

## *Prologue. A Child Is Born*

WHERE I AM FROM IT IS SAID THAT LITTLE GIRLS ARE BORN INTO THEIR fate.

Some girls are born to be wives of the farmer, help toil the land and birth the many boys that will carry forth the family name. Some girls are born to teach the children in the ways of our people and keep our beautiful history alive. Other girls are born to be healers of our people, practicing the ancient medicinal secrets that have been passed down for generations.

The lesser fortunate girls...the most beautiful of us all are born to please the men that control us. They are born into captivity of the oppressor and spend their lives hiding who they are and attempting with all that is in them to change their fate.

My birth marked a different purpose.

I was born to be the anointed daughter of the Marinites.

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THE STORY WAS TOLD TO ME SO MANY TIMES THAT I AM NO LONGER certain whether or not it was relayed to me or if I actually recall it from experience. It was my great-grandmother, Elizabeth Alpha Ylai, daughter of the clan Aleyk and later married to Franklin Kalaath, who shared her memories. Not so much for the sake of passing along history or assuring that I was aware from which I came but rather as a warning for me to heed, as a means of keeping me safe and free of the clutches of the men who have oppressed our people for the past forty-years.

It began with Diana, my mother and Elizabeth's granddaughter, saved from the womb of Elizabeth's own child Carolyn while on her deathbed. Diana, a wild, untamable beauty whose own fate was sealed the very moment a boy from a nearby village acknowledged her resplendence. My \*mira tried her very best to conceal Diana's looks, an allure perfectly fit for the desires of the soldiers of the Shadow Realm Allegiance.

Diana knew very well the dangers associated with her looks. Exceeding the ideal features and traits of what was considered to be most attractive, it was certain that were she ever seen by an SRA soldier she would most assuredly be recruited. Her skin was the rich dark color of the kakali bean that hangs from the large Panati trees that can be found on all edges of our quaint planet Marieux. Her hair, thick and long, was dark and shone beneath the sun, the soft feel of the silky strands brushing across her narrow back.

She was taller than she should have been, taller than what is traditional of my culture and built much sturdier than the average Marinite woman. Every feature was perfectly created and placed. Were she drawn by the most talented artist in the sector she could not have been prettier.

Diana was not an anomaly but certainly a rarity amongst the Marinite's, the blessed dark skin and flawless features that our people are known for but the sturdier physique generally reserved for the descendents of the neighboring planet Amironte. She was exactly what the SRA looked to recruit – and more. She was but fourteen when she was spotted and taken.

Mira never shared with me whose bed Diana wound up in. I suppose it was of little importance if she was even aware. What was most significant was that she was fixed for pregnancy – or rather to prevent it – as all girls recruited into Sisters of the Allegiance (or SOTA) are. A year later, however, she found that she was somehow carrying me.

She concealed it for as long as she possibly could before taking the risk of disappearing into the night. It was the best chance she had for our survival. Though her skin tone and long, beautiful hair was standard for the SOTA, her beauty far outmatched any other recruits and she was immediately sought after. She was in hiding for just under two months when she caught wind that SRA had picked up on her scent, and knew that it would be a matter of time before they would find her hiding in the abandoned shanty in the thicket that bordered the village of Kalaath and bring her back.

My mother went into labor prematurely, possibly from the stress of it all or maybe it was all just history repeating itself, and made her way to her grandmother Elizabeth who served as her midwife, just as she had done for her own daughter fifteen years earlier. While word in the village had it that the soldiers were on their way to my mira's, she worked diligently to bring me into this world.

It was a long, laborious birthing. Maybe it was because I knew what the hell I was being born into, or rather what *hell* I was being born into, and was fighting to stay where I was. Maybe it was simply as a result of the trepidation that was placed upon both women as their lives and mine literally hung in the balance. But finally, I was born. And to the horror of both women, this child that they'd fought so hard to retrieve and protect was born with golden skin of a variety that no one had ever before seen, a skin that practically glowed and eyes bright and gleaming and the color of imperial topaz.

Now, more fearful than ever, Diana talked Mira into quickly taking this child and going into hiding. All knew of the prophecy of *the chosen one* or *the anointed daughter of the Marinites*, and knew with certainty if the soldiers (or anyone for that matter) saw this child, she, her mother and her great-grandmother would immediately be put to death, ceasing the bloodline once and for all as they had believed they'd done years earlier with the murder of Carolyn Kalaath.

Before Mira left with this child...with me, the story is told that Diana kissed my forehead softly and blessed me with the gift that only a birth mother could give...should give. The gift of the first of my four names - Olivia.

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MARINITE CULTURE REQUIRES THAT CHILDREN BE GIVEN FOUR distinct names. The first is ritually given by the birth mother. For the past hundred years or so mothers preferred to give their newborns the beautiful exotic names originated by the humans on the planet Earth, rather than historical Marinite names. My name, Olivia, means olive tree, a symbol for peace and prosperity.

The second is to be bestowed upon the child by her \*musha or her mira, whichever is most fit for the task. The second name is the most important of them all for the second name speaks directly into the child's life and destiny (or so legend has it). The third name is rooted in Marinite culture and the clan of which the child belongs determines the last.

My full title as completed by my mira became Olivia Vala Eso Kalaath, Vala being the \*Gelish word for *chosen*.

But although Mira acknowledged the belief that I may very well have been *the one* and even named me according to this belief, she did everything in her power to prevent me from accepting any parts of this.

Instead of raising me as a warrior, she raised me to be a \*Concealor.

We survived in a small hut that she built on the edge of the Apigara River where we fed on fish from its mouth, milk from the Kakali bean, and Obi berries that grew abundantly in the brush surrounding (the green berries, *not* the red).

As I grew, Mira trained me to place the dark film into my eyes to hide their true color and to apply the perfect coat of the special mud dug from the banks of the Apigara to mask the glow of my skin. If done properly, anyone who encountered me would believe that I was born the correct color of the Marinite. Her training with me proved successful, possibly because it was my nature to be reserved, possibly because I was being raised in seclusion from other Marinite children.

Whatever the reason, I learned very early to work the land for my survival. I learned to be aware of my surroundings. I grew strong. Some would say mannish but I did not care, these lessons were crucial for my survival. In spite of her efforts I became a warrior in my own right.

When I was four, Mira negotiated with the nearest village elder for a small plot on their land not too far from the Apigara. We were able to add a variety of vegetables to our meal and I was able to stretch my legs that were growing at an accelerated rate requiring more freedom for me to roam.

In those days I never wondered what happened to my mother, my mira was enough. My life on the small plot of land in the minute village of Ashtwor was everything to me. But there was a sadness that cloaked Mira. Though she smiled bright when she taught me to pull the stalks and shuck the corn, though she laughed as I play perfectly content with the piece of rope that had been given to me by the barren Sarai Ashtwor whose husband owned our land, and although she beamed with pride when I picked up on my academic lessons quickly and with little effort, when she lay in bed at night I would often hear her weep quietly.

