

# Chapter Ten

Wind whipped through my hair while strands of it lashed against my face. Heat swelled around me in an explosion of steam, and a hated face hovered above, smirking.

Why did this seem familiar?

I was falling into earth's blood again, and as I realized the depth of pain that I'd soon be experiencing once more, I flailed, even knowing that I couldn't change what was coming.

*Damn Alouin to Katanti-*

Something smashed into me while force drove me toward the wall of Mt. Teisu's crater, but reaching it wouldn't be any better of a fate than my fall had been. Eaten by fire or splattered on slightly less searing stone. Which would I prefer?

To my amazement, my speed slowed and stopped, and I watched between my dangling feet as an ornithopter dropped into the earth's blood below.

"Hell, you're heavy," someone hissed. "*Would you pay attention and help me?*"

Snapping my head up, I spied Adams above me, which had my mouth dropping open. Wearing clothing suitable for a wealthier Hiyukian, she'd dyed her hair black, and darkened spectacles were hanging from her ears. She was clinging to the wall with metal slippers and a shimmering hand, extending a pair of translucent gloves to me, and somehow, I was dangling from her by an unseen attachment, a fact that made me much more eager to do as she'd asked.

Taking what Adams was offering, I pulled strangely cool... liquid? over my fingers and palms, and once they'd started shimmering like hers, I found handholds for myself. Above the popping bubble of earth's blood, I heard my boots hiss, and the smell of melting rubber drifted to my nose.

Meanwhile, Adams pressed a button on her belt, and once that was finished, I took my full weight. Far distant shouts accompanied the guilds' chairmen as they peered over the balcony, but before I could panic, Adams tossed a cloth over us.

"They'll still see us," I said.

At that, Adams chuckled while fiddling with something on the cloth's edge. Once she was done, the air beneath it became less oppressively hot, and my boot's sizzling fell silent, which had me thanking earth and fire. My toes had been starting to burn.

I didn't know how the cloth covering us wasn't turning to cinders, but then again, I also wasn't sure how these gloves were keeping my fingertips from getting seared off or why Adams seemed so

calm.

"I doubt they'll see us hanging here," she said.

Indeed, every gaze that turned our way slid over the spot where we were hiding, and after shaking their heads or exchanging comments, the guilds' chairmen left. We waited while the summit slowly emptied.

After a while, Adams said, "Well, Amari. You're officially dead."

Laughing, I forced myself not to hug the crater's wall.

"Don't panic indeed," I gasped. "That *bastard*."

"Who, Alouin? That's an understatement. Trust me," Adams said. "Are you ready to get out of here? The crowd around the crater probably won't notice us now."

Glancing at what had nearly killed me *again*, I suppressed a shudder.

"Please."

Pulling metal rings from beneath her jacket, Adams gave one to me. She pointed out an indentation in its side before sliding hers over her fingers like one part of paired brass knuckles.

"Point it where you want the threads to go," she said. "Then, rest your thumb in the hollow, and it'll do the rest."

As if to demonstrate, she lifted her arm, and glowing, blue lines shot from her fist to the precipice. She swept the cloth covering us to the side in time for her to spring toward the sky, suspended by nothing more than lines of light.

Gaping, I watched her ascent until she'd rolled over the crater's edge, and after hanging her head into view, she waved for me to follow.

I had so many questions, a host of them threatening to batter down my mind's door, but they'd have to wait. The only person who might give me answers was lying belly-first above me and...

Did I need to understand how and why I was alive or how and why Adams had saved me? Did I need answers to take my revenge?

Maybe. Maybe not. Whatever the case might be, I'd become a ghost in a city that wanted me dead, hanging over what they'd meant to kill me. Finding safety had become my top-

No. My *only* priority.

I aimed the metal ring at a spot beside Adam's head, pretending it was my pistol. When I touched my thumb to the indentation, sparkling blue light dazzled my eyes before something yanked me off

of the wall.

Wind tore at my hair once more, and every time I swung toward stone, I winced. In each of those instances, however, something repulsed me before I could be flattened into jelly, and I'd have been more grateful for that if the summit weren't approaching more quickly than I'd anticipated.

On reaching the crater's edge, I fumbled for a hold with my fingers unable to maintain a good grip, and when the blue strings vanished, I panicked. Even as I scabbled at loose stones, I knew that retaining my hold was a lost cause. I'd fall, and nothing would catch me this time.

The steam of earth's blood would ooze down my throat once more.

Hands pinned my wrists in place, and as I looked into darkened spectacles and a pale face, something pleasantly warm zapped up my arms with the hair on them standing on end. The world slowed down for me. I felt Adams' fingers curling under my skin and watched her lips moving, but I couldn't hear her.

Until her nails dug into my arms.

*"Help me!"* she hissed.

With Adams holding me in place, I rolled over the edge, landing on my back. Staring at a smog-coated sky, I laughed, shaking so intensely that I curled on myself. I dug my fingers into igneous pebbles, reveling at the sharp prick of their heat on my skin.

