



# The Little Sushi Chef (Knives & Flames Trilogy #1)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** She chased her dream. It tried to kill her.

Akiko Ono thought she'd won the lottery. A once-in-a-lifetime sushi apprenticeship—her dream come true.

But from day one, something felt wrong.

? Mandatory on-site residency

? Zero contact with the outside world

? Confiscated phones

What kind of apprenticeship demands this?

The kind where people disappear.

As tensions rise and rivals sharpen their knives, Akiko realizes someone doesn't just want her to fail. They want her gone for good.

The opportunity of a lifetime is becoming a waking nightmare. If Akiko doesn't uncover the truth behind the threats, she'll be next—and no one will see it coming.

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

The Sea of Japan is home to a monster.

In its black waters lurks the gorira maguro.

Ren Harada first spotted the giant bluefin two years ago and gave it the name that had haunted him ever since—gorilla tuna.

The fish was massive, nearly twenty feet. Harada estimated it weighed over two thousand pounds, a beast that had evaded capture for twenty years. A ghost of the deep. A monster no one could catch.

Every season since, Harada had chased the gorira maguro, only to return empty handed. The other fishermen mocked him, calling him a mad old fool with a child's imagination. Only his first mate, Danno Suzuki, believed him, though he hadn't been there the day Harada first saw the creature.

Harada swore to anyone at the fish market who'd listen that he'd seen it. The tuna had surfaced alongside his boat, its round, glassy eye as big as a watermelon locked onto him, daring him to capture it. Then, with a single swipe of its massive tail, the giant vanished into the depths.

Now, Harada and Suzuki were back on the Sea of Japan, chasing the phantom monster as they did every year. The sky hung low under dark-gray clouds, a storm brewing on the horizon. The swells rolled, restless but manageable. The rain held off for now, leaving the sea open and waiting.

Since Harada first saw the colossus, it hadn't surfaced. He wondered if its time had passed and it now lay rotting on the seabed. But he always dismissed the thought, clinging to the hope that the beast still swam in those waters.

Today, that hope burned white hot. Harada felt it in his gut. If the gorira maguro was going to resurface, it would be today.

To catch the monster, Harada chose the traditional method: hook and line. He would set live bait, a small skipjack tuna, and let it thrash in the water.

Suzuki dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand, calling the bait too big for any Pacific bluefin to swallow.

Harada whipped his head around, his stare like a harpoon finding its mark. "For the gorira maguro, it's an appetizer."

This wouldn't be a battle of strength alone. Harada had prepared for that. He'd bought a custom-made fishing gimbal belt designed to secure the pole to his body, locking him into the fight. Once the fish was on the line, it would be man against monster.

Suzuki hated it. "If that fish is as big as you say, it could pull you overboard and drag you under."

Harada dismissed the warning with a nod toward the belt. It had a quick-release mechanism if things got dangerous. What worried him more was the fish ripping the pole clean out of his hands. He'd seen it happen before, even with tuna half this size.

"You've always been stubborn, Harada," Suzuki muttered.

Harada glanced back at him, his grip firm on the pole. "You know why this fish

matters?" he said. "It's not just about catching it. It's about proving it can be caught, that no dream is too big."

With those words hanging in the air, Harada cast the bait. It skipped across the surface before sinking into the depths. Now, all Harada could do was wait for the silver beast to strike.

Back inside the cockpit, Suzuki gripped the wheel, his gaze darting between the water and Harada. He'd wanted a third guy on board to help today, but Harada refused, stating that all he needed was a fishing pole, his best friend, and a little luck.

The skies were still clear, the storm holding off for now. Suzuki split his attention between his friend and the horizon. At the stern, Harada stood with both hands gripping the fishing pole, his feet planted wide for balance, braced for whatever came next.

Then the pole bent sharply into a perfect, trembling C. Suzuki's heart jumped. He'd never seen a rod that size give like that. It could mean only one thing: Harada had been right.

Harada leaned back harder. His body tilted at nearly sixty degrees as he fought to keep control. The fiberglass pole groaned under the strain, threatening to snap at any second. Suzuki gripped the edge of his seat, half expecting the sound of splintering fiberglass. But the pole held.

The line jerked violently, whipping the pole left, then right, then left again, each pull nearly yanking Harada off his feet. He staggered, losing ground with every shift, but his grip never faltered. It was a deadly game of tug-of-war, mano a mano.

Suzuki's gaze snapped to the speed gauge. The boat had slowed—the engine, powerful as it was, strained against the force below.

A fish stronger than the engine? Impossible.

From the depths, the gorira maguro erupted, breaching the surface in a sweeping arc. Its entire body hung in the air for a moment, a monstrous colossus made real. Suzuki sucked in a breath.

Like a razor-sharp mohawk, the dark-blue stripe along its back shimmered in the gray light. Its underbelly gleamed white, taunting surrender like a raised flag, though the fight was far from over.

The silver titan twisted in slow motion, defying gravity as it hung in the air longer than anything its size should. Then Suzuki saw it. Its massive, round eye glinting like polished glass. The black pupil locked onto Harada, unblinking, filled with an eerie intelligence.

It hadn't forgotten.

Harada didn't back down. He leaned farther back, defying gravity, his body tilting past the point of balance. At that angle, he should've fallen onto the deck, but the sheer force of the fish held him upright. With a violent dive, the tuna plunged back into the water, dragging Harada to the keel.

Suzuki gasped, letting go of the wheel as he bolted from the cockpit. He stumbled down the stairs to the deck, barely keeping his footing. Before he could steady himself, the fish yanked hard to the right, whipping the boat around. Harada slid across the slick deck and slammed into the starboard side with a heavy thud.

"Let go of the pole!" Suzuki shouted. Harada didn't flinch. His grip was unrelenting, his eyes burning with determination.

Suzuki fought to stay upright as the boat pitched violently. He had to reach Harada.

The only thing keeping Harada on deck was the gunwale, barely high enough to brace him. Could Suzuki get to him in time?

He was just steps from grabbing Harada when the tuna jerked hard again. This time, the gunwale couldn't save him. Suzuki's fingers brushed against Harada's jacket, but it slipped through his grasp. In an instant, Harada was yanked overboard.

"Ren!" Suzuki shouted, slamming into the gunwale. He leaned over, scanning the water. Harada's bright-yellow jacket glowed like a beacon in the blue-gray depths, just feet below the surface.

"Let go!" Suzuki's voice cracked in desperation.

For a moment, it seemed like Harada might surface. Then, in a flash, the beast dove. Harada's yellow slicker shrank to a pinpoint before vanishing into the abyss.

"Ren!" Suzuki screamed, his hand outstretched over the water, ready to pull his friend back the moment he surfaced. But the seconds dragged on, each one heavier than the last until Suzuki's hope sank like a stone.

He collapsed to his knees against the gunwale, staring into the empty water. "You mad old fool," he said, his voice breaking. "Why couldn't you let it go?"

But the answer was clear. It wasn't the tuna that had won. It was Harada's pride.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:51 am*

### CHAPTER ONE

#### AKIKO ONO

It had been years since the gorira maguro dragged Ren Harada off his boat and into the depths, his body never recovered. All that remained of his existence was a cracked black plastic frame in the fish market, which held his fading photograph.

To most, he would always be the old man with wild tales about a mythical tuna. To me, he was Oji-chan, the funny uncle who made me laugh with his magic tricks. He never tired of pulling seashells out of my ears, even long after I was old enough to know how the trick worked.

Back then, he helped me get through some tough times—my father had disappeared when I was eleven years old.

No one, not even my mother, knew what had happened to my father. The authorities claimed he'd run off, even that he committed suicide, but I never believed that. He loved me with all his heart. Why would he leave me? Why would he leave us ? Still, with no trace of him, people eventually assumed he was dead.

Oji-chan used to say dreams were all we had. As I stood there, staring at his picture, I wondered whether that was still true.

“Akiko!”

I spun around at the sound of my name.

“I have the fish you wanted,” the fisherman called from his stall. Yuto was one of the last fishermen at the market who had watched me grow from a young girl into an adult.

My eyes widened when I saw what he was holding. “I can’t believe you caught a butterfish.” I absolutely loved this fatty fish. Its oily meat had a smooth, velvety texture that practically melted on the tongue.

“You gave me a challenge,” he declared proudly as I headed over to him.

Not only had Yuto been around when my father disappeared; he was also there when my mother passed. She hadn’t lasted much longer after my father’s disappearance. The weight of grief was too much, crushing her and leaving me to figure out life on my own.

And I did.

Now, I was a responsible adult with a job and a roof over my head. Sure, working in a restaurant had little to do with my degree, but I knew myself. Sitting in an office all day wasn’t for me.

Yuto slipped the fish into a bag for me.

“Thank you so much. It’s the perfect size.”

“What will you be making?” he asked, handing me the bag.

“Butterfish nigiri.” I was already envisioning the delicate slices atop perfectly vinegared rice.

“Good choice. This one has a fat belly, plenty of delicious meat.”

The butterfish was the last ingredient I needed for the dinner I was planning that night—a meal to celebrate the start of my new life. Little did I know, it was the beginning of my nightmare.

### CHAPTER TWO

As soon as I got home, my cell phone rang, and I set it to speaker and started preparing dinner.

“Akiko, I promise I’m on my way!” a high-pitched voice rang out.

Miki Miyamoto was my best friend—my only friend, really. We’d met during our first year at university and had been inseparable ever since despite being complete opposites. She was tall; I was short. Her long hair reached her waist, while mine stayed neatly trimmed in a chin-length bob. She loved numbers, excelling in math; I could barely balance a checkbook. She laughed like a horse; I sounded like a monkey. And when it came to food, we had one thing in common, sort of. I loved cooking, and Miki loved eating.

Miki always believed in me, even when I didn’t. “You should be running a restaurant by now, Akiko,” she’d told me a million times. And every time, I’d laughed it off as a silly fantasy. But deep down, a part of me wanted to believe her.

“Don’t worry, I’m just getting started on dinner,” I said, shaking the thought from my head.

“Did you get the butterfish?”

“I did.”

A loud shriek rang out from the phone. “Wonderful! I’m starving. See you in a few!”

Miki was the only person alive who knew about my dream. She'd always insisted I should have acted on it years ago, and why I'd waited so long was beyond her. But the time had finally come. I wanted to do what my father never had the chance to achieve—become a legendary sushi chef.

But there was one problem: sushi chefs were men.

There were plenty of female chefs. But when it came to the art of crafting sushi, women didn't exist, not in the kitchens or the apprenticeship programs. How could I ever achieve that dream?

Before his death, I confided in Oji-chan about what I truly wanted to do with my life. He didn't hesitate. "You can do it," he said, grinning in that way only he could, "and you'll be the best sushi chef."

Part of me wanted to believe him. I wanted to trust that Oji-chan's unwavering faith in me was enough to overcome centuries of tradition. But another part of me couldn't ignore the uphill battle I faced. The stares, the whispers, the rejection... It all felt inevitable.

A knock at my front door pulled me out of my thoughts and the kitchen.

"Miki, come in," I said, holding the door open.

She stepped inside, giving me a quick hug. "I brought alcohol," she announced, holding up a bottle of my favorite sake.

We made our way back into the kitchen, and Miki wasted no time filling a small bucket with ice and water to chill the bottle. "It smells amazing in here," she said, inhaling deeply. "I purposely had a light lunch so I could pig out tonight."

“I figured. That’s why I made more than usual.”

“I love that you know me so well.” She leaned against the counter and crossed her arms over her chest. “How are you doing? Are you ready for tomorrow?”

Tomorrow was the start of everything. I’d been accepted into the country’s most prestigious sushi apprenticeship program, run by none other than Chef Sakamoto himself. I was supposed to report to the House of Sakamoto, his signature restaurant, at 9:00 a.m. sharp.

I drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I think so. I still can’t believe it’s real. Part of me keeps expecting a call or a letter saying there was a mistake, that my spot was given to someone else.”

“That’s absurd,” Miki said, her tone sharp. “I’ve eaten a lot of sushi, and trust me—you’re good. Really good. With the training you’ll get, you’ll be unstoppable. You’ll open your own restaurant one day, and it’ll be a hit.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. And I’m not just saying that because you’re my best friend and my only hope of escaping the accounting hell I call a job.”

I laughed, the tension in my chest easing. “I promise you’ll be my first hire. You’ll be the social butterfly working the front of the house, ensuring everyone’s having a great time.”

“That, I can do. And well,” she said, raising her hand as if taking an oath.

Then she hesitated, chewing her bottom lip. “I do have some questions. Or, you know, concerns.”

I smiled, knowing where this was headed. “Let me guess, you think the program is weird.”

“Weird?” she echoed, her eyebrows shooting up. “Akiko, it’s more than weird. You have to live on-site, and you’re not allowed to leave or talk to anyone. Does that not scream cult to you?”

I laughed despite myself. “Maybe, but it’s only six weeks. I’ll survive.”

“And the NDA? Air-tight, binding for life, and practically screaming ‘Don’t ask questions.’ What’s that about?”

“They don’t want me spilling trade secrets,” I said. “Every person who’s completed the program has gone on to greatness. A lot of chefs who have trained under Chef Sakamoto now have their own Michelin-starred restaurant. This isn’t some gimmick. It’s the real deal.”

Miki frowned, unconvinced. “Give me the paperwork.”

I got up and grabbed the envelope from my desk. “Here,” I said, handing it over.

She flipped through the pages; her expression said it all. “These rules are insane. Listen to this: ‘Rule One: The named apprentice shall arrive at nine a.m. sharp. Tardiness will result in immediate dismissal.’ Harsh much?”

I shrugged. “Punctuality is important.”

“‘Rule Two: The named apprentice will bring nothing but the clothing on their body. No personal items are allowed.’ I hope they’re providing you with deodorant.”

“Miki—”

“Wait, wait, it gets better. ‘Rule Three: The named apprentice shall turn over all electronic devices before starting the program. These will be returned upon completion.’”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her dramatic tone. “Okay, fine. It’s strict. But I’ll manage.”

She shook her head as she continued looking through the paperwork. “All this, and they don’t even tell you what you’ll be doing daily? No schedule, no details, nothing. Akiko, this doesn’t sound like training—it sounds like they’re hiding something. What if this whole thing isn’t what it seems?”

Miki had a point, but I wasn’t about to let my doubts take hold. I couldn’t afford to. This was my dream.

She handed the envelope back to me. “I heard the Sakamotos live in a huge mansion that’s beautiful and luxurious. Living there can’t be that bad, even if the property resembles a prison.” She gave me a cheeky smile.

“I’ll be back here in no time, Miki.”

She shook her head but smiled. “You’d better. I can’t eat this well without you.”

She poured each of us a glass of chilled sake and raised hers in a toast. “Here’s to your dream, Akiko. You’re going to kill!”

### CHAPTER THREE

#### AKIKO'S DREAM – THE BOARDWALK

Later that night, I woke covered in sweat, my blanket tangled around me. I kicked my legs, freeing myself, and sat up, heart pounding. For a few seconds, I couldn't remember where I was. My gaze darted around the room until the familiar shadows of my bedroom anchored me. Safe. I was safe.

Beside me, Miki lay on her side, snoring softly. Not even an earthquake could wake that girl. I lay back down, staring at the ceiling, and did what I always did after having that dream: I tried to decipher it.

Over the years, the dream evolved, each time revealing more, like a puzzle assembling itself. Lately, though, it had felt...different. As if it was trying to tell me something. For months now, I'd been waking at the same moment, right before it could go further. But tonight was different. Tonight, I saw more.

It always started the same way, at the fish market. I was a little girl, and I always wore the same blue dress, ribbons tied neatly in my hair. I wandered among the stalls, eyes wide with curiosity, keeping track of the seafood I'd tasted and the ones I hadn't, until I realized I was lost.

I wasn't lost in the sense that I didn't know where I was. I knew the market like the back of my hand. But I was separated from my father. Panic set in as I ran up and down the rows of stalls, calling his name. He was nowhere to be seen.

I reached the edge of the market, breathless and scared. Had he left without me? My heart clenched at the thought. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him. He was walking toward the pier.

“Papa!” I shouted, my voice high and frantic.

He didn’t hear me.

I ran after him as fast as my little legs could, but I couldn’t catch up no matter how hard I tried. He reached the end of the pier, where a small wooden shack sold bait and fishing supplies. The dock was old and rickety, its wooden planks worn thin in places, revealing slivers of the water below. And then he smiled one last time before jumping off the pier.

This was where the dream always ended and where I always woke.

But not tonight.

This time, he stood in front of the bait shop. He turned back and looked at me, waving at me to come to him.

“Papa!” I called again, willing my legs to move faster.

He didn’t wait. By the time I reached the shack, he was gone.

I skidded to a stop, my chest heaving. “Papa?” I called, my voice trembling.

I ran around to the back of the shack, convinced he was playing hide-and-seek. But there was no one there. I stood alone, listening to the creak of the wooden planks beneath my feet and the faint sound of waves crashing against the pier. And then I spotted him, face down in the water below.

And then I woke.

I lay there, the fragments of the dream swirling in my mind. What was my dream trying to tell me now?

Was my path of becoming a sushi chef a dead end? Or was the dream encouraging me not to end it like my father might have? Perhaps the dream wasn't a nightmare at all.

Oddly enough, that thought brought a smile to my lips, easing the tension in my chest. If this was my father's way of guiding me, encouraging me to do what he couldn't, I would follow it. I closed my eyes, and sleep gently pulled me back under.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Over breakfast, Miki offered to drive me to the restaurant, but I told her it wasn't necessary. Plus, she had work, though she dismissed that. Honestly, she was just looking for an excuse to be late to her job. Again.

"You have to be on time," I said, using my chopsticks to mix my rice with my natto. "Didn't your boss already talk to you about your tardiness?"

"So what?" she replied, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Soon, I'll be the hostess with the mostest at your fabulous restaurant, and my boss will beg me for a reservation."

I laughed. "Oh yeah? And what will you say? No? Is turning away customers a great business decision?"

"First of all," she said, wagging her finger, "your restaurant will be booked a year in advance, minimum. So, 'Sorry, not sorry' wouldn't even be a lie. Maybe if he got down on his knees and begged, I'd consider squeezing him in, but only after six months. Or longer."

"You're a vengeful one. Remind me to never get on your bad side."

"I look out for my friends, that's all."

"And I appreciate your undying loyalty," I said, "but until I finish this apprenticeship, find the money to open a restaurant, and build it up enough to hire you, you need to

be on time for work so you can pay your bills.”

“Ugh,” she groaned, slumping in her chair. “You make it sound like it’s years away.”

“It might be.”

“Well, Miss Super Sushi Chef,” she said, standing, “you’d better call a taxi. If anyone can’t be late today, it’s you.”

Despite my protests, Miki insisted on waiting with me until the taxi arrived. “It’s my duty to see you off,” she said. She gave me a tight hug before I got in the car. “Good luck, Akiko. You’re going to crush it. I can’t wait to celebrate when this is all over.”

As the taxi drove through Kyoto, I couldn’t help but imagine what lay ahead. I’d never visited the House of Sakamoto before, but I assumed it would be in the trendiest, most fashionable part of the city. A crown jewel surrounded by celebrity-filled bars, designer boutiques, and beautiful people strolling along sunlit sidewalks.

But that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

The driver took me to the edge of a heavily industrialized part of town, far from Kyoto’s city center. At first, I thought he must have the wrong address. I checked my phone’s map three times just to be sure.

Outside the window, drab warehouses and nondescript buildings lined the streets, their gray walls blending into one another. It felt like a place where things disappeared.

Why would Chef Sakamoto open a restaurant here?

The taxi stopped in front of a building that didn’t belong. The facade was designed to

look like a traditional Japanese village home, complete with dark wooden beams and sliding doors. Above the double-door entrance, gold letters spelled out “House of Sakamoto.” My first thought? Strange, like a set piece from a period movie discarded on the side of the road. But what did I know? Chef Sakamoto owned a Michelin-rated restaurant. I didn’t.

I double-checked the address on my phone one last time, even though the signage in front of me was impossible to miss. Then I stepped out of the taxi, the soles of my shoes crunching on the gravel road.

The street was eerily quiet. No cars. No pedestrians. No one waiting to greet me. A strange unease settled over me as I clutched my acceptance letter. Did I get the time wrong?

I unfolded the letter, the one thing I’d been told to bring, and rechecked the details. Date, time, address. Everything matched. I was even five minutes early.

Well, might as well get on with it.

I walked to the entrance of the restaurant and peered through the window. The lights were off, and not a soul was in sight.

Straightening my shoulders, I lifted my chin and knocked firmly on the door. The sound barely echoed, and I hesitated. What if no one was close enough to hear? My knuckles stung from the initial knock, but I raised my hand again. Before I could torture them, the door swung open.

Standing in the doorway was a man I didn’t recognize. He wasn’t Chef Sakamoto: That much I knew. His salt-and-pepper hair was cropped close, and two heavy brows sat low over scrutinizing eyes. The harsh lines of his face deepened as he frowned, his scarred chin catching the light. He was dressed in all black: loose, baggy pants

suited for a kitchen and a buttoned-up long-sleeve shirt that seemed out of place.

“Hi,” I began, offering a polite bow. “My name is Akiko Ono. I’m here for the apprenticeship.”

He didn’t respond, only stared down at me, unblinking.

“I was told to arrive at nine a.m. sharp.” I fumbled with the welcome letter and held it out. He snatched it from my hand without a word.

“I am Aoto Matsumoto,” he said at last, his voice cold and mechanical. “From here on, you will address me as Kanshisha-san.”

The title caught me off guard. Kanshisha. Overseer. Was he the manager of the apprenticeship?

“Any questions, problems, or needs you have, you will bring to me. Is that clear?” His eyes didn’t flicker with curiosity or warmth. They were flat, unreadable.

“Yes,” I said, my voice steady despite the unease curling in my stomach. “Where are the other apprentices?”

He ignored my question and turned, motioning for me to follow.

We moved quickly through the empty restaurant. The modern decor was stark, almost clinical, with evenly spaced tables and plain white walls devoid of art. It felt as unwelcoming as Kanshisha-san himself.

He pushed through a pair of swinging doors, leading me into the kitchen. The lights were off, but the gleaming stainless steel countertops and the spotless floors stood out even in the dimness. The air smelled faintly of cleaning solution, sharp and sterile.

Along one wall were stoves and grills, while shelves of cookware lined another. A long prep table dominated the center of the room, its surface reflecting the faint light.

Goose bumps prickled along my arms. This was where I would train.

We didn't linger. Kanshisha-san led me out the back door into a narrow space between the restaurant and a towering concrete wall. I craned my neck, my gaze following the wall to the gray sky. Barbed wire coiled along the top, matching Miki's declaration that it looked like a prison.

Straight ahead were massive steel doors, weathered and foreboding, with intricate dragon etchings carved into their surface. They looked like they weighed a ton each.

Of course Kanshisha-san was taking me to meet the master himself. My heart quickened.

We crossed the path, the gravel crunching underfoot, until we reached the doors. Kanshisha-san pulled out a key and unlocked it. He turned to me, his eyes colder than ever.

I swallowed hard. His expression practically screamed disapproval. If I had to guess, he wasn't thrilled about having a woman apprentice. I'd expected pushback. I was bucking centuries of tradition. But this man seemed like the embodiment of tradition itself.

He grunted as he heaved one of the steel doors open. He then motioned for me to enter.

I hesitated for a fraction of a second, then stepped through. The air felt colder and heavier. Behind us, the door slammed shut with a resounding clank.

Six weeks. That was how long I'd agreed to. Six weeks inside these walls, cut off from the world. I barely noticed my hands trembling as I clasped them together. My fate was sealed.

Before me sprawled the compound, like something out of a history textbook. It resembled a traditional palace from a time when Japan's emperors ruled, complete with an arched wooden bridge spanning a narrow moat along the perimeter.

A moat. This place actually has a freaking moat.

Medium and small buildings dotted the landscape, connected by pebbled and stone walkways carved through manicured grass. Ishidoros, ornamental stone lanterns, rose from the earth lining the paths. Cherry trees stood scattered throughout, their branches heavy with pink blooms.

In the distance, I spotted a Zen garden and three-tiered red-and-black pagoda rising behind it. And beyond that, the Sakamoto residence loomed, its grandeur evoking royalty.

"This is amazing." The words escaped me without thought. Kanshisha-san didn't pause to acknowledge my awe. He brushed past me and retook the lead.

I followed, assuming we were heading toward the mansion. But instead, he veered left, passing a burbling fountain of stacked stones, and headed toward a long, rectangular building of dark-stained wood. It looked old, as though it had been transported straight from the fifteenth century. I half expected samurai on horseback to appear at any second, patrolling the grounds.

Kanshisha-san unlocked the door and stepped inside. I hesitated as the grandeur outside gave way to an eerie stillness. The hallway was dimly lit, with no windows—only small lamps jutting from the walls, their yellow glow barely piercing

the shadows. The air smelled dry and stale, like a cupboard that hadn't been opened in decades. We passed a series of narrow doorways, each closed, until we reached the very last room. Its door stood open.

"This is your room," Kanshisha-san said, his tone flat. "You are to wait here until told otherwise. Keep the door closed." His cold and dismissive gaze skimmed over me, settling on my phone in my hand. He snatched it from me. "Change out of those clothes."

I stepped inside, and before I could speak, the door shut firmly behind me, followed by the unmistakable click of a lock. I froze, listening to his footsteps fade down the hall. Slowly, I turned and tested the doorknob. It turned, but the door wouldn't budge. A dead bolt was in place.

Did he just lock me in?

My stomach twisted, and for the first time, I wondered if I'd made a mistake.

The room was stark, with a tiny window near the ceiling. A single mattress lay on a narrow wooden frame, topped with a thin blanket and pillow. Two white towels were folded neatly on top. A small table with a chair stood against the wall, holding the most basic toiletries: a comb, a toothbrush with a tube of toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, and a bar of green soap that smelled faintly medicinal. Above it hung a mirror, its surface slightly warped at the edges. I switched on the lamp beside it, bathing the room in weak yellow light.

A narrow standing closet occupied the corner. Inside hung two identical chef uniforms: black tops resembling kimonos, black pants, and red obi belts. The fabric looked stiff, utilitarian.

As I changed into one of the uniforms, unease gnawed at me. This apprenticeship felt

off so far. The cold welcome, the sparse room... It all felt wrong. Was this common in other programs? Were the other apprentices here being treated the same way? Or was this special treatment for me, the lone woman in a man's world?

I sat on the bed, the mattress creaking under my weight, and caught my reflection in the mirror. My own face stared back at me, pale and unsure.

Stop it, Akiko. The last thing you need is to second-guess yourself. Stay positive. This is the start of something new. Something great.

But the silence chipped away at me. Where were the other apprentices? Were they late? Would they be dismissed? Or were they here already, keeping quiet behind their closed doors?

I leaned toward the wall shared with the room next door and pressed my ear to the cold surface. Nothing. No movement. No sound. Just silence.

Minutes dragged by. Then I heard the faint creak of the front door opening, followed by heavy footsteps and Kanshisha-san's low, gruff voice. My heart leaped. Someone else had arrived.

The footsteps stopped near my room, followed by the squeak of another door opening. A pause. Then, the soft click of it closing again. No lock clicked into place.

Why was my door locked and not theirs?

Miki had been joking when she called this place a prison. But sitting here, staring at the locked door, it didn't feel like a joke anymore.

### CHAPTER FIVE

I jiggled the doorknob repeatedly, thinking it would magically unlock itself. Why me and not the person next door? Was this because I was a woman? If gender was such an issue, why let me into the program in the first place? I plopped back onto the bed, leaning against the wall with my knees pulled to my chest. Whoever was next door was being awfully quiet.

It had to be a man.

Sure, there was a slim chance another woman had been accepted, but I doubted it. The welcome packet didn't say how many apprentices were admitted, just that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So far, it seemed like there were just the two of us.

I strained my ears, trying to catch a sound, anything. Whoever it was must have been doing the same because the silence amplified my breathing. I couldn't help but wonder: Who were they? Would they be friendly? Or would they treat me differently because I was a woman?

Then, faint rustling. My pulse quickened as I pressed my ear against the wall. The soft shuffle of fabric—were they changing into their uniform? Mustering confidence, I decided to break the silence.

“Hello? Are you here for the apprenticeship?” I called out.

A pause. Then, a hesitant “Yeah.”

“Me too.”

Another pause, longer this time. “But...you’re a girl.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, and?”

“Why are you in the program?”

“Are you serious? I’m here for the same reason you are. I want to be a sushi chef.”

“But how?”

“I guess I’m that good.” Was this the kind of reaction I could expect from everyone here? “How did you get in?” I shot back.

“I applied, like you. I guess I just assumed it was for men.”

“Are you shocked?”

“A little. I’ve only ever seen male sushi chefs.”

“Well, now you’re about to see a woman sushi chef. Got a problem with that?”

“Uh, no. I think it’s fine.” His tone softened. “My name’s Kenji Sanada. Nice to meet you.”

Kenji Sanada? The name triggered a wave of memories. “Wait, did you say Kenji Sanada?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Could it really be him? “Do you have a birthmark on the inside of your left forearm?”

A pause, this time longer. “Who’s asking?”

“Just answer the question. Do you?”

“I do. Now, who are you?”

I grinned, my heart racing. “Did you name it Pikachu because it sort of looks like Pikachu?”

Seconds stretched like hours. Finally, his voice cracked with disbelief. “Akiko? Is that you?”

“Yes! Oh my God, Kenji! Yes, it’s me!”

“No way. I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Same here! The last time I saw you was when your family moved away.”

Kenji was my best friend growing up, my partner in every childhood adventure until his dad’s new job took them to Tokyo. When they left, it felt like losing a part of myself.

“This is surreal,” he said. “I can’t believe it.”

“Neither can I. Why didn’t you try to find me?”

“I did. Later, when I was older. But I kept hitting dead ends. You could’ve tried to find me, too, you know.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” My voice softened. He had no idea what my life had become after he left. “It’s a long story.”

“Well, we’ve got time. Tell me everything. How are your parents?”

Hearing Kenji say that broke my heart a little. He had moved away before all the terrible things that happened. He had no idea. So I started my story with my father disappearing.

“Wait, your father just vanished... No trace?”

“It happened right after you left. The police looked for him, but after a while they gave up, and that was it.”

“Akiko...I’m so sorry. I had no idea. I feel like an asshole for not trying harder to find you.”

“You couldn’t have known, Kenji. We were kids.”

“So it’s just you and your mom?”

I took another deep breath. “She took his disappearance hard and fell into a deep depression, barely able to get out of bed most days. Alcohol took over... About a year later she passed.”

“My God, Akiko... I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s fine. It happened a long time ago. I got through it.”

“You were alone? I mean, how did you survive?”

“Well, after my dad left, I started working part-time at the local fish market to help my mother. I learned responsibility quickly. I became the adult in the family, so by the time she died, I was practically surviving on my own anyway. The people at the fish market were a great help. I wasn’t entirely alone.”

“I wish I knew. I wish I could have done something.”

“I know, and thank you for saying it.”

“You were my best friend. We’re supposed to look out for each other.”

“Don’t feel guilty, Kenji. None of what happened was because of you moving away.”

“It’s hard not to feel guilty. Did you know I still consider you my best friend?”

“Really?”

“Of course! I always thought about you, wondering what you were up to.”

“Same here. Thinking about our fun times got me through those rough days.”

“I hate that you had to go through all that. I wish I could’ve been there for you.”

“You couldn’t have done anything. We were kids.”

A few moments of silence passed. “This is still so crazy,” he said. “Of all places to meet again, it’s here. In this program. What are the odds?”

“Pretty slim. But enough of me already. Since when did you start cooking? We were just eaters back in the days.”

He laughed. “True. I think it started in high school. I spent more time in the kitchen with my mom, and she taught me.”

“You? In the kitchen? That’s a sight I never imagined.”

“I know, right? But I was bullied at my new school. Cooking became my escape.”

“That’s awful, Kenji. I hate bullies. If I’d been there, I’d have knocked their teeth out.”

He laughed again. “I know you would’ve.”

“It’s surreal, though. Not only are we reunited, but we’re neighbors again. Wait, Kenji. Is your door locked?”

“What do you mean?”

“Can you open it?”

I heard his door creak open. “Yeah, mine opens.”

“I knew it! Kenji, my door is locked from the outside. Can you open it?”

“Hold on. I’ll check.”

As I waited, a wave of nervousness washed over me. Memories of afternoons spent playing ken ken pa or bidama with Kenji came rushing back, the way we easily laughed around each other and the tight bond that made us inseparable. But years had passed. Was he still the same Kenji I remembered, or had time and distance changed him? Would he view me as his old friend or just another competitor? And would I even recognize him?

Kenji jiggled the doorknob. A faint click and the door swung open. There he was, my best friend from childhood. His goofy smile was still there, but everything else about him had changed. He was taller and broader, and his once-skinny frame now had the definition of someone who'd grown into himself.

"Kenji!" I threw my arms open and walked straight into him, hugging him tightly. My cheek pressed against his chest. "Mmm, you smell good. Do I detect cologne on you?"

He laughed, pulling back to look at me. "You like?"

I buried my nose into him and took a dramatic sniff. "I like."

"You look exactly the same," he said as I pulled him into my room and shut the door. "Well, an older version of yourself." He stepped back to give me a once-over. "Sheesh, Akiko. You're hot now. Who would've thought?"

I laughed, feeling the warmth rise to my cheeks. When we were kids, Kenji had never seen me as anything more than his buddy. It was always me pretending we were married and him humorously playing along just to demand imaginary dinners after his fake workday.

"Well, you're not so bad yourself," I teased, poking at his abdomen. It was solid. "You've been working out."

"Gym every day," he said, grinning.

"So, any girlfriends?"

"Nah, I'm too busy. What about you? Bet you have a ton of guys chasing after you."

“I wish. I’m like a cat lady, just without the cat.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. You’re too cute to be single.”

I gave him a playful smile, kicking a leg up behind me. “What can I say? Right now, I’m focused on myself. I finally feel like I’m in a place where I can chase my dreams. Becoming a sushi chef is all I care about.”

“Same here. Guess we’re on the same path.”

A sound in the hallway froze us both. I pressed a finger to my lips. “Is your door closed?” I whispered.

Kenji nodded. “Yeah, why?”

We stood still, listening. Footsteps and the low murmur of Kanshisha-san’s voice floated through the hall, followed by the soft click of another door closing.

“Did you hear him lock that door?” I asked.

Kenji shrugged. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Why is my door the only one locked?” I muttered, frustration bubbling. “Do they think I’ll run off or something?”

“Maybe it’s random?”

“Or maybe it’s because I’m a woman,” I said bitterly.

Kenji frowned. “You really think so?”

“I don’t know. I just can’t figure out why.”

We sat on my bed, talking about everything: our childhood, the program, and the strange rules we’d already encountered. It felt like no time had passed between us. All the years apart melted away as we slipped back into the easy rhythm of our friendship.

“I’m still living in Tokyo,” Kenji said. “I sell earthquake insurance.”

“What? You’re an insurance salesman?” I muffled my laugh with my hand.

“I know, I know. Possibly the last thing I ever thought I would be doing, but it pays the bills. What about you? Still here in Kyoto?”

“Yup, never left. I’m working in a restaurant. Nothing to brag about.”

“At least you’re in the restaurant industry. A step closer than me.”

As the day dragged on, more participants arrived, filling the remaining rooms. Clearly we had been given different times to arrive. Kenji stayed in my room, stretched out on the floor, me on the bed.

“I’m starving,” he groaned, rubbing his stomach. “If I’d known we wouldn’t eat all day, I’d have had a bigger breakfast. Aren’t you hungry?”

“Starving,” I admitted. “And I really need to pee. Did Kanshisha-san say anything about bathrooms?”

“Nope. Maybe we have to use the Sakamotos’ bathroom,” he joked.

I rolled my eyes. “Highly doubt it.”

Kenji propped himself up on his elbows, looking at me. “I’m really glad we found each other again, Akiko. I missed you.”

His words softened something inside me. “I missed you too. Having you here makes this whole thing less terrifying.”

“Terrifying? You? I’ve never seen you afraid of anything.”

I smiled, but the truth was, I was terrified. Not of the training but of failing. Of not being enough. “Thanks, Kenji. It’s good to know someone has my back.”

“Always,” he said, his voice steady and sincere. “If anyone gives you trouble, they’ll have to deal with me.”

The thought warmed me, though I didn’t want anyone to think I needed a man to protect me. Still, it was comforting to know Kenji was in my corner.

“Thanks,” I said softly.

Kenji stood, stretching. “I should head back to my room before Kanshisha-san catches me. Don’t want to get kicked out on the first day.”

I stood, too, wrapping him in a quick hug. “Here’s to our new journey,” I said.

Kenji leaned down and kissed my forehead. “Don’t forget to lock my door,” I reminded him as he left.

He locked the door, and I sat on the bed, staring at the bare walls. My stomach growled. The day had been long and strange, and unease crept back as the silence settled over the dormitory.

Suddenly, the dormitory door banged open. Kanshisha-san's voice cut through the stillness, and my heart jumped. This was it—the start of whatever we'd signed up for.

### CHAPTER SIX

Goose bumps appeared on my arms, not from the cold but from the uncertainty of what was about to happen. I was about to meet my fellow apprentices. Would they accept me? Belittle me? Or worse, sabotage my chances? I rubbed my palms against my uniform to dry the sweat that seemed to collect out of nowhere.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to calm. This wasn't the time to unravel.

I straightened my uniform and tugged at my belt until it fit snugly. I drew a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. "You've got this, Akiko," I whispered to myself.

With my chin up and my back straight, I reached for the doorknob, ready for my entrance, and immediately froze. The door wouldn't budge. I jiggled it harder and gave it a few solid tugs, but nothing.

I stepped back and let out a frustrated sigh. My grand entrance, foiled by a single dead bolt.

Of course it's locked. Why wouldn't it be? I had Kenji lock it just in case Kanshishasan checked.

I glared at the door as if that might intimidate it into opening, but then a faint sound of footsteps approached.

A click and then the door creaked open to reveal Kenji's familiar grin. "Need some help?" he teased, already stepping aside to let me through.

“You’re lucky you’re still charming,” I said with a smile, brushing past him into the hallway.

The faint murmurs of other voices drifted through the hall as the other apprentices exited their room, all wearing their uniforms. These were strangers who could become either my friends or my enemies. I stiffened slightly at the thought but forced my shoulders to relax.

“You ready for this?” Kenji asked, falling into step beside me.

I glanced at him, his confidence contagious. “You bet I am.”

“Good,” he said with a thumbs-up. “Let’s kill it.”

As far as I could tell, I was the only woman. I stood at attention like the others, eyes forward, back straight, arms stiff by my sides. The silence in the hallway stretched on endlessly. I kept my face neutral, trying not to reveal my emotions. Was I already being judged?

Finally, Kanshisha-san’s voice shattered the silence, booming through the corridor like a thunderclap. “A sushi chef strives for perfection—anything less is a disgrace. But that alone won’t save you. You’re not here to train. You’re here to survive. Welcome to Kage Ryu!”

Shadow school? Why is he referring to the apprenticeship that way? And what’s this nonsense about surviving?

“Everything you are exposed to here is for your eyes and ears only,” Kanshisha-san continued, pacing the hallway with his hands clasped behind his back. His movements were sharp and precise. “You have all signed NDAs, which will be enforced if necessary. You are part of a group that will have access to information

that no one else is privy to. Do not spoil it by discussing what takes place here. Accept that you are now a part of a privileged few.”

Privileged few? Strangely, I didn’t feel privileged. If anything, I kind of felt like a lab rat in some grand experiment.

“Kage Ryu was developed by Chef Sakamoto to test the stamina, mindset, and physicality of chefs in training. You may not understand his methods at first, but the results speak for themselves. Every graduate of Kage Ryu has gone on to immense success. May the best man win.”

His words struck like a slap. Was that a dig at me? Am I already doomed, before the program has even started?

Kanshisha-san stopped in front of me, his dark eyes boring into mine. I tried to hold his gaze, but the intensity of his stare was too much. With my breath stuck in my throat, I glanced away, the victory of that stare down going to him. Only then did he turn on his heel and resume his pacing.

“Never speak to Chef Sakamoto first,” he barked. “This is the most important rule to follow. Breaking it will result in immediate dismissal from Kage Ryu.”

We’re not allowed to speak to him? I blinked, trying to process the absurdity. How was he supposed to teach us if we couldn’t talk to him? Was this really a twisted sushi cult?

“The dormitory, the bathrooms, and the training kitchen are the only places you have access to,” Kanshisha-san continued. “You are forbidden from entering other buildings or roaming the compound unless I give explicit permission. And under no circumstances are you to enter the Sakamoto residence.”

Great. Not only do we have to live here, but we're being restricted.

I did my best to keep my expression neutral.

But seriously, where are the bathrooms? And why is this starting to sound less like an apprenticeship and more like orientation day at a prison?

"When not training, you are expected to remain in your room unless granted permission to leave," he said.

"Excuse me, Kanshisha-san," a chubby man with a high-pitched voice interrupted. "What are we supposed to do in our rooms?"

Kanshisha-san's reaction was instantaneous. He spun on his heel, closing the distance between himself and the man in three swift strides. Without hesitation, he struck the man hard in the stomach. The apprentice doubled over, collapsing to one knee, gasping for air.

"Get up!" Kanshisha-san's voice thundered. "Or I will dismiss you this very second."

The man struggled to his feet, his face red and contorted in pain.

"Under no circumstances should any of you interrupt me while I'm speaking. This will result in immediate corporal punishment." Kanshisha-san's unforgiving gaze swept across us, almost daring someone to challenge him.

No one moved or attempted to say something; the reality of his authority had sunk in.

"Each week, there will be a challenge," he continued, resuming his pacing. "You will be informed of the challenge ahead of time. At that point, you will have twenty-four hours to prepare yourselves. Your performance on every challenge will earn you a set

number of points. The one with the most points at the end of Kage Ryu will be the champion, the chosen apprentice.”

Champion? My heart sank. This wasn’t an apprenticeship; it was a competition. We weren’t here to learn. We were here to compete. My fingers twitched at my sides as I fought the urge to glance at Kenji. I needed to keep my focus straight ahead.

“Every morning, after breakfast, you will have chore duty. There will be an inspection to determine if your efforts were satisfactory. Points will be taken away if you fail too many times. Cleaning and training are the only times you should be outside the dormitory. Period!”

I swallowed hard as he passed by me again. His footsteps echoed ominously, each one drilling the rules into my mind.

With each word out of Kanshisha-san’s mouth, this six-week program sounded less like an opportunity and more like six weeks of culinary hell. I glanced down the line of apprentices, each standing stiff as a board, their faces pale and tense. At least I wasn’t the only one who seemed unnerved.

