



THE RAKURAI, PACIFIC OCEAN

Present Day

“Dad!” Mitch and Tom called out at once.

Jack Hearn smiled wearily at his sons. He was relieved to finally be able to reveal himself to them, but how were they going to respond to him after he’d just attacked their beloved guardian? Would they think *he* was the enemy? Would they fear him?

Tom and Mitch just stood at a distance, completely dumbfounded and confused.

“Dad,” Tom began, “you just—”

“You killed Mr. Chance,” said Mitch. Then he demanded angrily, “Who are you? Have you been brainwashed?”

Jack wished that he could’ve spared them from seeing what had just happened. But he didn’t have a choice.

“I’m sorry, boys. I know this is difficult, but you

have to believe me when I tell you that Jin Chance was a traitor to the family,” he told them.

“But why? How?” said Tom.

“That’s not possible,” Mitch added.

“It’s true. I wouldn’t have done it unless I had to,” he said. Suddenly he felt the toll of the day weigh on him. He realized he was exhausted, and his left arm was starting to throb from the gash Jin had branded him with. All Jack wanted to do was sleep, but he couldn’t, not until his boys knew he was not to be feared.

“Boys, I will explain everything. For now, I want you to know that I haven’t changed. I haven’t been brainwashed or compromised in any way. I did what I needed to do to protect you, our family, and our clan. Please believe me.”

Then Jack held out his arms. For a moment he was afraid they would turn away from him.

Waiting there like that, the moment seemed to last an eternity. But suddenly Tom and Mitch both bounded toward him and hugged him so tightly he had trouble catching his breath. “We thought you were dead,” Tom said, trying to stifle his tears.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I tried to get to you, tried to tell you, but . . . well, things got a little complicated.”

The boys continued to hug their father until a low, rumbling sound made them look up. Vane Island had literally crumbled to pieces: rocks, debris, all lay strewn

across the salty waters, while the rest of the island plunged to the depths of the ocean floor.

“Hey, look,” Tom said suddenly, pointing to the sky.

The sound of beating helicopter rotors had brought their gaze up just in time to watch Vane flee the scene.

“I knew he’d have an escape plan,” said Jack.

“Dad,” Tom began, looking back at his father, “how do you know that Mr. Chance—”

Jack held up his hand. “I know you boys have a hundred questions for me, and I promise I’ll answer them all as best as I can, but for now I want you to get some rest. Our mission is not complete, not by a long shot, and we all need to be at our best.”

“Then it would be best if you stop bleeding all over the deck,” a female voice declared in Russian-accented English. Jack, Tom, and Mitch turned to see the beautiful Nadia Petrova, who had also been watching Vane’s helicopter take off.

“Boys, you haven’t introduced me to your . . . friend,” Jack said, staring at the stranger intently.

“This is Nadia,” said Mitch. “She, uh, helped us get out of Vane’s tower and into his prison so we could free everyone.”

“And your sons got me off this island of doom,” Nadia added, shaking her head.

“Yes, I saw you on the island with Vane,” Jack noted.

“Looks like your boss left without you.”

“He was not very nice boss,” said Nadia, with marked disdain in her voice. Then she looked down at Jack’s arm. “I have basic medic training. I look at that later.”

Jack was unsure what sort of medical training Nadia might have, especially since he had only seen Vane’s assistants make drinks and run errands. But he agreed to let her help him.

Once the helicopter had vanished from sight, Nadia retired back downstairs to her cabin. It was getting dark, and everyone was looking forward to a peaceful night’s sleep.

Just then Inoshiro Matsu appeared. “Jack, a word with you, please,” he requested.

“I’m sorry, Inoshiro,” Jack replied, “but I’m done keeping secrets. Anything you have to say can be said in front of my boys. They’re R.O.N.I.N. now too, and I believe they’ve proven themselves quite worthy of any inside information we may have.”

“Very well. We need to set a course for the ship. I discovered what I think is a map drawn by Dr. Gensai,” Inoshiro said, holding out the map. “It seems the previous crew was following the map’s course.”



“Boys,” Jack asked nervously, “where did you find this map? Why were you following it?”

“We have stuff to fill you in on too, Dad,” replied Mitch. “We were on the hunt for Dragon Island.”

“How do you know—you know what, we’ll talk about all of this later. Inoshiro, my boys are dead on. We need to go to Dragon Island.” Seeing Inoshiro’s reaction, he added, “Trust me on this one. Dr. Gensai can give you the the exact coordinates; no need to try and decipher this map when we have its author on board.”

Inoshiro nodded. “I will talk to him, and then arrange for him and his daughter, as well as Ms. Petrova, to be taken to Tokyo.”

“Is Laura okay?” Tom asked Inoshiro.

“Laura’s fine,” Inoshiro assured him. “She and her father are catching up with each other.”

Tom and Mitch breathed a sigh of relief. Knowing that Laura was taken care of, the boys led Jack down the stairs to their cabins.

“I have an extra bunk in my cabin, Dad, so you can sleep there,” Tom offered. “But we are *way* too tired to sleep. We have to know everything!”

“Whoa, speak for yourself, Tom. I could use a few hours of sleep before we get into everything,” said Mitch, yawning. Then he gave his father a hug good night, went into his cabin, and flopped down heavily on his bunk.

“It’s really good to have you back, Dad. See you in the morning.” And that was the last thing Mitch said before falling asleep.

When they got to Tom’s cabin, Tom gave his dad another hug before climbing into bed.

“Any chance you’ll dish the details without Mitch?”

“Nope.” Jack laughed, patting his son on the back.

It was good to hear his dad’s voice again. For the first time in a long while, Tom felt safe.

“I’m really glad you’re back, Dad,” said Tom, as he closed his eyes.

As Tom drifted off to sleep, Jack sat in the dim light watching his son’s chest rise and fall peacefully. His thoughts drifted back to a time when things were simpler, when the boys had normal lives; when they went to school, played video games, and were tucked safely in their beds at night by their mother. That’s the way it should *still* be, he thought. Then he recalled, with anger, that for the last eight years, the very person he’d depended on to take over their mother’s daily routine and protect his sons from harm was the person who had been plotting all along to destroy them.

He silently renewed the promise he had made a long time ago: He would never leave their side again, no matter what it took.