

Time Speaker, by David Anaan Drake (Raggedy edge)

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For Anne, and for Bill Mannens.

Time Speaker is also dedicated to Chester Bennington and the guys from Linkin Park. I want to specifically tell you that your music helped me in the mid-2000s to avoid becoming “one more light going out in the sky of a million stars”.

Thank you.

Forward

Despite being second in the series, *Time Speaker* was my first book. It was my baby but also my lifeline. It taught me how to write, and how to live again despite my day to day difficulties. This, the sixth complete rewrite, twenty-three years since I first started writing it, shall finally be the last rewrite – hopefully.

It's been a very difficult process to write this book again, it is a reminder of times when I truly believed I wouldn't survive to get to thirty let alone forty, and there's been a lot I've had to mourn in the process of moving through each section, so it's the very definition of a labour of love. For those who read the first edition: I've changed a lot of the little details, but I hope you can see the original core of the story and my precious characters shining underneath all of the changes.

This, above all of my other books represents the hopes and dreams from a time that I very nearly didn't survive, so please, tread lightly on these words... and above all else, know that you are welcome in TSU.

-- D.A.H.D.

Part One

Chapter One: Cheetah

*** 1 ***

18 Aracan 3004

Araam City

Planet Shadow

Jaola Armon sat in the driver's seat of an old two-door car, her head was drooped sideways against the window glass and her eyes were slowly closing. She hovered in a state of exhausted anxiety, one instinct demanding she sleep, the other insisting that she stay awake in case of attack. Slowly, her sleep deprivation won out over the fear of discovery, and her mind slid sideways into a dreamworld.

It was dark. She stood in an empty, mold-infested room and stared down the barrel of her onyx-handled gun at Taelin Kaan. His dark blue eyes were wide and fearful, and tears had left streaks on his cheeks. In the gaps between terror and grief on his face, she could also see a smattering of anger.

“You have killed everyone!” His voice echoed oddly in her ears, as if she wasn't really there.

“I will not kill you.” She was so icy cold inside herself that she didn't know if this was the truth, but she hoped so.

However, if he wouldn't let her pass she would have to attack him. She knew his reinforcements would arrive any minute, and despite probably not wanting to kill him, she had to survive at all costs.

He frowned at her. “I... I don't believe you!”

Forming her mental energy into a spike, she stabbed it into his mind, breaking what shielding he had, and piercing into his consciousness to incapacitate him.

His scream was awful, but was it heard by the part of her that didn't care about anything except escape. She would survive, no matter what...

Still asleep, her face screwed up as she instinctively fought that cold part of her that didn't want to care any more, that didn't want to feel *anything* at all.

Her conscious mind didn't notice her struggle as the screams of Taelin Kaan warped in her mind, and the dream world shifted into another memory.

Jaola's heart was pounding as she slid across the floor on her knees. Her spine arched back so far to avoid being hit that her head touched the floor.

“Wow, this Rebel is a kinetic,” she thought, watching the single bed as it flew over top of her. It was so close that the loose corner of its sheet brushed her face as it shot past.

The world sped up again as she slid through a doorway, gaining cover for a moment as the bed smashed through the wall next to her.

She got to her feet, and returned to the sitting room with the weapon barrel aimed out in front of her. The Rebel woman stood in the kitchen, using the door of an old-fashioned refrigerator for some ineffective cover.

Jaola stepped towards her and time slowed again for half a breath.

The woman had a regal face, tanned like Jaola, with long, curly black hair that was loosely tied back. Cobalt blue eyes stared at her over a smaller caliber handgun, and there was both fire and ice in that blue. The ice confirmed that this woman had probably once been an Agent, but the fire was utterly beautiful to Jaola. She was like a flaming dragon, fierce and powerful.

While still observing that beauty, she felt a flare of actual emotion; of joy and attraction. But her instincts immediately recognized the threat that such feelings posed to her survival and responded. No matter how attractive, this Rebel was still her enemy, and would likely kill her if her guard came down. With that understanding, something snapped in her head. A gray, emotionless sensation blew over Jaola like a winter's storm, and she was watching the situation from the outside.

The enemy had paused, her eyes wide and staring at her. Icy cold, Jaola recognized the moment of weakness in her enemy and formed her mental energy into a spike.

She attacked, but the Rebel was strong enough to block her telepathic intrusion, yelling out in her effort.

The two of them lifted and fired their weapons at the same time, and Jaola felt a terrible piercing agony blow through the side of her body--

Someone knocked on the glass close to her face, and Jaola flinched out of her dream. She blinked at the person through the car window. Frowning, she tried to remember what was going on.

He had blond hair, steely gray eyes, and his face was angular and defined. His name was Kita Oran, and he'd once been a Telepath Interrogator.

His eyebrows lifted expectantly, but she blinked a few more times at him before understanding what he wanted. Grunting, she leaned across the little car and unlocked the passenger door for him.

Kita smiled a silent 'thanks' through the window, and strode around the hood to get inside.

"Time to go home?" she asked, starting the engine.

"Yes. Thank you for waiting, Ninae."

"I don't mind. Is everything alright?"

He sighed. "Nama's cell captured another spy."

Understanding that he hated Interrogating as much as she hated being an assassin, she grumbled sympathetically.

Before she could offer any verbal condolences, he lifted one hand in a stop motion. "It's alright, at least I'm not doing it for the Agency any more. Besides, Naethan had a buried mental shield, I couldn't Anchor, so it wasn't technically an Interrogation this time."

Having been with the Rebels for a number of months she knew their basic reasoning, and spoke, giving him the response that he expected of her as a fellow Rebel. "That's good for you, but not so good for Nama."

He rumbled in agreement. "Let's go home, I'm hungry."

*** 2 ***

Dusk

Jaola sat on the bare wood floor with her back to the windows, and ate her dinner. New Rebels had to survive a year before being given their own set of utensils and plates, so she had to use the accompanying flat bread as a spoon to eat her stewed vegetables and rice. Her fingers were sticky, which itched at her need to be clean, but at least the food tasted nice and for once there was enough that she might just go to bed with a full tummy.

The main living room was surprisingly dry and warm, unlike most Rebel buildings she'd

experienced. To her right, towards the back-stairwell, thirty-odd camping cots stood in lines, and close on her left was a kitchen counter with a modern electric oven. The eight Rebels were seated on the floor, jostled together in a wobbly, stretched circle which included her at one end. The cell normally numbered closer to thirty, but the rest were off on a special mission for Hawk to free some kids from a desert training base.

At the furthest end of the group, Treana Norman was on her feet. Her eyes always seemed too big for her face, and that effect was more-so when she was in a Time Psi trance.

“Trii, how will tomorrow's mission go?” asked Tolan Enan, Amana's little brother.

“*We will not lose anyone from this cell in the desert. Hawk has ensured it.*” Treana's trance voice came out of her with an odd echo, as if more than one person was speaking.

Tolan smiled. “What about Nama's cell? Will anyone die in his?”

“*The answer to that question hasn't yet been determined.*”

“But I thought you knew everything, Auntie Treana?” replied Hilla Norman's teenage daughter.

Treana smiled. “*Dearest Cherie, we do not know everything, we only see that which will definitely come to pass.*”

Jaola wondered for a second if the Voice knew that she was a spy, and a bubble of dread flickered up into her stomach too fast for her to suppress it. Knowing that there was at least one strong empath in the room, she let out a sigh, in case anyone noticed. “Well, I'd rather not know at all,” she said, giving them a part of the reason for her dread. “I'd worry I might learn about my own death!”

Treana smiled at her, and eyes that were ordinarily silver gray, shimmered with a yellow undercurrent. “*We do not give answers that would cause harm if they were spoken.*”

Treana's eyes closed and she swayed as if she was about to fall. Hilla got to her feet to catch her.

“Trii?” asked Hilla, wrapping her arms around her much younger half-sister.

Treana's eyes were closed and she frowned. “Hrm?” she said, using her normal voice again.

“It's alright, you're coming out of a trance. I've got you.” Hilla gently lowered her down to sit on the floor.

“That was a bad one,” Treana said, putting her hand to her forehead. “How long did you all ask questions?”

“Probably too long.” Hilla grumbled. “I’m sorry, I should have kept better time.”

A smile brought a flash of love and affection, and Treana put her hand on her sister Hilla’s cheek. “It’s alright, I’m not hurt, just confused. So, what did I say?”

Jaola scooped out the last of her dinner, and shoved it in her mouth. Ignoring the replay, she got to her feet, and approached the kitchen sink to rinse out her bowl. Their affection reminded her of what she was missing in her own family, at least since her mother’s breakdown.

In that moment of stark loneliness, she wished desperately to stay with the Rebels. It was dirty and cold, and they spent a lot of time struggling not to starve, but there was so much love here, she didn’t want to go back to the Agency.

She turned her plate over to dry on the counter, and stood there, facing away from them.

She knew she couldn’t stay. The Agency would kill her parents if she defected, and she loved them too much to be responsible for their deaths. Even if that meant she would have to kill Hilla Norman tomorrow.

Jaola sighed. She didn’t want to do any of this.

A hand settled gently onto her back out of nowhere. She managed to suppress the urge to punch out at whoever was close, but she still flinched.

“Oh!” exclaimed Hilla Norman. “I’m sorry to startle you, Ninae. I just sensed that you were upset and came to check on you.”

She huffed, trying to fight the tears that were suddenly in her eyes. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.”

Jaola turned around, wiping at the moisture. Her training dictated that she had to stick to the truth as much as she could, but not so much as to out herself as a spy. So she took a breath and let some of it out.

“You and Treana are so close, and I’m just... I...”

“And it’s hard to be reminded of something you’ve lost.”

Jaola looked at her hands. “Yeah.”

Hilla’s smile was broad and very kind. She lifted her arms up to offer a hug, and the little girl in Jaola stepped into the offered kindness. Hilla’s arms wrapped around her, and Jaola sensed an empathic push of comfort and love.

The knowledge that she was going to have to shoot this lovely woman nagged at her. It didn’t matter how much she was hurting, she had no right to take comfort from Hilla.

“Thank you, Hilla.” Jaola released a deep sigh and let go of the older woman. “But I

should do my chores now.”

*** 3 ***

Jaola's onyx-handled gun was heavy in her hand. There was a chilly wind brushing through her hair as she stared at the carnage in front of her. It was as if some vast battle had been waged. Bodies lay strewn over and on each other, so densely packed that she couldn't see the ground underneath them.

Perceiving the world at a distance to herself, she observed her own lack of response to all of that death. If she were a normal person she would be afraid and grieving the loss of life, or curious as to what had happened. But she wasn't normal, so she felt nothing.

There was an instinct in her that she was in this place for a reason, that she was searching for something, but the details of her mission were blurry. She only knew she needed to find something, and that that something was hidden in the surrounding carnage.

Looking right to left, she found nothing familiar, so she turned to look behind her. Just as in the other direction, there were bodies as far as she could see. The carnage was strewn up over a little hill, and went out of sight over the peak. There was no grass or concrete, no ground to be seen except for the hundreds of bodies layered over each other, forming a carpet of dead flesh.

A shot of fear flickered like a tiny candle inside her, and she looked at her feet, afraid that she might be standing on someone. To her relief her shoes sat on a tiny scrap of grass, not someone's face

Right next to her feet, a hand reached out from under another body as if someone had been trying to touch her but hadn't quite made it. She leaned over, gently rolling off the top body, revealing that the owner of the reaching hand had died screaming.

“No!” Jaola jumped, falling back, and landing on her bum.

Their bright green eyes were wide with terror, and seemed to beg as if she could have saved them. Jaola sat there panting back her panic, trying to clear her mind well enough to think, to understand what she saw. That face, that screaming, terrified face looked like hers, but it couldn't be, surely? She was alive.

The fear dropped down a few levels and she could think a little. No, it wasn't her, it was her mother. Jaola had straight black hair, Charmaine's was a little curly. She was only eighteen,

and the body in front of her showed the twenty additional years in the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth.

Finally calm enough to move, Jaola crawled in and reached for her mother. She brushed her fingers over her face, and closed her mother's eyes. Kissing her hair, she rested her forehead on Charmaine's, saying goodbye. After taking a few deep breaths, she let go of her, and stood upright again.

She had to find a way out of this horrible land of bodies, and she wouldn't find that freedom by staying in place and mourning the dead.

Careful not to stand on anyone's head or hands, she stepped over the nearest figure and started moving towards the nearby hill.

It was utterly silent, with no birds or other animals, no voices of people, even the wind moved silently around her. The sky was an overcast gray, with clouds too thick to see where the sun might be, so she couldn't navigate or figure out the time. When she got to the base of the hill, she had to drop onto her hands and knees to continue upwards.

Still crawling, she got to the crest and stopped. All of the muscles in her body were aching as if she'd climbed a mountain and not a gentle slope. She put the heavy onyx-handled gun down on someone's stomach in front of her, and got up to look around.

A world made of bodies stretched outward to the limit of her vision. On that horizon, a dim mountainside lifted out of the mess. The rock was made of dark stone, and reached into the cloud as a sheer wall. Between her and the mountain, there didn't seem to be any buildings or other structures, no trees either. There was nothing but corpses.

Sighing, she reached down to touch her gun again, only to recognize the body on which she'd placed it. Her father's eyes were closed and he looked peaceful. The icy breeze played in his wispy dark hair, and there were tears on his cheeks.

She gasped as a prang of grief and regret vibrated through her. She knelt down to touch his cheek, brushing away the tears with her thumb. She sighed, kneeling down to kiss his forehead.

"Goodbye, papa."

Reaching for the weapon sitting on his stomach, she watched her hand start to shake. As she stared at the shake in her hand, she understood that she couldn't possibly take it with her any more. It was too heavy to carry.

Leaving it there, she got to her feet and focused her mind on that dark mountainside at the horizon. Maybe if she climbed to the top, the land on the other side would be free of the dead.

She walked for a very long time, carefully stepping over bodies, not wishing to disrespect them by putting her foot in their face or adding to the damage, but also feeling a deep need to find a way out of this place. To escape the Sea of the Dead.

Glancing down at her feet, she stepped up and over another body, and when she looked up again, she found that someone was standing just a few meters away. She frowned. He hadn't been there a moment ago, but he seemed to be real, and more importantly, he seemed to be alive.

“Hello?” she said.

He wore long black clothes and had his back to her. He didn't respond, so she moved towards him as quickly as she could.

She reached to touch his shoulder. “Hello? Who are you?”

He turned and she saw a pair of vivid blue eyes. He frowned. “Jaola?”

The jolt of surprise brought her back to consciousness and she gasped, sitting upright in her sleeping cot. “Father Owen?” she thought, confused. “Why was he--?”

It was then she noticed the vibrating alarm of her wristwatch. It meant that regardless of whatever else was going on in her head and dreams, she had to get out of bed.

It was painfully early, but it was her turn to be on guard duty. If she slept in and didn't take over from Hilla, then her target wouldn't leave the building for her morning tasks, and Jaola wouldn't be able to isolate her, and complete the mission.

She didn't want to kill Hilla. The dread pulsed through her and she let out a long sigh. This situation was untenable.

“Happy eighteenth birthday, Joala,” she thought to herself, as she got out of bed.

*** 4 ***

Later that morning

Hilla Norman walked quickly, moving away from Nama's new Rebel cell building and south back towards the factory and her family. As she walked, her thoughts kept hovering over one of their newest recruits. Hilla liked Ninae. Even though she didn't share many details of her life in the Agency, she had a wry humor that sometimes just burst out of her otherwise quiet exterior. Hilla had immediately felt a familiarity with her, as if Ninae could be part of her family, and that feeling

didn't happen very often with Agency escapees.

The world around her was cold and there was no traffic or pedestrians other than herself. Fifty years ago, this section of the city had been a middle-class street, filled with multistory townhouses stacked together in lines, and punctuated by a single school ground and a small shopping complex. But it was all abandoned now, and once it had been stripped down by the local gangs, no one, not the Agency nor the homeless, were interested in these cold brick buildings any more. This abandonment, while tragic, made it the safest neighborhood for her to travel through on her way home.

She glanced up the road, checking for non-existent cars, and stepped off the curb. Nama had passed on the message from Hawk that no girl matching Ninae's description had escaped Araam Tower in the last year. It didn't prove that she was a threat, however it did raise some potentially dangerous questions about what she might be hiding. Despite Hilla's affection for Ninae, it was standard procedure to lock up anyone who could be a threat until they knew either way.

"Oh, look! Here's my turn off!" she thought, shifting direction to move into an alley.

She managed to walk halfway down the narrow space before realizing that there was a dead end in front of her. Frowning, she turned around again. This wasn't anything like her turn off, how could she make such a mistake? As she strode back towards the sidewalk, someone moved into the gap, blocking her way.

Ninae's emerald green eyes held no emotion in them as they stared at her from behind a larger caliber handgun. To Hilla's empathic senses, she was all ice and that ice made her seem much older than her years.

"Ninae? What's going on?"

The girl swallowed. "I'm sorry," her voice squeaked a little, revealing that she wasn't as emotionless as she seemed. "There's no choice. If I don't do this, they'll kill my parents."

Hilla frowned, shaking her head. "Who will?"

Ninae sighed. "I'm Cheetah."

She stepped back, suddenly afraid. Cheetah had decimated the Araam and Marakan Rebels in the last year, taking out over a hundred of their numbers, including her step-sons. A year ago just after she started her campaign, this girl had almost killed Asha, whose skills in combat were otherwise unrivaled in the Araam Rebels. As a result, Cheetah had become a Rebel boogeyman, someone that no one, not even Hawk could stop.

Hilla's bottom lip flickered as the fear and grief vibrated through her. "You don't have to do

this. You could stay with the Rebels.”

The girl swallowed, tears dropping silently down her face. “You know I can't. The Rebels won't accept me. Nuth, I killed your step sons, how could *you* accept me?”

“I forgive you!” Hilla lifted her hands up to ear height, showing her that she wasn't armed. “And I won't tell them. All you have to do is come home with me and stay.”

Ninae stepped towards her, a flash of anger breaking through the icy demeanor. “But they'll kill my parents! I can't let them die, not for me. What would you do to save *your* family?”

Hilla's hands dropped. “I would do anything.”

“Exactly!” Ninae snuffled, wiping at her wet face with one hand. “I'm sorry.”

Hilla Norman took a deep breath and let it out slowly, pushing as much of her fear out with her breath as she could. This girl couldn't be convinced to let her live, and she wasn't skilled enough to fight her way out. If she was to die in this moment, she wanted to face death with as much dignity as possible.

Hilla closed her eyes and waited for the bullet to come.

* * * * *

The tears had started tumbling out of Jaola before she was able to feel the grief that caused them. She aimed the onyx-handled gun at Hilla's heart, but her hands were shaking. She didn't want to do this. Hilla didn't deserve to die in some random alley, she deserved to go back home and spend the rest of her life with her daughter Cherie.

But there was no choice! No matter what Hilla said, Jaola couldn't become a Rebel. If she chose to stand down, they would almost certainly kill her. And if she went back to the Tower without her kill, her supervisor's boss would insist that she go back to the factory and finish her mission, which would include wiping out the whole cell. If she refused, she would face a disciplinary committee and charges. If she just walked away and tried to live on the streets, they would still kill her parents.

Pulling the trigger in this moment was the only way through with the least amount of deaths. There was no other way; it was Hilla or her family.

She felt the wave of ice blow through and over her, washing away all feeling. The world became gray, and she watched herself from a distance. The shaking in her hands slowed and stopped, the tears ceased rushing down her face, and she felt utterly calm. This wasn't about what

was right or just. The micro-scale of the situation was solely the survival of her and her parents.

"There is no choice," she told herself.

A breath escaped from her body and her trigger finger twitched twice. She turned away so she didn't have to see Hilla's body, but she heard it drop.

Jaola sniffed, and without any conscious command, her legs started carrying her out of the alley, and east in the direction of the central Agency Tower building.

*** 5 ***

Araam Agency Tower

Charmaine sat on the corner of the bed with a photo frame in her hands. A long nightshirt hung loosely around her thin frame, and her hair was a mess of black chaos around her face.

She stared at the photo. It told the story of her daughter Jaola's early graduation into her adult profession as an A2 assassin. Jaola's black hair was pulled into a ponytail, and while she looked happy enough for their superiors, Charmaine remembered the waves of dread that pulsed from her daughter that day. She'd told her husband that assigning her to be an assassin wasn't what was best for their daughter, but William had replied that regardless of Jaola's own preferences for her future, she had the perfect combination of skills and Talents for a life of hunting down targets. It was in that moment that Charmaine realized that her daughter was living her exact life, and it was likely she was also careening towards the same end.

A couple of tears crawled down her face like hot wax and dropped, leaving two round splotches on the glass.

Charmaine had complained many times to William over the lie that he was forced to tell Jaola: that her compliance kept them alive. She didn't want to be the reason her daughter slowly destroyed herself as an assassin, but they both knew that if he didn't follow training protocol, he would be charged for real. So in a way the threat wasn't completely a lie. Either way, there just didn't seem to be a way out. It was as if they were all trapped in a maze, going around and around, trying to find a way out, only failing to realize that the only escape was death.

The only way to free Jaola is to die.

The words echoed in her mind with such force that she lost the ability to move. Her fingers let go of the frame and it dropped to the carpet. Her ears heard the sound of glass breaking, but her

mind didn't register it.

Her thoughts lifted into a terrible roar of overlapping words. It was her fault Jaola wasn't free. Her fault that her lovely, joyous daughter was out there in the world killing for the Agency and suffering. Her fault. Eighteen years ago, she'd been too afraid to run away with her friend Rita. Too afraid to leave her husband and escape the Agency with her unborn child. If she'd just had more courage she could have run away, could have given her daughter freedom.

Her fault...

As if viewing herself from very far away, Charmaine watched as she lifted her legs underneath herself, and she started to rock. Forward, then backward, and forward again. For some reason the motion flowed the pain away from her center, and out into the moving, squeaking bed springs.

"Charmaine! What's wrong?" asked William's voice behind her.

So paralyzed by her pain she couldn't even turn to look at her husband.

He moved around the bed and knelt down in front of her, hands rising to hold her gently by the arms.

Gray-blue eyes stared at her. "Tell me what's wrong, Charmaine."

She tried to push the words out of her mouth, but at first nothing would come. Air from her lungs pushed her lips open and the words tumbled out.

"It's my fault Boo's suffering."

William smiled at her. "Our daughter is just fine."

She shook her head. "N.. no, she's not. You would know she's not if you were an empath too."

He sighed, dropping one hand from her arm to wipe his face. She sensed his frustration, but she also sensed that he was trying to be patient with her too.

"She has said nothing to me. Besides, we don't get a choice in the Agency, she'll have to learn as we did how to make peace with her position in the Agency."

A sob burst out of her, and she leaned forwards to rest her head on his. "I never found peace. It broke me. Now it's breaking her. I can't stand to watch it any more!"

He kissed her forehead, wrapping gentle arms around her shoulders. "My love, I don't know how to help her. Anything I might do would result in one or all of us being charged with Treason. We're trapped."

"Not trapped completely. I could save her if I was dead!"

William's shock forced a gasp out of him, he sat back and stared at her for a long moment. Tears filled his eyes and he swallowed. "I think it's time we go up to level twenty-three now. I've been putting it off, but--"

"No!" she screeched, getting to her feet. "I'll not go to the Box!"

He came in close, trying to grab her by the arms. "Please calm down, my love. It's alright, they'll help you."

"No!" she yelled again. "I've got to get OUT!"

Her mind echoed the word 'out', and William flinched back away from her as if she'd struck him.

She wasn't sure what it was about her 'out' that made her stronger, but she needed something to get away from him and save their daughter. "OUT!" she yelled. "OUT!" Each time she said the word, her mind echoed it so loudly that reality itself warped and rippled.

William roared in pain melting to his knees, hands over his ears as if she was too loud for him.

"I've got to get OUT!" she screamed.

He wailed again, and his eyes rolled back in his skull. A blotch of blood settled in one nostril as he went limp. He landed on his side with his eyes closed.

She bent over to touch his face. He was breathing, and had a steady heartbeat. She sensed Psi Shock, but no permanent damage to his mind.

"I'm sorry," she said.

*** 6 ***

A terrible sense of doom punched through Jaola's stomach and she stopped walking. She stood in the Araam Tower plaza listening intently. Nothing seemed amiss. Cars rumbled past on one side of the building, the mirror glass reach up into the sky above her. Despite the feeling, there were no voices or gunshots to be heard. No terrible sounds of strife or damage. Just an ordinary day in the city.

She sighed and started her swift pace towards the side door. The public entrance was behind her, but it wasn't possible to get through the public area to the internal sections without an A1 rank access card. The side door was her only option to get home to her supervisor.

As she reached for the door handle she heard someone cry out from inside. She pulled open the door, and her instincts screamed an alarm. Dodging away, she brought the door with her as she moved. A gunshot reverberated and she sensed a pulse of white static.

Someone fell through the open doorway behind her, and she turned to look down at her feet.

“No!” Jaola gasped.

Her mother lay on her back, blood was slowly spreading out across her chest. She was panting, and one arm lifted towards Jaola as if begging for help.

Jaola dropped to her knees, taking the outstretched hand. “Mama!”

There were tears on her mother's face. “*Be free, Jaola. Don't live my life.*”

“No! Stay with me!” She put one hand on the wound, trying to stem the bleeding, while also knowing that it was futile. “Mama!”

Charmaine Pahna let out a long, moaned sigh and went still. Through their physical connection, Jaola sensed a cloud of white static energy flow out of her body, and then the light that had been her mother was gone from her eyes.

“No!” she whined, as she leaned so far forward in her grief that their foreheads touched.

There was noise all around her, and someone tried to pull her away from her mother, but she refused, gripping on to her.

“No!”

* * * * *

Jaola came back from out of the agony of grief to find that she was still attached to her mother. Glass walls cut a larger space around her into individual rooms, each with a bed in it. A hand touched her back.

“Boo?” Her father's voice was very gentle.

She sniffed and turned her head. “Yes, papa?”

“You can let go of her now.”

Her bottom lip quivered, but she did as he asked.

Jaola's arms and legs were sore, and she felt utterly exhausted. She tried to step back from her mother's body but her legs weakened. As she let out a gasp of pain, her knees dropped out from under her. His strong arms caught her, and lowered her into a nearby chair. She sat there, shaking

from head to toe.

Her father's arms dropped but one hand reached to hold hers. *"Are you alright?"*

They only ever spoke telepathically when he didn't think it was safe to be honest out loud. This meant he wasn't asking as her supervisor or as an Agent but as her father.

"No," she replied. *"No, I'm not alright. Why did she do this?"*

He sighed. *"I'm not entirely sure."*

Jaola sensed the lie, but she also sensed her father's inability to accept what he knew, so she understood that the lie wasn't a deception on his part, more denial.

He cleared his throat. *"My superiors have ordered that you go back out into the field."*

She shook her head. *"Why?"*

"Treana Norman."

The tears lifted up into her eyes and one dropped down her face. She glanced sideways at him.

He looked wary and very sad, which was a change from his normal ice. His bottom lip lifted in sympathy. *"I know. I'm sorry. I tried to argue that after what's happened you wouldn't be in the best space for such a mission, but, you know our bosses."*

"Unreasonable and inhumane?" she answered telepathically.

He nodded. *"Once it's done, you'll be on bereavement leave."*

She huffed. The Agency always took so much from her. She wasn't even sure she was physically able to get back to the Rebel building, let alone take out Treana. But she knew she would keep trying until she couldn't any more.

Her father leaned in close and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. *"She told me that you were suffering in the Agency. Are you?"*

With his closeness, she was reminded of being a child and the comfort that a hug from him used to give her. She leaned in closer and turned a half-hug into a full one by wrapping her arms around his middle. She wasn't sure if she should tell him the truth, but the fact that he asked mind-to-mind meant that he wanted the truth, not just what the Agency wanted from her.

She let out a tiny gasp *"Yes."*

"Do you want to be free, like she did?"

This was a harder question, because giving him her true answer would make her a Traitor, but she trusted that he wouldn't tell on her.

"Doesn't everyone want freedom?"

He grunted. “*Probably.*”

His arms loosened from around her and she sat up. “How about we go and get some food before you leave the Tower again.”

She nodded and carefully got to her feet.

* 7 *

A couple of hours later

By the time Jaola arrived back at the Rebel building, she felt entirely numb. A part of her understood that she could be broken, and that going into combat in her current state could very well kill her. But in that moment, she didn't care. If the worst should happen, at least she wouldn't have to kill people any more.

The livable area of the Rebel building was a smaller part of a much larger facility, which covered a whole street block. Most of the bigger facility was boarded up and entirely useless due to fire and water damage. But it was also easy to access with just a crow bar.

Jaola walked through the part of the fire damaged section that ran directly under the Rebel's main upstairs living room. She stepped around a piece of mangled machinery, and opened a door on the nearest wall.

The section where the Rebels lived was quite difficult to get into without someone to open either the back or front doors, but in her time with the Rebels Jaola had explored the entire complex. She walked through into an area around a large pipe. The opening into the pipe was rusted shut, but there was an ancient ladder on its outside leading up and down.

Careful to put her feet close to the bolts and not the center of the rung, she got onto the ladder and started climbing up the pipe, into the first floor.

The room above her was narrow and she had to step sideways around the pipe to get to a small access **hatch**. She stood there, her fingers gripping the handle as she listened for the mental noises of anyone nearby.

Two minds, Tolan and Anton, chatted together on the roof surface. On the same level as her, the silence of Kita's mental shield, and the static roar of Treana seemed to be in the kitchen. Given the time, the two of them were probably making lunch. Further across the level and below her, Cherie was down in the central hallway with Tana. She sensed the girl's laughter and figured

they were playing Cherie's favorite game of jacks.

