

Chapter Twelve

Brennan returned once light had faded from the world. After hours spent cooped in Zhao's house, I'd become a storm cloud of energy, threatening to burst free at any moment. Desperate for an outlet, I was buzzing about the kitchen, helping my old mentor prepare a meal.

It was a meal that had far more food than three people alone could consume in it. Noting the excess, I didn't enquire about it. Zhao would have his reasons for it, and whatever they were, I could use them against him if I needed to, leveraging him to stay away from operative outposts, but for now, I held the question close to heart, watching the old man while I helped with our dinner.

When a door slammed, I lowered my kitchen knife to the counter, listening to the approaching footsteps. They sounded light enough to be Brennan's, but still, I slunk into the shadows while Zhao moved to intercept.

Drawing a newly acquired knife, I got ready to throw it while caressing my dagger's hilt, but I left the pistol at the small of my back. If this was an intruder, that weapon would make far too much noise while dispatching them. There was no need to draw more attention to this house than I must.

"Brennan, you look well," Zhao said. "How did your investigation go?"

At her grunted response, I relaxed. Returning to where I'd been fileting rakshan meat, I moved my knife in a blur.

The buzz beneath my skin ramped in intensity the closer my companions drew to me, although they stopped in the doorway to watch while I wrapped meat around kakan nuts.

"Did he rest at all?" Brennan asked.

"No, and I know better than to stop him when he gets like this," Zhao said. "I praised that determination during his training but now..."

Sighing, Brennan handed over a bulging bag.

"More of the meds he manifested while we were descending the volcano," she said. "There should be enough kalim, padun, and jatcha in there to keep him going until he's fully healed."

Jerking away from her, Zhao said, "Those are highly illegal medicines. How did you...?"

As he trailed off, he glanced between Brennan and me.

"Wait. What do you mean he 'manifested' these things?"

"We should probably talk about that," Brennan said. "When we spoke earlier, he and I left out a lot, which was my fault really. I was frustrated. Needed to get out of here."

"You were frustrated? What about me?" I said. "And *maiyaru*, if you have questions, you could just ask them. I'm right here."

Switching a finished dish out for the one I'd prepared, I cleaned my knife in the sink, listening to gears grind as they brought forth a trickle of water. Once I had enough of that, I shut the stream off and set to scrubbing.

I'd nearly finished preparing our dinner, and once I was done, I didn't know what I'd do. The energy crackling through me already had me dancing from foot to foot. How would I handle it when I no longer had a way to release it?

And still, Brennan and Zhao stood in the doorway, watching me.

"Would you two set the table?" I growled. "We're almost ready to eat."

Zhao sprang into action, but Brennan strolled forward to lean on the counter beside the sink.

"So, you can cook," she said.

"Of course I can," I said. "How else would 'ribi have eaten if the palace's staff rebelled against him?"

Brennan shook her head, pursing her lips.

"You're the most paranoid person I've ever met," she said.

"I'm not paranoid enough," I said.

And because of that, Nokoribi had died.

The knife I was cleaning slipped in my grasp, slicing an arc of cool fire across my palm, and as blood welled, I dropped the blade, wrapping my wound in a towel.

"Zhao," I said, "packet of jatcha, please."

With his eyebrows raised, the old man dug through Brennan's provided bag before tossing the requested item my way. I ripped the packet open with my teeth, sprinkling the powder found inside over my wound. At its contact with the drug, an already slowed flow of blood stopped while a crust formed over the gash.

"Interesting," Brennan said. "Hiyuki's medical field is more advanced than I expected."

"This is only a stopgap," I said. "I'll still need stitches after the scab dissolves."

“Still. That’s... but why am I letting you distract me?” Brennan said, glaring at me. “How much do you want to tell him?”

She dipped her head toward Zhao, which had me watching him finish his assigned task. How much could someone trust an operative?

Then again, what did I have to lose? My life? It was no longer mine. Again.

“He can know it all,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Brennan said. “He might think we’re delusional-”

“Brennan. All of it.”

She glanced up at me, running her eyes over my form, and everywhere they landed, itching energy swelled until I couldn’t keep still. I drummed my fingers on my legs to appease it.

