

To undo dark magic, she must sacrifice everything.

Exclusive
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The Fox,
inside!

Huntress

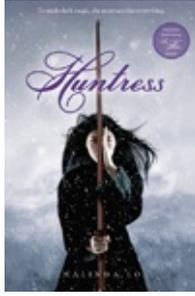
MALINDA LO

Huntress

M A L I N D A L O



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
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To Amy Lovell





AUTHOR'S NOTE

Huntress is set in the same world as *Ash*, but it takes place many centuries earlier. There are some significant cultural differences between the time periods.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

In multisyllabic names, the emphasis is on the italicized syllable. In some cases, both syllables should be given equal weight. In human names, the letters *ae* are pronounced like the *a* sound in *mate* and *skate*; the letters *ai* are pronounced like the *i* sound in *kite* and *site*. Xi names (designated with asterisks) have different pronunciation rules.

Ailan: *Eye-lahn*

Anmin: *Ahn-min*

Cai Simin Tan: *Tsai Sih-meen Tan*

Con Isae Tan: *Con Ee- say Tan*

Ealasaïd*: *Ay- lah-sed*

Elowen*: *Ell-oh-when*

Farin: *Fahr-in*

Kaede: *Kay-dee*

Kaihan: *Kye-hahn*

Maesie: *May-see*

Maila: *My-lah*

Maire Morighan*: *Mare Mor-ih-gahn*

Mona: *Mo- nah*

Nara: *Nah-rah*

Niran: *Nee-rah*

Noa: *No-ah*

Ota: *Oh-tah*

Parsa: *Par-sah*

Pol: *Pole*

Raesa: *Ray-sah*

Raiden: *Rye-den*

Shae: *Shay*

Sota: *So-tah*

Suri: *Soo-ree*

Taeko: *Tay-ko*

Taisin: *Tie-sin*

Tali: *Tah-lee*

Taninli*: *Tan-in-lee*

Tanis: *Tan-is*

Tulan: *Too-lahn*

Xi*: *Shee*

Yuna: *Yoo-nah*

Yuriya: *Yoo-ree-ah*



PART I



Clouds and thunder arise:
The sage brings order.
Those who chase deer without a hunter
Lose their way in the Wood.

—*Book of Changes*

Chapter I



She saw a beach made of ice, and she felt her heart breaking.

The ground where she stood was frozen white, but twenty feet away, cold blue ocean lapped at the jagged shore. Someone there was climbing into a rowboat, and she knew that she loved this person. She was certain of it in the same way that one is instantly aware of the taste of sweetness in a drop of honey. But she was afraid for this person's life, and the fear raised a cold sweat on her skin and caused a sick lurch in her stomach, as though she were on a ship during a violent storm.

She opened her mouth to call the rower back—she couldn't bear the loss; it would surely cripple her—and at that moment she realized she could hear nothing. All around her was an eerie, unnatural silence. There was no sound from the ocean. She could not even hear herself breathing. She felt her tongue shaping the syllables of the person's name, but she did not recognize what the name was until the rower turned to face her. *Kaede.*

The rower was Kaede, and she looked back with dark, troubled eyes. Loose strands of black hair whipped around her pale face; there were spots of red on her wind-roughened cheeks. Her lips parted as though she would speak. But then Kaede reached down into the boat and lifted out a long oar, dipping it into the azure sea to propel the small craft away from the shore. The droplets of water falling from the blade of the oar were tiny stars, extinguished as quickly as they burned into being. The boat cut through the water, leaving the shore behind, and just before the destination came into view, the vision ended.

She was wrenched out of the icy landscape and back into her body, where she was sitting in the empty practice hall, alone on her cushion.

She opened her eyes, blinking against the light of the single candle she had lit on the altar. Her heart was pounding, and there was an acrid taste in her mouth. Her hands, folded in her lap, were trembling and chilled. A trickle of sweat ran from her temple down her cheek.

