

# Chapter Thirteen

Arita's estate seemed modest for a guild's chairman. It didn't have a yard, not with its entrance directly abutting the street, but the building itself loomed over the ones beside it with its upper reaches disappearing into the low-hanging smog.

In addition, a nearby swell of gears from the ground indicated the estate's proximity to a steamworks hub, as did its presentation of steam-powered lamps rather than ones full of flame. Even with all of this, though, the only thing that spoke of its owner's opulent taste was the sharply smelted molding on its metal walls.

That molding would also be useful for breaching the estate, but I saw no other advantages for me, not from here at least. Brennan had mentioned that Rita had hired more security personnel, but she'd failed to mention exactly how many more he'd acquired. The estate was crawling with armed patrols, and I had no doubt I'd find its every entrance locked as well.

"How will you get inside?" Zhao said beside me.

I'd just been asking myself that question.

"I'll find a way," I said.

"You mean to go in without a plan?" Zhao asked.

"During my training, that was the only way I ever passed infiltration tests to your satisfaction."

Why did the look of surprise on Zhao's face warm me so much?

"What?" I said. "Did you think I planned to pull some of the shit I did?"

"Honestly, I didn't know what to make of it," Zhao said, "but you can't think that walking into this mess unprepared is—"

His frustrated yelp chased me as I leapt down perches until I was standing on street level. Would he follow me down here, or was this where we'd part ways for the evening?

I didn't wait to find out.

As soon as a patrol had passed my hiding spot, I dashed across the street, using my earlier spotted molding to climb to the building's third floor. The quality of security in Takanai must have truly gotten lax in no one had spotted that sloppy approach, although...

Maybe Zhao had taken care of the rooftop guard I'd spotted before, and I could have gotten lucky with the rest.

There was no point in pondering it. Wrapping my hand in a bit of cloth, I punched out a windowpane, reaching through the resulting hole to unlatch it. I had no reason for total stealth tonight—someone would no doubt discover my work by morning—and if this place's guards hadn't seen me sprinting across the street, they probably weren't aware enough to hear glass shattering.

If they were, though, the weapons on me would find blood. I didn't care either way and-

And-

The energy inside of me hadn't let me pause long enough to unlatch the window quietly. It jangled along my nerves, making me grit my teeth to keep from screaming, and I couldn't stay still.

Eventually, this would become a problem. I'd have to deal with it later, though.

Crawling through the window, I glanced down the hall beyond to find it empty, and as I kicked broken glass under a rug, I tugged a curtain over the window's newly created hole before creeping forward.

The typical citizen of Takanai preferred to sleep at ground level, as far from the city's smog as possible, but I knew from previous visits here that Arita's preferences ran counter to the average person's. He liked sleeping, working, and living on high, overlooking others.

Hence, why his estate rose above the smog line.

I took the closest set of stairs two at a time, quiet as a wraith, and only once I was on the building's top floor did I slip out of the stairwell. The security team stationed here had yet to see me in this brightly lit corridor. They remained oblivious to me, even as I drew and loaded my crossbow.

Slack of them.

They only noticed that something might be wrong when a dart buried itself in one of the guards' necks. He slapped at it, pulling it free to stare at its drained vial, and several confused heartbeats later, he fell to the floor. Considering he'd had enough padun dumped into his bloodstream to knock out a man twice his weight, this didn't surprise me.

Rushing forward, I cushioned his drop, snatching his body before it could hit the ground. I crashed my dagger's pommel into the second man's temple before he could cry out, stunning him, and with the first guard already lowered to the floor, I leapt to catch the second in a chokehold. After enduring several of his weakening scratches and kicks, I spread the other man out beside the first.

The door they'd been guarding begged for me to open it, but I swept the rest of the floor for additional security before doing so. I wouldn't want an interruption halfway through tonight's work, now would I?

Inside, the cavernous bedroom stood empty save for fluttering curtains and a massive bed.

Moonlight streamed through open windows to illuminate the pillows on it and the forms sleeping among them. Gliding to those windows, I closed and latched each one, methodically making my way to the object of my obsession.

As a last latch was clicked into place, I gazed out over roiling smog with the tips of Takanai's buildings poking through it. A thin, second smog layer acted as gauze for the moon, but even with it present, I enjoyed the clearest view of the sky that I'd ever beheld.

Amongst that hazy black expanse, dots of light twinkled. Their cheeriness was at such odds with my drawn-together shoulders and taut muscles, so I turned away before they could dissuade me from my purpose.

