



# MOONBURNER

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*To Mike,*

*for constantly reminding me that life is supposed to be fun.*





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# PROLOGUE

The thick woods muffled Hanae's anguished screams. Raiden had chosen this location carefully. They did not want anyone near when their child was born.

"It will be a daughter," Hanae had said. "And they will try to kill her."

Her mother's intuition came to pass. Hanae's labors were joined by the first wail of a new life—a perfect glistening daughter.

Raiden bathed their tiny child with a damp cloth and placed her in her mother's arms.

*Just like delivering a calf*, he thought, and then chided himself for having such a thought about his wife.

He bustled around the cabin, if it could be called that—only four ramshackle walls guarding a square dirt floor. He cleaned up the worst from the delivery and sat on an old wooden stool by his wife's side.

Hanae spoke softly to their daughter, entranced and oblivious to the danger that faced them.

"We need to perform the Gleaming ceremony," Raiden said, smoothing his wife's sticky hair back from her soft brow. "We need to know."

Hanae's arms tightened around the child. She didn't look at him. He could see that in that moment, she only had eyes for her daughter.

"She's weak—she's barely taken her first breath. Let's wait a little

longer. Until she has a chance to gain her strength.”

“My love. No daughter of yours could ever be weak. We talked of this. It must be now. We must know. Everything depends on what it shows.”

Her eyes flashed and she jerked away from his extended hand. “No.” Her voice was steel. “I won’t let you hurt her.”

“Hanae. We must. So they do not.” He stroked her cheek softly. “We swore . . . that we would not let them do to her what they did to Saeko.” Why they had named their first daughter, he didn’t know. She had only lived two days.

Hanae’s shoulders slumped, and the iron grip of her arms loosened. She turned back and offered him the bundle.

“You are right,” she said, as a tear slid from the corner of her eye to her ear, leaving a trail through the dried salt of her sweat. “But I can’t watch.”

She turned away from him, pulling her knees to her chest in a ball.

He stood before the small basin of water, resting on a rickety table on the other side of the cabin and unwrapped their daughter. She was so beautiful. Even red and wrinkled, he could tell she had her mother’s fine hands, delicate but strong. She had his square jawbone. He wondered whether she would be as stubborn as he was in his youth. But he was delaying.

He plunged her into the water and held her there, his own heart hammering in his chest like a wild beast desperate to be set free. He began counting. Ten. She flailed under the water, her tiny limbs no match for his strong calloused hands. Thirty. At sixty, he could let her up. And try to save her. Fifty. Relief and hope began to well in him.

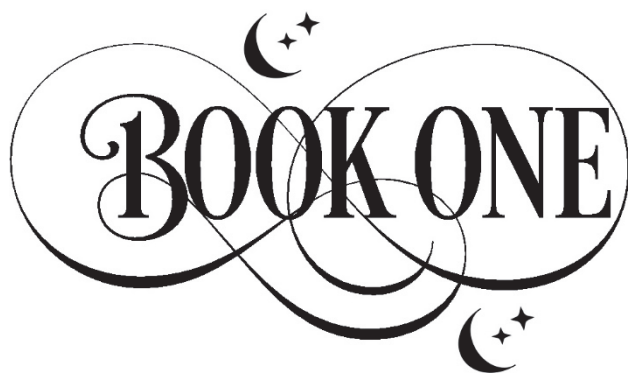
And then a bright, white light exploded from his daughter. He stumbled back, throwing an arm over his eyes. She illuminated the cabin, shining silver light into cobwebbed corners and dusty crevices.

After a few seconds, the light died, and his daughter was herself again. Tiny, pink, floating on top of the water peacefully. He and Hanae locked eyes. She had turned over and was half sitting up on her cot. The look of helpless horror on her face was mirrored on his own.

“I knew she would be,” Hanae said softly. “A moonburner. And a strong one.”

“What do we do?”

“We hide her. We keep her alive.”



BOOK ONE

The title "BOOK ONE" is rendered in a classic, blackletter-style serif font. The text is centered and enclosed within a decorative, swirling frame of thin black lines that form two large, overlapping loops. Two crescent moons, each accompanied by three small, five-pointed stars, are positioned symmetrically above and below the central text, adding a celestial or magical theme to the design.







# CHAPTER 1

The breeze blew across Kai's face, cooling a rivulet of sweat that dribbled down the side of her neck. She closed her eyes, opening her senses to the heat of the sun, the fresh smell of grass, horse and leather, and Jaimo's gentle wuffing.

