

The Aramaan City Rebels - 01 [Pilot]

Part One

Araam city, Planet Shadow

18 Aracan, 3004

*** 1 ***

Araam Agency Tower

Approximately 11.25 am

Tiras took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. Balling his fists, he willed his limbs to stop shaking. Continuing to breathe slow breaths to calm his nerves, he pulled his smaller weapon from the holster under his arm and checked it was loaded, then flicked the safety off. Returning it to its holster, he took out the larger one from the small of his back. Once it was clear and ready to fire, he put it back. He was ready.

He took one last deep breath, and turned to go out into the corridor.

A long section of navy carpet led him to the end of the hall, where double doors would open into the level nine Social Room. He stopped at the doors for a moment, and then moved inside.

The space beyond hugged the northern side of the Tower, with regular windows on the right hand wall letting in the bright autumn day. Collections of sofas and coffee tables were scattered up the length of the space, giving people the opportunity to socialize with beverages or food if they wished. There were less than a dozen Agents standing around, but despite the room being dedicated to connection, there was a palpable distance between each person, either literally, or in their lack of eye contact.

It was ironic that the three cameras trained on him at that precise moment were more attentive of his presence than the actual people in the room.

He glanced around, checking to see who was and wasn't armed. Standing closest to him, an androgyne was staring at the muted television screen above their heads. Zey wore a holster on zeir hip, making it likely that zey was trained as a TFO. The others had no obvious signs of being armed.

Tiras stepped past the androgyne and reached up. A round sticker on the television brace was actually a touch sensitive control, and he flicked his finger horizontally across it. The sound came

back on, and he was listening to a civilian channel with adverts. Using the touch plate, he flicked through to find the biggest national news channel, and stepped back into the center of the space.

On-screen, a weather report was being dictated, telling anyone who would listen that the day was warm and sunny without much wind.

Waiting in the agony of anticipation, he wiped at the sweat on his top lip.

The screen image shifted and he saw his own dimly-lit face. “My name is Tiras Malar, senior, and I am a high ranking Agent in the Araam Agency Tower.”

His voice sounded different on screen, far more cocky than he'd intended when he made the recording. He took his eyes off the screen to watch the collected Agents in the room, waiting for their inevitable attack.

“And I want out of the Agency. I will offer a full interview, spilling A0 rank secrets to the television channel that sends a helicopter to the roof of the Araam Tower to pick me up at midday today.”

The screen image jolted from the low lighting of his recording, back to the well-lit studio. Still watching the other Agents in the room, he didn't get to see the shocked expressions in the news anchors' faces, but he heard the long pause of silence before they started talking again.

The people around him were shocked and afraid, but hadn't yet noticed his presence. Tiras cleared his throat to get their attention.

Five sets of eyes shifted to look, and he waved at them. A gasp blew through the room, and the moment Tiras saw the androgyne go for the gun on zeir hip, he turned and ran straight for the exit doors.

Someone yelled words that were unrecognizable, and a gun went off. Tiras shot out through the doors, a bullet followed close behind, bursting through the wood and throwing splinters into the air around him. Tiras flinched and sprinted for the nearest turn in the hallways, managing to get out of sight as the second bullet fired in his direction.

[Rise of Hawk excerpt]

*** 2 ***

Jonah, the guard who worked full time in the level ten security room of the Agency Tower, liked being a 'nobody'.

"People who are invisible in the Agency," thought Jonah. "Don't get shot by moody superiors, and they—"

"Where is he, you incompetent preta?" A nearby screen and the back of Jonah's neck were peppered with little drops of spittle from the screaming man looming over the back of his chair.

"I... I don't know. How can I?" Jonah scanned the ocean of screens in the security hub room. "Sir, there are over a thousand cameras—"

Jaran Cowdy junior smacked the control panel with the palm of his hand. "I don't want to hear excuses! What I want is a competent worker! Where is your supervisor?"

Jonah swallowed. "I... I think he's on a lunch break, sir. I've paged him, he... he should be here soon."

"Where is that?" The superior pointed to a screen in the middle of the wall. A dark-haired man stood on camera in a hallway. A smile lifted into the man's oval face, and he waved at them.

Jonah felt it prudent not to point out the labels below each screen, he simply answered the question. "Level fifteen, sir. North side of the Research Labs."

"Where's your radio? Send troops to that location. Now!"

He glanced sideways at the A0 Agent, and lifted the microphone to his lips. ~ "This is Ra-Two, we need all available troops to level fifteen, over."

The radio buzzed with numerous copy signals from security teams all over the building.

~ "This is Hub-Eight, please repeat, Ra-Two?" came a muffled response over the radio.

Above them, the man on camera stepped out of sight again. Keeping his eyes on the screens above him, Jonah lifted the radio again.

~ "Copy, Hub-Eight, this is Ra-Two. All available troops to level fifteen, over."

~ "Copy, Ra-Two. This is Hub-Eight, sending extra troops now."

Jonah's eyes rushed tensely over the screens, the longer this Traitor was out of shot the further he could get from the incoming security teams. His older superior stepped back from him, still pulsing with rage and indignation, but currently focused more on the screens than unfairly abusing him for incompetence.

"Where is he... where is he? If Tiras escapes—"

A face flickered over a screen, long enough to catch Jonah's eye before moving off again. "There!" He pointed. "That's level twenty! He must have found an elevator or stairwell without a camera."

Blue eyes glared at him. "How many of them are there?"

Jonah tried not to tremble. This man was the son of the Head. He could probably kill him for no justifiable reason and get away with it.

He swallowed, thinking hard. “Accessible stairwells, uh, maybe two or three but there’s only one without cameras covering the doors. There’s only one elevator without a camera, and it’s on the north side of the Tower. But it’s supposed to be closed for maintenance.”

Again, the dark-haired man stepped into camera view with a wave and a smile for them, this time it was level twenty-six.

The older man swore. “That so’then a’kénaan is trying to play with us! Shut down all elevator use from above level ten. Shut the whole so’then building down if you have to! Send Teams up the stairwells from level twenty, and for Founder’s sakes send a few to the roof as well!”

Jonah glanced sideways at the man, confused. “Sir?”

“Just do it! I want that man in the morgue or with the Interrogators within the hour!”

* * * * *

Tiras tapped his foot on the carpeted floor of the elevator. He had one arm resting on the metal rail that lined the walls, and his other hand was slipped into the side pocket of his pants with his fingers touching the handle of his secondary weapon.

The elevator was taking forever to get to the top level. He didn’t want to be killed in a crowded little elevator by security just because the thing was so slow. The elevator was rarely used because it was on the wrong side of the building and far too small for most purposes. But it was the only elevator without a camera, and it wouldn’t take long for Jaran Cowdy junior to realize that he wasn’t about to climb thirty stories of stairs.

His impatience became acute to the point of torture. He couldn’t stay in one place, he had to keep moving. He smacked the button of a level above him so he could get out sooner. It was a good five levels below where he wanted to be, but there were a number of other options he could take that were less like a potential ambush than the little service elevator.

The doors opened to reveal a narrow hallway and a security guard standing directly in front of him. Instinct kicked in, and he stepped into the man’s personal space, took his weapon, and, gripping the man’s throat, he gained entrance to his lightly shielded mind to trigger a telepathic sleep program.

When the man was unconscious, Tiras pulled his body to the side and opening the nearest

door, dumped him out of sight in a cupboard.

So, they were onto him. There were five levels to cover and cameras everywhere: it was likely that Junior had already ordered Teams to the roof to head him off. He'd probably also figured out by now that Tiras knew where all the cameras were, so he would be expecting him to be in the camera black areas. This was going to be difficult, but it was all or nothing now. He could not be captured and taken to the Interrogators.

The ordered footfalls of TFO combat boots came towards him from up the hall. He ducked into a door on his left. A chemical smell met his nostrils and he knew, even in the darkness, that he must be in some kind of lab.

Reaching out his hands in the pitch blackness, he searched for something to guide him. His fingers brushed the line of a high table. Using touch alone, he followed the length of the wood to a wall on the other side of the room.

He knew there wouldn't be a door to his left because that was the north wall of the building so, shuffling quietly in the dark he followed the wall to his right. Edges and blurred lines hovered in the darkness around him, and he wished that he'd risked turning on the lights. With one hand on the wall, the other stretched out in front of him, he slid his foot another careful step forwards. His fingertips met a second wall perpendicular to the first.

An insert in the surface revealed another door. His fingers found the handle and pushed down as he heard someone knock on the entry behind him in the dark.

