

Chapter One

Cold metal prodded against his left arm, followed by the faint tingling of electricity. The hairs on his arm reacted sharply, standing at direct attention.

“Move faster,” came a faint and muffled voice from his left.

He took a sharp inhale, stumbling forward. LORA soldiers flanked him on either side, their armored black masks opaque and sinister. Agni moved forward, trying to maintain some level of personal space.

As his eyes scanned the line of people in front of him, a small boy stumbled out of line. The boy’s foot had caught on a large crack in the faded slabs of concrete of the train station.

A haunting flash of blue lit up Agni’s vision as warping bolts of electricity connected with the boy’s body. The boy gave a yell, when the blunt end of the black metal electric rods hit the back of the boy’s head. He collapsed.

Agni drew in a sharp breath, watching two LORA soldiers grab the boy roughly by his arms and drag him forward. Agni’s fist clenched involuntarily, but he stayed in line.

“Got a problem?” a LORA soldier asked him.

He would roll his eyes. Usually. But he was sure signs of his own annoyance would only lead to the same outcome as the boy. The LORA militia were ruthless and all the more intimidating with their black masks: just faceless soldiers, with a penchant for causing others pain.

Agni unclenched his fists, continuing on in line. He tilted to the right, glancing down the long line of boys and girls in front of him, all filing onto the train.

This wasn’t the subway, where most civilians rode, but a different train. The subway was

underground—a festering ground for the homeless and civilians alike—but this was higher. A topside train made of sleek black metal, with thin rectangular windows.

Agni sighed, wiping the sticky sweat from his brow. The sweltering sun blazed overhead, its unforgiving heat...well...unforgiving. Agni had to roll his eyes at this. They had all been forced to don the same sand colored robes. Who thought it was a good idea to wear thick linen robes in the heat of July? Probably just another way to demean them and make them sweat like pigs.

An older girl, no older than twenty tripped, stumbling out of line. Agni frowned, darting his head sideways to look at her. She was just catching her footing when one of the LORA men (or maybe a woman, Agni could never tell), stepped forward, grabbing her arm. Agni's eyes widened, sure they were about to electrocute her, but instead the LORA soldier shoved her back into line.

He could hear the sighs of relief from those around him. Perhaps the ruthless factor depended on what LORA soldier was handling you. He kept filing forward, watching the cracks in the concrete beneath his feet, and attempting to just be a body in a faceless crowd.

The LORA soldiers flanked either side of the long line, a wall of black armor that looked like snakeskin. The only splash of color was the bright red sash around their waist, with a faded burnt orange underside. They stood impeccably still, each holding a thin black rod.

Now he was near the train and could only wonder if it was used for transporting the wealthy. The subway to and from the city was worn—faded white, with scratched blue paint—with musky and stained floral seating that felt like cardboard. But why they were being treated to ride this train was beyond him.

He took a step up, rising onto the train, a steady stream of cool air soothing him. He licked his chapped lips, though his tongue felt like heavy gauze in his own mouth. Another drought for sure, but the cool interior was a nice contrast.

He then looked around, his eyes narrowing at the luxurious inside. The inside was slotted charcoal metal, with streamlined metal panels for the flooring and plush, navy seating. Quite different than the subway.

These seats were already filled with the hesitant and fearful gazes of boys and girls, ranging from as young as twelve to at least early twenties. Unlike the usual loud sounds of a train full of people, this one was eerie and silent, save for the footsteps echoing against the cold metal under their feet.

“Agni Suraj Anil?” a LORA soldier asked to the right of him.

Agni turned, a frown crossing his features, his brows furrowing. Why did this one know his name?

“Yes?” He responded, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth like dried peanut butter.

“Come this way,” the LORA soldier said. “Overlord Chanse would like to speak to you.”

Agni gave a curt nod, breaking rank and following the LORA soldier to the left. What could the Overlord of the seventh district possibly want? He had only seen the man on the faded political campaign posters strewn about the market, or posted to lampposts.

Agni chanced a glance over his shoulder at the line of kids still filing onto the train. There were over fifty left to board. At least a hundred who had already boarded. Why him? He followed the armored LORA soldier silently into another section of the train.

He hadn't expected it to change much, the industrialized metal of the train in line with

modern design sensibility. The man slid a door open, revealing a large rounded room, with a floral design carved into the metal beneath his feet. A division. The domed, stained glass ceiling made Agni think of luxury.

There were several LORA agents in this room, though they were significantly more relaxed than the ones who had been ushering them aboard.

