's brow. Having had enough of this annoying person, she slipped from her cubicle and walked in front of the row of toilets to find the one the girl was in. Satisfied she'd picked the right one, she slipped her shoes off and hoisted her dress up tight to her hips. Ready to make a swift exit, she then crept into the cubicle next to the girl, climbed onto the toilet seat and reached over to pull the chain flusher of the toilet the offending girl was sitting on. As the girl screeched with discomfort, her cries almost drowned out by the flushing sound, Cherry beat a hasty retreat. With no other thought other than escaping before the girl could emerge and beat her senseless, she leapt off the toilet and fled with her shoes in her hand and her dress high round her waist. Hoping against hope she wouldn't be spotted she charged back downstairs to her room, not even pausing to pull her dress back down and cover her modesty. Feeling thoroughly relieved that nobody had seen her, she almost flattening the door of her room in her haste to get inside. As she slammed the door behind her, she leant up against it and took a moment to get her breath back. Delighted to have got away with it, she allowed herself a wry smile before sliding her dress back down over her thighs. In that moment, she felt all warm inside. Not only was revenge sweet but surely now the five minutes had passed. Feeling pleased with herself, she placed her heels down and stepped into them.)

CHERRY: Yay, I'm tall again.

(And following a last check of her appearance in the vanity mirror, she grabbed her tiny handbag and strode back out of the door and off down the corridor, excited about seeing her sister at the formal.

It would be no understatement to say that Cherry had endured a horrible year. It had started off with such high hopes and descended into misery. To be able to end the year wearing a nice dress and hopefully enjoying a dance or two was something she was thoroughly looking forward to. I didn't matter if she'd be teased or receive dagger looks, so long as she could enjoy some of it with the only person whose opinion mattered to her anyway, Angel. For her, this would be a nice way to draw a line under everything. To her mind, ending the year on a high note would help her

prepare to start afresh after the summer. And so, with a spring in her step, she hummed a merry tune to herself as she emerged from the front door of her dormitory. Having paused to smell the fresh night air, she then strode from the building towards the gates to head for the civic centre in town where the formal was being held.

Wearing her trademark smile, something her peers had failed to make disappear, she swung her little bag back and forth and continued to hum to herself. Listening to the sound of her heels as she paced, she tipped her head from side to side in time with the rhythm of her feet. Lost in her own, merry little world, she didn't notice four silhouettes in the shadows beneath the trees just beyond the gates. Oblivious to their presence, she strode onwards, her mind wandering onto whether Angel was enjoying her date or not. As she passed through the gates, however, her happy thoughts were disturbed by the sound of an angry young woman's voice.)

FLORA: Hey, you. Bitch face!

(Having not seen anyone, Cherry was given quite a start. Following a startled scream, she held her hand to her chest and gasped for breath.)

CHERRY: You scared the life out of me.

(Before she could carry through her intention of ignoring them and walking on, the four scowling girls, also in evening dresses, emerged from the darkness and blocked her path. Not wanting to antagonise or encourage them in any way, Cherry took half a step to her left as if to go around them.)

CHERRY: Sorry, I'm in your way.

(She could tell from the looks on their faces they had menace about them and her heart started to race. All she wanted to do was get to the formal and see her sister; she had no desire for any kind of conflict. Unfortunately for her, the four girls thought otherwise and stepped in her way again.)

FLORA: Where the fuck do you think you're going, bitch?

(Her path blocked, Cherry stopped and pouted nervously. Feeling immensely intimidated, she said nothing.)

FLORA: Hey, I asked you a question!

(Flora and her three friends had always been among the worst offenders when it came to Cherry-baiting. From calling her names and daubing obscenely hurtful graffiti in various places about the academy, they'd undertaken a whole host of nasty tactics in their bid to hurt her, including throwing her uniform in the lake. Of course, there was never any proof. This was however, the first time she'd been confronted by them outside the academy. Naturally, she was more than a little scared by them. She didn't know how to defend herself and Angel wasn't there to help her. Hoping against hope they'd just leave her be, she nervously pointed behind them and spoke in a shy voice.)

CHERRY: I just want to...

(Before she could say another word, Flora snarled and stepped forth at her, pushing her down to the ground as she did so. As her backside thudded to the floor, Cherry immediately tried to crawl backwards. She wanted no part in any violence.)

CHERRY: Leave me alone.

(Flora didn't need any encouragement to hurt Cherry, nevertheless her three friends offered her plenty.)

KELLY: Punch her.

KERRY: Yeah, go on, punch her.

AMY: In the face.

(Without replying, Flora swooped down and grabbed Cherry's neck, pulling her fist back. Instinctively, Cherry tried to pull away but Flora was too strong for her.)

FLORA: Listen, you dirty fucking whore, we don't want you at the formal. We just want one night without you fucking everything up, got it?

(Cherry just winced, fearing she'd follow her words with a punch.)

FLORA: I asked you a question.

KELLY: Hospitalise the bitch, then she definitely won't go.

AMY: Yeah, go on, kick her head in.

(Flora released her neck and stood tall over her.)

FLORA: It's just a warning this time, bitch. We're all sick of you fucking up.

You've made our entire class look like morons this year. We deserve at least one night without you.

(Cherry pouted up at her from the ground and spoke in a small, nervous voice.)

CHERRY: But... Angel's waiting for...

FLORA: We fucking know where Angel is! She came by a minute ago!

CHERRY: But...

(Flora sneered harder.)

FLORA: Angel deserves to be there. You don't!

(Not wanting to let her sister down, even for a moment, Cherry attempted to climb to her feet only to be thrown down again. As she thudded to the ground she let out a cry of pain and tears started to well in her eyes. Flora scoffed.)

FLORA: Yeah, go on, fucking cry!

(With that, she kicked Cherry hard on the leg with her pointy-toed shoe, much to her three friends' delight. Forcing back the tears, Cherry wiped her eyes and tried in vain to speak.)

FLORA: Cry!!! Like I did when my dad beat me 'cause our class kept coming last.

(Recalling the painful memory in her head, it was as if a dark cloud formed over Flora's head. Wearing an almost demonic look of hatred, she snarled and clenched her fists before launching into the prostrate Cherry with a vicious array of punches and kicks.)

FLORA: Fucking bitch, that was all your fault!!!

(All Cherry could do was cover her head as fists and pointed shoes, thudded all about her body. Unable to get away from the unrelenting assault, she was desperately screaming for help. Flora's three friends, previously so keen for Cherry to get a beating, couldn't believe what they were seeing and leapt in to pull her off.)

AMY: Fucking hell, Flora.

KELLY: Stop it, you'll kill her.

KERRY: She ain't worth it!!!

FLORA: Fucking bitch!!!

(Having seen red, it took an almighty effort from Flora's three friends to even begin dragging her away. Despite Cherry now begging for mercy, she just kept on hitting her. Fearing they'd be caught and expelled, or that Flora might get arrested for murder if she continued, they eventually managed to drag her back, albeit kicking and screaming. After a good thirty seconds or so, unable to continue issuing the beating, Flora finally relented struggling and bellowed to her friends.)

FLORA: Alright, alright. Get the fuck off of me!!!

(Nervously, they relented restraining her and watched her with wide, cautious eyes.)

KELLY: You, okay?

(Still glaring at the floored girl she'd beaten, Flora bellowed.)

FLORA: No, I'm not okay. Fuck off back to the dorms, Cherry. If you come to the formal I'll fucking kill you. I hate you!!!

(She burst into tears.)

FLORA: Fuckin' hate you.

(With that, she raced off towards town. Desperately worried about their friend's state of mind, Kelly, Kerry and Amy immediately raced off after her leaving Cherry crying and squirming on the ground, bent double with pain. Winded and only just conscious, she barely moved for a whole minute. Finally able to breathe again after receiving a savage kick in the stomach, Cherry lifted her aching head to see her bag and all its contents strewn across the ground. With tears falling from her eyes, hardly able to comprehend what had happened, she struggled to her knees and crawled over to it. Having limply pushed the contents back into the bag, she staggered to her knees and cried her heart out as she limped back to the dorms. She hadn't seen it coming. Despite all the hatred she'd received, she never expected this. Degraded and humiliated, she headed inside, a broken shell of the girl of who exited the building only a brief while ago.

As she struggled through the door of her room, Cherry collapsed, exhausted to her knees. In that moment, she wanted Angel to come back and hold her. Her sole desire was for her beloved twin to come home and cuddle her and make everything alright again as only her words ever could. She was devastated. Wearing an empty expression, she sighed sorrowfully to herself and looked up towards her bed. She ached all over and seeing it made her desperately want to lay down. Slowly and wearily, she pulled herself to her feet. That was when she spotted her reflection in the mirror. The sight of mascara running down the tear strewn face that stared back at her, made her feel a sense of discomfort she'd never felt before. In that moment, she hated herself. All she could see was the same bumbling idiot the rest of her class chose to see. Disgusted by her own reflection, she felt a rage burn inside of her. As her anger boiled, she kicked off her shoes and ferociously yanked her dress over her head. She didn't feel weak any more and the pains from her beating meant nothing. She'd been given a resurgence in energy, fuelled by self-loathing. Seething at herself, she tore the cotton headband from her hair and threw it at the mirror. As she watched it plop to the ground, a few inches in front of her, courtesy of her lame throw, her shoulders dropped and she wept to herself. Right now she forgot all the things she did well, her mind had plummeted in a wholly negative mode. She couldn't even get in a temper right and her throwing was pathetic. Feeling quite depressed, she sneered at her reflection and trudged to her bed wearing only her bra and knickers. Dropping onto the mattress she then lay perfectly still and stared, long-faced, straight ahead. Her spirit was well and truly broken.

For thirty minutes, Cherry lay there, not moving a muscle. She was numb. It was only when she let her eyes drift to her sister's bed that she felt any hint of emotion. She missed Angel. With a sigh, she tried to think what her sister might say to her at a time like this. Her mind was blank. With a defeated sigh, she rolled onto her back when she felt a severe pain in her shoulder. Sitting up with a start, she rubbed the painful area and winced. Noticing it was bright red and a little swollen, she muttered a few obscenities under her breath and sat up. The obscenities were partly a reaction to her pain but mostly because once again, she knew she'd have to visit the infirmary, by now almost her second home. Wearing a sadden frown, she then upped and headed for the door. She didn't like the infirmary. The nurse, especially the one on the night shift, was somewhat lacking in a bedside manner and despaired of Cherry for taking up so much of her time. Nevertheless, she knew she had to go. Offering

the mirror one last scowl as she headed for the door, she noticed her reflection and stopped dead in her tracks.)

CHERRY: Oh crap, I can't go out there like this!

(Normally, doing something silly like almost going out in her underwear would make her giggle, but not tonight. She couldn't even force a smile. Her heart was heavy.

All too aware about the school rule to wear the uniform at all times when on campus, she sighed and reached for her blouse.

Moments later, having struggled to put on her blouse, neck-tie and socks and zip up her skirt with such a painful shoulder, she slipped her feet into her shoes and made her way into the corridor. Barely able to move her shoulder as it throbbed with pain, she winced and groaned her way across the campus to the main academy building in which the infirmary was housed. As she made her way into the building, looking thoroughly miserable, she sighed to herself. She couldn't help but wonder how long she'd be in the infirmary. More than anything in the world, she wanted to know how Angel and Carter's date went. Hoping she wouldn't be there for long, she paced up to the infirmary door and reached for the handle. Without slowing, she twisted the door knob and walked face first in the locked door.)

CHERRY: Ouch!

(Looking furious, she kicked the door.)

CHERRY: Fucking thing.

(Just then, an older man's voice boomed out from behind her.)

VOICE: Hello? Anyone there?

(Having been given quite a start by the loud, unexpected voice, she spun around and yelped.)

CHERRY: No!

(The man laughed and replied in a softer tone.)

VOICE: Silly me. Must have imagined it.

(Feeling quite foolish, she looked to see where the voice had come from. Upon seeing the open door to the library opposite her, she crept to the doorway and peeped inside. Sitting at one of the tables, reading a large book, sat the Ubermaster. The Ubermaster was a rank given to the head of a combat academy. Normally this senior figure was kept at a distance from the students. Seeing him was either a major honour or a prelude to expulsion. Having never seen the Ubermaster before, Cherry assumed he was the janitor and sighed to herself as she stepped into the doorway.)

CHERRY: You pillock, you almost gave me a heart attack.

(The Ubermaster raised an eyebrow and peered over his book at her. Sighting the sad-faced girl as she rubbed her painful shoulder, he sat back and rubbed his chin, placing the book on the table.)

UBERMASTER: And who might you be, young lady?

(Cherry hung her head.)

CHERRY: I'm nobody.

UBERMASTER: Doubtful. Everybody is somebody.

(Cherry just shook her head.)

CHERRY: I just wanted to see the nurse.

(As he sat forward, the Ubermaster placed his elbows on the table and linked his fingers together to rest his chin on.)

UBERMASTER: She's at the formal of course. Question is; why aren't you?

(Not wishing to discuss her problems with a stranger, Cherry just shrugged.)

UBERMASTER: I see. What's your name, young lady?

(Feeling quite put out by this Janitor's forwardness, Cherry reeled back slightly.)

CHERRY: I'm not telling you that.

(As the Ubermaster scowled, Cherry slowly paced backwards away from the door.)

CHERRY: You might be some pervert for all I know.

(He laughed, much to Cherry's annoyance.)

CHERRY: Well, you might be.

(As he continued to laugh, Cherry sneered.)

CHERRY: What's so funny? Haven't you got a floor to clean?

(Allowing his laugh to subside, the Ubermaster smiled.)

UBERMASTER: What if I tell you my name first?

(Cherry sighed and started to turn away.)

CHERRY: Look, I'm sure you're a nice bloke but I've had a really horrible day. I don't care what your name is. If the nurse isn't here, I'm going back to my room.

(She then sighed and started to walk away.)

CHERRY: Bye!

(In that moment, the man's voice deepened and he spoke in a deeply serious tone.)

UBERMASTER: I asked you your name, young lady!

CHERRY: And I told you I'm not telling you, you pervert!

(The Ubermaster then bellowed as she started to trot away in fear of the stranger.)

UBERMASTER: Then I'll tell you mine. It's Arkane. Ubermaster Arkane!

(Cherry instantly froze on the spot and shuddered. Calling the Ubermaster a pillock and a pervert probably wasn't a good idea and she knew it. Looking sheepish, she gulped and crept apologetically back into the library.)

CHERRY: Um... I'm expelled aren't I?

(She pouted nervously, expecting at the very least to receive quite a dressing down, when much to her surprise, the Ubermaster smiled warmly.)

UBERMASTER: You weren't to know.

(She shook a solemn head.)

CHERRY: I don't seem to know anything these days. Sorry.

(Having scanned her with his eyes for a few moments, the Ubermaster, Arkane, scratched his chin.)

ARKANE: You've hurt your shoulder, I see.

(She nodded nervously. To be in the presence of such an esteemed personage as the Ubermaster was more than a little daunting. Afraid to say anything in case she offended him further, she stood quietly and stared at the floor. Noting the girl's nervous disposition, Arkane stood and approached her.)

ARKANE: I'm pretty good at interpreting injuries; let me have a look at you.

(Too shy to object, she tensed up and allowed him to approach her and lay his hand on her paining shoulder.)

ARKANE: Hmm...

(As he felt up and down her arm and over her shoulder, squeezing his fingers together with each movement, Cherry winced, defying herself to scream, despite his shovel like hand squashing into her flesh.)

ARKANE: Don't be a martyr on my account, young lady, scream if it hurts.

(Needing no second invitation, she immediately yelped at the top of her lungs.)

CHERRY: Ouch, ouch, ouch... that hurt.

(Arkane stood tall and folded his arms.)

ARKANE: Well the good news is, it's not broken or dislocated. It's probably just severe bruising.

(Taking a deep breath, he then sat on the nearest table and looked her in the eyes.)

ARKANE: So, did you fall down the stairs or something?

(Not wanting to admit what happened to her, Cherry nodded. She didn't want to look weak in front of the Ubermaster and she certainly didn't want to get the girls who beat her into trouble. Doing that would only bring forth another beating. Acknowledging her solemn nod, Arkane grimaced.)

ARKANE: You know it never ceases to amaze me how many students fall down the stairs right after someone's beat them black and blue.

(Fearing she'd been rumbled, Cherry looked up and gave him a protesting look, still too nervous to speak.)

ARKANE: Those marks on your neck and forearm are from punches. From a female fist I believe.

(He frowned.)

ARKANE: Either that or we have a very effeminate dwarf at the academy. You were either beaten up or you fell down the stairs and landed on her fist. If it's the latter then you must have gone back up the stairs straight afterwards and done it again. Several times. Nobody's that clumsy!

(As Cherry's bottom lip quivered, Arkane sighed.)

ARKANE: It's alright; I won't push you to tell me who did it. I don't want to make you any more uncomfortable than you already are.

(He smiled.)

ARKANE: So, young lady, what's your name?

(Managing to raise a nervous head, Cherry looked him in the eye then looked away before she replied.)

CHERRY: Cherry.

(Upon hearing her name, Arkane looked enlightened and a knowing look crossed his brow. Barely able to summon the courage to glance at the esteemed gentleman, Cherry just hung her head. She hardly even flinched when Arkane folded his arms and started to talk to her.)

ARKANE: Cherry Wroxford I assume.

(He allowed himself a smile.)

ARKANE: At least you'd better be, there's only one girl... I mean, young lady, in this academy called, Cherry. You're pretty famous, my dear.

(Finally he had her attention. Looking crestfallen, she lifted her head to Arkane to hear what stories he'd been told about her.)

ARKANE: You're the one who set a new record for getting hit by a bean bag.

(Cherry sighed. Of all the stories she was sick of hearing that was the one that galled her the most.)

ARKANE: I've had six letters about you from parents of angry classmates. They all demanded their child be put in a different class. Away from you.

(Cherry pouted and felt a lump in her throat. Even here she was being reminded how useless she was. Fully expecting Arkane to go on and list all her faults before giving her a severe telling off, she could do nothing to stop a tear running down her cheek. Much to her surprise, however, Arkane smiled up and put his arm around her.)

ARKANE: Still, you don't deserve to get beaten up like that.

(Wearing a kindly smile, he gestured for her to sit on a nearby chair. She silently obliged. As she sat, Arkane crouched before her and lifted her saddened head with his open hand so she could look him in the eye. Widening his already warm smile, he then spoke softly to her tearful eyes.)

ARKANE: Don't cry.

(Despite his kindness being just the excuse she needed to burst in tears, she fought back the urge to cry and sighed.)

ARKANE: Now. Where are you going wrong?

(Feeling a little overwhelmed, Cherry just stared at him.)

ARKANE: After all the complaints, I looked you up in our files. Straight 'A' student at your previous school, your teachers adored you. Where do you think you're going wrong?

(Desperate to say something rather than looking like an idiot, Cherry spoke in a small voice.)

CHERRY: I keep doing everything wrong.

ARKANE: Yes, but why? What makes a bright, popular and dare I say, pretty little thing like you suddenly become a dunce and an outcast?

(In that moment, Cherry warmed to him. Having seen her records, this was one of only a few people who knew about the times when she wasn't a failure. This man might not be so quick to dismiss her. Slightly perking up, Cherry thought to herself and spoke in an uncertain voice.)

CHERRY: Well... maybe it's something...

ARKANE: Go on.

(Noticing his readiness to listen to her, Cherry spoke up. With caution in her voice, she chose her words very carefully.)

CHERRY: You see, I tried at first but I just couldn't understand what they were trying to teach me. It was like all the other students knew what to do when they got here and I was the only one who didn't. I was never good at activities or sports and I kind of got left behind. After a while, even when I thought I was trying my best, it didn't really *feel* like I was. You know... I felt like I could try so much harder but I actually couldn't.

(She sighed.)

CHERRY: That probably sounds ridiculous.

ARKANE: No, not at all.

CHERRY: But how can I not try harder when I'm not trying my hardest?

ARKANE: Maybe you were already trying your hardest.

(She shrugged.)

CHERRY: I don't know. I can't explain it.

(Arkane looked uncertain.)

ARKANE: So, what exactly did your teacher do to help?

(Cherry's expression turned completely blank.)

ARKANE: I see.

CHERRY: He did say one thing...

ARKANE: Okay.

CHERRY: At first... it was the first week I think, he told me I was using my heart too much. He said I needed to use my head.

ARKANE: Right.

CHERRY: I assumed he meant he wanted me to think more and be less passionate. Well, I tried that and he moaned at me for not having enough heart.

(Her shoulders sunk.)

CHERRY: I didn't get it. I still don't.

ARKANE: And naturally he didn't explain it any further.

(Cherry just nodded to herself. Taking a moment to observe her words, Arkane rubbed his chin and lifted himself to his feet. Wearing an embittered frown, he then placed his backside on the table next to Cherry's seat and groaned out loud.)

ARKANE: You know, Cherry. May I call you that? Of course, I can, I'm the Ubermaster. You know, teachers these days are a waste of bloody space.
(Having never expected to hear that kind of rhetoric from an Ubermaster, Cherry looked up in amazement.)

ARKANE: They assume too much and teach very little. Most of them just stand by while you teach yourself. They're there to help, to pass on the wisdom, to teach the bloody teachings, but woe betide any poor bugger who tries to get any help.
(He stood up and continued his rant to Cherry's astonished face.)

ARKANE: And they have such a simple job too. All they have to do is tell you the basics then sit back and guide you as you grow. Well, they've got the sitting back part down to a tee. They seem to assume everyone will already know the basics and give the teaching part a miss. They never seem to realise some of their students aren't as advanced as others. That's how people get left behind.
(He reached his hand out to Cherry.)

ARKANE: Stand up, Miss Wroxford. If they don't know how to teach you then I'll just have to do it myself. I'll teach you something in five minutes that might just change your life.

(Looking more than a little apprehensive, Cherry took his hand and climbed to her feet.)

ARKANE: Good girl... I mean young lady.
(He frowned.)

ARKANE: Apparently I can't call you young ladies "girls". Stupid politically correct nonsense. You're not offended if someone calls you a girl, are you?

(Cherry replied in a bewildered voice, extremely nervous about making a mess of whatever Arkane wanted to teach her.)

CHERRY: No, not at all.

ARKANE: I didn't think so. Anyway, to the point...
(He pulled a small bean bag from his pocket.)

ARKANE: Don't ask why I've got this on me. It's a long and bewildering story involving a gopher.

(Cherry looked even more bewildered than before and spoke up in a baffled voice.)

CHERRY: A gopher?

ARKANE: Like I said, don't ask. Now.
(He paced back five feet and about turned.)

ARKANE: You're no good at sport, you said, right?
(Cherry nodded nervously.)

ARKANE: Good. Here, catch.

(With that, he threw the bean bag to her softly. Taken by surprise, Cherry flailed her arms at it and missed it completely. As the bean bag hit her chest and plopped to the ground, she pouted and bit her fingernail apologetically.)

CHERRY: Sorry. I'm rubbish at catching.

ARKANE: Don't apologise. Throw the bean bag back to me.

(Clueless as to the point of the exercise, Cherry bent down and picked up the bean bag before walking over to Arkane with it.)

ARKANE: I asked you to throw it.

(Sounding thoroughly embarrassed, Cherry squeaked her words.)

CHERRY: My throwing is worse than my catching.

ARKANE: I see. Anyway, go back and I'll throw it again.

(Obeying him to the very letter, she did as she was told and sure enough, he threw her the bean bag again.)

ARKANE: Catch.

(As she flung her arms at the bean bag only to be hit in the face by it, her heart sunk. She was making a mess of it in front of the Ubermaster of all people. She feared the worst.)

CHERRY: I'm sorry. I can't do it!

(Arkane nodded.)

ARKANE: I know.

(Collecting the bean bag himself, he knelt before Cherry and looked up into her saddened eyes.)

ARKANE: Don't worry about it, Cherry; this is all part of the lesson. I can see you're trying your best and that's all I'll ever ask of you, okay?

(Heartened but still unconvinced, Cherry forced a smile.)

CHERRY: Okay.

(As he headed back to his spot with the bean bag, Cherry watched him go and sighed. Just like any other lesson here at Northgate Academy, this made no sense to her either. As Arkane turned, he folded his arms and spoke to her in a positive tone.)

ARKANE: This time, watch the bean bag. Nothing but the bean bag.

(He held the bean bag before his face.)

ARKANE: I'll be watching your eyes. Forget what your hands are doing, I want you to look at the bean bag only. Right?

(Cherry replied in an equally positive tone.)

CHERRY: Right.

(Absorbing his words, Cherry nodded and stared at the bean bag. Testing her, Arkane moved it from side to side and watched as her eyes followed it hypnotically.)

ARKANE: Good. Now, catch.

(As the bean bag flew towards her, Cherry's heart-raced. She wanted nothing more than to catch it and spare her blushes. Knowing all too well that her own way of catching things didn't work, she determinedly followed Arkane's instructions and kept her eyes firmly fixed on the bean bag. Much to her annoyance, however, despite having done everything he told her to, her flailing arms only managed to bat the bean bag back towards Arkane.)

CHERRY: Oh, poop.

(As she stamped her foot angrily, expecting a lecture for her inadequacy, Arkane picked up the bean bag and threw it straight back at her.)

ARKANE: Catch.

(Taken by complete surprise, Cherry's eyes bulged at the sight of the bean bag heading her way so unexpectedly. Without even giving it a second thought, she thrust her hands towards it, staring at it in horror. As the bean bag flew towards her, she didn't have time to panic or contemplate the consequences of failure, all she could do was try and grab it or dive out of the way. With no time for the second option, she adjusted her wrist and caught it squarely in the palm of her hand. As Arkane clapped, Cherry's mouth fell open and she held the bean bag in front of her.)

CHERRY: I... I caught it.

ARKANE: You did.

(Much to Arkane's amazement, tears of joy welled in her eyes.)

CHERRY: I caught it!!!

(With that, she threw it over her shoulder and ran to Arkane, throwing her arms around him. Amused by her appalling breach of etiquette, he grinned and gave a deliberate cough. Immediately realising it was more than likely forbidden to hug the Ubermaster, Cherry jumped back and blushed.)

CHERRY: Sorry.

ARKANE: It's quite alright.

CHERRY: It's just... I've never caught anything before. I mean never. Even in my old school they called me "no hands, Cherry".

(She beamed and muttered under her breath.)

CHERRY: I caught it.

(Much to her surprise, Arkane then ushered her swiftly back to her seat.)

ARKANE: Come on, now the final part of the lesson.

(As she rushed back and sat on the chair, Arkane stood before her and folded his arms.)

ARKANE: What you just learned was the source of the teaching, nothing more. If we kept throwing the bean bag for the next hour or so, eventually you'd be catching it every time. If I hadn't taught you the basic of keeping your eye on it, however, I promise you, you wouldn't even catch it once.

(Cherry looked to him with concentration etched on her face. Arkane had more than earned her trust and she desperately didn't want to let him down.)

ARKANE: Catching, like every other skill in life is merely a basic. Once you learn the basic skill, it's then down to you to perfect it with practice. If you can't master the basic, then you'll never learn the skill. This is what teachers forget. They assume you already know the basic skill. If you don't and they don't bother to teach you, then that's how you get left behind. That's what happened to you, Cherry Wroxford. (Without so much as a nod, Cherry listened on attentively.)

ARKANE: In your case, the matter of whether you fight with your head or your heart is simple. You fight with the head. Concentration is the difference between life and death. Awareness and thought are two of the most powerful attributes a combatant can have. But, that head must be fuelled by a strong heart. Your heart gives you the will and determination to fight on and do everything to the best of your ability. Once you learn to let your strong heart feed your focussed mind, you'll have mastered the basic skill. Then you can go on to practice and perfect your art.

(Cherry nodded nervously.)

CHERRY: I'm not sure how to go about it though, how do I...

ARKANE: It'll come, Cherry. You'll be in a situation and find determination driving you. Your mind will be strong and focussed. And from that day on, you'll understand.

(He smiled.)

ARKANE: You'll master the basics now you know what they are. I'm sure of that. And what happened last time you learned the basics?

(Cherry beamed.)

CHERRY: I caught the bean bag!

(Arkane nodded proudly at her.)

ARKANE: You caught the bean bag.

(Feeling optimism about her future at the academy for the first time in many months, Cherry gave a happy sigh. Forgetting all about her painful shoulder, she climbed to her feet and reached to shake Arkane's hand.)

CHERRY: Thank you, Ubermaster.

(Arkane pushed her hand away.)

ARKANE: A handshake? I think I deserve another hug, don't you?

(More than happy to hug the kind academic, Cherry threw her arms around him and sighed happily.)

CHERRY: Thank you, so much.

ARKANE: You're welcome.

(She looked thoughtful and looked to Arkane's face as she hugged him.)

CHERRY: Though, I wonder why my sister didn't tell me all this. She's really good at stuff.

ARKANE: Maybe she didn't know. To some, it comes naturally and they don't even realise there *is* a basic technique.

CHERRY: Yeah, that sounds about right; she's always been the sporty one.

ARKANE: Still, there's no excuse for a teacher not to know about it. I swear, any idiot can be a teacher these days.

(With that, he eased her away and smiled.)

ARKANE: Now go and get my bean bag back from where you threw it. Then you can be on your way. A sprightly young thing like you shouldn't be hanging around with an old git like me on a fine evening like this.

(He then slapped his neck and winced.)

ARKANE: Ouch! Bloody mosquito bit me!

(Thrown by his swift reaction, Cherry reeled back.)

CHERRY: You okay?

ARKANE: Yes, yes. It takes more than a pathetic insect to stop me. Now off you go, I need to return that bean bag to its rightful gopher... I mean owner.

(Cherry nodded.)

CHERRY: Okay.

(With that, she spun around and raced towards the bookshelves where she'd thrown the bean bag. Unable to see it at first, she frowned and got down on her hands and knees.)

CHERRY: Where the hell is it?

(With the bean bag nowhere to be seen, she mumbled to herself.)

CHERRY: Knowing my luck, I lost it.

(With a frown, she stood up and sauntered deeper into the shelves and away from the main seating area, where Arkane had sat to resume reading his book.

All in the library was once again silent, as it should be. Not for long, however.

Immediately immersing himself in his novel again, the kindly educator soon split the short-lived silence with an amused chuckle.)

ARKANE: Ha, ha, that guy's such an idiot...

(Enjoying the book as much for its far-fetched storyline as its sarcastic narrative, he scanned the page with a permanent grin on his face. Moments later, he rolled back his neck and laughed out loud once again.)

ARKANE: Ha, ha, that Bonson chap's a card.

(Suddenly, there was a deafening sound of glass shattering as three of the library windows smashed apart. Despite the violent interruption, Arkane coolly raised his head and saw three hooded men crash in through the glass, dressed all in black. Upon landing, two of them immediately raised bows towards him, their arrow tips pointed squarely at his head. The third climbed to his feet looking dazed and confused having hit his head on a desk. As his focus returned, he looked to Arkane and strained his eyes before speaking up in a distinctive, regional, Auland accent.)

JONES: So, we've finally got you, Arkane. It's time you paid your debt to Hamler. We're taking you back to Ardenmouth.

(Without any sign of emotion, Arkane shrugged and looked back to his book.)

ARKANE: I'll pass; Ardenmouth is crap this time of year. Thanks for coming though. See yourselves out.

(He raised his head wearing a thoughtful expression.)

ARKANE: Best use the door though, don't want to bang your head again, do you?
(He then looked to the book again. Raising a scowl, Jones glared at one of the bow wielding men.)

JONES: Find the girl, Griffiths. Evans, keep him covered.

(Immediately, Griffiths headed for the bookshelves while Evans fixed his stance.

Continuing to glance at his book, Arkane spoke up calmly.)

ARKANE: The girl went back to her dorm to get ready for the formal.

(As Griffiths paused, Jones bellowed at him.)

JONES: Don't listen to him, go and check.

GRIFFITHS: Right. Will do.

(With that, he marched into the book stacks. Feeling quite annoyed by Arkane's lack of reaction, Jones snarled.)

JONES: Nine years we've been looking for you, the least you can do is look nervous.

(Arkane groaned and placed his book on the table.)

ARKANE: It's no good; I can't read with you prattling on.

(He sighed.)

ARKANE: So, you want validation do you? Fair enough. Excellent work, I'm very intimidated. Now run along, will you? There's a good lad.

JONES: You should show us some respect, Arkane. We work for Foxton Hamler.

(Arkane rolled his eyes.)

ARKANE: Foxton Hamler is a big poof. Now go away.

(Sounding extremely peeved, the bowman, Evans, cut in.)

EVANS: Look here, you prick, we planned this for weeks. We even waited for the one night when all the students go into town for their formal dance. And now we've got you covered and defenceless. Now, look scared or else.

(Arkane chuckled.)

ARKANE: Sorry, I'd love to be scared for you but I can't. You see, arrows are quick, but I'm quicker. I could dodge those arrows and kill all three of you before you even get a chance to say "ouch".

(Just then, Griffiths returned from the stacks with a bean bag in his hand.)

GRIFFITHS: No sign of a girl. I found this bean bag though!

(He slipped the bean bag in his pocket and raised his bow at Arkane.)

GRIFFITHS: Now, who's going to tie him up?

(Hiding his relief that the intruder hadn't found Cherry, Arkane gave a deathly smirk.)

ARKANE: Yes, who wants to try that?

(They all just stared at him coldly.)

ARKANE: Oh, come on. Fight me. Please?

(Again the three intruders merely stared his way coldly.)

ARKANE: Okay, to sweeten the deal, after the fight I'll even ship your body parts back to Ardenmouth for you if you like?

JONES: You are one arrogant son of prawn cracker, Arkane.

ARKANE: I can afford to be.

(He folded his arms.)

ARKANE: Yes, you...

(He then performed a double take at Jones.)

ARKANE: Prawn cracker?

(As Jones shrugged apologetically, Arkane shook his head and continued his speech.)

ARKANE: Yes, you sensibly waited until all the combat students were somewhere else. And yes, you got in here swiftly, albeit noisily and got those weapons pointed at me. But there's one minor detail you overlooked.

JONES: Yeah right, and what's that then?

ARKANE: It takes more than three clowns like you to take *me* down. A minor oversight but nevertheless a fatal one.

(He then placed his hands on the table and rose to his feet in an intimidating manner.)

ARKANE: Let the killing begin.

(Just then, he started to feel more than a little lightheaded and disorientated.)

ARKANE: What the...

(As the world went out of focus, all Arkane could hear was Jones' sneering voice.)

JONES: We know what you're capable of, Arkane. Why do you think we hit you with a poison dart a good few minutes before we swung in?

(Starting to feel unstable, Arkane swayed on his feet.)

ARKANE: The mosquito...

JONES: Yeah, that wasn't a mosquito. That was a heavy dose of a sleep inducing poison.

EVANS: Like we'd be stupid enough to try and fight you.

JONES: Looks like the one who made the oversight was you, old man.

(Looking pale and sickly, Arkane slurred his words.)

ARKANE: Kudos. I *will* kill you though...

(With that, his legs gave way and he collapsed to the ground.)

JONES: Goodnight then.

(Looking thoroughly relieved, Griffiths and Evans lowered their bows.)

EVANS: Thank fuck. If that poison hadn't worked, we'd have been screwed.

GRIFFITHS: I know.

JONES: Yeah well, forget that for now. It worked. Let's bound him and get the hell out of here. We have to get the next ferry back to Auland before any of those students come back and find out he's missing.

EVANS: Right. Let's hurry then.

(Pulling an array of chains and handcuffs from various compartments within their clothing, the three henchmen then set about the task of securing Arkane's, motionless body. Fully aware of what a waking Arkane might be capable of, they secured and bound him tightly, making sure no limb would be freely moveable should he regain consciousness. Once they were satisfied he was suitably restrained, they wasted no time in dragging him towards the smashed windows, violently bashing the furnishings aside to make a path. Making short work of casting his body through the remains of the window, they then leapt out after him and disappeared into the night. Once again the library fell silent.

The reading area looked like a forgotten room in long neglected building. Desks and chairs were overturned and glass was strewn about the floor. The only sound was the flapping of the curtains covering the smashed panes as they blew in the breeze. The only sign of Arkane was his book, upturned on the floor. A good few minutes passed and the swirl of the billowing curtains remained the only thing to spoil the perfect silence. Just then, a frightened, barely audible whimper rose from a small cupboard in the aisles. As the cupboard door creaked open, Cherry crawled out, freeing herself from the dark, confined space where she'd hidden in a blind panic. Looking horrified and wide-eyed, she looked about herself before trudging towards the reading area like a zombie. Mortified by what she saw, she just looked about the library in wide-

mouthed horror. A few moments ago, she'd been talking to the Ubermaster here in an easy going manner. Now the welcoming and friendly room looked like a disaster zone. Absorbing the harrowing site before her, Cherry trembled. Confined in the tiny cupboard, she'd heard everything but only upon sighting the aftermath did the gravity of the situation become a reality. Ubermaster Arkane had been abducted while she trembled nearby. For a good many minutes she could do nothing but stare in a catatonic daze at the scene of the devastation. It was only when a stronger gust of wind caused a curtain to whip a desk that she snapped out of her trance. Feeling an overwhelming sense of panic, she turned and fled the scene. Without a second thought for what had happened earlier, she instinctively ran to the one person she always ran to in dire times. With fear etched on her face, she alighted the building at a great pace and raced across the campus, her heart thumping wildly. She didn't know what anyone could do to help Arkane, she just knew she couldn't do anything herself and needed help. Desperate to find that help, she thought of nothing else as she charged from the campus gate towards town.)

Northgate Ferry Port, Araminta.

(Just to the south of Northgate Unarmed Combat Academy lay some of the most picturesque golden sands anywhere in the world. This part of the country was a popular area for retiring couples and holidaying aristocrats. Some of the houses were among the most modern and beautifully designed in the whole of Araminta. Set in the midst of all this finery, lay the ferry port. A blemish on an otherwise perfect diamond. Several times a day, ferries would make their way across the twelve mile stretch of sea to the town of Birchwood in Auland and back again. Security was tight. Locked in an eternal battle to keep asylum seekers out of the country, the Araminta police kept the port under a constant vigil. All too aware of the difficulties of passing through this port, Hamler's henchmen had concocted what they thought to be a cunning plan. To get their captive out of the country they'd acquired a hearse and two black horses. Using a nearby clump of trees, just outside the port, to hide in the shadows, they loaded Arkane in a coffin and slid him into the glass carriage, surrounding it with wreaths. Having carried Arkane the mile or so from the academy they were glad to finally be free of the burden of hauling his weight. Satisfying himself that the hardest part was out of the way and their plan was now certain to work, Jones was particularly pleased with their days efforts.)

JONES: You know what, I'm a fucking genius.

GRIFFITHS: Are you? First I've heard of it.

JONES: Oh come on, this hearse plan of mine's bloody brilliant. Admit it.

(Evans rolled his eyes.)

EVANS: The plan hasn't even been executed yet and already you're hailing it a complete success.

JONES: Well come on, it's failsafe.

(He beamed.)

JONES: The perfect plan.

GRIFFITHS: You make me sick sometimes, Jones. Half of me wants this plan to fail just to wipe that smug grin off of your face.

(He scratched his head apologetically.)

GRIFFITHS: Obviously, the other half of me doesn't want to go to jail and wants it to work.

(Jones scoffed.)

JONES: You cock.

EVANS: Anyway, we're almost ready. We should get going. I won't be happy that we've got away with it until we're on the ferry.

GRIFFITHS: I agree. I don't want to get caught by hundreds of unarmed combat students. We'd better go.

JONES: Fair enough. Let's do that.

(Griffiths looked peeved.)

GRIFFITHS: Wait a minute, we can't go until you're ready, Jones.

JONES: What? I'm ready. What are you talking about?

(Griffiths winked at Evans.)

GRIFFITHS: Where's your mourning dress? Go and put it on.

(Jones looked baffled.)

JONES: Sorry, what?

GRIFFITHS: Your mourning dress. Hurry up.

JONES: What the fuck are you on about?

(Nodding cautiously to Griffiths, Evans cut in angrily.)

EVANS: Don't start that, Jones. We agreed that you'd play the grieving widow!

JONES: What???

EVANS: Now hurry up!

GRIFFITHS: And don't forget the black veil. If anyone spots your ugly mug they'll know you're not the heartbroken spouse.

EVANS: Exactly. Who'd marry someone with a face like that?

(Furrowing his brow, Jones placed his hands on his hips and scowled.)

JONES: What the hell are you two talking about? We never planned anything to do with a grieving widow.

EVANS: What? Don't tell me you forgot!

JONES: I...

GRIFFITHS: Look, the dress is in the carriage, go and put it on, will you?

(Jones looked trapped and said nothing.)

EVANS: Today, if you don't mind.

JONES: But...

(He looked thoughtful.)

JONES: Well... it's not like I've never worn a dress and stock...

(He looked mortified and coughed.)

JONES: Right, whatever. Anyway, show me the dress.

(Griffiths grinned.)

GRIFFITHS: There is no dress, Jones.

EVANS: We just wanted to make you squirm.

GRIFFITHS: And admit to cross-dressing apparently, though we probably never heard that.

(Jones snarled.)

JONES: Too right you never heard that!!! Besides, I was joking. I saw through your little plan and played along with it. I've never worn...

(Much to his annoyance, Griffiths and Evans shared a grin and climbed onto the carriage.)

JONES: It's true!!! I saw through it, I swear! You can't fool me that easily.

EVANS: Yeah right.

(As Griffiths and Evans slipped on their undertaker jackets and hats, Jones rolled his eyes and climbed on the carriage with them.)

EVANS: Anyway, you know damn well the plan was always for you to pretend to be the grieving brother. Like we'd change it.

JONES: Oh shut up.

GRIFFITHS: Maybe you'd rather be the grieving sister!

JONES: Oh, fuck off. Are we going or aren't we?

(Satisfied they'd wiped the smug look from Jones' face, Griffiths and Evans chuckled to themselves and led the carriage out of the darkness to head for the passport offices on the dockside. Jones sulked all the way.)

Northgate Town Hall, Northgate.

(Having ran from the academy in a blind panic without slowing even for a moment, Cherry found herself rapidly approaching the town hall. With no other thought than to tell her sister what had happened, she'd ducked down dark alleys and swerved crowds of people in her frantic determination to get there as quickly as possible. She didn't even show any signs of reducing her relentless pace as she reached the town hall doors. Looking desperate and flustered, she burst into the town hall foyer. As the doors flew open, the faint music she'd heard as she raced towards the building became extremely loud. Before she could even begin to follow the direction of the music and find the ballroom, however, she charged headlong into a group of girls who were chatting in the foyer. As they were all sent sprawling to the ground, Cherry included, a second group of girls looked over. Furious at what they saw, they immediately rushed over and bundled the bewildered looking Cherry back towards the doors. It was just her luck to cause such a calamity in front of the same group of girls that had beaten her up only a short while before. Assisted by the angry girls she'd knocked over, they violently dragged her outside. Determined to find Angel, Cherry struggled desperately for a moment but with ten furious girls dragging her by her clothes, hair and any part of her they could wrap their angry hands around, she was powerless to stop them throwing her back outside to the ground. As she thudded to earth, looking devastated and terrified, the girls crowded over her like a pack of wolves snarling at their prey. Determined to get help, however, Cherry managed not to panic and yelled to them imploringly.)

CHERRY: Ubermaster Arkane! Ubermaster Arkane...

(One of the girls sneered.)

AMY: He isn't here.

KERRY: Nobody's here to help you, slag.

CHERRY: No. Arkane's been kidnapped! They're taking him to...

(She panted for breath as she recalled what she overheard.)

CHERRY: Ardenmouth!

(The girls all cackled.)

ALICIA: She's unbelievable.

CHERRY: It's true. Three men came with a poison dart, they took him...

(Amy looked to Flora and scoffed sarcastically.)

AMY: Maybe she thought you were joking when you beat the shit out of her earlier, Flora.

(Flora sneered.)

FLORA: Maybe I'll fucking kill her this time.

(Not about to lay there and just accept a beating, Cherry swiftly leapt to her feet and rushed at them with a snarl on her face. She desperately wanted to speak to Angel and was determined that nothing was going to stop her. Unfortunately, being the

smallest person there, her attempt to steamroll them from a standing start served only to make them angrier. As if she'd triggered an eruption of anger in them all, they grabbed her with ease and started punching her violently. Screaming like excited hyenas making a kill, they lay into her with alarming ferocity. Kicks, punches, scratching, pinching, hair-pulling, between them they carried out every violent act they could think of. As Cherry screamed in immense pain, however, Flora gasped in horror.)

FLORA: Fuck! Stop! Too much!!!

(As the beating continued, Flora ended up pushing her friends back. It was only once they were out of the foray that they realised what they'd done. Many of them covered their mouths in disgust at their deed. As they stepped back and saw Cherry laying in the foetal position with her hands over her head, they couldn't believe what they'd done. Luckily for Cherry, Flora had come to her senses. Having already gone too far once that day and considered the consequences if she'd done her any permanent damage, she had the presence of mind to stop it. Standing over the terrified Cherry, she sighed angrily.)

FLORA: Don't fucking come here with your bullshit, Cherry. We all hate you. Just fuck off and you won't get hit.

(As Cherry struggled to her feet in considerable pain, she tried to implore Flora once again, desperate to be heard.)

CHERRY: Arkane... I have to...

(Flora threw her arms up in the air.)

FLORA: You don't fuckin' learn, do you?

CHERRY: But...