Jaola's eyes narrowed as she felt Shartaan move up the back stairwell towards her hiding spot. Thankfully for his potential survival, he wasn't a telepath.

Waiting with an icy calm in her heart, she watched his approach.

As he moved past, she opened the hatch, grabbed him by the mouth, so he couldn't cry out, and pulled him inside again with her. She was so well practiced at telepathic sleep programs, that by the time he was inside with her, he was already unconscious. She carefully put him down on his side with his back against the wall. It would be difficult for them to wake him again, but at least he was alive.

She moved out into the stairwell and closed the hatch door behind her.

Opening her telepathic ears, she listened again to double check everyone's locations. The others were in their same places, but Tana and Cherie were moving towards the front door of the building. It wasn't time for the regular messages, and the rest of the cell weren't due back from the desert until late that evening. Most likely, the visitor was a messenger with the news of Hilla's death. She didn't have a lot of time.

She crept silently towards their main living space. Kita was still in the kitchen with Treana. If he didn't move, she might have to cut her losses and kill Kita as well. Unlike Treana, Kita had Agency combat training, which meant he was a direct threat to her survival.

Checking that the safety was switched off, she lifted the onyx handled gun to ear height. She took a deep breath, and let it out again.

"Anton is about to come downstairs to ask how long until lunch," said Treana in the next room.

"I'll give him an update." She heard the grin in Kita's voice. "So, about twenty minutes?"

"Yes, perfect. Gives us time to serve it out, so they don't just come down and eat it out of the pot with their hands."

Kita chuckled and Jaola heard his footfalls on the bare wood floor.

Jaola paused, waiting again. If she timed it right, she might just be able to get out with only killing Treana. His feet thumped on the stairs above her head.

As soon as she heard the roof door close again, she stepped out into the living area, and swiftly bridged the distance between her and Treana. The older woman had her back to the room, tending to the large stew pot. She got within a meter of Treana and came to a stop. She lifted her weapon to aim and again her hands began shaking.

“*Be calm, Jaola,*” said Treana's trance voice. She turned around. Her eyes were too big for her face, as always, but there was no hostility there, or even fear. Treana smiled. “*It is our time to die, but I have one final truth to give you. The only way to come to peace with what you are, Jaola, is to realize the deeper ramifications of you also being white static. Now, you have about twenty seconds before Kita comes back, and if you do it while I'm still here, Treana will not suffer.*”

Jaola frowned, listening with her own senses. Those on the roof were getting to their feet. The Voice was correct, she didn't have long.

“I'm sorry.” She sighed and pulled the trigger.

Turning, she sprinted towards the central stairwell, but only crossed half the distance before Tana stepped into the doorway, blocking her exit.

He stopped and frowned at her. “Ninae?”

“Get out of my way,” she growled, lifting her weapon to aim at him.

There was a noise of surprise behind her and she turned again, instinctively aiming and firing her gun before consciously understanding that Anton was about to shoot her from the roof stairs.

Her bullet cleaved his heart in two and he dropped.

Her instincts flared up again, and she started running towards Tana and the nearest exit in a zigzag pattern. Camping cots flew around her, which meant that Tolan; the active kinetic, was in the fray. She lifted her gun sideways, slowing her zigzag long enough to get a good aim. Just as she fired, a cot hit her right in the face, pushing her into the far wall, and smashing the back of her head into the wood.

Pain and stars flared up in her mind for half a breath, and then she was unconscious.

*** 8 ***

Kita ran down the roof stairs and across their living space to where the intruder had fallen. Had he seen right? Had it really been Ninae? He pulled his handgun from the holster in the small of his back, and switched the safety off. The cot had landed on top of the intruder. Their hand lay stretched out to the side with a larger caliber gun just out of reach. Kita kicked the thing away, towards the kitchen. Lifting his gun, he brushed the cot off her.

Ninae was reserved and quiet. She always seemed terribly serious until someone said a

joke or was playful, which would bring out a flash of joy in her, revealing a playful, happy personality under all of that muted seriousness. He'd enjoyed her company these last few months. But she lay there, unconscious, her face proof that she'd been a spy all of this time.

Not wanting to take his eyes off her for too long, he glanced sideways at Tana. "Can you check on everyone?"

Tana stared at him. He swallowed and nodded, skittering out into the main level.

Kita frowned at Ninae. If she was a spy, why attack now? What was her mission? She hadn't seemed threatening at all, she'd done everything they asked of her, and she hadn't pushed for any strategically useful information about the inner workings of the Rebel command structure. She showed no obvious signs of being a spy, at times she'd even seemed like she belonged.

He sighed and reached a hand to touch her neck.

Her heart beat was strong, and with the skin contact, he could sense that she was definitely knocked out. Very gently, he weaved a sleep program into her mind. He needed to keep her unconscious for as long as possible, so they could get her into the prisoner cell at the bottom of the stairs.

He frowned. "Hey, Tolan? Can you help me move her?"

There was no response and Kita turned to look behind him.

"Tol?"

Tana was crouched near the bottom of the stairs, his voice was uneven. "He's been hit."

"Is he--?"

Tana's dark brown eyes were filled with moisture when he looked up. "He's still breathing, but he's pretty bad. We've lost Treana and Anton, though."

Kita swallowed down his grief. "Alright." He sighed. "We gotta prioritize. I need you to help me get her into the cell first, then I want you to grab the med kit and look after Tol."

"Yes, sir." Tana got to his feet, moving swiftly towards him. He sighed. "There's one more thing."

"Oh?" Kita said, leaning down to pull the assassin's arm over his shoulder.

Tana crouched, doing the same with her other arm, so they could carry her. "A messenger just left. She said..."

Tana's words faded into nothing and Kita frowned at him. "What?"

There were tears on his face. "Nama's people found... they found Hilla's body."

Kita stopped moving and his breath gasped out of him.

“It was Cheetah,” said Tana, his voice was very quiet.

It took a few deep breaths to calm the shock inside, and hold back the grief so he could still deal with their current situation. “We've got to... to get Ninae into the cell.” His sniffed. “Come on.”

*** 9 ***

Kita sat on the ground in their downstairs hall. The hall was shaped like an L, leading from the central stairwell and their storage rooms, past the little jail at the bend, and out into the larger downstairs space and the external doors.

Cherie lay on her side, crying silently. He stroked her hair while he watched their little barred prisoner cell a few meters away. Kita sensed that her grief was dangerously intense, to the point of warping her personal experience of reality beyond what was recoverable. But, to help her properly, he needed a lot of time and a strong empath, neither of which he had in the current moment. He finished layering the lines of supportive scaffolding in her mind. She had to stay calm until help arrived or she could lose herself entirely.

Leaning forward, he kissed her hair. “You are so very loved, Cherie,” he whispered.

She let out a little whimper but was otherwise unresponsive.

“Your uncle Nama is on his way.”

A few meters from him, the assassin let out a telepathic murmur. “I'm not going far, Cherie.”

Kita got to his feet and strode quickly to the bars of the cell. He hated being trained as an Interrogator because it meant he was very good at hurting people. But, in that moment, he was thankful for the training, because he could at least protect the Rebels with it. Carefully, he entered Ninae's mind again, Anchored himself in the depths of her subconscious, and wrapped his mental energy around hers.

She was fighting against his sleep program and given how much force it took to rip the threads he'd bound her with, it meant she was not only telepathically strong, but also a person with an iron will.

When she finally came to, she was confused and in pain from his intrusion. Her face wrinkled and those vibrant green eyes looked up at him through the bars.

“What's going on, Kita?”

“You're a spy. Where's Shartaan? Did you kill him?”

Her eyes widened, and he waited until he could sense the memories blowing through her. She huffed, likely sensing that he was inside her mind. “He's fine. Knocked out in a cupboard.” She showed him an image of the back stairwell. Half way up, there was a landing with a hatch in the wall. Beyond was a small room that had once been used to monitor and service a big pipe that ran through the building from the basement.

He took a long breath, knowing the question he needed to ask, but couldn't say it out loud.

She must have sensed the question because she answered. “Yes, I'm Cheetah, and yes, I... I did. I killed Hilla.”

“Why? She was your friend!”

She pushed against his control to try and sit up, but he held her there. Her voice became colder. “My feelings don't matter. They'll kill my family if I do not obey. What are you going to do with me?”

Kita leaned against the bars with one shoulder and took a deep breath. “Nama's coming with reinforcements. He'll decide. What was your mission?”

“I... no!” She fought him for a moment.

He tightened his grip on her mind, adding pressure through the anchor and his external grip, like a torus-shaped vice.

She let out a gasp of pain. “Mission was... was to find Hilla and Treana.”

“Isn't the standard procedure for an A2 Assassin to take out all known Traitors in a Rebel cell? Why did you wait until I was on the roof to kill Treana?”

He sensed her defiance, but she didn't fight him this time. “That's not legal procedure, that's habit. I don't have to kill anyone they don't know about.”

She pushed against his grip and he gasped, aware all of a sudden that she wasn't just a little strong, she was *a lot*. And worse still, she was *much* stronger than him.

He closed his eyes, fighting her attempt to break the Anchor and free herself. “No, stop--!”

The Anchor snapped and he heard the sound of breaking glass in his head. He yelled as his knees dropped out from under him.

He lay on his side blinking, unable to move or really think through the throbbing in his head. A shaft of pain, like a sword, thrust through him, and he understood that she'd Anchored her mind into his. The irony of their sudden role reversal crossed his brain for a second. He would have made a joke if the situation weren't so dangerous.

“Get up,” she said with an icy voice.

He had no control of his body, so he watched as his arms and legs moved without his will, and he was standing.

“Unlock the door.”

She might kill Tana and Cherie if she gets out. He closed his eyes, trying to fight against her. It felt like he was trying to move a mountain, but he managed to keep his body still for a few breaths. Then she tightened her grip on him.

“I’m a level 8 telepath, if you keep fighting me you’re going to die a horrific death.”

He didn’t want to die, and the pain was all encompassing, but if dying kept her from killing the others, he would do it.

She growled under her breath. “I don’t want to kill anyone, I just want to escape! Unlock the so’tthen door!”

With their minds so deeply interlocked, he knew immediately that she wasn’t lying. A gasp burst out of him as he surrendered. It only took a moment to retrieve the key from his shirt pocket, and unlock the cell.

“Where’s my gun?”

“Upstairs,” he moaned.

“Give me yours.”

He just let his body obey, handing her his much smaller caliber handgun.

“How soon until Nama gets here?”

He couldn’t use his mouth anymore, so he focused on the answer. “*Imminent.*”

“Alright, you’re coming with me until I’m clear.” She grabbed his elbow, obviously intent on taking him to one of the exits.

Behind them came a roar so loud that for a moment Kita couldn’t identify its source. Looking sideways, he watched as Cherie leaped to her feet.

“Murderer!” she bellowed, launching herself at the assassin.

Cheetah let go of Kita’s arm, spun around and grabbed the girl by her throat. “Go to sleep, Cherie.”

The teenager melted out of her grip and flopped onto the floor. Kita was incapable of checking on her. He pushed against his binds, but only managed to let out a squeak of distress.

“She’ll be fine, she’s just sleeping.” Cheetah’s voice was ice cold, despite the comforting nature of her words. “Come.”

*** 10 ***

Jaola walked north, in the general direction of the Park, dragging Kita with her. He was pretty close to passing out, and because of his initial resistance she wasn't sure if there was any permanent damage done to his mind.

She sighed, she hadn't wanted any of this.

"You could have just stayed with us." Kita's mental voice was strained with pain. *"Your trainer lied. There must be proof that your family helped you escape for them to be charged."*

She felt a shaft of rage; the first emotion she'd experienced since leaving the Tower. "You're the one who's lying!" she growled between gritted teeth. It took all of her willpower not to accidentally push against his mind and the Anchor with her rage, but she held fast. She wouldn't be responsible for someone dying like that; not ever.

Getting to the last road before the Park, she glanced both ways, and shoved Kita out onto the pavement.

He stumbled, took a few steps, and then it seemed as if his knees weakened underneath him.

Grumbling, she moved forward quickly, brushed her arm around his waist to steady him, and pulled them both to the Park entrance. There was a pair of benches close on their left, and she dove their uneven steps towards them.

When she got close, she dumped him onto the nearest surface.

He melted sideways, staring at her with resistant gray eyes. His face was pale and a drop of blood had settled into the edge of one nostril.

She huffed, realizing that she'd hurt him considerably. Fetching his weapon, she started to clear the chamber and take out the magazine.

"Are you... going to... shoot me?"

She rolled her eyes, shoving the spare bullet and magazine into a jacket pocket. "No, just making sure you can't shoot me for the next little while." She dropped his empty gun onto the bench opposite.

Taking a long deep breath, she calmed herself so she could focus properly. If she did this next bit wrong or too roughly, she could still kill him by accident. She held his mind firmly, keeping

him from fighting her. Dislodging the Anchor and raising her shielding, she carefully withdrew not only her mental form, but also the anchor from his mind.

He gasped as he was freed.

“Your back up has arrived at the factory.” Her voice was filled with sadness and regret, it wasn't how she wanted to talk to an enemy, but at least it was her own voice and not that of her icy assassin self. “You might want to call for help now.”

Turning, she strode towards the dense tree line about ten meters from him. Hopefully, his desire to survive was stronger than his desire to kill her. Either way she had to get back to base.

* * * * *

Kita lay on his side. The bright world outside of his head swam in nauseating waves, as if the wood under him was really the deck of a ship. He could taste blood, and knew that he was probably dropping into a bad case of Psi Shock, but it still took several breaths to gather his thoughts together enough to reach out for help. The distance between the Park and the old factory was only two blocks and well within his normal sensing radius, but it took him an age to push his senses out over that distance. His mind touched the lines of Psi suppressant material in the factory building, and he brushed around their firm edges, searching for Nama's mind.

The older man reached and met his mental contact.

“*Nama--*”

Kita cried out as the very act of speaking over that distance dug a hot shaft of agony through his temples. He gathered himself again, forming the words so that Nama would understand him.

“*I'm in the park, I need help.*”

A feeling of concern pulsed from Nama. “*Are you OK?*”

His words echoed painfully and Kita cried out again, panting to manage the pain. “*South side... near the playground... help me...*”

“*On our way.*” Nama's voice had been made quiet, without any mental force but it was still too loud for Kita's injured mind. He let out a moaned wail and closed his eyes. As the darkness swallowed him, he hoped he would wake up again.

* * * * *

Jaola had walked quickly to the tree line to get back to the Tower as soon as possible. She was so emotionally numb that she wasn't even sure if she was injured. But despite that numbness when she came under the cover of trees her feet stopped walking and she turned to look behind her.

Kita lay on the park bench in the fetal position, he was unconscious, but because she could still sense a mind, it meant he was still alive. She moved her attention to her broader telepathic senses and felt the forceful presence of Nama Ree barreling towards Kita from the factory, with the wisp of a second person rushing after him. She waited, watching Kita's unconscious mind, and the distance between him and his rescuers shortening. Nama and the second person crossed the street and ran into the park entrance. Only then, as she saw them find Kita did she turn around and move further into the cover of trees.

Chapter Two: Death or Freedom

*** 1 ***

7 Aracan 3007

(Three years later)

Kamo, in the country of Rona

Jessal Mier stood on the highest peak in Kamo and stared out at the darkening city. Streaks of car headlights traced the neon flows of main roads in a grid pattern across his view. The widest flow of bright color was the central motorway heading west away from him, and out towards the setting sun and the Aranan border.

He took a deep breath and pushed his fear and hurt out with the lung full of air. His home city was beautiful at this time of day, but it wasn't enough to salve the agony in his heart.

It had been fourteen years since his family were killed, and he could still hear the screaming. He closed his eyes for a moment, forcing his mind to block the memories of the fire from coming up again.

A broad hand settled on his shoulder. "You're safe with us, Jessal." Goid's voice rumbled, he felt the empathic push of comfort and calm, and let it in.

He opened his eyes and glanced up into his friend's face. "I know." He smiled.

Goid gave him a big grin, one that was so much like his elder brother Rana that it was more comforting than the empathic push. "Come on, kid. Mena's here, time to watch the fun."

Jessal nodded, as he let Goid pull him around and back towards the crowd. There were about forty people in the Rona-Abaan. At eighteen, Jessal was the youngest, and Mena the eldest. The crowd standing around on the flat of the hill, separated to let Mena walk in through the middle. He was a head taller than everyone else, so it was hard to miss him. He walked like some sort of lord, proud and with his shoulders back, but there was something else about Mena Malaan that Jessal couldn't quite put his finger on. Something both terrifying and breathtaking.

"Today is the thirtieth anniversary." Mena lifted his chin and Jessal could practically taste the rage rolling off of their leader. "Our government made it legal for them to murder us just because we are gifted." He held up one hand. "Eight government buildings have been fixed with explosives today, and in my hand is the detonator!"

Someone in the crowd let out a whoop, and a wave of joy pushed out into the world.

Mena held the detonator even higher above his head. “This is for all of our lost loves and family, and for a future without the Ronan Guard!”

He pressed the button dramatically and everyone turned to face westward and stare out at the city streets. Standing at the front with Goid, Jessal held his breath.

About five seconds went by, and then the first boom was loud, thrusting an arc of fire into the sky. The next seven explosions came in a string, barely half a second after each other. Behind him, his adopted family let out a cheer, and for a long moment Jessal felt a little hope for the future. Maybe *this* bombing would get the international community to force their government to stop murdering its citizens.

Sirens sounded from all around as fire engines rushed towards the burning buildings. An ambulance screamed westward from the local hospital, another came in from the south and Jessal's left. Then, the inevitable wail of a police car, and a Guard patrol called out on his right.

Someone barked in one of the languages from south Rona. Jessal felt the group behind him thin out as they evacuated, but he didn't want to move yet.

The last dregs of daylight flickered above him and across the sky, catching the bubbled curves and lines of the clouds in golden scarlet. It was almost as if the sky was mirroring the flames below.

Again the memory tried to come forward. He heard the crackling roar of flame, that terrible screaming coming from within, and saw the image of their home burning.

Close to him on the streets, the sirens came nearer. He saw the blinking lights rush towards them and not the fire. It was likely that they headed towards the access road for the lookout.

Goid, still standing next to him, wrapped an arm around Jessal's shoulders. “Come on, we gotta go. They're coming.”

He huffed but let himself be led away. “They're always coming.”

Goid snorted, and Jessal sensed amusement. “You're not wrong there.”

* * *

Later that evening

Jessal had drunken far too much whiskey. He sat in the corner of the room, certain that if he tried to stand he would absolutely fall down again. But that was OK, he could watch those who were dancing and making making delightful fools of themselves from his corner of the dining

room.

“Come on, Papa! Dance with me!” exclaimed ten year old Rena.

Goid, who sat a few meters from him laughed and took her hand. “I might stand on your feet, you sure you want to dance?”

She giggled like it was the greatest game in the world. “Of course, Papa! That's why I'm wearing my strong shoes!”

Goid let out a rumbling laugh. “You!” he said, unsteadily getting to his feet. “You are far too smart for my own good!”

The young girl giggled again.

Jessal enjoyed the RA in these times of celebration, when the weight of their horrible situation was lifted for an evening and their joy was allowed out. He grinned at Goid and his daughter dancing.

Holding hands, they gently spun around in the clear space of what had once been a dining room. Rena wore her favorite blue robeskirts, which had once belonged to her grandmother and as such were a little too big for her ten year old form.

The music being played on the old style record player shifted songs, from an active, joyful ballad to something soft and gentle. Their spinning dance over the hardwood floor slowed. Watching them and hearing the quieter music, Jessal's eyes became heavy as if the motion and sound were hypnotizing him.

Rena's young giggle filled Jessal's ears as his eyes closed properly. He faded into a comforted darkness and fell asleep.

*** 2 ***

The next morning

Agent Raraan Armon stood facing a broad floor-to-ceiling window and stared, sightless, out of it into a private garden. Every room in the Kamo Aranan embassy felt opulent. The building was made almost entirely of white marble, with rooms twice as wide and tall as any upmarket residence in Arana. The edges of the ceiling above him were carved, as if by hand, into a flowing vine pattern with broad leaves, and framed with deeply cut lines. The black desk he bought with him from Araam, which ordinarily took over whichever space it inhabited, was made small in the

vast office he'd been given.

The scale difference of everything made him very uncomfortable. He intellectually understood that his discomfort were from equal parts culture shock, and the fact that Ronan people were typically taller and wider than Aranan, so of course their buildings would feel overly large. But, even while knowing the cause of his discomfort, he still wanted to go home.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. If he could do his current mission quickly and efficiently, he and his family would return to Araam with his next promotion. Someone knocked on his door, and he turned around. His eyes brushed around the room, across bookcases filled with the resources and fiction tastes left behind by his predecessor, to check that the room was otherwise tidy.

“Come,” he barked, tucking his hands behind him to mirror a semi-militaristic stance.

The door opened and a very tall graying Ronan woman moved inside. Her chocolate brown eyes swallowed him for a moment. It was overwhelming how much taller and broader Ronan people were compared to Aranan. Raraan was of above average height, and hardly small in any other definable way, but this woman dwarfed him.

Pushing back his emotional reaction, he dropped his chin. “Greetings, Chairperson Redei.”

A smile twitched at the edges of her mouth and he caught a whiff of distrust and hostility in her manner. “Yes, hello, Agent Armon. Our Special Guard teams are already out in the field, do you have the information we requested?”

As he moved to his desk, he nodded. “Yes, I do. Our second team has gathered a dossier of the Rona-Abaan members.” He picked up the file folder from his desk and strode across the office to hand it to her directly. “Operatives from both teams are currently observing from a distance specified non-combatant targets in real time.”

She took the file and shifted through the many pages. “We need to break the will of the RA with just one target. Who would you suggest?”

Raraan knew the answer to her question and that knowledge forced a shard of dread into his heart. Swallowing, he suppressed that feeling. These targets were all traitors to their government, no less worthy of execution than any Rebel would be in Arana. Though, in the Agency they were at least expected to try and apprehend Illegals and minors, rather than just simply execute anyone with Psi abilities.

Sighing, he reached towards the paper in her hands and flicked the pages until he got to one particular file.

The two men who ran the Rona-Abaan were brothers. Their family had been extremely rich before the law changed, and in fact their family trust still owned at least one bank in the city. The Special Guard had been targeting them for thirty years, and as such, both men had lost romantic partners and many children to the Guard. There was only one blood-offspring of the Malaan brothers left.

“To break the will of one's enemy, one must first find their weakest point. For these people that weakness is Rena Malaan, Goid's ten year old daughter.” He kept his voice calm and ice-cold. He refused to imagine how he would feel if someone targeted and killed his daughter Chana who was almost fourteen.

“Will this break Mena Malaan?”

Raraan shook his head. “No, my behavior experts believe he doesn't have the emotional capacity to care enough about anyone but himself. But this should break the younger brother, and put the rest of the group in disarray.”

“Alright.” The Chairperson of the Special Guard supervisory committee took a long deep breath and closed the file. “My superiors would like it if your unit could stand back and let us deal with these people. Do you have a location for us?”

He dropped his chin again, trying to show her due respect as a high ranking Ronan official, but not drop his eyes like one would do in the Agency because Ronan culture interpreted such body language a signal of weakness.

“I'll contact those assigned to her right now for a current location.”

*** 3 ***

Lunch time

Someone yelled and Jessal's face screwed up even as he was still asleep. Another loud voice sounded and his slowly waking mind registered the agony of that sound. He flinched, eyes opening to discover that he lay on his side with his back up against the wall of the dining room. Someone had placed a blanket over him.

“No!” bellowed Goid's voice. “No!”

Pushing the blanket away, Jessal launched himself to his feet. His head ached from a hang over, and the muscles in his back had cramped up from being against a cold wall all night, but he pushed through the discomfort knowing with every cell in his body that something terrible had

happened.

“No!” roared Goid again, his voice carrying throughout the old manor house.

Jessal zigzagged from the dining room, into a narrow hall with an old, broken kitchen at one end, and out into the entrance hall of the manor.

A dozen RA stood around, close to the front door with their backs to Jessal. To his left, Mena held Goid tightly in his arms as if he was stopping his younger brother from running away.

Jessal moved through the crowd towards his friend but stopped as his eyes dropped to their feet.

Young Rena lay in the doorway, covered in blood. There was no empathic sense of life in her, and he knew instinctively that she was dead. Jessal's jaw dropped open and a squeak escaped his otherwise paralyzed lungs.

Jo was kneeling on the ground next to Rena. Her hands were bloody and the ordinarily tough as nails woman was grizzling like a child.

He got his voice back and leaned towards her to put a hand on one shoulder. “Jo? Are you alright? What happened?”

“We... we tried to hide but they cornered us,” she whimpered. “They knew! They... they knew who we were!”

It was then as he glanced sideways at her that he noticed the blood on her back. Jessal leaned to look at the wound. Through the mess of her bloodied, shredded jersey he could see a thick angry line across her lower back, showing the path of a bullet which had only just missed her.

Goid let out bellowed wail and he collapsed, slipping from out of Mena's grip and melted to the floor. He crawled across the wood towards his daughter. When his outstretched hand touched her arm, another wail came out of him.

Jo's younger brother, Ayren, rushed in through a side door with an armload of medical supplies. He skittered to a stop and stared at them all.

“Ayren, Jessal, patch up Jo,” barked Mena in a voice completely devoid of emotion. “You others, we need to move Rena and Goid up to her room.”

“No,” growled Goid. He pulled himself up to his feet like he had a great weight on his shoulders. “We're going out to find these monsters.” He let out a heavy sigh and wiped his face of moisture. “And we're going to make them pay for this.”

“Goid,” said Mena, his tone still utterly cold. “We'll send scouts out to see what information we can gather. For now you have to rest.”

“No!” yelled Goid in his brother's face. “I want to kill them!”

Jessal was surprised by the amount of rage coming off his friend. It was so intense that he started to feel nauseous. He stepped back, to get a distance from that rage and hatred.

“Little brother,” Mena said with a smidgen of kindness in his voice. “You're in no fit state to do anything. It would disrespect Rena's memory if you rushed into battle and got yourself killed. I promise on our family honor that we will make them pay. But not today.”

*** 4 ***

Many hours later

Jessal walked up the street on his errand run, mostly unaware of the world around him. He rubbed his thumb against the dried blood on his knuckle that a normal wash of his hands had failed to remove. Jodina was going to be out of commission for a while but, as long as she didn't get a bad infection or pop her stitches, she'd be fine. At least physically.

He sighed, glancing both ways as he crossed a wide four lane road. It was dusk; the time of day he normally loved, but given the last twelve hours, he couldn't enjoy it.

On the other side of the street, he stopped to pull out the key. Mena and Goid's family had been very rich, and not too keen on paying property taxes, so they'd hidden their ownership behind fake companies and cash dealings. The first time Goid had told him this, it seemed kind of dodgy, but regardless of the legality or even morality of a very rich family going to such great lengths to not pay tax, it ended up being helpful for the two Malaan sons to go off the grid and still have resources after the Guard targeted their family. Finding the ancient copper key in his pants pocket, Jessal inserted it into the front door of an old book shop.

“Hey, boy!” called out a voice.

He glanced sideways to see Old Ana moving towards him. Being polite he smiled. “Hello, Ana, how are you today?”

She cackled like he'd said the best joke in the world. “I'm fine, but you're not!”

He frowned, opening his mouth to ask what she meant but she interrupted him.

“The Soul Eaters are out tonight, and they're after *you*.”

Aware of her variable mental health, he smiled. “I'll be careful and look out for any... um... Soul Eaters. Don't worry.”

She put a broad hand on his shoulder and cackled again. “They’ll still catch you, boy. Just be careful not to get yourself shot, alright?”

He widened his smile, sensing her affection for him through her hand. “I’ll do my best, Ana.”

Most people on the streets knew Old Ana. She was forced into homelessness by the Guard like everyone else, but not many people knew that she was actually a very powerful Time Psi. Her ability was so strong that she sometimes dropped into trances and spoke the truth. Most people just thought she was a homeless old mad woman, and while her functional sanity was dodgy at best, he knew that she was kind and loving in between the outbursts of nightmares and nonsense.

Her hand lifted from his shoulder and she moved past him. When it was polite to break eye contact, he turned back to the key and unlocked the door.

The store beyond was covered in dust and very dark, but its shelves were still filled with books as if the owner was going to open up again, even though it had sat like that for as long as he could remember. He had no idea why it remained closed, it was just his pathway through. Jogging down the middle aisle of shelving, he found his way past the till, through a doorway and down a narrow hall to the back door.

He closed the door behind him and moved out through a concreted back yard to a hole in the wire fencing on the boundary. Beyond were the rail lines, and on the other side, a quick entrance to the warehouse district. If he tried to walk from the manor to the central business district along the main streets, it would take almost three hours, but through that short cut, it was only an hour.

By the time he jogged across the rail lines the sky had lost its brilliant orange color and was starting to fade into a clear night of stars and the colorful nebula.

It was as he moved through the fence and out onto a road beyond that the instincts of his Search Talent gave him a tickle of apprehension. It signaled that someone hostile was looking for him, and they were quite close.

Glancing around him, he tried to identify any threats. This section of the warehouse district was pretty much abandoned. There were no cars, and no visible people around but because of all of the fencing and boarded up buildings, there also weren’t many exits. He increased his pace, making a bee-line for an access path between two buildings which linked one area to another. If he could make it through, he’d be able to exit the bottleneck and be freer in the normal crisscross of streets in the central business district.

The access path was a single lane but it was the quickest way to a better area to get free of

who ever was following him. He got close to the end of the narrow lane, and collection of figures stepped into the exit, blocking his way. He turned immediately to try and get escape, but another figure stood at the entrance. He glanced back and forth between the two ends, wondering if he should try to push past them. He was taller than them, but his instincts continued to give him a sense of danger, which meant even if they weren't Guard, they were probably armed.

