

# LIANA MIR

*What does it matter if the Database bleeds?*

*She's not an operative any more. (She is.)*

*She goes by her birth name now. (She doesn't.)*

*She's not part of a team any more. (She always will be.)*

Rachelle Winslow was once known as the Database, one of the most powerful special human operatives in the military, able to read and process genetic material on contact. Now she has her own problems and trying to stay out of the business tops the list.

Then a professional informant vanishes from his city apartment, leaving shattered windows, blood on the carpet, and a frantic message that he knows who's coming after him—a special. It's just one more case, even if it could end up killing her.

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Liana Mir reads, writes, and wrangles the muses from her mundane home in the Colorado Rockies and, occasionally, from the other side of the Barrier.

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Science Fiction 5.99  
Mystery & Detective / Procedural

DOWNS  
& BLED  
*a novelle* of  
Kingdoms & Thorn

• YEAR 23, AUTUMN •

# DOWSE & BLEED

*A Novelette of Kingdoms and Thorn*

YEAR 23, AUTUMN

LIANA MIR

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DOWSE & BLEED



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## M A N Y   T H A N K S

*To thecatisacritic, who prompted this story. You have a knack for finding some of the most amazing song lyrics and sharing them with me and an even better knack for asking the right questions to get my muse hopping.*

*To Joni Mitchell for her song “Both Sides Now.”*

*To Gwynne Jackson, the woman who always pushes me to write my best. This story has your fingerprints all over it: the way you push me to dig deeper into my characters, to do them justice. You know I couldn’t do this without you.*

*To Percy O’Leary, the story girl who always tells me what I need to hear, often when I least expect it. You were of*

*invaluable help in putting the finishing touches on this story.*

*Finally, to Elsie Larson, the creative force who inspired my 365-day challenge to write 365 stories and poems throughout last year. Without that challenge, this story would not have existed.*

**WARNINGS:**

This book contains references to violence, abuse, child exploitation, etc. and some on-screen censored swear words. The viewpoints of the characters do not necessarily reflect those of the author.



*We're not all-powerful. There are limitations.*

— **BRITTANY RACHELLE WINSLOW, THE DATABASE**



## DOWSE AND BLEED

23 — 03. AUTUMN

Rachelle waited until the restless aches dancing through her upper body turned to outright pain before she finally forced herself to quit making endless cups of coffee and fished a mottled green star out of the embossed pink tin she kept on the granite kitchen countertop. She stripped off her overshirt and held the star to her left arm, braced herself, and pressed the needles on its back into the main carrier fluid vein on her arm. A light twist—which hurt, but she didn't wince—secured the star. Her carrier fluid flooded through the extra space, allowing the wash of genetic entries in her system to head for her central nervous system without making her want to scream.

She leaned back against the open dark wood lower shelves stuffed with spices, baking supplies, and potted vegetables. Dishes filled the shelves above the counters, and she kept an open cooler by the telephone. She picked up her coffee—the whole apartment smelled of it—and drank the rest slowly, shifting from one bare foot to the other on the heated tile floor as she cycled through all the genetic data in her body, cleaning it up and archiving the stuff she hadn't gotten around to yet.

Three years ago, cycling didn't hurt. She could do it when she pleased, throw on a star if she had to, and work through the build-up with barely a thought toward what she was doing. Now, it hurt; it *hurt* as she slammed another flood of archives on top of the overflow she already had, compressing what had never been meant to be further compressed. She didn't want to think about that, didn't want to think about the fact that the Department that made them never *would* go away for her or about the look in Sear's eyes six months ago when she gave Rachele another box of stars, arms covered in blood from doing

something they should never have had to do. How many lives had Sear taken to retrieve one more cache of the discontinued supplies?

Rachelle set the coffee mug in the sink and washed it, ignoring the way the water irritated her skin as she scrubbed harder than was necessary. Over the splash of water and ceramic, she heard the phone ring and glanced up toward where it sat on the higher coffee bar counter. Only a handful of people could keep hold of her revolving number. She never answered.

The answering machine clicked on. "*Rachelle Winslow. Leave a message.*"

Her birth name in her own voice jarred her. It wasn't her name. She drew the mug out of the sink, turned off the faucet, and set the mug in the sanitizer to dry.

"It's Ilsa."

Killinger.

Rachelle scowled and kept counting the seconds for the sanitizer to finish. Killinger had stayed with the Department and cut a deal for partial freedom. When she called, she always wanted the same thing.

The pause lingered and Rachelle paused with it, missing the beep from the sanitizer. Killinger was always calm, always spoke in the same quiet way, never hesitated at anything. The woman had seen and lived through too much for anything to ruffle her. She was hesitating now.

Come on. *Say* something.

“My informant has disappeared, and I owe him.” The line went dead. No pleas made and no reason offered that Rachelle should even get involved.

Just perfect. Rachelle yanked the mug from the sanitizer and put it away on the shelf with her others. Discomfort still crawled its way up and down her spine and over her shoulders, and she kept promising herself she wouldn’t go back.

*I owe him.* Killinger never owed anybody.

Rachelle bit off a curse. She knew what it meant to owe someone in this business. She knew what it meant to give, to take, freely or otherwise. She knew the hardness in her own leader’s eyes when the debt went too high and sacrifice didn’t come cheap. Shift had been a woman when she

should have been ten, and she never let her own owe too much.

Rachelle reached out and viciously hit the callback button.

“Killinger.” The pickup was quick and the ever-quiet voice had a faint undertone of...

Rachelle tasted the flavor in that voice, superimposed it over that of others she had known better... something almost frantic.

“I’m cycling,” Rachelle stated flatly. She rubbed her arms against the restless pain, hated her only weakness, the only thing that made her vulnerable—hated that she couldn’t write the woman off.

Another pause. She was beginning to hate those pauses.

“Marc and Cate are on their honeymoon.”

Her gut clenched. Cate was Killinger’s right hand and together with Marc made up one half of the standard team in Special Unit. That left Killinger with only Jarod, the mouthy cyberpath tech without an ounce of hard combat skills. The Special Unit needed him—both for his ability to

mentally interface with computers and also for his straight-up tech, warrant, and tracking skills—but he wouldn't be much help if things got messy.

*Make a case for me*, she thought but stayed silent long enough for Killinger to add, "I need forensics on an apartment."

"And I need a warehouse full of stars," Rachelle retorted, then sighed. Sear kept her supplied as long as there were any to scavenge and hardened her eyes at Rachelle's slightest protest. "Is he yours?"

"What do you mean?" Killinger asked slowly. She had never been a team member, only known them.

"Your informant, is he *yours*?" Rachelle had belonged to her team. They had all been Shift's, each other's. They had ruined Justus when they got him; he was the best thing they had ever made. Rachelle waited.

Finally, Killinger answered. "I offered him my protection."

If she hadn't trained herself out of swearing a blue streak, but she *had*. Justus hated it when they swore. Rachelle scowled, then carefully pressed

the skin by her star, testing it, and grimaced with the spike of pain. She pulled the star out and wiped up the carrier fluid wound with a cloth from the tin. Her body's cycling churned to a stop, and she queried through her archived entries for a self-healer to restore the vein to normal and smooth over the broken skin. She couldn't afford to cycle and work at the same time. "I'll need coffee. Lots of it."

"I'm s—"

Rachelle killed the line before an apology could be made.

—

The address was in the heart of Kishet, Rachelle's city, even if it wasn't her part of town. The Squares were located on the west end of the Core, the official name for the governmental jurisdiction that sprawled in a haphazard lump over the middle of Kishet. Old buildings for cheap living—each square was paved in yellowish bricks and surrounded by fifteen-story yardless apartment buildings in the same brick. Paved alleyways

ran off the squares into high-walled backstreets, and cement narrowly locked in each building from the pavement.

Killinger was waiting for her at the foot of a corner building, one hand holding a printed cup from the family-run café near Department headquarters, the other tucked into the pocket of her usual elegant brown wool dress coat. Her copper-colored features were softer than normal—with weariness; usually her no-nonsense sensibility gave them a harder edge. She was on foot, as expected. Kishet was made for walking and a car couldn't squeeze down these streets into the area.

“Core law enforcement made it here first,” Killinger said simply as she handed Rachelle the cup of steaming coffee.

Rachelle shrugged as they climbed the steep, narrow stairs leading up to the informant's third-floor apartment while Killinger rattled off the important facts.

“Name is Daniel Weller. He played a key role in the Sewell case last month.”

She paused and glanced at Rachelle, who nodded, familiar with the details. James Sewell

was an underground slaver, kidnapping special-type humans from free kingdoms within the city and selling them to regulars in kingdoms where slavery was legal. Then he took a Core-resident who happened to be the head of state's daughter's best friend. Miraculously, the seedy, crime-ridden Core officials who usually hated everything to do with the Department—*imagine that*—informed Killinger and her Special Unit within an hour.

“We kept his name quiet,” Killinger went on, “but he was able to pull all the information we needed to put Sewell away permanently. Enforcement wasn't pleased with my involvement.”

Which meant they were going to be a bear to work with on this case.

They reached the landing. Rachele leaned against the yellow asphalt concrete wall by the narrow wood-plated door of apartment 314 and kept sipping her coffee. Her skin was awash with more genetic drift than her body knew what to do with, and there wasn't much energy for dealing with the influx of details Killinger plied her with, just register and file—essentially the same thing

she was doing with the new entries piling into queue in a system already inundated.

