

VESPID

MANHUNTER

CHAPTER 1

I could feel the bass of the dance music of the District Club in the padding of the stool I was sitting on as I waited for my girlfriend. Bathed in strobing, vacillating, pink and orange party lights, the crowd before me shucked off the weight of the work week, replacing it with drugs, alcohol, conversation, and sexual preludes.

“Hey Kenz,” a voice shouted with an absolute lack of joviality right before my friend appeared with two drinks in her hands. She was dressed in an exquisite jumper that was pressed in such a way that each hard line masterfully represented its formal cut. Only the toes of her reflective onyx shoes emerged from the hem of the jumper’s wide legs as she glided into her place on the other side of the 2’ wide circular table to my left.

I raised my glass in greeting as I raised my voice so Liselle could hear me. “Hey girl! Traffic?”

She raised and knit her brows in obvious disgust. “No, I pay for the driverless express to avoid that shit. Who’d a thought that it would be just a couple hundred shy of a monthly car payment, anyways?” Liselle shrugged, continuing, “I was held up at work again.”

I smirked shamelessly at the hint she gave me. “Y’mean you were polishing the top brass for another raise?! It’s only been, what, a month?”

The freckles dotting her mocha skin came into view as she leaned over the table. Her eyes went soft with matter-of-fact-ness and a corner of her full, glossy lips quirked up. “He wants an arrangement.”

Uncrossing my legs and swiveling the chair to face my maverick girlfriend, I gape in disbelief. “No way! Contract and everything?” When she nodded smugly, my eyebrows furrowed deep over my still gaping face. “Lucky bitch! You’re a zech’s fucking researcher, not a working girl like me!”

The angle of her head and the height of her shoulders shrug carelessly as she said, almost bored, “He’s really thirsty for me until he cums. After that, it’s just a work day. But hey, girl’s gotta make a coupla paychecks these days. I just get to do it in the room next to my workspace, is all.”

“Hunh.” I place the tip of my finger to my cheek thoughtfully. “That’s a good way to think about it. A lot more benign than this nagging criticism I have about men before and after sex, s’for sure!”

Reaching behind my own head, I move the smooth veil of my teal hair to reveal the necklace of bruises around my neck. "My last client felt the need to remind me of our NDA."

My friend's eyes went wide, and her jaw slackened in an unbridled storm of sympathy, shock and rage. "Kenzika Celeste! Nuh-uh, girl, there's no fuckin' way that shit doesn't land a motherfucker in jail!" She stands furiously, nearly tackling a couple walking by as she rounds the table, and reaches for my arm. This bitch wants to take me to the Incorporated Locale Security Unit.

As I force my face into the universal sign for *'Hey Psycho! Dial that shit back a few clicks'* and swat at the air in front of me as though there was a housefly, I state the facts. "Liselle! I'd be the one that gets in trouble! While full-service sex work isn't out of regulations, I don't work in an institute. I'd be put in holding and fined as a Cardontel Girl, while dude wouldn't even get a phone call. Even worse, I'd get nixed from the guild at the first sign of paperwork."

More gently, my friend's hand lifts my hair away from my neck. "I'm sorry that this is something you had to put up with."

"It's too expensive to get trained into a job that makes comparable pay, not to mention I'd be homeless, or work as a solo until I got my next job." I press my lips together in a sad-but-true kind of way, in an attempt to further disarm her aggression. There was nothing that she could do to change the risks I face every time I have a client. The National Fed has worked too hard in the shadows to both keep this industry and its rueful etiquette alive, if for no other reason than because the politicians need a way to blow off steam. Regulation Enforcement Personnel (REPs) certainly don't mind it, either; but they don't usually make enough to receive guild standard services. If you're not a poli or a zech, you're getting it from desperate solo-girls.

It worked. Liselle sat down, dejection etched into her posture, then she suddenly straightened with a look of determination flashing over her face. "Well, hold tight, Kay, I'll try and get you a sponsorship at my firm."

