

Gloria Oliver

THE DISCOVERIES OF JULIA XERO



The **SECRET**
COUNTDOWN

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The Discoveries of Julia Xero
Book 3

Gloria Oliver

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The Secret Countdown

The Discoveries of Julia Xero – Book 3

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CHAPTER 01

An insane nightmare—I was trapped in an insane nightmare with *no way out*.

I had returned to the new penthouse apartment only a few minutes before. Just long enough to hear the pounding of the storm currently raging over Dallas as it beat against the floor-to-ceiling windows, and to find, on the kitchen island, a lone black feather that soon dissolved into nothing.

All of that I could have dealt with. All of that was *nothing* when compared to what came next.

As deafening thunder boomed just outside, my spidey sense started tingling. I couldn't tell what had set it off. My pulse raced while my heart violently pumped in my chest, the dead certainty that something terrible had happened making me feel faint. Then more lighting ripped down from the heavens, showing me that my brief respite was over and things were now worse than ever before.

Lightning forked through the sky outside, once more revealing the impossible. On the other side of the floor-to-ceiling window of my new home was an anomaly, a thing from myth and legend, but oh so very real. A yeti or abominable snowman—a creature about eight to nine feet tall, with white fur, who was said to live high in the Himalayas. It was a sight that would send my roommate Penny out the door in a hair-pulling panic.

But I suspected—no, I *knew* who this was, and it made my heart feel as if someone had wrapped a hand around it and squeezed.

The yeti didn't move. He just hung there, his long ape-like arms raised above his head and fettered to metal manacles. His fur was drenched, the water running off him in tiny rivers as the storm that raged over the city continued to pelt him.

I took a couple of manic steps toward him, a scream trying to bubble up my throat, but I clamped my mouth shut to hold it in. Waking up my roommate was the *worst* thing I could do right now.

The creature trussed up outside my window was an ally, perhaps even a friend, and someone had hung him there as some kind of macabre warning. My hands quivered as I pulled out my phone, my eyes burning. I may not have ever seen him in his secondary form, but I knew this could be no one but Councilor Karki: a Buddhist monk who served on the Council of Purpose, and a member of the race called the *Paphal Saġiga*, or the Secret Humankind.

I stared at my phone, a roaring sound pounding in my ears, as my suddenly-numb brain refused to remember how to use it.

Karki had to still be alive—he *had* to be.

A snippet of a past conversation whispered through my stunned thoughts—one about how, once dead, an SH would no longer keep its secondary form. The words were clear, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember who had told me that. My brain finally shifted into gear, and I opened my contacts list and then hit the call button for Rafael.

"Chica..."

That one word and the warm playfulness behind it almost undid me. For the merest moment, I relived the shivers of delight from our first kiss, which had occurred just minutes before in the elevator. I siphoned whatever strength I could from it before shunting it aside. "We have a situation. Can you come back upstairs? *Please?*"

I don't know what he heard in my voice, but a surprised puff echoed from the other end. "Be right there."

Like me, Detective Rafael Ruiz worked for and with the SH when necessary, as part of our daily lives. Since secrecy was paramount, we each worked the late shift at our respective jobs, even though the need for special services was supposedly few and far between. But with the secret project we were still trying to stop, and all the attempts on my life in the last couple of weeks, Rafael had been neglecting most of his non-SH-involved cases. I'd not been able to do my job at all.

With unsteady steps, I made sure Penny was asleep and that her bedroom door was closed. Fortunately, once she fell asleep, she could stay under through almost anything—one less thing I would need to worry about. I let myself out of the apartment and paced in the hallway. Should I call my boss, Anghelescu? Put a warning into

the anonymous chat that Karamel, the company's receptionist, had rigged for us? I rubbed at my numb face with my hands, drowning in indecision.

Our enemy was surely watching to see what I would do and who would show up once I found his or her little gift—an easy way to find out who was "in the know" about their illicit activities. That our enemy was more than likely a member of the Council of Purpose or someone very close to them was a given. The information they had access to, and the fact that they'd kept an SH child off the register and groomed him into an assassin to better serve their purposes, screamed as much.

With access to the security feeds of Remington Safe and Clean and the other businesses housed inside the same building, our enemy would be aware the moment my boss left her protected rooms on the thirteenth floor. The paranoia of the council and their decision to implant their human allies with a tracker bomb in their necks would make it difficult to ask Stan, my work partner, to help out.