(With that, Flora grabbed her hair and dragged her away from the building. As the other girls looked on, still horrified at what they'd done, Cherry winced in agony and struggled to free herself. Unable to even begin to match Flora's strength, her efforts were futile. As she pulled her away with her fist gripped tight around Cherry's hair, Flora made herself perfectly clear.)

FLORA: Everyone in our year has got into trouble 'cause of you. We don't want you. We don't even care if you die so long as we don't get the blame. You're a slut, a bitch and a fucking whore and I'm going to beat the shit out of you until I knock you out if you come back again. Got it, slut?

(Cherry could only reply with one word.)

CHERRY: Ouch!!!

FLORA: Yeah, and there'll be even more ouch moments if you show your face here again. *And*, like they'd let you into a formal in your school uniform anyway! Now... (She snarled.)

FLORA: Fuck off and die, bitch.

(With that, she slung her round and flung her by her hair like a hammer thrower. As she crashed to the ground, Flora rubbed her hands together then returned to her friends just outside the town hall doors. Managing to raise her head, Cherry burst into tears then staggered to her feet. To the sound of her tears being mocked, she then rushed away from the town hall. Not knowing where to go or what to do, her mind ran riot. She couldn't see Angel and Arkane had been taken. She had nowhere to run to except the sanctuary of her dorm room. With blood seeping from her nose and bottom lip, she ignored the pain in her bruised legs and headed back as fast as she could. She'd never felt so useless and alone. All she could think of was her dorm room where she never got beaten and nobody was ever kidnapped. Right now, she just wanted to hide from the world.

As she reached her dorm room, Cherry was severely distressed. She entered, closed the door behind her and just stood in a state of shock for a few moments. Her mind was numb. Eventually stirred into action by a twinge in her shoulder, she whimpered to herself and turned to face the mirror. Slowly, she lifted her blouse to reveal her heavily bruised stomach and shuddered. Allowing her blouse to drop, she shook a solemn head and wiped her teary eyes. Having received two beatings and been involved in the incident with Arkane, she didn't know what to think. Half of her wanted to hide under her covers until Angel came back but the other half of her couldn't just do nothing while Arkane's kidnappers escaped. She knew she had to do something but her hands were tied. Even the simple task of telling someone was beyond her at this point. Feeling devastated at being so useless, she looked to her bed and took a step towards it, choosing to hide from it all. Just then, a cold chill ran down her spine. Pausing before making another step, all she could think of was how much she'd hate herself if she hid in her bed and did nothing. This man had tried to help her, how could she look in the mirror if she ran away from trying to help *him* in return. A man's life might be in danger, a good man. She couldn't hide from that. The thought of doing nothing would haunt her forever. Whatever she did or wherever she went in life, she'd be weighed down and crushed by the knowledge that she'd turned her back and let a man die. A good person like her couldn't live with herself if she did that. With little rationale in her thoughts, she knew she what she had to do. She couldn't get anyone to help so she'd go after him herself. To her mind, it was the only option left open to her. Only she could help him now and if she didn't, Arkane would certainly die.

With nothing else in mind, and not having thought it through even for a moment, she quickly rushed to the wardrobe and pulled out her backpack. Looking focussed, she then yanked open a draw and pulled out her passport. Slipping her passport into the pouch on the side, she then rushed to gather up her money pouch, a change of underwear, her hairbrush, her make-up bag and her headband jar and thrust them into the main part of her pack. Feeling quite bewildered by everything that had happened and what she now had to do, she grabbed her favourite stuffed animal, a pink donkey, from her bed and pushed that into the pack too. She wouldn't need it and had no plans to use it for anything; the thought of having it close just seemed to bring her a modicum of comfort. Satisfied she was suitably packed, she slung the pack on her back and took a deep breath. Then, in a blind rush and with no forethought about what she was going to do, she rushed for the door.)

CHERRY: Crap.

(She then about turned and rushed to the desk in the corner. Licking her top lip as she did so, she scrawled a message for Angel on a note pad and propped it up so she'd see it when she got back.)

CHERRY: Uh-huh. Right.

(And with that, she charged out of the door.)

Northgate Ferry Port, Araminta.

(As Cherry rushed through town towards the ferry port, she only had one recurring thought. She couldn't let Arkane die. Not once did she think about how she could help. It didn't occur to her even for a moment that, when she got to wherever it was she was going, she'd be powerless to do anything anyway. She was purely driven by

her determination to do the right thing. She didn't even consider if she was *really* doing the right thing, to her mind there was no option but to go after him. Any other thought was obsolete. She only knew what she'd overheard, they were heading to Auland on the next ferry and in her mind she knew she had to go too. As a result, she stared dead ahead as she charged to the port. The first part of her plan was to get on the ship and right now, nothing else mattered.

Too determined to be nervous about anything, she raced from the township to the dockside and made a beeline for the nearest ship, only to be stopped by the outstretched arm of a dockworker.

DOCKWORKER: And where do you think you're going, miss?

(Startled by his intrusion, Cherry replied in a stunned voice.)

CHERRY: On the ferry.

(The dockworker smiled.)

DOCKWORKER: Let me see your passport then, love.

CHERRY: Oh!

(She slung the pack off her back and reached in the pouch.)

CHERRY: Just a minute.

(As she pulled it from her pack, the dockworker smiled.)

DOCKWORKER: Excellent, now do you have a ticket?

CHERRY: But... you didn't look at my passport.

DOCKWORKER: Don't worry your pretty little head about that, you'll have plenty of chance to show it when you try to come back.

CHERRY: Oh okay. And no, I don't have a ticket.

(The dockworker nodded and pulled out his ticket book.)

DOCKWORKER: Twenty shillings please, sweetheart.

(Having handed over twenty shillings, mere pocket money in Araminta but several days wages in Auland, where she was heading, the dockworker ripped a ticket from his book and handed it to her.)

CHERRY: Thanks.

DOCKWORKER: Off you go.

(With a grateful nod, she then slung her pack back over her shoulders and started to walk towards the gangplank.)

DOCKWORKER: Bon voyage.

(Wearing a devious smile, he then slapped Cherry's backside and puffed out his cheeks.)

DOCKWORKER: I could fuck that 'til the cows come home.

(More than a little disturbed by his words, Cherry flinched and raced off up the gangplank.)

CHERRY: Leave me alone.

(Much to her relief, as soon as she stepped onto the deck, the gangplank was taken away from the side of the ship. Fearing the dockworker might follow her and make her life a bigger misery than it already was, she took a deep breath, grateful for that one small mercy. She then stepped up to the side of the ship and looked down at the blackened waters below. She'd only just made it in time. As the ship slowly pulled away from dry land, gently swaying, she fought a sick feeling and leant on the railing to steady herself. Only now could she take time to think what she'd do next.

As she watched the port from the side of the ferry, she was a little taken aback by what she was experiencing. It felt like the land was drifting away from the ship rather

than the other way around. Watching the well-lit port slowly shrink, she spied the ranks of Araminta soldiers on the watchtowers and raised a curious eyebrow. Were these good men and women once students of N.U.C.A too? Did they ever go through what she'd been through? With a sigh, she turned her head and looked out to sea. How she wished she'd never gone to the academy in the first place. A year of being a laughing stock had ended with her being beaten twice, witnessing a kidnapping and somehow ending up on this ferry. As she shook a solemn head and tried to come to terms with the events of that evening, a horrible feeling rose from the pit of her stomach. The obvious had finally dawned on her. Swiftly turning pale, she shuddered and bit her fingernails.)

CHERRY: What the hell am I doing?

(At last realising the futility of pursuing Arkane by herself, she sunk to her knees on the deck. All at once she had what seemed like a million revelations. There was nothing she could do to help Arkane. If she'd just waited until the formal was over, she could have got help. She didn't know where Ardenmouth was or indeed how far and she didn't even know what Arkane's captors looked like. The worst revelation of all, however, was the fact that she was useless at fighting and would undoubtedly be killed if she even *tried* to rescue Arkane. Rapidly becoming all too aware that she should have waited in the dorm for Angel, she became extremely flustered. Running agonised fingers through her hair, she whimpered to herself before rising to her feet to pace up and down on the deck.)

CHERRY: Crap, crap, crap...

(Descending into a panic, she then raced to the side of the ship and tried to climb over. Luckily for her, two crew members had been nearby and spotted her moment of madness. Looking desperate, they charged at her and grabbed her arms as she swung her leg over the side of the ship.)

CHERRY: Argh! Perverts! Help!

CREWMAN: Don't do it, I implore you.

CREWMAN 2: He's right. You've got too much to live for.

(Cherry struggled desperately to throw herself into the sea.)

CHERRY: Let me go! I need to swim back!!!

(Suddenly remembering that she couldn't swim, she paused and looked thoroughly confused. Swimming didn't seem like such a good idea after all.)

CHERRY: What the?

(It then dawned on her that she was dangling over the side of the ship.)

CHERRY: Agh!!! Save me. Pull me back on, pull me back on.

(The two crewmen obliged dutifully. Having pulled her back onto the deck and helped her to her feet, the two crewmen then proceeded to lecture her enthusiastically.)

CREWMAN: Whatever it is, young lady, it's not worth dying for.

CREWMAN 2: Nothing is worth dying for. And besides that, do you realise the trouble these suicides cause? Do you?

(Cherry hung her head and accepted the lecture without question.)

CREWMAN 2: It's a great ordeal for the poor soul who finds the body. And then there's your loved ones. How do you think they'd feel if you came home dead? Don't be so selfish.

CREWMAN: Exactly. If you're upset about something, do something positive about it. Death is not the answer.

(Cherry looked up innocently.)

CHERRY: Sorry, I just panicked. I won't do it again.

(One of the crewmen offered her an accepting nod.)

CREWMAN: Good. Now let that be an end to it.

CREWMAN 2: Yes. And if you're still depressed when we get to Birchwood, come and see me. A damn good seeing to might cheer you up. I'm hung like a horse, you know.

(As Cherry greeted his comments with a bewildered stare, the other crewman ushered him away.)

CREWMAN: On that note, have a pleasant trip.

(As they walked away, Cherry watched them go and sighed with dejection.)

CREWMAN: What did I tell you about chatting up the passengers?

CREWMAN 2: Sorry, couldn't help it.

CREWMAN: No, you never can.

CREWMAN 2: Well, in my defence, she had a nice wrack and walking about in a skirt that short, she's asking for a damn good shagging.

CREWMAN: That, you tit, is her school uniform.

CREWMAN 2: Really?

CREWMAN: Really!

CREWMAN 2: Even better.

CREWMAN: You're a disgrace!

CREWMAN 2: What? If she's old enough to bleed, she's old enough to breed I say!

(As the two crewman continued to argue their way out of sight, Cherry sat against the side of the ship and slapped her forehead with frustration.)

CHERRY: What was I thinking?

(Feeling utterly stuck, she resigned herself to keeping going and catching the next ship back. Wishing she'd realised how stupid her plan was before she'd got on board, she thumped the deck with her palms and swore under her breath.

After a good 30 minutes of soul searching as she sat upon the wooden deck, Cherry had come to a conclusion. She wasn't cut out for the academy and was destined to fail. All she could do was stay by her sister's side and support her bid to become a success. Once her sister graduated, she'd leave. Until then, she'd keep her head down and stay out of people's way. She'd be happy to skip all the tests and take whatever detention they decided to give her. She could never pass the academy but nor could she leave Angel's side. Content with her plans for the future, she sighed to herself and climbed to her feet. She'd done enough thinking and needed to take her mind off it. And so, just for something to do, she took a stroll along the deck. Allowing the cool sea breeze to wash over her face, she passed a row of cabins and stopped to look out to sea again. As laughter rose from the cabin windows, she glanced over her shoulder and back out to sea again, taking a long overdue, relaxing breath. As one of the men inside the cabin spoke, however, she didn't feel so at ease. Spooked to the core, she ducked down and trembled as she listened.)

JONES: I told you the hearse was a stroke of genius.

EVANS: Again, Jones, it's not over yet.

JONES: Oh come on, we're on the ferry aren't we? We got past the Araminta soldiers. Getting through the port in Auland is a doddle, they let any buggers in.

GRIFFITHS: I just hope the horses don't shit all over the carriage deck floor. You know they make you clean that up before you get off.

JONES: So?

GRIFFITHS: We didn't bring a shovel. If that happens, you can do it.

JONES: Like they won't lend us a shovel.

EVANS: He's right, you know. They might not lend us one and if that's the case, you'll be doing the shovelling.

JONES: Bollocks, I'm supposed to be the grieving son. No undertaker would make me muck out the horses!

EVANS: We would. We're not very good undertakers.

GRIFFITHS: That's right, and besides, you're a tight old git and only bought the economy funeral package. Shit shovelling not included.

JONES: Look... let's not worry about that just yet. It'll be plain sailing I tell you. Our only worry will be if Arkane wakes up, and with that much sleep poison in his system, he won't be doing that anytime soon.

(Listening to their every word, Cherry gaped uncontrollably. As far as she was concerned, the fact she'd found Arkane's kidnappers was far from good news. When she'd sat trembling in the cupboard in the library, she'd overheard everything. She knew the kidnappers had seen Arkane talking to her and she knew they'd tried to find her. If they spotted her now, she was in deep trouble. With this in mind, she ran to the other end of the deck and darted into the first cabin door she came to. Looking severely distressed, she slammed the door behind her and gasped for breath. Her arrival in the cabin was a welcome surprise for its inhabitant, the randy crewman who'd propositioned her earlier. Wearing a knowing smile he looked her up and down.)

CREWMAN: I knew you'd come.

(As Cherry stood by the door looking shocked, he then winked and dropped his trousers.)

CREWMAN: Like I said; a horse.

(Her first instinct was to run; unfortunately she was paralysed by the sight of the crewman's manhood swinging proudly between his knees. She'd only ever seen two others and they were half the size of this one. In something of a trance, all she could do was gape and sigh a happy sigh.)

CHERRY: That's a big one.

(Snapping out of it, she then glared at him and shook an angry fist.)

CHERRY: You pervert. You're disgusting.

(Without removing her eyes from his large utensil, she then half turned and fumbled for the door handle in a daze.)

CHERRY: I'm leaving. I'm knob doing any Wang with you.

(Eventually managing to open the door, she took one last look then slipped out onto the deck again, easing the door closed behind her.)

CHERRY: The nerve.

(With that, she opened the door for another look.)

CHERRY: Wow!

(The crewman nodded.)

CREWMAN: I know. Now are you coming in or aren't you?

(Feeling quite foolish, Cherry blushed and made her excuses in a panic.)

CHERRY: I can't, it'd be dong... I mean long... wrong! Whatever. Cock.

(With that, she slammed the door and raced away to find somewhere else to hide.)

Birchwood, Auland.

(Having spent the entire crossing crouching on the deck, ready to run if any of Arkane's captors came her way, Cherry was immensely relieved when the ship arrived in the port. Having taken extreme care to make sure the hearse and the three

captors were long gone before she alighted the ship, she was the last passenger to set foot on the dockside. Having watched the hearse head out of port, her only priority was getting the next ferry back to Araminta. With this in mind, she headed straight for the wooden shack marked “ticket office. Inside the tiny booth, a ginger-haired, toothless hag, polished her nails and puffed on a cigarette. Feeling extremely nervous about speaking to this rough looking woman, Cherry stepped up to her slowly and spoke in a small, shy voice.)

CHERRY: Excuse me...

(The lady looked her up and down and sneered.)

LADY: What can I do for you, your majesty?

(Ignoring the comment, Cherry forced a smile.)

CHERRY: Um... I need to get the next ferry to Araminta tonight.

(The lady gave a wry smile.)

LADY: Oh yeah? Tonight you say?

CHERRY: Please.

LADY: Tonight?

(Cherry looked nervously from side to side.)

CHERRY: Um... please.

LADY: You have to be in Araminta tonight, do you?

(Cherry nodded solemnly.)

CHERRY: Very much so.

LADY: Imperative would you say?

CHERRY: Definitely.

(This information seemed to make the lady very happy.)

LADY: Better get swimming then, princess.

CHERRY: What?

LADY: You just missed it.

(Cherry was horrified.)

CHERRY: Missed it?

LADY: It sailed five minutes ago but don't worry, it'll be sailing back again.

(Cherry looked mightily relieved and smiled. Unfortunately, it was a smile the lady in the booth couldn't wait to remove from her face.)

LADY: And when it gets here it'll be going nowhere, the next ferry *out* aint 'til morning.

(Cherry's mouth fell open.)

CHERRY: You mean...

(The lady chuckled.)

LADY: Yup. You, my love, are well and truly fucked.

(As the lady laughed, Cherry's shoulders sunk. Wearing a beaten expression she pouted at her coldly.)

CHERRY: You're mean!

LADY: And you're fucked.

(As she laughed even harder, Cherry spoke up with desperation in her voice.)

CHERRY: But what am I going to do until then?

(Ceasing her laughter, the lady leant forward to her and snarled.)

LADY: Whatever you bloody well like, love. But if I was you, I'd keep my head down and just hope nobody notices you. Or you might not be alive to catch that ferry tomorrow.

(As the lady leant back and laughed, Cherry pulled an angled frown. Furrowing her brow, she placed her hands on her hips and scoffed.)

CHERRY: You're just trying to scare me.

(She wobbled her head in a cocky manner and walked away.)

CHERRY: But then judging by your hair, you probably used to be a scarecrow. I guess old habits die hard.

(Under the delusion that she'd put the old hag in her place, she then wandered from the ferry port and into the town. It was like entering a different world. She'd never seen anything like it. The air stunk of something putrid and the streets were paved with filth. Birchwood really was a dump. There were broken buildings and vandalised market stalls abandoned and left behind on the cobbles. Cherry found it all a little too intimidating. The people who were walking about the streets were dressed in poorly constructed clothing and didn't look like they'd ever seen a bar of soap, let alone used one. Knowing she'd be stuck in this scary looking hell hole all night, Cherry's bottom lip quivered. Not knowing where to go or what to do, she looked about herself at the people wandering by. Many were sneering at her coldly and there was no way she was going to ask any of them for help. Quickly becoming all too aware that her high quality attire was making her stick out from the crowd, she knew she'd have to hide away somewhere. Staying here was only inviting snarls and adding to her already overwhelming fear of the place. And so, with no other thought than to free herself of the burden of so many prying eyes, she swiftly ran across the cobbles and headed into the town. Looking to find a quiet place to hide and pass the time, she raced down the main street then darted down an alley to her left. Breathing heavily, she emerged from the alley and came to a large square with a broken fountain in the centre. It was a reasonably bright considering the time of night and not many people were around. Feeling a little easier about this part of the town, she slowed and looked about herself. Receiving a smile from the first person she saw, an old lady walking her miniature excuse for a dog, she nodded to herself and took a deep breath. Upon sighting a bench against a wall at the side of the square, she puffed out and made her way over to sit on it. This would have to be home until the morning. As soon as her backside hit the wooden bench, she sighed and held her head in her hands. It had been a disaster of a day and now she'd be sitting on this bench in a strange land until dawn. Feeling like the weight of the world was on her shoulders, she sighed once again and looked about the square. It may have been quiet, but this place was eerie and she didn't like it one bit. The only upside was that it was slightly less scary than the other part of town. Barely able to appreciate the upside, she fought back tears and hung her head once again. It would be a long night.

Cherry was devastated. She should have been enjoying herself at the formal; instead her bruised and beaten body was shivering on a bench, a long way from home. The last few hours had taken her from one nightmare to another and it wasn't over yet. As she sat with her head in her hands, rueing the day with many tears and whole lot of sighs, she felt like her whole world had fallen apart. Had she known what Birchwood was like however, she wouldn't have dared hang her head even for a moment. This town had muggers and thieves on every corner and lowering your guard was a foolish undertaking to say the least. As it was however, she continued to hold her head in her hands and failed to notice two shady looking young men lurking in the shadows on the other side of the square. As the old lady with her dog passed Cherry once again, one of the two shady characters watched on with interest. Being something of a "pretty boy", he ran his fingers through his long hair and smiled to himself as he surveyed the scene. The taller and more muscular of the two, merely sat against the

wall, lost in his own thoughts. Thoughts that were soon interrupted by his companion's enthusiastic words.)

DRAKE: Hex, get a load of this.

(Annoyed at being thrown off his train of thought, the taller man frowned.)

HEX: Fuck sake, Drake. What is it now?

(Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: Check it out; I think we've found a candidate.

(Hex looked into the square with curiosity.)

HEX: Where?

(Following a brief glance, Hex furrowed his brow.)

HEX: All I see is an old lady and a schoolgirl.

DRAKE: Yeah, the schoolgirl, mate.

(Looking furious, Hex climbed to his feet. Towering over Drake, he grabbed his collar and snarled.)

HEX: You're out of order! How many times? We only rob people who can afford it and defend themselves. I don't care how desperate things get, I aint a fucking coward.

(Trying to release himself from his companion's grasp, Drake protested.)

DRAKE: I know that, geezer, I know. Listen.

HEX: I aint mugging a schoolgirl, Drake. Forget it.

DRAKE: Listen man, she aint an ordinary schoolgirl.

(Letting him go, Hex stood tall.)

HEX: No? Got superpowers has she? Is she one of those ninja schoolgirls you hear so much about?

(Drake shrugged.)

DRAKE: Actually yeah!

HEX: Oh, fuck off.

DRAKE: Listen to me, mate. I've banged enough schoolgirls to know, that's the uniform of Northgate Unarmed Combat Academy in Araminta.

(Hex could only shake a disdainful head.)

HEX: You're a sick man, mate. Get help.

DRAKE: Whatever. Did you hear what I said? Araminta, mate. She's probably loaded.

HEX: I don't care, I aint mugging *any* schoolgirl. And since when did you think it's okay to rob kids?

(Drake looked offended.)

DRAKE: I thought you knew me better than that!

HEX: So did I. Apparently not.

DRAKE: Look, N.U.C.A. is a...

(Seeing Hex's blank expression, Drake rolled his eyes.)

DRAKE: Her school, Northgate Unarmed Combat Academy...

HEX: Right.

DRAKE: It's for 18 to 21 year olds. She aint a kid. We're only 22 ourselves, mate. We can hardly call her a kid!

HEX: She's still a bird. I don't rob birds. I rob blokes and fuck women. *Never* confuse the two. At least you can stop hanging around with me if you do.

(Drake frowned.)

DRAKE: You aint even listening.

HEX: Well you aint said anything worth listening to yet.

DRAKE: Look. She's an adult *and* adept at the ways of martial arts. Unless I'm mistaken, she's completed two grades. Those are blue belts which means she's a second grader and seeing as the schools break for the end of year about now, that means she'll be a third grader when she goes back.

HEX: Hmm... so she's some kind of martial arts expert?

DRAKE: Exactly. She's an adult with exceptional fighting skill. Some of the pupils in that place are veritable combat hardened warriors, mate. Like fighting machines, they are. And that in my book is fair game. Don't you reckon?

(Hex rubbed his chin.)

HEX: I guess it does. Besides, we can't really spare her just 'cause she's a bird. That'd be sexual discrimination.

DRAKE: Yeah, and being a sexist is worst than being a crook if you believe some of the stories you hear these days.

(Hex nodded.)

HEX: Alright then, let's do it.

DRAKE: I knew you'd see it my way.

(Hex chuckled.)

HEX: Though she is pretty fit. I'll have to avoid the temptation to let you mug her so I can rush in and save her, thus procuring a one way ticket into her knickers.

(Drake laughed.)

DRAKE: That scam is a classic. I see the temptation, she is pretty damn tasty.

HEX: I must admit I wouldn't mind a piece of her but if she's as tough as you reckon, we'd better do this properly.

(With that, he picked up a baseball bat and allowed himself a smile.)

HEX: Let's bag us a blonde.

(Grabbing his bat, Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: Let's bag us her bag.

HEX: Come on.

(And with their target acquired they nodded to one another and charged across the square towards Cherry. Still lost in her own miserable little world, she didn't even notice them coming. It wasn't until their shadows fell across her that she sat up with a start and stared at them in horror. Confronted by these two bat wielding men, one a considerably large, muscular fellow, she instinctively leapt to her feet. She wasn't about to take a beating sitting down. She was going to run away. With terror in her eyes, she didn't even give them a chance to speak before taking to her heels and darting away along the side of the square. Drake and Hex were far from impressed.)

DRAKE: Hey! Come back here, that bag's ours.

(With absolute panic running through her veins, Cherry raced away in fear for her life. The words of the old hag in the ticket booth about her not getting out alive were beginning to seem very real. Needless to say she was terrified. Not about to let their meal ticket escape that easily, Drake and Hex gave chase.)

HEX: Hey!

DRAKE: Hand it over!!!

(Hardly the quickest on her feet, Cherry had barely run twenty feet before she could hear the sound of her pursuer's feet growing louder as they swiftly caught her up. She immediately realised that running away was a futile gesture. Knowing all too well they'd catch her any second now, she instinctively panicked. With terror in her eyes, she contorted to swing her bag off her back to throw it to them in the desperate hope they'd take it and leave her alone. Without slowing, she swung the pack in their direction and yelled; her voice choked by fear.)

CHERRY: Take it and leave me alone!!!

(All too typically for Cherry, however, her attempt to throw the backpack resulted in her merely dropping it, having gained no momentum from her swing whatsoever. As it fell to the ground and got stuck under her feet, she tripped and staggered a few yards before completely losing her balance. With a shriek, she thrust out her hands to protect herself and crashed to the ground. The pursuing duo merely slowed and walked over to her, Drake scooping up her pack as he did so. Scared witless, Cherry looked up to them from the ground and raised a terrified voice.)

CHERRY: Take it. Just don't hurt me.

(Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: That works for me. Come on, Hex.

(As Drake turned to go, however, he felt the full weight of Hex's grip pulling back his collar. Swiping at Hex's hand, Drake turned to face him angrily.)

DRAKE: Hey, get off me!

(It was then that he noticed Hex's angry and somewhat sceptical frown.)

DRAKE: Um... you okay, Hex?

(Maintaining his disdainful look, Hex gestured to where Cherry lay trembling.)

HEX: This is your idea of a veritable combat hardened warrior is it?

(As Drake looked down at Cherry crying on the ground, Hex continued.)

HEX: A fighting machine, I believe you said.

DRAKE: Um...

HEX: So at what point is this crying schoolgirl going to leap up and rip us both a new hole?

(Drake could only give a bewildered shrug.)

DRAKE: I dunno, I'm sure that's the N.U.C.A uniform, she should be a fighter.

(Ignoring Drake's reasoning, Hex continued with his sarcastic riposte.)

HEX: Hmm, maybe we should go to this N.U.C.A place then. Hopefully she's got a little sister we can rob. Or maybe her grandmother will pick her up. It might be fun to mug an old lady! While we're at it, let's go to the hospice and beat up some war veterans, I could do with a laugh.

(Drake frowned.)

DRAKE: Your sarcasm cuts me deep, Hex.

(Hex gave him a cold stare.)

HEX: Give me the fuckin' bag, you tit.

DRAKE: But we...

(As Hex snatched the bag from him, Drake sighed.)

DRAKE: Fine.

HEX: Dude, she's a harmless schoolgirl. What the hell are you trying to make me do?

(Drake shrugged and mumbled under his breath.)

DRAKE: I didn't know she was harmless.

(Wearing an apologetic grimace, Hex then knelt before Cherry and held her bag out to her.)

HEX: Sorry about that, love...

(He gestured over his shoulder at Drake.)

HEX: Arse face here thought you were someone else. Under all that floppy hair he can't tell a ninja from a schoolgirl.

(Drake sneered.)

DRAKE: I resent that.

HEX: Oh, get a haircut, you pansy.

(Hex shook his head.)

HEX: Anyway, we're sorry.

(As he looked into Cherry's wide, terrified eyes, he offered her another sorrowful smile.)

HEX: Here, take it.

(Looked extremely peeved, Cherry snatched her bag then cradled it to herself.

Holding it tight, she glared at Hex.)

CHERRY: You're mean. Mean old men!

DRAKE: Old? We're 22!

HEX: Yeah, and besides, we're not mean, just misinformed.

(He glared at Drake.)

DRAKE: Oh, whatever. She's got her bag, let's go.

(Hex nodded and climbed to his feet.)

HEX: Anyway, sorry again. Bye.

(As Cherry greeted his words with a hateful snub, Hex and Drake started to head away. They didn't go far, however, before Hex turned to face her again.)

DRAKE: Mate, what is it now? You gave her stuff back, let's go.

(As he watched Cherry cradle her bag and rock back and forth, Hex said nothing. Something in this trembling girl's demeanour bothered him greatly.)

DRAKE: Hex, mate... let's go!

(Hex shook his head.)

HEX: We can't just piss off and leave her there. She'll get mugged.

(Having heard his words, Cherry glared at him coldly.)

HEX: By someone else I mean.

(As Cherry resumed rocking, Hex sighed.)

HEX: I can't do it, mate. I can't just leave her here.

(Drake gave a stifled laugh.)

DRAKE: You're too soft for your own good sometimes, Hex.

(Ignoring his comrade, Hex knelt next to Cherry once again.)

HEX: Listen, you can't stay here. It's dangerous. Have you got somewhere to go?

(Cherry could only pout at him.)

HEX: I'll take that as a no.

(He sighed.)

HEX: Look, don't be afraid. We made a mistake, we're good blokes really. Let us take you somewhere. Or stay with you for a bit. It's the least we can do.

(Being a trusting person by nature, Cherry looked to him nervously.)

CHERRY: I'm scared.

HEX: I can see that. But there's no need, sweetheart. We'll take care of you. I promise.

(Realising she had little option but to trust him, Cherry forced a half smile.)

CHERRY: Thanks.

(With that, he climbed to his feet and offered Cherry his sizeable hand. Looking uncertain, she slowly placed her hand in his and allowed him to help her to her feet.)

HEX: There you go.

(Drake folded his arms.)

DRAKE: Right, marvellous. Now what?

HEX: Now we find out why a defenceless schoolgirl is hanging around a dangerous place like this at this time of night.

(They both looked to Cherry and received a cheesy grin in return.)

HEX: Let's sit down.

(Having taken refuge back on the bench with Drake and Hex sitting either side of her, Cherry nervously set about trying to explain what she was doing in Birchwood. At first her voice was quiet and subdued but upon noticing the two men's genuine interest in what she had to say, slowly but surely she regained a little confidence. Receiving sympathy for her plight, it wasn't long before Cherry returned to her old self. When this girl started talking, it was nigh on impossible to shut her up. She went on to relate everything about how she was disliked, how she'd been written about on toilet doors, how she'd suffered two beatings, the kidnapping she'd witnessed and even went into great detail about how silly she felt for getting on the ferry. More than a little stunned by her incessant talking, Drake and Hex could only sit and listen as an animated Cherry filled them in on every last factor of her disastrous year at N.U.C.A and how it'd led her there.)

CHERRY: So I can't do anything until the ferry comes. I'm stuck here. And this place is scary, oh my god, it's horrible. Everyone looks like a mugger. A murderer even! I don't want to get murdered. Especially here! I want my tombstone to say "Here lies Cherry Wroxford" not "Here lies unidentified murder victim" and that's what'll happen if I stay here. I'll get murdered and buried where Angel will never find me. It's not fair. I don't want that to happen. I want to go home.

(As she sighed and finally fell silent, Drake and Hex both rubbed their necks and strained their eyes. Having been something of an endurance event to sit through, they were much relieved her speech was finally over.)

HEX: Damn.

CHERRY: I know.

HEX: So you've had a rough day then?

CHERRY: The worst.

HEX: Well don't worry; you're safe enough as long as you're with us. We aint gonna hurt you.

(Cherry smiled and looked into the night sky.)

CHERRY: I know that. If you were going to rob me you'd have done it already. You'd have just taken off into the night with my bag when you had the chance.

(She then turned to glare coldly at Drake.)

CHERRY: Like *you* wanted to.

(Drake leant back, offended by her cold stare.)

DRAKE: Steady on, girl.

(He sighed with concession.)

DRAKE: Look, yeah. I was out of order. I didn't know. I really thought you were a warrior type. I'm sorry.

(Cherry smiled and looked ahead.)

CHERRY: I know you're sorry. And thanks guys.

HEX: You're welcome.

CHERRY: You know, I'm not a failure. At least I never used to be until I went to N.U.C.A. I hate it there; I'm so not good at the things they expect you to be good at. But I *can* do stuff.

(Once again, she became animated.)

CHERRY: I'm great at cooking. And I can sew, I can do household stuff, you know; all the girly chores. So what if I can't do sporty stuff? I'm a girl, I do girly stuff, you know? And I'm really good at maths and that. I can do...

(Fearing they were in for another long speech, Drake sighed and sat back. Unable to sit through another rant, Hex sat forward and talked over her.)

HEX: Cherry, we don't think you're useless. You don't have to justify yourself to us.
(Cherry paused and looked to him.)

CHERRY: Huh? I'm not trying to. I just don't want you to think I'm a rubbish person who can't do anything right.

HEX: Well, we don't think that anyway, love.

CHERRY: Oh, cool.

(Delighted at Hex's intervention, Drake gave him a thumbs up behind Cherry's head.)

DRAKE: So, what now then?

HEX: Good question. I don't fancy sitting here all night.

DRAKE: We might as well go home then?

(Cherry looked worried.)

CHERRY: What about me?

DRAKE: You'll be coming with us obviously.

CHERRY: Phew.

(Despite these two being complete strangers to her, their kindness and their company had lifted Cherry's spirit greatly. Being lost, defenceless and alone was a hell she couldn't bear and these two gave her hope.)

CHERRY: Is your place nice and warm? My legs are cold and...

(Looking thoughtful, Hex raised a finger and cut over her.)

HEX: Hold on. You say these blokes took your Ubermaster and smuggled him here in a coffin?

(Clueless as to why he was asking, Cherry nodded with uncertainty.)

CHERRY: Yeah, why?

HEX: And there were only three of them?

CHERRY: Um... yeah?

(He gave a knowing smile and sat forward.)

HEX: Listen...

(Drake and Cherry both sat forward.)

HEX: You said they laced him with a sleep inducing poison because this bloke...Arkane?

CHERRY: Yeah.

HEX: He's well hard?

(Cherry shrugged.)

CHERRY: They said they wouldn't have dared take him on otherwise, or words to that effect.

HEX: So, he's well hard then.

(Drake looked devastated and sighed heavily.)

DRAKE: Oh my god, you're having a plan aren't you?

HEX: You know, I think I am, mate.

DRAKE: Good grief. Your plans never work out.

(Hex looked across to him knowingly.)

HEX: Don't they now? We have a really strong guy being subdued by three guys who can't take him. All we have to do is remove the sleep poison from this Arkane guy and he'll do the rest.

(Drake rolled his eyes.)

DRAKE: Oh, is that all?

HEX: Yes, that's all! We've got the antidote for sleep poison at our place. You nicked it off that soldier we mugged.

(Drake smiled; fondly recalling the moment.)

DRAKE: I remember. Great times.

CHERRY: Yeah, but... but... they were on the same ferry as me. They might be half way to Ardenmouth by now.

HEX: No they won't.

CHERRY: How do you know? They could be anywhere!

HEX: This town is sealed off at night. Those plains are too dangerous at night, so they made it illegal to leave town after dark.

CHERRY: Really?

DRAKE: It's a stupid law though, if you do go out there they won't go after you to arrest you, it's too dangerous.

HEX: Yeah but what it means is, those kidnappers are somewhere in this town. Probably at an inn for the night. We just have to find out which one, find this Arkane, inject the antidote then leave the rest to him.

DRAKE: You make it sound so simple.

HEX: Of course they might have bound him too, in which case we'll need your knife, Drake. And if they used chains, we'll take some bolt cutters. We'll go prepared, that's only common sense.

(Hex's starry-eyed optimism wasn't shared by his reluctant friend or a confused Cherry.)

DRAKE: Count me out, you're mad.

CHERRY: I don't get it. You want to go and rescue him? Why?

HEX: To answer you both in order, no I won't count you out, you're most definitely in, Drake. And Cherry, yes I do want to rescue him! Why? Well, you've had a crappy time of it and we made it so much worse. As far as I can see, we owe you. (He nodded proudly.)

HEX: It's called doing the right thing. You're a damsel in distress. We'll save your Arkane for you. Leave it to us.

(Drake rolled his eyes.)

DRAKE: You always have to play the hero, don't you?

HEX: Yes, yes I bloody well do. Now come on, let's head into town and find out which inn they're staying at.

(With that he climbed to his feet proudly and looked down at a less than confident Drake and Cherry.)

HEX: Just going to sit there are you?

(Drake sighed and climbed to his feet.)

DRAKE: Fine.

(Cherry followed suit, nervously.)

CHERRY: Are you sure about this? What if the three bad guys catch you?

HEX: It'll be fun. We enjoy a good punch up.

DRAKE: It's true, we do.

(He beamed.)

DRAKE: Suddenly I'm thoroughly up for it. Let's go and beat up some twats!

HEX: Let's!

DRAKE: First job, finding out what inn the buggers are staying at.

HEX: I say we try "the badger" first. We can work our way up the high street from there.

DRAKE: Fair enough. Tell you what then, you two head for "the badger" and I'll run back to our place and get tooled up. I'll catch you up, it won't take a minute.

HEX: Right.

(As Drake ran ahead and Hex strode onwards confidently, Cherry watched them go and rubbed her chin nervously. A short while ago, she'd just wanted to go home and

had forgotten all about rescuing Arkane. Knowing that these two men could rescue him for her, and that she'd return to Northgate a heroine, however, she'd started to feel a whole lot more positive. This could be the night that changes everything for the better. With every confidence in her two new companions to succeed in their seemingly simple plan, she smiled to herself and ran to catch Hex up.

N.U.C.A dorms, Araminta.

At Northgate Town Hall the formal event was in full swing. There was music, dancing and much laughter. Everyone in attendance was having a wonderful time. The academic year was over and all the students were royally letting their hair down. Every student in the whole academy was present, making merry and celebrating their graduations; every student with the exception of three that is. Cherry was nowhere to be seen and in turn Angel had started to worry. Unable to wait for her arrival any longer she'd set off back to the dorms to find her. With her date, Carter in close attendance she rushed into the dorm block looking more than a little concerned. The night had been a wonderful one for both of them until Angel started getting worried. Carter had been at his romantic best and felt sure of getting at least a kiss. Angel was planning to give him so much more. Now her sister was her only concern but Carter wasn't about to abandon hope just yet. Eager to get back to the romance, he followed her to her dorm room and watched on as she thrust open the door and went inside.

ANGEL: Cherry, what the hell are...

(Upon noticing the room was empty, Angel fell silent and frowned.)

ANGEL: Where the...

(She then noticed Cherry's tattered dress on the floor and the half open draws. Immediately she was overcome with fear. Cherry would have never left the room in such a mess.)

ANGEL: Oh my god, what the hell???

(Heeding her panicked voice, Carter stepped in beside her and was immediately shocked by what he saw.)

CARTER: What's... damn, what happened in here?

(Feeling sick to her stomach, Angel whimpered under her breath.)

ANGEL: Cherry, where are you?

(She felt her hair and then rushed to the table where Cherry had left her note.)

ANGEL: What's this?

(Carter watched on silently as she read the note with worried eyes.)

ANGEL: Ardenmouth? Birchwood???

(She hung her head and passed the note to Carter. Her shoulders sunk as he proceeded to read it out loud.)

CARTER: Ubermaster Arkane was kidnapped; they've taken him to Ardenmouth. I've gone to Birchwood to save him. I wanted to tell you but Flora beat me up and wouldn't let me into the formal. I love you, Cherry.

(As soon as he finished reading, he screwed up his face.)

CARTER: Huh? What kind of joke is this?

(With that, Angel barged past him mumbling angrily.)

ANGEL: Cherry doesn't make jokes. She just acts without thinking. Fuck.

CARTER: What? Where are you going?

ANGEL: To find out what the fuck happened!

(With her head down, Angel steamed from the dorms staring straight ahead. Her nostrils were flaring and her face burned red. Her fury was plain for all to see.)

Looking lost and bewildered, Carter raced after her desperately trying to calm her down.)

CARTER: Angel, stop. Slow down. Think about it. You don't honestly believe Flora would beat Cherry up, do you? That note makes no sense. Who'd kidnap the Ubermaster? And how is Cherry going to rescue him? Cherry couldn't rescue a bulldog from a caterpillar.

(Angel said nothing and stormed onwards. Carter continued his vain attempts to pacify her all the way to the town hall. It was only when they were approaching the doors that he stopped and threw his despairing hands in the air, realising he was wasting his breath.)

CARTER: Fuck sake, Angel.

(Ignoring him completely as she had done since storming from the dorms, Angel bound through the town hall doors and immediately made a beeline for Flora. As she stood chatting with a group of friends, she didn't even notice Angel until her friends were barged aside and a series of deft punches pummelled into her face. As her friends screamed out for her stop, Carter rushed in and immediately attempted to restrain her. All he received for his efforts, however, was an elbow in the face as Angel continued to lay into Flora.)

ANGEL: What the fuck did you do? What the fuck did you do???

(With all the commotion in the foyer, a large crowd started to gather, including faculty staff. It took two teachers and three third graders a full minute or so to restrain her. She'd seen red. Under the supervision of Master Rauchen, once they'd managed to calm Angel down, they helped Flora to her feet. With tears in her eyes and blood running down her nose, Flora growled angrily.)

FLORA: What was that for?

(Still restrained just in case, Angel snarled back.)

ANGEL: You beat up my sister.

(She tried to punch her again but couldn't move her arms.)

ANGEL: Bitch!!!

(Not about to let them have a slanging match, Master Rauchen interceded swiftly.)

RAUCHEN: What the hell is this all about? All this fighting gives the combat academy a bad name.

(As some giggles rose behind him, Rauchen frowned.)

RAUCHEN: You know what I mean!

(Angel and Flora said nothing and held hateful stares at one another. Holding his painful face, Carter spoke up.)

CARTER: Cherry left a note saying Ubermaster Arkane was kidnapped and taken to Ardenmouth. Apparently she's gone to Birchwood to rescue him.

RAUCHEN: The Ubermaster? Cherry went to rescue the Ubermaster? That doesn't sound right! She couldn't rescue a...

ANGEL: She's telling the truth. She might not be good at fighting but it's just like her to try and do the right thing, no matter how futile it may seem.

RAUCHEN: I'm not so sure. The Ubermaster is the strongest, quickest, deadliest fighter I've ever known. He wouldn't get kidnapped. And how would Cherry know what the Ubermaster's doing? And why are you hitting Flora? What's she got to do with it?

(Angel snarled.)

ANGEL: She knows.

RAUCHEN: This is nonsense. Angel, I don't know what you've been told exactly but you can't go hitting other students. And I don't believe for a minute the Ubermaster's been taken.

(Not about to get into a debate, Angel tried to struggle free.)

ANGEL: Go and check it out then. I'm going.

RAUCHEN: Oh we will, and don't think you've heard the last about this incident either, young lady!

ANGEL: Whatever; just let me go will you?

(Careful to release her towards the door, her restrainers let her go and she paced towards the exit taking one last look towards Flora as she went.)

ANGEL: I haven't finished with you yet.

(With that, she barged through the doors and stormed into the night. As soon as she left, a heated debate started in the foyer. Some strongly agreed with Angel's stance, knowing they'd do the same if someone hit their sibling. Other's didn't agree with Angel's violence but found Flora's decision to beat Cherry up, quite contemptible. No matter how much they didn't like her, to physically assault her was a despicable thing to do. Others just wanted to talk to Flora and find out how great it must have felt to hit her. To live the dream. To touch that rainbow. Some, of course, didn't really care either way.

Outside in the meantime, as the cold night air raced from the sea, Angel marched with her head down towards the dorms. Her mind was filled with a million horrible thoughts about what she'd do if anything happened to Cherry. Lost in her dark thoughts, she didn't even notice, Carter racing after her. With one horrid thought after another plaguing her mind, she remained oblivious to his presence until he finally caught her up and started marching at her side.)

ANGEL: Carter?

CARTER: Angel.

ANGEL: Sorry about the elbow. I just didn't want you to stop me hitting the bitch.

CARTER: I get it. Cherry's your twin. I think anyone would've felt the same.

ANGEL: Then you know I have to go after her, right?

(Carter didn't sound so encouraging this time.)

CARTER: Don't be mad. If Cherry's telling the truth you should let the staff and the seniors handle it.

ANGEL: Cherry *is* telling the truth. She's never lied to me, I mean ever. And no, I can't wait for them to help her, she's my sister, I can't sit back and do nothing. I'm going to Birchwood. If I'm quick I can still get the last ferry.

CARTER: Angel, that's madness.

ANGEL: I don't want your opinion. I'm going, okay?

(Carter sighed.)

CARTER: I hate being a good guy. If you're going to that hell hole, I'm going too. It's safer that way.

ANGEL: No. I don't want you to...

CARTER: I don't want your opinion, isn't that what you said? I'm going, okay?

(Angel gave him an uncertain glance.)

CARTER: I can be stubborn too, you know.

(She gave him a grateful smile.)

ANGEL: Thanks.

CARTER: You're welcome. But, you know, the ferry port is the other way. If we're...

ANGEL: I aint going there in these shoes.

(She pointed to her high heels.)

ANGEL: Besides, I need my passport.

CARTER: Good point.

ANGEL: When we get back, go and get changed. Get your passport and stuff and meet me at the front gate. Okay?

CARTER: Right.

(And with that, they put their heads down and rushed back to the dorms.)

Birchwood, Auland.

(Cherry was not a brave person. Her tendency to roll into a ball and cry in the face of danger was a common topic of mirth among her peers. As such, being involved in Hex and Drake's plan was sending shivers down her spine. All she had to do was identify Arkane's kidnappers so that Hex and Drake could find him and slip him an antidote, but even that was a horribly daunting proposition to her.

