

戦士

SENSHI

COLE GIBSEN



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1

A grime-covered alley was not exactly the romantic date atmosphere I had in mind.

My boyfriend Kim pulled his silver Trans Am next to a graffiti-covered Dumpster and cut the engine.

The smell of rotten food wafted through the car. Covering my nose with my hand, I turned to Kim. “Um, when you promised me a night out, just the two of us, I was thinking along the lines of a nice dinner and maybe a movie. But this ... is really something. What’s the occasion? Did I forget our anniversary?” Something scurried in the shadows. A rat? I shuddered. “Where are we, anyway?”

“An art gallery.” He didn’t look at me but continued to stare down the alley.

I twisted in my seat so I could study the street behind us. A single streetlight illuminated two beer bottles and an empty potato chip bag floating on a puddle in an otherwise deserted road. “Yeah, I think they’re closed.”

“They are.”

I dropped my hand from my nose. Something stank worse than the Dumpster. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He turned to me, his eyes pleading. “Please don’t be mad. The Network called right before I picked you up. I promise this will not take long.” Each word held the slightest pause, the only giveaway that English was not his first language.

“Are you *serious*?” I flopped back against the seat with a sigh. The Network was a government agency that kept an eye out for reincarnated souls. They had us running missions practically every night—which was kind of annoying when you were trying to have a relationship. Kim and I shared a past life where we lived together, fought together, and slept tangled in each other’s arms. But in this life, we’d only been reunited for several months, and it wasn’t easy finding a

starting place—especially when we hardly had a minute to ourselves. “But you said tonight was going to be about *us*.”

His shoulders slumped. “You’re mad.”

“No, Kim, not at all. Prowling around an alley that stinks like ass, breaking and entering, and looking for bad guys is every girl’s dream date.” I narrowed my eyes but knew my glare didn’t hold any heat. It was impossible for me to stay mad at Kim—he’d saved my life too many times. Still, I could pretend. “I just thought that, after spending 500 years apart, we deserved, at the very least, a movie. And maybe some popcorn. Heck, I’d settle for just the popcorn—provided there’s extra butter. But there’s not going to be any extra butter, is there, Kim?”

He sighed and ran a hand through his black hair. As soon as his fingers left his scalp, his layered locks fell back into jagged strips around his face. “You think I don’t feel the same way? I want to take you on a normal date. But the problem is we’re not a normal couple. We’re samurai. We have obligations.”

I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t like I asked to be a samurai. In fact, only a couple of months ago I’d been a normal teenage girl who only worried about perfecting my ollie for skateboarding tournaments and keeping my grades high enough to get into a decent college. (This was before I’d transcended—a fancy way of saying I smooshed my past life with my present life, threw the whole mess in a blender, and put it on frappé until smooth. The end result was an ex-samurai skateboarding Rileigh-Senshi smoothie with just a hint of raspberries.) Now I had so much more on my plate. Enemy attacks, past-life memories, and my growing ki powers were only the tip of the iceberg. And, while I felt a sense of rightness about joining up with my samurai brethren, part of me longed for the normalcy I had before. Was one interruption-free date night with my boyfriend really too much to ask for?

“Rileigh.” Kim reached for my hand, his voice soft. “The rest of the team should be here any minute. We just have to do a quick sweep of the building.” He leaned into me and whispered the last part against my neck. “Afterwards, we can pick up exactly where we left off.”

It was as if a thousand hummingbirds fluttered inside my body. I shivered happily. “Promise?”

He sat back and smiled. “Promise. This shouldn’t take long at all. The gallery was broken into last night, but it doesn’t look like anything was stolen. The cops have come and gone, but just in case, the Network wants us to check it out. You know when it comes to artifacts, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

I nodded. Especially because antiques and artifacts were the key to transcending. They stored the energy of every person to come in contact with them. It was this energy that had power to awaken the past-life memories.

Kim shrugged. “It was probably a bunch of wannabe-thugs screwing around. If that’s the case, with all the attention they’ve drawn, I highly doubt they’ll come back.”

Someone rapped a hand against Kim’s window, and we turned to find Braden waving at us, a crooked grin on his face. Michelle and Drew stood behind him. “Hi, guys! Are you ready to get down to business?” He paused. “Why are you two dressed so nice?”

I opened the car door and stepped out into the alley. The stink from the Dumpster was stronger here, a tangible wall of sickly sweet smells that almost forced me back to the car. “Oh, you know. I always like to look my best when I go traipsing through alley sludge.”

“Huh.” The smile fell from Braden’s face. “That’s not really a good idea. You could ruin your clothes doing that.”

Michelle sighed. “*Anyway*, we should get this over with. My mom thinks I’m studying at the library. I have to be back before my curfew at eleven.”

“And I’ve got Sunday brunch with my grandma in the morning,” Braden added.

Drew leaned over, his long blond braid falling over his shoulder. “Yeah, and there’s a Star Trek marathon on tonight—the good series—with Captain Picard.”

Kim shook his head. “What a scary bunch of warriors we’ve become. Our enemies are sure to tremble with fear.” He gestured to the door. “Shall we?”

I was about to answer him when my phone rang. I pulled it from my pocket and glanced at the screen. My mother. I shook my head. “It’s Debbie. Looks like you’re going to have to start without me.”

He frowned.

“Go on.” I shooed him with my hand. “I’ll just be a minute.”

He nodded and turned to Michelle, who was already at work picking the lock on the art gallery's rusty side door. I climbed back inside the car to muffle the sounds of the breaking and entering taking place a few feet away. "Hello?"

"Raleigh." My mother's voice was breathless and tinged with a hint of excitement. I'd heard it enough to know it was her money-making voice. She didn't wait for me to respond. "Look. I need your help. Remember that blonde boy you went on a date with a couple of months ago? The one with the really great cheekbones?"

She was talking about Whitley. Of course I remembered him. When a boy drugs your food, sets your house on fire, and tries to ritually sacrifice you to claim your soul, it kind of leaves an impression.

"Yeah?" I braced myself for whatever came next.

