

# **The Fear and the Solace**

## **Book Two of the Kyrennei Series**

**ARIE FARNAM**

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### **SAMPLE CHAPTER**

#### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **Cho**

The smell of late summer dust bit sharply inside my nose as I walked cross the gravel courtyard toward Jace's office. I could see the peaks of the Rocky Mountains shimmer in the dry heat over the roof of the western side of the compound.

Kenyen was coming out of the infirmary with Jen Mitchell and he raised a hand toward me. She made the Meikan sign. Her smile was still a little hesitant. She was not a born outlaw and she could not get used to seeing me - a woman young enough to be her daughter I suppose - carrying a submachine gun around as if it was nothing.

In truth, we had new rules about weapons. With families and children around, only those who were on active duty of some kind carried and then you could not lay it aside even for a second. The mere joking mention of gun accidents made Jace grind his teeth.

I was the youngest in the core of J. Company but Jace never acted like that mattered. Once you were in you were in and he expected you to be ready for anything. I thought I was ready as I made my way to the cramped storeroom above the practice hall that he used as an office when he was at the compound. I had a personal message on my beeper. Not an emergency, but a summons.

And it turned out to be the one thing I was not exactly prepared for.

“Have a seat,” he said, glancing up briefly from the netbook keyboard he was hammering on.

I sat down on the only other available chair, which had one bent leg and a tear in the plastic covering the back.

“I’ve told you before that the new recruits are basically yours. That stands and it’s likely to be permanent,” he said, turning to face me fully with his broad, forceful smile.

“Beyond that, someone has to remain here when we go out scouting for Kyrennei with Aranka and you’re number’s up. It will mean you’ll be in command of this base for at least a week, probably two.”

My heart suddenly seemed to be blocking my upper airways.

“I...” I tried to speak and then coughed.

“You’re doing just fine, Cho, and you’re ready to take on more,” Jace said. “You’re very good with the younger Meikans and this particular group needs someone they can relate to, someone more their age.”

“Well, except that there is the one guy who is almost forty and looks like a lumberjack,” I said. The croak in my voice could have been from a real cough.

Jace laughed, a chuckle that rolled out of his tight shoulders with good humor. “Dirk won’t give you any trouble,” he said. “He’s the type who’ll be fiercely loyal. You’ll see. If you treat him the same as the others, he’ll respect your authority and the others will follow his example.”

I glanced around Jace’s office. Piles of seemingly unrelated documents teetered atop mugs of week-old coffee. Jace was meticulous and precise outside that room, but inside it he let go in a way that was almost frightening. Still, he did not have to look anywhere in that mess to bring up the codes he wanted me to memorize as the temporary commander of the base.

He gave me the usual speech about disaster scenarios. “It could happen. In fact, it’s very possible. You must be truly prepared that at any moment the message that the core of the team has been breached could come in. And you’ll have to evacuate, destroy the base and set up in a new location on your own. We might never be back in contact.”

“I still cannot imagine where we would go,” I said. It cost some effort to keep my voice cool.

His expression was hard and he did not waver from the assertion that I could handle it. “You know that can’t be planned in advance anyway. You’ll have Jim Mitchell no matter what happens to the rest of us. We haven’t known him long, but if I’m any judge of character, I’d say you can count on him through anything until the day he stops showing you the sign.”

That is how Jace always put it. It was not a matter of “if” someone you trusted would be taken. It was only a matter of “when.” I slid one of the piles of office debris off of the dishes

and tried to excavate the coffee mugs and a dirty plate without him noticing too much.

“If you do ever end up on your own,” he said once we had all the technicalities of the base settled, “my advice is that you make your priorities clear and always keep them in front of you. The first priority is that someone somewhere must survive to continue the fight, even if you don’t. You don’t want or need to know everyone’s location. Knowing means the Addin can get that information out of you if you’re taken under their control. With their immunity, the Kyrennei are an advantage now. Make them the keepers of sensitive information. They’re the next priority beyond the bare continuation of the struggle. If you have to sacrifice other things to protect them, you do what you have to do.”