She drew her knees up and hugged them close, burying her face in the crook of her elbow, and because there was no one to hear her, she let out the sob that reared up in her throat. The sound echoed in the vaulted ceiling of the practice room, and for once she gave in to the overwhelming feelings rushing through her. She felt gutted. She felt powerless.

She had never seen so clearly before, and her teachers would praise her for it. But she felt no satisfaction, for she could not rejoice in the vision of someone she apparently loved departing on a journey to her death.

Chapter II



Kaede was working in the cliff garden when she received the summons. This was her favorite part of the Academy—the crescent-shaped patch of earth carved out of the edge of the island, facing the mainland. On a clear day, she could see the brownish-green hills behind the crooked roofs of Seatown. But there had not been a clear day in a little over two months; only this constant gray light and scattered drizzle. Yet, as much as she hated it, it was better to be outside in the brisk sea air than trapped indoors behind the Academy’s suffocating stone walls.

She continued down the row of stunted carrots, working in the rich fertilizer that Maesie, the Academy’s cook, had given her at the start of her shift. A hard winter had been followed by no sign of spring, and Maesie had delayed planting at first, hoping for sunshine and warmth before she subjected her seedlings to the cold earth. But one morning she announced that she would wait no more, and the seeds went into the ground that day, followed by biweekly applications of the thick black fertilizer she concocted in the evenings. And despite the lack of sunlight, the seeds sprouted, though they were thinner and weaker than usual.

Kaede had just finished the row and was about to drag the jug of fertilizer to the next when Maesie came out of the kitchen, an odd look on her face. She held a wooden spoon in her hand as if she had come straight from the stove. Kaede straightened, brushing off her dirty hands on her cotton trousers. “What is it?”

“I’ve just had word from the Council,” Maesie said. “They want to see you.”

Kaede was puzzled. What would the Council of Sages want with her? She was hardly one of their favorite students. “What? When?”

“Now. You’d better leave your things there. I’ll have someone else finish up for you.”

She blinked at Maesie. “Now?” She wasn’t sure she had heard correctly.

“Now. But you should clean up before you go—you don’t want to track mud all over their chambers.”



Kaede had not been to the Council chambers since her first visit to the Academy of Sages when she was eleven, to apply for admission. In the ensuing six years, there had

never been a reason for her to make the long trek to the North Tower, for the only students invited into that inner sanctum were those who could perform the rituals they were taught. Although she had read the *Book of Rituals* several times, Kaede had never successfully completed even the simplest of blessings. She knew she had only been allowed to remain at the Academy because her father was the King's Chancellor, and her mother—before she married him—had been a sage. Now she wondered if her time at the Academy was finally coming to an end, for why else would the Mistress have called for her, if not to dismiss her at last?

To reach the Council chambers, she had to climb a lengthy, circular flight of stairs. Carved in every step were the words to a different verse from the *Book of Changes*. She knew that if she read each step in order from the ground floor up, she would find the entire first folio there, comprising the core teachings that every student was required to learn during her first year. But Kaede only glanced down at random, and the verses made little sense out of context.

*In disorder, misfortune.
In sincerity, fear gives way.
Dragons battle on the plain: yellow and black blood spills.
Fire in the mountain lake: grace brings success.*

The phrases irritated her, reminding her of countless hours spent huddled over her books, feeling as though they were only mocking her. By the time she reached the landing outside the iron doors to the Council chambers, she was eager to be done with it. Whatever form her dismissal might take, she would welcome it.

She reached for the rope hanging from the mouth of the iron dragon embedded in the stone wall, and pulled. Several minutes later the left-hand door was opened by Sister Nara, the youngest of the three Council members. Her black hair, which was normally coiled in two careful braids tucked against the nape of her neck, was coming loose as though she had rushed through her morning rituals. Two small vertical lines appeared between her brown eyes as she said, "Come in."

Kaede followed Sister Nara through the circular antechamber to the inner redwood doors. Each was hung with a round gold shield. On the left was a phoenix, its tail feathers curling toward its beak, wings extended: the sign of harmony. On the right was a unicorn, the symbol of justice; its deerlike head was lowered so that its curving horn pointed down, while its goatlike tail curled up.

