

The bread tumbled from the paper bag as it impacted with the ground. Fruits rolled out from within, quickly squashed underfoot of the many pounding and stomping feet of angry, too taxed people. Tomorrow's rations destroyed and joined with the earth they were reaped from. Food for her family, her boys.

*Help!*

Breath escaped from her lips, curling as visible vapor in the dim lights of the cooling evening. She could feel her coat scrape against the pale greys stones of the building behind her. Shoved by the rioting mob, innocent bystander just trying to get home, the woman tried to push her way out from behind the backs of her fellow Selenians. Fists narrowly missed her, connecting into the cheeks of who that blocked her. They were fighting, distrust and hysteria running rampant in their bones. The impact knocked the wind from Marelai Baswill's lungs, an elbow jabbing into a rib as the man was forced into her.

*Please, stop!*

Suddenly, the bodies trapping her against the wall lifted and she peeked her sea blue eyes out from under the forearm guarding her face. A man partially dressed in the Selen army's uniform, the tree-like symbol embedded into the right breast of the armor, tossed the rioter away from the crowd. He started muscling another from the fighting as he uttered to the other, "Go home and cool your head!"

He shoved a third fella out into the street, advising him the same before turning towards her. Brown hair greyed in sections, light beard lining his jaw, and hazel eyes, Marelai recognized this scarred face. "Kobign...thank you."

"Are you hurt, Marelai?" his voice rolled over the syllables.

Giving herself a once over, her side aching from the elbow being the only thing of note, she shook her head. "No, I think I'm alright — the boys, Kobign! They should've been home before now, but Maxzain was helping Mrs. Frannich and and L-Lanric was visiting some friends. What if they aren't —"

"— Hey, hey. Breath. They're smart boys, your husband helped make sure of that. I'm sure they would of laid low when it started getting bad, okay?" Kobign placed his hands lightly on her upper arms, bedding slightly to look reassuringly in her eyes at her level.

"M-mhm...okay," she nodded, letting out a shake breath.

"Alright," he straightened and glanced at the slowly dispersing crowd, mostly through persauding force. "How about you head home and —"

“— Can you come with me?” she pleaded. Settgré was an old comrade buddy of her late husband, Grethe. She hadn't met or heard of him before the day he solemnly appeared at her door with a stained, folded flimsiplast picture of the boys and the mournful news of Grethe's passing. Ever since then, he's been helpful to her family and others of her husband's comrades. In truth she was thankful for it and although she never cared to trouble him with anything, she could use his support now. “Please?”

Kobign passed his cyber right hand through his hair, thumb resting on a scar running into the hairline. He exhaled and gestured at the men and women working behind him. “Sure. They can handle this here.”

“Thank you,” her lip quivered and she squeezed his left wrist. He returned to her a soft smile before pivoting to lead away.

Footsteps fell in behind them, a dark-skinned woman with white hair bouncing at shoulder level had accompanied them. Her face wore a heavy determination as she walked. Marelai was taken aback when she spotted a sandy tail lashing behind the stocky lady, a Near-Human species she's never met before.

“Settgré, I'm going to the Citadel,” the woman spoke, accented tongue flitting on every vowel. Perhaps this was the lady he mentioned being hired under, post leaving the army.

The man nodded, “Understood, Zujenia.”

Amber eyes glanced towards Marelai and the woman gave a light smile. It was more of an acknowledgment of presence, laced with empathy for the current situation. She could tell this officer of sorts, her dress didn't really place her as such, was honestly well meaning. The lady adjusted the ruffle strap on her shoulder with a wince, and Marelai could spot the purple bruising setting into her exposed left shoulder — a injury occurred earlier in the evening?

“When you're done, join the reinforcements at the medical ward. I'm more concerned with the citizens safety there. Do not seek to aid me.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

They exchanged nods, Zujenia parting the pair at an intersection and heading deeper into the heart of the city with a quick ‘Take care.’

Time passed as Settgré and Marelai briskly paced down the street for several blocks. They managed to side step any trouble or wait in alleys for the angry mobs to pass. She nearly swore her heart would jump from her chest in fear with their hollering and knife-waving. She didn't understand why the Selen Army had to leave planet for a war that took her husband, but the Citadel was trying to aid the people. Turning off the main way, it was only a moment before they

had reached her home's steps. The building luckily escaping the destruction that had plagued the Estle in the past few years. Two sets of dirty blond hair peeked from behind some curtains, the setting sun washing them with red light. Maxzain and Lanric, home and safe.

She turned to face Kobign, a streak of tears wetting the dirt on her face and mudding her flushed cheeks. "Thank you again, I don't know what I would of done had they not been safe."

"Don't thank me, Mrs. Baswill." He shook ed his head and gestured at the two teenage boys with his mechanical hand. "They were the ones who's wit kept them unharmed, go to them."

"Okay..." She smiled lightly, wiping the salty mud mixture from her cheeks with a sleeve. Marelai paused, eyes lighting up with remembrance and urgency. She pushed his side firmly back towards the main road. "Oh, go! You need to go and help others!"

"Alright, alright! On my way as we speak, Ma'am." Kobign dipped his head with a low, lone chuckle. He started to leave when he paused and started rummaging through his pockets. "Uh, sorry. May I borrow a comm from you?"

"Sure, sure! Here," she pulled out a standard army issued one and handed it to him, "take Grethe's. I...I don't particularly use it really."

He uttered gratitude and started entering a sequence of numbers, giving her a hazel rich glance. "I'll make sure it's returned to you."

Marelai bit her lip and nodded, watching him pace towards the main street. She didn't mean to stand there a moment longer, ears catching the start of his conversation with someone, that Zujenia? No, a different person.

"Ganimeed, the shoal is spread thin, fishing for other herring species. I recommend setting anchor," his rolling voice drifted to her.

Sighing, the secret code language of military folk slipping past her once again, Marelai couldn't help but to be awed by his commitment. And, walking to her front door, she desperately needed to embrace hers, Grethe's living legacies.