

## Meds

Hali weaved through people on the sidewalk at a breakneck pace, ducking in and out of storefronts, pulse pounding in her temples. Her left hand, tucked deep in her pocket, clutched a small phial of meds that she had just stolen from the Apothecary.

Hali tried to avoid looking behind her. It's dangerous, turning your head away from the road when you are in a dead sprint. She checked the faces of the people she was passing. The Watchers make noise when they are in chases, they don't want Laborers in their way. Everyone she passed had their heads down, and as she dove through carts and over produce stands she thought, *I'm good.*

Three blocks from her pod, she slipped out of her coat and dumped it in an alley, deftly keeping a firm grip on the phial. Slowing her pace, she tucked her loosened hair back into her ponytail, slipped the meds into her tunic, and rounded the last corner. Curious, she looked towards the door of her pod and dashed back around the corner. "Shiska," she coughed to herself. She leaned her head back around the corner just to make sure she was right. There were Watchers at her pod.

Hali's pod was located in the Hecatian Plaza of the southern district of Rahun, a Laborer manufacturing city. In the center of Hecatian Plaza stood a crumbling statue of Hecatia, one of Dirahl's sister suns. The monument was beaten down, worn by hundreds of years of Rahun's harsh weather and even harsher overseers. The podplex encircled half of the statue oriented courtyard, stacking eighteen high and twenty-three around. Hali's pod sat center-left and a group of Watchers stood directly in front of her lift, harassing people as they passed.

Ordinarily, Hali would go find something to do. Maybe lift a few Rankastas from old Bigbleet's shop. He was too old to catch her, and while stealing from him always felt a bit immoral, the Rankasta meat was always so good..

Hali shook her distraction. She couldn't waste time today. Not now. Baba was dying and she needed these meds. Hali jogged back a few blocks and retrieved her coat. She had planned on grabbing it again in a few days, but she needed it right now. Quickly, while heading back to her pod, Hali came up with a plan to distract the Watchers. *Hang on Baba, hang on.* She lifted a bottle of Nobrib from Hagash's stall of spirits, picked a pair of snap-cracks from the pockets of a sleeping Laborer (Yunki had a habit of sleeping on benches in the sun), and grabbed a fistful of Genui's white flash powder.

As she headed back, Hali opened the bottle of Nobrib with her teeth, took a swig, wrapped her coat around it, and shook it until the bottle emptied. *Two blocks left.* She sprinkled the fistful of flash powder into the empty bottle and pushed the cork back into it. *One block left.* She laid the powder bottle in her soaked coat and placed the snap-cracks next to each other, against the bottle. Tying her coat tightly around the arrangement she cracked a grin.

Stopping again at corner, she checked on the Watchers. They hadn't moved, still pushing people around. She looked around her to see if anyone was paying attention to her, but nearly everyone walked with their heads down today. Unconcerned, she welcomed the lack of attention and slammed her coat into a nearby dumpster. It landed with a satisfying *CRACK* and her jacket wrapped in flame. She jogged away from the dumpster a few steps and then resumed walking, taking a wide arc around the front of the podplex. She counted in her head, *five, six, seven, eight*, until a dull *whumpf* echoed in the courtyard and everyone froze. Hali, slowing her pace but not stopping, looked over her shoulder towards the alley. A thick cloud of white smoke drifted into the street. *Perfect.*

The Watchers looked up from the Laborer they were intimidating, leveled their rifles, and swiftly made their way across the courtyard and around the corner. Everyone in the courtyard returned to their business, keeping their distance, their eyes in the dirt. Hali smiled again, dashed up to the lift, and tapped in her pod number. The lift groaned to life and began to rise. *Hang on Baba, hang on.*

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When the pod door slid open, Hali saw that Baba had been lifted and laid on the table, which had been moved to the center of the room. Mama, Papa, Dalim, and her family's podmates encircled the table. They held hands and whispered ancient prayers as sweat dripped from their brows. Mama opened her eyes and looked up at Hali, "Hali, baby, where have you been?" She asked. She broke the circle and embraced her daughter. Without opening their eyes, the rest of the circle joined hands and closed the gap.

"I had to get Baba medicine Mama, I'm sorry." Hali held the phial out to her mother.

"Where did you get this? How?" Mama took the phial and stared at it in disbelief.

"I went to the Apothecary," Hali said. She allowed a slight smirk to split her lips.

"Jaja, please tell me you didn't steal this!" Mama threw the phial back at Hali. "Jaja, what have you done?" Mama pushed past Hali and looked through the pod door window.

"Mama, I'm not little Jaja anymore!" Hali moved to Baba in the middle of the room, breaking the circle, "And I'm not going to put my hope in dead gods to make Baba better!"

"Hali hold your tongue!" Papa snapped, his eyes now open. Dalim jumped into his bed and pulled his blankets over his head.

"No Papa! This is what Baba needs." Hali popped open the phial, pinched Baba's chin, and tipped its contents into her mouth.

"Hali, this is not how we do things," Papa put his hand on Hali's arm. His eyes held in them a pain that she had never known.

