



A
DARKLY
BEATING
HEART

LINDSAY SMITH



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Also by Lindsay Smith

Sekret
Skandal
Dreamstrider

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For Ashlan

風をいたみ
岩うつ波の
おのれのみ
くだけで物を
思ふ頃かな



*“Like a driven wave,
Dashed by fierce winds on a rock,
So am I: alone
And crushed upon the shore,
Remembering what has been.”*

—Minamoto no Shigeyuki
(13th century)

CHAPTER ONE



UNCLE SATORI SAYS MASTERY IS A WELL-WORN PATH.

(At least, that's how my cousin Akiko translated it for me, though I rarely take her at her word.) If he's right, then I am mastering a path of hatred, carving it deeper every day like the scars along my thighs. I wake up with a hatred that gnaws at me like hunger, and I feed that hatred with Akiko's snores from the other side of the room. I feed it with the sight of my megalith suitcase spewed open beside my pallet, still not unpacked. And with the one unread email clogging my phone's notifications that I can't bring myself to read.

If I carve a path deep enough, then it will become a trench. A grave. Carve it deep enough, and I'll never have to climb out.

In the three months since I arrived in Tokyo, I've made a

routine that turns me inside out with exhaustion and keeps my thoughts on their well-worn trail. That's what I came here for—a distraction, something to overload my senses and leave me to myself-devouring mind. No time to think about what came before or whatever might come next. Maybe my parents hoped I'd learn mindfulness here, or obedience, or drive, or at least a goddamned Japanese phrase or two beyond *sumimasen*—*excuse me, forgive me, please pardon me for all the evil I've done*. But no, all I've accomplished is that I've filtered my raw hate into something potent, clarified, lethal.

I have mastered the path of hatred, and I know now where it ends.

It ends with my revenge.



I leave Uncle Satori's apartment with my anger burning through me like a grease fire. The sidewalks of Shinjuku are clean as ever: gray asphalt and crisp white lines and slender concrete fingers of apartment buildings thrust toward a crystal blue sky. Nothing like Seattle, where we smear our lives and our insides across every surface—yarn bombs knitted around statues and trees and signs, used chewing gum crusted against the Market Theater wall, ripe with our saliva and germs. I think that's what my parents have never understood about our life

in America: that we're not meant to keep everything locked inside, preserving a uniform façade for everyone else's benefit. Hideki and I lived our lives in a kind of purgatory, halfway between our parents' stonewalled world and the wild, free-range one our classmates inhabited, never able to stretch out fully in either one.

I feed two 100-yen coins into a vending machine and crack open a hot can of Suntory Boss coffee (*the boss of them all*, I say to myself). Black-clad office workers in modest heels and starched white button-downs join me in an eerie, silent parade—our daily mourning procession. Right on cue, I see my favorite couple, husband and wife, walking side by side, not speaking, not making eye contact, and when we reach the corner, her hand darts toward his for a hasty squeeze before he turns the corner without a word.

I want to scream at them—interrupt our vow of silence. *So do it*, I imagine Chloe would tell me. *Disrupt the status quo. Break free and make everyone know your name.*

But it's not yet time. When I get the guts to do it, it's her name everyone will know. She'll be the one to take the blame.

In the subway station, the train arrives with a polite ding. I've fantasized before about flinging myself in front of it, too fast for the white-gloved train pushers to catch. Clog up a million salarymen's morning commutes. But it's useless to throw myself in front of a train as it pulls into the station, as I've learned from my extensive research. The train's already decelerating,

and a lot of cities use recessed track wells now so the average would-be suicide usually survives, albeit with grievous body blows and broken bones. Anyway, I didn't come here with suicide in mind, though if it serves my goal, I won't dismiss it. These fantasies, for now, are part of the dark need for vengeance beating inside of me. My death has to serve a purpose—make someone else suffer even more.

We all shuffle on, sucked inside like the pristine cars are a massive set of lungs. “Please take care that your typing sounds do not disturb other passengers,” the signs implore. I know my black metal playlist is seeping out of my cheap earbuds, but I don't care. The other passengers look away, look down, look anywhere but at me. They don't know I'm a tourist—nothing brands me as American-born except my rudeness. To them, I'm just a disgrace.

I close my eyes and sink into the dark forests and ghost-filled castles of the black metal songs as though they're a sludge, pulling me under. This playlist is all Chloe—it keeps my wounds nice and raw. One night in the summer camp painting studios, when we'd been painting our canvases and each other, she snatched my phone to get us some music and declared my half-assed collection of '70s soft rock and classical piano sonatas to be an unmatched tragedy. “Let me fix this for you,” she said. I think part of me believed she meant my life. She taught me how to kiss to the aching chords of

Opeth and the thrashing drums of Cannibal Corpse and Sleater-Kinney's refined rage.

It's been over a year now since she chewed me up and spit me out. A year since I was dumb enough to believe that she (or anyone) could love a fucked-up, forgettable little girl like me. For ten short weeks at the PNW Summer Arts Camp, I was cool. I was hot. I wasn't Saint Isaac's Preparatory Academy's punch line and punching bag. She showed me that all the tangled-up feelings I had for other humans didn't have to stay inside my head. That I could trail love on her skin and smear hate on the canvas in a vicious dance, hot and cold.

The playlist starts over again. The trains get more crowded as we draw closer to the center of Tokyo: schoolgirls in uniform, holding down their pleated skirts to defend against perverts with camera phones, elderly women in quilt coats with bags of groceries, sneer-lipped kids my age punching away at their (respectfully silenced) handheld game consoles.

After Chloe released my carefully maintained feelings, I left camp and returned home to start school, locking them away again. But I didn't forget that summer before my senior year when I was free. And so when we had our first long weekend in the fall, I hopped a bus down to Portland to see her. Her new girlfriend answered the door.

That's when my Chloe problem really began.

I exit the Shibuya station onto the dense neon hub of iconic

Tokyo. Maid cafés, hyperactive fashion shops, pachinko parlors, karaoke bars, and all the latest electronics advertised on retina-scorching five-story screens, with the scent of Asahi beer and boiling ramen stock drifting over it all. Shibuya is what Westerners think when they think of modern Japan. It's bright, it's shiny, but still there's a scrim of silence laid over everything (the slot machine parlors blaring J-pop being the sole exception) and order, always order, even in the platform vinyl boots and gaunt *ikemen* cute boys. I reach the epicenter, the Shibuya scramble crosswalk, where a dozen peninsulas meet, crammed with pedestrians all waiting for traffic to stop so they can cross at once.

I plow my way through the orderly lines of pedestrians the moment the light turns. Maybe someday the streetlights will malfunction, and all the intersecting streets will be green at once and everyone will get crushed in the center of colliding cars.

I reach Satori Graphics, 4F, as the sign reads in front of the narrow concrete building. Nominally, I work in my uncle's design firm. The job was part of my parents' stipulation for allowing me to defer college to go "find myself" or "wait for a spot on RISD's waitlist to open up" or whatever lame excuse I used. All explanations don't mention what happened to Hideki—the real reason they let me come to Japan at all. It's a small business, less than thirty employees, and we mainly design websites, catalogs, fliers, menus, and signs for

other small businesses around Tokyo. Mostly, though, it seems to serve as a halfway house for weirdo creative types who couldn't hack it on Japan's notoriously brutal high school and college exams or refused the typical salaryman work-as-life system.

I'm a "layout assistant," since I've refused to do serious artwork after what happened with Chloe. I place all the non-text graphical elements that Kenji, our junior illustrator, designs, then Mariko, the junior copywriter, fills in the Japanese because I've still barely learned a handful of Japanese characters. My cousin Akiko, who merits her own office because she's the owner's daughter, works as our junior team's "project assistant." Apparently that means her job is to nag the rest of us while she browses fashion sites, manages her not-so-budding J-pop lifestyle empire, or sneaks off with her boyfriend.

"Good morning, Reiko." Kenji peers around his monitor as I flop into my desk chair. "Mm, I take it you beat Aki out the door again," he says in English, then drums the butt of a black Sharpie against his lips.

"You know how she needs her beauty rest. Gotta snag her shooting star," I say. But the little wrinkle appears between his eyebrows, underneath a fan of black bangs, that always shows up when he doesn't understand. "Rising star," I say. "Because she wants to be a pop star—"

"Right, right." His face eases back into its usual soft smile before he disappears back behind his monitor. "I thought you

meant . . . mm . . . never mind.” He pops the cap off of his Sharpie and resumes drawing on a wooden scrap.

Never mind. Everyone’s favorite euphemism for “it’s too much effort to try to put it in English for you.” Which is everyone’s favorite euphemism for “I can’t believe you’ve been here four months and still haven’t learned more than a few phrases.” I gesture to his piece of wood. “What’re you working on?” I ask him. “Some sort of viral marketing campaign?”

Kenji pauses; the slender bones of his hand tighten. “Mm . . .” He flips the piece toward him, hesitant, but then he extends it underneath our monitors toward me. “It’s an *ema*. A prayer board. You write your wishes on it and hang it up at a Shinto shrine.”

I glance at his precise columns of writing on one side, then flip it over to the other side. The *ema* is triangular, and Kenji’s used the shape to draw an elaborate wolfish head on the back. He’s a great artist—quick and precise in his work for Satori Design—but here, he’s showing a completely new style. It’s not just some cartoon corgi promoting a WiFi subscription or a cartoon bunny shilling a sale on dishwashing detergent. These prayers clearly mean a great deal to him.

Another kindling on the pyre of my hatred: people who are still capable of believing. In anything.

“I didn’t know you were religious,” I say, too casually, as I hand the *ema* back.

Kenji slips it into the breast pocket of his gray-and-black

plaid shirt. “Shinto isn’t really—religion, you know. You don’t have to get the thing with the water on the head, any of that.”

“Baptized.”

“Right, that,” Kenji says. “Visiting shrines and all, it’s a tradition. I do it every week.”

Like Saint Isaac’s, with their weekly assemblies in the smaller chapel of Saint Isaac’s Prep. I remember one assembly in particular. Me standing in the front, tears blurring my sight as I read the court-ordered apology. *I have come before you all today to beseech you for your forgiveness. I’ve sinned not only against God, but against each and every one of you . . .*

“Shinto’s just how I grew up. If something’s bothering me, or I’m hoping for something, then I go to the shrine and let go of those fears or hopes, whatever emotion it is, give it over to the spirits.” He smiles that self-effacing grin that folds shyly back on itself. “Then I can get on with whatever I need to do.”

What he needs to do. I’ve been carving my routine deeper every day, but I’m not making any progress on what I need to do. I need payback against Chloe, against Hideki, against my parents, even against Akiko. Hideki showed me I have to be sure I go far enough. I want a trail of scorched earth in my wake.

