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Chasing Freedom: A Novel Excerpt

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Chasing Freedom

A Novel Excerpt

—

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Dallas Funk

—

December 2014


THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 19, 2014


We hereby recommend that the thesis of Dallas Funk entitled *Chasing Freedom* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.


Elizabeth Hand

Advisor (signature)


Michael Kimball

Reader (signature)


Justin Tussing

Interim Director (signature)

Accepted


Manuel Avalos (signature) Dean, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

ABSTRACT

Chasing Freedom is a young adult novel set in a future Savannah, Georgia where children can be genetically engineered in a rainbow of colors to their parents' specifications and scientific logic informs every aspect of society. It is grounded in classic noir elements: the main character, Rune, is a combination femme fatale and amateur sleuth and is helped by her best friend and loyal sidekick, Kai, and a hard-bitten rookie cop named Darrius. Together they are searching for a missing teenager named Hope, who is a Bio like Rune and Kai. Through Hope's perspective, the reader will learn that Hope has been kidnapped by a woman who is collecting people based on physical attributes that she admires.

Chasing Freedom is an exploration of the search for freedom--freedom from family, freedom from society, and even freedom from one's own preconceived notions of self--as well as a commentary on the human need to be emotionally tied to other people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without inspiration and support from a great many people:

First, I would like to thank the many educators who have helped to shape my mind, starting with Mrs. Hosie, my second grade teacher, and Mrs. Masters, my high school English teacher. Without them, I would never have delved into the world of writing and would not have believed that being an author was an acceptable life goal. I am also indebted to the workshop leaders and mentors that I have had while in the Stonecoast MFA program: Sarah Braunstein, Theodora Goss, Aaron Hamburger, Elizabeth Hand, Nancy Holder, Cait Johnson, James Patrick Kelly, Michael Kimball, and Elizabeth Searle. There is no doubt that without them, this thesis would be incomplete and as unpolished as rusty metal. They are a brilliant set of writers and educators and I am honored to have had the chance to work with every one of them.

Secondly, I want to thank my friends, especially Rachel Jacobs, Sarah Miller, Elizabeth Ashe, Suzan Joy, Fiona Lehn, and Shawna Borman. Without their help and encouragement, I would not have had the confidence and faith to apply to graduate school or complete my thesis.

Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my family. To my three grandmothers, my step-mother, and all the other women in my life: thank you for showing me how to be a strong and determined mother and woman. To my mother, who taught me to love books and told me that I could be anything I wanted to be, to my father, who taught me the rhythms of storytelling with every anecdote shared at the dinner table, and to my step-father, who taught me that chasing your dreams is always worth the effort: without the three of you, I would not be the person I am. To my little brother, who is not so little anymore, thank you for all the times you have held my hand, literally and metaphorically. You have lent a listening ear in good times and in bad, and helped me to believe not only that I could write, but that I could write well. And to my husband and children, thank you for putting up with my doubts, my insecurities, and my panic attacks, but most of all, thank you for believing in me. I am a better person and a better writer because I have you in my life. Never forget that every word I write is a testament to the love you have given me and the love I feel for you.

Table of Contents

Preface	1
Text of Creative Thesis	26
Bibliography	143

“What great thing would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?”

~Robert H. Schuller

I was six years old and knew exactly what I wanted. I pushed through the large door, the curve of the metal handle four times as big as my palm and cool to the touch. My heart sped up, adrenaline flooding my system as I stopped and surveyed my second home. My sanctuary. Christmas and carnivals and candy: the three c's had nothing on it.

Enclosed by four towering walls and separated from me by one hundred and three footsteps worth of creaking, uneven wooden floor covered in time-ravaged berber carpet. The smell of age--of dust and paper and the slightest hint of vanilla--surrounded me.

The smell of books surrounded me.

I walked past towering shelves of library books, struggling to keep my feet to an appropriate, inside pace when all I wanted to do was run to the children's area in the back. It was separated from the rest of the library by a short, half wall that I was just recently tall enough to see over. When I stepped behind that barrier, countless worlds would open up to me, and the world of reality, of adults, would fall away.

My first stop, though, would be the same as always: straight to the back, one third of the way over from the left wall, in the middle of the second shelf, found under “JFic Gob”. Between the covers of this book, I would travel with an Native American girl as she tied her life to that of a wild stallion's and, ultimately, would be turned into a horse by the love she had for him.

The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses by Paul Goble not only heavily features horses--a favorite animal from the moment I first laid eyes on them--but showed a pretty young woman--apart from but respected by her people--being carried away and transformed by her dreams. It ignited in me a desire to find my place in the world, a place so fully mine that I would be irrevocably altered by the formation and pursuit of this target. What it would be, I had no clue, but I did know that if I read *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* enough times, it would help me on my way.

“The printing press is the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern commander.”

~T.E. Lawrence

I was eight years old and in awe of Mrs. Hosie, my second grade teacher. She had a loft in her classroom, and it caught my imagination even before I knew what its purpose was. Made of simple lumber, the same as any dorm room loft I would eventually see by the dozens when I went to college, it was approximately four feet tall, piled thick with large square pillows above and below, gauzy curtain on one side and two bookshelves and a wall to complete the cave-like effect underneath. It was exotic and homey all at the same time. The perfect clubhouse for D.E.A.R. time.

Drop Everything And Read time. Heaven on earth.

I had never loved reading--or school--more than I did in her classroom. Everything that came before it paled by comparison, and everything that came after it had high standards to live up to. Few teachers managed the feat.

Once a week the class would file down to the library, as close to silent as a second grade class can be, whispers and giggles bouncing off the brick walls, shoes sticking and squeaking on the tan linoleum as I followed my own version of the yellow brick road to my personal Oz.

When we got there, we would step down three steps to a room lined with bookshelves three books high. We were given a paint stick as a place holder and then unleashed to explore the countless worlds that were now at our fingertips. Most kids would bounce around aimlessly, still chattering away about whatever was the conversation of the moment. I, however, would walk the edges of the room, fingertips trailing over the spines of the books until one caught my eye. I would pull it from the shelf, place the paint stick in its place, sit down on the floor, open the cover--smiling at the crinkle and rattle of the cover protector--and read the book. If I had time to finish it, I would replace it and find another book, repeating the process until library time was over. Whatever book I had when it was time to check out was the book that went with me back to the D.E.A.R. loft and later home. It was almost as good as D.E.A.R. time.

The real life-changer, however, was when Mrs. Hosie had us write our own books--and then "published" them for us. Mrs. Hosie Press was a simple press, producing only one copy of each student's book, but it was enchanting. I remember standing next to her shoulder at the front of the classroom, the keys of the keyboard clacking as I read my story to her. When we were finished, she printed it, the classroom filling with the sound. After ripping the edges off of the paper, Mrs. Hosie would place the "book" into a fabric-wrapped, cardboard cover, complete with our picture and an "about the author" paragraph

on the back flap. Illustrations were the purview of the author. Even though it has been twenty-five years, I still get a swelling of pride and a renewal of creative energy every time I crack open my first book.

I left Mrs. Hosie's classroom half-way through the school year when my mother's job necessitated moving thirty minutes away, but what I got from her that first semester was planted deep in the soil of my soul. No matter where we moved or what friends moved away from me, the friends I met while reading and writing were always with me.

My mother taking me to the library, Mrs. Hosie giving me my first publication; these two women built the core of who I am and gave me the tools to cope with everything I have face in my life. Of course, I didn't know that at the time, and it would take many years and many changes before I would realize what was growing inside of me.

"If you wish to be a writer, write."

~Epictetus

The best part of school was always reading and writing. When other kids were groaning about a reading assignment, I was eagerly racing through the opening chapter. When kids were changing fonts and margins to make a paper long enough to fit minimum page requirements, I was doing the same to come in under the maximum page limit. Still, it wasn't until high school that I was bit by the desire to be an author. To write grand,

novel-length stories for other people to read. To see my words and my name in print and take my place on library shelves across the country.

It was my first day of high school and my English teacher, Mrs. Masters, had just given us the most creatively freeing writing assignment I have ever gotten: writing one page a week of anything we wanted. Anything we wanted, even if it was the list of ingredients on a can of soda. I decided to write a novel inspired by the Christian Reese Lassen artwork on the cover of my notebook.

My parents, best friend, Mrs. Masters, and even the student teacher were all very supportive of my new endeavor. They encouraged me, left comments in my journal indicating an eagerness to see what happened next, and helped me explore the possibilities of writing as a future. A new dream had been born and they did everything they could to encourage it and see it flourish.

For the next five years, I spent every spare moment writing. I worked on my novel in my journal, wrote poetry in my head while mowing the lawn, and lived for English class. I also discovered, joined, and devoted myself to the world of Dragon Rider of Pern role-playing clubs (based on the series by Anne McCaffrey). I wrote pages long character histories, developed intricate story lines that stretched years into the future, and never had a problem meeting activity requirements. Between school and Pern fandom, I was in a writing heaven that carried me through high school and my freshman year of college and a second novel attempt.

The summer after my freshman year, however, I stayed on campus to work at the library. I fell in love and discovered that there were more ways to find heaven than just

falling into a writing induced haze. My participation in fandom dropped off and a lot of my writing energy was siphoned off and applied toward creating elaborate back-stories to my characters, and live-role-playing with my friends in late night sessions of Dungeons and Dragons.

By the time I graduated college, I was quite happily married, but writing was firmly on the back burner, an after thought that I turned to only when I was alone, which was rare. I had taken all of the English classes that would fit in my class schedule--including Writing Fiction and Writing Poetry--but I had given up writing as a career in search of more steady options with advancement potential.

I continued to work on the novel I started in college and, in one brief flare of dream-chasing, even quit my job once so that I could spend more time working on it, but slowly came to realize something was missing from the book. I shelved writing more firmly and turned my attention towards building a future for the family my husband and I were hoping to have. I took a job at the local schools as a literacy associate. I loved the job and was good at it.

Before I knew it, we were living in Michigan, owners of two small businesses, parents to an eighteen month old, and five months pregnant with our second child. I hadn't even thought of writing in so long I had forgotten it was a part of me. Although I didn't know it at the time, the stage had been set for one of the most important lessons of my writing--and personal--life.

“Promise me you’ll always remember: You’re braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

~A. A. Milne

In June of 2009, while traveling the midwest on our first family vacation, we learned that the company our investment club had been working with had stolen the club’s money. My husband’s inheritance and the money we had been living on was gone. Due to the way we had budgeted our trip, we weren’t even sure we were going to have enough gas money to get back home.

My husband and I loaded our son into his stroller so we could pace the hotel parking lot and discuss our options. The sun was hot and the air was humid, a typical day for an Iowa summer, but not the reasons I was having trouble breathing. My hand rested on my stomach, and I marveled at the relatively new movements of our unborn child even as I worried how we were going to keep our children safe. The charmed life we had been living was over. The world we had built crumbled around us.

We managed to make it home, but things only got worse. Outside forces caused us to close one of our businesses, we almost had our daughter in our car, we spent a night in the middle of the winter with no heat because our application for aid had been processed incorrectly, our car’s transmission broke down while on the job for our photography business, and the first person who hired my husband ended up not paying him the agreed upon amount and forged papers to “prove” otherwise when we filed a complaint. We eventually lost our house and had to move back to Iowa to live in a house my dad owned.

While living there, my husband had three jobs, my 10-month old daughter required a trip to the emergency room for stitches, and I became depressed enough that I began to understand why people choose to commit suicide. The only thing that saved me was my children.

After several months of being back in Iowa, my daughter's blood tested high for lead. We had to move again and in a hurry. We managed to find an apartment close to the highest paying job my husband had, and they agreed to give him more hours, but it wasn't a pet-friendly apartment. We were forced to re-home our cat with friends and surrender our two dogs to a rescue organization.

The day they came to pick Mork and Griffin up is one of those snapshot days, frozen clearly in my memory, light and sounds and emotions as strong as the day it happened.

It was winter, the ground frozen and covered in brown grass that crackled under our feet and air cold enough to burn the lungs even as it filled them with oxygen. I gathered up all of our pet supplies--treats, grooming items, food, bedding, and kennels--my movements stiff and my heart pounding painfully in my chest.

When Mork and Griffin's new foster parent showed up in her dusty blue station wagon, my throat was so tight that swallowing hurt. I relied on my husband to do the talking. The woman was nice, but she was here to take away the first dog that was mine--Mork, who had lived with me for ten years--and the first *anything* that had been *ours*, my husbands and mine--Griffin, our first "child" together.

The hatch back closed with finality, a sound that echoes through my heart even now, as I write this, after almost five years have passed. I went inside, practically running up the stairs that normally terrified me, my family temporarily fading from my world. That night, my world was made of pain, all of the loss from the previous year let loose from my heart as my dogs were driven away, the miles stacking up between us as I cried myself to sleep.

Not long after that, we were in another new apartment in another new town. My husband was in a good job, with crazy hours but a full-time schedule and the benefits that go with it. Over the next eighteen months, he got promoted multiple times, we made friends and established a small support network, and I sold several children's books to a few small, regional projects. Life seemed to be heading in the right direction. We finally felt settled enough to invite outlying family--family we hadn't seen in years--to come visit us.

When one of our relatives took us up on the offer, we couldn't have been more excited. We scoured the house, reorganized all of our belongings, and made sure processes were in place to make the visit smooth and fun. The first day or two went well, but it wasn't long until our visitor became sick, suffering from a debilitating migraine and the accompanying dizziness, nausea, and vomiting. After a week of long work hours, my husband finally got some time to spend at home.

With his presence at home, things finally came to a head. The relative had become sick due to worry over the way we were raising our children and offered to take them off our hands indefinitely, until we were better equipped to raise them ourselves. Worries that

were raised were exaggerated and, in most cases, completely unfounded and unreasonable. A fight ensued and my hard-won stability crumbled, revealing itself for the delicate organism it had been.

A few weeks later, I injured my lower back and was barely able to move for several days. If I hadn't had friends already in place and able to help me, I don't know how I wouldn't have gotten through this physically and emotionally black summer. After months of medicine, pain, and diligent, four-times-a-day stretching, I had to admit that the damage was not temporary. Getting my doctor's to agree with me, however, took much longer.

It wasn't until almost a year later, after my husband got another promotion, we moved to yet another new town, and a trailer full of pictures, heirlooms, and other important belongings was stolen, that I finally got a doctor who would listen to me, and I finally got a diagnosis: fibromyalgia. The pain, exhaustion, stiffness, and mental foggy was no longer a mystery. I had a name and with it came a plan of action. My family was once more on an upward trajectory.

Several months into my regiment of pain killers, anti-depressants, and exercise, however, found me still struggling with memory and verbal foggy. I couldn't remember what I had done thirty minutes ago, let alone figure out what words I needed in order to express myself. A fibromyalgia support group on Facebook led me to believe that things were not likely to get better with time. I panicked that I would lose my ability to write and worried about the message I was sending to my children by allowing my dream to die in a very real way. At the same time, our financial situation left me feeling guilty

that I wasn't working, yet terrified at the thought of the pain I would face if I went to work in a traditional setting.

In August of 2012, I decided to conquer both fears with one solution: I would go back to school and get an MFA in Creative Writing, turning my passion into a viable career option. I dusted off my pencil, dug through my old writing samples, and--with the help of an old college friend who had already gone on to receive an MFA--polished up a writing portfolio, complete with the first appearance of Rune, the main character of *Chasing Freedom*. I applied to three different writing programs and, within about six weeks, had been accepted to all three of them, including my top choice: the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast program.

The world had beaten me black and blue emotionally, I was more exhausted than I had ever been before, but I was ready to take back control of my life and face the challenge of graduate school. Two years of dedicating my life to writing stretched before me and, for once, I wasn't disappointed.

"In the depths of winter, I discovered there was in me an invincible summer."

~Albert Camus

While a great deal happened in my life during the next two years--including multiple moves, multiple hospital stays for family members, missed and canceled airplane flights, and a great many fibromyalgia flare-ups and battles with migraines--the biggest impact on my writing came, logically enough, from my Stonecoast experiences.

From the moment I walked into the Harraseeket Inn and the Stone House and began my tenure as as Stonecoast student, I felt at home: acceptance, belonging, and a part of something that was bigger than the sum of its parts. To a person who has lived in twenty-seven different houses, a home is a rare and precious thing and it is something I have never felt as strongly as when I was cradled within the arms of the Stonecoast community.

During my first residency in January 2013, I was privileged enough to work with James Patrick Kelly and Theodora Goss. I took the first thirty-six pages of the very first draft of Rune's story, eighteen pages for each workshop. Jim Kelly taught me, in no uncertain terms, that this was a place where the mentors were whole-heartedly, enthusiastically committed to making every line, of every story, of every student, the best that it could be. My opinions and writing were respected and I was surrounded by people who loved books of all types just as much as I did. Dora was quiet and understated, especially after four days spent with Jim, but she taught me that there was a depth to my writing that I hadn't known existed. Between the two of them, I found the courage to step outside my comfort zone, set aside Rune for a semester, and left the residency with Sarah Braunstein as my mentor, my long-distance, day-to-day guide through the crazy world of writing.

Sarah Braunstein may seem like an odd choice for a first semester, pop fiction specialist given Sarah's literary fiction leanings, but we had several chances to talk during the residency and there was an instant click between her philosophies on writing and an idea that had been tickling the back of my brain for several weeks. We built a reading list

that stretched my boundaries outside of the science fiction and fantasy genres that are my bread and butter and dove headfirst into *Bootiful*.

Bootiful is an exploration of the women in my family, as seen through the lens of my daughter's unborn soul as she researches potential parents and, eventually, chooses where to be born. All characters are fictionalized, and events are added or tweaked for the purpose of creating a story arc, but they are strongly based in and influenced by reality. With Sarah's guidance, I explored point of view, short stories, and dialogue, as well as close readings of Lovecraft, Carver, and Jennifer Egan's *Goon Squad*. It was a semester of adventure, testing, and rich investigation, and, more than anything else, I discovered the precision and intent that a writer puts into every word.

After a long, exhilarating, exhausting first semester of writing, I discovered the second gift of the Stonecoast program: residency is a place where students can come year after year to recharge their batteries, soak in the inspiration, and become that most elusive of things: a dream catcher. For that is what residency does: it takes timid, uncertain, aspiring dreamers--students who want to write--and gives them a place to ripen into a person who not only can write, but *does* write.

Sure, a writer can write just about anywhere, with just about anything. But writing *well* requires more than just a place to sit and a method to record your thoughts. Writing requires everything of its practitioner: heart and soul, sweat and tears. Writing requires you to sink into the world you are creating, vanishing into your writing so thoroughly that your heart begins to beat in unison with your characters, their reality becoming your reality, if only for a few hours.

Despite this gift, this energizing quality, of the Stonecoast program, my second residency, in July of 2013, was much harder for me. The day I left to take my children to my mother's for the duration of the residency, I broke my right foot. Without even taking the time to visit the doctor, I drove the 18 hours to my mother's house, using cruise control as much as possible. In a hotel we stayed at on the way there, my daughter fell off of her hotel bed, receiving a minor concussion. The last five hours of the trip were spent cleaning up her vomit and trying to keep her from getting car sick again.

Once at my mother's, my son decided it would be fun to try crossing a pool that was deeper than he was tall. I leapt into the pool, fully clothed, broken foot making me awkward, and rushed to his side. He turned out fine, but there was a moment where he paused in his struggles. A moment where he just hung there in the water. My heart skipped a beat and my breath caught painfully in my throat. Was my dream going to cost me my son? Was I about to watch my son die in front of me because I had decided I should go back to school? Was I on the wrong path?

Hugging my son to my chest, I knew I couldn't give up. The fact that I had so easily imagined the worst case scenario simply showed I was good at my job. What does a writer do if not throw their characters into the worst possible situations--and then make them worse? Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being tested. Writers are never short of nay-sayers, but I was being asked to show my commitment. I was determined to prove it beyond a doubt.

Not long after arriving at the residency, I became covered in more than 100 bug bites on my calves. I am still not sure where they came from, I just know that I went to

sleep for a nap in the cabin I was renting, and by the time I was heading to the evening's activities, my legs itched incessantly. Due to my fibromyalgia, I happened to have multiple ice packs along and began rotating them from my shoulders--which were cramping from fibromyalgia pain--and my ankles--which were swollen from the bug bites. Between the foot, the itching, and the hottest-week-of-the-year-heat, my second residency took an effort and a stubbornness that had not been required in January.

Thankfully, I once more had wonderful workshop leaders to keep me interested and energized. Michael Kimball led my first workshop of the summer residency. He shared a wealth of knowledge about plot structure and the duty of a writer to "walk through the fire" with the characters and readers. I took a short-story-turned-new-novel to his workshop and applied newly acquired knowledge of the three act structure and turning points to plan out a rough outline and a new opening scene. It was energizing and informative, and left me eager to work on Charlie and Erella's story in *The Celestial Mirror*.

My next workshop was a novel writing workshop, led by Elizabeth Hand and Aaron Hamburger, and once again focusing on Rune's story. It was the first time I had taken a specialty workshop and I was excited to be exposed to the work of multiple genre's, both in the leadership and the other students. We had reading assignments, short writing exercises, and, due to the smaller size of our workshop, were able to give a thorough look at each workshop piece. I was able to see how the other students approached their own novels, and learned a lot about characterization. I firmly believe

that if it hadn't been for this workshop and the skills I gained, I would have grown bored with Rune and my thesis would be entirely different.

Despite my broken foot, the Stone House gave me what I needed to “hit the ground running” for my second semester. The stone facade, stained glass, and warm wood; the porches, fireplaces, and chandeliers; the rocky pathways, harbor views, and remote location all combined to allow me to sink into my works-in-progress, living and breathing my creations. I left with a brain humming with the creative electricity that had passed from one student to another. I had been tested, yes, but with effort and determination, I had passed.

I focused my attention on Rune's story--then titled *The Guardians* and featuring a goddess named Asatera, magical powers and sidekicks for Kai and Rune, and an older cast--with Mike as my mentor. I went through many, many versions (at least seven) of the first fifty or sixty pages of the novel, tweaking point of view, pacing, and character development. My annotations focused on world-building, structure, and pacing. After five months of working with Mike, I headed into my third residency with a great deal more knowledge and, most importantly, a larger degree of confidence that the book Rune needed was a book that I could write.

My third residency was easily one of the best and one of the worst. In January 2014, the week before I left for residency, my family was in a car accident. Everyone walked away from it, but our car was totaled. I bruised my left foot and shin deeply enough that they still throb and ache a year later, and popped a rib out of place. I was stressed and once again suffering from a lowered ability to move.

