

WHAT'S BRED IN THE BONE

A SPECIAL SAMPLE CHAPTER ONE - BOOK ONE
OF THE XK9 "BONES" TRILOGY

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What's Bred in the Bone, Chapter One Sample

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CHAPTER 1

A WALK IN THE PARK

Damn it, no horizon should bend upward. XK9 Rex Dieter-Nell flinched away from the “scenic overlook.” He clenched his jaws on a quiet whimper, but the shudder down his back made his hackles prickle.

His human partner, Charlie, met Rex’s eyes. *I’m sorry. I know you don’t like it.* His words flowed through their brain link on a wave of empathy.

Rex lowered his head, wary of insulting his partner’s beloved home. Maybe if he switched to using his collar-mounted vocalizer, he could achieve more emotional distance. “I think perhaps the taste must be acquired.”

But is it one you’ll ever acquire? Charlie’s worry echoed through the link.

Rex looked away. He shared his partner’s concern but feared to admit it. “It is getting dark. Perhaps we should move on.”

Charlie straightened, stepped away from the guardrail. *I know everything’s different for you here. It’ll take time. Things’ll grow less strange. I’m just being impatient.*

Rex had hoped to spare his partner’s feelings, but the brain link had betrayed him again. *I guess we’ll see how things work out.* He hazarded another look. *Ugh.* It was freaky-unnatural for a

river to run down the wall at one end of the vista, as Wheel Two's Sirius River did. Even worse for it to run back up the wall at the other. But this weird quirk of Rana Habitat Space Station's toroidal wheel-geography, in itself, was minor compared to all that Rex had lost.

I appreciate your respect for my feelings about my home. Charlie'd followed his thoughts again. He ran a strong brown hand along Rex's neck, then rubbed the base of his ears with soothing strokes.

Rex leaned into his partner's hand, despite his mood. That did feel pretty good. A soft little whimper escaped. He pressed his head against Charlie's sternum and gave in to the ear-rub.

I don't want to belittle your loss. Charlie's fingers kept up their soothing rhythm. *I know how much you miss your Packmates, especially Shady.*

Rex, his mate Shady, and their Packmates, the ten members of the Orangeboro Pack, had spent every day together at their planet-based former home in Solara City. Together for training. Together for meals. Together each night, nestled in the straw bedding on the hard floor in the Unpartnered Kennels. Together was how they'd always hoped to stay. The Pack, together, meant home, meant family. Meant love.

Rex rubbed his head against Charlie, soothed by his partner's empathy and his comforting personal scent. But a burning knot of longing expanded within him whenever he thought about Shady or his Packmates.

None of the Pack had seen each other since the Presentation Ceremony in Orangeboro's Central Plaza. Each XK9 lived at his or her human partner's home now. Rex and Shady spoke secretly on their coms each night, but that was their only contact. It had been almost two entire months.

Charlie had lodged several protests about the Orangeboro Police Department's policy of keeping the dogs apart. Shady said her partner Pam had too. No luck. The XK9 Project had prescribed these handling protocols. The OPD wouldn't budge.

The Pack stayed apart, ten lonely exiles in a bizarre foreign place, with only humans around them.

Longing ached from Rex's throat down through his chest, to knot in his gut. A howl swelled from his heart, but he swallowed it unsung. Time to change the subject. *At least we did well today. Even if no one else knows.*

Charlie stroked Rex's neck. *We scored a nice win today, and trust me, the right people know.*

I guess. Rex flicked his ears, still dissatisfied. Their subject had been an acrobatic burglar who liked to climb up the local residence towers' outer balconies to gain entrance. Rex hadn't needed to climb balconies to chase her, thank goodness. He'd crossed her trail outside a pub she was known to frequent, then tracked her to a storage unit where they'd caught her literally hip-deep in stolen goods. That had been fun.

But then came the rest of the day. They'd spent it in Precinct Nine Station's Evidence Submission Room. That had not been fun. Rex had helped as much as he could with the inventory. But mostly it was Charlie who'd imaged, ID-tagged, bagged, and deposited everything they'd recovered. Meanwhile upstairs DPO Sanchez, the lead detective, received all the congratulations.

