

CHAPTER ONE

I never knew my mother's name.

I knew she was a hero. The first story Surya ever told me was of my mother and her death. How, gravely injured herself, she dragged me from the fire that consumed our home and carried me all the way from Aroha to the House of God in the mountains. How she refused any treatment for herself and died of her injuries, peacefully, only when she knew that I would live.

But she never told anyone her name. Only mine.

Zira.

The story was all I had of my family. Surya said that after the Sedorne came, slaughtering and burning their way across Ruan, so many families were scattered, so many homes destroyed, so many people murdered and abandoned to rot by the roadside, there was no way to

trace my identity. I was alone in the world from that day—the day my mother died to save me.

I was lucky. Incredibly lucky. I always knew that. I could have been one of the poor orphan children dying of starvation or disease on the streets of Aroha. I could have been dead myself. Or I could have been living as a slave—in all but name—under some bloated Sedorne lord.

My childhood was not perfect—whose is? But I had a precious gift, one denied to so many children in our troubled country: a home. I cherished it and thanked God for it—until the day it was taken from me.

Sunlight sparked from the curved blade as it slashed downward. I shut my eyes hastily and twisted away, the soft hiss by my cheek telling me that the sword had almost found its target.

Half-blinded by sun shadows, I spun past my opponent and brought the flat of my sword down hard where instinct told me his hand would be. I was rewarded with a snarl and a juddering clash of metal as the blade skittered off his padded gauntlet; then I was turning again, the movement sweeping my short hair across my face.

Keep moving . . . keep moving. . . . I saw the dim shadow of his bulk to my right and feinted left, then snapped toward him, bringing the sword up in the half-crescent move. Metal screeched as our weapons

slid together. I threw all my weight into my sword arm with a grunt of effort and wrenched upward. I felt the sudden release as the sword popped from his hand and I leaped back, eyes clearing just in time to see his blade flick up in a jagged arch against the sky, then plunge back into shadow as it landed in the dirt of the practice ring, raising a small puff of dust.

He gaped at his empty hand, then burst out laughing. “Excellent, Zira!”

I lowered my sword and bowed, tugging my rumpled robe back into place. “Thank you, Deo.”

“It was well done. Though I hope you realize that move was a dangerous one. It could just as easily have ended in your losing your own sword.”

I shrugged, trying to keep my voice even as I replied. “But if it had been a real fight and you had blinded me, I would have been desperate enough to take the chance.”

Deo loved it when I lost my temper. He grinned approvingly. The tattoo that curved over the ridge of his left eye and cheek—a stylized leaping wolf for his warrior status, surrounded by stars that symbolized his commitment to God—gleamed blue against his dark skin.

“It was a dirty trick, yes,” he admitted. “Yet you coped, as always. We’ll make a fighting namoa of you yet.” He turned away to address the small huddle of young people gathered at the edge of the practice

circle. “Did you all see that? Yes? Would anyone like to try it themselves?”

Most shook their heads vehemently. My irritation disappeared, and I had to cover my mouth to hide my smile. I didn’t blame them.

He continued. “Well, perhaps something simpler then. Don’t worry—I won’t let her gut you.”

As if that’s what’s worrying them, I thought.

Deo beckoned the children forward, and reluctantly they filed into the circle, arranging themselves in a ragged line before him. He clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels as he addressed them. “Now, I know that many of you have never held a sword or a weapon before. But all of you would like to learn to fight. Yes?”

The children—ranging in age from nine to about my own age of fifteen—looked at one another and shuffled uneasily, but stayed silent. They were the latest ragged group to arrive at the temple complex. None of them had been here longer than a month. I examined them closely, though I had seen children like them all my life. They were bony, and quiet, and frightened. But they were proud too—still proud enough to be disdainful of the baggy hand-me-down clothes they wore, of the kindness that the temple people offered, and the lessons the namoa tried to teach.

If they have pride, I can teach them strength. The thought rippled up like a memory, and I frowned. Who

had said that? I couldn't remember. Surya, perhaps. With a small shake of my head, I stepped forward to talk to the refugees.

