

ISLAND OF EXILES

ALSO BY ERICA CAMERON

SING SWEET NIGHTINGALE (THE DREAM WAR SAGA, #1)

DEADLY SWEET LIES (THE DREAM WAR SAGA #2)

TAKEN BY CHANCE (LAGUNA TIDES, #1)

LOYALTY AND LIES (LAGUNA TIDES, #2)

DEALING WITH DEVALO (LAGUNA TIDES, #3)

ASSASSINS: DISCORD (ASSASSINS, #1)

ASSASSINS: NEMESIS (ASSASSINS, #2)

ISLAND OF EXILES

THE RYOGAN CHRONICLES

ERICA CAMERON



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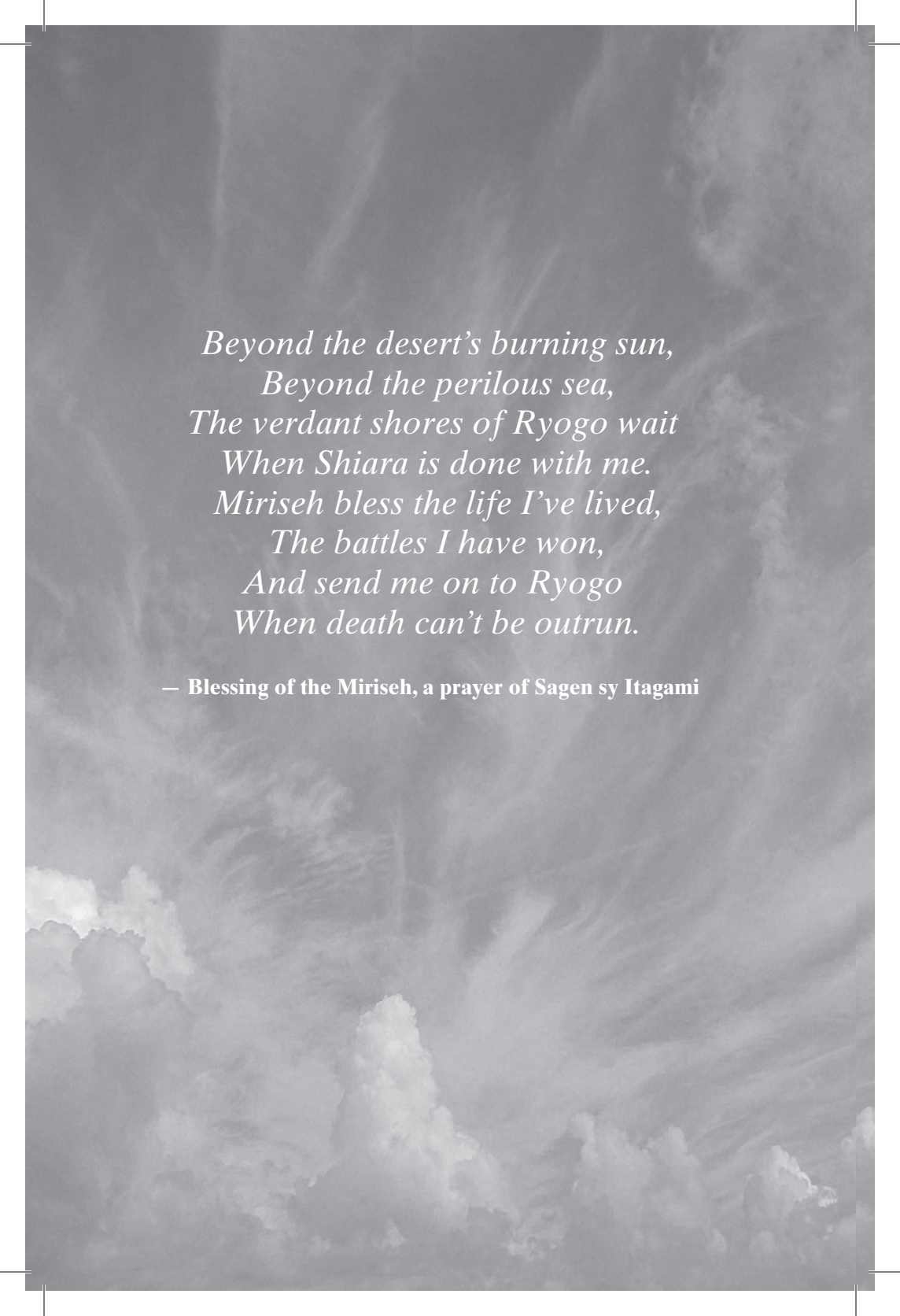
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To Mom, for everything. ♥♥

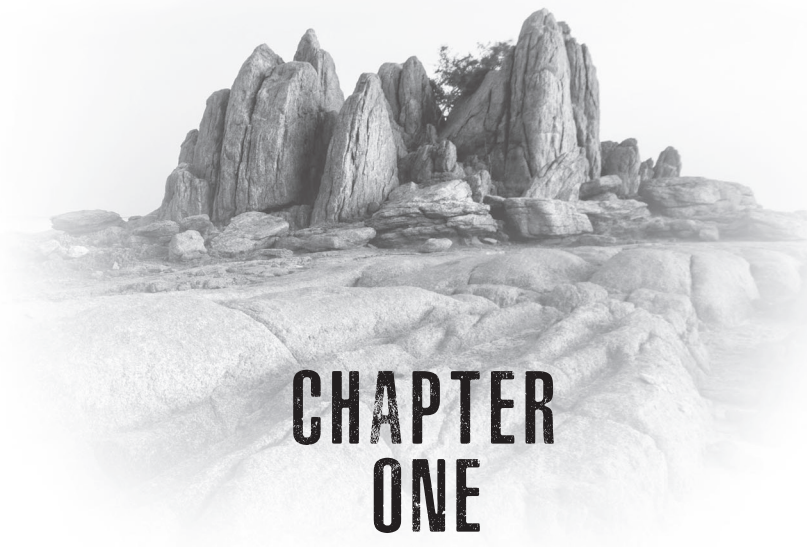


*Beyond the desert's burning sun,
Beyond the perilous sea,
The verdant shores of Ryogo wait
When Shiara is done with me.
Miriseh bless the life I've lived,
The battles I have won,
And send me on to Ryogo
When death can't be outrun.*

— Blessing of the Miriseh, a prayer of Sagen sy Itagami







CHAPTER ONE

I press as close as possible to the sandstone wall of the ravine, trying to shove my whole body into the narrow strip of shade on the rising slope. A few feet below, Rai does the same, pulling the canteen of water from the pack strapped to her thigh, loosening the atakafu cloth covering her mouth and nose, and sipping slowly. The sight makes my mouth feel drier than ever.

My hand falls to my own thigh pack, and I toy with the ties holding it shut. There isn't much water left in my canteen, and I don't know how much longer we'll be enduring the brutal, dehydrating heat of the desert sun. The hunt has been longer than we expected and far trickier than it should be.

Pulling my hand away from the temptation, I search the path above us for any sign of our prey. There isn't anywhere else the teegras could have gone once they entered the ravine, but we haven't spotted a single trace of them since— Wait. There.

“Rai, look.” My murmured words are muffled by the

atakafu, but it's enough to draw her attention to fresh claw marks on the red sandstone.

She's already put the waterskin away, so she lifts the atakafu back over her nose and cautiously climbs until she can see the marks for herself. The corners of her round eyes crinkle with a grin as we cautiously hike up the steep ravine, moving as silently and steadily as we can.

We've barely gone thirty feet when the wind shifts. The gust presses my tunic tight against my body and nearly rips my hood off, but that's not what makes my pulse falter.

The desosa, the elemental energy in the air, has sharpened. It's carrying the tingling burn of electricity, but this is the wrong season for a typhoon. The first storms shouldn't hit for another moon.

"Do you feel that?" I don't look at Rai, keeping my eyes on the sky instead.

"No. What— Khya!" She tries to grab my ankle when I turn away from the narrow path; I pull myself up the wall of the ravine instead. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to figure out why the desosa just changed." Shifting my weight and ignoring a sharp rock that cuts into my bare feet, I look for a handhold that will get me to the top of this wall. I need to see the horizon.

"Rotten, obstinate, idiotic desosa mages," Rai grumbles as she follows me up the wall.

"*You're* a desosa mage." She's a kasaiji; she uses the ambient energy surrounding us for her fire magic just as much as I use it for my wards.

Rai grunts. "You know I can't feel it like you can."

"Then you'll have to shut up and trust me, won't you?" I place my feet carefully to avoid disturbing loose rocks. If the teegras are closer than we think, attracting their attention could be deadly. Those vicious scaled cats are a

danger only for my squad. If I'm right, what's rolling in off the northern sea will threaten every man, woman, ebet, and child in the city. It'll threaten *Yorri*.

Testing the scents in the air is always harder through the filter of the *atakafu*, but I breathe anyway. On the wind, there's a heavy scent of salt and brine.

We're too far inland for the smell of the ocean to be this strong.

Miriseh save us. Even the briefest of storms will flood the area in minutes. Trapped here, the high walls of the ravine mean death.

At the narrow ledge near the top of the rock wall, the wind tugs at my hood and flattens the bottom of my tunic against my thighs. I stay low and pull Rai up after me.

"Why are we risking making ourselves dinner?" Sunlight glints off the iron blade of the *tudo* strapped to Rai's back, and it brings out the rich red undertone to her brown eyes. Before I can answer, her head snaps up, her gaze pointed north. "Oh."