Killinger frowned when the keys jangled in the lock but didn't turn. Probably law enforcement, Rachele figured. They liked to think everything in the Core was under their jurisdiction when fact was, anything involving a special-type human automatically fell under the Special Unit—thus, Ilsa Killinger, a woman who was near impossible to ruffle, threaten, or intimidate and who never bothered to explain how she got her results.

“Weller regular human?” Rachele asked casually.

“Yes.” But under Killinger's protection.

Rachele blew out a breath. It was always more complicated when law enforcement had a point. She reached out her hand and pulled up an entry in one fluid gesture, opening the lock with a telekinetic power and shoving open the door.

Her birth name was Rachele Winslow. Her *name* was the Database. Regular humans thought the Database was a government computer program tracking every person, animal, epidemic, or outbreak within the entire city. They were both

wrong and right. The Database was a genetically-modified woman in her twenties able to process any scrap of DNA that made contact with her skin. She was immune to every pathogen or drug she ever encountered and could make *very* brief use of any genetic property in her system, regular or otherwise. She had belonged to the government for most of her life. They had made her, given her to her team, then trained them all into top-secret military weapons. Unfortunately, this work came all too naturally.

“Thank you,” Killinger said as they stepped through the door onto threadbare carpet in a small square studio apartment.

It was crawling with black coats, Core law enforcement officers in traditional garb. The team wasn’t one Rachelle recognized: a clean-cut early-thirties detective in the middle of the apartment looking up with a surprised frown at the pair of them and surrounded by five or six male officers and a forensic tech, also male. Killinger’s computer tech, Jarod, hunched over his portable on the tiny rectangle of kitchen counter, seemingly oblivious to their arrival, though Rachelle doubted

it. He was far more observant than he let on.

Rachelle handed her coffee to Killinger, then pulled off her denim jacket to hand that over as well and unbuttoned her overshirt. She curled her lip at how thick the air was with pathogens—influenzas, autoimmune viruses, sewer’s plague, and a host of lesser infections.

“Killinger. Who is she?” the detective demanded, his white rank star almost glowing in the meager light of the one naked lightbulb overhead.

Killinger had a badge; Rachelle had a history. She let Killinger walk over to explain in hushed tones the way things worked.

Rachelle began circling the apartment, sticking close to the walls. The tiny kitchen ran to the left, all appliances and appliance tops and bottoms for laundry and cooking, sanitizing and incinerating, then that bit of counter. Food and food-related bacteria seemed to stick to her skin where it hit her. “It’s a wonder he’s not sick and retching,” she muttered. Incredible how immune systems in the Squares could be so hardy.

Past the kitchen, the corner and back wall of the apartment were packed with the sorts of necess-

ities that closets and pantries were designed to hold, neatly stacked but overflowing. She imagined thumbprints over all those papers and clothes and bottles of food and dishes and almost curled up on herself at all the human traffic that had marked them with genetic material. Animal entries could have been meat, strays, or pets—no telling.

She moved on in the direction of the bed and a knot of three black coats. One glanced over his shoulder and frowned before hunching his shoulders against her. She almost brushed past the other forensic tech, avoiding him by centimeters and absorbing another smattering of entries with distaste.

The entries faded here to ambience level, and not much ambience at that. Three square windows, one after another in a neat little row, were glassless but for tiny glimmers clinging about the edges. No shards on the stacks against the wall. She glanced out the window to see bits of glass glittering on the cement below. Shattered outward. Interesting.

The neatly made bed—two thin blankets over an almost clean sheet—occupied the entire right

wall up to another narrow door where the entries became intensely bacterial, low human traffic. She pushed it open to see a small grungy bathroom with shower hole in the middle of the tile floor and free-standing sink and toilet facing each other. Another window looked out from here, also shattered, but inward this time. Something different here—a special.

She took it in and focused long enough to keep the entry from cycling and ran a query instead to test the limits of information it held. Once assimilated, it would get harder for her to pinpoint the person from the usable data.

Rachelle backed away from the bathroom and returned to the middle of the room where the detective and two others were photographing and discussing two irregularly-shaped bloodstains, mercifully small, among sheaves of rifled papers, clothes, and photographs left in a mess in the middle of the floor. She shuddered at the density of the genetic information. So much of it and too many regular human patterns.

Killinger glanced at her. “I told them you were forensics.”

Rachelle nodded, watched the detective frowning at her. She studied the mess on the floor. Weller didn't seem inclined to be messy.

Grudgingly, the detective reached out to shake. "Manning," he offered.

She ignored the gesture. "Didn't know they ran them solo." Her barb was pointed, questioning his credentials the way he questioned hers.

Manning withdrew his hand. His jaw tightened. "My partner is none of your business."

Killinger's mouth formed a hard line. She passed the coffee cup back to Rachelle. "Did you get anything?"

"Improbably high number of regular-type human genetic patterns, enough pathogens to take down a hospital, and one special-type human." Rachelle glanced over the blood on the carpet.

Manning's dark eyes zeroed in on her. "A special?"

"Not your forté," she retorted. To Killinger, "I need to get out of here." Pain was starting to crawl up her back again, strong enough that she couldn't shake it off.

“We have the right to whatever data you procure,” Manning insisted, putting out a hand to stop her.

Rachelle jerked away from his touch, and Killinger stepped forward into the gap, giving him that impervious, neutral look she’d become famous for. “No. You don’t.”

—

Jarod’s mouth opened the moment they were out of enforcement’s presence and didn’t stop running until they got back to the Special Unit where Rachelle slammed her hand over his chest with a definitive “Shut. Up.”

The physical contact was enough to reassure him she meant business, so he did. He was usually good at getting that the whole united-front thing meant keeping quiet, but put him with Unit only and all bets were off.

“That wasn’t really necessary,” Killinger chided quietly.

Rachelle ignored her and brushed past Jarod

into the single office Special Unit had inherited upon formation. She skirted the peeling conference room table dominating the small space and dropped her things over the back of Cate's unoccupied chair. Only Jarod and Cate merited small desks and both hoarded that space jealously against the teetering inbox trays and organizers stuffed with files, reports, and paperwork. Everyone else got to stand around the table and leave their things on the long back counter or the short side one. The only clear patch of wall was a blue-grey strip between the glass door and the glass window into the rest of the building.

Jarod ducked into his back corner with his portable, becoming nearly invisible behind the overflowing countertops. His work often demanded that he haul his computer to every street in the city, and Special Unit didn't really have room for a desk computer anyway. He started unpacking samples and packages from his portable's carrier bag and brought a scoff of appreciative disbelief out of Rachelle.

He glanced up. "What?" he demanded. "I am good for something."

“And something just happens to be Core’s forensics?” Rachelle shook her head and let him get back to work.

Killinger stood in the doorway for a moment, studying Rachelle with that same impassive expression she had given Manning.

Rachelle retrieved a spinal star from one of the cabinets and unsealed it from its sterile packaging. She bent over the table to carefully twist it into the small of her back, wincing as she did so. The churn started up again and she struggled to keep her older entries out of the extractor. Just the scene was all she needed.

It was different from cycling, in that cycling meant taking a bunch of gathered entries and essentially archiving them. Processing allowed her to actually replicate the genetic patterns in her own body and analyze them with her special ability or external tools like stars. Processing took more out of her, required her to focus and work—like scratching an itch under her own skin.

She spared little attention for Killinger, but did notice her draw over the small recording unit that normally occupied the center of the confer-

ence table and hover one hand over the play button.

“Jarod,” Killinger said suddenly. “What do you have?”

“Some forensics, some records to pull, phone records tap.” Jarod’s head appeared from his corner in the back. “Got a few warrant requests pending. Anything particular you want?”

Killinger didn’t answer directly. “Let’s start with the basics.” She waited until she had their attention. “Core law enforcement received a call approximately four hours ago from Daniel Weller’s apartment with a publicly filed time-stamp to establish jurisdiction. He is also a registered regular human who regularly earns money by being an informant to almost any law enforcement body that asks him.” She took a deep breath. “He called me fifteen minutes later.”

*“You got to help me, detective lady. I helped you, and he’s coming.”* Static. *“I gotta go.”* Dead air, then dead line. Killinger flicked off the recorder.

“Likes to cut off your ankles, doesn’t he?” Rachelle demanded viciously.

Killinger didn’t answer.

The kingdoms cities had become forcibly independent from the Thorn Republic through no fault of their own when the teams of special-type human operatives, including Shift's, finally rebelled against their makers and trainers. Since the teams made no special effort to install government in Thorn's place, eventually smaller jurisdictions—counties, districts, quarters, and communities within cities—took up the slack. A single city could consist of anything between a handful and a dozen or more nations. The Department was a holdout, good enough at what it did to maintain a presence in the cities whose kingdoms were willing to hire it.

Rachelle realized the difficulty Weller had placed them in by playing the field. Personal interest did not establish jurisdiction in a kingdoms city like this—especially not for the Department, allowed its tiny foothold only grudgingly.

She started worrying at the problem mentally while physically zeroing in on the forensic entries from the crime scene: forty-four forms of bacteria and counting, twenty-two human genetic patterns and counting, one canine genetic pattern, three

feline, one bovine—definitely food, three plant-based, and one special human. Something about the whole pattern was bothering her.

