

A BONE TO PICK

CHAPTER ONE

A SAMPLE EXCERPT FROM "A BONE TO PICK,"
BOOK 2 OF THE XK9 "BONES" TRILOGY

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A Bone to Pick, Chapter One Sample

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CHAPTER 1

CROP INSPECTION

“**W**hat is that dark thing in Bonita’s quinoa patch?” XK9 Shady Jacob-Belle dialed her vocalizer low, flattened her ears, and growled. Unease slithered in her gut. She drew back from the balcony’s railing.

Her mate Rex had been gazing toward the starry nighttime sky-windows with a dreamy look on his furry black face. Now he crouched beside her in the shadows, tense and focused. He stared toward the quinoa. “I am not sure.” Like her, he’d lowered his volume as far as it would go.

Together they peered through gaps in the trailing curtain of sweet potato vines that hung down from the rooftop garden on the level above them. The leafy vine tendrils provided a handy impromptu blind.

Through their brain link, Shady felt her partner Pam rouse from an exhausted sleep. Physically Pam was at home, seven kilometers away in the Central Plaza District of Orangeboro. But their brain link gave her the ability to be aware of what Shady was doing. *Shady?* Pam’s mental voice came across drowsy and disoriented. *You okay?*

For now. Stand by, Shady answered. Whatever lurked a hundred meters away in their neighbor’s field, it was roughly

human-sized. Shady's hackles rose with a prickle of foreboding. All she could see in the darkness was a lumpy shadow among the meter-high quinoa spikes. Veils of mist drifted on thermals up the clifflike terraces from the river far below. Some were too thick to see through. Air currents carried scents from the quinoa patch away, not toward her.

She stifled an urge to bark. Better stay silent until they knew more. It might be nothing. But it also might be a Transmondian agent, here to spy on Rex's Corona Tower home. Spy, or do something worse.

Shall I come out there to you? Pam seemed wider awake now.

Be ready to call it in, but stay put for the moment. There may be a simple fix.

Shady activated the neural Heads-Up Display of her Cybernetically-Assisted Perception equipment, then shifted to the thermal-imaging setting. A man's hot, white form blazed into view among the dark, much-cooler stalks. He'd positioned himself about a meter from Rim Seven Road. "Damn. Definitely a man out there."

At her side, Rex's deep growl rumbled like thunder. "Not. On. My. Watch." He rose from his crouch, then whirled toward his bedroom door. No light flicked on when he entered. He must've used the com in his CAP to disable the motion sensor.

She followed, of one accord with him. On a different night they might have been less alarmed, although no night was good for prowlers. But tonight their world had changed, very much against the Transmondian government's wishes. The humans of Orangeboro and Rana Habitat Space Station had publicly declared to the Universe that XK9s were not mere forensic tools, but sapient beings.

News feeds all over Alliance Space had broadcast a presentation that Rex, Shady, and the rest of the Pack had given to demonstrate some of their capabilities. They'd designed it to show that XK9s were capable of sapient-level thought.

The government of Transmondia had tried to stop the presen-

tation. They'd launched hot rebuttals the moment broadcasts began. Transmondian government officials, as well as the government itself, were the XK9 Project's major backers. They'd sold XK9s to agencies all over Planet Chayko, and planned expansions far beyond Rana Station. Premium dogs sold for millions of novi, a lucrative trade that would end if XK9s were declared sapient and shielded from trafficking by Alliance-wide laws.

I'm calling it in, Pam said. I'm getting dressed.

Shady's gut tightened. Her hackles prickled anew.

"Head for the garage," Rex said. "We can swing through the orchard. Approach from the back of the property. I imagine he will be focused more toward the road, with its potential traffic. He may not expect us to come from the other direction." Rex had lived here more than two months. He knew the layout of the two-hectare property far better than Shady, who'd only visited a couple of nights.

She and her mate moved silent as wraiths through the apartment, then six flights down. They passed rack upon rack of seedlings, bathed in blue light and fastened all the way down the leeward wall of the stairwell. The young plants' vigorous, fecund smell hung thick in the air, laced with faint, faded scent-trace from Family members—but not from Rex's human partner Charlie Morgan. Charlie was currently in the hospital. The doctors had brought him out of his re-gen coma on Friday, but he still wasn't healed.

