

27. Slosh

When I found him he was sitting alone in a makeshift cell in the bottom of the hideout with his hands on his lap and his eyes turned toward a narrow beam of moonlight pouring in through a high window. The Toji was a small man with a broad face and a perpetual frown, short-cropped hair and a heavy blue haori frayed at the elbows. He had a quiet look of worry in his eyes, not for himself, but for someone else, somewhere else.

My shadow filled the doorway. The Toji looked at me--or the silhouette of me in the doorway, my sword still bare, blood steaming off its edge. His jaw stiffened. To set his heart at ease, I cleaned the edge of my sword, returned it to its scabbard, then bowed at the waist.

"Toji Hidetaka? I was sent to find you."

Hidetaka gave a long, slow sigh, not of relief, but something else. Was it regret? Slowly, he unfolded and pulled himself to his feet.

"Did you have to kill them?" he said.

"They left me no choice," I said.

"They were just men trying to live their lives the way they knew best," he said, quietly, as he passed me by. He paused to consider me for a moment. He was my height, and looked me in my eyes. "Did you enjoy it?" he said.

I was taken aback. "No," I said. "No, I never do." Hidetaka searched my eyes. Whatever he was thinking, I couldn't tell, but he nodded to himself, as if he was satisfied with my answer--or as if I'd simply told him what he expected.

"I need to get home as quickly as possible," Hidetaka said, walking with me out the ruined hovel. "There's something very important that needs my care. Something that won't survive the night unless I'm there." His sandals sounded on the cracked wooden floor. Dust hung suspended in beams of bone-gray moonlight through the broken roof.

A Toji was a sake-master. Toji Hidetaka had spent forty years as an apprentice in the capital of Doma. When the Imperials laid siege to the city, the Toji fled north in a scattering of refugees. He'd been profoundly respected in the capital, serving as the official brewer to the king himself. Then for years he was no one. To be a refugee in one's own country was to be lost in dark waters; you jettisoned everything you had or you drowned. Money, reputation, even identity.

The two of us rode together away from the old hovel. It was one solitary building tucked away in a forest glade, a day's journey from a mountain path that would've taken the Toji somewhere beyond my reach. He was an urgent rider, pressing on as if he was running away from

something. I knew we were safe. There were six bandits waiting in the hovel when I'd found them, and I'd left six bodies in the snow behind us. Hidetaka didn't seem to care.

"How much farther?" he said, riding shoulder to shoulder with me.

"Another hour?" I said.

Hidetaka shook his head. He snapped his reins and forced his poor horse onward. I shouted after him and gave chase. Hidetaka was a fast rider, faster than I expected for an old man. The land was a wide flat plain of dead autumn grass in the moonlight, and in the distance all I saw was the spattered ink pattern of pine trees silhouetted against fog-covered mountains. Hidetaka pointed out his home. I had to look twice to see it: just a narrow line of a rooftop etched into the paleness of the moonlight, another few marks designating a wall and a doorway.

We drew close. He dismounted first, panting, legs shaking from the effort of the ride. "Inside," he said. "I'll need your help."

Hidetaka's home was dark. The only light was incidental. Moonlight spilled out across a wood-and-stone floor in great gray pools, reflected off the corners of pots and pans, an old hearth, some simple furniture.

The air was thick with a strange scent. Warm and earthy, the scent of tilled earth and fresh rice. Hidetaka rummaged in a corner for something, fumbling and muttering to himself. I found a lamp sitting by the hearth and lit it for him. A dull, rust-colored light swept along the inside of his home.

"Down here," he said, heaving open a basement hatch. The same scent billowed out: rice and earth, and something else. A cloying, frosty sweetness.

Hidetaka's basement was just cold enough to make my breath fog before my lips. My lantern swept to the left and to the right, revealing squat, broad barrels of dense wood wrapped with heavy ropes. Each barrel was covered with linen and fastened tight with more rope. The air was cold but dense, a strange miasma of fragrance: the sour-sharpness of alcohol, the luscious warmth of steamed rice, shot through with threads of something bitter and pungent, something I couldn't quite place. In the dim light, the barrels seemed to melt out of the darkness.

Hidetaka dropped to his knees and embraced one of the barrels, laying his head on its wooden belly. He gave a long, slow sigh of relief and patted it twice. "Still alive," he said.

"Sake?" I said. "You are still brewing?"

Hidetaka didn't bother answering me. The answer was self-evident. His basement was more than a brewery. It was a nursery. Each barrel of sake was a living thing, he said. He peeled back

one of the linen coverings. Warm air billowed up. I leaned over with my lantern. The thing inside the barrels seemed alive. Moromi--the steamed mash of polished rice churning in pottage of sugar and yeast. It seemed to rise and fall with its own alien respiratory patterns. Hidetaka produced a long wooden pole, the kind I'd seen boatmen use to steer on the water, and stirred the pole around inside the mash.