The possibility was a jolt to my own frame. "Really? That would be amazing!" While they don't go out with the intention of finding Cardontel Girls, they use top-of-the-line AI's watching with gold plated surveillance systems to make sure the IRFiR's (Individual Room For Rent, essentially a really small economy apartment) and OBA's (One Bedroom Apartments) have only one person living in them, unless the guest is paying an exorbitant security fee every night they stay with their registered resident. The **only** exception is when the guest is sponsored by the resident as a student or an assistant in their workplace. Then the student could pay rent without the risk of getting locked up.

CHAPTER 2

I arrived back at my IRFiR at The District Arcologies later that night. As I reached for the lamp that was on my bedside table only feet from the door, it lit up. I hadn't even touched the smart surface, but with the lights now on, I could plainly see the burly man who turned it on for me. Before words or even sounds rose to my lips, my instinct was to dive back toward the door I just entered, where there was a tough-looking man with a small frame in a well-fitted three piece suit, leaning nonchalantly. "Now, now," he started. "No need to get excited."

Before I could say anything, my vision exploded with the blinding light of unexpected and intense pain. Before the next heartbeat, everything went dark.

My awareness faded in sluggishly to reveal damp, cold concrete beneath my face and fingertips. I was laying tummy up on a bedroll that was so flimsy, the padding wasn't under all of my body. As I started to move, aches that were typical of sleeping on hard surfaces erupted along my neck, shoulders and hips. I didn't have to look around very much to know that I had no idea where I was. The room I awoke in was little more than a closet, and the air here was dank and moldy, like a basement. The back of my clothes and the bedding were almost imperceptibly moist from ground water condensation.

It was then that I noticed that the only light in the room I was in was that which streaked across the floor from beneath the door. It became noticeable due to the telltale shadows of approaching feet interrupting the lifeless glow of LEDs and computer screens of which the light was composed. A heartbeat later, the old door squealed open on its grimy, reinforced hinges. "Well now. She's awake," the same man that I was facing in my IRFiR said. "You probably should have stayed asleep, you worthless cunt." He quickly advanced on me and grabbed the handful of my shirt between my shoulder blades and fucking dragged me across the unfinished basement floor into the next room. Nearly tossing me toward the foot of a narrow table, he plucked the pistol from the holster at his hip and pointed it at me. As the safety clicked off and his finger settled onto the trigger, he said in a graveled voice, "Lay on the table."

After only a fraction of my hesitation, he lurched toward me to put the gun even more in my face. "I won't tell you again." Startled, compliance found its way into the deepest foundations of my being and I jumped up, sitting on the hard surface of the table. I swiveled and kicked my legs up onto the table before realizing what was happening. "This... this is an operating table," I said with disbelief still saturating my voice. Tears started to rise to the corner of my eyes and into my throat. "What are you going to do?"

Laughing with ire, he reached for my wrist and put the gun to my head. "Me? I'm not doing anything but strapping you to this table." Placing my wrist at my side, he started to do exactly that. Once the first one was secure, the gun went back into the holster. From the look of him, he wouldn't need the gun to get me to comply further, even if I tried to get off the table. The next moment, my ankles were secured. "The next time we do this, though, it's going to be a lot easier."

I don't know if I was trying to buy myself more time, or if I really wanted to know, but I asked, "Why?"

He was at my other wrist now. "Because you're gonna be really fuckin' high from now, on."

"What do you need to get me high for?"

Seemingly as an answer, another door in the room swung open and a person wearing a dark paper apron and goggles walked in. "Is the subject ready?" The question came out clinically, dry of any empathy the new man was capable of.

"Yeah," the gruff voice of my first captor answered as the strap over my forehead was made taut.

Trying to look into the goggles of the second man, I asked, "What are you doing to me?"

The second man looked up at the first. "If the subject speaks to me again, shoot it in the knee."

Drawing the weapon, the first man forcefully nudged its barrel against my knee. "Shut up, bitch."

Not knowing what else to do, I started to sob. The second man suddenly produced a syringe and jabbed it into my neck. As a woozy feeling washed over me, he said to the one with the gun, "Next time, I want the subject sedated before I come in."

Murk began to flood my vision as the first man promised, "Plannin' on it."

