

# Chapter Eleven

Zhao had done well for himself since retiring. His modest, two-story home reminded me of a mid-level guild member's domicile, one that spoke of coziness and comfort.

Its outer walls had been painted to resemble the wood found in the trees of old, and inside, poured walls descended from the ceiling to waist-level before switching to metal. Not as much cloth was draped from the ceilings in here as I'd grown accustomed to in the palace, but some did drift through the air, giving the place's halls and rooms a softened look that they could never otherwise find.

Most impressive, however, was each room's self-contained atmosphere. I marveled at these, even as I pushed through one barrier's viscous material and into the space beyond.

A fire pit with incense sticks strewn around it occupied the center of the room while pillows were scattered like detritus across the floor, and organza curtains diffused the yellow light streaming through the windows along the ceiling.

While Brennan dove into the pillows, I sat beside the fire pit, watching Zhao pour drinks at an elegant sideboard.

Seeing the old man had done me good, I decided. After the pain of the last few days, finding a familiar face, one who might be an ally, made a knot in my stomach relax, if only a little. When I'd heard that the old man wouldn't stop my quest for vengeance, I'd almost forgotten how many times Zhao had knocked me on my ass during my training or how deep of a betrayal it had been when he'd left.

Of course, that didn't negate my worry over how long his deliberate ignorance of my survival would last.

Handing me a glass, Zhao took a position far from the door, in the room's most vulnerable position. How much effort was he putting into placating me?

"How are you holding up, *ko*?" Zhao asked.

He took a sip of his drink to assure his guests that poison hadn't come into contact with it, but I still sniffed at mine before swirling its contents.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

With a sigh, Zhao said, "Please don't. I remember when my emperor died, gone in his final communion with the earth. I was devastated, and Yukinaga and I were nowhere near as close as you and Nokoribi were. He was your brother in all but name and blood."

Well did I remember the months after I'd been summoned to the palace. Well did I remember Zhao's intensity when he'd been training me to take his place. Well did I recall his inexplicable bouts of anger and the times when he'd abandoned me to my own devices, all while precious water—tears—had spilled over his face.

And everyone knew that the former emperor and his bodyguard had never liked each other. If that weren't enough, Yukinaga had died of natural causes, hence why Zhao was still breathing. My emperor, my best friend, had been murdered.

"I'll survive," I said.

I rubbed at my burning eyes while Zhao regarded me with... pity?

"Nokoribi always told me that I'd taught you too well," he said. "He said I killed a part of you."

"Maybe you did," I said. "I don't see how it matters unless it relates to getting revenge."

"Is that what this is about?" Brennan asked.

Damn, I'd almost forgotten she was here. With her drink already emptied, she was lounging in the pillows with her hands folded on her stomach.

"I hate revenge stories. They never end well for anyone," she said. "Maybe I should leave. I've already saved your life, as Alouin asked. From what I can remember, he didn't need anything else from me here."

Surprisingly, I didn't want Brennan to go, but I didn't know why that was. Did I want answers for the many strange things I'd seen while around her?

Yes. That must be it. It was the only logical explanation for the strange feeling I experienced at the idea of her gone.

So, when Brennan rocked to her feet, I caught her hand, ignoring the sensation of crawling skin that always came when I touched someone else.

"Please," I said. "Stay."

I could feel her eyes on me, but nothing could drag my gaze away from the smoking incense burners, scattered along the room's edge. When I curled my fingers around her hand, she didn't force me to release her. She sat back down, and only then did I take a breath.

"Maybe I didn't kill that part of you as thoroughly as Nokoribi thought," Zhao said under his breath.

Flicking my eyes to him, I frowned. What was that supposed to mean?

"Ok. Stop me if I've got this wrong," Brennan said. "You, Kasai, were the bodyguard of this place's emperor, a man you loved like a brother. Something bad happened, and during it, the emperor

died. For some reason, everyone in this backward iteration blamed you for his death, which got you executed, and now that you've been *rescued from execution*, you want to waste your life looking for the person who killed your friend so you can exact your revenge. Sound about right?"

"Almost," I said.

"Wait a minute. Before we get into details, let's make sure we're safe," Zhao interjected. "Did anyone see Brennan rescuing you? Will anyone come knocking at my door in the middle of the night, looking for you?"

"I doubt it," I said. "The only one who saw Brennan pluck me from mid-air was Arita, and I don't consider him a threat."

While silence descended, I took a sip of my drink. If it had been poisoned, Brennan and Zhao would likely have shown symptoms of it by now.

"*Arita?*" Zhao sputtered. "One of the most influential guild chairs in Takanai witnessed your rescue, and he's not a threat?"

"Of course not," I said, once more swirling my drink. "He'll be dead soon."

Another silence fell, and in it, I observed my companions. Brennan looked bored, watching me through drooping eyelids, but Zhao... not so much. His face had reddened while he repeatedly opened and closed his mouth, which was a much greater emotional reaction than I'd expected from him. He'd been out of the game for too long.

"You think he caused Nokoribi's death," he eventually said.

