

WAR OF
STORMS
THE RYOGAN CHRONICLES

ERICA CAMERON

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xoxo

Liz Pelletier, Publisher

*This book is dedicated to those who followed me on this
voyage, to anyone who risks taking a journey of their own,
and to everyone who's looking for home.*

Cast of Characters

Ahnatiolio – one of the Denhitran elders and leaders and married to Ralavanonav; he/him

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

Akia – one of the elders of Soanashalo'a's family, a responsibility shared with her husband Hoku, and a citizen of the hanaeuu we'la maninaio tribe; she/her

Amis – an original member of Tyrroh's squad; oraku mage; he/him

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

Arinri – one of the born immortals trapped on Imaku with Yorri; akuringu mage; she/her

Atsudo – a tyatsu guard serving in Jushoyen; she/her

Chio Heinansuto – Tsua’s husband, Varan’s brother, and one of the original twelve immortals; dyuniji mage; deceased; he/him

Chirida Josenshi – the general of the Ryogan army and the Jindaini’s military advisor; she/her

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; deceased; she/her

Donya – an original member of Tyrroh’s squad; kasaiji; ey/em

Elyini – one of the original twelve immortals; he/him

Etaro – an original member of Tyrroh’s squad and currently platonically partnered with Rai; rikinhisu mage; ey/em

Gentoni Gotintenzo – the elected leader of Ryogo who holds the title of Jindaini, he is married to Jintisu; he/him

Hoku – one of the elders of Soanashalo’a’s family, a responsibility shared with his wife Akia, and a citizen of the hanaeuu we’la maninaio tribe; he/him

Hykin – Tyrroh’s childhood best friend who was imprisoned on Imaku by Varan; kasaiji mage; he/him

Jintisu Gotintenzo – a leading figure in Ryogo and wife of Gentoni; she/her

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

Keili – an original member of Tyrroh's squad; deceased; he/him

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

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

Mytua – one of the original twelve immortals; ratoiji mage; she/her

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

Natani – an original member of Tyrroh's squad; zoikyo 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

Osota Tarusuta – Ryogan smuggler and descendent of Suzu's family; married to Shiodeso; she/her

Osshi Shagakusa – Ryogan historian who sailed to Shiara looking for proof of the bobsu's existence; he/him

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

Ralavanonav – one of the Denhitran elders and leaders and married to Ahnatiolio; ey/em

Reeka – a yonin attendant whose partner Taya was killed by Varan and who helped Sanii and Khya look for Yorri; she/her

Remashi – an original member of Tyrroh's squad; rikinhisu mage; she/her

Ryzo – former second-in-command of Tyrroh's original squad, but one who initially remained on Shiara; hisingu mage; he/him

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

Shideso Tarusuta – Ryogan smuggler; married to Osota; he/him

Shiu - one of the elders of Soanashalo'a's family and a citizen of the hanaeuu we'la maninaio tribe; he/him

Shytari Leowesa – captain of a Khyllari cargo vessel; she/her

Soaholia – one of the Denhitran elders and leaders; she/her

Soanashalo'a Shuikanahe'le – Osshi's friend and the voice of a hanaeue we'la maninaio caravan; she/her

Sotra – the ahdo training master who taught Khya, Yorri, and Tessen in Itagami; kyneeda; she/her

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

Syoni – an original member of Tyrroh's squad; ishiji mage; she/her

Tessen – a one-time member of Tyrroh's squad and Khya's current partner; basaku mage; he/him

Thelin – an original member of Tyrroh's squad; deceased; she/her

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

Tyrroh – an original member of Tyrroh's squad; oraku mage; deceased; he/him

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

Vysian – an original member of Tyrroh's squad, but one who initially remained on Shiara; rikinhisu mage; he/him

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

Wyrin – one of the original twelve immortals; hishingu mage; he/him

Yarzi – an original member of Tyrroh's squad, but one who initially remained on Shiara; ratoiji mage; ey/em

Yonishi Tsukadesu – the leader of the group of kaiboshi (priests) who serve the goddess Masya-Mono and also acts as a confidante and counselor to Jindaini Gentoni; 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

Epigraph

Who are the Kaisubeh to control our lives with such heavy hands while denying us the least proof they exist? Essentially, we're expected to unquestioningly follow beings about whom we know nothing real.

The teachings the kaiboshi claim our gods left behind contradict themselves, which just proves the kaiboshi are as greedy as they are ignorant. The stories I learned as certainties growing up in the north are treated like frivolous folklore in the southern provinces, and that's nothing to the differences between our beliefs and what the nomads or anyone outside Ryogo calls truth.

Maybe the reason we still tell tales about gods no one's heard from in ages is because we don't want to accept the truth—the Kaisubeh are dead. Maybe

*they've been dead for the last three thousand years,
since the schism that broke the world.*

*If that's true, what I'm attempting is the only way
humanity will ever be unified again. If what I created
in Kaisuama does what I intend and Chio wakes
up from this sickness transformed, then Ryogo
will finally get a chance to meet their Kaisubeh. We
will lead them, kicking and screaming if we must,
and we will make Ryogo more powerful than it has
ever been before. After, the world itself will fall at
our feet, and the generations that follow will barely
remember the names of the so-called Kaisubeh.*

They'll tell stories about the Miriseh instead.

—Excerpt from the journal of Varan Heinansuto, written
3205 A.S., seven years before the beginning of the Great
War and twelve years before the bobasu's exile

Prologue

Lightning cracks through the sky, fast and close. Thunder is a continuous rumble that shakes the foundations of Shiara. Every rock on the island trembles and vibrates, and Yorri has felt it for so long he can't remember what it's like to be still.

Days. Weeks. A moon cycle or more. Yorri can't be sure how long ago the Miriseh abandoned him and the other prisoners in the mountains, leaving them to the torment of the elements. The storms haven't broken once.

Thunder shakes the air and the ground. Heavy raindrops batter him from above. Lightning blazes overhead, leaving glaring streaks even against Yorri's closed eyes. He wishes he was numb to all of it—shouldn't he be by now? He's not. Whatever power heals the burns from lightning strikes and keeps him alive without food also seems to make him feel each drop of rain as if it's the first to strike. It makes each deafening crash painfully fresh. Lack of sleep should've sent

him into delirium and unconsciousness ages ago, but the fresh sparks of pain continuously shock him into alertness, and his mind processes each moment in perfect clarity.

He wants to scream, to struggle against the magic binding him to the black platform he's laid out on. Instead, he presses his lips together to hold back outbursts of agony and anger. He doesn't think anyone is guarding the valley, but he can't be sure, and he refuses to give the Miriseh the satisfaction of screaming for the help no one is going to give him.

Swallowing the pain, he tries to find something else to focus on. The only option, though, is staring at the others trapped on their own platforms. Some are as still as their stone beds, but others thrash and flail, arching up against the cords binding their wrists and ankles to the rock, their mouths open in shouts Yorri can barely hear over the thunder.

If Khya were in my position, she'd find a way to free herself from this, he thinks. By now, she would've found a way to free us all. He knows his sister sees him as the problem solver with a mind that can see its way out of any situation, but this... What the bellows is he supposed to do about this? Not even his enhanced strength can break his bindings, and the storm isn't the only anguish he's suffering.

The ache in his chest has been getting worse. Between his lungs is a spot where a pale yellow warmth bloomed when he bonded with Sanii, but they've been apart for too long. The connection has stretched and strained and soured. The spot has grown cold. It's sent out barbed vines; they wrap around his lungs and heart and slowly constrict. He didn't notice at first—not in the midst of the storm. Now, it's

impossible to ignore.

The only way he has to mark the passage of time is the steady increase of that pain and the water slowly filling the small, rocky valley. Now, swells lap at the base of his black stone bed, and sometimes wind forces the waves to crest over him. When the water covers him completely, will it bring death or just a new kind of torture?

Lightning strikes the closest peak. Thunder cracks and rumbles. Huge chunks of stone break off the slope, dropping into the valley below. Several land in the water, sending up massive waves. One cracks off a piece of the platform closest to Yorri, missing the prisoner's hand by inches. One falls straight on someone else's leg, crushing it completely.