"Look sharp, Kai." Her father, Raiden, trotted by, sending her a pointed look. She shook herself from her reverie. Sitting and soaking up the sun upon your face wasn't very manly. She blew a stray lock of her shaggy hair from her forehead in a silent rebellion. That habit wasn't particularly manly either, as her parents constantly reminded her.

She nudged Jaimo's chestnut flanks and trotted to join her father. He sat astride their other horse, Archer, a feisty dun with a white marking like an arrow on his forehead. Her father sat with the grace of a man who had spent his life on horseback. He was muscular and strong, the skin on his face, neck and arms weathered from years outside. Laugh lines paralleled his wide mouth and strong square jaw, and he shared his easy smile often, revealing white teeth. Only the tightness around his eyes betrayed the stresses he had faced in the last few years. None of her family had been unaffected.

"They are looking good this year," she said, surveying the cattle herd. There were a number of calves that looked healthy and strong.

"Yes, Taiyo has blessed us," Raiden said.

Kai snorted. "Right. It was all Taiyo. None of the hard work, careful

selection, or late hours we spent with the herd played any part in it.”

“Do not speak such blasphemous things.” Raiden lowered his voice. “At least where others can hear you. You know better.”

“Somehow,” Kai said under her breath, “I don’t think Taiyo has much interest in blessing me.”

Taiyo, the Sun God, was worshipped by all of Kita. His golden-haired sun-burners, who drew magic from the rays of the sun, were treated like royalty. Never mind that it was his war with Tsuki, the Moon Goddess, that had plagued their lands for hundreds of years. Never mind that it was his damn war that had forced her to masquerade as a boy for the last seventeen years.

Kai and Raiden joined the rest of the men: her father’s old friend Aito and Tomm and Ren, brothers from their village. Handsome, perfect, Ren. They had reached a watering hole surrounded by tall, delicately-leaved ironwood trees. It was an oasis of color in the otherwise dull tan landscape—leagues after leagues of banu grass withering in the summer heat. The cattle were already heading to the edge of the water and reaching down to drink.

“We’ll break here for lunch,” Raiden announced. “I’m going to take a closer look at some of the calves. Save me something to eat, you animals.”

Aito pulled lunch out of his saddlebags, spreading dried meat, fruit and cheese over a flat stump under the shade of one of the ironwood trees. He was the keeper of the food, as Tomm and Ren—renowned bottomless pits—couldn’t be trusted.

The brothers were nearly identical—tall and thin but strong, like two acacia trees that refused to bow to the wind. Tomm was the older and more charismatic, with an easy laugh and a quirk in his smile. Ren was more reserved, as if he preferred to observe life around him before expressing his conclusions.

Kai found him observing her often, which was disconcerting, as it usually happened when she herself was trying to sneak a sideways glance at him. She didn’t think he suspected her secret, but he must know something about her was not as it seemed.

Kai sprawled out on the ground next to the watering hole in typical masculine fashion, eating her lunch with gusto. She constantly felt that she was playing a caricature of a man, that her exaggerated gestures and mannerisms were painfully transparent. Apparently they weren’t, as the

villagers who lived around them hadn't discovered her yet. If the tables were turned, she supposed she wouldn't see reason to think twice about herself. She was short in stature for a man, but her lean figure, made strong by years of helping her father, was not unusual in this rural area. Food was not always plentiful during childhood. Her face was square like her father's, her skin tanned by the sun, a field of freckles across her small nose and cheeks. Her ears stuck out like her mother's, though her mother could cover hers with long hair. Kai's cheekbones were a bit high for a man's, and her eyes were hazel and almond-shaped, but those feminine features were balanced by a nondescript mouth, unruly eyebrows, and a close-cropped, unfashionable haircut. As a woman, Kai would never be more than plain, perhaps pretty if she really put some effort into it. She thanked Tsuki every day for her unremarkable features.

Kai only had to blend into the background for six more months and she could be free. Maybe. If she made it across the border and wasn't killed for a spy. It was the best she could hope for, a shadow of a future that could easily elude her. But as quickly as her emotions took a turn towards self-pity, she righted them. She knew she was lucky. By all rights, she shouldn't be alive at all.

Kai laid back into the dry grass and her mind drifted, imagining what it would be like if she and Ren were at the watering hole alone, as a man and a woman. Would he hold her hand or kiss her? Look at her softly?

