

## ***Prologue***

### ***“The Fire of the Phoenix”***

*The Year of our Founder 3000*

*Araam city, country of Arana*

*The planet Shadow,*

*in orbit around the star Beta Five*

Sarah lay on the dim blue couch sleeping peacefully. Her beautiful face glowed ever so slightly in the late afternoon light that shone through one of the wide sitting room windows. Dobid Aenan smiled, she was so lovely. She had a perfect oval face with light brown skin, high gentle cheekbones and thick lashes over her elfin-shaped eyes. Her chocolate brown hair framed her face in messy curls. In her long fingered hands she held the rainbow baby blanket she'd been given earlier that day. His smile became wider and he felt tears of joy rise to his eyes.

Carefully, Dobid sat down on the edge of the couch next to her and reached with one hand to brush a stray hair from her face. Her eyes flickered open and a sleepy grin widened her mouth.

“Hello, my love. Nice nap?”

She nodded.

“I love you.”

Smiling broadly at him, her eyes sparkled mischievously. “I love you too, but... help me up, will you?”

He chuckled and got to his feet. Taking her outstretched hand, he lifted her and the bulk of the baby up so that she was standing. One side of his mouth lifted playfully and he pulled her into a loose embrace. He put one hand on her waist, the other lifted her hand to shoulder height and they started to sway gently from side-to-side like a slow dance. She stepped in closer, wrapped her arms around him and put her head comfortably on his shoulder.

Holding her in his arms, he smiled contentedly and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, taking into him her scent along with a deep sense of peace. They were two parts of the same being, she made him feel complete. “*Let this feeling last forever,*” he thought.

She lifted her head off his shoulder and smiling, she kissed him. As they separated from the kiss, he saw that same mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

“Dobid, can you take me out for a walk?”

Stepping back from her in surprise his heart rate suddenly quickened. She was safer in the

house.

She seemed to anticipate his reaction. “Just around the block?”

He frowned with concern and worry. “Sarah, it’s best if we stay inside. Please, for once can you listen to Father’s advice?”

She stepped back, a flash of determination brought her eyebrows together. Her silver gray eyes sparkled and her mouth deliberately formed into a pout.

“Aww. Dobid, please.” Her eyes opened wide to mimic an innocence he knew she did not possess. “Please.”

She had an uncanny habit of knowing just how to get her way with him. Unfortunately, he knew the only way to convince her otherwise, was to reveal the seriousness of their situation.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “OK, but just once around the block, then you’ll stay inside?”

She nodded. A satisfied grin lit her face; she had won with very little fight and she knew it.

He lifted his sleeve to his mouth. ~ “Leader to Point One, copy?”

~ “Copy, Leader,” came the response in his earpiece.

Sarah turned and reached for a gray woolen coat that hung by the front door, and put it around her shoulders.

~ “Point One, how is it outside?”

~ “Quiet, sir. Not even any pedestrians.”

~ “Point One, we’re walking around the block, and then returning. Keep formation.”

~ “Copy, Leader.”

She smiled at him with mock concern. “Is it safe?”

He smiled. Even if the world were ending she’d be sarcastic. “Always,” he answered gently.

“I don’t know why your father has been so worried about this person. I know he means well, but we should be fine, we’ve got you and six other guards. This person can’t be that good, can they?”

Dobid swallowed. “*They could be and probably are.*” Hiding his concern from her, he looked away, grabbing his blue suit coat hanging next to the door and put it on.

“How do they even know this man wants us?” She waited in the open doorway for him. “He’s worried this much about one silly letter. No, they must be overreacting. Besides, aren’t you the best there is?”

Dobid laughed as he walked out past her and down the concrete steps, while she locked the door.

He turned to face her, smiling uneasily. “Actually, by record I’m second. But, you know, I am the best *living* Agent.” He winked at her as she chuckled. She walked slowly past him and his smile became tense. It made him uncomfortable not to tell her what was going on. But the situation was complicated, one that required a good Agent and not a candid husband.

It was cool and calm outside. The afternoon light had lost most of its heat and the icy chill in the wind reminded him of the coming winter. Their house stood on a middle-class street with many expensive two or three storied houses on both sides. It had been a wedding present from his father a year ago. He had said it was an investment in their future and he was hoping for a payout in many grandchildren.

Across from their house was a small side road that connected their street another parallel one. It was no more than a glorified driveway, but he figured it was the quickest way around the block to get her back to the house safely.

There were no cars on the street and no people walking. This wasn’t too strange for a weekday evening, but Dobid felt uneasy. He almost wished to see real people, just normal people, so that reality could be a bit more familiar. Since the first assassination three days ago, everything had a strange tension to it that made him wary.

He took her arm and they started to walk slowly across the street towards the side road entrance. On the outside he was calm, letting her lean on him, and walking slowly across the road with her. But on the inside his mind was racing.

*“All of my friends and colleagues killed inside secure environments. Can I protect us? This man took down the most highly trained team of A0 Assassin-Class Agents in three days, I am one of the last of the Alpha Group. It is painfully obvious who is next on the list... and...”* he swallowed, *“and their families were obliterated, their partners and children, dead.”* He took a deep breath to calm himself. *“I mustn’t wind myself up, fear will only make the situation worse.”*

They walked slowly across the street and into the small side road. It was lined on both sides by a high wooden privacy fence that gave the illusion of a small canyon between his street and the next. The lane was only just big enough to have one car drive up it, which, as they walked, only added to the sensation of a canyon.

Dobid tensed as a feeling of nausea tickled his stomach and a prickling sensation ran up his spine to his neck. Without thinking his arm came up.

~ “Leader to Point one, two and three, report.”

~ “OK, on one.”

~ “A-OK on two.”

~ “Three, all clear.”

They stopped walking and Sarah frowned at him. “What’s wrong?”

He smiled reassuringly at her. “Nothing my dear, just a routine check.” He took a breath. ~  
“Point four, five and six, report.”

~ “Four here, quiet.”

~ “All quiet on five.”

Looking around him, he waited for the final Agent to report in but no response came.

~ “Point six, report.” The tension in his body increased with each second he waited. Dobid stood utterly still holding his breath as his eyes wandered slowly back the way they had come, back to the house and safety for his wife and unborn child.

~ “Six here, sorry, had to pee. Everything is fine.”

He released the breath he’d been holding and tried not to show the bright flare of relief he felt inside.

Swearing mentally at his own sense of tension and fear, he took her arm again and continued walking. He was supposed to live for this sort of situation, it was what he was trained for. But the difference to other missions was the lack of sleep; he’d been awake since just after the first assassination three days ago, and of course, this situation involved his loved ones.

Suddenly he frowned, stopping again. “Pee?”

~ “Point six repeat?”

Dobid turned back towards the house, looking for any sign of movement. The radio was silent.

~ “Point four and five report?” He looked behind him then back at the house again. There was no movement and no sounds, aside from the wind creaking in nearby trees.

He grabbed Sarah’s hand and swore under his breath. “We have to get back to the house.”

Without waiting for a response from her, he pulled her quickly back down the side road towards the house. He swallowed and lifted the microphone in his sleeve to his lips again.

~ “Point one, two and three, report.”

Only static answered him. This was getting bad. If it was just him it wouldn’t be so terrible, but his wife had little to no combat training and was certainly not in any fit state to defend herself even if she had.

~ “They can’t hear you, Aenan.” The voice in his earpiece was calm and made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. For the first time that night, he felt true panic rise in his chest. He started to run, dragging her along as fast as she could go, which he feared was not fast enough. They had to get back to the house. If they could just get to the house, she would be safe in the panic room.

A shot sounded, and his wife tripped and fell to the ground, yanking her hand out of his. He pulled out his gun and looked down at her.

“Sarah?”

She lay flat on her back with her eyes closed. There was blood forming above her swollen belly and his mind stopped at the blood.

“*Blood means she could be...*”

He didn't want to think about it, he couldn't think about it. This person was still around, a very dangerous person out to kill them. For him to be able to help her he would first have to stop this person. He touched the edge of his earpiece to switch radio frequencies.

~ “AE two to base, request ambulance and backup, AE two requesting an ambulance and back up at Xiian Street Alley.”

Dobid looked around him over the line of his gun. Concentrating hard he focused left and right, there were only two exits: one to the road beyond and the other back towards the house. The high fence line either side of him was practically impenetrable. This meant the assassin had to come from either behind or in front of him, but for the moment Dobid couldn't see or sense anyone.

He glanced again down at his wife, but forced himself to look away. He had to bring this conflict to a close as quickly as possible and to do that he needed to concentrate. He took a deep breath and focused. Maybe a challenge would bring this assassin out?

“Come out, assassin! Put me out of my misery!”

“Oh, I can't do that, Aenan.” The voice was calm and strangely quiet. The man stood barely a few meters away from him between himself and the exit to the house.

He was tall and thin, and his features were strangely non-descript even in the afternoon light. He had dark eyes and a long plain white face. On his head scruffs of black hair barely covered his scalp as if he had been a victim of radiation sickness. He wore all black. The uniform was Agency issue even down to the black walking boots. His face seemed too plain and there was a strange look to him as if he were a hundred thousand years old. Frowning, Dobid faced him and lifted his gun to aim at the man's chest.

“What are you doing this for?”

“Oh, you'll understand soon enough, Aenan. Everyone has their place in the Universe and you'll find yours, as I found mine.” There was a cold rage in the man's dark eyes. “The victory that *must* happen must start here.”

Dobid frowned at the assassin, feeling confused and a little afraid. He sounded like a raving lunatic, speaking the right language but seemingly in riddles. However, the lunatic lifted what looked like an Agency issue sighted rifle and aimed it straight at him.

He reacted on instinct, firing two shots that echoed around him. The man fell to the ground, dropping the rifle next to him.

Cautiously, Dobid approached the man's body, kicking the rifle as far out of the side street as he could. He'd fallen on his side, a small puddle of blood collected in front of him on the concrete. Leaning, Dobid prodded him with the barrel of his handgun, but there was no reaction. With a quick flick of his foot, he kicked the man onto his back.

Without warning, the assassin reached and grabbed his boot. Dobid let out a shout of surprise and fell. The man grabbed at him and they struggled over control of his gun. The world spun around him as they grappled and rolled on the concrete.

The man tried to face Dobid's gun at him. The men's muscles strained, but by changing the angle of his grip Dobid pushed the barrel away. First one shot and then another were fired into the air. Again they grappled. For a moment the man held the barrel facing Dobid's stomach, with his muscles straining painfully to move it away. The weapon went off just as Dobid pushed it away, and the shot fired out at the fence.

With renewed control of the gun, Dobid pushed against the other man's grip and got the barrel aimed at his chest. He pulled the trigger and the assassin went limp. Reaching into his jacket pocket for his handcuffs, he cuffed the man's hands behind his back.

Dobid sat awkwardly on the concrete breathing deeply. His arms were aching and he felt very tired. His hands shook as he reloaded his handgun from a magazine he had in his jacket pocket.

He tried to stand but felt very woozy. It took two tries to get to his feet and he managed to teeter towards Sarah. Flopping onto his knees next to her, he reached over to touch the wound. She still lay on her back. There was a lot of blood, it discolored most of her chest and had seeped through her clothes over the bulge that was her stomach. She didn't seem to be breathing.

It took him a moment to notice that her beautiful face was blue and purple. The realization hit him suddenly and he let out a sob. "No!"

The tears overran him and the gun dropped from his hands as he covered his face. He leaned over her, wrapping his arms around her cooling body and weeping in the sudden despair.

As he wept, a shiver ran up his spine and a feeling of vertigo overcame him for a moment. He glanced around him through the tears. *Something* was happening. He watched the wind-caught rubbish hover in mid-air as if time itself was slowing down. He frowned, tears still running down his face.

The sound of rushing wind filled his head, and he reeled backwards as if someone had hit him hard across the face. He lay on the ground unable to move or fight the overwhelming instinct to close his eyes, and when he did, he sunk immediately away from consciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Two weeks later*

Toma Aria sat in a chair next to the unconscious Agent Dobid Aenan. The Agency had insisted that Aenan had his own room and guards at the hospital. Tom and his partner had been the first Agents on the scene. They found Aenan bleeding and unconscious, lying next to his wife's body. A few meters away lay handcuffs and a pool of blood.

Tom felt as if something else had happened, something bigger than what it appeared to be. What it looked like was that Agent Aenan had caught the person who shot his wife, but fainted from bloodloss after being shot himself, and while he was unconscious the offender then got out of the cuffs.

However, there was a strange taste in the air and a feeling of static even though there were no storm clouds that evening. His instincts told him that something else entirely had happened, as if the scene evidence was telling a lie. Tom didn't think of telling this to anyone else, because if they didn't feel it then they were not meant to know about it.

Agent Aenan had been shot in the abdomen. This sort of injury explained the loss of consciousness, but he hadn't woken up for two weeks. The doctors thought he was also suffering some sort of emotional or psychic shock, possibly caused by the death of his wife. No one would know either way until he woke up again.

Tom had volunteered to sit there with him for those two weeks and any length of time more than that, and not because of any obvious reason. Nobody knew it, but Aenan had saved Tom's life once. Three years ago, Tom was sixteen and he'd been cornered by an escaped Psi. The man was beside himself on some drug and was holding a gun to Tom's head. The man had been screaming something about Tom being an Agent and trying to kill him. Then all of a sudden he fell to the ground, dead. Tom never heard the shot. Afterwards, Agent Aenan approached to make sure Tom was unharmed and didn't leave until the shock had lifted.

Because of this, Tom had volunteered for conscription into the Agency, and because of this he was there when Agent Aenan awoke.

Aenan's face twitched and frowned, and then he started to mumble. This mumble generated into one word: "Cassandra."

Tom put down the magazine he had been reading and leaned over the bed. Aenan woke with a start, his blue eyes suddenly opened wide. He frowned, looking around him, and then at Tom.

"Sarah? Where is Sarah?"

Tom swallowed. He hadn't wanted to be the one to give him the news. "I'm sorry, sir, she didn't make it."

The news hit him immediately and hard. He released a deep breath and his eyes closed as if to block out the truth. "I knew, Tom. I knew, I just needed to hear it from you."

Tom watched, feeling lost and uncomfortable as tears overwhelmed Agent Aenan and ran freely down his face. He waited. He couldn't make the pain go away, but he could stand with him, allow him the space to express his grief.

Some time later a warm wet, hand touched his. "Tom, you are loyal without me asking. Thank you." The sorrow was still contorting his face, but he seemed calm now.

Tom smiled. "I am honored to do anything for you, sir."

Aenan's face was oddly square but at the same time rounded at the edges, and even at twenty one he had an aged look in his vivid blue eyes.

"I need some help from you, Tom. I need to get to the Cathedral."

Tom nodded and gestured to the door. "I'll get you a wheelchair and we'll go right now."

"Thank you."



## **Part One**

*In the Beginning there was Darkness...*

## Chapter 1 - Jaola Armon

**\* 1 \***

*Four years later*

*The Year of our Founder 3004*

*Araam city, Arana*

*Planet Shadow*

*Her silver onyx-handled gun was heavy in one hand as Jaola walked across a sea of dead bodies. There were no structures or ground to be seen, only the dead for as far as the eye could see. Some were burned beyond recognition, some looked as if they were sleeping, and others were shot and covered in blood. She moved among them searching for something.*

*She glanced around her, eyes brushing across the gray expressions. Seeing someone familiar, she stopped and stared. Her mother lay on her side with other bodies on top of her legs and torso as if they'd fought with her, forcing her down as she died. Her mouth was caught in a death scream, and the rich green eyes Jaola herself had inherited were wide with terror.*

*Mother and daughter were so similar in appearance that it was as if she was looking at her future self in death. But the unnerving effect was undermined by the curving waves in her mother's pitch black hair, and the lack in her own.*

*Swallowing, Jaola wondered why there was very little grief. She knelt down and closed her mother's eyes. Picking up her heavy silver weapon as she got to her feet again, she continued with her search.*

*The silence was deafening, even her footsteps were muted by the death that surrounded her. She stepped over another body, and while trying not to stand on his face, she looked down and recognized him. He was shot in the heart and still bleeding a little. His long wispy dark hair moved in the breeze and tears were drying on his cheeks. Her father looked more peaceful than her mother. With his eyes closed he looked as if he was just sleeping. She touched his cheek with the palm of her hand, wiping the tears away.*

*Again, the grief was momentary, but she left a single tear on his reddened shirt before continuing on.*

*Jaola walked for a long time searching among the dead bodies. They were everywhere. Some were half buried, some lay on top as if they had just fallen and died. The sky above her was cloudy and overcast, so that she couldn't see the sun. She felt no anxiety, no pain nor pity for the*

*dead, merely the calm need to search.*

*As she stepped over another person, her foot caught on something, and she stumbled and fell. Landing on her front, she pushed to get up again and looked into another face right in front of her. Her eyes snapped open and she gasped. Standing, she stared, feeling confused and a little frightened.*

*It was her body lying there, and worse, she didn't look terrified, and nor was she asleep like most of the others. Instead, she had an expression of absolute rage on her face. The dead Jaola's deep green eyes were dark with hatred. In her limp hand lay an onyx handled gun.*

*Staring at it in shock, Jaola dropped her own weapon. For the first time she felt a very real fear, and stepped back. Slipping again, she fell backwards.*

*The terror kept rising and she crawled back, trying to get away from the hatred of her own dead face. It cut deep inside of her with an agony and terror that overwhelmed her. She had to get away from it.*

*Crawling over the bodies, unable to take her eyes off herself, she backed into something and could scramble no further. Looking behind her, she saw the legs and body of someone, someone who was actually alive in the sea of dead people. A hand was offered to help her stand up and she took it. Getting up and finally losing sight of her own corpse, Jaola looked down into the man's face.*

*His eyes were brilliant blue, and she stared at the sapphire color as his face became increasingly familiar...*

*Jaola shot up out of her nightmare into a seated position.*

*"Father Owen?" she thought, he had been the one alive person in the dream, the first ever living person in that dream.*

*She frowned, shaking her head to try and wake up. Lifting her arm to look at her watch, she realized that its vibrating alarm was going. She stared at it for a moment. The tiny silver watch told her that it was painfully early in the morning, but also that she had to get up.*

*She sighed and rubbed her eyes. Every year on that day, she dreamed about the Sea-of the Dead, and every year on that day something big happened. The year before she had been promoted from upper-A3 undergrad to full active A2 Assassin duty. At seventeen she'd been the youngest Agent ever to be promoted to that position. The fanfare had been huge. A massive private party was organized, all of the Agents in Araam Tower and nearby facilities were invited. A ceremony was performed, and her father gave her a new silver onyx-handled gun and silencer to congratulate her.*

*At the time she'd gone through the motions, pretended to be happy and that it was an honor. But that day she couldn't suppress the deep feeling of dread inside. She had known in the*

first year of service at age eleven that she did not want to be an assassin. However, duty to the security and continuity of the Agency was more important than individual preference. And this was enforced.

Getting out of her cot and throwing the thin blanket onto the floor, she started to dress. The Rebel sleeping room was practically empty. There were only five people instead of the normal thirty or so. The sixth, Hilla Norman, should still be on guard duty and was probably up on the roof.

Jaola sighed, she was still on her undercover mission, and she didn't want to be there.

The sleeping room of the Rebel base was in the second floor of an old abandoned factory. There was no furniture on the whole level except the cots they slept on and a few cushioned mats next to the eating area, on the far side of the room. The floors were unpolished wood, and wide uncovered windows let in the autumn chill. It was certainly a bare minimum Rebel base. There was no light yet coming in from outside, but she could see enough to dress and glance around her at the other sleeping, shadowy forms.

Nearby lay the telepath, Kita Oran. He was a bit of an egomaniac but was not without skill. His ego had helped Jaola keep a low profile. Had he more humility, he would have admitted that she might be stronger than him. She tried to give the other Rebels the impression that she was only a level 3 telepath. Kita knew she must be *at least* a 3, but was too proud of his strength to speak up.

In the stretcher on other side of hers was Tolan Enan. He was a kinetic, and if he'd been rated by the Agency, he'd be above a 5. However, his weakness was that his mind was totally unprotected, and without an artificial mental shield or an accompanying telepath, he was utterly susceptible to enemy intrusion.

On the far side of the room slept Tana Bleu. He was an ex-A3 and a kinetic telepath. She didn't know Tana very well, but he seemed to have been pretty good as an A3 Searcher, though, his Agency file was far more modest than the stories he told of his own exploits. His Psi ratings weren't very high, a level 2 telepath and a 3 kinetic, but they augmented his Talent for investigation and danger very well. Tana had never really trusted her, but had no reason to speak up about his feelings. Had he, or anyone else, known he was also Talented, she would have been dead on her first day under cover.

Sleeping next to Tana, was Anton. He was very shy and the extended Rebel groups mostly used him as a scout. He'd arrived from one of the other Rebel bases yesterday, so she didn't really know any real details about his history or previous position in the Agency, but she knew for certain that in any kind of combat, he wouldn't be much of a threat to her.

Jaola picked up her blanket from the floor, placed it absently on the little cot and looked for her shoes underneath. It was very cold and she was already starting to shiver. Last night, she'd

thrown the old battered shoes and socks under her cot as she undressed. She grabbed them and sat down to put them on again.

There were normally many more people in the Rebel base, but most of them had gone to join a larger group of Rebels in an attempt to break into one of the Agency children's training bases in the Great Desert. The desert was in the far north of Arana and about two days drive from Araam.

The Agency rumor-mill said that the 'training' the children underwent there was so traumatic that they build the bases in the deserts to keep the children from trying to escape. It was not the sort of place in which anyone deserved to grow up, and as a result Jaola felt that it was good for those children to escape.

She smirked. Those treasonous thoughts, and the many others she had day to day, reminded her that as a high rated telepath she was lucky. The Agency tolerated her ability for private thoughts in exchange for her obedience. If she was anything less than perfect, they might punish her by sending her to the Telepath Interrogators to ensure her compliance, or, worse they might execute her parents, and possibly even her father's twin brother Raraan. The Agency seemed to think disobedience ran in families, so she couldn't just run away.

She didn't want this life, not at all, and the grind of it against her soul settled her with a permanent weight. Sometimes that weight turned into rage, and she would run through different scenarios where she would assassinate the A0 council members, one by one, just so she could be free.

Unfortunately, her training was too well-ingrained and her love for her family too deeply anchored. Because, while she fantasized and planned the various ideas to their last detail, she would never actually do anything. The loyalty was hardwired into her reflexes, and even if they weren't, she couldn't risk her family just for a selfish desire for vengeance and freedom.

Jaola put on her long black coat and took a deep breath. Turning, she walked to the dark corner of the room where a stairwell led to the roof.

At the top, she opened the door and stepped out onto the graveled roof surface. It was a chilly morning and the air made her breath come out as steam. Looking around, she closed the door behind her.

Hilla Norman stood near the edge of the building looking out at the street below. It was still dark, but on the horizon above building tops and in the direction of the ocean, there was a pre-dawn glow.

Jaola felt a twinge of sadness. She'd gotten quite fond of Hilla. The older woman had opened her arms to Jaola's alter ego, Ninae, and today she would betray that. Jaola took a deep breath and focused on hiding her feelings with a mask of other emotions. She wasn't an empath like

Hilla, but she was trained to create emotions in her own heart as a screen. It would be very embarrassing to get caught at this stage of the operation because of silly sentimental attachments. Her job was to execute Traitors, and that order existed whether she liked the person or not.

Hilla had a halo of curly blond hair around her face and soft blue eyes. She was quite a bit shorter than Jaola, with small hands and feet. Jaola was certain that in hand-to-hand combat situations Hilla would probably break many bones. She was far more suited to her current leadership role.

In the three months that Jaola had spent with this group, Hilla had never thought or said anything negative of anyone. She was always positive and had only once lost her temper. Her reasons for being a part of the Rebel group were simple, she believed in the right of every person to their own life. And even though she had spent time in the Agency, Hilla had no feelings of or need for revenge because her pain had been dealt with fully, and all she wanted to do was help free others. There was very little of Hilla Norman that Jaola did not respect, and she quietly wished there were more people like Hilla in the world.

With a sigh, Jaola slowly walked across the roof towards Hilla. As she neared her, the older woman turned around, grinning broadly at her.

“Ninae! You are perfectly on time!”

Jaola nodded and smiled shyly. “Yes, ma’am, I like to be on time. Anything happen?” She knew that if anything had happened then everyone would have been woken up, but it was a sort of social protocol to ask rhetorical questions.

“No, no, completely dead tonight.”

Blinking, Jaola had to focus to clear her mind of a vivid flash of dead bodies from her dream.

Hilla seemed unaware of her reaction. She kept eye contact with Jaola and gave her a serious look. “When the others wake up, could you tell them I should be back mid-afternoon?”

Jaola smiled slightly and nodded. “Of course.”

Hilla walked past Jaola across the roof and to the door, which she closed quietly behind her. Jaola turned to pace to the side of the building that Hilla would exit from on the ground floor to watch her. Two stories below her on the street a car drove by, but nothing else seemed to be happening at this early hour of the morning.

She watched Hilla open the back fire escape door, walk out across the small parking lot, and onto the street. Jaola knew that Hilla was going this early in the morning to attend a Rebel meeting somewhere else, and her insistence on walking made it the best opportunity for Jaola to get Hilla alone and complete her mission.

Hilla's small form soon disappeared into the streets. Jaola turned away from the edge of the building, and absently started a guard duty marching formation.

She would wait an hour, and then wake the next person on duty.

\* 2 \*

*An hour later*

Anton slept curled up in a fetal position, and hugging his pillow like a stuffed toy. He looked very much like a little boy asleep.

She touched his shoulder. "Ant, wake up." He frowned, turning his head away from her. "Anton, wake up, you've slept in!"

"Eh?" Anton's small blue eyes opened a crack. "Wha?"

She smiled. "Ant, I need you to do guard duty. I have to go. Come on, get up."

"OK." He sighed deeply, and dragged his skinny body out of the cot.

"I'll see you later." Jaola turned away.

The central stairwell opened up on the ground floor into a small area, with a number of storage rooms coming off of it, and the hall leading out into the main ground floor area. As she got to the foot of the stairs, Triana walked out right in front of her from an adjoining storage room. They both stepped back in surprise.

Triana was quite strange looking. Her eyes were a little too big and behind their gray color Jaola sensed something alien. The tall willowy woman had long straight hair, which cut her face into a box shape.

"Oh! Hello, Ninae. Checking the ground floor are we?"

Jaola smiled politely. "No, Triana, I have to go. Ant is doing guard duty for the moment. I will see you later." She stepped around around her.

Triana was a fairly strong Time Psi. In the Agency, functioning high-rating Time Psi were rare, so she would have been considered a precious commodity, even considering her quiet non-aggressive nature.

"Um--"

Jaola turned to look back at Triana. There was a blankness in her face that Jaola had seen before, and she frowned, irritated. The dilated, wide eyes meant that Triana was in a Time Psi trance. She didn't have time for this mamon!

The voice that came out of Triana's mouth was the same as it had been the last time she had a vision: calm, echoed and very certainly *not* Triana's voice.

*“Jaola, I see what is inside.”*

Fear shot up into her heart, the voice knew her real name!

*“Jaola, listen to your dream...”*

Frustrated, she quickly dug into Triana’s mind. If she didn’t get control before the woman regained consciousness, she would sense her intrusion. She couldn’t see what this woman was seeing because it wasn’t a telepathic knowledge, and neither was it a normal kind of Time Psi knowledge, but it was trouble for her mission.

Triana frowned and the voice sounded more like her own. *“I see my death.”*

She blinked repeatedly, swayed on her feet and she gasped. The blankness left Triana’s eyes.

She frowned. “What did I say, Ninae?”

“You said we would be victorious.” Jaola sighed and pushed gently on her will. “Triana. It’s time to sleep. Go to bed and sleep.”

Triana smiled numbly and nodded. “Yes, it is time to sleep.” Triana’s small form slowly turned, alighting the stairs.

If Triana was going to remember what she saw, it would be at least half a day for it to settle into her conscious mind. Her being forced asleep would buy Jaola some time to do what must be done, and get back to the building to take her out. Her jaw tightened. The body count for the day was rising already, and it wasn’t even dawn yet. Jaola walked briskly from the antechamber, into the hall towards the empty prisoner cell, and out towards the front door.

The building had been abandoned a hundred years ago when there’d been a fire and the company went bust trying to repair the damage. Other areas of the building were water damaged and black, but the Rebels lived in the one area that was warm and dry. Everything was bare and dusty, old wooden floor boards peeked out of gaps in the threadbare carpet, and crumbling ceilings had pipes and wires hanging down in places. It was remarkable, given the few resources that the Rebels had, that they didn’t all die of sickness and starvation.

Her thoughts turned to the task ahead of her. She had to catch up with Hilla after her meeting, but before she met up with Nama Ree at a second Rebel building. Hilla had requested information from Hawk about her escape from the Agency as ‘Ninae’, but, because she *hadn’t* actually escaped, she wouldn’t be confirmed, and then protocol in the Rebels would ensure she was executed or captured. Neither outcome would keep her family alive, so there was no choice but to advance her mission.

\* 3 \*



*An hour or so later*

The cool autumn streets were cluttered with the mid-morning rush, so much so that Hilla had to dodge and weave around people to make any headway up the street. The muscles around her eyebrows were painfully tense from concentrating both on her running thoughts, and walking swiftly through the crowd.

She had so much to plan, the rest of her cell had gone to the Great Desert to try and set free a group of kids from a children's training base. And then there was the new Psi, Ninae. The report had come back saying that no one called 'Ninae' or matching her description had escaped the Agency, within the last year.

Hilla flicked a long tuft of curly blond hair from her face, and wondered if she should suggest to the others that Ninae be detained until she could be authenticated. Best-case scenario, the girl could just be an Illegal Psi who thought that the Rebels would only take escapees. And worst-case, well, *she didn't really want to think about that.*

Her swift weaving had brought her through the densely packed pedestrians, taken her past the cafés, and finally away from the lunch time crowds. Hilla crossed another street as a bitter autumn wind blew through and made her shiver. She lifted the hood of her coat around her head and its thick wool sheltered her ears.

She sighed, and again her thoughts turned to Ninae. From what she knew of telepaths, Ninae couldn't be an untrained Illegal Psi. Hilla had seen Ninae do some very impressive things, one of which was contacting other telepaths over great distances, a skill which had been started, she claimed, by the needs of a frequently ill telepathic mother. But distance communication was not something one could easily learn on their own. In fact, it was unheard of, such skill and control without formal training. This suggested that Ninae could very well be an Agency spy, maybe even an assassin.

Hilla turned left onto another road. The street was almost all industrial and there were very few people around. *"But if she is an assassin, it could only be Cheetah. The last meeting of Rebel Leaders established that Cheetah is currently the only female Araam-based assassin threat to the Rebels."* Hilla frowned. *"But, if she is, why didn't she just take us all out the day she found the base? I should really... oh, here is my turn-off... I really should get back home as soon as possible--"*

Hilla stopped mid-thought and frowned. She was in an alley, one with a dead end. Red brick walls lifted high on either side of her, and at the end stood a very high electric fence. The other side of which was the back end of a yard and a large gray factory building.

Slowly, Hilla turned around. “*What am I doing turning into an alley?*”

Standing in front of her, between Hilla and the street, was Ninae. She wore a long black coat, and under it she wore a simple white shirt and gray jeans. Her long black hair was pulled back away from a pair of icy cold emerald green eyes. Hilla sensed no emotion inside the girl whatsoever.

Hilla’s mouth opened as she stepped back, realizing that Ninae’s presence confirmed her identity. “No, Cheetah, you don’t need to do this.”

Ninae looked back at her with an emotionless smile on her face, which made the girl look so much older. “There is no choice Hilla, there is only duty.”

The girl slowly dipped her hand inside her coat, and pulled out a silver and black handgun, and a loose silencer.

Hilla started to shake in her fear. There was no way out. Hilla looked around her for an exit. There were two red brick walls either side and a high wire fence behind her. A small white sign was tacked halfway up the wire fence with a black lightning bolt on it, which told her she probably couldn’t even try climbing it in order to escape. She glanced at the assassin girl. Hilla had only spent a few years in the Agency, and they hadn’t trained her in combat, so there was no way she could fight her way through either.

The girl slowly screwed the silencer into the gun. Her movements were eerily calm. Hilla felt overwhelmed by her need to escape, and the lack of possibilities open to her.

The gun was slowly lifted towards Hilla’s face, still there was no emotion in her assassin. This was it.

She let out a gasp and covered her eyes with her hands. The tears tumbled out of her quietly. She didn’t want to die but there was no escaping it.

**\* 4 \***

Jaola tried to stop her trembling hands. Her gun was aimed at Hilla. Thankfully, she’d covered her face, unable to see the terrible shaking.

Hilla’s hood had fallen onto her shoulders and her blond hair hung around her head like a halo. Jaola stared at the halo, and in the flashing sunlight Hilla looked like an angel before her, begging for life.

*“I am going to kill an angel.”*

She watched as the tremble in her hands worsened, and the frustration rose. *She* was the assassin, what was wrong with her!? Holding onto her anger, she gripped the gun. Her eyes became

colder, she aimed, and pulled the trigger twice.

Turning quickly, she left the alley before she saw the body. She tried to bolster her confidence, and ignore the fear and disheveled feeling inside of her.

“OK!” Her voice sounded lost and somehow alien, making her feel *more* unsettled.

She sighed, exhaling loudly. There was no time for all of this emotional stuff. She had to report in with her supervisor. Given the events of the day, her mission was probably over, but she had no authority of her own to close it down. The Rebels of Hilla’s cell would likely figure out what happened once they got the news of Hilla’s death, so she had to hurry. It would take time to get back to base, update her supervisor and then return to gather her hidden recon, and sew up the loose ends. There was no time for any more distractions, but at least the walk back to base would give her some time to calm her nerves. If she wasn’t completely relaxed when she reached the base, and the wrong empath sensed her unrest, she could end up in the psych ward on level 23 and never leave the Tower again.

Between the threat of the Rebels finding her and killing her, the Agency finding out about the tremor in her hands and retiring her like her mother, and the threat to her life and the lives of her family if she failed the mission, there was too much pressure, but no way out. All she could do was continue forward and hope that a way through could be found.

\* 5 \*

Charmaine sat on the corner of the large bed with a photo frame in her hands. She’d only just gotten up. A long nightshirt hung loosely around her thin frame, and her hair was a mess of black chaos around her face.

Those dreams had come again, the dreams filled with screaming faces and blood. Those dreams had been there since her beautiful daughter Jaola had turned eleven and entered the Agency assassin training program. Her heart was heavy and tears fell on to the photograph in her hands. There was too much pain inside her. There was no place inside where there wasn’t pain.

In the center of the photo sat Jaola, smiling happily, with William and Charmaine standing behind her. William had been so proud the day Jaola graduated into full A2 duty. Charmaine had tried very hard to be happy for her daughter, but she knew the cost that Jaola would have to pay and it made her deeply sad.

It was the graduation day when the voices in her head were given volume and they started destroying her mind. There were so many of them, blaming her, screaming at her, crying, yelling and shouting out the pain. All of them trapped inside her head where she couldn’t escape from

them.

The doctors had told them that Charmaine's mind was broken.

*"Broken."* She tumbled the word around in her head.

*"Broken."* She was more than broken, she was smashed into tiny little screaming pieces. She wished that the pieces would stop screaming and give her some peace of mind, if only for a short time.

Pulling her feet under herself, Charmaine started to rock. Forward, then backward, and forward again. For some reason it felt better, somehow the motion flowed the pain away from her center, out into the moving bed and into the sounds of squeaky springs.

The doctors had said that such a sensitive empath shouldn't be an assassin because it broke some empath minds to repeatedly feel what one feels just before death. It was just like a high-rated Time Psi whose mind broke under the weight of knowing too much of the future.

She looked at the frame. In her hands she held the two people she loved the most in the world, William and her beautiful daughter.

*"Jaola... she's trapped too..."* said her sorrow, *"it's your fault she's trapped you could have escaped that day with Rita... could have saved us all and her,"* said the accusing voice.

The pain rose inside her, flooding and drowning her in tears and screaming. She had to get out, she couldn't stay here anymore. She had to leave, to go out of those two doors downstairs, those bullet-proof doors, guarded by a man in a uniform suit with his gun strapped to his waist.

*"Out, we have to get out!"* screamed the shattered voices in unison.

*"The doorman will shoot..."* said what was left of her sensible mind.

*"We've got to get out.... OUT... go through the doorman to get out."* The scared shattered mind echoed back at her with its many voices.

*"No! Not another death, no more blood on our hands!"* sensible Charmaine wailed back.

*"GOT TO GET OUT, nowhere there isn't pain... out!"* wailed the voices.

*"He will shoot and kill us,"* said sensible Charmaine.

*"If out is dead then dead we must be, dead is free, away from pain,"* answered the shattered mind.

Charmaine looked again at the picture in her hands. "I'm sorry my loves."

She slipped off the bed onto her feet. The photo frame absently fell from her hands and she walked numbly to the door, muttering.

*"Got to get out... out... got to get out..."*

On the floor in the empty bedroom lay the broken photo frame, three smiling faces behind shattered glass.

Toma Aria was getting a coffee. He'd spent all morning on the door without a break because the Agent who was supposed to relieve him had gotten sick and there was no one to replace them. So, he had to wait for the next person on shift, without a break. It was only a few more hours, but he needed the caffeine and sugar to tide him over until then, even though technically he wasn't allowed to leave his post for anything.

He smiled at the coffee man, thanking him silently for the foam cup he'd just given him.

Tom took a sip and grinned. They had the best coffee. He turned back towards the doorway, glancing up through the open entrance, and saw a woman walk quickly past towards the exit door.

Tom sighed, and put his coffee on the nearest table. "*What is Charmaine doing down here?*"

Jogging, he went after her. "Charmaine, where are you going?" He grabbed her arm and swung her around to face him. Her deep green eyes were wide and vacant, her long black hair had been tied back in a ponytail, but her hair had come partially loose making her look quite shocking with a halo of chaotic black hair around her face.

She didn't seem to respond to his question, she merely stared blankly at the space next to his head, mumbling incoherently. She was wearing a large nightshirt that came down to her knees. Tom knew she wasn't in her right mind, but he also knew that his superiors would not care if she happened to escape on his watch.

She tried to step towards the door, but Tom held her arm firmly. She started to struggle. "No! Let me go!"

Tom felt a deep stab of compassion for her. Such a waste, driven to unwellness by her job and still not able to be free.

"Charmaine, listen to me, you can't--"

She struggled out of his grip and started to run hard towards the door, her white legs bare underneath the long shirt.

"Charmaine! Stop! Charmaine!"

She stopped suddenly, but did not turn around. Tom felt an intensely sad knot form in his throat. Swallowing it, he knew he had to remain detached to do his job correctly, even as he started *knowing* what was going to happen, and what she was going to make him do.

"Charmaine, you know you cannot go outside, you have to stay here. Come on let me help

you. We'll ring William and he'll come down to get you." Tom walked towards her as he spoke, and she stood back to him, not moving.

Tom reached to put a gentle hand on her shoulder, trying to soothe her obviously high-anxiety state, but at his touch she jumped, screaming in fright as if he was attacking her.

She turned around to face him. Her green eyes were very wide, her face too pale. Her lips still moved and mumbled quietly under her breath.

Tom felt as if he was looking at a ghost and as if there was nothing human behind her eyes. For no reason, he felt terrified of her as if she was trying to kill him, and for a moment he heard a loud screaming in his head. He flinched and then it was gone again.

"Charmaine?"

Her eyes held his for a time and he flinched again. The screaming returned in his mind. There was a long moment of just overlapping screaming and wailing in his head, and then Charmaine started screaming verbally.

"No! No! Have to get OUT... out... got to get OUT!"

Deep inside him, a feeling overwhelmed his own emotions. It was as if he was dying and watching, helpless as it was happening. The feeling was terror, confusion, apprehension, deep anxiety, and a sort of wordless screaming.

He started to drown in the feeling, and panic echoed around him. "No!" he wailed. "Please help me!"

Charmaine blinked and turned, and the feeling mercifully dropped away.

It took him a moment to recover from the psychic assault, and he wondered again if that had been her mind or his own. Recovering himself, he realized too late what was happening.

He lunged to grab her arm but missed her. "Charmaine! Stop!"

She kept walking away from him towards the exit door with no reaction.

"Stop! *Charmaine!*"

He swallowed that lump in his throat again and numbly took his gun out from the holster at his hip. "Charmaine, don't make me do this." His voice broke into a whisper.

She kept walking her bare legs pacing their way towards the door.

"Charmaine! Stop!"

\* 7 \*

Suitably calmed from her walk, Jaola stepped into the concrete plaza in front of the Agency Tower. The building looked like any other skyscraper in the central business district of

Araam, a tall angular column of reflective glass. But on the inside it was very different from the other buildings. For one, all of the windows on the first five floors were bullet-proof, all the fire escapes were locked, and there were only two accessible exits from the building. One exit in the plaza ahead of her, which the public used to access Agency services, and for the processing of newly conscripted Agents. And one exit conveniently concealed on the side of the building. Agents could only use the side door because the public areas of the building were restricted from the rest by locked doors. Her living quarters were not accessible from the public entrance without a very high rank ID card. All of this ‘extra security’ meant that she had to go through the plaza, past what the public assumed was the main entrance, and around to the other door. The real main entrance looked like a service door from the outside, hidden away behind some conveniently placed bushes.

As she walked closer to her entrance, a terrible feeling of dread and terror climbed into her. It was as if she were suddenly a moment from death. Recognizing the source of psychic assault, Jaola started to run when she heard the mental screaming.

She pulled the heavy door and stepped inside.

“Charmaine! Stop!” cried someone.

Jaola saw her mother’s face, the terror and blankness loud in her eyes.

“No, Mother! No!”

There was no recognition in her mother’s face of her own daughter, and past her stood Tom with his gun drawn. Jaola saw in the man’s mind the intention to shoot, and her instincts dove her sideways, where she landed on the ground in the security office.

The shot fired.

She flinched and heard her mother fall. On her hands and knees Jaola crawled out of the small space to her mother, who lay on her side. Her mother’s green eyes looked up at her from the carpet.

“Mother!” Jaola reached to touch her face.

*“Jaola! I’m flying... I’m free!”*

Before she could respond, her mother’s beautiful face relaxed, she let out a final breath, and became utterly still.

Jaola sat next to her mother, stunned, and looking into dead eyes. It was just like her dream. A wave of nausea brushed through her, and flashes of that dream played around her peripheral vision. The other bodies surrounding her mother, the dark cloudy sky, and an icy wind forming goosebumps on her arms.

With a hard blink, the dream bodies faded away and became the exit hallway in the Araam City Agency Tower building.

She let out a squeak of distress and the tears rolled out of her. Reaching, Jaola gently closed her mother's eyes.

**\* 8 \***

*An hour or so later*

Jaola stood in front of a wooden door, feeling pained and disrupted. She had been in front of this door many times before. Its light brown lines and darker circles were familiar like a second home, but this time she was a little nervous. What would he say or do about her mother's death?

For a moment, her mother's face flickered in her view. Taking a deep breath, she tried to focus and clear her vision again.

She had to prepare herself, her Duty must not be interfered with by grief. Taking another deep breath, she wiped her face of any residual tears and knocked on the door.

From inside, a man's voice sounded. "Come in, Jaola."

Inside, the office had bookshelves and filing cabinets on most of the walls and a broad window on the far wall, which covered the width of the room. Slightly to her right was a long desk, and she glanced at the dark-haired man who sat behind it.

He stared sadly back at her. He looked as if he too had been crying, wet lines creased his face and his eyes were obviously reddened. She firmly controlled her breathing to keep the tears from rising again inside her.

"Close the door, Jaola. I need to talk to you privately." His voice was quiet and gentle.

"Yes, sir." She nodded and did as she was ordered.

He leaned back on his old leather chair and looked at her. There was a kindness to his blue eyes that Jaola hadn't seen for quite some time.

"I understand you were witness to your mother's death."

Nodding silently, Jaola swallowed. She felt very tired.

The man leaned over his desk and looked her firmly in the eyes. "How do you feel about it, Jaola?"

She frowned, turning her head to the side. "I don't know, sir, what should I feel?" Pushing against the desk, he swiftly stood and glared at her, the softness turning icy in his blue eyes.

"This meeting is not between assassin and supervisor, Jaola, in this room at this time I am your father and you are my daughter. How are you *feeling*? Tell me your thoughts."

A tear welled up in one eye and dropped down her cheek. Jaola swallowed again. "I wish I could have made her life easier, Father." Her voice was quiet and broke at the edges.



He nodded thoughtfully and stepped around the desk towards her. She could not sense his thoughts because of his own ability as a telepath, but his body language made her feel confused: his hands lifted as if uncertain and his breathing seemed labored. This was not a side of her father that she knew. He had always managed a near perfect face of emotionlessness, as she herself had tried to maintain. For a moment he looked as though he wanted to hug her, then he seemed to think better of it, and stepped back from her with that strange, sad face.

“All she wanted was to be free of the Agency, Jaola. You realize that don’t you?” He was calm and gentle in his tone of voice.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Her father leaned over her, making eye contact, and watching her face intently. “Do you feel as she did? Like you would rather be free?”

Jaola stepped back, caught completely by surprise. Her mouth opened as she took a few hurried breaths. Then she shook her head. “That is a baited question, Father. I cannot answer that.”

“Nothing leaves this room, daughter. If you had the choice would you rather be out?” His voice was firm and calm, eyes wide and expectant for her answer. He seemed genuine, but she of all people knew that it was possible to fake truthfulness.

Confused, she frowned. She had always trusted him, and therefore doubted any deception on his part. Sighing, she knew she had to answer his question but carefully, in case it was a test.

She swallowed. “If I was free of duty and responsibility, then, yes, but... but--”

Her father stepped back, turning away towards his desk. “Jaola, you have three years from today to prepare. This conversation never happened.”

He turned his back fully towards her, his face looking out of the window to the small internal garden beyond. He straightened his back, adjusted his tie and pulled his arms behind him in a relaxed military stance. Then he took a deep breath. She recognized in all of these slight nuances the change back to his role of supervisor.

“With regards to your mission, you must complete it. Hilla’s daughter may have Psi abilities, and if she does, you need to take her out.” His voice was quiet but firm, he turned a little, looking at her for a moment over his shoulder. There was a trace of the sadness in his familiar ice, but it was only a trace. For a moment Jaola pitied him more than her mother, at least she was free now.

He took a breath and continued. “Also, you need to get the information you have been storing. When that is done report back, and you will be on bereavement leave.” Her father turned fully around and pulled out his large leather chair, ready to sit in it. “Dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned away and walked out.

**\* 9 \***

Kita Oran stood in the upstairs kitchen, frowning. There was a sense that something was wrong. Turning, he looked around the huge room. In front of him stood the twenty or so cots everyone slept on, they were scattered up against the long blank wall that ran through the middle of entire building. Behind him was the kitchen, with basic benches, and an old-fashioned oven. At one end of the room, was the side stairwell with the steps to the roof climbing up against the wall. At the other end of the room, on the same wall that the cots sat against, was the door to the central stairwell going down. The place was empty and nothing seemed amiss, despite his instincts.

He frowned. *“No, that’s not it.”* Again he looked at the cots. Triana lay asleep on one of them. *“She should be awake by now.”*

Kita walked towards Triana, gently reaching to her surface thoughts with his mind. Her mental sleep pattern seemed strange. It felt as if she were leaking mental energy all around her, whereas, when someone is asleep, this energy is kept within them and conserved.

“Triana, wake up.” Kneeling next to her, he touched the Seer’s face, but there was no reaction.

Frowning, he gently pushed further into her mind to investigate.

**\* 10 \***

Jaola stood on the street looking across road at the abandoned factory that had become one of many hidden Psi Rebel bases in Araam. She had to think of how she was going to approach the base. She had to get her information, do another scan of Cherie, take out Triana, and then get out again intact. The easy way would be to just go in and obliterate anyone who got in her way. She could be in and out in a manner of minutes using that method. And while she wanted this whole thing over and done with, the thought of finishing the mission that way dragged heavily at her soul.

*“Not to mention,”* she added, *“that way is grossly unprofessional.”* She frowned. *“But what to do instead?”*

Where she stood, she wasn’t easily seen from the roof. There were also very few windows on the street side of the building. So, she was mostly unseen by them, despite how close she stood. She’d already considered a scenario to give for why she woke Ant so early into her own shift on guard duty, so she *could* just go in and continue her cover. But the situation **would** be less controllable because the news of Hilla’s death could come at any moment, and it **would** be harder to

get her information down in the basement.

Chartan regarded his privacy paramount to holiness, and this was why she hid her information in his basement room. It was the safest place possible in an otherwise communal environment to stash her data. Unfortunately, it also made it the most difficult to extract. Chartan was a rare kind of Search Talent. He found *secret* knowledge, so, he was instinctively obsessed with hidden objects and keeping his own possessions hidden. As a consequence, communal living was difficult for him, so the Rebels gave him the tiny room next to the boiler to keep him comfortable. But due to his mildly paranoid state of mind, if he caught her down in his room there would be no convincing him that she was present for innocent reasons. If caught out, she'd have to deal with him quickly or he would raise the alarm and she'd be dead.

She frowned, looking away from the building's main entrance door. If she went in under the premise of being Ninae, it would be very possible for her cover to be blown and of course, for it all to go south. She put her hands in her jacket pockets, the gun was in the right, the silencer in the left, and she had two other guns stashed on her person for emergencies as well. This meant that if things became complicated she could still resolve the situation with firepower. She had to at least try not to resort to killing everyone first off. If they escalated it to a point where it was needed, at least she knew she'd tried. And if she failed, then she wouldn't care either way because she'd be dead.

Focusing her mind with a deep breath, she took her hands out of her pockets and stepped out into the street towards the main entrance of the Rebel base. First, to get to her information, she had to first establish Chartan's location.

Crossing the road she jogged up to the front door. It wasn't possible to sneak in through the back door, because it was designed as an out-only fire exit, and so she had to announce her arrival by going to the front. Without pausing, she knocked on the wooden panel in the center of the huge metal door.

The code was: three knocks, pause and then a final knock.

She waited a moment, impassively. Focus and control was in her training and it must hold until this was over, even considering **whom** she'd lost that day.

The wooden panel slid away to show half of Tana's face. "Hey Ninae, where'd you go this morning?"

She smiled shyly at him. "Sorry, Mother needed me again, she fell in the night and broke her hip."

Tana's brown eyes looked away as he started to unlock all of the locks. "Is she alright?"

"Yeah." Jaola mimicked a tired but relaxed attitude, as if she had in fact spent all of the

morning with an injured elderly mother. “She’s really sore and weepy, but I left her sleeping soundly.”

The last lock was undone with a thunk, and the door opened to reveal all of Tana. His eyes still held the mark of having been in the Agency: distrust, a touch of fear, and a sense of spiritual exhaustion. He smiled politely and let her in.

“Well, it’s good she’s OK. Hey, did Hilla say when she was coming back? I need to talk to her.”

Jaola stepped through the door and feigned trying to remember. “Yeah, she did tell me... I... I think she said she’d be back late in the day.”

“Oh, OK. Thanks.” Tana’s long face looked a bit disappointed. He closed the door behind her, and slowly started doing up all of the locks again.

“Did I miss anything while I was gone?”

There was a sigh. “No, not much.”

She had observed in her time with the base that Tana seemed to have had expectations that being a Psi Rebel meant a lot of excitement all the time, and the reality of it sometimes got him down. She suppressed the amused smile twitching at the edges of her lips.

“Better nothing happening than something terrible, I say.” She had to get onto finding Chartan, because very soon someone would alert the Rebels about Hilla and soon enough the news would reach the base so she didn’t have much time to socialize. “Hey, Tana, where is everyone?”

“Chartan and Cherie are in the stairwell. We were playing knuckle-bones, but I don’t know where everyone else is.”

Jaola nodded and turned to walk to the stairwell. Tana followed sullenly behind her.

They reached the stairwell and she heard the girl laugh. “You’re not very good at knuckle-bones are you, Chartan? Tana needs to help you.”

The young girl’s giggle made Jaola smile. They sat on the floor on the little gap of carpet between the stairs and the storeroom. A set of little metal knucklebones was spread out between them.

“I think even with Tolan helping I’d still be bad at it, Cherie.”

“Hey, Ninae, you wana play?” The girl’s eyes were bright and happy, so blue, just like her mother’s.

At the reminder of Hilla, Jaola shivered, but she forced a smile into her eyes.

“Oh, I’m worse than Chartan at that kind of game, Cherie. Though, Tana’s back, he might help. I’m just going to go and find the others.” With a broad, friendly smile Jaola paused for a moment and stealthily scanned Cherie’s mind. As she already knew the girl was not a Psi, nor a

Talent. If she had the genes they certainly weren't switched on. So thankfully, she didn't have to take out the fourteen year-old girl.