Light met him on the other side. With his fingers groping to turn the lock, he spun around and at the click of metal on metal, he realized he was trapped. The room was a little adjoining storage area. There was shelving on three walls, which were cluttered with glass bottles and jars. Next to the door on the fourth wall was a single clear table.

There was no exit. He sighed.

Voices sounded from outside and the handle moved as someone tried to open the door. He stepped away from it in case the person on the other side was touch-sensitive, and they could feel him through the wood and metal. More voices sounded and he knew it wouldn't be long before they broke through.

It was freedom or death for him, because he knew who Hawk was and that information could not reach Jaran. He glanced around the room, either for possible escape or a possibly quick death. Something above the door caught his attention. A yellow sticky-note protruded out of a fairly large air vent in the ceiling. Tiras leaped onto the bench and pulled the sticky out.

“Go up!” it said.

“Of course!” he thought. “They wouldn’t think to check the air vents.”

He would have to buy Hawk a drink once he got out, the man certainly thought of everything!

* 3 *

Tiras crawled awkwardly in the narrow space of the air duct. He was hot and covered in dust. His hands and knees ached, and he was starting to feel a bit claustrophobic. But moving through the ducts was still better than trying to get to the roof by fighting off every Agent in the Tower.

Up ahead, light filtered into the otherwise dark space from a grating. In that illuminated glow sat another yellow sticky.

He approached it carefully and leaned in close to read it. There were no words on this one, only an arrow pointing left. If it was like the last one, it meant that at the next T-junction, he needed to turn left. As he pulled the sticky from the metal, he lost a grip on it, and watched as it dropped down against the grating. He reached to grab it, but, as if the universe itself was mocking him, the little slip of yellow paper found its way through the gap, and dropped into the room below.

Leaning forward, he peeked through the gaps of metal. It should be an empty room under him, maybe he could sneak out and grab the sticky without being caught.

Below was a long conference table, covered in piles of paper. Sitting immediately under the grate was a woman he recognized. An A0 rank Bانشii admin secretary, Scarlet. She held the yellow sticky, and letting out a snort, her chin lifted. Dark brown eyes stared at him from under fringe of black hair.

A shot of panic blew through his body. There was no where for him to hide or run, she could just shoot him and he couldn't move fast enough to get out of the way.

She smirked and crawled onto the table. Reaching, she shoved the sticky back in through the gap and got down again.

“Carry on,” she said.

He swallowed, taking the sticky and shoving it into his pants pocket. “Aren't you going to shoot me?”

"No."

"But what about the law?"

She rolled her eyes. "I don't care about the law, just get going before you get *me* killed."

His eyebrows lifted. "You could come with me?"

Her laugh was almost haughty. "No, I have a job to do here. Now git, or I'll start up the air con and freeze your ass off."

"Yes, ma'am!" he said, grinning.

[Rise of Hawk excerpt]

*** 4 ***

Tiras sat in the stifling humidity of the air-vent and listened. Above him, the next curve in the pipework should let him out onto the roof. There would be Task Force Operative Teams out there, but how many and how close he didn't know yet. There were no sounds of voices or weapons being loaded, only the deep thrum of air-conditioning fans.

His wristwatch told him it was five minutes until midday. He'd have to take out as many of the Teams on the roof as he could before Bana arrived to pick him up. The helicopter wouldn't take much weapons fire, and he wasn't wearing a vest. So he had to be at his very best, and incredibly lucky.

Careful to keep noise to an absolute minimum, Tiras stood up inside the air vent and peered out at the roof. Looking for all the world like a periscope, the vent obscured him on all sides except at the round opening. Someone had unscrewed the vent cover from the outside, and propped it on the roof resting against the aperture and concealing much of the opening. Hawk must have some kind of ally to help with all these preparatory tasks, and he must be a high skilled Time Psi to know what would happen in such precise detail. Surely, in the long run, Jaran didn't stand a chance against such preemptive knowledge?

The metal around him hadn't been painted with Psi suppressant material, but there were other things out on the roof making his empathic survey patchy at best. This made locating the nearest target more than a little difficult.

As he pulled himself onto the roof surface his foot bumped the vent cover, and it clattered down onto the slate. The noise wasn't particularly loud but he froze and listened.

“What’s that?” said a voice, that was far too close.

“Don’t know,” answered another.

Hunkered down, Tiras lifted his primary weapon from the small of his back, and his secondary from a pocket. They were both loaded. Flicking off the safeties of both weapons, he stood upright.

Moving sideways around the edge of a wall, he caught sight of a four-man Team and started firing. Two of the four went down immediately with bullets through their foreheads. A stray bullet ricocheted off another air vent, and the third dropped to the ground screaming and grasping at an injured leg. Whipping back undercover, he moved around to the other side of the wall, and took out the fourth man from behind. The fifth shot silenced the screaming man.

Turning away from the carnage, Tiras looked around for cover. The roof was a chaotic landscape of periscope-shaped air vents, walled boxes for elevator maintenance, antennas, and stairwell entrances, so there was a lot of cover.

Ducking behind an elevator box, he put his back against the metal Psi suppressant surface and reloaded his primary from the stash of clips in his pocket.

He heard yelling coming towards him from his left. He waited until they were close enough, before stepping out of cover and taking out two of the next team before they were even aware of him. Automatic fire sounded from the two remaining Agents, and he dropped back out of sight. He skirted the elevator box to get a better firing angle.

As he walked, the vibrating alarm of his wristwatch went off. It was midday, and Bana was due.

Pulling out of cover again he fired, taking out the two remaining members of the second Team.

Flicking on the safeties of his handguns, he shoved them back in their holsters. The auto lay on the ground next to its dead owner and he grabbed it, finding five full auto clips in the dead man’s jacket.

More gunfire sounded and there were figures running towards him, with weapon barrels flashing as they fired. There were two more Teams but so far only one auto. He dropped the old clip and snapped the new mag in with practiced ease. Stepping behind another elevator box, he opened fire on the Agents running towards him.

Some fell, others jumped for cover.

Above him the air began to hum with the sound of helicopter blades. Three ’copters came

into view at a distance from the tower, close enough for their cameras to be rolling, but not so close that a stray bullet would easily take them out. Turning, he saw two more coming towards him from the south. Five helicopters in the air and none were getting close to the roof. Bana was late.

“Well, at least my death will put on a show for their cameras,” thought Tiras with a cynical snort.

Returning weapons fire made him duck and run towards the edge of the building. Crouching over a vent, he aimed and fired a short burst at one man who was out in the open. He dashed on to the next cover. He had to keep moving, being still for too long meant death. Weaving between vents and broad antenna bases, he took out two more Agents as they came into view.

He reloaded the auto and skirted around the back of a stairwell entrance. Shouting and the sounds of running echoed out of the open doorway towards him. It sounded like a lot of Agents were coming up to the roof.

He laughed. “*Junior really wants to stop me.*”

The Agents spilled out onto the roof firing their autos. He took out a few before their numbers overwhelmed his ability to get all of them and not get shot himself. He pulled left, running for better cover as bullets ricocheted off the metal behind him.

There were too many of them now and he was running out of time. “*Hai di’chéna! Where the nuth is Bana!*”

Diving behind a broad power dish, he rolled back up to his feet, and got into firing position over the dish edge. A deep thrumming pulse vibrated the air, and it was so close his eardrums started to echo the noise into his skull.

A gunshot fired behind him and he spun around, lifting the auto. The helicopter was huge and shiny black as if it had never been flown before. The markings on the side claimed it was a television network ’copter, although he knew it had to have been stolen or loaned for Bana to be sitting in the pilot seat. The back door was open and a dark-haired woman sat with a long barreled sniper rifle aimed out at the roof. The rifle fired again.

“*Tiras, get in the so’then helicopter.*” The woman’s mental voice was cool and crisp, a deep dark blue with a flare of orange mischief waiting under the surface. He knew immediately that he’d enjoy her company in the days ahead. Dropping the auto, he ran towards the edge of the building and jumped, landing on the deck, side on.

“*Go!*” someone yelled on a broad telepathic range, and the floor dipped sideways and down.

“Tiras Malar, I presume?” The tall leggy woman grinned down at him.