Standing at Arita's bedside, I absently examined him and the girl at his side. Was she his wife? I hadn't thought he was married.

No, the bruises on her arms and neck as well as... other signs would indicate otherwise. No self-respecting guild chair would leave such visible marks on his wife. They might leave them in more concealable spots but never in a place this exposed.

I knew what this was, much as it pained me to see it. Much as it brought back memories.

I'd known that Arita had certain... tastes, but when I'd seen clues about them in my subordinates' reports, I'd always ignored them. Not only was what I was seeing here a subject that I had... difficulty considering, but I hadn't wanted to believe what I was reading. While certain aggressive tendencies in the bedroom were considered acceptable, so long as both parties were willing participants in said activities, there was a line that most people didn't cross. In my experience, that blurry line separated consensual play from physical abuse.

No one liked believing that something so dark could exist in the human soul, no matter how often instances of it were allowed to slip below the surface.

After injecting Arita with several hypos worth of padun, I shook the girl awake, and when her eyes fluttered open with her mouth parting to scream, I laid a hand over it, lifting a finger to my lips. I only removed my touch from her when she nodded.

"Has he paid you?" I asked. "Quietly now."

"Ye- yes," she stammered.

"Then, I suggest you leave this place as quickly as you can," I said. "I wouldn't want you blamed for what will happen here tonight."

"And what's that?" the woman asked.

For earth and fire's sake, why would she want to know that? It could get her in so much trouble... but in a way, I understood.

Fixing her with my gaze, I let my crimson eyes peek out from my cowl.

“Emperor’s justice,” I said. “Go, girl. Report to your madam.”

Without another word, she slipped out of bed, threw on her clothes, and fled. Alone with my prey, I hung my mask over my face, unwound a length of silk rope from around my chest, and set to work.

When the first flush of light bounced along the smog outside, I was sitting cross-legged in front of Arita while he stirred. I waited for him to wake up, cupping the flame of the candle I’d set between us.

Soon enough, Arita grunted through his gag before struggling against the restraints pinning his arms to the bed. I only looked up from the fire when that noise cut off.

“I’m going to remove the gag, but before I do, know that I’ve dispatched your guards. No one will hear you scream,” I said. “Feel free to do that anyway.”

Arita obliged me. He called long and loud for help, and I closed my eyes to more fully appreciate the sound.

When silence fell with no sounds of rescue to fill it, I waited. What would my prey do? Would he bargain with me or plead for his life? Would he try to assert his authority over me?

“I told the others you were alive,” Arita rasped. “They laughed at me, told me I’d been seeing things. How I wish they’d been right.”

Resignation. I hadn’t expected that.

“That’s all you have to say to me?” I asked.

Snorting, Arita said, “I’m not stupid. I know why you’re here, which means I know I won’t live to see the sunrise. The only thing I can affect is how much pain you inflict on me before ending my life, so go ahead. Ask your questions. I’ll answer them as best I can.”

Strength. I found it in the man who’d murdered my best friend. Why...?

*Find the truth, K.*

Shaking my head to clear it, I asked, “Who are the others? You said more people were involved in the plot to kill my emperor. Who else?”

I truly hoped that Arita would make this easy for me because I wasn’t good with-

“Taro was part of it, to a small degree,” Arita said. “More than that, I can’t say. He was the only other person I met face to face. The rest of us communicate via missive and with codenames to boot.”

Taro, the chairman of the brothel's guild. The man who'd shown such sorrow as I'd been led to my death. Who'd inexplicably received a position of authority during my trial. Who'd forced me, as a child, to the steamworks, there to end my life if not for Nokoribi.

Seeing him would make for a pleasant, late-night visit.

"And the girl?" I asked. "Who assassinated the emperor?"

"Ah. I'm afraid you'll have to torture that information out of me," Arita said. "We have plans for her. Her death will serve a greater purpose than your revenge ever could."

For a long moment, I sat motionless, savoring the moment when my prey's false bravado dissolved from his face.

"You mean *they* have a plan, not we," I say.

Arita jerked against his bonds with his mouth opening, presumably to beg for mercy.

"Fortunately for you, I've never had a taste for torture, and you've given me a lead to follow. I won't hurt you for what you know when I can gain it from other, easier targets," I said before he could make a sound. "Unfortunately for you, I've gotten rather good at dealing death over the years."

I lifted the thick candle that had been sitting between us, examining its flame as I twirled it.