She straightened and let the shift in her body go ahead and ache. “We have a special on the scene. Weller probably knew that, figured the guy was special. We can claim.”

“You’re positive we have a special?” Jarod asked from his little corner of the room. “‘Cause once I file, they’ll hang us if we’re wrong.”

“How do you think they shattered those windows like that?” Rachele retorted. She couldn’t quantify it yet, but she hadn’t been working forensics since childhood without learning something here and there. She shook her head in disgust, leaned back down on the desk, and nearly scalded her fingers picking up one of the coffee cups she’d gotten on the way in.

“They don’t hang anyone anymore,” Killinger said quietly.

Jarod accepted the chiding for what it was and tapped a panel on his portable, likely navigating to file.

Rachele puzzled and teased out the mashup

of entries she was working, tried to figure out what didn't make sense about them. "So who was Daniel Weller anyway?" She had heard of him before. He was a regular enough informant and she was a regular enough consultant for that.

Jarod's hand snaked out into view, holding a small clear bag with hair samples. "Surprised you couldn't tell who was in there most."

Killinger brought over the bag.

Rachelle thanked her with a nod, set down her first cup of coffee, and took a sip from the second. She worked open the bag and compared its contents to the entries she already had, feeling the duplicates and comparing. "He's three different people." She rolled her eyes and closed the bag.

"Wiry build and short," Killinger told her. "He has light brown hair—curly, and hazel eyes."

"And fidgets as much as he stutters," Jarod added. "You've really never seen him?"

"No." Rachelle leaned on her elbows on the table, kept processing, worked her fingers through her thick, auburn hair. "Mixed ethnicity?"

“Purebred mutt,” Jarod quipped. “About the color of your latte.”

“It’s not a latte.” Rachele thought he had paid enough attention to her when she was in to know *that*, but she was only lightly bothered. She kept sorting through the regulars, taking more time to check for melanin-producing genes. It was a strain having to dig in deep like this, spinning her processing paddles and feeling the constant sharp pain of holding the data in place.

She could almost hear the eyeroll in Jarod’s voice when it came around again. “Seriously, you ought to get a guy.”

The words surprised Rachele enough to snap her out of processing and make her notice the world outside her body, see Killinger raise her eyebrows, and nearly have a flashback of her last conversation with Justus. “I. Should. Not.” She shot a quick glare in Jarod’s direction before snatching back at the entry she’d just released.

“Could be good for you,” he pressed teasingly. “Love’s a powerful thing.”

“Love isn’t just romance,” Rachele retorted,

back in control, churning through regulars. She drained the last of her second cup, noting the amount of sugar was off but not enough to render it ineffective. Romance. The comment wasn't as offhand as he let on. She worked one hand through her hair and pulled it tight enough to hurt, one pain offsetting the others.

"Never said it was," he agreed breezily, fingers tapping panels at a ridiculous pace, "but you could use some softening up."

She laughed at that. Love was blood on Sear's arms and Meld's fragmented memories when he poured his life into hers, Shift's wounded eyes and the scars on Shift's back. Love was *sacrifice*. It didn't soften anything. G—, she'd been *angry* when she realized Justus had fallen in love with her, and he'd seen it coming but even then not understood the point. She never wanted him willing to pay that price.

"I don't think soft is what the Unit needs," Killinger interjected quietly, silencing Jarod before he could speak again.

Rachelle agreed with the sentiment but said nothing and instead withdrew into herself, away

from memory and love, and immersed her mind in the ache of fluid carrying DNA, RNA through her vessels, back and forth, in and out, like a breath. Her fingers worked open and then tightened into a fist as entries broke down into component parts, searching, querying. Don't focus on the pain. Don't *think*. She found him.

It was an ache to uncurl from the table, stretch just a little, let something cycle out of her system and into her permanent genetic structure, and it hurt and felt good at the same time. "The blood was Weller's." She slid the bag across the table toward Jarod's side of the room.

Killinger took a deep breath, then turned back to Jarod. "Warrants?"

"Nothing's come in yet," he admitted, "but I'm pulling up record matches for Core's forensics. Could really use Rachele's."

Rachele sipped from the third coffee cup, leaned one hip against the conference table. "Patience is a virtue, Jarod. Learn it." To Killinger, "Who would be after him?"

Killinger crossed her arms and leaned back against the side counter. "He had contacts in sev-

eral circles. Any one of them might have had a bounty out.”

“He ran with specials?” Rachelle asked skeptically. She moved to the one special-type on scene and began mining it for information. Specials didn’t hang in large groups unless they were teams like Rachelle’s. She still saw Shift, Sear, Justus, Meld, and all the others on a regular basis. They didn’t get too social with regulars, at least not if they were in the business—above ground or under it.

Killinger sighed and stepped forward, spreading her hands expressively. “I felt his terror.” She was a situational empath and the first thing she did on any scene was take a read of the traces left there. “This is someone he knew and someone who could do him serious harm. If the blood was his...” She frowned.

Rachelle followed her thought. “Then the special injured him.” Initial analysis of the special’s DNA seemed to agree. She shook her head, not liking what she was getting.

“A special he knew was coming, though that begs the question how,” Jarod added, noting her

words aloud but clearly otherwise preoccupied. He made a small sound of frustration. “Which we could answer if we could get a warrant. Core’s blocked us out.”

Killinger glanced over sharply.

Jarod called out an update. “Okay, I’ve run everything we’ve got, and our missing boy’s not turning up anywhere the Department can track him. The blood on the carpet is Weller’s,”—he nodded towards Rachelle—“so no leads on how it spilled from that. The apartment was broken into and rifled through, but from the time fades on the stuff Core got, the guy was already gone. I need some forensics, girl.”

“I’m not your girl,” Rachelle bit out. She worked her way quickly through the last of the string, marking off here, there, this aspect, that. The room went out of focus as she internalized again.

“Do you even *know* what a good romance can be like?” Jarod suddenly asked, snapping her attention back hard—and with it a leak.

She snatched after the power to check it, but Jarod’s mug still rattled and the liquid in it sloshed

mildly with the force of the aborted telekinetic shove. Rachelle lashed out verbally to cover the spasm spiking angrily through her vessels, “Give, take, and a bunch of lies to smooth things over. I know what love is, and it isn’t romance. I’ve got your man.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” All back on business, Jarod tapped a few panels and paused with his fingers over the keys. “Fire off an ID.” He kept a running database of every entry she, or any other reader, had previously processed for the Department.

Rachelle stared at him, at the instant shift from one mode to another, then let it go. “It’s new,” she told him, straightened from the table, and twisted the star attached to her spine to loosen it. Careful business that. She tried not to wince—and failed—then slipped around the table toward Jarod, handed him the star, and rattled off a bunch of numbers in the ID format he preferred. “Have at it. I doubt he’s registered.”

“Everyone’s registered,” Jarod replied.

Killinger raised her eyebrows again; Rachelle laughed silently to herself. Special Unit’s job was

to handle any investigation that turned out to be related to special-type humans, and special-type humans were rarely registered. Killinger wasn't because she'd struck a deal with the government to use her situational empathy for law enforcement. Jarod was because he was a good law-abiding citizen whose parents were delighted when he was born a cyberpath—even though at that time, few had even known specials existed. Rachelle was a team member registered in a database Jarod would never have access to. Registration in the standard database was simply not applicable.

“Anything helpful?” Killinger asked Rachelle quietly.

Rachelle shrugged and settled into the absent Cate's ergonomic chair before propping her feet up on the table and tasted the last bit of coffee in her cup to find it cold. She grimaced and tossed it in the can under the desk. “He's a dowser. Recognizes fluids through a few feet of layers and can draw them up with the right call. Sizable range but it cuts out after ten yards or so.” She picked

up the fourth cup, felt it—still warm—and started drinking.

Jarod stopped and looked over. “You mean he could draw blood from a victim while standing across the room.”

“And draw air through windows.” She spun the coffee cup idly in her hand, worn out and aching like she’d been pummeled inside and out.

“Air is a gas,” Killinger reminded her.

“And gas is a fluid.” Rachele closed her eyes and let her entries start cycling again instead of processing. It was slow work without a star to shove more of them through, but she had to do something before the abilities hovering at the edge of her internal working queue became more than just shadows and a stream of available options.

“Jarod.” Killinger said the name slowly, thoughtfully.

Rachele opened her eyes and took in the canted angle of Killinger’s head, the faraway look in her eyes.

Jarod rolled out from his corner as far as the chair would go in the tiny room.

“Why do the time fades show that Daniel had left the apartment before the break-in? If it was his blood, then he should have been there.” Killinger’s frown deepened. Her gaze came back into focus as if she were seeing Rachelle and Jarod. “I think our special wanted something in those papers,” she stated quietly.

Rachelle thought that over and started to piece together her disconnect. *He’s three different people...* She almost swore. “Bring up Weller’s registration,” she demanded.

Jarod grabbed his portable and tapped a few panels. “What am I looking for?”

“You’re not.” Rachelle came over and glanced over the screen. “Does this go by something I’ll recognize?”

“If you speak guanine, adenine, thymine, cytosine.”

“Lucky for you, I do.” Rachelle skimmed down the identification codes until they broke into something she understood, then read over the genetic signatures.

