



*“In the shadow of doubt and the storm of betrayal, let the heart remain steadfast for the Anointed shall rise.... The courage of the faithful shall kindle the dawn of deliverance, and their convictions shall be their shield and sword.”*

*Book of Luminaries, Chapter 7, Verses 12-14*

# *One* Disappearance

## **SEVERAL MONTHS IN FUTURE**

THE SOUND OF THE DROPLETS OF WATER FALLING FROM between the warped wooden slats above to the insecure floor below reverberated throughout the small, stuffy space. It rarely rained on Marieux. Years had passed since residents and transplants had experienced the release of fluid from the chemically tinted sky.

Rain was not a sign of prosperity on a planet such as this. The naturally moist ground could not withstand much of the solution before the threat of ruined crops and flooded shanties sent residents running to dust off emergency contingency plans, hoarding food, and fleeing to higher ground.

The young Marinite swallowed his fear slowly, cautiously.

## Rise of the Anointed

The blade pressed firmly against his abdomen, threatening to tear through his flesh with any sudden movement, potentially ripping vital organs necessary for sustaining a proper quality of life. He quickly and discreetly scanned the faces of the men surrounding him, their presence thickening the air. They were undoubtedly soldiers, representing the Shadow Realm Allegiance, known colloquially as the SRA\*. He didn't recognize any of their faces, and the reason for his abduction eluded him, although he suspected his younger sibling's dangerous discovery had everything to do with it.

A large Amirontian with a deep complexion and broad shoulders paced before him. He hadn't laid a hand on him yet, though he had allowed one of his subordinates the pleasure of delivering a couple of blows to the young man's jaw. It was clear that whatever they wanted, they were deadly serious about obtaining.

"You wonder who I am," the Amirontian began, his voice deep and cavernous. "You do. I see the question marks in your eyes."

The young boy searched for the courage to respond, then cursed himself for being stumped by such a simple question. "Yes," he replied, his voice a hoarse whisper, fearing it might not have been heard. He debated whether to repeat himself, tensing and fully expecting to earn another blow.

The man began to nod slowly, signifying that the answer he expected had indeed reached him. He wore a black uniform with a tan patch over the left breast, adorned with the SRA emblem. His position of leadership was clear. Initially, the boy had pegged

him as a Legatus\* and was thus puzzled by the reference to him as Auctoritas\*. His sheltered life had kept him away from SRA ranks, but his mandatory survival training had taught him to distinguish between the dangerous and the deadly. But Auctoritas? This title would put him on par with General Henry Kelsard and Commander Taaman Dupec. Only members of The Board were referred to as such. The term literally translated to “Of Authority.” However, Auctors were known not for fieldwork but for delegating tasks to lower-ranked individuals. Politics worked that way. Technically, this Auctor had delegated this boy’s ordeal. Despite this, his presence seemed unusual.

“You know what it is that I seek from you,” the Auctor stated.

The boy quickly shook his head and whispered fearfully, “No ... I ...”

A hint of a smile brushed across the man’s lips as he leaned in, studying his prey. “Are you certain?”

Whatever courage the young boy possessed waned as the man’s dark eyes bore into him. No matter how hard he willed himself to respond, he found no breath to complete his reply. He could confess, give up the information he believed was desired, and spare himself. But what consequences might that unleash upon his sister? He swallowed the swell of tears building in his chest at the sight of a subtle nod to the soldier by his side, the one eager to deliver another blow. The boy tensed, mentally preparing himself, yet no preparation could shield him from the force of the next punch. His breath was knocked out of him, and his already tender eye swelled rapidly.

## Rise of the Anointed

He silently pleaded for the torment to cease. He wasn't a warrior, hadn't been trained for battle. He was a simple farm boy who'd managed to avoid such terror for all his seventeen years of life, fortunate to belong to a clan that had settled far enough away from SRA's radar. Until now, his contact with SRA had been minimal. He prayed to Deus for relief, and as if answering, the man signaled for his henchman to stop. A breathy "thank you" escaped his lips.

"Would you like another chance to answer my question? I would take it if I were you. Second chances are rare in my world."

The boy gently rubbed his tongue against his tender, swollen bottom lip. "I ... I do n—"

He flinched as the large fist drew back again, but to his surprise, the Auctor moved swiftly, catching the fist before it landed. Everything happened so quickly that the boy questioned his perception. The Auctor seized a blade from a nearby guard's hand and plunged it into the renegade soldier's side.

