

Praise for *Island of Exiles*

“I was consumed by the savage mysteries of Cameron’s harsh and haunting fantasy world. A story of love and loss as searing as the desert heat.”

—Diana Peterfreund, author of *For Darkness Shows the Stars*

“Harrowing and heartfelt. The intricately realized world of *Island of Exiles* crackles with harsh magic and gripping suspense.”

—A.R. Kahler, author of The Immortal Circus series

“*Island of Exiles* is imaginative, bold, and as electrifying as a Shiara storm.”

—Lori M. Lee, author of *Gates of Thread and Stone* and *The Infinite*

“A beautifully wrought fantasy filled with magic, rebellion, and romance, plus a strong, butt-kicking heroine to root for!”

—Lea Nolan, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Conjure*, *Allure*, and *Illusion*

“Erica Cameron’s *Island of Exiles* is a remarkable achievement: a fantasy world so richly imagined, so finely detailed, and so strikingly original, even the most incredible elements feel totally real. The energy of the desosa will tingle along your skin as you race through this amazing book, and at journey’s end, you’ll long for the sequel so you can immerse yourself once more in the mysteries of Itagami!”

—Joshua David Bellin, author of the Survival Colony series

“*Island of Exiles* has everything I’ve been looking for in a fantasy—powerful characters, magical powers that make me itch with envy, and a spoken language that is as intrinsic to the story as it is beautiful.”

—Amber Lough, author of *The Fire Wish* and *The Blind Wish*

ALSO BY ERICA CAMERON

ISLAND OF EXILES (THE RYOGAN CHRONICLES, #1)

ASSASSINS: DISCORD (ASSASSINS, #1)

ASSASSINS: NEMESIS (ASSASSINS, #2)

TAKEN BY CHANCE (LAGUNA TIDES, #1)

LOYALTY AND LIES (LAGUNA TIDES, #2)

DEALING WITH DEVALO (LAGUNA TIDES, #3)

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

DEADLY SWEET LIES (THE DREAM WAR SAGA #2)



SEA of STRANGERS

THE RYOGAN CHRONICLES

ERICA CAMERON

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For Liza Wiemer, who offered me hope when
I needed it and who never lost faith.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

AHTA – a Ryogan child living in the Mysora Mountains with eir mother Dai-Usho; ey/em

ANDA – Khya and Yorri's blood-mother and a kaigo councilmember; rikinhisu mage; she/her

CHIO HEINANSUTO – Tsua's husband, Varan's brother, and one of the original twelve immortals; dyuniji mage; he/him

DAITSA – former second-in-command of Tyrroh's squad; dyuniji mage; deceased; she/her

DAI-USHO – Ryogan woman who lives in the Mysora Mountains with her child Ahta; she/her

ETARO – member of Tyrroh's squad and currently platonically partnered with Rai; rikinhisu mage; ey/em

KAZU – commander of the Ryogan ship that carries Tyrroh's squad to Ryogo; he/him

KHYA – member of Tyrroh's squad, Yorri's older sister, and Tessen's current partner; fykina mage; she/her

LO'A – Osshi's friend and the voice of a hanaeuu we'la maninaio caravan; she/her

MIARI – member of Tyrroh's squad and currently partnered with Nairo and Wehli; ishiji mage; she/her

NATANI – member of Tyrroh's squad; zoikyo mage; he/him

NAIRO – member of Tyrroh's squad and currently partnered with Miari and Wehli; kasaiji mage; he/him

NEEVA – Tessen's blood-mother and a kaigo councilmember; rusosa mage; she/her

ONO – Khya and Yorri's blood-father and a kaigo councilmember; oraku mage; he/him

OSSI SHAGAKUSA – Ryogan historian who sailed to Shiara looking for proof of the bobasu's existence; he/him

RAI – member of Tyrroh's squad and currently platonically partnered with Etaro; kasaiji mage; she/her

RYZO – former second-in-command of Tyrroh's squad who remained on Shiara; hishing mage; he/him

SANII – Yorri's sumai partner and the one who discovered the truth about Yorri; hyari and tusenkei mage; ey/em

SUZU – a leader of Sagen sy Itagami and one of the original twelve immortals; sykina mage; she/her

TESSEN – a member of Tyrroh's squad and Khya's current partner; basaku mage; he/him

TSUA – Chio's wife and one of the original twelve immortals; rikinhisu mage; she/her

TYRROH – the leader of Khya's squad; oraku mage; he/him

VARAN HEINANSUTO – leader of Sagen sy Itagami and one of the original twelve immortals; ishiji mage; he/him

WEHLI – member of Tyrroh’s squad and currently partnered with Miari and Nairo; ryacho mage; he/him

YORRI – Khya’s brother, Sanii’s sumai partner, and a born immortal; kynacho mage; he/him

ZONNA – Chio and Tsua’s son and a born immortal; hishingu mage; he/him

SENTENCE TRANSLATIONS:

Ou’a ka lea’i imloa ka’i ia okopo’ono aloshaki ana’anahou. – hanaeuu we’la maninaio – It is good to see you again.

Aloshaki naho olea’o wa’heekohu shahala’kai. O’kaoo malohakama ka lea’i le’anoahu – hanaeuu we’la maninaio – You were not lying. Your friends are many.

Shomaihopa’a sha opai’hoa. – hanaeuu we’la maninaio – Bless this fate.

CITIES AND PLACES:

ARAYOKAI SEA – the stretch of water between Shiara and Ryogo

ATOKOREDO – a city in northwestern Ryogo within the Soramyku Province

DENHITRA – the city in the southern mountains of Shiara

EJINOSEI – a city on the western coast of Ryogo within the Soramyku Province

IMAKU – the black-rock island off the north-eastern coast of Shiara

JUSHOYEN – the capitol city of Ryogo, located in the center of the country

KANAGA'AKO – a city in southeastern Ryogo within the Namimi Province and Osshi's hometown

KHYLAR – the country directly to the north of Ryogo, separated by the Mysora Mountains

MUSHOKEIJI – a prison for mages located within the Soramyku Province in northwestern Ryogo, specifically the Suakizu region

MYSORA MOUNTAINS – the northern-most range of mountains that separates Ryogo from Khylar

MYSORA'KA RIVER – the river that runs from the eastern half of the Mysora Mountains to the eastern coast of Ryogo

NENTOADO – the section of the Mysora Mountains known for being harsh and impassable

Po'UMI – a port city on the southeastern coast of Ryogo within the Namimi Province

RIDO'ITI – a port city on the southern coast of Ryogo within the Namimi Province

RYOGO – the country north of Shiara where Varan, Chio, and the other immortals are from

RYOGAN PROVINCES – (clockwise from the southwest)

MINOWA – southwestern-most coastal region

AZUKYO – central western coastal region

SORAMYKU – northwestern-most mountains

KYO'NE – northeastern-most peninsula

OKASUTO – northwestern coastal region

HYNOCI – central plains

TOMI'ISHI – central eastern coastal region

NAMIMI – southeastern-most coastal region

SAGEN SY ITAGAMI – the city in northeastern Shiara; often simply called Itagami

SANSOSI'KA RIVER – the river running from the western side of the Mysora Mountains to the city of Atokoredo where it splits

SHIARA – the island nation south of Ryogo

SUAKIZU – the region within the Soramyku Province where the prison Mushokeiji is located



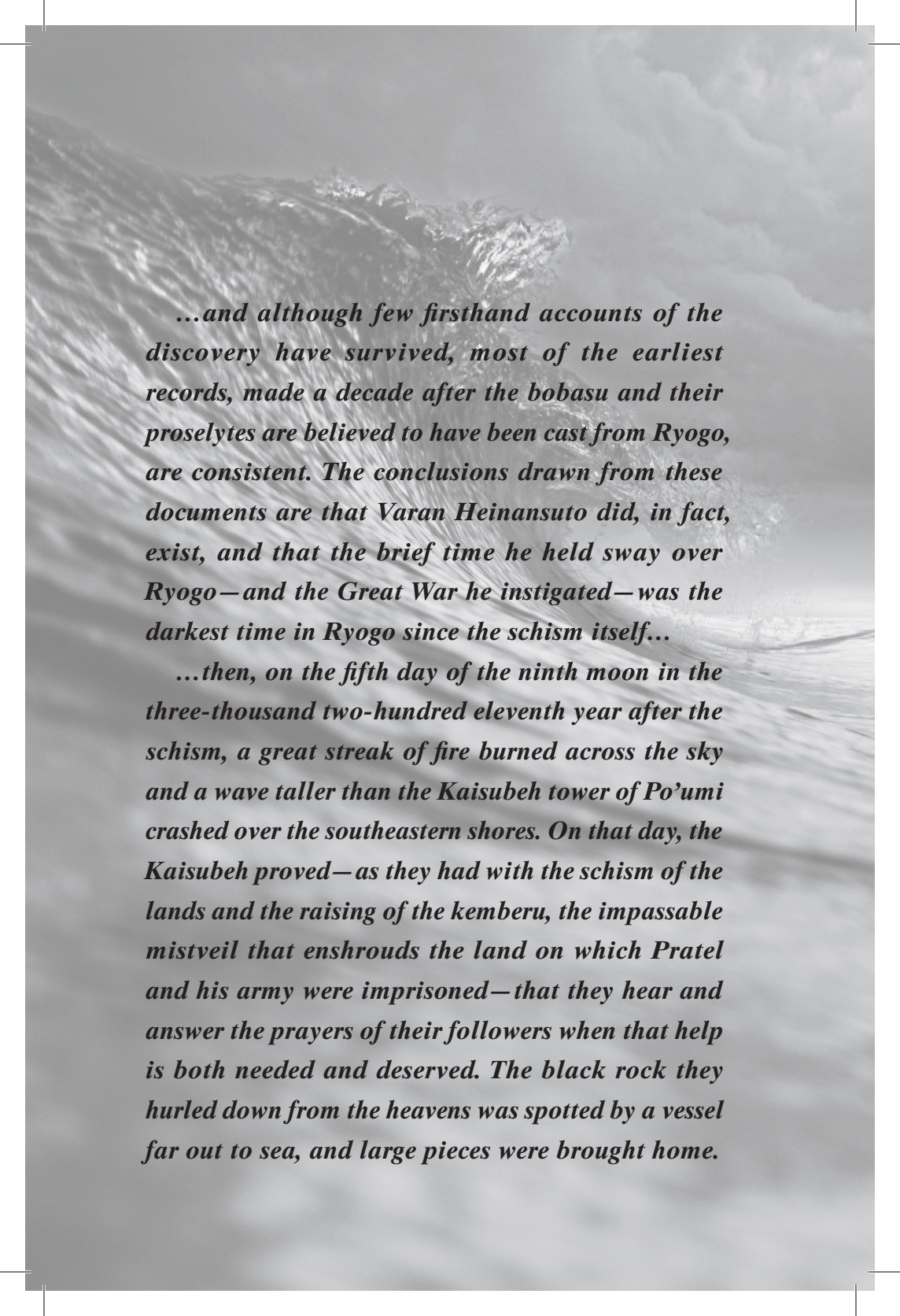
TIRODO – a city in northeastern Ryogo, near Uraita,
within the Kyo'ne Province