"I need his phone number," she said. "Abercrombie needs a male model for their next shoot, and this guy would be perfect. We're talking huge numbers here."

I should have known that my mother, the talent agent, would only call if there was a major deal at stake. Too bad for her I'd left Whitley pinned to the wall in my bedroom while the house burned down. I sincerely doubted that a fistful of ashes would sell clothes as well as a set of greased-up abs. "I wish I could help you, Mom. But he moved."

"I don't care," she answered. "This could be a seven-figure deal. Get his number. I'll track him down."

"You can't." My mind raced for an answer that didn't involve his burning to death in our old house. "He moved to ... Lithuania. He joined a monastery."

"What?" There was no disguising her irritation. "Raleigh, if you're—"

I cut her off. "And there are no phones there. Not that it would matter. He's devoted to God now. Not underwear. Sorry." I clicked off the phone before she could argue with me further—a move I was sure to pay for later.

I shoved the phone in my pocket and glanced around the empty alley. Time to get down to business. But as I reached for the car door, the metal clink of a soda can skittered across the alley behind the car. I froze and peered into the rearview mirror just in time to see a guy with shoulder-length blond hair run past the building. It was too dark for me to be sure, but from where I sat, it kinda looked like Whitley.

Awesome. Now, thanks to my mother, I was seeing ghosts. I continued to stare into the mirror waiting for, I wasn't really sure. Did I expect the guy to come back and tell me he wasn't the ghost of the boy burned alive? Yeah, because that was going to happen. But still I remained frozen in the passenger seat, my eyes glued to the mirror.

The alley remained quiet.

Get a grip, Raleigh. I chuckled under my breath. I survived a couple murder attempts and now every shadow was out to get me? Embarrassing. The more likely explanation was the guy I'd seen had been a night jogger. It was dark and, because of my mom's phone call, Whitley was at the front of my thoughts. That's the only reason the jogger had resembled him. It made perfect sense.

Again I reached for the door handle, but again I stopped when invisible ice-crusted fingers curled around my throat, forcing me to gasp.

"Son of hibachi." I ducked down. My heart beat so frantically it felt like it might burst through my rib cage. Not a fun feeling. It'd been 500 years since I had it last, but I knew exactly what it meant.

Climbing onto my knees, I twisted on the seat so I could have a better view of the alley. Nothing moved. But that didn't mean they weren't there. Watching me.

I wanted to laugh at the craziness of it all. How did they find us? In this century? In this alley? But I knew better than to doubt myself. When it came to danger premonitions, I'd never been wrong in this life. Or the last. And this particular feeling only meant one thing.

Ninja.

2

Nothing moved in the alley. Not that I thought it would. *Think, Rileigh. Think!* If the ninja weren't already here, they would be soon. Somehow I had to get inside the art gallery and warn the others. My first thought was to honk the horn, but that would alert the ninja to my position.

"Crap," I whispered. The pressure in my chest expanded and pushed against my ribs. The ninja were closing in.

Plan time. The first thing I needed to do was get out of the car. A small space could quickly become a cage in a fight. I popped open Kim's glove compartment and fumbled around in the hopes of finding a weapon. Unfortunately, besides an owner's manual, the only thing inside was a tire pressure gauge.

Making a mental note to pay for the repair, I took the thin piece of metal and slammed it into the dome light, cracking the plastic and shattering the bulb underneath. Without the light to give away my presence, I opened the door, slid out of the car, and pressed myself against the jagged edges of the brick wall behind me.

So far, so good.

Keeping my back to the wall, I used my fingers to guide me to the side door Kim had disappeared through. The sharp concrete chipped away at my freshly painted nails. Somebody owed me a manicure.

Several heartbeats later, the brick gave way to cool metal, and I knew I'd made it to the door. Without taking my eyes off the street, I patted the area behind me until I found the door handle. With a relieved sigh, I gave the door a tug.

It didn't budge.

Double crap.

It wasn't like I could bang on it and hope Kim would hear me. Nothing says, "Hey, if you want to come kill me, I'm right over here!" like a buttload of noise.

I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled through my mouth. *Okay, no biggie. Ninja are coming, and you're alone in a dark alley with no weapon, and no way to alert your friends. Do you: (A) Call the cops and hope there will be pieces of you left to identify when they arrive? (B) Jump inside the Dumpster and hope they mistake you for a rat? (C) Fight?*

I snorted at my own options. Option A sounded bloody and option B sounded dirty. This was a no-brainer. I cracked my knuckles.

Something stirred in the darkness barely beyond the edge of my vision. Like a hand moving under a black sheet. I couldn't see the object itself, but its movement distorted the shadows. I straightened my stance, balancing my weight on my back foot. My insides screamed from the pressure consuming every inch of my body, from my tingling toes to my eyeballs that felt ready to pop from their sockets.

I balled my hands into fists. "I know you're out there!" My voice echoed off the walls and spilled onto the street. "You may as well save us both some time and show yourself."

A chuckling answered me. "You can sense us. Impressive." The male voice echoed around me. Before I could wonder where it came from, a shadow peeled off the wall several feet away and, like a cookie fattening in an oven, became whole.

I rolled my eyes. "Seriously? Materializing from a shadow? After 500 years, you couldn't come up with anything new? No theme music? No dance number? As it stands, I'm kinda disappointed."

Two more shadows pulled free from the wall, materializing into figures that flanked the first. They were dressed head-to-toe in black from their boots to their face masks.

I folded my arms across my chest. "And what's with the black suits? That's so 16th century."

The figure on the right, the smallest of the three, cocked its head. "Do you always talk so much when facing death?" Her voice was low, just above a growl.

"Actually, I talk when I'm *bored*."

The wink of metal glinting under the streetlight answered me. The girl removed a small, sickle-like blade from her belt. The short handle was attached to a chain that she swung menacingly in front of her.

A kusarigama—designed not only to cut but to ensnare. Triple crap.

My alarm must have showed on my face because the middle figure laughed. “So you’re the great *Senshi*. I’m afraid I don’t understand the hype.” His eyes traveled the length of my body. “I was expecting ... *more*.”