"Did I instruct you to lay a hand on the boy?" he growled.

The soldier, clearly pained and bewildered, shook his head while enduring the injury.

The man scanned the room, assessing reactions, as though preparing to face them all. Blank stares met his violent act against one of their own. The Auctoritas looked satisfied, nodding at a companion.

"Take him outside to die in the rain. And clean my blade while you are at it."

A compliant soldier sprang into action. “Yes, Auctor.”

Satisfied, the Auctor returned his focus to the frightened boy. “Apologies for the interruption. Now, you have wasted enough of my time. Let us get to the point. You have met the Anointed Daughter, have you not?”

The boy’s stiffened posture betrayed his attempt at loyalty.

The man leaned closer, allowing himself to be seen clearly by the boy’s good eye. He revealed a new blade, identical to the one previously used. Long, broad, serrated. The boy pondered the Auctor’s actions, realizing that if he could be so ruthless with his own soldiers, the consequences of withholding information could be dire.

His sole experience with SRA was when his sister was taken. It was his fault; his idea to join their elder cousin on a secret journey to The City. For one day, they gained a lifetime of experience, feeling rebellious and courageous. It had been worth it until his sister was spotted and abducted. He couldn’t save her, so he didn’t try. He betrayed her, and now he was asked to repeat his mistake with another sibling.

The boy felt the cold blade graze slowly across the flesh near his good eye. “Be cautious how you answer from this point on.”

A small drop of liquid trailed from the corner of the boy’s eye onto the blade. He wasn’t sure if it was his tears, blood, or the fluid leaking from above. He whispered a breathy affirmation.

“Tell me, what is your name?”

## Rise of the Anointed

“Eda ... Edan.”

“Edan. Good. Edan, the Anointed Daughter. You know who she is, do you not?”

He swallowed hard. “No—yes! I mean ... I have never seen her, but I know ... I know ...”

The Auctoritas nodded, smiling. He stood upright, retracting the knife. “Excellent. You know where I can find her?”

He sighed, defeated. “Yes ... no. Not ... not exactly.”

“But you have an idea.”

His response was barely audible.

The man’s patience waned. His face darkened, contorting as he moved forward, aiming the blade’s tip millimeters from the boy’s eye.

“Do not play games with me. Enough of this; my patience wears thin. *Where is the Anointed Daughter? Where is Olivia?*” His voice, grave and furious, resonated throughout the room, anger manifesting as threatening fangs.

The boy found his voice. “I do not ... I do not know, but I can find out. I will find out.”

“How?”

“My sister,” he answered, flinching. Mentioning her pained him, but he was a poor liar, struggling to buy time.

“There is a sister I should threaten instead, it seems.”

The Auctor stood, smiling—almost genuine—a sight more terrifying than his scowl. “There is always a sister embroiled in unrighteousness. So, where is she, your sister?”

“I do not know, but I will find her. She snoops ... she knows their location but will not lead me to their camp. I can uncover it, though!” His final thought slipped out as the blade crept closer to his pupil. “I will find out!”

The man paused, seeming to consider the response. He raised an eyebrow and nodded as he leaned back. What use would the boy be dead or blinded? If he betrayed him, his fate would be far worse than his current ordeal.

“Yes. Discover where The Anointed and her band of miscreants are camped. Will you do me that favor? We are allies now. Are you a loyal friend, Edan?”

“Yes, yes I am ... I will be. And when I do ... when I find out, how do I locate you to report back? What is my next step?”

“Report back?” The man chuckled. “That will not be necessary. Simply locate her. And when you do, relay a message for me. Tell Olivia that Razi Las sends his regards.”

†

WHERE I COME FROM, IT IS SAID THAT LITTLE GIRLS ARE born into their destinies. And as a child raised in secret, it seemed my fate was to be on a small plot of land at the edge of the modest village of Ashtwor. There, I was kept safe and out of sight, away from danger. It was there that I heard prophetic tales of



## Rise of the Anointed

a girl child, Goldenborn, burdened with the destiny of freeing the people of my planet, Marieux. This prophecy, passed down through generations, did not bypass me in my secluded corner of our world. The elders called her The Anointed, consecrated in the womb.