“Oh, OK Ninae. Come on, Tana, join in! You're better at this!”

Jaola turned away, walked along the little hallway and out towards the other stairwell on the far wall. Jogging down the stairs she headed to the basement. She figured if she got her information quickly while they were playing games she'd be out before the news of Hilla's death came to the base.

Downstairs in the basement there was really no ceiling as such, just the foundation beams of the level above and a mass of wires and pipes set into the gaps. As well as having no discernible ceiling, the floor was unfinished concrete and the walls were bare chipboard. Somewhere in the basement a huge fan thumped, slowly circulating air around.

She walked swiftly along the dim passageway from the bottom of the stairs to the end where there was a door. Carefully, she opened it and stepped into the room, closing it again behind her.

The room wasn't very big. There were boxes covering and filling two walls. The cot sat next to the door on her right. At the end of the cot were a collection of Chartan's precious possessions in boxes. Reaching down into the boxes at the foot of the cot, she felt around for her stash. There was about a centimeter's thickness of papers and three computer disks all in an envelope. They lay right where she had left them between the boxes and the wall. She slipped the envelope into the large inside pocket of her jacket, zipped it closed and turned to leave the room.

In front of her, the door opened and Chartan stood there. His jaw dropped. “What are you doing?”

Reaching into her jacket, she gripped the onyx-handled gun. Drawing it out and disengaging the safety, he didn't even realize what it was until the barrel was a few centimeters from his nose. His eyes widened.

“I'm giving you a choice, Chartan. Do as I say and you will live. Understand?”

He nodded slowly.

“Get on your cot. Lie down.” She watched as he frowned in confusion, unmoving. “Now.”

Chartan swallowed and got onto the cot. His thoughts were confused and frightened, he wondered for a moment if this was some sort of kinky seduction. She snorted and shook her head at him. Seeing her reaction, he remembered that she was a telepath and meekly let go of that thought.

When he was fully lying down, she reached into his mind. “Chartan, it's time to go to sleep now.”

He was unconscious even before she put her gun away. Unless Kita found him, Chartan

would stay like that. Only a telepath could tell his subconscious mind to wake up and only a very gifted telepath could unlock her puzzle to undo the sleep pattern.

Closing the door behind her, she thought about her last task: Triana. Unless Kita had discovered her artificial sleeping state, she should be still upstairs sleeping. Walking quietly up the basement stairs she stopped near the top, out of sight, to listen. She could hear the distant laugh of Cherie from the main stairwell entrance and nothing else, no footsteps nearby and no-one walking on the wooden stairs above her.

For a moment she wondered if she should just leave while it was quiet and never come back. But no, she told herself, she had to take out Triana. Whatever vision she'd had, she saw Jaola as she was, not as Ninae. This made her a clear threat. Regardless of how tired Jaola felt, it must be done, and soon. Taking a deep breath, as her old teachers had shown her, she focused on a cold mindset. An assassin's mindset. She didn't understand why she hadn't been able to hold it even with the death of her mother. She'd been trained from a very early age, so it was normally like instinct to her. It was very disconcerting how unstable and emotional she felt, and worse so because she was in the middle of a potentially dangerous mission. She had to get herself under control or it could easily kill her.

Out in the main area of the ground floor, a knock sounded: three times and then once. Someone was at the door. She heard someone else walk out of the stairwell, someone she assumed was Tana.

Quickly and soundlessly, Jaola moved up the last few steps and around up onto the next stairwell. She stopped again, crouching, hidden in the second stairwell and listened. For a moment all she could hear was mumbling and tones, there were no sounds of locks unlocking or the door opening. The visitor must be a messenger. With the up-to-date knock code, it would be directly from one of the other Rebel bases. It had to be the news of Hilla's death, because they never sent unexpected messengers unless it was serious.

Jaola stood. The calm cold mindset had finally stabilized in her mind. It was time. It wouldn't take long to take out Triana, even in a hidden way, but she had to act now. Quietly but not soundlessly, she ascended the stairs. She adopted the emotional and mental mask she had created for her alter ego, Ninae, and stepped onto the first-floor landing.

The level was pretty much as she'd left it early that morning, except sunlight shone through the large bare windows to her left and warmed the air. Turning right to look further around the level, Jaola took in the rest of the room. The kitchen area was empty, two long metal benches with sinks in the middle of them. Further down and to her right against the wall stood twenty or so cots, most of them empty. Closer to the far stairwell, she could see Kita sitting on one cot.

*“Hai da!”* she thought. *“He’s found her.”*

Jaola walked towards Kita, in the clear space between the kitchen area and the cots. Her alter ego was too shy and unconfident to interrupt Kita in a mental trance and she knew that if the visitor was a messenger with news of Hilla all hell was about to break loose so it wouldn’t be advisable to take out Kita to get Triana. So she kept walking quietly and shyly towards him, making sure he’d basically have to be a deaf Norm to not sense her presence.

**\* 11 \***

The mental puzzle within Triana’s mind was very complex and whenever Kita thought he’d unlinked one combination, he found more to unlock. It didn’t make sense to him. Triana was relatively harmless, what use would it be to make her sleep?

Behind him in Triana’s sleeping dreamless mind a gentle song started. It was familiar, but he couldn’t place it.

*“Araa anaan, chii-yan, me-taan, araa anaan, chii-yan, me-taan...”*

He frowned. Someone was singing and he couldn’t tell if they were singing out in the real world, in the mental construct of Triana’s mind or, impossibly, in his own. The song seemed to be a lullaby, it was gentle and the voice singing was a woman, but none of the words were understandable. He felt confused, there should be nothing happening in her mind. Although, he mused, Triana was a strange one, so anything was possible.

*“Triana? Is that you singing?”*

*“Close your eyes, Kita. You’ll see better that way.”* The voice was gentle and calm. It was alien to him, but at the same time painfully familiar. He closed his ethereal eyes. A gentle hand touched his cheek and in his own mind, he saw the shape of a woman, all in white with a deep brown face and gentle amber-yellow eyes.

*“Triana?”*

The lovely face smiled. *“Not quite, Kita. I am like her subconscious. I am the part of her spirit that has visions. It is my voice you hear when she goes into trances.”*

Kita frowned. *“I don’t understand. What are you doing here? Who are you?”*

She smiled wisely. *“Don’t worry yourself with such questions. With time many questions are answered and some are never meant to be answered at all.”*

Her hand left his face and her smile dropped. *“I am here to tell you of an assassin in the base, and to tell you that you mustn’t kill her. The pathways of Time must be kept in balance. Just as Hawk has kept the balance in the past for you, you must do so for her.”*

Kita frowned, feeling very confused and a little awed by this strange woman.

The woman in white smiled and stepped back from him. Kita just stood there gaping. She was quite lovely, but in an angelic way, gentle amber eyes and light brown face, with long, straight, sandy-colored hair. There was a sense of calm about her and he felt a little out of his depth, as if he couldn't possibly understand what she was and why she was there. But then his thoughts returned to reality: if he left her mind she wouldn't be able to wake up, and if there was an assassin in the base they'd need her awake.

*"But, what about you?"*

She smiled sadly. *"Don't worry about me."*

Her gentle face faded and Kita opened his mental eyes to Triana's quiet sleeping mind. He knew that Triana had never been wrong with her visions. If that woman was responsible for her visions, then her words had to be truth. Kita felt confused, but if there really was an assassin in the base, sitting there trying to undo Triana's sleep puzzle would certainly not help the situation. Drawing back from her mind, he opened his physical eyes. But then blinked as he found Tana's dark face was directly in his field of view.

"Kita?"

"Yes Tana?" Tana looked mournful and Kita frowned at the young man. "What's wrong?"

"She's dead. An assassin..." Tana's voice trailed off and his eyes filled with tears.

"Who? Who's dead?"

Tana's voice broke. "Hilla."

"What?" Kita's mind reeled and he blinked at Tana for a moment, watching the poor man start to weep with his face in his hands. "Where is Cherie?"

There seemed to be no response so Kita stood, grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Tana, where is Cherie?"

Tana looked up at him tearfully. "She's... she's downstairs."

He gaped at the distraught man. "You left her down there? Is anyone with her?"

Tana shook his head.

"Well go down and get her! She's a fourteen year-old girl for Founder's sake!"

Kita breathed through the tears and grief that were attempting to escape him. *"Oh, Hilla."*

Turning, he saw Ninae standing nearby. She looked as timid as ever. Dimly aware that Tana had walked off towards the main stairwell, he turned to the girl.

"Hilla's dead?" she said uncertainly, her bright green eyes wide with fear.

"So it seems. Can you keep an eye on Triana? I have to go upstairs to tell the others."



“What’s wrong with her?”

He sighed. “I’m not sure. Wait here.”

He saw her nod and he turned towards the roof stairs. If what Triana had said was true, and he believed it was, he’d need to get the others to focus on the danger and not the loss of Hilla. Pushing the doors open, he stepped out onto the gravel roof. Tolan was lying a few meters from the stairs to his left on a sun recliner. The man was sometimes intolerably vain, wasting all morning on getting a tan. Thank Nera, he never did it when he was on roof-guard duty.

“Tolan, get up, I need you dressed.” Kita scanned the rest of the roof and saw Anton on the far side. “Ant! Come here.”

While Kita waited for him, Tolan put on his shirt and pants. Kita refused to look at him, but instead watched Anton. When the young man got close enough for both of them to hear him, Kita spoke. “I’ve been told there’s an assassin in the base right now. We need to find this person and stop them.”

Ant nodded, his young face quite suddenly darkening in mood.

Tolan frowned at him. “But, how do you know there’s an assassin if you don’t know where they are?”

Kita, who for some unknown reason found Tolan endlessly irritating, growled in his throat. “That will take too long to explain, now let’s get going! We need to sweep the whole base!”

\* 12 \*

Jaola waited for Kita to get out of sight and quickly closed the distance between herself and Triana. If she worked fast enough she could take out Triana and be on her way out again as he got back. Hauling her leg over Triana’s slight frame and the cot, she sat on the woman’s hips. Jaola made both hands into fists and lifted the forefinger knuckle above the uniform line of the other fingers. Quickly, she punched seven different points on Triana’s torso that would restrict the blood flow to her heart and eventually stop it.

“Hey! What are you doing?” She stood up before even seeing Tana in the stairwell doorway.

“*Here it goes,*” she thought absently as she took out her onyx-handled gun.

“Get out of the doorway.” Her voice was ice cold. Tana’s eyes widened and he stepped sideways. There was a sudden shout from behind her and the sound of a gun firing. Something clipped her left arm and she was spun around by its impact. Rolling before she hit the ground, she stood quickly and aimed at the shooter: Anton. She fired and he fell where he stood, halfway down

the stairs. Turning, she started towards the nearer stairwell, gun raised and aimed at the roof stairs.

Quite suddenly, a cot flew very close to her face. Flinching, she aimed at Tolan, who was now at the bottom of the stairs. Kita was running towards her but she couldn't see a gun in his hands, so she didn't aim her weapon at him. Another cot flew at her and as it hit her dead, on she fired her weapon. Jaola impacted the wall and then the back of her head hit the brick. Stars and pain shot up into her sight and were quickly followed by darkness.

**\* 13 \***

Kita ran around the cots to secure the assassin. Had he seen right? Had it really been Ninae? He pulled a handgun from a holster in the small of his back. The cot covered the assassin but her gun had flown away from her. She was unmoving. He lifted his gun and engaged the safety. With one hand, he cleared the broken cot away from her.

It was Ninae. Ninae was the assassin. Kita frowned. He'd been a little suspicious of her in the beginning seeing as he couldn't immediately sense her public thoughts, but he hadn't told Hilla, he should have but he hadn't.

He swallowed. *"Why didn't I tell Hilla?"*

He had to focus. She was the assassin that Triana had talked about, and because he believed Triana, he had to figure out what to do now. Usually, an Agency assassin was killed if captured, but if he didn't kill her he had to secure her somewhere safe.

Tana stood near the stairwell door and with what Kita could see of him in his peripheral vision the man was trembling in his fear. "Tana. Head count."

"Yes, sir."

Leaning forward to kneel next to Ninae's crumpled form, he checked to see if she was still alive. Her arm had been clipped by a bullet and she was unconscious, but the heartbeat in her neck was strong. Opening her coat, Kita did a quick search for more weapons. He found a small handgun hidden under one breast. And after patting her down he eventually found a second hidden at her ankle.

"Sir, Triana's dead." Tana's voice was uneven.

"What? Is she shot?" He turned his head to look in Tana's direction.

"No. But I saw Ninae punching her before you came down." Tana's face looked grim and immensely sad. Kita knew that if he didn't keep the man busy he could easily fall into shock and become completely useless.

"She may have used pressure points. Tana, go and check on Ant. Tolan, get over here I

need a hand.”

There was no response. “Tolan?”

“Kita, he’s been hit.” Tana was on the verge of tears.

“What about Ant?”

His voice broke this time. “Dead.”

“Hai da! How bad is Tolan?” Kita stood and stepped around Ninae so he could keep the gun trained on her, but also look at Tana, who was kneeling next to the base of the stairs over what must have been Tolan’s body.

“There’s a lot of blood, I... I can’t tell, but he’s breathing.”

“Well, breathing is good. Can you come back here? We need to get this one into the cell before she wakes up.” Leaning over her, he pulled off her jacket and threw it to one side. There wasn’t time to search it, but he would later when they were all secure.

Even though Tana had ratings in PK, they struggled to get the woman downstairs and into the cell. On the way down, Kita heard Cherie weeping somewhere below them. The girl was obviously not handling the news of her mother’s death. He also sensed that she was in desperate need of a high-rating telepath intervention if she was to remain mentally stable.

Once they’d gotten the woman into the cell and locked the door, Kita turned to Tana. “Where’s Chartan?”

“I don’t know.” Tears came to the dark man’s face. “Oh no, she’s killed Chartan too.”

Kita looked at the unconscious woman through the bars then gave Tana; who stood next to him, a firm but kind look. “Not necessarily, Tana.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He needed to call for help, the Rebel groups had few situations where they assisted other groups because of the need to keep the whole Psi Rebel army cellular and minimize the chance of complete annihilation by the Agency, but this was one of those situations where they helped.

“*Nama! Nama this is Kita Oran.*”

“Yes, Kita?” Nama’s mental voice was deep and calm, but tinged at the edges with a little irritation.

“*We need help. An assassin hit the base. We have her detained but we’ve got at least two dead. Tolan is injured badly, Chartan is missing, and Cherie is having a breakdown over her mother. Can we get some reinforcements?*”

“*Hang on a minute.*”

“Tana...” Kita looked sideways at him. “Tana. I need you to go and get the med kit and start patching up Tolan. Do you remember how?”

Dark watery eyes looked at him with gut wrenching despair, but the man nodded.

“Go look after Tolan. I’ve sent out a mental call so help should be here soon. Just try and keep him alive, Tana.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kita walked over towards Cherie and knelt down next to her. He placed a gentle hand on her back. “It’s OK, Cherie, help is coming.” He wasn’t high enough rating to fix the girl’s mental state, but he sent a gentle thought stream to her mind in the hope that it would soothe some of her distress.

“*Kita?*”

“*Yes, Nama.*”

“*We’ll be there in ten to fifteen minutes. Can you hold the assassin until then?*”

He nodded absently as he stood. “*Yes, I think so.*”

Leaving the poor girl where she lay, he stepped towards the cell and the unconscious assassin. If she woke up in the next few minutes, he could easily be in trouble. They knew she was a telepath, but she could have many other skills that she’d hidden from them, including being a high-rating telepath. If he had any chance, he would have to anchor her mind so he could control her until the others arrived.

\* 14 \*

There was a terrible feeling in Jaola’s head. It throbbed and sparked pain, like she was being hit over and over with a mallet covered in broken glass. There was another pain underneath it, one that made her open her eyes quickly and attempt to get up. Someone was inside her mind! The world around her spun terribly, and against her will she slipped back down onto the cot. The mind that had invaded her mental space was calm and slightly cold. Some of the confusion and disorientation lifted and above her, behind some metal bars, stood a face she recognized.

“*Kita? What’s happened?*” Subconsciously, she flavored her mental words with confusion and shyness, with a touch of uncertainty and low self-esteem.

“*That won’t work Ninnae, I know you’re an Agent. What is your real name?*”

“*I don’t know what you’re talking about. Please tell me what happened.*”

“*You killed Triana and Anton, and Tolan is close to joining them.*” His mental voice was firm and focused. She realized then that he had a tight grip on her mind. But, at least she remembered what had happened.

“What is your real name?” He mentally pushed against her mind in an attempt to force his will upon her, but he didn’t know how strong she was. He didn’t even realize that she was almost free. *“A cheetah launches and attacks only at the perfect time to get their prey.”* She waited patiently under his control for the right time to launch her attack.

“Jaola Armon...”

“Where is Chartan?”

“In the basement asleep.”

“Did you kill Hilla?”

She struggled against answering that question, but couldn’t fight it. “Yes...”

*“Nearly there,”* she reassured herself silently.

“Why did you come back?”

“Cherie...”

*“Nearly there.”*

“Why did you kill Triana?”

She was suddenly free and pounced mentally into his mind. “Too late, Kita.”

Groaning in agony, he flinched and slipped down onto his knees in front of the cell. Jaola got up carefully, aware of the pain in her body, the bullet wound in her arm, and his mental shock. She didn’t want to kill him unless she had to, but she also had to get free.

“Give me the key.” She snarled coldly.

“No...” Even as he mentally said it his body did what she asked, retrieving the keys from a pocket in his pants. *“No don’t, she’s just a child... please.”*

She could see in his mind that he thought her a cold inhuman being and that she was about to kill Cherie.

*“I have no wish to kill the girl, enough people have died today.”* For no reason that she could justify, she showed Kita a few moments of her mother’s death in her arms and tinged the vision with her desperate wish to get home to mourn her mother. *“I wish to leave, that is all. Please give me the key, Kita.”*

“No... I... can’t... let you... leave...” She was a little surprised that he was still fighting her, considering the mental agony he must be experiencing.

“Give me the key.” Leaning strongly on his mind, she forced him to lift the key up to within her reach. She grabbed it and unlocked the door. Stepping out of the cell, she bent over Kita and stared coldly at him. “Where is my jacket?”

He was panting. “Upstairs.”

“Give me your gun.” Without resisting, he picked up the gun that must have fallen to the

ground when she launched at him, and handed it to her. “Stand up Kita. You’re coming upstairs with me.”

As he stood, Jaola noticed Cherie in the far corner weeping. The girl was emitting some very self-destructive mind patterns. But she didn’t have time to deal with her. Instead, she pushed Kita towards the nearby stairs. He tripped but managed to stay upright. She had to get her jacket and then she had to get out of there quickly.

**\* 15 \***

Cherie’s thoughts kept cycling in her mind. She couldn’t be dead. Her mom was alive, she just had to be. Her mom was the leader of a Psi Rebel cell. She was indestructible. She was the nicest, kindest, bestest mother in the whole world. She just couldn’t be dead. But Tana had said that she was. He’s said that a messenger from the other cell had come to tell them that they found her mother’s body. But her mother couldn’t be dead...

“Did you kill, Hilla?”

“Yes...”

Cherie heard the words, but couldn’t quite get out of the cycle of thoughts. Her mother was not dead!

“Why did you come back?”

“Cherie...”

The assassin did not kill her mother! She would come back soon and make it all better again, they would go out as they planned and watch a movie tonight. This assassin business was wrong, it was someone else, it had to be another Psi Rebel cell leader because they’ve made a mistake.

“Why did you kill Triana?”

“Too late Kita.”

There was movement nearby, a part of her thought that something bad was happening, but her mother wasn’t dead! It was lies!

“Give me the key.”

But the messenger had said it was her mother, that they had found her body in an alley, it was an assassin.

“No... I... can’t... let you... leave...”

An assassin killed her mother. *“No! MY mother is alive! No one has hurt her it’s all a trick, it’s all a lie!”*

“Where is my jacket?”

“Upstairs.”

“Give me your gun. Stand up Kita. You’re coming upstairs with me.”

People walked by her, Ninae walked up the stairs with someone at gunpoint. She couldn’t move. *“My mother is not dead! There is no assassin! She’s coming home to me really soon!”*

She couldn’t live without her mother. With that realization, the inner conflict turned into absolute silence in her mind. She stared out sightlessly at the small room in which she lay. Her body was still, mind thoughtless. Tears ran freely down her face and were the only sign that she was still conscious or alive.

There were footsteps on the stairs above her. No words. They passed her. A man and a woman. The woman held a gun.

*“That woman is an assassin. That woman killed my mother!”*

Cherie jumped up and ran at the woman roaring wordlessly. The woman’s face filled her vision. A tanned oval face, long black hair tied back tightly, cold green eyes. The face of the assassin burned into her mind. *“She will die. I will kill her.”*

“No, Cherie!” She barely heard Kita’s voice, all she saw was the assassin’s face. Ninae’s face. Cherie kept running and screamed.

The assassin caught her arms and spun her around. Cherie fell towards the ground screaming angrily and trying to wrestle free of the assassin.

“Sleep, Cherie.”

**\* 16 \***

The girl fell quickly away from consciousness, even before she hit the ground. Jaola let go of her and turned emotionlessly, pushing Kita out of the small hallway and into the ground floor area.

“Where are you taking me?” He demanded.

“Fire exit.” She pushed him in that direction.

Why was she taking Kita? She had her jacket and her files now, so she could just hit him hard and run. But he could come after her. He could be tricking her. He would have called in for reinforcements while she was unconscious. They would arrive soon, she was sure of it. They could arrive through the front, but if they arrived at the back to head her off, she would need a hostage to get out in one piece. It didn’t really make sense, but it was all she had in the roaring pain of her body and mind.

They walked around the mobile office cubicles and towards the fire exit at the back. She hadn't wanted to kill the others, but there had been no choice. Kill or be killed.

Kita pushed the old fire exit handle and the door opened out into a small parking lot. There didn't seem to be anyone else around. It was a private car parking lot that the old factory workers had once used. It was made of loose gravel, with faded parking lines and a capacity of maybe twenty cars. The backs of other parts of the old factory boxed in the entire area except for the exit. There was one car in the lot, a battered little two-door that had once been white but was now a sun-faded yellowy brown.

She pushed him. "Keep walking, Kita."

She had to get out of this bottleneck, out onto the street and to relative safety. The driveway into the lot was one car wide and exited out onto a main road. They walked wordlessly down the driveway, two pairs of feet noisy on the loose gravel. As they got closer to the road, she put the gun in her pocket and pushed tighter against Kita's mind. He seemed to be concerned for his friends and the girl they had left sleeping. And living, he was thinking about living most of all. Jaola didn't want to kill him, but would if she had to.

She'd read most of his Agency file. He hadn't been an assassin like her, but his history was quite impressive. He was born into the Agency from one of the founding families like herself. His job had been as a Telepath Interrogator and base telepath. As an Interrogator he would have telepathically forced Agency prisoners to give up information (usually at the cost of the prisoner's brain function), and as a base telepath he would have helped other Agents who had been victims of a telepath attack. The part that impressed her was that most Interrogators became ghosts of themselves due to the mental trauma they inflicted on others. He had managed to not only remain emotionally and mentally intact, but also escape the Agency on his own.

Still with a firm grip on his mind, she walked him across the road between cars and around a corner so that they were out of direct sight of the building, and the car parking lot.

"What now, assassin?" His voice was quiet but still defiant.

*"That poor girl, she's an orphan. You monster."* She wasn't sure if he had thought it or if somehow she had thought it, but its effect on her was immediate. It broke her calm assassin mindset completely, like a hammer through glass. Her foot caught on something and she stumbled. She managed to catch herself, but not without Kita turning to look back at her with confusion and fear clear on his face. Rage rose up, she was the assassin! She was the one in charge of this situation! She had no time for emotions at that moment. Reaching into her pocket she took out Kita's gun. It was much lighter than her own, much easier in her hand.

She spoke through gritted teeth. "Keep walking."



\* 17 \*

The door was unlocked when Nama and his group got to the old factory. When he opened the door a young man sat on the floor nearby, weeping uncontrollably. He recognized the man as Tana, one of the Rebels for the base. Signaling silently to the others to sweep the building, he stopped in front of the distraught man.

“Tana?” Getting no reaction, Nama crouched down next to the man. “What’s happened, Tana?” The dark man was covered in blood, all down the front of his shirt and up his hands.

“Tolan’s dead. Everyone’s dead.”

Grief shot through Nama and he swallowed. “Everyone? Where are Kita and Cherie?”

“Cherie won’t wake up and she took Kita.”

He frowned. “Who took Kita?”

“The assassin.” The man was starting to go into shock, his body was trembling and he couldn’t seem to control his breathing. It wouldn’t be long before the young man would be unresponsive.

Nama put a hand on his arm. “Tana, where did they go?”

\* 18 \*

They were near the Park, she could hear the birds over the noise of distant traffic. But she didn’t care about that now. Something was wrong. Something was wrong in her head. There was a fog, pain and coldness inside her mind. She could still force Kita to keep walking, but her thoughts were messed up and broken. She didn’t know what was going on.

There were two benches opposite each other across the road in the Park, one of them faced in her direction and invited her to sit in it. Waiting for the traffic light to change, she wondered for a moment what she was going to do with Kita. It would be hard for her to force him to sleep, if he fought her she could inadvertently rip out most of his mind. After that, she may as well have just killed him.

The lights changed and she pushed him onto the road ahead of her. The gun was back in her jacket pocket, but if he tried to make a break for it she could shoot him before he could get away.

When they crossed the road, she angled towards the park bench, pushing him in that direction. “Sit on the bench.”

Sitting opposite him, she brought out the gun and sat it on her knee in plain sight of him. He looked nervously at her, but he seemed mostly just exhausted. She didn't want to kill him. But for some reason she couldn't let him go either. He could still be a threat to her. She also couldn't just shoot him non-lethally and leave him there to bleed, at least not without attracting unwanted attention.

Why couldn't she think clearly? Why was this so hard? What was wrong with her? This should be easy for her to think through, she'd been in more complicated situations than this.

Could he be doing this to her? She looked at him, forcing her mind into his, and scanning deeply to see if he was doing anything. He flinched and closed his eyes. As much as she searched and caused him pain, she could see nothing. Unless he was a much higher rating than he let on, he couldn't be doing this. She let go of her search and stopped shredding his mind. When he opened his eyes, he looked ill and tired. He had given up getting out of this situation alive, and so had stopped fighting her.

Nearby, further into the huge Park, was a playground with a colorful jungle gym, a large wooden fort, and a set of swings. She heard the giggling of a small child and looked up. There was a mother and daughter playing on the swings, the dark haired mother was pushing the small girl. The child's giggling echoed in her head: it sounded like Cherie's laughter. That poor girl was never going to be the same again. From what little she saw of the girl's mind, she would never fully recover from the loss of her mother.

Jaola felt a moment of clarity in her thoughts. Neither Cherie nor herself would ever have a mother again, and if she took Kita's life there would be one less person in that girl's life to love and support her. She had to let Kita go, killing him would only break herself and Cherie even more.

**\* 19 \***

"Sit on the bench."

Kita sat obediently. The assassin seemed tired and distracted. She had pushed so many times against his mind that he felt empty and pained. The longer she kept him prisoner the more likely he wouldn't survive. She sat down opposite him and put his gun on her lap, an obvious enough threat for him to see and understand, but not so obvious as to get attention from anyone else in the Park. The barrel was faced at him, and he wondered if she'd kill him soon.

With a glance from her sharp green eyes, he felt her push against his mind again. She seemed to be searching for something, but it hurt so much he couldn't sense what she was looking for. The pain was sharp and quick, right through his temples and into the center of his brain. He

leaned back on the bench and closed his eyes, trying to ride the pain without fainting from its intensity.

Eventually, when it was over, he felt dizzy and mentally raw. He opened his eyes and watched her again. She seemed distracted. He wondered for a pained moment how things were at their base. Nama's group should have gotten to the old factory by now and he hoped they'd started to help Tolan and Cherie.

"Kita, get up and go now. Just go before I change my mind."

Kita looked at the assassin with surprise. Was it a trick? Was she playing with him? He stood anyway, afraid that she'd make him stand.

"...Go... look after Cherie."

He stepped away from her, a little afraid, a little confused. She sighed and stood. Turning away from him, she walked towards the center of the Park. He stood there and watched her go out of sight.

*"Over, just like that?"*

His head was spinning badly and he sat awkwardly back on the bench. He felt ill and injured. He needed help. "Nama--" He flinched as pain shot through his head. *"I'm near the park, I need help."*

*"Are you OK?"*

Kita cried out and leaned forward with his head in his hands. *"South side... near playground... City Park... help me."*

Leaning sideways, Kita lifted his legs onto the bench and lay on his side. The pain was getting too much to stand.

*"On our way."* Nama's mental voice was quiet, but it was still too loud for his sensitive head. He cried out a final time and let his mind succumb to it.

**\* 20 \***

Jaola lay on a mattress in a practically empty apartment near the Park. She'd tightly bandaged her left arm. Luckily, the wound was only a scratch. It was time to focus on finding out what was wrong with her mind. She couldn't do so at the Agency base because it would involve her lowering all of her mental shields, and anyone of any telepathic ability would sense her thoughts, even through the minuscule Psi shielding in the walls of her accommodation block.

She felt panicked and confused, and there was also some kind of mental coldness like a winter breeze.

The little apartment she lay in was a safe house she'd rented a few times as a part of her cover, she also used it as a place to go if she couldn't return to the base. It was all but empty, a mattress and a few supplies: food, weapons and basic medical stores.

Closing her eyes, she drew herself inwards. The problem was inside her, and so she had to become an observer in her own mind to find the solution.

She found herself standing in a room, not unlike her father's office, but much larger. Along one wall was a huge window that opened out to a large garden. Her father's office had such a view, created by putting a garden in the center of the building and reflecting natural sunlight into the garden area. The illusion made it appear as though the garden was outside, and his office on the ground floor. The view through her window stretched out into the distance, to what appeared to be a real horizon, with sky, wild grasses, and mountains in the far distance.

In the middle of the room was a large desk with an empty chair sitting behind it. On the desk was one lone piece of paper. Turning the paper over, she looked at the other side. It was a photograph of her mother. Not just any picture of Charmaine Pahna, but the face that Jaola had seen when she entered the base, just before her mother was shot.

Picking up the photo, she held it and looked at it carefully. She relived that moment, walking up through the plaza and just before the door, feeling that horrible feeling of death and terror. Opening the door and seeing her mother right in front of her, a blank expression on her beautiful face. Her experience freeze-framed and she stepped out of the scene to watch it from the side. Her mother had been transmitting empathically, transmitting what she was feeling in the most horrendously intense fashion. Stepping in between her frozen self and her mother she sensed something else. Her mother had been somehow also transmitting telepathically.

*"An empath, transmitting telepathically, how strange."* But what was she transmitting?

Jaola sensed through the transmission. It seemed to be on the same frequency as her mother's ill mental state. It was made of confusion, mental anguish, fear and a foggy unfocussed sense of thought. So her mother had somehow switched on her telepath genes and transmitted her own mental illness onto Jaola.

Stepping away from her other self and her mother, she looked at Tom. He held the gun that killed her mother, but she felt no ill-will towards him. If he hadn't have shot her, she could have escaped and he would be charged with dereliction of duty and possibly even treason. Any Agent who did not do their job to ensure the security of the Agency or the country could be charged with treason, punishable by death.

Behind Tom's determination and willingness to shoot she found in that he, too, had received her mother's telepathic transmission. She couldn't tell from her mental copy of him if he

was negatively affected by it because she had only connected to him on a low level at the time it occurred, but she would bet money that he too was having trouble with the side effects of her mother's passing.

Clearing out all of the mental images, Jaola focused on mending her own mental health. It would take a few hours, but she knew what to do and then she would find Tom to see if he was OK.

\* 21 \*

Tom sat in the corner of his bedroom in the dark. The shadows around him were whispering and he was frightened. They wouldn't be silent. He just wanted them to be silent. His thoughts weren't clear and he knew they were supposed to be. Up until Charmaine's attempted escape there had always been calm because he had *known* that everything was happening as it was meant to. But now the Shadow Voices covered the certainty, they clouded his mind and all he felt was fear and confusion.

Somewhere in his Agency apartment, a door opened and closed. He wondered if it was another trick of the Shadow Voices.

"Tom? Are you OK?" A voice called. It actually sounded like a voice that wasn't one of the Shadows.

*"Lies! That is lies! You are alone! You'll always be alone! There are no more people aside from us!"* The Shadows hissed at him menacingly and he covered his face. It was hopeless, he couldn't see his way through to the *Truth*, which he knew stood out there just beyond his reach. He whimpered.

Hands touched his and lifted them from his face. Kneeling in front of him was Jaola Armon with a concerned look on her face.

"Tom, are you OK?"

Tom felt the tears of fear and sadness rise to his throat and he looked at her helplessly. "The Shadows won't be silent, I can't hear truth anymore."

"Oh, Tom, let me help you."

\* 22 \*

*Three years later*

*The Year of our Founder 3007*

*Araam, in the Country of Arana*

Staring out of a window four stories above the City Park, Jaola watched Jerna Ahlan through her scopes as he sat down on a park bench. Three months ago, he'd escaped the Agency with his nine year old son, Jahna. In the process of their escape, he was supposed to have killed six Agents. Though, Jaola doubted this kill number. It was common for superiors to add inflated kill-numbers to Traitor files to motivate assassins. But, it didn't actually matter to her whether or not he had, because Jerna Ahlan was not her Target. Her target was his younger brother, Mathew who was still an Agent and planning his own escape.

Jaola's mission was to get proof that Mathew was planning an escape and take him out. It looked as if Jerna was offering to help him escape, or at least help him once he'd gotten out of the Tower.

Jaola thought that Mathew was being selfish. He had a wife, child and other relatives who could be killed simply because he wanted to escape. She'd managed, for most part, to free the family of possible execution, but Mathew just kept digging his own grave with every move he made. The most recent mistake was in meeting with his brother Jerna in the Park to discuss his escape.

She sighed. *"Dumb, a'kenaan."*

She sat on the bare wood floor of her little safe-house, with her legs crossed under her and watched Jerna through a detached scope. Below, the Park was pretty empty for mid-morning, but that was good. Mathew was due very soon and the less people around, the clearer any recordings she took would be.

She surveyed the area of the park around Jerna. A woman in black spandex was running with her dog and a couple of nannies were watching their children clamber over the playground behind him. A tall man in a blue suit and hat walked slowly towards Jerna's bench.

A small frown creased her forehead. Jaola sensed deception in this man. He had the initial appearance of a normal person, but it was a mental mask, a trick telepaths used against other low level Psi. Concentrating on the man and making sure she didn't alert him to her presence, she lightly scanned his surface thoughts through the mental mask and his shielding.

It was Mathew Ahlan.

Jaola lifted the laser microphone and, turning it on she aimed it at them. Mathew walked purposefully, trying to look relaxed. As he got near to where his brother sat, he quickly dropped down to the bench next to him. He was obviously not accustomed to undercover missions.

"Jerna! Are you all right? They said--"

"Mathew, hush. We don't have much time. I've found a person who can help my son and I get out of the city. I must leave tonight. Can you and your family come? I've reserved you three

spaces.”

There was a sigh. “No, she won’t even let me talk about it. So it’s just me. Where and when do we meet?”

“No, Mathew. It isn’t that simple. Wait at the old train station phone booth tonight at ten. I’ll phone you with more details. Are you going to try and take your daughter?”

“I’ll try, Jerna, but she’s only a baby.”

There was silence for a moment and Jerna spoke. His voice cracked. “It’s good to see you brother.”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

Jaola watched them hug and a knot formed in her throat. Her lips tightened and she suppressed the emotion with anger. She was glad she didn’t have any siblings, because if they tried to get out, *she* would have to stop them. Within the Agency, such things tended to stay in families, especially assassin families.

She sighed and turned off the microphone. This was enough evidence. She didn’t want to hear any more, nor think about what she’d have to do to finish the mission. Instead, she focused on the next part. She had to probe the wife. If there were any provable guilt, she too would have to be taken out.

*“Then the baby would be an orphan.”* She swallowed and shook her head. *“That’s not my problem.”* She took off the headphones and started to pack up.

\* 23 \*

Jaola sat at a small wooden table, wearing headphones and listening to the fight that was going on in the next condo. She’d snuck into Mathew Ahlan’s condo the day before and hid a bug in the couple’s sitting room.

“You have to listen to me!” Mathew sounded angry.

“No! You listen to me! I will not talk about this! There is no room for this, no time and no room! What about our child?”

“I’ll--”

“No! You will do nothing! She is our responsibility and our work is more important. I will not let you destroy this family!”

Jaola could sense in the woman’s mind that she desperately wanted out of the Agency, but she didn’t think it was possible. To her, there was too much risk, especially with their baby. Like Jaola, the woman couldn’t understand why Mathew wanted to risk everything to escape.

Taking off her headphones, Jaola turned off the digital recorder. She had enough proof firstly, that Mathew was indeed trying to escape, and secondly, some proof that the wife wasn't involved. Jaola was quietly relieved. It was only Mathew she needed to deal with.

Grabbing the small recording device from the table, she got to her feet. It was time to meet with her father to get official permission for the final stage of the mission. They would go through the evidence and her father would then issue a death warrant for Mathew. The meeting with Mathew's brother was certainly enough to condemn the man. However, if she didn't present all of the evidence regarding the wife delicately, it could look bad for the woman. In the past, Jaola just presented all of the evidence and they would have sifted through it together. But, Mathew was planning to escape that evening, so there was no time. Hopefully, the argument with Mathew would be enough to save the woman.

**\* 24 \***

*A few hours later*

It was nine-thirty. Mathew *had* to be leaving soon. Jaola stood in the dark corner of a corridor with her gun heavy in one hand. They were arguing again, she could sense the sharp thoughts flying around the nearby apartment.

The wife left, clutching her baby, and in her distress she didn't even see Jaola standing nearby. After the wife was out of sight, Jaola walked towards the open doorway. As she entered, she took one calm deep breath and emotionally stepped back from the situation. If her father's promise was real this would be the last one.

She found Mathew in the bedroom packing a bag hurriedly. He was worried that he wasn't sure if his wife would tell on him, so he had to hurry. There was only one doorway to the bedroom and Jaola stood quietly in it. She paused, hoping to solidify her detachment from the situation before it started. For a minute or so, she watched him. He hadn't even noticed her. He mustn't have been much of a combat Agent.

"Mathew Ahlan?" Her voice was calm and leathery.

He jumped and spun around. "Y... Yes. Who are you?"

"I am Cheetah." She lifted the gun from her long coat and aimed it at his chest.

His blue eyes widened, he knew the name. His eyes darted around the room, likely looking for a way out. She wondered if he would try to run.

He coughed. "Cheetah? Wh... why are you here?"

"You are a Traitor."



“No, please.” He stumbled backwards, tripping over the bed and onto the floor. “No, no, you don’t understand.” He scrambled backwards around the bed, trying to get away from her and ended up with his back against a wall.

She flicked her head towards the bed. “I see you’re packing. Are you going somewhere?”

His eyes glanced to the half-packed bag lying on the bed and then back at her gun. “I... I...”

She watched at a distance as her arm raised the gun from his chest to his head. He was quite a handsome man. Dark brown hair flitted around his face in small gelled spikes, the pointed ends slightly blonded. His small frameless glasses accented his blue eyes, which were wide with his terror and desperation.

“Please don’t kill my wife and child!” He begged.

It seemed that the inevitability of his own death had finally hit him. She was glad he hadn’t tried to run. For a moment, she felt pity for the man.

“You are the Traitor, not your wife and child.” She saw the relief enter his face, but hardened her heart again before she could have more pity for him.

Jaola heard the shot but did not see it. A part of her was looking at him to aim, but she concentrated on her peripheral vision where a flower was painted on the wall above him. She could nearly convince herself, as she turned around again, that there was no one else in the room. But only nearly.

\* 25 \*

*Three days later*

Jaola did what was needed to complete the assignment. She took the necessary time and when it was completed she had that same amount off. Mathew Ahlan had taken three months, therefore protocol dictated that she would have full, free movement within the Base for three months. But her supervisor had requested that she attend a briefing for her next assignment. It had only been three days. She was *not* ready to start another assignment.

Gritting her teeth, she channeled her frustration into each step, trying to walk it off before she got to her father’s office. But the walk wasn’t long enough. She stopped and glared at his door. Closing her eyes, she took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves. Regardless of whether she was justified in her anger, it would not do to enter his office in a huff.

When she was calm enough to control the frustration, she knocked on the door and waited. There was no response. Frowning, she knocked again.

“William Armon, are you available?”

Again, no response came and she couldn't sense anything inside the office. Her father would never call her to a briefing and not be there to receive her. Frowning, she wondered if something had happened.

Looking left and right to check that no one saw her, she quickly turned the doorknob and stepped inside the office. She wasn't officially allowed to go into his office without permission, but he wouldn't mind if he caught her.

Jaola turned and stopped, her mouth opened.

With one step, she was kneeling on the floor next to him. He was lying on his side, back facing her. Blood seeped in a widening circle from him on the gray carpet. The gun and silencer were laying only a meter away. She had to take a second to fully grasp what was before her.

She leaned over and checked his pulse. His neck was warm, but there was no heartbeat.

*"He killed himself. But why?"*

*"If you had the choice, would you rather be free?"* his voice echoed in her memory and she swallowed.

It was three years to the day since her mother died. He'd killed himself to give Jaola the chance to be free like her mother wanted.

*"What do I do now?"*

Jaola knelt there thinking only for a short time, not even ten seconds. Then her silver wristwatch started its vibrating alarm. This alarm meant that there was only one guard on the door, which was the perfect time to get out. Her father had known the best time for her to leave and planned for it.

She blinked a few times, still trying to process it all in the haze of shock.

Her uncle Raraan was far away in Rona, so there was no risk to him if she escaped. He couldn't possibly be complicit in her plans from two time zones away. Her mother was dead. Over the last three years, she had deliberately isolated herself emotionally from the rest of her blood relations, so the Agency couldn't use their lives to force her to kill any more.

With her father dead, she was free to choose for the first time in her life.

Swallowing, she stopped her watch alarm and stood up. She knew the grief would hit her soon, but she turned away from her father's body. She would have to mourn him later.

Outside in the hallway, she focused on the spaces around her. There were no minds nearby, so it was clear for the moment. She walked quickly down the long gray-carpeted hall towards the elevator.

*"How long would it take for them to discover him?"*

As far as she knew, she was the only Agent he supervised since his application to retire

was put in a year ago. So he could lie there the whole day undiscovered. Or, his assistant could go into the office with a coffee and discover him in five minutes.

*“How far can I get before being stopped? How much of a head start can I get?”*

She shook her head. They were questions she couldn't answer. There were too many variables.

*“But if I make a mistake, if they catch me...”* her body tensed and green eyes reduced to a slit. *“I have to try. Even if I die trying, I won't ever have to kill again. If I succeed I'll finally have the choice, so it's worth the risk.”*

The elevator only took a few minutes to descend from the seventh floor to the ground. A short bell sounded and the metal doors opened. Stepping out, she stood for a moment looking in both directions at the ground floor hallway.

Navy blue carpet led from left to right past closed office doors. In the distance, was a small square of sunlight from the exit door. There was no one in sight, but she knew the door guard would be watching the video feed at his office desk next to the exit.

She turned and walked towards freedom. Near the door was the bloodstain left by her mother. It was only a watermark in the faded navy carpet, but she knew what to look for. She shuddered. *“I am not my mother. One more moment of being as good as I am, and then I don't have to kill ever again.”*

In her safe-house above the City Park, everything was ready. All it was going to take was getting through the one guard in the side-office, and then she'd be free.

The hallway had no windows. It was long and lined with steel reinforced walls. The last doorway in the hall was that of the small café. She passed it and glanced inside, but there seemed to be no one seated at any of the tables.

There was a camera on the door, so by now he'd know she was heading in his direction. As she thought this, the guard stepped out into the hallway and lifted one hand to stop her.

Jaola knew this man, his name was Ino. He was mean and spiteful, having grown up as a Child Talent in the Desert bases. He'd wanted to be an assassin, but hadn't passed the proficiency test. Consequently, he was very bitter about having to be a lowly A6 guard.

*“Where are you going, Jaola? I have no notice of your exit.”* She continued to walk towards him, silent and focused. Hidden behind the lengths of her dark skirt she held a new gun with a silencer attached.

*“How long will it take him to realize I am leaving, and leaving through him?”*

She watched his face. His eyes widened, and his confused frown lifted away as he started to understand what was happening. She was the last person he expected to turn Traitor. In his mind

was the image of a dedicated Agency woman, her focus never deviating from her job. His mind reeled with the realization of what she was about to do. This would give her an advantage.

Lifting her gun at the same time as he did, she did not pause. Her gun went off and he dropped to the ground like a rag doll. If she was as accurate as she had always been, his heart would be shattered. It was one very quick, mostly painless way to die.

She opened the door and broke into a run.

## Chapter Two - Jessal Mier

\* 1 \*

*The Year of our Founder 3007*  
*The City of Kaamo, in the Country of Rona*  
*(neighbor to Arana)*  
*The planet Shadow,*  
*in orbit around the star Beta Five*

Jessal stood high on a hill looking out at the city. The sun was setting and the entire sky was filled with color. Deep purples, pinks and hints of amber were caught in long wisps of cloud high in the atmosphere. The colors and light eased slowly into a deep, dark blue on the western horizon. Jessal was buffeted by the high winds as he marveled at the magnificence of the city at such a moment. Even with all the horror that had happened in Kaamo it was such a beautiful city.

The lookout point he stood on was the highest hill for kilometers, so it afforded anyone on its peak an impressive view of the biggest city in all of the Five Nations.

“Is everyone here?” Mena’s deep voice sounded from behind him. Jessal faced Mena and the rest of the Rona-Abaan. There were forty-odd people in front of him, all different ages, with Mena being the oldest and, at nineteen, Jessal was the youngest.

Mena stood in the middle of the group, arms raised and looked intently around him. Mena smiled broadly and nodded. “I think we are all here.” He opened his arms wider, as if to embrace everyone standing in front of him. “Tonight, starts an era when the world will hear our call for help. Eight government buildings have been fixed with explosives, and in my hand is the detonator!”

Mena’s voice was proud and strong, it made shivers run up and down Jessal’s spine. He thought Mena was just about as impressive as the city at that moment. Around him, a few people in the group yelled excitedly.

“When the world knows what they’re doing to the Psi and Talent of this country they will have to stop it!” Mena cleared his throat and seemed sad for half a second. “But, before we start, we should all remember our dead. Our families, loved ones, friends and children, all of those the Special Guard have destroyed.”

Jessal swallowed back his own grief. Everyone around him had lost someone to the Guard, Jessal had lost his entire family to them.

“Know in this act, as well as being seen by the international community, we have also

gotten some of our revenge! For all of our dead!”

Jessal watched as the old man held up the detonator and pressed the button. Everyone turned to look out at the city, Jessal held his breath. There was a good three second delay, and all over the city large explosions blew up into the evening sky.

Jessal saw the destruction, and remembered the fire that had killed his family. He had four older sisters, two older brothers and one younger brother. Jessal had only been ten when it happened. He and his older brother, Rana, had come home from shopping late in the day to find the house burning. Someone was screaming inside the house, but no matter how much Rana tried, he couldn't get to them. The fire was just too hot and the smoke too thick. That was how the country of Rona treated its Psi and Talents. They killed them, burned them alive, adults and children alike.

In his mind he could hear the screaming from the fire, the smell of burned flesh and wood. He remembered how terrible his little brother Ton had looked, so badly burned no one could recognize him as the beautiful little boy he had been. In Jessal's mind, he heard Rana's scream of abject despair at finding Ton's little body.

Jessal felt a hand on his shoulder and his focus moved outwards again. He turned to look at Goid. His closest friend smiled gently at him and signaled with a sideways flick of his head that it was time to leave.

Jessal nodded and wiped his face. Goid stepped away from him, walking down the grassy hill towards the car, and Jessal followed quietly behind. It didn't matter that those explosions meant some people were dying. It didn't matter that he helped cause that death. He remembered the pain of his family dying and the horror of the fire. He remembered the burnt body of Ton, and years later when the Guard eventually caught up with Rana. Jessal only cared about the pain they had caused him, and that now he, along with the Rona-Abaan, was giving that pain back.

**\* 2 \***

*Later that evening*

Everyone was laughing and drinking. Jessal leaned back in an old deck chair and watched the celebration. He had a beer in one hand, and a piece of pizza in the other. In the middle of the room, Goid and his wife were dancing. She was beautiful, with long brown hair, a broad smile and strong heart. It was unbelievable that she had brought down more of the Guard than even Mena.

She and Goid had been together for five years. They had three children. She was a "Thought Talent". By her thoughts alone she could reduce someone to a vegetable. She did this by over-running another person's mind with mental static, so that it completely fried their thought

processes, permanently. Goid was not a Talent but a Psi. He was a low level kinetic and telepath, two abilities that were not really a threat on their own. But with his training in weapons and hand-to-hand combat, he was the best warrior among the RA.

Jessal sometimes wished he was more of a combat member of the Rona-Abaan. But he enjoyed his part. He was smart and could find nearly anything they needed. He was quick and his scouting ability had gotten them all out of quite a few sticky situations. So he was thankful for the part he did play in the RA even if it wasn't direct combat.

After most Actions, they celebrated inside one of the warehouses gifted to them by the local bus and taxi companies. It was a glorified concrete box, but it was a roof over their heads and a good hiding place for their parties.

He hoped the other countries would take notice of their bombing and care why they did it. No matter how many bombings singularly they'd done, the government always seemed able to hide them from the other countries so that no one knew what they were doing in Rona. How could they hide the loss of eight government facilities and such large explosions? But, he thought worriedly, after knowing what was going on would the international governments even try and do something about it? Most of the other large powers seemed to have enough problems of their own.

Out of all the other international governments Jessal hoped that the Aranan government would rise up to help them. They found a use for Talents and Psi, giving them careers that utilized their abilities for the betterment of their country. If they knew what the Ronan government did to Psi and Talents, they had to do something, surely! It was appalling, every Talent and Psi was hunted down and killed.

Blood tests were done at any kindergarten, school, high school and university. If a person was tested and found positive, even a four-year-old child, they were kicked out and the government told. Then, the Guard would come.

Jessal took another sip of his beer and looked around him. People were laughing and dancing. He smiled. The RA really knew how to celebrate. But even with all the celebration and happiness around him, he felt uneasy and detached from the others.

What if the other countries didn't do anything? Breaking the Allied Charter and interfering with another country's rule could risk a massive international war. Could they or would they help if they were to see what was going on in Rona? If none of the other countries did anything once they knew what would the RA do then? Would they give up and go into hiding? But then they wouldn't be doing anything towards saving the Psi and Talents around the city or helping the other cities. What else could be done?

Sighing heavily, he realized he really didn't feel like celebrating any more. Why celebrate

something they didn't know was going to work? He put down his beer and finished off the last bite of pizza in his hand. He would go for a walk. He needed to go out onto the streets and maybe talk to the cabbies to find out if there had been a reaction in the international community yet.

It was quite cold outside. In a month or so winter would set in and it would snow. Although the cold that evening was nothing in comparison to a winter snowstorm, it was still enough to make him shiver. Jessal did up his long woolen coat and started a quick walking pace.

He crossed the warehouse yard to the shortcut and walked out across the railroad tracks towards town. If you didn't know about the shortcut through the fence it could take over two hours to get out of the huge warehouse yard and through the streets to the center of town.

On the streets, many of those out walking recognized him. He nodded and smiled as people greeted him. A few cabbies tooted at him as they drove past and he waved back with a smile. Old Ana stood on her normal corner looking as crazy as always. Very few knew it, but she was quite a strong Time Psi, consequently, she really was a little bit crazy. She looked up at him smiling, and he waved back.

“Hello, Ana! How are you?”

She grinned at him and he tried not to chuckle at her gummy mouth. “Hello boy! You be careful this night! Boy, the soul eaters are out and about.”

His eyebrows lifted uncertainly. She had unusual names for different people. He didn't know who the soul eaters were, but he knew he'd probably find out. She called the Guard, dragons, probably because they frequently burned houses down. But he had never known her to be wrong, once of course you found out what she was talking about.

“I'll keep a lookout for them, Ana.”

She cackled as he passed her. “Boy, you'll still be caught out by them!”

He took a deep breath of the cool night air. It was nice to get out there sometimes, to see the people and community of the city central. It reminded him what the RA was about. People needed the freedom to be who they were, to use the skills they were born with, and not have to spend their lives running and hiding because of those skills. That freedom was worth fighting for, and aside from revenge that was why he did fight.

Still walking quickly, Jessal turned the corner past an old bank. He probably should go back around the block to the party because Goid might worry if he was gone too long.

