

**Shield Crow**

**\* 1 \***

*(24 Mecra 3004)*

Eight year old Metaana stood with her chin up and hands on her hips. Her Papa always gave out a bit of guilt when the four kids did their dodging game, as a result she'd decided a long time ago to show no fear, even to the point of putting up a wall of confidence between them so he never found out that she did get a little afraid sometimes.

He crouched down in front of her and undid the metal clasp on his watch. "Now, Metty, you remember which hand on the clock needs to move to measure an hour?"

She nodded. "The second fastest one. And it goes around in a circle to make an hour."

He smiled his special just-for-her smile, filled with sunlight and joy. "That's good my love! I want you and the others to do what you do best, and then wait in the hiding place for an hour before coming back. You got that?"

She nodded. "We hide for an hour before coming back."

"Good." He strapped the watch onto her much smaller wrist. "Go now, we'll be ready for them." He wrapped his arms around her and she leaned into the hug.

"Yes, papa."

**\* \* \***

Eesen ran after the four Traitors with his TFO Team close on his heel. The Traitors were young; between the ages of five and ten years old. They zig-zagged down an alley ahead of him, two of them bouncing off the walls in a sideways flip. The smoothness of their motion suggesting strongly that in addition to being Dodge Talents, they were probably also kinetics. He and his TFO team members ran after them, trying and failing to take them down with targeted auto fire.

He didn't ordinarily shoot kids. When his unit fired upon them, he always deliberately missed, but these little ones were getting on his nerves.

Still giggling, the children skittered around a corner to the left, and up some steps into an old brownstone apartment building. Following, he led the Team up and inside.

The scent of damp air met his nose, and he understood that this was one of the many

abandoned buildings in the city. If these children had parents somewhere inside, it was the Team's job to execute them along with their offspring. Any resistance to the Agency had to be met with death.

That's what the law said, anyway.

Old floorboards creaked under their footfalls as the four of them continued their zigzagging chase. Up ahead, the children turned another corner, and Eesen followed into a long hallway with no doors or windows. At the far end stood a line of adults, all holding guns. The children skittered under between their legs, out of range, and the adults started firing.

Eesen realized that this was a deliberate trap to kill TFO units just as the first bullet brushed through his body, piercing his heart. He took his very last gasp of air and dropped.

**\* 2 \***

Metaana sat on the carpet in their secret safe room and stared at her papa's wristwatch. It was old, made of copper and steel, and had been created in the era before the Agency. She watched the hour hand on its face; it was almost time.

Remembering her younger cousins, she looked up to check on them. Zeka, the youngest, had a habit of wandering off or chewing on yucky things, so she needed to keep a careful eye on him until they got back to their family. Across the space, Ekaan and Kree; who were twin brothers, played slappy games. Nearer to her, Zeka had curled up on his side to have a nap.

Her papa thought that their secret safe place was a thing called a "panic room", but it was locked from the inside out. So that, other than their crawling down the air vents, there was no other way inside or out.

Little Zeka who was still asleep, started to shiver. She crawled towards him and draped one end of her woolen coat over him. He smiled and she sensed that her action made him feel safe.

Her eyes returned to her papa's watch, and the big hand had almost made its way around all of the numbers.

She put her hand on Zeka's back. "We gotta go back now. Zeka! Wake up!"

He rumbled unhappily, crawling into her lap, and wrapping his arms around her neck. She hugged him tight for a long moment, trying to ease the aching feeling that he was giving off. When that feeling had lowered several octaves, he let go and she got to her feet.

The twins offered a hand each to Zeka and the five year old took them.

Metty sighed. "Come on, we gotta get back to papa and the others!"

\* \* \*

Metaana crawled slowly through the air vents, controlling the speed of her younger cousins, who were so energetic that they'd run all day every day if given half a chance. Coming to an intersection in the vents, she shuffled to the left, down the intersecting metal tunnel.

Ahead the tunnel ended at a grate and she moved towards it.

The grate had already been unscrewed, so she just pushed, and it dropped down to the floor. Careful not to rip her pants on the lip, she pulled herself through the gap and out into the hall.

Turning around, she flinched and stared. Five bodies lay in front of her on the carpet. She let out a squeak of terror. The nearest face belonged to her auntie, and the twin's mother. Tears trickled down her face and she ran to her.

Checking faces, she found that everyone else was lying there, dead, except her papa.

"Papa!" she called out. "Papa!"

A door slammed nearby and she turned to look.

"Papa?"

Through the door, she saw a figure come towards her. Their face was covered with a black cloth, so she could only see a pair of silver eyes. The man wore black and on top of his clothing was a combat vest. She gasped, knowing all of a sudden that this was a TFO.

She turned to grab the other kids, who had just crawled out of the vent, and were staring at the bodies.

"Run!" she yelled, grabbing the hand of the nearest twin, and pulling them towards the exit.

The kids reacted with fear, as they'd been trained to do, and the four of them dropped into a sprint.

\* 3 \*

Tiras sat in the middle of a run down, but thankfully dry, sitting room. There was no natural light, just the carbide lamps all around him giving off an oddly yellow glow.

Naethan's face was displayed on an old-school cathode-tube television. The TV had been hot-wired into an older model tablet device, which talked to a very modern micro-dot camera and something with satellite relay capability. The ingenious mash of various technologies created the ability for them to have a live video chat across the country, and cheaply.

Naethan smirked. "Well, if Daeden can do the job of cell leader, you don't need to push in," he said. "Your main job is to be the regional rep."

"Main job?" asked Tiras, sensing that there was more.

Naethan sighed. "Zeir cell has had to evacuate six times in the last year due to inbound TFOs, and each time they've lost at least one Rebel. The last time an attack killed five people and their previous Leader, so--"

"There's a spy?" he barked. "That makes me even more of a liability to them! Are we *trying* to kill these folks?"

Naethan's smile was gentle. "In rooting out a spy, having a famous face can be an advantage."

Tiras lifted a hand to his forehead. "I'm bait. *Again*. This is turning into a pattern with *you*."

Naethan chuckled.

He sighed, changing topics. "So, what about these two newcomers, Red and Dragon?"

"They and their people have full clearance as allies, somewhat like the local monastery. In fact, if you can figure out how to get them to trade in the long term, it could seriously help us. I suspect they have a lot of resources we can't otherwise access."

"Sure, I'll do what I can, but they're rather squirrely about sharing any kind of personal information." He cleared his throat. "So, is there any more information about this spy?"

Naethan lifted one shoulder. "There's not much. Whoever they are, they're not directly under A0 control, and they're permanently out in the field, so they don't have a supervisor."

"Ah, that's not much help."

"No, it's not, sorry." He glanced off screen and let out a sigh. "Look, I've got to sign off, but can you go the long way home through Nen Street?"

Getting to his feet, Tiras frowned. "Sure, what do you need me to do?"

**\* 4 \***

Metaana ran, feeling panicked and afraid. The others were behind her, laughing and giggling as they did when they played dodge, but they didn't completely understand the situation. When they eventually realized how much trouble they were all in, their fear would make them falter, and that would be it.

Her instincts blared a warning and all of her thoughts and fear dropped away. Her body moved sideways to dodge a bullet. Jumping up, with a thrust of kinetic push to help, she launched over a big dumpster, and side-flipped off it again, landing back on the concrete.

A broad alley opened up to her right, and calling wordlessly for the others to follow her, she skittered around the corner. She was pretty sure that they would come back around in a big circle behind the main street, and if she aimed properly, perhaps they could get back inside the building, into the air vents, and their little safe room.

Then again, could the TFOs find the safe room? She wasn't sure of anything.

Halfway down the alley, she glanced back over her shoulder to check on the others, but could see none of them. There wasn't time to freak out, because a TFO came in behind, and started firing again. Instincts pushing her forward, she ran further into the alley. A different, louder gun went off behind her. All of the lines of potential bullet fire dissolved in her mind's eye, and she was suddenly safe.

Coming to a stop, she turned to find a TFO dead on the concrete. Her fear and confusion struck her mute, and she stared at the odd scene. Who killed the TFO? And where were Zeka and the twins? What was she to do now? How would she get the others back? Even if she could find them, how would she feed them without their parents?

All of the feelings bubbling up in her became very loud, too loud. Her fear overwhelmed her, and she let out a gasp. Her knees dropped out from under her, and she started to cry.

“It's alright, little one. You're safe now.”

A man stood on the other side of the TFO's body, in the alley entrance. He wore ripped pants, and a stained white shirt that was too big for him. He lifted both hands up to ear height, and she sensed him broadcasting an empathic signal of calm and safety.