The thought of being left without Jace or the rest of J. Company made my knees turn to jelly but I walked out of his office without stumbling. It opened out onto the upper catwalk in the first courtyard, almost opposite the tower. I stood at the wall looking down into the gravel yard and took deep breaths.

*Of course, they would come back safe.* Jace went through this with someone every time the team split up for a mission. I understood that he had seen it happen, had lost his whole team before, but I could not really make myself believe that it could happen to us, even though I knew that was Jace’s point. We had to believe in order to be prepared.

Thanh was coming down the catwalk from the tower, his warm, open smile lighting up the dim walkway under the eaves of the building. “You got ‘the lecture’ I see,” he said. His tone was a mix of sympathy and humor. “He’s particularly bad when it’s your first time in command of something.”

“He is right though,” I said.

Thanh stood close beside me at the railing but did not reach out with a hug or any other sign of comfort, as I wished

he would. After a minute, he nodded, “Yeah, but you can’t let it get to you.”

After they left I missed all of them but Thanh in particular. At the same time I was still mad at him because he was such a male blockhead.

We had both felt the attraction between us for some time and yet he insisted, “J. Company men don’t have girlfriends, and particularly not J. Company girlfriends.” As far as he was concerned, that was the end of that.

It was not the end of it for me. They could all talk about sacrificing everything for the struggle but it never stopped any of them from having human feelings and denying them only made a mess of things. I was truly committed to the cause. I knew that it was unlikely I would ever be able to settle down and have a family, but that did not mean we could not take joy and comfort where we found it. And I found it with Thanh, when he would let me.

The first days after the core team left to scout for Kyrennei across the Northwest were pleasant enough. The mountain slopes had turned as dry and crackly as a brand new bag of potato chips. Other than the hardiest evergreens, everything was dusky yellow or faded brown.

I was in the large shop under the office working through a martial arts practice with two of the recruits, when our beepers all went off with the quiet alarm. We were having drills almost every day and although this was not one I had planned, Jim and I were almost in a competition to see who could startle the recruits more.

I was glad to see that the recruits only barely glanced at me before leaping up the stairs to the catwalk. They were not supposed to look to me for orders right now because I was not

in the tower and I could not have the best information about what was happening. The protocol was to get to the catwalks and take cover until the situation became clear.

When we reached the upper level, they took positions around the inner courtyard and I slipped passed them toward the tower. Jim was there. However, he was not grinning at me with the gleam of a good scheme in his eyes. Instead he was peering at a security monitor that showed a Forest Service truck parked outside the gate.

One of the rangers had got out and stood impatiently tapping on his clipboard. He glared up at the small openings in the wall above the gate which gave us both a non-electronic view and a vantage point from which to fire on anyone besieging the base.

I thought I recognized this ranger. Rick, who had been the official owner of the compound during the past few years, was friendly with the local Forest Service guys and a visit was not unheard of. The important thing was that the local authorities had to go on believing that the compound was nothing more than the wilderness hangout of an eccentric businessman and that it rarely housed more than three or four people.

I went to the radio. "Amber Valley here," I said on the Forest Service frequency.

"This is Dough Meyers," a slightly irritated voice came back. "We need to check your fire protection." I had heard the guys talk about it, although I had never actually stayed at the compound during the autumn before. This was a particularly hot and dry September and the way Jim and Dirk talked they considered wildfire as likely a threat as the Addin

"Sure, I will be right with you," I replied. I took Dirk with me for his woodsy local appearance and the fact that he actually knew quite a lot about fire protection and had been working on clearing brush for weeks with a couple of the kids.

As it happened, the recruits did not have to hide very well within the compound because the rangers did not actually want to go inside. They were much more interested in the meadows beyond our buildings, the junk yard and Dirk's tidy piles of cut brush.