"Most of you are here because the Sedorne stole your homes, hurt your families, and drove you out. Is that not right?"

Several of the children nodded hesitantly, avoiding my eyes. Others only stared at their feet. They knew that Deo was a namoa and therefore a servant of God, to be respected. But I was not even a novice namoa yet—I wasn't tattooed—so despite what they had seen of my skill with the sword, they knew I was only a little older than they were. And then there was my face. The afternoon light was bright and golden and reflected off the stark white of my scar, making it uncomfortable to look at me. So they didn't.

Yes, I had a good idea of what they were thinking. I crossed my arms and waited, drawing out the silence until they began to shuffle again, nervously, and each of them had braved a swift look at me out of curiosity. Deo smiled, but said nothing.

"Is that not right?" I repeated finally.

They were so relieved that the silence had ended that this time almost all of them had an answer for me.

"They burned our farm."

"The lord accused our pa of stealing."

"They said we were helping the resistance."

"They hanged my uncle."

“They killed my mama.”

I looked at the child who had spoken last and felt a little lurch of recognition. The girl, perhaps nine or ten if she were small for her age, had raggedy chopped hair—even shorter than mine—which stood out in black spikes around her thin face. To the Sedorne, long hair on men or women was a sign of status and pride, and they often shaved the heads of their Rua prisoners, thinking to humiliate them. It was another example of how little they understood the people they professed to rule.

I dropped to one knee before the girl. Her amber eyes were defiant, as if daring me to raise a hand to her. Holy Mother, she was so young . . . I had to swallow before I could speak.

“They killed my mama too,” I said.

The little girl blinked. I blinked too, and looked away. The attention of the group was now fixed on me. I looked back at them, forcing each one to meet my gaze.

“When the Sedorne soldiers—the gourdin—came to your homes, what did you do?”

A chorus of defiant voices answered.

“Ran. Ran away.”

“We hid from them. We had to.”

“They would have killed us.”

“We had to run.”

“You’d have run too.”

“We had to.”

I asked them, “What did you *want* to do?”

They were silent again. Outside the practice circle, the temple people and namoa went about their business with cheerful noisiness, but within, the stillness was absolute.

“I think you wanted to stay. Didn’t you? To defend your homes and your families. I think you wanted to stay so much, it must have almost killed you to run. You didn’t know how to fight, and you had no weapons. You were afraid. You had no choice.” I heaved myself to my feet and looked them over. “You have a choice now. If you want to learn to fight, we’ll teach you. If you want to walk out of this circle and never come back again, we’ll let you go. It’s up to you. I’ll promise you this, though: make the right choice, and the next time the Sedorne come, *they’ll* be afraid of *you*.” I waited for a beat. “Is that what you want?”

Every head nodded, hard enough to send braids whipping across faces and caps flying away. Some of them were even brave enough to step forward.

This time I didn’t try to hide my smile.

Forty minutes later, the air was filled with the sharp crack of the light softwood practice staffs meeting, grunts of effort, and the occasional yelp of pain as someone forgot to get his or her glove-padded fingers out of the way quickly enough.

Deo rubbed a giant hand over his curly hair as he inspected the pair of children I had been supervising.

“Remember—watch those fingers!” he said, then nodded in satisfaction and stepped outside the circle to lean against the wall next to me.

When he spoke, his voice was pitched low. “That’s a real gift you have there, girl.”

“Thank you, Namoa.” I bowed my head to hide my pleasure and embarrassment. I was relieved when Deo turned his gaze back to the practice ring.

I knew that out of the dozen we had begun training this afternoon, probably less than half would take the oath and stay in the House of God when they came of age. Of that handful, there might be one or two who had the talent or inclination to be a warrior namoa. That wasn’t the point of the training sessions. When we taught the children to defend themselves, we taught them courage. It was amazing how quickly they could recover from the fear that had dogged them all their lives when they had a sword in their hands. They would not cower from the Sedorne anymore. They would have pride.

If they have pride, I can teach them strength. The Rua needed all the strength they could get.