The buzzing within me electrified my blood, skipping my pulse into an erratic rhythm. So they knew who I was—or at least who I’d been—which meant they’d been searching for me. Now the only question was *why*? “What do you want?”

The middle ninja cocked his head. “Your head on my blade.”

I sighed. Ninja always wanted me dead. How come they never wanted to take me for pancakes? That would be a nice change.

The middle ninja dropped his arms to his side, exposing the hooked blades protruding from his knuckles.

This was getting better by the minute. I cast a quick glance at the side door. *Dang it, Kim! Where are you?*

“Let’s do this.” The remaining ninja—definitely male given his linebacker build—pulled two short curved blades from his belt. He ran at me, the blades arched above his head. In the space of two heartbeats, his blades dove for my skull. I had just enough time to duck the first slash when the kusagirama wedged itself into the brick wall inches away from my nose.

My own wide eyes stared at me from the blade. *Sloppy, Raleigh*. I pushed off the brick just as the ninja with the blades lashed out with a spinning kick.

Diving to the ground to avoid the blow, I only had a millisecond to mourn my ruined shirt, now soaked with muddy rainwater and whatever else was in the murky puddle I rolled in. I planted my palms onto the asphalt, wincing as jagged pieces of gravel dug into my skin. A second later, I was back on my feet. Just in time to face the ninja with the blades on his knuckles.

His first strike was high, giving me plenty of time to duck. But his second came fast and low. I jumped back—not an easy feat in my skinny jeans—and, even then, two of his blades snagged the fabric of my shirt, slashing through the hem.

My breath came in rapid bursts. Two close calls within the space of seconds. I was going to have to do better than that if I hoped to leave with my head.

Knife ninja was in front of me.

Darting to the left and ducking to the right, I dodged the knives that struck at me like a pair of silver cobras. Behind me, the sound of a chain unraveling echoed through the alley, alerting me it was time to dive and roll before the kusagirama invaded my personal space—and by personal space I meant spleen.

Thanks to my quick movement, the kusagirama missed me, and instead grazed the shoulder of knife ninja. He cried out, dropping the blades in order to clutch his bleeding shoulder. “Watch where you’re aiming!”

Kusagirama girl’s eyes narrowed behind her mask. “Then stay out of my way!”

I used their standoff to make a dive for the discarded blades. Clawed ninja seemed to guess what I was about to do and lashed out with a kick. He missed my head (point for me) but caught my shin with his heel (point for him). Pain blossomed under my skin as I staggered to my feet with the knives in my hands.

Kusarigama girl pulled back her blade and wound the chain around her arm. She left two feet dangling from her hand and began spinning it over her head.

My body, bruised from the kick and scraped from the asphalt, tensed. Every muscle inside of me strained, ready to leap in the opposite direction of wherever the kusarigama struck.

She released the chain viper fast, the blade aimed for my chest. I had just enough time to bend over backward as the kusarigama sailed past my body, close enough to ruffle the tattered edge of my shirt. It sank into the wall, crumbling bits of brick onto the ground.

Gritting my teeth through the burn of my aching muscles, I jabbed a knife into the chain above me and twisted until it was locked in. Using my new grip on the chain, I pulled myself back up into a standing position and ripped the blade from the wall. I raised the chain above my head, spun, and pulled down, wrenching the kusarigama from the ninja’s grip. She stumbled to her knees.

Sensing the clawed ninja, I swung the end of the chain behind me. The ninja grunted as it wrapped around his calves. He fell forward. Using his momentum, I dropped to my knees and propelled him over my shoulder, where he landed on top of the girl. She cried out as one of his clawed hands pierced her thigh.

I made a face and whistled through my teeth. "Ouch. That looks like it hurts."

The third ninja glanced nervously between me and his fallen friends from where he stood clutching his bleeding shoulder. A steady trickle of blood seeped from between his fingers. His entire left arm looked useless. Bad news for him but great news for me.

A rustling noise caught my attention, and I turned back to see clawed ninja pushing himself off the ground. His eyes crinkled behind his mask, indicating a smile. "You think you're good, don't you?"

I shrugged. "You're the one coming back for seconds."

He laughed. "It's a shame it has to go down like this. I'll admit, I kinda like you."

I held the knives in front of me, forming an X. "Aw, you're sweet. Too bad for you I don't date ninja. I *kill* them."

He opened his arms wide, beckoning me forward. "You can *try*."

I spun the knives in my hand, casting a quick glance at my surroundings. The other two ninja were licking their wounds exactly where I left them. Kim was still nowhere to be seen. I was tired, dirty, and my clothes were ruined. The last thing I wanted to do was to keep fighting. But it didn't look like I had much choice.

Clawed ninja ran toward me and I met him in the middle of the alley in a frenzy of clashing metal. He swung a clawed hand at my face, which I dodged, and then I quickly darted to the side of his other reaching fist. Just as easily, he blocked my blows. My punches were sidestepped, and my kicks deflected by his blocks.

He aimed a high kick for my head, which I ducked under. When he brought his foot down, he balanced his weight on his back leg and leaned back, bringing his arms up in a defensive pose. We stared at each other a moment, both of us using the pause as a chance to catch our breath. The skin on my arms burned, and my muscles pulsed from blocking strikes that were meant to break bone. If I survived, I was going to look like a Dalmatian with bruises for spots.

The clawed ninja, as if sensing my exhaustion, charged. His fists were a blur of metal and death, an angry cyclone trying to suck me inside its razor-edged core. But just as fast as he could swing a fist, I could duck. Rolling and dodging.

Weaving and sidestepping. I bounced his claws off my knives, leaving the clang of metal ringing in my ears.

A thin line of sweat trickled along my temples. I wasn't sure how much more I could take. My body was already trembling from exertion. With his claws pressed against my knives, I stepped closer and stood on my toes so I could meet his eyes. When I spoke my voice was strained. "Who sent you?"