“God, you’re intense when you’re focused,” Brennan said.

I was?

Shrugging, I checked on the stove before joining Zhao at the table. With my mask peeled off, I set it beside my plate while Brennan sat uncomfortably close to me.

Sandwiched between a relative unknown and a possible enemy, I forced myself to relax, ignoring the panic that was fighting to break through. Zhao gave me a nod of approval, but Brennan, seemingly oblivious to how she’d trapped me, started serving herself food from what lay in front of us.

What should I make of this woman? She seemed competent, but at times, she’d pull shit like this. She was a strange amalgamation of strengths and weaknesses, and I didn’t know what to do with her.

That was a lie. I knew one thing I wanted from her: what she’d learned about Arita today. The energy inside of me demanded it, but she was right. We needed to share our story, getting everyone on the same page, before continuing on.

Which meant I’d have to trust Zhao with more than I already had. Damn, but he wouldn’t like this story. He’d never believed in the mystical, even when he’d been presented with proof of it as Yukinaga’s bodyguard. How would he take everything that Brennan and I meant to share?

Probably not well.

As soon as Brennan had finished filling her plate, I snatched rakshan rolls from their platter for my own. I dug into my meal with Brennan following suit, but Zhao didn’t move, eyeing us instead. Ignoring him, I enjoyed the work of our hands, even if he wouldn’t.

As soon as it was given, I used the excuse of removing a dish from the oven to trade places with Brennan, regaining my avenue of escape as a result, but when my stomach lay heavy with food and I reached for my mask, it wasn't where I'd left it. I met Brennan's mischievous grin with an extended hand.

Shaking her head, she said, "Are all Hiyukians as averse to conversation as you two?"

"Please, give it back," I said through gritted teeth.

"No. I like your eyes," Brennan said. "You want to cover them? Find your mask yourself."

She liked my eyes. *Earth and fire*, how that idea hurt.

"I could just get another one from where I found the one you took," I said.

Smirking, Brennan said, "I figured, but we have a story to tell. Leaving Zhao in suspense would be rude, wouldn't it?"

She was right. Again. Since we'd met, she'd been right during every disagreement we'd had. Why was that?

With thinned lips, I turned on my old mentor, and Zhao met my gaze with a grimace.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're about to tell me something I don't want to hear?" he asked.

He had yet to take a bite of his dinner, letting it cool in front of him. Had he poisoned the food?

"That's probably because I am," I said.

No, that was ridiculous. I'd helped supervise our food's preparation. I'd have noticed if Zhao had slipped poison into these dishes. It was more likely that he wasn't eating because he was battling nerves.

But why?

"Well?" Zhao said. "Let's get it over with."

Maybe he didn't want to hear this story, which meant his apprehension had destroyed his appetite. I could relate. I'd gone through the same thing when confronting Nokoribi about his weakness.

Yes, that scenario made the most sense, and if that was the case, I shouldn't delay any longer, much as I might want to. I'd hated it when Nokoribi had tried to do that with me.

"I died today."

Once those words had fallen from my lips, an uncomfortable silence took hold of the kitchen. The oven's flames flickered at deafening volumes as Zhao's eye twitched.

“Yes, and the whole city is in an uproar about it,” he said. “Wasn’t that the point of faking your death?”

Oh, how I wish I had my mask, something that could shield me from my mentor’s nervous gaze, but my story demanded my focus. Zhao needed clarification.

“No, *mai-yaru*, you don’t understand,” I said. “I *died*. Arita pushed me off of Mt. Teisu’s summit, I fell into earth’s blood, and it consumed me. The agony of that... I can’t describe it. If my need for vengeance hadn’t been eating into my thoughts as surely as earth’s blood was doing with my body, I’d have gone mad in the seconds it took me to die.

“Then, the world went white, and I was floating in... nothing. A place that was absent of form or substance. All that felt real were the voices, so disjointed and malevolent. I don’t know what they were but-”

“The enemy,” Brennan said, as if to herself. “The Morán.”

Holding a wrapped morsel up to the flame, she looked through it to somewhere beyond Hiyuki, and I couldn’t escape the pull of her until she shivered, returning to herself.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt your tale,” she said. “You were floating in the space between realities and...?”