Slowly, he became aware of an uncomfortable prickly feeling inside him. He knew this meant someone was following him. Just as he became aware of the man, he stepped in behind Jessal and pressed a gun firmly into center of his back. Eyes widening, Jessal stiffened and raised his hands a little in the air. He wasn't armed. The man pushed him wordlessly in the direction of the



Aranan Embassy.

The embassy was a big old white building. It looked just like a block of expensive apartments, except for the two guards either side of the doorway and the high wire fence around it. The Aranan man pulling him along wore a blue suit like a businessman. But his face and manner looked harsh and more as if he should be wearing an army uniform instead.

Jessal was taken through a large foyer made of white marble. They passed a young light-haired Aranan woman sitting at a desk, and then up some broad white stone stairs. At the top of these stairs, was a door and he was pulled towards it. The door closed behind him before he realized that the man who had escorted him in had gone immediately out again. He stood dumbly for a moment facing the door with a frown of confusion on his face.

“Jessal Mier?”

He turned around and there was another man sitting at an antique desk nearby. Jessal didn't answer him, he just stared at the man's pale face. He looked old enough to be near Mena's age. He too wore a blue suit, but it seemed more like a second skin on him.

Jessal smiled uncomfortably and nodded.

“I am Agent Raraan Armon. I warn you now I am a telepath. Do not lie to me. Sit down.”

Jessal cautiously took one of the two wooden chairs in front of the man's desk.

“You are a member of the Rona-Abaan, are you not?” The man's head turned on the side. A single eyebrow lifted, and Jessal felt as if he was saying; “*go on, I dare you to lie.*”

Jessal swallowed tensely. “Yes.”

“We at the Aranan Government know of your situation. Unfortunately, the Aranan government along with the other world governments are not able to do anything about the Ronan Psi and Talent obliteration. However, I have brought you here to offer you something.”

Jessal shuffled uncomfortably on a chair that had obviously been designed for the more slight form of the Aranan people.

“The Ronan Government has asked us to help them solve the problem of the RA. Now, you are one of a small few who we are able to cut a deal with because you have not killed anyone directly. We will not negotiate with anyone who has already contributed directly to this terrorism.”

The man's demeanor irritated Jessal. He seemed so superior and incredibly bored as if he were chairing a meeting about paint drying and not the obliteration of a group of living breathing human beings.

“Our reconnaissance indicates you are such an individual. I am offering you a way to survive what is to come. You turn over the location of all of the RA's stores and the identities of the head players, and your government will let you live.”

Jessal crossed his arms over his chest. "If you're a telepath, you already know my answer."

The man's grim expression showed that he did. "I will give you some time to think about this offer. But if you tell anyone or participate directly in the deaths of others, the deal will be off."

Jessal laughed. "If I tell anyone they will kill me just for talking to you."

Raraan stood and Jessal was surprised, the dark haired man was nearly the same height as him. "Well, then we are in agreement, silence is best for both sides. You may go now."

The man walked past him towards the door and Jessal stood up. The Aranan opened the door and gestured outside to enforce his point. "Good evening, Mr. Mier."

**\* 3 \***

*Two days later*

Jessal was late. He was always late no matter how hard he tried. He had run all the way from town and across the train tracks to the warehouse for the meeting. Finally, he got to the main door of the warehouse and took a deep relieved breath as he entered. Some people nearby turned and smiled at him. He wasn't sure if the smiles were greetings or a gentle reminder that, as usual, he was late.

"You're late boy! Didn't miss much though." Goid was looking at him from the back row as he turned on his chair. He winked and indicated the empty chair next to him. Jessal quickly jumped over and onto the spare chair.

The warehouse was scattered with chairs and bums on those chairs, except for a small circle at the front of the room where Mena stood. In total there were about forty people in the room, which was probably ninety percent of all those in the RA.

"OK, OK, hush everyone." Mena gestured for silence and threw Jessal a quick grin to let him know he'd seen Jessal's late arrival. "OK, now for the part of this meeting that everyone has come to discuss. What do we do next?" Mena paused, looking around the room at everyone. "The floor is open." He turned and stepped aside from the center of the circle. The din of discussion started and Jessal waited for the first idea.

"We could take ourselves to the Capitol and bomb government house." Came one response.

"We soon as Bomb one of the moons than get in there with explosives!" Another answered.

"True, true." Said the first.

Goid stood up and looked around at his friends. "What about setting up other RA groups in

other cities? This problem isn't just in Kaamo, the Psi and Talents are getting killed in other cities as well."

Mena walked closer to Goid. "Little brother, that is an excellent idea. However, is there enough of us? There are nearly a hundred towns and cities in Rona and less than fifty of us."

Jessal thought about his words and stood up next to Goid. "Well, why don't we start with the surrounding cities and aim long term for the rest of Rona?"

"Why don't we aim for an RA in every city in the world?" Someone in the back retorted with a teasing laugh.

Mena glared at whoever it was on the far side of the room and turned to look at him and Goid. "Well, it is a pretty good long term suggestion. Thank you Goid, thank you Jessal. But we're here today to brainstorm what to do immediately. There has been no response in the national or international media. What else could we do to get their attention? What else can we do immediately towards our present goal of Talent and Psi freedom?"

Both Jessal and Goid sat down. They had talked about it for hours the previous evening, but beyond applications of the same idea they had very few new suggestions.

"Why don't we bomb schools? They are the starting point of this problem."

Jessal's heartbeat increased. "*How could anyone be suggesting this?*" He couldn't see the person who was speaking, but they were somewhere to his right.

"How about the fact that there are innocent children in those schools?" Came another response closer to Mena.

"We want to free the children not kill them." Jessal still couldn't see who was making the comments, but the din of talking was starting to get louder.

"Maybe that's what must happen for them to notice. Look at all of the children they have killed because they weren't Normal. Why not kill a few of the Normals to get their attention?"

"Two wrongs don't make a right, Ayren!" That sounded like Lilaan, who was a fairly strong kinetic and combat member of their group.

"Whoa! People, people, settle down this is a discussion of ideas not set actions. I think Ayren has a point, Lilaan. They kill our children to get our attention, why not kill their children? The death of as many children as they have killed should get the attention of the international governments."

Jessal stood up. "But you are talking about the lives of children. Normal or not they are still just children. Besides, our bombing hasn't done anything yet in the international community. How do we know that the other governments would do something if they saw?" Jessal's heart rate sped-up. This was an opinion that was a dramatic change from his previous discussions. They might

query where it had come from. The din grew into a shouting match and Jessal couldn't really hear anything that was being said.

Mena raised his arms and yelled for quiet. He waited for the noise to quiet down again, and then he looked at Jessal with a very strange expression in his eyes. "What would make you think that, little brother?"

Jessal felt many eyes all focus on him waiting for his response. An uneasy feeling itched his extremities and he knew he would have to answer very carefully. "I, I merely suggest, how do we even know any of our actions are doing anything? The government could be lying to the international community. We could be considered terrorists to the international community. What reason would the government have to tell them any truth about the situation? They are politicians after all. And, and, why kill the children of those who quietly support us? The non-governmental community has supported us from the beginning. We have the taxicabs behind us and most of the large companies trade and help hide us. Why kill the children of our supporters? It seems to me to be strategically unwise to attack those who keep us afloat. Maybe we start bombing the government houses getting them in their own homes?"

Jessal looked around him. And there was silence. He couldn't tell if the silence was good or bad. Then Mena started to laugh.

"We have a young Mecra's-advocate in our midst! Let's talk more together after a week of thinking individually. Everyone have a good week!" Mena turned and walked around the chairs towards the exit. Jessal felt confused and certain something had happened that he had no idea about.

Goid turned and smiled gently at him. "Hey, the wife and I are holding a dinner here on Holy day want to come?"

Jessal tried to smile. "Yeah, sure Goid, of course."

**\* 4 \***

*Just under a week later*

Jessal frowned. He couldn't find anyone. Goid was off doing something, but his wife wouldn't tell Jessal what and where. He was beginning to wonder if someone had seen him being escorted into the Aranan Embassy. Though, if that really was the case he'd probably have been killed by now as a traitor.

Earlier that day, he had focused his Search Talent upon Goid and went for a walk. He ended up walking all over the city that day and not seeing Goid at all. He wondered for the tenth time if there was a way to interfere with his Search Talent.

Still following the Search Trail, he looked up and around him. He was now walking through the warehouses yard again, back towards a few of their hidden stash buildings. His Searching had never steered him wrong before, so he assumed Goid must have been given a lot of errands to do. The Search stopped outside a warehouse where they stored all of their explosives and spare instruments. Cautiously, Jessal stepped in through the entrance. The main area was full of clutter, broken guns and gun parts, stable explosives containers, in one corner stood a large amount of canned foods and donated clothes that they had collected and not used, and sitting in the middle of the large room was an old broken-down jeep covered loosely with a tarpaulin.

Jessal turned to look at the whole of the main area. There were two rooms off this main area, the little room in front of him was so small it was practically useless. It had once been a small bathroom that had since been dismantled. The other room on the same wall as the exit was an office about four meters square. If anyone was in the warehouse they would probably be in that small office. He walked towards its door and as he passed the tarpaulin-covered jeep he heard voices. An instinct screamed inside him to hide, so he quickly jumped underneath the tarpaulin and sat hidden in the front seat of the jeep.

“Are you sure that’s what she said?” It was Mena.

“Yes, sir. She said exactly: ‘The Searcher has been talking to the Soul Eaters. He will bring the Children’s Champions down before the Dragons’. You know as well as I do that her name “the Children’s Champions” has always referred to us and the “Dragons” being the Guard. I don’t know who the “Soul Eaters” are, but Jessal is the only one whom she refers to as the Searcher because of his Talent. Isn’t that enough?”

Jessal’s heart dropped into his stomach. Because of the ranting of a crazy old lady, he was going to be dead within a few hours at the hands of his adoptive family.

“But, Mena, can’t we at least give him a chance to explain himself. We have been known to take her sayings too literally.” Goid’s voice sounded distressed.

Mena sighed. “I know how you feel, little brother. But, let’s do this first. When it’s all finished, we’ll deal with Jessal.”

“Yes, sir.”

“OK, Ayren, you go in with Goid and plant them. I want Jo and Laan in support. Goid has isolated the best one, it’s large and on government grounds.” The group of people walked past Jessal and towards the exit door. “I want it done in one hour. Get going.”

Their footsteps moved out through the exit and away from the warehouse, leaving Jessal in stunned silence. He sat under the tarpaulin feeling decidedly shocked. What should he do now? They had obviously planned an Action and kept it from him. And they’d done this even before they

talked to Old Ana, because it usually took longer than a week to plan an Action. So, he was probably already in trouble before Ana. What could they be bombing that they'd need to keep from him? And would they kill him if he tried to explain what happened with the Aranan Agent? Would he have to run? And where would he go?

Maybe if he got Goid aside and explained to him what happened he'd be OK? But, he would have to find Goid soon because everyone went to ground after a bombing.

Jessal got out of the jeep and from under the tarpaulin. He would need to Search for Goid and pray to the Old Gods that he found him fast enough, because Goid was probably his only chance to live.

\* 5 \*

*Forty-five minutes later*

Jessal stood there on the street watching the little girl. She was standing on the other side of the road to him with a vacant look on her dark chubby face. Her little dress was burned at the edges and dusty. She could have been a particularly badly treated street urchin, that is, if it weren't for the expensive materials of her dress and the burning building behind her.

Even if he'd known what they were going to do he was too late, so late that there weren't any other sounds but the fire and distant sirens. The little girl seemed to be the only survivor. His eyes filled with tears of frustration.

*"Why did they have to do this? Why?"*

The fire fighters would be there soon and so would the Guard. He knew if he stayed he would be arrested, and then probably put to death for this bombing. The Guard didn't care so much about justice, their reasoning was that he was one of the RA and therefore guilty. It wouldn't matter to them that he had no hand in this Action.

Turning his back to the devastation, he started to run out of the immediate vicinity. This wasn't the reason he became a part of the Rona-Abaan. He had never wanted innocent children to die. If only he had been able to speak better and show them that it wasn't a good course of action. Now, he had nowhere to go. He had missed Goid leaving by mere seconds and watched him get into a car from across the road. He knew if he went back to find the others they would probably kill him. If he went back onto the streets, either someone from the RA or the Guard would eventually find him. There was nowhere to hide in Rona. So, there was only one option left, the Aranan Agent.

He looked around for a pay phone, and it didn't take long to find one.

With his back to the road against the booth glass he put some coins in the phone and

dialed.

“Arana Embassy, Hona speaking.”

He took a breath, not in a million years did he think he would ever end up doing this. “Uh, yes, can I speak to Agent Armon?” There was a click and the phone was ringing again.

“Raraan, speaking.”

“Yes. This is Jessal Mier. I think I’m ready to make a deal.” A vehicle went past behind him, sirens screaming and lights flashing. Jessal flinched at the noise and turned his face away from it.

“Good, that is good. Where shall I meet you?”

“No. I’m coming to you on foot. But I will give you the information if and only if you do something for me.” Jessal’s heart quickened and he waited.

The Agent sighed. “And what is that?”

“I want you to get me into the Agency.”

There was a pause. Jessal must have taken the man by surprise. He held his breath. This was the only way he could survive after this all settled down.

“What rating Talent are you?”

Jessal scratched at his short black hair. “About an eight, I believe.”

“I think I can do that. What information can you give us?”

The wave of relief made Jessal’s voice wobble. “The information you need for now is the main warehouse where they go after bombings...”

\* \* \* \* \*

“OK, Jessal, thank you.” The phone clicked and he was disconnected. He hung up the phone and looked around him warily.

*“I can’t take any taxis because they’ll know pretty soon and I’ll be a sitting duck. Can’t take a bus, same reason. Main roads are out. Right, Jessal, you’ve got a two-hour walk through town on your hands and you have to keep out of sight.”*

\* 6 \*

*Sometime later, closer to the center of town*

There was a strange silence in the air as if the whole world was holding its breath. The tingling started and he knew this meant someone was looking for him. It also meant they were close

and that they were dangerous.

It was the same feeling he had the day Rana was killed. The sensation had led him to clamber into a broken old dumpster. Four years ago, he'd been a terrified and homeless fifteen-year-old boy hiding, desperately afraid and surrounded in filth.

They had been close to getting him that day. Unfortunately for Rana, his brother didn't escape in time. The five men cornered Rana and threw him onto the ground, barely a meter from Jessal's face and swearing abuse at him. Poor Rana must have been so afraid. Then Jessal, unable to help his brother in any way, watched through a hole as one of the Guard standing over his brother pulled out a gun and put it to his brother's head.

Jessal increased his running pace. If the Guard had found him he didn't want to stick around, and even less desirable was if it was someone from the RA.

But, the Guard wouldn't be onto him yet, and there was only one person from the RA who would come after him instead of running to the various hiding places. Jessal bolted as fast as his legs would take him. There was no way he would survive the meeting if Goid wanted him dead.

He could hear swift footsteps on the cobbled street behind and gaining on him.

"You traitor! Jessal, you traitor! How could you betray us all like that! We were your family!" The pain and rage in his friend's voice dug painfully at his heart.

"I had no choice."

The footsteps were closer. "What choice? Betrayal or loyalty?"

"You wouldn't understand!"

A broad hand clamped down on Jessal's shoulder, it pulled him backwards and he lost his balance, falling awkwardly to the ground. As he fell, Goid jumped over him, landed nearby and very quickly there was the sound of a gun's safety being flicked and the barrel was in his face.

"Try and explain it. Convince me."

Jessal sat on the cold cobbles panting and looking up a silenced handgun at his friend's angry face. Catching his breath, Jessal tried to find some of his previous rage. "Mena was going to kill me anyway, after what Ana said."

"Oh, you heard about that? Well, it was obviously true."

"They put a gun in my face. The Aranan Agent gave me no choice to meet with him. I wasn't going to take the deal until I overheard what Ana said. And... and... I did not join the RA to murder little children!" His voice broke and he swallowed, trying not to succumb to his fear. He knew nothing about combat, so he was solely at Goid's mercy.

Goid looked at him, his fingers re-gripping the handle of the gun. "The Ana issue aside that kindergarten was responsible for the death of my first born. They locked him in a cupboard to wait



for the Guard, who took him away. We found his body in a gutter. My son dead because he was a Psi.”

“What about the parents of the children who died today? We killed innocent children! Doesn’t that make you sick?”

Goid’s cold dark face glared back at him. “Stand up, Jessal.”

He stood carefully. His whole body was trembling with fear and physical exhaustion. He looked Goid straight in the eye. “At least I’ll die without any guilt for those children.”

Goid paused with his gun still in Jessal’s face, and then it dropped. There were tears in Goid’s eyes. “Go. Go and never come back. I’ll not kill you today, Little Brother but next time I see you, you won’t be so lucky. Go before the others catch you.”

Jessal nodded grimly and turned away.

\* 7 \*

*The Year of our Founder 3007*  
*City of Kaamo, in the Country of Rona*

Jessal was running. There was only a block to the Aranan Embassy and then he was free. The relief nearly overwhelmed him. He would be in the Agency where his Talent could be used for good, and he wouldn’t have to hide from it. He’d be free. Free to be himself, free to be a Talent.

At exactly the same time, but far away in the Aranan city of Araam, Jaola was running. She’d run a block from the Base and she was free. She felt full of power and hope. She was free from the Agency and from killing any more people, free to be herself and to have the chance at a real life.

## **Part Two**

“Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find...”

[Gospel of Thomas]

### Chapter 3 - Cassandra Cowdy

\* 1 \*

*Three Years later*

*The Year of our Founder 3010*

*In the city of Marakan, the country of Arana*

*The planet Shadow,*

*in orbit around the star Beta Five*

Cassandra had spent three happy hours next-door helping Mr. Tyrell put the last touches into his garden. When it had gotten too dark to see, he gave her a hot chocolate with marshmallows and told her old hunting stories. Then, later than she'd intended, her empty stomach told her it was time to go home to her mother.

The feeling of danger hadn't come to her until she walked into the dark kitchen. Her mother wasn't there and it didn't look like there was any dinner waiting either. The only light came through the sitting room door, which was adjacent to the kitchen-dining room. The door was open only a crack, but through it she sensed an overwhelming danger. She stood in the dark, her eyes wide with fear and body absolutely motionless. She willed herself to have the courage to look into the sitting room and find out what was happening.

"Where is Cassie?"

Fear jumped up at her and she flinched. That was His voice, her father's voice. Its cold rage frightened her so much that suddenly it was difficult to even breathe.

"She's not here and you're not going to get her!" Her mother's voice was broken and strained.

Taking a deep breath, Cassandra looked into the sitting room, and then moved her face back into the safety of the darkness. Her light blue eyes widened as she realized what she'd just seen. Her mother was on the floor with her long blond hair held roughly in his fist and he was standing over her menacingly. He was probably twice her mother's size and a giant to Cassandra. The fear in her reached another level and she started to tremble with it. For a moment her mind was blank with terror.

"She's mine, Gwen. You'll tell me or you will die!"

Cassandra knew she had to do something. He would kill her mother if she did nothing, of that she was completely sure. But what could she do? He was much bigger than her, and stronger.

There was a clicking sound. Cassandra knew that sound, it was the sound a gun made when it was ready to shoot. She remembered hearing it once when he had been so drunk for a moment he thought she was someone else. That had been the longest minute in her life with his gun in her face and him yelling. That noise meant that her mother was just about to be shot. Taking a breath, she realized she just had to be brave. Brave for her mother.

Pushing the door wide with her arm and trying very hard not to show her fear she glared at him. “You leave my mother alone! I don’t want to come with you, I want to stay with her!”

He turned around to face her, his eyes the color of ice. Rage horribly contorted the rest of his square face. He let go of her mother’s hair and she dropped to the ground.

He pointed the gun at Cassandra. “You don’t know what you want! You’re only twelve. You’re coming back home with me.” His voice was crazy. Maybe he was drunk again.

She stood in front of him trembling and shaking her head. “No.”

“Come *here*, Cassie. Now!”

She took a step towards him even as she was shaking her head.

“Run, Cass! Run! Get help!” Her mother screamed from the floor.

He kicked her mother very hard and Cassandra flinched. She felt frightened and unsure. She wanted desperately to help her mother, but she knew she was physically unable.

Her mother curled up from his kick, but looked up at Cassandra, her deep blue eyes were strong and calm.

“*Run, Cassandra. Do as I say!*” Her mother’s mental voice was a cool blue in her head.

Cassandra stepped back in slight shock, they only ever talked that way if it was really important. Tears fell from her eyes. She took one last look at her mother and then turned to run for the door.

Back in the sitting room, her father roared. “No! She’s getting away you *a’kena!*”

Running out of the side door, across her lawn and passing the kitchen and dining room windows, she focused on Mr. Tyrell’s front door. As she reached his fence there was the sound of a gunshot. She stumbled in fear at that sound and knew even though she didn’t want to that he had just killed her mother. She got to Mr. Tyrell’s front door and hit it as hard as she could. The tears were running freely down her face now and her sobbing was making her breath come out in ragged gasps. The door opened and she fell. The old man caught her and lifted her up into his arms. Faded green eyes looked at her, puzzled.

“What’s wrong Cass? You’re trembling, what’s happened?”

“He... he has a... gun!” She sobbed.

The old man’s eyes widened and he quickly closed and bolted the door.

“M... Mom... still there...” The sobbing got worse and she leaned into him for comfort. He wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her back, but it didn’t ease the horrible feeling inside her.

With her in his arms, he walked through the kitchen into his small hallway. “Cass, I need you to call the police.” He gently set her down on a stool next to the phone. “I know you’re frightened, but I need to get my rifle out. Here.” He handed the phone to her, dialed the number and turned to the hallway cupboard. He brought out an old rifle. She could tell it was old because it had a strap on it that was faded and cracked, and areas of the dark wood handle were rubbed smooth from use.

There was a voice on the phone and she put the receiver to her ear. “Hello? What is your emergency?”

She struggled to stop her sobbing so she could speak. “He...He’s got a gun... he... he’s shot my mom...”

Cassandra flinched as another gunshot fired and there was the sound of something wooden smashing. Mr. Tyrell ran from the hallway and out of sight.

“He’s here! He’ll get me!” She dropped the phone and ran for the back door. As she opened it there was another shot. Pausing a moment, she listened. Her heartbeat thudded loudly in her ears.

“Cassie, where are you? You are going to get such a beating when I find you!”

She whimpered and ran out into Mr. Tyrell’s huge garden. There were four small metal sheds in among the rows of green and she ran for the one furthest from the back door. She was sitting in the darkest corner of the shed behind a shelf before its door closed. Sitting in the darkness she desperately tried to be quiet. Her hand whipped up to her mouth to stifle her whimpering.

The back door of the house slammed and she heard some swearing.

“Cassie! Come out, right now! The longer it takes for me to find you the more it’s going to hurt!” She curled up with her arms wrapped around her legs and face buried in her knees. A shed door opened and then slammed shut.

“Cassie, get out here now.” There was nowhere to go, it was only a matter of time before he found her, but she couldn’t move through the crippling the fear and despair. Another shed door opened, there was a pause and then it slammed shut.

“Get out here! I’m not playing hide and seek with you!”

There was suddenly shouting, she was too frightened to hear any words and then there were the sounds of many gunshots. The silence that followed was deafening.

Her shed door opened, a light hit her face and she screamed with all her might.

“Hey, hey, hey, little girl, hey, it’s OK.” She took a breath and there was a man in a police

uniform and bullet-proof vest standing in the doorway. “My name is Rob. You’re safe now, see, I’m with the police.”

Her bottom lip flickered in her fear as she looked at the man. Her fear was so close to making her scream again, but then his words sunk into her mind. Big safe arms reached around the shelving and lifted her up. She rested her head on his shoulder and the tears started again.

\* 2 \*

The headstone was a simple light gray slab of concrete with a half circle for its top. Carved into the concrete in simple block letters were the words:

*“Gwenith Cowdy nee Rena, 2 Aracan 2979 - 8 Meha 3010”*

Cassandra wept quietly as she read the headstone in front of her again. The charity fund that volunteered to pay for her mother’s funeral had only been able to afford a cheap headstone. She had wanted to put so much more on the stone. Somehow express how beautiful her mother had been, perhaps something lovely and poetic. But Cassandra had neither the money nor the poetic skill to come up with anything good enough. She sat on the grass in front of her mother’s grave weeping quietly. She was alone and would always be alone from that moment onwards.

Mr. Tyrell had a beautiful funeral the day before. His children had gotten so many flowers for him that his grave looked like a garden. His friends and family filled a little chapel and some of the street on the far side of the city. She’d been the only one at her mother’s funeral, if anyone would call it a funeral. It was just a few words from an unknown priest over her mother’s grave.

He had killed her, that evil little man. That selfish violent mean man. All because he wanted his Cassie. Even after all he’d put them through with his drinking and his anger, he still wanted his Cassie and killed her mother for her. Cassandra’s hands covered her face. Now she had no one. There was no one left to look after her, to love her or to teach her things that others couldn’t.

Well, she decided, her mother had been strong, her mother had escaped her father and started a new life for them. She had managed all that on her own. If her mother could be strong so could she. Cassandra could be strong. She could look after herself and she could make herself a new life like her mother had done. It would be hard and she might fail, but she had no other choice. Her mother had taught her that the world wasn’t always a nice place and that sometimes a person just had to knuckle down and do what must be done to survive. And Cassandra could do that.

Placing the battered yellow flower she’d picked from the edge of the graveyard fence onto the newly dug earth, Cassandra stood up. She wiped her face of tears, took a deep pained breath and

turned away.

**\* 3 \***

*Several weeks later*

“Cassandra Cow-dy! Get down here right now!” Cassandra lay on her new bed thinking. She sighed and rolled her eyes in disgust. She wasn’t going to do anything that orphanage lady said. The stupid woman never even got her name right.

“Cassandra! Don’t make me come up there and get you!”

She sighed again and dragged her tired body off the bed. Her bed was one of fourteen in the girl’s room of the orphanage. The other girls tried to be nice to her but she didn’t want to make friends. What’s the use in making friends? As soon as she could she was out of there.

Walking slowly towards the door, she wondered what Grace wanted. The orphanage was pretty rundown. There were sparse few carpets or mats over the bare wood floors, faded peeling wallpaper on every wall and unpainted boards sat above her in the sloped ceiling. Deliberately, she dragged the soles of her shoes over the bare floor as she walked. She hoped petulantly that the noise would irritate Grace as much as Grace was annoying her. The stairwell was not far from the door and holding the banister, she slowly trudged downstairs dragging her shoes where ever she could.

“Cassandra Cow-dy! Run!”

Cassandra petulantly kept her slow deliberate pace down the stairs. Grace stood at the bottom with hands on her hips. Her face was mouse-like, with a long nose and chin, little buckteeth and tiny dark eyes. Grace seemed impatient but Cassandra didn’t care.

“Grace, my name is said Cody.”

Grace nodded absently. Cassandra rolled her eyes again, typical adult, only listening when she wanted something.

“Cassandra Cow-dy,” her voice was high-pitched and excited. “We found some relatives of yours.”

Cassandra glared, again Grace had said her name wrong, and at that moment everything that had happened over the last few months condensed to a point in her mind and she started to shout.

“My name is Cassandra Cowdy, said Cody, I’m not related to a cow! It’s Cowdy, Cody, Cody, Cody, Cody!” She stopped yelling as she reached the bottom step. Behind Grace, stood two men in crisp blue suits staring coldly up at her. They were familiar, but all she could remember was that they were somehow related to her father.

“OK, *Cody*, we found some relatives of your father, these are your uncles. And they want to take you home.” She frowned a moment at Grace, who still hadn’t listened to her properly, and then at the two men. Cassandra crossed her arms across her chest.

“I’m not going with anyone related to my father. Tell them to go away.” She turned to go back upstairs.

“Cody, they have signed the adoption papers so they are now your legal guardians. Go and get your things.”

“No! I am not going!” She was angry and didn’t want to be at this stupid orphanage any more. The outside door was behind the two men and she dashed towards it. One of the men grabbed her. His cold hand firmly held her at the back of her neck. She struggled and tried to get away but the man’s grip tightened until it hurt.

“Ow! Lemme go!”

The man roughly turned her around to face him and looked at her with cold blue eyes. His face looked so much like her father’s, square and sharp, with a big jaw and long flat nose. For a moment she shivered at the similarity.

“It’s OK *honey*,” the man accented “honey” with a tighter squeeze to her neck. “You’ll love your new home.”

Out of nowhere, she felt a mixture of fear and confusion rise inside of her and she frowned. Those emotions weren’t hers. Her mother had told her about people who gave others their feelings. She told her that when someone tried to give you their emotions that you must concentrate on your own to break free of them. There was no mistaking how she felt. She was angry because she didn’t want to be with these people. She concentrated on her anger and the more she concentrated on it, the more it overran the man’s fear and confusion. She wasn’t going to any relatives of that murderer. They were probably just as violent and horrible as him. She didn’t want that and no one had the right to force her to do something she didn’t want to do.

“No! I am not going with you!” She reached up to the man’s hand trying to make him let go, but she felt her anger flow up her arm and out of her fingertips into his hand. The man screamed in agony and let go of her to cradle his hand. The second man pushed Grace to the ground and brought a gun to bear on Cassandra. For a moment she felt the fear try and return, but she was too angry to let it. Instead, she pushed her anger at the man’s gun. To her surprise, the gun flew across the room and landed in a far corner.

The man stood staring at her with a completely shocked expression on his face. The other one was still grappling with the pain in his hand. She realized then that this was her opportunity to escape. She turned away from them and ran out of the front door of the orphanage.



She ran onto the street looking around her, but then, turned again and jogged into the alleyway between the orphanage and the next building. They would think she was scared and thoughtless, so she would just run down the street in a panic. However, at that particular moment fear was the only thing she wasn't feeling.

Looking around her in the narrow, rusty alley, she searched for a good place to hide. There were some large pipes that ran the height of the orphanage from the roof. They were wide enough for her tiny frame to hide behind. There was also a gap between the wall and the pipes, which she could look through and see the street. When she was sufficiently hidden behind the piping she became still.

Her mother had taught her how to be almost invisible. She had to keep silent and quiet inside her head because if she kept silent they wouldn't see or sense her.

A few seconds later, the orphanage door slamming echoed down the alley and, just as she expected, two sets of footsteps ran up the road. She waited. When their footsteps were far enough away she started to run again, through to the other end of the alley and out into the next street behind the orphanage.

The new road was made up of short one- and two-story buildings, many of them run down and overgrown. Looking up and down the street, she tried to figure out where the center of town would be. She knew there was a homeless shelter at that big Cathedral church she'd visited a year ago with her mother. Once she found the shelter and was safe, she could figure out what to do from there.

In the distance she could see a handful of skyscrapers, the afternoon sunlight behind her reflected brightly off their glass panes. That direction must be the center of town. Determined, she turned towards them.

## Chapter 4

\* 1 \*

*Somewhere else in the city of Marakan*

*Just before sunset*

Jessal's head was aching, as were his eyes. The quiet four-lane road he was driving on kept spinning at the edges of his sight. It had been a hard few days working in Marakan, neither himself nor his partner Ulnon had gotten much sleep for two days. Ulnon sat in the passenger seat with his arm over his face and breathing deeply.

Jessal smiled. "Hey, Ulnon, wake up, I am *not* carrying you!"

There was a chuckle from under the arm. "I know that we've been together for three years, but I'm not ready for you to carry me over the threshold just yet." Ulnon let his arm fall from his face and turned to smile affectionately at Jessal.

They both laughed.

Ulnon was physically a typical Aranan, pale coloring and delicate looking. He had very light skin, blue eyes and nearly white blond hair. He even had a delicate oval shaped face, delicate at least compared to the square face of Ronan men. They had been partners for three years, both professionally and privately. Ulnon never judged him as other Aranan Agents had, in fact it was never mentioned between the two of them that he was not Aranan.

Jessal sighed. He certainly was tired. There had been very little sleep the night before because they were on a stakeout. All night they'd watched that house and not until mid-morning did the suspects leave. Then, of course, they couldn't find anything of use against them.

Jessal changed lanes absently, they would be at the hotel soon and he could sleep. A little electronic tune sounded and Ulnon sighed deeply. Only when he reached for the cell phone did Jessal recognize that the tune had been the phone ringing. The small phone was lifted to view the caller ID.

Ulnon turned it towards Jessal. "Guess who?"

Jessal poked his tongue out and made a rude noise.

Ulnon took a breath and lifted the phone to his ear. "Agent Ree, speaking."

This could only mean that there was more work to do and they wouldn't be going back to the hotel to sleep. Jessal watched the road warily. More work and no sleep were two bad combinations that were not rare for them. In the three years he'd been with the Agency it was

always the same. Keep doing work without sleep and just when he would get to a state where he didn't care if they killed him he *had* to sleep, they would give him only just enough time to catch up and the cycle would start again.

"Speaker phone. Of course, sir." Ulnon placed the cell phone in the cradle next to the radio.

"Can you hear me?" Their supervisor's voice sounded just as tired as he felt.

"Yes, sir. We can hear you. What's happening?" Ulnon sounded more energetic than he looked.

"You wouldn't have been given this new assignment under any other situation. But, Jessal there has been a sighting of a known member of the Rona-Abaan in the country. And they were sighted in Marakan."

Jessal's heartbeat quickened and he swiftly pulled over onto the side of the road. "Excuse me, sir? The RA is in Marakan? In Arana?" Jessal stared wide-eyed at Ulnon, who mirrored his expression of shock and disbelief.

"Yes, Jessal. They want you to try and bring them in."

"Who is it? Do they know?" He could feel the adrenaline increase in his body, his eyes were wide and he was awake again.

"Goid Malaan. He's with an Aranan man, someone we have yet to identify. We currently have only a single sighting, so, I would advise you two go and get some coffee. More information is due to come in very soon."

"Yes, sir."

Jessal absently indicated and turned back onto the road. He was pretty sure the coffee shop, where they'd gotten dinner the previous night, was about a block away.

"Did you know Goid Malaan?" Ulnon's voice had softened.

Jessal took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, I did. He was my best friend. He's also Mena's brother."

"Who was Mena?" Jessal could hear the frown in Ulnon's voice. This was sort of expected, he didn't like to talk about his time in the RA.

"Mena's the Leader."

"Oh."

A lot had happened with the RA in the last three years. Since Jessal had left, the RA had in fact done what it wanted, gotten the attention of the other governments. But instead of being the heroes trying desperately to free their people, they had become the most vilified group of terrorists, more famous in Arana than even the Psi Rebels.

Sadly, Jessal thought, Goid was their champion. The Guard had, in a raid, killed his wife and remaining children. After this, as the story went, he freaked out and started taking out Guard members all alone.

Jessal pulled the car into a parking space near the coffee shop. As they got out, Ulnon turned and stared over the roof of the car at him.

“Is it going to be hard to bring Goid in?”

Jessal nodded. “Very.”

\* 2 \*

They sat in the coffee shop. Both had the strongest coffee known to them and both were feeling a little better. “They had better give us a holiday soon, or I might go AWOL myself.”

Grinning, Jessal nodded in agreement.

A waitress in a red apron approached their table. She smiled, even though her face gave away how tired she really was. “Apart from coffee, would you gents like some food?”

Jessal looked up at her, smiling as friendly as he could. “No, thanks. Ulnon?”

Ulnon just shook his head.

“Just yell if you change your minds.” She turned away from them, her black ponytail swaying with her walk. Leaning back in his chair, he watched her walk towards the kitchen. For an Aranan she had quite a feminine figure.

“Careful, I heard yesterday that a guy slapped her ass, and she turned around and broke his arm.”

Jessal looked up at Ulnon ready to laugh if he was joking. “Really?”

He nodded and Jessal’s eyes widened.

The cell phone sat on the table between them. It started blinking and singing its tune while vibrating itself slowly across the table.

Ulnon picked it up. “Agent Ree, speaking.”

Jessal watched his white face frown as he listened, and then he nodded absently. “Ah huh... OK... we’re on the way.” Ulnon put the phone down. “They just got a report of where they’re staying. I’ve got the address. Let’s go.” Ulnon dropped the cell phone in his shirt pocket and stood.

Jessal lifted up his half full coffee cup. “One for the road?”

Ulnon grinned and tapped his mug to Jessal’s. They downed their coffees and dropped their cups onto the table as if they were shot glasses in a bar.

\* 3 \*

*About half an hour later*

The small green car they'd followed since the hotel parking lot hadn't sped up or driven erratically at all. They'd watched Goid jump into the car and drive off, but there had been no sign of the other man, an Aranan businessman called Coan Taso.

It puzzled Jessal that Goid wasn't driving like he'd spotted them. But he couldn't have missed them following because Ulnon was driving directly behind the car. Back in Rona, Goid had been good at knowing when someone was following him even when the person was four or five cars behind. Surely, by now Goid would realize and take evasive action.

There was an underlying feeling of unrest in Jessal. Something wasn't right but he didn't know what. Perhaps, if he'd slept at all it would be obvious, but his addled mind couldn't see it. The little green car turned right into a side street and they followed. This other man, Taso, had no obvious motive for being associated with the RA. He was just some Aranan businessman and where had he gone? He certainly wasn't in the car with Goid, unless he was unconscious or in the trunk. Besides, why would Goid enter the country in the first place? It meant certain death or certain capture and then death. Goid was smarter than that.

Frowning, he glanced sideways at Ulnon. "I can't understand it. Nothing adds up."

"No, it doesn't. Do you think? Whoa!" The car ahead accelerated and pulled off down another street into a residential area. Ulnon turned sharply into the corner to follow and Jessal gripped the dashboard.

They swerved around and over a slight rise in the road between two old stone apartment buildings. The car ahead of them disappeared behind another corner and when they followed, the back of Goid's car came up to meet them. Their brakes screeched and Jessal held his breath as they careened towards an inevitable impact.

The car skidded into the back of Goid's with a loud bang and crunch of metal impacting on metal. Jessal jolted forward and his seat-belt caught him.

\* 4 \*

Jaola stood in her apartment kitchen filling her only vase with water from the faucet. Someone had left *another* large bouquet of flowers at her door, wrapped in green cellophane. The bouquet consisted of a collection of different kinds of white flowers, from large long-stemmed lilies to tiny many-petaled blossoms set within a network of thin green tendrils. It was a very beautiful

bouquet. The problem was that she didn't give out that address to anyone. If the flowers were actually for *her*, then some unknown person knew where she lived. It was more likely to be something stupid, perhaps relating to a previous tenant of her apartment. However, at that particular moment she had no energy to care who sent them and why. She would have to deal with that tomorrow. She was just too tired. Her feet ached from being on them for twelve hours and her exhausted brain demanded that she ask no more of it after a day of bad mannered customers and snarky bosses at the coffee house.

Her red apron lay draped over the couch, but the rest of her work clothes were already in the washing machine. Instead of the uncomfortable uniform, she wore her slouchy clothes. Light gray stretch jeans with a white long sleeved t-shirt.

She yawned. Some days she almost missed being an assassin because at least sometimes it was fun and there was a lot more rest time between assignments. But then of course, she'd rather deal with a day of grumpy caffeine-deprived customers than having to kill people.

A distinctly uncomfortable sensation of biting static tumbled up her spine from the base, causing goose-bumps to flare up in its wake. Jaola gripped the bench with her fingertips and closed her eyes. When the sensation reached the top of her head, she released the breath she'd been holding and opened her eyes again. Her gaze followed the static out of the kitchen window in front of her. There was *Something Important* outside. She hadn't felt the static since before her mother died. But, it was a sign, at least, that her 1/5 Time Psi ability had not been completely shut down by her mother's death like her father thought at the time.

Her eyes focused down onto the street, and there, standing across the road in front of an alleyway was a small girl. She moved slowly and painfully as if she was injured or exhausted. All that Jaola could see of her features were shoulder length blond hair and dim, dirty clothes. The girl looked around her on the street and then hobbled into the alleyway. It was obvious that the girl needed help. Sleeping in an alley, even in the quiet end of town was not safe. Jaola decided at that moment to help the girl, maybe feed her, give her some clothes and find her somewhere safe to be. She dumped the mystery flowers into the vase and ran for the door. Her heavy velvet jacket waited on a coat rack and she grabbed it as she left the apartment.

Down on the street, Jaola jogged across the road, her velvet green jacket flashed in the pool of dying sunlight and she stepped into the shadows of the alley. It was surprisingly dark inside and she blinked, trying to adjust her eyes to the different light level. From what little she could see the alley was small. It was an oblong space between buildings, which wasn't even four meters wide. To her right was a large dumpster. It was half the width of the alley. At the far end was another brick wall, a dead-end. She stepped further into the alley and towards the dumpster where the girl was

hiding. They had sensed each other when she crossed the road.

“Hey, girl--”

There was the sound of a car screeching to a halt in front of the alley and hurried footsteps echoed towards her. Jaola turned around. She sensed someone close and backed up a little. At the same time as she stepped back another car’s brakes screeched and metal hit metal as the second car crashed into the first.

Jaola squinted in the dim light. In the alley entrance, just inside the dimness, stood the silhouette of a man in a long coat. She had no time to decide whether he was a danger or not because yelling came through to the alley from the street.

“This is the Agency! Surrender, Goid!”

Jaola’s heart jumped in shock and she ducked behind the dumpster.

“*Never!*” Screamed an angry, defiant voice. This response did not come from the silhouette in the alley, but somewhere out on the street.

Shots were fired, repeatedly and by all parties. To her trained ears she heard three different guns, one being an Agency standard issue handgun, another an illegal hand-cannon, and the third was something unrecognizable, but obviously modified.

By the time the shooting stopped, she was sure that at least one person had cleared out an entire clip. A wondrous silence descended on them, leaving her ears ringing.

She looked around the edge of the dumpster to see what was going on. The silhouette in a long coat stood hard up against the alley wall. Past the man, she could see that out on the street lay a crumpled body. She couldn’t see it well, but she recognized the general shape, and with all the bullets that had been flying it wouldn’t surprise her if that person was now dead.

The silhouette up against the alley wall was breathing quickly, he wasn’t very far from the dumpster and she could hear him struggling with his pockets. His breathing was jagged and fearful. She realized that this man was obviously not used to being in a gunfight, because the general rabble of his thoughts suggested he was terrified. He fumbled some more and pulled out what looked like a handgun. She could see its metal reflection in the light from the street.

His thoughts were messy, and there was a distinct underlying franticness to them, even as she wasn’t deliberately trying to listen. Whoever he was, he probably wasn’t a telepath nor someone who lived or worked with other Psi.

She sat crouched with the girl behind her as she continued to watch around the edge of the dumpster.

A tiny hand touched the small of her back and Jaola felt the girl lean around her to see what was happening.

The nearby silhouette lifted his gun to eye level and waited. His thoughts calmed for a moment. Beyond him, she saw another figure bend over the body on the street. She couldn't really see the person, but it was likely that it was one of the Agents.

*"It's him or Leelah! Now do it!"* The man's voice resounded in her head. It was so loud and clear she wondered if he'd physically said it as well. Before she could get the girl out of sight, a sharp crack of the man's gun bounced off the brick walls and she saw the kneeling person fall forward.

The girl's breathing quickened and the blankness of shock filled her mind. There was a half suppressed whimper and then a loud scream as the event hit the girl's mind. Jaola saw the silhouette turn towards them with his gun lowered for a moment. Behind him in the streetlight, another figure came into view with a gun at shoulder height. The nearby silhouette was still looking in her direction when two shots sounded and he fell heavily.

The man standing in the streetlight stepped into the alley and over the person he just shot. "Come out now! I heard someone scream, get out here right now!" The man's voice was firm and angry.

Swearing in her mind, Jaola lifted the trembling girl into her arms and stood up. "Please don't shoot, we're not armed."

Jaola started to mask herself telepathically and empathically so that she appeared to be a non-Psi to anyone who could sense it. It might be too late already, but if he wasn't a telepath or a particularly gifted empath, he could probably be fooled until there was an opportunity to get away from him.

She walked towards the man pretending to be shocked and scared. When she was close enough for him to reach out, he grabbed her arm, pulling her swiftly out of the alley and into the streetlight.

Under the illumination she could finally see his face. He was definitely an Agent. The blue suit, his weapon was a modified Agency issue handgun, and he had that look. She had never seen it anywhere else. It was a look that said the world has no joy in it. But to her complete surprise, he was Ronan and not Aranan.

"Stay in my sight." The man glared at her for a moment, as if to threaten her.

Feigning fear of him, she stared at him. He was very tall with nearly black skin and a large square face. Such a strong face, but on it was a look of abject despair. One of those bodies must be his partner and for a moment she felt a pang of sympathy. But, she reminded herself, the man was an Agent and this made him her enemy.



*About half an hour later*

The street was cool and dark with a few pools of orange streetlight working in vain to clear away the shadows of the autumn evening. Jessal sighed, trying to keep his emotions inside him and the exhaustion at bay. He'd watched them take Ulnon away in the ambulance with their lights flashing and siren blaring. Ulnon had been alive but the paramedics weren't sure of his survival. He swallowed. It was awful. In order to do his job he had to pretend as if Ulnon wasn't in critical condition. He had to be cold and emotionless, like other Agents. But it was the last thing he wanted and needed to do at that precise moment.

In front of the wrecked cars lay Goid's gory body. Behind his body, in the darkness of the alley, Taso was certainly dead as well because he'd been shot twice in the head.

Jessal rubbed the headache between his eyebrows.

"Two dead bodies and your partner badly injured?" The phone was hot on his ear, aggravating his already bad tired headache. "Is there anything good about this catastrophe?"

Jessal had to focus to understand his supervisor's words through the man's odd drawly Aranan accent.

"We have two witnesses. A woman and a young child."

"Well, that's just..." His supervisor continued to yell at him, but Jessal's mind wandered.

He should have known. If he had had any sleep at all it wouldn't have happened. They would have cleared the alley before standing in front of it. If only he had just slept on the stake-out, then maybe Ulnon would be OK, and Goid would be alive in custody. He tried again to listen to his superior even though his mind could barely hold his thoughts in any order.

"Jessal, you will have to bring them here for questioning tonight!"

Jessal frowned, mildly confused. "But, sir--"

"Sir!" A shout came from behind him but he ignored it. He stood on the sidewalk far enough away from the police and other civilian forces to have a private conversation.

He moved the cell phone to the other ear. "Sir, you realize we're in Marakan at present not Araam? It's an eight-hour drive from here. Sir, I haven't had any sleep for three days. Surely, there is someone else available to transport them?"

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. The exhaustion hung on him like weights on chains as he waited.

"Sir! Agent Mier! I need to talk to you!" A blond-haired cop was standing next to him. He shook his head at her and put his hand on the receiver.

“What? Can’t you see I’m on the phone?” He glared at her angrily.

“But, sir, he’s alive.” Her light blue eyes were wide with obvious fear and he hoped he seemed very frightening to her. Then her words sunk into his brain and Jessal frowned.

“What?”

“The man you shot in the alley, sir, he’s alive.”

The woman couldn’t have been long out of the police academy, she wasn’t very old and her eyes gave him the feeling of innocence or naivety. The voice on the other end of the cell phone started talking again, but he stood there for a moment frowning at her young face with his mouth open dumbly.

*“He couldn’t be alive! How is that possible?”* Shaking himself, he focused on the voice in his ear.

“Agent Mier? Are you there?”

He lifted his hand from the bottom of the cell phone and tried to think of something to say. “Yes, sir, I’m here... ah... I’m going to have to call you back. There seems to be some confusion.”

“What kind of confusion? What’s happening, Agent Mier?”

“I might not have killed Coan Taso, sir, I really should see to this. I will ring you with a full update in approximately half an hour.” Jessal quickly disconnected before his superior could ask any more questions. He put the cell phone in the breast pocket of his jacket and turned to the policewoman. “What is your name?”

“Officer Raan, um. That’s Officer Shaena Raan.” The young woman brushed some of her blond hair behind her ear.

“Well, Officer Shaena Raan, lead on.” He motioned with one upturned palm and she turned towards the alley.

*“Taso must have jumped out of the car as soon as it braked,”* he thought with a frown. *“This means that he’d been hiding from view in the car the whole time we were following Goid, which means they were setting a trap for us and were probably in Arana to kill me. It explains it all, why Goid came to Arana and why he didn’t try to hide his identity.”*

Jessal glanced up from his thoughts as he passed the woman and child. They sat on the curb looking a little rattled. The dark-haired woman seemed wary and tired. He sensed that she didn’t want to be there. The young girl’s bright blue eyes were wide with fear. She sat on the woman’s lap held in a gentle hug and seemed afraid of him.

*“I’ll talk to them before I phone in again.”*

Looking past the wrecked cars, Jessal saw the long white sheet where Goid’s body lay. Jessal felt sadness and pity for his old friend, but not as much as he expected. Either it hadn’t fully

hit him yet, due to shock and sleep deprivation, or he had grown so far from Goid that he didn't care as much as he once had. Someone had placed the sheet over Goid, which was wise because both he and Ulnon shot practically an entire clip each at him so his body was pretty messy. Thankfully, the coroner's ambulance would arrive to pick him up and Jessal wouldn't have to think about his old friend any more.

Following Officer Raan, he turned into the dark alleyway. It seemed pitch black in the alley, but the policewoman turned on her torch. In the line of light he saw a second cop kneeling next to Taso's crumpled body. The man was checking his pulse with two fingers pressed against a bloody neck. Jessal crouched down next to the second cop and looked at Taso carefully. Earlier, he hadn't been willing to look at him because he'd aimed at the man's head and that kind of gunshot wound made Jessal very queasy. He should have checked anyway.

Now that he looked, he saw that only one of his shots had grazed the man's head, the other bullet was lodged high in one shoulder. There was a lot of blood and the man was very pale. Jessal realized that Taso was not very old. He looked so young that he may not even be old enough to be out of college.

He glanced sideways at the policeman. "He's alive?"

The cop nodded. "Only barely, sir. He needs medical attention or he will die fairly soon."

"I'll arrange for one of our people to deal with that, do you have any first-aid training in the meantime?" Jessal didn't wait for a verbal response, just the beginning of a nod to answer his question, before he stood upright again.

He grabbed the cell phone from his pocket and flipped it open. He had to ring the Marakan Base immediately. This man, if he lived, would have to face the Telepath Interrogators at some point and his supervisor would be exceedingly unforgiving if Taso was lost in the public health system after having survived being shot in the head. He turned to go back out onto the street.

Jessal's head throbbed in the shifting light levels and he rubbed the bridge of his nose with a knuckle. He desperately needed sleep, but he knew if he did have to travel to Araam tonight he would have to pace himself with caffeine, so he couldn't get another coffee until he knew what was going on. Dialing the number, he put the phone to his ear.

"Marakan Agency Switch board, who can I connect you to?"

"Can I have the head of medical, thanks?"

The line clicked and then rang again. "Medical. Doctor Urlin, speaking." The woman's voice sounded impatient as if she was in the middle of something important.

"Um, yes, I am Agent Mier, I have a suspect who needs medical attention. Gunshot wounds to the head and shoulder. He needs to be stabilized enough to travel to Araam, tonight."

“I’ll see what I can do, we’ll send out a bus and someone as soon as possible. Where are you?”

“I’m at the north end of Hiran Street, seventy-fourth precinct district. Thanks.”

Putting away the cell again, Jessal wondered how Ulnon was doing. Taso had shot him in the head and by the time Jessal cleared the alley and checked on his partner, he was barely alive. The ambulance took him to the nearest civilian hospital, and knowing Agency protocol if Ulnon stabilized, he would then be transferred to the Marakan Agency Base Medical department.

Jessal closed his eyes to fight off the sudden surge of despair. They had been professional and romantic partners for three years, Ulnon was his best friend and all he wanted to do at that moment was rush to the hospital and stay with him. But he had to finish this job. Once he got to Araam and slept he would come back and be there for him. Rubbing away the dampness in his eyes, he opened them again and looked over at the woman and child huddled together on the curb.

*“Time to talk to them.”* He walked the short distance from the alley entrance to the curb.

The woman held the girl on her lap, arms wrapped around her as if to comfort her. As he approached them the woman picked up the girl and stood. She had an unusual appearance for an Aranan, long deep black hair tied back loosely in a ponytail and reddish-tanned skin. She didn’t look Aranan at all, more like Tolaan: she was far too dark. But it was her deep green eyes that gave her away because neither Tolaan nor Kranaan people had this eye color in their genetics. With a strong oval face, she was very beautiful and oddly familiar to him, though he couldn’t place her in his memory. She was also fairly tall and as she stood, her eyes were nearly level to his chin.

In her arms, and holding tightly onto her, the little girl couldn’t have been much older than nine or ten. She was a tiny thing and very much the typical Aranan in appearance: gold blond hair, a little slender face and big bright blue eyes.

He stopped in front of them and tried to give off the impression of being a calm professional and not the train-wreck that he was in reality.

“How are you two?”

The woman smiled tensely, but the girl hugged in closer avoiding eye contact with him.