Sister Nara opened the doors, and the moment that Kaede entered the Council chamber, she knew something was wrong—she could not have been called there merely to be dismissed. For there were two men seated at the long wooden table along with the Council members and the Mistress of the Academy: One of them was her father, Lord Raiden, the King's Chancellor; the other was King Cai Simin Tan himself. What could have possibly brought him all the way from his palace to the isolated Academy?

Out of long habit, she folded her hands and bowed to the King, but she did not acknowledge her father. The last time they had spoken, they had argued heatedly, and

the memory of it still made her face burn with suppressed anger.

At the head of the table, Maire Morighan, the Mistress of the Academy, said, “Kaede, please sit down.”

As she walked to the table, her cloth shoes making no sound on the cold stone floor, her pulse quickened with curiosity. She saw the three Council members: Sister Nara, who was just pulling out her chair; Sister Ailan; and Sister Yuna. She saw Maire Morighan, her hands clasped on the table before a small wooden box. And, unexpectedly, she saw another student seated beside Sister Ailan. Kaede recognized the girl’s face, but she couldn’t remember her name. They had arrived at the Academy the same year, but after that first year, they had never had any classes together. She was supposed to be extraordinarily gifted, and she took all her classes in private with Sister Ailan. Kaede had never given much thought to her, but now she wondered why she was here. The girl’s cheeks darkened a little under Kaede’s gaze, and she turned deliberately toward the Mistress. And then Kaede remembered: Her name was Taisin.

Maire Morighan said: “You must be wondering why you have been called here. But before we can tell you that, you should know a bit more about why His Majesty has visited us so unexpectedly.” She inclined her head toward the King. “Would you like to tell the tale, Your Majesty?”

King Cai glanced at Lord Raiden before turning his attention to Lord Raiden’s daughter. He had seen her before, of course, when the Chancellor brought his family to the palace, but the King had never done more than keep track of her as a potentially useful tool. She was not the beauty her mother was, though she resembled her in spirit, at least, for she raised her eyes to him boldly. He ran a hand over his triangular beard, considering where to begin.

“One month ago,” the King said, “a visitor arrived at the palace in Cathair. He demanded an audience with me, but he was in a wretched state—looked as if he’d been traveling for months, clothing all torn up. I thought he might be mad. Of course, I refused to see him. I couldn’t risk it. This year alone my guards have uncovered three assassination attempts—those southern lords are getting more brazen by the day. So I waited until Lord Raiden—until your father returned from his visit to the South. That was about two weeks ago.”

Kaede finally let herself look at her father, whose face was carefully blank as he regarded the King. He was wearing the plain black cap and robes of his station, but they were made of the finest silk, embroidered all over with phoenixes in black thread. The last time she had been home in Cathair, her father had been preparing for the trip to the southern provinces that the King had mentioned. The past two years had delivered extremely harsh winters followed by particularly poor harvests, especially in the South. This year, the strange, lingering winter, combined with the unexpected spoilage of much of the Kingdom’s food stores, had led to growing panic among the people. The Academy was largely insulated from such things, but Kaede knew that some in the Kingdom were already going hungry, and hunger led to unrest—especially when the wealthy continued to eat well.

The King continued: “Your father met with this visitor as soon as he returned. He—I could hardly believe this when I first heard it—the man claimed that he had been given something by the Fairy Queen, and she had ordered him to deliver it to me. We have heard nothing from her people, the Xi—at least nothing *official*—in generations.”

He leaned forward, stabbing a heavily ringed finger against the table to emphasize his point. His blue silk sleeves ballooned. "I thought it was a hoax at first."

Kaede asked, "What do you mean, nothing official?"

Irritated by the interruption, the King answered brusquely, "There have been some sightings—nothing definite, mind you—but it seems that some of the Xi have been coming across the borders into our lands."

"It may not be the Xi who are crossing over," Maire Morighan said.