A commotion by the water jarred her from her daydream, and she sat up.

"Kai! Come on, we're going swimming!" shouted Tomm, already stripped down to his underclothes.

Her cheeks grew hot as she watched Ren take his shirt off. His lean, tanned muscles shone with sweat. She tore her eyes away, not wanting to be caught staring. "No thanks," she called. "My father might come back any moment."

The brothers seemed to accept her excuse and dove into the water. She watched them splashing each other, floating, and doing lazy backstrokes across the glistening surface of the water. Just another slice of everyday life that she had to watch from a distance.

Kai closed her eyes and laid back on the grass again, listening to the light sounds of Aito's gentle snoring punctuated by the brothers' laughter. That man could sleep through anything. It grew quiet. A shadow passed over her, and she felt a drop of water on her forehead.

She blinked it away and opened her eyes to Tomm and Ren standing over her, mischievous grins on their faces.

“Come on!” Tomm cried. The brothers heaved her up, racing her down to the water to throw her in. She panicked, beating Tomm across the shoulders uselessly. She couldn’t end up in the water, it would expose everything.

Kai’s blind panic gave way to a spark of reason, and she acted quickly. She punched Tomm in the windpipe with a quick blow of her hand, trying to strike true despite the angle they were holding her. Luckily, it was enough, and Tomm doubled over in surprise, dropping her left side. Unsupported, she tumbled out of Ren’s hands as well. She sprang to her feet, and with a mental apology, kned Ren in the stomach. She raced up the bank, leaving the two of them spluttering and coughing.

“Wow, Kai,” Tomm said when he finally caught his breath. “Can’t you take a joke? What are you, a manga cat?” he asked, referring to the big felines that roamed the Tottori Desert that bordered their land.

“Looks like you two need to spend some more time in sparring lessons with Master Opu,” she said, trying to turn the situation into a joke. They couldn’t realize how deadly serious it was.

“What’s this?” Her father chose that moment to reappear over the hillside. Her shoulders sagged as the tension left them. Playtime was over. She was safe. “You boys should know better than to try to take on my son, even two to one.” He clapped her across the shoulders, giving her an inquisitive look. She nodded wearily.

Ren laughed. “He’s right Tomm, we better adjust our plan of attack next time. We underestimated Kai.”

“I bet you won’t make that mistake again,” she said, grinning.



The rest of the ride home was uneventful. Kai loved the peace of the open countryside, disturbed only by the soft creak and clank of tack and leather, the soft hoofbeats of the horses and gentle moos of the cattle. The land they rode through was yet untouched by the war. When she was out here, she could almost imagine it didn’t exist.

As they neared their village, the reminders were obvious. Even the smallest towns were fortified, wooden and earthen walls and gates built to protect from an attack by Miinan soldiers and moonburners. Though if the moonburners really came, that wood and earth would do nothing to stop them. A few Kitan soldiers were stationed in each village,

providing defense as well as intelligence back to King Ozora.

Her family's house was one of the few built outside the town wall. Officially, her parents had built the house beyond the walls in order to stay close to their livestock. Unofficially, they had wanted to be as far away from their neighbors as possible.

They rounded the cattle into the pens, and Aito, Tomm and Ren waved goodbye. She and her father watered the cattle and then saw to their horses, rubbing them down and filling their stalls with fresh hay and oats.

"Do Tomm and Ren suspect anything?" Raiden asked as they walked from the barn towards their small stout house.

"No. I handled it. They just think I'm strange." *They and everyone else in the village*, she thought. That was the price of keeping the entire town at arm's length.

"Be careful, my little fox. We are so close." It was her father's nickname for her when she was little, given to help a child understand and embrace the little-taught virtues of slyness and deception. They had made it a game for her. It didn't feel like a game anymore.

"I know we're close," Kai said. "But some days I don't think I can do this another six months."

"You are strong. You will. You must."

And there it was. She had never had a choice but to carry on.

They walked into the small wooden house and were greeted by the welcoming smell of a spicy stew on the fire. But when Kai saw who filled the room, she stopped in her tracks.

Raiden recovered more quickly.

"Prefect Youkai." He gave a respectful bow. "To what do we owe this honor?"

Prefect Youkai stood up from the kitchen table, his bloated stomach jostling the teacups set on top.

"I had a minor ailment and I was consulting your wife regarding a remedy. Her herbs and poultices always do the trick."