I can't do all the work, little brother. The whisper sounds like Khya, and his sister's voice soothes even though she's not here; all he's hearing is what he guesses Khya might say. *I'm fighting to save you. The least you can do is help.*

We never gave up on you, Sanii, his sukhai, would likely add. *Don't you dare give up on us.*

Tessen's imagined voice throws down a challenge. *Khya always bragged about how smart you are, Yorri. Prove it.*

But he can't. There's no way to win a fight against magic, a mountain, and a storm.

He stares at the bloodied mess of the prisoner's crushed leg, only blinking to clear the rain from his eyes. Over time, the flattened, pulped places round out and the skin smooths. The injury heals completely; only their torn pants and the faint bloodstains not washed away by the rain prove it happened at all.

Yorri huffs, and then he laughs. He laughs despite how the pain between his lungs pierces and pulls. In part, he

laughs because of it. His pain will never be enough to kill him. His injuries will always heal. He can't die, and for some Kujuko-cursed reason, he doesn't even have the partial oblivion of false unconsciousness anymore. He's awake, he's aware, and he's watching as the water gets higher with each hour of rainfall.

How long, he wonders, will he be able to drown?

Chapter One

Rido'iti is burning. And all I can do is watch.

We're on a ridge overlooking the city and the ocean beyond, a seemingly endless stretch of white-capped water so dark it's nearly black. The position is a hundred feet up and half a mile away from the city, and we've barely moved for the last two hours. Sanii is as mute and still as the nearby Zohogasha, the statues of the Kaisubeh standing sentinel on the coast. Etaro holds Rai tight, face turned against her shoulder. Nearby, Sanii, Zonna, and Natani stare at the city below us, unblinking. Tessen leans against me, his breathing shallow and too quick, his body trembling.

When Varan's army landed, I stayed because I needed to see what he would order his nyshin mages to do. And if they would listen. A small part of me had hoped, despite knowing exactly how well the citizens of Sagen sy Itagami unquestioningly follow orders, that those I once called clan would *look* at where they were and see that the city they'd

been commanded to decimate was defenseless, its people weak and unprepared. I'm too far away to see faces or watch individual reactions, but the army didn't seem to hesitate before the slaughter of Rido'iti began. Now, only ruins, blood, and ash remain.

I barely blink as my gaze traces the narrow, twisting streets dividing the tightly packed, sharp-peaked buildings of stone and wood—or the lines of what's left of them. We reached this height while the Itagamin army was still marching across the ocean, and then the wide thoroughfares were nearly empty; the raging storm had driven everyone indoors. Even in the darkness of the storm and with my vision blurred by pounding rain, I could see the bright paint on the structures and count the trees lining most roads. It's easy to imagine what this place might've looked like on a sunny morning with a harbor full of ships and a city full of life. I'll never see it like that. I will only ever see it in flames and ruins.

Fire has engulfed most of the city, crawling from building to building with the help of brutal gusts of wind. The flames are so thick and hot not even the rain can put them out. It'll extinguish itself eventually, but only after everything it can consume is gone. No one is here to douse the flames anymore. The citizens have either fled or died, and the Itagamin army is already leaving the chaos behind to move north, away from the roiling ocean and into Ryogo.

"How many do you think died?" Etarō asks.

"Too many." I close my eyes. Acrid smoke burns my nose, the scent full of burning wood, roasting flesh, and singed hair.

At least the screaming has finally stopped.

“What do you want to do, Khya?” Tessen’s voice is so low that I might not have heard the question if he hadn’t rested his forehead against my temple. “We need to go, or we’ll get caught by their scouts.”

I nod to let him know I heard, but I don’t move yet. We were so close. After four moon cycles in Ryogo, hunting secrets and building weapons, we had finally been about to get on a boat and sail home. When we reached Rido’iti, we found an army instead of a ship. There’s no way for us to get back to Shiara—for *me* to get back to Yorri—now. Even if there was a ship in the harbor that hadn’t been broken into pieces by weeks of vicious storms, we *can’t* leave Ryogo to the revenge of the bobasu. But that doesn’t mean I have the first clue how to stop them.

We never planned for this. And it’s ridiculous that we didn’t. Or maybe the others *have* been considering this kind of failure and I was too focused on saving Yorri to worry about the rest of the world. Even now, if I found a ship, I’d be tempted to leave this place behind.

Love is pulling me to cross the tumultuous ocean to save Yorri.

Duty is pushing me to get ahead of this army and destroy Varan.

Choosing one means turning away from the other, and though I’ll hate myself for failing Yorri again, I won’t be able to live with myself at all if I leave Ryogo to die. I thought Varan wanted to take over and put himself in the Jindaini’s place. That’s hard to believe after Rido’iti. Looking down at the smoldering city, it doesn’t seem like he wants to rule the Ryogans, he wants to rule *Ryogo*. Even if there’s nobody left to follow him.

I watch the last squads of nyshin leave Rido'iti as I step backward toward the tree line. "We'll head north and try to catch up with Wehli, Lo'a, and the others before they get too far inland. Whether we find them or not, though, we have to go to Jushoyen."

Jushoyen, the city at the center of Ryogo, is where their leader lives.

"It won't be an easy trip. We'll have to cross half the country." Round face pinched and spattered with mud, Rai looks between me and Etaro, who's still pressing close for comfort. Then she tilts her head to the north. "It's going to be especially hard if we have to move fast enough to stay ahead of *them*."

"Easy or not, we need to go." I turn north, drawing my wards in tight to make it easier for us to pass through the dense forest. The magical shields will not only keep off the driving rain, they'll keep my friends safe if we run into trouble.

"But, Khya, we can't—" Sanii cuts emself off, but I hear what ey didn't say. Sanii's the only one as horrified by the thought of missing our chance to go back to Shiaras as I am.

I'm making the right decision to head inland and warn the Ryogans, but seeing the lines of strain marring eir long face makes me wince. My heart cracks, and my resolve weakens. I remember Yorri and the others trapped on those platforms on Imaku, and I've been desperately trying to avoid picturing the awful places Varan could've shoved my brother. All the agony and indecision I've been trying to squash since we first saw the empty harbor and the incoming army rises and chokes me.

Yorri is my brother, but he's Sanii's sukhai, eir

soulpartner. To me, missing him is like missing half my heart; for Sanii, being apart must feel as though it's slowly eroding eir soul.

Swallowing hard, I step in front of em, stopping only when we're so close the toes of our boots are nearly touching and I'm looking down into eir big eyes. "I know. I know, and I hate this, but what— When I think about what Yorri would do if he were here, I can't believe..."

Ey flinches, eir hand pressing hard against eir chest as eir small frame seems to collapse in on itself. "You can't believe he'd leave when he might be able to help. Because he wouldn't."

"Especially not when he had a way to know without a doubt we were alive." Which all sumai partners do. As torturous as it must be for them to be apart, Sanii told me moons ago that so long as ey was focused and functional, Varan hadn't found a way to kill the immortal born. I would know Yorri's life had ended the moment ey dropped to eir knees, keening and begging to die. It hurts to even allow for the possibility, but I've already proven immortality has limits.

Sanii looks south, across the towering waves toward Shiara and Yorri, and rubs eir hand in circles against eir chest. Then ey nods. Determination settles over eir face as ey turns north. Rai and Etaro, still holding hands, follow em into the forest.

Natani, who's been nearly silent for hours, gives me a long look, the expression in his dark eyes unreadable. "Do you really think we can make a difference against an army?"

"No, but I don't plan on stopping the *army*. All we need to do is destroy the bobasu." And all I have to do is find a

way to make that happen.

I have to find a way to make that happen.

Blood and rot, how am I possibly going to make that happen?

But Natani nods like he expected my response, and then he trudges after the others. Zonna, though, is watching me, his expression carefully blank. The raw pain that's burned in his eyes for the past five days is now banked and hidden behind a wall as impenetrable as my wards.