Bellows and blood, I wish I had been wrong.

The barren plain is drenched in light, soaking up the heat from the sun and releasing it in waves that distort my vision. At high noon, there should be at least one pack of *teegras* roaming, their red scales glowing like embers. There should be colonies of *mykyn* circling above us, too, waiting to pick the bones of the *teegras*' abandoned kills.

The expanse is empty. The animals have dug deep into their dens or hidden in their caves by now, fleeing the coal-black clouds about to make landfall.

"Bellows," Rai breathes. "It's too early for a typhoon."

The *desosa*'s needling prickle flares, cutting enough to make me flinch. A bolt of blue-white lightning rips the dark mass of clouds in half. The thunderclap that follows

is distant, a sound I feel more than hear. Despite layers of cloth and padded armor, the hairs on my neck and arms rise.

This storm will rip apart everything in its path.

“We need to find the others.” I’m glad Yorri hasn’t earned the right to train outside the city. My younger brother is safer inside Sagen sy Itagami. Only the city’s tall, thick walls and the network of caves underneath it will protect us from this.

If we can reach it in time.

No. Not getting back to the city alive—back to Yorri alive— isn’t an option.

Rai lowers herself over the ledge and reverses the climb. I slide down with far less care, my bare hands and feet gathering scratches and scrapes, and Rai does the same before pushing away from the wall six feet above the floor of the ravine. As soon as our feet hit solid ground, we run, cutting through the maze of trenches and boulders toward the rendezvous point.

The gusts are almost strong enough to lift my feet from the ground, but running with the wind gives us the speed we need.

When we turn into a narrow pass, the gale comes at us crosswise, sending my loose hood flapping. I keep my feet. Rai grunts when her shoulder slams into a solid wall. She recovers but falls behind, more careful now.

I push faster.

Ahead is the mouth of the wider canyon, the red-and-gray rock walls almost a hundred feet high—our rendezvous point. Nyshin-ma Tyrroh is there with Nyshin-pa Daitsa, his second-in-command, and Nyshin-ten Ryzo, the command trainee a breath away from a promotion. Tyrroh tenses as soon as he spots me. I yank the atakafu away from my mouth.

“Storm!” I call. Protected from the gusting wind and unable to see the ocean, neither one of them could have noticed the impending danger yet. “Typhoon from the north.”

Tyrroh pulls a horn from his belt, brings it to his lips, and blows three quick blasts. When Rai and I reach Tyrroh, pausing for breath just off Ryzo’s broad shoulders, I search the horizon for the return of the others.

I can’t keep still.

We have to wait for the rest of the squad, but the longer it takes for them to return, the more likely it is we’ll all be caught by the typhoon. I shift from foot to foot. I itch to *run*. To fight. The brine-laden wind blasts into the canyon, heightening the sting of the desosa. It pelts the edges of my mind like hail. Drawing in power that unstable is risky. I have a tundo blade strapped to my back, but what good is a blade against wind?

Nyshin-ma Tyrroh eyes the horizon like an enemy he has to defeat. A ravine may be the deadliest place to get caught, but the open plain between the Kyiwa Mountains and the Itagami mesa won’t be much safer. We’re several miles away from the city, and the clouds loom closer every second.

Animals can be outsmarted. Enemies can be fought. Storms can only be survived.

Even the strongest mages and fighters in the clan are helpless in the face of a storm, and I hate that. I hate the fear chilling my skin and clouding my thoughts, and I hate that I can see all of those fears reflected in Nyshin-ma Tyrroh’s eyes. “Go now, Khya. Take Rai and run.”

I look toward Itagami. That way lies safety, and leaving now might get me there before the worst of the storm strikes. Staying, though... If the desosa remains this sharp,

this dangerously electric, it'll be stupidly risky to channel that power into my wards.

It'd be safer for Rai to make it back to the city before the storm hits, but it doesn't matter, because she won't go back alone. She definitely won't go back without Etaro. Risk or no, neither of us will abandon our squad if there's a chance we can help protect them.

The safety of the clan comes before our lives.

Yorri is one of the only people I'd ignore that conviction for, though Rai and Etaro are tied for second, but running ahead to get back to Itagami first won't make it any more likely that I'll arrive alive. My best chance is with the squad, and their best chance is with me.

I shove my panic aside, squaring my shoulders and planting my feet. "I'm not leaving you all behind."

Tyrroh has been my commanding officer for more than a year. This is the first time I've dared disobey an order. He nods once, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners like they do when he smiles. That smile falls as the other six squad members appear over the rise. I fix my hood and reknit my atakafu to keep it in place over my mouth. As they approach at a run, I ready my wards; the invisible shield won't save us from the wind, but it may at least keep us from literally losing our heads to a barreling piece of debris.

Nyshin-ma Tyrroh barks orders, and the squad forms a tight column behind Rai and me. When we move, we move fast.

The first mile is protected by a narrow canyon, then the south wall tapers off to nothing. As the blasts of wind grow stronger, I watch the air as much as the ground, ready to deflect rocks carried by the currents of air. Soon—too soon—we have to turn east and leave the shelter of the high stone walls.

Each step becomes a battle. There's still daylight, but the normal blinding brightness of the desert at noon is gone. The storm will have swallowed the sun by the time we reach the narrow, winding path up to Itagami's gates. Even in daylight, that path is treacherous. But in the dark while fighting the wind?

I dig my feet into the hard-packed ground and push faster.

Someone shouts, but it's distant over the rush of the wind. How far back have they fallen? I look. Tyrroh is dragging Eтаро up until ey is on eir feet again.

My stomach flips when Eтаро cradles eir arm. Did I miss a piece of debris? I pay more attention to the sky, but I don't stop running. I might've been able to prevent whatever struck Eтаро, but nothing I'm capable of will help the ebet now.

The Itagami mesa is dead ahead of us, and the fires in the watchtowers are beacons guiding us home. It's a safe haven that the Miriseh carved out of the rock for our ancestors, but it's too far away to do us any good.

The clouds are almost over our heads when the desosa flares again, the power so electrified by the storm that it nearly burns me. So electrified that it nearly burns cold.

Blood and rot. I've felt this before.

Years ago, Yorri and I stood on the north wall of the city to watch a storm, the wind whipping our skin like a lash. An arc of lightning had streaked through the sky, striking the exterior wall not twenty feet from where we stood.

It's happening again. Siphoning as much of the dangerously strong desosa into myself as I can bear, I bring up my wards and dive for Rai.

Miriseh, bless me; I hope this works.

Lightning tears through the sky, the flash sunlight-bright. It strikes exactly where we'd been standing. Even warded, the heat is like standing inside a forge. It's agonizing. Almost too much. I bite back a scream and grit my teeth, pulling in more of the unstable desosa to reinforce the magic.

Never draw power from unstable desosa. You'll burn out. Overload. Die.

My training master's warnings roar through my mind.

Too late. I've already ignored them all.

The lightning disappears, leaving only the rumbling, echoing thunderclap behind. My vision is washed out in red-tinged white light. I lose hold of the desosa. My wards drop.

Hands wrap around my shoulders. Someone hauls me to my feet.

"Move!" Tyrroh orders, gripping me by the waist and keeping me upright when my knees buckle. Two of the others do the same for Rai, pulling her forward.

I did it. She's fine. We're both okay.

A deep breath is barely enough to clear my head, but I manage to find my stride again.

We've almost reached the bottom of the path to the city's gates when the clouds unburden themselves on the sunbaked desert of Shiara. Sheets of water drench us to the skin as we run up the winding path cut into the sandstone.

The higher we rise, the stronger the wind gets. My hood fills with air and flies back off my head, pulling so hard it chokes me. Someone almost goes flying off the ledge. Rai tows them back just in time. I tuck my hood into my tunic as I press against the wall, moving as quickly as I can while hugging the stone.

The wet rock is slick under our feet. I slip, catching myself on the cliff. Wind rips strands of my dark hair from

the twin braids keeping it tight to my scalp. Pieces stick to my forehead and cover my eyes. I wipe them back and keep moving.

Two hundred yards to safety.

Someone else gets too close to the edge. The gale rips them into thin air, but Ryzo catches their wrist.

One hundred yards.

All the muscles in my legs burn. Rai falls. Tyrroh barely catches her tunic in time to save her.

Fifty yards.

Ever-more-frequent lightning strikes light up the path, gleaming off Itagami's iron gate. The guards at the gate are shouting. Though the words are lost, the message is clear: Run, run, *run*.

I sprint, diving under the protection of the wide stone archway. As soon as the last of the squad is inside, the guards heave the massively heavy iron doors shut. The gate's groaning protests are lost to the storm, but the *thud* of it locking reverberates through my chest.

Miriseh bless it, we made it back alive.

Laughter bubbles up from my chest, relief leaving me light-headed and exertion leaving me too weak to stuff it away. Closing my eyes, I collapse against the wall of the archway until I can trust my unsteady legs to support me.

Stepping into the open, I pull my atakafu away from my mouth and turn my face to the sky, opening my mouth and swallowing as much cool, fresh water as I can. If we're lucky, this will replenish all of the pools in the underground caverns. Off-season rain is so rare that even the shortest of unexpected droughts leaves us teetering on the knife's edge. This storm might've nearly killed us, but it also might give Sagen sy Itagami enough water for us to survive another half a year.

“Ryzo! Get Etaro to Hishingu Hall for healing. Everyone else retreat to the undercity,” Tyrroh bellows. I watch Ryzo help Etaro into the city, biting my lip. I should have been paying more attention. If I’d been faster, more alert, Etaro wouldn’t have gotten hurt.