I would go to her and stroke her silky hair with my small hands and she would fall asleep in my tiny arms.

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MIRA'S LIFE HAD BEEN DIFFICULT SINCE THE DAYS OF THE SHADOW Wars, when the sovereign leader of the planet Amironte, Claude Ustek, used his gift of the *poison tipped tongue* to talk our leader, Vincent Ittas, into a treaty that he summarily violated. In his quest to join forces with Katashi Kedt, the ruler of Arethoxx, the largest planet in our system Zephyrnox Theta, the rogue Ustek took control of our planet, thrusting my people into captivity and inhabiting it with his fellow Amirontians.

Ustek controlled both his own planet and ours for four years until his greed led him to a fate that he had previously bestowed upon the Marinite leader Ittas. Kedt slaughtered Ustek and all of his leaders, dumping their bodies into the Velox Continuum and sending our planet Marieux, without a leader, into chaos and complete civil unrest. Many lives were lost including Mira's first-born child, a son, Thomas Kalaath.

Marieux had once been a very peaceful and upstanding planet where the concept of violence was foreign. Now the streets ran with blood. The climate was perfect for the rise of a new leader and it was the Marinite Henry Kelsard (with the guidance of a rogue Amirontian named Taaman Dupec) who stepped up to the challenge. And so began the reign of the SRA and further destruction of my mira's life.

Mira lost her husband as he attempted to rescue their daughter Carolyn, a child with the skin of the anointed and eyes of a see-er (like mine), from the clutches of SRA and Sisters of the Allegiance, (SOTA). She lost her daughter when Kelsard sent soldiers to slaughter the pregnant Kalaath in the street for fear that she, or the child that she carried, was the one that would bring forth the destruction of the allegiance and return Marieux to its original inhabitants.

All of the pain and loss Mira experienced took a toll on her. The morning following my thirteenth birthday I awoke to find my mira was dead.

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CRYING IS NEVER AN OPTION FOR ME. I HAVE NO TIME FOR TEARS. TO show emotion is to show weakness and being in the world – in this world alone - to show weakness can be disastrous. Mira was my family, *she* was my world. She was all that I had and all that I'd ever known and I buried her myself with honor in the tradition of the Marinite and secured a promise from Pete Ashtwor to return her to her home village of Aleyk so that she may rest in peace and with dignity.

Sarai and Pete insisted that I live with them. \*Galê Sarai had always wanted a child and now she had the opportunity. I loved them both dearly for what they had done for us, what they'd done for Mira and me, but I would not stay. I left their home under the cloak of darkness and made my way to The City in search of Diana...in search of my mother. I knew that she was alive and I knew that I would find her there. How I knew these things at the time were far beyond me, but I felt what I believed to be true.

Finding Diana was important to me. If she were alive, she would be all that I had left of my family. Finding Diana would give me a part of my mira back.

I did not know that finding Diana would help me to find my own self and the fate that I was destined to realize.

*One. Jayde*

WHERE I AM FROM, TO BE DIFFERENT IS DANGEROUS. IF YOU ARE male, being different can get you beat or worse – jailed. If you are a female, being different can get you enslaved. And if you're lucky, being different can get you killed.

I was thirteen when I fled from the land of Pete and Sarai Ashtwor in the night. They were wonderful people and I will always remember their kindness and to include them in my prayers. They were upstanding citizens and maintained their strong Marinite morals and ethics despite the horrors that they'd lived through and seen firsthand. They were a sign of pride to the native race of Marieux. Mira always spoke of life before the Shadow Wars and how much the Ashtwor village represented those values.

I am certain that Golê Pete searched for me when they awoke to find my bed empty and cold. I am sure he would have scoured the banks of the Apigara, seeking out my young body, washed ashore, my life taken by my own hands in the height of my grief. I am positive they mourned the loss of me and what they deemed as a failure to the memory of the Aleyk daughter Elizabeth when they could not find me.

I feel guilt for that still.

I wanted to leave behind a note. I wanted to leave some message behind for Galê Sarai to find and know that I was alive and that I would be all right. But I was too afraid that something in my writing would betray me. I could not afford to be found. I could not return to them for they could not provide what I needed most which was that missing part of my mira.

Furthermore, I could not take the chance of their finding out my secret. I couldn't put their lives at risk. They were old and had been through so much in life already. They deserved the opportunity to die an honorable death...to die in peace.

It was nearly four years earlier that I made the journey from the tiny far away village into the centre of town, the area known simply as The City. Mira said that pre-war, The City was a grand place to visit and, for the younger generation, to live. She told tales of how when Thomas and Carolyn were small, she and my great-grandfather Franklin would enter The City every weekend to trade at the markets, purchase wares from the shops, and oft times catch a film or a play.

Mira had actually lived in The City herself for three years when she was much younger. She'd attended the University School and been taught by the great Zanti teachers who'd transplanted from the faraway planet Ntozaint to share their vast knowledge. That is where she met and married the Kalaath son, Franklin, defying the laws of Aleyk that required that her parents arrange her marriage, as was custom.

Mira was the original rebel, living up to the second name Alpha that was bestowed upon her by her own mira.

The City was no longer a place for scholars and friendly proprietors. During war, the University School that the fortunate bunch who wanted a little bit more out of life willingly entered suddenly became a place where all whose hearts pumped Marinite blood were remanded whether they'd ever wanted to be there or not.

It's once bright walls were now gray and dull and held the souls of many – too many – fallen Marinite men, women, and children. The hallowed halls that became our very own death camp, post the death of Ustek and rise of Kelsard and Dupec, became nothing more than our own personal Velox Continuum where bodies went in but rarely ever came out.

It was a frightful thing to be near the former University School at nighttime. It is said that a thousand souls come alive and tug at the heels of the Marinite and Amirontians alike that are held there as prisoners of SRA. The shrill screams that arise at all hours pierces the souls of all that hear.

The cinema, also the former pride of Marieux, was no more. Throughout my lifetime, it has been nothing more than a dumping ground for illegals, abandoned children, girls and boys, under the age of sixteen. Run by an awful Amirontian woman from an unknown clan by the name of Tagali, it is rumored that she was brought especially for the purpose of caring for *the fosters*, hand selected by Dupec himself, from a village back on their home planet.

A ghoulish woman of at least 6' and 300 lbs who is known to use children as her own indentured servants, forcing deeds upon them that range from preparing her evening dish of the Amirontian delicacy of boiled carrupe, a bitter tasting fish imported fresh daily from Amironte and purchased by the elite, to satisfying her own twisted sexual desires.

At the age of sixteen the illegals become legitimate and are released and allowed to find ways to fend for themselves. Few survive the ordeal and a high majority of the ones that do are those that were taken only a year or two prior to their sixteenth day. It is not uncommon for a newly released foster to find themselves quickly thrust into the \*Facilities shortly after their release for thievery, or if it is a female, raped, beaten, or even killed for being caught taking money out of the pocket of SOTA and SRA by stealing their customers. But how else is one to survive under such depraved circumstances?