“Sounds great,” I tell him. But I have my own work to prepare. It’s like an itch, burning beneath my skin. I duck my head behind the monitor and carve the path of vengeance a little deeper into my mind.

Akiko staggers in twenty minutes before lunch, comically large sunglasses concealing her hangover eyes. Kenji hurriedly chucks the manga he'd been reading into his bag, and I let my boots slip off the edge of the desk. As usual, she's dressed up for the red carpet, not for another day at the office: fur-trimmed jacket, embroidered skinny jeans, platform boots that ensure she'll tower over the rest of us, and her lightened brown hair set in ringlets that bounce in time with her steps. We're not her intended audience, though—that honor goes to Tadashi, her helicopter boyfriend, and whatever entertainment industry suit he's bribing to invest in the aki * LIFE * rhythm brand.

She says something in Japanese, nothing I understand, but Kenji, Mariko, and Kazuo, a junior sales rep, bob their heads with varying levels of enthusiasm and mutter a few *hais* of compliance. Then Akiko turns to me and smiles, a vulpine look. “Reiko, I know you are not clever enough to have learned Japanese still, but I was just telling the others that we’re going to lunch together today.” She pauses to take a sip of coffee. “I have a big announcement to make.”

A big announcement. Just what I want to hear. I yank my long black hair into a sloppy ponytail and follow my co-workers back out to Shibuya. Mariko whines that we haven't gone to the pancake café recently, we find ourselves at the usual *ramen-ya*. We order at a vending machine at the front

of the restaurant: just insert your money and punch the button with the photograph of the soup you want.

We scoot past the row of salarymen in matching suits, all facing the wall like naughty schoolchildren while they slurp their ramen. Mariko slides first into the booth, then Aki heaps her jacket and purse on Mariko, who scrambles to fold them and stack them neatly beside her. I slide onto the bench opposite Mariko. Kazuo slides in next to me, eyes never once lifting from his PlayStation Vita handheld console. I catch a glimpse of a busty sorceress charging a skeletal dragonlord on the Vita's screen. Kenji squeezes in on Kazuo's other side.

"I've landed a job," Aki says, then says it again, louder, when no one responds. "I've landed a job performing at the Kuramagi Cultural Festival. And you're all going to go with me."

Kuramagi. Where's Kuramagi? The others are offering half-hearted congratulations in Japanese, but my pounding pulse fills my ears. I don't want to leave Tokyo. This is where I've mastered my path

The waitress arrives and drops bowls of ramen down the length of the table, then passes a tray of *gyoza*, fried pork dumplings, toward Mariko. Aki arches one brow. "Oh," Aki says, "I didn't know you were eating things like that again."

Mariko's teeth catch the collar of her jacket and her head shrinks back, her pudgy cheeks shining with red.

"Anyway, this is a huge opportunity for the aki * LIFE *

rhythm empire. I will need everyone's help to make the festival a success. Kazuo?"

Huge opportunity. No. I can't leave. I can't break out of my routine. I squeeze my chopsticks so hard they break.

But they're paying me no mind. Kazuo snaps at Akiko in Japanese, and Mariko giggles, once, into her jacket collar. I start to grin, drawn to their discord like it's blood in the water. If I can get them fighting with each other, then maybe we won't have to leave.

But Akiko's hand shoots across the table in flurry of lacquered nails and seizes his handheld game. She dangles it right over her steaming, deep bowl of ramen. Kazuo cries out, and the sorceress bounces up and down on the screen, her tinny moans thick as the rising steam in the dead silence of our table.

"I need you all to understand that this is a team effort. When we are in my father's office, we are a team focused on the task of creating excellent graphics for his clients. But when you are with me, we are focused on the sole task of building my fan base. We are launching my career. *Our* careers. Even simple Reiko's. Do not forget that I'm doing this for all of us."

All of us. Another lie. We're playing her media team for extra spending money. She's playing pop star, vlogger, and dispenser of advice on fashion, love, and other topics for which she has zero qualification. Not only do I hate people who

believe in things and care about things, but I especially hate people who have a high regard for themselves. And dare to think that others should care about them, too.

“To be fair,” Kenji says, gesturing with his chopsticks, “we’ve only seen a fraction of the money you’ve promised us.”

Akiko flings Kazuo’s Vita back at him. “And whose fault do you suppose that is?”

Kenji shrugs. “My portraits of you are selling pretty well on the e-store.”

“My posts on your Mixi profile get a lot of likes,” Mariko says.

“Then you’re—*Reiko!* What’s the phrase?” Aki snaps her fingers at me. “When he’s tugging himself. No, pulling himself.”

“Ah,” I stammer, “I don’t . . .” My head feels scrambled. I was going to plan something here—in Tokyo. I don’t want to be ripped away.

“Come on, keep up!” Aki snaps her fingers in front of my face. “Kenji is pulling—”

“Pulling his weight.” I manage to break through the fog and find my way back to my path. I don’t understand why we need to leave Tokyo.

“Yes. You’re pulling your weight. Everyone else—”

“‘Sup, *otaku?*” Tadashi sways up to our table. Akiko’s talent manager-slash-sort-of-boyfriend never seems to lack funds to buy those shiny skinny jeans and shades and bleached-tip

haircut, but still mooches off the rest of us when we go out. He grabs a dumpling off Mariko's tray, pops it in his mouth, perches on the edge of the bench next to Akiko, stroking the bleached goatee that drapes his face like a bad taxidermy job. "Aki. Baby. Who loves you?"

Aki snaps her chopsticks apart with a sound like gunfire. "I hope you have more good news for me."

"*aidoruLOVE* magazine is sending a journalist to report on hot new trends at the Kuramagi Cultural Festival." Tadashi couldn't look more pleased with himself if he'd turned our soups into liquid gold.

Aki juts her chin toward him, like she's expecting more. "And?"

"And? And I'm gonna try to get them to write a feature on you." He grins. "Duh."

"But they haven't agreed to it yet," Aki says.

Tadashi plucks the pickled egg out of Aki's ramen. "They will," he says, custardy yolk oozing into his whiskers.

"Kazuo," she says, "I need website updates. New sections. A feed of all the good press aki * LIFE * rhythm is getting."

"Yup. I'll code it later." Kazuo runs one hand through his stubby fauxhawk while he plays.

"And Reiko," Aki's devious smile turns on me, "historic photo shoots for the historic village. Make it happen."

I stare back at her. What the fuck am I supposed to know about Japanese history? How am I supposed to arrange

costumes or anything in a strange village when I can barely say *sumimasen*? I stare into my bowl.

Kenji taps my shin under the table. “I’ll contact a kimono rental company,” he says. “Just worry about lighting and so on.”

His voice is kind, but it makes my insides convulse. “Okay. Sure.”

I don’t look up. The Reiko of a year ago would have devoured the glistening, tender pork cutlets and perfectly seasoned broth in three gulps, but I feel too wrung out and shrunken to even try now. I watch the steam wisp and curl through the air while Akiko chatters about plans for our weekend in Kuramagi village. The boys slurp down every last noodle of their ramen. Even Mariko valiantly manages to eat half her bowl, and Akiko sips at the broth. Tadashi slips the untouched *gyoza* in his pockets as we depart.

“You look shaken,” Kenji says to me, as we walk back to work.

I shrink into the hood of my jacket. “Why do we have to go to some backwater village?”

“What, the trip to Kuramagi?” His expression softens. “It pays the bills. Should be a pretty village, too. They’ve preserved all the original Edo-period structures and everything.”

I tighten my grip around my satchel and hurry my pace. I don’t know what to expect in Kuramagi. I don’t have a plan for what to do with my time, my thoughts. And when I don’t have a plan, the feelings—the anger—find their way back in.

The programmable electronic toilet seat in the women's room is sweltering hot against my thighs; someone left it set at max heat. As soon as I lean back, the toilet control panel speakers blast the sounds of rushing water right into my eardrums. Not my favorite conditions, but Akiko's news forced me off my path, and I need to shepherd myself back on course. Everything's been shattered since Hideki's terrible act, and the only thing left is to shatter it more.

Before Hideki left for the medical corps, I'd already mastered the path of secrets, the trick of coiling them up tighter than a nautilus shell. There was always room for more secrets in the black hole of my soul. Crush them all down, make geological layers of secrets, but never let them see the light of day.

I study the scars along my wrists and arms—those are from Hideki. But the thin parallel rows of scars along my thighs belong to me.

This hatred belongs to me. Chloe and Hideki and Akiko and my parents and the entire student body of Saint Isaac's Prep can never take it from me. Only I have earned that right. *I am mastering the path of hatred.* The first slice runs only a fraction higher than my oldest scar, my favorite scar, the uneven one wrought by an unsteady hand. The scar of a girl who hadn't yet learned how to unleash the violence that pumped through her heart. The blood wells up sluggishly, thick and already congealing, but the sting is what I crave. The

sting of air on all the exposed pain rings clear and perfect through my hollow body.

I am in control. The next slice, right on top of the scar from the day Chloe ruined everything. The day those awful, bloody secrets were bared for all to see. But this blood is for me alone. No one else can see these scars, this smear of red on my shriveled-up thigh. And no one ever will.

The third slice—never more than three, never too deep, never too close together—goes on the other thigh, somewhere in between a scar from Hideki’s cruelty and a scar from Hideki’s failure. I slump back and let the wave of pain roll through me, loud as the tinny trickling sounds on the toilet speaker box. *I will make them pay.*

CHAPTER TWO



AKI THRUSTS ANOTHER CELL PHONE AT ME. "PHOTO," she snaps.

I take a step back and sigh. This has been my Sunday so far—photographing her with tourists at the cosplay gathering grounds of the Jingu-mae bridge in Harajuku. We're crammed in here with Gothic Lolitas and sword-wielding Sephiroths and man-eating Titans and Malice Mizers, but she clears a space and strikes a perfect *kawaii* pose next to the pimply white American tourist: head cocked, one leg kicked back, two fingers spread wide in victory. "Say *kawaii!*" she hisses through a clenched-teeth smile, and the guy eagerly obliges.

I snap the photo and exit out to his phone's home screen, then immediately wish I hadn't—two plump cel-shaded

anime breasts glare out at me from between the app icons. I all but toss the phone at him while Aki does her best to pretend she doesn't understand his declarations of love.

It's our last day in Tokyo, and Aki's making me spend it in the Harajuku district to drum up free publicity for aki * LIFE * rhythm and her performance at the festival. "Tune in on NHK5 to see the big show!" she cheers in English between each song.

Tadashi keeps wandering off to answer his phone, Mariko's already camped out at our usual table at the nearby pancake-serving bunny café, and Kenji's tucked himself into the narrowest corner he can find to sketch the crowd.