TSIMO – a city on the western peninsula of Shiara

URAITA – a village in northeastern Ryogo within the
Kyo'ne Province and the hometown of Varan
and Chio

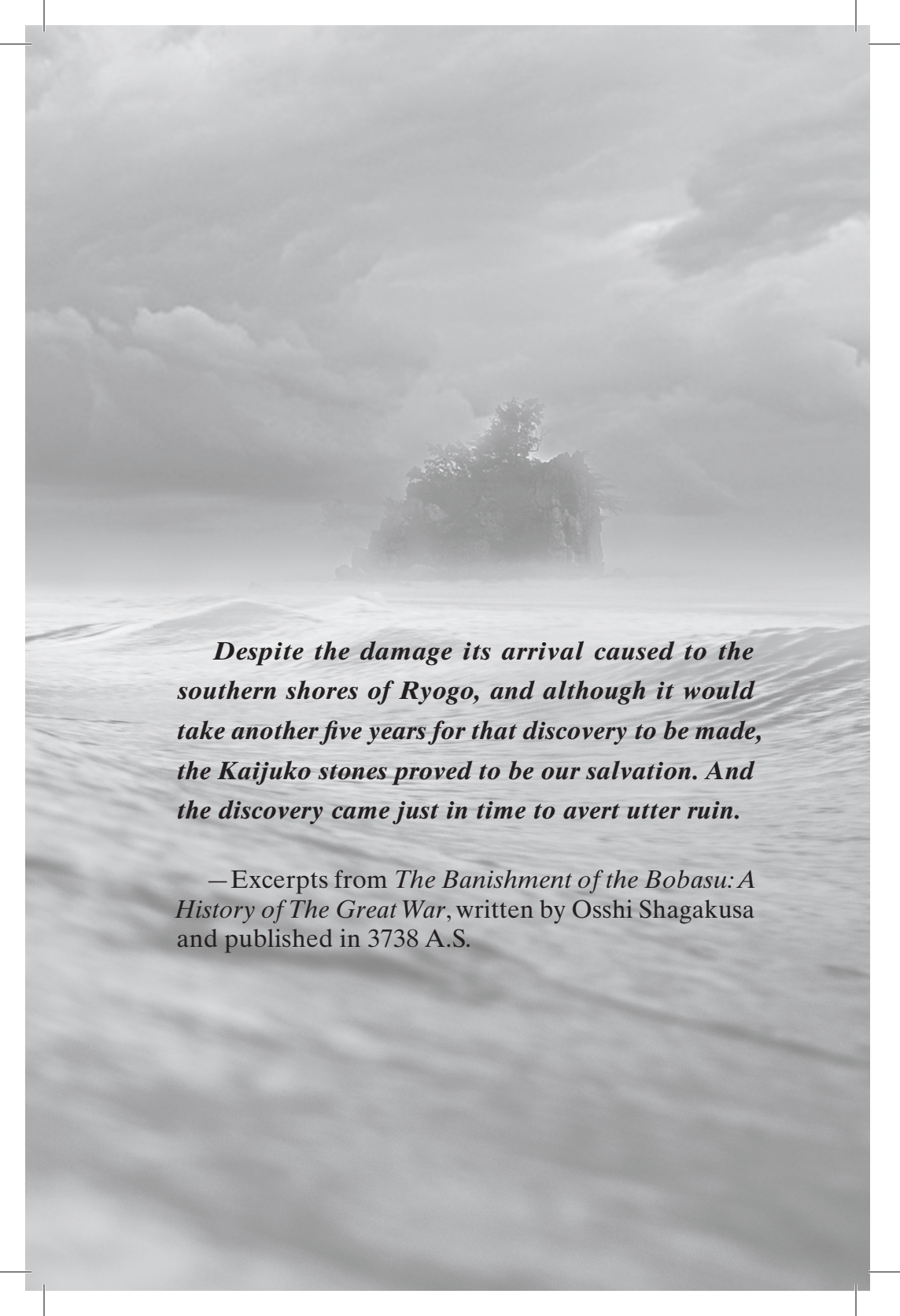
ZUNOATO – a city in the Okasuto Province that sits just
north of the Mysora'ka River

**A glossary of terminology is
included at the end of the book.**



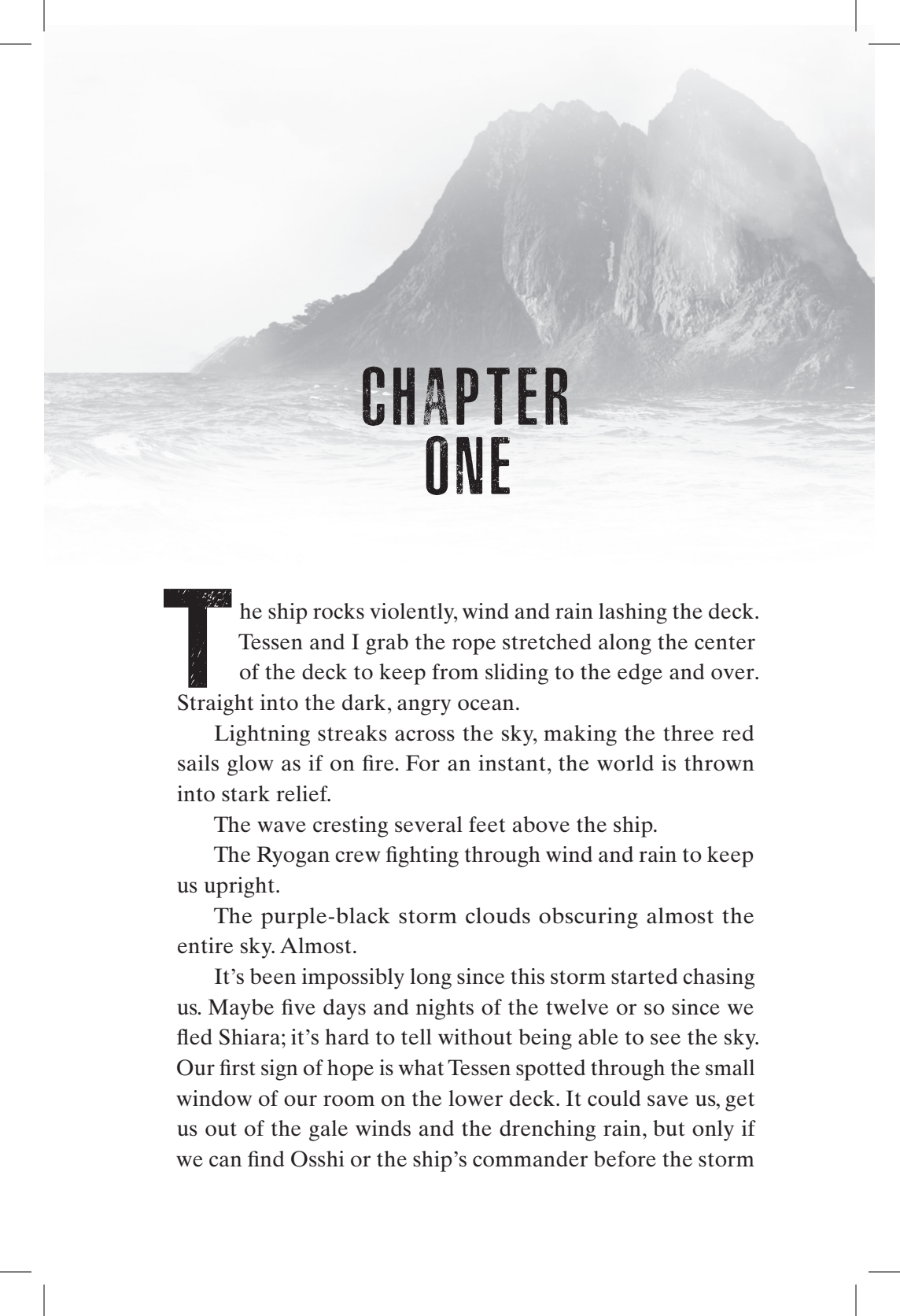
...and although few firsthand accounts of the discovery have survived, most of the earliest records, made a decade after the bobasu and their proselytes are believed to have been cast from Ryogo, are consistent. The conclusions drawn from these documents are that Varan Heinansuto did, in fact, exist, and that the brief time he held sway over Ryogo—and the Great War he instigated—was the darkest time in Ryogo since the schism itself...

...then, on the fifth day of the ninth moon in the three-thousand two-hundred eleventh year after the schism, a great streak of fire burned across the sky and a wave taller than the Kaisubeh tower of Po'umi crashed over the southeastern shores. On that day, the Kaisubeh proved—as they had with the schism of the lands and the raising of the kemberu, the impassable mistveil that enshrouds the land on which Pratel and his army were imprisoned—that they hear and answer the prayers of their followers when that help is both needed and deserved. The black rock they hurled down from the heavens was spotted by a vessel far out to sea, and large pieces were brought home.



Despite the damage its arrival caused to the southern shores of Ryogo, and although it would take another five years for that discovery to be made, the Kaijuko stones proved to be our salvation. And the discovery came just in time to avert utter ruin.

—Excerpts from *The Banishment of the Bobasu: A History of The Great War*, written by Osshi Shagakusa and published in 3738 A.S.



CHAPTER ONE

The ship rocks violently, wind and rain lashing the deck. Tessen and I grab the rope stretched along the center of the deck to keep from sliding to the edge and over. Straight into the dark, angry ocean.

Lightning streaks across the sky, making the three red sails glow as if on fire. For an instant, the world is thrown into stark relief.

The wave cresting several feet above the ship.

The Ryogan crew fighting through wind and rain to keep us upright.

The purple-black storm clouds obscuring almost the entire sky. Almost.

It's been impossibly long since this storm started chasing us. Maybe five days and nights of the twelve or so since we fled Shiara; it's hard to tell without being able to see the sky. Our first sign of hope is what Tessen spotted through the small window of our room on the lower deck. It could save us, get us out of the gale winds and the drenching rain, but only if we can find Osshi or the ship's commander before the storm

cracks the vessel in half and drowns us all.

Tessen and I haul ourselves along the deck, scanning for Osshi and Taikan-yi Kazu. The rain is too thick. Without the flash of lightning, I can barely see the rope in my hands. Hopefully, Tessen's vision isn't as hobbled by the storm as mine.

Someone is shouting; the words are lost in the wind, drowned in the crash of a wave slamming into the ship and washing over the deck.

A hand grabs my elbow. The unexpected touch sends an unpleasant shock up my arm. I don't dare shake it off, not without risking my balance.

"Get below, Khya!" Osshi's small eyes are wide, but his square jaw is set and determined. "You can do nothing here. Go!"

"Look! There!" With the hand not gripping the rope, I point to the horizon, to the thin strip of bright blue. It's almost invisible at this distance. His gaze follows my finger, squinting into the driving rain.

"Thank the Kaisubeh." He sags with relief, but the drop of his shoulders only lasts a heartbeat. We've still got to make it there. He pushes me toward the lower deck. "Go! I'll tell Kazu if he doesn't already know."

