

Helicopter Pilot

(2 days since 02 Shield Crow)

Part One

*** 1 ***

(26 Mecra 3004)

The early morning sky burned with brilliant colors, tracing the edges of wind swept clouds in orange and gold. Kiida was pretty sure that sunrise from the top of the Agency Tower building was the best view in all of Aramaan, perhaps even in all of Arana.

She sat on a deck chair, with her back against the nose of her little bubble helicopter. This was her moment every day to simply enjoy the brilliant spectacle that was dawn, even if the rest of the day was probably going to be difficult.

She lifted her coffee to her lips. It was strong and very hot; just the way she liked it.

Her life in the Agency wasn't as bad as others had it. Because her skill set as a Talented pilot and her boss was only an ass not a violent person she was much less likely to be executed, but she still felt the burden of her lack of choice, and the call of freedom to get away from the Agency.

If she had a choice she'd take her helicopter and work as a civilian pilot somewhere away from the city, perhaps in the mountains to the north or the west. Somewhere wild. Somewhere that her natural flying Talents could be used to help make the world better in some small way.

She let out a long sigh and took another sip of her coffee. If only Hawk would leave her a yellow sticky.

The wind shifted direction around her, slowing considerably and sneaking around her copter from the west to brush icy pinpricks down her neck and across her face. There was an odd tingling in her extremities, and just as she was sitting up to look around in case there was danger, the wind shifted back to it's strong but comparatively warmer bluster from the desert in the north east.

There was no time to wonder because her wristwatch started to vibrate, telling her that it was time to start her early morning checks for the midday. She sighed again and sculled the rest of her coffee.

There had been a late booking yesterday, made by some high rank Agent from Araam wanting a visual tour of the city and their new proposed facility. The new building was being made to house the three pursuit helicopters in one place instead of the current set up of three different

roofs, each holding and maintaining a single copter. It would mean more fuss for the high rank mucky-mucks in their various facilities if they wanted to get somewhere quickly, but according to the regional boss it would make resupply much cheaper, and orienting an aerial pursuit with the other pilots more efficient.

Kiida didn't want the upgrades. The new facility wasn't going to be tall like the Tower, so her morning enjoyment of the sunrise would be hampered considerably. But she didn't get a choice and she had to get ready for this tour job – despite the wasted resource of her being a tour guide today instead of being available for the next pursuit.

Clicking the lid of her coffee container closed, she got to her feet and pushed it into the backpack she had stashed behind her pilot chair.

“Kiida!” barked a voice from behind her.

She turned and suppressed a groan. Whenever her boss was stressed out zey went into micromanaging mode. “Yes, shan?”

Zey's gray eyes were wide, and zey's short brown hair was disheveled at odd angles, likely from having gotten out of bed without a mirror check. This did not look good.

“Kiida, this tour must go off without a hitch. Rumor is that he's one of the sons of the Head!”

She frowned. “You mean one of the Nightmare Sons?”

“Yes! If you and your weird ideas upset this man...” Tosha left the rest of the sentence unfinished. Zey's predecessor had been killed as a Traitor after his interaction with the eldest of the Head's sons. No one knew precisely what he'd done or said, but the rumors were vast and ridiculous.

“Don't worry,” she said, letting out a sigh. “I know how to kiss ass.”

“You have enough trouble kissing *my* ass!” Tosha growled. “That sass of yours is going to get you killed one day, and you're *not* taking me with you! Now get to work! I want a full maintenance check on this copter before you take him out!”

They'd done a full check yesterday. “But sir!”

“*Don't* argue with me Kiida, or you'll find yourself in trouble before this man even arrives! Now get to work!” Zey turned back towards the roof access door. “And for Nera's sake, remember to refuel!”

Kiida glared at Tosha's back as zey disappeared inside. She wasn't intimidated by Tosh or the Head's sons. Huffing in irritation, she turned back to the copter.

Reaching into the cockpit, she grabbed the check list from its hook on the back wall. Her hand brushed something extra that wasn't a clipboard and it dropped, rattling down behind the passenger chair. She grumbled again and climbed inside to fetch the mystery object.

It was the relative size and shape of a brick but much lighter. She lifted it out to look, and stared not only at the older style walkie-talkie radio but the yellow sticky attached to it.

So many mornings she'd fantasized about getting a yellow sticky and here it was; in actual reality. She was so shocked that she just stared at it unseeing for what felt like hours. Then the roaring, blustery wind brought her back to reality.

The sticky said, "only fly at the last moment". She turned it over, looking for more information but there was none.

Letting out a snort of joy she grinned. "*I'm getting out!*"

She stuffed the sticky into her jacket and dropped the radio through the open zip of her back pack. She had a lot of work to do, if she was stealing the copter, she'd need some new parts put in, and quickly so as not to get caught.

* 2 *

Further north across the city

Rebel base

Yaan reached towards her wife, pulling her arm up over her shoulder, and gently helping her out of the sleeping cot and to her feet.

Brii let out a grunt of pain but didn't complain.

"*We'll just see how far you can walk,*" she said telepathically. "*Then we'll know how long until we can leave.*"

"*It won't be today,*" Brii replied.

Yaan smiled. "*No, probably not, but you know the drill. We should get back to base as soon as we can. Staying here is against protocol.*"

"*Really?*" Brii's smirk was playful. "*My wonderful wife, worrying about protocol?*"

The laughter came out of her. "*Yeah, yeah, cheeky!*"

They moved very slowly around the edge of the room which the Rebels used as a medical space. Nessa sat against one wall with her eyes closed and head back. As they moved towards her

she pulled her feet in closer to herself so she wasn't a trip hazard for them.

Yaan smiled at her. "Thanks, Nessa."

Brii made a grumbly but similarly thankful noise in her throat to underline Yaan's words.

Nessa's eyebrows lifted, showing her acceptance of their thanks, but her eyes remained closed.

The young man, Crow was still sleeping, but he'd woken at dinner time last night. There hadn't be any opportunity to have a decent discussion with him or Nessa because of all of the Rebels around them, but the four of them knew that they were all Servants of the Oracle, and it was oddly nice to be around folks from home. As Swords, they tended to transfer from one area to the next with new missions. Their accommodations were often isolated from others, and they had little to no time to socialise or rest with any particular group before being transferred again.

She and Brii moved to the exit, and as they stepped through the door into a connecting hallway, the psychic noise of the place increased as suddenly as a curtain dropping down. Yaan grunted and increased her empathic shielding to lower the volume.

"Gods! How many folks live here?" asked Brii.

"I'm not sure, maybe twenty-five or thirty. But that includes a few kids, so that might account for a bit of the noise."

"Ah, fair enough."

They moved very slowly down the corridor, one step at a time.

* * * * *

Daeden Yen picked up the last box of supplies from the truck bed, and craned zeir neck to look at their trader. "Hey, Ziggy, where's our new med supplies? Is there another load coming?"

"Naw," said Ziggy, his shaggy brown hair bobbing around his head as he shook it. "Sorry, Den. My supplier got raided by the Agency, and they have to resupply. I've been guaranteed that your stock will be at my building the day after tomorrow. I've got the number of a fellow who can get some of it, if you need it right now, but zey's plenty sketchy. I wouldn't risk it if you can afford to wait."

Den smiled at their civilian trader. Ziggy was sometimes unreliable, and often exaggerated his prices to see what he could get away with, but Den sensed that Ziggy held no ill-will towards the Rebels.

“I think we can afford to wait, thanks though.”

Ziggy grunted and got back into the cab of his delivery truck. “No problem! I’ll see you then!”

Den turned around and moved back towards their front door as Ziggy’s old truck roared to life and rumbled away. Zey moved through the double doors into the central room. It was colder inside than outside, but that was mostly due to the lack of windows and the ceiling sitting two stories above their heads.

Red and Dragon walked very slowly towards zem from the central hall. Den had an instinctive sense of comfort with them, as if zey knew them from a past life or had known them when zey was too young to remember. Despite zeir own feeling of a lack of threat, some of the other Rebels weren’t so relaxed around them. Grena, carrying a box of supplies, moved right around the two women. She stared at them as she moved past, and even across the room, Den could sense Grena’s fear and hostility. Yakaan came in from the other side after having put his box of supplies into storage and stood in the door way to stare at Red and Dragon’s backs. He was a little less empathically obvious in his hostility, but that sense of worry over the strangers was present on his face. Den sighed and wondered how to ease everyone’s discomfort.

As the problem brushed through Den’s mind, there was a bang above everyone’s heads. Zey looked up to find Keton had opened an air vent up high, and was about to slip and fall to the ground.

Letting out a cry of surprise, Den dropped zeir box and started running to try and catch zeir little brother.

Closer to Keton, Red and Dragon let go of each other. Red rushed forward and up into an obvious kinetically enhanced jump, while Dragon slid onto her back underneath. Red bounced up the wall as if it was made of grippy rubber, caught Keton into her arms and flipped onto her back, falling down again towards her wife.

Dragon lifted her arms up as if to catch them. Red and Keton’s fall slowed and stopped just above her hands, and then they dropped the last half meter into Dragons arms.

Den was still rushing towards them before it was all over. Zey got to them as Keton wrapped his arms around Red’s neck while giggling.

Keton saw zem and lifted his arms up towards zem. “Denny! Denny! Denny!” he repeated.

Grinning at zeir little brother, Den lifted Keton up into a hug. “Thanks, you two! That was amazing!”

Red was already on her feet and helping her wife. She grinned. “No problem, it’s kind of our job to help.”

Dragon grunted in agreement.

Den glanced over zeyr shoulder at the other Rebels, to check their reactions. Five faces were surprised, two somewhat chagrined. Hopefully, this would be enough to keep the hostility down until Red and Dragon were ready to move on.

A loud rap on wood sounded from the front door and zey turned around again.

“Hello? Anyone home?”

Recognizing the voice, Den put Keton down with a quick kiss to his forehead, and jogged towards the door. “Hey, Asha! Come in! How are you?”

Her dark blue eyes were shining as she opened her arms to give zem a hug. Den moved into the friendliness and hugged her back.

“Hey, Denny. I swear you’ve grown a head taller since I last saw you!”

Zey smiled. “It has been four years, Asha, and please call me Den.”

“Of course.” She let go of zem.

“Asha!” said Tiras behind zem. He brushed past Den to hug Asha as well. Den sensed a different sort of closeness between the two of them, as if they’d been friends for a while.

“Hello, T! Keeping out of trouble?”

Tiras laughed and let go of her. “Never! You know me!”

“I do.” Her grin was gentle.

“So, how’s him-indoors--?”

As Tiras spoke, a younger man moved in behind Asha. He had light hair and vivid blue eyes, and was more than a head shorter than Den.

“He’s busy on mission,” the man interrupted. “How are you Tiras?”

“Uh—” Tiras floundered for a second before his eyes dropped, illustrating the Agency-learned body language of showing respect to someone of higher rank. He lifted his eyes again, as if it was difficult but smiled at the newcomer. “Four days in, I think we’re doing pretty well. Thank you.”

Den frowned slightly at Tiras, empathically asking the identity of this new person.

“Um, right,” said Tiras. “Everybody, this is Asha and Naethan, they’re Hawk reps from Araam. Asha, Naethan; this is, ah, everyone.” He scratched at his black hair uncomfortably. “So, visiting is all well and good, but is something going on?”

Den watched as Naethan dumped the two large bags he was carrying onto the floor between Asha and Tiras. “Nice to meet everyone, but I’m just here to drop off your special supplies. Good luck today.” He nodded his chin low, and turned around to leave again.

Zey watched this Naethan person disappear from sight, and glanced at Asha and Tiras. Obviously something big was happening, and those two knew more than they were saying. Zey gave them a slightly cynical eyebrow lift.

Asha grinned at zem. “Anyone feel like a coffee?” she asked looking at Tiras. “It’s on me.”

“Sounds good, you want to come too, Den?”

All of a sudden they were both looking at zem with quite a lot of mischief in their faces. Zey rolled zeyr eyes and huffed. They definitely knew more than they were saying.

“Alright.” Zey shrugged. “Where are we going?”

Asha grabbed Tiras’ hand and pulled him towards the exit again. “I know just the place, follow me.”

Den shook zeyr head. “Alright.” Something was definitely going on and zey hoped whatever it was, those two would tell zem. Den gave Yakaan a pointed look, inferring with head flick that he should help tidy away their new supplies and do their normal morning routine while the three of them were out doing... whatever they were going to do.

Yakaan nodded. He knew what was needed.

*** 3 ***

Asha moved quickly. Daeden’s cell building wasn’t far from her and Naethan’s safe house, unfortunately there were also a lot of cameras for her and Tiras to avoid. Asha zigzagged through off-road lanes and down an alley or two. There were much fewer lanes in Aramaan than back home in Araam, but she’d memorized most of those in the area. The local Aramaan governing body was more cooperative with the Agency than the one in Araam, so the Agency presence was significantly more aggressive.

As Asha got close to the road side, she lifted her fist up in a stop signal, telling at least Tiras that they should stay there until she gave the all clear. She glanced up and down the two-lane road and skipped across, back under the cover of another lane that ran through behind a set of apartments. Turning around, she checked the road again. Tiras stood with his back against a brick

wall and Den stood behind him further off the street. The road was clear, so she signaled with one hand for them to rush across.

Den was much taller than zey had been when she last saw zem. There was a confidence in zem that hadn't been there when zey was fourteen. It had been heartbreaking to leave Den and Kasa so soon after they lost their parents. She'd wanted to stay and stand with them in their grief, particularly as she knew what it was like to grieve one's parents. But, if she had stayed, others in Shada would have died. Sometimes it was hard being Hawk's Second. But at least Den looked confident and strong, confident enough to even run zeir own Rebel cell at such a young age.

When Tiras and Den got across the road and into the lane with her, she turned and continued jogging.

* * * * *

Den tried to keep up with the other two. They moved mostly in sync and they used different hand signals to the ones zey knew from other escapees. Den could only assume they were the style used by the high ranks or just simply Araam Agents. They passed through another lane and into a side road, which gave access to the backs of a bunch of industrial buildings. There were no cameras in this road.