As she headed towards "the badger" inn with Hex and Drake, who'd just caught them up after fetching the tools required for the job, she looked extremely nervous. Very much on edge, she walked between them with wide eyes, in readiness to hide behind them should anything even remotely unsavoury arise. Highly amused by her disposition, the two men at her side both faced inwards, enjoying the display. Sneaking between them with all the grace of a drunken penguin, she looked like a covert operative who'd forgotten to wear camouflage.)

HEX: You okay there, Cherry?

(Cherry nodded.)

CHERRY: Don't w-worry about me. I'm not that scared.

DRAKE: That's a relief. For a minute there you looked nervous.

CHERRY: Me? No, I'm fine.

(Wearing a devious smile, Drake nodded knowingly to Hex then tapped Cherry on the shoulder. Like a startled banshee, she leapt up and screamed then jumped into Hex's arms. As they both burst out laughing, Cherry pouted and glared at Drake.)

CHERRY: That wasn't nice!!!

DRAKE: Oh, I don't know about that.

(Noticing he was staring adoringly at her thighs, she looked down at herself and let out a shriek. Where she'd jumped, her skirt had billowed up and was caught between her backside and Hex's arm, revealing her white cotton knickers to the world.)

CHERRY: Put me down!!!

(Chuckling to himself, Hex's set her down and shook an amused head. Looking most indignant, Cherry pulled her skirt down and rolled her neck.)

CHERRY: There's no point even looking, boys. You can't afford it.

(Hex puffed out and smiled.)

HEX: Harsh, darling, you break my heart.

CHERRY: Yes well, let's go shall we.

(With that, she strolled ahead deliberately swaying her hips defiantly.)

DRAKE: She's fun, can we keep her?

(Hex shrugged.)

HEX: We can't afford her apparently.

(As they shared a chuckle, Cherry soon rushed back and stood between them again.)

CHERRY: Um... after you.

(And once again, they headed forth. This time, Cherry did her utmost to look composed and force some kind of bravado. Even though she managed to walk with an air of confidence, however, her wide eyes gave away her inner fear. All she could think about was what she'd do if the three kidnappers saw her first and Drake and Hex couldn't defeat them. Slowly but surely she was losing confidence. Just as they started to approach an inn, Cherry pulled to a halt and waved her arms about frantically.)

CHERRY: Nope. I'm not doing it. I want to go home.

(Drake and Hex looked to one another and rolled their eyes.)

DRAKE: It's no good panicking now, girl.

HEX: Yeah, don't you want to help your Ubermaster?

(Cherry grimaced and looked to the floor.)

CHERRY: But... what if you two are really weak and get beat up? I'll be for it.

(She looked up with puppy dog eyes.)

CHERRY: I don't want to be killed; I haven't even been with a ...

(She looked angry, folded her arms and glared into the sky.)

CHERRY: That's none of your business!

(Hex stepped up to her with a smile.)

HEX: Look, trust me. We can handle ourselves.

(Cherry looked to him.)

CHERRY: Can you though?

HEX: Sure. Look, hit me.

CHERRY: Hit you?

HEX: Hit me, go on!

CHERRY: What's that going to prove? Look at me. I'm short, skinny and weak.

(Drake smiled.)

DRAKE: You aint that short. You're about the average height for a bird. And you aint that skinny...

(If looks could have killed, Drake would have died a most horrible death at this point.)

CHERRY: You take that back!!!

DRAKE: I'm just saying, you aint skinny, you're perfectly proportioned, thin and have all your curves in the right place. The perfect definition of the female body is...

(Noticing the disturbed look on Cherry's face, he quickly realising how lame he must have sounded and grimaced to himself with embarrassment.)

DRAKE: ...and on the subject of making myself look a tit, why don't I just pull my trousers down and ride a unicycle round in circles proclaiming my allegiance to Albert the tap-dancing fish god?

HEX: You do that, Drake. What he's saying is, you're a perfectly normal-sized person. See how easy that was?

(Drake nodded and hung his head.)

HEX: Now hit me.

CHERRY: I don't want to.

HEX: You doubted my metal as a man, now hit me. You'll see.

CHERRY: Well...

HEX: Don't think, just do it.

CHERRY: But...

HEX: Hit me...

CHERRY: I...

HEX: Fuck sake, hit me!

(With that, she slapped him around the face with all the power she could muster. Having expected a punch, Hex froze to the spot and said nothing. Feeling an iciness in the air, Cherry paced backwards nervously.)

CHERRY: Um, sorry!

(Looking extremely peeved, he glared her way coldly and rubbed his painful cheek.)

HEX: Ouch!!! You bitch-slapped me!!!

CHERRY: Um...

HEX: That fucking hurt. You... slapped me. Like a girl!!!

(Cherry's brow furrowed swiftly.)

CHERRY: I *am* a girl!!!

HEX: You were supposed to hit me.

CHERRY: I did. That's how I hit.

HEX: You were supposed to punch me.

CHERRY: I don't know how!

(Hex glared at a chuckling Drake.)

HEX: Are you sure she goes to a combat academy?

CHERRY: Hey, that's mean. Next time I'll kick you in the nuts if you'd rather.

(A cold silence followed. Feeling more than a little intimidated, Cherry tried to shrink and offer Hex a friendly smile.)

DRAKE: Seriously, can we keep her?

(Hex relaxed his stance and gave a single laugh.)

HEX: Come on, let's find your Arkane.

(Cherry smiled.)

CHERRY: I was joking by the way.

HEX: I'm glad to hear it.

CHERRY: Anyway, what was your point? Why did you want me to hit you?

(Looking sheepish, Hex coughed his words.)

HEX: Yes well, forget that, shall we?

CHERRY: Why?

HEX: Never you mind, just trust me. Drake and I can handle ourselves, you'll be perfectly safe.

(Accepting his words, Cherry nodded and the three of them turned to face the inn they'd been approaching.)

DRAKE: Well, no time like the present. When we get in there, just act naturally. The last thing we want to do is attract attention to ourselves.

CHERRY: Right.

(Hex looked to his two companions and nodded.)

HEX: Okay. Through that door is the main saloon area of the inn. Remember; walk in like it's no big deal. We'll all head to the bar. Cherry, once we're there look around and if you see them, discreetly point them out to me. Got it?

(Wearing a thousand yard stare, Cherry nodded and replied in a whimper.)

CHERRY: I'm not confident. I only saw them briefly through a ferry cabin window.

DRAKE: You'll be fine, Cherry. Trust us. Okay?

(She nodded and gulped.)

HEX: Okay, this is it. Discretion is the key. Like Drake says, let's not draw any attention to ourselves. Now let's go.

(Remembering her instructions to act naturally, Cherry swaggered towards the door behind her two companions. Doing her best to look natural, she trembled and her bottom lip quivered. Knowing all too well that her nerves were showing, she screwed up her fists and gritted her teeth, telling herself to calm down. She could picture

herself messing the plan up and her friendship with the two men going the same way as her friendships at the academy. Determined not to let that happen, she refocused and followed on positively. With a nod, Hex swung open the inn door and the three of them stepped inside. Despite the smoky air, bright lights and intimidating atmosphere, Cherry fought the urge to tremble. She was told not to bring attention to them and she was going to do her utmost to make sure she didn't. Unfortunately, they'd overlooked one minor detail. As soon as they walked in, the landlord looked over to them and brought them to the attention of the entire saloon.)

LANDLORD: Hey, no schoolgirls in here. What do you think this is, a brothel?

(Hex looked miffed.)

HEX: What sort of brothels do you go to???

(Looking tortured by his slip of the tongue, the landlord quickly tried to save face.)

LANDLORD: I was joking about the brothel; I've never even been to one actually. You can't bring a schoolgirl in a pub though! Go on, get out.

HEX: But, she's 18!

LANDLORD: Been kept back a few years has she? Go on; clear off before I fetch the doormen!

(Drake scoffed.)

DRAKE: Make us!

HEX: Um... no need for that.

DRAKE: We came here for a punch up didn't we? Let's have one!

CHERRY: Um...

LANDLORD: Doormen!!! Come and eject these three kids!

(As four large men came from behind the bar, Cherry's eyes bulged.)

CHERRY: Fuck that!

(Without a second thought she turned and dashed back outside to wait for Drake and Hex. Hex paced out after her moments later, followed a little while later by Drake, thrown to the pavement by the doormen. As he upped and dusted himself down, he laughed to himself.)

DRAKE: Now that was a laugh.

(Hex clearly didn't agree.)

HEX: Was it? We're screwed! We'll never find out if those blokes are in there now.

(Drake shrugged.)

DRAKE: Yeah but, still...

HEX: But nothing, how are gonna find them if we're out here and they're in there?

DRAKE: They might be in a different inn.

HEX: Yeah, but they might not be.

(Cherry mused to herself.)

CHERRY: They'll probably be in whichever inn has a hearse outside!

(Silence then descended. Hex and Drake had turned to statues and Cherry started getting nervous.)

CHERRY: Um... guys?

(Hex whispered from the side of his mouth to Drake.)

HEX: Why didn't you think of that?

(Drake replied in kind.)

DRAKE: I thought you were the smart one!

HEX: No, I'm the strong one... and come to think of it, I *am* the smart one too. Why are you here exactly?

(Drake chuckled.)

DRAKE: That's cold, mate.

(Hex smiled.)

HEX: Seriously, what's the point in you?

DRAKE: Yeah, mate, shut it!

CHERRY: So, is everything okay?

HEX: Yeah, apart from telling you not to draw attention to yourself in a pub and forgetting you're in school uniform, things are going swimmingly.

(Cherry grinned.)

CHERRY: I like you guys. You suck. It's nice to know I'm not the only one.

(Seeing four angry eyes staring her way, Cherry cowered.)

CHERRY: What? It was a compliment.

DRAKE: When?

HEX: How is saying we suck a compliment?

(Cherry chuckled innocently and hid her face.)

DRAKE: Nah, I can't be angry at her, she's like a fluffy kitten. I want one.

HEX: You'd only forget to feed her, mate.

DRAKE: True.

(Hex then stood tall.)

HEX: Anyway, she's got the right idea. Let's check the inn parking areas for a hearse. When we find that, we'll find our man.

DRAKE: Hold on, what if we find a hearse and it's not the right one?

HEX: Then we won't find the blokes who own it and we'll look for another one. We aint doing anything until Cherry points the three blokes out to us.

DRAKE: Right, fair enough.

HEX: Now let's check the parking area here; if there's no hearse we'll check the inn down the road. Come on.

(With that, they headed round the back of the inn to check for a hearse in the parking area. With no hearse in sight, they drew a sigh of relief and headed off down the road to check the next inn.

When it came to thinking up names for their establishments, the innkeepers of Birchwood could never be accused of lacking creativity. It was a matter of pride amongst them to give their inn the most memorable and unique names they possibly could. You'd certainly never find two of the same name. Having checked the parking area of "The Drowning Badger" from which they'd been ejected, Cherry, Drake and Hex had gone in search of a hearse at "The Hopeful Halibut Hotel", "The Flying Elderberry Tavern" and the controversially named "Amputee's Arms", whose pub sign made extremely unpleasant viewing. So far, there was no sign of a hearse. Not about to give up the search any time soon, Hex led Cherry and Drake from yet another fruitless parking area and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.)

HEX: I bet they went to the pub with no name.

CHERRY: There's a pub with no name?

DRAKE: That is its name. "The pub with no name".

CHERRY: Oh...

(She frowned.)

CHERRY: This place is weird.

DRAKE: I suppose we'd better head over there then.

(He sighed.)

DRAKE: It's a bit of a way though.

HEX: The exercise will do us good.

CHERRY: Exercise? Oh god, no!

HEX: Sorry, babe. If...

CHERRY: Wait!

(Drake and Hex looked to Cherry wearing doubting glances.)

CHERRY: Look, over there!

(She pointed to a parking area over the road. Sure enough, a black, glass carriage sat gleaming in the moonlight.)

CHERRY: Let's check it out.

(Forgetting herself for a moment, Cherry raced across the road and darted into the parking area. Watching her go, Drake and Hex shared an uneasy glance.)

DRAKE: Isn't that...

HEX: Sure is.

(As they stood nervously watching, Cherry raced back excitedly.)

CHERRY: I found it. I found it.

(Hex sighed.)

HEX: Are you sure?

CHERRY: Yeah. Well, it's definitely a hearse.

(Spying their unimpressed looks, Cherry looked to her feet.)

CHERRY: That's an undertaker's house isn't it?

DRAKE: If only! That's a whorehouse!

CHERRY: A whorehouse? How do you know?

(At this point, Drake and Hex both felt a compulsion to shrug a lot and act aloof.)

DRAKE: Well, you know...

HEX: Your hear things...

DRAKE: Hear things, yeah.

HEX: Oh, the things you hear!

(As she scanned the building with her eyes, Cherry looked baffled.)

CHERRY: Hear things?

(She pointed to the sign on the side of the building.)

CHERRY: It says it's a whorehouse on that sign!

DRAKE: What?

HEX: Oh yeah, I heard about that sign.

DRAKE: That's right, heard about it.

HEX: Nasty places. I certainly wouldn't go in there.

DRAKE: And I wasn't with him!

(Feeling pleased with herself for her eagle-eyed spotting of the hearse, Cherry folded her arms confidently.)

CHERRY: Found it. Go on then, do your stuff.

HEX: What?

CHERRY: Rescue my Ubermaster! I'll wait here.

DRAKE: Yeah, right. Like we know what the kidnappers look like.

(Cherry mused to herself.)

CHERRY: We'd better go inside then.

(Drake and Hex both thrust hands in her direction.)

DRAKE: No!!!

HEX: We aint taking you in there!

(Fearing they knew something, Cherry stepped between them and shivered.)

CHERRY: What's wrong?

(Hex sighed.)

HEX: There's rooms in there, it's like an inn in a way, except you go to the special area and pick a girl to take back to your room with you.

CHERRY: Yeah, I know what a whorehouse is, Hex.

HEX: I won't ask how...

(Cherry growled.)

CHERRY: It's common knowledge!!!

HEX: The problem is, they won't let *you* in there, Cherry. The only females allowed in there are the whores. And without you, we won't know who to rescue.

DRAKE: Exactly, we don't want to rescue the wrong person.

HEX: This is serious, Drake. We can't take any risks until we know exactly who these kidnappers are. We need Cherry for that and she can't go in.

DRAKE: True, we can't just bust in there either.

CHERRY: No?

(He looked to Cherry.)

DRAKE: No. The doormen here have swords and aren't afraid to use them.

HEX: He's right. Apparently the owner's afraid of his own staff.

DRAKE: What does that tell you?

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: What shall we do then?

(As a wry smile developed on Hex's brow, Cherry knew she was going to regret asking. She had no idea what his words would be but the look he was giving her didn't fill her with much joy.)

CHERRY: Whatever you're thinking, the answer's no!

(Drake hung his head.)

DRAKE: Oh god, he's got a plan.

HEX: I have. And it's foolproof.

DRAKE: You know, if I had a shilling for every time you've said that...

HEX: You'd have one shilling. Give me some credit!

CHERRY: I want no part of it. I want to go home!

(Determined to share his plan, Hex pulled Drake and Cherry close.)

HEX: Hear me out.

CHERRY: I don't want to!

DRAKE: You might as well listen, Cherry; he's going to tell you anyway. Then you can tell him to sod off.

(With a sigh, Cherry relented.)

CHERRY: Fine.

HEX: Cherry, we need to search the rooms to find this Ubermaster of yours... so, if we can get you a job as a whore in there...

(Already Cherry had to fight the urge to flee.)

HEX: All you'll have to do is put the outfit on, go into the special area where the clients are and take one of them upstairs to the rooms with you. It's so simple. When you're up there in the room, hit him on the head to knock him out and open the window to let us in. We'll, do the rest.

(Drake frowned with uncertainty, thrown by Hex's poor explanation.)

DRAKE: Do the rest?

HEX: Yeah, remember Cornerstone Manor?

(Drake looked delighted.)

DRAKE: Our finest hour. I like it.

(Waving her hands frantically in front of her, Cherry wasn't so enthusiastic.)

CHERRY: Hang on, hang on!!! I don't want to be a whore. And I can't go about hitting people on the head! As for taking guys upstairs...

HEX: Look, they'll hire you; no doubt about that. It's not like you're really a whore, you'll just be pretending. So get changed and go to the special area. That area's full of dirty old men looking for a whore. Just grab a guy and take him upstairs to the rooms. You might not even have to do that; someone might decide to take *you* upstairs. For the sake of getting it over and done with quicker though, you should just grab a guy.

DRAKE: What if the guy don't want to be grabbed?

CHERRY: Yeah! What if he don't want to be grabbed?

HEX: Come off it, girl. There's no way they'll turn down a tasty bit of stuff like *you*! They're all perverts and you're fucking fit. You're perfect whorehouse material, Cherry!

(She gave him a hateful stare and placed her hands on her hips.)

CHERRY: Thanks a lot. Bastard!

HEX: I don't mean that in a bad way! Anyway, once you've taken a guy to the rooms, hit him one and then let us in through the window. Once we're on the floor with the rooms we'll be able to look for your Arkane. Simple.

(Hating the plan with a fiery passion, Cherry trembled.)

CHERRY: But, but I don't want to hit anyone.

DRAKE: Not even a pervert?

HEX: Yeah, only sick, twisted perverts visit those places!

(As they both looked away innocently, Cherry bit her nails.)

CHERRY: I suppose they do deserve it but... I'm not good at violence.

HEX: Hit him with a vase or something then!

DRAKE: Yeah, make him comfortable then when he's off guard, whack him one.

(They both gave her their kindest smiles.)

HEX: We believe in you, Cherry!

DRAKE: We do!

(Lifted by their confidence in her, Cherry mused to herself.)

CHERRY: I suppose it is for a good cause. I like the Ubermaster.

(She looked into Hex's eyes.)

CHERRY: And I just have to act sexy and take one of those perverts upstairs to the rooms?

HEX: Yeah, simple. They're bound to go for a beauty like you.

(Cherry blushed.)

CHERRY: Really?

DRAKE: No doubt about it.

CHERRY: Then I just have to wait until he's relaxed and hit him with something heavy? Then you'll come and save me?

HEX: We'll be up the fire escape before you know it.

DRAKE: And if you can't knock him out... if it comes to that... just tell him you'll be back in a few minutes and run for it. Okay?

HEX: Yeah, simple as that. You won't be in any danger. If it goes wrong you can abort the plan.

(Cherry sighed with much reluctance.)

CHERRY: Okay, well I can try.

(Her heart was thumping. She was far from happy about doing such a thing but with her two friend's confidence in her spurring her on, she managed to place her reservations to one side. Also knowing that Arkane's life might just depend on her being brave this once, she felt she had little choice but to try her best. Reassuring herself that her feminine charm would make the first part the simplest of tasks, she put

it to the back of her mind and tried to psyche herself up to knock someone out. Knowing that if she couldn't bring herself to hit the man, she could just abandon the plan, she felt a little reassured. It was a far from complicated plan but it was never far from her mind that she'd made an unholy mess of simple plans before. Something her classmates would never forgive her for. Determined not to make a repeat of her previous failings, she nodded to herself.)

CHERRY: I can do it. I can. Let's go, guys!

(Hex smiled.)

HEX: Good girl. I'll take you to meet the owner then. Drake, wait here. When she's sorted I'll come and wait round the back with you for her signal.

DRAKE: Gotcha! Good luck.

(And with that, he led Cherry towards the whorehouse. Trying her best to hide her fear, she clenched her fists and reaffirmed herself under her breath several times.)

HEX: You okay, Cherry?

CHERRY: Yeah. If you believe what's written on the upstairs toilet doors in my dorm, I act like a slut all the time. So, this should be a doddle.

(Allowing herself one last disdainful snarl at the thought of whoever scratched that into the door, she growled and made a fist. Letting it go she then focussed on the task in hand. She knew it'd be nerve-wracking but she wasn't alone and with a little confidence in herself she could do it. Focussing on that, she allowed Hex to lead her into the whorehouse.

If ever there was a man who didn't like being kept waiting, it was Drake. Patience was a virtue he simply didn't possess. Unlike Cherry, however, when he was expected to wait, he'd manage to do so without making much of a fuss. Within minutes of Hex and Cherry entering the whorehouse, he'd found boredom setting in and simply made himself comfortable for the long wait ahead. Had the roles been reversed and Cherry was the one asked to wait, she'd already have been pacing up and down and getting annoyed. Drake, however, was rarely overtly passionate about such unimportant things as being asked to wait. He took it as one of those things in life that a man should tolerate and endure without complaint. And so, with no idea how long Hex would take to arrange the job for Cherry, he remained watching the building quietly and emotionlessly.

When Hex finally emerged from the whorehouse, some forty minutes later, Drake spotted him and allowed himself a smile. He'd never intentionally let on how pleased he was that his wait was over, but he could rarely hide his pleasure at seeing the person he'd been waiting for. People always assumed he was simply an amicable and welcoming person; truth was, he simply took delight in no longer having to wait. As Hex raced over to him, Drake maintained his smile and climbed to his feet. In the darkness he could barely see Hex's face, and was most surprised to see the perplexed grimace on his brow once he finally made it over to him. Curious at to why his friend looked at such a loss, Drake held his palms out to the side.)

DRAKE: What's the matter with you, mate?

(Hex scratched his head.)

HEX: I aint taking my custom *there* again. And if I do, I'm going to choose the roughest whore they've got!

(Bemused by Hex's bizarre statement, Drake grinned.)

DRAKE: You might want to explain that, mate.

HEX: Yeah, I will.

(He gestured to the back of the whorehouse and they both started to walk towards it to wait for Cherry to open a window.)

HEX: I took her in there and they loved her. Blonde, cute... perfect they said. They couldn't wait to take her on.

DRAKE: Well, we figured that'd be the case.

HEX: Yeah, but the Madame aint there to check her out at the moment so really they should have made her come back. Apparently though, when a pretty one like her comes in, they don't even bother checking if she's got V.D. They said if anyone gets a disease after being with a bird like her they'll figure it was a price worth paying.

DRAKE: They didn't check her for diseases?

HEX: Nope.

(Drake grinned.)

DRAKE: I'm kinda glad, mate. We forgot to tell her about the genital check.

HEX: That aint the point, I aint going there again. I don't want me knob turning green and falling off.

DRAKE: Yeah, I see your point.

(Hex sighed.)

HEX: Anyway, they got her a bunny girl costume. It belonged to one of the girls who quit last week. So, she's sorted. Now we wait.

(Drake sighed longingly.)

DRAKE: A bunny girl? Man, I love bunny girls. How did she look?

(Hex smiled to himself.)

HEX: Fishnets, high-heeled, black leather boots, fluffy tail on her round little arse...

(He looked to Drake wearing a triumphant smile.)

HEX: Cleavage, mate.

(Drake looked love struck.)

DRAKE: Cleavage?

HEX: Tits like a goddess, I swear to you. Her body is smoking, geezer.

DRAKE: Damn. I can't wait to get up there now.

HEX: You just like the bunny ears.

DRAKE: Lies. It's the tail that does it for me.

HEX: Bunny girls are pretty great though, aint they? I just love knowing that under that thin layer of material, there's nothing but naked, female goodness.

DRAKE: What no underwear?

(Hex looked peeved with his friend's silly question.)

HEX: Of course not, you tit. It'd look ridiculous, those outfits are skin tight.

DRAKE: Yeah, of course. That was a stupid thing to ask.

(As they arrived in the whorehouse parking area, they both looked up to the windows.)

HEX: Well, we've done all we can; now we just have to wait for Cherry.

(Hiding his distain for the thought of having to wait again, Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: I hope she's quick.

(He rubbed his chin.)

DRAKE: You know, I was thinking while I was waiting for you. It'd probably have been easier if one of us had gone in and rented a whore. Then we could have let Cherry in.

(Hex shook his head.)

HEX: Nah, that'd have meant hitting the whore to knock her out. A bloke hitting a bird is wrong.

DRAKE: Yeah, I figured you'd say that.

HEX: This is the only way, trust me.

DRAKE: Yeah, I guess you're right.

(Knowing she might still be a while, they both took a relaxed stance and scanned the upstairs windows. They had no idea which room Cherry would call them from so kept a roving eye on the entire floor.)

Little did Drake and Hex know, Cherry hadn't even reached the special area. The boss, a man who insisted on being referred to by that very term, was taking extra time to tell Cherry the terms and conditions of her job. She'd been told them several times already but the boss wasn't going to let the opportunity to stare at her cleavage pass him by and was repeating them generously for his own viewing pleasure. He'd been talking to her for several minutes already and still had no idea what colour her eyes were. With his eyeballs glued to her cleavage, he rambled on incessantly.)

BOSS: So, Cherry...

(He gave a satisfied smirk.)

BOSS: Even your name is sexy...

(He allowed himself a joyful sigh and continued.)

BOSS: For each client you take upstairs, you owe me eight shillings. How much you charge is up to you. Just make sure you satisfy the client or he won't be coming back. (Cherry was no stranger to skimpy outfits. Every summer she was to be seen in the most revealing tops and mini-skirts and enjoyed the attention. Having some toothless, middle-age pervert with his balding pate almost disappearing between her breasts, however, was something she'd never get used to. With her neck reeled back in disgust, she winced and tried to resist the temptation to slap him as he continued his repetitive lecture.)

BOSS: One client is eight shillings. Two is sixteen, three is twenty something.

CHERRY: Twenty four.

(Disgusted by the man, Cherry found the daunting task of carrying out Hex's plan relatively appealing. Anxious to get her breasts away from his permanent glare, she plucked up the courage to speak up.)

CHERRY: I get it. Can I go now?

(Annoyed at the interruption, the boss finally looked her in the eye.)

BOSS: Excuse me?

(Daunted by his unimpressed tone, Cherry grimaced.)

CHERRY: Um... time is money.

(She giggled innocently and forced a smile onto the boss' face.)

BOSS: Money. I like money. I really do.

(He wasn't lying. She'd managed to tap into the one thing he liked more than a firm pair of breasts packed into a tight outfit.)

BOSS: Go on, darling. Make us both a pretty packet. If you do well I might even take your beaver for a spin myself, later.

(While Cherry tried not to dry heave, he walked up to the door and swung it open.)

BOSS: There'll be no shortage of takers for you, my girl. Go on, make us both a packet. Make me proud, Miss Wroxford. The rooms are through the red curtain. (He smiled.)

BOSS: Just follow the sign.

(Anxious to get as far away from him as possible, Cherry trotted out of the door, arching her back just in case he tried to slap her bottom. As she disappeared from his view, the boss allowed the door to fall shut and pulled the waist of his trousers out. Looking down at his manhood, he smiled.)

BOSS: Save your energy, lad. No *might* about it, we're gonna roger that later for sure.

(And with an excited spring in his step, he released his waistband and skipped over to his desk to count his money.)

As Cherry stepped nervously into the special area, she had no idea what to expect. The lanterns were covered with a red tinted glass to create a somewhat seedy ambience and the air was filled with smoke. As she pushed aside a large leaf that hung from an obscenely large pot plant, she emerged in front of a series of sofas, each one filled with men enjoying a laugh and a joke. To the side of the room there was a bar with more men sitting at tables and just beyond it was a door marked "private rooms". As soon as Cherry appeared in view of the large collection of middle-aged and old men, a series of wolf whistles and excited cheers filled the air. At this point, if Cherry hadn't been frozen by fear, she'd most definitely have jumped straight through the brick wall and fled. She had no problem with dressing in a revealing or a provocative manner but being fair game for men's lusting hands was petrifying. She'd never minded men subtly looking, but now she was expected to interact and allow them to do so much more. Terrified by the prospect, she gulped and decided to get it over and done with. The quicker she took one of these disgusting men upstairs, the quicker she could stop being lusted over and give the man the hit on the head he deserved. Resigned to her fate, she forced a smile and minced towards the excited crowd of potential clients. Wearing her sexiest smile, she tried to use a seductive voice. Sadly her nervousness came to the fore and she squeaked her words in terror.)

CHERRY: Well... hello, b-boys.

(Knowing she'd have to do better, she gathered herself and tried again.)

CHERRY: Is that a cosh in your pocket or do you just really like bunny girls?

(Despite doing much better, she was far from reassured by the answers.)

MAN: Both.

MAN 2: Just a cosh, but I'm sure you can help with the other thing, darling.

MAN 3: Hey, sweetheart, how about some "try before you buy?"

MAN: Yeah, get your baps out; show us what we're missing.

MAN 4: Hey, come and sit on my knee.

MAN: And when he says knee, he means cock.

(As the men all laughed, Cherry immediately lost all her confidence. Trying not to look foolish, she panicked and tried her best to keep up the sexy act. With a terrified face and quivering lips, it wasn't going to be easy.)

CHERRY: Um... I'm sexy.

(She grimaced and flicked her hair before speaking in a shy, unconvincing tone.)

CHERRY: Ooh, I feel hot tonight.

(Embarrassed by own words, she placed her hand across her forehead and groaned.)

CHERRY: I'm gonna screw *this* up too!

(Remembering Hex's advice, she snarled, annoyed at her own incompetence.

Determined to get it right for once, she then stood tall and looked to the drooling men.)

CHERRY: All mouth, boys, you're all mouth.

(As the men all made sarcastic noises at her comment, Cherry forced herself into one final push. Swaying her hips like a veritable sex kitten, she approached the tables by the bar where two men were drinking whisky shots. With a sexy glint in her eye, she bent over the table and smiled at one of them, following it with a wink.)

DRINKER: Well hello. Aren't you the cutest little thing?

(Encouraged by the reaction, she smiled and allowed all her natural feminine charms to flow to the fullest.)

CHERRY: Cute, you say? *I can* be cute.

(She looked him dead in the eye and licked her top lip in a sexy manner.)

CHERRY: I can also be hot.

(The drinker's mouth fell open and his friend puffed out lustfully.)

DRINKER 2: Mate, go for it. She's fine!

(Having felt like she'd been wearing a multi-coloured wig, a fake red nose and large floppy shoes at the academy everyday, being seen as something desirable all of a sudden brought back memories of a happier time. Having been terrified only a few seconds before, Cherry soon started to feel empowered. Making the most of the feeling, she reached for the drinker's tie and pulled him up from his chair.)

DRINKER: Oh, yes.

CHERRY: I'll give you a feeling you'll never forget.

(With her neck turned to keep a sexy glance fixed on his eyes, she led him to the door to the private rooms. Already the client was having trouble walking thanks to the large bulge in his trousers. Torturing him with a look of raw sex, rather than looking where she was going, she then walked straight into the door. Fortunately, she was so in the moment, she managed to disguise the error by spinning around and putting her back flat to the door. Flicking her hair and pouting playfully, she then pulled it open.)

CHERRY: Come on, baby.

(The drinker could only purse his lips in anticipation as she led him to the stairs. Feeling delighted with herself for having done so well, Cherry allowed herself a beaming smile as she led him by the tie, up the stairs and through the open door of one of the rooms. Removing the glowing smile, she turned around and held a sexy pose as the client closed the door behind him. Cherry was in the moment. She'd been determined not to let herself down and she hadn't. Determined to keep up the good work, she allowed herself to get deeper into the moment. Once again using her tongue to turn the client on, she beckoned him towards her.)

DRINKER: Fantastic.

(As he approached her, she slipped her hands over his shoulders and looked him in the eye.)

CHERRY: Make yourself comfy, baby.

DRINKER: I'm comfy here, thanks.

(With that, he dropped his pants and gestured to his erection.)

DRINKER: Suck it, bitch!

(Immediately, all the colour drained from Cherry's face and her previous desire to succeed, withered and died. Having lost all her confidence once again, she trembled, looked away and spoke up in a small, warbled voice.)

CHERRY: *You* suck it.

(The client wasn't impressed.)

DRINKER: I'm the fucking customer. Now get on your knees.

(Terrified by the thought of what might happen next, Cherry did what she always did when the going got tough. She panicked. Knowing the plan was to knock him out and remembering little else; she grabbed a vase from the bedside cabinet and threw it at him. As the vase landed nearer to her than its intended target, the client laughed.)

DRINKER: Playing games, are we? I've got a game for you, darling.

(With that, he charged at her. Immediately, Cherry's eyes bulged and she raced to the window. Before she could quite manage to open it and leap out, however, he grabbed her and thrust her face first up against the window. Naturally, Cherry was terrified.)

CHERRY: Help!!!

(Fearing he'd force her to do something she'd hate, she was utterly dumbfounded when he knelt and started nuzzling her bunny tail with his cheeks.)

DRINKER: I love your fluffy little tail.

(Startled but a little relieved by his weird little perversion, she drew a sigh of relief and opened the window as a signal to Hex and Drake. She might not have knocked him out but as far as she was concerned, it was over. They could either knock him out or get her the hell out of there. Knowing she'd have to play along for a while until Hex and Drake came, Cherry tried to entertain him, albeit it with a bewildered look on her face.)

CHERRY: Um, if you're a good boy... I'll let you brush it?

(The drinker drooled.)

DRINKER: Thank you, mummy.

(Feeling increasing uncomfortable with this strange man nuzzling her buttocks, Cherry mouthed his previous words back to herself in a state of shock. Closing her eyes to endure him, she was most relieved to hear a hand grab a hold of the window sill. Opening her eyes, she saw Hex and Drake outside the window and gestured over her shoulder at the strange man, rubbing his face on her posterior. With a nod, Drake slowly climbed through the window. Hoping he'd clobber the weird man as soon as possible and end her hell, she closed her eyes and awaited the sound of a battering. Unfortunately, the man had sensed something and leapt to his feet.)

DRINKER: What the hell's going on???

(Drake gave a knowing smile.)

DRAKE: I'm going to pummel you, that's what!

(With that, Drake let loose with a series of punches. With a shriek, Cherry leapt onto the bed and huddled in a ball, hoping he'd make short work of the pervert.

Unfortunately for her, the pervert in question wasn't going down easily.)

DRINKER: What the fuck's this all about?

DRAKE: Never mind that, pass out will you?

(As Hex slid his bulky frame through the window, he looked up and frowned.)

HEX: Hit him them!

DRAKE: I am, the bastard won't go down.

HEX: Fuckin' leave it to me.

(With that, Hex rushed to him only to receive a powerful left hook to his face.)

HEX: Hey!!!

(Once again, Drake laid into him, only for the pervert to reel back and return his punches with interest.)

DRAKE: Who *is* this bloke?

HEX: Dunno, but it's about time we showed him who he's messing with.

(Hex then leapt forth and delivered a swift uppercut to the man's jaw. Looking dazed, he staggered back and thudded into the door. With a snarl, Drake patted his fist.)

DRAKE: Let's finish him.

(Looking menacing, he rolled his sleeves up and growled.)

DRAKE: Right, you...

(Just then, the pervert he intended to pound stood straight and pointed at Drake's bare forearm furiously.)

DRINKER: You!!! You're one of those 3rd infantry division pussies that cost us the war!

(In that moment, Drake and Hex looked extremely daunted. Glancing at the military tattoo on his arm, Drake gaped.)

DRAKE: You know this symbol; then you're...

(Before Drake could finish his sentence, however, the man yanked open the door and bellowed into the hallway.)

DRINKER: MP's!!! Code red!!! Code red!!!

(Hex and Drake looked at one another nervously.)

HEX: Military police!!!

(Only seconds later, another ten or so men crashed through the doors.)

DRAKE: Fuck!!!

HEX: Cherry! Fucking run!!!

(Needing no second invitation, Cherry leapt from the bed and attempted to flee through the door. Unfortunately her path was blocked by the large mob trying to batter Hex and Drake. More than adept at fighting and armed with baseball bats, a set of heavy, steel bolt-cutters and a knife however, Hex and Drake weren't about to be beaten so easily. Scared witless by the melee and flying fists, Cherry ducked and weaved, whimpering all the way to the door. The middle of a fight was the last place she wanted to be. In a blind panic, she reached the door and attempted to dart into the corridor, only to be grabbed by the perverted man she'd come to the room with.)

DRINKER: You!!! You planned this. You're in cahoots with military traitors! You must die.

(Desperate to plead her innocence, Cherry pouted anxiously and stared wide-eyed at his raised fist.)

CHERRY: Please, I didn't...

(Before the man could hit her, however, one of his comrades, crashed into him, courtesy of Hex's swift fists. As the two men fell into the corridor, Cherry shrieked and dashed out the door. With her heart beating like a runaway train, she then sprinted down the stairs and back through the door to the special area as fast as she possibly could in her high heeled boots. With terror etched in her eyes, she threw the door shut behind her and ran headlong into a client, sending him sprawling to the ground. Not about to let that stop her fleeing, she ignored him and rushed back into the boss' room. Watching her go, the felled man bellowed angrily.)

JONES: Watch where you're going, you stupid bint!!!

(Immediately recognising his distinctive accent, her panic doubled. Enemies seemed to be everywhere. Screaming, she dashed past the boss without even acknowledging his existence. Grabbing her bag as she passed through, she crashed out of the main door and rushed off down the road, her thudding heels echoing as she struggled her way down the cobbled street.

Without having to worry about Cherry, Hex and Drake were in their element. They were taking several hits but they enjoyed nothing more than a good punch up. It was never far from their minds however, that losing this particular fight might just cost them their lives. Knowing they'd have to end it soon, they battled determinedly, turning brutal violence into an art form. As if his bat was an extension of his person, Drake was lashing out and scoring one perfect hit after another. Being built like a tank, Hex preferred to use his sheer bulk and size rather than a weapon. With power to match his precision, he was knocking his foes back with relative ease.)

HEX: These MP tossers make me sick. Two against ten. Too much to expect a fair fight, is it?

DRAKE: They're too cowardly to know what that is.

HEX: Too weak to be proper soldiers!

DRAKE: Too low to be pond scum.

(Just then, a second group of men bounded through the doors to inflate their already overwhelming number.)

DRAKE: Too fucking many!

HEX: Too fucking right!!!

(With the enemy number increasing, Hex and Drake didn't hesitate to make a hasty exit. Knowing they'd never to be able to take down this many, they both turned on the spot and dived out of the window. Landing in a roll on the fire escape outside the window, they leapt to their feet and hoped over the railings. Dropping two floors to the ground, they both landed in a crouch and took off down the road. Not about to let them go that easily, the leader of the men, the pervert Cherry had been unfortunate enough to choose as her client, bellowed at the top of his voice.)

DRINKER: After them!!!

(Immediately, half the men rushed out of the door while the rest dived from the windows to alight via the fire escape. As he turned to head for the stairs the leader barked an order to his comrade.)

DRINKER: Go and see the owner, find out who that whore was then catch us up!

MP: Sir!

(The mission had been an abject failure and now Hex and Drake were in real trouble. Knowing that being captured could quite possibly be fatal; they sprinted with everything they had, back through the darkened streets of Birchwood. As a loud cry filled the air, they both twisted to look behind them. Sure enough, the angry mob of twenty or so Military Policemen, more commonly known as MP's, were in hot pursuit.)

HEX: Fuck!!!

(As they bounded forth with determination etched on their brows, Cherry came into view before them. Struggling to sprint across the cobbles in her high heels, she was looking behind her, crying and whimpering. Hex and Drake knew they could outrun the pursuers but Cherry didn't stand a chance. The MP's would undoubtedly catch her and do unspeakable things to her before making her stand trial for crimes she didn't even know existed. Not about to let that happen, Hex put his head down and sprinted towards her. Scooping her up as soon as he reached her, he then put all his efforts into mustering the energy to carry her to safety.)

DRAKE: Impressive.

HEX: Fuck impressive, let's get the fuck out of here!

(Determined not to let their intended catch slip away, the chasing MP's snarled.)

MP 1: Fucking traitors. Faster men.

MP 2: Don't worry; no 3rd infantry faggot ever outran an MP. We'll catch the bastards.

(As Hex bounded forth, Cherry held his neck for dear life and stared ahead through terrified eyes. With her bunny ears flailing about wildly in the wind, she panicked like a heron caught in the jaws of an alligator.)

CHERRY: Don't drop me, don't drop me, don't drop me...

DRAKE: Shut her up, will you? We can't hide if she's going to...

HEX: I know, I know. Cherry, shut the fuck up!

CHERRY: Oh god, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die... I want my mum!!! Angel!!!

(Determined to stop her incessant panicking, Hex bellowed.)

HEX: Shut the fuck up, Cherry!!!

(Scared stiff by his tone, Cherry clammed up and stared wide-eyed ahead of herself. Satisfied she was silenced, Hex then nodded.)

HEX: Come on!!!

(With that, they veered to their left and ducked down an alley. Shocked by the swift detour, Cherry screamed.)

HEX: Shut it!!!

(As she fell silent again, Drake rushed up to a door in the darkened thoroughfare and struggled it open. As they darted through the door and whacked it closed behind them, they heard the sound of several pounding feet rushing past on the cobbles outside. Cherry desperately wanted to whimper but couldn't make the sound for Drake's hand covering her mouth. Moments later, Hex and Drake drew a sigh of relief. Cherry was too stunned to say a word.)

HEX: Come on.

(It was pitch black where they stood and Cherry was extremely disorientated. Seconds later, as Hex carried her up a flight of stairs and into the relative brightness of a moonlit room; she allowed herself a sigh of relief. She thought they were in a shed or storage space of some kind. Realising it had simply been the darkened stairwell to an upstairs dwelling, she gave a sigh of relief. She hated confined spaces.)

CHERRY: Is... this your house?

(Following them up the stairs then passing Hex as he set Cherry down, Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: Flat, apartment, whatever you want to call it. This is ours for the moment.

(As Drake slumped in a chair, Cherry looked about the room. Apart from one cracked window, it was surprisingly well kept for the abode of two single men.)

HEX: Make yourself at home.

(At Hex knelt to make a fire, Cherry forced a smile and walked over to kneel beside him. To be able to take the weight off her feet, felt wonderful. With a sigh, she then relaxed into a sideways kneel to get comfortable. Resting her arm just behind Hex's back, she puffed out.)

CHERRY: I'm knackered.

HEX: Yeah well, that didn't exactly go to plan.

CHERRY: So what exactly happened at that Cornerstone Manor?

(Hex and Drake both gave her enquiring glances.)

DRAKE: Sorry, what?

CHERRY: You said "remember Cornerstone Manor?". Like you were going to do the same thing in the whorehouse as you did there. So, I just wondered...

HEX: It's no big deal, I just thought it'd be like a job we did there once.

DRAKE: And it was!

HEX: Yeah, that was an almighty cock-up as well.

(Cherry looked bemused.)

CHERRY: If it was a cock-up, why did you...

DRAKE: Well, it was fun. Sure it was an almighty bollocks up, but we enjoyed ourselves.

(Hex smiled.)

HEX: Happy times.

(Allowing her mind to wander, Cherry sighed and laid herself on the floor.)

CHERRY: I miss my sister.

(She sighed.)

CHERRY: I'm such an idiot. What the hell am I doing?

HEX: You and your sister close then?

CHERRY: Very. We're twins. She's like the other half of me.

(She frowned.)

CHERRY: She's the intelligent and capable half. I'm sure I was made of the bits her body rejected. She's taller than me, smarter than me and her hair's a beautiful platinum colour compared to my yellow mess. The only stupid thing she does is love *me*.

(Drake and Hex said nothing. Cherry was clearly in a deep depression and it wouldn't be easy to reassure her. Looking thoughtful, Hex smiled to her. He knew he couldn't cheer her up but he might just be able to take her mind off of it.)

HEX: Is she your only sibling then?

(Cherry just nodded.)

DRAKE: I've got a sister. She'd be about your age. I aint seen her since...

(He sighed and clammed up.)

CHERRY: What about you, Hex?

(Hex mused.)

HEX: Well... blood relatives... not a thing. I was an orphan, you see.

(He sighed.)

HEX: I used to think I had a thousand brothers though.

(Drake nodded solemnly.)

DRAKE: Yeah. So much for that.

(Cherry gave them both a bewildered look.)

CHERRY: I don't understand.

HEX: Then we'll explain.

(Ten minutes later, with a roaring fire burning in the hearth to light the room and take the chill from the air, Hex and Drake availed themselves of the two easy chairs and Cherry sat on the carpet in front of them with her legs crossed, eager to hear their story. Anything to take her mind off of the day's horrible chain of events. Having put Cherry in so much danger with the MP's, Hex and Drake both felt the least they could do is explain themselves. Leaning forward in a relaxed position, Hex got the ball rolling. With a serious look on his face, he gestured towards Drake with his hand.)

HEX: Me and this geezer here were soldiers in the Kastanie army. Meet Private's Drake Sterven and Zach Hexton.

CHERRY: Zach Hexton? Hex is a nickname?

(Drake grinned.)

DRAKE: Obviously. Who'd name their kid "Hex"? They might as well call the kid Pox-boy or Curse-face.

(As Hex chuckled, Cherry gave him a baffled look.)

DRAKE: Hex means curse.

CHERRY: Oh, right. I didn't know that.

HEX: Anyway, we joined the 3rd infantry unit together at the age of sixteen and fought side by side for years. I don't know how much you heard about the war from over there in Araminta, you lot didn't take part.

(Cherry shrugged.)

CHERRY: I know there was a war. I heard it was a pointless fight over a piece of wasteland. That's about all really.

HEX: Yeah, well we didn't see it like that. We were told we were fighting for the freedom of Kastanie. You know; the usual bollocks they tell soldiers before they pack them off to get killed for no reason.

CHERRY: So... you're not from here; Auland?

DRAKE: Nope, born and bred in Kastanie.