“Move, Khya!”

I jump, yanking my attention away from Etaro, and follow the squad.

The undercity is so massive I’ve gotten lost in its network of caves more than once, but Itagami couldn’t survive without it. Partly because of things like the iron and crystal mines, the mushroom farms, the bathing pools, and the small spring of fresh water. Mostly, though, it’s because of days like today. The undercity is our escape when a tornado, a typhoon, or a dust storm tears across the desert. Wind may keen and wail as it whips through the crevasses in the rocks, but the damage can’t reach us here. We’re safe.

As safe as we can ever be.

When we reach the caves, I turn toward Yorri’s usual hiding spot. Rai stepping into my peripheral vision stops me. Her hand is raised to silently ask permission to touch, and she’s staring at me with bone-deep relief in her expression. Water drips over her round face and into her eyes, but she doesn’t seem to notice it. The fingers of her raised hand twitch and I nod. Only then does she place her hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you, Khya.” She pulls me into a hug, and I don’t have the strength to fight the embrace. I don’t want to, either. If I had been but a hair slower, that strike would have left blood burned into the scorch mark the lightning left behind.

“Don’t stand in the way of lightning.” I hope it sounds

like a joke and not a plea, but I don't know what I'd do without her. Rai and Etaro are the only reasons I don't drive myself to distraction during most of our long shifts on the wall. Clearing my throat, I disengage from her clinging hug. "Next time I might not be there to ward you."

Rai laughs, running a trembling hand over her face. What can I say to bring her back to herself?

"Nyshin-ten Khya, a word." Tyrroh's timing is wonderful. I want to hug him for keeping me from saying anything too unbearably sentimental. Rai smiles at me and inclines her head to our nyshin-ma before she leaves.

"Every time I think you can't surprise me, something like this happens." He's almost smiling at me, and I suppress the urge to shift under his penetrating stare. His hood has been pushed back and his atakafu unwrapped. Rich brown skin worn by the sun, scarred by battle, and wet from rain gleams in the firelight. "This squad owes their survival to you."

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to grin. Nyshin-ma Tyrroh does not impress easily. To have him in my debt? It's a heady thing.

"Didn't your blood-parents have a second child?" Tyrroh's words catch my attention. It's not surprising that he remembered; more than one child from the same set of blood-parents only happens with sumai bond pairs. He looks pleased when I nod. "Miriseh bless us. If they have even half your instincts, they'll be a gift to the ranks."

More than one person has joked that if our blood-parents had a third child—unlikely as it is—they would have ended up with one offspring of each sex. Whether another child had been born ebet to round out the set or not, I doubt it would have mattered. I can't imagine a third sibling fitting in the bond I have with Yorri.

This time, I let myself smile at Tyrroh. This time, the expression is a lie.

Tyrroh inclines his head with the same respect Rai had shown him and then leaves, headed for the bathing pools. Though I'm sure Tyrroh means well, his words have started an avalanche inside my head.

What moon cycle is it? We're three moons away from the rainy season, so that means... Bellows and blood. I'd known it was coming up, but I hadn't realized just how soon it was.

Yorri will face the herynshi in one moon.

Reminding myself that this is a rite of passage every child of Sagen sy Itagami faces doesn't warm my chilled skin. It doesn't slow my stuttering heart at all, because the herynshi is the night the Miriseh decide if we'll have the full rights and honors of a nyshin, linger with the city guards as an ahdo, or spend our lives toiling in obscurity as a yonin. There's no comfort thinking that the fourth outcome is rare. There's never comfort in death.

Surviving Shiara's deserts takes iron, will, and magic, and sometimes even those aren't enough. It's why the Miriseh use the herynshi to test our skills, and it's why the magic-less yonin don't ever leave Itagami.

I found my magic when I was twelve. Our blood-parents Anda and Ono both discovered theirs at fourteen. Yorri will be sixteen in one moon cycle, and there's been nothing. Not a single hint of power. But if he can't display his power at the herynshi, he'll spend the rest of his life as a yonin, working in the mines, the farms, the forges, the kitchens, the nursery, the —

No. Shuddering, I try to breathe.

A hand locks around my arm, and Yorri spins me around. His dark eyes search me for injury, and I find

myself doing the same to him.

Though he's a year younger than me, he's taller now, his nose level with my forehead. When we were little, people had a hard time telling us apart. Both of us have the same lean build, sharp features, brass-flecked brown eyes, and dark curls. Yorri's hair has grown longer than he usually wears it, long enough to cover the tips of his ears and brush the top of his neck; it's almost as long as mine.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it back in time." Yorri's voice is shaking. From fear? Relief?

"I'm fine. My legs feel like they're made of overworked leather, but I'm fine."

It's cooler in the undercity, where the sun can't warm the stone, and I'm soaked to the skin. That's why I shiver. Not because there's only one moon cycle until...

I force a smile, trying to reassure both of us.

Lips pursed, Yorri tightens his hold on my arm and turns toward the bathing pools. "Come on. We need to get you warmed up before you get sick."

Every few seconds he glances back at me, as though to make sure I haven't disappeared. That familiar action, and the concern that goes with it, both soothes and unsettles me. It's his empathy, his sometimes overflowing mercy, that has held him back his whole life.

The faintly steaming water filling the massive cavern always smells of sulfur, and it's unsurprisingly crowded with citizens carefully wading into the waist-high water. On the wide ledge surrounding the central pool, piles of tunics and pants to be cleaned are growing fast as every man, woman, and ebet strips to the skin, naked except for the band of leather around their left wrists, the one that bears the wardcharm showing their citizen class.

I watch them as Yorri and I soak in the warm water.

Their battle scars are slashes of pink, white, and beige against varying shades of brown. The marks are badges of battles Itagami's nyshin and ahdo citizens have survived. Will Yorri ever bear similar scars? He won't if he truly doesn't have magic. They'll never let him out to earn any.

Clean and no longer shivering, I walk toward the ledge, cautiously maneuvering around the others.

"Thank you," I murmur to the yonin who offers a drying cloth when I step onto the ledge that borders the pool. The taller one standing behind offers a jar of oil that we dip our fingers into and rub into the leather cuff on our wrists, keeping it from cracking when it dries. They nod acknowledgment when I give them a small smile, but say nothing.

Wiping my skin dry, I head for the shelves of clean clothes and take a breast band, a loincloth, a pair of the wide-legged pants that bind tight from ankle to calf, a high-necked sleeveless undershirt, and a long-sleeved hooded tunic. Yorri holds out an atakafu for me, already knotted to fit loosely around my neck since I don't need to wear it over my face in the undercity.

"Ready?" He places the circle of nyska cloth and silk over my head. When I nod, he leads me into the tunnels of the undercity, turning away from the central cavern where most of the clan congregates during the rains. There's a narrow alcove that's close enough to the clan to hear orders, but far enough away to make us feel alone.

It's a hideaway we've used for years, not a secret by any stretch of the imagination, but a space small enough no one else ever bothered squeezing themselves into it. It's where Yorri keeps the odd little treasures he collects, things no one else in the clan has any reason to want or need. He used to store them in the doseiku dorm, but the other

trainees kept mistaking his projects for misplaced junk. It's all safer here.

"Sit," he says once we're settled into the familiar space. "Do you want one braid, two, or many?"

"Two." He kneels behind me and cards his fingers through my damp hair, pulling the short strands tight. My eye catches on an unfamiliar shape, something that looks like a tangled mess of scrap metal the size of two closed fists. Did he make another puzzle?

I reach forward, trying not to move my head. Catching one of the metal pieces with the tip of my fingers, I drag it closer. The pieces are interconnected in a pattern a lot more complicated than the last puzzle he created. I couldn't solve that one. This one looks impossible.

Yorri's nimble fingers quickly separate my hair, plaiting it into a pattern that lies tight against my scalp. I can't ever recreate his braids; they're almost as complex as his puzzles.

I idly turn his creation over in my hands, but my mind isn't focused on untangling the linked metal. Tyrroh's words and my own worries are taking up too much space.

"You're quiet," he says a few minutes later. "Even for you."

I run my thumb along one of the puzzle's curved edges and shrug.

Yorri has always been different. His hands and his mind are as quick as a lightning strike, but when he has a weapon in his hand, something holds him back. He's slow to take advantage of a moment of weakness or a mistake. He never seems to understand how to predict that moment when his enemy's guard is down and he can strike a killing blow. He leans toward mercy, and mercy has put him flat on his back staring at the tip of a sword more times than I can count. Mercy is weakness. Hesitation means death. He cannot

give in to either if he means to make it through the trial as a nyshin.

No matter how much I want to, the herynshi isn't a fight I can save him from. Everyone enters alone, and the rank they're placed in is based entirely on their merit. For doseiku who've already found their power, it's our chance to impress the Miriseh with our skill and control. The Miriseh push those who haven't passed their own limits, giving them one last chance to escape the drudgery of life as a yonin, but the chances are good that if a doseiku walks into that ordeal with no power, that's exactly how they'll walk out of it.

The thought forms slowly, trickling into my head in bits and pieces until I'm holding my breath at the idea. Stupid and dangerous.

Yorri secures the end of the second braid and moves to sit against the opposite wall, watching me carefully as he does. His head is cocked and his stare intense. It's strange to think that we were never supposed to know each other like this—blood-siblings aren't usually placed in the same nursery. We're close enough in age that we trained and learned and practiced together for most of our lives. I've watched over him as best I could since he looked at me when he was five years old and told me, with absolute certainty, that I would be one of the kaigo council members one day. Since the day one of the yonin nursemaids smiled at me and said, "You take very good care of your brother."