Irritation prickled like an itch he couldn't reach. Rex smelled the hot, achey inflammation that lingered in his partner's neck, back, and especially his weaker left arm, although Charlie had not complained. *DPO Sanchez did nothing but tell us a couple of places we might start, and hand us a glove for me to sniff. We took it from there. We followed the scent. We solved the case. It was our victory.*

Charlie shook his head. *You know Sanchez has been on that case for months. The glove was crucial, and so was the tip about the pub. Gotta give her that, at least. She deserves the glory.*

Hurt and frustration squeezed Rex's throat. *But I deserve glory, too. Captain Argus had to order her to use us.* He stifled a growl. *Sanchez called me the Chief's new toy. I am not a toy.*

And you proved it today. Charlie scratched behind Rex's ears again. Do solid work, then don't be obnoxious about it afterward. That's the best way to convince a doubter like Sanchez. And as I said, the right people know what you did. Captain Argus and Chief Klein are both very pleased.

Rex sighed. He was acting like a puppy, longing for praise. At the mature age of seven, he was old enough to know better. Dogs mustn't snatch admiration away from humans. He did know better. But he loved being at the center of admiration. Having a mature attitude sucked.

They turned away from the overlook, headed up the path toward the steps of the next switchback. All manner of scents flowed down from plants, small creatures, buildings, and humans up-slope: residual odors of what people had eaten, or scent factors that revealed their moods. Rex recognized several human scent-profiles from past encounters, but the nearest was Charlie's neighbor Fatima Smythe. Rex had met her at a neighborhood picnic the week he'd arrived on-Station.

Associated with Fatima's location, other new scents filtered down. Ozzirikkians had a characteristic sweet-organic, almost smoky odor, in contrast to most humans' base-scent, which lay in the musky, mellower mid-ranges. They were Rana Stationers, just like humans, but the higher gravity of human habitat wheels made it unusual for them to visit. *What are two ozzirikkians doing here?*

Charlie gave him a sidelong glance. *Ozzirikkians?*

They're with Fatima and one other human, approaching on the path above us. Rex gazed up the path, but the bushes obscured his view.

The link conveyed Charlie's puzzlement. *To venture into our gravity, these ozzirikkians must be close friends.* Anything higher than 0.823-Terran G taxed ozzirikkian joints and organs if they stayed more than a few hours. Charlie frowned up the path, but then, through the link, Rex felt his realization dawn. *Oh. I bet*

they're co-workers, here for the Betrothal rehearsal. I wonder if they're part of her Betrothal party.

Whatever they were doing here, they drew nearer. Rex caught scents similar to those that humans or dogs emitted when in mild-to-moderate pain. Ozzirikkians didn't come into human territory lightly. They had their own habitat wheels, Numbers Five and Six. Those Wheels were a different size, and counter-rotated at a slightly different velocity from the human Wheels, to provide the proper gravity.

Rex froze, nose high. Here was another new scent, an unmistakable combination of human sweat with scent factors spawned by anxiety, hyper-alertness, and ill-intent. There was nothing else in all the scent-spectra quite like the smell of a human preparing to do something bad. And this human was closing in on Fatima and her friends.

A shrill cry cut the air. No mistaking the person's fear.

Rex sprang up the path. He ran into a cloud of malevolent, aggressive male human scent. Mingled with it, Rex caught the human women's and ozzirikkians' scents, sharp with terror.

"Damned click-apes!" the man cried. "What're you doing here?"

Protective fury swept through Rex. He rounded the bend, hackles stiff and teeth bared.

A slender man in dark clothing confronted Fatima and her friends. He leveled an EStee at them.

Rex cranked his vocalizer to top volume. "Police! Halt! Drop your weapon!"

The man swung around. He fired the EStee in Rex's direction, then plunged into the thicket next to the path. With a crackle of dry leaves, he disappeared.

Rex bounded past the human-ozzirikkian group, focused on their assailant. He shoved his head and burly shoulders into the brush. Stiff branches tore at him, but he pushed forward by main force. Being larger than any normal dog had both advantages and drawbacks.