And me—I'm playing Aki's photographer even though I hate her frilly candy-blue maid costume and curly caramel-colored hair. But most of all I hate this camera. There was a time when you couldn't pry the camera out of my hand, or the scissors I used to chop up my photos to make collages. But that time feels like a movie I watched long ago, falling asleep during all the good parts. A life that happened to someone else.

"And who are you supposed to be playing, my fair maiden?" The same guy is behind me now, smoothing the front of his silk-print dragon shirt. "No, let me guess. Is it Mako Mori from *Pacific Rim*? You'd look positively ravishing with a touch of blue in your hair." He starts to reach for a lock. "Want to find out if we're drift compatible?"

I jerk violently away from him. I'm shaking with disgust. He thinks he can speak so lewdly to me, that I exist for his adoration. These are the moments when I wish I knew just how to wield all my hatred. But I'm not prepared. No snappy rejoinders at the ready.

"I will carve your insides out," I manage, my voice breaking as I say it. But even then, I only think of it because Chloe once hissed it at some woman on a camp field trip who acted disgusted to see us holding hands. Stupid. Stupid. Now Chloe's back inside my head, her grating laugh, the cocksure way she wrapped my hand around the paintbrush and told me not to hold back.

The guy's stammering out a response, but I'm just thinking of Chloe's words about justice and freedom that always left me hungering for more. I walk away as Aki yells for me, but I ignore her and push through the sea of plastic claymores and wigs like exotic birds.

"Why do you let them call you names?" Chloe had asked, after I told her about Saint Isaac's one late night at camp. How they toss slurs my way, gross Orientalist comments. "You can't let them say that shit to you. They think they won't have to pay? You're an artist. You have power. This is your chance to take control."

So I cut the head off another photograph of a student in a white and navy uniform. I painted the cathedral weeping with blood. I don't even remember how the other collage

elements got introduced—the guns, the guillotines, the gas masks, and mushroom clouds.

Subversive, Chloe had said, standing back, looking at the carnage I'd wrought across the painting studio.

Disruptive, she said, as her arms found my waist.

I had been so sure she was right. That this was what real art was—not the silly elven princesses I'd drawn before, or photos I'd taken of my brother, his combat-haunted smile strained to breaking point. Art was violent and aggressive and charged. Art would set me free.

“Hey, Rei.” I'm heading across the bridge, into Yoyogi Park, and Kenji is calling my name, just loud enough for me to hear.

I start to walk past him, pretending not to notice, but guilt tugs me back and I turn toward his bench. “Hi.” I jam my fists into the pouch of my hoodie and watch his hands work.

It's a sketch of the chaotic scene on the bridge, of course, but everything's all inverted. The cosplayers and tourists and fashionistas in all their garish glory—they're just background noise, a dull sea of gray. At the center, a skeletal girl with a sloppy braid stands, shoulders back, stance wide. Leather bracelets scale both of her forearms. Ones that perfectly match the ones I'm wearing now.

I look from the drawing toward Kenji's face. He's so intent, and he has these beautiful dark lashes framing his eyes,

and the sloppy hair and wry wit and kindness, but . . . I can't do this now. The antidepressants have chiseled away all semblance of a libido from me, and after Chloe, I don't know if I can bear to be touched by anyone ever again. I squeeze my eyes shut and rock back on my heels.

Kenji glances up at me, and his face darkens. "Sorry. I don't mean to be, mm, creepy. I just . . ." He twiddles the pencil between his fingers. "It's practice. For the comic I want to draw."

"What, and she's your main character?" I start to roll my eyes, but manage to stop myself in time. He doesn't deserve that. Of all of our team, he's the one who doesn't deserve to be hurt.

"Maybe." One corner of his mouth twitches into a grin. "I'm still figuring out her backstory." His gaze darts up at me, flashing like fish scales, before sinking again. "What her secret powers are."

I sink onto the bench beside him. "Pretty sure she doesn't have any."

He shrugs and keeps drawing. We sit in companionable silence—I'd forgotten such a thing exists. Usually silence claws at me like a cornered animal, desperate for something to relieve the agony of everything going unsaid. I turn on my camera and snap a shot of Kenji working—it only seems fair, after all, to take his picture when he's drawing me.

"Hey, nerds!" Tadashi calls, striding toward us as he shoves

his phone into the back pocket of his jeans. “Kenji. My man.” He claps Kenji on the shoulder so hard it jostles both of us, then leans in and whispers something to him in Japanese. Kenji tightens on himself like a fist and shuts his eyes.

Then Tadashi rounds on me. “Rei-rei. Time for Aki to sing, don’t you think? Present our *ninkai nanba wan* star! Get some snaps! Help me work the crowd!” He pushes his fingers through the stiff peaks of his frosted bangs, then bounces off to boss around his equipment flunkies who are hauling amplifiers and synth boxes through the crowd.

“And that’s my cue to go.” I stand up and shake the concrete dust off the butt of my jeans. God, how are they so baggy on me now? They used to call me a pork dumpling back at Saint Isaac’s. I wish I could feel proud of myself for shedding the weight, but it’s just a side effect of my failed efforts to disappear.

“Not going to get more pictures for Aki’s portfolio?” Kenji asks, a teasing grin in his tone.

I roll my eyes. “I’ve got enough. See you at the café, or something.”

“Or something,” he echoes. “Yeah.”

I stroll along the pathway deeper into Yoyogi Park just as the frenetic strains of some technopop song blasts out of Aki’s amplifier. The same song I’ve heard her practice ad nauseum at the apartment.

The crowds have dried up this far into the wooded park;

the clattering JapanRail trains and honking cars are reduced to nothing but a dull throb behind my eyes. The leaves are still mostly green in Yoyogi, though the overcast sky muffles everything with a gray filter, sapping away the color and life. No birds. No people. Nothing but the dim rustle of branches in the wind. Total, solitary silence. I hate it and love it—love that I have space to breathe and think, hate the thoughts that take the opportunity to crowd into my head.

I pass under a hulking wooden *torii*, the Japanese-style archway that marks the winding pathway that leads toward Emperor Meiji's shrine. Massive wooden racks holding sake barrels, wine, beer, and countless other offerings from around the world line the path. Emperor Meiji is a Shinto spirit now, because he ended the centuries of military shogun leadership and brought Japan into the modern era, which apparently meant opening it up to Western influence. Doesn't sound like that great of a deal to me, but now Emperor Meiji gets to hang out with all the other spirits and drink sake and party all the time until someone petitions him with a prayer, like Kenji with his *ema* board.

I reach the main area of the shrine. The slate square, hemmed in by a variety of wooden structures with weathered green roofs, is empty save for a white-swathed Shinto priest meticulously sweeping the stones. A breeze snakes through the square, rattling the *ema* boards that dangle from the prayer wall and swirling dead leaves around my legs. The priest pauses,

glancing up at me with a tiny frown before he returns to his work. I wrap my arms around my chest and shuffle deeper into the temple grounds.

I'm lost in my own homeland, ignorant of my own language, my culture, my customs, my heritage. I had to plead with my parents to send me here, revisit their birth land, or at least, that's the excuse I used. They preferred to keep their heritage like a coffee table book to display at parties, not anything to look too closely at. The tech industry was their tribe now, and Saint Isaac's their religion. Their children were a newly compiled source code in constant need of upgrades. When Hideki went to Stanford, they were sure, so sure, at least one of them had served their purpose. And for a time, Hideki seemed so sure of it, too.

But that conviction didn't stop him from swallowing that vial, burning a hole in his larynx, wrecking a kidney or two, failing every final exam, costing Dad a major contract when he had to leave the middle of a software sales pitch to drive down the coast. I, on the other hand, was already in San Francisco, in Hideki's grad student apartment. He wanted it that way. He intended me to be the first art critic on the scene of his final masterpiece.

I just found him sooner than he intended. Rough luck for him.

Standing in the shrine, I can't get the image of Hideki lying in the hospital bed, a tube down his throat, out of my mind.

His arrow-slitted eyes. His hand squeezing my wrist, fingers lining up on the old familiar bruises from him—one, two, three, four, five. Like he always used to do, his eyes burning with hatred, a smirk on his mouth as he told me I'd always be the unwanted shadow in his sunlight. Except this time, he was the one who was fading fast.

The memory is uncontrollable here, in this unfamiliar place. But maybe there's something to what Kenji said about his practice—about giving his troubles over to something outside himself. I don't believe in gods and spirits, despite the hours I've spent at Saint Isaac's mandatory daily chapel time. But I'm tired of walking around with these memories in me, throbbing like a knife I never bothered to pull from my back.

I'm just so tired. Of not being able to eat or sleep or to chase all these thoughts from my head. Tired of not finding the right trigger to pull to get the revenge that I'm due.

A sign spells out in English how, exactly, to go about honoring the *kami* in the shrine. I start by scooping water into a ladle from a nearby trough, and pour it over my right hand, then my left, then pour water into my cupped hand to use to swish out my mouth. The chilly water raises gooseflesh along my arms, and I nearly drop the slippery ladle as I try to replace it in the trough. The priest's back is to me, but I swear I can see his shoulders tensing at my clumsiness.

Next up: the shrine itself. I step up to the outer edge of the

shrine and peer through the wooden doorway to the inner sanctum. I'm not allowed inside—instead, I'm supposed to clap twice to get the *kami's* attention, drop some coins in the offering box, bow, pray, bow, and clap again. When I reach the prayer part, I stutter for a moment. Am I supposed to address Emperor Meiji? Some other spirit or deity? The universe at large?

Dear world. I hook one finger in a loose belt loop on my jeans. Feel the hatred burning like napalm in my chest. *Help me find a way to get my revenge.*

I don't know what I expected. To feel like a stone slab had been lifted off my chest, maybe, or for the perpetual antidepressants fog in my head to clear? But nothing like that happens. Nothing happens at all. What a silly waste.

I turn and walk away without bowing and clapping again. Tears prickle in the corners of my eyes. So stupid. I briefly allowed myself to hope. There is no hope for me. I must seek out my revenge on the world alone.

But I don't know if I have the courage. I don't know if I can see it through.

I am nothingness. An empty vessel. The core of me is rotted away, and I can never get it back. There's nothing left to fill me but anger. There's nothing left for me to sense but pain.

Another breeze lifts the stray tendrils of hair away from my face and neck, and a cold wind reaches inside the gaps of

my clothes. I raise my head, looking around the square. The prayer boards sway and clatter; the tree leaves beyond the shrine's square shush against each other in a fervent roar. My heart is beating like a drum inside of me—a dark rhythm, goading me on. My blood is on fire; my mind is buzzing as if my dark thoughts were wasps, circling, circling—

And then they collide inside me, like a thunderclap.

“Anatawa nanio shiteiru!”