At first the rangers seemed disgruntled, hot and dusty, but after they saw what Dirk had been doing, their demeanor changed and they started smiling and complimenting his work. We gave them cold water from the spring to pour over their heads and refill their canteens and then they got back into their dust-covered truck and sped off down the gravel track.

It was not really an emergency but the recruits felt as if they had at least weathered something that was not a made-up drill and the authorities were still no wiser about our operations.

Beyond that and the day to day maintenance of the place, my biggest concern was the simmering tension that bubbled up from time to time within the group.

It had to do with three Meikans who had joined the compound in August. They were long-term J. Company contacts and serious outlaws unlike the raw recruits from La Grande. The eldest of the group was Storm, a shaggy-haired Canadian Meikan of about thirty who had gray eyes to match his name. He never seemed to question my authority - even though he towered over me - but there was soon friction between him and the La Grande recruits.

I felt the mutual frustration building. I could see the groups divide physically but I did not know what the issue was or what to do about it. Storm was friendly with the two others who had come with him - Shen, a girl of eighteen, and Erik, a guy from some Scandinavian country who was my age. The

three of them hung out together whenever they could. They were polite to the families of the Kyrennei kids but as time went on their antagonism with the four men and two women who had come from La Grande as recruits became more and more apparent. They had nothing at all to do with the Kyrennei twins Chris and Kev but I did not really put that together until later.

When it finally blew up, I only happened to be nearby and overhear. I was on my way to the office above the practice hall when I heard raised voices through the doorway to the stairs that led down on the inside. I stopped and was about to go in but some instinct made me wait. This was my watch. I needed to know what was happening with the undercurrents of the group.

Through the cracked open door I could see Kev standing in the middle of the floor, carrying something bulky in his arms. Afternoon sunlight streaked through the dusty air from three narrow slits in the upper part of the western wall. The hall had been originally designed for mechanical work and it was essentially a large garage. Storm, Shen and Erik had been working out in there and doing their independent martial arts practice but we often walked through it as a shortcut between the first courtyard and the pit. That was what Kev appeared to be doing but Storm and the others had stopped him.

“Now!” Storm demanded. “I don’t care what that girl says. You don’t go another step unless—”

“Lay off him!” Finn, one of the La Grande recruits, emerged from the shadows at the back of the hall, where the secondary showers were. “You can see his hands are full.”

“He just came from there... from that damned shell boy,” Storm said, still glaring at Kev. “You’re way too relaxed about that. All of you come from one town and you seem to think you’re special. But you’re soft treaty kids. You don’t know



what this life is like. Your so-called prisoner is Addin and we aren't taking any chances. I said, show it now."

Kev stooped and stiffly put down the box he was carrying. It appeared to hold dishes that he must have been bringing back from the prisoner's cell.

A chill crept along my back. I did understand what was going on here. Chris and Kev - with some occasional help from Elias Miko - were in charge of all physical contact with the young Addin boy from La Grande. Storm had not made his opinions on that clear to me but it was obvious that he was uncomfortable with the idea of an Addin prisoner. Not that any of us were exactly comfortable with the notion but Jace had continued to keep the boy, a decision I had not thought much about until I was left with the responsibility of leading the compound.

Jace's words to me on the subject had been simple enough, "For now, we hold the boy. I'm confident that the Kyrennei can keep him out of trouble. If the Addin couldn't crack Cory Mitchell and the other Kyrennei while they had them in that lab and could do anything they liked with them, then I doubt one fifteen-year-old newly acquired kid can touch Kev and Chris or even an uninformed Kyrennei for that matter. Still, you check in with them every day. Briefly but every day. They know to tell you about anything strange."

Kev straightened and showed Storm the sign. I could not see his face from my vantage point, but what I could see of the rigid set of his shoulders and the slow, deliberate way he gave the sign indicated that he was not happy with Storm's tone but also did not want any confrontation.

"Alright," Storm acknowledged that Kev was clear. "But you don't treat this seriously enough, in my opinion. You don't have an auxiliary guard outside to clear you when you come out. That should be routine. Why McCoy is keeping the

boy... Well, I guess that is rather obvious. It's just to placate the softies from this miracle town with all the Kyrennei."