This traditional folk tale offered hope for a better future to the citizens. A future free from the harsh dictatorship that shattered our planet's peace and community. For years our home had been oppressed by a ruling force. Marieux, the smallest in the Zephyrnox Theta system, was once a peaceful agricultural planet. It thrived under the leadership of Vincent Ittas, a descendant of respected leaders from the Ittas clan, the oldest known clan in history. During his reign, we felt the unity and pride that came from being part of a community.

But, as all good things must end, ours did with the Shadow Wars. The ruler of the neighboring planet, Amironte, used his silver-tipped tongue to lure our leader into a treaty he promptly violated. Claude Ustek, the power-hungry ruler of Amironte, sought to ally with Katashi Kedt of Arethoxx, the most formidable planet in the system. Together, their alliance led to the massacre of Ittas and his Council and the genocide of all known or suspected members of clan Ittas—a brutal act of betrayal.

Life as we knew it crumbled. Ustek flooded our streets with transplants from his planet, disregarding our ways and traditions. But his plans unraveled when karma—or perhaps his own greed—led to his downfall at Kedt's hands. With no government and no Ittas left to claim the throne, chaos reigned. Aggressive transplants disrupted our culture, plunging Marieux into turmoil.

Amidst the confusion and destruction, the cry for leadership grew louder. The descendants of Ittas had vanished, assumed murdered. This void allowed a young Marinite, without rightful claim, to seize power. Henry Kelsard, under the guidance of the Amorite Taaman Dupec, gained the trust of a desperate populace who either missed or ignored the warning signs of a new kind of destruction—slow, insidious, and without a clear solution.

This union has held our planet hostage for years. And though I do not know the tale's origin, I have accepted its truth and the realness of the prophecy. A girl child was born, destined to bring order and justice to Marieux.

That girl is me. I am Olivia Vala Eso Kalaath, and I will not stop until our oppressors lose their dominion and power returns to its rightful place—with the people.

# *Two* **Burning Decisions**

## **PRESENT DAY**

WITH HEAVY LEGS, I TRUDGED ALONGSIDE MY TEAM AS we hiked through the sheath grass, following the invisible path that would return us to the home Charleston and James shared with the rest of us. I embraced the peace that only existed on this leg of our journey—post-reconnaissance. A hopeful return to our beloved. Though a couple of weeks had passed since the fight with SRA, I knew this sort of amity could not last. We had a mission to complete, an impossible one.

It had been a long, arduous pilgrimage into The City, and my eyes only wanted to close. We were all in need of rest. Given the chance, we would sleep away three suns. The grass grew taller with each labored step. I might have thought us lost had I not spied

the thick trunk of the panati tree that Charleston and I shared a distant memory beneath. I glanced up at its wild and full branches splayed across the dimming sky, like the spindly phalanges of an aging musha\*. I slowed to a stop and stared curiously beyond the tree. A chill crept slowly up my spine, and the hairs on my arms lazily rose to attention. There was no specific sign of trouble, but then I was worn and unfocused.

Aissa took a double take in my direction. “Everything alright?” she asked.

My head tilted, and I squinted in search of what could be causing my body to react. The muscles in my face relaxed slowly as my eyes widened. “Do you see that? Or are my tired eyes playing tricks on me?”

Faraji stepped closer, stopping just behind me. “Deus, no!” His feet moved faster than his words traveled to my ears.

My suspicions were confirmed when James cried, “FIRE!”

I ran. My legs grew wings, and the sheath grass that only moments earlier had peacefully embraced me like an old friend was now disciplining me with heavy-handed smacks and hard slashes across my bare face. It became the enemy, hell-bent on keeping me from my destination, punishing me for having been disconnected. The stench of burning wood assaulted our nostrils as we closed in on the place we called home, praying that its inhabitants had somehow managed survival.

“Silver! Jiliane!” James cried out. “Deus, please let them be okay. Silver!”

## Rise of the Anointed

“Silence,” I barked. “They are fine.”

I abruptly stopped just shy of the walkway, feeling the force of the powerful breeze as James charged past me. I knew she did not believe me as my words contradicted the scene before us. Charleston ran quickly, snatching her small frame only moments before she charged into certain death.

“Let go of me, Chas. Release me! I have to save my son and my sister. I must...” Her voice cracked, and emotion caught in her throat. Tears streamed from her eyes as her body fell limp. It was the first time I had seen any emotion from her, and the sight so fascinated me that I was momentarily dumbstruck.

I snapped quickly back to reality. “James. Quiet,” I said with force. “They are fine.”