When I woke up in what felt like the same room as before, I couldn't see, and I was still very drugged, as my captor had promised. Through the numbness and droning headache, I could barely feel the soreness and a strange puffiness over my face. When I reached for my face, I found that my hands were buckled separately, against each hip. As I started to squirm my way to being face down, the door squealed open again. "Fuck, you're so stupid," my captor exclaimed. I could feel the sting of a needle in my neck, then I drifted off again.

The next time I came to, I was still unable to feel very much. However, this time, I couldn't move my jaw at all, and the puffiness consumed my whole head. I was so drugged that I could barely wonder what was happening to me, or even care about my bleak predicament. My captors were getting what they wanted out of me, and I had no idea what that was, but I was still alive. Would I want to be alive when I found out what they were doing? The door swung open again, and there was a prick at my neck. "Goddam, you're ugly."

After a few more times of this, my existence was stuck in a weird liminal space. Some distant part of me was in anguish about not knowing how much time was passing, or what was happening to me. There was no time to BE me, and I felt like I was slowly losing it. My face was in noticeable pain this time, and I couldn't move my hands. There was a disembodied feeling of

my hands being in cages, or like a frame. I could feel pins going through my fingers, but they were otherwise numb. I couldn't see, but, through the dull pain, I could now feel the wet, sticky gauze covering my whole face. Many of my facial muscles weren't working. The door opened, and my body jerked in protest of the coming needle. "Hey, psycho, fuck! Hold still!" The jab came, and the injection was delivered.

Sometime later, a muffled voice behind the door was saying, "... but he's not loyal. Now he's got to pay." After a moment, the voice continued, "that's what we're doing here."

Another voice, this one slightly more familiar. "Wait. The subject is conscious."

I barely had the wherewithal to take inventory of what I could feel, but I got to focusing on various parts of my body as I heard a chair move, like it was giving up the weight of one of my captors. Both of my arms were entirely numb. Fuck, my head was in unprecedented pain. I could move my jaw again, but the bitter taste of metal and the soreness of my gums was all I could sense there. The back of my head was a weird combination of numb and excruciating pain. The door shrieked open. I tried to thrash, but I was held in place by something. A frame of some kind? The needle found its way into my neck.

Time and time again, I woke up in this dark, damp hell. Unable to see or move, and with the mere minute or two of consciousness my mind tried to utilize, what came back into consciousness was less than what it was before. The door opened. A little prick.

The door opened as I started to wake. Poke.

Door. Jab.

I woke. Metal shriek. The nib of pain in my neck. I didn't even try to move this time.

CHAPTER 3

"Hey, baby," a deep voice mewed into my ear, warm breath tickling my neck.

As he took another breath, instinct raged through me and I spun from my side-lying position to face the intruder, my elbow connecting firmly with his jaw. Following through, I grasped at him, and he screamed while a warm, thick liquid oozed between my fingers. As he rolled away from me and started to clutch at himself, I noticed that the whole room was bathed in red light. Weird, urgent-sounding vocal utterances were coming out of my mouth, like I was trying to say something, but I couldn't make out what I wanted to say, or what was being said. Was I high? His almost familiar face was twisted in pain and horror as he looked up at me. Still burning with adrenaline, I got to my knees and went to punch him, but deep gashes and holes appeared on his face.

Suddenly frightened at the way he seemed to be falling apart at my touch, I pushed off of him and the bed, onto my feet a short distance away. Looking at my hands, I was filled with terror as I found angular blades coming out of the nail beds and what looked like little folding knives coming out of the top of my fingers, just after my knuckles. I was so beside myself that I heard a disembodied, panicked scream coming out of my mouth as I took in what was happening.

At that moment, the man rushed at me as though he were going to tackle me. I reached out to grab him, but my grasp just pulled chunks of meat out of his frame like cotton candy. He screamed, and fell at my feet, crumpling into a writhing pile of torn, profusely bleeding flesh. "FUCKING KILL ME ALREADY," he managed to yell hoarsely as he looked up with fear, hatred and confusion written into what was left of his face, still bathed in bright, red light.

This time, I knew that I wanted to ask who he was and what the fuck was going on, but that's not what came out of my mouth. It was an unintelligible garble of hisses, roars and vowels. My tongue wasn't working. No. *It wasn't there at all.* At that moment, I remembered that I was kidnapped and that my captors were doing surgeries on me. Leaving the man, *oh fuck, that's Billy Price on the floor,* I scrambled into the bathroom. When I hit the switch, light exploded around me, painful and blinding, so I slapped the light switch to turn it back off. It was red in here, too. I looked into the wall of mirrors over the sink and...