I couldn't be tracked anymore, my body having rejected the tracker and pushed it out. The reason for that was one I was still battling to wrap my head around. Something inside me had changed—or, more accurately, been fully activated—when I had almost died. A tenuous connection I didn't even know I'd had to what the SH called the Energy of Life had broadened and given me the power to heal myself. My 'spidey sense' had always been with me, but it, too, seemed to be evolving. That, or I was finally started to use it the way it had always been intended. It was only a scant few days ago that Anghelescu and I learned I wasn't strictly *human* but rather the

result of illegal experiments, putting me in the 'abomination' column as far as most of those in the council were concerned. This was something I'd not yet shared with the rest of my friends—not even Rafael.

Especially not Rafael.

And how fair was that to *him*, when I'd been the one to initiate our first kiss? *You're a selfish one, Xero.*

In case I've yet to mention it, my name is Julia Xero, the last name having the same pronunciation as 'zero'—probably someone's idea of a little joke when picking a name for the foundling.

I shook my head to dislodge the depressing train of thought. Best to stick to the craziness of the present.

The elevator's ding heralded the detective's imminent arrival and helped me push everything but the current mess firmly to the back burner.

Seeing his handsome face with its light bronze colored skin, thick dark brows drawn together in concern while his deep brown eyes locked on me, eased the grip of the fist still clenching my heart. Only a little relief, but just enough to remind myself I wasn't alone in this, that I no longer had to face things on my own.

Rafael's usually bright blue and green aura had darkened. Have I mentioned yet that I can see auras?

"Chica, what's going on?" he asked.

I took a deep breath to steel myself for what was coming next. "Someone left me a warning outside my window." I tried to say the rest, but my mouth wouldn't do it. Saying it would make it real.

Rafael blinked several times. "*Outside?* In this storm?"

"Yes." I grabbed hold of his coat sleeve. "It'll make the explanation easier if you see it for yourself." I half-led, half-followed him back to my door, the dread building at having to see that horrid image again. My hand shook so much that I needed his help to get the keycard into the slot. His brow grew more furrowed by the moment.

Having him close gave me the strength to walk in the direction of the open study and the window Karki had been suspended over.

"I... I wouldn't have even seen him if not for the lightning," I said. As if to move things along, several bolts flashed nearby, highlighting the suspended body.

"*iDios mio!*" Rafael crossed himself, something I had never seen him do before.

"I think he's still alive and needs our help." Watching the dawning horror on his face somehow made mine more palatable. "And we definitely want him down from there before anyone else spots him." I swallowed hard. "Do you think we can use the Sky Lounge to get to him?"

Rafael dragged his gaze from the now-dark window before slowly shaking his head. "No. I visited up there once, and it's not open to the outside." He spoke barely above a whisper, his expression a mix of shock and worry. He looked to be having as bad a time with this as I was. "Is anyone else coming?"

I shook my head. "No. It would take too long, and..." I couldn't bring myself to voice my suspicions.

Rafael's brow rose, but he didn't press me. "Then our best bet is the BMU, the Building Maintenance Unit," he said.

My confused expression got him to add, "The angled top of the building rises up and has a telescopic crane that can be used to install glass replacements, but mostly to move a window washer gondola up and down so the glass can be kept clean." He turned his back to the window. "One of my uncles used to work for the maintenance company. He took several of us up to check it out when it was the talk of the town."

That made sense, especially since Fountain Place was in the shape of a crystal. "Do you know how to get to it?"

"There's access via the maintenance elevator, though I doubt it's kept unlocked." He gave a half-hearted grin. "It's time to flash my badge around." His attempt at levity tripped and died, his whole face turning grim. "We're going to have to be quick."

Bringing attention to ourselves wasn't the best idea, but we were low on options. I nodded, and the two of us rushed back to the elevator. And down we went.



CHAPTER 02

"We need access to the BMU." Rafael set his credentials before the building's night security officer.

Both of the gray-haired man's brows rose even as he took a closer look at the gold-colored badge and detective info. "You do realize it's storming like crazy outside, right?" the older man asked. His nametag cited his last name as Charles. "I don't mind letting you up there, but under no circumstances will I be raising the top for the crane." He tilted his head to the side. "What's this about, anyway?"

Rather than answer his question, Rafael asked one of his own. "Have you checked to make sure it's not open?"

The man's attention snapped up to Rafael's face. "It was closed when I came on shift. If someone had messed with it, it would have set off an alarm."

Rafael kept silent, just staring at the man intently.