When I finally headed towards Maine, my plane from Newark to Portland was cancelled due to weather. I was stuck at the airport for at least two days and would miss half of my first workshop. Lady Luck gave me a slight nod, however, and stranded another Stonecoast student at Newark with me. Between the two of us, we managed to figure out a way to get to the Harraseeket Inn that night: we rented a car, tracked down our luggage, and drove the eight hours from Newark to our residency. It was dark, the weather was less than perfect, and we were late and tired, but we made it.

I had a few days of peace before my husband called to tell me that my daughter was sick, with a swollen hand, and was in the emergency room. Over the remainder of the residency, she ended up being transferred to a Children's Hospital, was assigned multiple teams of doctors, had an allergic reaction to the first two antibiotics they put her on, and never received a definitive diagnosis. In the midst of all this, my husband received the promotion we had been hoping for--but we were given only 17 days between his promotion and his new start date. I had another seven that I was spending in Maine before I would get home. That left us a mysteriously sick daughter and ten days to find a new home and a new school for our children. Needless to say, my head was spinning and I wasn't sure how I was going to survive my still-undecided third semester project.

This had quickly turned into the hardest month of "real life" intrusions into my Stonecoast experience. The workshops at my third residency, however, become some of the most inspiring. My first one was a special dialogue intensive with Michael Kimball and Tony Pisculli, a graduating student who acted as the director for our workshop. One of the best --and most revealing--parts of this workshop was the inclusion of a group of

actors. They would read our scene, the director would discuss the scene with the actors and provide some suggestions on how to read it differently, the actors would read it one more time, and then the workshop students would discuss the scenes in typical workshop manner. We then had a chance to rewrite the scenes and have them performed one more time on the last day of workshop.

I submitted dialogue from two scenes of *The Guardians*. The suggestions of everyone involved led me to discover who Rune and Kai really were, allowing me to see their actions and tell their story, cutting all the extra “getting to know you” scenes that slowed the novel down. These four days simultaneously changed the course of Rune’s life and reaffirmed my dreams of being a writer. Before this workshop, I had never had the opportunity to hear my words spoken by someone else, nor had the opportunity to see and hear my audience’s response. The power of words is incredible, and for the first time, I realized that I had command of that power. My words could paint pictures and elicit emotions. Publishing may still be somewhere in my future, but I have known from the last day of this workshop that I am already a writer, regardless of my publishing status.

The second workshop in January of 2014 was with one of the writers I was most hoping to work with when I applied to Stonecoast: Nancy Holder. She writes the sort of books I want to write and has books that tie-in with a large number of my favorite shows. My experiences with her during the first two residencies proved she was upbeat, encouraging, and--most importantly to me--has done writing and motherhood at the same time. I was eager to work with her.

She did not let me down. She happily shared her experiences as a writer--including what it is like to work with tie-ins and co-authors--and also managed to give a three minute lecture on the structure of a short story, an area I tend to struggle with. Surprisingly, however, the most impressive part of working with Nancy was not what I learned, but the camaraderie she established between workshop members. She accomplished it almost immediately, allowing us to feel more confident and secure in our opinions and our stories. I went deeper and received more comprehensive feedback on my writing during this workshop than in any other.

Both of my previous residencies had provided me with a gift and this one was no different. At a time when I was lost and overwhelmed, Nancy's workshop--and the rest of the Stonecoast community--lifted me up, letting me know that they would help in any way they could and reaffirming my choice to stay: many people checked up on the status of my daughter on a daily basis and just as many people let me know they were impressed with my commitment to stay at Stonecoast.

When the Stonecoast community gathers together, our surroundings become our house of worship: we gather together, share our woes, and lift each other to greater heights. We sing poetry, praise prose, and believe in the sanctity of creation. When the Stonecoast community gathers together, it is something rare and special. It is a gift made of the unique combination of people coming together in a shared goal. It is a gift of family.

With this family solidly behind me, I went back to Iowa to wrap my arms around my baby girl, who had been discharged from the hospital but was still recovering. With

only one night to rest, we climbed into our rental car to drive across the state and find a new place to live. Things were crazy, but I refused to make liars of my Stonecoast family and trusted my newest mentor, the seemingly unflappable Elizabeth Searle, to get me through my third semester project.

After meeting with her and discussing the difficulties in my family life, we settled on a craft paper that I eventually titled “Planting the Seeds of Love for Non-Traditional Characters: Techniques to Make Sympathy Take Root and Blossom into a Long-Term Relationship”. Throughout the semester, I looked at some of my favorite characters (Phedre from *Kushiel’s Dart* by Jacqueline Carey, Styxx from the Dark Hunter series by Sherrilyn Kenyon, and Sherlock Holmes from both literary and film sources). All of these characters have traits that make them unlikeable or place them outside societal norms. I examined them, looking for when I “fell in love” with them and what techniques the authors used to make me fall in love.

It was a new way to look at reading. Prior to this, I read books for the simple love of reading or to look at a predetermined aspect of writing (such as characterization or world-building). Never before had I had a question in mind before reading without knowing where I would find the answer. I had done research previously, but I had always been guided by my professors or the researchers who had come before me. For the first time, I created my own questions and found my own answers. I was no longer someone who simply reads and writes for fun, I was a scholar. I was a student working on a master’s degree and I no longer believed it was silly to think of myself as approaching a master’s level with regards to my craft.

This is not to say that I no longer felt I had anything to learn. To the contrary, the more I learn about writing, the more I realize I haven't even scratched the surface of this great craft. It did mean, however, that I didn't feel like a fraud as I headed into my fourth and final residency as a student. I no longer felt like a little kid playing dress-up. I was a writer and a scholar and a person who could contribute to the community I was a part of.

This newly defined sense of self did not, unfortunately, protect me from whatever bad luck demon has been hounding me through each of my residencies: once again, in July of 2014, my plane was delayed--this time due to technological failure. My plane was almost an hour late taking off from North Carolina and heading to Portland. I was lucky enough not to have any more layovers or connections to make, but I once more found myself late to the opening ceremonies. My husband, who had come from Iowa earlier in the day and already checked into our lodgings, met me at the airport with food and a full tank of gas, whisking me off to the evening activities at the Brunswick Hotel and Tavern.

The theme of building my confidence, which began with the successful completion of my third semester project, continued throughout this fourth and final residency. Walking into the reading, I felt comfortable, knowing I had come home and my "family" was once more surrounding me. I was greeted with hugs and smiles and people who genuinely cared about how I was doing, people who were eager to meet my husband and add a face to the name for one of my family members. With him at my side, acting as chef and chauffeur for me, I was determined to make this the easiest, least stressful residency of my tenure as a Stonecoast student.

My first workshop was a world-building workshop led by Elizabeth Hand and Cait Johnson. Though they did not know my goal, they provided the perfect backdrop for an easygoing experience. Every day, they led the workshop in exercises focuses on one aspect of world-building, looking at everything from creating mood to exploring our senses. We also had in-class and nightly writing assignments, as well as the typical workshop critiques of each other's writing.

I submitted the first eighteen pages of Rune's story. With every exercise we were given, I looked for a way to stretch and deepen my understanding of Rune, her friends, and her world. For the first time, the comments given to me by other students were pointing out small weaknesses rather than gaping holes. I discovered what was working, what was being misinterpreted, and what needed to be strengthened. A fellow fourth semester student, who had previously seen multiple renditions of Rune, let me know that she had loved Rune since she first read about her, still loved Rune in her current incarnation, and hoped that I would stick with her for my thesis. Without her words, the words of encouragement from Liz and Cait, and the wonderful pictures I had created while in the world building workshop, I know I would have pushed Rune to a dusty corner in my mind. I had already picked out the story I was going to replace Rune with. Thankfully, I had several people tell me during that workshop--students and professors, in and out of the classroom--that I had the skills, I had the knowledge, I just needed to believe in myself. As I headed into my second workshop, I was even beginning to believe them.

Jim Kelly, the first person I had spoken to at Stonecoast, the first person I had a workshop with, was also the leader of my last Stonecoast workshop. It was the perfect bookend to my residency experience and one I was greatly looking forward to; nothing compares to the belief that Jim has for every single writer and every single piece he critiques. For this workshop, I had submitted a short story titled “The Forest of Beginnings and Endings”. It is about a woman’s search for the source of magic in a world dying from the overuse of technology.

There were many holes that needed filling and areas that needed enrichment, but there were two things I gained from this workshop. First, my newly developed sense of being a scholar was well founded: I had two fellow students who informed me that the critiques I had provided them were the most productive critiques they received. Whatever words I shared with them allowed them to look at their writing in a new way and see a path through the difficulties they were currently facing. Second, I received another reminder that I need to believe in my skills: while critiquing my piece, Jim turned to a favorite paragraph and read a line. His voice combined with my words, gave me chills. I was *proud* of what he read. Proud that I could produce something like that. I was even prouder when he told me that it was dynamite writing.

Confidence is not something you can just decide to have and believe in, but every time I have doubted myself during this final, thesis semester, I have paused, taken a deep breath, and looked back over the past two years. I have grown, both as a person and as a writer. I have learned new skills and polished old ones. I have faced enough trials to put Hercules to shame. And I have triumphed. I have had people choose to believe in me,

when there was no other reason for them to do so other than that they honestly believed in me. I have had people tell me that I have the skills, I just have to use them. And they are right. It may not always be easy to act on it, but I believe in me, because they believe in me. And that is something no emotional winters or bad luck can take away.

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you truly are”

~E.E. Cummings

Now, as I look forward to graduation, I realize that the Stonecoast program has one more gift left for me: a future as a writer and scholar, complete with a community of colleagues, the skills to write all the novels rattling around my brain, the ability to continue growing, and multiple options within the world of writing. I can teach, edit, write novels or articles, and even branch out to multiple genres. I can do anything I want to do with the confidence of knowing I have the tools to do it well.

Because of Stonecoast, and the many gifts it has bestowed on me, I will be able to do what I have dreamt of doing my entire life. I have faced the darkest depths of my soul, struggled through the craziest upheavals, and waded through the coldest emotional winters I ever hope to see, and I know that I can make it through anything. When times get rough, I will walk through the fires of my life and drag my characters with me.

With every day and every word written, every word that I sweat and cry over, every word I bleed over, I will give testament to my life and the gifts of the Stonecoast

program. I will go out into the world, write my words and sentences and stories, and I will have an impact on the world. I will broaden the world. Change the world.

So what would I do if I could grow up and become who I truly am? What would I do if I knew I could not fail? Because of Stonecoast, I know the answer to that and it is exactly what I have already done: *Chasing Freedom*.

Chapter One

Rune closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The sharp smell of a recently run steri-unit filled her nose. Of course, Master Yoshido always ran the steri-unit if he knew Rune was coming to work out. She never had to worry about germs when she was at the dojo. Sensei was thoughtful that way.

Another deep breath and Rune's mind pushed past the smell, past the locker room, and settled into the part of her mind where she was free. Free from her obligations. Free from her parents. It was the only place in her mind she liked. She never left the locker room without first meditating on the silence and freedom she found at her center.

A sharp knock on the old-fashioned wooden door interrupted her. "Miss Kerapa? Your father has just arrived. He says you have sixty seconds to start or he'll consider the test failed."

"Shit!" Rune slammed her locker shut, wincing at the slight echo her sensitive Bio hearing picked up. Grabbing her hair in one hand, Rune wrapped it into a tight bun and fastened a tie with a quick twist of the wrist. Long experience made her confident that every long swan-white strand was in place. Her parents would expect no less.

Pushing through the locker room door, Rune was careful not to slam it into the bodyguards waiting just outside. She bowed, hands at her sides, and then stepped onto the black mat of the dojo's workout room. It felt squishy and mildly unsettling as she walked across the expanse of rubber, until she reached the center of the ten foot sparring area marked by a white circle.

Her father looked at his watch, one dark eyebrow raised. He gave a sharp nod before turning his icy blue gaze to Rune's mother. "Let's have a seat, sweetheart. She was on time; the test will proceed as planned."

"Why wouldn't she be? You designed her personality that way." Rune's mother picked a piece of lint off her pants and sat down, smiling and bumping shoulders with him. "Your skill with genetics is unparalleled."

Taking another deep breath, Rune turned her attention to the dojo walls. Master Yoshido had paid to have mirrored windows installed not long after Rune began taking lessons with him. Most students got to practice with an abundance of sunlight streaming in. Rune--and the few other high profile students--got the privacy of mirrors. If they couldn't see out, no one else could see in. Her father had required the security measure before he allowed Master Yoshido to take over Rune's self-defense training.

She didn't mind too much, though. Her mother had designed her physical appearance to highlight the extremes that were possible in Bio design and she made for a striking image. The mirrors gave the opportunity to admire her parents' handiwork. Her sterile, bright white gi was a stark contrast to her blue-black skin, and her eggplant purple eyes really popped under the bright lights of the holo-emitter. It was the one benefit of not being allowed to fight living breathing people. Not that her holographic opponents would care about any of this.

Kai, on the other hand, would have properly appreciated the drama of the situation. She had always appreciated Rune, even when they were young children. Kai should have been here now. Daddy's insistence that Rune and Kai not socialize outside of

appearances for Diamond Labs was getting old. It would be much easier to sneak out to see Kai when Rune no longer had to deal with bribing or losing her bodyguards.

A faint hum filled the air and Rune's skin prickled as the electric field of the holomitter was activated. She wondered briefly whether her father would actually honor their agreement if she won, but pushed the thought back. Daddy was honorable and Rune would win. In a few short minutes, she would have everything she wanted.

She stepped back, weight on her back leg, ready to kick. The heavy smell of the rubber mats wrapped around Rune, grounding her. Master Yoshido's dojo was more comfortable than home. This was going to be fun. Easy, even. The perfect start to her day.

A creak sounded behind her; probably Daddy shifting in his chair. He never enjoyed Rune's practices, and had only seen a handful since she began working with Master Yoshido when she was four. He found them tedious and had told Rune so on multiple occasions.

But this fight--a privilege bestowed upon her nineteenth birthday last month--held the key to her freedom. Today he had to watch. She would make sure of it. If Rune won this match, her bodyguards would be looking for a new job and she would be free to come and go unshadowed. Failure meant agreeing to drop the issue. For good.

"Ready." Rune could handle whatever they threw at her. The trick would be to make it exciting. Keep her father interested. Show him she knew how to kick ass. By the time Rune was done, there'd be no doubt in his mind that she was grown up. Able to take care of herself.

Movement flashed to her left. There was only one sequence that started this way. It was her favorite. She had done it blindfolded even before she had memorized it. Rune ducked, twisting to face the hologram, fists guarding her face as she snap-kicked his chest for the point. Her foot landed, weight shifting forward. A quick roundhouse and the dull but satisfying crack of a dislocated kneecap. One down, three to go.

Letting momentum spin her to face the opponent at her back, Rune threw up an arm to redirect the attacker's fist while she swung an elbow at the hologram's nose, missing by less than a centimeter.

Rune frowned, her forehead tightening with tension. That hit was supposed to finish him off. It always finished him off. But this time he had flinched backward. And that changed everything.

Fair enough. Rune relaxed her weight back onto the balls of her feet. It would be more fun if it was a challenge.

Rune took a step forward and buried her knee in his groin. An uppercut to the nose. There. Two down.

A flicker to the right. Wrong direction. Rune's heart pounded against her ribs, adrenaline racing through blood vessels, energy pushing against the constraints of skin. She was going to have to follow instinct instead of memory.

Rune feinted, swept a mid-section kick out of the way with her left arm. The hologram spun, turning his back to Rune, trying to keep his balance. Two quick jabs to his kidneys. A right side-kick to the mid-back. He staggered away. Slowed, not stopped.

A scuff behind her. That particular footstep was a favorite. But Holographic Bob was not where he was supposed to be.

She spun 180 degrees. Rune was fast, but not fast enough. Bob connected. Side-kick to the ribs. A small electrical shock ran through Rune, the hairs on the back of her arms and neck standing up. She grunted. Point.

Stepping back into a fighting stance, Rune glared at the three holograms warily surrounding her. Two more than there should be. No matter. Defeating five opponents would impress Daddy more than a mere three. It was time to end this fight.

She sprang forward. With a shout, she performed a spinning round-house to the head of the closest hologram. The instant Rune set foot back on the mat, she sensed someone moving behind her. Both arms were wrenched back. This sequence was starting to get annoying. Daddy had to be behind the changes, but she wasn't going to let him get the better of her.

Rune dropped her weight forward and sprang off the floor, head slamming into her captor's nose. He let go and staggered back. Rune followed. One jab to his stomach, a right hook, and an elbow strike to his face. One left.

Hands high, Rune spun around, ducked low under the final hologram's punch. A triplet of jabs to his ribs. He stumbled back, hands guarding his face; she kept pace. Smashed her heel into his kneecap with a roar. The hologram collapsed. The fight was over.

Over wasn't good enough. Her father had to know she was as ruthless in a fight as he was in the boardroom. That she would go as far as the bodyguards if necessary. Master Yoshido wouldn't be happy, but she would apologize to him later.

With freedom in sight, Rune grabbed a handful of her opponent's gi. Eyes narrowed, she punched once, twice. Heard the snap of a breaking nose. Slammed his head against the floor and let go.

Rune turned to examine the rest of the holograms. They remained on the floor. She settled once more into a fighter's stance and waited for the fight sequence to be cleared. They were only training holograms, but Master Yoshido would never pass her if she relaxed before they were turned off or reset. They were programmed to stay down once they had fallen, but Master Yoshido would see it as sloppy. And sloppy would get an instant refusal from Daddy. Maybe even earn an increase in security.

When the holograms disappeared, she straightened and turned towards Master Yoshido. She bowed, hands at her sides. Rune turned to her father. "So? Am I Kerapa enough to be let out without bodyguards, Daddy?"

His legs and arms were crossed. The pinstripes on his dark, mock-vintage suit made his limbs look even longer than they really were. He gazed at Rune before turning his attention to Master Yoshido. "What do you say, Sensei? Can she keep herself safe?"

Rune swiveled her head to look at Master Yoshido. He was tall and lean and seemed almost fragile if you only glanced at him. But close observation would show how deceptive a first impression was. He was strong, arms corded with muscles, shoulders broad, and waist narrow. His eyes were almost as dark as his black hair, his golden skin

practically glowed with good health. And when he smiled, it was obvious that he found living to be a grand adventure. Rune had never really gotten over her girlhood crush on him, and if he hadn't already been in his thirties she might have acted on it. Right now, though, he looked displeased, his jaw tense even as he maintained a calm, blank expression. An apology wasn't going to be easy. She would have to spend more time, more money, on the gift than originally anticipated.

"She is overconfident, favors certain moves, and has never faced a real opponent, taken a real hit. And she's cocky. But you designed her with great intelligence, strength, and speed, and I have trained her well. She has the skills to protect herself against unarmed assailants."

"See, Daddy? Now give the bodyguards to Mother. Or fire them." Rune ran her tongue over her lips and smiled, adding an extra flutter or two of her eyelids. Daddy responded better to more feminine women.

"Master Yoshido said you could protect yourself against unarmed assailants. There are still plenty of armed assailants." He stood up, buttoned his jacket, and took out his favorite computer, a slim, platinum cased D.O.G. that Rune was fairly certain he even showered with. He was no longer looking at Rune, his fingers flying over the screen as he turned his attention back to Diamond Labs. "The bodyguards stay."

Rune backed up a few steps, arms crossed over her chest to hide her clenched fists. "You gave me a gun. You made sure I knew how to use it. I take it with me everywhere I go." She pulled it from the holster at the small of her back. "It's never on stun. Armed assailants won't be any more trouble than the unarmed variety."

He glanced up from his D.O.G.. Tucked one hand into his pants pocket. Her mom stood and slipped her hand through his elbow and around his waist, her green eyes peering up at him through her long lashes. He turned his attention to her, smiling softly. He always relaxed when he was looking at Rune's mother.

The door to the dojo opened with a clatter. Rune turned to see who would be impertinent enough to interrupt her family, and was surprised to find Nuru and Jasira Contee. Rune's mother was on all of the same humanitarian fundraising committees as Jasira, both women having a strong love for building ornamental gardens and parks--and not just edible gardens--throughout Savannah. The Contees also had a daughter who was a Bio like Rune. Still, it was unusual to see them outside of political events.

Nuru's arm was around Jasira's shoulders, but the intense look on his face was focused entirely on Rune's father. His skin looked sickly. His suit was wrinkled. His left eye twitched. Jasira looked worse; her eyes were unfocused and she sagged into Nuru's side as if her legs couldn't hold her body up. Weak. She looked weak.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kerapa. Sorry to interrupt. Your assistant gave us the address." Nuru's voice sounded breathy and hoarse. Rune's father could command the attention of a buzzing crowd with a single syllable. No one's voice was impressive after his. "Hope is missing."

Chapter Two

Rune's father froze, fingertips hovering above the screen of his D.O.G.. His eyebrows shot up. Her mother gasped. Behind Rune there was the sound of rustling cloth. She glanced over her shoulder; her bodyguards had moved closer. The timing of the

Contees' arrival was abysmal. Rune took a deep breath. There had to be a way to salvage this situation.

Rune's mother gave herself an almost imperceptible shake. "I'm so sorry." She stepped forward and gave Jasira a quick hug. "Did you call the police?" Her voice the same modulated tone that she had used to soothe away hurts and fears when Rune had been little.

Nuru nodded. "Yes, yes, of course. They say they can't do anything. She's sixteen and there isn't any evidence of kidnapping. It's evidently skip week at the academy, so they classified her as truant. We complained again last night and they sent an officer to talk to some of her friends. Her best friend had a note on her D.O.G. from her. Something about some trip to check out a university with her boyfriend."

Rune nodded. "It's common at the academy this time of year. It's usually an excuse for other things, but not for everyone. I'm sure Hope will be home in a day or two, all excited about whatever college she's picked out."

Nuru turned to look at Rune, brown eyes wide. "Hope doesn't lie. She doesn't skip school. She doesn't do *anything* impulsive."

"She was designed that way, Varunani."

Rune glanced at her father. His voice had been soft in volume, but steely in tone. He obviously didn't appreciate her interruption, but she wasn't about to back down. Life without bodyguards was at stake. "Of course, Father, but even a carefully designed Bio is susceptible to outside influences. You've stacked the deck in Mother Nature's favor, but

nurture still has an ace or two up her sleeve. I'm sure Hope just wants to see what the universities are like when parents aren't around."

Jasira stood straight for the first time since entering the dojo. "I know my daughter, and this isn't like her. She has wanted to go to the same university since she was ten. She wants to be a pediatric epidemiologist. Use Bio technology and the genetic knowledge your father discovered to cure diseases." Jasira's voice was sharp, angry even, but thick with unshed tears.

"And what did the Enforcers say to that?" Rune's father stepped closer to his wife, effectively blocking the Contees from view and drawing their attention back to himself.