"Of course," Raiden said, eyeing his wife who was also standing at the table. "We are happy to assist."

Kita was divided into shoens, which were each ruled by a prefect appointed by King Ozora. Youkai, the prefect of their shoen, was a man of appetites. If he cared about the residents of Ushai at all, it was only

for the tax revenue they represented. Today his massive girth was swathed in a colorful silk tunic embroidered with flowers, wrapped with a straining obi sash. His tiny dark eyes, set above a pencil-thin goatee drawn onto his quivering pale jowls, flicked to Kai's mother too frequently for comfort.

"Hanae," Youkai said, gathering the stoppered bottle she had given him. "I will try this. Thank you as always for your help." He nodded to Raiden and lumbered towards the door.

He paused at the doorway and turned.

"Raiden, be alert. I have received word of a raid on the next shoen by Queen Airi's moonburners. I think an attack here is unlikely, but we must be vigilant."

As soon as Prefect Youkai was gone, Kai's mother Hanae shuddered slightly and blew a few stray strands of hair off her forehead. Then she turned her attention to Raiden and swept him into an embrace.

Her parents' love for each other, after almost twenty years, was still embarrassingly intense. There were many nights Kai wished that their house was bigger, or at least had thicker walls.

"I don't like how he looks at you," Raiden said. "Or how often he comes to visit."

"I don't either," Hanae said, leaving Raiden's arms to check the stew. "But I am the village healer. I do not turn patients away."

"Even patients with fake ailments?" Kai chimed in. "His only ailment is being fat as a rhinoceros."

"Kai!" her parents chided her simultaneously.

"We must show him respect," Hanae said. "Even if he has not earned it."



After dinner, Kai and her parents sat by the warm light of the fire. Her father oiled a halter for one of the horses. While her mother ground herbs in a stone bowl, Kai studied her face in the firelight. It was no surprise that Prefect Youkai was interested in Hanae. She was strikingly beautiful despite years of hard work as a rancher's wife and the village's only healer. She had lustrous black hair, pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck, a few stray pieces loose around her temples. Her face, round and smooth like a doll's, was filled with perfect features: wide, striking light-gray eyes with long lashes, a small nose and a full button mouth.

The way her ears stuck out at the top seemed endearing, rather than awkward like Kai's. But more than that, her mother had a way with people. She treated each of her patients, from the poorest to the oldest, with kindness and humor, earning their trust and respect. The townsfolk worshipped her. Some days, Kai aspired to cultivate her mother's gentle strength, while others left her annoyed that she had a role model that she could never live up to.

Kai flipped through *The Rising Sun*, a children's fable about the formation of Kita that she had already read about a thousand times, before finally tossing it aside.

"Can we talk more about the plan?" Kai asked, breaking the silence.

"Not tonight," Hanae responded. "I have had a trying day."

"Please? I can't just sit here anymore. I need to do something, prepare, plan . . . something."

"We have been preparing you for this your whole life," Raiden said. "You are ready. You are strong. We just need to wait until you are eighteen. Then you will gain your full powers, and the moonburners will not be able to deny you."

"I know. But won't you tell me more about the moonburners? About Queen Airi? I need to know what to expect."

"Queen Airi is a calculating woman," Hanae said. "I do not relish entrusting you to her care. Her moonburners are only a weapon to her." Her mother pursed her lips. "But there is no other place for you. Now please, let us speak of this no more tonight."



## CHAPTER 2

**K**ai awoke that morning from a hot, fitful sleep. She never slept well. It seemed that as soon as the sun set, her mind and body became energized and alive, like a taut bowstring itching for its arrow to fly. She opened the tight shutters over her window and sunlight streamed into the room.

The air in her room already felt heavy. It would be a hot day. The shutters were her mother's idea, designed to keep stray rays of moonlight from touching her, lest they awaken some hidden power she was unprepared for. In her seventeen years, her supposed powers had only ever once manifested, and at this point, she couldn't help but wonder if it was all a horrible misunderstanding.

If not for her hair. That was undeniable. She splashed water on her face and towed it off, careful not to get her hair wet. A moonburner, a female sorceress who drew her magic from the light of the moon, developed her powers fully by age eighteen. Her magical maturity was marked by her hair turning entirely silver, a process that had already begun for Kai. Hanae carefully dyed Kai's short cropped hair dark brown once a week to cover the silver, but if her hair got wet in the meantime, the dye would wash out.