“Keep up.”

Agni started, shuffling forward, not realizing he had fallen behind. The LORA soldier slid open another set of doors at the opposite end of the room. Agni stepped through, realizing this one led to a narrow hallway with several rooms on either side.

The doorway of each room was lit with a glowing blue rectangle. The LORA soldier stopped in front of one, giving a simple knock.

The door to the room slid open with a faint hiss and the LORA soldier gestured for Agni to enter. Agni sighed, biting the inside of his lip as he stepped into a spacious chamber where a man stood, his back to them, his waves of curly blond hair impeccably done. He stood tall, his shoulders broad and his hands folded behind his back.

“He’s here, Overlord Chanse,” the LORA soldier said from behind Agni, bowing.

“Good, you may leave,” Overlord Chanse said, his voice stronger than Agni had expected.

Agni glanced back, watching the LORA soldier close the door behind him, leaving the two of them in the room alone.

“Sir?” Agni asked, frowning.

Overlord Chanse turned, his long, weighted and stylized black robes sweeping with the movement, revealing golden swirls on the inside of the fabric, and a navy blue sash with a

turquoise undertone. The colors of the seventh district of the city.

The Overlord was a political figure, 'elected' by the people. One for each of the eleven districts of his city, Natāria. Together they formed the Overlord council. Originally, they ruled on direct cases related to Natāria. When Natāria became the capital of both the United District Province and the continent, Rezyna, the Overlords made a play for power, becoming a key lawmaking force in Rezyna. Despite this, they still played the part of representing one of the districts. Agni's district, eight, was represented by red and orange.

The train gave a faint hum, a soft vibration beginning beneath his feet. They must have finished boarding.

"Hello, my name is Overlord Chanse," Overlord Chanse said, offering out his hand.

Agni was slightly taken aback by this gesture. He hadn't expected such a greeting. He dubiously shook the Overlord's hand, surprised by the firm and quick squeeze. Overlord Chanse put both his hands behind his back again, his green eyes passive and calm.

"What do you want with me?"

"Ah, straight to the point," Overlord Chanse said. "Very well then. Your sister, Sonia, has shown incredible progress. Not only has her research begun to redefine our knowledge, but her powers are developing considerably well. I believe we've had reports of her for years, but her seal didn't show up until two weeks ago."

Agni nodded. No surprises. His sister had always been the best. Top in her class. Best in sports. Able to connect with anyone. It was like checking off a laundry list of perfection. His whole family had always been *so* proud of her.

"So what does that have to do with me?" Agni asked.

His sister had an *Acia Seal*. Once a seal showed up, a person was taken away for training. After that, contact with family was basically non-existent.

“You are all valuable resources. The next generation, if you will,” Overlord Chanse said, a faint grin turning the corners of his thin lips up. “Others would seek to corrupt and use you. We however have great interest in keeping you all *safe*.”

Agni blinked, taking a faint step back. Menacing. Overlord Chanse was menacing. So, basically, the government had gotten to them first. He wondered who these ‘others’ were.

“Research has shown that those with powerful *Acia Seals*, usually have siblings who are also uniquely strong.” Overlord Chanse continued.

Common knowledge was more limited. Agni had already read all the books available in his public library, talking about the different types of Seals a person could have. But many aspects of it remained unknown. The exact link, or factor that caused someone to have an *Acia Seal* had never been determined. But apparently they had found some genetic link.

“So everyone here was chosen because we having family members who are powerful *Acia*?”

“Exactly,” Overlord Chanse said with a false smile and perfect teeth. It was almost disarming.

The train jerked suddenly, before it started moving, the windows, which had been facing bright sunlight, now turning darker as they moved, facing a dark metal wall.

“So what’s going to happen to us?” Agni asked, wondering why Overlord Chanse had singled him out. Was his sister really so special?

“You will be transported to the great city of Ziar for training.”

This was only partly true. He wasn't going to be training. If his sister's research was revolutionizing the field, then—

“—we're guinea pigs.”

“And your father said you weren't like your sister.” This statement was faintly sarcastic.

Agni's fist clenched at the mention. His dad never thought he was worthy of anything.

Agni worked on keeping his face composed, though he could feel his heart racing in his chest. A guinea pig. They were going to be subjected to tests. Since none of them had seals, they would be studied to figure out that missing link nobody knew.

“You're trying to figure out what makes an *Acia*,” Agni stated. “But why tell me this?”