“My name is Agent Jessal Mier, I need to ask you a few questions. You are presently in the custody of the Agency and if you just answer all questions as best and honestly as you can, we should be able to get you home and back to what you do normally within a couple of days. Do you understand?”

The woman nodded slowly.

“OK,” he said, pulling out a pen from one jacket pocket and a small notebook from another. “First, I need your names.”

The woman's voice was firm and calm. "My name is Anne Draena, but I don't know her name."

Jessal moved to try and get eye contact with the girl, but she completely avoided him, turning her head this way and that away from his face. He smiled tensely. "That's OK, we can talk to you later. What were you doing in the alley?"

"I was walking home from work and I saw her enter the alley. She looked homeless, so I went in to offer her a hot dinner and a place to sleep."

He frowned. "You were walking home alone? It's a bit dangerous in this area don't you think?"

The woman smirked. "I've been doing martial arts since I was three years old. I'm pretty sure I can handle most situations."

Jessal nodded slowly, he could see in her steady gaze that she completely believed what she was saying. His breast pocket started to vibrate. Sighing, Jessal rolled his eyes and pulled out his phone again.

"Excuse me for a moment." Turning from them, he walked a short distance away for privacy and pressed the talk button. "Agent Mier."

"Have you resolved the situation yet, Jessal?" It was his supervisor.

"Yes, Coan Taso is alive. I have arranged for a bus and someone to maintain his condition for a journey to Araam."

"Good, good. Unfortunately, you will have to bring the two witnesses with you for interviewing."

"Sir, is there someone who can drive them back to Araam? I don't think it's safe for me to drive that distance."

His supervisor sighed. "No, Jessal, there isn't. You are just going to have to get more coffee and drive. By the way I thought you might want to know Ulnon has stabilized and is being transferred to Marakan Agency Medical right now. He's in a coma but they think he might just pull through."

Jessal nodded even though he knew his supervisor couldn't see him nodding. "Thank you, sir. I'll ring you back when I get an E.T.A."

"OK, Jessal."

**\* 6 \***

*A little later on*

He and the nurse stood side on to the back doors of an Agency ambulance. Tasoia was already loaded inside on one stretcher, but the short, dark-haired nurse in front of Jessal refused to move.

“This man needs to be in a hospital, not traveling all the way to Araam!” Her hands were placed defiantly on her hips. Even though he towered a good foot above her, she was not intimidated. Ordinarily, this would be a good thing, but at that moment he was more interested in getting them moving and a little fear could have expedited the situation.

Jessal sighed, lifting his hands palms-up in defeat. “I know! But the orders have come straight from Araam Base.” He took a deep breath and tried to make his voice sound gentle. “Can you at least keep him alive for the journey?”

She shuffled uncomfortably, her angry look melting a little, and she nodded.

“Thank you. By the way, I’m Jessal.” He offered her his hand and she took it.

“Juniper.”

“Nice to meet you.” He mumbled and turned to face the two witnesses standing behind them. “Miss Draena, we’re leaving. You two have to travel back with us to Araam.”

The woman didn’t respond, she simply stood in front of him with a shocked expression on her face.

\* 7 \*

Jaola stared, feigning shock rather than the fear she was feeling. She could run and get out now, but not without leaving the child behind. It confused her, but for some reason she couldn’t leave the child. The girl was alone, utterly and completely alone, and she needed someone to look after her. Jaola didn’t want to be trapped in an ambulance or risk capture at the other end. However, for the moment no one had recognized her, so she could still get away later.

The Ronan man frowned at her. “Anything wrong, Miss Draena?”

“I...” She scrambled for anything. “I’m supposed to be at work tomorrow. We’re already short of people, without me it will be impossible for them. Can’t I just give you my number or something?”

The man shook his head. “I’m sorry, if it were my call I’d say it was fine, but this man has nearly killed an Agent. My superiors will want to interview you personally, so you have to come with us. We’ll stop a few times on the way, maybe there’ll be a chance where you can call your work and leave a message.”

Jaola knew if she tried to run with the girl at that moment, she would not get away. There

wasn't enough cover and she had no weapon. Even if she had a gun, she still wouldn't want to deal to these two Agents. If she became difficult and resisted them, it would make the Ronan Agent suspicious and he might run her name through a check, a name that wasn't in the system yet. She looked down at the girl in her arms. Maybe she could escape with the child at one of the pit-stops?

Feeling mildly trapped, she walked up into the back of the ambulance. The girl wouldn't let go of her, so she sat down on an empty stretcher and let her sit on her lap.

The second Agent jumped in after her and closed the doors of the bus. The woman smiled in a kindly manner and sat down next to Jaola.

"Hi, I'm Juniper. Are both of you OK?"

"I'm Anne." Jaola nodded and suppressed a frown, the woman's face was so familiar. "I'm fine, I think the girl is OK but she won't talk."

The girl was sitting on her lap facing away from the woman, with her arms wrapped around Jaola's middle. Juniper leaned over and touched the girl's back to get her attention.

"Hello, my name is Juniper. What's your name?"

The girl gripped Jaola tighter, but turned to look at Juniper over one shoulder. A small voice came from her. "Cassandra."

"It's nice to meet you, Cassandra." The Agent smiled and offered the girl a hand to shake.

The girl turned around and gingerly shook hands.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

The girl shook her head. "Juniper?" Her voice was still tiny.

"Yes, Cassandra?"

"Where are we going?"

Jaola watched Juniper's pretty face smile. This woman must have children. Only people with their own knew how to talk to and treat them in a way they respond. Jaola felt quite lost dealing with children.

"We have to go to Araam City. Some people there want to talk to both you and Anne about what happened in the alley."

"Oh." The blankness of shock lifted from the girl's mind and she turned to look up at Jaola. "I like your jacket, Anne, what's it made of?"

She laughed. "Well, Cassandra, it's made out of velvet. I like it too, it's my favorite jacket."

"I want a jacket like that one day." The girl slid off her lap.

Juniper moved to the other stretcher and started checking the man's vital signs. He lay unconscious, his face and body were covered in blood. The woman opened one eye at a time and

shone a light in them. Then she checked all of his bandages. One side of his face was bandaged up and bloody. Jaola had spent more time causing injury than dealing with it so she had no idea if this man was going to live. He was breathing on his own, though.

“Is he going to live?” She had been fully in the “normal person” role for over an hour and she surprised herself by how uncertain she sounded.

The woman looked at Jaola and then at the girl. She sighed. “I really don’t know. The shoulder wound will heal fine unless it gets infected. However, he’s sustained a serious head injury. The bullet hasn’t entered his skull, but there is still a chance he won’t make it. As long as he doesn’t bleed out into his cerebral cavity, and he wakes up sometime in the next few hours, I’m hopeful.”

“He’ll live, only to be put in custody for the rest of his short life.” Jaola hadn’t meant to speak out of character, but Juniper nodded grimly. She was probably thinking the same thing. Not even the worst kind of person deserves the environment of Agency custody and the telepath Interrogators.

**\* 8 \***

*Less than an hour later*

Cassandra was curled up with her head on Jaola’s lap. She seemed to be sleeping but Jaola could sense her consciousness, so the girl was probably just resting her eyes. After Juniper had gotten her to talk the girl hadn’t stopped. She told the story of how she came to be in the alley, the deaths of her parents and having to run away from the orphanage. It sounded as if her uncles were Agents, if not her father as well. The girl’s mother must have escaped the Agency some years before.

It was strange, for the first time in her life Jaola felt directly responsible for someone else. This girl had no one and now she knew the child’s history she was even more determined to help her.

At the other stretcher, the nurse, Juniper, was checking the man’s vital signs again. As she lifted his eyelids, he flinched away from her.

“Coan, can you hear me?”

He groaned.

She tapped his cheek. “Coan?”

“Who are you?” He moaned.

“My name is Juniper. Coan, do you remember what happened?”

“No, where am I?” He looked sideways and Jaola saw a flash of gray-blue eyes. In among



the blood and mental fuzz Jaola saw an innocent personality, without any trauma or loss in his life until very recently. His young face seemed handsome to her and she smiled at him.

Juniper glanced sideways at her, before focusing back on Coan. “You’re in an ambulance. What’s the last thing you remember?”

He closed his eyes. “No... I don’t know... who are you? Where... Where is Leelah?”

Juniper took his hand. “Coan, can you squeeze my hand?” There was a pause. “Good. Open your eyes and look at me. Do you know the date?”

“Where’s Leelah? Leelah!” He tried to sit up, but Juniper put a hand on his chest.

“No Coan, you’re badly injured and you shouldn’t sit up.”

His eyes widened and it seemed as if he had realized something. “They have Leelah! I have to go and get her... please... they’ll kill her!”

“Who is Leelah?”

His eyes became slits. “My daughter... if I don’t kill that Agent... they’ll... they’ll...” His body relaxed completely and he slipped into unconsciousness. Juniper tried shaking him awake but there was no response.

\* 9 \*

When Jessal turned the ambulance bus into the brightly lit gas station, the forecourt attendant was absently filling another customer’s car with gas. The boy glanced sideways at him, and looked just about as tired and soul-struck as he felt. Jessal parked and got out of the bus, as the young man hung up the pump and approached him.

“Do you need a hand, sir?”

Jessal put as much friendliness as he could into a smile for the boy and shook his head. “I’m fine, I can fill it up. But, do you have coffee and toilets?”

The young man nodded. “Yes, sir. I’ll have to show you through to the staff bathrooms, but we have a coffee machine at the quick-food bar.”

“Thank you.”

Behind him the back of the ambulance opened, and the two women and the girl got out of the bus. All three of them looked tired and haggard from traveling, and he assumed he must look pretty bad as well.

“Does anyone need the bathroom?”

The two witnesses nodded.

Jessal turned back to the young attendant. “Can you show those two to the bathroom,

please?”

Juniper walked towards him. There was a moment of silence as they both waited for the doors of the station to swing shut and for the woman and child to get out of earshot.

“Anything to report, Juniper?”

That stubborn expression lifted into her face. “Yes. Taso was’n’t working with the RA, he was their prisoner. They have his daughter.”

**\* 10 \***

Jaola closed and locked the door behind her. The bathroom was painfully small, with barely enough room for one person, let alone two. Next to the door was a small hand basin with a mirror above it, when sitting on the toilet her knee hit the basin. To even get the child in here with her to escape would be difficult. Above the toilet was a window, but there was no way she could get through it because the frame was smaller than her head. Standing, she reached behind her and flushed. It would be too risky to try and get away in this place and that wasn’t even considering the obvious fact that they were in the middle of nowhere. Even if they escaped, getting back to civilization would be extremely difficult.

She washed her hands in the sink and sighed, she would have to try the next stop for an escape.

**\* 11 \***

Jaola lay with her back to the wall of the ambulance and the girl lying in front of her. She tried desperately not to sleep, but her body just wouldn’t agree with her command. Her day had been too long and there was no adrenaline to keep her awake. This would never have happened when she was in the Agency, but that was three years ago and she had let that part of her life go. Now, she thought with some apathy, she was soft. When she got out of this she would have to remedy that.

The nurse sat opposite her on the other stretcher, checking the man’s vital signs again. Jaola’s mind had slowed and she knew this even as she fought her heavy eyelids. The falling sensation became too strong and her exhaustion dragged her down into a comfortable darkness.

*She stood somewhere cold and overcast. A frown wrinkled her brow.*

*“Where am I?” said a voice that wasn’t hers.*

*She walked, feeling utterly dazed and confused. There was softness under foot. What was*

*she walking on? Looking down, she stared at her feet in surprise.*

*“No!”*

*Her foot rested on the face of a young girl. She was dead: her eyes were closed and there were tears still drying on her face. Slowly, Jaola lifted her shoe from her delicate skin. The little blond-haired girl was buried up to her neck in faceless adult bodies. One little hand reached up out of the mess as if she'd been begging for help when she died. Jaola knelt next to her and touched her hand. The hand was warm!*

*Bang!*

Jaola's suddenly conscious mind reeled at the dream and the sound that had woken her. The surprise was made worse by the fact that her body wouldn't move. It took her a moment to remember where she was and orient her herself. When she was calm again, she understood that she couldn't move because her body was still asleep, so that once she woke up fully she'd be able to move again. It was just a matter of waiting.

“Agent Mier.” Came a familiar female voice, very close to her.

A male answered. “Please, call me Jessal.”

“Fine.” The woman sounded a little angry. “Jessal, I don't think this man is lying about what's happened to him. He seems to be more of a victim in all of this than a—”

“No, Juniper, the only victim in this is Ulnon. That man still chose to pull the trigger and therefore chose the consequences of his actions. Besides, it's not up to us to judge this man, our superiors will judge him.” The male voice sighed. “Look, we need to get going again. There's only three more hours to go now.”

**\* 12 \***

It was a pitch-black world except for the two slivers light that illuminated the road immediately in front of Jessal. The flicker of white line was hypnotizing, on-off, on-off.

He sighed. He had had a strong coffee at each stop, but his mind and body felt like cotton wool. Lifting a hand to his eyes he rubbed at the grainy feeling. The friction only made the sensation worse. They were a short distance from Araam and he knew he would be able to sleep when he got there, he just had to go on for a little longer. The thought of his bed sounded great, the warmth and softness, and his own smell. There would be nothing they could say or do to keep him from it.

He blinked heavily and looked up at the road. Sometime soon the streetlights would start again and the world would stop being black. It wouldn't be long after the lights came back that he

could sleep. He could finally sleep. Three entire days and nearly three nights without any and within an hour he could sleep. His eyeballs needed moisture so he blinked, but the lids would not reopen. He fought against it, but the need for sleep was stronger than his will to be awake. The world spun around him and he sank away from it.

Only a moment, he'd slept for only a moment. He heard a screeching sound and a car horn. His eyes shot open. There was a car and a corner. He swerved, trying to miss the car. Its horn was still screaming as it shot past far too close to the side of the bus. There was no bang of impact, but there wasn't time to relax because the corner was still coming at him. The bus brakes squealed and he turned the wheel in the other direction trying to stay on the road, but the tires locked up and the bus slid sideways towards the corner. He felt the ambulance hit the road guard, bounce sideways over the bank and start to roll onto its side. Debris from around the cab flung itself sideways at him and he lifted his arms to protect his face. His side of the cab smashed hard down onto the ground. The side of his head impacted with the window and the world faded from him.

**\* 13 \***

Jaola lay on the wall of the ambulance among a lot of debris. She mentally checked herself for injuries. Her elbows ached slightly but she seemed otherwise intact. The girl stood next to her on the wall that had become the floor, seemingly untouched.

“Anne? Are you OK?”

Standing carefully, Jaola nodded. “Yes, Cassandra, I'm fine.”

She stepped over the mattress she had been lying on and looked around her at the mess. The injured man was still strapped to his stretcher. It had half come away from what had been the floor, but he probably hadn't been more than jolted in the crash. The nurse lay unconscious a little further towards the cab.

*“Maybe now is a good time to run with the girl.”*

Jaola climbed over the wrecked room towards the doors. It took a moment to push open the bottom door, climb under and she was standing in the cool night air. The girl followed her.

“Come on Cassandra, if we walk now we might make it to Araam before dawn.”

“But Anne, what about Juniper? She's hurt we have to help her.”

Jaola sighed and turned to look at the girl. “Cassandra, do you understand what they'll do when we get there?”

The girl shrugged. “They'll ask us what happened.”

She stepped towards her and knelt to get eye contact as she'd seen the nurse do. “The

Agency will use very strong telepaths to take the information they want from our minds. It hurts a lot and it will probably kill us. Cassandra, the hard truth is that we have to leave Juniper behind so that we can get away.”

“No, Juniper wouldn’t let that happen to me, she’s nice. I’m going to help her. Go if you want.” The tiny blond haired girl turned away and climbed back into the ambulance. Jaola stood upright again and rubbed her face warily. Every bone in her body wanted desperately to get away, but she wouldn’t let them destroy this girl, she couldn’t. So, with a sigh of frustration, she followed her back into the ambulance.

The inside was surprisingly dimmer than outside, but after a few seconds she could see the dim form of the girl kneeling over Juniper in the far corner.

“Juniper, wake up.”

The woman sighed and started to move. “What happened?” Came a groggy reply.

“We crashed. Are you OK?” The girl’s concern for the nurse was sweet. Jaola just hoped it wouldn’t be the cause of her capture. She stepped around debris and closer to them. Juniper sat up slowly and looked around. She was bleeding from her hairline but it didn’t look too serious.

“I’m OK, Cassandra, we have to get Coan outside.”

Jaola absently offered the woman a hand to stand and she helped to pull her to her feet. As she got her balance, Juniper’s face turned to Jaola with wide eyes.

“Where is Jessal?”

Jaola sighed. “I’ll go.”

This was going to be a long night. Ducking under the ambulance door, Jaola walked around the bus towards the front. It lay in a ditch at least ten meters below the road. Surrounded in wrecked shrubbery and rubbish, the bus didn’t seem too damaged on the outside, except for lying on its side, of course. As she walked her elbows bled down her forearms and ached something fierce, but she ignored them.

At the front of the bus, she squinted at the windscreen. Through the dim, she could see the shape of a crumpled body in the cab, which logically had to be the Ronan Agent. Turning side-on to the windscreen, she slowly lifted her foot up to a high sidekick position and kicked hard. Glass smashed around her foot and shattered to the edges of the frame. Putting her foot back down, Jaola turned her head to one side to stare at the unconscious Agent. His chest rose and fell evenly, so he was alive. Cynically, she wondered if that was a good or bad thing, at least, for her chances of escaping with the girl.

“Anne! Can you give me a hand?”

She looked up and spoke loud enough for Juniper to hear her over the length of the bus.

“Coming!”

Jogging to the back again, around what used to be the top of the ambulance, Jaola found Juniper struggling to move the unconscious man. The nurse held him under his arms, so Jaola stepped over his legs and lifted them.

“Got him.”

They shuffled and struggled together until they were about ten meters from the doors where there was a flat even surface and placed him carefully on the ground.

The nurse wiped her face with one hand. “Is Jessal OK?”

Jaola shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s breathing, but unconscious.”

Juniper nodded. “Can you please check the ambulance for any supplies we may need, like blankets and bandages. I’ll check on Jessal.” She turned before Jaola could respond or argue.

“*A long night indeed,*” she thought cynically.

\* 14 \*

Jaola watched the little girl sleep. Cassandra was a tiny creature. She was completely asleep and laying in a position that should be causing her pain. The girl’s head oozed over one of Jaola’s knees, her little mouth was open slightly and her tatty gold hair was spread out around her head onto the ground. Both of the girl’s legs were bent over Jaola’s other knee with the toes of her grubby little shoes touching the ground. One hand was curled up on her chest and the other splayed on the dust in front of Jaola. The girl was just so beautiful and all Jaola could do at that moment was struggle to keep from crying. Cassandra was so helpless, a little helpless bundle of legs and arms.

“Are you OK, Anne?” Juniper was nearby attending to Jessal’s injuries. She was looking at her with concern and confusion on her lovely face.

Jaola blinked rapidly, her mind trying to put her feelings into words. “I... I... she’s so beautiful.”

The nurse smiled. “Most children are when they sleep. I have a daughter, she’s much younger than Cassandra. Sometimes I watch her sleep for hours. Don’t you deal with children in your line of work?”

Jaola frowned, “*my line of work? What was that supposed to mean?*” She’d managed to avoid killing children in her missions. Jaola mentally shook her head. “*I’m not an assassin any more, I’m a coffee shop waitress.*”

She laughed. “Yes, there are children in coffee shops, but they aren’t generally this quiet. They’re usually trying to trip me up or screaming at the top of their lungs over something.”

Juniper's smile became broad and she nodded.

Jaola looked down at the girl again. She still felt confused and almost frightened by her, but it was almost a good confusion. She would protect this little bundle of arms and legs with her very last breath.

"No, Jessal, don't get up."

"I'm fine, Juniper." He sounded tired and a little irritated.

"No, Jessal, you've been unconscious for a while, just stay there while I finish checking you."

A resigned sigh came from him, and Juniper shuffled around checking joints and limbs for injury. "Does anything hurt?"

"My head."

Jaola snorted at the slightly petulant tone in his voice. A torch was whipped out from one of the nurse's pockets and shone on his dark face and eyes.

"Well, you seem OK."

"Can I get up now?"

Jaola felt the girl's body on her lap start to twitch. The muscles across her back tensed randomly, the small hand on her chest tightened and released, and her face screwed up as if she was in pain. Jaola tried to calm her by stroking her face. The girl's public thoughts started to race and her muscles tensed more rapidly.

"Cassandra, it's OK, Cassandra." She whispered trying to soothe her.

"No. No! Nono!" The girl's body tensed completely and her eyes thrust themselves open. Cassandra's face flew away from her. Jaola landed before she realized that she was the one flying and not Cassandra. The ground took her breath from her and she lay there stunned for a few moments.

"Anne? Are you OK?" Cassandra's voice sounded just as shocked as she felt. Jaola managed to take a deep breath and sat up, looking around her. She had gone nearly twenty meters in a very short time.

"I'm fine. Bad dream, huh?"

Cassandra's little form ran towards her. "I'm sorry, Anne, that happens these days when I get scared!"

The girl knelt down next to her in the dirt and brushed away a thread of hair from Jaola's face. That confusing feeling rose inside Jaola again: she was such a beautiful little girl. Jaola fought the urge to cry and suddenly she was being hugged.

Behind the girl, Juniper and the Agent sat next to each other with their mouths open, eyes

wide and staring back at them. Jaola smiled, trying not to laugh. That settled it. She would escape with the girl no matter the cost. A kinetic of her age and strength would go directly to a desert training base to be tortured and “trained”. Jaola simply wouldn’t allow it to happen, even if she had to take out these Agents to get the two of them free.

\*15 \*

Grabbing a couple of bandage pads and tape from her medical box, Juniper turned back to Jessal. “Do you know where the cell phone is?”

He frowned and one large hand rose absently towards the empty breast pocket of his shirt. “I don’t know. It’s probably wrecked.”

Half of his face was covered in thick blood and Juniper started to roughly wipe it away with a sanitized bandage pad.

“There’s no radio in the Ambulance, so we’ve got no other way of contacting Base. And we certainly won’t be able to get up that bank without some more help, it’s far too steep. What should we do?”

“I’m not sure.” He shrugged. “I suppose, if we wait until dawn one of us can see enough to climb up the bank and flag down a motorist.”

She had cleared most of the blood from his face except for the still-bleeding wound on the side of his forehead. Wiping it quickly, she put a clean bandage pad over it and applied pressure with the palm of her hand.

He flinched. Ignoring his Ronan curse words, she started to tape the pad down. “Well, if we *are* going to wait for dawn, you might want some rest. It’ll be a while and you look exhausted.”

Jessal nodded and his eyes started to close. “Good idea.” He mumbled.

She helped him lie down on one of the blankets from the Ambulance and lifted another two over him. His eyes closed and Juniper sensed sleep immediately. Tasoia would need attending to again, so she got to her feet and turned away.

“*The girl is a kinetic.*” This thought egged at her. Cassandra was the same age she had been when they conscripted her into the Agency.

“*Twelve years old.*” Her mind echoed. “*Twelve years old and kinetic.*”

Juniper sat down next to Tasoia and started checking his bandages. They were weepy and needed to be changed again. Her cold hands brushed his face and he flinched a little.

“It’s OK, Coan, just rest, I’m going to change your bandages.”

Blue eyes opened a slit and looked at her. “OK.”



She should probably check his mental acuity in case his head injury was worse than it seemed, but even if he was bleeding internally there was very little she could do for him medically in a ditch with only basic supplies.

Her thoughts returned back to the girl. When they finally got to Araam, Cassandra would be conscripted into the Agency and considering how strong a PK she was, they would force her to start “training”. Juniper flinched at her own thoughts. She had been sent to one of the desert training bases. This lovely girl would be sent there too. She’d experience the worst possible teenage years, the beatings, child against child, the fear and wariness, all until she was eighteen. Conformity would be beaten into her and that beauty Anne was admiring would die away.

Juniper didn’t want the girl to go through that, like her daughter may have to in the future. If only there had been someone to save her when she was twelve, and then her life would have been different. Juniper sat for some time thinking intently as she changed Taso’s bandages. She wondered if it was possible to save the girl, herself and her daughter. Perhaps, Anne could help.

**\* 16 \***

Jessal slept deeply and snored a little with each in breath. Juniper watched him. Taking a deep breath to slow her heartbeat, she crouched down. His gun lay next to him and her hand rested upon it.

This was it, this was best way to escape. She could feel Anne’s concern for the girl and her desire to run from them, in fact she had felt it the moment she arrived at the crime scene. Something about Anne made her feel certain that she could help. Maybe it was her fluid body movement or the empathic calm that she radiated, but whatever it was she felt certain that Anne could protect the girl.

It was time to do something right, even if it was illegal. She would help keep Cassandra from being destroyed by the Agency and hopefully protect her own daughter from the same fate. Her hand gripped the gun and as she stood, she lifted it up. She took another deep breath, in and then out. Anne and the girl were out of hearing range and talking low. She walked slowly towards them.

“...Can you control your ability just a little?” Anne was kneeling in front of Cassandra with her back to Juniper.

Cassandra nodded. “Ah huh, I can push things in one direction, I’ve been practicing. Is that good?”

“Could you do it right now if I asked you to?”

By this time Juniper had walked to within a couple of meters of Anne and the woman

stopped. She turned to look at Juniper with her mouth open slightly and vivid green eyes feigning an innocence Juniper did not sense empathically.

Juniper smiled at the guilty expression. “It’s OK, Anne, I want to help you get Cassandra away.”

Anne’s mouth opened wider and black eyebrows dropped down over her green eyes.

“I will help you if you help me, my mother and my daughter escape.” Juniper took her hand out from her jacket pocket, the gun lay across it.

**\* 17 \***

Jaola felt the tension rise inside her. Should she take the invitation? Was it a trap? She reached her mind towards the woman’s, there seemed to be no reaction to her pressure so she probably wasn’t a telepath. As she passed the threshold, Jaola recognized the mind and the very real desire to leave the Agency. Perhaps helping her would not only keep the girl safe, but right a wrong from their shared past.

Her hand whipped out quickly and took the gun from Juniper’s hand. Without thinking she checked the chamber and clip, it was loaded. Then with the safety on the gun secured, she tucked it in the back of her waistband. Juniper looked a little surprised but said nothing.

Behind Jaola the girl tugged on the sleeve of her jacket. “If we’re leaving, Anne, we should take Coan. He needs help to rescue his daughter.”

“Alright.” Jaola nodded. She knew it wasn’t worth arguing with the child because if that was what she wanted she wouldn’t move from that position. Instead, she looked tensely past Juniper at the injured man lying on the ground.

“Do you think he’s well enough to be able to come with us?”

Juniper shook her head. “I don’t know, Anne. But he’s awake for now.”

She shrugged. “Well, let’s get on with it. We’ll need blankets and a few other things to make this work.”

**\* 18 \***

*There was a song somewhere in his head. A woman was humming. It was maddeningly familiar, but his mind would not remember where it came from. He saw dark skin surrounding full red lips and the slight curve of a mischievous smile, but nothing more of her. The humming stopped and the lips smiled broadly. “Jessal...”*

“Jessal! Help!” His eyes were heavy but he knew that voice. Something was wrong. Struggling against his exhaustion, he wrenched his eyes open and forced himself up to a sitting position on the blankets. The toppled ambulance lay beside him, past it was the blanket that Taso had been lying on, but he wasn’t there.

Beyond the blanket stood the woman, Anne. She had an arm around Juniper’s neck and a gun pointed at her face. Jessal reached to where he knew his gun should be, but it wasn’t there. He stood, walking towards them with his hands up at shoulder height.

He made his voice calm and firm. “Anne, you won’t get away.”

She looked scared, her green eyes were wide with fear and her gun-hand shook. Stepping backwards away from him, Anne dragged Juniper with her.

“I think we will.” The voice was too calm, almost leathery

He frowned and stepped closer, trying to bridge the gap between them. “Why are you doing this? We would have let you go after the interviews.”

“Don’t assume I’m naive, Agent Mier, I know about the Telepath Interrogators... Now, Cassandra.” The woman’s voice shook a little at the end.

Before he saw where the girl was, he felt strong invisible hands push his chest and he was flying through the air. He expected the ground to come up and meet him at any moment, but, something invaded his mind and he hit a wall of unconsciousness instead.

## Chapter Five

\* 1 \*

*The Year of our Founder 3010*

*Approximately half an hour's drive from Araam*

*Sometime in the early morning*

“Don’t assume I’m naive, Agent Mier, I know about the Telepath Interrogators.”

Anne’s arm was tight around Juniper’s neck. The position of her grip and her height, held Juniper at a slightly uncomfortable angle, so she had to hold onto Anne’s arm to stop herself from toppling over. The gun barrel was cold on her cheek. Her facial muscles instinctively pulled away from it. Juniper was so afraid. She pushed that fear at Jessal so that if he was an empath he would sense it.

“Now, Cassandra.”

The girl was standing behind them and that was her cue to throw Jessal. For a moment, Juniper fought to hide a niggling doubt about this course of action. She held the doubt deep inside her away from any one’s ability to sense it while she watched Jessal fly into the air and back towards the ambulance. A long moment *before* he actually hit the back of the bus, she sensed an instant unconsciousness, as quick as if he’d been hit hard in the face with a bat. Perhaps Anne was a telepath?

The gun that was held to her face clicked and moved away. Anne’s arm dropped and she was free. Turning, Juniper watched the woman’s manner change from a very convincing sense of terror to being completely relaxed. The fear was a deception, any empath could sense that, but the woman would have fooled any non-Psi with her body language, even down to her shaking hands and quick fearful breathing. Juniper wondered for a moment just who this woman was, but it didn’t actually matter as long as Anne helped her get out of the Agency.

“If we’re lucky, we should reach the suburbs before dawn, but we’ve got to get going right now.” There was no doubt or fear in Anne’s voice.

“Alright,” Juniper swallowed. “Help me with Coan.”

\* 2 \*

Juniper's back was aching terribly and she hoped it wasn't much further. Coan was getting heavier and heavier, even with Anne on the other side of him. She could sense his waning consciousness and knew it wasn't good, but they had to keep going for as long as possible.

They were walking through a huge dark field. She could see the dim shape of hills on two sides of them and ahead was a line of fencing cut in the middle by the silhouette of a huge tree. Ambient light seemed to come from that direction. It was too early in the morning to be close to dawn, so the glow must be Araam City.

Juniper shuffled Coan's arm to a more comfortable place on her shoulder and took a step. Coan seemed to trip and all three of them fell towards the ground. As they fell, a sensation crept over his energy and made Juniper's skin prickle with goose bumps. The three of them hit the ground together.

Juniper untangled herself and gently rolled Coan onto his back. "He's dying." The words slipped from her lips, even before her fingers went to his neck.

"What are you going to do? We don't have medical equipment."

"I'm going to heal him."

"What? You're a healer?"

Ignoring her question, Juniper sat on her feet next to him and placed her hands on his chest. Closing her eyes, she used touch to sense into his body and find the source of death. A bleed on the inside of his skull hummed at her with the discord of death-causing injury and blood. The other pain and injuries in his body did not matter because this specific discord would kill him in a matter of minutes.

The healing energy in her body reached a crescendo pitch and she passed it into the death-causing injury. Carefully, she started working at converting the vibrational discord into something manageable, specifically something he would live from. Clotting off the bleed with his body's natural processes, she wiped over inflamed tissue to ease the pain and opened up the fluid channels in his brain to release the pressure into his sinus cavities. It would take layers and layers of application of healing energy and far too much time that they didn't have, but she couldn't stand by and watch him die when she could do something about it.

\* 3 \*

Agent Robaat Upham sat in his dim box-shaped office sifting through the digital scene shots of the incident with Jessal Mier. The terrorist Goid Malaan was very certainly dead. The scene

photographer had taken a great many pictures of him for the enquiry and although efficient, it was most certainly getting to be quite gruesome for Rob.

He took a deep breath and closed his dark gray eyes. He was way too tired for this, but unfortunately his superiors didn't see sleep as a priority. Releasing his breath, he opened his eyes again and focused on the laptop screen. The next photo was of a dark-haired woman and the accompanying photo stated that she was a witness. "Anne Draena."

Rob frowned. Her face seemed very familiar, but the name attached to the photo had to be wrong.

He transferred the image into the Agency system database and loaded the search program. It would take time for the system to do a proper facial recognition search and he needed a coffee to continue sorting the uploaded scene images. He stood warily, straightened his navy blue suit and left the small office.

When the room was empty and Rob too far away to hear it, the computer started to blink and beep. Two images flashed on the screen. One from the crime scene and another from a match in the database. "Traitor List" stood in blinking bright red letters at the top of the screen and on the bottom stood the name "A2.0248 Jaola Armon, Refer case to: A1.0116 Raraan Armon."

\* 4 \*

When she opened her eyes again Juniper was utterly shattered. It had taken so much focus that every inch of her body ached from the tension. She looked around her. It was still dark and Cassandra was asleep nearby curled up with one of the blankets they took from the ambulance. Anne stood nearby with her back to her.

"He's going to be OK?" Anne turned slowly to look down at her.

Juniper nodded. "Should be, if we're careful. But I can't do that again for a while."

Anne had the gun at her side and as she turned and looked down at Juniper, a shiver of recognition hit her. The terror rose in Juniper like a tidal wave and she scabbled backwards.

"Y... Your name isn't--"

The woman stepped towards her with her gun hand up. "No, Juniper."

"Cheetah..."

*"What have I done? They will kill me for sure."*

The woman bent over Juniper even as she was still struggling backwards. "No, Juniper, I'm not that person anymore."

"No! No!" Screaming in terror, all she could see was the face that her dying husband had

seen and that harsh look behind a gun just before it fired. He had wanted her to see his killer. She had, and now that killer stood in front her with a gun. Juniper started to weep as the woman knelt next to her with the gun in plain view.

“Here, will this prove it to you?” She gave her the gun and Juniper stared dumbly at it in her hands. “Juniper, I escaped. Calm down. I’m not with the Agency anymore and I’m not going to kill you.” She stood up again and walked back towards the others.

Juniper sat in the long grass with the gun in her hands feeling lost and afraid. Her mouth was open with fear and shock. The woman came back towards her and Juniper flinched as a water bottle was put in front of her face.

“Drink, Juniper. You’ll feel better.” The woman sat down next to her in the grass and Juniper looked into her face. It was Anne again and her lovely long face seemed just as frizzled as she herself felt.

A smile lengthened the woman’s thin lips. “That’s better. But, just to encourage more trust: I’m a telepath like your husband, Mathew.”

Juniper nodded. “I wondered why Jessal was unconscious before he hit the ground. How did you escape?” Juniper swallowed. Did she really want to know how an assassin escaped the Agency?

“Timing and preparation. Your husband was my last assignment.”

“But, why? You were A2.”

Cheetah looked away and then back at her. Juniper felt real fear and pain from the woman. “It was destroying me.”

They sat in silence for a while, and then sighing, Cheetah stood and offered Juniper a hand to help her stand up.

“How long until he wakes up?”

She shrugged and got to her feet. “I don’t know.”

“Can we make a stretcher out of blankets and carry him that way?”

Juniper shook her head. “Aside from being very heavy, he shouldn’t be moved until he wakes up. Any movement could start the bleeding again. The only way we could transport him safely would be with a PK.”

“Oh.”

Cassandra was sitting up in the grass looking at them when they got back. Juniper couldn’t quite see the girl’s face in the darkness, but she could see her outline.

“Anne, what happened?” The shadow said in a small, scared voice.

“It’s OK Cassandra, we just had a little misunderstanding. Did we wake you?”

“Yes, but that’s OK. I’m a PK. Can I help?”

Juniper smiled at the young girl. “Cassandra, only a *trained* Psi PK would work.”

“She isn’t trained but I am.”

“What do you mean, Cheetah?” She regretted it the moment she said it and that regret was reinforced when the woman flinched as if she’d been hit hard across the face. There was a pause and she heard her sigh.

“Juniper, please call me Anne. What I meant was that together Cassandra and I could move him. I can help her with the control, that is, if you didn’t mind, Cassandra.”

“You can do that?” The girl sounded excited.

“Yes. It was something I learned as a girl.”

Juniper frowned. “Why don’t you practice first, we don’t want anyone making a mistake. Maybe try to move me instead. I mean it’s OK if you rattle me around, but you could kill... Oh!” Juniper tensed as she realized that she was rising up in the air slowly. The other two laughed and, embarrassment followed quickly by anger, flushed Juniper’s face red. Hands rose to her hips. “Very funny. Point taken, now put me down!”

\* 5 \*

*Approximately half an hour later*

The sun was starting to rise in front and slightly to the left of them in brilliant yellows and deep oranges. They had crossed several fields and ahead, on the other side of a wire fence, Juniper could see the line of a road.

“Is that the suburbs?”

“Should be Enara Street.” Anne’s voice was monotone and strained. “I have a friend who can help us. Not much longer, Cassandra.”

She wondered how hard this was for the girl. “Wait, put him down for a moment, I want to check him.”

He had been hovering at about waist height and she watched him descend slowly into the long grass. Juniper leaned over him and lifted the bandages for his shoulder. It seemed OK, but she would need to change that bandage pretty soon. As she checked his head bandage, her cold hands pressed on his cheek and he flinched away from her.

“Coan, are you awake?” His white face frowned and he breathed deeply. After a few seconds his eyes reluctantly opened.

“...Hmm... My head...hurts. Where am I?”



Juniper smiled. “We are just outside of Araam city and your head will hurt for a while. Can you stand?”

“I... can try.”

\* 6 \*

Karen was making breakfast in her little kitchen. Birds sat along the fence line outside the window as they enjoyed the sunrise and the bread she’d put out on the back lawn for them. She opened her tiny fridge and got out some sandwich spread and left-overs from dinner. A left-over sandwich wasn’t the best start to the day, but it was all she felt like eating at that precise moment.

She was placing thinly sliced pieces of roasted meat on her bread when a double knock sounded at the back door. She put her knife down on the bench and turned towards the back door. Stepping past her fridge, through a doorway and down a step into the sun room, she looked out through the glass door. On the other side was a familiar face. Karen grinned and opened the door for her old friend.

“Anne! How are you? I haven’t seen you for ages!” She opened her arms and hugged her.

“I’m sorry, Karen. This isn’t a social visit my friends and I are in trouble—”

Karen let go of her friend and raised a hand to stop Anne mid-sentence. “No need to explain, bring your friends in.”

\* 7 \*

“Jessal, can you hear me?” He was staring at the ceiling. It was painted white and unusually clean. He couldn’t move, couldn’t stop looking at the ceiling and he couldn’t blink.

“Jessal?”

He blinked slowly and frowned. “What happened?” The sound of his own voice resonated in his skull. Reality had a dreamy aspect to it, even though he knew he was definitely awake. He tried to lift his hand to wipe his face, but it wouldn’t move.

“One of your witnesses,” came a familiar voice. “They must have been a telepath. You were programmed to sleep.”

“Why can’t I move?”

“The sleep program didn’t allow for you to wake up. Your body still thinks it’s unconscious, so you’re experiencing sleep paralysis. We have telepaths undoing it right now.” The voice was brisk and formal. There was almost no human warmth in it at all.

“Have they been found yet?”

The voice sighed. “No, not yet, but we think they went into one of the surrounding farms.”

With effort he managed to clench his fist. “How long will this take? I must head the search.”

“Not long now. Your new partner is presently heading the search until you can join him.”

Jessal swallowed. “How is Ulnon?”

“Agent Ree is still in a coma, his condition is critical.”

Jessal managed to lift his hand up to his face and rub his eyes. There was a bad headache forming behind them. “Who is my new partner?”

“Agent Morgan.”

Jessal nodded. He knew Morgan. They had worked together for a week last year when Ulnon was ill. Straining heavily, Jessal pulled and pushed at his body until he was able to get into a sitting position. Either side of him stood two very pale-faced people with their eyes closed, and turning, he saw that there was a third standing behind him.

“Jessal, just wait a few more moments, so they can program an artificial mental shield. That way, you will not respond so quickly next time.”

Off to one side, Raraan leaned against a white wall, with his arms crossed over his chest and a condescending smile on his face. He’d gotten thinner since Jessal last saw him in Rona and lost a bit more hair on top, but his light blue eyes still held their coldness and arrogance.

“You’ve been reassigned?”

“We suspect your witness is a Defected Psi. Your previous supervisor does not have the resources or security clearance for this complication.”

Jessal nodded and slid off the flat bed to stand. “If she is, I need her name or another proper link to her to use my Talent properly. Can I get access to the Traitor database?”

Raraan’s pale face and body language did not shift to show it, but the tone of his voice rang with annoyance. “At present that is not possible. You will have to just do what you can with what you have.”

Jessal nodded. “Yes, sir.”

The three telepaths turned away from him and left the room like ghosts. Jessal shivered. They didn’t seem to be people any more.

“This way, Jessal.” Raraan gestured to a door set in an alcove to his right.

Dobid stood in the chilly morning wind surrounded by the headstones that inhabited the West Marakan Cemetery. He wore a long gray woolen coat wrapped tightly around him and a black scarf that danced loosely around his neck in the autumn wind. His vivid blue eyes were sad.

“Oh, Gwen, I’m so sorry.” In one hand, he held a small bunch of miniature yellow roses, which he lifted and placed on the grave in front of him. Dobid turned away from the grave and walked back towards the exit a hundred meters away.

Behind him on the gravestone was the inscription:

*“Gwenith Cowdy nee Rena, 2 Aracan 2979 - 8 Meha 3010”*

**\* 9 \***

With a handful of towels, Karen walked into her spare bedroom. The injured man was laid out on the bed and Anne stood back as the other woman was checking bandages.

“Can I help?”

Anne smiled, one eyebrow lifted and Karen sensed her friend was thinking *“of course”*. The smile dropped into a question and Karen answered her before she put it into words.

“The girl is sleeping on the couch.”

“Thanks.” Remembering her manners, Anne gestured to her friends with one hand. “This is Juniper and Coan. The girl’s name is Cassandra.”

The other woman, Juniper, looked up at her with a tense face. “Do you have any bandages? Or something I can rip up?”

“Yes, of course. Anne, you know where the supplies are.”

Anne nodded and strode out of the room. Leaning over the man, Karen quickly placed a few towels under his wounds and took off the bandages around his head. It was a fairly nasty, but surprisingly clean bullet wound, which grazed across the skull in a line above his ear. He should be in hospital, not her guest room.

“Juniper, please make yourself at home. Go and rest, I’ll re-bandage him and join you.”

Standing on the other side of the bed, the dark haired woman frowned. “I’m a nurse, I can help.”

“It’s fine, just go and eat.”

The woman didn’t move, simply continued to frown at her. Karen sensed she’d need to pull rank with the young woman and suppressed a smirk. “I’m a doctor, Juniper, I know what to do.”

“Here you go, Karen.” Anne came back in behind her and passed her the first aid box.

“Thanks. Show Juniper where the kitchen is. And make me a coffee will you?” Karen dismissed the two women with a flick of her wrist and, knowing her better than the newcomer, Anne pulled the young nurse out of the room by her elbow.

Karen turned her attention to the injured man, who was surprisingly conscious for someone with such a nasty bullet wound. He was quite young, perhaps not even twenty years old. Lifting his chin with one hand, she shone her pen light into his face. Ocean blue eyes looked up at her and she could see in his different sized pupils that he was definitely concussed.

“Coan, my name is Karen. Do you remember what happened?”

When she dropped the penlight, his eyes darted around the room like he suddenly realized he was somewhere he didn’t know. “A little.”

“Well, how about you tell me what you remember while I change your bandages?”

**\* 10 \***

Jessal was driving out of the central business district of Araam towards the main northern highway. Cars, all going in the same direction as he, surrounded him on four sides giving him a sense of being rather boxed in. With all the motion and flickering lights, the headache had developed into a throbbing pulse of agony through his brain cells, like some maniacal demon wreaking havoc inside his head.

He sighed, he didn’t have time for a migraine. Reaching into the glove compartment of the car he got out a tray of painkillers. With one hand on the steering wheel, he put three painkillers in his mouth and downed the last of the coffee he’d gotten from the Base cafeteria.

He lifted the radio from the dash to his mouth and took a breath.

~ “This is Mier, inbound, Morgan, can you give me an update?”

~ “This is Morgan. We are on Green-Tyler farm heading up to Enara Street. Welcome back, Jessal. How are you?”

Jessal smiled, Morgan was really friendly. ~ “I’m fine thanks, Morgan, I’ll meet you there. E.T.A. about an hour.”

**\* 11 \***

Karen finished re-bandaging Coan and she smiled at him. “You get some rest.”

“Yes, ma’am.” His blue eyes closed as he nodded.

She picked up the first aid box and walked out of the room, into her hall and towards the

kitchen. Through the archway at the end, she saw the two women sitting at her kitchen table eating hurriedly. They mustn't have eaten for some time.

"OK, give me your arm." Dumping the first aid box on the table, Karen leaned over Anne and grabbed a bleeding elbow.

"Karen, I'm sorry--"

"Anne, hush." She wiped over the cuts on Anne's elbow and stuck a large plaster on it, and then she grabbed the other elbow. Anne knew her well enough not to protest at her invasion of personal space. "I know you are a busy person, your visits come when they're meant to. That's all I expect." Finishing with Anne, Karen turned to the young nurse who put her food down and let Karen clean up the blood on her face.

"So, Anne, is this about you or the man in the spare room?" She finished cleaning the small cut on Juniper's hairline and left it, it didn't need any bandaging.

"A bit of both, it's a long story." Anne sighed and put a full coffee cup on the table in front of her. "Sit and we'll explain what's happened."

**\* 12 \***

*About an hour later*

~ "This is Morgan on Enara Street, Jessal, I've just interviewed a resident who saw a group entering her neighbor's gate and she's not seen them come out again. I'm just heading over there to investigate. Over."

Jessal was just turning off the main highway, he was less than five minutes away from them. He picked up the radio again.

~ "This is Mier, I'll be there in a few moments if you'd like to wait for me?"

**\* 13 \***

"*He really is quite handsome.*" Karen thought as she sipped her hot coffee. The bed was far too soft, so the young man slept with only his oval face peeking out of the creamy linen like a piece of fruit on top of vanilla ice-cream. At a guess, he probably wasn't any older than twenty and if he was any older than that, he must have lived a sheltered and well-to-do life.

"*Lucky him,*" she thought with cynicism.

Anne came into the room next to her, the tension clear on her face. "We have to get going soon. Can we borrow your car? I'll do my best to keep it in one piece, promise."

Karen smirked. "Of course you can. Here." She fetched the keys out of her jeans pocket and handed them to her.

In the nest of linen, Coan's blue eyes opened and he stared wide eyed at them. "We're going?"

"Yes, Coan." Answered Anne, her tone cooling. "We need to get out of here and find somewhere safe to lay low for a while. The Agency will be coming."

"Anne!" Juniper's voice called out from the kitchen end of the house. Anne's face became distant for a moment, and then her emerald eyes focused on Karen again. She saw a touch of fear in her friend's face.

"They're here in the street. We have to go. Now."

Together they helped Coan out of bed and onto his feet.

"Hai di'chena!" Anne looked at her tensely. "Karen, they're coming up to the house, can you distract them?"

She nodded. "Of course, go out the back way." They'd done this a few times, although, usually with cops and not Agents.

Karen followed the two of them out into her hall and stood in the doorway watching them shuffle down the length of her house. Anne was practically carrying Coan down the hall in her effort to get him moving quickly.

There was a knock at the front door and Karen's heart jumped a few beats. She waited until Anne went into the kitchen and out of sight, before taking a deep breath and making her way slowly to the front door to greet her guests.

She focused on her story to make it real in her mind and heart, she was an innocent victim in all of this. The "fugitives" had tricked her into opening her back door and forced her at gun-point to treat the injured man and feed them before they stole the keys to her car.

At the door she sniffled fearfully and pulled it open. A very tall, broad-shouldered Ronan man stood on her front porch. He wore the recognizable navy suit of an A3 or below Agent. She allowed herself to be startled. Everyone knew the only Ronan Agent was the Rona-Abaan traitor. He seemed taken aback by her reaction, but not at all threatening.

She heard her car start in the driveway. "They... they forced me!" she stammered.

**\* 14 \***

Juniper lifted Cassandra's sleeping form up from the couch. The girl was very heavy for such a small thing and Juniper had honestly hoped she would wake up once she was moved, but

Cassandra didn't even stir in her sleep.

She and her heavy load walked out of the sitting room, and met Anne and Coan in the sunny little kitchen.

Anne stepped in front of them into the sun room. Following, Juniper continued to struggle with the weight of Cassandra. Her foot caught on a floor mat and she stumbled, but didn't fall. She stepped into the sun room close on the heels of Anne. Anne reached for the door handle but there was a stranger standing outside in front of the glass. Both Juniper and Anne took in a startled breath and stepped back. The man smiled at their reactions and stepped up to open the door.

All of Anne's emotions drained from her like water down a drain. A calm cold focus filled the empathic space in place of the fear and tension that had been bubbling from Anne only a moment ago. Juniper shivered at the empathic transformation, and inside her a deep and very real fear flared up. She knew instinctively that this change in Anne was not a good thing.

The backdoor opened. Anne brought out the gun from her waistline up to eye level and into the face of the man in the open doorway. The Agent's smug expression fell.

"Get out of the way or you will be shot." Her voice was filled with a calm venom.

The man stepped backwards as if to do as she said, but brought out something from behind him. Anne's gun went off, and both Juniper and her heavy load jumped. The Agent fell backwards with a shocked look on his face. Juniper's fear locked her knees and weakened her arms as she struggled to contain the terror inside her and hold onto the child.

Coan stepped towards her with one arm up. "I've got her."

He took Cassandra from her arms and propped her against his good shoulder and arm. Anne ran quickly ahead of them out of the back door and towards the driveway. Juniper jogged to keep up with her. She went past the Agent, who lay on the grass weeping and grasping at a bloody hand. She stared down at him in surprise. Anne was a good shot.

"Juniper!" Anne's cold voice rang out. "Get here."

Juniper jumped fearfully and did as she was told. She was grabbed roughly around the shoulders and it took a moment for her to remember that she was supposed to be a hostage. A handful of keys were thrown at Coan.

"Unlock this door. Then get into the back."

As he opened the driver's door of Karen's little blue hatchback, Coan shot Juniper a confused look and got quickly into the backseat with Cassandra.

Anne shoved Juniper in the driver's seat and sat behind her. "Here." Keys were thrown at her and she put them in the ignition.

She put the little blue hatchback in reverse and drove backwards out onto the street. Anne

lifted the gun to the back of her neck and Juniper tensed up, fighting the urge to cry out in fear. They drove out onto the road and Juniper caught a glimpse of Jessal and another running towards them down the drive.

Juniper flinched as she felt the bumper graze the concrete curb. She backed out towards one end of the street and then headed for the other end. She didn't look back. At the next corner, she turned off to the right.

"Anne." Her voice broke slightly with her fear so she cleared her throat. "Anne, do you know where we're going?" Juniper flinched as the gun, which had been steadily embedding itself in her neck, lost contact with her skin.

"Yes, take a left here. When you get to that big hotel up there, hang a right."

Juniper turned the car, following her instructions and watched the rear view mirror for the Agency cars. The street they were on was a four-lane road so Juniper could weave in between the cars with relative ease.

"Where are we going?" Juniper swallowed, she wanted to be safe and far away from those dark shiny cars behind her. Maybe when they were gone the old Anne would come back.

"There is a mall with a parking complex up the road. We can lose them in the mall. Hang a right here!"

Juniper swerved into the turn, cutting off a driver next to her on the inside lane. The other car skidded ninety degrees and stopped halfway between the two lanes of traffic traveling in their direction. Traffic started to brake to avoid the other car, and as they turned the corner, the possible roadblock disappeared from view.

"Up here! Up here! Quick!"

Juniper saw the car parking entrance and aimed for it.

"Get the ticket!" The tires squealed as she put on the brakes and they stopped abruptly on the ramp. She grabbed for the ticket in the dispenser and as the arm raised enough for her to get through, she sped up into the building.

"Where should we park?" She threw the ticket on the passenger seat next to her.

"Go to the next level."

Juniper heard Coan exclaim as she skidded around another support beam and then up the ramp.

"Give me Cassandra, she needs to be awake."

Juniper frowned. "Why isn't she awake?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's psychic shock. It might have been too much for her this morning. But we need her awake if we're going to escape."



Juniper started looking for a parking space on their level. She immediately found one near an entry into the mall and they screeched to a halt.

“I can carry her fine, Anne. It sounds like it would hurt her to wake her up.” In the rear vision mirror she saw Coan hold Cassandra tightly with his one good arm.

Behind her in the back seat, Anne sighed. “OK, fine.”