Sunburners, male sorcerers that drew their powers from the rays of the sun, were marked by the same distinct hair—except theirs turned the color of spun gold. And it wasn't illegal to be a sunburner in Kita. They



were honored and revered, making up King Ozora's most elite fighting force. It would have been so much easier if she had been a boy.

She pulled on brown trousers and began the daily process of tightly binding her breasts so any trace of a feminine curve was gone. Not that there was a lot of curve to begin with. She pulled on a long white shirt and leather vest, followed by her leather work boots and broad-brimmed hat. Her costume as Kai, the cherished only son, was complete.

That day, they checked the cattle for illness and pests and branded the new calves. The day passed quickly as Kai and her father worked in companionable silence. As much as her situation grated at her, there was much she would miss about this life.

But there was no place for a moonburner in Kita. King Ozora had decreed years ago that all moonburners would be killed on sight. All female babies who were revealed by the Gleaming to be moonburners were left in the Tottori Desert to die; a gruesome sacrifice for Taiyo. No one ever said gods were civilized.

When her parents realized that she was a moonburner, they had pretended she was a boy to avoid performing the Gleaming in public. A king's ransom to the town surgeon had secured his silence in the matter, and even then, her parents breathed easier after he passed away a few years ago. They had somehow, miraculously, kept up the charade.

Kai and Raiden walked in from the outer pasture as dusk was falling. The last rays of the setting sun fell across the caramel-colored grass of the fields, seeming to set it on fire with its ruddy light.

The stillness was shattered by a piercing scream that sounded faint in the distance, soon followed by the sounds of broken glass and falling rubble. Kai and her father looked at each other in alarm and both started running towards the house.

"I'll get mother," Kai said, and her father nodded his assent. He split off from Kai, heading towards the closest gate to the village.

Kai flew through the front door.

"Something's going on in the village. It sounds like there could be injuries," Kai said, catching her breath. Hanae was already gathering her bag of instruments and herbs and Kai grabbed the knife and sheath her father had given her when she turned thirteen, tucking it into her belt.

They ran towards the village, one-tenth of a league from their house. Smoke was already rising from the buildings behind the stout wooden wall. Screams and explosions punctuated the scene. She could only

imagine what was going on inside those walls.

“There are no attackers at the gate,” Hanae said. “It must be someone from the inside.”

“The inside? A rebellion? But who? Why?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand,” Hanae said breathlessly. “But the gate is closed.”

“Maybe we can get in the Sun Door,” Kai said, referring to the pedestrian entrance leading into the town market.

They veered to the left, flanking the high walls. Smoke was billowing higher now in the center of town, drifting over the side of the walls.

They reached the Sun Door and were almost bowled over by two women fleeing the burning town. Hanae grabbed the arm of one, who Kai recognized as the baker’s wife. Her face was smeared with soot and her eyes were wild.

“What is going on?” Hanae asked, gripping the woman’s arms as if willing her to shake off her daze through sheer force.

“Moonburners. Attack.”

Hanae recoiled as if bitten by a snake. The women continued to flee and Hanae turned her iron grip to Kai.

“You cannot go in there. They might recognize you . . . what you are. You must run.”

“I am not going to flee while you and father help save our village,” Kai replied, square jaw set stubbornly. “I’m coming.”

“Absolutely not. This is not up for discussion. There is no way I will—”

Hanae was cut off as a fireball hit the wall above their heads, the strength of the blast tossing them to the ground like discarded chaff. Kai tried to sit up and reeled to the side, a vision of the flames burned onto her retinas. A portion of the wall above them was alight and spreading fast. Her mother wasn’t moving.

And then Kai saw the moonburner. She rode astride an enormous black bat, circling and flapping its membranous wings to stay aloft above the town. Kai had heard the legends, but had hardly believed they were real—moonburners or the giant bats. Did they breathe fire, too, like the stories said?

Kai’s body felt strangely detached from her mind, as if she were floating outside of time, senses ringing and backfiring.

The woman sent fireball after fireball along the length of the village wall, systematically lighting it on fire, a grim smile on her face. Her long silver hair whipped in the wind and the heat; her eyes shone like comets blazing across the sky. She was beautiful and terrible.

The moonburner's gaze swept past Kai and returned, eyes narrowing as she no doubt realized that her prey had not been neatly dispatched. As the woman raised her arm to throw, Kai's mind slammed back into her protesting body, and she launched into action. She heaved her mother's unconscious body up into her arms and half stumbled, half threw them through the Sun Door. Fire exploded behind them, the intensity of the heat threatening to overwhelm her. But Kai managed to stay on her feet, gripping her mother's unconscious form over her shoulder.



