

schooled in
revenge

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HYPERTON

NEW YORK

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To all of those who have ever been
wronged . . . and so desperately wanted
to make it right

If you prick us do we not bleed?
If you tickle us do we not laugh?
If you poison us do we not die?
And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

—SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*

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CHAPTER ONE

A VA WINTERS LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW OF THE charter plane, taking in the desolate landscape below as the pilot banked toward a small patch of level land. Rebun Island, Japan, was even more remote than she had expected, the tiny landing strip surrounded on three sides by snow-covered cliffs and fronted by the frigid waters of the Rebun Channel.

Then again, she hadn't expected it to be easy. She knew what she was signing up for when she'd accepted Takeda's offer of training.

The plane touched down, bouncing over the frozen ground until it finally came to a stop. A minute later, the door opened and Ava exited with her small duffel bag in one gloved hand.

"Welcome to Japan," the pilot said, stepping to the ground beside her.

"Thank you." She turned her attention to the surrounding landscape, the wind whipping her long dark hair around her face. There was no airport, no taxi station, no people. She looked at the pilot, already heading back into the plane. "Wait! Where do I go from here?"

He glanced back, nodding at something behind her.

She turned around, peering into the distance until she could make out a building at the top of the jagged cliffs, the sea crashing violently against the rocks at its feet.

“But . . . how am I supposed to get there?” Ava asked.

“If you want this badly enough,” the pilot said, climbing into the plane and reaching for the door, “you will find a way.”

She was still in shock when the propellers began to move. For a minute, she could only watch as the plane took off into the steely sky. The hum of its engine had diminished to a faint buzz when a frigid wind blew in from the Rebun Channel, sending a shock of cold through her system. She shivered, pulling up the hood of her sweatshirt, and started walking.

The ground was icy, her warm breath turning to smoke as it hit the frigid air. Frost blanketed the cliffs in front of her but she kept her eyes on the ground, not wanting to trip and fall. She’d come to the island with a singular goal. An injury was the last thing she needed this early in the game.

After two hours of struggling to stay upright on the frozen soil, she finally reached the base of the cliff. Pausing to catch her breath, she tipped her head back, her gaze coming to rest on the old Japanese *tera* forty feet above her. She scanned the face of the cliff, hoping for some kind of hidden staircase, or at the very least, something resembling toeholds.

But there was nothing. Just a wall of sheer rock.

Taking a deep breath, she slung the duffel bag over her shoulder and across her chest, adjusting the strap so it fit snugly against her body. Then she started to climb. At first, she could hardly see the small crevices that could be used as footholds, the protruding rock she could use to pull herself upward. But after a while, her eyes became accustomed to scanning for the

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next indentation, the next thing to grab. As darkness began to seep across the sky, she became aware of her aching arms and forced herself to move faster. She didn't have the luxury of hanging by her fingers, looking for the perfect place to put her feet.

The past had toughened her will, but she only had so much upper-body strength.

She was near the top when her foot slipped, a smattering of rocks falling into the abyss below as she clung to the cliff face, her breath coming fast and heavy, her heart nearly pounding out of her chest. She allowed herself only a minute to gather her courage before she started climbing again.

Her arms and legs were trembling when she finally heaved herself over the top of the cliff. She lay there for a minute, sweat coating her body despite the frigid temperatures. When she could breathe without gasping, she got to her feet and headed for the *tera*.

It was smaller than it had looked from the ground, and less imposing, with five pillars resting atop a gently curved roof. She'd read somewhere that it was a tradition of this kind of architecture, the pillars representing the Buddhist universe's central elements: sky, wind, fire, water, and earth. The roof was a deep red, a punctuation mark against the snow-covered terrain.

But it was too cold to stand still, and she grabbed on to a bamboo pillar, one of many lining the walkway to the *tera*'s entrance, and walked toward two large doors at the front of the building. She was almost there, her steps slowing to a shuffle, when exhaustion overtook her. She dropped to her knees, closing her eyes and trying to find the strength to stand.

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“You’re Ava Winters,” a voice said from behind her.

Ava turned in surprise, her gaze landing on a red-haired woman about her age. Ava tried to smile around the pain in her arms and legs, thinking the woman had come to greet her, but she only favored Ava with a steely glare before walking wordlessly past her.

Too tired to care, Ava got to her feet. She was inching her way forward when the doors to the tera opened. A stoic, authoritative man with a weathered face and strong build stood in the doorway. He said something to her in Japanese as the wind howled around them. She had no idea what the words meant, but it didn’t matter.

This was Satoshi Takeda.

An aura of strength and control emanated from him, temporarily stopping her forward progress. A moment later, she remembered why she had come.

She met his gaze. “Takeda.”

Silence settled between them. Even the wind seemed to calm in the face of his presence.

Finally, he nodded.

Ava bowed. “I’m ready to start my training.”