

Chapbook 01: Run, Arlan

* 1 *

Agent Arlan Edaan ran sideways and collected his Team Leader, pulling the older man to the ground as he fell. Arlan landed on his side as a car flew over them. It was so close, had he wanted to, he could have reached out and touched it. Mouth open wide, he stared at it as it rolled over them in slow motion.

The girl was a kinetic, obviously, he thought.

Time sped up again and the flying car hit concrete, shredding metal and glass over the road and ploughing into the oncoming traffic with a terrible smash.

“They’re getting away,” his Team Leader yelled as he scrambled to his feet.

Arlan gathered his thoughts from their muddled shock and stood up as well.

“Quit blinking at me!” The Team Leader barked at the other two TFOs, who stood on the sidewalk their eyes wide like animals caught in car headlights. “And get after them!”

He didn’t even say thank you, thought Arlan.

The man glanced sideways at him. “No need to thank a person for doing their job, son. Now come on!”

Their targets ran on up the narrow residential street. Two parents and the little girl. They wore layers of grey drab rags, and the adults had no shoes.

Arlan couldn’t understand why they refused to surrender. As he ran with his Team, he frowned at the family. If they surrendered to Agency custody the girl would live. She wouldn’t have much choice in her life but she’d be alive. Why would her parents not surrender to save her?

The family skittered up the sidewalk and into a tall but crumbling apartment block. His Team went into the building after them and he followed.

“Weapons ready!” called the TL.

Arlan shrugged the auto assault rifle off its clip and, bracing it against his shoulder, lifted the barrel to aim.

They burst through into an apartment and his three teammates started firing without warning. Arlan paused, unable yet to see his target and unwilling to shoot randomly into a room, but the gunfire stopped before he zeroed in.

The others shifted sideways out of his line of sight. There was a mess of bodies in front of him and he gasped, turning away from it.

With his back to the horror, he stared at a rotting wall. Stuck to wallpaper at his eye level was a yellow sticky note. He blinked at it.

“Arlan, run,” it said.

A shot of fear blew through him and he ripped it off the wall, stuffing the sticky note into the front pocket of his bullet-proof vest. He hoped none of the others had seen it.

Turning around again, he tried not to see what they’d done. Bodies lay in front of him in a line of gore and horror. The walls were splattered with blood and, not a meter from his boots, were the remains of the little girl. A child, who in her attempt to escape the Agency pursuit had been able to throw a car at them with her mind. She would have been a very high-rated kinetic, if she’d lived.

Poor kid. Arlan swallowed.

His Team Leader, and the only telepath in the group, moved out of the room into another area of the apartment and Arlan’s thoughts flickered back to the note in his pocket.

Hawk left yellow stickies for people when he wanted them to escape the Agency. Maybe today *was* the day he should run. But then his new Task Force team would hunt him down just as they had the girl and her parents.

Everyone knew the laws. If you were Psi or Talent, you had to work for the Agency. If you refused, you were a Traitor and Aranan law stated Traitors were to be immediately executed.

But I don’t want to do this. He swallowed again, trying to suppress his grief and fear. *I don’t want to kill people.*

His bottom lip twitched and he turned around, striding out of the room and back down to the street entrance. The nausea rose up into his throat and he only just made it outside before the grief and disgust resurrected his breakfast of cereal and cheese toasties.

When his body finally gave up its spasms, he was leaning over his knees and breathing in pained gulps of acrid air.

Someone patted him on the back. “You alright, kid?” said his Team Leader.

Arlan shook his head but couldn’t otherwise reply.

“It’s always bad the first time. You stay here, we’ll clear the building. Clean yourself up.”

The man talked like it was ordinary. Like killing a child and her family was normal.

Arlan waited until he could hear the sounds of his Leader tromping back upstairs, and pulled the yellow sticky out of his pocket.

“Arlan, run.”

Surely this was meant for him? How many people called Arlan would find themselves in that abandoned apartment before the paper glue lost its stickiness? Not many. They said that Hawk’s stickies were always put in the most impossible places with the best timing. If this really was a sticky from Hawk, it could mean Arlan might actually escape the Agency and not be killed.

The Team Leader’s voice barked orders from inside.

If Arlan chose to run, now was the best time. He had two choices. Stay in the Agency and kill more innocent people because they chose not to be conscripted, or run and have a chance at freedom, even if it was short-lived.

He stuffed the sticky in his pocket, dropped the auto assault rifle from his vest-clip, and started running.

* 2 *

Yera got out of bed and brushed back a swatch of blond hair from her vision and as she futilely rubbed at the sleep in her mind with the palm of one hand. Waking up was always the hardest part of the day.