Your brother.

Yorri had been *mine*—the first and only thing that had ever belonged to me more than the clan—and I promised to protect him; I swore it on blood before I knew how tightly those vows bind. Now, imagining life without him opens

a sinkhole in my stomach, leaving me gasping and hollow. Now, he's the only thing that I value above what's best for Itagami. Above the future position in the clan I've imagined for myself since I first learned the legends of the Miriseh.

They came to us from Ryogo, from the haven we all ascend to when death finally takes us. For centuries the immortal Miriseh have protected and guided us, passing on their wisdom and showing us how to live honorable, loyal lives to earn a place in the afterlife. They gave up paradise to lead the clan, so in return we do what we can to serve them.

Now I'm actually contemplating risking our lives and a dishonorable death. I'm risking our chance at Ryogo just to hope that Yorri won't have to face the herynshi disadvantaged.

"I'm in."

His voice is so low and his lips so still that, for a second, I'm not sure he spoke. Then one of his eyebrows rises; he's waiting for a response.

"In what?" I ask, my voice just as quiet.

"Whatever trouble you're planning."

"How do you know I'm planning anything?"

The corner of his lip quirks up. "You may be able to hide it from everyone else, but I know you, Nyshin-ten Khya. I know that look."

"It's a bad idea. Dangerous." I look at him now, needing to know he's marking my words. "And it might not work. It might not be worth the risk."

It definitely won't be worth it if it doesn't work.

"I already said I was in. You can't change your mind now. Besides, if *you're* willing to risk trouble, then it has to be trouble that's worth getting into." Even in the dim light cast by the oil lamps, I recognize that look. Merciful my brother may be, but he's still *my* brother. Our stubborn

streak runs deep and strong.

Groaning, I drop my head back until it thunks against the stone behind me.

After a moment I meet Yorri's eyes. He relaxes and smiles.

"You'll conveniently forget you said that as soon as I try to drag you into my plans."

"Probably," he agrees easily.

"Rot-ridden pest." I shove his legs away with the flat of my foot, but I can't erase my smile. "Show me how to solve that ridiculous puzzle before I lose patience with you and leave."

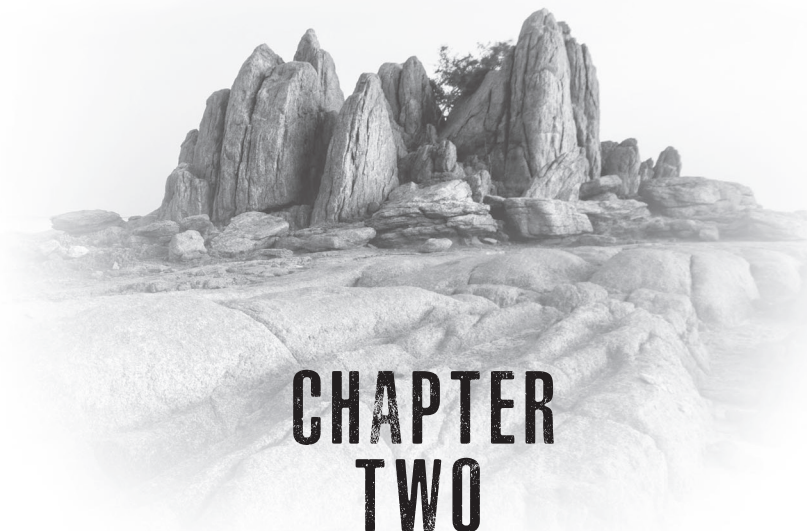
Yorri rolls his eyes, but he's grinning when he takes the puzzle from my hands and starts explaining how he pieced it together. It's comfortingly familiar, something we've done together ever since we were kids, but it's not enough to stop the thoughts and plans and fears spinning in the back of my head like a tornado. My brother is so lost in his explanations that it doesn't seem like he notices my tension.

But that's why I have to push him. I can't let him walk into the herynshi without magic, or he'll walk out of it as one of the yonin. He'll never rise through the nyshin ranks, following me higher until we can take our blood-parents' places on the kaigo council.

If I don't find a way to trigger his magic, I'll lose him to the undercity. Our lives will diverge, and that gap will eventually become impossible to bridge.

I cross my arms, tucking my clenched fists out of sight. Listening to Yorri verbally disengage the various pieces of his puzzle, I focus on my own challenge.

One moon. It might not be enough time, but, Miriseh bless it, it's all the time I have.



CHAPTER TWO

When the walls of my barracks start to feel too close, I wander through the city, sticking to the smaller alleys instead of the main thoroughfares. On the wider roads I'd have to dodge nursery groups, formations of doseiku in training, and metal carts carrying food, weapons, or iron from the mines. The story of my squad's escape from the typhoon has spread. Everyone seems to want to hear it for themselves, but I don't want to repeat it. It's not as special as they make it sound. Any citizen would've done the same thing.

Five days after the storm, the city is finally returning to its usual rhythms. The yonin teams have finished sweeping the streets for debris fallen from the rooftop gardens, and I've seen far fewer hushed conversations with wary eyes cast to the sky.

"It struck without warning, but your strength and diligence ensured few lives were lost," Miriseh Varan told the clan the morning after the vicious winds faded and the desosa settled back into its usual soothing, constant vibration. "The Miriseh

will see you through this like we've done for centuries."

And so it's been. The reports of damage have been given to the kaigo council, who serve the Miriseh and oversee the daily decisions—mission assignments, resupply requests, promotion approvals, and transfers. The kaigo sent squads to recover the fifteen citizens who died in the desert—drowned by flash floods or blown off heights by the wind. The bodies have been brought home to Itagami for saishigi rites. Repair orders for the base camps in the desert were given, but the first won't be carried out until tomorrow. Today the clan is focused on the herynshi—the ordeal I still haven't figured out how to see my brother through.

But in all honesty, what do I think I can do for Yorri in the span of a single moon that almost sixteen years of training and teachers haven't?

There is always a hint of brine and salt in the air over Sagen sy Itagami—not exactly a surprise since our mesa is practically part of the coastline of Shiara—but it's ten times stronger on the north wall. It's been especially strong in the five days since the daylong storm.

Between the edge of the north wall and the endless ocean is a strip of land barely long enough for me to lie across, and then there's a sheer drop of more than a hundred feet to the crashing waves and the rocky shore. Those red, beige, and gray rocks continue into the sea, jutting out from the water to break up the solid blue line of the horizon. The massive, black, barren isle of Imaku is the only one of them large enough to be an island in its own right.

Nodding to the ahdo team patrolling this section of the wall, I wait until they pass and then climb up the chest-high ledge of the exterior wall.

A stronger gust of wind strikes, almost unbalancing me. I bend my knees and shift with the motion it demands. That was how it happened with my magic, too. I found myself in a situation that demanded something of me—something *Yorri* demanded of me—and I figured out how to give it.

His mind was always a dozen places at once, never fully committed to anything. Not even training. One day, before he learned to channel his focus into a single task, *Yorri* was more distracted than usual. He missed a step—just a single step—and began to fall. Directly into the path of a zeeka sword. Someone had stumbled. Their swing had gone wide, into *Yorri*'s training space. The blade would've struck his throat. I don't know if even the strongest *hishingu* in the clan would've been able to heal him if my wards hadn't burst to life, if I hadn't been able to deflect the blow.

Fear brought my magic out of me, fear and the overwhelming need to protect what was mine. The problem is that true danger, the kind that sparks soul-deep fear, isn't easy to recreate. It's even harder to create it in a way that isn't real. That's what the *Miriseh* use the *herynshi* for—to construct the convincing but controlled illusion of imminent death.

How can I put him in danger without actually risking his life? If I can pull it off, will it be enough? I shudder at the possibility. I've spent most of my life trying to keep him safe. Am I seriously considering purposefully endangering him for this?

The scar on his shoulder is the only visible reminder of the day I learned I was a *fykina* mage, the strongest class of ward mage. It could've been a death blow if I hadn't been there. What will happen to him during the *herynshi* if I don't intervene? He'll end up *yonin*. Or the first time he faces a battle as a *nyshin* or an *ahdo*, an enemy's blade will

land the blow that I saved him from years ago.

I didn't purposefully aim myself this way, but coming to the north wall makes sense. This is one of Yorri's favorite spots in the upper city, and he's the puzzle consuming my mind.

The wind tugs at my hood and the end of my tunic. Because of the slits that rise to my hips, the back half flares out behind me like a mykyn bird's tail. It's not like the Kujuko-cursed wind during the storm, destructive and angry. This is the cool, playful breeze that carries the ocean with it. It reminds me of my brother when we were younger, constantly tugging at my tunic and asking me question after question. I only ever knew the answers to a portion of them, but he kept asking. Sometimes it felt like he thought if I didn't know the answer, it wasn't worth knowing. *That*, at least, he's grown out of.

I breathe the briny air and try to consider the options objectively. As objectively as I ever can when Yorri is involved.

Yorri, who was the first person to tell me that one day I'd be kaigo, just like our blood-parents, serving the Miriseh and earning high honors in Ryogo. I'd flicked him on the shoulder and said "Of course I will be," but his faith had been what convinced me I was right.

Yorri, who gets so excited he stumbles over his own words when he's explaining how he solved some new, impossible puzzle. He devotes himself with frightening fervor to anything that ensnares his arrow-quick mind, but sometimes needs reminding that the rest of the world exists.