“Is it the same one you identified?” Killinger asked.

“Weller’s a shifter.” Rachelle shook her head in disgust and straightened. “We have jurisdiction.”

Killinger’s intake of breath was soft, but loud enough to sound in Rachelle’s ears. Jarod snapped his mouth shut, then read the look on Rachelle’s face.

“Have something against shifters?” he prodded with genuine curiosity.

Rachelle shut down her emotions, off her face, out of mind. This accomplished, she raised an eyebrow and answered, “Quite the opposite.” She knew more about shifters than anyone else alive, even shifters themselves. Rachelle had absorbed every single shifter genetic pattern known to exist, sliced and diced them open, and compared them to each other. *But*— Shift was a woman when she should have been a kid, and she could manipulate almost anyone into exactly where she wanted them. Rachelle had never had a taste for that.

She aimed her next words at Killinger with a mood shift so rapid that she surprised herself. “You still want to save him?” The change was there, right under her skin where she hadn’t

expected, and she found that professional operative inside her waiting to take over. She covered her coolness by stretching against her irritated muscles, tilting her head from one side to another to release the pressure in her neck and shoulders from a blockage. What she wouldn't give for Justus right now to break up the kinks. He had learned the pattern of her vascular system more quickly than she had and mastered the work of massaging it into a smoother flow.

She glanced back over at Killinger, whose mouth had tightened into a grim line.

Killinger uncrossed her arms. "Yes. File the appropriate breach reports, Jarod, and we'll take this from the apartment." She moved to the cabinet to gather up the things they would need.

From the apartment. A reader run. Rachelle scowled as anger provoked painful twinges down the vessels in her body. No reader cared to walk a path from a scene like a sniffing terrier.

Jarod seemed surprised but went promptly to work, tapping, filing, then snapping together his own essentials, starting with the portable.

Rachelle tossed her last empty cup into the

trash can and threw on her missing layers. She heard what Killinger hadn't said. Killinger had promised Weller protection, never mind whether his sorry hide was worth that promise. Rachelle had heard it from her leaders her whole life, *I never lose one of my own.*

“And Core?” she asked, even as she scrounged around for her own first aid kit— instant coffee packets, sugar, creamer, small bandages, bioreader, biosupport patches, an emergency medical star still sealed in its packaging. She didn't want to do this.

“Manning needs to close this case,” Killinger stated without inflection.

Rachelle glanced up, interested. Jarod paused just inside the door, waiting for the two women to catch up.

Killinger shrugged. She never was given to explanations of how she knew things, not even to her own people. “He can't do that without us.”

—

Manning may have needed to close the case, but

he wasn't particularly happy to see them—or the report Jarod gave him on informant fraud breach and confirmation of the involvement of special-type humans. He barely refrained from gritting his teeth in irritation.

Rachelle grimaced when she immersed herself back into that cesspool of drifting genetic material and scrambled hastily through her entries. Two shields had already cycled past, fourteen more in queue. She found a suitable entry, pulled it into focus, and overlaid her skin with a thin, invisible shield that locked out the drift, then let go of the ability and let it slide back into the churning database. Two seconds. She had three seconds left to unshield when she needed to.

She leaned with some relief against a wall. Manning narrowed a questioning glance at her, but she disregarded it.

“What do you have from the case so far?” Killinger asked politely, calmly.

Jarod waited at a small distance, hand tapping arrhythmically against his portable's case.

Manning's techs had wrapped up and it was just him finishing his initial report against the

countertop on a clipboard. He weighed the question for a moment. “What do *you* have?”

“The Database, man,” Jarod interjected, then fell abruptly to silence beneath Killinger’s chiding look.

“We need each other, it would seem,” she answered Manning indirectly. “The Special Unit’s purpose is to handle special-type humans, but we don’t need to redo whatever footwork you’ve already done.”

“And Core’s *purpose* in this?” Manning demanded caustically.

Rachelle honestly couldn’t blame him. Who wanted their case snatched away if they actually cared about this sort of thing? She pushed off the wall, drawing the gazes of the Unit and Manning as she stretched her back just enough to unkink it. Cycling was sluggish, slow. It would take her ages to finish at this rate and running entries wasn’t going to help.

“Core’s law enforcement,” she bit back with her own characteristic harshness. He could have figured this out. “You’ve interviewed the neighbors, paid out informant fees, and have some sort

of theory going on in that detective head of yours. You do arrests. I don't."

Killinger's eyebrows came up. Fact was, the Special Unit *did* do arrests, but without Cate or Marc here, bringing in a special would be difficult at best.

Manning frowned at her, also uncertain at her conclusion, realizing perhaps that Rachelle wasn't a member of the Special Unit. "Killinger's handled arrests." He had read enough files over the years since the Thorn Rebellion.

Rachelle rolled her eyes. "I'm the brawn of this outfit unless you call in a team, and I do not do arrests."

Killinger slid her gaze back toward Manning, apparent acceptance of Rachelle's point. Jarod coughed slightly to cover his laugh. Working with specials for real wasn't something law enforcement generally did, so they had little in the way of experience with the different set of rules under which those specials operated. Oh, there were a few branches here and there that had some. Justus had taken up law enforcement in Riving. Protector took up with militia. It wasn't unheard

of, but the Core didn't have specials. They had the Special Unit, and the Special Unit had Killinger and Cate who had people like Rachelle in their personal economy of debt, love, and sacrifice.

"I handle the arrest," Manning repeated, his stare aimed straight into Rachelle's.

She laughed. "If he doesn't end up dead."

"You have a suspect." His attention shifted back to Killinger.

"You have a theory," she answered evenly.

He had a theory. He just didn't have the facts. There wasn't quite as much choice as they were all letting on. The Special Unit had the jurisdiction and Core had the information the Special Unit needed. Handing over the arrest rights was simply a faster way to get Manning to give up the data that Killinger frankly had the right to.

"The neighbors reported hearing glass breaking approximately seventeen minutes after the call to Core." Manning tapped his pencil against his clipboard as he spoke. "Nobody reported witnessing anything, though the apart-

ment overhead reported more breaking glass about ten minutes after that. Core arrived on the scene at thirty-four minutes.” Seven minutes too late.

Jarod’s face went as stoic as he could make it and Rachelle figured he was biting back a drop-down list of comments on the poor response time.

“It’s Core,” she retorted. “Cut them a break.”

Streets in the Core were a tricky proposition. Backstreets made for walking only, front streets broadening from thin alleyways as narrow as three men standing abreast to open thoroughfares that could accommodate three or four cars driving parallel—travel took multiple forms for a single nearby destination, and black coats were already spread thin enough responding to the densest crime rate in any of the western cities.

Puzzlement flickered in Manning’s eyes at her defense. Rather than respond, Rachelle moved toward the stacks of paper under the windows.

Manning kept talking to Killinger. Killinger responded in low murmurs. The case for Jarod’s portable unzipped, followed by the sounds of

fingers tapping and panels pressed. Rachelle studied the papers. Nonsense rhymes and riddles. She glanced back toward the unit and heard Manning say much the same thing.

Nonsense rhymes and riddles and Weller a shifter. D— it. This was going to hurt.

She leaned back and forced herself to uncross her arms, uncurl, and toss her hair back and out of her way. The database in her body cycled backward as she focused and, combing through a few dozen entries, found the shield she'd tossed aside earlier. Sliding it off was like diving into a swimming pool of needles. She slid off her jacket, opened her eyes from half-shut concentration, and studied while she processed. Pinpricks of genetic drift washed over her. She watched dust—*dead skin, wasn't it?*—floating in the meager window light as she searched for the dowser in the morass. He had to be there. He'd had a reason for coming and it was somewhere in these papers.

Ten minutes. He'd probably expected longer when he came to pick up Weller and took off

when he realized his target had called for help. It had been six hours since Weller went missing.

Killinger was standing at her side. She hadn't noticed her approach, still didn't take time to do more than that.

After a pause, "What are you thinking?" Killinger asked.

Thinking? Rachelle could have laughed but instead shook her head. This wasn't thinking, running pins and needles under her skin in an urgent rapid rush—*the dowser, the dowser, the dowser...*, RNA, DNA, in and out like a breath. She backed up, shook her head again. "He didn't find what he was looking for." She tightened her nails into her bare arms, abruptly realizing she'd gone to gripping herself somewhere in there.

Manning held out the clipboard, flipped open to his techs' analysis of the scattered, bloody papers and photographs in the middle of the room. She didn't take it, just read it.

"Forensics, huh?" he asked, tone dipped in suspicion.

"Told you we have the Database," she bit back

sharply. “I need to contaminate the scene.”

Manning’s jaw set. “Look. This evidence hasn’t been catalogued—”

Killinger cut him off before he could continue. “We’ll give you ours.” A blunt offer. She had promised Weller protection and time was running long.

Jarod was mercifully professional as he slipped Rachelle a data reader.

She bent down and tucked it under her pant leg, pressing it into her skin. “Got me?”

The cyberpath narrowed eyes at his screen, then nodded, expression clearing. “You’re on.”

It was snatching at the entries passing as quickly as she could send them. She reached into her jacket pocket and tore open a coffee packet with her teeth.

“You drink entirely too much coffee,” Jarod quipped.