"That's a secret." He rotated his arms up and under, wrenching the knives from my hands and sending them skittering across the asphalt into the shadows.

Son of hibachi. I cast a quick glance at the door to the gallery. How long did it take to search a building? Surely not as long as Kim and the others had been gone. Why hadn't they come looking for me yet? I took a step backward. "If you can't tell me who sent you, maybe you can tell me why?"

He stepped closer and shrugged. "Why does any ninja do what they do? Money? Power?" He chuckled, his laugh husky from exertion. "Or maybe we do it just because we *can*."

Kusarigama girl giggled from where she sat tearing fabric from her pants and wrapping it around her leg.

I took another step back, only to bump into the brick wall of the building. There was nowhere to run. I needed a plan and I needed it fast.

Clawed ninja closed the distance between us in two long strides. He lifted his arm and struck before I could move. His claws sank into the brick next to my right ear, dusting my shoulder with crumbled rock. I choked on a scream before it exploded up my throat as a gasp. I pressed myself against the wall, as if by sheer force I could sink into it.

"Not so sure of yourself now, are you?" He slowly raised his right hand in the air. "That first strike was just so I could see the fear in your eyes before you die. This time I won't miss."

3

A wind stirred inside of me, burning an icy trail just beneath my skin. It looked like Senshi was finally coming out to play. At least now that I had transcended and we were more or less the same person, I knew how to fight and control my ki—or spirit energy—without the voice of my past self whispering inside my head. I closed my eyes and, when I opened them again, my lips curled into a smirk. “You better hope you don’t miss. Because I *never* do.”

He hesitated, his arm hovering in the air.

I wondered if he could sense the change in me—if he could feel the power buzzing around me as much as I felt it pulsing within.

His eyes flicked nervously from me to his fallen friends. “I hardly think you’re in a position to make threats.” But his voice held a waiver of uncertainty.

“Oh yeah? Here’s where I get to see the fear in *your* eyes.” I released a small amount of ki. The wind brushed through my skin and, once outside my body, became something hard and stiff. It struck clawed ninja in the chest, snapping his head back. He grunted and doubled over.

That should have been the end of it.

But it wasn’t.

I tried to reel my ki back inside me, but the more I pulled at the energy flowing from my body, the faster it spilled out. In fact, I seemed to be creating power faster than I could expel it. It pushed against my bones and stretched under my skin. I felt like a balloon stuck to a helium tank. Gritting my teeth, I staggered backward, my arms wrapped around my stomach. Something was really, *really* wrong.

Clawed ninja screamed and tried to tug his bladed fist from the brick. And when that didn’t work, he released his grip on the metal handle, leaving the

claws behind as he felt his way along the wall, shielding his head with his arms. “What are you doing?”

I opened my mouth to explain that it wasn't me—that I'd lost control—but my words were replaced by a cry of pain. Doubling over, I gripped my sides. Something snapped. A rib? This was followed by a ripping sensation so intense it brought tears to my eyes. I cast one last longing glance at the door. *Kim, where are you?*

“Please!” kusarigama girl cried out, shielding herself from the cyclone of wind that filled the alley. “Stop it!”

I tried. But it felt like trying to pour the entire ocean into a coffee mug. My body shook as my ki continued to flood from every pore. A person only had so much spirit energy. I remembered enough from my past-life ki lessons to know that if I didn't find a way to stop the flood from within, I'd lose all of my ki. And then I'd be in a permanent state of dead.

Already the effects of my ki loss were taking a toll on my body. My knees buckled and I dropped to the ground, each of my limbs too heavy to move. The energy I needed to stand, to lift my head and even beat my heart, drained from my body with each passing second.

And I wasn't the only one in trouble. The three ninja cried out in pain—or fear—I couldn't be sure. Their screams echoed off the brick walls before the wind picked up and tore the voices from their throats. Aluminum cans, discarded lottery tickets, and other trash swirled around us, hitting our bodies only to fly away and strike again.

I mustered enough energy to cover my head with my arm, protecting it against the onslaught of debris. Again, I tried to retract my ki, and again I failed. I couldn't explain it, but something inside of me felt ... off. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to figure it out. I didn't have time for anything.

I was out of options.

The clawed ninja sank to the ground beside me, tearing at his throat, gasping for the air being sucked out of him. The other two ninja lay huddled against the wall, their heads tucked under their hands like they were protecting themselves from a tornado—and in a way, they were.

The ground trembled beneath my body. A shriek of metal pierced my eardrums, and I looked up to find the Dumpster sliding across the asphalt. Where

were the other samurai? There was no way Kim and the others couldn't hear what was happening outside, no way they couldn't feel the building shake around them.

Was Kim in trouble too?

A beer bottle skipped across the asphalt before wind picked it up and smashed it against the edge of the Dumpster. Dozens of jagged pieces swirled in the air like a swarm of glittering wasps. The first shard to come my way only grazed my arm. But the second bit into my cheek with enough force that warm lines of blood streaked across my face. If something didn't happen soon, I'd be cut to pieces before my spirit bled out of me.

Beside me, the clawed ninja howled in pain. I looked over to find him pulling a jagged piece of glass out of the side of his neck. Another shard brushed across my back, leaving a burning trail in its wake. Hissing in pain, I tried, one last time, to focus, to harness the energy back inside of me like I had so many times in battle. But each time I tried to mentally tug it, it tugged right back, drawing even more energy from within me.

Dying sucked.

I'd killed myself in my first life. Of course, it was to keep from being taken prisoner (and whatever torture-filled plans my enemies had for me). So I could attest to how much suck was involved in dying (hint: it didn't tickle). Not to mention that, if I did die, it meant losing Kim all over again. I wouldn't, *couldn't*, let that happen—at least not without a fight.

I grunted as a sliver of glass sank into the back of my arm. First things first—I needed a shield. I held my hand up to protect my eyes and did a quick scan of the alley. The Dumpster, while sturdy, was sliding around, making it way too hazardous to hide behind. Kim's car, on the other hand, would provide the perfect shelter from the glass storm. Using the last of my strength, and with one arm shielded over my head, I half shimmied, half crawled toward the Trans Am. My leg bumped something along the way and a glance showed me it was the clawed ninja, motionless, on the ground. I kicked him in the stomach as I crawled by. It may or may not have been an accident.