Forget objectivity. It's worth the risk.

I am *going* to keep him safe, just like I always have.

"You're going to be late for the vigil if you stand here staring into nothing for much longer, Khya."

I tense, keeping my eyes on the angry, dark blue, white-capped waves. I'd heard the footsteps approaching, but several people had come and gone already and left me alone.

Tessen, however, never was able to keep his thoughts inside his head.

"I won't be late." I avoid looking at him until he moves into my peripheral vision.

He leans against the wall to the left of me, his forearms crossed on the ledge and his head tilted up. With his arms folded on the ledge and his body held slightly away from the wall, I can make out the lines of muscle under layers of cloth, all of it hard-earned—though I probably won't ever admit that to him. I don't look directly at him, but I turn my head enough to get a better look at his face.

He's taller than me, so looking down on him like this is strange. Seeing him without the hood and atakafu we always wear on duty is stranger. I don't think I've seen his whole face since he became nyshin over a year ago.

His thick eyebrows sit low over his deep-set eyes and the line of his nose is straight, because somehow he was always quick enough in training to avoid all but the most glancing blows to his face. The setting sun highlights the red in his terra-cotta skin and makes his oddly pale eyes flash. Usually they're limestone gray, but now they're paler than ever and gleaming almost as bright as the sunlight off the ocean.

"Shouldn't you be off training? Or guarding something?" I ask before he speaks.

"I am." He smirks at me. "I'm guarding the mad nyshin girl who's decided to perch on the walls and imitate a mykyn bird."

"I'm not planning on attempting flight." I wave my hand

at him, trying to brush him off. “You can go, Nyshin-ten.”

His lips purse; I hide a smile. It was delightful discovering exactly how annoyed he got when I called him by his class and rank instead of his name. The flash of aggravation disappears quickly, replaced by his more usual sardonic smile. “Should I guess what has you lost in your own head the night of a vigil?”

“No. I don’t have that much time.”

“Then I won’t guess. Only your brother puts that look on your face.”

I look at him, expecting to see mockery in his eyes. There isn’t any. He looks almost...serious?

“You’re worried about his *herynshi*. Unless he’s in trouble again? It’s been a while. He’s overdue.”

“It’s been a while because he doesn’t have to deal with people who point out his every mistake anymore. Like *you*.” Gritting my teeth, I bend to brace my hand on the ledge and jump down to where Tessen stands. At six feet, he’s only an inch or two taller than me. Our eyes are nearly level when I square off against him. “You’re one of the reasons he ever got in trouble in the first place.”

“And you spent years trying to make him invisible.” Tessen’s lips thin, and the muscles in his jaw clench for a moment. “Even before you found your wards, you shielded him from everything. What he can do now that you’re not there to monitor his every move should be all the proof you need.”

“He would have *died* if I hadn’t protected him.” Nothing will ever convince me it was wrong to keep him alive. “You can’t seriously be suggesting I should have let that happen?”

“No, that isn’t— You don’t even know what he’s capable of! How long has it been since you’ve seen him fight? It’s

been—” He steps back, his lips pressed tight and his hands held away from his weapons. “Bellows, Khya. I didn’t come here to fight with you. This isn’t how this was supposed to go.”

I blink. “What?” Tessen backing away from an argument? This has to be a trick. “How what was supposed to go?”

He shakes his head, a small smile quirking up the corners of his mouth. “I only came to ask if you’d dance with me tonight at the celebration.”

He can’t be serious...but there’s not a single sign that he isn’t being sincere.

I drop my gaze to hide the confusion that has to show on my face. My focus catches on the pendant gleaming against the undyed cloth of his tunic—a two-inch iron disc etched with crossed zeeka swords. Blood and rot, I hate seeing that around his neck. The zeeka is the symbol of the kaigo; the pendant is a symbol of their students.

Tessen is wearing the kaigo-sei pendant that should have been *mine*.

Out of the whole clan, the Miriseh and the kaigo only choose one nyshin-ten per year. His blood-mother, Neeva, is on the kaigo council. Being named a kaigo-sei isn’t a guarantee of advancement, but it is a sign that the leaders of the clan are keeping an eye on you. The kaigo-sei are given extra training and have to face additional tests of magic, skill, and leadership. Not every nyshin named a kaigo-sei student becomes a council member, but no one who *isn’t* a kaigo-sei will ever become one. I can still earn one—and I *will*, sooner rather than later—but it seems like they’re already grooming Tessen to take Kaigo Neeva’s place one day.

Rot take him, it was supposed to be me.

Swallowing the fruitless envy building in my chest, I raise my eyes to meet Tessen's again. "I don't make promises I don't intend to keep."

"But that's not a no, so I'll ask again tonight." He smiles, inclines his head, and then walks away whistling. I hate that sound, and I'm almost positive he knows that.

If I follow him down, he'll try to talk to me again, and I'll spend the entire walk to the courtyard trying not to strangle him with the leather cord of the kaigo-sei pendant. Growling under my breath, I turn in the opposite direction and run to the stairs at the northwestern edge of the city. The wasted time is worth it to keep myself from getting in trouble over Tessen.

I run down the steep steps and through the mostly empty streets. Bellows. It's later than I thought—almost everyone is gathered in the courtyard, holding vigil until the herynshi ends, until the Miriseh bless the new citizens and we see if the student or friend or lover we sent into the ring was strong enough to make it into the ranks of the nyshin.

For this vigil, and the introductions that come after and the celebration after that, the clan stands in ranks and formations. As a nyshin, I get to be part of the first class, but because I serve under a nyshin-ma instead of a higher ranking -co or -ri, our squad is pushed to the back of the nyshin.

As I wind my way through the ahdo squads I have to pass to reach mine, I spot Yorri. The doseiku stand behind the ahdo, and my brother is one of the oldest in the doseiku class now. He's easy to find in the center of the first line of trainees. I nod hello when his eyes meet mine, but my attention moves past him and the other trainees to the yonin standing along the rear of the square.

Their role within the clan is both necessary and worthy of respect, but anyone can farm, mine, cook, or clean. The work is without valor. Without honor or recognition. It means an entire life spent locked inside the walls of the city, often a life spent under it. That isn't the life I wanted, and it's not one I want for Yorri, either. I have to find a way to keep Yorri up here in the sunlight with me. Even if he doesn't venture into the desert to hunt or to help protect the borders, his quick mind would serve the clan so much better if he had the power to put his brilliant plans into action.

Trying to calm my racing pulse, I slip into place next to Rai and Etaro and focus on the bikyo-ko—the center of the city, the armory, the barracks for both the Miriseh and the kaigo council, and the focal point of the two main roads that divide the four zons.

The bikyo-ko isn't the tallest building, but it's the largest, stretching for at least a hundred square yards. The rest of Sagen sy Itagami is designed around this intricately carved three-story building and the courtyard in front of it—the only open space in the city large enough to hold all ten thousand citizens and doseiku. At some point, a talented ishiji used their stone magic to etch and then paint battle scenes into the once-smooth surface of the building, all of them depicting the legends of the immortal Miriseh and the clan's victories against the Denhitran and Tsimos clans. On every other building bordering the courtyard, the sandstone has been smoothed by wind and sand and rain, and only the symbols over the doorways adorn the otherwise bare walls.

Thud.

The sound reverberates in the air, echoing off the buildings. I look over my shoulder toward the road leading

west. The sun has set, and Itagami's iron gates are closed for the night. The Miriseh and the new citizens have arrived.

At the head of the line approaching on the main road, Miriseh Varan and Miriseh Suzu march. Their hoods are dyed vibrant indigo, a color only the immortal elders are allowed to wear. Behind them, twenty-seven newly classed citizens march in three columns of nine while six of the Miriseh and eight of the kaigo council march in an honor guard on either side. I almost smile when I notice many familiar faces from my old training class standing in front, almost all of them ranked among the nyshin, but...

I look toward Yorri even though I can't see him from here. What will his position be in that procession when he faces the herynshi?

Rai snaps her fingers in front of my face.

Flinching, I spin in her direction. "What?"

Etaro is watching me over Rai's shoulder, eir narrow eyes crinkled with concern. Ey mouths silently, "Are you okay?"

I nod, and Rai jerks her chin toward the dais, whispering, "Then pay attention. I'm not doing laps of the wall because you got distracted."

When she tries to smack my elbow, I deflect her hand and roll my eyes. "Unless you're planning on sharing my bed tonight, keep your hands off."

"You wish," Rai whispered with a grin, puckering her lips and giving the air between us a smacking kiss.

Etaro huffs a laugh at both of us. They're right, and for more reasons than they know. I shouldn't—*can't*—let myself get distracted.

Varan and Suzu lead the group toward the bikyo-ko dais, traveling the path that runs down the center of the courtyard between squads. They climb the five steps,

directing the columns behind them into position with small hand signals, and then stand in the center of the dais facing the clan. When they remove their indigo hoods, their dark hair picks up tinges of red from the firelight; their skin—normally the same pale beige as the sand on the narrow shoreline a mile from the city—has a similar red cast.

“In the eyes of the Miriseh, all who face the herynshi are blessed,” they shout in unison, officially beginning the induction. One by one, Varan and Suzu introduce each nyshin and ahdo citizen by name and their new class-rank. “Welcome your new brothers and sisters!”