“I'm not going to hurt you. My name is Tiras, what's yours?” Slowly, he moved to bridge the distance between them. As he got closer she saw a deep kindness in his eyes. She knew then that he wasn't a threat, besides he didn't look like a TFO.

Still crying a little, she stuck out her bottom lip. "I'm Metty. Did you shoot the bad guys?"

He smiled. "Yes, I did. It looked like they wanted to hurt you and your friends. Are you injured?"

Wiping her wrist up her face to get at the itchy tears, she shook her head. "Did they kill my cousins?"

"No, they're fine, see?" His smile widened, and he pointed up and to the side.

Her eyes followed to where he was pointing, and she saw her three cousins standing on a second level balcony. Zeka waved at her with one little hand.

The relief was instant, and a wail broke out of her like it had been there forever, waiting to escape.

The stranger approached her slowly and knelt down next to her. A gentle hand dropped onto her back, and instantly the storm inside of her calmed enough for the wail to stop. She sat up and blinked at him.

The kindness was very strong in his light blue eyes. "Want to know something awesome?"

She wiped her face with her elbow. "What?"

"It's almost lunch time."

Metty frowned, unsure why this was awesome.

The kind man chuckled. "And us Rebels have enough to share, if you want?"

Every instinct in Metty told her that this man was safe, that he wasn't lying, and that he genuinely wanted to help them. But she'd always been told by her papa not to trust strangers. With the thought about her papa, she remembered that her family was dead, and the tears returned.

"They killed them!" she whimpered, pointing at the TFO. "They killed my papa!"

The man opened his arms like he wanted a hug, but didn't lean forward to give it to her.

She whimpered again and jumped into that offer of kindness. His arms wrapped around her, and she felt safe.

**\* 5 \***

Rana Malar loved to cook. In fact, if he were free to live his life without fear of the Agency, he would immediately open a restaurant and live out the last of his days cooking for other people.

When he arrived at the building yesterday, he discovered that none of the Rebels there really

knew how to cook, so he had unofficially adopted the role of chef. The Rebel food supply was very simple, but he'd found some avian eggs, a few friable vegetables, and some spices, as well as the last of the maka bread, so he'd whipped up an omelet for Dragon.

Grinning, he looked down at the plate, a simple but nutritious meal would help her heal quickly. He lifted the plate and a glass of water from the kitchen counter, and moved out of the room.

It was a zigzagging path from the kitchen, down a hallway to the main room, and then south into another hall. He backed into the door to open it and turned, pushing through into the healing room. Many spare cots were flat against the far wall in case of new injuries, but only one was set up. Dragon lay in the cot, resting, though he sensed that she was awake.

He put a smile on his face and in his heart. "Hello, Dragon. I'm Rana, Tiras' uncle. Are you hungry?"

She let out a rumble, and turning onto her side, she slowly sat up. "Yes, I am. Thank you."

He moved towards her and put the plate on her lap with a fork, and set the glass of water down next to her on a small table, then he dragged a chair over.

She separated a forkful of food and scooped it into her mouth, letting out another rumble. "Oh, wow, I've been eating rations for ages, this is wonderful. Mm! Thank you."

Leaning back, he lifted his foot onto the other knee. "It's no trouble. I love cooking."

She grinned, purple eyes shining at him like amethyst crystals. "So, if you're Tiras' uncle, does that mean you were born in the Agency too? When did you escape?"

He shrugged. "I escaped in 2990. Tiras was supposed to come with me but didn't. I've been alone on the streets ever since. It was only in the last year or so that I've been with the Rebels."

"I'm not sure I could live on the streets, alone." She frowned. "I really need to be with other people. Not to mention, I can't imagine living without Red."

He smiled. "I was at home on the street for a long time. There's a certain peace to the quiet and sneaking around, stealing to survive. I mean, as long as you don't get caught of course..."

She snorted. "There is that."

"But once Asha found me and offered a place in the Araam Rebels, I discovered that I also quite like being around people."

"Araam? What are you doing here in Aramaan?"

"Hawk sent Tiras here and I followed. I liked the folk in Araam, but he and I have more than a decade to catch up on."

She smiled at him, nodding. "I understand completely."

"Rana!" cried out Tiras from elsewhere in the building.

He got to his feet, giving Dragon a smile, and turned back towards the central room.

"Rana! Where are you?" He cried out again.

"I'm coming, Tiras. What's up?" he said, turning the corner and walking out into the central space of the building. Tiras stood in the middle of the room with four young kids clamped onto his legs.

Rana frowned at his nephew. "So what's going on?"

"We have four very hungry and frightened small people," he said with a slight sing-song tone to his voice. "I sure hope there's enough for lunch?"

He grinned, generating a sense of welcome and safety at the children. "I was just about to start cooking, would you all want to help me?" he asked getting eye contact with each child and putting as much kindness as he could into his smile.

The four children reacted immediately to his empathic manipulations by letting go of Tiras' legs.

"Awesome," he said. "Follow me."

Tiras moved in close. "So where are the others?"

"Den said they were going to the Northern Markets to get supplies."

His nephew put an arm around his shoulder. "That's good, it'll give this lot enough time to eat, and decide whether they want to stay with us."

"We can stay?" asked the eldest, a young girl with dark hair.

"If you want to."

One of the identical twins frowned. "What if we don't?"

"Well, then we'll try and help you as much as we can, but we're not going to force you to join us." Tiras waved his arm in a welcoming fashion. "How about we eat first. I don't know about you four, but I think better when I'm not hungry!"

**\* 6 \***

Yaan came out of the narrow, constricted world of an alley, and stepped onto a sidewalk clear of pedestrians. She took a deep breath and smiled. Across the road was the northern Aramaan

street market. She enjoyed going to such places in her off time. Whichever city, the street markets always had so much color, and many interesting things to look at. Even in the poorest of areas, the street markets seemed to have the soul of the locals in them, and that soul was always joyous and hopeful, even in Agency-ravaged Arana.

Elsewhere in the city, the stores and malls were usually not safe for anyone but the rich Norms. With the armed guards, security cameras connected to the Agency facial recognition database, and their assumption that poorly dressed people must always be a threat, ordinary folks saw the malls as one way tickets to either prison or the Agency. So the various street markets had become their malls and grocery stores.

The north-Aramaan street market was fenced in by the backs of tents and strategically parked vehicles, with a clear open entrance in front of them. The sky above her was blue and unusually sunny for late autumn. Despite all that had happened recently, just standing there under that bright blue in front of the joy of a market brought her mood up.

Daeden stepped in next to her, and she glanced sideways at zem.

“So,” zey said, grinning at her. “We gotta connect to the organizer before we do anything. You still happy to pay?”

“Yeah, of course. You folks are helping us, and I have the money.”

She sensed a shimmer of tension in Den. “Uh... how much money? If... you know, if it's not rude of me to ask?”

“I have three thousand. That should be heaps to give you folks a leg up.”

Den grunted. “That's definitely enough. Come on, we'll leave the others here and go talk to the market boss.”

They stepped off the curb, crossed over to the other side, and moved into the entrance.

“So, do the Rebels get a special discount or something?”

Zey frowned. “Huh?”

“For talking to the boss?”

“Oh! No, there's two TFO units that patrol the market for Rebels, the boss has set up several rules to keep the gunfire to a minimum without having to ban us. Rule number one is to check with her first. If she thinks it's not safe, she'll veto us, if it's safe enough she'll supply us with spotters to keep an eye on the TFOs while we trade.”

“The boss is smart!”

Zey laughed. “Yes, she is.”

\* 7 \*

The four orphans ate everything on their plates and licked them clean. In the time it took Rana and Tiras to get the spare camping cots from the healing room and come back into the central space, the four children had fallen asleep in a pile.

Rana grinned at them, reminded oddly of his own children. “Sweet kids.”

Tiras nodded. “They are. Let’s put some blankets over them, and set up the cots for tonight.”

Smiling, Rana threw Tiras one of the blankets in his hands, and placed the other over the smallest child. “So did you end up having kids in the Agency with that woman—what was her name?”

Tiras let out a grumble of frustration. “Alaha. And yes, we had four kids.”

“How could you stand to be that close to her? Was she secretly nice, or something?”

Moving out of the central room, they carried the cots into the other hall, and strode down to the end where two doors opposite each other led to the two sleeping rooms.

“No, she wasn’t. In fact, the Alaha you met *was* her being nice.” Tiras sighed. “You’ve got a good instinct for kids, you think these four will want to stay?”