She glared at him, opened the creamer, the sugar—just the right ratio of each—and treated it like medicine when she tossed the ingredients into her mouth and swallowed. Careful business to thumb through the stacked papers and pull out

those the dowser had touched. Still running through entries, dragging the whole thing to a slamming, aching halt as she grabbed the one she wanted: Shift. Her leader. She ignored the flashbacks, the memories of every time she'd taken on these particular genes, let them split open her own double helices, and five seconds to snatch up the papers in the middle of the room and *shift* them, into her body, out again, and into whatever they were really supposed to be.

Rachelle shuddered, power spent. She handed the papers over into Killinger's gloved hands—no new entries there, she was grateful—then scrounged through the entries one more time for another shield as she pulled on her jacket. “I hate this,” she muttered.

“You're a special,” Manning stated, voice unreadable. His stare was fixed on the papers in Killinger's hands. They frowned over them together.

“You think?” Rachelle straightened the lengths of her hair with her fingers, then braided them swiftly. If she didn't have to fight today, then she didn't have to cycle. She made a small noise of

disgust in the back of her throat. How many times had she told herself she wasn't going to do this again? Reviving her combat skills, playing coverage, overloading her own vascular system, dirtying herself with the Department one more time and one more time whenever Killinger called her because Killinger was Cate's and somehow Rachelle had never learned to quit caring. She tossed aside her braid and didn't flinch at the way it hurt when her hair fell back against the skin of her neck.

Manning looked up at her then. "Caffeine addiction?" he asked quietly, with neither acceptance nor condemnation—still genuinely curious, reserving judgment until he understood.

She laughed him off and Jarod too, who was staring in unabashed curiosity in the hopes she would answer. "Can't. Someone made me addiction proof before they figured out the side effects." And that was it, all she was willing to say about what the Department had done to her body when she was still a child and the kingdoms were still a part of the Thorn Republic. "You caught it?" she

aimed at Jarod, turning her body toward him and cutting Manning out of the loop.

Jarod skimmed down his screen again, tapped a few panels. “Your body went crazy, but the pictures are good. Shipping the catalog to Core.” Then he settled in to start reading himself. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

Crazy was about right. Her body was going crazy now, hectic patterns of heated rushing fluid pushing and shoving and tumbling through too little space in those vessels under her skin. Spider aches and little breakages. What did it matter if the database bled?

“What do they say?” Rachele looked to Killinger, who had finished reading and was now on the photographs. Once family photos, now they were gritty backstreets and gang-marked buildings.

Killinger sighed. “Nothing good.” She straightened the papers and laid them carefully on the floor again.

Manning shrugged it off. “Power suppression is supposed to be impossible, but if this kidnapper

thought it wasn't, it could be cause for this." He gestured at the ruined windows, the glass, the papers and went back to scribbling his report.

"Genotype reversal kills the subject," Killinger corrected him quietly, making Rachelle want to flinch with *those* words. There was no undoing what had been done. "Not suppression."

Manning looked surprised at Killinger's upending of his knowledge about specials. Rachelle could see the thoughts whirring behind his eyes as he considered the implications. She could almost hear those thoughts and she abruptly realized she was running a telepath.

She shoved the entry to silence before it broke something that couldn't be fixed. Don't go there. Don't talk about this. Rachelle wanted them to shut up before this leaked some information none of them had any business leaking. "What do those papers say?" she ground out between gritted teeth.

"This"—Manning waved a sheet of paper—"is the bill of sale for two hundred power suppressors to be used on special-type humans."

Jarod looked back and forth among them.

“But power suppression is *impossible*.”

“And who told you that?” Rachele scoffed. “Thorn?”

Manning’s eyes darkened. “You’re a rebel?” He recognized the difference between how a former Thorn Republic citizen referred to their one-time country and how a former operative did. The operatives had *hated* Thorn, a country willing to experiment on its own children to create the perfect warriors. Former citizens never knew why they no longer were.

She spared him a glance and pulled up a cyberpath. A spark of white light at her fingertips. Five seconds. She flung her mind into Jarod’s computer and through the files he had read off her while she shifted those papers: power suppressors, real ones—black market, Department issue and the type all team administration had worn and some team members used for medical reasons. Only there was no way in Kishet that Rachele would believe these were purchased for medical use. She lost her grip, and the entry slid out into her database.

“You still want to go after this fish?” she

demanded of Killinger. He had information on something he knew perfectly well was beyond illegal. “*This* was how Sewell was holding his specials and Weller *knew* about it.” This was how they were able to trade in the lives of special humans and enslave them. It was part of how the Department had done it then, and it was how the slavers could do it now.

Killinger closed her eyes, pained expression furrowing her forehead. She had promised Weller protection in exchange for the information he had given, but he had held this back. “We have a duty to go after the kidnapper,” she said at last, opening her eyes.

“But we’ve got enough here to lock away Weller too,” Jarod pointed out.

Killinger shrugged. “He is an informant. I will leave that to Core.”

“An informant who, according to your own analysis, profiled himself fraudulently.” Manning glanced around, frustrated. “But we don’t have much to go on as to where they went. Unless we look at everyone tied to Sewell.”

“Wouldn’t matter,” Jarod disagreed. “The dowser’s not registered.”

“Not even in the Database?” Manning frowned.

Rachelle moved closer to the counter to remove her emergency biosupport patch from her pocket and apply it to one arm, letting it throw some healing power and energy through her muscles. She couldn’t really afford to move to a star right now, and she wanted to skip out on this conversation if possible.

“He’s in the Database,” Killinger replied evenly, “but without a name.” She glanced toward Rachelle. “Physical attributes?”

Rachelle only handled genetics, but even that had salient points. “Five foot eight, white male, brown hair if it’s not dyed, carrier for sickle cell anemia...” She trailed off. Invisible trait. “Sorry.”

“Not everyone sees the world through a microscope,” Jarod teased.

“Not everyone mistakes reality for a chip,” she said, sharply again. “Medium build, high cheekbones, somewhat pronounced if he’s not

fat, blue eyes, body hair light. Anything else?”

“If he’s not fat?” Manning’s tone was flat, but his eyes provided the question mark. “Old picture, then.”

Rachelle shrugged.

“Jarod. Run these through and see if you can bring up a location.” Killinger handed the photographs to Jarod, then shot Rachelle an apologetic glance. “I think it’s time for a reader run.”

Manning didn’t know what that was, but he stayed quiet and watched intently as Rachelle shoved off the counter and ran the entries she had tagged for this ten minutes ago. Jarod kept an eye on the reads from her chip. Rachelle focused on processing the incoming data from empathic, telepathic, thermal, and genetic reads. Five seconds, but it was long enough to map the entire apartment inside her mind and confirm what she and Killinger had both noted earlier.

“Bathroom,” she commented tersely.

“The window in there was broken inward,” Manning reminded her. “More likely, it was the entry point.”

Rachelle stayed quiet. Killinger glanced at her

then seemed to realize why Rachelle wasn't talking. No need to clue Manning in as to exactly who and what the Database was. Like Rachelle didn't have enough complications in her life, she really didn't need that one.

"The dowser can only draw fluids toward himself," Killinger explained. "He can't push them away."

"Fair enough." Manning gestured at the door. "After you, ladies."

Killinger shook her head. "I'll meet you outside."

Jarod followed on Rachelle's heels. Manning stood near the door of the tiny room as Rachelle sized up the exit point.

It was a trip through the window and she pointedly ignored the flashbacks from her work before the Rebellion as pointedly as she ignored Manning just behind her. She had always been picky about who watched her back.

Jarod gave her a leg up. She accepted not because she couldn't flip through the thing on her own strength, but because she didn't want to pull an entry, run one, send another RNA command

screaming through her system. She angled herself just so and held herself by her hands in the near-empty window frame, palms grinding into the last remaining glass. She paused for the wash of more entries, more data, but G—, where was she going to put them?

“Tell me she’s not intending to go through,” Manning said when he realized she wasn’t angled right for returning to the ground inside.

“Regular,” she bit out through pain-gritted teeth, then tossed herself through, somersaulting down three stories of yellow brick toward Killinger, standing on the pavement, staring upward. Rachelle hit with the acrobatic landing and somersault rebound that had been hammer-trained into all her team, letting the impact flow with her and out of her body.

Killinger searched her gaze with restless worried eyes.

Rachelle grimaced. “Exit point.” She glanced up.

Jarod and Manning stared out the bathroom window. Jarod gave a nod at her word and

disappeared back inside; Manning followed hard behind him.

—

The backstreets of the Squares reminded Rachelle of too many crowded narrow streets in foreign cities on other continents, but the genetic detritus was undeniably of the Core—its typical plagues, diseases, and ethnic groups.

Killinger stared down those streets, eyes narrowed, reading if Rachelle wasn't mistaken. Killinger's genes had a different taste when she was using her empathy, and Rachelle could feel it, along with the wash of Jarod and Manning approaching from behind: the snap of cyberpathy and a regular who had walked through too many places in this city. Too many entries, too much data flickering through her body. Rachelle shuddered and forced herself to pay attention. She had zoned out upstairs and that was the sort of mistake she couldn't afford to make again.

“You’re absolutely crazy,” Manning muttered, his voice a low rumble.

Rachelle spared him a brief glance. She had no desire to answer the accusation veiled in his words.