Zey glanced around for habitation tags. This area was known for having a lot of Spades-controlled buildings and occasionally a hidden TFO hub. The others wouldn't know how to read the graffiti tags and that lack of knowledge could get them into trouble.

The nearest building was a vehicle wrecker's site. It had a high chain-link fence around a large area behind the building. Piles of broken vehicles were stacked around. On one side of the yard were the older all-metal framed cars, and on the other, the more modern plastic style with light poly-metal framing sat about. There were no tags on the building or the road surface in front of a pair of fence gates, so it was likely to be a norm business.

Up ahead was an old brick building, it looked as if it might have once been some kind of factory, but all of the ground floor windows and doors were boarded up. The concrete base of an old broken street lamp sat next to a metal garage door, on it were three tag symbols. One was the occupied symbol, telling anyone who cared that this building wasn't free for new habitation. The second tag was for the Yellow Hairs, a local gang who weren't to be trifled with but were not instantly hostile, unlike a Spades affiliation. The third tag told zem that it was not a trading space so

that strangers, on the whole, were not welcome.

They walked as a group past the Yellow Hairs' building, towards the end of the lane where they could turn left or right. Pausing to look around, Asha seemed to make a decision and turned to jog left. As zey followed, last behind Asha and Tiras, zey noticed the tags for a TFO hub located in the other direction. Den wondered if Asha could read the tags or if she was just clairvoyant. Although, in the grand scheme of things, as long as they were safe, the how didn't matter.

They headed towards another road crossing. Cars brushed past at a quick pace, showing it was a main road. Asha stopped walking a few meters from the exit, and waited for them to catch up. When the three of them were standing almost shoulder to shoulder, she pointed at a narrow space between two buildings.

“Wait until I get to the top and I'll help you up.”

She launched into a sprint and shot into the narrow gap. At the end was nothing but a brick wall, but when she got close to it she leaped up to grab the bar of an old fire escape two stories above them. Due to the dimness, Den wasn't initially sure how she'd managed to get up there, so zey watched as Tiras went next. Sprinting at the brick wall and jumping, he lifted up in a much less fluid way. Watching, Den understood then that Asha was a kinetic.

Zey waited for Tiras to get up onto the fire escape before starting to sprint. Asha's kinetic hands were tight around zey's ribs and let go as soon as zey's fingers gripped the iron frame. Both Asha and Tiras offered zem a hand to get up over the railing onto the platform, and the three of them were standing in a small space almost three stories above the street level.

*** 4 ***

The building they'd slipped into was mostly abandoned. They walked through rotting hallways in an odd zig zag pattern through the level, and then down a set of stairs back to the ground floor. Asha moved through a doorway ahead of them and Den followed into a clean, dry but very small apartment. The main room held two camping cots in one corner, a kitchenette in the other. Windows and a door led out to what looked like an internal garden, and another door led to what zey could only assume was a bathroom of some sort. There were no floor coverings and the wood was clean but obviously well traveled with shoe scuffs and dents in the surface. A single light bulb hung down from a high ceiling, and there seemed to be some sort of air conditioning blowing

warm air through a vent above the door. It was a very odd space.

Asha strode immediately towards the kitchenette, pulling open a cupboard door above her head to show coffee cups, a cupboard at knee height had a tiny fridge, and the kitchen counter had the makings for coffee. An old fashioned kettle sat on a single oven element, steaming. She constructed a coffee from the supplied elements; black with one sugar. Den hadn't really had enough coffee in zeir life to know zeir preferences, so zey had one of each: coffee powder, sugar and some animal milk from the "beer fridge".

There were no seats, but the floor was clean and dry so Den moved to sit with zeir back to the nearest wall and the other two joined zem in that corner.

Den used a tiny spoon to stir zeir drink and took a sip. There was a long moment of the others letting out noises of enjoyment, and when it felt like it would be OK to start asking questions, Den cleared zeir throat.

"So, what was that all about?"

Asha grinned with an undeniable spark of mischief. "Well, other than it being fun to dodge around street cameras, I was A0, I can't be caught on any CCTV systems, neither can Tiras."

"No, I got that bit. That's obvious. Why the secrecy from the other Rebels? You didn't need to bring us all the way out here for coffee, you could have brought it with you. Why did you need to get Tiras and I out to this place?"

"You don't miss a trick, Denny-- uh, sorry, Den," said Asha, putting her coffee cup onto the wood in front of her. "Well, Hawk seems to think there might be a spy in your cell--"

"Or it's bugged," added Tiras, nodding.

Den smirked at the older man. "So why am I not a suspect?"

Tiras chuckled and winked at zem. "Too ornery."

Den laughed. "OK, what's the mission? You wouldn't be here, Asha, if it wasn't big."

"You're not wrong; big and complicated." She took another sip of her coffee. "We're going to steal an Agency pursuit helicopter and its pilot."

Den straightened, surprised. "That's... that's definitely a thing. How's that possible?"

"Yeah," said Tiras. "How would you get away with it, let alone store it without getting caught?"

"Well, it's quite involved, which is the normal fare for Hawk." She rolled her eyes at Tiras.

He chortled. "He definitely plans in the larger scale, I'll give you that. But he's also frighteningly good."

“Yes,” Asha grunted, as if it was painful to agree. “But the Rebels have just gotten the keys to a large facility where we can store it. Once we get it out of the city there’ll be no problems with keeping it hidden. That way there’ll be plenty of time to get some new tags for it, then it’ll be used for another thing Hawk is planning.”

“And what’s that?” asked Den, before realizing it might not be something zey was allowed to know.

Asha grumbled again. “He hasn’t told me yet, only that if he can pull off the rest of it our trade supply system will improve significantly and over night. Either way it’s worth the risk of trying to get this copter. Assuming the pilot wants to escape as well.”

Den tipped zair head on the side. “So, the pilot is doing the stealing of the copter?”

“Yes, that’ll be late morning, so we don’t have a lot of prep time.”

“How are they going to get the copter off its landing pad without being shot to nuthen?”

Asha grinned at them. “Well, we have a man on the inside.”

* 5 *

Early lunchtime

Kiida stood at the refueling port on the copter with the fuel line from the Tower in one hand. Slotting it in place, she locked it and then pulled the lever to turn on the flow. She had managed a minor miracle by replacing a number of parts in the copter, while still looking like she was doing the normal maintenance procedures. Given a few minutes to top up the fuel, the copter would be ready to take off.

She paced around her little bubble-faced whirly-copter and checked that her backpack was in place. The pack ordinarily held a change of clothes, some emergency food, a small survival kit and a spare pair of socks and shoes, but she’d taken out the clothes in order to fill the space with a few things she’d managed to get from her apartment in her break. There were one or two keepsakes from her family, and the cash she’d been saving from her civilian jobs when the Agency loaned her to search and rescue or the forestry firefighters. It wasn’t a lot and she wasn’t sure what she’d need as a free person, but she figured that if the Rebels needed a copter and a pilot, she might already have all she needed waiting for her with a new job.

The fuel pump let out two loud bleeps to let her know it was full. Zipping up the old canvas

bag again, she moved to dislodge the pump.

“Kiida! He’s in the building!” barked Tosha from the doors behind her.

She turned, as dread settled into her stomach. “What? He’s an hour early! I’ve got a bunch of checks left to do!”

Tosh glared at her over the distance and she heard the menace in zeir voice. “Well, get it done! I’ll stall him for as long as I can, which won’t be very long!”

She rushed to the pump and released it, running with the fuel line back to where it rolled back into a container in the Tower roof surface, and clicked the nozzle into its protective port.

The roof doors slammed closed, and she was alone on the roof with a helicopter which was ready for flight. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Was she really going to do this?

Grinning, she sprinted back to the copter and leaped inside to start the quick version of the start up procedure.

* * * * *

The young man with very blue eyes was pushing Tosha around just by moving forward towards zem, and zem being forced to back up or risk being bowled over.

“But, sir!” zey said desperately. “You’re an hour early, Kiida and the helicopter aren’t ready!”

“Incorrect.” His voice was oddly terrifying in a way Tosh couldn’t describe. “I have another appointment to get to, so, she will have to just leave early.” The young man, whose very name was classified, stepped forward, forcing Tosha backwards into the elevator. He lifted an eyebrow at Tosh and leaned sideways to press the button for the roof access.

As the elevator rose up the building, Tosh swallowed and blinked repeatedly under that icy blue glare. The young man didn’t seem particularly arrogant or even loudly hostile like his older brother, but there was something about him that scared the living Light out of zem. Something that Tosha’s instincts said was even more dangerous than his older brothers, as if perhaps he was the reincarnation of Patron Mecra himself and capable of things worse than just executing zem.

The cab slowed, stopped and the doors opened with a muted “ding!” The young man turned around to leave, breaking their eye contact and Tosh nearly deflated entirely in zeir relief. Panting from the emotional exertion, Tosh quickly followed him down a hall which lead off to different storage rooms for supplying and maintaining the copter, at the end was a door that led upstairs to

the roof surface.

As they got to the top, Tosh could hear the helicopter motors going. It was against general safety protocols for the rotors to be going before the passenger had boarded. Tosh prepared zemsself for the need to tell off Kiida for the breach. The young man opened the door and moved out onto the roof, it was as Tosha followed him that zey noticed the lack of a helicopter sitting on its pad.

Zey let out a gasp of horror, rushing around the young man and pulling out zeir gun. Flicking the safety, zey started firing at the helicopter before zey'd consciously understood that Kiida was trying to escape the Agency.

The A0 was suddenly close and grabbing the gun from zeir hands. His voice was whispered in zeir ear but underlined in abject hostility.

“That helicopter is worth more than you, Tosha.”

Zey stared, terrified, at him.

The young man cleared his throat and handed zeir gun back. “Call the other pilots. They are to force that escapee out of the sky without destroying the copter. Do you understand me?”

Tosh swallowed and nodded. “Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

*** 6 ***

Aneyia held a first generation radio frequency scanner. It was the size of an old fashioned brick cellphone and someone had ripped off the back of it, exposing wires and a battery compartment, which had then been left to melt from ancient, acid leakage. Anei had checked through all of the circuits to discover that the acid burning made it very ugly, however each of the necessary components seemed intact. Unfortunately, it still wasn't working.

The car moved around a corner, pushing her into her seat belt. She sighed and traced through each of the sections again, following stage by stage along the circuit map which she'd projected onto the dashboard.

Her third run through the circuits discovered only a single damaged resistor, which was blackened in one corner. She scratched it with the edge of her fingernail to get some of the scoring off, and it moved quite a lot. This meant that the connectors and the bottom wire were broken.

Had she been a verbal person she would have sworn. Instead her fingers twitched into a sign for offensive irritation, and she opened up her emergency talking app on her micro device. She

didn't use the app day to day because, firstly, she didn't need to, everyone else either knew sign language or translated for those who didn't without any requirements from her, and secondly, because the others said the app's voice wasn't always understandable.

She typed in what she wanted to sign, but couldn't because Den was busy driving, and hit return.

* * * * *

Having the radio earpiece with constant Rebel chatter installed was distracting Den quite a lot, but zey kept zeir mind on the road. Zeir job seemed pretty simple: to get Anei from their building to the landing spot safely. But it was not as easy as it sounded when you had to avoid Agency checkpoints, and intersections with face cams. To get to the right location without getting into trouble they had to employ a very zigzagged path through the city. But zey felt pretty confident that they'd get there in one piece.

Zey steered the car off the main road, into a side street which was narrower but clear of cams and patrols.

Sitting next to zem, Anei was fiddling with the bug scanner that Hawk had managed to find. Apparently, the devices were controlled as heavily as the bugs themselves, so getting a hold of one was difficult, even with a Norm ID. As a consequence, Hawk had only managed to find a half broken one.

They could not take the helicopter if they didn't find the GPS tracker, and to find it, Anei had to fix the scanner.

She let out an odd sort of grunt and Den sensed that she was irritated.

"Dein, we need, to turn around. Back to, Zebby," said her buggy speaking app.

Her talking program was quite imperfect, but that was alright most of the time, because it wasn't needed. Zey frowned while trying to figure out who or what "Zebby" referred to.

Zey risked a momentary glance sideways. Her eyes widened as if zey should do something if zey understood. There was a pause and she got her computer to produce the sentence again.

Zebby? Zey wondered. "Oh! Ziggy!"

Changing gears, Den accelerated, and waiting four or five seconds for a clear space of road, zey pulled a perfect u-turn and shot back up the way they'd come.

Once the car straightened up again, zey leaned forward and clicked the radio onto broadcast.

~ “Taxi to Bird’s Eye?”

~ “Bird’s Eye to Taxi, how you going?” Tiras’ voice was very playful as if he was having the time of his life.

~ “We gotta go back for something. You think you can stall them?”

~ “How much time you need, Taxi?”

Den grunted. ~“I don’t know, but just the transport aspect will add another twenty minutes to our ETA. So your new Sparrow friend is going to need to stall for time.”

~ “Copy, Taxi. I’ll see what I can do. Out.”

* * * * *

Yakaan stood on the roof of a private office. The building was the nearest skyscraper to the Agency Tower and it had a nice flat roof. He had to break in and get to the top without being caught, but because it was a norm business, he’d been able to sense where people were and avoid them. The office people below him didn’t use the roof access, so he was sitting up there in the gusty wind without worrying too much about being caught. He watched the Agency Tower, which sat on the edge of the western hills.

This was a huge undertaking. So huge in fact that had anyone else but Hawk suggested this sort of mission, he would have laughed in their face. To steal a pursuit copter from the roof of an Agency Tower building, and get away with it seemed utterly ridiculous. But Hawk had a reputation for doing the impossible, or at least the improbable.

He was staring into space, listening to the radio stream in his ear when he heard the helicopter thrum. By the time he got to his feet, gun shots were just audible under the pulsing noise. He lifted the radio bit to his lips just as the little bubble copter rushed past the building. It was so close he could see a figure inside. Just in case they could see him, he grinned and waved. Good on them! The hardest part was done.