"I don't know what I'm doing." The words tumble out before I can stop them. Thankfully, only he and Tessen are close enough to hear me; admitting the depths of my uncertainty feels like quitting. It *is*, in a way—it's giving up a lifelong goal—and I hate myself for it despite knowing how poorly the reality of my old dream has settled on my shoulders. "I don't want this. I thought I did—growing up, I always wanted to be a leader one day—but now... Zonna, it should be you. You have the seniority. You have the experience. You know so much more about, about *everything*, and I think..."

Something flickers in his eyes, sadness, but not the deep loss that's been consuming him. This seems more like empathy. "You think what?"

"There's only a few of us against ten bobasu and an army of thousands, and we're relying on a weapon we don't know how to deploy." I grind my teeth, frustration and fear mixing painfully in my stomach. "I think *you* are our best chance at getting to Varan."

"You're fooling yourself if you think anyone, even me, can get to Varan without going through his army," Zonna murmurs. "And in five hundred years, I've never seen

anyone rattle Varan's foundation the way *you* have, Khya." He steps closer and reaches out, but he doesn't put his hand on my shoulder until I nod. "I'm not the person who needs to be leading us. You are. Even if it seems impossible right now."

Tessen huffs. "Telling Khya something's impossible is the fastest way to make it happen."

I don't think that's true this time, but his faith is heartening. I reach back and brush my fingers along the back of Tessen's hand. It's a shame I can't absorb the confidence he has in me as easily as I can soak in his body heat. To me, it feels like I've been stumbling along ever since Sanii discovered Yorri had been captured instead of killed. Even though we've made it this far, I feel like I've failed far more than I've succeeded. The costs of those failures outweigh anything we've gained. I don't think there's anything I can do to make it up.

And now no one who's able is willing to take this responsibility from me. Not Zonna, and definitely not Tessen. I glance at Tessen anyway, and his smile is grim and stressed. "I'll follow you anywhere, Khya, but I'm not a leader. I never wanted to be."

Biting back everything I could say to make him change his mind, I follow the others.

The ridge had been rocky and stable underfoot. Between the trees, that solidity vanishes and the mud gets deeper. It sucks at my boots and makes each step an effort. I shiver and pull my damp coat tighter around my body. It wasn't this cold here moons ago, so the storm must've brought the temperature down. The boots and the layers of thick, padded cloth took some getting used to, but I'm glad

Soanashalo'a found them for us. Even with them, the damp and the cold seep through and bite at my bones. Has the air gotten colder or am I getting worse at handling it? It's not like my wards help with this; they don't contain warmth unless I make them keep out everything, including air. I thought immortality would make me nearly invulnerable, but even though I know the cold won't kill me—not much can anymore—it doesn't seem to make a chill any easier to handle.

“You can't get warm, can you?” Zonna climbs over a fallen tree, his gaze flicking back to me. I don't answer as I follow him over the massive trunk. He nods as though I did. “This is something you'll have to get used to.”

“What is?”

“Feeling everything fresh.” He looks at his hands, flexing and clenching them as he talks. “Pain is usually sharper the first time you experience it, isn't it? Most people I've met can brace themselves for certain kinds of agony, push the feeling aside and ignore it. That's because their body adapts and their mind adjusts. They learn to handle misery.” Then he drops his hands and lifts a shoulder. “Or that's what it seems like they can do. I can only guess.”

My stomach drops as another shiver rattles my bones. “It *never* gets better?”

“It won't anytime soon,” he admits. “You can train your mind to ignore certain signals, but it's not easy, and it won't happen quickly.”

I fold my arms, hiding my clenched fists and trying not to clench my jaw, too, but it doesn't stop my anger from spreading. “So, suffer in silence. Is that what you're saying?”

“No, I'm just trying to explain what's happening and

why. If you don't understand, the sensations are going to distract you when we need your attention elsewhere."

Because you aren't willing to take over and give me a minute to breathe. The thought is uselessly spiteful. I bury it and consider what he's saying instead. It makes sense and it doesn't, especially considering I've trained myself to work through pain once already. "It hurt every time an Imakustone arrow hits my wards, but I got past it and learned how to block them. Why can't I do the same with cold?"

"Because it's physical, Khya," Zonna says over our squelching steps. "The arrows are different. What you feel when one of those pierce your wards *seems* like pain because your mind can't understand it any other way, but it's not physical because your wards aren't. *Those* will feel the same as before. The only difference there is that the well of energy you have to draw from will be deeper."

"At last. Good news," I mutter. It *is* good, I just wish someone had warned me sooner. Though, to be fair, I'd been dying when they gave me the *susuji*. There hadn't been time for a breakdown of penalties and benefits.

"There's always more good news eventually." His voice is soft and low, barely carrying over the sound of the rain. "It may not come often, but I promise there will invariably be more."

It sounds like a meaningless but reassuring adage, but the look on his face is too intense. This means something more coming from him, and I slowly realize it means something more to me now, too. The timeline of my life has the potential to stretch for ages, but my mind hasn't adapted yet. I'm still thinking in months and years instead of decades and lifetimes. Maybe I don't yet fully believe I

have that much time.

But that's not what I need to focus on now. "So what else should I watch out for?"

"Hunger will hurt, but you'll never starve," Zonna says after a moment. "You can go about two weeks without sleep before you begin to see things that aren't there, and close to three before your body shuts down and makes you rest. No injury I've seen can kill you, not even losing a limb. Suzu once regrew a finger after it was sliced off in a sparring match. Every hurt will feel like the first you've ever experienced, and it'll take you a long time to get past that because all of it will be more painful than you can understand yet."

He's right—I don't understand yet. I'm also not looking forward to the day that I do.

I don't know what to say, and he doesn't add anything else. Moving faster soon takes all our concentration, fighting through the tightly packed forest and against the thick mud. The wind is at our backs, but instead of urging us onward, it feels like the breath of a bellowing beast chasing us deeper into Ryogo. The thunder's cracks and rumbles seem like its growl as it hunts.

The comparison should be ridiculous—overwrought in ways that only breed fear and end with death—but it's all too apt. We *are* in the forest with a monstrous beast, it's just one with twenty thousand pairs of hands and feet instead of four, and ten thousand bodies instead of one. If it catches us, we'll be consumed, and no matter how much I've learned in Ryogo, I'm not sure my wards are strong enough to protect us.

I pass Etaro first. Then Rai soon after. A few minutes later, I realize I haven't picked up my pace much, the others

are slowing down to let me overtake them. It makes me grind my teeth in frustration when each of them gives way, but there's no point in protesting. *Someone* has to take charge if we plan on surviving the day, and right now that someone is me.

Keeping us traveling the right direction isn't easy, but I head northwest along the coast until I spot a rock formation I remember. It marks a turn. Earlier, it'd taken us maybe half an hour to get from here to the cove west of Rido'iti, but the journey back has been at least twice that. Maybe longer. It's frustrating, because Rai was right—we have to move fast to stay ahead of the army and away from its scouts, and my decision to act as witness for Rido'iti instead of running as soon as we spotted the invasion has cost us precious time. Now, downed trees, sagging branches, thick debris, and deep mud keep slowing us down.

My choices have put us in danger yet again.

The forest is so dense even the lightning's flashes of light struggle to reach the ground, so as I wave my hand to catch Tessen's attention, I can hope he doesn't notice my shivering. I gesture to the path, hand signing a question: *Clear?*

Closing his eyes, Tessen listens to the world ahead. I listen, too, but without the power of his basaku senses, all I hear is wind whipping through the trees, raindrops smacking against leaves, ocean, and rock, and the near-constant thunder rolling overhead. It's so overwhelmingly loud I can't even hear my own heartbeat thudding quick and hard through my body.

"I think we're clear for half a mile, but that's a guess. The storm is—" Tessen flinches at a particularly close peal

of thunder and rubs his ears. "I don't know what's coming."

We haven't known what's coming for moons now, I almost say. I bite the tip of my tongue to keep the words back and nod instead, trying to think. Staying here isn't an option.