The skinny-hipped subject scrambled through natural tunnels under the bushes. Rex's equipment panniers caught in the stiff twigs.

Rex retreated, shook himself, then stepped back to get a better overview. *My panniers are too wide!*

Charlie reached him in seconds. His hands loosened buckles, released hook-and-loop straps. The panniers lifted off. "Can you get him?"

"Consider him got!" Rex lunged into the brush, the subject's scent hot in his nose. The tunnel twisted. Rex rammed his way through the tough branches.

His quarry's scent went sweaty-cold with terror.

Good. Rex's growl thundered in his chest. He shoved through the bushes.

At the edge of his attention, he sensed Charlie. His partner strove to calm the victims, called for backup. Charlie was covering his end of things. Rex had a different mission.

Rex's quarry doubled back, dodged, evaded. Always stayed beyond Rex's reach. "Give up while you can," Rex warned him.

The man didn't answer. He dodged down another branching tunnel.

Rex halted. This could go on a long while, if he followed the agile young man's route through the brush. He put his nose up, tracked his subject's progress. Then he stepped back through his memory to that overview he'd glimpsed. They were on a narrow section of a flat secondary terrace in Glen Haven Park. The thicket ran along one of the park's terrace walls. At the right end of it lay a muddy drainage groove; at the left end, a flight of steps.

The subject managed to keep his noise-making down to quiet crackles of leaf and twig until at last he stopped deep inside the bushes. By now he'd probably put at least 15 meters of circuitous burrows between himself and Rex. Self-satisfied scent factors drifted out through the branches. He thought he'd escaped.

Rex snorted. Did he think Rex couldn't hear him breathing?

Couldn't hear his heartbeat? Couldn't smell his bad self, over there by the terrace wall? Did he believe Rex could only follow his twisted path? Well, screw that. The subject was only four meters away if one took a direct route.

Rex sized up the tough bushes. This'd be doing it the hard way. But only for four meters.

He bunched his haunches, set his hind paws. Breathed in and out, and focused on his subject's location.

Then he launched himself through a blur of breaking branches with a roar.

His quarry screamed. He darted to Rex's left.

Rex rebounded off the wall, lunged after him. Twigs tore at him. He shoved through the brush. He reveled in the sweet taste of his subject's terror. He closed on the heat of his subject's body. Heard the frantic thunder of his subject's heart.

The man struggled free of the bushes. He sprinted upward, three stairs at a time. But no human could outrun an XK9 with a six-meter stride. Rex caught him in two bounds, clamped his jaws around the wrist of the EStee-hand, jerked his head, and laid his subject out on his belly on the landing.

The man gasped for breath. He stared at Rex's teeth on his arm, his scent factors raw with terror. A distinct, pungent odor of soiled pants rose from him. The young man dropped the EStee.

Rex raked it out of reach with a hind paw. Crappy substitute for a real gun, but illegal in civilian hands. Rex didn't fear it, but it could harm a human or an ozzirikian, so he made sure the subject couldn't grab it.

"Backup's on the way," Charlie called. "Hold him!"

Rex growled. "He is not going anywhere!"

The subject whimpered.

Rex wagged his tail but kept the man's wrist firmly between his teeth.



Crisp, warm satisfaction filled Uniformed Peace Officer Seaton's scent factors. "I have a DNA positive on our subject." She gestured toward the man Rex had flushed from the thicket and caught on the stairs. "Just as I thought! Meet Elmo Smart, AKA 'Thumper.' Got a rap sheet several clicks long. We've been trying to catch him for almost five weeks. He's been working this park and a couple of others, leaping out of hiding to mug unsuspecting passers-by."

Their captive, now cuffed in the back of a prisoner transport, sneered and looked away. But his bravado couldn't conceal the glum, sludgy dread in his scent.

Five weeks? Rex shot another look at the slender young man. That explained his familiarity with the terrain. "How many incidents?"

"In all?" Seaton's brows went up as if the question surprised her, then she frowned. "Oh, dozens. He's a one-man crime wave."