She shut down the motor and got out. When everyone else was out, she threw the keys in the glove compartment and locked the doors.

\* 15 \*

Jessal was swearing a long string of Ronan curses. They had lost the fugitives. He and Morgan had to redirect to another intersection to get around the roadblock Juniper’s obviously frightened driving had caused. Now they’d driven up the street for the fourth time with absolutely no sight of them. The Agency chase fleet had cordoned off most of the central city roads, but there was no sign of the car. There were no sightings by the weather and police helicopters. In fact, there was nothing. But they couldn’t have just disappeared into thin air. He had to think and figure it out.

If this woman, Anne, was ex-Agency, she could know a lot about procedures.

He rubbed at the headache between his eyebrows. “*So, if I knew about the helicopter assistance and the multiple chase vehicles, what would I do?*”

Jessal looked around him at the busy mid-morning center city streets. There were a lot of places they could hide a car and four people. But how would they escape with a hostage? Surely someone would notice the gun or there would be an opportunity for Juniper to call out for help and one of the public would phone the police?

As their car turned back into the intersection, his mind’s focus floated tiredly back to the area the car had last been seen. He and Morgan had driven through the intersection barely two minutes later and seen nothing. Jessal frowned with the effort to concentrate. He wished his head wasn’t so full of cotton wool from the lack of adequate sleep and hitting his head in the accident. He was sure the solution was right in front of him, and if he wasn’t so clouded he’d get it immediately.

“Hey, Morgan, can we go back to the intersection again. We have to have missed something.”

It only took a few minutes to turn around and get back to the intersection where the roadblock was. No one had been injured, so said the lack of an ambulance, but there were four cars piled up against each other covering that whole side of the road. Their car turned into the intersection and down the road where the fugitives were last seen. Jessal looked around him,

wracking his brain about possible escapes. On the right were normal shops with no car entrances and nowhere to hide. On the left his eyes fell on the entrance to a car parking building.

He blinked and swore again. "Morgan, go in there!"

**\* 16 \***

"There! There it is!" The car was unobtrusively parked near a mall entrance-way. Had he not been Searching, Jessal might have missed it. Grabbing the radio, Jessal took a breath. "This is Mier One, the fugitives have entered Star Mall. Team One close off the parking entrance, Team Two cover the north foot entrance, Team Three the south."

**\* 17 \***

Coan raced behind Anne and Juniper through the crowds of people. He watched Anne ahead of him as she navigated her way through the crowd. He didn't know Anne, but he could have sworn she wasn't like this before. She seemed devoid of emotions and with absolutely no compassion. And what was with the whole Juniper being a hostage thing? He didn't know what Anne would do next, and that frightened him a lot more than he would ever admit. He slowed as the two stopped in front of a clothing store.

Anne turned and looked around. "Do any of you have cash?"

He shook his head, so did Juniper.

"OK, I'll buy some clothes. We'll leave the mall in different directions. Coan, do you know where the cathedral is from here?"

He nodded, he'd been married there. Anne turned around and melded into the store.

Coan stared wide-eyed at Juniper. "Was she like this before?"

She shook her head. "No, but I think she knows what she's doing, just trust her."

They stood in the entrance of the busy clothes store. He took a breath, trying desperately to calm his nerves down. There were so many people in the store and walking past that he felt dazzled by the noise and motion.

Anne appeared out of the store again and threw something at Coan.

"Here, wear this." She took the girl from him and he started to put on the denim jacket that she'd given him. "Go out the south entrance and zigzag to the Cathedral. You'll be safe there. If you need help ask for Father Owen and tell him Jaola sent you, he'll look after you."

His shoulder was very painful, making it impossible for him to lift his arm enough to get it

into the jacket. He struggled twice with it, and then stepping behind him, Juniper helped. She did the zipper up for him and Anne put the girl back in his arms.

“Go now. Remember, don’t draw any attention to yourself.”

She pulled a big floppy winter beanie onto his head over his bandages and he nodded.

It didn’t take long for him to weave through the crowd and downstairs to the South entrance. He tried to walk comfortably, as if he was just a father on his way out of the mall with his sleeping daughter. As he got closer to the exit, he saw a string of dark cars with their sirens flashing rush by on the road outside. He waited for a second and then walked outside. Stepping into the sunlight he watched the Agency cars turn a corner away from him. “*That was easy.*”

**\* 18 \***

Juniper was standing in a large toilet cubicle. She glared down at the flowery dress Anne had given her to wear. It was very ugly.

“*At least,*” she thought, “*Anne’s one is worse.*”

Dumping her old and bloody nurse’s uniform in the paper bin nearby, she stepped out of the cubicle. There was no one else in there except for her and Anne. It was just like any other public bathroom. There were shiny white tiles on the walls and floor, sinks opposite the lockable toilet stalls. It was clean, but not overly so, because of littering paper towels and splashes of water. Walking up to the sinks to wash the remnants of Coan’s blood from her hands, she took a breath to calm herself. She’d been scared for too long and it was taking its toll on her body. A toilet flushed and Juniper turned around. The door next to her cubicle opened and Anne stepped out wearing her own ugly dress with her old clothes scrunched up in her hands.

“Cassandra is going to be disappointed, she loves this jacket.”

Juniper winked at her. “You can always buy her a new one later.”

Anne smiled ever so slightly and nodded. She dumped her pile of clothes in the main bin under the sinks and started washing her hands.

“Now, remember, we have no reason to be frightened or anxious, we’re just two friends in the mall wearing ugly dresses.”

Juniper nodded and glanced at the cut on her hairline in the mirror. “Who have recently been in a car accident.”

“Yes. That too.”

Leaving the ground-floor bathroom, they turned and headed for the north entrance, weaving in and out through crowds of shoppers. As they approached the entrance, Juniper saw a

group of seven or eight Agents walk through the tinted doors. They wore the black combat fatigues that identified them as Taskforce members and held their rifle barrels up.

Her heart quickened. “Anne--”

“*Keep on, no fear!*”

She heard the woman’s voice in her head and swallowed. Anne was right, she just had to focus. She couldn’t handle it if her fear was what ended up getting them killed. Concentrating, she hid all of her anxiety behind a mask of calm, and then she added a slight twitch of apprehension as they got closer. The group of Agents walked past them seemingly unaware that anything was up.

Juniper and Anne kept walking. They strode out through the doors and into the autumn sunshine. A man in a blue suit stepped in front of them with one hand up to stop them.

“I’m sorry you will have to go back inside the mall. No one is allowed to leave until we locate some fugitives.”

Juniper sighed, faking frustration and a different lilt to her voice. “But we’re gonna be late! Obviously, we’re not the people you’re looking for.” Her mouth tightened as she concentrated. She pushed a deep feeling of cloudiness at the man. He visibly swayed and she tried to step past him.

“Wait--”

Before he could say any more, he seemed to faint and slipped down to the pavement. Anne turned, indicating with a flick of one hand that she should follow, and led them both across the road and down a side street. They ran for five zigzagging blocks before Anne stopped and waited for her to catch up. Guilt painted her long oval face.

“I’m sorry I had to scare you like that. It was necessary to appear to any empath or telepath that you were my hostage.”

Juniper smiled and nodded. She understood.

Anne smiled back and rolled her eyes. “So where’s this daughter of yours?”

Juniper stared at her for a moment. “Um, can we get my mother first? They won’t kill my daughter.”

Anne shrugged. “OK, where is she?”

“South Side Rest Home. What about Coan, he might worry?”

“Well, he’s safe, your family is not.”

**\* 19 \***

*At the Araam City Cathedral of the Founder*

Coan sighed as he stepped through the huge doors of the Araam Cathedral. The arm

holding Cassandra had started to cramp and his head was thumping painfully along with his heartbeat. The first pew he came to, he gently laid the girl down onto it and sat next to her. He leaned over the pew in front of him and covered his face with one hand. The pain was increasing exponentially now and it wasn't just his head and shoulder wounds, but his grief. He tried to breathe deeply through the pain. At least they were safe for the moment.

The last two days had been a nightmare. He had never held a gun before all this, let alone fired one. And now he'd probably killed someone and become a fugitive from the Agency. He didn't know a lot about the Agency, but what he did know was that they were dangerous and powerful.

The Rona-Abaan had grabbed them when he and his daughter were crossing a road in Kaamo. They were just a group of people crossing the street with them, they surrounded them and then someone came up close behind and put a gun to his back. They hadn't said a word, merely physically guided him into a taxicab. His beautiful little girl hadn't even realized there was anything wrong. Leelah sat on his lap in the taxi happy as a lark, humming and looking around her at the streets and the world of ebony giants.

In a warehouse office, they gave him a photo of a Ronan man and said that he would have to kill that man to get Leelah back.

*"Abe Kashaan, how am I going to get her back now?"* He took a deep breath, fighting the tears that wanted to well up. This was no time to cry.

But slowly, the tears built up in his heart and behind his eyes. When he couldn't hold them back any more he let them go. A quiet whimper left him and the tears flowed freely down his face. He sat there crouched over the pew in Araam's biggest place of Religion for several minutes, crying his eyes out.

Sometime later, once he'd calmed down a little, he heard someone clear their throat behind him and he quickly wiped his face dry with a hand.

"Excuse me, are you OK? Do you need help? I am Father Owen." There was a warm hand on his shoulder and with a sufficiently dryer face he looked up at the man. The priest's appearance was unremarkable to Coan, except for his brilliant blue eyes. The priest smiled sympathetically.

"I was told to come here by 'Jaola', can you help me?"

The priest's face became very serious and he nodded. "Do you need help with the child?"

Coan shook his head.

"Follow me."

The priest waited quietly while Coan lifted Cassandra back onto his good shoulder. Fighting the sorrow and physical pain, he followed the priest past the pews and through a side door.

For a while they walked through the stone hallways. Coan had enough trouble trying to keep hold of the child, walk straight and follow the priest, without trying to figure out how to get out of the place again. So, he knew almost immediately that he would be unable to get out again without help. The priest turned into a doorway. In the room beyond were a few beds.

“Lay the child here, she will be safe.” Coan gently lowered her onto the bed and unfolded a couple of blankets onto her. When she was comfortable he followed the man out back into the stone hallways.

They walked into a small space at the end of the hall. To his left was a battered couch along one wall, a square table and chairs in the center of the room, on the wall opposite was a bench with a sink and kettle on it, and to the right a large open cupboard stood against the wall, filled with tins of food and kitchen utensils. The priest motioned for him to sit at the table and he did so.

“Would you like a hot drink?”

Coan nodded and took off the beanie he’d been given. “Do you have some pain killers? Lots of pain killers?”

The priest smiled gently and turned to rummage in the cupboard.

The priest set a glass of water and a tray of painkillers in front of Coan and then he brought out a small bowl of fruit, and some bread and butter. “It’s not much but our food is your food. Tell me, how is Jaola?”

Downing four painkillers with the water, he dropped the glass on the table and looked back at the priest. “When you say Jaola, you mean the woman with long black hair and green eyes?”

The priest nodded, a slight smile crossing his face as if at that moment something funny was in his thoughts.

“Well, apart from being on the run from the Agency and acting crazy scary, I’d say she’s fine.”

The priest sat down in the chair opposite Coan with two hot drinks in his hands. He pushed one towards Coan and looked at him intently with his vivid blue eyes. That look made Coan uncomfortable. It was as if he could see right through to every secret within him.

“So, Coan, what is your story? How did you meet Jaola?”

“Someone kidnapped my daughter in Kaamo. They said I had to kill a particular Agent to get her back.” Coan swallowed sadly. “Then, then my only contact with the group who kidnapped us was killed and I shot the wrong person...” The man kept looking at him with those vivid blue eyes and Coan looked away uncomfortably. “She, she’s probably d...d...” He swallowed again, he didn’t want to cry in front of this man even if he was a man of Religion.

The priest stood up, as if understanding Coan’s thoughts and he smiled sympathetically.

“You took four pain killers, you’ll soon want to sleep. I’ll show you the guest room again and you can rest.”

\* 20 \*

*South side of Araam City*

Rita sat up in bed, she knew Juniper would be there soon, in fact, she had known all day. She coughed, spluttering and choking on the liquid that came up from her lungs. Breathing was very difficult for her.

“*Damn my addiction to those smokes,*” she thought absently. “*Not long now, my part to play and then I will be out of here. It is the right time.*” Wheezing, Rita put the oxygen mask over her face again, it was easier but still not easy to breathe.

“Mom! What happened?” Juniper ran up to her bedside, her lovely face full of concern. Another woman, black hair and green eyes watched from the doorway.

Rita took the oxygen mask off and patted her daughter’s hand. “It’s alright Juni. Who...” She wheezed. “Who is your friend?”

Juniper absently gestured to the woman in the doorway. “This is Anne. Anne, this is my mom, Rita Hilla.”

The dark haired woman smiled and bowed respectfully to her. Rita smiled knowingly. “Juni, listen... I need to tell you something... listen to me... I’m not ... going to be here long... this is important... especially... if your friend... is who I think she is...”

Juniper frowned at her, obviously thinking she was senile. “No, you’re coming with us, Mom, we’re going on a little field trip. You’ll enjoy this trip, Mom.”

Rita rolled her eyes at her daughter and looked at the other woman squarely. “You’re Will and... and Charmaine Armon’s daughter, aren’t you?”

The woman’s green eyes widened. “Yes, ma’am, but how did you know?”

“I used to know them... you’re her spitting image... she was a... dear friend of mine... are they still...?”

The woman shook her head sadly.

“Oh, well, then... it’s more important to listen... you listen now!” Rita tried to sit up a little, but only managed to shuffle in place. She fixed a firm as possible look on Charmaine’s daughter. “Jaola, girl, you listen... you find Hawk... you tell him it’s the girl... the blond haired child, Cass, he’s looking for... tell him it’s her. You look after her... she’s important...she... needs a mother... not a protector...” Her breathing was very hard. She wanted to let go, but Rita knew certain things must

be said for other things to happen and her part played in the balance for the future.

She fixed her gaze on her daughter again, a gentle but firm look. “Juni! You need... need to listen... look after Sarah... go get her soon! You... take her away... don’t get her involved... in all of this...” Rita felt the calm of knowing the words were said and deeds done. Her granddaughter would be saved and the girl connected with Hawk. There was relief and she closed her eyes. She was too tired. Her breaths were too hard. She let herself sink into sleep.

\* 21 \*

“Mom...” Juniper was crying over the woman who had all of a sudden stopped wheezing. Jaola stood in the doorway frowning in confusion. If she knew how, she would be comforting Juniper but she didn’t.

*“How could this woman know about Cassandra? How could she know who I am? How could she know all of these things? Maybe she was Time Psi?”* Recovering her thoughts Jaola noticed in the woman’s fading color that she was dead.

“Juniper, she’s gone. We must go.”

Juniper sat up with her face covered in tears. She nodded and touched her mother’s hand. When she stood, she wouldn’t meet her eyes. Jaola turned and led them out again.

\* 22 \*

Jessal watched as the Agency paramedics lifted the unconscious Agent onto a stretcher.

He sighed. *“Obviously, they’ve escaped.”*

On the security camera footage the two women had walked out of the building. There was no hostage/hostage-taker body language and no evidence of a gun as they left. Jessal’s mind couldn’t hide any more from the obvious realization that had been waiting in the back of his mind.

*“Juniper must have helped them escape.”*

Walking wearily back into the mall, Jessal found a seat on which to rest for a moment. It was atrocious for him to think that way about a fellow Agent, but his instinct and that footage rang so loudly with the conclusion that he couldn’t ignore it.

He sighed again and pulled out his cell phone. If she were defecting she would want to take her child with her. It felt wrong but he had to do his job. He put the phone to his ear and waited for the other line to pick up.

“Raraan. I need to know where Juniper’s child is--”



“Why?” Raraan’s voice sounded confused and mildly irritated.

“I’m pretty sure Juniper helped them escape. Where is the child?”

“Four-two-two Oak Street. Do you want some backup?”

“I’ll bring one of the teams here with me just in case I’m right. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

\* 23 \*

Jessal pulled into the baby sitter’s driveway, put the car into park, threw the car door open, and jumped out. It was quite a nice house, with modern angles and horizontal beams of red treated wood on every exterior wall. At the babysitter’s door, he knocked and only waited a short time before a very small woman opened it. For a moment Jessal was stunned by her height. Her eyes were at his stomach height, and she was so slight of body that he felt as though he could pick her up and throw her like a spear. It was amazing to him that Aranan people could bear children at all. Jessal tried to cover his surprise by smiling formally.

Her only reaction to him was to lift her chin and turn her head sideways. “Can I help you?”

Jessal fetched his ID from the inside pocket of his jacket. “I’m Agent Mier, and I’m looking for Juniper Case’s child--”

“Oh, she’s not here. Juniper left five minutes ago with her. Is she in trouble?”

Jessal’s smile fell. “No, never mind. Thank you anyway.” He bowed formally. “Good day.”

He turned quickly, walking away from her before the little woman saw the scowl drop into his face. Frustration clenched his jaw tightly. He had to try and compose himself even though with this final lead falling through, he had no other direct means of tracing them. His fists tightened so much that he could feel the remnants of his nails pressing into the palm of his hand. The other cars that had been following screeched to a halt on both sides of the road in front of him. He shook his head at the lead car and got into his own.

## Chapter Six

\* 1 \*

*The Year of our Founder 3010*

*Araam City*

*Approximately 11am*

The child sat on Juniper's lap in the taxi quite happily. Jaola watched the beautiful little thing and wondered what it was about children lately that seemed to entrance her so much. The girl looked very much like her mother, long dark brown hair, oval face, light skin and deep brown eyes. She even seemed to have the same smile as Juniper. And yet there was something about this child, something unique that held her attention. She seemed strong and mature, even though she was only about four years old.

The taxi pulled onto the side of the road and the driver turned around in his seat. "That'll be twenty." Jaola pulled out the note from her pocket and passed it to the driver. Next to her Juniper opened her door, letting the child out first and then getting out of the taxi herself.

When the taxi drove out of sight, Jaola turned and started walking slowly up the residential street.

"So, who is this person?" Juniper's voice sounded a little frightened. She picked up her daughter and matched pace with Jaola.

"He likes to be called Digs. He can give you a new identity, job, house, furniture, whatever you need to start a new life. He's helped a lot of people before you and helped me a few times as well. Just relax, you're nearly free of the Agency, OK?"

Jaola turned off the footpath and into a large school field. Digs' place was on the other side of the field and down a long driveway. He was a little crazy and looked like an old hermit who belonged in the mountains somewhere, but he really knew his stuff. He knew how to hide from the Agency and what they looked for when they searched for escaped Psi and Talents. What he did was very good for people who wanted to stay under the radar and live a normal life. Unfortunately for her, she could never quite keep herself clear for more than about six months. Usually, it was because someone came along who needed help, or she did or said something strange to get someone's attention as to her true nature, and then she would come back and visit Digs. With the people she helped and her own needs she was probably his most frequent customer.

At the edge of the field she turned into his long driveway. As she passed it, she reached into his letterbox for the envelope he always left there. If it wasn't there it meant he had a client, he didn't want visitors or that it wasn't safe. She took the envelope out of the box and continued down the driveway. Juniper followed her quietly with the child still in her arms.

"Now, he's a little strange, but he knows what he's doing. Speak only when you're spoken to and do as he says. He'll take a photo of you for your new ID and probably one of your daughter too. He'll ask you lots of questions, and then give you all your information and a bus ticket. I've got the payment he requires," she patted her pocket with an envelope filled with money, which she'd recently gotten from one of her stashes in town. "And then I'll walk you to the bus station."

Wide-eyed but trusting of her, Juniper nodded. "OK, Anne."

\* 2 \*

*Midday*

Jessal sat waiting outside Raraan's office for a meeting. After such a monumental failure, he had to give a verbal report of what happened and justify how they managed to lose the fugitives. Jessal held his chin in his hands. Why hadn't he thought of Juniper being a Traitor as well? Why had it taken so long for him to realize the very good possibility of it occurring? He didn't think there'd been more he could have done with the information he had, but why had he been so instinctively against the possibility that Juniper had helped them escape?

The door next to him opened and Raraan stepped out of the room.

"Jessal, could you come in now?"

Nodding absently, he stood and followed Raraan into the room.

Raraan's office was significantly bigger than his other supervisor's. Jessal stood for a moment looking around him. Raraan had a huge window behind the desk that covered the whole width of the room. Through the windows, Jessal saw a small garden courtyard that must have been built into the Tower because they were quite high up in the building, too high for it to be a ground-floor garden. In the far corner of the room Raraan sat behind his broad desk, with his back to the window.

He motioned the chair in front of Jessal. "Please, sit. Normally, this meeting is for your verbal report but quite frankly, I already know what happened for the most of it. I only have a few questions and then we can look at other avenues to continue the investigation."

Jessal nodded as he sat. "Yes, sir."

Raraan held a collection of papers, which Jessal assumed were notes on what had

happened in the last twenty-four hours.

“OK, Jessal,” Raraan flipped through the file in front of him and settled on one sheet. “There has been some discussion among my superiors about your Talent and the use of it so far in this investigation. At what point since the phone call from your superior yesterday afternoon did you start bringing your Talent into effect?”

Frowning, Jessal thought about his response. When did he start it? “Sir, when we lost sight of the stolen car this morning.”

“And why, Jessal, would a man of your high Talent rating wait until then to use it?”

This question took him by surprise. Although it made him feel as if he were being verbally attacked, he could see immediately that it was a relevant one to ask.

“Sir, I’m sorry, I didn’t see the need up until that point. There were other leads to follow for the search before then.”

Raraan nodded, sharp blue eyes seemed to almost absorb Jessal.

He swallowed and wondered if Raraan was looking into his mind. But he had done nothing to hide from. He could have started a Search much earlier, but that wouldn’t have made the investigation go very much faster.

Raraan seemed satisfied with his answer. “From now onward, Jessal you must use your Talent at every moment. It is the reason you were allowed into the Agency in the first place. It must be the primary source of your leads. For you, the physical evidence is secondary.”

“Yes, sir. I will from now onward.”

Raraan looked down at his desk and seemed to read a few pages. Jessal waited patiently in the silence.

“Did you have any indication before the mall video tape, whether physical or Talent, that Juniper Case might have helped them escape?”

Jessal shook his head, but paused, frowning. “Sir, it had crossed my mind as a possibility because they traveled so far, so quickly even with Coan Tasoia being injured. However, I had no other evidence to indicate that Juniper was defecting.”

Raraan’s emotionless face stared at him for a moment, then, without looking at his notes his face turned sideways. “Did the child really throw this fugitive several meters in the air because she was frightened by a dream?”

He couldn’t help but grin at Raraan’s incredulity. “Yes, sir, she did.”

“Excellent.” Raraan smiled broadly at Jessal and he relaxed. A smiling supervisor meant that he probably wasn’t in trouble.

“So, Jessal, what are your thoughts on your next course of action?”

Without pausing, Jessal looked directly at Raraan. “I intend to assign twenty-four hour surveillance to this Karen Frene woman. We have no proof that she aided the fugitives, however, I suspect that she knew at least one of them. They might try to contact her and we will be watching.”

Raraan nodded and Jessal took this as a sign to continue.

“I wanted to apply again for access to the fugitive database to identify--”

“Jessal, I doubt they will allow it. You are not Aranan, you are not born into the Agency and your security level is too low. But, I can see why you wish to apply for it and I will pass on the application to my superiors, regardless of how futile to me it seems.”

“Thank you, sir.”

**\* 3 \***

*About 1pm*

Jaola walked into the Cathedral thinking about Juniper. For some reason she felt a little sad that she would probably never see Juniper and her child again. It had been a unique thing to feel a bit more at ease with someone. She hadn't needed to hide her obvious Agency upbringing and they jointly understood the complications of being ex-Agency. She wondered if Juniper would have become a good friend if she'd been able to stay.

“You look deep in thought, Jaola.”

Blinking, she looked up and saw Father Owen standing in front of her. She smiled. “Hello, Father, how are you?”

“I am well, thank you. You look good?”

She nodded, and then remembered Coan and Cassandra. “Did you--?”

“Your two friends are sleeping in the spare room. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, yes I am.” Grinning, she followed Father Owen into the hallways behind the public part of the Cathedral.

She knew the way to the small kitchen blindfolded, after so many coffees and long talks she had with Father Owen since just before her mother died. Jaola wasn't really the religious type, but Father Owen's kindness had helped her through the loss of her mother, and then later her father's loss.

Father Owen knew her real first name and he knew that she had been an Assassin, but she'd been careful not to tell him anything that could be taken from him by the Agency and compromise her safety. Theirs was a mutually beneficial friendship. She had safe company and a refuge for herself and the number of people whom she had helped over the three years she'd been

out, and he got difficult-to-find supplies and generous donations to the Cathedral. It was a useful arrangement they had and he seemed to genuinely like her company.

Following him into the small kitchen, she went to turn on the kettle for coffee and he to the cupboards to find any food to eat. She wondered if Father Owen knew this enigmatic Rebel Leader, Hawk, and turned around to face him.

“Father, do you know this Hawk person?”

To her amazement the normally stoic priest seemed genuinely surprised. “Well, yes, I do. Why?”

“I was given a message to get to him. Would you be able to arrange a meeting with him?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry Jaola, I can’t do that. I’m sure you know who he is and why he wouldn’t agree to such a meeting.”

She nodded grimly. “Ah well, I’ll have to figure out another way of getting it to him.”

By this time the kettle had boiled, so she turned around and finished making their coffees. They both sat down at a small table in the middle of the room. She brought their coffees to the table and he brought bread, butter and some crackers. There was a comfortable silence between the two of them. She found it very easy to feel relaxed in his company. Smiling, Jaola passed him his coffee.

“So, Jaola, how long will you need the services of the Cathedral?”

She took a sip of her hot drink. “Oh, not long Father, I just need to arrange some new papers for us three and we’ll be out of your hair.”

Father Owen smiled warmly at her. “It’s no trouble at all. You are all welcome to stay as long as you need.”

\* 4 \*

*Nearly 2pm*

Cassandra woke slowly. The smell of coffee hit her senses and she wondered who her mother had over this morning for breakfast. Opening her eyes, she looked around. This wasn’t her bedroom. This wasn’t her house. Where was her mother? Her mind gave her the answer she didn’t want to know: *she’s dead*.

Cassandra sat up. The room was filled with beds, with only a little bit of space between them. She was wearing ordinary clothes, dirty ordinary clothes. Getting out of bed, she shimmied down onto the ground. Nearby, another bed was occupied and she walked closer looking at the man who slept there. That was Coan, the man who had to find his daughter. She watched him sleep for a

few moments and wondered where they were. Then she poked him in the arm, not the arm that was hurt, the other one.

“Coan, where are we?”

He groaned, but did not wake up.

“Coan! Wake up!” She shook him, leaning all her weight on his chest with her arms.

“What? Leelah... I’m sleeping... leave me alone...” His eyes didn’t open, but he tried to turn over and away from her.

“Coan, it’s me Cassandra, wake up!”

One eye opened and he looked at her. “Who? Oh.” The other eye opened. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Where are we?”

“In a church... now let me sleep...”

“But, what do I do?”

He groaned and opened his eyes again. “Cassandra, there’s a priest around, he’ll keep you company.”

“Can you come with me?”

He sighed, but sat up and got out of bed. “OK.”

Cassandra grabbed his hand as he stood. She didn’t know why, or really care why, but he made her feel safe. They walked slowly out of the little room and into a corridor. She could smell coffee off to her right and she pulled him that way. At the end of a hallway was an open door and inside Cassandra could see Anne sitting at a table drinking coffee.

“Anne!” She let go of Coan’s hand and ran to her. Anne smiled and let her up on her lap. Cassandra looked around the room, but she couldn’t see Juniper only a man who looked like a priest. “Where’s Juniper?”

“She’s left the city, Cassandra.”

“Oh,” she frowned, feeling disappointed. “I wanted to say goodbye.”

“I’m sorry, she didn’t have time to come back. She would have missed her bus. Coan, sit, do you want a coffee?”

Cassandra curled up into Anne’s lap and closed her eyes. She wasn’t tired any more she just liked the feeling Anne gave off. She liked to sit in her calmness.

\* 5 \*

2 pm

The table was black and oblong. At intervals around this table sat about ten people, all wearing dark blue suits. At the head of the table sat a man with a shock of white hair around his wrinkled face. The look in his ice blue eyes was cold and sharp. No one would want to upset this man because that look said to most people: “cross me and I’ll kill you”. This man, Jaran Cowdy Senior, was the Head of the A0 Council. Most of those gathered in the room were older men and women, and all with a similar look to them: cold, potentially dangerous, and veiled.

As a not-so-subtle reminder of his rank in the A0 Council, Raraan sat the furthest away from Jaran Cowdy senior. Raraan had only been in the Council for about a month, but already he felt as though he was a toddler trying to fit in at university. There was a lot of old blood in this council, and although his family line had been a part of the Agency since its beginning, he was the first of his branch to be promoted out of active duty and into A0 level affairs. William would have been so proud of him if he were alive.

Jaran glowered at Raraan from the head of the table. “Please start, Raraan.”

Raraan nodded and stood. “Jessal Mier has put in another application for A2 Level access to our databases for his investigation. Although this is against protocol, I would like to show you some of the preliminary findings of this particular case that may warrant an exception to those protocols.”

Raraan swept his eyes around the room to get an idea of their overall reaction to his proposal, and saw that most of the others seemed interested in listening. He risked a glance at Jaran. His eyes still held their steely look, but there was no tension in his face or shoulders that would suggest protest. Raraan loaded his presentation onto the network and the other laptop screens around the room.

The first picture was of a collection of a dozen weapons with accompanying ammo sitting on plain gray carpet and leaning against a white wall.

“This, as you know, is some of the stash of weapons found in the hotel room Goid Malaan and Coan Tasoia rented when they came into the country. Some of the weapons we found had Agency issue serials from those stolen by the Psi Rebels in 3004 from a supply depot. This suggests that the Rona-Abaan have been in trade-contact with the Psi Rebels, and could be a pre-emptive sign for the two groups uniting together for a massive strike here in Arana.”

The next picture was of his niece Jaola. “This, ladies and gentlemen as you know is Jaola Armon, code name Cheetah, who defected in 3007 by killing her father, William Armon, and the door security guard, Ino Ren. This picture was taken at the scene where Goid Malaan died and is currently listed under the name she gave to Jessal Mier as ‘Anne Draena’.” He paused. “What you may or may not know is that her last assignment as an A2 assassin was to assess and dispatch



Mathew Ahlan as a possible defector. Mathew Ahlan was found to be planning to defect and was immediately dispatched, however, his wife was proven not to be involved. His wife, Juniper Case.” He loaded a picture of the woman from the scene photos.

Raraan waited a second for a reaction. No one seemed shocked, however, all seemed to be listening intently. Even Jaran at the head of the table, leaned forward.

“I would suggest that it could be possible that Jaola Armon made contact with Juniper Case when Mathew Ahlan was being investigated, and that maybe a deal was struck between the two women.”

Agent Ba'ala Eka sat forwards. “There is no proof to support or deny that claim, Raraan.”

Raraan nodded politely. “That is true, ma'aam but there is a similar association of Jaola Armon to the Psi Rebels. Over the years with her missions to penetrate Rebel groups none of her reconnaissance led to any arrests by other Agents from her reports, suggesting that for some reason she was filing incorrect information. Although, there is no proof that she made a deal with Juniper Case, or that she was helping the Psi Rebels at times in her career, there is room for such events to have occurred. That in itself is cause for concern.”

Raraan took a breath to relax his nerves, this room was very tense. Not that he'd let anyone know how he felt because a lot rode on this. If he could somehow legally give Jessal Jaola's real name, he may be the person to bring his traitorous niece to justice for William's murder.

“The fact that there is a lot of room in her history for such possible alliances, and the supporting evidence that she may have joined the Psi Rebels, make her a potentially lethal threat to us. Add in the Rebel's new association with the Rona-Abaan and this situation could be disastrous. The Psi Rebels haven't resorted to bombings yet, but may be inclined to start if they have continued contact with the RA. Coupled with Jaola's training and knowledge of the Agency and its possible weaknesses,” he sighed. “Well, we could be attacked at any moment.”

Coughing slightly, Raraan reached for his glass of water and took a sip. “My suggestion is to only give the Ronan Jaola's file. It is not necessary to give him the full access he is requesting. In my opinion, he will be able to find them better than any other A4 Agent currently employed because of his Talent. His searching capabilities are accurate to almost a hundred percent, that is, once he has an adequate link to the subject. I have telepathically scanned him a number of times, and you have the report from the official scan I did this morning, he is, in some ways, more loyal than most Aranan Agents. With a link to Jaola, he may have a very good chance of bringing all of the fugitives into custody even with Jaola's additional training in Psi evasion. And once they're in custody, we can properly assess the threat of terrorist activity here in Arana.” Raraan stopped speaking and looked around the room waiting for a response.

“Jessal has only been with us for three years. He’s not even Aranan. How could we trust him with any access to A2 files?” said one Council member.

“We could monitor him closely or put a telepathic compulsion in his subconscious mind to maintain his loyalty?” replied another.

Raraan lifted his arms, palms up as if to embrace the entire table. “Fellow Councillors, I can arrange any level of supervisory actions even to the extent of me constantly supervising him if you wish. However, I do think this decision needs to be made soon, so that Jessal can start working to find them.” Raraan loaded the picture of the guns and explosives found in Malaan and Tasoas’s hotel suite, and then he sat down.

Jaran stood and stared coldly around the room. “Raraan, call Mier to this meeting in an hour. Tell him to prepare a presentation for convincing us to accept his application for access. When he gets here we shall assess his threat level to our security. Does anyone have an objection to this?” Jaran looked around the room and there was no response to his question. “Good, now that’s resolved, let’s get onto the next topic of this meeting, shall we?”

\* 6 \*

Jessal concentrated hard. It had never been this hard to start a Search. He wanted to Find Coan Tasoas. Nothing happened. No direction and no itching in the back of his head. Focusing on the man’s face in the picture he had in front of him, he tried to Find Coan Tasoas, the man with that face and again, nothing. He wondered if it was possible to block his Talent.

Sorting through the pictures on his desk, he found one of the child. Cassandra. He wanted to Find Cassandra, but again, nothing. He dumped the child’s picture down in front of him. Leaning over the desk, he shuffled through the files and discovered he also had a photo of the woman, Anne, from the security cameras at the mall. A moment of concentration and again he felt no path to follow. Even a dead body would give him a path, it was as if they didn’t even exist.

Finally, he picked up a photo of Juniper. He wanted to Find her. He was surprised when a little tingle responded, but immediately he could feel that it was too far away to follow, as if she was already out of the area and it would probably take him a long time to locate her. Dropping the photo back onto the mess on his desk, Jessal leaned back in his chair, frustrated. There was a knock on the door and he looked up.

“Come.”

“Jessal,” Raraan half opened the door and leaned inside. “You’ve got an hour to prepare a presentation to convince the Council to give you access. I’ll come down again just before you’re

due and take you up to the meeting, OK?"

Jessal had stood up without realizing and grinned informally at Raraan. "Really? They'll listen to my application? Thank you, sir!"

Raraan's face looked uncharacteristically tense, but he nodded and closed the door.

\* 7 \*

2.45pm

Jaola sat in the Cathedral kitchen and listened to the girl chatter away about everything and nothing. "And Mr. Tyrell had these really messy gardens where he'd put other plants in between the vegetables. I didn't really understand why, but he said the other plants stop the vegetables from being eaten by bugs and something about making more food for the other plants... and anyway, he used to make me hot chocolate with the little baby marshmallows and tell me stories of his hunting days... the marshmallows are really hard to get, mother tried to find them for me, but she couldn't find them at the supermarket we used to shop at and Mr. Tyrell wouldn't tell me where he got them from, he said it was a secret... one day I'm going to go to all the supermarkets and places you can get marshmallows from and find where he brought them... and have marshmallows and fancy hot chocolate and give them to all my friends... would you like some Anne?"

Jaola chuckled at the girl. "Sure, Cassandra, that sounds nice. Hey, we need to get going soon. We've got to get some pictures taken and then get back to Marakan."

"OK," she said and slipped off her lap.

Coan stood in the doorway of the kitchen. She smiled up at him. He had color in his face and seemed more alive than he had been before. The sleep must have done him some good.

"Coan." She fished the rental car keys out of one of her pockets and threw them. He caught them easily with one hand. "I've got a rental car for us. It's a little red hatchback in front of the Cathedral. Can you take Cassandra out to it and I'll meet you there?"

Jaola watched the question rise in Coan's mind, but answered it before he could even start to speak.

"Just follow the main passageway and it'll lead you out."

He nodded, and following Cassandra he turned away back down the hall. Jaola waited for them to be sufficiently out of earshot and turned to Father Owen who sat next to her at the table. "Father, can I ask a couple of favors?"

One corner of his mouth lifted in amusement. "Of course, what do you need?"

"Firstly, I'm going to have to leave Cassandra at one of my apartments in Marakan for a

couple of days. I was wondering if you could pop in sometime and check on her. I've got the money for a plane ticket--"

Father Owen put his hand up and shook his head. "No need, Jaola, I'm actually going to Marakan tomorrow on Church business, I'll be happy to check on her while I'm there, what's the second thing?"

She smiled, he was too generous sometimes. "Well, I was wondering if I wrote a letter to Hawk, could you pass it onto him? The source was very insistent that I get the message to him."

He got up and nodded slowly. "I can do that. Come, I'll get some stationery for you from my office and you can write the address of your apartment."

**\* 8 \***

Dobid watched Jaola as she leaned over his big old desk with a pen in her hand and started to write on the Church stationery. The light from the stained glass window beside him spilled multi-colored sunlight across his face and onto Jaola's long black hair.

She was a spitting image of her mother. Except of course, Charmaine's hair had been slightly curly at the ends, and Jaola was at least half a head taller than her mother. But she was none-the-less close enough in appearance to her mother to be a little spooky.

All this he thought silently behind his mental shield. Outside of the shield, where she was able to easily hear his thoughts, Father Owen was thinking happily through his itinerary for the next week, which included his trip to Marakan and to look in on the girl. Unless Jaola dug into his mind, she wouldn't be able to see the two sides of him, even with her high telepath rating.

He made no effort to read the message as she wrote it, and when she finished she put the note in an envelope and handed it to him. He didn't think a second more of it except to put it in his top draw.

"Here, write the girl's address on one of these." Smiling, he reached across the desk and handed her a few small square pieces of blue paper from the pile. "I'll check on her about lunchtime tomorrow after my appointment."

A scribble later, she dropped the pen next to the note on the desk and looked up at him. Her emerald green eyes sparkled. "Thank you so much, Father, I really appreciate it."

He nodded slowly. "No problem at all."

She turned to the open office door and he followed her out. They were just stepping into the hallway, when he heard his desk phone ringing.

"I'm sorry, I'll have to answer that. Good day, Jaola."

He saw the flash of a polite nod and smile in his direction before he carefully and quietly turned around back into his office. Slowly, he closed the office door and then, chin lifting and confidence returning into his manner, he strode to his desk.

Dobid picked up the phone receiver and took a breath. "Araam City Church of the Founder, Father Owen speaking."

"Are you alone?" The older man's voice was emotionless and cold.

Dobid mirrored his father's tone. "Yes, sir."

"The man you arrested wasn't Hawk."

Dobid sat down in his old leather chair. "Are you sure, sir?"

"The Interrogators were certain."

His blue eyes narrowed in the colored light. "Ah. Of course."

A hand brushed through sandy colored hair. He sighed as he leaned back in the chair, making the battered leather squeak under his robes.

"OK, I'll keep looking. There are a few more potential leads to follow."

"Good. Let me know your progress within the week."

Dobid leaned forward and put the receiver back on the phone. Loosening the collar of his robes, he took a deep, tired breath and leaned back on his chair again. He did have to go to Marakan for the church tomorrow, and he wondered absently if he should postpone it. He leaned forward, took Jaola's letter out of the draw and reached over the desk for a small sword-shaped letter opener.

Unfolding the gold-leaf-bordered paper, he started to read her note. Light from the stained glass windows nearby painted his pale face with streaks of red and gold, a blue flower flowed over one cheek. As he read, Dobid's blue eyes widened and he sat up.

He swore and stood, dumping the letter on his desk before striding to the old dark-wood door.

**\* 9 \***

*A couple of hours later, at approximately 5pm,*

*Araam, Arana*

Jessal stared at the computer screen. It had been nearly two hours of manual searching through the Traitor Database, and he was definitely about ready for another coffee. His finger clicked the mouse for the next picture. Another ex-Agent who had defected, she looked almost like Anne, but her hair was brown and the nose too crooked. He continued on. Most of the defectors in this database had been A3 and A4. There were only the occasional A2, and assassins had already

taken out most of them.

He clicked again for the next file and took in a shocked breath. Anne's face was in front of him on the laptop screen. Her face was thinner and much colder in the picture than in real life, but he was certain it was her. She had been an A2 Assassin. His eyebrows rose. No wonder she was so hard to catch, she was one of the few escaped A2s still alive.

Her real name was Jaola Armon, code name Cheetah. Her mother had been killed in an attempted defection when she was eighteen. Three years after that, she killed her father and a security man to defect.

Jessal frowned. "*Armon? Could it be a coincidence?*" Skimming through the rest of the file, he found her nearest kin. "*Father: William Armon, twin brother to Raraan Armon.*" Still frowning Jessal shook his head, "*why didn't he tell me?*"

A quick knock sounded on his door and he grumbled. Jessal had specifically asked not to be disturbed.

"What is it?" he growled.

The door opened to his little office, and a man with sandy hair and blue eyes stepped inside.

Standing, Jessal looked at the man irritably. "Yes? I'm quite busy."

The stranger wore the robes of a man of Religion, but he held himself as if he had far more authority than this. He stepped towards Jessal and offered him a hand, which he shook.

"I am Agent Aenan, on an undercover assignment."

Jessal nodded. "I'm Agent Mier. What is it you want?"

"I believe I may be able to help you track down one of your targets."

"Really?" Jessal frowned. "Please sit down." He gestured the man to sit in front of his desk and took his own chair. "Which target?"

The strange man bowed his head formally and sat down. "Cassandra Cowdy. I came across them in the middle of my assignment. One of your fugitives is a target of mine, recovery."

"Would that be Jaola Armon?"

The man nodded. "Yes. I have a deal to make. I will give you the whereabouts of the child and potentially the whereabouts of Coan and Jaola if, when you arrest and take them into custody, I have Jaola and Cassandra."

Jessal looked suspiciously at the man. "Three? What about Juniper and her daughter?"

The man shook his head. "They have left the region and are not part of the group any more. Do we have a deal?"

Jessal frowned at the man for a moment, thinking hard. It was a significant lead on Taso,

and he was certainly the main target of his investigation, although the capture of an ex-A2 Assassin wouldn't be a bad thing for his career.

The small phone on his desk started to ring. "Excuse me." Jessal picked up the receiver. "This is Agent Mier."

"Jessal, I'm sorry, but Ulnon died about an hour ago. Your investigation has just been upgraded to a homicide." Raraan's voice sounded uncharacteristically sympathetic.

Jessal's heart sank and he swallowed. "Thank you, sir."

As the receiver found its way back to the phone there was silence in the room. The strange man sat looking at him. There was no emotion in his face, just an odd stoic calm. Jessal needed to calm himself, he did not want to cry in front of this person. He took a breath to collect his thoughts. It was necessary for him to focus on the task at hand and unfortunately he would have to mourn Ulnon later.

"Aenan," his voice was barely a whisper. He cleared his throat. "You have yourself a deal. Where do we go from here?"

The man sat up in the chair and locked cold blue eyes with Jessal. "We go back to Marakan, I have a plane on standby waiting for us."

Jessal nodded and stood.

**\* 10 \***

*Back in the City of Marakan*

*Nearly 10pm*

Their airport rental car slowed in front of the alleyway and Coan shivered. Everything that had happened was getting clearer and clearer in his mind. He remembered the car chase, hidden in the back seat with that man, Goid, talking harshly at him and the rush to get out of the car into the alleyway. Then, near the end of it, he'd brought the gun up and felt the kick of it as he heard the shot.

It was very dark on the street and his eyes were grainy from tiredness, but he could just make out that there was still tape around where it had happened. He wondered if the Agent he shot was alive or dead.

"Coan, it happened and you can't change that fact. Once you accept it you can move on."

Swallowing back his emotions, he dropped his eyes to the hands in his lap. She may be able to let go of it, but he doubted he would ever forget that night.

The last time he saw his daughter they had taken her out of the small office room. Her little

face turned to him as she was led out and she said to him: “See you soon, Daddy”, and waved. He swallowed and wondered if he would see that beautiful little face again.

“Coan, come on.” He blinked and realized that the car had stopped and they were parked in an underground lot. Anne was standing in the open door looking down at him.

He shook himself. “Sorry.”

Getting out, he followed her past a few lines of cars and towards an elevator. He was tired, so tired that he knew Cassandra was somewhere nearby, but he didn’t know where until she ran ahead of him to the elevator.

“Can I press the button, Anne?” He dimly heard Anne respond but the world around him swallowed her voice. Heavy eyelids slowly closed into welcoming blackness. He fell towards that darkness unable and unwilling to fight it.

“Coan!” He felt arms catch him and his eyes shot open. He was standing in the elevator with Anne holding him upright.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Her shocked face softened into a smile. “You’re tired Coan. I’ll make you a coffee when we get upstairs.”

He nodded numbly.

The elevator doors opened. He followed her up a dark, kind of manky corridor and around a corner. Anne leaned over in front of a faded red door.

“I don’t know who’s sending me these.” She lifted something from the ground and started unlocking the door. In her arms were a small bunch of white flowers, some were bigger flowers with long sloping petals and others looked like tiny cotton balls on thin green threads. His mind was too tired and wary to think more of the flowers or even feel jealous that she might have an admirer. The door opened and he saw an inviting yellowish couch in front of him. He fell gladly onto the soft cushions and leaned his elbow on the armrest with his jaw resting in his hand.

There was a sense of Cassandra running around him like a little fairy flitting through the room in a cloud of laughter and excitement. Her movement seemed impossibly fast to his fuzzy mind and eyes.

Gently, the world around him floated sideways and he closed his eyes. The sounds of cutlery and talking traveled over and around him pleasantly. He floated in that nice calm distant space for a while.

“...? Coan?” Someone touched his arm. “Wake up, Coan. Here, drink this.”

He managed to open one eyelid and then a few seconds later the other lifted. In front of him was a steaming mug of coffee. He smiled at the face behind it and took the mug.



“Drink up. I’m getting some clothes for you, and you can have a shower.”

He blinked slowly at the mug and raised it to his lips. The liquid was hot, but it was also wonderfully sweet and it tasted like proper coffee, not instant. Cassandra was still running around the room laughing and saying something. But he couldn’t concentrate on drinking and listening, so he kept drinking.

By the time he finished his coffee he felt much better. The world around him had mostly unbent itself and both of his eyes finally blinked at the same time. Cassandra had finished running around and was sitting sleepily next to him on the couch. Anne came out of a doorway somewhere ahead of him with an armful of clothes and he stood to help her.

“Thanks for the coffee, I needed it.”

She nodded and passed an armful of clothes to him. “No problem. See if you can find some clothes in that lot that you can wear. We haven’t got long before we have to leave for the airport again, and you’ll need a shower and new bandages before we go. We’ll take three planes and then be in Kaamo early in the morning.”

Coan nodded and started looking through the clothes she had handed him.

**\* 11 \***

*Approximately 4am Marakan Time,*

*6am Kaamo Time*

*City of Kaamo, country of Rona*

Coan stopped in the doorway of a hotel room, standing in her way. “There’s only one bed, Anne.”

Jaola pushed past him and brought in the last of the bags with her. “Yes, Coan, remember I told you, the cheapest flights and accommodation I could find were under the premise that we were newlyweds?”

“Oh.” He seemed confused, but not uncomfortable. He dropped his bags where he stood and sat down on the bed. “I don’t know if I can sleep now, I’ve had so much coffee.”

She laughed. “I know how you feel.” Jaola closed the hotel door and went into the kitchenette to boil a kettle. “How about a decaffeinated drink?”

“OK.”

There was silence while she made the drinks and in the quiet, she wondered what they’d find later after some sleep. Walking into the sitting room-bedroom area, she handed Coan a mug and sat on the bed next to him.

He looked at her with teary eyes. “Do you think she’ll be alive?”

She took a sip of her drink and looked at him sadly. “I don’t know Coan, I really don’t know.”

Her drink was a little too hot so she put it down on a small bedside table. When she turned back to him, he was crying into his mug. She took the drink from him and put it next to hers, then gingerly put her arm around his shoulders. She didn’t know what to say or if what she was doing was the right thing, but she hoped at least he’d realize she was attempting to comfort him.

It was strangely pleasant for him to be in her arms. She didn’t quite understand it. While she was analyzing the feeling, he leaned into her and started sobbing. She wrapped her arms around him and let him cry, holding him there for a long time and rocking him gently, aware that she was feeling nearly wrung-out enough to cry as well.

When he finally stopped crying, her shirt was wet and the face that lifted up to look at her was a little embarrassed. Jaola felt strangely affectionate towards him and smiled. She wanted to let him know he had no reason to feel embarrassed. Absently, she moved a stray dark hair from his face. Very suddenly he was kissing her, which was a pleasant surprise to her. She felt herself react and returned the kiss firmly. His hand moved to her waist, hers to his face and very quickly they were lying back on the bed, her on top of him, kissing passionately.

## Chapter Seven

*\* 1 \**

*The Year of Our Founder 3010*

*Marakan, Arana*

*A few minutes before dawn*

*They were coming for her. She was lying on the bed sleeping. She couldn't escape. They were coming for her and she was powerless. They broke through the door and she tried to scream, but only managed to whimper.*

Mid-whimper, Cassandra shot up into a sitting position on a couch. For a moment her eyes were wide with terror. She blinked and looked around her. It was only then that she realized she was still in Anne's apartment. All was quiet and dark. Gentle early morning lights filtered through the kitchen windows and she could see no threat. Nothing chasing her. She remembered Anne and Coan waking her and saying goodbye. They were going to get his daughter and they'd only be away for one day.

She sighed. Reaching over the couch arm, she touched the fake brass base of an ornate lamp. It flickered on and pushed back the darkness in the room. Cassandra wiped her face with her hand and shivered. That was a horrible dream. But she had to hold onto the fact that it *was* only a dream.

Her stomach rumbled impatiently at her and she wondered if there was any food in Anne's apartment.

*\* 2 \**

*Approximately 8am Marakan time,*

*10am Rona time*

*The City of Kaamo, Rona*

Jaola lay on her side facing Coan. He was on his stomach with a pillow under his injured shoulder. Jaola watched him sleep, a little jealous of his ability to do so. Unfortunately, her body was just too tired and her mind too hyped up to rest, so she'd watched him sleep for the past four hours.

Coan looked so much younger when he was sleeping. At twenty-four he was actually a year older than she was, but at that moment he looked like he was ten years younger. He had the face of a teenager, calm, utterly relaxed and so very innocent. She didn't know his background, but guessed that he'd lived a comfortable, safe life, with little to no traumas until the recent kidnapping, which was a very rare thing in modern Arana.

The digital clock on the wall seemed to flicker at her, reminding her of reality. She sighed and got out of bed. Walking through into the small en-suite bathroom, she grabbed a towel from the vanity and started to undress. She'd need a quick shower before anything else. The water was hot and thankfully the pressure quite high. As she cleaned herself, she wondered where they were going to start searching. Coan had described what happened in a lot of detail, but she still wasn't certain where to begin. She could perhaps do some scouting to try and find these RA with the hope of approaching them directly, though that could be dangerous while unarmed. It was probably safer if they started looking for the warehouse instead.

He said that they were taken to a warehouse in a large lot of other warehouses, an industrial zone, obviously, where he'd been told that if he didn't kill that Ronan Agent, they would kill his daughter. It was also the last place he'd seen Leelah.

Jaola frowned, *"but the girl could have been moved easily. She could be anywhere by now."*

She turned the water off, stepped out of the small glass-surrounded shower and started drying herself with a towel.

The warehouse was really their best lead, and if she was honest, their only lead. They did have to be very careful, though. She was skilled enough to protect him from a few problems, such as muggings, but not an entire terrorist cell of Psi and Talent. She'd been unable to stash a weapon on the plane and didn't have any contacts in Kaamo to arrange acquiring another. She sighed. There really wasn't much choice. She would do all that she could with what she had, if it wasn't enough to keep them alive or find this girl, there was little she could do to change the situation.

She walked into the sitting room and searched through their bags for underwear, a white long-sleeved t-shirt, and a pair of simple purple velvet dress pants. Putting the long-sleeved shirt on over her underwear, she smiled at Coan's young face. He was kind of adorable in his innocence.

Leaning over, she touched his shoulder and echoed her physical words in his head, so that he would hear her. "Coan, it's time to wake up. Wake up now."