I alerted Dispatch, Pam reported. Your backup's on the way.

Thanks. Shady passed this on to Rex. Gratitude for Pam's conscious presence and backup through the link filled her with a warm swell of affection. Poor Charlie had worn himself out, staying up to watch the XK9s' presentation on the vid screen in his hospital room. He probably was deep asleep right now, unable to advise or comfort Rex.

Mist-borne odors of hours-ago supper and the big oak tree at the courtyard's center mingled with the other smells into Coro-

na's unique mélange. Rex led her to the underground garage, then out on the spinward side of the tower, opposite their watcher's location.

They leaped up the embankment by the driveway. "He is crouched in a harvest-ready field, heedless of the damage he is doing to the crop." She hadn't been a Ranan for long, but angry disgust soured her throat. "Only an ignorant foreigner would do that."

Hot rage like charred coals burned in Rex's scent factors, and deepened the menace in his growl. "Transmondian agent. Got to be. Probably thinks the crop is just tall weeds."

Her mate was right. No Ranan would make such a mistake. A stealthy foreigner, concealed, spying on Corona, almost certainly came from the Transmondian Intelligence Service. Rex had good reason to hate the TIS, and especially Col. Jackson Wisniewski, the spymaster who'd tried to make Rex one of his assets.

Shady followed him toward a grove of fruit trees. By now she'd phased into full guard-dog-on-the-hunt mindset, ready to deal with this trespasser. They'd learned as puppies how to quietly navigate thick, wild brush. Far easier to move in silence through Corona's well-maintained orchard, but better not get sloppy. Especially not if this guy was from Transmondian Intelligence. She kept her nose up, sorting through the night-smells. At last came a tendril of the stranger's scent, laced with a telltale touch of gunshot residue.

GSR? Alarm radiated through the link from Pam. *Is he armed?*

I don't think so, Shady replied. "Faint GSR," she texted to her mate, not daring any sound at this point. If only she and Rex had a brain link like the one she shared with Pam!

"GSR confirmed, but maybe a day old," Rex texted back.

Gunshot residue didn't wash off easily, although this man had tried. It was yet more proof that he was a Transmondian, or at least a dirtsider from Planet Chayko. Almost no Ranans had either access to firearms or any need for them on their space

station home. Good thing this man didn't smell as if he had a gun tonight.

They crept closer, screened behind a trellised vineyard row on the leeward side of the tower, their footsteps muffled by clover. A quick dash across a short gap brought them onto neighboring Bonita Tower property, between two rows of leafy quinoa topped by heavy seed heads. Shady brushed carefully between the drying stalks, wary lest they crackle.

She and Rex moved upwind of the intruder, a couple of rows over. She'd already committed his personal odor profile to memory, but now she studied his scent factors. The involuntary exudations betrayed the dusty-smoky smell of fatigue. Perhaps a touch of shuttle-lag? She caught the faint *pa-pum* of his heartbeat, his careful, even breathing, and then his quiet yawn.

"Wait here," Rex texted. "I'll approach from behind him." He disappeared around the end of a row.

Shady halted, ears up. "How close is our backup?" she texted Dispatch.

"En route," the dispatcher replied. "ETA about five minutes."

"Good evening, sir," Rex said in a calm, moderate tone.

The man gasped. Dry stalks crunched.

"I do not believe I recognize you." Rex's robotic vocalizer-voice wasn't capable of much emotional nuance, but from the cadence she pictured him with ears up and tail wagging. Trying to look as non-threatening as an unexpected, enormous black wolf-dog in the night could. "May I please ask what brings you—" The *pop* of a trunk-pistol cut him off.

Shady shouldered between the plants. "Shot fired!" she told Dispatch. "We are engaging!"

"Here, now! There is no call for that." Rex had dodged the trunk bolt. A black blur of motion beyond a last row of stalks, he darted in, snapped his teeth onto—

The man twisted, faster than humans could move. His weapon popped again.

Rex stumbled backward into the quinoa, legs wobbly, then fell over.

