



inujini.

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•foreword by alma katsu•

For the Ryūkyūans, past and present.

Now that we've met, we are family.

Ichariba choodee.

Three

Kaori, North Okinawa, Shiisaa Sighting



“Get on this boat!”

Get on this boat!” If she hadn’t been clutching a newborn baby, Kaori’s mother would have jumped out of the boat and wrestled her crazy daughter into their rickety little skiff. She would have tied her up if needed, gagged her to muffle the tantrum screams. In the distance, they could all hear the explosions.

“Kaori! Please! We have to go!”

Kaori backed away another step. She wanted to run through the outgoing tide and join her family. She was terrified of the soldiers that would soon overrun everything. She felt too young to be alone, but there was no way she could leave the island, the grove and grotto specifically. Her spirit voice told her to stay, so she would.

The tide was leaving, and with it Kaori’s family. Her father was resigned to the loss. Kaori could see it in his eyes. He was sealing her off in his heart, turning his gaze away so as to not see her. It hurt, but she understood. He was practiced at losing things—a first wife and family. A son, her little brother.

“You won’t find him.”

Her mother’s words traveled across the surf to lodge in Kaori’s eyes, making them sting. She wanted to ask them to wait. She knew they would. Her father

would be relieved, her mother would sob into Kaori's hair. Her baby sister would know her. She swallowed the words back. She had to stay. They were already leaving, going out with the tide.

"I don't know if I want to find him!" Kaori yelled to be heard. "But I still have to stay."

Her mother looked confused and then she too resigned. She was losing another child. Her eyes reflected the pain and then she closed them, sealing it away. Her tears escaped to baptize the new baby.

Kaori could hear gunfire. There were dangerous smells in the breeze. Iron tainted smoke, burning poisons—the smell of strangers. She turned her back on her family and the sea. There was no point in watching the little boat recede into what was now her past. The present moment was calling her attention now. Above the trees there was smoke. The soldiers were here.

There was no time to berate herself for not acting faster. There was no time to wish her family had spent less time preparing to leave and more time leaving. With soldier voices bouncing through the underbrush, there was no way she would be able to get home to hide. Kaori scanned the beach, looking for a miracle.

"Please, show me what to do."

Her words were directed to her spirit voice. Kaori didn't know many things, but she knew to trust this inner voice. Her grandmother had heard it all her life and it had never steered her wrong. Sometimes Kaori felt her grandmother's presence adding volume, texture and depth to what had just been a nudge in her mind before. It was toward this presence she now directed her plea.

"I listened. I stayed. Now please tell me what to do."

For a second out of time, the world paused. Kaori felt the danger waiting. The smoke in the treeline stilled, the unfamiliar yells froze in foreign throats. Kaori felt her mind go flat and smooth like the sand before it expanded to encompass her surroundings. Then she saw it.

At the edge of the treeline, half in shadow, a rocky outcropping peeking out from beneath rotting trunks. Several trees had collapsed, giving their lives in a past typhoon to make this shelter for Kaori now. She sprinted across the

sand, racing toward the danger to dive into the tangled pile of deadwood.

Burrowing through the vine and undergrowth, she scrambled to the base of the rocky pile and found a shallow den. It was just big enough for a skinny adolescent girl to slip into, more a hollow beneath the rocks than a cave, but it was enough. Kaori wriggled her way in, her last glimpse of the beach was of the wind wiping the sand clean of her footprints. When she was as far as she could go she closed her eyes and prayed.

She called to her little brother, like her, somewhere still on the island. She was sure he could hear the helicopters and smell the acrid odors they left. Wherever he was, she tried to send her protection. *Stay hidden*, she thought to him. *Don't let them see you.*

She pictured her mother and father in the tiny boat not meant to go too far beyond the coves. It would be in the wide ocean now. If it flipped in the swells her mother and father would be able to paddle themselves to safety, but her baby sister would be lost. Kaori sent breathless whispers of prayer to find them. Then she heard harsh foreign voices yelling words she couldn't understand. She stilled her breath, closed her eyes, willing herself to be a shadow and nothing more.

The shouting and sound of soldiers lasted most of the afternoon. At one point there was gunfire followed by yelling and laughter. Kaori only heard the voices of men but they were nothing like she had heard before. The men she had known all her life had soft, firm voices that blended with the island topography. Their words curved against the sand, wove through the trees and bounced off the waves like song.

The voices she could hear echoing through the trees now jarred her. They fought against the landscape. She could feel the spirits of the island flinching against the discordant dialect with no music in it. Flat, the strange words slapped against the sand like dead fish. The land was shocked but not submissive. It resisted, pushing back against these strangers that didn't belong.

Eventually, the voices faded. It took much longer for Kaori's heart to stop pounding against her ribs, beating her lungs to be free. She lay still in the ensuing quiet. It was too quiet. The animals had fled. No birdsong broke

the hush, even the waves seemed to be muted. All lay silent in the humid afternoon, listening with Kaori until eventually she fell into a restless sleep.