I order Tessen to lead us on, and I stand back to let the others pass. Etaro comes next, and then Zonna, Rai, Natani, and Sanii. I put myself at the end of the line because if the army is behind us, I need to be the wall between them and my squad.

As we walk, one mile and then two, I glance forward at Tessen as often as I look behind. I know him well now, so by the set of his shoulders, the speed of his steps, and the angle of his head, I'll know as soon as he sees danger, probably before he can send a message down the line. Even with his senses hindered by the storm, Tessen's our best chance of an early warning.

And we very well might need one.

On the ridge over Rido'iti, the horror of everything we were seeing distracted us; there might've been moments when we weren't as concealed as we should've been. Tessen may have been the only basaku the clan has seen in decades, but he wasn't our only riuku mage. There are at least a hundred unikus with enhanced sight and dozens of orakus with overpowered sight, hearing, and scent. Plus, everything we know about tracking, evasion, and fighting, we learned from someone in that army, and we're still young. There was a lot we hadn't learned yet. Underestimating them now would be dangerous.

Still, if I were invading Ryogo, I'd order a quick, straight strike to Jushoyen, so I could cut out the heart of this nation.

Deviations would be a waste of time unless I spotted something dangerous enough to be worth eliminating. I assume that's Varan's plan, too, which means we might be safe if we continue moving parallel to the army, but I'm not risking my friends' lives on an assumption. Despite having learned how to use my wards in ways the mages of Sagen sy Itagami never conceived of, I shouldn't think we can simply—

Tessen's posture stiffens. He hesitates before taking a step. It's all the warning we have.

Someone else's ward flares to life, encircling and trapping my squad. More than a dozen Itagamin nyshin drop from their hiding spots in the trees, safe on the opposite side of the shield.

Heart pounding, I flood my own ward with desosa, reinforcing my protections. More nyshin move in from all sides, weapons drawn and magic ready. The air around us crackles as dozens of mages draw on the desosa. Flames appear in the kasaijis' hands. Lightning gathers around the ratoijis' bodies. Sharp stones and deadly arrows hover in front of the rikinhisus. The ground rumbles as the ishijis shove their power into the stone under us.

My heart stutters. Blood and rot.

Fifty-four nyshin—nearly three full squads—have us surrounded, and two of the squads are led by members of the kaigo council, the yellow stripe running down the center of their tunics' hoods a clear marker. I track them as they move closer, but it isn't until one stops, pushes their hood back, and pulls the atakafu scarf from their face that I recognize her.

“I almost didn't listen when my scout reported seeing

a group dressed like the people in the city but carrying Itagamin weapons.” Anda steps closer, toes mere inches from the nyshin ward. “But here you are. Somehow not dead yet.”

“Do you think you’re going to change that now?” This woman gave birth to my brother and me, but she was nothing more than a distant figure in our lives. Anda and Ono were interested in us only when our successes added to theirs, and I cared solely for their respect. When I left Sagen sy Itagami, they weren’t on the list of people I knew I’d miss.

Part of me wonders what her orders are, though I guess it doesn’t matter. She won’t succeed. She’s a strong rikinhisu mage and a brilliant fighter, but nearly everything about me has changed since I last saw her.

I smile, and my expression feels closer to a teegra baring its teeth than anything else. “I might be harder to get rid of than you expect.”

Sanii and Zonna are as indestructible as I am; I’m not going to tell Anda that, though. I’m also not going to think about who else is standing with Anda or what we might have to do to them simply because they believe what they were taught, trained, and ordered to believe.

“Varan has ordered you to return. None of you will be hurt until you face the Miriseh yourselves if you surrender to the clan’s authority.”

“We’re not going anywhere with you. And whatever ‘authority’ Varan once had over us disappeared as soon as we discovered what he’s been hiding.” Although I feared I’d hesitate the first time I faced one of my old commanding officers or falter the first time I had to put my squad’s lives over my clan’s, my conscience hardly twinges. Anda isn’t

fighting for the good of the clan, she's fighting for Varan's petty vendetta and his catastrophic war—it's those who follow her who are oblivious. I raise my voice, projecting over the storm and hoping everyone can hear me. "Do they know? Have you told them what Varan's been hiding on Imaku for centuries? Did you even *look* at the people you slaughtered in Rido'iti?"

"Enough!" Her bellowed command instantly halts the restless shifting that swept through the nyshin. Jaw tense, my blood-mother shakes her head. "Such a disappointment."

She raises her hand. The nyshin attack, launching a barrage of fireballs, lightning bolts, and projectiles against my ward. They must step through their sykina's ward to do it, so for a split second, each one of them is vulnerable.

My wards don't have that restriction.

Rai's flames blast the rikinhisus' projectiles out of the air, and the heat forces the mages back. Etaro uses thick sticks and debris to knock people off their feet. Tessen shouts warnings about the next wave of strikes. I create smaller wards in midair, blocking lightning and creating invisible walls that shock those who slam into the barriers.

Anda's orders get sharper. Angrier. The nyshin's responses get slower. Warier. We're young and, in their eyes, inexperienced. They clearly expected us to fall quickly under their onslaught, but now they're eyeing us like true threats.

Tessen moves closer, murmuring updates in Ryogan and telling me who, exactly, we're up against. I breathe deep, drawing on the sparking desosa surrounding us as an idea forms. I relay new orders to Etaro, opening the pouch strapped to my thigh and activating the wardstones inside.

Etaro will shoot the stones through the sykina's ward, and the impacts should shatter the shield, landing beyond the nyshin. Then I can use my wards to trap *them*.

Tessen's attention fixes on one nyshin south of us. "Khya, wait, there's—"

A nyshin bellows an order. Anda's regimented ranks shatter as a third of the soldiers turn on the others. Confusion locks me in place, but my eyes dart from one furiously fought battle to the next until the leader of the splinter group shouts again. Ryzo.

A new warmth floods my veins. Ryzo may not have followed Tyrroh out of Itagami, but he's always been my friend, and now he's here, helping us. If I don't help *him*, the other nyshin will tear him apart. I refuse to allow that while I'm here to stop it.

I scream, "Etaro! Go!"

The wardstones rise from my thigh-pouch and shoot away in all directions. Their power is connected to mine, and I sense each impact like sparks of pain inside my chest. Although passing through the nyshin's ward slows the stones down, it doesn't stop them. Some slam into the nyshin's chests. Others embed themselves in tree trunks. Some keep going until they get swallowed by the muddy ground. I use them as anchors, running my magic through them and raising an impenetrable ward around Anda's squads. The pitch of the battle changes, the frantic energy of a life-or-death fight snapping through the air like deadly magic as my friends join Ryzo's team, and together we fight against the nyshin we once fought with.

From the center of my squad, I deflect and defend, pouring energy into the wards, enough to shock the nyshin

unconscious when they crash into the invisible shields. An arrow breaks against my wards, directly over the center of Rai's throat, and I gut the rikinhisu who shot it. Blood spreads across the front of their slashed tunic, darkening the wet fabric. Their hands press against the wound, and their eyes widen in shock as they collapse.

Then I'm left facing Anda. Around us, her nyshin are falling fast.

She's back a dozen feet, sword up and dark eyes flashing with anger. Her hair, the same brown-black as mine, soaking wet and sticking to her dark skin. For a second, the image flashes me back a week. All I can see is Tsua and Chio kneeling on the wet ground with pure anguish on their faces and black veins spreading under their skin. Then Anda shakes the thick strands out of her eyes, and the image shatters.

Tessen screams my name. I catch movement to the left—the second kaigo is coming in fast, their sword aimed straight for my heart. I throw a ward up to block the inbound blow before it can come close. The kaigo slams sword first into the shield. Impact breaks the path of the sword, but training keeps the kaigo's grip tight on the weapon. Which gives it the force it needs to careen sideways and slide deep across Anda's chest.