Elmo Smart was more dangerous than he looked. *That's two notorious thieves in one day.* Rex glanced toward Charlie, who'd stayed with Fatima and her friends. *Will we get any credit for that? Will 'the right people' know?* His partner hadn't yet had time even to pull out the traditional squeaky-toy. Rex kept his growl to himself, but that toy'd probably be the extent of the recognition he'd get. The play-reward practice dated back to the earliest days of K-9s on police forces, but the older Rex got, the more it felt like a mockery, not a reward.

Charlie seemed stung by this. *Dr. Ordovich always stressed it was important.*

Rex let a little of his growl out. *If you really want to reward me, let me spend time with Shady.*

Reluctance surged through the link. *I'm sorry.*

Rex knew Charlie's reaction was more than simple disinclination to subvert OPD protocols. Until about seven weeks ago, Charlie and Shady's partner Pam had been lovers. Then she'd

dumped him, just a few days before the trip back to Rana Station. She'd left Charlie to take up with a former boyfriend, an OPD detective named Balchu Nowicki. *I can't really blame you for not wanting to see Pam. But Shady and I still love each other.*

Can we discuss this later, please?

Rex sighed. *You always say 'later,' but we never do.*

"Well, well." Seaton had continued perusing Smart's file. "Looks like we have a known human-exclusivist, here. At least, he's made some statements and boosted some posts in support. But an actual assault on an ozzirikkian is new."

Rex snapped his ears flat. "Probably because he never had any ozzirikkians to assault before."

Seaton's partner UPO Wells scowled. "Just needed to find one, I guess." He reached in to fasten Smart's seat belt.

Rex watched with close attention, growled a soft warning.

Smart rolled an eye at Rex. He behaved himself, but the sharp stink of his resentment hung in the air like an invisible fog.

Rex huffed. Resentment was probably Elmo Smart's normal outlook. Charlie said human-exclusivists lived on resentment. They ignored history to justify their bigotry, because without the ozzirikkians Rana Station never would've been financed or built.

Wells slammed the door of the prisoner transport, locking Smart inside. Rex rejoined his partner. They were on call later tonight. Charlie'd want to head home soon.

Paramedics were just finishing their examination of one of the ozzirikkians Smart had targeted. K'ki clicked and whistled to k'kir companion in k'ki'irn home language.

Rex couldn't make sense of what k'ki said. New longing filled him. Shady was the Pack's linguist. She'd studied Pan-Ozzirikkian when she'd learned the Pack would come to Rana Station. If only he could ask her!

The paramedics gave both ozzirikkians pain-patches. K'ki'i applied them to k'ki'irn foreheads. The blue-black patches blended in with the skin color of one better than the other, whose

face was a lighter blue-gray. Soon the achey heat in k'ki'irn scents eased.

"Fatima, you remember my new partner, XK9 Rex Dieter-Nell," Charlie said.

Fatima smiled. She reached out a hand to Rex. "Who could forget? Hello and thank you. You really came to our rescue!"

Rex wagged his tail and offered his paw to shake. He let his tongue loll in a dog-smile. "It is my pleasure to remove someone from our park who would dare to threaten our neighbors and honored guests."

The two ozzirikkians had gone silent at Rex's approach. When he spoke, two pairs of round violet eyes widened. K'ki'irn heavy brows rose, forming wrinkles around k'ki'irn pain patches. K'ki'i emitted sharp, brisk, rising scents that smelled similar to human amazement or surprise.

I'm always astonished by how many people are surprised that we XK9s talk.

He sensed Charlie's agreement through the link. *You're a new thing in k'ki'ir world. They don't know what to expect, so they assume you're a dog, except MUCH bigger.*

Kind of like the human-exclusivists talk as if ozzirikkians are some kind of Terrestrial ape?

Good point. Yes, very much like. Rex glimpsed Charlie's smile from the corner of his eye.