Deo cleared his throat, breaking into my thoughts. “Is Surya sure you don’t come of age until after Green Equinox? I could do with you teaching here full time, instead of only alternate afternoons.”

I shrugged, embarrassed again. “She’s not sure of anything, including whether I’m even sixteen this year or not, but that’s the date she’s set, and she’ll be true to it. Besides . . .” I shifted my position on the wall. “Even once I take the oath, I might not get a placement in the fighters.”

“You’ll get the placement, girl. It’d be a waste of God’s gifts if you didn’t come to us, and Surya knows it. Mark me—in two months you’ll be a novice fighter.” He rubbed his hands together gleefully, whether at the prospect of adding me to his fighting unit or of having more time to torment me, I didn’t know.

I won’t mind him tormenting me, I said to God. *Only please let me be a fighter. Please don’t set me to minding the goats like Rashna.* . . . I noticed a loose thread on my much-mended hose and pulled hard on it, then stared at the hole I’d made. “Burn it!”

“Mind your language,” Deo admonished. “Stop worrying. You’re almost a fighter now. It’s your destiny, girl.” He pushed himself away from the wall and strode ahead into the circle, clapping his hands for attention. Most of the trainees were panting and sweat-soaked, all too ready to let their weapons fall.

“Excellent. A very good first lesson. Now, for your entertainment, Zira and I will stage a little demonstration of how the long staff can be used in the hands of experts.”

My heart sank, though I tried to keep my expression

blank. I should have known. Deo was well aware that I disliked the staff, so he made me use it every time he got the chance.

“If you continue to work as hard as you’ve worked this afternoon,” he continued, “one day you may be able to do this. Clear those staffs away and give those gloves back—all of them!”

He waited until the trainees had handed their weapons in and regrouped outside the ring, then reached into the barrel and pulled out, from among the short greenwood staffs, a long polished one, bound at both ends in plain brass. He tossed it to me and then picked out his own staff, lavishly carved with designs that echoed the wolf and stars of his tattoo, and capped with silver.

“Ready?” he asked me, twirling the wooden staff idly in one hand. Show-off.

I rolled my shoulders to loosen the tension I could feel contracting my muscles. I was tall for a Rua, a head taller than most women and an inch taller than Deo, but he had several inches on me in reach, and the long staff was his favorite weapon. He was a demon with it. Resigned to the bruises I knew were coming, I took up the fighting stance, legs braced, staff held diagonally across the body, and nodded.

The familiar grin split his face, and he struck, his staff moving in a dark blur of speed toward my chin. I threw myself forward under his strike, which passed narrowly over my head, and jabbed toward his stomach.

He turned at the last instant, and I missed, sliding past his belly. I allowed the momentum to carry me past him, but he brought the staff around in a one-handed whirl, and it glanced off my collarbone. I sucked in a sharp, painful breath as I dropped.

I rolled across the dirt and came back to standing with a pump of my legs, turning and kicking out sideways with my right foot in one movement, aiming for his knee. He deflected the kick, his staff hitting the sole of my boot and forcing me to drop back. As he blocked, his left side was open for a second, and I brought the staff around in a horizontal two-handed strike. The brass cap thudded soundly against his side. The watching trainees gasped.

Deo responded with a savage overhand sweep of his staff. I panicked, dropping again. My shoulder hit the ground badly this time, and I hissed as I tumbled forward, flattened, and dived between his legs. A faint titter of laughter rose from the children. Scorch it! The staff was not my favorite weapon.

Deo's weapon thudded into the ground by my head, ripping a few stray hairs out as I rolled and popped up. I slid left to avoid the powerful kick he aimed at my torso, blocked a high strike at my face and a low one at the hip, caught a sideways blow to my stomach that almost made me double over as the air whooshed from my lungs, and managed to get in a light hit on his right forearm.

We could be at this all day, I thought. Time to try something different.

I slammed my staff point into the dust and, still holding the other end with both hands, flung myself up and sideways in a two-footed flying kick. He brought his staff up, but it was too late—my weight thudded into his shoulder and knocked him literally off his feet. I fell as he did.