"Suit yourself," Charles grumbled, turning to type into a computer. Four screens sat side by side on the desk, showing four camera

views per screen and shifting to different cameras every few seconds. "What the fu--" He turned back toward Rafael, his face slack. "How did you know? There's no sign the alarm ever went off at all." The color drained from his face. "I need to get the arm back inside and close that thing!"

"No, don't!" I'd been staying out of the way, half-hiding behind Rafael, but now a bolt of panic made me jump forward. There was no telling what would happen to Karki if the security guard retracted the arm with no one up there. Or what the man would do at seeing a yeti dangling from the end of it.

The guard flinched back at my reaction, then his eyes widened as he got his first real look at me. I had been getting that a lot lately, at least ever since I fully connected with the Energy of Life. It's what the Secret Humankind called the ambient energy generated by living beings. The SH needed it to live, and it was also what gave them their powers, depending on what creature was pulled from humanity's subconscious to be imprinted on them when they matured at the time of the Change. The fact that I could tap into it as a human was something totally unheard of, and hadn't made me popular with the SH hierarchy, but it had also changed my thin, mousy brown hair and dark amber eyes. Now, my hair was mostly a golden blond with dark highlights, and it curled every which way. My eyes were still amber-colored, but of a much lighter hue. Nothing else had changed externally, so at least there was that. But being noticed was a new experience and one which, honestly, I could have done without.

"She's right," Rafael said. "Don't do anything for the moment. Since the alarm didn't go off, there's a chance your system's been infected by a virus. No telling what it's been programmed to do. We'll go up there and check it out and bring it in manually."

The guard stood up. "I'll take you up there."

Rafael waved him back down. "Sorry, Charles, I need you here. If someone is messing with your system, it could mean they've also made it inside and are up to no good. I need you ready to call for backup if we need it."

"Understood." He handed Rafael back his credentials. "Wait a sec." He punched in a combination on a keypad on one of the desk drawers to pop it open, then pulled out a couple of walkie-talkies and an unmarked key. "We can stay in contact with these."

Rafael took the offered two-way radio and used the clip on the back to attach it to his belt. "Thanks."

Charles then offered him the key. "If the system is compromised, the keycards might not work, so use this instead. The door can be opened both ways."

"Good to know." Rafael started to turn away.

"The maintenance elevator is in the back, past the golf simulator, and down the stairs," Charles said, pointing in the direction we needed to go.

I took off with Rafael at my heels. The picture of an old-fashioned grandfather clock had popped into my head, each tick of the second hand pounding like a hammer. There was no telling how long Karki had been out there. He could be wounded and bleeding out, for all I knew.

"Julia, calm down."

I glanced at Rafael, his brow bunched together as he stared worriedly at me. That's when I realized I had been pacing inside the large maintenance elevator, glaring at the floor indicator every chance I got. "Sorry."

Rafael removed his pistol from his shoulder holster and held it against his chest as he moved to stand at the front left corner, so he'd be out of sight when the doors opened. He signaled with his free hand for me to do the same on the other side. Not seeing a camera, I willed my double-edged sword and semi-opaque round shield to appear. Anghelescu had given me two Secret Humankind upper arm bracelets that stored the items out of sight until called. They had already helped save my life several times.

A glance at the floor display above the closed doors finally showed we were almost there.

"Any thoughts on why they might have done this?" Rafael asked. I was sure he was trying to distract me in an attempt to keep me from going batshit crazy.

"Karki sent Anghelescu a note saying he might have found something of interest," I said. "Whatever it was, I think it got him in trouble." Which was the last thing I ever wanted. "Worse, by leaving him out there, I'm pretty sure this is a warning but also a trap to try to figure out who else knows."

"*iCoño!* That's not good. Not good at all," he said as he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

The elevator dinged, announcing our arrival. The doors opened and nothing happened, so Rafael took a quick peek. "The corridor is

clear." He held his weapon at the ready. "I'll take the lead. Stay behind me, just in case."

I was the one with a shield. *I* was the one with healing powers. Nothing doing. I slipped out the doors before he could stop me.

"Dammit, Julia! Be sensible!"

I ignored him and moved forward, my shield arm up to protect my torso. I would probably be getting a loud earful later, but for now, Rafael let the matter drop and followed me.

The corridor was wide and nondescript, with dollies, carts, moving blankets, and furniture pads propped all along the left side. A cool, humid wind whispered around us, bringing with it the sounds of pounding rain. The door at the end of the hall had been propped open.

Was the bastard playing games? Or was he just making it easier for us to get at Karki now that we'd seen his warning? It made no sense! I grew even more confused when I reached the actual door. Our enemy had used Karki's large prayer beads to keep it from fully closing.