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AT AGE THIRTEEN BEING IN THE CITY WAS DANGEROUS. SRA SOLDIERS blanketed the area serving many vile purposes. Some to collect dues from the level 1 SOTA that resided in buildings that Kelsard provided. Some to collect the outrageous taxes imposed on those that continued to do business there. Some watched for thieves that they would beat mercilessly if they opted not to turn them in. Others kept their eyes peeled for minor citizens just like me, underage girls that had no family that they could rape and pass around before handing over for further humiliation and degradation under the "care" of Galê Tagali.

I kept my eyes low and wore the garments of a male. I stayed in the shadows of the soldiers and avoided being seen. I followed what my instincts commanded, never once betraying or second-guessing an order. Some say it was as though an anointing covered me and had they seen me without the mask of the contents of the large jar filled at the banks of the Apigara that I carried at all times in my backpack, they would truly believe that.

I did not.

I was smart, raised well by my mira who trained me in the stealthy ways of the Marinite, the art of following in the shadow of the pendi as they swam near the shallow banks of the Apigara...following patiently and spearing an entire family without them ever sensing they were in danger. Their deaths were as peaceful as if they had fallen asleep and never waken up.

This skill was the key to my survival then just as it is today.

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“WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?” JAYDE ASKED FAINTLY AS WE WALKED together toward Mole’s, one of many underground gathering spots for people in my age group that operated just out of range of SRA’s radar. Mole’s was the perfect place for Jayde and me, our favorite hangout. The owner, an Amorite who was simply called Mole, welcomed everyone, black, brown, and other, Marinite, Amorite, Citoberian. I had even once met a young rebel Zanti there. All he cared about was red, the color of the \*dashii’s that were handed over to him to gain entrance.

“I bought it,” I answered simply and without the reserve that had been clear in Jayde’s tone.

“Bought it with what?”

“With dashii’s, what else?” I responded, looking her directly in the eyes.

An awkward grunt escaped her and she stopped abruptly grabbing me by my arm, almost making me drop the fresh pendi and rutarb sandwich that I had purchased just before I met up with her on the predominately Amirontian side of town.

“Hey,” I cried out, switching my delicacy to my right hand and snatching my arm back.

“Where did you get the dashii’s?” Jayde asked, her eyes darting back and forth as though she feared that she may somehow be overheard by the invisible presence of SRA that constantly loomed over us.

I smiled devilishly, my eyes already darkened by my contacts, darkened further with my mischief.

“Olivia, where did you get the dashii’s?” she asked again, sternly.

“Relax, my Amirite sister,” I responded, continuing forward toward Mole’s. “It is legit.”

“Since when?”

“Oh, do you think that little of me?”

“Um, yes.”

I rolled my eyes, not the least bit offended by the unvoiced accusation and verbalized insult.

“Jayde, \*meli,” I began, stopping before her and cutting her short as she had done me. “I did a job for Wally.”

“Wally.”

“Yes, Wally.”

“Let me ask you a question, Liv. Since when does Wally pay enough for you to pay Diana your cut, go to Mole’s, and have enough left over for a pendi and rutarb sandwich from Kel’s Deli?”

I turned and continued forward. “He does not. Diana paid my cut this month.” I took another bite, savoring the flavor of the moist fish mixed with the tangy orange sauce and for a moment – just a moment – flashing back to Ashtwor and my days with Mira. I shook off the overwhelming sadness attempting to cover me and wrapped the rest of my sandwich and tucked it away inside my jacket.

“Diana paid your cut,” Jayde asked more than stated.

“Yes. It is her early gift to me.”

“Your cousin, Diana Kalaath. Since when does she do that? Since when can she afford to?”

My stride slowed and my jaw clenched. “What are you trying to say, Jayde?”

“Nothing. I am only saying that it is not like her, is all. I mean, if she somehow had extra money would she not spend it on \*obi red?”

I folded my lips in and nodded my understanding of the accusation before sucking my teeth and turning away.

Jayde called after me. “Where are you going? Olivia, why are you leaving?”

I could hear the sound the tall heels of her shoes made on the pavement as she ran after me. She grabbed my arm gently. I stopped.

“Olivia, why are you upset? It is just so unlikely. You have to understand my doubt.”

“I am not a liar.”

“Meli, I know you are not.”

“I may be a lot of things...a lot of things but I am not a liar.”

“I know. I know, I am sorry. Please, forgive me.”

Jayde was looking down at me, her brown eyes boring into mine, pleading for a stay of execution.

I looked away. I could not stay angry with her for very long. She was my friend. Besides Diana, she was all I had on Marieux.

“I forgive you, Jayde. Of course I forgive you. I just...I am just going to go home.”

“Oh come on, Liv. You know I look forward to this all week. This is the reason that I even survive the week, to get to the day that I get to party at Mole’s.”

“No one is stopping you from going.”

“You said you forgive me.”

“And I do. I am just no longer in the mood.”

“Liv, please. You cannot send me in there alone. Aissa’s off at Moxi with Raz and hoping to hook up with that bartender Lakew...Lakin, whatever his name is. And I cannot take Tabi following up under me all night.”

“Faraji should be there if he did not go to Moxi with Aissa and Raz.”

“All night,” she stressed, ignoring my suggestion about her other roommate’s potential presence. “Please, Liv, please. I will buy you your next pendi sandwich myself, the next time I get paid.”

I fought the smile emerging. Jayde pleaded and pouted, forcing a laugh out of me. “Can I get it with \*mateles on it? You know Kel started charging extra for mateles?”

“You can get mateles.”

“And a kakali milkshake? You know they make the best kakali milkshakes on the planet.”

“Okay, now you are pushing it,” Jayde answered in her beautifully husky voice, grabbing my wrist and pulling me after her.

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I HAD GOTTEN UPSET WITH JAYDE FOR THE ACCUSATION BECAUSE I was insulted by the implication that I was a liar. I had been quite self-righteous and made my best friend feel bad for having suggested such a thing.

But I am liar.

I have been lying to Jayde since the very day she led me to my mother.

Jayde filled in the blanks where my own instincts left off. Moving in the shadows, living on streets beneath stoops and just out of view from doorsteps, was the perfect entry into the world of small time thievery. A talent that could see me locked away in the west wing of the Facilities and at that age could have easily had me under the control of that witch, Galé Tagali.

That is where Jayde found me, at the most dangerous point in my young life. Behind an old rundown building where I watched dolais' and Sisters enter horny and anxious and exit separated and satisfied, obi red dealers selling their lethal product on the steps...where stray \*marineals and diseased rats attempted to steal what I had already stolen for my survival, that is where a young Amirontian girl, brown skinned and nearly 6' tall discovered me, dirty and hungry.

She offered her assistance to me because she thought I was one of her people. I was tall when I stood upright, not close in comparison to her but exceeding the height expectation of a Marinite my age.