“Jessal Mier!” barked an angry voice. “This is the Agency, stand down or you will be shot!”

A cool breeze seemed to blow through his clothing and he shivered as he mentally heard Old Ana's words echo through his brain: “*be careful not to get yourself shot, alright?*”

He wasn't armed and despite being good enough Search Talent to be able avoid most conflicts, it didn't help him dodge bullets once they started firing. He sighed and lifted his hands up above his shoulders.

* 5 *

Raraan stared at the young Ronan man, who stood with his back wedged up against the office door as if he could escape by pushing through the fibers. He looked tall and broad compared to Raraan's narrower, shorter Aranan form, but, compared to other Ronan he wasn't particularly big. Raraan stared at his brown eyes, sensing innocence and fear. This kid held little to no rank in the Rona-Abaan, other than being close to Goid Malaan. He was a glorified runner, but he could be useful.

Raraan kept his voice neutral. “Jessal Mier, please come in and sit down.”

The boy just stood there with his eyes wide. Opening his telepathic senses, Raraan listened to his loudest thoughts, which confirmed his guess that Jessal was afraid of being killed.

Raraan sighed and moved in behind his desk. “My name is Agent Raraan Armon. Procedure dictates I inform you that I am a high rating telepath. I'd appreciate it if you didn't lie but if you do I will know.” He cleared his throat, keeping his tone formal and unemotional. “You have been brought here under my orders, and as long as you pose no threat to myself or my people, you will not be harmed. Please sit down.”

“I'd really rather leave.” Despite his obvious terror, Jessal's voice did not wobble.

Raraan smiled and leaned back in his chair. “I won't take up much of your time. I promise.”

The boy stayed still, with his back pressed up against the office door.

“Have it your way.” He sighed, reaching to pour the Ronan tea he’d prepared for their meeting into his cup. It was a sweet but peppery tea which didn’t seem to exist in Arana. He’d gotten quite fond of it in the months he’d been assigned to Rona. Lifting the cup, he inhaled the spicy scent and closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying it immensely. His eyes opened again with his out breath and he took a sip. By the time he’d put his cup back in its little saucer, Jessal had moved a few steps from the door.

“Is that spice tea?”

He grinned at the young man. “It is, would you like some? I also have my PA sourcing some sweet bread. Do you get to eat much in the Rona-Abaan?”

Jessal’s spine straightened, and Raraan sensed his guard come up again. “I… I’m not…”

Raraan took another sip of his tea. “I’ve just told you I am a telepath and can sense when you lie. Pretending that you’re not with RA when you are, is only going to waste time.”

The young man sighed and when Raraan looked up at him, he could see the defiance clearly through the fear. Jessal spoke through gritted teeth. “How about you stop pretending to be nice when you’re not, and just tell me what you want?”

Raraan smirked at him. He was smart as well as brave. “The Ronan Government has asked us to help them resolve the problem of the Rona-Abaan, and because, as far as we can tell, you have not participated directly in any violence against your government, we are authorized to offer you either legal amnesty from your government, or refugee status in Arana if you help us capture the two Malaan brothers.”

Jessal’s bottom lip lifted and he crossed his arms over his chest. All fear was gone from his body language and replaced with that quiet defiance. “If you’re really a telepath, you know my answer.”

“I do,” he said, admiring the young man’s spark. “I will give you some time to think about this offer. It will be on the table as long as you don’t tell anyone in the RA about it.”

Jessal’s eyes rolled upwards. “If I say anything, Mena will kill me just for talking to you.”

Raraan sensed that there was currently no way of changing Jessal’s mind, not without decent leverage or risking killing the young man with telepathic interference. He got to his feet, moving around the taller man to the exit. “Then we’re in agreement, silence is best for both of us. You may leave now.” He pulled out the key from his suit jacket and unlocked the door. Opening it he indicated the exit with one hand. “Good, evening, Mr. Mier.”

*** 6 ***

16 Aracan 3007

(seven days later)

Goid's voice was angry and he pulsed with waves of hatred and rage. "They kill our children with impunity, I propose that our next target is a school."

Surrounded in the roar of response, Jessal stood in the crowd, unhearing. Shocked that his loving, kind friend, the man who had rescued him as a kid after his brother Rana was killed, would propose such a horrifying idea. Jessal understood that Goid loved his daughter, and she hadn't deserved such a terrible end, but to bomb a school? To kill children and make other parents, Norm or not, feel the same way? It was inconceivable.

He realized he'd been holding his breath, and gasped in air. The numbness lifted a little and he heard Lilaan's voice.

"We can't! We do that, we become no better than them!"

"They have killed us for thirty years!" roared Goid. "Murdered our children, our partners, our families, you--"

"These are innocent children Goid!" she growled back.

Jessal pushed through the crowd towards Goid, tears leaking out of him. "You can't!" he squeaked. Clearing his throat, he brushed two others aside and moved in close to Goid. "You can't murder children! Goid! No!"

Goid's face was utterly blank, reminiscent of Mena's coldness. "We kill people every time we do a bombing!"

He leaned in to hold Goid's arms at the shoulder, begging his friend to come back to the world of empathy and reason. "You know this is different. Children don't choose to serve the Guard."

"They may not," he snarled, dislodging his grip. "But their parents do!"

Trying to use his meager empathic ability to reach Goid, he stepped in closer. "Please! You know this is wrong!"

Goid's rage was stronger than Jessal. "Get out of my face!" he snarled, and stepped back out of his grip.

Jessal stood in the crowd and watched Goid turn his back on him. He could neither see nor sense anything of his old friend in that figure. Just a terrible screaming rage and grief.

Mena's voice rumbled in the background, calming the other voices. Jessal heard enough to understand that no decisions had been made, that this meeting was for exploring ideas, then he turned around, and moved through the group to the nearest exit. He needed some air.

The meeting room was an old warehouse big enough to hold them all but too small and water logged for storage. There was was a slab of concrete which ran across the front of the building but the rest of the parking lot was filled with gravel. He stood on the concrete, staring at the holes in the tips of his old sneakers. They couldn't kill children. Adults were different, particularly the adults that worked for the Guard and the Government, they chose to help them and they chose to enforce their immoral laws. But children chose nothing in the situation. They were innocent. The RA couldn't start--

"If it's any comfort," interrupted Lilaan, who stepped in next to him. "I don't think they're really going to bomb a school. Goid's just hurting right now."

He glanced sideways and up. Lilaan was one of the active members, in fact, she sourced and processed the raw materials that they turned into explosives, and sometimes she even placed them in government buildings herself. They didn't really know each other, but Jessal had always felt more comfortable with her than some of the other members.

He sighed. "I loved Rena too, you know--"

"No, Jessal. Not like Goid. You ain't lost a kid of your own, you can't understand and I hope you never do. That kinda loss breaks the world for a while."

"You've lost a child?" He frowned, not knowing much about her history.

"I did." Her voice was quiet. "Twenty years ago, when I was your age. He was a kinetic like me but had no control. He just didn't come home one day. I found him..." she cleared her throat and he sensed a shaft of white hot grief. "They left him in the gutter a block from the school. He was five years old."

He put a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry."

Her velvet black eyes were filled with moisture, but also kindness. "It's alright, it was a long time ago. I've been with the RA longer than you've been alive, and I can't imagine Goid actually doing this. He's just mourning Rena. Give him some time. Alright?"

Jessal nodded. "Alright."

"Come on, you can help me with our pick ups."

He smiled at her. “Yes, ma'am.”

* 7 *

The same day

Araam city, Arana

Agency Tower Building

Jaola was furious, more than she'd been in a long time. “I told you the wife isn't the Traitor, why can't you just *trust* me?”

Her father's eyes widened. “Dear daughter, it's not about me trusting you,” he said. “It is procedure. If we don't have proof *my* superiors will discipline us both. Why are you so insistent?”

“The defection is planned for tonight!” she barked. “There isn't time to get physical proof that the wife isn't involved. I need clearance to complete the mission or we'll both be charged when Matta Ahlan defects!”

She heard her voice echo in the otherwise silent room and realized that she was more emotional than she should be for the situation. Pacing across the long side of his office, she explored her heart to identify where all of this rage had flared up from, but she had no answers; she was just angry.

She huffed and turned to face him. “I've done a number of passive telepathic scans of the wife, and it's obvious that she isn't a Traitor.”

Jaola suppressed the spurt of fear in her heart from lying to her father. Technically, Yuniya Case wanted to escape and was therefore a Traitor, however she wasn't planning to leave with her husband Matta that evening, and that was the pertinent point, so, strictly speaking she wasn't lying.

Jaola sighed, leaned forward on his desk, and deliberately projected the exhaustion she felt deep in her core out into her body and face so that her father could see it. “I... I'm sorry for my anger. This mission has been hard on me because of how close it is to my birthday, and I've not slept much this last week. I just want to get this over and done with so I can rest.”

Her father's face lifted into a gentle smile. “It's alright, I remember how hard these sorts of missions are even at the best of times. I'll give you clearance for tonight. And while you're resting I'll figure out how to patch up the inconsistencies in our data.” He took a deep breath and as he let it out again, his shoulders dropped, and smile softened further. Jaola recognized his mental shift from

being her supervisor into her father. “Would you like to have lunch with me?”

She smiled, nodding. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

*** 8 ***

Late evening

Jaola Armon stood in the darkness of the empty apartment. Next door, even through the Psi suppressant walls, she could sense that they were arguing again. The wife was a nurse who worked in the medical level of the Tower, the husband, Matta, was an admin specialist and worked for Jaola’s grandmother, Jeanie Armon in the A0 level Bانشii offices. She sat there waiting, praying that they would both decide not to take up with the escape plan.

“No!” yelled the wife, her anger making her thoughts loud enough for Jaola to hear her words. “*You are not taking her!*”

Jaola’s instincts wordlessly told her that it was time to move, even though she really didn’t want to. Walking through the darkness, she got to the door of the apartment and opened it a crack.

“*Go if you like, but we’re not coming with you!*”

Down the hall, another door opened and the wife rushed out and down the corridor in the other direction. She held their new born baby in her arms and Jaola was oddly relieved. She didn’t have to kill the wife.

She moved very quietly down the hall to the next doorway and stepped inside their apartment. The husband was in a bedroom to her left. As she crept towards him, she saw that he was packing a small bag, which meant he was still planning on escaping. She paused, psychically invisible in his doorway. She needed to calm herself and emotionally detach from the situation. She didn’t like her assassin mindset, but if it wasn’t securely in place before she started, her true emotions could stop her from doing her job, or in the case of combatant Traitors, could get her killed. For a minute or so she watched him.

When the ice was clear and firm in her heart, she took a deep breath.

“Matta Ahlan?” she said.

He jumped and spun around. “Uh... uh... yes. Who are you?”

She lifted her gun and aimed it at him. “I am Cheetah.”

His blue eyes widened. Everyone had heard of Cheetah. The name had become a

boogieman, not just for Rebels but for Agents as well.

“Wh... why are... you... you here?” he stammered.

“You are a Traitor.” Her voice was leathery and cold. She didn’t recognize it as her own.

“No!” He stumbled backwards, tripping over the bed and onto the floor. “No, I’m not!”

Scrambling around the bed, he tried to get away from her, but ended up with his back against a wall.

“I see you’re packing.” She advanced, flicking her head to the small bag still open on the bed. “Are you going somewhere?”

There was a snap in her mind and she was viewing the situation from a great distance. Matta was quite a handsome man. Dark brown hair flitted around his face in small gelled spikes with the ends slightly blonded. His small frameless glasses accented his blue eyes, which were wide in his terror and desperation.

“Please don’t kill my family!” he begged, seeming to have surrendered to his fate.

In the ice and blurry world where she lived, Jaola felt a prang of sympathy for him. “You are the Traitor, not your wife and child.” This time her voice was oddly soft.

For two breaths she watched the relief on his face, her focus shifted, and she pulled the trigger. Jaola heard the shot but did not see it. A part of her was looking at him to aim so that he didn’t suffer, but the rest of her concentrated on her peripheral vision, where a flower was painted by hand on the wall above him.

His figure slumped sideways and she turned around.

Her limbs had started to shake again, but she couldn’t feel much of anything. Putting away her gun, she walked out of their apartment.

*** 9 ***

19 Aracan 3007

Three days later

Back in Kamo, Rona

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

Jessal jolted out of his dozy state, sensing danger.

“Yes, sir,” answered Ayren, under his breath. “I don’t know who the Soul Eaters are but Ana said that he’s been talking to them and has betrayed us.”

Mena's voice was low and hostile. "Get your sister and go find him, Goid and I will finish the mission. We'll meet back at the flooded warehouse and deal to Jessal then."

Jessal carefully opened his eyes and discovered that he was in the little cubbyhole behind the children's play room. His instincts of danger must have brought him there in the night, which was something that used to happen a lot when he was younger. For whatever reason, his subconscious mind found the little dark space comforting.

Taking a number of deep breaths while still trying to stay as still and quiet as possible, he focused his mind on the task of getting out of the Malaan manor without being killed by Mena or Ayren. His Search Talent fired up and in the flicker of increased instinctual awareness, he knew without words that he had to stay still for a little while. A tingling line moved away from him, across the first floor, to the servants stairs, kitchen, and out the back door. But for the moment his instincts screamed for him to be utterly still for several breaths.

They thought he had already left the building, likely for his morning job as a runner with messages and small trade deliveries. Which gave him time to find Goid, convince him that he hadn't betrayed them and maybe, just maybe if he was lucky, he would survive the day.

A pulse of urgency blew through his body and he moved before consciously deciding to do so. He skittered, head low, running on his toes out of the little alcove, across the main landing, past the largest bathroom, and around a corner filled with windows. The glass wall embraced him with warmth and light for a moment, and then he ran down the narrow servant's stairs. At the bottom, it was dark, and his limbs became still again. He listened, hearing footsteps on the wood close by. Someone stomped around a corner close to him, and then away, getting quieter and quieter. A door closed, and that urge to move again exploded into his limbs. Opening the stairwell door, he shot to the right and straight into the old burned out kitchen, around a counter top to the back door. He opened it, jogged down two or three steps, and sprinted towards the fence line and a copse of trees at a distance.

This was bad. Why would Old Ana tell them such a lie? She would know that doing so would get him killed. If he couldn't fix it by explaining things to Goid, there was nowhere to go. Without the protection of the RA, the Guard would get him. Even if he could make it north or east to the borders (which were weeks away on foot), the Guard had a heavy presence there specifically to catch Psi before they escaped the country.

He remembered then that he had another option in the Aranan Agent. But to take that deal he would have to *actually* betray the Rona-Abaan; betray Goid, and he couldn't do that. Goid had

looked after him when he was utterly alone. He was family. If he did that, then Old Ana's words would become true and he'd lose everything.

The temperature dropped as he made it to the cover of the trees and the chain-link fence. It took a little longer to climb over, but once on the other side, he zigzagged in between tree trunks until his Search Talent instincts told him that he was far enough away to no longer be in any danger.

It wasn't far to the other side of the trees, and as he walked he focused on Goid. He had to get to Goid as quickly and safely as possible. If he could get his old friend aside and explain what had happened, he might just be able to fix the situation and survive.

The itchy, buzzing line of energy blew up into his senses and he knew which way to run to Find Goid.

*** 10 ***

About an hour later

Jessal stood and watched the child on the other side of the road. The little one, who was maybe five years old, was utterly still and stared at nothing. Their long over shirt was covered in ash and burned at the edges, some of the child's thick ringlets were melted on one side. It seemed terribly wrong that such a small person would be so still and unmoving. Jessal kept expecting them to break through their obvious shock and start to wail, but they didn't.

He'd heard the explosion as he ran, but by the time he arrived the whole building was engulfed and only this one small person was left.

Counter to the child's blank muteness, the sirens of emergency vehicles screamed in the background. The increasing volume of official noise broke him out of his own shock. Fire fighters and probably the Guard would arrive soon. He had to leave or be shot.

He swallowed, saying a little prayer under his breath for the traumatized kid standing on the roadside, then turned his back to the devastation.

Why had they done this? How could Rena's death take away Goid's ability to know that this was too far?

He had no answers. He wasn't even sure now if Goid would listen to reason even if he could find him. He rushed around a corner, out of sight of the disaster, and into a connecting lane between two white-stone apartment buildings. There had to be a way through all of this where he

survived. He wasn't sure what that path might look like, though.

A shimmer of his Search Talent vibrated into his brain with an answering direction to run. He let his feet lead him where ever that instinct might take him. If there was a path to survive, he was going to try for it.

* * * * *

When the Search trance lifted from his mind, Jessal found himself standing in front of a pay phone. Since the advent of cellphones and other digital communication devices, payphones had slowly been taken away, often replaced by free WiFi hubs. To Jessal's knowledge, this one, which sat next to the western terminus subway access, was the very last pay phone left in Kamo.

He stared at it. If calling someone was the only way to survive, there was only one person he knew with a phone: the Agent in the Aranan Embassy.

If he called Raraan, the man would demand information about the RA that could conceivably kill everyone he knew. If he made this call he would definitely be a traitor to the RA. He didn't want to betray them, but he trusted his instincts. His Search Talent was never wrong, and he'd asked for a way to *survive*. The fact that the answering pathway had been the payphone and not going back to the manor or Finding Goid, meant that it was likely that if he tried to resolve things with the Rona-Abaan, they would kill him anyway.

A chilly breeze played around his face and a tingle shivered up his spine. These little, seemingly external sensations were really his Search Talent telling him that time was running out. He took a deep breath, let it out and stepped forward to pick up the receiver.

Above anything else, he had to survive.

* 11 *

Kamo, Rona

Jessal was running, zigzagging in an easterly direction, trying to avoid the main streets or the areas where the RA-owned taxis and buses frequented. The Aranan Embassy was half way across the city, but if he could get there he would be safe. He hadn't decided yet to what degree he would betray the RA, and what he could try to get for it, but Agent Armon was the only chance he

had to survive.

A sudden shot of terror rushed through his body and down into the ground with such force that his sprinting pace faulted and he nearly tripped. His Search Talent was telling him that he was in imminent danger, he had to hide. In fact there may not even be time to hide. He looked around as he ran in order to maybe see the threat before it got too close.

“Traitor!” roared Goid from behind him.

He was close, probably too close, but Jessal pushed on, sprinting as fast as he could. “I’m not!”

“Old Ana said you are!”

“She lied!” he snapped back.

A broad hand clamped down on Jessal’s shoulder and pulled him backwards. He lost balance, falling awkwardly sideways and down, landing on his bum. Goid jumped over top of him and landed nearby.

As he gathered himself to stand again, Jessal looked up into the barrel of Goid’s gun. Over the line of black metal his eyes were so darkly angry that Jessal could no longer see his friend.

Fear and despair tumbled out of him and he sobbed. “The Agency kidnapped me, they offered me freedom if I helped them get you and Mena.”

Goid re-gripped his gun. “And you agreed?”

“No!” he bellowed. “I told that Aranan preta to shove it up his ass!”

“Why are you running then?”

“Old Ana lied, and you’d never believe me. I’m just trying to survive.” Jessal wiped his face with a sleeve. “You murdered an entire school of little kids!” His voice broke. “How could you?”

Goid’s gun hand dropped and he let out a heavy sigh. His voice was very quiet. “All of their parents work for the Guard. Now they know not to kill *our* children.”

Jessal frowned up at his old friend. He barely recognized him. There was no love or light to Goid. No joy, no warmth. The rage and grief were simmering at a low heat but he had more in common empathically with Mena than the Goid Jessal had known for ten years.

“You killed children.” Jessal’s voice broke. “Little children.”

Goid’s eyes rolled up as if he was being obnoxious and he paced around Jessal, who was still sitting on the concrete. “You’re missing bigger picture, Jessal. Their lives didn’t matter. What matters is the impact their deaths had on our war!”

“No,” Jessal said very quietly. “You’re the one missing the point. The impact doesn’t matter. We were fighting for justice, what you’ve done isn’t justice.”

Goid’s black eyes gained a deeper level of darkness that Jessal sensed was actual hatred. His gun came up again and sat millimeters from Jessal’s nose. “Get up.”

Jessal’s whole body trembled with terror and fatigue as he got to his feet. He took a deep breath, and with tears in his eyes he stared straight at his ex-friend. “At least I’ll die without any guilt for the lives of those children on my heart.”

The handgun dropped a few centimeters and Jessal saw a tear slither down Goid’s cheek. For a second Jessal sensed his old friend, then the rage and hatred lifted up with the barrel.

“Goid Sennaa Malaan!” An older voice sounded from one side, they had the tone of authority that every parent had with a naughty child. “Drop that weapon!”

Both of them frowned and turned to look. Old Ana stood close, but with an empathic essence to her that wasn’t the Ana Jessal knew. It was as if someone new was speaking through her.

“Stay out of this, old woman!” barked Goid.

Ana’s hand moved quickly, grabbing the top of Goid’s gun and yanking it out of his fingers at a speed Jessal hadn’t thought possible for such an ancient person.

“You will not speak to me like that, young man!” she roared, stripping down Goid’s gun as she spoke. There was an odd disconnect that Jessal could sense, as if the person speaking wasn’t the same person pulling apart the gun, which if he knew her at all meant that she must be in a trance.

“You will let Jessal go!”

Goid grunted. “And why should I let a traitor go?”

“He’s not the traitor *you* are.”

“What are you talking about? You yourself said he’d been talking to the Agency and had betrayed us!”

“I said that in a state of mind where I didn’t understand the difference between the past and the future. My saying what I said triggered the circumstances which led you to *betray him*, and set up the situation where he has to betray you in order to survive. Right in this moment he hasn’t betrayed you. Right?” She glanced from Goid to Jessal and lifted expectant eyebrows at him.

Jessal shook his head. “I haven’t betrayed the RA.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Goid’s voice was very quiet. “Mena believes you’ve betrayed us, there’s no way to convince him otherwise.” He shook his head. “No way to save you.”

“There’s a way,” said Old Ana. “First you have to knock him out.”

Jessal frowned at Ana but flinched as Goid grabbed his throat. He struggled for a moment but sensed a pressure in his mind. He knew if Goid was telepathically forcing him unconscious that he had to not resist or risk being hurt.

Old Ana's chin dropped slightly and he felt her say without words for him to trust her. He was afraid, but he did trust Old Ana. Closing his eyes he let go, completely surrendering to Goid. Unconsciousness overtook him swiftly.

* * * * *

Jessal woke to find himself lying on his side. Someone had a hand on his shoulder.

Instantly sensing that this person wasn't someone he knew, he flinched, flinging his hands up defensively.

The person moved back out of his personal space, and it was then that Jessal saw the white stone walls of the Aranan Embassy building.

"Are you alright?" asked Agent Raraan's voice.

Jessal frowned at him. "How did I get here?"

Raraan shook his head. "You were found in front of the embassy. It took me a while to unwind the sleep program they put in your mind. I take it things went poorly in the RA after their recent bombing?"

He grumbled and sat up on the couch. "You could say that."

Raraan's face held none of the icy hostility of their last meeting and Jessal glared, waiting for it to return, but instead the older man sighed and looked away.

"Jessal, there's very little I can do to save you." He turned around to sit in a little chair, obviously made for the smaller Aranan body. "No one expected the RA to attack a kindergarten. The Ronan government is in shock and are probably going to retaliate. When they find out that we have you here, they will demand on the grounds of our non-interference treaty that you be surrendered to them, and they *will* execute you. Coming here wasn't your best option."

Jessal could practically taste the attempted manipulation in Raraan's tone. He growled again and got to his feet. "Quit playing word games, and tell me what you want."

There was a snort and Raraan's gray-blue eyes seemed amused. "Well," he got to his feet and moved around his desk. "We need the locations of every RA-controlled building that you know of. If you resist, I'll be forced to take that information from you and we won't help--" Raraan let out

a grunt and his face grimaced in pain. He leaned back on the desk with one hand, as the other lifted to touch his heart. All color drained out of his face and Jessal stepped closer to him.

“Are you alright, Raraan?”

He shook his head. “It’s not me. My twin brother is hurting.” His voice strengthened for a moment, with a clear undertone of command in it. “Look, to be clear, if you do exactly what I say, the best I can offer you is refugee status in Arana and entry into the Agency. But right now I need you to stay here while I make a phone call.”

*** 12 ***

Back in Araam, Arana

About the same time

Jaola got out of the elevator on level seven and turned left towards her father’s office. She was still so numb from her last mission. It had slowly become easier to disconnect from the kills, but the numbness had begun hanging around for longer and longer after each mission. She wondered if by her next birthday that she might get to the stage when the numbness was permanent.

She was twenty-one today. The day she officially became a fully legal adult. In the Norm world she would likely be finishing the last semester of an undergraduate degree and preparing either to go out into the workforce, or continue studying. Sometimes she wondered what career path she would have chosen had she been free and a Norm, but the question was very hard to answer when she didn’t even know her favorite food, let alone something like what career she might wish to try. All she really knew was that she didn’t want to destroy people any more.

She stood in front of her father’s office door and took a deep breath. Projecting enough peace and calm into her body, she prepared to pretend that she could still feel, that she wasn’t exhausted playing this game of pretend, and that she was the ever dedicated, perfect Agent. When that mask was stable and clear in her mind, she took another deep breath, let it out and knocked on his door.

No answer came, so she knocked again.

“Father?” she called out. Mentally, she reached through the door to see if he was inside. There was a snippet of consciousness, a wordless sense reached out to her desperately. She turned the handle but it was locked, so she stepped back and kicked downward and hard. The lock smashed

in with a boom and quickly she was inside the office, dropping to her knees next to him.

There didn't seem to be any blood, and other than his blue lips she couldn't tell what was wrong with him. "Father!"

A hand reached up and she grabbed it.

"*My little Boo.*" His mental voice was very quiet and she sensed that the edges of his mind held the sticky black tar associated with death.

She gasped. "Papa, stay with me! I'll call for help!"

"*No. Run.*" Tears leaked from his eyes as they closed. "*Be... free...*"

His hand let go of hers and everything that was her father faded away.

She stared at him. Shocked to stillness. Did he really tell her to run? To escape the Agency? She reached to gently wipe away the moisture on his face with her thumb. There was no life in him, no breath, no heartbeat.

The desk phone started to ring and startled her. She got to her feet intent on answering it but she only took one step before halting.

He told her to run. To be free. Now that she was no longer beholden to the rule that escape meant they killed her parents, did she want to run? She'd been preparing, with a safe house filled with all the kinds of supplies she might need. It was all waiting for her in an apartment overlooking the City Park. But now she was free to run, did she want to?

The desk phone continued to ring in its monotonous pattern and half of her wanted to answer it, the other wanted to simply run. She took a number of long deep breaths to figure out which action she really wanted to take, stay or run. In the struggle, her numbness lifted completely and three breaths later she had an answer.

She glanced down at her father. "I love you, papa." And turned away.

Part Two

Chapter Three – Cassandra Cowdy

*** 1 ***

3010; three years later

City of Marakan, Arana

Gwenith Rena pulled her uniform tunic back down into its place with the fake belt sitting properly under her breast line instead of over. The tunics weren't made to fit each worker as they were in the Agency, clothes were shaped to conform to average sizes, and with her slighter than average frame, the darn thing never sat properly on her body for very long. She took a long deep breath, releasing her frustration as she glanced at the counter top where her next order would be placed very soon. Waiting tables was hard work and while she didn't particularly like it, this was a Norm job for a Norm life.

"You know, you could probably tack-sew some pleats under the belt and the boss wouldn't notice," said a playful voice from behind her.

She snorted and looked over her shoulder at her work mate, Anne. "I would if I knew how."

Anne placed a tray of dirty dishes onto the counter and smiled with shining green eyes. "I can do it for you later if you want--"

"Table six!" said the chef, crossing the kitchen to shove four meals onto the counter in front of them.

Gwen sighed again, re-tied the straps of her red apron across her stomach and reached for two of the plates.

Next to her, Anne grabbed the other two. "Be careful, Jeni," she said under her breath as she passed Gwen. "They're Agents."

Gwen grumbled, neither her nor Anne ever spoke of it, but they both knew that each other had escaped the Agency and were telepaths, so they had become accustomed warning each other.

At her rating, she could only hide her ability by dropping her mental shields. It was painful to work in that state of open sensitivity, but worth it not to be shot or conscripted. Worth it to feed her daughter Cassandra.

She pushed the door to the restaurant with one shoulder and moved out into the noise, deliberately focusing all of her thoughts on the present moment. One of the party at table six had ordered a soup, so she kept her attention on getting that bowl of hot orange liquid around other tables by avoiding customers' chairs in case they pulled out suddenly, and keeping the spicy soup level so it didn't spill. She looked at Anne, who indicated with a glance who to give the meals to in order.

Gwen carefully walked around the table to the one with short blond hair, a woman if she was reading the cut of her jacket properly, and put down the soup. They nodded their chin once to acknowledge her. Gwen dodged around Anne expertly, and placed the second plate down with a much older, dark haired man, who'd ordered a vegetarian dish. He grunted but otherwise did not acknowledge her presence.

"I hope your meals are to your liking, Gentle-beings. Would you like to order any drinks?" asked Anne. Bright green eyes darted sideways at Gwen and she sensed that Anne was telling her she could go.

She nodded and backed away, showing respect with lowered eyes, before turning. She only had half an hour left before she could go home and make dinner for her daughter. She was tired and looking forward to seeing her favorite face in the whole wide world.

As she moved back towards the service door, she sensed a wave of shock, then rage somewhere close to her. She stopped and turned around to look, as if checking to see if anyone needed service before going back out of sight again. She couldn't identify the source of rage, even as it pulsed at her.

"*Gwen!*" The mental voice sounded victorious, and far too much like her ex-husband.