"Papa...we don't *do* anything. We work like slaves for who? Not for us. We eat a meal a day, maybe. We get medicine in doses so small it would not cure a baby Favo." Hali looked around the pod. The prayers had stopped and both families watched her as she removed the phial from Baba's lips. "The way we do things now is *wrong*, Papa. We are nothing to the Watcher, we are slaves to the Auros. We are just pieces of their oppressive machine." She turned and folded her

father's hand into hers. "Papa, everyone, this is not living. What I did today was the first step towards making our lives our own. *Tohav* the Watchers. *Tohav* the Auros. Baba needed this medicine and they didn't *care*."

"Oh no no no." Mama turned from the pod window, "Watchers, they are coming."

"No, that's not poss-...they didn't see me I swear." Hali ran to the window to look out herself. A squad was jogging across the courtyard, directly to her lift. She turned back to the pod, "I swear to you, I was not followed." Panic gripped the pod. Mama and Papa lifted Baba off of the table and laid her in her bed. The rest of the podmates scattered the religious candles and paraphernalia across the pod. They hid things under beds and in pantries. Hali, just stood at the door, petrified, unable to move.

Papa shook Hali out of her shock as the lift started to ascend to their pod. "Come Jaja, it will be ok. Come come." He lead her away from the door. Everyone in the pod tried their best to look busy. *Always look like you are busy*, Papa always said. He sat her at the table and handed her a broken trinket to fix but her trembling hands made the illusion less than convincing. When the lift jarred to a stop the room went silent. No matter how much she tried to prepare herself, when the pod door opened she nearly jumped out of her skin. Through the blinding light, now pouring in, Watchers entered the pod with their rifles drawn.

"Freeze! Freeze! Right where you are!" All three shouted in cacophonous unison. "Laborer 1-G69002-G-"

"What is the meaning of thi-," Papa took the butt of a rifle before he could finish his sentence. Teeth and blood flew into the left wall of the pod and he dropped to his knees. Mama cried out, tears pooling in her eyes.

"Where is Hali Koliska?" The red sleeved Watcher barked. Their leader. Hali kept her head down. No one in the pod said a word. Even Mama acted like she had never heard the name.

"She is right here!" Everyone's heads snapped to Dalim. He stood, finger pointed directly at Hali. In his other hand, raised over his young head, a badge for the Secret Eyes, the Watcher's initiation program.

"Dalim, what have you done?" Mama sobbed. Looking into her baby son's stoic eyes. "Dalim look at your mama."

"She stole the medicine officers!" Dalim did not look away from Hali and she could see fear hidden deep behind his face.

"Where is it *Ghulla!*?" Two Watchers stepped through the pod and picked Hali up out of her chair. The third remained by the door, standing over Papa.

"I don't have it I swear!" Hali said trying to kick free of their grip. "It's gone!" The Watchers dropped her in the middle of the pod, where Baba's table was.

"Did you sell it? That is punishable by death." The Watcher Captain leveled his rifle and placed the barrel between Hali's eyes. The pod watched in horror.

"I-I gave it to my Baba. She is very sick." Hali began to feel herself calm, like she had just come to the realization that she didn't fear the faceless enforcer in front of her. "I used every last drop." The Watcher seemed thrown by her tonal change, and he hesitated.

"St-Stand up *Ghulla!*" The Watcher lifted her to her feet.

“Leave her alone.” Papa stood up and faced the Captain. Blood streamed from his nose and temple and his eye was nearly swollen shut.

“Learn your place old man.” The Captain said. The Watcher near the door struck Papa in the lower back. The blow from behind sending him to the floor.

“Pick on someone who can fight back, you cowards!” Hali broke free from the Watcher holding her and dove across the pod at her father’s assailant. She landed two or three blows before the Captain pulled her away.

“Feisty, this one,” The Captain said, “and left-handed too.” The Captain motioned to his men and hit Hali in the gut. She coughed hard and saw black stars in the corners of her vision. The two Watchers straightened her back and held her in place, left arm held out.

“I’m feeling kind today *Badshka*. So I will not kill you. Not today.” In one move the Captain extended his baton and brought it down on Hali’s forearm, snapping both bones. She cried in pain, and dropped to the floor. “Do not let us meet again girl, or I will do far worse to you and your family.” The Watchers left the pod. Hali turned to look at Dalim, her brother. He had dropped his badge onto the floor and was sobbing into his hands. Before she could tell him it was ok, her vision clouded and she passed out.

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When Hali woke, her pod was was bustling. The port window was dark, so she assumed she had been out for hours, but she had no way to know for sure. It could have been days. She slowly sat up, only to fall back. She had forgotten her arm was broken. Her eyes caught a glint and fell to the floor. Dalim’s Secret Eyes badge remained where he dropped it. Immediately Hali looked for Dalim. He sat in a chair by the door, his knees pulled to his chest, arms locked around them, crying into his lap. Hali managed to push herself out of bed and cross the room towards him. She pushed her mother and father away as they approached her. She knelt beside her little brother. “Dalim, Dalim...it is ok.” His eyes, red and tired, looked up at her and blinked tears.