"Then who—or what—are they?" the King snapped. "They're unnatural, these creatures, whatever they are, and they don't belong here."

Lord Raiden said mildly, "Your Majesty, perhaps we can discuss the identity of these creatures later. Let's continue."

The King relented. "The man brought a box with him; he said it had come from the Fairy Queen herself. Inside the box there was a medallion and a scroll. The scroll was written in the language of the Xi, which we could not read. Lord Raiden informed me that the scroll appeared to be genuine, and in that case, we had no choice but to bring it here. This morning, the Council deciphered it. It appears to be an invitation to me to attend the Fairy Queen at her palace in Taninli at midsummer."

"This is the box," Maire Morighan said, gesturing to the small rosewood container before her. She placed her finger in the center of it, and the top opened like the petals of a flower. From within, she removed a tiny scroll and a medallion on a long silver chain. "We have read the scroll, and it is indeed an invitation. It seems that the Fairy Queen, at least, still abides by the laws of our treaty."

Kaede was puzzled. "What treaty?"

"Many generations ago, our kingdom negotiated a treaty with the Fairy Queen that established the border between her lands and ours," said the Mistress. "It was also agreed that we would each keep to our side of the border, and that no one—human, Xi, or other races of fay—would cross it without an invitation from the other land's sovereign. It has been so long since the Borderlands Treaty was signed, and no invitations were ever issued, I believe, until now. So this is quite unexpected."

Everything Kaede had been taught led her to believe that the Xi had no interest in humans anymore. Some traces of them remained—especially here at the Academy, where each Mistress took on a name in the Xi language—but Kaede had always had the impression that the Kingdom was better off without the Xi. "Why do you think they're contacting the King now?" she asked.

The Mistress's eyes flickered to the gray sky outside the windows. "We believe that the unchanging seasons—and even those creatures who have been crossing into our lands—we believe that these are all connected. You have learned, in your lessons here, that we are all part of one vast motion of energies. Something is disrupting the natural flow of things. The meridians that run across our world have been... bent... somehow. We suspect that the Fairy Queen may be aware of this, too. It is very important that we accept her invitation." Maire Morighan's lips narrowed briefly, as if in disapproval. "However, the King is not able to go on the journey, for it will take many months and may be quite dangerous. He will send his son, Prince Con Isae Tan, in his stead."

"I remind you that my hands are full dealing with the chaos in the southern provinces," the King said defensively. "They're nearly ready to launch a civil war. I

cannot leave my kingdom for months just to gallivant off on an invitation to the Fairy Queen's court—an invitation that says nothing about why she's inviting us after all this time, I might add."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty," Maire Morighan said, "it is the Council's strong belief that the Fairy Queen may know why the seasons haven't changed, and *I* remind *you* that all the storms and droughts and food spoilages have been the primary cause of all that unrest. We need to reestablish relations with the Xi; it is a matter of supreme importance."

"His Majesty and I agree that we must answer the Fairy Queen's invitation," Lord Raiden put in, trying to smooth both King Cai's and Maire Morighan's ruffled feathers. "But he cannot travel now. Not only are we on the verge of war, the Queen is pregnant."

"I dare not leave her," the King said stiffly. "She has had a difficult pregnancy." Kaede remembered that the King's first wife had died more than a decade ago, but he had not remarried until last year, when he chose a much younger bride. It had been something of a scandal, for the new Queen was the same age as Prince Con, the King's son from his first marriage.

"We understand," Maire Morighan said, as though they had argued over this many times already. She looked at Kaede. "We have also consulted the oracle stones about the invitation, and they called for Taisin, your classmate, to accompany the prince."

Kaede shifted in her seat, confused. "But what does this have to do with me?"

The Mistress leaned forward slightly, her dark eyes focused on Kaede. "You have been called, as well."

Kaede stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded. "Me?" It made no sense to her.

And then Taisin, who had been silent until now, said: "I had a vision. I had a vision, and you were in it."