“I was floating in *nothing*,” I said, correcting her. “The voices tried to touch me, but I wouldn’t let them, and I’m not sure what happened next. Two... hands? Hands, so completely opposite in nature, tossed me into the place where I met Brennan and a man, Alouin. He asked Brennan to help me, and once she’d agreed, he offered me a choice, peace or revenge.”

“And of course, you chose revenge,” Brennan said. “Like the bastard wanted.”

“What else was I supposed to do?” I asked. “Let the people who killed my friend get away with murder?”

“No, but-”

“I chose revenge,” I continued over her. “Alouin turned my timeline back; I woke up, falling into earth’s blood again; and Brennan saved me. You know the rest.”

Ignoring Brennan’s glare, I waited for Zhao to respond. What would my old mentor do? Would he accept this story and move on? I doubted it. He was more likely to-

Zhao burst into nervous laughter, retreating as far into his seat as he could. Yes, that was about what I’d expected.

“I don’t know what drugs you two have taken, but if they’ll let my imagination soar like yours have, I’d like to try some,” he gasped.

"We're not on drugs," Brennan snapped, "or rather, *he* is, but they're to stave off his injuries, which I still think you should get treated-"

"Not now, Bren," I said.

Zhao's laughter died, and as he glanced between us, his amusement was replaced with something else.

"You should go upstairs and sleep off whatever you've taken," he said. "Obviously, Nokoribi's death has hit you hard, *ko*, and you!"

He waved at Brennan.

"I don't know what to make of your behavior, young lady!"

...Much as I might want to, I couldn't get angry at Zhao. He didn't know, didn't understand.

"Please, *maiyaru*," I said, rolling my eyes. "I'm not so weak that I'd numb my friend's passing with drugs. You know me and where I come from. How could you think I'd indulge in something like that?"

Surely, with that explanation, Zhao would understand-

"Your past is *exactly* why I'm worried," he snapped before his face softened. "You need help, *ko*."

My temper flared, nearly having me spew something unwise on my mentor, but his pity killed that outburst before it could emerge. He met my eyes, a mark of pride that had long ago become my source of shame, and all I wanted to do was hide. I needed a mask to get away from his disappointment, much as I'd needed it when I was a child to shield me from-

Cool metal brushed against my skin, and even knowing what must have happened, I tensed. Zhao, on the other hand, flew from his spot on the bench opposite me with his sword drawn. He looked like he might have attacked me too, if a blade's edge hadn't been drawing a drop of blood from his neck.

"I worked *too damn hard* to save that man's life for you to end it because you're afraid," Brennan snapped. "Sheathe your weapon!"

Once Zhao had done as she'd asked, Brennan released her grip on his hair, and she circled him with her dagger's point still at his throat.

"Now, sit."

Only once we were arranged to her liking did Brennan withdraw her weapon.

Damn, that had been impressive. I'd barely caught her movements as she'd leapt over the table, and she'd done that both quickly and with flawless execution. Who was she?

“What was that?” Zhao asked in a trembling voice.

Right. My mentor.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have an answer to his question, just as lost about the mystery that had shocked him as he probably was.

“That was an aftereffect of his time spent as an essence, I think,” Brennan said. “Sorry. I don’t know what Hiyukians would call the state. A spirit? Soul, maybe?”

When we didn’t answer her, she shrugged, quickly moving on.

“Before Alouin reversed Kasai’s timeline, our friend here did something similar in the bastard’s safe space. That ability has carried over to the physical plane, or that’s my theory, at least.”

Removing my mask, I found myself holding a copy of what Brennan had stored for me on Mt. Teisu’s slope.

“How does it work?” I asked.

“No clue,” Brennan said, “but it’s not a simple summoning ability.”

Metal clattered on the tabletop as a twin of the mask I was holding spun to a stop beside my plate.

“You’re manifesting items into the world,” she continued. “It’s a damn strong power, which means it probably carries a high cost. I wouldn’t use it until we learn what that is.”

“Easily done,” I said. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Still, having a power like that could be useful. It would certainly make a home invasion or an interrogation easier. What would I do if I needed an item I hadn’t brought with me? Simply will it into existence.

“You died. You actually *died*.”