Moving into the left hand sleeping room, he shrugged and let out a grunt. “Kids are mostly run by their bellies and love, I’m sure once they feel safe with us, and learn that they can trust us to protect them, they’ll stick around.”

“I hope so, I can’t imagine how they’d survive on their own.”

\* \* \*

Yaan stood at a distance, watching Den and *zeir* little brother. Keton didn’t talk much, but the way he tottered around the stalls, touching everything and giggling at his new discoveries, he reminded Yaan very much of Brie’s little sister Nala when she was that age.

She watched him let go of Den’s hand, and crawl under a cloth that covered the nearest stall table.

“Nessa!” said Den, loud enough for Yaan to hear *zem*.

Yaan glanced sideways at their nearest ‘spotter’, who stood with their back to them watching the TFOs in the next line of stalls over, and moved to bridge the gap between her and Den.

“Denny! How’s the family!”

The voice was familiar. Frowning, Yaan stepped around a blackboard with prices scrawled onto it to look at the person behind the table.

“We're doing well,” said Den.

'Nessa' glanced from Den to look at her, and her eyes widened. “Red?” She laughed, and stepped around the edge of the table to offer her a broad hug.

Yaan grinned, moving in to accept the hug. “Hey! How are you?”

“Good!” Their hug was firm and left both of them grinning when they let go. “How's your other half?” she said. “Is she here too?”

“Naw, just me today. I'm paying Den's bills.” She grinned at her old school friend, whose real name was Tena, but as a Servant graduate she too had a 'safe' name.

“Really?” she said, glancing at Den and back again. “You hanging out with *zeir* lot?”

Yaan could see all of the questions Nessa wanted to ask in the micro-expressions of her face. The general standing orders were, where possible and whether Sword, Shield or Sleeper, that all Servants of the Oracle should avoid contact with the Rebels unless it was part of the mission.

She smiled. “Dragon and I got into some trouble. Den and *zeir* folk were kind enough to help us get out of it again. Hence my bribery. How big is their bill with you?”

Nessa laughed and moved back behind her stall. “We have an agreement, they pay what they can, when they can. How much you got?” She winked.

Yaan rolled her eyes. “What's the current bill, Mrs. Cheeky, and we can go from there?”

Her friend laughed. “Only a couple of hundred, though that'll go up today with the newest lot of supplies. In fact they ordered so much stuff, I've a *helper* today.”

She sensed a flicker of a *hint* in Nessa's manner, which meant that she was doing more than just introducing some random friend that she'd roped in to carry heavy things.

A young man, who she hadn't noticed, sat behind Nessa on a collapsible chair. A face of Basaan decent lifted, and a pair of golden yellow eyes glanced up at her.

“This is my friend Crow.”

The young man got to his feet and moved towards them.

Yaan smiled, lowering her chin but keeping her eyes steady. Which was a quieter version of their formal bow.

The younger man copied the gesture.

“Nice to meet you, Crow. I'm Red.” She watched his face for a reaction. “And my wife is *Dragon*, but she's not here today.”

His eyes widened a little, suggesting that he might have heard of the Sword-pair Red-Dragon. Given his youth but quiet self-confidence, and the rather rare codename of Crow, he was probably a Shield like her sister Eagle.

“Pleasure to meet you, Red,” he said, with an accent that suggested he was from Triumph Island, and not mainland Haven City.

“And Crow,” continued Nessa. “This is Daeden Yen. Zeir sister Kasa is probably somewhere nearby, and the little fellow under the table is their brother Keton.”

Crow turned and offered a hand to shake across the table. The moment Den and Crow's eyes and palms met, Yaan sensed a shimmer of white static, followed by a gentle flow of physical attraction between them.

She smirked at Nessa, who would have also felt the energetic interaction.

“Hey, Den!” called out Kasa, as she jogged back towards them with Aneiya in tow. “I found a supply of medical grade plaster, you think we could get some?”

Den let go of Crow's hand, and turned to grin at zeir sister. “Might want to ask our bank roll. She's the one with the means and the will.”

Yaan laughed. “Yeah, sure. How much is it?”

“Thirty?”

She shuffled with the Aranan notes from her pocket and gave her double that amount. “Go on then, get something fun too.”

“Thank you, Red!”

Someone whistled very loudly, and the group turned to see their escort waving at them from the gap between stall tables, indicating that a TFO unit was likely coming their way.

“Alright,” said Nessa with an authoritative bark. “You three scrappy ones come and hide in the back. The boxes are mostly Psi suppressant, so unless they're really persistent, they shouldn't feel you.”

Yaan stepped back allowing Den, Kasa, and Aneiya to rush inside the tent, and out of sight.

**\* 8 \***

Shield Crow stood at the Haven trade stall, and attempted to look like he'd done that kind of job before. Nessa was the primary trader through the shell company that ran many stalls across each

of the Aramaan street markets. Many of their stalls sold bigger, more expensive stock like vehicle parts and technology, but this particular outlet sold small items like basic food supplies, utensils, and cooking implements. There were boxes of microwaves in the back, and some clothing options as well. He understood that this stall was specifically for the things that Haven had authorized to trade with the Aranan Rebels.

He glanced down and saw the young one, Keton staring up at him with dark eyes. He sensed fear building up in the five year old, so he gave him a broad smile, tinged with a tiny empathic bump of safety. He wouldn't let little Keton be hurt or taken by the Agency.

Crow leaned forward, reaching for a tray in the very front of the table which held a variety of confectionery. He grabbed one packet, which was a long piece of stretchy, chewy candy dipped in a sweet powder, and was also the only piece of food on the table that was certified as safe for the four most common food allergies. Pulling out his pocket knife, he cut the wrapping open, and leaned down to give Keton the treat.

“Here you go, it's on me.”

Keton's eyes were huge as he reached for the candy. He brought it in close to his body, and grinned at it like Crow had given him pirate treasure.

Crow smiled and stood upright.

The older woman, Red, stood with her back to the rest of the market. Every inch of her body position and micro expressions looked, at least from a non-Psi point of view, like an ordinary person who was very carefully sorting through the stock on the table, trying to make a decision about what she was going to buy. What psychic things he could sense mirrored this as well, except that he could feel her absolute attention and awareness of her surroundings, which wasn't out of character for a market that had regular TFOs patrolling it.

She sighed and glanced at him. “I used to know a Crow. He was much older than you, of course, but his grasp of moral philosophy was impressive.”

Crow suppressed his urge to snort. She was gently telling him that she knew his mentor.

“He was also not a person to train with if you just wanted a gentle spar.”

He grinned at her. She knew that he knew that they were both Servants of the Oracle, and now they had a common friend. He shrugged. “I agree with him, actually. Why train at all if you're not going to go hard out?”

“I guess.” She glanced sideways and her back straightened.

The shift in body language was a sign that the Agency was close. He took a deep breath and

made himself calm. He was just a volunteer helping a friend with her stall. “Hey Nessa, have you found Red's bill yet?” he said over his shoulder.

Nessa, who was in the back probably trying to hide the Rebels as best she could, now knew that the Agency was close.

“Yep, just found it. Your filing system sucks, boy!”

He rolled his eyes, playing the part that they'd already discussed. “Sorry, at least my *accounting* is better than yours.”

She pushed through the cloth that hid the back part of the tent from view, and came out with what looked like an account book.

“Cheeky boy!” She laughed. “So, how much can you pay, Red?”

Two TFOs in their black fatigues and bullet proof vests had stopped, and stood either side of Red, one looking at their candy, the other at the pyramid of stacked cans. Crow sensed that both were bored and hot from the sun, but despite their apparent lack of interest in them, it took a lot of focus for him to keep his body externally relaxed.

Red lifted out a roll of cash from one pocket. “Will five hundred clear a good amount of my bill?”

“Oh, yes! And put it in the positive!” said Nessa, sounding completely normal and relaxed, despite being so close to two people who would be perfectly fine in murdering all of them if they found out they were hiding the Rebels in the back. “You want change, or just let it overlap with next month's bill?”

“Ah,” Red shrugged. “May as well let it tick over. Can you give me a receipt? The accountant is getting twitchy about all of these cash buys.”

“Sure,” said Nessa. “You think you can find the receipt book, kiddo?” She stared at him, eyes widening a little as if emphasizing something.

This meant she thought it best that he went out back. It was a good idea, just in case the Rebels needed a quick extraction.