It was too noisy to speak, so he answered mind-to-mind. *“At your service. You’re Asha?”*

“I am. It’ll be a while before we have time alone to talk. But we will. For now we’ll be landing in a nearby airport then taking the others to a secure safe house.” He sensed her switch to a narrow telepathic band, so tight a 10/5 telepath would struggle to pick it up. *“As far as anyone else knows you haven’t met Him. Do you understand?”*

Tiras nodded slowly. *“Of course.”*

Part Two

[Banshi Haven, Part 2 excerpt]

*** 1 ***

Aramaan City

Late the following evening

Five year old Keton had been playing hide and seek with his big sister. He was pretty sure that because she hadn't found him, he had won the game, but now it was dark and he didn't recognize any of the buildings.

He reached his mind out as far as it would go trying to find his sister's voice, but only unaware minds and the walls of black brick came back to his mental senses.

Keton whimpered.

His sister had always told him that if he was ever lost, to find a hiding place and wait for them to find him, but there was no where obvious to hide. The alley was narrow and buildings towered over his little form like bullies on all sides.

Even though he'd started with a game, and if she found him his sister would say that he'd won hide and seek, he was pretty sure that this was what 'lost' meant. He lifted one hand to his face, sucking on the knuckle of his thumb in an effort to comfort the gnawing fear in him.

Gunshots sounded from above. Frightened, he jolted backwards into a brick wall.

"Keton!" cried his sister's voice in his mind.

He grappled onto her energy, tears rolling down his face in his sudden relief. "Kaasaa!"

He sensed a spark of love from her. "Where are you, K?"

"Don't know."

"OK. Remember what we did last time you won hide and seek?"

"Show you what I see, and you come find me?"

"Yes, show me where you are."

There was a door in his mind. He didn't understand that it wasn't a real door, but that was what his sister had called it, so that's how *he* saw it. The door was always closed and locked except for when he chose to open it for special people. His sister was one of those special people.

When he opened his sight to her, there was an odd sense of double-vision, like he was seeing the world through his eyes twice. But that happened last time too, so it didn't scare him very

much.

He looked at the closest end of the alley. Cars brushed past, temporarily illuminating everything around him with their headlights. Across the road, he could see a Basaan restaurant, all in red with their picture letters, and a dancing golden dragon. He sensed Kasa wanting to see more, and so he looked in the other direction. His eyes brushed past the back door of a big brick building, following the floating rubbish that hopped in the windy gusts down the narrow space of the alley to the end, and the other exit. The street view looked down a broad road, with lights and cars, and above the visual noise, the sky shimmered with colored nebula clouds, stars, and the bigger moon, Taena, framed by the lines of sky scrapers.

Keton liked Taena. He imagined her to be kind and loving, like a big warm hug from a friendly giant.

"Stay there, Keton. I'm coming for you," said Kasa in his mind.

He heard footsteps and looked around to find their source. His sister didn't feel close enough for it to be her, but who else could it be?

A tall, broad-shouldered woman ran into the alley from the far end. He sensed the wall of her mind, which meant that she talked with thoughts like him. She had a gun in one hand, but it wasn't aimed at anything. Still running, she saw him just as she passed by.

Her steps slowed and a pair of purple eyes frowned down at him. "You shouldn't be here, kiddo. It's not safe."

A door slammed open against the brick, and a man ran out of the building. He was filled with rage and hate, and even while not understanding that this man was a Spades gangster, the young boy knew that he was suddenly in a great deal of danger.

The man lifted his weapon, aiming at Keton as if he was somehow a threat just by seeing his face. Lifting her own gun, the woman stepped in front of Keton and started firing.

His sister's mind was still connected, and through their combined and echoing perceptions, Keton understood that this woman was protecting him. That would have probably made him feel safer, if it weren't for the terrible noise. He put his hands over his ears, and tried to push himself into the wall.

When it was silent again Keton opened his eyes. The woman was lying on the concrete nearby. There was blood on her, but she was awake. A pair of bright purple eyes, illuminated by the steady flow of cars nearby, blinked at him.

"Kid," she gasped. "You gotta run away. Run!"

Keton's bottom lip flickered and he turned towards the moon, running as fast as his little legs would take him.

* 2 *

Briiana Zuru lay in the alley bleeding. The pain was awful, but she knew that Yaan would come and find her as soon as the other Swords had secured the weapon, and disarmed the Spades gangsters inside. She just had to breathe and try to stay conscious.

A bright light flared from one side of her, and was gone before she'd turned her head. From that same direction, she saw a figure moving towards her. Their footsteps were very quiet, and the motion of their legs seemed odd in some way, almost as if their feet weren't quite touching the ground. The figure moved in right next to her and crouched down. A hand dropped onto her stomach below the bullet wound.

She frowned at them, unable to really clear her vision. "Who are you?" she asked.

A smile shone down on her and she felt an increase of warmth where their hand sat. "I'm another Dragon, like you. I'll just stop you from bleeding out, OK?"

Brii rumbled, confused. "But what--?"

Her vision cleared for a micro second, and she saw the man lift his free arm to cover his lips with a forefinger. "Shh, it's our little secret. Promise?"

She frowned at his arm, which was bare but covered in beautiful colored drawings. The primary design was a bright green serpent-like dragon, which climbed up his forearm towards his shoulder. It was as if a painter had used his skin as a canvas. She blinked at him and his skin markings for a few breaths.

A wave of strong nausea forced a moan out of her.

"Rest, Dragon." His voice was very gentle. Despite her pain and fear, her mind floated sideways, and she drifted away from the conscious world.

* * * * *

Kasa Yen's little brother Keton gripped onto her hand like he was lost at sea and she was a life raft. She led him off the street and back into the alley. They approached the stranger's

unconscious body, and Kasa knelt down next to the much older woman. She looked to be of Tolaan descent with a rich reddish brown skin and curly dark hair. There was blood all over her abdomen, but Kasa could sense that she was still alive.

She wrapped one arm around Keton to continue giving him comfort, and put both hands on the woman's stomach above and below the nasty wound. Kasa closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting her healing ability turn on and start to lift out the damage from her body.

There was a momentary pause, the woman released a sigh, relaxing down as if letting go of all of that pain. An intact bullet pushed out of the wound, rolling down her body, and dropped to the concrete.

“Have you healed her, yet?” Her older sibling, Daeden, jogged into the alley from behind. “Come on let's go before her people or the Agency turn up!”

A hard expression deepened Kasa's dark brown eyes. “We have to take her back to base, so I can stitch her up. Go get the van.”

Den let out a grumble of irritation. “We don't even know who she is! What if she's an Agent? No!”

“An Agent wouldn't have saved Keton.” Kasa's glare was like a laser over her shoulder and she put a measure of unmistakable anger into her voice to communicate her intentions. “Go get the *van*.”

Zey let out a second grumble of frustration, but turned back the way zey'd come to do as she asked.

Kasa reached to brush the woman's disheveled hair from her face. “Thank you for looking after Keton. I promise, we'll look after you, now.”

[Banshii Haven part 2 excerpt]

* * *

An hour later

Yaan stared at the blood pool on the concrete. It was far too much. If this was from Brii, she couldn't have moved on her own with those sorts of injuries. But her body was gone. The dead Spades she'd been chasing was splayed out on the concrete not a meter away, but where was Brii?

"Red," said a voice from behind.

She turned and looked into their Leader's purple eyes.

Zeir smile was sympathetic. "We have to go. Escorting the package back to Araam is our priority right now. I'm sorry."

She sighed. "Of course, shan. May I request authorization to search for Dragon once the mission is complete?"

Zey nodded. "I'll send in the request from the safe house. Permission should be granted by the time we arrive in Araam. Come on, help us pack up."

As she nodded, Yaan wiped at an errant line of moisture on her face. She had to force herself to be first and foremost a Sword. She could be a grieving and potentially avenging wife once the mission was complete.

*** 3 ***

22 Mecra 3004

(The next morning)

Eighteen year old Daeden Yen filled three bowls with their sparse meal of scrap meat and vegetable soup, raised maka bread, and a single glob of mashed tubers.

Looking at the bowls, zey ripped a little more bread from the main loaf, and put two extra bits into zeir siblings' portions. Satisfied, zey lifted one of the plates off the table.

Zeir little brother Keton liked to hide in tight spots. They all encouraged this behavior because if the Agency came, five year old Keton would be more likely to run and hide in places out of reach of the TFOs, and be safe. Even if it did make getting him out of such places when he didn't want to go, quite difficult.

Den moved across their main living space to an air vent that opened at floor level. Zey knocked on the grate. "Keton! Breakfast!" zey said, placing zeir brother's breakfast onto the floor.

The grate opened sideways and a pair of small hands reached out to grab the food.

Smiling, Den returned to the table across the room, which had been set up for everyone to serve themselves breakfast, and grabbed the second plate.