Chapter III



Lord Raiden watched his daughter's face as Taisin spoke. Kaede was startled, curious, but guarded. She lifted a hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. He had noticed the minute she entered the Council chambers that she had cut off her hair at chin-level since the last time he had seen her. She should be wearing it in a cylindrical roll at the nape of her neck in the manner of a proper sage-in-training—like Taisin. It was a small rebellion, but an unmistakable one, and Lord Raiden felt a familiar frustration rising in him. He had thought the Academy would discipline his daughter, force her to act in accordance with her station. But instead, it seemed to have only encouraged her to run wild. He could see traces of dirt on her hands, and he frowned.

"Taisin is a true seer," Sister Ailan was saying, "and we consulted the oracle stones. They confirmed what she saw. Kaede must also go on this journey."

"But the stones are not always clear," Lord Raiden objected. "There are hundreds of stones with thousands of marks on them. Perhaps they've been read incorrectly. And Taisin is so young—"

Sister Ailan said crisply, "I have not read them incorrectly, Lord Raiden. And Taisin may be young, but she is our most gifted student in a generation."

Lord Raiden looked pointedly away from Sister Ailan to Maire Morighan. "Mistress, I must question the wisdom of sending my daughter on such a mission. You yourself admitted it might be dangerous. I know the state of our kingdom right now, and I can assure you it is not a place of peace. I refuse to risk my daughter's life."

"Raiden," the King said, "you know we would send as many guards with them as necessary."

"Of course, Your Majesty, but you know as well as I do that Kaede is not gifted in the way that Taisin apparently is. Nor is she trained to defend herself as your son is. And Kaede is only a child; she is not yet eighteen." Lord Raiden glanced back at Maire Morighan. "You should be sending an experienced sage, not a couple of students. You heard my daughter—she isn't even familiar with the Borderlands Treaty."

Kaede's cheeks burned at the dismissive tone in her father's voice. Resentment seethed inside her, acidic and sour. She wanted to lash out at him, but Maire Morighan

gave her a warning look, and Kaede reluctantly bit her tongue.

“Lord Chancellor,” the Mistress said, “I understand your concern for your daughter’s safety, but the matter is no longer in our hands. Taisin’s vision was exceptionally clear, and when we consulted the oracle stones about Kaede, they were decisive. Kaede is meant to accompany Taisin, and no other sage may go. That is the word of the stones. Even if we don’t always understand why the oracle stones say what they do, there is a reason. They have never steered us wrong. We must trust in them.”

“Wait,” Kaede interrupted, frustrated. She turned to Taisin, whose brown eyes were shadowed as though she had not slept well. “What was in this vision?” Kaede asked. “What was I doing there?”

Taisin glanced at Sister Ailan as if to ask permission, and when her teacher gave an almost imperceptible nod, she said haltingly, “I—I saw you on a beach—a beach made of ice.” The memory of it washed through her; she felt the same loss and fear she had felt that night in the practice room, and beneath it all, she remembered the deep ache of love. It was disorienting, for in her life at the Academy, she had rarely noticed Kaede before, and now, sitting there across the table, Kaede was simply another girl in a black Academy robe, the plain stone buttons marching across her left shoulder as they did across her own. Taisin was sure she had no feelings for her—not here in the Council chambers. The emotions in the vision seemed to belong to someone else, and Taisin couldn’t reconcile them with the present.

“What were we doing on this beach?” Kaede asked.

Taisin took a deep breath. “The vision was very clear, but it was also quite limited. I only saw the beach, and the ocean... and you. You were important.” Taisin colored, and she lowered her eyes to her lap. “I had the vision the night after the Council told me the oracle stones called for me to go to the Fairy Queen. I knew that the vision was about this journey, and I knew it was telling me that you must be a part of it.”

“Kaede,” Lord Raiden said, addressing his daughter for the first time that day. “You know that you have duties that you cannot shirk.” Kaede’s stomach dropped; she should have known he would bring that up. “This is not the best time for you to be absent.”