Closing her eyes, she grumbled, tottering her way on autopilot out of her bedroom, across the small Agency apartment living area, and into her tiny bathroom.

Cracking one eye open, she glared at herself in the mirror. Buttercup-yellow hair hung limply around a long square face and one silver-gray eye stared back at her through the glass. She sighed and brushed at the uneven threads of gold that stuck out in a tangle from the side of her head.

She pulled down her pajama pants and dropped onto the toilet to relieve herself. Rubbing her eyes, she forced all of the sleep out of them. One lid flickered opened and as she stared at the wall immediately in front of her, she frowned.

A yellow sticky sat on the wall, at eye height as if whoever put it there knew where she'd look while sitting. She blinked at it a couple of times. A yellow sticky was something that Hawk left behind.

Hawk, that mysterious Rebel Leader who chose people from all over the Agency and helped them to escape. The man whose identity was so secret that not even the Rebels themselves knew his face.

With her heart tightening her throat, Yera pulled the sticky note from the wall, bringing it closer to her face so she could read it without her glasses. She stared at the sloping, flowing handwriting.

It said: "*Wear a B.P. vest today.*"

Do I want out of the Agency? She thought. *Of course I want out*, she corrected herself, *but do I want out enough to risk being executed if it goes wrong?*

She sat there thinking and watching the flow of oddly pretty handwriting across the paper for several breaths.

A grin lifted into her lips. *Nuthen, yes! I want out and I know exactly where I put my bullet-proof vest!*

Laughing, Yera wiped herself and got to her feet. It was time to get ready for work and maybe get ready for freedom.

Arlan skittered around a corner and flinched as a bullet ricocheted off the bricks close to his head.

This is it. I'm going to die.

Agony burned through his legs and set his lungs on fire; he couldn't run much further without rest. It hadn't occurred to him that being a telepath, the Team Leader could follow him even after he'd physically gotten away.

Arlan's toes dragged his body to the left and another bullet embedded itself in the brick very close to his face.

His Dodge Talent ability was keeping him alive so far. He zigged to the side avoiding more gunfire and then zagged left into a narrow space leading back out into the street. Unfortunately, even as a level nine Talent he couldn't dodge forever.

He got close to the street but his instinct pulled him left through the open side-door of a warehouse. The echoing percussion of weapons fire followed him into the building. He scrambled towards the middle of a large space, looking desperately around him for another way out.

The room was broad and tall, and the place smelt like wood dust. Beams of sunlight from above cut the floor into oblong shapes of gold and grey. At ground level, a curtain of light reached towards him from beyond a network of wood columns. The light had to mean that there was a door or a big window in that direction. He skipped around the beams and headed towards that spark of hope.

He found two big double doors open wide as if the owners were expecting to drive a truck inside. It was unusual for an empty building to be so open, but Arlan didn't care, he sprinted towards the exit and street beyond.

He shot out of the building as fast as his legs would carry him, but someone much bigger and stronger caught him and wrapped their arms around his shoulders. The two of them spun around and came to a stop.

Arlan struggled against his captor, crying out and swearing in his mother's native tongue.

"Calm down, kid!" said a rumbled voice in his ear.

The man held him tightly with very strong arms. Whoever he was, he was significantly bigger than Arlan.

"No!" Arlan cried out. "No!"

"Calm down, we're here to help you!"

The man's arms tightened and pushed the air out of Arlan's lungs. He stopped struggling and gasped, trying desperately to breathe.

“Calm down, son,” came the rumbled voice again. “I’m not an Agent.”

Agency issue gunfire echoed out of the building behind them and Arlan flinched. “Please, he’s going to kill me,” he wheezed.

A larger caliber weapon answered the first with one bullet and the sound reverberated through the building.

Silence washed over the echo and his instinctive sense of danger lifted. Arlan’s mind slowly dislodged the panic and terror. The more he calmed, the looser the arms around him became.

“That’s better now, isn’t it?” He heard a smile in the man’s voice, and finally Arlan felt free enough to push against his captor and turn around.

The man wore layers of rags—he certainly didn’t look like an Agent. Messy black hair, speckled with grey pepper made a birds’ nest frame around his tanned face.

Cobalt blue eyes smiled down at him. “What’s your name, kid? I’m Taelin.”

“I... I...” Arlan couldn’t quite get the words past his lips so he swallowed. “A... Arlan.”

Footsteps came towards them from the warehouse and he stepped back, just about ready to run again.