Rex! Shady reached the intruder in less than a stride. She slammed against him at full-gallop. Lunged for his weapon-hand.

"Officer down!" Pam yelled to Dispatch through Shady's connection. "Need backup! *Stat!*"

The man tumbled away from Shady with a yell, then regained his feet and swung the pistol toward her.

Still has two darts. "Stand down!" She zigzagged to evade his aim.

The pistol jerked back and forth, tracking her.

Dammit. She darted closer to the man, fainted right, then dodged left around a leafy stalk. Lunged from behind it to slip under his guard and go for his weapon-arm. She sank teeth into the muscle and bone of his brawny forearm. Coppery-metallic blood filled her mouth. She attempted the protocol throw-maneuver, a full-body twist. XK9s were so big and powerful, that always brought suspects down.

Except—this time it didn't work.

He swayed, but kept his feet. "Damn you!" His left fist landed like a sledgehammer against her face.

Ears ringing, she flinched away from the next blow. Let go, then circled around. Darted in and latched on again. She bit farther up his arm this time, behind and just above his right elbow.

He yelled and tried to hit her, but he could only strike awkwardly across his body at her. She moved backwards with his motion when he attempted an elbow-strike. Jaws locked, she sidestepped a backward hammer-fist meant for her abdomen.

She clamped down harder on his arm. Her teeth sliced muscle and tendon, grated on bone.

He yelled, cursed, struggled against her.

She dragged him backward.

They rotated in a ragged circle. Quinoa stalks bent and shattered, but the man kept his feet.

She'd met one objective, anyway. She controlled his right arm—the one that clutched the trunk pistol. He couldn't get an angle to point it at her. Her bites had half-disabled his arm, and he couldn't break her grip.

He screamed rage and pain. Wrenched his body back and forth.

She dug her teeth in harder, and wrapped her front legs around his torso for a better anchor against his wild swings. With her hind feet still on the ground, she pushed or pulled into his every twist. Could she get him off his feet?

He staggered, spun. Stayed upright.

Her feet blundered over a knot of shattered stalks. She stumbled.

He threw all his weight into driving her into the ground with his shoulder.

She released her jaws. Pushed away just in time.

He landed like a load of bricks. Lay there on his side for a moment, stunned.

If only I could use handcuffs! She darted forward. Grabbed his trunk pistol—but also sank teeth into part of his hand.

He raised his head with an agonized yell. Threw a desperate punch with his left fist.

She dodged away behind him, dragging his right arm, jaws still clenched on his hand and the trunk pistol. His blow couldn't connect. She gave his hand a "kill shake," but maybe he couldn't let go. "Stand down!" she ordered. "Stop resisting! You are under arrest! "It is your right to say nothing, but it may—"

He rolled his body toward her, reached out with his left hand. Lurched upward with an angry grunt.

She powered backward hard and fast, teeth still locked on his hand. Yanked, but didn't manage to dislocate his shoulder. She dragged his heavy bulk about half a meter through the quinoa.

“As I was saying, it may harm your defense if you do not mention, when questioned—”

He gathered himself, drew his legs in toward his torso, then tried to kick her, but couldn’t connect. Nor could he break her grip or regain his feet.

She pulled as hard as she could. Her 119 kilos couldn’t match his weight, but she could keep him off-balance till backup arrived. “Let us try this again! It may harm your defense if you do not mention, when questioned, something you later rely on in court. Anything you do or say may be used against you in a court of law.” She gasped and panted and drooled around his hand. This was exhausting. She paused for an instant.

He lunged at her. His fingers tore through her furry ruff, ripped a gouge in her cheek, then caught on her collar. He gave a triumphant yell and twisted. The collar tightened against her throat.

She choked. . . Strangled . . . Terror thundered through her. She clenched her jaws harder, ground her teeth into his pistol hand.

He roared pain and fury, but he couldn’t pull away.

Muscles and tendons shredded between her teeth. She tasted a new flow of blood. How was she not breaking bones?

They swayed back and forth. He twisted the collar with all his might.

Black spots gathered at the edges of her vision. Somewhere far away, Pam was yelling.

The collar broke. She could breathe again!

She released his hand and the pistol. Staggered back. Gasp gulps of air, lest she black out.