He deliberately let out a chuckle. “I know my filing isn't perfect, but I'm sure I can find the receipt book.” He smiled at Red. “I won't be long.”

Moving at a relaxed pace, he stepped through the curtain and into the 'back' of the tent. Microwave boxes were stacked to the right of him in a 'U' shape, and the three Rebels were crouched in the gap.

Daeden had a light about zem that Crow couldn't quite put his finger on. He smiled first at

Den, and then at the two women. “*You understand sign language?*” he asked with his hands.

All three grinned at him and the third, whose name he hadn't been told, signed very quickly. “*It's my first language.*”

He grinned. “*That's good. I want you three to be ready to run. If they become aggressive, I'll get you out.*”

“Do you take Agency credits?” asked a voice outside.

“No, sorry,” answered Nessa. “You want some candy?”

The TFO grumbled. “Yeah, haven't eaten since dawn and I'm starving.”

“Well, hows about you give me your lovely shiny watch, and I'll give you half of the candy, and a dozen meal bars. Berry chocolate, fine with you?”

Someone laughed. “Deal!”

“Come on, Nen! We gotta do another loop!” whined a second voice.

“Just a second!”

Crow heard the rustle of a paper bag, there was a pause, and then Nessa's voice sounded again. “There you go.”

“Thanks!”

He watched the three Rebels, as all four of them waited for a sign that it was safe again.

Next to him the curtain was pulled open and Nessa was smiling. “Clear,” she said quietly.

**\* 9 \***

“OK,” said Tiras. “You each get a cot, and a bag of stuff. Anything that's on or under your cot is yours, and no one will take it from you.”

The littlest of the four children, Zeka, giggled and crawled under his cot like it was the best game in the world. The twins moved their cots together and sat down on top. Young Metaana just stood next to hers and stared up at him with big eyes.

He smiled and sat down on the floor in front of her. “Metty, are you alright?”

“All our stuff... is... is back...” Her voice petered out as if she couldn't possibly finish her sentence.

“We could go back together, or I could go, if you don't want to and get some things for you?”

Her chin dropped and he sensed a nawing terror in her. “What about the TFOs?”

“Well, they usually function in independent groups of four, which means unless they were a special high ranking unit, no one else will know that they're gone yet, let alone why. So it should be clear.”

She frowned at him. “And how do you know so much?”

He grinned. “Because I used to be in the Agency, I was trained to be a unit commander.”

“You're a TFO?” she squeaked. “But you're a person! People can't be TFOs!”

“I'm not a TFO, Metty. I'm a Rebel, but a lot of Rebels used to be in the Agency. Some would have been TFOs too. But they left. They ran away so they didn't have to be TFOs any more.”

“Oh,” she said.

He could see the confusion on her face, but understood instinctively that talking more about it wouldn't help. “So, would you like me to go back to your house and grab some stuff for you?”

“I'll come. You won't know what's important or how to get inside the secret place.”

He shrugged. “Alright.”

Tiras turned his head to look at Rana, but his uncle predicted what he was going to ask. “Yes, I'll keep an eye on these three, we can maybe hang out with Dragon in the healing room. You go, if the others get back with supplies before you return I'll tell Den what's happening.”

“Thanks, Uncle.”

\* \* \*

Tiras waited in the hallway with his back to the bodies of Metaana's family. Metty had moved inside the building, and past the dead as if they were bits of rubber. He couldn't tell without a telepathic intrusion if this was an unhealthy disconnection, or simply a coping mechanism that would resolve later once she'd spent more time feeling safe.

Metty had climbed into an open air vent in the wall, and told him to stay there while she got her precious things from their secret place, so, showing her the trust he hoped to build, he waited patiently.

In the momentary silence, his attention focused on his psychic. Even without kinetic genes he could feel the empty rooms by sensing the gaps where lines of psi suppressant cut the spaces up. The outside world was dulled by the external walls, but it wasn't completely blocked off.

He turned to face the center of the building, sensing a mental rumble, as if someone was

waking from a long sleep. As their consciousness arrived in the real world, he felt the agony of the person's physical injuries burst through that awareness, and a voice cried out. They were somewhere close, but with at least one physical wall between them.

Being as respectful as he could, Tiras stepped over the bodies, and in through a door. Beyond was another hallway, dimmer than the first. It was wide with many doors along the sides leading to other areas. The place was rundown with flaking, curling wall paper, and worn carpet but it was otherwise clean. The family had obviously kept the place as tidy as they were able.

Beneath his feet, a streak of blood marred a door mat. The flash of color flowed to his left, and under the open door. He sensed the pained consciousness behind it, and reached to pull the door.

“Tiras?” said Metty's voice. “Did you leave?”

He laughed and turned to step back into the hall. “No, I just heard something and went to investigate.”

“What did you hear?” She carried a hand sewn messenger bag, made from a vegetable sack.

“I think someone's hurt.”

She stopped and stared at him. “Is it a TFO?”

He smiled. “I'm not sure, but if you stay here, I'll check, alright?”

He waited for her to nod, and turned back to the door. The person beyond had heard voices and was quiet again. Tiras was pretty sure they weren't a TFO. An Agent, even while injured would be trained to almost always respond with hostility, not hide in fearful silence.

Tiras moved to the side so he could pull the door away from the wall, but not stand in the gap. If the person had a gun, him opening up their hiding place was the most likely time that they'd try to shoot defensively. He reached and flicked the door from the wall. Beyond, there was another door, to what looked like a cupboard. He reached and pulled at it, sliding it along the wall and opening the cupboard.

There was no gunshot, only a sharp pulse of terror.

“It's OK, my name's Tiras,” he said, braving a look inside.

A man lay in among cleaning supplies. His face was pale, and there was blood over one arm, which spilled onto his chest.

“I'm a Rebel, not an Agent. What's your name?”

“Hannel,” he gasped.

“Papa?” called Metty from the other room.

The man let out a gasp. "Metaana?"

"Papa!" She shot through the door, past Tiras, and jumped onto the injured man.

He let out a grunt of pain, but wrapped one arm around the young girl. "Oh, Metty! I thought they'd taken you!"

"Nope!" she said with a great deal of pride. "Never!"

Sobbing with joy and relief, the man pulled Metty closer, and they put their foreheads together. "You know how much I love you, Metty?"

She giggled. "As much as the stars in the sky!"

"More!" he said, sniffing. "As much as *every* star in the universe, even the ones we can't see."

Sensing that the game they were playing was a part of Hannel's system of reassuring and comforting his daughter, Tiras joined in.

"That's a lot of stars!" he said, smiling at them. "Billions and billions. That's so many stars, I dare say no person could count them all even if they started as a kid, and went on counting until their old age!"

Metty giggled, seeming to realize that this too was a game.

"So," Tiras grinned. "Hannel, you look like you need some medical attention. You think you can, with some help, walk two blocks, and come spend some time with the Rebels?"

"I can try. Are the other children alright?"

Tiras nodded. "Yeah, they're fine. They've had some food and a nice nap. I bet they'll be happy to see you."

**\* 10 \***

Den walked quickly with a box in zair arms, leading Crow back through the markets, towards the western edge, and their extraction point. The old van they used to own had been totaled the last time the Agency came. So, without a vehicle to the heavy lifting they'd set up a rally point where they could leave all of their newly bought supplies, and the others waiting there would then start moving them back home on foot.

Crow was quiet and seemed utterly content in his skin. It was a trait that Den envied a little, but it also brought a peace in Den that zey was enjoying.

“So, where's your vehicle?” asked Crow in an unfamiliar accent.

Zey shrugged. “It got busted a few weeks ago. We've a place to stash things, and we'll get it back to base on foot over the rest of the day.”

“You know Nessa has a delivery service, right? We could drop it all off at a much closer location to save your legs.”

Glancing sideways at him, Den wondered cynically what that would cost.

Crow seemed to read zey expression, and started to laugh. “Let me rephrase that: how about I drive it there as a favor? No charge.”

Zey smirked, realizing that zey new friend must be an empath. “Sorry. I'm so used to everyone trying to get a meal out of us. That would be very helpful, thank you. Where's the car?”

“Just up there, the blue van.”

They moved out through the market entrance into the street. Across the road, zey could see a blue van parked facing the 'wrong' way. It was a bright ocean blue and very shiny. This meant it had to be new. With the city bordering on the edge of the desert the winds from the north always brought iron sand particles, which quickly dulled the shine of most things.

“Awesome,” zey said. “Once we're loaded, I'll go to the others, and let them know what we're doing.”

“Are they far?”