"They called the boyfriend's parents, who knew about the trip. They refuse to look into it further unless and until they don't make it home when his parents are expecting them. But she's not answering her D.O.G. and that's three days from now. We can't wait that long."

Her mother and father exchanged a glance before her father turned his attention back to his D.O.G.. "Of course not. Why don't I look up her biological signature for you and see where she's popping up on our lab satellites?"

"Thank you. We should have come to you last night, but we just kept thinking that the police were right and she'd walk in the door and we'd ground her until she has white hair and someday we'd all laugh about this." Nuru grimaced.

"It won't take long, will it?" Jasira's chocolate colored eyes practically glowed with hope behind their shimmery curtain of tears.

Rune resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Jasira was a pretty woman, even when she was crying, but she was definitely weak. Hope was better off with a programmed pre-disposition for her own personality. She'd never make it as a pediatric epidemiologist if she had to rely on her mother's genetics as a source of strength.

She tapped her finger on her upper arm. If this kept up too long she wouldn't have any time to shop and it was important to have a new outfit to celebrate her new life without bodyguards. Interrupting her father was never a good idea, however.

Shifting her feet, Rune turned her attention away from the scene the Contees were creating. Her gaze settled on her sensei. As she watched, Master Yoshido selected a piece of incense and lit it. A curl of smoke rose to the ceiling. It had been years since she'd wanted to grow up to be just like him, and while most of what she'd learned when she was twelve had been relegated to the dustier corners of her mind, burning incense had stuck with her. Rune took a deep breath.

Juniper Berry. Protection and healing. Rune held back a snort. Even he was worrying about Hope. All the fuss made no sense. Hope was a sixteen-year-old girl with a boyfriend. The perfect circumstances to be rebelling. Personality design was not nearly as constricting as the physical manipulations were; Rune knew for a fact that there were many areas of her own personality that did not strictly line up with the way her father had designed her. Rune agreed with the Enforcers. There was no reason for the Contees to be worried yet.

“Things change a lot in high school, Mrs. Contee,” Rune said, voice confident and a smile firmly in place as she stepped back into view. “New subjects in school, new activities, new friends. Boyfriends. She’s just trying to spread her wings a little.”

“No. There’s something wrong.” Jasira swallowed hard, her jaw clenching and unclenching as she took deep breaths. “She wouldn’t do this to us.”

Rune turned back to her parents. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

Her father glanced at her. He put away his D.O.G., one hand still resting on Nuru’s shoulder. “Willow, why don’t you go back to the Contees’ house with them. If the Enforcers are right and Hope has just been on a road trip, she’ll come home on her own. Someone should be there when she does. In the meantime, I’ll start making the rounds while we wait for the satellites to locate her signature. Chief of Enforcers to begin with. The Governor if necessary. I will find someone who can help us track her down, wherever she is. You can keep people organized and on point once they start showing up to help.”

Jasira sighed audibly and tucked a strand of wavy black hair behind her ear. “Thank you! Thank you so much!” She was still pale--except for her splotchy red eyes. She turned from Rune’s father to her mother. “Are you sure you have time for this?”

“Of course.” Willow responded firmly. “Our children are priceless. We can even start interviewing personal protection for when she returns. I should be able to get you in with our firm.”

“I’ll be down in just a moment.” Rune’s father watched as the trio headed out the door, face blank. When the door was shut, he turned to the bodyguards. “I want you to

stay close to her. Call in extra shifts. I expect you to stay fresh while we wait to see what happened with Hope.”

“I can keep myself safe, Daddy.”

Rune’s father was silent for a long moment. Rune swallowed and reminded herself to stay still. Fidgeting wasn’t something either of her parents approved of. He pulled his coat on. “No. I won’t make the same mistake the Contees made with Hope. You’re only nineteen. The bodyguards stay. We’ll revisit this issue at a later date. You balanced, Varunani?”

Biting the side of her tongue to prevent an angry response, Rune nodded, reached up and kissed him on the cheek. She had been designed tall, but he was taller. He’d made sure of that. “Perfectly.” Rune watched him leave and then turned towards the locker room, brushing past her bodyguards. When she reached the doorway, she bowed to Master Yoshido one more time and then hurried into the locker room.

Shutting the door behind her, Rune turned and punched her locker. Daddy wasn’t playing fair, using an out-of-control drama created by two overly protective clients as an excuse to deny Rune what she had so clearly earned. She glared at the dent she had made in the locker; this wasn’t over.

Taking a few deep breaths, Rune glanced down at her Orb ring. If she used the SkyBahn lanes above the city, she would still have plenty of time to see Kai before her class that afternoon. Sure, it would cost her extra credits to use SkyBahn lanes rather than one of the lower public transport lanes, but her father could afford it. After his interference with the fight sequence, he even deserved it.

Rune took another deep breath and let go of her anger. It was time to go rinse the sweat from her body. Kai would know how to fix this; her father hadn't won yet. She was a Kerapa, after all, and Kerapas always got their way.

Chapter Three

"Kai! Kai! Are you in there?" Rune pushed the silver door to the dog kennel open with her elbow, settling her foot against it. She hated how old and ratty this shelter was. They didn't have automatic doors or steri-units. Even most of their dogs were old-fashioned: mutts and pure-bred creatures without the slightest bit of genetic improvements. The smell of dogs and cleaning chemicals was strong, overwhelming her Bio senses. A headache blossomed at her temples and her stomach lurched. She swallowed hard against the nausea and switched to breathing through her mouth. The largely metal room practically sparkled. Kai had to be almost finished. "Why are you still back here? Can't you get someone else to do that? I wanted to chat before I left for my law class at the university."

Kai glanced at Rune and raised an eyebrow before shrugging. "Can't have the real humans getting their hands dirty," she said, leaning down to finish scrubbing the ceiling of the waist-high kennel.

"Why do you put up with that shit? You're human, too; green, but human." As far as Rune was concerned, Kai was gorgeous. She had pale mint green skin, wavy aquamarine hair that fell to the middle of her back, and rich emerald green eyes. Rune would bet money that people were less concerned with the oddity of Kai's coloring and more jealous of her beauty.

“I may be just the basic model, but I’m green and I’m smart and I’m poor. That’s three strikes too many. Besides, why do you let yourself be trotted out every time your father wants some more good press?”

Rune snorted. “It’s not the same and you know it. I was designed as a walking advertisement for Diamond Labs; you weren’t designed to take on crappy jobs for lazy ass humans. I don’t have a choice, you do. Now...you almost done or what?”

“I’ve got a bit more. 30 minutes, maybe less. Why the rush?”

“Daddy’d be unhappy if I’m late to class. It’d reflect badly on him, on Diamond Labs. Could even keep me from being elected to the United Conglomerate Senate someday. You know Daddy’s plans for me.” She stepped into the room, crossing to the wall of metal cupboards and drawers directly across from the doorway. “Here. I’ll help.”

She took a quick look around the room. It room was narrow, with a four foot walkway squeezed between two walls of dog kennels. The biggest were three feet tall, the smallest half that. All of them were old-fashioned cages with manual latches. The cages on Kai’s side of the room were all empty, the others were full of scraggly, rough-looking, dogs.

Rune rolled her eyes. Even the dogs in this sector were poor. No wonder Kai stuck out. People couldn’t even design their own dogs; there was no way there were other Bios around here. If it hadn’t been for the lottery Rune’s father had run, her best friend wouldn’t exist. “What do you have for protective gear?”

“Gloves.”

Rune wrinkled her nose, pulled a floor-to-ceiling cupboard open with her foot.

“How about this sani-suit?”

Kai nodded. “Sorry. I forgot we had that. They don’t let me use it.”

“Seriously? They don’t allow you to wear the sani-suit?” Rune paused, stepping into the suit and pulling it up over her shoulders. She breathed a sigh of relief at the comforting sound of the suit slithering into place, shrinking or stretching until it fit her perfectly. “This place doesn’t deserve you, Kai. Come work for me. You could be my assistant. We could talk any time I want. It would be fun times and good pay.”

“You don’t have to help with the cleaning, you know. I’ll go as fast as I can.”

Rune settled the sani-suit’s mask into place, completing the seal and providing her with odorless air to breathe. The throbbing behind her eyes slowed. “No. Things didn’t go right at the test and I need your perspective. Daddy just refuses to see that I’m grown up.”

“Perhaps it’s because you still call him Daddy.”

“Pfft.” Rune stuck her tongue out at Kai’s back. “You know he likes his women girly. Besides, we’re here to discuss his hang-ups with bodyguards, not his name.”

“So you didn’t pass?”

“Of course I did.”

“Well, what are you all worked up for then?”

“The Contees showed up.” Rune began filling a bucket with soapy water. “They think their daughter is missing, but the police think she just went on an unauthorized trip. They wanted Daddy and Mother to pull some strings.”

Kai jumped, bumping her head on the roof of the small kennel she was cleaning. "Ouch! Shit!" She backed up and turned to face Rune. "Hope never seemed like the type of girl to run off without telling her parents. Is there any sign of foul play?"

"No idea, but Daddy's taking care of it." Rune plucked a sponge from underneath the sink, holding it carefully between her thumb and forefinger. "Is this new? I don't want a used one. You never know what's living on it."

"Mendel's sake, Rune, who cares? You're wearing a sani-suit." Kai took a deep breath, shoulders and chest lifting in a slow, controlled movement. "I want to know more about what's being done for Hope. She's always seemed so sweet when I met her at fundraisers. I can't believe she's missing."

"It matters to me. I said I'd help you and I'm going to help. Just find me a new brush, will you? And she's not missing. She's on a trip with her boyfriend."

"Are you really just letting your dad take care of it?"

Rune felt the muscles of her cheeks tighten and forced herself to relax her jaw. She turned her back to Kai, kneeling down to get a better look under the countertop. When she found a scrub brush that was still in its capsule packaging, she tossed the sponge and clicked open the brush. She stood up and turned to face her friend.

"Of course I'm letting him handle it. He knows everyone. He probably already called the university and has Hope on her way back home." Rune picked up the bucket and moved over to the kennel next to Kai's. She began scrubbing the metal surface. "You guys really need to have better equipment than this. It's all so primitive. And slow." She

glared at her own reflection, scrubbing the surface harder. "Maybe I can get Mother to do a fundraiser for you."

"Does Hope really strike you as the runaway type?"

"No. Not really." Rune stopped scrubbing, let the silence stretch for a few moments before speaking again. "She's punctual. Habitual. Sweet, like you said. A Bio after my own heart, really."

"So do you think she could have been kidnapped?"

"Mrs. Contee thinks something bad happened, but no, I don't. The Contees are almost as rich as Daddy, but there hasn't been a ransom note." She moved to the next kennel, shaking her head. "No. Who kidnaps a rich kid and doesn't ask for ransom money?"

"Stalkers, rapists, serial killers." Kai ticked the answers off on her fingers.

"Someone who thinks Bios like Hope--like us--are an abomination."

"What do you want from me, Kai?" Rune turned, glaring at Kai through the mask.

"There's nothing I can do. I'm not the bad guy here; I'm just a walking advertisement for Diamond Labs. My job is to look pretty, not track down a girl who would rather make out with her boyfriend than go to school. Mendel's sake, Kai! It's skip week!"

Kai didn't answer right away, turning and scrubbing first one kennel and then a second before she answered. "Pulling some strings isn't the only way you can help, you know. That may be how your dad works, but you...Rune, you're fast and you're strong and you're well-trained. You were designed to be the best that a human can be. Better,

even. You can do more, be more than just advertising for your father's company. Step up. Canvass the neighborhood. Hang flyers. Something. Anything."

"But I don't even believe anything is wrong. You do, obviously. What are *you* going to do?"

"We're not talking about me. You're the one always saying you want to be someone other than a Kerapa." Kai licked her lips, pink tongue a stark contrast to her mint green skin. "Do you really not care? If Hope truly was kidnapped, she's probably scared. Maybe even hurt."

"I'm not going to waste my own time just because she decided to steal some of her own. I've already lost a chance to get rid of my bodyguards because of her. I don't owe her anything else. She's not my problem."

"She's a Bio. One of us. We have to stick together. Besides, your dad won't get rid of the bodyguards while she's missing. So find her. Prove she ran off on her own."

Rune stood, dropping her scrub brush in the bucket. "Fine. That's a good idea. I'll call Daddy and see if they've found her signature yet. Or her. If not, I'll see if I can before she slinks back home."

She walked over to the door, opened it and caught it with her foot before pushing the button to release the sani-suit. She let it fall to the floor and stepped out of it, holding the door open with her elbow. She kicked the suit out of the way and stepped through the doorway, glancing over her shoulder one more time before letting the door slide shut.

"And when she turns up fine, I won't even say I told you so."

Chapter Four

Darrius closed the door to the interrogation room and motioned for Emma to precede him into the observation room next door. “So what do you think?”

Emma watched through the one-way mirror as the suspect paced back and forth behind the table. “What do *you* think, rookie?”

“I think he’s innocent,” he said, eyebrows drawn together and jaw clenched. “I don’t care what the evidence seems to suggest.” Darrius slipped his hands into his pockets, thumbs hooked into his belt loops. The suspect paced around the interrogation room, chewing on the fingernail of his left pinky, and tapping the fingers of his right hand on any surface within reach. He in no way looked like a man capable of criminal activity, let alone a gruesome, premeditated murder like the one he was being charged with. “He didn’t do it. He isn’t smart enough, for one.”

“I agree. I don’t think he did it either. The evidence is circumstantial, and the polygraph the prosecutor is relying on, well...” Emma shrugged. “That guy is so twitchy I doubt he could introduce himself without shaky hands and sweaty palms.” Her gaze met Darrius’s. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“Go back to the crime scene. Interview neighbors and witnesses again. See if we can find evidence we missed the first time around.”

Emma laughed. “You are fresh off the boat, aren’t you? How’d you ever get assigned to our unit with rose-colored glasses like yours?” She glanced down at her shoes. “We did our job. You heard the captain: we’re to file the paperwork and move on. It’s up to the attorneys now. Hopefully the suspect gets a good one.”

Darrius rubbed the back of his neck and turned to face Emma. Her long, curly brown hair was nice enough, and off-duty she always wore fashionable if slightly worn outfits. If it weren't for the tired look in her eyes she'd probably be pretty. "He can't afford one of his own. If he's lucky, the one appointed to him will be experienced. Overworked, but experienced. If he isn't lucky, he'll get a kid who can hardly knot his tie, let alone take the time to look at Benito's file before making a plea bargain. This poor guy doesn't stand a chance if we walk away."

"Poor guy? Getting a little dramatic there, aren't you?" Emma crossed her arms, the tight fabric of her bulletproof uniform shimmering slightly. She'd chosen the blue one today. Darrius had a hunch it was vanity that inspired the tendency. "This guy has just as much chance as anyone else in the legal system."

"You know it doesn't work that way," Darrius replied.

Emma turned, weaving through the electro-acrylic smart desks that were scattered around the large room that housed their squad. "It doesn't matter. Regulations state we quit working a case once a suspect is charged. Remember the contracts we signed when we became Enforcers, the oaths we took? Where we promised to follow orders?" She glanced over her shoulder. "Benito has been charged. We've been given new orders. Move on."

"What about the oath we took to protect the innocent? Or the one to get the bad guy?"

Emma stopped, hand resting on the worn back of the chair that had just risen out of the floor. She raised an eyebrow, her lips twitching. If she didn't take her job so

seriously, he would have bet money she was going to smile. Or laugh. “Really? You took an oath to ‘get the bad guy?’”

Darrius kicked the wall, triggering the button for his own chair. He settled into it heavily when it appeared. “Come off it, Emma. You know what I mean. We’re supposed to protect the innocent by removing evil from the streets. How is sending Benito to prison going to do either or those things?”

She leaned back in her chair, and sighed. “If you want to get the bad guy, stick to your job. Defending suspects is not your job. *Finding* suspects is.”

Darrius pressed his thumb print to the top of his desk, activating the files for his case. He flipped through them until he found what he was looking for: a picture of the victim’s face, lips missing. There was plenty of other damage to the body, but this was definitely the worst part.

“I don’t want an innocent man convicted, but I don’t want the person who did this--” He took his forefinger and swiped it across his desk. The photo moved and settled directly in front of Emma, “--left out on the streets to do it again.”

Emma’s eyes flicked to the photo and back to him. She swiped her hand across the photo and shoved it to the side of her desk, where it went dark. “In a few months you’ll realize that following regs does more good than harm.”

“Detective Kalb!” Darrius glanced towards the front desk. The officer on duty pointed. “Someone to see you.”

Darrius frowned. He didn't understand why the preferred method of communicating among Enforcers had always been shouting. He waved to let the officer know he had heard her. "Be right back," he said to Emma.

His chair sank back into the floor as he headed towards the front desk and got a good look at the visitor. Varunani Kerapa, daughter of the richest man in Savannah, the first successful Bio ever designed, and general pain in the ass. She'd been four years behind him in school and had still managed to interfere with his life on more than one occasion. He frowned. "How may I help you, Miss Kerapa?"

"I'd like to ask a favor of you. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?"

She smiled at him, a gentle curving of her lips that would have been attractive if it were some *other* beautiful woman smiling at him. On her it made him think of the flashy colors of poisonous frogs. He glanced over his shoulder; the conference room appeared to be empty.

"This way," he said, gesturing for her to follow. He held the door and walked into the room after her. "What do you want?"

Rune trailed her fingers along the conference table, drumming them a few times before turning and flashing another poison frog smile. "I told you. A favor."

Darrius chose to stay silent. Varunani Kerapa's eyes narrowed briefly. She licked her lips slowly and relaxed her face. She took a few steps closer, tucked a strand of white hair behind her pointed ear, and cocked her head.

"The Contees think a sinister fate has befallen their daughter Hope. No ransom demand yet, but they insist she wouldn't run away. Your bosses disagree. For the next

forty hours. That's when she's supposed to come back and then either the Contees or your bosses will be proven right."

"I'm aware."

"I knew you would be," she said with a small laugh, reaching out to briefly touch one of his arms. "You were on Hope's design team, right? As a job shadow for school? I'm sure you're concerned, but you don't need to be. You can help." She moved closer. "That's why I chose you."

Darrius weighed whether or not to back up, quickly decided that he didn't want to give that amount of control to Rune. "The law is clear on this matter, Miss Kerapa. There will be no Enforcer involvement until forty-eight hours have passed, or there's evidence of the presence of some form of threat to Hope. I'm surprised this hasn't been made clear to them."

"Oh, absolutely." She peered at him through lowered lashes. "I'm not here to speak with Darrius the Enforcer. I'm here to speak with Darrius the man." She licked her lips again. "Surely you could do a little investigating off-duty and off-the-record. Check in again with the friends who are saying she snuck off with her boyfriend. It would set everyone's mind at ease. The Contees would be grateful. My family would be grateful. I would be grateful."

Darrius removed her hand from his arm. "I will not break the law for you or anyone else. The Contees will have to bring us evidence of foul play or wait the way any other citizen would have to."

Rune backed up, crossing her arms over her chest. “Get over yourself, Darrius. I’m not asking you to break the law. I’m asking you to be nice to the Contees so they can quit worrying about Hope. I’ll even go with you. It will practically be a social call.”

“The law exists for a reason. Now,” he nodded toward the door. “you’re out of your league here and it’s time for you to go.”

“Out of my league?”

“Yes. You were designed to look pretty and make Daddy proud and rich. You don’t belong here, Miss Kerapa.” He opened the door and gestured for her to leave.

Rune’s arms dropped to her side, hands clenched into fists. If her skin wasn’t black, Darrius had the feeling her cheeks would flush with anger. Her violet eyes had definitely darkened a shade or two. “It’s *Ms.* Kerapa to you, you great hairy ass.”

Darrius watched her leave, her high heels clicking loudly on the tile floor. When she was out of sight, he grinned. She certainly was pretty for a Bio so far outside of Norm standards. She’d been top of her class at Savannah Prep, too. Beauty and brains.

And he had won that round. She was grasping at straws. Anyone who’d ever met him could see he wasn’t hairy. She always resorted to insults when he won. It was the surest sign that he’d bested her.

Of course, it wasn’t a good sign that she was sticking her nose into the Contees’ case. With his experience in the Bio design lab, chances were high that he’d be assigned to this case--if it actually turned out to be a case. If Rune got too nosy, he’d have to draw on his weekly experience playing cards with the guys. He could do poker face better than anyone else. And when Rune was around, a good poker face was a valuable weapon.

Ideally, though, Hope would show up when she was supposed to and there wouldn't be a case to open. Cases involving young women never turned out well.

Chapter Five

"Are you awake in there? You've had enough beauty sleep; you need to keep up your strength. I've brought you your dinner." The hatch in the bottom of the door opened with a clatter and a tray of food slid through.

Hope's head throbbed; she still hadn't recovered from the bump she'd gotten trying to run away from her kidnappers. The bed beneath her wasn't letting her get much sleep, let alone beauty sleep. It was hard. The blanket she had been given was thin and coarse and made her arms itch. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes a slit. The walls held steady like they were supposed to. That was definitely an improvement. She sat up slowly and opened her eyes the rest of the way. Everything stayed right where it belonged. Even her stomach.

"Come on, dear, eat up." The woman's voice was encouraging.

Heart pounding, Hope stood up and crossed the floor, placing her feet carefully and holding one hand out in case she got dizzy. When she had made it safely across the six paces between her bed and the door, she bent down and took a deep breath of the steaming bowl of soup. It made her mouth water.

"No thank you," she said, pushing it back through the opening. "I'm not hungry."

"What ugly lies. Eat or I'll force you too. You're no good to me if you're not healthy."

The tray and bowl slid back through the door, a small amount slopping over the edge. Hope frowned down at it. "I don't trust you. I'm not eating it. I had a big meal before you took me. It'll last until my parents pay whatever ransom you're asking for."

"Very well. Boys?"

The door rattled. The click of a tumbler echoed through the cell, and the door handle began to turn. Hope's mouth dropped open, but she didn't hesitate. She rushed towards the opening, arms outstretched as she tried to push past whatever was in her path. Hands grabbed at her, fingers dug into her forearms. Sharp pain shot up to her shoulders.

"Stop it! Let me go!"

She turned and pulled, twisting her body and struggling as best she could. When she realized they were stronger than her, she lashed out with her feet, connecting with them. More pain shot from the outside of her foot straight up to her hip. Her legs buckled and the only thing holding her up was the two men bruising her arms.

"Careful! I don't want her any more damaged. Especially her hands."

One of the men switched his grip from her hands to her hair. He yanked backwards before wrapping his arm around her throat. Hope suddenly found herself unable to breathe. Spots danced across her vision. Her hands dug at his arm. She felt a fingernail tear, a burning sensation.