Swallowing her panic, she shot straight for the service door. Beyond, her boss stood in the glass box where zey took payments from customers and oversaw the whole business. Gwen moved in close to zem, and slid open the glass hatch so zey could hear her.

"I think I saw my ex!" she squeaked breathlessly.

Nen, the boss, was hard but fair. Zey frowned and glanced around the dining room.

"Where? I'll kick him out!"

She shook her head. "I only saw him for a moment, I think he might be out the front.

Please, if he gets me, he'll kill me!"

Nen huffed. "Right, short shift it is. Come on." Zey pressed a button under zeir desk surface which would call zeir teenage offspring from upstairs to cover the desk. "I'll take you down to the garage and you can get out on the other side. Come in the same way tomorrow morning, early, and I'll let you in. What's this preta look like, anyway?"

* 2 *

Twelve year old Cassandra Cowdy crouched down and stared at the bright yellow flower. Crinkly layers of petals were pushed tightly together so it looked a little like the pompom on her winter hat. She tipped her head on the side. "So can I eat flowers?"

Mr Tyrell chuckled. "Not these ones, why do you ask?"

"Isn't this a food garden?"

The older man knelt down next to her, his smile was gentle and it made his gray eyes seem as if they glowed at her with love.

"It *is* my food garden but these flowers aren't planted here for eating, they have a smell that repels the insects that like eating my vegetables!"

This whole gardening was complicated. Her eyes widened. "Insects like people food?"

"Only the green stuff." He laughed again. "It's getting cold out here, do you want to come inside for a hot chocolate?"

She stood upright and grinned. "With baby marshmallows?"

"Of course!"

Cassandra was very careful to step over the messy rows of her neighbor's beloved food garden to the square stones installed specifically for walking on, and followed the old man to the gate and fence which kept the bigger pests out. Her and her mother had never lived in a neighborhood with gardens and grass. They'd only lived in small apartments nestled in bigger buildings. They'd never had back yards or gardens, and sometimes they even went without sunlight on the window panes. Cass was thoroughly enjoying living in Marakan, with the gardens and houses, her own bedroom, even public school was sort of fun.

She followed Mr Tyrell upstairs to the front door, and into his house. The kitchen was just to the right. It had a long, narrow window above the counter, which looked out over his food

garden. The house had brightly colored surfaces and cupboard doors at knee and head height, and in the far corner sat a little round table and chairs. She liked the atmosphere of his house, as if she could feel the love of those who'd lived there radiating out of the walls at her. She felt safe in his company, almost as safe as with her mother.

"Sit at the table, and I'll put the kettle on to boil."

She did as he asked, crawling onto the nearest chair to sit with her legs dangling.

"So how is school?"

She sighed. "I like the subjects I'm studying but that bully keeps beating people up, and last week five kids in my class came back with a positive blood test and were taken. It's scary."

He glanced up at her from the two coffee mugs he'd been preparing for their drinks. "Have you had yours?"

She looked at the floor and recited the words her mother told her to use to answer any questions about the mandatory Psi blood tests. "Mama arranges for a private test to be done, she says she doesn't trust the schools because they get money for every positive test. I did mine at the beginning of the semester and came back negative." She stole a look up from the ground into his face, and saw amusement shining in the gray of his eyes.

"Your mother is smart! We did the same in our family and I pay for the great-grandkids' tests as well. The youngest is about your age, though he lives in one of the small district towns so I don't get to see him often."

While they'd been talking he'd made their hot chocolates, which he lifted from the kitchen counter and brought to the table. He put hers down first and she saw the little baby marshmallows floating in the frothy milk. She grinned. "My mama says she can't find these baby marshmallows, where do you get them from?"

He sat down at the table in front of her and his grin was broad and loving. "That's gotta be *my* secret. You see if I tell you, you might not come around to visit!"

She giggled. "You're silly! I like you for more than just your marshmallows, Mr Tyrell!"

He let out a belly laugh. "I'm glad. But it's almost dusk, so after you've finished your hot chocolate you should get home for dinner."

She nodded. "OK."

Cassandra helped her mother set their tiny dinner table and place the food bowls into the middle of it. They had roasted vegetables, some curry and rice, something green and leafy with spices and a loaf of fancy oval maka bread with little black chopped olives on it.

She watched her mother as she put the plate with the maka bread onto the table. Mama's long blond hair was still tied back in a loose plait from work, even though she usually took her hair out as soon as she finished, and there was a wrinkle between her eyebrows. Cass could also see the tension in her tight lips. These small things all added up to something weighing heavily on her mama's mind, but Cass understood instinctively that if she asked what was wrong directly, that her mother would deny it. So, Cass nattered about the good parts of her school day and hoped that her words would push away that worry, even if only for a little while.

"And Bremaan slipped off the climbing rope!" she started to giggle. "He was fine but he toppled head over heels, *sideways*, and landed on his bum! We knew he was OK because he started to laugh! Everyone was so relieved that he was alright that we all laughed too!"

Her mother chuckled and absently reached up to free her hair of its bindings. "That's good he wasn't hurt," she said, pulling one of their chairs out from the table. "A fall like that could easily break a bone."

Together they sat down at the table, facing each other with a big dinner between them. The wrinkle of worry between her mother's eyebrows had disappeared for a moment but as she looked at the food, it returned. Her mother glanced up at her across the table.

"Do you remember what to do if you get into trouble, love?"

She nodded. "I've got a good hiding place for school, and I can just go next door to Mr Tyrell. He used to be in the army, so he has a shot gun. He can protect us."

Fear shimmered across her mother's face and Cassandra's developing empathic instincts told her that her mother was properly afraid of something, but didn't want to tell her all of the situation. She swallowed that fear down and gave Cassandra a very strong, burst of calm emotion from her eyes.

"My love, if you're ever without me, I want you to try to get to a church, particularly those kinds of churches with a monastery. They'll look after you, alright?"

Cass frowned but nodded. She wished her mother would tell her what was going on, but trusted her implicitly. "I'll find a church if we're ever separated, promise."

Her mother started serving the food from out of their trays onto their plates, and Cass

watched that worry wrinkle tighten between her eyebrows.

Cassandra wanted to ask what was wrong, but still her instincts told her not to because she'd get no answers and only irritate her mother, who still saw her as a small child and in need of protection. Which wasn't entirely false, but Cass was twelve now, and she could handle a lot more than her mother thought she could.

They both sighed at the same time, and lowered their chins to say a prayer over their food.

*** 4 ***

The next day

Cassandra's school

Approx 11am

The girl in Cassandra's class was small for her age and very shy. She'd lost both of her parents in an Agency raid, and lived in an orphanage. She hardly ever spoke and when she did, she stuttered badly. Cassandra's instincts told her that the girl's manner and situation had come from hurt and terror, that Viola's "strangeness" wasn't anything she chose or anything that meant she was a bad person. Unfortunately, the bully standing over her and yelling at Viola was a Norm, and essentially incapable of understanding this.

"You're a freak!" the bully yelled. "You're a freak like your parents and you'll die like them too!"

The mouse of a girl lowered her chin even further and pushed her spine into the locked door. Cass felt a great deal of sympathy for Viola and wanted to defend her, but Cass' mama had always told her to keep a low profile. To not start or participate in fights. To keep her grades at a solid B so that she wasn't noticed either for perceived brilliance or the need for a special tutor. To be as unremarkable as possible so that the paranoid Norms wouldn't realize that she was Psi and call the Agency.

"Freak!" The bully stepped forwards, and all of Cass' instincts told her that this older kid was about to beat on the girl who had no way to escape.

Cass moved forwards. "You leave her alone, you big bully!" She grabbed the kid's clenched fist, pulled it firmly around behind her and toppled the girl over with a toe jab to the back of her knees, just like her mama taught her.

The bully let out a cry of pain and hit the ground flat on her face.

Cass offered Viola her hand. "C'mon!"

Hand in hand, Cass and the other girl ran up the wooden walkway towards the office.

Before getting to the double doors that would admit them to the world of teachers, photocopiers, and that stern, grouchy glare of the office lady, Cass pulled the girl left down a couple of stairs and dived around another corner out of sight. A concrete path dropped towards the road and the main public entrance to the school. The teachers' staff room jutted out over the slope, and in the foundation wall which held it up, there was a small hatch. She dragged the girl straight for that hole and pulled her inside under the teacher's staff room.

Sitting on bare earth, she closed the little access door behind them, and sat there in the dark with Viola as both of them recovered from their sprint.

Above them the footsteps of teachers moving around across bare wood floors, dislodged bits of dust into the air. It wasn't comfortable being so close to the teaching staff, but their rumbled voices and close presence meant that as long as the two girls were quiet, they were safe from both the teachers *and* the bully. She sighed. This incident probably meant that her and her mother would have to pack up and leave again, but it was worth it to save the shy kid from a beating.

Cass listened intensely, waiting. There were perhaps half a dozen teachers above them, and through the gaps between floor boards their words blurred into each other.

"We need a better coffee machine."

"I know! This stuff tastes like dirt."

"Someone probably just needs to clean the filter again."

"Not me! I--"

"She said what?"

"She wants a divorce. I don't know what I've done wrong?"

"You are a bit of a jerk, Arna. When was the last time you took time out for a date night?"

"I brought home flowers, last week!"

"Yeah... the flowers you stole from Gen's birthday party!"

"Zey left them behind! I'm not going to waste--"

Over top of the inane talking points of teachers, Cassandra heard the scream and wail of the bully-kid throwing a tantrum. She was an only child of one of the teachers. Consequently, she was overly indulged, and never faced any real consequences for her violence towards other students.

The wailing came nearer as the bully and her teacher father moved towards the school office. “Cassandra Ren! Viola Priian! Where are you?” barked the bully’s father, who taught history to the eldest kids.

Next to her, Viola let out a squeak and Cass sensed her terror rise up again. She leaned in close and put a gentle hand over her mouth.

“Shh,” she whispered. “They won’t find us here if we’re quiet.”

Cassandra waited in the dusty shadows. Voices called out, and above them the teachers moved out of their space. The voices were indistinct but Cassandra knew in her gut that they’d decided the two girls had run away. The normal procedure for this was to bring all of the other students into the school hall to be looked after by a small number of teachers, and the rest to go out onto the street to search.

Cass waited until her instincts told her that the teachers were far enough away before she dropped her hand from her new friend’s face, and let out a long sigh of relief.

She turned to look at the younger girl. “Are you alright?”

Viola’s bottom lip quivered but she nodded. “Th... th... thanks.”

Cass smiled. “I couldn’t just stand there and watch her hit you.” She sighed. “But now I have to run away from school, which means I can’t help you again.”

“C... can I... c... come with you?” She brushed at her short, straight black hair with one hand. “My b... blood test... it came back... p... p--”

She watched the grief and terror contort the girl’s face, and Cass understood what she was trying to say. Viola was about to be sent to the Agency.

“So that’s why Pen was after you?”

The girl nodded. “I was let out... to... to say goodbye.”

“Alright,” Cass took a breath, trying to control her fear. “Viola, I can get us away from school, but I can’t help you after that. So, you have to choose to either stay here and wait for the Agency, or try to live alone on the streets. But I’ve got to go really soon.”

“You’re Psi, aren’t you?” she said without any stutter.

Cassandra felt a flicker of fear, like a little warning from her instincts to be careful. She shook her head. “No, all my tests come back clear, but my mama is, and I want to stay with her. Are you coming with me?”

The little girl’s bottom lip poked out, tears shimmered into her eyes, and she shook her head.

“I’m going to go now.” Cassandra started shuffling away from Viola in the narrow space, towards the trapdoor. “Can you try and stay here for as long as possible to give me a head start?”

“OK. And Cass?”

She got to the exit and looked over her shoulder at Viola. “Yeah?”

“Thanks for saving me from Pen.”

Cassandra smiled. “Good luck.”

* 5 *

Cassandra sneaked into the back yard of their new house through the gap in the fence. The yard wasn’t very big, but the key to get inside was hidden under a rock next to the house, so she quietly let herself in, intent on getting to the emergency cellphone to call her mother. It was only as she moved down the back hallway that she sensed danger in the house.

“Where is Cass!” bellowed a voice she hadn’t heard since she was small.

“She’s not here and you’ll never find her!” answered her mother. They were in the sitting room.

Every instinct in Cassandra blared to immediately run and hide, but she stood there in the hall panting, trying to figure out what to do. Her instincts blared with information, telling her that this voice was her father’s and that he had her mother captive with his gun. She didn’t remember much of her time in the Agency, but she remembered his raging voice and the barrel of his hand gun pointed right at her face.

“*Run and hide, Cass!*” spoke her mother’s voice in her head.

“*No! He’ll kill you!*” she answered. “*I’ve got to help!*”

“*Cassandra Lilith Bethany Cowdy, you are the most important thing in my life! And I need you to be safe. Run and hide!*”

She didn’t want to abandon her mother, but she did trust her to know the right thing to do. Cass huffed, and turned back the way she came. Her mother’s mind remained connected to her as she ran. Slipping out of the back door, she moved down one step and sprinted around the side, along the fence-line that separated their property from Mr Tyrell’s.

Another roar came from inside, this time wordless, and a gun went off. Her mother’s mental grip on her loosened.

“I love you, Cass.” Her voice was barely a whisper, and all of a sudden she could feel nothing of her mother in the world.

She let out a choke and pushed her legs to keep running. Mr Tyrell would protect her from her father. She would be safe with him.

Cassandra was running so hard that when she got to his front door she hit it at full speed with her body. Still pressed against the wood, she lifted her fists to pound on it. As she hit it the grief and terror overwhelmed her, forcing sobbed tears to tumble out.

The door opened and she fell. The old man caught her and lifted her up into his arms. “Cass? What’s wrong, love? You’re trembling!”

“Papa... found... us!” she sobbed. “He’s got... a gun!”

Mr Tyrell grunted, turned, and closed the door behind them. He carried her down his central hall to an odd seat attached to a little table. It was an old fashioned piece of furniture made in a time when telephones had cables, and a person needed a chair close to the phone in order to talk for long periods of time. He sat her down and lifted his wireless land line phone receiver. He dialed as he spoke. “Ask for the police, tell them your father is armed, and they’ll come as quickly as they can. Here.” He handed her the phone.

She watched him rush down the hallway to his bedroom as she lifted the phone to her ear.

“Hello, what is your emergency?”

“H... help!” For a moment the words were stuck, but she pushed through the terror. “He... he’s got a gun!”

Mr Tyrell came out of his bedroom with a long barreled shotgun in his arms. She sensed the buzz of fear in him but his face showed courage.

“Who has a gun? Do you know your address?” asked the voice on the phone.

“Papa has the gun!”

Mr Tyrell moved past her to the front door and opened it to go outside. Through the gap she heard her father’s voice.

“He’s here!” she squeaked. “He’s going to get me!” This time her fear was so imminent that all reasoned thought left her. She dropped the phone and rushed down the hall towards Mr Tyrell’s back door, and the larger yard that lay beyond. She was touching the door handle as another gunshot fired, she jumped and skittered outside.

Mr Tyrell’s backyard was vast and framed on all sides with head high fencing. The green was filled with fruit trees and lines of food gardens. On the edges there were four garden sheds, two

to her left, two to her right. So far beyond reasoned thought, Cass ran following only her instincts, choosing the garden shed furthest from the back door on her left. Thankfully, Mr Tyrell had no padlocks on his sheds, so she opened it and was inside with the door closed again in half a breath. The space was filled with lines of shelving and a big ride-on mower. She crawled around the shelves to the darkest corner and sat down, hidden from the door by clutter and the mower.

Pulling her legs into her body, she curled up as small as she could get. Unlike her mother, her father wasn't telepathic or empathic, so if she hid well enough he wouldn't easily find her.

There was silence for what felt like a long time. She tried to slow her breathing so she was less noisy, but it was hard in her still raging terror.

For a second she wondered if her father had given up and left, if maybe it was safe to get out of there and run away, but her body wouldn't move. Then she heard the back door of Mr Tyrell's house slam open and her father roared.

"You get out here right now, young woman!"

Cassandra was too scared to move, or even make a sound. She closed her eyes and tried to make herself as invisible and tiny as she could. Her mother had told her to be invisible psychically one had to try and put one's thoughts and feelings deep inside their heart so that from the outside there were no thoughts or feelings. She knew he wasn't psychic like her and Mama, but she still practiced it, practiced putting all of those feelings and all of her terror in a little box deep inside her so that maybe she might actually go invisible so he would never find her at all.

A shed door banged open and she heard swearing. "Come out here! I am your father and you will obey me!"

Another metal shed door banged against its walls as he opened it, searching. Her terror lifted to a degree so terrible that she was overwhelmed. She put her hands over her ears and that terror enveloped her in nothingness. Reality faded away from her, and she was drowning.

*** 6 ***

Robaat Ngii was a social worker and he'd seen a lot of horrible things in his life, but as he stared at the three stretchers being loaded into an ambulance with bloodied sheets over them, he figured that this event was in the top ten of the worst.

"You gotta come through the house," said a young policeman. "We can't get close to her."

Rob let out a sigh and moved up the front steps of a nice looking family home. There were bits of flesh on the door with a bullet wedged in the wood at chest height, and he had to step over the puddle of blood on the floorboards. He swallowed. This was where the neighbor had died, and by the look of the mess, Rob was thankful that the paramedics had already covered and retrieved his body.

The corridor moved through the center of the house directly to the back door, which was ajar. Outside, the yard had obviously belonged to someone who loved gardening. The policeman escorting him moved off to his left and he followed. The yard was framed on three sides by a tall fence. His escort moved suddenly around something in the grass and Rob looked down to discover another puddle of blood. This had probably been the perpetrator, killed by police when he started shooting. Rob dodged around the area.

The young policeman stopped at a garden shed. It had a raised wooden floor but aluminum walls and roof. He glanced back at Rob. "She's in here but every time we open the door, she screams. We can't get close enough to extract her."

Rob nodded. He took a deep breath, folding his apprehension and grief into the center of himself, and once the negative feelings were sufficiently captured and controlled, he thought of loving things, kind, soft things, the laughter of his children, the comfort of his husband's hand, and filled himself with that feeling. Not entirely understanding that this was his empathic ability firing, he deliberately projected the good, comforting feelings out in front of him.

Another deep breath, and he quietly opened the shed door.

He immediately knew where the child was hiding. She seemed to be in a state of severe shock and was pulsing with terror. Making his love stronger, he pushed back the terror as he walked towards where she sat behind the large lawn mower. He shuffled around the side of the thing, and slowly dropped to sit within arms reach of her.

She flinched as if only then realizing that she wasn't alone, and stared at him with a set of the biggest blue eyes he'd ever seen.

He smiled, giving her as much of that love as he could muster. "It's alright, you're safe now. My name is Rob. What's yours?"

A sunroof above them illuminated her face as she blinked at him. Her mind wasn't working enough to speak. He needed to calm her first.

Very slowly, he lifted one hand and moved it towards her as if offering her a hand to stand up. "It's alright, you're safe." He kept his voice gentle and quiet, his words were somewhat less

important than his tone. He reached and took her nearest hand as if to comfort her. He took a deep breath, focusing and sharing his calm with her through their touch. He had to push back her terror, blow it away like sand in the wind. And the only antidote for this amount of terror was love and comfort. An adult was less likely to drop into this state and words often were enough to extract them from a crime scene, but this girl, who couldn't be any older than ten years, would need to know that she was safe on a deep level.

He felt her heart rate slowing down, her breathing became longer and deeper. All of a sudden her hand tightened around his, she let out a sob and crawled in close to wrap her arms around his neck.

A little wail came out of her, breaking her traumatic silence. He could sense then that she'd be alright now. She was coming back to the world and soon enough she'd be able to speak and be extracted to a safer location.

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and stroked her back with one hand. "It's alright, you're safe now. My name is Rob, I'm a social worker with the police. We'll look after you."

As she wailed and sobbed, her grief seemed to push out of her like waves of agony, and he sensed that she too was an empath, able to push or pull other's emotions. But, as long as she was younger than twelve, he could hide her at an orphanage. He'd done it before, knowingly hiding Psi kids to give them a few more years of normal life before being conscripted.

The girl's wail dropped in volume and her sobs slowed. "Cassandra," she said with a little voice. "My name is Cassandra."

He let go of her and when they got eye contact again, he smiled. "Nice to meet you, Cassandra. Are you hurt? Or hungry, maybe?"

She shook her head. "Not hurt."

"Well, my office has a food dispenser with chocolate and sweet drinks, do you feel like some nice snacks while we figure out how to help you?"

She nodded. "OK."

* 7 *

Araam Agency Tower

"I want their heads on pikes!" His father was yelling so loudly that Dobid Cowdy could hear his words echoing down the hall from halfway across the building.

He rolled his eyes. For a man so obsessed with his children being "in control", he had very little control of his own temper when things weren't going his way.

As Dobid neared Jaran's office, he consciously changed his body language and external emotions to appear colder, more arrogant. His pace increased and he strode through Jaran's door, ready to bark or condescend depending on what was causing Jaran such distress.

His brothers Junior and Kranaan stood either side of the door, and Dobid moved through into the gap between them. Jaran paced back and forth behind his desk like an angry bull, head down and nostrils flaring.

Dobid crossed his arms over his chest and lifted one eyebrow at Jaran. "What's wrong, father?"

"Morna!" bellowed the older man. "They killed him!"

He straightened his spine. "What? Who?"

"The police in Marakan!"

"What was he doing in Marakan?"

Jaran picked up a coffee mug from his desk, and the three brothers ducked out of the way as it flew across the room and out into the hallway beyond.

"What was *he* doing in Marakan? What were they doing shooting him?" Jaran's rage was so complete that he was spitting out his words, with his eyes wide and unseeing.

Dobid looked at his older brother, Junior. "Will someone tell me what's happened?"

Junior rolled his eyes. "Morna was out looking for Gwen and Cass. Apparently, he found them. Cass is still missing, but he killed Gwen and a civilian trying to get her. Then the police arrived."

"I want you three to go to Marakaan, and kill every single police-person who fired at Morna!"

Neither Kranaan or Junior turned to go or said anything.

Dobid smirked at Jaran, showing mocking disdain. "You really want us to hunt down and kill civilian police because Morna broke protocol and got himself killed?"

Jaran's mouth opened wide and he stared at Dobid, his shock and rage stunning him for a long moment.

Dobid rolled his eyes. "You are entirely out of control, father. We're never going to get

Cass back if you continue to entertain your vast ego instead of your strategic intellect. And I'm not having any part of this mamon. I'll be at the Cathedral when your reason finally returns!"

He turned away, back out through the door, and around the pieces of broken coffee mug scattered in the hall.

As he stalked back towards the elevator, he heard his father growl. "You two, get to Marakaan and find Cass!"

*** 8 ***

Cassandra sat in an old couch, it was sort of ugly with an orange and green crisscross pattern which weaved in and out of itself. The material was rough to the touch, and she found herself focusing on the sensation of stroking it with her finger. She felt odd in her brain. As if she wasn't quite real, and as if she was both terrified and utterly calm at the same time.

The room around her vibrated in a strange way, both brightly excitable and dully boring. There was an odd sense of reverberation, as if a part of her was bouncing off the walls like some sort of strange echo-location. It was so vivid that she had a sense of every surface, every wall, the very densities of everything around her. She could probably have walked through the room with her eyes closed and not hit anything, so clear was her sense of every object in the room.

The nice man, Rob, had a very light blue sort of energy about him. Everyone else in the building was made up of dim colors, mossy green, sea blue or deep red, and many shades of gray and brown. But his energy was loud and kind, bright in such a way that she could follow his movements through the building even when he wasn't in the room.

She felt him moving towards her, and it took every ounce of focus to lift her gaze up from the patterned couch arm. When she did, his green eyes were kind and loving. She sensed his desire to help her, to keep her as safe as he could.

His smile lifted and shone kindness at her. "I found some baby marshmallows for your hot chocolate, Cassandra."

He handed her the dark blue mug, and the warmth of it was oddly overwhelming in her hands. She took a deep breath, inhaling the yummy scent of chocolate and marshmallow, a smile made it to the edges of her mouth. "Thank you."

"We're arranging to transfer you to an orphanage." His tone changed slightly, volume

dropping as well. “You’ll be safe there.”

She understood that he meant she’d be safe until it was revealed that she was Psi. That she could hide at this orphanage place for a little while. But while temporary safety was good, it didn’t actually make her feel any safer than before, and she wondered if she could get out of the building next time he left her alone.

He seemed to sense her desire to flee and smiled, lowering his voice. “This is a secure facility, Cassandra. To get out, you’d need my card and my thumb print, I hope you’re not the type of person who would steal my thumbs?” He chuckled, spreading that amusement around himself by spreading his hands up at face height.

The image of her stealing his thumbs and him stumbling around the building in a clown like fashion, trying to pick up things without thumbs leaped into her mind and she giggled.

“No,” she shook her head. “You need your thumbs. I just...” she huffed, putting her mug of hot chocolate down on a low table in front of her. “I just don’t like this place. The air tastes funny, I can’t breathe.”

“I’m sorry, we have to stay here for a couple more hours but, I’m due a break. Would you like to see the roof? It has lots of fresh air?”

She understood that she was supposed to laugh because she sensed his mirth again but she just stared at him, frowning a little. He knew that fresh air wasn’t what she really wanted, but she could also hear in his mind that he had no choice in how he was allowed to help her, and that he was the only thing currently standing between her and an updated blood test.

She sighed and got to her feet. “Alright.”

* * * * *

The roof of the building was made up of gray concrete, but it was pretty high above the road, and because it also sat on the side of a hill, if she stayed on the east edge she could look out at the rest of Marakan level with a proper sky scraper. She gripped the concrete lip tightly, standing on tip-toes so she could enjoy the view.

She wondered randomly where the nearest church with a monastery was from there.

“Cassandra?” asked Robaat, there was a different tone in his voice.

Letting go of the ledge and dropping down to stand properly on the bench, she glanced back at him.

“Could you sit down, I need to talk to you about something serious.”

Still feigning an age younger than her years, she obeyed and sat on an old chair, opposite him.

“Your father was an Agent wasn’t he?”

A shot of fear triggered an inability to answer him, but, seeing her reaction, he smiled and nodded.

“I thought so. Look, I’m going to do everything in my power, short of getting charged with Treason to help you, Cassandra. I’ll hide your file so it’s hard to find out where you’re staying, and I’m not insisting on a blood test, so they won’t know that you’re an active empath. But eventually, they’re going to come and find you, so I want to give you some advice. As soon as you are left alone, run away from the orphanage. Make sure to pack some supplies, food, clothes, any personal care items you need, and run. If you were a Norm, I would entirely encourage you to stay in the orphanage because living on the streets isn’t safe or healthy, but if you want to stay out of the Agency you need to leave the orphanage as soon as you can.”

Cassandra was so surprised that she stared at him as he spoke, unable to reply or ask questions.

He smiled at her again, noticing her shock but showing a deep kindness in his eyes. “My brother was taken into the Agency. He was twelve: a little older than you are, and they sent him to a desert training base. He wasn’t a kinetic and couldn’t protect himself. He died within a year of his conscription. He’s the reason I became a social worker. He’s the reason I help kids like you.” He sighed. “Now, that paperwork should be processed by now. We’ll go by your old house to get some of your more precious items and a change of clothes. I’m sorry, but we can’t go into the sitting room, it’s blocked off, but we can go into any other part of the house. Then I’ll drop you at the orphanage. They’ll probably give you a meal and settle you in for tonight.”

Some of her shock lifted and she tipped her head on the side. “Why didn’t you say this before?”

“Because there are listening devices and Norms downstairs. We’ve got to be careful. I can’t help the next kid if I’m charged with Treason, OK? So this conversation is our little secret.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Jaola stood in her uniform, tying the red apron around herself without really being aware of what she was doing. Jen hadn't turned up for her shift covering the lunch run. The rush had just calmed down enough for her to take a breath between orders. She stood in the space that separated the glass box where the main boss sat, and the kitchen. She sighed and moved towards their boss to slide open the glass panel. Zey was serving someone, so she waited patiently.

The boss handed the customer a receipt and smiled. "Have a nice day!" When the person was clear, zey sighed and wiped zeir face as if it was zeir time for a break too. Jaola tapped on the glass to get zeir attention.

The boss didn't turn around, just glanced sideways for a moment. "No, she hasn't rung yet. No, I haven't had time to ring *her* to find out what's going on. I'm doing it right now."

She kept an eye on the service counter behind her, in case a new order came through, and waited there, watching as zey dialed.

It seemed an age before zey started talking. "I'm the manager of the Red Dragon cafe, what's going--"

The boss was interrupted. Zey sighed and glanced at Jaola, zeir face was pulled into a deep, but pained frown and Jaola knew then that Jen was probably dead.

"She was Jeniifa Ren on my books, what do you--"

Again, someone on the other end of the phone interrupted zem and zey sighed, this time as if in frustration.

Zey let out a dissatisfied grunt and put the phone down again.

Jaola swallowed the ball of fear in her throat and stared at their boss.

"She's gone, Anne," zeir bottom lip lifted, showing grief. "They wouldn't tell me much but given that she said she saw her horrible ex last night..." zey swallowed but didn't finish zeir sentence.

"What about her daughter?"

Zey shook zeir head and shrugged. "Wouldn't let me get a word in to find out anything else."

A shot of fear brushed through her. "Will they send someone to question us?"

"Not sure." One of the cooks called out an order. The boss glanced behind her at the serving counter. "Anne, I need you to stay until the end of shift. We're already short staffed. You can have your break when Nen arrives in twenty minutes, alright?"

“Yes, shan.” She huffed and turned around. Even though she wanted to check up on them, there wasn’t much she could do, really. As a fellow escapee, it was likely that the address on file for Jen wasn’t where she really lived, and even if she could find their real address, Cass was likely with the police now.