But when my eyes landed on the last apprentice, standing in front of room one, my stomach dropped. I blinked, my breath catching as I took in his profile. It was impossible. It couldn’t be him.

Jiro Tachibana.

My ex.

There was no doubt it was him. I could pick him out of any lineup, even with just a glimpse of his profile. An uncomfortable knot formed in my stomach. And to think I’d thought Kenji showing up was the wild card of the day.

If there was anyone I had hoped would never enter my life again, it was Jiro Tachibana. We had dated during university, but I ended things before graduation. He hadn't taken it well at all. If there was ever an enemy I wanted to avoid, it was him.

And I'd managed to, up until now.

For five years, I'd successfully kept him out of my life. No accidental encounters, no awkward sightings in public. It was as if we'd agreed to exist in entirely separate worlds. At least, that's what I'd thought.

I stared at him, old memories and emotions clawing to the surface. But they weren't the warm, fuzzy kind that left you feeling nostalgic. No, this was something entirely different. I certainly wasn't conflicted or thinking that maybe I'd been too harsh on him all those years ago. I was sure of those red flags I'd seen back then. What I felt now was pure, unfiltered anger.

Because I knew Jiro too well. I knew how he thought, what drove him, what made him tick. As soon as he discovered I was here, he'd use every opportunity to attack me, ridicule me, and, worse, knock me off my game.

This day just keeps getting better, doesn't it, Akiko? Not only are you stuck in a glorified prison with a dictator for an overseer, but now you're competing against your crazy ex. Still think you want to be a Michelin-starred chef?

It was a fair question. Nothing about this experience so far was turning out the way I'd imagined. If this was just the beginning, how much worse could it get?

I stared at Jiro, needing to confirm that I wasn't imagining things. That it really was him. And then, as if sensing my gaze, he turned his head. Our eyes met, and he smiled. Smiled.

Was that a friendly smile? A mocking one? Or something worse?

“Any questions?” Kanshisha-san’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. His sharp tone demanded immediate attention, and I straightened, my gaze darting back to him.

“Dinner will commence in thirty minutes,” he continued, his voice final. “I’ll return to escort you to the dining room.”

A collective breath of relief filled the hallway as soon as he disappeared. Shoulders relaxed, necks rolled, and tension drained from everyone like water from a sieve.

Kenji turned to me, stepping into my line of sight and blocking my view of Jiro. “That was something, huh?” He gave me a small smile, though I couldn’t tell if it was nervous or playful.

“I don’t even know what to think,” I said, shaking my head. “This is nothing like what I expected.”

“Same here. But,” he added, his tone shifting, “no matter how strange or unconventional this program is, Chef Sakamoto’s results speak for themselves. Kanshisha-san made that pretty clear. Maybe this is what it takes to be great. To make it to the top.”

I couldn’t argue with him. There were other apprenticeship programs, but none had the track record Chef Sakamoto’s did. He was the gold standard every aspiring sushi chef dreamed of surpassing. Maybe Kenji was right. Maybe pushing the envelope was what it took.

Kenji’s hand landed on my shoulder, the gesture warm but firm. He gave a light squeeze, his expression softening. “May the best chef win.”

I smiled back. I knew I could count on Kenji. And even though we were now rivals, we were friends first.

But still, there was something about the words Kanshisha-san had uttered. The way he laid out those rules that in no way seemed normal. It made me think for a moment that maybe, just maybe, this place wasn't about teaching us but about breaking us.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

You'd think my stomach was possessed and speaking in tongues with the noises it was making. But hunger wasn't even the worst of my problems. I had to pee.

I paced my room in a desperate attempt to distract myself from the burning pressure in my abdomen. Fifteen minutes felt like fifteen hours. I swore the second Kanshisha-san returned, I would demand to know where the bathrooms were. Let him glare all he wanted.

The sound of the dormitory door opening was music to my ears. I bolted out of my room with the others, ready to plead my case, but someone beat me to it.

"Excuse me, where are the bathrooms?" asked one of the apprentices.

Big mistake.

The poor guy got hit with a glare so icy, it could've frozen a bowl of ramen solid. He shrank back into line like a scolded child.

"If looks could kill," Kenji muttered under his breath. "I was about to ask the same thing."

"Why is he torturing us like this?" I said, performing a little shuffle-dance.

Without a word, Kanshisha-san spun on his heel and motioned for us to follow. We trudged behind in a single file to a smaller building next to the dormitory.

“This is where you will find the toilets and showers,” he said. “You are now permitted to exit your rooms to use these facilities.”

Now? Only now? You mean to tell us up until this moment, the bathrooms were off limits? What’s next, rationing our food?

The moment Kanshisha-san finished speaking, everyone took off like the Wicked Witch of the West avoiding a downpour. I made a beeline for the nearest open stall, slammed the door shut, and finally—bliss. When I came out, I spotted Kenji leaning casually against the wall.

“Feel better?” he asked, his kind brown eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Much,” I said with a dramatic sigh.

He slung an arm over my shoulder and pulled me close, lowering his voice. “Good, because you’re really going to hate the shower situation.”

Kenji led me to the far side of the building, where the showers were. My stomach dropped. It was a single open space with showerheads lining the walls. No stalls. No curtains. No privacy. It was like something out of a high school locker room.

“How am I supposed to bathe?” I exclaimed, my voice rising slightly in panic.

Kenji grinned. “Before you explode, I have a solution.”

“Oh, this should be good,” I said, folding my arms.

“We’ll come here after everyone else is done. I’ll stand guard while you shower and make sure no one tries to peek.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “And what’s to stop you from sneaking a peek?”

“Nothing,” he said, smirking.

I jabbed him in the bicep with my finger. “How convenient for you.”

“Look, Akiko, you know you can trust me. And if I recall correctly, we’ve been naked in front of each other before. Remember the neighbor’s onsen when we were kids? I’ve already seen all your bits and pieces.”

“Kenji, our bits and pieces look very different now,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Yeah, I know.” His grin widened. “But seriously, do you have a better idea?”

I didn’t. As much as I hated to admit it, his plan made sense. And truthfully, I did trust Kenji. The idea of him standing guard eased my fears more than I expected.

“Fine,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But if you even think about sneaking a peek?—”

“You’ll throw a sushi knife at me?” he finished, raising an eyebrow.

“Exactly,” I said with a grin.

Kenji chuckled and slung his arm around me again. “Deal. But just so you know, I’m not thrilled about being anyone’s lookout. I’m sacrificing part of my shower time for you.”

“Oh, please. Like you wouldn’t want the same thing if you were a woman.”

He tilted his head, pretending to think. “Fair point.”

I shook my head, but I couldn't help smiling. As frustrating as this whole situation was, having Kenji here made it bearable. Enjoyable, even. He had grown into a handsome man, and for the first time, I caught myself wondering whether our friendship might turn into something more.

Kanshisha-san's sharp call snapped me out of my thoughts. I hurried out, still feeling a small, nagging knot in my stomach. My eyes swept over the group of apprentices gathered outside, and there he was—Jiro.

His gaze was locked on me, his expression unreadable. Part of me wanted to believe he didn't recognize me and that I could somehow play it off like I was just another face in the crowd. But deep down, I knew better. And the longer he stared, the more obvious it became.

To make matters worse, judgmental eyes fell on me. With all the apprentices gathered, I stood out like a sore thumb—the token female. Every glance felt like their eyes were collectively weighing my worth. I straightened my back, keeping my chin up as I followed Kanshisha-san like a soldier on a mission.

He led us into another building, this one housing a pristine kitchen. It wasn't as extravagant as the one in the restaurant, but it was still sleek and modern—stainless steel everywhere, with stocked shelves, polished counters, and all the tools a chef could ever dream of.

My heart fluttered with excitement. This was why I was here. This was my dream. I exchanged a quick look with Kenji, and the grin he gave me was all I needed to push aside the unease brewing from Jiro's presence.

“This is where you will train,” Kanshisha-san announced, his voice as severe as ever.

The thrill of training bubbled up in my chest, momentarily reminding me of what Oji-

chan always said: Focus on the goal. Everything else is just noise. For a moment, I forgot about Jiro. I even forgot about the strange rules and the oppressive atmosphere. This was what mattered.

“You will treat this kitchen with the utmost respect,” Kanshisha-san added before ushering us into a room just off the kitchen.

Inside, a communal table awaited us. Four seats lined each side, with one each at the head and the foot of the table. Place settings were arranged, and a bento box with a bowl of miso soup sat neatly before each chair. The room was stark, with no windows, just cold fluorescent lighting. A trash can stood in the corner, the only other notable feature.

“You will eat here as a group,” Kanshisha-san instructed. “When you finish, place your boxes in the trash can. No one leaves until I return. Is that clear?”

We all nodded in unison.

As soon as he left, the apprentices surged toward the table like they hadn’t eaten in days. Kenji nudged someone out of the way to secure a seat for me at the head of the table. He sat in the chair to my right. I appreciated the gesture until I looked up and saw who had taken the seat opposite, at the foot.

Jiro.

Perfect.

Everyone else was too busy tearing into their bento boxes to notice him eyeing me. His gaze remained glued to me, unblinking, even as he slowly picked at his food. I tried my best to ignore him, focusing instead on my meal, but it was impossible to shake the weight of his gaze.

When we were together, I loved the way Jiro looked at me. It was intense, all consuming, like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. I'd craved that attention, that feeling of being number one. But now, it felt suffocating. Ick.

Back then, I'd been cautious about letting him in. Everyone warned me, especially Miki. "Jiro Tachibana is trouble," she'd said. "You'll regret it." And she wasn't wrong. His reputation as a player preceded him. He didn't date; he conquered. But for some reason, with me, he'd been different. Patient. Persistent. He made me feel special, like I was worth the effort.

That was mistake number one.

My eyes flicked to him again, and my stomach churned. He looked good, annoyingly good. His chest stretched the fabric of his uniform, his longer hair was perfectly styled, and his teeth were flawless now. Of course they were. Even his damn flaws had been upgraded.

I bit down hard on a piece of pickled radish, trying not to grind my teeth. Surely there had to be something about him that wasn't an improvement. He doesn't have me hanging on his arm, I thought, but the smug satisfaction didn't last.

I shook my head. What was I doing? This was day one of my apprenticeship, the start of my new journey. Why was I letting this man take up space in my head? Especially with Kenji sitting right next to me, a guy who was kind, supportive, and actually worth my time.

"Everything okay?" Kenji whispered, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Huh? Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "Just...still taking it all in." I gestured to his bento box. "How's the food?"

“Not bad,” he said, popping a piece of fish into his mouth. “I could probably eat another one, though. I’m starving.”

“Same. Hopefully they’ll feed us three times a day from now on.”

Kenji nodded, but his attention drifted to Jiro for a split second. My stomach tightened. Had he noticed the staring? Of course he had. But thankfully, he didn’t say anything.

I wasn’t ready to explain. Not yet.

The sound of a throat clearing silenced the chatter around the table. “Well, well, well,” Jiro said, his voice dripping with mockery. “If it isn’t the trailblazer herself, Akiko Ono.”

Crap!

His eyes locked onto mine, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. This was my worst fear playing out in real time. Jiro making a spectacle of me.

“She’s here to become a sushi chef,” he announced. “Can you believe that?”

The other apprentices chuckled, a few exchanging amused glances. “Well,” Jiro continued, leaning back in his chair, “that’s one less person we need to worry about.”

My cheeks burned as anger simmered beneath the surface, but I forced myself to stay composed. Let him talk. Let them all think whatever they wanted. I would prove them wrong, not with words but with my skills. Clenching my chopsticks tighter, I focused on my bento, ignoring the snickers that rippled around the room.

Underneath the table, Kenji nudged my foot. When I glanced at him, his expression

was a mix of irritation and concern. He thought Jiro was targeting me because I was a woman. If only it were that simple. I gave Kenji a small, grateful smile, trying to reassure him.

“You all know the real reason why she’s here, right?” Jiro pressed on. “It’s because her father was friends with Chef Sakamoto. Best buddies, from what I heard.”

My heart stopped. He hadn’t. He couldn’t. That information about my family was something I had confided in him during the most vulnerable moments of our relationship. Pillow talk. It wasn’t meant to be thrown back at me, especially not here. This was the one thing I wanted to keep a secret.

Jiro grinned, clearly relishing the attention. “He took pity on her. What a waste, taking the spot of someone more deserving. One of us could’ve lost our spot because of her.”

The mood around the table shifted. The smirks faded, replaced by sharp, judgmental stares. Even Kenji looked at me with unease. What if he thought the same? What if Jiro’s words planted doubt in his mind?

I couldn’t remain silent. If Jiro wanted to play dirty, so be it.

“My father had nothing to do with me being here. I don’t come from money or from a family dynasty, like you. I’m here because I earned my spot,” I snapped, meeting his gaze head-on. “Jiro, you’re just scared you’ll lose to me...again.”

The words hung in the air, and Jiro’s smirk faltered, his jaw tightening as he stabbed a piece of fish with his chopsticks. He shoved it into his mouth without another word, chewing slowly and deliberately. His ego was clearly still bruised from our breakup.

“Uh, do you two know each other?” Kenji asked, his voice cutting through the

tension.

I sighed. The damage was done. There was no hiding it now. “It’s a long story,” I said, glancing at Kenji. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

Kenji nodded, but his eyes lingered on me, filled with questions I wasn’t ready to answer.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Kenji and I stood at the entrance to the shower area. One of the showerheads still dripped, the faint plink-plink breaking the silence. The rest of the apprentices had finished bathing. Kenji had made sure of that. The narrow entrance was no wider than a doorway, shielding most of the shower area from prying eyes.

“I recommend showering in the far corner,” Kenji said, his tone casual but his expression serious. “I’ll be right outside. Just holler if you need help scrubbing your back.”

I gave him a playful pat on the chest. “Oh, I’m sure you’re the best back-scrubber in the business, huh?”

He grinned and stepped back, leaving me alone.

Six weeks of this, Akiko. Better get used to it.

I quickly stripped off my clothes and stepped under the farthest showerhead, letting the hot water cascade over me.

Okay, this isn’t so bad. The pressure is good, and the water’s still hot. I can live with this.

The moment of calm didn’t last. A noise echoed faintly from beyond the shower area as I switched off the water. A door closing.

“Kenji?” I called out, my voice steady but quiet.

My towel and clothes were hanging on hooks by the entrance, inconveniently far from where I stood. I tiptoed toward the edge of the showers, straining to hear anything beyond the faint drip of a faucet. Nothing. Had Kenji left?

I grabbed my towel and wrapped it around myself, the air suddenly feeling colder. “Kenji?” I called again, softer this time. No answer.

I peeked out, scanning the sink area and the stalls beyond it. Kenji was nowhere to be seen. To the left, rows of sinks lined the wall. To the right were urinals and the bathroom entrance. I crouched, peering under the stalls for any sign of feet. Empty.

A chill ran up my spine. I returned to the shower area, where I dried off quickly before slipping into my uniform. Just as I fastened the belt around my waist, the faint squeak of a door froze me mid-movement. Someone was out there.

My heart raced as I pressed myself against the tiled wall, straining to listen. The air felt thick with tension. Kenji wouldn’t ignore me, which meant it must be one of the other apprentices.

Anger bubbled up, cutting through my fear. I could let them believe they could intimidate me, or I could stand my ground.

Screw this.

I inhaled sharply and stepped out of the shower area, moving quickly and slamming into someone. Kenji.

“Akiko!” he said, steadying me with his hands. “Are you okay?”

I looked away, a little embarrassed by my wild imagination getting the best of me. “Yeah, I’m fine. What happened out here?”

“I had to chase away two guys, but it’s nothing this shower guard can’t handle.”

The rest of the night, Kenji hung out in my room. By now, we’d figured out that Kanshisha-san didn’t check in on us at night. The subject of Jiro inevitably came up. There was no avoiding it.

“I can’t believe it,” Kenji said, his mouth agape as he sat beside me on my bed. We had our backs against the wall, legs stretched out. “You and Jiro were boyfriend and girlfriend? Wait, I thought you said you didn’t have time for a relationship.”

“I didn’t. I mean, I don’t now. But this thing with Jiro happened back when I was in university.”

“So, what was it? Like a fling? A few months at most?”

“Um...a little over three years.”

Kenji whipped his head around to face me. “Three years? You dated that asshole for three long years? Oh my God, Akiko. I can’t believe this.”

“Kenji,” I said, rolling my eyes, “you’re overreacting.”

He shifted to fully face me, his expression serious. “Did you love him?”

I hesitated, but there was no point in lying. “I don’t know. Yeah, I guess. I mean, three years is a long time to be with someone without a good reason.”

His reaction softened, but I could still sense the tension in his jaw. Beneath his shock,

I caught the faintest glimmer of something else... Jealousy.

I looped my arm through his and rested my head on his shoulder, hoping to ease his mind. “Look, he means nothing to me now. Trust me. I broke up with him. And from what I heard later, he was walking around brokenhearted.”

Kenji raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t look brokenhearted over dinner. He came across as vengeful. And just to go on the record, I don’t believe you’re here because of your father’s relationship with Chef Sakamoto. But the others...they’ll think exactly what Jiro told them.”

“I know. It’s the one thing I wanted to keep under wraps.”

“Were they really that close? I don’t remember Chef Sakamoto ever visiting when I lived next door to you.”

“We were kids,” I said with a shrug. “I highly doubt you paid much attention to people visiting my father. Even my memory of him is vague. But I do remember enough to know they were very close, and both were rising stars in the sushi world.”

“Do you think he knows what happened to your father?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve been tempted over the years to reach out to him. I did hear that my father’s disappearance affected Chef Sakamoto—he almost gave up his career.”

“Really? We wouldn’t be here if he had. This all wouldn’t exist.” Kenji gestured around.

“I know, but apparently he pulled it together, and look at him now. King of the sushi chefs. Success beyond belief.”

“It could have easily been your father; he really was a rising star back then. I knew that much about him.”

It was true. As a little girl, I heard it all the time: that my father was destined to become the best, the kind of legend whose name would be whispered in reverence.

“Did you know they were each other’s only competition? My father told me they trained in the same apprenticeship program, pushing each other. He said they always joked about who would claim that crown.”

A look of concern appeared on Kenji’s face.

“I know what you’re thinking: Did Chef Sakamoto have anything to do with my father disappearing? The police cleared him, so no. And I believe it. When my father spoke about how he and Chef Sakamoto had plans to conquer the world of sushi together, I believed him. They were best friends.”

“You’re probably right. You lost your father; he lost a best friend. Kenji paused and turned to me. “You know, Jiro could end up being a real problem for you, Akiko. Especially if you have other secrets he knows about.”

“Trust me, that’s the only one.”

“We still don’t know how this program will play out, but if we’re competing against each other, I wouldn’t put it past him to sabotage you. He strikes me as the kind of guy who holds a grudge.”

“I know,” I admitted. “That’s what worries me too. But if he tries anything, I’ll be ready.”

Kenji snapped his fingers, and his eyes lit up. “If he goes after you, it’ll be

psychological. Mind games. Guys like him love toying with women. He's a fuckboy."

"It's a good thing I have you around to make sure I don't get screwed over by the fuckboy." Again.

Kenji laughed, the sound easing the tension in the room. "Seriously, though. The fact that he's here must feel unreal for you. Two guys from your past are showing up at the same time in the same program. Those odds are insane."

"A zillion to one," I muttered.

Kenji's face softened, and he placed a hand on mine. "For what it's worth, I want you to succeed. I really do."

The sincerity in his voice made me smile, but it also made my stomach twist with guilt. "But what if you're not—" I stopped myself before finishing the thought.

Kenji picked up on it anyway. "You mean, what if I get dismissed?"

I swallowed hard. "Well...yeah. I mean, if you accidentally break a rule or something. I mean, we all could, right?"

His expression didn't falter. "Until we face that issue, we're friends. And friends look out for each other."

I studied his face, searching for any sign of doubt, but there was none. Still, I couldn't ignore the other feelings swirling beneath the surface. I'd missed him. I realized that now more than ever. And yet I couldn't help but wonder... Were we destined just to be friends? Or could this be the start of something more?

I let out a yawn, and Kenji followed suit. “It’s getting late,” I said. “We should get some sleep. Tomorrow’s our first full day, and I have a feeling Kanshisha-san won’t take it easy on us.”

“You’re right.” Kenji stood and stretched. “Oh, before I go...” He dragged my chair to the door and lodged the back under the doorknob. “Now, no one can get in. Not without making a racket, anyway.”

I tested the door, tugging on the handle to make sure the chair held. It did. “Thanks, Kenji,” I said softly. I leaned up and kissed his cheek. “For looking out for me.”

Kenji smiled but didn’t say anything. After he left, I replaced the chair and crawled into bed, pulling the thin blanket over me. The chair trick worked, but for the first time, it dawned on me that I was surrounded by strangers, young men with their own ambitions and desires. What was stopping any of them from trying to get into my room during the night? Nothing but a chair.

Sleep didn’t come easy. I drifted in and out, every creak of the building snapping me awake.

And then it happened.

The doorknob jiggled.

My breath caught in my throat, and I froze, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure whoever was outside could hear it. I strained to listen, but the sound didn’t come again. Maybe I’d imagined it.

Then the doorknob jiggled again, harder this time, followed by the faint scrape of chair legs digging into the floorboards.

Someone was trying to get into my room.

I gripped the blanket tightly. What should I do? Should I scream? Pretend to be asleep? Confront whoever it was? My mind raced, paralyzed by indecision.

Then the shuffling stopped.

A faint click of the lock turning sent a shiver down my legs. Whoever it was had locked me in from the outside.

### CHAPTER NINE

After tossing and turning most of the night, I finally managed to doze off, only to be jolted awake by Kanshisha-san's booming voice.

"Wake up! Wake up!" he shouted, banging on each bedroom door as he moved through the hallway. He gave mine an extra-hard hit when he reached it, causing the door to rattle in its frame before he unlocked it.

Thanks for that.

I groaned and glanced at my watch—7:00 a.m. What kind of torture apprenticeship made people get up this early? Propping myself up on my elbows, I rubbed my eyes and noticed the chair still firmly wedged under the doorknob. A wave of relief washed over me. Kenji's chair trick had worked like a charm.

"At eight o'clock, I will return. Be ready," Kanshisha-san barked before slamming the dormitory door shut.

We had an hour. I promptly flopped back onto my bed and pulled the covers up to my chin, determined to catch at least a few more minutes of sleep. But barely a moment passed before I heard a knock on my door.

"Akiko, it's Kenji."

I groaned again, louder this time. Wrapped in my blanket, I rolled off the bed and shuffled to the door. "Hold on," I mumbled. Still cocooned in my makeshift fortress, I

yanked the chair away from the doorknob and cracked the door open just enough for him to squeeze through.

Kenji slipped inside and closed the door behind him. “How’d you sleep?” he asked, perching on the edge of my bed.

“Terrible,” I muttered, collapsing back onto the mattress. “Someone tried to get into my room last night.”

Kenji’s eyes widened. “What? Who?”

“I don’t know,” I said, peeking at him from under the blanket. “But your chair trick stopped them from getting in.”

“Wow. Good thing we did it.”

I rolled over to face him fully. “You know what would be an even better thing? If someone didn’t try to break into my room while I slept.”

Kenji winced. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Your idea worked,” I said, my voice softening.

Kenji frowned, his concern evident. “We should tell Kanshisha-san. This isn’t some casual sleepover. It’s the most prestigious apprenticeship program in Japan. Stuff like this shouldn’t be happening.”

“I know, but I think everything that happens here is a test, a way to see how far we’ll go, what we’re willing to endure. For now, let’s just see how things play out.”

Kenji nodded, though I could tell he wasn’t entirely convinced. Only then did I notice

he was already dressed in his uniform. “When did you have time to change?”

“I got up before Kanshisha-san came through,” he said with a shrug.

“Let me guess. You slept like a baby.”

“I did, but I woke early...too excited. Today’s the first real day, Akiko. You should be excited too. Now, come on. Time to get up.”

“Why? I can’t shower right now anyway. The others will be in there.”

“That’s true,” he admitted. “Fine. You’ve got thirty more minutes. But after that, I’m coming back. Okay?”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice muffled by the blanket.

Kenji leaned down and kissed my forehead before heading for the door. “See you in thirty.”

That was the second time he’d kissed my forehead since we arrived. Was it just a friendly gesture? Or was it something more? Either way, it warmed me, leaving a faint smile on my lips.

Oh, Kenji. What are we going to do? This is neither the time nor the place to catch feelings, no matter how tempting.

When Kenji returned, I was still in bed, my blanket wrapped tightly around me. “It’s time to unravel yourself,” he said, shaking me gently. “I’ve already showered, so it’s your turn.”

I groaned in protest. “It feels like you just left.”

“Are you naked under there?”

“Just about.”

“You have five minutes to get dressed, or I’ll do it for you.”

“Promise?”

The word slipped out before I could stop myself, and my eyes widened. Oh crap. Did I just flirt with him? Maybe he didn’t notice.

Kenji arched an eyebrow. “Someone’s naughty in the mornings. Are you always like this?”

Damn it. He noticed.

“Fine, fine,” I grumbled, rolling out of bed. “I’ll be ready in five.”

True to my word, I was dressed and ready within minutes. Kenji led the way to the bathrooms, doing a quick sweep to ensure the coast was clear before letting me inside.

“Okay,” he said. “The shower’s all yours. I’ll be right outside.”

When we returned to the dormitory, Kanshisha-san was waiting for us. We lined up in a single file and followed him to the training kitchen.

As I followed Kenji, I tapped him on the back. “You think we’ll get breakfast?”

“I hope so. I’m starving.”

“You know,” I said, lowering my voice, “I’ve been thinking I should ask Kanshisha-san to remove the lock on my door.”

Kenji glanced over his shoulder. “Really?”

“Yeah. I know I said I wanted to wait, but I want everything to be equal between me and the other apprentices. That includes not having a lock on my door. Besides, I’ve got your chair trick to keep people out.”

“Plus, it’s a total fire hazard.”

“Exactly,” I said with a nod. “I’ll bring it up when I get a moment alone with him or at least when no one else is around.”

“Good idea,” Kenji said.

And for the first time that morning, I felt a smidgen of hope that maybe, just maybe, I could navigate this program without losing my mind.

As we entered the training kitchen, a smile formed on my face. I could already picture myself at the countertop, perfecting sushi techniques or learning a secret trick only Chef Sakamoto’s apprentices were privy to. After all, that was the reason for the ironclad NDA, right?

I couldn’t wait to start training with Chef Sakamoto. But something gnawed at me. It was strange that he still hadn’t made an appearance. No introductions, no welcome dinner to kick off the program, just rules, chores, and Kanshisha-san barking orders.

Kanshisha-san led us into the tiny dining room. My spirits lifted at the sight of the bento boxes and miso soup neatly arranged on the table. Kenji claimed the same two chairs we’d sat in the night before. I noticed Jiro, unsurprisingly, taking his seat at the

foot of the table again. In fact, everyone seemed to be gravitating toward their spots from the previous meal. No way I could live with this as my permanent seat for six weeks.

“Switch with me,” I whispered to Kenji.

He complied without question, moving to the seat that put me out of Jiro’s direct line of sight. I exhaled, relieved. At least now I wouldn’t feel his eyes burning into me during the meal.

The other apprentices were chatting now, their voices weaving a lively hum around the table. Kenji and I stayed quiet, listening.

“We should introduce ourselves,” Jiro said, his tone carrying that infuriating arrogance I knew all too well. “We all know who Akiko Ono is, but we should learn each other’s names. That way, she doesn’t feel too special.” He smirked as he turned to me. “I’ll go first. I’m Jiro Tachibana. My last name might sound familiar since my father is a prominent politician.”

A murmur rippled through the group. Jiro had set the tone, one of superiority. Of course he had.

“I’m Hideo Nakata,” said the thin man seated to Jiro’s left. He adjusted his thick-framed glasses. “My family owns a chain of well-regarded restaurants. You could say cooking is in my blood.” I watched his unusually large Adam’s apple bob with each word. “It’s expected of me to take the reins once I’m done here.”

Next up was a stocky guy with a cheerful, high-pitched voice. “I’m Kaiyo Uchida. My family doesn’t own restaurants, but I can out-eat and out-cook anyone here. Just wait. You’ll see.”

“Apparently you also outweigh all of us,” one of the others teased.

Kaiyo adjusted his uniform, which was clearly too tight for him.

The next person cleared their throat, waiting until the laughter settled. “My name is Miyo Yokohama,” he said with a self-satisfied grin. “Yes, my family is the Yokohama behind Yokohama Tires. But I suspect I’ll be known for something else after this apprenticeship.”

What was this, a bragging contest? Who cared what their families did? I glanced at Jiro, who was enjoying the spotlight he’d orchestrated. He knew I had nothing to contribute, and he was loving it.

All eyes fell on me. The room quieted, expectant. “You already know my name is Akiko Ono,” I began. “And yes, as Jiro mentioned, I’m here because of Chef Sakamoto. Not out of pity, though. He thinks I’m the best, a certified rising star. Do what you wish with that information.”

The room froze. If there were a sound of jaws collectively hitting the floor, it would’ve echoed off the walls. Everyone except Kenji and Jiro seemed to buy my sarcastic declaration. Kenji gave me a grin of approval, while Jiro’s glare could’ve incinerated me on the spot.

Kenji cleared his voice. “I’m Kenji Sanada. I don’t have a famous family name or a prestigious background, but I love cooking and am grateful to be here.”

I smiled at Kenji’s straightforwardness.

The next person stood out the most in the group, with shoulder-length bleached hair, piercings, and flame tattoos running up his arms, a hint of them peeking from his collar at his neck. “I’m Osamu Ito, and when I’m not drumming with my killer band,

I'm in the kitchen drumming up food." He tapped out a drumroll on the table with his fingers.

Seated next to Mr. Drummer was a man with a fondness for eyeliner who looked like he'd stepped out of a K-pop boy band. He cleared his throat. "My name is Sana Ito. I don't have a famous family name, either, but I highly doubt Chef Sakamoto thinks Akiko is the best," he growled, his voice killing any illusion he could carry a tune.

Can't win them all.

It was clear the next two guys had known each other before entering the program, as they had been inseparable from the start, thick as thieves. They introduced themselves as Taka Yanagi and Dori Misaki and loved high-fiving each other like partners in a buddy cop movie. Plus, they were the only ones with matching facial hair.

"We excel at everything we do," Taka announced, throwing a pointed glance my way. "We don't look for handouts, like some people. Good luck, everyone."

Ah, subtle. Team Tweedledee and Tweedledum had officially declared themselves allies. Did they know something the rest of us didn't?

"What do you think Iron Face will have us do today?" Taka nudged Dori, and the two snickered as they high-fived.

"Iron Face? That's perfect!" Hideo chimed in, adjusting his glasses. "Kanshisha-san totally has an iron face."

The nickname caught on instantly, and everyone at the table had a good laugh at how perfectly it captured Kanshisha-san's constant scowl. Even I couldn't help but chuckle.

Taka stood and hunched over, clasping his hands behind his back to mimic Iron Face. “No one takes a shit unless they have permission from me! Is that clear?” he barked in a poor imitation, prompting laughter from everyone at the table.

Then the door creaked open, and the laughter evaporated. Iron Face stood in the doorway, his expression as stony as ever. Taka slid back into his seat, trying to look invisible.

“I will assign chore duties,” Iron Face began, his voice cutting through the tension like a blade. “After you finish, I will inspect your work. If it’s subpar, you will start over. Is that clear?”

Everyone nodded collectively.

He cleared his throat and began reading from a list. “Taka Yanagi and Dori Misaki, you will wash and hang all the linens from last night’s dinner service. Hideo Nakata, you will sweep, mop, and dust the dormitories. Kaiyo Uchida, from the look of it, you seem to like food. You will devein shrimp.”

The chores didn’t seem so bad at first.

“Kenji Sanada, you will sweep, mop, and remove trash from the restaurant. Akiko Ono, you will scrub the sinks, toilets, and shower area in the bathroom.”

Snickers erupted around the table. Great. Of course I got the grossest, most backbreaking task.

“Jiro Tachibana,” Iron Face continued, “you will assist me with office tasks.”

What? Why does he get a cushy chore?

As Iron Face finished assigning tasks, Miyo tentatively raised his hand. “Uh, when do we start training with Chef Sakamoto?”

Iron Face slowly lowered the paper he read from and turned his attention to Miyo. The look on Miyo’s face told me he wished he could time travel and take back that question.

“You think you’re ready to train with Chef Sakamoto?” Iron Face loomed over him, his voice dripping with disdain. “This program is the most successful in Japan because we do things differently!” His words were punctuated by spit that sprayed across Miyo’s face, but the poor guy didn’t dare wipe it off.

Iron Face turned to address the rest of us. “Right now, your only concern is the challenges. Do not think they will be easy. You will be tested beyond anything you’ve ever experienced. Do your best because Chef Sakamoto doesn’t work with losers. And remember, only one of you will train with him.”

My stomach churned as Iron Face reiterated that only one person here would be an actual apprentice. Six weeks of challenges with no guarantee of learning anything unless I won.

“If you’ve already made friends or alliances,” Iron Face added, his eyes locking on Taka and Dori, “you will find yourselves becoming enemies.”

### CHAPTER TEN

Within a day and a half, I had gone from hopeful sushi apprentice to designated bathroom floor scrubber. There I was, on my hands and knees, inhaling the eye-watering sting of chemical fumes while scrubbing the tiles around the urinals. Each swipe of the brush brought with it gag-inducing thoughts about what, exactly, I was cleaning.

Focus, Akiko. Just focus and get it done.

The showers weren't as revolting as the urinals and toilets but felt endless. The sheer size of the area played tricks on my mind, making the task seem overwhelming. My fingers throbbed with every scrub, and the occasional echo of laughter from the hallway only fueled my frustration. It was clear to everyone, and painfully clear to me, that I was taking the longest to finish my chore.

Stay calm, Akiko. This is just another test. Don't let them break you. Tomorrow, someone else will get stuck scrubbing.

I focused on the task, determined not to give in. But then the bathroom door creaked open, and I froze. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Jiro leaning casually against the entrance to the showers. He had that signature smirk plastered across his face.

Of course. It took every ounce of self-control not to throw the scrub brush at him. He said nothing to me, preferring to watch. Thankfully, he left after a minute or so.

Two hours. That's how long it took me to finally satisfy Iron Face's standards. By the

end, my hands felt raw, my knees ached, and my shoulders screamed. I consoled myself with the thinnest silver linings. If I ever got stuck with bathroom duty again, I'd know exactly what Iron Face was looking for. Pathetic, right?

There was still some time before lunch. I trudged back to my room, thinking a catnap might help my aching body recover. Just as I opened the door, Kenji popped out of his room, his face lighting up the way it always did when he saw me.

“You’re back! That took forever.”

“Tell me about it,” I grumbled.

Kenji followed me into my room, and I promptly face-planted onto my bed. Without a word, he grabbed my legs, lifted them onto the mattress, and scooted underneath them so he could sit at the edge.

“I didn’t pass the first inspection,” I admitted, flopping onto my back. “That’s why it took so long.”

“Seriously?”

“At least now I know what to do if I get that chore again.”

Kenji grinned. “That’s very optimistic of you.”

Before I could respond, he pulled off my shoes and started massaging my feet.

“Oh my God,” I sighed, sinking into the mattress. “That feels incredible. You realize you’ve made yourself my official foot masseuse for life, right?”

He chuckled, his hands working magic on my sore feet. “Well, you did have the

worst chore of the day. You deserve a little R and R.”

I lifted my head to look at him, my lips curling into a lazy smile. “What did I ever do to deserve a friend like you?”

“You lived next door,” he said simply. “That’s what you did.”

Our laughter filled the room, chasing away the gloom of my morning.

“So, should we talk about the elephant in the room?” Kenji asked, raising an eyebrow. “Because this whole situation, it being a competition, is messed up.”

“Totally,” I admitted.

“The only positive I can think of is that the challenges might actually involve training, like those cooking shows where the chef demonstrates a dish and then the students are judged on how well they replicate it.”

“You really think that’s what the challenges will be?” I asked, stretching out my legs.

“What else could they be? How well we mop floors? I mean, I get cleaning the training kitchen after using it, but scrubbing the entire compound? That’s total bullshit. But the real problem is these so-called challenges. We have no idea what’s in store for us. It’s a little infuriating.”

“Kenji, it’s not just the chores or the challenges. It’s the fact that Iron Face has said twice now that only one person here will become Chef Sakamoto’s apprentice. There are ten of us. Nine will go home empty handed.”

Kenji focused his gaze on my feet. “I know.”

“That means you and I...we’re competing against each other.”

“I know,” he said again. He then looked over at me. “But if I had to lose, I’d want to lose to you.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet. Thank you.” I smiled.

“You know you’re supposed to say the same thing back, right?”

I burst out laughing. “I know, I know. I’m just lightening the mood. And I want to lose to you too.”

“Can you imagine if Jiro wins, though?” Kenji muttered, shaking his head.

“Don’t even start.” I groaned.

“I’m serious, Akiko. You need to be careful around him. Now that we know how this program works, he’s got even more reason to mess with your head. If what you told me about your past is true, it’s obvious he’s still harboring some serious resentment.”

“I know,” I said quietly, “but I’m hoping it won’t come to that.”

Kenji leaned closer. “It’s not just him, though. And you know I’ve got your back, but let’s be real—every guy here wants you to fail.”

I considered his words. “Maybe that’s my advantage. No one thinks I’m capable of winning.”

Kenji mulled over my words for a moment. “Interesting strategy. Fly under the radar. Let them underestimate you.”

“Exactly.” I tapped his hand with my foot, prompting him to resume the massage.

He frowned. “Still, enemy number one is Jiro. He’s a charismatic guy, and it already seems like he’s stepping into a leadership role with the others. He could easily turn everyone against you. I mean, more than they already are.”

I sighed. “He’s definitely still bitter about the breakup. But it’s more than that. It’s like he needs to prove something. Losing to me once was bad enough. Losing to me here? That would be unbearable for him.”

We sat in silence for a while, lost in our own thoughts. For me, it felt like life was throwing yet another hurdle my way, as if being chosen for this apprenticeship wasn’t hard enough. It had to be more challenging. Why couldn’t something just be easy for once?

Kenji broke the silence. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“I’m a little worried about my skills in the kitchen,” he admitted.

I blinked. “What? Kenji, you said you spent your teens cooking with your mom.”

“I did. But it was different with her. She was always so encouraging, no matter what I made. Honestly? I was shocked when I got accepted into this program. I never thought I’d actually make it here.”

“Well, you did,” I said firmly. “And you beat out thousands of others to get here. That’s something to be proud of.”

Kenji smiled faintly. “When you put it that way, it does help. What about you? Are

you worried?”

“Not about my ability,” I admitted. “But my gender? That’s another story. Add Jiro to the mix, plus the others who probably wouldn’t think twice about sabotaging me. It’s a lot to deal with.”

“I don’t believe for a second you were chosen out of pity,” Kenji said. “Chef Sakamoto has a reputation to uphold. There’s no way he picked you just because he knew your father. That’s Jiro talking, trying to plant seeds of doubt. He probably knew this was a competition from the start.”

I smiled, grateful for Kenji’s loyal support. “Thanks for being such a great friend.”

Kenji’s eyes lit up. “I have an idea. Since we trust each other, let’s make a pact. We help each other out, no matter what. Let’s make sure that at the end of this, you and I are the two apprentices with the most points. Deal?”

I grinned and shook his hand with my foot. “Deal, partner.”

A wave of gratitude washed over me. Having someone I could trust in a place like this felt like a lifeline. For the first time since arriving, I let myself believe that maybe, just maybe, I could do this.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

On the way to breakfast the following morning, Kenji and I lagged behind the group, our conversation revolving around my locked door. The night before, I'd deliberately left the dead bolt unlocked, with Kenji's help, but when I woke up, it was locked. He had to let me out.

"Do you think Iron Face locked it?" Kenji asked. "Or was it one of the others messing with you?"

"It's hard to say," I said, trying not to show my unease. "But the fact that my door's the only one with a lock is really messed up."

"You need to talk to him about it. There's no reason for the damn thing."

"I know, and I was planning to bring it up yesterday," I said, pulling my uniform straighter as we walked. "But then he talked about how only one of us would be an apprentice, and I didn't think it was the right time. I'll try after breakfast."

"You want me to come with you?"

I shook my head. "I need to handle this myself. If you're there, it might look like I can't deal with a simple locked door on my own."

Kenji shot me a look. "You think he'll judge you on something like that?"

"Why else would my door be the only one with a lock?"

We filed into the dining room. Taka and Dori pounced on their bentos and started shoveling food into their mouths. Iron Face had caught them roaming the compound, and their punishment had been no dinner. Judging by the way they were inhaling their breakfast, I'd say they learned their lesson.

"That'll teach them," Kenji muttered, settling into the seat beside me.

As soon as Iron Face left the room, Miyo couldn't resist stirring the pot. He cleared his throat loudly, drawing everyone's attention. "I heard we're getting our first challenge today," he sang with a smile.

"What makes you so sure of that, Tire Boy?" Sana asked, speaking through a mouthful of rice. His eyeliner looked heavier today. He must have sneaked it in.

"Never mind how I know. Just be grateful I clued you in," Miyo replied. "And I prefer Yokohama Boy. Get it right next time."

"Whatever." Sana waved him off with his chopsticks.

"But we're competitors now," Kaiyo said, adjusting his uniform over his belly. "You had an edge, and now you've lost it by telling us."

Miyo shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't know the challenge, so it's not like I gave much away. Next time, I'll tell everyone but Sana."

Sana sneered, unimpressed by Miyo's threat. "You know we have a challenge but don't know what it is? What good does that do us? Tell us who told you and maybe you'll prove your usefulness here."

"No can do," Miyo replied, lifting his bento box to funnel the last rice into his mouth.

Kenji leaned toward me and whispered, “You believe him?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “He comes off as harmless, but it could be a strategy. It’s a competition.”

Kenji nodded, his eyes scanning the room with quiet calculation.

Taka balled up a napkin and lobbed it at Miyo. “Hey, are you and Iron Face bunk buddies now? Is that how you’re getting your info?”

The jab earned a few laughs, but Miyo didn’t flinch.

Iron Face reentered the room, and the laughter died instantly. “It’s time for chores,” he announced, his voice as sharp as ever. He read from a piece of paper.

He rattled off the assignments, pausing dramatically before my name. “Bathroom—Akiko Ono.” His eyes lingered on me, his expression icy, causing me to question whether I had projected my annoyance onto my face.

Kenji got laundry duty. Jiro, yet again, was given an easy task: something with reservations.

Iron Face folded the paper. “Your first challenge is ready for you,” he said, his tone ominous.