“Urah!” The clan raises their left hands, the wardcharms stitched to our leather cuffs glittering in the firelight—the yonin’s circular iron disc stamped with the outline of a bare foot, the ahdo’s small iron shield, the nyshin’s miniature morning star, the kaigo’s minuscule zeeka sword, and the Miriseh’s iron and brass sun. They’re symbols of our purpose within the clan, our standing, and our skill.

Our training master Ahdo-mas Sotra used to tell us that although victory should never be assumed, we would always be defeated if we believed we could be. Even though I don’t yet know how I’m going to win, defeat isn’t an option in this.

Varan’s voice booms across the courtyard. “Tonight twelve have been placed within the safety of the yonin, and we ask that every citizen does their part to protect those who serve within the city.”

I lift my right hand to my left wrist, running my thumb along the edges of my morning star wardcharm. In one moon, Yorri will wear one of these, too.

“The success of the night has been high,” Suzu cries. “Celebrate the victory.”

As soon as Suzu drops her arms, the drums begin. Iron

casks of ahuri wine are opened as circles of space, their boundaries marked by borders of gray limestone laid into the red sandstone, clear throughout the courtyard.

The tokiansu—the warrior’s dance—is beauty, strength, grace, speed, and deadly skill melded into a glorious performance. I’ve only joined once since my herynshi a year ago. It didn’t go well after I saw that my partner wasn’t willing to take risks. It was disappointing and frustrating, and I walked away wishing I hadn’t danced at all.

As much as I want to try it again, there isn’t any citizen I trust to read me well enough. Yet. That will change once Yorri becomes nyshin, because we have years of practice behind us. Granted, we weren’t supposed to be taking the tokiansu weapons into the undercity and teaching ourselves how to perform the complicated dances, but we did it anyway. And we got pretty good at it, too.

Until then, I can wait. Ill-matched partners often end with someone bleeding, which is one of the reasons sumai pairs are so good—the soulbond connects them in a way no one else can match. They know their partner as well as they know themselves, can predict moves with the flicker of an eye or the twitch of a finger.

Yorri and I aren’t that, but we can definitely get through a dance without goring each other.

“Khya!” Etaro grips the sleeve of my tunic between eir fingers and tugs me toward the center of the square. Rai doesn’t follow, already off to find a partner to dance with. “If we hurry, we might be able to get a spot at the inner ring.”

“A spot for what?”

Etaro grins and keeps speed-walking, gracefully dodging people who aren’t moving fast enough for em. “Trust me. I heard that— Just hurry up.”

I hear the names before we’re halfway there. My heart

skips a beat, and I no longer lag behind Etaro. Ey's right. I definitely want to watch this.

Kaigo Anda and Kaigo Ono grin at each other—both carrying a long, curved, narrow-bladed tudo sword—as they take the center circle. The rest of the clan holds its breath on nights when bondmates dance. It doesn't happen every moon, but it's happening tonight.

Sumai bonds run deep, but it means that when one of them dies, grief carves a permanent, unhealable wound on the other's soul. It's why so few people request the bond. Living unbonded and moving from one short-term relationship to another as the needs of life change is more common. And easier.

Many who are willing and able to bear children do eventually find a temporary khai partnership that meets the approval of the Miriseh, but that's more like a statement of intent than a true bond. There's no soul wound to recover from when an old lover dies, and on Shiara, death is the one thing that's inevitable. For everyone except the Miriseh, at least. My blood-parents risked it anyway.

"I need to find Yorri," I tell Etaro, rising onto my toes. We used to press as close as we could on the nights our parents danced, gaping from the sidelines as they twirled, ducked, and struck with gracefully unerring accuracy. "He'll want to see this."

"Fine, but hurry up or I won't be able to save you a spot." Etaro's smile spreads across eir sharp-featured face, lighting up eir dark, narrow eyes as ey wiggles eir way through the gathering crowd.

Though I'm searching the faces for Yorri, I spot Tessen first. He's bearing down on me with a determined stride, the fingers of his left hand striking his upper thigh in time

with the drums of the dance.

Bellows. He was serious about asking again, wasn't he?

I cast a look at Anda and Ono, then lose myself in the crowd. Tomorrow I'll have to explain my disappearance to Etaro, but I'd rather face eir annoyance than Tessen's persistence.

Slipping through the press of people, I keep searching for Yorri. Some faces I recognize, others I don't—none are my brother.

A spot of stillness catches my attention.

Yorri stands near a side street leading into the Southwestern Zon, his hands balled at his sides and his shoulders tense as he stares into the shadows of the dimly lit alley.

Before I reach him, he leaves, skirting the more densely packed areas of the courtyard and moving toward the northeastern end of the bikyo-ko. He could be headed back to the doseiku dorm, but he looked upset. If he is, he won't want to spend the evening with the other trainees.

I walk straight for the main north road. The wide street is deserted tonight, so I'm able to run the mile and a half to the wall without obstruction. When I reach the small open space surrounding the staircase Yorri usually takes, it's quiet. I glance up at the wall. Did I beat him here or is he already up there? From this angle, I can't tell, but it isn't likely that he reached the wall before me. He had no reason to run.

Minutes pass, the only sounds the ocean, the wind, and the occasional orders from the ahdo-sa on the wall. No one is approaching the stairs. It doesn't sound like anyone but me is moving within a hundred yards of here. I look up again. Maybe I was wrong?

I shift toward the stairs. A light footstep against the

stone catches my attention. Seconds later, my brother appears out of the shadows of one of the nearby alleys. Yorri exhales heavily when he sees me, but he doesn't protest then or when I turn to follow him up the stairs.

It's odd for anyone to leave the celebration unless duty calls. It's stranger for Yorri to leave early if he doesn't have to. He loves the tokiansu, loves getting the chance to talk to our blood-parents, loves the revelry and the wine and the music. Tonight he left it all behind to come to the north wall and...pace?

I lean against the hip-high inner ledge and watch him cross the width of the wall. He's muttering to himself, I think. I can't make out the words. His steps get shorter, and his body gets tenser. His hands clench spasmodically, the motion almost like he's looking for the hilt of a weapon he's not wearing. But he's never instinctively reached for a weapon. What happened?

As soon as I straighten and reach out for him, he speaks. "Sanii was declared yonin."

"Sanii?" No one in the Northeastern Zon's training class was called Sanii.

Yorri's eyes flick away. "Sanii is an ebet from—" He snaps his mouth shut and shakes his head once. "It doesn't matter. I talked about em, but you haven't met. I wanted to introduce you two for moons now, but..." His eyes lose focus and his shoulders sag as he lifts one hand to rub his mouth. His voice trembles with barely concealed pain. "I thought there would be more time. I was so sure eir magic would be as strong as eir skill."

Sagen sy Itagami is far too densely populated for all of the trainees to fit in one school, but I do remember a doseiku ebet named Sanii who grew up in the Southwestern Zon. Almost a foot shorter than us, but

exceptionally quick with eir hands. Wiry strength, large, intelligent eyes, a strong jawline that gave em a consistently serious expression. But how did I not know Sanii better if they were this close? I've never met em and, no, he *hasn't* ever mentioned—

Oh. He *has* mentioned someone named Sanii.

Breathing the brine-laden air, I force myself to think. And remember.

I've been busy with the squad, and he's been focused on the last moons of his training, and our free days aligned so rarely recently. The time we have gotten to spend together, I always wanted to hear about his puzzles and his training and our doseiku friends that I didn't get to see often. He'd talked about Sanii, but since I only ever had the vaguest idea who ey was, the stories hadn't stuck. I hadn't thought they mattered.

"Ey hasn't died, Yorri." I may not want my brother to live as a yonin, but it's not a fate that deserves a reaction like this. "If Sanii can't protect emself with magic, you know this is the safest place for em. The Miriseh are only trying to protect the clan."

"The safety of the clan comes before our lives." Yorri's face twists. He turns away, running his hands over his hair and muttering again as he walks.

When he faces me again, my heart stutters.

"No." I've seen that determination in his eyes before, but only when he's about to do something stupid. Like the day he attempted to rescue a baby teegra from the butchers. "Whatever you're thinking, Yorri, *no*."

I expect my brother to fight, to insist I don't know what I'm talking about. Instead, he releases a long, slow breath, and all the tension in his body vanishes, leaving behind only sadness, a level of weariness I have never seen in his

face before. “We’d planned to request a sumai bond after my herynshi.”

My breath catches. A sumai? I had no idea my brother was that close to anyone but me.

How can you possibly do that? I want to shout at him. How can you trust anyone with half of your soul?

And why, in all the times Sanii had come up, would he never, ever mention this to me? If he’s kept this secret—

No. It doesn’t matter. At least, not now.

“How did you know em so well?” We met the doseiku from the other zons more than once over the years, but never often enough to develop a sumai-strength bond.

Yorri looks out over the water. “Ey liked to watch the ocean.”

My brother has always been fascinated by the angry, endless expanse of water that surrounds us. I’ve always found the sight daunting. The waves are dark and dangerous, an impassable barrier and a tease in times of drought—so much water and all of it undrinkable without hours and hours of effort to obtain even the smallest measure of fresh water. And every year, at least five yonin die pulling in the fishing nets strung between the closest rocks. The currents are vicious and relentless, swallowing those who get caught in them, breaking them against the rocks, or bearing them all the way out to Imaku. That massive, black island is only a shadowy blot on the dark horizon now, but it’s there, like a great black fist waiting to smash anyone or anything stupid enough to get too close.

Yorri has never been afraid of the water like I am. He likes the sound of the waves crashing on the rocks and rolling back. Did Sanii obsess over it in the same way? I can’t believe it would be enough for either to have considered a sumai. Considering it he had been, though.