Jaola stepped forward and grabbed the meal sitting on the counter. She prepared her face to appear friendly and bubbly for the customers.

Pushing through the server’s door, she moved expertly across the dining area with a plate of ‘big breakfast’.

Jaola had only met Jen’s daughter Cassandra just the once. She was a lovely young girl, inquisitive and playful. She didn’t deserve to be taken by the Agency, particularly if her nasty ex husband was also an Agent. Jaola wondered if she might have active Psi genes. Would the police blood-screen her? Was she currently on her way to the Agency as a new conscript? The thought of such a young person being alone in the Agency made her stomach tighten. Hopefully, she wasn’t a kinetic.

She placed the plate onto the table and begun to turn around.

“Excuse me, miss, might I trouble you for a coffee?” asked the other customer at the table. “One of your super caffeine ones? What do you call them?”

She smirked. “A coffee bowl?”

There was a deep kindness in the man’s gray eyes, despite the Agency suit he wore. “Yes! One of those!”

His friend dropped the paper he was reading and noticed the food she’d put in front of him. He was Ronan, broad in the body and very dark skinned, but like his friend his eyes held some kindness. “Oh! Thank you for the food, could I also have a coffee bowl?”

She bowed her head but deliberately didn’t lower her eyes, Norms didn’t have the culture of lowered eyes to show respect. “Of course. Would you gentlebeings like some kind of milk in your bowls? We have two kinds of animal milk and four kinds of nut milk.”

The Aranan and the Ronan Agents smiled at each other, and both shook their heads. “No, thank you,” said the Aranan.

“I won’t be a moment.” She smiled and turned back to the kitchen door.

Jessal watched the waitress move away from their table and then grinned down at his big plate of food. They'd not managed breakfast yet and dinner had been about midnight, eaten from takeaway boxes while they sorted through camera footage and investigation notes.

"Mm," he said licking his lips. "Are you sure you don't want any food? You're welcome to share mine?" He smiled at his partner.

Ulnon's silver-gray eyes shimmered affection at him. "Maybe after my coffee." He yawned and wiped his face.

They'd been up for three days straight investigating the connection between a known group in Araam, which they helped to take out last month, and a Rebel cell there in Marakan. All of their leads had dried up and there hadn't been enough threads for them to follow and trace to an actual location. He didn't mind the 'failure' so much because now they had some down time in a comfortable hotel for a few days, but it wasn't very good for their work history.

Jessal shoveled food into his mouth. The 'Big Breakfast' was as greasy but delicious as advertised. He'd asked for a double serve because he didn't like the tuber patties, and Ulnon didn't like the sausage, so that once these two parts of the meal were separated and he ate half of what was left, there was just enough food for both of them to be satisfied while neither of them had to eat the thing they didn't like.

Next to him Ulnon's head started to droop down towards the table top, and Jessal grinned at him.

"Hey, wake up, sleepy head," he said tapping Ulnon on the arm.

Ulnon snorted, sitting upright all of a sudden as if someone had given him an electric shock. "I'm awake," he groaned.

Sitting between the two of them on the table was a small mobile device with multiple functions, the most annoying function was as a cellphone. As Ulnon wiped his face again and yawned, the device started to vibrate and play a little tune, which was apparently a theme song from a computer game that Ulnon had enjoyed as a youngster.

Jessal sighed. He knew what that tone meant. Next to him Ulnon grumbled wordlessly. His partner reached to touch the screen, opening the call to both of their earpieces.

"Agent Ree, speaking," said Ulnon, who was technically the ranking Agent. "Also on the line is Agent Mier."

"We have a problem," said their supervisor. "I'm sorry, I know you're due some off time,

and I wouldn't be calling if this was anything else." There was a breath and Jessal could practically feel the tension in the tone of their boss' voice. "Jessal, there has been sighting of the Rona-Abaan in Arana."

He gasped. "What? Who?"

"Goid Malaan, and he was spotted in Marakan an hour ago. We need you to help corner and capture him."

Jessal's shock was so acute that he couldn't quite string his thoughts together enough to speak.

Ulnon saw his distress. "Um, sir, we haven't slept for three days. We are not--"

"No one is expecting you two to capture him alone. We believe that Goid is in Marakan to kill Jessal, so we just need you two to lure him into an area where we can control and capture him. And this is an order from *my* superiors, so it is non-negotiable."

"Yes, sir," answered Ulnon.

Jessal cleared his throat. "I hope you have many TFO Teams, sir. Goid won't go down easily, he may even give you no choice but to kill him." He sighed, feeling a shot of grief and guilt. "He's also a kinetic, maybe a level two or three. So, we need to be extra careful with him."

"Understood," said their supervisor. "I need you two to get back to your hotel as soon as you can, and rest while we wait for the next sighting of him."

"Yes, sir." Ulnon reached to disconnect the call.

Jessal had stopped eating, simply staring at the table feeling fearful and shocked. Goid in Arana? It seemed impossible that Goid could have gotten over the border without being caught, let alone made it across the width of the country all the way to Marakaan without even being seen.

The waitress came back, awkwardly carrying a tray with two large coffees on them. Their mugs were literally the size of a small soup-bowl and delivered the equivalent of three coffees in one go.

Jessal huffed, wiped his face, and tried to smile for the waitress. She was tall and her torso was thin and curved into an hour-glass figure, which was an unusual shape for most Aranan folk. He sensed grief in her and a feeling not unlike his own: a spiritual exhaustion.

"There you go, giant coffees for you both. Are you sharing the big breakfast? I can get you another set of utensils if you like?"

Ulnon gave her one of his dazzling, flirty smiles. "Thank you, that would lovely."

As she moved away, Jessal sighed again and looked at Ulnon, giving him an unspoken

permission to ask whatever questions were burning in his brain.

He tipped his head on the side. “So, is this the same Goid that you’ve talked about before?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “He was my friend and he’s the leader’s little brother.”

“So this is probably going to be a hard mission?”

Swallowing back the ball in his throat Jessal nodded. “Absolutely. For the Agency, and for me.”

Ulnon lifted a hand to touch his arm. Jessal sensed sympathy and love from him and reached to hold his much smaller hand.

“There you go, gents. Enjoy!” Metal utensils were placed carefully on the table and the waitress moved away again.

*** 11 ***

Cassandra stood in a room full of beds set up in ordered lines perpendicular to the walls left and right of her. The beds each had their own colored blankets and pillow cases, with a set of drawers underneath them. It looked crowded and basic but not particularly hostile, except for the fact that this wasn’t her home. Rob’s hand rested over her shoulder and she resisted the request for her to unwrap her arm from around his waist. It felt as if he was the only nice person left in the entire world, and now he too was leaving.

“It’s time to let go of Rob now, you’re safe here, Cassandra.”

The woman who spoke was called Grace, Cassandra’s instincts told her that she wasn’t mean, but that didn’t guarantee she was nice, either.

Still afraid, Cassandra shook her head. She didn’t want to be left here, she wanted to go wherever Rob was, because at least he was nice, at least he definitely cared about her well being.

Rob’s hand lifted from her shoulder. Gently dislodging her arms from his waist, he turned to crouch down in front of her, taking both of her hands in his, and getting eye contact with her.

“You remember what I told you on the roof, Cassandra?”

She nodded. “*How could I forget?*”

His smile lifted and she knew that he had sensed the sarcastic undertone of her thought. “You’ll be safe here with Grace, and the other children. I have to go back to work and help the next kid.”

She sighed, looking down at the floor. She understood what he was trying to say, his mind was practically screaming it: he needed her to be compliant so that she could run away, and he could stay out of trouble.

His hands squeezed hers for a moment before he let go. “It was lovely to meet you Cassandra, good luck.”

Unsure what to say, she turned her back on them and put her bag on the bed she’d been assigned.

The two adults mumbled under their breaths as they moved towards the doorway. She very deliberately refused to listen to their thoughts. She didn’t need to know what they thought of her, or what silly grown up thing one or both of them would say about the situation to make themselves feel better.

Cassandra huffed and took off her back pack. If she was going to run away sometime soon, she would need to sort through her bag and get rid of any extra weight. It was currently too heavy to run with.

She unpacked three changes of clothes, folding them nicely onto her new bed. Placing her old elephant stuffy down on top, she reached in to get the photo of her mother. She pulled it out from under the tins of food and her spare pair of shoes.

Her mother had been short and her body wafer thin. People always under-estimated her mother, who was a lot stronger than she looked; just as they did to Cass. She touched her mother’s smiling face and slid the photo into the front pocket of her jeans.

Unpending her backpack, she tipped the food tins and shoes onto the bed. Staring at the tumble of things now on the blanket, a spark of irritation blew through her, and she wondered if she even needed any of it. She took a deep breath to calm her irritation, just like her mother had taught her, and stared again at all of her stuff. The tins were heavy and useless, but perhaps the other stuff could be helpful.

She sat down on the scrap of clear bed surface and grabbed the spare shoes. Unlacing her school shoes, she put on her good sneakers, which were much more comfortable and sensible for running. She got to her feet and packed her clothes back into the bag, as well as Oki, her stuffy. She zipped it closed and pulled the straps over her shoulders. She wouldn’t take the bag off until it was time to run.

* * * * *

The orphanage had many kids from very little to almost teenage. A few of them had strong minds that pushed at the edges of hers with unsaid questions, but everyone felt muted and afraid. She sat at a table that held six kids on the long sides. The chairs were like long church pews and made of just wood. She glanced around at the kids at other tables. Grace, the only adult in the room, stood at the front, staring with hawk-eyes, probably just waiting for the next fight or drama. Cass looked down at her plate. Her lunch was bland and simple, not made with love like her mother made, and had no color like Mr Tyrells veggie garden. A flash of grief blew through her as she remembered that both of them were dead. But instead of tears, the feeling only added to the building anger inside her.

She sighed and dug her fork into the boiled tubers. They needed salt and something spicy added to the meal to offset the otherwise linear flavor. Nothing on the plate was appetizing and she grunted, roughly dropping her fork. The sound of metal bouncing off of crockery jangled some odd nerves in her head. She felt twitchy and the noise caused her head to hurt.

It wasn't fair.

Tight lipped, she got to her feet, intent on leaving the room.

The hanging light above her head flickered. The shift in light forced her to look up, and she felt some of that anger leave her body through her eyes. Immediately the shorting light went out with a satisfying 'bink' sound. Too angry to care whether or not she had somehow been responsible for that blown light bulb, she stormed off down the aisle between tables, making a beeline for the door.

Following her movement across the room, the bulbs above blinked out one at a time so that when she got to the door, the whole room behind her was dim. She moved out of the doorway into the hall beyond.

"Cassandra!" growled Grace, from the darkness.

In her mind, she could see that Grace thought not only that she was the source of the darkness, but that she'd done it deliberately. Again, the anger bubbled and boiled in her heart. How could she stop something she didn't understand? Why was she the one who was always responsible? Why did they always blame her for *their* problems? Why did she have to suffer because of *their* mistakes?

The anger flared up, like white fire in her heart and she glared at the door just out of arm's reach, wishing it would slam itself closed, and then, to her utter surprise, it obeyed her. It slammed

so hard against the frame that she heard the wood crack. Shock over ran the anger for a moment and she stared at it.

“Cassandra! You get back here and apologize to us!” yelled Grace from inside.

She lifted her chin and stomped her feet down hard on the wood floors, and each step as she made her way upstairs. By the time she got to her assigned bed, her head was thumping with pain and she felt very tired. Without removing her shoes or backpack, she brushed the tins off the bed and curled up on her side, closing her eyes.

* 12 *

Robaat sat at his desk hoping that young Cassandra would be alright. It was always hard to leave the young ones who'd come into his professional life because of violence or for being Psi. He always wanted to take them home and keep them safe, but it wasn't logical. He couldn't help others if the Agency caught him hiding Psi children in his home. He took a deep breath and put this feeling of guilt aside. He did what he could. Her paperwork was lost in the bowels of their inefficient filing department, and he needed to print out and complete the other incident reports so he could go home for the day.

Telling his ailing computer to print the completed forms, he spun around on his office chair to wait for the papers to be spat out.

Loud voices came from the direction of the elevator. Rob stood up, looking over the dividers to see what was going on. Two men in Agency suits were at the reception desk, Luna, who was on desk duty for the day had a very frightened expression on her young face. He heard her voice rise to a squeak, very high pitch compared to the two lower voices of the Agents, and then two angry faces turned to look directly at him.

Rob sensed the icy hostility from the two men and felt a shaft of terror.

“Robaat Ngii!” bellowed the older man. “Come here!”

Suddenly shaking all over, he moved out of his cubicle and walked towards them. The receptionist's face was pale and he sensed that she was on the edge of tears. He took a few deep breaths as he neared them, and tried to show them respect by looking the two Agents in the eyes. “Yes?”

He focused on different child faces he'd recently helped and deliberately wondered which

child could have unknowingly been an Agency escapee.

“Her name is Cassandra and you saw her today. Where is she?”

Ignoring the sense that the elder was a telepath, Rob frowned. Cass was too young to be conscripted.

“I followed procedure, sir. She’s in an orphanage. Are you able to tell me what’s going on? She said she was only ten--”

“She’s twelve,” said the younger.

“Which orphanage?” barked the elder.

He was really afraid now, they could execute him for aiding a fugitive. He hadn’t known she was at conscription age. He wouldn’t have been any less kind to her, but he wouldn’t have endangered Grace by dropping her off there.

“*Poor girl.*” His real thought leaked out. “*She’s going to be executed by these men.*”

“Neither you nor Cass will be executed if you go and get the address of this orphanage.” The man’s chin dropped a little and his voice moved into a growl. “Right now.”

Rob jumped and turned back towards his desk. “I... I’ll write it down for you.”

Ordinarily he knew the address off by heart, but in his fear it took a few deep breaths to recall the details and scratch it messily onto a white notepad. He ripped it off and staggered back to the men with the paper stretched out in front of him.

The younger man who hadn’t said much stepped forward to grab the address from his fingers, and there was a click. He turned his head a little and looked up the barrel of a gun at the elder Agent.

Rob swallowed. “But you said--”

“You are a Traitor and there is only one future for Traitors.”

Rob closed his eyes.

*** 13 ***

“Cassandra? Cassandra!” the stern undertone of the voice reminded Cassandra of the teachers from her school, but underneath the correcting pitch, she could also feel a shot of very real fear.

She jolted out of her nap. Something was wrong. She wasn’t sure what, she had no details,

she just *knew* that danger was nearby. Eyes still closed, she shuffled out of bed, determined to find her mother and get the two of them away from whatever that danger turned out to be. Eyes opening to look around her, she realized that not only was she not at home, but her mother was gone.

“Cassandra, you get downstairs this instant!” The stern voice was Grace, the manager of the orphanage.

She was alone in the world.

A few tears tumbled out of her eyes and she let out a gasp. She had to be brave. Crying wouldn't help if she really was in danger. Sniffing, she wiped her face of moisture with the palm of her hand, and got to her feet.

“Cassandra!” Grace's voice had an edge of desperate anger, and as Cass moved out of the sleeping room, down the hall and alighted the stairs, she heard the older woman apologizing repeatedly to someone. “I'm sorry, mister... um... mister--”

“Agent,” barked a very deep voice. “Agent Cowdy.”

Cass' eyes widened, that was her father's last name. Had they heard her? Could she make it to the door and get away?

“Ah!” said Grace with a big chunk of relief flooding out with her words. “Cassandra, here you are! My dear child, these are your uncles. They've come to take you home.” Grace moved into her view at the bottom of the stairwell and gestured behind her.

Two men, one made of pain and the other of hostility, stepped into her view. They both had very square faces and bodies, with dark hair and ice blue eyes. They looked like her father, more pressing, however, was that they also wore unmistakable Agency suit jackets.

Afraid, but also too angry to let that fear freeze her limbs, Cass made her way one step at a time down to the base of the stairs. She deliberately turned her back to the front door, so she stood between the two men and her exit.

They stepped towards her, and she stepped back.

“Cassandra,” said the man made of hostility, his voice trying to be gentle. “We've been looking for you for a long time.” He smiled, obviously trying to look good in front of Grace, but to Cass' empathic ear, the fake smile just made the situation even more ominous.

She shook her head and backed towards the exit. “No,” she said, her voice quiet.

“Come now, niece,” said the man made of pain as he stepped forward with a hand extended. “You mustn't resist.”

He reached for her shoulder so fast that she couldn't keep the distance between them. A big

square hand gripped like a vice on the base of her neck. Through the touch flowed a stream of terror and confusion. This man was trying to manipulate her into coming with him.

“No!” she said again, putting her hand on his and trying to dislodge him, so she could get away. A thought whispered in the back of her head, as if her mother was standing close and speaking to her. “*What if you throw your anger at him? Like the door and the lights?*”

She got a good grip on his hand as she struggled against him. Imagining him being her father, she pushed all of her anger into his hand.

He screamed as if she’d burned him, but his grip on her released and she made a dash for the front the door.

“Stop, Cassandra!” growled the man made of rage. And there was a click. She knew what that sound meant. It was the sound of a gun when it became ready to fire.

Still with so much anger left inside to use, she turned and glared at the gun. She felt a shape bubble out of her body, and reach towards him. It brushed at the gun in his hands and the weapon flew itself out of his fingers, jumping across the parlor as if it had a life of its own. The last thing she saw before turning back around, was the shock on the man’s face.

Sprinting, she ran out through the orphanage doors and turned left. She knew the men would pursue her and that they could probably run faster and farther than her, so she had to find a quick exit out of sight. As she ran, the view of a narrow slit opened up between the orphanage and an old brick fire station. She sprinted into that gap, out of sight.

Her mother had tried to teach her many things to help her stay safe. And now was the time to practice the one thing she’d never quite mastered: being psychically invisible. Her mother told her that the secret to pulling it off was to not feel anything. To hide all of her feelings inside her, and to do the same with her thoughts. That way there was no psychic noise to be heard by the outside world.

The narrow lane was cluttered with piles of things, making her zigzag to get to its end. Ahead of her was a big metal dumpster. It was rusted from age, and she dove straight for it to hide.

When her back was pressed hard against the metal and the brick of the neighboring building, she closed her eyes. Taking long deep breaths, she imagined the folded paper flower her mother loved to make out of scraps of paper she found. It was folded in such a way that until construction was complete, you couldn’t see that it was a flower, but on the last fold, it was opened up to reveal its many petals. Cass didn’t have the patience for all of the precise instructions, but she loved taking her mother’s flowers to fold them in and out; to hide the petals, and then reveal them

again repeatedly. Her mind took that image, and she made herself into that flower, all of her feelings and thoughts became that flower, and when it was clear in her mind she visualized folding the petals away inside herself, so that her thoughts and emotions could not be seen. All of sudden, the world became gray and utterly calm. She sat there just breathing and listening.

*** 14 ***

Jaran Cowdy junior gaped at his niece as she made a sprint for the door. A breath later his surprise lifted and he dived for where his gun had landed. Behind him, Kreenaan was grappling with his hand and screaming. Junior put his gun into its holster under one arm and approached his younger brother.

“She’s an active kinetic,” he growled, but without feeling any anger. “She triggered your pain nerves.” He grabbed Kreenaan’s hand and started squeezing it tightly. His brother pushed back against the pressure, using the well known cure for the illusion of pain. Kreenaan let out a sigh of relief and they turned together towards the doors.

Outside, the road was empty of cars or other pedestrians. There were no sounds of footfalls, and after extending his telepathic senses, Junior couldn’t feel her psychically.

Junior’s eyes narrowed angrily, he glanced sideways at Kreenaan. “You feel her?”

Kreen shook his head.

Junior let out a grunt. “Gwen must have trained her. But she’s a kid, she can’t have gotten far. And if she resists again...” he let the threat hang in the air.

Kreen sighed, but he nodded. “Of course.”

“Come on,” Junior barked.

Chapter Four:

*** 1 ***

Someone was singing a gentle lullaby. The voice was clear and crisp. The singing slowed and they started speaking, but he was too drowsy to understand their words. A little person giggled.

“Peek-a-boo!” said the adult voice.

The child voice cackled with a bubbling happy sound.

Coan Taso smiled. The joy was so big it filled every molecule of his being. He hovered in that joy and those two wondrous voices, happy beyond measure.

“I said wake up!” snarled a hostility which was far too close to his face.

All joy drained out of him and he flinched, putting his arms up around his face and trying to push away who ever was too close. “No!” he yelled.

The person grumbled and that sense of closeness withdrew from him. He opened his eyes, and the wonderful dream drained back into the darkness of his subconscious mind.

Sitting up, Coan stared at a hostile Ronan face. This man was called Goid and Coan was his prisoner. Coan looked around, noticing a cheap motel room, with two single beds, and a bare desk with a small fridge underneath; every detail framed in ugly browns and greens.

He stared at his captor. “Where’s Leelah?”

Goid grumbled again. “She’s back in Kamo, waiting for you to do your job.”

“W... where are we?” he said, getting up and realizing that his bladder was very full.

“You’re in Marakan. Go relieve yourself, there aren’t any spare clothes if you happen to piss yourself.”

Coan skittered to a doorway off to his right, hoping that it was the bathroom.

“And don’t dawdle, our target is already here so we’ll be leaving soon.”

*** * ***

Sitting in the passenger seat of their patrol vehicle, Jessal watched the motel door. He didn’t want to be the one to arrest Goid, in fact if he had any choice in the matter, he would rather simply go back to their hotel to rest before transferring back to Araam Tower in the morning. But in the Agency you did as you were told.

Even though he'd left Rona as Goid's enemy, he still loved him as a brother and a friend. Jessal let out a sigh and wiped his face.

A hand dropped onto his arm and he felt Ulnon lean in so their shoulders touched. He glanced sideways, smiling. Ulnon's silver gray eyes were gentle and kind, and he sensed his love for Jessal. Dropping his head sideways, he rested it on the top of Ulnon's, and glanced back through the windscreen at the motel.

They sat comfortable in each other's company, waiting. Jessal enjoyed these quiet times with Ulnon, without words, without complications, just being together. The peace of Ulnon's company was a salve on his exhausted, hurting heart.

Something shifted in the world. What, he couldn't articulate, but it was enough of a change to break the spell and they both sat up again. The motel door across the road opened. Goid stepped out and up to his car, which was parked parallel to street, across three perpendicular spaces. He unlocked the passenger side door, glancing around as if looking for threats but deliberately not looking at the patrol car, which wasn't even hidden.

Jessal's sense of danger flared up. "He can't have not seen us?"

Ulnon grunted in agreement. "This car is hardly a stealthy vehicle."

Goid stood there for several breaths with the car door open, but staring out at the world and avoiding looking at *them*. He glanced down into the car, put something on the front seat, closed the door again, and moved around the bonnet to get into the driver's side.

Next to him, Ulnon put the car into drive.

Jessal looked at Ulnon. "This could be a trap, be careful."

Ulnon gave him a uniquely mischievous smile. "Yes, sir!"

Remembering again that technically Ulnon was the ranking Agent, Jessal let out a chortle of amusement.

* 2 *

Wide eyed but too stressed to be conscious of much, Coan sat in the foot-well of the front passenger seat. The car seemed to be a rental because it was so regularly cleaned that it smelt of cleaner despite being worn and shabby.

Goid grumbled and shifted the car into a higher gear.

“Hold on,” his captor barked as the swift acceleration began pushing Coan face first into the passenger seat. He put a hand out to keep from headbutting it.

“See that gun in front of you?”

Coan nodded, glancing up and round the bottom of the dashboard at Goid’s square face.

“That’s for you to shoot Jessal with.”

Staring back at the gun, Coan didn’t want to reach out for it. He’d never fired one before, in fact he had never even been in a fight. He wasn’t sure if he could kill someone.

“Stop thinking so hard about it, norm. It’s really simple: the moment Jessal dies, your daughter is free.” Goid paused, turning the wheel and changing gears again with a quick, well-practiced double foot motion and a hand on the gear stick. “In fact, it’s so simple that even if neither of us survive this, your kid will live -- just as long as you shoot Jessal. Understand?”

Coan sighed, still terrified and uncertain if he could do this, but determined to try. He reached up onto the seat and took the gun. It was heavy and cold to the touch.

“You know where the safety is?” Goid didn’t wait for him to answer. “It’s the little switch on the side, marked safety. It’s currently on. Once you flick it the other way, you can fire the gun. Use two hands, aim down the barrel at the middle of his body, and pull the trigger. It’ll kick pretty hard so make sure your feet are planted or it’ll knock you on your ass.”

Just holding the gun made Coan’s stomach churn, but he pushed through it, making sure he found the safety.

They skidded around another corner, the tires screeching as Coan was pushed by centrifugal forces into the door frame. He grunted as a plastic edge embedded into his shoulder. The car righted itself as Goid barked out a string of syllables in an unfamiliar language. The breaks fired, screeching out their resistance, and then the wheels locked.

* * *

The walking distance from Jaola’s work to her apartment was only a couple of blocks, but, so paranoid that she could be traced, she took a tram in the opposite direction to an area of the city without cameras, and doubled back on another tram that had recently lost it’s camera via an angry Illegal with a baseball bat. She ended up zigzagging home, through alleys and avoiding any of the cameras in the area.

After more than an hour of traveling she turned into her narrow, but relatively safe street.

The sun was low in the sky, painting the cloud cover with various brilliant orange tones and lines of gold. She smiled and watched that flickering light as she walked. She was almost home. It had been a long stressful day and she could finally rest for a little while.

Her focus dropped from the beauty of the evening sky into thoughts of Jeni's young daughter. She frowned, gaze falling to the concrete in front of her feet. Cassandra was too young to be alone in the world, certainly too young to be alone in the Agency, but there was no way to find her let alone help her. Besides, what did Jaola know about raising a child?

She sighed and lifted her eyes to see how close she was to home, and looked right into the face of young Cassandra who was walking towards her. Both of them stopped and stared at each other for a few breaths.

"Cass!" she started to say.

The girl put her mouth into a pout and turned abruptly to cross the road away from her.

It was then as she moved to follow her that Jaola heard the screeching of tires. Her instincts fired before her brain caught up with the fact that a car was speeding and very close to both of them. She reached out, grabbed the girl, and pulled her back off the road. They landed together, Cass on top of her, and before she could understand what had just happened, there was a terrible crashing sound. Jaola let go of Cass and crawled to her feet, looking around, assessing any threats.

Two cars sat on the street painfully close to them. One, an Agency patrol vehicle was rammed into the back of a blue civilian car. Jaola couldn't see the driver of the blue one, but the patrol had two lower rank Agents in the front with their faces down.

Jaola turned quickly, scooped up Cassandra by the shoulders, and moved into the nearby alley, hoping that there was an exit in that direction.

*** 3 ***

Jessal's ears were ringing when he came back to himself. He let out a groan and sat up. Next to him, Ulnon was already upright with his head back and eyes squeezed closed as if he was in pain. Jessal reached to touch his shoulder, worried that he was injured. Through the connection, he sensed that he was physically alright, just a little shaken up.

"Well, that sucked," rumbled Ulnon.

Jessal snorted. "Yes, it did."

Ulnon sighed and fetched his gun from the holster under his arm. “I’ll secure the prisoner, back me up once you call in?”

“Yes, sir.” Jessal leaned forward to grab the radio.

His partner dislodged the seat belt and got out of the car. Jessal watched warily as he put the radio to his mouth.

~ “Marakan Hub, this is Mobile-fourteen, requesting immediate back up on Kraan Street North, plus a med team. Back up on Kraan Street North, and a med team. Mobile-fourteen, out.”

~ “Mobile-fourteen, this is Marakan Hub, confirm. Back up and med team on the way. Hub out.”

Jessal took a deep breath and pushed his fear out with the air in his lungs. This wasn’t what he wanted, he would have preferred to never see Goid again, but there was no choice. He had to move forward. Grabbing his gun from the floor where it had fallen, he pushed the safety and got out of the car to follow Ulnon.

* * *

Crouched in the foot well of the rental car, Coan gripped the gun he’d been given. He felt a bit dazed from the impact of the crash, but other than bruises he wasn’t hurt. Above him, slouched over the wheel and pretending to be unconscious, Goid glared at him.

“Stay still,” he hissed. “Wait for my signal.”

Coan sat there, the seconds passing by far too slowly, and waited for whatever this signal would be. The car around them groaned and made odd ticking noises, as if somewhere it was leaking water. Listening carefully, he knew that the Agents would be coming to arrest them, but he couldn’t hear any foot steps or yelling. He held his breath, waiting for this nightmare to come to its horrifying conclusion.

Something shifted in the air, he wasn’t sure what because he couldn’t hear or see anything, but there was a pause and Goid let out a terrible roar. Coan heard the sound of metal ripping away from metal. Goid pushed with one arm and the car door ripped from its hinges. The car jolted as Goid jumped out with the door like a shield in front of him as he got out of sight. Heavy footsteps thudded around the front of the car, and right next to Coan’s face, the other door opened.

“Out,” barked Goid.

Beyond was the street and a narrow, dim gap between two buildings. Frozen, he stared at

the alley as if something in those shadows might eat him.

Goid roared wordlessly and started shooting over his head. Feeling a very strong and sudden urge to run, Coan crawled outwards, and only half upright, sprinted for the alley.

Due to the darkening twilight sky there wasn't a lot of light between the buildings, so he could only see general shapes in the dim. A big older style metal dumpster sat to his right. Concrete walls framed the space on three sides showing him that the only way out was back onto the street.

"This is the Agency! Surrender and you will not be harmed!" yelled someone out of sight and Coan turned around.

"I will *never* surrender!" Goid roared defiantly as he continued firing at the Agents.

Backing up, Coan put his spine against the wall and the metal dumpster. He fumbled with the gun to find its safety and flicked it off.