There's little chance he knows. Taikan-yi Kazu, the commanding officer, is probably too busy steering the ship through the massive waves and making sure the storm doesn't overturn us. I'll be shocked if *any* of the crew have noticed the tiny strip of sky yet. Tessen only did because he's a basaku, and his senses are far stronger and more discerning than anyone else's.

Tessen tugs on my wrist, pulling me toward the safety of the lower deck. And he's right; there's nothing else we can do here.

I follow him, holding the rope tight. The rough fibers scratch my palms. I grip harder. That abrasion means I'm

attached to the deck. Not even my magic will save me if I fall into the ocean.

I can't swim.

Tessen reaches the door first. A flash of lightning illuminates the straining muscles under his soaked tunic. The wind must be holding it shut. It shouldn't be this hard for him to open. Yanking myself closer, I wrap my left arm around the rough rope and grab the handle of the door with my right. For a breath, it doesn't budge. Then the wind shifts. It's enough for us to haul the door open and rush inside. A gust slams it closed behind us.

The walls of the ship aren't nearly thick enough to eliminate the howling wind or the waves crashing against the hull, but for a moment, the world sounds silent.

Then Tessen's pained, and poorly stifled, groans register.

I check him for injuries; there aren't any, but the trip obviously wiped him out. "You shouldn't have come with me."

He grunts. Was that supposed to be a word? Maybe, but it looks like he might throw up again if he tries to repeat it.

The rise and fall of the normal sea he handled fine, but the extreme dips and climbs of the storm-tossed waves coated his terra-cotta skin with a sheen of sickly sweat and seemed to turn his stomach upside down. Probably because he's a basaku. He hasn't been able to eat much since the storm started, he's been achy for days, and it seems like the trip took all the energy he had left.

I put my hand out, waiting for him to take it. I expect the rain to have chilled his skin, but his hand is cold even against my rain-cooled skin. Worryingly so. I urge him forward, trying to ignore the ominous creaks and groans that echo through the hull with each wave.

How can any structure not reinforced by magic survive this assault?

The ship tilts. I stumble and lose my hold on Tessen. My shoulder slams against the wall of the narrow hallway. From the thump and groan behind me, Tessen lost his footing, too.

Bellows and blood. It's not a long walk between this deck and our room one level below, but it takes us several minutes. We collect close to a dozen new bruises on the way. Tessen stops twice, heaving even though there's nothing in his stomach left to lose. I stay with him, one hand pressed to his back and the other braced against the wall.

"I know I promised...we'd steal a ship to get back—" He closes his mouth, breathing deeply through his nose. "Back to Shiara, but...we might have to steal a crew...too. I don't think I'll be much use...running the ship."

"You were fine before the storm." I rub circles on his back, trying not to think about how true his worries are. Or how we would ever have survived this trip without Kazu's crew. Or how we'll do it when we make the trip back. Or how long it'll be before that happens.

He rests his head against the wall. "And with our luck...there'd be nothing but storms."

"With our luck, it would be — *will* be — exactly like that." I move my hand to Tessen's arm, pushing all of those thoughts away as much as I can. We have other problems to face first. "Let's get you sitting before I have to drag you the rest of the way."

Tessen pushes himself off the wall. Our rooms are spread throughout this level, the andofume in one, Osshi and Tyrroh in the next, and Miari, Wehli, Nairo, and Natani sharing a third. I haven't seen anyone but Osshi since the storm started. I should check on them, especially since we have to pass the other rooms to reach the one Tessen and I have been sharing with Rai, Etaro, and Sanii. No. Later. Once we're dry and the ship stops trying to kill us.

"Please tell me they're taking us toward the end of this," Rai says with a groan as soon as Tessen and I enter. Though her stomach isn't faring as badly as Tessen's, she's not exactly enjoying this new way of traveling.

"We pointed them to it, but they'll only be able to head that way if the wind lets them." I hover over Tessen as he eases himself down to the floor, mostly to make sure he doesn't collapse, then I sit against the wall next to him.

It's warmer in here, the enclosed space containing everyone's body heat, but I'm soaking wet and the air is so much colder than I'm used to. I shiver; Tessen does, too. When Rai notices, she shakes her head. "No. Can't. Don't have the energy for fire. Change before you both catch a chill and die."

"We won't die from a chill." But she's right. I should've dried off better before I sat down.

"I might." Tessen lifts one of his arms as though thinking about taking off his sopping wet tunic, then drops his hand back to his lap. "Dying would probably hurt less than this."

"No one is dying. There's been enough of that already." Sanii unpacks clothing from our bags and holds out the pieces of cloth. Etaró—who hasn't seemed affected by the storm at all—uses eir magic to float them across the room and make them hover just slightly out of my reach. I strip Tessen and myself out of our soaked clothes and get us both into the dry ones.

The ship rolls again. Tessen's head smacks against the wall. I fall forward, my hands landing on Tessen's chest. Sanii almost tumbles off the low table ey'd been sitting on. Etaró and Rai slide a few feet before they can brace themselves.

"I *hate* that." Sanii moans when the ship rights itself once more.

"Oh really?" Sarcasm practically bleeds from Rai's voice. "I'm sure the Miriseh will call the whole plan off, then."

“We don’t know this has anything to do with the Miriseh,” Etaro says.

Rai glares, but it’s Sanii who says, “We don’t know it doesn’t, either.”

It’s an argument we’ve already beaten to death, especially since the storm hit, but they keep coming back to it. I can’t blame them. If talking about whether the Miriseh could create a storm and send it after us would give us an answer, I’d bludgeon the conversation again, too.

But we can’t know for sure. We didn’t know the truth when we were on the same island—in the same city, even—as the immortal leaders we spent our lives serving. How can we possibly know anything more now that hundreds of miles separate us from them?

Tessen’s hand lands on my knee, flopped there without any of his usual grace. I bite back a smile at his pitiful expression and move in front of him, placing his upturned hands on my thighs and applying pressure to the points below his wrist. Our healer Zonna eased Tessen’s agony until Kazu’s crew started collecting injuries more life-threatening than an upset stomach. Pressure point relief is a poor substitute for magic, but it’ll have to be enough. I’m no hisingu. My wards may be able to keep someone from getting hurt, but it can’t do a thing to help anyone who’s already in pain.

“We were supposed to see land today.” Sanii’s looking out the small window, eir narrow face tense as ey peers into darkness broken only by lightning. Most of us have to duck or bend to look out the window; ey’s so short it’s at a perfect height for em. “Or yesterday, if it’s past midnight.”

“Who can tell?” Etaro stares at the small black stones dancing in midair above eir palm, some of the few we took off Imaku, the barren, black island that was once my brother’s prison.

No. My chest tightens, and I press my thumbs deeper into Tessen's skin. I can't think about that place until I have some idea how long it'll be before I can try to rescue Yorri.

Try. Again. For a third time.

"Horizon was...too bright," Tessen manages to say. "Not night. Midday, maybe."

"We could still find land today." Etarō bit eir full bottom lip, eir concave cheeks sucking in deeper. The words are hopeful. Eir expression isn't.

"Do you really want to get there?" Rai asks something I've been thinking, but haven't said.

We're headed to Ryogo—a land I believed I'd only see in death—and it isn't going to look or feel anything like I expected. The realization has hit me in bits and pieces over the past two weeks, like sporadic grains of sand at the beginning of a dust storm. And like those small strikes, it's become more uncomfortable—nearly unbearable—the longer it goes on. The closer we get to the real Ryogo.

"Even with what we stole from Itagami, we'll run out of food soon." Sanii doesn't look away from the window. "Either we find land or we starve."

I look at the empty plate sitting on the floor in the corner of the room. A few hours ago, those of us who could stomach food shared a meal smaller than what *one* of us ate back home; Sagen sy Itagami's kitchens only ever rationed us during the worst of desert droughts. The city where the clan we abandoned lives. Where Yorri is hidden. Where we thought we'd remain our whole lives.

Until Osshī hauled me out of the ocean, I didn't know anywhere but Shiara existed. Even now, even knowing there *has* to be another land, it's hard to convince myself we won't either fall off the side of the world or find ourselves facing the mountains of Shiara's southern shore. Yorri was the only

person I knew who had guessed there might be something beyond our island.

Tessen's fingertips lightly brush my forearm. Even through the cloth of my long-sleeved tunic, I can feel his body heat and the softness of the gesture. The ridiculous boy is reading my emotions again.

"Stop it." I don't bother whispering. The room is barely big enough for us all to sit without touching, so everyone will hear, even with the storm in the background. "You've got enough to worry about without adding me."

"I'm always...worried about you." He swallows hard when the ship shudders, but a little of the strain has eased from his wide-set, narrow eyes. Maybe the pressure points are helping. "When I stop paying attention, you...go and do something ridiculous. Like trying to take on the bobasu alone."

"She wasn't ever alone in that." Sanii turns to glare at Tessen.

"Yes, but it's the *Miriseh*, Sanii," Etaro says, not unkindly. "Khya's wards may be able to hold against them for a while, but unless you're as invulnerable as they are—"

"You might as well offer your throat for them to cut." Rai, as always, goes straight for the point Etaro was circling. "It'd be less painful than fighting."

Sanii opens eir mouth. I hold my breath, waiting to see if ey will finally mention eir strange magic. The secret was fine at first—ey didn't know or trust my squad—but it's been almost two weeks now.

I almost laugh with relief when Sanii extends eir arm and stares challengingly at Rai. "I'm not as helpless as you think."

Eir hand, and for the first time *just* eir hand, begins to glow. The light, initially a faint white glow over eir beige-brown skin, grows brighter until it's so strong I have to look away. I turn to Rai, waiting for her reaction.

“Huh. Well, the Miriseh—bobasu—whatever.” Rai waves off the mistake. “They definitely didn’t know you can do *that*.”

“What *is* that?” Eтаро leans in, eir narrow face alight. The ship pitches. We all brace—and Tessen and Rai grunt—but when we level out, Eтаро reaches out again, hovering over Sanii’s hand without touching. “There’s no heat.”

“It’s light, not fire,” I say before I can stop myself.

“You— No. Right.” Annoyance sparks in Rai’s round eyes. “Of course you knew, and of course you didn’t tell us.”

I don’t need the warning tap of Tessen’s fingers on the inside of my wrist. This time, I let Sanii answer for emself.

“It wasn’t Khya’s secret to tell.” Sanii’s light vanishes. “I asked her to keep quiet, and because she takes her promises seriously, she did until I was ready to trust you.”

“Trust us to what?” Eтаро asks.

Sanii turns back to the window. “To not look at me like you’re scared.”

“Of what?” Rai asks, scoffing. “Light?”

“Something different,” Sanii says.

“Different isn’t scary, it’s weird.” The ship dips. We all brace. Rai grimaces, but quickly starts speaking again, as though she’s desperate for the distraction. “Besides, it’s *light*. What’s there to be scared of?”