I blink and step back. Even as I watch Anda stumble, eyes wide and hands dropping her blade, I can't quite make myself believe what I'm seeing. All the uncertainty I hadn't felt before rushes in now. Anda looms giantlike in my memory, as powerful and untouchable as the Miriseh used to seem. Even when this fight began, I somehow couldn't see this moment. I can't look away. Tessen takes out the kaigo

who'd tried to kill me, and blood spatters against my ward, but I only see it in my periphery. My attention is entirely on Anda.

She touches her chest. Her hands come away dark with blood. Eyes wide and breath coming in fast, pained gasps, she stumbles again, but one bloodstained hand gestures sharply toward her fallen zeeka sword. The short blade rises, the tip pointed at my head.

“You—you can’t be allowed to...” She closes her eyes. The sword trembles between us. “You can’t— This can’t—”

Anda sways. In my periphery, the last of her nyshin fall. Anda tries one more time to aim her sword and thrust the blade toward my head, but it’s as though that effort is what finally breaks her. Her knees buckle. The sword drops. Anda collapses so heavily the mud splashes up, dark brown spots smacking against my ward. I look away as the spark in her eyes fades and her life seeps out of the gash in her chest.

Chapter Two

Fifty-four nyshin surrounded us moments ago.

Thirty-five of them are lying on the ground now, unconscious or dead, their beige nyska-cloth, Itagamin tunics stained with blood and Ryogan mud. My chest aches at the sight, but I can't close my eyes or look away. They aren't supposed to be here. None of us should be here. These lives were only lost because Varan couldn't see the good in what he'd built on Shiara. All he'd seen was his own exile. I grew up believing in something beautiful, but because of his heedless persistence, even the good parts of his lie have been crushed to worthless rubble.

“Khya?”

I tear my eyes away from the lifeless forms, finally looking at the faces of the nineteen nyshin left standing. I recognize all of them, but there are seven who've placed themselves ahead of the rest of the group, and my breath catches at the sight of them. Yarzi, Syoni, Vysian, Remashi,

Donya, Amis, and Ryzo. *Ryzo*. I never thought I'd see him, or any of them, again.

"Ryzo." I cross to him, my arms held out, and he meets me halfway, gripping me so tightly he lifts me off the ground. "What are you doing here? How did you find us?"

"Who else but you would be mad enough to stand on a cliff in the middle of a storm watching an invasion?" His cheek presses against mine. I close my eyes and fight the burn of tears. "As soon as I heard where Anda was going, I made sure we went with her."

I can't believe he's here. I squeeze him tighter before he puts me down so the rest of our former squadmates can engulf me in equally tight hugs. Everyone is pressing in close, his squad and mine, and it's like being surrounded by a physical sense of home.

I end up next to Ryzo again. My heart is skipping, and my skin is tingling, and I watch everyone talking excitedly, but it's so hard to believe this is real. Etaro introduces Zonna and Sanii to the new arrivals. Rai stands at the center of a tight circle, hands waving widely as she talks. Tessen is standing with Amis, whose oraku abilities make his senses second only to Tessen's, and their attention is focused outward, watching our backs in case another wave of trouble is about to crash over us. The sight of that watchfulness frees me to ask the questions I desperately need answers to.

"Ryzo, why— You didn't—" I stop and swallow, trying to organize my thoughts, because I need to know. How is this possible? We were cornered, and we weren't doomed, but the odds were bad. "How are you here? And why did you help us?"

The conversations around us falter. All eyes lock on me,

but I don't look away from Ryzo. I used to know his face in minute detail—his strong, square jaw, his sharp nose, and his straight eyebrows—but it's been a year since we were anything beyond squadmates, and it feels like I haven't seen him in a lot longer than that. He almost seems like a stranger now.

"Tyrroh told you the truth, but you didn't leave with him." I try not to say it like an accusation, but it feels like one anyway. "And then you came here with the army?"

"Khya..." He looks down, his face pinched.

"We watched Rido'iti, and— I don't understand. None of it, Ryzo. How could..." I shake my head, trying to think around the chaos of today. "Were you part of that?"

"Khya, *no*. Bellows." He runs his hand over his close-cropped hair, glancing at Yarzi before he meets my eyes. "Do you remember when I ran into you and Tessen in the undercity?"

It takes me a few seconds, but then I do. Tessen and I had been in a rarely used section of the tunnels coming back from meeting with Sanii. "You were following Tyrroh."

"Because a few weeks before, I thought I saw—"

"Him and Daitsa talking to the Denhitrans." We'd been in the mountains chasing a Denhitran squad, and Ryzo had come to me with a gnawing worry—he was sure he'd seen Tyrroh conferring with the enemy. I convinced Ryzo not to report it. Blood and rot, this feels like it happened ages ago, but it's only been moons. Looking back, I can guess what happened next. "You thought he was working to undermine Itagami, so when he came to you with a story about the Miriseh's secret plans and wanted you to run away to meet the supposed enemy, you didn't believe him."

“You’d just *disappeared*, Khya, and nothing had changed in Itagami yet.” Ryzo’s plush lips thin, the lines around his eyes deepening. “It wasn’t until after he’d left that we couldn’t...”

“We couldn’t deny it anymore.” Yarzi steps forward, strands of eir long hair sticking to eir oval face. I shiver at the sight of those dark lines on eir sandstone skin, but push the memory of black veins and brutal death away again. That’s not what’s happening here.

I grind my teeth and wish I could wipe those memories from my mind. I refuse to look at Zonna, because no matter how badly the deaths of Tsua and Chio are plaguing me, it must be so much worse for him. I don’t want to see that pain in his face. Or the blankness he uses to mask it.

Yarzi keeps talking. “The storms have been relentless since you left, and the city was going to die if it didn’t change. Everyone was thrilled to have a way across the water and somewhere to escape to, but the first trial failed less than a mile out to sea.”

“How many died?” Eтаро quietly asks. I barely keep myself from wincing at how closely the question mimics what ey asked barely an hour ago as we watched Rido’iti burn.

Ryzo closes his eyes. “Over a hundred. Only the quick thinking of a few dozen rikinhisus managed to get the rest of us back to the shore before we drowned.”

“That’s why it took so long.” Tessen eases closer, so close I can feel the heat of his body against my chilled skin through my layers of cloth. “We’d wondered, but if the first trial failed, it makes sense. Varan would’ve been more cautious. He would’ve tested his plan better.”

“Exactly. And he was furious between those tests.” Ryzo exhales heavily, his eyes opening but his posture drooping. “I regretted not following Tyrroh out of Itagami—and I hated myself for ever doubting him—but the Miriseh and the kaigo watched every way out of the city after he disappeared. Very few squads were allowed out. So I tried to take over where Tyrroh left off.”

“Leading a squad?” Rai asks, confused.

“No—well, yes.” He glances at the nyshin behind him. “I was placed in command of what was left of our squad after I proved my loyalty.”

“Proved it how?” Whatever the task, it can’t have been easy.

“I...” Ryzo trails off.

When it doesn’t seem like he’s going to start again, Yarzi explains for him. “He told them Tyrroh had been trying to convince us Denhitrans weren’t the enemy, and he told them where Tyrroh was planning to take everyone.”

“Is that *all* you told them?” I narrow my eyes, watching Ryzo shift uncomfortably.

“Nearly.” He looks away before seeming to force himself to meet my eyes. “The only other details I knew were where I’d seen Tyrroh in the undercity and that he planned to head to Denhitra from Itagami. It seemed to be enough for Varan.”

“It was,” Yarzi agrees. And then ey adds, “After Ryzo took a public beating, a punishment for ‘inaction’ according to the kaigo.”

“Ryzo.” My own back aches thinking about the pain of that. Public punishment was never excessive, but they made sure the memory of it lasted, both in the minds of the clan

and on the skin of the convicted.

He shrugs as though it was nothing, and his lips part to speak. Then, one of the nyshin nearby begins to stir, struggling to push themselves off the ground. Yarzi's bare, muddy foot snaps out, catching their chin and knocking them unconscious. Ryzo winces at the *crack*, his mouth snapping shut again.

Rai sighs. "I guess it's a good thing Tyrroh didn't tell us about Yorri or Imaku until we were away from Itagami."