Everyone turned to Miyo, whose smug grin widened. Even Iron Face caught the look, causing Miyo to drop it immediately.

“After I inspect your chores, I’ll explain the challenge. Prepare!”

Prepare? For what? You’ve told us nothing!

As Iron Face turned to leave, Kenji nudged me. “The lock, this is your chance.”

I jumped up, my heart pounding. “Kanshisha-san, may I ask something?”

He stopped outside the room but didn’t turn, clearly annoyed. “What is it, Akiko?”

I swallowed hard. “The lock on my door, it doesn’t make sense. It’s a fire hazard and unnecessary. Could it be removed?”

Iron Face slowly turned to face me, his expression colder than ever. “Your room used to be a storage room. That’s why there’s a lock.”

His curt explanation didn’t make much sense to me, but his tone left no room for argument. Iron Face looked beyond me into the room. “Why is everyone sitting?” he barked. “You have your chore assignments. Get moving!”

And just like that, he was gone.

Kenji came up beside me as I stood there, fuming. “What did he say?”

“That my room used to be a storage room,” I replied in frustration.

“Makes sense.”

“But he answered the wrong question. I don’t care why it’s there. I care about getting it removed.”

“He gave you a nonanswer. What a dick!”

“Totally. Iron Face hates me.”

“He’s testing you to see what you’re made of.”

“Why me and not everyone else?” As soon as I said it, the answer hit me. I wasn’t a man.

Jiro sauntered over, smirking. “Your door has a lock for your own protection, Akiko. It’s so you don’t embarrass yourself in the upcoming challenges.”

The smugness in his tone sent my blood boiling as he and the others walked away, laughter trailing behind them.

Kenji and I were relaxing in my room after chore duty when Iron Face suddenly appeared in the dorms. Without a preamble, he led everyone outside toward a part of the compound I hadn’t seen before.

We walked past a nondescript building between a Zen garden and an open pavilion, passing blossoming cherry trees and small jizos—stone Buddha statues. The serene beauty of the area felt misplaced.

Iron Face stopped in front of a small structure with traditional Japanese architecture. He pulled open the unlocked door and motioned for us to enter. Inside was a library, the air tinged with the faint smell of aged paper and cedar. Floor-to-ceiling shelves groaned under the weight of hundreds of books, with a ladder leaning against one shelf. A communal table with wooden chairs dominated the center of the room.

“You have been granted access to Chef Sakamoto’s private library,” Iron Face announced. “There are hundreds of books from which to glean information. Any question you have, the answer is here. If you can’t find it, you’re not looking hard enough. You are allowed to be here during your free time. The rule about the rest of the compound remains in effect. Those areas are off limits. Any questions?”

We exchanged wary glances, but no one spoke.

“Good. Your first challenge will involve shime saba. You have twenty-four hours to prepare.”

As soon as Iron Face left and the door clicked shut, Hideo adjusted his thick glasses and muttered, “Is he kidding? What’s so special about preparing shime saba?”

“He thinks torching a small piece of fish is a challenge?” Taka scoffed, turning to Dori. “This is supposed to be an elite competition. I wonder if we picked the wrong place to train.”

I glanced around the room, noting the shared expressions of disbelief. Shime saba was one of the most straightforward dishes to prepare. It was cured mackerel sliced into sashimi and charred lightly on the skin with a blowtorch. It didn’t require much technique, just a steady hand and basic knowledge.

“Bullshit,” Osamu declared, drumming his fingers on the table. “That’s what this apprenticeship is turning into.”

“But think about the long line of chefs who’ve come out of this program that now have Michelin-starred restaurants,” Kaiyo countered, tugging at his too-tight uniform. “There’s got to be some reason to assign us this task.”

Jiro plucked a book from the nearest shelf. “The first challenge isn’t much of a challenge,” he mused, flipping through the pages. “They’ll probably ramp up the difficulty over time.” He turned toward me, holding the book out. “Akiko, this book covers grilling techniques. You might want to brush up; scorching fish skin can be tricky.”

“Shut up, Jiro,” Kenji snapped, his voice sharp. “Being a dick isn’t the goal here.”

Feigning hurt, Jiro placed a hand on his chest. “Oh my, I think I’ve angered the boyfriend.”

Laughter rippled through the room, and for the first time, I noticed how closely Kenji and I had been sticking together. It must have looked like we were a couple.

“You think you’re better than Akiko?” Kenji challenged, stepping closer to Jiro. “She earned her place here, just like the rest of us. Maybe you should take that book back to your room and read it yourself.”

Jiro’s smirk faded, his expression hardening as he squared up to Kenji. “You looking for another challenge? I’m right here.”

I grabbed the back of Kenji’s uniform and tugged him away. “We’re here to learn, not fight. This challenge might seem beneath us, but maybe that’s the point. It’s probably some sort of test.”

“What kind of test?” Hideo asked, peering at me through his glasses.

“I’m not sure. But why else would they give us such a basic challenge? There’s got to be more to it.”

Osamu drummed his fingers again before standing. “Still smells like bullshit,” he sang as he walked toward the door. “I’m out of here.”

One by one, the others followed.

Jiro paused near the entrance, his gaze shifting between us. “Better focus on the challenge instead of her, Kenji,” he sneered. “And Akiko, don’t forget who you’re up against. This isn’t a cooking class to impress your friends. See you two lovebirds tomorrow.”

After the door closed behind him, I let out a frustrated sigh. “It’s not about the fish,” I muttered, scanning the shelves. “There’s something else we’re not seeing.”

Kenji nodded, his fingers trailing over the spines of books. “It could be the process, like an ancient technique, or maybe it’s about precision.”

“Presentation might be a factor too,” I added, pulling down a book on plating techniques.

We spent the next hour diving into every possibility, but nothing jumped out. The dish was so simple that anyone with basic skills could prepare it. That simplicity gnawed at me. There had to be something we were missing.

Kenji sighed, closing a book with a soft thud. “I thought coming here would be life changing, like I’d finally be on the path to opening my dream restaurant.”

“What kind of restaurant?” I asked softly.

He smiled, his eyes lighting up. “A place where my friends and family could gather. Where people could taste the love that goes into every dish.”

As he spoke, warmth spread through me. A sense of hope. Kenji’s presence made the hate from Iron Face and the others bearable. Without him, this place might have beaten me down even more.

“What?” I asked, catching him staring at me.

“Nothing,” he said, grinning. “Just thinking about how everyone assumes we’re a couple.”

I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks burned. “Crazy, right?”

He leaned back, balancing his chair on two legs. “I know in real life you have tons of guys chasing after you. You’re just downplaying it.”

“Are you kidding? I’m as single as they come,” I shot back, trying to deflect. “And you act as if you don’t have a roster of women on your phone.”

“Nah,” he said with a shrug. “I’m too much of a nerd.”

For the first time in years, I felt like there was someone besides Miki whom I could let my guard down around. This apprenticeship might have been different from what I had imagined, but having Kenji by my side softened the disappointment.

Later that night, I couldn’t sleep, no matter how hard I tried. I lay in bed wide awake, the soft sound of Kenji’s snoring filtering through the thin walls. I considered waking him but dismissed the idea.

Frustrated, I tested my doorknob and was relieved to find that Iron Face hadn’t returned to lock it. That was enough to spark a plan. I quickly changed into my uniform and did the boldest thing since arriving. I sneaked out of my room.

The compound was eerily quiet as I followed the pebbled pathway to the library. The ishidoros glowed faintly with candlelight, their warm flicker guiding me to the library.

Inside, I switched on a small table lamp and began pulling books off the shelves. I skimmed through them individually, trying to find a clue that might give me an edge in tomorrow’s challenge.

After an hour of reading, I let out a yawn. My legs stretched stiffly under the table, the ache reminding me how long I’d been sitting. None of the books had revealed anything groundbreaking, just basic tips and techniques. Part of me wondered if this

whole thing was as simple as Jiro claimed. Maybe the difficulty would increase with each challenge.

The last book I flipped through was on kitchen burns and first aid, completely unrelated to the task. I shook my head, chuckling to myself. I'd officially fallen down the rabbit hole. Deciding I'd had enough, I stood and returned the books to their places, ready to call it a night.

As I walked back toward the dorm, the cool night air shook off my drowsiness, making me aware of movement in the corner of my vision. My eyes snapped toward the rear of the training kitchen, where a thicket of cherry blossom trees stood. I froze mid-step, my heart racing. Was someone there?

I squinted, peering into the darkness. I saw nothing and heard only the trickling water basin a few steps away. My pulse quickened anyway, and before I realized it, my feet were carrying me forward at a much brisker pace.

I stopped abruptly, turning back toward the trees. This was ridiculous. I wasn't about to let some shadow spook me. If someone was out there, they needed to show themselves. "Come out. I dare you!" I whispered fiercely under my breath.

I stared at the spot, my breath shallow. The candle in an ishidoro crackled softly, easing my nerves. I turned back toward the dorm.

The hairs on my arms stood on end the moment I resumed walking. An inexplicable wave of panic rolled over me. I picked up my pace, practically running when I reached the dorm. I darted into my room, slammed the door shut, and wedged the chair under the doorknob.

I stood there momentarily, catching my breath, and then it came.

The front door opened, followed by hurried footsteps down the hallway. My heart pounded in my chest as the footsteps stopped right outside my door.

I crawled under the covers, forcing myself to stay still and quiet, even as my lungs begged for air after my sprint. Then it happened. The doorknob jiggled.

I froze, gripping the blanket tightly as though it could shield me from whatever was on the other side of that door.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

We had just finished breakfast, and I was expecting to be given my chore duty for the day when Iron Face announced that the first challenge would commence instead. We gathered in the training kitchen, standing side by side in a single line.

The room was immaculate, as always, the stainless steel counters gleaming under the fluorescent lights. In front of us, a long steel table split the space, and resting on it were ten skipjack tuna, each about two feet long. The fish gleamed under the lights, their silver-blue skin a reminder of the task ahead.

“I thought we were torching mackerel,” Kenji said out of the corner of his mouth.

Each fish was paired with a fillet knife and set neatly on a plate. But the more curious items on the table were the ten cylindrical tanks, each attached to a short rubber hose ending in a flared nozzle. They looked like something out of a survivalist’s bunker, part scuba tank, part fire extinguisher.

“What the hell are those things?” Kenji whispered, but I shook my head, not wanting to draw Iron Face’s attention.

The door opened suddenly, and all eyes turned. Chef Sakamoto walked in. He was dressed in a black uniform and red belt similar to ours and exuded an air of authority. This man turned every restaurant he touched into a Michelin-starred success. Seeing him in person was surreal, and pride swelled in my chest for a brief moment.

Trailing behind him was a woman who couldn’t have looked more out of place in a

kitchen if she'd tried. Her cream-colored skirt suit and gold-checkered scarf radiated wealth, as did the diamonds glinting in her ears and the jeweled brooch on her lapel—a chef's knife dripping rubies that looked like blood. Her long black hair was perfectly styled, her makeup precise, not a smudge in sight. She had the kind of beauty that turned heads, with a slim frame and legs that belonged on a runway, not navigating kitchen floors. Her bright smile and kind eyes were a stark contrast to Iron Face's perpetual scowl.

“That's his wife, Reina Sakamoto,” Kenji murmured. “I heard she used to be a top model.”

She nodded at each of us as she passed, her gaze lingering just long enough to feel intentional. There was something magnetic about her, something that made you want to believe she was on your side.

Chef Sakamoto exchanged a few quiet words with Iron Face before stepping aside with Reina. They positioned themselves behind a transparent protective barrier I hadn't noticed before. Then, without a word, they both put on gas masks.

We all glanced around, confused as to why they wore masks. Were they allergic to the smell of grilled fish? And why the barrier? None of it made much sense.

“Your first challenge at Kage Ryu is Yaketsuku Kogeki!” Iron Face announced proudly as he threw his arms up.

Yaketsuku kogeki—scorching attack? What does that have to do with grilling a piece of fish?

“You will each fillet a piece of your tuna, grill it, and plate your dish for Chef Sakamoto. He will decide the winner of this challenge. You have two minutes.”

A digital countdown clock on the wall buzzed to life, its glowing red numbers set at two minutes.

I exchanged a glance with Kenji. Two minutes? That barely gave us time to breathe, let alone fillet, grill, and plate a fish. And what was with the gas masks? The protective barrier? None of it made sense.

Iron Face handed out hachimakis, cloth headbands. On the front was a rising-sun motif and the characters for Kage Ryu . “From here on, you will wear this for every challenge.”

As I tied the strip of cloth around my head, I watched Iron Face turn a knob on one of the tanks. A loud hiss escaped, and the sharp smell of gas filled the air. He moved down the line, repeating the process with each tank. When he finished, he tossed a single lighter onto the table. The metallic clang echoed in the silence.

Iron Face put on a gas mask and stepped behind the barrier with Chef Sakamoto and Reina. With one sharp motion, he raised his hand and then brought it down.

“Begin!”

Iron Face’s hand came down, signaling the challenge had begun. It only took a split second to realize what was happening.

“Gas,” I muttered. “Highly flammable gas.”

Kenji’s eyes widened. “We’ll blow ourselves up if we take too long. Hurry!”

He lunged for his fish, and I followed, grabbing the fillet knife with trembling hands. My blade made swift incisions, head to tail, spine to belly, but my fingers fumbled as the pressure mounted.

Miyo and Sana finished filleting their fish first, sprinting toward the single lighter on the table. Miyo snatched it from Sana's hand with a triumphant laugh and hurried back to his torch. "I'm gonna win!" he shouted, pumping a fist. "You all laughed at me during lunch. Who's laughing now? Watch and learn, amateurs."

The room went still as everyone's attention shifted to Miyo. He stood there, a cocky grin plastered across his face, basking in his moment of victory.

With exaggerated flair, Miyo performed a quick, showy dance, waving the lighter around as if taunting the rest of us. Then, he held the lighter to the hose, and with one confident flick...

A fireball roared to life, swallowing him whole in an instant.

Kenji tackled me to the floor as the explosion rippled through the kitchen, a wall of unbearable heat rolling over us, setting off the other torches. I thought we would be set on fire next as the flames unfolded.

Through the haze, I caught sight of Miyo, his body ablaze, his screams cutting through the panic. My stomach lurched as he stumbled, flailing in desperation. Seconds later, the sprinklers roared to life, dousing the flames, but the damage was done.

Miyo collapsed in a charred heap. My throat tightened as I turned my face into Kenji's chest, trying to block out the horrific sight.

"He's...he's not moving," Kenji whispered, his voice shaky.

Two men in black uniforms and wearing black medical masks appeared, silent as ghosts, carrying a stretcher. They lifted Miyo's limp body onto the stretcher with mechanical efficiency and vanished as quickly as they'd arrived.

The room fell into stunned silence, save for the water dripping from the sprinklers above. Iron Face shut off the gas valves on the cylinders.

Chef Sakamoto and Reina removed their gas masks. From the look on Sakamoto's face, he was disappointed, while Reina portrayed indifference. Neither acknowledged us. They simply turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Iron Face's voice shattered the silence. "You call yourselves apprentices?" His disgust was visible, and each word felt like a slap. "Weakness is not tolerated here, and neither is failure. If this is the best you can do, you don't belong at Kage Ryu."

The metallic tang of burned flesh lingered in the air, making it hard to breathe. One by one, the others hurried out of the kitchen. Kenji grabbed my hand, pulling me along with him.

Outside, the whispers started, low and frantic. Faces were pale, eyes wide with confusion and terror. Miyo had been burned alive, and yet Chef Sakamoto, his wife, and Iron Face hadn't even acknowledged it. Instead, Iron Face had critiqued our performance like it was a classroom exercise.

"This is insane," Kenji said, his breaths fast and shallow. "What the hell just happened in there?"

Jiro stopped beside us. "You saw what happened in there. This program just showed its true colors. Don't expect it to get easier. It won't. Good luck, Akiko. You'll need all you can get."

"I've heard not everyone makes it to the end, but I thought it was just rumors," Sana said.

"Are you saying people are supposed to die here?" Hideo adjusted his glasses, a

slight tremble in his voice.

“It’s what I heard,” Sana replied. “The ones who don’t win, it’s like they just...disappear.”

“That’s because of the NDA,” Hideo reasoned, though his voice wavered. “They can’t talk even if they wanted to.”

Kenji’s grip on my hand tightened. “What if this isn’t just about cooking? What if they’re deliberately trying to weed us out?”

Iron Face’s earlier words echoed in my mind: Everything you need to know is in the library.

“We missed something,” I whispered. “The books in the library are not all about cooking. Some of them were about emergency first aid and trauma injuries. What if the challenges are traps, and the books are the only way to prepare?”

Kenji’s eyes narrowed. “If that’s true, then Jiro’s right, and more people could end up like Miyo. We can’t let that happen to us. Akiko, we need to stick together. If we protect each other and use every advantage, we have a real shot at being the last two standing, or...”

“We’ll end up like Miyo.”

We sealed our partnership with a firm handshake. This wasn’t about cooking anymore. It was about surviving a program designed to destroy us.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Days passed without any word on Miyo's fate, making it hard to deny the obvious—he hadn't survived.

I tried not to dwell on it, but the image of him burning haunted me. The others seemed unfazed, treating it like another fleeting headline in a twenty-four-hour news cycle. Sana even joked that Miyo got what he wanted, saying he was now famous for something besides Yokohama Tires.

The laughter that followed, including Kenji's, caught me off guard. I didn't understand how they could shrug off something so horrific. Was I the only one who saw the gravity of what had happened? The next challenge could easily claim another victim. Didn't they realize that?

On my hands and knees, I scrubbed yet another bathroom tile, my raw fingers aching from the harsh cleaning solutions. Every day, I hoped for a new chore, and every day, Iron Face assigned me the same task.

My apprenticeship dreams of learning knife techniques, precision cooking, and sushi artistry had morphed into a nightmare of forced labor. The thought that I might have made a mistake coming here crept into my mind more often than I cared to admit.

Since the fire in the kitchen, Kenji and I kept our distance from the others, though it was impossible to avoid them during meals. Jiro used those moments to hurl insults at me, always finding a way to undermine me in front of the group. Even Kenji, usually calm and collected, grew tired of his taunts.

It wasn't just Jiro's hostility that cast a dark cloud. The fire had changed everything. The easy camaraderie of the group had shattered. Wary glances replaced banter, and whispered conversations filled the air. It was clear now that our challenges weren't just tests of skill. They were battles for survival.

We all knew there was no way out. The six-week program was a cage, locking us in with no escape. Survival wasn't a choice—it was the only option. Because second place wasn't an honorable mention; it was a trip to the morgue.

“Hey, you almost done?” Kenji's voice pulled me out of my thoughts. He poked his head into the bathroom, his expression softening as he saw me.

“All done.” I stood, stretching out my sore back.

Kenji placed his hands firmly on his waist as he glanced around the gleaming bathroom. “Man, you've got this chore down to a science. It's spotless.”

If that was his attempt to lighten the mood, he failed. “Practice makes perfect,” I said dryly. “Let's head to the library. I want to get some reading in before lunch.”

We had made it a point to spend all our free time in the library. Even if we didn't always find helpful information, it felt productive. The others rarely joined us, which was a relief. Being around them only heightened my anxiety.

Lunch came and went with no word from Iron Face about the next challenge. We were at the two-week mark, and the silence was unnerving. Was there one challenge per week, or did challenges happen whenever Chef Sakamoto felt like it?

As usual, Kenji sat beside me in the library, our arms brushing slightly. I didn't mind. His presence was a comfort and a reminder that I wasn't entirely alone in this madness.

“You know what I’ve been wondering?” I said, flipping through a book on traditional plating techniques. “If Chef Sakamoto chooses one apprentice yearly, where’s the current one? Shouldn’t they be here?”

Kenji frowned. “Good point. They might work in the restaurant.”

“I wonder if Miyo managed to talk to them. Maybe that’s how he knew about the first challenge.”

“Could be. He might have run into them during chore duty or something. Sadly, it didn’t help him.”

I smiled faintly but couldn’t shake the thought that had occurred to me during chore duty. “You know, every night, just on the other side of this wall, people are dining on Chef Sakamoto’s signature dishes, completely unaware of what’s happening here. Can you imagine?”

“We were once just like them, unaware.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder. “Sometimes at night, I lie in bed, knowing the restaurant is packed with guests. But I can’t hear anything. No voices, no laughter, nothing. It’s like we’re completely sealed off from the world.”

“Look, I know it’s hard to forget what happened, but we need to focus on what’s coming and keep our heads in the right space. What happened to Miyo is terrible. But what’s done is done.”

As much as I didn’t want to admit it, Kenji was right. “I just don’t understand why Chef Sakamoto can’t train us all and then pick one person at the end to continue. Why make us go through these challenges? It makes no sense.”

Kenji reached for my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine. “Nothing makes a lot of sense right now. We were warned that Chef Sakamoto does things differently. It’s a test, like you said. Who really wants to be the best?”

“Do you think the restaurant staff knows what’s happening to us?”

Kenji tilted his head, considering. “Hard to say. They probably signed NDAs too. And I bet Chef Sakamoto pays them well to keep quiet.”

“There’s no amount of money that could make me work under these conditions,” I said firmly. “I’m willing to learn from him, but I’d never work for someone like him.”

“Weren’t you singing his praises not too long ago?”

I pulled back and looked up at Kenji to gauge whether he was joking. He wasn’t smiling.

“I watched Miyo get torched alive, and Chef Sakamoto didn’t even flinch. Tell me you’re not still idolizing him.”

Kenji sighed. “I’m not. But I can’t help but think that you have to be different to get to where he is. His methods are unconventional. If the normal way worked, everyone would be at the top.”

Kenji kissed the top of my head before wrapping an arm around me and pulling me close. I wondered if he even realized what he was doing. We’d never talked about us as anything more than friends. Sure, we flirted, and I enjoyed his playful teasing, but this—this kiss—felt different. His lips lingered longer. It also felt like something he’d done a hundred times before. And the strangest part? It felt normal to me.

“Here’s a question for you,” Kenji said, leaning back slightly but keeping his arm loosely around me. “What if Chef Sakamoto offered you the chance to head up his new restaurant? You know, make you the head chef. Would you take it?”

“No,” I said without hesitation. “I want my own restaurant. I’ll settle for nothing less.”

“Not even to train?” he pressed. “You could make mistakes on his dime. Running a restaurant is a lot more than cooking. It’s payroll, inventory, marketing, all the boring stuff no one tells you about until you’re knee deep.”

“Stop,” I groaned, pulling a book off the shelf and plopping it before us. “This program is already an unthinkable hurdle. Thinking about all of that on top of surviving this? You’re killing my vibe, Kenji.”

“Just trying to keep it real,” he said as he flipped open another book. “But speaking of restaurants, have you noticed something weird? Most of the chefs who trained under Sakamoto left Japan to open their own. None stayed here.”

“What’s your point?” I asked, blowing dust off the pages of an older book.

He shrugged. “It seems like a pattern. Maybe they thought the same thing you do—learn from him, then get the hell away. Or,” he added with a dark glint in his eye, “maybe he scares them into leaving. ‘The Restaurant on the Other Side of the Wall’—sounds like a horror movie, doesn’t it?”

He lifted his hands like claws, growling softly for effect. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Stop it! You’re making me imagine some ghost chef lurking in the shadows with a cleaver.”

“That’s the sequel,” he said, deadpan, flipping a page. “I’m telling you, there’s a

story here.”

“Or maybe,” I said, with exaggeration, “a clause in our contract bans us from competing with him in Japan. That’s how he stays number one, by ensuring no one can rise against him.”

Kenji’s expression shifted to thoughtful. “That actually makes sense. That’s probably it.”

I smiled despite myself. In a place that seemed determined to crush us, Kenji made me feel lighter. Despite everything so far, he somehow found a way to look for the silver lining. His humor, his warmth... It had become a lifeline I didn’t know I needed.

But it was more than that. I liked being around him. I liked how his hair sometimes flopped into his eyes and how he’d casually toss it back with a quick flick. More than once, I’d caught myself wanting to brush it back for him, like a doting girlfriend.

And that thought scared me.

We’d been spending all our free time together, and I’d grown comfortable, maybe too comfortable. But then I’d remember why I was here, the promises I’d made to myself, the dream I was chasing. There was no room for distractions, no matter how safe or wanted he made me feel.

Kenji let out a yawn, and for a fleeting moment, I imagined pulling his head into my lap and running my fingers through his hair as he drifted off to sleep.

“Hey,” he said, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Would you mind if we head back to our rooms? I could use a quick power nap before dinner.”

“A quickie before dinner?” I teased, arching an eyebrow. “You naughty boy.”

“Guilty as charged,” he shot back with a grin.

I laughed, shaking my head as I grabbed my books and followed him out of the library. On the walk back to the dorms, I tried to ignore the warmth of his arm brushing against mine, the way my chest warmed every time he smiled.

I couldn't stop replaying that moment in the library when he kissed the top of my head. It felt like a promise. And I wasn't sure I was ready to believe in promises again.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We had left the library holding hands, but I slipped my hand free after a few steps. I didn't want anyone who saw us to think there was something official between us, because there wasn't. At least not yet. We were friends, and that's all anyone needed to know.

"I'll meet you back at the dorms," I told Kenji when we reached the split in the path. "I need to use the bathroom."

He offered to wait, but I waved him off. "I think I can handle a bathroom break alone."

Kenji hesitated before giving me a relenting nod. "All right. Don't take too long."

I stepped inside the bathroom, pausing at the entrance. It was empty. The stalls were unoccupied, and the showers were quiet. Just me. The silence was oddly comforting after the chaos of the past few weeks.

I was halfway through my business when the sharp sound of heels echoed across the tile floor. Heels? My pulse quickened. The clicking grew louder, deliberate, until it stopped just outside my stall. I froze. Every nerve in my body was on high alert. Whoever it was wasn't leaving. I considered staying put, but my legs were already starting to go numb. No choice. I had to face whoever it was.

I flushed the toilet, squared my shoulders, and opened the door.

Standing there was Reina Sakamoto.

“Uh...” My voice caught. Why was Chef Sakamoto’s wife here?

“Hello, Akiko,” she said, her voice warm yet precise, like she’d rehearsed this moment a hundred times.

I walked to the sinks and washed my hand. “What...what are you doing here?” I stammered, trying to process the sight of her in this dingy bathroom. She looked out of place, her flawless designer outfit clashing with the worn tiles and harsh lighting.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she said as if reading my thoughts. “Come with me.”

Instinct took over. I followed as she led me out of the bathroom, past the dormitory, and straight to the sealed steel doors. My breath hitched as the doors opened for us like magic, revealing the world beyond the compound.

The fresh air hit me like a wave. It was crisper, cleaner, sweeter than I remembered. I hadn’t realized how stifling the compound was until now.

Reina led me to a sleek black Mercedes where a driver waited, holding the rear door open. She climbed in first, then turned to me, her smile inviting me inside. I hesitated.

“What’s the matter? Aren’t you hungry?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Excuse me?” I blinked, caught off guard.

“I’m taking you to an early dinner,” she said. “Get in. Quickly.”

I knew getting into the car was breaking the rules, but how could I say no? I climbed

in, and the door closed behind me with a soft thud. The car pulled away from the compound, and I was filled with equal parts dread and curiosity.

Reina broke the silence first. “When we return, you will attend dinner as usual,” she said, her gaze fixed on the passing scenery. “Eat your food, even if you’re not hungry. No one must know you left. You’ll be in trouble if they find out.”

Trouble? But you took me out of the compound!

“I understand,” I said.

“Good.” She finally turned to me, her expression softening. “I won’t be able to protect you if word gets out.”

Tell me I didn’t just kick myself out of the program for a meal.

The car sped through narrow streets, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this was some kind of test or, worse, a setup. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as I stared out the window.

“Don’t worry.” Reina’s voice was calm and even soothing. She placed a hand on my thigh. “My intention isn’t to get you in trouble. But I thought the risk was worth it.”

“Worth it?” I echoed, turning to her. “For what?”

“To get to know you better,” she said simply. “You’re the first woman to ever participate in Kage Ryu. That’s a big accomplishment—unheard of, really. I’m impressed, Akiko. And I’m cheering for you.”

Her words caught me off guard. Of all the people in the program, I never expected Chef Sakamoto’s wife to be in my corner.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Reina had picked out a small, posh restaurant specializing in French fusion food. The menu was unfamiliar to me, and when she offered to order for us both, I quickly agreed.

I couldn't help but appreciate Reina's smile as we ate and talked. It was warm and inviting, yet a sharpness in her eyes kept me slightly on edge. It wasn't threatening, but something about it felt rehearsed, as though this dinner was more than just a friendly outing.

“You've come so far, Akiko,” Reina said as she cut into her lamb gracefully. “Just make sure you don't lose sight of the end. The points don't matter as much as you might think. My husband will choose whoever he feels is most deserving.”

I paused my fork briefly. Her words completely contradicted everything Iron Face had told us. “But...Kanshisha-san said the points determine the winner. That they're everything.”

Reina gave a soft laugh, almost pitying, and sipped her wine. “He says a lot of things. The truth is, my husband is looking for more than just skill. Points are a part of it, but they're not the deciding factor. He's looking for resilience. Adaptability. Someone who can handle anything.”

I didn't know what to say. Her words spun in my head, raising more questions than answers. Were the points a facade, a way to distract us? If they weren't the true measure, then what was?

“Every challenge will seem simple,” Reina continued, her tone dropping to a near whisper. “Mundane, even. Don't be fooled by that. Preparation is key to surviving.”

I flinched at her choice of words. “Surviving?” I asked cautiously. “Don’t you mean winning?”

Reina’s smile didn’t falter, but her eyes sharpened. “Winning, surviving—they’re often the same in Kage Ryu. The challenges are designed to look deceptively easy but are far from it. What happened to that young man during the first challenge was unfortunate.”

I wanted to ask about Miyo and find out more, but I stopped myself. Reina had taken a risk by sharing this information with me. Pushing her too far might undo everything.

“Why are you telling me this?” I finally asked, keeping my voice steady.

“Because I want you to succeed,” she said without hesitation. “You’re the first woman to ever enter this program. That’s monumental, Akiko. You’re breaking barriers just by being here. But this program isn’t kind to anyone, especially someone like you. If I can give you even the smallest advantage, I will. Women need to champion each other, don’t you think?”

I nodded, a swell of pride and gratitude rising in me. Reina wasn’t just offering me advice; she was rooting for me, believing in me like no one else here did.

Her demeanor softened as she reached across the table and placed her hand over mine. “But remember, Akiko, trust is a dangerous thing here. Even the people you think are on your side might not be. Stay focused, and don’t let your guard down.”

Her words were meant to comfort me, but they chilled me instead. Also, why did Reina’s support feel like it came with strings attached? Was she genuinely trying to help me, or was this another test? Or worse, a way to set me up for failure?

As we finished our meal, Reina leaned back with a faint smile. “You have great potential, Akiko. Don’t waste it.”

Reina whisked me back to the compound with seconds to spare. As I climbed out of the vehicle, she offered a parting warning. “The program is designed to break you. If it doesn’t, it means you belong.”

I’d just shut the door to my dorm room when Iron Face showed up to escort us to dinner.

“Where did you go?” Kenji asked as we walked. “You never came back to your room.”

“I’ll tell you later. Too many ears listening right now. Plus, I’m starving.” I rubbed my stomach for added effect, trying to change the conversation.

During dinner, I ate like someone who hadn’t been fed in days, polishing off my bento box faster than anyone else. Kenji kept sneaking glances at me, but I ignored him, focusing on the meal as if it were a performance I needed to nail.

Once we were back at the dorms, Kenji and I settled into my room. It was the farthest from the others, giving us a semblance of privacy. Kenji always stood by the door for a minute or two, listening to make sure no one was lurking in the hallway. He would join me on the bed only when satisfied, where we always sat side by side with our backs against the wall. His long legs dangled off the edge, brushing against the floor.

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze. “Are you okay? You seem off.”

“I’m fine,” I said, though my voice betrayed my uncertainty. But I knew what Kenji was waiting for. An explanation. “I’m just not sure where to start. The whole thing feels surreal.”

“Start at the part where you said you’d meet me back at the dorms,” he prompted.

I did, recounting every detail of my unexpected encounter with Reina. His expression shifted from curiosity to disbelief, then to worry as I described the events of the evening. When I finally finished, he stared at me silently as if trying to process everything.

“She singled you out just because you’re a girl?” he finally asked, his brows knitting together.

“Kenji, you say that like it’s a trivial thing,” I said, pulling my hand back. “I’m the first woman ever admitted to this apprenticeship program. Isn’t that reason enough for Reina to want to meet me and offer her support?”

“But that’s not all she did. She gave you valuable information,” he countered, his voice tinged with irritation.

“I know,” I said, exhaling sharply. “And now you know.”

Kenji’s expression darkened. “She’s trying to help you, Akiko. Not me.”

“Hey.” I grabbed his face with both hands, forcing him to look at me. “Why are you acting like this? This is a good thing. She’s trying to help us.”

“No, she’s trying to help you ,” he spat.

“She never told me to keep it a secret.” That was a lie, of course. Reina had explicitly told me to keep our meeting and conversation between us. But Kenji didn’t need to know that.

Kenji sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sure she just assumed you

would.”

I leaned closer, locking eyes with him. “Look, Kenji, we’re getting off track here. The important thing is we”—I pointed to him, then myself—“now know the points aren’t everything. It’s getting to the end that matters. And the challenges? They’re like Trojan horses. They’ll look easy and harmless, but they’re far more dangerous and harder. That’s the key takeaway. We have an edge now. You and me.”

His cheeks flushed, embarrassed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just...I was worried. You disappeared without a word. For almost two hours, I had no idea where you were or if you were okay. I thought maybe something happened to you.”

I backed down and hugged his arm, resting my head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Kenji. I didn’t think about how it would look from your perspective.”

He nodded but remained tense. “It’s not like you could’ve texted me, but man...I was really worried.”

“So, you’re saying you missed me?” I teased, flashing him a playful grin.

“More than missed you.”

Hearing the sincerity in his voice made my heart ache in the best way. His concern wasn’t just friendship; it was something more profound, and it felt good to be cared for like that. Still, I wasn’t sure how to respond without opening a door I wasn’t ready to walk through.

“She’s not what I expected,” I said, shifting the focus to Reina. “I thought I was in trouble, but she quickly eased my fears. I get the feeling she disagrees with her husband’s methods and feels conflicted.”

“It could be.” Kenji rested a hand gently on my thigh. “Promise me something.”

“Sure, anything.”

“If Reina contacts you again, you’ll tell me. No secrets, Akiko.”

“I promise.” Another lie. How many promises would I break before this was all over?

“I just...” He hesitated, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I can’t stand the thought of anything bad happening to you. I lost you once before. I?”

I pressed a finger to his lips, silencing him. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m right here.”

As I looked into his eyes, my thoughts drifted to Reina’s parting words. The information she’d shouted out through the car window, the one thing I hadn’t shared with Kenji, hung heavy in my mind. I hoped keeping that secret wouldn’t come back to haunt me.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Two days had passed since my secret dinner with Reina, and I was still wrestling with Kenji's claim that there was a hidden agenda behind Reina's reaching out. Was it truly about women cheering on other women, or was there something more?

Reina had warned me that the challenges were designed to be deceptive. We were supposed to be fooled. That was the test. But did that thinking extend to every encounter we had in the program? Was my meeting with Reina part of the same manipulation? If so, I couldn't trust what she said or believe she had my best interests at heart.

Still, she'd seemed so genuine during our meeting. I never would have questioned her motives if Kenji hadn't planted that seed in my head. Now I was twisted, second-guessing myself, overthinking every word, every smile, every gesture.

Akiko, you still have nearly four more weeks to go and five more challenges to survive. It's too early to break down. Stay strong.

During breakfast, I was quieter than usual. Kenji picked up on it, of course, and kept asking if I was okay. I brushed him off with a smile and a quick excuse about being tired. I didn't want to get into my sleepless nights, the constant doorknob jiggling, or the doubts swirling in my head.

For the first time, I looked forward to chores. Bathroom duty again. Perfect. A chance to be alone and away from everyone. I scrubbed the tiles harder than necessary, trying to shake the funk out of my head.

After lunch, Iron Face surprised us by allowing us to explore the compound. The Sakamoto residence was still off limits, but everything else was fair game. I couldn't help but wonder if this was Reina's doing. From the way Iron Face sneered at us, it certainly wasn't his idea.

Like kids on the first day of summer break, Kenji and I took off immediately. We wandered along the moat, marveling at the wildflowers and the darting fish. Everything was immaculate, yet I'd never seen a landscaping crew. Maybe they came at night.

We avoided the others hanging out in the open pavilion and followed the pebbled path leading to the library.

"You want to research?" Kenji asked.

"No, let's stick with the path and see where it takes us."

"The Sakamoto residence is beyond. Iron Face said it's off limits."

"Oh, Kenji, stop being such a worrywart. We're just skirting past it, that's all."

A narrow pathway led between tall hedges. We realized it was the start of a maze when we stepped inside.

"This is so cool. An actual maze!" I grabbed Kenji's arm with excitement.

"I know. That means this place is bigger than we thought."

We reached a T intersection.

"Your choice," Kenji said.

I grabbed his hand and led him right. Left. Left again. Dead end.

“You think there’s an exit?” Kenji asked, looking around.

“There has to be. What’s the point of a maze without an exit?” As soon as I said it, I realized a maze without an exit wouldn’t be out of the question. Nothing here was what it seemed.

We backtracked to a small stone fountain at the center of a four-way intersection.

“It doesn’t even feel like the maze should be this big,” Kenji said. “We should’ve left some sort of marker on a hedge or something.”

“I can’t decide if getting lost here is dangerous or just embarrassing.”

“I vote embarrassing. I can deal with that.”

Eventually, we emerged on the other side. My breath caught as a large Japanese garden spread out before us. Cherry blossoms and maple trees dotted the area. Azaleas, irises, and peonies added vibrant splashes of color.

We followed a path of stepping stones bordered by stone lanterns and water basins until we reached a pond filled with koi fish. We sat on a bench under a cherry blossom tree, its branches forming a pink canopy overhead. The water reflected the blossoms, making it feel like we were in a bubble of pink light. Birds sang, and squirrels scurried across the grass, giving me a fleeting sense of peace.

Kenji rested his arm around my shoulder, his warmth drawing me closer. “Do you think this is the Sakamotos’ private area? It’s a lot nicer than the other parts of the compound.”

“Iron Face never mentioned a garden,” I replied, brushing a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “I say we feign ignorance if we get in trouble.”

We sat in the sanctuary of the garden, an untouched haven amid the chaos of the program. It was serene and surprisingly romantic. For a moment, the stress of the competition and the haunting memory of Miyo’s screams melted away. The gentle rustling of sakura petals in the breeze soothed me as I leaned into Kenji’s chest.

Our conversation flowed naturally, peppered with playful teasing and lingering touches. It felt different, though—more intimate. Kenji wasn’t just the boy from my childhood anymore. He had grown into a confident man, his features sharpened with maturity. His steady presence was comforting to my nerves.

With my head against his chest, I listened to the timbre of his voice as he spoke further about his dream restaurant. His vision was so clear and purposeful that it made me forget, for a moment, where we were.

But guilt crept back in, uninvited and sharp. Reina’s warning, her cryptic words, replayed in my mind. She had painted a picture of survival, and it gnawed at me. What if Kenji and I were destined to turn on each other?

Kenji must have sensed my shift. “What’s wrong?” he asked softly, glancing down at our entwined hands. His brows furrowed as though he was searching for the cause of my unease.

I mustered a smile and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “Nothing,” I lied. “What happened since our arrival here... It’s a lot to process.”

Kenji tilted my chin up with gentle fingers, searching my eyes. His gaze lingered, and the world around us faded for a moment. His lips descended on mine, tentative at first but quickly deepening into something more. His hand slid into my hair, anchoring me

as his kiss stole my breath.

Butterflies danced in my stomach. His kiss was an escape, a promise, and a challenge all at once. My hands gripped his shirt, holding on as though letting go would mean thrusting myself back into the darkness of this place.

When he finally pulled away, his lips curved into a sheepish grin. “Was that okay?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “I didn’t mean to...”

“It was more than okay,” I said. “It was perfect.”

His shoulders relaxed, and he chuckled, running a hand through his messy hair. “Good. For a second, I thought I had overstepped.”

“Not at all,” I said as I traced patterns on the back of his hand. “There’s just so much happening here. My mind keeps snapping me back to reality and how everything feels like a trap and trust is an issue.”

“You can trust me,” Kenji said, his voice firm and unwavering. “Not even an army of undead samurais could stand between us.”

I giggled despite myself. “That’s oddly specific.”

“I’d fight them all,” he said, his smile softening. “You have no idea how far I’d go to protect you.”

His words sent a warmth spreading through me. I wanted to believe him, to trust in his loyalty. Yet Reina’s parting words echoed in my mind, a warning I couldn’t ignore. “Your biggest threat here isn’t the challenges. It’s your friend, Kenji.”

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Another day of bathroom duty wrapped up. I stood, brushing off my knees, before giving the showers one last look to ensure I hadn't missed anything. Iron Face had scrutinized every little detail lately, his glare sharper than the fillet knives we weren't allowed to touch yet. Maybe he was pissed I wasn't breaking under the monotony of this chore.

Just then, footsteps echoed through the bathroom. My hand froze mid-reach for the mop bucket. I hadn't heard the door open. Rarely did anyone come into the bathrooms while I was cleaning; everyone was usually preoccupied with their chores.

I strained my ears. The sound came again, faint and deliberate, out of sync with my movements. A cold shiver ran up my spine. I peeked around the shower entrance.

No one.

The sinks were empty. I crouched low, scanning under the stall doors for feet. Nothing.

It had to be my imagination. Or maybe the acoustics of this place were playing tricks on me.

Get it together, Akiko.

I shoved the cleaning supplies into the storage closet and washed my hands quickly. As I reached for the bathroom door, I pushed and slammed right into it.

It didn't budge.

My pulse quickened as I threw my weight against the door. Nothing. There was no lock on it, yet it wouldn't move. Panic bubbled in my chest.

"Hey!" I shouted, pounding on the door with both fists. "Hey! Is anyone there?"

I rammed my shoulder into it, then winced at the dull ache that spread down my arm. I ignored it and attacked the door once again. Suddenly, it flew open, and I crashed right into Iron Face.

I bounced off him like he was made of concrete and landed on my backside. His unyielding frame didn't so much as sway, and his scowl would have curdled milk into cottage cheese.

"Sorry," I stammered, scrambling to my feet. His eyes bore into me like a stabbing finger. "The door, it was stuck. I couldn't get out."

He said nothing, his expression unreadable as always. Emboldened by the moment alone with him, I ventured, "Speaking of stuck doors, I was wondering?"