Inch by inch, I pushed myself through the beating wind and pelting glass. It wasn't until the Trans Am's back bumper was several feet away that I thought I

might actually make it. But the first squeal of rubber against asphalt told me just how wrong I was.

I didn't believe it at first when the car shuddered. I thought my flying hair and the wind had distorted my vision. I mean, sure, it was windy enough to move the Dumpster, but a car weighs a lot more, right? There was no way my ki had gathered enough power to move a car. But no sooner had the thought passed through my mind than the Trans Am's brakes released a toe-curling shriek and the car began rolling toward me.

Son of hibachi! I tried to stand, but my knees buckled. Not only was I immediately blown over but more glass pelted my body. As I fell onto my back, the glass protruding from my arms dug farther into my skin. My head hit the ground, and I heard a crack. Could have been more breaking glass. Could have been my skull. Either way, it hurt like a mother. If I didn't move—like *now*—I was going to be Rileigh Martin, human speed bump—not exactly an ideal obituary article. I pushed up onto my hands and feet and attempted crab-crawling backward.

The Trans Am picked up speed.

I tried moving faster, but my body refused to respond. Another foot and my back met with something hard. Twisting my head, I looked to see what was blocking my path. The Dumpster. My heart fell into my stomach. I didn't have enough time to move around it. The Trans Am was only seconds away.

Okay, Rileigh, you have one shot at this. Make it count. I flattened myself to the ground, ignoring the sting of asphalt and glass that bit into my back and legs. Maybe I'd get lucky and the car would pass over with me safely between the tires. Maybe I'd miscalculated and would be crushed.

Either way, I closed my eyes.

4

Japan, 1491

Akiko pressed her hands against her hot, swollen eyes. But still, tears worked their way through the crevices of her fingers, trailing down her wrists where they soaked into the sleeves bunched at her elbows.

“Stop rubbing your face!” Akiko’s mentor Etsu scolded her as she jerked and combed fistfuls of Akiko’s hair into a topknot. “You are ruining all of my hard work. What a mess!”

“I do not care,” Akiko muttered.

The older woman tsked. With stiff, hooked fingers, she removed a bundle of silk from within her robe. “Such an attitude! You should be excited! This is a great honor, after all.” She picked at the cord knotted around the bundle until it loosened. Carefully, she peeled back the layers of silk and revealed the dagger within.

Akiko flinched, causing Etsu to laugh softly. “Silly girl. You cannot keep acting like a child, Akiko. You are fifteen today.”

“Which means I am a woman now. *I know.*” She didn’t bother to hide the bitterness in her voice.

“Well.” Etsu’s gaze wandered to the white cloth draped across the sleeping mat waiting for Akiko’s virginal blood. “Not yet, you are not.”

Despite her best attempt not to, Akiko shuddered. The cloth would be not only a souvenir, but also insurance to the winning bidder. Proof that he was getting exactly what he paid for.

A ball of fury burned in the pit of Akiko’s stomach. She hated that cloth more than she hated anything in her life. She wanted to rip it apart with her fingers, tear into it with her teeth, and set fire to whatever pieces remained.

As if sensing Akiko's thoughts, Etsu patted her shoulder—the first tender touch Akiko could remember receiving from the gray-haired woman. “This is a great honor, Akiko.” When Akiko didn't answer, Etsu added, “It will be over before you know it.”

Akiko said nothing, only bit her trembling lip.

The old woman sighed and shook her head. “Such a stubborn girl.” She lifted the dagger from its bed of silk and inspected the edge with her thumb. “Perfectly sharp,” she muttered.

Akiko's heart skipped as Etsu brought the dagger closer to her head. Again, Akiko's gaze was drawn to the white cloth. “Make it fast,” she whispered.

Etsu nodded and wove her gnarled fingers into Akiko's hair. “Do not move.”

Akiko couldn't if she wanted to. The old woman had her fingers so firmly entwined into her scalp that she would have her hair ripped clean from her head if she ran—a possibility she considered.

But Etsu's blade was faster than Akiko's plans for escape. The younger girl felt a tug on her scalp followed by a release, as her newly shorn hair fell to her shoulders.

“It is done,” Etsu told her.

Akiko cracked open her eyes, startled to find she'd closed them.

“See?” Etsu put down the dagger and held what remained of Akiko's topknot in the air. The hair spasmed in her arthritic grasp like a dying creature taking its last breaths.

Akiko's stomach clenched, and she fought the urge to snatch her hair back from the older woman. But it wasn't her hair to begin with—not really. Akiko had no right to anything, as her mentor was so fond of reminding her—not her hair, not her body. Akiko's eyes were drawn back to the white cloth. She didn't even have claim to her own blood.

Tears, hot and stinging, sprang to her eyes.

Etsu sighed impatiently. “If you are going to cry about it, I will let you keep it.”

If she wasn't between sobs, Akiko would have laughed at that. Why would she want to keep her cut hair? It would only serve to remind her of this day and everything that was taken from her. She shook her head and waved the old woman's offering away. That's when a glint of silver caught her eye.

Etsu's dagger, forgotten on the floor.

Akiko sucked in a breath. Surely, the old woman wouldn't leave it.

"Suit yourself." Etsu shrugged and pocketed Akiko's discarded hair. She made no move to reclaim her blade as she struggled to her feet, joints popping, and hobbled to the door where she paused. "Akiko?"

"Yes?" The girl's gaze darted away from the dagger. Her pulse quickened.

Etsu sighed. "Sometimes there are things in life we must do. Things that are not always pleasant." She paused. "A courtesan's life is a good one. You will have wealth. Honor. Respect."

Akiko struggled to keep her eyes locked on Etsu's face. So badly she wanted to stare at the dagger, as if it would disappear if she did not keep watch. "But what about freedom?"