Zey moved towards the side door that led to the only Psi shielded room in the building, which was also where any injured Rebels stayed while they were healing. Zey stood in the door way and looked inside.

Kasa was very gently fastening a large wound pad onto the mystery woman's injury with medical tape. This person had taken a bullet for Keton, and while Den understood that it was only good manners to look after her, zey was still worried about when she woke up. Given her non-Aranan appearance, it was unlikely she was an Agent, and fighting the Spades probably meant she wasn't allied with *them* either, but even those who might save little kids from gangsters could still be a threat to the Rebels.

Zey sighed and walked across to the chair and table in the corner of the room to put down Kasa's breakfast.

Kasa smiled. "Thanks, Denny."

"No problem. How is she?"

Kasa stuck down a final line of medical tape and pulled the woman's shirt back down over the wound.

"I think she'll be alright. She was very lucky. The bullet was close to an artery, she really should have bled out before we found her."

"When do you think she'll wake up?"

Kasa lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. "Probably not before the morning, in fact I'd be surprised to see her awake before dinner tomorrow."

Her healing ability was very strong, and most of their injured were conscious after only a few hours, or a day at the most. Two days meant that Keton's new friend had been very close to death, indeed.

Zey nodded. "Alright, we can at least keep her safe until she wakes up. We can put a guard on her after the mission this afternoon--"

"She saved Keton's life!" Kasa growled. "Why do you always assume someone's a threat?"

Zey sighed, and gave her a tired smile. "Because they usually are."

"Well, she's no threat to anyone right now!"

Den sighed again and turned to leave the room.

Moving back out into their main living space, Den strode across it to grab zeyr own breakfast, and approached the nearest wall. Zey sat down on the floor next to Aneiya.

At twenty-two, Nei was a few years older than Den, but she had been with them four years. Hawk had sent Asha and Anei to save them from the Agency. They'd managed to get Den, Kasa and Keton to safety, but the three of them lost their parents in the skirmish, and while Asha had to leave immediately after, Anei stayed and helped them through their grief. She was family, now.

Den put zeir plate down on the floor and tapped Nei on the shoulder, using sign language to communicate.

“You got enough food this morning?”

Anei nodded. Her hands weren't free to reply, because she was fiddling with her impressive wrist device. It was basically a super computer but in micro-scale. A small picture was projected onto the nearby wall instead of having a screen, and she navigated the device through gestures using special bits of technology on her finger tips.

Den smiled. *“How goes the digital recon?”*

A twist of the wrist into the sign for 'off' freed Anei's hands to reply. *“No red flags. I can access the network node of the facility from here, so it shouldn't be too hard for my part.”*

Zey glanced sideways to see that the image projected onto the wall showed a video feed of a fight on a roof top, and then a little figure jumped off the roof into a helicopter.

Den rolled zeir eyes and pointed at the image.

Glancing sideways, Nei snorted. *“Yes, everyone is still talking about him. So, how long until we leave?”*

“About an hour, we need to gear up, and go over the plan with everyone.”

Nei nodded. *“I'll be ready. You eat your breakfast.”*

*** 4 ***

Closer to the city center

External Agency facility #29

Nena Amaan's Agency apartment was small. When she was first assigned to it, there had been minimal furniture, all gray and boring, with bare white walls and dark blue carpet. It had been suffocating. But over the years she'd collected colored throw rugs and posters, bought many blankets which scattered a rainbow of joyous shapes and ideas across her space. She'd also managed to wrestle enough spare time to paint on canvases, and then hung them all over the walls to cover as much of that boring white as possible.

Every morning, instead of waking to a bland, tiny apartment made up of dull color schemes and an overly simplistic style, she opened her eyes to a joyous mash-up of the entire color spectrum.

Her bedroom had one window, facing east, and she'd moved the bed so that at certain times of the year, she woke to real sunlight. That morning, she lay in bed enjoying the sun on her face and wishing terribly that she didn't have to leave her artistic haven for work.

Her second alarm went off, and she sighed, forcing herself out of bed. Nena went through her morning routine, making and eating breakfast, then into the shower. Once she was dry, she slowly put on the layers of uniform that the Agency required her to wear despite their almost monochrome dullness. Dark blue pants and a white long-sleeved shirt. She clipped her A5 rank pins to the lapel, and pulled on the distinctive navy blue suit jacket. Each layer made the knot in her stomach tighten further, so that as she put her shoes on, it felt like a brick weighing her down.

She sighed. It was now time to take on her always horrific day.

Getting to her feet, she moved out, across the sitting room, and to her front door. She put her hand on the knob, but turned around to look at the colors and joy resplendent across every inch of her apartment.

For a moment she took it all in, every detail, every color, every painting of beautiful things like sunsets and forestry, and the sea. She wondered in that moment how people got the attention of Hawk so they could escape the Agency, because she wasn't sure how long she could continue.

Gathering herself, she opened her front door and stepped into the dull, monochrome world of the Agency.

* 5 *

Nena's elevator arrived on the bottom floor of their facility and opened. Its original cheerful tune that signaled its arrival on the requested floor had long since died. Instead, it occasionally let out a disconcerting hissing noise.

She held her hands in front of her, and dropped her eyes to the navy carpet as she stepped out into the mortuary basement. She could hear the gross laughter of her workmates, and that knot in her stomach tightened further. Turning down the hall, she made a bee-line for the open doorway of the furnace room.

“And this one got a bullet to the face! Clean-up is still scraping his brains off the bedroom wall!” roared their boss, who stood in front of the main furnace, watching as her two co-workers were feeding a messy corpse into the fire.

The two workers snickered and started laughing, as if the gory remains of a person was a truly amusing thing.

Nena saw the bloody etchings of a face as it passed into the fire, and her stomach churned. She gagged and put one hand to her mouth.

“You're not laughing Agent Nena,” said her boss in a very hostile tone. He had green eyes the color of deep water, and there was something indefinable in that green which terrified her.

She swallowed and cleared her throat. “Sorry, boss. I've only just had breakfast, you know me and my delicate stomach.”

The boss' eyes were still dark but his mouth wrinkled into an expression of disgust rather than hatred. “You'd better learn a thicker skin, I'll not tolerate people vomiting over everything. There's a family there,” he said, lifting his chin to indicate a line of corpse trolleys behind her. “I need you to strip the bodies, and do the paperwork for their possessions.”

She lowered not only her eyes but her chin. “Yes, sir.”

“I'll be back at lunch time. If you need to vomit, you know where the bathrooms are!” he growled, glaring specifically at her.

She kept her eyes and chin low, slouching her shoulders as well to show subservience. Once he was gone, she turned around to look at the bodies covered in sheets. Her co-workers smirked at her, and started feeding the next naked body into the fires.

Nena took a deep breath, and while putting on her work gloves, she thought of the colors and joy waiting for her in her apartment if she could just get through today. When she felt centered enough, she brushed back the sheet over the first table. It was a teenager, a young boy, by the looks of his clothes. An ugly red patch showed where he was shot in the chest, possibly even at point blank range, shredding his shirt and shoulder.

She swallowed and gently put her hand on his forehead. “*May your soul find its way back to the world, and have a better life next time around,*” she prayed silently.

Ripping the remains of the shirt open, she carefully turned him onto his side so she could get off his shirt sleeves, but she stopped, staring at the metal surface underneath him.

It was yellow. Bright yellow. Just a little scrap of paper, but it was the kind of thing that changed the entire world.

She glanced across the room at her co-workers, but they'd already turned their backs to her, as they loaded the furnace and chattered away. She reached and took the yellow sticky, stuffing it in the side pocket of her jacket.

Pacing around the young man's body, she then pushed him onto his other side, and lifted away the last of his shirt. This side of him had a lot of blood, and as she turned to dump his shirt on the nearby table, she noticed that the blood had seeped over the edge of the tray and down onto the ground. She glanced at her feet, realizing that she stood in a puddle. A drop fell from the tray and splashed the toes of one shoe.

Her stomach churned again, and she grabbed for the sheet cover to clean off her shoes.

It was then as she was stomping on the material to get it off the soles that the young man's arm came loose from its connective tissue, and dropped into the pool at her feet.

She cried out as the blood splattered her face, and her already queasy stomach decided that it was time to evacuate her breakfast. She put her hand to her mouth, and ran straight out of the room, down the hall, and skittered into the shared bathrooms. She only just made it into the nearest stall before her stomach emptied itself.

She wretched for a good five minutes. Every time she thought it would stop, her photographic memory showed her the young man's severed arm falling, and it would start again.