Goid had said that this Jessal person was the only Ronan national in the Agency, so all Coan had to do was wait, try not to panic, and pull the trigger when he saw a Ronan man in a blue suit. He still wasn't sure if he could do it, he'd never fired a gun before, let alone hit a target, but, he just had to focus on saving his daughter.

*** 4 ***

Jaola sat at the end of the alley with her back pressed against the metal dumpster and the nearest wall, with young Cassandra in her arms. The girl had barely resisted as she dragged her to the far end of the alley. She hoped that she would remain compliant and quiet until they could get away from the Agency out on the street. Gunfire echoed all around them, but she was pretty sure all of the bullets were flying out on the street and not much of a threat to them deep in the alley. The dumpster seemed to be made of a Psi suppressant alloy in addition to the dark bricks around them because her telepathic senses were too blurry to get an accurate sense of the combat out on the street.

A loud boom of a larger caliber gun echoed through the alley and the girl flinched. Jaola lifted her arms to gently hug her, hoping that it would comfort her terror.

"It's alright," she said, echoing her words telepathically so Cass would understand her despite the noise. "I'm going to do everything I can to keep you safe."

"I don't know you! Who are you?" said a terrified voice directly to her mind.

She smiled. *“I’m Anne, I worked at the cafe with your mother. We were really good friends. You and I met once last year, but it’s OK if you can’t remember me.”*

“I don’t... know.” She sensed that Cass was very afraid, so much so that she was frozen.

“It’s alright, we’ll wait out all of this noise, and then when the coast is clear we can run away, I have an apartment nearby. We just have to be still and quiet so the Agents don’t know we’re here. OK?”

“OK.” She nodded. *“Did... did you escape the Tower too?”* The girl projected flashes of locations which were blurry, but Jaola could see enough detail to recognize the higher rank spaces in Araam Tower.

“I did, three years ago. How about you?”

“I was five and I’m twelve now, so... it was seven years ago. Mama told me she got a yellow sticky note and that’s how we got out. Did you get one too?”

Jaola chuckled. *“No, I ran away, though I would have welcomed a yellow sticky.”*

The noise out on the street dropped suddenly, and Jaola’s back straightened as she listened for whatever was happening out there. Cassandra got to her feet, moving slowly to glance around the line of the dumpster. One little hand rested on Jaola’s arm.

* * *

Jessal couldn’t shoot Goid no matter how much he tried to pull the trigger. But Ulnon seemed to know this instinctively because he took point and let Jessal lay down cover fire over Goid’s head to help him get closer. Jessal fired his weapon, and the back window of the other car smashed out, causing Goid, who was crouched behind the front, to flinch and fire back in his direction. With the shift in attention, Ulnon stepped around the other side of the vehicle and his gun went off.

Goid let out a gasp of pain and Jessal felt the empathic shock-wave boom out from him. This boom meant that his old friend was dead.

Jessal grunted in distress, but he forced himself to stand upright, sidestepping around the car to cover Ulnon. Goid lay on his side, with his back to them. There was a lot of blood and Jessal kept his distance, unwilling to see the damage in any detail.

Ulnon came around him, close enough to Goid’s body so he could kick the weapon away, then he knelt down for a moment. Standing up again, Ulnon took his jacket off and placed it over

Goid's head and shoulders. There was a breath of silence and Jessal's grief flared out of him like an explosion. He brushed a hand down his face, trying to keep that pain from turning into tears.

Still standing over Goid, Ulnon glanced sideways at him, the concern clear on his face.

"You alright?"

Jessal shook his head, then, swallowing, he nodded. He would be alright given a little time.

* * *

Coan stood in the evening shadows. He had his back to the dumpster, and facing out to the street. The gun was heavy in his fingers, but the safety was flicked off, so it was live. He stared at Goid's body, the shock and terror blowing through his brain, and wiping away any reasoned thought.

There was no where to run, and likely no where effective to hide, so, when his mind came back out of the frozen terror, his instincts kicked into a fight response. The only thing he could do to save himself and his daughter was to kill these two Agents, and he had to do it soon. The certainty washed over him, calming the panic in his brain, and he lifted the weapon. Taking a step forward he aimed at the Aranan Agent nearest to him. The man turned around and Coan's instinct for seeing the nature of people fired up. It tried to tell him that this man was not a typical Agent, that he was good in his core, but what little of Coan's reasoned mind was conscious batted away that information. The Agent could be the reincarnation of Nera the Good, and still it would not change anything.

He had to save his daughter.

He didn't feel his fingers pull the trigger, but when it fired the recoil pushed him hard up against the dumpster. He was winded for a moment, stunned, but before he could recover, the tall, broad figure of the Ronan Agent stepped into the alley with his gun up and aimed at Coan. Nearly black eyes glared at him over the gun and Coan saw a flash.

A hot agony sliced through his body and dragged away his consciousness. In that micro second of agony and darkness, Coan heard his daughter giggling and he reached towards her.

"Leelah!"

* 5 *

The second shot fired very close to them, the boom blowing through the dumpster. The girl squeaked, and Jaola instinctively wrapped her arms around her, hoping to comfort that terror even though she wasn't an empath herself. Footsteps moved closer and she sensed a focused but non-telepathic mind move around the dumpster towards them. There wasn't time to get away, so she deliberately let herself be afraid in case this person was an empath. It was too dark to see a face, but she saw the shine of metal as the Agent lifted their weapon to aim at them. Expecting the gunshot any second she closed her eyes, mimicking the reaction of a Norm.

Cassandra let out a whimper and started to wail.

Impossibly, the Agent cleared their throat. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" The voice wobbled with emotion.

Jaola opened her eyes again. She let go of Cass long enough to lift her palms up and show that she didn't have a weapon. Cass gripped onto her neck.

She let her fear leak into her voice. "My... my name is Anne. We were nearly hit by a car--"

It was then as she looked into a Ronan face, watching for any trace of possible hostility, that she recognized him as one of her customers.

She frowned. "Double big breakfast and two coffee bowls with no milk, right?" she said.

His shoulders dropped and he tipped his head on the side, eyebrows coming together for a moment. "You were our waitress today?"

"Yeah, where's your friend with the lovely smile?" She asked, and glanced around as if she was looking for the other Agent.

"He's been shot." His voice broke. "Come out to the street, I'm going to need you to help him while I secure the scene."

As he turned around and she saw his back, Jaola thought about knocking him down so they could escape. But he was broad and tall, and while she was pretty strong for her size she wasn't sure if she could hit him hard enough to knock him out. If he got up again, there was no way she'd risk running with Cass while an Agent fired at them.

She sighed and got to her feet. "Of course," she said, deliberately making her voice annoyed but compliant. "How long is this going to take?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her and she could see the confusion in his face, which she read to mean that she might have seemed too callous in the face of his partner's injury.

She shook her head. "No offense to your partner, I'll help where I can, but I'm in the

middle of a work week. I can't do tomorrow's ten hour shift without sleep--"

She took a breath to continue talking about work and how unreasonable her boss could be, but as she moved into the streetlight, she glanced down at her feet and saw the injured Agent. The man's face was gray, and eyes were closed with a wrinkle of pain between his brows. A bloody chest wound had shredded his white Agency shirt. Surprisingly, despite the awful wound, he was still breathing.

"Abe Kashaan!" she whispered. Jaola half-moved to put her hands on the wound but realized they weren't clean enough. "Um, I need something--"

The Ronan Agent handed her his navy jacket.

She took it, absently letting him sense her frustration at their situation, her fear of the Agency, and magnified her desire to help his partner so he'd read her as an ally if he was an empath. Putting the jacket onto the wound, she sat down next to the injured man, and applied a firm and consistent pressure with both of her hands. Young Cass moved in close to her while avoiding all eye contact with the Agent. She seemed overwhelmed by all that was happening, and far too afraid to do much but demand comfort. Jaola tried to meet that need as kindly as possible.

"I have to check on the perpetrator and secure the scene as much as I can." His voice softened a little. "Don't worry, Anne, I'm pretty sure Agency procedure should let you go once my back up arrives, and we get a verbal statement from you." His eyes settled on his partner for longer than she expected, and then he turned back to the alley.

* 6 *

"She didn't do anything wrong!" barked Jessal down the phone.

"It doesn't matter," said his supervisor. "This is an unprecedented situation, Jessal. The Rebels have allied with the Rona-Abaan. The Council believe these two witnesses could be involved. So you will not release them."

Jessal grumbled unhappily and turned to face the chaos of the crime scene. A single TFO stood over the two where they sat on the curb. He caught a glimpse of blood on the waitress's hands and his grief was renewed. Ulnon had left the scene in an ambulance, alive but with a grim prognosis. Jessal pushed that pain down and cleared his throat, trying to focus on the present moment.

“Um... So are we taking a flight back to Araam?”

“No, Jessal, I’m sorry, the medical airbus isn’t available, and we only have an ambulance. You’re going to have to drive everyone back tonight--”

“Sir!” he gasped. “I’ve not slept--”

“I know! These aren’t my orders. The A0 Council want the prisoner and witnesses in Araam by their morning meeting at ten, with no excuses.”

“Of course they do.” Jessal let out a loud grumble and covered his eyes with his free hand. “Is there at least going to be an EMT in the back with the prisoner?”

“There’s a nurse already on the scene, Agent Yuniya Case, she’ll be returning with you. The vehicle should arrive within the next half hour. Good luck, Jessal.”

He huffed and dropped the phone into his back pocket. He didn’t want to be there in that moment, all he really wanted to do was get in a car and go where ever Ulnon was, to sit with him until he got better. Unfortunately, the Agency wasn’t an organization of compassion or kindness, so he couldn’t. If he didn’t follow orders he could be charged, and even though as a Ronan born person they couldn’t execute him, they could certainly deport him and *his* government would execute him instead. He needed to do one thing at a time, and he’d get through, hopefully.

The nurse had an Agency suit on, the only navy among the black vests of TFOs and light blue civilian EMTs, so, with one visual sweep of the road side, he found her working on the prisoner in the alley entrance.

As he neared her, he sensed flares of frustration, as if her situation was untenable. Staying at arm’s length to manage any anger thrown his way, he crouched down.

“How’s it going?” he asked, keeping his voice gentle.

She growled, her chin lifting as he sensed her desire to express her frustration, but her eyes moved from his lapel rank markings, to his face, and the words didn’t come out. She stared at him, stunned to silence for a few breaths.

Lowering her eyes to show due respect, she cleared her throat. “He’s still alive. I have patched him up as best I can. He’s stable, but he really needs to be in hospital.”

Jessal relaxed his body into the crouch, dropping his forearms onto his knees. “My superiors have just ordered us to transport him via ambulance to Araam tonight.”

She snorted, suddenly angry again. “What? That’s--”

“I agree,” he interrupted her. “But I’ll tell you what my direct boss said to me: it’s out of my hands. This order comes from the A0 Council. Do you think he’ll survive the journey?”

She sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know. I’ve done my best with limited resources, but he’s lost a lot of blood, and he’s at a high risk for infection. At the very least we’ll need a proper medical transport bus, as he’s going to need to be put on an IV. Why do they even want him alive? Who is he?”

Jessal shrugged. “We don’t know much yet, but he’s somehow involved in the Rona-Abaan *and* the Rebels. So he’s just as much a witness as a prisoner. The vehicle will be arriving very soon, can you do your best to prep him for transfer?”

She nodded.

* 7 *

Jaola watched as the civilian EMTs loaded the shooter into a new ambulance. It would be soon, soon they’d be let go and she could pack up her belongings and move to a new city with Cassandra, then figure out what to do from there.

A nurse wearing an A5 rank blue suit followed the prisoner into the ambulance, and, behind her, Jaola sensed the Ronan Agent’s focus shift. She didn’t move, continuing to look at the noise and motion at the road side, only turning when she heard his foot steps close.

“Miss Draena?” he asked.

She looked up into his deep brown eyes and knew that they weren’t being let go. Smiling tensely, she feigned not knowing anything. “We almost done?”

“I’m sorry, no. My superiors would like to talk to you in Araam, and have ordered that we all drive there over night.”

Letting out a huff of frustration, Jaola checked her surroundings. She assessed the two TFO Teams, this Ronan Agent, and the half a dozen police scattered all around. Most of them were armed and well trained. If it was just her on her own, she could have almost certainly gotten away, but even if Cassandra had a clairsentient ability and knew how to dodge bullets, their chances of getting away without injury or death were pretty slim. Preparing her face for looking angry, she glanced back at the doors of the ambulance, then returned her gaze to the Ronan.

“But I’ve got work tomorrow!” She said between clenched teeth, reaching to bring Cassandra in close to her. “We haven’t eaten dinner, and,” she indicated the uniform she was still wearing with the other hand, “I don’t even have a spare set of clothes!”

“I’m sorry.” He sighed and genuinely seemed regretful for the situation. “We’ll have to stop off somewhere for food anyway, so we can at least go to your workplace and explain things.”

She stared at him, for a moment unsure what to do. The Agent indicated with one hand for her to move towards the bus doors and she sighed. She wouldn’t risk the Agency shooting up her workplace, but it was an eight hour drive to Araam even on the overpass motorways, so they would need to stop for fuel and bathroom breaks fairly regularly, which should give them multiple opportunities to escape.

Gripping Cassandra’s hand, she moved slowly towards the vehicle.

On a very tight telepathic band, Jaola spoke through their physical contact. *“Don’t be afraid, Cassandra. There’s plenty of time to get free of them.”*

*** 8 ***

Jessal sat at the table that he and Ulnon had shared earlier in the day. The waitress, Anne, was talking to her boss while they waited for a takeaway meal to be made. Still sensing that deep desire to run away, he watched Anne. Despite her resistance, he was pretty sure that if she was an Agency Traitor or an Illegal Psi, she would have already tried to run. Given that her ID came back with a valid work certificate, and all of the associated background checks that went with a Norm identity, which had been active since the first childhood Psi blood tests, it was far more likely that she was just a Norm who didn’t particularly like dealing with the Agency.

His eyes drifted to the chair in front of him and he let out a sigh. Ulnon would know what to do and whether he should trust her. He was always better at sniffing out deception than Jessal.

As he stared at the empty chair, it moved out from the table. He frowned but there wasn’t time to react before a pair of large, very blue eyes lifted up from the table edge. The girl, Cass, stared at him with equal parts terror and determined courage. She was very small, so small in fact, that had she been Ronan she would have been a toddler. She hadn’t spoken yet so he wasn’t sure of her exact age, but he would guess she was no more than ten years old.

He smiled gently, hoping she’d sense that even though he was an Agent, he wasn’t inherently hostile.

“So, Cass, how do you know Anne?” he said, keeping his voice very gentle.

Despite all of his effort to not increase her fear, her eyes widened and head dropped so that

only her eyes and the top of her blond hair were visible.

He smiled. "It's alright, I'm not going to hurt you."

A frown wrinkled her forehead. "That's what Agents do," she said.

Shocked to silence he stared at her.

She huffed and got off the chair.

Still surprised, he watched her walk away, across the dining space of the cafe-restaurant towards Anne, who stood near the main counter with her boss.

* * *

"What's going on, Anne?"

Jaola kept her eyes on her boss, trying to appear calm. "It's a long story, but I don't know when I'll be back to work."

Zey frowned, looking very confused. "Have you been arrested?"

"Not technically. I'm a witness to an attack on the Agency." A sigh tumbled out of her. "Look, I'm sorry to leave you in the lurch like this--"

"But you can't argue with an Agent." Zey nodded. "I don't have to like it to understand. I'll get the pay you're owed in cash, just in case. You need your locker key?"

"Yes, thank you. I really need to change out of my uniform." She gave zem a gentle smile.

As her boss turned away, back into the private area between the kitchens and the front desk, Cassandra attached herself to Jaola's leg. She looked down into a pair of very frightened eyes.

"I don't want to go back to the Tower," Cassandra said mind to mind.

"Me neither, but we have to be patient and pick the right time to run, or people, us included, could be hurt."

Cassandra let out an unhappy grumble. "I'm hungry."

Jaola grinned. "Well, Cook is pretty fast, our dinners should be ready soon." Leaning down, she lifted the girl up onto her hip and wrapped her arm around her. "It'll be OK, Cass. I'll look after you."

* * *

Yuniya sat on the back step of the ambulance and stared at the brightly lit entrance to the

cafe-restaurant. Her patient was probably going to live, at least from the perspective of his gunshot wound. She'd been quietly giving him short healings when she could do so unobserved. Her efforts had sealed all of the injured parts which were specifically bleeding. But the injury was still quite messy, and he had a high risk of infection, particularly if he was transferred away from her care when they got to Araam, but there wasn't much more she could do for him without being caught.

The Healing Talent was a rare phenomenon, rarer even than being a kinetic, and the Agency always sent healers to the acute care department of the Tower. For an empath as sensitive as her, that particular job would involve near-constant torture, and she just couldn't face such a thing. Besides, if they found out she'd been lying to them all these years, she might also risk being executed, and she had to keep her daughter safe.

She sighed and glanced through the windows to see the waitress, Anne, move in and then out of sight. Anne seemed oddly familiar to Yuni but she couldn't place her. The woman was tall and very attractive, and there was a deep sense of power about her, even though she seemed to be a Norm.

The restaurant door opened and Jessal stepped outside, leading the girl towards Yuni with one hand on her shoulder. Cassandra looked terrified, despite his absolute calm.

"Up you go," he said with a very gentle voice.

Cass obeyed and climbed up into the ambulance, standing in the gap between the two stretchers.

"Sit down, we'll be leaving soon. Nurse Yuni?" He asked, his eyes dropping from the girl to her.

She tipped her chin down to show respect. "Yes, sir?"

"Are you sure you don't need food or anything else? It'll be a few hours before the next meal break."

She shook her head. "No, sir, I'm fine, thank you."

"Alright, Anne is just getting changed out of her uniform then we'll be off."

*** 9 ***

Yuniya stood next to her patient, checking his IV line, while pointedly ignoring the waves of terror and fear flowing off the young girl and waitress behind her. According to her watch, they'd

been driving for about twenty minutes, which meant they were likely to be moving up onto the raised motorway soon. Yuni had hoped that the two witnesses would have calmed down by now. She finished her routine check of her patient, and turned around to face them.

The child's blue eyes widened even further and another flare of terror blew through the air.

Yuni sighed. "I know you two are frightened, and you have every right to be afraid of the Agency. But I'm just a nurse in a blue suit, who happens to also be an empath." She took off her navy jacket, gesturing the lack of armpit gun holsters. "I don't have a gun, and I don't think I could shoot anyone, even if I did. I'm not a threat to you, but I really need you both to calm down." As the words came out of her mouth, she realized how unreasonable it was to request that a child have that much control of her own feelings. Yuni wondered when she'd gotten so cold towards children who were not her own. Closing her eyes for a moment, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, that was mean and unfair of me. Let's start over?" She offered a hand to Anne to shake. "Hi, my name is Yuniya, you can call me Yuni."

Anne's smile was tense but she reached to shake hands and Yuni sensed a willingness to help the girl. "Hi, I'm Anne."

Yuni brought down her instinctive emotional walls, feeling herself as she was: a mostly friendly person who was no threat to either of them, and when that feeling was clear in her heart, she offered young Cass her hand. "It's very nice to meet you."

The girl seemed to have received her subconscious message, because she was already calming down as she reached for her hand.

A little voice squeaked out of her. "Cass."

Yuni's smile broadened. "Do you like lollipops, Cass? I have a secret stash in my medical bag." She winked.

Cass let out a little chuckle.

Yuni reached down to the floor where her bag was sitting and pushed her hand into the front pocket. Her secret stash was mostly for herself and her daughter, but she was happy to share if it calmed everyone down. Pulling out a handful of lollipops she brandished them with a playful swirl of her wrist. Many bright colored balls on sticks were presented to the young girl.

"Which color is your favorite, Cass?"

The girl blinked at the candy. She vibrated with a little tension and Yuni sensed that the truthful answer was one Cass was certain would get her into trouble.

She laughed, guessing that Cass's answer was the same as her own. "You don't have to

choose only one, you can try each color if you like! I have plenty.” Leaning back she grabbed another handful. “Anne, which do you want?”

The woman, who seemed to be about her age, perhaps a little older, grinned and took one of each of the three brightest colors. “Thank you.”

Cass reached with both hands and very carefully took one of each color, putting all but a lime green in the pocket of her jacket. “Thank you,” she mumbled shyly. Small adept fingers demolished the wrapping and tasting it, Cass let out a rumble. “Mmm.”

Yuni smiled. She couldn’t help them escape without risking her daughter’s life, but she could at least make them comfortable in that cramped space. Yuni hoped for their sake that neither of them were Psi so they could be released again.

* * *

A few hours later

Jaola lay with her back to the wall of the ambulance and the girl lying in close to her belly so they could share the spare stretcher and get some sleep. Cass wouldn’t rest without someone close and Jaola was happy to be a comfort for her, but now that it had been a while of inactivity, her body reminded her of the ten hour day she’d just finished at work, and the many days of ten hour shifts before that. She didn’t want to sleep, but her body had a far more powerful opinion on the matter.

She mentally grumbled. This would never have happened when she was in the Agency, but three years as a civilian had changed things.

“I’ve gone soft.” she thought with some apathy.

Just as the world was blurring and fading away into sleep, she sensed a flicker of white static pulse through the nurse. Static energy didn’t tend to flow through a Time Psi body, rather it usually flowed around. The only time Jaola had sensed static flowing *through* a person it had been a Healer.

But, then the comfort of sleep swallowed her, giving her no more time to process this information.

* 10 *

A loud noise startled Jaola out of her sleep, and there were people very close to her, talking. Her tired brain wanted to go back to sleep, but her instincts blared a warning of danger that she'd been too well trained to ignore. Gasping, she came out of her drowsy state quickly.

In her arms, young Cass woke as well and cried out.

Even before she was entirely conscious, Jaola moved to comfort the girl, by putting a gentle hand on her arm. "It's alright, you're alright."

She sat up, and a pair of very blue eyes stared at her for a moment before the girl moved in close again, wrapping her arms around Jaola's middle. Still a little uncertain of how to deal with a kid, Jaola hugged her tight.

Someone cleared their throat and she looked up into a Ronan face. The Agent smiled, obviously trying to be kind.

"We're at the halfway mark, I'm getting some food for everyone, and there's a bathroom, if you'd like?"

Jaola didn't need to go—but shifting her thoughts and feelings to be more in line with what was needed—she did need to freshen up a little, wash her face, braid her now messy hair back into compliance. And Cass probably needed a wash, if not a bathroom break too.

She nodded. "That sounds good, thank you."

Careful to lift Cassandra into her arms as she stood, Jaola stepped out of the ambulance and down onto the flat surface of a parking lot. It was dark above them with no stars or the rainbow nebula, which meant a thick cloud cover.

The Oasis Rest Stop marked the halfway point between Araam and Marakaan. The land for it had been cleared directly out of the forest so they were surrounded in ancient trees. The Oasis had a nice big eatery, framed in bright reds and neon lights, a refuel and charging station for vehicles, a public toilet, and on the far edge of the lot, a line of special parking areas for those vehicles which needed water processing and an electricity port for an overnight stay.

She lifted Cassandra and shuffled her onto one hip to make carrying her a little easier, and then headed into the eatery. Inside was somewhat like her old work: it was half cafe, half restaurant. There were booths around the edges, big enough to house four people and their meals. The counter sat to her right, but straight through from the door was the sign for the bathrooms, so she headed there directly.

Far enough away from the Agents, Jaola's thoughts moved straight into possible escape.

Perhaps the bathroom had a fire exit or a large window they could crawl out of and escape. It wasn't easy surviving in the forests, but if they got far enough from the Oasis, the Agency wouldn't be able to find them on foot, and it would take a few hours to get the rescue helicopter with thermal imaging from Araam, so, they might just have a chance if she could get them away from the buildings first.

Pushing the door, she turned left into the area with individual stalls. She put Cassandra down, and strode from one stall to the next, checking for windows.

She got to the end, having found none and turned to look at the line of basins. One tiny window sat over a set of faucets, with grubby wall mirrors either side of it. A cool night breeze brushed in through a window that was far too small for either of them, and then around the lines of metal bars bolted to the frame.

Jaola leaned on the basin and let out a string of swear words. There was no way out, not without risking Cassandra's life in a shootout.

Behind her, a toilet flushed and young Cass moved in next to her to wash her hands. She smiled up at Jaola with such innocence and trust that she felt overwhelmed, both by the intense desire to protect her, and the deep feeling that she wasn't parental enough to be a good mother figure for anyone, let alone this lovely small person.

She sighed and crouched down to Cass' eye level. "I'm sorry, I don't know what to do. I'll stick with you, no matter what, but I can't figure out how to get away without starting a fight. If their guns come out--"

"Yuniya doesn't have a gun, not even in her bag," interrupted the girl. She seemed so certain of this fact that Jaola smiled.

"And how do you know?"

"I can..." she stopped talking to frown. "I don't know how, but I can sort of see all of the insides of the building. I can tell that there's five people cooking in the kitchen over there." She pointed to the wall behind the stalls. "And there's eight people sitting in the dining area, eating. Yuni and Jessal are standing at the back of the ambulance talking. Yuni is scared like us and Jessal is really sad because his boyfriend got hurt. You're scared too. I can *feel* your fear, but more than that I can also feel your heart pulsing quickly when you get a fright."

Jaola blinked at her, surprised. "Cass, can you move things with your mind?"

The girl nodded. "Yes. What does it mean?"

"It's called being a kinetic, it's quite a rare ability." Jaola smiled as she realized what it

could lead to. “Can you control it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. The one time it worked I just threw my anger at the gun and it jumped out of his hand.”

A wave of relief shimmered inside Jaola’s body. There was a way through. Still risky, but the chances of getting away were already better.

“OK, Cass, I think we can get free, but I’ll need your help. When we arrive in Araam, we’ll have to stop at an Agency hospital to drop off the injured man. Yuniya should follow him, so then she doesn’t have to be involved. Once it’s just us and Jessal I’ll need you to throw his gun as far as you can, and then run, I’ll do the rest, OK?”

“OK.” Cassandra smiled, and for a second she looked just like her mother. A ball of grief lifted up in her and Jaola touched the girl’s face.

Cass frowned. “Why are you sad, Anne?”

A tear dropped down one cheek. “You looked just like your mother for a second, and I miss her a lot.”

“I miss her too.” Cass lifted her arms up as if to hug, and Jaola leaned into the offered affection.

*** 11 ***

Jessal took one hand off the steering wheel to grab the paper coffee cup from its holder in the door of the ambulance. He lifted it to his lips and drained the last of it. The coffee was cold, bitter, and unsatisfying. He sighed and put the empty back in the holder.

The motorway was well lit and mostly straight, making the drive from Marakaan to Araam as easy as it was possible for an eight hour car journey. The barrier to his right was very high, and at times it felt like he was driving in a cage, but it was necessary because if a vehicle were to lose control and break free, they would drop many stories to the forestry and die.

All of the raised motorways which connected the cities of Arana were constructed like this to minimize the impact on the ecosystems below them. Being so high in the air, no animals could run across and be killed by a truck, and once it was constructed, the forest could grow back naturally. When Jessal had first seen the motorways, it seemed monstrous and extreme, but over the last three years as an Agent, he’d come to relax his opinion of them.

Up the road, a line of large, blue reflective signs overhead told him that the northern most off ramp for Araam was ahead, and a few seconds later his lane peeled off from the main motorway. Jessal steered the bus downward. The motorway lifted above and over them as they rolled around a steep left hand curve to move under towards the city limits. As the bus neared the ground the guard rails shortened and then separated into road marker pins with reflective squares on their tops, and all of a sudden, Jessal was driving in the dark.

The northern edge of Araam city was mostly suburbs and farmland, so the road builders kept the motorway off ramp a good distance from most of the houses to avoid too much light and sound pollution, but the sudden darkness triggered a wave of fatigue in Jessal. It was as if his body needed the light to stay awake, and now it was dark, his instincts demanded that he sleep.

He leaned forward, fumbling to locate the radio, which had not been upgraded to the newer digital touch screen with voice activation. He found the dial and turned it on.

Voices pierced the cab and he flinched.

The voice on the radio was giving a news report, telling him the time and the weather forecast for the coming day. The accent was a local one and they sounded a lot more awake than he felt.

It wouldn't be long and he could rest. An hour, maybe two to drop off people first at the Agency hospital, then at the civilian holding facility. It was another twenty minutes to the western edge of Araam to his apartment, and then he could sleep in his own bed for a few hours.

He sighed and wiped his face with one hand. Blinking heavily, he forced himself to focus on the road. Relatively soon, he would enter the first suburbs and the streetlamps would light his way again, he just had to fight the fatigue for a little longer. He rubbed at his dry, aching eyes and let out another sigh, if only the nurse had the proper driving license, then he'd be asleep in the back while she drove them.

Feeling his chin drop, he grunted, and forced his head up again, but it kept fighting him. He pushed against that urge to sleep, he had to stay conscious! But his fatigue was stronger. His chin lowered to his chest, eyes drooped closed, and he sank away from the world.

A horn bellowed and he jolted awake. Only a moment! He'd slept for only a moment!

Ahead were car lights and the source of the horn. He jolted the wheel to the right, only just avoiding the car. It's horn was still screaming as it shot past him, far too close to the side of the bus. Then road markers came up to meet him and the van's headlights illuminated the edge of

something. He slammed on the brakes, and tried to pull the wheel in the other direction, but the old style brakes locked, and the bus slid sideways. He felt the bumper of them hitting the road markers, and they bounced into a ditch. After making a terrible crunching noise as it hit something side on, the cab tipped into a roll. Loose objects from the seat flew up into the air and Jessal put his arms over his face protectively.

His side of the cab slammed down onto the ground, his head impacted the window, and the world faded from consciousness.