“No,” Den shook zey head. “There's an old Rebel safe house just the next block over.”

\* \* \*

Yaan and Nessa moved around a corner in the markets, a box each in their arms. They were moving the Rebel's supplies from Nessa's other, bigger site in the center of the markets to the smaller stall. Yaan had a sense in her gut that something was wrong, and wasn't quite sure how to ask Nessa what she knew without breaching protocol. Nessa had to know something about what was going on otherwise she wouldn't have offered to do the extra leg work for the Rebels.

Next to her, Nessa let out a deep sigh and glanced sideways. “You know, our mutual friend at the Academy told me that young Crow is considered a prodigy.”

“He is?” Yaan said, feeling a flicker of disbelief.

Nessa smirked. “Yep, that's why he's called Crow.”

The name Crow, particularly 'Shield Crow', was a special codename. It could only be

awarded to a Servant by the Oracle or another Crow. He must have been special indeed for their mutual friend, Crow the second, to have allowed the young man to take the name.

She frowned. “*But they only send the best Shields for the worst situations,*” she thought. Yaan let out an offensive Kranan swear phrase that she'd learned from her mother. “We're going to be in trouble, aren't we?”

“Exactly my point,” muttered Nessa.

Ahead of them, due to the angle they were walking, Yaan could see a TFO unit moving across from the left, down an intersecting path between stalls. She swept her eyes around to check for any obvious Rebels or people they might target. To her right, she noticed Kasa walking on an intersecting path.

Yaan let out another offensive curse phrase. “We're in trouble *now!*” She handed her box to Nessa. “I'll grab Kasa, can you get Anei and Keton out?”

Her friend rolled her eyes. “Sure. Even though it's not my job.”

Yaan smirked over her shoulder. “You know you like saving the day!”

Behind her, there was a snort.

She ran, hoping not to look desperate, just perhaps somewhat rushed, to bridge the gap between herself and Kasa. She managed to jump in front of the young woman just before she came into sight of the TFO patrol.

Surprised, Kasa stopped, still thankfully under cover. “What's up?”

With her back to the crowd, Yaan made her face very grave, but her voice quite melodious as if she was happily excited about something. “Oh, I saw this amazing broach on a stall back that way, we should totally go look at it before we leave.”

Kasa's frown was confused, but she seemed to understand that something was wrong. “OK?”

“I'll show you!” she bubbled, grabbing the fifteen year old's hand, and they rushed back the way Kasa had come.

“What? What's happening?” she asked, as they moved out of sight.

“TFOs. You were just about to walk into them. Come on, lets get you out of here.”

Kasa yanked her hand away. “What about Keton?”

“Don't worry, Nessa has gone to get him and Anei, and we can check-in with them from behind her stall, just up here.”

**\* 11 \***

Den and Crow were heading back towards Nessa's stall to pick up the next lot of supplies. Zey walked quickly and Crow kept up. Mid-stride Den stopped walking to look around. Nothing had changed, the market looked as it always did, but something wasn't right.

“What is it?” asked Crow.

Den shook zeir head, unsure.

The sensation dropped suddenly into a sense of terrible danger, and at the same time, Crow grabbed zeir hand, pulling them both to the left, out of the clear space. It was then, as they ducked behind the side of a food truck, that Den felt the potential bullets building in the air.

A shot sounded and a bit of wood siding exploded above their heads. Den flinched.

“The van's not far,” said Crow as he moved through the gap. “I can leave you there and grab your siblings-”

Growling under zeir breath, Den pushed Crow out of zeir way, and turned in the opposite direction to the van, making zeir opinion on the matter clear without words.

“Fair enough,” said Crow, matching step with zem. “Have you at least got a weapon?”

Den glared at the slightly shorter man. “I'm a so'then Rebel, what do you think?”

There was a streak of mischief in his yellow eyes. “Well, then, you got a spare one for me?”

Snorting, Den grabbed zeir primary weapon from the front holster, and pulled zeir spare from the small of zeir back. “Full clip, but I've got no more for it.”

As zey handed Crow the weapon, more gunfire echoed from the direction they'd just come. Den flinched, despite having no sense of bullets anywhere near them.

**\* \* \***

Aneya sat in the back of Nessa's stall with Keton. Another friend of Nessa's was attending to the stall at the front of the tent while the others helped to move the Rebel's trade supplies as quickly as possible. The area where they sat was pretty small and packed with other supplies, but it was big enough for her and Keton to play hand slaps comfortably.

Slapping down on her hands, he grinned at his victory. “*Can we see the Tiras man again?*” he said in careful Sign.

She chuckled and activated her virtual keyboard. Keton, despite his older sibling's irritation

with Tiras' escape video, loved watching it, and asked for it whenever Den wasn't around. She found the footage, and triggered the little projector to put it on the tent wall next to them.

She glanced out through the gap in the curtain, hoping to see a familiar face sometime really soon. There was a lot of tension in the body language of the others, it felt as if the combatant folks were bracing for something terrible, particularly Nessa and Red. Observing all of that tension and not knowing the nature of the threat created a chilly fear inside her. All she wanted was to be home where it was mostly safe.

Glancing back, she saw that Keton wasn't watching the video, but looking around him as if he could hear something.

She frowned, tapping him on the shoulder. *"What is it?"*

*"Buzz-buzz."* He used his special sign for the sound of drones.

Clearing the video, Nei flicked through the different layers of her device's programming to see what networks were around. Usually an Agency drone had wireless access to the facial recognition database, which meant if they were relatively close, she might be able to hack into them or at the very least track their locations.

Her computer's projection showed a simple map of the area between the three local cell towers. The image showed an outline of the roads and buildings, and centered in the image was the city block where the market was situated. Five dots orbited the middle in crooked loops. There was usually one drone assigned per TFO team, so this was bad.

Anei huffed. They had to get out of there, all of them. She turned off her interface and started signing quickly. *"Can you call out to Kasa in your mind, and tell her that there are five buzz-buzz here?"*

He nodded and closed his eyes.

As she waited for the response, which was likely to quickly evacuate, Anei turned her attention to hacking.

When she was in the zone with her Talent, the digital world felt like color and sensation. As she moved her system's code into the signal for the nearest drone, she felt a jolt of pressure. A scent of citris burst into her nostrils, and there was a warm breeze brushing over her skin. They were all sensory illusions, just her Talent talking to her of the digital world in terms with which her brain was already familiar, but they were vivid enough for their lack of 'realness' to not matter.

The program locks; accessed via passwords, were like great doors made of cool stone and steel. She smirked and they came apart easily, dropping like a curtain.

She was in.

With a flick of her wrist, she overloaded the drone's systems, forcing it to fly at increasingly faster speeds over the roofs of the tents and trailers that formed the market structure. She watched through its front camera as it reached full speed.

The feed cut off as it plowed into the brick wall of a nearby building.

Keton put a hand on her arm, breaking her out of the programming trance, and she opened her eyes.

*"Kasa says we have to go now."*

As she was nodding, the curtain next to her opened wide, and she looked up into the face of Nessa.

The older woman was smiling. *"We have to get you two out of here."*

**\* 12 \***

Crow sprinted to keep up with Den, who zigzagged around market customers as if they were bullets, and made their way up the line towards the back end of Nessa's smaller stall.

He'd been on active duty as a Shield for three years now, and never in that time had he a Target who was capable of looking after themselves in a fight. He was so used to protecting and extracting a non-combatant Target that Den's unwillingness to be extracted was somewhat exacerbating. But, if he had younger siblings who might be under fire, he probably wouldn't let some stranger get him to safety, he'd want to go in and get them too.

He heard the whirring sound of a quad-copter drone above him and kept his chin down to minimize the chance of it getting a picture. Thankfully, the thing was flying very fast, and shot past him too swiftly to get a scan.

Ahead and running towards them through the crowd were Red and Kasa. They met in the middle directly behind Nessa's tent, all four of them coming to a stop in front of each other.

Kasa was gasping. "Anei says there's at least five TFO units here!"

"That's... a lot," answered Den.

Crow nodded. "Twenty TFOs is a bit of an overkill for a public street market."

"Someone must have rang the tip-line or one of the Rebels got caught on facial recognition," Red replied, brushing away her words with a hand gesture. "But none of that matters, we just gotta

get out of here.”

“Crow, you got the keys to the van?” barked Nessa as she stepped around the nearest tent sides, dragging both Keton and the young hacker with her. Nessa had put clean long sleeved shirts on them, which covered their rags pretty well, likely to make them less of a target for the TFOs.