Sanii glances at her, shrugs, and looks back to the storm. It’s not the whole story, but the sumai ey managed to create with my brother is a special, private thing. Forging a soulbond should’ve been impossible for anyone but one of the Miriseh, according to what they taught us about magic, and it can only be performed once. The second time a soul splits, it’s a deathblow. So the light isn’t Sanii’s whole story, but what ey’s hiding won’t hurt them.

The ship tilts hard. I slap my hands on the wall over Tessen’s head to keep from crashing into him. Someone above

us screams. The ship's creaking groans are suddenly deafening.

"Oh no." Tessen's horror-wide eyes are fixed on the ceiling. "Wards, Khya!"

I tense, my heart pounding as I create an invisible energy shield around everyone. Less than a second before the small window shatters.

Water pours in. Sanii screams. I clench my fists and push my ward back to the wall of the ship, shoving as much water as I can back into the ocean. And watching at least one of our bags go with it.

Bless whatever piece of luck or fate made me a fykina mage instead of sykina—if my shields could only protect against magic, we'd be dead now.

Closing my eyes, I mentally feel for my wardstones, the power-filled crystals I use as anchors. When we fled Shiara, I hid them all over the ship in case Varan chased us across the ocean. This isn't how I planned on using them, but I can't shield a ship as large as a building without them.

Vicious storms over-excite the desosa. The elemental energy created and used by everything in the world fuels magic, and it can make a mage more powerful—if they're capable of using it. Attempting it when the desosa is this chaotic, though, is dangerous. Life threatening. Most mages don't survive it.

I've done it before, though. More than once.

Pulling in as much of the desosa as I can without turning my brain to charcoal, I activate the hidden wardstones. My ward stretches, growing from each stone in a snap until the sections meet and merge. The connections spark like fire in my mind; each enhances my awareness of the ship. I can feel exactly what's trying to break through. And where.

My heart pounds. My head buzzes. My hands shake. "The hull is broken. A deck below us. Water's trying to break in."

“That’s mostly supplies, right?” Etaro looks down. “Is anyone hurt?”

“How should I know?” I snarl. Another wave tilts the ship beyond what the hull can bear. Another too-loud groan of wood and metal as the only thing holding us above the water tries to shatter.

The weight of the waves against my wards is immense. Keeping the water out without squashing one of the crew between my wards and the hull is so hard it hurts. Chest aching and lungs burning, I try to breathe normally instead of panting for air. My vision is fuzzy on the edges and my brain buzzes. I’ve never tried to make my wards impervious to water while allowing people through. I can’t hold this balance for long, either. There’s another option, but...

I’ve always used my wards to either protect or to trap. Using them to reinforce a non-magical barrier? I don’t know if it’s possible. None of my training taught me how to merge magic with something solid; usually I use it to shove physical things out of the way.

Remembering how I tweaked my wards when we escaped from Imaku, I imagine I’m shaping them like a blacksmith shapes metal. I press my shield toward the hull, pushing water out of cracks and broken windows until the wards meet wood. Keeping the water in the ocean is like trying to carry the weight of a dozen people. It should be impossible—it’s too much pressure for one person to bear—but I will *not* let this beat us. I promised I’d go back for Yorri and, bellows and blood, I am not going to break my vow.

I suck in more of the desosa and focus. Molding my magic, I fit it within the cracks and seams and joints of the wooden ship. Overhead and under, I create a dome to protect us from the worst swells.

We’re still tossed heedlessly, but now my wards take the

beating. *I* take the beating. I'm being compressed, the water and the wind and the rain and the sky and the desosa and the fury of the storm all pressing closer, as though it's becoming a solid thing trying to crush me to dust. The force of it builds. Sound fades. Pain shoots between my clogged ears every time I clench my jaw. Someone puts his hand on my shoulder; I can barely feel it.

Holding my breath, I count to ten. I have to let go of my wards. Just for a moment. Have to. The pressure is too much and it's going to—

Everything stops.

The ship lurches and then rights itself, gently rocking with the small swells of a calm sea. Wind that's been a constant noise in the background for days dies away. The pressure of the waves against the hull vanishes so fast I almost collapse without the weight as a counterbalance.

"Oh, thank the M—" Tessen bites off the word.

Thank the Miriseh.

Miriseh bless it.

Save us, Miriseh.

The oaths are automatic—phrases we've used and believed our entire lives. I've said them more than once since we left Itagami. It's only been twelve days or so, if I'm right about how long we've been lost in the storm. Compared to the seventeen previous years, it's nothing, but I've gotten angry at myself every time their name brushes my lips. I can almost see the same thoughts passing through Tessen's mind now.

On Shiara, they are the Miriseh, the immortals.

In Ryogo, they're called the bobasu, the exiles.

Tsua, Chio, and Zonna named themselves the andofume, those denied death.

Whatever the word, it means the same thing, and when we land, there isn't much of a chance any Ryogans will see us

as anything but the descendants of monsters, ones that, for them, fell into legend centuries ago.

That's assuming we get there alive.

The storm has quieted, but below the waterline there's more than enough pressure to test my wards. I can hold the ocean out for a while, but even with the wardstones as an anchor, a while might not be much longer.

"I need to check with Osshi and Kazu." I swallow and stand, trying to still my shaking hands. "They need to know where the worst damage is."

Tessen watches, his full lips pursed. It's likely he wants to come, but his skin is beaded with sweat, and his gray eyes are glassy. If he tries to get up, I'll push him down and *make* him rest. Now that the ship has stopped rocking so violently, he might be able to sleep.

"I'll go with you." Etaro stands and crosses the room. "I can help with repairs."

A little of the frustration eases out of Tessen's face.

Oh. He still thinks I don't know when or how to ask for help.

I may take too many risks, but I'm not a fool. The crew could use Etaro's help. Ey's a rikinhisu, and eir power is our second-best chance at quickly patching the damage. Tsua is the first, but the andofumes' door is open and the room is empty, so all of them are probably already helping. Before we hit the stairs, I check on Miari and the others; thankfully, the only damage is a few bruises and scrapes, some lost supplies, and a puddle of water on the floor.

Despite how it felt belowdeck, the world is far from calm. The sky is obscured by storm clouds, and the brine-laden wind bellows over the ship hard enough to force us to lean into it to walk. The roll of the sea is why it felt so quiet below. The high, crashing waves we faced during the worst of the storm

are gone. It's become a rhythmic slap that's eerily steady.

No, not eerie. Good. We need quiet and calm so we can make repairs. But the suddenness of it is still unnerving.

Osshi and Taikan-yi Kazu are easy to find; both surveying the deck from the front platform. Every few seconds, Kazu shouts orders, his sharp gaze scanning his ship and crew.

"That storm wasn't natural," Kazu says as we close in, his gaze fixed on the southern horizon, which is a solid line of dark clouds and flashing lightning. "This ship should've been able to weather a storm. It has before."

"It fared worse than you know." I tell him what happened and point him toward the holes that, if not patched before I fall straight into a dead sleep, will sink the ship. Kazu gives me a wary glance, but he shifts his crew to those repairs. Etaro offers to assist, and Kazu agrees. Kazu clearly isn't going to turn away a useful tool just because he doesn't like it.

"That was *you*, Khya?" Osshi waves his hand overhead, his expression pinched. "The water rose over our heads but didn't touch us, and the wind—"

"Yes. The ship was breaking apart, Osshi. I *had* to use my wards."

He closes his eyes, shuddering. "Kaisubeh forgive us."

I saved your life. Biting my tongue is harder every time I see him react like this to magic.

On Shiara, Tsua created a bridge for us to cross a ravine, magically lifting wide, flat stones and holding them in midair for us to walk over. I'd thought Osshi's collapse when his feet hit solid land was from a fear of heights, but it's become clear his fear is of magic, of anything more than the most basic usage. *Because the Kaisubeh forbid it* is the only explanation he's given.

"I'm grateful, Khya," Kazu says. "I don't think the ship would've survived without you. And without Etaro and Tsua,

this work would take twice as long.”

Osshi has been teaching us Ryogan—the spoken and written language—since we left Shiara. Their tongue is similar to Itagamin, which helps, but sometimes it’s a struggle to mentally sort through my three languages—Itagamin, Denhitran, and now Ryogan—before speaking.

“We’re on this ship, too, Kazu.” I smile, hoping it looks more genuine than it feels. I can’t tell if he trusts us, especially since he hasn’t done anything to stop the fearful whispers of his crew, but I ignore my own nerves and try to reassure his with a joke. “It wouldn’t be smart of us to let the ship crack, would it? I can’t swim.”

Kazu smiles, but a shout from across the deck pulls his attention away before he answers. I watch him walk away, anxiety condensing in my stomach.

The men on this ship—and, oddly, his crew is *only* men—saw where we came from. They know a little of why we needed to flee Shiara and saw the kind of power we’re running from—that we’re trying to protect *their* homeland from—yet they still don’t trust us. Except for Osshi and Kazu, the Ryogans have mostly kept themselves apart, watching us with wariness if not stark fear.

Tsua and Chio have warned us that peoples’ fear will only be worse on Ryogo, but it could, they think, help us.


To kill Varan, we have to figure out how he made himself immortal, and if we want to know that, we have to head to the mountains beyond Uraita, the village where Varan and Chio were born. Centuries ago, Chio followed his brother into the mountains, to a spot where Varan liked to hide things he didn’t want anyone else to find. Including, we hope, information on his hunt for immortality.

The andofume’s theory is that none of our goals should be hard to meet when so few people in Ryogo are warriors.

Even fewer are mages. They can't fight us. Most of them will be afraid to try.

It's good, I remind myself, facing the northwestern horizon. Ryogo is out there somewhere, and it's hiding what I need to free my brother and unravel the bobasu's plan. Varan's secrets are either well guarded or long destroyed, but the Ryogans can't plan for everything.

Lucky for us, magic is one thing they won't see coming.



CHAPTER TWO

Overnight, the solid line of land slowly grows thicker on the horizon, but only Tessen and Tyrroh can see anything other than flickering lights and the solidity of something that isn't water. At dawn, the sun—its light almost as soft as the glow of a cooking fire—reveals the land I once thought the Miriseh were the keepers of.

Varan and the others have lied about almost everything, but maybe not Ryogo.

Spread out before us is a vast, lush land, greener than I've ever seen. No amount of rain would ever transform our desert island into land as fertile and verdant as this. It's all somehow soft, too. The mountains rising high above the coast don't have bare rock or ragged points and edges; their curves and slopes are covered with green that, from a distance, looks like it would be soft as a niora fur mat.

"Is that supposed to be a wall?" Sanii points north of where I've been looking. As I run my thumb along the red cord around my wrist, I follow eir gaze.

"If it was once, it isn't anymore." The massive pieces of

stone standing upright on the coast might be taller than Itagami's walls, but there are massive gaps between them. "I have a hard time believing that ever protected anyone."

"Wait," Osshi says as he joins us. "You'll see when we get closer."

Soon, I do see. It's not a broken wall, it's a row of enormous statues, a line of stone people. Fourteen of them.