"I'm alive," I gasped.

"Yes," Adams said, "and we need to get you into hiding before anyone else realizes it."

She was standing over me, rifling through a satchel at her feet.

Pointing across the crater, she said, "Hopefully, the people who've lingered won't look our way."

On the other side, several citizens were leaning over the balcony's end, perhaps hoping to catch a glimpse of a failed bodyguard's remnants.

"Vultures," I muttered.

Melding my body with the ground, I created as low of a profile on the horizon as I could.

"Here."

Adams lowered a bubble into my field of view, and snatching it from her, I donned it, letting my shoulders loosen when the taste of sulfur faded. She took the mask that I'd removed, stashing it in her satchel.

“I’ll give you the rest of your disguise once we’re less exposed,” she said. “Let’s get off this weird volcano first.”

With her satchel thrown over her shoulder, Adams marched toward sprawling Takanai, and I crept after her.

Or I tried to.

I made it about ten steps before my legs gave out. I might have been healed while in Alouin’s domain, but if that man had reversed my timeline by only a few seconds, then my body was still broken and weak from my time in the palace’s dungeon. In the rush of my rescue, I’d forgotten.

“What’s the matter?” Adams asked. “Are you hurt?”

Only everywhere.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Everything just caught up with me. Let me-”

I struggled to reach my feet, wobbled a bit, and promptly fell down once more. Adams squatted in front of me with her lips pursed behind her bubble.

“You’re not fine. God, what is it with the people I meet and their insistence on toughing it out?” she snapped. “Tell me what happened. Maybe I can fix it.”

Could I admit to this weakness? Which would be worse: Concealing my body’s state and limping along or sharing what was wrong with Adams and getting healed? Which would more quickly get me to revenge?

“I took a beating while in the dungeon,” I said. “From what I cataloged while enduring it, I have several cracked ribs, a crushed toe along with a few minor fractures elsewhere in my foot, and bruises everywhere. I might be bleeding internally too, but I couldn’t say for sure, just like I’m not sure if I’ve listed everything that’s wrong with me. After a bit, I started losing track of what was happening to which body part.”

While I’d been telling her about my injuries, Adams had cradled her forehead in her hands, and once I’d finished, she massaged it.

“Ok. I’ve already used tech from other iterations here more than I’d planned but babysitting you while you recover sounds nauseating. Although maybe...” she said before clicking her tongue. “Please tell me that Hiyuki’s medical field is more advanced than everything else I’ve seen here.”

Scowling, I said, “If you’re asking how I’d normally treat injuries like this, then the answer’s simple. I’d take several doses of kalim and padun, the first for a boost in concentration and the second for pain relief. I’d find a way to support my broken bones before swallowing a packet of jatcha to stop the possible internal bleeding. Then, I’d wait to heal, but I wouldn’t be an annoyance while doing that; I promise. I’ve served my emperor in worse states than this.”

“Of course you have,” Adams said. “Well, if you can make it down the mountain, I can get you... your... drugs...”

Trailing off, she frowned at my lap, and when I looked down to find what had caught her attention, I'd have leapt backward if I'd had the energy for it. Every item I'd listed was lying between my sprawled legs.

Where only rock had been a moment before.

“Hmm,” Adams hummed. “Well? Take your meds, stupid. We'll consider that bit of strangeness once we're off of this mountain.”

Disconcerting as it was for things to randomly *appear from nowhere*, I knew Adams was right. So, I jabbed my skin with hypos and dumped a packet of powder into my mouth before accepting her help up. She supported my first limping steps, but when numbness had finished suffusing my body, I shook her off, testing my range of motion as we hiked down Mt. Teisu's slight incline.

At the mountain's base, Adams pulled me to the side before we could plunge into the capital city. One by one, she gave me a set of darkened spectacles, an oversized coat, and a floppy hat.

“I wasn't sure what size to get you,” she said. “Our first meeting was a couple of weeks ago for me, so I had to guess it from what I remembered, although I suppose that doesn't matter. The point was to drown your form in cloth.”

Raising my arms with the jacket's sleeves drooping from them, I chuckled.

“You managed that goal,” I said. “Do I pass as a downtrodden?”

“I don't know what that is but...”

Surveying me, Adams tapped her chin.

“You'll do for now,” she said. “We'll get you a better disguise once we reach my hideout.”

Hideout? She'd been busy.

With Adams taking the lead on our trek, I could observe the city around us. Walking through it, knowing that anyone who pierced through this disguise would rip me to shreds, felt strange. With each street we ventured down, Nokoribi's absence at my side twisted the dagger in my heart one more turn, and it took everything I had to focus on my surroundings and not my loss.

Angry energy was buzzing in Takanai. People went about their business with a tension that infected everyone around them. No one stopped for pleasant conversation, and I heard little laughter. Even the beggars kept quiet, timidly lifting their bowls overhead instead of loudly pleading.

The people's silence made the city's clattering gears all the more deafening. When a squealing hiss split the air, everyone flinched at the audible and abrupt evidence of the steamworks' presence.