He clicked the radio and started speaking.

* 7 *

Tiras sat in the most amazing place he’d ever been. It was a nook in the side of an older style

sky scraper with a white stone exterior. Better than the architecture and the view was that he shared this nook with a stone gargoyle, which sat on the edge, reaching out at the city with one paw. The space was so small that with him sitting in the corner, his knees dropped either side of the gargoyle's bum.

His view of the city was breath taking. Facing west, he could see the Aramaan Agency Tower as it climbed up from a hill side, dominating the other buildings, and the entire central business district of Aramaan. Immediately below him was a single overpass, which was the beginning of a vast motorway that zigzagged over top of itself as it headed west to Rona, and north to Tola. Underneath the overpass was the landing spot for the helicopter.

He grinned at the view and lifted the radio to his mouth.

Yakaan's voice on the radio interrupted him. ~ "Scout Ten to Bird's Eye, the Sparrow has left the nest."

~ "Confirm, Ten."

~ "Can I get off this roof already?" There was an obvious grin in his voice. ~ "The view is amazing, but nuth is it cold up here!"

Tiras chuckled. ~ "Can you hold out long enough to see how many folks are going after them?"

There was a long breath of radio static. ~ "Oh, alright."

~ "Stay warm, Ten. Over."

* * * * *

Kiida couldn't believe that she got off the roof without apparent damage to the copter. She had no idea where she had to go, but with a full tank of gas she could probably escape out into the forestry preserves, although finding somewhere set down with the ability to escape before her pursuers found her was another issue. Before she left, she put the old brick radio that came with the yellow sticky into a hands free frame and turned it on. She wasn't sure what frequency it was on by default, but it had a scrambler attached, so perhaps Hawk had a plan on how to get her to safety.

She was certain that if she turned on the copter radio and tuned into the Agency frequency that there would be many voices yelling at her, so that one was off. She didn't need to hear any of that noise.

~ "Bird's Eye to Little Sparrow, how does freedom feel?" The voice on the radio was oddly

familiar but she couldn't place it.

She reached with a finger to the radio panel to open up her end. ~ "Honestly haven't caught my breath yet, Bird's Eye. So what's the plan? I can't fly forever."

"There's a plan, but there's also a hiccup, are you good at your job?"

She laughed. ~ "The best, and I have the fastest wings of the bunch, too."

~ "That's good, Sparrow. We need you to stall for time, it could be as much as thirty minutes, but once we're ready, you and your wings can come to the eastern side of the city and we'll get you out."

As he talked, she realized where she'd heard his voice before. ~ "You..." Her words petered out. It wasn't safe to say names over the air, even with a scrambler. ~ "I know your voice, Bird's Eye. I believe you went on a flight yourself a few months ago. In Araam."

Tiras laughed over the airways, he sounded very happy. ~ "I did indeed, though I had someone else doing the flying. Hold tight, Little Sparrow. If you need a hand let me know, we've got a pretty big crew spread out across the city so we can offer some assistance. I'm also here if you need someone to talk to, but it shouldn't be too long, my friends are doing their best to bring you home in one piece."

*** 8 ***

Bené's trucking company was good to its employees, they had a facility in every city and rest stops on the motorways at regular intervals so drivers always had somewhere to rest and refuel. That morning when Bené turned up at his local facility to collect this week's schedule, there were fliers on the smoko room table. The fliers had coupons for a free lunch that day. There wasn't a lot of information about why this promotion was happening, but it didn't matter, a free lunch was worth an investigation.

He turned up at the eastern bridge underpass with his truck to discover about a dozen other trucks from his company were parked up in a large, clear lot. At one end, was a small metal bullet-shaped food trailer. He parked close to the exit in case it was some sort of dodgy deal and might need a quick exit. Jumping out of the cab, he closed the door and moved towards where his fellow truckies were gathered.

Someone had set up a few picnic tables and even some portable toilets in one corner.

Whatever the agenda, they seemed to want people to stick around for a while. Bené passed through groups of his work mates, some of the faces he knew and waved a hello as he passed them. There was no line in front of the trailer when he got to it, so he stepped in close, leaning on the counter to read through the menu.

The attendant moved into view from a side area. The man was tall and oddly beautiful. Dark blue eyes and black hair added detail to a square face, and there was a welcome kindness to them that Bené responded to on an instinctive level. He felt as if he was looking at a friend, nay, it was as if he was looking at a future lover. Someone safe, someone loving and kind, someone he could live his entire life with and find absolute happiness.

The man grinned at him. “How can I help you?”

Bené swallowed. “Um, could I have the big bowl of cheese and beans? And, um, maybe your phone number?”

The man chuckled and Bené thought he saw a little flush in his cheeks.

“Coming right up... the ah, food, I mean. Sadly, the number isn’t available, but I would totally if I wasn’t already in a committed relationship.”

Bené deflated and looked down. “That’s a shame. I hope they’re treating you like the glorious king you are?”

His laugh was wonderful and heart felt. “Oh, definitely. Here,” he said, adding another layer of cheese. “My treat. And do you want anything else? A free dessert, perhaps?”

Handing over the coupon, he reached to grab the offered meal and blushed for a moment when their eyes met again. “No, thank you.”

“You have a good day of driving, sir!”

Bené waved as he turned around. “Have a nice day too!”

* * * * *

Asha watched the truckie walk away with his meal of cheesy beans and noodles, and tried not to laugh. The telepathic and empathic projection was working far too well. Her intention had been to seem to be friendly and non-threatening, perhaps even one of their own. It had not been her goal to appear romantically attractive to folks.

“Ah well,” she said to herself. “I’ll be careful with the next customer.”

She shuffled to the hidden end of the trailer to grab a drink of water and reset the view of

anyone watching her. If she stood there projecting different faces to each customer, with no transition, there was a chance that a civilian with an untapped telepathic ability might see her face appear to change. She needed to give them all different faces to confuse matters if they were interviewed by the Agency, she did *not* need someone freaking out because she seemed to be a shapeshifter.

In the few seconds of drinking a glass of water, she telepathically reached up into the sky to touch Tiras' mind.

"Hey, Trouble," she said, keeping her tone flirty. *"How's it going?"*

"Pretty well, the view is amazing up here!" he sounded like he was on a carnival ride or at least grinning from ear to ear. *"We got a problem with Den and Anei, seems they need to get something to make the scanner work, but the helicopter has been tracked as having left the Tower, so, stage one is accomplished. Our 'inside man' obviously helped. How are your new truckie friends going?"*

She mentally chuckled. *"Great. One just asked me for my phone number. There's about a dozen trucks here, so we're on course."*

"That's good. This is going to be fiddly."

She shrugged and looked up to see if any customers were approaching. *"They're always fiddly with him. I should get back to it. I'll check up in the next break between hungry truckies."*

*** 9 ***

Tosha stood in the main security control room of the Tower. The young man was barking orders, and every time he glanced back at Tosh, zey started shaking in zeir terror. Tosh was certain now that once they'd reacquired the little bubble copter from Kiida, zey was getting a Traitor charge.

"Sir!" said someone in a chair to zeir right.

The young man moved to stare at them. *"Yes?"*

"Sir, there's a police report of a small helicopter circling the MCC bank building in downtown."

He turned to glare at their primary radio tech. *"Order the pursuit over to the MCC Bank. Right now!"* His voice was emotionless but oddly spine-tingling. Tosh wasn't sure what it was

about this man's manner and voice that terrified zem so much. In fact, for whatever reason, zey wished for a loud, angry supervising Agent, over this oddly calm, brisk man. Perhaps it was the lack of emotion that freaked zem out? Tosh mentally shrugged as zey had to step back to keep out of his way as he paced across the twenty-odd radio, radar, and communication stations.

"Tosh!" he barked and zey had to suppress the urge to flinch.

"Um, yes, sir?"

"Go get me a coffee, black, two sugars, and something small to eat. Have your own lunch first, if you need it. But be quick."

Tosh dropped not only zeir eyes but zeir chin as low as they'd go without zem bending at the waist. "Yes, sir."

It was an odd relief to have permission to escape that room for a little while. Tosh backed out of the room and scampered away. There was a cafe on the ground floor, as there was in every major Agency Tower, and zey had enough clearance to get down there and back up again without any trouble at the various security stations. A sweet muffin was in order, and a hot chocolate.

* * * * *

Kiida lifted the helicopter up and around the top of the building again, dipping down on the other side to then bank left out of sight of any pursuers. Procedure dictated that they listen to civilian reports as a part of a wider net to capture fleeing Traitors. She needed to stay out of sight of any copters, but to randomly cause trouble for any norms witnessing her flying acrobatics. The area she was playing dodge in was made up of mostly high end businesses and corporate interests, who would not appreciate the presence of a noisy helicopter around their building. Hopefully she'd annoyed them enough for them to call the police.

She spun the copter around and lifted it slowly above the top of the skyscraper to check for anyone in the sky from the west. She couldn't hear anything above the sound of her own rotors, but there were two little black blobs flying towards her from the direction of the nearest Agency facility.

Excellent, she thought.

Dipping the copter as low as it was safe to be, she moved between buildings towards the eastern side of the central business district. The far north east of the city overlapped with the desert, and in that area were a few high priced towers where rich people lived, so she headed in that direction to bug some more rich people. She knew they'd catch up with her eventually, so, while she

played cat and mouse she needed to figure out a plan on how to lose them again.

She'd flown with her father from a young age, so she knew this city. And while she'd become good at pursuit, she was also quite knowledgeable about the areas which could help her escape, hopefully moreso than the other less experienced pilots.

*** 10 ***

Agent Khenaan sat in a dark room surrounded on three sides by flickering computer screens and listening equipment. It had taken him two years to get a bug into the central Aramaan Rebel cell, but today, with the arrival of two Rebels from Araam, they'd gone dark.

"Where have they gone?" Khen thought desperately.

There was no one in their building, at least no one making noise in the same room as the bug. They'd even taken the children out "for a walk". He wasn't sure if he was made or not, wasn't sure what would happen if the Agency discovered that he had failed, again. He just knew he had to figure out some information to give to the Agency or his operation would be over and he'd be trapped in the Tower with no freedom at all.

He'd managed to bug a number of other Rebel cells but there'd been no way to get a camera into any of them, let alone the central cell. All but three of his video feeds were of the building he inhabited, both internal and external. The other three views were in the legal shop front for Anaan Brei, aka Ziggy, who was known on by most local gangs as a fence for everything but drugs and weapons, but he also supplied various Rebel cells with some of their living needs.

Khen's eyes skimmed across each video feed, and the visual relay for the many bugs he had out in the world, across from right to left and then his attention floated to Ziggy's place. There was no one in the back room, Ziggy stood at his counter serving a customer, and at the precise moment that Khen's focus moved to the external camera, a silver gray car stopped out in front of Ziggy's and parked. Khen watched for a moment, waiting to see who would step out. Hopefully, it was a Rebel.

*** * * * ***

As soon as the car slowed to a stop outside of Ziggy's shop, Anei opened the door and

rushed in. She held the little resistor between two fingers. The outside of the building looked relatively nondescript. It sat on the border between the central area of the city where most buildings were inhabited, and the abandoned spaces where Illegals and Rebels lived in rotting buildings. His space looked relatively inhabited but under-maintained with crumbling stonework at the front and mossy white stone pillars at the entrance. Stalls sat out under an old gray sun-sail, showing that Ziggy sold all sorts of things, from food to housing supplies like cutlery and wheelbarrows, and even some outdated technology in bins right next to the door.

She rushed through the cluttered insides and straight to his serving counter.

Ziggy saw her and grinned, signing an overly friendly welcome.

She held up the resistor which was about the size of a little finger, and signed “do you have?” with the other hand.

He nodded and signaled for her to follow him into the back room. This was the space where he normally interacted with Rebels. It was out of view of the front and the street to avoid any accidental sighting of him dealing with Rebels from a passing cop or Agency patrol, and with a handy back door exit nearby.

Every wall had layers of shelving and cubbyholes, filled with products. The only gaps in the clutter were doorways and one small clear area which he obviously used as a workbench. He reached up to a shelf way above his head and pulled out a box of older resistors. Reaching a hand towards her, he asked wordlessly to see it, so she gave it to him.

He compared the broken one to a number of loose resistors in the tray and upon finding a new one he showed her both of them side by side on the palm of his hand.

She signaled a woohoo and grabbed the new one. Then she realised she needed an electrician’s soldering iron. Looking at the work bench, she noticed among a lot of other randomly scattered equipment, exactly the thing she needed.

Pulling out the RF scanner she pointed at the soldering iron on the counter.

He nodded and stepped back from the surface.

Aware of the time crunch, she moved forward and started to push the new resistor into position ready to be soldered into place.

Den sat in the car waiting outside of Ziggy's place with the motor running. Zey didn't like sitting out in the open like that. Threats could come from many angles when one spent too long being stationary on a main road. But it couldn't be helped. The car was a relatively nice rental. Clean, tidy and it smelt of carpet cleaner. Asha had bought it with her, and asked if zey could at least try to keep it from getting banged up because Hawk put his own money down as a deposit.

Zey glanced in the rear view mirror down the road, and then through the windscreen, checking for threats. Sensing motion next to zem, zey glanced sideways and Anei was walking towards the car.

Den smiled. "*All good?*" zey signed.

Anei nodded. "*Fixed.*"

Zey waited for the door to close and her seat belt to click before moving the car back onto the road. Den turned the radio on again.

"This is Taxi, we are on the go, ETA fifteen minutes."

"This is Bird's Eye, that's great. See you soon. Out."

It was as Den flicked off the transmitting part of the radio that zey felt a punch of danger push right through zeir stomach. Zey swore an offensive Ronan curse under zeir breath, and with one hand, zey signed a quick "hold on" to Anei. Changing gears in the old stick shift car, zey accelerated, passing cars as they came to them. The sense of immediate danger was on three sides, and zey, determined to get away, steered the car in a zigzag towards the one safer direction. It was unfortunately an orientation perpendicular to where they needed to be, but, better to get there late than not at all.

