

WE'RE HERE TO SHOP

“What’s going on?” Deen turned to the shopkeeper, who nearly knocked her over, diving to slam and secure the door.

“Shut up and help me, for the sake of the blood! Get these bars in place!” She lofted a steel bar down from a shelf. Marra grabbed it, staggered to the door and dropped it into a low pair of brackets, diving away just as Deen, trembling with the effort, placed the next one above it. The shopkeeper, her arms showing the cords and bulges of her strength, rammed the third bar into place at the top of the door. She turned to them. “It’s gotta be the war,” she panted. Pounding at the door. “Excuse me.” She raced to the back of the shop and disappeared. Another door slammed, and the clanks of heavy bolts fell among the thumps, explosions, shouts and screams coming from the street. The shopkeeper reappeared.

“The war? What war?” Deen put her hands on her hips.

“You just get into the City? Well, they said something big was gonna hit this area, but everybody thought it was something different. That is, until the lights went out, and we figured somebody was going for the Power Complex. Now that’s war.” More explosions. The air seemed to Marra to be heavier. “But like stubborn idiots, we weren’t gonna let that stop the Run. Oh, no. We went ahead, just like those crazies in Sobi. At least the fight didn’t get in here.”

The woman shook her head, took a long breath, ran her fingers through her shock of long, black hair. “But I guess I like the Run enough to take the chance. I found my friends and my man this year. I guess you didn’t do so well, even for andros. Or are you?” She looked closely at them. “Just who are you, anyway?”

Marra said, “We used to live here, years ago. We’re just people like you, except we got burned.”

“No! Really?”

“Some healers saved us, brought us back to life,” Deen said, smoothly transiting out of the zone of truth, “But they didn’t get the skin color right.”

“I don’t believe you. That’s too much. But—” She looked at their scalps and shook her head. The noise outside had faded; no more explosions struck, and the sound of hundreds of shoes and boots had dwindled to a few hurried passing steps.

Marra took initiative. “We’re here to shop,” she said, “And I really like this tight gray suit. Could I try it on?” The woman nodded and pointed to the rear of the store. Deen selected a pair of coverall suits and followed Marra.

“How much?” Marra asked, coming out with the suit molded to the lines of her body. “Do you like it?” she asked Deen.

“Forty.” The shopkeeper seemed a bit overloaded by the combination of shopping andros and city warfare.

“It looks really good, especially on your tummy.” A shot from a ballistic weapon rang in the understreet. Running feet.

“I’ll take it, and a pair of simple black shoes like those, with two sets of hose. Deen, that looks great, but will it do when you’re brown again?” The shopkeeper’s eyebrows went up.

Deen looked down. “I guess not. How about the red one?”

“Yes. And don’t forget the shoes.”

The total bill came to seventy-three for each of them. They paid the shopkeeper, who by now had nothing to say. They listened at the door.

“It’s quiet out there. Could you remove the bars, please?” She nodded at them and went to work, and they finally looked out into near-total darkness. Fitful gleams from a few remaining wall torches, still pouring their scent into the stifling air, showed bodies up and down the understreet, most starting to clamber back to their feet.

“Thank you, we’ll be going now,” Marra said to the shopkeeper, who nodded dumbly again. “We should be back looking for sales some time after all this is over.” She considered asking whether the suits carried warranties, but decided she wouldn’t, under the circumstances, find the answer useful.

Deen led the way back toward the intersection. Marra walked with relief, her feet at last properly covered. Someone crouched near the entrance to the domed area, bending over a figure slumped unconscious against the wall.

“Help me with him,” came a young male voice. “I’m hurting, and I can’t get him to open his eyes. Please. I can’t go any further.” He doubled over in pain, looking at her.

Marra bent down and looked at the unconscious figure, in his twenties, maybe a little older than the speaker. His ears and some of the skin on his neck were pebbled and gray like lizard hide.

One of his hands had been maimed, and had healed into a twisted but still mobile thumb and three fingers. From his lower belly, a trickle of blood ran, soaking the coverall he wore.

Deen asked the younger man, who wore a heavy carapiece, “What’s wrong with you?”

“I— I don’t know. I got here okay, thanks to him and his woman, but something’s wrong in my insides, like it’s all turning into scars or something else.” He choked and swallowed. “And the dreams. And—” He started to shake.

Marra grabbed him and held him as Deen looked in his eyes. Now would be a good time to have Aoriver around. She closed her eyes and called. No response.

“Who are you?” Deen asked him. “Where are you from?”

He pulled at the straps to his carapiece, as if trying to loosen it. The carapiece’s orange shell, dented and gouged, carried the Darko Hejj sign. “Please, he needs help. The bugboys found him and tore him and then the shooting— aah!” He bent and twisted in pain. “My name is Frei.”