"I said don't damage her hands!"

"This wouldn't have happened if you'd let us drug her." The voice came from behind her. It sounded strained. Maybe that meant she had hurt him. She hoped so.

“Just tie her up. If we can’t subdue her without drugs, she’s of no use to me. We may as well kill her.”

Hope froze, her heartbeat loud as the blood roared through her head.

“That’s right, girly. Settle down or we’ll kill you.”

Every muscle in her body started trembling with the need to fight harder. The problem was, she believed what they were saying. If she caused more of a fuss they would just kill her. She dropped her hands back to her sides.

“Good job. I knew you were smart. If I wasn’t already smarter than you, I could as easily have chosen you for your brains as for your hands. And they are such lovely hands, you know. Your parents chose well when they designed you.”

Hope swallowed hard against the arm that was still at her throat, barely able to get enough air in her lungs to keep from blacking out. She still hadn’t seen the woman who was doing all the talking.

“Take her back and tie her down.”

The two men grabbed her legs and she hung between them as they carried her into her cell. But she had finally caught a glimpse of the other woman. She had black skin and white hair that curled over her shoulders and half-way down her torso. Her nose reminded Hope of a cat’s and her lips were so thin they no longer looked human. Long, thin, pointed ears stuck several inches above her curls. And there at the top of her head were a pair of thick curving Kudu horns.

The air grew dry and hot. Hope blinked several times, trying to clear the spots, and that image, from her vision. When the woman smiled at her, revealing long, sharp

canines, Hope gave up. She let pain and unconsciousness claim her. Anything was better than facing the abomination that held her captive.

Chapter Six

Rune glanced out her car window, drumming her fingers on the arm rest. Auto pilot was on, and she'd already finished her business law homework by the time her car had maneuvered up to the Skybahn lanes. She was free to contemplate how she could track down Hope.

There were even fewer cars than normal up here this afternoon. The only other vehicle she'd seen so far had been the one the bodyguards were tailing her in. The unimpeded view of the sparkling private-polymer glass buildings of the city a scant fifty feet below her seemed to be clearing her mind of anger, leaving behind plenty of ideas.

She'd talked to her father just before going into class. They hadn't been able to find Hope's bio signature anywhere near her home, or at the university she was supposedly visiting in St. Louis. He'd seemed impressed that she was showing initiative and, hoping to take advantage of this, Rune had decided to spend law class doing some research on her own. Her professor kept interrupting her, obviously aware that she wasn't paying attention, but what he didn't realize was that Rune had read and memorized the whole textbook the first day of class. The only reason she was taking the class was because it was a requirement of her father's that she get a law degree. She really didn't need anyone to teach her anything.

Once she'd pointed out the error in the professor's own work, however, he'd left her alone, and she'd finally been able to gain access to the transport authority's records.

Hope had never gone to the inter-city jetport, let alone purchased a ticket or boarded a jet. Rune was sure her father would be impressed with her initiative, but she was still hoping to find Hope before anyone else. If she did that, her father would have to see she was capable.

Rune had considered canvassing some of the favorite hangouts of Savannah Prep students, but there were too many hotels, malls, and other places that Hope might be. Unless Rune got lucky and picked the right location early on.

“On approach to Diamond Lab Headquarters. Docking in 60 seconds.”

Rune turned her attention back to her car, watching as it maneuvered into position at her office window. When it had safely clicked back into place, Rune glanced at herself in the mirror. Neither of her parents would be able to find fault with her appearance. She wasn't going to spend her day hunting for a Hope-needle in the teenage-hangouts-haystack. Kerapas didn't count on luck; they made their own. She was ready for battle.

“Mr. Kerapa will see you now, Ms. Kerapa.”

Rune breezed past her father's personal assistant without a second glance. He was a good-looking young man, but outside of office management, his brains left a lot to be desired. Besides, he was the help. He didn't deserve her attention.

“Father,” Rune said with a nod, crossing the large, airy office to stand in front of her father's desk. It was larger than most peoples's dining room tables and made of antique black walnut. Rune didn't know anyone else who could afford a wooden desk

instead of an electro-acrylic smart desk. It always gave her the absurd desire to curtsy. She remained standing.

“I finally got Darrius Kalb to agree to look into Hope’s disappearance.” She took a deep breath, mentally crossing her fingers before she continued. If this didn’t work she would be in a great deal of trouble. “I think you should call his captain and thank him personally. Make sure they don’t change their minds.”

Her father sat back in his chair. “And how did you manage that, Varunani? I’ve been talking with the governor and getting nowhere.”

“I reminded him of his previous connections with both the Contees and myself. He agreed that it was worth looking into, if only so the Contees can have piece of mind.” Rune remained standing. Her father hadn’t offered her a seat. Today she was glad to be kept standing. It kept her from focusing too much on the lie she had just told. She needed Darrius’s help, though, if she were going to find Hope before the day was over.

“All right. I’ll give the captain a call.”

Rune knew the protocol for this, too. She headed to the far side of his office where she wouldn’t be able to hear his call. No offer of a chair meant she couldn’t use his couch, either, but the view by the windows was better.

Kerapa Tower was the highest building in the city and one of the tallest in the world. 500 floors above ground, with Diamond Labs extending another fifty floors below. Her father’s office was one of only two on the top floor; her mother’s was the other one. Rune shared space with the conference room five floors down. Amazingly, her father’s

office was the only one high enough to provide an unobstructed view of the ocean. Five floors made a lot of difference in the heavily populated city-states of the modern world.

Today, however, the view was impeded by a shimmering haze of clouds. They would probably have a storm before the night was through.

“You can come back, Varunani.”

“Did he appreciate the call, Father?” she asked.

“He seemed rather surprised by it, actually.”

Her father’s left eyebrow was lifted, but Rune held his gaze. “It’s not often he gets to talk to someone so far above his pay grade. He probably wasn’t expecting a personal call.”

“Perhaps. Either way, he said that young Kalb and his partner would be heading to the Contees’ house shortly. Good work, Rune. Was there anything else?”

With his switch to her preferred nickname, Rune felt some of the tension ease from her shoulders. “Actually, there was, Daddy,” she said, hoping her own change of address would soften his heart a little. He wasn’t going to like her next request. “May I have a seat?”

When he nodded, she smoothed her damson-plum skirt over the backs of her legs, making sure the glow-fabric underskirt was turned off as she carefully balanced on the edge of the leather chair across from her father. It was lower than his, but that was all right. She was hoping that if he felt more in control of the situation he wouldn’t be as defensive.

“What do you want to talk about? I have six minutes before my next appointment.”

“Well, Daddy, I was thinking it would be good for Diamond Labs to have a liaison on this case. Someone to remind the detectives that the Kerapas are interested in the outcome, to keep them motivated.”

Her father frowned. “It’s not a bad idea, Rune, but we don’t have anyone else we can afford to send to the Contees’ house. Your mother has already had to cancel all of her meetings for the day, and I rescheduled all of my morning meetings to this afternoon. The cops are on their way. We’ve done enough.”

“I could do it. I can read up on the private investigator’s licensing requirements on the way over to the Contees’ and be ready for the test as soon as you can get somebody to let me take it. We’ll offer my services to the Contees free of charge and--”

“Absolutely not. It’s too dangerous.”

“Daddy! You saw me at the testing; you know I can take care of myself. Hope’s bio-signature may not be showing up, but that doesn’t mean she’s in danger. Besides, I wouldn’t ever be alone. I’d be with two detectives. With guns. They’re at least as good as bodyguards.”

“No, Varunani, they aren’t. Detectives are paid to protect all the people of Savannah. Bodyguards are paid to protect you specifically.”

“Fine. But there is no one, bodyguards or otherwise, who will protect me as fiercely as I protect myself. That ought to count for something. And this will be good for the company.”

Her father leaned back in his chair, further from his desk, further from her. His switch back to her full name was not a good sign. He crossed his legs and rested a hand

on his knee. “I fail to see how the company will benefit from you becoming a private investigator.”

“Every one of our clients will see what I am doing for the Contees. They’ll know that we will do anything for our clients. We don’t just care about the money, or the science. We care about the people. It will be great PR.”

He continued to look at her. Rune felt an itch between her shoulder blades and breathed deep, focusing on the subtle aroma of the scent module Mother had chosen for her father’s office. When he didn’t speak, Rune pressed forward.

“That can even be the slogan. ‘We care about more than the science, we care about the people.’ All those people who think we’re playing with things we shouldn’t? Their campaign would be hurt by this. It’d be a great time to roll out the new genetically modifying inoculations you’ve been working on for diabetes and glaucoma.” She smiled. “How great would that look? First, you show that you care about Hope, long after you’ve gotten the money for designing her, then you show that you care about Norms as much as you care about Bios. The stock prices will soar, clients will flock to our doorstep, and before you know it, you’ll have all the money you need to move on to inoculations for cancer and MS and whatever.”

“I didn’t know you were aware of the anti-Bio campaigns. Or the G.M.I.s.”

“Of course, Father. I pay attention to everything you say.”

“Than pay attention to this: If we roll out a new PR campaign, it must be carried off flawlessly. We don’t want to be seen as taking advantage of the Contees’ bad situation. I am not going to risk your safety for anything less than assured success.”

“I want this. I know I can do this. I won’t mess it up.”

Her father held her gaze, the silence stretching long enough that Rune began to worry about how many more bodyguards her father was going to add to her detail. “Fine. You and the bodyguards head on over to the Contee house. I’ll make sure you can tag along and get the test lined up for you as soon as possible. Anything less than one hundred percent and I won’t let you keep your license. And you’re never to use it for any reason that hasn’t been pre-approved by your mother or I for Diamond Lab purposes.”

“I can’t have the bodyguards trailing along! They’ll just make everyone nervous. It’ll be bad enough having two Enforcers questioning people. Do you want us to actually *find* Hope or not?”

“You will take the bodyguards with you to the Contee residence. You will use a company vehicle so that they are in the same car as you. You will do this without complaint or you will not get to do this at all. When you get there, you will be a help to the detectives. Consider yourself a diplomat, but without the immunity. Your behavior will be without reproach, understood?”

Rune’s jaw was clenched tight. Her hands were in fists in her lap. She stood up, forced her hands to relax so she could smooth down her skirt, and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now get out of my office before I change my mind.”

He immediately turned to his D.O.G., flipping it on and immediately dismissing her. She didn’t understand why he would rather have a D.O.G. than a smart desk, but he was attached to it. Sometimes she thought he loved it more than he did her. Glaring at the

top of his head, she turned and headed back out the door. Things hadn't gone perfectly, but they had gone better than she expected.

Playing people off of each other seemed to be going rather well for her. And this day wasn't over yet. Maybe she could get Darrius or his partner to suggest the bodyguards be left behind. Daddy would have to listen to them, she'd get her chance to show she could handle her own protection, and the bodyguards would have to start looking for a new client.

Chapter Seven

"Evans. Kalb. My office. Now."

Darrius looked up from the photographs spread across the screen of the photo table. "What's he want?"

Emma shrugged. "Maybe he found another case for us."

Darrius snorted. "I still don't understand why he's so ready for us to be done with this." He swiped his hands across the surface of the table, stacking the images together in a neat pile before tossing them to Emma's waiting D.O.G.. "There's got to be something that I'm missing. I will find it."

Without waiting to see if Emma was ready, Darrius made his way through the desks of his fellow detectives, knocked on the captain's door and entered, closing the door after Emma joined them.

"What can we do for you, Captain?" she asked.

"I just received a call from one Ryan Kerapa." The captain ran stubby fingers through his thinning brown hair. "He wanted to thank me for being willing to let you look

into the missing daughter of the Contee family. Thing is, I seem to remember being told that she wasn't missing. And I certainly don't remember assigning you to any case, let alone the case of a missing teenager. But he was very clear that you had told his daughter that we would be looking into it."

Darrius shook his head. He glanced at Emma before turning back to the captain. He held his hands up. "I did no such thing! I told her exactly the opposite, sir."

"You sure you didn't decide bend the rules a little. For old time's sake? You're one of them, aren't you?"

"Sir?"

"Rich. Went to the same school as the runaway girl?"

"Yes, I did, sir, but I know regulations and I know what orders were handed down. I told Miss Kerapa that there wasn't any case and I wouldn't be looking into it."

Emma leaned forward. "Sir, there's no way Detective Kalb would break regulations like this."

The captain frowned. "Well, I don't know what the young Ms. Kerapa did, but we've been maneuvered very neatly into a corner. I want you to head over there right away. Regardless of how it happened, we're on the case now. And you're the ones that are going to have to deal with it."

"Yes, sir," Darrius said, at the same time Emma did.

"Good. And Detectives?"

Darrius was surprised that the captain had anything else to say to them. The orders had already been given.

“I don’t trust Ms. Kerapa one bit. She woke up this morning and decided she wanted us to jump at her command--and managed to make it happen. On the off chance there is something more going on with this Contee girl, we can’t afford to have Kerapa fuck up our investigation while she satisfies some random itch she has to walk on the wild side. Keep her out of our hair.”

“Of course, sir.” Darrius nodded. He’d already been thinking the same thing. He didn’t know what was motivating Rune, but he’d bet anything it wasn’t concern for Hope.

“Good. Dismissed.”

Darrius let Emma lead the way out of Captain Vincent’s office. With the door shut safely behind him, he took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and rubbed his forehead.

“Are you going to be all right?” Emma asked.

He thought of one of the last times he had interacted with Miss Kerapa before this case. It had been prep school. Her first day as a ninth year, his last month as a twelfth year, right before he began pre-college internship for her father’s company. Being from different sectors, it was the first time he had been in close proximity to Verunani Kerapa. Seeing her surrounded by bodyguards during brief appearances at charity events didn’t count.

She had been beautiful. Exactly the type of Bio he hoped to be designing during his internship. Not her black skin and violet eyes but her strength and grace. He thought she was a great representation of what the human body could be, if man stepped in to give evolution a little nudge.

Before he'd realized that designing Bios wasn't the gift to humanity he'd been dreaming of.

So he'd stepped away from the world of science and turned instead to the life of a public servant. And he'd never regretted it. The people he worked with out on the streets were more honest than those he'd grown up with. Even the criminals. And those he ended up helping were always grateful for his help.

But now he was heading back into that world, not as Darrius Kalb, but as an Enforcer. And he was going to have to keep Miss Kerapa from fucking things up. If the Contees were right, Hope's life could depend on him doing his job and keeping Miss Kerapa out of it. Rune, who would only be thinking about disproving his statement that she was out of her league. "I'm fine, Emma," he said at last. "Just thinking about what our next step should be. It's bothering me."

"And 'it' isn't Ms. Kerapa's part in our current predicament?"

"Really, Ems? That's all you have to say?"

Emma shrugged. "It's over now. Nothing we can do about it except find Hope. Once the Contees see their daughter is safe, Ms. Kerapa will go back to her world, and we'll be able to get back to solving real cases."

"I suppose." Darrius sighed. "I still feel bad."

"You didn't have anything to do with this, Kalb." Emma shook her head. "It was all her. Now come on. We still have to get across town." She headed towards the elevator. "We'll have a few hours on public transport. What do you say we take a look at Benito's case again? Maybe you'll find what you're looking for."

Darrius smiled. "How about we take my car? I can spring for the extra credits. Even pay for the Skybahn if you want."

The elevator pinged, the doors opening with a soft whoosh. Emma walked on and hit the button for the parking garage. "Sounds like a plan. Don't want to be looking at those photos in a public place."

The sun was low in the sky when Darrius and Emma arrived at their destination. Darrius slid his thumb against the scanner to mark which parking depot they had gotten off at, and noted how many credits would be removed from his account. They still had to walk the last mile from the station to the Contees' house, but it felt good to stretch their legs after the two hour cross-town ride, even if Darrius' car was bigger to fit his six foot four frame.

Darrius also enjoyed the opportunity to observe the neighborhood the Contees lived in. Every house they passed was only ten to twelve stories tall. And every building was obviously a singly family dwelling. As long as you didn't count the families of the servants who worked--and lived--with the rich. And the rich didn't count anybody but themselves. He should know; he'd been raised in a neighborhood just like this over in Sector 1.

"Now remember, these people aren't like the ones we normally work with. They'll expect us to be grateful that we're on this case. And they expect us to be confident to the point of stupidity. They don't want to hear statistics, because even if the statistics are true for most people, they don't consider themselves most people. And they

aren't, honestly. The rich are a whole other breed of humanity. We're proving that just by being here."

"Yeah, yeah. I got it." Emma waved her hand. "They teach us this stuff in basic training, you know. And then again when you pass the detective's exam. Of course, they also cover it once you get assigned as a detective. I have also been a detective long enough to deal with them a time or two on my own. And--"

Emma paused, stopping to place her hand on Darrius' arm. "There was also this one time, on a train, when this guy I know drilled it into me for the entire ride across Savannah. The entire. Long. Ride."

"All right, O-Wise-One. But the majority of our funding comes from donations made by people who live here. The common man likes to think it's taxes and election donations. But it's just the rich. It's part of why I settled on being an Enforcer; I wanted to give more than just money. Now that we're here, we have to keep them happy if we want to keep Savannah safe."

Emma nodded. "I get it. I do. Really." She smiled again. Darrius didn't think he'd seen her smile so many times in one day. Ever. He was glad to know that at least one of them was enjoying this. "Tell you what," she said, "how about if I promise to let you take the lead? I'll make a polite introduction and then step back and let you do all the talking. Lock my lips and throw away the key. Will that calm you down?"

Darrius nodded, pleased. "Excellent plan. Thank you," he added, turning and heading towards the Contees's address.

When they reached the house, after walking through a long avenue of twisting, sprawling Southern Live Oaks, Darrius rang the doorbell. In a neighborhood of elaborately decorated buildings, this one still managed to scream money. It was two stories, covered with ornate carvings on actual woodwork, and surrounded by a large, well-groomed lawn with beds of large azalea bushes and vibrant red, pink, and white roses. There was even a small pond. In short, it was the sort of house that had been around for generations--probably since before the United Conglomerate City-States had been formed--and all of them with vast amounts of wealth. Darrius had grown up as part of a wealthy family, but he had always regarded the Contees with awe; their money put his family's accounts to shame.

The door opened to reveal a middle-aged woman, hair pulled back in a tight bun, face carefully molded into a stern but blank expression. "May I help you?"

She stood stiff and tall and had a perfectly cultured non-accent. If he'd been a betting man, Darrius would bet she had been raised in this house, and probably wasn't the first generation in her family who could claim that. "Yes. We are Detectives Darrius Kalb and Emma Evans. We have been assigned to look into the circumstances surrounding Hope's absence."

"Did you say Detective *Kalb*?"

Darrius kept his face professional. He expected it, even after five years as an Enforcer, but he couldn't quite get rid of the hope that people would fail to recognize his name. When his work involved the rich, they always expected special treatment due to familiarity with his parents and their bank account. When his case involved the poorer

citizens of Savannah, on the other hand, people closed ranks and frequently caused his job to be harder than it needed to be. Sometimes he wondered why he didn't just fall back on his biology degree and get a job in a lab somewhere doing research science. "Yes, ma'am. Detective Kalb."

"I'll inform Mr. and Mrs. Contee right away. " The woman turned aside to let them through the door, shutting it softly behind them once they were in the foyer. She turned and headed toward the stairs, pausing with her foot on the tread of the first step. She glanced over her shoulder. "Mrs. Contee will be pleased when she hears who has been assigned to the case," she said, color flooding her cheeks before she turned and hurried up the wide staircase.

"What was that all about?" Emma asked.

"What happened to you locking your lips and throwing away the key?"

Emma snorted, but held up her hands, palms facing outward toward Darrius. "All right, all right. Don't get your boxers in a bunch, big guy. I was just asking."

Darrius rolled his eyes but chose not to carry the conversation any further. You could never tell whether the rich would keep you waiting because you were beneath their notice, or greet you immediately since you were since you were showing the brains to answer their summons. His parents tended to be the waiting kind. Darrius was guessing this time it would be a short wait, considering the Contees were anxious about their absent child.

"Detective Kalb? I am so pleased someone is finally going to take this seriously."

Darrius smoothed his features before glancing up to a landing at the top of the stairs. A thin woman with long, wavy black hair and tanned skin led a small party the rest of the way down. Her almond-shaped eyes commanded attention even though they were puffy and red. Mr. Contee was at her side, one arm tight around her waist as if he were holding her up. "I'm honored to be able to help you, Mrs. Contee."

"Please. I know that you were an intern on the team that designed Hope. I don't think there's ever been a more beautifully designed Bio than our Hope," she said, her voice breaking.

Darrius's gaze shifted to a movement behind Mrs. Contee. Rune Kerapa stood there, quiet but with her eyebrows drawn together in a fierce frown. Darrius guessed that she wasn't happy to be second-best in anyone's eyes. Second place certainly hadn't been in her vocabulary in school; he doubted it would be now. Her presence was not a good sign.

"Please," Mrs. Contee continued when she was able to speak again. "Call us Jasira and Nuru. No need for formality here."

"Of course." He turned slightly to include Emma in the conversation. "And this is my partner, Detective Evans."

Rune stepped forward, her hand outstretched, a folded piece of paper gripped firmly by her long, thin fingers. "Pleased to have you joining us. I'm happy for your help on the case."

Darrius nodded, mentally filling out reports in order to keep his face blank. "Miss Kerapa," he said, taking the paper from her and handing it to Emma. He wanted to make

sure Rune Kerapa knew he wasn't intimidated by her last name. Or the stunt she had pulled earlier. She had won that particular battle, but he wasn't about to wave the white flag.

Thankfully, even trouble-making heiresses like Rune couldn't fight regulations. Not twice. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave while we discuss the situation, Miss Kerapa."

"It's Ms. Kerapa, Detective. And the Contees have asked that I be present. They'd like the support." Rune blinked rapidly several times. If Darrius hadn't known better, he'd have sworn she was trying to charm him. "And as you'll see, your captain has already given permission for me to sit in on any interviews."

"You have to be licensed to be provided information on an open case." Darrius glanced over at the paper Emma was still reading.

"This isn't even a case yet, is it?" Rune crossed her arms and shifted her weight. "This is just to determine whether or not there should be a case opened. Besides, I've got a temporary license, pending testing in two days."

"She's right, Darrius. Captain's orders," Emma said in a low voice.

"Sorry to disappoint you." Rune cocked her head to the side. "I get to stay."

Darrius reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out his PocketPup and its matching stylus. An early generation D.O.G., it had caused the guys at the station to laugh the first time he'd pulled it out, but it had "archaic" features that were no longer available on new models, which had replaced the need for a stylus with high quality talk-

to-text recording abilities. Darrius preferred taking his own notes. Something about the physical connection with his notes made it easier to remember them.