Eventually, there was nothing left in her stomach and she finally managed to get her thoughts focused on color and art, and beautiful things. She remembered the recent painting she'd done from a photograph of the Araam central bridge in the fog, another of the steepest hill in Arana, with houses stacked at a strange angle to the road, all painted up in bright colors, and the letter box of the middle house with orange, hand painted spirals on the front.

Suitably calm again, she wiped her face with toilet paper and flushed. She walked out of the stall towards the mirror, and stared at herself. Her face was pale and brown eyes red from crying.

She sighed. "Hang in there, Nena," she said.

It was there as she smiled at her reflection that she remembered the yellow sticky. Pulling it out of her pocket, she uncrumpled it to read what it said.

"10.28am

Just keep running"

Frowning, she checked her watch for the time. It was precisely twenty-seven past ten in the morning. She stared at it comparing the time on her watch with the time on the yellow sticky.

Did this mean Hawk wanted her to run in less than a minute? Did she really want to risk it?

The digital face on her watch shifted from twenty-seven to twenty-eight minutes past, and she realized that there was nothing she wanted more than freedom from the Agency. She shoved the sticky in her jacket pocket, drank a mouthful of water from the faucet, and jogged for the door and the elevator beyond.

*** 6 ***

“I thought the Traitor laws don't apply to kids? They should have been arrested, not executed!”

Den rolled zeir eyes at the newbie Rebel. “TFO patrols don't follow the laws. They do what they like, including murdering kids.”

Senaan had only been a Rebel for a week, and while he was a fair shot and had an impressively strong kinetic ability, he'd grown up in an Agency facility, so his understanding of the world outside was quite limited. The two of them stared at the five storied building as they waited. It was a processing facility that dealt with those killed by the Agency. In the basement was a furnace that burned bodies almost twenty four hours a day.

“So, tell me the truth, does Hawk really exist?”

Den shrugged. “Well, someone has to leave behind all of those yellow stickies.”

“Have *you* met him?”

Den snorted. “No, no-one's met Hawk, not even Nama Ree.”

The young man tipped his head on the side. “Who's Nama Ree?”

Den huffed, not wishing to answer all of these questions, but knowing instinctively that if zey didn't answer them, Senaan would just keep asking. “He's the leader of the Original Rebels in Araam before Hawk.”

“Wow, really? There were Rebels before Hawk?”

“You didn't know?” Den smirked at him.

Senaan frowned, letting out a frustrated grumble. “No one ever said that there were Rebels before Hawk. How am I supposed to know the Araam history? This is Aramaan!”

Impatient, Den rolled zeir eyes again. “Well, as the eldest survivor of the Original *Araamaan* Rebellion, will you stop flapping your mouth and focus? It's about time for the action to start!”

“Yes, shan.” Senaan dropped his chin.

Den glanced up the road, to where Anei was standing in an alley. Zey waved to get her attention.

When they had eye contact zey started signing. *“How is the time?”*

“Thirty seconds. I have control of the facility's security systems, and the drone servers.”

“That's good. Stay under cover and tell the others with you to get ready to move once Senaan has done his thing.”

“Affirmative.”

Den shuffled on zeir feet and patted Senaan on the shoulder. “Time to be awesome, Senaan.”

He grinned at him. “Alright, which car should I trash?”

Laughing, Den glanced over the road side. There were two of the newer cars, which were basically metal framing with plastic draped over them, and parked closest to them was a big flat bed truck, old enough to probably be made mostly of metal.

“The truck,” said Den.

Senaan cackled. “Good thinking!”

*** 7 ***

The elevator opened and, almost tripping on the lip, Nena spilled out onto the ground floor of her building. Technically she wasn't cleared for that level, but because there were no secrets being kept and really only bodies to steal, the internal security wasn't strictly enforced.

Jogging, she moved around a corner in the corridor, and was greeted by a long hall with windows down the left side. At the end, was the entrance to the building. She wasn't sure how she was going to get through, but, the yellow sticky meant that she had to at least try to trust that Hawk had her covered.

There was an all-mighty crash and the windows, mere meters from her, burst inwards with bits of wall wrapped around the side of a flat bed truck. The vehicle bounced off the internal wall and dragged itself up the hallway towards the security box and entrance, throwing bits of wall, metal window framing, and glass everywhere. As she watched, the truck hit the security box at full speed, bursting through the bullet proof glass, and mashing the TFOs stationed inside.

Nena flinched.

Through the chaos, Nena saw that the entire hallway was open to the street, and she ran towards the gap and freedom. She had to get to some cover before the other TFOs got to the front of the building.

She jumped over the rubble into a trashed garden and across the footpath to the road side. Half a dozen faces stared at her from behind various vehicles that were parked down the road.

“Bren! Get her out of here!” called a voice from one side.

A figure ran towards her and offered her a hand. “Come on, follow me.”

She nodded and took zeyr hand.

*** 8 ***

Den was crouched behind a van at the back end of it, zeyr gun up and aimed, while Senaan was at the front, kinetically moving the flat bed truck back and forth along the entrance hall of the facility to block the internal TFOs from attacking. The escapee, who looked to be in her early twenties, ran across the road and took the outstretched hand of Bren, one of their older Rebels.

Bren had escaped the Agency less than a year after Hawk rose to power, so Den knew that zey would get the newest escapee clear of the action as soon as possible. The dossier sent by Hawk through the Rebel Network stated unequivocally that the escapee was a non-combatant, which meant she wasn't able to help with the fight.

Sirens sounded at a distance and Den straightened zeyr spine, listening to identify which kind of emergency vehicle was coming this way. It sounded like patrol sirens.

Swearing, Den got to zeyr feet, and jogged up the length of the van to Senaan. “We gotta go, can you make a bullet shield?”

Sen nodded.

“Just wait for the others to get to us.” Zey turned around and whistled very loudly to get the attention of one of the hearing Rebels close to Anei. Grena, who they'd rescued last year from a TFO patrol raid, heard zeyr whistle over the noise.

Den indicated with a flick of zeyr head for her to tap Anei on the shoulder.

When zey had eye contact with Nei, zey started signing. “*We gotta evac, there's at least one set of TFOs on the way, can you try to disable their drones?*”

Nei nodded.

Den turned and shuffled along the side of the road. Zey kept low to avoid enemy fire, which came at them intermittently through the windows on the top story of the facility, and stopped behind another car about halfway between Senaan and those with Nei. Den lifted zeyr gun over the bonnet of the car and fired at the top story windows, laying down some cover to get the others down the street to Sen. Nei sprinted across the gap from the alley entrance to the nearest car as Grena added cover fire from the alley.

Den signaled at Nei and the others to keep coming.

The three of them moved in a line, Grena bringing up the rear. Crouch-running, Nei skipped past Den and made a break for the van.

Den waited for Grena to drop down next to zem, and with a head nod, they both stood again, moving sideways, shooting sparingly at the building, and bridging the gap to their temporary safety. When zey got under cover of the van again, Den moved around the others to where Senaan was standing at the other end of the van.

Zey reloaded zeyr weapon while speaking. "You ready?"

"Yes, shan. Where are we withdrawing to?"

Den could practically feel the danger pulsing at them from the south, if they moved east they'd mostly have the sun in front of them, making it harder for the TFOs to aim in the glare. Zey pointed at the intersection north up the road a little. "Next intersection, we'll go east."

"Alright, everyone ready!" Sen called out.

Den put zeyr hand on Nei's shoulder to let her know they were heading out. Nei was fiddling with her wrist device, but moved to stand up as soon as Den touched her shoulder. Den glanced at each person, checking that they were ready and took a breath.

"Ready, Sen."

A deep metallic groan sounded nearby and an older car, further up the street, lifted off the road, into the air and slid in next to them. It hovered on its side, the undercarriage facing the incoming threats.

"Go, go, go!" called Sen.

Daeden signaled with a hand for everyone to run as zey and Senaan backed up the road towards the intersection.

The sirens were uncomfortably close as they ran, and it seemed an age for them to get to the intersection. Den glanced behind zem, checking on Senaan, who was striding backwards, still kinetically using the car as a bullet shield. Further up the road, over the car, Den could see three

TFO troop transports approaching, and that meant at least twenty-four Operatives.

This was bad. This was very bad. There weren't enough Rebels in their group to push back against those numbers.

“Senaan! Drop the car and just *run*,” zey barked.

They ran together across the last couple of meters to the intersection, sprinting around the edge of an old concrete garage and out of the direct line of fire. Everyone was now under cover, running up the road, but they were moments away from the TFOs coming around the corner after them, and then they'd be in trouble again.

