

FOUR



WHEN SHADOWS TURN INTO WRITHING SNAKES

I STOOD ACROSS FROM PAPA with my staff ready to strike. Our neighbors' dog, Lucky, poked his nose through the fence separating our backyards. His tail wagged as he looked back and forth between Papa and me. With all the treats I'd given him, Lucky *should* have been on my side. But ever since Papa brought him that peanut butter and jelly bone, he'd defected.

"Traitor," I hissed at him.

The golden retriever stuck out his tongue, leaving no doubt whose side he was on.

Narrowing my eyes, I turned my attention back to the match. Papa circled my position. Maybe other kids liked to spend their Saturday afternoons hanging out with their

friends or playing video games, but this was my favorite time with Papa. We'd been practicing staff play since fourth grade, and I'd gotten a lot better at figuring out his next move. He always got a twinkle in his eyes when he was about to try some fancy footwork. When he went for a straightforward strike, he usually had a silly grin like now.

I shifted the staff so that it was alongside my body with my arm tucked in close. It was almost as long as I was tall and made of smooth oak, with knots where the tree limbs had once been. The wood was reddish-brown and polished, and easy to handle. Papa's staff was a head taller than me and as black as night, with white writing painted on it. When I was little, he used to point out the symbols and tell me what they meant.

Unlike with alphabets, each symbol had several meanings. A leopard with raised paws had a different meaning than a leopard leaping or one sitting. To make things more complicated, the exact meaning depended on the symbols around it.

So the symbols for the sun, tree with leaves, and a leopard with raised paws meant *I walk with courage*. Like the leopard, a tree had different meanings too, depending on if it had leaves or not. A tree with leaves represented *movement*. A tree without leaves meant *to stay in one place*. There were

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hundreds of symbols on the staff, and I couldn't remember what they all meant.

Lucky barked, catching my attention for a split second, and Papa attacked. I almost didn't have time to block. Going on the defense like he taught me, I ducked, sweeping my staff in a long arc, and slipped behind him. But Papa was too quick as he twisted around and struck twice more. I parried right, then left, but caught a tap on my shoulder for moving too slow.

"You're distracted today, Maya," he said as our staffs connected a fourth time.

He was right. I couldn't stop thinking about yesterday. To make matters worse, I kept remembering the man in shadows from my dream. His slippery smile taunted me.

I took the offense with a one-two-three strike combo. Learning how to handle a staff was Papa's idea. After I'd begged him to sign me up for the dojo down the street, he insisted on teaching me how to use a staff. He said that he learned when he was young, and he was so excited about teaching me that I couldn't say no. Even if it wasn't exactly self-defense, I was learning how to be quick on my feet and dodge attacks. So instead of taking *normal classes* like a *normal kid*, I got to spar with my father in my backyard. Not that I was complaining. I liked having a staff of my own, and it was fun.

A shiver shot down my back when I thought about the man from my dreams again. It would be easy for one of his writhing ribbons to trap me like a fly in a spider's web. Thankfully it was just a nightmare, but that didn't make him any less scary. "A staff won't matter in a real fight," I said, concluding that it would be nothing against him.

Papa raised an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

"Because knives and guns and other things are more dangerous," I answered. Emphasis on *other things*. "We can't defend against them—or something even worse—with a staff."

Papa struck again, and the force pushed me back. "That's true. Sometimes it wouldn't be enough." Then he held his staff in front of him. He never went anywhere without it, even when he left for work. "This is my lucky staff," he said. "It's always served me well."

I didn't mean to insinuate that his staff was useless. It was actually pretty cool, especially the way the sun made the symbols shimmer. "Your staff is good," I said, going on the attack, "but mine is better."

Papa looked surprised, then his face transformed into pride. He struck back without warning, but I was ready for him and thrust my staff out to catch his blow. Then I stepped to the side and the momentum of his strike pulled

him forward, while I was already clear of his path. He'd taught me how to face an opponent much bigger and stronger than myself. Now I couldn't stop grinning. Soon I'd be as good as him or better.

"Good work, Maya." Papa laughed. "You're a quick learner, but don't get too cocky."

Before I could say anything, a piercing boom shook the ground so hard that I almost lost my balance. Car alarms went off on the streets, and Lucky barked. A flock of birds flew in a panic from the tree in our backyard. Papa's face turned a little gray, and his mouth settled into a hard line. He looked *afraid*.

Papa was never scared, or more than mildly upset. At that moment, I realized that he wasn't invincible, no matter if in all his stories he always outwitted his foes. A tremble crept up my arms as I leaned on my staff for balance. The fact that Papa was afraid made me scared too.

"Was that an earthquake?" I asked, my voice quiet.

