

Olivia
Rebirth of the Anointed

A REIGNSTORM PUBLISHING
MINNEAPOLIS MINNESOTA

Prologue
A Child is Born

WHERE I AM FROM IT IS SAID THAT LITTLE GIRLS ARE born into their fate.

Some 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 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.



THE STORY WAS TOLD TO ME SO MANY TIMES THAT I am no longer certain whether or not it was actually relayed to me at all, or if I recall it from a past life experience. It was my great-grandmother, Elizabeth Alpha Ylai, daughter of the clan Aleyk and who later married Franklin Kalaath, who shared her memories. This was not so much done 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, a means of keeping me safe and free of the clutches of the men who have oppressed our people for more than two decades.

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

Diana certainly would have known very well the dangers associated with her looks. Exceeding the ideal features and traits of what was considered to be most attractive, it was guaranteed 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 brushed low 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 designed and placed ideally. Were she drawn by the most talented artist in the sector she could not have been prettier. I wish I would have had the opportunity to see her that way.

Diana was not an anomaly but certainly a rarity amongst the Marinite's; the blessed dark skin with rich red hues that our people are known for coupled with the sturdier physique generally reserved for the descendents of the neighboring planet Amironte. She was exactly what the SRA looked to recruit. She had hardly seen her fourteenth day 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 about the tale as she told it was that Diana had been fixed for the prevention of pregnancy, as all girls recruited into Sisters of the Allegiance (SOTA) are. A year into her captivity, she discovered she was with child.

She successfully concealed her condition before taking the risk of disappearing into the night. I imagine that 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 out-matched any other recruits and she was immediately sought after. She managed to remain in hiding for just under two months when she caught wind that SRA had picked up on her scent. It would be a matter of time before she would be discovered hiding in the abandoned shanty in the thicket that bordered the village of Kalaath.

Diana went into birthing prematurely, possibly from the stress of it all, 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 spread through the village that soldiers were en route, Mira 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, more specifically, what hell I was being born into. 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 convinced Mira to take me immediately and go into hiding. All knew of the prophecy of the chosen one...the Anointed Daughter of the Marinites, and they knew with certainty that if the soldiers (or anyone for that matter) saw this child, all would immediately be put to death as a means of ceasing the bloodline once and for all as they believed they'd done years earlier with the murder of Carolyn Kalaath.

Mira escaped with this child...with me. I have been told that before we departed, 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.



MARINITE CULTURE REQUIRES THAT CHILDREN ARE bestowed four distinct names. The first is ritually decided by the birth mother alone. 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 of peace and prosperity.

The second is given 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 it speaks directly into the child's life and destiny (or so legend has it). The third name is a collective decision and 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.

Although Mira acknowledged the belief that I may very well have been *the one*, even naming me according to this belief, she did everything in her power to prevent me from accepting any parts of this prophecy. Instead of raising me as a warrior, she raised me to be a *concealor.

We survived in a small hut built on the edge of the Apigara River. There we fed on fish from its mouth, milk from the kakali bean, and obi berries that grew in great abundance in the brush surrounding (the green berries, not the red).

As I grew, Mira taught me how 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. 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, or maybe 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. There we were able to add a variety of vegetables to our meal and I could 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 laughed kindly when she taught me to pull the stalks and shuck the corn, though she smiled brightly 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. I would go to her and stroke her soft hair with my small hands and she would fall asleep in my tiny arms.



DIFFICULTY SURROUNDED MIRA'S LIFE DURING THE DAYS following the Shadow Wars, when the sovereign leader of the planet Amironte, Claude Ustek, used his *gift of the poison tipped tongue* to sway our leader, Vincent Ittas, into the signing of 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 during this dark period, including Mira's first-born child, a son, Thomas Kalaath.

Marieux had once been a 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, a woman who had already lost her husband in a failed attempt to rescue their daughter Carolyn, a child with the skin of the Anointed and eyes of a see-er, and an original Sister of the Allegiance. Her pregnant daughter, murdered when Kelsard sent soldiers after her, fearing that she, or the child that she carried, would

be the one to 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 and the morning following my thirteenth day I awoke to find that my mira was dead.



CRYING IS NEVER AN OPTION. I HAVE NO TIME FOR TEARS. To show emotion is to reveal 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 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 her soul may rest in peace with dignity.

Sarai and Pete insisted that I live with them. *Galê Sarai had always wanted a child and now here was this refugee orphan to fill that void. 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 believed that she was alive and I knew that if she were, I would find her there.

Finding Diana was suddenly everything 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, upstanding citizens who maintained their strong Marinite morals and ethics despite the horrors that they’d lived through and I will always remember their kindness, and to include them in my prayers. Mira always spoke of life before the Shadow Wars and how much the Ashtwor village represented those values. They were a sign of pride to the native race of Marieux.

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 just fine, 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.

Nearly four years had passed since 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 the days when Thomas and Carolyn were small, how she and my great-grandfather 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 a couple 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 wartime, 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 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 watchful eye of Galê Tagali.

That would not be my fate. I kept my eyes low and wore the garments of a male. I stalked the shadows of the soldiers and avoided being seen. I followed what my instincts commanded, never once betraying or second-guessing an order. Some might 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 awakened.

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 we met up 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. My concern is less about you and more about – never mind. It is unimportant.”

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, Galê 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 own 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 had 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.

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MOLE'S WAS FULL AS IT WAS EVERY ENDWEEK, FILLED TO

the brim with Amirites and Marinites. A couple Citroberians 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 Citroberian 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, certainly Jayde had, yet she kept moving forward. She was going to make Tabi work. Tabi 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.

“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 have been 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 would 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 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. 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 endweek. 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 us go.”

We walked together quietly, immediately sobered by the constant threat present. At the edge of downtown, Jayde offered her brief goodbye and she and Tabia 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 had resided there and I would not 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 had snorted.

I took her firmly beneath the pits of her arms and pulled her higher upon 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 legs 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. I would have to cut it again in the morning...yawn...maybe color the roots and flatten 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.