“Well, since everything is in order, we’d be happy to have an extra set of ears in the interview, and, since you’re new to this, I’m sure you’ll be happy to let Detective Evans and I take the lead.”

He flashed a smile wide enough he could feel his eyes crinkle before turning his attention back to the Contees. “Now, why don’t you go over everything that’s happened since you realized Hope wasn’t at school?” Glancing at his military-grade Orb ring phone, he noted the time on his PocketPup.

Out of the corner of his eyes he noticed movement: Rune’s arms dropped to her side, hands clenched into fists. She was angry again. It seemed to be her only honest emotion. She was sure to have more to say about the matter, but he didn’t care. He was here for the Contees and for Hope. A potentially missing young woman took precedence over a decidedly angry one.

Chapter Eight

As the Contees shared their story with Darrius, Rune walked over to the window and stared at the rose bushes that lined the front porch. They were her favorite flower. Beautiful enough to draw you in, but with thorns to remind a person who was really in charge. Darrius never seemed to respond to Rune’s beauty, so this time she was skipping to the thorns.

She needed to let him know what she had learned about Hope. Let him and his partner know that she was already doing a better job than they were. An image of herself

as a private detective--with close-fitting, dark-wash jeans, a soft pink blouse, and an eco-leather jacket--flashed through her head. He had said she didn't belong in his world. In school he'd always been top of every class and sport he was in. Now he would loathe being proven wrong, and she was just the girl to do it.

Of course, Jasira would fall apart if Rune just blurted out the information. She clicked her front teeth together softly, fingers keeping rhythm on her upper arms. How could she hurry this along?

Rune turned away from the roses and looked back at the small crowd surrounding the Contees. Her mom was working on her D.O.G.. Rune's bodyguards--and her mother's--were standing to one side, and a maid stood at the door to the sitting room. Nuru was back to doing most of the talking, but Jasira kept interjecting her own comments. Pale as she was, she finally seemed like she could stand on her own two feet again.

"Nobody would listen to us; nobody! I just don't understand it!" Jasira crossed her arms and leaned into Nuru.

Rune stepped forward. "*I'm* listening to you. The detectives are listening to you now. And I'm sure they'll be happy to go talk to Hope's friends with me. Maybe even talk to her boyfriend's parents. We'll figure out where she is. Don't you worry." Rune looked over at Darrius, her face as relaxed as she could make it. Innocence wasn't usually her style, but her mom was watching.

With a sigh, Jasira rested her hand on Rune's shoulder. "Thank you." She sniffed and wiped her eyes again. "She's a good girl, you know. Like you." Jasira's gaze met

Rune's. "I suppose all Bios are, aren't you? I always forget to think about her that way. She's just our daughter. Choosing her features and having her implanted doesn't change that. It's no different than if we had gotten a Natural child through the normal process."

"Of course, Mrs. Contee. You're a good mother. I wouldn't expect anything less." Rune offered a smile, mentally urging Jasira along in her head. The longer this took, the longer Hope would be missing. The longer Rune would have to wait until she could get rid of her bodyguards. "What do you say, Detectives? Do you have what you need from Jasira and Nuru?"

Darrius opened his mouth, but it was Emma who stepped forward and answered. "Yes, thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Contee. You've been quite helpful. We recommend you stay close to home, so it is easier for us to keep you updated."

"Of course. We'll be expecting your call." Nuru turned to wave the maid forward. "Please see the detectives and Ms. Kerapa out."

"Actually, I did have one more question we didn't get to ask before Miss Kerapa interrupted."

Rune raised an eyebrow and gave a soft snort. Evidently Darrius wasn't going to give up easily. It would only make his fall harder when it came.

Darrius ignored Rune. "You seem pretty sure that Hope isn't with her boyfriend. That she's missing. Is there anyone who would want to cause your family harm? Do you have any enemies?"

A rush of adrenaline coursed through Rune's veins. This was quite exciting, like being in the boardroom. Only that the stakes were higher here. Turned out that higher

stakes made it more fun. Rune took a slow, deep breath, and waited to see what would happen.

“Absolutely not.” Nuru’s voice was low and firm. It was the first time Rune had seen a glimpse of how he could run a company. “We are honorable in our dealings with clients, servants, and the service businesses that we work with. We are prompt with our bills, generous with our tips, and active in community and Savannah-wide fundraisers for the Historical Society and art schools. We have no enemies.”

“Of course, sir, but even the most upstanding families can encounter difficult business dealings on occasion.” Rune hated to admit it, but she was impressed. Darrius wasn’t backing down. “I need you to think carefully. Is there anyone who--deservedly or not--took offense over the way you or your company dealt with them?”

“I already told you--”

“Nuru. Please. He’s just trying to help.” Jasira’s voice was firm.

Nuru sighed. “Fine. You’re right. But my answer is still the same. There’s nothing in our dealings, recent or otherwise, that could be considered the slightest bit negative. No one, to our knowledge, has even been mildly disgruntled.” He gestured at the maid again. “Now, my maid will see you out and I look forward to hearing from you about progress on Hope’s location.”

Nuru turned and headed back up the stairs, taking Jasira with him. Rune gave her mother a quick hug, and watched as Willow and her bodyguards trailed up the stairs behind the Contees. When they were out of sight, she turned to Darrius and Emma.

“Seriously? You couldn’t have handled that better? Are you sure you should be taking the lead?”

Darrius’s eyebrows shot up. “It was an important question. It needed to be asked.”

Emma’s eyes were wide when she stepped between them. “Let’s take this outside, shall we?”

Rune swallowed back her retort and nodded. “Fine. I have some important information for you.” She brushed past Darrius and Emma, waited for the maid to open the door, and headed outside. She leaned against and watched as Darrius and Emma had a furious-looking conversation on the porch, but even her Bio hearing couldn’t make sense of what they said over the sound of gardeners cutting the grass.

Darrius glared at her. “Let’s get this over with. What do you think we need to know?”

“I tracked down Hope’s travel plans.” Rune smiled. “She never made it to the jetport. Neither did her boyfriend. And my father hasn’t located her bio signature yet, either in Savannah or St. Louis.”

“And you’re just now telling us this?”

Rune shrugged and pushed off from her car. “It doesn’t change what we need to do, right? We’re still going to go talk to Elizabeth first. She’s the one who got the text about where Hope was supposedly going. She lives just down the street; I’ll meet you there.” With a big wave, she climbed into her car and took off down the driveway. She probably should have waited for them, but she wanted a few minutes to call Kai. If Rune was going to stay ahead of the detectives, she was going to need some help.

Chapter Nine

Hope woke up on a cot. Again. Her leg throbbed, and her head was tender, but she had to start looking for a way out. Her captors had made it clear they were willing to kill her if things didn't work the way they wanted. She couldn't wait for her family to rescue her.

She gazed around the room. There were only the four brick walls and the door with the small hatch in the bottom; no windows or vents. The ceiling was low, with seamless lighting panels casting a soft glow, no better than a nightlight. Thankfully, one of the upgrades her parents had purchased was better night vision. She could practically see in the dark.

Hope stood and limped around the room, running her hands over as many bricks as she could. None of them were loose. None of them even stuck out, or had any imperfections in them whatsoever. The walls were utterly smooth.

After making a complete circuit of the room, she stopped in front of the door. It was made of wood with old, twenty-first-century-style door handle and hinges in place of electronic openers. There were no loose nails, rotting wood, or rusting metal. She wasn't likely to be able to break through it. She sighed and lay down on the floor. The weakest point in the room seemed to be the hatch that they had shoved food through that morning. If it really *had* been just that morning; there was no way to tell for sure how long she'd been passed out.

With just a little maneuvering, Hope pulled open the small door and pressed her cheek to the floor. She was at one end of a hallway lined on both sides with more doors. Each had a small food hatch at the bottom. Hope frowned. Were there other prisoners?

“Hello? Is there anyone out there?” she said, softly at first and then a little louder. A few moments later, there was some scuffling: first one hatch, and then a second and third opened up. She couldn’t see any faces, but there was definitely movement in the shadows. “My name’s Hope. I think--”

“Hope? Thank Mendel! I didn’t know what they had done to you!”

Resisting the urge to rattle her door and try to rip it open, Hope felt her chest loosen. Her boyfriend was all right. “Emre! I’m fine. I’m here. What about you?”

“I’m fine, Hope, don’t worry about me. They haven’t done anything but shove food under my door. Are you sure you’re all right? I heard yelling earlier.”

“No. No. I...” Hope frowned, unsure what to say next. She wasn’t used to lying, but she didn’t want to worry him. “I must have slept through that. I’m fine. What about you others? You all right?”

“Others?”

“Yes, Emre. There’s at least two more. Hello?” Hope scraped her lip between her teeth and took a deep breath. “Please answer...”

A long silence filled the hallway before a soft female voice floated finally answered. Hope was barely able to hear it. “We...we shouldn’t talk. They’ll be back soon. They don’t like when we talk. It makes her mad.”

“I can see everything. No one’s here,” Hope answered.

A new voice came from a room beside Hope's, a room that she hadn't even noticed before. "The men aren't afraid to hurt us, as long as they don't leave marks. The freak wants my legs left unharmed."

"Shoulders," said a tired sounding young man from the door next to Emre.

"Cheekbones," whispered the soft female voice.

"Someone's coming!" Emre's urgent whisper cut across everyone else's. Food hatches clattered shut, and Hope picked up the faint sound of scraping as people backed away from doors.

Hope turned back towards her cot. The blanket and pillow were useless, unless she could somehow strangle or smother her captors, but maybe the frame would provide her with a tool or weapon. It wasn't only Hope's life on the line now; there were others who needed saving. Two of them seemed to have already given up, but Hope wouldn't stop. Not until they were *all* safe again--and the freak and her henchmen were behind bars where they couldn't hurt anyone else. Safety and justice; Hope wouldn't rest until she had both.

Chapter Ten

"So tell me everything that happened from beginning to end.," said Kai. "Who said what. I need to know what's going on."

They whirled off the dance floor and headed back to the table where their drinks waited. It was nice here at The Watering Hole; no one recognized them. Skin-tight glow fabric was everywhere, pulsing to the slow, heavy bass weaving through the more frenzied sound of classical instruments and synthesized counterbeats.

Kai glanced down at her hands--hands that didn't look any different than anybody else's in the blue-green underwater lighting that the club used--and sighed. She and Rune had been at the club for two hours, and Kai had managed not to ask any questions. It was time for her friend to share the details of what happened.

Rune swirled her straw in her drink and took a sip before nodding. "All right. Well, while you were checking the malls and posting fliers, the detectives and I were interviewing persons of interest." Rune frowned. "Darrius kept trying to tell me what to do, but Detective Evans was nice about it. And everyone was much more comfortable talking to me than to the detectives."

"Tell me again how you managed to tag along with them?"

"Oh, that was Daddy." Rune shrugged, still playing with her straw as she watched people on the dance floor. Kai could see Rune's leg shaking to the beat of the music; it wouldn't be long before her friend headed back into the center of things. "I convinced him it would be good publicity, and he got me a temporary private investigator's license." Rune frowned. "I still have to drag them along with me, though." She gestured in the direction of her bodyguards.

"I know I didn't learn anything with the busywork you gave me, and I don't think anyone has called because of the posters I put up. But you must have found something, otherwise we wouldn't be celebrating." Kai paused to take a drink, the sweet cherry flavor coating her mouth, the cool liquid soothing her raw throat. Clubs and conversations didn't go together all that well. "You *did* have a reason for us to celebrate, right?"

“Yeah, yeah, but I want another dance first.” Rune set her drink down hard and slid off her silver stool.

Kai reached out and grabbed her wrist. “No, no! I want to know about Hope.”

“Fine. If I tell you, will you let me go enjoy myself?”

“You take the situation seriously for a couple of minutes and I’ll even join you for another dance or two before I go home.”

“All right, then.” Rune sat back down, but kept one foot solidly resting on the floor. “I’m pretty sure Hope ran away from home.”

“Wait! What?”

“Yeah. I think she and her boyfriend ran off together. They really did buy intercity jetport tickets, but they never used them and never even showed up at the jetport.

Diamond Labs still hasn’t picked up her Bio signature either. She’s just disappeared.”

Rune leaned forward, elbows on the table. “It’s weird, though. How does somebody just disappear?”

Kai swallowed. She had to be careful, no matter how serious the situation was: Rune tended to run from anyone who expressed strong emotions and Kai couldn’t remember the last time Rune had expressed anything other than confidence or anger. “What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know. Hope must be a runaway. It doesn’t really make sense. Her family loves her and she’s got a great life at home and school. Anyone can see that. And the boyfriend seems to have a pretty good life too.” Rune swallowed the rest of her drink, leaning to peer at something behind Kai. “Hope’s parents didn’t know about Emre, but

other than the deception, they don't seem to care that she was dating, so I don't really know why they were hiding it. But running away is the only thing that makes sense. There still hasn't been a ransom demand."

Rune stood up and grabbed one of Kai's hands. "Come on. I want to find a boy. A man. Even a girl would do at this point. I just want to have some fun! I had to be so serious all day. Being a detective was supposed to be fun and instead it was just work."

Taking a long swallow of her drink, Kai used the time to figure out what she could say next. Rune could be high maintenance, especially when they were out in public. It could be exhausting to carry on a conversation with her, and Kai's energy was already flagging. It had been a long day. "What's the next step?"

Rune sighed. "The detectives have city workers looking for her in the hospitals and morgues. And there's the posters you put up. We're getting together tomorrow morning at Diamond Labs. They should have found her Bio signature by then. If not, I don't know what. Detective Evans seems smart, for a Norm. Between her and me, I'm sure we'll figure something out. Hope will be back in her bed by tomorrow night, if for no other reason than she'll realize the world isn't very fun without her family's credits." Rune grabbed both of Kai's hands. "Now, please. Enough talk. We came here to blend. Be Norms. Let's dance. Find boys."

Kai decided it was time to let the matter go. Laughing, she shook her head. "We've been blending for two hours. My feet hurt."

"I told you not to buy those shoes." Rune batted her eyelashes. "Come on. Just a couple more songs?"

Kai gave up. “All right, but just two more.” It was important to be specific with Rune.

“Whatever you say.”

“Promise?” Kai raised an eyebrow. “Promise me, Rune, or I’m not going out for one more note.”

“You said two songs.” Rune grabbed Kai’s arm, pulling her toward the dance floor.

“Promise me, Rune.”

“All right, all right. I promise.”

Two more dances was a small price to pay to make her friend happy. Most people Kai associated with didn’t understand why she spent any time with Rune, who was seen as uncaring, snobbish, and superficial. But Kai knew that Rune’s faults had been drilled into her by Mr. and Mrs. Kerapa. Rune, when left to her own devices, tried to be a good person. She didn’t always succeed, Kai thought as she watched Rune shove a path through the crowd. But Rune meant well.

“Come on, Kai. I’m not letting you get away with swaying like a mooner. Dance!”

Kai tried not to feel hurt, even as she tried not to get swept into Rune’s dizzying, enthusiastic dancing. Kai was sure her friend hadn’t meant it, but it hurt for Rune to question Kai’s sanity. The “free design” that Kai’s parents had won in the lottery had been very basic. Kai was the *only* Bio who could end up with mental health issues. Kai sniffed. “I told you. These shoes. My feet hurt!”

“Take them back,” Rune shouted.

“I’ve already worn them!”

“So?”

Kai stopped dancing. “I saved for months to buy these shoes,” she shouted over the music. “My purchase meant something to the girl who sold them to me. Probably rent. You know those girls work on commission. We’ve been over this.”

“I still don’t get why you care. It’s not your job to care.” Rune stopped and squinted at Kai, as if it would bring her into better focus.

“It’s everybody’s job to care, Rune. Humans help each other out. Or they should. It’s what makes us human. Isn’t it why you’re helping Hope?”

Rune nodded her head slowly, lips pursed. “All right. How about we get one last drink and then we can go. I won’t even hold you to the second dance.”

They headed back to the table. Kai was finding it hard to keep her mind off Hope. They were practically the same age.

And they were both Bios. What if it had been Kai who had disappeared? Had Rune made that connection too? Would Rune ever be able to make a connection like that?

“One more for each of us, please,” Kai requested after catching the attention of a waitress.

Rune raised a perfectly arched white eyebrow. “‘Please?’ It’s her job to bring us the drinks, you know.”

“And it’s polite to say please. I know your parents taught you that.”

“You don’t need to be polite to your subordinates,” Rune said, scratching behind one ear. “It’s just the way it is. You really need to start learning this stuff if you want to catch a guy in my circle. My parents gave you the in, but you have to prove you belong here.”

Kai snorted. “I don’t belong and I don’t *want* to belong.”

Rune never took her gaze off the dancers. “Whatever. Do you mind if I stick around and dance some more? I really just don’t want to leave yet. It’s so nice being here. Nobody notices my skin or my hair or my eyes. I can be a Norm here.” Rune smiled. “Besides. I still have a man to find.”

“I know, Rune.” Kai sighed. Nobody noticed her green skin or hair or eyes in this lighting; at The Watering Hole, everyone was some shade of green. It *was* nice, for a little while.

But for Kai, it was just as nice when she left the club, heading back into the real world, where she could be her real self, green skin and all. Sure, it marked her as different--and always would, even if Bios became more popular. But Kai liked being different on the outside. It reflected the fact that she was different on the inside. “I’ll see you next week then, at the next fundraiser? Keep me updated on Hope. I’m happy to help any way I can.”

With a small squeal, Rune flung her arms around Kai in a quick hug. “Thanks, Kai! I think Daddy scheduled us for another charity event. Have to make the labs look good.”

Kai opened her mouth to respond, but Rune had already spun back into the dancers, her hips shimmying to the music. Even tonight, looking like a Norm, Rune commanded the attention of the room. Kai watched for a few moments before gathering up her purse. She left a tip big enough to cover both of them and headed for the exit.

Outside, a small breeze dried the sweat on Kai's face, helping her to cool down, even though the air temperature was warmer. It smelled better, too. This sector was one of the few where people invested in ornamental gardens as well as the government-mandated edible plant gardens. It was the reason she spent so much free time here during the spring months.

The crosswalk lines in the road in front of her flashed red and Kai jerked to a stop. She let her gaze wander aimlessly as she waited for the lines to switch back to green. Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, her attention settled on the park across the street.

Sector Seven's central park was lauded as one of the prettiest in Savannah--some said, one of the prettiest in the United Conglomerate. Kai didn't know if she believed that and, with travel permits harder to come by every year, didn't think she'd ever get a chance to compare. But she did know that she loved the rare oaks and even rarer Spanish moss that government botanists had worked hard to bring back to Savannah.

Kai ran across the crosswalk towards the park, yellow lights blinking beneath her aching feet. She hadn't noticed any Enforcers around, but they were almost always nearby, and Kai didn't have the money to waste on a fine. Her front foot hit the other curb just as the crosswalk turned red. Kai breathed a sigh of relief.

Breathing in the rose and lilac scented night air, Kai strolled to the fountain in the middle of the park. She glanced around and, finding that she was still alone, reached into the basin and scooped some water up, splashing her face and shoulders with the cool liquid. She kicked off her shoes and walked around the circular base, fingertips trailing in the water. This was just what she needed to wind down.

Rune was her friend. The only Bio Kai regularly spent time with, since the others were rich, and found Kai to be beneath their notice. They didn't care that Kai was a Bio; they just cared that she was working class. It was an unforgivable sin in their eyes. Rune liked to provide Kai with tips on how to join the world of the rich, but Kai knew it would never happen. The most Kai could hope for was to teach Rune that the rich weren't better people, just different people; that everyone was worthy of kindness and help.

Glancing down at her Orb ring phone, Kai was surprised to see how much time had passed. She was never going to get enough sleep before work now. Her small herd of rescued pets would be missing her, eager for a walk and some cuddle time.

She slid her shoes back on and dried her hands on her skirt, glad once against that her taste ran towards longer, fuller skirts than Rune's did. No one would ever notice the wet spot and she wouldn't be in breach of the contract her parents had signed after winning a free Bio child in the Savannah lottery. Kai was just as trapped by the Kerapas' expectations as Rune was.

She headed in the direction of her apartment, taking the longer route through the park. It would mean she would lose even more sleep and risk being less-than-

presentable at work--at least by Kerapa standards. But it was her life and she was going to make it a happy one. And a walk in the park always made her day better.

Chapter Eleven

Rune glanced over her shoulder at her bodyguards and gave them a little wave. Bathrooms were nice because the bodyguards stayed outside. This bathroom was especially nice because it had several windows near the ceiling. Windows that were going to provide her an escape tonight.

After checking to make sure the bathroom was empty, Rune reached up and opened a window as wide as she could. Her six feet of height came in handy when she wanted to ditch her bodyguards. With one last glance around, she bent her knees and jumped, pulling herself up and through the window. She swung one leg and then another over the sill, dropped down into the alley behind the club, then trotted to the front of the building. Her prize for escaping awaited her.

“Gentlemen! You ready to have some fun?” She inserted herself between her conquests. They were both even taller than her, and well-muscled, of course, one dark-haired and dark-eyed, the other blonde and blue-eyed. The only thing she was missing was a redhead. That would have been perfection. “We’ve only got a few minutes before they come looking for me. My car’s on the other side of the park. Let’s get back to my place, shall we?”

Arms looped through theirs, she headed down the sidewalk before they had a chance to respond. They hadn’t been chosen for their conversation; she was hoping to put their mouths to better use than that.

A scream shattered the quiet evening air. "Help!"

Rune stopped. Turned her head toward the park. "Did you hear that?" The men shook their heads.

"Help! Somebody help!"

"Kai?" Rune pulled away from the men. "I'll be back," she called to them.

She checked her gun, flipping it off of the stun setting; bent and pulled her knife from her boot. She ran through the old stone archway of the park, heading toward where she thought the scream came from. Spanish moss hung from the limbs of the park's trees. When she reached the central fountain, she turned slowly to get her bearings.

"Help! Please!"

Men's laughter told Rune just where to go.

She headed off the path and into the trees. The air was musky; heavy with the promise of the approaching storm she had noticed earlier that day. Another hour and it would hit Savannah. Branches on the smaller trees slapped at Rune's bare arms. Thorns from a secluded rose garden tore at her pants. Rune kept going.

A wordless scream told Rune she had almost reached them. She moved forward slowly, until she reached the edge of a clearing, and crouched behind a bush.

There were five men. Four of them were positioned in a loose circle, pushing Kai back and forth, groping her as they passed her around. The fifth man stood off to one side, arms crossed as he leaned against the trunk of a tree, silent but watchful. Five men, no sign of guns. This would be no different than the test this morning.

“She only wants the eyes this time; we can have fun with this one before we take her back!” The men all laughed.