“You do not know this to be true. How do you know? Where are they? Do you not see this blaze?” She regained strength and struggled against Charleston while her eyes stared accusingly at me, as though I was somehow responsible for the situation we faced. I did not judge her judgment. It was likely that I was.

“Trust me, they are fine,” I stressed. “I know ... I ...” I looked about trying to determine where they would be hiding.

“Trust you?” James laughed cynically. “Trust? How can I trust you and your senses when you did not detect that this was even happening?”

“I did ... sort of.”

“What do you mean, you did? You sensed this and said

nothing?”

“There was no danger attached and so—”

“You hesitated! Praise Deus, you hesitated, and now possibly my family is—”

“Fine. They are fine,” I stressed.

Aissa stepped carefully to me. “Liv, are you certain? If so, where are they?”

I focused ... trying hard to connect with Diana. Warm relief rushed over me. I nodded beyond the burning shanty. “The shed. I believe ... they are in the shed.”

For a moment, time stood still. I had provided hope. For an agonizing moment, James had faith that her son, Silver, and her sister, Jiliane, were indeed alive and not burning corpses buried in a fiery grave. I understood this torture because, for a most agonizing moment, I had that same hope for Diana. I silently prayed that the woman I had pretended was my cousin for so many years, for our protection, was still alive.

James broke free from Charleston’s grasp and charged through the thick smoke that filled the air around us, crying out for her beloved. She ran and raised her voice, oblivious to any potential danger. I had spent my entire time within The City limits practicing quiet and caution, no matter what was at stake—this reckless behavior was intolerable.

There was no present danger in the shed; I knew this. Knew it the same way I knew other things that I should not have known—

## Rise of the Anointed

but she did not. And so she reacted, I understood that. My senses had become keener since accepting my place as The One—the Anointed Daughter of the Marinites. She did not have these same senses, but that was no excuse to toss out common sense.

I had always possessed an innate ability to detect danger, but this was one of the few times when I felt something different. This time, I felt ... safety. It was as though I could sense Diana's spirit—tense, but unafraid. I concluded that there was no clear and present danger. If there had been, I would have sprung into action, and there would have been no need for her to run screaming into the night.

I grabbed Charleston roughly by the arm as James ran with reckless abandon to reunite with her loved ones. I glanced past him and saw Diana stumble quietly into the open. Although I was sure that she was fine, seeing her there still buckled my knees. I pulled myself together and returned my gaze to Charleston, leading him to a place where we could speak and still breathe.

“She cannot do that. She cannot be part of this if she cannot control herself,” I insisted.

“What are you talking about?” He looked down at my hand, which held a vice grip on his arm. I released him and stepped back.

“She had no idea what, if any, danger awaited us in that shed, and yet she ran screaming, revealing our position and utter vulnerability into the night.”

“You told her that everything was fine,” Charleston defended.

“I told her that her family was fine.”

“I think you are being overly dramatic and dare I say, unreasonable.”

“Is that so? Yet you do not find the actions of your wife to be unreasonable in the face of uncertainty? Charleston, whether you or James recognize this or not, we are at war. And not only with the regime that rules this place we call home but also with a psychotic rogue with violently political ambitions. We cannot afford such dramatics—no matter what is happening.”

“I think you are being especially hard on her.”

“Of course you do.”

Charleston exhaled heavily and stepped closer to me—almost too close. He placed his large hands gently on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “Olivia, I hear you. We must exercise caution, but this is her family. Please understand, they are all she has in this world.”

For a moment, I was swept away by his touch and the sound of his voice. So close to my ear, his breath on my face. I recalled evenings beneath the panati tree, drinking kakali nut shakes and watching the setting of the suns. Just as quickly, I remembered the lie. I remembered the withholding of vital information regarding a wife, a sister-in-law, and a stepson, and I called him out on the lie he was feeding me at present.

“She has you, and let us please not forget that I, too, have so little that to lose it would cost me so much. No matter what is happening, Charleston. No matter what, or who, is at stake.



## Rise of the Anointed

Control. Patience. Discipline and faith in Deus and His plan for us. That is how we will stay alive and win this war.”

His brow furrowed, and he stepped away. “Perhaps you should save the self-righteous judgments, Liv, until you can get yourself under control and believe your own hype for once.”