I stagger forward. For a moment it feels like I'm falling out of my body, like I might just keep falling. But then the buzzing and drumming subsides, and I find my balance. The priest—he's shouting at me. He props his rake against a sign and charges toward me, his wide, pleated skirt giving the impression that he's floating. He's saying something—I imagine it's some variation of *hey, you*—but the only thing clear is that he's gravely upset.

“Sumimasen,” I say, over and over. *I'm sorry. Excuse me.*
“Wakari masen,” I don't understand.

“He's trying to teach you about the double—no. Mm. The *dual* nature of the *kami*,” Kenji says, stepping through the outer gates. His sketchbook's tucked under one arm and his backpack is slung on the opposite shoulder.

“What the fuck, Kenji.” I turn from the priest to him. “Are you stalking me?”

Kenji says something to the priest in soft, even tones. *Amerika-jin* juts out, an ugly boulder in the otherwise even

stream of Japanese. *American*. At that, the priest glances toward me with the curled-lip look that I'm far too used to by now.

Whatever Kenji says next, though, softens him. Lots of *hais*, and a calmer response from the priest. Kenji bows at the waist to him. "*Domo arigato, gozai mass, domo arigato.*"

I stare at Kenji, one eyebrow cocked.

"He wants you to understand that every *kami* has two natures, all right? That when you respect them, then they are more than happy to love and nurture and care for you. But he thinks you approached them with—mm, how did he phrase it? With a darkened neglect in your heart."

Darkened neglect in my heart? I laugh like dry leaves rattling. Yeah, he's really got my number there. "Whatever. It's not like I believe in that shit."

Kenji makes a strained expression. "It doesn't matter what you believe in, Reiko. If you feel angry, if you're destructive, then you draw anger and destruction to you. Your mindset creates your reality, no matter what you believe."

I gust out my breath, blowing stray hairs out of my face. "Well, then that's just fantastic. Really great. I was just trying to—fuck it. Never mind." I shove past Kenji and head out the outer gates of the square, but he stays right at my side. "You said it always made you feel better to give your problems over to them."

"To let *go* of my problems," Kenji says. "It is the act of releasing them. Not dumping them all over someone else."

“Fine. Whatever. Quit following me everywhere, okay? I don’t need you making excuses for me. And it’s creepy.”

Kenji hesitates, tugging at the strap of his backpack. “I, ahh, I have to follow you.”

I stop walking. “Excuse me?”

Kenji lowers his head, a dark fringe of hair concealing his eyes. “Satori-san. He said we aren’t ever allowed to let you go anywhere by yourself, because of . . . ahh, because of your condition, and he . . .”

“Oh, my God. Are you kidding me? He told you all that?” The chill from the breeze is gone; instead, I’m burning up, from the inside out. The smoldering coals of my hatred are crackling to life again, shifting and sparking with fresh fury.

Kenji doesn’t answer. He won’t meet my eyes. Just another coward, same as me. Why don’t they beat him down, too? Why does he have to still give a damn?

“I figured out your superhero’s secret power,” I tell him. My power. My anger, burning me up. I’m going to make as much of a mess as possible when I leave—smear them all with a stain they can’t scrub out. “She destroys everything she touches. And everyone.”

I will master Hideki’s path of vengeance. I will make everyone listen to the dark pounding of my heart.

CHAPTER THREE



THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS TO KILL MYSELF IN Japan—ways to make it matter, make it sting. Suicide isn't a bad way to make my point, as long as I make others suffer for it. I could find it at the end of a cord—an electric kettle's cord, perhaps, because Aunt and Uncle Satori won't let me near anything longer. Crumpled in the alleyway beneath their ninth-floor apartment in Shinjuku, though it turns out, all the windows are painted shut. The only shame is that I'd never see Chloe's face when she hears what became of me. That I'd never get to nestle in that dark guilt that would forever weight her steps.

But if I did it—then I'd really have myself a coup. For once, I'd be the first Azumi child to succeed at something.

Like Hideki tried to do, though I want my death to hurt far more than just me. And I'm hoping that in Kuramagi, I can find just the right way.

This trip will be good for you girls, Uncle Satori told us while he helped us pack. *Maybe you can learn to get along*. Like we're two puzzle pieces he can force together, and not vinegar and blood. We meet up with Mariko, Kenji, and Kazuo at the main Tokyo *shinkansen* station and wait for the rip of air as the bullet train arrives. (Tadashi is too good to travel by such plebian means; he's going to drive his Range Rover down later in the day.) Mariko pops into the convenience shop and returns with a plastic bag full of triangular *onigiri* and starts nibbling on one while we wait for our train. Kazuo and Aki stand too close to each other while they watch videos on Kazuo's phone. Kenji reads a thick manga compilation. And I wonder what it would be like to be struck by a *shinkansen* train while it's whirring along at 200 miles an hour.

The train hisses into the station. Disgorges its passengers. The cleaners walk down the aisles, collecting any trash left behind and washing down headrests. The seats lift up and swivel around to face the opposite way. Sterile, sleek, empty. Everything moving in flawless concert. Perfection through repetition. I press the bruises on my wrist. One, two, three, four, five. Vengeance will be mine.

The train ride is a blur of scenery and noise—Chloe's playlist again, double-bass drumming its way to the speed of

our train. Mariko punches away at the cell phone novel she's always working on—short dribs and drabs of words pushed out to her subscribers, chronicling the ups and downs of a water hostess in Tokyo. She tried explaining the plot to me, but it sounded more melodramatic than my old Legends of Eldritch Journey role-playing forums, which is really saying something.

I am flinging across the length of the island of Honshu as my thoughts churn ever inward on themselves, ever fixed on single points.

You've made a mistake, Chloe's email had said, that day it all went to hell. *Everyone needs to see you for what you really are.*

Not who. What. And what they needed to see, apparently, was the monster who'd been lurking in their midst all along.

The email came the week before winter break. Two months after Chloe and her new girlfriend, Selena, shredded up my heart with their pyramid-studded belts. Two months after I left those shreds in Portland, amidst the rain-water flecked with blood and broken glass. Not three days after my early decisions arrived from Stanford and RISD—a yes and a wait list, not that I cared about college. I wanted to go there to develop my art, but none of that mattered anymore. Chloe had pulled my art out of my soul as if it were a thread she'd unraveled herself. Was it even mine, or only something I'd done because she put the brush in my hand? If it had been up to me, would I have made it at all?

When I saw the paintings I made at summer camp with Chloe again, that week before winter break, all I felt was shame. They weren't for the student body of Saint Isaac's to see. What were they doing plastered all over the school? The rotten thing inside of me had gotten loose. Someone had smeared it across Saint Isaac's halls. Why was everyone pointing, cupping hands around their mouths as their eyes followed me? How did they know they were mine? Why weren't they looking at the teachers, hurrying to pull the paintings down? It wasn't until I reached homeroom that I saw Chloe's message on my phone.

Then the security guards came for me.

"We've received some unsettling information about you, Miss Azumi," the principal said. Deacon Karlsson, a man as gaunt and Scandinavian as his name, sat across the desk from me, pretending the conversation was strictly between the two of us and didn't include the three nuns and four security guards crammed into the back of the room. "Some credible information that you mean to do your fellow students harm."

I was too stunned to respond. I'd never before considered doing anything like the collages and paintings portrayed. Those were private works—things created in the dead of night in the studio spaces of camp. I hadn't even turned them in as part of my final portfolio at the end of camp. They were a wonderful secret, a bond between only Chloe and me.

"Your painting with photographs of the senior class says,

and I'm quoting here, 'Everyone must pay for their crimes,'” Deacon Karlsson said.

Oh, God. I felt the floor opening up beneath me, the lurch before the roller coaster rushed down.

“I'm sure you understand why I've had to contact your parents. And the police.”

The world turned into a metallic buzz around me. I couldn't breathe or feel or see. Just noise, crackling like a downed wire in my head. So much noise.

It was better that way.



The train glides to a stop, and we board a smaller local train. A stop in a pristine bathroom at a train station, the toilet playing pop music at me while I pee. A bus. All the while, Mariko, Kazuo, Aki, and Kenji chattering. I chug another Suntory Boss, the only thing I think I might be able to keep down, while Mariko works her way through several more *onigiri*.

WELCOME TO THE KURAMAGI RYOKAN!

We stand in the front entrance of the traditional bed and breakfast, a *ryokan*, that Tadashi had booked us at the sort of nightly rates so high I had trouble translating them into dollars. (“Some Sony execs love to host retreats at this place,”

he'd said. "Lots of opportunity here.") The girl at the front counter isn't at all what I'd expected: American, dark-skinned, naturally tightly curled hair cropped close to her head, smiling, confident. Gorgeous. Speaking English. I kick off my shoes with the rest of our crew, tuck them in a cubby, and slip into plastic red slippers.

"My name's Sierra. You marked 'English' on your language preference card, but I'm happy to speak with you in Japanese if you prefer." She glances down at the card in front of her. "Is Mr. Itoyama here?"

"He'll be arriving later." Aki slides across the gleaming wooden floors to the clerk's counter. "I can check us in." They switch into Japanese, and Sierra follows along flawlessly, her intonation sounding—to my ears, at least—as good as any I've heard. Suddenly Sierra stands up from the desk and starts up a narrow staircase, everyone following her closely. I scramble to keep up.

"Can you explain in English, too?" I ask, even as a hot shame washes over me. "Please?"

She flashes a smile at me. "Sure. I'm just showing you all to your rooms."

We reach the top of the staircase. It looks over the front gardens of the *ryokan*, running along the main street of Kuramagi village. "Kuramagi was once a thriving village along the old postal route between Kyoto and Tokyo during the shogunate period," Sierra says, then repeats herself in Japanese.

“Kuramagi is one of the first villages to choose to preserve its historic appearance by not permitting any electric lights outdoors and burying all cables. The village works hard to retain its original Edo-period feel.”

I look out the opened windows at the multi-tiered garden beneath us: small stone statues, koi ponds, bristly bushes turning autumn shades. The main street of the town is lined in dark and white wood buildings, few of them more than two or three stories tall, with narrow vertical strips of wood across most windows and steep roofs of overlapping tiles ending in fancy, swirling caps.

“At night, we ask that you please be indoors no later than ten. The village is lit with gas lamps at that time, and it’s very dark, so for your protection, it’s safer to remain indoors. We will lock the doors to the *ryokan* each night at ten.”

Sierra turns to the row of sliding thin wood and rice paper panels set back from the windows and twists a small piece of metal in the center of one panel’s edge. “Ladies, this will be your room. I’ll give you a moment to drop off your things. Then please come meet me downstairs. Gentlemen, come with me, please.” Sierra and the boys disappear back down the stairs.