“Hurry it along, boys,” the one beside the tree said. “Have your fun when we have her somewhere secure.”

Rune took a deep breath. Stepping sideways, her feet rolling heel to toe in the soil, Rune aligned herself with the biggest of the thugs. She reversed the hold on one of her knives and charged into the clearing. At the last moment, she dropped to her knees, sliding past him and slashing the back of his calves.

He screamed and dropped to the ground, clutching his legs and rolling on his back. All around the clearing, the men swore and scrambled for their weapons.

Blood glittering on her knife, Rune rolled back to her feet. Letting the momentum carry her forward, she executed a spinning side-kick to the nose of the skinniest thug, before turning and shooting the man who held Kai’s left arm. Rune grabbed Kai’s hand, thrusting her gun at her friend.

“Run!” Rune shoved Kai past the remaining two men.

Kai hesitated. “I won’t leave you.” She raised the gun and shot at one of the men.

Rune jumped at Kai’s wild shot.

“Fucking bitch!” The skinny thug had finally righted himself and took a wild swing at her.

She ducked under his fist, standing up and retaliating with a side kick to the stomach. The man folded in on himself, one hand still trying to hold back the blood flowing from his nose.

“Run! Get help!” Rune shouted over her shoulder at Kai. She landed one more side-kick on the skinny man, the pop of his knee swallowed by his screams of pain. Rune gave Kai a shove with her knife-less hand. “Go! I’m right behind you. I’ve got this.”

Kai turned and raced away. Rune faced the two men who were left. The leader stepped away from the tree, but did not join the fight.

The other man was approaching cautiously, a lightness to his step, hands guarding his face. “You’re a fucking pain in the ass.” He looked like he might know how to fight.

“I try.” She could take him in her sleep.

She shifted slightly, rotating around the clearing until the fighter was between the tree-man and herself. “Ready to join the fight now that I’ve taken out half your friends?” she taunted, waving her dagger in a “come and get me” motion. “If you’ve got big enough balls to take on a woman who can defend herself!”

The man shook his head, letting out a harsh laugh. “There ain’t no Bio better than a real human like me, bitch. You’re not gonna do any better than the other one, even if you do know how to fight.”

Rune saw movement in the corner of her eye and took a half a step to the side, bending backward just in time to see a knife sparkle across her field of vision. Someone new had just joined the fight. She didn’t know where he had come from, but she knew where he was going. She grabbed the thug’s wrist, using his own momentum to pull him past her and brought her knee up into his stomach. He staggered. A front snap kick to the face and he fell to the ground, silent.

A second later, the man standing across from her stepped forward with a roundhouse aimed at Rune's head. She dropped into a squat, one leg outstretched as she swept his balancing leg out from underneath him. He fell backward, his head thumping loudly when it bounced off the ground.

Rune crossed over to where he lay, considering how to finish him. He would be down for some time. Maybe long enough to get him into Enforcer custody.

But he had threatened Kai. Rune wanted to hurt him. Maim him. Maybe even kill him.

"Ouch!" Rune stumbled backwards, her scalp stinging as the tree man grabbed her hair, yanking her off balance. She remembered the knife in her hand and sliced at the air behind her, but her wrist was caught before she could make contact with anything. Caught and twisted until her fingers went numb and the knife fell to the ground.

"You're good. I'll give you that. The mistress would like your strength. She might even add you to the collection. Then again." He leaned in close, his breath moist and hot against her ear. "You just cost me most of my men. Maybe I should make you pay up before I take you to see her."

He wrapped his fingers around her throat, releasing her hair to pull out a knife, and pressed the tip against her inner thigh.

Rune stared directly into his eyes to show she wasn't afraid. This man was more resourceful than the others. So there was a reason he was the boss. He was good.

She'd be better.

He backed her against a tree.

The man was taller than her. Outweighed her. He had a scar across the right side of his lips and had broken his nose at some point. He'd been in a fight or two and survived. But so had she. She'd been training since she was four. She'd been in thousands of fights and done better than survive. She'd won.

Rune took a deep breath and forced herself to wait until he leaned towards her. When his lips were almost touching hers, she slid her hand between her thigh and his knife, fisted her free hand in his hair for leverage, and drove her knee into his groin as she pushed the knife towards his belly. He backed up, half bent over, the knife slicing deep into her palm.

Pain shot up her arm and stole her breath. Tears filled her eyes and her vision danced. She retreated quickly, tripping over roots and falling to the ground as she tried to put the tree between her and the man. Rune scrubbed the tears from her eyes, as he headed towards her. Jaw clenched, she sucked air through her teeth and climbed to her feet. She wasn't going to let him touch her while she was still down.

"Take more than a knife to stop me." She forced a smile as she cradled her hand against her stomach.

"And it'll take more than a nut shot to stop me."

He circled the tree, knees bent and hands up to protect his face, one hand fisted, the other holding the blade of the knife backwards, against his forearm. Any punch from that hand would be followed up by a potentially deadly cut. Breath slowing to a more steady rhythm, Rune slowly circled back towards the last place she had seen her knife, eyes on him as she waited for him to make a move.

She didn't have to wait long. With a quick two steps forward, he threw his first punch. She ducked under it, leaning into him as she stepped forward. An elbow strike to the chin. A punch to his knee. Her forward momentum carried her behind him. She spun, arms up, hissing when she tried to curl her fingers around her cut palm. If making a fist hurt this much, how was she going to land a punch?

He turned. Rubbed at his knee. Straightened and gave an experimental bounce on both legs. His lips twitched, a slight lift upward that might have been a smile. "You might actually make me work at this. Not many can say that." A punch that missed her head. A jab at her stomach she pulled back from just in time. A roundhouse to her upper arm that knocked her off her feet.

Rune's head was spinning. She'd never taken that hard of a hit in the dojo. She gave a little shake and narrowed her eyes, forcing her gaze to focus on him. Everything seemed to slow down. He leaned forward, knife once more pointed at her. She rolled to the side and kicked him in the chest, screaming when she felt the hot pain of another cut.

Her heart thumping, Rune turned and crawled towards her knife. Her fingers wrapped around it just as the man grabbed her hair again, pulling her to her feet. Rune turned and slashed his cheek. He shook her head roughly and growled, backhanding her before letting her drop back to the ground. Rune's cheek throbbed. Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes again. Her field of vision darkened. Now was not the time to pass out.

She scrambled backward, placing more distance between herself and the man. With unhurried movements, he stalked her across the clearing, slowly rolling up his

sleeves. His eyes narrowed, and he reminded Rune of when her father was about to tell her how she had let him down. He looked angry. Very angry.

Her hand touched her knife handle. She lurched to her feet, knuckles white where she gripped the hilt, holding it out as a barrier between him and her. She continued to back away, shifting sideways around the clearing until she was back where she had started. He flashed white teeth, prominent canines that sent a shiver down her spine.

She whirled and ran into the trees. She was bleeding, and two cuts were enough. Her bodyguards would be looking for her soon. She didn't want to get them hurt. Rune needed to find somewhere to hide until they caught up with her.

Skidding and sliding, she made it back to the main path. Her arm throbbing, Rune turned where she'd left her dates. They were long gone.

The sound of breaking branches behind her grew closer. She didn't see Enforcers anywhere. Her stomach lurched. At least she didn't have to worry about a police report making its way to her father. Across the street and three blocks to the south, the light of the market caught her eye. This time of night it would be bustling with second-shifters heading home. Not as busy as it was during the day, but the throng of people would still be able to help her disappear.

"You can't get away. Give up now and I'll go easier on you."

She ran full speed toward the crowd, weaving between tired shoppers, but forced to slow down the deeper into the group she went. Crouching slightly to minimize her height, she let her eyes dart from one side of the market to the other. There had to be a

hiding spot here somewhere. Behind her she could hear disgruntled people as the man bullied his way through the market stalls.

“Pardon me. Excuse me. Coming through,” she said, doing her best not to bump into anyone. You never knew where lower class people like these had been. Most of the metal shelters in this market were a hodgepodge of recycled advertising and various size bolts and random pieces of rope, a sure sign of a distinct lack of credits. Half-way through, she spotted a stall rich enough to have an actual store front. It even looked like it had been built by professionals, although the doors and windows were an old-fashioned, non-automated style. “Thank Mendel!”

With a quick glance over her shoulder, Rune ducked into the store and under the sales counter, the breath hissing out of her when she bumped into one of the metal table supports.

“Are you all right, child?” an old woman asked softly, bending over to peer at Rune. Silver hair flowed over her shoulders and brushed against Rune’s hand.

“I didn’t think it was that bad,” Rune gasped, wiping at the blood on her upper arm. “Twice. He got me twice.”

“We need to get you some help.” The woman reached to help Rune stand back up.

Rune shook her head and tucked herself into the corner under the counter. “No. There’s a man chasing me. I can’t let him see me.”

“All right, all right. Don’t worry. You’re safe here.”

Rune blinked rapidly and gave a small shake of her head. Her thoughts were starting to grow fuzzy around the edges. The lights kept sparking off of the woman’s

butterfly brooch, easily distracting her as the adrenaline left her system. Rune took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind and stay awake. She became aware of the warmth of blood trickling down her arm. Her head became light and her eyelids heavy. Rune put her arm out to catch herself as her world went dark, and she slumped onto the floor.

Chapter Twelve

After a long day of dead ends, Darrius was ready to head home, watch the latest episode of Science News, and go to bed. Hands shoved in his pockets, he started the long trek to the public transport station. A walk would be a good way to let go of the headache Rune had caused. Her smart ass mouth, and having to explain the presence of bodyguards to everyone they interviewed, had been far more trouble than it was worth. At least this way he would get to walk through the market, something he enjoyed doing, and end his day on a high note. Or as high of a note as it could end on, when a young woman seemed to have vanished into thin air.

The sights, sounds, and smells of the market would also help remind him why he had given up a career in science--a career his parents were happy with--and become an Enforcer. This particular market was known for the spices produced in this sector. There were plenty of other handcrafted items and secondhand shops, but it was the spices--and the way they made the market smell--that kept him coming back. You could smell how hard the people in the market worked every credit they had. Most of them barely made enough to cover food, clothing, and shelter. People like this didn't need another scientist designing Bios or creating technology they'd never buy. People like this needed someone

protecting their rights. Maybe watching them on their way home from work would shake loose an idea of what to do next for Hope.

This was definitely the most confusing case he'd had so far. All of the texts and plans that had been made by Hope and her boyfriend seemed legitimate. Rune had even tracked down the tickets they'd purchased. Of course, they never actually used them.

And he hadn't been able to track down anyone who had seen them after the texts were sent. It seemed like Hope might have truly been kidnapped.

Except for the fact that there was no ransom. So they'd decided to put an APB out on both kids, as well as notifying the hospitals and morgues around Savannah and St. Louis. All of that required them to sit around and wait, however, and Darrius wasn't fond of that approach. Not when a sixteen year old girl was missing.

He'd barely entered the market when he noticed suspicious activity. As he watched, the crowd's movements changed from random milling about, to that of people avoiding an object in their midst. He'd bet credits that someone or something was running through the mob. Darrius moved forward, concerned about what might be happening. Since the commotion was moving in his direction, it didn't take long before he could see specifics.

Specifically black skin and white hair.

Darrius groaned. He'd already had enough of Varunani Kerapa to last the month, let alone one day. She kept glancing over her shoulder. Judging by the shouts and curses in her wake, she was being chased. Before he could call out to her, she ducked into a shop, disappearing from view.

He hurried closer, waiting to see who or what was chasing her. Thirty seconds later, he noticed a tall, well-muscled man pushing his way through the crowd. The man seemed unaware of those in his path, or the curses they sent after him. His eyes scanned the throng, his eyebrows pulled together, and his jaw clenched. This was definitely someone who had been dealing with Rune.

The man walked by the shop without pausing. He pushed a young woman out of the way, shoving her in Darrius's direction, Darrius caught sight of a tattoo on the inside of the man's wrist. It was a dagger with a bright red, snake-like dragon wrapped around the blade. He felt like he'd seen it before, but he couldn't remember where.

"You all right, ma'am?" Darrius asked, stepping forward to help the woman back to her feet.

"I don't know what's wrong with him. Jerk."

"I'm just glad you're all right."

"I am, thanks."

Darrius nodded but stayed silent, pulled out his Pocket Pup and sent a quick voice flick to the dispatch officer, sharing what had happened and requesting an increase in Enforcer presence for the remainder of the night, as well as issuing a BOLO for the man he'd seen. When he was done, he turned and headed into the shop.

He found a dim but clean set of shelves covered in a wide variety of sparkly knick-knacks, including a glass case in the center of the room, filled with butterfly items. Broaches and rings were displayed against a faded black cloth, but it was the large blue Morpho jewelry box that caused a double-take. It would make a great gift.

Neither Miss Kerapa nor a worker were anywhere to be seen.

“Hello?” Darrius called, hands resting on the main counter.

A door opened and a thin old woman almost as tall as he was walked out, shutting the door behind her with a soft click. “How may I help you, sir?”

Darrius noticed a butterfly brooch on the woman’s shoulder winking in the dim lighting. “I saw a friend of mine come in here. She looked like she was upset. I was hoping to see if she was doing all right, but she doesn’t seem to be here. But I know she didn’t leave. Can you please tell me where she is?” He was off duty for now; he wasn’t going to use his Enforcer credentials unless he needed to.

“How do I know you’re not the one who chased her in here? Plenty of ugly men hide behind a pretty face.”

Darrius couldn’t believe the way she was looking at him; like his grandmother used to when he had lied to her as a little boy. Except this time he wasn’t lying. Well, except for the friend part. “Ma’am, I understand your concern, but Miss Kerapa and I went to school together. Our families have known each other since before we were born. And I have to confess, my Enforcer training kicked into overdrive when I saw the way she came running in here. I really must insist on seeing her.”

“I never said she was still here.”

It was Darrius’s turn to put on the “don’t-lie-to-me” stare. “If she wasn’t here you wouldn’t be trying to protect her. You’d just tell me she was gone and send me on my way. Besides.” Darrius looked around the shop one more time. “I’ve got the feeling

there's only the one exit. And I know she didn't come back through that door after she entered."

"Your feelings serve you well in your work, Detective?"

"When necessary."

The woman laughed, a light sound that was more appropriate for a woman decades younger. "I'd venture it's less than it should be." She headed back to the door she had just come through. "But they've served you well today. Miss Kerapa is back here. She seems to have been in a fight." She held the door open for Darrius. "She's received a cut, lost some blood, and fainted. She'll be fine, but I was going to let her stay here for the night."

Darrius knelt next to Rune and lifted the bandage on her arm. The old woman had cleaned it and, from what he could tell, it wasn't going to take long for it to heal. Not surprising for a Bio. He glanced up at the woman. "There's no need for her to stay here. I know where she lives. I'll get her home."

"I'm not sure she should be left alone tonight. Observation is the best policy for any uncommon injury." The old woman folded her hands at her waist, one eyebrow raised.

The challenge was clear on her face, but Darrius didn't mind. Old ladies were always over-protective. She probably didn't even understand all the things that separated Bios and Norms, aside from the obvious differences in looks, of course. Darrius tucked a strand of hair behind Rune's elongated, pointed ear. Even among Bios, such ears were uncommon. Last Darrius had heard, it was a design element that had been priced beyond

what others were willing to pay, even amongst the rich. Mr. Kerapa had always had a reputation for liking rare collectibles.

“All right. I have to say, I disagree; Miss Kerapa will be fine. But--” He held up his hand to quiet any response from the shop owner. “I will take her home and then keep watch for the night; she’ll have a chair or couch I can use. I’ll check on her a couple times. That work?”

“I knew you could be counted on to do the right thing.”

Darrius decided not to bring up her earlier doubts. “Yes, well. Thank you for taking care of her. It’s very kind of you.”

“Anyone would do the same thing.” A small bell sounded from an intercom next to the door. “Ah, I have a customer. Please excuse me. Feel free to stay here as long as you need to.”

Darrius nodded and gave a small wave over his shoulder. He had to figure out the best way to carry an unconscious woman through a crowd of people without grabbing too much attention. The Kerapas would not appreciate the publicity such an action would attract.

The only thing that would possibly work was a private car. Something he didn’t have. And Rune certainly wasn’t able to tell him where hers was.

Or where her bodyguards were, for that matter. Whatever had happened to her shouldn’t have happened to begin with. And now he was left cleaning up her mess. Again. Sighing, he pulled out his old PocketPup and sent a quick voice flick to his parents’ car service.

The door opened and the old woman peeked back into the room. “There anything else I can do to help you? I’m about to close up shop for the night.”

His PocketPup pinged, and he glanced down to see the response from his parents. “Thank you. If we can just stay here for a few minutes until my car service gets here, we’ll get out of your way.”

“Of course. That’s no problem. You stay here. I’ll keep a watch out for a car and driver and let you know when they arrive.”

Darrius nodded and turned his attention back to his Pocket Pup, pulling up his paperwork for the day and flipping it over to holographic mode. With the files centered in front of him, he began transferring his notes from the Hope Contee case onto the appropriate forms. It was the perfect way to forget that he’d just had to use his family’s money and clout for the first time since he graduated from high school.

When the woman announced the car’s arrival, Darrius carried Rune outside and settled her into the back seat, and then folded himself into the seat next to her. Once they were out of sight he could relax. The Kerapas’ reputation was protected and neither Rune’d family nor his would be able to find fault with how he had conducted himself. It was a good result, considering Rune was involved. Now to make sure the rest of the night would go as smoothly.

Chapter Thirteen

After the long ride across town, Darrius was ready to stretch his legs when the driver pulled up to Rune’s building. Her family had the resources to keep her out of an apartment, where Rune would have to live in close proximity to thousands of other

tenants, and put in time working on the hydroponic floor. But it seemed as if she wanted the freedom from her family more than she wanted to avoid getting her hands dirty. It didn't fit with what Darrius knew of Rune Kerapa, but he understood the impulse. He'd made the same decision, more or less.

Of course, from the looks of this building--and the fact that there was a doorman waiting--Darrius had a feeling Miss Kerapa had no problem spending her family's money. And that was where they most certainly differed from each other.

Darrius pulled her out of the car, settling her injured arm against his chest to keep it hidden, and rested her head on his shoulder. She murmured something incomprehensible and snuggled in closer to his neck with a soft sigh. He turned to the doorman, who was already holding the front door open for him.

"She must have found the car to her liking," Darrius said, implying that she had fallen asleep during the car ride.

"Yes, sir."

"Can you push the button for me, please?"

"Of course, sir. Ms. Kerapa's got the 80th floor. You'll have to swipe her fingerprint to get the elevator to open when you get there."

Darrius nodded. "Thank you for your help."

The elevator closed, and Darrius felt himself relax. He glanced down at Rune, amazed at how peaceful she looked. He hadn't realized she could look anything other than ambitious. It was times like these when he was glad there were procedures to fall back on and keep him from doing something foolish.

The elevator dinged. "*Fingerprint please.*" The feminine voice was smoother than the one in his building's elevator. Couldn't risk offending the eardrums of the rich, after all. He shifted his load until he could press Miss Kerapa's finger onto the pad.

"*Thank you, Miss Kerapa. Have a nice evening.*" The door slid open.

Darrius exited the elevator into the apartment, still carrying Rune in his arms, and headed in the direction that most bedrooms tended to be located. After two wrong guesses, Darrius pushed open a door and found a bed. It was large, had a thick comforter covered in ruffles and lace, and more pillows than he cared to count. The carpet was thick and a pair of fuzzy blue troll-feet slippers waited on the floor in front of the night table. It was as far away from what he'd expected for Rune Kerapa's room as it could possibly be. Of course, it was possible that this was a guest room. An apartment this big surely had one or two guest rooms.

He leaned over and placed her in the middle of the bed, worrying for a moment about whether or not the pillows would smother her. Deciding she wouldn't have decorated the bed with them if they were life-threatening, he headed back into the hall to look for an extra blanket. He wasn't going to wrestle with the over-done comforter on the bed, but he didn't want her to be cold, either. Sleep was the best medicine a Bio could get; he didn't think it would be good for her to wake up before morning, not if he could do anything about it.

"What are you doing here?"

Darrius froze, the blanket held out in front of his body as he prepared to drape it over her. He glanced up to the head of the bed. Rune was awake and glaring at him.

“I saw you go into the market shop and saw a man following you,” he stammered. “After talking to the shop owner, I volunteered to bring you home.”

“You didn’t call my parents, did you?” She sat up, wincing when she placed her weight on the wrong arm. She frowned when she noticed her bandages. “The old lady do this?”

Darrius nodded. “And I checked it out. You’ll be fine. I’m more interested in why you were being chased. And how you got injured.”

“I got between a group of men who were intent on abduction. I took out most of them. The guy chasing me was who was left.”

“How stupid are you? Why on Earth would you jump into the middle of something like that? That’s what Enforcers are for, not rich girls like you. Where were your bodyguards, anyway?”

“That’s none of your business, and I’d say I did just fine taking on five men on my own.”

She practically launched herself off of the bed and pushed past Darrius. From the sound of banging and slamming, she’d headed into the kitchen. He decided to follow her. Even though she was awake now and he could leave without worrying about his conscience, he still felt it was important to find out exactly what had happened.

“Those cuts would seem to say you could have used some help.”

“Kai was in trouble. Screaming for help.” She raised an eyebrow and looked at him squarely. “And I was the only one there. Not the Enforcers. Me.”

Darrius tucked his hands into his pockets to keep from clenching his fists. This girl pushed his buttons without even seeming to try. It was a gift, really; probably something her father had designed into her to ensure she'd always control any boardroom she entered.

And why all the other boys at Savannah Prep had followed after her like lonely puppies. She'd have the pick of the litter when she was ready to increase her family fortunes through marital alliance. His own mother had dropped some not so subtle hints that Rune would be welcomed into the family with open arms.

"What? Nothing to say to that?"

"If you had looked for an Enforcer, you wouldn't be injured and the perpetrator would be working his way through processing, along with his compatriots. What do you think happened with them once you had to run away?"

"I haven't thought about it. I suppose they're still there. I didn't leave them in any condition to walk."

Darrius positioned himself directly across from her, the kitchen's breakfast bar the only thing standing between them. "I don't suppose you stop and think about the consequences of your actions very often." He lifted an eyebrow. "You might want to start. You've got some explaining to do with the Enforcers tomorrow, which I doubt your father will appreciate. Unless your chaser went back and cleaned up the scene, in which case we've lost a crime scene that could have led us to the perps."

Rune stood up straight, stretching her spine for every inch it had. "I don't care what those men do next. They were doing something wrong and I stopped them."

“You do this often, then? Help those less fortunate than yourself?”