Jarod opened his mouth to—what? Defend her? Rachelle shut him up before he had a chance to say a word. “I do my job.” This wasn’t her job, but Manning didn’t know that.

Killinger turned to face the group. “It comes in snatches. Nothing is... complete.”

Another one of those things where an interpreter would come in handy. On a good day, further away by weeks from needing to cycle, Rachelle would have run Killinger’s entry and figured it out for herself. Today she was bone-weary, over-stretched, and wanting to hook into Meld long enough to get healed—even if every bit of life he poured into her came from his own.

She shuddered, altering her wish. The last time he’d healed her, he had barely pulled away soon enough to remain alive. Don’t go there, don’t go there. She jerked her head and ignored Manning’s concerned glance. Let Jarod do the heavy

lifting on this one, reading Killinger through his computer, and nodding as if he understood.

“Going in and out of consciousness maybe?” Jarod suggested.

Manning frowned at the portable’s screen, clearly more lost than Rachelle.

She didn’t like feeling lost. Killinger was studying her, waiting. This was a reader run, wasn’t it?

Rachelle could have closed her eyes, but she had long since mastered the art of falling inside herself with eyes wide open. There was a river inside of her, the serpent biting its tail, turning around and around and getting longer every time she added new entries onto the end. Rachelle did not reach out with her hand to that cramped maze of backstreets and alleyways, grime and dim sunlight, because the river was already there. She opened up and let the world come in. Truly becoming her power instead of merely using it was immersing herself in an entirely different way of seeing, feeling, sensing, *thinking*.

Genetic drift weighted the air heavily toward Killinger, Jarod, Manning, herself—but there

were other entries awash in faintly moving currents in the air. Brick walls layered decades-old material under years-old under days-old. The ground was a scattered, profligate map of every weed and animal or human foot that had ever passed. There was Weller and there and there in so many shapes and forms. This was his home territory after all. She held out a hand as she walked, coming close to brushing the brick walls, the sidewalks in the more densely covered areas, seeking a moment of transition and the entry which would allow her to run Daniel Weller. She didn't find it.

“Don't think I've ever seen you do it like this,” Jarod commented, almost breaking her concentration.

She shrugged him off, held onto that tight immersion. Entries flickered in and out at the edges of her vision, her nerve endings, endless possibilities to use this special human ability or that or some of that unthinking intuition a normal—*Justus*—might have.

She abruptly switched gears and went looking for the drift and impacts of the dowser, followed

the directional flow as best she could, marking it off in her body. She let herself feel the taste of his various entries: initiating dowse, dowsing, pulling, releasing, winding it down, leaving it inactive. Once she was sure she had collected it all, she let it all go and shuddered as her body struggled to swallow the new entries she had dumped into queue.

“Snatches will have to do,” Rachelle snapped. She was gripping her arms again and *that* hurt, tightening down the space her vessels had in her body. She had stayed thin all her life, never cared that much for food, but now she wondered if she should have put on weight to lengthen those vessels and gotten some more room for the DNA, RNA breathing in and out like a series of zeroes and ones. “I can’t do that again,” she said abruptly.

Killinger nodded, eyes concerned but face unmoved. The woman took stoic to a whole new level.

Rachelle shook herself, ignored the keen narrow-eyed stare Manning was sending her, and straightened. “The dowser dampened his fall here.” Right under the window. “He pulled on

the air to cushion them.” She gestured down the second backstreet, opening leftward. “Took that south, second right.” A seer entry flew into position with a sharp spike that made her catch her breath, and she kicked it right back out. “Weller could be awake or not, no telling. The dowser was messing with him but then quit around the first corner.”

She was climbing the walls, spider pains crawling up her back, but she let that be, fell into step behind Killinger, glanced over at Jarod’s screen while Killinger read all the empathic signature snatches she could down the second backstreet south and around the second right.

Killinger and Manning took opposite sides of the streets, knocking on what few doors were in view of the exit route. Manning’s brief note to Jarod on security cameras was that the whole area had been swept already. There were none.

Jarod nodded at that and ran his own sweep, eyes unfocused, mind stretching out for anything he could possibly hook into. Precious few security systems were impervious to a cyberpath, even fewer invisible. Rachelle knew of only one and

possibly a second that were able to consistently skate below notice, and both had been designed by cyberpathic former team operatives.

Both sweeps came up empty. Jarod's computer made a pinging sound as they huddled together in a likely corner.

"Got something?" the detective asked, gesturing at the portable.

Jarod held up a finger.

Killinger shook her head and rubbed her arms with her hands. "Nobody seems to have seen anything helpful."

Rachelle felt that itch of wanting to know what was going through Jarod's machine and mind, but she too settled for rubbing at the irritation in her arms and focusing her gaze outward into the maze of backstreets. Let Killinger do her job and Rachelle be the coverage Cate wasn't there to be. Could the woman have picked a worse time to get married?

"Restaurant," Jarod commented abruptly, breaking the tense silence.

Killinger leaned in to read over his shoulder. "Auspin."

Manning shook his head. "I don't know the name offhand. Send it to Core." He aimed this last at Jarod, who merely continued tapping away on his panels.

A cool, stale breeze wafted through the stony corridors. Rachelle felt the faint drift and scolded herself but snatched at it anyway. She shrugged her hair to one side to expose more of her neck and angled her face into the faintly moving air for better access.

"Silas Auspin isn't coming up with a lot of cross-references." She could hear the frown in Jarod's voice. "I've got an application and license in Silent Kingdom for the restaurant from a little over two years ago and not much after that."

"Not much or nothing?" Manning demanded.

Jarod didn't answer right away. He kept tapping, then paused and drummed his fingers against the side of the portable while it hummed merrily. Rachelle was certain his cyberpathy was running overtime. "Core's got nothing. Silent Kingdom isn't exactly what you'd call hackable."

Rachelle narrowed her eyes. Silent Kingdom. That was the taste of it. A difference in the gene-

tic ambience in this corner where the dowser and Weller had passed beyond her scan.

Manning came out and said it. “We need to check this out, but how do we know we aren’t chasing wind here? This is a photograph our suspect *might* have been after. There’s no guarantee this restaurant has anything to do with him at all.”

“Medical records,” Killinger ordered Jarod. “See what you can bring up under 7th Ward at the Burdown Hospital.”

“Get right on that.” Jarod’s hands quit drumming and got typing. “What am I looking for?”

“Sickle cell anemia,” Killinger answered. “Carrier.”

Rachelle glanced back from the wind at that. Manning’s expression registered surprise, but also that he remembered what Killinger was pulling from. If Auspin was a carrier, their evidence trail had just gotten tighter.

Jarod’s eyebrows rose. “I got a Jameson Auspin for sickle cell. Brother to the Silas Auspin who opened our restaurant.”

Killinger looked to Rachelle for confirmation and Manning followed the look, knowing that

Rachelle was forensics, but not *knowing*, not like he was about to.

She just couldn't keep some things quiet forever. Rachelle sighed. "Hang on a sec," she muttered. "Running a normal."

The words drew sharp glances from the rest of the Unit. None of them had seen her do it, assumed there was nothing valuable in a regular-type human genetic pattern for her to run, just query, but he gave, Justus gave, and she hated him for it as much as for anything he took.

She settled on the ground, bent her head to knees, and tangled hands in the lengths of her hair, messing up the braid. He had always liked her hair. "This won't be pretty."

It wasn't. It was a mess of color, sensation, memories gained from every time she read him with a hundred different abilities, every time he touched her when she was cycling—she hated that his was the only touch that could actually make it feel any better—shuddering through her body with the results of more reads than just her own. Becoming another person *hurt*. Harshness melted into self-loathing, crisscrossed with a moral

standard far too high for all the things they'd done, the sharp taste for blood and violence bleeding into tender, brutal intuition—intuition that ran in his family. She grasped for it quickly, no time limit on her own power, and there. She had it. It was hers.

She threw back her hair and sat up, clenched hands, clenched teeth to hold onto a pattern that could only last but seconds, and there it was: the way her teammate could read a dozen variables and find the thread that made them hang together. All those photographs she'd read with borrowed cyberpathy, the papers, the genetic ambience from another kingdom hanging in the air, the images in her own mind of that same kingdom gone silent once the Thorn Republic had been taken away.

Rachelle nodded at Killinger. "It's Auspin. He's keeping his specials in the basement of that restaurant."

Manning frowned. "The basement?"

"Steps," Killinger said, pointing at the screen as Jarod flipped through the thumbnails for her. "They lead below ground." She continued to

study the pictures, then gestured again and Jarod brought up the documents. She said slowly, “Putting Sewell out of business would have locked down the power suppressor supply, but they are no longer being manufactured and we confiscated everything in Sewell’s warehouse.”

“Including a bunch of suppressors that nobody bothered to investigate?” Rachele demanded.

Killinger shook her head. “Evidence hasn’t had time to deal with much of anything that’s already locked up and closed out. Most catalogues go into storage if we don’t have a reason to sort through it.”

Jarod looked incredulous. “We could have found evidence of a slave-trade ring for all we know.”

“Same happens in Core.” Manning leaned back.

“It was already catalogued,” Killinger replied flatly. “Small printless black boxes don’t help us find related suspects.”

Jarod didn’t argue the point, but did bring up another, more salient one. “So how are we going to do this in *Silent Kingdom*?”