My chest aches, and the grief at Tyrroh's loss rises up anew. Tyrroh didn't tell anyone about Yorri until they'd committed to following through because he was trying to protect him. And me. He always tried to protect me, and I wasn't strong enough to save him.

My heart cracks when Ryzo looks around and asks, "Where *is* Tyrroh? I owe him more than one apology."

"I..." My hands clench. My breath rattles in my chest. "Ryzo, I tried, but he..."

"He died weeks ago," Sanii finishes solemnly. "The Ryogans have arrows even Khya's wards couldn't stop, and one of them struck his chest. We couldn't save him."

Grief etches itself deep in Ryzo's face, and the flicker of his eyes gets faster, jumping from face to face. "What about Wehli? Miari? Daitsa?"

"Wehli, Miari, and Nairo are with friends, and hopefully safe." I look north, wishing I could see for myself now. We've lost too many people already. I need to make sure they're okay. But Daitsa... "Daitsa, Keili, and Thelin died before we ever left Shiara."

"Bellows, Khya." Ryzo's shoulders sag, and he covers his eyes with his hand. "I'm so sorry. I wish I had left with

Tyrroh when— I should've been there to—”

“Hey, no. Stop.” I stuff my own guilt down and step closer, not touching him but making sure he feels me in his space. “Varan controlled *everything*. He only told us what he wanted us to know. You did the best you could.”

“No, I didn’t.” Ryzo’s hand drops. He straightens, meeting my eyes. “But I can now. I can come with you. We all will. The army is heading for a city called Jushoyen, and we can help with whatever impractical plan you’ve got.”

Yarzi and the others are nodding, and I exhale.

“Yes. Yes, of course. It’ll be a relief to have so many people I trust at my back. Blood and rot, Ryzo. There’s so much I need to tell you.” Plus, Ryzo was Tyrroh’s second-in-command, his nyshin-pa. He’s a leader. Maybe *he’ll* be willing to take some of this weight off my shoulders.

“No,” Sanii suddenly cuts in. “They should go back to the army.”

“What? Why?” I turn to face em, my heart rate jumping. Sanii wouldn’t suggest this without a reason, but I want Ryzo and the others with us.

“Taking down an army is impossible. So is getting *through* one. However, if Tessen still has Osshi’s garakyu...?” Sanii glances at Tessen, who nods. He retrieves the small, clear sphere from his pack and tosses it to Sanii. Ey holds it up, balancing it on the tips of eir fingers and holding the sphere out to me, eir eyebrows raised. “If we had someone inside the army who we could communicate with at a distance, then maybe the impossible becomes a little easier.”

A smile spreads across my face as I take it. “You are just as brilliant as my brother.”

Sanii’s expression softens into a pleased smile. Then

Ryzo asks, “What is that?”

I extend my arm, the sphere cupped in my palm. “It’s called a garakyu, and it’s a desosa-powered way to communicate across miles, even for someone with no magic.”

“How is that possible?” Ryzo reaches out to brush his fingers over the cool surface.

“Explaining it would take more time than we have,” Sanii says before I can answer. “Trust us—it *does* work, and it’ll be far better for us in the long run if you stay with Varan.”

Ryzo meets my eyes, two deep furrows appearing between his brows, and all I can do is nod. “I hate for you to leave, but I think Sanii’s right.”

“Okay, but look around us. What exactly am I supposed to tell Varan about them?” He gestures to the bodies strewn between the trees, and I grimace.

I don’t know what to think or how to feel about the death surrounding us. I was taught to obey my superior officers, and that the clan comes before our lives. The beliefs were engraved in me, but I also know getting rid of Varan’s most ardent supporters is the only way to purge the clan of his influence. Still, I just can’t stop thinking about how much blood is now mixed with the mud under my boots.

Sanii bites eir bottom lip as ey thinks. “Tell him Anda ordered your retreat when it looked like she was going to lose.”

“Yes. Give him a version of the truth,” I agree as a story blooms in my mind. “Tell him there *was* a group with Itagamin weapons near Rido’iti, but it was Ryogans who’d either found or stolen our weapons. If you claim Anda

ran into an ambush, you can tell him that even though the regular citizens are defenseless, he should be wary of the soldiers. They have weapons capable of breaking through wards—arrows with black stone heads.”

“You can even prove it to them.” Etarō steps forward, an Imaku-stone tipped arrow with a black-painted shaft in eir hand. “Tell them you pulled this from one of the dead.”

Yarzi takes the arrow, narrowing eir eyes and peering at the tip. Then, without warning, ey spins and slams the stone head into Anda’s unmoving chest. My stomach turns; I want to rip the weapon away from em, but I don’t dare touch that stone. When Yarzi rips it free, drops of dark blood fall, splattering on Anda’s brown skin until the rain washes it away.

“What are you *doing*?” Not even after the most brutal of battles has anyone from Itagami ever defiled one of the dead.

“Ono was her sukhai, right? So he knows she’s dead.” Yarzi slides the arrow into the quiver at eir back. “He’s also an oraku, and he’ll recognize her scent on this now.”

Oh. I hadn’t thought about that—not the idea of scent, but the fact that my blood-parents are sumai. Their souls are bound together, just like my brother and Sanii, and one sukhai always feels the loss of the other. Ono knows Anda is dead, and I’m sure he’s already on his way to find out what happened. So long as the shock of her death didn’t kill him, too.

“If Ono’s coming here, we need to leave. Now.” Because he won’t be coming alone. To avenge his sukhai, he’ll drag half the Itagamin army with him if he can.

“At least this time the rain will help us,” Tessen mutters.

When I look at him, wondering why, he shrugs. “*I’m* having trouble picking up scents and following trails in this, and not only are my senses better than anyone else’s, I’ve spent the past few moons learning this place. They haven’t. We can use the rain to help us evade them.”

“And we’ll delay them more.” Determination hardens Ryzo’s expression. “Show me how to use your little Ryogan message ball and then go. Now that I know you’re alive, I want to keep you all that way.”

Relieved he’s not fighting our plan, I help Sanii explain the garakyus. It takes longer than I like, because we also have to teach them how the Ryogans use words to shape and control the desosa—the energy created and used by the natural world, and the source of all magic. Itagamins are taught to mold desosa like it’s clay. Ryogans try to siphon and contain it like it’s water. It takes several minutes for Ryzo to understand the theory behind the magic and memorize the garakyu’s call and answer phrases.

Then, I give him one more task. “Slowing the army down is a good start, but the only way we’ll be able to save Ryogo or any part of our clan is if we erode the nyshin’s trust in their leaders. Don’t put yourself at risk, but try to make them see the people here aren’t enemies, and almost nothing Varan told them about Ryogo is real. I think making them understand that what they expect from this place isn’t possible is the only way we’ll be able to convince them to follow us home.”

“If they can’t see that on their own after Rido’iti,” Ryzo mutters, “I doubt anything I can tell them will make a difference.”

“You have to.” Because if we can’t convince them,

we won't be able to save any of them, and no matter what happens to Ryogo, my entire clan really will die.

There's one truth we could share that would all but guarantee that the clan would begin to splinter, but our immortality isn't a secret I want to reveal yet. If the clan knows, Varan might find out, and this is one of the few surprises we have in the fight against him, so when Sanii catches my eye and makes a slicing motion across eir forearm, thin eyebrow raised in question, I shake my head. Thankfully, no one notices the exchange.

Ryzo finishes fitting the garakuyu into his belt pouch and steps closer, lifting his hand. He doesn't touch my cheek until I nod permission. Smiling sadly, he brushes his calloused fingertips along the sharp line of my jaw. "Take care of one another, yeah? It's going to get dangerous."

"We've been dealing with Ryogo's version of dangerous for moons." I place my hand over his, pressing his palm against my cheek. "I'm more worried about you. You're the ones going back to the people who ordered a massacre."

Ryzo closes his eyes, and the others shift, many of them looking east-southeast, toward Varan's army, or where they might be now. No one tries to tell me I'm wrong.