“Yes. I do. It’s why I’m helping the Contees, after all.”

Darrius snorted. “Is that so?” He gave the counter a light slap. “I remember now. You helped them by asking for *my* help. Trapping my chief into giving it.”

“I was the only one getting answers during the interviews today. I’d say I’ve done plenty.” Rune flashed her teeth, perhaps smiling but looking more like she might bite him instead. “Those men tonight kept mentioning others. Like they’ve done this before. One even mentioned a collection. They were after Kai, and seemed to think I would work just fine in her place. Maybe they have something to do with Hope. Three Bios has to be more than a coincidence. I plan to find out.”

“Of course you do,” Darrius ran a hand through his hair. “All right. Fine.” He sighed and pulled out his PocketPup. “What’d they say, exactly? I can fill out a report now and we’ll finish tomorrow when we meet up with Emma at Diamond Labs.” He flipped it on and held the stylus above the screen. “Now, let’s start at the beginning. What was it that drew your attention?”

“I already told you. A scream.”

Darrius frowned and looked up. “Miss Kerapa, I’d appreciate it if you simply answer the questions. Clearly, concisely, and with as much detail and as little lip as possible.”

“Fine. But I’m not a child. It’s Ms. Kerapa.”

“Very well. Ms. Kerapa. Where were you when you heard the scream?”

“I had just left The Watering Hole. The sound came from Sector 7’s central park.”

“Were you alone?”

“What’s that matter?” Rune asked, leaving the kitchen with a cup of dia and flopping down on her living room couch.

“They can provide additional witnesses.”

Rune shrugged. “I wasn’t alone, but it’s not like they can be witnesses.”

“Because?” Darrius asked, stylus poised as he waited for her to explain.

“I’ve no idea what their names were. They were just two cute men.”

Darrius sighed again. “All right. We’ll come back to that. We can figure out who they are later. Do you know what time it was?”

“One or two, maybe. I don’t pay much attention to time outside of work.” She took a sip of her dia. “So, are we going to get to the interesting stuff now or is there more minutiae you feel a need to drag out of me?”

“This is exactly why I know you weren’t made for this sort of work, *Ms. Kerapa*,” Darrius replied, moving into the living room. “No attention to or patience for the details. In this business, everything is in the details. *Everything*.”

“Sure. Whatever you say, *detective*. But I’m telling you the only details that matter are the ones where the bad guys said they wanted to put me in their collection. I don’t see how what time they said it can change the importance of them saying it at all.”

“It can’t, but it does give us a time upon which we can compare alibis. Now, quit arguing and just answer. I’d like to get home and get some sleep, and you need sleep too if you’re going to heal properly. The benefits of being a Bio can be negated through stupid decision making.”

Rune narrowed her eyes, and Darrius found himself happy that Bio benefits didn't include shooting lightning from the pupils. He dropped into poker face, staring at her blankly until she finally nodded. With that sign of momentary retreat, he launched back into the questions. Once she settled in to simply providing him the answers he needed, he found that she was a good witness. Her answers were clear, more detailed than average--although he would never tell her that--and given without any hesitation.

"All right," he said, saving the file and turning off his Pocket Pup. "That should do it for tonight. I think you should come to Headquarters first, instead of meeting at the labs. What time will work for you? I'll make sure Emma and I are available to finish the paperwork with you."

Rune shrugged and stared down into her cup. "I'm not a morning person unless I have to be. If we're going to wait to head to the office, I'll go ahead and wait until after lunch."

"Not worried they'll slip away from us if you wait until the afternoon?"

"Why should I be? I thought you were good at your job."

Darrius frowned. Rune was being aggressive, even for a typical Kerapa. And she was still staring down into her dia mug. Something was up, and it wasn't a lack of interest in the case. Not any more. He'd bet his badge that she was lying to him. He stared at her for a few seconds before he answered.

"Fine. Do whatever you want to do. I'm certainly not going to try and stop you. Come to the station whenever you're ready to do something about the attempted kidnapping. Or the Hope case. Emma and I will be on top of things, even if you aren't."

“Whatever makes you feel better, Kalb, but we’ll see who was really on top of things when the dust settles, and I’m pretty sure it won’t be you.”

Darrius rolled his eyes. He’d had more than enough Rune for one day. He’d seen her home and she was safe. As a Bio, she’d probably be almost healed by the time she came to the station tomorrow. He wasn’t obligated to do anything else. “Goodnight, *Miss* Kerapa. I’ll see myself out.”

Darrius turned and headed towards the elevator. Rune growled and Darrius instinctively ducked, her dia mug shattering against the elevator door. “It’s *Ms.* Kerapa!”

Darrius kept his face blank until the elevator door shut. He pressed the button for the lobby and finally let himself smile. Maybe he’d sleep all right tonight after all.

Chapter Fourteen

Kai sat with her back to the door, Rune’s gun clenched in one hand, her other hand absently rubbing Charlotte’s shoulder. The scarred and disfigured brown pit bull-wolf mix pressed tight to her side, head resting on Kai’s knees. Her gray cat was draped over her feet, while the tiny black kitten with enormous paws had shoved itself between Kai’s back and the door. It wasn’t until the sun peeked over the jagged skyline of glass buildings and terrace gardens, pouring light through her eastern windows, that Kai realized how much time had passed.

After pulling her limbs free from her animals, Kai rubbed her eyes and struggled to her feet. Her legs tingled from so many hours of being immobile and the room spun as the blood rushed to her head. “Time, please?”

“It is nine a.m.”

The answer from the apartment's control module did not make her feel any better. It had been close to twelve hours since Rune had shoved Kai away from the men. Twelve hours since Rune had said she was right behind Kai. Too long, even for Rune, who was late to everything except fundraising events and her martial arts classes. "Something's happened, Char," Kai said, uneasy.

Charlotte whined, her nails clicking on the bamboo floor. Its fake but expensive-looking wood grain made most of the tenants feel like they were better off than they really were. It only reminded Kai that she was indebted to the Kerapas. Everything from the apartment itself, with its out-dated control module, to the soft yellow couch and bright red cashmere throw rugs and pillows, was a "benefit" of being on retainer to the Kerapas for the rest of her life.

"Maybe I should call her. She might have just gone home instead of here. Right?" Charlotte wagged her tail, a few solid thumps on the floor. "Right. Phone please. Verunani Kerapa, private line."

Kai paced back and forth beside the two-seat kitchen island that acted as table, counter, sink, and stove, waiting for the phone to connect. After a few moments, Rune's module picked up. "Thank you for calling, Miss Kai. Ms. Kerapa is unavailable to answer the phone. Please leave a message and it will be forwarded to her as soon as she checks in."

"Mendel's sake, Rune, you were supposed to be right behind me. I'm worried about you. Call me as soon as possible; I need to know that you are all right. Please, Rune. I need to know you're safe. End message."

“Thank you for calling, Miss Kai. Have a nice day.”

Kai forced her mind to stay calm as she headed up the metal steps to her bedroom loft. It was small, but it was hers. Hers and Charlotte’s and the kitties’. But somehow it didn’t feel as safe as it had the previous day. The warmth was sucked out of it, despite the warm colors--deep oranges, sunny yellows--of her bedroom.

She sat on the edge of her bed and picked up one of her fifteen pillows, cradling it to her chest. Charlotte cocked her head, her warm brown gaze focused intently on Kai.

“What, Char? What should I do?” Charlotte yipped, a small bark she gave only when Rune visited. “Yes, I know. Why did I have to walk through the park?”

Charlotte whined and stepped closer, bumped her head under Kai’s hand, and nosed the gun out of the way. Kai frowned, surprised she still had it in her hand. She set it down on her night stand. “I wouldn’t be able to do anything if I went to the park, would I? I’d be next to useless; all I could do is get help--”

Charlotte hopped up, her front paws resting on the downy bedspread, her tongue snaking out to give Kai a wet, sloppy kiss on the cheek.

Kai straightened, the pillow sliding off her lap. She gave Charlotte a hug, face pressed against Charlotte’s half-missing ear. “I’ll just call the Enforcers; they can send someone to the park.”

Kai stood and headed back downstairs; for some reason her control module only recognized phone requests from the kitchen area. “Phone please. Dial Enforcer Headquarters.” Silence, then two deep beeps to indicate the connection had been made, and someone picked up.

“Enforcer Headquarters, how may I direct your call?”

“I need to report a crime. An attack. Someone--”

“All people who wish to report a crime are required to do so in person.”

“No, no. I need someone to go--”

“Do you wish to report a crime?”

“Well, yes, but--”

“Then it is necessary that you come make a full report. In person. Thank you.”

A long tone let Kai know that the conversation had been disconnected. “Mendel’s sake, Char. What am I supposed to do now?” She sighed. “All right. I can do this. I need to get dressed, right? I can’t go out in club clothes at nine in the morning.”

Kai gave all three of her pets their food, and headed back upstairs to her bedroom closet. None of her clothing seemed right. All of it seemed so...feminine. Which was a weird complaint; Kai enjoyed being a girl. But everything was too sheer, too tight, too low-cut. Too...something. She finally grabbed a high-necked, long sleeve shirt. It’d be on the warm side, but it would cover her.

She tossed her previous night’s clothing in the corner and slid the shirt on over her head. “What’s wrong with me today?” she asked her reflection as she pulled her hair back into a braid. “Nothing actually happened. Rune made sure of that. Nothing to be afraid of.” Kai swallowed. She was scared. Very scared. Where had the Enforcers been last night? How could something like that have happened to her? What if Rune hadn’t shown up in time? Kai realized her hands were shaking, and she sank to the floor.

Would anything ever feel normal again? She was frightened at the thought of walking through crowds to the transport station; crowds that would have many men in them.

And any one of those men could look at her the way the men last night had looked at her, talk to her the way they had talked to her. Overpower her the way they had overpowered her. In just a few minutes she had gone from being a strong, independent woman with goals and a plan to reach them, to a scared, uncertain person who didn't know how she was going to pick out clothes to wear that day.

Kai lurched to her feet and hurried downstairs to the kitchen. She poured herself a cup of dia and reached for the bottle of whiskey she kept above her refrigerator, for the rare occasions that Kai felt like it was a whiskey day. Today was definitely a whiskey day. Maybe every day would be from now on. She took a drink straight out of the bottle before adding a couple of swallows worth of whiskey to her cup of dia. Charlotte whined. Kai grabbed her mug and headed to the sitting area.

She tucked herself into the corner of the couch and stared out the window. When she reached the bottom of her cup and shook herself free of her day dreaming, Kai realized that her two kittens were curled up on her shoulders, and Charlotte was curled up on her feet. Without warning, Kai began to cry, tears streaming down her face and her entire body trembling. She carefully placed her mug on the coffee table and tucked her hands under her arms in an attempt to still their shaking.

Her thoughts were unable to focus on anything other than one word: why?

Charlotte whined. Kai scrubbed her face with the heels of her palms, attempting to swipe away her tears. When she could see clearly again, she stared into Charlotte's warm eyes.

When the Enforcers had brought the dog into the animal shelter where Kai worked, they had shared some horrifying details: Charlotte's owners had been renting an extra home in the slums of Sector 3; a home filled with dogs, cats, and other popular pets. Some had been used strictly for breeding. But some, like Charlotte, had been used as fighting dogs. Dog fights were very popular in the slums of Savannah. At some point during her short life, Charlotte's legs, ribs, and jaw had been broken. She had a scar across one eye and showed evidence of having had many litters as well.

As for the home that had been rented for the animal farming operation, it had been in such deplorable condition that it was now condemned. The families that had lived in the adjoining houses had been given temporary housing in a new location for the duration of the renovations. It wasn't often any one condemned a house in the slums.

And yet, with all the cruelty and harsh living conditions that Charlotte had seen in her life, she was still a sweet tempered dog. After several months at the shelter, with her end in sight, not one single person had considered taking Charlotte home. Once they got a look at her scarred face and awkward gait, most people had given her kennel a wide berth. When it became obvious that Charlotte was destined for euthanasia, Kai had decided to adopt Charlotte herself.

Now she laid her head on Charlotte's. "You got through your life, I can get through mine."

Kai clenched her jaw and stood up. She had to take care of Rune. “You’re strong, so I’ll get stronger.”

Kai took one last look in the mirror, grabbed a coat out of her closet, and tossed Charlotte and the kittens some new treats. She paused, her hand on the doorknob, and took a deep breath. She stepped out into the hallway, shutting the door and locking it behind her. Yesterday may have been a lifetime ago, but she was determined that this new life would still be one of *her* choosing, not one of fear induced by the men in the park.

Chapter Fifteen

Kai couldn’t help it: everyone made her nervous. From the little old lady who had bumped into her to the young girl who spent thirty minutes staring at Kai’s shoes before getting off the train with her mother, everything made Kai feel like she was being watched.

The men were the worst. She knew she was being paranoid, but they all made her feel like they were picturing undressing her; ripping her clothes and saying the obscene things the men from the previous night had said.

In a way that she had never experienced before, she felt that a Bio was an unfortunate thing to be. Her green skin and green hair made her stick out from everyone else, when all she wanted to do was blend in and be invisible. When yet another person bumped into her, Kai found herself wishing she had worn something looser; more layers or a bulkier coat, despite the weather this time of year. Something that would have helped put more fabric and distance between herself and those around her.

Kai had thought that she was fine; even after breaking down and crying, she had thought that she was more or less fine. But now that she found herself parting with half a month's salary worth of credits to secure a private cabin for the remainder of the ride to the Enforcer's station, she realized that she was *not* fine. She was scared and mad and just plain overwhelmed.

When the train pulled into the terminal, Kai headed over to the information booth. She uploaded the district's government buildings map to her Orb before slipping the phone off her finger and positioning it in her ear. "Directions to Enforcer Headquarters, shortest distance by foot," she commanded.

As she walked, Kai realized she was breathing shallowly, practically panting. It hard to resist the urge to run to Enforcers Headquarters. The only thing keeping her from running was her shoes: thousands of iridescent micro-crystals dusted their scalloped cutout straps. District Four was known for having poorly maintained sidewalks. Any stray chip or crack could result in a broken heel. And Kai had invested a fair amount of credits into this pair of shoes. She wasn't going to cap off yesterday's life-changing events by damaging her favorite shoes.

As she stared up at the large building that housed the district Enforcer station, Kai realized this wasn't going to be as easy as she had originally thought. This morning it seemed as though every man in Savannah had a leering mask where his face should be. And it now occurred to Kai that a large portion of Enforcers were men.

Kai began to back away from the building. Before she had gone three steps, she bumped into a solid body much larger than her own. She turned, eyes widening as she

took in the sight of the well-built Enforcer she had just run into. Darrius. He would be able to help.

“Sorry, ma’am. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

He paused, his eyebrows crinkling as he took a good look at her. Kai fought the urge to back away; Rune knew him from school, had spent the past day working with him. He was also an Enforcer. If any man in Savannah was safe, he would be.

“Kai, right?”

She nodded, blinking rapidly, trying to figure out how Darrius Kalb knew her name. “I’m looking to report a crime,” she said, a few very long seconds later.

“Of course. Miss Kerapa told me all about it last night. Let’s get you through security and then we’ll take your statement. Rune *should* be here soon, to give *her* official statement. Any time now.”

“You’ve talked to Rune? She’s all right?” Kai felt the muscles in her neck loosen. Immediately she could breathe easier.

“Yes, she is. Didn’t she check in with you?” Darrius frowned. “Well, no matter. Let’s get you taken care of first and then we can track down Rune if she hasn’t shown up by then.”

Kai nodded and muttered a thank you. Once inside, she found a short line of citizens waiting to go through the security check. Taking her place in line beside Darrius, Kai found herself shifting from foot to foot impatiently. It was nice that she no longer had to worry about Rune, but being around all these people was making her jittery again. She just wanted to get somewhere quiet.

Taking a deep breath, Kai forced herself to focus on watching the people pass through security. Everyone passed their loose belongings through some form of scanner, and then walked through a larger one. Kai nodded to herself. She could do that. She had done that many times in the past. She had nothing to hide and no one would touch her. It would be simple. Like ripping a Band-Aid. Simple and fast. “Nothing to worry about.”

“I’m sorry. What did you say, miss?”

Kai whipped her head around, surprised to see a woman standing between Kai and Darrius. Kai glanced at Darrius; he gave a small smile and nodded. “This is my partner.”

“My name’s Emma. You look a little nervous. Are you all right?” Emma stuck out her hand, smiling big but without showing any teeth.

Kai stared at her a moment, trying to decide if she really wanted to introduce herself. Yes, she was an Enforcer, but she was also a stranger. And now that Kai was faced with the thought of actually sharing her problem with someone, she wasn’t sure she could do it. Not yet.

“Miss?”

“Sorry.” She shook her head to clear her thoughts, but didn’t take Emma’s hand.

“My name’s Kai.”

Emma turned to Darrius. “I’m going to stay here with Miss Kai and help her get where she is going. This is obviously her first time here with us. We don’t want her to get overwhelmed.”

“I think that’s a good idea, Emma. Bring her on upstairs to us; she needs to file a report on that case I opened last night,” Darrius responded softly, bending over to speak into Emma’s ear. When he was done, he straightened up. “Good to see you again, Kai. You’ll be in good hands with Emma, here. She’s one of the best partners I’ve had and one of the best detectives on the force.”

Emma watched him go. After a minute or two of silence, she turned back to face Kai in line. “So. Kai. How can I help ease this process for you?”

Kai found herself shrugging again, and wondered when she had picked up that annoying habit. The Kerapas would not be happy if it became a permanent tic. “I don’t know. I’ve never done this, you know. I’ve never even thought about it.”

“*Next!*”

Kai jumped and glanced back over her shoulder. It was her turn to go through security. Swallowing, she emptied her pockets, took off her shoes--as if she’d risk ruining them by hiding something in them--and plopped her coat and purse onto the belt behind her other things.

“Hey, Miss? You need to come over here now. Doesn’t do any good to watch them go through. And you’re holding up the line.”

Kai blinked rapidly, turning to face the Enforcer in front of her. The very large, very muscled Enforcer. She took a step back, bumping into Emma. Emma gently placed her hands on Kai’s shoulders to steady her. “It’s all right, Kai. Officer Shollun is a good man. He’s just going to do his job and then we can get you upstairs to file your report.”

“Oh. Right.” Kai said.

“Thank you, ma’am.” The Enforcer manning the metal detector placed his hand on Kai’s arm. “Now, if you could just step over here?”

“What? Why? No one else had to.”

“It’s just part of our random body checks, ma’am. Nothing to worry about.”

“Body check?” Kai repeated, panicky.

Emma stepped between Kai and Officer Shollun. She placed her hands on Kai’s shoulders and made eye contact with her. “It’s all right, Kai. Just look at me and take a deep breath. Now. I know what Rune reported, but what are you here to report?”

Kai’s eyes were wide. She knew that if she had a mirror to look in, she would be wild looking. How could she look any other way? It was how she felt, after all. Wild and frantic. “Attempted...attempted...” She paused, swallowing hard. “They tried to kidnap and...and...to me. Five men.”

Emma turned to Officer Shollun. “I think we’re going to skip this body check. You can put down my name as the reason it wasn’t done. Kai will come with me and I can take responsibility for her and anything that might happen because of her.”

Officer Shollun face filled with sympathy. “Of course, ma’am. I find no problem with that.” He turned his attention towards the belt of the scanner. “You are welcome to get your belongings, Miss Kai. Everything else checked out fine, of course.”

“Thank you,” Kai said softly, once she had her shoes back on and her purse over her shoulder.

Emma stood off to one side, waiting patiently. When she saw that Kai was ready to go, she gestured towards the elevator. “Right this way, Kai. We’re going to be going up

to the tenth floor, where there's a nice private conference room. I'll get an Enforcer to keep guard at the door for you while I get Darrius and the case file he opened after Rune's initial report. I know just the lady for the job, too."

"A woman?"

"Yes. We want this to be as easy for you as it can possibly be. You've been through enough."

"Thank you. I didn't think it would be this hard. I was worried about Rune and thought that would be the hardest part; tracking her down. I figured I would just come in and have everything be taken care of. I want it over with."

Emma's head tilted, as the elevator started moving with a soft whoosh. "I know. And we will take care of it on our end. We'll do our best to close this case. But I think this is one of those things that will take a while to be over with. Counseling helps. The fact that you are willing to make a report at all is also a very good start." The elevator doors spread apart, a soft ding announcing they had reached their destination.

Emma led her down a short hall to a door that swung open to reveal a conference room, with a plush couch off to one side. "Have a seat wherever you like, Kai. I'm going to get Officer Richelle. Is there anything I can send back for you? Water? Dia? Soda?"

"You have dia?"

"Of course. Would you like some?"

"Very much so. Thank you."

"No problem, Kai. I told you, we want to make you as comfortable as possible."

Kai smiled sadly. “I appreciate it. Really. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.” Kai hesitated, wishing that Rune was with her. Kai sighed. “You’re making me feel safe again. That means a lot to me today.”

Emma stepped forward and gave Kai a quick hug, her movements a little awkward but obviously sincere. “That’s our job. I’m just glad it’s working. Now, settle in and get comfortable. It may be several minutes before we can get started.”

Kai headed towards the couch. She settled down onto the cushions of the couch, tucking her feet in close, her knees brushing her chest. It was too bad that Charlotte couldn’t be here. Charlotte always made her feel better. And safer.

But Charlotte wasn’t here, and Officer Emma was doing a fair job at making Kai feel safer. For the first time since she had left the club last night, she felt safe enough to let go. She wrapped her arms around her knees, rested her head on her arms, and cried. As each teardrop fell, she let go of the idea that she was weak, and grabbed onto the idea that she wasn’t turning into her mother. It was life that was crazy, not Kai.

Chapter Sixteen

Darrius watched as his partner stopped at the desk next to hers, and leaned closer to hear what she was saying. He was eager to find out what Kai had to add to the report. She was a well-known Bio, the product of a lottery Diamond Labs had conducted not long after Rune was born and the design process was shown to be safe. Kai’s parents were too poor to afford a Bio themselves, but Diamond Labs had been eager to show the less advantaged citizens of Savannah that Bios were for anyone. Anyone willing to save up their credits, anyway. He was beginning to wonder if somebody was hunting Bios.

“Hey, Sonja. Think you could do a favor for me?”

The young officer glanced up from where she was filling out a report. “Of course, Detective Evans. What do you need?”

“There’s a young woman in conference room A. She’s here to report an attempted kidnapping and rape. Five perps. She’s extremely nervous.”

Darrius flicked through the files on his desktop, sending the one he had opened for Rune to his Pocket Pup. As an afterthought, he added the updated version of Hope’s file as well. One missing Bio, the attempted kidnapping of a second, and a willingness to substitute a third was just too big of a coincidence. And Darrius didn’t even believe in little coincidences.