Glancing at Zhao, I frowned at the tears spilling over his cheeks. Why was he crying?

“Oh, *ko*,” Zhao whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“My death’s irrelevant,” I said, fluttering my fingers in a wave. “I only told you about it so we’re all on the same page, and now that we are, I’d like to know what you learned today, Brennan.”

In response, they stared at me for far too long, which made the restless energy inside of me surge. To appease it, I shot to my feet and started pacing across the kitchen.

Why was this room so small? I was reaching the edges of its confines much too quickly while the taste of metal and salt grew heavy on my tongue.

And still, they stared at me.

“What?!” I snapped. “I’ve been stuck here all day while ‘ribi’s murderers have been walking through Takanai, free. Forgive me if I want to change that status as quickly as possible. So. Brennan?”

She glared at me, clearly displeased about something, but she gave her report regardless.

“Hiyuki thinks you’re dead,” she said, “but Arita doubts that, much to the amusement of the other guild chairs. He’s holed up in his estate after having hired more security personnel to guard him. I’d recommend waiting until he’s relaxed before-”

“Why?” I asked.

Brennan paused for a moment before saying.

“Because it’s the smart thing to do. He’s not going anywhere. Your revenge can wait until he won’t see you coming.”

“I don’t need the element of surprise,” I said.

There was another pause.

“I think you do,” Brennan said. “Or at the very least, you need time to-”

“What do you know about what I can do?” I snapped. “You may be impressive in your own right, but don’t diminish my abilities because you’ve proven your strength. I have that too.”

“No one’s arguing that you don’t, *ko*,” Zhao said, “but she might have a point. Perhaps you should take a seat so we can discuss-”

“You’re taking *her* side?”

Stopped short by the idea, I stared at Zhao for several seconds before the energy inside of me forced my feet into action once more. I swallowed a warm tang while heat started escaping in rivulets from my eyes.

Why would Zhao side with Brennan, someone he couldn’t have known for more than a few weeks? He knew how easily I could break into Arita’s estate. For earth and fire’s sake, he’d taught me how to do it!

“Kasai, sit your ass down right now.”

That had sounded like the Zhao I’d known. I laughed, a mused garble that oozed into the energy driving me.

How I'd missed my old mentor. When Nokoribi had offered Zhao a position as the head of his intelligence network instead of ordering Yukinaga's bodyguard killed once I'd been trained, as was tradition, I'd been so relieved. The years we'd spent working together had been a wonder, years where we'd become a family formed by chance and circumstance.

Why had Zhao left us? He'd never explained.

"Hold him down."

They thought they could restrain me? How laughable!

When I tried to get away from them, though, or move as the energy inside commanded, I couldn't. When had they pinned me? Why couldn't I seeeeee-?

The energy inside ripped through me while earth's blood filled my every vein, but instead of quickly dissolving me as it should, this stayed, circulating through my body over and over and over and over.

A flame flickered in a glass globe with blurry shapes between it and me. A wild howl shredded the air, and blue interchanged with purple, flashes of color that stabbed at my eyes. With each of these, agony became earth's blood became energy became a hard-packed, restless kernel in my core.

I blinked at anxious faces, noting that Brennan was holding a tube, one that had a blipping blue and purple light on the end, far too close to my face. Feebly, I swiped at it.

"He's back with us," Brennan said.

Zhao didn't reply, instead watching her store the tube in her satchel. When she caught him staring, she smiled.

"I'm not from here," she said, as if in explanation.

Groaning, I sat up before struggling to reach my feet. Zhao and Brennan tried to stop me, but I broke through them, stumbling to the closest washroom. Once there, I examined the damage done in the mirror.

Trails of drying blood were running from my eyes, almost like the color found in them had spilled over.

"What happened?" I quietly asked before making a face.

I spat phlegm into the sink, cursing when its dry state made accomplishing that task so much more difficult.

"I don't know," Zhao said. "You and Brennan were arguing, and then, you started bleeding, fountains of it from your mouth and..."

He waved at my eyes.

"I tackled you, holding you down while Brennan performed magical voodoo on you," he finished.

"It's science, not magical voodoo," Brennan said as she joined us.

She met my eyes in the mirror with her face set into grim lines.