"The Kaisubeh Zohogasha. The guardians." Osshi touches his three middle fingers to his forehead, his chest, and then his lips, almost like a salute. "They were erected a decade after the bobasu's exile. The seven facing the ocean shield Ryogo, and the seven facing land bless it. There are Zohogasha sets along the entire coast, but these were the first. Intended to watch the bobasu's prison and guard against their return."

"They're not stopping us." I tilt my head to glance at him. "I don't think they work."

He nods, his expression more solemn than I expected. "Symbols rarely do."

I watch his face carefully. "Still no word from your friend?"

"We're too far away from Po'umi. The garakyu only reaches for five miles." Although his hand falls to the belt pouch where he keeps the clear sphere he can use to send messages, he doesn't take it out. "I only hope they'll know how much trouble I need to be prepared for."

"Will your leaders really kill you on sight?" Sanii sounds skeptical.

"That's the worst possibility. I'm still hoping no one figured out where I went." Osshi takes a deep breath, pulling his attention back to us instead of his homeland. I glance at the cord on my wrist and try not to think about mine. "If they don't know I went hunting for proof of the bobasu, no one will be looking for me, but...I don't think that'll happen."

"It doesn't matter. Your people dying is the only thing

I'm worried about, if my squad meets a Ryogan one." They fear magic and only a small, specific class of their citizens are weapons-trained. So far there's little I've heard about Ryogo that scares me. "Worry more about your friends and our way in than what will happen when—"

Osshi jolts, then both hands drop to the pouch. My heart skips a beat when he nearly fumbles the palm-sized globe into the water. Recovering quickly, he steps away from the railing to speak the spell that brings up a swirl of color in the clear sphere. "Bless the Kaisubeh am I glad to see your face, Iwakari-tan."

"Don't be happy yet." I can't see Iwakari, but his voice is clear. And breathless. And shaky. A quick glance at Sanii, and I know ey's noticed, too—something is wrong. He warns, "Flee, Osshi. It might not be too late if you head back to sea right now."

"What happened?" Osshi brings the orb closer to his face. "Where's—"

"Arrested. And I will be, too, if I can't stay ahead of the tyatsu."

Osshi's eyes go wide and white. "Go to my father! He'll—"

"You think the tyatsu didn't grab him *first*?" Scorn and anger fills Iwakari's voice. "You didn't think at all before leaving on this Kaisubeh-cursed trip of yours, did you? Of course you didn't! Answers before everything else, right, Osshi-sei?"

Bellows and blood. I spot Tessen coming up from the lower deck, and I whistle him closer. We're going to need a new plan. Because of course we are. It's been too many moons since a plan I've helped make has actually worked.

Osshi doesn't speak. It doesn't even look like he's breathing. Iwakari, though, takes an audible breath. "Forget it. I promised you and your father I'd help, so I am. By telling you to stay away from Po'umi and every other port on the

east coast. If anyone spots Kazu's ship, the tyatsu will be on you as soon as you land. Just tell me one thing, Osshi."

"What?" His voice is thick.

"Was it worth the voyage?"

Osshi nods. "In ways you won't believe until you see for yourself." Abruptly, he straightens, his gaze focused intently on the globe. "Remember the place I took you to last summer? When you got drunk and slept a whole day?"

"You're bringing that up *now*?"

"Do you remember how to get there or not?" Iwakari must nod, because the set of Osshi's shoulders relaxes. "Head there. I'll meet you. I'll protect you from it all, I promise."

"Your father and most of your friends have been arrested, and you're being chased by the tyatsu, and you're still chasing children's stories?" Iwakari scoffs. "Not this time, Osshi. You're on your own. Just don't get yourself killed, or your father will never forgive me."

And then the garakyu's colors are gone, leaving Osshi staring at nothing.

Small mouth pressed thin, he puts it away, his eyes fixed on the deck of the ship. "I need to talk to Kazu."

Tessen, Sanii, and I watch him walk off. His first steps are slow. Then each one is faster until he's almost running to the rear platform of the ship. To the west, Po'umi is coming into view. It should have been the end of our journey, but now we're veering away from it, running back out to sea.

The golden-bright haze of early morning has intensified. The light's glare doesn't come close to the desert sun, but it's enough. Ships fill the protected harbor, some smaller than the one that carried us here but many larger. All of them have sails in bright colors: blues, greens, whites, yellows, and intricate multicolored patterns.

On land, buildings spread in all directions, rising with

the slightly sloped landscape. Po'umi is packed right up to the base of a steeper hill that climbs several hundred feet up from sea level—a seemingly unguarded hill that'd be the perfect spot from which to attack the town. All of it is almost impossibly colorful, and I can see everything from the water because Po'umi has no walls.

How can they protect themselves without a wall? Maybe they really do expect those statues to protect them. My squad alone could take over the city in an afternoon if we wanted.

"We needed to head north already, didn't we?" Tessen asks as we stare at the shore. "That's where Chio's old village is."

Sanii nods. "And as much as you and Rai hate traveling by water, it'll be faster than trying to run there."

"I hate traveling by water in *storms*," Tessen corrects.

I glance at the door to the lower deck. Despite what I told Osshi about the outcome of a fight between his people and mine, reality is bringing doubts with it. "We need to fill in Tyrroh and the andofume. They're looking for Osshi now, which means we're more likely to be spotted and stopped if he's with us."

"They'll *try* to stop us." Sanii looks up at us, eir dark eyes defiant.

"And either they'll somehow succeed, or we'll be hunted the whole time we're here, and they'll only have to follow the trail of bodies to find us."

Tessen laughs. "As if Rai would leave anything more than ash behind."

"But even the best warriors and the strongest mages can be overwhelmed by superior numbers, and that's just *one* of their cities." I wave my hand toward Po'umi. "The Ryogans could easily overwhelm us if we gave them a reason to try."

Neither of them has a response for that.

When we leave the main deck to look for our commanding

officer and the andofume, my thumb traces the cord around my wrist again. One of them had better be able to come up with a new plan for infiltrating Ryogo. Otherwise, we'll have to take our chances against greater numbers. Just heading out to sea and staying there like Iwakari wanted Osshi to do isn't an option. There's no rot-ridden way I'm leaving Ryogo without the answers I need to save Yorri and kill the man who took him from me.

We stay ahead of the storms and away from the shore for days. A week. Ten days. Two weeks.

The rainwater we collected during the storm ensured we had plenty to drink, but we were running dangerously low on food back when we were closing in on Po'umi. Our rush north means we can't stop for more. Only the fish we catch keep us from starving.

The training we couldn't do during the storm begins again. Just not the type we're used to. It's not Tyrroh running us into physical exhaustion with drills and practice, it's Osshi and the andofume making our brains hurt with language and customs and *reading*.

Sanii and I were right about the wall of tiny markings we found in the cave under Sagen sy Itagami—they mean something when someone knows how to decipher them. Osshi and Tsua started teaching us to read before the storms hit, and the calm seas let us go back to that practice.

Learning how to see the meaning behind these marks is more memorization than any of us have done since we were children expected to know the laws of the clan by rote. It's exhausting.

I pick at the knot binding the red niadagu cord around my wrist, one of the dozen we stole from Imaku. Nothing I learn can tell me for sure how to break the four niadagu cords binding my brother to the black rock of that rot-ridden island. He's not on Imaku anymore, but he's still locked to the black stone platform, wherever the bobasu's servants moved it. Where they moved all thirty-nine platforms.

Tsua gave me a theory on breaking the niadagu spell before I tried to rescue Yorri the second time. It's only a theory, though, the only one I have. If it doesn't work, I won't ever be able to free my brother from whatever prison Varan has him in now.

The work is hard and my eyes, fingers, and head hurt by the time we're finished each night, but at least it gives us something to do besides waiting. We're waiting to see if the few Ryogan ships we pass turn to pursue us. We're waiting until we're far enough north to risk nearing land again. We're waiting for Osshi to be within range of another so-called friend who might be able to sneak us into Ryogo undetected.

I hate waiting.

Most of the time when I take a break, I head up to the main deck, needing the open air. I stand at the railing, watching the Ryogan shoreline pass or studying the crew to learn as much as I can—just in case we really do have to steal a ship to make it back to Shiara. Today, Zonna is already in my usual spot, his elbows on the railing and his eyes locked on the green, mountainous horizon.

"So much has changed. This isn't my parents' home anymore," Zonna says softly when I join him. "It's never been mine, no matter how much I imagined it when I was a child. *Uncle* Varan loved to sit me down and tell me everything about Ryogo."

"*Uncle*? Is that a Ryogan word?" We'd been speaking

Itagamin, but even when I search my mind for a translation, I don't know what that means. "I thought they called Varan and the others bobasu here."

Zonna blinks, his focus shifting to my face as understanding dawns. "Right. The *yugadai*. I'd forgotten that, somehow."

"I don't know what *yugadai* means, either." It's not his fault I haven't learned everything about Ryogo. I won't take it out on him. I *won't*, but it's frustrating.

"Chio used to say everything broken on Shiara was a punishment," Zonna says. "Chasing the Kaisubeh was what led Varan to whatever it was that gave him immortality, and he's been running after them ever since. I really don't think they like it."

I really don't think they exist, and I also don't want to give Varan that much credit, but I close my mouth on the words, hoping Zonna will explain with actual answers. Thankfully, he takes a long breath and keeps talking.

"You need permission to have a child in Itagami, right? The pairing has to be approved by the Miriseh?" When I nod, he runs his fingers through his hair, distress clear on his face. "*That's* the *yugadai*. When Varan and Suzu took control, they spent hundreds of years using Shiara's original inhabitants, his followers, and the bobasu themselves to breed stronger mages and better warriors." He pauses. "Given what Itagamin mages are capable of now, they succeeded."

No, I want to protest. We need permission and the Miriseh's blessing because resources are scarce and keeping the population steady is the only way to survive. They're the only ones who can give us the *ability* to have children in the first place.

"I'm sorry." He watches me carefully. "We weren't sure if we should tell you or not."

No, no, no. But then, why else would Varan not only have to

approve the birth, but the parents as well? And why was there such a strict ban on a nyshin or ahdo pairing with someone from the magicless yonin class? And why the bellows would Zonna lie about this?

“We didn’t know about it for almost a century. Not until the first Itagamin escaped to Denhitra. She was injured, and when I healed her, I found...” Zonna shakes his head. “From what we’ve learned since then, Varan has the hishingu mages alter every citizen of Itagami who might be capable of producing a child. They make the changes young—immediately after puberty, we think—making it, well, not impossible, but extremely hard for conception to happen.”

My hand drops to my stomach. My mind buzzes. Someone changed my insides just to make sure I wouldn’t have a baby? Not that I wanted one, especially not *now*, not with everything I have to do, but to have the choice made for me... Did I ever have any control over my life, or has it always been an illusion?

“I can reverse it for all of you if you want,” he quietly offers.

I’m shaking my head well before I can manage words. “I don’t— No. You can ask the others if they want you to...but it’s not a good time for anyone to get pregnant.” I’m barely able to wrap my mind around the fact that I *can* without the bond blessing from Varan and Suzu. I don’t want to think about this right now, so I ask, “What’s the yugadai got to do with an uncle?”