Den risked a glance at zeir rear view mirror, seeing a string of blue and white lights several cars behind them. This was not good.

Still driving way above the speed limit, Den skidded sideways onto a four lane road, making it easier and safer to dodge around cars. When zey got to a section of the road which was clear enough, zey took one hand off the steering wheel to click the radio on.

"Taxi to Bird's Eye, we got made. Six Patrols on us, I'm on Asana Street, heading north. I need some help to get free."

"Copy, Taxi. Stand by."

* * * * *

Tiras carefully stood up, with his spine pressed into the white stone he'd been sitting against. It was a long way down to a concrete road and if he slipped, he wouldn't survive the fall. Lifting one leg up over the back end of the gargoyle, he shuffled three meters along a flat piece of roof which was only as wide as his shoes. At the end was a railing that he expertly climbed over, and stepped inside through a gaping window. The building had been abandoned a while ago. It had once been a huge four storied department store, with the upper levels filled with middle class apartments.

Tiras jogged across a concrete floor which had been stripped down completely, and towards a fire-safe stairwell. It would take a few minutes to get to the ground floor without a working elevator, but at least he was fit and it would give him some time to figure out what to do for Den and Aneya.

To help, he would need some kind of advantage, and probably some kind of transport. The only vehicles the Rebels had access to were the van that Asha had brought with her which was towing the food trailer, and the one left by Naethan that Den was driving.

Suddenly, he had a thought and lifted the radio to his lips. ~ "Bird's Eye to Taxi do you happen to know what the public transport system is like in Aramaan?"

~ "Yeah," said Den without any radio tags. ~ "Why's that?"

~ "I'm going to need to take a ride on a public system, to a very public place near to you. What do you recommend?"

~ "Um, there is a loop trolley that goes north and south, you could catch it at a stop one block east from your position. If you go three stops north you'll be at the big upmarket mall. Is that what you need?"

~ "Sounds good, how about once you're clear enough of the trouble, try to get close to drop off your passenger?"

~ "OK. Good luck, Bird's Eye."

~ "You too, Taxi."

Tiras had gotten to the bottom floor by this time, panting but still running, he came around the building in the opposite direction to Asha and the landing zone. He jogged to the next block over, through a walking path between buildings. The trolley seemed to be a little like the Araam tram except the system was automated instead of driven by a person. He didn't know Aramaan well enough yet to know precisely where they went or how regularly, but he trusted Den's local knowledge.

The trolley was painted red and looked somewhat like an old style train carriage without an

engine. It slowed and came to a stop, a voice repeated: “wait, wait” and a piece of the doorway floor rolled outwards to connect perfectly with the sidewalk and curb. With the ramp in place, the voice started counting down from three hundred, which Tiras guessed was to signal how long until it started up again towards the next stop. There was another door at the other end of the trolley tram, and a group of people rushed out through it. Careful not to meet anyone in the eyes, Tiras stepped onto the tram and faced the front. He wasn’t sure how long until someone noticed his identity, but being eventually seen was part of the plan anyway.

It only took a few minutes to go through three stops. Tiras stood in the alcove right next to the entrance door and because nobody got on in that time, no one should have seen him. It stopped outside the entrance to a very tall, oddly angular mall building.

He took a deep breath and prepared to walk the length of the trolley to get off. Hopefully there were no Agents on this tram. He turned around, lifted his chin and walked to the other end. A couple of waves of shocked surprise rocketed through the tram empathically but no one said anything, or moved in any obviously hostile way. He stepped down the ramp, onto the sidewalk and looked around. Enough people should have seen him for one of them to call the Agency hotline, but he stood there for a few moments to give them a good look.

“*Is that Tiras Malar?*” He couldn’t physically hear the words, but being a norm, the speaker’s thoughts were loud enough to be heard. He took another deep breath, let it out and headed up to the mall entrance.

The mall was rather dramatic. It was an oddly shaped thing, like a collection of boxes with strangely angled walls and roofs, all mashed together in a hodgepodge of mismatching lines. A cobbled path lead up through several sets of steps to a grand entrance, and ramps for those on or with wheels zigzagged a lazy pattern on the sides making the building fully accessible. Between the paths and ramps were little patches of green and the occasional park bench positioned in little groups so that people could sit outside and enjoy the gardens on their way inside.

All of these details definitely gave Tiras the feeling of a place constructed solely for the well off norms of the city. He brushed absently at the ratty woolen jumper he wore, aware that even if his face wasn’t famous, his tattered clothing would definitely get him noticed in there. But, he reminded himself, he was the distraction so being seen was the point. The priority was probably to identify where all of the exits might be so when the Agency arrived, he could escape. Taking another deep breath to manage his fear, he strode in through the entrance.

*** 12 ***

Tosh backed into the security room with a plated sweet muffin and a coffee to the A0 man's requirements. Zey had already scoffed a small lunch and zey own coffee which was pretty much half chocolate and half caff, taking zeyr break early as requested. Zey had expected after twenty minutes that the stolen helicopter would be captured already, but there was still a lot of action in the room and the young man looked quite tense.

Tosh dropped zeyr nose as zey approached him. "Sir, your lunch."

"Thank you," he barked. The man took the coffee first, taking a sip from the mug and then grabbed the plate to immediately put it down on a clear space of table.

The security room was a decent sized space, but it looked small because three walls of it were covered in screens right up to the ceiling with a dozen people seated at computers and radio stations in front of them.

As the young man took another sip of his coffee one of the technicians approached, looking very tense.

"Sir?"

"Yes?" he barked.

"Sir, the standing orders are to send a pursuit copter to trace this Rebel target."

"I said don't worry about some random Rebel--"

"But sir, if we disobey your brother will execute one of us!"

The young man grumbled and glanced sideways at zem. "Tosha, do you know anything about this Rebel target, 'Daeden Yen'? Why is zey so important?"

Tosh tried very hard to remain standing while also trying to show as much respect to this man as zey could, lowering zeyr chin to zeyr chest and staring at the floor.

"Um... zey is one of the last Rebels from before Hawk."

He grunted. "There are plenty of pre-Hawk Rebels in Araam, why would my brother care about this one?"

Tosh's eyes widened and zey started to shake. "I... I don't know, sir."

"Oh, for Nera's sake, stop shaking, Tosh. I'm not going to execute you for not knowing something." He sighed. "Alright, send one of the pursuit copters after this Rebel. I don't know how we'll get the Traitor with just the one copter, but I can't have my brother executing you all."

“Sir!” barked another technician.

The young man sighed. He seemed annoyed at the whole situation, as if perhaps he was bored. “What is it?”

“There’s been a sighting of Tiras Malar senior at the Oshara Mall.”

“Tiras, here?” he said, sounding a little surprised. Then he sighed again. “I suppose that the standing orders from Junior are to prioritize Tiras too?”

“Yes, sir, should I order pursuit?”

“Of course. But keep any spare patrols on the stolen copter.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * * * *

Den steered the car, tires sliding sideways, around a sharp bend and zigged into another road immediately out of sight of the pursuing patrols. Zey’d managed to reduce the numbers of patrols following, but there was a copter above them which meant they wouldn’t be lost for long. This was getting too dangerous. The car couldn’t run forever and neither could the escaping copter and its pilot, the situation had to resolve soon.

Zey zigged again, turning the car quickly, sliding in a mostly controlled sideways direction to catch another sharp bend in the roads. They were lucky that this area of the city had mostly four lane roads, making it easier to dodge around the flows of traffic and wide enough to move into intersecting streets relatively easily. No day since the rise of Hawk, was Den more thankful for zeyr Dodge Talent and whatever Talent it was that allowed zem to always find intersections to go through with green lights while being chased. Zey moved into another long road, this one with a tram line on the curb-side lanes.

Zey got even with where the Oshara mall was, but three blocks east, and watched in the rear view mirror as all but one of the patrol cars veered off in that direction.

Den clicked the radio. ~ “Bird’s Eye, this is Taxi, you have incoming. A *lot* of incoming.”

~ “Affirmative, Taxi. Thanks for the head’s up.” Unsurprisingly, Tiras’ voice sounded tense.

If Den could get free of the patrol car behind zem, and then get into the underpass tunnel system, zey could lose the copter, but the slow traffic and narrow lanes in the Octagon meant that zey couldn’t go in with too many in pursuit or they would box zem in and the only way out would be on foot.

If this was what Tiras and Asha had meant about Hawk's big escape plans always being overly complicated, zey wasn't impressed.

*** 13 ***

Tiras officially did not like malls. He ran, zigzagging around slow moving customers through otherwise wide walking paths. The map of the mall showed only four exits for this upmarket space, each in the main compass directions, but the paths between them were not straight forward, and the floor was made of white marble and quite slippery. He'd already dodged around or over two mall security guards, who were thankfully so poorly trained as to be very little of a barrier to him. But there were cameras everywhere, and far too many civilians about. He had to get out of there before the Agency arrived, or a bunch of innocent folks might be killed just for being physically near him.

He rushed past a number of very up market shops, then turned left at a cafe towards what he hoped should be the exit out to a stacked parking lot. There wasn't a door, just another hall, and then a bathroom entrance. For no particular reason, his eyes dropped to the floor in front of the bathroom and there, sitting boldly was a yellow sticky. He dived towards it, hoping it was Hawk and not a random person who dropped their shopping list.

On the yellow paper someone had drawn the symbol for the mobility friendly bathrooms.

Glancing around he looked for the little sign that showed the way to the more accessible toilet. It was down the hallway a few more shops, so he sprinted towards the doors. He burst through into the space and locked the door behind him. Inside and to the left, there was a low hand basin and a toilet with a number of hand bars and other aids around it in order to help someone sit down. To the right was an adult sized changing table, folded out, and above it was an open window, not large but big enough to get himself through.

Climbing onto the changing table, he crawled up onto the frame and through the window. As he shimmied out the other side into a manicured garden, he said a quiet apology for whomever might want to use the bathroom after him. They would unfortunately have to get a manager to unlock the door, which wasn't very fair, but it was better than him being cornered and executed by the incoming Agents.

Rolling over very short grass, he got back up to his feet and ran in the complete opposite

direction to the Asha's location and the escapee's landing zone.

Above him, he could hear helicopter blades and he hoped they hadn't seen him yet.

* * * * *

Kiida lifted the copter above the line of a building, turning for a moment to look behind her, one of her pursuers had already gone, she wasn't sure why, but then as she looked, she watched the second copter pull sideways and down as if they'd been ordered to let her go.

Not trusting this, she triggered the radio so she could speak.

~ "Sparrow to Bird's Eye, my pursuers have gone, what's going on?"

~ "Just get to the landing zone, Sparrow." said Tiras' voice. He sounded like he was running.

~ "You'll have to ditch and evac with the others. It's gone pear-shaped."

Surprised, she turned the copter to head in the direction of the eastern side of the central business district. ~ "What's happening? Can I help?"

~ "No, Sparrow, you need to get out."

~ "Doesn't he want the wings?"

~ "Yes, Sparrow, he does. But you are our priority."

She gave him her teaching voice. ~ "Bird's Eye, you tell me what's happening, right now."

He continued to pant, likely running while telling her all of this. ~ "For us to take your wings, we need to get the GPS. The car carrying the person who can do that got made and is being chased."

~ "Bird's Eye, there are two birds who've left my six. Does that mean one's following your friend, and the other is following you?"

Tiras laughed over the radio. ~ "You have it a hundred percent correct."

~ "Alright, just a tip for you: neither telepathic searchers nor copters can go into the Octagon Tunnels in the central business district, so you might want to lose your bird in there."

~ "Thanks, Sparrow. Now get landing and ditch!"

Kiida smirked. ~ "No guarantees, Bird's Eye, but good luck."

Part Two

*** 14 ***

Eroka was finding it very difficult to follow the car in her copter because of how erratically they turned. Whoever the driver was, they were very good, probably Talented, and this made her already bad day, worse. She grumbled as they turned again, because she had to be so low she overshot the line of motion, and had to double back around the top of a building to get in formation above them again. Normal protocol with car chases dictated that they had a spotter in the copter with a pilot to help with navigation, but the day had started with an aerial chase, not a street one, so now she was not prepared for the mission ahead of her.

She grumbled again, trying to focus on her task, and not the rage inducing betrayal she felt at Kiida for going Traitor.

~ “Alpha-three Charlie, Charlie-two, this is Charlie-one,” said Kiida’s voice over the radio.
~ “You are not doing your turns well at all. I thought I taught you better than that.”

Eroka looked around her to try and see Kiida but couldn’t in a single visual sweep, so she focused back on her target below her on the street.

~ “Charlie-two?” This time Kiida sounded less admonishing and far more playful. ~ “Won’t you dance with me?”

Eroka grumbled and clicked the radio. ~ “Leave me alone Traitor!”

All of a sudden the smaller bubble copter that Kiida never let anyone else fly was right in front of her. Eroka pulled her copter down and to the side, trying to avoid a collision.

~ “What is wrong with you, Kiida?” she barked.

~ “Nothing.”

Eroka managed to stabilize and turn the copter back in the direction of her target. She wouldn’t let her ex-lover distract her from her job.

~ “I just think you should go back to training because your flying instincts are shot.”

Kiida’s copter hovered in front of her, this time at a somewhat safer distance, but still blocking her way.

Eroka spoke between gritted teeth. ~ “And I think you--”

~ “Game of tag?” she interrupted, wagging the copter side to side like a feline about to jump on its prey. ~ “Come on, you know you want to try one more time. One more roll in the sack, right?”

Eroka let out a roar of anger and directed her copter to chase Kiida’s. ~ “That was a long time ago, and is never happening again, Traitor!”