The five of them sprinted up the middle of the road, Grena ran ahead, leading them in a line towards another alley. Den glanced over zeyr shoulder, lifting zeyr weapon as zey ran sideways to cut down the first few Agents that came into sight behind them.

The line of Rebels moved around a couple of big concrete street dividers, which, if moved into place would make good cover or a good barrier to slow the TFOs down.

“Sen!” Daeden called out. “Those dividers! Bring them with us?”

Glancing back at Den, he nodded. Senaan's face was sweaty, and it was already obvious that he was getting tired, but despite being a constant question factory, he wasn't the type to give up when things got a little hard.

Backing towards the alley Den watched for TFOs as Senaan dragged the concrete dividers from the middle of the road. Stacked two abreast they formed a wall that almost completely blocked off the Rebels from the TFOs.

The pulsing sound of flying drones filled the air above them.

As Den backed through the gap in concrete, and Senaan sealed it, zey turned to look at Nei, who stood under cover, her attention focused on the little wrist computer. Likely sensing Den's attention on her, her eyes lifted for a second.

“*Drones?*” Den signed quickly.

Nei shook her head. Indicating that her hack into the mobile drone server wasn't working.

Den swore under zeyr breath and looked around. They had to get under cover. If the drones got a picture of their faces, they'd be loaded onto the Agency's Traitor database, and none of them would be able to go into areas of the city with CCTV cameras without immediately attracting more patrols.

Den felt a shot of panic. It had only been a few weeks since their last Leader was killed in a raid. Under most situations Den felt in control and quite capable of leading a mission, but this was

different. There weren't enough of them, and they didn't have access to their vehicle to escape.

“What do we do?” asked Senaan, as he moved in close to Den.

Daeden sighed. “Run. We gotta just run.”

*** 9 ***

They'd been zigzagging in a north-easterly direction for several blocks. Den was tired and sweaty. They'd managed to keep ahead of the drones but couldn't get free of them or the TFOs following. As a group they ran down a narrow lane to the end where a boarded door frame came up to meet them. Den stopped in front of it, tipping forward against the wood and gasping for air.

Zey looked over zeyr shoulder. Grena's face was red and she leaned over her knees, trying to catch her breath. Nei stood with her back against a brick wall panting. Senaan rested his arm against the same wall as Nei, and their fifth person, Yakaan who used to be a TFO, was covering their backs with his weapon aimed out at the world.

Everyone's exhaustion and fear rippled back at Den, and zey knew that something had to change soon or they were all going to get caught.

“Sen,” Daeden panted. “Can you--?”

Senaan huffed, stood upright and moved to the wood in the doorway. He put a hand to one of the boards and closed his eyes. There was a creaking sound of bending wood, then a boom as it cracked, and blew into the dark space beyond.

As a group they fumbled inside. There wasn't a lot of light, and because Den's father was Ronan, zey had little to no night vision anyway, but zey could see enough to understand that this building had been stripped down to the concrete foundations. Light glowed from across the space and zey walked towards it, hoping they could get out again on the other side.

“Hey!” called out a voice.

Den couldn't immediately see where it came from or whether they were a threat. Zey lifted zeyr handgun. Walking with zem, the others also tensed.

“Fellow Rebels!” called the voice again. “Over here!”

The voice called from zeyr right, and as a group the five of them moved towards it. In the center of the building stood a concrete elevator shaft. Standing in front of it was an older man. Going by his height and relative thinness, he was at least in his sixties. Den didn't know him,

despite him looking very much like every other Rebel, wearing rags and looking half-starved.

Den didn't drop zeyr gun. "Who are you?"

"My nephew and I have been sent by Hawk to help." He lifted one hand to show them the little scrap of yellow in his fingers.

Den dropped zeyr gun hand and put the weapon away. "OK, what are we doing because the drones are only a few moments behind us, and the TFOs barely seconds after that."

The man flicked his head sideways. "Up the elevator shaft."

Moving forward to look inside, Den discovered a wrecked elevator below them in the basement, and above, the roof of the shaft was open to the late afternoon sky. To zeyr right hung a rope ladder.

Den, feeling far too tired to climb a ladder, let out a sigh of frustration. "Alright, there's a rope ladder here. We gotta get up as quickly as we can." Zey turned around to look directly at Senaan. "I know you're wrecked, Sen, but can you throw some of us up there?"

Senaan let out a similar bone-weary sigh. "Yeah, I'll try."

Grena stepped forward and started climbing the ladder, as Sen signed at Anei to be the first for him to kinetically throw up the shaft.

Den stood in the doorway, watching this Rebel they'd never met. "Your accent," Den said. "You from Araam?"

The older man nodded. "Yeah." He bridged the gap between them and thrust out his hand. "I'm Rana."

Zey took his hand. "Daeden, but call me Den."

Yakaan moved into the space, next to be thrown up the shaft. Den watched as Yakaan stepped inside, putting the toes of his shoes on the remaining lip of the elevator floor, put his hands up to touch the wall, and with a deep breath from Senaan, Yakaan shot upwards into the shaft. He caught the edge of the floor above them, and pulled himself up into the sunlight up there.

The buzzing sound of flying drones became louder than the peripheral noises of the city, and Den glanced over zeyr shoulder back in the direction they'd come.

"They're here," zey whispered. "We gotta hide."

The new person nodded and gestured with one hand that Den and Senaan needed to get inside the broken elevator.

Den had to be careful, most of the floor of the shaft was in the basement, but zey carefully shuffled along the lip to the rope ladder and started climbing. Senaan followed but launched himself

kinetically up the wall, catching the floor above them and pulled himself up.

Den watched below as Rana pulled a big piece of wood over the gap and stood in the shaft, waiting at the bottom of the ladder.

“Den! Get ready!” called Senaan from above.

Knowing what he was going to do, zey unwound zeir arms and feet from the rope ladder, and when zey felt the kinetic energy tighten around zeir middle, zey let go. Den shot up to the next level, and instead of having to crawl up onto the floor, Senaan pulled zem up through the gap.

“Oof!” zey said, landing awkwardly on zeir stomach.

“Rana!” whispered Senaan's voice. “Let go of the ladder, I'll grab you.”

Den very slowly got up onto zeir hands and knees. As zey lifted one leg up to stand, someone grabbed zeir arm to help, and Den glanced into a very familiar face.

“What?” zey barked, getting to zeir feet. “What are you doing here?”

Tiras Malar grinned at zem. “Nice to meet you too, we gotta get around to the shielded room before the TFOs get below us. Come on!”

Their footsteps were loud on the bare concrete floor, but they didn't have to go far, just around the frame of the elevator, and into a door through an internal wall.

As soon as they moved inside, Den felt the dulling of zeir psychic senses, confirming that it was shielded. The others sat on the floor. There were no windows, only a couple of camping packs and a kerosene lantern. Relief flooded Den and zeir knees weakened, forcing zem to drop down next to zeir friends.

Once Rana and Senaan were inside, Tiras bolted the door closed and turned around to stare at them. He gave them a broad smile and Den sensed friendliness from him.

“Hi, everyone. I'm Tiras, this is my uncle Rana. You're safe here but we're going to have to sleep over or risk being caught by the TFOs. Is anyone injured?”

Den glanced at the others, everyone shook their heads. Nei stared down the line of them with a confused frown on her face. Den immediately translated Tiras' words in sign language, and Nei did the OK sign to let zem know she was uninjured as well.

Daeden lifted zeir chin at Tiras. “Amazingly, it looks like we're alright.” Zey crossed zeir arms. “So, why are you here? Why didn't Hawk send a rescue from one of the local cells?”

Tiras put his back to the door and crouched down to their level as he smiled. “That's a smart question, Den.” As he spoke, he very slowly also used sign language. “Hawk has sent me to be the new Leader of the central Aramaan Rebel cell.”

Den growled. “This cell already has a new Leader. Besides, you'll be a liability to us! Do you know how high your bounty is now?”

“Bounty?” asked Rana standing next to Tiras. He glanced sideways at his nephew. “What bounty?”

Nei wrapped her knuckles on the ground to get people's attention and when all eyes were on her, she touched her wrist computer, projecting the video of Tiras' escape onto the nearest wall.

Watching the video, the older man gasped. “You said your escape was dramatic, I didn't realize you meant that it was broadcast on national television!”

The image of Tiras zigzagged across the roof of a skyscraper, shooting TFOs, like a scene from an action film. Tiras jumped off the top of the tower and into a shiny black helicopter. The copter dipped down out of sight, and the footage flicked back to the studio set of a news channel.