I scrunched down to retrieve them, first peeking through the exposed crack. The room beyond was dark, lit up a little by the occasional streak of lightning still wreaking havoc outside. Whenever the wind changed in our direction, a low whistling ensued, and rain lashed inside.

"Don't touch those," Rafael whispered. "There could be prints."

As wet as they were, I kind of doubted it, but I wasn't the expert. Rafael was a glass-half-full kind of guy, while I was a half-empty kind

of girl. Being raised in the foster system probably had a lot to do with that, or so I liked to tell myself.

I put my shoulder against the door to keep it still as he reholstered his weapon, pulled an evidence bag out of his jacket pocket, and used a glove from the other to pick up the beads and seal them inside the bag. Then he put everything away and rearmed. There'd been no activity on the other side the entire time.

"All right, push the door open nice and slow."

I did as he asked, even as he reached a hand inside, hunting for the light switch. If someone was inside waiting for us, it would affect them more than it would us.

Thunder filled our ears as the lights in the next room came on. We pushed on inside, each of us taking a different side of the doorway. The long room appeared to be empty of the living. My spidey sense remained quiet. We quickly searched behind the machinery and any other possible hidey-holes, just in case. There was no one there.

I willed my sword and shield away, not caring one way or another at the moment if I was being caught on a security camera. I was pretty sure our enemy had already taken steps to guarantee Karki wouldn't show up on any. An odd suspicion coalesced inside me that whoever our enemy was, he or she was still trying to maintain the Paphal Sağiga's secrets. Allowing Karki to be found by anyone else or to be digitally recorded in his current form would work against that.

Our nemesis's project to basically neuter a large portion of the human population might be all sorts of bonkers and cold as ice, but it would still work in the SH's best interests to assure their continued

survival. The trauma it would induce in millions of couples was but a minor side effect. Have I mentioned that, as a race, some of the SH thought themselves superior to humans? That one of their self-assigned duties was to guide humanity toward *wisdom*? Yeah. Admittedly, there were a few I considered worthy of being thought of as wise, but by and large, not so much.

The wind howled, turning and picking up speed, spraying us with cold rain. The room's roof sat fifteen to twenty feet higher than it should have been, supported by hydraulic columns that raised and lowered it. A bolted crane with a retractable arm took up most of the central area. The arm was completely extended at the moment, and thick metal wires dropped from the end to disappear down my side of the building. Rafael rushed up the ladder to the BMU's control box.

I tried peering out the lip of the opening to the outside, but it was too high.

"I'm going to try to bring him up." Rafael had poked his head out of the control box and yelled at me to be heard over the storm. I gave him a thumbs-up rather than trying to yell back.

We were so high up, and that metal arm extended so far out, I truly hoped whoever had installed this thing up here had had the foresight to add a lightning rod to the building just in case. As if to show me, a crackling sound and a flash of blinding light lit the air right outside. I yelped at the unexpected boom. All the hair on my head and arms stood up with a strange prickling sensation pouring through the rest of me as the air filled with static electricity. The smell of ozone, a pungent metallic odor, assaulted my nose. A small

bolt shot from my finger to the wall as I turned to make sure Rafael was all right. Since we hadn't been turned into buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken, I could only assume that there was definitely a lightning rod somewhere.

The thick cables connected to the BMU started to crawl back into the drum. The wind shifted again, now driving the rain into the large room with a vengeance. Standing near the wall opening, I was drenched in seconds. The crane stopped rewinding until the wind changed once more. At some point, as the angle towards the top became sharper, Karki's body would no longer rest against the side of the building, and the last thing we wanted was for him to swing and smack about.

After what felt like forever, Rafael stuck his head out of the control box to yell again. "He's up! I'm going to bring him inside."

I gave him another thumbs-up and strained to see past the wall into the chaotic darkness outside. The crane's arm retracted inch by nerve-racking inch. As the end of the arm pulled inside, I finally spotted him. The sodden, limp yeti was hanging from chains attached to a long metal bar, which looked to be what the window-washer swing stages were typically attached to. His light blue and white aura was almost non-existent.

Rather than loosening, the grip around my heart now squeezed harder than ever. The Buddhist monk had been the first of the councilors to reach out to me, who wanted to see *who* I was and not just *what* I was. He'd offered to help, and this was his reward. The unfairness of it boiled inside me, so when it thundered again, I

screamed all my anguish and frustration at the heavens along with it.

With the crane's arm now fully retracted, the ceiling came down to seal in the BMU from the weather. Once the ceiling was closed, Rafael uncoiled some of the cables to bring Karki to the ground. Then a different kind of problem made itself known.