She was floored when I asked that she lead me in the direction of the location of a Marinite named Diana Kalaath. *“Why in the world would a young Amirontian with clearly no ties to SOTA want to find a whore, not to mention a Marinite whore, like Diana Kalaath?”*

I hadn't known what I would find when I found her. A beautiful home and a four-door transport car imported from Ntozaint? A beautiful woman, a husband, two new siblings and a pet? Not likely. She had been a SOTA escapee when she gave birth to me; I only truly hoped to find her alive.

Though I hadn't ever seen her in life she was still my mother and my initial reaction was to defend her honor. But she'd apparently been reduced to a level 1 SOTA whore. She had no honor.

I recalled the teachings of Mira, the gift of the Marinite that she passed on to me. Be calm. Be patient. Be in control.

I spoke in the small voice of a new teen with all the passion of a seasoned adult. *“I am not Amirite. I am full blood Marinite and I have just lost the only family I have ever known. I am only thirteen, I am an illegal and I am desperate to find the only known relative I have, a distant cousin my mira once mentioned. A cousin from Kalaath. If you will not help me, I'll find her myself. I have come too far to give up.”*

I had not understood why I had given her so much information about my plight, but as I have already stated I'd always followed my instincts and never once second-guessed. She was an Amirite and though I couldn't care less

about such things, clearly it mattered to her. It would have been nothing for her to flag down the nearest SRA soldier and have me turned over to Galê Tagali.

But more than a proud Amirontian, she was a victim of the injustice of the society in which she and I both lived. She was barely legal herself, but a year beyond the danger zone.

She did not turn me in. Instead she introduced herself to me as Jayde Nestyton.

I introduced myself as Olivia Aleyk.

I *am* a liar.

†

MOLE'S WAS FULL AS IT WAS EVERY ENDWEEK, FILLED TO THE BRIM with Amirites and Marinites. A couple Citoberians laughed over shots at a table in the back that they shared with a couple Amirontian girls and boys and a tiny pale-skinned, red-haired girl who was likely a Dorolard transplant. Since the Shadow Wars, my planet had become a regular nesting spot for transplants that were either outcast or bored with their own planets.

The DJ, a popular Citoberian female on the underground circuit who simply referred to herself Silhouette, mixed dance beats with heavy bass lines through the most powerful speakers Mole could afford to acquire from Ntozaint. Half dressed waitresses who stood no less than 5'10" without the additional 4" that their heels provided, worked the crowd, their sturdy bodies traditionally Amirite complete with full breasts and round rears and thighs that could crack walnuts, offering watered down drinks at hiked up prices and commanded a tip greater than the last girl to pass by.

Jayde's face lit with joy as she danced through a crowd smiling and stealing air kisses from the many patrons that recognized her. I followed along barely noticed, the way I liked it.

"Jayde! Jayde," a voice called over the music.

It was the voice of Jayde's roommate Tabia. If I had heard the shrill cry of her voice, certainly Jayde had, yet she kept moving forward. She was going to make Tabi work. She would not speak to me, not until she had to. She didn't care for me. Not so much because of my Marinite blood but mainly because of my relationship with Jayde. She envied me for that though she was not likely to ever admit as much.

I turned, catching Tabi's eye and shrugged my shoulders, unwilling to plead her case and attempt to stall Jayde. That is until I spotted Faraji. His crown displayed his Amirontian ancestry, bald on all sides except down the centre.

"Hey, Liv," Faraji called, smiling and showing perfectly even teeth.

I tugged Jayde's top and nudged her toward the table informing her that roomie #1 was present, taking some of the pressure off her and commanding some of Tabi's attention.

Jayde grunted, leaning toward my ear as she and I walked toward the saved table. "I so wish Raz would take this little \*shunti off my hands sometimes. I swear I don't think she understands that I do not like girls like her. She is lucky she's the only \*ami in the house that's dependable for rent."

I laughed heartily, a chortle made stronger at the sight of Tabi looking on nervously between Jayde and me, her expression betraying her thoughts.

“Hi, Jayde, I did not think you would make it,” Tabi said uncomfortably.

Jayde only nodded and offered a brief wave.

“Hi, Tabi. Can’t speak?” I said to her.

“Hello, Olivia,” she answered reluctantly.

“I thought maybe you two changed your mind and decided to stay home with poppy beer and girl talk.” Faraji laughed as he stood to give Jayde and me a welcome hug.

“And we would do this without the biggest girl of all?” Jayde jokingly responded.

I noticed the attractive Citoberian male who sat at the table beside Faraji watching closely every move he made and phalangering the material of his top. My mind flashed to Razi and the pleasure it would give me to see the look on his face if he ever found out about Faraji’s secret obsession for pretty Citoberian males.

Faraji caught the eye of the tallest waitress, waving three phalanges.

I felt Jayde’s hand press discreetly into my spine firmly as she, at the last moment, swapped positions with me, forcing Tabi and me to share personal space in the booth. It bothered me none, but I felt Tabi’s entire energy shift.

The waitress returned with three small glasses filled with a potent dark liquor manufactured secretly by Amirites at some heavily protected location not very far from where we sat.

Faraji stood, passing one shot to Jayde and the other to me. On cue we stood for the toast.

“May your life be long and full, may your days be never dull, if you battle with soldiers may you aim to kill, and when between the sheets may it be surreal,” we cried out in unison, toasting our glasses and sending the feeling of flames shooting over our tongues and down our throats to warm our bellies before landing with a thud in our seats, laughing along the way.

Faraji leaned to his right, planting his full lips against the mouth of the smooth faced Citoberian boy. The kiss was extended and wet and filled with much more lust than passion.

When he was done, he wiped the moisture from the boy’s mouth before addressing us. “Girls, this is Madan. Madan, these are the girls. Girls, thank Madan for the drinks.”

“Not if I have to follow your lead,” Jayde stated with laughter in her voice.

“Oh no, save the dirty work for me,” he said, kissing Madan again.

I chuckled. “Thank you, Madan for helping to kick off my weekend binger.”

Jayde saluted her thanks. “Oh Raj, if Raz could only see you now.”

“Not funny, J,” Faraji said apprehensively.

“I’ll never tell,” she said in a singsong voice.

“Better not.” He turned his attention away from Jayde. “Why the scowl, Tabi? Mad because you cannot spend the night sniffing Jayde’s forearm.”

“Screw you, Raj, you silly \*ganti.”

Faraji hissed. Jayde and I folded into one another in laughter. I could feel Tabi’s eyes boring into my side. She wanted me gone, but she could never make me disappear.

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IT WAS JAYDE THAT LED ME TO DIANA. TWO BUILDINGS OVER FROM where I'd been hiding for the first twenty-four hours after I arrived in The City. The sight was not what I had expected yet I wasn't terribly surprised.

She was doped up on obi red and emaciated. Her right eye moved a hint slower than her left one. Her hair was dirty. She did not match the pleasant visuals that Mira had left with me but when I looked deep into her eyes, I knew the stories were once true.