He lifted his eyebrows, giving her a wordless affirmation. Diving into the back pocket of his jeans, he threw the keys into the air for her.

She caught them as she moved completely out of cover. “Right, us three will head straight for the van as if we're scared civilians. Good luck, you four.”

As they moved past, the woman following Nessa used sign language to talk to Den.

*“I'll work on the drones when I can.”*

“Thanks,” Den answered.

Watching the three of them rush away, Red sighed. “As far as I can sense, the TFOs are in all directions. Those three might get through but we won't. Anyone got ideas?”

Crow took a deep breath and as he let it out again, he reached deep into his spirit to find a way through where everyone survived. The path through was buzzy with static. It was wobbly with motion that zigzagged and looped. At the end of it, he sensed pain, but not death.

“There's a way through,” he said, as he opened his eyes again. “Yaan and Kasa should go east, looping around the near edges of the market, and that should avoid direct combat. We'll punch a hole through the middle to draw their attention away from you.”

Yaan stared at him for a moment, her eyebrows jolting up in surprise, then her mouth closed and he sensed determination. “Alright, come on Kasa.”

Glancing over his shoulder, he smiled at Den.

Zeir voice was quiet but not at all angry. “You didn't even ask if I wanted to rush head long into some TFOs.”

Crow smirked. “You're still coming with me, though, aren't you?”

A snort burst out of zem. “Of course!”

**\* 13 \***

Den shuffled through a gap between two stall tents, following Crow towards the noise of gunfire. It sounded as if the TFOs were firing randomly at people, which wasn't a typical behavior.

Sure, if they were penetrating a known Rebel location they tended to kill everyone, but legally speaking they were not supposed to attack Norm civilians.

Ahead of zem, Crow slowed down, and signaled with one hand for zem to 'halt'. He crouched, and Den was able to look over his head to see out into the broad aisle beyond. A woman lay out in the open with her back to them. There were splotches of blood all over her clothing as if someone else had died standing very close to her, but there was also a decent sized wound marring the middle of her back with more blood. Den was too far away to tell if she was dead or alive, but given the size of the blood pool and the position on her back, it was likely that if she wasn't dead, she certainly would be before help arrived.

Den glanced around. To the right led west back towards the streets and Nessa's blue van, to the east felt dangerous. As if to underscore zey instincts, a blast of automatic weapons fire burst from that direction.

Crow tapped zem on the leg and started signing when zey looked down.

*“We have to draw their fire to allow Red and your sister to get around them. You happy to pick a fight?”*

Den grinned. *“It's my specialty.”*

Crow let out a bark of laughter, and signaled for zem to follow.

They moved together, turning left, each aiming their weapons out ahead. As they approached a group of TFOs, they fired at the same time, taking out the four TFOs with two shots each.

A second group came in from their right. Den ducked quickly under a line of potential gunfire, and skipped north toward an ice-cream trailer for cover.

Crow followed close in behind, jumping behind the trailer with zem a moment later.

\* \* \*

Yaan held Kasa's hand tight as they weaved around the running, panicked people. Intermittent gunfire sounded from all around them, and they'd already come across a couple of bodies. The TFOs seemed to be randomly shooting at people as they searched, which was weird behavior for them.

A blast of noise echoed to their right, and Yaan pulled them left into a gap between stalls. She only had her handgun and throwing knives on her, having not expected to need her larger blades for a walk through the market. She pulled the gun out and checked that it was loaded.

“Do you know how to use one of these?” she said, glancing at Kasa.

The young woman's eyes were wide and she shook her head. “Not really, I'd like to learn, though.”

“Maybe there'll be time for that later.” Yaan put away the handgun in its belt-holster. She took off her scarlet coat, and put it over Kasa's shoulders.

“Why are you giving me your jacket?”

“If you look like you have money, they're less likely to shoot you.”

Kasa frowned, but she lifted her arms into the sleeves. Flinching, she squeaked and put one hand on her shoulder, pulling out a blade from their specially sewn pocket. “What is this--?”

“Throwing blades,” said Yaan, grabbing it from her fingers and slotting it back into its place inside the coat shoulder. “Try not to lose any of them, they're really expensive to replace.”

She did up the clasps across Kasa's stomach to hide her rag clothing. She was shorter than Yaan, so the hem of it touched the ground. It was also loose around her middle in a way which made it obvious that it didn't belong to her, but it also served to make her look younger than her fifteen years, so the mismatch in size could be an advantage with TFOs, who weren't supposed shoot either kids or Norm civilians.

Yaan wasn't a Shield or trained to protect an unarmed person on her own. Swords, when on protection detail, tended to do such missions in groups of ten or twelve, and with a safe position from which to defend said person. She felt somewhat out of her depth, and definitely wished that Brii was with her, but the reality of the situation was that whether or not she was trained for this situation, they were in it, so she just had to do her best.

She took a deep breath, releasing her fear with her exhale, and moved around the back of the tent, pulling Kasa with her.

\* \* \*

Aneya couldn't run and hack at the same time, but she had the map on the tiny wrist display, so that she could at least monitor the drones' locations.

The Rebels had known Nessa for many years, in fact Den's family had been trading with Nessa when Aneya escaped the Agency four years ago. With that history in mind, Nei was sure that while Nessa obviously didn't want to be risking herself by helping them, she would still try.

Nei glanced down at the little screen and noticed how close one of the dots were. Not

bothering to try and make the right noises to warn Nessa, she grabbed the older woman's arms, and pulled her to the side behind a food truck. The three of them, herself, Nessa, and little Keton all lost their balance, and tripped into the clear space between the truck and a small tented stall.

Lying on her side, with Nessa on top of her, Nei opened her eyes and looked right into the gap under the food truck. Three terrified faces stared back at her from underneath, and she felt their fear vibrate the air.

She smiled at the hiding civilians to at least let them know that they weren't TFOs, or likely to shoot them. She felt Nessa move, and, in the restricted space between truck and tent, they dislodged from each other. Nei reached to touch Keton's hair, and check to see if he was alright.

The little boy, likely sensing her concern smiled.

Nessa tapped her arm and she looked up.

*"What was that about?"*

Nei pointed at her wrist device. *"Drone."*

*"Is it gone?"*

Nei checked the interface to find three drones were flying really close. She shook her head. *"No. I'll try and disable them."*

She flicked her hands, engaging the gesture software, and focused on the device.

A tingle shimmered up her spine as her Talent flared up. She could almost taste the wifi signal that the drones were using, and she dove her digital fingers into it.

Copying code from her cloud drive, she created a ghost signal, so that they talked to her device through the cell towers while thinking they were communicating with their server. Then when the mask was properly accepted by each of the four drones, she disconnected them from their own server, so that even if they got a scan of any Rebel face, they wouldn't be able to find out whether or not that face was on the Traitor list.

One drone sensed the disconnect and kept re-initializing its real connection, so she focused her attentions on that one. Inside its shell the programming felt like two breezes, one bitterly cold, the other tropical, and both brushing over her skin from different directions. The code was more up to date than the previous one, and she saw a number of sub-functions which she hadn't come across before. This drone either came from a higher ranking Agency department, or was simply brand new. As she hacked further into its code, searching for an off switch, she started making copies of the new sections. If they were indicative of future upgrades, then it would be helpful to go through them line by line when they returned home, so she could hack them faster the next time.

It took longer than she wanted, but after breaking through a wall, she finally got into the core chip. Steering it, she aimed the quad copter towards a brick wall and increased its speed.

Her body twitched as her Talent gave her some feedback as the drone smashed.

The last three drones were humming away happily, not realizing that they were disconnected from their servers. They were the low rank kinds that were everywhere and fairly easy to hack. Pretending to be their server controller, she sent them the order to purge their memory banks of data, and when that order came back as having been obeyed, she instructed them to rush full speed at the nearest building. That would sort them.

She disconnected from the interface and freed her hands. As she glanced at Nessa, the older woman flinched as if there was a sound very close to them.

*“Drones are clear,”* signed Anei. *“What's happening?”*

*“Gunfire,”* She signaled, pointing south behind Nei. *“We have to get up, get away.”*

Nei nodded as she stood, helping little Keton to his feet.

**\* 14 \***

Straggling behind the others on their walk home, Senaan heard the gunfire before anyone else. He stopped walking to listen, at first unsure what he'd even heard.

Another burst of automatic fire was clear in the air. *“Hey, you guys! You hear that?”*

*“What?”* barked Grena over her shoulder.