* * * * *

Aneya watched through the window as the helicopter which had been following them veered off to the side, chasing a second copter away from them. She wondered what had happened but was more relieved that they might just get away. Den had been driving erratically but in that terrifying manner that also happened to be a great way to lose pursuit vehicles, such that, zey had lost all of the patrol cars behind them. This meant that if the mission was still going ahead, Den would double back and get to the drop off zone. She held on as they seemed to slip and slide up the road in utter chaos but somehow amazingly avoiding hitting any of the other cars, the car spun around at right angles and dodged down an intersecting street. They moved through a covered bit of road, into a single lane which was blessedly clear, and then Den slowed the car considerably, turning onto a road that ran under one of the overpasses, as if they were an ordinary civilian car on a normal commute.

She let out a sigh of relief. That meant that Den believed they were no longer being chased. She glanced sideways at zem, knowing that now was the best time for zem to tell her what they were doing next.

Over the four years since she'd escaped the Agency, they'd been in many scrapes like this one, where Den was driving and didn't have both hands free to sign, so they'd created a short form of sign language that only needed one hand.

Zey lifted zeir spare arm, signing "get ready" and then "exiting, at speed". Which told her that the mission was still a go, and zey was going to try and drop her off at the landing zone to get the GPS while zey took the car elsewhere.

She signaled the OK and, popping her seat belt, checked that she had everything she needed to get out quickly.

*** 15 ***

Senaan got out of the cab of the big truck and jumped down to the ground. The driver was a Rebel from Shada who happened to have been a truck driver before discovering she was Time Psi, and needing to go on the run. She was good enough at her old job that she backed the whole truck

and trailer into the old airplane hanger and got the rear end pretty close to the second set of doors on the other side. Sen walked the length of it, pulling ties to loosen the cover so they could bring the framing down flat to give the copter a clear space to land. Moving towards the big doors, he got in close to sense if the inner workings needed an extra kinetic pull or not.

In the old days they'd made the hanger doors like this able to be moved by one or two people through a series of wheels and wires on pulleys, but the building had sat unattended for about fifty years so they could be entirely seized up. He put his hand on the metal surface and sensed the details of the mechanism. Most of it was still intact but one corner where a water stain ran down the length of the three storied door, had a set of mechanisms which were rusted closed.

Had he known how much being in the Rebels involved using his kinetic ability, he would have spent much more time training those muscles before he escaped. He took a long deep breath, focused his mind on the doors and drew in all of the kinetic energy, rising it up above him and into the door mechanisms. He wasn't articulate enough to move every single little bit of machine in the right order, but through the increase of focus, he could sense where best to push without causing damage but also opening them. The right hand door pulled itself sideways, running freely on its track and the wire pulleys all moving and redirecting force in all the ways it was designed to. The left side resisted him, pulling sideways with a terrible scraping of rusted wire rubbing against rusted pulley frame. With a bit more focus, and perhaps an unnatural amount of "muscle", the left hand door rolled sideways and opened fully.

Beyond the huge, empty space of the old hanger sat an open yard, framed roughly with chain link fencing. The gated area was split in two by a food trailer, which was hooked up to a modern looking van. Just out of sight of Senaan, they had set up a parking area for truckies, and some tables for them to sit and eat their free lunch. Leaning out, Senaan saw that there were about a dozen trucks parked in front of Asha's trailer.

The most important detail was that the entire yard was covered by the eight lane overpass, so it couldn't be seen from the air.

Senaan grunted. At least this part of the plan was working.

* * * * *

As soon as Anei's feet were on the street, Den put zeir foot to the floor and accelerated away. At the very least, Anei was safer, and could get home with the others if the car was spotted again.

Zey headed in an easterly direction, ready to zigzag north. There were many areas in the north east where a car could be lost in a large underground parking lot or otherwise hidden from view of the sky or street cameras. It took a concerted effort of will power to keep the car under the speed limit, but zey focused on driving like a person going about their normal civilian life.

~ “This is Bird’s Eye to Taxi, how you going?”

Den smiled so that Tiras could hear it over the radio. ~ “Doing alright. We got free of the stalkers and I dropped off my passenger. About to find a parking space. How are you going?”

~ “I got clear of the crowds and now I’m heading out to go underground and shake off my own stalkers.” His tone changed from vaguely playful, to being somewhat serious. ~ “Can you check on Sparrow, she doesn’t have any back up and I doubt the radio will work where I’m going?”

~ “Of course, I will. Send up a flag when you get clear again and one of us will come to pick you up.”

~ “Thanks, Taxi. Out.”

* * * * *

Tiras’ lungs were burning by the time he got to the very middle of the central business district. The Octagon was a massive underground bypass with multiple roads going in and out of it, from the air you could only see the eight big road ways running into it, like an octopus, with a large octagonal building above it for parking and shopping. It had been built to help manage the high traffic in the city, but, ironically, the traffic moved slower through the Octagon than through the main streets. There were many walking paths inside, and he jogged towards the nearest entrance.

The copter sat oppressively above him in the sky. It was bigger than the copter they had been trying to steal, so it’s rotors were loud. Getting to the entrance, he shot inside and immediately slowed down. Now was the time to conserve his energy. The concrete footpath led down at a relatively steep angle, and as he got further into the darkening space, he sensed that the structures above him were Psi shielded. This was helpful.

He couldn’t go up into the more public areas to escape, because his face was far too recognizable to the general public, but, if he remembered the place properly, he could use walking bridges and get to other entries on the lowest levels. If he picked the right angle, he could come out into an area with cover above his head and escape into the city.

The north and east sides of the city were the most Rebel friendly areas, so he figured he’d

start on those sides to see what was out there. Then maybe once he escaped, he'd have to find somewhere to lay low for a while.

*** 16 ***

Kiida dove the helicopter around one building and then up, over another, out maneuvering Erika's larger helicopter, keeping her ex-lover from catching her. If Erika managed to come at her from above, this would force Kiida downwards, but what she couldn't catch, she couldn't bring down.

She got to an area of the southern city where the shapes and position of the buildings formed a stream of wind. None of the other pilots, and certainly not Erika, had flown the Aramaan skies enough to know of the little idiosyncrasies of the skies above the city.

She dipped the helicopter slowly down into the stream, careful to control her rate of descent. Erika, however, was not generally a careful pilot. She dipped down, likely thinking that she had to quickly take advantage of the situation, but unaware of the stream of air coming in as a tail wind. Just as Kiida predicted, the larger copter dropped into a vortex ring state, losing altitude quickly.

She was pretty sure that Erika could get out of the dive as long as she kept calm, but it should be enough to get a gap between the two of them. She moved her copter sideways out of the stream.

She had turned the volume down on the main radio frequency, but she could hear enough to listen to Erika swearing profusely in the background.

The Rebel radio frequency buzzed.

~ "This is Taxi, calling Sparrow, over." The voice was different, definitely younger and with a local accent.

~ "This is Sparrow, over. Is Bird's Eye alright?" she asked, hoping that this new person wasn't talking because Tiras finally got taken down by the Agency after so many months of wily avoidance.

~ "Bird's Eye is fine, just a little distracted. Thank you for getting that bird off my back, by the way."

She laughed. ~ "Always glad to help," she paused, checking below her for Erika's copter, which thankfully hadn't crashed. ~ "Did you make your delivery? Because if you did, I'm going to

need a little help to land. I don't suppose you have some kinetic friends who are happy with heights?"

~ "In fact I do have a kinetic friend. You got a plan there, Sparrow?"

~ "I think I might. Can you get your friend up the Nen-Ree building?"

~ "I'll see what we can do for you. Until then, hang in there. You're doing brilliantly."

Grinning, she lifted her chin. ~ "Thank you!"

* * * * *

Eroka panicked for only a few seconds as she and the copter dropped a decent amount before she gained control again. She swore a lot and then as it leveled out and started to rise again, she sat there panting.

Once she was calmer she growled over the radio. ~ "Everyone always hated your cockiness, Kiida. You're too smart for your britches!"

~ "And you need to chill out more Eroka. You've just lost your target because you were too busy following me. When you get back to the Tower you're going to be in so much trouble."

Eroka had been so filled with rage and frustration, she hadn't even thought of what would happen after she defied orders. ~ "I might get a sanction or even a demotion, but you're the one who's going to die, Kiida."

Kiida's voice was serious all of a sudden. ~ "And you want that?"

She huffed. ~ "That's not what I would have chosen, that's what *you* chose by stealing that copter."

~ "No! Your choice was to break us up because your precious ego couldn't handle me as your boss. That was your choice, ultimately. And maybe if I had something worth staying for, I wouldn't have chosen freedom from the Agency. But it's all 'what ifs' anyway. I choose freedom and you choose to come after me. Now we've got to deal with the consequences. Are you prepared to kill me? Because it's you or me now."

Eroka frowned, moved to silence by the realization that Kiida was right. She didn't want to bring her and her copter down. She didn't want to kill Kiida, but there was nothing left to do now. If she withdrew, she'd be charged with negligence and executed.

She sighed. ~ "There's no choice, Kiida. I'm sorry."

~ "Me too, Eroka."

* * * * *

Senaan watched the blue skies for a little helicopter. He sat on the roof of the second tallest building in Aramaan, although “roof” wasn’t really an accurate description. The top of the Nen Ree Building was about a meter square and so windy that he had to stand on the ladder halfway through the access port to keep from being blown off the building. This was why any crew sent up to maintain the massive aerial usually came with climbing gear. The Rebels, unfortunately, didn’t have climbing gear; at least not their cell.

He took a few deep breaths to calm his instincts. He was safe on the ladder, even though he was very high in the sky. If he could just calm himself, he could enjoy the ridiculously beautiful view. More deep breaths and he was calm enough to notice how very blue the sky was at that height. There were almost no clouds today, and the sun was unseasonably warm too, even if the wind that high up was definitely chilly. The city below was far away, with the people down on the street looking like tiny insects crawling across the surface. Other large buildings dotted around him, the furthest was out to the west where the main Agency Tower building sat on a hill overlooking everything else. His building overlooked the area where Asha was still serving lunches to truckies and across the road was the mostly hidden hanger where they hoped the helicopter would land on the truck.

It was weird that there was a giant air hanger in the middle of the city, but he’d discovered that it had been built, one among many dotted throughout the city, in an effort to decommission, dismantle and recycle airforce planes. Just before the rise of the Agency, a hundred years ago, Arana and Rona were on the edge of war, and in preparation the armed forces had built many planes and other vehicles. And once the Agency took the focus away from that conflict, the country had all of these useless vehicles and storage facilities, which needed decommissioning. Many of those planes were melted down and used to create guns and ammo for the Agency.

Senaan thought that was a bit ironic, the weapons of one war melted down to create the weapons of another. It was also depressing considering that the civil war they were still fighting against the Agency was nearly a hundred years old.

The wind around him slowed for a moment and in the brief quiet, he could hear the sound of helicopter blades.

Gripping the ladder tightly with one hand, Sen lifted the radio with the other.

~ “Scout Ten, to Sparrow, you still flying?”

The voice that came over the radio sounded playful. ~ “Hey there Scout Ten, how you going?”

He smiled, knowing instinctively that he’d probably enjoy this person’s company. ~ “Oh, you know, just hanging about in the free air a few hundred meters above the street. How about you?”

~ “Same, same. Are you my back up?”

~ “I am indeed what do you need me to do?”

Their voice dropped a few degrees of its playfulness. ~ “I’m leading another bird to you. She’s my ex, and even though she wants me dead, I’d appreciate it if you could try not to destroy the copter, if it’s at all possible?”

~ “I’ll do my best, Sparrow. What’s your plan?”

*** 17 ***

Den steered the car around the last turn at the bottom of the parking building, and pulled it into a space in one corner. The building was four stories underground and eight above, built solely to house cars and other small vehicles. Zey pulled the parking brake, got out and locked all of the doors. The building had different access ways under and over the surrounding roads to make it fully accessible to the nearby shopping district. Zey put the car keys in zeyr pants pocket and strode towards the nearest exit door. Zey hadn’t come to this part of the city for a while, but unless something drastic had changed, there was a tunnel running under everything, which came out very near the Octagon.

Den had been listening to the radio as zey drove around the safer edges of the city, so zey knew that there wasn’t a lot of time left to get back to Asha’s location. The plan had originally been to have the car parked at the over bridge, and once the copter was tucked away, to use it to transport two or three more people and follow Asha to where ever they were going with the captured helicopter. But, the irritating reality was that if there wasn’t enough room in Asha’s vehicle for everyone, some folks would have to walk home.

Moving out through the exit door, zey followed the signs indicating that zey needed to go down a long corridor to zeyr right to get to the Octagon. The walking tunnel was mostly made of

plain concrete but it was wide enough for three or four people to walk comfortably next to each other. On the walls were clusters of advertising posters glued or stapled into the concrete. Nothing seemed relevant, just the ordinary advertisements for sales at particular name brand stores, ticket sales for local dramatic productions, and a few private advertisements for house mates or offerings for intimate time in exchange for money.

Usually these community based advertising spaces held some relevant notices so zey kept reading as zey continued walking. It was a long tunnel, with no doors off the sides. In addition to the unofficial decoration, there was real signage every ten meters telling the people walking that it was this way to access the Octagon gardens as well as a nearby street famous for its historical shopping district.

Zey walked for about five minutes and once zey got to the end of this long walking track, zey saw signs saying the Octagon gardens were to the left, and Setan Street markets to the right. Someone had drawn on the very last paper notices stapled to the wall, which made Den slow down to look at them. On the left side, written in gold pen on an advertisement for a local production were the graffiti tags for an Agency camera, and a Patrol checkpoint. On the right side, someone using the same colored pen had drawn the tags for safety and open trades.

Daeden turned right despite wanting to go to the Octagon to meet up with Tiras. The street tags had an associated code that everyone, even hostile gangers like the Spades, complied to. A big part of that social contract was to never put up false information. If the tags said there was an Agency presence along the tunnel to the Octagon, Den believed them.

* * * * *

Senaan had only been rated in the Agency at a level three kinetic, and while that number was more of a guideline than a static rule, he wasn't sure he was skilled enough for this plan. He'd always tested with a level five or six pushing strength which was quite sufficient, but his variable control always brought down his rating in tests. He hoped he was going to be able to do this, but he was going to give it a so'then good try.