I was about to go down and deal with the situation myself. But finally Kev spoke and I definitely wanted to hear the uncensored version of what he had to say.

"I'm not sure what you're implying, friend," he said in a quieter tone that barely carried to my perch at the top of the stairs. "You don't believe my brother and I are Kyrennei or you don't think we can withstand—"

"I suppose we believe you're Kyrennei, if the girl is sure of it, but how much do we know about it?" Erik said, standing squarely by Storm's right shoulder. "All we have to go on are the words of one girl and some very old legends about people who could resist the Addin. You can't blame us for being a little cautious."

Finn came further into the hall, his bright blond hair catching one of the beams of sunlight like a beacon. "You accuse us of being soft!" His fists were clenched at his sides but before he could start a real fight, Kev stepped between him and Storm.

"I do have something to say to you," Kev said. "Cory, a kid I grew up with, is dead. There was a reason for that. They couldn't break him. If they had been able to, it would be different. That's enough for me to believe that we can't be taken. If it wasn't true, Cory and the others would have turned out differently."

He met the older man's eyes. I could see Kev's profile now and the line of his jaw showed the anger he held in check.

Finn stepped up behind Kev and I decided this was the time to make my presence known. I pushed the door fully open and came down the stairs. They all looked up at the sound of the door and five sets of eyes watched me as I made my way down the stairs at a carefully measured pace. I kept

my shoulders up even though something in my stomach wanted to slink away and hide.

I stopped when I was within easy speaking distance on the hall floor. “Storm, I need you to bring concerns directly to me or to whomever is in command.” At least my voice was crisp and steady. “We can’t afford to keep distrust under the surface.”

I turned then to face Kev, who stood impassive, his hands at his sides.

“You know, Storm’s suggestion is a good one.” I made my voice light, as if the idea had just occurred to me at that moment. “Storm, Shen and Erik will trade off duties providing an outside guard to clear you and Chris when you come out of the cell.”

“What about Elias Miko?” Storm asked. His bluster had subsided a little but he was still unabashed. “He’s been sharing their duties and no one here can clear him.”

That had been going on since before Jace left, so I had assumed it was okay and not something I should interfere with. But now I had put myself into a bind. I had said that Storm had a good point and an outside guard was desirable. It followed logically that only those who could show the sign should be allowed to deal with the prisoner.

I felt the tension of a headache building. I had to take Storm’s side in this, though I truly did not think the Kyrennei were in danger. Jace was undoubtedly right about this one and the boys had given every indication of being responsible and cautious around the prisoner. “Until the others return, Kev and Chris will deal with the prisoner alone,” I said, trying to sound decisive.

Kev let little of what he thought of my decision show. He just nodded to me and then to Storm and left without a word. Finn looked a bit irritated with my decision. I had mostly

appeared to side with Storm after all. But Jace had been right about the younger La Grande recruits. They followed my lead eagerly in most things and absorbed the training sessions without complaint.

“Finish up your work out then. Aren’t you on duty in the tower in fifteen minutes?” I asked Storm as I turned back up the stairs.

I did not have time to seek out Kev until the next day. We ran together in the evening and the morning with all the off-duty recruits but he mostly kept his head down and did not say much. Before dinner the following day, I found him alone in the pit, looking through old books on the shelves that lined the walls at the back of the room.

I sank into one of the three low-slung armchairs that made a snug reading corner between the shelves and the fireplace. “Can you give me an update?” I asked before I realized that I had not either given him the sign nor expected it from him. Now that was a telling change.

He looked up from his book and shrugged. “Nothing new. We’ve been paying attention but really we don’t sense anything from Chad. He’s just really unpleasant to be around. That’s all. He hates us.”

He slid into the chair on the other side of mine and laid his head back against the rough corduroy cover.

“That must hurt,” I said. I could only imagine. I had known people who were taken and controlled by the Addin but I had never been forced to spend time with them afterwards. “He must know you are Kyrennei too.”