With a groan, he opened his eyes.

"Go have a shower Coan, you'll feel much better. I'll make you a coffee, OK?"

Without waiting for his reply, she went into the small kitchenette, started the kettle boiling

and searched through the sachets of hot drinks the hotel supplied.

**\* 3 \***

*10am Marakan, Arana-Time,*

*12pm Kaamo, Rona-Time*

*Kaamo, Rona*

Coan stood on gravel, a few meters from the doorway of a small warehouse. His heartbeat was throbbing in his ears. He was almost certain that this one was the warehouse where the RA took him and Leelah.

Anne stepped up next to him. "Is this it?"

He swallowed. "Yes."

"OK, I'll go in first and clear it, you stay behind me." She walked around him to the door, but his feet wouldn't move to follow her. He watched her from the road as she checked the door and opened it. Looking like one of those people on a reality police show with her back to the wall, she glanced in before stepping cautiously inside and out of sight. Through the open door, he could see an empty concrete floor.

She appeared again a moment later. "It looks abandoned. Coan, come on, show me where you last saw her."

The warehouse wasn't very big, as far as warehouses went. It was two stories high, with a square concrete floor and brick walls that held up a rough tin roof. On the same wall as the entrance, but in the far corner, there was another door. Coan was almost certain that it led to a small office, and that office was the last place he saw his daughter.

"Coan, tell me what happened again?"

He pointed to the door. "We were taken into that room."

She walked towards it and he numbly followed. Was his daughter dead? It had been too long and it wasn't as if the RA were afraid of killing children. He didn't know if he should expect to find her body or to hope for finding her alive. Instead, he just felt a numb sort of despair inside. Anne opened the door and let him into the room before her. He took a deep breath, readied himself and stepped inside. The small room was utterly empty. Neither the chairs nor the desk were present in the room like last time.

On the day of the kidnapping, they had pushed him inside and down onto a chair in front of a small battered desk. A Ronan man had sat next to him and flung photos onto the wood surface. They were photos of a Ronan Agent living in Arana. The man told him that he had to kill the Ronan

Agent or he would never see Leelah again.

Just being in the room again brought up the fear and grief he'd felt that day. He remembered the harsh unfriendly faces of their captors, the silence of the man who went back to Arana with him and the absolute terror of having to leave Rona without Leelah. He swallowed back his grief and the memories. There was nothing in that room left for him. Turning towards the door, he looked up at Anne. Her eyes had gone a darker green than he'd seen before, but otherwise she seemed emotionless. He wondered what she was thinking.

"There's nothing here." Pushing past her, Coan walked out into the main area of the warehouse again. He didn't want to be there anymore. He wanted to leave the warehouse and get away from it. Surely, there was somewhere else they could go looking for her?

"Where else can we go? What else can we do?" He felt so heart struck and lost, he just wanted to curl up into a little ball and weep for the rest of his life.

She sighed. "I'm not sure, Coan. We may as well walk back to town and get something to eat. Then we can talk about what to do next, OK?"

He nodded numbly.

\* 4 \*

*Approximately 10am, Marakan, Arana*

Cassandra still felt very unnerved by her dream, but she tried to ignore it. She sat at Anne's small round table eating morning tea. The peanut butter and jam sandwich she was eating was good, her favorite thing next to a hot chocolate with marshmallows, and that she was drinking. Anne didn't have the marshmallows she liked or the fancy proper hot chocolate powder, but it was still hot chocolate with marshmallows and better than none at all.

She couldn't shake the feeling from her dream, of being chased and trapped, and being utterly powerless to escape. This feeling made her very restless, and her restlessness wasn't helped by the fact that Anne didn't have any games or books to read and there was nothing on television. She wished she had someone to talk to about all of this, someone to reassure her that the feeling from the dream wasn't real. But it couldn't be real because she was still in Anne's apartment.

*"And dreams are just dreams, right?"* she asked herself.

There came a knock at the door. "Cassandra, it's Father Owen, will you let me in?" Even though the door muffled his voice, she recognized him.

When the door opened, he smiled at her over many grocery bags. "How are you today, Cassandra?"

She liked his deep friendly voice. "I'm good, I was feeling a bit lonely before, but you're here now."

The bags were dropped onto the nearby table and he sat down on one of the chairs. Cassandra started to explore the bags and put their contents on the table.

She glanced, unseeing, into the nearest paper grocery bag. "I had a horrible nightmare last night."

"Oh?" He said pulling out a bag of chocolate cookies from the other bag. "Why not tell me about your dream?"

She ripped the packet open and took out a cookie. "Chocolate cookies!"

His smile widened.

"Oh," she said through cookie crumbs, "The dream. I was being chased, and I was trapped, I couldn't get out. There was another part of it, but I can't remember. It was awful, anyway."

Father Owen frowned. "That's not a nice dream at all."

She pounced on the chocolate cookies again and started to chew on two, one in each hand. "I know, but it was just a dream right? Not real?" She looked up at him over the cookies hoping for reassurance.

Father Owen paused, and then he smiled. "Of course it's not real."

She felt slightly uncomfortable. She'd expected no pause and no sickly feeling in her heart.

*"That certainly didn't make me feel better,"* she thought absently.

He leaned over the bags with a grin on his face, oblivious to her uncomfortable feeling. "Do you want some hot chocolate, with marshmallows?" He pulled out a box of proper hot chocolate and what looked like a bag of those little marshmallows Mr. Tyrell used to buy.

She laughed. "Oh, yes, yes please! I'll start the kettle. Where did you find them?"

"When all this is over, I promise I'll show you where to buy them OK?"

\* 5 \*

*11.30pm Marakan, Arana*

Cassandra was feeling very sleepy and she didn't know why because it was only about lunchtime. There was a haze around her that she couldn't clear. Frowning, she looked numbly at the priest. "Father Owen, what's your first name?"

His blue eyes seemed to sparkle and he smiled affectionately. "Dobid. My first name is Dobid. Cassandra, you look tired. Do you want to have a nap?"

She nodded and then shook her head. Flashes of that dream crossed her mind. Frowning,

she looked at him fuzzily. "I don't know." She started to tip and leaned so far on one side of her chair that she quietly slipped onto the polished wood floor.

He stood and gently lifted her up onto his shoulder. "I am going to put you to bed and then leave you alone."

Cassandra's face frowned. "Bed?" There was fear on her face, but she slipped into a deep sleep in his arms. He carried her to the huge bed and covered her in blankets. Then quietly, he left the apartment.

**\* 6 \***

*11.45pm Aranan time, 1.45pm Ronan time*

*Kaamo, Rona*

Coan was staring at the concrete in front of him as he walked. Dark clouds covered the sun and it was starting to get cold. It looked as if it was going to rain soon. He wondered if he'd ever see his beautiful daughter again. Even if she was alive they may never find her in a city this size. Coan sighed heavily. He was utterly exhausted.

Anne walked a little ahead of him. She seemed to have more hope than he did. As he glanced up to see how far ahead she was, he saw a battered old woman step towards him. She was dressed in oddly colored clothes that did not match her ancient face.

Coal black eyes smiled down at him. "You've lost your little lamb haven't you? Tut tut tut, you need help to find your little lamb."

Coan frowned at the woman and started to walk around her. She was obviously homeless and quite mad.

"No, no, you need help finding your lamb, Old Ana can help. They took her so you would kill The Searcher and now he hunts you always."

Coan stopped and blinked at the strange old woman. "What?"

Physically, she looked as if she was extremely old, but her dark eyes were deep and Coan felt a shiver run down his spine because there seemed to be something alien about her.

"Tut tut, you should listen to Old Ana, she knows... Old Ana's seen your little lamb. Saw her last night crying in the dark."

Coan's heart raced in his chest, "*is she talking of Leelah?*"

"What do you know old woman?"

"Ah, that is better, you want Old Ana's help then? Hmm? Do you? What will you give Old Ana?"



“What do you want? We have money, here.” Coan handed over the hundred-dollar note he had in his pocket. “Here, have our money, where is my daughter?”

The strange woman dropped the note on the pavement. “Old Ana don’t need your money. It’s dirty. Makes Ana dirty. Old Ana needs your shoes!”

Coan bent over to pick up the note and stared at this woman. She had to be crazy.

“We have a lot of money... Old Ana... we can buy you shoes, please tell me where she is.”

The woman backed away from Coan, shaking her head slowly. “No! Money makes Old Ana dirty. Give your shoes or Old Ana walks away, your Lamb forever lost.”

Anne stood silently next to him, glancing first at the old woman and then at Coan. He stared at Old Ana with a deep frown on his face. If he trusted that she wasn’t crazy, she might actually take them directly to Leelah, but if she *was* crazy he’d have no shoes.

“OK, you can have my shoes.”

\* 7 \*

*12pm Marakan, Arana*

Cassandra whimpered in her sleep, she was being chased and they were closing in on her. Someone was knocking at the door. It was loud and she tried to open her eyes. But she couldn’t. There was a bang and she jumped. The fright of the noise woke her enough to open her eyes.

In front of her, running over the broken door, were men in black with black masks on. They pushed over the couch as they ran into the room. Cassandra tried to scream, her mind forming the desperation but her lips would not respond and no sound came out.

The men in black lifted their guns and aimed them at her. She choked on her scream. The fear overwhelmed her and tears flowed down her cheeks.

A man clothed in gray walked through the door towards her. She recognized him as the Agent who had been chasing them, Jessal. He walked right up to her with handcuffs in one fist. Terrified and crying, she flinched away from him.

“You are now in the custody of the Agency. You have no rights. Come with me.” He leaned over her, put the handcuffs on her wrists and then taking hold of her arm, he tried to lift her to her feet. But in her terror she lost all strength in her body. She couldn’t make a noise let alone stand. He sighed and picked her up like a baby in his arms. “Not so brave without the others are you?” He took a breath and yelled. “Withdraw!”

One by one the black clothed men dropped their gun barrels to the floor and marched loudly out of the flat. Cassandra watched helplessly from his arms as he followed the black-clothed

men out of the room. Dizziness spun her around and she frowned, fighting the sleep that kept trying to force itself upon her. As he walked into the hallway, she lost her grip and was dragged heavily into the darkness of sleep.

**\* 8 \***

*1pm Aranan, 3pm Ronan*

*Kaamo, Rona*

Coan's heart was beating loudly in his ears. She was somewhere in this building. He ran up a warm passageway, he could feel the cream colored carpet under his bare feet. It was such a strange place, a terrorist base that seemed more like an office block.

*"I hope the room Leelah is in has carpet, it's cold outside."*

He ran right at the T intersection in the corridors like that crazy woman had told him. At the end of the corridor was a metal door, it stuck out against the professional calm cream shades of the rest of the hallway.

He stopped at the strange metal door. It had a sliding bolt lock that he reached for and pulled open. She was behind this door, his beautiful daughter was behind this big metal door. The bolt slid easily and he pushed. The room beyond was dark and he flinched as his feet touched the cool concrete floor inside.

"Leelah?" His voice echoed in the dark room. Pushing the door wider to let in more light, he squinted around the room. His eyes were taking their time to adjust to the sudden low light. "Leelah?"

Next to the door he could see a light switch, so he hit it. Above him a neon bulb flickered on. The room was very rough. The floor was uneven concrete and the walls were unpainted boards with white filler smudged randomly over them.

Coan looked around expectantly. "Leelah..?" In the darkest corner of the room, she lay with her back to him. Her beautiful auburn hair was messy and wet around her head and over her face. His eyes widened and he rushed over to her.

He touched her shoulder and rolled her over gently. Coan let out a startled whimper. In front of her lay a large pool of blood. Her beautiful little face was cold and very certainly not alive. A huge gash opened the skin on her neck and blood covered some of her face and body. He let out a sob.

"Coan?" Anne stood behind in the doorway.

He took Leelah's cold little hand in his and started to weep. All that he had gone through to

get there and she was gone, the last light of his life had gone. He had nothing left, his beloved wife was dead and now their only child was gone as well. His career was over, so was his freedom. Everything he had fought for all of his life was dead or destroyed.

As he gave in to the feeling of abject despair and loss, he felt Anne's arms around him. She spoke but he couldn't hear her words.

**\* 9 \***

*7pm, Marakan, Arana*

They slept a little on the plane journey, but not much. Jaola felt utterly exhausted. They had to get Cassandra and some of her stuff, and then they'd be out of the apartment to her nearest safe house. There, she hoped she could sleep properly. The taxi stopped outside the entrance to her apartment building, the driver barked an amount around twenty dollars and she opened her purse.

She passed the burly taxicab man a hundred dollar note. "We got out three blocks over, yes?"

The man's eyes widened joyfully at the note and he nodded.

She got out of the car. Coan got out slowly on the other side. He stood with his head down looking at the pavement. He hadn't really spoken since leaving that office block. She let him be quiet because his mind needed time to recover from such a shock and loss.

The taxicab drove away and they were standing on the road opposite her small apartment. Absently, she looked up at the windows of her kitchen, which could be seen on the second story above them. There was a light was on.

She wondered if Cassandra was OK. She wasn't even sure if there had been any food left, but maybe Father Owen had brought some with him. Gently grabbing Coan's arm, she led him across the road to the entrance of her building. She had to sleep soon, there was only so much caffeine one could ingest in one forty-eight hour period.

Opening the door they stepped inside her building and made their way towards the elevator.

**\* 10 \***

Jessal held his breath in anticipation. Armon and Tasoia had just entered the apartment block and very soon they'd be in custody. He stood in an empty apartment sitting room, in front of a broad window, which overlooked the street and the fugitive's apartment building entrance. He had

three groups of armed Agents stationed around her apartment to trap them once they entered. One group covered the main entrance in various positions, ready to secure that exit. He had another group covering the main stairwell and the fire escapes and when they exited the elevator, he would lead the third team up to bring them in.

Lifting the binoculars to his eyes, Jessal watched the two of them walk inside out of view towards the elevator. He waited, holding his breath.

~ “Targets have entered the elevator, over,” came a radio call in his earpiece. Jessal lifted his arm up and signaled the team with him in the room to get ready to run.

~ “They have exited the elevator, over.” Giving the signal to move out, he turned and started out of the apartment with the team of eight armed Agents following close behind him.

He ran out onto the road and across it, with his heart beating loudly in his ears. They only had to get up the elevator and there was no escape.

**\* 11 \***

Jaola stood in her doorway staring at the mess inside and the broken door. She blinked. Her mind was blank for a moment.

“Hai di’ chena!” She whispered.

Recovering from her shock, she stepped over the broken door and tipped the nearby coffee table. On the underside of it, a briefcase was taped down and hidden from normal sight. She ripped it free and knelt, placing it flat on the ground.

“Cassandra. Cassandra!” Yelled Coan.

Fiddling with the catch, Jaola watched Coan search the room. “Cassandra?”

The catch loosened under her fingers and she opened it. It held money, fake ID’s, some contact lenses, phone numbers and a spare gun. She grabbed the gun and clips, putting them in her pockets and closed the briefcase.

“Coan! We have to leave! Now!” She stood, grabbed his arm and pulled him forcibly out of the room.

“But, but... what about Cassandra?” His eyes were wide and full of sadness.

“Later! We have to save ourselves first Coan. Come on!”

Stepping back over the wrecked door, she turned away from the elevator and started running, dragging him down the hallway with her. The Agency was probably already inbound to arrest them. Jaola knew if they could just get out of sight they’d have a better chance of escaping.

“Coan, hold this.” She dropped his elbow and passed him the closed briefcase. With her

hands free, she loaded the handgun.

At the end of the hallway, she ran right and Coan followed her, at least they'd be out of sight of her door for the moment.

**\* 12 \***

Jessal stepped out of the elevator and ran to the apartment doorway. He raised his gun to eye level and entered the room. One sweep of the sitting room and kitchen, and he saw that no one was there. He signaled for another Agent to enter and help him clear the next room. The bedroom was clear and in less than thirty seconds, he knew the small rooms down the hallway were clear as well.

“Hai da!” He said through gritted teeth.

Running out of the apartment, he signaled for four men to go up the hallway past the elevator and signaled the remaining four to follow him down the hallway in the other direction.

As he ran, he lifted his hand to touch the radio.

~ “Apartment is clear. Team two and three check?”

Reaching an intersection, Jessal looked left. There were more apartment doors with the hall ending in another door. They'd evacuated all of the apartments on this level and installed sensors, so if anyone had opened one of the doors he'd know.

Turning right, Jessal kept running. Both groups stationed around the building called in their individual clear signals over the radio. There was another intersection to the right and they turned again. According to the plans that he was given this hallway only led to the building manager's apartment and a locked stairwell down to the basement. It was sealed. The building plans stated there was no access to the street level, only access to the furnace and cleaning supplies in the basement.

Keeping his gun raised at eye level, Jessal turned the final corner in the corridors. At the end of the hallway stood the door to the basement, which to his surprise, was just closing. Jessal started firing before his conscious mind caught up with his instinct.

He closed the gap between the door and himself, and stopped shooting. The metal door was probably locked and he wasn't going to waste bullets on it. He tried to catch a glimpse of anything through its tiny broken window. All he could see were concrete stairs and a splatter of blood on the wall opposite the door, he must have hit someone.

He touched the radio and barked. ~ “I need a battering ram or the keys to the basement door, whichever gets here first!”

Jaola let Coan walk past her and took her skeleton key out of the lock. As she let the door close itself behind her, she heard a shot. Above the din of repeated shots, a deep pain hit her in the stomach and she fell.

“Anne! Wake up! What do I do?”

She opened her eyes to a panicked face. Frowning she tried to remember what had happened. “What?”

Coan stared at her with wide blue-gray eyes. “Anne, they’re hitting the door upstairs, they’ll be down here any minute! Why did you take us down to the basement? I can’t find a way out.”

Blinking, Jaola tried to stand. It hurt, it hurt a lot. “Sewer entrance...” she gasped. “There’s a sewer entrance... at the back.”

He turned and walked away. The basement wasn’t very big and wasn’t very clean either. Under the stairs stood a large rusty furnace, which heated the whole building, and scattered around the bare concrete floor were boxes, tools and cleaning equipment. Using the banister for leverage, Jaola managed to drag herself up to a standing position and watch Coan throwing boxes around in his search for the grating.

Running her hand along the wall to support herself, she walked to where Coan had stopped. He looked at her, panic and confusion in his eyes. “Is this it?”

A square grating lay in the floor between them.

She nodded. “Open it, Coan. Lower the ladder.”

He nodded and pulled it open with his good arm. “How are you going to get down there, Anne?”

It wasn’t far to the bottom. “At the bottom go north... about a hundred meters... and there’s a door. My keys will open it. A car parking building. Blue car right next to the door. You go first Coan... You can catch me if I fall.”

Jessal stood in the wide cross-section of two sewer tunnels. He looked in all four directions around him and sighed. There was very little chance that they’d be found down there because it was a maze. He’d sent the other teams to look, but he doubted they’d find anything.

Walking a little up the narrow pathway, he glanced around for a sign of which way they went. There was a lot of dirty water and round concrete walls, but very little else. A short way up the tunnel, he felt a niggle in the back of his neck and stopped walking. Turning in the direction of the niggle, he noticed a dark passageway coming off the main tunnel. Its walls were straight and the passageway was very short ending in a brick wall. There was a big metal door to his right. There was no handle on the door, just a lock, but to one side of it was a smudge of bloody red.

~ “This is Team one, Ohna, I’ve found a door about a hundred meters north of the sewer grating, where does it lead?”

~ “Uh... one moment, sir.” He heard typing over the radio. ~ “It’s the Market Street Car Parking building.”

Jessal swore under his breath. ~ “All groups they’ve exited into the Market Street Car Parking building, Team two and three, surround the building, Team one, I am a hundred meters north of the sewer entrance. Get here, ASAP!”

Gritting his teeth, Jessal started to kick the door near the lock. In the pit of his stomach he knew they’d gotten away, but he had to keep trying otherwise he’d be accused of letting them escape.

**\* 15 \***

Coan drove as quickly as he could without going over the speed limit. He wanted to go faster, but Anne had said that he was to drive without bringing any attention to the car. She was asleep in the passenger seat next to him, or at least he hoped she was asleep. As they left the parking building, Anne gave him instructions to get to a healer in the outskirts of Marakan. She seemed to be bleeding a lot. He wished he knew anything about medicine to help her.

Looking at the dimming road ahead of him, Coan watched out for their turn-off. Anne said he should turn at a red house on Hill Street, and then he had to drive to the end of the road where there was a long private driveway. The streets around him were mostly residential. It was the main North Road out of the city to some farming communities, Marakan, and eventually going over the Great Mountain Range between Arana and Krana.

Up ahead on the four-lane road, he saw a bright red house lit up with search lights and as the distance shortened he saw in front of the house a small road sign: “Hill Street North”. He turned the car and kept driving. A kilometer or so down, the unlit road ended in a cul-de-sac and a gated driveway. One of the gate panels was open wide enough for the car. He looked anxiously at Anne, who was very pale and he couldn’t even tell if she was breathing.

Accelerating quickly, he drove the car straight onto the drive. He hoped he wasn't too late for Anne. A tall man in light clothing came running out of an old turn-of-the-century house as he drove up to it. The man had a bag in his hand and ran up to Anne's door as soon as Coan stopped. Obviously, the man frequently dealt with strange cars arriving with medical emergencies.

The door opened and the man smiled briefly at Coan. "My name is Kaan." He reached the doorway to check her pulse and breathing. "She's alive, help me get her inside."

**\* 16 \***

*The next day*

*Araam City Agency Base*

"Jessal Mier?"

Jessal stood in a broad room at the furthest end of a long black table. He looked up at the adjudicator at the other end of the table. "Yes, sir."

"Please tell us again what happened to the girl..." The man looked at his notes for a moment and then captured Jessal in his cold blue gaze again. "Cassandra Cowdy."

"A man who identified himself as Agent Aenan took her into custody."

The man frowned at him. "So where is the girl now?"

"As I said Agent Aenan took her from the scene moments after we captured her."

The man looked away from Jessal and at another man nearby. "Agent Pahna, what have you found out about this character?"

The man smiled politely to the adjudicator. "Sir, we have found no trace of any living Agent, Psi or otherwise under the name of Aenan."

Jessal turned to look at this older man, shocked. "What?"

"Jessal," the adjudicator lifted an unimpressed eyebrow at him. "You turned over a prisoner to someone who doesn't exist. And you were unable to apprehend two fugitives who you had within reach. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Jessal stood there, flabbergasted and a little frightened. "Well, sir, I... I don't know. I guess... nothing... Losing the two fugitives, Coan Tasoia and Jaola Armon was solely on the out of date information about the layout of the building, which I should have double checked. The loss of the girl was purely my fault for being duped by this person." He swallowed. "I leave my fate at the mercy of your judgment." He hung his head respectfully.

There was a very long pause, but Jessal did not dare to lift his head to see what was happening.



“Jessal Mier, it is this council’s judgment that you be suspended indefinitely. All of your security clearances will be revoked and Raraan here shall escort you to the Telepath Defense department to have all secure information in your memory removed. Good day.”

Jessal looked up at them with wide eyes and his heart beating quickly in his chest. “*Memory removed?*”

Raraan took Jessal’s elbow and led him out of the broad room. When they’d walked some way down the hall, he looked at Raraan with a touch of desperation. “Raraan, that ID of his looked real. How was I supposed to know that it was a fake?”

“Jessal--”

“My memory removed? I don’t have all that much security-threatening memory to remove.”

Raraan pulled Jessal into a small alcove in the corridor. “Jessal look at me. Think about it, anyone else would have been executed for treason.”

Jessal stared at Raraan’s blue eyes and saw a little sympathy there. For a moment he thought about it. He was right! This guy would have been considered a potential Psi Rebel.

“But, why did they let me live?”

“Consider yourself lucky, Jessal. Someone else besides me was batting for you. Now, come on.” Raraan moved out of the alcove and pulled Jessal with him.

“*If that’s the case,*” thought Jessal, “*maybe Aenan was a real Agent after all.*”

## **Part Three**

### *The Lightning Struck Tower*

## Chapter Eight

\* 1 \*

*The Year of our Founder 3010*

*In the City of Marakan, Arana*

*A few days later, sometime in the morning*

*“Cassandra? Where are you?”*

She opened her eyes and frowned, “*what?*” The voice in her mind dimmed and fell out. Confusion overwhelmed her. She didn’t understand.

Her body lay somewhere cold. In front of her was a concrete wall and the room seemed to be dark. She couldn’t remember anything. Why was she here? Where was here? Why did she feel so scared? Turning over, she looked around her. It was a tiny room with white concrete brick walls, and smooth concrete floor and ceiling. The “door” was made of bars like a prison. She wondered if that meant she’d done something wrong. What could she have done? She tried to remember something before this place, but there was nothing to remember, not even the semblance of images or feelings, just nothingness.

The confusion overwhelmed her again, and she curled up into a ball with her knees touching her chin. She shivered, as much from the cold as her complete confusion. She lay like that on her side for a long time. She kept trying to find anything to remember, while going around in circles in her mind because there was nothing there.

*“Hey! Get up!”*

The girl opened her eyes.

In the doorway stood a boy about her age, short brown hair and gray eyes. He glared at her. “Come on, we’re going to be late for lunch!”

She frowned at the boy. “Where am I?”

“Come on!” The boy strode up to her and dragged her to her feet. He pulled her out into a hallway.

She fought him, feeling more frightened and confused. “But, where are we going?”

“Lunch! Come on, hurry up. If we’re not there soon we won’t get any food. What’s your name anyway?”

She shook her head. “I... I... I don’t know.”

The boy said nothing, instead he dragged her roughly by the elbow as he ran down the narrow corridor. The hallways were all made of concrete, the walls, floors and ceilings. It seemed unusually sparse and unwelcoming to her.

Sensing, somehow, that the boy meant her no harm she kept pace with him. And he let go of her arm. They came to some plain wooden double doors set into a concrete wall. The boy pushed through with his shoulder and they stepped into a larger space. There were children lined up along one wall as if they were waiting for something. Other children sat at various picnic tables around the room eating. Everyone wore the same ugly gray overalls that she'd woken up in. Some of the children were a little younger than her and others were a great deal older.

The boy moved to stand in line and she followed. The line moved quickly and she saw up ahead that she was expected to know what to do.

“What do I do?” She asked, fiddling with her roughly cut fingernails.

“There are plates, you grab one when you go past and the lunch workers will put food on it when you get to them. Then we go and sit down.”

“OK.” The girl stared wide-eyed at him. She felt so confused and frightened she couldn't really think properly.

He sighed and smiled sympathetically. “My name is Wolf. Welcome to nuthen.”

“What is this place?”

“It's a jail for kinetic and trouble kids until they turn eighteen. Do you really not remember your name?” Wolf motioned for her to take a tray and plate from the pile in front of them and she did so.

“I don't remember anything. Nothing before I woke up in that room.”

Wolf frowned and then shrugged. “Oh well, we'll just have to make up a name for you until your memory comes back.”

\* 2 \*

“Hey new girl, what's your name?” The scruffy looking red headed girl sitting opposite her cocked her head.

The girl frowned. Wolf had told her the situation when they sat down. “I don't know.”

“Whatcha in here for?”

The girl felt her irritation rise. “I don't know.”

“What's your name?”

“I don't know, I told you already.”

“But what you in here for?”

The girl glared angrily at the red head.

“Jean, leave off.” Sitting next to her, Wolf glared at the other girl across the table.

Jean poked her tongue out and stood up.

Wolf gave her an apologetic smile. “Jean is a lot nicer once you get to know her. So, what do you want to call yourself?”

The girl shrugged. “I don’t know, what do you think?”

“Sarah?”

She shook her head. “That’s a nice name, but what about a cool name like yours?”

He smiled and looked thoughtful, turning his gray eyes up to the ceiling for a moment to think. “Uh, how about Avalia, Moana, Enana, um, Luthium, Taniquell, um--”

The girl’s eyes lit up. “Ooo, I like that one! Say it again.”

The boy smiled. “Taniquell. So we call you Tani then?”

She nodded.

Wolf stood up with his tray and motioned her to come with him. She followed to a pile of trays, plates and cutlery, where they placed their own in the appropriate piles.

“So what do we do here, anyway?”

“Well, we study every morning, we’re in the exercise yard after lunch, and after dinner it’s lights out. But, you’ve got to be careful in the exercise yard. Do you know how to fight, Tani?”

The girl frowned. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll find out.”

“Look, Tani, if you get into a fight today I can’t help you. You’re on your own, so just keep your head down until you get used to the place, otherwise you could be beaten to death on your first day.”

The girl felt cold inside her heart. “*Surely, it’s not that bad?*” she thought to herself.

“Oh, it can be.”

She stared at him. “I didn’t say that, how did you know I was thinking that?”

The boy smiled. “Your thoughts are loud to me. The adults call it being a telepath.”

Above them a loud siren rang out with three long high-pitched blasts.

She stared at the ceiling. “What’s that?”

He turned towards the double doors and pointed. “We have to go to the exercise yard now. That’s another thing, if you don’t obey the bells you’ll get into trouble. If an adult catches you in the lunchroom after a certain time, you’ll get beaten. Come on, I’ll show you how to get to the yard.”

Tani sat in the corner of the exercise yard with the other young ones, next to Wolf. The floor was made of hard black sand. The walls on all four sides were rusting metal, which towered above them at least two people high. There was no roof, just the blue sky above them and a howling gusty wind. Not a lot of the wind blew down into the yard, but the few gusts that did reach her brought a penetrating cold with them. The prison must have been there for a long time because there were lots of long rust lines down to the ground from bolts and folds in the metal. It was no place for children, she decided, no matter what they had done.

The youngest children sat huddled up in one corner of the yard and a group of ten or so older teenagers stood on the other side, pacing. One of the older boys stared intently at their group of younger kids. Tani could sense that trouble was coming. She didn't know what or how but the feeling was just there inside of her, like a bad smell or a subsonic tone.

The older boy who watched them intently was blond and had a very harsh, cold face. Tani had a sense that this boy was somehow broken inside, possibly even broken by being in this place for so long. The boy turned as if he'd made a decision and strode towards the group. Everyone around her lowered their eyes and turned away from the approaching teenager.

"Hey you!" The boy pointed at someone on the edge of the group. Tani tried to keep her eyes low enough not to get his attention, but she wanted to see what he'd do. He approached someone who she couldn't see at the front of the group and grabbed hair.

A girl screamed in fear and pain.

"I was talking to you." The boy snarled. He dragged the girl by her silver-gray hair towards the center of the yard. Tani felt uneasy. She could see the girl on the ground, weeping and struggling under the boy's grip. She seemed terrified and he exultant, as if in her terror he had won something. The silver-haired girl sat crumpled at his feet, her almost white hair tightly held in his fist. She was tiny in comparison to his near-adult height. For a moment she felt a sensation of *déjà vu*, but the older boy's voice shattered the feeling.

"Why do you have silver hair, girl?"

The girl's response was quiet and said between sobs, so Tani didn't catch the words.

"Oh, you don't know? Why didn't you respond to me when I called out before? You should respect your elders. Hey boys, what do you think? Should we teach her a lesson?"

The other teenagers all laughed and crowed encouragement from the sidelines, and then the blond-haired boy punched her hard in the face. The silver-haired girl fell limply onto the ground. The boy kicked her in the stomach but she didn't move. The group of older boys advanced on her

body, crowding around. When she could no longer see the girl the boys started to throw punches and kicks.

Tani chewed on the side of her lip. "Shouldn't we try to help?"

Wolf shook his head. "No, Tani, if you interfere and you're not a kinetic they'll hurt you too."

"But... surely--"

Wolf's face became firm. "No. They'll hurt you too."

She and Wolf watched the kicking and punching. The boys seemed all at once to get bored and broke off in small groups, abandoning the girl's body to the open space in the middle of the yard. The girl lay unmoving on the crusted dark sand. Wolf sighed wearily and got to his feet. A few others got up as well and followed him to her body in the center of the yard. One person leaned over and touched the girl's face. Together the small group of kids lifted the girl's body and moved her to the side of the yard, near the entranceway.

Wolf solemnly returned and sat down next to Tani with his back to the center of the yard. "Well, she's dead."

She stared at him dumb-struck, a little frightened, a little sad. She wondered why they were all there in such a horrid place. Surely nothing any of these children could have done was so bad that they deserved this place?

A shaft of unease and fear shot through her and she glanced around. Someone stood directly behind Wolf. She frowned and looked up into a harsh face. The moment she recognized the harsh-faced boy she looked down again.

Wolf's body became tense and silver-gray eyes widened as he stared fearfully at her.

"Don't you know it's impolite to have your back to us?" The bully grabbed Wolf by the collar and dragged him away from Tani. Wolf didn't cry out, but his wide gray eyes told her that he was terrified.

Tani couldn't believe it and for a moment her own shock covered all thought. But then, the injustice of it all hit her. It wasn't fair! Why should they behave this way?

Anger filled her heart and she stood up. "You leave him alone, you big bully!"

The older boy dropped Wolf and stepped over him towards Tani. "Well, seeing as you're new, I'll ask you whether you know what happens to people who stand up for others?"

His condescending tone irritated her and she started fuming. "No, I don't."

"We beat them up too."

He strode towards her. The other children scattered away from her and she glared at their cowardice. The boy was much taller than her, so much so she couldn't stop him from grabbing her

hair. She screamed and struggled against him, but the pain made her feel angrier and not at all frightened.

From deep inside her mind, behind the fog of forgetting, something pushed through to her conscious awareness. She knew she had the power to change this situation, and with that understanding came the certainty of exactly what she could do. Reaching up, she grabbed the boy's hand that had her hair. She put all of her rage into her fingers and making sure she had a good grip, she threw that rage into his hand and up his arm.

The boy screamed in agony and dropped her. Standing as quickly as she could, she glared at the sniveling boy who was groping uselessly at his agony-filled arm. The face that looked at her was no longer harsh and hateful. Tears fell from his eyes and his bottom lip trembled.

"What did you just do?" He sniveled.

She put her hands on her hips. "Do you know what happens when someone tries to hurt a friend of mine?"

The boy frowned at her. "What?"

"This." Glaring, she threw her anger at the boy. He flew away from her with a shout of fear and hit the rusted wall behind him. He fell to the ground and did not get up.

Taking in as many of the older teenagers as she could with her glare, she stepped towards them. "Anyone else want to hurt my friend or any of the other kids?"

The older ones stood at a distance, staring at her wide-eyed. No one stepped forward to challenge her.

"Good."

Tani turned away and walked to where Wolf sat on the ground. She smiled at him and offered a hand for him to stand.

"You're a kinetic, Tani?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Is that what they call it?"

**\* 4 \***

### *Araam City*

Even after a few days, Jessal still felt a little pained from the telepaths. He also felt rather fuzzy around the edges from the beer he was drinking. He sat on the large couch he'd had to get imported from Rona. It was comfortable, a horrid shade of lime green, but comfortable compared to the tiny blue Aranan-made lounge suite in the other corner of his otherwise empty sitting room.

He sighed and took another swig of beer from the bottle. He never wanted to go through



what the telepaths did to him ever again. It felt as if they had taken a part of him, like his ear or an organ or even a section of his brain. There was the sensation that something was missing, that there was a hole somewhere inside of him that he couldn't quite describe. He wondered if Old Ana's 'Soul Eaters' description was a far more accurate name for the Agency than he had first thought. It certainly felt like he'd given them a piece of his soul and, worse still, a piece that he could never get back again.

Aside from getting as hammered as he could on weak Aranan beer, he had no idea what he was going to do now that he was out of work. Although technically on suspension, so he shouldn't be getting any money at all, the Agency was still paying him his normal wage. If he wanted to, he could easily crawl inside a crate of beer for the rest of his life. But even though it seemed mildly appealing at that particular moment, he still couldn't stomach the idea of giving up on life, he was only twenty-two after all. As far as he was concerned he may as well jump off a building for all the use doing nothing for the rest of his life would be.

*"No," he decided, "I am going to keep looking for those two, but Divinity help them when I finally do find them. Jessal took another mouthful of beer. But not today, today I am going to see how much weak Aranan beer it takes for me to pass out. I'll face it all tomorrow morning, or maybe tomorrow afternoon."*

*\* 5 \**

*A week later*

The niggling in the back of Jessal's head stopped and he looked around. He was standing in front of a small overgrown cottage. The lot was surrounded by a metal fence and the yard completely overgrown with weeds. A massive flowering wisteria vine had almost completely taken over one side of the house and most of the fence line. He pulled open the rusty gate and pushed through greenery towards the partially covered front door.

From the other side of the house came the sound of a car skidding in gravel and driving away at speed. Jessal pulled out his gun, ran through the overgrown yard and through layers of the dim-blue flowers that coated the gap between what was left of the cottage and the wrought-iron fence.

By the time he got around the house and yard, the car was out of sight and lost somewhere among the thousands of others on the nearby motorway. Jessal swore under his breath and looked around. On this side of the house nearby neighbors plodded around in gardens mowing lawns and watering flower-beds. He quickly put his gun away out of sight, it would not do for him to get

arrested.

That woman was obviously very good at evasion but he knew eventually, even with the loss of her real name from his memory, he would find them. It was only a matter of time. His Talent never failed once he had a search running. *“I will find them.”*

**\* 6 \***

*Two weeks since the loss of Cassandra*

*Someone was searching for her and no matter where she ran they were always just about upon her. She ran left and then right through a shadowy formless city with the sounds of running footsteps close behind her.*

*“Leave me alone!” She screamed desperately over her shoulder. “Leave me alone!”*

*Zigzagging across the dark formless streets, she ran faster and faster hoping that her erratic movements would throw the Searcher off her trail. But the footsteps never lessened behind her.*

*She sprinted around another corner and to her horror discovered that she’d accidentally run into a dead-end alley. Three high brick walls surrounded her and without anywhere to go she turned to face the only exit. A shadow stepped into view, a genderless shadow of focused animosity.*

*She stepped back and found herself against a wall. This was it, the Searcher would kill her now, of that she had no doubt.*

*“Jaola!” A male voice called from above her and a wire ladder banged onto the brick wall next to her shoulder. Grabbing the ladder hastily, she pulled herself up onto it. Only just getting a good grip on the rung, she found herself being lifted up into a dark sky. She glanced down at the alley and saw that the shadow’s formless face turn upwards and dark eyes glared at her down the barrel of a gun.*

*“No!”*

Jaola jolted up in bed with her eyes wide and the cry still in her throat. She looked around the bare room for the shadow, and only then did she realize that it was just a dream. The room was empty, just a square room with a double bed in the center of it and faded patterned walls. Coan lay sound asleep on the other half of the bed.

She checked her watch for the time and sighed. *“Two hours! Only two hours sleep!”*

Jaola groaned and carefully got out of bed, so as not to pop her stitches. She was beyond exhausted. For the past two weeks since they’d escaped the Ronan Agent, every time they moved to a safe house and she managed to relax enough to actually sleep, she would have the chasing dream.

And, if she trusted her instinct, the dream meant that it was time to go to the next safe house, regardless of what horrible time of the night it was or how tired she felt.

She wiped her face with her hand and left the room to start packing. It just had to let up some time soon, the Agency couldn't be that desperate to get them, surely?

\* 7 \*

*A week later*

The girl sat at a lunch-room table surrounded by her new friends. The others were all happy that morning and chatted animatedly across the table around her. But she felt strange inside. The strangeness didn't frighten her or make her feel anxious, it was more that she felt somehow separated from everyone around her, as if she was the eye of a storm and everyone else moved chaotically around her, as the storm.

Tani wasn't very hungry that morning, instead of eating, she swirled her food around her plate with a fork.

"If you're not going to eat that, Tani, I'll have it."

She glanced up at Wolf who sat opposite her, his face held that familiar mischief. Around her the others chimed in with a similar offer to her for her food. Shrugging, she pushed her plate across the table to Wolf who grabbed it enthusiastically and started shoveling.

For no conscious reason, she looked up from her greedy friend and directly at the doors that led out of the lunch-room. At that precise moment the doors opened and a man stepped into the room. She knew this man, but as with everything else she couldn't remember how she knew him. His face was emotionless and he looked around the room with ice-colored eyes. No one but her had noticed him yet. The others were still in their jovial hurricane of breakfast while she, and now him as well, in the stillness at the eye of the storm.

They locked eyes across the room. People around her started to notice him and a hush spread through the room. He kept staring at her. If he knew her, he should have recognized her and reacted in some way, but he didn't. The strange feeling within her shattered away and she was connected to everything around her again, she was quiet, they were quiet, and he was quiet.

He broke eye contact with her and looked around the room as he waited for complete silence.

"My name is Aenan. That is what you will address me as. I have come to offer some of you a place in the Agency, and if you accept you will come with me today to start your Agency training in earnest." The man paused and looked around the room with his blue eyes resting on

several different people. His gaze brushed over her and rested for a few breaths on Wolf before he glanced away, addressing the group again. “You will all stand and put away your dishes, then make an orderly single file line from where I am standing. Those offered a place must go to the exercise yard. Those who are not, must go to their rooms and await new instructions.” The room fell silent as he closed his mouth.

A few seconds passed and the tense silence shattered into a single mass of pushing, shoving kids. Taking her plate back from Wolf, Tani joined in the chaos and pushed her way to the bench where they left their dishes. By the time she had gotten back to the line it was already quite long and growing by the second.

She waited, apprehensively. She didn’t know what this could mean but if she was chosen she would leave. She felt a spark of guilt. “*But what will happen to the kids who are left behind if I go? Who will protect them from the bullies?*” However, as selfish as it was, if she was chosen she would leave this horrible place, and she doubted that anyone else chosen would stay either.

When she got to the front of the line she stepped forward. The man had a clipboard and looked down and his blue eyes cut into her. “What is your name?”

Tani swallowed, he really didn’t seem to recognize her. Maybe she was mistaken and she hadn’t known him before this place. “I... I don’t know my name, sir, but my friends call me Tani.”

He nodded and smiled formally. “Yes, you’re on my list. You have amnesia. Please go to the exercise yard.”

She turned away and walked out of the lunchroom, probably for the last time. As she walked down a dark hallway towards the yard, she wondered if he had her real name on his list or perhaps nobody knew her identity.

Exiting out into the sunlight, she searched around the yard for any familiar faces. There seemed to be only about twenty of the younger kids in the yard and none of the older kids. She saw Wolf walk towards her from the group and felt relief surge in on her, she had hoped he’d be wherever she was.

Running up to him, she grinned and hugged her friend. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here, it’d be no fun without you!”

He laughed but didn’t say anything.

All of her friends had been sent to the exercise yard. There was no one missing from the core group of six or so kids who had adopted her since defeating the bully-kid. They huddled together to one side of the others waiting, and talked in hushed voices about what they thought might happen if they went with this man. The consensus was that anything was better than the prison, even the Agency.

She was sitting on the sand behind Jean, plaiting the girl's long red hair into pigtails, when Aenan stepped out through the doorway. Behind him, the door slammed shut and blocked off the entry to the rest of the prison. He stared at the small group of kids for several silent breaths. His face was still emotionless except for icy blue eyes. He crossed his broad arms over his chest.

"Does anyone wish to stay here?" His voice was almost gentle.

None of the children spoke or moved and the hint of a smile twitched around the corners of his mouth.

"I didn't think so."

He walked through the middle of the huddled group and across the yard to the opposite wall. To her surprise, there was a loud clanking sound and the wall jolted sideways like a door to reveal what looked like a desert outside.

"Follow me." He said as he stepped out of view through the doorway. Tani frowned as she did as she was told. The harshness of this man seemed wrong to her. She felt as though he should be far gentler. The twenty or so children walked numbly after him. Tani followed quite closely, next to Wolf who was staring at the man's back intently.

"Where are we?" yelled someone behind Tani.

The man turned, the coldness gone from his face for a moment, and he smiled mischievously at the speaker. "Now that is something you will never know."

For a moment, Tani saw this man in her mind somewhere else. His smile was gentle and loving. "Dobid. My first name is Dobid." In that place with him she had felt completely safe. Tani tried to find more of the memory but it flew away from her like the other flashes. However, the safe feeling stayed with her and she started to relax. Whatever was happening, he wasn't the bad-guy.

They walked along a concreted path from the exercise yard and around one of the tall concrete walls. Ahead of them sat a huge helicopter with its blades slowly spinning up. Tani felt a flare of excitement. For some reason she knew that she'd always wanted to have a helicopter ride. Grinning, she looked sideways at Wolf. "Have you ever been in one of those?"

"No, but it looks fun."

**\* 8 \***

*The next day*

*Araam City Agency Base*

Tani looked at Aenan, her bright blue eyes were wide and her bottom lip twitched. "But I might hurt him."

One side of Aenan's mouth lifted in amusement. "Remember, he's a bad guy. It doesn't matter if you hurt him. Besides, if you drop him there are mats to break his fall. The boy will be fine. Go on, try and lift him."

In front of Tani a boy her age was standing stock-still. Little flecks of blue hair stuck out from his otherwise black head, making the startled boy look even more startled. Tani took a breath and felt for the force behind her anger. She imagined it like a hand, gripping the boy around his waist and lifted him carefully from the floor. He let out a slight whimper as his feet lost contact with the mat.

"That's good, Tani. Now I want you to move him over there above that red mat."

Tani had a sensation in the back of her mind, a feeling of control from somewhere. The feeling was of someone calm, sitting in her mind and helping her to lift something important in the past. She grabbed for the memory, but couldn't hold more than the comfortable feeling of complete control. She smiled and held onto that strength.

Slowly, she pushed at the boy, moving him across the room at the same height, and over the red mat.

"That's good Tani. Now hold him there."

With that slight memory of control the exercise felt easy, even though when they had started Aenan said it was a hard exercise. She grinned.

*"Now, drop the boy."*

Pulling down, she placed him back onto his own feet and the mat. The boy wearing black let out a deep sigh of relief.

"I didn't say to drop him, Tani!" Aenan lifted his hands to his hips.

She turned and frowned at him. "You did so, I heard you plain as day."

"You're lying, Tani. I said nothing at all."

Tani sighed. She knew he had said it. "I do not mean any disrespect, sir, but I don't have a reason to lie. I know I heard it. I heard it in my head like my thoughts, but with your voice."

His eyebrows lifted and he seemed genuinely surprised. "So, not only are you a kinetic, but you're also a telepath?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. What does that mean?"

He sighed and brushed his mouth with one hand, looking introspective for a moment. "OK, Tani, that'll be it for your training today. I want you to go have an early lunch downstairs and attend your afternoon classes as normal."

Tani was a little disappointed, she had wanted to continue training, but she knew it wasn't worth arguing with him. She nodded and quietly left.

The hall outside was quiet. The teaching area on level nine was usually full of students when she was out of class. But it was nice to pad down the white walls and dark blue carpet alone with just her thoughts to keep her company. She wondered how Wolf and Jean were going in their classes.

\* 9 \*

*The outskirts of Araam City*

Jaola sat on the bus next to the window. Traveling from the city center, the bus took about an hour to get to her stop, so she had plenty of time to think before she got back to Coan. Her stomach still hurt a lot from the gunshot wound, but she had to expect that, healers were able to heal only so much, and then the body had to do the rest. She had been lucky, she could have easily died from that wound.

Her thoughts turned to the situation at hand. She'd taken the risk to go into the city and find out if Father Owen was still at the Cathedral. But he wasn't. Apparently, he was elsewhere, but none of the priests and priestesses she talked to knew where. What it meant was that Father Owen was more than likely an Agent. There seemed no other way that the Agency could have traced her to the apartment in Marakan, unless they had gone through Father Owen.

If Father Owen was an Agent that meant the Agency had known where she'd gone when she escaped. They would have also known about Karen, because Father Owen himself had arranged for her to live with Karen those first few months out of the Agency. This would mean that not only were her two closest allies the enemy, but that in fact she had not been free from the Agency for three years, but was merely some kind of sleeper Agent. Her jaw muscles tightened.

She looked out of the grungy bus window next to her. Her thoughts moved from her betrayal to the girl. How could she get Cassandra back? She didn't know where any of those children's training bases were and wasn't exactly going to search every square inch of the Northern desert, it was vast and dangerous.

A few weeks ago, she'd thought she'd gotten some kind of contact. It had felt like the girl's conscious mind was awake, but her body had been asleep.

Jaola frowned. *"How could something like that occur? What could the Agency have done to her to cause something like that? Drugs?"* Jaola sighed in frustration. She was too tired and sore to figure this out.

Closing her eyes, she let her mind wander over inane things such as the rain that had started, and her and Coan's movements from safe house to safe house in Marakan and Araam.

She was very lucky that Coan had followed her street directions the day Jessal shot her. Kaan told her afterwards that she had been very close to death when she arrived. The bullet had gone straight through her, and cut a path of terrible destruction on its way out.

After they left his place, she brought Coan to a string of safe houses, but they kept on having to move on quickly. Now, they were staying at her last safe house in the area. When she got back from the city they had to leave. She wasn't sure where they'd go, but she'd managed to obtain a car, a stack of extra money and provisions, so they could go all the way to Tola if they needed.

Opening her eyes slowly, she felt a pins and needles sensation crawl up her spine. It was nearly painful but with the feeling came a realization. Her eyes widened.

*"Of course! They would have a handful if they had Cassandra knowing who she was and that Father Owen had betrayed her!"*

Jaola knew of a telepathic process where someone could move all conscious access to memories into the subconscious part of the brain so memories would be too hard to access. The process would give the person a near total amnesia, but it could be easily reversed if needed. It also took a lot of telepaths to make, but only one to release it. It was a bit like a dam breaking, once there was a hole in the barrier between the person and their memories the rest just flowed through, and the person was restored.

So, to find Cassandra, she had to search for her conscious mind pattern in a subconscious range of thoughts, which would be deeper and harder to sense. Jaola smiled and closed her eyes again. She would have about half an hour to do a quick search for Cassandra on the bus. Then, there would be plenty of time when she got back to Coan.

The stillness came to her mind quickly, and she reached out around her for a subconscious mind pattern like Cassandra's. This kind of search would take a while, because she had to sense small groups of minds at a time, over and over, instead of a blanket pattern search. She reached out across the country towards the last place she sensed the girl. But the girl wasn't there anymore.

She frowned. If the girl had been moved it was likely she was back in Araam. It had always been the best base for training, and with a kinetic as strong as Cassandra, one would want to train her with the best teachers. She reached back behind her towards the Araam City Agency Base. It was nearly time to get off the bus, but she still had a few minutes left.

She reached through the shielding in the walls of the Tower and sensed a tickle in her mind, the girl was there. She focused and touched the girl's mind. To her surprise, Cassandra was aware of her mental contact.

*"What is your name, girl?"*

There was a sense of recognition in her, a part of her knew Jaola, but the conscious part of



her did not.

*“I don’t know,”* replied the girl carefully. *“I don’t remember. But my friends here call me Tani. Who are you? Do you know who I am?”*

Jaola smiled, the mind was definitely Cassandra no matter how confused she was. She sent a mental smile to the girl. *“I think I do know who you are, Tani. My name is Anne. Do you know what has happened to you?”*

The girl frowned. She was so confused about the past. *“Not really, Anne, I woke up in this horrible prison for kids, and then Aenan took us away to this building where we have to go to school. He’s started teaching me how to throw things with my mind.”*

Jaola looked up and around her for a moment, she was nearing her stop. Reaching her hand to the bus window, she pressed the plastic strip that sounded the bell.

*“Tani, I have to go. But can you do me a favor?”*

*“What do you need?”*

*“Don’t tell anyone that we’ve talked, not even your friends. Do you have a place in your mind that others cannot hear?”*

She felt the girl nod.

*“Good, put our conversation there in that place, and don’t take it out again until I contact you.”*

*“But why, Anne?”*

Jaola felt the bus slow down at her stop and she started to get out of her seat.

*“Because you are a prisoner, if people find out about our conversation they will take you somewhere else, and we won’t be able to get you out. I want to help you escape, but I need some time to do that. Do you understand?”* Jaola sent with her thoughts a sensation of grave concern and the precarious situation she was currently in.

She felt the girl nod. *“OK, Anne, I can do that.”*

**\* 10 \***

Jessal sat two seats back from her in the bus. It was strange being close to her after searching so long and hard. He wasn’t so sure what he’d do now, now that he had actually found her, but he didn’t really care anymore. Perhaps he could kill her.

The bus slowed and ahead of him ‘Anne’ stood up. Standing as well, he tried to get closer to her, but the couple in front of him stepped into the aisle first. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he checked to see if his Agency issue handgun was still there. Its cool metallic surface assured him that

it was.

Walking down the steps of the bus onto the sidewalk, he looked around him. In one direction he saw her walking quickly away from him. Slowly and without apparent intention, Jessal headed in the same direction.

It had only been three years since he joined the Agency, but he struggled to remember the training he'd been given in following a telepath. He had to make a running dialogue in his public mind that did not relate to the telepath, he had to watch the direction they traveled in, but not the fact that it was them traveling it, and finally, he mustn't make any direct contact including thinking their name.

