



# *the Elites*

NEVER BE AFRAID TO FALL

NATASHA NGAN

that suggested Ember was inside.

As soon as they began the training programme, all juniors were paired with an older Elite to be their mentor. Silver had moved into the bedroom she shared with Ember when she was thirteen years old. She was fifteen now. Two years of living with her Elite senior had taught Silver enough to know that if she found Ember waiting in their bedroom now, she'd end up feeling even worse than she did already.

Silver pulled away from the door. She hadn't heard a thing. Sending a quick prayer to the gods that Ember was elsewhere – and ignoring the thought of what her parents would say if they knew she'd asked the gods for help with such a trivial matter – she unlocked the door by

touching her hand to the panel at its side. Then, carefully, she pushed it open.

The room was empty.

'Thank you, gods!' Silver smiled, stepping inside.

The room was just as she'd left it that morning. To the right, the shutters of her and Ember's bedpods were open, and at the far end of the room the blinds for the plastiglass outer wall were pulled up, letting in a wave of pale light from the setting sun.

Silver shut the door behind her and dropped to the floor. She lay spread-eagled on her back, grinning widely. It felt so good not to be on her feet. Training had been intense that afternoon; five hours of stamina, stealth and fighting sessions. She could already feel the

bruises forming on her body where the blows of her trainer had landed. Now, lying on the floor in the warmth of the sunshine, she felt her muscles relaxing, her limbs softening. Fighting had never been Silver's strong point. She was quick and agile, which suited her to the covert assignments Elites were given by the Council, but even after years of training her combat skills were poor.

'I'm not moving all night,' she announced out loud to herself. 'I'll just have to miss the banquet. No one will care.' She snorted. 'And Ember will be thankful that she won't have to sit next to me, pretending to be nice –'

'Oh, is that right?'

Silver scrambled up so quickly she banged her forehead into the door.

'Careful now,' said the voice behind her. 'We don't want you injured for your big day tomorrow.'

'I'm fine,' muttered Silver, getting to her feet.

Ember was leaning in the bathroom doorway. She had changed out of her uniform and was wearing a silk kimono tied loosely at her waist, slipping off one shoulder to reveal a curve of white skin. Her flame-red hair was wet and dark from the shower. Even without make-up she was beautiful, and Silver felt the familiar pang of jealousy as she took in Ember's womanly figure, her large green eyes bright and sharp as jade stones.

'It doesn't look like you're fine.' Ember crossed her arms, the corners of her lips curled in a sneer. 'After that pathetic

performance at training today, I'm amazed Senior Surrey didn't remove you from the Elite programme right away.'

Silver ignored this. She went to move towards her bedpod.

Ember stepped in her way. 'But then,' she said, leaning her face down to Silver's, 'maybe he's finally realised how irrelevant you are to the Council.' The orange blossom fragrance of her perfume was sickly sweet, clogging in Silver's throat.

'Look, Ember –'

'Perhaps he's working out who to replace you with tomorrow.'

Swallowing down an angry retort, Silver tried to push past her, but Ember grabbed her shoulders, leaning her face so close to Silver's their noses almost