The wind at the top of the Nen Ree Building was very gusty, constantly trying to lift him up and off the ladder, but he gripped onto the metal rung with one arm as he waited for the sound of helicopters.

It was nice be far above the noises of the city and the sometimes dank air of the streets. It

was almost like there was more air up there, and the sunlit blue sky more vivid.

The pulsing throb of rotors rose above the roar of the wind and he took a really deep breath to focus his mind. Building up the kinetic energy around him, he held it at its peak, waiting. The noise got louder and louder, and he, unusually so, waited patiently.

A whoosh of air rushed up over his face and a small bubble helicopter flew upwards dangerously close to him. Crouching, he prepared to throw the kinetic wave.

A second copter, this one much louder and bigger followed the first. Senaan pushed all of his kinetic ability up at the bottom of the helicopter in a big, wide column. The copter shot up like a fireworks rocket.

As it got to the edge of his range, he let out a cry of effort and pushed it even higher.

* * * * *

Eroka cried out, terrified as the helicopter shot up into the air as if a tower of wind had suddenly formed underneath it. The cabin shook around her, and predictably the engine stalled, but in that precise moment she was more concerned about the rest of the copter falling apart around her.

Reaching the peak of her ascent, she felt the shift in direction right through her middle. The copter started to fall again, and again predictably, the interaction between the rotors, the copter body and the wind as they dropped, she started spinning around.

Crying out again, she flicked different switches, and tried desperately to restart the copter.

Trying to sound calm, but probably failing, she touched her radio. ~ “Mayday, mayday, this is Alpha-three Charlie, Charlie-two, mayday.”

*** 18 ***

As soon as the copter bridged up over the top of the Nen-Ree building, Kiida moved it around the great aerial, and dropped down again towards the street. She hoped Eroka would survive the kinetic boost into the air, she wasn't so unskilled as to be unable to do a restart and gain upward momentum again before hitting the ground, but ultimately, whatever happened to her ex-girlfriend, Kiida wanted to be free and she would do anything to achieve that. Even letting Eroka crash.

She dropped her own copter as quickly as it would go safely. Below her was an overpass,

and apparently, under it was a hanger.

As the land came up to meet her, she looked around the street, there wasn't a lot of room to safely hover. Cars rushed in one direction over the motorway, the Nen-Ree building was the tallest structure within close proximity, but there was another older style tall building made of white stone and covered in gargoyles, everything else around her were short five storied buildings.

She wondered how many cameras were around to witness her landing. The cars would see her, regardless, but if they had picked a good place no one's faces; herself included, would get caught on the Agency facial recognition system. She hovered the copter over the line of rushing cars, turning it around to face the over pass. It wasn't easy to hover under things but Hawk seemed to think she could do it.

Underneath the road surface was a big area covered in gravel. One side had a large number of trucks all from one company with a round, blue symbol on their sides, and in front of her the other side was clear of obstacles. Through the clear area, she could see that two very big double doors had been opened and another truck was parked there with a helicopter transport trailer on the back.

Listening intently to her instincts, she moved the copter towards that trailer.

* * * * *

Asha heard the helicopter as she was packing away some of the extra food and prep supplies. They'd hired the trailer and the food from a vendor in Marana and drove it north with the new van. Hawk was pretty sure the Agency wouldn't catch a camera shot of the food trailer, but they'd changed the plates just in case, so as to protect the owner and their business.

Hawk had found out that the owner of the Nen-Ree building wasn't particularly cooperative with the Agency. So much so, that as cameras were put up in the area in the 80s, they'd mysteriously been destroyed or vandalized, at least all of the ones in and around the building and facing the entrance, which meant there was a decent camera free radius in which the Rebels could work with little to no risk.

The helicopter came down under the road surface behind the trailer. She moved outside to watch it hovering carefully but fairly close to the ground, and then it moved in through the big doors of the abandoned hanger. It landed very nearly perfectly on the big truck-trailer.

She took a deep breath, relieved. They all had a much better chance of getting away now.

* * * * *

Staring at the RF scanner in her hands, Aneyia waited impatiently. She hoped the darn thing would work long enough for them to get the tracker off the copter. The air started to vibrate in such a way that she could feel the pulsing in her bones and through her feet. She looked up and stepped back. A small bubble copter hovered towards her, it was quite close.

The pilot was good, moving it slowly down towards the trailer and landing it, almost perfectly in place. Determined, despite her fear, Aneyia crawled up onto the trailer to meet the pilot. The woman was wearing a uniform, somewhat like the kind worn by airplane pilots only the shade of blue that was distinctly associated with the A3 and A2 rank levels of the Agency. The woman grinned at her with a pair of bright green eyes.

Anei returned the grin. *“Welcome to the Rebels,”* she signed.

The pilot’s smile broadened.

“Do you have an idea where the GPS is?” she signed then lifted the RF scanner to show it to her.

The pilot shook her head. *“My guess would be with the radio systems. Anywhere else and I’d have seen it already.”*

“OK, there’s a van out there, you need to go and wait inside in case we need to bug out.”

She shook her head again. *“Nope. I’m helping to pack the copter.”*

Anei laughed at her bravado. She nodded. *“Alright.”*

* 19 *

Den had managed to get through the camera riddled zone of the shopping district by stealing a couple of medical masks from a stall, putting one on, and coughing intermittently to give anyone looking at zem the reason for zeir wearing a mask. Then, using the hidden walkway under one of the main lines of traffic, zey crossed over to enter the Octagon from underneath. The gardens and shopping area in and around the block were filled with cameras linked directly to the facial recognition database, so zey knew that Tiras wouldn’t be up there. The only place without much surveillance was on the bottom levels where cars shot by on their way under the gardens.

Den clicked the radio, hoping that the Psi suppressant in the walls wouldn't interfere too much, now that zey was underground.

~ "This is Taxi calling Bird's Eye, Bird's Eye, you there?"

There was a few seconds of radio static and then Tiras' voice sounded. ~ "Boy am I glad to hear your voice Taxi. How are things going upstairs?"

~ "Last I heard we managed to get around the blocks, and things were back on plan. Come to the central underground walkway, we can get home together."

~ "Already there, Taxi. I think I can see you."

Den glanced around. Zey was walking down, parallel with the traffic. Slightly above zem the flow of walking people moved across concrete walkways, which hovered above the rushing cars. Glass sealed off pedestrians from poor air quality and noise. Tiras stood at the glass almost at the middle of the over bridge. Den waved and jogged ahead to where the path split off to go up and over.

Tiras laughed as zey bridged the distance. "What are you doing here?"

Den shrugged. "I figured since you hadn't sent up a flag that you might be having trouble getting out."

Tiras nodded. "You're not wrong. There's a lot of Agents above our heads and I can't find an exit that doesn't have a camera." He indicated Den's mask with a chin lift. "I see you got a solution."

Den chuckles. "Yep, here's yours." Zey took out the spare mask from zeir pocket. It was white, zey'd grabbed it so that against Tiras' tanned skin, he might look darker than he was, thereby covering his identity a little more. "Got a hat too if you want, though, sorry to say it might have lice, I got it from a very dirty looking pan handler in the nearby markets." Zey pulled the old baseball cap out of zeir back pocket. Under the grubbiness, it might have once been red and white.

"Better dirty than dead. Thanks!" he said, putting them both on. Together with his slightly over-sized raggy clothing, he looked very much like the panhandler. "So, what's the plan?"

"Just follow me, I know a way out. Keep your head down, and occasionally cough."

Over the edge of his mask, the grin in Tiras' eyes was filled with affection and mischief. "Yes, shan."

Den snickered at the idea of having any rank at all, and turned around.

* * * * *

Eroka hovered in a circle around the Nen-Ree building looking for any sign of Kiida in the air, and swooping down a little to check on the roads. The GPS tracker on Kiida's copter said it was somewhere nearby. Somewhere close, but for the life of her she couldn't see anything.

~ "Charlie two, this is Alpha One, come in Charlie Two." The operator's voice was very neutral, which was bad. Whenever Arba, the primary radio operator, went stoic on you it meant he was either very angry, or there was someone standing over him making him extremely uncomfortable. Knowing how annoyed her boss was, she figured it was probably both.

She sighed. ~ "This is Charlie two, over."

~ "Charlie two, the GPS confirms the location as in front of the Nen-Ree building. Any sign of her?"

~ "No, base, I can't see her. There's an overpass, but it's too low for me to check under without breaching local ordinance. Other than that, I can't see her."

~ "Copy, your orders are to wait where you are for back up."

~ "Confirmed." She sighed. She was in so much trouble. ~ "Charlie two, out."

It sounded as if she was going to regret surviving the drop out of the sky. But hopefully, it was the kind of regret where she was put on supervision, and not charged with something fatal.

* * * * *

Asha handed the little tub of left over bean curry to the truckie with a smile. This one had a kind look in her eyes, despite the rough exterior.

"Thanks," said the woman. "I've got such a long trip this aft'noon, this'll be m'dinner!"

Asha laughed. "Happy to help!"

Three knocks sounded quietly on the back door of the trailer, telling her that it was time to leave. Touching her ear, she pretended like she was listening to a radio in her ear piece. She was, but it wasn't the police or Agency band radio.

Deliberately letting out some choice swear words, she started hurriedly packing up the smaller containers of food.

The truckie holding her free bean curry with rice frowned. "What's wrong? You hear some bad news on the radio?"

She grumbled. "That helicopter landing five minutes ago?" she said, adopting some of their

ways of speaking. “That’s attracted the Agency. I don’t know about you, but I want nothing to do with that kind of trouble. You might want to tell the other drivers to clear out.”

The woman whistled between her teeth. “Too right. Thanks for the warning.”

*** 20 ***

Tosha paced across the back of the room, while the young A0 stood in a disconcerting silence without apparent emotion in the center. His arms were crossed over his chest as he watched the dozen or so cameras

They’d lost the traitor Tiras Malar senior. Kiida had escaped, and likely with the helicopter. And the pilot who defied orders to chase her also allowed a known local Rebel to escape. If the young man or his older brother didn’t execute her, Erika was probably going to be demoted and never be allowed to fly again. Tosh, however, was a hundred percent sure that zey was headed for execution. Zey wanted to run, but there was no way to escape, and no where to go if zey managed to get away.

“Sir! There are a dozen trucks from the MCC delivery service coming out of that area,” said one of the technicians.

The A0 stepped out of his stoic calm and moved forwards. “Show me.”

Tosh, still panicking but trying to look like zey was doing zeyr job, stepped in to see as well.

The screen showed a low orbit satellite picture of the city. Digitally outlined in red, were the many oblong shapes of long-haul truck-trailers. A dozen of them were pouring out from under the overpass, each heading in different directions.

“Send patrols after them to pull them over.”

“Which ones, sir?” asked the tech.

There was an underlying hostility to him. “Why can we not go after all of them?”

Tosh could hear the sudden anxiety in the operator’s voice. “Uh, sir, there’s twelve of them, we need at least two patrol cars per target and we don’t have that many at our disposal at this time of day.”

The young man sighed. “How many can we pursue?”

“About half of them. Which should we prioritize?”

He stood there for three or four breaths as if thinking.

“Uh, sir?”

“What?”

“There’s another one, there.” The operator pointed to the screen. Another truck of the same company and size was driving down a street parallel to the target zone. It drove slowly, much slower than the other trucks.

The young man shook his head. “No, don’t bother, a thief will run if they’ve got stolen goods on them. They’re practically meandering. In fact, see those five who are rushing straight for the city borders, target them. They’re more likely to be involved.”

“Yes, sir.”

Behind them, the security room door opened so fast and hard it slammed against the wall. “What is this I hear that one of your pilots has stolen a helicopter?” roared the eldest of the Nightmare Sons right in Tosh’s face.

Tosh stepped back from the much broader, taller man. Zey dropped zey eyes and chin as low as they’d go to show absolute respect, but zey was unable to reply in zey sudden terror. This man executed people he didn’t like, Founder knew what he’d do for actual failure.

The younger brother stepped in front of Tosh. “It’s very hard to reacquire a helicopter that’s been stolen and is flying.”

“Reacquire? Reacquire!” the older man roared. “You should have shot it down the moment they got into the air!”

“Brother, that copter is worth more than the average yearly income in the norm world--”

“I don’t care how much it costs!” he growled. “We can always make more, but now the Rebels have a helicopter! This is negligence!” The elder stepped around his brother, lifting a gun to aim at Tosh’s face.

Zey flinched, curling up further in the hope that complete subservience might save zem.

“No, brother.” Again the younger brother stepped in front of Tosh. “*I* ordered it not be shot down.”

“Then you’re an idiot and father is going to make sure you pay for it.” There seemed to be a struggle but Tosh couldn’t see anything. “Move out of the way, *Runt*. Someone has to be executed for incompetence.”

“No.” The younger man’s voice was utterly calm, despite being insulted by his own brother.

“Why not? We all know that fear is a good motivator, it’ll ensure everyone else stays in line.” The elder was gruff and hostile, but there was something utterly joyous in his tone as if the

thought of murdering Tosh was something he absolutely wanted to do.

Tosh's limbs started to tremble and zey silently begged zey legs to cooperate and not add to zey humiliation by giving way in that moment.

"Firstly, father warned you about killing too many underlings just last week, secondly, it was only recently that you executed the last manager, I'm sure the staff in this department are plenty scared. Any more afraid and their efficiency will drop. And thirdly," his voice dropped into a growl, "You will not execute someone for my mistake, do you understand me?"

The older brother huffed in such a way that he sounded like a snorting bull.

"Now come, brother. You have that meeting in Araam this afternoon. I'll arrange for a private jet to get you there in time." The younger moved forward, putting a hand on the elder's back, turning him around and leading him towards the door. "It'll be a first class one with all of the trimmings. You'll have a whole jet to yourself..."