He was right. I was being hard on James, but I would not admit that to him. I swallowed my discomfort as I walked toward Diana. The heat of the blaze mixed with my anger and warmed the back of my neck. Diana was my mother and all I had left of my family. My mira\*, Diana’s musha, was long gone. And Jayde ... She was my best friend—better still, my sister—and she had died before my eyes on the streets of a planet that was foreign to me. Her final breath was taken by a Miltvarian Hunter, one that I could not save her from. One that I vowed to kill given the chance.

The lot of us stood at a safe distance from the burning embers and smoky debris, watching the home and all of the family’s possessions be cremated. James pressed Silver’s head to her bosom as Jiliane held tightly to her sister’s arm. Faraji and Aissa flanked Diana and me as loyal subjects should, while Charleston landed somewhere in the middle, his loyalties visibly torn.

“How did this happen?” I inquired.

“I do not know,” Diana replied in a low tone. “I was asleep. I rose for water and smelled smoke.”

“Jiliane?”

“I do not know,” she answered impatiently.

“A house is blazing to the ground, yet no one can be certain how it came to be? Silver?”

Diana replied, “We do not know, Olivia. I smelled smoke in the night air. I ran to the house as quickly as I could manage. We made it through the escape tunnel just before the home exploded into flames.”

“We were asleep,” said Jiliane. “We were all asleep. We did not cause this, if that is what you mean to imply.”

Something was not right. Homes did not just burst into flames, not even in The City where anything and everything was bound to occur. Yet, I did not sense any other presence or danger. Still, it was clear that the fire had been set. It was an intentional act. A message. Someone knew that we were here and wanted to make sure that I was aware. It was no longer safe for any of us in The City or around it.

I strolled languidly across the grounds, looking and listening, but nothing else struck me as out of the ordinary. The house was destroyed, beyond salvaging. The small shed that sat in the back, previously out of sight, remained intact, but there was no way that all of us could survive there. In such close quarters, James and I would surely destroy each other. But more importantly, this was far from over. If Jiliane, Silver, and Diana were all asleep, then the fire was caused by someone else. Whoever set the blaze would definitely return to confirm that their objective was met.

I paused, gazing into the distance at the sheath grass, watching it bend and sway beneath the gentle evening breeze. Peaceful and in stark contrast to the devastation that had occurred. It stood

## Rise of the Anointed

oblivious, as though there were not a family home being reduced to embers beside it.

I looked around for a clue, a way to make sense of it. My eyes fell on James. I watched as she investigated every inch of Silver as he tried to peel himself away and assure her that he was unharmed. My gaze met Diana's. Her arms were wound tightly around her body, making her appear even smaller. I wondered whether I should fuss about her in a similar manner—if that was the proper behavior of a good daughter. As if reading my thoughts, she nodded to me, signifying that she was okay. Discomfort filled her vacant eyes, and she and I both, shamefully, looked away.

I swallowed heavily and shifted my eyes to Aissa, who was catching up to me, saying words that I did not hear. A chill ran through me, and all I wanted was Jayde. She would know what to say, what to do. The time for action had arrived, and a small panic stirred inside me. I remembered that I had not the faintest clue what I was doing. I wished Jayde were with me, fussing over me in the manner of an overprotective parent, the way she had once upon a life—helping me take my next step.

Aissa reached me, continuing to speak as I continued to not hear her. I watched as Charleston wrapped a blanket around Diana's frail shoulders, attempting to cease her incessant shaking. It would not help. She was not cold as much as she was ill. Her entire life experience wreaked havoc on her. I had imagined many times what she might have done with her life if she had never been stolen away and made to whore herself for the benefit of SRA. And now, to top it off, thanks to me, she had been exiled. A SOTA\* whore was no life, but a sickly addict with a bounty was

hardly an improvement.

“Liv, are you even listening to me?”

“No.”

“Olivia.”

I exhaled, reluctantly shifting from my thoughts to Aissa ... my friend. Aissa who, along with Faraji, remained by my side despite the dangers, because they somehow believed in me more than I believed in myself. I had not been good enough to save Jayde and was furthermore responsible for Tabia’s murder, and still, Aissa stayed at my side, going against her twin brother Razi Las for my purpose. And where had it gotten her? Where had following me gotten any of them?

“I am hearing you, Aissa. But I cannot answer the question of what we are to do next. I do not yet have that answer.”

“Well, figure it out, because we cannot stand around here doing nothing.”

“No, we cannot.”

“Nor can we bring down the Allegiance without a base,” said Faraji, approaching.

“Do you think this was SRA?” Aissa asked, alarmed.