Rex turned toward the ozzirikkians with his ears up, tail waving. Both individuals had pale tufts of fur that partially concealed the half-circle ears high on each side of their round, furry heads. The tufts marked them as kixi, a non-breeding gender. K'ki'i had wrapped k'ki'irn long, furry arms around each other. Like k'ki'irn elongated torsos and short legs, k'ki'irn arms were covered with thick fur, patterned in striking black, gray and yellow spotted markings. One had a vid-recorder on a length of webbing around k'kir neck.

Fatima turned to k'ki'in. "Ter, Jik, this is XK9 Rex. He's Char-

lie's partner. Don't be afraid of him. He might *look* like a huge black wolf, but he's really very friendly."

The one with the vid-recorder loosened k'kir grasp on the other, lifted k'kir blunt, rounded muzzle and sniffed in short puffs through k'kir flat, triangular nose. K'ki cocked k'kir head at him. K'kir alert violet gaze studied him.

He cocked his head at her in reply. "Hello."

K'kir flexible, gray-blue lips parted to give the fang-flashing gape of greeting the Pack had been taught was a parallel expression to a human smile or a canine ears-relaxed tail-wag. "El-l-l-oh. T-tank you vor-r r-rezzgue us."

K'kir high-pitched voice spoke with studied deliberation, but Rex could follow k'kir words. Shady said many ozzirikians were able to create the sounds needed to speak Human Commercial Standard. It was much harder for humans to reproduce the clicks and squeaks of Pan-Ozzirikian. Lucky for XK9s, their vocalizers could do both. Maybe he should learn at least a little Pan-Ozzirikian from Shady. *If* he ever saw her again.

He wagged his tail, relaxed his ears. "You are most welcome."

"Please meet Terchikni Jochikti, Welder First Class," Fatima said. "K'ki is the leader of my work-group."

Terchikni extended a hand that had six, slate-blue-skinned fingers with black, clawlike nails, an opposable thumb, and yellowish fur to k'kir first knuckles. "My firzzt-t XK9."

Rex went to "parade sit," with head up, ears forward, and tail straight out behind. He offered his paw to shake. "My first ozzirikian. Hello."

The ozzirikian emitted high, bright scent factors that smelled almost like excitement and curiosity in a human. "T-tiz XK9 so big! But-t very smart-t I t-tink!"

Rex let his tongue slide out in a dog-smile. He'd been hasty to think ozzirikians were bizarre. This one seemed highly perceptive. "It is nice to meet you, Terchikni."

“And this is Jikjikchi Ziktikki, my partner from work,” Fatima said.

Apparently emboldened by k’kir work-group leader’s example, but still smelling frightened, Jikjikchi also stretched out a hand to shake with Rex. “T-tank you,” k’ki said in a soft, high voice.

“And my longtime school friend, Nancy Tibma,” Fatima added.

Nancy, a slender blonde human woman, smiled. “Fatima’s told us about her XK9 neighbor, but I never imagined you’d come to our rescue.” She reached up boldly to stroke his head and neck, then glanced back at Terchikni and Jikjikchi. “His fur is really very soft. You should feel it.”

The two ozzirikkians hesitated, looked at Charlie.

Charlie grinned. “Rex loves being petted and admired. He looks fierce, but he’s a lover.”

Fatima and her friends encircled Rex. They stroked and caressed him, murmuring praise and delight. The ozzirikkians made contented little sounds deep in k’ki’ir throats, like a cross between a coo and a purr. Rex basked in the attention, tail wagging.

Charlie looked on, his brown eyes alight with pleasure. *See? You got to be at the center of admiration after all.*

Rex rolled over to let them rub his belly. *I definitely could get used to this.* All the same, no one had tried to pet Charlie, had they? Not Seaton or Wells, either. Humans were picky about where and when they allowed others to get near them. Yet everyone assumed Rex wouldn’t mind if sapient creatures touched him wherever they liked. *Another form of condescension? Well, damn. Probably.* Then Terchikni’s clever fingers found a really good spot. Rex sighed. *I’ll worry about whether to be offended later.*

Charlie grinned. *Take your kudos where they come. Just don’t expect me to lug your panniers up the switchbacks for you.*

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