*“Sounds like gunfire. And it's coming from the market.”*

Grena turned around properly and stopped to listen. More sounds of combat confirmed his observation, and she swore. *“We gotta help the others, come on!”*

They ran together back up the street, dodging around the occasional pedestrian. Senaan only had a single clip of bullets on him, which wasn't much to go into combat with. He hoped that he hadn't completely exhausted his kinetic muscles the other day, or he would be in trouble pretty quickly.

Senaan led them around a corner, and into sight of the empty lot that was used for the markets. This side seemed empty of people, without customers nor even people attending to stalls. A lone body lay in the middle of the entrance. Glancing up and down the road, he checked, but there were no TFO transport trucks on this side. Another round of automatic weapons fire told him that

while no one was near them some TFOS were definitely in there.

The three of them moved across the road, past a very new, shiny blue van, and into the market.

In the entrance, Grena leaned down to check on the body. “Not one of ours,” she said standing up again.

“How do we find them in this mess?” asked Yakaan.

Senaan shook his head. “I don't know, but if they're alright, they'll be heading in this direction.”

“What, so we should stay here?” barked Yakaan. “What if they need help in there?”

Sen growled. “And how exactly do we find them? Are you a telepath? Because I ain't!”

Grena, who was unofficially more senior than either of them hissed. “Shh! Find cover and wait. Get ready to retreat if we see too many TFOs.”

Sen shook his head at her. “But we can't abandon them!”

“Do we even know that they're still in there? They could be free, and heading back home for all we know. Just find cover!”

\* \* \*

Crow and Den had moved together, looping around the main group of TFOs, distracting and picking them off. There had been no need to speak or orient their combat, it was as if their instincts knew what the other intended do and did most things in concert. For Crow it was almost like he was on this mission with one of his fathers or his older brother; as if he and Den had trained and fought together for many years.

They rushed away again, back around the corner out of sight of the six TFOs. As they jogged in a loop back at the enemy, Crow watched Den reload zair hand gun. Crow had been counting bullets, and knew without checking that he only had one bullet in his clip.

In the air above them, two drones rushed past, and sped headlong into the wall of a nearby apartment building, smashing to pieces.

“Was that your hacker friend?” He grinned sideways at Den.

Den lifted zair chin. “Nei is very good.”

Zair gun clicked, it was reloaded. They both took a breath and their instincts aligned again. Together, they ran back around into the clear area where the TFOs stood. The group seemed to have

worked out some kind of pattern in their attacks, and were lifting their weapons up to fire their autos.

Crow skipped right as Den moved left away from him. The Agents started shooting again, and Crow's instincts pulled him in a zigzag pattern to avoid being shot. Sprinting left again towards Den, he ducked into a side-flip to evade another line of bullets.

Landing low to the ground, Crow rolled over his shoulder to get in close to a TFO. Knocking their knee out, they lost balance and fell back. He twisted around them, catching them with one arm, and pushing them backwards over his knee, so he could expose their vulnerable stomach. Lifting his spare arm high, he smashed his elbow down onto that bare tummy.

The TFO wheezed what would have been a scream of agony, and Crow dropped him.

A shimmer of static brushed up his body like a cool breeze as he got to his feet, and he knew it was time to start retreating; Kasa and Red were out of immediate danger.

As if also sensing the need to withdraw, Den stepped in close, and was firing at the remaining Agents.

Crow brought out his almost empty gun and aimed at the final four TFOs. Together, he and Den zigzagged backwards to the nearest cover.

When they were out of sight of the Agents, they both dropped their gun hands, and sprinted west down through the central aisle of the market. Ahead of them, he could see the main entrance and the street beyond.

**\* 15 \***

Senaan hid behind an old caravan. Someone had parked it perpendicular to the entrance so that it became a part of the outer boundary. It was made of light metal and unless someone was storing something like concrete blocks inside, it was probably a very poor bullet shield, but at least it formed a decent enough visual cover so that he could watch the line of market stalls in relative safety. Yakaan had parked himself on the other side of the entrance behind a big white tent that formed the back of a fairly large stall.

Glancing around the edge of the caravan, Senaan watched out for the others. He heard foot steps and leaned out to see Aneya running towards him.

He lowered his gun and moved out of cover to meet her. Following in behind Nei was one of

their regular traders, and behind her ran young Keton.

It was as he reached for Nei, signaling that she should keep running, that he heard the sound of gunfire.

\* \* \*

Yaan ran with Kasa. They jogged along the western edge of the markets. Most of the stalls on that side were backed by vehicles and fencing, so they had to run down along the front of the market to escape.

She kept her eyes peeled and senses open wide for the need to dodge.

They neared the main entrance. Coming towards them from the other direction was Aneiya, Keton, and Nessa, and as they turned to get out onto the street, Yaan sensed the danger.

Silver lines of potential bullets filled the air. They were spread over the entire the entrance, covering not only where Nessa ran with young Keton, but also over her and Kasa.

“Watch out, Kasa!” she cried as she deliberately fell sideways on top of her, knocking the girl to the ground.

\* \* \*

Crow ran with Den, their steps matching. They sprinted towards the entrance. It wasn't far now. Gunfire sounded behind them, and both of them skittered sideways out of danger. Ahead, Crow saw young Keton running. He was right in range of the TFOs behind them.

Next to him, Den cried out. “Keton!”

As zey reached for zeir brother, Crow felt another line of bullets. He jumped in close, wrapping an arm around zem, as he tried to drag Den down with him.

They fell together as the TFOs fired another burst.

\* \* \*

Without giving her a warning, Senaan used kinetic arms to pull Aneiya through the entrance, and out of range. So he didn't accidentally dump her onto the road, he lifted her up first before very gently putting her feet on the ground. Her eyes were wide with surprise.

“*Find cover!*” he signed.

He turned around again to find that lying in the entrance, not a meter from the dead body was their trader friend, Nessa with little Keton under her. He ran to bridge the distance.

Four TFOs strode towards him, their guns raised. Kneeling, Senaan reached to check on their trader friend, while also not taking his eyes off the TFOs.

She had a wound on her back and was unconscious, but still breathing.

The Agents stopped walking, their stance powerful, speaking wordlessly of superiority and dominance. They thought he was unarmed and alone, and were gloating.

Senaan got to his feet, visually and physically standing his ground. He wasn't afraid.

The TFOs reacted to him by snarling, lifting their weapons and moving to bridge the distance.

He smirked at them, drawing in as much strength as he could. When the force peaked inside him, he yelled, letting it out of him and throwing at at the TFOs. The thrust hit their four vests with a blast strong enough to throw them down the length of the thoroughfare, and come crashing down onto a long stall table at the far end.

**\* 16 \***

From the ground, Yaan watched the Agents fly into the air pushed along by the leading edge of a very strong kinetic wave. As they landed, she felt a sudden and profound sense of well-being overcome the fear in her. They were safe; no more threats were in their immediate vicinity, at least none that were conscious.

As soon as she rolled off Kasa, the girl got to her feet and sprinted to check on her little brother. Yaan followed at a slower pace, warily glancing around her.

Standing over Kasa, Yaan watched her free young Keton from Nessa's arms, and then put healing hands either side of the wound in Nessa's back.

While the healing happened, Yaan closed her eyes to open all of her senses, feeling the where, who, and what around them. A few meters up the aisle lay two people near a stall table. There were two heartbeats, but one of them was rapid, suggesting that they were injured.

She moved towards them, unsure if they were allies or civilians.

By the time she got to them, Den had pushed zeir way out from under Crow. Zey had zeir

fingers to his neck. Crow's lips were blue, and as she got closer she saw the blood on him.

“He took the bullet for me,” said Den, zeir voice wobbling with emotion. “Why did he do that?”

She wanted to answer with the truth; that it was his job, but procedure required her not to specifically identify a fellow Havenite.

Grinning deliberately, she put a hand on zeir shoulder. “Some people are just *obnoxiously* heroic.”

Den snorted. “True.”

“Den!” called out Kasa as she and Keton jogged towards them. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, but Crow isn't.”

Kasa got onto her knees. “We'll see about that!”

There was more gunfire in the periphery and Yaan looked around, hoping it would stay at a distance.

“We need to evac as soon as possible,” said Yaan.

Den got to zeir feet, and taking Keton's hand, zey moved towards the entrance. Three other Rebels stood there, staring at zem.

“Alright, we're going to steal Nessa's van, and bring them back to base. Senaan?” zey said. “There's a blue van parked out on the street. The pretty shiny one, I need you to carry Nessa to it. She's got the keys on her, so you can also unlock the van for us.”