The panel slides open to reveal a traditional sitting room: rice paper-paneled walls, tatami mats on the floor, and three pallets like the one I sleep on at the Satoris’ apartment lined up against one wall. Akiko immediately heads toward the one closest to the window. “I’ll take this one.” She picks one of

the casual robes, a *yukata*, off the stack and tosses it at me. “Wrap it left over right.”

“I can’t believe we have to be inside by ten,” Mariko says. “This is going to be so lame.”

Akiko rolls her eyes. “We’re not following that.” She punches at her phone. “Tadashi says there’s a great club the next village over. A real one, not a sad thing like when we went to Nagano.”

“But Sierra said they lock the *ryokan* doors at ten,” I say.

“Yeah. The doors.” Akiko slides open the window. “You’ll stay here and let us in, won’t you, Rei-Rei?”

I glimpse a wonderful fantasy. A dark, hateful world—monsters pursuing Aki through the streets of Kuramagi. She’s trapped in the darkened garden, thick, sinuous shadows coiling around her. *Please, let me in!* she screams, while the shadows carve deep furrows into her flesh. *Reiko, help!*

If only. I smile, imagining my teeth thick and bright as a shark’s. “Of course I will.”

The screams echo in my thoughts while I unpack. The path of hatred carves deeper, greased on thoughts of Aki’s pain.



“So what are you planning to do around here?” Sierra asks, while I sit in the lobby and wait on Aki and Mariko to finish

priming for dinner and their inevitable nightclub trip later tonight.

I close the magazine I'd been flipping through. "Do?" I laugh, throaty. "Follow my cousin around, I guess. She's the exciting one."

"Sorry, you came to the wrong town if you're looking for excitement. People come here to relax."

"Fine." I smile in spite of myself. She's easy to talk to, and not just for her English. Again I feel that tug in my gut, pulling at the space where my attraction to human beings used to be. But the antidepressants have hollowed me out. "What relaxing things are there to do around here?"

"Well, there are the *onsens*, of course. Natural hot springs along the mountainside. Mister Onagi owns a couple of them, and he'll rent them out to you guys by the hour. There's the hiking trail that runs between this town and the next one on the old postal route . . ." She drums her mint-green nails on the counter. "You can always check out the historical museum. It's in the old travelers' inn down the road. Or there's the *shinju* shrine, if you're feeling morbid."

Like I'm ever not. "What do you mean?"

"Oh—I figured you knew about it. It's why a lot of people come to Kuramagi, aside from the festival. It's a monument to two doomed lovers, you know, a Romeo and Juliet thing." Sierra's eyes roll. "They, like, pray to the doomed lovers to

bless their own relationships. Pretty twisted, if you ask me, but it keeps me employed, right?”

I curl back, my mouth suddenly parched. “Oh.” I force myself to swallow. “Is that why you live here?”

“Please, are you kidding? I don’t live here. Just work here a couple afternoons a week.” Sierra smiles again. “I teach English a few towns from here. No, I think you have to be a special brand of disturbed to live in Kuramagi.”

“Because of the shrine?” I ask.

“Sure, that’s part of it. But mostly they’re such sticklers about the whole historical setting, you know. And then there’s the curfew . . .” Sierra closes her hand on the counter into a fist, and leans forward, checking the hallway toward the dining rooms. “Like, don’t tell Mr. Onagi I said so, but they get so caught up in preserving history around here that I think they sometimes forget the rest of the world’s moved on, you know?”

I nod and fiddle with the belt on my *yukata*. Stuck in time, unable to move forward. I know the feeling well. My thoughts are buzzing, wordless, in the back of my mind.

“It’s just creepy, is all. Stick around here a couple days—I bet you’ll see what I mean.” She looks toward the staircase that leads toward our room, her extra-wide smile returning. “Welcome back, ladies! Are you ready for me to show you to your dining room?”

Aki and Mariko clomp downstairs. Even though they’re

wearing their *yukatas*, they're clearly wearing another outfit underneath, and Aki's makeup is thick as ever. Mariko's three-inch platforms jut out of her handbag.

Sierra leads us to the dining room, reminds us to take off our slippers, and explains a few of the dishes. Our dining room is traditional-style as well, with small legless chairs propped around a low table. I survey the explosion of tiny ceramic plates before me. Pickled radish, maybe? That one definitely holds sashimi, though I'm not sure what type of fish it is. Raw beef, which may or may not end up cooked before the night is out. All the sorts of food I'd have loved to devour, before I lost my taste for everything.

And—raisins?

"Those are really good," Aki says, leaning over my shoulder. "Miniature sugar dates."

But when I pick them up, I see the tiny legs on their undersides.

I narrow my eyes at Akiko and plop them in my mouth. Grin darkly as her upper lip curls back.

"Eww, I can't believe you ate them!" Aki squeals, as I finish off the bowl. "Don't you know what those were? They were wasp larvae. Wasps."

As I stare Aki down, I imagine I can feel the wasps buzzing inside me, angry, churning with an acute need to strike. A fitting image. I'm starting to feel in control of my hate again. "I know now," I say.

Mr. Onagi's workers bring out our next courses. Beautiful, fresh fish; vegetables carved like blossoms. I want to enjoy it, but I know it'll taste the same as everything else these days—ashy and dead, sucking the saliva right out of my mouth. Everything sticks in my throat like a too-large pill.

"We'll go to the lovers' shrine tomorrow," Aki says. "It's supposed to be a beautiful place for photographs. Very scenic."

Translation: if the photographs don't serve her purpose, it'll be my fault. I may not have learned Japanese yet, but I'm getting fluent in Akiko.

I clench a pale sliver of raw fish, translucent and shimmering like a shell, between my chopsticks. I have to eat. Everyone else is scarfing down rice and *shabu-shabu* slices of beef, roasted trout, pickled plums and ginger and radishes. I want to eat it all, but I'm so full, I've gorged on my anger and hatred, I feel like I'm vibrating out of my skin. I've shoved my anger down for so long and there aren't any pockets of my body left for me to tuck it away—

The lights flicker overhead. Mariko squeaks; everyone glances up, food dangling from their chopsticks and broth spilling from their spoons. The buzzing in the back of my head intensifies. Maybe my anger is making me hallucinate, but somehow, I can't shake the feeling that I made the lights flicker.

Embrace it, a voice whispers from within me, Chloe's voice, and I let the buzzing take me over. I am the earthquake. I am destruction. The buzzing in my head grows.

“Worthless old building,” Kazuo says. “This whole village is lame. What’s the big deal with preserving it anyway? Who cares about the past?”

Something rumbles behind us, like a truck shoving its way down the narrow street. No—now it’s rumbling *into* the wooden *ryokan* building. It’s rolling up through the floor and rattling our plates and sending the pendant lamp bouncing furiously. Mariko scrambles into Kazuo’s lap. The glass bottle of sake crashes off of the table’s edge and shatters. One shard of glass strikes Akiko on the wrist, and she screams.

I sink back into my chair and pretend I called the earthquake to swallow me up. How wonderful it feels, to imagine my body tearing apart, wrenched open by the ground itself.

But within seconds, it’s over. Everyone’s frozen, waiting for more. When nothing else happens, they all start talking at once, frantic in Japanese. Through the thin walls, we can hear chatter in the other dining rooms as well. Kenji rushes over to Akiko with a damp napkin and twists it around her wrist, then helps her to her feet.

“Hello? Is everyone all right?” Mr. Onagi is knocking on the door to our dining room. “Anyone hurt?”

Akiko screeches a reply in Japanese. Tadashi finally stands and rushes to Akiko’s other side, and he and Kenji carry her from the dining room like they’re rescuing her from a burning building.

I help myself to another scoop of rice, savoring the buzz in

my head and the rattle in my bones. The egg of my anger has cracked open, runny yolk spilling out, and suddenly I feel better than I've felt in weeks. I take a bite of food. I was meant to come to Kuramagi after all. Maybe, just maybe, it can give me the strength—fill me with enough hatred—to do what I have to do.

I'll make them all sorry. I'll find a way to make them pay for their cruelty, their neglect. I'll make sure they never forget me or what I've done.

CHAPTER FOUR



SOMETHING IS HITTING THE THIN WINDOW OF OUR *ryokan* room, tapping like a skeletal branch. I blink, groggy, still feeling pinned in place by the thick vines of my dreams—dreams of lava and steam, of the valley filling with blood as the earth rumbles and I raise my hands up high. But it's all gone now. Everything is dark and a deeper dark, all swirling together, until finally I spot the square of weak dishwasher-gray moonlight coming from the window.

Plink. Plink.

I throw off the heavy duvet and force myself to my feet, though my muscles feel shot through with lead. My head is still buzzing, more insistent than ever in the room's cavernous

silence. I stagger toward the window. *Plink*. I jerk back, startled, as a pebble hits the window again.

Mariko and Aki. Of course. I glance over my shoulder; their pallets are still empty. It takes me a few seconds to figure out the window latch, then I slide it open and narrowly dodge another pebble aimed right for my head.

“Took you long enough!” Aki hisses up at me from the ground floor garden. A sheet of fog is tucked tight against the ground, so the girls look legless, floating toward me from the lamp-lit ancient world of Kuramagi. The air tastes heavy with impending rain. I know the souvenir shop is just on the other side of the narrow street from us, but all I can see is the dull halo of its lantern now, the darkness and fog is so thick.

Mariko hoists Aki up onto her shoulders, then Aki rolls onto the roof of the first-floor porch. I catch her by her bandaged hand, and contemplate letting go far longer than I should. It’d serve her right, but that’s not how I want to get my revenge. I yank her through the window, then wait for Mariko to make her way up.

The lantern at the souvenir shop quavers; a deeper shadow cuts through the fog, stirring up the smooth butter-spread calm along the road. *Let it in*, something says from inside of me. Just like the earthquake.

I frown and lean back from the window. Am I seeing things again? Hearing them? A bitter voice answers me inside my head. *Idiot. Of course you are. Just like you think you can cause lights*

to flicker. Like you can summon earthquakes with your hate. It's not Chloe's voice this time but Hideki's, which never fails to remind me of how worthless I am. I look again, and the fog has settled once more, except where Mariko bounces, trying to scramble onto the lower roof. I jut my torso out the window again and help her in.

"You should've gone with us, Rei! The club was so cool! They played great music, and Aki convinced these guys to buy us free drinks because they felt bad about her hand." Mariko shimmies out of her coat. "She should work at a hostess club. She'd make so much money in tips—"

"I'm not working at a hostess club. I'm a star." Even in the dark, I can see the knife glint of Aki's narrowed stare.

Something rustles in the far corner of the room. I can see it outlined in moonlight against the tatami flooring—the sleek black husk of a Japanese roach. Japanese roaches have shells that look thick as a beetle's, and I've seen ones in the Satoris' apartment almost the size of my fist. If we were back there, I'd already be reaching for the spray bottle with a label that is a mystery to me save for the massive exclamation mark at the end and the depiction of what looks like a drunken cartoon roach.