Silent Kingdom was, to put it mildly, a problem. It used to be the bad area of town when Kishet was still a Thorn city, but now it was an isolationist nation without law enforcement or judicial system beyond the hero and villain vigilantism that had sprung up there. Neither black coats like Manning nor the Special Unit were welcome within its borders—with or without a warrant.

Rachelle looked disgusted. “We get a team and we get out there.”

“If we could arrest him and get Weller out,” Manning countered, “it would be better to get a team out to bat cleanup later.”

Killinger disagreed. “This is an act against a citizen of Core. We have jurisdiction whether or not Silent Kingdom wants to grant it.”

“Are you suggesting war?” Manning asked, exasperated.

Killinger’s face hardened. “I’m suggesting heroism.”

Weller wasn’t exactly a worthy candidate for heroism in the old vernacular, but Killinger wasn’t using the old vernacular. She was referring to the

right of a vigilante hero to take back what was stolen or defend what belonged to their own side. A vigilante villain was not so much someone intent on wrong as someone who would steal or destroy what another side should not have—or go into a place like Silent Kingdom to deal with a slave trader.

“Keep the slave trade out of it,” Rachelle bottom-lined it. “We’re going in to get Weller and that’s it.”

“Which doesn’t require a team,” Manning pointed out again.

Jarod was sitting back and watching. He knew the conclusion Killinger was working toward.

“No, it doesn’t,” she said softly. “But Rachelle doesn’t do arrests.”

“I’m climbing the walls,” Rachelle admitted to Killinger, who looked over impassively, proving she had already known that. “There’s going to be collateral damage.”

Jarod snapped his portable shut. “It’s a vigilante state,” he said. “There’s *always* collateral damage.”

Rachelle exhaled sharply. And wasn't that the truth?

—

There wasn't going to be a later. There wasn't going to be a cleanup. This was the Department and even though the Special Unit was a step removed from the Thorn Republic and the old laws in the black book that was above the security clearance of almost everyone high up enough in government or military to "need to know" almost everything, some things fell back on old school when there wasn't anywhere else to fall back to. Rachelle wasn't Special Unit; she was an operative, and she and Killinger both knew how to play this so everything stayed legal where it mattered.

Jarod supplied the passes into Silent Kingdom out of his portable. Killinger asked Manning how good he was with his gun.

"Good enough to take down a hostile," he stated and, for the first time since Rachelle had

met him, earned a second look. He wasn't an operative and she didn't need confirmation to know it—the Database was the only operative who had been personally introduced to every single team member there was—but he used their words and the hardness in his eyes was all too familiar.

They stopped off before heading in to let Jarod make sure they had all their red tape taken care of. Rachele had her own preparations. She would have to hold on tight to make it through this without destroying something.

“How do you know Killinger?” she asked Manning as she slapped on her second biosupport patch and downed another round of coffee at their stop-off point, a small, friendly little restaurant the Special Unit frequented. She would have asked Killinger, but Killinger was near the door making a phone call for some medical backup, something Rachele didn't want to think about.

He shrugged. “Ran into her a few times the usual way.” The ‘usual’ meaning she took his case out from under him. Killinger did her work well,

but she had never cared if she made friends or enemies along the way.

Nevertheless, it wasn't a real answer. Something about it bothered her, and Rachelle hadn't been in the business since she was a stolen six-year-old child without learning some instincts along the way.

"You normally talk like an operative?" she retorted, more to the point. Her gaze raked over his black coat, white star. She tilted her head in question and drained another cup. She didn't have to say there were none of her kind in the Core.

Jarod didn't even bother looking up. He was used to her harshness and probably knew Manning better than she did.

Manning's jaw set, then he shook his head. "Not normally, no." He finally met her gaze and shrugged simply. "I've known a few."

Rachelle nodded, gathered her trash to dump it in the incinerator by their table. "Good enough." She had always been picky about who watched her back.



The restaurant was next to deserted, a small island of clientele in this corner and that and a couple laughing beneath the window sign over their plate of cobbler. People walked the street in front, but traffic was low enough to be acceptable. The operation probably wouldn't raise a fuss. Rachelle stretched out with a borrowed mental power and felt the faint hum of dozens of minds below—trapped, worried, guarded, *pained*. That would be Weller. She nodded to Killinger.

Jarod entered through the front door. The tiny bell overhead tinkled wildly. He smiled as he went in, as though he were a normal patron and went up to the back counter to order. His ability didn't require him to be downstairs. Anywhere with electronics or data processing ports would do.

Killinger led them around the back of the building. The view that met them matched the photograph: under graffiti, a rusted set of stairs led down from the grey brick backstreet. One tiny

security camera poked out of the corner above the door. Manning looked grim.

Rachelle stood back, waiting for the ping through her consciousness. She only had so many mindreaders, so many telepaths to catch Jarod's message. There. "Security's down."

"People?" Killinger prompted.

Manning undid the safety on his gun.

This time, Rachelle didn't fight off the wave of familiarity from another time when she did this sort of thing regularly. Muscle memory and habit as old as she was took over. She was playing coverage, querying her internal database through the pain to find the first power that would do. She slammed a wave of unconsciousness through the entire basement and waited for the aftershock of minds falling silent, tumbling into dreams without warning. Five seconds passed. She dredged up a biosensitive and located the remaining wakeful forms.

"Just one." She sighed wearily. "Auspin. Weller's in there. Alive."

Killinger nodded, and they moved in.

Amazing what Department overrides could do to a building's built-in security, but they had to wait for Jarod to undo the layer of custom internal security. She was running through cyberpaths—ten, twenty, thirty, thirty-four endless seconds; she only *had* ten entries—then finally, the entire computer network winked out from Rachelle's awareness. "We're in."

Manning stepped up to guard the left side. Rachelle breathed relief and slid to the right, leaving room for Killinger to take point and open the door. A narrow, cramped hallway ran down the back of the building with rows of doors on either side. There was absolute silence and tension hanging in the air. Auspin knew they were here. About how big *were* those rooms? Rachelle narrowed her eyes, estimating and comparing to her mental scan, then gestured noiselessly at the second door on the right.

This time, Manning turned the handle, but they didn't get far.

Auspin met them instantly, shoving out of the room, firing an automatic and shouting obscenities. Instinct had Rachelle throw out a telekinetic

wave against the bullets and yank the weapon from his hands with the same power. Manning fired twice, but Auspin clearly had learned how to manipulate projectiles by pulling on the air around them.

Auspin's hand reached out toward the Unit, and Rachelle felt it with her own power, the slide of genetic triggers into place to dowse for their blood. She didn't give him the chance. She threw herself into the gap and pummeled him to the ground.

He writhed under her, muttering curses, and grabbed at her, flailing wildly. Blood churned in her arteries and veins, but he didn't know that her blood was never her weak spot. She didn't bother with elegance, just grabbed his power from the stench of his breath, the hand on her shirt and yanked with her own mind on the blood in his body.

He screamed, blood welling up through his skin, and the five seconds were over and she shifted to the next entry, and he sensed the carrier fluid churning through its system. He was trying not to die, but it was too late for that. He pulled

on her database, gurgled his last breath, and her world exploded with an endless agonized scream and hundreds of unleashed powers.

Climbing the walls could destroy a city, but he had *shattered* her walls. Dimensions that shouldn't have existed flickered in and out, the walls of the room melted, air glowed then hardened then reverted to air again. Manning's arms hauled her up from behind, and she cried at the agony of twelve more entries—four bacterial, two human genetic patterns— Stop it, stop it, stop it. Fires burning, ice sliding out of nothing, minds screaming as she woke them, the in and out of comm data overhead—

“...healer in here,” Killinger's voice over the dispatch. “...should be...outside.”

Rachelle struggled to hang on, to stop the madness, but she couldn't stop rocking and screaming. No, no, no... Not another healer. She'd nearly killed her brother. She'd nearly killed him. There had to be an entry to shut this all to silence. No!

Reflex found what mind could not, a cold

slap of darkness hit her, and she fell into it with relief.

—

The healer woke her. Rachelle knew the taste of a healer: the plead for trust, the life and memories and emotion swirling on the other side of their skin. She knew it even through the blinding pain and everything she could see swirling around her in blurs and flashes of color. She heard moans and knew they were hers.

“Come on. Let me in.” A young woman loomed over her, hand pressed to the center of her chest just below her collarbones. “Come on, Rachelle.”

Frantic memory, Meld’s pale face, feeling him dying on her—no, no, no, no...

The world snapped into focus and she bit down hard on her scream at the pain of the entries filling up more space than she had vessels to put them. She pulled together every shred of

distrust she could muster and shoved them into the healer.

“She knows how to shut me out.” Frustration flooded between them from the girl to Rachele, but she kept trying, kept trying just like... Meld.

She’d broken the walls before. She’d nearly killed her brother. No.

Long ago, she used to cycle without the stars, without the discs. She had room and knew how to do it. She could shove her own entries through her own vessels to their own processing centers to be assimilated into her final genetic makeup. She could do this. She could do this.

So she did. She screamed and cried and held on and used up every entry she had that could help—telekinesis, healing, self-healing, regeneration, everything she could get her mind on and throw through her own system until shuddering and still crying, she could open her eyes and the world wasn’t spinning.

They were back. Her walls were back and she *had* vessels again to hold the data.