CHERRY: So how come you're here?

HEX: I'll get to that.

(He sat back and made himself comfortable then continued.)

HEX: It was a good life in the army. Women falling at your feet, the money weren't bad and the camaraderie was just great.

(Drake nodded in full agreement.)

HEX: Anyway, one day our unit was asked to guard the ridge at Sutherland Point... you wouldn't know it. Anyway, we had our orders so we moved out. It took us two full days to march there but when we got there we found another unit was already in place.

(He sighed.)

HEX: I don't know quite what happened. Both units claimed they were supposed to be there. We had our orders and they had theirs so neither of us budged. Now, I don't know if it was clever espionage or a severe clerical error that caused both units to be at the same place, but while we were on Sutherland Point nobody was defending the Weston Pass.

DRAKE: Yeah, the enemy strolled through there unhindered and attacked our capital. That was it. They captured our king and we'd lost the war.

CHERRY: Wow.

HEX: Well the upshot of it was that our king had to surrender the land we'd been fighting for back to the enemy and pay vast amounts of compensation. Times were hard. Taxes had to be doubled to pay the debt for the war.

(He sighed.)

HEX: Of course, the people had been promised an easy victory. After all his positive talk and propaganda, the last thing they expected was a defeat. People felt they'd been lied to and the king was a national hate figure after that. We lost the war on Monday, he doubled taxes on the Wednesday and everyone was talking up a revolution for that weekend.

(Cherry sat forward, engrossed in the story.)

HEX: Of course, the king had other ideas. He needed a scapegoat.

DRAKE: And guess who that was!

(Cherry pointed across at her two companions.)

HEX: Precisely. He issued a statement that we'd been winning the war until the 3rd infantry soldiers deliberately disobeyed an order and abandoned the Weston Pass. He turned all the hatred from himself onto our unit and ordered that every one of us be hunted down and hung for treason.

DRAKE: What a wanker, huh?

CHERRY: Wow, that's a horrible thing to do.

HEX: Some of us were captured and hung, the rest of us fled. And here we are.

DRAKE: The Kastanie Military Police will hunt us down for the rest of our lives.

(Hex rolled up his sleeve and pointed to his tattoo.)

HEX: We used to be so proud of this symbol. Now it's like wearing a target. If the wrong person sees it, we're in deep shit.

CHERRY: Like tonight?

DRAKE: Yeah, of all the luck. The guy you picked happened to be a Kastanie MP.

(Cherry grimaced.)

CHERRY: Oops.

DRAKE: It's not your fault, you weren't to know.

HEX: The good thing is, we're safe in here. The Kastanie MP's are a foreign force and they can't make too much fuss here in Auland. That's why they won't come

knocking door to door. No doubt, now they know we're in town, they'll be looking for us though.

CHERRY: Why don't the Auland government stop them?

DRAKE: Auland was on our side. When we lost, they lost. They let them hunt us down just as long as they don't draw attention to themselves.

HEX: Another bright side is, MP's are shit soldiers. It takes a whole hoard of them to take down one proper soldier. So don't worry about us, as long as we stick together we'll be fine.

DRAKE: Yeah, no doubt we'll get in a few scrapes but then, we like scrapes.

(Hex nodded.)

HEX: That's putting it mildly.

(Cherry hung her head.)

CHERRY: It's no fun being an outcast, is it?

DRAKE: Maybe not, but you play the hand you were dealt.

HEX: And it could be worse, I guess. We're well-fed and enjoying life; some people have it much worse.

(Just then, Cherry started to twiddle her forefingers nervously. Immediately picking up on her discomfort, Hex raised an eyebrow.)

HEX: What are you thinking, Cherry? It's okay, you can tell us.

(Glancing nervously to her side, Cherry spoke in a small voice.)

CHERRY: Um... I was wondering... why did you try to steal my bag? I mean... I didn't do anything to hurt you.

(Hex immediately glared at Drake.)

DRAKE: What? It was a mistake!

CHERRY: No it wasn't. You can't accidentally mug someone.

(Hex folded his arms and gestured with his eyes for Drake to answer her question.)

DRAKE: Well, it was a mistake, like I said. We thought you were tough.

CHERRY: Even if I was, why would you mug me? That's not a civilised way to behave.

(She folded her arms defiantly.)

CHERRY: That's plain rude if anything.

DRAKE: We have to make a living somehow, girl.

HEX: He's right. Nobody's giving out jobs these days.

CHERRY: But...

HEX: I know it's wrong. Why do you think we only try to mug people who look like they can both afford it *and* defend themselves?

DRAKE: Yeah, we're not like half the bastards out there who'd mug and kill anybody who looks like a soft target.

HEX: You were lucky we spotted you first.

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: I guess.

HEX: We actually had a good record when it came to spotting the wealthy, strong ones. Until tonight.

(Receiving another hard stare, Drake rolled his eyes.)

DRAKE: Like you've never made a mistake!

(Looking thoughtful, Cherry offered them half a smile.)

CHERRY: I *am* glad you tried to take care of me. Thanks, guys. I know it ended up in an awful mess but like you said, Hex, it could have been worse.

(Recalling how she'd been beaten up twice, witnessed a kidnapping, been mugged, molested and chased by blood-thirsty MP's, she pouted and hung her head.)

CHERRY: Though it's hard to imagine how.
(Looking down at her saddened face, Hex sighed.)
HEX: Cherry, you've had a shit time.
DRAKE: Yeah, that much bad luck in one day just isn't right.
(She pouted and a tear rolled down her cheek.)
CHERRY: I'm sorry for being so feeble.
HEX: Hey, don't be...
CHERRY: I'm really scared and I want to go home.
(Drake furrowed his brow, angry to see her so upset.)
DRAKE: Then that's what'll happen.
(Cherry looked up.)
DRAKE: I don't care if there's MP's out there, tomorrow morning we're going to take you back to the port so you can get your ferry.
HEX: Yeah, we'll just have to be careful; the MP's will be after you too now. Don't worry though, we'll protect you.
(As Cherry forced a smile, a tear rolled from her face and splashed on to her leg. Watching her pitifully, Drake thrust his hand to his forehead.)
DRAKE: I must be turning gay or something.
(Hex looked horrified.)
HEX: You fucking do and you're outta here! I'll turn you in to the MP's myself!
DRAKE: No, I mean. We've got a pretty girl sitting here in a bunny outfit and all I want to do is give her a reassuring hug. What's wrong with me?
(Hex smiled.)
HEX: That *is* kinda gay!
(Cherry gave them both a lost look.)
CHERRY: What?
(Looking uncertain, Drake scratched his chin and sat forward.)
DRAKE: Bollocks, I'm gonna say it.
(Feeling a little foolish, he smiled warmly to Cherry.)
DRAKE: Cherry, you're really cute. You're like this cute, cuddly, innocent little puppy. I just want to pat you on the head and tickle your tummy.
(Cherry blushed.)
HEX: Nice, Drake. I'm sure that makes her feel really sexy.
DRAKE: Mate, she reminds me of my little sister, only cuter.
HEX: Tickled your sister's tummy a lot did you?
DRAKE: You know what I mean. She's a pure, innocent, nice girl.
(His nodded sternly.)
DRAKE: That's why it's important we help you get back home, Cherry. You deserve better than being stuck here. I'll feel a lot better tomorrow when I see that ferry sail off with you on it.
(Cherry gave him a warm smile. It was nice to hear such kindness after such a torturous ordeal of a day.)
CHERRY: Thank you, Drake.
HEX: That's Drake, he's got an odd way of saying it but he's right. We'll take care of you.
CHERRY: Thanks.
(She grinned.)
CHERRY: I wonder what they'd say if I went home in this bunny costume.
DRAKE: I'm sure there'd be a few raised eyebrows.
HEX: And raised...

(He hung his head.)

HEX: Forgive me; I'm a sucker for a bunny girl.

DRAKE: Where are the clothes you were wearing before? Your uniform?

CHERRY: In my bag with my underwear.

(She mused to herself.)

CHERRY: Though... wearing my uniform just draws attention to me here, doesn't it?

(Hex nodded.)

HEX: Well, it's made of expensive materials; you just can't get that sort of cloth around here. Don't worry about that though; you'll be with us until you get on the ferry.

CHERRY: Even so, I'd rather not stand out from the crowd.

DRAKE: Well, if it helps, the lady who lived here before us left in a hurry. There's still some of her old clothes in that cupboard there.

(He pointed to a small cupboard door.)

DRAKE: Our neighbour is always talking about her... drooling about her I should say. From the sounds of it, she was quite petite and slim. They might fit you.

(Hex gave him a cold glance.)

HEX: Weren't you going to clear that cupboard out while I sorted out the one in the bedroom?

(Drake grimaced.)

DRAKE: Yeah, about that... I didn't do it.

HEX: Evidently.

CHERRY: No harm in looking I suppose. It'd be nice to blend in for once. I don't like being stared at.

(Noticing her pout, Drake chuckled.)

DRAKE: See. Cute as hell.

HEX: Tickle her tummy and I'll kill you!

(Cherry giggled.)

DRAKE: Spoilsport.

HEX: Anyway, I'm going to get some sleep.

CHERRY: It's late isn't it?

HEX: Very!

(Hex climbed to his feet and pointed to a small mattress in the corner.)

HEX: You can have my bed, Cherry. I'll kip here.

(Drake smiled.)

DRAKE: Nice of you.

HEX: I'm a nice guy.

DRAKE: I'll be off to bed then.

(With that, he upped and headed through the adjoining door to the bedroom.)

DRAKE: Goodnight.

CHERRY: Night.

(As the door closed behind him, Hex sat back on his chair and smiled.)

HEX: Seriously, try and get some sleep. I know it won't be easy. And don't worry, they're clean sheets.

(As Cherry nervously headed for the mattress, Hex stretched and yawned.)

HEX: If you need the toilet. It's through that door there.

(He pointed to a door which had moonlight pouring through it.)

CHERRY: Okay.

HEX: The balcony's out there too, that's why it's so bright. If you were wondering.

CHERRY: Right, okay. You have a balcony?

HEX: Just a small one. I go out there to think sometimes.

CHERRY: Um... and you'll be sitting there on that chair, will you? All night? You won't leave me on my own?

HEX: Not unless you want me to.

CHERRY: No... no, definitely not.

HEX: Okay. Goodnight.

CHERRY: Night.

(Feeling unsure about sleeping in a strange place, she nervously sat down on the mattress and removed her boots. Wearing an uneasy frown, she then flopped onto the mattress and curled into a ball. Left alone to think, a tear soon ran down her cheek. Every cold feeling came at once. They'd found the hearse but she'd failed to save Arkane and his life was still in danger. She missed Angel. Her fellow students hated her to the point of physically assaulting her. She was stuck in a strange town and a foreign military police unit wanted to arrest her. With those dark thoughts coming at her thick and fast, she knew it'd be a long night.)

Northgate Ferry Port, Araminta.

The last ferry had been due to leave Northgate, bound for Birchwood, over an hour ago. For reasons unknown to its passengers, however, the ship had been delayed and remained in port. This was especially frustrating for one particular, frantic passenger. Desperate to find Cherry and bring her home, Angel stood upon the deck with a bored looking Carter, tapping her foot impatiently.)

ANGEL: I can't believe this, what the hell are they waiting for?

(She paced back and forth waving her arms in the air.)

ANGEL: It must be over an hour by now.

(She glared at Carter.)

ANGEL: Why are they doing this to me?

(Carter sighed and shook his head.)

CARTER: I don't know what to tell you. We'll just have to be patient.

ANGEL: Patient?

(She folded her arms and scowled.)

ANGEL: How can you be so callous?

(Carter looked baffled.)

CARTER: I was being callous?

ANGEL: My sister's lost somewhere and god only knows what's happened to her and you ask me to be patient! That's cold.

CARTER: I'm just saying; getting flustered isn't going to help.

ANGEL: It isn't going to hurt either.

(Carter shook his head and mumbled under his breath.)

CARTER: Can't you tell they're sisters?

(Unfortunately for him, Angel had extremely good hearing.)

ANGEL: What gave it away? Is it 'cause we look the same or was it the identical surnames that did it? Cheeky git.

CARTER: Sorry.

(He gave her an apologetic smile.)

CARTER: Besides, you don't look the same at all.

ANGEL: Don't push it, Carter.

CARTER: What? You don't. You're taller, your hair's a different colour and to be honest, you look, well...older.

(Realising he was digging himself a grave, he quickly tried to retract his statement. He wasn't quick enough.)

ANGEL: I look old, do I? Thanks. Why don't you just poke me in the eye and throw me overboard?

CARTER: I said older, I didn't say you looked old. You've a womanly look about you, whereas Cherry has... well... big girly eyes and dimples from where she giggles a lot.

ANGEL: She doesn't have dimples.

(He shrugged.)

CARTER: No, but she giggles a lot.

ANGEL: Anyway, what do you mean by saying "can't you tell they're sisters?"

(Carter hung his head and sighed.)

CARTER: Sorry, I take that back. You just had a panicked look on your face. I've never seen that on you before and it reminded me of Cherry. Sorry.

(Angel gave a conceding smile.)

ANGEL: It's okay. I'm not ashamed to be compared to Cherry. I wish I was more like her in a lot of ways.

(Carter couldn't help but laugh out loud.)

CARTER: Yeah, right. Like anyone would...

(Noticing the furious snarl on Angel's face, he quickly fell silent and tried to think of something to say to get himself out of trouble. Luckily for him, before he could even begin to think, a large crowd of people made their way up the gang-plank and onto the deck. With Angel distracted by their arrival, he was spared an ear-bashing.)

CARTER: Do you think they're the reason the ship was delayed?

ANGEL: I'm not talking to you.

(Much to their surprise, the crowd of new arrivals were all teachers, faculties and fourth grade graduates from the academy. Stunned to see so many make their way onto the ship, Angel looked to Carter.)

ANGEL: You don't think they've come to help Cherry, do you?

CARTER: I thought you weren't talking to me!

(Annoyed with himself, he rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. He liked Angel a lot. He'd had a thing for her for several months but for some reason, now she was severely distressed, he couldn't seem to help but antagonise her.)

CARTER: Sorry, I'm being an idiot.

(Angel shrugged, agreeing he was indeed being an idiot.)

CARTER: But no, I think they're coming to help Arkane.

(Angel sighed.)

ANGEL: You can stop being an idiot now.

(Carter nodded.)

CARTER: I'd like that, thank you.

ANGEL: I know they probably wouldn't send so many just for Cherry, but of course they'll help their student.

CARTER: Yeah, you're right.

(Just then, one of the teachers, Master Lewis approached them with an uncertain look on his face.)

LEWIS: You two? Aren't you first grade students at the academy. Angel, is it? And you're Carter I believe.

ANGEL: Yes, sir.

CARTER: Sir.

LEWIS: Why aren't you at the academy? All the pupils have been recalled and the summer break has been suspended.

ANGEL: Cherry is my sister. I'm going to find her.

CARTER: And I'm... I'm going to help her.

(Master Lewis shook his head.)

LEWIS: I can't allow that, I'm afraid. I must insist you return to the academy.

(Angel shook her head.)

ANGEL: Expel me then. I'm not going back without Cherry.

CARTER: Besides, we can't go back. The ship's moving.

(Sure enough, with the party from the academy onboard, the ship had finally set sail. Such was the influence of the academy in local affairs, the ferry operator had held up the crossing at their merest request. The delay had, as they suspected, been for the sole purpose of allowing this group from the academy time to prepare and make their way to the ship.)

LEWIS: I see. Then we have a problem.

(Just then, a familiar voice spoke up.)

RAUCHEN: Carter, Angel. What are you doing here?

LEWIS: I'll leave this one to you, Master Rauchen.

(As Master Lewis rejoined the ranks of the academy on the other side of the deck, Master Rauchen looked to Angel sympathetically.)

RAUCHEN: Angel, ignore Master Lewis. Between you and me, the guy's a bit of a prick.

(Amazed to hear such words from a teacher, Angel and Carter stared open-mouthed.)

RAUCHEN: You heard him though; he said he'd leave it to me. You must be worried sick about your sister and to be honest, so would I be.

(He gave her a nod of understanding.)

RAUCHEN: You do what you think is right.

(He looked to Carter.)

RAUCHEN: Carter... are you a sucker for a pretty lady or what?

CARTER: What?

RAUCHEN: You don't even like Cherry, why are you going?

(Noticing Carter's scowl, Rauchen bit his lip.)

RAUCHEN: Sorry.

CARTER: Is it true then? The Ubermaster has been abducted. You wouldn't have brought this many people just to retrieve Cherry.

RAUCHEN: Well, I'm not supposed to tell you this but the library was quite a mess. There were signs of a struggle and the Ubermaster's favourite book was found upside down on the floor. So, yes, he *was* abducted.

ANGEL: I told you Cherry was telling the truth.

RAUCHEN: And I'm sorry I didn't listen.

CARTER: Why would anyone abduct our Ubermaster though?

(Rauchen mused for a moment then nodded to himself.)

RAUCHEN: Again, I shouldn't be telling you this but seeing as you're here I might as well brief you on what we're doing.

(He took a deep breath and started to explain.)

RAUCHEN: Ubermaster Arkane has been taken to Ardenmouth; Cherry told you that in her message, right?

ANGEL: Yeah.

RAUCHEN: Well, Ardenmouth is run by a man named Foxton Hamler. He's a powerful, vicious, vile criminal. A disgusting human being. If our Ubermaster is being taken to Ardenmouth then he's behind it. That's a given.

ANGEL: But, does anyone know why?

RAUCHEN: Yes. I do.

(He sighed.)

RAUCHEN: Many years ago, before becoming our Ubermaster, Arkane took a job working for Foxton Hamler. He worked himself into a position of trust then betrayed him. Hamler deals in human traffic, you see. Well, Arkane worked with Hamler until he found out where the slaves were kept. Then one night, he freed all the slaves and helped them escape. He's a great man.

ANGEL: Wow.

CARTER: Did he tell you this?

RAUCHEN: No. The reason I know this is because my wife was one of the slaves.

ANGEL: Your wife?

RAUCHEN: Yes, my wife. She came here with Arkane after she'd been freed. We met, fell in love and now we have several ugly children.

(He frowned.)

RAUCHEN: They all look like me. Anyway, Hamler isn't the type to let something like that go. That's why, when we heard he'd been kidnapped and taken to Ardenmouth, we just knew who was behind it.

CARTER: So you're going to rescue him?

RAUCHEN: Them. Cherry too.

ANGEL: Thanks.

RAUCHEN: We're not doing it for you, she's our student, it's our duty.

ANGEL: Even so, thanks.

RAUCHEN: So, now you know. We've gathered a party together because Foxton Hamler is a brutal man with a lot of flunkies. Strength in numbers. It's the first time we've been called into battle as a student unit but I think we're more than up to it.

(Carter raised an eyebrow. He'd had no idea of the severity of the situation until now. Angel, on the other hand, was having trouble absorbing the revelations. Her only priority was to find Cherry and talk of anything else was only killing time.)

RAUCHEN: That said, I'll leave you two alone. Just let me know what you intend to do. As far as our official academy mission goes, I haven't seen you.

(With that, he about turned and headed back to the party from the academy.)

CARTER: Thanks.

(As Angel forced a smile, Carter turned to her and grimaced.)

CARTER: What the fuck has Cherry got herself into???

(Seeing Angel trying not to cry, Carter rushed and pulled her close to hug her.)

CARTER: It's okay, it's okay.

(He'd never seen Angel look fragile before. One of the things that attracted him to her was her permanent upbeat nature. It was a trait she shared with Cherry, the main difference being, Angel was competent with it. He liked that about her. Knowing a situation had to be pretty dire to reduce Angel to tears, he held her tight and kept his mouth shut to avoid saying anything stupid. Moments later, Angel struggled back from the hug and wiped her eyes.)

ANGEL: Sorry. That was a weak moment. I didn't want you to see that.

CARTER: Don't worry, we all have them.

(He looked out to sea and nodded positively.)

CARTER: I never thought I'd see you cry. Though, I guess you'd have to be pretty cold not to cry, under the circumstances.

(Angel forced a smile and shook her head.)

ANGEL: I guess so.

CARTER: You're strong, Angel. That's what I like about you. There's no shame in crying at a time like this and I bet when your tears are past you'll be stronger for it.

ANGEL: Will I?

CARTER: I think so. I mean, I think I know you. You know?

(Angel smiled warmly and leant over the side of the ship.)

ANGEL: You don't know me at all.

(Carter looked baffled.)

CARTER: I don't?

ANGEL: I have weak moments. A lot of them. I cry, I get flustered, I get angry. Sometimes I even get scared.

CARTER: Doesn't sound like you! Sounds more like...

ANGEL: Cherry?

(He hung his head.)

CARTER: Yeah.

(Angel was far from impressed and made no secret of it.)

ANGEL: I told you. Cherry and I are alike. She's just more honest than me. She'll cry or get flustered in public whereas I'll hold it in.

CARTER: Seriously? No, that doesn't sound like you at all.

ANGEL: Like I said, you don't know me. You probably think I'm off to save my sister yet again, as if it's always *me* saving *her*. Like I've spent my life rescuing Cherry from one calamity after another. Like I'm always there for her as she bumbles through life, giving *me* nothing in return. You think it's like that, don't you?

(Carter could only shrug.)

CARTER: Well... isn't it?

(She shook her head slowly.)

ANGEL: No, no it isn't. It's not a one way street. She's always there for me. Who's the one who's there to hold *me* when I get upset? Who calms *me* down when I'm angry? And who puts *me* at ease when I'm scared? Cherry.

(She sighed.)

ANGEL: She's the only one who knows me. I'm just like the nervous, bumbling girl you all despise. The girl you see and say you like is the girl I let you see. You don't know me at all. If you want to know the real me, think of Cherry. I'm just as lost and confused by life as she is, I just hide it better.

(Carter couldn't think of anything to say. He liked Angel despite her clumsy, hopeless sister and didn't want to think of them as being even remotely similar.)

ANGEL: Carter, I don't mean to bite your head off.

CARTER: Well, that's a relief.

ANGEL: I like you Carter, you're a nice guy. I just don't want you to see me as this, strong, infallible woman, because that would be a lie. I'm just as fragile as Cherry. I'm just better at physical activities.

(Carter sighed.)

CARTER: No, you're right. I hardly know you and here I am making assumptions. I really would like to get know the real you though.

(Convinced there was no way she could really be just like Cherry, he nodded to himself.)

CARTER: I really would.

(Angel smiled.)

ANGEL: Then you shall.

(With that, she rested on the railings at the side of the ship and sighed to herself. How ever long this journey took, it'd be too long.)

Birchwood, Auland

(Birchwood was virtually silent. In Hex and Drake's home, in the dead of night, all that could be heard was the distant sounds of a lively club, quite someway down the road and the sea lapping against the shore.)

Having been plagued by endless horrible thoughts as she lay upon Hex's mattress, there was no chance of Cherry falling asleep any time soon. After an hour or so of trying, she'd given up all hope of sleeping and had taken herself out onto the balcony, an eight foot square, stone plateau with a three foot wall all around the edge. Resting her elbows on the wall, she slouched and leaned against the brickwork to peer down into the street below. There wasn't a soul around. It was a most unwelcome solitude. She didn't want to be left alone to her thoughts right now.

Having been struggling to get to sleep on the uncomfortable chair he'd chosen as his bed for the night, Hex opened his eyes and noticed Cherry was nowhere to be seen. Spying her bag next to the bed, he sat up and scratched his head. Sensing, she might need some company, he then upped and headed for the balcony. As he stepped outside, he saw her leaning with her back against the wall and forced a smile. Stepping before her, he spoke in a soft voice.)

HEX: You okay, Cherry?

(Barely moving, Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: I couldn't sleep.

(Hex nodded and looked about himself. The balcony was bathed in moonlight and accompanied by the sound of the sea, it made for quite the romantic scene. The sight of Cherry's miserable slouch, however, killed the mood completely. Determined to cheer her up, Hex leant with his back against the wall and turned his head to face her.)

HEX: You know, you're a miserable looking sod. Cheer up.

(At first, Cherry gave him a disdainful glare but upon noticing his smile, she returned it with one of her own. Standing straighter, she looked down herself and grimaced.)

CHERRY: Maybe it's my own fault I couldn't sleep. This costume is extremely uncomfortable.

(Hex's smile grew wider.)

HEX: Looks good on you though.

CHERRY: Thanks.

HEX: You might want to take the ears off now though.

(Looking flustered, she reached to her head and felt the bunny ears, still resting on the top of her head.)

CHERRY: I forgot I had them on.

(She chuckled and leant back on the wall.)

CHERRY: Think I'll keep them on, I like them.

(Hex laughed.)

HEX: You're fun. You're not like most women.

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: So people keep telling me.

HEX: I mean that in a good way. You're an easy going type, well, that's how you seem. Despite everything, you can still smile.

CHERRY: I have to smile. If I don't...

(She hung her head.)

HEX: I know.

(He sighed.)

HEX: It's a shame you're going home tomorrow. I'd liked to have got to know you better. And I reckon it'd be fun to have you around.

(Cherry looked up at him.)

CHERRY: You do?

HEX: I do. I mean, Drake already sees you as a little sister type, you heard him. And I... well...

(He looked away.)

CHERRY: What? What is it?

HEX: No, you'd laugh.

CHERRY: I won't.

HEX: Well... I'm fond of you.

(As Hex blushed, Cherry looked away shyly and smiled to herself.)

HEX: See, I knew you'd laugh.

CHERRY: I'm not laughing.

HEX: Nah, it's okay. Women never go for me anyway.

(He shrugged.)

HEX: They all say they want a nice bloke but when it comes to it, they always want the rich guy, or the pretty boy. They always go for the arseholes then complain that they dated an arsehole. I don't understand women.

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: My last boyfriend...

HEX: He was an arsehole, wasn't he?

CHERRY: Well, he was a nice guy actually. It's just when you mentioned going for arseholes, you reminded me of him.

HEX: I don't follow.

CHERRY: We went out for a year and a half. I mean, I loved his company and everything... I loved him to death. He never wanted to make love to me though.

HEX: What was he, gay or something?

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: As it turned out, yes. He dumped me for his friend, Irvine.

HEX: Ah, so when you say going for an arsehole reminded you of him...

(He laughed heartily, much to Cherry's annoyance.)

CHERRY: No, I meant Irvine was an arsehole. I didn't mean...

(She frowned then allowed herself a chuckle.)

CHERRY: Though that is quite an unfortunate choice of phrase.

HEX: Well, he was an idiot. He was lucky enough to have you and threw it away. The fool. If you were my girl...

(He bit his lip.)

HEX: Nothing.

CHERRY: No, go on.

(Looking extremely serious, Hex nodded with determination and turned to look into her eyes.)

HEX: I want to go to Araminta with you. Hell, I like you, Cherry. I know we've only known each other since this evening but I like you a lot. I know nothing may come of it but...

(He leant against the wall again and sighed.)

HEX: Who am I kidding? I'm the guy who girls consider their friend. They come to me for advice and tell their friends what a sweet guy I am. Just for once it'd be nice to be the one who gets the girl for a change. No, they'd rather go for a pretty boy like Drake then come crying to me when it all goes pear-shaped.

(He turned and looked to the sky.)

HEX: I used to read fantasy books when I was a kid. At the end the hero would always get the girl and the big bloke, the nice friendly giant, like me...

(He shook his head.)

HEX: If he was lucky he'd get a barrel of ale for his reward or a date from a toothless barmaid. I always thought that was so ridiculous.

(He sighed.)

HEX: Turns out to be true. Girls don't go for nice blokes. They just don't.

(Looking up at him wearing a shocked expression, Cherry raised a finger and replied in a small voice.)

CHERRY: You want to come to Araminta with me?

HEX: Forget I said anything. You're not interested in me.

CHERRY: Actually...

HEX: No doubt you'd prefer a pretty boy like Drake...

(He then performed a double take in her direction.)

HEX: Hang on... did you say... actually?

(Looking into his eyes, Cherry nodded.)

CHERRY: I'd love you to come to Araminta with me. You can come as a visitor on my passport. Will you do it? Do you really like me that much?

(Looking back into her eyes, he reached for her hands and turned to face her.)

HEX: I do.

(As a warmth rushed through her that she hadn't felt for quite a long time, Cherry's heart skipped a beat. She was looking into the eyes of a man who understood her and wanted to be with her. A man who'd protect her and love her like she wanted to be loved. After a year of being a dateless, social leper, this was a feeling she didn't think she'd ever have again. She'd been wrong about men before but this time it felt so right. He was a soldier, a good man and he wanted to take her in his arms. She wasn't going to let the moments pass. Trembling with excited anticipation, she stood on her tip-toes and strained her neck upwards. As his face drew close to hers, she closed her eyes and allowed the inevitable to happen. They kissed. First a few gentle pecks on the lips, then a slight parting of their mouths before he pulled her close and they allowed their tongues to illustrate their passion and desire for one another.

Cherry hadn't experienced a kiss quite like it. Her body seemed to quake with pure pleasure at the feeling of his tongue teasing hers. She never wanted it to end. As they parted from the kiss for an intake of much needed air, Cherry was shaking all over. She couldn't take her eyes from his. It had been a day of pure pain but somehow he was washing all the hurt away. As he spoke gently, she exhaled lovingly.)

HEX: Cherry, let me be your man. I want to be your boyfriend.

CHERRY: I want that too.

(And with that, their open mouths once again entwined. It all seemed too good to be true but here she was experiencing something wonderful. In this moment, she wanted

to be with him forever. She wanted to give herself to him unconditionally. Feeling more than ready to sacrifice her innocence to him, she recalled a conversation she'd had with her sister. At the time, she'd giggled through everything her sister said but now the time had come, she remembered almost every detail. She'd do all she could to satisfy him, to keep him, to make him want and desire her even more. Having found this wonderful new boyfriend, she didn't want to ever give him a reason to let her go. With that in mind, next time they parted from the kiss, she looked into his eyes with a seductive smile on her pouting lips and sunk to her knees.)

HEX: Oh, yeah!!!

(Looking up into his eyes, she slipped his trousers and pants down and reached for his manhood. Hex puffed out and licked his lips excitedly. Teasing him, she slowly licked the tip, before availing her tongue of its entire length.)

HEX: That's good, babe. That is fucking good.

(Looking up to the moon, he placed his hand behind his head as she took his length in her mouth. Using every technique from varying her speed to swallowing it, she pleased him to the extreme for the next five minutes.)

HEX: So this is heaven. Damn. Man!

(She was probably the only girl in her academy who hadn't done this before and had overheard several stories. She never believed their tales about how great it felt to pleasure the one you desire. She did now. Sensing his ecstasy, knowing she was the one giving him such a high was every bit as thrilling as she'd heard it was.)

HEX: I've got to have you. I mean now.

(As he pulled himself from her mouth, Cherry looked up longingly into his eyes. Not sure what was about to happen, she allowed him to guide her. As he leant over her kneeling, trembling body, he pushed the top of her bunny outfit down, revealing her breasts. Only too delighted to remove the outfit, she climbed to her feet to writhe free of it and pulled her fishnets down to her boots. In a daze of glorious anticipation, she then slipped her boots off and slid the fishnets from her feet. Looking her lovingly in the eye, Hex then lifted her naked body and sat her upon the wall. Instinctively, she threw her arms round his neck as not to fall. With a smile, he then placed his hands behind her backside and stepped between her legs, penetrating her moist vagina.)

CHERRY: Oh, my god!

(She'd never been penetrated before and every thrust was like an injection of raw pleasure. He was taking her virginity and as far as she was concerned, he could keep it. She was glad to be rid of it. A pleasure like this was beyond her wildest dreams and she finally understood why her sister had been so excited after her first time. For what seemed like a beautiful eternity, he thrust into her as she sat upon the wall. He wasn't being gentle and she loved it. Now and again, he'd stoop to run his tongue over her erect nipples and heighten the already glorious myriad of sensations that were running through her body.

CHERRY: Don't stop, never stop. Fuck me forever, okay?

(No sooner than she'd finished talking, he withdrew and lifted her from the wall. She looked bewildered and confused.)

CHERRY: What?

(He spoke in a gentle yet firm tone.)

HEX: Get on your hands and knees.

(Obliging, she sunk to her knees and placed her hands before her. As he entered her again, her eyes almost crossed with delight. This was even better than before. With real power in his forearms, he gripped her hips and thrust himself deep into her, harder and faster. Cherry couldn't contain herself and panted and groaned

relentlessly. A pleasure like this ought to be compulsory. As he continued to thrust himself into her, a shadow appeared in the doorway. Having been woken by Cherry's groaning, Drake had come to see with his own eyes whether the noise was what he'd feared it was. Watching Hex rob Cherry of her virginity, he gritted his teeth and snarled. With clenched fists, he then returned to his room. Oblivious to Drake's temporary presence, Hex continued to thrust with increasing speed, sending his full length deep into her, over and over. He thrust so hard, her bunny ears came loose and slipped from her head. Moments later, Cherry felt a quivering through her entire body before a sensation a thousand times stronger than anything she'd ever felt before washed over her in waves. She couldn't help but let out a loud cry of unadulterated ecstasy.

CHERRY: Oh, my god. Oh, my god.

(Hex beamed.)

HEX: Orgasm?

CHERRY: God, yes!

(Hex's face then screwed up and he groaned inwardly.)

HEX: Me too!

(As he withdrew and exploded over her backside, he exhaled deeply and gasped for breath. Equally exhausted, Cherry spun herself around and threw her arms around his neck.)

CHERRY: I love you. I don't care if we just met. I love you. I do.

(Hex smiled.)

HEX: You're not so bad yourself, girl.

(With that, he picked her up and took her back inside the flat. Resting in his arms, she smiled and said nothing as he lay her down and climbed on the bed next to her.)

CHERRY: I'm so glad I found you.

(As she nuzzled into his neck and cuddled up to him, a warm glow filled her heart. She knew it was foolish to fall in love so soon but this man was special. He wasn't like other men, he'd said so himself. She'd been through hell and emerged in heaven with a new boyfriend to love her. Just like she'd endured a hellish year at the academy and ended up graduating, she'd been to hell and back on that night and now she was deliriously happy. She couldn't wait to introduce Hex to Angel. Forgetting her woes as if they'd never existed, she then closed her eyes and tried to drift off to sleep. Laying next to her with Cherry's head on his shoulder and her arms round his neck, Hex smiled and stared at the ceiling. That was the best sex he'd had in a long, long time. Feeling pleased with himself, he too closed his eyes and started to doze off.

Birchwood was a strange place at night. Once the bars had closed and the last few drunken stragglers had made their way home, it seemed a like a peaceful, sleepy ocean side town. To see anyone wandering the town so late was indeed rare. A visitor may have been fooled into thinking this was merely typical of a quiet town. They'd be wrong. The reason for the deserted streets in the dead of night, was a far more sinister one. Hidden by the blackness of the moon's shadow, muggers and killers lurked in abundance. Anyone unlucky enough to be out late in this town was unlikely to ever make it home. Knowing the dangers all too well, the quietness of Birchwood at night was due only to the fact people were too scared to go out at night. On this night, however, things were very different. The streets were far from deserted. Marching in a simple formation of four to a row, the party from N.U.C.A

had arrived in town. They were well aware of Birchwood's reputation but with their large number, they were in no fear of a cowardly mugger trying their luck.

Walking alongside the well drilled party from Araminta, Angel looked about in every direction like a lost tourist. Following closely behind her, Carter was admiring her backside and paying no heed to his surroundings. Hoping she might find a sign or a clue as to Cherry's whereabouts, Angel screwed her eyes up to scrutinise every alleyway and corner for the merest of hints. Despite the frustration of finding nothing thus far, she kept up her determined vigil right up until the moment the party reached the north gate at the other side of town. She, like the rest of the party was halted by an officer of the Birchwood security service, a fancy name for their police force. Standing in the centre of the open gates to the wilderness beyond the town, the officer held out his palm and offered a friendly yet sombre warning.)

OFFICER: Stop. I must warn you, it is prohibited to leave this town and night. Should you attempt to disregard this law I will be forced to arrest you.

(Taking charge, Master Lewis approached the officer.)

LEWIS: Leave this to me. Officer, I'm afraid we have no choice but to ignore your warning. We mean you no disrespect and apologise, but it is imperative we leave this town immediately.

(The officer sighed and nodded with acceptance.)

OFFICER: It's not like I'm going to arrest all of you lot. I don't have superpowers. I must warn you, however, the plain lands outside of this town are extremely dangerous. Wolves hunt at night at there are roving bands of bandits and thieves. If you do decide to ignore my warning, be careful.

LEWIS: Thank you, we will.

(The officer nodded and stepped aside. His job was to uphold the law but it was generally accepted by all the officers on the force that if a large group should attempt to break this law, they should let them through. The officers weren't stupid enough and certainly weren't paid enough to risk their health by trying to restrain large mobs. And so, as the large group from N.U.C.A passed from the town in the blackened wilderness of the plains, he smiled and wished them good luck. As the last one disappeared through the gate, he sighed then went to stand back in his position at the side of the gate again.)

OFFICER: Rather than me.

(As he leant on the gate post and raised his head to look into town, he was quite surprised to see that two of the party had remained behind. Not sure whether he should address them, he raised an eyebrow and looked to them inquisitively. One was looking thoughtful and her companion was looking extremely worried.)

CARTER: Um... Angel! They've left!

ANGEL: Hmm... I know.

(Carter remonstrated to her with his arms and pointed to the gates with a frantic bobbing of his head.)

CARTER: Then don't you think we ought to go with them???

ANGEL: No.

CARTER: What?

(At this point, the officer cut in.)

OFFICER: If you're gonna go with the rest of your party, I'd hurry if I were you. You don't want to be out there at night with just two of you.

(Angel smiled his way.)

ANGEL: It's okay, were not going!

(Accepting her smile, the officer smiled back and looked away.)

OFFICER: Right you are then.

(Carter looked horrified.)

CARTER: What? Are you mad?

ANGEL: No. There's no way Cherry would have defied a law enforcement officer. If they told her not to go, she wouldn't have gone; therefore she must be in town somewhere.

(Carter mused for a moment then shrugged.)

CARTER: You know her better than I do.

ANGEL: That's right.

CARTER: So, now what?

(Angel sighed to him apologetically.)

ANGEL: I suppose we should go and look for her.

CARTER: Hmm... I've heard things about this town. I don't fancy that idea much.

ANGEL: Have you got a better idea then?

(He mused for a moment then nodded.)

CARTER: Yes, actually. Much better!

(As Angel gave him a one-eyed scowl, he was left in no doubt that his plan really had better be a good one. Certain that it was, he placed his hands on his hips and spoke confidently.)

CARTER: If Cherry is still in town because she can't leave at night, then surely she'd have found an inn or something for now. Come daybreak, she'll undoubtedly return here to the gate. When she does, we'll spot her. So, I suggest we wait here. That way also saves us going searching around town and getting ourselves killed.

(He gestured to the officer.)

CARTER: We'll be safe here and Cherry will undoubtedly pass by in the morning.

(Thinking his idea over in her head, Angel raised her eyebrows and looked to the stars. Hoping against hope she'd agree, Carter hunched his shoulders and awaited her reply nervously.)

ANGEL: That'll work. We'll do that then.

(Carter drew a sigh of relief.)

CARTER: Thank god. I thought you'd say no and have me trawling over town all night.

(Angel grinned.)

ANGEL: Good idea! I'll wait here while you search. Off you go.

(Immediately recognising she was joking, Carter smiled.)

CARTER: There's a real dark side to you, isn't there?

ANGEL: I have my moments.

(As she walked to the wall and slid herself down it, Carter watched her and smiled. She may have often been flippant tonight but he understood how upset she must be feeling. Accepting she'd be in a strange mood, he decided to take whatever happened and just enjoy having the honour of her company.)

ANGEL: Might as well get comfortable.

(Carter nodded and paced over to her to sit against the wall beside her. As he slid down and made himself comfortable, he sighed warmly.)

CARTER: You know, I don't know if you really care about this right now, but I had a wonderful time tonight.

(As Angel gave him a stern glance, he quickly clarified his point.)

CARTER: I mean at the formal. I was having a lovely time until this all kicked off.

(Angel blushed and looked away.)

ANGEL: Yeah, same here.

(She sighed.)

ANGEL: None of this would have happened if that bitch Flora hadn't stopped Cherry!

(She shook her head and snarled.)

ANGEL: I meant what I said; I haven't finished with that bitch yet. She's getting another pounding when we get back.

(Now, Carter may have been wise to her potential to have mood swings under the circumstances but sadly he wasn't wise enough to just let her air her feelings and get her anger out of her system. Foolishly taking everything she said at face value, he didn't even consider that she may have been making empty threats and tried to apply his own sense of reason to her words. There comes a time in every man's life when he realises it's sometimes best to let a woman sound off and simply back her up.

Alas, Carter hadn't learned that lesson yet. Finding the thought of Angel returning to N.U.C.A and thumping Flora unreasonable, he was unable to let it go and foolishly availed her of his unwanted opinion.)

CARTER: You can't hit Flora again, Angel. What would be the point?

(Angel was incensed and scowled at him.)

ANGEL: What would be the point? She beat the crap out of my sister!

CARTER: Yeah I know... but...

(He mused to think of an answer and came up with the dumbest reply any human being will ever utter.)

CARTER: Maybe she had her reasons!

(Immediately realising he was in trouble, he grimaced and leant away from Angel's ferocious snarl.)

ANGEL: She had her reasons??? You're trying to justify what Flora did? That's as good as beating Cherry up yourself!

CARTER: What?

ANGEL: You asshole. What possible reason could she have? So, Cherry messes up a lot. She doesn't mean to.

(Rather than apologising and retracting his statement unconditionally, Carter then underlined his stupidity by trying to explain himself.)

CARTER: Yeah... I know, but... when Cherry messes up we all end up looking stupid!

ANGEL: And the answer is to kick her head in, is it?

CARTER: I didn't say that. I'd never hit a girl. But Flora... when her dad found out our class kept coming last, he gave her a beating for it. Under the circumstances you can't really blame her being angry.

ANGEL: Angry? Anger is fine. Kicking seven bells out of my sister is a whole different story.

(As Angel looked away furiously, it finally dawned on Carter that maybe this wasn't the time to be having this conversation. Realising his mistake, he sneered at himself and sighed.)

CARTER: Sorry, Angel. You're right. Beating Cherry up was inexcusable. Forgive me.

(With no reaction from Angel whatsoever, he hung his head.)

CARTER: I'm a tit.

(Seconds later as he stared dejectedly down himself, Angel spoke up in a soft voice.)

ANGEL: So... Flora's dad beat her 'cause of Cherry?

(Carter nodded.)

CARTER: Yeah. When people found out about that... that's when everyone started to dislike Cherry.

(Angel nodded.)

ANGEL: I see.

CARTER: You didn't know?

ANGEL: Nope.

CARTER: Well, seeing Cherry laughing and joking after that, made people angry.

(Angel shook her head.)

ANGEL: If Cherry knew that, she'd be really upset.

(Carter said nothing.)

ANGEL: Not that anyone would care.

CARTER: It's just... people see her messing up and they never see her make an effort to do anything about it. All they see is this girl messing about.

(He rested his head on the wall behind him and sighed.)

CARTER: I think everyone in our class has had to face a million questions from their parents about why our class always comes last. To come back to the dorm after getting lectured by your parents and see you and Cherry laughing and messing about... well, it's not easy to like her, Angel. She's dragging us all down and it's like she doesn't care.

(Angel turned her head to face him.)

ANGEL: Doesn't care?

CARTER: That's how it looks.

(Angel sighed and stared ahead.)

ANGEL: If you only knew.

(They sat in silence for a few moments before Carter spoke up.)

CARTER: Enlighten me.

(Turning her head to face him again, Angel nodded emotionlessly.)

ANGEL: That night after the bean bag incident. When she got a record bad score.

CARTER: When she got our *whole class* a record bad score!

ANGEL: Yeah...

(She sighed and looked ahead again.)

ANGEL: She cried herself to sleep that night. Not just because she'd embarrassed herself, but because she'd let everyone down. Her body was covered with bruises, I mean, you can imagine, right? She got hit by all those bean bags.

CARTER: Yeah.

ANGEL: Despite the pain, the only thing she was upset about was letting everyone down.

CARTER: Really?

ANGEL: I got up and climbed into bed with her. She cried in my arms for ages. She wanted to do well and make friends but everyone was angry at her. She kept saying everyone was right to be angry at her 'cause she let everyone down. She didn't make excuses.

(A tear rolled down Angel's cheek.)

ANGEL: She tried so hard after that. She even asked me for help 'cause she wanted to do it right and not let people down again. But when the time came for the next test it was no use. There I was telling her she could do it and all the while everyone else was telling her she was pathetic and worthless. She'd lost all her confidence and when the test came round she... she just...

(Carter tried to put a consoling arm around her but had it quickly shrugged away.)

ANGEL: Don't!

CARTER: I...

ANGEL: All people had to do was encourage her. If they hadn't convinced her she was useless then maybe she wouldn't think she is. Maybe she'd do better and Flora wouldn't get those beatings. Beatings that are her father's fault incidentally, not Cherry's.

CARTER: Yeah, I can't argue with that.

ANGEL: No, you can't, can you?

(Carter sighed and hung his head.)

ANGEL: Anyway. You just see her smiling and laughing after she's let you all down. I see the tears. I see the times when she's been insulted and bitched at all day and can barely face going out of the dorm. Everyday people just snipe at her everywhere she goes. There's been times when she's been so miserable she hasn't wanted get out of bed.

(Much to Carter's amazement, she smiled.)