I told her that I was her cousin, separated from Aleyk in my youth and raised alone by my mira Elizabeth Alpha Ylai Aleyk and watched as, for the first time since Jayde left me in her presence, life entered her eyes. When I gave her my name her knees buckled.

"Olivia," she'd whispered with relief while wrapping her arms tightly around me, pulling me into her body. Her tears soaked the jacket that I wore where her head rested on my shoulder. My tears filled up my throat and I fought hard to swallow them but not before one or two escaped.

I came to live with her in the small two and a half-room flat that she rented from Kelsard in the downtown SOTA building. She could not afford to have me there, but she didn't complain. I did not eat much better in Diana's home than I had behind it. From that moment on, thievery became my chosen profession.

Mira would be terribly disappointed.

I saw Jayde often but only by chance. She resided on the outer edges of The City's downtown in a heavily Amirontian populated area, but she frequently visited the SOTA building that she'd discovered me loitering behind, checking on the well being of her own cousin, another demoted Sister (in her case for age and weight gain that suddenly seemed impossible to lose).

We acknowledged one another out of courtesy...in passing. But soon our discreet head nods led to casual conversation. She came to be concerned about me and my health and well being, as it seemed to her that I was disappearing before her very eyes. This did little to help improve the opinion of the woman that she thought was my cousin.

She offered her home as a legal, viable option for me to have food and a quick rest without being subjected to the sighs from Diana and grunts from whatever dolais that happened to be contributing to the paying of our household expenses that hour. The only condition she imposed was that I pretend to be Amirite. She lived with four other Amirontians who were none too fond of the Marinite race, for how they saw it, we were prone to demonize them all for the sins of others and for them that injustice was greater than any sin Kelsard and (particularly) Dupec could commit.

It was just that simple. I'd be fed and rested and the only cost imposed upon me was to take advantage of my inability to properly darken my skin and the several inches I towered above a typical Marinite woman.

I told her thank you, but I would rather continue to starve. To deny who I was would be to deny everything that Mira represented. I'd die before I further shamed my mira.

I did continue to starve. I ate the meager rations that Diana remembered to purchase. I ate from the proceeds of what I could acquire on my own. I continued to roam amongst the shadows half dead and waiting for Mira to extend her hand to me and take me home to be with her and my other ancestors until Jayde's latent motherly

instincts kicked in and her concern for me far outweighed the importance of maintaining an allegiance to a prejudice.

From then on she became my big sister. She fed me, protected me and stood by me despite the opposition she faced from all, but most pointedly Razi Las, pro-Amorite which for him is equivalent to anti-Marinite.

In time I came to win the respect of Faraji and Aissa (twin sister of Razi) and they dubbed me their friend. Tabi saw me only as an inconvenience, someone who stood between her and whatever disturbed affections she held for Jayde. Despite the great efforts of Tabia and Razi to convince Jayde to rid herself of me, *a dirty little \*Mariuchan girl who dresses and behaves so much like a boy that she's probably a nasty \*codila who's just waiting to pounce on you the first chance she gets*, Jayde stood by me and I will forever love her for it.

†

WE STOOD TOGETHER IN A CLUSTER NOT TOO FAR FROM THE 5 cement steps that led from the secret \*hold to the thicket in the abandoned yard which led to the heavy metal gate that separated our world from our reality, passing around a \*caniron stick supplied by Faraji's date for the evening.

Faraji inhaled deeply the smoke the little purple leaves created as they burned in the treated film that they were wrapped in. Tabi waited impatiently for Faraji to pass the cani her way. She stood as close to Jayde as possible, breathing in her scent and getting her high from that as she waited.

Faraji finally finished his turn and passed the drug my way. I declined as I always did.

"Loser," Tabi commented as she anxiously put the stick to her lips.

"Just remember that OR addicts were first cani addicts."

She responded with the age-old display of the center phalange.

It was the end of the night and Mole's was shutting down, its remaining patrons sneaking off into various directions, careful to keep a watchful eye for the soldiers. They would not be very diligent at this hour; they never were which is why most of the underground spots in every section of The City closed down at this time. Many of the soldiers were likely asleep at their posts, between the legs of a Sister, or locked in their own cani or OR haze.

Faraji inhaled the stick that had, like magic, materialized in between his fingertips once again. He looked on lovingly at the remains as he held the purple haze in between his jaws while Madan fondled him unabashedly.

"It has been great, guys," Faraji announced diverting his attention to the horny young fair skinned Citoberian \*giji boy that was commanding his attention. He handed the remainder of the stick to Jayde. "Liv, see you around. Jayde, Tabi, I'll see you two in the morning...or afternoon...or the next day..."

Faraji's voice, low and laden from the effects of the cani, trailed off as he led Madan away flirting and clearly excited for what was to come.

"What shall I say to Razi of your whereabouts should he ask?" Jayde questioned playfully as the couple ascended the steps.

Faraji responded, "Tell him to try it. He just might like it."

We laughed. Razi had no idea about Faraji's secret weakness and would consider him a traitor and complete embarrassment to the Amirontian race if he ever did. Even worse, he would probably kill him.

Jayde took the cani stick to her lips and adjusted her skirt. "We should go, too. In another hour it will be too dangerous to venture about this side of town. Olivia, why not stay over? You know I am always so nervous about you creeping through downtown this time of night. You know SRA is always heavy near anything SOTA."

"We go through this every week. Razi would have a fit if he woke to breakfast with a *dirty Mariuchan* at the table."

"Screw that arrogant, ami," she said, mashing the end of the cani stick with the tip of the exotic shoe she wore.

"Yes, pleasant though it may be for some, that arrogant ami pays a fifth of your rent and keeps you from having to live in the heart of downtown with me and D. I am going home, that's all to it. No time for Razi's drama or Tabi's either for that matter once she is sober."

Tabi showed me the tip of her tongue. I continued the tradition by showing her my friendly phalange.

"Ugh, you are so stubborn. Whatever, let's go."

We walked together quietly, immediately sobered by the constant threat present. At the edge of downtown, Jayde and Tabi offered their brief goodbyes and made their way east as I took to the shadows. The presence of SRA was evident where I lived as it always was. I had never been caught sneaking back onto the block in the four years that I'd resided there and I wouldn't now.

I entered the building from the side entrance and traveled the five flights to the home I made with Diana. I used my key though it was unnecessary, as she had forgotten to lock it behind Ja'ali Dupec, an SRA ranking officer and her regular, yet again.

I stepped lightly but even doped up she was a faint sleeper.

"Olivia, is that you?" she asked in a terribly groggy tone.

"Yes, Diana, it is me. Go back to sleep."

She made an odd noise that sounded faintly as though she were trying to tell me something as she drifted back into slumber. She laid across the foot of the bed, nude and sweaty, her dark hair matted to her head. She was not hot, the sweat beads were not caused by heat but rather as a reaction to the obi red I was sure she'd snorted.