Rachele fell back on the floor, still crying, but forced herself to take in the scene around her.

The healer was a young woman barely out of her teens, blonde and rounded edges, cursing fluently in another language. “Stubborn, stubborn processor,” she muttered.

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” Rachelle found her sharpness and used it to shove down the remaining weakness.

“You should be more worried about yourself,” Killinger said quietly.

Rachelle turned away and ran a quick query through her own body. She had maybe a dozen usable specials left—more flooding in through the stale air: red hair, red skin, heat vision, heavy bones, down syndrome carrier, electricity energist...—but she had patched up all the broken places. She’d be okay. She breathed hard. If she went home and cycled, she’d be okay. It would buy her another couple months before this happened again.

She looked around at the ruined room crowded with people moving in and out between melted doors. Conversation rolled around her in a dull murmur. There was an emergency medical team and at least a few plainclothes law enforce-

ment officers that Rachelle knew perfectly well shouldn't be dressed as if they belonged to the hospital. Typical. Absolutely typical. She rubbed at the aches and pains in her body and mused that at least they would get out of Silent Kingdom alive.

The formerly captive specials were being allowed to walk away, dazed but free. It was Silent Kingdom. They couldn't legally be questioned. Black coats boxed up the evidence and the power suppressors, not realizing the Department wouldn't let them keep it. They were on to wrap-up now, getting out of the scene, calling Killinger over to tell her the situation was under control if not resolved.

"Auspin's dead." Rachelle demanded, "What do you mean, 'Not resolved?'"

Only Jarod was near enough to hear her. "Weller's loose without a statement, and our arrestee will never testify."

"You think?" she retorted. She reached down and massaged her ankle, realized that the blood douse *had* done something. "I hate this job."

"Well, I like you in it," he offered.

“Jarod. Shut. Up.” Rachele glared at him, holding her ankle as she called up her last relevant entry, regeneration that normally took three days, not five seconds, and paired it with a time-accelerant. She watched and felt the ankle heal, tendons knitting back together, blood pulling back from ancillary tissues and back into the vessels where they belonged. And now she was down to ten.

He stared at her. “Rache—”

She shook her head. One hard jerk to the right. “Been there, done that.” Give, take, and a bunch of lies to smooth things over because the truth of that give and take was too raw and terrible to leave alone. “Never knew what the big deal was.”

It wasn’t a lie and it didn’t smooth out anything between them, just drove his mouth into a hard line and let her stand up and walk away.

“You shouldn—” the healer started, but Jarod waved her to silence and followed, near enough to help if needed.

“I’m. Fine.” Rachele was tired of biting out another truth, tired of all of this. She kept promis-

ing herself she wasn't coming back.

She was almost to the Unit's car and there was Killinger, intercepting the two of them before she could climb in it and drive away.

"We all need the ride, you know." Killinger's gaze held sympathy but no give.

Jarod glanced back and forth between them.

Rachelle shrugged, leaned one arm against the vehicle and rested her head in the crook of her elbow. It smelled like car metal and rust and her own stale breath, but she didn't care if she didn't have to look at anyone else for a little while.

"Manning's filing the report about Auspin," Killinger said quietly. "Killed in the line of duty." Collateral damage, as expected.

"Good for him." She was tired and cross and awash with genetic drift from more than a dozen specials.

Silence stretched for a moment. "Seems you have a ride," Killinger said at last.

Rachelle pulled up her head and craned her neck to see over her shoulder.

Night had gathered over the crooked cobbled

streets, and only a single gaslight shone on the man standing at ease, a mere white t-shirt over jeans against the evening chill. Justus. Justus who she hadn't seen or spoken to in three months because he'd been fool enough to fall in love with her. Should've known it wouldn't matter if she needed him.

"Who dragged you out?" Rachele demanded.

"Battery Acid." The simple handle said more than any retort. She was caustic but indispensable. Justus had always preferred to call her by that name, as if it were affectionate.

Jarod coughed and she glanced over at him. He had never met Justus and his eyes said he wasn't sure whether to protect her or to realize he had lost a battle there was never a chance of winning.

She laughed, just a little, and turned to Justus. She was tired, but it was good to see him anyway. "Who?"

He nodded at Killinger, then held out his hand for hers, not touching her, testing her well-being. Just to spite him, she took his hand and curled her fingers around his on the way to his

car. Let him guess what had happened from that.

—

They didn't talk. He drove. She rode, shoe balanced against the glove compartment, head leaning back, one hand tracing abstract patterns on the glass window. Don't focus on the pain, she told herself. Justus followed her to her apartment and locked up behind them, watched her strip off her jacket and kick off her shoes and go over to the tin on her counter to fish out another star.

"That bad, huh?" he commented dryly.

The spidery aches crawling up and down her back agreed.

She shot him a look, then focused on hooking the star into her left arm. "I hate you."

"Shut up." He pulled her hard into his arms, ran his hands over the right places on her back—every ache, every hurt. He knew her body's system better than she did, the first to realize all that pain was a lack of circulation.

But she stopped him, even though she knew

it would help and it was exactly what she usually wanted. She pulled him after her into the living room and settled beside him on the couch. He leaned back so they could lie down. His arm wound around her waist, and she tucked her head against his shoulder, letting his familiar warmth relax her. No giving, no taking—just being, and for once she could let herself breathe again.

Justus held her gently against him. He always knew what she needed. She was just so tired of the sacrifice.

“Sometimes I do hate you,” Rachele said softly. Her fingers idled against his arm.

His hands flexed against her hips, stopping himself from gripping her tighter—she didn’t want to imagine the words he wasn’t saying—then just as softly he answered, “Sometimes you don’t.”

She closed her eyes in the darkness and let herself fall asleep. ❧



## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Business, The:** The business refers to the criminal underground and the behind-the-scenes agencies and organizations that deal with them, including law enforcement, anti-terrorism, international espionage, some military and paramilitary, special forces, and intelligence.

**Department, The:** A branch of the Thorn Republic government that handles defense and law enforcement which cannot be handled within the bounds and parameters set by Thorn Republic law.

**Genetically Modified Human (GMH):** A human who has been genetically modified to have special abilities beyond the norm, e.g. telekinesis, telepathy, biotransference, etc.

**Hero:** A vigilante fighting to defend a person, group, or organization. This can sometimes include retrieval work or criminal containment.

**Kingdoms City:** A city which has no federal government but rather is composed of multiple jurisdictions ranging among counties, industry districts, ethnic burros, religious quarters, etc.

**Naturally Gifted (NG):** A human who has naturally inherited special abilities beyond the norm, but who was neither genetically modified nor the offspring of one who has been genetically modified.

**Normal:** Common parlance for a regular-type human, e.g. *He's a normal.*

**Operative:** A member of one of various military, peace-keeping, and/or law enforcement agencies and organizations.

**Projects, The:** The branch under the umbrella of the Department which handles genetically-modified human operatives.

**Regular-Type Human (Regular):** A human who has no special abilities and is genetically baseline.

**Shifter:** A human with the ability to modify molecular, genetic, or dimensional structure, e.g. a gene shifter modifies genes. The unqualified term, e.g. *She's a shifter*, always refers to the ability to alter oneself so as to appear as someone or something else.

**Special-Type Human (Special):** A human with special abilities regardless of origin, e.g. natural-born, genetically modified, etc.

**Special Unit, The:** A post-Rebellion unit within the Department hired out by various kingdoms to enforce law when special-type humans are involved.

**Thorn Rebellion:** When the team operatives within the Projects rebelled against the Thorn Republic and wrested away control of the western half of the continent. Eventually, the Rebellion ended in a treaty between the teams and the

Thorn Republic. The general citizens of the western cities were not consulted but were left to their own devices with government in disarray.

**Villain:** A vigilante whose work involves infiltration or invasion of an enemy. This includes retrieval work and several forms of anti-criminal activity.

## INDEX OF CHARACTERS

Brittany Rachelle Winslow, The Database

*Genetic Processor* — Team Thirty-Four.

**Preferred Name:** Rachelle.

**Also Called:** The Database, Cypher, Britt, Battery Acid, Guardian.

**Occupations:** Computer Analyst, Tracer, Special Unit Consultant.

**Residence:** Kishet.

## Ilsa Killinger

*Situational Empath* — Special Unit.

**Preferred Name:** Ilsa.

**Also Called:** Killinger.

**Occupation:** Special Unit Lead.

**Residence:** Kishet.

## Jarod Walters

*Cyberpath* — Special Unit.

**Occupation:** Special Unit Tech.

**Preferred Name:** Jarod.

**Also Called:** Walters.

**Residence:** Kishet.

Daniel Weller

*Shifter* —

**Occupation:** Informant.

**Residence:** Core, Kishet.

Alexander Manning

*Regular* — Core Law Enforcement.

**Preferred Names:** Alex, Refuge.

**Also Called:** Manning.

**Occupation:** Detective.

**Residence:** Kishet.

## Justus Ellison, Defender

*Regular* — Team Thirty-Four.

**Preferred Name:** Justus.

**Also Called:** Defender, Ellison, Keen,  
Cover.

**Occupation:** Law Enforcement Officer.

**Residence:** Riving.





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Liana Mir reads, writes, and wrangles the muses from her mundane home in the Colorado Rockies and, occasionally, from the other side of the Barrier.

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