“It’s OK.” Taelin put a reassuring hand to his back. “Your Agent is dead.”

A figure moved through the shadows and stepped into the sunlight. She was as tall as Taelin with dark curly hair and deep blue eyes. She clicked the safety on a large handgun and dropped it into the pocket of her long black coat.

As she approached, she smirked down at Arlan with an expression of kindly amusement, as if he’d been a child afraid of the monster under his bed, and she the one who evicted it with a torch and a steady smile.

“All clear. Arlan, is it?”

Wide eyed, he nodded.

“I’m Asha, this is my brother Taelin. Hawk sent us to help you. We need your expertise. That is, if you’re not entirely traumatized already, of course.”

He blinked at her. *What expertise could I possibly have to help Hawk?*

“You’re a Dodge Talent, yes?”

He swallowed. “Y... yes, ma’am. A level nine.”

“Good! That’s exactly what we need. Come with us and I’ll fill you in.”

* 4 *

The vest was itchy and heavy under her suit. Yera controlled her urge to scratch, lest she reveal to her partner that she was wearing it. There was no excuse for an Agent on diplomatic assignment to

be wearing a vest. Ordinarily, folks on the Operative Specialist career track wouldn't even own one. She only had it because of her early training in Task Force.

The elevator dinged and shiny metal doors rolled open to reveal the red marble floor of a corporate lobby.

“Is there time for a lunch break, Yera?” Her younger partner, Obiin, had a voice that always sounded slightly whiny and it was worse when he was actually complaining.

She sighed. “You're always thinking of your stomach. Can't you wait until the end of shift like everyone else?”

“But I had breakfast at dawn—”

“Quit whining!” she growled. “Learn to do what everyone else does, and bring meal snacks with you.” She stepped in front of him, deliberately forcing the younger man to recoil out of the way.

She had no patience for his childish sniveling and stupid questions. They'd just executed a young woman in her workplace for avoiding conscription, and then they killed her boss for aiding her. There were more important things to be upset about than food.

Yera strode out onto the pavement and, in her anger, didn't sense anything wrong until she reached the car. A shimmer of danger moved up the hairs on the back of her neck and she stopped walking to listen. Turning, she glanced around the street, opening her mind to the nearby mental spaces of the city.

Bubbles of unshielded consciousness chattered back at her from buildings on all sides. Thousands of them towered above, becoming a loud roar of words and impulses, but none of them were shielded or thinking in her direction. At street level, more unshielded minds were whispering and babbling, and the noise was becoming too loud to be of any use.

“*She knows I'm here!*” said a tiny mental voice to her right. She turned to follow the thought, and sensed a mental squeak of terror.

A mind, not the one she could hear, but someone near them and shielded, reached out to hers. “*Yera Maraa, are you wearing your vest?*”

“Yes,” she answered.

A gunshot sounded and reverberated up the street.

Behind her, Obiin dropped to the ground and she dove for cover behind the car, pulling her weapon from the holster under one arm.

Obiin lay on the pavement barely meters away. Blood flowed through his black hair and she could see enough of his head to understand that he was very certainly dead. If this was an escape, she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do now.

The other mind brushed hers. “*There's a camera in the street, you've got to pretend.*”

Yera took a breath and peeked over the edge of the car. The other telepath and the unshielded mind stood in an alley further up the road. Deliberately, she glanced in the opposite direction as if she was still looking for the shooter. The sounds of feet running on pavement made her turn back, and she watched a short young man skid around a nearby corner.

Lifting her weapon, she fired and got to her feet.

* 5 *

Yera aimed her gun at the boy's back. Deliberately shifting her aim, she fired and the bullet clipped a clay brick next to his face. It exploded outwards, scattering red dust and chunks over the concrete ground. The boy seemed to know it was coming and ducked, stepping into the only space not riddled with larger pieces of fast moving brick. Still running, she adjusted her hold on the grip and aimed for his shoulder before firing. Again, the boy's body moved out of the way as if he knew it was coming, and the bullet embedded itself into the stone wall behind him.

Dodge Talent, she thought with surprise. *Which means...*

She stopped running, lifted the barrel, and aimed for the boy's back. A microsecond before her weapon fired, he moved out of the way.

Alright, she thought. *They want me to put on a genuine show for the Agency cameras. I can do that.*

* 6 *

They zigzagged in an easterly direction through the streets of Araam, keeping up a good, fast pace through the alleys and side streets of the city. She saved her bullets for when they came out onto the streets because her aim was better in the open spaces, and there was a higher likelihood of there being cameras.