Iron Face brushed past me like I wasn't there, his focus already on inspecting the bathroom. I stood awkwardly, waiting for some sign that I'd passed his inspection. Finally, he gave a curt nod, and I took that as my cue to leave.

Back in my room, I noticed the dead bolt was gone. Relief washed over me. Iron Face had listened. It wasn't a perfect solution. My room could still be walked in on while I wasn't there, but at least I couldn't be locked in anymore. That small concession felt like a win in this place.

Kenji wasn't in his room. I figured he was either finishing up his chores or at the

library. I made a beeline there, excited to tell him about my breakthrough with Iron Face. But when I pushed open the door, I found Jiro instead.

“Sorry,” I blurted, instinctively apologizing. “I didn’t think anyone would be in here.”

Wait, why am I apologizing?

Jiro glanced up, his head tilted slightly to the side. His layered black hair fell over one eye until he flicked it back with a practiced motion. A slow, deliberate smile spread across his face.

Why is he smiling at me? I’m not smiling back.

I turned to leave but stopped myself.

Why should I leave? I have every right to be here.

I squared my shoulders, leveled my chin, and spun back around. “I changed my mind. I think I will stay.”

“You can stay,” he said casually.

Uh, I know. I wasn’t asking for your permission.

I sat opposite him and grabbed the nearest book, pretending to immerse myself. Only a foot or two separated us. I could hear his soft, measured breathing, a sound that used to soothe me. Now, it grated on my nerves.

We sat in tense silence, flipping pages like strangers in a doctor’s waiting room. Of course, I couldn’t resist sneaking peeks over the top of my book. His hair was longer now, constantly falling into his eyes. He raked his fingers through it in that same

maddeningly attractive way he used to. His uniform stretched across his chest and shoulders, his biceps still as solid as I remembered. Suddenly the memory of those arms wrapped around me, holding me close, began to smother any ill will I held toward him.

Snap out of it, Akiko.

I caught a faint whiff of cologne. We weren't allowed personal effects. Figured he'd find a way to break the rules.

As I peeked again, I realized he was staring at me. Those almond-shaped hazel eyes, so rare, so captivating, locked onto mine. He smiled, his dimples deepening. I jerked my gaze back to my book, heat creeping up my neck.

"Why are you looking at me?" he asked, his voice teasing.

"I'm not looking at you," I shot back. "Get over yourself."

"Maybe you're the one who still needs to get over me."

I slammed my book shut. "May I remind you that I broke up with you?"

Jiro leaned forward, resting his arm on the table. The sleeve of his uniform tightened around his bicep as he scratched his chin, a move so calculated I almost laughed at the absurdity.

I looked away, sneering loudly. Focus, Akiko. The prize, not the past. Jiro might be handsome, but that wasn't going to last. Winning this apprenticeship would define my future. What did he have? Great hair and a gym membership?

Still, my mind betrayed me, conjuring memories of his arm around my waist and his

lips brushing my cheek. I clenched my fist under the table, forcing myself to shove those thoughts aside.

“Can you stop breathing?” I snapped, unable to take the sound any longer.

“You want me to stop breathing?” he asked, amused.

“Yes. I mean, stop breathing so loud.”

Jiro chuckled, low and deep. “Don’t worry. I’ll leave you to your studies.”

He closed his book and slid it across the table toward me. “Try this one. You might find it enlightening.”

His fingers brushed mine as he passed it over. The contact sent a tingle up my arm. His smile held just enough mystery to leave me guessing.

“You’ll need it,” he added softly.

I watched, frozen, as he stood. His V-shaped torso and confident stride were annoyingly distracting. As he passed behind me, his hand rested on my shoulder for a moment. A lingering, deliberate touch made me shiver. He leaned in.

“Good luck, Akiko.” His breath tickled my ear.

I didn’t turn around as he left, the door softly closing behind him. My fingers instinctively traced the spot where his hand had been on my shoulder. The warmth faded quickly, replaced by an unsettling chill.

“Good luck.” What did he mean by that?

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I sat alone in the library, staring at a book on mukimono—the Japanese art of carving fruits and vegetables into intricate designs. It wasn't unique to sushi chefs but was often used to elevate plating. I had a basic understanding of it: petaled flowers from carrots, roses from tomatoes, tall grass from cucumbers. Once, I'd even created a floral design in the cross section of a sushi roll. Nothing fancy.

As I flipped through the pages, I couldn't shake the thought: Did Jiro have inside information about the next challenge? And if he did, why share it with me? He was my rival.

Reina's words echoed in my mind. "The challenges are designed to be deceptively easy."

I traced the edge of the page with my finger, my thoughts spiraling. If mukimono was part of the next challenge, it wouldn't be as simple as carving pretty designs. There had to be more to it. But what did Jiro gain by pointing me to this? Did he genuinely not want to see me hurt, or was this another layer of the competition, a trap meant to trip me up?

The door to the library swung open, and Kenji burst in, startling me out of my thoughts. I nearly jumped out of my seat.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." He placed two bento boxes on the table and sat down beside me. "Lunch in the dining room was canceled. These were left outside everyone's rooms."

“Wow, time flew by.” I glanced at my watch. “Thanks for bringing mine. I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

“No worries.” He popped the lid off his box and stuffed a piece of fish into his mouth. “Find anything useful?”

I slid the book across the table. “Mukimono. I think the next challenge involves this.”

Kenji raised an eyebrow, chewing thoughtfully. “So, whoever makes the fanciest flower wins?”

“Remember, the challenges aren’t what they seem. It probably involves carving something, but there’s more to it.”

“How do you know this is the next challenge? Did Reina talk to you again?” His tone sharpened. “If she did, I’m worried she might be setting you up.”

“It wasn’t Reina,” I said quickly.

“Then who? Wait...” He frowned, and his chopsticks fell out of his hand. “Jiro? You’re kidding me. That guy wants to watch you fail.”

“I thought so, too, but now I’m not so sure.”

Kenji shook his head as he resumed eating. “Don’t tell me you still have feelings for this guy.”

“Kenji,” I sighed, “this isn’t about feelings. We now know how dangerous the challenges are. Maybe he just doesn’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“And you believe that? Akiko, people will do anything to win this apprenticeship.

You can't trust him."

"Maybe. But I wouldn't want someone else to get injured just so I could win."

"That's the difference between you and them," he said. "You're being naive if you think everyone feels the same way. Jiro's playing you, Akiko. Be smarter."

"Smarter? Did you just call me stupid?" The words stung more than I expected.

Kenji's eyes widened. "That's not what I meant. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"You better not have," I said sharply. "It was a cruel thing to say."

"I know." His voice softened. "It won't happen again. I promise."

I sighed, letting the tension ease. "Look, this isn't about everyone conspiring against us. Miyo knew when the first challenge was happening. It's not a stretch to think Jiro came across some information too."

Kenji leaned back, his brow still furrowed. "You think Reina's feeding everyone information?"

"Maybe. Or maybe Jiro just got lucky. Either way, this is the best lead we've got."

He exhaled, his shoulders relaxing. "You're right. I'm sorry I blew up. I just...I don't want you to get hurt."

His hand brushed mine, his touch lingering. "Akiko, I like you, not just as a friend. I mean, I really like you. You don't need to respond or anything, but I thought you should know."

Kenji's vulnerability softened my frustration. "One day at a time," I said, leaning into his embrace.

Kenji kissed my forehead, his arms tightening around me. His warmth was comforting, but as he held me, memories of Jiro's laugh, his teasing words, his touch, resurfaced. I pushed them down, forcing myself to focus on Kenji.

I stared at the book between us as his words lingered. My goals were clear in my mind. Winning this apprenticeship was everything. Relationships, whatever they might become, would have to wait.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After breakfast, Iron Face announced the second challenge would commence immediately. As we filed into the training kitchen, the unease among the apprentices was apparent. The rustle of uniforms betrayed everyone's nerves.

At the center of the long stainless steel table sat a massive cornucopia made of rattan, its narrow tip pointing skyward while the wide, flared end spilled over with fruits and vegetables. Berries, pineapples, carrots, and turnips. It was a vibrant mess of color. Four knives were spaced evenly in front of the basket. But not just any type of knife. If I wasn't mistaken, those were yanagiba, long blades used by sushi chefs.

"They expect us to use those knives," I told Kenji. "They're extremely sharp and dangerous."

"No cut-resistant gloves on the table," he said. "And there are only four knives but nine of us. What's up with that?"

The fluorescent lights flickered briefly, casting a sickly green hue on the room, making everyone look ill. The strong smell of bleach stung my nostrils. It was always present in the kitchen, but that day it seemed overpowering, as if Iron Face had given the space an extra scrub in anticipation.

My thoughts drifted to Miyo. His accident haunted me more than I cared to admit. Since that awful day, no one had spoken of him. It was easier, I suppose, to pretend he'd never been here than to confront the grim reality that the same fate could await any of us. Would I be just as easily forgotten?

The kitchen door creaked open, and everyone straightened instinctively as Chef Sakamoto entered. His black uniform was immaculate, his expression cold. Had he already decided that we'd failed?

Reina followed a step behind, her elegance and grace in stark contrast to her husband. She always dressed as if she were attending a high-end fashion show rather than watching a challenge. Her perfect makeup and polished demeanor seemed so out of place in this sterile kitchen. Why even bother attending the challenges?

As she took her place beside him, she looked directly at me, her gaze lingering longer than necessary.

"Teacher's pet," Kenji said playfully under his breath, earning him a sharp elbow to his ribs.

Iron Face's gaze swept across us. And then with dramatic flair he raised a clenched fist and delivered a triumphant pump as he announced the challenge. "Your second challenge at Kage Ryu is Ayatsuri no Odori!"

Dance of the puppets? What a strange name for a challenge that involves cutting fruit.

"If it isn't clear," Iron Face continued, pulling out three glossy photos, "today's challenge involves mukimono." He held the pictures up; they depicted various flower designs. The designs were simple, nothing with too much detail.

Reina's words rang in my ears: The challenges are designed to be deceptively easy.

"You will be working in pairs." Iron Face scanned the room. "One team will have three. Make it work."

Kenji shot me a grin. We didn't need to say it. We both assumed we'd pair up.

“But don’t get any ideas,” Iron Face added, his tone ice cold. “I’ll be assigning the teams.”

Just like that, a storm cloud formed over me, and the downpour began.

“When your name is called, join your team and stand to the side,” Iron Face commanded. “Team One: Sana and Osamu.” The two stepped aside without a word. “Team Two: Kaiyo and Kenji.”

My stomach dropped as Kenji gave me an apologetic look and joined Kaiyo.

“Team Three: Taka, Dori, and Hideo.” The trio exchanged quick glances before moving to the side. Taka and Dori had been inseparable since the program began. It made sense they’d be grouped together.

That left Jiro and me. The moment I realized Kenji and I weren’t paired, I knew I’d be stuck with Jiro.

“And Team Four: Jiro and Akiko.”

Jiro flashed me a cheeky smile as he made his way over. I couldn’t decide who was enjoying this more—Jiro or Iron Face.

“One of you will cut, the other will direct. A puppeteer and a puppet.”

Iron Face moved down the line, pointing to each group and assigning roles. In the trio, Hideo was designated the cutter, with Taka and Dori as the puppeteers controlling one hand each.

I was the puppet for my team, which meant Jiro would be guiding my hands and the razor-sharp knife they held. If he wanted, this was a chance to slice a finger and ruin

my chances in future challenges. I had to stay sharp and control his hands as much as possible to avoid any so-called accidental slips.

Iron Face ordered Jiro to stand behind me, then tore into a roll of duct tape with a sharp rip that echoed through the room. He bound Jiro's wrists to mine tightly, before wrapping the tape around our torsos, forcing Jiro's entire body against mine. I felt the solid weight of him at my back, the closeness unbearable. Awkward didn't even begin to describe it, and I sure as hell wasn't ready for it.

Iron Face moved from team to team, binding them the same way.

"Well, isn't this cozy. You the little spoon, I the fork you could never resist," Jiro whispered, his mouth just a hair's breadth from my ear.

I delivered a sharp elbow into his rib cage. "Don't confuse cozy with consent."

"Akiko, you never could resist a good fight. It always led to your surrender in the bedroom."

I gritted my teeth, determined not to let his words get to me.

He leaned in farther, the warmth of his solid chest intensifying. The tip of his nose brushed against my hair. "You're not using that shampoo I always liked," he murmured, inhaling softly as if savoring the scent.

"Of course not, you idiot. We're not allowed personal belongings." I twisted my shoulder back sharply, catching his chin in the process. "And stop smelling me."

"Feisty." He chuckled, unfazed. "I've always liked that about you."

"And don't even think about trying to cut me with the knife," I said firmly.

“Remember, I can cut you back just as easily.”

“The thought never crossed my mind,” he said, his voice laced with amusement. “But now that you mention it...”

Iron Face returned to our team, a black strip of cloth in hand. “The puppet in each team will be blindfolded.”

Wait, what? That’ll leave me totally dependent on Jiro!

Just before Iron Face covered my eyes, I stole one last glance at Reina. She seemed lost in thought, her gaze drifting beyond the line of competitors in front of her. Did she even want to be here? The thought disappeared as Iron Face secured the cloth tightly around my head, plunging me into total darkness.

“Trust,” Jiro whispered after Iron Face left us. “It’s the foundation of any successful relationship.”

“Partnership,” I corrected quickly, keeping my voice firm.

“Relationship, partnership,” he said with a light chuckle. “Semantics, really. Speaking of relationships, though...” His tone dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Do I detect a little lovey-dovey action between you and Kenji? If only you could see the daggers he’s throwing my way. He must be broiling right now, knowing I’m pressed up against you like this, my hips at just the right... Well, I’m sure he gets it. Has he gotten this close yet?”

I refused to dignify his comment with an answer, clenching my jaw to keep from reacting.

“Wait, I bet he hasn’t. Poor guy.” Jiro’s voice dripped with exaggerated pity. “He’s

followed you around like a lost puppy, and now the pack's alpha has taken what he wants. Perception is reality, Akiko. And right now? We look like the perfect couple."

"You didn't take anything," I shot back, my tone sharp. "I'm being forced."

"You are," he said, his smirk practically audible. "But does anyone else see it that way?"

"You haven't changed one bit," I grumbled. "You're still the asshole I dumped."

"We all make mistakes," he said lightly.

Before I could fire back, Iron Face cleared his throat. "Think hard about how you move forward. Slow. Fast. What will it take to win?"

"I think slow and steady is the right strategy," Jiro said, suddenly serious.

"From what I remember, your style was more like a rabbit, fast and furious," I replied, unable to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

He ignored my jab. "There's something we're missing here. It can't just be about speed."

"Then what?"

"I'm not sure yet," he admitted. "But the setup, our hands bound, you blindfolded... Moving slowly and cautiously eliminates the danger that the blindfold intended."

"So, you think there's something else that hasn't been revealed yet?"

"I do. For now, we take it slowly. Agree?"

I nodded.

“You will have five minutes,” Iron Face shouted. The countdown clock reset, its mechanical beep echoing through the room.

“So much for moving slowly,” I said.

“I expected the time limit,” he said. “But I don’t think that’s the big twist.”

The buzzer rang out, and Iron Face shouted, “Begin!”

“Trust me, Akiko,” Jiro whispered, his lips brushing against my earlobe. A jerk, and we were moving, our bound arms working in unison. Blindfolded, I had no choice but to let Jiro lead.

“We need fruits, vegetables, and a paring knife,” he said, calm and steady despite the chaos erupting around us. I felt our hands move forward, his grip on my hands firm and deliberate.

“Let me grab the items.” He let go of my hands and continued. His movements were quick and precise. A second later, I felt something cool and firm shoved into my uniform through the opening near my neck.

“What are you doing?” I said, shifting uneasily as he continued stuffing items inside my uniform.

“Everyone’s doing it,” he replied, unfazed. “It’s the best way to carry our fruits and vegetables.”

He tucked the items into my uniform one by one before placing my left hand on a pineapple. “Grab. I’ll take the knife with my other hand.”

Just then, someone barreled into us hard. The clink of metal hitting the floor echoed loudly.

“Watch it, assholes!” Jiro barked, frustration creeping into his voice. “We need to get down. Our knife fell under the table.”

Awkwardly, we bent down together and scrambled to recover the knife, the produce in my uniform moving further down around my belly and the sides of my waist. When we stood and returned to the table, I was sure we were the last to start.

“Talk to me, Jiro,” I said, trembling. “What’s everyone else doing?”

“They’re moving slow and being overly cautious,” he said.

Suddenly, a sharp tug at my uniform caught me off guard. My lapels were yanked open, and the contents spilled onto the table with a dull thud. Heat rushed to my face as I realized my chest was exposed to anyone not blindfolded. Jiro reached inside, his hands fumbling near my hips. Before I could fully process the moment, he was done, and my uniform was closed again.

“Grab,” he commanded, guiding my right hand toward something cool and rough. I closed my fingers around it—dragon fruit. He moved my hand over to the handle of the knife, and I picked it up.

“Remember, let me guide. Don’t try to fight my movements, okay?”

Jiro started slow and precise, the sound of slicing filling the air.

Then a sharp cracking noise rang out, followed by a blood-curdling scream, shattering my focus. “What’s happening?” I whispered.

“It’s Iron Face,” Jiro said. “He’s using a whip on anyone moving too slow.”

The crack exploded again, closer this time, followed by a gut-wrenching cry. My grip tightened instinctively. “Shit,” Jiro muttered under his breath. “There’s blood. The whip...”

“Hurry!” Iron Face’s voice boomed over the chaos. “Time is running out!”

My arms stiffened, my hands tense as I fought against Jiro’s movements.

“I need you to relax, Akiko,” Jiro said, his voice calm and steady. “Don’t fight me.”

“But the whip...”

“Let me worry about that. You just focus on being the best puppet possible.”

I swallowed hard and forced myself to comply, relaxing my shoulders and letting him guide my right hand. His precision felt sharp, deliberate, though I couldn’t see it. All I could do was trust him and pray he didn’t make a mistake.

Another crack, another scream. My pulse pounded in my ears. “That’s one design done,” Jiro said.

“How does it look?” I asked.

“Good enough,” he replied.

Before I could respond, the whip cracked again, this time so close it sent a sharp, stinging pain shooting through my ear. Jiro let out a guttural yell, his body jerking against mine.

“Jiro! Are you okay? Can you keep going?” Panic laced my voice. The thought of him incapacitated sent a fresh wave of fear through me.

“I’m fine,” he said, his voice strained. “Grab.”

I obeyed, reaching out blindly just as a sound—an inhuman cry—froze me in place. It was followed by “My hand! My hand!”

“What’s happening?” I asked, unable to control the fear in my voice.

“Someone’s hurt,” Jiro said in a lowered voice. “Badly.”

The chaos around me grew louder. Screams. Shouts. The clatter of something falling. “You did it on purpose!” someone yelled, followed by a panicked cry: “Oh my God! His neck! His neck!”

I squeezed my eyes shut beneath the blindfold, my body trembling. I couldn’t see what was happening, but the sounds painted a horrible picture. My knees buckled, but Jiro caught me and held me upright.

Iron Face shouted. He was near us. “Only the strong endure! Finish your task!”

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

“Thirty seconds left!”

Jiro’s grip tightened around me, and then, to my shock, he stopped moving entirely.

“Wait, why are we stopping? We won’t finish if we stop,” I said with panic.

“That’s the plan,” Jiro murmured, leaning in close. His body pressed firmly against mine, his breath warm against my ear. He spun me around with startling force before I could ask what he meant.

The sharp crack of the whip cut through the air, followed by Jiro’s cry of pain.

My body stiffened. He had shielded me.

With the final seconds ticking away, his arms remained wrapped around me like a protective cocoon. “Trust me, there’s no need to finish,” he whispered, his tone unsettlingly calm, as though he knew something I didn’t.

I felt his breath against my neck, steadying me one last time as the timer buzzed. And then, a fleeting sensation. So quick I almost doubted it. His lips grazed my neck.

My pulse raced. Did he just...kiss me?

I stood frozen as the blindfold was yanked off my head. The room spun into focus, blurred and disorienting. In front of me sat our single dragon fruit flower, perfectly plated. For a moment, I felt relieved until my gaze shifted to the carnage around me.

Blood was everywhere.

Sana clutched his arm, his hand hanging by a few tendons, blood pooling on the floor. Nearby, Osamu lay motionless in a spreading puddle of crimson, his neck slashed open. I couldn’t tell if he was alive or...gone.

My stomach knotted. The metallic scent, mixed with the sharp sting of bleach, made breathing unbearable. Other contestants nursed bloody welts from the whip, their

faces strained. Kenji looked unscathed as he tended to a welt on Kaiyo's back. Kaiyo appeared in great pain as Kenji dabbed a cloth napkin at it.

I turned to Jiro. "Are you okay?" I asked, noticing a welt along his neck.

"I got lucky," he said with a strained smile. "My uniform absorbed most of the hit."

Two men dressed in the familiar black uniforms and masks entered the room, their eyes expressionless. Without a word, they hauled Sana and Osamu away. I watched, horrified, as Osamu's lifeless body left a trail of blood behind.

I scanned the table. Every team had completed one flower design—except Sana and Osamu. Did that mean the rest of us tied? Were they the losers by default?

The thought felt wrong. Sana and Osamu had been seriously injured. Osamu might even be dead. While my stomach turned, my mind stayed disturbingly focused on the challenge. I couldn't forget why I was here. Letting go of that focus would only hurt me. I was already in too deep. I had to see this through, or everything I'd endured—the fear, the manipulation—would be for nothing.

Chef Sakamoto's face remained unreadable. Was this par for the course in his apprenticeship program? His cold demeanor seemed immune to the chaos that had unfolded. And Reina, standing silently beside him, was just as detached. Did they not see the tragedy unfold with their very eyes? Without a word, they turned and left the kitchen.

Iron Face stepped forward, looking at us with pure disdain. "Another disgraceful showing for Chef Sakamoto," he growled. "I don't think any of you truly want this apprenticeship. Your efforts are pathetic."

He snatched a plate from the table, a sunflower design, and held it up. "You think this

is worthy of a Michelin-starred restaurant?”

With a swift motion, he hurled it against the wall, the porcelain shattering into pieces. Without waiting for a response, he stormed out of the kitchen, leaving us in blood-soaked silence.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kenji came running toward me just as I peeled the last of the duct tape from my wrists.

“Don’t worry, she was safe with me,” Jiro said, his voice full of smugness.

Kenji’s glare followed Jiro as he walked away before turning back to me. “Are you okay?” His hands moved to my shoulders, and his eyes darted over me, scanning for injuries. “Did he hurt you? Did?—”

I reached up and touched his uniform. Blood was streaked across the front.

“It’s not mine,” he said quickly. “Iron Face whipped Kaiyo straight through his uniform. Split his back open a little. It sounds worse than it looks. He’ll be uncomfortable sleeping on his back for a few days. Even more so in that uniform he has to squeeze into every day.”

He pulled me into a tight hold, his arms firm and protective. “I can’t believe this place. These challenges are insane.”

“We knew they wouldn’t be easy,” I said, my voice dead as a numbness overcame me.

“Knowing it and seeing it are two different things. Did Jiro try anything? If he did, I swear I’ll?—”

I cut him off. “No, he didn’t.” I hesitated, a little taken aback that Kenji was more concerned about Jiro and me than what had just happened to Osamu and Sana. “Actually, he made sure we got through it safely. Even took a couple of hits himself.”

“Good for him,” he muttered. “Seems like the right thing to have done. But that doesn’t mean he’s not dangerous. You still can’t trust him, Akiko. I don’t care how helpful he pretends to be.”

“He understands what it takes to survive here,” I countered, though part of me bristled at defending Jiro. “There’s no room for games anymore. Not if any of us want to make it out of this.”

Kenji scoffed, his grip on my arms tightening. “He’s playing a game. I don’t know what, but I’m sure of it.”

Shouting erupted nearby. Taka’s and Dori’s voices rose, each louder than the last, their argument echoing in the blood-streaked kitchen. Taka and Dori had been close friends since day one, but now they were at each other’s throats. Watching them, I couldn’t help but wonder, was this what the program wanted? For us to turn on each other?

“Let’s get out of here,” Kenji said as he eyed them. “No reason to stick around for this.”

I nodded, letting him lead me.

Once we stepped outside the training kitchen, Kenji steered us away from the dormitory. “It’s too dangerous to go back there. People are unpredictable right now. Let’s go to the gardens. It’s safer, calmer, and we can think.”

I nodded, silently following him to the bench near the koi pond. The vibrant fish

glided playfully beneath the surface, blissfully unaware of the madness that had just taken place.

Kenji sat beside me, the crease between his brows deep enough to plant seeds in. “We need to watch out for Iron Face,” he said, barely above a whisper. “It’s obvious he has it out for you. Splitting us up like that? Total bullshit.”

I shrugged. My shoulders felt tight. “I figured that out on day one. It’s not exactly subtle.”

He turned to face me fully, his dark eyes scanning mine. “We need a real plan, Akiko. I mean it. Something solid. I know we have each other’s backs, but I can’t afford to wing it anymore with you being such an easy target.”

The way he said it felt like a punch to the gut. “An easy target?” I said, arching an eyebrow.

His expression softened. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just, you know what I mean. Iron Face is gunning for you. I need to be ready for anything.”

“And I’m supposed to do what? Sit back and let you ‘prepare’ while I hope for the best?” I sighed, rubbing my temples. “Look, the plan is simple: We do our best in the challenges and try not to die.”

It was meant to be a joke, but Kenji didn’t laugh. If anything, his frown deepened. “That’s not a plan, Akiko. That’s wishful thinking. I was thinking more about needing a plan to protect you,” he said, frustration creeping into his voice. “I should have teamed up with you during this last challenge. You could’ve easily been the one injured or, worse, killed.”

“You don’t think I thought about that? I knew there was a risk with Jiro, but I dealt

with it. And guess what? It worked out,” I said, trying to keep my tone under control.

“Yeah, this time,” he shot back. “You need me. I can protect you better than anyone. Jiro might’ve behaved himself during this challenge, but who knows about the next? As far as I can tell, two more people are out of the competition.”

“Kenji,” I said, exhaling slowly, “I appreciate your concern, but you need to trust that I’m not completely hopeless. I don’t need you sheltering me every step of the way.”

“What is it with you and Jiro, anyway?” he snapped as his gaze held mine. “You seem awfully quick to defend him.”

“There’s nothing between me and Jiro,” I said firmly. “We used each other strategically to survive the challenge, just like you and Kaiyo did. Kaiyo could’ve easily slit your throat.”

“I don’t think Kaiyo would have done anything like that.”

“Maybe so, but you still had to trust him. Look, Kenji, people already think we’re a team, and we can look stronger to them, like a threat. Let’s not give them reasons to target us. Plus it’s important to me to prove to them I can stand on my own.”

Kenji hesitated, then ran a hand through his hair. “I totally get it, Akiko. It’s just... People can be cutthroat.”

I placed a hand on his arm, trying to calm him. “Relax. I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not, Akiko,” he said, shaking his head. “You need me to protect you. No one else will look out for you like I can. Next time, we’ll fight to make sure we’re paired up. Whatever the challenge is, I’ll take the more dangerous part. You don’t have to do it alone.”

His words gave me pause, not because I thought he was right but because his protectiveness was starting to feel stifling.

“Kenji,” I said, keeping my voice steady, “I appreciate what you’re saying. I really do. But nothing happened to me this time. You can’t fight every battle for me. I need to face some of this alone, whether or not I want to. That’s part of what Chef Sakamoto is testing: how we handle pressure. I need to show that I can stand on my own two feet.”

Kenji kept rattling off ways to protect me, such as how he’d shield me from the others and take on the riskier tasks in future challenges. He wasn’t hearing a word I said, his mind spinning out of control. And his jealousy over Jiro? It was starting to unsettle me. Was this about protecting me, or was it about him wanting control over me?

Finally, I grabbed his arm, forcing him to stop. “Kenji. Listen! I don’t need you to protect me. What I need is for you to be my friend. That’s it.”

Kenji’s shoulders dropped, his head bowing slightly. When he spoke, his voice softened. “I hear you, but...I couldn’t forgive myself if something happened to you. You mean so much to me, Akiko. Please, listen to me. If you don’t, I can’t protect you, especially from Jiro. Sooner or later, he’ll strike. And honestly? It looks like you’re getting comfortable around him, which is probably his plan. You can’t trust him. Trust me.”

I forced a small smile. “But you need to trust me, too, Kenji. Trust that I know what I’m doing.”

He nodded, even though his expression disagreed. As I stared into the pond, my thoughts drifted to Jiro’s actions during the challenge, how he had protected me from the whip and guided me through the challenge. Could it all be an elaborate setup? Or

was there something genuine behind his behavior?

Kenji's voice broke through my thoughts. "Whatever happens, Akiko, remember, you can only trust me."

I didn't respond. Watching the koi swim lazily beneath the surface, I couldn't shake the feeling that trusting anyone in this competition, even Kenji, might be the greatest risk of all.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

#### KENJI SANADA

We lined up outside our rooms, waiting for Iron Face to escort us to breakfast. Akiko smiled at me, and for a moment, I felt on top of the world. Seeing her in a good mood was reassuring. But then I caught Jiro at the other end of the hall with a smug grin plastered across his face. Was she smiling at me or at him? My stomach twisted. When I glanced back, she was already staring at the wall again.

On the walk to the training kitchen, Jiro kept looking over his shoulder at Akiko. The bastard turned his head every few steps, making a point of it. I stepped in front of Akiko, blocking his sightline.

And because I can't resist an opportunity, I placed a hand on the small of her back, guiding her gently like we were something more than teammates. Petty? Maybe. But revenge tasted sweet.

Akiko tilted her head up at me, brow crinkling. She looked so cute when she did that, even if I knew she was about to call me out.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I put on my best innocent smile.

"You keep moving me left and right like a chess piece. It's making me dizzy."

“Am I? Sorry, didn’t even realize. I’m starving. Are you hungry?”

She frowned slightly, probably not buying it. “Very.”

“You know what I’m thinking?” I said, leaning closer. “Once this ends, I’m taking you on a proper date.”

Her brow softened, and a smile appeared. “Really? And where would that be?”

“It’s a surprise,” I teased. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Just then, she reached out for Kaiyo’s arm, grabbing his attention.

“How does your back feel?” she asked.

He winced when he turned to her. “It’s fine. Last night, Iron Face came to my room and asked about my injury. For a second, I thought he wanted to send me home.”

“What did you say?”

“I lied and told him I was fine.”

“Did he believe you?” Her voice was inquisitive.

Kaiyo shook his head. “I don’t think so. He took me to the training kitchen, though. One of those masked men treated my back and bandaged it. It helps keep the uniform from rubbing against it.” He adjusted the part over his belly.

I moved up alongside Akiko, reached around her, and patted Kaiyo’s shoulder lightly. “Well, it’s good to know Iron Face isn’t a total asshat, right?”

“I can’t believe he even bothered to check on you,” Akiko said.

“It could’ve been worse,” Kaiyo said, glancing at Akiko before looking at me. “Kenji spun us to the right just in time. I’ve got him to thank for only catching part of the whip.”

I shrugged. “Eh, we got lucky. I was blindfolded, but I guess I have this sixth sense about protecting people.”

Kaiyo’s face broke into a broad smile, his eyes filled with relief. “Yeah, Kenji. Perfect timing.”

I shot Akiko a quick wink, hoping she’d notice. Maybe she’d finally see that I could protect anyone I chose.

As we approached the dining room, Jiro slowed, angling himself to enter alongside Akiko and me. Subtle, my ass. He was as obvious as a neon sign. Before he could pull his move off, I stepped between him and Akiko, guiding her forward with a hand on her shoulder.

“Good morning,” Jiro said with fake politeness.

But Akiko was already inside the dining room by then. I shot Jiro a pointed sneer before following her inside, keeping my body between them.

At breakfast, Akiko and I usually talked quietly or not at all, but that morning, Jiro was doing everything he could to catch her eye. Like hell I’d let that happen. Every time her gaze drifted his way, I steered it back to me. Cockblocked him. The smug bastard didn’t deserve even a second of her attention.

“Do you think you’ll get bathrooms again for chore duty?” I asked, knowing the

answer but wanting to keep her focused on me.

“For sure,” she said as if she’d already resigned herself to it. “Need a sparkling-clean bathroom? I’m your girl.”

“I wish I could trade places with you.”

“Really? Why?”

I shrugged. “To give you a break. Make things a little easier.”

“Please.” She laughed. “I can clean those bathrooms with my eyes closed. I’ve got it down to a science.”

Iron Face appeared, barking out chores. As expected, Akiko got stuck with the bathrooms again, and I got laundry. Perfect. Not only could I not keep an eye on her, I had to spend the morning wondering whether Jiro would “accidentally” cross paths with her.

Once we were outside, I pulled her aside.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Help me with my chores first. Then, when we’re done, I’ll help you. That way we can stay together the entire time. Iron Face only inspects at the end. He never said we couldn’t help each other.”

Akiko hooked her arm around mine, and for a second, I thought I’d won her over. God, it felt good, even after all this shit we’d been through. But then she hit me with a stiff arm straight to my heart.

“I appreciate everything you’re doing for me,” she said, “but really, I’m fine. It’s easier for me to do the bathrooms by myself. I’ve got a system. It goes by fast.”

“It’s just that...you’re my friend. We were best friends as kids, and I lost you once?—”

“Kenji, I’m just cleaning bathrooms, not dodging knives. It’s the crazy challenges we need to worry about.”

“I just don’t want to lose you again. That’s all.”

“I don’t want to lose you, either, but we have to focus our energy on the challenges, not chore duty.”

I moved in closer, brushing my lips against her forehead. She didn’t pull away immediately, which gave me hope. Wrapping my arms around her, I held her tightly until she gently stepped back, glancing around.

“I don’t give a shit if anyone sees us,” I said, holding her gaze. “I care about you, Akiko, and I don’t want to hide it. You feel the same way, don’t you?”

She hesitated. “I do, but now isn’t the time. Everyone already thinks I’m here because Chef Sakamoto knew my father, not because of merit. Don’t take this the wrong way, I love everything you’re doing for me, but I don’t want to give them another reason to hate me.”

“You think they’ll be jealous?”

“I think it’ll look like I have another person in my corner, and it’ll just make them angrier. It could work against you too. They might target you.”

“If they try, I’ll deal with them,” I said, waving off her concern. The others didn’t scare me, not even Jiro. I wouldn’t let anyone come between us. I wish she knew I’d do anything for her.

“Kenji,” she said, her tone dropping into that calm, cooing register that always fucking wrecked me. “Our goal is to make sure we’re the last two standing. It’ll be hard enough getting to the end. No need to add to the difficulty, okay? You understand what I’m saying?” She rubbed my arm gently.

“Fine,” I muttered, looking away briefly, only to feel her lips brush my cheek in a quick peck.

“Go do your chores, and I’ll do mine. We’ll meet up after, okay?”

Before I could answer, not that it was really a question, she turned on her heel and walked away.

Damn it. I came on too strong. Why do I always do that? I’ve got a good thing going here. I just need to rein it in. I can’t let my feelings screw this up.

What Akiko needed at the moment was strength. She needed to see me as her rock, her safety net. That’s what women liked in men: stability and confidence. Not a lovesick puppy dog following them around, wagging his damn tail. I knew we’d be perfect together. She just needed to see it too.

As I headed to my chore duty, I spotted Jiro in the distance, leaning casually against a small structure, that same smug grin plastered on his face. I’d had enough of his bullshit. My fists clenched before I realized it, and I stormed toward him.

“What’s so funny, huh?”

Jiro straightened, still grinning like an idiot. “I’m just enjoying the day. Clear skies, warm sun,” he said, spreading his arms wide like some damn philosopher. “What’s not to like?”

He tilted his head, his eyes narrowing in mock concern. “But you, Kenji? You don’t look like you’re having such a great day. Trouble in paradise? Someone leave you in a hurry?”

“Shut up. You have no idea what you’re talking about. And from now on, stay the hell away from Akiko.”

Jiro’s grin widened, taunting me. “Oh? And who’s going to stop me? You?”

“Damn straight.” I got right up in his face, chest heaving, daring him to make a move. “I see the way you look at her. Whatever you’re planning, it won’t work. She has no interest in you, bro. Just give up already.”

I bumped my chest into him, knocking him back a step. His smug grin faltered, and I thought for a second I’d shut him up for good. But then he snarled, fists clenching, ready to throw down.

Before he could swing, Iron Face materialized out of nowhere, his expression pure fury. “Why are you two just standing here? Get to work!”

Jiro’s grin snapped back into place, daring me to wipe it off his face. “Watch yourself,” I said.

He leaned back, smirking, and delivered the line that sent every ounce of blood in my body boiling. “Nah, I think I’ll keep watching her. I used to love the curve of her ass when she climbed out of bed after I ruined her.” He paused, feigning mock surprise. “Oh, that’s right. You wouldn’t know much about that, would you? First base still out of reach?”

The bastard. My vision went red. Every instinct screamed at me to swing, to slam him into the ground and pound his face until he didn’t have one anymore. But Iron Face

was standing right there, and I couldn't risk it. Not yet.

Jiro sauntered away, Iron Face shoving him along. I stayed rooted in place, trembling with rage. Every step Jiro took was punctuated by a laugh, making my fists itch to strike.

One thought burned as I headed toward my chore duty: I can't let him take her from me. She's mine!

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

#### AKIKO

I dabbed a wad of toilet paper against my forehead, soaking up the slickness caused by my chore. Cleaning the bathrooms was mindless work, but today, I scrubbed extra fast, eager to finish and lose myself in the library's quietness. With the stalls finished, I moved to tackle the showers.

On my hands and knees, I scrubbed at the stubborn grime between tiles, my conversation with Kenji replaying in my head. He'd always been my rock here, my constant since day one. His silly jokes and steady presence could brighten even our darkest days. I loved that he always looked out for me.

I hear a but coming.

Yes, there's one coming.

As much as I appreciated his efforts, they felt...suffocating lately. Kenji walking around like my personal bodyguard wasn't helping me. Strength and independence. That's what I wanted people to see. Not a girl with a safety net.

I liked Kenji a lot. When we were kids, I'd wanted him to notice me, to want me the way I'd wanted him. And now, finally, we were on the same page. Only it had taken a literal nightmare to get us here. Still, I couldn't deny that I still wanted him in my life.

Kenji would make a great, stable, loyal boyfriend who wouldn't leave when things got tough. And maybe that's what scared me. That I'd fall into that comfort and lose myself, just like my mother did.

I scrubbed harder, as if the act could scrape away my dark thoughts. I had dreams, big ones. And if I leaned too heavily on Kenji, would I end up like my mother? Broken. Hopeless.

Lately, though, Kenji's protectiveness had crossed a line. Overbearing. Controlling. It wasn't malicious. He meant well. But it was too much. His constant hovering made me feel like a liability who needed saving. And in this competition, the weak didn't survive.

If I can't stand on my own here, what's the point? Kenji needs to trust me to fight my own battles. If I get hurt, so be it. If I lose, I'll know I gave it my all. What I definitely can't do is depend on someone else to clear the path for me. Not here. Not ever.

Sometimes, being around Kenji made me lose sight of my goal: opening a successful sushi restaurant. That dream was well within reach, with Chef Sakamoto's help. But every decision I made needed to move me closer to that. No matter how much it might hurt Kenji's feelings, I couldn't afford to compromise.

"You're my only hope of escaping the accounting hell I call a job." Miki's plea circled around in my head. She was counting on me. I knew it wasn't a great reason to win this competition, but it was one. She was my best friend, and her happiness meant a lot to me.

I didn't know how to handle things with Kenji. Maybe I was hoping they'd work themselves out, but deep down, I knew better. His obsession with Jiro wasn't fading. It was escalating.

But he was wrong. I wasn't running back to Jiro.

I was using him, just like everyone else in this competition. Kenji didn't get to decide who I avoided or who I trusted. I'd do what I had to. Jiro was nothing more than a tool to me.

If that's true, why do you keep thinking about him?

I'm not. I'm assessing.

Assessing why you weren't disgusted by that kiss on your neck?

I finally faced what I'd been avoiding. That kiss still held center stage in my mind. And it shouldn't have, not with everything else happening around us, people being whipped and cut open.

But it stayed with me, no matter how much I tried to ignore it.

It was even there when I was with Kenji, my head in his lap and his hands caressing my cheek. No matter how much I tried to dim the light of Jiro's kiss, it burned bright. I couldn't get it out of my head. Damn that son of a bitch.

Breaking up with him was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. It was exhausting and impossible because of my love for him. But it had to be done. For months after the breakup, I cried. I picked up the phone countless times to call him, only to slam it back down. I stalked his social media, desperate to know whether someone had replaced me. It drove me nuts, but I did it. I got over him.

I think.

Enough, Akiko. Stop obsessing. Jiro is the enemy. He'll have you out of this

competition when he gets the chance. Kenji might be overbearing, but he's probably right about this.

Just then, the bathroom door opened, and someone walked in. I was in the shower area, alone and vulnerable. No one would know if I was attacked, even if I screamed. It was days like this when I wished the bathrooms weren't unisex.

Whoever had come in was at the urinal. I heard the steady stream, then the flush, followed by the faucet running at the sink. A blown nose. Someone was just feet away, but who? One of my competitors, surely, but which one?

There was a voice. Someone was talking—not like they were on the phone, but to themselves. I pictured them standing in front of a mirror, giving themselves a pep talk. I should have recognized the voice. Only seven of us were left, and I'd heard everyone at meals. But they spoke just low enough to blur into a murmur.

I don't know why I needed to peek, but I did. Slowly, I leaned out just enough to glimpse the room. Before I could process what I saw, a sudden flash of movement caught my eye. A split second later, sharp pain, then darkness.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I woke to find Kenji staring at me, cradling my head in his hands. It took a moment to piece things together. I was on the floor of the shower, and my face throbbed.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice filled with concern.

“I’m not sure,” I said, slurring slightly. “I think someone attacked me.”

Kenji growled, shaking his head as though he could barely keep himself from exploding. “I knew it. I knew one of the others would pull some shit like this. You’re not safe here, Akiko. From now on, you don’t leave my sight.”

I winced and reached for the side of my face where I felt the pain.

“You’ve got a red mark,” Kenji said, leaning closer, inspecting my face as though his glare alone could undo the damage. “I’m guessing that’s where they slapped you.”

“Felt more like a punch,” I muttered.

“Anywhere else hurt?” His hands moved over me in a frenzy, checking for other injuries.

“No, just my face,” I replied, knocking his hands away. “I’m fine, Kenji.”

“Fine? Someone sucker-punched you, Akiko. This was a cheap shot.” His jaw clenched so tightly that I thought his teeth might crack. “Do you remember anything?”

Anything at all?"