I ignore the roach and give the garden one last look, but the shadows I'd seen have evaporated; the fog is thick and solid. No disturbances, no movement. I latch the window shut again.

"This place is so boring. Even the earthquake was a letdown,"

Aki says. "Only a three, they said at the club. No serious damage."

"Yeah. A real letdown," I say. "Too bad we aren't all dead."

"It's not boring." Mariko exchanges a look with Aki. "It's creepy. That fog . . . it isn't right." The look Aki gives her could pop a zit, but Mariko doesn't back down. They regard each other for a long moment. Then Mariko says, softer, "I'm not just making it up. I'm telling you, I saw—"

"You watch too much anime," Aki says.

Discussion over. I wriggle back into my pallet, and let sleep drag me under again, swaddling me in the thickness of the buzzing inside my head.

I wake up again just after six, slip out of our room, and shuffle toward the communal bathroom in my plastic red slippers to empty my bladder. On my way back out of the restrooms, I run into Mr. Onagi as he unlocks the front door to the *ryokan*. "I trust you slept well after last night's earthquake?" he asks me in English.

I nod.

"I'm very glad. Some people your age find our curfew boring. But it's for the best for everyone."

God. Everyone acts like roving bands of vagrants sweep through the town at night, emboldened by the lack of streetlights. "What do you mean, it's for the best?"

His leathery face scrunches up. "Well, it's how we keep the village safe." Then he smoothes his expression. "But no matter.

You are here for the cultural festival, yes? I expect a lot more guests will arrive tonight.”

“Yeah. Can’t wait.” I grimace and shove my hands into my pockets. “Actually, I thought I might go for a walk,” I say.

“Sure, sure. I’ll have breakfast ready in an hour. If you like, though, you should visit the historical museum. They open at seven.” He jabs a thumb to the right down the main road. “Might want to get your walking done early. It’s supposed to rain.”

Poor Aki and her photo shoot plans. I head upstairs to dress, then come back down and sit on the porch steps to lace up my boots, then head into the narrow streets.

The fog is gone, though woolly thunderheads sheathe the mountain peaks that pin us in on either side. If I stand perfectly still, I can hear the distant rustle of the river at the valley’s base. As I walk through town, I look over my shoulder after every couple of buildings I pass, just to make sure Kenji isn’t following me, or anyone else—now that I know about Uncle Satori’s decree, I feel honor-bound to keep them from succeeding.

The village’s streets are stacked one atop the other like rice paddies, a stair step of dark tile and wood down the mountain-side. I climb a narrow, crooked staircase to reach the next tier up and catch my breath at the fiery burst of fall leaves along the opposite mountain’s slope. It really is beautiful here—there’s a dull thump inside of me, that feeling that once compelled me to grab my camera and frame up a thousand shots in hopes that

just one might capture the awe that I feel. I wish I could feel that again—like I did at night in the studio at camp with Chloe cheering me on. But I think the weight of my hatred has shattered it. I can never feel that again.

The buzzing in my head crowds around my thoughts, a tremor like too much caffeine. I pinch my nose to try to clear it out.

An old woman, humped back jutting through her parka, makes her way down the steps of a Shinto shrine embedded in a gap between buildings. Zigzag paper lightning bolts dangle over the entrance to the shrine, twisting back and forth as a fresh breeze kicks up and whips my loose hair into my face. The woman glances at me, frowns, then begins her slow crawl down the other side of the street.

The village is more extensive than I first expected. There's a water wheel alongside the mountain stream at one edge of town; countless tiny shops and cafés, their proprietors just now unlatching the window covers and setting out their signs. Their persistence in keeping the historical feel to the town has been successful. If it weren't for the occasional Toyota crawling along the road, I'd feel lost in time.

Finally I pass a sign for the KURAGAMI HISTORICAL HONJIN AND HERITAGE MUSEUM. It's set back from the road behind a gateway that opens onto a spare garden. A gray-haired woman is polishing the dark wooden doors, but stops and bows to me with an "*Ohaiyo gozai-mass.*" *Good morning.*

“*Ohaiyo gozai-mass,*” I reply, then decide to press my luck, “*Hakabutsu-kan wa akimasu ka?*” *Is the museum open?*

She tilts her head, momentarily flustered, then answers me in a steady stream of Japanese until I hold up my hand.

“*Eigo-ga hanasemasu-ka?*” *Can you speak English?*

That flicker, that frown. “Please, come inside. I am just now starting the fire.”

I follow her indoors. The main chamber of the room is two stories tall, its tatami mat floor raised on a platform, with a massive chain dangling down from the roof and holding a cauldron. She prods the cauldron’s contents with a poker, inviting a gust of smoke into the room. “This *honjin* was built in 1804 to host imperial and shogunate guests who passed through Kuramagi,” she says. “This is the main room of the traveler’s inn, where the travelers and the family who lived here would gather. Seating depended on a person’s rank. They would sit farthest from the direction of the smoke if they were very important, or in the smoke’s path if they were of low ranking.”

I laugh in spite of myself. Nothing like a case of black lung to keep those filthy peasants in line.

“The women of this inn have wiped down the walls every day since it was built in order to clean off the smoke, like this.” She demonstrates with her rag, running it along the gleaming wood. Sure enough, I can see a line out of arm’s reach where the dark wood changes from perfectly polished to smoky and

charred, though it's just barely visible on the near-black wood. "Do you know why we have the wooden slats on the windows?" she asks me.

I shake my head.

"They are specially angled. The inhabitants inside the building can see out, but a person on the street cannot see in. In the shogun times, this was very useful!"

I grin again. "Why? What did they have to hide?"

"Some people in the town supported the emperor. They did not want the shogunate to rule any longer. So it was good to know if anyone was coming who might hear them plotting against the *bakufu*—the military government that supported the shogun."

History has never been my forté, but Japanese history, even less so. We never got much in school in America beyond what happened in World War II. And Mom and Dad would sooner get a colonoscopy than talk about their lives before they came to college in the States. I run my finger along the length of one of the slats. "Oh. I guess I thought you meant because of . . . like, swords and arrows and stuff." As soon as I say it, I wish I could stuff the words back in my mouth. A dumb American tourist, she can probably forgive. But a dumb Japanese-American one? Inexcusable.

"No, no. Life was peaceful here under the shogunate. Peaceful, but . . ." She lets the rag dangle limp in her hands.

“Stagnant. The *bakufu*’s warrior class, the samurai, were bored without battles to fight. They caused problems sometimes for people trying to make their lives better.” Her expression darkens. “And a bored samurai, especially one part of the Tokugawa shogunate, could be a very dangerous thing indeed.”

My grip tightens around the slats. I remember the way Hideki looked on his first home leave from Iraq, before he got his early discharge. A medic without a body to mend. A weapon without anyone to fire it. Once again I can feel the five points on my arm striking a dissonant chord. A fighter will always find himself a new fight.

“The Tokugawa shogunate ruled everything. The emperor was only a puppet on their strings. We were a military country then, but some people—like the residents of this house—fought to restore the emperor’s right to rule.”

“And why did people want the emperor to be in power again?” I ask, trying to keep my tone light.

“The emperor wanted to befriend the West and make Japan a superpower. Not a lonely island. After your American Admiral Perry arrived with his *kurofune*—the black ships—and tried to force Japan to open itself to trade, the shogunate wanted to close off even further. But the emperor’s supporters wanted to join the rest of the world and gain even more power for Japan.”

I laugh. Well, I guess I know who won. Emperor Meiji and his grand Restoration and his shrine in Yoyogi Park.

“If you go upstairs, you can see the secret panel,” she says, bunching up her rag once more. “It’s blocked now, but it leads to the attic room where the emperor’s supporters would gather and plan to overthrow the shogunate.”

I thank her for the tour and make my way back downstairs. Part of me is itching to have a camera in my hand once more so I can document the weak sunlight filtering through the open rooms, the details carved into the wooden beams overhead, the paintings and scrolls. But I’m done with that life. I lace my boots back up and head onto the streets.

I collide with Kenji on my way back down to the *ryokan*’s street level, nearly knocking us both down the narrow stairs. “Rei!” he cries. “Where the hell have you been? I’ve been looking for you everywhere! You wouldn’t answer your phone, and you didn’t say anything to Aki and Mariko—”

“You didn’t call Uncle Satori, did you?” I make fists inside my hoodie pockets. The last thing I need is him thinking his impromptu “suicide watch” needs to be doubled up.

Kenji hesitates, Adam’s apple quivering against the collar of his shirt. He smells of warmth and soap; I notice his damp hair slick against his head, and realize he’s just come from the shower. His shirt clings to him in damp patches, revealing more muscle beneath than I would’ve guessed.

“No,” he finally says. “And I won’t. Not unless you force

me to.” He looks me square in the eye. “Don’t force me to, okay?”

Don’t give him a reason to think I’m sneaking off to hurt myself, he means. Because my parents and Uncle Satori conscripted him to spy on me. I shrug and look away.

“Reiko.”

I look up at those deep brown eyes, the fine planes of his nose. I try not to see him as another jailor, another thing for me to hate. But it’s hard. I can’t pull away the red filter that warps every memory I make.

“I’ve seen what you can do with a camera. The collages you used to make.”

Shame billows inside of me. “How did you see those—”

“The ones of Seattle. You know? The black-and-white photos that you painted on and stitched together. I thought it was really cool.”

Oh—he means the ones from before art camp, before Chloe and the collages that landed me in the psychiatric ward. I forgot those were still online, on that cheesy little ArtSpace site I’d created to serve as my portfolio for RISD. The ones that were only good enough to get me waitlisted.

“If you have a gift like that, you should use it,” Kenji says. “Pay the bills with Aki’s stuff and Satori-san’s work, sure, but you could do so much more. It must be incredible, to see the world the way you see it.”

“You mean the way I *saw* the world.” I smile, sticky as

honey. “But that world’s gone, so why worry about capturing it? Let’s give Aki what she wants.”



“Give me the map. Just give me the goddamned map,” Aki snarls, and follows it up with a flurry of Japanese words that I’m quite certain I’ve never heard before. “We have to do the photos at the lovers’ shrine. It’s so tragic and romantic.”

Tadashi surrenders the map to her. We’ve been wandering the forests beneath the lowest tier of Kuramagi for half an hour now, trying to find the lovers’ shrine before the black woolly clouds overhead split open and soak Aki and her rented silk kimono. I squint down at my English version of the hiking map, which helpfully marks such features as “Moon Waterfall” and “Teahouse” further down the trail, but doesn’t list the alleged lovers’ shrine at all. The only thing close to the *ryokan* and the village proper is the untranslated *Shinju-hokora*. It depicts two green fingers of stone yoked together with rope at their tip, which seems vaguely like it could depict lovers. All the same, I can’t figure out how we reach it from the trail we’re on, or if it even connects at all.