“When would be the best time, Father?” Sarcasm twisted her words. “Should we ask the Fairy Queen to wait until you’re finished with me?”

The Chancellor’s face darkened with suppressed rage. “You disrespect your King, and I will not tolerate that,” he snapped.

“I think you are the one who is disrespecting *me*,” Kaede countered, hot with anger.

The King frowned, but before he could speak, Lord Raiden pushed his chair back from the table, the legs scraping loudly against the stone floor. He stood, towering over the table. “You are behaving like a spoiled child, Kaede, which only goes to show that you are not prepared to take on the responsibility that this journey would entail.”

“If I’m so irresponsible, why do you want to marry me off to some lord from the South?” Kaede demanded. “Why would you trust me with a political alliance if you think I’m such a child?” The words seemed to echo in the room, and she heard her own heartbeat thudding in her chest. When her father had first presented her with his plan last winter, they had argued over it for hours. He wanted her to marry a complete

stranger just to keep the man's province under the control of the King's Guard. The idea of it sickened her.

"We are trying to prevent a *war*, Kaede," Lord Raiden said coldly. "Surely you are not so selfish that you would send your kingdom to war just because you don't wish to settle in the South?"

"It's not about where I wish to *settle*, and you know it. And who's the selfish one? You only want me to marry him because it would be good for *you*."

Maire Morighan rose abruptly, cutting into their argument. "Enough," she said. "Lord Raiden, please sit down."

"Mistress—"

"*Sit down*," the Mistress ordered. The Chancellor's face was nearly purple with frustration, but he sat, the chair legs scratching across the floor again. "Lord Raiden, with all due respect, this is not your decision to make."

For one brief, glorious moment, Kaede felt vindicated, but then her father said, "She is my daughter. She is not of age. She does not go where I do not permit."

Kaede fumed, but before she could rebut him, the Mistress said coolly, "Undoubtedly that is true. But this journey is every bit as important—perhaps even more important—than your plans for her. You must give her up to us. She has another duty that comes first now."

"Don't I have any say in this?" Kaede asked. She looked at Maire Morighan, who seemed exasperated with both her and her father. "Mistress, you can see that I have no desire to do what my father wants me to do. But you aren't giving me a choice, either." Maire Morighan frowned, but before she could speak, Kaede rushed on. "I have been a student here for almost six years. Not the best student, but I have paid attention. And the one thing that has always made sense to me is the teaching that every individual has the right to make choices about their lives. Every minute of every day, we make choices. Why would you take that away from me now?"

Kaede knew she was taking a risk by speaking so forcefully to the Mistress of the Academy. But the anger she felt at her father boiled within her, driving away any fear of offending Maire Morighan.

The Mistress was not surprised by Kaede's willfulness. That had always been the one quality that hampered Kaede's ability to work through the rituals. But she was taken aback by Kaede's appeal to the Academy's teachings. From across the table, Sister Yuna said softly, "She is right. She deserves to choose her own path."

Maire Morighan looked at Kaede, whose face was filled with desperate determination. At last the Mistress said, "All right. You have until the evening meal to make your decision."

Chapter IV



Kaede's entire body was tense as she hurried down the stairs away from the Council chambers. The unexpected encounter with her father had rattled her, and she needed to shake it off. Her teachers would have advised her to go to the practice hall, to sit quietly, but she wanted to go outside and breathe the fresh air.

She took the empty corridor behind the kitchens, avoiding the students at their work shifts. The kitchen cat, curled in his basket by the back door, stretched lazily as she unlatched the door and slipped outside. The rain had lightened to a drizzle, but the cobblestones of the path down to the beach were slick, and she walked carefully. The sea, visible ahead of her in a gray swathe only a few shades darker than the sky, moved in giant, undulating swells. She could hear the crash of the surf below.

When she reached the edge of the kitchen garden, she went down a narrow stone staircase toward the sand. A stream of smoke curled up from the groundskeeper's workshop huddled against the retaining wall ahead. Fin was in. Kaede hesitated only a moment before heading for the workshop. She knocked on the wooden door, and hearing a gruff answer from within, she pushed it open, the hinges creaking slightly.