I closed my eyes, trying to sift through my brain fog. "There was someone in the bathroom. I heard them talking to themselves, maybe standing in front of the mirror. Then I peeked out, and bam."

Kenji's lip curled in disgust. "It was Jiro."

"What?" I frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"Because he's obsessed with you, that's why. He thinks you want him back."

"That's ridiculous. Why would he think that? And how does wanting me back equate to punching me in the face?"

Kenji shrugged. "He's an asshole, Akiko. Who knows what goes on in his tiny brain? Plain and simple, he wants you out of this competition. He's jealous. I could tell earlier when we exchanged words."

"What words?" My frown deepened. "What did you say?"

"Just that he needs to back off. He didn't take it well, obviously. I know you think he's all innocent, but he's not. He's dangerous."

I sighed, trying to process his accusations. The thing was, I couldn't completely dismiss them. Jiro had been watching me too closely, too often. And that kiss... A mind game? Or something real? I didn't dare mention it to Kenji; he was already on a witch hunt.

But this? This was different. This wasn't flirting or subtle manipulation. Someone had actually hit me. Hard. It was a wake-up call. I was a target now, whether I liked it

or not.

Kenji helped me to my feet. I wobbled slightly, leaning into him for balance. His arms wrapped around me, and he pressed a kiss to the top of my head, the gesture protective but smothering at the same time.

“Why don’t we head back to the dorms instead of the library?” he suggested. “You could use some rest.”

“No.” I pulled away from him, straightening my uniform. “I can rest after the competition. Right now, I need to prove that I belong here. We’re going to the library.”

Kenji stepped in front of me, blocking my path. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. You’re still shaky. Let me take care of you.”

“Kenji, you’ve been great, but you need to stop treating me like a fragile porcelain doll. I can take care of myself.”

“But I can protect you.”

“Kenji,” I said firmly, my voice rising, “I don’t need you to protect me!”

He flinched as though I’d slapped him. But I couldn’t let this continue. I couldn’t be his protection project. Without waiting for a response, I marched out of the bathroom.

“Wait, Akiko, I’m sorry!” Kenji called after me. “I’ll come with you to the library.”

“Please don’t.” I glanced over my shoulder, my tone firm. “I need some time alone right now.”

I walked away without looking back, refusing to give him a sliver of hope he could follow. Some distance would do us both good.

Honestly, I didn't even feel like going to the library. I was too worked up, angry about getting hit, and frustrated with Kenji's overbearing behavior. Without my realizing it, my feet carried me past the library and into the maze, where the towering hedges offered a quiet escape.

Left, right, a dead end or two, and I eventually found myself at the four-way intersection with the fountain. I perched on the edge of the circular stone, stretching my legs out. The height of the hedges created the illusion of being someplace else, anywhere but trapped inside the Sakamoto compound.

As I relaxed, the crunch of gravel underfoot reached my ears. Someone was approaching. My first thought was that Kenji was coming to find me. I ducked quickly down one of the pathways, pressing myself against the thick hedges. A few seconds later, Reina appeared, her poised figure passing by the fountain.

What's she doing here?

The wife of a madman strolling the grounds alone. How could I resist? Without much thought, I followed.

As always, Reina was impeccably dressed, her outfit more suited for a glamorous lunch than a casual walk. A small woven basket hung from her arm, swaying gently with her confident stride. Back straight, chin lifted, she moved with purpose, easily avoiding the maze's dead ends. Of course, she would know the way; she lived here.

The maze opened into the gardens, and for a moment, I thought Reina was preparing for a solitary picnic. I stayed far back, crouching behind bushes and hiding behind trees. The eerie stillness of the gardens struck me. No birds chirped, no squirrels

darted about. Even the koi in the pond had disappeared beneath the surface. It was as though all life had been snuffed out, leaving only Reina and me.

She continued deeper into the gardens, toward a small temple I hadn't noticed before. I followed, my heart pounding with each step. Spying on Reina was most likely an automatic disqualification from the program, but I couldn't stop myself.

The temple was serene and beautiful, with open windows on all sides. Reina stepped inside, disappearing from view. I crept closer, using the shrubbery as cover, and peered cautiously through one of the windows. Inside, Reina knelt on a mat before a kamidana, a traditional Shinto altar.

The altar was intricately carved, its dark wood polished to a gleam, and it sat on a pedestal. From her basket, Reina removed her offerings: a bowl of rice, a bottle of sake, and what looked like a red envelope, probably filled with money. She lit three sticks of incense, the thin trails of smoke curling upward, before bowing her head in prayer.

Seeing Reina like this, so vulnerable, so human, was jarring. She was always so composed and untouchable during the challenges. But here, she seemed real. I didn't realize how intensely I was staring until her voice broke the silence.

“Would you like to light incense and pray, Akiko?”

My heart leaped into my throat. How did she know I was here? Panic surged. I slapped a hand over my mouth to stifle a gasp, my mind racing for an excuse. Surely I had just destroyed my chances in the program.

Reina turned her head, her gaze locking onto mine through the window. “You may as well come in.”

I hesitated, quickly weighing my options. Run and hope she didn't report me? Or face whatever consequences awaited? After a moment's pause, I stepped into the temple. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"Don't be silly. Come, sit with me."

I joined her on the mat, folding my legs beneath me. "I'm not very religious," I admitted.

"Neither am I," she said, with a faint smile. "But some days, I find my spiritual side calling me."

We sat silently for a moment, the soft scent of incense filling the air. Then Reina turned to me. Her eyes were warm and searching. "Tell me, Akiko, is the apprenticeship everything you expected?"

Was she genuinely interested, or was she looking for weaknesses? I chose my words carefully. "It's...challenging," I said finally. "More than I expected."

Reina nodded thoughtfully, her gaze never leaving mine. "A challenge, yes. But not one too great for someone as determined as you." Her eyes studied me. "Focus can be a double-edged sword. It can also make one vulnerable. Don't you agree?"

The compliment was there, but so was the warning. Vulnerable. Was she praising me or cautioning me? I wasn't sure. "I think I understand," I said slowly. "Focus can blind you to other things."

Kenji's face flashed in my mind. His obsession with protecting me was starting to distract us from the competition. Maybe Reina was right.

Reina placed a hand on my shoulder. "In this place, everyone is driven, hungry to

prove themselves. Sometimes, too hungry.”

The warmth in her eyes disappeared for a fraction of a second, leaving them dark. A second later, the softness returned, like the moment hadn’t even happened.

“I believe in you, Akiko. You’re strong enough to make it to the end. But talent isn’t enough to get you there. You must know whom to trust.” She turned back to the shrine, drawing a deep breath before releasing it slowly. “Now that the pleasantries are out of the way”—Reina’s smile dipped—“I want to know your real thoughts about your time here. There are no wrong answers.”

Could I truly be honest with Chef Sakamoto’s wife? She was the second-most powerful person here. If this was a trap, I’d be digging my own grave.

Reina must have sensed my reluctance. “I don’t involve myself in my husband’s business. Whatever you say will remain between us.”

“Really?” My curiosity got the better of me.

“I’m not a fan of attending the challenges, but he insists. Says it shows solidarity.”

I wasn’t sure if I believed her just yet. “Well... I thought there’d be more training. That we’d be working directly under Chef Sakamoto. Instead, it’s been nothing like that. There’s so much wasted time that could be used productively.”

Reina’s smile didn’t falter. “My husband is stuck in his ways, but they are proven. Every chef who trains under him goes on to have great success. Isn’t that what you want?”

I nodded. “Of course, but we only get a day’s notice for challenges.” I wanted to ask about the purpose of the challenges but held back.

“In the real world, sometimes you have even less. The kitchen is unpredictable; you must learn to solve problems on the spot while staying prepared for the unexpected. Remember what I said: It’s not the points that matter. It’s making it to the end.”

Reina rose gracefully. Watching her, I felt like a child staring up at a mother. “I wish you the best of luck, Akiko,” she said. “I’d love for you to be the first woman to train under my husband.”

She walked toward the temple entrance but stopped just before stepping out. Turning back, she added, “My advice? Study poison.”

And then she was gone.

Her words lingered like the faint scent of incense in the air. Study poison? I whispered the phrase to myself. The very idea made me prickly all over.

Was she warning me about the next challenge?

The words hounded me the more I thought about them. I already knew every challenge here wasn’t what it seemed; there was always a twist that upended expectations. Could this be the same? But what kind of poison? Actual poison, the kind that tainted food, turning a single bite into a death sentence? Or was it metaphorical, a warning about the people around me?

The image of the bathroom came rushing back: the quick, calculated strike that had left me sprawled on the floor. Was that attack the beginning of everyone turning on each other? On me? The thought made my stomach drop.

I touched my cheek, the faint ache still nagging. Whether Reina was talking about poisoned food or a poisoned environment, I couldn’t dismiss it. I had to figure out what she really meant.

“You must know whom to trust.”

That thought echoed through my mind as I made a silent vow: I would watch everyone closely from now on and assume no one here would stop short of winning—not Kenji, not Jiro, and certainly not me. The stakes were too high. I had to be ready. Ready to adapt, ready to spot every lie, every hidden agenda. Whatever poison was brewing in this place, it wouldn’t claim me.

Stepping out of the temple, I scanned the pathways ahead. Reina was nowhere to be seen, but then movement caught my eye. Jiro stood in the distance next to an ishido, his gaze locked on me for just a moment before he turned and headed toward the maze.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

#### KENJI

I finally spotted Akiko walking near the library and jogged to catch up to her. “Where were you? I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” I pulled her into a hug, relieved she was safe. “Are you okay?” I gently turned her face, examining where she’d been struck.

“I’m fine, Kenji,” she said, pulling back slightly. “I just needed some time alone. I was in the gardens.”

“Gardens? I checked there.” She looked off to the side, a sign she wasn’t being honest. “Akiko,” I said softly, “you don’t have to lie to me. It’s me, Kenji. Your best friend.”

Her eyes darted back to mine. “I’m not lying. Maybe you overlooked me. I’m short, remember?”

“I’m not blind,” I said, exhaling sharply. “I could pick you out of a lineup of shadows. I know your size, your shape, your...” I stopped myself before saying something that might sound too intense. “Okay, maybe I did miss you...”

Akiko frowned. “What? Go on, spit it out. You’re always telling me we must be honest with each other for our alliance to work.”

“This isn’t about the alliance!” My voice was rising. “This is about you, about us. Do

you even realize how much you mean to me? You were my whole world back when we were kids. And then one day, we were just...separated. It wasn't your fault, and it wasn't mine, but that didn't make it any easier."

Her expression softened, and for a moment, I thought I saw a glimmer of the girl I used to know.

"I had no idea it affected you that much," Akiko said. "It makes sense you were sad about moving, but...why didn't you try to find me when you got older?"

"I did," I said quietly. "I went by your house a few years ago, but you weren't living there anymore."

"After my mother died, I sold the house to pay for university."

"I'm sorry," I said, the guilt piling on. "Your life...the hardships you endured...it's amazing that..."

"I survived? I know, right?" Akiko laughed, lightening the mood. "Kenji, I'm here now. That's all that matters."

"That's right. You're a fighter. I'm sorry about your mom, and your dad and everything else that went to hell after I moved. I always liked your mom. I have fond memories of her making us delicious snacks."

"That's right, she did do that," she said, a small smile tugging at her lips. "But after my dad disappeared, she was never the same, not with the depression and the alcohol. I'm glad you never saw that side of her. You only have the memories that I choose to save. And those are the most important ones anyway."

"I know, but I should've tried harder to find you," I said. "Maybe I could've?—"

“Could’ve what? Saved me?” she interrupted.

“No. I mean, maybe,” I admitted. “I don’t know. I just feel like I let you down.”

Akiko placed a hand on my arm. “Kenji, you don’t need to carry that guilt. I don’t blame you for what happened to me. I’ve been through enough to know I can handle myself. That’s all I want. And for you to believe that too.”

“You’re right,” I said, forcing myself to look at her. “You’re here, after all. That says a lot.”

“It does,” she said, her smile growing.

I chuckled. “Yeah, look at us now. Here we are in the most prestigious apprenticeship in the country.”

“Exactly. Let’s focus on why we’re here in the first place.”

I smiled and kissed her forehead, a small gesture I’d come to love. “This, us—it feels right.”

“It does.” It was soft, barely a whisper, but she said it, and that was what mattered. “And Kenji, I also want to say I could’ve tried to find you too.”

“How could you? Even I didn’t know where we were for a while,” I said, shaking my head. “So, do you believe me now? That my worry isn’t about the apprenticeship or our alliance. It’s about you.”

“I do,” she said. “But you need to understand something. I’ve been on my own for a long time. I can take care of myself.”

“Yes, I know that, but it’s dangerous here, and I can protect you. I want to protect you...even if you don’t think you need it.” Why can’t she just accept I’m right?

Akiko gave me that warm, knowing smile that always made my heart ache a little. “Kenji, I know this competition is dangerous. I know the others will do whatever it takes to win. But a bodyguard isn’t what I need right now. I need a friend.”

Friend. Every time she said that word, it was like an uppercut to the gut. I forced myself to remain positive. She wants to fight her own battles. Fine. Knock yourself out, Akiko. But it won’t stop me from doing what I know is right. Whether she admits it or not, she needs me.

“It’s just that my feelings for you...” I started, trying to find the exact words. “I guess they cloud my judgment sometimes.” I looked at her, letting my eyes roam over her face, neck, and body. She had no idea how much I thought about her, how much I wanted her. She had no idea how far I’d go.

Before she could say anything, I pulled her close. She didn’t resist as I wrapped my arms around her. My hands slid down her back, slow and deliberate, until they found the curve of her ass. I grabbed her, relishing the feel of her cupped in my hands. For a moment, I thought she might stop me, but she didn’t.

That was all the permission I needed.

I leaned in, my mouth hovering just above hers, ready to claim what was mine. But she turned her head at the last second, pressing her hands against my chest.

“We’re out in the open, Kenji,” she said, looking around.

“So?” I shot back, my grip on her tightening. “Let them watch. I don’t care.”

“Well, I do. When we’re in public, we need to keep it professional.”

Her rejection stung like a slap to the face. For a moment, I considered pushing back, but then Iron Face appeared and interrupted us.

“I have an announcement. Go to the dorms!”

Akiko didn’t wait. She slipped out of my hold and walked away, her steps quick and determined. She didn’t look back, not once. I balled my fists as I watched her go.

She wanted space. She wanted to do things her way. I was fine with it. But I’d be watching. I’d always be watching. If she thought she could shut me out, she was wrong.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

#### AKIKO

We had just been briefed by Iron Face on our next challenge: It would involve the poisonous fugu blowfish. Reina's haunting warning about poison had come true. Iron Face's instructions were vague, as always, but everyone assumed we had to prepare a dish using the fish. The bitching started immediately after Iron Face left us and continued into the dorms.

"Twelve hours?" Kenji muttered as we headed to his room. "What's next, six hours' notice?"

"I have something to tell you," I said.

I plopped down on his bed and began telling him about my second meeting with Reina. If he was jealous about the attention I'd received from her again, he was hiding it better this time. Maybe he realized by now that whatever Reina told me, I'd pass along to him.

"She was right about the poison," I said.

"But why stop there? She's just as vague as Iron Face. Do you think she doesn't know more? She's enjoying it, just like Chef Sakamoto and Iron Face. And really, she told you—what, fifteen minutes before the next challenge was announced? It seems helpful until you think about it."

“Maybe she can’t say more, or they’d know she was helping,” I said, rubbing his arm to calm him down. “Come on.” I stood and pulled him to his feet.

We pushed past Taka and Dori in the hallway and made our way to the library. Kaiyo and Hideo were already inside, huddled around the table, flipping through books on fugu preparation.

We dove into the research, and our goal was clear: find the simplest, safest dish we could prepare. We had to assume someone, probably Chef Sakamoto, would taste our dishes. Killing him would end more than just the competition.

I glanced at Kenji, who was furiously jotting notes. “You good?” I asked, trying to gauge his state of mind.

“Yeah,” he replied without looking up. “Just focused.”

Good. That’s what I wanted to hear. Focused on the challenge and not on me.

The books were clear that the most important part of preparing fugu was removing the poison. Most of the fugu’s deadly toxin was concentrated among its organs. One wrong cut and the meat would become lethal. Even cooking the tainted meat wouldn’t neutralize the poison. It was a tightrope act, and none of us had the safety net of past experience.

From what I read, the toxicity varied by fish. Some were less dangerous; others were instant death waiting to happen. It was like drawing straws, except the loser didn’t get the short one. They got a death sentence.

Kenji whispered to me, “You know this is illegal, right? Preparing fugu without certification? The government forbids anyone near this stuff unless they’ve been trained.”

“Yeah, well, nothing about this program is exactly aboveboard,” I replied, flipping a page. “But you’re not wrong. This is insane, even by Sakamoto’s standards.”

I looked up. Kaiyo and Hideo were busy researching, paying us no attention. We’d left Taka and Dori back in the dorms. Where was Jiro? His absence was suspicious. I didn’t think he’d slack off on this challenge, not with this much at stake.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that he was up to something. Something I wouldn’t like.

Kenji and I stayed in the library until the last possible moment, barely making it to the training kitchen on time. Iron Face’s glare followed us as we entered the lineup. Blowfish were spread across individual cutting boards, their lifeless eyes staring blankly at us.

Chef Sakamoto entered, followed by Reina, who offered a polite but forced smile. Iron Face turned to us, a twinkle in his cold stare, indicating his favorite part was next: telling us the menacing name of the challenge.

“Tonight at Kage Ryu, you face Shinigami Fugu!” He raised both arms as if speaking to a crowded coliseum in ancient Roman times.

Death God Pufferfish. Did I call it or what?

“Half of you will prepare the torafugu variety; the other half, the mafugu. Both are equally deadly.” His words hung heavy in the air, causing the lineup to fidget.

Kenji and I had already decided to play it as safe as possible. Our dish would be thin slices of raw sashimi. Simple, clean, and, hopefully, nonlethal.

“You have twenty minutes to prepare and plate your dish,” Iron Face instructed. A large round tabletop had been set up for us to present our finished creations. “Begin.”

I waited, half expecting the inevitable twist that would ratchet up the stakes and send us scrambling. But none came. No added obstacle. Just us, the fish, and the clock.

The timer buzzed, and I snapped into action. Carefully, I slid the knife into the belly of the blowfish, my hands steady despite the hammering in my chest. Carefully I removed the organs like a ticking time bomb I had to defuse. If one wrong cut was made, the flesh would be contaminated.

From what I'd read, even properly prepared fugu carried a faint trace of the toxin. A tingling sensation on the lips or tongue was expected, but any more than that could be deadly. The thought lingered in the back of my mind.

Kenji finished before me. "You've got plenty of time left," he said, his voice low and calm. "Don't rush."

Across the room, Jiro's voice rang out. "Yeah, Akiko, take all the time you need. It's not like we're on the clock or anything." Laughter rippled through the room.

I didn't look up, but his cockiness made me wonder. Did he know something the rest of us didn't? Had Reina spoken to him too? Was that why he was MIA earlier?

"Ignore him," Kenji muttered, his tone protective. "You're almost there."

I placed the last slice on the plate and carried it to the tabletop, my steps measured and deliberate. Kenji and I weren't the only ones who'd chosen sashimi; two others had taken the same route. Taka and Dori were the last to finish, placing their dishes on the table just before the timer buzzed.

I cast a quick glance at Jiro. He winked at me and blew a kiss.

Iron Face stepped forward and closely examined each dish before turning to Chef

Sakamoto and nodding. He approached the table, spinning it slowly, his gaze lingering on each plate. An emptiness developed in the pit of my stomach. Would Chef Sakamoto really taste each dish? Did he trust us enough? After a long moment, he nodded to Iron Face and returned to Reina's side.

Iron Face took over, spinning the tabletop again. He called out, "Kaiyo, come here."

Kaiyo stepped forward, his face pale. The table slowed to a stop, revealing a grilled fugu dish in front of him. "Taste," Iron Face commanded.

There's the twist. We were the guinea pigs .

Kaiyo hesitated, his chopsticks trembling in his hand. He glanced back at us, uncertainty showing on his face.

"Taste!" Iron Face barked again.

With reluctance, Kaiyo picked up a piece of fish and placed it in his mouth. He chewed slowly, as though bracing for something terrible to happen. We all were.

The seconds stretched on until he stopped chewing and finally swallowed. A pause that felt like a lifetime before a small smile crept onto his face. "Hey, that's pretty good."

Relief rippled through the room as we all exhaled.

My name was called next.

"You got this," Kenji whispered, giving me a reassuring nod.

I moved to the front, my steps heavy with dread. The tabletop spun again, the plates

blurring together. Please let it be sashimi. Please. The table slowed, revealing a fried fugu dish. Meat, bones, and organs mixed together. I sucked in a sharp breath. I remembered this recipe. It was one I'd avoided for its difficulty and risk.

"Taste," Iron Face ordered.

My heart pounded as I picked up a piece with my chopsticks. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jiro, his eyes locked intently on me.

Into my mouth I placed the bite, the fish warm, crispy, savory. It tasted fine—delicious, even. But then a tingling sensation spread across my tongue and throat. My hand flew to my neck as panic set in. Was this it? Was I about to die?

"She's been poisoned!" Taka shouted.

His words sent the room spiraling. My throat tightened, and I gasped for air, waiting for the inevitable. But the seconds ticked by, and nothing happened. The tingling remained, but my breathing was steady. Slowly, I lowered my hand.

"You're excused," Iron Face said, his tone devoid of sympathy.

One by one, the others took their turns, each tasting another's dish. No one showed signs of poisoning. I relaxed, knowing the hard part was over. But when I looked at Iron Face, the expression in his eyes told me otherwise.

"Did you know the effects of fugu poisoning aren't immediate?" Iron Face asked, a dark edge in his voice.

Just then, Hideo began to cough.

"It can take forty minutes to manifest." He turned to Hideo. "It's subtle at first, but

then the affected person begins to?—”

Hideo collapsed, clutching his stomach as a guttural howl escaped his lips. His body convulsed violently, thick white foam bubbling from his lips and spilling down his chin. His eyes rolled back into his head, leaving only the whites. The room froze—every breath held, every eye locked on the horrifying scene.

“It paralyzes its victim while they’re still fully conscious,” Iron Face continued, his voice colder than ever.

Hideo choked and thrashed on the floor, his violent spasms breaking the fragile silence in the room.

“They feel every second of it,” Iron Face added, unflinching. “Their heart slows, their lungs seize, and they suffocate—fully aware but completely helpless.”

Hideo arched his back, his body taut and trembling, poised there for a terrifying moment, before collapsing, motionless.

Two men in black uniforms appeared. Without a word, they grabbed Hideo’s lifeless body and dragged him out of the room, his heels scraping against the floor.

The door slammed shut behind them, leaving us in a dumbfounded silence as the deadly reality of the challenge sank in.

Iron Face grabbed the dish Hideo had eaten from. “Who prepared this?” he demanded, his voice like thunder. The room remained silent. No one dared step forward to claim ownership.

Chef Sakamoto shook his head, his disappointment this time eclipsing anything in the past. He turned and left the kitchen without a word, Reina following close behind.

We had come so close to completing the challenge. But one of us had ruined it. Was it an honest mistake or a calculated move to thin the competition?

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next day, Hideo was nowhere to be seen. Another one of our fellow apprentices had fallen, leaving just six of us. Kenji and I had an alliance. Taka and Dori were inseparable, always scheming together. That left Kaiyo and Jiro. Jiro had always been a lone wolf who thrived on his own. The idea of him forming an alliance with anyone was laughable.

Even at university, Jiro had been self-reliant. It was one of the qualities that drew me to him back then. He had an enigmatic presence, as if he didn't need anyone. Now, in this environment, that quality felt more dangerous than alluring.

After lunch, Kenji and I were heading to the library when Iron Face intercepted us. He didn't even glance in my direction. "Kenji, with me," he ordered before spinning on his heels. Kenji followed, casting a concerned glance back at me.

But I exhaled, relieved to have a moment alone. As much as I liked Kenji, his constant hovering was wearing on me, and I'd begun to wonder what he'd be like outside this nightmare of a competition. Would he still see me as someone who needed shielding from the world?

The sound of voices up ahead snapped me out of my thoughts. Taka and Dori were walking toward me on the narrow path. I hoped we'd just nod in passing, but Taka stopped dead center, blocking my way.

"Akiko," he said, a sly grin spreading across his face. "Where are you off to?"

“The library,” I replied, trying to sidestep him, but Dori blocked my efforts.

“All alone without your boyfriend, Kenji?” Taka ridiculed.

“He’s not my boyfriend. We’re just friends,” I said, my words clipped.

“Just friends?” Taka shot a glance at Dori. “Hear that? She’s single and ready to mingle.” He ran a finger down my arm. I slapped it away, hitting the bandage around his wrist.

“Ouch!” He cradled his hand.

“Iron Face’s whipping still hurting you?”

“No, but if you keep acting like a stuck-up bitch, you’ll find out how it feels.”

I tried to sidestep Taka again, but he blocked me. I turned to back away, only to bump into Dori and catch a whiff of his sour breath.

As I fought to repel my nausea, I noticed Jiro in the distance, leaning casually against the wall outside the library, watching. Was this a setup? Had he put them up to this? The thought lit a fire in me.

I shoved Taka with all my strength, catching him off guard. He stumbled back and fell on his ass hard. He growled, his face twisted in anger.

Before I could react, Dori grabbed me from behind, his arms locking around me like a vise.

“You want to play rough?” Taka sneered as he got to his feet. “We can play rough.” His gaze dropped to my chest, and my stomach clenched.

Dori's hands started roaming, and I kicked back at him, struggling against his grip. Both men laughed as though there were nothing wrong with their actions.

"You know what prize you get if you win the game we're about to play?" Taka grabbed his crotch. "The chef's special."

Dori clamped a hand over my mouth, muffling my scream as they dragged me off the path toward a cluster of blossoming cherry trees. My heart pounded. I feared what would happen next if they got me out of sight.

I drove my elbow into Dori's ribs repeatedly, but his grip didn't loosen. Taka grabbed a fistful of my hair, yanking me forward. The cluster of trees loomed closer.

A low growl broke through the chaos, and then Jiro slammed into us like a freight train. We all went down hard, and I was free.

Jiro was on his feet in an instant, positioning himself between me and them. "Touch her again, and I'll destroy you," he said, his voice ice cold.

Taka and Dori hesitated, their eyes narrowing as they sized him up. Dori mock-charged, testing his reaction. Jiro didn't flinch. He snapped forward with a punch that sent Dori stumbling back. Taka stepped in next, fists raised, but Jiro was faster. He unleashed a brutal combo. Taka reeled, his head snapping to the side. For a moment, his eyes went blank, dazed.

Dori lunged forward, trading sharp jabs with Jiro, who didn't back down an inch. Taka staggered to his feet, eyes darting between them, and for a moment, it seemed like they might team up against Jiro. But he was bigger, stronger, and radiating rage that dared them to try.

Taka grabbed Dori by the arm, yanking him away. "You'll regret this, Jiro. Watch

your fucking back!”

Jiro stood firm, keeping guard until they were out of view. Only then did he turn to me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded slowly, my voice catching in my throat. “My wrist hurts a little, but I’m fine.” The words felt hollow. My mind was still spinning from the assault that had almost happened. If it hadn’t been for Jiro... I reached up to the bandage on his neck, the wound from Iron Face’s whip. “Does it still hurt?”

“No.”

We stood there in awkward silence until I remembered.

“Did you set that up so you could come in and be the hero?” I asked, my voice sharp.

Jiro smirked. “I was your hero?”

“I knew it,” I said, shoving past him and stomping away.

He caught my arm, not hard, but enough to stop me. “Akiko. I didn’t set that up. You looked like you were in trouble, so I helped out.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not the biggest asshole on earth, even though I know you think that.”

His words caught me off guard. “Well, thank you. I appreciate it.”

Jiro’s smirk softened. “Is Kenji okay? I saw Iron Face take him away.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you always watching me?”

He shrugged. “Call it coincidence.”

“That’s a lot of coincidences.”

“Lucky for you.”

“Why do you care so much about what Kenji is doing?”

“I don’t, really. But this is a competition. It’s smart to keep track of the others.”

“Is that why I always catch you looking at me?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Afraid I’ll beat you?”

“That,” Jiro said with a playful grin, “and because you’re cute.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere.”

“It’s not flattery if it’s true.”

“What? That I’m cute?”

“No,” he said, his grin fading. “That you’re the best chef here. You’re the one to beat.”

I tilted my head, studying him. “Maybe I missed it, but did one of them hit you a little too hard back there? You’re talking nonsense.”

He chuckled. “I’m serious. Don’t forget, I’ve tasted your cooking. You were amazing then, and I can only imagine how much better you are now.”

His words threw me off. Jiro, of all people, complimenting me? “You hate me, Jiro. There’s no way you think I’m the best.”

“I don’t hate you.” His smirk faded. “You always had a knack for cooking. You enjoy it, and it shows.”

I searched his face for a sign of ridicule but found none. “Why say this now? You’ve done nothing but tease me from day one.”

“I’m not blind, Akiko,” Jiro said, leaning closer, his voice dropping. “I saw it back then, when we were dating. You cooked all the time. You had raw talent that only needed time to evolve. You belong here.”

His words stirred something inside me. Memories of the early days, sharing that tiny apartment, me cooking for him every night. “You remember all that?”

“Of course I do. How could I forget? Just because we’re not together doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten the good times.”

My cheeks burned, and I glanced away. The intensity in his eyes was too much. It always had been. Back then, it made me melt. Now, it made me...shy.

“Jiro,” I said, forcing myself to meet his gaze. “What exactly are you after here? You’re antagonizing me one minute, and the next, you’re saying I’m the best chef here. What’s your angle?”

“No angle,” he said with a shrug. “I saw you in trouble and stepped in. If your...boyfriend had been here, I wouldn’t have had to.”

“Kenji’s not my boyfriend,” I snapped. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

Jiro's smirk returned. "You're right. It's not my business. But for what it's worth, I meant what I said. You're the one to beat. You deserve to win this. But unfortunately, skill isn't what decides the winner."

My stomach tightened. "You mean because the points don't matter?"

"It's not about points either," Jiro said. "It's about survival. That's why you might lose to the worst chef here."

My body tensed. "And who's the worst chef here?"

Jiro's smirk flatlined. "Your buddy, Kenji."

At first, his words hit me like a punch, but then I wanted to laugh and dismiss them as jealousy or manipulation. But the look on his face was calm and confident. It rattled me.

"I'd be careful about his real intentions," Jiro said, his voice low. "Just don't say I didn't warn you, Akiko."

That's two people who have now warned me about Kenji.

With that, he walked away, leaving me confused. I wanted to chase after him and demand answers, but I didn't. This was Jiro. I had to assume he was playing mind games, trying to drive a wedge between me and Kenji. Still, Jiro had never been one to mince words.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I tossed and turned on the hard mattress, my body aching no matter how I lay. Even my flat pillow had lost its cool side. But it wasn't the discomfort keeping me awake. It was Jiro. His words from earlier stuck in my mind like a pebble in my shoe. Impossible to ignore.

When we parted during our final year at university, Jiro didn't take the breakup well. His ego was bruised by my repeated rejections of his attempts to get back together. After that, we became enemies, or at least it felt that way. Whenever I caught him glancing in my direction, his expression would sour.

Breaking up with your first love isn't easy. It's messy and leaves you limping through life for a while. I hadn't realized how intertwined we were until I rearranged my entire schedule to avoid him—switching gym times, staying out of the library at night, even grocery shopping at dawn. Avoiding an ex is exhausting.

After I graduated, Jiro mostly faded from my life, but no matter how hard you try, you can't erase your first love entirely. His resurfacing here, of all places, had brought a fresh ache. Breaking up with him, though, had been the right decision. We wanted different things. I craved stability; he chased adventure. We were never going to align.

So why did his words from earlier make me feel something? Did I still have feelings for him? No, no way. Not possible.

Sounds like someone has a crush.

Quiet. You don't know anything.

Jiro and Akiko sitting in a tree...

Finish that song, and I swear I'll ? —

What? Punch yourself in the face?

I groaned and sat up, running a hand through my tangled hair. “Get it together, Akiko,” I mumbled to myself as I stretched my arms high above my head. This wasn't a summer camp romance or some twisted second-chance love story. This was a competition. A deadly one.

Soooo, flirting with Kenji is fine, but Jiro's off limits?

It's not the same thing.

Oh, really? Care to elaborate?

Grrrr.

It wasn't just my feelings throwing me off. Jiro's admission that I was the best chef had blindsided me. Why would he say that? How could he even know? No one had seen anyone else cook in a way that allowed for comparisons. And honestly, I was still convinced Jiro couldn't cook. So what the hell was he doing here?

As I stretched, twisting my torso, the doorknob jiggled. The chair I'd wedged against the door held firm, as it did every night. This wasn't new. Someone had been testing my doorknob nightly. But after today, I was done. No more freezing under the covers, waiting for them to leave. Tonight, I'd find out who it was.

I crept to the door, heart pounding in my chest. On the count of three, I yanked the chair away and pulled the door open.

Kenji stood there in the hallway.

“Good, you’re up,” he whispered, slipping into my room and shutting the door behind him.

“What are you doing?” I looked at him blankly.

“Shhh, keep your voice down.”

“Kenji, why are you trying to get into my room every night?”

“What? I’m not.”

“Someone’s been jiggling my doorknob every night, Kenji. Tonight, I finally opened it, and it’s you.”

“Yeah, tonight. But it wasn’t me the other nights.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

He hesitated, his gaze looking everywhere but at me. “I couldn’t sleep. I felt bad about our fight earlier.”

“Oh my God, Kenji.” I moaned. “That was hours ago. I’m over it.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, but I need to tell you something.”

“Kenji, can it wait until morning?” I stifled a yawn.

“It’ll only take a few moments. Please.”

I sighed. “Fine. What is it?”

“I love you, Akiko.”

“Yeah, I know. I love you too.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I mean, I’m in love with you. I can’t imagine my life without you as my girlfriend, maybe even my wife.”

My jaw dropped. Was Kenji really picking the middle of the night to confess his love?

“Kenji...” I started. My mind raced for the right words. “I don’t think you mean that.”

“I do! Don’t you feel the same?”

I took a step back, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Kenji, you’re sweet. And your friendship means the world to me.”

“But you only see me as a friend.”

“It’s not that.” I sighed. “We’re in survival mode here, okay? This, whatever this is...is what matters right now. Making it to the end. I can’t afford distractions, and neither can you.”

“I just don’t want to lose you again,” he said quietly.

“You won’t lose me,” I replied. “But we’re?—”

“Moving too fast?” he interrupted.

“Exactly. After this is over, there’ll be plenty of time to talk about us.”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“Don’t be. You didn’t do anything wrong except try to sneak into my room in the middle of the night.” I gave him a pointed look. “Are you sure it wasn’t you those other nights?”

“I swear to God, Akiko. Tonight’s the first time.”

I studied him for a moment. “Fine. But you need to go.”

“Can I stay?” he blurted out. “I mean, just to sleep. I promise that’s it.”

I hesitated. “Just sleeping, right?”

“Just sleeping,” he said, raising his hands in surrender.

Against my better judgment, I let him stay. We climbed into the small, uncomfortable bed, and his arm draped over my waist as he pulled me close. His body was warm and comforting, and I found myself relaxing. Maybe I’d been too hard on him.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Sun Tzu’s words echoed in my head. I wasn’t sure if Kenji was a friend or a foe. But I needed to keep him close if I wanted to survive until the end.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Iron Face stood in the dining room doorway, his cold eyes scanning each of us. No one dared touch their food while he remained.

After a moment, he drew a breath. “After lunch, I will teach a class for you.”

I waited for him to explain what the class would cover, but he gave nothing away, as usual. No details, no hints.

“This is not a challenge and will not count toward the six you are expected to complete,” he added before turning and leaving without another word.

It struck me then that I didn’t know anything about Iron Face’s background. Was he even a chef? Could we actually learn anything from him? Judging by the expressions on the others’ faces, I wasn’t the only one with doubts.

“Does this mean we’ll have an exam?” Kaiyo asked, stuffing his mouth with rice.

“Why isn’t Chef Sakamoto teaching the class?” Dori chimed in, rolling his eyes. “We haven’t learned a damn thing from that guy.”

“Whatever it is, I hope it’s something physical,” Taka sneered, his eyes cutting to me. “Some people here need a lesson on getting hit.”

I ignored him, as I always did.

“Hey, Akiko,” he added, leaning forward with a grin. “This is one class where you’re not the teacher’s pet.”

Had the others noticed the way Reina kept glancing and smiling at me?

On and on, Taka and Dori threw insults my way. Kenji sat beside me, his chopsticks moving mechanically from his bento to his mouth as if he couldn’t hear them. It was strange, as he’d always been the first to defend me. Why was he silent now, when I needed him most?

Taka kept it up until Jiro finally spoke. “Still mad about Akiko shoving you to the ground the other day?”

Kaiyo’s laugh was loud and sudden. “Akiko threw you on your ass? I need to hear this story.”

“Shut up, Kaiyo. That never happened,” Taka snapped, his face reddening.

“Yeah, if anything, she was the one about to get her ass handed to her,” Dori added, puffing up beside Taka. “If it weren’t for her boyfriend here.” He jerked his thumb at Jiro.

“I’m just calling it like it is,” Jiro said, smirking. “She knocked you back when you tried to block her path.”

Taka’s face darkened. “Funny, coming from the guy who wouldn’t stop poking fun at her and now suddenly feels the need to defend her.”

“Jealous?” Jiro quipped, raising an eyebrow.

For the first time, Kenji’s mechanical movements slowed. His chopstick hovered in

midair, and his jaw tightened. Finally, some reaction.

But that's all it was, a reaction. He said nothing and didn't even look my way. Not until lunch ended did he pull me aside.

"What were Jiro and Taka talking about back there? Did something happen yesterday?"

Now he's interested.

"Nothing that needs repeating. Forget about it," I said, turning to walk away.

Kenji grabbed my arm and jerked me back. "Hey, I'm talking to you. Are you getting back together with Jiro?"

"What? How the hell did you get that from anything I said?" I yanked my arm free. "And don't ever grab me like that again."

"Just answer the question," he demanded, his tone sharp.

"I don't think I will. Not with that attitude." I hated fighting with him. It was exhausting. But his need to control everything about me was wearing thin.

Diplomacy, Akiko. Remember the game. Keep your enemies close.

I forced a smile. "I'm sorry, Kenji. I didn't mean to snap. Can we talk about this later? Please?"

Before he could respond, Iron Face appeared. His gaze chilled the room into silence. Without a word, he turned, and we all followed. He led us to a clearing near the left side of the Sakamoto residence, a part of the compound I hadn't ventured into yet.

In the center of the clearing were six metal tables, each holding a fish about two feet long. The fish looked odd, and as we got closer, I realized why. They were made of metal.

Iron Face began with a flip chart, revealing a diagram of a bluefin tuna.

“Today’s class is Zap Sakusen! We will learn the key cuts of a tuna.”

Interesting, but why the strange name? Operation Zap?

“This is a practice fish because a real bluefin tuna would be wasted on amateurs. These replicas have internal sensors to measure your precision.”

He flipped the chart again, revealing another diagram with four cuts highlighted. “Akami,” he said, pointing to the bright-red flesh along the sides. “Chutoro.” His finger moved to the area between the belly and the sides. “Otoro.” He tapped the belly. “And kamatoro.” The collar.

The cuts were straightforward, but his tone made it sound like we were preparing for surgery, not sashimi.

“Take your positions behind a table.”

Kenji took the table to my right. Jiro took the one to my left. “This will be fun,” Jiro said, grinning at me.

Kenji glared. And just like that, the tension doubled.

I stared at the fish; its lifeless glass eye and the hyperrealistic paint job were an odd combination. Four outlined cuts marked its body, each holding a plastic piece of fish. Beside it lay oversize tweezers and a small rubber mat. What had seemed like a

teaching moment was something else entirely. No cutting, just plucking pieces from the fish.

Iron Face moved to Taka's table and flipped a switch. The table buzzed ominously, a crackling hum filling the air. "Touch it," he ordered, his stare locked on Taka.

Without hesitation, Taka tapped a finger on the table and immediately screamed, yanking his hand back.

"The tuna is attached to a conductive surface," Iron Face said. "If you touch the table, or if your tools make contact with the table or any part of the fish aside from the piece you're extracting, you will be shocked. Severely." He moved down the line, flipping switches at each station as a low buzz filled the room. "A steady hand is the mark of a sushi chef. One careless cut can destroy hundreds of thousands of yen worth of fish. Your task is to extract the four primary cuts cleanly. Place each one on the rubber mat."

Jiro leaned toward me, muttering, "This reminds me of that operating game where you yank out a funny bone with tweezers."

"Except now it's a fake fatty tuna piece," I replied.

"But you still get shocked," he added.

"Don't listen to him," Kenji snapped. "He wants you to screw up."

"Actually, I want you to screw up," Jiro shot back, his grin widening.

"Enough!" Iron Face barked, silencing us. "Trigger a shock, and you start over. Three strikes, and you're out. You have ninety seconds." He set a timer on the podium. "Begin."

The buzz of the timer signaled the start. Within seconds, shocks echoed around the room, followed by gasps and curses. I accidentally touched the table while picking up my tweezer, and it bit me with a jolt. The initial shock wasn't too painful, but it rattled my nerves. I gritted my teeth. Focus, Akiko. Don't rush. Just stay steady.

I zeroed in on the akami, the largest and easiest cut. Tweezers in hand, I leaned over carefully, ensuring no part of me touched the table. I lowered the tool into the gap, gripped the piece, and pulled. I dropped it onto my mat. One down, three to go.

Glancing around, I saw the others had also succeeded with the akami. I decided to tackle the otoro next, along the belly. A yell broke my concentration as I bent down to align my view. My tweezers grazed the edge of the gap, and the resulting shock shot through me like fire. I yelped, the tool flying from my hand.

Kaiyo was cradling his hand, tears streaming. "The second shock's worse!" he cried.

Iron Face's voice cut through the air. "Did I forget to mention? Each mistake intensifies the shock. Hurry, time is running out. The loser will be eliminated."

My stomach dropped. Frantic, I retrieved my tweezers and forced my breathing to steady. I couldn't afford another mistake. I refocused on the otoro, carefully gripping and pulling the piece free. Relief washed over me as I placed it on the mat.

"Good job," Jiro whispered, his tone unusually sincere.

Kenji let out a triumphant "Yes!" as he placed his second piece down. The tension in the room thickened as we moved to the more difficult cuts.

I bent over the chutoro, my hands trembling. "Forty-five seconds!" Iron Face called out. "Who's going home today?"