She opened her eyes to darkness. There were still no sounds around her except the waves lapping onto the beach. Kaori's stomach was empty but her bladder was full. She wriggled out of her hiding spot and crawled out onto the sand. In a rush, she steadied herself against the trunk and squatted so she could relieve herself, sighing.

The sound of urine hitting the ground echoed from her right. She looked over to see one of the soldiers looking right at her. He had just finished urinating himself and was still exposed. Kaori jumped up, still midstream and tried to dart away but her baggy pants were down. They wrapped around her ankles and she tripped. Bigger and faster, the soldier lunged forward and grabbed her.

Kaori kicked at him but he flipped her around easily so her legs flailed uselessly in the air. She tried to scratch his face but she couldn't reach him from her current angle. She drove her free elbow back, hard and connected with his torso. He grunted and slapped her across her temple hard enough to disorient her. She couldn't understand what the soldier was saying, but his meaning was clear.

He was dragging her back into the trees when he stopped. He was speaking to someone else. She craned her neck to see another soldier. The other soldier pointed at her, shaking his head. They were arguing and Kaori seized upon the chance to drive her elbow back again as hard as she could. She connected with bone and was rewarded with a pained grunt from her captor. Kaori shrieked at him in terror and rage. Her captor slammed her into one of the dead trunks that had sheltered her earlier. She collapsed, her vision disintegrating into starry grains of sand. Kaori was vaguely aware the two soldiers were now yelling over her.

A rush filled her ears. It sounded like the surf had risen in a storm. The soldier that had been leaning on her was suddenly knocked away hard enough that Kaori too was spun around. She lay on her back, disoriented, stunned, staring at the dark canopy. A thick liquid sprayed through the air, cutting across her vision. She struggled to prop herself up on her elbows. Her eyes

felt too loose in her head, like they might roll out on their own.

The soldier that had attacked her dangled in the air. He looked like he was being eaten by a lion, half crushed between teeth the size of boulders. He kicked at the monster as helplessly as Kaori had kicked at him minutes earlier. One of his arms was torn off at the elbow, the broken bone jutting from shredded flesh. Blood sprayed everything, including Kaori and the other soldier.

A thick paw came out of the shadows, sinking claws into his torso, piercing the skin to release his innards. Pulling free, a handful of entrails dangled like a nightmare sea creature. The soldier's screams turned into a gargle. The creature dropped the body and turned to Kaori, towering over her.

She was too stunned to move, too terrified to scream, but the beast didn't advance. It growled, extending paws to her as if to embrace. Just behind the tree Kaori could see the other soldier, a red spray of blood across his face in the starlight, but otherwise he was the color of milk.

"Help me, please," Kaori called to him. Her voice trembled with hysteria. The soldier didn't respond. His eyes were fixated on the beast.

The giant animal did respond. It dropped its massive paws back to the ground and went silent, watching her. It was a face she recognized, but her mind refused to make sense of what she was seeing. A curly mane, shining like copper even in the twilight, coal black eyes shining at her from above a gaping grin. It was a shiisaa.

Flat, angry voices tore through the dark. Lights flashed and bobbed through the trees and machine gun fire rang out. The staccato sounds spurred her to action. Kaori backpedaled away from the shiisaa, the soldiers and the gore to scramble, crab-like, across the sand. When she thought she was out of the shiisaa's reach she flipped over and scrambled to her feet, sprinting toward the water.

She charged into the gentle waves waist deep before she risked a look behind her. Neither the remaining soldier or the shiisaa-monster followed. The beach was clear. In the dark edge of the tree line Kaori could see lights darting around, the silhouettes of men flashing in and out. There was more yelling and then the lights and noise converged to a single group.

Beams of light reached across the sand, groping for her. Kaori dove and swam away sideways across the pull of the receding tide as fast as she could. When she surfaced, there was a good distance between her and the chaos she had left. She bobbed in the dark water, watching until she was sure none of them were coming after her and then she swam away.

Kaori had spent her whole life on the island, but she had never spent much time out alone at night this far from their small house. She was disoriented. There was no moon out, both a blessing and a curse. With no moonlight she couldn't be easily seen, but neither could she easily see. The shoreline was a blot of shadow once she was out of view of the soldiers' lights. Still, she felt far from safe. Every patch of dark seemed to be shiisaa shaped and moving. Finally, she swam back to a bare scoop of beach with a flat, grassy expanse of beach grass.

Kaori was hungry and cold. Her long baggy shirt flapped against her as she moved, but she didn't feel comfortable taking it off. The forest was watching her. In the distance she could hear the voices of soldiers still yelling, but she had no way of knowing how many there were. Was that all of them, or were they spread out across the entire island, silent and waiting for a young girl to show up? Now she didn't even have pants to cover herself.

With her bare hands, Kaori dug out a shallow hole in the sand. She pulled the still-warm island back over herself. She lay sideways, back to the sea, watching the trees. If anything came from the treeline, she could sprint for the ocean and be gone fast enough. Certain she would never sleep again, she lay wide awake under the stars in her sand cocoon. The weight of the sand was soothing. Kaori watched the moon rise, her mind blank with shock.