The door closed behind them, and Tosh stood there for a few breaths, terrified and stunned. When zey fear dropped down enough so zey could think again, zey knees started to shake, and zey weakened back into the wall. One of the operators seemed to see zem falling, and tried to catch zem, but, unable to stand any longer, Tosh's legs gave way and zey melted down to the floor.

"Shan?" said someone near zem.

Nothing in zey brain or body worked, zey couldn't even say anything. Tears tumbled out of zem. Tosha didn't want to do this any more. None of it.

*** 21 ***

Den led Tiras in a dodging sprint out of the lowest exit from the Octagon leading to the north of the city. It was still in the wrong direction for them to get back to the landing zone, but zey was pretty sure that the mission was now in other people's hands.

Instincts dove zem to the left as they moved off the walkway into the normal streets of the city. Tiras followed without comment or resistance. Den was pretty surprised that Tiras didn't seem to want to dominate anything. Most ex-Agent Rebels took a while to unlearn the dominance culture of the Agency so they could fit in their Rebel cell. While the Rebels tended to still have a military structure for combat, no one was inherently better than anyone else even if they had a higher "rank". Tiras had dropped into this role immediately by not fighting Den for the Cell Leader

position and only stepping in to help when it was needed.

Zey's Danger Sense flared up to one side, and zey dodged in the other direction. Zey was never sure precisely what the danger was, but every time zey ignored that instinct, zey got into trouble. They shot into a lane which serviced the backs of stores and restaurants on the main street. On the right was a high brick wall, covered in graffiti. Den jogged past, checking for codes. Zey saw some tags saying that Rebels had lived in this area for a while but then the code was painted over with a TFO symbol. Den remembered that raid. The cell was otherwise wiped out, with only three survivors escaping the attack.

"What's wrong?" asked Tiras right behind zem.

Den remembered that Tiras was an empath and huffed. "Nothing, just remembering some lost friends." Zey got to the end of the lane, and slowed to check the next group of tagging carefully, touching the brick with one hand.

"What am I missing? You seem to be reading this graffiti?"

Den smiled sideways at him. "I am in fact. These codes and symbols give an assessment of the area's potential threats." Zey pointed to a jagged symbol framed in a circle. "This is a warning to say there's an active TFO hub, given its position in relation to the others, it's a block north. This one that looks like a gargoyle face is for one of the local gangs but because it's done with this Reda letter it means that they're open for trade. I'm just checking to make sure we don't run into a hub or something."

Tiras tipped his head on the side. "Who does them? And how can you trust it?"

Den smirked at Tiras. "This is how the illegal underground works here in Aramaan. Everyone, regardless of their street alliances agrees to maintain these where possible. Us Rebels don't generally have the money to buy spray paint, but what cells we have that are open to trade try to mark themselves. We use the arrowhead symbol that's on Nama Ree's bootleg whiskey." Zey chuckled. "A Hawk face would be too on the nose, and it looks close enough to the Spades so that most people leave us alone. The gangs and illegals use their own symbols, and everyone tries to use a format so it looks like a tagging war between kids, so the cops and the Agency don't realize it's code. It's in everyone's best interests for all of us to maintain the accuracy of the tags so everyone does. Any group that tries to move in and modify the system gets ignored by everyone else, so the system remains in place. It's gotten us out of a lot of trouble in the past. Particularly before Hawk came along."

"That's really smart." He didn't sound surprised, just impressed.

“It is. The authorities always underestimate us illegals, and that’s to our advantage. Come on,” zey said. “There’s a Rebel safe house just around the corner. We can rest, eat and then radio the others to see when they can come and pick us up.”

* 22 *

Tiras sat on a dusty floor eating a meal bar. The safe house wasn’t really a livable space. It was a small dark room with minimal supplies so that if a Rebel was lost or being chased, they had somewhere secure to rest. The food was only long-life meal bars and army rations, nutritious but bland. There was running water, a toilet, and some camping cots, all covered in dust from disuse. But it was dry and relatively warm, and because the entrance involved a lot of climbing and crawling, it was mostly safe from being accidentally discovered by other groups of Illegals.

He and Den sat on the dusty floor in silence, both of them were very tired. Tiras finished his meal bar and got up to tidy the place, Den followed a moment later.

There was a big broom which he used to sweep up most of the loose dust and dirt into a pail, while Den offered a spray of cleaner to the ancient toilet and basin in the other room.

This small amount of work would at least ensure that the tiny space was clean enough for the next person. Together they put away the cleaning implements in a cupboard under the basin, and without saying a word, the two of them turned to leave the way they’d arrived.

Back outside they stood waiting just off the street in relative silence. Tiras felt an odd sort of comfort with Den. Even though they didn’t really know each other yet, he sensed in the young androgyne a commonness of spirit, which gave him an instinctive peace of mind. This young one could be trusted, and that sense of trustworthiness almost demanded that he be just as trustworthy in reply.

He smiled at Den. “Hey, thanks for coming to help. I wasn’t sure how to get out of there.”

Den’s smile was open. “You’re in my cell. That’s what we do. Thanks for luring some of the Agency away, I’m a good getaway driver, but that was quite ridiculous today.”

“I’m happy to help.” Tiras nodded. “They sure do want to arrest you, though.”

“No idea why.”

Tiras grunted as if agreeing. “Might be because you three siblings are the last of the original Aramaan rebellion. The Head of the Agency is quite focused on killing all of the Originals. He’s extremely obsessed with Nama Ree and that one lady in Shada... Enaad?”

“Yeah,” zey grunted. “Enaad Ken. She came down to us a year ago to start up trade. She kicks some serious ass.”

“You do too, Den.”

The younger androgyne chuckled. “Thanks, but I’m going to have to disagree. Both Enaad and Nama have attacked the Agency directly and done some amazing things. Our cell is best at running away, mostly.”

Tiras looked across the alley and lifted an eyebrow at Den. Did zey really not know how amazing zey was?

There was a car horn, awfully close to them and Tiras looked up into Asha’s face. She sat in a van, parked on the side of the road.

“Hey, you two. Get in. We’re a little crowded, but at least it’s warm.”

The side door of the van slid open and Tiras was looking at a number of faces smiling at him, including a new one. “Kiida, I presume?” he said kindly.

She laughed, brightening emerald green eyes. “Yep, no guesses to who you are.”

“Did we get away with the copter?” he said crawling into the van after Den.

“Yep,” said Asha from the front seat. “Scott-free, I think. How are you two?”

“Far too much running and dodging,” said Den, “But I think we’re both alright.”

“Yeah,” said Tiras letting his exhaustion into his voice. “I haven’t run that much since A1 grad prep, but I’ve got no bullet holes so it’s all good.” He deliberately changed his tone to something playful. “I found a yellow sticky in the middle of the fancy mall.”

“You did?” balked Den.

“Yeah, just sitting on the floor.” As the van accelerated back into the main flow of traffic, he pulled the little sticky out of his back pocket to show it to Den. “Don’t know how he got the time to leave it there...”

“That’s godlike,” said Den sounding completely shocked. “How does Hawk do that? How does he know what will be needed?”

“He’s a high rated Time Psi.” Asha shrugged from the front seat. “How do you know how to dodge bullets?”

Zey frowned. “I don’t know, I just do it. Nothing special really.”

“Well, people that can’t dodge bullets think what you do is supernatural, Hawk’s the same. He’s just a level twenty Time Psi, half the time he doesn’t even realize he’s doing it. It’s irritating, and quite frankly, he can be rather obnoxious about it sometimes.”

Remembering some of his interactions with Hawk, Tiras let out a grumble of agreement. “Yes, playfully cocky, but also really helpful. Without this I wouldn’t have found an open window to get out of the mall.”

Den was still staring at the sticky, incredulous.

Tiras changed the subject. “So, boss?” he addressed Asha. “Where we headed?”

“We’re going to drop off all but you and Den at the old building then take you two, Kasa and Keton to a special location.”

Den snorted. “OK, but do we at least get to find out where we’re going?”

Asha chortled playfully. “Being surprised is half the fun, Den!”

*** 23 ***

Yaan sat cross legged on the wooden floor of the Rebel’s infirmary. Sunlight flowed through some high windows, not only lighting up the space in joyful golden light, but warming it. Ever since she’d arrived, she’d felt a quiet sort of peace with the Rebels. Not nearly as all encompassing and welcoming as back home at Mern Song Manor, but peace enough that she was a little sad to know they’d be going again sometime soon to be back under contract as Swords.

The four of them sat on the floor in the gap between their cots and the counter top that Kasa used to hold her medical tools and supplies. Brie sat next to her, resting with her eyes closed and head leaned against her. Yaan had her arm wrapped around her wife’s shoulder. ‘Nessa’ had her back against the same wall as the windows, and Crow had his back to the cupboards under Kasa’s counter top. They’d sat there in the sun and warmth for a while. Words weren’t needed, it was just nice to be around people from back home.

Yaan took a long deep breath and glanced sideways at Nessa. “So how long have you known this group of Rebels?”

Nessa shrugged. “Den and Kasa’s parents traded with us before I came on the scene, so I’ve known the family for more than a decade.

In her arms Brie snorted. “So you met Den when zey was a little kid?”

“Yeah, zey was much less serious back then.”

“Was zey shy or rambunctious?” Yaan asked with a wink. Nessa had always been a curious, playful child, and Yaan and Brie had been on the quiet side. So she knew that Nessa would

understand the reference.

Nessa chuckled. “Definitely the curious type. And zey ran around a lot too.”

Young Crow grinned at them. “I was both.”

“What?” asked Yaan. “Loud and quiet?”

“Yeah.” There was a quiet seriousness to the young man, with an underlying playfulness in his eyes that Yaan kind of liked. Oddly enough, he reminded her of the other Dragon pair under Service. Quiet, serious Dragon and playful, gregarious Onyx.

“My sister is the same,” she said with a nod. Remembering that they were Yens, she looked sideways at Nessa again. “So were their parents nice? I mean, Den and Kasa’s?”

Nessa’s face pulled into a little grimace of sadness. “Yeah, they were the loveliest people I’ve ever known.”

Brii chuckled again, but this time she sat up and opened her eyes. “Lovelier than us?”

Nessa rolled her eyes at the ceiling. “Yes, even lovelier than you two knuckleheads.”

“How is that even possible?” Yaan snickered.

“I take it you three know each other from back home?” interrupted Crow, wearing a broad smile.

“We went to the same school,” said Nessa.

Yaan nodded. “Song clan.” If there were any bugs or spies, they wouldn’t know that this meant they grew up or lived at Mern Song Manor, a special orphanage, but as a Havenite Crow would know what it meant.

The smile loosened on his face and he nodded. “Me too.”

“Oh?” asked Yaan. She wasn’t sure she’d ever met him, and they lived at Mern Song when they weren’t working.

He switched to speak telepathically. *“It was only for a year. Have you been back recently? How are everyone? Auntie Miira?”*

Brii shrugged. *“Everyone’s fine, it’s always busy, as you know. And I think Miira will outlive all of us.”*

Crow chuckled and nodded without saying anything out loud. Anyone who had met Auntie Miira knew how much energy she had, despite being quite ancient.

Yaan felt a cool breeze brush through into the room from the doorway, as it flowed over her bare feet, she sensed that it was actually a wave of black static. It seemed to call to her, as if a high rated Time Psi was trying to pull her out with just static. She frowned and stared at the door.

A voice seemed to call without words and every instinct in her body knew that someone was at the front door; someone who wanted to talk to her and her alone.

“Something wrong, love?”

She shook her head without looking at her wife. “No, I don’t think so. Give me a moment, you stay here in the warm.”

Getting to her feet, she left the room, striding down the short corridor to the main entrance area. She was drawn to the front door and opened it. Standing barely a meter from the door was Naethan. His face was utterly emotionless, the blue in his eyes so bright in the sunlight that they seemed to glow. He was almost creepy, except that she sensed a quiet friendliness from him.

A smile broke the stoic expression on his face. *“Hello, Yaan. How are your friends healing?”* he said telepathically.

Sensing that there was a reason for not speaking out loud, as well as not coming to her to talk she answered mind to mind.

“They’re healing pretty fast. Kasa is quite a gifted healer. So, why did you call me out here like that?”

He frowned. *“Like what?”*

She tipped her head on the side. *“You didn’t deliberately use Time static to call me out here?”*

He shook his head. *“No, I simply knew we needed to speak privately and had a vision that you would come out to me. So I waited here for you.”*

“Well, you sure are accidentally disconcerting.” She smiled to reassure him that this wasn’t a statement of criticism.

His eyes seemed to shine a little more as if he found this amusing.

“So,” she said, changing the subject a little. *“What do you need?”*

“I have to ask that you keep your knowledge of me to yourself.”

She shrugged. *“That’s kind of a given. Besides we’re going soon, I’m not sure it’s that big of a deal.”*

“I don’t just mean with the Rebels here, I mean with your people, even with your wife. No one can know. My position in the Agency means that any knowledge of me is extremely dangerous, for you as well as for me.”

Sighing, she crossed her arms over her chest. *“Even if your secret didn’t protect three thousand Rebels, it also protects my little sister, so of course I’m going to keep quiet. Besides, Brie*

knows that if I keep something from her it's for a good reason, so I've no pressure to be a hundred percent candid with her. I was already intending on keeping it to myself."

He smiled. *"That's good. Now, I need some help that's a little more practical. We're going to be moving you and your friends to a more secure location."*

"Why's that? Surely these folks are safe, they're friendly enough?"

"It's not them that's the problem," he said, moving towards the front door to enter the building. *"The Agency is somehow monitoring this Rebel cell. We don't know how. It could even be a spy, though Tiras seems to think it's probably a bug and he's got good instincts. Either way, it'll be safer for you four elsewhere, at least while everyone's healing up. But I imagine given your culture that they might be afraid of a trap, are you able to reassure them?"*

She turned to follow him. *"Sure, I can help with that."*

Glowing blue eyes glanced back at her in the gloom and she sensed surprise. *"You're awfully accommodating, I was expecting you to be more like your sister and fight me for every inch."*

She laughed out loud, amused. *"Maybe her stubbornness is how I learned to compromise."*

They moved through the guts of the building, down the hall and back in through to the Rebel's shielded infirmary room.