ANGEL: So, people see her laugh and it angers them, huh? I see her laugh and think she's a small miracle. Despite everything, even though she's lost every ounce of confidence in herself, she's still trying. Things have been unbearable at times and yet she keeps on giving it her all. I don't care if her best still means failure; nobody tries harder than she does. Yet for all the failures and all the abuse that comes with it, she still won't let herself be crushed.

(She looked to Carter, maintaining her smile.)

ANGEL: I couldn't do that. Cherry's strong; much stronger than me. Her strength is what I aspire to. So fuck the lot of you, I'm proud of her!

(Feeling quite uncomfortable, Carter raised a protesting finger in the air and looked to her sternly.)

CARTER: Fuck the lot of you? What did *I* do?

(Angel shrugged.)

ANGEL: When it comes to Cherry, you're either with me or against me. And seeing as I'm the only one who likes her, that makes you the enemy doesn't it?

CARTER: Hang on, who said I didn't like her?

ANGEL: I'm not stupid, Carter. Nobody likes her. You only tolerated her earlier for my sake.

(Carter sighed.)

CARTER: Okay, maybe that's true, but look...

(He swung himself round to look into her eyes.)

CARTER: When I made my mind up to ask you to the formal, I knew Cherry would be around. Yeah, I feel uncomfortable around her because you hear things. All I know about Cherry is what I've heard. But I knew that if I was going to get to know you, I'd have to get to know her too. That hasn't changed. Maybe my perception of her is completely wrong. I was willing to find out and that still stands.

(He gave her a friendly smile.)

CARTER: Please don't judge me just yet, Angel. I'm willing to get to know Cherry before I pass judgment. Not many people are, so that must count for something, right?

(As he finished his sentence, Angel looked away and nodded.)

ANGEL: I guess it does.

(Relieved to have calmed her a little, he sat back and allowed a devious smile to cross his brow.)

CARTER: You never know, I might prefer her to you.

(As Angel gave him a distrusting look, he shrugged sarcastically.)

CARTER: I might even take *her* to the next formal while *you* make yourself scarce.
(Angel's mouth fell open and she turned bright red with embarrassment.)
ANGEL: Oh my god, you heard that?
CARTER: Cherry might well be strong, but she's no good at whispering.
ANGEL: Oh my god!
(As she held her head, Carter chuckled.)
CARTER: I don't know why I'm laughing. I was on a promise and now look at us.
(As Angel started to chuckle, Carter looked to her and grinned.)
CARTER: Sorry. That was cruel; I didn't mean to embarrass you.
ANGEL: Yes you did. It's okay, though. I guess I deserved that.
(She rested her head on his shoulder.)
ANGEL: Sorry, I can't seem to help biting your head off tonight.
CARTER: Yeah, I had noticed. Don't worry about it.
(He frowned at himself.)
CARTER: If I didn't keep making dumb comments, you wouldn't have to!
(Finally agreeing on something, they both fell silent. Despite being in the middle of nowhere, sat against a wall where they'd probably be spending the night, there was something quite comforting about it. They were in for a long night but as long as they were silent, they wouldn't argue and that suited them both.)

Birchwood, Araminta, Sunrise.

(As the sun rose to cast its first orange streaks upon the sea around Birchwood, the port would become very much alive. The trawlers would return from their nightly plunder of the ocean accompanied by screaming flocks of gulls that filled the air with their unmistakable call. Workers would arrive from all over town to unload their ships and prepare the first ferries of the day. The town centre, however, would remain silent until the white glow of the sun chased all trace of the dark shadows away. Daybreak would then bring with it a burst of activity. The trader's horse drawn carriages, on their way to the market square would fill the roads with traffic and the paths would start to bustle with men and women of various trades as they begun another busy day. Mornings were always chaos and yet carried the happiest atmosphere of any time of day. Nights were a miserable affair in Birchwood and every sunrise was viewed by many as a blessing. Not many in this town would want to miss the early morning rush, the longer the people got to enjoy daylight, the happier they were. In Hex and Drake's home, however, this was rarely the case. Spending most nights in brothels, bars or out stealing, they rarely saw the sun come up. Today would be one of those rare times. As the sun broke in through the living room window and sparkled on Cherry's eyelid, she groaned and twisted her head before waking up with something of a start.)
CHERRY: Oh my god!
(Instantly recalling events during the night, she blushed to herself and chuckled excitedly. Wearing a loving smile, she then glanced down to where Hex had laid himself at her side. Much to her disappointment, he wasn't there. As she heard heated voices from the balcony, she nodded to herself realising he was outside chatting to Drake. Not wanting to waste a second of her glorious, first full day in love, she sat up. As the sheet that had been protecting her modesty slipped down to reveal her naked breasts, she quickly grimaced and pulled it back up over herself.)
CHERRY: Better get dressed.

(As she reached in her bag for her underwear, however, she remembered Drake's advice about the clothes in the small cupboard. Pulling her bra and knickers from the bag she smiled and decided to heed his advice. Looking love struck, she placed her arms in her bra straps and mused to herself.)

CHERRY: I wonder what those two are talking about.

(Allowing herself a giggle, she fixed her bra then lifted her knees to slip her knickers on.)

CHERRY: They're probably talking about me.

(With a happy glow about her, she then made her way to the small cupboard with a spring in her step. As Cherry had suspected, Hex and Drake were indeed talking about her, but not in the way she thought. As she looked through the small cupboard, she pictured Drake congratulating Hex on acquiring a shiny new girlfriend. In reality, Drake was far from being congratulatory. Looking peeved to the extreme, he spoke with anger in his voice being careful not to talk too loudly and awaken Cherry.)

DRAKE: No, no. Bollocks. That's crap. You're out of order; simple as that.

HEX: Oh, come off it. Like it's anything new. And like *you've* never done it.

DRAKE: I don't believe you sometimes, mate.

(Hex shrugged.)

HEX: Look, geezer, what's all the fuss about? She's just a bird, mate.

(Drake growled.)

DRAKE: Just a bird? Is that what you're gonna tell her?

HEX: Well... not in so many words.

DRAKE: Arsehole.

HEX: Hey, less of that.

DRAKE: Bollocks. A bloke I know did that to a bird I went to school with...

HEX: You went to school?

DRAKE: Yeah, shut it. This aint a time for jokes.

HEX: Oh, lighten up.

DRAKE: Nah. I can't. That poor bird stayed in bed for a week. She was devastated. Fucking crushed, mate.

(He shook his head.)

DRAKE: Cherry was clinically depressed *before* last night, how the hell do you think *she's* going to take it?

(Hex shrugged.)

HEX: She'll be fine. Birds are resilient.

(Drake ran his distressed fingers through his hair and seethed.)

DRAKE: That girl in there is one of life's innocents. I could tell from the minute we met her she was a vulnerable and naïve sort. I never thought you'd take advantage of a girl in that state.

HEX: Why not? I've done it before. So have you.

DRAKE: That aint the point. She's a nice girl and she trusts us. She fucking loves *you* and...

(He sighed.)

DRAKE: You've gone down in my estimation.

(Hex grinned.)

HEX: *She* went down, and it was fucking good!

DRAKE: What, do you think I'm gonna laugh at that?

HEX: Yeah, why not?

DRAKE: Why not???

(Hex threw him a dismissive hand.)

HEX: Oh, put a sock in it. You sound like an old lady. She weren't your sister. I don't know what you're making all this fuss about.

DRAKE: Hex, she wasn't fair game. She was a soft target.

HEX: Bollocks. Don't be a drama queen.

DRAKE: I tell you, after all she's been through this might just destroy her. Like she didn't have enough on her plate.

(He shook his head and looked Hex in the eye coldly.)

DRAKE: You're a fucking wanker, Hex.

(Before Hex could reply, Cherry sprung onto the balcony like an excited child and threw her hands out to the side to show off her outfit.)

CHERRY: Tada!!!

(She beamed.)

CHERRY: How great do I look? Out of 10! Lowest is 9.

(Dressed in a black top, black leather, knee-length skirt and her black boots from the night before, she chuckled and walked to Hex's side.)

CHERRY: Well?

(She took his arm and looked up at him.)

HEX: Yeah... nice.

(Drake sighed.)

DRAKE: You look beautiful, Cherry.

(With that, he headed inside and sat on an easy chair awaiting the inevitable explosion of emotion to begin. After watching him go, Cherry shrugged quizzically.)

CHERRY: Is he okay? He seemed a little down.

(Hex took a deep breath and grinned at her.)

HEX: Um... Cherry, we need to talk.

CHERRY: Cool. I've got loads of things to tell you about. Like my dorm, and the academy, oh my god, you'll adore Angel. Oh my, I don't know where to begin.

(Fearing she'd talk for hours, Hex winced and rudely interrupted.)

HEX: Sorry, Cherry. I can't go to Araminta with you. I changed my mind. I can't be your boyfriend after all.

(Cherry immediately fell silent and her mouth dropped open. Unable to look into her wide, staring eyes, Hex scratched behind his ear and looked away.)

HEX: It's not you... it's me. I don't want you.

(Breaking from her stare, Cherry forced a laugh and shook her head.)

CHERRY: No, no... that's not funny. You can't make jokes about that.

(Hex smiled at her apologetically.)

HEX: I'm not joking. You're a great girl, Cherry but...

(Knowing there was nothing he could say to make it any easier on her, he sighed and didn't even bother trying to think of anything comforting to soften the blow.)

HEX: Nah, I won't lie to you. It's pretty simple, really. I just don't want to go out with you. Sorry.

(Nervously looking into her eyes, he grimaced with uncertainty. She was motionlessly staring straight ahead and turning pale. The only sign of life in her eyes was the pool of water that was forming in them. As a tear run down her cheek, he scratched his head and looked away.)

HEX: Right, I'll leave you to it then.

(As he took a step away, she turned her neck and looked to him, speaking in a small, lost voice.)

CHERRY: But... you told me you wanted to be with me.

HEX: Um...

CHERRY: You said you liked me, why would you say that if it wasn't true?

HEX: Well...

CHERRY: You told me you weren't like other men.

HEX: Well, you know...

(As an angry look enveloped her brow, she stared hard into his eyes and spoke in a tearful voice.)

CHERRY: I gave myself to you. You took my...

(She hung her head and sighed despairingly.)

HEX: Cherry?

CHERRY: Yeah, my cherry!

HEX: No, I mean, Cherry, you! What can I say? My mistake, okay. Completely my fault.

(He offered her a cheesy grin.)

HEX: Sorry about that.

(Looking devastated her shoulders sunk and she sniffed back a tear.)

CHERRY: How could you do that to me? You made me think you were a nice guy.

(Hex merely shrugged. He didn't know what to say and therefore didn't bother saying anything.)

CHERRY: Why?

(Inside the apartment in the meantime, Drake remained in the easy chair with his head in his hands. Hating to think how Cherry must be feeling at this point, he sighed and mumbled under his breath.)

DRAKE: For pity's sake, Hex.

(A few short moments later he heard a noise by the door and looked up to see Hex coming back inside. Seeing he was by himself, he spoke up in a concerned voice.)

DRAKE: How is she?

(Looking sheepish, Hex offered him an unconvincing smile and scratched his head again.)

HEX: Um... well they say you feel a bit better after you've been sick, so... I'd say she's on the mend.

DRAKE: You twat.

(As Hex shrugged, Drake climbed to his feet and made his way out to the balcony. As he passed Hex, he gave him a cold glare.)

DRAKE: You're a bad person, Hex.

(Hex just waved him away and headed to the kitchen area to grab a snack. As he emerged onto the balcony, the sight of Cherry crying her eyes out made Drake clench his fists angrily. Noticing the pool of vomit in the corner, he shook his head and sighed to himself.)

DRAKE: This is wrong.

(Determined to help, he slowly approached Cherry and held out his arms.)

DRAKE: Cherry, mate. Come here.

(As he pulled her close, she lay her head on his shoulder and cried her heart out. Doing his best to reassure her, Drake stroked her hair and spoke in almost a whisper.)

DRAKE: It's okay, sweetheart. He ain't worth it. You deserve better.

(Halting her tears, Cherry sniffed and looked up into his eyes. The sight of her puppy dog eyes combined with the most pitiful of pouts on her lips, made him even angrier. He wanted to hit Hex right now. Not about to get into a fight with a man twice his size and twice as strong, however, he opted to hold Cherry tighter.)

DRAKE: Sorry, Cherry, you really didn't need this.

(Finding it quite a struggle to look into her sorrowful eyes, he glanced down at her and offered her a smile. Still pouting up at him, she spoke in a small, heartbroken voice.)

CHERRY: Why did he do this to me?

(She sniffed back a tear.)

CHERRY: Did I do something wrong?

(She hung her head.)

CHERRY: Can you talk to him for me? He might listen to you, then he might want me again.

(This was all Drake could stomach. This girl was broken and he couldn't stand it. Looking furious, he snarled and stepped away from her.)

DRAKE: That's it. I'm gonna kill him!!!

(As he went to turn to give Hex a sound thrashing, he then remembered the massive gulf in their size, height and weight and quickly turned back to hug Cherry again.)

DRAKE: On second thoughts, no I won't.

(As he held her tight, Cherry sighed and stared straight ahead of herself in a traumatised daze.)

CHERRY: I thought he really wanted me. I'm so dumb.

(She sighed.)

CHERRY: How could I fall in love with someone so quickly, what's wrong with me?

DRAKE: Hey don't be hard on yourself.

CHERRY: I gave him my innocence.

(She pouted.)

CHERRY: He was lying from the start, wasn't he? He had no intention of being with me.

(Drake just sighed.)

CHERRY: I'm so fucking stupid.

(Knowing there was little he could do to mend her broken heart, Drake eased her away and placed his hands on her shoulders. As she looked nervously into his eyes, Drake spoke to her purposefully.)

DRAKE: Listen, I want you to do something for me.

(Cherry just looked at him, her face the very picture of misery.)

DRAKE: Go and see Angel. Get on the ferry, go and see your sister and tell her you made at least one friend while you were here.

(She answered in a daze.)

CHERRY: Okay...

DRAKE: Forget Hex, he's an idiot. We're still friends though, aren't we?

(She nodded and forced a pathetic smile.)

DRAKE: Good.

(He stood tall.)

DRAKE: Now get your stuff, we're gonna get going now.

(With her shoulders hunched, she allowed Drake to lead her back inside. As they passed through the door, they saw Hex standing the other side, happily chomping on an apple.)

HEX: You cheered up yet, girl?

(Quick to disregard his heartless comment, Drake spoke up.)

DRAKE: We're going to the port now. You ready?

(Cherry scowled.)

CHERRY: He aint coming is he?

DRAKE: Afraid so; there's MP's out there, so it's best to have strength in numbers just in case.

(Cherry growled.)

CHERRY: Tell him to keep away from me.

HEX: Oh, get over it.

DRAKE: Look, let's just go.

CHERRY: Let's.

(Looking to Hex just so she could turn her head away and snub him, she grabbed her pack and slung it on her back. Satisfied she was ready, she gave Hex another contemptuous look before looking to Drake.)

CHERRY: Come on then, Drake. You too, fatso!

HEX: Fatso? This is all muscle. Man meat! As you well know.

DRAKE: Let's just go, for fuck sake.

HEX: Cherry, we had a good fuck. A monumental fuck as it goes, so stop whining, you're spoiling it for me.

(As Cherry retorted, Drake spammed his forehead with his palm.)

CHERRY: No, *you* had a good fuck. And you got it by lying to me. I hate you.

HEX: You wanted a shag as much as I did!

CHERRY: I thought it was something else. I didn't know you were using me, I'm not like that. I'm a good girl.

HEX: Yeah, you were great. Bit bony I suppose but even so, you were great.

(As tears streamed down her face, Cherry bellowed back.)

CHERRY: Why are you being so cruel? I hate you; I hate you.

(Looking furious, Drake gestured towards Cherry and looked Hex in the eye.)

DRAKE: You happy now?

(Hex sighed.)

HEX: Look... bollocks, let's just get her home. I'm sick of this already.

CHERRY: Bastard.

DRAKE: Look, just don't talk to her Hex; if all you can do is twist the knife, just don't bother. And Cherry, ignore him, he's being a cock.

HEX: I'm gonna slap you in a minute, Drake. Whose side are you on?

DRAKE: Hers! Now let's go, shall we?

(Finding the idea of not being there very appealing, Cherry immediately stomped off down the stairwell without another word.)

DRAKE: Right.

HEX: Fine.

(With that, they rushed off after her and followed her out into the street. By sheer luck, Cherry had chosen the right direction and her two companions were quick to catch her up and march alongside.)

CHERRY: Get away from me, Hex. I don't care if those MP's do catch me, at least I won't have to be near you.

HEX: Tough. Now I've boned you, the least I can do is see you home. I'm not that much of a bastard that I'd let you get killed.

CHERRY: I don't...

(With a frown, he raised his voice to talk over her.)

HEX: Even if your whining *is* beginning to give me a headache.

(Cherry just closed her mouth and steamed ahead. With her heart in turmoil, she couldn't think straight. Nothing made sense. Hex wasn't the same kind, caring man he was yesterday and she didn't understand it. She was hurt. How could someone be wonderful enough to steal her heart one day then smash it the next? She could only

conclude that her mother was right, men are devious and shouldn't be trusted. How she wished she'd listened. Beginning to wonder if Drake was only being kind so he too could get inside her underwear, she sobbed as she paced ahead. This heartless, cruelty from Hex was the last thing she'd needed. After the disasters she'd had to endure, she'd been depressed and close to breaking point *before* he'd broken her heart and she didn't know how much more she could take. It was as if she'd spent the whole of the previous day being slapped in the face only to be kicked in the teeth in the morning. For Hex it was a little too bewildering. He knew he shouldn't have done it. Cherry was clearly too weak to handle being manipulated right now and he felt extremely guilty. He wouldn't let on, but he was feeling extremely annoyed at himself. He'd always thought he was a very secure man but for some reason, he couldn't seem to admit his feelings. Every time Drake or Cherry said anything about what he'd done, even though he knew they were right, his self defence mechanism would kick in and he'd say something harsh. He'd be only too glad when Cherry was aboard her ferry so he could stop hurting her and hating himself for it.

As the three of them marched across the cobbles, they made for quite a bizarre sight. A tearful girl being followed by two scowling men, one either side of her, giving each other dagger looks. Their plan was to reach the ferry port and sneak in through one of the many broken fences, thus avoiding the MP's who'd undoubtedly be keeping a vigil on all the exits from town. Unfortunately, thanks to Cherry's wandering, confused mind being unable to focus on anything other than her pain, however, things didn't quite go to plan. As they reached the building next to the ferry port, Hex nodded to Drake.)

HEX: Right, stop here. This is it the one.

(He stopped walking and gestured to the building.)

HEX: We've just got to cut down the side of this building. The port-side fences are just behind it.

DRAKE: Right. Come on, Cherry.

(As he looked to where Cherry ought to have been standing, his eyes bulged and his hair practically stood on end. Cherry wasn't there.)

DRAKE: Cherry?

HEX: Oh crap!

(Much to their dismay, Cherry had either not heard Hex tell them to stop or she'd ignored him. Either way, she was walking straight towards the main entrance of the port.)

DRAKE: That aint good.

HEX: You aint kidding, quick!

(Looking extremely alarmed, they leapt into action and charged towards her.

Desperately hoping they wouldn't be seen, they wasted no time in bounding over to her and rushing either side of her to grab an arm each.)

DRAKE: Not this way!!!

(Taken by complete surprise, Cherry screamed. A natural reaction for anyone who's been grabbed mid-stride.)

HEX: Don't scream, you silly...

(As all eyes in the port turned their way, Drake and Hex let go of Cherry's arms and tried to look innocent. Cherry was baffled.)

CHERRY: What are you doing? What did you grab me?

DRAKE: Wrong way, Cherry. We need to go this way.

(He gestured back where they'd come from with his head.)

CHERRY: Oh! Why?

(Before he could answer her, however, a voice yelled out from the port.)

MP: It's them!!!

(Next thing they knew, four large men with swords were charging towards them through the early morning crowd of townsfolk and travellers.)

DRAKE: Fuck!

HEX: Swords? These ones have swords!!!

(As Drake and Hex shared a horrified stare they both noticed Cherry was no longer standing between them. From the moment she'd seen the swords, she'd taken off in the other direction as fast as her legs could carry her. Unfortunately for her, her decision to wear high-heeled boots meant that wasn't very fast at all. Stamping away rather than running, she looked behind her and whimpered in a panic. Taking her lead, Drake and Hex swiftly raced after her. They could handle four MP's in a fist fight but swords were a different proposition. Not about to take them on and lose a limb, they sprinted away, Hex scooping Cherry up like a swooping eagle, under his arm as he went. She was far from happy about it. Stuck under Hex's arm, with her backside facing four swordsmen, she struggled and bellowed at him angrily.)

CHERRY: Get off me, I hate you!!! Put me down!!! Leave me alone!

(Hex frowned as he charged forth.)

HEX: Stop struggling!!! If I put you down, they'll catch you!

CHERRY: I don't care. I hate you!!! You're gay!

HEX: No, I'm fucking not! You know damn well I'm not.

CHERRY: Gay!!! That's why you dumped me! After going with me you realised you didn't like women!!! So you dumped me! You gay!!!

(Despite her attempts to anger him into letting her go, Hex bounded forth undeterred with Drake at his side. Stuck there unable to move, Cherry frowned bitterly.)

CHERRY: Bloody poof.

(Determined not to let them escape again, the four sword-wielding MP's kept hot on their tracks. The wanted threesome of Hex, Drake and Cherry had a good twenty foot head start over them and they were determined to chase them down as soon as possible. With both parties matching one another for determination and speed, however, even after they'd raced over half the length of the entire main street, that twenty foot gap remained. Undeterred by their failure to gain any ground, the MP's remained wholly confident that they'd close them down eventually, even if took all day, and bounded after them remorselessly. They'd been taken in completely by the tales about the 3rd infantry and weren't going to let these hated traitors off easily. There was nothing Hex and Drake could do but run and hope they got away somehow.)

HEX: Where to???

DRAKE: Wherever! Just keep going.

(Looking behind him, Drake frowned.)

DRAKE: Persistent little shits. They're still right on us.

HEX: I know!!!

(Getting an ache in his arm, he snarled and gritted his teeth.)

HEX: This is no good.

(With that, he growled and with amazing strength in his arm, somehow managed to lift and twist Cherry up and over his shoulder. Being slung about like a rag doll, Cherry screamed and grabbed his back.)

CHERRY: Agh!!! You bastard!

HEX: Shut up!!!

CHERRY: I hate you!!!

HEX: I'll fucking throw you in a minute, if you keep on.)

(Clamming up, she pouted sheepishly as she hung off his shoulder.)

CHERRY: Please don't.

(Her silence was short-lived, however. Dangling there with a perfect view of their four sword wielding pursuers, she screamed for all she was worth. As it turned out, having her backside facing them rather than her head had been far more preferable. Scared stiff, she screeched in terror continuously as they bounded forth through the busy town thoroughfares. With no plan except to hopefully outrun the MP's on their tail, Hex and Drake looked extremely desperate. In this area of town there was nowhere to hide, they had to either outrun them or stop and fight them. With the second option being both unwise and undesirable, they put their hearts and souls into running.)

DRAKE: Hex, they're not letting up.

HEX: Then nor will we!!!

(Drake snarled determinedly.)

DRAKE: Damn right.

(Racing on down the lengthy main street with the MP's still showing no signs of slowing whatsoever, Hex grimaced angrily. Carrying Cherry on his shoulder was making his arm ache and her endless screaming was driving him to distraction. Knowing he could nothing but tolerate it and try to run through the pain, he snarled to himself.)

HEX: This is my retribution, right? This is bad karma coming to get me, surely.

DRAKE: I doubt it. If it's *your* bad karma, why am I being punished with you?

(Despite the severity of their current predicament, Hex forced a smile.)

HEX: Because you're a cock, mate.

(Ignoring his comment, Drake looked about their surroundings, before casting a glance over his shoulder.)

DRAKE: Fuck, they're not slowing down and I don't know this part of town at all.

HEX: Me either.

DRAKE: We should take a turn though. If we can't outrun them, we'll have to outfox them.

HEX: A turn? And risk running down a dead end?

DRAKE: What choice do we have?

HEX: I say we keep going, as long as madam here keeps pretending to be a siren, we've got a chance.

(Cherry's hysterical screaming was indeed coming in quite handy. The townspeople could hear them coming from quite a distance and were quick to get out of their way. The MPs might even had gained a little ground were it not for people walking in their way to stare at Hex, Drake and the screaming girl once they'd sprinted past them. Luckily for Cherry, this side effect of her incessant wail was the only thing stopping Hex or Drake from coshing her to knock her out. The noise was maddening to say the least.

Being former soldiers, both Hex and Drake lacked for nothing when it came to stamina. Unfortunately for them, nor did the pursuing MP's. The pursuit wasn't going to be ended by anybody's fatigue any time soon. Knowing they'd have to take the initiative were the chase to end sooner, the MP's hatched a plan as they bounded forth.)

MP: Well, we can't just chase them around town and hope one of them has a heart attack, this is ridiculous.

MP 2: Yeah, but your idea could be dangerous! We're a foreign force, if we hurt someone there could be a diplomatic incident.

MP: Oh, you big pansy. Stop being such a drama queen!

MP 3: He's right. We can't just run all day. I say we do it.

MP 2: We? I'm the poor bastard who's got to throw the thing.

MP: Oh, stop whining.

MP 2: Fine. But if I miss and get arrested, I'm taking you down with me.

MP: You do that then. Now hurry up and throw it.

(The second MP sneered.)

MP 2: Just don't blame me if it all goes tits up!

(With that, he pulled a dagger from his belt and growled.)

MP 2: Here goes nothing.

(As he raised the dagger to take aim, Cherry went from screaming to yelping, kicking and flailing her arms about in a complete panic. Hex and Drake immediately knew something was wrong. Looking back, Drake gulped.)

DRAKE: They're going to throw a dagger at us!!!

HEX: Fuck!!!

(Staring back in terror at the pursuing MP as he was about to throw, Cherry cried out imploringly.)

CHERRY: Please don't kill me!!!

(Seeing her terrified eyes, the MP gritted his teeth.)

MP 2: I don't want to hit the girl. It's too risky.

MP: Oh, just throw it at her!

(Upon hearing his words, Cherry burst out crying and screamed back at him.)

CHERRY: Why throw it at *me*??? I didn't do anything!!!

(Seconds later, the spinning dagger whooshed past her head and narrowly flew on between Hex and Drake.)

CHERRY: You bastard, you could've killed me!!! I hate you!!!

(The MP's were far from impressed with the throw and scowled at their comrade.)

MP: You missed on purpose.

MP 2: No, I never!

MP 3: You're just lucky you didn't hit a civilian.

MP 2: Oh piss off. I didn't do it on purpose but I'm glad I missed. I didn't join the military police to throw daggers at women, you know.

MP 4: You were right, he *is* a pansy.

MP: I know!

MP 2: Tossers.

(Relieved by the near miss, Hex and Drake looked to one another and puffed out their cheeks.)

DRAKE: That was close.

HEX: Too fucking close. If they do that again, we could be fucked.

(Facing ahead, Drake looked tortured and furrowed his brow.)

DRAKE: We are fucked, mate. We're heading for the central gates leading out of town!!!

HEX: Shit.

(He snarled determinedly.)

HEX: Fuck it. I aint stopping. Looks like were heading out of town.

(With that, they both put their heads down and charged for the exit to the marshlands. Taken by surprise, the two MP's who'd been resting by the gate on a lookout for them, could do nothing but watch open mouthed as they bounded through the gates and headed down the long straight road away from town. As he snarled and stared back through the gap in the gate, Drake was shocked to see the four pursuing MP's come a halt, just inside the gates.)

DRAKE: They've stopped.

(Unable to turn and look due to Cherry panicking over his shoulder, Hex smiled as he bounded onwards.)

HEX: Good. When we're out of sight, so will we.

(Watching them race away down the road, the lead MP nodded to himself. With nothing but thick marshland either side of the road for several miles, he was certain Hex, Drake and Cherry would now make an easy catch. Apart from a stretch of woodland and a small river some five miles down the road, there was virtually nowhere to hide out there in the wilderness. Knowing this, the MP turned to his subordinate and spoke in no uncertain terms.)

MP: Gather all the men from the south and north gates. Get the horses and carriages prepared and gather our equipment. They've got nowhere to run to now. We'll catch them in no time.

(As his subordinate nodded and immediately turned to carry out his order, the MP folded his arms knowingly and smirked to himself.)

MP: Those traitors are going to die a horrible death.

(Allowing himself a chuckle, he then turned and headed back into the township.)

(With the sun shining into the town and reflecting off the grey cobbles, it truly was a beautiful morning in Birchwood. Despite the sea air, there wasn't even a hint of a chill. Having spent the night resting against a wall by the north gate, Angel had felt the sun on her face and nodded off in the heat of its glow. Certain that if Cherry came past she'd most definitely see her there, she wasn't even remotely worried that she'd miss her. At her side, Carter was yawning from remaining awake all night. He too felt like a nap but didn't want to miss a single second of having Angel's head resting on his shoulder. Feeling more than a little content, he ended his yawn and turned his head to look at her hair in the corner of his eyes. He then smiled and gave a contented nod. He didn't want the moment to end. Unfortunately for him, moments later two burly men rushed over and spoiled his perfect morning. Looking extremely serious, they rushed to speak to two other men who were standing by the north gate looking bored out of their minds.)

MP: Hurry. The two traitors and their prostitute accomplice headed out of the central gates about five minutes ago. Our orders are to gather our equipment and go after them. We're shipping out.

(Having been half asleep, Angel opened her eyes and looked up to see what the noise was about. Enthralled by what they were saying, Carter also couldn't help but listen in.)

MP 2: The central gate? Didn't we have a posting there?

MP: It seems they evaded them. It doesn't matter, they won't get far.

MP 2: Okay, then I guess we're out of here.

(He paused.)

MP 2: I don't suppose we know their rank yet do we?

(This wasn't an uncommon question in such situations. The bounty for catching officers was far higher than for catching a private. Being paid according to this sliding scale, the MP's were always curious to know.)

MP: For one of them we do. The whorehouse manager spotted them running past his window and identified one of them as his customer. His name is Zach Hexton, our logs have him down as a private. The other one we're not sure about.

MP 2: And the prostitute?

MP: We have a name, Cherry Wroxford, but there's no-one of that name registered as a female soldier according to our logs.

MP 2: Could be an alias!

MP: Could be. Either way, they're national traitors and she's definitely in cahoots with them. Our information is, Hexton helped her apply for the job at the whorehouse.

MP 2: Okay. Let's go.

MP: I have to get the men from the south gate. You two go back to base and get prepared. We're shipping out from the central gates as soon as everyone's ready.

MP 2: Right!

(As the four men departed in two different directions, Angel and Carter sat open-mouthed, staring at where they'd stood. Looking pale and shocked, Angel shivered.)

ANGEL: Um... Carter?

CARTER: I heard.

(In a state of shock they remained where they sat, staring in disbelief for a few moments before both leaping to their feet.)

CARTER: Come on!!!

ANGEL: Go!!!

(With that, they sprinted for all they were worth in the direction the burly MP had come from. They had no idea why Cherry was being referred to as a prostitute or who these men were. All they knew was that she'd left town through a different gate and they had to catch her up. As they charged forth, Angel cursed her lack of local knowledge all the way. She didn't know there was more than one gate and couldn't believe she'd made such an assumption. Desperate to atone for the error, she and Carter raced for the central gates, asking directions along the way. As they ran, Carter started to think about what they'd heard. As his mind processed the information he started to wonder about the wisdom of rushing to the aid of a girl who was being hunted by a large group of men who were quiet obviously soldiers. He certainly didn't want to upset a foreign military. Knowing that Angel would go after her anyway, he quickly cast any doubt about it aside. He couldn't allow her to go alone and there was no way she'd abandon her sister, no matter what the threat. He then started to wonder whether there was any chance the soldiers may have been talking about a different Cherry Wroxford. They'd referred to the girl they were after as a national traitor and a prostitute. How could she be such things? He soon brushed those doubts aside too. Cherry might have done something to offend the nation while she was here, she was undoubtedly clumsy enough. As for her being a prostitute, if the rumours about her at the academy were true then it'd be an ideal vocation for her. Satisfying himself he was doing the right thing, he nodded to himself and smiled to Angel.)

CARTER: Don't worry, Angel. We'll save her.

(Angel returned his smile. And with no more to be said, they raced on through the town, determined to find the central gates and catch up with Cherry.)

Highway somewhere between Birchwood and Ardenmouth, Auland.

(When the roads between the townships of Ardenmouth and Birchwood were first built, they were hailed as an amazing feat of ingenuity. Many had previously believed that building a road between the two settlements would be impossible, and the fact they'd built one that split into a trident, serving all three gates into Birchwood was considered quite an achievement. The land between the towns had consisted almost entirely of nothing but a thick, boggy marsh. The engineers who'd first decided the route upon which the road would be built, had faced many difficult obstacles. Finding a route with enough solid ground had been something of a headache. After years of planning, they'd had to move a considerable amount of earth to bridge gaps in their planned route. There was no natural, solid path through the marsh, so they'd had to create one by filling in bits of the marsh with rocks and dirt. It had taken many years to merely create a route before they could even consider building the road. Once the project had been completed, the head engineer had been hailed a hero and in both townships, several schools, roads and buildings had been named after him.

The three pronged road had opened up Birchwood to the rest of the world. Previously only accessible by sea, the town's new land route had opened up many opportunities for trade and had brought with it much prosperity. For a good few years, Birchwood had thrived. That was, of course, until war broke out and the whole of Auland fell on hard times. Gangs of wolves had always been a problem but due to the nationwide poverty, many homeless and desperate people had taken to the marsh to rob those who were foolish enough to travel at night. This was not a proud time in Auland's history.

At this current moment in time, however, the impoverished gangs of robbers were not the only desperate ones out there on the road. Hastily making their way along the well worn cobbles with a thick, black quagmire a few feet either side of them, Drake, Hex and Cherry all bore angry and frustrated looks. Hanging off of Hex's shoulders as he bounded forth alongside Drake, Cherry looked particularly annoyed. Exhausted from all her screaming, however, she'd fallen silent and hadn't complained for over half a mile. Tiring from running so hard and fast, both Drake and Hex puffed and panted loudly, their aching legs starting to slip or buckle with every extra step they took. Finally too weary to keep up the pace, Drake slowed to a walk before stopping to place his hands on his hips. As Hex also slowed, Drake caught his breath and shook his head.)

DRAKE: Fuck this. I'm shattered, mate.

(Stopping dead, Hex bent forward to allow Cherry down and joined Drake in panting for breath.)

HEX: I hear you.

(As soon as her heels found the cobbles, Cherry stood up straight and launched into Hex's chest with several ham-fisted punches.)

CHERRY: Bastard!

HEX: Hey!

(Relenting with her fists, she then kicked him in the shins and turned away, folding her arms indignantly.)

CHERRY: I really, really hate you.

(Hex shrugged.)

HEX: Fine.

CHERRY: Fine.

(Ignoring her distain, Hex turned to Drake and spoke through exhausted breaths.)

HEX: Geezer, this sucks. You know why they stopped chasing us, don't you?

(Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: Yeah, to regroup and chase us down on horseback.

HEX: Exactly. How the fuck are we going to outrun that?

(Drake shook his head and grimaced angrily. Outrunning carriages would be impossible and taking to the marshes would be suicidal. Absorbing the reality that they could neither run nor hide, the two men shared a horrified glance. Oblivious to their concerns, Cherry turned to face them and placed her hands on her hips in a cocky manner.)

CHERRY: You can do what you like, I'm going home.

(She mumbled under her breath as she turned towards Birchwood.)

CHERRY: Pratt. Carrying me all the way out here!

(As she started to head back the way they'd came however, Hex grabbed her wrist and pulled her back.)

HEX: No!

CHERRY: Get off me. You're diseased!

(Trying to reason with her, Hex furrowed his brow and spoke with authority in his voice.)

HEX: Cherry, listen...

CHERRY: Let me go. Leave me alone, I hate you...

HEX: Cherry, it's...

CHERRY: I said get off!!!

(As she swung her free arm to slap his face with all her might, Hex caught it and growled into her eyes.)

HEX: Don't even think about it.

(Struggling to pull her wrists free of his tight grip, Cherry snarled.)

CHERRY: Why? What are you going to do, hit me? Why don't you? You seem to get a thrill out of hurting me.

HEX: Look you dozy, whore, if you go back there, they'll cut you into tiny pieces as soon as they see you. And they *will* see you.

CHERRY: No, they won't!

HEX: Yes they will!

(With a sigh, Drake cut in.)

DRAKE: They will, Cherry. They'll probably be on their way already and if not then they'll be watching the gate for sure. They're after you too remember. As soon as they see you, that'll be it.

(Cherry froze and pouted at him.)

CHERRY: That'll be it?

DRAKE: Yeah.

HEX: They'll kill you in a heartbeat.

(He mused.)

HEX: Of course, they might decide to rape you a bit first then kill you.

(With a whimper, she looked back down the road and trembled.)

CHERRY: We should get going then.

(Drake shook his head.)

DRAKE: That's the problem, Cherry. If we go back we're dead for certain and if we keep going then it's only a matter of time before they catch up.

HEX: Basically, we're screwed!

(As Hex released her wrists, Cherry spoke up in a small voice.)

CHERRY: They might let me go, I didn't really do anything.

HEX: Cherry, you let us into that room to hit their leader. In their eyes you're as guilty as we are.

DRAKE: He's right. After what happened at the whorehouse, they must think we're a gang of three violent robbers. To them, we're traitors and you're a collaborator, under Kastanie law that makes you just as guilty as us.

CHERRY: But...

HEX: But nothing. There's no reasoning with MP's.

DRAKE: And you *are* guilty of being a part of the plan to cosh their leader.

HEX: Shit. It's bad enough that they see us as traitors; that's enough for them to want us dead. The fact we tried to beat the leader up in the brothel as well...

DRAKE: Yeah, that's just pissed them off even more, no doubt.

(Cherry's shoulders sunk and she started crying.)

CHERRY: You said you'd protect me.

(She pouted at Drake, sorrowfully.)

CHERRY: What part of protecting me is getting me killed?

(She sunk to her knees.)

CHERRY: It's no wonder they kicked you out of the army.

(As Hex went to scold her, Drake placed his hand on his shoulder. As Hex swiftly glanced in his direction, Drake shook his head and forced a smile.)

DRAKE: Just, let her say what she thinks.

(He sighed.)

DRAKE: She's right after all. Our idea of protection has a lot to be desired, she'd have been better of taking her chances with the muggers.

(Hex nodded in concession.)

HEX: Yeah, you've got a point.

(Just then, the sound of a horse and carriage approaching caused everyone to cast a terrified gaze back towards Birchwood.)

HEX: Fuck. That was quick!

DRAKE: Cherry, run! We're going to have to...

(Noticing Cherry was nowhere to be seen, he looked about himself and frowned.)

DRAKE: Cherry?

(Sharing his bewilderment, Hex threw his arms out to the side.)

HEX: Did we imagine her or something?

DRAKE: Looks that way doesn't it?

(He nodded determinedly.)

DRAKE: Doesn't matter. It's better this way.

HEX: Yeah, just us two. No whinging, clingy bint to hold us back.

DRAKE: No, I mean, now she's gone I don't feel so bad about taking them on.

(Hex nodded.)

HEX: Right. I guess we have no choice.

(The looked to each other determinedly.)

DRAKE: We've been through a lot of shit together, Hex. Let's not make this the last time, okay?

HEX: Couldn't agree more.

(With that, they turned to face the oncoming carriage and snarled.)

DRAKE: If we do go out fighting...

HEX: Less of the "we", mate. I aint dying out here. I'm gonna kick the crap out those MP's, you see if I don't.

DRAKE: Yeah, you're right. Let's do that.

(As they took up their fighting stances, they were most put out to see a black funeral carriage, manned by three men in civilian dress. There wasn't an MP to be seen. Relenting their fighting stances, they stepped to the side of the road and bowed their heads to allow the hearse to pass. Once it had passed, they looked to each other wearing embarrassed grimaces.)

DRAKE: Well, I feel like a complete fool, you?

HEX: Just a bit.

(As they watched it head off further down the road, Drake had a realisation and scratched his head.)

DRAKE: Hang on, you don't think...

(Still watching it go, Hex replied emotionlessly.)

HEX: Maybe. Most of all I'm thinking how stupid we are for not hijacking it.

(He smiled to Drake.)

HEX: Fancy a sprint? If we nab that coach, we'll definitely get to Ardenmouth before the MP's find us.

DRAKE: Yeah, and possibly save Cherry's Ubermaster in the process. I like your style.

HEX: Stuff, Cherry. She's gone! We've got our own arses to save.

(Just then a shrill voice made Hex wince.)

CHERRY: Stuff Cherry?

(They both swiftly spun around to see Cherry lying on the grass roadside verge where she'd been hiding. Somehow she'd managed to find one of the few pieces of off-road land that wasn't thick mud. Before Hex and Drake could even begin to comment on her swift discovery of the sloping piece of land, however, she climbed to her feet and launched into a rant.)

CHERRY: Stuff me? Stuff me?

(Hex shrugged.)

HEX: I stuffed you last night, it's Drake's turn.

DRAKE: Fuck sake, Hex.

CHERRY: I see. I see. You're not happy with mugging me then getting me into trouble with an entire army, no...

(She snarled.)

CHERRY: That's not enough for you, is it? You have to shag me, break my heart then drag me into the middle of nowhere and leave me here!

HEX: It sounds bad when you put it like that.

CHERRY: Sounds bad? Sounds bad?

(As she stepped into Hex's face to bellow at him, Drake leant over the side of the road to take a better look at where she'd hidden.)

CHERRY: You're lucky I'm rubbish at unarmed combat!

(Hex found it something of a struggle not to laugh at her less than intimidating threat.)

HEX: Yes... I'm counting my blessing as we speak.

(Cherry flexed her neck muscles and sneered into his eyes.)

CHERRY: Yeah, well... so you should.

(She looked away and scoffed.)

CHERRY: But we're all rubbish at some things. I can't fight and you're shit at sex.

(Hex scoffed.)

HEX: Made *you* cum!

(Flustered by his painfully truthful retort, Cherry's lips quivered as she desperately tried to think of something clever to say.)

CHERRY: Yeah, but...

(She shuddered with embarrassment for a moment then a cocky retort of her own sprung to mind; one she didn't hesitate to use.)

CHERRY: Yeah, well, I only cum 'cause I was playing with myself at the same time. (Her shoulders then sunk and she hung her head. Unable to look into Hex's highly amused face, she pouted and sniffed back a tear.)

CHERRY: I'm rubbish. I can't even beat an idiot at trash talk.

(Noticing Hex's amused smile disintegrate into a frown, Cherry then mused to herself.)

CHERRY: Maybe I can then.

(Hex gritted his teeth and scowled at her.)

HEX: Bitch!

CHERRY: Wanker!

(Having ignored their argument, Drake waved his arms about and spoke up excitedly.)

DRAKE: Hey, Hex. I've had an idea!

(He turned to face his two companions with a knowing smile on his face.)

DRAKE: If we fail to catch up with that hearse...

(Taking a glance down the road towards the black carriage in question, he paused with an open mouth. They'd spent so long arguing, the hearse had disappeared into the distance. Staring down the road in the same direction, Hex winced and Cherry looked baffled.)

CHERRY: Hearse?

(Determined not to look any more foolish than he already did, Drake shrugged and continued his speech where he'd left off.)

DRAKE: If we fail to catch up with the hearse, which we have, then there still might be a chance.

HEX: A chance?

DRAKE: A good chance!

(He nodded knowingly.)

DRAKE: Remember Blueberry Forest?

(Hex looked enlightened.)

HEX: Ooh... yes. Now *that* I like.

(Cherry, however, wasn't quite as enthused.)

CHERRY: If it's anything like your Cornerstone Manor, you might as well kill me now.

HEX: It's tempting, Cherry, thanks for the offer but you know, I think Drake's onto something.

DRAKE: You're damn right I am.

(He nodded positively.)

DRAKE: How are you at weaving, Cherry?

(Cherry looked bewildered.)

CHERRY: Weaving?

DRAKE: Yeah.

(She shrugged.)

CHERRY: I'm okay, why?

DRAKE: You'll see.

(He looked to Hex.)

DRAKE: You're gonna have to get dirty, Hex. See if you can find any land patches like that verge.

(He pointed to the verge where Cherry had hidden.)

DRAKE: Anything accessible; doesn't matter how far out in the marsh.

(Hex nodded. As a soldier he knew to do just as the planner told him. Looking resolute, he about turned and stepped along the edge of the road.)

CHERRY: What's he doing?

DRAKE: Trust me, Cherry. I know what I'm doing. Fetch the longest grass you can for now. And there's no time to be girly about it, if you get dirty, you get dirty.

(Cherry frowned.)

CHERRY: I'm not a complete diva, you know?

DRAKE: Then go.

(As Cherry also turned away to do her part, Drake rubbed his chin and allowed himself a wry smile.)

DRAKE: Drake, you're a genius.

(Whether or not he was a genius would remain to be seen. Satisfied his excellent plan stood no chance of failing, however, he beamed to himself and set about his own particular task, convinced he was indeed, the world's smartest man.)

Central Gates, Birchwood.