I shook my head. “Not exactly. This was Razi. I mean, not directly, but he has a foot in this somehow.”

“You do not know that.” Her tone was defensive. She quickly looked away, ashamed.

## Rise of the Anointed

“Oh, I know. I am confident.”

Faraji asked, “So if it was Razi and he knows where we are, then we have to leave because he will return. But where will we go that he will not find us?”

“Sulari.”

The voice was not mine. Aissa, Faraji, and I turned toward James. Satisfied with her son and sibling’s condition, she was now ready to focus on all the ways I was leading this team astray.

“We cannot go to Sulari.” My voice was low and unconvincing. I again walked away. She and I had had this dispute before. Time and again, I rejected the suggestion. It was smart, but it was too risky.

James followed. “Why not? We should have gone long ago. You knew that it was only a matter of time before we were found out here, on the outskirts of The City. Jessenia Sulari told us when we returned Ramona’s body—”

“I know! I know what Jessenia Sulari said. Jessenia Sulari’s daughter is dead because of me, and now we should go and endanger her entire clan?”

James laughed cynically. Her patience was thin. “You give yourself too much credit. You are but a child, Olivia. I realize this. And this burden being placed upon your shoulders is unfair, but you must cease with the pity!

“You did not cause that girl’s death. She chose to fight at your side, as we all have, whether we want to or not. You saved

her life, and she sacrificed it for you in return. Deus is King and Queen, and you are The Chosen, so we follow you because we must. Death is a price that will be paid, one way or another. This battle is imminent, and for all of your gifts and skills, you are not yet ready. Physically. Emotionally. We need to get Diana, Silver, and Jiliane somewhere safe—”

“That is what this is, is it not?”

“What is what this is? What gibberish are you speaking?”

“Your insistence on taking our troubles to Sulari. This is about *your* family. This is about Silver and Jiliane.”

“Of course this is about Silver and Jiliane. But it is also what needs to happen for all of our sake. Look around, Olivia! It is our best move—our only move.”

I closed my eyes and focused on the darkness. My brain pulsed inside my skull. For the briefest moment, I wished the Ittas Clan were still here—if even one of them remained, perhaps the weight of this burden could be lifted from me. Rumor held that their clan was anointed, and if that were true, perhaps I would not have needed to be, and I would not now be forced to consider the truth in James’ words. I had not avoided this decision because I thought it was wrong but because I knew it was right.

“I will think about it.”

“We need to act, Liv.”

“Just give me a moment to think ... please.”

I turned away from James’ judgmental stare, seeking a

## Rise of the Anointed

moment of solace to reflect and ponder next steps. I had no desire to become a leader, had not meant to stir up a cause, and yet, by virtue of my existence, I had done just that. Me, a child as James had pointed out, and yet somehow meant to save a planet from a power greatly preceding all of our existence. I was meant to do that and yet, I could not even decide if it was the right move to take our burdens and place them at Sulari's feet. Charleston was right; I did not yet even believe my own hype.

My eyes locked onto the old panati tree in the distance. I took my moment of peace as it would likely be my last. My mind returned to a much simpler time, an oxymoron on this planet. A time before I knew that Charleston had a secret family. Before Jayde was struck down far from home. A time when, for the briefest of moments, I thought that I could be normal. A time when I worked side by side with Charleston's side as his assistant at the little pastry shop at Market. And in the evenings, he and I would lie beneath the panati and watch the setting of both the eastern and western suns. The perfect divide. It was the best place to watch.

"A rebellion is brewing in The City," James stated, invading my space and my thoughts.

"What are you talking about?"

"That is the intel that I gathered during this mission. What I planned to discuss this evening. A rebellion is brewing. The time to strike at the core of SRA is upon us. But we must be prepared."

I turned to face her now, intrigued. "What do we know of it? Do we know who is leading the charge?"

“No, not yet. Whoever it is, he or she is being protected fiercely and rightfully so. If we expect to get anywhere, to capitalize on this momentum, then we will have to first rid ourselves of the threat of Razi Las. If he had a hand in what happened here tonight, then it is not safe for any of us, particularly the weaker ones. But we cannot do that if we do not gain the advantage.”

“I know.”

“So what are you willing to do, Olivia? If we attempt to stay here any longer, we risk death, and the ones that will suffer the most are the weakest links—my family ... and yours. You know this as well as I.”

“So we take this danger to Sulari. We risk their lives?”