Zonna exhales heavily, but doesn’t protest my obvious avoidance. “Because of the yugadai, it’s rare for any couple to have more than one child, right? You and Yorri were an exception rather than an expectation.”

“In more ways than one.” Full-blood siblings are uncommon; the only exceptions are usually born from sumai pairs—two

people who chose a soulbond, something tying them together beyond death. So, as rare as full siblings are, it's *rarer* for them to be placed in the same nursery. Yorri and I only had the chance to grow up together because of misunderstood directions. And now Zonna is telling me our births were part of a plan, the same revenge plan that Varan's pursuing across an ocean. Followed by an army of intentionally bred warrior-mages.

My mind spins. Memories surface, my attention snagging on one in particular—the nyshin pair who'd wanted to have a child and had been denied. Without a reason. It had been unexpected—almost all nyshin pairs were approved. Lack of detail sparked rumors that tainted both the nyshins' reputation for moons, and it ended a relationship between the two, which had seemed to be heading toward either a life-long partnership or possibly a sumai. Did all that happen because of the bobasu's yugadai?

I press my hand against my abdomen, betrayal and hurt and confusion churning. How do I add this to everything else? I don't even know if this matters now. What is this when compared to Yorri vanishing, the lies about Ryogo, and the deliberate attempts to destroy so much of what I loved about Shiara? Where does this fit between everything else that's happened?

"Varan doesn't want people forming blood-ties because those almost always become more important than the clan as a whole. It was to my parents. Varan blamed their 'desertion' on me. He wasn't entirely wrong, but I was only part of it." Zonna exhales and leans over the water. "If blood-ties were all that mattered to my father, we never would've left Itagami."

"Because Varan is Chio's blood-brother." Tsua and Chio told us that much before we left Shiara. "Which makes him your uncle?"

"The brother of your father is your uncle," Zonna confirms.

"I wonder if I have an uncle." It's a ridiculous question. The answer doesn't matter. If I ever get back to Shiara, no one in Itagami is going to want to talk to me, blood-relative or no, and no matter how often I tell myself I don't care, just *thinking* about being turned away by my clan makes it hard to breathe.

"I don't think we'll ever know for certain." He looks almost apologetic.

I force myself to shrug. "I've lived the first seventeen years of my life without an uncle. I'm sure I can live another seventeen without one."

"I don't doubt that, youngling." Zonna smiles gently, but it turns strained when his eyes lock on something behind me. Tyrroh is approaching, his eyes bright and his steps quick. It makes the ache in my chest ease to see him.

The only good thing about waiting is that, eventually, it ends. And right now, I desperately need the distraction.

After Tyrroh gestures for us to follow him, he leads us to the room he's been sharing with Osshi. Tsua and Chio are already seated at the low table with Osshi, and Osshi is holding his garakyu again.

"What did your friend say?" I ask as Tyrroh, Zonna, and I sit.

"I don't know yet," Osshi says. "We were waiting for you."

Why? I bite the question back. And have to hold back even more questions when Tyrroh leans down and whispers, "Listen closely. No matter what his friend says, we'll need to come up with a plan that has at least a chance of success."

Finding success depends on how you define it. Killing Varan is everyone else's top priority. Sanii and I are the only ones who are more concerned about saving Yorri. But to do the latter, even I can admit we'll probably have to accomplish the former first.

Osshi lifts the garakyu to his lips and murmurs to it. Colors swirl inside as the magic in the sphere connects his sphere to the one his friend has.

“Osshi Shagakusa.” The voice is resonant and melodic and carries a faint rasp. “I do not usually find you in this corner of your country.”

Tsua and Chio exchange a loaded glance, one I don’t understand. Across the table, Zonna seems just as perplexed.

“Maybe not, but I’m extremely glad to find you here, Lo’a.” Osshi’s smile is strained. “I’m calling in my favor, and it’s not a small one.”

“Changing your mind after so many years?” Curiosity fills Lo’a’s voice, but all she says is, “What do you need?”

“I’m on a ship off the eastern coast—we’re just passing the mouth of the Mysora’ka River. I need you to meet us north of there, somewhere secluded and safe, and take us to Uraitā.”

“You are right. That is no small favor.” Wariness has infused Lo’a’s voice. “And you said ‘we.’ How many are traveling with you?”

His gaze jumps to meet Tsua’s before he swallows and looks back at the garakyu. “There are fourteen, including me.”

“*Aloshaki ki’i olea’o ka lea’i ho’uliopolikia.*” Lo’a’s laughter sounds surprised. “Where in this world did you pick up that many people desperate to get to a nowhere village like Uraitā?”

“Meet them and see,” Osshi presses. “Will you help us, Lo’a?”

“I think so, yes, but I need to talk to my family first. I will call you in an hour with a place to meet if they agree.” The garakyu clears, the connection gone.

Tsua and Chio stare at Osshi with offended incredulity on their faces. “Lo’a is hanae’uu we’la maninaio, isn’t she?” Tsua asks. “That’s why you didn’t want to tell us about her before.”

“The prejudice against them is ridiculous!” Osshi protests. “There are more lies than truths in what Ryogans know about the hanaeuu we’la maninaio, and historians have proven that more than once.”

“Ridiculous?” Chio’s eyes harden. “They attack unprovoked! When I was a boy, they raided Tirodo and burned the Kaisubeh tower to the ground.”

“That was far from unprovoked. One of Tirodo’s Kaiboshi gave them a gift. Of poisoned meat. It was a supposed peace offering that killed half their family.” Osshi’s voice grows strident. “The truth about the poisoning was buried. No one wanted to admit *we* could be the ones in the wrong.”

Chio nor Tsua hold their tongues, and their expressions slowly shift from angry to pensive. Osshi takes a long breath and starts again.

“When I was ten, I saved a hanaeuu we’la maninaio boy from drowning.” He runs his fingers through his hair, pushing the long black locks aside. “My father never believed the stories about them, and *their* people believe a life saved creates a heavy debt, so every time they visited Kanaga’ako, they’d bring me a gift. They swore they’d try to grant any favor I asked, but this —” He shakes his head. “If they get us to Uraitai, it’ll more than clear that debt.”

“Will it be any safer or faster than on our own?” Tsua asks cautiously. “They used to be under severe travel restrictions. They were always watched.”

“They’re warily ignored now,” Osshi admits. “I hate it—the way they’re treated is unfounded and unfair—but it’s useful for us; those beliefs keep everyone else away. Even the tyatsu ignore the hanaeuu we’la maninaio unless they’re forced to interact with them.”

He never shortens the name of the group. It’s an odd habit considering how long the name is. Our city was called

Sagen sy Itagami, but we rarely used more than just Itagami. For some reason, Osshi doesn't do that with the hanaeuu we'la maninaio.

Chio finally nods. "You've gotten us this far. If you trust them, it's enough for me. For now."

"That only matters if Lo'a's family agrees to help us," I add. "She didn't sound sure they would."

But when Osshi's garakyu swirls with color again less than an hour later, Lo'a proves as reliable as Osshi had hoped. She gives us a destination. Osshi heads off to tell Kazu with relief lightening his steps.

Once he's gone, Tyrroh faces the andofume. "How worried do we need to be about his friends?"

"I honestly don't know." Chio rubs his hand over his once-bald head, brushing over the short, newly grown gray-streaked black strands. "My experiences with the hanaeuu are ancient. Anything could've happened in the interim."

"And yet it all feels the same when we hear their name." Tsua looks at Chio with gentle mockery in her half-moon eyes. "So much for age bringing wisdom and patience."

"If they're still treated with caution," Chio says after a moment, "then they'll have little loyalty to Ryogo. That could be good for us."

But Tsua looks worried. "Unless they remember the stories about us as well as Osshi does."

"Don't tell them unless we have to, then." My words draw everyone's eyes. Since they're waiting instead of hushing me, I keep talking. "If they're doing this favor for Osshi, maybe they won't need to know who any of us are beyond his friends. I'm not saying we lie, but we can't regret something that's never been said. And we can always give them the whole story later."

"I was thinking the same thing," Zonna admits. "But there's a risk to keeping the secret, too—hiding something like this

won't make us look very trustworthy, so we'd better hope we don't need their help once we reach Uraitā. Omitting this for too long might make them decide we're not worth the risk."

Tsua turns toward the room's small window, then she nods. "We'll wait and see what happens when we meet them. Maybe they'll change their minds about helping and this whole discussion will be irrelevant."

"Guess we'll find out soon," Zonna says as he walks out of the room.

And he's right. The meeting place Lo'a gave Osshi is only an hour from where we are. Of course, once I see the place, I start to wonder if Tsua and Chio had been right about the trustworthiness of the hanaeuu we'la maninaio.

"If you weren't with us, would you be able to find a way to climb this?" I ask Osshi as we stand on the beach and look up at the daunting wall of rough, dark stone. The cove has a small beach, but beyond that are sheer cliffs. At least a hundred feet high. Completely encircling the only safe place to anchor the ship and row the smaller boats to shore. Telling Osshi to land here seems like setting him up to fail. Or fall.

Osshi shakes his head. "Even with you, it's hard to believe I can survive this."

"It won't be that bad. Look." Tessen points to the south edge of the beach, but until we get closer, I can't see what he spotted—an incredibly narrow footpath carved into the rock.

It makes the climb easier, but by no means easy. The path nearly disappears at times, barely wide enough for the balls of our feet. My fingers collect scrapes and cuts from how hard I grip the sharp stone. The wind tugs insistently at my clothing as I climb higher.

We can count on Tsua's and Etarō's magic to catch us if we fall—both are powerful enough rikinhisus for that—but they can't fly us all up the cliff. It's too much even for Tsua,

especially since she's already mentally hauling up all our bags and weapons. Miari going first does help, though; since she's an ishiji, she can shape the rock as she climbs, leaving us better handholds and footholds in the stone wall. It helps, but not enough to make the climb painless.

Halfway up, my hands ache. Three quarters of the way up, my arms and shoulders burn. By the time we reach the top, Etaro has caught Osshi twice to keep him from tumbling down to the rocky beach a hundred feet below us, and my hands are seconds away from giving out.

I've been on Ryogo for less than an hour, and I already want to go home.

This isn't the smooth, sand-blasted stone of Shiara's desert. This rock *hurts*, even after Miari manipulates the stone. And I thought that the breeze would warm once we landed, but if anything, it's gotten colder.

Zonna stops by each of us, healing whatever injuries we collected. I smile when he approaches me last, hands held out in front of himself with his palms up. I place my hands on his. Instantly, the soothing energy of his magic sinks into my skin, easing the ache in my shoulders and feet and legs and arms, and healing the cuts on my hands. It felt cool on Shiara, like water from a deep spring rushing over sun-burned skin, but now it seems wonderfully warm to me.

"We need you in one piece for what's coming," he says.

I flex my newly healed hands and try not to let his words sting. He didn't mean them to hurt, but they do. Because he's wrong. Before, that might've been true—it was just me, Sanii, and Tessen against the bobasu. Now, I've been knocked back down to youngest in the squad. "The only thing we need me for is wards when something else goes wrong."

Zonna smiles, but says nothing. In part because Tessen has gone stone-still nearby, his narrowed gaze locked west of us.