“That's not my best angle.” Tiras snorted. “Look, I'm not here to muscle in or cause any trouble. Hawk himself asked me to come and help.” He sighed. “We have some food and water, and some blankets. We should probably try and settle down for night. Once it gets past midnight Rana and I will go out and check the perimeter. You folks need to rest, you look about ready to drop.”

Grena grunted. “You're not wrong there. What kind of food you got? Any protein?”

Tiras' smile broadened. “Yeah, it's mostly just army rations, but they're plenty nutritious.” He reached for the tramping packs, and started to loosen the drawstrings and undo clips to get inside.

*** 11 ***

Sitting with his back to the door, Tiras kept guard while everyone else slept. He smiled, as he watched his uncle Rana rumbling away in a deep sleep, curled up in the far corner.

Hawk's brief had said they would be safe in the shielded room, but his nerves were still on edge from the escape and everything he'd done since, so even if he wanted to, he couldn't yet relax enough to sleep. But even if he could sleep these folks had been through enough, they deserved to feel safe while they slept, and he could at least do that for them.

The five Rebels looked half-starved and utterly exhausted. Den, who seemed to be the leader, couldn't be any older than eighteen or nineteen. Zey should be far too young to be taking over the responsibility of leading an entire Rebel cell, though, zey must have been good enough for

the others, because they were all older than Den, and still looked to zem for the big decisions.

Den, who was curled up back to back with Anei, let out a squeak of distress. Zeir face screwed up, and Tiras felt zeir dreaming world shimmer into a nightmare. He got to his feet and stepped in next to zem. Crouching, he put a hand on Den's arm and attempted to empathically calm zem down. The kid needed sleep, not night terrors.

Den let out another squeak, zeir face was screwed up tightly. Tiras' senses told him that this dream was one of trauma, and despite being a relatively high rated empath and telepath, Tiras couldn't shift the terror. In his effort to try and help, his shielding came down for a moment, plunging him into Den's nightmare.

Asha reached and grabbed zeir hand, dragging zem to zeir feet and pulling both of them to a doorway. Daeden looked behind zem for zeir parents.

Tiras saw two adults, an Aranan woman and a Ronan man, running. They looked scared. Gunfire sounded, with barrel flashes lighting up the hallway behind them.

Den's mama reached towards zem with one hand. "Denny, run!" she screamed.

More shots fired, and both parents seemed to trip and fall. Daeden tried to dislodge from Asha to help zeir parents but Asha swore and grabbed zem tightly, forcibly pulling Den through a doorway out of sight of zeir parents' bodies.

Again, he heard the woman scream. "Run, Denny!" And the following gunshots jolted both Den and Tiras out of the dream.

Tiras flinched, pulling back away from zem and landing backwards on his bum.

Den sat up and yelled wordlessly.

He shook his head, trying to clear the terror he'd absorbed from Den, and when it was released, he reached to touch Den's shoulder again.

"You were having a pretty bad nightmare. Are you OK?"

Daeden brushed his hands off zem and let out a grumble of irritation. "I'm fine!"

Sensing that he was too close for Den's comfort, Tiras shuffled back. "Look, Den," he said, letting out a sigh. "I'm not your enemy, I'm here to help you."

Den glared at him, but said nothing.

He recognized zeir expression as one he'd seen in his teenage son's face. "Yeah, I know how condescending that sounds, but it's the truth. Hawk has asked me to be his representative in

Aramaan, and to help your cell survive. If you and your people don't want me to take over as Leader, I won't, I'll just hang about and be the new Asha." He smirked, gently pushing a feeling of playful mischief at the younger androgyne.

A tiny smile lifted into edges of Den's mouth. "Those are big shoes to fill. She kicks some serious ass."

He snorted. "What? And I don't? I took out almost twenty people on that roof, doesn't that count for some ass kicking?"

Den chuckled and Tiras knew that they'd probably alright. "Maybe," zey said. "We'll see."

Grinning, Tiras glanced down at his watch.

"Dawn yet?" asked Den.

Tiras nodded. "Yeah."

"We should we start waking people up."

He nodded. "I agree."

Part Three

*** 1 ***

(Later that morning)

Briiana Zuru-Yen slowly returned to the conscious world. The first thing she became aware of was a tune being hummed. The sound was edged with a happy peace as if the source was at ease in their environment.

A deep pain pushed right through the middle of her, and as she came to full consciousness she realized that this pain was the remnant of a gunshot wound.

A moan escaped out of her and she sensed the presence of another person in the room. They had a telepathic shield over their mind, but she sensed no immediate hostility. Their humming stopped and a voice spoke. She couldn't quite understand the words, but she kinetically sensed their motion as they walked towards her.

A pair of warm hands settled on her stomach either side of the terrible pain and, like a faucet turning on, a flow of tingling static and warm empathic energy poured into that pain, and washed it away. She let out another moan, but this time it was one of relief.

The voice kept talking and finally, as she was able to clench her fists, her mind was awake enough to translate the Five Nation Common tongue.

“You're alright, that gangster shot you but I--”

Brii sat up, using her kinetic ability to move her body even before she was physically able to use her muscles.

The teenage girl let out a gasp, but didn't fight when Brii grabbed her around the shoulders.

“*Is this an Agency base? Where is the exit? Where's Yaan?*” Brii was confused, but had to escape and get somewhere safe. She didn't want to hurt the girl, but if there were others in the building, she would need collateral to get to the door.

Her eyes flicked around the room and she saw her blades sitting on a nearby table. She shuffled herself and the girl across to them, and kinetically pulled them into the pockets of her pants. Her handgun, which she hardly ever used, was also on the table. She picked it up, fingers sensing that it was still loaded, and she lifted it to point out at the world. The room seemed to be shielded because she couldn't really sense much outside of its walls.

Carefully pulling them both towards the door, she moved through into a corridor. Once clear of the shielding, she sensed that there were many minds in this place, and most of them were

standing in the next room. She could sense an area which was two stories high, with walkways servicing the top space. Rooms led off from the ground floor into the rest of the building, and on the other side of the larger area, she could feel an external door. So, that was the way she needed to go.

Listening with all of her senses, she walked slowly to the next door, waiting for a person to walk past, and moved through into the central room.

Above her head, the only illumination came from a hanging fluorescent light. She lifted her gun and fired, taking out the bar and plunging the room into darkness.

*** 2 ***

Daeden pushed the front door of their current building and held it open for the others. Senaan, Grena, Anei, and finally Yakaan moved inside. Everyone looked exhausted and grubby, but at least they were home.

“Go and relax, we've all earned a rest today.”

Coming inside last were Tiras and Rana, Den held the door long enough to let Tiras catch it and moved in ahead of them.

“We'll have to get you some cots from one of the other Rebel cells, but I'll send someone out later today for that. You might have to share a plate at meal times until we can get you the basic kit. We've got running water, and while we have a little bit of electricity from the new set of solar panels, there's only enough for lights and heating, not for hot showers, so if you want hot water, you'll have to boil it yourself. Otherwise, welcome to the central Aramaan Rebel cell--”

A sense of doom settled into Den's nerves and zey stopped talking to listen.

“What's wrong?” asked Tiras.

“Danger sense just flared up.”

As if utterly trusting Den's instincts, even not knowing zem, Tiras pulled out a medium caliber handgun from a jacket pocket, and signaled for Rana to check outside.

As Den was going for zeir own weapon, someone discharged a handgun. The light above them sparked and went dark. Den had almost no night vision and was suddenly blind. The sense of danger wasn't immediate, so it wasn't an Agency assassin, but it was certainly clear and present. Keeping zeir breathing slow and calm, zey listened to zeir instincts, ready to dodge bullets if they came.

Someone moved in close and Tiras' voice was in zeir ear. "That shot came from inside, you've probably got the best contrast vision, you want to sit on the door? I'll sneak around to see if I can find them."

Den nodded, glancing sideways as Tiras moved past. His eyes reflected silver in the dim light coming through the doorway. Zey stepped backwards, stopping when zeir spine touched the door frame. The light coming in from outside was minimal, but with zeir back to the light zey had the tactical advantage, particularly if the intruder shot the lights out because they themselves had good night vision.

The doors behind zem opened, and Rana moved back inside.

"We have an intruder," said Den.

The older man nodded. "Tiras told me. I'll stand with you, keep them from escaping."

*** 3 ***

Brii felt nauseous and hot as if she had a fever. The pain in her stomach was angry and slicing. She knew she was far too unwell to be upright, but she wouldn't surrender.