“This way,” Tadashi says. “Hurry up.”

We trudge behind him down the same slope we climbed two minutes before.

The slender branchless cedar trunks cause some sort of eerie optical illusion in my peripheral vision as they slide past. Wet, moldy scents soak the air around us; the too-ripe scent of early autumn surrounds us with rot and decay. That, coupled with the buzzing in my head, now a raging hornet's nest, keeps me perpetually on the cliff of feeling like I might throw up. I never ate breakfast after I visited the museum so I could get the women's bathing room to myself. though I want to eat comfortably, like I did last night, but now the thought of making myself eat feels awful again. My hunger is turning ragged in my gut, slicing me up from the inside.

I trip over a loose stone on the trail; when I glance down, I notice a crooked line between the stones, probably split open by the earthquake. Sure enough, as I look through the trees further up the slope, a narrow furrow runs through the undergrowth, then halts at a sagging, moss-strewn boulder. The boulder looks as if the earthquake pried it forward; feathery torn vines fringe its edges. It looks so inviting, like the perfect place to curl up and hide from the world for a while. I lean toward it.

The buzz in my head rises in cadence.

"Are you guys sure this is the way?" Mariko says. "My feet hurt. Maybe we should do this another day . . ."

Her voice tapers off in the distance as I step off the path, onto the mountain's slope. I want to see what's behind the

boulder. All I can hear is the crunch of leaves under my feet like snapping bones. Everything smells loamy and close to death, like fruit just about to ferment. It smells wonderful. It smells the way I feel inside.

I run my hand along the boulder. An involuntary shudder wracks through me, though there's no breeze, no chill. There's a hollow space tucked behind it, just like I'd hoped. Stone and dirt, ripe with a metallic tang. The buzzing has turned to a chorus now, a pressure guiding me in.

Someone's calling my name, but it's too quiet. All I hear is my own heartbeat, throbbing in my ears. I all feel is the pressure in my head, threatening to pop.

I step into the hollow just as the sky opens up and the rain thunders against the forest canopy.

It looks like some sort of shrine inside the hollow—at least, to my untrained eyes. Only a weak, watery light grazes against the paving stones crusted with dirt and the carved altar pressed against the far wall. But none of the other items I've grown to associate with Shinto shrines are present—none of the zigzag streamers, the prayer boards, the offering boxes, or recessed spaces for the *kami* to rest. Just that altar, splattered with dried moss and vines and roots that curl down from the hollow's roof.

Then I spot a stone: black speckled with gray, round on one end, curved, shaped like a comma. The buzzing in my head mingles with the sounds of rain. Something inside me

shifts—a weary sigh, a head falling against a pillow after an exhausting day.

I reach for it easily, my body a resounding chorus of *yes*.



Someone is calling my name again. I push myself up from the altar—when had I knelt before it?—and turn toward the opening into the makeshift *hokora*, the tiny Shinto shrine. My sandals skitter across the stones as I peer down the slope toward the postal trail.

“Hurry up! You need to get inside!”

“I’m coming!” I shout, unable to keep my annoyance from curling the edges of the syllables. I just want a moment alone—it’s all I ever want—but of course there’s always more work to be done. I hoped Aki’s kimono was ruined by the storm, her makeup running clownish trails down her face. I close my fist tight around the stone, duck around the boulder—I fit around it more easily this time—and start down the wooden path to meet them on the trail.

It’s not until I stop to lift the skirts of my burgundy *iro-muji* that I realize I’d just answered in Japanese without thinking. And that I’m wearing a burgundy *iromuji*.

And that the woman waiting for me on the trail, her finely patterned *kimono* immaculate even as rain pelts her, is not Akiko.

CHAPTER FIVE



"YOUR CHORES AROUND THE *HONJIN* ARE STILL NOT finished," she says, shuffling ahead of me in small but furious steps. "And yet you play at that foolish old shrine. It's disgraceful. Your father is soft for allowing you to go on this way."

My father. I know, with a conviction I haven't earned, that this woman isn't talking about Tetsuo Azumi. How could she be? I don't know how, but I know it as certainly as I know my own name. Which is—

"Miyu!" the woman hisses again. "You're slower than spring thaw! Hurry up! Do you really want to disappoint him?"

Miyu. No. That isn't right. I'm Reiko—Reiko Azumi, daughter of Tetsuo and Yuki Azumi of suburban Seattle, Washington. But Miyu feels; like an old nickname, maybe,

something a friend had called me once as a joke and then it suited me so well it stuck.

No. What am I thinking? I'm dumbly following some grumpy older woman who is calling me by the wrong name. What about my—my co-workers? (My mind hitches as if over a snagged stitch at the thought of calling them friends.) Akiko and Kenji and Mariko and the rest. I stop and turn, searching for them, but there is no sign. I fumble with the *ironmuji* kimono's massive, billowing sleeves as I reach for my throat. My camera is gone. What the hell? Wrong clothes, wrong name—what is going on?

"If you do not come with me right this moment, you will not like what happens," the woman says, with a voice like charcoal. I clatter after her, all too aware of the noise of my wooden sandals—when did I put those on?—against stone and the way I feel I might tip over with every step.

The rain sounds worse than it feels; the high canopy of trees absorbs most of the moisture. Maybe Akiko's kimono will be spared after all. Maybe they've already headed for shelter, too. All right—I'll follow this lady, figure out what has her panties all in a wad (is she wearing panties under her robe? Am I?), then find the others. Simple enough.

Or so it seems, until we reach the trail's mouth and turn onto the main streets of Kuramagi.

Hundreds of people pour through the streets like a spilled bag of grain. Men and women of every age, but every last one

of them clad in traditional kimonos—navy and red and green and patterned. This girl wears an elegantly embroidered kimono called a *furisode*, and that man has the wide folded skirt of a *hakama*—not that I have the first clue when I'd learned the distinction. Pack horses haul carts of caged chickens or grain or fabric down the streets. Ribbons of smoke spin from every chimney and hut; a sweet starchy smell radiates from one of the shops we pass, enticing me to linger in spite of the rain.

Is this part of the cultural festival? The opening ceremony isn't until tomorrow, but maybe today is some kind of unofficial reenactment or something, chock full of cosplayers. I can't find a single person in jeans or hear the telltale twinkling cell phone sounds, but maybe that's part of the reenactment rules.

And at some point, I must have agreed to participate, too. God. First I think I can cause earthquakes, then I start having blackouts where I don't remember changing into feudal villagers' garb. Probably another undocumented side effect of the antidepressants: *agrees to absurd historical reenactments*, right along with *may cause suicidal thoughts and tendencies*. Gotta love modern medicine.

My sandal catches on the uneven stones of the narrow staircase to the village's upper level. I pitch forward and nearly slam my chin into the step in front of me. "Graceless cow," the woman snarls back at me. Like it is my fault these sandals are

impossible. I slip my foot back into the sandal—I am wearing *tabi*, I notice, white cotton socks with a separate slot for my big toe—and hurry up the stairs after her.

“Listen,” I call. “I think there’s been some kind of mistake. I need to get back to my—uhh, my friends, and—and I appreciate the costume, but I—”

“Friends!” She laughs. “A jester, are you? You have no friends.”

Well, that cuts a bit close. “I appreciate that you’ve all gone to a lot of trouble here, but I really don’t think I should have a role in your reenactment or whatever. I just—umm, I really need to go. Sorry.”

The woman whirls around to face me and seizes a handful of my robe’s collar. Shock more than anything pins me in place. The fine white powder dusting her face cracks as she leans in close; I can smell her breath, heavy with tea and rot.

“You had the perfect opportunity to leave us, didn’t you? But you chose not to take it. Live with the choices you’ve made.” Her upper lip twitches; she seems to be searching my face for something. “Or do your father a courtesy and relieve him of your burden for good.”

The hairs on the back of my neck raise at that. This lady’s role-playing skills put the Legends of Eldritch Journey board members to shame. Okay, I decide. I’ll see where this goes. It beats tailing Akiko around. And I’ve never turned down a chance to be someone other than myself.

She's leading me to the *honjin*, I realize. An unbidden sense of dread coils around my throat like a noose. Though I don't know why I feel it, I recognized this sensation all too well—it's like the long walk to the principal's office that day at Saint Isaac's. It's like the moment I first pushed open Hideki's bathroom door. I can't name what fills me with that dread, but I know it lays inside the *honjin* walls.

The woman and I shed our sandals in the front room of the inn, and I drop into a bow without thinking. "*Chichi-ue*," I say. *Father*. I don't know what chills me more: the word itself or the fact that I'd said it so readily.

"Stand." A shadow drapes across me. "You have work to do."

I rise and find myself face to face with a man who looks nothing like my dad—Tetsuo Azumi, Chief of Digital Product Sales and Development for UpStart Technologies. And yet . . . I can't shake the flare of shame the sight of that face ignites in me. Round nose, wrinkles folded across his face like a fan, thick black hair speckled with gray . . . it's a particular breed of shame. I felt it the first time I'd been informed that my parents were coming to visit me in the psychiatric ward. The shame of facing my parents for the first time since the glass jar where I'd hid all my secrets had shattered open.

"You are not supposed to leave this house unescorted, Miyu," he tells me. Me—Miyu.

I grip a handful of my thick cotton robe in one hand.

“Uhh . . . I had . . .” I glance toward the woman beside me, her mouth puckers up like a stubborn spring bud. “Yodo-in was with me.”

She closes her eyes with a snort of air.

“And your work was not finished when you left,” Father says.

I look toward the platform of the main room—the hanging cauldron in the center, issuing a spray of sparks each time a stray raindrop finds its way through the chimney into the embers. The wooden bucket against the wall with a rag draped over it. The black wooden floors, only partly polished, but mostly fuzzed by a thin veneer of soot.

“I have a very important gathering tonight,” he says. “I will not allow you to ruin this, too.”

Something in his tone makes me tremble like a string he’s twanged. “I’m very sorry. I’ll finish it right now.” I pad up the stairs onto the tatami mat platform and snatch the rag. The scrap trembles in my hands as I dip it into the soapy water.

What kind of crap role had I been assigned for this stupid reenactment? I think. But at the same moment, as I start wiping the wood, up and down, up and down, my muscles find the rhythm like an old familiar warmth. I know this act. I have cherished this act for the silence and peace it brings me. When I do this, I am safe.

My father (the man playing my father?) and the older woman speak in jagged, splintered tones in the other corner

of the main room, but I can hear enough to make out what they are talking about. Perhaps that's their intention. "You should send her away," the woman says, her scowl furrowing her brow and flaking the pale makeup on her face. "Our plan is dangerous enough without the sort of complications she always brings. Everything she touches is destroyed."