(Much of the township of Birchwood had been built after the completion of the three funnelled road from Ardenmouth. Having been a quiet, sleepy and largely inaccessible place, the new route had transformed it into a bustling and desirable place to live, virtually overnight. Faced with a sudden overflow of migrating citizens, the townsfolk had had very little time for planning and set about building new homes in almost every available plot of land. The demand for housing had been such that there was no time for design and they'd stuck to their tried and tested materials and building styles. As a result, many areas of Birchwood were built in characterless squares and several districts of the town ended up looking distinctly similar.

Thrown by the repetitive scenery around them, Angel and Carter had found the task of finding the Central Gates quite bewildering. Being told to turn left at the corner of a building that looked exactly like every other building in the block had caused them to get quite lost on several occasions. Birchwood was by no means a metropolis, but it was certainly big enough and bland enough to confuse a person. Needless to say, after much confusion they were indeed relieved to finally find themselves approaching the Central Gates. For Carter it felt like quite the milestone, a moment to savour. For Angel on the other hand, it was an overdue achievement and a moment they should try to forget. To her, finding the gates was nothing, finding Cherry was what mattered and until that happened she wouldn't be able to rest. As they raced towards the gates, Carter spied the road heading off into the horizon and the endless stretches of marshland either side then sighed to himself. Cherry was nowhere to be seen and he knew this would only cause Angel more heartache. Determined to try and ease her obvious tension, he thought hard about something to say as they bounded through the gates and out into the wilderness. Knowing he couldn't offer her anything reassuring about her sister's whereabouts he sighed to himself and opted to try to take her mind off of matters instead. Running alongside her, he offered her a friendly smile and spoke in a kind, reassuring voice.)

CARTER: So... Angel, that's an unusual name.

(Angel said nothing. She only had one thought, she must find Cherry. That thought, though very much alone, echoed through her head constantly, blocking out Carter's

words. Not about to give up his attempt to reassure her so soon, however, Carter elaborated with a slight increase in volume.)

CARTER: Yes, indeed it is. I don't think I'd ever heard that name until I met you.

(Again, he received no change from Angel.)

CARTER: It's a beautiful name though, I like it. I like it very much. It's like Angela only completely different.

(Frowning at himself, he continued.)

CARTER: It's nothing like Angela though, I mean, except that Angela has Angel in it. Maybe Angel is the feminine of Angela.

(Immediately remembering that Angela is also a girl's name, he snarled at himself.)

CARTER: Carter, you're a dickhead.

(Feeling increasingly flustered at his failures, he sighed and tried again.)

CARTER: So, Angel, what possessed your mother to call you that?

(As if the gods were mocking the well meaning young man, the one time he slipped up and worded his question like an insult, Angel heard him perfectly. Throwing a glare in his direction, she replied defensively.)

ANGEL: What the hell's that supposed to mean?

(Looking horrified, he mouthed empty words for a moment then hung his head.)

CARTER: I was just trying to take your mind off things.

ANGEL: By insulting me?

(He looked to her desperately.)

CARTER: I asked several times but the one time I panicked and phrased it poorly, you heard me.

(Angel just shook her head and ran on.)

ANGEL: Idiot.

CARTER: Uh-huh. I can't argue with you there.

(Carter hung his head and decided to quit before he infuriated her any further. Much to his surprise, however, as she bounded along the road, she suddenly answered his question.)

ANGEL: If you must know, I'm named after the cake.

CARTER: The cake?

(He was dying for her to elaborate but on his current form, he daredn't ask. Luckily for him, Angel sighed and continued.)

ANGEL: It's a long, uninteresting story.

(Amazed to be getting somewhere, finally, Carter smiled.)

CARTER: Let me be the judge of that. I'd love to hear it.

(Giving him a disbelieving glance, Angel bit her lip as she thought over whether she should tell him or not. Noticing his sincere smile, she nodded and looked down the road ahead.)

ANGEL: Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you.

CARTER: Okay.

ANGEL: When my mum was at school, she had a crush on someone in her class, my dad...

CARTER: Your parents met at school?

(Angel nodded.)

ANGEL: Yeah.

CARTER: Okay...

ANGEL: So, yeah, they were at school... according to my mum, I mean I wasn't there obviously...

CARTER: Obviously.

ANGEL: Well, she says dad didn't even notice her. Apparently he was quite popular you see and there were far better looking girls in the class...

(Carter scoffed.)

CARTER: That's crazy talk. If you're anything to go by, your mum must have been quite the looker.

(Expecting a warm smile, Carter was most perturbed to see a scowl coming his way.)

CARTER: What?

ANGEL: Get your nose out of my arse and stop interrupting.

(Feeling she was being somewhat harsh, he returned her scowl.)

CARTER: I was only saying you're beautiful, since when was that a crime?

(Noticing Angel chuckling to herself, he shook his head.)

CARTER: Oh, okay. Got me again. I hate your dark side.

ANGEL: Sorry, I couldn't resist that.

(She smiled.)

ANGEL: I mean it, I'm sorry. I need to let loose and you've been like a punch bag for me sometimes.

CARTER: Yeah, I know. And it's okay, it's funny. And, I'm glad I can be here for you.

ANGEL: Thanks. If this all ends well, you won't be sorry.

(As she winked his way, Carter beamed excitedly.)

CARTER: Now that, I like the sound of. Unless you're being mischievous again.

ANGEL: No, no. I mean it.

(As Carter's excitement tripled, Angel mused to herself.)

ANGEL: Now where was I...

(Looking enlightened, she continued her story as they raced forth.)

ANGEL: Yeah, my parents at school together. Mum liked dad for ages but she wasn't getting anywhere until the school had a special cake sale... I don't know what it was in aid of but, anyway, she made these Angel cakes with Cherries on top.

(Acknowledging the link to Cherry, Carter nodded.)

ANGEL: Anyway, my dad tried the cakes and absolutely loved them. Well, when he found out who made them, he told her they were the nicest things he ever ate.

Apparently all the other girls were jealous. Anyway, she made them every day after that.

CARTER: Everyday? She baked everyday?

(Angel shrugged.)

ANGEL: She was in love, I guess. So, yeah... to cut a long story short, she made him those Cherry topped Angel cakes every day and they ended up eating them together every lunch time. My mum says it was her Cherry Angel cakes that got them together and made my dad fall in love with her. So when Cherry and I were born...

CARTER: They named you both after the thing that made them fall in love!

ANGEL: Yeah.

(Carter smiled and nodded approvingly.)

CARTER: That's a lovely story. I was named after my grandfather, now that's a boring story.

ANGEL: Isn't it though?

CARTER: And your parents met and school? Wow. Are they still together?

(Angel looked sheepish.)

ANGEL: Um... that's the thing you see...

(She looked down and continued in a solemn voice.)

ANGEL: No actually, they're not. See, when I said they were in the same class, she was 14 and he was her teacher. He's doing twenty years for statutory rape.

(As Angel continued to deliberately avoid making eye contact, Carter mouthed nothingness and grimaced with embarrassment. He wanted to be reassuring but had no idea how to comment on such a revelation. Unfortunately for him, his failure to think of anything didn't last. As the thought of Cherry's mother seducing the teacher played on his mind, he looked enlightened and made the stupid mistake of airing the first thought that came into his head.)

CARTER: So, that's where Cherry gets it from.

(Immediately realising his mistake, his mouth fell open and he stared in horror at Angel. Receiving the iciest stare ever given, he pouted frantically and said nothing.)

ANGEL: That's where Cherry gets *what* from?

(Desperate to atone, Carter gaped and chose his words extremely carefully. And yet, he still managed to say something frighteningly stupid.)

CARTER: Well, you know, all the sleeping around that she does.

(Wishing he could be struck by lightning at this moment, Carter hung his head and his shoulders slouched.)

CARTER: Aw, crap.

(As he glanced to Angel and saw she was no longer beside him, he slowed to a halt and nervously turned to face her. As she stood there snarling back at him with her hands on his hips, he hung his head and resigned himself to receiving a fiery reception.)

ANGEL: Sleeping around? Sleeping around?

(Carter could but shrug.)

ANGEL: So, she's a slut is she? Even *you* think that?

(She shook her head.)

ANGEL: Am I a slut too then?

(Looking desperate, Carter offered a hand in her direction.)

CARTER: No, I...

ANGEL: Shut it! How dare you?

(Failing to acknowledge that the time to apologise and beg for mercy had already long passed, Carter foolishly opted to defend himself. Feeling incredibly sorry for himself, he shrugged and threw his hands out to the side.)

CARTER: Well, what else can I think?

ANGEL: What else? Think what you fucking like!

(And with that, she marched past him furiously.)

ANGEL: Just piss off, I'll go on without you.

CARTER: Angel?

ANGEL: You heard me.

(Jogging alongside her furious march, Carter remonstrated desperately.)

CARTER: Hey, don't be like this. It's not like Cherry's an Angel or anything.

(He mused.)

CARTER: That wasn't a pun, by the way.

(He frowned.)

CARTER: Oh come on, she hardly helps herself, does she?

(Angel said nothing and strode forth snarling at his presence.)

CARTER: I'm just saying, if she didn't sleep around then people wouldn't think she's a slut! If she's going to commit the crime...

(At this point Angel stopped and sneered in his face.)

ANGEL: A slut? A slut? Cherry's a fucking virgin, you prick!

(Carter leant back and scoffed.)

CARTER: Oh, bullshit.

(Once again realising his mistake far too late he spammed his forehead as Angel retorted furiously.)

ANGEL: You're just like the rest. Cherry's never had sex, not once. Don't you think she'd have told me? We talk about everything. She's only ever seen two cocks and one of them was an unfortunate slip of a bath towel when my mum had a guy stay over!

CARTER: But...

ANGEL: She dated the same guy for 18 months and they didn't do it. Not even once. (She shrugged.)

ANGEL: She may have wanted to but the fact is, she didn't. He'd get as far as producing the goods then he'd put it away again before she could have a play. Poor thing gave her heart to a poof.

(She folded her arms and calmly walked on.)

ANGEL: I, on the other hand, I had sex with my last two boyfriends. So if Cherry's a slut then what am I?

(Walking aside her, Carter replied solemnly.)

CARTER: Well, and don't shoot me for saying this, if she's a virgin how come everyone says...

ANGEL: Says what? That she sleeps around? Have you ever met anyone who's slept with her?

CARTER: Well, no, but...

ANGEL: Didn't anyone ever stop to think, Cherry's so unpopular, sleeping with her would be the kiss of death for any guy's social life at the academy?

CARTER: Um...

ANGEL: It would be, wouldn't it? If anyone went with Cherry, people would take the piss out of them?

CARTER: Well, yeah, that's true...

ANGEL: So how is she a slut then? Who did she sleep with, herself? Me?

(As Carter paused to ponder the imagery, Angel scowled.)

ANGEL: Stop that!

CARTER: What?

ANGEL: So what are we saying then? What have we decided? Cherry is a slut for masturbating which makes me an outrageous whore. Thanks, Carter. Why don't you fuck off back to the academy?

(As she stormed ahead, Carter sighed and raced after her.)

CARTER: Angel. I'm a twat. An ill-informed twat who assumes far too much.

ANGEL: Just go, Carter. Get lost.

(Carter shook his head and grabbed her arm.)

CARTER: No!

(He sighed passionately.)

CARTER: Yeah, so I hear rumours and assume they're true. And I'm stupid enough to repeat them. Have you never heard a rumour and believed it without checking?

(Angel pulled her arm free and walked on.)

ANGEL: I don't know.

(Carter walked alongside her looking extremely serious.)

CARTER: Look, when you and your sister first came to the academy, the guys all drooled. I mean all of them. They even had bets on who'd bed you both first. They even took a vote on which one of you was the tastiest.

(Angel gave him a sideways glance.)

ANGEL: Who won?

(Shaking the thought away, she sighed coldly.)

ANGEL: I don't want to know.

CARTER: I wasn't going to tell you, anyway. Mostly because I don't know.

Anyway, you two were hot news until Cherry started fucking everything up and dropping us all in it. I guess people just wanted to believe the bad things they heard. You know, it makes them feel better to hear something bad about someone they don't like.

(Angel shook her head disdainfully.)

CARTER: And you know; if she wasn't your sister you'd probably have been taken in by the lies too.

ANGEL: No I wouldn't.

CARTER: Yes, you would.

(He sighed.)

CARTER: Look, I admit it. I didn't delve too deeply into it; I took what I heard as the truth. I've also resented Cherry when she's let us down. But like I already told you, I made a mistake. At the time, I didn't know she was suffering too. Most people still wouldn't care; it suits them to hate Cherry, but not me. I'm willing to get to know her. I want to know what's real.

ANGEL: What do you want, a medal?

CARTER: No, I just want you to understand that I'm no different.

ANGEL: Yeah, I've realised that. See, I hoped you were.

CARTER: No, I mean I'm no different to you.

ANGEL: Bull...

CARTER: You're just like the rest of us, Angel. Whereas we've all assumed the rumours are true, you're assuming I'm not sincere about wanting to get to know and understand Cherry.

ANGEL: Can you blame me?

CARTER: Yes, yes I can. You think I'm a bad person. Can't I be a good person who made the mistake of assuming too much?

ANGEL: Not as far as my sister's concerned.

(Carter sighed and looked into her eyes.)

CARTER: Would a bad person come this far with you? Would a bad person risk his life for you like this? Would a bad person have gone through this just be insulted and belittled by you? You admitted yourself you've used me as a punch bag.

(Angel sighed and gave him a pitying glance.)

ANGEL: I don't know.

CARTER: I do. The answer is no. Even your average good guy wouldn't put up with this but I'm so horribly in love with you I can't help myself.

(Angel froze and looked into his eyes with disbelief.)

CARTER: You heard me. Even if Cherry is your sister and liking her is a kiss of death, I don't care. She matters to you and so she matters to me. Now, so fucking what if I listened to rumours? Even if I believed them for ever more, as your sister Cherry will get nothing but respect from me. And I mean it.

(As he went to march on ahead, content he'd said his piece, Angel held his arm back. Looking baffled, Carter looked back to see her facing the floor with a tear rolling down her cheek.)

CARTER: Angel?

(Angel mumbled her words solemnly.)

ANGEL: I'm sorry.

CARTER: Sorry?

ANGEL: I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, I just...

(Carter smiled and pulled her close for a hug.)

CARTER: Hey, if I didn't understand, what sort of an arse would I be?

(He nodded.)

CARTER: You can abuse me as much as you like until we find Cherry. I can't even imagine the pain you're in at the moment.

(As they hugged, Angel managed a weak smile. His words had touched her unexpectedly. It meant everything to her to have someone understand the pain she was feeling. Slowly, she lifted her head and whispered in his ear.

ANGEL: I think I'm falling for you too.

(Overjoyed by her words, Carter leant back to look her in the eyes.)

CARTER: Do you mean that?

(She forced another smile.)

ANGEL: I need to find Cherry first, then I'll know.

CARTER: In that case we'd better hurry up.

(Nodding sternly, he took her hand and they hastened on together. The explosion of emotion they'd just experienced had released a lot of tension. Feeling quite weak, and yet empowered by the moment, neither one felt they had anything left to say. Their closeness serving to fuel their determination to find Cherry and bring her home.)

Highway somewhere between Birchwood and Ardenmouth, Auland.

(It wasn't all doom and gloom out there on the marshes that morning. Seated upon the horse drawn hearse as it made the final leg of its journey to Ardenmouth, Foxton Hamler's three flunkies, Griffiths, Evans and Jones were far from feeling down. With Arkane secured safely in the coffin and their final destination getting ever closer, they all wore satisfied smiles. It had been a long nine years for them. Tracking down Arkane had been a mammoth task and attempting to capture him carried many potentially fatal risks. Knowing they were soon going to be able to put the job behind them, spirits couldn't have been much higher. Even Evans, the most sceptical and cautious of the trio, was finally beginning to relax. With a deep, satisfying breath, he sat between his two comrades atop the carriage and looked from side to side at them proudly.)

EVANS: You know what chaps? I think we've cracked it. I've refused to believe it up until now but... we're so close I can smell it now.

(Jones chuckled.)

JONES: Well, when a drama queen like you is satisfied then we must have got something right.

GRIFFITHS: Feels good, doesn't it?

JONES: It feels great. I certainly wouldn't want to relive the last nine years again.

EVANS: Oh, fuck that. It's been a living hell.

GRIFFITHS: You know, when the boss told us to find him and said it didn't matter how long it took, I thought he was giving us a matter of weeks.

JONES: Me too. I had no idea he actually meant it.

EVANS: Oh, forget that now, lads. Think. No more travelling about, no going back to Hamler when we need more money and getting our heads chewed off. All that shit's going to be over.

(The three of them gave a simultaneous sigh of joy.)

EVANS: You know there were times when I thought Lloyd got the better deal.

JONES: You what?

EVANS: When we were up to our neck in cow shit that time, lost, miles from anywhere, I couldn't help wishing it was me he'd stabbed on the dockside that day.

(Griffiths nodded.)

GRIFFITHS: I had the same thoughts.

JONES: Really?

GRIFFITHS: Several times over the last few years I've thought to myself "I wish it was Evans he'd stabbed, not Lloyd".

(Evans laughed inwardly.)

EVANS: That's how he repays me after I saved him from that savage tribe.

JONES: The savage tribe you brought him to the attention of, you mean?

EVANS: You had to bring that up, didn't you?

GRIFFITHS: Well, I had the last laugh. In the process of saving me, you got your head kicked in.

(They all chortled about the experience.)

JONES: We had some great times but from tomorrow morning I won't have to look at your ugly mugs ever again. I couldn't be happier.

EVANS: You'll still be working for the boss won't you?

JONES: Yeah but I won't have to wake up in the morning with you two, I mean.

GRIFFITHS: I'm looking forward to that.

EVANS: Me too. I miss my old bed.

(Jones mused and scratched his head.)

JONES: I was thinking... that bed of yours might be a bit rusted. It's been nine years since we slept at home. I wonder what our homes are like. They might be as dusty as hell!

EVANS: Is hell dusty then, is it?

JONES: You know what I mean.

GRIFFITHS: We might even have been burgled!

(Evans smiled.)

EVANS: Oh, who gives a crap? Once the boss sees us with Arkane, he's bound to give us a huge bonus. Plus, we've only had travelling expenses for the last nine years. Think how much he owes us in wages.

(The three of them mused together merrily.)

EVANS: Nine years wages?

GRIFFITHS: That's a lot!

JONES: A fucking lot, unless he screws us and tries to say our wages were included in the travel expenses.

EVANS: He won't. Not once he sees Arkane. He'll be so happy he's bound to cough up. And you know me, I'm usually quite the sceptic but I have a good feeling about this.

JONES: I hope you're right. Nine years money will buy us a lot of ale and women.

GRIFFITHS: Here's to that then!

(He pulled a whisky flask from his pocket and took a swig. Puffing out, he then passed the flask to Evans.)

EVANS: Thanks. To women and ale!

(He also swigged then passed the hipflask to Jones.)

JONES: Cheers men. Here's to the end of our trip and of course, the floozies and the ale!

(In perfect synchronicity they let out a cry of 'aye' and raised a fist aloft.)

EVANS: Good shit.

(And with everything to look forward to, they continued to laugh and joke with one another merrily, all the way back to Ardenmouth. It was a momentous day for them and they planned to celebrate it in style.

Quite some way behind the joyous kidnapping trio, another group also harboured plans to be celebrating once the day was over. Having already passed Angel and Carter, the MP's from Kastanie were looking forward to catching up with the two traitors and their pretty collaborator. With two horse drawn carriages easily bearing the weight of the twenty men in their unit, they'd sped past the horrified twosome and left them behind with ease. The sight of the carriages had struck extra fear into Angel especially. With an intense sense of alarm, she'd tried to race after it only to be caught in its wake of dust and debris, thrown up by the rear wheels as they powered forth. Needless to say, the carriages soon disappeared from Angel and Carter's sight. With the carriages a long way ahead, all they could do was keep up their seemingly futile attempt to chase them. Angel would never give up, no matter how hopeless it seemed.

Having given the two pedestrians no thought whatsoever as they'd thundered past them, the MP's didn't even know they were being pursued. Keeping a sharp eye out of peep holes in the carriage canvases, their only focus was spotting their intended kill and doing a professional job for their king. Expecting the three wanted outlaws to come into sight any moment, not one of them spoke with anything but dedication to their mission. Although their opponents would be unarmed and heavily outnumbered by them, they knew that beating these former infantry men would still require the utmost professionalism. As a unit, not one man wanted to lose concentration and cost his comrade his life. The leader, a man of little to no mercy, had drilled his men well. As he sat at the front of the first carriage, he looked across the marshes from left to right like an eagle searching for rabbits in the long grass. Having travelled quite a distance, he too expected them to come into view any moment now.)

LEADER: You have to hand it to them, they're pretty fast.

(Beside him, the coachman, his second in command, nodded.)

SECOND: It's a shame they're traitors, don't you think?

LEADER: Indeed. Our army could do with more men like them.

SECOND: Indeed.

(He gestured to the troops in the carriage behind him with a flick of his wrist.)

SECOND: I mean these guys are professional and all; we can't fault their dedication but...

LEADER: I know what you're saying. Not a muscle between them, is there?

SECOND: Exactly.

LEADER: Still, they're quite handy with a blade; even without the bulk they're effective enough as killers.

SECOND: Very true, to be a killer all you really need is a weapon and a willingness to use it.

LEADER: Well, in times of war you either kill or be killed. In that sense, being able to kill is vital.

(He nodded and looked across the marshes.)

LEADER: As those three fools will find out any time now!

(Just then, a rock flew at the second's head from out of the marshes. As it collided with his temple, he gave a stifled moan and collapsed, lifeless to his side.

Immediately stung into action, the leader bellowed his name and leapt down from the carriage.)

LEADER: Action stations!!!

(At once, his men proceeded to leap from the carriages with swords in hand. Before the full compliment had alighted and managed to take stock of their surroundings, however, a hail of mud bombs and rocks flew into the air and cascaded down on them. Having fired the missiles from a makeshift catapult, created using a weaved reed basket and Cherry's underwear elastic, Drake clenched his fist and looked across to Hex. Having taken the firing as a signal, Hex had immediately leapt towards the MP's from his hiding place by the side of the road, hoping against hope he didn't get hit by a rock. While the MP's cowered and scrambled to avoid the falling hail of mud and rocks, Hex took full advantage of the confusion. Like a man possessed, he snapped the neck of a cowering MP, stole his sword and plunged it into the heart of his comrade. Taking the second man's sword, he then rushed back out of the fray and back to the long grass, where Cherry and Drake were reloading the homemade catapult. Their plan to cause confusion and use it to swiftly steal two weapons had been executed to precision.)

HEX: Got them.

DRAKE: Nice!

(The MP's were bewildered. There'd been a sudden incoming of missiles and in the matter of seconds it had taken to pass, two more of their number were down and the enemy still weren't in sight. Living up to his rank, the leader immediately called his men to the side of the road where the missiles had come from and barked into the wilderness.)

LEADER: Show yourselves, cowards!!!

(As they peered at the assembled MP's through the long blades of grass, Hex and Drake looked to one another.)

DRAKE: Okay, mate, don't die on me. This is it.

HEX: I told you. I aint dying yet.

(Drake nodded and looked to Cherry.)

DRAKE: Fire when ready.

(Looking nervous and very much like she didn't want to be there, Cherry shyly nodded and struggled to pull back the heavy, refilled catapult via the elastic.)

CHERRY: Um... Now?

HEX: Go for it!

(She scowled.)

CHERRY: I was talking to Drake!

(Directing all her attention into her scowl, she snarled and accidentally let the catapult elastic slip through her fingers. As the rocks and mud flew into the air, she shrieked and covered her head. Remaining true to their plan, Hex and Drake took the firing as a signal and charged towards the 17 remaining MP's. The battle was on! For normal men, deliberately rushing into a battle when outnumbered by over eight to one would be nothing short of suicide. These were not normal men. Back in their military days when patrolling areas in pairs, every soldier in their unit hoped to be paired with Hex. His sword skills were second to none. Drake was no slouch either. What he lacked in bulk, he more than made up for with speed and agility. Knowing they were better trained and a might more skilful than their opponents, Hex and Drake were confident of victory. With only two men to take down and the chance to swamp them a real possibility, the MP's matched their confidence. They knew they weren't a match

when it came to sword skills but with such a numerical advantage, they very much fancied their chances.

Using the second wave of mud bombs and rocks as cover as they waded and leapt from the marsh, Hex and Drake wasted no time in meeting their foes head on. Emerging onto the road by the side of one of the motionless carriages as to give the enemy little room to attack all at once, they instantly set about thinning the enemy number. Drake's first attempts to take down an opponent were perfectly blocked, Hex on the other hand, removed a head with his very first strike. Determined to take full advantage of the numbers on their side, the MP's leader, yelled out to his men.)

LEADER: Swamp them!!! Get in and overpower the bastards!!!

(The leader hadn't realised that Hex and Drake had expected this move. They were well versed in the army's tactics and wouldn't be foiled so easily. As the MP's tried to carry out his order, they found themselves only managing to fit two at a time between the carriage side and the slope down into the marsh. It made them easy targets for Hex especially. Even when they tried to attack from both ends of the carriage, Drake managed to hold them back on one side with swift defences while Hex, spilt their blood on the other. Swamping them would not work. Spotting the failure, the leader called for his men to stall them before turning urgently to his comrade and issuing a list of commands with a look of extreme urgency on his face. As the MP's started using their swords solely for defending, offering no chance of a counter strike, Hex and Drake shared an angry glance. This seemed like a cowardly tactic and they had no idea why they'd make such a move. It wasn't until they noticed one of the bigger MP's bound into the marshes in search of whoever fired the rocks and mud that they realised what was going on.)

DRAKE: Fuck. They're stalling us while they look for Cherry!

(Hex snarled.)

HEX: Sounds like something they'd do!

(With a snarl, he increased his attacks on the two men he was facing, managing to finally land a killer blow to one of their necks. As the fallen man was instantly replaced by another, he growled.)

HEX: We'll just have to kill them all before they find her!!!

(Furious about the move, Hex bellowed wildly and doubled his attacks. Hoping that by going into berserker mode he could kill them all then rush to Cherry's defence, he set any thoughts of preserving his energy to one side and slashed his sword wildly and venomously at his foes. Looking terrified and defending for their very lives, the MP's were stunned by his ferocity. As Hex went into his sword swinging frenzy, however, standing behind him, Drake found himself with nobody to fight. The MP's he'd been facing had backed away and ran out of sight around the carriage. Bewildered by the move, half of him wanted to run to Cherry's aid but he knew that by doing that, the MP's would have the chance to come back and cowardly attack Hex from behind. Feeling confused and somewhat useless he gritted his teeth and snarled to himself.)

DRAKE: Fuck!!!

(Just then, the carriage seemed to rock beside him. Immediately wise to it, Drake snarled and grabbed Hex's back.)

DRAKE: Back up, Hex, they're going to stab through the canvas!!!

(With a snarl, he then led Hex, backwards, onto the open road in front of the carriage.)

HEX: Wankers!!!

(Once Hex and Drake were out in the centre of the road, the MP's swiftly assembled before them and took up defensive stances. For a few moments Hex and Drake were

stuck for what to do and snarled uneasily. Their plan to avoid being swamped by battling in a thin space had gone awry and only a few of the MP's had been struck down. As it turned out, the MP's leader was something of a tactically genius. Not about to be downhearted by the failure, however, Hex glanced swiftly to Drake.)
HEX: Fuck it. I'm going to keep slaying and I aint gonna stop until either they're all dead or I am!

(With that, he charged for the MP's like a man possessed. With wide eyes, the MP's desperately blocked his every swing with a view to trying to turn him so his back would be facing one of their allies. It was a well known, but much frowned upon military police tactic. Defend, turn, stab in the back. Well aware of this cowardly tactic, Hex focussed hard on keeping up his assault while keeping himself well positioned to stop anyone from sneaking past on his blind side. Standing just behind him, Drake glanced from side to side with a view to warning Hex of any such sly moves from the MP's. He felt confident that as long as he watched Hex's back, they'd overcome whatever dirty tricks the MP's tried to pull. Moments later, however, a bellow and a scream came from the wilderness. Much to Drake's horror as he looked out, he saw an MP holding Cherry up with a short sword to her throat. As Hex continued to give everything he had to culling the defending MP's, only one thought entered Drake's mind. If they surrendered, they'd kill Cherry anyway. They'd all be killed. This was an absolute certainty. As the inevitable request came from the leader of the MP's, Drake just shook a despairing head.)

LEADER: Throw down your weapons or the girl will die!!!

DRAKE: No!

(Expecting an immediate surrender from men he suspected to be fiercely loyal to their own, the leader was shocked.)

LEADER: Did you not hear me?

(Drake was resolved; there was but one course of action to take. Raising his sword, he bellowed at the leader.)

DRAKE: Death before surrender!!!

(With that, he leapt alongside Hex and killed the man who'd been so brilliantly defending his every attack.)

HEX: Cheers, mate!

DRAKE: You're welcome!

(The leader snarled.)

LEADER: You traitors have no honour!!!

(Seething, he yelled to his men.)

LEADER: They're open! Swamp them again!!!

(As the MP's charged towards them, Hex and Drake nodded to one another and leapt forward to take them on head on. Watching from the marshes, Cherry was in tears and screaming at them.)

CHERRY: You complete bastards!!! How could you? How could you???

(The MP with the sword at her throat looked baffled.)

MP: They didn't want to save you!

(Cherry whimpered.)

CHERRY: I know!

MP: I can understand that though. I've only known you two minutes and I can't stand you either. You're very loud.

(Cherry thought desperately.)

CHERRY: I'll stop being loud if you let me go.

MP: You'll stop being loud when I kill you.

(Cherry cried out loud again.)

CHERRY: But I don't want to die! I'll do anything.

(The MP scoffed.)

MP: Unfortunately for you, I'm a raving homosexual; you've got nothing I need.

CHERRY: But...

MP: And now I've told you that, I really do have to kill you.

(With that, he threw her to her knees in a pool of thick mud. With a shriek and a splash she landed in the boggy filth and spun around onto her back. Looking up at him with imploring eyes, she cried through terrified tears.)

CHERRY: But I'm a girl...

MP: And I'm a gay. Hell, I'm more effeminate than you are, I'll wager. You'll get no change from me.

(With that, he lowered his sword to her neck.)

MP: Any last requests?

CHERRY: Yes, let me go!

MP: Denied!!!

(As he lifted his sword to strike her down, her eyes bulged. She'd been here before. She'd felt the same feeling of terror about imminent pain only the day before in the gymnasium. She'd managed to save herself that time and instinctively she did it again. Screeching in terror, she delivering him a swift kick between the thighs, catching his testicles with her heel. As the soldier sunk to his knees in breathless agony, dropping his sword, she scooped it up and leapt to her feet before desperately trying to flee. It was hard enough to run in high heels on the cobbles but this marshland was a thousand times worse. Slipping and falling every few feet, she desperately scrambled to get herself away from the ruthless killer before he could recover. Crying and whimpering she cut quite the pathetic sight.

Drake felt extremely guilty. Despite knowing that surrendering would definitely have got Cherry killed, he couldn't help but feel angry at himself that she'd become involved in the first place. Not knowing whether his decision to refuse surrender had kept Cherry alive or not, he channelled that anger to perfection. Like a man possessed, he was chopping and slashing at the MP's with an intensity that made even Hex look slow and cumbersome. The MP's were by now scared witless of the two wild men they were facing. Their attempts to swamp them had failed as it was always likely to do. Swamping in numbers during a sword fight was not a tactic any competent leader would ever employ. All it served to do was crowd the men at the front of the swarm, reducing their ability to swing their swords, making them easy targets for their enemy. It may have sounded like a good plan but in practice it was an awful one and its failure had cost them dear. Their number was rapidly dwindling. Those who remained were giving everything they had to mere self preservation. Every attempt their comrades had made to strike a blow had resulted in a fatal counter attack. They'd bitten off more than they could chew by taking on these two men. Knowing Cherry could well be slain, Hex and Drake no longer had to be considered about their actions. Running wouldn't save her, surrendering wouldn't save her and even fighting might not save her. By letting them think Cherry could well be dead, the MP's had taken their desire to protect her out of the equation and freed them to release their unreserved savagery. They no longer had a reason to hold back.

When the MP's had engaged Hex and Drake in a fist fight at the whorehouse, the two men had run to avoid a potential beating having been heavily outnumbered. When

they'd chased them with swords, they'd run to save Cherry and been unwilling to take them on without weapons. Now when their lives had depended on it and running was no longer an option, they'd shown themselves as the superior fighters they were. They'd boxed Hex and Drake into a corner and wouldn't even get the chance to live to regret it. The MP's had been given a false impression of their enemy. Hex and Drake's previous decisions to run rather than fight had made the MP's believe they were the stronger force. Now, when forced to fight to the death, the two men were holding nothing in reserve. The MP's had deluded themselves. When faced with the full force of a real soldier's desire to live they'd been found wanting and weak and they went to their deaths knowing it.

It was only a matter of time before the only remaining MP at the battle site was their trembling leader. Having been well and truly humiliated and out battled, he hung his head, expecting his end to come soon. Not daring to look up, he heard Drake and Hex's footsteps approach him. With a gulp, he watched their feet appear before him and slowly raised his head like a condemned man.)

LEADER: You fought well.

(He sneered.)

LEADER: But it means nothing. More of Kastanie's soldiers slain and you walk away as traitors once more. Your time will come; sooner or later you will pay for your crimes in hell.

(Hex scoffed.)

HEX: They aint soldiers! They're just immoral weaklings who feel big when they swarm on people in numbers.

(Leader spat on Hex's shoe and snarled. Hex looked to Drake in bewilderment.)

HEX: He spat on my shoe!

DRAKE: Yeah well, they need a polish anyway.

HEX: That's true.

(Hex nodded.)

HEX: Right, I'll allow you to die with...

(With that, he sliced his head clean off.)

HEX: ...that gormless look on your face. Tart!

(As he spat on the leader's body, Drake nudged him.)

DRAKE: Here, look. That's the MP that went after Cherry!

(Hex swiftly raised his head to look. Sure enough, an MP was tramping through the thick marshes, clearly fleeing having seen the fate that befell his comrades.)

DRAKE: Let's...

HEX: Nah, fuck it. Hopefully he'll get lost and the wolves will get him in the night.

DRAKE: Yeah, but...

HEX: Bollocks. I'm knackered. There's no point chasing him anyway, what's he gonna do?

DRAKE: Tell his bosses what we did!

HEX: Like it makes a difference, they're after us anyway. It changes nothing. Fuck him.

DRAKE: I guess you're right. Anyway...

(Looking triumphant, he threw his sword into the marshes.)

DRAKE: Won't be needing that anymore.

HEX: Couldn't agree more, mate.

(Following Drake's lead, Hex also cast his sword into the marsh.)

HEX: A consummate victory, geezer.

DRAKE: Oh yes!

(He sighed.)

DRAKE: Shame about him though.

(Taking one last bitter glance at the cowardly MP, desperately struggling away in the distance, Drake sighed.)

DRAKE: Come on, let's see if...

(His words were then interrupted by a distressed cry of pain rising up from the marsh to his side. Looking overjoyed, Hex and Drake smiled at one other.)

DRAKE: That sounds like Cherry!

(Before he could take a step forward to investigate, however, Cherry yelled again.)

CHERRY: I'll fucking kill you both. Ouch!!!

(As Hex and Drake shared an uneasy grimace, a mud covered Cherry slowly climbed from the marsh holding her horribly twisted shoulder. Upon sighting them she screeched in anger.)

CHERRY: This is your fault!!! You broke me!!! Ouch!!!

(Hex winced.)

HEX: That doesn't look right.

DRAKE: Shit, looks painful.

CHERRY: Of course, it's fucking painful, you prat!!!

(Ignoring her anger and pain, Drake stepped forward. He was extremely relieved to see her. As it turned out, he'd taken the right decision not to surrender and she'd been spared. He couldn't have faced having her death on his conscience and had an overwhelming desire to hug her.)

DRAKE: Cherry, I'm so fucking relieved you're okay.

CHERRY: Bullshit! You left me for dead at the mercy of that gay MP!!!

DRAKE: Look, first things first. I can explain *that* and you can tell us how you escaped in a minute.

(He smiled and opened his arms to her.)

DRAKE: Come here.

(Much to his horror, before he could hug her, she raised the short sword she'd taken from the MP and wafted it at him.)

DRAKE: Huh?

(In a cold, unwelcoming voice, Cherry replied slowly with a sneer on her face.)

CHERRY: How did I escape?

(She winced with pain and raised her voice bitterly.)

CHERRY: Without any help from you, that's how! I kicked him and ran... ouch!!!

Then while you were enjoying yourselves I hid until he ran away. Ouch! Bastards!

DRAKE: Cherry, I promise, it wasn't like that. Now put the sword down and...

(As he went to step forward she wafted the sword about again.)

CHERRY: Don't come any closer!

(Ignoring her feeble flailing of the blade, Hex rolled his eyes and walked towards her.)

HEX: Let me look at that shoulder.

CHERRY: Stop it. Go away; you've already broken me once.

HEX: No, we didn't.

CHERRY: It was your fault I fell in a ditch and broke myself!!!

(As she tried to slash at him, Hex scoffed and pushed her sword hand aside.)

HEX: You're not broken!

(With that, he spun her so she was facing away from him then wrapped his arms around her upper body making her scream in agony.)

CHERRY: You fucking...

HEX: Brace yourself!

(And with a grimace, he twisted her torso and popped her dislocated shoulder back into place. Her scream could have been heard for miles. As he stepped back to admire his work alongside Drake, Hex beamed.)

HEX: Sorted!

(As they watched her standing with her back to them, however, they quickly realised something was wrong.)

DRAKE: Um, Cherry?

(Cherry's shoulders were hunched tight and her fists were solidly clenched. There was growling in her heavy breathing and she was clearly about to explode. Hex and Drake both gulped. They may have just faced and taken down a large number of MP's but a woman's scorn was a different proposition. Not knowing what to say, they just stood there ashen faced as she slowly turned to face them looking slightly deranged.)

CHERRY: You two! You...

(As the two men pouted like little boys receiving a lecture from their mother, Cherry shook a disdainful head and snarled.)

CHERRY: What is it with you two? Why are you trying to get me killed???

DRAKE: Well, in our defence...

CHERRY: Bollocks!!!

(She sneered contemptuously and stood firm.)

CHERRY: I don't want to hear it. We're through! I'm going on alone from here and don't you dare follow me!!!

(Drake held his hands out.)

DRAKE: Oh, come on...

HEX: Yeah, don't be unreasonable, girl!

(Angrily fighting back her desire to fill the air with expletives, she ruffled her neck and growled.)

CHERRY: You heard me!!!

(She then turned and took a step away.)

CHERRY: Don't even begin to follow...

(Upon completing her first step, however, her heel snapped and she tripped and fell to the floor. As Hex fought back laughter, Drake stepped forward to help her up. Much to his horror as he stooped towards her, she swung her sword at him from where she lay on the ground. As he reeled back to avoid the blade, she struggled to her feet and pulled at her hair in a mad fit.)

CHERRY: You two!!!

(Hex and Drake shared a nervous grimace. How it was their fault, they couldn't begin to understand. With her eyes turning bloodshot, Cherry pointed to her boots and snarled ferociously.)

CHERRY: Thanks for these! They're fucking perfect. Not that I can even act surprised!!! Since I met you it's been one thing after another!

HEX: Um... you got those boots from the brothel, not us.

(Cherry yelled.)

CHERRY: Yeah, the brothel *you* took me into!!!

(Clearly at breaking point, she growled bitterly, unzipped the boots and kicked them into the muddy quagmire to her side. Much to the two men's horror she then started to violently remove her top.)

CHERRY: That's fucking done it. I don't want anything to do with you anymore. These are *your* clothes!!! Fucking having them back and get out of my life!!!
(Much to Drakes dismay, she then threw the top at them and started removing her skirt.)

DRAKE: Don't take that off, we used your knickers for the catapult!!!
(Having lost her mind completely, Cherry simply didn't care anymore. With a snarl, she threw the skirt to her feet and kicked it at them.)

CHERRY: There, take them!!! Now, get lost!!!
(As she stood before them in only her bra, Hex mused to himself. He didn't know how to pacify her fury and opted to try humour.)

HEX: That's all very well...
(He pointed to her shoulder and grinned.)

HEX: But your bra strap's twisted!
(Having been made even angrier but his careless comment, Cherry snarled and howled at him furiously.)

CHERRY: Oh, well I'm fucking sorry!!! Here!!!
(In a fit of rage she then unhooked her bra and cast it into the marsh. Averting his gaze from her nakedness, Drake mumbled to himself.)

DRAKE: Good grief!
(Knowing he couldn't let her stay like it, he stepped forward.)

DRAKE: Cherry, come on; put your clothes on...
(Once again he had to duck back to avoid her flailing blade.)

DRAKE: Fuck sake, woman!
(Wearing bewildered expressions, Hex and Drake could only look on as she waved the sword between them with a disturbing, crazed look on her face. With her nostrils flaring, she then turned and sprinted off into the marsh lands on the opposite side to where she'd hidden earlier. As they watched her go, Hex and Drake scratched their heads.)

DRAKE: Um... that can't be good!

HEX: Um... yeah...
(He shook his head.)

HEX: You know, I can't help but feel a little responsible.
(Drake shook his head.)

DRAKE: A *little* responsible?
(Hex hung his head.)

DRAKE: Fuck sake. Come on, we can't let her wander off like that.

HEX: You're right. Hold on a minute!
(As Hex rushed off into the marshes on the opposite side to which Cherry had fled, Drake watched him go and shrugged.)

DRAKE: Where you going? She went the other way!
(Moments later when he returned from the marshes with Cherry's bag over his shoulder, Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: That's very thoughtful of you.

HEX: Not really, I put my money and my neck chain in it before the battle. Never go into battle with valuables. You've heard the tales about souvenir hunting mercenaries, right?

(Drake rolled his eyes.)

DRAKE: Never mind that, we'd better go after...

(As he looked in the direction in which Cherry had fled, he clammed up and run his fingers through his hair.)

DRAKE: She's gone!

(Hex frowned.)

HEX: Come on, let's quickly grab her clothes and go after her!

(A few moments later, as they raced into the marsh to search for her, Hex became overcome with guilt. Having lied through his teeth to take her innocence then break her heart, he knew all too well that he was largely responsible for Cherry's descent into madness. Drake also felt guilty but most of all, he felt frustrated. With the MP's no longer a threat they were free to take her home. Having gone quite insane, this hadn't occurred to Cherry. When he first heard Cherry's voice from the marshes after defeating the MP's, Drake had expected her nightmare to be at an end, the fact a new one had begun was extremely infuriating.)

As they made their way through the marsh, wading and slipping in the slimy undergrowth, Hex and Drake never said a word to one another. Heading further from Birchwood into an unfamiliar wilderness, their only concern was finding Cherry. Plagued by unwelcome thoughts, they battled their own fears as they soldiered on determinedly. Would she recover from whatever madness had engulfed her? Would she be hurt out here? Struggling against such questions in their heads, they fought their way through the difficult terrain resolved to finding her as soon as possible.

A few miles deeper into the wilderness, with Cherry still nowhere to be seen, they found themselves approaching a small stream with a wooden footbridge crossing over it. Beyond the stream was a stretch of woodland, the other side of which lay Ardenmouth. Unsure whether or not to search through the woodland or remain in the marshes, Drake sighed to himself.)

DRAKE: Shit. Do you reckon she went in there?

(Hex shrugged in defeat.)

HEX: Mate, you saw her, she could have gone anywhere. Who knows what she's thinking?

DRAKE: Fuck it then, I say we try the woods.

HEX: We might as well.

(Beginning to lose hope, they trudged towards the bridge looking more than a little worried. These woods were allegedly home to some of the nastier desperados who prowled the marshes at night. If she'd gone in there, she could well be in danger. With every confidence in their own fighting skills, however, they felt no danger for themselves. As they approached the bridge, Drake flexed his neck muscles and glanced at Hex.)

DRAKE: I swear, if anyone in there has hurt her...

(Not wanting to finish his sentence, he looked ahead and froze to the spot. There she was. Cherry was on the other side of the stream, sitting under the footbridge, rocking back and forth. Looking extremely relieved, Drake nudged Hex and picked up the pace.)

DRAKE: Come on.

(With extreme urgency, they bound from the marshes and leapt onto the footbridge. As they raced across it, every heavy footstep on the wooden slats echoed through the woods in front of them. Wasting no time whatsoever, as soon as they crossed, they made their way down separate sides of the bridge to crouch either side of Cherry as she rocked back and forth.)

DRAKE: Cherry? Cherry? You okay, girl?

(As she continued to rock in silence, Hex bit his lip.)

DRAKE: Cherry? Talk to me.

(Clueless as to what he should say, Hex shrugged at Drake.)

HEX: I dunno!

DRAKE: Cherry, listen. We can take you home now. And Hex has your clothes with him.

HEX: Yeah, that's true. And I've got your bag.

(Just then, she stopped rocking and lifted her head to look at Hex. The empty look in her eyes made him feel quite cold.)

HEX: Cherry?

(She then looked to Drake in the same way and held her arms out as if to hug them both to her.)

DRAKE: Okay...

(Confident this was a sign she was okay, Hex and Drake leant towards her to allow her the hug, when she snarled and banged their heads together. Wincing with pain they both turned away and held their heads.)

HEX: Ouch!!!

DRAKE: Hey!!!