James nodded, regretfully. “Jessenia knew the risk when she offered to host. In doing so ... she is accepting whatever consequences there may be. But alas, it honestly does not matter. This is bigger than the inhabitants of one clan on the East Bank. They fled The City, they had their peace. Now they must answer the call. Everyone must do their part.”

I rubbed my fingers roughly across my face. She was telling me nothing that I did not know. To go through with it ... that was entirely different. But, unfortunately, she was right. There was no choice. It was the best option. It was the only option.

“So be it. But if we are to do this, we will need help. We cannot journey that far on foot. Our number is too high, which makes us too vulnerable.”

“What do you suggest?”



## Rise of the Anointed

I paused, chewing on my thoughts. “I am going back into The City. You will need to keep watch—all of you. Whoever is responsible for this action could return to confirm their work.”

James’ expression changed. Concern or fear shadowed her face. “Back into The City? Why? No one is to know you are here, so what help will you possibly obtain?”

“A rebellion is brewing, is it not?”

“Yes, and? How does that help you right now? Help us?”

“You do not need to concern yourself with that. Let me do my job; you just do yours.”

She opened her mouth to speak more useless protests, but I saved her the trouble and walked away, headed toward the shed. James called after me and began to follow, but Charleston’s deep voice halted her. I walked faster, entering the small living space to gather my meager belongings for solo travel, leaving them to compare outrage at my decision. I looked around. I possessed nothing but discord. And now I would gather those troubles and drop them on another’s doorstep, driven out by the enemy that was mine alone.

Razi Las.

He had hated me ever since the day that Jayde brought me home so many days prior. She tried to convince me, for my sake and her own, to pretend to be of Amirontian heritage, but I refused. I did not care that her roommate was fiercely anti-Marinite. At the time, I believed myself to be full-blood, and I was honored to be so.

This was long before I learned that Diana had secretly belonged to the evil oppressor, Taaman Dupec. Long before I learned that he, an Amirontian Commander, had violated the uncompromising SRA law forbidding him from consorting with Marinite Elites. Before it was revealed that Taaman Dupec was my father, giving Razi yet another reason to hate me—a half-blood. But now he needed me. In order to secure a proper position amongst the Allegiance, he needed me. He certainly hated me most of all for that.

What I found most frightening was my belief that his ambition exceeded that of both Dupec and Kelsard. He desired Dupec's seat; that much was clear. I would not have been the least bit surprised if his aspirations included the removal, or rather disposal, of the Marinite Kelsard altogether. At least on that front, we were in agreement. But I feared what Razi would do with that power far more than I feared the men who presently held it.

And now he had found our location ... waited until I was far away and occupied, then struck. His goal was obvious—kill Diana and anyone with her, for that matter. He wanted me to find the charred remains of my mother. He wanted to destroy me—the only person that could truly stand in his way. Ridding the world of the only family that I had left was the best way for him to start.

Had I returned to find Diana's cremated remains, I would be enraged, likely reckless. The latter is the part that he was counting on. I would come after him with my vengeance. This was his best chance of capturing me and turning me over to SRA. His best chance to prove his worth and be ranked, if not take Dupec's title forthwith.

## Rise of the Anointed

Despite what Aissa wanted to believe, I knew this. He had tried his hand at this game once before and failed miserably. This time would be no different. He had lost the advantage. It was clear that he had sent someone in his place, someone else to do his bidding, lest Diana would be dead. He should have done the deed himself because now, he could be certain that when the Shadow Realm Allegiance fell, he would go down with it.

“I hear you are going into The City.” The words hung in the air before Charleston entered the shed and closed the door gently behind him. “Liv, what are you doing?”

“The very thing that your wife has been begging me to do.”

“Olivia.”

I discovered Charleston’s union to a woman named Juliane, but known to others as James, long after having spent nights fantasizing about a life with him. A shanty of our own, possibly even children. And though he described their marriage as one of convenience, meant to free an innocent woman from a cruel convert of a husband, love had certainly grown. If not on his end, definitely on hers.

The shock of it all should have long worn. It had not. There were greater things at stake, much greater. I had no time for the triviality of jealousy and offering of snide commentary for the sake of reminding him that he had hurt my feelings. I knew better. This was the pettiness of normalcy. I was not normal.

I exhaled and shook it off. “My apologies. However, I cannot drag you people with me, so do not ask.”

“We people are in this together. We have just returned from The City as a team. Suddenly we are burdensome?”