What was staring back at me was the most terrifying thing I had ever seen in my life. My hair was still there, but the whole top of my face was an array of menacing red lenses. My teeth were replaced with gleaming steel, including a set of brutal fangs, four on top and two on the bottom.

When I looked at my hands this time, the knives folded back into the tops of my fingers and knuckles when I opened them, looking mostly like they should, except for the slots and the two articulated joints on each finger. My nails, conversely, were *permanently* replaced with tiny, single edged tanto-shaped razors, sharp edges toward the palm side of my hand.

Looking back to the mirror, I saw a message scrawled into my chest, with something about as sharp as a tiny flathead screwdriver, in big letters composed of straight lines, like runes: "FV<K Y<>V BILLY". These were the freshest of my injuries, as all the hardware seemed to be mostly healed.

Looking at the thing in the mirror once more, something snapped in me. I would never see my face again. I would never see any color but red. I would never see daylight, and I would terrify anyone who saw me. *There was no going back. They fucking took everything away from me! How was I supposed to live beyond tonight?*

I slumped against the wall, onto the floor. A tired, desperate moan sounded from the living room. There was a curious knock at the door. I could hear Billy wheeze as he tried to answer the person on the other side. He sounded too tired to get up. Conversely, I was completely dissociated, and I didn't care. *I wasn't even fucking human anymore.*

My life was over. I was used as a weapon to kill a man who thought he'd have another chance to fuck and choke me. Whoever kidnapped me knew they wanted to kill Billy Price, and *exactly* how they were going to do it. I'll admit it; it was fucking genius to do all this to me, to keep me bound and forgotten in darkness for days or weeks, who knows, then to set me up in this room, sleeping just light enough to wake and brutally kill him *on accident*. Whoever did this would get away with it, while sticking me with the motive of vengeance against an abusive man.

If I give up, if I get caught, they will get away with it and I will fucking be put down. No other way this can go. I can't let that happen. I won't let that happen.

I listened to the ragged breathing on the other side of the bathroom door for long enough to feel pity for him. The notion that no one should die that way drove me back to my feet and had me opening the door. Billy's gaze rose slowly to meet with the dim red lights softly glaring from my face. He probably couldn't see all of me, because it was actually very dark in here. "Kill me," he wheezed at me.

Remembering what I just saw in the mirror, and knowing that I wouldn't ever wake up and get my life back, I had to face the fact that I would be a monster for the rest of my days. So, I sat cross-legged on the floor in front of him and ran my fingertip, and thus, the lethally sharp razor protruding from my nail-bed, down his jugular vein. As though I were a vet that just delivered a lethal injection to an old dog, I placed a comforting hand on his clammy, stubbled face, caring not to cut him again. Feeling the absence of my tongue, it occurred to me that I couldn't even provide soothing shushes during his last moments. His labored breathing just stopped after a moment, and I sat there with him until I felt the temperature of his skin drop.

CHAPTER 4

Looming over the rapidly cooling body of Billy Price, I listened to the silence of the room. The silence of his stilled breath, which I caused. Never, in my whole life, did I ever think I was going to kill anyone, not even Billy, who gave me that necklace of bruises as a threat. This development changed everything, and it would make things a whole lot worse if I was here when this horrorshow was discovered. I had to get out. Once I was gone, I could come up with the next leg of the plan.

Nothing was happening in the room, or outside it. From the looks of it, I was in a hotel. *I wish I was at his house.* I was naked, but this was a hotel. I couldn't have been brought here that way. *Ah, yes,* I thought as I found the clothes I would have been wearing upon entering this building. The top was a cute, cropped, I'm guessing olive and gold colored faerie bodice with a deep hood and skin-tight lace up sleeves. The bottom was a pair of shimmery, translucent gold harem pants with a sewn-in thong. Definitely *not* my style, but it was obviously chosen carefully. *Who cares if you can't see a girl's face when you can plainly see her ass?* I didn't dare to touch any of it until after I had a quick shower, which was only long enough to wash off the blood. I gingerly towel-dried my hair, but left it down to hide my face as much as possible.

