

**Rayla 2212**

**Prequel**

**The Glowstick Training Series**

**Ice Cream in the Emerald City**

*“Age ain’t nothin’ but a number,” Aaliyah, 1994*

*Earth*

Rita didn’t think I was old enough. Rita an attractive woman with wide brown eyes and short dark curls that wound up like ringlets was arguing my fate with my protector Sui Lee. Wearing a pink knee length dress, cinched at the waist, matching kitten heels and giant white pearls around her thin neck, she lived in a world apart from Sui Lee and me. Her bronzed cheeks were flecked with rouge. Her lips were painted the color of dark cherries. She was tall, too. Much taller than Sui Lee. Much taller than I.

They were the picture of opposites. Sui Lee’s short cropped army green pants and orange tank was functional, as was her dangling black hair always swept back into a ponytail. She kept two daggers in her side pockets and a mojo bag tied with reeds around her neck. I couldn’t imagine Rita with a dagger in her pleated pocket. I couldn’t imagine Sui Lee with reddish make up on her cheek. The two had the camaraderie of sisters. I guess they knew one another from before the war.

I sat on the marble kitchen table, my legs dangling as Sui Lee and this Rita woman argued back and forth in the adjoining room. I was 12 now, and Sui Lee had been hiding me in the Enchanted Forest for five years. We hid with the Sisterhood, in a gated area so deep into the forest that no human, other than those in the Sisterhood, knew it existed. I was the only kid, which apparently some in the Sisterhood thought was a problem. I didn’t see what the big deal was. I’d be a teenager soon. Besides, where else

was I going to go? I heard one of the Sisters saying there was a price on my head. I guess the bounty hunters were cutting deeper into the forest. I'm the one they're after.

I was enjoying being in a kitchen though. The warmth from the solar panels was refreshing. The clean lines of normalcy were as familiar as they were foreign. Food in this world didn't come from the blue soil. It could be found in boxes – square ovens, rectangular refrigerators. Everything had a 90 degree angle with the exception of the apple face clock hung on the wall. Oops, wrong again. The arms on the clock had the angle, too. It read 14:15 pm, but the red sun was at high noon. The symmetry was unsettling as if a bubbling brook ran beneath us on the brink of overflow.

This world was so confusing. Life was easier in the darkness of the woods. There I could find mint leaves and boil water with bark. I could sing with the morning birds. And when the Sisters went off to fight the Tigers, I had the beauty of the crystal cove and their giant snakes to give me comfort. But it was nice to have carob and green tea soy ice cream for dessert. The Sisterhood wasn't big on making frozen treats. I could hear Sui Lee and Rita in the other room. They spoke of me as if I couldn't hear them. But most things went over my head anyway, they figured, so they talked as loudly as they wanted.

"She's just a child, Sui Lee. She can't hide out in the forest with a bunch of bandits.

"So we're bandit now?"

"Let her stay with me. I'll raise her as my own."

"They know who she is, Rita. And you're too close to the Dirk."

"So what do you need from me?" Rita asked. I was curious, too. Why were we here? We entered through the back entrance with dark cloaks wrapped around us. It keeps us invisible, Sui Lee said. We did an Illmatic Superman blink to get here. But it took longer than an instant for some strange reason – a reason that Sui Lee didn't want to talk about.

“The keys to Shogun City.”

“Absolutely not,” Rita said, slamming her hand on the table. Sui Lee, arms folded leaned in closer, as if Rita were going to whisper.

“Why not?”

Rita mimicked her lean. They were inches apart.

“She can’t go to Shogun City. Illmatic would never approve.”

“He’s not here, Rita.”

“And her mother?”

The two eased back into their chairs, looked at me and said nothing.

“This is dangerous.”

“What isn’t these days,” Sui Lee said, tapping her fingers on the table.

“I can take her to Shogun City. They’ll train her. In fact, they’ll be quite happy to have her there, with her lineage and all. But when she leaves, we’ll have to wipe her memory of the place clean. She’ll remember the skills, but not her life there.

Sue Lee shot a nasty look.

“She’s foreign born. They have their rules,” said Rita.

“We’re all from the same planet. How are we supposed to have a successful resistance effort with hierarchies of idealists? We’ll never win.”

"I didn't make the rules," said Rita. "I'm a spy who's married to the commander for the enemy. You wanna talk tough, let's talk about that. Hell, I can't get into Shogun City and my mother was one of the architects."

"Fine."

"The school will do them all some good. The kids of the Missing need one another, those that are left anyway. I'll put her with the Washingtons. The Misses is longing for a daughter."

"The Misses, can't you use another word?" Sui Lee said.

"Formalities, darling," said Rita. Sui Lee thought things over. She mapped out circles with her fingers on the table.

"As long as she accepts the terms. We need a leader, not a pampered princess."

"And where will you be?"

"You know how to find me when she's ready. What do you say, about 8 years?"

"That should be enough. She'll be 21."

"Good. Gives me enough time to make some headway," said Sui Lee.

"Do you really think matters will take that long?" Rita asked.

Sui Lee shrugged. "Can't say," she said. "The ship we constructed works in this atmosphere. It's undetectable, it's invisible."

"It's a long time. I don't know if I can hold out that long. And if you don't come back?"

"Let me worry about that. As for . . ."

“Don’t say her name,” Rita whispered. “Her name sets off an alarm in this atmosphere that triggers the Tigers. If you even think about her too long, the wave machines will pick it up.”

“I thought this room was secured?”

“It is. I think.”

Silenced stretched the minute into two. I glanced at the open face apple clock. Same time, but the sun had set.

“Is she like him?” Rita whispered.

“How could she not be,” Sui Lee replied.

Rita had poured some dark beverage with foam into two large wooden cups with handles, one for her, one for Sue Lee. They crashed cups together and chanted “To the Rebellion.” Rita turned to me and winked. Just then, I spotted a hint of silver flash from a fold in her pink skirt. Maybe she did have a dagger in her pleated pocket.