"The first four days are crucial," he said. "This batch is in *tomozoe*--the fourth day. If I was gone for one more day, it would have died. Fetch me that bottle on the wall."

The bottle was a heavy glass jar filled with something too fine to be sand or dirt. When I tilted the bottle to the side, the thing in the glass shifted around on its own.

"Cover your nose," he said. I covered my nose with the sleeve of my robe. Hidetaka uncorked the bottle and sprinkled its contents into the mash. The powder drifted out and hung suspended in the air like breath. I didn't even see it fall.

"Is this the koji?" I said.

He gave me a surprised look. "Koji mold. It eats the rice and spits out sugar. Like I said. Sake is a living thing."

He stirred the vat again, frowned, stirred again. "Can I trust you with the secret to my sake?" he said.

"Who would I tell?" I said.

He considered this response and nodded. "The secret to good sake is two things. Temperature and water. This far north, the temperature is perfect for brewing sake. Cold in the autumn, but not so cold that it freezes. And the waters are more pure than any in the capital. There's a stream nearby fed by the meltwater from the mountains. This barrel is thirsty. I want you to go fetch a pail of water. Fill the pail to overflowing and bring it back here."

Hidetaka had a look of total concentration on his face. The way he held the stirring pole and stared down into the swirling mass of mold and mash wasn't the expression of an artisan at work. It was the expression of a worried parent.

The stream wasn't far from his home. It rushed through an old, barren field, gathering pine needles from the nearby trees. I dipped the pail into the water and let it fill. Water rolled into the mouth of the pail, and with it, the glittering disc of the full moon. The water spilled and sloshed about as I hauled the pail back to Hidetaka. It was heavy, even for me, but I took care to spill as little as I could.

Hidetaka was still stirring the barrel of mush when I returned. He ushered me over and the two

of us dipped the pail of water over the barrel's edge. Moonlight shimmered in the rushing waterfall as it poured into the mush, swirling and dissolving into the mixture. Hidetaka looked satisfied. He pulled the pole free and sealed the barrel.

I didn't have the opportunity to feel proud of myself. I saw Hidetaka's eyes staring at me in disbelief, or rather, at my hands. I looked down and realized what he was looking at. There was still blood on my hands. Not much, but enough to smear on the grip of the pail. Had the blood dripped into the water?

We both looked at the barrel of sake, sealed in darkness. Somewhere underneath that seal, koji mold feasted on rice and dreamed of strange alchemies. Hidetaka and I had the same thought at the same time.

"I am sorry, I should have been more--"

"Blood in sake?"

Then he laughed. He clasped a hand on my arm. "It's alright," he said. "Sake always has the character of the hands that bring it to life. If you hadn't saved me, this barrel would have died overnight."

I let Hidetaka work in solitude for another hour while I sat upstairs on his porch, listening to the muffled sound of him moving around in the basement. Crickets were singing in the grass. The moon dipped behind a long line of black pine trees at the forest's edge. I wondered how beautiful Hidetaka's home must have been in the winter, when snow fell like a blanket of silence on the pines and daggers of ice hung from the eaves. I imagined sitting here with a hot cup of sake and letting the hours melt away.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't hear Hidetaka sit down beside me. He had a tokkuri of sake, as plain and white as snow, tucked in one arm, and several small clay cups on his fingers. He gave a long, satisfied groan and reclined. Then he sat the tokkuri down with a thump and arranged the cups.

"How many did you kill?" he said.

"Six," I said.

He poured six cups. "Then we'd better drink for them. May the spirits of the dead taste the memory of sake on their lips and envy the living."

We brought the cups to our mouths and drank at the same time. The sake was complex, sweet and sharp, with a lingering aftertaste of apples. One by one, we downed the cups. When we were finished with the cups, we poured the rest of the tokkuri out between us and drank that,

too. The night seemed suspended in time. I hardly realized when I started to feel drunk. It wasn't until we were talking about children that I knew that, yes, I was probably drunk.

"Well," Hidetaka said, scratching his chin thoughtfully, as if he was contemplating a serious philosophical question. "Well, if you don't plan to have children, you could learn to brew sake. A barrel of sake is a living thing. It has to be tended to constantly, like an infant. And also like an infant, it takes about nine months to be born."

"I don't think I should try to brew sake," I said.

"Why is that?" he said.

"I have trouble with commitments," I said. Being drunk sometimes gave us a clear understanding of our own true nature.

Hidetaka nodded gravely and said nothing more until it was time for him to sleep. He rose to his feet and said something about letting me sleep by the hearth if I needed.

"I think I'll stay here for a while," I said.

Hidetaka left me there, presumably to give me the courtesy of being alone with my thoughts. Only, for the first time in many nights, I had no thoughts at all. The moon sat in the sky like a white porcelain cup. I filled my own with the last trickle of the tokkuri, raised it to the moon, then left the cup at my side where it stayed until morning.