"Hold up a second!" I quickly waved my arms over my head to grab Rafael's attention and ran toward the control box.

Rafael stuck his head out again. "Yeah?"

"Let me get one of those carts to put him on! He might be too heavy to roll onto one after he's down."

The detective threw a glance in Karki's direction. "Great idea. Grab some of those furniture pads, too."

Nodding, I set off for the corridor. I heard the walkie-talkie attached to Rafael's belt go off. Probably Charles checking in on us. I found a stopper by the door and used that to wedge it wide open. Glancing over the offerings in the hallway, I grabbed the biggest cart they had and dumped a couple of pads on it before pushing it back at a run.

Centering the dolly in the puddle beneath Karki's still unmoving form, I signaled Rafael to go ahead and lower him slowly. The moment I could touch his wet, furry feet, I angled him so he'd end up on his side. The pad greedily soaked up the water clinging to him, and I watched the wet stain spread, thankful it wasn't blood.

Rafael shut down the BMU and came over, helping me unhook Karki from the holding bar, then we shifted and folded his large yeti form until he lay in a fetal position on the cart. Rafael had the

presence of mind to check that the monk was breathing and had a pulse. I knew he had to be alive, or he would have reverted to his human form, but having Rafael verify it brought a welcome wave of relief.

"Let's grab a few more of these pads on the way out and cover him up before we go back down."

If worse came to worst, we had Karki's beads. I'd seen him use one of them before to turn invisible. That was probably the real reason Karki's attacker had left them behind: to give us a way to keep the secret of the SH if we weren't smart enough to figure something else out on our own. It bothered me, though I couldn't pin down exactly why.

We left the BMU room, and Rafael closed and manually locked the door.

Now that we were out of the weather and had gotten Karki out of immediate danger, my body started shivering in the building's air-conditioned air.

"Chica, you're soaked!" Rafael grabbed the nearest pad. "Try to dry off with this. I'll take care of covering him up."

I did as instructed, thrilled to feel a little less like a drowned rat.

As planned, he covered Karki with more furniture pads until the yeti couldn't be seen, and so they soaked up as much water as possible so we wouldn't leave a trail. Rafael then took off his jacket.

"Here," he said as he handed it over. "It's a bit damp, but should help."

I gratefully put it on, the interior still warm with his body heat.

Rafael pushed the button to take us back down to the sublevel we came from. "I'll go talk to Charles and return the key and the radio," he said. "I gathered from our last exchange that the camera feeds were tampered with because he couldn't see us up there, which I was thrilled to hear—silver lining and all that."

See? A glass-half-full kind of guy. "I had a feeling that might be the case."

He threw me a raised-brow stare. I just shrugged.

"Not sure what to make of that, but okay," Rafael said, not pressing me. The elevator finally reached its destination, and we got off.

"Making our way through the underground Dallas pedestrian network will be our best bet to get him back to the RSC building unseen," he said. "So wait for me, all right?"

I nodded in agreement. The fifty-year-old network would be perfect. Anghelescu had made sure I could get into it even when it was locked down after hours. A way for me to go from my new home to the Remington Safe and Clean offices without being seen. Having just survived a handful of assassination attempts, it'd been a prudent move. So had the acquisition of my expensive new apartment suite, even if my boss had gone a little overboard with it.

Rafael flashed me an encouraging smile before starting up the steps to the lobby.

I scrunched down the side of the wall once I was alone, and hid my face in my hands for a minute, the weight of all this madness catching up to me. Then I reached out and slipped my hand beneath

the furniture pads to touch Karki to reassure him that *he* wasn't alone either, and also to make sure he was still with us.

Every time an obstacle was removed, something worse seemed to rise to take its place. Billions of unborn lives were counting on us to stop the maniac's lunatic project, but progress had been slow, and other crises kept getting in the way. Now that our nemesis knew we were onto them, Karki was but a taste of how bad things were likely to get.

Being a glass-half-empty kind of girl really sucked at times like this.



CHAPTER 03

"What did you tell him?" I asked. Rafael had returned—and thankfully *not* before I'd calmed down and put myself back together. I used to be great at putting on a neutral expression and keeping everything hidden and tucked away, but that had grown harder and harder to do once all this madness started.

I had opened the gate into the pedestrian network, then closed and locked it behind us, and we were now wheeling the cart down the barely-lit halls toward our building.