The man who'd thrown four TFOs about twenty meters, nodded. “Yes, shan,” he said, immediately picking Nessa up into his arms.

Den turned around and she could see a confidence in zem that she hadn't seen before. “Red, once Kasa has healed Crow, can you carry him?”

She dropped her chin for a moment, showing both agreement and respect to zeir rank in the group.

“The rest of us will probably have to cram into the van or get home on foot.”

**\* 17 \***

It had taken a long time to walk Hannel and young Metana the two blocks back to the Rebel building. By the time Tiras could see their front door, he was practically carrying Hannel. He'd

managed to make a simple tourniquet for the bullet wound in Hannel's arm, but he'd already lost a lot of blood and it felt to Tiras as if he was about to pass out.

Tiras tightened his grip around the younger man's middle. "Come on, Hannel. Stay awake, we're almost there!"

Hannel let out a rumble and Tiras sensed through their physical contact that he didn't want to be awake any more.

Young Metty moved to the other side of her father and grabbed his hand. "Come on, papa! I can see the doors! You gotta keep on going like the man with the cloak of stars!"

Her voice seemed to charge Hannel just a little bit. His consciousness held onto her like she was an anchor in a terrible storm. Tiras understood that if they were to get him up the street and inside, her voice was the way to do it.

"Can you tell me the story of the man with the cloak of stars?" Tiras asked.

She seemed to understand that Tiras wasn't asking for himself but for her father. "Papa! Come on, help me tell the story!"

He moaned, unable to say words, but he tried.

"Alright, I'll start. So the sky used to be a glass dome! And the sun and the moons and the stars all danced across the dome. The glass kept everything separate, us down here, from the space and the stars up there. The sun didn't come too close to burn us, and the moons had a surface to dance on, like ice skaters. And the stars all hugged the dome. But then one day a trickster god came along and broke the glass! All of the things in the sky fell down onto us. We were all drowning in the stars and the moons and the sun with no space or time between them." She took a deep breath, yanking on Hannel's shirt. "What happens next, papa? Papa? Should I tell him what happens next then?"

Tiras smiled at the young one. She was brave and strong, and so loving. She reminded him intensely of his daughter, Nola. Looking both ways, he checked for traffic, and then the three of them moved carefully across.

"Well," she said. "A nice god came along and tried to help. Zey wasn't all powerful, but nearly. Zey noticed a beetle that rolled a giant ball of mud around, so the nice god picked an especially strong beetle, and made it grow huge. The nice god put the beetle and the sun back in the sky, so the beetle would roll the sun around, and return the night and day to the world. Then the nice god called up the east and west winds to help. The nice god split the two winds so that now there were two east winds and two west winds, like twins! Zey took the spare winds and tied their tails to

the moons, one each, and put them into the skies together. The winds then began to blow, dragging the moons across the night sky. Finally, the nice god was left to try and catch all of the stars, but they were like kids playing tag, and couldn't be slowed down. So zey made a great big rainbow cloak and used it like a net to capture them, and after being trapped zey sewed them into the cloak.”

They got to the doors of the Rebel building, and Tiras leaned forward to push them open. He slowly pulled the nearly unconscious Hannel inside. Once the doors were behind them, the younger man's knees dropped out, and the two of them slipped to the floor.

He untangled himself and gently repositioned Hannel's body onto his side, with his injured arm on top.

Tiras listened to the building to find out where Rana might be. He couldn't telepathically hear anyone, which meant that it was likely that they were all in the healing room with Dragon.

“Rana!” he called out. “Rana!”

A voice replied, but it was too muffled to hear any words. Then footsteps came out to the central room.

“Tiras?”

“Yeah, We're here! I need a hand.”

His uncle stepped into the doorway, frowning at him. “Who's that? What's happened?”

Very tired, Tiras sat back on his bum. “This is Hannel,” he sighed. “He's Metty's father and uncle to the other three kids. He's caught a bullet in the arm. Can you grab the stretcher?”

“Alright.”

Wiping his face, Tiras smiled at Metana. “So, how does the story end? What did the nice god do with the rainbow cloak of stars?”

She giggled. “Zey gave it to a loving, strong man, but the cloak is actually too heavy for him. Even though it's too heavy for him, he carries the cloak and drags it across the sky every night because he loves the stars, the nice god, and all of us people living below. But if he ever gives up under the strain, the sky will fall again.”

Tiras blinked at her, surprised that it such a depressing end to a children's story.

She giggled. “Papa tells special stories. They're not about real events, they're about feelings! And that one is a story of why we keep fighting even when it's hard, because if the man with the cloak of stars can carry it every night, then we can do the hard things too.”

Tiras smiled at her. “Sounds like your dad is pretty good with stories.”

She lifted her chin and nodded. “Yes, he is!”

He heard the sound of an engine rumbling close outside, the sound of breaks firing and the motor cut off. Tiras got to his feet and leaving Hannel on the ground, he moved through the entrance to check what was happening outside.

A brand new blue van was parked close, and Den stood with zey back to him, reaching inside the cab for something.

“Hey, Den. What's up? Where'd you get the van?”

Zey turned around, smirking at him. “We stole it.”

“Is Kasa with you?”

Den's back straightened and zey knocked on the metal. “Yeah, is everyone alright?”

The side door of the van slid open a little, and Kasa looked out at him through the gap.

“Yeah, the others are fine. I found some potential new recruits, one of them has caught a bullet in the arm.”

Kasa climbed out of the back and headed inside.

Tiras craned his neck, looking inside the shiny new vehicle. Two injured people lay on the deck of the van, their eyes closed. “Who are these two?”

“We got jumped by TFOs at the markets. This is our primary trader, Nessa and her friend Crow.”

Tiras snorted. “It's been a week for bringing in strays, hasn't it?”

“It really has.” Den flicked his head. “Come on, we gotta get everyone inside and then figure out where we can park Nessa's van so it doesn't get stripped down by one of the street gangs.”

**\* 18 \***

*That evening*

Briiana was still in a lot of pain from the gunshot wound, but feeling surprisingly well considering how bad it would have been without help from Kasa. She sat on the floor with her back up against the wall of the healing room, while she ate a simple dinner of spicey meat broth and rice. Yaan sat next to her, also eating. Three people lay in their own cots, sleeping and resting from their wounds.

Brii and Yaan had gone to school with 'Nessa', they hadn't been terribly close, but close enough for Brii to be glad that she survived, and of course to look forward to teasing her when she

eventually woke up.

The young man, 'Crow', was of Basaan descent and couldn't be any older than about twenty. There was a quiet seriousness to his face even as he slept.

She frowned at him. "He looks nothing like the professor."

Yaan snorted and elbowed her. "You do know the Crow name isn't genetic, right?"

"OK, but is he, you know, a *Crow*?"

"He was brilliant today, calm and confident—more than I. So, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he's Crow the third."

The moment felt a bit too serious, so Brie grinned at her love. "Was he as brilliant as your sister?"

Likely sensing her mischief, Yaan chuckled. "Cheeky! No one can be as brilliant as my little sister!"

"Do I know this sister?" asked Tiras, as he moved into the room, with a bowl of something in his hands.

Yaan winked at Tiras. "Telling you that'd jinx it."

He snorted, then rolled his eyes. Brie sensed he knew that they had to be coy about certain information, and was mostly accepting of it. "I grabbed some sweet rice pudding for you two. We don't have a lot of plates, so you'll have to share."

Brie shrugged. She didn't mind sharing with her wife.

"Mm, thanks!" said Yaan as she got to her feet to grab the bowl from him.

"You two have any plans?" asked Tiras. "You going to stick around or...?"

As she often did, Yaan answered for both of them. "Not sure yet. There's no rush to leave, and Brie needs more time to recover."

Tiras glanced over Yaan's shoulder at her, and Brie nodded to affirm her wife's words. She couldn't walk without help, and probably couldn't even get to the front door if she tried.

"Well, Hawk considers you two to be certified allies, and Den's just said that you're welcome to stay as long as you need."

"Thanks! Did you talk directly with Hawk?" said Yaan.

Brie sensed a flicker of something that she wasn't saying out loud, and she wondered if Yaan had met Hawk when she was in Araam.

Tiras' smile drifted sideways. "Telling you that would jinx it."

Brie let out a bark of laughter. He was a lot more wily than she expected, given he looked a

bit younger than them. She had a deep feeling in her gut that given time she and Tiras could become very good friends.

“Fair enough,” said Yaan, grinning at both of them.