It's enough to make me wonder what else there is about my brother that I don't know.

Yorri has training sessions throughout the morning and afternoon, but tomorrow is my free day. I can train while keeping an eye on him from a distance, watching instead of protecting this time. Maybe I'll see whatever it was that Tessen hinted at earlier.

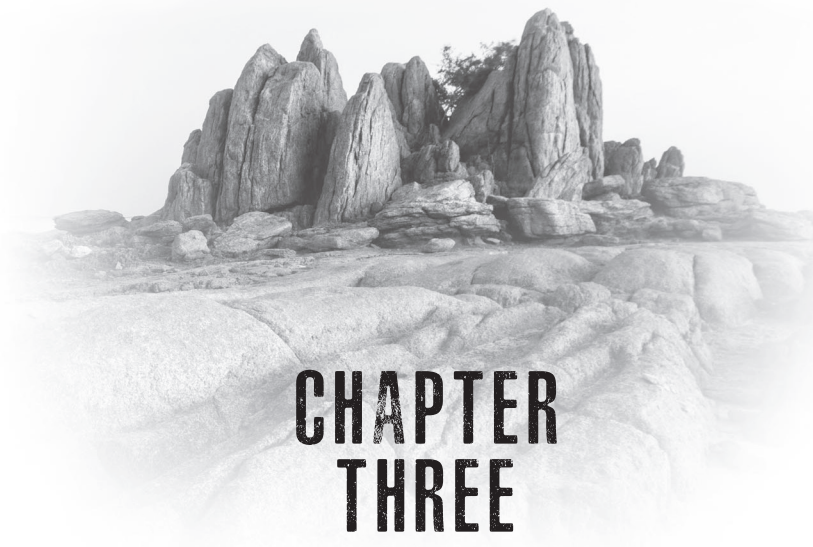
For now, the only thing I can do is rest my hand on my brother's back and my head on his shoulder, offering what little comfort there is to be had.

There are so few unbreakable laws in our world. A sumai between a yonin and anyone in the classes above theirs is one of those laws. Even a bond between an ahdo and a nyshin is looked at askance, but they're allowed. Not so with yonin. If Sanii is yonin, ey is untouchable.

Unless... *Oh, blood and rot.*

There's an exception. Yonin can bond among themselves.

Tonight Yorri may have found the motivation to give up fighting.



CHAPTER THREE

Today I'll be spending more time with the doseiku class than I have since my last day as a trainee. It feels odd, like somehow stepping backward in my own life.

There are two separate sides to the yard, one for the doseiku and one for the nyshin and ahdo squads. I enter through the citizens' door, skirting the teams running drills and the nyshin-ma and nyshin-co shouting orders, and head for the long storage room that divides the two halves. I nod at those I recognize as I pass, staying out of the way but not hiding. The only person I'm avoiding is my brother. Yorri can't know I'm here, not if I want to see what Tessen hinted at.

From the practice weapons in the storage room, I take a curved, narrow-bladed anto dagger and strap its sheath to my belt, and then I reach for a zeeka sword.

"This isn't where I expected to see you this morning, Khya." Bellows. Tessen.

He'll be more insufferable than usual as soon as he figures out why I'm here. Swallowing a frustrated growl, I

try to keep my expression indifferent as I turn to face him. I think that expression falters as soon as I see him.

How does he always look like he's just had a week of bed rest? Almost everyone in the clan is sleep-deprived and hungover the morning after a celebration. Never Tessen. I didn't even drink any of the wine last night, and I still feel—and probably look—like I downed half a cask.

He smiles, his eyes alight with amusement.

Oh, of all the blood-rotten things. How long have I been staring at him?

I try to keep my face from flushing, but this is Tessen. There's no way his basaku senses missed the way my pulse rate just jumped. I clear my throat and pretend I don't know that. "Me being here is no odder than finding *you* here the morning after a celebration."

Tessen shakes his head, his smile going tight. "I've been assigned to work with the third-year doseiku today."

My gaze falls to the kaigo-sei pendant, and the fingers of my right hand twitch, wanting to curl into a fist. Right. The early stages of a kaigo-sei's leadership training are working with small groups of doseiku. I'd been looking forward to doing that. I could do it well. I've already had years of practice working with Yorri.

"Then what are you doing talking to me?" I shift my weight, starting to turn back to the zeeka I was going to borrow for the day.

Tessen slides a step to the right, keeping himself in front of me. His expression is serious when he asks, "Why did you run last night, Khya?"

"I didn't *run*." I don't run, not like that. Retreat is necessary sometimes, but running is hiding, and hiding is cowardly. I am not afraid of Tessen. "There was something else I needed to take care of last night, so I left."

"I'm sure you found something to do after you left, but you didn't leave the center circle until after you saw me looking for you." He steps closer, his voice low enough that anyone else who happens to come through the storeroom would have to strain to hear him. "If you didn't want to dance, all you had to do was say no."

"As if you would've listened."

"I would've, I *will*, and I am. You're still not saying no." He smiles, his teeth bright against his russet-brown skin. "So I'll ask again next moon."

I roll my eyes and run my finger along the curve of my anto. "This is one fight you don't stand a chance of winning, Nyshin-ten."

"And yet not only haven't you said no, you're here on your free day, which means you might be listening to me about your brother after all." He shifts closer, his smile seeming warmer. "If it's all the same to you, I'll continue to hope, oh deadly one."

With a slight inclination of his head, Tessen winks at me and then disappears between the tight rows of stone shelves. There one second, and then gone.

Bellows. That boy might be bizarre, but he's undeniably fast. He's also smart, skilled, stubborn, and the strongest basaku mage the clan has seen in generations, possibly ever.

All of his senses are so strongly enhanced that he had to be sequestered in a near pitch-dark, solitary cave in the undercity for two full moons after he first found his power. Ahdo-mas Sotra told us that it had taken him that long to learn how to keep from being completely overwhelmed by his own senses; she'd also told us that two moons was far less time than any of the oraku mages—sensor mages who only have to adapt to enhanced sight, hearing, and smell—expected him to need.

I heard from an oraku who trained with Tessen that he once spotted a Denhitran raiding party almost a mile off. At twilight. There was another story about how he could pick a single conversation out of the noisy chaos of the celebrations every moon cycle.

Like Yorri and me, both of his blood-parents are still living—not necessarily a rarity, but certainly uncommon. Surviving more than thirty-five years in the ahdo or nyshin ranks is a sign of intense skill, power, or cunning. Tessen is the child of two of those survivors. I am, too, but even I have a hard time keeping up with Tessen when that deadly light gleams in his eyes.

He smiles more than anyone else in the city, but I've seen fury darken his eyes, turning them storm-cloud gray, and watched him move with as much speed and deadly grace as the iron-bladed fan he's named for.

We were almost friends once, but that was before his magic developed. He found his six moons before I did, and he usurped the promotions that were supposed to be mine. I might've been able to tolerate him better if he didn't treat everything like either a joke or an inconvenience. Especially all the honors and responsibilities he's earned—most of the time he acts as though they don't matter.

Rolling my shoulders to ease the tension in my muscles, I take a breath and let it out slowly. Only after I've shaken off most of Tessen's visit do I wrap my hand around the hilt of a decent-looking zeeka sword and head into the doseiku half of the yard.

Everything is so familiar; it's almost like coming home. The sun beats down on us through the open roof, and the clash of metal against metal rings through the air. It smells like sweat, dust, iron, and stone, and across the wide expanse, dozens of doseiku circle each other, all of them

wielding weapons made to end—and also save—lives.

Yorri's training squad is on the south side of the yard and Tessen's squad is on the west, so I stay near the north wall where another group is running drills. I join them with permission from the training master, but only half of my attention is on the doseikus' movements and the corrections I give them. Every chance I can without drawing his eye, I watch my brother.

The first few moons after I became nyshin were completely taken up by the adjustments I had to make to my new role in the clan—moving into the squad's barracks, learning the signals and commands Nyshin-ma Tyrroh favored, and training with my new team every day we weren't on duty. My visits with Yorri those moons were short and usually focused on his puzzles or sitting on the ledge of the north wall, relaxing the way we didn't get to with anyone else. It became habit after that for our time to be more about talking than training.

Which means it's been more than a year since I've seen him with a zeeka in his hand.

At fifteen, Yorri was awkward and unsure in his movements, hesitating long enough in training bouts that he hardly ever won. He'd grown several inches that year, though; his longer arms and legs seemed to unbalance him. Now he has the muscle he needs to control his long-limbed body, and he moves with a fluid grace that wouldn't be out of place in the tokiansu. Each block or strike seems to land precisely where he intends it.

Blood and rot, was Tessen right? Yorri's skill has vastly improved in the past year. Because he grew into his height and became comfortable with his own body, or because I actually had held him back? Or maybe he held himself back while I was here, which isn't a theory I like any better.

Whatever the reason for it, this is good. I'll have a hard enough time coming up with death-defying yet somehow safe scenarios to scare the magic out of him. Training him to fight? I couldn't have done it in one moon.

Leaving one worry behind, I pay more attention to the group of ten-year-olds around me, helping one girl adjust her stance and showing an ebet the correct grip for eir anto dagger.

And then a furious shout splits through the yard.

Movements falter. Heads turn. I'm running across the yard, a chill crossing my skin. I've heard that sound before, but not for years.

A crowd has tightened around two fighters. I have to shove three people aside to reach the center of the circle. I'm already planning my attack when I reach the inside. And cringe. Aemon is strong. Not incredibly bright, but strong and brutal. He'll be tough to bring down if something has pushed him into attacking.