He hit the ground with a shout and rolled, hoping to knock me over as he went, but I'd already backflipped off him and out of range. He snapped to his feet at the same moment that I came upright. For a split second, we faced each other, breathing hard as the sweat made flesh-colored runnels over our dusty skin. Then Deo lunged. I twisted left, but the turn was too slow and I recognized his maneuver too late. His staff hit my bad shoulder with enough force to numb my arm, and before I could adjust my grip, the second strike came, hitting the staff at the exact right point to scoop it from my fingers. My staff flew from my hands, rapping me sharply on the head as it turned in the air. It rolled off my shoulder and landed behind me.

“Ow.” I rubbed my bruised head and heard the children giggling at me. Wonderful.

“An excellent bout!” Deo planted his staff in the dirt and leaned on it. I saw with a mixture of irritation and admiration that his breathing was barely disturbed and already slowing. “Your two-footed kick is improving,

though your aim is bad. You know you should go for stomach, not shoulder. If you'd hit me right, I wouldn't have gotten back up again.”

“I will practice, Namoa,” I said through gritted teeth. I winced at the pull on my shoulder as I bowed.

Deo waited for me to straighten and then returned the bow neatly, but I noted with some satisfaction that his spare hand had risen to surreptitiously massage the shoulder I had kicked. My aim was bad, was it? Ha!

He turned to look at the children. “Do you see how the movements we have taught you today can be used in a fight?”

There were some dubious nods. I couldn't help laughing. Deo was a wonderful teacher, but sometimes his love of showing off was counterproductive.

“Come on! It's easy!” I called.

“Easy for the teacher's little pet,” a mocking voice said.

Everyone turned to look up at the steps along the inner wall. I felt the laughter wilt and die away as I saw the woman with a stylized wave tattoo on both cheeks leaning against one of the stone pillars. There, as if my earlier thoughts had called her up, was Rashna.

Rashna was a year older than me and had taken her vows to God the year before, but despite all her promises of humility and compassion, her nature was as prickly as a porcupine's back. I was just grateful that, for the most part, her new duties as a novice kept her busy and

out of my way. Hopefully by the time I took the oath and became a novice myself, she would have advanced again and would be too busy to bother with me.

“I assure you, novice, that I do not have pets of any kind,” Deo said sharply. “If you would care to spar with me yourself, you’d have the bruises to prove it.”

I looked at him in surprise. It wasn’t like him to snap.

Rashna raised an eyebrow. “I certainly meant no disrespect to you, Namao. Or, of course, to your favored pupil.” She nodded to him, then turned and swiftly mounted the stairs.

“That girl . . .” Deo muttered between his teeth.

I stooped to collect my staff from the dust. “She has a wicked tongue,” I agreed, hoping my tone did not give away my rampant curiosity.

Deo’s scowl suddenly turned into a grin. “I hear Surya put her on duty with the goats. Not precisely what Rashna expected, eh?”

I hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Did she request a placement as a fighting namao, then?”

“Demanded it, more like. It never crossed her mind that she wouldn’t get it.”

“Then why didn’t she? We all know she was the best fighter in her age group. I thought she must have decided not to take the placement, for some reason.”

“Oh, she has a definite talent. Especially with the long staff.” He grinned again.

“Then why isn’t she in your unit?” I repeated.

“I have a shrewd idea that her temper’s gotten her into trouble one too many times. Hopefully goat duty’ll cool her down, and then Surya can reassign her somewhere more to her taste.” He shook his head and glanced at me. The smile turned to a look of concern as he saw me massaging my shoulder. “I’ll take care of this lot. You should go to the herb room and get Mira to mix up some ointment for your shoulder.”

Mira was Deo’s wife, a gifted herbalist and fellow namoa. She was two months pregnant with their first child.

“Would you like me to request some extra for you?” I asked, straight-faced.

He narrowed his eyes. “No, thank you. Go on—before I change my mind and have you scrub the rust off my battle plate.”

“Yes, Namoa.” I bowed primly, handed him my staff, and walked out of the ring. Only when I was out of sight did I allow myself to laugh.