Inside, the workshop was a warren of crates and sandbags, wood scraps and tools. A lamp was lit in the back, where Fin called out, "Who is it?"

"It's me," Kaede replied. She threaded her way through the shop toward the sound of Fin's voice.

Fin was seated on a stool at her workbench, mending a gardening tool. Her short gray hair curled over her ears and forehead, which was marked with black oil as if she had pushed her hair aside with dirtied fingers. She had once been tanned dark from the sun, but without a clear day in months, her skin had paled. She was still as vigorous as ever, though, despite the fact that she had celebrated her half-century mark the previous winter. She glanced at Kaede with quizzical brown eyes. "What are you doing down here? Your work shift with me isn't until tomorrow. Maesie has you today, doesn't she?"

Every student at the Academy spent several hours each day working in the kitchens or the library, cleaning the practice hall or sweeping the corridors. During Kaede's first year, she had been assigned a task suitable for a Chancellor's daughter: sitting in the library and marking down the names of every student who came and went. The duty had left her so restless that she had soon been reassigned to Fin, the

Academy's groundskeeper, who set her to work sweeping the Seawalk or filling sandbags. On slow afternoons, Fin would take her out to the North Beach and set up a target, teaching her how to toss the knives she kept in a tooled leather case, evidence of her former life with the King's Guard.

Fin saw the nervous energy in Kaede's stance, and she asked, "What happened?"

Kaede took a deep, shaking breath. "My father is here. And the King. When did they arrive? Where is their ship?" She hadn't seen or heard any ship in the harbor that morning, and she knew it would have caused an uproar, for the only ships to come and go were scheduled months in advance.

Fin put down the tool, wiping her oily fingers on a rag. "They came in the middle of last night. The ship sailed back to Seatown as soon as the King disembarked. They wished to keep it secret." But there could be no secrets from Fin; she had been roused by Sister Nara herself, bearing a candle and urging her to come down to the dock. She looked at Kaede's agitated expression and said, "We should take a walk out to the North Beach."

Startled, Kaede said, "Now?"

"Now is as good a time as any. I could use a break." Fin levered herself up from the stool, reaching for a long leather case on the shelf bolted to the wall above her head. She slung the case over her shoulder. Her joints were a bit stiff from sitting still in the damp air, yet she moved with the measured gait of the former soldier she was.

Kaede followed Fin out into the misty afternoon. "Did you know they were coming?" she asked as they walked across the wet sand.

Fin shook her head. "I didn't. They sent word by carrier to the Council, but only an hour or so before they arrived. You've spoken to them?"

"Yes. The Mistress summoned me to the Council chambers."

"Ah. What did they want?"

Kaede explained what had happened, and recounting the argument with her father caused her anger to flare again. "I can't do what my father asks—I just can't," she said vehemently.

"Are you—" Fin hesitated, glancing sideways at Kaede, who had a fierce scowl on her face. "Are you in love with someone else? Is that why you refuse to marry this man?"

Kaede almost laughed. "No. I'm not in love with... anyone." She wasn't sure if she ever had been in love, although she remembered the rush of emotions that accompanied her first kiss, with her classmate Liya, up in the crescent garden. It had been almost two years ago, on a sunny early summer afternoon. They had been clumsy and shy at first, but the giddiness that flooded through her after the kiss had plowed through all those nerves. She had felt exhilarated—free. But had she been in love? She didn't think so. There was no heartache on either side when their little romance ended a few months later.

Kaede and Fin rounded an outcropping of rock that jutted from beneath the Academy's iron foundation and stepped onto the North Beach, a crescent of unmarked, light brown sand cradling the sea. About a hundred feet out, waves crashed against submerged rocks that created a breakwater. When it had been warm, Kaede had often come here with classmates to swim in the sheltered cove. Fin set the case down on the sand and unlatched it, asking, "Who does your father want you to marry?"