Kai made her way into the center of the village, placing one heavy foot before the other. Her skin felt tight and painful, especially where the weight of her mother pressed her. People streamed past in panicked flight, oblivious to anything but their own survival.

Kai reached the first clearing in the market and nearly cried from relief when she saw her father. He was directing a team of men pulling buckets from the ornamental fountain, trying to make a small dent in the blazes that lit the sky around them.

"Father!" she cried, reaching his side and laying her mother down as gently as her aching muscles would allow.

They examined Hanae quickly together, reaching the same conclusion that she was unconscious, but alive and generally unharmed. She was already stirring.

Raiden drew Kai into a quick, fierce embrace. "Good job, my little fox," he said into her ear.

"How can I help?" Kai asked, wiping the back of her shirtsleeve across her forehead, no doubt leaving more grime than was there to start.

Before Raiden had time to respond, a woman stumbled out from a stone building to the left of the square, tripping and falling to the ground like a limp rag doll. The top floors of the building burned brightly, and debris was already beginning to fall. Kai ran to her side, kneeling down.

"Maiko!" Kai said, smoothing the tangled hair from her face. "Are you all right?"

"Sora is still inside," she sobbed. Maiko was Tomm and Ren's

mother. Sora, their little brother, was eight. Sora with his brothers' same mischievous smile, Sora who loved chasing the calves in the field, sprinting after them until he fell to the ground, breathless and giggling. Kai's anger flared. How could someone do this to an innocent child?

"Where are Tomm and Ren?" she asked. "Are they inside?"

"No, they ran to help when the attack first came. I tried to get Sora, but his door was stuck, I couldn't get it open. Help him!" she pleaded.

"Kai!" She heard her father call. "You can't!"

But she had already plunged into the house.

The bottom floor of the house was smoky but not yet aflame. She used her knife to rip a patch off the bottom of her shirt and tied it over her nose and mouth. The smoke stung her eyes as she ran up the stairs, taking them two by two.

The air on the second level was almost suffocating. Flames licked the ceiling from the rooftop above. She passed two open doors, Ren's and Tomm's, she presumed. There. The closed door. Her eyes watered, blurring her vision. She tried the knob and screamed as her hand came away. The knob was red hot and angry. Blisters spread across her palm and fingers. She took a shuddering breath to steel her nerves and doubled over, coughing from the smoke.

She mentally shook herself. *Get this done or you will die in here*, she thought. She took a step back from the door and kicked with all her might. The door hardly budged, the impact reverberating through her entire body. She tried again. And again. The fourth time, the warped wood of the door frame gave and the door burst in. Sora lay on the floor curled in a ball, unconscious.

She lifted his still body; her burned hand screaming in protest. She turned to leave and was driven backward as a portion of the hallway roof gave way in a shower of embers and wood. The flames roared through the doorway, greedily making their way inside the room.

Kai looked back at the second story window, too tiny for her to fit through. The hallway was the only way. *Tsuki be with me*, she prayed silently to the moon goddess. She backed against the far wall and sprinted forward, leaping through the flames over the downed beams.

She had cleared it! Her elation died in a strangled scream as she felt flames continue to caress her body, up her shoulders and down her back. Her shirt had caught fire.

She pounded down the stairs and out the front door, straight for the

fountain. She hurdled the low stone ledge and plunged into the shallow water with Sora still in her arms, collapsing sideways. Steam rose from her as she heaved Sora over the edge, lowering him to the ground gently. She had done it.

Kai dragged herself from the fountain, searching for Maiko in the crowd. The number in the square had grown. Even Prefect Youkai was helping quell the worst of the fires. She found Maiko, and it took her a moment to realize that Maiko's eyes did not register gratitude, but shock. Fear.

Confused, she searched for her parents. There they were; her mother had awoken. But the look on their faces . . . horror. She self-consciously wiped the soot from her face and her hand came away black. Not black from soot. Black from dye. Her dye was streaming down her, staining her shirt.

*Oh no.* Her shirt. It was nearly gone, charred and hanging in tatters. Her feminine form was unmistakable.

Prefect Youkai's eyes were large as saucers, his bovine face quivering with fear. He pointed a finger at her, accusing. "Moonburner."