Emma sat down across from Darrius. “I had to help that poor girl through security. She had the bad luck to be picked for the random body checks. I asked Sonja to guard the door for her while we get ready to take her statement.”

Darrius lifted an eyebrow. “Are you going to be able to keep enough emotional distance on this?”

Emma frowned. “I suppose you do know me, don’t you?” She leaned forward. “Seriously. Any self-respecting woman would want to help this girl out.”

“Any self-respecting human, Ems. But we aren’t just anyone. We’re Enforcers. Aren’t we supposed to stay level-headed and logical?”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t be emotionally invested once in a while. It just means we can’t let our emotions rule us. And we won’t. I’ll make sure of it.” Emma pushed back away from the desk. “Besides, with the Benito case over, we’ve got room

for another case, even with Hope on our plate. With your internship experience and Kai being a Bio, we shouldn't have any trouble getting the captain to let us keep it. Now let's go get her some dia and take her statement."

By the time that Kai heard voices outside the door, her tears had long ago dried up, and her energy with them. She knew her eyes were puffy and her hair was surely a mess, but she didn't care anymore. She was exhausted and just wanted to take a nap for the next several hours. Or days.

At the sound of a soft knock, Kai lifted her head off her arms and tucked her feet into a more respectable position. "Come in," she said, her voice a raspy croak.

The door opened and Detective Emma stuck her head in. "Sorry that took so long, Miss Kai. But I'm back now. You think you're ready to talk?" She pushed the door open wider, so that Kai could see Darrius standing behind her.

"Yes. Please." Kai watched them as they moved into the room, shut the door behind them, and sat down at the conference table in the chairs closest to Kai.

Emma held up a small recorder. "Now I'm going to be taping our conversation, just to make sure we don't miss anything, and Detective Kalb will be making notes as well. He will also be doing most of the interview. If you need to take a break, please let us know. Here. I brought you some more dia."

"I will. And thank you." Kai blew on her dia and took a small sip. "I came here so I could tell somebody what happened to me. Make sure it doesn't happen to somebody else. But I didn't think it was going to be this hard for me. I'm not normally this weak."

Emma sighed. "There are going to be a lot of things that are harder than you thought. Life will be different now than it was yesterday. But you have to remember that what you are doing now--reporting the attack--is a very brave move. You are not weak. Many women don't have the strength to do this. And because of you, we will have a chance to make sure these men never attack another woman."

Kai shifted her weight before settling deeper into the couch with her legs crossed. When she spoke, her voice was quiet, but steady. "I was taking the main path past the fountain and the angel grotto to the First Tree. A hand covered my mouth and an arm wrapped around my waist, pinning my arm to my side." Kai's breathing had increased and she was blinking rapidly, but she forged ahead, continuing to tell her story.

"I struggled, kicking and moving around as much as possible, but he was strong. And taller than me. It wasn't hard for him to keep my feet off the ground. That means he was taller than me, right?"

Darrius glanced quickly at Emma. "Most likely."

"We cut across the park, trampling the plants. It was rude of him, really, rrampling the plants. He didn't even seem to notice them. I thought we were past that now. The government became what it is, the United Conglomerate States exist, because we decided to respect life beyond our own. I mean...isn't that why we passed the population cap laws and the organic food laws and all those others? But this guy...he just didn't care. About the plants."

Emma licked her lips. "It's nice to think we're better than our great-great grandparents. And we are, most of us. But we are also part of a species that has emotions

and makes individual choices. And some of us make those choices poorly. That's where we step in. To keep bad men from making bad choices."

Kai turned her head slightly, meeting Emma's gaze squarely for the first time. "It's not right, what he did to those plants," she said softly, before lowering her gaze and resuming her story. "We ended up in one of the secluded glades. I see danger in them now. Like a scorpion. Lovely little scorpions all over Sector Seven Central Park. Danger is everywhere, really, isn't it? But I suppose Enforcers like yourselves know that all too well. Danger is probably your middle name," she added with a sharp bark of laughter, glancing at Darrius before turning back to Emma. "And you as well? I could probably ask all the Enforcers their middle name and they would all answer the same."

"Only the best of us," Emma said with a wink. "Detective Darrius Danger Kalb and Detective Emma Danger Evans, at your service."

"I'm glad to hear it." Kai heaved a deep sigh that, this time, seemed to lift some of the weight off her shoulders. "When the man entered this clearing, he flung me away from him. The ground was hard and bruised my knees, but the grass...it was soft. I remembering thinking it was odd how soft the grass was. When I looked up, I wished I had kept my attention on the grass. It wasn't just one man, there; not just the man who had ripped me from the lights on the main path and into the shadows of the gardens and groves. There were five of them now. Five!" she said, her voice dropping to nearly a whisper as she described the other men, despite the fact that she maintained her taller, straighter posture and had a determined look on her face.

“What happened when Rune showed up?” Darrius asked after she’d finished her description, his pointer finger tapping slowly on the conference table.

“She came flying out of nowhere. Took out two guys, shoved her gun at me, and then told me to run. I tried to shoot one of the other two, but I missed. When she told me to run again, I did.” Kai glanced down at her lap. “You’re sure she’s all right?”

“I saw her myself, Kai. She’s fine. Angry, eager to get the men, but fine.” Darrius placed his hand across his heart. “I promise. Leaving was the right thing for you to do. Is there anything else that you can tell us that might help?”

Kai chewed on her fingernails for a few minutes, thinking hard. “No. I don’t think so. Not really. I said they didn’t like Bios, didn’t I? They talked about me like I was an animal. Like they weren’t doing anything wrong. And that it was only my eyes that they needed. I don’t know if that helps. Or if anything I’ve said helps.” Kai sighed. “It’s all I can tell you.”

“It’s good, Miss Kai,” Darrius said. “You’ve given us a lot to go on. Truly. I would like to ask one more thing of you, though.”

“Yes?”

“Would you allow us to escort you to your home so we can get the clothes you were wearing last night? There may be evidence we can use on them.”

Kai swallowed, suddenly realizing how dry her mouth was and taking a drink of her now cold dia. “Yes. I suppose so. I want to make sure these men don’t do anything like this again.”

“Wonderful. Just give us a few minutes to report to our captain and then we can take an ecobus across sector to your house.”

“Loft. Hardly worth calling an apartment, let alone a house.”

“Do you need anything else before we go?” Emma asked.

“No, thank you. I just want to get this over with. I want you to stop these men. Please.”

“Anything we can do to be of service,” Emma said. “Now, if you’ll excuse us?”

“Of course. And thank you. Thank you for helping me.”

“It’s our job, Kai,” Emma said gently.

Kai watched as Emma stood up and Darrius opened the door so they could leave.

“I thank you all the same.”

“You’re welcome,” Emma said. Darrius gave a half-bow and they headed out the door.

Kai fidgeted. Last night had been horrific and this morning had been overwhelming. Still, she was certain she had done the right thing. These detectives would find the men, and it would not be long before the men were behind bars. And then her life would go back to normal.

Chapter Seventeen

When Darrius reached Kai’s building, he paused, waiting for the other two to catch up and stop talking about Kai’s shoes. When they turned their attention to Darrius, he gave a small—but serious—smile. “Now, Kai, when we walk in, we’ll go ahead and

stay by the door. We don't want to intrude on your space. You go and get the clothes that you wore last night. Any questions?"

Kai shook her head. "I just wish I had thought to bring them along with me in the first place. It's not like I've never watched a crime show."

"Most people have seen a crime show before, and most people don't think to bring anything in to the police station, unless it's a photograph of someone or something that is missing," said Emma. "You have done just fine. More than fine, actually. You've been exceptional in what you have accomplished today."

"If you say so." Kai opened the door and gestured for the detectives to lead the way into the lobby. "But it's difficult to believe I have done all that much. I'd think everyone would want to make a report when something bad happens to them. Especially a crime like this." She paused and blushed slightly. "I would think everyone would want revenge, or justice at the very least."

Emma nodded as they walked to the elevator and waited for the doors to open. "There are people who simply shut down and don't even leave their homes any more. Or people who believe it was their fault that the crime took place. And a few have been threatened by the criminal. In most instances, a threat will keep a person from ever reporting the crime."

The doors opened with a soft chime and the trio climbed inside. "Seventieth floor," Kai said. "Right this way," she said, they reached her floor.

“Shh. Do you hear that?” Darrius frowned, his hand going to the holster at his waist as he pushed past Kai. “Emma, keep an eye on her. And the elevator. Something isn’t right.”

Kai backed up to the wall. “Do you think they came for me? Most people know who I am; it wouldn’t be hard to figure out where I live, would it? What am I going to do? They’re going to kill me, aren’t they?”

Kai’s voice rose with every word; Darrius knew she was close to panic. She sank to the floor, eyes wide as she pulled her knees in close to her chest.

He knelt down to look her in the eyes, hand still resting on his holster. “Rapists don’t usually bother to track down their victims in order to kill them, Kai,” he said, despite the fact that he was thinking about Rune’s report and the fact that she had mentioned a potential link to Hope’s kidnapping. If it was true, this was neither a simple rape nor a simple kidnapping.

Nor would it be helpful for Kai to know. “I need you to take some deep breaths and stay calm. Emma will stay here with you. I’ll go make sure everything is safe.”

“What if it’s not?”

“Then we have our badges and our guns, and lucky for you, we know how to use them.”

Kai gave a slow nod.

Darrius stood. He pulled his gun and double-checked that it was on stun, gave a small nod to Emma, and turned in the direction of the noise that had first caught his attention.

He heard a soft whimpering from further down the hallway. He moved slowly, feet soft and quiet on the bamboo flooring, gun ready to shoot but aimed at the floor. As he approached each door in the hall, he checked to make sure it was secured before moving on.

Finally, he reached an open door; the whimpering seemed to be coming from inside. He took a deep breath and emptied his lungs. Raising his gun, he pivoted until he could peer into the loft. Moving carefully, he stepped inside to check every corner for an intruder. Belongings had been swept off of the counters to shatter on the floor. Pillows and cushions had been cut open. Furniture was overturned. There was even a lipstick drawing of the dagger and dragon tattoo from the night before on Kai's bathroom mirror. The whimpering came from upstairs: he had found an injured dog lying next to Kai's bed during his search of the apartment.

Shaking his head, Darrius headed back, and leaned out into the hallway. "All clear!"

Kai raced towards him. "My apartment!" She took a few steps forward, bent to pick up a red pillow from the floor. Clumps of soft hemp fibers spilled out of the seams. Kai looked back at Darrius. "My cats. My dog. Did you see them? They should have been here. They should have greeted me."

"Your dog is upstairs. I didn't see your cats." Darrius gestured to the apartment. "There was obviously a lot of noise and commotion here. They might just be hiding. Is there somewhere they go and hide?"

Kai peeked under the couch before turning and heading up the stairs to her bedroom. Darrius followed her. The forensics team would be all over him for extra footprints in the crime scene.

“Charlotte!” Kai dropped to her knees on the far side of the bed.

Darrius’ throat tightened when he saw the battered dog Kai knelt beside. With slow movements, she stroked the dog’s head. The dog gave a thump of its tail, licking Kai’s hand once before whimpering and resting its head back down on the floor.

Darrius moved to get a better look at the dog. He swallowed hard and wished that Emma had been the one to come upstairs. He didn’t know how to handle a situation like this. The dog was clearly as important to Kai as a human would be. Emotions, especially women’s emotions, were dicey, especially when they were justified.

“Kai.” He pitched his voice low and soft. “I don’t think anyone can do anything for your dog. That cut is a mortal wound.”

“What cut? She doesn’t have a cut. She’s just beat up. Some broken bones maybe.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s blood on the carpet. And it looks like it’s coming from her belly. She’s been cut or shot in a very bad place.”

Kai’s eyes were frantic as she searched for the source of the blood. When she found it, she slowly reached out and touched the gash. It was much deeper than it looked. She pulled her hand back; stared at the blood on her fingers. “But a vet can fix her. A doctor. They fix anything. We just have to get her to a vet.”

She didn't look him in the eyes. Darrius crouched beside her. "Your dog has a wound that is going to kill her slowly. I've seen it before. Even if we get her to a vet, even if the doctors can fix her insides and sew her back up...well, all the stuff that was in the intestines--all that waste--is now swimming around her insides in places it shouldn't be. It will make her sick. Sick enough that she'll die, but not so sick that it will happen quickly."

Kai met Darrius' gaze, her emerald green eyes filled with tears. "You mean she'll die slowly and painfully."

"I'm afraid so."

"Then I need to...need to ease her way," she said. "Please. Can you help me? I need...something. She doesn't deserve to suffer. She's suffered enough." Tears fell down her face as she gently moved Charlotte's muzzle into her lap, cradling her and stroking the top of Charlotte's broad head.

Darrius frowned. The girl hadn't needed to tell him that this was a dog that had suffered-- this was an instance of a rough life ending in a rough manner. "Do you have a gun of your own?"

Kai shook her head. "No. Charlotte and I were each other's protection. I never felt a need for a gun after she came to live with me."

"I'll go see what I can figure out." Darrius turned and headed down the stairs. He walked over to where Emma was carefully examining the mess. "Well. Kai's dog is up there dying--"

"Wait, what? Who's dying? What in Mendel's name happened here?"

Darrius whirled to face the door. Rune stood there, arms crossed, glaring. Darrius got the impression that, for once, it wasn't actually anger: Rune was worried. "Charlotte. Kai's dog. She's not going to make it. Gut wound."

Emma came around the end of the couch and glanced up towards the loft. "Poor things. What is Kai going to do?"

"She wants to finish the dog off herself," Darrius took a deep breath. "So Charlotte doesn't suffer. I think we should let her. Any evidence on the dog will still be there, even if she's dead. And it will be good for her to take control of something, even as awful as this is. Thing is, she needs something to do the deed with."

"What's wrong with your gun?" Rune asked.

Darrius shifted. He didn't appreciate being put on the spot like this. "You're kidding, right, Miss Kerapa? You know the regulations against letting a civilian use a service piece. Or any gun not registered to them. I'd be up for an inquiry even if I was the one who did the deed. We won't get anywhere on Kai's or Hope's cases if we're held up by investigatory hearings at headquarters." He raised an eyebrow. "You got any ideas?"

"Here." Rune reached into her boot. "She can use this," she added, handing the knife hilt first to Darrius. He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "Mendel's sake. It's registered."

"You'll have to report its use, you know."

"Yeah, yeah. I know the weapons laws."

"You could have fooled me. You wanted me to let *her* use *my* gun."

Rune shook her head. “Whatever, you hairy pain-in-the-ass. If she can do what’s needed for Charlotte, I can do a little paperwork for Kai.”

Darrius rotated the knife in his hands, feeling the quality of the well-balanced blade. And feeling surprised yet again by the enigma that Verunani Kerapa was turning out to be. Evidently, even spoiled little Bios could have knife-shaped surprises up their sleeves. “You coming up?”

“No way. Too messy. Besides, I have no desire to see *my* best friend kill *her* best friend.”

Nodding at Emma, Darrius turned and headed back upstairs. He found Kai rocking gently back and forth as she absently ran her hand along Charlotte’s back, her eyes vacant.

“We don’t have a gun that you can legally use,” he said, sitting on the top step to be at her level. “But Rune has a knife that she is willing to let you use.” He leaned forward to hand the knife hilt first to Kai.

“What do I do with it? I don’t want to do it wrong,” she whispered.

“You are going to want to grasp it firmly in your hand. It’s important to keep good control over it so you don’t slip. And then you’ll want to place the blade at the base of her skull, in the middle. You can usually feel a bump there, where the spine and the head join. That’s where you’re going to place the knife. When you’re ready, you push as hard and as fast as you can. As long as you don’t miss, it will be quick and almost painless.”

“Almost?”

Darrius flinched when her eyes met his. “The quicker you do it, the less pain,” he said. “Trust in yourself. Have confidence that you can give this last gift to Charlotte. You are a strong and amazing woman, Miss Kai. I trust you. Charlotte trusts you.”

Kai took a deep breath. She let her hand move to the base of Charlotte’s skull. The air hissed out through her lips as she plunged the knife into Charlotte’s neck. Charlotte gave a small twitch, but her breathing stopped, and with it went the whimpers and the light in her eyes. Kai carefully slid the knife out, staring at the blood now coating the blade. She blinked twice before letting out a sob and tossing the knife away. She grabbed Charlotte, hugging her and rocking back and forth.

“Who would do this?” she asked, her voice breaking. “Why?”

She turned her emerald eyes in Darrius’ direction, unable to keep the accusation from them. “I thought you said I’d be safe! This isn’t safe! Charlotte wasn’t safe!”

Chapter Eighteen

Rune watched as Darrius walked up the stairs, listened as Kai screamed at him. Everything around her seemed to be spinning out of control, ever since she’d heard about Hope going missing. It was definitely time to stop this. She hoped the information she’d gathered earlier that morning would give them the edge they needed to figure things out.

Without saying anything to Detective Evans, Rune let her gaze travel over the mess and began looking for anything that might indicate who had done this. Not that she knew what a clue would look like. Could it be the men from last night? That was a thought Rune didn’t want to linger on. While she would never admit it to anyone else, Rune was happy if she never had to face the leader again.

“So where have you been all morning? I thought you were going to come to the station and make a full report.”

Rune glanced over her shoulder to see Darrius coming back down the stairs. “I wanted to check on Kai first. How is she?”

“She’s...grieving.”

“She took care of Charlotte, then?” Rune tried to imagine what her friend might be going through right now. A memory flared of her favorite jumping horse. She hadn’t thought of Maneeka since the horse had broken a bone and her father had made Rune put it out of its misery. Something about taking responsibility for those under your care, rather than passing it along to someone else. She’d cried for weeks over that horse.

“Just a minute ago. I’m surprised you didn’t hear her yelling at me.”

“I did, but I figured she’d reached her limit. Only takes a few minutes before I’m yelling at you.” Rune smiled sweetly and batted her eyelashes at him. Annoying him was better than thinking about Maneeka or Kai and Charlotte.

Emma stepped forward, hand out. “Good to see you again, Rune. I don’t suppose you’re ready to come down to the station and make that report now? ”

Rune glanced back at Darrius, who had a muscle ticking in his jaw, and finally shook Emma’s hand, wiping her palm on her pants afterwards. “I already gave all the information to Darrius last night. I don’t know what else he needs. Unless he isn’t a good enough detective to ask me all the right questions?” She raised her eyebrow in his direction. “Besides, I’ve been busy finding information on my own. Wasn’t up for waiting around until you guys got all the paperwork filed.”

“All right. What did you find out?” Emma asked.

“The guys last night mentioned a collection. I think there’s a good chance someone is collecting Bios. Or trying to. So I took a drawing of a tattoo I saw last night to someone I know. They had a couple of ideas about artists who work in that style, with criminal types of clients.” Rune reached into her pocket, turned on her D.O.G., and flipped up a holographic map. Several red dots blinked on the outskirts of Savannah in Sector Three. “Right there. I think we should check them out. I figured that would be more important, for both Hope and Kai, than me filing some report.”

Rune wandered over to the window and stared down at the tiny people milling about on the street. There was one man down there who wasn’t moving. He stood, hands in his pockets, staring up at Kai’s building. Rune frowned and glanced over her shoulder towards Darrius and his partner. “Do you suppose this,” she asked, gesturing to the mess in the room, “is the same men as last night?”

Darrius turned his attention from his notes and raised an eyebrow. “I think so, despite the fact that this isn’t your typical rapist’s m.o. There’s a drawing of the tattoo in the bathroom.”

“Then she needs protection.” Rune frowned, realizing what she had just said. Bodyguards weren’t a fate she would push on anyone. But Kai wasn’t like Rune; Kai didn’t know how to protect herself. And she didn’t have a gun. Or even a dog now. Rune turned her attention back to the man outside.

“I agree,” said Darrius.

“Good.” Rune crossed her arms, looked back out the window. The man was still there. “When can you get someone here for her?”

“Unfortunately, it will take a few days before the paperwork can be processed. I can station someone outside the building right away, but anything better takes a fair amount of shuffling personnel. We don’t have many people qualified for this type of assignment. Don’t have much call for it, really.”

Rune turned around, crossing the room to Darrius. “Are you kidding me? They’ve attacked her twice in less than twenty-four hours. How can there be any doubt that this woman is in immediate danger?”

“This woman has been victimized twice in the last twenty-four hours. We cannot treat it as one case until we have something more than a lipstick drawing. Quit acting like a spoiled brat. You don’t get to issue commands around here. I’ll get her protection, but it will take some time. Deal with it.”

Emma cleared her throat. “Hey. Darrius. Rune. If you don’t lower your voices, that woman upstairs is going to hear what you’re saying. And if there’s one thing she doesn’t need, it’s you two shouting about how unsafe she is. The world is scary enough for her right now.”

Rune tossed her hands up in the air, frustration coursing through her body, her muscles so tense she was surprised she wasn’t shaking. “He’s the one who started this.” She jabbed her finger in Darrius’ direction. “I don’t see how you can keep calm around him.”

She began pacing, her boots making sharp clicks on the bamboo floor.

She took a deep breath, her temper back under control now that she had put some distance between them, and turned to face the two detectives. "Fine. If you can't protect her, I will. Starting with seeing why there's been a man outside, staring at this building for the past five minutes."

Not waiting for a response, Rune quickly exited Kai's apartment and headed to the elevator. Luck was with her; it opened as soon as she pushed the button.

"Rune!" shouted Darrius. "Hold the elevator! You can't go down there on your own."

Rune stepped inside and pushed the close door button repeatedly. She wasn't going to let Darrius take this away from her. She'd been the first to see the guy, and she seemed to be the only one who really cared about Kai's safety.

The door shut just as Darrius reached it. Rune smiled as he pounded on the door. Maybe he'd take her a little more seriously now. After all, she was a Kerapa. She didn't stand back and wait for things to happen to her. She went after them full force, and look out anyone who was standing in her way. Failure wasn't an option.

Rune crossed the lobby and exploded into the sunlight, feeling more and more sure of herself as she went. Winding her way through people on the sidewalks, her gaze found and stayed focused on the man she'd seen from Kai's window.

"Afternoon, sir. Care to tell me why you're staring at my best friend's window?"

The man looked at Rune. His eyes widened, and Rune felt her stomach drop, an inexplicable rush of panic zipping through her body before adrenaline raced in behind it. He turned and ran.

“Rune! Don’t!”

Rune looked back across the street. Darrius was racing towards them. She wasn’t going to let him take this from her. She was going to catch the bad guy. And then she was going to prove the connection with Hope. They’d never ignore Kai’s need for protection then. She took off after the gang member. He had a head start, but she was a Bio.

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