The man’s cry of triumph turned to anguish. She’d shredded his right hand to gory ruins. The trunk pistol fell to the ground. He collapsed with a cry, and stared at his macerated hand. His whole body shuddered.

Shady drew in another deep breath, then licked her lips to clear them of blood. She found the pistol with a forepaw, passed

it to a hind foot, then sent it spinning away into the field. *Nasty thing!* She snorted. *Still no sign of Rex.* That dart must've delivered a full load. He might be out for hours. *I'm on my own.*

No you're not! "Officer down! Officer down! Officer needs assistance!" Pam yelled into her com. "Rim Seven Road, Ninth Precinct, corner of Bonita and Corona!"

Sirens wailed in the distance, far to leeward on Rim Seven Road.

The man's ragged cries grew quieter. He bowed his head and moaned.

Where was I, on that arrest warning? Oh, yes. "It is your right to have an attorney with you while you are questioned." Her voice issued from the vocalizer, still attached to her collar on the ground near him. "If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to represent you before you are questioned. Do you understand these rights?"

He didn't answer. Didn't move.

More sirens. These came from spinward.

"Subject apprehended!" she shouted into her com through the vocalizer, also texting the words to be sure they went through. "Need medical assistance! Need backup now!"

The man groaned. He laboriously pushed up onto his left hand and knees.

Shady eyed him. "You probably should stay down. You have lost a lot of blood. You will get dizzy, and bleed harder."

He hugged his ruined hand to himself. Rocked back and forth, and glared at her. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Definitely a Transmondian accent. South-central piedmont, from the cadence and the half-swallowed "yud" for *you'd* and "wu'nt" for *wouldn't*.

"I would have preferred for you to stand down when I told you to, so I did not have to hurt you."

"I don't take orders from a bitch." His left hand cradled his wounded right arm. Now he pulled it harder against himself. A new, pungent, deceitful scent grew alongside the dark blood-

smell of traumatic injury, the raw darkness of fear, and scorching stink of fury. The fingers of his left hand slipped inside his torn, bloodied jacket.

Shady growled. "Think twice about that."

He froze. Met her gaze, then bowed his head. "I didn't do anything."

Like you could fool me that easily.

The sirens drew closer.

His left hand slipped into his jacket again. Flashed back, then forward to throw—

Shady dodged it, circled right. A second knife. She kept moving. A third—but by then he'd twisted himself off-balance and she'd moved behind him.

She launched herself against his back and shoulders. Bore down with all her weight onto the man's burly shoulders and upper back. He fell on his face once again. Lay still for half a second, then his muscles shifted and tensed.

She grabbed his left triceps in her jaws. "Stop now, or I shall bite you hard."

He shook himself almost like a dog. Uttered a deep, gut-level yell and strove to rise.

She clamped down full-force. *Damn*, this creep was strong. And persistent! Cold, queasy fear coiled in her gut. *I'm not heavy enough. He's never going to give up.* Shady twisted to throw her body into the back of his head. *That's his third face-plant.* "Stop! What do you think you can do?"

She drove her weight down on him again, as fast and hard as she could. Through the link, she sensed Pam's yell into her com.

The man hunched his back. His body trembled with exertion. He must be in horrific pain.

Shady's teeth sliced into his triceps. "Stop! Stop! Now I am destroying your other arm!" Her voice yelled from the churned-up ground where he'd dropped her collar.

Hot blood flowed, but his back muscles bunched. Heaved.

How was he still moving? “Stop! Stop!” She bit all the way through to the bone. But it was like biting a steel girder.

A steel girder leaking blood. The ground reeked of it. His arm and back and body were slick with it. So was she.

His head bowed. His breath rasped. He shuddered, then collapsed.

THANK YOU FOR READING THIS SPECIAL-OFFER SAMPLE!

I hope you enjoyed Chapter One, “Midnight Crop Inspection,” from my novel *A Bone to Pick*! If you’re curious to read the rest of the story, you have options!

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Use this link for the book page!

You may also enjoy **My FREE Monthly Newsletter**. It comes with an option for a FREE e-copy of *The Other Side of Fear*.

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And thanks again for your interest!

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