We say goodbye—though I don't want to let them leave—and then they're off, Ryzo leading them away.

"Why didn't we tell them we found out how Varan created immortality?" Sanii asks quietly. "Ryzo wanted a way to convince the clan to abandon Varan, and the quickest way would be to prove the myth of the Miriseh is a lie."

"Exactly. Ryzo would have to *prove* it." I glance at Sanii, crossing my arms. "How can he prove anything without one of us as evidence? If he tries to claim we've become

immortal without proof, it'll probably only convince people he's lying."

Sanii looks conflicted, but nods. It's okay. I'm not entirely sure I'm right, either. But there is one thing I do know. "We also don't want to warn Varan we're fighting on a level field now."

At that, Sanii's expression calms, and both of us turn to watch the last of Ryzo's squad disappear between the trees.

"I think seeing them was as close to home as we're ever going to get," Rai murmurs.

"No." My stomach constricts at the very thought. "We'll get back to Shiara. We have to."

I have to, and I will as soon as I've done everything I can here. I have a promise to keep.

But no matter how determined I am to follow through on my vow, I can't erase the fear that I'm not right this time.

I can't help fearing none of us will ever see home again.

Chapter Three

“The forest smells like rot.” Tessen is leaning against a nearby tree, his head tipped back and his chest rising and falling fast with each harsh breath.

We’ve been pushing ourselves all day, and he and the rest of the squad are on the edge of collapsing from exhaustion. The only thing threatening Zonna, Sanii, and me, though, is the constant cold. It sinks into every muscle and deep into my bones. The chill is so painfully pervasive that it’s hard to think, but I can pull my thoughts together when I try. Tessen’s words make it worth the effort now.

“Rot,” I say, just to be sure I heard him right. “The whole forest?”

He tilts his head toward me. “It doesn’t smell the same as on Itagami, but I’m almost sure there’s rot in every area we’ve passed through. And if the forest is beginning to decay, it’ll be worse on the farms.”

I wince. The same thing happened in Itagami, and Varan

used it to kindle fear in the clan. Starvation is a dangerously potent motivator, strong enough to goad the nyshin across an ocean.

“Well, when we find someone in charge, we’ll try to remember to mention that.” If they’ll listen to a single word we say.

He nods, pulling his chapped lip between his teeth and glancing off to the side as new lines appear on his forehead, an expression of suspicious concern I’ve seen directed at me too often. This time, he’s looking at Sanii.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I don’t know. We should keep an eye on em, though. It’s almost like ey’s hiding an injury, but that’s impossible.” His expression makes sense now; he’s not suspicious, he’s confused because the only weapon that can harm Sanii is safely locked away. Then, Tessen says, “If ey’s in pain, it has to be because of the sumai. Ey’s been away from eir sukhai for more than six moons.”

I feel the corners of my mouth pulling down despite trying to keep my face neutral. “I don’t understand why they did it.”

For a heartbeat, Tessen goes still. He doesn’t even breathe. “You don’t?”

“They knew they’d have to spend nearly every day apart.” Sanii had been placed yonin, the lowest of the three classes in Itagami, and my brother had been nyshin. If anyone had discovered their relationship, it would’ve gotten both of them in serious trouble. “It’d get harder, not easier for them to be together as Yorri rose through the ranks.”

“Maybe that’s exactly why they did it.” His tone is unexpectedly subdued. “*Because* they knew there might not

be any other way for them to be together. And they loved each other enough to risk anything to change that, even if only in the afterlife.”

I close my eyes, an ache settling in the center of my chest. The afterlife. When Yorri and Sanii bonded, they did it believing they’d spend eternity together in Ryogo. Sanii knows the lie of that now. How will ey explain it to Yorri? Even if they made the decision in pursuit of forever, it doesn’t seem like they thought about the consequences at all. They risked their lives and their souls without considering the years of pain they’d be putting each other through *before* eternity. It doesn’t make sense. The very last thing I want is to be a source of hurt in someone I love, and that’s what a sumai bond does, eventually and inevitably.

But my understanding or lack of it doesn’t alter what’s happening now.

“Let me know if anything with Sanii changes.” When I step away from the tree, Tessen gives me a long look. I feel the weight of his gaze even as I walk away.

It’s been about a day and a half since we left the southern shore, so we *must* be close to catching up with Wehli, Miari, Nairo, and Soanashalo’a. As soon as the others finish eating some of the strips of dried meat we have left in our bags, we keep moving.

Finally, several hours later and miles farther north, Tessen spots the hanaeuu we’la maninaio wagons in the distance. Excitement flares through me though they’re still too far for me to see. We won’t be any safer in those wooden boxes on wheels than we are on foot, but we’ll be a lot warmer in those small spaces. And we’re mere moments from seeing Wehli, Miari, Nairo, and Soanashalo’a again.

The trees thin another hundred feet on, and I can make out flashes of color ahead. There are three brightly painted, intricately designed wagons in a clearing, and Wehli, Miari, and Nairo are standing guard. Several hanaeuu we'la maninaio are spread out behind them. Relief almost buckles my knees. They're okay. They look dirty and exhausted, but they're here.

Weapons come up when they hear our approach, but as soon as we're close enough for them to see our faces, they sheathe their swords and rush forward to meet us. I extend my overhead wards as far as I can, shielding them from the hard rain. Miari, Wehli, and Nairo reach us first, but Soanashalo'a is only a few steps behind.

"We have a lot to tell you, but we need to leave as soon as possible, Lo'a." I talk before anyone else has a chance to.

My words stop them abruptly. Soanashalo'a recovers first, signaling to a man named Shiu to prepare for our departure. Another gesture sends two others running back to the yellow wagon my squad has been calling home since the day we met the hanaeuu we'la maninaio. Then she looks at me, her golden-brown eyes worried. "What happened, Khya?"

"Rido'iti is gone." I hate dropping the news so bluntly, but there's no way to soften it. "Varan ordered it destroyed, and the clan obeyed."

"Blood and rot." Nairo rubs his hand over his mouth. Miari and Wehli press closer to his sides, eyes wide and bodies tense.

"Worse, we were seen. Two kaigo squads nearly caught and executed us." Rai smiles grimly. Miari sucks in a sharp breath, stepping forward with hands outstretched, like she

wants to check us for injuries. Rai waves her off. "We're fine."

I nod. "Because we had help. Which is our good news."

"Good news?" Wehli straightens, his square chin lifting.

"Ryzo showed up with the rest of our old squad," I say, managing a smile. "They turned on the kaigo's nyshin to help us escape."

"What? Where are they? Are they following?" The questions come fast from all three. Soanashalo'a stays silent, but I can see the same questions in her eyes.

"No, they're not." I hold my hands up to keep them quiet. "I'll tell you everything, but *after* we get moving."

They snap their mouths shut and jog toward the wagons. Soanashalo'a issues a series of orders in her flowing, lyrical language, sending the rest of the hanaeuu we'la maninaio hurrying off. The two she'd sent to our yellow wagon are just finishing their work when I step up to the door. One is carrying a large, steaming bowl to the narrow table usually kept folded up and stowed, and the other is laying out thick, colorful blankets and various changes of clothes on the two platform beds. I eagerly step past them, shedding my damp outer layers and grabbing a blanket to wrap around my shoulders. Then, I take a slice of spiced meat from the bowl and gratefully chew the first cooked food I've had in days.

The interior of the wagon is comfortably unchanged and familiar. The deep beds extend from the narrow end of the wagon, directly opposite the door. The padded bench attached to the left wall looks invitingly soft, and the black stove just to the right of the door is already crackling with fire to warm the small space. Everyone follows me inside, and the interior becomes uncomfortably packed in seconds,

but the body heat added to the fire's warmth feels like bliss. Even knowing I must go outside again isn't awful when I get to come back to this.

"I need to check the trunk." Inside the thick wooden box strapped to the rear of Soanashaloo's wagon is our collection of Imaku stones.

"No, *I'll* check it," Tessen insists as he pulls on a dry shirt. "You can come if you have to, but for both of our sakes, please don't go anywhere near that box."