"I suppose that's the cost," I said.

Brennan nodded, and with a sigh, I cleaned my face. Earth and fire, today had been long, and so much still needed to be done. Unfortunately, Brennan and her insistence on seeing me in complete health was stopping me from easily finishing all the tasks I had left. So...

"I'm going to bed," I said.

Pushing through my companions, I headed for the stairs.

"Wait a minute. I'll come too," Brennan said. "Can you handle what we discussed earlier, Zhao?"

"No problem," the old man said. "Will he be...?"

"I'm standing right here," I said in a grumble. "I'm *fine*. Everything feels normal right now."

Zhao narrowed his eyes at me as if he'd detected a lie, but he waved us off.

"Then, good night, you two," he said. "No shenanigans while in my home."

Shenanigans? What did he think was going to-?

Grabbing my wrist, Brennan dragged me up the stairs, spinning to lean against our door once she'd closed it.

"You really feel all right?" she asked.

My every muscle was screaming to twitch along with the rhythm of this newly discovered, pulsing energy inside. It took everything I had to ignore that urge, standing still so I could nod.

Collapsing on her bed, Brennan hid her face in her hands for a moment before digging through her satchel.

"Come here," she said.

When I crouched in front of her, she took my hand, and I bit my tongue to keep from jerking it free. Soon enough, she pressed several packets and hypos into it.

"For the next day," she said. "I'll put the rest under my bed, if you need them."

Nodding, I tried to withdraw my hand, but she held it firm. She chewed on her lip for a moment, but once she'd made her decision, she laid the tube from earlier on top of the meds.

"In case of emergency," she said. "Press the clicker on one end and aim the other at your eyes. It should ease your symptoms. I'm begging you to only use this when you must and only in private. I'm not supposed to mix iterations like this. If one of Ellair's inventions fell into the wrong hands..."

I rested my palm on her knee, grateful for the cloth between our skin.

"I understand," I said.

I let myself drown in her brown eyes until she nodded, but then, I stood and after extinguishing the room's lamps, crawled into bed.

"Good night, K."

Her use of Nokoribi's nickname for me gave me pause, but I caught myself before my silence could concern her.

"Good night."

Waiting for Brennan to fall asleep became a special kind of torture for me. Energy was thrumming in me, compelling me to move, but I lay motionless in the dark while time dragged by. Eventually, her quiet snores filled the air while the moon's dispersed light fell through the window, and I rose from my sheets, kneeling in front of Zhao's improvised vault.

Once I had what I needed, I changed into a pair of black pants and a shirt, wrapping a cowl around my head. I slipped through the window, hanging from its sill while latching it behind me, before slipping over the roof's eave. As I shot upright, I almost lost my balance, but Zhao's grip on my shirt helped with steadying me.

"I'm disappointed," the old man said. "You should have been expecting me."

Shifting, I barreled into Zhao, knocking his feet out from under him. I let my old mentor roll to his belly before pinning him with a knee and digging a dagger's point into his jaw. Raising an eyebrow, I waited.

"That's more like it," Zhao said.

Lowering my weapon a fraction, I said, "Why were you waiting for me here?"

"Brennan gave you what you wanted," Zhao said. "I knew you'd go after Arita tonight."

"Despite all the damage that's been done to my body?"

Zhao let his head fall to the side with my dagger chasing it.

"I know you, *ko*," he said with a sigh. "You'd work yourself to death if it meant you'd achieve your objectives. I intend to help you last for as long as possible while you do that."

"So, you won't force me to go back to bed?" I asked.

Giving me a sideways glance, Zhao said, "Could I?"

Smiling, I sheathed my dagger before helping my old mentor to his feet.

"I need to speak with Arita alone," I said.

"I won't be there."

"I can't have you slowing me down."

"You'll never see me."

It was amazing how much easier negotiations went when both parties understood one another. With that finished, I'd almost taken off when a last question occurred to me.

"What did Brennan want from you tonight?"

Dim moonlight glinted off the teeth of Zhao's grin.

"For me to keep an eye on you, of course."

Of course. Shaking my head, I turned to sprint across Takanai's rooftops with the light from Mt. Teisu's summit leading the way.

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