“Yeah, he picked that up right away,” Kev said. “He’s got some pretty creative epithets about it.”

“Does he try to threaten you in any way?” I asked. My curiosity would not rest.

“Sure,” Kev gave a hoarse half-laugh. “He made a lot of threats at first. Now he goes back and forth. He keeps threatening what the Addin will probably do if we don’t let him go, what he’ll do if he ever gets away and so forth. But then sometimes he’s almost like a kid. He doesn’t like being shut up in a cell and he sometimes cries. I don’t even think he’s trying to play on our sympathies. He doesn’t think Kyrennei are people or can have any feelings. He just really does want out. It’s the weirdest thing because he still has feelings like anyone. It’s just that he sees some important things differently now.”

Kev did not seem that uncomfortable with talking about it, actually not nearly as uncomfortable as I was. The whole topic made my palms sweat but I was also fascinated the way you might be morbidly curious about some horrific plague or natural disaster. “How well did you know him before?” I asked, swallowing back my discomfort.

“Well, he’s four years younger than us, but there were only a handful of Meikan kids in our age in the valley,” Kev said. He shivered a little. “We knew him well enough. He’s Kaylee’s cousin but he might as well have been our cousin too. We’re all like cousins, the Meikan kids in our area.”

“You have to be careful with thinking of him that way now, you know,” I reminded him. The cold sweat had spread up my arms and across my chest.

“He doesn’t let us forget it,” Kev said as he blew out a long breath. “I suppose someone more experienced might try to manipulate us but Chad doesn’t hide the fact that he despises us. It’s weird when you look at him because I know his face, but otherwise, it’s not Chad. He’s just not there anymore.”

He was quiet, turning the book he had chosen over and over between his thumbs. It was one of the roughly bound

volumes of history written in Akashka. The revelation of his Kyrennei genes must have sparked a greater interest in ancient history.

Finally, I decided on how to mention the tense incident with Storm in order to clear the air. “Kev, I trust you and Chris,” I said. “I trust Elias in this too, because I know Aranka is right. I have seen her point out people when she had no idea what our reality was. Her gift is real.”

He nodded but still looked at his hands.

“That is not the point though,” I said. “Until others have seen her in action too, they need to know they are safe. Trust is one of our greatest assets.”

“That’s fine,” Kev said, his eyes still locked on the book. “They can clear us. Chris and I want everyone to feel safe. It’s just...”

He stopped and swallowed. Then he finally looked up at me. The gray of his eyes was tinged with green, more sea than clouds. “Will Jace or the others kill him?”

The cold wind seemed to be on my back again, despite the warm chair. I shook my shoulders to loosen them. “I do not know, Kev,” I said. “It is not my decision unless things go terribly wrong.”

Jace had said it clearly enough. “If you do have to evacuate there is that one extra thing. You can’t either take the prisoner with you or leave him alive. It’s part of being the commander. It isn’t something you delegate.”

Kev’s face was creased with worry and sadness. “I just can’t help thinking about what happened last year. I had a job in La Grande at a gas station. Chad came up to the station one day walking his bike. He was beat up pretty bad. He had a bloody nose and one eye swelling up. His bike had been pretty thrashed too. I guess we all got it sometimes. Since that other girl was taken in La Grande a few years ago, the local Addin

knew about all of us in the valley. The adults mostly left you alone, except to give you these looks like ‘I’m watching you and if you make one false move...’ but the Addin kids liked to threaten us and if they caught you alone, they’d hammer you and scare you out of your wits because they could take you if they chose to. I was lucky to have a twin brother.”

“So, they beat Chad up not that long before he was taken?” I asked.

Kev nodded. “I patched him up. You’ve always got a first aid kit at a gas station. But what rips me up is that he didn’t even care about being beat up. He was so scared they would take him. We were all scared but he was just a kid. At that age, you’re just starting to understand the whole thing, how screwed up the whole world is and it scares the crap out of you. He was really scared of that in particular and I told him that it almost never happens to Meikans, that he had nothing to worry about. We were supposed to be safe because of the treaty.”