Overlord Chanse gave a grin at this, turning away again, folding his hands behind his back.

“I wanted to get a feel for who you are. Now go find your seat, Agni. We'll be there in a few hours.”

“I'm sure you have a whole continent to help run,” Agni said.

The train dipped slightly, the movement subtle, and the three rectangle windows just above Overlord Chanse head turned black before taking on an eerie blue glow as they passed through a tunnel.

Agni frowned, his eyes darting to the metal rod on Overlord Chanse's belt. It was loose. If he moved quickly enough, he could grab it and maybe deliver a lethal jolt to the overlord's heart. Then maybe he could find a way to hide, and escape once they got to Ziar.

Agni shifted, his right foot sliding against the graphite-colored cork floor. He took a deep breath, his brows narrowing slightly, when there was the sound of an explosion.

A flash of red, orange, and white erupted outside the windows, before the windows

shattered, the glass shards blowing inward like a rush of diamonds. The train screeched, before tilting sideways, throwing both Agni and Overlord Chanse to the right.

Agni's forearm skidded sharply against a wall, and he turned as the train tumbled sideways. He clutched the wall, using it as leverage to force his whole body toward Overlord Chanse.

Overlord Chanse twisted, but Agni was smarter than that. He spun his foot, knocking Overlord Chanse further off balance, before the tips of his fingers snagged the cool metal of the black rod.

He pulled it forward with his momentum and it slid out of Overlord Chanse's belt. He looked down, twisting the glass knob that circled the base of the rod. The rod hummed to life, a small symbol now illuminated in bright blue. A pulse.

He squeezed against the cool metal and a pulse of blue lightning erupted from the end of the metal rod, shooting forward.

"Bast—" Overlord Chanse began, before the pulse hit him squarely in the chest.

Agni landed against the tilted floor of the train, before he kicked off, leaping up, his left arm reaching out and grabbing the broken frame of the window. He gasped in pain as the sharp glass tore into the palm of his hand.

Overlord Chanse hit the door hard, which was now the floor. Now Agni was hanging from what was now the ceiling. Agni took a deep breath, his left hand now wet with blood. He let go, falling heavily, but he braced his fall, absorbing the shock in the balls of his feet.

He looked forward. He had no idea how to get out. He supposed he would have to climb back up to the window and crawl out. He then looked down at Overlord Chanse. Now the cool metal was hot against his hands, his heart beating wildly in his chest. He frowned, twisting the

glass knob again. The blue glowing symbol turned a bloody red.

Nobody would survive this much electricity pumping through their body. And Agni refused to be a guinea pig. His fists clenched against the metal and he was about to jab it against Overlord Chanse's throat when the wall (which had been the ceiling originally), exploded outward.

Agni hit the other wall, tumbling against the ground. He frowned, struggling up, his ears ringing, and smoke—colored orange by lights—clouding his vision. The metal rod had flown from his grip and now lay somewhere in the room.

The part that had exploded had been the metal paneling of what had been the ceiling. The metal had warped out in jagged twisting pieces, like an odd sculpture he would see in the art district of his city. Smoke still rolled off in heavy globs of gray and orange, and standing against the smoke was a shrouded figure. A woman?

She was dressed in full black and orange armor, a red sash around her waist. She had on a red headband, her short brown hair brushing against her neck, her gray eyes cold.

“Come on,” she ordered.

“Who are you?” Agni asked.

“Saving your ass, so come on,” she responded.

Agni stumbled over, knowing his best chance was with this stranger. He supposed this was the “other” Overlord Chanse had mentioned. He bit his lip, wondering if it would be safer to go his own way. But then again ... anyone not found on this train would be considered a fugitive. And he wouldn't survive on his own.

He frowned, turning back to Overlord Chanse, when another person came running up. This

one had on a full mask, but the voice was male.

“Come on, Miara!” he said. “They will be storming this area in a second.”

“Are you coming?” Miara asked, Agni.

Agni, glanced back at Overlord Chanse. Why leave him alive? He would only cause future problems. His eyes scanned the room for the weapon, but he didn't see it. He moved to walk over, but a gloved and armored hand gripped his bruised forearm. He winced, turning to see Miara holding him.

“Leave him. This is our only chance before LORA swarms us. Then we'll be good as dead.”

Agni nodded, letting Miara and the man lead. As he climbed through the twisted, torn metal and jumped onto the train track, he took one last glance back at the curly blond hair of Overlord Chanse. Every part of him knew this was a mistake, but he didn't have time to kill him.