Before I got dressed, I recognized the need to become more acquainted with my new hardware. I could move my hands and fingers, but as soon as those muscles were tensed, the blades sprang out, which meant that I couldn't pick up anything heavier than a mid-sized purse or make a solid fist without them deploying. Meaning, I couldn't move the body, either.

I got dressed carefully, and thankfully without tearing through the delicate clothes, raised the hood and studied the room once more before leaving. Billy had left his comm on the desk near where his blazer was draped over the chair. It was 0247 hours at night, said the clock on the nightstand. While that was ideal, I could tell from the seam around the door that the hall lights were still shining at the full extent of their glory. What was worse is that I no longer had eyelids to block that light.

Fixing my gaze down on the ground, I opened the door and found the stairs expeditiously. The assholes put me on the 36th floor, so I was descending the stairwell for a while. When I reached the lobby, I slowed down to make sure I didn't look too in a hurry. Passing the concierge, I ignored their greetings and kept looking at the ground, which was still incredibly painful.

Now, as a sexworker, I have had the privilege of having a room at damn near every hotel in the District. This one was prominent, however, so it was too risky to be identified as a Cardontel girl. Once outside, I was able to identify the hotel and get my bearings. This building was actually not very far from the club where I last saw Liselle. *Oh, and I'm even closer to Liselle's residence.*

Just then, a large, white van came to a screeching halt, right in front of me, and the back panel opened violently. Next thing I knew, my vision flashed a blinding, pearlescent white, and then I was just... gone.

As though someone hit the “ON” switch, I came to in a dark red room. I was standing upright, but unable to move. The man that I immediately recognized as the surgeon during my captivity was in front of me, but not in the paper hat and gown he was wearing before. He held up a little panel, the top edge pointed at me as though it were a remote. The loud man who put a gun to my face before my first operation sat in a chair a little behind the surgeon, one of his shins perched on his other knee. The sitting man was the first to speak. “She’s fucking scary, bruh. Like waking up to a snake in your bed.”

The wall of a man that was sitting on my bed that night in my IRFiR came from behind me, into my field of vision. “Nah. More like steppin’ into a whole fuckin’ hive of hornets. Y’can keep a snake as a pet. This bitch’s pure nightmare fuel,” The Wall said in an Australian accent smeared with pure disgust. “Can she hear us, Rip?”

In a flash, the surgeon went from intense scrutiny to a full-force right hook into The Wall’s face, crumpling the sizeable man to the floor like he dropped a sopping wet robe. As the latter groaned and writhed around on the linoleum, holding his face, the surgeon turned to the other, saying in a surprisingly bored sounding way, “Clean up this trash. He’s not allowed in this room anymore. Talks too much.”

Without saying anything, the other guy stands and grabs The Wall by the back of his jacket and drags him out of the room. Must’ve been his favorite move. When the door snicks shut, the surgeon, resuming the deep inspection, murmurs, “This one really is nightmare fuel, though.” It was the most personable thing Rip has said in front of me, but I couldn’t even say anything about it.

I couldn’t figure out why he would have me conscious while he assessed me, though. What was the point? Didn’t he know that it was perhaps more cruel to keep me drugged up and passed out in the dark? Was this just to show me that he was in control and I couldn’t do anything about this?

A more frightening thought started to occur to me: was this actually better than going to Liselle’s residence, or trying to carve out some hole, deep in the murky, stale shadows of The District? Everyone out there would be little more than an alarm that would eventually capture the interest of some badge or corpo-sec agent. This surgeon, this monster who made me a monster, was now the closest person I would have to a friend.

But Rip would not be my friend. He doesn’t see a person here; he sees a “subject”, and he’s tinkering with me like I’m just some machine. *Fuck. I am a machine.*

Just then, I heard a quick double-beep from somewhere off to the side. Rip suddenly turned away from the hardware on the side of my head and looked at the panel. Sneering as he slowly turned back toward me, he said, “Yes.” His voice was nothing short of viscous and slimy. “You are *just* a machine.” Without another word, he reached to the side of my head and... turned me off.