Her kinetic senses showed her where everyone stood. The two guarding the door, a handful in the next room, their hearts pounding loudly in their chests, and the one trying to sneak around the side. The sneaky one had a loaded gun out and aimed.

If she hadn't been a kinetic, she was pretty sure she wouldn't have otherwise sensed the one sneaking around. This physical and psychic silence meant that if this was the Agency, this one was likely the high ranking Agent so she had to be careful.

Feeling how weak her actual muscles were, Brii held her kinetic ability in place first before moving her body. If she lost her concentration, her real muscles would not catch her. Sliding sideways, she dragged the young woman with her into the corner of the room, so as to put the girl between her and any threats. Agents didn't always care about the lives of other Agents, but, if she was lucky, this girl would keep Brii alive long enough to escape.

The girl let out a sigh. "You're going to pass out if you don't lie down!"

"Shh!" Brii's grip tightened around her shoulders.

The sneaky person coming around the sides of the room stepped into sight next to a weight bearing pillar, his gun up, eyes reflecting silver over its barrel.

“Possibly a sharp shooter,” she thought, deliberately loud enough for him to hear her if he was a telepath.

“Yes, I was trained as a sharp shooter. What about you? Are you an assassin?”

“No.” She frowned. Such an odd question to ask, she just wanted to get out.

* * *

The doors behind Den pulled outwards and zey turned with zeyr gun aimed, just in case this new person from outside was a threat.

A taller woman stood in the doorway. Purple eyes glowing. She was wearing a full length red coat with metal buttons and a high collar. She looked well fed, clean, and her hair was the color of fire, so she probably wasn't a Rebel. She looked as if she was from Tola, not Arana, so, likely she also wasn't an Agent either.

Den frowned at her. “Who are you?”

“Is Tiras here?” she said, her voice raised as if talking to the whole room.

Den nodded. “Yeah, somewhere. What do you want?”

“I want you all to stand down, so I can keep you alive!”

Den wasn't a terribly strong empath, but even with such little sensitivity, zey sensed the absolute truth of her words.

Out of the darkness came Tiras, his back to the side wall and eyes glowing. “I'm here, who sent you?”

One side of the woman's mouth lifted playfully. “He called himself Naethan. Bright blue eyes, a penchant for the dramatic?”

Tiras grinned as his shoulders dropped. He put his gun away, and all tension in his body disappeared. The older man looked Den right in the eyes. “Den, stand down.”

Zey stared at him for a long moment, and then, trusting only zeyr instincts, zey pulled the safety on zeyr handgun, and dropped the barrel. “What now?”

The woman in red put a hand up in a stop motion. “Stand back.”

* * *

Yaan strode down the middle of the dim room. She could feel the entire building, all of the

spaces and walls, every person, and the other life forms in the ceiling spaces. All movement and levels of density were clear in her mind, but she focused on the one heart beat she could feel in the far right hand corner of the entrance space.

“Briiana?” she said in their home tongue. “Brii, it's Yaan. You're safe.”

Brii's voice sounded very weak. “Yaan?”

She was close enough now to see her wedged in the corner of the room with a young Ronan woman captive in her arms. She could feel the lines of kinetic energy that kept Brii upright when she really should be flat on her back.

She smiled at her wife. “Yeah, ya silly chicken, it's me,” she said switching to the Five-Nation Common Tongue. “You're in a Rebel cell. You can stand down.” She moved towards the gun in Brii's hands, lifting a hand to grab it. “Now let that poor girl go. The Rebels were helping you.”

Reaching, she finally took the gun from her fingers. Briiana let out a terrible gasped moan, and collapsed, sliding down the wall into a heap. The girl, after being freed, turned around and reached for the circle of blood on Brii's shirt.

Yaan felt the sparking energy of a healer and bridged the distance.

“Now look at you!” barked the young woman. “You've ripped your stitches! All you had to do was ask! I'd have been happy to tell you where you were! Silly woman!”

“Sorry,” rumbled Brii.

“Well!” said the girl, including Yaan in her barking tone. “Help me get her back to bed and I'll fix those stitches!”

Yaan grinned at her, knowing that she liked this young woman already. “Yes, ma'am.”

*** 4 ***

By the time Yaan had carried Brii through a hall and into another room, her wife was unconscious. Yaan was deliberately gentle with her kinetic muscles, lifting Brii upright in the air first, and then lowering her, flat onto the empty cot.

The young woman simply watched her with eyes as wide as saucers. “Wow,” she said. “I've never seen anyone with your level of combined control and strength!”

Yaan smiled. “Thank you. I'm told it's quite rare to have both strength and articulation.” She tipped her head a little to the side. “You can call me Red, by the way.”

“Kasa. Can you grab the stitching kit over there,” she pointed to a table standing against the far wall. Tiny shelves and drawers covered the back end of it, revealing a likely knowledge in apothecary medicine.

Yaan strode across the room, searching for something that might be needle and thread for sewing wounds. There was a little yellow tin about the size of her hand, and on the lid it was labeled as a Wound Stitching Kit “*How convenient,*” she thought, grabbing it.

“And the bottle of--”

Predicting what she wanted Yaan reached for an obvious bottle of alcohol. “Got it!”

“Thank you.”

Strong enough in her Psi abilities to feel past the shielding in the walls, she was peripherally aware that elsewhere in the building people were scuttling around cooking and doing chores.

Two figures walked through the entrance room, down the hall, and Yaan turned to watch them enter the room. Tiras Malar senior stood with his hands behind his back. She sensed no tension in him, but his friend, a young androgyne with a decent dose of Ronan blood in zem, looked both angry and scared at once.

Yaan dropped her head a little to acknowledge their presence, but kept her eyes on the two of them. “Thank you for looking after Dragon.”

The younger one smirked. “Not like Kasa gave us any choice.”

The young woman, who was clipping stitches from Brie's stomach, laughed. “She saved Keton's life! We couldn't just leave her there to bleed out!”

Yaan frowned. “Who's Keton?”

The androgyne's mouth pulled back into tension again. “Keton is our five year old brother. He has a habit of wandering off. My name's Daeden Yen, but please call me Den. This is my sister--”

“Yen? You three are Yens?” Yaan hadn't meant to interrupt, but she was just so surprised.

Den frowned. “Yes?”

“Are you related to the Yens who were in the original Aramaan Rebellion?”

Kasa had pulled out a long piece of thread and threw it over her shoulder. “Yes, our great-grandfather, Gaan, was in the original Rebellion.”

Yaan grinned. “Dragon's *grandfather* was Eesa Yen, Gaan's kid brother.”

Both Kasa and Den stared at her for a long moment, obviously surprised.

“Small world,” Tiras chuckled. “Anyway, Red, was it?” he asked, deliberately changing the subject. “You talked to Naethan, did he have a message for us or me?”

She nodded. “He said was to ask if you could check the Rebel Network tomorrow morning for messages.”

“Thank you.”

“Who is this Naethan, anyway?” asked Den, innocently.

Yaan watched Tiras' face to see if *he* knew Naethan's identity.

Tiras' eyes widened, and back straightened, suggesting he might just know. The twitch of tension loosened out of his shoulders again as he took a breath to speak. “Naethan? He's just another Asha.”

Amused, Yaan smiled at them. “Another Asha?”

A deep kindness settled into Tiras' blue eyes. “Asha is Hawk's second. Hawk is trying to get at least one person in each city to be a representative of him, so that our communication network is better, while also remaining as safe as possible.” He tipped his head to the side. “I'm the Asha for Aramaan. Do you have anywhere to stay, Red?”

Yaan shook her head. “I'll not leave my wife, but I'm happy to sleep on the floor here.”

Den moved forward. “No need. We'll be getting supplies later today any way, so getting another cot for you won't disadvantage us.”

“I've got some money to offset any supplies we might use.” She smiled at the three Rebels. “Is there anything you desperately need or can't get easily? I also have a Norm ID so I can buy things that you may not be able to.”

“Antibiotics,” answered Kasa. “And full courses of treatment for the Winter Lung.”

Den, seeing that Kasa needed an extra hand, stepped close to zeir sister to help pull out a stitch. “Yes, though, if you have the cash, it might be helpful if you come with us to market day tomorrow, and help us pay the bills directly.”

“I can do that.”

Zey nodded. “Are you hungry? We'll be starting lunch soon.”

She lowered chin. “I haven't actually eaten today, so anything you can spare would be appreciated. Thank you.”

(Continued, in Episode Two, Shield Crow).