I'd never heard of an earthquake causing such a loud boom. They weren't common in the Midwest, and definitely not Chicago. At least there didn't seem to be any real damage. One by one the cars stopped blaring as people turned off their alarms.

"It sure felt like one." Papa tightened his grasp on his staff and looked around as if he expected someone to appear out

of thin air. “I have to leave again tonight,” he said, rushing his words.

“You just got back!” My voice was so high-pitched that I sounded like a little kid. “Can’t you stay the whole weekend?”

“My work is never-ending,” he said, his face stern. “There’s much I must do.”

“Can’t someone else do it for a little while, Papa?” I begged. “Why is it always you?”

Papa winced. “I told you already, Maya, I’m the only one who can.”

He always gave the same answer, so I asked, “What’s so important about your work?”

Papa frowned and said, “I promise I’ll tell you very soon.”

Mama had a shift at the hospital again. She went through her usual routine of looking for her misplaced car keys and purse, and Papa helped her. When she was almost out the door, he wrapped his arms around her, and she leaned against his chest. They stayed like that for a long time. Neither said a word.

“Be safe,” Mama whispered. “Okay?”

“Always,” Papa answered.

My cheeks warmed watching them, so I stared at the TV instead.

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Soon after Mama left, Papa announced that it was time for him to go too. I would be home alone again. I wasn't scared, but I wished the three of us could spend more time together.

"Will you be back in time for Comic-Con?" I asked, biting my lip.

"Of course, I will." Papa knelt in front of the couch where I sat. "I wouldn't miss taking you to see Oya, the great warrior goddess. If we're lucky, we'll get a picture of the two of you."

My heart lit up at that idea, but I wouldn't let it distract me from my plans.

Papa got dressed in his usual multicolored shirt (this one red with penguins on it), jeans, and a dark coat. After he left to walk to the train, I counted to ten, then followed him. Mama would usually drive him to the airport, but with the car gone, he'd have to take the orange line to Midway. I knew I was breaking Mama's number one rule (*don't ever leave the house alone at night*), but something wasn't right. Papa never left again so soon, and he was upset after the earthquake this morning. Not only that, he'd paced back and forth and stared out the window all day. He even took a private call upstairs in the middle of lunch. I didn't have much of a plan, but maybe I'd get lucky and overhear something on the way to the train.

As I hurried down the sidewalk, shadows crawled in the places where the streetlights didn't reach. There were a few people out, but the streets were mostly empty. If Papa or Mama knew that I'd left home alone after dark, they would ground me for a month. Even worse, they might take away my Comic-Con tickets, so I had to be extra careful.

Papa kept looking around, almost like he expected something to happen. It was eerily quiet, and I got that queasy feeling in my stomach again. A little voice in my head told me to go home, but I didn't listen.

The longer I followed Papa, the more things didn't feel right. The darkness seemed to almost breathe on its own. I forced myself to keep going as the shadows grew closer. "It's just your imagination," I whispered.

But I didn't believe it was my imagination when Papa stepped into a curtain of shadows and vanished. I stopped cold, and my hand flew to my mouth to cut off a scream. The shadows had swallowed him up.

They *swallowed* him.

"Papa?" I snapped out of my shock and rushed after him, but he was gone.

My breath came out hard and fast, and my lips trembled.

I turned around and looked everywhere. There was no sign of him. My heart thundered against my chest,

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and goose bumps lit on my arms. The shadows pressed in around me and felt slick against my face. I could smell them too. They stank like rotten eggs.

When I backed away, something reached out of the dark and grabbed my wrist. Cold seared into my skin. I tried to free myself, but the thing only tugged harder. Shadows like writhing snakes crawled up my arm—and I knew it was *him*. The man from my nightmare. Come to make good on his threat to kill me.

I clawed at the shadows with my other hand, only they slithered up that arm too. I screamed, and the darkness muted my voice. When I kicked, my foot connected with air.

Pain shot up my arms. My hands had gone numb. Frost started to creep across my skin. I wriggled my stiff fingers, and the ice crystals cracked and shattered. Then, with all my strength, I closed my hands around the shadows, which felt like thick ropes. I was sure they would turn me into an ice cube, but I gritted my teeth and jerked my arms back even harder. This time it worked.

I was barely free before someone grabbed my shoulder. I tried to pull away, but the person held on tight and stopped me in my tracks. A hot breeze whipped against my neck as a piercing screech rang out in the night. I flinched when the shadows recoiled and disappeared into the darkness.

MAYA AND THE RISING DARK

Before I had time to sigh in relief, the person spun me around. I stared up at my cranky neighbor, Miss Ida Johnston. I knew it was her, not Miss Lucille, because of the mole over her left eye. She glared down at me with a look that said I was in big trouble.