*"Oh my, what a rainy day it's been today... whoops... almost missed the turn... I'm going home not to Dave's place..."*

He watched detachedly as she turned another corner, and he thought about walking across the old run-down petrol service station to get to Clarke Street. Jessal kept up the mental chatter as best he could, but as the Agency had managed to wipe a lot of what he'd learned, he wasn't sure if his memory was missing something important.

He watched from the corner near an old-fashioned general store as she crossed another road and opened the gate of a small cottage. He ran quickly over the road behind her and as she got to the door, he opened the gate and pulled out his gun. Running up the steps, he pushed the gun sharply into her back as the door opened. "Why don't we go inside?"

She didn't even flinch. "Sure."

When the door closed behind them, he lifted the gun from her back and let her turn around to face him. As she turned, she lifted her hands to her hips.

"What is it that you want Jessal? Are you taking me in?"

Jessal frowned. He really didn't know what he wanted, but he certainly wasn't going to take her in. "Take you in? I'm not an Agent anymore. "

Her green eyes seemed to darken. "So, what do we do now Jessal? Are you going to kill me?"

For some reason he felt angry. "Maybe, it might solve all my problems. Where's Taso? I might want to kill him too!"

She shrugged. "I don't know where he is."

Jessal felt itchy in the back of his head and that itch made him angrier.

"Liar! Shut up!" He roared. His head hurt and he put a hand to his temple, as he glared sideways at her. "What are you doing to me?"

"You need to sleep, Jessal." The hallway they stood in bent around her green eyes.

He dropped the gun as the pain in his head intensified. “No... Stop it...”

**\* 11 \***

“No... Stop it...”

Jessal’s mind was surprisingly resistant to her sleep impulse, but she pushed at him harder and he slipped to the floor. She picked up his gun from near her feet and put it in her pocket.

“Coan! Co-an!” Jaola glared at Jessal’s unconscious form in the safe house hallway. How could they have been found? She had been so careful! Was it possible that one of her contacts had betrayed her? She didn’t think so, but who knew these days.

Coan stood in the doorway behind her. “Abe Kashaan! Is that, that Agent?”

“Yes.” She said impassively.

“Is he dead?”

She turned and glared at him. “No, Coan, he’s sleeping, he’ll be fine once he wakes up. I’m going to start packing our supplies. I’ll help you get him into the car. Can you get him to the nearest hospital?”

“Sure, uh... will he wake up while I’m driving?”

“No. I promise you he won’t wake up.”

**\* 12 \***

Wearily, she sat down on the manky little sitting-room couch. Their bags were packed and placed in the hallway near the door waiting for Coan to return. It would only take Coan about half an hour to drop off Jessal at the nearest hospital and get back. In the time left before he returned, she needed to talk to Cassandra again. Then they had to leave and find a better place to hide.

While Jessal had been following her through the streets, she hadn’t managed to get a lot out of his mind, at least not without breaking it. It was very obvious, even at that low level of scanning, that he had been wiped before they suspended him. They did such a good job that there was no trace of this “Aenan” person’s face. It couldn’t be coincidence that the man who manipulated Jessal and got him fired had the same last name as the man training Cassandra at the Tower. She would bet money that if she could get onto the Agency database she’d find attached to this name the face of Father Owen. On their way out, she and Coan would have to find a hacker in the city to confirm it.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and focused her mind on the task of penetrating

the Psi suppressant material of the Tower and finding Cassandra again.

The girl was close to a window, thankfully.

She sensed her mental touch immediately. *“Anne! Is that you?”*

Jaola smiled. She was going to be a powerful Psi when she grew up. *“Yes. What are you doing at the moment, Tani?”*

The girl showed herself writing in a classroom and there was a distinct sense of boredom about her. *“I have to do normal school work, it’s easy and I’m so bored. Aenan said it’s best if I do school work even if it’s easy.”* Jaola felt the girl wrinkle her nose in disgust.

*“Who is Aenan, Tani? What does he look like?”*

*“He’s our head teacher... um... he looks like this.”* Quite suddenly, Jaola saw a vivid mental image of Father Owen’s face, colder, harsher but still recognizable.

She sighed. Jaola was silent for a moment, a little shocked and a little scared even though she’d suspected. It was still frightening for her suspicions to be confirmed. She had to find out who this Aenan man was, and quick.

*“Do you know him, Anne? I’m sure I knew him before, but I can’t remember. What’s my real name, Anne?”*

Jaola wondered if she should lie to the girl to minimize any negative reactions she may have, but then she felt the urge to tell her the truth because it wasn’t fair to lie to her because protecting children with lies often ended badly.

*“Your real name is Cassandra. And yes, I thought I knew Aenan, but I knew him as a priest friend of mine. He’s been lying to me for nearly seven years. I have to go now, Cassandra, please hide your knowledge of your name and me. We’re going to try and get you out very soon.”*

Jaola felt the girl nod as she broke contact with her.

**\* 13 \***

*Approximately 4pm*

Jaola sat in the car with Coan in the passenger seat next to her. “Are you sure about this guy, Coan? Can he be trusted?”

“Anne, I’ve known this guy since high school and we went to university together. He’s very good at what he does. I used to hire him when the company needed information that no one else could get. He’s a natural at hacking into systems, even systems as secure as the Agency.”

Jaola still wasn’t sure. She had an agitated feeling inside of her, which made her think this man Coan had suggested would bring danger to her.

Coan smiled and opened his door. "It's OK Anne, really, he's safe."

Jaola watched him get out of the car and close his door. She leaned over, locked it and shuffled around the steering wheel to get out herself. Locking the car, she watched Coan stride up the stairs of a large one-storied house and onto the deck. Running after him, she took the stairs two at a time.

"But I've never heard of this guy, what if he's an Agent?"

They stood in front of the man's door. Coan laughed. "If he can't get into the database, no one can, just trust me." He turned and knocked on the wood. Jaola felt suddenly ten times more cautious and nervous. But she kept silent.

The man who opened the door laughed and hugged Coan jovially. "Dude! Haven't seen you in ages!"

Coan grinned and returned the hug. "Hey, Oscar. How have you been?"

"Pretty good, dude."

Jaola waited for the scruffy man to notice her.

His eyes glanced from Coan to her and he smiled. "Hey, hey, who is this?"

Coan lifted a hand to gesture her. "Oscar, this is Anne, Anne, this is Oscar."

Oscar lifted his eyebrows inquiringly, Jaola knew what he was about to ask and rolled her eyes preemptively. "Are you single?"

She suppressed the urge to growl, and stepping up closer towards the two men, she glared at the scrawny hacker. "How about you get that mind of yours out of the gutter and get on with deciding if you want to help us." Feeling mildly irritated, Jaola roughly shoved them into the house and closed the door behind her.

The hacker turned to face her, frowning. "*Oh-kay*. What do you need?"

Jaola folded her arms across her chest and glared at the scruffy blond-haired man. "We need you to get into the Agency personnel database. Not just the A5 to A3 levels, we need A1 or even A0, to find a person."

Nodding, Oscar turned and walked down the wide hallway they were standing in, his long battered gray coat bouncing around his skinny form. They followed him into a large room filled with computer parts and flashing lights. He sat down at a desk and looked sideways at her.

"You have a name?"

"Only a last name, 'Aenan', but he's got to be up above A2."

Nodding absently, Oscar searched through the many pockets in his long coat and pulled out a small can of some kind of energy drink. "Give me about an hour, sitting room is across the hall, kitchen's attached, make yourself at home."

Jaola frowned at Coan who nodded and signaled for her to leave the room with him.

\* 14 \*

*Jessal stood on the front lawn looking up at the fire. There was screaming coming from somewhere. There were no words to it just agony and terror. Tears ran down his face. Jessal didn't understand, what had happened? Who was screaming? Where was his family?*

*His older brother Rana stood next to him crying and talking sadly. "Abe Kashaan! Why would anyone do this?"*

*Rana leaned sideways and wrapped his big strong arms around him. He smelled like smoke, he could see that the corners of his clothes were black from the fire. Jessal had watched Rana try to get in the front door, but he came out of the house again, coughing badly. He said it was too hot. Jessal didn't understand and he didn't want to understand. He couldn't Find his family anywhere, there was only Rana next to him who he could Find.*

*Concentrating, Jessal focused more on Finding his family, one at a time calling out their names in his mind. His mother, father, four sisters and brothers. Nothing echoed back. Lastly, he called for his little brother Ton, and a niggle hit his mind. His feet started walking on their own and he moved around the yard to the back of the house. Rana followed him, but he couldn't hear what his big brother was saying through his concentration. His feet stopped and Jessal looked around. There was a burnt something in front of him. It breathed and Jessal jumped back in fear. Rana yelled and fell to the ground in front of the burnt thing.*

*"Oh, no, Ton? Ton!"*

*Jessal looked at his older brother and then at the burnt form. That couldn't be Ton, could it? Jessal stood there in shock and fear. In the background the screaming had stopped. Along with his awareness of the silence, he finally realized what had happened. His family was in the house, in that fire. He couldn't Find them because they were all dead.*

*"No!"* He fought against it. There was something he couldn't escape, something he couldn't get away from. He reached out, but freedom was a little out of his grasp. There was only darkness in this struggle.

*"Jessal, hold on."*

*Something else was there in the darkness with him and a pinprick of light stood at a distance. He reached for it and grasped it. His eyes were too heavy, he couldn't open them but his hands curled into fists in his effort to wake up.*

*"I'm nearly there Jessal, just wait a little longer."*

He felt his face frown with concentration, and then he won the fight and his eyes opened. The roof above him was white and he wondered where he was.

“Welcome back, Jessal.”

He pulled himself upright and looked around. The room was plain and unusually clean, it took him a few moments to realize he was in hospital. He wondered how long he’d been unconscious.

“You’re lucky I found you, the doctors diagnosed you as psychosis-induced coma not Psi induced.” A man sat next to his bed on a chair. He wore ordinary clothes, blue denim jeans and a plain long-sleeved shirt.

Jessal frowned at the man. “Who are you?”

The man’s ice blue eyes sparkled. “Agent Aenan. You would know me, but they deleted my face from your mind.”

“What in nuthen do you want?” Jessal snarled. He still didn’t recognize his face, but the voice and the attitude were becoming more familiar.

The man did not seem intimidated by his rage. Instead he smiled. “I’ve come with a proposal. I can help you get back into the Agency.”

“Assuming I want back in the Agency, what do you want in exchange?”

One corner of the man’s mouth lifted in amusement. “I only want you to follow my instructions. You’re going to bring in Coan Taso.”

\* 15 \*

*Approximately 5pm*

Jaola sat on a dingy brown sofa and stared into space. In one hand, she absently held a half-drunk glass of caffeinated soda. She’d already had a look in Oscar’s kitchen. Most of the cupboards were filled with empty or full cans and bottles of various caffeine drinks or junk food. She had never met anyone with so little actual food in his or her kitchen. When she’d commented to that effect, Coan had laughed and stated that Oscar was a little eccentric. He was more than a *little* eccentric in her opinion.

The sitting room was very small with a single three-seat couch in front of a large wide-screen television, with game controllers scattered on the floor in front of it. Around the walls were bookcases filled with all sorts of textbooks, manuals and a variety of different computer-related books. To her right an open doorway led to the tiny, messy kitchen. Coan leaned against the doorway looking at her with a bored expression on his face.

The door behind her opened and she jumped slightly as Oscar came into the room. “OK, guys, do you want to see what I’ve found?”

Putting the can of soda on the floor next to her, she stood and followed the man out into the hallway.

Back in his “office”, Oscar sat down and turned the computer screen towards her. She felt Coan stand close to get a good look over her shoulder. The photo attached to the file looked like Father Owen.

Oscar cleared his throat and started talking quickly. “This dude is the only living adult male Aenan in the database and he’s like, an A0 operative. His complete file was up on the top security level. Married name’s Dobid Aenan, born Dobid Cowdy--”

Jaola frowned. “That’s Cassandra’s last name.”

“This dude is majorly indoctrinated into the Agency--”

Jaola reached over Oscar’s keyboard and ran a search for family members.

Oscar glared at her. “Hey... that’s my computer... don’t touch it!”

The computer displayed another file and attached to it was a picture of a very young Cassandra.

“Is there a relation between this guy and Cassandra?” Coan was addressing Oscar, but Jaola answered the question instead.

“He’s her uncle, Coan.”

“Hey, who’s doing the search, lady, you or me?”

Jaola glared coldly at Oscar. “You got us in, I know the system, it’s quicker if I do it.”

An eyebrow rose incredulously. “Oh, yeah and how do you know the system?”

An uncomfortable feeling spun in her stomach, but she decided to quickly tell him. “Look up, Jaola Armon.”

Coan stepped forward in front of her as Oscar started typing quickly.

There was a pause, and then the two men took a shocked breath. “Wow, you’re an ex-assassin? You were A2 level, you’ve got to be one of the first to escape and survive at A2. How *did* you escape?”

She crossed her arms defensively across her chest. “It doesn’t matter anymore, Oscar. Do you have somewhere safe to go?”

“I’ve hacked the system before. Why do you think it only took an hour? I know how to look after my back.”

“Just because they don’t come when you hack into the database at level three and four doesn’t mean they don’t know where you are. What is your handle Oscar, would it be ‘Proton10’ or



'BlueFlamingo?' Those were the ones we were tracking just before I left."

Oscar stared at her, and then he swore obscenely. "OK, give me a moment." Turning, Oscar started typing furiously. "I just need to scramble my computer system and we'll be out of here. I've got one possibly safe place to go but they don't like me. Do you mind if you come and explain the problem to them?"

"Of course not, Oscar." Coan answered affectionately and Jaola thought that this had better not lead to their mutual deaths.

**\* 16 \***

5.30pm

She stood on the other side of the road, cars shooting past her and her heart racing in her ears.

*"Don't tell me they never left!"* She sighed apathetically. *"Why did it have to be this one?"*

Reluctantly following the others, she crossed the road through a gap in the cars. Oscar and Coan were standing at the doorway. There were two tall heavy metal doors. Last time she had gone through those doors she'd been eighteen and about to kill three people.

Shaking her head, she looked at Oscar. "I can't go in there." Before she could protest more Oscar knocked on the small wooden window in the door.

He turned to frown at her. "Why not?"

"They'll try to kill me."

Oscar smiled at her knowingly. "I'll explain to them that you're not with the Agency. They'll understand."

The small window behind him opened and Oscar turned to the face that filled the space. "I thought you understood that you weren't welcome here, Oscar." The voice was angry, but thankfully the woman in the window was not familiar to Jaola.

"Yes, I know, but Ver I really need to talk to Cherie." Oscar's voice became more excitable. "Verity, this is my friend Coan, you know of him--"

The woman looked past Oscar at Coan, and then at Jaola. "Who's she?"

Jaola fought the urge to step back from her gaze.

A breeze blew around her and she turned her face towards it. A feeling was laced into the wind and as it became louder reality broke around her with a deep resounding ethereal crack.

"Her name is Jaola." Oscar's voice was distant and, at the same time, right next to her. Still

facing into the strange breeze, she thought absently that this was a Time Psi episode. The feeling laced into the wind held her there in front of the Rebel base, and then the wind changed direction. She felt a gentle pull towards the door of the building. It meant that she should go inside against her better judgment. Jaola wondered what would happen once they got into the base. Who would be inside? Would anyone recognize her?

She blinked slowly and reality snapped back into place again. She was able again to focus on the conversation in front of her.

“Why do you need to talk to Cherie?” demanded the woman.

Oscar shrugged. “I hacked a bite bigger than I can chew, I need some help to get out of here or the Agency will get me.”

The window slammed shut and all three of them could hear the bolt and several locks being pulled. Jaola’s heart rate increased as the huge doors opened out into the street.

“*This is it.*” She sighed and followed the other two inside.

The base hadn’t changed much, the small sealed cubicles scattered around the huge room were still set up the way they had been when she was last there. To the right she saw the entrance to the main stairwell. There were people walking in and out of the stairwell entrance and she paused there in front the doorway looking around as the others walked ahead of her. Someone stopped in the entrance to the main stairwell and stared. She turned to look and immediately mirrored his shocked expression. His deep blue eyes were wide and mouth was open slightly.

She felt a shot of guilt. “Kita, I--”

“Anne! Come on!” Slightly to her left and ahead, Coan frowned at her. She looked at Kita again and turned towards Coan and the larger office that had once been Hilla’s.

Oscar was already talking as she entered the room behind Coan. “She used to be an assassin, Cherie, an Agency Assassin, but she got out three years ago. Imagine that! Actually getting out of the Agency on your own and not being caught all this time!”

Stepping in past Coan, the silence that filled the room made the air heavy around her. The look on a grown Cherie Norman’s face told her that the young woman recognized her. Wide blue eyes flitted between Jaola and Oscar. The young woman stood quickly, her face transformed by her sudden rage. She pulled out a small silver gun and aimed it at Jaola.

“Oscar! How could you bring her here, you traitor! She’ll kill us all! Amana! Oscar, you get out of here! I never want to see your face ever again! Get *out!*”

Jaola could sense something chaotic about Cherie’s mind. The girl still seemed to be a Non-Psi and curious, Jaola pushed a little further. Clear just underneath her public exterior, Jaola could see that Cherie’s mind had never recovered from the death of her mother. This young woman

was disturbed inside and at the center of her disturbance stood Jaola's own face.

She was dimly aware of Oscar running past her and out of the room.

"Six years ago, you killed my mother! And tomorrow we're going to kill *you!*" Cherie's eyes looked behind Jaola and before she could react someone hit her hard from behind.

**\* 17 \***

Coan watched the broad-shouldered woman pick up Anne's unconscious form from the ground. "*Is this really happening?*" he asked himself.

"You, Suit, I trust you know the way out too?"

Coan looked numbly at the crazy woman. "But, she's not an Agent anymore."

The woman moved to aim her gun at him. "Suit, I have a gun. I don't care what you think. Get out of my base or she'll meet you in the afterlife. Get out, *now!*"

He backed out of the strange office, nearly tripping on the step down to the floor. Someone grabbed his elbow and guided him to the large door at the front of the building. He was shoved out onto the sidewalk. He turned back towards the door, but it slammed in his face.

He stood there in the sunlight on the side of the road stunned for a few minutes, what was he to do now? He couldn't take on these people. He was just a businessman with no combat training or anything.

A hand slapped him on the back. "So, buddy where to from here?"

Oscar stood next to him and Coan smiled tensely at him. "I have no idea. What do you suggest?"

"Pizza?"

Coan frowned at his friend. "What about Anne?"

"Can you go in there and get her? I sure can't. I'm starving and need more liquids. Let's go and get food first and then figure out what we're doing, huh?"

Coan looked at his friend then at the door behind them. He didn't know what to do, he knew that he couldn't rescue her, but going off to eat seemed so callous. His stomach grumbled at him and he realized he was hungry. There was nothing he could do to help Anne right at that moment. Perhaps, after some food they'd come up with a plan and return to get her back.

"OK," he nodded. "Pizza it is."

**\* 18 \***

*Approximately 7pm, Araam.*

Coan picked at the pizza he had ordered. After a couple of pieces, he wasn't hungry anymore and he couldn't stop thinking about helping Anne somehow. Oscar had eaten two pizzas and several glasses of high caffeine fizzy drinks. "Dude, I'm going to order another pizza you want one?"

Coan shook his head without looking at Oscar. Obviously, Oscar's coping mechanism was eating and caffeine. "Nah, Oscar, I might go to the bathroom though."

"OK, dude. Hey, do you want the rest of your pizza?"

"Go ahead, I'm not hungry."

He got to his feet and headed across the half-filled restaurant to the bathroom doors. The pizza place was one in a chain of restaurants with the same dark-wood booths, red and white checkered table cloths, brightly colored stained-glass light-shades and ridiculously uniformed staff. He'd been in hundreds of them around the country. That particular one was rather old and stained, with dusty, brown carpet and mucky, round windowpanes.

He sighed and pushed through the door into the bathroom. What was he going to do? He didn't know anyone. He couldn't really go back there alone and actually hope to succeed at getting Anne out of there. Pushing open the stall door, he pulled his pants down and sat on the bowl to think.

He wasn't a combat person like Anne. In fact, Anne was the only combat person he'd ever known. Negotiating friendly or unfriendly company take-overs, he could do without blinking, but an armed rescue into Psi Rebel territory? She may as well be held prisoner on one of the moons!

He sighed again, finished his business and left the stall.

As he washed his hands, he heard loud crashing and yelling noises coming from outside. Roughly wiping his hands on the towel, he walked into the short hallway and up to the door leading to the main eating area. There was a round glass window and Coan stepped up to look into the dining room. He froze. The place was crawling with armed blue suit Agents and Oscar was surrounded.

"Hai di'chena!" Coan stepped back out of sight. He had to get out! Turning, he looked around him. There was one door on his right to the bathroom, and at the end of the hallway another door stood with "Staff Only" on it. Knowing there was no way out of the bathroom, he ran up to the staff-only entrance. The door was thankfully not locked and he pulled it closed behind him. There was a narrow corridor with boxes stacked up against the walls in rough piles. To his left was another doorway and the sounds and smells of cooking came through to him from there. Ahead, down the hallway was another door with a bright green "Fire Exit" sticker above it.

*“That had better not be alarmed,”* he thought cynically.

The door opened without any siren sounding. He was out in the cold evening air, standing in a car parking lot out the back of the pizza restaurant. A road led off in another direction and he started running. He had to go back to that place and try to get them to help him.

**\* 19 \***

Coan hit the great big doors as hard as he could, over and over with his fists. The small window opened and the face from earlier in the day looked out at him.

“Alright, alright, what do you want?”

“They’ve got Oscar, you’ve got to help me!”

“Who’s got Oscar?”

“*Them.* The Agency, I need help.”

“Just a minute.” The small window closed and he stood there feeling frustrated and scared.

A few minutes later another face, a man, opened the window. “What’s happened?”

“The Agency has Oscar, I need help.”

The blond-haired man sighed, “I’m sorry but we can’t help you. Cherie won’t allow it because you brought Cheetah here. Go home. Be thankful she let you go.” The window closed shut with a bang.

Coan hit the door hopelessly with his fists. “No! You’ve got to help me! I can’t go home! You’ve got to let Anne go. She’s not an assassin any more. She got out. She waits tables now for Divinity’s sakes! She can rescue Oscar! Come on, let me in and help me!” There was no reply.

An hour of bashing his fists on the door and pleading in the darkness got no reply either. Coan flopped down on the ground with his back against the door and tried not to submit to his tears of frustration.

**\* 20 \***

*Pre-dawn, the next day.*

It was nearly dawn as Jessal stepped into the side street as per Aenan’s instructions. He wondered how a man could know exactly when and where an individual would be. The street was one lane and was really only an access route behind some restaurants. It ended at a high brick wall about twenty meters ahead of him. Raising his gun to eye level, he did a quick check.

The lane was filled with garbage bags and the wind blew flecks of rubbish in little circular

updrafts here and there. The street behind him was empty of people and cars. The four back doors to various restaurant kitchens were closed, and probably locked at this hour of the morning. Squinting in the predawn darkness, Jessal wondered if this was a farce. He couldn't see Coan Taso anywhere.

Jessal walked further up the lane, checking little nooks and crannies. He checked a large collection of broken garbage bags to his left, "*clear*," he thought. A small dumpster sitting next to one of the doors, he stepped past it, "*clear*." There was another dumpster at the end of the lane, which was not quite against the brick wall. Walking sideways to keep his back to the areas he knew were safe, he cleared a fire escape that was closer to him. Turning his back to one wall, Jessal sidestepped within view of the dumpster, and the gap between it and the wall. He couldn't see much as it was dark, but as he stepped closer he saw there was something on the ground between the dumpster and the wall. Another step closer, with his gun aimed out in front of him, but he still couldn't see what was there in that gap.

The nearest back door opened wide. "And stay out!" Jessal saw the face of the man being thrown out in the artificial light that shone through the doorway. He moved quickly and was standing over Coan before the man could get up again.

"Hello, Coan."

His eyes widened, first looking at the gun and then at the face behind the gun.

Stepping back, Jessal glared at him on the ground. This man had killed Ulnon and escaped from him so many times. He wanted to hate him, but couldn't quite gather enough enthusiasm. Instead, Jessal pulled the trigger and the tranquilizer shot embedded itself in Coan's chest.

**\* 21 \***

*Cherie's Rebel building*

Kita Oran sat on an old battered kitchen chair in front of the prisoner cell, with the assassin's gun heavy in his hands. What could it mean, her being there? And now, on that day of all days, six years exactly since she'd escaped this very same cell. He'd made sure she didn't wake up through the night by telepathically keeping her unconscious. Even if she was free of the Agency, she was probably still very dangerous.

He sighed. Cherie wanted her revenge and planned to execute her in the morning. Kita wondered if this act would get Cherie taken from the command of the base. Everyone knew that the poor girl had never recovered from the death of Hilla, and that the girl was disturbed inside. But no one wanted to face her down, and to take her out of the position into which she'd put herself. For

the most part, the base functioned because he helped run it behind her back, along with some of the other senior Rebels, but it was getting embarrassing.

He looked at the large gun in his hands. Since the day she left it in the base, he'd kept it. He wasn't sure why because it was heavy and difficult to use, but it reminded him of what happened, whom he had lost that day and what he'd gained since then.

Without her attack and the harm she inflicted on his psychic nervous system, his increased Telepath Psi wouldn't have happened. Without the trauma he experienced, he wouldn't have unlocked his empath genes either. Six years of emotional, spiritual and psychical growth all because of her attack. It had come at a terrible cost and had he the ability to go back in time to change things, he wasn't sure if he'd let it occur again. However, he was too much of an optimist to not be thankful for the positive things that eventually came from that event.

But here she was again and this time, seemingly no threat to the base. Oscar said that she'd escaped the Agency and if this was true they were basically on the same side, regardless of her past. If this was really true it would be wrong of Cherie to kill her. He felt confused and unable to understand what he was supposed to do now.

*"Kita Oran?"*

Kita stood up and looked around him. The voice was calm and icy blue. The man seemed to be some distance away from him. *"Yes? Who is this?"*

*"This is Hawk. Sorry, Kita, my normal contact is asleep and I am too far away to wake them. You must evacuate the base immediately, I have just heard that a man named Oscar was captured and has given the location of your base to the Agents in charge."*

*"Abe Kashaan! So we've got to go now!"* Kita turned and started upstairs. *"Thank you for the warning."* He turned a moment and looked at Cheetah's unconscious form on the cell cot. *"Sir, one question? Did Cheetah escape the Agency three years ago?"*

*"Yes, Kita, she did. Get your people out now. I'll be at the Rose Road safe house later in the day. Once you get the others to their safe houses can you meet me there?"*

Kita started to run up the stairs towards his fellow sleeping Rebels. *"Of course, sir."*

## Chapter Nine

\* 1 \*

*The Year of our Founder 3010*

*Araam City, Arana*

*Just after Dawn*

*Jaola stood in an ocean of dead bodies. Her heavy onyx-handled gun was held loosely in her right hand. She looked out ahead of her, but as far as she could see and in all directions, there were only dead bodies. She felt puzzled and confused. She knew that she didn't want to be there, wherever she was, and that she had to get out, somehow.*

*A cold shiver ran up her spine and she swung around, looking down at her feet. Next to her old, gray sneakers lay the body of someone she recognized. She saw his blank gray-blue eye, a half-open mouth and tears that sat on his cheek drying in the cold air. Her emerald eyes widened with shock. Despair flared in her mind and rage followed soon afterwards.*

*"No!" She screamed. "You can't have him! No!"*

*A sickening spin overwhelmed her body and she wanted to vomit. She had to get away from all of this death, to escape. Her old silver gun slipped from her fingers and dropped as she leaned over her churning stomach. Shaking her head in utter denial of his presence there in that place she started to weep.*

*"Please... no more... Please... no more death... oh Lady Nera, help me..." She dropped to her knees. "Help me. Someone please help me!"*

*Her voice echoed around her and faded back into silence. Jaola choked on her despair. There was no one. She was utterly alone with only the dead for company. She was trapped in that awful place.*

*Sitting back on her feet, she covered her eyes with her hands and let herself release the pain and despair she had always felt. The tears came quickly, followed by sobbing and an insurmountable wave of emotions. She was trapped. She couldn't do it alone and alone was what she was.*

*"Someone! Help me!" Her voice broke into a whisper. "Help me."*

*She reached out telepathically across the death, looking for a mind that was alive, anyone would do.*

*"Help me."*



*A hand gripped her shoulder and she froze.*

*“Jaola.”*

*She couldn’t move, but the voice was familiar.*

*“Wake up, Jaola.”*

The world around her spun into darkness, but in that darkness she could still feel the hand on her shoulder. A sharp throbbing pain ached at her from a distance. She frowned and opened her eyes. The throb in her head deepened and she groaned. She raised her hand to the back of her head. It was tender and bruised, but she could sense that the injury wasn’t serious.

Turning her head, she looked around her and sighed apathetically. This was the second time she’d been in this narrow Rebel cell and this time she was far less likely to survive. Through the bars, the dim hall leading to the base of the stairs was empty. There were neither sounds around her nor any immediate sense of people.

*“Jaola.”* It was the voice from her dream.

She sat up. *“Who are you and what do you want?”*

*“I am Hawk. Jaola, I need your help.”*

She crossed her arms over her chest. *“And what makes you so sure I want to help you?”*

*“Because it involves Cassandra and Coan.”*

Jaola frowned. *“I don’t even know you, why would you have something to do with Cassandra and Coan?”*

She sensed a smile in the man’s cool mental voice. *“You do know me, of sorts. Will you open up a little more so I can explain it better?”*

*“Fine.”* Jaola mentally shrugged, what did she have to lose exactly?

*“This is how you know me.”* In the forefront of her mind stood a clear picture of Father Owen standing in the Araam City Cathedral next to a pew.

*“You! Where is Cassandra? Why did you let them take her? Who are you?”*

*“If you know of me at all in the Agency, you would know me as Enigma. But, that’s not important at the moment. What is important is that I need your help to rescue Cassandra. Will you let me show you something?”*

Shaking her head, she stood up in the little space between the cot and the cell bars. *“You took her! You got her captured! Your file says you’re an A0 operative. Why don’t you just take her out of the Agency yourself? And why should I help you? I can get her out myself!”*

*“No, Jaola. There are right ways of doing things to get the best out of all consequences.”*

*“Oh, so you are Time Psi then?”*

*“Yes, and a telepath, 3/5. I promise, if I show you this you’ll understand, at least in part.”*

*“Why should I trust you? Give me a reason.”*

*“Well, I’ve known where you lived since you moved there, Jaola. The little apartment upstairs across from the alley, how long did you get those flowers for? Three weeks? Four? I sent them to you. I could have taken you in at any time. I didn’t because I need you to help me get Cassandra, her friends, and myself out of the Agency. But it hinges on you and Coan. Remember your dreams, Jaola.”*

Her eyes opened wide and she stepped backwards, tripping over the cot and sitting awkwardly back onto it. *“What do you know about my dreams?”*

*“The sea-of-the-dead, they are all the people who have died over the generations from this conflict. You’re searching for something. Who is it that always answers your searching?”*

Her eyes narrowed. *“You can’t be only a 3/5 telepath.”* She reached out to his mind and pushed. He reacted, but she was quicker and was past his public mind in a flash. He stood in a mindscape. It was a great field of long grass contained on all sides by high mountains, which was a buried mental shield. That explained why she hadn’t sensed it before.

A gentle breeze brushed at her loose black hair. From the middle of the field, he watched her calmly with his piercing blue eyes.

*“Will you let me show you this now? Or do you need to go further into me?”*

Jaola’s eyes narrowed. *“Yes.”*

She pushed to sense the rest of his mind. A feeling met her, it was something familiar, a knowing, a smile. It was something that she could both understand and yet not understand. He was a Time Psi of amazing ability and he was correct, almost every sea-of-the-dead dream she had, he had answered her call in one way or another. Somehow, she knew deep inside her that this was the way it was meant to be.

She was lost in a moment of realization. *“He’s the answer, the answer to the dreams. The one who can get me out of the cycles of death.”* The answer had been there all along and she hadn’t seen it. If he was the answer, then she had to at least give him a chance to explain.

She returned to the mindscape of the field where he stood. *“OK, what is it?”*

He pointed up and she looked into the deep blue sky. Impossibly, the sky opened out into darkness, as if someone had cut the blue with a very sharp knife and pulled at it. Through the hole a familiar sensation came towards her, that feeling was what she had when her own small rating Time Psi was activated. Electric, calm yet fearful, peaceful yet agitated, warm yet icy cold, and then everything around her shattered into nothing. She lost the sense of her body and they were simply two consciousnesses flying in nothingness.

*“Time is not linear as we have thought before. It runs in circles and it branches out like*

*tree roots. Threads of individual action are interwoven together to form a mess of threads that we consider to be time. Each of those threads affecting other threads, each thread having far reaching consequences than merely the obvious. Time Psi have the ability to sense the most stable path in the myriad of threads and act accordingly to keep the balance.”*

She saw an image of herself running into the Araam City base in search of Cassandra. There was a flurry of activity, people dying at her hands. It ended with a gun to her head and a terribly injured Cassandra.

*“That future would not do. You must live to complete other things and so must she. The effects of your actions could have far reaching consequences.”*

Her view panned out and she saw the Psi Rebels falling to the Agency, hundreds of people, perhaps even thousands executed for treason. And further in the future, the planet shifted into a lifeless rusty red planet.

She frowned. *“Why would my actions have such consequences? We are only two people.”*

*“Everything in Time is connected to everything else. Things that you and she would have done in the future will not happen, people saved, friends made, lovers found, children born. Your actions affect the world, as do hers.”*

She sighed, trying to absorb it all.

*“This path is the most stable course of action from here and this is what I need your help for.”* She saw Coan. He was lying in an ambulance and she could sense him dying there. Time sped up around him and she saw two paths, one where he gave up and died in the ambulance and one where she interfered and he didn't die. There was a sense that this was a fulcrum for action, a place and moment to act for the continuity of time and reality. It all hinged on her and on the actions of Coan.

They stood again in the field surrounded by mountains. She frowned uncertainly. *“What do I call you?”*

He smiled. *“I prefer, Dovid.”*

Nodding, she glanced sideways at him. *“OK, let's do this.”*

**\* 2 \***

He was happy. There was warmth from the bright sun and a feeling of great joy permeated everything. Somewhere near him a woman and child giggled happily. The light was too bright around him to see anything, so he followed the laughter and giggling. Joy throbbed inside him overwhelming his confusion.

*“Rachel? Leelah?”* He reached out towards the happy laughter.

A cool breeze brushed across the back of his neck. The wind felt like a winter breeze blowing on his bare back with pinpoints of pain and iciness running along his skin. As he half-turned towards it a cool hand touched his shoulder and a familiar voice spoke.

*“Coan?”*

Turning fully around, he blinked at the lovely oval face and bright green eyes that were in front of him. Her face was so familiar, but his mind didn’t want to know who it was. He frowned and turned back towards the light and laughter, not caring who this icy person was, just wanting to be where Leelah and Rachel were waiting for him.

*“I know you want to go, Coan.”*

The light behind him dimmed and despair encroached on the joy he was feeling. With the despair, he recognized this face now and the blue-eyed man behind her.

*“No, please, let me go, Anne.”*

Her bottom lip twitched and he wondered why she looked so sad. *“Coan, you have one more thing, one more task and then you can go into the light.”*

He frowned, a little confused and a little angry. *“But why? It’s happened, why can’t I go now?”*

Anne turned to look at the man behind her, he nodded and she looked back at him with her brilliant emerald eyes. *“Let us show you, Coan, will you at least listen?”*

**\* 3 \***

Cassandra sighed and leaned over her completed mathematics worksheet. Class was too easy, but she knew if she told the teacher that she’d finished her worksheet the woman would simply give another to complete. Everyone else, the ten or so of those her age and younger, looked busy at their own worksheets.

Everything was so clean and perfect in their new classroom. Their desks were arranged in long perfect rows up the room. Everything was equidistant from each other, the walls, and the teacher’s desk at the front of the room. In fact, everything in the room was lined up straight and perfect, and impossibly clean, from the ceiling mobiles, to the bookcases under the windows and even down to the direction the piles on the navy blue carpet were pushed. For no reason other than pure instinct, the perfection of the room irritated her immensely.

She tried not to sigh again. There was an itchy feeling of unrest inside her. It had started when she woke up that morning. Her dreams had been of running and fire, but there was no detail in

her memory of them, merely a sense of deep unrest and a desire to get out into the fresh air. The teacher narrowed her beady little black eyes at Cassandra and she sensed that the woman was wondering if she was finished and needed another task to complete. Cassandra dropped her eyes and pretended to write something down on her sheet. It was only the first class and she was antsy already. This day was going to be long.

*“Arrg! Bored!”*

Wolf, who was sitting in front of her turned for a moment and looked at her sideways. *“Bored huh?”*

Cassandra sighed. *“Yeah.”*

*“Well, then, tell me the answers, smarty pants!”*

She suppressed a snort of laughter and covered her face. *“What’ll you give me for them?”*

*“I might entertain you when we’re finished.”* A wink accompanied his reply and she grinned broadly behind her hand.

*“OK, then!”*

**\* 4 \***

Coan breathed in deeply as if he hadn’t breathed in forever. He found himself awake with his eyes wide and staring blindly around him.

*“Coan, can you hear me?”*

He turned his head towards the voice. There was a beeping noise and something rumbled unidentifiably in the background. His eyes began to focus and he saw a man. He wore a light blue uniform, with a short-sleeved shirt and rubber gloves on his hands. He looked like a nurse or an EMT.

Coan frowned and blinked at the dark-haired man. *“Where am I? Who are you?”*

The man’s serious expression lifted into a smile. *“My name is Ngaata. You’re in an Agency Ambulance. You were shot by a tranquilizer and had an allergic reaction. We only just managed to resuscitate you. How do you feel, Coan?”*

Blinking slowly, Coan became aware of a deep exhaustion in his body. He closed his eyes. *“Tired.”*

A hand grabbed his shoulder and shook him. *“Try to stay awake, Coan. I’ll give you a stimulant and you should feel better in a few minutes.”*

The prick in his arm made him flinch and then a warm buzzy feeling flowed into his veins. There was something in the back of his mind that he had to remember, but it was all blurry. He felt

like he was made of cotton wool and a headache was starting in the back of his skull.

“Do you know what happened to me?”

The man nodded. “Yes, allergic reaction.”

Coan sighed. That wasn't what he meant.

He remembered being thrown out of that Rebel building where Anne was, Oscar's arrest and wandering the streets at night. He found a restaurant, some kind of Tolaan pasta restaurant where he'd managed to sneak into the staff room and curl up on a couch to sleep. He'd been found and kicked out. Then that massive Ronan Agent had somehow found him and shot him.

The Rebels were going to kill Anne sometime that day. If he really was in Agency custody, he wasn't going to be able to help her. The small room within which he lay jolted and he realized that the ambulance had stopped. Doors in the direction of his feet opened and a figure came from the bright light outside and into the ambulance. He couldn't really see any details of the face through the haze in his head.

“Get up, Coan Taso.” The owner of the cold voice grabbed him by his arm and yanked him up to a sitting position. “Ngaata, help me get him standing.”

The voice seemed harsh and Coan felt a little frightened.

They pulled him up to a standing position in the Ambulance and dragged him by his arms out into the bright light. With all the motion and light his head swam and so did his vision. The man pulled one of Coan's arms over his shoulder as the hands of the ambulance person let go of him. Coan walked alongside this man trying to adjust his blurry vision, but he couldn't see clearly.

The light level changed and they went inside. They walked through what looked like a series of fuzzy corridors and then they stood in an elevator. The lack of motion cleared his sight a little better and he looked at the man helping him stand. He wore black and seemed quite strong. The side of the man's face seemed familiar.

Coan frowned. “Do I know you?”

The man didn't answer. There was a moment of silence and the elevator doors opened. He walked in a sea of fuzzy motion again with this person and eventually they went through another doorway. He was dumped on a chair and the door closed, leaving him alone with this harsh-voiced man in black.

He grabbed Coan's hand and put something in it. “Coan, that will clear your head, take it.”

Coan brought his hand up to his face and stared at the object. With a moment of concentration his vision cleared and he could see it was a pill of some sort. A glass of water was placed in front of him and he did as he was told. He seemed to be sitting at a small table in a bare room. If he didn't move his head he could make out that the man stood next to the door to his left.

They waited in silence. Then the waiting and not knowing got to him.

“So, what is going to happen to me now?” He turned his head in the direction of the man, his vision remained clear and he saw his face front on for the first time. “What? How in nuthen did you get here?”

Father Owen smiled, his voice was gentle again. “I’ve been an Agent my whole life, Coan. I was born into it. Do you remember what happened while you were unconscious?”

Coan frowned, confused. “No, how could I, I was unconscious?”

Father Owen sat down on the chair opposite him. His blue eyes seemed sad but firm. “Anne came to visit you while you were sleeping, in your mind.”

Thinking deeply, Coan glanced away. “I remember light, I remember wanting to go somewhere and she stopped me, yes,” he nodded. “She stopped me.”

“Do you know why she stopped you?”

“I... she wanted me to do something before I left. I was going to die wasn’t I?”

The man nodded slowly. “Yes, Coan. You were.”

“What did she want me to do?” Inside him there was an aching. He didn’t want to be in the room, he wanted to be in that place with the light.

“We need you to help us get Cassandra and her friends out of this building. And we need you to help take out some key figures in the Agency.” Father Owen lifted a bag from the ground and opened it to show Coan some explosive charges.

“Who are you really?” He asked looking wide eyed at the explosives.

“That is a relative question, Coan, the answer depends on the context.”

Coan stared at the man. There was no emotion inside him and he wondered if there should be any. This man wanted him to blow something up, probably killing a few innocent people in the process. But he felt numb to it.

“Why did you get Cassandra into the Agency only to get her out again? And why this way?”

“One of Cassandra’s friends is my son and this was the only way I could get him out without raising suspicion. In the chaos she, her friends, and I will be assumed killed in the explosion.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “The future holds a great many choices and the group of Agents you are about to meet are very high up in the Agency. They make a lot of choices that will affect not only this country, but also this world. In the years to come their decisions from this point will bring a cascade of destructive consequences and in the end, alive, this group will be partially responsible for the destruction of this planet and the possible destruction of many other planets in the far future.”

Coan stared at the man, shocked and confused, but not at all skeptical. “Why do I believe you?”

The man laughed and a gentle expression rose in his eyes. “Because we showed you some of this when you were in the ambulance. Here, let’s start.” He stood and dumped the bag’s contents on the desk in front of Coan.

\* 5 \*

Jessal had been left in an interview room. He hoped that all of this hadn’t been another Aenan trick. The interview room was about three meters square, with white bare walls, one door, and a single metal table and chair. He wondered if he would be in trouble for all of this or whether he’d be killed this time.

“*Bleh, I shouldn’t think about things like that.*” Warily, Jessal leaned forward on the table. He was tired and really needed a coffee. “*I wonder if I’m allowed to go downstairs and get one?*”

The nearby door opened and slammed against the wall. Jessal jumped and looked up in alarm at the man standing in the doorway. Raraan looked annoyed, *really really* annoyed.

“Raraan...?”

“Come on, Jessal! I’ve been instructed to take you down to the cafeteria before I get to sit in on Taso’s interview. You have free range around the base until your debriefing, which will be after they interview Taso.”

Jessal frowned and looked at Raraan blankly.

“Come on! Get up, I want to get back to the meeting!” Raraan grabbed Jessal’s arm and pulled at him until he got out of his chair.

\* 6 \*

Jaola lay on the cot in the cell with an arm over her eyes. She was tired and her head ached quite badly. The base around her was unusually quiet. Although, she suspected it was still pretty early in the morning so, people could just still be sleeping. In the distance she heard a door open. Her heart quickened. Maybe they were coming now to kill her. Footsteps came closer and they were so close to her they must be coming down the hallway from the stairs.

“Cheetah?” The voice was familiar.

She opened one eye and glanced sideways at the person standing at the bars. She feigned a confidence she definitely did not feel. “Come to kill me this time have you, Kita?”



“No. We’ve got to get out, the Agency is coming.” Shuffling nervously with a key, Kita unlocked the cell door.

Jaola stood quickly and he flinched back a little.

He swallowed. “Come on, we’ve only got minutes before they get here.” He turned away and started walking towards the front door. Jaola followed him.

“Where is everyone else, Kita?” They walked from the stairwell entrance to the front door, but Kita didn’t answer her question. The front door was wide open and she couldn’t sense anyone else in the building. Kita strode outside and hurried across the street. Jaola kept pace with him.

They were two blocks from the base when she took his elbow and pulled him into a small side street, away from sight of the main road. He didn’t flinch at her touch, which surprised her.

“Kita, tell me what’s happened.” She said as gently as she could.

He sighed and glanced up at her. “The Agency got Oscar. Hawk warned everyone and we left.” He looked down at his hands. “I came back to get you.”

“Why? Why would you do that? After what happened six years ago?”

He shrugged and turned back onto the street. “Hawk confirmed that you escaped and that makes you on our side. Look, there’s no more time, we have to get to the safe house.”

\* 7 \*

Coan stood in the room, feeling decidedly heavy. He wore what looked like a bullet-proof vest but, the flat explosive charges from the bag had been fixed to the inside of the vest in the place of metal plates. Finally, Coan’s rational mind was returning and he was feeling quite nervous. Even though he still wanted to be with that light and joy, he understood that it was more than a little crazy to do this thing. The man pulled on all of the straps attaching the vest to him, then stopped fiddling with it.

“OK, that’s all done Coan. Just give me a moment, then I’ll be ready to set the timer and take you into the meeting.”

The man sat down on one of the chairs and closed his eyes. Coan wondered what he was doing, but realized it really didn’t matter that much anymore.

Turning, he looked around the bare room. On one wall there was a long mirror, on another stood a door and the two remaining walls were a blank dark gray.

*“What a depressingly dark room this is,”* he thought.

The man took a deep breath and opened his eyes. “OK, the detonator is really easy. It’s timed so you don’t have to do anything.”

He took something small and black with buttons all over it, from out of a pants pocket and fiddled with it. Then, without showing it to Coan he put it in one of the pockets at the bottom of the vest.

“Now, when you get in there they’re going to be hostile. Do not answer back, speak only when you’re spoken to and use as few words as possible in your responses. Let them do all the talking. You got that?”

Coan nodded. He wondered how deeply entrenched this man must be in the Agency to need this method just to escape. “Yes, sir. I’ve got it.”

“It’s time.” The man grabbed his elbow and led him out of the room.

**\* 8 \***

Cassandra sat playing mental tennis with Wolf. The game was who could send the most detail to the other’s mind. So far Wolf was winning, consequently, she was making every effort to better him. She saw in her mind as clear as she could of a beautiful golden yellow flower with many petals layered upon themselves. She brought in the detail of some of the petals being darker at the base and lighter at the edges of them. Finally, she added to that imagery the process of the flower opening from a bulb and spreading out as a fully-fledged flower over time. Holding the entire process in her mind, she showed it to Wolf.

*“Wow, Cassandra, that’s amazing.”*

*“Hey! How’d you know that name?”* She was annoyed that maybe he’d been searching through the recesses of her brain or something.

*“You call yourself that now in your head, why wouldn’t I use it if it’s not your name?”*

*“No one’s supposed to know about it—”*

At that moment both of their heads turned in the direction of the door and both of the children felt the mental presence of someone. The person was an icy blue and she sensed a tension in him that bordered on fear.

*“Wolf, Cassandra, I need you to get out now. Make the teacher sleep or something. Whatever. Get out onto the street and into the mall across the road, now! You’re in danger!”*

*“Who are you? How do you know my name?”* Cassandra asked suspiciously.

*“Cassandra, it’s Aenan, just go, and bring the rest of the class with you. Now! The both of you!”*

Cassandra frowned at Wolf, whose face had a question. *“Do you know how to make her sleep?”*

She shook her head. *“No. Do you?”*

*“I can try.”* Wolf stood up suddenly and walked directly up to the teacher. *“Miss.”*

He put his hand on her shoulder and the woman slumped down onto the desk, seemingly asleep. Wolf looked around at the class with mischief in his grin.

*“OK, I’m bored, who’s up for a walk?”*

The others cheered loudly and threw their work up into the air. Cassandra grinned and followed Wolf, with the rest of the class into the corridor. Outside in the hall, Wolf turned to face his classmates. *“Come on, the stairs are this way.”*

**\* 9 \***

*“Wait up Kita! My head is spinning, can we rest here?”* Jaola stood at the base of some battered stairs. Kita stood a few steps above her.

He turned around. *“Amana hit you pretty hard didn’t she?”*

Jaola smiled. *“Yeah.”* She sat down on the stairs and put her head to her knees. She felt strange and not just from the head injury. *“Kita, why did you really come and get me?”*

*“I told you, Hawk confirmed that you had escaped from the Agency. That makes you one of us.”*

*“But why risk your own safety for me? I killed a lot of people very close to you. You have every reason to hate me.”*

*“Cheetah--”*

*“No.”* She sighed. *“I’d prefer Anne.”*

*“OK, Anne. Hawk helped me escape the Agency. He sometimes talks of how things are meant to be or that things are kind of fated. So, because of Hawk and what he has taught me I believe that certain things happen for a reason. For you to have turned up nearly six years to the day at that base and free from the Agency tells me that there is a reason for you being there. And for me to be the only one to even care that you might be captured by the Agency also makes me think I was supposed to help you, and...”* Kita winked at her. *“Hawk asked me to come get you.”*

She rolled her eyes and laughed.

**\* 10 \***

Dobid walked with his head high, and at the quickest pace he could without looking suspicious. Thankfully, because of his position in the Agency and his reputation for being

dangerous, most people he met on the tenth floor at that time of the morning recognized him and immediately looked down at the carpet.

He had about two minutes to get out of the building before the explosion. He could see that the children would get out, that they would escape the blast without injury, but he wasn't so sure about himself. Nine sets of stairs in two minutes wasn't a promising record he wanted to fail. But at least once in the stairwell he could run without drawing attention to himself.

Tom should have already gotten clear and be at the fire exits. It was going to be a big blast and most of that level would be taken out and the level above and below it. But if Lady Krena was in a fortunate mood, a lot of people would survive and they would be able to get out of there with Tom's unlocking of the fire escapes. He might even be hailed as a hero, which could earn him a strategically advantageous promotion within the Agency, so that once Dobid was out he would still have an ear in the Araam base.

Dobid pushed through the stairwell door and started running.

**\* 11 \***

Wolf somehow knew his way around the building, where the stairs were, and even when to stop and wait because someone was coming and might spot them. Cassandra had been quite lost, but he seemed confident so she followed him. They were finally on the bottom floor and she could see the street through some big double doors ahead of them.

Wolf was walking swiftly in front of everyone and she mentally poked him. *"You look happy."*

*"Of course I'm happy, we'll be out of the Agency and I can spend time with my dad!"*

*"Huh? Who's your dad?"*

*"Aenan of course."*

Before Cassandra could respond, a man stepped out of an alcove near the door, and without stopping Wolf jumped up and punched the man high in the stomach. The man seemed to melt towards the ground and out of view again. Wolf pushed the doors and held them open for the other children. As she walked past him, she stared wide eye at him.

He smiled. "I wasn't always at that prison, Cass."

**\* 12 \***

*Approximately 8.30am*

Coan sat in a chair at one end of a long black table, at the other end of the table almost huddled together at a distance to him, sat a group of steely-eyed men and women. They seemed to genuinely hate him. But he didn't care anymore. He could hear the laughter and feel the light on his skin, so although he seemed to be listening to them and occasionally responding, he wasn't really there. He was really with the light and laughter. He knew he would be there with them soon, he just had to reach further and further away from those steely-eyed people and towards the laughter.

It was so warm he could barely feel his body, and the laughter so loud he couldn't hear much at all.

\* 13 \*

Jaola sat on the stairs still feeling dizzy. "If you can get up stairs it's not far to the safe house. You can rest there."

She shook her head. Up would be bad. "Not yet, give me a bit more time."

For a second, she thought she could hear laughter and she looked up to find its source. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Kita sat half way up the stairs.

"Laughter." She reached out to where it seemed to have come from. It was a little way away and she realized that it wasn't someone physically laughing, but something for her.

"Oh, no, Coan's about to die." She knew she shouldn't, but she sat with Coan's mind, sat in the joy and laughter he was experiencing moments before his death.

"Don't stay with him Anne, the shock could kill you." Kita's voice was dim against the backdrop of laughter.

She knew what he said was true, but just wanted one more second in that beautiful mind space.

"Jaola. Come back. Now."

At that moment, she sensed the tremor in Coan's mind. It was happening! Withdrawing as quickly as she could, she flew back to her own mental space, but not fast enough because she received a few moments of his death mind. She was enveloped by a darkness that was like an oncoming black explosion.