"Freedom?" The woman waved a gnarled hand. "You think you could survive on your own? That you could make a better life for yourself?" She laughed. "Here you will be taken care of. Protected. Out there on your own?" She shook her head. "You would not last a day." Etsu slid the door open and disappeared.

Akiko didn't move for several heartbeats. When she was sure that the older woman wasn't returning, she scrambled to the dagger and slid it into the folds of her robe.

We shall see who survives.

5

The first time I died, it had been a relief. Though I remembered very little about it, I did remember passing beyond the barrier of a broken and bleeding body, away from the smell of blood and burnt skin, and into the comfort of darkness. It was inside that darkness that a hand waited to envelop my own.

This was nothing like that.

This darkness was cold. It spun around me, or maybe I was the one spinning? Either way, I was about to throw up.

“Raleigh!” Even Kim’s voice sounded different. Last time it had been a calm beacon that urged me from my body. This time he sounded scared, frantic even. “Raleigh, don’t you go anywhere. Stay with me.”

Like I could leave if I tried. The black room had no doors, no windows, only strange distorted lights that blinked at me from the edge of my vision. Lights that, upon staring at them, grew larger and fuzzier until the world opened up around them and I realized I was staring at the streetlight in the alley next to the gallery.

“Oh, thank God.” Kim’s body, which had been so tall and rigid in front of me, seemed to deflate under the weight of what could have been. “Raleigh, I thought you were—” His voice caught in his throat. “You weren’t moving ... I ... ” He placed a fist against his forehead and bowed his head as if he really was thanking God.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” But even as I said it, my vision swam in a kaleidoscope of color. I placed a hand against my head as if that could stop the world from moving under my body. It was then that I felt the baseball-sized lump on my forehead. “I think I have a concussion.”

Michelle, who I'd just now noticed crouched by my side, said, "You're lucky you're not dead! We found you under Kim's car." She looked around the alley before meeting my gaze. "It looks like there was a tornado out here. What happened?"

I tried to sit up but immediately stopped when my vision teetered. "Let's just say that even after 500 years, ninja still suck."

"What?" Kim's head snapped up at the same time Braden and Drew raised their arms in fight stance and scanned the alley. "What do you mean by *ninja*?"

"I mean"—I took Michelle's offered hand and let her pull me up into a sitting position—"the three bloodied and bruised guys in the black pajamas just over," But when I looked past my shoulder to where the three ninja had been before Kim's car ran over me, no one remained. "Huh."

Kim jumped to his feet, the muscles in his jaw flexing as he studied the shadows in the corners of the buildings. "I knew it! I knew I recognized ninja black magic."

Slowly, and with Michelle's help, I stood. My head throbbed, and I swayed lightly on my feet. "What magic?"

Drew glanced at me. "We were trapped inside the art gallery. The doors wouldn't budge, and the windows wouldn't open."

"Kim even threw a chair against one window, trying to break the glass," Braden added. "It just bounced off like it was made of rubber."

"That's when we knew we'd fallen into a trap," Michelle said.

"No." Kim walked up to me, his eyes locked on mine. "The trap wasn't *inside* the building ... " He placed his hands on either side of my face and drew me closer to him. "Was it?"

The words caught in my throat. I didn't want to tell him that I was in danger again. I knew by speaking the words I'd break the delusion I'd allowed myself to fall into—that being a samurai again didn't have to change my life. I should have known better. I was a protector. It was who I was born to be—I felt sure of it. And with that came responsibility. Even if it meant forgoing a trip to the movies to tango with ninja in a dirty alley. It sucked, sure. But I could handle it because I had Kim and my friends. And they made my life better no matter what I was doing. "I don't know if it was a trap. But they definitely expressed a strong desire to kill me."

Kim made a strangled noise and released me.

“I don’t understand.” Drew approached us. “Why was the trap for Raleigh only? Why were they sent to kill her and not the rest of us?”

Kim shook his head. “I don’t know.” He looked at me, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Did they say anything else?”

“You mean after they started throwing sharp things at me?” I examined the tattered edges of my shirt. “No.”

Braden poked his head out from behind the Dumpster. Something about the trash bin didn’t look right, and it took me a moment to realize that it was on its side. He kicked his way through the garbage bags and cardboard boxes that spilled from it. “You know what else is weird?” He paused to pull a candy bar wrapper off his shoe. “Why send so many ninja after just one person? Kinda overkill. I mean, look at this place.” He gestured to the torn-apart alley. “How many were there? Twenty?”

I lowered my gaze and studied my grease-stained jeans. “Yeah ... um ... would you believe three?” Even without looking I could feel the wide-eyed stares of my friends boring into my head.

“Wait. What?” Michelle let go of me. “Raleigh, look at this place! The Dumpster was overturned. Kim’s car was pushed backward—with you under it! You’re telling us that three ninja did all that?” She hugged herself and shivered.

“I didn’t say that.” I ran my fingers through my hair, gently pulling apart the tangles.

Kim frowned and folded his arms across his chest while the rest of them waited for me to continue.

I dropped my hands from my hair and sighed. “It was me, okay?”

Braden and Drew exchanged incredulous looks while Michelle made a choking sound.

“How is that possible?” Drew asked.

“My ki.” I shrugged. “I kinda lost control.”

“I’ll say.” Braden’s eyes swept the alley.

Kim took a step forward. “You did this? The Dumpster? My car?”

I nodded.

He muttered something under his breath that was distinctly not English.

Michelle spun a slow circle, her eyes scanning everything from the trash on the ground to the tops of the buildings. “Well, this is going from bad to worse.”

I leaned against the building, which steadied the Tilt-A-Whirl I seemed to be riding. “It’s not a big deal.”

Kim gave me a look that clearly told me he didn’t agree. “Really? What’s under your nose?”

I touched my upper lip and felt something flake against my hand. I raised my finger up to the streetlight. Flecks of dried blood dotted my fingertips. Huh. “Probably hit my face when your car ran over me. It doesn’t matter.” I dusted my hands on my jeans. “That’s not the big issue. Why are you freaking out about my ki when we should be freaking out about the bigger issue?” When no one said anything, I groaned. “Hello? *Ninja*?”