I took her firmly beneath the arms and pulled her higher up on the worn down bed. The moonlight streaming through the smeared window reflected off the long, jagged scar that extended from above her rib cage and across to her lower back. I touched the raised skin gently, following its trail from top to bottom, wondering who had inflicted the gruesome wound and why.

I grabbed the tattered blanket and tucked her in tight, noticing for the first time that her teeth were chattering. She mumbled some incoherent words to which I respectfully agreed.

My feet were heavy as I crossed the room toward the small section of the flat hidden behind a pale yellow curtain, the area we called my bedroom. I fell onto the old mattress that took up nearly the entire space, staring at the ceiling.

I eased the green wool hat from my hair that was turning curly again from the sweat I worked up at Mole's. I measured its length with my phalanges. It'd already grown nearly two inches since the last time I cut it only four

days prior. I would have to cut it again in the morning...yawn...maybe color the roots and straighten it again...yes, in case my hat were removed at an inopportune time I would definitely have to steam it again.

My heavy eyelids closed and I drifted away to the place I waited all day to get to. I drifted away to meet Mira for lunch of fried pendi with rutarb sauce on a bed of lettuce with matele's on the side, enjoyed near the Apigara not far from Ashtwor...same as I had done in a past life...same as I did in all of my dreams.

## *Two. Heart of the City*

AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE SHADOW WARS, WHEN KATASHI KEDT, sovereign ruler of the planet Arethoxx, leader of a clan in rule for over four hundred years and certainly not known for diplomacy, overthrew the Amironte leader Ustek and all that ruled beside him, a young Marinite named Henry Kelsard was making a name for himself and creating a following during captivity and the subsequent uprising on the planet Marieux.

He had always had ambitions of political power but a common tradition on the planets that make up the sector of the galaxy called Zephyrnox Theta requires that the ruling clan retain power as long as there is a first-born son to carry forth the family's name. Under such conditions a family can remain in power indefinitely.

Unfortunately for Henry he could never expect any opportunity to be in any position of power in the ranks of the reign for he was the eighth born son of a poor farmer from a limited lineage with no education.

But with the murder of Ittas, the subsequent murder of Ustek, and a race war on the streets and in the valley's of Marieux, Henry finally had the playing field leveled. It is said he did much to fight for the people during and post captivity, which gave him the appearance of a savior. A handsome young Amorite, named Taaman Dupec, with political ambitions of his own took notice.

Marinites were fighting to regain control of their home. It was theirs and with Ustek forever gone they saw no reason that Amirontians should not jump into their shuttles and return to their own home planet. Amirites who had lived here for more than four years and made Marieux their home felt they had a claim staked in this place and had as much right to be here as the natives. Both could likely agree that the blood loss had to stop; the season was ripe for new leadership. The citizens, native and transplants alike, craved guidance. It matters not what planet one is from or race they are, at some point everyone desires to be led.

In the beginning the newly formed Soldiers of the Allegiance was a Godsend from the perspective of the citizens on both sides. They policed the streets, created laws, and ultimately reinstated a decent economy. But there was a saying taught to the former students of Zanti professors, a saying that originated on the planet Earth and made its way via space and time, a saying that was passed down from one Marinite generation to the next – power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

While Henry Kelsard and Taaman Dupec were taking charge of the streets of Marieux, there was no one in charge of them. Something that can only be described as greed consumed both men inspiring them to create even more unreasonable laws and excessive punishments for the smallest infractions.

In the midst of this recognition of ultimate power, Sisters of the Allegiance was born.

†

FROM THOSE EARLY, COMPLETELY CHAOTIC DAYS OF SRA REIGN, THE pair found a perfect way to use SOTA to satisfy multiple purposes. Ranking officers were given access to nearly any Sister of his choosing within his race (with the exception of Level 1's where race is irrelevant). All others, whether SRA or not, could have their time with a Sister for a price. But only level 1 Sisters were allowed to retain a share of the profits earned. While Elite's and level 2's are 100% provided for, Level 1's are not.

Understanding that the day would come when Kelsard would retire the Sister and immediately evict her from her residence in the downtown SOTA building, many began to follow the Marinite practice of sacrificing 10% off the top of their profits, a figure normally reserved in sacrifice to Deus but would instead be used as their retirement fund. The likelihood of returning to their home village or meeting a successful man who would care for them after having lived such a degrading existence was slim to none. When the day came they would have a little something to help them get on their feet. The personal retirement fund was essential to a former Sister's survival.

Diana had nothing.

From our first meeting she was rather fragile with sunken jaws and shallow eyes. Much of her dashii's were spent on the purchase of cani and obi red. But somehow through it all she could still be quite lovely. She had something special and men, from the hardhearted Sector Leader Ja'ali Dupec to the husbands of the many upstanding Marinite women who lay with her, seemed to have a weakness for Diana.

There were months when she would attempt to become sober, kicking her OR habit once and for all. During those times signs of her former self shone through. She ate more and picked up enough weight to put a rosy glow into her dark cheeks. She would wash her long, luscious hair with a mangalee-based shampoo, twisting it into the intricate and elegant Valian bun, and adorn it with a bright yellow flower.

On those mornings, during those months, she would apply a bright red lip paste and pierce the holes in her ears with a beautiful and valuable pair of earrings made from the shell of a conchi, a rare crustacean found only on the deep south end near Ittas Lake (named in honor of the former ruling family).

But as the years pressed forward, somewhere along the line, she simply gave up.

†

“THERE IS NOTHING IN HERE TO EAT. DIANA. DIANA!”

She sat on the edge of the bed, seemingly in a daze. An old, pale yellow brassiere concealed her once perky breasts. She wore a pretty green skirt that had seen better days. It was one that I had used my *special skills* to

acquire for her a year earlier. She was rolling a stocking on her leg. She had been attending to that one leg for a good five minutes.

I walked over to where she sat and gently touched her shoulder. "Diana."

She looked up at me. Looked at me like this was the first time she had noticed that I was in the flat.

"Olivia."

"Yes, it is me. You okay?"

She eyed me oddly...longer. "What? Of course I am okay." And like that, she was back.

"Where were you?" I asked, scratching my scalp and walking back to the tiny kitchen to scour the cabinets in case I had missed something.

"What are you talking about? I am right here."

"I was speaking to you."

"Well, what did you say?"

"Food, D. There is none," I answered with exasperation, allowing a cabinet door to swing closed with a thud.

She frowned. "Please, do not call me D. I am your...I mean, I know you very well cannot...just do not be that casual with me."

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Can't you buy food this time?"

I stood at the mouth of the kitchen, watching her dress in her corporate wear, dumbfounded and speechless. She paid me no mind. Instead she finally made progress with the other stocking. She stood and walked to her dresser, sifting through her meager belongings (most acquired by me) seeking out a top to wear.

She was too tall for a Marinite woman, exceeding the expectation by a good 4". I had already grown beyond that by at least 2". Evolution was changing much of what was normally expected to be reality. My eye was drawn to the red ink embedded into the pigment in her shoulder, barely noticeable for her skin was so richly dark. It was the ancient Marinite symbol for PEACE.