Part Three – Chapter Five

*** 1 ***

Yuniya came back to awareness slowly. There was a high pitched noise which filled her head, and thinking much of anything was really difficult. She let out a groan, putting her hand to her head where there was pain.

Someone else's hand touched her shoulder and the empathic feedback shattered the ringing sound.

"Yuniya? Are you OK?" The hand belonged to someone who was exhausted and frightened, someone who desperately wanted to run away but was keeping that fear under control for the moment.

She shook her head, trying to free herself of the blurry numbness. She let out a grumble, trying to answer the question but not quite able yet to form sentences. She sat up and blinked at them. Bright green eyes stared at her and she wondered why this person was so afraid. The hand dropped from her shoulder, silencing the screaming emotions coming from them.

They stood up. "Yuni?"

She stared at them from the floor, trying to pull her thoughts together enough to understand. Their face was so familiar to her. The green eyes and black hair, tanned face and longer limbs. She frowned, but before she could figure it out, an almost audible pop sounded in her head. All of a sudden, she could think clearly again.

There was debris all around, and the surface under her wasn't a floor but the wall of the ambulance. There must have been some sort of accident. It was then as she struggled to remember what happened that she realized the woman with the green eyes was their prisoner, and *that* was why she was so afraid.

Yuni swallowed the shot of guilt at having a prisoner and nodded. "I think I've hit my head but I'm otherwise OK, how about you?"

Anne shrugged and let out a grunt. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Yuniya sat up, looking around for her patient and the little girl. Cass stood behind Anne, shy and thankfully not nearly as terrified as before, but her patient lay on his side against the nearest wall. She crawled towards him.

The moment she reached out and touched his shoulder, she sensed that he had no additional

injuries, which was a relief.

Her head throbbed with the angry pain of a concussion and she knew if she didn't get some alone time to deal with it, it would hamper her ability to do her job, but first, they needed help. She turned to look around for her day bag but sighed. "Patrons damnit! My cell is back at base! Anne, do you have a phone on you?"

Green eyes widened and she shook her head.

"OK, I need you to get outside and check on Jessal. Keep an eye out for a phone or a radio, if we can't call out or walk back up to the road it'll be a while before we're found. Cass, I need your help to sort through our supplies."

Anne stared at her for a moment and Yuni sensed that she was uncertain.

Yuni grumbled. Tired and sore, she really was not interested in arguing.

Before she could adequately voice her irritation, Cass moved around Anne and stood in front of her, hands held behind her back and chin low. "How can I help you, Yuni?" she said in the most compliant voice Yuniya had ever heard from a small person.

Anne glanced down at the girl, frowned, and then immediately turned to try the doors.

Yuni smiled at young Cass. "Thank you. First I need you to find all of the bedding we have and fold them into a nice pile--"

The door closest to the ground dislodged from its catch and dropped, letting out a loud bang, and Yuni flinched.

"Sorry," said Anne as she pushed the other door up and stepped out into the early morning air.

Yuni risked the child sensing anything and put her hand to her head as if the headache was particularly bad. Opening to the healing energy, she let it flow out of her hands and into her aching brain. It wasn't a serious concussion and wouldn't have led to anything dangerous, but she wiped the pain and inflammation away as much as was possible with her healing Talent.

While she did this, the girl moved quickly around the room to pick up blankets, sheets and pillows as if she didn't notice anything amiss.

* 2 *

Jaola grumbled quietly as she strode up the length of the toppled bus towards the front. The

problem with being as gifted a Psi as Cassandra, as well as being as young, was that small people decided unilaterally not to cut their losses and just run. It was sweet that Cassandra understood the personhood of both Yuniya and Jessal, and their individual struggles, but that didn't help them escape Agency custody. The sensible option would be to knock out Yuni, pick up the girl and run. But if she did that Cass would never forgive her. She grumbled again. This girl was going to get her killed.

The bus had landed from its nauseating roll on the driver's side. Beyond the nose of the bus, a sheer vertical wall of dirt led back up to the road. Only a gifted kinetic would likely succeed in getting back up there. So at least they were going to be there for a while, it might give her more chances to get away.

She stepped around the cab to try and look in through the windscreen, but it was too dark, both inside and out. She sighed, turned her body, and performed a perfect side-kick. The glass collapsed around her foot and being standard safety glass, the whole thing fell like a sheet.

She leaned in to check on the pile of person that lay inside. Jessal's arm was flung over his head, so she reached to carefully move it away. Through the physical contact, she sensed he was alive but currently unconscious. Reaching further, she checked his pulse. He groaned and seemed to try and recoil from her. She moved back out of his personal space, and watched him wake.

He rumbled wordlessly and one large, coffee-colored eye opened to look up at her.

She smirked at his disheveled appearance. "You awake, Jessal?"

"Unfortunately." He moaned and tried to move.

"No, keep still. You could be badly injured, I'll get Yuniya."

Totally disobeying her, he used his free arm to sit upright. One side of his face was covered in blood and bits of embedded glass fragments.

"I'm not badly injured. My head just hurts." He grumbled again and reached one arm towards her. "Would you help me up?"

She suppressed a sigh and moved in close, grabbing his hand. With the additional skin contact, she sensed that he wasn't a telepath, despite having a rudimentary shield. This meant he was more likely either a Talent or an empath (or both). Knowing this, she kept her hostility towards him deep inside, instead, choosing deliberately to be annoyed at the situation and the extremely high likelihood that if she got out of this whole thing, she would *not* have a job to go back to in Marakan.

He was wobbly on his feet, so she put one of his arms around her shoulders and gently led

him back down the length of the bus to Yuniya. As she half-carried him and through their close physicality, she sensed more of his nature. His thoughts were scattered because of his concussion, but they kept cycling from worrying about his partner, Ulnon, to how much trouble would come from this accident. He didn't seem to be suspicious of them yet.

By the time they got to where Yuni and Cass were making a camp of some kind at the back of the bus, Jessal's wobbly knees were worse. She saw an empty stretcher and bullied him towards it.

"Sit," she ordered.

He let out a gasp of relief and dropped down.

Yuniya shuffled under the hanging door of the bus and made a bee-line for them. "Are you alright, Jessal?"

"Hit my head," he rumbled. "Otherwise, I'm fine."

"I'll be the judge of that!" Yuni barked as she got to him.

Seeing the momentary shift in power between Jessal and Yuni, Jaola chuckled, and stepped back out of the way, moving towards Cass.

The girl had a blanket around her shoulders, and as Jaola got close, she handed one over. It wasn't until the thick material was around her that Jaola realized just how cold she was feeling.

"Oh! Thank you!" she said, sitting down on the grass next to her.

Cassandra crawled in close, obviously wanting comfort and warmth, and Jaola met that unspoken request by letting her into her lap, and wrapping her arms and blanket around her.

The girl melted into her hug with a little rumble, and closed her eyes. Jaola tightened the hug and dropped her chin onto Cass's hair.

*** 3 ***

Yuniya prepared herself for the empathic backlash, took a breath, and leaned in close to Jessal's face. Using fine medical tweezers, she pulled the last piece of glass out of Jessal's face. He squeaked a little but didn't otherwise react.

He'd been lucky. None of the glass had gotten into his eyes or ears, and while a few of the cuts from the lodged glass needed paper stitches, he probably wouldn't need actual stitches. His face was going to be puffy and bruised for a while, but a black eye was better than a lot of other

things that could have happened.

Yuniya lifted his chin and swiftly wiped that side of his face with an antiseptic cloth. He let out another yelp but continued to obediently move as little as possible.

“I’m almost done,” she said, deliberately charging her words with a sense of sympathy, so that if he was an empath he’d know she wasn’t hurting him needlessly.

He sighed. “Are there any pain meds?”

“I have only the very strong stuff, and it will almost certainly make you sleep. So I’ll have to do a proper empathic scan to make sure your concussion is stable before I can give it to you.”

He let out a grumble of irritation, but said no more. His compliance surprised her. Normally a ranking Agent struggled to surrender any control at all, barking and bullying to continue establishing their dominance. She often had to get quite rude or put up with abuse, just to do her job, but Jessal hadn’t resisted her at all other than a few grumbles and squeaks of pain. It was refreshing.

She put the final paper stitch on his cheekbone, and stood up.

“I need you to lie down,” she said as gently as possible.

He sighed as if doing anything was a great burden, but did as he was told. As he lay down, his handgun slipped out of a pocket in his trousers. She glanced at it on the grass to make sure the safety was on, and then moved to stand at his head.

A full empathic scan took a lot of focus. Any empath could sense injury and pain in another, but to be clear enough to understand the structures in the body and where it might be going wrong or what shouldn’t be there was a Talent. One which got her transferred into nursing very early on in her Agency life.

She took a deep breath to focus her mind, and she gently put her hands under his head, fingers spread out around his ears, but avoiding the injuries on one side. Opening her empathic senses she listened to the musical notes of his body.

He was younger than she would have guessed; in his early twenties not thirties. There were ripples of uneven bone and tendon density, indicating that his childhood was fraught with food insecurity and trauma. He was dehydrated and sleep deprived. Under the pulsing layers of pain, surface injury and bruised bone, she sensed the impact of a concussion on his brain, but there were no bleeds or injuries which might create pressure in his skull, and what dysfunction she sensed was getting better, not worse. This meant it was safe for him to sleep. In fact, given how sleep deprived he was, a good rest would be the best thing to help him heal, even though it was against Norm

medical protocol to let a person with concussion sleep so soon after the injury. Taking another deep breath, she closed off the layers of her empathic ability to shut out all of that data again. Then she lifted her hands from his head.

“You’re going to be OK, Jessal. I’ll have to put a line in to give you the pain medication, but you can sleep while we wait for rescue.”

* * *

By the time Yuniya set up the IV for Jessal, it was time to check on their other prisoner. The two stretchers sat next to each other, their IVs sharing the same detachable frame above Coan. She put a hand on his chest, sensing that his heart and breathing rates were stable, and blood pressure was alright considering that he’d lost quite a bit of blood immediately after being shot.

She glanced sideways. Anne was sitting upright with her back against a tree trunk, but her eyes were closed, and Cass was curled up in her lap. Both of them seemed to be unconscious. Next to her, Jessal was rumbling a little in his sleep.

This was good, she could give her two patients a little healing without being observed. Moving to Coan’s head, she gently put one hand under his shoulder and the other over his bicep. She closed her eyes and unfolded the levels of her empath ability. When her sense of all the layers of his body was clear, she opened her heart to the energy that healed. It was cool and tingling as it flowed into her body but it came out hot, filling the spaces of pain and impact inside Coan’s shoulder and arm with a heat that brushed aside inflammation, and sped up the body’s natural healing processes. With her senses open, she watched the progress, waiting for the point at which she would have to stop the flow of healing energy. Unfortunately for him, he still needed to have a gunshot wound when they arrived in Araam. But she would do as much as she could get away with.

* 4 *

Cassandra woke screaming without knowing what she was afraid of other than a vague sense of being chased down and trapped. With her yell, she felt the power of her anger push out of her and collect Anne. Wrenching her eyes open, she watched Anne fly a good distance from her and land heavily on the grass.

“Anne!” she squeaked, getting to her feet. “Anne?”

Her new friend let out a groan but sat up. “I’m alright.”

Cass ran as hard as she could to bridge the gap between them, she couldn’t possibly stand it if she’d hurt Anne.

Adult arms wrapped around her, and she sensed a wave of affection and comfort. “I’m alright, Cass. It’s OK. Bad dream, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Anne lifted her into her arms and stood, moving them both back towards where they’d fallen asleep.

* 5 *

Jaola held young Cass tightly as she walked. This little girl, in less than a day had buried herself in her heart. It was frightening to love someone this quickly, and more so considering their current situation, but she was not going to let go. Cass needed someone to look after her, and Jaola would figure out how to do that. As she headed back to their blankets, which sat discarded on the grass at the base of a tree, her eyes swept across her environment.

The ambulance lay on its side in the background, it’s hood facing a sheer cliff of earth and rock lifting to the road. A line of debris led from the side up a slightly less steep but no more climbable slope, showing their spinning path from the road. Both Jessal and the shooter were asleep on stretchers, each with an IV bag attached. Jaola’s eyes settled onto Yuniya, who, for whatever reason she’d forgotten was even there. Yuni stared at her, and Jaola’s heart quickened.

In the Agency, procedure dictated that strong kinetics must be arrested and confined in preparation for conscription, and if either of them resisted at all, Yuniya would be required to execute one or both of them regardless of age or fugitive status.

Jaola and Yuni stared at each other for several breaths. Jaola feeling afraid and Yuniya looking utterly stunned.

Hoping to predict or at least avoid a sudden conflict, Jaola risked telepathically brushing the surface of Yuniya’s mind to see her thoughts. To her surprise she discovered that Yuniya’s thoughts were of her memories of being sent to a desert training base as a non-kinetic.

Yuniya understood that if she reported Cassandra’s kinetic ability to the Agency, that little Cass would be sent into a place of trauma for the entirety of her teenage years, and that she would

have to carry that agony into her adulthood just as she herself had.

As she watched Yuniya make the decision of what to do, Jaola slipped out of her mind again.

Yuni's face lifted out of her shock. She cleared her throat and gave her a kindly smile. "Are either of you hungry? I've got some meal bars, and I still have lollipops."

Jaola smiled, feeling her exhaustion deeply so that Yuniya could feel it. "No, thank you. I'm too tired to eat. Cass, you hungry?"

Cass, whose arms were wrapped tightly around her neck, shook her head.

"We'll just sit down again and rest." *And plan a way to escape without hurting you,* Yuniya, she added.

Jaola understood the sad truth that just because Yuniya was prepared not to rat them out right now, didn't mean she wouldn't turn them in later to save herself. There was no choice, the two of them had to escape before the Agency rescue services arrived.

Sighing, Jaola walked back to their blankets and the big old tree she had been resting against.

She wrapped the blankets around Cass and herself, and got comfortable again. Jaola tucked Cass's head under her chin and tightened her hug.

"*I'm not leaving you and I'm not letting you get taken by the Agency, alright?*" she said telepathically.

Cass huffed and snuggled herself closer in. "*My mama promised me that too, and she's dead.*"

Jaola's own parental grief rose inside her and a single tear escaped down her face before she could stop it. Wrapping the blankets up over her face, she kissed the girl's hair. "*I know how much that hurts, I've lost my parents too. I can't guarantee that something bad won't happen to us or me. What I can promise is that I'm not going to leave you by choice, and I will do everything in my power to keep you from being taken into the Agency. Alright?*"

"OK."

"*So, tell me, how do you feel about me making Yuniya sleep? Is that hurting her?*"

She sensed surprise and then curiosity. "*You can make people sleep?*"

"*Yeah, you probably can too, though it's best not to be done on another telepath because we're sensitive. But Yuniya isn't a telepath, neither is Jessal.*"

"*What's a telepath?*"

Jaola suppressed the chuckle that wanted out of her. “A telepath is someone who can talk like we are right now. Mind to mind instead of with sound.”

There was an almighty yell which silenced their conversation, and Jaola lifted her face out of the blankets to see what was happening. The shooter, who’d been unconscious this whole time, was awake. Yuniya tried to hold him down by the shoulders, but he struggled.

“No! No! Let me go!”

“You’ve been shot!” barked Yuni. “Don’t move or you’re rip your stitches!”

“No! I have to find Leelah! No!”

The nurse glanced up at Jaola and she felt the empathic urge to get up and help her. Even though she could certainly fight it, she sighed, and got to her feet. She wrapped both blankets around Cassandra’s shoulders, and put a gentle kiss on the girl’s forehead as she stood upright again.

Moving towards them, she noticed that a hand gun lay in the grass underneath Jessal’s stretcher. It was an A3 standard issue glock. She kept her focus where it should be, but mentally noted the new resource if they needed it later.

Jaola hadn’t really wanted to know much about the injured man considering he was headed for execution, but as she leaned forward to hold him down, she found herself looking into an uncomfortably young face. A pair of dark blue eyes stared up at her pleadingly as she put her hands on his chest. The physical contact told her immediately that he was a norm.

“No!” he yelled again. “I have to go and get Leelah!” The moment he said the name, Jaola saw the face of a kid, no more than five years old, looking up at her.

“Papa?” asked the child from his memory. “I’m hungry.”

Even without being an empath, Jaola sensed the man’s all encompassing love for this young child.

Jaola glanced at Yuni, uncertain what was expected of her, but Yuni stepped away to gather surgical gloves and other first aid supplies.

She looked back at the younger man. “Look at me,” she said in a quiet but firm voice.

He stopped struggling for a moment and did as she asked.

“We need you to keep still while Yuniya checks your wound.”

He frowned. “Are you the Agency?”

She smirked, deliberately trying to put him at ease. “I’m a waitress. My name’s Anne, what’s yours?”

Yuniya came back to them and lifted his blanket to reveal a bloody wound pad on his upper chest.

“I’m Coan. Please, where am I?”

She sighed and looked around her at the clearing where she stood. “I’m not sure precisely, somewhere near the northern city limits of Araam. Who’s Leelah?”

His bottom lip quivered. “My daughter. Please I have to go and find her!”

Jaola had put up a layer of blocking when she touched him, but as a norm, his thoughts were so undisciplined that they poked out at the world with his distress. In that moment of desperation, he projected a series of images. She was overwhelmed and fought hard not to show it in any way that Yuniya might sense. She saw Ronan faces, dwarfing the viewpoint. A tiny red haired child, his daughter, was taken away by those figures.

She understood then that Coan was just as much a victim in all of this as Cass. It took all of her willpower to keep her emotional reaction from bubbling to the surface, as she did this, Yuniya put a hand on Coan’s forehead and within a few seconds the feedback of mental distress from Coan slowed and silenced. He seemed to be asleep again.

“Better?” asked Yuniya.

Jaola frowned up at her, unsure. Had she sensed something?

“You’re a telepath, aren’t you?”

Lifting her hands from Coan, she stepped back, afraid and unsure what to do now. Yuniya was between her and Jessal’s gun.

“It’s alright, I’m not a threat.” Yuniya lifted her hands to ear height. “I want to help you get away with Cass. She needs to be free and she needs *you*.”

“Won’t you be charged if you help us get away?” Jaola said cautiously.

“Not if we’re careful and figure out a plan.”

She took a breath, unsure if Yuniya was tricking her. “You could come with us?” she said, testing the waters.

Yuniya’s face tensed up and Jaola could see the conflict in the wrinkled brow. “I have a young daughter,” she replied. “I can’t leave her.”

“Well, where is she? If she’s at an external facility maybe we could get her out?”

Yuni tipped her head on the side. “You’re not an Illegal Psi are you?”

Jaola tried to answer the question, but the agony of her Agency life rose up in her. It brought with it the memory of her last target. A young father, Matta. The agony lifted into her throat

and it was as if that pain blocked her ability to talk. She swallowed, trying to clear it so she could answer but it wouldn't go down again. The effort started filling her eyes with tears. She wasn't sure why but even just yes or no was too much to say in the moment.

Overrun, she saw those light blue eyes wide with terror behind a pair of glasses, and the tone of his voice as he begged, not for his own survival, but for that of his wife and child, Jaola couldn't speak, couldn't think. The tears brushed down her face even as she became frustrated with the panic and terror. It wasn't the time for a flashback. It wasn't time for trauma.

A little warm hand brushed into hers and she sensed Cass standing there. For the moment their roles reversed, Jaola silenced by her terror and Cass the comforting pillar of calm.

* 6 *

Yuni moved forward, feeling the traumatic agony flowing from Anne and wishing desperately to comfort her.

Behind Yuniya, Jessal gasped and let out a squeak of fear as he started to wake. He must have sensed Anne's distress. Yuni turned around, trying to put herself between Jessal and Anne, so the other woman could have a moment to compose herself. Yuni's foot touched his gun and she dipped quickly down to grab it from the grass. As she got up again, she swapped it to her non-dominant hand, and held it behind her as she touched Jessal's face.

"Jessal?" she said, tinging every angle of her outer self with concern for his distress.

His eyes were opening but he wasn't entirely conscious yet. He let out a grumble of confusion. "Hrm? What was that? What's happening?"

Someone behind her sniffed and she sensed that person step in close to her. Cold fingers pulled the gun from her hand and she let them.

"You cried out in your sleep," she said, trying to keep herself empathically neutral to the world behind her. "Did you have a nightmare?"

He sighed. "Don't know. But I wouldn't be surprised. How long have I been asleep?"

"About an hour—"

She heard the click of the safety being disengaged and Anne stepped in close from behind. Yuniya sensed a coldness to her new friend, which caused her back to straighten in fear.

Anne's voice was low but loud enough for both of them to hear. "Give Jessal the same

sedative you just gave your prisoner.”

She frowned, confused. An empathic sleep nudge wouldn't work as effectively on another empath.

“Drug him. I don't want to kill anyone.”

Jessal had also frozen in place and she glanced down at him. She was pretty sure Anne wanted her to play along. She dropped her chin a little as she stared at him, and gave off a very distinct empathic feeling that he should trust her, as if she had a plan to disarm the civilian.

Still looking at her with big eyes he nodded once.

Lifting her hands to shoulder height to show obedience, she turned towards her meager medical supplies in a heat-proof box. She only had one shot of strong painkillers left and certainly no chemical sedatives, so she moved very slowly, making a show of it, and picked up one of the syringes of saline, which she had on hand to flush IV lines.

Turning back to Jessal, she glanced over her shoulder at Anne, who had put enough distance between them to stop anyone swiping the weapon out of her hands, but still close enough to shoot one or both of them. Her eyes were red, face patchy from tears and her hands shook a little.

Anne swallowed. “Do it,” she barked. “Stop putting it off.”

Yuni stepped up to Jessal's IV bag and injected the saline into the necessary port.

“Step away from him.” Anne's voice was completely icy cold.

Yuni did as she was told and watched Anne move in to put her hand on the younger man's heart. Barely a second later, Jessal's whole body melted into unconsciousness. Anne's hand lifted off him while the gun clicked and lowered into a jeans pocket.

Anne's eyes dropped away from looking at anything, and even though she was still empathically silent, Yuniya could see the pain in the twitching of her lower lip.

Yuni stepped forwards. “Are you alright?”

Anne shook her head.

“I'm a healer. I might be able to help, but I will need to touch you, and I'm not a telepath.”

She nodded. “I can shield, thank you.”

Yuni dropped the empty syringe onto the stretcher next to Jessal and walked towards Anne. She wrapped her arms around her and opened up her empathic senses. The pain in Anne was a freshly triggered trauma memory, and even without doing a full scan, Yuni sensed multiple healed bullet wounds, broken bones, and so much spiritual trauma. Anne absolutely had to have once been an Agent. The healing energy flowed through Yuni and right into Anne's heart. It was a strong flow,

and while it stabilized the feeling, it didn't ease much of the pain.

Anne let out a ragged sigh. "I was an A2 assassin," she said very quietly. "And I didn't want to be." Her voice broke. "My last mission..." she sighed, unable to finish her sentence.

Yuni smiled and let go of her. "I understand."

She huffed, wiping away a few tears that had come up again. "If we're going to walk into the city, we're going to have to bring some supplies, and we need to be under cover by the time the rescue crews find the bus, or the chances of being caught are high. Once we're somewhere safe we can plan out how to get your daughter."

Yuni nodded.

"Um," said a very small voice. "We need to bring Coan and help get his daughter too."

"No, Cass," said Anne gently. "He's in no state to be walking across fields in the dark."

"But!" the young one said a little louder. "But, the Agency! They're going to kill him!"

Anne sighed. "They will, yes. But we can't carry an unconscious person and get away."

Yuni, unsure if she might be adding to their potential arrest and execution, cleared her throat. "I can heal him almost completely in a few minutes."

"You can? Why haven't you already?"

"The Agency doesn't know I'm a healer." Yuniya sighed. "He'll still have the surface wound once I'm done, and he's lost a bit of blood so he won't be able to move quickly, but he could definitely walk."

Anne looked very tired and her sigh underscored the exhaustion she was feeling. "Alright, how about you do that, while Cass and I grab some supplies."

Yuniya nodded, respecting the fact that Anne likely had more experience with living as a fugitive, and should probably be the de facto leader of the situation.

* 7 *

Coan woke up quickly but without a shock, he was just all of a sudden conscious. As he opened his eyes a warm hand lifted from his chest.

"Coan? How are you feeling?"

He was sure he'd been shot, so sure in fact that he thought he'd been a goner, but there didn't seem to be any injuries now. He lifted his hands to check himself. A shaft of pain radiated out

from his upper chest, on the left.

“Sore,” he croaked. “But alright. What’s going on?”

“See if you can sit up.”

He grunted from the stabbing fire in his chest, but managed pretty easily to get upright. He sat on a wheeled stretcher. It was night time and the air was very cold.

He looked around, seeing an area of grass with trees all around. The night sky was clear with a double full moon giving plenty of light to see. Behind him was an ambulance sitting on its side, and a trail of debris leading up a very steep hill. “Abe kashaan! What happened?”

The person who had been close sighed. “It’s--”

“There’s no time for questions.” The interrupting person stepped right in his face and gave him a very determined frown with a pair of green eyes. “Can you walk?”

He had no clue what was going on, but shuffled forwards to get to his feet. The person stepped back, and he saw a lady wearing jeans and a rough poncho. His knees were weak and he felt a little nauseous, but he nodded. “I think so. Where--?”

“First,” said the green eyed lady, “we have to get out of sight of the Agent over there, then we can figure out what to do.”

He turned to look over his shoulder in the direction she pointed. A Ronan man lay on a second stretcher. “An Agent?” Coan swallowed, feeling overwhelmed and afraid, but determined. “Alright. Which direction?”

“We’re going, south,” she said pointing into the trees. On the horizon in that direction was a line of reflected light from a city.

The person with warm hands gave him a blanket. “Put this on, it’s cold.”

He opened it up to discover that someone had cut a hole in the middle, turning it into a poncho. He did as he was told and moved to follow the green eyed lady towards the tree line.

“Where are we?”

“Like I said before, we’re somewhere north of Araam, in the forestry,” she said.

It was then as he tried to recall when he’d spoken to her before, that he remembered his daughter.

“Leelah!” he gasped, turning around to look for her. “Where is she?”

A young girl, perhaps ten years old, was suddenly close, staring at him with a set of big blue eyes.

“We’ll try to help you find her.” She offered him a hand to hold and he took it, unsure if

she needed the comfort or she thought he did. He was about to ask her name but she spoke. "I'm Cassandra."

"I... I'm Coan. What happened?" His head was aching and the world seemed to be ever so slightly swaying. He lifted a hand to touch his face. "Why do I feel so weird?"

"Stop asking so many questions, and move!" barked the green eyed woman.

He frowned at her, unsure why she was so hostile, but his instincts told him that she was afraid, not angry.

As they got to the tree line, Coan glanced over his shoulder, trying to piece together what had happened.

"It's really simple," said a voice in his memory. *"The moment Jessal dies, your daughter is free."*

He turned around letting go of the girl's hand. That Agent behind them was the man Goid had talked about. The only Ronan-born Agent. The one whose death would free his daughter.

"Don't even think about it," said a quiet voice behind him.

He turned and that pair of green eyes swam in front him again. "What?"

"Killing Jessal," she said.

He frowned. "How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"I'm a telepath, your thoughts are very loud. So don't even think about it."

"But!" he said desperately. "But if I kill that man they'll free Leelah! One man's life for my daughter..." He swallowed, aware suddenly that he never thought of himself as a killer.

"If you do it, you'll be executing a person who has no chance to defend themselves. Turning him into prey, into nothing, into a non-person. Trust me, you don't want that on your conscience." Tears had built up in those green eyes and his talent for seeing the truth of people underscored that she was telling the truth, that the pain he could see in her face would be something he might carry with him forever if he did this thing.

"What about my daughter?" he said. "She's only five years old, and with the RA."

She sighed and seemed extremely tired all of a sudden. "Once we get somewhere safe, we can talk about how to rescue your daughter. Right now, we have to get away."

He swallowed the grief in his throat and looked down. "Alright."

The icy edge of her voice dropped away. "Come on."

Yuniya had been walking for nearly an hour towards the city glow in the distance. The light to the east was increasing. Jessal had told their superiors that they'd be in Araam by dawn, and procedure dictated that after they were late by an hour without any radio contact, they would be declared missing. Generally, the Agency assumed if you weren't where you were supposed to be, you had "defected", so they would send a TFO team to confirm or deny this assumption. This meant that there wasn't a lot of time for them to get free.

The trees in front of them opened up and there was wire fence in front of her. Beyond were fields, and at least two fence lines away, she could see the outline of houses.

Anne stepped in next to her. "If I'm right, that should be Enara Street and I've got a friend who lives there. We probably can't stay there long, but we might get some food, and a vehicle."

Yuniya sighed. She was exhilarated by the hope of being free with her daughter, but also very scared.

Behind her, she felt a wall of nausea and the sensation of spinning came in close. She turned around and looked into the very gray face of Coan. He swayed a little too far forward and she put up a hand to stop him tipping over. Through that touch she sensed that he was very nearly unconscious.

"You have to rest, Coan," she said, expertly guiding him to sit down on the grass.

"We're almost there," said Anne.

"Yes," she said without looking back at her. "And Coan is about to pass out."

Her healing ability wouldn't turn on, which meant whatever was wrong wasn't a soft-tissue injury. The likely culprit was low oxygen level from blood loss.

"You got any water?" she asked Anne.

"I do!" said a small voice.

For some reason Yuniya had forgotten that young Cass was walking with them. She was very quiet both physically and psychically. Yuniya made the effort to give the girl a broad smile when she handed her a full water bottle from her backpack.

"Thank you, Cass." Popping the lid open, she aimed the sipper part at Coan's mouth. "Here, Coan, have some water, you'll feel better."

He grumbled, but didn't otherwise resist.