Before I could start, a piercing scream froze me in place. Kaiyo stood rigid, his hand pressed against his table. Sparks danced up his arm, his body convulsing violently. Foam bubbled from his lips as his body smoked. Blood streaked from his eyes, dripping from his chin.

For a moment, no one moved. The air reeked of burned fabric. Or was it flesh? He's being electrocuted.

Kaiyo crumpled to the ground, motionless. No one said a word; the only sound was the hum of the tables. And then, out of nowhere, as if on cue, those same two mystery men in black uniforms appeared, dragging his limp body away like garbage.

The timer buzzed, snapping us out of our trance. Iron Face surveyed us with disdain. "Pathetic," he sneered. "Chef Sakamoto says you're the worst group ever, and I don't doubt him. Today was just practice. Practice for what's to come. Imagine what the final challenges will demand." His smile was colder than the steel tables.

What had happened to Kaiyo wasn't a lesson. It was a harsh reminder that hit me like a third shock. There was only one way out of this place. Survive.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Dinner that evening was unusually quiet, a rare break from the usual barrage of verbal attacks thrown my way. But the silence offered me no comfort. It felt cold in the absence of Kaiyo. No one doubted he was dead.

I couldn't stop replaying the sight of him convulsing, sparks crawling up his arm, blood dripping from his eyes. It seared into my memory, haunting me with every bite. Was this apprenticeship worth it? Was a Michelin star worth my life?

Kenji and I sat at one end of the table while Jiro, Taka, and Dori grouped at the other. It felt like we were divided into teams now, alliances formed by default. Survival demanded it.

"Are you okay?" Kenji's voice was low, barely audible over the quiet tapping of chopsticks. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I stared at my bento, my chopsticks aimlessly stabbing at the grilled fish. "It was supposed to be a classroom instruction," I said softly. "That's what Iron Face told us. You heard that, right? It wasn't just me."

Kenji nodded. "I heard the same, but he never said it wouldn't be dangerous. We assumed it wouldn't."

His words were maddening because they were true. We should have known better. This place thrived on deception, luring us into a false sense of security before pulling the rug out from under us. And yet, every time, we fell for it. Kaiyo had paid the price

this time.

“It’s our fault,” I said. The words left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“We didn’t kill Kaiyo. This place did. He knew the risks.”

“Did he, Kenji? Did any of us know what we were walking into when we accepted the apprenticeship? This was supposed to be about becoming great sushi chefs, not...whatever this is.”

“Regardless, that’s one less person to compete with. I’m one step closer to the end.” He shoveled rice into his mouth without pause. “Are you finishing your food?”

His bluntness hit me like a slap. I knew this was a competition and that winning was the goal, but his indifference was jarring. Without a word, I slid my bento over to him.

He dumped the contents into his own container. “Those three,” he said, nodding toward the other end of the table, “are our enemies. We need to protect ourselves from them.”

I frowned. “The challenges don’t really pit us against each other. They never have.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The challenges aren’t designed to make us sabotage each other. They’re testing something else: our problem-solving, our ability to withstand pressure, to push forward even when death is staring us in the face.”

As the words tumbled out of me, clarity formed in my mind. For the first time, I began to understand the program’s real purpose. Every challenge was a worst-case

scenario, a nightmare brought to life. Survive Sakamoto's tests, and you could survive any kitchen. Even the most toxic.

"The lock on my door is a test," I muttered, more to myself than Kenji. "It's all a test. Every single part of this program."

Kenji's brows dipped together. "A test for what?"

"Trust. Endurance. Loyalty. If we can survive this, we can survive anything. Would you want a kitchen staff you couldn't trust who would leak your recipes or turn on you at the first sign of trouble? Or one that gave up as soon as things got tough?"

"You think that's what this is all about?" His tone was skeptical.

"It's an explanation that makes sense. Chef Sakamoto can't just be a psychopath who enjoys torturing people, right?"

"That's debatable," Kenji said, shrugging. "But I still think those three are the enemy."

After dinner, Kenji left me abruptly, saying something about returning to the dorms. I didn't try to keep up. We usually hung out in my room on nights we skipped the library, but tonight, I welcomed the break. I needed time to think.

Since entering the program, I had started to see the bigger picture. The challenges weren't just cruel. They were calculated. Every twist, every lie, every moment of panic served a purpose. But one question kept nagging me: How far would they go to test us?

When I entered my room, I found a folded piece of paper on my bed—a note: Come to the temple in the gardens.

The handwriting was unfamiliar but feminine. My mind jumped to Reina. It had to be her. But what if it wasn't? One of the others could have left this. Taka came to mind. Was it a trap? Or did Reina really want to meet?

My pulse quickened as I tucked the note into my uniform. It was reckless to follow blindly, but curiosity won over caution. My instincts screamed Reina .

Once the hallway cleared, I slipped out of the dorms and hurried to the gardens, the darkness closing around me.

The temple rose against the moonlit sky, its silhouette stark and foreboding. The open windows revealed only darkness, but the faint scent of incense told me it was not empty. Reina stood at the far end of the temple, near the flicker of a single candle. As the flame's light danced across her face, she turned slightly. "Please, come inside."

Tonight, Reina wore a traditional floral kimono, which contrasted with her usual polished attire. The look felt ceremonial.

"Today, another apprentice was lost," she said, her voice low. "How does that make you feel?"

Again, diplomacy challenged me. Speak my mind, or play it safe?

"I thought Kanshisha-san would instruct us in a class, but it was like the other challenges. Were you aware of this?" My voice was steady, but frustration bubbled under the surface.

"I wasn't," she said softly. "I'm sorry you and the others were put through it."

"Sorry?" The word escaped me, sharp and incredulous. "Kaiyo is dead. He was a real person, someone who was looking forward to enjoying his life as a chef," I blurted

before I caught myself and stopped. No matter how much Reina encouraged me to speak freely, she was still Sakamoto's wife, and I couldn't afford to disrespect her. "I'm sorry. My emotions got the best of me."

"Emotions are part of what makes us human," she said calmly. "I would worry if you showed none. What happened to Kaiyo also saddens me, but as I've mentioned, it's important to always be on guard."

"I realize that now," I said. "It was our mistake to assume only the challenges would test us with danger."

"Chef Sakamoto only views the challenges," she said. "That is the only time you will have to impress him. Everything else is a distraction. Remember that."

"How can I stand out if I'm just trying to survive?" I snapped. "Don't you think this is insane? Surely it's illegal."

Her expression shifted, cracking slightly, revealing something dark and monstrous under her composed mask. She spoke, her words now clipped. "Most of you won't make it. That's the point. To be a top chef requires sacrifice and resilience. Perhaps I was wrong about you." She paused, her lips pursed. "Maybe you don't have what it takes to be great...like your father."

My stomach twisted. "Why would you say that?"

Reina tilted her head slightly, a faint smile returning. "Your father was a great chef, perhaps even better than my husband. But..." Something flashed behind her eyes before she looked away. "He could have had it all, the fame, the fortune, and..." She trailed off.

"Fortune and what?" I demanded, stepping closer. "What are you talking about? Tell

me!”

Reina turned back to me, her composure snapping back into place. “Do you want to be the best?” she asked. “You have the talent, just like your father. But talent alone won’t carry you. You must sacrifice.”

“I want to be the best. I’ll work hard, but these challenges?—”

“Akiko,” she interrupted. “If it were easy, every chef would have a Michelin-starred restaurant. Sacrifice weeds out the weak. Resilience sets apart the best. You cannot have one without the other. You must find the right balance.”

She blew out the candle. Darkness engulfed the room, and for a moment, I was blind and vulnerable. When my eyes adjusted, she was already near the temple’s entrance, her figure framed by moonlight.

“Oh, and Akiko...” Reina’s voice softened to a whisper. “Pay attention to the knife. It can be your greatest tool in the kitchen or your undoing.” Before I could respond, she disappeared into the night.

The temple was silent, but my thoughts refused to settle. Reina’s cryptic warning echoed in my head. Would the next challenge push me to my breaking point?

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I left the temple feeling both hopeful and confused. Hopeful that Reina was trying to help me but baffled by how matter of fact she was about the challenges and deaths. Was she desensitized, or was she more like Chef Sakamoto than I wanted to admit?

She spoke about the challenges as if they were written exams. Show effort, work hard, and you'll earn a gold star. Simple as that. But nothing here was simple. Not even her advice. She was just as cryptic as Iron Face. What did she mean about paying attention to the knife? Still, I felt grateful for her guidance, even though I knew better than to blindly trust her.

What bothered me most was how she'd brought up my father. It had come out of nowhere, like she knew it would dredge up painful memories. Had she even known him? Maybe. He'd been best friends with her husband. But my father had never mentioned Reina, not once. And the way she compared us, as if I were destined to fall short of his greatness, made my blood boil. What could she possibly know about me? About my potential?

I stepped out of the temple and into the gardens. The night air was cool against my skin, raising goose bumps along my arms. The pathway was dimly lit by the ishidoros, their faint candlelight barely enough to counter the darkness. Every so often, a shadow flickered in my periphery—a trick of the moonlight, I told my jumpy self.

Then I heard it. A crunch of gravel up ahead. My breath caught, and I froze. Someone was there.

Had Reina come back to provide me with more cryptic advice?

From the shadows, a figure emerged. The light from the ishidoros glimmered over them, but not enough to reveal their face. By the outline, I could tell it wasn't Reina. A man. Kenji, maybe? My mind jumped to the worst possibilities. Taka or Dori. Maybe they'd come to finish what they'd started the day before.

Behind me, leaves rustled faintly, making me glance over my shoulder. I thought I heard voices, faint and indistinct. My imagination was taking on a life of its own.

The person continued toward me, slowly, deliberately, making the gravel crunch underfoot. If they'd already seen me, there was no use in trying to hide. The fork in the path was still a ways off, making a detour impossible, and venturing off the trail into the dark would mean losing what little light the ishidoros offered. I had two options: run or face them.

Everything is a test, Akiko.

If it was Taka or Dori, maybe this was my test. To outthink them. I had information they might want, something I could use to keep them at bay. Keep your enemies close.

I held my ground, heart pounding as I watched the figure approach. Their footsteps crunched louder with every step, their shadowy outline growing clearer. But the flickering light played tricks on their features, keeping them hidden until they stepped into a patch of moonlight.

I blinked. It was Jiro.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his familiar smile coming into view. "Isn't this area off limits?"

“I should ask you the same,” I replied, arms crossed.

“I hate being cooped up in the dorms.”

I no longer considered Jiro a direct threat. He’d had countless chances to sabotage me and hadn’t. But that didn’t mean I trusted him.

I shifted my weight to one foot, my stance firm. “Jiro, what do you want from me?”

“What do you mean?” He’d moved close enough that I could make out the hazel in his eyes.

“You defended me at dinner. You pulled Taka and Dori off me. What’s your angle? Just come out with it once and for all.”

He threw his hands up in mock surrender. “Whoa, I’m sorry if I was being too nice.”

“That’s exactly what I’m getting at. Why are you being nice? I broke up with you, and from what I remember, you weren’t exactly thrilled about it. We shouldn’t even be talking.”

He hesitated. His gaze fell to the ground for a beat before meeting mine again. “I’m just trying to keep things fair. Level the playing field... I hear the whispers you don’t, Akiko. You have no idea how much danger you’re in.”

“Me? You mean us...everyone here.”

“Yes, we all are, but you especially. I know you’ve gotten this far, and I’m not trying to take that away from you. But...”

“But what?”

Jiro kicked at the ground with his shoe, avoiding eye contact. I just didn't get it. Why was he even here? Why did he care? One minute he was acting how I expected, like someone who despised me. And the next, he was singing praises and telling me I was cute and deserved to win.

"You have to trust me. That's all I can say," he offered up eventually. "You deserve to be here. I don't want to see your chance at real opportunity diminished."

"Fairness? That's the angle? That's what this is about?" I raised a brow. "This has absolutely nothing to do with our past. I mean, you can see how this looks from where I'm standing, right?"

"I'll admit, I was pissed when you broke up with me. But this isn't about revenge, if that's what you're thinking." He paused, as if reflecting for a moment. "I was kind of an asshole back then."

"Kind of?" My voice pitched higher.

"Okay, fine. I was an asshole." He shrugged, a sheepish grin tugging at his lips. "But?—"

"Please don't tell me you've changed," I interrupted.

"People do change. Cut me some slack here... You're not the same person you were back then."

I tilted my head, studying him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, for starters, you're confident now. You're not afraid to speak your mind or step into the spotlight. Back then, you were quiet and kept to yourself. But now..." He gestured vaguely, as if searching for the right words. "You're surer of yourself."

And you've grown up. You've always been cute, but now—" He eyed me up and down. "Now you're beautiful. Graceful, even. It suits you. You were kind of clumsy back then."

I stared at him, caught off guard by his words. Compliments I didn't realize he was capable of giving or that I even wanted to hear. At least I think they were compliments. Whatever they were, he had to have been paying attention to dish them out. I mean, really paying attention.

But this was also Jiro. Fuckboy numero uno. He was the guy who could talk his way into any girl's bed. Had he rehearsed this entire spiel? Or had he really changed?

"Well, thank you," I said cautiously. "That's nice of you to say. But you still haven't answered my original question. What do you want from me?"

He sighed, his expression softening. "I guess I'd like to be friends again."

"Friends? The Jiro I know doesn't just want to be friends with a girl."

"I'm not that Jiro anymore," he said. "I've grown and changed. Look, I was a punk in university. I know that. Honestly, how you even put up with me is a mystery."

"It really is," I quipped, unable to help myself.

"If I were you, I would've dumped me sooner."

"I'm glad we can agree on that."

He chuckled. "I probably wouldn't even entertain a conversation with me right now. It's asking a lot."

“No arguments there,” I said simply.

“But when I think back... We had some good times, didn’t we? You made me feel...different. Like I could open up and say things I didn’t tell anyone else. Remember how we’d talk for hours before falling asleep? Those are good memories for me.”

Don’t crack, Akiko. This is Jiro. Remember why you broke up with him.

“And every time you cooked for me...” His voice dipped. “It made me feel special. Loved. I know I didn’t show it enough back then, but I felt it.”

Shit!

“I’m sorry, I have to go.” The words spilled out before I could stop them. I pushed past him, my shoulder brushing against his chest as I forced myself forward. My pace quickened with each step, each one heavier than the last. I didn’t dare look back, afraid even a glance would shatter the fragile dam holding my tears back.

“Wait, did I say something wrong?” he called out, his voice laced with confusion.

No. You said everything right.

As I marched on, I clenched my fists at my sides, wishing the cool night air could numb my heart.

I rushed into the dorms, footsteps echoing faintly down the empty hallway. Reaching my room, I shoved my door open, stepped inside, and slammed it shut behind me. I leaned against the wood, squeezing my eyes shut to steady my breathing.

Tears pricked at my lashes, and I swiped at them angrily. How could Jiro still manage

to affect me like this? I thought I'd buried those feelings long ago, yet here they were, surfacing with brutality.

Then, movement. I held my breath as a figure stirred in the shadows near my bed, the dark silhouette sharpening into focus.

"Where were you?" The voice was quiet but unmistakable. My eyes adjusted to the dark, and there was Kenji, perched on the edge of my bed, elbows on his knees and hands clasped tightly together.

"Kenji?" I forced my voice to remain calm despite the creepy feeling that overcame me. "What are you doing here?"

He switched on the small lamp, and the dim yellow glow warmed the room. "I was worried about you," he said calmly as he stood, his figure looming closer. "You disappeared without saying anything. I thought something might've happened."

"I'm fine," I said, forcing a tiny smile I didn't feel. "I just needed some air."

"Air?" His voice rose. "You think it's smart to wander off alone in the middle of the night? This place isn't safe, Akiko. You know that. How am I supposed to protect you if you won't tell me where you are, always?"

"Kenji, I don't need protecting," I said firmly, taking a step back until my body pressed against the door. "I'm not a child. I can take care of myself."

His gaze punched right through me, unrelenting. His voice dropped, low and menacing. "You're not handling anything. You're acting like you're untouchable, like the rules here don't apply to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“Sure you do.” His lips curled into a cold smirk. “You’re the special one here. Wait, what did Jiro call you? Oh yes, the trailblazer. The one who has no problem accepting help from him or Reina, but when it’s me, suddenly, it’s a no-go.”

“Kenji.” My voice cracked, fear bleeding through. “Leave. Now. Please.”

He tipped his head. “Why won’t you answer me? Where were you? Who were you with?”

“I went for a walk.” I folded my arms across my chest, trying to project confidence while nausea churned in my stomach. “Do I need your approval now?”

His laugh was low and soulless. “How can I protect you if you keep shutting me out?”

“Kenji, we’ve already talked about this. I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“Yes, you’ve said that many times. Why is my help labeled suffocating ?” He took a step closer, his presence growing like a shadow. “That’s what you think, isn’t it?”

“That’s not true. You know I appreciate you.”

“For us to survive, we have to trust each other.” His words crawled under my skin as he closed the distance. “And I’m starting to feel like you don’t trust me anymore.”

I shifted uncomfortably, my back pressed flush against the door, no room left to retreat. “You’re overthinking this, Kenji. We’re still a team. We’ve come this far together, and we’ll make it to the end. But right now, I need you to leave.”

His chest heaved, his breathing ragged like he was wrestling with a dark thought. For a long moment, he stood there, his frame rigid, his gaze searing into mine.

Finally, he let out a slow, reluctant breath. “I’m only trying to help,” he said, but there was nothing soft about his tone.

He reached for the doorknob, and I quickly moved to the side. He hesitated at the door, his hand lingering on the frame for a moment before he finally stepped into the hallway.

The second he was gone, I shut the door and wedged the chair beneath the handle, the scrape of wood against the floor breaking the silence. My hands shook as I backed away from the door, exhaling a shaky breath. Something about this place was making everyone change.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

#### JIRO TACHIBANA

She still doesn't trust me fully, I thought as I watched Akiko head toward the maze. Not that I blamed her. I'd given her plenty of reasons not to, back when I was too immature to realize what I had right in front of me. But she had grown. Everything about her now, her confidence, her drive—it was sharper, more refined. She was still Akiko, but a version of her I had never imagined.

My father used to say I coasted through life on the back of his hard work, and he wasn't wrong. A prominent politician in Kyoto married to a celebrated socialite, my parents were the sort of power couple that turned heads and closed deals. Wealth wasn't just a privilege in my family but a legacy spanning generations.

But with that legacy came expectations. And my role? To carry the torch, whether I liked it or not.

For most of my life, I didn't. My university years were an extended rebellion. Parties, women, and adventures in exotic corners of the world. Anything to avoid responsibility. And for a while, my parents indulged me, maybe thinking I'd eventually grow out of it.

Then came the ultimatum: Join my father in politics or be cut off from the money faucet.

I resented him for forcing my hand. But then fate—rather, Akiko—changed

everything. Overhearing my father talk about Chef Sakamoto's program and mention her name sparked something in me. I hadn't thought about Akiko in years, but the memories came flooding back.

I couldn't resist.

That's how I found myself in my father's study, pitching the most absurd idea of my life. "I want to be a chef," I told him. He laughed, assuming it was another one of my excuses to avoid the real world.

"I've given it a lot of thought. It's what I want to do," I insisted, staring him down. It was true; I had. In fact, I'd done my homework on Sakamoto and his secret program.

My father didn't hide his disappointment, but I knew how to play him. I appealed to his pride. I promised him I'd prove myself or join him in the office within six months, no questions asked. He asked whether I truly knew what I was getting myself into, whether I was aware of the program that Chef Sakamoto ran. I told him I wouldn't waste his time if I didn't. "If you get into trouble there, I may not be able to help you," he said.

I admit, hearing those words come out of his mouth gave me pause. My entire life, I'd done whatever I wanted, knowing my father would always bail me out of any trouble I got into. Now we were at a crossroads. I could take the safe, comfortable route and join him. Or I could move on, knowing I had no safety net.

"I understand," I told him. "I'm ready to face whatever happens, alone."

Begrudgingly, he made the call. Promises were exchanged, strings were pulled, and just like that, I was an apprentice.

While my reasons for being here had nothing to do with culinary ambition, Akiko

didn't have to know the truth, not yet. And if that meant betraying her trust one last time, so be it.

The garden was quiet now, the scent of jasmine mingling with the dampness of the earth. As I started back toward the dorms, the shadows around me felt heavier, darker than they should have under the moonlight. Was it my imagination, or had this place started to wear on me too?

Earlier, I'd played my hand better than I expected. Akiko might have put on a strong front, but I knew her better than she realized. She wanted to believe me, even if she wouldn't admit it. The cracks were there; I just had to exploit them.

The rest of the competition was a chessboard in my mind. Taka was reckless and easily provoked into making mistakes. Dori followed him blindly, a predictable pawn. But Kenji? Kenji was the wild card. His blind devotion to Akiko was both a strength and a liability. But that had to end. Severing their bond wouldn't just isolate him. It would leave Akiko vulnerable. And more reliant on me.

Failure wasn't an option. If she faltered, my plan would crumble. Trust wasn't necessary; survival was a must, even if I became the one person she would never ever forgive.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

#### AKIKO

I was still shaken by Kenji's behavior. His insistence on controlling me went beyond caring for a friend; it verged on maniacal.

My mind raced through all the arguments we'd had. Were there red flags I'd ignored? Kenji was my childhood friend, and my best friend back then, and with people like him, you cut them a lot of slack, right? I'd brushed off behavior that would've set off alarms with anyone else. But now, sitting on the edge of my bed, I felt shaken.

Surviving the challenges had always been my focus. But now that the group had been whittled down to five, the dynamics had shifted. We were becoming more dangerous than the challenges themselves. Was it Chef Sakamoto's intention all along to pit us against one another and reveal our true colors? If so, it was equal parts brilliant and psychotic.

No one was the same person they'd been on day one, including me.

The program had torn me apart and magnified every flaw. My upbringing had already left me with abandonment issues and a deep distrust of people. I'd grown up cautious and distant, with walls so high only a few ever broke through. Reuniting with Kenji was proof I hadn't lost everyone important to me. But now, I wasn't so sure about him. Too many years had passed. We weren't the same anymore.

The same was true for Jiro. He'd broken through my wall once, only to leave me

rebuilding it when our relationship fell apart. But the Jiro I saw now didn't resemble the Jiro from the past. He, too, had changed.

And I'd changed. I was even less trusting and more cynical. I felt myself retreating into a hole, wanting to shut everyone out.

I should've seen Kenji's transformation coming. Thinking back, it was obvious. What I'd once considered sweet had morphed into something obsessive.

And Jiro's sudden declaration that he wanted to be friends again? What the hell was that about? He'd thrown a massive wrench into everything. They both had.

Now, it felt like it was me against the rest. Was I overreacting about Kenji? No. I didn't think so.

But Jiro? Were his intentions genuine? After a little over three years together, I liked to think I could tell when he was lying.

Had Jiro really gone from adversary to...dare I say, someone I could trust again? He didn't have to stop Taka and Dori from assaulting me. But wasn't that the bare minimum of being a decent human being? See something wrong, step in. Or was there more to it? He'd said he wanted to be friends and admitted he had failed our relationship. Was that so hard to believe?

Were people truly capable of change? Could someone bad ever become good?

I felt more confused than ever. How was I supposed to play this game moving forward? Focus only on surviving the challenges? Or question every interaction, every conversation with Kenji, Jiro, and even Reina and Chef Sakamoto? Assume the game was twenty-four seven now, and everyone was in play?

The sound of the dormitory door opening echoed down the hall, pulling me from my thoughts. I figured it was Jiro returning. Before I knew it, I was on my feet, stepping out of my room.

I moved silently down the hallway, my steps light as I avoided the creakier boards until I reached Hideo's old room. It was next to Jiro's; he occupied the first room. I pushed the door open. Hideo's belongings had been cleared out.

"Akiko?" Jiro's head popped out of his room. "What are you doing?"

"I want to switch rooms. Are you okay if I take this one?"

"Why? I mean...yeah, it's fine. Are you okay?"

For a moment, I considered telling him about my run-in with Kenji but decided against it. Better to keep my cards close. "I don't like my room, that's all."

I hurried back to my room, my hands trembling as I packed my belongings. I shoved my clothes into a pillowcase with quick, jerky movements. A floorboard creaked outside my door, and I froze. Was someone watching? Listening? Or was it just my paranoia?

On my way back to Hideo's room, I passed Kenji's door. I couldn't help but wonder if he was on the other side, awake, aware of my every move. The thought of his eyes on me made my skin crawl.

When I reached Hideo's room, Jiro stood in the hall, watching me with a slight furrow in his brow. I sensed him trying to piece together the real reason for my room change.

"Need help?" he asked.

“I’ve got it,” I said, forcing a small smile as I stepped inside. There wasn’t much to unpack.

“Well, if you need anything, just knock like this.” Jiro rapped on the wall between our rooms three times.

I thanked him and closed the door, shoving the chair under the doorknob. For the first time since arriving at the compound, I felt relieved. Relieved not to be sleeping next to Kenji.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

#### AKIKO'S DREAM – THE LOCKED DOOR

Later that night, the recurring dream returned. The one where I'm chasing after my father. But this time, I made it farther than I ever had before.

The pier's boards groaned beneath my feet, and the tang of saltwater filled my nose. His silhouette at the end of the pier, near the bait shack, teased me like a mirage. He was smiling, waving me forward. I ran, the wind blowing at my face as I pushed myself to reach him. But when I arrived, he was gone.

I stood before the weathered bait shack, its warped wooden slats barely holding it up. "Papa!" I called out, my voice straining against the roar of waves below and the cries of seagulls. I peeked over the edge, expecting to see him face down in the waters. But he wasn't.

And then I spotted him on the boardwalk, smiling, waving. How was he able to stay ahead of me? Frustrated, I charged forward, determined to close the gap and finally grab hold of his hand. Yet when I reached the spot where he'd stood, he was gone. Again.

Suddenly, the boardwalk was teeming with people. Where had they all come from? I pushed through the crowd, searching for the familiar blue shirt he always wore. A flash of color ahead caught my eye. There he was.

I took off, weaving through the crowd, bouncing off people like a pinball. He slipped

into an alleyway between two buildings, and I followed. As I turned the corner, I caught sight of a door at the far end of the alley just as it closed. I sprinted toward it.

“Papa!” My tiny fists slammed against the wood until they stung. “Papa, please.” My voice cracked, but the locked door stood firm and impenetrable.

Where had he gone? What was this place?

I woke up with a jolt, my chest heaving, my hands clenched tight as if they were still hammering against that door. For a moment, I didn’t know where I was, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings of my new room. Slowly, reality settled in, and I exhaled.

The dream always left me feeling empty, but this time was different. The locked door lingered in my thoughts. Was it my father I was chasing? Or was I chasing something else—something locked away from me?

I sat there in the darkness, grappling with what the dream was trying to tell me, if anything. Or was it just a cruel trick of the universe reminding me that my father had abandoned me?

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The following day, it was impossible to hide that I had switched rooms as we waited for Iron Face to escort us to breakfast.

At the front of the dorms, Jiro and I stood side by side, in full view. Taka and Dori were smack dab in the middle, their heads tilted close, locked in a hushed conversation. And at the far end, Kenji stood alone, his simmering anger unmistakable as he stared me down.

To him, it must have looked like Jiro and I had paired up, forming our own alliance. But that couldn't have been further from the truth. No words about teaming up had passed between us. Still, I knew what Kenji was really thinking, that I'd lied about my feelings for Jiro. It looked terrible, but I couldn't worry about appearances. I was playing the game.

Taka and Dori were too preoccupied to acknowledge the room change, their conversation full of quick words and sharp glances. They were clearly strategizing. Five people were left. Three challenges to overcome.

The dormitory door creaked open, and Iron Face stepped inside, his gaze picking over us. His eyes settled on me momentarily, then flicked to Kenji, and the corner of his mouth twitched upward. It wasn't a warm smile. It was the knowing grin of someone reveling in unraveling alliances, the kind of smile that said he knew exactly how close we were to turning on each other, and found it entertaining.

During breakfast, I sat to Jiro's left. Taka and Dori had abandoned their usual seats

and chosen the middle of the table, sitting shoulder to shoulder. Kenji sat at the far end, alone.

His chopsticks moved in a deliberate, grating rhythm against the bento box while his eyes remained locked on me. I kept my eyes on my food, but the intensity of his stare was hard to ignore. I didn't have to look to know he wasn't blinking.

Jiro leaned closer, his voice so low it barely reached me. "He's going to kill you."

The chopsticks in my hand froze. The words didn't shock me as much as his tone, as if it were an obvious conclusion.

"Why would you think that?" I whispered.

Jiro's eyes didn't leave Kenji as he spoke. "Because you committed the ultimate betrayal. You switched rooms. That wasn't just you making a personal decision, Akiko. It sent a message."

"What kind of message?"

"That you're like the rest of us. You care only about making it to the end."

His accusation hit me hard. Was I really that person now? A cold, calculating player in a twisted game? Or was I just someone taking steps for their safety?

Jiro continued. "Hideo, Miyo, Osamu, Sana, and Kaiyo are all dead. You don't really think Chef Sakamoto plans to pick an apprentice from what's left of us, do you?"

I stared at him, trying to read his expression. "Wait, what are you saying?"

He finally turned to look at me. "This is a process of elimination. Only one of us is

leaving here when this is over.”

The air left my lungs, and the hairs on my arms felt prickly. Only one? Four more deaths?

“How can you be so sure?” I asked, a slight tremble in my voice. “What if more than one of us makes it?”

Jiro tilted his head slightly, his eyes flicking to Taka and Dori, then to Kenji. “I agree. It’s possible. But highly unlikely. This isn’t about teamwork, Akiko. It never has been. We’re all just waiting for our turn on the chopping block.”

I followed his gaze, taking in the room. Taka and Dori were leaning close, their heads nearly touching as they whispered. Their quick glances toward us were calculating. They weren’t wondering if we were a threat; they were deciding which one of us to eliminate first.

On the other hand, Kenji wasn’t trying to hide his feelings. His grip on his chopsticks tightened. I expected them to snap. Vengeance seemed to become his motivation.

Jiro leaned back in his seat, his posture casual, but his eyes remained sharp. “We’ll talk later,” he said. “When it’s safe.”

It was obvious that Taka and Dori had the strongest alliance in the group. Their strategies had been aligned from the start, and their bond was unbreakable. Unlike my fractured partnership with Kenji or the flimsy understanding I had with Jiro, Taka and Dori’s relationship made them very dangerous.

Jiro, on the other hand, was a mystery. He played the game well, but I couldn’t tell whether he was playing for himself or something else entirely. Was aligning with him a smart move or a death sentence?

And then there was Kenji, the boy who used to make me laugh until my stomach hurt. He was gone, replaced by a shadow I no longer recognized. The look on his face was a mixture of hate and betrayal. In the past, I had always been the one left behind, the one others turned their backs on. Now, I appeared to be the traitor.

Could we ever repair our broken relationship? Did I even want to?

Taka and Dori were the ones to beat. Kenji was my biggest threat, and Jiro...well, Jiro was a conundrum.

I swallowed hard, my gaze dropping to my half-finished bento. The way Kenji's hand gripped his chopsticks, the way Taka and Dori whispered with darting glances, even the way Jiro smiled as if he had nothing to lose: every move felt like a loaded gun pointed at me.

I had three more challenges to survive. And I couldn't afford to lose a single one.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Did this game reveal who we truly were beneath the surface, or did it change us? Was I really someone cold and calculating, or was I forced to be this way because of my situation? The thought stuck with me as I hung a tablecloth on the clothesline.

Not everything was gloom and doom. Something positive had happened after breakfast. Iron Face assigned me to laundry duty, cleaning and hanging table linens from the restaurant's dinner service. Meanwhile, Kenji got stuck scrubbing the bathrooms. I couldn't help but chuckle when it was announced. He'd always wanted to help me with chores, but this felt like poetic justice.

Because of my assignment, I had the rare opportunity to be outside. The air was crisp, the breeze light, and the weather mild. Sunshine peeked through scattered clouds, warming my skin as I worked. For a brief moment as I stood among the swaying white linens, the scent of lilac soap surrounding me, I forgot where I was. Almost.

Hanging linen was a task so simple and repetitive that my mind wandered back to the program. Iron Face's mention of points gnawed at me. None had been awarded yet. Just another meaningless layer to the game. In fact, nothing about this place added up. Not the rules, not the methods, and certainly not the motives.

Even Reina's words of advice seemed suspect. "Chef Sakamoto will choose whomever he wants." Was he really choosing? Seemed more like a process of elimination, like Jiro had suggested.

Wait, if I'm the last person standing, would Chef Sakamoto deny me the

apprenticeship spot because I'm a woman?

Could I really be here just as a tribute to my father? If that was true, it would make everything worse. Chef Sakamoto had known precisely what I'd endure here. He knew the risks I'd face. Would my father have approved of this?

A gust of wind raced through the compound, sending the linens flapping wildly like flags of surrender.

Movement at the end of the row caught my eye, and my pulse quickened. Kenji? I couldn't let my guard down.

"Hey!" I called, but the figure darted out of sight behind the next row.

I dropped the tablecloth I'd been hanging and sprinted to the spot, yanking the linens aside. Nothing. The breeze rustled the empty line, mocking me.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw it again, another shadow slipping past at the far end. My heart raced as I tore after it, shoving the tablecloths out of my way. When I rounded the row, no one was there.

Maybe I'm just on edge. Perhaps it's nothing.

But then I saw him as I adjusted the linen back onto the line. A man stood in the distance, his back to me. The slope of his shoulders and the way he turned his head were all too familiar. My pulse quickened.

It couldn't be him—my father.

Before I could think, my feet moved on their own, carrying me toward him. But as I rounded the corner where he'd been standing, he was gone.

My chest heaved as I scanned the area. My eyes locked on the library just in time to see someone slip behind the building.

Kenji, I swear I'll kill you if this is some twisted joke.

I sprinted after the figure, every step crunching the gravel beneath. When I reached the back of the library, the only place left for him to go was the maze. Without hesitation, I dove into the manicured hedges.

The walls of greenery loomed around me. Every rustle of leaves set my nerves on edge. I thought I heard footsteps on the other side of the hedge, but when I hurried to the corner, no one was there.

By the time I stumbled out of the maze and into the garden, my breaths were ragged. I scanned the area but saw nothing. No man, no shadow, no trace of anyone.

I swore I'd seen someone—a real person, not a figment of my imagination. It couldn't have been a hallucination. Impossible. Yet here I stood, alone, staring at the pink canopy of cherry blossoms swaying in the breeze. Was this place getting to me? The anxiety of not knowing what the next challenge would bring, stacked on top of the guilt from watching my fellow apprentices eliminated in the most horrific ways, was a lot to bear. The wheels in my head wouldn't stop turning, taxed and spinning overtime without additional pay.

But if it really was my father, why now? Why here?

I forced myself back to the clotheslines. As I adjusted the last of the linens, a sharp movement caught me off guard. A figure emerged from behind the sheets, and I screamed, stumbling back.

“Whoa! Easy, Akiko!” Jiro's voice broke through my panic. His expression was as

startled as mine. “It’s just me.”

“Damn it, Jiro!” I snapped, clutching my chest. “You scared the hell out of me! What are you even doing sneaking around like that?”

He frowned. “I wasn’t sneaking. I thought you saw me coming. Are you all right? You seem on edge.”

I glanced up and down the row, still jittery. “You shouldn’t sneak up on me like that.” My voice was quieter now. “I’m a target here. You know that.”

“Hey, I’m sorry.” Jiro’s tone softened. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just finished my chores in the restaurant and was heading to the library. I saw you and thought I’d say hi.”

I sighed, the tension in my shoulders easing. “It’s fine. I guess I am on edge.”

“We all are.” He tilted his head, studying me.

For a hot second, I debated telling him about the man I’d seen, my father’s ghost haunting the compound. But why give him something he might use against me when I didn’t know his true intentions?

“I’m fine,” I said instead. “Just tired. This place is getting to me.”

He raked his hand through his hair, clearing his eyes. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m tired of it too.”

That surprised me. “You?”

“Why not me?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. You just don’t seem like the type to... Never mind.” I shook my head. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I told you. I was heading to the library. You want to join?”

“I can’t leave until Iron Face checks the linens.”

“Well, you know where to find me.”

As I watched him leave, I caught sight of Reina in the mansion’s second-floor window. There she stood, her silhouette a chilling still life of herself, her gaze pinning me in place. When I raised my hand to wave, she stepped back into the shadows, leaving me with the unsettling feeling that I’d just failed another test.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I waited much longer than usual for Iron Face to arrive for inspection. He acknowledged me with a grunt before moving through the rows of hanging linens with his hands clasped behind his back, scrutinizing each tablecloth as if hunting for a microscopic stain that would send me back to square one.

I trailed a few steps behind him, my stomach grumbling with hunger. Each time it did, Iron Face would pause and tilt his head slightly in my direction. It was enough to give me a complex.

When he finally reached the last row of linens without uttering a word of criticism, he gave me a curt nod of approval. Relief rushed over me. Even laundry felt like a matter of life and death.

I glanced back at the mansion as Iron Face disappeared. The window where I had last seen Reina remained empty. I stared until Jiro's face appeared in my sight line.

"Why are you still standing here?" he asked.

I blinked, nearly stumbling as I took a step back. "I, uh, I had to wait for Iron Face to inspect my chore. He just left."

"Well, it's lunchtime. Shall we?" He held out his arm, and I ignored it.

I made sure to keep a step behind him as we walked. Whenever we fell into step, our arms occasionally brushed against each other. I didn't need reminding of our time

dating.

“Was anyone else in the library earlier?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Taka and Dori were just leaving when I got there. They were flipping through books on ramen noodles.”

“Ramen? Do you think that’s the next challenge?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Or it was a misdirect to throw me off. I wouldn’t put it past them.”

The idea of planting false flags hadn’t occurred to me before, but of course it made sense. Fantastic. Just one more delightful way to meet my end here.

Inside the dining room, everyone sat in their usual seats. The arrangement felt more like a battlefield than a dining hall. Jiro and I on the high ground. Taka and Dori in the valley. And Kenji, lurking along the edges of a tangled black forest where shadowy creatures roamed.

The tension broke as Taka lifted the cover off his bento. “What the hell?”

The bento held only shrimp tempura. No rice. No vegetables. Just golden-fried shrimp.

“What’s this about?” I muttered, glancing at Jiro.

He picked up a shrimp and bit into it. “Tastes fine to me. Maybe they’re trying to use up the shrimp before it spoils.”

Nice leftovers.

I took a bite and begrudgingly admitted it was perfectly cooked. The batter was light and crisp, just as it should be. Whoever made this had known what they were doing.

As I chewed, a thought struck me. “Do you think this is a clue?” I asked Jiro.

“What do you mean?”

“We were all served the same thing. Maybe it’s hinting at the next challenge.”

“Cooking shrimp tempura?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Or something related to tempura. Everything here is a test. It wouldn’t surprise me if this meal is part of it.”

“That’s true.” He nodded, leaning back in his chair. “You’ve made tempura a million times before.”

“And you? Have you done it even once?”

“Let’s just say I’m better at eating tempura than cooking it. But knowing how these challenges work, if it is about tempura, then it’s not about tempura.”

“Agreed.”

All through lunch, my mind investigated the possibilities. What could the twist be? Maybe we’d have to fry something unexpected, like an entire lobster or even a sea snake. Jiro joked it might be something absurd, like mochi candy. Either way, we both agreed it wouldn’t be shrimp. That would be too predictable.

The door creaked open, and Iron Face entered, silencing the room. “Did you enjoy your tempura?”

No one dared to answer.

“Your next challenge will take place now,” he declared.

“Now?” Dori blurted out. “But we haven’t had time to research?—”

Iron Face turned to him with a look that curdled the air between them. “Do you need to research how to prepare soft-shell crab tempura?”

My jaw nearly hit the table. Soft-shell crab? Seriously? While it wasn’t shrimp, it wasn’t a curveball.

“Today, you will cook for Chef Sakamoto,” Iron Face continued, his gaze sweeping across the room. “Do you think you can accomplish this without embarrassing yourselves?”

We all nodded. It was the safest response.

“Follow me.”

Iron Face led us to the same area where his instruction class had been set up. I wondered why we weren’t in the training kitchen, where the stoves were.

In the center of the clearing stood a raised platform surrounded by a solid circular wall. The sides were too tall to see over, but five staircases, one for each of us, led up to the top. Something about this setup felt off.

“The Sakamotos have a perfect view,” Jiro murmured, gesturing toward the balcony jutting out from the house. Chef Sakamoto and Reina stood there now, watching us like hawks. “Looks like we’ll be performing on a stage for them.”

“Today at Kage Ryu, you will face Kumo Tempura!” Iron Face announced, glee dripping from every syllable. “A dish that demands skill, precision...and balance.”

Spider tempura? I frowned, realizing he must be referring to the look of a soft-shell crab. Once it’s fried, it does resemble a spider. But what that had to do with balance, I had no idea.

“The challenge is simple,” Iron Face continued. “Prepare your crabs, fry them to perfection, and plate your dish for Chef Sakamoto.” He gestured to the balcony, where Chef Sakamoto stood stoically beside Reina. “When the challenge begins, ascend the stairs to your assigned station. In the center, you’ll find everything you need—crabs, skillets, and ingredients. Once finished, place your dish on the table. You have fifteen minutes.”

No one said a word.

“Take your positions,” Iron Face ordered.

We moved to our assigned staircases. I stood between Jiro and Dori, with Kenji directly opposite me, out of view. Taka and Dori exchanged a quick glance before taking their places. The air buzzed with unease.

Iron Face raised an air horn. The sharp blare signaled the start, and we bolted up the stairs.

At the top, I froze. This wasn’t a stage. It was a giant steel pool filled with boiling oil.

The rising heat licked at my skin as I took in the full scope of the setup. Five rope bridges stretched across the oil, leading to a central cooking station. Each bridge had a single rope to walk on and another to hold for balance. The cooking platform in the middle was circular and unsteady; the entire design resembled a spider’s web.

Oh. That's why it's called the Kumo Tempura challenge. How stupid of me to think it had something to do with the FREAKING CRAB!

"This whole setup is completely unstable!" I shouted to Jiro.

"I think that's the point," he said.

Taka was the first to step onto a rope bridge. It swayed wildly under his weight.

Jiro stepped onto his bridge next, gripping the top rope for balance. Kenji and Dori followed. My legs locked in place, the commonsense part of my brain screaming to stay put.

Come on, Akiko. You've got this. Don't be the one who can't even make it to the cooking platform.

I took a deep breath and stepped onto the rope. It wobbled, and I steadied myself, focusing on one step at a time. Reina's advice about balance came flooding back. She had warned me, but I wished she'd been clearer.