These changes made sense, though, Hiyuki's Blessed Emperor had died, and no heir stood ready to replace him. The empire had no one to commune with the earth, and if the situation was left like this for too long, the people knew what would come. They were waiting for lurching stone, spewing fire, and raining ash with dread. How many more days of peace did Hiyuki have left?

When Adams ducked into a private abode's fenced yard, it came as a relief. I followed her to the rear of the house, examining the building's soot-streaked paint, but on turning the corner, I stopped short.

In the privacy found beside an emergency channel, chitinous spikes formed kakan plants and junom bushes, and an older man was plodding between these plants, watering them. Once he'd quenched each one's thirst, he shook hiryo powder on their tallest spikes, waiting beside them to make sure that fertilizer continued falling downward.

All of this took my breath. All of it was the epitome of illegal activity.

As Adams crunched over the stony roots toward him, the old man glanced up, and his wiry body started dropping into an attack form I recognized before a smile brightened his wrinkled face.

"Brennan!" he exclaimed. "You've returned. How was the execution?"

"It went as expected," Adams... or was it Brennan? said. "I've brought a friend home."

She gestured for me to join her, but while I did as she wanted, I also kept a careful eye on the old man.

"I'll make introductions," Brennan said. "Amari, this is-

"Zhao," I interrupted. "Imada Zhao."

The old man crossed his arms in an attempt to beguile me, but I saw him lowering his center of gravity while spreading his feet.

"Oh?" Zhao said. "Do I know you?"

I didn't once consider concealing my identity from this man. If Zhao didn't already know who I was, he'd figure it out soon enough. Best to get whatever might come from that revelation over with now.

"I should hope so, *maiyaru*. I would hate to see your skills so badly rusted," I said. "Did Nokoribi know about this gardening project of yours?"

Zhao's ready stance wavered.

"Kasai?" he breathed with his voice trembling. "Is it really you?"

“Please,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You expect me to believe that the retired head of ‘ribi’s intelligence network didn’t penetrate this terrible disguise in the moment he saw me?”

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Zhao whispered.

It was my turn to cross my arms, matching my potential opponent’s vulnerability.

“She saved me,” I said, inclining my head toward Brennan.

“*That’s* why you were so intent on the execution’s details!” Zhao said.

When we both stared at her, Brennan threw her hands overhead.

“Of course I’d pick the home of someone you know as a hideout,” she growled. “What else should I have expected? It’s just my goddamn luck.”

Speaking of hideouts and the reason I needed one.

Sliding into a stance to match the old man’s, I glared at him.

“Will you turn me in?” I asked. “If we have to fight, I’d rather do it now.”

“You’d trust an old operative’s word?” Zhao said before shaking his head. “I taught you better than that.”

I failed to respond, as answering his question seemed pointless. He knew what I’d say.

When Zhao relaxed, though, I barely kept my surprise from showing. What was he doing? The Zhao I knew didn’t break the law like this. He didn’t stand by while a crime was committed.

Then again, he *did* have a very illegal garden in his backyard.

“You’d have died before letting harm come to Nokoribi, and if you couldn’t protect him, you’d have run yourself through after he died, unable to live without your best friend,” Zhao said. “Given that, the only reason you’re standing here is that you plan to bring his murderer to justice. I want that, more than anything, and...”

He looked away.

“Nokoribi told me this might happen. I’ve been preparing for it, all while hoping it would never come to pass.”

Zhao glanced back at me when I stayed silent, and on seeing my open skepticism, he clicked his tongue. He proceeded to disarm himself, making knives appear from hiding spots across his body. Dropping a pistol on the pile’s apex, he retreated from it, allowing me access if I wanted it.

When I didn’t move, Zhao said, “I’ve always thought of you and Nokoribi as my sons. So, even if the operative in me is screaming to bring the news of your survival to the closest outpost, I won’t.

Whoever killed the emperor needs to die. Painfully. And it's your responsibility to do it. I won't turn you in."

Was he telling the truth? One way or the other, nothing in the world could tell me for sure, and no one should give an operative, even one who was retired, their trust.

I couldn't do anything, however, to change Zhao's eventual decision about me. All I could do was stay vigilant for his possible betrayal.

Forcing myself to relax, I bowed, and Zhao rearmed, although he tossed several weapons my way, including the pistol.

The illegal pistol. In the illegal garden. What had happened to Zhao since he'd left Nokoribi's service?

"I'm confused as hell," Brennan said, "but if you two have finished posturing, perhaps we can go inside, away from prying eyes. We have a lot to talk about."

"That sounds like a good idea," I said.

Wearily nodding, Zhao trudged for a door into his home, and Brennan waited until he'd disappeared before speaking up again.

"Kasai?"

"Yes, Brennan?"

Whipping the spectacles off of her face, she pointed at me with narrowed eyes.

"Your home's fucking weird."

And she flounced through the door. Shaking my head, I followed her.

---

Revision #1

Created 1 December 2024 23:07:07 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:48:39 by FatalisticFable