Yaan stepped around Naethan to face her fellow Havenites. "Hey, everyone, this is Naethan, he's a high ranking Rebel from Araam." She pointed to each person as she said their name. "Naethan, this is Crow and Nessa, and you've already indirectly met my wife, Dragon."

The other three nodded and made appropriate hello-type noises, Naethan lowered his chin while surprisingly managing to keep his eyes up – he must be learning from Eagle.

"So, apparently we're moving to a better building." She smiled at them to ease the vaguely tense expressions in their faces.

"Yes," said Naethan, his voice quiet. "Hawk is concerned about security for you as this is a very active Rebel cell. So we've arranged for a more secure location for you and some of the other Rebels to stay while everyone recovers from their injuries. It's also as a thanks for all your help. I have Nessa's van, so we can transport you all in relative comfort, we'll leave it there so you can leave this new location when you're ready."

Yaan saw Brie trying to get up and failing, so she moved forwards to help her wife.

Behind her Naethan cleared his throat. "May I help you Nessa?"

"Yeah, thank you. But can you drop me off somewhere else instead? You Rebels are nice

and all but I can recover at home.”

“Of course!” said Naethan. “Do you mind if we borrow your van for a little while?”

Nessa smirked at Yaan and Brii. “Not at all, I have a few of them. Crow will know where to park that one when it’s time.”

Crow had managed to gently pull himself to his feet. “Yes, ma’am, I do. So where is this more secure place?”

Nessa allowed Naethan to wrap his arm around her to help her walk and Yaan was a little surprised at how compliant *she* was in all of this.

“It’s out of the city,” Naethan said, and then touched everyone’s minds telepathically. “*The location is actually a secret from most Rebels as well, so for the sake of security, I’ll explain on the way.*”

* 24 *

Asha drove through the broad gates of the derelict air force base. It was a very large facility surrounded on all sides by about a kilometer square of grass, old concrete runways and four huge airplane hangers. The place had been abandoned for more than fifty years, so two of the hangers were unsafe due to storm damage, but the facility itself was surprisingly well preserved. She drove the van along the straight one-lane road towards a multi-storied building, it looked a little bit like several boxes stacked unevenly onto each other, like the play blocks of a giant child. Despite its odd shape, Asha kind of liked the place. They approached the front and parked next to a shiny blue van, which had to be the vehicle owned by one of the newbies.

Naethan refused to tell her anything about these new people, but he *had* said that it was safer she didn’t know, and even though it was annoying to be kept out of the loop, she trusted his judgment. Pulling the parking break, she dislodged herself from the seat belt and got out. The van door opened and Tiras, Den, Kasa and little Keton tumbled out. Everyone, even Keton, looked very tired. Tiras leaned down to pick up the five year old as they moved towards the front doors.

Asha opened it up, glad to find the door unlocked. There was a rumbling hum coming from inside, which told her the generator was on. The vestibule was empty of anything but sunlight and old carpet floors. Doors led off in multiple directions, but she turned right to lead the others down the main hall towards the old dining room.

“What is this place?” asked Kasa behind her.

“It’s one of the old air force bases that were built before the Agency. It’s been decommissioned, but we managed to buy the demolition rights at a steal.”

“It seems warm and dry, it’d be a great place for a non-combatant Rebel cell,” she answered.

“You’re not wrong there, but Hawk wants to keep it mostly unoccupied for some part of his new trade plan.”

Den’s answering voice sounded cynical. “The trade plan that will improve all Rebel supplies over night?”

Asha tried not to snort at the cynicism. “Yeah, apparently.” She pushed open the double doors and let everyone else through ahead of her.

Beyond was a large empty space that had once been a dining hall for air force and army troops. The carpet was old and well trampled, but still intact. There were windows on three walls, making the space sunny and warm. To her right was a u-shape of kitchen counter tops. Naethan stood in the kitchenette, cooking something at the oven.

“Ah, you’re here! How did it go?”

Asha grinned at him. “It got a bit complicated in the middle but the truck will be arriving soon with the copter, and Kiida is with the other Rebels, likely being plied with food from Rana.”

Naethan laughed, they both remembered how much Rana loved to cook for new Rebels. “That’s good.”

In the middle space of the room were a gathering of pillows and blankets. Three of the four newbies sat there. She frowned. “Where’s our fourth?”

“Nessa wanted to go home instead,” said Yaan, who had been previously introduced as ‘Red’.

“Ah, alright. More food for everyone else.” She grinned at them. “I managed to get cake for you, and I believe Naethan even got a hold of some more coffee, which is a rarity in the Rebels.”

The four Rebels who came with her wandered into the middle to sit down on the pillows.

Tiras put Keton down on a pillow, where the young one immediately curled up as if to have a nap.

“So, can we find out what’s going on yet? Or are we continuing the confusion?” asked Den.

Asha grinned at zem. Zey looked tired and a little grouchy. She took a breath. “Well, Hawk seems to think that you all need some time to hang out, also, the newbies need somewhere absolutely safe to recover from their injuries, so he’s arranged for you to spend some time here at

the airbase, which is one of our super secret locations. The Agency shouldn't come here to bother anyone and there's no chance of a bug or a spy being here, so any words that need saying can be said without any worry."

"Yes," said Naethan, bringing a soup pot and a collection of plates out of the kitchen towards those sitting down. "You'll have a van outside for when you're ready to leave, there's a spare in the hanger with the helicopter in case the Rebels wish to leave earlier or later than the new people." Naethan put the stewing pot down onto a heat pad, and started handing out plates to everyone.

Asha moved in close and fetched an envelope out of her jacket pocket to hand to Tiras. "This is from Hawk, it contains a few things you're going to need. Once you're settled, Nae and I will leave you to it."

Naethan started to scoop the meal he'd been cooking into various plates. He, like Rana, had a predisposition for showing affection with food.

"Hey, Preta," she said to him. "You ready to go? I'm sure they can serve themselves, and we've got other places to go, remember?"

He laughed and put the food down. "Yes, ma'am."

Den got to zeir feet and showed them a set of car keys on the palm of zeir hand. "I'm sorry, Naethan, I had to ditch it to get away. I don't think I dented it, but the tires are probably trashed. I parked it--"

"Not to worry," he said taking the keys from Den. "I'll report it to the rental agent as being stolen and they'll find it eventually."

"What about your security deposit?"

He shrugged. "It's only money. But thank you for keeping it intact."

"We gotta go now," she said, her voice gentle but firm.

"Yes we do. Enjoy your time, this place is quite nice. With the generator and solar panels on the roof, you should even get hot showers if you ration it."

*** 25 ***

Tiras sat on some pillows and ate an oddly nice tasting stew made by Naethan. He hadn't known that he could cook. Keton lay on his side between Tiras and Kasa, he'd obviously had a long

day too. The six adults sat in a circle, quietly eating. The airbase had a nice atmosphere to it, almost homely it was just a little too unfurnished to be completely welcoming. There were fold up chairs and tables against one wall, and a handful of camping cots, half made up and leaning against the kitchen cupboards.

He scraped the last of the stew in his bowl and scooped it into his mouth. As he put the bowl onto the ground in front of him, he let out a gentle rumble of contentedness. It had been a long day, and even though he'd do it again, he was very tired.

Red, who sat opposite him had finished hers and was smiling. "Naethan dropped off some coffee supplies if you want one?"

He perked up immediately. "Mm, yes. Does anyone else want a hot drink?"

Everyone made affirmative noises and he got to his feet.

"Let me help you, Tiras," offered Red.

The two of them moved around the old kitchen making coffee and hot chocolate. They managed to make enough drinks for everyone without banging into each other, which was quite a feat in such a narrow kitchen space. Grinning at her, he balanced three hot drinks in his hands and moved towards the circle of people. It was as he was handing out coffee and sitting down with his own that he remembered the letter Asha had given him. He took a sip and put the coffee down again.

The envelope was plain with just his name written on the front. He ripped it open to discover a few sheets of paper, each with their own separate bits of information. One was an address with a note that when they returned to the city, their cell was going to move again, this he handed to Den across the circle. A second bundle of paper seemed to pertain to a raid mission, so he put that down next to him to look at the third.

It was a letter in neatly square hand writing saying that the three guests and Nessa were confirmed and certified as safe allies by Hawk.

Tiras chuckled and put it down in front of him. "Seems like Hawk likes you folks," he said looking at Crow, Red and Dragon. "You've been confirmed as absolutely safe allies."

Kasa leaned forward to grab the letter. "Wow, really? Not even the church has that, but I'm not terribly surprised, I knew Nessa was safe the first time I met her."

Sitting next to Kasa, Den nodded in agreement.

Opposite him, Red brought out an envelope of her own. Dragon and Crow frowned and leaned in.

“Where’d that come from?” asked Dragon.

Red didn’t verbally answer the question, she just took the contents out, started to read, and handed the envelope sideways to her wife, who then showed it to Crow.

There was a pause as Red was reading and then she also handed the letter sideways.

Tiras cleared his throat, aware that there was a lot going on under the surface. “Um, a part of the certification is the request that for as long as you are with us, that you’re on the first evac list if there’s an Agency attack on our cell, with myself and the children.”

“What?” barked Den. “You get first evac because of knowing something about Hawk, but why are they so important?”

“You don’t know our situation, Den,” answered Crow as he read the mystery letter from Red.

“What could you be risking? My entire family has been killed by the Agency for four generations!”

Crow looked up. “The Rebels don’t have the monopoly on trauma. Many of us have been harmed by the Agency, and Tiras isn’t the only one whose secrets protect lives.”

“My mana was killed by the Agency,” said Red.

“Yeah,” replied Dragon. “My papa too, and they kidnapped and tortured my grandmother eighty years ago. The Agency doesn’t just hurt Rebels.”

Red sighed and sat up, folding her legs under her and grabbing the letter as Crow handed it back across the circle.

“This letter is from our employer. You have been formally given level three clearance to know of our existence.” She took a breath and Tiras sensed a snippet of fear, as if she was about to say something that frightened her. “We come from an organization outside of Arana, called Haven. Our employer is a high rated Time Psi, somewhat like Hawk except she sees the lives of all people on this planet, not just the Rebels and the Agency. We work to help her prevent certain things from happening.” She glanced at Crow, who sat upright and nodded.

He didn’t look pleased to share his information either. “With level three clearance, I am obligated to tell you that I am what’s called a Shield, and you three Yens are my Targets. What this means is that it’s my responsibility to keep all three of you, but particularly Den, alive for an undefined amount of time.”

“Yes,” said Red. “And my wife and I are Swords, and our new orders are, if the Rebels will have us, to help your cell accomplish its goals for the foreseeable future.”

Dragon let out a grunt and Tiras sensed an awkward agreement.

He stared at the three newbies, uncertain how he should react.

“We don’t need a babysitter!” barked Den.

Crow smirked. “And I don’t need your permission to do my job.”

Tiras smiled at the tension between the two young ones. “Well, Hawk has given them complete support, where’s the problem if they want to stay?”

Den turned to glare at him. “I don’t need a babysitter!”

“I’m not sure Crow said that’s his job. Sounded more like a bodyguard.”

“I *don’t* need a bodyguard, either.”

“Denny,” interrupted Kasa. “Without these Haven folks, we would be dead, and twice over for Keton. Stop being a stubborn Preta and just think about it for a while.”

Den crossed zeir arms over zeir chest, looking as if zey was going to insist, but then zey let out a long breath before looking across the circle at Crow. “That’s why you took that bullet at the markets, isn’t it?”

Crow’s face was a little grim but he nodded. “Yes.”

“Why is your life less important than mine?”

“It’s not.” Crow shook his head. “Shields are assigned to people whose lives save a large number of others. My one life is something I’m prepared to sacrifice in order to save not just your life but all of those who survive because of you.”

“But we’re not saving mamon!”

“No disrespect, Den,” Tiras interrupted, “but you’re wrong. How many people has your cell helped escape the Agency? That pilot, Kiida today would be dead without your help. And the others you helped lead away from the Agency the other day when we first met. You may not think it, but you’re already helping others. Someone to help you could be good. And three extra gun hands could sure help our cell survive too.”

Den still didn’t look very impressed.

Tiras smiled. “How about a trial period?” He turned to look not only at the new people from Haven but also Kasa. “Assuming everyone else wants this to happen of course?”

Kasa nodded, as did the three from Haven.

Dragon, who didn’t generally speak a lot, grunted. “I’ve not felt at home anywhere in Arana before. Your cell,” she looked at Den, “Feels a bit like home. I was sad thinking that we’d have to go soon. I’d love to try out being a Rebel for a while.”

Tiras lifted his eyebrows at Den. “Well? Trial run?”

Den sighed and dropped zair arms. “Alright, I mean, we do need more help, I can’t deny that. But with all of this level three clearance stuff, what do we tell the others?”

“Also,” added Tiras, “You should know that the cell might be under Agency surveillance.”

Crow’s back straightened again. “You’ve got a spy?”

“Ah, maybe, but I my gut says it’s more likely that there’s a bug somewhere.”

“Then don’t tell them anything.” Crow shook his head. “We’re just Illegal Psi, no need to say anything more.”

“Yeah,” agreed Red. “And what we expect from you is to not mention that we’re from Haven. Just act like you know nothing about us.”

Kasa lifted her eyebrow at Red. “Well, we actually *don’t* know much about y’all.”

“Then it’ll be easy,” replied Dragon with a broad grin on her face.

Tiras held back a chuckle. He liked these people a great deal. It was as he grinned that he remembered someone had mentioned that there was a treat in their food supplies.

“I think Asha said we have cake, shall we investigate?”

Next to him, little Keton let out a snort and sat upright. “Cake, cake, cake.” he rumbled, then melted back into the pillows.

Kasa smiled at her little brother, stroking his hair with much affection. “We must save some for him, he loves anything sweet.”

Tiras got to his feet again. “That’s only fair.”