"You said that you would buy food."

"I said no such thing."

"You did so. You told me you had extra. That you would pay the full house bill for the month and buy food."

"Wait, what?" She turned to face me, halting the process of pulling the thin, white top over her body. "You have your share, right?"

"What? No. You said-"

"I said no such thing."

"Yesterday-"

"Voshon will be coming to collect first thing tomorrow. You had better have that money or we are in trouble."

"I spent the money."

"Why would you do that?"

“Because you insisted you would pay it.”

She flipped her hair, heavy and weighted from oils and dirt, from inside her shirt and walked to the mirror.

“Then you better find some way to get it back.”

She leaned forward and began smearing lip paste across her pouty mouth. I could not be bitter, it was my own fault, I should have known better. I should not have trusted her. She was my heart, all that was left of my mira. In this city filled with corruption, she was how I survived. She was my heartbeat and I wanted to trust but I knew better.

She walked toward me smiling, as though she had not just betrayed my desired confidence in her. She stopped in front of me, her eyes just below my own. Her dirty nails created a path through my curly locks. Gold shone through at the roots and I knew my skin color must be uneven.

“You better dye this pretty soon. You should probably cut it, too. I can do it later if you wish.”

She was my heart in this horrible city.

I nodded. “I am going to dye it today...after the floor is cleared out. Maybe...maybe I will cut it myself if you are going to be, you know, busy.”

Her eyes dropped to the scuffed floor and the light that had flickered there moments earlier, extinguished.

“Yes, that is probably best.”

She stepped back from me and walked to the door. She called to me without pausing or looking back. “Be careful, Olivia. You are all I have left in this world.”

She closed the door firmly behind her before I had a chance to respond.

“Right back atcha.”

†

THE DAY WOULD COME WHEN VOSHON, THE ODD LITTLE MAN FROM a system to the north of Zephyrnox Theta, would make the rounds to collect the tax and he would walk though our door with the typically dreaded announcement, “*Congratulations. You are being retired. Your services are no longer needed.*” It would be said in a tone befitting of the news, said in the annoyingly nasal and monotone voice apparently synonymous with his race.

Though every level 1 Sister dreamed of the day that Kelsard allowed them to retire, they dreaded its arrival. With the emotionless announcement came the instruction to be out within 48 hours.

Many Sisters were left with no place to go. Some roomed with others that they had come to be close with but because spaces were small that did not usually last for very long. If Bea had a bed available, the Sister would take advantage of her 3-month policy.

Bea Yalei was a former SOTA recruit who was demoted and ultimately retired for excessive weight gain. Legend around the SOTA building has it that she gained the weight purposely as a means to break free from the clutches of SOTA and Kelsard. Though she garnered a great deal of respect for her ability to maintain control over herself and her life in a controlled society, few had the stomach for the task. Bea Yalei diligently saved her earnings and soon formed a privately funded home in the underground circuit for formers.

A lucky few returned to their village. The others, those that hid their money away, were able to begin again. That was the afterlife that I wanted for my mother, Diana. I followed in the footsteps of the wiser of the Sisters but since there were two of us I took it a step further. I put 12% off the top of every dashii that came my way.

Whether I earned it doing errands for the Marinite Wally or acquired it from my former side hustle of relieving the Amirite proprietor Tiakalu out of his dashii's, twelve percent always went into the envelope I kept hidden away deep inside my old, pre-used mattress.

The day would come when Kelsard would retire Diana and we would not have to grovel at the feet of aging whores or pay for a temporary bed beside a former one. I was hoping to use the dashii's to purchase one of the many vacant shanty houses in villages around town. We would live there and make a home. We would find one near the banks of the Apigara and we would grow our own veggies that we would sell at market and fish for pendi in the river. We would plant our very own Mangalee tree and drink the nectar from the ripened fruit.

We would lie in the sun, her dark skin getting darker and mine concealed, sucking on the sweet juices of green obi berries.

†

I MET WALLY DURING MY EARLY DAYS IN THE CITY. A BIG FLIRT WHO grew on Jayde and became an associate; she connected me with him to do odd jobs that would keep me from stealing and potentially being locked in the Facilities. I tried to remain on the straight and narrow for not only my sake but also Diana's and Jayde's. At the news that Diana was going back on our arrangement I went directly to Wally. I found him at his little shop and begged and pleaded for something...anything that would earn me the money that I would need to pay the balance of the tax before Voshon arrived the next morning.

He had nothing for me but promised if any opportunity arose he would seek me out. I did not have time to wait for opportunity to knock. I had to go to opportunity myself.

I stood next to the side door of Kel's Diner at nightfall. It was the one on the Marinite side of The City, the one where he did his most rip-offs. Kelikee Tiakalu was one of few wealthy Amirontian businessmen who owned three such diners throughout The City amongst other ventures. He had sold his soul and it served him well.

Much of what was served in each diner varied by location. If it was on the Amirontian side of The City, boiled carrupe platters with couscous and topped with mantele's was the top sale. Where I was, the most famous dish was the fried pendi sandwich on a roll with rutarb sauce. He charged extra for mantele's. He charged us extra for everything. A green obi kakali nut shake cost us Marinites twice what it cost at the Amirontian location.

He had been robbing us blind for years. And I had been doing the same to him.

Fortunately, I spotted the camera before it spotted me. Tiakalu had apparently gotten wise it seemed and purchased one of the pricey new surveillance cameras manufactured on the industrial planet Ntozaint and sold locally. I would have to be even more cautious.

I knew the layout of the shop and I knew the rotation of the clerks and soldiers. This was the one uncoordinated time of day. I had 12 minutes to get in, get the seventy dashii's I had come for (fifty for the house

bill and twenty for myself. If I were going to do it anyway, I may as well profit). I had not accounted for advanced security but I would not allow such a thing to count me out.

I stayed close to the building, blending in, and becoming one with the structure. I was unsure if he had ordered one of the alarms that some shop owners were investing in. If he had, I did not know that I would be able to get around it.

I reached over to test the handle. I took a deep breath. If a sound cried out I would have to move quickly to avoid the ray of the Harbinger, a weapon that the soldiers carried and used to immobilize (and sometimes slaughter) the innocent and guilty alike.

My hand gripped the handle. I pulled slightly and the door opened – no alarm. Opening the door wide enough for me to fit inside would cause it to pass the eye of the observing technology and if someone were monitoring from the inside, alert them to a problem. I determined my best option would be to shift the fixture slightly away from the door so that I could get inside.

A nearby dumpster acted as my stepladder. I carefully, but swiftly, climbed on top. I balanced myself and tipped to the edge, reaching for the device. My fingers brushed against it but I could not grasp it unless I stepped closer. If I stepped out further I would run the risk of losing my balance and falling to the ground below. If I got down and pushed the dumpster closer, the loud noise it would make scraping across the ground was bound to command attention.