* * * * *

Jaola's insides were raw and burning. She didn't want to be there, she wanted to pick up Cass, jump over the fence and run until they were safe again. Waiting for Coan and Yuniya felt like a precursor to being murdered by the Agency who, if the ambulance had a crash sensor could arrive at the site any second. She paced next to the wire fence. Beyond were empty fields of grass and the glow of Araam city. Soon the sun would be rising. They needed to get inside before it got too light. Enara street was in a middle class suburb, and consequently it was filled with many nosy neighbors who would certainly call the Agency hot line if they saw four grubby strangers sneaking about.

She sighed. Trying to manage her frustration. "We could try and carry him?"

Yuniya turned from her patient to glare at Jaola and she sensed the forcefulness of an angry mind. "Over the fences?"

It was then as Yuni glared at her that Jaola recognized the younger woman. She stared at her for three or four breaths, then frowned. "Cass, do you have enough control to break or push over these fences?"

"I.. I think so?"

"Won't they see that?" grumbled Yuni.

"Almost certainly, but my friend has a car." Jaola smiled, filling her heart with a bit of mischief so Yuniya could feel it. "And I'm pretty sure she'll let us steal it."

* 9 *

Cassandra was exhausted and as she stared at the fence, she wasn't sure if she could muster up enough anger to throw at these fences.

"*Are you alright, Cass?*" Jaola's mental voice was very gentle and she sensed her new friend's affection for her.

"*I did it before with anger, but I don't have any left.*"

"*You don't need anger to use a kinetic ability, there will be a feeling under the anger but separate to it. Like a push, or a density that moves with your focus.*"

She continued to frown, then tipped her head slightly to one side. "*Or a tingling?*"

"*That's another description, for those who are also Time Psi.*"

She didn't know what that meant, but it didn't matter. Focusing on the fence some more, she reached out with the tingling blob that helped her feel her surroundings. She could sense the edges of the wood and the fibers inside it. The wire was cold and the tingling feeling vibrated in the metal with an almost citrus flavor. She took another long breath and pulled the deeper part of tingling out of her heart and threw it at the wood and wire.

The fence folded away from her, falling onto the ground. To her left and right, fence posts followed in a domino effect.

She chuckled. "Wow, that worked!"

"Marvelous job, Cass," said Jaola, her voice straining a little as she and Yuniya half carried, half pulled Coan over the line of downed fence. "Want to run ahead and do the next one?"

Despite her physical and emotional exhaustion, Cass laughed again and started to jog. "OK!"

* * * * *

Karen Frene sat in her little kitchen at the breakfast table. It was far too early to be awake but her body simply refused to sleep. Thank Nera she didn't have to work. She sighed and looked down into the dregs of her hot chocolate. It was probably too late to try and sleep again, so she may as well make a coffee and start her day. Getting to her feet, she put the mug into the dishwasher and closed the door. For a moment she thought she heard a sound, almost a voice but not quite. She turned around, glancing at the sparse features of her kitchen and dining area as she listened.

A rumbling wave of white static reverberated through her house from back to front, like a helicopter rushing overhead.

There was only one person and situation that tended to create that sort of reaction: Jaola, in trouble and with hangers-on. Karen moved out of the kitchen into the little conservatory which serviced an old laundry room and the back door. Just as she grabbed the door handle, someone knocked.

She pulled it open and looked down into a pair of very blue eyes. A young girl, with blond hair stood there. She had on a backpack which was nearly as big as she was. Karen frowned and looked around the handkerchief-sized bit of green that pretended to be her backyard. Jaola came into view around the side of the house. She was helping another woman to carry a third person who looked very nearly unconscious.

Karen smirked at her friend. “Bringing home more strays?”

Jaola laughed. “Something like that, I’m sorry, it’s not deliberate.”

Karen opened the back door wide and indicated with a flick of her head that the girl could go inside. “It’s nice to see you either way. What do you need?”

“Your car. Is it insured?” They pulled the third person up two steps, grunting in the effort and Karen reached to help.

“No?” she chuckled. “I don’t have money for insurance!”

“Alright, I’ll do my very best not to scratch it and I’ll dump it somewhere public, maybe out of the weather so you can get it back quickly.”

“That’s very considerate. Is it just you in trouble this time?”

As soon as Karen had one side of the injured man, the other woman dislodged herself to hold the door open for them. “Officially it’s only Coan who is a fugitive,” said the new lady, “But very soon it’ll be all of us.”

“Alright,” Karen said, pulling with Jaola, to get the nearly unconscious man inside. “I’ll do what I can to help, but you can’t stay long.”

“Not intending to,” said Jaola. “We can put him in the sitting room to rest. You got enough food to feed us?”

“Maybe, if you like jam on toast. Got plenty of coffee, if that helps.”

The other woman laughed and Karen looked up into a very amused face. “Coffee would be wonderful, we’ve been up most of the night. Do you have a first aid kit?”

“Oh, yes, in the bathroom.” Together she and Jaola mostly carried the young man through her kitchen, and into the sitting room at the front of the house. There were no couches in the room, instead she had single beds against every wall. She often had random people staying over night and very few of the normal kinds of guests. It was the upside of her nameless blue eyed friend, and volunteering in the Cathedral homeless shelter.

They sat him down on the nearest bed and together lifted him sideways to lie down. Reaching, she pulled a rainbow throw rug off one of the other bed-couches and pulled it over him.

His skin was pale, and she leaned forward to check his vitals. “I’m a doctor, what happened?”

“He was shot last night,” said the unnamed woman. “I healed most of the injury but he’s lost a lot of blood.”

Karen stood up and glanced at the new person. “I might have some medicated broth

sachets in the cupboard. I often see healed gun shot wounds in the Cathedral shelter.”

Jaola, who stood in the doorway, nodded and turned around. “I’ll start on breakfast while you do that. You had any food yet, Karen?”

She shook her head. “Nope, but you know where everything is. We shouldn’t be too long.”

*** 10 ***

Jaola sat at Karen’s round kitchen table, Cass had placed herself on the window seat to her left, Karen to her right, and Yuniya was across the table. There was no talking because everyone was eating, but here she felt at ease, perhaps as if she was eating with family.

She finished chewing and washed the mouthful down with the last of her coffee. “Mm, thank you, Karen. It was definitely time for breakfast.”

Her friend gave her a slightly sheepish expression. “I wish I had more nutritious food available.”

Jaola put one hand on Karen’s. “It was perfect.”

Karen sighed and drained her own coffee. “Well that broth will probably be ready to bottle up now. You have to tell your friend to drink as much as he can stand. It tastes like meat flavored chalk, but it’ll help restore his blood-nutrient levels quickly. And he has to rest whenever possible.”

Jaola smirked at Karen. “Yes, ma’am.”

Karen grinned and got out of her chair, moving directly out of the room. “I’ll get the rest of what you need.”

There was a pause and Yuniya took a breath to speak in low tones. “So where do we go from here?”

Jaola sighed. “I’m not sure. There are a couple places where we can hide. I want to dump Karen’s car somewhere public. Maybe near a mall so it gets picked up quickly. If I can get into the Northbridge Bank through the back, I can get some money from a safe deposit box. I’ve got a contact who can get you and your daughter out of the city quick. Where is she?”

“She’s not at a facility, she’s staying with a norm cousin of mine, east side of the Memorial Gardens.”

Jaola nodded as she stood, collecting their small plates from the table. “Alright, sounds loosely like a plan.”

Yuniya looked around and Jaola knew what she was going to ask. “What about Karen, is she--”

“I used to consult at the Agency Tower labs,” interrupted Karen as she walked back in through a doorway. “They insisted on installing a strong mental shield to protect confidentiality. As a legal norm, no Agents can break the shield to scan my thoughts without breaching norm law.” She batted her eyelashes at the both of them with a sudden and disturbingly innocent expression in her eyes. “Honestly, Mr-Sir, they tricked lil’ old innocent me into opening the back door, and then the ruffians stole my car keys! Mr-Sir, I expect you to execute those evil Psi Traitors!” Her tone was deceptively soft and sweet, despite the harshness of her words.

Yuniya cackled like she’d been told the greatest joke of all time. “Fair point.”

“You don’t have worry about me, just keep yourselves safe.” She lifted a key ring dangling from one finger, and in the other hand she held a first aid bag. “You need help with your friend in the other room?”

“We’ll get him, you and Cass sort the supplies. We’ll go out the back door. And as soon we turn the corner--”

“Yes, yes... don’t nag! I’ll call the police immediately.”

Part Three - Chapter Six

*** 1 ***

Araam Agency Tower building

Raraan Armon stepped out of the elevator and into the main hall of level ten. He'd been careful to make his breakfast the night before, so as not to wake his wife or the children. The sun wasn't even up yet and while he would have preferred to join his family and still be in bed, as the one who advocated for Jessal Meir's admittance into the Agency, he was ultimately responsible when something went awry with the young man. He took a sip of his coffee and moved towards the east corner offices where the lower rank analysts were working. Hopefully they'd managed to trace how the Rona-Abaan got into the country and traveled to Marakan without any alarms being triggered. Goid and his accomplice should have been caught on both sides of the border, but they weren't – it was a disturbing conundrum.

He stopped walking at the entrance, took a deep breath, another mouthful of coffee, and opened the door. Beyond, a single worker sat in front of four different screens. Scattered in the gaps of the desk were empty coffee cups and junk food wrappers. One screen had what looked like air traffic control recordings, two had grids of security video feeds; both seemed to be airports or perhaps a train station. Raraan stepped around the view of the Agent's head to see the fourth screen, which showed a grid of still photos. In one corner, a photo of a woman and child sitting on the road side caught his attention.

"Who's that?" he said pointing at the screen.

"Oh!" The other Agent jumped. "I didn't know you were there, sir! Um, the two witnesses--"

"The civilian waitress and the unknown child?" he barked.

"Yes, sir."

"That's not a civilian, that's a Traitor."

The other Agent turned their face to frown at him. "Her IDs came through a detailed check?"

"Trust me, *that* is my niece. She turned Traitor three years ago. We can investigate later how her IDs held up against a check, for now we need to send a TFO escort. Where does the GPS say they are?"

“Um, sir, the bus is old and doesn’t have a GPS or a radio. I can call Jessal’s cellphone, but they’re due to arrive at the holding facility about now. What do you want me to do?”

Raraan sighed. His gut told him that this was going to be a long day. “Call Jessal first for a sit-rep, if he’s out of range call the holding facility. I’ll grab a TFO unit from the Banshii to arrest her, and then head over there. You have my number if you need it.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * * * *

The sun was just coming up over the horizon when they found the crash site. Wobbling black skid marks told the story of the ambulance sliding onto the wrong side of the road, Jessal realizing the mistake and trying to get back in place, perhaps even dodging away from another vehicle. The lines wriggled and locked in place as the old steering system worked against him, and the bus shot through the guard rails, smashing a hole through them and the foliage beyond. A trail of debris and broken trees led down a steep slope to the bottom where the ambulance lay on its side, prone in a clearing.

There was no way get down there on foot unassisted. Raraan stared at the mess, and as he took a deep sigh, he put his hands on his hips. Yes, this was going to be a nuth of a day.

“Sir, I’m a kinetic I can get down there,” barked the leader of the TFO unit, in a stiff, overly formal manner.

“Could you get all of us down there? And back up again?”

“Yes, sir. I’m a level five kinetic.”

“Excellent. Let’s do that.”

The man in black fatigues and bullet proof vest, took a deep breath and ran at the gap, he leaped, jumping in a wider arc than was normally possible, and landed next to the ambulance.

Down below him, the TFO Leader lifted his hands to signal for Raraan or the next person to jump. Raraan was certain deep inside him and underneath layers of shielding that if he didn’t go next he’d be too afraid to go last. Determined not to be seen as weak, he waved at the Leader, backed up, and rushed at the edge.

Kinetic hands grabbed him around his middle, he felt the lift, and the controlled, slow drop, then his feet touched the ground.

Keeping his face emotionless he gave the Leader a nod. “Thank you, Emaan, get the rest of

your men down here, I'll look around."

"Yes, sir."

Looking at the path of destruction, he had the sense that the ambulance had rolled down the hill, rather than smashing, but there was still glass and bits of metal spread out all around. A broken cellphone lay near his feet. Stepping around it, he approached the vehicle. For half a breath he silently hoped that he wouldn't find Jessal dead in the cab, and he was relieved to discover it was empty. Stepping sideways, he moved cautiously down the length of the ambulance. Listening with his senses, he couldn't detect any conscious minds other than the TFO unit and animals in the trees around them.

At the back of the bus there were two wheeled stretchers with supplies scattered around as if they'd left in a rush. One stretcher was empty, the other held Jessal lying flat on his back.

There was no sense of danger, but he moved carefully, eyes darting around him in case of an ambush or other threat.

Jessal had a nasty black eye and some small wound pads on his face. He'd obviously gotten some medical care. Raraan reached to check the younger man and felt a strong heartbeat. It was then that he sensed Jessal was under a telepathic sleep program. Jessal was lucky, Jaola's history as an assassin showed that she either knocked out targets like this or killed them.

Raraan shuffled to stand at Jessal's head and put his hands on the young man's temples. He knew how Jaola's sleep programs worked, so he could certainly undo it given time and patience.

* 2 *

Jessal heard the flickering sounds of a fire burning somewhere. Sirens wailed in the background and he could smell smoke. Something was wrong but he couldn't see and couldn't move.

"Jessal, can you hear me?" said a voice.

He couldn't move, but heard himself moan in the effort of trying to answer them.

"Hold on, Jessal, I've nearly got it."

There was a pressure in his head, as if he was being squished from the inside. He let out a strangled moan as the pressure transformed into a sharp spike.

"Oh! Ow!" The words finally came out of him.

“I’m sorry Jessal, it was necessary to push deep in your mind to free you.”

He sighed and managed to open his eyes. It was cold and above him was a brilliant blue sky. He frowned. “Where am I? What happened?” He pushed against stiff, bruised muscles to sit up.

He sat on a wheeled stretcher with trees all around.

“One of your prisoners wasn’t actually a civilian.” Raraan’s voice sounded almost sarcastic. “She put you in a telepathic sleep program.”

Jessal rubbed his face and flinched at the bruised side. “Where’s Yuniya?”

Raraan shook his head. “No one else is here, Jessal. Do you remember what happened?”

He frowned, trying to push through the pain and grogginess. “We crashed. I hit my head. Yuni said it was safe to sleep, I’ve been up for three days straight so I didn’t argue. Then I woke up to find Anne had a gun and was ordering Yuni to inject me with a sedative. I thought she had a plan so I didn’t fight it.”

“Typically medical buses like this don’t have sedatives, so she likely did have a plan to help.”

The rest of the evening crowded into his memory and, swallowing down the shot of grief, he stared at Raraan. “How is Ulnon?”

The older man’s face twitched at the edges showing a brief flash of sympathy, but his voice was emotionless. “Agent Ree went into surgery about midnight, it was a success, but he is still in critical condition.”

Tears had made their way into Jessal’s eyes, he sniffed and wiped at them. He wasn’t sure what he’d do without Ulnon in his world.

“You can request emergency compassionate leave if you wish, Jessal.” Raraan’s voice was quiet and oddly gentle, he seemed to have softened a little since they’d last talked. “I have the authority to rush it, if you need it.”

Jessal shook his head and sighed. “I appreciate the offer, sir, but my Search Talent is probably the fastest way to find the fugitives and rescue Yuniya.”

Raraan smiled and nodded. “Alright, we’ll get you up to the road and your new temporary partner is bringing a car. You’re head of this investigation, however you’re now under Banshii jurisdiction, so if your injury or your grief gets in the way, Agent Morgan is empowered to put you on leave and take over the investigation. You understand?”

Jessal sighed, but nodded in agreement. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

* * *

Jessal stood on the road above the crash site. Staring down the line of debris at the overturned ambulance, he shook his head. It was amazing that no one had been killed. The sound of an oncoming vehicle made him turn around. The area of road around him had been completely blocked off from civilian traffic so a car could only be his temporary partner, Morgan.

A modern black car rolled towards him and came to a stop with the passenger door very nearly in front of him. Jessal opened the door and got inside.

Morgan's brown eyes glanced sideways as he put the car into drive. "Morning, Jessal," he said.

"Morning." Jessal let out a little sigh, avoiding the slither of sympathy in Morgan's voice. "Any leads?"

"No, nothing yet."

"Alright," he said, closing his eyes. He needed to *find Coan Taso*. The moment he felt the words, a tingle rushed up his torso and when it got to his face, he sensed the line of the Search heading south towards the city. "They're on this side of the city for the moment." He opened his eyes. "If we keep heading in this direction I can let you know when to turn off."

"Alright."

They and the car rolled around a corner, to discover an Agency blockade. Patrol cars were parked across the road, their blue lights flickering in the slightly foggy morning air. Morgan slowed the car down to a stop and waited as the A5 Agents on patrol pulled back the wooden barricades to let them through. On the other side, the line of civilian vehicles waiting was shorter than he expected. This was the main road to access the northern motorway and it was usually busy.

In his mind, the Search vibrated in his senses like a glowing worm made of electricity. He kept his focus on the target, on *finding Coan Taso*. Once they rescued Yuniya and arrested the fugitives, he could leave Morgan to do the paper work and go to be by Ulnon's bedside.

* 3 *

Jaola moved through the side door of Karen's garage, and the other three followed. She

reached sideways and slapped the button that opened the electric rolling door. “Get in,” she said. Pressing the key ring button, she unlocked the little car.

The others moved around the car to get in and she climbed into the front seat, starting the motor immediately. She kept her focus on the present moment, she had to be calm, everyone else was relying on her to be the leader, to get them away. The last door closed and she started the motor. She put the car into reverse and glanced over her shoulder to check behind her. It was then as she started to back the car down the drive that she felt a shaft of doom cut through her spine. Her Time Psi ability wasn't very high rated, but it was enough to let her mostly dodge bullets and sense danger. That feeling of doom meant they were onto them, and close.

“Seat belts!” she said, accelerating backwards.

She turned the car to face the central business district and shifted gears to go forwards in that direction. Yuniya reached from the passenger seat next to her and clicked Jaola's seat belt in for her.

“Thanks!”

Glancing in the rear view mirror, Jaola saw a very shiny black car moving towards them from the direction of the motorway. Just seeing it sparked the sense of doom again, which meant that it had Agents inside. She let out an offensive swear phrase in one of the Tolan languages.

* * *

The Search was loud and buzzing in Jessal's head, like a worm made up of lightening. The intense tingling in his face meant they were close. He and Morgan drove down a well-to-do norm street, small family homes lined the road. Further down Enara Street, a little green car backed out of a driveway, and the energy of the Search pulled back like a tight rubber band about to snap. The Search shattered in his mind and dissipated all of that built up tension down his body like an electric shock.

He pointed. “There,” he gasped. “That's them!”

Morgan put his foot on the accelerator and Jessal was pushed into his seat. Enara Street was long and straight, like many roads in Araam, so even as the target car increased speed it was easy to follow them zig-zagging around civilian cars.

Jessal leaned forward to flick on the flashing blue lights which identified them as Agents in pursuit, and immediately the cars around them coming both ways pulled to the sides, clearing up the

center line for them to accelerate down. Ahead Enara Street widened to become a four lane road, houses gave way to multi story apartment buildings and upmarket stores. Ahead at the next intersection there were traffic lights and another four lane road crossing Enara Street.

The little car ahead of them shifted into the outer lane as if intending to turn right, Morgan saw this and followed suit, steering the car into the side line. As the target car hit the intersection, the lights went orange and instead of turning right, their targets moved left, crossing four lanes of traffic and causing immediate chaos as cars braked suddenly to avoid crashing.

Ahead of them, a small sedan came up to meet them. Seeing the inevitable, Morgan let out a Kranan curse word and swerved for the clear footpath to avoid hitting another car. Jessal cried out and instinctively reached for the dash as if that would stop them hitting anything. For a moment his memory showed him the crash from the day before. Careening into the back of Goid's car and that terrible sound of their patrol car smashing into the back of it.

No impact came this time, instead, their car slid up onto the footpath, turning slightly as it drifted, and came to a stop with them side on to another car and its bum on the sidewalk.

Shocked and relieved, Jessal let out a gasp.

"That was close," said Morgan with an edge of sarcasm in his voice.

Jessal glanced sideways and saw the mischief in his eyes. "Quick thinking, Morgan!"

"Thanks. So," he said, dropping his hands from the steering wheel. "What now, boss?"

Jessal sighed and popped his seatbelt. He looked around at the cars all pushed into each other, blocking their way out. "We'll have to requisition a civilian vehicle." He took another deep breath, reaching for his Talent to Find the fugitives. Buzzing line cut through his mind towards the center of town. "Tell home base and grab what we need from this one. I'll see if I can find some more wheels."

"Yes, sir."

*** 4 ***

Jaola's luck held as the car shot across four lines of traffic without hitting anyone. As soon as the intersection and the trapped Agents were out of sight in her mirror, she turned off again, heading towards town.

"Everyone OK?" she asked glancing first at those in the back then at Yuniya next to her.

She sensed three minds in shock.

“Um, yes, I think so,” said Coan’s voice behind her.

“Yes,” sighed Yuniya. “Wow, I’m glad you were driving, Anne.” She chuckled. “I couldn’t have pulled that stunt off.”

Jaola snorted. “Thanks?”

“How did they find us so quickly?”

She sighed. “I’m not sure, but my guess is that one of them is a Search Talent.”

Yuni sighed. “But if that’s true how do we get away?”

Jaola paused for a moment, thinking. “Well, first, we need to split up. Yuniya and I have some chores to do, so I’ll drop Coan and Cass off at the Cathedral.” She glanced in the rear view mirror at him. His eyes were wide but his mind seemed clear of shock. “Coan?”

He looked back at her through the glass. “Yeah?”

“When you get there, just sit down somewhere inside and stay there, I’ll come and get you two in an hour or so.”

He frowned. “Why the Cathedral?”

“It’s got a lot of Psi suppressant material in the walls, should block the Search Talent.” She turned the car onto a smaller road which had fewer CCTV cameras, and led west almost the length of the city but more specifically it brushed past behind the Cathedral.

He let out a little sigh. “Do I have to?”

“Just trust me,” she said, trying to make her voice sound confident but gentle. “This isn’t the first time I’ve run from the Agency, I know how they work. Besides, Cass? I bet you don’t want to be alone at the Cathedral, do you?”

There was no verbal answer from young Cass, Jaola sensed she was too afraid to put any thoughts into words, but after a moment of silence Coan huffed as if he’d lost an argument. “Fine, I’ll stay.”

* * *

The civilian vehicle Jessal had requisitioned was modern, fast and maneuverable, perfect for pursuit, but the front passenger seat refused to slide back. They jolted over a cross walk, ramming his shins and knees into the dashboard, he tried not to make a sound but a little gasp escaped.

“Sorry,” said Morgan.

“I keep telling you that it can’t be helped,” said Jessal, bracing for the next large bump.

“Turn here - away from the park.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Search energy burned in his mind, projecting a path which had zigzagged from Enara street towards the middle of town, with a very noticeable detour away from the network of CCTV cameras which surrounded the Agency Tower Building. Jessal wasn’t sure where they were going but they were taking a fairly direct route.

“Brace,” said Morgan.

Jessal pulled his legs in closer to his chest.

The car brushed up and over another raised pedestrian crossing. Despite his attempts at self protection, the motion still bashed his shins on the dash again.

Jessal let out a sigh and glanced out of the window. They were moving past the big greenhouse in a westerly direction. In that moment, Jessal felt the Search wobble and flicker. He swore. “Go faster!”

Despite his insistence, by the time they got to the next intersection, the search had faded from his mind. He grumbled. “Can you pull over and park so I can stretch my legs?”

“What’s wrong?” asked Morgan, as he steered the car closer to the road side.

“I lost the Search.”

“I didn’t know that was possible, aren’t you like a level nine or ten?”

The car came to a stop and Jessal opened his door to stretch his leg, but stayed seated. “A ten, but it can be blocked. Psi suppressant was used as a common insulation before the Agency. They could be anywhere. Nuth! At the end of this road is Star Mall, that whole place is a Psi black out zone.”

Morgan, who was only a medium level telepath, grunted. “I didn’t know. So, boss, what do we do now?”

Jessal closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and tried to reach out to each of the fugitives, one at a time. Coan and the child were completely invisible to his Talent. The witness, Anne, was blurry. He could sense that she was still around but there was no direction, Yuniya felt the same. The group must have split up.

He opened his eyes again and glanced at the ever cheerful Morgan. “We’ll have to go conventional for a while. We can put a flag on Yuniya to prioritize her in the facial recognition

software. And get the techies to put out a fugitive alert on the others. You got a phone? I lost mine in the crash.”

“Yeah, sure,” Morgan said, reaching into his jacket pocket.

* 5 *

Dobid stood in the gap between an internal door and the choir box at the front of the Cathedral’s primary worship space. He’d stood there before, it was the best position to see anyone coming in through the main public doors, while also being close to an exit just in case he had to get away quickly.

And if he was quiet enough, no one noticed him standing there, so he could also watch a lot of what was happening in the main room without being observed himself.

Jaola had somehow gotten embroiled in the incident with the Ronan Agent, so he’d stay in the Cathedral until his meeting later in the afternoon, just in case she needed help.

Flickers of white static hovered in the air like tinkling sun-catcher crystals, and despite their underlying psychic beauty in his senses, he felt antsy and twitchy. It was as if he was waiting to do a combat test against a stronger opponent or to do something that could cause the harm or death of someone else if he didn’t perform the task properly. Whatever was about to happen was connected to him, somehow.

A shimmer of black static brushed over his face like a winter breeze. Across the large worship space, the front doors opened. A man struggled inside. He moved in a wobbly diagonal towards the nearest pew. A young girl followed him.

From across the sanctuary Dobid sensed desperation in the stranger, as if he was alone in the world. To Dobid’s right, Father Andrew came through the side door from his office, likely empathically sensing the stranger’s intense emotional state, and coming to help.

He glanced at his friend, shaking his head once to let Andrew know that the new arrival was probably connected to the Rebels or the Agency, and that Dobid should deal with him.

Dobid moved carefully across the length of the worship space. The newcomer leaned forward over the pew in front of him and hid his face. Dobid sensed a Norm mind, and that the man was on the verge of tears.

At the distance of a few meters, Dobid sensed frantic, running thoughts. Not even trying to

listen, he heard snippets of the man's inner monologue.

"They took us off the street." An image of him holding the hand of a young girl flickered out at the world. They were surrounded in looming figures. One of the crowd came in close, lifting a gun against his side. A harsh Ronan face glared from out of the man's memory.

Images flickered in a rumble of thoughts and fear. A little face with gray eyes and bright red hair looked at the viewer. *"Daddy?"*

"Abe Kashaan, how am I going to get her back now?"

The man let out an audible whimper, his breathing became ragged with grief, and the tears flowed out of him. A pulse of static ran through Dobid's body and he understood.

This man was the father of the girl that the RA currently had in their possession. It was a unique, but painful irony that Coan was here. The younger man was about to talk to the person responsible for the Rebel side of his predicament, but likely never know.

Dobid hadn't wanted to be so directly faced with what he'd helped to do. He clenched his jaw against the guilt and bridged the gap between them, despite the discomfort it was only fair that he be the one to help this man.

* * *

Cass stood in the aisle next to where Coan sat on a pew. The man was crying and she wasn't sure how to comfort him. His grief and exhaustion were overwhelming and she wasn't sure how to react to it. She wanted to hold his hand or touch his shoulder to show comfort like other norms seemed to do in times of distress, but any touch would make his pain even louder, so she just stood there, awkwardly standing with him.

An inaudible pulse shimmered through the floor and she looked up. Approaching them was a man in priest robes with very bright blue eyes. She didn't know his face but her instincts told her that he wasn't a threat.

He moved quietly around the pews and stopped within an arm's reach from them, he crouched down, giving her a smile filled with kindness.

"Hello, do you two need help?"

She nodded and glanced sideways. Coan seemed surprised by the appearance of this new person, he wiped his face of tears quickly but his bottom lip still trembled.

"Sorry," his voice was uneven. "It's been a bad day."

“No need to apologise, we all have bad days. Are you hungry? We have a tea room that’s perhaps a little more private.” His smile broadened. “I may also have a secret cookie stash?”

Cass couldn’t help herself, the giggle tumbled out of her. The flash of joy broke the spell of shock and fear and she grinned. “I’d like some cookies!”

Bracing herself for the feedback, she reached to grab Coan’s hand. “Come on, Coan. Cookies!”

He sighed, but let her pull him to his feet.

* 6 *

Jaola pulled Karen’s little car into the back entrance of Star Mall. The parking garage was old and made from a darker concrete. Before the rise of the Agency, people used Psi suppressant dust or gravel for heat and electrical insulation, it also bonded well with concrete powder and clay so there were many buildings with trace amounts of the substance in the walls or floors. She’d learned over the years how to sense what density was useful and in what buildings so she could escape effectively, even with a Search Talent on her trail.

She drove the little car to the top most level of the parking garage that was still covered, and pulled it into a space. Turning off the motor, and put the key in the glove compartment.

“Alright, I need you to promise to do exactly what I say,” she said, turning to look directly at Yuniya.

She frowned as if she was confused. “OK, sure?”

“The areas that aren’t covered by cameras are very narrow, if you move out of those areas they’ll catch your face and a lot of Agents will be inbound within a few minutes.”

“What about *your* face?”

She smirked. “Mine too, but I’m a cold case you’re the kidnap victim.”

“Ah.”

“We’ll be leaving the car here, help me wipe it down for fingerprints.”

* * *

[Maybe they see a camera and choose to leave the car where its parked and catch the free bus up two blocks to get off and then walk to a street without cameras. Then they'll be heading towards Memorial Gardens and the babysitter's place.]

*** 7 ***

□