"Tell me, Arita. Do you know what it feels like to inhale fire? No, of course not. How could you?" I said. "However you think it might feel, it's worse. It scorches your throat while blackening and shriveling your lungs, and you can't breathe as it eats its way out of your chest. You did that to me."

Carefully, I poured molten wax into a waiting bowl with several other candles lit around it. Their heat kept that hot stream in a liquid state.

"Do you know what it feels like to have your body so riddled with holes that every organ except for your brain fails? No? Neither do I," I say. "I only witnessed the end of someone who experienced that horror, and it was awful. Worse than anything else I've seen in my life, and I've seen a lot of terrible shit. You did this to your emperor."

"You don't understand!" Arita snarled. "We saved Hiyuki-!"

I raised a hand.

"I don't care why you did it," I said. "All that matters to me is that my friend is dead. I will never again laugh at his stupid jokes or antagonize him with my insistence on formality or sneak out of the palace with him. He's dead. Because of you. And I will punish you for it."

“When did you become an executioner?” Arita snapped. “We have trials for this sort of thing, you know. Not every criminal in Hiyuki can go before the emperor. So, when did your authority supersede the government’s?”

Straddling the man’s thighs, I jerked my prey’s head back.

“Mine became greater when I died and death spat me out,” I said. “Now, open wide.”

Forcing Arita’s mouth open, I retrieved my bowl, full of molten wax, and poured its contents down a gaping maw.

“I can’t recreate what you did to ‘ribi,” I said. “So, I must settle for a poor representation of what you did to me.”

With the bowl emptied, I tossed it over my shoulder before clamping Arita’s nose closed. The body beneath me spasmed and bucked, and I pressed my hand over its bloodied lips, but when the guild chair eventually fell still with his chest failing to rise, I let my hands fall away.

I stared at those empty eyes, wondering why I was suddenly filled with the need to scrub my body clean. Where was my exultation from a purpose fulfilled?

Earth and fire, how many times had I killed someone as Nokoribi’s bodyguard? I’d lost count, and none of those deaths had incited more than bored indifference in me. So, what was this filth that was closing my throat or this nausea, begging for release? Why was I experiencing these things *now*?

The sun had risen before I could make myself stand. I escaped from the estate with only long-honed skills keeping me from mishap, and once I was outside, I found a dark corner where I could curl into a ball. My eyes remained dry, even as every part of me shook.

With the energy inside of me blessedly silent, I didn’t move, half-listening as the city woke up around me. I didn’t move when city police officers eventually infested Arita’s estate and began their questioning. I didn’t move when someone dropped to the ground beside me.

“That was effective,” Zhao said.

I had no reply for him. What was I supposed to say? Thank you?

“Did you get what you needed?” Zhao continued.

“Yes.”

A new name. A new line of investigation. How many times must I endure this uncomfortable experience before the task was completed?

Sighing, Zhao shifted in place above me.

"It's different when someone's death comes by your hand rather than as something you're bidden to do," he said. "Nokoribi went through the same thing when he first ordered an execution."

Twitching, I got to my feet, wondering all the while whether my legs would hold.

"How did 'ribi handle it?" I asked.

"He got roaring drunk and went out whoring. I was his acting bodyguard at the time, so I got the pleasure of keeping him from killing himself," Zhao said. "At some point, he buried what he'd done, but everyone could see the change in him."

"He lost his wide-eyed belief in the good of humanity," I said. "It had survived for so long, even after everything that happened in the steamworks, but he went to the palace and..."

I couldn't finish that thought, couldn't remember the day when my friend had come to find me with *such* a hard look in his once-bright eyes.

"That's right," Zhao said. "Did you know, he often told me that between the two of you, you were the better man? He thought earth and fire should have chosen you, not him."

"He can join the list," I said, barely keeping from a growl.

"The point remains that he believed in you," Zhao said. "So, how will you handle what you've done?"

Certainly not by drinking and whoring. Or sitting in the street like a lump.

"I hope Brennan's a late sleeper," I said.

"That she most definitely is, you lucky bastard," Zhao said.

"Then, I'm going home to catch up on my rest."

And that was exactly what I did. Once we'd returned to Zhao's home, I climbed its stairs, removing my mask and cowl before dropping onto my bed.

For a while, I watched Brennan sleep before rolling away from her and pulling the covers over my head. Wrapped in comfort and shielded from the world, I shivered until my exhausted body relinquished its hold on consciousness.

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