(With them both crouching off balance, she then pushed them down the slope towards the stream. Fortunately for them, physical might wasn't an attribute she carried in abundance and she didn't manage to push them far. After a good five or so seconds of scrambling to regain their balance and halt their slides towards the stream, they both lifted their heads to glare at her angrily. She'd gone. The short sword she'd had with her was nowhere to be seen either. Looking baffled, Hex and Drake both climbed up the slope and emerged from either side of the bridge looking all about the area for her. Holding his paining head, Hex grimaced with confusion.)

HEX: What the fuck did she do that for?

(Drake just sighed and kicked the dirt.)

DRAKE: Fuck, we lost her again.

HEX: Aw, crap!

DRAKE: She must have gone in the woods. We'd have heard her if she'd gone over the bridge.

HEX: Yeah, makes sense.

DRAKE: Shit.

(Hex shook his head.)

HEX: Mate, we're never gonna find her in there.

DRAKE: It won't be easy, I know...

HEX: She could have gone in any direction; those woods are a couple of miles thick at least.

(Drake frowned.)

DRAKE: Then what do you suggest we do? Give up?

HEX: No. No chance. It's just...

(He mused for a moment then nodded positively.)

HEX: I've got a feeling she's heading to Ardenmouth.

(Drake gave him a questioning glance.)

HEX: Look, her mind isn't with her right now, yeah?

DRAKE: Clearly.

HEX: So I reckon, she's probably just carrying on in the general direction we were heading earlier.

(Drake mused to himself.)

DRAKE: She could be, I guess. But who knows what she's thinking?

HEX: Well, exactly.

DRAKE: So, what are we saying?

HEX: Maybe, rather than hunting everywhere in these woods, we just head for Ardenmouth.

(Drake nodded with uncertainty.)

DRAKE: I suppose we could do that...

HEX: What have got to lose? If she aint there then we'll just come back.

(Drake sighed.)

DRAKE: Yeah, I guess that makes sense.

(With that, they headed into the woods in the general direction of Ardenmouth.

Feeling flustered at losing her again, Drake shook his head repeatedly and frowned to himself. Hex could only stare forward emotionlessly; his guilt had left him numb.

Having kept his true feelings to himself up until this point, only a few feet into the woods, he sighed and solemnly murmured as they paced along the woodland floor.)

HEX: I shouldn't have done it, mate.

(Drake sighed.)

DRAKE: I've been telling you that all day.

HEX: No, mate. You haven't been telling me, you've been hammering home what I already knew.

(Drake just looked to him and listened as he continued.)

HEX: When we met her I could see she was on the verge of a breakdown and yet I still...

(He hung his head.)

HEX: She wouldn't fight us, remember? She ran away crying. Even when I told her to hit me she was almost in tears 'cause she didn't want to. Violence aint in her nature and yet now she's swung swords at us, banged our heads together and tried to push us in the stream. What the hell have I done to her?

DRAKE: It's not just you. If I had mistaken her for a martial arts expert...

(Hex shook his head rigorously.)

HEX: No, mate. That was an actual mistake. I knew she was on the verge of cracking up and decided to seduce her anyway. What an asshole!

(Drake sighed.)

DRAKE: Well... yeah. I mean, what the hell possessed you to take advantage of her anyway?

HEX: Honestly? That wasn't my intention at first. I nodded off for a few minutes and when I woke up she wasn't on my bed anymore. So, I went to see if she needed a shoulder to cry on...

(He looked imploringly to Drake.)

HEX: I swear, it was as innocent as that. I felt sorry for her.

DRAKE: So what changed?

(Hex sighed.)

HEX: I know it's wrong but... I went out on the balcony and she was standing in the moonlight wearing that bunny girl outfit. I remember taking one look at her perfect body and that was that. I can't really tell you much about the rest, my mind stop thinking at that point and my bollocks took control. I even used that line about girls not going for the gentle giant.

DRAKE: Well, it *is* a classic.

HEX: Works every time but that aint the point.

(Drake nodded.)

DRAKE: Okay, so maybe I understand to a degree. She *is* a stunning looking girl, and the atmosphere combined with a bunny girl outfit... but why were you such an asshole to her about it this morning?

(Hex shook his head.)

HEX: I don't know. I felt really bad but I couldn't seem to help myself.

DRAKE: Yeah, you didn't exactly handle it like a man did you?

HEX: To put it mildly, mate. I felt so guilty I turned into a spineless teenager about it. I should have just taken the abuse like a man. I knew I deserved her scorn, why I couldn't handle it I don't know. I thought I was better than that but I behaved like an insecure little boy.

(Drake placed a friendly hand on his shoulder.)

DRAKE: Well, look, it's done now. No point dwelling on it. Let's just find her, fix her and get her home safely.

(Hex nodded.)

HEX: Agreed. Now get your hands off me.

(Drake removed his hand immediately.)

DRAKE: Sorry!

HEX: Nah, that was a joke, mate. You know, insecurity and all that.

(Drake smiled.)

DRAKE: Come on.

(As they continued heading through the woods in the direction of Ardenmouth, neither one felt confident about what might lay in store. Having driven Cherry mad, they might never find her and they dreaded to think what would become of her. When they'd met her, they'd both taken the innocent, luckless girl into their hearts and they were both thoroughly ashamed about what had become of her. With Cherry's fate uncertain, the only thing they knew is they could never give up trying to put things right. With this as their driving force, they headed onwards to Ardenmouth determinedly.

The entrance into Ardenmouth from the marshes had a very distinct and unique feel about it. The unkempt road from Birchwood would merge with a far better maintained one that led downhill. The downhill road had been cut into the hillside and featured a cliff on one side and a bumpy, grassy embankment on the other. At the bottom of the hill, the road formed a T-junction, both left and right sides leading around a large mansion and into the township. The gates to the mansion sat proudly opposite the downhill road. Those who came to Ardenmouth via this route always asked the same question. They wondered who lived in such a magnificent building. As they emerged from the woodland and caught sight of the mansion, Hex and Drake wondered the exact same thing. Admiring it's grandeur as they headed down the sloping incline, being dwarfed by the cliff at their side, they both gave impressed nods. They'd have liked to have been able to stop and admire it further but right now, they were more concerned about whether Cherry had passed by this way.

As they headed down the hill, pondering a few minor dilemmas such as whether to go left or right at the bottom, to stay together or split up, they both looked to the grass verge on the opposite side of the cliff and couldn't quite believe what they were seeing. Looking baffled, they both stopped and scratched their heads. A large group of people had gathered and were standing, spread out about the grass. Several were in uniforms, the few girls among them wearing the same uniform Cherry had except with black belts rather than blue. Instantly recognising their standing formation as a

combat one, they swiftly rushed over to investigate. It seemed pretty obvious that these people were from Cherry's academy but why were they here? They didn't have to wait long for an answer. Only a few feet onto the grass verge, they were rapidly approached by a serious looking gentlemen. Holding his palm out to stop them advancing any further he spoke in a polite but firm tone.)

LEWIS: Sorry, gentlemen. For your own safety, I'd advise you to vacate this area as soon as possible.

(Not caring for his advice, Hex ignored him and replied with a knowing smile.)

HEX: You're from Northgate... um...what was it?

DRAKE: Unarmed Combat Academy.

HEX: Yeah, you're from there aren't you?

(Lewis raised an eyebrow.)

LEWIS: That's classified.

HEX: Are you looking for Cherry?

(Lewis gave him a suspicious glance then called over his shoulder.)

LEWIS: Master Rauchen, would you come here a minute? It's rather important.

(As Master Rauchen approached them, Hex folded his arms.)

HEX: I thought as much.

(Upon arriving by Master Lewis' side, Rauchen looked to him enquiringly.)

RAUCHEN: What's so important you need to drag me away from my preparations?

Can't you handle it yourself?

(Lewis nodded towards Drake and Hex.)

LEWIS: Listen to this, Rauchen. Repeat what you just said, would you, young man?

(Hex shrugged.)

HEX: I was just asking of you've come for Cherry.

(Rauchen raised an eyebrow.)

LEWIS: He knows we're from N.U.C.A too!

RAUCHEN: I see.

(He gave Hex a doubting glance.)

RAUCHEN: Cherry who?

HEX: Wroxford.

RAUCHEN: I see.

(Drake rolled his eyes.)

DRAKE: No need to act all suspicious, Cherry was with us all last night and this morning. She was with us until... a short while ago.

(Rauchen placed his hands on his hips.)

RAUCHEN: And where is she now?

(Hex and Drake looked at one another uneasily.)

HEX: Um... you'd better explain.

DRAKE: I suppose so...

(He gave Rauchen an apologetic smile.)

DRAKE: She... she kind of went a bit mad. She's had a crap time and after everything that happened she flipped, stripped naked and ran off into the marshes with a sword!

(Rauchen and Lewis stared at him in disbelief.)

DRAKE: She could be anywhere now.

RAUCHEN: She ran into the marshes? And you didn't go after her?

(Not about to be lectured by a stranger, Hex stepped forward.)

HEX: What do you think we're doing?

RAUCHEN: These aren't the marshes!

HEX: I know that! We last saw her near the woods; we thought she might have come this way.

DRAKE: Yeah, give us some credit. We're looking for her.

(Lewis shook his head.)

LEWIS: Look, we'll have to sort this out later. We've got work to do here and you two had better make yourselves scarce.

(Greatly interested in the academy's presence, Hex ignored his request and spoke up with great enthusiasm.)

HEX: So, who are you fighting?

(Lewis gave him a disdainful look.)

LEWIS: Fighting?

HEX: Yeah. You've got loads of your fighting school students waiting in combat formation, who are you fighting?

(Before Lewis could even begin to chastise him for his intrusive attitude, Hex looked enlightened.)

HEX: Ah, I see. That bloke, Arkane must be in there.

RAUCHEN: You know of Arkane?

HEX: Yeah, Cherry told us everything. We tried to save him actually.

RAUCHEN: You tried to save him?

HEX: Yeah, they smuggled him out of Birchwood in a coffin, you see. We tried to get into where they were staying but it went a bit wrong.

DRAKE: To put it mildly.

(Lewis looked stunned.)

LEWIS: A coffin?

HEX: Yeah.

LEWIS: We let a coffin pass through here just a short time ago!

(Rauchen placed a hand on his forehead.)

RAUCHEN: Arkane was in the coffin?

(He groaned.)

RAUCHEN: We let the coffin into the mansion, for pity's sake. I thought, what with Foxtan Hamler being a gangster and all, it must have been for one of his many cronies or something. Shit.

(Lewis also looked thoroughly embarrassed.)

LEWIS: We're going to demand Arkane back right after letting them carry him straight past us and into their compound.

(Drake looked enlightened and pointed to the mansion.)

DRAKE: So that's Foxtan Hamler's place is it? Nasty piece of work, I hear.

HEX: Notorious, mate.

(Lewis stood tall.)

LEWIS: Thank you for this information gentlemen, it's greatly appreciated.

However, my advice still remains. You should vacate this area.

HEX: And miss the battle? Piss off.

RAUCHEN: He has a point, gents...

(Looking extremely peeved, Drake shook his head.)

DRAKE: Look, bollocks. I don't know Arkane and frankly I don't care. I aint moving until I'm happy you clowns are going to do something to find Cherry.

(Rauchen and Lewis looked to one another.)

LEWIS: I'm done with these two.

(As Lewis headed away, Rauchen nodded to the two men.)

RAUCHEN: Don't worry; we'll do whatever we can to find Cherry. We came to find both her and Arkane. We won't return without both of them, I can assure you.

DRAKE: Thanks.

HEX: Yeah, thanks. In the meantime, what say we help you? We didn't bring any weapons or anything, but we're pretty handy in a punch up. Then when we've finished here, you can help us find Cherry.

DRAKE: Yeah, we could help each other.

(Rauchen looked about himself suspiciously before winking to them.)

RAUCHEN: No. You're in no way affiliated to the academy and I can not accept your offer.

(He muttered under his breath.)

RAUCHEN: Officially.

(He then leant forward to them.)

RAUCHEN: If you happen to help us, it's nothing to do with me.

(Hex and Drake nodded.)

HEX: Absolutely.

DRAKE: For sure.

RAUCHEN: There's over forty of us here to fight. All are highly trained so this shouldn't take too long. After it's over, with all of us looking, it shouldn't be too difficult to find Cherry either.

(At this point, Lewis returned.)

LEWIS: Rauchen, I just discussed it with the other masters, when this battle is over, we're going to scour the woodland for Miss Wroxford.

(He nodded then looked to Hex and Drake.)

LEWIS: Now I suggest you two men heed my advice and take cover, things might get a bit nasty out here. Rauchen, whenever you're ready!

(Rauchen puffed out and looked to the mansion.)

RAUCHEN: Okay, get everyone to take up their stances, I'm going in.

(With that, he stood tall and marched purposefully towards the mansion gates.

Watching him go, Hex and Drake shared a knowing smile. They'd seen this kind of thing numerous times before. During the war, they'd helped besiege many small towns and villages. On each occasion a member of the military staff had delivered a message to the leader of the settlement. As Rauchen approached the gates, it was obvious to them that his purpose was to deliver an ultimatum to Foxton Hamler. It brought back happy memories for them. They loved battles and were looking forward to joining in. With Rauchen's word that they'd all search for Cherry after the battle was over, Hex and Drake both felt quite relaxed. Rather than waste time hunting for her, they could enjoy a battle and then track her down later as part of a large group. The academy had impressed them. Rather than splitting to try and save Arkane and find Cherry at the same time, they intended to tackle the two problems patiently, one after the other. This was the military way. Standing among the academy number, albeit with Lewis' disapproval, just for a moment they felt like soldiers again.

As he reached the gates to the mansion, Rauchen yanked on the long pulley to ring the bell and attract the attention of those inside. Only seconds later, one of Hamler's men who'd been standing on guard just inside the gate, stepped before him and folded his arms.)

GUARD: Yes?

(Having suspected Hamler would have men posted on his gates, Rauchen wasn't even remotely surprised by the swift response and stood to attention.)

RAUCHEN: I have a message for Foxton Hamler.
(The guard rolled his eyes.)
GUARD: Do you now?
RAUCHEN: Yes I do.
(The guard placed disinterested hands on his hips.)
GUARD: Go on then, what is it?
(Rauchen frowned and raised his voice.)
RAUCHEN: Stand up straight when you're being addressed.
(Looking quite flustered, the guard did as he was told.)
RAUCHEN: That's better. Now, tell Mr Hamler he's got fifteen minutes to return
Ubermaster Arkane, unharmed, to either myself or one of my fellow academics.
Should he fail to do so, we'll be forced to gain entry and take him back ourselves by
whatever means necessary. Is that clear?
(The guard look stunned.)
GUARD: Um... no, mate.
(He slouched.)
GUARD: What are you on about?
RAUCHEN: I see; thick bloke are you?
GUARD: So my mother tells me.
RAUCHEN: In that case, let me translate it into idiot for you.
GUARD: If you would.
RAUCHEN: Tell Hamler to give Arkane back. He's got fifteen minutes.
(The guard snarled.)
GUARD: And if he says no?
RAUCHEN: Then we'll be forced to gain entry and...
(Remembering who he was talking to, Rauchen sighed and spoke in a cold tone.)
RAUCHEN: If he says no we'll beat you all up.
(The guard nodded and run the words through in his head.)
GUARD: Give back Arkane in fifteen minutes or we'll beat you up?
(Rauchen sighed.)
RAUCHEN: Yes, I suppose that'll have to do!
GUARD: Right, sounds like a laugh; I'll go and tell him.
(As the guard raced away, Rauchen spammed his forehead.)
RAUCHEN: I shudder to think what message Hamler will end up hearing.
(Fearing he'd be called back any second now to remind the guard what the message
was, Rauchen headed back to the grass verge to wait with his comrades. There
seemed to be every chance the guard would get the message wrong and state fifteen
days rather than minutes but he didn't care. The message had been delivered and the
wait was on. Should Hamler fail to comply, fifteen minutes from now there'd be
bloodshed.

Of all the preliminaries to battle, this part was the one soldiers hated most. Waiting.
Being psyched up and ready to let loose, every second was like a slow torture. Rage
and adrenaline would flow with nowhere to go. If a soldier wasn't careful, his tension
would build until he exploded into a careless rage when battle finally started. This
was how mistakes were made and many soldiers had lost their lives simply through
handling the waiting game badly. For these masters and students of N.U.C.A,
however, this would not be a problem. They were not like any ordinary battle unit.
Focussing the mind was the very basic foundation on which their skills were built.
Even in this tensest of situations, they were relaxed and breathed easily, patiently

waiting for the battle to begin. Despite having done battle so many times in the past they'd lost count, Hex and Drake were amazed by their composure. They'd never seen anything like it. It was impressive to say the least. There was no sign of fear or unease. Their focus gave them an intimidating aura that was sure to breed confidence in every ally by their side.

The most impressive thing about the N.U.C.A party was that none of the students had ever been in a real battle situation before. In Hex and Drake's experience, a newbie could always be spotted by his endless shifting and nervous movements, but they were displaying no signs of discomfort whatsoever. They were clearly a formidable force. Things could have been very different however. These students had completed their four years at the academy and had been due to leave, most likely for a career in the military. Had they not stayed behind after graduation for the previous night's formal dance, the N.U.C.A forces would have been made up of students with a whole year's less training. Third graders. The timing was extremely fortunate. Not only were these final year students, they were successful graduates.

Hex and Drake simply didn't have the same levels of discipline as the combat academy party. They found the waiting quite a chore and had to use their own techniques to remain calm. These techniques ranged from glancing around at their surroundings to singing to themselves inside their heads. Of everyone out there on the verge, expecting to do battle, they looked the most unprofessional. They couldn't stare ahead patiently and keep a calm and balanced mind at times like these, they needed a distraction. It was a tactic that hadn't let them down in the past; the fact they were still alive after so many battles was testament to that.

Keeping an eye of his timepiece, Master Rauchen stood aside Master Lewis with an empty expression on his brow. He would be steadfast in standing by the promised fifteen minute limit in the ultimatum. Even before one of those minutes had passed, however, he knew what was to come. Foxton Hamler hadn't gained such a fearsome reputation for nothing. It was obvious to Rauchen from the moment he'd delivered the message that surrendering or backing down wouldn't even be considered by Hamler as an option. He'd fight them. As ten of those fifteen minutes passed, he handed his timepiece to Master Lewis and pulled a pair of leather, fingerless gloves from his pocket. Slipping them over his hands then taking back the timepiece, he nodded to Master Lewis. He was ready. Returning the nod, Master Lewis also pulled gloves from his pocket. The two master's role up until now had been to keep a sharp eye on their party and make sure everyone was focussed. Satisfied they were all well prepared they moved onto the next part of their duty. Preparing to lead the onslaught. Gloved and ready, they placed patient hands behind their backs and waited.

Such was the high level of discipline within the N.U.C.A ranks, nothing would distract them. There was no sound that could tear their minds away from focussing on what they were about to do. Not even when a carriage slowly approached the top of the slope, did they look away for even a moment. Hex and Drake on the other hand, welcomed the distraction. Watching as the carriage started to slow, they shared a baffled look. It was one of the carriages that had been left behind by the MP's.)

HEX: Interesting!

(Drake nodded in agreement and headed towards it. Following on, Hex looked back at the waiting students and raised an impressed eyebrow.)

HEX: Excellent.

(As he caught up with Drake, he watched a young man atop the incoming carriage desperately try to halt the horses as they made their way down the slope. Eventually bringing the horses to a standstill half way down the hill, narrowly avoiding running them into the cliff face beside it, both the young man and the young lady in his company leapt down from the carriage. Drake immediately realised who the young lady was. Facially, she bore an uncanny resemblance to Cherry. Being a little slow on the uptake, Hex looked bewildered.)

HEX: She looks bloody familiar! Like a taller version of Cherry.

DRAKE: I'm guessing that's what she is, mate.

HEX: You what?

(As he approached them, Drake smiled.)

DRAKE: You must be Angel.

(Hex looked enlightened and slapped his forehead.)

HEX: What an idiot.

(Having found two abandoned carriages sitting helplessly on the highway surrounded by dead bodies, Carter and Angel had panicked. They had no idea who'd killed all those people and wanted to get away as fast as possible. Thus, they leapt on the carriage and galloped the rest of the way at great speed. Having finally arrived, they were stunned by what they saw. Something was clearly about to happen on the verge beside them. Ignoring Hex and Drake, Angel looked to Carter and shrugged desperately.)

ANGEL: What's going on? They all came here! Is this Ardenmouth then?

(Carter shared her bewilderment.)

CARTER: I guess it must be.

(Determined to introduce himself, Drake tried again.)

DRAKE: Angel?

(Having no idea who this stranger was, Angel reeled back and glared at him.)

ANGEL: Who are you?

DRAKE: I'm Drake, this here is Hex...

HEX: Pleasure.

DRAKE: We're friends of Cherry's.

(Angel's eyes lit up.)

ANGEL: Cherry? She's here?

(Drake and Hex both looked shifty.)

DRAKE: Yeah, um... sort of. Look, there's about to be a battle here, so you might want to...

HEX: For your own safety.

(Immediately seeing through Hex and Drake's attempt to change the subject, Angel sneered.)

ANGEL: Where's my sister?

(Drake sighed and looked to Hex. Feeling it was best to leave the explanation to Drake, Hex looked towards the mansion.)

HEX: Still no sign of the enemy.

DRAKE: Yeah, thanks Hex.

(He shook his head.)

DRAKE: Cherry is... well... she had a bad few days...

(As Angel's heart started to pound, she placed her hand over her mouth and spoke in a panicked voice.)

ANGEL: Oh my god, she's okay isn't she? She isn't hurt. Please tell me she's okay!

(Drake held his hands out to calm her.)

DRAKE: Yeah, yeah... physically she's fine. Mentally, however...

(Angel looked lost.)

ANGEL: What?

DRAKE: She kind of lost the plot a bit!

(As he looked to the mansion in the vain hope the battle would begin and save him having to explain, he saw the continuing wait and hung his shoulders.)

DRAKE: Aw, crap.

(Much to his horror, seconds later Angel grabbed him by his collar and snarled in his face.)

DRAKE: Steady on!!!

ANGEL: Where's Cherry???

(Realising there was no point stalling, he sighed and pushed her away.)

DRAKE: Fine!

(He straightened his collar and looked into her angry eyes.)

DRAKE: She's running about in the woods or the marshes somewhere, stark naked with a sword. She went quite mad and run off, you see.

(Hex gave him a sideways glance.)

HEX: If I knew you were going to be that tactless *I'd* have done it.

DRAKE: Well, I can't lie, can I?

(Angel was speechless. What he was saying was ridiculous to her. Cherry was extraordinarily mentally strong and she couldn't even comprehend the thought of her cracking under pressure. There was only one explanation in her eyes. Drake was clearly lying. Starting to seethe, she clenched her fists and glared at him. Spotting her rage, Carter tried to intervene.)

CARTER: Um... calm down, Angel.

(Brushing his words aside, Angel growled.)

ANGEL: I'll ask you again...

DRAKE: Oh please god, let the battle start.

ANGEL: Where the fuck is my sister?

(She glared between Drake and Hex wearing a demanding scowl.)

ANGEL: Well?

DRAKE: I already...

(Angel threw an accusing finger at Hex and snarled at Drake.)

ANGEL: And why has *he* got her bag???

(Hex felt over his shoulder, tapping the strap to Cherry's back pack.)

HEX: I forgot I had this on actually.

(Angel seethed.)

CARTER: Angel, take a deep breath.

ANGEL: You take a deep breath! I want my Cherry back.

(Hex sighed inwardly.)

HEX: Yeah, that's what *she* said.

ANGEL: Where is she? What have you done with her?

(Fearing he'd find a sex related retort too difficult to resist, Drake quickly cut over Hex before he could reply.)

DRAKE: We didn't do anything. I told you, she went doolally and buggered off!

ANGEL: Bullshit!

(Wearing a ferocious snarl, she faced the ground and looked up at Drake through her hair. Speaking through gritted teeth as she tapped her thigh impatiently, she made sure he was in no doubt about her intentions.)

ANGEL: You've got to the count of three to tell me where she is...

(As Hex and Drake looked to one another, clueless as to how to pacify the livid young lady before them, they prayed for an interruption. They didn't want to have to restrain her, she'd quite obviously suffered enough and if the experience with Cherry was anything to go by, antagonising this family might well end up in another case of acute insanity.)

ANGEL: One...

(Much to their relief, the sound of the mansion gates cranking open took her attention away from them. Angel, like everyone else, looked on as Hamler gave his answer. Looking mean and menacing in their identical black suits, over one hundred of Hamler's flunkies made their way out onto the road before the grass verge. Armed with swords and bats, they assembled to form a human barricade between the mansion and the N.U.C.A party. Still unmoved, the academy fighters merely watched them with emotionless eyes. As their training had dictated, it made no difference whether the enemy was in sight or not, only when the fight began would they alter their relaxed mindset. With Angel and Carter looking on open-mouthed, Hex nudged Drake and the two of them sloped away to escape Angel's scornful rage. Not only did they not want to miss the imminent battle, they didn't want to answer to Angel.

Once all of Hamler's men were in place, Rauchen stepped forward and offered them a respectful bow. The leader of the flunkies just scoffed.)

FLUNKIE: Yeah, alright, mate!

(Gesturing towards the N.U.C.A combatants, he glanced over his shoulder and spoke to his men in a mocking tone.)

FLUNKIE: Do 'em! And be quick about it, I've got a lunch date.

(Upon his word, the fight began. No pomp or ceremony, the flunkies had come out to inflict their brand of violence on the enemy and weren't about to discuss it first. If you messed with Foxton Hamler, you were killed, it wasn't open to debate. Having been more than prepared and focussed, the N.U.C.A warriors weren't slow to respond. Immediately, they met the challenge head on and an unholy cacophony of battle cries filled the air.

Having been entranced by the sight of the emerging flunkies it was only now that Angel and Carter noticed Hex and Drake had slipped away. Looking extremely miffed, Angel bellowed.)

ANGEL: Hey!!! Where the hell did those two arseholes get to?

(Carter was more concerned by the battle that was raging only a few metres away from where he stood and tried to usher her away.)

CARTER: Stuff them, we should be somewhere else.

ANGEL: Bollocks, what about Cherry?

CARTER: She isn't here obviously.

(He gestured towards the cliff face.)

CARTER: Let's at least go the other side of the carriage...

(He then gestured to the raging battle.)

CARTER: I don't fancy being caught up in that, do you?

(Angel looked to him imploringly.)

ANGEL: But... Cherry, they did something to her, I know it! I have to find them!

CARTER: Don't be...

(Just then, there was a thudding sound and the carriage at their side rocked. Ducking down, Angel and Carter looked up at the carriage and received quite a shock. A

naked, sword wielding woman had leapt from the top of the cliff onto the carriage. Raising her sword aloft, the naked woman then gave a primal scream and leapt to the ground, landing in a crouch with her back to them. Carter didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This woman was clearly dangerous but he couldn't help but marvel at her perfect backside. Angel on the other hand, was utterly mystified. Looking thoroughly shocked, she climbed to her feet as the naked woman stood tall and pointed her sword towards the mansion. In a small voice, Angel spoke through quivering lips.)

ANGEL: Cherry?

(Slowly and coldly, the naked woman turned sideways to look at them. As Angel had suspected, it was indeed Cherry. Looking utterly deranged and covered from head to toe in dirt and grime, she barely resembled the girl Angel knew. As Carter delighted in Cherry's magnificent breasts, Angel tried not to faint and took several quick breaths.)

ANGEL: Oh... my... god...

(As Cherry relaxed her sword and slowly approached Angel, Carter stepped back. Not only was this a personal moment for Angel that he felt he should have no part of, but he could get a better look at Cherry's nakedness from where he was now standing. As he looked on, Cherry stepped up towards Angel and offered her a loving smile. Trying not to cry at the sight of her beloved twin's bedraggled appearance, Angel could only pout and say nothing. As she tried to come to terms with what she was seeing, Cherry planted a soft kiss on Angel's lips. Having sown the seed for what would become Carter's darkest sexual fantasy, Cherry then pulled away from the kiss and spun around to face the mansion again. Still stunned, Angel could only mouth empty words as Cherry thrust her sword in the air and charged towards the mansion. Immediately, a chill run through Angel's body. Cherry was kissing her goodbye. In an instant, all thoughts for her own personal safety evaporated and she charged after her.)

CARTER: Angel!!!

(Not about to let her get herself killed, Carter snarled and raced after her.)

(As Hamler's flunkies and the N.U.C.A team battled violently all about her, Cherry ducked and weaved to avoid flailing weapons and injured battlers. Showing no signs of her trademark fear of danger, she slipped through them with ease. In no time at all, she managed to dodge her way through the entire melee and emerge the other side, in Hamler's compound. Her actions at this point had had quite an effect on the battle. Having been highly trained to focus on their opponents and the dangers of attacks from the blind side, the N.U.C.A party had ignored her completely. Not having such a well disciplined focus, many of Hamler's flunkies had been distracted by the large breasted, naked beauty that had appeared in the fray and had lost their individual duels because of it. Cherry's involvement had seen many flunkies hit the dirt albeit with a smile on their face. First blood to N.U.C.A! As the battle raged on behind her, Cherry snarled and raced across the grounds of the mansion before darting through the main entrance of the building. All her crazy mind was telling her was that she must save Arkane. Arkane was good, Arkane was great. She had no memory of being a girly girl and no concept of her failures at the academy, her rationale was completely gone. Her brain had closed for lunch and had left a note on the door asking her to save Arkane. In the confused fuzz of thoughts that shot through her mind in all the wrong directions, this was the only message that was coming through.

On the verge outside the mansion, the battle was raging on. Fist and high-kicks were flying among a sea of swinging blades and batons. The heavily armed, merciless flunkies were proving quite a test for the academy battlers. Any failure to defend at the right time, or any loss of focus could result in death. They were unarmed and outnumbered. The battle would be the ultimate assessment of the academy's worth. At this early point in the battle, they were looking good. There were no casualties on their side and many of the flunkies had breathed their last. The defend, block and counter moves they'd spent four years perfecting were proving extremely effective. With every confidence in their weapons and their strong desire to kill, however, the flunkies showed no signs of fear and kept up their attacks relentlessly.

With such a determined battle rampaging around them, Angel and Carter were having great difficulty. Their attempts to follow Cherry through the mansion gates were proving quite fruitless at this point. Angel had been knocked to the ground twice and Carter had found himself having to throw punches to protect them both. Undeterred by the apparent futility, however, Angel remained determined. Knowing Angel would never stop trying to reach her sister, Carter also resigned himself to somehow breaking through to the mansion. Their progress was slow but every inch counted. After several close calls with sword blades flailing all about them, they eventually managed to crawl from the fray on their hands and knees to the relative safety of the mansion forecourt. Looking focussed on his mission to keep Angel safe, Carter helped her to her feet and ushered her toward the mansion wall as soon as he was certain they were out of sword range. Breathing heavily, they both thrust their backs against the wall and looked to one another with tired eyes.)

CARTER: That was close.

(Angel nodded.)

ANGEL: Too close. Thank god you can fight.

(Carter beamed.)

CARTER: Pleasure.

(She rolled her eyes at him.)

ANGEL: I said thank god. Are you god?

(He gave her a conceited smile.)

ANGEL: Yeah, whatever your holiness. Let's get inside and find Cherry.

(And with that, they both raced along the front of the mansion before disappearing inside through the main entrance.

The top floor of the spacious mansion, the side facing the township of Ardenmouth, was dominated by Hamler's study. From here he often liked to cast a watchful eye on the town, ever on the lookout for beautiful women to lure into his clutches. Being a man of great power and influence yet devoid of a sense of morality, he had no problem with promising them the world before dispensing with them once he'd finished using them. Despite being in his fifties, his eye for the ladies was as strong as ever and such was his hold over the town, very few dared to deny him his wanton desires. This was by far Hamler's favourite room in the entire building. He'd spend most of his recreational time here, either reading, observing or entertaining the ladies. Today, however, he was using the room to partake in his most beloved pastime of all. Torture. Despite having a chamber dedicated to the practice down in the basement of the dwelling, today's victim was special and he'd opted to maximise the experience by doing it in his preferred surroundings.

In the nine years since Arkane had smashed his people trafficking ring, Hamler had grown distrustful of all those around him. Having been betrayed once, he'd grown exceptionally paranoid and on several occasions had taken extreme measures to make certain it never happened again. His suspicions about everyone around him had resulted in many unnecessary funerals. To all those around him, it seemed that the closer anyone got to him, the more likely they were to meet a premature end.

Such was his anger towards, Arkane, Hamler had enjoyed little respite. Every day he'd not been able to make the traitor pay had been like a dagger in his heart. His hair had quickly turned grey and he'd lost weight through fretting about it for days on end. All he wanted was to make Arkane suffer; he'd have paid any amount of money to make it happen. It had been on his mind constantly and he'd lost untold amounts of sleep over it. After a long nine years, however, his suffering was about to come to an end. To finally have Arkane where he wanted him was a dream come true. For the first time since the betrayal, he had a spring in his step and a song in his heart.

With Arkane still chained up and laid out on a table at the side of the room, he stood over him wearing a gleeful smile. With a glass of water in one hand and a dagger in the other, he laughed out loud to himself. He hadn't been this happy for a long, long time.)

HAMLER: Wakey, wakey sunshine. I can't enjoy it as much if you're not awake.
(With that, he poured the water from the glass over Arkane's head.)

HAMLER: Come on, old boy, it's rude to sleep when I'm trying to torture you.
(Roused by the soaking, Arkane's eyelids fluttered and he mumbled in a groggy voice.)

ARKANE: What said who to why?

HAMLER: Ah, excellent, you're awake.

(As Arkane strained his eyes, he tried to move but found himself unable to. Struggling, he opened his eyes wide and snarled at Hamler.)

ARKANE: What the hell? Hamler?
(Hamler beamed.)

HAMLER: You remember! Excellent! Then I assume you remember what happened nine years ago.

(Arkane struggled to free himself and said nothing.)

HAMLER: Actually, I don't care if you do or not! And there's no point in you struggling, old chap.

(He gestured to his desk by the window.)

HAMLER: You're chained up and the bolt cutters are over there.

(He stooped to talk smugly to Arkane's face.)

HAMLER: They're not to cut you free by the way; I thought you might like to experience life with no cock before you bleed to death.

(As Arkane's eyes bulged, Hamler stood tall and laughed.)

HAMLER: Still, no hurry. That'll give you something else to think about while I'm gauging out your eyes.

ARKANE: Hamler, you sick...

HAMLER: Sorry, old man, no time to chat. You see, it seems the three little pricks I sent out to capture you brought half that academy of yours back with them.

(He sighed playfully.)

HAMLER: I'm no fool; I know that if you weren't chained up it'd be my blood decorating these walls rather than yours. And I'm guessing my men won't stand much of a chance if *you* trained those students out there.

(Arkane sneered.)

ARKANE: Your weak flunkies don't have a prayer. My students will make short work of them then it'll be your turn.

HAMLER: Yes, I thought that too. Thing is you see, my flunkies may not win but they'll buy me enough time to torture you for a bit, make sure you're dead then escape through the front. I don't care for this building anymore; I've got the thing I want. You chained before me. After this I can take my millions and retire happily anywhere I bloody well feel like.

(Arkane scoffed.)

ARKANE: You're a fool, Hamler.

HAMLER: Now, now, Arkane, any more of that and I'll remove your tongue first! Besides, who's the fool? I exaggerated, there's only about forty so or your lot, not half the academy.

ARKANE: Even so.

(Hamler sighed and looked to the ceiling.)

HAMLER: It'll be a shame to leave this place, but that's what I get for employing idiots, I suppose. Still, I don't want to talk ill of the dead. Let's get on with killing you shall we?

ARKANE: You're a coward, Arkane. Less than a man.

HAMLER: And you'll be even less than that once I chop off your chap. Now, I'd love to chat a bit longer but I don't have long and I really do have to make you die.

(He lifted the dagger before his face and grinned.)

HAMLER: I think I'll start with this.

(Just then, the door flew open and thudded against the bookshelf behind it. Startled, Hamler jumped back and glared into the doorway. Spying the naked, mud covered girl on the threshold, he snarled venomously.)

HAMLER: Get out! I didn't order a whore. I'm busy.

(He looked her up and down and sneered.)

HAMLER: Especially a muddy, angry looking... what the hell have you come as?

(The girl in question, Cherry, snarled and growled under her breath. Looking menacing she then slowly paced towards Hamler and pointed her sword at him. As Hamler took a step back, Cherry stared into his eyes and spoke in a dark, almost Neanderthal tone.)

CHERRY: Cherry.

(She thumped her fist against her chest and then pointed to Hamler.)

CHERRY: Cherry kill you!!!

(With that, she leapt forward and started flailing her sword at him wildly.)

HAMLER: Fuck that.

(In a blind panic, Hamler dived to his side to avoid the blade. Defying his age, he then clambered to his feet and raced towards his weapon rack to avail himself of a broadsword. Swinging the sword towards Cherry, he spoke through gritted teeth.)

HAMLER: You will die for this interruption! I don't have time to waste, bitch!!!

(As Hamler launched into a string of attacks, Cherry danced backwards to keep herself well out of his reach. Frustrating his attacks with her youthful energy, she retained a hateful scowl into Hamler's eyes. Looking up from where he was tied and bound, Arkane was baffled. Who was this naked warrior? Why was she here? He

could see she looked familiar but couldn't quite place her. That's when he spotted the headband in her hair. Now he was twice as baffled.)

ARKANE: Cherry? *Our* Cherry from the academy?

(Arkane couldn't believe his misfortune. Of all the people to suddenly become brave and attempt to rescue him, why did it have to be her? Her record spoke for itself.

Knowing all too well of her incompetence, he came to a simple conclusion. He'd have to talk her through it. As she danced around to circle Hamler's blade, with her own short sword held out before her, Arkane yelled his advice to her.)

ARKANE: Remember, relax. Keep calm, think about what your doing and do it with all your heart. You can do it, Cherry.

(Still a little groggy from the sleep poison, it hadn't occurred to Arkane that giving tips on mental conditioning to someone who'd gone somewhat insane was quite the waste of time. He might as well have been speaking in a different language.

Undeterred, he continued to waste his breath.)

ARKANE: Excellent, now trust yourself, don't let him intimidate you.

(Cherry was far from intimidated. She had no concept of fear at this point. She was happy to deflect, Hamler's attacks and bide her time to catch him off guard. Being taller, stronger and possessing a far bigger sword, Hamler was finding her patient tactic extremely frustrating and wasn't slow in telling her so.)

HAMLER: You're wasting my time, whore!!!

(Cherry said nothing and continued to keep her distance with a view to pouncing when the time was right. With an angry Hamler slashing at her constantly, her moment didn't look to be coming any time soon however.)

ARKANE: Good girl, bide your time. Make him fight *your* way.

(Hamler snarled.)

HAMLER: Oh, shut the fuck up, Arkane!!!

(In a fit of rage, he then charged for Cherry once more. He didn't have time to waste and this intrusion was bringing back all his anger and frustration at once. With tremendous aggression he channelled all his anger into striking Cherry down. His only chance for a quick ending to the duel was to make full use of his size and weight advantage. With this in mind, he charged in to block her much smaller sword and swung a fist at her face.)

HAMLER: Bitch!!!

(Reeling back to avoid his fist, Cherry lost her balance. As she thudded onto her back, Hamler snarled and raced in for the kill.)

HAMLER: Die!!!

(Instinctively, Cherry scrambled backwards as fast as she could. Barely able to watch, Arkane winced as the sword blade thudded into the carpet just between Cherry's open legs. Not about to be thwarted so easily, Hamler growled ferociously and raised the blade once more to make an instant second strike. Fortunately for Cherry, she had speed on her side and managed to jump to her feet and dive clear of him.)

HAMLER: No!!!

(It had been a close call but Cherry was defiant. Once again taking up her stance, she glared coldly into Hamler's angry eyes.)

HAMLER: You won't be so lucky next time, you whore.

(With that, he leapt forward once again to try and overpower her. Once again Cherry jumped back and fixed her stance, much to Hamler's fury.)

HAMLER: Bitch!!!

(With the anger now burning in his eyes, he raced towards her and lashed his sword at her once more. Being light and far from muscular, Cherry was immediately knocked off balance as she blocked his blade with her own. Desperate to evade his attack, she attempted to about turn and jump out of range. Instead, she tripped forwards and staggered, only just avoiding another furious swing of Hamler's blade. Convinced he had her where he wanted her, Hamler snarled and dug his heels in for another charge. Putting all his efforts into charging her down and forcing his blade through her torso, he didn't notice the edge of one his rugs sticking up. Tripping, he thudded into the off balance Cherry and sent them both sprawling towards the wall. As their swords both fell to the floor, Cherry hit the wall face first, only to be pinned there by a furious Hamler.)

HAMLER: Well, this was an unexpected bonus!

(Struggling to free herself of his weight, she growled and tried to slide out from under him. With his full weight pressing her against the wall, however, she couldn't budge.)

ARKANE: Cherry? Don't panic now.

(Hamler looked over his shoulder and gave Arkane a knowing smile.)

HAMLER: Fuck you, Arkane. I'll just kill you and leave. It'll have to do. But first...

(He turned and snarled into Cherry's ear.)

HAMLER: First, before I snap her neck, I'm gonna teach this bitch a lesson.

(Wearing a ferocious scowl, he forced her neck into the wall with his forearm and fiddled with the zip in his trousers with his free hand. Freeing his manhood, he gritted his teeth and snarled into Cherry's ear.)

HAMLER: You thought you could take me did you? Looks like you need some education, bitch. I'll show you who owns who!!!

(Cramming himself forward, he then forced his penis deep into her anus. With a yelp of pure disgust, Cherry flinched and struggled wildly. Grinning fiendishly, Hamler groaned and thrust himself into her violently, several times, enjoying the sounded of this girl's pained whimpers.)

HAMLER: Don't whine, bitch, you know what they say, one up the bum, no harm done!

(Desperate to end Hamler's painful anal intrusion and get back to the task of killing him, Cherry snarled viciously then thrust her head back to butt him on the nose. In complete agony, Hamler jumped back and held his bloody nose.)

HAMLER: Fucking slut!!!

(Taking full advantage of the opportunity to free herself, Cherry rushed away from him and stooped to pick up her sword. Not about to let her go so easily, Hamler swung a leg at her and kicked her foot. Tripping, Cherry somehow managed to grab the sword and roll over to safety. As she leapt back to her feet, she saw Hamler climbing to his feet having also retrieved his sword. With a hateful glint in his eye, he zipped his trousers back up and wiped some blood from his nose. Clearly at the end of his tether, he spoke down to her in no uncertain tone.)

HAMLER: I don't know who you are...

(From where he lay Arkane couldn't resist chirping in just to anger Hamler further.)

ARKANE: She's a friend of mine. She's come to kill you.

(Hamler shook with rage.)

HAMLER: Shut the fuck up, Arkane.

(Breathing heavily, he then puffed out and tried to refocus. As Cherry once again took up her stance, he snarled and looked her in the eye.)

HAMLER: Here we go again then.

(Outside in the meantime, the battle was still in full flow. The flunkies, despite their numerical advantage, were having great difficulty in making any inroads whatsoever. They were used to wild fights where mad attacks were made and the most aggressive man ended up the victor. They'd never fought an enemy this calculated before. This body of students and teachers made no rash moves and despite having no weapons, were making all the telling blows. Battling and fighting were very much a *man's* undertaking in this part of the world and yet even the women were impossible to hit. To the flunkies it was a bewildering and painful experience. What would normally be an easy kill, a seemingly open strike was being countered with a kick to the head and nothing seemed to work. The leader of the flunkies, having watched several of his best men be either knocked out or killed, couldn't believe what he was seeing. Looking flustered, he backed up against the mansion wall and shook his head in a cowardly fashion. He didn't want to be a part of it anymore. As one of his tired comrades thudded against the wall next to him, he turned his head swiftly and spoke urgently to him with a worried look in his eye.)

LEADER: How are they doing that?

(Gasping for breath, his comrade shook his head.)

FLUNKIE: I don't know.

LEADER: Unarmed, mate! Unarmed! How can their hands and feet be more effective weapons than swords and bats???

(His comrade looked to him questioningly.)

FLUNKIE: You need to calm the fuck down.

LEADER: Do I?

FLUNKIE: Yeah. You'll be no good to us in that state.

LEADER: Mate, it doesn't matter. They're indestructible or something. We're gonna die if we keep fighting, you do realise that don't you?

FLUNKIE: What the hell are you saying?

(The leader bit his lip and remonstrated to his comrade.)

LEADER: Let's fuck off. Hamler needn't find out. We can get on a ferry and go somewhere else. Anywhere else. Hamler aint worth dying for. What do you say?

(His comrade sighed and shook his head.)

FLUNKIE: Sorry.

LEADER: What do you mean, s...

(Feeling immense pain, he looked down to see his comrade's sword protruding from his stomach.)

LEADER: Why?

(His comrade snarled and pulled his sword back.)

FLUNKIE: Because leader or not, cowards like you make me sick!

(Watching the blood run down his sword, the flunky then snarled and raced back into the fray. If there was one hope for the flunkies it was their loyalty to Hamler. Having witnessed what happens to those who cross him, they'd learned to fear him and daren't even begin to consider letting him down. In the face of the overwhelming skills of their current enemy, many would have surrendered; it was only their fear of what Hamler would do to them that had stopped them from doing so long ago.