“They’re coming,” Tessen warns.

Tyrroh silently signals us to spread out, weaponless, but magic ready. I stand at the center, just behind Osshi, and I reach for the desosa in the air, testing it and getting myself ready in case whoever’s coming brings danger with them. The rest of the squad spreads out in a line to either side.

“Khya, do you feel that?” Tessen moves closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Focus on the desosa. Do you sense anything different?”

“No.” I’m already focusing on it; it seems normal. “But you obviously do. What is it?”

“I have no idea.” He looks up at the impossibly tall plants that grow here. They’re densely packed, growing close enough to each other to easily hide an army behind them. “Whatever it is, it’s almost here.”

Moments later, even I can see the shapes of more than a dozen people in the shadows cast by the tall plants. They’re dressed brightly, as colorful as the ships’ sails we passed in Po’umi’s harbor, but the cut of the clothing worn by some of them vaguely resembles Itagami’s.

Our pants bind tight from calf to ankle, theirs fall straight from their hips. Our tunics are long-sleeved and reach just above our knees, split on the sides. Their sleeveless tunics only fall to their hips, and the split is down the front instead of the side, exposing their bare chests even though it’s so cold I wish I had several more tunics to put on.

Those not wearing the loose pants are wrapped in voluminous folds of cloth that hang from their hips to the ground. The fabric is bright, multicolored, and patterned with tiny, intricate designs. Breastbands, just as colorful, are wrapped around their chests. The few with anything over the wide band are wearing a shorter version of the open-fronted tunic.

In skin and size and shape, they vary as widely as my clan

in Itagami, from warm beige to rich brown, and from as short as Sanii to one who looks taller than Tyrroh. Including all members of the group, it's more revealed skin than I've seen since the last time I bathed in the pool under Itagami. But what keeps my eyes locked on them is the colorful patterns and designs drawn over almost every inch of exposed flesh. Even their faces bear symbols and marks, though mostly surrounding their eyes.

The closer they get, the more I feel what Tessen must have. The desosa flows in lines and ordered swirls around these people, eddying in certain areas but always moving in what seems like an ordained path. When I reach out to pull some to me, it comes, but only when I insist. What have these people done to the desosa? It almost feels trained. Like the energy *likes* obeying them.

Who are these people that they have such power? Osshi didn't mention magic at all, so they must be able to use it without the Ryogans noticing. Somehow, they're working powerful magic under the Ryogans' noses. I look at the cord on my wrist, and I can't help wondering if they might have an answer the Ryogan books haven't given me yet.

"*Alima'hi*, Lo'a." Osshi inclines his head to the woman at the head of the group. Lo'a. "*Ou'a ka lea'i imloa ka'i ia okopo'ono aloslaki ana'anahou.*"

"*Aloslaki naho olea'o wa'heekohu shahala'kai. O'kaoo malohakama ka lea'i le'anohu.*" She smiles, and her voice is exactly as rich as I remember. It's a relief when she switches to Ryogan. "Osshi Shagakusa, my cousin is going to be extremely upset to have missed you."

"And I'm sad he's not here, but it's a relief to see you," Osshi says.

"I can see that. And that you have had hard times recently." She tilts her head in our direction. The others arrayed beside

her follow her gaze; none of their faces are nearly as open or warm as hers. “You trust these people?”

“Yes.” His answer is unequivocal. “And if you help us, it will wipe out the family debt.”

“More than, I think.” Her smile fades. “I am worried about what this favor might cost us, honestly. There are rumors that the Ryogan’s coastal guard is searching for a traitor.”

Osshi stiffens. “I’m no traitor.”

No, he’s not. He very well might be a savior if we can get what we need in time, but I don’t think his people will ever know what he’s risking for them. He’s putting his standing with his people in jeopardy to protect them, I realize suddenly. Just like we are.

For a long moment, Lo’a and the others with her watch us. The ordered swirls of energy surrounding them reach out, brushing over us like questing fingers, and it takes all my willpower not to snap my wards into place to stop the intrusion. It’s worse than bugs skittering across bare skin, but the touch never digs, pulls, or burns, never grows edges, so I let it be.

When it retreats at last, it’s a relief.

Lo’a looks toward two of the older members of her group—both with gray and silver-white streaks through their dark hair. The three of them seem to communicate in small gestures and facial quirks, and then Lo’a turns back to us.

“We should go.” Lo’a sweeps her arm the way they came. “There are patrols nearby, and the last thing we want is for them to think you anchored here for something more sinister than evading the port tax.”

Osshi mumbles his thanks, quickly picking up his bag and following Lo’a, as though he wants to be sure she doesn’t have time to press for more details. The rest of us move a few seconds slower, and as I step closer to the towering plants, I

look back at the ocean.

Dangerous as that watery expanse was, at least it was familiar. Ahead, I'll be shocked to find even one small thing that reminds me of home. We're putting our lives in the hands of strangers, and all I can do as I follow them into the shadowy growth is hope Osshi's trust isn't misplaced.

It had better not be. Yorri doesn't have time for me to make mistakes.

And neither does Ryogo.



CHAPTER THREE

“**T**his feels like a horrible idea,” Rai mutters in Itagamin as we follow Lo’a and her people through the plants. Then she raps her knuckles against one. “And what the bellows are these things?”

“Trees,” Tsua responds.

“There are enough of them to hide an army.” Etaro peers around as though ey expects one to attack out of the shadows. “How do you know when someone’s coming?”

Tsua takes a long, deep breath. “You learn the scents on the wind, and how to listen.”

No way it’ll be as easy as that, but I’m more worried about Rai’s first comment than what the trees may be hiding. “*Is this a horrible idea, Tsua?*”

“Possibly, but not the worst one I’ve ever heard.” Tsua shrugs and steps over a gnarled root. “Chio and I haven’t been here in centuries, Zonna hasn’t been here ever, and Osshi is a scholar. He doesn’t know these forests like the hanaeuu. If we’re going to get to Uraita, we need the help of someone who knows this land. The hanaeuu are the only ones offering.”

Hanaeuu we'la maninaio, I correct silently.

Tessen raises his hand and signals—motion ahead. Wherever Lo'a is leading us, we're almost there.

The trees thin. There's a clear space ahead. Clear of trees, at least. Large boxes on wheels sit at the edge of the open space. They're each a different color—all of them incredibly bright—and they're covered with intricate designs. Other symbols made of metal and crystal hang from the eaves of the domed roofs, and more marks are etched around the windows and doors.

In the center of the ring of the colorful boxes are people. There are a bunch of odd animals, too. The ones closest to us are horned beasts, their hide tough-looking and mottled gray. Although they snort and toss their heads, they're otherwise placid, not even trying to free themselves from their loose tethers as they chew on leaves pulled from low-hanging branches. They're bigger than the teegras on Shiara, but those vicious scaled cats would tear us to pieces for even thinking about trapping them like this.

"Is that little, brownish-green thing an animal?" Etaro asks.

I don't spot the creature until one of the children scoops it into their arms. Stranger still, the animal doesn't seem to mind; it curls its lithe body into a smaller ball as though it's trying to make it easier for the child to hold it.

"So weird," Rai mutters. "We would *eat* something like that. They're playing with it."

There are several of the small animals scampering around the camp. One, a white one with golden paws and subtle stripes, falls in by Lo'a's side as soon as it sees her. The two people who Lo'a conferred with earlier, smile at the creature, bending down to brush their fingers over its fur as they say something to Lo'a in their flowing language. Once Lo'a responds, they split off toward the main section of the camp.

“You’ve painted the wagons since the last time I saw you,” Osshi comments as we sit near one of the fires.

Wagons. At least I have a name for the boxes now. The designs covering them seemed random at first, but they’re definitely not. Certain marks and patterns repeat on almost every surface, though not always in the same order or configuration. The replicated symbols seem almost buried within the swirling, patterned chaos of the larger design. Deciphering it all reminds me of the puzzles Yorri used to make, one shaped piece of metal intertwining with so many others that it’s hard to tell one from the rest.

Yorri would love these wagons. He should be here to see them, and it *hurts* that he’s not.

I clear my throat and gesture to the camp. “The colors are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Lo’a says. “It is almost due to be repainted.”

The way her fingers trace a mark on her arm sparks a realization—the main designs on the wagons are also repeated on their skin.

Lo’a notices my scrutiny. Voice dry, she says, “You are staring, *limahi*. Are you not used to seeing skin where you come from?”

“I’m used to seeing a lot more than you’re showing, actually. But usually the only thing decorating that skin is battle scars.”

She raises her hands, looking down at the patterns as though she’s seeing them for the first time.

“They’re beautiful,” I say before she can take what I said the wrong way. “There’s just nothing like it on Shiara.”

Lo’a watches me, her golden-brown eyes wary. “I do not know of Shiara.”

“And Shiara knows nothing of you.” I hold my breath, hoping she’ll let the subject drop.

Lo’a’s eyebrows rise, but she thankfully says nothing.

Instead, she turns to Osshi. “We should go. I do not know what your secrets are or where your friends are from, but I think it will be better for all of us if we get to Uraita as soon as possible.”

“That’s all we ask,” Osshi insists. “Safe passage. And help getting some books from the Zunoato library. Once we reach Uraita, you can leave us behind with a debt wiped clean.”

“Hmm. You make it sound so easy. But I am warning you now, Osshi Shagakusa—if this harms any of my people, your family will be the ones who owe the debt. Do we have a deal?”

Osshi tenses, and then seems to force himself to relax before he answers. “Yes, of course. It’s a deal.”

Lo’a whistles, a piercing three-tone call. It causes a flurry of motion. Children and small animals are herded into the wagons. The massive horned beasts are led to poles that extend from one end of each wagon, then they’re tied to those poles.

It all happens quickly, and everyone knows their role in the process. Their obvious training is comforting. Maybe they really will be able to get us to Chio’s village safely.

“Come with me.” Lo’a walks off. Osshi follows first, but the rest of us aren’t far behind. She heads toward a yellow wagon with patterns painted in white and brown, approaching steps that lead up to the door. It opens outward before she reaches it. Two people jog down, each burdened with bags and boxes. The second one nods to her and says something in their language.

She nods. “Thank you.”

I watch the two leave, wondering if anyone but Lo’a speaks or understands Ryogan. No one else has spoken a word of it yet.

Her gesture to the wagon catches my attention. “Fitting you all in here will be tight, but we cannot spare any more space.”

As Osshi assures her we'll be fine, Tyrroh says, "Wardstones first, Khya."

"Yes, Nyshin-ma." I jump the three stairs and head inside.

The wall opposite the door has two platforms, the bottom one about a foot wider than the top, and both are covered with mattresses and blankets. Below them are what might be drawers for storage—that's what they were called on Kazu's ship. To the left, immediately past the door, a flat piece of wood is strapped down. Beyond that is a cushioned bench that stretches all the way to the beds.

I take a breath and wish more than ever for Yorri. He'd love a challenge like this, trying to fit fourteen adults plus their gear, weapons, and bags into this limited space. But we don't have Yorri. All we have is me.