"I told him that we found nothing weird up there, so the perps looked to be long gone," Rafael said. "I also suggested he call their IT department and have them restore the system from a backup, which will hopefully override any viruses or forced openings in their security. I also strongly suggested they upgrade their firewall ASAP." He flashed me a quick smile, though it did little to change the stressed look around his eyes. "I tossed around the possibility this was some sort of prank because who wouldn't want a chance to play

with the BMU? But I also told him that I'd go check and make sure they didn't escape using these tunnels and for him to call me if any of the residents reported a break-in. Otherwise, I wouldn't be filing a report."

"And he was okay with that?"

Rafael nodded, a mischievous glint finally softening his eyes. "Sure. A fancy place like this? The last thing they want is bad publicity, especially about their security, which is supposedly one of the main perks of living here in the first place."

With the two of us pushing the cart, we moved at a half jog, always being careful not to slam into any walls or accidentally tip Karki's limbs out of it. I kept hoping the jostling would wake him up or make him moan—anything to indicate he might be coming around—but he stayed as still and quiet as before. If he died before we got him help...

I strangled the thought away before it bit me any deeper.

While my new apartment keycard had been "upgraded" by Anghelescu so it would allow me access to the underground passenger network, in order to get into our building, I switched to a special cylindrical key to open it. Both items had been imbued with "magic," or at least a mutated form of the living energy, so that only the assigned bearer would be able to use it to open the locks it was tied to.

We'd just started down the RSC building's maintenance corridor with its pipes and other building infrastructure items when, to my surprise, Karamel came around the far corner in a rush.

"*Julia?*" RSC's bubbly receptionist and resident dryad came to a surprised stop. "And Rafael?" Though it was the middle of the night, my friend looked as fresh and adorable as ever. Super petite and with a pixie haircut, my blond friend made the glass full and overflowing. "But I sensed..." She glanced all around, then her wide-eyed gaze homed in on the covered cart. "Is someone under there?"

She rushed over to us. "Who is it?" Karamel's face blanched. "Julia, were you attacked again?" She stared at me, oozing worry, her mixed yellow and green aura fluttering wildly in her sudden distress.

Aside from my dead social worker friend, Laurel, no one had ever been this concerned about me. Being among friends and people whom I could regard as family was still a fresh and awkward experience. "No, not me. I think it's Councilor Karki. He's been hurt."

Karamel's hands flew to her mouth. "Oh no."

"It gets worse," I told her. "He's unconscious and in his second form. And I'm pretty sure this was done by the *last* person we want to notice us."

Rafael spoke. "All the security feeds here go into the network, correct?"

Karamel pulled her hands away from her mouth, her brown eyes growing wider. "So you think he'll be watching to see who you take him to?" She shook her head rapidly. "You might be overthinking it. Of course you would bring him to us!"

My face heated up. She was right. Where else would we take him? Anywhere but here would make us seem guilty of having done it. Avoiding the cameras here might make it appear as if we had

something to hide and bring suspicion down on us, something that would work in our quarry's favor.

Rafael gave a self-deprecating laugh and smacked his forehead. It looked like I hadn't been the only one to board the paranoia train. "Should we take him to Morgan? Is he still here?"

Karamel shook her head. "No, but the sixth floor is the best place, anyway. We have a couple of rooms with hospital beds and monitoring equipment there in case of trouble. Since Karki's a councilor, I'm sure they'll want him seen by an SH healer rather than a human one." She threw the cart a worried glance. "I'll go wake Dawn, then meet you on the sixth floor to show you where to take him."

Before we could say anything else, she turned on her heel and ran back the way she had come. How she would get to Anghelescu fast enough to then come back and meet us without us having to wait, I had no idea. Did it have anything to do with the fact that there were bits of her oak tree embedded in the building's structure?

"Chica, you heard the lady—let's go!"

Pushing my weird questions aside, I concentrated my efforts on grabbing the cart and rushing as safely as possible toward the maintenance elevator.

True to her word, Karamel was waiting for us on the sixth floor by the time we arrived. I would need to ask her how she did that when, and if, things ever calmed down around here.

"Dawn will join us after making some calls," Karamel said. She walked briskly down the hallway, stopping at a seemingly random door close to Dr. Morgan's office.

"Houston, we have a problem," Rafael said. "That doorway is way too narrow for this thing. And even if we manage to haul him in there, I'm not sure he's going to fit on the bed, either."

I gritted my teeth, another frustrated scream trying to climb its way out of me. We didn't have time for this shit!

A warm hand settled on my arm, distracting me. I found Karamel at my side. "It'll be all right. We can just pull on the pads and slide him into the room. We can use pillows and blankets to make him comfortable on the floor."