"He as much as admitted it before pushing me off of the summit," I said. "The girl who did the deed was only a tool. Arita and his compatriots were her guiding hand."

"So, what's your plan, then?" Brennan asked. "Go in and murder this Arita?"

So much sarcasm had dripped from those questions that I almost took offense to it, but I could understand where Brennan was coming from. She very obviously wasn't from here, meaning she probably didn't conform to or understand Hiyuki's customs. She didn't know everything I was capable of, and... she had a point about my recent escape from death.

Still.

"No, simply killing him would be stupid," I said. "I'll find him, torture his co-conspirators' identities from him, and *then*, I'll kill him, in the manner he deserves."

Sitting up, Brennan flung a pillow into her lap.

"Men," she said, rolling her eyes. "Always resorting to violence first, and never looking for another way. All so they seem strong."

*Find the truth, K.*

Something unpleasant jolted through me as I spun on Brennan with my teeth bared.

“You don’t know,” I spat. “You didn’t spend your life protecting your best friend, the only person you ever loved, only to have vines separate you while those same tendrils riddled his body until he barely looked human. You didn’t hold him while he fought to live. You don’t see that image every time you close your eyes. I will *annihilate* Arita and everyone else who ended my friend’s life. They will *wish they’d never known us*. Don’t condescend to me when you could never hope to understand.”

Brennan coolly regarded me until she was certain I was finished.

“I do, actually. Understand, that is,” she said. “I’ve held a friend while he struggled to breathe, begging every power I once considered holy to heal him. They didn’t. He died. So yes, I understand. And that’s why I’ll make inquiries into this... Arita, was it? You stay here, dead man. We can discuss our next steps when I return.”

Setting her glass on the fire pit’s lip, Brennan got to her feet, all while I fought to close my gaping mouth. She’d spoken with such *passion*, so much empathy and derision swirled together, that I was stunned as she walked across the room. She paused at Zhao’s side on her way out.

“Will you show him our agreed-upon quarters?” she asked.

When Zhao nodded, she stormed out of the room, and I struggled to collect myself.

“Strong, isn’t she?” my old mentor eventually asked.

“Yes,” I mumbled.

I couldn’t tear my eyes off of the curtain she’d disappeared through.

“I can see why you like her,” Zhao said.

*I liked her?*

Whipping my head toward him, I snapped, “What?”

“Nothing, *ko*,” Zhao said with a chuckle. “She made a good point about scouting for us. No one in Hiyuki knows her face yet... but I know you might not agree with my assessment. Let me at least show you to your room before you make any plans for the afternoon.”

He led me to the second floor, stopping in a chamber that overlooked the nearby emergency channel. Two, narrow beds lined the walls, one of which was already mussed with clothes strewn across it.

“We’re sharing a room?” I asked.

“Yes,” Zhao said. “I’m not terribly worried by the prospect, though.”

Shouldn’t he be? A man and a woman, unbound by oath, sharing a room seemed like a recipe for scandal, no matter how far-fetched I found the idea, but Zhao merely strolled to the far wall, placing a hand on a metal panel near the floor.

“I haven’t shown her this,” he said, looking back at me.

When I nodded, he pushed on the panel, swinging it open once it had clicked. Behind it lay weapons aplenty: swords, knives, pistols, and their requisite bullets. Several changes of clothes waited there too, from court dress to street attire to stealth wear. A cloak was folded beside these outfits, but my most coveted items hung on the back of the panel.

Masks, bearing all sorts of visages, leered at me, and ripping my spectacles off of my nose, I snatched the closest one to secure it to my face.

“I thought you might appreciate these,” Zhao said. “You’ve always had such a fixation with hiding your eyes.”

Hunching my shoulders, I said, “You know why I do it.”

I inspected the weapons while Zhao decided how to respond.

“Yes,” he soon said, “I know.”

There was such pity in his voice! Earth and fire, I never should have shared the story of my childhood with him.

“Why do you have this?” I asked, waving at the improvised vault.

“Nokoribi told me to prepare, remember? Collecting these weapons was a part of that,” Zhao said. “What will you do, *ko*? Will you wait for Brennan? Patience has never been your strong suit.”

I badly wanted to hunt Arita down *now* but...

“I’ll let Brennan have her chance,” I said.

“You’ve grown.”

Hefting a short sword, I got to my feet, swinging the blade to get accustomed to its weight.

“This grown man would like to wait for her in solitude,” I said. “Unless you want to practice with me?”

I lifted the sword’s point toward Zhao, who raised his hands.

“No. From what I’ve heard, you’ve far surpassed me. I’ll give you space,” he said. “Besides, you and Brennan interrupted me while I was caring for my plants. You can enjoy stabbing your invisible

enemies by yourself.”

He left, and when the door snicked closed behind him, I stripped off my coat and shirt, imagining Arita tied to the chair in front of me.

“Why did you do it?” I asked, lunging with the blade. “Why did you kill him? Why threaten Hiyuki like this?”

Slowly, precisely, I hacked my enemy to pieces.

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