Kev scuffed his sleeve across his forehead. His whole face was screwed up tight. I thought he was still young enough not to want the sisterly comfort of a hug, so I only said, “You feel bad for that kid that he was.”

He looked full at me again and said, “Well, aren’t Kyrennei supposed to protect you from that. If there was anyone who could have shielded him it would have been us, and we didn’t. And now... Well, now all we can do is keep his body alive. But I want to do at least that for some reason. It just isn’t fair.”

It was not fair. That was true. And it sounded very much to me as if the Addin in that particular valley had very little respect for the Treaty of Constantinople. They had almost certainly taken Chad on purpose. They had known the identities of all the Meikans in the area after all. It could not

have been an “accident” the way they claimed it was when a Meikan was taken.

They had taken him, from what Jim speculated, probably around the time the initial tests for Kyrennei were done. It was a way of finding out how local Meikans and particularly Cory’s family would react to the tests and the aftermath. It seemed reasonable that any Meikan community faced with the tests would probably have at least one person taken in order to ensure that the Addin could keep tabs on any reaction.

There was very little of comfort I could say to Kev, aside from my assurance that, as far as I was concerned, he and Chris were to continue taking care of the prisoner as they had before. It did not even require their constant presence. Whoever was on duty in the tower had a wide-angle video monitor over which they could dimly see what the prisoner was doing. He could not attempt to break out of the cell or even destroy its furnishings without being noticed.

Kev and Chris mostly went in to check on him, to bring him food and water and reading material. There was a sort of shower in one corner but it was locked and he was only allowed to use it when one of them was present. So, that was a daily task as well. It did not take up that much time but I still did not want to think about how long - or not - Jace meant for it to go on.

Other than that, the greatest difficulties we had at the compound concerned romance. You might think that would be something the commander of the base could safely stay out of, but I finally intervened to keep it from getting out of hand.

This time the person of controversy was Chris. Kaylee, the girl from La Grande with long hair the color of light soy sauce, had been dating Chris before they came to the compound.



They had not been overly serious apparently but perhaps Kaylee was more serious than Chris at the time.

Since coming to the compound, Kaylee had often seemed a bit emotionally fragile and it finally came out that Chris would not discuss the relationship with her and the other Meikans had been discouraging her. Some of them went as far as to insist that non-Kyrennei should not have that sort of relationship with Kyrennei.

Not that they had anything against the Kyrennei. On the contrary, they had this idea that part of our goal would be to build up the Kyrennei population and that would in effect require breeding them with each other rather than with non-Kyrennei.

The issue eventually became controversial enough that I called Kaylee into the office. She came in and slumped into the extra chair with her cheeks already red and raw.

“There is just one thing I need to check on,” I told her. “Why exactly did you sign up to fight with us?”

Her head jerked up and she stared at me. Apparently, that had not been what she expected. I merely looked at her over my folded hands, trying to channel Jace’s self-assurance.

“I...” she sniffed and cleared her throat. “I’d had enough. I am not going to sit around quietly anymore while they take my cousins or kill my friends.”

I nodded and waited a little. She did not offer anything more.

“And your... relationship with Chris?” I asked. “That was not why?”

She looked back at me. “I was just in shock about him,” she said and her eyes were indeed wide with confusion. “At first it didn’t really dawn on me. I did like him, but no, I didn’t join just to stay with him.”

I watched for signs that this might not be the whole truth but she seemed at least relatively solid on that point.

“I certainly hope not,” I said. “You may think our life is hard here but you have not seen the full reality of it yet. It is very unlikely that any of us will get to have that kind of relationship much at all. You will almost certainly end up on different missions and in different teams. Those decisions are made based on need, not on personal attachments.”

She swallowed hard. “I know,” she said. “They’ve been telling me that I shouldn’t be... well, I don’t know if it’s even allowed.”