I tipped further out onto the edge delicately. Beads of sweat that had spontaneously popped onto my forehead trickled down between my eyes and passed by my nose. I closed my eyes tight and extended my arm as far as it would go, managing a loose grip onto the camera. I held my breath and moved it slowly, carefully. If anyone were indeed watching, hopefully they would not notice.

When I felt I had gone far enough, I paused and waited. According to my mental clock I had, maybe, seven minutes before the safe would be guarded, nine before the soldiers would return.

I jumped down, landing softly and ducked beneath the device and to the other side of the door. I turned the handle and eased inside the back of the diner. I could hear voices not far away. My adrenaline intensified. I kept low and out of sight and quickly made my way to the unlocked safe. It was between shifts and the clerks, despite all the years I had been shorting their delivery, had a terrible habit of leaving the safe open while the transition was made. My actions had led to the termination of numerous clerks who were blamed for the shortfall that their carelessness caused.

I reached inside the safe and quickly counted out the seventy dashii's I had come for but at the last moment decided on an extra five for good measure.

“Did you lock the safe?” a voice asked. The voice, deep and sultry sounded closer than it should have been.

“I forgot.”

“You forgot.”

“What is the big deal, no one is here but us.”

“The big deal is that it is Tiakalu's procedure, that is reason enough.”

“To hell with that greedy, ami. Had I the nerve, I would rob him myself.”

The voices were moving closer. Quickly, I pushed the door closed. I looked to the door from which I had entered. I wanted badly to make a break for it but I could not without passing the workers and if they spotted me, they were certain to flag down a soldier. The consequences for stealing from a man like Tiakalu, a man that was in bed with the devil, would be severe.

My heart pounded but I steadied myself. I remained calm and clearheaded. I moved backward, centimeters away from the large metal counter, the centerpiece of the room. The footsteps approached to my left so I dashed to the right.

“Just keep talking like that,” the bass-filled voiced warned. Curiosity consumed me. If I was going down I wanted to see who would take me there before he saw me. I peered around the corner, careful not to take a breath. I could see the owner of the voice from where I sat in hiding but unless he turned and leaned forward, he would not see me. I was fairly certain he was Marinite. His barren, kakali nut colored scalp gave way to his heritage. He bent down and entered the combination on the safe and my shoulders relaxed. To my relief he had not first checked the contents.

As the men disagreed, I took inventory of my surroundings. There were two entrances to the kitchen from the interior of the store. The one the workers had come through and the other directly across from where I crouched. The dilemma I faced was that the shop would be locked during the transition.

The voice spoke again. “Just stay back here and get to work. I will finish up in the front and get ready to open the store again.”

I had to move. No time to contemplate what could happen; I darted across to the doorway, keeping low, unsure of what other obstacle awaited me on the other side. Footsteps moved in the direction of the front of the store as I arrived at the edge of the counter. I glanced to the door. There was no way out without being seen. The one thing I had going for me was that there were no customers, or worse, soldiers present to witness my emergence.

I crept from the side of the counter to the front. I had no choice; if I wanted any hope of escaping I would have to take my chances. I stood upright, coming face to face with the owner of *the voice*. He jumped, startled by my presence.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “How did you get in here?”

“Through the door,” I answered calmly as though what I said were absolutely true.

“What door?”

“That door. What other door is there?”

“That door is locked.”

“No, it is not.” I stepped slightly to my left hoping to obscure his view. “How else would I get in?”

He paused, looking from me to the door. “What were you doing down there?”

I chuckled nervously. “Tying my shoe.”

His facial impression said he was not completely convinced. “So...what do you want?”

“I wanted a kakali nut shake.”

The question mark remained as he began to service me. “Certainly. What flavor?”

I glanced out the glass of the door in time to see two soldiers approaching. I cursed inside. If they pulled the door and proved it was indeed locked there would be no way for me to explain my presence.

“Hey, what flavor?”

“Never mind.” I turned quickly and walked toward the door.

“Hold on. Hey, hold on for a second,” he called after me. I continued forward, walking faster. I could hear him moving from behind the counter. My eyes stayed on the approaching soldiers.

“I changed my mind. I can get it cheaper across town.”

He stopped. I faced him as I turned the lock quick and discreet while pushing the door moments before one of the soldiers reached out to open it.

“Thanks, anyhow,” I said before disappearing into the shadow of night.

†

“WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?” JAYDE ASKED. NOT WAITING FOR A response, she leaned in and pulled me into a tight embrace. “Happy 17<sup>th</sup>, you old \*shunti!”

I half smiled. “Thanks.”

Jayde stepped back and looked into my eyes carefully. “Okay, what is going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“We have not just met, Liv. It is a big day. You do not seem very excited about it.”

I bit down on my lip, trying to contemplate my response before I spoke. “Is it, Jayde? Really. What is so big about it? I am officially old enough to be tossed into the Facilities. Maybe it is a big day on Amironte or even in some villages around Marieux but what of the rest of us? Those of us who have to live in this God-forsaken city? Whose mothers have been taken by men with no conscience and forced into a life of servitude?”

“Whose mother?”

“Mothers, sisters, cousins. There is no future for us. The Starr of Tayle does not even shine on us here in The City let alone ever dreaming of seeing what life looks like to the west of it. And yet I am expected to celebrate the start of another seventeen days of pure hell.”

Jayde took my hands in hers and pulled me close. “What happened?”

An outsider had noticed me. I was but one carefully executed fib away from being captured and found out by SRA. Someone had seen me, knew what my face looked like beyond the substitute mud powder mixture used to conceal it. And when it was discovered that seventy-five dashii’s had gone missing, I would likely be number one on the radar.

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it when my eyes locked on Aissa approaching in the distance, preparing to share in the joy of this most anticipated day. How could I rejoice? If I were lucky I would be allowed to live to experience another seventeen of dodging SRA, caring for a drug addicted mother who I called cousin, and going out of my way to hide the most dangerous characteristics I had the misfortune of being born with.

Happy day to me.

“I...I gotta go. Thanks, Jayde. Thanks for being here for me. Diana did not remember.”

“Olivia, no. It is your seventeenth. We have been looking forward to this day.”

I paused. Jayde did not fully understand – wouldn’t because I could never be 100% honest with her. Aissa approached, waving and smiling and ready to celebrate what, for me, was not worth the energy.

I leaned forward, taking Jayde into my arms. I spoke softly into her ear. “Sorry. I cannot do this. I cannot celebrate this.”

I turned away quickly, leaving Jayde behind to explain to an even more confused Aissa what she did not fully understand herself.

†

THE AIR WAS THICK WITH MUST AND SWEAT, BREATH AND CONJOINED flesh and Diana’s moans and the groans of a stranger bounced off the paper-thin walls. The space was dark and I crept silent and unnoticed across to my room, stumbling over some discarded garments along the way.

She had not told me happy day. The past three she had remembered and found a way to make good on. Her only present this year was nearly having me tossed in the Facilities as a result of a renege gift...and she didn’t even know it.