As I crossed, the bubbling noise hissed beneath me, a reminder of the danger below. The skin around my neck quickly turned slick, and I used the back of my hand to wipe away a trickle.

"Hurry, Akiko!" Jiro called.

The bridges swayed in tandem as we crossed, each contributing to the motion. By the time I reached the platform, Kenji was already there, prepping his batter with laser focus. The cooking station itself was no better than the bridges. It shook with every step, and there was barely enough room for us to maneuver. One wrong move could send me, or someone else, straight into the boiling oil.

I started mixing my tempura batter, my hands trembling. The heat, the instability, the stakes: Everything about this challenge was designed to break us.

A sharp crackling erupted as Kenji dropped his crab into his skillet filled with boiling oil, sending a spatter across the platform. Jiro and Taka recoiled as the droplets hit them.

“You’re a fucking asshole, Kenji!” Taka yelled, shaking his hand.

Kenji’s grin stretched wide, his eyes narrowing as they locked onto me. He looked like a devil child who had just set off firecrackers in the house, pleased by the chaos he’d caused.

Then he did the unthinkable. Kenji grabbed the edge of the tabletop and began rocking the platform deliberately. The entire setup wobbled violently, sending tremors through the structure. Oil from the skillets splashed everywhere, sizzling.

“Cut it out, Kenji!” Taka shouted, his voice filled with panic.

Kenji only laughed as he flipped his crab with tongs, the batter crackling loudly. Then he stomped his feet, shaking the platform even harder. Dori flailed, barely keeping his balance.

Taka lunged, shoving Kenji hard enough to send him teetering on the platform’s edge. Kenji managed to grab the tabletop and steady himself, his laughter now a low rumble.

“This is getting out of control!” I yelled, my voice cutting through the chaos. “If you two keep this up, we’re all going down!”

“Don’t you get it, Akiko?” Kenji slammed his foot down, throwing the platform off

balance. “We’re not all supposed to make it past this challenge.”

His words hit me like a gut punch, a harsh reminder that one of us wasn’t leaving alive.

“Focus, Akiko!” Jiro said as he lowered his crab into the skillet.

“Yeah, listen to your punk boyfriend,” Kenji taunted.

Kenji finished his crab, plating it with a smug look. He grabbed the rope bridge and began his trek back to the stairs. Every step sent violent shudders through the platform, and when he reached the midpoint, he stopped and looked back at us. His grin widened.

Then he started bouncing on the rope.

The platform jerked and swayed like a seesaw, each motion growing more erratic. The remaining oil in Kenji’s skillet tipped over, splashing onto Taka. He screamed as the searing liquid burned his skin. His arms flailed wildly, striking Dori, who was flipping his crab. Dori staggered, his foot slipping off the edge.

He reached out blindly, grabbing Taka’s uniform in desperation. Taka wasn’t ready for the sudden weight, and with Dori pulling hard, they lost their balance. Taka’s hands shot out, trying to grab the table’s edge, but one landed on a burner. He yanked it back with a cry of pain, but the damage was done. The momentum dragged them over the edge.

It all happened in slow motion. Their bodies twisted as they fell, a tangle of limbs and panic. Dori’s eyes locked onto mine, wide and terrified, while Taka’s back was to me, his arms flailing uselessly.

The vat erupted as they hit the oil. A furious cascade of bubbles and steam swallowed them whole. Their screams were muffled almost instantly, drowned out by the snapping and crackling of the boiling liquid. The oil frothed and churned violently, leaving no trace of them.

Then, for a brief moment, a blistered hand broke the surface, fingers clawing at the air. It lingered for a heartbeat before sinking back into the bubbling depths.

Jiro yanked me back into him, steadying us both as the sudden weight imbalance rocked the platform wildly. His arms tightened around me as we rode out the shaking, neither daring to move until the structure stilled.

“Don’t look, Akiko.” Jiro turned me back toward the cooking station. “We can finish this.”

He was right. I forced myself to focus, dropping my crab into the skillet, the batter sizzling as it hit the oil. Just a few more minutes, I told myself. Just a few more minutes and this nightmare would be over.

Kenji was already off the platform, his plate neatly on the table. He stood there like a child waiting for praise, the look in his eyes unapologetic. I wanted to scream at him, to throw him into the oil like he’d thrown away Taka’s and Dori’s lives.

With our crabs perfectly cooked, Jiro and I plated them carefully and began the treacherous journey back across the rope bridges. Deliberate, careful, and measured steps kept the wobbling to a minimum. When we finally placed our dishes on the table, the air horn sounded, signaling the end of the challenge.

We stood at attention, three survivors facing the aftermath. Chef Sakamoto and Reina appeared moments later to inspect our work. I couldn’t believe it. Chef Sakamoto was about to taste our dishes. It was the first semblance of normalcy in this insane

program.

He approached Kenji's plate first and cut a small piece. He chewed slowly, his gaze never leaving Kenji's face. Then, without a word, he moved to Jiro's dish and repeated the process. Finally, he reached mine, sliced a bite, and placed it in his mouth. His expression gave away nothing.

When he was done, Reina stepped forward and cut a piece from my crab. She chewed, her eyes meeting mine briefly before she nodded, a faint smile tugging at her lips. Then she turned and walked away, leaving me feeling that I'd just passed another test I hadn't known I was taking.

Chef Sakamoto nodded to Iron Face and followed Reina, disappearing into the house.

"You have all passed the challenge," Iron Face announced, his tone devoid of enthusiasm. "One point each."

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

It was closing in on midnight, and everyone had long retired to their rooms. I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Two days had passed, and I still couldn't shake the image of Taka and Dori falling. Dori's eyes locked onto mine in that final moment, pleading for help. The guilt continued to weigh on me.

I hadn't tried to help. I hadn't done anything. I'd stood and watched, as useless as someone filming on their phone.

Jiro had told me over and over that there was nothing I could've done. The challenge was designed for failure, and someone had to fall. But knowing that didn't ease the guilt clawing at me. It didn't change the fact that their deaths didn't feel like accidents. Kenji's actions had tilted the scales. His deliberate malice had turned a gamble of chance into a calculated death sentence.

Would it have ended differently if Taka had been faster or if Dori hadn't panicked? Or had Kenji sealed their fates the moment he stepped onto the rope?

Two challenges left. Three of us remained. If Jiro's theory was correct and Chef Sakamoto intended for only one person to survive, the math was simple. But it contradicted what Reina had told me: Chef Sakamoto chose his apprentice. And then there were the points, which still made no sense to me.

Why Chef Sakamoto had bothered to give us points in the last challenge was a mystery. Each of us having one point was no different from being tied at zero.

I rolled onto my side, curling into a ball.

Three soft knocks broke the silence. I froze, staring at the wall that separated Jiro's room from mine. It was our signal to talk. If the other responded, it was a go. I debated for a moment before sliding out of bed and knocking back.

A few moments later, I opened the door just enough for Jiro to slip inside.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked as I climbed back onto the bed.

"No," I said, pulling the blanket over my legs. "I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Everything," I replied honestly, tilting my head to look at him. He sat at the foot of the bed and leaned against the wall. My feet were close enough to touch him if I straightened them. "And you?"

"I've been giving the game a lot of thought," he said. "Mostly about what would be the best strategy moving forward."

"And?"

"No one else can die. That includes Kenji." His voice was flat, his gaze fixed on the wall.

I pushed myself up on my elbows, studying him. His jaw was tight, his shoulders tense. Sensing my gaze, he turned slightly to look at me. He looked exhausted.

"I mean it," he said, quieter now. "The odds are too great now. We all have an equal one-in-three chance of being the one to go. It's better if we all survive the next two

challenges. If we all survive, it forces Chef Sakamoto's hand to pick a winner. The two that aren't picked walk away with their lives."

I couldn't argue with the logic. The alternative was to gamble with our lives.

Jiro reached down and took one of my feet in his hand, massaging it absentmindedly, just like he used to when we were dating. His thumb pressed into the arch of my foot, firm but soothing, and despite myself, I felt my muscles relax.

He wasn't looking at me; his focus remained on the wall, and his expression was unreadable. His hands were moving on memory alone.

"I've thought this through from every angle," he continued in a low voice. "This is the only way forward."

Even though I could hear Jiro, I was fixated on his massaging my foot. It was so familiar that I didn't know what to do for a moment. Should I pull away? Make a joke? Or just let it happen?

But more importantly, why did this massage make me feel vastly different from the one Kenji had given me?

In the end, I let it happen. Maybe I needed the comfort, or perhaps I just wanted to pretend, for a fleeting second, that things between us were still simple.

"That's a radical solution," I said finally. "Especially since none of us have been able to predict a challenge."

"It is," he admitted. "But the alternative is taking your chances with dying."

"But are the odds really equal?" I pressed. "It's not just chance, is it? These

challenges test skill, cunning...and maybe something else we don't even realize. If one of us has an edge, or if someone sabotages another, those odds shift."

"If we start thinking like that," he said slowly, "turning on each other, measuring who's weakest, it'll tear us apart."

"It's already happening," I said sharply. "Kenji turned on us. He killed Taka and Dori. If we play the game your way, and he doesn't, doesn't that give him the advantage?"

Jiro was silent for a moment, his fingers stilling against my foot. "You're not wrong," he said finally. "But that's why we need to stick to the plan. All three of us make it to the end, even if Kenji attacks us."

I paused. Could I do that to Kenji? We were best friends as kids, inseparable. And while he'd turned into something else now...was I now capable of the worst?

No one deserved to die here. Not Kaiyo, not Miyo or the others, not even Taka and Dori, as much as I despised those two. And though I feared Kenji, he didn't deserve to die. At least not by my hand.

"I know you're feeling conflicted about Kenji," Jiro said. "I get it. He was a big part of your life when you were young."

Jiro lifted my legs off him so that he could slip into the space between me and the wall. He lay on his side, his entire body pressed up against my back.

It happened so fast. I was still processing. Was he cuddling?

A second later he'd wrapped his arms around me, entwining them with mine. And just like that, we were spooning, like we always used to do during the conversations

we'd have late into the night.

"But you've also known me for quite some time too," he continued, his warm breaths tickling the side of my face. "I mean, we both know you, in different ways. But if I may be so bold, I think I have an edge on Kenji."

Why was I not bucking him off me?

Every second without objection said this was okay. I should have already moved away.

And yet I hadn't.

I should have been disgusted by his warmth. But I wasn't. Nor was I afraid of what he might be thinking.

Was I seriously enjoying this?

Apparently, because the five-second rule has passed. Throwing an elbow into him and demanding he unspoon you is impossible now. It'll be awkward and paint you as a waffler.

Five-second rule? That's for food that falls on the floor.

Nope, it applies to this situation. You gave him the go-ahead by shouting "Drivers, start your engines!" followed by an enthusiastic wave of the green flag. You might as well have flicked on the "Open 24 Hours" neon sign, left a trail of breadcrumbs, slipped a get-out-of-jail card into his hand...

Okay, okay. I get it already. But I'm in control.

“This has nothing to do with me not liking Kenji,” Jiro continued, his thumb rubbing gently against my wrist. “And you know there’s no jealousy from my end. This is about making it to the end.”

You could have fooled me. Seems like this is about making it so my clothes come off.

He nuzzled his face into my neck, sending chills down my arms and turning the hairs into purposeful little prickles. Then he drew a breath, the tip of his nose grazing my neck, before...

And there it was. His full lips, lightly touching my neck. My legs were useless, all feeling drained from them, as I lay back into him. His gentle kisses peppering me, slowly, intentionally.

Right then I didn’t care about our relationship.

I didn’t care about what had happened in the past.

I didn’t care about the challenges we were still facing.

None of that mattered as I melted into him.

You still have a chance to save yourself, Akiko. You can stop this. Jiro would never force you to do anything. Just roll over and tell him.

Jiro’s fingers gripped my waist, dragging me against him. I could feel him—hard, deliberate. His breaths were uneven.

I turned to fully face him, to stop this madness. I locked onto his hazel eyes. That familiar look froze me.

I expected him to kiss me again. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, eyeing me the way he did back in university—like he was waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

And then he did.

His lips crushed against mine, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, deep and sure. His hands brushed down my sides on cue, thumbs grazing my ribs, fingertips burning against the thin barrier of my shirt.

I knew I should stop this. Kenji was right down the hall.

But I didn't stop it.

I didn't stop him when he slipped a hand under my shirt, fingertips gliding over my stomach, tracing the curve of my waist. I didn't stop him when he pushed me onto my back, his body shifting above mine, heat radiating between us.

I didn't stop him when he started moving down.

His lips pressed against my collarbone, then lower still.

“Jiro—” My voice hitched when he reached my stomach, his tongue trailing over my skin.

He didn't answer. He didn't have to. His fingers were already hooking into the waistband of my panties, dragging them down, baring me completely to him.

I knew what he was going to do.

I remembered what he could do.

And yet somehow, I wasn't prepared.

His mouth was on me before I could even exhale.

A sharp cry caught in my throat, my fingers grabbing at the sheets, his hair, anything to anchor me. His tongue swept across me, slow and deliberate, his lips closing around the most sensitive part of me. He sucked lightly—just enough to make my hips jerk off the bed, a gasp finally escaping me.

Oh, God!

Jiro groaned. The sound vibrated through me as his arms locked around my thighs to keep me from moving. His tongue pressed into me, a slow, unrelenting rhythm that had me fisting the sheets.

He wasn't rushing. He was savoring me. Enjoying every second.

I knew because he always had. Because this wasn't new. Jiro had always loved this part—loved unraveling me, loved listening to the sounds I made when I couldn't hold back.

And I couldn't hold back now.

I barely recognized my own voice when I moaned, my fingers twisting in his hair, tugging. But he didn't stop. His tongue flicked, his grip on me tightening when I tried to squirm away. Too much. It was too much, and he knew it.

And still, he didn't stop.

I felt it building, pressure coiling tighter, spiraling fast. He could sense it too. His mouth moved faster, more focused, his tongue stroking exactly where I wanted, as if

he could still read every shift of my body.

“Jiro—oh, fuck?—”

The orgasm slammed into me so hard I arched off the bed, his hands locking me in place, his mouth not letting up until I was gasping and shaking beneath him. I came apart completely in his hands, just like he’d intended.

My mind was still spinning when I felt him moving back up, his mouth leaving a trail of soft, lazy kisses along my stomach and ribs. His lips found the curve of my breast; his tongue flicked over my nipple before he took it gently into his mouth.

A gasp escaped me, my fingers tightening in his hair. He lingered there, teasing, tasting, his other hand sliding up my side, fingertips grazing the other peak, rolling it between his fingers. I arched into him, chasing the warmth of his mouth.

He kept moving, pressing kisses along my neck, before his weight settled against me. I could feel him—still hard and wanting.

I reached for him, my fingers brushing over the hard outline beneath his pants. With a swift tug, I freed him, guiding him between my thighs, but Jiro caught my wrist before I could slip him inside.

“Not tonight.”

His words were gentle but firm, his grip steady, his breath warm against my ear. I blinked up at him, still dazed. “Why?”

“You know why.” His mouth brushed against my forehead. “You’re loud.”

Heat flushed my cheeks. Was he seriously bringing that up now?

“Jiro—”

“Not happening. Our friend is just down the hall.” He kissed me again, slower this time, before easing onto his side, pulling me back into him. “No need to give him another reason to want us dead.”

I should have been annoyed and frustrated. But he was right.

His arms curled around me, his breathing slowing. This Jiro, this new Jiro, didn’t just want to fuck me—he wanted to keep me.

And somehow, that seemed more dangerous than anything else.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I woke the following morning feeling well rested, ready for another day at the apprenticeship from hell. The soft glow of the bedside lamp chased away the lingering shadows as I stretched my legs and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, then froze.

The chair.

It wasn't lodged under the doorknob. Instead, it sat a few feet away, with its back facing me. My stomach twisted. It should have been firmly pressed against the door, as it always was.

A sickening feeling fell on me. I shot to my feet and rushed to the door, my hand trembling as I gripped the knob. It turned easily, moving seamlessly, and the door opened.

I froze, nausea bubbling in my stomach as the realization washed over me. I had slept with an unsecured door. Vulnerable. Exposed.

I shut the door, turning back to the chair. How had it moved? Had someone come into my room? Were they watching me sleep?

A wave of panic swelled in my chest. My sanctuary, the one place where I thought I could let my guard down, was no longer safe.

Wait, Akiko. Are you sure you even lodged it under the knob last night after Jiro left?

Could you have forgotten?

I clawed through my memory of last night, searching for clarity. Jiro and I had talked about strategy, he pleased me, we lay for a moment, and then he left. I remember closing the door, and... My mind went blank. Why couldn't I remember? Surely I'd secured my door. That was my routine. Always.

My pulse pounded in my ears as I replayed the scene in my head. Jiro had been sitting at the edge of my bed. He had yawned, I had yawned, and we'd said good night. He'd left. I'd walked him to the door and...

The rattling of the doorknob had always woken me before. Why not this time?

Then, a coldness prickled the back of my neck as a horrifying thought took hold. Had I been violated?

My hands trembled as I glanced down at myself. My T-shirt was precisely where it should be, the waistband of my panties undisturbed. There was no indication that they had been removed or pushed aside after Jiro left. But the questions wouldn't stop.

Why didn't I wake up?

I knelt by the door, running my fingers along the floorboards. The back legs of the chair had scraped the wood, scars from the last few nights I'd wedged it under the knob.

Someone had been in my room.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Since we were down to three apprentices, meals were almost too quiet. Jiro and I focused on eating, exchanging only the bare minimum of words when necessary. We did our best to keep our actions professional and unreadable.

Kenji, however, didn't hide anything, especially his amusement. His gaze lingered on us, his lips always a menacing smirk. Occasionally, he let out a low cackle as though he'd just thought of a particularly cruel way to get at us.

I decided to keep the break-in to myself. Sharing information now was akin to giving away pieces of armor in a battle. Why weaken myself?

Two more challenges. That was all I had to endure before this nightmare would end. I'd already survived four challenges and one grueling training exercise. Surely I was better prepared now. Surely I could better predict how a challenge would unfold.

That said, I couldn't shake the growing paranoia. My suspicions extended beyond Kenji and Jiro. Iron Face had always been cold and calculating, and his disdain for me was evident from the start. Could I rule him out? If this place had taught me anything, it was that the rules were mere suggestions to be bent or broken at will.

Sadly, Reina wasn't exempt either. She had been kind to me, even helpful, but how much of that was genuine? She knew the horrors that took place here, the lives lost, and yet she stayed silent. Her kindness now felt like a cheap Halloween mask, hiding something darker.

And Chef Sakamoto? He was the architect of it all, watching us from his throne with the amusement of a god pulling strings. I imagined his hands red with blood, the lives lost in his program nothing more than minions sacrificed in his toxic kitchen.

As I chewed my food, I couldn't help but wonder: If I survived this and won the apprenticeship, would I relish the victory? Would I proudly train under Chef Sakamoto, knowing what it had cost?

You wanted to be the first successful female sushi chef, right?

Yes. And?

You dreamed of owning a Michelin-starred restaurant.

Most chefs do.

But you stayed. Even after you realized what was happening here.

I can't leave. The rules ? —

The rules? Or your ambition?

The thoughts clawed at the edges of my mind. Was I complicit? Could I justify staying, knowing the price others had paid?

No! I wasn't a bad person for having dreams. I wasn't a bad person for wanting to succeed. But I was here, and now that I'd endured so much, leaving felt impossible.

Unless there was another way.

Jiro's theory still lingered in my mind. What if we all survived? What if no one else

had to die? It was the only alternative to walking away with what was left of my conscience, but it came at the cost of ambition.

I was trapped in a moral gray area, straddling the line between good and evil. The end was fast approaching, and I had a choice to make. Pursue greatness at any cost or hold on to the last shred of my humanity.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

With two challenges left and only a week remaining in our six-week program, I suspected the final days would be a flurry of chaos, survival, and consequences.

As for my strategy forward, Jiro and I still hadn't officially agreed to work together. While I didn't entirely disagree with his belief that the best path was for everyone to survive, I had my doubts. My issue was Kenji. How did we control him? He hated us.

After dinner, Jiro caught me in the hallway, returning from the bathroom. He had a determined look on his face, making it impossible to say no to whatever he was about to ask me.

"Come to the library with me," he said.

"What's this about?" I asked.

"Strategy. We need to talk," he replied, and I followed him.

As we walked, he glanced over at me. "I know you don't fully trust me, and honestly, I wouldn't either. But I'm hoping our past doesn't dictate our decisions here."

"What are you getting at, Jiro?"

"We only have two more challenges to get through. They could happen back-to-back, for all we know, and we haven't discussed a strategy yet."

“You mean teaming up,” I said.

“It makes the most sense, Akiko. Do you think you have a shot with that nutjob, Kenji? He’s been festering ever since you switched rooms. The guy’s unhinged.”

I didn’t respond, mulling over his words instead.

“Wait, you aren’t seriously thinking of going it alone, are you?” Jiro said, his voice incredulous. “Wow. Talk about a wild card. I never saw that coming.”

I watched as he flailed his arms dramatically. “I haven’t said anything, Jiro.”

“You didn’t have to say anything,” he continued. “Your face gave it away. You get this look when the wheels in your head are spinning. Your lips get all pouty.”

“Pouty?” I feigned innocence.

“Yeah, pouty,” he said, exasperated. “Are you going to repeat everything I say, or are we having a discussion?”

“Discussion?” I echoed, barely keeping a straight face.

Jiro growled, clenching his fists, and I burst into laughter. It had been so long since I’d purposely irritated him like this, and the look on his face was priceless.

“I’m sorry,” I managed between laughs. “I couldn’t resist. I promise I’ll be serious now.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay, then.”

“All righty, then.”

“Akiko!” he snapped, but I couldn’t stop laughing even harder.

The laughter felt like a release, weeks of pent-up tension spilling at Jiro’s expense. When I finally calmed down, I grabbed his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you. I needed that.”

“Are you done?” Jiro said, an eyebrow raised.

“Yes,” I said. My top lip quivered as I struggled to contain another outburst.

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right!” The floodgates opened once more. This time, I didn’t bother restraining my laughter. When I finally managed to calm down, I grabbed onto Jiro’s bicep and squeezed gently. “Thank you. I need a good laugh to save me from a depression.”

“Well, I’m glad I could be your punching bag.”

“I’m serious. Thank you, even though I might have peed my uniform a bit.”

He shot me a sideways glance, trying to hide a grin. “You’re welcome. When’s the last time you laughed like that?”

“It’s been a while,” I admitted. “Not since...university.”

“With me?”

“Yes.” I chuckled. “You can be gullible and easy to tease.”

“I’m glad I have you to point out my quality traits.”

“I didn’t mean for it to come across as an insult. It’s sweet and adorable.”

“Keep talking like that, and I might start believing you.”

As we walked under the moonlight, memories of our time together crept in: walking side by side, holding hands, how I would snuggle into Jiro’s side, and how his voice comforted me back then. For a moment, I let myself relax.

“What are you thinking?” Jiro asked, breaking the silence.

“That for once, I feel calm.”

“That’s dangerous,” he said. “Good thing you’ve got someone watching your back.”

It felt like the right moment to ask the question nagging at me. “Jiro, why are you helping me?”

“I already told you. I think you’re the best chef here and deserve to win.”

“Thank you, but seriously, why? I feel like you’ve given me boilerplate answers each time.”

“You want to know why I’m being so nice to you after what happened in the past.”

“Yes,” I said softly, as if I were ashamed to admit that I’d broken it off with him.

Jiro sighed. “Look, I don’t hate you for what happened in the past. I’ve had a lot of

time to reflect, and I know I was a piece of work back then. I've grown. I take life much more seriously now. And honestly, I've always admired your drive, your determination. You fight for what you want."

"I had no choice. No rich parents. Actually, no parents."

"But I think that's what made you who you are today. The only thing I thought you lacked back then was confidence. But this, coming here, is pure determination. This is Akiko saying I want this, and I'm taking it. "

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Who was this man telling me things that made me feel proud and my heart swell? Sweet words that made my knees weak and left me a little flustered?

Pull yourself together, Akiko. Remember why you're here. Remember how the game works. Anyone could be a part of it, even Jiro.

I straightened up, cleared my throat, and threw my chin up. "You're saying you honestly want me to win? There's no agenda at work here?"

"No agenda," he said firmly. "I mean it."

"Okay, I believe you."

"Finally."

"But..."

"Here we go with the but ... Come on, bring it on."

"Don't you want to win? Isn't that why you're here?"

“Sure, but when I saw you, I knew you deserved this more than I did. You will make the most out of this opportunity.”

“Is that why you want us all to survive the challenges?”

“Partly. I also don’t want you to get hurt or worse,” he said quietly. “And I think it’s the best way forward. If we all survive, Chef Sakamoto loses. He doesn’t get his bloodbath.”

Jiro was right. All we needed to do was focus on surviving the challenges.

“Do you think Kenji would even consider it?” I asked.

“It’s worth a try. He hates me, but I think he still has some room in his heart for you.”

“Wait, you want me to talk to him?”

“Well, he’s not going to grab a beer with me, is he?”

The memory of my unlocked door flashed through my mind. I imagined Kenji entering my room as I slept, sitting on the edge of my bed...touching me. A shudder ran through me. “I’m not sure I can.”

“Why not?” Jiro asked.

I stared at him, my eyes wide. “Are you joking? You just said you didn’t want me hurt and that he’s unhinged.”

“The plan isn’t perfect, but I’ll be nearby.”

“Why not right next to me? Why not approach him together? He might even think

I'm trying to double-cross you if I go alone."

Jiro tilted his head, considering my words. "You've got a point."

"Of course I do. So, we agree. We approach him together. Over breakfast tomorrow morning. We lay it all out and tell him our plan. And then..."

"And then we hope he believes us," Jiro finished.

"But if he doesn't, he knows our game plan. He could use it against us, become even more dangerous."

"That's true," Jiro said. His expression darkened. "And if that happens, we'll need to consider my backup plan."

I narrowed my eyes. "Which is?"

"We take him out before he can get to us."

### CHAPTER FORTY

#### JIRO

I lay on my bed with my hands behind my head and my legs crossed, a smile on my face. My plan was coming together better than expected, not that I'd ever doubted myself. Still, I'd thought it might take longer to gain Akiko's trust.

But I'd done it. I'd tugged at her heartstrings, reminded her of what we'd once had. Her feelings for me hadn't disappeared. They'd just been dormant, waiting for the right spark to reignite them.

I let out a satisfied breath, my smile widening. There were moments I'd questioned whether I could pull this off, but once my father told me I was in the program, I'd known there was no turning back. I had to see it through.

And I would.

Because after all these years, I had to prove to Akiko that she'd been wrong about me and that I'd been right all along.

I glanced at my watch. A little past one in the morning. Almost time. I sat up and slid on my shoes. I was still dressed in my uniform, having never bothered to change. I stood by the door, listening for movement. Satisfied that the dormitory was silent, I slipped out.

Under the cover of darkness, I made my way across the compound, staying off the lit

pathways and using the trees to shield my movements. When the entrance to the maze came into view, I slowed my pace, ears straining for any sound.

The maze was silent.

I entered, following the path I'd memorized: a right at the first T intersection, then a left, another right at the Y split, looping back, and finally, a left that led to a dead end.

I stopped.

A figure sat on a stone bench at the far end of the pathway, their silhouette barely visible in the shadows. I approached until I stood before them.

"Hello, Reina," I said.

"Jiro," she replied. "Thank you for meeting me at this hour. It's safer for both of us." She patted the bench beside her. "Sit."

Reina kept her gaze ahead, her chin level, her back perfectly straight. She rarely looked at me when she spoke, but I didn't mind.

"She trusts me," I said, sitting beside her. "We're further along than I expected. I believe she'll do whatever I ask of her."

Reina's lips curved into a cold smile. "How can you be so sure?"

"I know her. I see it in her eyes and hear it in her voice. She's agreed to my plan to team up with Kenji. We'll approach him tomorrow morning during breakfast. I suspect he'll say no."

"And if he doesn't?" Reina asked. "What if he surprises you and thinks it's a

wonderful idea?"

"Then I'll deal with him," I said. "Either way, he won't make it past the next challenge. I'll make sure of it."

"You'd better," Reina said, her voice hardening. "You've had ample time to prepare for this."

"I have," I said. "Thanks to you. And don't worry. Akiko will make it to the final challenge."

"Good," Reina said, her tone laced with venom. "Because that bitch deserves everything that's coming to her."

### CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

#### AKIKO

I woke up having to pee badly. The short walk to the bathroom building, though only next door, left me exposed during a time when I had to watch my back. I tried my best to resist, to will the urge to go away. But tonight, the pain in my abdomen was too much. If I'd had an empty bottle, I might have used it. But I didn't.

Grumbling under my breath, I changed into my uniform and slipped outside the dorms. The night air was cold, and the compound was eerily silent as I hurried to the bathroom. The lights inside were always on, which I appreciated.

I darted into the last stall, relieved myself, and was standing at the sink when the door opened.

Kenji walked in.

I froze, my mind racing through possible escape routes.

Run back into the stall.

Pretend I didn't see him.

Wave and walk past him like nothing was wrong.

He spotted me immediately, and his gaze locked onto mine.

“Don’t worry, Akiko,” he said, his voice low and tired. “I’m not here to hurt you or anything like that. Just need to take a whiz.”

He scratched the back of his head as he yawned and walked past me to the urinals. For a moment, he seemed...normal.

“It’s a pain in the ass, coming all the way over here to use the bathroom,” he mumbled.

“What?” I asked, still on edge.

He glanced over his shoulder. “I said they should connect the two buildings. It’d be a lot easier.”

“Uh, yeah. They should.”

From where I stood, Kenji looked nothing like the predator I saw at meals or in passing. His hair was messy, his posture slouched. He almost looked like the boy I’d grown up with.

He flushed the urinal and came to the sink beside me, studying his face in the mirror as he washed his hands.

“Two more challenges,” he said, his voice quiet. “And then we’re free of this place.”

“Yeah,” I said cautiously. “Two more.”

His eyes met mine in the mirror. “I’m tired of this. It’s draining. To be honest, it’s not worth it.”

His tone was so casual that I almost let my guard down.

“And it’s driven us apart,” he added. “Cost us our friendship.”

Was he apologizing?

“I can’t wait to sleep in my bed,” he continued. “To have a toilet just a few steps away. And if I never hear Iron Face’s voice again, I won’t lose any sleep over it.”

I hesitated, debating whether to bring up Jiro’s plan. Kenji seemed calm, reasonable even. But could I trust him?

“About the challenges,” I began, testing the waters. “I was thinking?—”

“We should all team up and help each other to the end?” Kenji interrupted.

I blinked. How did he know? It felt like he’d been in the room with Jiro and me.

“Uh, yeah,” I said carefully. “I guess you were already thinking that.”

“It makes the most sense,” he said, lowering his voice. “The last thing we need is to turn on each other. But I think...” His eyes flicked to the ceiling. “I think that’s what they want.”

I followed his gaze, unease erupting across my skin. Did he really believe we were being watched right now?

“So, you think it’s a good idea?” I asked.

“I do,” Kenji said. “But it’ll only work if all three of us participate. Genuinely.”

“Jiro’s willing,” I said quickly. “I mean, if I tell him, he’ll go along with it. Let’s finish this safely.”

Kenji yawned and dried his hands on his uniform. “We can talk more at breakfast tomorrow. Let’s head back to bed.”

He led the way out, his steps slow and heavy. As I followed him back to the dorms, I watched his silhouette, his head tilted forward like he was already drifting to sleep.

When he disappeared into his room, shutting the door softly behind him, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off.

It’s important to keep your guard up, Akiko—the sharpest knife in the kitchen is the one in your back.

### CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

A jarring noise tore me out of sleep, my heart pounding as I shot upright. For a brief moment, I thought someone was trying to break into my room again. My eyes darted to the chair. It was still safely lodged under the doorknob. Relief came in a heavy exhale.

“Wake up!” a harsh voice yelled, accompanied by rapid pounding on the door. Iron Face.

“Wake up! Your next challenge is ready for you!”

Challenge? I fumbled for my watch. The glowing numbers read 6:30 a.m. Why so early? Iron Face went down the hall, banging loudly on every door. When he reached Kenji’s, the thudding echoed like a war drum.

I scrambled to change into my uniform and stepped out of my room just as Jiro did.

“I didn’t think Iron Face could be any more of an ass,” Jiro muttered, clearly irritated. He gestured toward the end of the hall, where Iron Face was now banging a wooden spoon against the bottom of a wok, creating the metallic clanging noise that had yanked me out of dreamland.

Kenji emerged a moment later, fumbling with the belt on his uniform and looking half-asleep.

“Follow me. Your next challenge begins now!” Iron Face barked, already marching

down the hallway.

Kenji trailed behind him, his head down. As he passed Jiro and me, he didn't snarl or glare like usual. Was it possible my encounter with him last night was a turning point?

I hadn't had a chance to tell Jiro about my run-in with Kenji, so I grabbed his arm, slowing him down.

"I spoke to Kenji last night about the plan."

"How?"

"It's not important, but he's in. We all work together."

The cold bit through my uniform as we trudged through the early-morning chill. I hugged myself tightly, shivering as we approached the clearing where the last challenge occurred.

Then I saw it. Something that looked like an oversize shipping container, its steel walls glinting under the faint morning light.

Iron Face stopped before the container, straightening as he turned to us with a flourish, like a circus ringmaster revealing the main attraction. "Your challenge today is Kori no Oooooooooori," he said, drawing out the word with dramatic flair.

Cage of Ice. He's becoming cleverer with his names.

The steel doors groaned as Iron Face pulled them open, revealing a rush of freezing air. Inside, the walls, floor, and ceiling were slabs of glistening ice, reminding me of an ice bar I had once visited. Three rectangular blocks of ice stood in the center. It

was clear we'd be carving something out of them.

Jiro let out a low whistle. "Guess we're freezing our asses off today."

Iron Face's smirk deepened. "Work together. Use your creativity to think outside the box," he said. "Impress Chef Sakamoto." Iron Face gestured for us to enter.

We exchanged wary glances, but there was no point in stalling. Jiro led the way, followed by Kenji and then me. The moment we were all inside, the doors slammed shut with a resounding clang, sealing us in.

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself, trying to stave off the chill as I walked toward one of the ice blocks. It stood almost as tall as my chest, its surface slick and clear.

"So, we carve something...like a swan?" Kenji said, running his hand over the icy surface. "He was very ambiguous with his directions. So unlike Iron Face."

"Iron Face said to impress Chef Sakamoto," I said. "To think outside the box. I'm guessing nothing that screams typical, like a swan."

"I don't know how to carve anything," Kenji said. "What about you guys?"

"I have a little experience," I said, "but I don't think it'll impress Chef Sakamoto. What about you, Jiro?"

He shook his head. "Looks like we follow your lead, Akiko."

"Where are the tools?" Kenji asked as he circled his block.

"That must be the twist," Jiro said. "We're supposed to carve without tools."

“That’s idiotic,” Kenji snapped. “Do they really expect us to carve a block of ice into something with our bare hands?”

While Jiro and Kenji complained to each other, I moved toward one of the ice walls, running my fingers over its frosted surface as I walked. Something caught my eye, a faint outline embedded deep in the ice. I rubbed away the frost and gasped.

“Hey, guys! Over here!” I pointed at the wall. “Look. It’s a chisel and a hammer!”

The tools were frozen solid, encased in at least a foot of ice.

“How the hell are we supposed to get them out?” Kenji asked, his voice tinged with frustration. “This wall’s thicker than a glacier.”

“Maybe there are more tools hidden around,” Jiro suggested. “Let’s split up and search.”

We scoured every inch of the icy room. The walls, the floor, even the ceiling, but the only tools were the ones I’d found. We regrouped, staring at the ice-locked chisel and hammer in silence.

“This is so dumb,” Kenji said, his voice rising. “Are we supposed to stand here breathing hot air onto the ice until it melts?”

“Iron Face did say we needed to work together,” I said.

“I bet that’s the key to this challenge,” Jiro added. “But instead of hot air, rubbing our hands over it might work better. Come on, let’s try it.”

The three of us pressed our hands against the ice, rubbing back and forth to create friction. The ice became slicker, but progress was excruciatingly slow. My hands

went numb within minutes.

“This is useless,” Kenji muttered, pulling back. “There has to be another way.”

Before anyone could respond, a hissing sound filled the room. I glanced up and saw sprinklers embedded in the container’s ceiling. They sprang to life, dousing the icy ceiling and outer walls in water.

“What the hell?” Jiro shouted. “Are they trying to help us, or?—”

A deep groan echoed through the room, cutting him off. The ceiling above us shifted slightly, sending chills rippling through my body.

“They’re not helping,” I said, my voice shaking. “The water’s melting the walls. It’s destabilizing the ceiling.”

“Holy crap,” Jiro whispered. “If that ceiling collapses...”

“We’ll be crushed,” Kenji finished.

My heart pounded as the full weight of the challenge hit me. The tools, the carving—it was all a distraction. The real challenge wasn’t about ice sculptures.

“Guys, forget the tools,” I said, stepping back from the wall. “The challenge isn’t about carving anything. It’s about escaping this cage of ice.”

The groaning of the ceiling above us didn’t leave much time for contemplation.

Jiro nodded slowly. “She’s right. We’ve been focusing on the wrong thing. The question isn’t what they want us to carve; it’s how we’re expected to survive.”

The doubt in Kenji's eyes told me he wasn't entirely on board. "Are you suggesting we continue rubbing our hands over the tools?"

"No, you idiot. Clearly, we need to brainstorm another idea," Jiro said.

"Who are you calling an idiot?" Kenji walked up to Jiro, chest puffed out, fists balled.

"Guys! Guys! Stop it!" I shouted, coming between them and using my arms to push them apart. "This is what they want. They want us to turn on each other. But remember what Iron Face said. We need to work together."

I glanced around the room, my eyes landing on the three massive ice blocks. The pieces started to come together in my mind. "What if the blocks aren't just there to carve? What if they're meant to...hold the ceiling up?"

Jiro's eyes widened as realization dawned. "Like support columns. If we stack them, they could stabilize the ceiling. At the very least, give us a safe zone underneath."

Kenji let out a laugh. "You want to build a structure out of these giant blocks? Do you know how heavy they are? We can't even lift them!"

"Not by hand." Jiro's gaze darted toward the belts on our uniforms. "But we can use these as straps. I've seen it done before. We can rig a way to lift the blocks."

Kenji hesitated, mulling over Jiro's suggestion. "Fine. Let's do it."

Just then, the longer metal sides of the container fell onto the ground, exposing the ice room. A support structure held up the container's ceiling, which still sprayed water down on the ice. The only difference now was that we had an audience. Chef Sakamoto, Reina, and Iron Face were watching from the other side of the ice.

“As if we needed the added pressure,” Jiro said. “I’m surprised they’re not sharing a large bowl of popcorn.”

The ceiling groaned again, reminding us we were running out of time.

We quickly removed our belts and fashioned them into makeshift straps. Jiro crouched by one of the blocks, slipping the belt underneath and securing it tightly. With a grunt of effort, he heaved the block onto his back, using the straps to distribute the weight.

“See? No problem,” Jiro said through gritted teeth as he shuffled toward the second block. He rose onto his tiptoes, carefully aligning the first block on top of the second. The ice wobbled precariously before settling into place.

“That’s two,” Jiro said, stepping back. “Now for the third.”

“That’s the problem,” Kenji said, gesturing to the stacked blocks. “There’s no way we can lift the last block that high. Not with the tools we’ve got.”

My mind raced. There had to be another solution. “What if we didn’t stack them straight up? What if we leaned them against each other, like a pyramid? It wouldn’t need to touch the ceiling completely, just enough to deflect the weight if it collapses.”

Kenji’s face lit up. “Sort of like an igloo. That could work.”

“Then let’s move!” Jiro shouted.

The three of us hurried to reposition the blocks, tilting them into a triangular formation. The ice ceiling and walls groaned and shifted as we worked, but we managed to wedge the blocks into place. The triangle wasn’t perfect, but it was stable enough to provide a small space in the center.

“It’s not much,” I said, stepping back to survey our work. “But it’ll have to do.”

Another loud crack echoed through the room, followed by a cascade of ice chunks falling from the ceiling. One piece narrowly missed Kenji, shattering on the floor beside him.

“Get under!” Jiro yelled, shoving me toward the opening.

I scrambled inside, pressing myself against one of the blocks. Jiro followed, pulling Kenji in after him. For us all to fit, I ended up being sandwiched between them, our bodies practically molded together. I felt Jiro’s and Kenji’s every movement, every breath pressed upon me. Odd was the best way I could describe it. But it was better than being crushed.

The ceiling let out a low groan. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for the impact.

And then it came down.

The sound was deafening—a cacophony of cracking ice and thunderous booms, echoing like cannons. The structure jolted as the ceiling caved in above us. Chunks of ice slammed into the floor with resounding thuds.

When the noise finally stopped, I opened my eyes to find Jiro and Kenji staring at me, their faces pale and stunned. Above us, the triangular formation of ice blocks had held. Large chunks of the ceiling rested on the outside, but we were safe.

“We did it,” I whispered, hardly able to believe it. “We survived.”

Kenji let out a shaky laugh. “Holy shit. I can’t believe that actually worked.”

To my surprise, Kenji planted a quick kiss on my cheek, which prompted Jiro to pull

me in for a hug and kiss my other cheek.

“Good thinking, Akiko,” he said.

We crawled out from under the shelter, taking in the wreckage around us. The walls of the ice room had collapsed completely, leaving only the steel framework of the shipping container. The rest of the ceiling had crumbled into massive chunks, littering the floor like building debris in a war zone.

Clapping drew my attention to Chef Sakamoto, Reina, and Iron Face standing a few feet away.

“Congratulations!” Chef Sakamoto called out, his voice bright and cheerful, as though we’d just completed a fun team-building exercise. He popped the cork off a bottle of champagne, spraying it into the air before taking a celebratory swig. “You have successfully completed the challenge without fail!”

He passed the bottle to me with a broad smile, his eyes twinkling with something I couldn’t quite place. Glee? A twisted delight? I took a hesitant sip, the champagne fizzing on my tongue. It tasted bitter. Wrong. A celebration among the aftermath?

I passed it to Jiro, who drank deeply before handing it to Kenji. They laughed and clapped each other on the back, their earlier tension seemingly forgotten. For a moment, they looked like ordinary friends celebrating.

A queasiness bubbled in my stomach at the sight of Chef Sakamoto’s beaming face, like that of a father watching his children succeed. Reina stood beside him, snapping photos with her phone as though documenting a holiday party. Even Iron Face, in danger of losing his nickname, wore something resembling a smile.

This wasn’t a victory to be celebrated. We had almost been killed. And yet there were

smiles and laughter aplenty. I half expected cake and ice cream to be rolled out. Was I dreaming?