Her confusion was honest and sweet. I tried not to laugh much. “Kaylee,” I said. Okay, my breath sounded like laughter. “J. Company has one rule about this sort of thing. Do not let it interfere. There is no taboo about Kyrennei and non-Kyrennei getting together. There is certainly enough about that in old legends. You can dally with whoever you want to, as long as they are like-minded. But whoever you decide to have fun with, it had better not interfere.”

She looked relieved and whatever she told the others, that seemed to settle the matter, although I saw very little of their dalliance, if it even continued.

The other couple was not that big of a surprise. Aranka’s friend Cindy really had no one else in the compound besides Elias and she seemed enamored of him from the beginning. During the first few weeks, she had quickly gone from skepticism and shock about the existence of the Kyrennei and her own identity as one of them to intense intellectual curiosity. She had become Dasha’s protege of sorts. Aranka had certain advantages when it came to learning Kyren language and history but she had usually been distracted by other things and it was really Cindy who sat around for hours talking to Dasha.

With Dasha and the others gone, Cindy's attention reverted to her initial interest in the compound, which was Elias. For his part, he seemed happy enough with her attention, but somewhat startled. His already unruly hair tended to stand on end and he often walked around in a bit of a daze. I suppose that bordered on relationships "interfering" with our work but my orders where those two were concerned were primarily to keep an eye on them for any signs that they were denying the reality of their situation and ready to belatedly bolt for the hills. The fact that neither of them seemed to question the necessity of staying hidden at our base was really all I could ask at the moment.

It was about nine thirty in the evening on the last Friday in September. Storm was on duty and a group of us were gathered in the pit. I had been pestered into playing some of the Akashka ballads I remembered from my childhood on the battered guitar that one of the families had brought with them.

We lit one of the first fires of the season in the fireplace and the recruits lounged around the room on the benches and window sills, singing along on the choruses. Even Shen and Erik now joined in with the La Grande crowd comfortably enough.

Cindy and Elias were the only ones there who had not been raised Meikan and they knew no Akashka. I tried to stop at various points to give them a brief summary of the lyrics. Cindy, at least, listened eagerly. She sat on the floor near enough to lean against Elias's knee but he simply tapped his foot to the rhythm and looked glum. It was the best I could do to ensure that they were included.

We almost missed the beeper alarm because the first alert came in while we were singing a rousing chorus of Dai Ashka (The Old Words).

Can you speak the old words?  
Are you free or will you yield?  
Can you sing the hidden songs?  
Will you carry the shield?

When it died away I heard the tail end of my phone's message jingle. I took the phone off my belt and peered at it.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath. "We have a mid-range alert but no details."

The younger recruits looked frightened. "Mid-range just means there is something going on that might affect us and also might not," I reminded them. "The main thing is that someone else needs to go on duty in the tower as back-up and we cannot stay up late carousing because we have to be ready to move, just in case."

Jim volunteered to go up to the tower for a couple of hours. He would be replaced by one of the recruits at midnight unless the alert was canceled, which it probably would be.

The reminder of the dangers outside our mountain haven dampened spirits enough that the group soon broke up with some going off to evening prayers and others to their own duties. It was about a half an hour later when the high alert came in. I was in the living quarters with Jen and the other women from La Grande, who were settling the two younger girls to sleep. As soon as everyone's beepers went off, recruits came boiling out of the rooms to either side, looking tense and ready for anything.

An alert like this was something we had drilled for so they were moderately efficient, grabbing their weapons and

heading out to the catwalks. A high alert meant no one, except perhaps the younger children, would sleep that night. The mothers did look frightened. I let them know that there were still no details yet and then I hurried to the tower.

It was twenty nerve-wracking minutes before the message came in that gave the painful accounting of that night - Kwasi and Radek dead and Aranka missing and in danger.

“What does that mean? ‘In danger?’” Elias demanded, standing with Cindy and a couple of the recruits in the doorway to the tower.