I blinked back tears, feeling like a slapped-around buoy in the middle of a raging tempest. What the heck was the matter with me? "Y-yeah, that sounds good. Would you hold the cart steady for us?"

She suddenly got an impish gleam in her eyes. "It'd be better if I pulled him in." She raised her dainty arm and curled it to show off her tiny muscles. "We dryads are stronger than we look."

Before Raphael or I could comment, she leaped past the cart and through the doorway, then turned around and effortlessly slipped the furniture pads and Karki's heavy, unconscious form off the dolly and set them parallel to the hospital bed. We stared at her in shocked amazement.

Karamel was full of all kinds of surprises today.

Rafael pushed the empty cart to the side so we could join her inside.

"Normally, those with a second form revert to their human shape when unconscious," Karamel said as she glanced at the bed and Karki's way-too-large size. "I'll make sure to ask for an upgraded model in case this comes up again."

I'd be happy for us never to have to use it.

We removed the pads covering Karki and straightened him out so he lay on his back. The ape-like face was still slack, and his mouthful of sharp teeth didn't seem anywhere near as intimidating as they would have if he had been awake. Karamel rushed out, then came back moments later carrying towels and blankets. In silence, the three of us grabbed a towel each and rubbed the unconscious councilor as dry as possible, turning him carefully this way and that so we could replace the soaked pads beneath him with dry ones.

After stripping the medical bed and grabbing more sheets and blankets from the closet, Karamel gently slipped a pillow beneath his head as Rafael and I covered the rest of him. Just like on the way here, Karki never moved, twitched, or showed any signs of coming around.

I took off Rafael's jacket and returned it to him, and he handed me a towel to use on myself in exchange.

We were all sitting on the floor when Anghelescu arrived.

My boss and the owner of Remington Safe and Clean wasn't what you'd call typical, even if she hadn't been part of the Secret Humankind. A tall and lithe European beauty, she exuded sophistication and poise. She was also the most generous person I had ever met, a trait she displayed almost to the point of insanity. It had been her idea for me and Penny to move to one of the penthouse apartments in Fountain Place to assure our continued safety when the attempts on my life began. She had somehow managed to buy the unit outright, though they were supposed to be available only for rent. And Anghelescu was charging us the same

rate as we had been paying for our old apartment. Beneath the luxuriant hair of brown and gold, the lovely oval face and snub nose, even the brown eyes with gold that could see right into your soul, lay an Amazon warrior. Being on her bad side was not something I would recommend.

"The council has been informed. A healer should arrive soon via the portal." Though she spoke to all of us, her gaze was locked on Karki's prone form. "Kara, would you mind meeting them at the elevator and showing them the way here?"

"I'm on it!" Karamel sprang to her feet and left.

Anghelescu knelt down and gently took the councilor's large simian-like hand into hers. Her brows drew together, marring the perfect lines of her face. "How could this have happened?"

I hoped the question was rhetorical because I hadn't the faintest clue how to answer it. This was our fault, though. I knew that without a doubt. I didn't have the faintest idea what we were going to do about it. But the guilt of it was a heavy weight on my back.

"Where did you find him?" she asked. Though she didn't look away from Karki, I knew the question was aimed at me.

I swallowed hard, hoping my voice would remain steady. "Someone trussed him up outside the window of my study."

Her gaze snapped to my face, her deeply troubled expression and flashing eyes letting me know she understood exactly what it meant. But we couldn't talk about it here, and retreating to the special conference room, where we would be guarded against being seen or overheard, would only alert the person we hoped to stop.

"He's been unconscious the entire time?" Anghelescu asked, her gaze returning to Karki.

I forced the answer out. "Yes."

"Was he seen?"

"I don't believe so." Thankfully, Rafael answered that one. "There was a problem with the security system and the cameras."

She raised a brow at that little tidbit. "I see."

We sat in silence after that. I was so mentally exhausted that I think I even zoned out for a while. An unfamiliar voice coming down the hall brought me back.

"What a drab place this is. You know, painting the walls in a bright color would do a lot here." A woman's melodious voice carried easily to the room, yet she wasn't talking loudly.

"I know, right?" came Karamel's bubbly response. "But sadly, Dr. Morgan likes it. And although it is drab, it makes the place easier to overlook."

"Is that so? Still, it's something of a downer," the newcomer said. "The place doesn't *flow* at all."

They reached our room, and I got my first look at a Secret Humankind healer. She was... not exactly what I had expected.