But... Am I seeing this right? I blink. The scene doesn't change.

Aemon isn't the one on the attack. Yorri is.

Heat flushes Yorri's cheeks a deeper shade of brown, but his eyes burn cold with rage I've never seen in him. He's wielding a short zeeka sword in one hand, its narrow, curved blade whipping through the air. His other hand grips an iron anto.

I can barely believe this is the same boy who resisted picking up even an anto dagger when we were children. Each move is faster and surer than I've ever seen from him, and each blow is millimeters from its intended target. None of them are blocked by Aemon's zeeka; it seems like they don't meet flesh only because Yorri doesn't finish the strike.

"Doseiku Yorri, stand *down*!" Ahdo-mas Sotra smoothly disarms Yorri, knocking his zeeka out of his hand

with a deft twist of her own sword. Nyshin-ma Tyrroh is only a second behind her to restrain Aemon.

“Take it back, *now*,” Yorri hisses at Aemon. There’s so much fury in his eyes that I can’t tell— Does he even realize Sotra is holding him back? If he doesn’t stop fighting her grip, he’s going to be in so much more trouble.

I rush to Yorri’s other side, placing my hand on his chest, just below his throat, shoving him back when he tries to lunge for Aemon again.

Ahdo-mas Sotra catches my eye and nods before tightening her grip on Yorri. “Explain yourself, Doseiku Yorri,” she demands.

Yorri stops surging forward, but I don’t let him go. “He spoke ill of Yonin-va Sanii.”

That display was over *Sanii*?

I’m glad my brother has found someone worth fighting for, but I’ve saved his life. I protected him for years, standing between him and a thrashing when his defensive skills weren’t enough. More than a few times, I took those thrashings for him. How much less pain might I have suffered in our childhood if he’d managed to break through his mental barriers to avenge *me*?

“Who is Sanii?” Sotra asks.

“An ebet who serves the city with more honor than he’ll ever know.” Yorri swallows hard, deflating like a leaking waterskin. I slide my arm around his waist to give him something to lean on. “Ey would’ve been my sukhai if not... Eir herynshi was yesterday and ey...”

His voice isn’t loud anymore, but the yard is nearly silent. People hear, and more than one of the doseiku watching repeats what they heard in a gasped whisper. It ripples through the audience so quickly and with so much genuine shock that the desosa reacts, rolling against my

awareness like a ripple in the breeze.

Tyrroh's eyes widen, and he looks between Yorri and me. Whatever he's thinking stays inside his head. He outranks Ahdo-mas Sotra by a lot, but this is her domain.

"You were going to request a sumai bond after your herynshi?" She asks the question like she has to be sure she heard right. I can't blame her. I felt the same way when he told me. It's rare for anyone to request a soulbond. It's almost unheard of for it to happen at sixteen.

"I was. We *will* if I—" He closes his mouth fast when my fingers dig into his bicep, tightening so hard I might leave bruises behind.

No, I want to hiss into his ear. Don't you dare think like that.

"Is it true, Doseiku Aemon?" Sotra faces Aemon. Whatever he sees in her expression makes him shrink, his broad shoulders curling in. "Did you insult Yonin-va Sanii?"

For a heavy, tense moment, Aemon doesn't answer. Tyrroh frowns down at the doseiku and shakes him once, hard enough to make Aemon stumble. "Your training master asked you a question, Doseiku."

"Y-yes, Ahdo-mas," Aemon stutters, shame obvious in his face. "I...I said things I shouldn't have."

"Confession heard and witnessed." Sotra looks between Yorri and Aemon before she grunts and turns her attention to Tyrroh. "Nyshin-ma, would you take him outside? It seems like I need to find a way to reteach him what clan loyalty looks like."

"With pleasure, Ahdo-mas." Tyrroh shoves Aemon toward the exit without releasing his hold on the doseiku's arm and bellows, "March!"

As Aemon stumbles past, Yorri hisses, "*Never* speak to me again."

“Quiet! Don’t think you’re getting off without punishment, Yorri.” Sotra hauls him to the north end of the yard. I follow a few feet behind them, as close as I think I can get away with.

Yorri’s eyes narrow and his jaw clenches, but he stays silent, thankfully.

“Losing control like that—hurting another clan member—is absolutely unacceptable.” Sotra releases him under the shade of the corridor ringing the open yard.

Yorri trips over a crack in the stone, but catches himself against the wall. When he turns to face Sotra’s judgment, I almost believe the impassive resignation on his face. I might believe it if I didn’t know him so well.

I hold my breath, waiting for her verdict. Miriseh, please let her be lenient.

“I know the provocation was harsh, but complete control over yourself and your reactions is the only way to survive,” Sotra says. “You’ll do an extra meditation hour after every training session until your herynshi, and for the next three days you’re on restricted rations.”

I release my breath. That’s practically no punishment at all.

“And I am sorry there’s a chance you might be separated from someone you care about that much, but if I hear or see you even hinting at willfully holding yourself back from your full potential, I won’t let you out of my sight until you walk out of the city for your herynshi.” Sotra stares Yorri down when he bristles. “We must all do our best to serve the clan, wherever that capability takes us. Do you understand?”

She doesn’t bring up Kujuko, the empty realm that shirkers, cowards, and traitors are trapped in after death, but I don’t think she needs to. That potential fate is not a

possibility any of us forget.

Her posture doesn't relax until he drops his gaze and nods. "Good. Dismissed, Doseiku. Do *not* let this happen again."

My brother inclines his head, his wrists crossed at his chest, and then strides toward the stairs that will take him to the bathing pools. The crowd he leaves behind looks stunned, all of them watching Yorri with something close to awe on their faces—everyone except for Tessen, who's standing a few feet away. Tessen is the only one watching *me*.

Ignoring Tessen, I follow Yorri down to the undercity. The air carries the scent of water, and Yorri's steps echo off the walls; he's moving quickly. I pick up my pace to match his, but I don't catch up to him until we've reached the main level of the undercity. He glances at me when I step into place beside him, his jaw clenching and the tendons in his neck tensing, but he doesn't speak as we walk into the bathing cavern.

At this time of day, only a few dozen citizens and the yonin on laundry duty are here, scrubbing away desert dust and bloodstains, repairing ripped cloth, and reoiling cracked leather. None of them spare us more than a glance as we wash and dress in clean clothes.

Yorri tries to bolt as soon as his tunic is over his head. I run after him, fixing my clothes as I go. In a nearly empty tunnel, I reach for his arm. "Yorri, stop."

"I wanted to *kill* him." He pulls out of my grip, a shudder running through him, and stalks toward the stairs that let out closest to the north wall.

"Understandable. Even Sotra understood."

Yorri makes a wordless noise. It's not an agreement or a dissent, but at least it means he's listening. Probably.

"I'm glad you didn't go through with it, but the fact that you wanted to might be a good thing." I'm serious, but he scoffs. Anger, worry, and confusion churn my stomach and heat my face, making my next question sharper than I want it to be. "Would you *rather* be yonin?"

Yorri stops and turns, but his eyes lock on something behind me—the narrow, rapid stream running through the cave, or maybe the oil lamp guttering and dancing in the bracket on the wall. I take a long breath and concentrate on relaxing individual muscles, if only to give my mind something tangible to focus on. How can I put any of the thoughts spinning through my head into words that will make sense?

"You said you were in, that you'd go through with whatever plans I had, but that's not true if you're going to throw whatever potential you have away so you can spend the rest of your life down *here*." I run my hand over my damp hair, pushing the short strands out of my face, and exhale in a short, sharp gust. "If you're going to walk into your herynshi and actually *try*, you have to be willing to fight—to kill. The Denhitran soldiers aren't going to hold back. You can't either, not if you're going to survive outside Itagami's walls."

He looks at me, his dark eyes reflecting the firelight, but he doesn't speak.

Swallowing around the worry that's almost a solid block in my throat, I try to keep my voice even. He did well in the fight today, but the herynshi is going to be much, much more difficult. Kaigo Neeva's illusions are convincing; they left me with nightmares for weeks after my herynshi, though I never admitted that to anyone.

No matter what kind of foe she creates for Yorri to face, one thing will be true. "If you're not willing to strike,

you've already lost. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And are you? Going to fight?"

Pain creates lines around his eyes that I hate seeing. He looks away, taking a shuddering breath. When he meets my eyes again, most of the pain has been pushed aside by resigned determination. "You're not the only one who would be disappointed if I gave up. Sanii would be furious if ey found out I let myself fail."

I close my eyes, the relief dizzying. That's a point in Sanii's favor. "Well, no matter what happens next moon, you'll have to introduce us. Ey sounds like someone I'd like."

He tries to smile, I think, as he runs his hand over his hair. The expression becomes more of a grimace than a grin, and the tug of his fingers through his loosely curled, dark hair reopens a small cut on his forehead. Blood is dripping sluggishly from the wound, so I take off the atakafu looped around my neck, put it in his palm, and guide his hand to the spot.

"You did good today," I say, pressing his hand against his head.

"Thanks." The tiny quirk to his lips looks rueful.

I pat his shoulder, and, as we turn toward the north wall where we can sit in peace for a while, I ask the question that's been burning up my mind since I shoved my way through the crowd to reach him.

"Where'd you learn to fight like that?" It really is galling to know that Tessen was right about Yorri, but my pride in my brother is enough to trump even that.

My brother smirks. "Where do you think? From watching you."