I grimace. She *really* knows me well.

"That will be for the *daimyo* to decide," my father replies. "She'll be his problem soon enough."

As I bend down to wet the rag again, I feel something pinch my skin inside a hidden pocket of my robe. It's the stone I took from the altar. Something shifts inside me, like my dream of the earth splitting open, and I smile.

Beyond the narrow slats over the windows, voices gather in the streets, shouting something I can't quite make out. I peer through the wooden slats. A pair of horses—tall, proud steeds, unneutered, muscles firm as clay on their chests—push through the throng of peasants and merchants. The faces of the men atop them are shielded from my view, but I recognize the golden three-leaved sigil on the black banner carried by the man in front.

The *Tokugawa*. The shogunate rulers I'd learned about at the *honjin* historical museum—the same building where I now stand. According to the woman at the museum, they were the ruling family of the shogunate, the Japanese military that, in essence, ruled over Edo-period Japan.

The banner bearer pulls his horse to a halt just outside our *honjin* and slides from the saddle. After securing his horse, he moves to the two men behind him. They wear the long sleeves of a traveling *haori* jacket in a solemn deep gray; rather than don the broad hats of the villagers, their silky black top-knots stand uncovered, at attention.

A new fear trickles into my veins at the sight of these men. Unlike the dull weight of fear I'd felt toward my father, this one jolts me like lightning. A dangerous fear. The kind of fear I never can resist.

"Who is it?" Father asks, frowning as he moves toward the front windows.

The answer comes to me from a deep well that opens inside me, and sounds just as dark. Somehow, I know the name of these men and feel the fear of them, too.

"Samurai."

Father's eyes widen, whites flashing, before he recovers and stares outside. "Not just samurai." His fingers hook in the *obi* sash that binds his kimono. "*Hatamoto*."

The meaning of the word bubbles up from the dark well, too. The *hatamoto* are samurai who represent the shogunate in Kyoto directly rather than serving a feudal lord. Military officers, immediately responsible to the *bakufu* government.

"What are they doing here?" Yodo hisses. "We received no word of this. If they know of our—"

“Silence,” Father says. “They know nothing. The shogun is just rattling his saber at the *daimyo*, like he so loves to do.”

“But they could ruin it all. Too much scrutiny—”

“Go,” Father says to her. “Send word to the *daimyo*’s clerk. Don’t let them see you.”

Yodo-in bows, quick and reflexive, as she moves toward the back of our *honjin* to slip away unseen. I glance toward Father and let the crackle of shame I feel when I look at him embolden me. “And what is it you wish for me to do?” I asked.

His jaw goes stiff as steel as his gaze snaps toward mine. I can hear his old lessons, can hear the rap of the bamboo stick against the garden stones as he forced me to recite the seven virtues that I forever seemed to lack. *Filial piety* was forever at the top of the virtues I’d violated.

“What I always wish you to do,” he says at last, the ice of his tone glistening with a threat. “Serve.”

He steps out of the *honjin* to greet the shogun’s samurai. My pulse quickens, hatred filling me like oxygen.

“My deepest respects to you, honorable samurai of the Tokugawa,” I hear my “father” say. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?”

I draw a deep breath as they talk, trying to break whatever spell has been woven over me. I’m not in feudal Japan. There is no great life-or-death conspiracy to overthrow the shogunate hanging in the balance. This stranger cannot order me

into service. Who the hell do I think I'm pretending to be? It's always been second nature for me to piece together elaborate backstories for my elven sorceress and cruel space syndicate baroness. I always feel safest playing someone other than myself, but playing a weak, shame-filled character is not why I came to Kuramagi. It's time for me to quit succumbing to distraction and plot my revenge. No more delays.

I toss the rag back into the wooden bucket and headed toward the front of the great room to slide back into my wooden *geta* sandals. "Look, I'm sorry," I say, as the door swings open again. "I've got to get back to my friends. You guys have fun with your—"

The two samurai, their squire, and my "father" stare at me as if I've been speaking . . . well, as if I've been speaking English.

Which I have.

But which I *haven't been*, up until this point.

Once again, the throbbing pressure builds up behind my eyes. God. What the hell medication did I take? If I accidentally doubled up on the Xanax, this just might be a really wicked hallucination—

"She speaks the language of the barbarians," the elder samurai says. His right hand crosses his body and slides to the handle of his *katana*. "Do you allow her to consort with the animals aboard the *kurofune*?"

The American naval vessels, right. Okay, fine, so they're

going to scold me for going out of character. I can play along just long enough to find a graceful exit.

“Please forgive my daughter, Goemon-sama,” Father says to the oldest samurai. “She is of a dark disposition, and her sense of humor is lacking.” Father’s lip curls back so hard I can almost hear it. “Miyu, bring our guests some tea.”

“*Hai*, father.” I bow and scrape my way toward a smaller bed of coals sunk into the tatami flooring. Once they are stoked, I set a kiln onto them and set about the lengthy process of stirring the powdered green tea leaves into heated water.

Finally, I pour the boiling water into a clay teapot and set it on a wooden tray, along with teacups and a tray of tiny confections shaped like maple leaves, just like at the teahouse I’d visited once with Akiko. The raindrops against the roof high above me patter in time with the rising cadence of my heartbeat. I truly want to do a good job of presenting the shogun’s representatives with tea. I am *nervous*. Where did *that* come from? God, what a strange feeling—to actually care about something. But that’s the magic of playing a role; no matter how you feel about yourself, you can’t let your character down.

I carry the trays to a smaller alcove, where Father and the two samurai sit with their backs to the *tokonoma* that display a scroll depicting cloudy mountain peaks and a vase holding a *chabana* of a single fresh blossom. They have removed

their *katanas* and *wakizashi*, the shorter knives usually worn on the right, and placed them in front of where they kneel, parallel, like a thick demarcation line. I kneel beside Father, who faces them, and distribute the tea and sweets.

“You perform a less formal tea ceremony?” Goemon, the older samurai, asks, though he addresses my father and not me. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t expect refinement from a little village out here.”

I wrinkle my nose. How complicated can it be to pour some tea?

“Thank you,” the younger samurai says, with enough kindness that he seems to want to chip away at Goemon’s criticism. I glance up at him and flash him a grateful smile. He is a full samurai, I see now, and not just a squire like I’d originally thought. He is lean, his muscles taut without being chiseled; his eyes are the same rich dark hue of the *honjin*’s wood, clear when he looks at me, but as his gaze moves back to his senior, they bear the same smoky screen as the unpolished planks. Something in his expression tightens, and I recognize it instantly.

His look has the slow simmer of a hatred contained for too long.

I nod my head and lean back until I sit on my heels.

Goemon, the senior samurai, swallows his tea in two gulps; rather than turn the bowl deliberately in his palm to drink from a clean lip, he seems to rotate it with a tension that goes right

into his shoulders. The junior samurai follows the tea ceremony protocol more closely, and nibbles at the confection with a wry grin.

Finally Goemon sets down his empty teacup. “We have been sent here to review some discrepancies in your village’s records.” He frowns at Father. “The shogunate is concerned your territory has not been paying its proper tithes.”

Father tips his head forward before he speaks. “I would be honored to fetch the records for you. However, if you wish to rest before I do so, my daughter would be happy to show you to your rooms. You must be tired from riding, and damp from the rain—”

“We do not wish to rest. We wish to complete our work here and be done with this wretched village,” Goemon says.

I rock backward. I’ve been so absorbed in our reenactment that I’ve actually forgotten to walk my path of vengeance. Now, though, I feel its old familiar hunger opening up inside of me like quicksand. I need a hatred to keep it fed. Goemon, the older samurai, seems more than happy to step up to the task. The younger man tilts his chin away with a flinch. Perhaps I’m not alone in that hate.

“Your merchants dress as well as your farmers, as if they think themselves above their lowly station,” Goemon said. “Meanwhile, your farmers behave more like their swine. You let your daughter gab in the tongue of the Western mongrels, and the stink on the streets leads me to believe you’ve adopted

their bathing habits as well—or lack thereof.” He scowls. “I can only imagine what sort of disarray the *daimyo*’s records are in.”

Yodo pushes open the front door, removes her jacket and shoes, and shuffles toward us. Dark patches of rain speckle her robe and cause the loose wisps of hair against the nape of her neck to curl and frizz. “Greetings, most honorable samurai of the *bakufu*. It is an honor to host you in Kuragami village.” She sinks into a bow so deep she looks boneless as a slug. “My deepest apologies, but the *daimyo*’s clerk is not able to meet with you at this time. He has been called into the fields to settle a dispute among the peasants, but will join us as soon as it is resolved.”

Goemon’s silence hums in my ears: the way a forest falls too quiet just before a storm sweeps in. Then he smiles in a way that freezes my blood. Like he knows Yodo is lying, and it pleases him. As if he is hoping for a challenge. “I would like to rest after all before we explore the village,” he says. “Please, show us to our rooms.”

As I stand, I feel Goemon’s gaze upon me, slithering down my back like a bead of sweat. Jiro, the younger samurai, waits for his senior to stand, then slides his *katana* and *wakizashi* back into his belt. “Right this way,” I say, again feigning confidence that I can improvise my way out of this if I only believe hard enough that I am Miyu.

I lead them to the staircase and climb up to the second

floor of the *honjin*. Instinctively, my gaze snags on the hidden panel where the museum docent told me the imperial loyalists' secret meetings were held. (Had that only been this morning? I feel like I'm fossilized in place; I can scarcely remember anything outside the rainy dome of our little role play.) My socked foot slips on a step, and I fling my arms wide to catch myself on the staircase railing. Shit. I've been too busy thinking about the hidden room.

But Jiro catches me by the wrist and holds me steady as I find my foot beneath me again. "Thank you," I say under my breath. My skin is warm where he touched me; it makes warmth bloom on my face as well.

"I hope this room is satisfactory to you." I slide open the main panel to the largest guest room. A small window on the far wall looks down on the interior garden. "If you require anything else, my room is down the hall." The words startle me as I say them, but then, what hasn't startled me about this day?

"I am certain we will," Goemon says, and sweeps inside.

Jiro starts to follow him, but then turns to face me, and makes the slightest bow. Something hitches in my throat. "Thank you." He speaks in English. His voice twists on itself, like a ribbon of water being poured. "Your tea was . . . delicious."

I smile, though my face feels stiff, pained by it. "You're welcome," I answer in English, too. His grin goes wide.

I shuffle down the hallway before he can say anything more. The anger in my belly is still there, crackling, crackling. But it feels different from the familiar path I tread in Tokyo. It is carving a fresh path of hatred—Miyu's path. It is beating a dark new rhythm in my thoughts. However I have come to be in this role, I can't bear the thought of letting it go.

And that scares me most of all.