“That is all it says.” I tried to keep my voice low even though every fiber in my body was pulled tight. My hands were clammy and I rubbed my knuckles to keep my fingers from going clumsy. This was teetering on the edge of my worst nightmare. If someone on the core team was taken in the fight or in the aftermath, it would mean evacuation, the end of J. Company as I knew it, the end of the brief, delightful hope of the past few months.

*Please, lady, embrace Kwasi and Radek. May they find peace. And let the others be safe.* I prayed silently as I stood behind Jim and Storm, who pored over our main communications screens.

“There were text messages between Jace’s phone and the others saying that police blocked off a bridge and shined lights into vehicles. Then that he was allowed through the police checkpoint,” Storm said. Then with a gasp, “Here’s the reply from Thanh. He’s reporting shooting on the bridge and into the water, flares being thrown into the river. Someone jumped off the bridge but he doesn’t know who it is.”

“Wait...” Jim was scanning down the lines of communication data. “It has to be Aranka.”

There was a collective intake of breath, sharp and painful, then silence.

I heard a sudden cry from the catwalk behind me and I turned to see a scuffle just beyond the doorway. Elias was trying to pull away as Cindy clung to his jacket. Kaylee and Kev were trying to talk to him.

“I don’t give a shit,” Elias cried. “Let me go. They were supposed to protect her. That was all they were supposed to do.”

Cindy’s small weight did not do much to slow him down but Kev was taller than Elias and stepped into his way.

“Elias,” Kev said, his tone taut between urgency and grief. “You can’t help by driving out there in the middle of the night. It’s something like fifteen hours to drive to Portland. You’ll know more by staying here.”

“She’s one girl,” Elias’s voice rasped with fury and he pushed Kev aside. “You guys are a bunch of idiots. Can’t keep track of one girl. You go on and on about your ancient languages, your conspiracy theory history and you put a teenage girl out in front to get shot at.”

I moved toward them, trying to think fast. Elias was the least readable member of the group for me. I was not entirely sure what he was capable of at this moment. But before I could reach them, Cindy swung around to face him and stood firmly in his path.

“If you want to go out there, go. But don’t think you’ll be doing anything to help Aranka,” she said with more mettle than I would have expected from her. “You can help her by staying here and thinking things through. And beyond that, Elias, have a little faith in your sister. She’ll come through this. She survived before and she can survive this.”

“How do you know?” He tried to brush her aside but she had an instinctual grasp of the flexible yet unshakable stance of Wing Chun.

She put a hand out against the front of his shoulder, part comfort and part staying power. “I have a feeling about her, Elias,” Cindy said. “And you know Aranka. She won’t ever give up.”

He was eventually convinced to wait impatiently with the rest of us. The next three days were a test of everyone’s nerves. More terrible details came in. Thanh and Rick had searched for her all along the river. There was a massive police hunt. They were not sure if she had been shot in the water but it seemed impossible that she could have escaped.

By the next night, most of us were nursing the bitter disappointment of a fragile hope lost. Aranka had changed the way we looked at our world. The recruits had partly joined us because of the light she brought to the struggle, and so quickly that light was drowned in darkness.

Elias paced and looked ready to bolt at a moment’s notice but once the first spark of panic had faded he was reasonable enough to realize that there was nothing we could do to help. While my heart was sore with grief for Aranka and for Kwasi and Radek, my all-consuming fear was that someone from the core team could be taken and I would be forced to evacuate the base and would become the de-facto leader of this shaky little band indefinitely.

Jim was as solid as Jace had predicted and even Storm turned out to be both efficient and dependable once his fears about the Addin prisoner had been put to rest. But still I had no desire to become a real outlaw leader and the part of my heart that ached for Thanh and for the possibility that I might never see him again was frighteningly large.

You can say I am selfish for even thinking of my own happiness at a time like that but I am warm-blooded. I lost my brother and my parents when I was a girl and then the

grandfather who raised me, when I was twenty. I could not just give up on having some little spark of love for myself.