"Namaste, Guardian and fellow beings." She placed her hands together and half bowed. The healer wore a bright, multi-layered, long purple boho skirt, a yellow peasant blouse with embroidered purple flowers, and leather open-toed sandals. She had long, wavy, platinum-blond hair, wore purple-tinted large round spectacles, and even had a crown of white and purple blooms on her head. *This* was

who they'd sent to help Councilor Karki? A woman with literal flowers in her hair?

"My name is Vera Feelgood," she said with a calm, straight face.

I felt my eye twitch. *Vera Feelgood?* And she was a *doctor*? With a name like that, she could have been an extra in an old James Bond movie.

"Is this my patient?" We got out of her way as she kneeled beside Karki. Her aura was like nothing I'd seen before—it resembled a rainbow, and it pulsed and shifted. If I stared at it for too long, I knew it would make me seasick.

Feelgood didn't check Karki's eyes or vitals, just held her hands an inch above his body, closed her eyes, and stayed still. The female herald I had seen before came in from the hallway and closed the door. She was carrying an oversized multi-colored tote bag with peace signs all over it.

"Bummer." A soft sigh reverberated in the room as the healer moved her hands away from Karki's prone form. "My bag, please."

The herald stepped forward to set the tote bag beside her.

"Thank you, Steph." The healer flashed her a mellow smile before digging into the bag. She pulled out a stethoscope, a tongue depressor, and a small flashlight. She examined Karki thoroughly before putting her things away. Feelgood then removed a small bottle from her bag, unscrewed the top, and held it under Karki's flattened nose. There was no reaction.

"Double bummer." She put the bottle away as well, and rose to her feet. "If it had been an illness, I would have been able to take care of this. But it's not." A forlorn expression settled on her face. "His

vitals are stable, and he doesn't seem to be suffering any distress. But the total lack of a reaction to the smelling salts worries me." She turned toward the herald. "Steph, we're going to have to take him back with us so I can run some tests and scans."

"Leave it to me, Doctor." Herald "Steph" pulled out a folded piece of canvas from her pocket, as well as one of the belts I'd seen her use before to levitate captives. She snapped the canvas with a flick of her wrist and it unfolded in midair into a stretcher. No way was Karki going to fit on that thing. But before I could put my foot in my mouth by stating the obvious, the herald pulled the sides farther apart, and the gurney stretched.

Everyone moved to the wall to give her room to expand it even more. When she'd manipulated it into the right size, Steph then placed the belt around Karki's waist and, with a little help from Karamel, effortlessly moved him over onto the gurney. The stretcher would be incredibly convenient since the SH with second forms could be all manner of sizes. The herald put one of the blankets over him, then strapped him down tight. "We're ready to go, Doctor."

"Cool."

Without being asked, Rafael opened the door. The herald deftly tilted the gurney so it would fit through the doorway. We all followed her out.

I turned at an unexpected touch at my elbow and found myself face-to-face with Feelgood. The scent of peaches and cream circled around me. "You're *her*, aren't you?"

I didn't see the point in trying to hide it, so I nodded. Word of my existence had spread far and wide despite the council's gag order. At

least she hadn't called me an abomination, which made her more polite than several other SH I'd met.

"How very interesting," she said, looking me up and down as if seeing things only she could see. "I've been told you can heal yourself. Is that right?"

I nodded again, taking a step back, bothered by her continued invasion of my personal space. The doctor's gaze grew intense.

"Can you heal others?" she asked.

I felt my brows draw together—where had *that* come from? "I don't think so."

Her purple-tinted eyes locked onto mine, and she closed the distance between us, her expression oddly serious. "Have you ever *tried?*"

How in Heaven would I even go about doing that? "One of the conditions of my release was that I not consciously use or experiment with any powers I might have." The Council of Purpose had remanded me to Anghelescu's custody while they decided what to do about me, but it had come with a list of conditions.

"What a downer." Feelgood's whole face drooped in disappointment, but only for a moment. "You should come see me when they let you out from under their thumb," she said. "Do take better care of yourself until that happens, won't you? Look into doing some meditation and yoga to siphon all that yucky stress away. Otherwise, it will eventually make you sick. And we can't have that, can we?"

"Doctor, we need to get moving so you can tend to your patient." The herald didn't quite hide her annoyance from her voice.

"Oops!" Feelgood finally stepped back. "Can't have Steph getting out of sorts. She can be a *cranky* one." She flashed me a secretive smile and a wink before swishing past me to join the herald.

I watched them go, hoping Karki would be all right.