"Tessen, pass up the bags." I place wardstones along the wagon walls. "Keep out small weapons and essential items. Everything else has to be stored."

Thankfully, there's more space than I spotted at first, like the empty area inside the bench seat. Hooks drop down from the ceiling, and there I hang the bags and weapons we might want quick access to. It makes stowing our gear quicker than I'd hoped it would be.

Once we're all inside, Lo'a warns, "Brace yourselves. We must travel fast to make the most of the remaining daylight."

She unhooks the steps from the doorway and secures them to the wall. The look she casts Osshi as she closes the door is somewhere between speculation and warning, but she says nothing.

Tessen shakes his head, slipping through the crowded space toward the door. "There must be a way to keep this open. I've spent too much time the last moon in small, dark spaces."

And in a land this strange, it doesn't feel safe to cut off

our best line of sight. Or escape.

“You’d better figure it out fast,” Rai tells Tessen from near the window. “Looks like we’ll be moving any second.”

Thankfully, it’s a simple solution—there’s a latch on the wagon’s exterior wall. Once it’s secure, Tessen and I settle onto the floor in the open doorway. The wagon jerks and rolls forward a moment later.

The motion is uncomfortably reminiscent of the ocean, so it’s nice to be able to see, hear, and smell Ryogo to remind me we’re back on solid land. I lean out, trying to study as much as I can of this place. To help, Osshi and the elder andofume give us names for plants and animals, none of which have counterparts on Shiara. They even explain the hanaeuu we’la maninaio’s animals—the large ukaiahana’lona are kept for work, like pulling their wagons, and the small ahoali’lona are companions, cared for and protected the same way human clan members are.

It’s all strange, but the farther we travel into Ryogo, the more some things make sense, too. Like how they can build ships and wagons—and probably cities—with wood. On Shiara, only the kicta ever grows as tall as a person, and the shell of that spine-covered plant becomes unusably holey when it’s dried out and dying. I can’t imagine ever building a boat out of kicta panels or the kindling we collected from the desert’s low-growing brush.

Trees, though. There is so much potential locked in trees. More than that, I think trees might be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

They soar high above us—some must be over a hundred feet tall. The bases vary in width, some thin enough that I could wrap my arms around them and touch my fingers on the other side, and others so broad that it’d take three of us to completely encircle it. Leaves sprout from branches that

spread in every direction, and the sound they make when the wind blows is wonderful. Like the waves crashing against a distant shore. The only thing I don't like is the shade they cast; it drops the temperature too much, and the air is already cold enough.

It's incredible, but the sight is tainted by a single question: What will all this look like if Varan lands in Ryogo? He was willing to kill and deceive and manipulate and destroy everyone on Shiara for the chance to come back here. I can't trick myself into believing he'll be any kinder to the Ryogans than he was to us. It'll be worse. If we fail—if *I* fail—Varan could sweep through this forest with my clan at his back and raze this land until nothing but ash and blood are left.

After an hour, I have to move away from the door; the weight of what might happen is beginning to overwhelm the wonder of seeing Ryogo for myself.

I'm glad for the distraction of the books on magic and history that Lo'a gave us. Some she had on hand, but the rest she sent several of her people to collect as we hurry northwest. When I find one that mentions the niadagu, I pull it aside and read with careful attention, trying to memorize it, a goal that feels impossible when even understanding the words is a struggle.

By the time we stop for the night, my head hurts and I'm so cold my fingers are nearly numb. Before I let myself settle near the warmth of the blaze our two kasaiji are building, however, I walk the outer edge of the hanaeuu we'la maninaio camp and set my wardstones down at regular intervals. Just in case trouble finds us.

Protections set, I sit between Tessen and Rai near the fire and take a deep breath. The scent of the smoke is an aching reminder of home. For most of the year, Itagami smells like smoke, brine, sulphur, sweet kicta, and bitter scrub. I can't

identify what the air is carrying here apart from woodsmoke.

"I can't be the only one who thinks the world smells strange," Sanii says. "Nyshin-ma? Tessen? Either of you know what it is?"

Tyrroh shakes his head, and Tessen says, "I don't know what to call anything here. It's *all* strange."

"I seriously don't envy your senses right now, basaku," Rai says.

"Is this what cold smells like?" Miari rubs the tip of her nose. "I don't like the scent any better than I like the temperature."

"Don't worry." Wehli smirks and leans in to press a kiss to her tawny skin. "Nairo and I will keep you warm."

"The smell we can't do anything about," Nairo adds wryly, adding a jet of flames to make it burn hotter.

"It's not the cold." Osshi gestures widely. "It's the trees."

"That's unfortunate." Natani scoots closer to the fire. "I was just starting to like trees."

Tessen taps my knee, nodding toward the main camp when I look at him. "You might want to warn Lo'a not to touch those wardstones."

Following his gaze, I see Lo'a walking the perimeter of the camp with one of the older hanaeuu we'la maninaio, their attention fixed on the wardstones. The others watch Lo'a's progress but don't approach. As I turn back to Tessen, I can't help wondering if the other hanaeuu we'la maninaio are keeping a distance out of respect for the woman who seems to be their leader, or out of wariness of us.

"Worried she'll dump us here and flee if she learns how dangerous those stones are the same way you did?" I ask. The shock of touching my active wardstones had left his short hair standing straight up.

"Any sane person would," he answers wryly.

“Hmm.” I stand up. “What does that say about you?”

He tilts his head back far to look up at me. “That you broke my mind a long time ago.”

Grinning, I tap his nose and then jog away, reaching Lo’a just before she reaches toward a wardstone. “I don’t recommend that.”

“I did not plan on touching it.” And she doesn’t. Neither does the older woman standing beside her, watching silently. Instead, Lo’a carefully moves her hand over and around the stone, feeling the air, or maybe testing the stone the way she tested us earlier. “This is not like anything I have seen before. Would you tell me how it works?”

“If you’d be willing to tell me how you get the *desosa* to run like a well-trained soldier through those symbols you use.”

Her hand freezes, and her eyes snap to meet mine. The older woman cocks her head, her long, gray-streaked hair falling over her shoulder; there’s vigilance in her expression that makes me almost certain she understands Ryogan even if she can’t, or chooses not to, speak it.

Lo’a glances at the woman, who doesn’t seem to offer her any direction. Then Lo’a shakes her head. “I do not know *desosa*. What is that?”

Thoughtless of me; of course she doesn’t. “The closest word I know in Ryogan is *sentukei*—magic. But *desosa* is more than that.” I circle my hand in the air, trying to encompass everything. “It’s the energy of the world. The power in the air and the land and the water.”

“You know the *akiloshulo’e kua’ana manano*?” She stands, eyes intensely focused on me. Surprise shows on the elder’s face, too. “You can feel it?”

“You can’t?” That doesn’t make sense. How can they possibly be channeling it this well if they can’t feel it?

“No, of course we can.” She waves her hand dismissively.

“But in all the lands we have traveled, we have met very few who can. Many deny it exists, but those people do not see our magic at all. Almost no one in Ryogo can sense it.”

By now, I feel the attention of the rest of my group. I’m sure a few of them have moved closer to listen, just like several of Lo’a’s people are moving in behind her. No one speaks, and Lo’a seems to pay them no attention, so I ignore them, too.

I take a breath and gesture toward my circle of wardstones. “I’d be willing to teach you about my magic if you explained yours.”

Although interest is clear in her expression, she doesn’t say anything for almost a minute. The elder woman murmurs something in their language, the words so long and flowing I have a hard time determining where one ends and the next starts. When Lo’a speaks again, it’s not what I expected to hear. “Do you know how many colors exist?”

“Colors?” I am utterly confused. “Of course not. How could I?”

“Exactly.” She gestures around the camp to, I presume, all the colors her people use. “Just here, there are so many it would take a long time to count them. When you combine some colors, you can create something beautiful, like a shade of blue that captures the essence of the sky. Other times the result is less lovely, a murky darkness that reminds people of death.”

“What does that have to do with magic?” I ask.

“There are just as many ways to use the *akiloshulo’e kua’ana manano*—what you call desosa—as there are colors in the world,” Lo’a explains. “The wrong combinations can be disastrous. Catastrophic, in certain circumstances. Even if it were allowed, teaching you to see magic the way my people do might not work the way either of us intend.”

“Or it could give us a useful new tool, something to help us protect our homes.” Most of the magical limits I was taught have been proven wrong in the last several moons. It’s not in me to believe the *only* possible outcome is bad.

My words seem to make her think...until her gaze flicks up to focus on something over my shoulder.

“Khya.” Tessen’s words—spoken in Itagamin—are filled with the kind of worry I’ve learned to pay attention to. “I think I hear something. Can’t be sure here, though. Too much noise for me to filter out.”

“Go tell Tyrroh, and be careful.” We’re not like Tsua and Zonna. He can be hurt. “Make sure you take someone with you if you need to go far.”

He turns then, a teasing light in his eyes. “Is that an order, Nyshin-pa?”

“I’m not your nyshin-pa.” Our squad had two seconds serving directly under Nyshin-ma Tyrroh. Neither of them is here. Ryzo is still on Shiara, left behind, and Daita...

“You are, Khya, whether you’ve officially accepted the position or not.” Smiling, he touches my shoulder gently and leaves, stopping to whisper to Tyrroh. Both continue south. In a few seconds, they’re lost in the trees.

Lo’a’s sharp gaze tracks their departure, and then she beckons to one of her clansmen. The conversation is short but heated; as far as I can tell when the man walks away, she won. Then she demands to know what’s happening.

“Tessen thinks someone might be approaching from the south. He and Tyrroh have gone to check, that’s all.”

“It seems like more than that.” Her gaze locks on Osshi. “What have you brought down on us, Osshi Shagakusa? If you are no traitor, why is there so much fear in your eyes to think someone is coming?”

“I’m *not* a traitor.”

“To yourself, maybe. But in the Ryogans’ eyes?” she challenges.

“I’ll explain it all, Lo’a, tell you whatever you want to know, but if the tyatsu really are coming, we need your help.” He walks closer, hands outstretched. “If they find me, I think they’ll kill me.”

She stiffens. Those standing behind her start whispering amongst themselves, hurried gestures sending one of them running toward the main camp. My pulse speeds up to see the fear and anger on so many of their faces. We’ve barely started this trek and it already feels like we’re about to lose the only possible allies we have here.

The conversation stops when Lo’a raises her hand. “The risk to us is enormous. We are tolerated in Ryogo because of the trade we bring them, but the leaders have been trying to banish us for centuries. If they catch us smuggling a *traitor*, that faction might finally win their fight against us.”

“Lo’a, I know it’s a lot to ask. Too much.” Osshi is nearly pleading with her, and he never even looks at the elders. He’s treating Lo’a as if she’s the only one who makes decisions for this family, as if he’s never noticed how often—like now—she looks to one of the elders for opinions, approval, or advice. “All I ask right now is for you to listen to what we’ve learned and then decide for yourself if carrying us where we need to go is worth the risk.”

She opens her mouth. I hold my breath—

And then Tessen’s voice cracks through the forest. “Enemy incoming!”