“We were there on a recon mission; this is not the same. We were there to check the climate, to learn what we could. To know what we are dealing with and how to proceed.”

“Nice try. We were as much there to sniff out Razi Las as anything else.”

“Your point?” I took a seat on the edge of the slim bed that I shared with Diana when I slept there at night—when I slept. I rubbed the coarse green blanket between my fingers. She had been through hell and yet she survived. I hoped that Mira could see the fighter her granddaughter had become despite her forced servitude as a SOTA. She had been demoted, turned into an addict, beaten, and locked away in the Facilities\*. All I had ever wanted was to give her a good retirement and a little peace in life. Tonight, she had nearly died, yet again, thanks to me. I had to do a better job of protecting her, starting now.

“We can be of assistance is my point.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Olivia—”

I stood abruptly, grabbing my green satchel and strapping it to my body. “No, Charleston, no. That was reconnaissance; this is not that. We cannot make it to Sulari on our own. The eight of

## Rise of the Anointed

us? With Diana? With Silver and with Jiliane?”

Charleston moved quickly, wrapping his strong hands around my forearms, turning me to face him. “Liv, Silver and Jiliane are capable, you know that. James has trained them well.”

“Yes, and for all of their training, they remain a liability because Jiliane and Silver are distractions, like Diana. More important, they are inexperienced in these matters.” I carefully freed myself from his grasp, swallowing my futile emotions. “We were found here. And the silver-lining to that is that at least now we know that Razi has his eye out. We are at a temporary advantage. Clearly he, or someone under his command, has dropped the ball. But he wants me, just me. The rest of you are as good as dead if he gets the advantage again.”

A knowing look crossed his face. His posture straightened, and his eyes traveled contemplatively into the distance. His gaze moved slowly to lock onto mine, darkened by the film that I used to conceal their glow.

“What will you have us do?” he inquired, regretfully.

“Stay alive until I return for you. I will secure us safe passage underground to Sulari.”

“And how will you do that? If you reveal yourself, Razi will find you.”

“Possibly, but there is no other way. If we are to go, we must go underground, and we cannot do so without help. Set a watch rotation. Without me here, you are vulnerable, but you have power in your numbers. When I do not seek Razi, he is likely to

investigate what went wrong and know that Diana is not dead. I cannot venture a guess at his timeline, so be prepared for anything. Be diligent.”

Charleston nodded his agreement, albeit reluctantly. Nervously, I diverted my line of sight, adjusting my bag and rushing past him. I did not make it far before his large hand grasped my arm and pulled me back to him.

His full lips were pressed firmly to mine before I realized what was happening. Where were my instincts in times like this? I tried to resist, tried to free myself, though I did not try hard. I wanted to be stubborn, wanted to fight him off. I tried, and I failed.

Instead, I melted in his embrace. Felt the passion in his kiss, the heat of his body against mine. For a moment, I allowed myself to disappear into the freedom of loving and being loved. I allowed myself to drift away ... to time travel. To return to the day that Obsidian taught me how to bake the perfect powdered babali. To kakali nut milkshakes and fried pendi\* sandwiches. Back to Jayde's smile and laugh and the pleasant scent she saved especially for endweek at Moles.

Jayde. If for no other reason, I had to be successful to redeem myself before Jayde. Her body, not recovered, meant there was no afterlife for her. I owed her.

My instinct was there and it told me to take this moment and live in it just a little bit longer, for once I left the shed, everything would change. I was seeing my Mira's beautiful brown face as we picked fresh obi berries (the green ones, not the red). I traveled back to the happiest memories of life pre- and post-Ashtwor. From

## Rise of the Anointed

chasing Ibdia to that most memorable afternoon spent with Jayde, Faraji, and Aissa by the River Lux. I felt that joy once more. A memory that I would cherish for as long as I had breath. Before I was recruited. Before Diana was beaten. Before Jayde was taken.

Before Jayde and Tabia were killed.

Charleston slowly broke my trance, the fog of memory sweeping away and returning me to the cruelty of the present and the task at hand. I swallowed hard and adjusted.

“Liv, you know that I love—”

“So I am going to slip out and head to The City. There is no time for re-explaining myself to the group; I will leave that task to you.”

“Liv. Olivia...”

I turned away, but paused for the briefest moment. I did not desire for him to finish his statement. I carried on, cautiously exiting the shed, and when I was sure the coast was clear, I disappeared into the night.