Considering I don't want to go near those stones in the first place, it's an easy concession to make. If I'm close to them, their buzzing power scrapes against my skin until it feels like I'm slowly being broken down layer by layer. It's like the stone is sentient and waiting for its chance to attack. Tessen feels it, too, and it makes him uncomfortable, but it can't hurt him. I go with him when he leaves the wagon, a blanket wrapped around my shoulders and a ward enveloping us both. I'm glad, however, to stay a few feet behind him.

When we laid the pieces of Imaku's black rock over the katsujo and drew the impossibly potent desosa into them, they transformed into something capable of destroying an immortal. *I* am an immortal, and despite the wardstones I laid in the box to serve as both a lock and a shield, the stones' energy leaks through like it's reaching for me. It bites with teeth sharper than any animal, but no wounds appear on my skin. It burns hotter than a towering bonfire, but the heat does nothing to warm me. I shiver and pull the blanket tighter around me as Tessen runs his hands over the wood.

I thought the stones' power felt like vengeance made tangible when we first succeeded in creating these weapons,

but vengeance is enraged and uncontrolled. This feels much more like a predator waiting in the shadows for the right time to strike. Strike it will, but not yet, not here, and not against us.

“It’s as secure as we can make it.” Tessen touches the center of the trunk one more time before he steps back. I nod and glance around the temporary camp. The ukaiahana’lona—massive horned beasts used to pull the wagons—are hitched in place and the three-wagon caravan is ready to move, so we hurry back to our wagon and climb in.

The wash of heat inside stings like I’m standing naked too close to a fire. I flinch but force myself to keep moving. Feeling everything fresh, Zonna had said. Bellows, he was right, and not just about this. So long as I’m in command, I can’t afford to allow myself to be distracted by this. Learning to cope with this has to be a priority.

The ukaiahana’lona bray, and then the wagon creaks and groans around us, jolting forward before I have a chance to brace myself. Tessen catches my arm and helps balance me until we reach a seat. Natani, Rai, and Etaro are perched on the upper bed, Wehli, Nairo, and Miari sit on the lower, and Sanii is sitting next to Zonna and Soanashalo’a on the bench. Tessen and I take the two foldable chairs that had been hanging on the wall. Sanii is already explaining what’s happened since we split up, so I let em continue.

After a few minutes, Soanashalo’a gets up and moves carefully toward the stove to finish preparing the rest of the meal. I doubt I could cook while the wagon shifts and jolts like this, but despite her constant glances at Sanii, she moves with the ease of long practice and continues tossing items

into the large clay pot on the stove. Soon, the enticing scent of spiced meat, vegetables, and rich grains fills the wagon.

Wehli, Miari, and Nairo interrupt Sanii to ask questions. Soanashalo'a stays quiet, but the worry lines on her face get deeper. When Sanii is finished, I finally ask, "What is it, Lo'a?"

"Aside from the world being on the brink of ruin?" She covers the pot before she sits down, strain surrounding her eyes. "Maybe we made a mistake. Was Osshi Shagakusa right about warning Jushoyen?"

"I don't know. We *can't* know." But I've wondered the same thing.

Osshi is Ryogan, and he kept pushing us to go to the Jindaini and reveal everything. He was so committed to that goal, he abandoned us and headed for Jushoyen on his own. If he was granted an audience when he got there, I doubt it went well; the Ryogan tyatsu were still wasting their time chasing *us* a week ago, which isn't surprising. His stories must've seemed impossible, and he barely had any proof. Maybe it would've gone differently if we'd been there, but what might've been doesn't matter, because it never can be again.

Soanashalo'a exhales heavily. "Are you sure we should be heading for Jushoyen now?"

"We?" I ask hopefully. She and her family have carried us all over Ryogo, and their help made half of what we've accomplished possible, but I would've understood if Varan's arrival changed things. "It'll be safer for you if you don't come, Lo'a."

She searches my face consideringly. The rest of my squad watches, quietly waiting.

“It is not for us to know what will be remembered by future generations.” She looks around, her arched eyebrows raised. “This, though? I believe what you and your friends are doing will become the seeds of legend for the next several centuries, no matter the outcome.”

“And you want your name in those stories, too?” It was the kind of dream I might’ve had once. Now, I’d happily forego all recognition if someone else wanted it instead.

“I want to watch the truth unfold,” she says. “Your name will be remembered for ages, but the truth of your story will only happen once. I want to be there for it. Others will get the story in pieces that will be diluted or distorted with each retelling. I want to be the first to tell your story, if I live.”

“Oh, really?” The corners of my mouth twitch, but I can’t quite smile. “And how are you planning to distort the truth?”

“I think I will make you taller,” she says with mock seriousness.

Tessen laughs. I straighten in my chair, pulling my shoulders back and lengthening my neck. “I’m not tall enough already?”

“Definitely not for someone about to become a legend.” She winks. “Maybe I will also give you glowing eyes and claws that extend like a cat’s and rip your enemies to shreds.”

“Ridiculous.” I smile and relax again. “No one will believe you.”

“I’ve met you. I believe it,” Tessen says. Rai, Etaro, and Nairo immediately agree.

“See, Khya?” Soanashalo’a nods at my supposed friends as she gets up to check on the food. “Besides, I can be very believable.”

“That I believe.” And I do, but the lightness of the moment is already beginning to fade as the problems of tomorrow fill my head. What would Tyrroh or Tsua do if they were here? What questions would Yorri ask? I tap a rhythm on my knee and try to think. We’re already on the only path I can see. “When we reach Jushoyen, we’ll warn the Jindaini like Osshi wanted us to originally. The Ryogans must have a way to send out alarms in times of emergency.”

Soanashalo’a sighs. “We will probably have to convince them to release Osshi, too, or rescue him ourselves if they refuse.”

Rai snorts. “Why the bellows would we want to do that?”

“He abandoned us, Lo’a.” I shake my head. “Then he helped the tyatsu spy on us. The ambush his choices led us into killed someone in your family.”

Tessen nods, expression grim. “He’s caused us enough trouble. We don’t need to invite him back to cause more.”

“My family’s debt to him was cleared weeks ago.” Soanashalo’a stirs the contents of the large pot. “But you still owe him a favor.”

“Why is that?” Sanii’s voice is unreadably even.

“For introducing you to me.” Her smile makes it hard to tell if she’s serious or joking. “His trip to Shiara also made it possible for you to get here, and his research helped guide your journey to find a weapon against immortals. Plus, as many problems as his decision to leave caused, you have to admit he was not entirely wrong.”

I don’t have to admit anything. “I’m more worried about beating Varan to Jushoyen than I am about finding Osshi.”

“Speaking of worrying, what about the Ryogans’ little

spies?” Etaro looks up even though Tessen would’ve warned us if there was anything hiding in the trees. It had taken us moons to realize the Ryogans had hidden garakyus in the trees at strategic points throughout the land, a way to monitor their people and the strangers who pass through their territory. Those magical spies were how they found us over and over again, but Tessen eventually learned how to spot them before they spotted us. He should still be searching for them...unless he forgot about the danger; I almost had.

The more decisions I make, the deeper the truth settles on my shoulders—I shouldn’t be in command. There’s so much more I needed to learn before becoming the nyshin-ma of a squad, but one by one, those who had been leading us have died, and Zonna—who by age, experience, and right should be in charge—refused to take over. It’s fallen to me, even though I can’t even keep something as important as the network of garakyus in mind.

Exhaling heavily, I rub my forehead and try to focus. “I don’t want to make it easy for the tyatsu to find us, or warn the Jindaini we’re coming, but speed seems more important than secrecy. Ryogo has bigger things to worry about now than us, don’t you think?”

Yes, but if a tyatsu watcher sends a force after us, that will tell us something, too. If, in the face of Rido’iti’s destruction and Varan’s push toward the capital, the Jindaini sees us as an equal threat, then meeting with him is going to go even worse than I expect.

And I’m already expecting it to fail. Explosively.