As the sounds of the battle raged outside the window, Carter and Angel found themselves racing down a long corridor inside the mansion. They'd swung open the doors to several rooms but Cherry was nowhere to be seen. Becoming quite flustered, Angel was having trouble keeping her emotions in check. Carter, on the other hand,

was unusually focussed. He'd been reputed at the academy for his trademark coolness and yet every time he'd spoken to Angel he'd turned into a gibbering fool. Having had a passionate heart to heart with her on the road to Ardenmouth earlier that day, however, he'd managed to overcome his nervousness around her and was only now showing the cool-headedness that he'd become known for. Having swung open yet another door to an empty room, Angel snarled angrily and threw her hands up in the air.)

ANGEL: This is pathetic! Why does he need so many rooms anyway?

(Carter shrugged.)

CARTER: For all those flunkies.

ANGEL: Carter, this is frustrating. She has to be here somewhere, right?

CARTER: Yeah, she does. So, let's just keep looking, okay?

(Angel nodded and hung her head.)

ANGEL: You're right.

(As Carter placed a warm hand on her shoulder, Angel looked up to him wearing a saddened expression.)

ANGEL: This is too hard, Carter. Stop a minute.

(She hung her head once again.)

CARTER: Hey, it's okay.

ANGEL: Is it?

CARTER: Angel, look at me.

(She slowly raised her head.)

CARTER: I know it's crap but all we can do is open every door and hope we find her.

Yeah, it's infuriating and frustrating but the only other option is to do nothing.

ANGEL: I know that. And I'll never stop looking, I just need to take five and get my head around it. I mean, you saw her. She was covered in mud from head to toe.

CARTER: Not to mention naked.

ANGEL: And then, she looked in my eyes and... it was like only half of her was in there, you know?

(Carter looked enlightened.)

CARTER: You're worried what we might find, aren't you?

(Angel nodded solemnly.)

CARTER: Look, it's possible she's just had a breakdown or something. When we find her we can fix her.

(With a shudder, Angel looked into his eyes and forced back a tear.)

ANGEL: And if we can't?

CARTER: If we can't?

(He shrugged.)

CARTER: Then we'll take care of her. Angel, one thing I *can* say with complete certainty is, no matter what happens to Cherry, you won't love her any less.

(Angel was stunned.)

CARTER: You okay?

ANGEL: Who are you and what did you do with Carter?

CARTER: Sorry?

ANGEL: That was just what I needed to hear, that's not like you.

(Carter smiled and shook his head.)

CARTER: Yeah, I've been kinda hopeless on the reassurance front, huh?

ANGEL: Yeah, but you're so right this time. Cherry is Cherry, she's my sister no matter what. So what if she *is* a mental case, she's *my* mental case.

CARTER: That's the spirit.

(With that, Angel raced down the corridor.)

ANGEL: Come on, what are you waiting for?

CARTER: Cheek!

(And with a smile, he raced after her.)

(In the top floor study in the meantime, Cherry and Hamler were continuing their duel. Despite his longer blade and superior sword skills, Hamler was still being frustrated. Cherry was agile and unlike him, she was in absolutely no hurry. Hamler was no fool however; he knew he'd have to play to his strengths. With a heavily blood stained nose and top lip, he watched Cherry like a hawk as she circled round him. Little did she know, being circled suited him just perfectly.)

HAMLER: Keep circling, go on, there's a good girl.

(Cherry was oblivious to his taunts. There was no communicating with her right now. She was focussed on what she was doing and too mad to take onboard anything anyone said to her. She was merely following what her confused mind told her was instinctive. She had to kill this man and survive; right now this was all she knew. Following that instinct, she circled at a distance carefully. Watching her circle, Hamler allowed himself a wry smile. He'd had an idea and despite his impatience, he was willing to wait for the right moment. As she circled, one step a time, he waited until she stepped in front of a table before leaping into action. His moment had arrived. Looking furious, Hamler snarled and raced towards her with his sword hand stretched out before him. As always, Cherry leapt back to avoid it, only this time there was a table in her way. As she fell back onto the table top, Hamler screeched and immediately slammed the blade down to go in for the kill.)

HAMLER: Whore!!!

(There was nowhere for Cherry to go. Not only had she fallen awkwardly but she was also disorientated by the shock of the fall. There was nothing she could do to avoid his killer blade this time. Much to his Hamler's horror, however, before the venomous swing of his blade was complete, the wafer thin, ornamental, wicker table Cherry was laying on snapped beneath her and she fell through it. As a result, his sword swiped at thin air and he was sent sprawling forwards under the weight of his own swing. Much to his disgust, by the time he'd steadied himself, Cherry had managed to roll back and leap to her feet again.)

HAMLER: Cheap fucking wicker table!!! Why the hell did I buy that?

(Arkane scoffed.)

ARKANE: You might as well give up and kill yourself.

HAMLER: Fuck off, Arkane.

(Oblivious to the amazingly lucky escape she'd just had, Cherry stepped across the broken table, wafting her blade towards her disdainful looking opponent. She was completely undeterred by the near miss. Her bewildered brain was simply telling her to keep going. Hamler could only shake his head.)

HAMLER: You trained this one well, Arkane.

(Arkane sighed.)

ARKANE: I think you'll find what *she* has can't be taught so easily. Though having said that, driving people insane is probably what you're best at.

(Observing his words, Hamler looked into Cherry's eyes and raised an eyebrow.)

HAMLER: Insane, eh? Interesting.

ARKANE: Unpredictable, you mean. I'd run for it if I were you.

HAMLER: But I'm not you, Arkane.

ARKANE: I can't say I'm sad about that.

(Fixing his sword stance, Hamler leant his head forward and pulled a face at Cherry.)

HAMLER: I'm right here, fruitcake!

(He then blew two raspberries and warbled his bottom lip.)

HAMLER: Come and get me if you're not too busy skipping through the daisies with the elves and the pixies!

(He frowned.)

HAMLER: Hmm... taunting her isn't working.

(Not even remotely fazed by his comments, Cherry remained before him, glaring coldly back into his eyes. Insulting her was indeed pointless.)

HAMLER: How odd.

ARKANE: Of course that won't work you tit, that only upsets people who *aren't* insane.

HAMLER: Hmm... oh well.

(With that, he stepped back into the centre of the study and beckoned her to him.)

HAMLER: Come on, bitch let's finish this thing.

(Slowly and cautiously, Cherry stepped forward and held her sword out to protect herself. No longer circling, she stared into his eyes awaiting his next move. Waiting for her to do something, Hamler groaned to himself. He didn't have time for a stand off. Knowing it'd be his move, he leapt towards her making full use of the duelling training he'd received as a young man in the army. Using her agility to full effect, Cherry skipped left and right to avoid the blows. Blocking each one, she edged slowly around the entire room, with the tiring Hamler following her, slowly getting angrier and angrier as he did so.)

HAMLER: Keep still, you slag. Fuck sake.

(Stopping to gather himself, he took a deep breath then refocused his stance. Feeling quite foolish for exhausting himself by doing things her way, he snarled to himself and furrowed his brow.)

HAMLER: I've wasted too much time as it is.

(With a devious look on his brow, he engaged her in a face to face once more. This time, rather than charging her, he flailed his sword in her direction and kicked his shoe at her at the same time. Taken completely by surprise as she ducked back from the blade, Cherry could do nothing to avoid being hit on the chin by his shoe. As she flinched and staggered backwards off balance, Hamler leapt in for the kill.)

HAMLER: Finally!

(As he bound forth to strike her down, however, he was in such a rush he didn't notice the shoe he'd just kicked at Cherry laying in his path. With a horrified look on his face, he tripped on the shoe and flew forwards towards Cherry. In her desperation to avoid being fallen on she immediately turned to run. He'd charged towards her with such ferocity, however, as his arms flailed about for balance, his blade slipped out of his hand and he crashed face first straight into Cherry's back. With quite a force, they both slammed into the wall.)

HAMLER: Fuck!!!

(Hamler's bitter expression then changed. He had her like this before and she'd managed to butt him to escape. Not about to be foiled again, he put his head aside hers and spoke menacingly in her ear.)

HAMLER: Doesn't look good for you, does it? Bitch!

(Forcing her against the wall with the force of his entire body weight, Hamler laughed out loud.)

HAMLER: It worked out alright, Arkane. I'll just rape this bitch, break her neck, kill you then be on my merry way!

(Arkane growled as he watched Cherry pinned to the wall, barely able to move.)

ARKANE: Let her go, you son of a bitch!!!

(Slipping his manhood from his trousers once again, Hamler beamed.)

HAMLER: Careful now, I don't want to get your vagina by mistake.

(As he fumbled about and tried to penetrate her anus, however, he felt an immense pain in his side. With a deafening scream, he looked down at his side and gaped in horror. He'd made one fatal oversight. Cherry hadn't dropped *her* sword this time. Staring down at where her sword penetrated his skin, Hamler tried to speak but no words came out. Still facing the wall, Cherry looked over her shoulder at him and sneered. While he'd been trying to violate her she'd simply pulled her arm back and plunged the sword into him. Still holding the handle of the sword, Cherry growled at him under her breath.)

HAMLER: Bitch!

(As he staggered backwards, gasping for breath Cherry yanked her sword back with a twist causing him to release another loud cry of pain. Turning away from the wall, she then paced up to him as he fell to his knees.)

HAMLER: You... you...

(As Arkane looked on in bewilderment, he was horrified by what he saw. With no element of remorse or compassion, Cherry held an emotionless expression and plunged her blade deep into the kneeling Hamler's throat. She then proceeded to twist it violently as blood gushed from the gaping wound, splattering all up her torso. Moments later, she yanked back her sword and watched on coldly as Hamler's lifeless body collapsed backwards to the floor.)

ARKANE: Fucking hell.

(He looked on with his mouth prized wide open as she stood over Hamler's corpse coldly. No snarl, no sneer, no emotion whatsoever. Seconds later, she knelt by the side of his lifeless body.)

ARKANE: Um... Cherry?

(Ignoring him, she slowly reached for the gaping wound in Hamler's neck and placed her hand into the pool of blood.)

ARKANE: Cherry? Miss Wroxford. Ahem.

(Much to his amazement, Cherry then rubbed Hamler's blood together with her fingertips before smearing it on her face as a symbol of her victory. It was only now that the depth of Cherry's madness became apparent to Arkane. Feeling quite depressed to see the likeable girl he'd met only the day before be reduced to this, he sighed to himself.)

ARKANE: Damn.

(As Cherry climbed to her feet and started to approach him, Arkane offered her a kindly smile.)

ARKANE: Ah, Cherry... I know you don't know what I'm saying, but I'm so sorry.

(As she reached him, a gentle smile crossed her blood soaked face. Hoping it was a positive sign, Arkane looked into her eyes.)

ARKANE: Cherry? Can you understand me?

(As she stood over him, Cherry looked him up and down and then beat her chest with one hand as she'd done earlier.)

CHERRY: Cherry!

ARKANE: Yes. That's right. You're Cherry. I'm...

(Much to his horror, before he could finish his sentence, she swiftly looked him up and down again then started to pull his trousers down. Powerless to stop her, he protested vehemently.)

ARKANE: Cherry! No! Bad girl! Don't do that!!!

(Ignoring him, she took his penis in her hand and started to excite him.)

ARKANE: Good god. Stop!!! Um... Cherry!!! Naughty!!!

(With her small soft hands massaging him gently, it didn't take long to get him aroused and as soon as she completed the task, she dropped her sword and climbed up on top of him.)

ARKANE: This isn't... oh, shit. Cherry, will you just... oh, god.

(Slipping herself into a seated position on his pelvis, she then lifted herself and reached back for his penis.)

ARKANE: Cherry!!!

(As she started to lower herself onto him, Arkane squinted in dreaded anticipation.

As soon as his penis penetrated her, however, his eyes bulged.)

ARKANE: Great clouds of the forbidden kingdom!!!

(As she started to rock back and forth, Arkane remonstrated to her through tearful eyes.)

ARKANE: No, Cherry. You can't do this! Cherry, please! Oh my god I forgot how amazing this feels. Nevertheless. Stop it, will you?

(Panting, he stopped protesting and sighed.)

ARKANE: Fuck it, you aint gonna stop, I might as well enjoy myself.

(With that, he closed his eyes and relaxed.)

(Out in the corridors of the mansion in the meantime, Angel and Carter were having a spot of trouble. They'd thrown open one door too many and accidentally strolled in on three of the few flunkies who'd remained inside. Having been chased round and round the corridor that circled this level of the mansion, they were becoming increasingly frustrated, as were their pursuers. Angel and Carter couldn't get away and the flunkies couldn't catch them.)

ANGEL: This is ridiculous!

CARTER: You're telling me.

ANGEL: We can't run in circles all day, we should run down the next stairwell or something.

CARTER: I thought that two laps ago but I haven't seen it yet.

ANGEL: No, me either. And I don't remember which way we came.

(Behind them, the flunkies made no secret of their feelings either.)

FLUNKIE: This is dumb.

FLUNKIE 2: I know, but what else can we do?

FLUNKIE 3: We could try stopping and waiting for them to run around again.

FLUNKIE: Like they'd be that stupid!

(It hadn't occurred to them that if one of them went the other way they'd catch them with ease and it wasn't likely to. Hamler didn't employ them for their brains after all. And so, the chase continued.)

ANGEL: I don't like this, Carter!

CARTER: Babe?

ANGEL: I just want to find, Cherry. I've got no time for this!

CARTER: Yeah, you're right.

(Seeing she was getting upset, Carter snarled. If there was one thing he wasn't going to stand for, this was it. Looking menacing, he slowed to a standstill and turned to face the three incoming pursuers. Overjoyed by his move, the three flunkies adopted their most evil expressions and bore down on him.)

ANGEL: Carter, no! What are you doing?

CARTER: I'll be with you in a second, beautiful.

(One of the flunkies scoffed.)

FLUNKIE: Yeah, in heaven!

(With that, he threw a punch at Carter only to find himself crashing to the ground on his back.)

ANGEL: Huh?

(As Carter then high-kicked the second then spun around and punched the third in the throat, Angel swooned.)

ANGEL: That's so hot!

(Standing tall over the three unconscious men, Carter shrugged.)

CARTER: I studied martial arts for six years before I came to the academy.

(He gave her a knowing smile.)

CARTER: Did I mention that?

(Angel could only place a loving hand to her heart and pout.)

ANGEL: We're so going to have sex later.

(As Carter grinned, his teeth gleamed in the sunlight from the window.)

CARTER: Let's go!

(With a nod, they both raced down the corridor once more, this time keeping a keen eye out for the stairwell. The mansion could indeed be confusing. The stairwells were concealed around corners and every sub-corridor had other sub-corridors off of them. It took them a good few minutes more to find the stairs to the top level. After a fruitless search thus far, they were far from sad to see it. As they emerged onto the top floor landing, Angel paused for breath and looked to Carter.)

ANGEL: This must be it then. We've exhausted every other possible place. She has to be up here somewhere.

CARTER: Yeah and if she is we'd better be on guard, there might be...

(Noticing she was looking all about herself quizzically rather than listening, Carter frowned.)

CARTER: Angel!

(Angel waved a hand at him.)

ANGEL: Shush a minute! Listen!

(Pausing, he turned his head to listen.)

ANGEL: Hear it?

CARTER: Yeah, sounds like groaning. The naughty, sex kind of groaning at that.

(Angel's mouth fell open.)

ANGEL: Oh my god, it's Cherry! She always sounds like that!

(As she tried to rush away in a panic, Carter grabbed her arm.)

CARTER: Hang on? Always? I thought you said she was a virgin!

(He looked excited.)

CARTER: Or do you mean... with you?

(Desperately trying to pull away, Angel snarled.)

ANGEL: No, you tit! That's the sound she makes when she's jogging! She gets tired quickly. Now let me go!!!

(Letting her go, he joined her in racing towards the source of the noise. As they headed forth, however, Angel gasped in disgust.)

ANGEL: With *me*??? Dude, Cherry's my sister!

(With his hopes well and truly dashed, Carter could but sigh solemnly.)

CARTER: Yeah, okay.

(As they rushed down the corridor, following the sounds of the groans, Angel's heart raced. Why was Cherry panting so loudly? What were they doing to her? As a

thousand horrible thoughts entered her mind, Angel whimpered. Desperate to calm her, Carter spoke in a soft voice.)

CARTER: Almost there!

ANGEL: I swear, if anyone's hurt her...

(As the noises grew louder, they could tell they were emanating from the next door along. Looking flustered they both picked up the pace, Carter clenching his fists in readiness for a fight. Moments later, both wearing determined expressions they raced through the door just in time to hear Arkane cry out in orgasmic ecstasy.)

ARKANE: Oh lord, heaven above, there it goes!!!

(Instantly freezing to the spot in abject horror, Angel averted her gaze.)

ANGEL: What the fuck is she doing?

(Sharing Angel's amazement at Cherry's actions, Carter gaped. They hadn't even noticed the blood spattered body over by the wall, and with Angel averting her gaze in the opposite direction while Carter stared at Cherry's naked body, they were hardly likely to.)

CARTER: A fuck is exactly what she's doing! Are you really sure she was a virgin? Only she definitely isn't one anymore!

(Oblivious to their presence, Cherry slowed her rhythmic rocking and climbed off of the delighted looking Arkane. Without even acknowledging him, she then bent to pick up her sword and rushed towards the door.)

ANGEL: Not so fast, missy.

(As Angel stepped in her path, Cherry swiftly came to a halt and gaped at her in bewilderment. The empty look in Cherry's eyes chilled Angel to the bone.)

ANGEL: Cherry, what...

(Interrupting her, Cherry thumped her chest and spoke in a loud, primal voice.)

CHERRY: Cherry!

(Angel was rendered speechless. This wasn't the Cherry she adored and she couldn't bear to see it. As she gaped uncontrollably however, Cherry hung her shoulders and swayed in a daze.)

CHERRY: Cherry love Angel.

(Her eyes then rolled upwards and she passed out.)

ANGEL: Cherry!!!

(With tremendous reflexes, Angel swiftly swooped to catch her as she fell. Laying her down with her head on her lap, she looked imploringly to Carter.)

ANGEL: What happened to her? Why'd she pass out?

CARTER: Maybe she's got a temperature or something.

(As he reached his hand to feel Cherry's forehead, however, Angel cradled her closer and pulled her away from him.)

ANGEL: Don't touch her.

(Looking up from where he lay, Arkane spoke up apologetically.)

ARKANE: Um... sorry to interrupt, but would someone mind pulling my trousers up for me. I'm chained up you see.

(Feeling quite powerless to help Angel, Carter turned a saddened head in Arkane's direction. Upon spotting the Ubermaster, he gulped and swiftly raced to his aid.)

CARTER: Sorry, sir. Didn't realise it was you.

ARKANE: It's okay. There's bolt cutters on the table.

(As Carter reached for the table, however, Arkane raised his voice.)

ARKANE: Pull my trousers up first. I don't want anyone coming near me with bolt cutters until I'm all put away.

(Carter grimaced and nodded obligingly.)

CARTER: Sir!

(As he nervously grabbed the top of Arkane's trousers, he cringed and looked away.)

ARKANE: Good god, boy. You'll give a man a complex.

CARTER: Sorry, sir. Sticky.

(Arkane looked enlightened.)

ARKANE: I see, grossed out by the sticky patch. Couldn't be helped, I had no say in the matter, as you can plainly see.

(Shuddering, Carter pulled up Arkane's trousers then reached for the bolt cutters.

Moments later, Arkane was free. Looking quite relieved he sat up and smiled to Carter.)

ARKANE: Thanks for that, young lad.

CARTER: Sir.

(Sharing a brief smile they then both turned to look where Angel was cradling Cherry's head with tears streaming down her face. Looking devastated, she spoke to her in worried whispers.)

ANGEL: Please don't be broken, Cherry. Open your eyes and look at me. Cherry? Cherry, I love you. Come on, speak to me.

(She looked to Arkane and Carter.)

ANGEL: Why did she pass out? What's happened to her? What's wrong with her? (Stepping forward, Arkane offered her a caring smile.)

ARKANE: Miss...

CARTER: This is Angel, sir, Cherry's twin sister.

ARKANE: Angel, from the looks of things she's been suffering some form of temporary dementia.

(Angel looked to him imploringly.)

ANGEL: Temporary?

CARTER: So she'll be okay?

(Arkane mused for a moment.)

ARKANE: This is an educated guess, I can't be certain obviously. I saw something similar in the army a couple of times. The two concerned had the same look in their eyes so I think it's the same thing. Anyway, one of them joined the service with seven of his friends and in their first battle together, all seven of his friends were killed. When he found out he returned to the scene of the battle and spent several hours fighting an imaginary enemy in the field by himself.

CARTER: And how does that relate to Cherry?

ARKANE: Well, and this is a guess. Did she initially set out to save me by any chance? I mean before she went insane?

ANGEL: Yeah, she did. On her own. God only knows what she was thinking.

ARKANE: That makes sense then. She probably had several traumas on the way and had a nervous breakdown. I would wager her mind shutdown and just like that soldier could only visualise fighting in that battle with his friends, Cherry could probably only visualise saving me. Her mind was probably holding onto that one simple memory of what she set out to do. It must have driven her every move, I would imagine.

(He nodded.)

ARKANE: That simple desire to follow through with one task is what afflicted the soldiers I knew, anyway. So, if it's the same thing then, yes it's temporary.

(Angel looked peeved.)

ANGEL: Hold on, that doesn't explain why you were shagging her!

(Arkane stood tall defensively.)

ARKANE: I was chained to the table and she raped me... effectively. I didn't mind.
(He winced.)

ARKANE: And by that, I mean she couldn't help it, not that I enjoyed it.

ANGEL: You didn't seem too upset about it when we came in.

ARKANE: Um... I was still groggy from the poison!

(He shook his head.)

ARKANE: Look, she reverted to her animal state. You saw her. She accomplished the task she set out to do, she stopped Hamler killing me. Then she...

(He held his head in embarrassment.)

ARKANE: Tried to mate.

(Angel looked to him in bewilderment.)

ANGEL: To mate?

ARKANE: Yes. Good thing I'm infertile really.

CARTER: So why did she just pass out for no reason?

ARKANE: Could have been a few things I suppose. You can never really understand an insane person's mind. Maybe she'd accomplished her tasks and her mind switched off. Maybe seeing Angel calmed her and her mind switched off. We'll never know for sure but I'm certain she'll be as right as rain after a good rest. Back to her old self.

(Angel sighed solemnly.)

ANGEL: She'd better be. I don't know what I'd do without her.

(Cradling Cherry in her arms, she climbed to her feet and tried to force a smile.)

ANGEL: I want to take her home now.

CARTER: But, the battle's still going on outside, we can't leave yet.

ARKANE: Don't worry. Once I get out there, the battle won't last much longer.
Let's go!

(Something had been bugging Carter and he couldn't leave there without asking about it. The Cherry he knew was hopeless and none of this made sense. Looking puzzled, he shrugged to Arkane quizzically.)

CARTER: Sorry, I've got to ask this, how did Cherry save you exactly?

(Arkane pointed to the blood soaked body by the wall.)

ARKANE: She killed that guy with her sword!

(As their eyes caught sight of the body, Angel and Carter both looked stunned.)

CARTER: Damn, I didn't even see him there.

ANGEL: Cherry did that? No, way.

CARTER: Yeah, not Cherry, she couldn't.

ARKANE: Well one of us did and as you saw, I was chained up.

ANGEL: Oh, my god. That's so not Cherry.

ARKANE: She fought well actually.

ANGEL: And that's even less like Cherry!

CARTER: Yeah!

ARKANE: Well, I saw it with my own two eyes. Cherry's a heroine.

(Angel smiled.)

ANGEL: Now that I *can* believe. To me, she always has been.

ARKANE: I'll bet. Come on,

(Watching Angel carry Cherry through the door with Arkane by her side, Carter sighed and shook his head. He didn't want to say anything in front of Angel but he didn't share Arkane's optimism about Cherry returning to her old self. It had often been said that once a person has killed another human being, it changes them. They cross a line and can never go back. Should Cherry make a full recovery, could she really return to being the clumsy, hapless girl she'd always been having butchered a

man? As he looked down at the pools of blood that streamed from Hamler's gaping wounds, wounds inflicted by Cherry, he wasn't convinced. Shaking a despairing head, he looked away from the bloody body and sighed to himself. If he was right and Cherry failed to recover then Angel would be in for a rough time. Knowing all he could do was support her should that be the case, he nodded to himself and headed for the door to catch them up.

Outside on the verge, the battle looked to be nearing its end. The flunkies were suffering great losses and the mere fact they were still willing to fight was quite bewildering. Such was their fear of Hamler, they'd keep fighting in a battle they were almost certain to die in rather than face his wrath if they gave up. For Hex and Drake the battle hadn't quite gone to plan. They'd started off with enthusiasm, rushing in with punches and kicks but had very quickly seen the error of their ways. These flunkies were not like the MP's. The flunkies were hard men; they loved to fight and had a flare for violence. The MP's had been weak men with little skill, whose only attribute was strength in numbers. After several close calls, both Drake and Hex had realised the stupidity of facing these hard, violent, well-armed men with only their fists and had retreated to watch the battle from the top of the verge. Unlike those from N.U.C.A, they didn't have the disciplined skills it took to face down the flunkies without weapons. As much as they liked a good fight, they weren't about to commit suicide just to be involved in one and had taken the sensible option.

Once Angel, Arkane, Carter and Cherry emerged from the mansion, the battle came to an abrupt end. The news that Hamler was dead brought about an instant surrender from all the flunkies. Without their fear of him, they had no reason to keep up the losing battle. Without even having to be asked, upon the news reaching them, the flunkies had all dropped their weapons and headed to face the wall with their hands on their heads. There were only twenty of them left alive and all they'd managed to do was inflict minor injuries to seven of the N.U.C.A party.

As Master Rauchen and Master Lewis kept a watchful vigil on the captured flunkies, Arkane emerged from the front gates of the mansion to a rapturous round of applause. Quick to dismiss their plaudits, he made certain they all knew who the real heroine was. As Cherry lay cradled in Angel's arms, wrapped in a blanket they'd found in the mansion, Arkane gestured to his unconscious saviour. As he hailed the first grade student as a beautiful human being to whom he'd forever owe his life, Hex and Drake looked to one another and stepped among the N.U.C.A members to tell them they knew her before she was famous.

With everyone surrounding her, Angel felt extremely uncomfortable. She just wanted to take Cherry home and hated the way everyone was gathering to grin at her and pat her unconscious head. Looking extremely annoyed, she turned away and walked back into the mansion grounds with her. Agreeing with Angel's sentiments entirely, Arkane issued an order to leave Cherry alone. Left with no other way to find out more about this brilliant heroine, the curious combatants turned to the only other remaining source of information on her.)

DRAKE: Yes, we know her; she's stayed over at our place. Lovely girl.

HEX: Indeed, a close friend.

DRAKE: In fact...

(Looking devious, he pulled at Cherry's pack, still sitting on Hex's back.)

HEX: What are you doing?

(Allowing him to slip the pack off, Hex was most put out when Drake held it before him.)

DRAKE: This is her bag. We were carrying it for her, you see.

HEX: You mean *I* was!

DRAKE: Only because you put your stuff in it.

HEX: Even so, I was still...

(Looking peeved, Drake held out his hand to him.)

DRAKE: Look, she doesn't even like you. In fact, she despises you.

(Hex gave him a condescending look.)

HEX: You want to play it like that, do you? Fine.

(He stood tall and rubbed his chest proudly.)

HEX: What my friend here forgets is, I know her intimately.

(He gave Drake a smarmy grin.)

HEX: We were lovers for a while.

DRAKE: You git!

HEX: Well, we were.

DRAKE: Yeah, for about twenty minutes.

HEX: Ah, but what a twenty minutes!

DRAKE: Geezer, you used her and dumped her, she hates your guts.

HEX: Crap. She loves me really.

DRAKE: Bullshit.

(As they stood and snarled at each they became aware that the interested crowd who'd been listening to them had wandered off and there was only one person still listening.)

HEX: Oh!

DRAKE: Go away!

(As the student shrugged and walked away, Hex and Drake shared an amused chuckle.)

HEX: And so ends our five minutes of fame.

DRAKE: Yeah, four minutes early!

(With Arkane taking charge, the after battle formalities were brief and simple. Satisfied that without Hamler, the captured flunkies posed no threat whatsoever, he gave them one simple instruction. They were go back into the mansion and stay there for an hour, then they were free to go. With them out the way, he then ordered that the injured should be taken home in the carriage that Carter and Angel had arrived in. The rest would march back and catch a later ferry. Angel, Carter and Cherry were included in the party on the carriage and Drake and Hex had to walk back to Birchwood. This suited Drake and Hex as they weren't exactly enthusiastic about the idea of having to explain to Angel why Cherry had cracked up.

The trip home was a long one for Angel. Every second Cherry remained unconscious her heart felt heavy. In turn, Carter felt her pain and the journey was a miserable one.

Marching behind, things weren't so bad for Drake and Hex. They told the students who accompanied them all about their time in the war. They were an interested audience. These students also had plans to join the military and were only too pleased to hear some first hand accounts. Hex also boasted about his intimate encounter with Cherry, something he soon regretted when Arkane informed everyone that Cherry was insane and would need special attention when they returned. Having left everyone

with the impression that he was in the habit of seducing lunatics, he was only too glad to get back to Birchwood. At which point, the two of them took their leave and returned home.

As they alighted the carriage upon their return to the academy, Angel was surprised to see a full campus. She'd forgotten what she'd been told about the whole academy being kept behind until they were certain the threat was lifted. It was hardly a glorious homecoming. As she carried Cherry through the grounds, past some of the students in her class, they all gave her a cold glance and looked away again. None of them asked if the unconscious girl was okay. One girl gave Angel a friendly nod and that was the extent of the greeting. An instant reminder of Cherry's extraordinary unpopularity. Even in this state, nobody cared about her. Whereas everyone was pleased to see Carter, Angel was barely acknowledged for the simple fact she had Cherry in her arms. She couldn't help but wonder if things would have been different had they heard Arkane's comments about her. It had been typical of Cherry's luck, however, that those students who *had* heard it were due to leave the academy anyway. Shrugging it off, she carried Cherry towards the infirmary with a resolved look on her face. She didn't care for their scorn towards her sister. They didn't matter. She loved her and her only concern now was to help her get better.

N.U.C.A Infirmary, two days later.

(It had been an anxious time for Arkane. All though he'd not been responsible for what happened to Cherry, he couldn't help but feel guilty. Upon being brought to the infirmary, she'd been placed in a bed and left to regain consciousness. She'd been out for the count for over forty hours and Angel would have remained at her side throughout had Arkane not ordered her to go home and get some sleep. If he hadn't have done so, she'd have remained awake at Cherry's side until she made herself ill. Having given Angel the order, Arkane then sat with her all night himself.

Having managed to grab a reasonable sleep under the circumstances, as soon as Angel was awake, she'd headed back to the infirmary. It had been a good many hours since she'd seen her and all the way there she'd pleaded to the gods for Cherry to be awake and lucid. As she entered the building, she rushed to the infirmary door with trepidation. Shaking like a leaf, she pushed the door open only to be stopped by the infirmary nurse.)

NURSE: Angel. Wait.

(Angel looked to her desperately.)

ANGEL: Cherry...

(The nurse placed a hand on her shoulder.)

NURSE: Calm down. Now, listen. Cherry's awake and she's been asking for you.

(As a tear of delight run down her cheek, Angel looked to the nurse imploringly.)

ANGEL: Oh, my god, I want to see her.

NURSE: Be patient, good girl. The Ubermaster is with her. You can go in afterwards.

(Feeling like her legs might give way; Angel nodded breathlessly and struggled to take a seat. As soon as her backside hit the chair, she held her head in her hands and burst into tears. She'd feared the worst on several occasions. Telling herself it was okay to wait so long as Cherry was okay, she let her heartache flow out of her freely through her tear ducts.

Inside the infirmary's recovery room, Cherry was sitting up in bed with her hands placed nervously on her lap before her. Arkane was sitting on a chair at her bedside and she couldn't even begin to look him in the eye. Fighting his own discomfort, the Ubermaster had done most of the talking. Trying to retain a professional aura, he sat with his arms folded and leant back as he spoke.)

ARKANE: So, yes... it was an animal state.

(As Cherry winced, he continued.)

ARKANE: The psychology nurse here, she thinks you passed out through a mixture of exhaustion and neural complications. I have no idea what that means.

(Wearing a shy expression, Cherry looked to him.)

CHERRY: Um... I think I know...

ARKANE: You do?

CHERRY: Um... yeah. I remember feeling vindicated...

(She looked away from him.)

CHERRY: Like I'd achieved what I was supposed to do then I saw Angel.

(She looked nervously into his eyes.)

CHERRY: I remember feeling this overwhelming calm when I saw her. Like a fuzzy, warm feeling...

ARKANE: Like home?

CHERRY: Yeah. Then everything went all blurry.

(Arkane nodded.)

ARKANE: I see.

CHERRY: I think that's why I passed out when I did. I can't explain anything else.

ARKANE: Well like I said, trauma, animal state and all that.

(Cherry hung her head.)

CHERRY: I'm not pregnant am I?

ARKANE: No, no, don't worry about that.

CHERRY: Only you're well old. You'll die by the time the kid reaches school age.

(Arkane looked most put out.)

ARKANE: I'm 54! And in extremely good shape thank you very much.

CHERRY: Even so... please don't tell anyone.

ARKANE: Of course I won't. Since my wife turned frigid, she's been waiting for me to stray. She'd have a field day if she knew about this.

(Cherry placed an embarrassed hand on her forehead.)

ARKANE: Anyway, that's enough about that. The reason I'm here is, firstly to thank you for what you did for me and to make you an offer.

(Cherry peered through her fingers at him.)

ARKANE: I did a little investigating. The chap who keeps the records for the academy selections is a personal friend of mine. He doesn't live far away so I dashed over to see him yesterday. As you know, certain academies, including this one, select and invite students they feel have all the right ingredients for their particular establishment.

(Cherry hung her head.)

ARKANE: Well, I checked the list and it seems there was an error.

(Cherry frowned at him.)

CHERRY: I knew it!

ARKANE: Yes, well, you see the list has names in one column and the academy name in another. Your name was directly under Angel's; she was selected for here and well... you weren't. When it came to you, they must have run their finger to the

wrong column or something. You were supposed to be invited to Northgate Ladies College just down the road.

(Cherry gave him a disbelieving look.)

CHERRY: Ladies college? What's that?

ARKANE: Well, they do girly things like cooking and sewing and basically teach girls how to be fine upstanding ladies, that sort of thing.

(Cherry looked peeved.)

CHERRY: Wife training? They selected me for wife training? That's all I'm fit for?

(Arkane scratched his head nervously when much to his surprise Cherry beamed.)

CHERRY: They think I'd make a good wife? Cool.

ARKANE: Really?

CHERRY: Well, I'd rather that than be a poor one.

ARKANE: I see. Well, I can arrange a transfer for you.

(Much to his surprise, Cherry's previous enthusiasm quickly disappeared and she turned her head away.)

CHERRY: No need.

ARKANE: But... you were keen a minute ago.

(She gave him a warm smile.)

CHERRY: Sorry, sir but... people really hate me here, I'm destined to fail and I've got no friends whatsoever, but, I get to share a room with Angel.

ARKANE: I see.

CHERRY: I know that seems a bit lame, but you wouldn't understand unless you had a twin.

ARKANE: Enlighten me.

CHERRY: Well, it's like... I'm not Cherry...

ARKANE: Yes, you are!

CHERRY: No, I've always been half of Angel and Cherry, you see? Well, forty eight percent anyway.

(Allowing himself a chuckle, Arkane nodded.)

ARKANE: Maybe forty nine with your heels on.

CHERRY: Something like that. So, you see I don't want to leave here.

ARKANE: Well, I figured you say that, so how's this, you can live here in the dorms with Angel but still attend the ladies college?

(Cherry looked to him enquiringly.)

CHERRY: Is that possible?

ARKANE: Yes. I'm the Ubermaster and if I want to let you live in the dorm then you can. You don't have to live at the ladies college, it's not like all students live on campus anyway. You'll just be like all the other girls there who live outside and commute in every day.

(Cherry looked upwards and rubbed her chin thoughtfully.)

CHERRY: Can I think about it?

(Arkane nodded.)

ARKANE: Of course. I'll give you until next week. If I'm going to arrange it, I'll need to get the papers in.

CHERRY: Okay.

(With that, Arkane climbed to his feet.)

ARKANE: Anyway, I've got things to do. Once again, thanks for everything, Cherry. Don't forget, I'm forever in your debt.

CHERRY: Thanks.

(With a smile he headed for the door and pushed it open. Looking back with a smile, he then passed through it. Left on her own, Cherry sighed and hung her head. She was slowly remembering everything that happened and the last thing she wanted was to be alone to think about it.)

CHERRY: Poop.

(As the door swung open again, however, her eyes lit up. Panting excitedly, she literally bounced where she was sitting and threw her arms out.)

CHERRY: Angel!!!

(Both bursting into tears simultaneously at the sight of one another, Angel ran to Cherry's side and threw her arms around her. Squeezing each other tight, they spoke to each other with extremely high-pitched, over-excited, tearful voices.)

ANGEL: Thank god, you're okay.

CHERRY: I missed you.

ANGEL: Cherry!!!

CHERRY: Angel!!!

ANGEL: I was so scared!

CHERRY: So was I!!!

(Calming slightly, Angel stepped back and looked to her wearing a joyful smile. Returning the smile, Cherry watched as Angel took a seat and shook her head.)

ANGEL: Damn it, girl. Don't you ever frighten me like that again.

(Cherry pouted.)

CHERRY: Sorry.

ANGEL: How are you? Any headaches? You look okay, considering. Are you though? Are you okay?

(Cherry looked shamed faced to the floor.)

CHERRY: I'm okay... just embarrassed.

(Angel waved a dismissive hand at her.)

ANGEL: You've got nothing to be ashamed about!

CHERRY: Angel, I went mad and raped the Ubermaster!

(Angel nodded.)

ANGEL: That's true. Slut!

(As Cherry looked up at her sister with a hurt look on her face, she noticed Angel's cheeky grin and chuckled to herself.)

CHERRY: Oh, stop.

(Giving each other a warm smile, Cherry shrugged.)

CHERRY: So, I guess everyone really hates me now, huh?

ANGEL: What do you mean?

CHERRY: When I came to, the nurse told me everyone had been kept back until this morning, just in case. I bet they all blame me.

(Angel scoffed.)

ANGEL: They got held back because the academy wasn't sure whether the attack on Arkane was aimed at the academy. Just to be on the safe side, they kept everyone back, nobody's blaming you.

(She chuckled out loud.)

ANGEL: Besides, they daren't blame *you*.

(Confused by her laughter, Cherry scratched her head.)

CHERRY: Daren't?

ANGEL: Yeah. Did you hear about the fourth graders who went to retrieve Arkane?

(Cherry hung her head.)

CHERRY: The nurse mentioned something about it.

ANGEL: Well, they all came back with tales about how you went mad and butchered the leader of a violent gang with a sword.

(Cherry gave her an astonished look.)

ANGEL: Everyone's talking about it.

CHERRY: Oh, crap. I'm gonna be the laughing stock... even more than I already was!

ANGEL: Hardly. They're all crapping themselves!

CHERRY: What?

ANGEL: Especially Flora!

CHERRY: Why? I don't get it.

ANGEL: They all think you're a psycho. Everyone who was ever mean to you is scared you'll come for them.

(Cherry was speechless.)

ANGEL: I may have stirred it up with Flora, though. I told her that you were mumbling all the way back, saying "Must kill Flora".

(As Angel giggled, Cherry gave a stunted laugh and stared into space.)

CHERRY: Wow. I guess they won't be picking on me anymore then.

ANGEL: Not if they have any sense, they won't.

CHERRY: Nobody's going to speak to me are they? Not that they do anyway.

ANGEL: Does it bother you?

(Cherry shrugged.)

CHERRY: No... I suppose it's better this way. I mean I'd rather *they* were scared of *me* than me being scared of them. And I guess I won't get bullied ever again.

ANGEL: Exactly.

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: People are going to see me and run aren't they?

ANGEL: Well...

CHERRY: I mean, when I walk down a corridor they'll press themselves against the wall. Nobody will go near me.

ANGEL: Actually...

(Cherry gave her an enquiring glance.)

ANGEL: You might find it's quite the opposite with a lot of the boys. Whether they think you're a psycho or not, I have a feeling you might be getting a lot of male attention in the future.

CHERRY: What? Why?

ANGEL: That guy, Hex.

(Cherry snarled.)

CHERRY: That bastard?

ANGEL: He kind of told everyone what you did apparently. That's gone round the academy too.

(Cherry looked horrified.)

CHERRY: What I did?

ANGEL: You had sex with him!

(Cherry's shoulders sunk.)

CHERRY: Holy crap! That went round the school?

ANGEL: Yeah, but that's not the point. He told everyone you give the "worlds most phenomenal blow job".

(Cherry thrust her hands over her face.)

CHERRY: Oh, what???

ANGEL: I've already heard several third graders saying stuff like...

(She faked a man's voice.)

ANGEL: I've gotta get me one of those.

(Holding her head in her hands, Cherry shook from side to side.)

CHERRY: No, no, no...

(Angel then glanced away uneasily.)

ANGEL: Um... it was only those two wasn't it?

CHERRY: What?

ANGEL: Hex and the Ubermaster. You didn't have sex with anyone else did you?

(Cherry frowned.)

CHERRY: No! Give me some credit!

(She then shuddered and dropped her head into her hands.)

CHERRY: Oh my god, Hamler stuck his willy up my bum, that doesn't count does it?

(Angel shuddered in her behalf.)

ANGEL: Gross. No, no it doesn't.

(She bit her lips then repeated her earlier question.)

ANGEL: That was it though, right? No other sexual encounters you want to tell me about?

(Cherry looked miffed.)

CHERRY: No!!!

(She then looked to the ceiling and sighed.)

CHERRY: Though I seem to remember seeing a lot of willies!

(She counted on her fingers.)

CHERRY: The guy on the ferry showed me his, there was the guy at the brothel...

(She sunk down into the bed.)

CHERRY: Angel, I've had a horrible time with men. Using me, sticking things up my bum, rubbing their faces on my arse... it's been horrible.

(As she looked nervously to Angel, she was a little disturbed by her stunned expression.)

CHERRY: Um... Angel, you okay?

ANGEL: Did you say brothel?

(Cherry winced.)

CHERRY: Um... yeah, we've got a lot to talk about, sis.

(Nodding in agreement, Angel quickly pulled a hairbrush from her bag.)

ANGEL: Indeed we have.

(As Cherry sat forward, Angel stood up to brush her hair for her.)

ANGEL: Right, now get talking.

(Cherry sighed.)

CHERRY: Okay, I guess it all started...

(She winced.)

CHERRY: Careful.

ANGEL: Sorry, it needs washing really.

CHERRY: Yeah I know. Anyway, it all started when I left the dorm to go to the formal...

(As they always had done, ever since they were old enough to talk, Cherry and Angel told each other everything. Every little disaster, every feeling. From the beatings to losing her innocence, Cherry left no stone unturned. Angel in turn, told Cherry every detail of her experiences from everything Carter had said to the fact they were now seeing each other. As he peered through the door, Arkane smiled. The sight of Angel brushing Cherry's hair while they held their animated, high speed conversation came as a true relief to him. All his doubts were washed away. Just by looking at them he

could tell this was their way. She'd been to hell and back but Cherry was safe, she was home and she was happy.

There was a popular, common phrase in Araminta that stated "every new experience gained is another lesson learned". At this moment in time, neither Angel nor Cherry could apply that statement to what they'd been through. They'd learned nothing new. All their suffering had done was confirm what they already knew. They loved each other with a unique bond that only twins can understand. Where was the revelation? Where was the breakthrough? What happened to the ground breaking epiphany? In time, they would come to understand but for now the only difference between before and after the events they could see, was a slight alteration in people's false perception of Cherry.

There was one positive to come from their nightmare. Cherry would never be picked on again. Rather than choosing to view her as an idiot they now chose to view her as a unexploded bomb. It was far easier to accept being avoided than it was to accept being bullied. In the absence of any great revelation, Cherry was more than a little satisfied with this outcome. She may not have gained any great wisdom, but at least now she was free to live her life without fear.

A few short hours after Angel and Cherry were reunited, Cherry was released from the infirmary. Having stayed behind for Angel's sake, Carter came to the infirmary to help her get Cherry back to their dorm. Unlike Cherry and Angel, he very quickly learnt something new. Dating a twin would be hard work. As soon as he'd arrived and offered to help, they'd loaded him up like a camel with all Cherry's belongings and walked back to the dorm arm in arm, leaving him behind. They then moaned that he walked too slow. At this point he realised he'd always come second in Angel's affections. Satisfied Angel was worth it, he smiled to himself and decided to accept whatever happened. It turned out to be a wise move. Shortly after getting back to the dorm, Cherry sat herself at the vanity mirror and reached for her make-up bag. Wearing a knowing smile, she told her sister she might take a while and suggested she might like to find something else to do for half an hour. She cited going back to Carter's room as an example. Needing no second invitation, Angel kissed her sister on the cheek and they left the room. Left alone, seated there before the mirror, Cherry felt a warm glow inside her. She was back at the academy where she longed to be and the one thing that had previously blighted her existence there, the bullying, was to become a thing of the past. For the first time in a long while, she felt secure about her life and her future. It was a beautiful, soothing feeling. Allowing herself a deep, relaxing breath, she looked into the mirror and her regulation cheeky grin appeared on her face. She was herself again. That smile that had taken so many, so long to wipe from her face was back where it belonged.

OUTCAST

THE CHERRY WROXFORD STORY

THE END

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