"Help me!"

Strong hands gripped her shoulders. A light as bright as the sun turned on in her mind and pushed away the black flames. When all of the darkness was gone, Kita sat in her mental space smiling at her. "Are you OK?"

She felt a blush warm her cheeks. “Yes, thank you.”

\* 14 \*

All of her friends were running across the road as a huge explosion burst out of the building above them. Cassandra looked up and in among flames and black smoke she saw shards of broken glass falling towards them.

“Glass!” She yelled. “Run!”

As a group they sprinted across the rest of the road and into the entrance of a mall. Cassandra glanced at Wolf and then back at the doors.

“What about Aenan?”

They both stood in the glass doorway with the others huddled behind them, as they watched the door across the road for any sign of him. A large lot of glass fell all over the road like rain in front of them. The noise was ridiculous. Squinting through the falling glass and debris, Cassandra thought she saw a figure at the doorway. The door opened and Aenan stepped through.

Behind him a light flared up from inside the building and Cassandra realized it was fire. “He’s not going to make it!” Reaching with her strength, she pulled Aenan up over the road, through the falling glass and he fell awkwardly at their feet in the doorway.

Wolf leaned over and touched his father’s back. “Dad!”

“Aenan! Are you OK?”

He groaned. “I... I think you broke my arm.”

\* 15 \*

Jessal lay on his back somewhere. There was smoke everywhere and he started to cough painfully as it filled his lungs. He lay there unable to connect anything in his mind. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t see. His head hurt. Something bad had happened.

He blinked and his thoughts started to turn on. “*Abe Kashaan, the building’s on fire!*”

Shaking the blariness from his mind, Jessal forced his body to roll over onto all fours. He had to get out of there, now, before the smoke choked him to death. He remembered he’d been in the café, in one far corner. A loud noise and some kind of wave threw him to the ground. It must have been an explosion.

“*How could anyone get a bomb in this building?*”

Shocked and still a little confused, he tried to look through the dark smoke for an escape.

On one side there seemed to be a yellow-orange flickering light that was probably fire, so that way wasn't the safest. But on the other side of him, to his right, there was a touch of blue light. He wondered if it was a window. If it was one of the windows that ran most of the length of the café, he may be able to get out.

He was overcome by a fit of coughing and stopped crawling to curl up. He fought against a choking cough, but couldn't stop it instantly. Once it subsided, he focused his thoughts again on getting out. He tried to visualize the café in his mind. The café was essentially an oblong room. One doorway stood next to the counter, and then the rest of the room went backwards away from the counter with chairs and tables. The windows were along the wall opposite to the doorway.

Crawling, he moved closer to where the blue light was and all of a sudden his face came up against a wall. Feeling around him with one hand, he felt for something to throw at the window. With a little stretching he managed to find the legs of a chair. Taking painful gulps of air from near the floor, he held his breath and stood up. He lifted the chair over his head and threw it with all his strength at the blue light. He was rewarded with the sounds of broken glass and smoke whooshing out in that direction.

He felt for the window sill, but flinched as his hands touched broken glass. Ignoring the cuts, he found the edges, lifted himself up through the window, and rolled out into the fresh air.

He lay on his back in the garden for a while gulping massive breaths of fresh air. Each lung-full of air burned through his chest, but it was gloriously fresh. His hands were starting to ache quite badly and he lifted them to his face. They were disgustingly bloody and gory. He would probably need stitches, but it was a small price to pay for not dying in the fire.

**\* 16 \***

Jaola opened her eyes to find Kita holding her in a warm embrace. Strong arms were wrapped around her and she felt oddly safe there. He was warm and somehow comforting, so she did not break away from him. Instead, she leaned further into his hug, wrapping her arms around his back and under his arms. It seemed that she was safe. Coan was dead, but she was safe.

A feeling of deep despair, which she'd felt for a long time, bubbled up in her heart and became too strong to fight. She sighed with the effort, but eventually she lost the fight. Slowly and surely, she started crying quietly onto Kita's shoulder. His arms tightened around her and, ridiculously, she felt even safer, which only made the tears come faster. She closed her eyes and surrendered.

Dobid struggled through the pain in his forearm to get up off the concrete. By its feeling and how it moved when he didn't hold it still against his chest, it was probably broken. His body begged him to sit down and recover from the shock of injury, but he knew he had to get the children out of the area before fire engines and other Agents turned up.

He got to his feet and stood there breathing slowly for a moment. "OK, kids..." He panted. "We have to get out of here... I want you all... to form a line, Wolf and Cassandra... you two behind me... everyone else... form into a single file line... hold onto the shirt... of the person in front of you... don't let go."

Dobid focused again on clearing his mind of the overpowering pain in his arm. He held it as still as possible across his chest with his right arm but every breath, every twitch of injured muscle shot daggers of pain into his mind and threatened to *make* him rest. He felt hands pull on his jacket and knew that the children were nearly ready to go.

With one more ounce of focus and willpower he held himself inside his mind, building an impenetrable space for his consciousness away from the pain. This only took about a minute to construct, but by the end of it he was calmer and able to think clearer.

He sighed. "Is everyone ready?"

"Yes, Dad," came the voice of his son behind him.

"OK, we only need to go two blocks, so, we're going north to the next intersection. Ready? March!"

Jessal rolled onto his side and staggered to his feet. He needed to get further away from the smoke to clear his head and lungs, so he walked across the narrow garden and the Agency Tower Square, towards the street. Coughing painfully from the smoke still in his lungs, Jessal rounded the side of the building where the main street passed by and looked around him. The fire engines weren't there yet, although he could hear their sirens in the distance. The street beyond seemed to be cleared of people, except for a group of children all walking in a line away from him.

"*How strange,*" he thought to himself. Instinctively checking the road for cars, even though there weren't any, he followed them.



Jaola cried for what felt like a long time. Kita said nothing, but let her cry. She thought of everything that had happened in her lifetime and all those she'd killed for the Agency. Remembering, Cherie's broken life because of her mother's death, her own family destroyed. Even with all the people she'd helped in the three years she'd been out, it would never be enough to wipe away the guilt from those she'd killed as an assassin for the Agency. She felt as if she would always be that assassin and always be made to kill people. A murderer even though she didn't want it.

Whenever she was in danger, her mind just reacted instinctively with that terrible mindset of survival and inflicting death. It was an instinct that had been programmed into her from a very early age. It seemed as if she would never be rid of it. How exactly could a person change their childhood programming? She was going to be forever haunted in her dreams by that place with all the dead bodies. She would never have a real life, a normal life. She'd die without ever really having the chance to live. She wondered if it was possible that this man who, as Hawk, and both Agent and Rebel, could really help her, or if she was hoping too much for a miracle.

A mind came near her and did the telepath equivalent of knocking on the door. Opening her eyes, she looked around her but could see no one.

"Yes?"

The mind stepped forward and she could sense the man who had been Father Owen. "*I need a hand, Jaola. Jessal is following us, and we're near you.*"

She wiped her face of tears and glanced up at Kita. "Did you hear that?"

He let go of her and a frown answered her question.

"Hawk just told me that someone is following them. Do you have a gun?"

Without pausing, he pulled a weapon from his jacket.

"Thank you, Kita." Taking the gun, she carefully stood and turned to open the door. "And not just for the gun."

She rested her back against the open door, hidden from sight, and glanced quickly into the street. Less than twenty meters from her, she saw Father Owen walking with a group of young people behind him, and further down the narrow alley she saw Jessal's tall, dark figure following them. Clicking off the safety and making sure the gun was loaded, Jaola opened the door fully and waited for the others to get to her. They followed single file through the door and past her.

A pale Father Owen glanced at her as he passed. "OK, everyone. Top of the stairs. The door at the end of the hallway. Double time."

The group of young people scattered around him and he turned to watch the door. She waited until she sensed Jessal was close and stepped out, holding the gun right up to his face.

“Hello, Jessal.” She said coldly.

His eyes widened and body stiffened at the appearance of the gun. A pair of bloody hands rose to shoulder height and she sensed that he wasn’t armed.

Sidestepping out of the way, she signaled with the gun for him to go inside. “Get in, Jessal. Now.”

He didn’t resist, he simply did as he was told. She closed the door behind her and put the gun between Jessal’s large shoulder blades. Kita stood at the top of the stairs and whoever-he-was stood about halfway up.

“Go upstairs, Jessal, follow them.”

Fighting the dizziness from her hit to the head, she walked upstairs and pushed Jessal in front of her with the barrel. They got to the top and followed the other two down a long dark passageway to an open door. She stepped into a dingy room and looked around.

“Father Owen, where do I put Jessal?”

“There’s a room.” He sat down at a table in a green kitchen. “To your right, put him in there... Kita can you get Karen?”

She prodded Jessal forward and found the room with a key sitting usefully in the keyhole. She pushed him in and locked the door, taking the key with her.

The dingy kitchen was dark and cold. Bare wood floors were so badly scuffed by foot travel that there was no more varnish on them. Against the same wall as the door sat a short, old-fashioned sink and bench, a white half-sized fridge sat in the far corner, and in the middle of the room was a small Formica-top table. He sat at the table with one arm resting on it. As she got closer to him, she saw that the forearm resting on the table was somehow crooked.

She sat down opposite him and frowned at the arm. “Ouch, is that broken?”

His face was pale. He nodded and looked at her with his familiar blue eyes. “Cassandra... she threw me, but I landed badly... she saved my life.”

“Father Owen--”

“Please, Jaola... call me Dobid.”

She smiled a little at him. “Only if you call me Anne.”

“Deal.” He turned his face to the ceiling and took a deep breath, obviously struggling with pain.

“Dobid, what do we do now?”

The face that lowered and looked at her seemed very tired and very pale. “We wait. Go and say hello to Cassandra. She’s... she’s in the other room.”

Karen stood nearby with a large case in one hand. “Hello, Anne. I’ll look after Dobid,

OK?”

Jaola stood and then remembered Jessal’s hands. “You might want to go in and check Jessal, he looked like he was bleeding. Here’s the key,” she placed it on the table next to where Dobid was sitting. “Call me if you need a hand.”

\* 20 \*

Jaola sat on a musty, two-seat couch in a tiny, dark sitting room. In front of her was another couch where young Cassandra sat and looked back at her with bright blue eyes. One of her friends sat next to the girl, but Jaola couldn’t remember his name. He seemed calm and friendly, but there was something about him that separated him from the other children.

“You’re Anne aren’t you?” It was odd to see that lovely little face again, but for Cassandra to not recognize her.

Still feeling emotionally rung out, Jaola looked away and nodded silently.

“Do you know anything about who I am?” Those big blue eyes of hers begged for her to tell Cassandra what she knew.

One corner of Jaola’s mouth lifted slightly. Even with amnesia the girl was still herself. “Well, I know your name is Cassandra Cowdy, that your mother and father are dead, and that the one you call Aenan is your uncle.”

“He’s my Uncle? But... that means--”

The girl looked at her friend who finished her sentence for her. “We’re cousins! I have to tell Jean!” The boy laughed, stood up and ran through a nearby doorway out of sight.

The girl’s smile dropped and she looked up at Jaola with something that resembled sympathy in her eyes.

“Are you OK Anne? You look upset.”

Attempting to smile, Jaola held the girl’s eye contact. “I am very tired, Cassandra. I haven’t really slept since you were taken away from us.”

The girl nodded, and looked a little uncomfortable. “I might just go and talk to the others in the next room.” Without waiting for a response from Jaola, she stood and walked away.

The room was dark even with the light on above her because there were no windows in the small space, only doors to other rooms. There was barely pacing space around the two couches, and the walls and doors. The little flat was obviously not made for the fifteen or so people currently inhabiting it.

She sighed. She was tired, so very tired. She hadn’t slept well since she was shot because

of the pain and nervous tension of being chased for so long. She wanted to sleep forever. Bending forward, Jaola put her head in her hands. Something hard in her pants pocket pushed sharply into her leg. She sat up and absently took the gun out. It was heavy and before she even looked at it she knew what it was. It was her onyx-handled gun, the one her father had given to her for her seventeenth birthday. She stared at it, astonished that it could have made its way back to her.

Kita walked in from the kitchen and saw her. “They found it while cleaning up the day Hilla died.” Kita sat down in front of her but she didn’t look up at him, she just stared at the weapon. “You can have it back. I don’t want it. It’s too heavy to be a personal weapon anyway.”

She opened her hands fully and let it rest on both palms. “My father gave me this gun on my seventeenth birthday when I made A2. I was the youngest Agent to make that level in Agency history. He was so proud of me. He’s dead now. I miss him so much.”

There was so much pain inside her, so much raw flesh that was burning and had been burning for a long time. She couldn’t escape it could she? Here was the gun she thought she had lost, the gun she had gladly lost. It was always in her sea-of-the-dead dreams, *always*, even after she lost it. As long as she had the gun and it was in her dream, she would always be forced to kill.

“I hate this gun. I hate being an assassin. But it looks like I can’t escape either of them.” She checked the safety on the gun and put it on the floor in front of her. She looked at Kita’s dark blue eyes. “All I seem to do is spread pain and death. All those I have ever cared about are dead.”

His square face showed little emotion, but she could see he was listening.

A tear dropped down one cheek. “I’m sorry I hurt you so much, six years ago.” She didn’t know why she needed to show him that she was human. Maybe it was because she had to convince herself.

“I’m not.”

She frowned at him. “What?”

He smiled. “The trauma I experienced unlocked my empath genes and strengthened my telepath ability. Instead of just a 4/5 telepath I now rate at a 6/5 and I’m a 4/5 empath as well.” He leaned over and touched her hand with his in what seemed to her to be an effort to comfort her. “You need to realize something. Being an assassin isn’t something you’re bound to forever. No one can change your past, but you have the power to change your future. I have the belief that Hawk and the Psi Rebels may have the key to that, otherwise, why would you be here? Why would he be interested in you?”

She felt like a child, infinitely vulnerable and terribly scared. She was utterly unable to calm the emotions inside of her. His hand was warm on hers and she let his words sit in her mind as she dared to believe what they meant.

Her voice was a whisper. “You really think so?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” He moved to the edge of the couch and took her hand in both of his. In that small act of kindness from someone whom she had hurt in uncountable ways was a trigger for the mountain of tears within her. The trigger for the emotions she’d had to suppress for so long. Tears broke from her eyes and slipped down her face silently. A sob escaped her and she put a hand on her mouth to stop it. He moved out of his seat and sat next to her. She sobbed again and the tears clouded her vision completely. She felt his arm wrap around her shoulders and draw her into his embrace.

“Just let it out. Let it out. You’re safe. No one is going to hurt you here.”

It hit her like a huge wave of pain and emotion, and Jaola let it all flow out of her in tears and sobs.

\* 21 \*

In the room where they’d put Jessal, there was a bed made up and enough room around it and the walls to pace. Jessal had paced around the bed a few times, walked over to the window to try and see out of it only to find that there was just a brick wall a few meters away, and held his hands above his head in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

He was feeling tired now and his hands continued to bleed, so he sat on the bed and carefully took his jacket off. He had to do something about his hands because, although he didn’t know much about first aid or medicine, he did know that continued blood loss wasn’t good. Resting his hands in the jacket on his lap, he tried to get a look at the wounds. He couldn’t see any embedded glass, but there were some deep gashes in the palms of his hands. Turning them over, he tried to gently wipe some of the blood off onto his jacket, but he barely touched the jacket before the sharp pain made him flinch back.

From behind came the sounds of a key in the lock and the door opening. Someone stepped inside and closed the door behind them. “Jessal, I was told you were bleeding. I’m a doctor, how can I help?”

He turned and his jaw dropped. “Ms Frene?”

“Call me Karen, Jessal. Are you bleeding or not?”

He held up his hands to show her.

“Well then, shove over and I’ll take a look at them.”

\* 22 \*

“Sir... Can you hear me?”

Raraan’s ears were ringing and his head ached. The voice that had spoken sounded young and he wondered if he’d fallen asleep at a meeting or something. He opened his eyes. The face in front of him was wearing red and yellow. No Agent would wear these colors, at least not on duty.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m here to help, are you feeling any pain, sir?”

Raraan thought for a moment and shook his head. “My ears are ringing. Otherwise I feel fine.” The young man’s face cleared a bit in his vision and Raraan saw that he wore a helmet that said he was a member of the fire department. “What’s happened?”

“Sir, there’s been an explosion in the building. Can you form a fist with your hand? Wriggle your toes?”

“I’m fine.” He said impatiently. Raraan couldn’t believe what he was hearing. An explosion in the Agency Base? Then the memory hit him. There *had* been an explosion. He remembered the building shaking and a flash of flame coming at him from the elevator shaft. He hauled himself up to a sitting position. He was in an alcove in the main hallway of the ground floor, a few meters from the elevator shaft. The explosion must have pushed him into it when it sent him flying.

“Give me a hand up will you?”

Raraan stood with the help of the young fireman.

“Thank you. What level was the explosion on?”

The fireman seemed a bit surprised at his question, but he answered quickly. “We think it was on level ten.”

Raraan stared at the man with a deep frown on his face. Level ten was where the others from the A0 council were interviewing that suspected terrorist. He’d been heading there when the explosion happened.

“Are there any survivors?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t know. I’ve been instructed to get all able-bodied survivors out onto the street for safety reasons.” The fireman gestured in one direction behind him with a long arm.

Raraan nodded. “Of course.” He turned away from the man and walked a few paces towards the old exit, then turned back towards the fire fighter again. “Where is your superior?”

The man had already started walking away from him, but he glanced up at Raraan over his shoulder with a touch of irritation and confusion in his dark blue eyes. “Why?”

“If there are no survivors on level ten, I’m the new Base Head.”

“Um... he’s outside, coordinating everyone. Now please, sir, you must get out of this building.”

As he walked, Raraan brushed at his suit. It was covered in dust and soot. He’d probably never get it clean enough again. He found his cell phone, but one look at the busted screen told him it was useless. The ringing in his ears started to ease as he got closer to the exit. The café was a burned-out smoky mess and he wondered for a moment if Jessal was alive.

Raraan still felt a bit stunned, like the world was foggy or something, but at least he didn’t seem to be particularly injured.

Outside, there was glass and debris all around the front of the building and on the road. He walked some distance onto the street and looked up at the side of the building. About five or so levels above him there were no windows, only blackened smoking holes. Other windows up and down the building were cracked and shattered and there was smoke billowing out from some of them. It did in fact look like level ten was the center of the explosion.

There were several fire engines out on the street. Two were parked close to the building in the Square with their ladders extended and were still putting out fires below the explosion. To one side near an engine on the street, was a fire fighter standing with a radio in his hand. Raraan walked towards this man. He looked mature with a big, bushy, graying mustache.

Raraan stopped in front him and waited.

~ “We need a water source to level five, can you get it up the stairwell?”

~ “Sir, there’s too much debris in the main stairwell.” A static-filled response came over the radio.

~ “OK, I’ll see what I can do from this end, over.” The man looked at Raraan and his eyebrows rose expectantly under the bright yellow helmet. “Yes?”

“I need to know if there are any survivors on level ten.”

“I’m a little busy right now, buddy. You’ll find out when Agents from Marakan get here.”

“No, I need to know now.” The man glared at Raraan and returning the glare, he continued before the man could reply. “If there are no survivors on level ten I am the ranking Agent for this base. Now, can you answer my question, or not?”

The man’s whole demeanor changed. The annoyance lifted from his body language and face, and he nodded slowly. “Of course, sir. Level nine, ten and eleven were completely destroyed. There are barely bodies let alone survivors. Is there anything I can do to help?”

So it was true, he was the last of the A0 council left. It wasn’t quite how he wanted to be promoted, but at least he was alive. He sighed. “Yes, I need access to your communication network.”

The man pointed at a nearby truck. “I have a spare radio in the cab of that truck over there if you wish. The Marakan Agency contact that’s arriving soon is on channel four. Anything else you need just let me know and I’ll see what we can do.”

“Thank you.” Raraan nodded formally and turned towards the other truck and radio.



## Chapter Ten

\* 1 \*

*The Year of our Founder 3010*

*Araam City, Arana*

*A few hours later*

Jaola lay on someone's lap. She'd cried herself to sleep, but she was half awake again. Someone was stroking her hair, but she was too sleepy to open her eyes. She hadn't slept properly for such a long time and it was a wondrous luxury to be able to just nap with no pressures to get up and do anything. She felt someone put a blanket on her. People whispered and someone continued to stroke her hair.

"How is she?" A hushed voice came from the air.

"Exhausted. How are you, sir?" came the reply.

"It's just a broken arm. You OK? Want a drink or some food?"

"Nah, I'm OK, thanks."

The voices faded to nothingness and she slipped back into sleep.

*Jaola stood in the place filled with death. She was oddly calm. There were so many bodies and so many people dead but she felt nothing. She felt almost free of this place, she knew it was a dream and she knew that she wasn't trapped any more. Standing calmly among the mess, she looked around her. A very gentle breeze brushed at her loose black hair.*

*"Help me..."*

*There was a voice. In all this mess someone was alive? She tried to identify its direction.*

*"Someone... please..."*

*Running, she followed the voice. It seemed to be far away from her, it was a deep male voice that was broken up by fear. There was silence again and she stopped.*

*"Hello? Is anyone there?" She called expectantly.*

*"Please..." The voice was right next to her and turning she looked down at her feet. She saw a dark frightened face. He was completely buried except for one hand and a circle around his face.*

*She stared at him. "Jessal?"*

*"Can you get me out? I can't do it on my own... please?"*

*Without thinking, she leaned down and took his hand to pull him out. Light flooded*

*everywhere around her. She couldn't see or hear anything nor even feel his hand in hers any more.*

"Jaola? Wake up."

Wrenching her eyes open she couldn't remember where she was for a moment.

"Are you OK?" She was lying on someone's lap and his voice vibrated strangely on her ear.

Sitting up slowly, she frowned. "Kita? I... I was dreaming..."

Every time she'd dreamed of that place, bar Cassandra and herself, those people she saw in that place had died. What could it mean now? Standing, she picked up the blanket that had been placed over her, and wrapped it around her shoulders. Pacing in the small space between two couches, she glanced sideways at him.

"Do you know anything about Time Psi dreams, Kita?"

He shrugged. "Not really, just that they tend to be accurate, why?"

"Long story but I think I'm supposed to help Jessal."

He frowned. "Oh. How?"

"I don't know." She shrugged.

"Maybe Hawk can help clear it up?"

She sat down on the couch facing Kita and looked at her hands. "Maybe."

**\* 2 \***

Jessal lay somewhere warm, hovering between being awake and being asleep. The painkillers the woman had given him had blissfully knocked him out for a little while. He wanted to go back to sleep, to deny his current situation, but despite lying still and keeping his eyes closed his body still knew it was daytime and insisted upon being more and more conscious.

The lock in the door nearby rattled with the sounds of a key and he opened his eyes reluctantly. When the door opened, the man he'd known of as Aenan stood in the doorway with a tray of food in one hand and a bottle of water in a pants pocket.

Jessal sat up and watched him warily. "So, what are you going to do with me?"

The man put the tray on the bed in front of Jessal and then the bottle. He was awkwardly nursing his left arm, which was in a cast.

"Well, that's up to you."

Jessal was in no mood for word games. "How about being specific?"

The man dragged a chair inside and closed the door. "You have two choices, you can either go free and we'll take all of the information you possess about us from you." Sitting down on the

chair with his back to the door, the man glanced up at Jessal, his ice-blue eyes almost glowing in the dimly lit room. “Or you can join us.”

“Join you?” He snorted. “That’s not likely. Tell me, were you *ever* in the Agency?”

“Jessal, I was born into the Agency. My family has been in the Agency for five generations. The only reason why I’m not a part of the Agency right now is because they think I’m dead.”

Jessal felt angry and trapped. He was being offered to join another terrorist group. “You bombed that base. There are probably hundreds of people killed and injured--”

“This is all much bigger than the Agency and that explosion, much bigger.”

Jessal crossed his arms over his chest and turned his face from the man in disgust. “Of course.”

He heard the man sigh and get to his feet again. “I’ll give you some more time to think, but either way you’re being let out of this room in the morning.”

Jessal refused to look at him and waited until the door was closed and locked before he looked around again. He had three choices: one, leave without his memories; two, stay and be a part of another terrorist group; or three, try to escape. Neither of Aenan’s options seemed particularly appealing to him, so he decided that there was only one option left: try to escape. But first, he needed to eat.

**\* 3 \***

*Half an hour or so later*

Jaola stood in the kitchen making sandwiches. She still felt nauseous from the head injury and exhausted, but she wasn’t able to sleep any more. Because she’d really needed to do something to keep her mind busy, she was making sandwiches. Sandwich-making wasn’t glorious or anything, but it was better than baby-sitting ten loud and energetic pre-teens. She wrapped up another set of two sandwiches in lunch wrap, put the sandwich package in the battered fridge with the rest of them, and decided that she needed a rest. She closed the fridge door and turned to sit at the kitchen table.

Hawk stood nearby in sitting-room doorway. He still looked quite pale, but he was smiling. “I heard you wanted to talk to me?”

Absently, she turned and flicked the kettle on to boil, they always had a hot drink when they talked.

She sat down at the table. “Yeah, sort of.”

“And?” He sat in the chair opposite and looked sideways at her.

“I had another sea-of-the-dead dream. About Jessal.”

He rested his cast on the table and leaned forward. “You think he might die?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure because he was alive in that place and asking for my help.”

He gave her one of those looks he used to give her as Father Owen, one of knowing, of being a billion years old and for a moment understanding everything. “So, you think he needs help?”

“We’re not going to kill him, you said it yourself, so, who would be the threat? Beside, how can I help him? He probably despises me. I doubt I could even talk to him without a negative reaction.”

One corner of his mouth lifted in amusement. “He isn’t in a very receptive mood. He seems to think we’re worse than the Rona-Abaan.”

“But what should I do?”

His face became calm, almost radiant for a moment. “What does your gut say, Jaola?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe talk to him?”

The sound of broken glass made them both turn. They realized at the same time that the noise had come from Jessal’s room, and standing they went to the door. She turned the key in the lock and they stepped inside. Jessal stood near the far window. He had smashed the glass with a chair and was struggling to pull it out again.

“What are you doing?” Jaola barked.

He turned to them with a guilty look on his face. Jaola pushed into Jessal’s mind and by the time they both got to him, he was on the floor “asleep”.

**\* 4 \***

Once they’d gotten Jessal up onto the bed with a little help from Kita, they tied him to the bed posts and patched up the window with duct tape. Jaola stood staring at their sleeping guest, thinking about what she should do about her dream.

Hawk stood in the doorway, one hand on his hip watching her. She could feel his eyes on the side of her face. “Well, now we need a guard on Jessal. We can’t have him escaping, now can we?”

She glanced sideways at him and for a second she saw the minutest of smiles lift one corner of his mouth.

“So, do you want to take the first shift? Maybe wake him up and talk to him?”

She sighed and nodded. “Of course.”

Hawk closed the door and she turned to stare at Jessal again. Pulling the chair to the side of the bed, she sat down to think. It wouldn't be hard to release him from the sleep program, it was something she'd learned how to do when she was a child, but she just wasn't sure how to approach Jessal when he woke up. She didn't even know if she wanted to help him either. It wasn't her responsibility to help people out of the messes they put themselves into. Although, she knew that if it was a Time Psi thing it might have far wider reaching consequences than just her not helping and Jessal dying.

But, there was no better time than the present, so she projected the unlock pattern for the sleep program into his mind and prepared herself for whatever was going to happen.

\* 5 \*

Jessal woke up quickly, as if someone had dropped him out of the nothingness. He jolted awake with his body instantly tense and eyes wide from the fright. What had happened? Something had happened just before this.

He tried to sit up, but he found that his arms were tied down. With a quick pull he found out his legs were tied too. He dimly remembered a chair. That was it! A chair! He'd tried to get out by breaking the window with the chair and... and... someone came into the room and stopped him.

Stretching his neck, he looked left at the window and saw that it had been patched up with some kind of tape. Then he looked right. Someone was sitting nearby.

“Hello, Jessal.”

“Oh, it's you.” He sighed apathetically and looked up at the ceiling.

“Nice to see you too, Jessal.” There was a smile in her voice. “I have a question for you, I'm curious. Why do you want to stay in the Agency? Surely, you saw how badly they treat people?”

He lifted one eyebrow at the ceiling. She was certainly blunt. “I'm not going back to the Agency.”

“Then why not join with Hawk?”

His eyes widened. “Aenan is Hawk?”

“Yes.”

“*One of the most famous leaders of the Psi Rebels and Hawk is stuffing around with a prisoner?*” Jessal frowned. “Why isn't he killing me? I'm a threat. Mena would have in a second.”

She sighed. “Jessal, I’ve only been in on this since this morning, but I do know that Hawk isn’t like the other Psi Rebel leaders of the past, he has a vision that goes beyond just fighting the Agency. There’s something coming, something is going to happen that could threaten everyone on this planet and that’s what he’s involved in. So, if he wants you to live then he has his reasons.”

Jessal turned his head to try and see her face. She seemed to be telling the truth, or at least believing what she said. He felt confused and unable to accept such a broad scale thing. “*The whole planet? What a bizarre concept.*”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

She sighed. “I wish I was.”

Jessal lay there for a few minutes thinking. It could all be an attempt to manipulate him and this woman was certainly capable of that. But for some reason he found himself believing that she was telling the truth, or at least a truth that she believed in.

She sighed and leaned forward on the chair. “I heard that you were the one who captured Coan.” Her voice sounded as apathetic as he was feeling.

He shrugged. “Only with the help of your Hawk.”

“Did you know that the RA killed Coan’s daughter? They slit her throat and left her to die alone.”

Straining against the ropes, he tried to turn more than just his head to look at her. “You went to Kaamo?”

“Yes.” She paused and then continued with her voice much quieter. “We wouldn’t have found her at all without that crazy old lady.”

Jessal frowned and raised an eyebrow. “Old Ana?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“She’s an old acquaintance. It was her that was responsible for my leaving Rona, oh,” he added apathetically. “And *your* Uncle.”

She straightened in the chair. “Who? Raraan?”

“Yes, he wanted me to turn in the rest of the RA in exchange for asylum from the Guard. And crazy Old Ana told them about the offer, but not that I had turned him down.”

“Well, she took Coan’s shoes for information about where his child was and we had hundreds of dollars of Ronan money, but she didn’t want any of it. Crazy old woman.”

He nodded and almost chuckled, that *did* sound like Old Ana. “Did you ever find out why they targeted him? I mean, to assassinate me?”

She answered immediately, but sounded distant. “No. He thought that maybe he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Oh.”

There was more silence but this time she seemed to be the one thinking. Jessal carefully pulled against the ropes one at a time to see what kind of give they had.

“Jessal, you’re not getting out. Even if you could somehow get out of the ropes and stop me from putting you on the floor, the door is locked and the window you were trying to break before is two stories above a concrete box with no exit. There’s nowhere to go.”

“I’m just trying to get comfortable.” He lied.

“I’m an 8/5 telepath, Jessal.”

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling again. “*Bloody telepaths,*” he thought as loudly as he could.

She stood up and leaned over the bed looking him in the eyes. “You didn’t answer the question before. Why don’t you want to join Hawk?”

“What, and join another terrorist group?”

Turning away, she paced around the bed towards the window. “A terrorist group seeks through fear and death to attain their goals. The Rona-Abaan, the Agency... these groups are terrorists because they use fear and threats to enforce compliance. I think Hawk genuinely wants to stop whatever is going to happen and is prepared to do anything to achieve that goal.” She stopped at the window and looked out.

He snorted. “What about you? Are you willing to do anything towards that unknown goal of his?”

She turned and looked at him, she didn’t seem angry, but her voice was almost cold. “Not anything Jessal, I’m not a zealot and neither am I a mindless follower. I haven’t seen anything that suggests the Psi Rebels are expected to act mindlessly. In fact, he seems to encourage people to make their own decisions. The only thing I’ve seen is that everyone who follows him loves and trusts him, and he them. I think that is an honorable quality and it shows that maybe what he has to say has more merit than being the mere vision of a madman.”

“Well, he certainly seems to have captivated you. Maybe we’re in a similar situation and you don’t realize it.”

She turned away from him and seemed to be staring out of the broken window. He wondered if she was angry with him. He also wondered if she was the violent type. If he wound her up enough would she explode and attack him? He sighed, and stared at the ceiling.

Jessal was counting the mould spots above him, when he heard the sound of a key turning in the lock. The door opened and Aenan stepped into the room.

“Jessal, I’d like to show you something, but I don’t want to force it on you. I think it might

change your mind about joining us.” The man sat down on the bed next to Jessal’s waist and stared calmly at him with ice blue eyes.

Jessal smirked at him. “About the only thing that will change my mind is threatening me with my life or forcing me to change my mind with her.” He used his head to indicate the woman he’d known as Anne.

“Jessal, if I’d have wanted you dead you would be. And to be honest, I’d prefer not to have to get all the telepaths here together to wipe your memory. I can see that there is a place for you in this group and if you let me I can show you that future right now. However, I’m not going to force you to do anything.”

“I don’t mind forcing him.”

Jessal looked uncomfortably in her direction. She had her hands on her hips and a cold look in her eyes. He swallowed and glanced back at the man sitting next to him.

“No, Jaola, I don’t want anyone in this who isn’t here of their own free will.” He looked from Anne to Jessal, his eyes seemed endlessly calm and focused. “Will you or will you not consent?”

Jessal looked away, back at the ceiling mold and wondered if he should. “I don’t know, will it hurt?”

“No, Jessal, it won’t hurt.”

He thought about what Anne had been saying about Hawk, and what he knew of him. According to the history he’d learnt in the Agency, this man had managed to unite the few surviving Psi Rebels and increase their numbers from less than twenty to hundreds if not thousands. He knew for a fact that Hawk had given the Agency a run for their money, even with over half of the Agency part of a concerted effort to track him down for ten years. No madman with a mad vision could do that, at least not for as long as he had. Aenan had known where Coan was going to be the night before, and what hospital Jessal had been admitted to after he’d tracked Anne back to that outlying town on the bus.

Jessal was a little frightened of the situation and the offer this man was giving him. He didn’t know what was a trick and what was not, what was going to happen to him, or even if he should just stand his ground. His knee-jerk reaction was to stand his ground for the principle of the thing, but something in Anne’s words made him curious and, he begrudgingly admitted to himself, a little hopeful. He currently had no future waiting for him and maybe this man offered him something worth the risk.

He put on a sarcastic smile and looked at Aenan. “Hey, why not. Aside from my mind what have I got to lose?” His voice was far more sarcastic and apathetic than he felt, but it didn’t



matter.

“Close your eyes.”

As soon as he did he was drawn into a place where he was watching himself tied to the bed, but at a distance. There was a strange impression of truth and a sensation not unlike static in the ether around him. He watched a procession of events in front of him. It was in three dimensions, but also as if it were projected onto a wall where he watched it in the safety of a dark room.

He saw four people standing around him forcing amnesia on him. It skipped forward and he was wandering around night-time streets lost and confused. Eventually, he was taken to a hospital. After that, he saw the faces of Agents asking him repeated questions. Eventually, he was taken into a room where telepaths ripped his mind apart for knowledge. When he came out from that white walled room he was a mental vegetable. Sometime after ward, he saw his own dead face lying in a morgue. Somehow, he knew instinctively that all of this would happen within a few weeks.

The space from which he watched the images went blank and the view changed. He could see an alternate path. He saw them leaving the place they were currently, Anne teaching him martial arts, and the wonderful feeling he missed from the RA when he would Search for something and find it for them. He could see himself through the coming years using his Search Talent for something useful that he felt good about. The last image, he watched himself leading others through a very dark maze and Searching for something. It was important, whatever it was, and for a moment in the pitch blackness of the Search, he was filled with an intense sensation of hope and strength. In that moment, he felt the utter joy of being useful and having purpose. The sensation cut off abruptly and he returned to current time.

“Jaola, could you untie him?”

Opening his eyes, Jessal watched her untie one of his hands. When it was free, he wiped his face of the tears he hadn't felt himself shed and waited as she worked on the knots holding his other arm.

Hawk stood over him. “Jessal, we're untying you under the assumption that you aren't going to try and escape again. In about an hour, I'll be back with your afternoon tea. I'd like a decision by then.”

**\* 6 \***

Once Jaola untied their prisoner, she went up to the window again and stared out at the brick. She felt emotionally exhausted, as if someone had come along with a rough, hard brush and

scrubbed away at her insides. After all the crying she'd done that day, she wondered if she'd ever cry again.

She wasn't sure if she wanted Jessal to be a part of something that she was, if only because she'd been his enemy for so long and it was strange to think of him any other way. But she figured it wasn't as if she really had any clue about where this new situation would lead her anyway.

The onyx-handled gun was heavy in her pocket. She didn't want it, but didn't want anyone else to have it either. It was her burden. Some of the children had wanted to hold it, but they didn't know what it meant, what it symbolized. Until she could figure out what to do with it, she would hold onto it and keep it from being used by other people.

Jessal sat on the bed behind her, his public thoughts seemed to be focused on his time with the RA. Occasionally, he would ask himself loudly what did he really want to do with his life?

After he repeated the thought several times, she turned to face him. "What *do* you want to do, Jessal?"

His eyes widened, but he remembered she was a telepath and brushed off his surprise with a shake of his head.

"When I was old enough to understand, I would fantasize about being in Arana and being an Agent. I wanted to be using my skills instead of hiding from them or running because of them. I wanted to be useful. The happiest memories I have in my life are of being useful to the RA. I want that feeling back, of being useful, of being able to use my Talents for something worthwhile." He stood and looked out towards the window behind her.

In that moment and being so close to him, Jaola really saw him for the first time since they'd met. Ronan men were tall and broad across the chest and Jessal was no exception. His skin was as dark as coal and his face square. Having been used to the shape of Aranan men, he seemed too broad and tall to her. Not that she doubted she could still take him out if she needed to, but she hadn't had the time to really notice how big he was. She was usually the same height or taller than most Aranan men and was very tall for a woman, but Jessal was taller than her, in fact her eyes were level with his chin. She wondered for a moment if he'd been treated differently in the Agency for his size and coloring.

"What about you Anne? What do you want out of life?"

Blinking out of her previous thoughts, she focused on his question, and then looked up at him firmly.

"To not be an assassin."

Jaola sat in the dim sitting-room with the onyx-handled gun in her hands. She'd taken out the magazine so that it wasn't loaded. But even though it was just a hunk of metal and stone, unable to kill someone in the way it had before, at least until she reloaded it, it still felt heavy in her hands. It still felt like a burden she couldn't get away from. She suspected even if she filled it with concrete and put it on the wall it would still be a burden. It would always be a reminder of who she was born to be. But she didn't want to just throw it out either. Someone else could use it, someone else could kill with it, and she couldn't let that happen.

"That's a nice looking gun."

She looked up at Dobid as he slowly walked between the couches and sat down opposite her.

"No, no it's not," she said. The cast on his broken arm had been painted black and rested awkwardly on his lap. "*It must still be hurting him,*" she thought.

"Why's that? What's its story?" His vivid blue eyes were warm and friendly, the way they were sometimes when they used to spend evenings talking at the Cathedral.

She smiled at the memory. "You know, even before I left the Agency you were such a steadying influence on my life. Even with all the lies we shared, you helped me in ways I didn't realize. Did you know then that all this would happen and that you wanted me for your little club?"

Dobid sat back on the couch with an amused smile on his face. "No, but I knew you were involved. I knew I had to be involved in your life. As it is with most Time Psi, I know when I'm meant to know. It would take an extraordinary person to know everything from the start and be able to act accordingly."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Jaola looked down at the gun again, feeling sad and remembering her father. She lifted the gun up and handed it to Dobid.

"My father gave it to me for my seventeenth birthday, for being the youngest ever to make A2. It's killed a great many people for the Agency. And it was always in the death dreams, always. So it may look pretty, but it's really an ugly thing."

Dobid nodded slowly, looking down at the gun in his hands. "Well, then why not throw it away?"

"Would it be that easy? Would it stop others using it? Would I stop feeling like a murderer?"

"We could throw it in the river? It'd take a while before someone found it. These things don't float."

She smiled slightly at the mischief in Dobid's face.

“But seriously, healing and change happen slowly, maybe getting rid of it is the first step.”

“Maybe.” She nodded and stared off into space for a while.

He stood up and put the gun next to her on the couch. “Well, I must go to bed, Jaola. Goodnight.”

**\* 8 \***

Someone shook Jaola awake. “Wake up, Anne! We’ve got to go!”

She was only half-awake when her eyes opened. It took a second to recognize Karen’s face and she frowned at her old friend. “What’s happening?”

Karen looked tense. “Dobid woke us all up and said that the Agency was on to us. We have to pack and get out now.”

Shaking her head to wake up, Jaola got to her feet. She’d fallen asleep on the couch and her gun had left a dent in her side. She picked it up and put it in her jacket pocket, then followed Karen out of the room into the kitchen. The children held folded up sleeping bags and cots, and stood by the door. She had nothing to pack that she knew of.

“How can I help, Karen?”

Karen went to the fridge and started stuffing the wrapped sandwiches into a backpack. “There’s a bag around here somewhere, can you put the medical supplies that are on the table into it?”

Looking around her, Jaola found an empty backpack on the floor and started stuffing the supplies into it. Behind her, more people walked into the kitchen area. Hawk was barking off orders.

“Jessal, I need you up the front with me. Children you’ll be in the middle. And can you three adults take up the rear to secure the children? They cannot be taken, do you understand that?”

“Yes, sir.” “Of course, Dobid.”

“Jaola?”

She turned from what she was doing and looked up at Dobid’s overly serious frown. “That’s Anne, and yes, I understand.”

“Good.”

**\* 9 \***

Jessal was at the bottom of the stairs with the door in front of him and Aenan standing to

his right.

“Give me a second,” he said absently, and closed his eyes.

He needed to Find a *safe pathway out of the city* for all of them. The Search was a bit more complicated than he was used to, usually he only Searched for a person or an object, but he was sure he could do this, he just had to focus. *A safe way for all of us out of Araam, I need to Find a safe pathway out.* He took a slow deep breath and felt the niggle in the back of his head that told him he had a path to follow. He opened his eyes and glanced sideways at Aenan.

“I’ve got a path to follow, Aenan.”

The man smiled gently. “Good, thank you. And Jessal, please call me Dobid or Hawk.”

Jessal nodded. “OK.”

The whole situation was so strange to him. But if what Aenan (Hawk) had shown him was as real as it felt, it was worth the strangeness.

Hawk walked back up the stairs to get the others. Jessal’s feet itched to follow the path and he had to focus to keep his feet still. It always felt so good to follow his Search Talent and it seemed so instinctively wrong to not follow it. But it didn’t take long for the others to start coming down the stairs.

“OK, let’s go.” Hawk stood next to him and opened the door. It was night time outside and very dark. It seemed as if there were no streetlights on the road, at least, none that worked.

His feet led them zigzagging across streets and through dark alleyways. As he fell deeper into the Search trance, Jessal stopped noticing the sounds of the others behind him, although there was still a sense of them because they were a part of the Search. Jessal became the pathway, he was no longer aware of his body or really the physical world, all he knew was the shimmering and tickling pathway in his mind.

**\* 10 \***

*Some hours later*

Ahead of Jessal, the Search-path stopped flowing and he knew without thinking it that they had to stay there for a while. Becoming more aware of where they stood, he glanced sideways at Aenan. “We have to stop here for a while. I don’t know how long, but we’re safe here for the moment.”

They all stood in a dark alley between two quite tall buildings. The only light around them came from a pair of windows a few stories above them. There was very little noise around them and he figured it must still be too early for most people to be awake.

There was whispering behind him and he figured that Hawk must be telling the others that they had to stay put. The ground sounded wet under foot and he wondered if it had rained while he'd been in captivity. Turning around and still adjusting his perceptions back into the more "normal" mental state, he looked at the group behind him. The children were the obvious shadows because they were short and seemed almost jovial, whereas the adults were taller, and from what little he could see of their shadows they were all looking around them for possible threats. Even the doctor was tense and as far as Jessal knew, she had never been in the Agency.

He couldn't see which of the children was Cassandra, but he knew she was among them. Hawk had said that she didn't recognize him because she had some sort of amnesia. He secretly thanked that amnesia because, untrained, that girl had an amazing kinetic thrust and he'd hate for her to throw him again.

Off to the side, he saw that Anne person. She looked as separate and outcast from the group as he felt. She had said that what she wanted from life was to not be an assassin. Jessal didn't understand what she meant by that. She'd been out of the Agency for three years, or so her file had said, and that meant she hadn't been an assassin for three years. He mentally shrugged. Those sorts of questions didn't matter so much, he'd probably never understand her, so why even think about it.

There was a niggle in the back of his head, which meant that it was nearly time to start walking again.

"Hawk?" He whispered loudly.

Aenan stepped out of the shadowy figures. "Yes, Jessal?"

"It's nearly time to go again."

"OK." The man nodded. "Just a moment. Kita!"

The shadowy figures melded together in the darkness as one leaned in to talk to the other. They whispered too quietly for Jessal to hear, but the one they called Kita stepped forward towards him and handed Jessal something.

"Seeing as you're with us now, you might need one of these." The man stepped back and to Jessal's surprise, he found a small revolver in his hands.

"Oh, thanks." Such a small gesture, but Jessal felt as if they had welcomed him into the group. He grinned at the weapon.

The niggling became very strong in the back of his head, so he put the gun away and stepped back out towards the street.

**\* 11 \***

*About an hour later*

Jaola's head had started throbbing even before they left the safe house, but with each step and each new street the throbbing pumped pain deeper into her skull. She hoped they would get wherever they were going soon because she desperately needed to stop moving.

They'd already rested twice in dark alleyways, but neither of the stops had been long enough to help her headache. She had no idea who was leading them or where in the city they were, only that they were always in quiet, dark places.

She followed the group across another dim road and into the shadows of a pedestrian overpass. They all stood under the overpass for a few seconds in the pitch black as a car drove through a nearby intersection, and then they were jogging again. Each time her foot hit the ground, each heart beat that pumped blood around her body, felt like a hammer smacking into her skull. Deeper and deeper the pain drove into her head and she begged in her mind for the journey to be over.

Quite suddenly, everyone was still. There seemed to be a bench along a dark wall because some of the others were sitting. Jaola crouched down where she stood and held her head in her hands willing the pain to ease.

"Anne? Are you alright?" The voice was Karen.

"Migraine," she grunted. "Bad one."

"You should have said earlier. I'll give you something for it." She felt Karen's cool hands touch her arm. "Come on, sit on this bench."

\* 12 \*

*An hour from dawn*

Jaola stood in pitch-blackness at the top of a hill. A motorway bridge rose above her head, but remarkably there was only the occasional car or truck driving overhead. She wondered how the Agency had responded to the explosion. One thing was certain, there was no one on foot in the streets and barely any cars. They must have at least enforced a martial law on the city.

Her instincts told her to go to ground and wait it out, not make a break for the city limits. But Dobid had insisted, and for the first time since her father died she trusted someone else's judgment over her own. It wasn't just her life at stake, but eight children and four other adults.

The children rested on the grass behind her in the pitch-black with their backs to one of the concrete pillars that held up the motorway. The adults stood in various guard spots around them, still mostly covered by the darkness of the overpass. She stood between the children and the nearby

road. Jessal was closer to the road, in fact he seemed to want to keep walking because he was standing very near the line where streetlight cut through shadow and he was shuffling restlessly on his feet. She watched him with wary eyes, he of all of them was the most likely to be seen from the street.

**\* 13 \***

The itching in the back of Jessal's head and in the soles of his feet was unbearable. But Hawk had said that the children were exhausted and they needed a break. They had to wait until the children were able to continue. But his Search Talent was painful inside of him. It insisted he had to walk. He had to walk *now*.

He shuffled very uncomfortably, moving his weight from foot to foot, not realizing that he inched closer and closer to the road and the line of streetlight nearby.

In the distance, he heard a car and looked out at an intersection down at the bottom of the hill. He sensed movement behind him and turned to watch as the dim shadows of the children melted into the large support pillar for the overhead highway.

It took him a moment to understand that the car was coming towards him and as he turned back to watch, he realized that it was too late to get out of sight because the car was practically on top of him. It screeched to a halt very close to him on the footpath.

A man wearing a suit of a very similar cut to the one he'd had to wear in the Agency got out of the car with a gun raised. "Do you know there is a curfew in effect?"

Jessal lifted his hands to shoulder height. "No, sir, I didn't."

"What are you doing out here?"

"Nothing. I... I was just enjoying the night." The Search shattered in his mind and Jessal flinched. That meant it wasn't safe anymore.

"You're very tall." The man stepped closer and squinted at him in the darkness. The gun barrel hovered centimeters from Jessal's diaphragm. "You're not Aranan are you? You're Ronan! You're under arrest. Hands in the air! Now!"

Jessal lifted his arms and felt someone slip by him from behind. The gun was kicked from the man's grasp. As Jessal realized it was Anne in front of him, he watched her punch the Agent mid-chest and dump him onto the ground in some kind of twirling feat of strength. He blinked at the unconscious form lying on the ground, and then stared at her.

"Whoa, when this is over can you teach me how to do that?"

In the darkness, he heard her laugh. "Sure."



*The next day in the very far  
west side of Araam City*

It was a bright sunny day. The sun shone on Jaola's back and an unseasonably warm breeze played in her long black hair. Jaola leaned on the bridge barrier looking at the blue waters flowing underneath her. The river was swift at this point and it looked deep as well. Below her the blue was very dark with touches of a deeper green where there must have been a channel.

She sensed that Dobid stood behind her, keeping his distance so as not to interrupt her thoughts. She remembered the heavy gun in her pocket. She hadn't wanted to remember it but his presence made it impossible to forget. It was because of that gun that she was there on that bridge. She sighed ever so slightly. Maybe she should wait a little to do this. It wasn't exactly the best time to be out in the open, although realistically when would be a good time to be out in the open? As long as she was alive she would always be on that Traitor List, so she would always be on the run. Now was as good a time as any to be out in the open doing this.

Hawk stepped up next to her and leaned on the handrail, but he didn't look at her. She turned to him with an ironic smile on her long face.

"It's funny, I don't know if want to let go of it. Can you believe that?"

Brilliant blue eyes turned to look at her. There was a touch of mischief in them. "You want to back out?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No, but it's a surprising thing to feel."

"Surely, it's not so surprising? It's all you've ever known."

She nodded and looked out at the river again. "I guess so." She knew there wasn't much time, but still she stalled.

"I'm sorry to push you, Jaola, but we don't have much time."

"Oh, I know, Dobid, I know." She sighed and took out the gun from her pocket. Looking at it sadly, she turned it over. At the base of the gun, carved into the onyx was a small cheetah running. Her father had chosen her code name. He said it was how she hunted as an assassin. Stealthily, and only launching into an attack at the very last moment. The cheetah was a mythical being and no one even knew if it really existed. Her reputation was like this as well. People heard of her and feared her, but didn't know for certain if she even existed until she was in their face and they were about to die.

She loved her father, more so after her mother died, because afterwards he opened up a

side to him she'd never seen before. She'd had what she imagined a real father was like. She had affection, love, support and human emotion. It had only been for three years, but it had been more than she'd had even in her childhood. This gun wasn't about him, it wasn't him she was letting go of, because he was in her heart and would always remain there. She was letting go of Cheetah and that assassin she'd been. That assassin she'd never be again. She didn't know what she'd be without Cheetah, but she did know that by releasing the gun into the river she would be free to find out.

Leaning over the edge, she held the gun above the water. She paused only for a moment and then let it go. It splashed a second or so later and sunk very quickly from view. With it, she saw Cheetah sinking down and away from her. She let out a deep breath and turned away from the water's edge. At one end of the bridge a battered white van was parked on the side of the road. In the van waited the children and some of the other Psi Rebels.

She was no longer an assassin for the Agency, she was a Psi Rebel. She had to keep telling herself that until she believed it.

Walking back towards the van with Dobid, she smiled. She really was free.

## Epilogue

*Jaola stood somewhere with a warm breeze on her skin. Opening her eyes, she was surprised to find herself standing on a stone balcony high up on a white marble building. Below her, a beautiful landscape spread out to the horizon. Closest were manicured gardens, flowers in lines, and a great fountain further away. In the distance was a forest of giant trees, the green leaves were interspersed with patches of deep purple.*

*Behind her, she heard the sound of footsteps and turned. A lovely woman stood there dressed in a flowing blue gown, long straight golden brown hair fell delicately around her face and down to her waist. Jaola looked at the woman and smiled as if she was a good friend.*

*“Anu... it is time... we must go...” The woman’s voice was soft, but also commanding and with a strange accent.*

*Jaola found herself bowing formally. “Yes, Chancellor, of course.”*

*The woman turned and walked through a huge stone doorway. Jaola followed her silently. As she stepped into the room beyond, she fell away from that place and into the peaceful darkness of deep sleep.*