It seemed that they were getting closer to the ocean. She could hear the sea birds calling to each other and the air had that clean ionized feel that was often present around moving water.

Ahead, the boy ran out of the alley exit into a street. She heard car breaks squeal and a driver pumped their horn. But, a few seconds later when she got to the road, there was no sign of an accident.

Vehicles rushed past her in dense formation and Yera wondered for a moment how she was going to get across as she looked down and up the street for her target. Ahead, the boy, instead of running into the next alley as she'd expected, had run up the road. She turned and started jogging in that direction—perhaps she would get the opportunity to cross later.

There were many civilians rushing about on the pavement, making it unsafe—indeed, illegal—for her to continue firing at the boy. But that was good because she only had one clip left anyway.

The road curved up and around the side of a hill. With the incline and her need to dodge around pedestrians, her pace slowed considerably. Ahead on the other side of the road, she saw that the boy was having similar problems, so at least she wouldn't lose him.

A teenage girl without any safety gear rode a bicycle on the pavement ahead of Yera. The girl moved fast through the compliant crowd towards her and Yera dodged into the doorway of a shop to get out of the way. When she stepped back out, she couldn't see the boy any more.

Jogging around a group of school children, she made her way up to where she'd last seen him. The road was straight with no side streets or alleys, so unless he went into one of the waterfront houses he had to have continued running.

Up ahead, the road ended at a broad cobbled cul-de-sac and the banner sign above her head told her that she'd arrived at the entry to the Waterfront Mall. Yera gripped her weapon and pushed on.

A wide path led pedestrians past a number of shops and stalls which sold all sorts of things. Summer sandals and swimming trunks, the latest fashions in clothes and technology all begged her to buy them in a litter of bright colors and sale signs.

Yera moved swiftly between the lines of people. Some of them saw the gun that she held and likely recognized the distinctive Agency cut of her suit jacket because they backed up, dragging their less-aware loved ones and children out of her way. She kept her reactions to them ice cold and angry in case there was a hidden camera somewhere nearby.

The walkway curved to the right into an eating area. She glanced around and saw a number of food outlets. There was processed meat wrapped in maka bread with various savory toppings, ice-cream, flat-bread pouches with any number of fillings, and even a place to get fried, battered food, like fish. The eating stalls marked off a semi-circle around a wide space with cheap plastic tables and chairs.

In the corner which wasn't part of the food area, the path through the mall continued out onto a boardwalk over the edge of the ocean. Moving closer to the water's edge, she craned her head to look for the boy. She couldn't see him. The boardwalk was long and straight, so long that she figured if she couldn't see him, he probably hadn't run that far ahead of her. It also meant that she must have gone the wrong way and now she had to double back. She sighed and turned around.

A tall man with black hair, dark blue eyes, and broad shoulders stood close. He held a weapon aimed at her middle.

"You need to back up a little," he said.

She sensed no hostility in him, but she still felt a flare of tension ripple through her. She swallowed, lifting her hands to head height as she stepped back, closer to the water's edge. His gun went off and she felt the impact of the bullet push all of the air out of her.

* 7 *

When she came-to she was underwater. It was freezing cold. Someone gripped her body under her arms and pulled her through the water, and a hand kept a diving respirator to her mouth so she could breathe.

Above her, the surface was dark and wrinkled, reflecting thick beams of light through the navy blue. It was an oddly ethereal and spooky environment to awaken in.

The middle of her chest ached and her bruised muscles twitched as the icy water moved through her clothes. The bruise was bad and she coughed through the respirator, instinctively trying to shift the pressure. She wasn't shot, but her vest had definitely caught a bullet.

"You're OK," said the woman in her mind. *"We've got a healer who can ease the pain and check you out for injuries. Just stay calm, we're almost there."*

Yera put her hand to the respirator. *"Who are you? Why did the Agency need to think I'm dead?"*

"I'm Asha. Your Taskforce Team used to guard the Desert Valley transport route, yes?"

Yera frowned. *"Yes, we did."*

"Apparently if the Agency thinks you escaped rather than died the route will change, which will also mean the Rebels can't get some high-rank mucky-mucky out. You'll be briefed on that later if you want to join in... for now, we're almost there."

Yera leaned her head back in the direction they were traveling. There was a line of wood on the surface above them. It was some kind of wharf or fishing platform. Shadowy figures stood above the water, she couldn't see them clearly without glasses or a mask but there were enough details to understand that they weren't suited Agents waiting for her up there.

She grinned at those figures through the respirator. *"I'm free, aren't I?"*

"Yes, you are. Welcome to the Aranan Psi Rebels."