“Good point.” Braden stood from where he’d crouched to study the front of Kim’s car. “Ninja do suck.”

I gestured at Braden as if to say, *See*? But Kim didn’t look convinced. “We can’t ignore this, Raleigh. Ninja, we can handle. But this?” He gestured to the alley. “You could have killed yourself.”

I rolled my eyes even though I knew he was right. Never before had my power refused to listen to me. If I hadn’t knocked myself out with Kim’s car, would I have continued to bleed my spirit out? A chill crept along the length of my spine.

Kim stepped forward and put an arm around me. “While I am glad you were able to defend yourself, this—I’m just worried.”

I softened. “I know.” I was worried too.

He sighed and kissed the top of my head. “I don’t know who we’re going to find to help us with this. It’s not like there is an abundance of ki masters running around these days. I can check with the Network. Maybe Dr. Wendell—”

“No!” I cut him off. Dr. Wendell was the obnoxious and annoying doctor/government agent who wouldn’t stop dating my mother despite my constant threats. I didn’t need him more involved in my life than he already was. Besides, I wasn’t dumb enough to work with someone until I knew the motivations under their shiny exterior. Call me paranoid, but when you die at seventeen, you aren’t so trusting in the next life. “It’s just that, while I agree the whole ki situation is serious, I don’t think it takes priority over the ninja who want us dead. Do you?”

“Another good point,” Braden said. “What if we dealt with the ninja first, and in the meantime, Raleigh could just ... *not* manipulate ki.”

Kim frowned at him. “That’s supposed to be a plan? We try not to die and in the meantime Raleigh doesn’t manipulate ki?”

Drew raised his hand. “Actually, I’m in favor of any plan that involves *trying not to die.*”

I had to agree. It was the trying not to manipulate ki part that had me worried. Manipulating ki was part of who I was, and I didn’t always have a choice when it decided to rise inside of me. “Kim, if you have a better plan, now would be the time to share.”

His silence was my answer.

6

As if chemistry class wasn't bad enough.

I flexed my tingling fingers and let out a quivering breath. It had been a month since the ninja attack, and so far Kim had no leads on who they were or where to find them. And while the thought of a bunch of ninja on the loose who wanted me dead didn't give me the warm fuzzies, I had bigger problems to deal with.

Much bigger.

The tingling under my skin turned into pinpricks, like a thousand tiny needles digging beneath my flesh. I wasn't sure what caused it, only that it started happening to me after the ninja attack. I shifted in my seat, hoping to distract myself from the pain.

My best friend Quentin pushed his metal stool away from the lab table. He eyed me nervously while addressing the doe-eyed brunette sitting between us. "Seriously, Carly, you need to give it a rest."

"What?" His twin sister snapped her gum. "If people were talking smack about me behind my back, I'd want to know." She patted my hand, a touch I could barely feel through the buzzing beneath my skin. "Raleigh, you should know that people are ... worried about you. You're super jumpy all the time, you have horrendous bags under your eyes, and, sweetie, when's the last time you exfoliated?" She wrinkled her nose. "Are you having a breakdown or something?"

I snatched my hand away from hers and clenched and unclenched my fingers. All the relaxation techniques I'd remembered from my past as a samurai had failed. But still, I tried. Sucking in a deep breath of lab air (a sickly sweet combination of formaldehyde and ammonia), I counted to ten and exhaled slowly. Some of the tightness inside me unwound but the pressure remained—

like unzipping a pair of too-tight jeans but not being able to take them off. “I am *not* having a breakdown.”

She shrugged and snapped her gum again, a sound that made my teeth grind. “Are you sure? Because you’re totally on edge. And the last time I saw you this stressed, you flipped out on some poor homeless guy.”

If by “flipped out on some poor homeless guy,” she meant “saved everyone’s life from a nunchaku-wielding assassin,” then I guess I did. “That guy was dangerous, Carly.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. He was just some doped-out homeless guy. Stop being so dramatic.”

The electric hum pulsed beneath my fingertips and a heaviness filled my lungs. I tried to expel it with a slow steady breath, but the weight didn’t budge. “I’m sorry, you’re calling *me* dramatic?” Did she somehow forget the fact he threw a shuriken at her? She either had the long-term memory of a gnat, or she was in denial. My money was on gnat brain.

Quentin shot me a pleading look and snatched the box of matches sitting in front of me. “I think I’ll light the Bunsen burner, if you don’t mind.”

Carly shrugged. “The truth can be painful.”

So can an axe-kick. I gripped the countertop. *Must. Resist. Kicking. Carly’s. Stupid. Face.*

“Listen.” She leaned across the table to meet my eyes. “Honey, it’s not that I don’t understand. You and my brother were attacked.”

I laughed through clenched teeth. If only I could make it through my classes without losing control, then I’d get to see Kim at training tonight and I’d feel better. Kim always made me feel better. “Oh, I’m so sure you *understand*.”

“Ri-Ri,” Quentin warned.

Carly flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Of course I do. It makes sense that both of you are going to be traumatized or whatever. Just ... maybe tone down the drama while you’re at school? You don’t want anyone thinking you guys are bigger freaks than they already do.”

My body shook as every muscle tightened in anticipation of the explosion to come. Beads of sweat prickled along my forehead as I fought to gain control. If I lost control here, how many people would I hurt? I couldn’t let that happen.

“Wow.” Quentin shook his head. “It’s hard to believe I’m the one who wants to be a psychologist. Your ability to empathize is astounding, you know that?”

“Right?” She nodded. “See, Rileigh? Quentin gets that I’m just trying to help.”

He snorted. “Even so, I think your services are best provided elsewhere. Don’t you have minions to text or something?”

I shot Q a thankful look before I pulled my water bottle from my backpack. I unscrewed the lid and took a long drink, hoping it would cool the anger burning inside of me.