“I-I-I’m sorry Jaja. I thought they w-would just make you work more.” He said.

“Oh pal, you are just too young to understand what they do. The Watchers aren’t our friends little one. They hate us. And they will take any excuse they can get to beat us. Even kill us.” Hali put her hand on his shoulder.

“I didn’t know Jaja, I promise. I thought I was helping. I’m sorry...” Tear welled up in Hali’s eyes.

“I love you Dalim. I always will.” She took his hand in hers. “Remember what Papa taught us?”

“Pain comes and goes...but love and family are forever.” Dalim looked up at Hali. She could see his smile hidden behind the tears in his eyes. She smiled and kissed him on the forehead. He sniffed, wiped his nose, and smiled ever so slightly.

Turning to her parents Hali realized they were packing a bags. “Mama, Papa, what are you doing?”

“Baba can’t stay here Hali. Not in her condition. And we can’t afford the money to buy her medicine.” Mama said.

"I am going to take her down to the Black Road, hire a smuggler to take her to Lakhur." Papa said, "They have better medicine there, and more of it." He paused a moment and looked back at his mother, "And Laren's Rebels won't let Watchers hurt her."

"Papa, you can't take her there. Mama needs you here. If you get caught our family will starve." Hali said.

"We don't have any other options Hali." Papa put his hand on her shoulder and forced a weary smile.

"And how do you know Laren will protect her?" Hali asked.

"I don't...but I have written a letter, asking her to take Baba in." He pulled the letter out of his jacket pocket and showed her. Hali looked at her Baba, and at Dalim, and at her parents.

"I'll take her." She said, taking the letter from Papa's hand.

"Hali, if you get caught they will kill you. You can't." Mama tried to take the letter back but Hali held it over her head.

"Mama, listen. If Papa goes and gets caught they might kill him too. And then...and then whether I am here or not, we will starve. We need him. You need him." She looked at Dalim and winked. "And if I go *with* her to Lakhur, I can offer my service to the Rebels in exchange for medicine and protection for Baba. Maybe even you guys too." She looked at Papa. "Papa, let me do this. Let me fight for our family."

"You can't Hali. We can't lose you either." Mama pleaded with Hali.

"You won't lose me Mama. I will come back when I have finished paying off Baba's expenses."

"I won't let y-"

"She is right Solis." Papa interrupted. Mama looked up in shock. "She is right and you know it. I am too slow to get Baba to the Black Road safely. And Hali can make a difference fighting with Laren in Lakhur." Mama hung her head and silence filled the pod.

"I know Kadim. I know..." Mama held her hand out to Hali and locked eyes with her. "I can't lose you Hali. You better come home to us, or gods be praised I will find you and beat you myself." She smiled as a tear streaked down her face. Hali took her mother's hand and squeezed it.

"I promise Mama. But you have to promise me something."

"Anything." Papa said.

"When I come home, call me Jaja again?"

"Of course." He replied.

It only took a few moments to pack her things, Laborers never really had much in terms of belongings. After she said her goodbyes as quick as she could, she hefted Baba onto her back, took the lift down, and jogged into the night. Hali knew the streets of Rahun by heart. And she had a rough understanding of the Watcher patrols across the city. She took the fastest route with the least resistance and, aside from one alleyway where a Laborer was being beaten, she didn't have to make a single detour.

As she approached the Black Road, Hali began to get a little nervous. She had been to the Black Road a few times during the day, and that was intimidating on its own, but at night, she wasn't sure what to expect. Surprisingly, it was barely different. She gave the night password to the gatekeeper and entered the Smuggler's market without trouble. Finding the right Smuggler,

that was a challenge. Many Smugglers were hardened criminals looking for a way out of the slums. That meant that some would be dangerous choices, especially if she was going along. Hali remembered hearing horrible stories of people sold to the Watchers or Auros as pets, as things to be used. She wasn't quite sure how to avoid that fate, but she certainly knew what Smugglers not to take a chance on.

A few hundred feet down the Black Road she found a woman standing against her Craft, picking at her fingernails. She had a tan, scuffed coat on, and purple hair hung from under her hood. She seemed, welcoming. Maybe even friendly. Hali slowly approached her and cleared her throat. "Excuse me, ma'am?" The Smuggler looked up.

"What do you need kid?" She stood up straight and tucked her hair behind her ears.

"My name is Hali Koliska, my grandmother is very ill and I need her taken to Lakhur."

"Lakhur is on lockdown right now, you know it will cost you extra." Hali reached into her pocket and produced the credit chip that her father had given her as she left.

"This is all I have," Hali said, "and I have a few motor parts in my bag. I won't be needing them."

The Smuggler looked her and Baba up and down. Looked around at the other potential clients milling about the Black Road, and looked back at Hali.

"Well Hali, my name is Ferre Astraea. Climb on in. Let's get going. We will want to get there before dawn."