“*Ms. Martin.*”

I paused mid-sip to glance at the chemistry teacher, Mr. Fritz, leaning across a lab table at the front of the room. “I thought I made it clear on the syllabus that there is no food or drink in this class. There are dangerous chemicals in this lab and I’d hate to see anyone get hurt.”

I set the bottle on the table. “If you’re worried about someone getting hurt, you might want to reconsider the seating chart—” Q shoved an elbow into my side before I could finish.

Mr. Fritz crossed his arms and frowned. “I’m sorry. What was that?”

I glanced back and forth between Mr. Fritz and Q. The identicalness of their scowls was uncanny. Finally, I sighed. “Not important. I’m sorry about the water bottle, Mr. Fritz.”

He nodded, the movement sliding his glasses to the edge of his nose. “One strike, Ms. Martin. Don’t let it happen again.”

“I won’t,” I replied glumly and stuffed the bottle back into my bag.

Seemingly satisfied, Mr. Fritz nodded and moved on to another table.

“*Anyway.*” Carly smacked her gum, each pop like a hammer pounding the base of my spine. She poured the contents of a test tube into a beaker. “I didn’t want to do it—I know you guys are best friends and all—but I had to tell Mom that I didn’t feel safe with Rileigh coming over to our house anymore.” She looked up at me and smiled. “At least not until you work out your *issues.*”

Quentin made a choked sound as I whirled around to face her.

“What?” My pulse jumped from a jog to a sprint as the pressure built inside of me, pushing against my ribs until I thought they would crack. It was no secret that Carly and I couldn’t stand each other, but she’d never tried to come between Quentin and me before. He’d been my best friend since first grade. Not to

mention he was the one person who kept me firmly grounded in this life. Without him, I'd be more lost than ever.

Invisible hands ripped into my chest, trying to claw their way out. What little control I had was slipping away—and fast.

Quentin, as if sensing my distress, snatched the empty test tube from Carly's hand. "Carly, oh my God, you got something on your face."

Wide-eyed, she patted her face. "Where? What is it?"

Quentin pointed to his nostril.

"Oh, God." The color drained from her cheeks. "Mr. Fritz!" She leapt from her stool, ran to the front of the classroom, and snatched the wooden hall pass from a hook on the wall. "I have to go to the bathroom!"

He looked up from assisting a table of students and waved her away with a sigh. "Hurry back. Your table is behind the rest of the class. You should have your Bunsen burner turned on by now."

She nodded and ran for the door.

Quentin gave a nervous glance to the matches in front of him. "Don't listen to her. My mom loves you and she knows Carly's a drama queen. She'd never ban you from the house." He looked at me. "Are you—are you okay?"

Not even close. But maybe if I lied to him I could fool myself. "I'm good." I tried to sound convincing, but my voice came out strained.

He took a match from the box but didn't strike it. "Besides, I love you and isn't my opinion the only one that counts?"

"I just thought she'd be more understanding, you know? I'd assumed since I saved her life, lost my house, and almost died, she'd get off my back." I shook my head and closed my eyes, trying to harness the energy swirling inside me. It felt like I was being torn in half.

"Yeah, well ... " Quentin turned on the valve that released the gas. "Welcome to high school." He struck the match and raised the lit tip to the nozzle.

At that moment, the hum of ki burst through my skin. To make it worse, I'd spent so much of my energy trying to keep it from escaping that I had none left to control it when it did. It happened so fast, I was helpless to warn Quentin about the attack coming his way.

The Bunsen burner exploded in an angry fireball that ricocheted him off his stool, and he collapsed onto the floor. He buried his face in his hands while uttering a stream of obscenities under his breath.

“Q!” I leapt from my chair and joined him on the floor. The acrid stench of singed hair stung my nostrils. “Oh my God! Are you alright?”

He didn’t move but continued to mutter every curse word I knew, in addition to some awfully creative ones.

“Mr. Fritz!” Fear strangled my voice into a garbled mess.

My chem teacher was next to us in an instant. He placed his hand on Quentin’s back, his eyes wide with alarm. “What happened?”

“I—I—” *Oh, you know, I lost control of my ki and set my best friend on fire.* “I don’t know. Quentin was lighting the Bunsen burner, and then—” I sucked in a ragged breath. “And then—”

“It exploded,” Quentin mumbled miserably against his hands.

Mr. Fritz held his arms up and glanced at the students who’d left their seats and were climbing over each other to get a closer look. “Okay, I need everyone to calm down.”

I stared at him in disbelief. Calm down? I’d nearly roasted Quentin’s face off, and he wanted me to be calm about it? My stomach twisted until I thought I’d double over from the pain. What if it’d been worse? What if—

Before I could finish my thought, the Bunsen burner flared to life again, issuing a beach ball-sized fireball that dissipated with a whoosh into black smoke before reaching the ceiling.

“What the—” Mr. Fritz stumbled backward, knocking over Carly’s abandoned stool. I jumped in front of Quentin and grabbed onto a metal leg, righting the chair before it could fall on him. At least my reflexes hadn’t failed me.

Mr. Fritz’s skin paled to the color of the plastic skeleton mounted on the wall. He grasped the counter and pulled himself to his feet. “Gas leak. It has to be a gas leak.” He looked at us, his eyes impossibly wide. “I want all of you”— he scanned the entire classroom—“outside and in front of the gymnasium. NOW.”

The stunned silence erupted into squeals and shrieks as my classmates scrambled to grab their belongings before stampeding from the room.

“Ms. Martin.” Mr. Fritz grabbed Quentin’s elbow and motioned for me to do the same. Together, we lifted him to his feet. “Get Mr. Farmer to the nurse. I’m

going to the office to alert them about the gas leak. The school needs to be evacuated.” Mr. Fritz placed a hand between my shoulders and gave me an urgent push forward.

I nodded even though I knew there was no gas leak. Wrapping my arm around Quentin’s waist, I guided him out the door and down the hall. I whispered how sorry I was more than a hundred times, but still he refused to look at me and kept his face buried beneath his hands. How badly had I burned him? Would he scar? Guilt twisted my insides.

Carly had been right about me.

I was dangerous.

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