My gaze shifted to the center of the wreckage, where our makeshift ice shelter still stood, defiant and fragile. A monument to our alliance. But as I watched, one of the blocks shifted. The entire structure collapsed into a heap of jagged shards.

The symbolism wasn't lost on me. Our alliance had held, for now. But how long before it crumbled too?

I glanced back at Jiro and Kenji. Their laughter rang out, carefree. How could they ignore the weight of everything we'd just endured? I envied them and their ability to find normalcy in the chaos. I for one couldn't join in their celebration. I couldn't let myself forget what this place truly was. Evil.

### CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

I did my best to keep up a positive front. Who was I to ruin the moment? We were still gathered in the clearing, the once formidable ice cage now reduced to a giant's spilled slushy. The upside, because I needed to believe there was one, was that this was the most time Chef Sakamoto had spent around us.

He stood animatedly recounting his early days as a young sushi chef, weaving stories of struggle and perseverance. "There are countless chefs," he said, gesturing with his hands. "To stand out, one must do the unthinkable, whatever that may be."

Was it this very philosophy that had laid the foundation for his apprenticeship program and the twisted world he seemed to thrive in?

"You are here because I saw something in you that reminded me of myself as a young person," Chef Sakamoto said, his voice calm. "But I alone can't make you a Michelin-star chef. All I can do is shatter the weakness holding you back. Much of it will depend on your hard work, grit, and determination."

Shatter the weakness? Is that what this place does? No, that's what he does. He doesn't build greatness—it's what's left after he's destroyed everything else.

"Yes, Chef," Kenji said eagerly. "I'll do whatever it takes."

Kenji was completely starstruck being in Chef Sakamoto's presence. I'll admit, it was surreal standing in front of arguably the best chef in all Japan. The awards he'd collected, the accolades, and the Michelin stars all contributed to creating an image of

a chef who seemed untouchable. But beneath the shine of his reputation lived an apprenticeship program that was anything but inspiring. It was brutal, torturous, savage, and, above all, unforgiving.

Iron Face had disappeared. I wasn't sure where, nor did I care. Reina and Jiro were deep in conversation across the clearing under the pink canopy of a cherry blossom tree. I assumed she was giving him a pep talk similar to the one Chef Sakamoto was delivering to Kenji and me.

But then I noticed something unusual. Reina's gestures were sharp, her movement deliberate, and her tone seemed commanding even without hearing the words. It stood out because it clashed with my past conversations with her. Reina had always been pleasant, her voice calm and soothing, exuding the grace and poise of a lady.

Yet the person facing Jiro now seemed demanding, forceful, even intimidating. Jiro's arms were resting across his chest, and his weight shifted to one foot. He appeared to be biting his tongue while Reina spoke.

Then her eyes met mine, and in an instant, her entire demeanor shifted. She laughed lightly, her hand patting Jiro's shoulder in a friendly manner. It was a calculated transformation, so deliberate it left no doubt in my mind it was meant for me.

A few moments later, Jiro and Reina joined our group. Reina's face radiated warmth as she turned to Kenji and me. "You both should be proud. Your cooperation and creativity today were remarkable."

She smiled, her words gracious as always. "I was just telling Jiro that it feels right that the three of you are still here. Today, you proved why."

Then, with a delicate turn toward Chef Sakamoto, she added, "You look tired, dear. Shall we?"

He nodded, and just like that, our celebration was over. Kenji, Jiro, and I stood alone in the clearing, surrounded by the remnants of the challenge.

“That was something else,” Kenji said, still riding the adrenaline high.

“Yeah, it felt good to finally crush a challenge and be acknowledged for it,” Jiro added, his voice full of pride.

“Did either of you notice that no points were given?” I asked, zapping the feel-good moment.

“That’s because it was a group effort,” Kenji said with a shrug. “I think they recognized that and figured awarding points didn’t make sense. Besides, we all know the points don’t mean jack.”

“I’m agreeing with Kenji on this,” Jiro said, slapping Kenji on the back. “Our strategy of sticking together is working. We all make it to the end, and whoever Chef Sakamoto picks, he picks.”

I seemed to be the odd one out with my feelings. I just couldn’t get on board with the celebration. People had died over the past five weeks, and Chef Sakamoto had tried to kill us less than an hour ago. Was I the only one who hadn’t forgotten that?

“I’m hungry,” Kenji said, rubbing his belly. “I wonder if we’ll get breakfast or if we have to wait for lunch.”

Jiro glanced around. “I say we head to the kitchen. There might be food waiting for us.”

As we walked to the training kitchen, I fought the urge to question Jiro about his conversation with Reina. It was better to wait when Jiro and I were alone.

To our surprise, bento boxes were waiting for us in the dining room. The food was cold, a clear sign it had been sitting for a while, but none of us cared. We dug in right away.

“We should be ready to go again,” Jiro said between bites. “There’s not much time left in the program unless they extend it.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised if another challenge comes tonight,” Kenji added.

I stared at them both with shock. “Listen to yourselves. Not too long ago, you were sipping champagne with Chef Sakamoto, and now you’re strategizing on how to stop him from trying to kill you again. In what world does that even make sense?”

“This one,” Jiro said. “It’s messed up. I haven’t forgotten that, but now’s not the time to wax poetic about the morality of it all. We’ve got another challenge coming, and our number one goal is survival.”

It was brief, but I caught it. Jiro shot Kenji a calculating look while Kenji kept his head down, slurping noodles. Did Jiro still not trust him? Or was there something else going on? If one of us turned on the others, our fragile alliance would shatter, and none of us would survive.

The door to the dining room opened, and Iron Face walked in, his stony demeanor firmly back in place. He barked out our chore assignments before storming out, the door slamming shut behind him.

The room fell to an uneasy silence—a stark reminder that we were back on the chopping block.

### CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

#### JIRO

I glanced at my watch. It was time.

Iron Face had deliberately assigned me an outdoor task, away from Akiko and Kenji. After hanging the last tablecloths on the drying line, I made my way toward the maze.

My pulse quickened with each step as I navigated the memorized path to the dead end with the stone bench. Reina was already there, sitting with her hands neatly folded in her lap, her scowl sharp enough to draw blood.

“You told me Kenji would not survive the next challenge,” she said, her voice hissing. “Yet here he is, alive and well. It was supposed to be just you and Akiko left by now.”

I sat beside her in deliberate defiance; I had not been invited. “And you told me the challenge would involve the venomous spiny sea urchin,” I countered. “I had it all worked out. Kenji would get poisoned and, in his delirium, stumble into the industrial meat grinder.” I turned to her, my voice rising despite myself. “But no, instead, we get thrown into an ice cage. That’s not even close! I could have died!”

“My husband changed the challenge without telling me. What was I supposed to do?” she said, cold and unbothered.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I snapped, rolling my eyes. “Maybe warn me? Did it not occur to

you that was an important detail?”

She whipped her head around. “Be careful how you speak to me.” Her words were clipped. “I am Chef Sakamoto’s wife. You will address me with the respect I am due. Am I clear?”

I swallowed the sharp retort that I had ready to fire off and forced myself to nod. “I apologize for raising my voice,” I said.

Reina’s expression softened slightly. “We were both caught off guard,” she said, as if offering an olive branch. “But the question is, Can you still do what you promised?”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “What, get rid of Kenji?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “I’ll try.”

She clicked her tongue impatiently. “I’m not asking you to try, Jiro. I need an absolute. Kenji must die, and it must happen before the next challenge. It needs to look like an accident.”

I leaned back, studying her carefully. “Why is this so important? Are you afraid Chef Sakamoto might pick him?”

Her lips stretched into a thin smile. “My reasons are my own. We had an agreement, Jiro. I’ll keep my end if you keep yours. So, can I count on you?”

I exhaled sharply, raking a hand through my hair. “What exactly do you expect me to do? Sneak into his room and stab him in his sleep?”

She waved off my sarcasm as if it were a pesky fly. “I don’t concern myself with the details.” After a moment, her expression shifted, and a faint smirk appeared. “You aren’t having second thoughts, are you? The three of you looked awfully friendly

during the last challenge. Are you becoming BFFs?”

I let out a dry laugh. “Hardly. Look, I’m not a trained killer. If you want this done, I’m going to need help.”

She tilted her head, considering for a moment. “Fine,” she said at last. “I’ll make arrangements with Kanshisha-san.” She paused. “You know he’s aware of the nickname given him, don’t you?”

My stomach tightened. “Really?”

“Of course,” she said with a laugh. “And he takes it as a compliment, the opposite of what was intended.”

I stared at her, unsure whether to believe her, but before I could respond, she stood, brushing a little dirt off her skirt. “Iron Face will be in touch. Be ready.”

And like that, she was gone, leaving me alone in the maze, wondering if my plan would work the way I intended it.

### CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

#### AKIKO

Dinner was warmer than usual; thanks to Kenji's shift in demeanor, we had a real conversation. It revolved around our recent challenge, speculating on the final and how we could handle it.

Kenji seemed keen on continuing our alliance, which put my fears of cracks forming to rest. I knew Jiro and I were fully committed, so no worries there. But there was still a nagging feeling I couldn't shake, and it needed to be addressed. After we finished eating, I asked Jiro to go for a walk.

"What's up?" he asked as we stepped out of the training kitchen. Kenji excused himself to use the bathroom but mentioned catching up with us later to continue strategizing.

"Is there somewhere private we can talk? Somewhere our third wheel won't find us, if you know what I mean."

Jiro smirked knowingly. "Yeah, I know just the spot."

He led the way through the maze, taking a route that seemed rehearsed. Right, then left, then another right. Eventually, we reached a dead end where a stone bench sat tucked away from prying eyes.

"How'd you find this place?" I asked.

“I got lost one day and ended up here,” he replied with a small smile. “It’s quiet. Perfect for thinking. So, what’s on your mind?”

I sat beside him, trying to organize my thoughts to avoid sounding like a babbling idiot. “Yesterday, after the challenge, I saw you talking to Reina under a cherry tree.”

“I remember.”

“Well, it kind of looked like you two were arguing.”

Jiro’s brow dipped. “Arguing? Seriously?”

“I couldn’t hear anything, obviously, but her body language, the way she moved her hands, and the look on her face felt off. Like she was possibly reprimanding you for something.”

“Wow,” Jiro said, crossing his arms. “When you said you wanted to talk in private, I thought you planned to confess your undying love for me or something.”

I swatted his arm. “Stop it! I’m serious. What were you talking about?”

“I dunno. I guess the same stuff Chef Sakamoto was telling you and Kenji.”

“Chef Sakamoto was telling us kitchen stories. Don’t tell me Reina was also sharing her culinary war tales.”

“No, she wasn’t. She was congratulating me. Saying how proud she was that we survived the challenge.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I know you, Jiro.” I pointed to his leg, which was bouncing like crazy.

“That’s your tell.”

He stilled his leg but avoided my gaze.

“Jiro, look at me,” I pressed. “If I need to know something, now’s the time to tell me.”

He sighed and turned to face me. “You know I care about you, right?”

“Or so you say.”

“Listen, Akiko. If I’m being real, I’m worried about us surviving the next challenge.”

“Why?” My stomach knotted.

He hesitated before leaning closer. “The alliance isn’t going to work, Akiko. We need to get rid of Kenji.”

I blinked, stunned. “What? Why?”

“I don’t trust him. During the last challenge, he almost cracked under pressure. You saw it. He got angry and started to lose control. If we keep him around, he’ll be a liability.”

“I saw frustration, Jiro, not betrayal.”

“Frustration leads to mistakes,” he shot back. “The final challenge will be the hardest yet. Do you want to bet your life on Kenji keeping his cool?”

“I can’t believe you’re suggesting this.” My voice dropped to a whisper. “You want to break up the alliance?”

“This was never about friendship,” Jiro said firmly. “It’s survival. I need you to make it to the end, and you need me. But we don’t need Kenji.”

“He’s part of this, Jiro. We agreed?—”

“We agreed to survive,” he interrupted. “If that means cutting our losses, so be it. Kenji needs to be sacrificed.”

The word sacrificed hung in the air like a dark cloud. I stared at Jiro, struggling to process what he was saying.

“Jiro, is that how you see me too? As nothing more than a tool to get ahead?”

He reached for my hand. “No, Akiko. You’re different. I don’t want you to get hurt. That’s why I’m doing this. Everything I’m doing is for you.”

I pulled my hand away. “What do you mean, everything you’re doing?”

“Trust me,” he said, his voice firm. “If you trust me, I promise you’ll be the one Chef Sakamoto chooses.”

“And if he chooses you?”

“Then I’ll defer to you,” Jiro said without hesitation. “You deserve this more than anyone. But if we keep Kenji around, you might not even get the chance or be alive.”

I felt like the ground had shifted beneath me. “Wait, you think Kenji still wants me dead?”

“Don’t you?” he asked pointedly. “Think about it. One day he’s eyeing you like he’s ready to slit your throat, and the next day, he’s all chummy, like nothing happened. He’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing, Akiko.”

### CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

#### KENJI

Jiro and Akiko walked out of the maze, side by side, their conversation low and intense, like two conspirators plotting the plan of a lifetime. They had no idea I was in the parallel pathway, absorbing every word of their intent to sacrifice me.

Those double-crossing bastards think they can outsmart me. We'll see who ends up begging for mercy. I'll make sure Jiro pays first, and I'll savor the moment when Akiko realizes she's next. Her charm and beauty won't save her this time. She won't get another chance to manipulate me, to twist my emotions like a knife.

A rustle behind me broke my thoughts. Reina appeared, gliding over with that elegance I always admired. "Didn't I tell you they were scheming against you?" A wry smile appeared on her face. "Believe me now?"

I looked over at her, still replaying the betrayal I'd overheard. "I believe you, but only because I heard it myself."

"Well, however you came to see the truth, the important thing is that you recognize they're cut from the same backstabbing cloth." She stepped closer, her voice turning sweet. "And what will you do about it, darling?"

"I'll make them pay," I said. "With their lives."

Satisfaction gleamed in her eyes. "Now, that's the determination. You've finally

come to understand what it takes to win.”

She reached up and lightly caressed my cheek. Her fingers were cool, sending a shiver rippling through me. “You’re so adorable,” she cooed, her eyes inviting.

I leaned toward her, desperate for her approval, and when our lips met, her kiss was as intoxicating as ever. Her soft body pressed into mine, and her warmth enveloped me. Our tongues met flirtatiously, a teasing dance that stirred me to attention. I slid my hands around her waist, pulling her closer, deepening the kiss. But then she pulled away, leaving me breathless.

“Can I count on you, darling?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll do anything for you. You’re the only one I can trust here.”

Her eyes beamed with satisfaction. “Good boy. You’ve played your role perfectly from the beginning. I couldn’t have asked for more.”

“And after this is over,” I said, my voice faltering slightly, “we’ll be together, right?”

Her smile never wavered. “Yes, of course. Don’t you believe me?”

“I do,” I said, keeping my voice steady despite lingering doubt. “It’s just...Chef Sakamoto...”

Her light laugh mocked me. “My husband? That old man? He’s a relic, past his prime, and unable to satisfy me. Don’t worry about him. I’ll handle everything.”

“But—”

She pressed a finger to my lips, silencing me. “Have I ever let you down?” she asked

firmly.

“No.”

“Didn’t I warn you about the ice challenge? About the boiling oil?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “And I’ve done everything you’ve asked, even the relentless jiggling of Akiko’s door nightly.”

“You do trust me, don’t you?” She leaned forward, tipping onto her toes, her lips inches from mine, as she tightened her grip. “Tell me you do, darling.”

“I do.” My lips brushed hers gently, a fleeting touch. “I know you’ll keep your word.”

“Good.” She released me, her feet returning to the ground. She took a step back, brushing her hands off. “Do you know what sets me apart from my husband? I’ll tell you. He might have talent, but I’m the one who turned that talent into an empire. I built this.” She gestured around her. “Every detail, every challenge, every apprentice who’s passed through this program—I orchestrated it all.”

She tilted her head as she eyed me. “Who designs the challenges?”

“You do.”

“That’s right. And who, in the end, truly decides who wins?”

“You do.”

Her smile returned, both radiant and captivating. “Exactly. Chef Sakamoto may be the face of this empire, but I am its architect. And now, Kenji, I’m building

something new. It's time for a younger, hungrier chef to take the reins. Someone the world will worship just as they once worshipped him. It's time for Chef Kenji Sanada."

Those words made my heart race. The thought that all of it—the fame, the power, the woman I desired by my side—was within reach. All I had to do was survive one more challenge. With her guidance, I could do it. I would do it.

"I won't let you down," I promised, my voice once again filled with confidence.

As she walked away, her words echoed in my mind, feeding my need for power. I would be the last one standing. I would have it all. Her, the empire, the glory. Nothing and no one would stop me.

### CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

#### JIRO

Reina wanted me to kill Kenji, an actual living person. I wasn't a killer. I wasn't even remotely qualified for this kind of thing. How the hell was I supposed to navigate this? Surely she didn't expect me to go through with it. I'd been tossing and turning in bed, unable to fully accept what she was asking of me.

Maybe I could stall her. Play dumb.

A soft click interrupted my thoughts. My door creaked open, and Iron Face loomed in the doorway like a servant sent from hell.

"It's time," he said, his voice low and cold.

"Time for what?" My voice was pitched higher than usual.

"Follow me. You'll find out soon enough."

Crap! This was it. Iron Face was here to help me kill Kenji. I had to figure a way out of this. Fast.

But instead of walking down the hall to Kenji's room, Iron Face led me out of the dorms. Confused, I kept following. We weren't heading to the training kitchen, either, so where? We approached a small windowless structure I'd seen a few times in passing. It was a little bigger than a toolshed, with a single steel door.

“What is this place?” I asked as I studied it.

Iron Face ignored me, pulling out a key and unlocking the door. He pushed it open, revealing a dark interior. “Go inside,” he ordered.

Hesitant at first, I eventually stepped through the doorway. The door slammed shut behind me, and fluorescent lights flickered on overhead. In front of me was a smaller, sealed room made of steel and glass. At first, it resembled an observation chamber. My stomach dropped as realization hit me.

“Is this...a gas chamber?” I looked back over my shoulder. Iron Face’s grin had stretched into something grotesque.

“You can’t be serious,” I said, panic rising inside me. “Reina wants to use a gas chamber? What the fuck is this? A horror movie?”

His silence was answer enough.

“Look, Kanshisha-san,” I stammered, “I’m not sure this is a good idea. There has to be a better way to?—”

Iron Face raised a knife he was holding. It clicked right then. The chamber wasn’t for Kenji. It was for me.

Before I could react, he lunged at me. I stumbled back into the chamber, causing him to miss. He continued to slash the blade, catching me on the forearm. I screamed in pain. Iron Face turned to exit the chamber, and without thinking, I attacked him, kicking him square in the back, sending him flying into the chamber wall. He fell to the ground, and I jumped on top of him, ignoring the searing pain in my arm.

We wrestled for control of the knife. He was stronger than I’d expected. Desperate, I

slammed his hand against the steel frame of the chamber until he finally dropped the blade. But before I could grab it, he jammed his fingers into my open wound. I screamed.

We grappled, each of us blocking the other from reaching the knife. I managed to roll on top of him, raining punches on his face, but he flipped me over with ease, slamming me into the ground. He tried to crawl out of the chamber, but I grabbed his ankle, yanking him back inside.

Each strike from Iron Face sent a wave of pain through my body, but my adrenaline surged, fueling me to fight back. I clawed my way to the door, shoving him back with a kick to his face. Blood smeared the steel as I slammed the door shut and threw my weight against it.

Iron Face roared, hammering his fists into the door, trying to force it open. My hands fumbled for the lock, slipping on sweat and blood. He pummeled the door harder, and I felt my feet sliding, losing leverage.

Finally, the lock clicked into place. Without thinking, I slammed my fist on the red button next to the door.

A loud hissing noise filled the air, slicing through the silence. Inside the chamber, Iron Face froze, his body stiffening as his eyes widened in horror. A cloud of gray gas began to seep from the vents, creeping like a toxic mist.

“No!” he screamed, his fists pounding against the glass, the sound of a desperate man. “No, no, no!”

His wheezing turned into violent coughing, then choking. His body thrashed against the gas surrounding him before he collapsed to the floor, jerking violently, until, limb by limb, he fell still. The chamber was silent, save for the faint hiss of gas still

seeping from the vents.

I backed away from the door, my breath ragged from our fight. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his lifeless form as I struggled to process what I'd just done.

I killed him. I killed Iron Face.

But I'd had no choice. It was either him or me. He had orders. Had I not pressed that button, Iron Face would have gassed me without giving it a second thought.

It was clear that Reina never trusted me. Sending Iron Face to kill me was all the proof I needed. And now, with him dead, there was no telling how far she'd go to ensure her control.

### CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

I stumbled out of the shed holding my injured arm, my heart pounding and my lungs fighting for air, only to stop dead in my tracks. Akiko and Kenji were standing just a few feet away. Bright floodlights had snapped on, illuminating the compound like broad daylight.

Akiko stared at me, frozen in place, but not out of fear. I sensed anger and disappointment on her face. And Kenji—something about the way he looked at me was off as well. What was going on?

“I told you, Akiko!” Kenji’s voice rang with vindication. “I told you Jiro was lying all along.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” I asked between breaths.

“Oh my God.” Akiko’s gaze was fixed behind me. “Did you...did you kill Iron Face?”

I turned, realizing too late that the glass-walled chamber was still visible outside. Inside, Iron Face’s lifeless body lay on the floor, foam on his lips and gas still swirling around him.

“He gassed Iron Face!” Kenji shouted, his words cutting through the night.

“No! That’s not what happened!” I spun back toward them. “This is a setup!”

“What were you planning next?” Kenji asked. “You wanted to sacrifice me! Akiko told me. You said you don’t need me.”

Reina appeared from the shadows, her face a mask of feigned horror. Behind her, Chef Sakamoto followed.

“Jiro, how could you?” she gasped, clutching her chest as if on cue.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “This is a setup!” I yelled. “Iron Face tried to kill me! He attacked me! I had no choice but to defend myself. This was Reina’s doing.” I pointed at her. “She wanted Kenji dead. She wanted me to do it, but I didn’t want to.”

“How could you, Jiro? I trusted you.” Akiko’s voice cut through the chaotic moment.

I realized right then that it sounded like I was confessing. “No, wait. I can explain, Akiko. I only told you about getting rid of Kenji because Reina wanted me to kill him. I needed her to think I was on her side because I came here for—for...”

“For what, Jiro? Why did you really come here?”

“I—I...came here for you. To save you.”

Akiko’s face twisted in disgust as she shook her head. “What do you mean you came here to save me?”

“Don’t listen to his bullshit,” Kenji interrupted. “He wanted the alliance so he could gain our trust and turn on us both during the last challenge. You’re pathetic.”

“That’s not true. Akiko, please, you have to believe me!” I pleaded. “I didn’t lie about anything! Reina’s been manipulating everyone from the start. She wants you

dead, Akiko. She hates you.”

Reina’s theatrical gasp grabbed our attention. “Jiro, is there no limit to the lies you’ll tell to save yourself? My husband was right. We never should’ve let your father bully us into accepting you into this program.”

Akiko’s eyes widened. “Your father got you in here?”

“He can’t even cook,” Reina added, her voice sharp and cutting. “I never understood why you wanted to be here, Jiro. But now I see. In your mind, it was some sick, twisted way to get Akiko back.”

“It’s true! I used my father to gain entrance to the program,” I shouted, my voice cracking. “But it was so that I could protect you. I knew this program was sick and twisted. You would never be privy to information like that. You could never have known what you were getting yourself into. Once you were here, there would be only one way out: to survive all six challenges. I couldn’t let you willingly sign your life away. That’s why I came here—to help and save you. I was given no special treatment. I was also risking the dangers when I accepted. That’s something Reina doesn’t tell you. Not even my father could help me after walking through the front doors of the compound.” I clasped my hands together, holding them in front of me. “Please, you have to believe me!”

“Such colorful lies this privileged and entitled boy tells,” Reina sang out. “Jiro, you should write a children’s book instead. I’m sure your father would buy a publishing company to see that it happens.”

Kenji wrapped a protective arm around Akiko. “Reina’s right. Don’t listen to Jiro,” he warned. “He’s a liar and has lied to you since day one. I’m sure he was returning to the dorms just now to throw me into the chamber.”

As Kenji's arm tightened around Akiko, a devilish grin spread across his face. And then I saw it. The same smirk mirrored on Reina's lips. My stomach dropped. They were working together. They had planned this.

Before I could react, two masked men appeared and restrained me.

"What are you doing? Let me go!" I thrashed against them, but it was no use. I was run down and injured from my fight with Iron Face.

"You will watch," Reina said coldly.

"Watch what?" I demanded, my voice trembling with rage.

Reina turned to Akiko and Kenji, her expression shifting to glee. "There's still one challenge left," she announced. "It must be completed."

"Wait, what?" The color in Akiko's face drained. "Why? I don't want any part of this. Kenji can have the apprenticeship. I don't care. I just want to go home."

"That's not how the rules work, Akiko." Reina's voice had dropped to a sinister whisper. "When you agreed to join this program, you agreed to see it through. Jiro is right about that part."

"I'm forfeiting!" Akiko shouted. "Give the apprenticeship to Kenji. I don't care!"

A maniacal smile spread across Reina's face. "What fun would that be? No, Akiko, I want you to suffer."

"What? I don't understand?—"

"You really think you can be the chef to rival my husband...or even your father?"

How quaint. You don't have what it takes. You never did. All your cooking has done is lead you straight to your own demise. You should see the pathetic look on your face. You actually thought you were good enough to get this far? The final challenge? It has nothing to do with your skills or effort. You're here because I wanted you here, to teach you a lesson you'll never forget. Stay. In. Your. Own. Lane!"

"Stop!" Chef Sakamoto cried out. "This must stop!" He turned to Reina. "I cannot allow this to continue. You must stop. You've taken this program too far. I can't let you hurt anyone else."

"You stupid old man. Do you honestly think you're in control?" Two additional masked men appeared and secured Chef Sakamoto.

"What is going on here?" Akiko cried out. "I don't understand."

"It's Reina," I said. "She controls everything, even the challenges. She's the brains and the evil behind it all."

"I am, and we will continue." Reina's laughter echoed through the compound like a madwoman's. "The final Kage Ryu challenge," she declared, "is Hi no Odori, Dance of Fire!"

"Run, Akiko!" I shouted, struggling against the masked men. "Run! The challenge is rigged! You're not meant to survive it!"

But Kenji's arms locked around Akiko, trapping her. "You're staying right here," he hissed.

"Kenji, what are you doing?" Akiko screamed, struggling against him. "Let me go!"

"No," Kenji growled. "You will compete with me in the next challenge. I will win,

and you will lose. Because I was meant to be the next great chef.”

“This is insane!” Akiko cried, her voice breaking. “What is happening here?”

“I told you, Akiko,” I said, my voice hoarse and desperate. “This is all a setup.”

But as I looked at her, all I saw was utter fear in her eyes. And for the first time, I wasn’t sure if I could save her.

### CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

#### AKIKO

Kenji held my arms tight in his grip as he maneuvered me ahead like a wobbling shopping cart he was determined to control. His fingers dug into my skin, a bruising reminder of his strength. In front of us, the masked men, those silent, faceless enforcers, had Jiro restrained. Their movements were methodical as they shoved him forward like he was nothing more than cargo.

Reina was at the head of the procession. Her chin held high, her back ramrod straight, exuding an air of triumph. But this time, she wasn't trailing Chef Sakamoto like the obedient wife she pretended to be. No, she led the way, and the once-revered master followed behind her, his shoulders slumped, his steps hesitant, as her guards prodded him along. He looked like a broken man who had finally realized the empire he thought was his had been a facade.

"I can't believe you're working for Reina, Kenji," I said, twisting my head to look at him. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing," he replied, his voice cold and robotic. "It's just my time. I'll take over where Chef Sakamoto left off."

"Do you honestly believe that?"

"Tell me you're not falling for Jiro's explanations," he snapped. "He tried to outsmart Reina and got his ass handed to him."

“I don’t believe anybody anymore,” I said, my voice rising. “You’re all nuts as far as I’m concerned. And I still don’t understand why we must go through this. I already deferred to you! What if you make a mistake and end up getting injured or worse? Why chance it?”

“I’m not worried about that because I know the challenge. I know how it works.”

“Then why do it? Why do I have to risk my life? Do you really want that?”

“It’s the rules. You agreed to it when you came here.” A cruel smile spread across Kenji’s face. “Akiko, you had your chance. I tried to be with you, but you blew me off for your ex, only to find out he’s been lying to you this entire time. You deserve what’s coming.”

Fear gripped me tighter as his words sank in. This wasn’t the Kenji I grew up with, the boy who used to make me laugh when I was sad or stand up for me when others tried to push me around. That Kenji was gone, replaced by someone unrecognizable.

I could kick myself for ever letting him into my room earlier, for believing even for a second that the bond we once had might still exist. He’d used everything he knew about me, every weakness, every vulnerability to manipulate me. And I’d fallen for it.

“Where are you taking me, anyway?” I asked, trying to mask my fear. We weren’t heading to the training kitchen or the area where our last challenge took place.

“Someplace special,” Kenji said with a smirk. “The Sakamoto residence.”

The Sakamoto mansion—or monstrosity, as I had come to think of it—was a two-story colonial home with six massive columns out front, each like a marble sentinel guarding the entrance. Windows lined the facade, too many to count. It resembled a government building or a museum more than it did a home.

Reina led the way up the gleaming white marble steps, her heels clicking sharply against the surface. Chef Sakamoto followed behind her like a scolded dog. I couldn't help but feel pity for him, even now.

Inside, the mansion was just as grand and cold as its exterior. The foyer was a gluttony of marble and gold, with twin staircases curving up to the second floor. Every detail, from the ornate moldings to the polished wood railings, screamed wealth and power.

We didn't linger in the grandeur for long. Reina directed us to a small stairwell that led down one floor. The shift in the atmosphere was immediate. The opulence gave way to a stark, sterile basement, industrial in its design. The walls were lined with heavy-duty steel panels, like those found in a commercial kitchen, and the floor was smooth white concrete. The air smelled faintly of disinfectant, like I imagined a morgue would. There were eight round tables scattered across the space, each with two chairs. Dim spotlights in the ceiling cast a muted yellow glow on each tabletop, giving the room cheap-cocktail-lounge vibes.

Reina turned to face us, her voice rising above the tension. "In this challenge, the final remaining apprentices, Kenji Sanada and Akiko Ono, will battle as servers." Her smile was so grand that the corners reached her eyes. "Waiting tables in a restaurant can be chaotic. Unexpected obstacles can thwart your path at any moment. The objective is simple: Fulfill your orders."

She gestured to a long table off to the side, where trays laden with dishes and drinks were neatly arranged. "Each table is assigned an order. Whoever has the fastest time serving their tables wins. Kenji will go first."

Kenji released me, his smirk widening as he walked toward the trays, a noticeable bounce in his step. He picked one up, balancing it with ease and giving me a playful lift of his eyebrows before turning his attention forward.

Reina raised an air horn and let it blare. Kenji moved along the floor with deliberate precision, but instead of heading straight to a table, his steps looked as if he were tracing an invisible map. Four steps forward, stop. Turn right, two more steps, turn left. Suddenly, a large flame erupted from the floor exactly where he turned left, nearly engulfing him.

The twist in the challenge had revealed itself.

Timed bursts of fire shot out of the floor like it was a splash pad in a park. Only this wasn't a theatrical dance of water. The explosions were violent, powerful, and the heat stung even from where I stood. Kenji had learned how to navigate a maze of fire. His steps were confident and deliberate as he avoided the timed fiery blasts.

"Akiko, he's counting!" Jiro's voice broke through the haze of my panic. "It's a pattern. Remember it!"

I watched Kenji place the first tray down and retrace his steps, narrowly avoiding the fiery eruption. The realization hit me like a freight train. This was a death trap, one for which Kenji had been preparing for who knew how long. One misstep or slight hesitation could mean being burned alive. How could I possibly navigate this maze?

When Kenji finished delivering all his orders, Reina clapped gleefully like a proud parent watching her child sing off-key during a school play. She turned to me. "Akiko, take your position."

My legs refused to move, weighed down by the daunting reality I faced. "I can't do this," I whispered, barely audible.

"Akiko!" Reina barked. "Take your position!"

The room spun, and my breaths grew shallow. My heart pounded violently, each beat

reverberating in my ears like a drum.

“Stop!” Jiro’s voice cracked.

I turned to him, his eyes glassy and face tight with desperation, as he struggled against the men holding him.

“Take me instead!” He turned to Reina. “Sacrifice me, not her. Please. I beg you.”

Reina tilted her head, amusement flickering in her eyes. “And why should I spare her?”

“Because I love her.” His eyes flicked to mine. “I’ve always loved you, Akiko. I’d gladly live a thousand lifetimes of suffering if it meant you’d have one without pain. Please, Reina, let me face the dance of fire instead.”

His words hit me like a tidal wave, crashing into me with years of emotion I hadn’t allowed myself to feel. My body stiffened, and my breath caught in my throat as I stared at him, the man who would throw everything away for me. Tears streamed down his face, and I felt something deep and aching awaken inside me. Memories of his arms around me, his warmth at night, his love, which had once made me feel safe in a way no one else ever had.

I realized then that Jiro had truly risked his life coming here to protect me. If he understood the dangers ahead, knowing his father’s power ended at the gates...only someone driven by true love would willingly do something so reckless, so foolish.

Jiro hadn’t been right for me the first time. But the tears in his eyes, the broken desperation in his voice...they told me he was now. And I wanted that chance, that life with him. A life we never finished. A life we never truly started. But how could I let him do this? How could I ask him to die for me?

I took a step toward the table.

“No, Akiko. Stop!” Jiro pleaded. He fought to free himself from the men holding him, his body jerking and twisting as he tried to reach me. “You don’t have to do this! Let me be the one!”

I steadied my head, refusing to look back, and I forced my legs to carry me forward. My hands gripped the table’s edge, braced myself; then I picked up a tray.

“You can be something great, Akiko!” Jiro frantically cried out. “You have the most to gain! Let me do the challenge! Please, just let me!”

The sharp blare of the air horn cut Jiro off, and I stepped onto the floor. My heart thundered in my chest as I tried to remember Kenji’s pattern, knowing deep down it was hopeless. The first flame shot up beside me, the heat scorching my skin, and I turned sharply, barely avoiding another burst. Each step felt like it could be my last, the air thick with smoke and the acrid stench of burning fuel.

“Akiko!” Jiro’s cries echoed behind me, but I couldn’t look back. I couldn’t lose focus. My life depended on it.

A roar erupted, followed by a deafening crash. I turned just in time to see Jiro break free, throwing one of the masked men into a burst of flame. The fire engulfed the man instantly, his screams cutting through the chaos. I staggered back as another flame erupted before me, blocking my path. Panic took over, freezing me in place.

Jiro wrestled the remaining man to the ground, and their bodies rolled across the floor. Then the flames erupted, engulfing them both, and I screamed as they disappeared in the inferno. The masked man’s body bore the brunt of the blast, allowing Jiro to leap away, his clothes singed.

“Akiko, you can’t stay still!” he shouted. “Move! Now!”

I took a shaky step, and a burst of fire erupted where I’d just been standing. My heart pounded, my breaths shallow as I tried to find a path forward. But I was clueless.

“Don’t just stand there. Kill him!” Reina commanded Kenji as she pointed at Jiro, her eyes filled with hate. “Kill him now!”

Kenji moved like a predator, lunging toward Jiro and tackling him to the ground. I watched as they grappled, their bodies rolling dangerously close to another burst of flames. They popped up to their feet, exchanging punishing blows, each one landing with brutal precision.

Wild eyed, Kenji lifted Jiro and slammed him into the concrete floor. Jiro’s agonized scream pierced the flames. Kenji pounced, his hands wrapping tightly around Jiro’s throat, as he leaned in, using his weight to crush Jiro’s throat. The life was draining out of him, and his flailing arms were slowing with each passing second.

“No!” I screamed, running toward them, but a wall of flames erupted in front of me, cutting off my path. I tried another direction, but fire blocked me at every turn. “Fight back, Jiro!” I screamed. “Fight for us!” Fight for me!

Just when I thought I would lose him, Jiro managed to land a solid punch to the side of Kenji’s head. The impact disoriented him, and his grip loosened. Jiro bucked him off with a burst of strength and rolled away, narrowly avoiding a surge of flames that erupted where he had just been lying.

I pushed forward, ignoring the heat searing my skin. Reaching Jiro, I patted at the flames on his pants, extinguishing them. I grabbed his arm and tried to pull him to his feet. His burned legs buckled beneath him, and he was too heavy for me to lift alone.

“Come on, Jiro,” I pleaded, my voice struggling. “We need to move!”

“You can’t help him,” Reina taunted from somewhere beyond the flames. “You’re weak, Akiko. Just like your father.”

Her words stung, but I refused to let her break me. My eyes flicked to Kenji, and my blood turned to ice. He had one of the flamethrowers from the first challenge in his hands, its nozzle pointed directly at us. A manic grin spread across his face as he adjusted the fuel canister.

“I’m going to roast you two alive,” he roared.

Adrenaline surged through me, giving me the strength to move Jiro to my other side. I flipped a table over and pulled him down behind it just as a stream of fire shot toward us. The table deflected the flames, but the heat was unbearable. My skin prickled with pain, and the wood began to char beneath the relentless assault.

The flames stopped momentarily, and I risked a glance over the table. Kenji was adjusting a valve on the canister, preparing for another attack. My heart pounded as I realized the table wouldn’t survive another blast.

Then, out of nowhere, Chef Sakamoto had somehow managed to free himself from his captors and was charging across the room with an ear-piercing warrior cry. He slammed into Kenji, tackling him to the ground. The flamethrower hit the floor, and the canister ruptured, spilling fuel across the concrete. A massive fireball erupted, engulfing them both.

“Kenji!” Reina’s scream pierced the air, but there was nothing anyone could do. Kenji’s body was a blur of flames as he thrashed wildly, his screams echoing through the inferno.

The fire spread rapidly, licking at the walls and igniting the floor where the other canisters were lined up along the room's edges. The basement had become a ticking time bomb.

"Jiro," I said. "We need to get out. Now!"

I hooked my arm under his and helped him to his feet. Each step was agonizing for him; with his burned legs, he could barely support his weight. We were close to the stairs when Reina appeared, blocking our path, teeth bared. Before I could react, she punched me hard in the face.

My knees buckled, sending me to the floor, dazed. Reina was on me instantly, her hands clawing at my throat. "You can't escape!" she shrieked, her voice wild with rage. "I forbid it!"

Fueled by panic and rage, I swung my fist, hitting her square in the jaw. She fell off me to the side but kept a firm grip on my uniform. I hit her again and again, pouring my fury into every blow. The flames around us crept closer, the heat singeing my hair, but I couldn't stop, even when she let go of me. I began to hack from the thick smoke that gathered, but I continued to strike her.

A strong hand gripped the back of my uniform and yanked me away. "Akiko!" Jiro's voice broke through my rage.

He pulled me to my feet, and together, we stumbled toward the stairs. Just as we reached them, a deafening explosion rocked the basement. The blast wave knocked us down, but Jiro pushed me forward, shielding me with his body as debris rained down around us.

Somehow, he managed to get us up the stairs, each step a battle against the rising smoke. We burst through the door into the foyer, but the fire followed us, spitting out

and consuming everything around us. We made our way to the front door and burst into the cool night.

We collapsed on the front steps of the mansion, gasping for air. Behind us, the entire house erupted in a massive explosion, the force igniting the nearby library and pagoda. The flames reached skyward, a hellish beacon against the night.

“The whole compound will be in flames,” Jiro said, coughing as he pulled me to my feet. “We need to get out of here.”

We ran toward the bridge that spanned the moat, the twin steel doors ahead our only escape from the burning hell consuming the compound. Sparks shot through the air like frenzied fireflies, igniting everything they touched. The fire surged, leaping from one cherry tree to the next with terrifying speed.

We hurried over the bridge, and Jiro slammed into the doors, pushing, but they wouldn’t budge. No, no, no. This can’t be happening. I joined him, throwing my weight against the door, straining against the immovable steel.

The dorm roof suddenly caught fire, flames climbing higher by the second. The crackle of burning wood and choking smoke surrounded us. Heat clawed at my skin. If we didn’t escape now, the inferno would consume us.

I shoved my shoulder against the door with everything I had, and suddenly, I wasn’t in the compound anymore. I was a little girl at the pier, desperate to follow my father into a building he had just entered. His voice echoed in my memory: Push, Akiko. Good things await on the other side.

Hearing his words fueled me. I wanted so much to reunite with him, to tell him that I had survived the impossible.

The steel door groaned and shifted. Jiro and I pushed harder, moving it inch by inch until it finally swung open just enough for us to slip through. As we stumbled outside, explosions echoed from the mansion. I glanced back over my shoulder. Through the roaring flames and billowing smoke, I swore I saw a figure standing in the doorway of the burning mansion. But it was impossible to tell if it was real.

### CHAPTER FIFTY

My bedroom door opened, and Miki stood in the doorway, wearing an oversize T-shirt. She flipped the light on, and I groaned, pulling the comforter over my head.

“I can’t stand seeing you spend your days in this dark room. I know you’ve been through a lot, but it’s been three months, Akiko. Look, I’ve made breakfast. Please come eat with me.”

Hearing her say “three months” was a reality check I hated. I’d rather not have any concept of time, or acknowledge my life wasting away. But Miki wouldn’t let that happen. Before I could groan again, the blanket was ripped off me.

“Arrrgghh!” I screamed as the cold air hit my half-naked body.

“Yup, that’s right. Call me a bitch all you want, but you’re getting out of bed and joining me for breakfast.” She grabbed my arm and pulled. “Come on. I’ll drag you across the floor if I have to.”

Knowing Miki, she wouldn’t hesitate to follow through on that threat. I let her pull me to my feet. She threw a robe over me and led me out of the room. The sunlight hit me like a shock, and I squinted, my eyes watering from the sting. I blinked until I could keep them open without pain. On the kitchen table sat the breakfast Miki had made. I took a seat.

“Now, this isn’t close to what you would have prepared, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

Breakfast wasn't as bad as she'd made it out to be. There was rice, grilled fish, pickled vegetables, even miso soup. I took a sip of green tea, and its warmth was surprisingly comforting.

"The miso soup's from a packet. I just added hot water, but I like it. The fish I bought down the street, the pickled veggies are premade, but hey, I made the rice." She smiled at me, and I finally cracked a laugh.

She sucked in a quick breath. "Is that life I'm seeing from the walking dead? My God. I can't believe it. Folks, she's woken from her coma!" Miki said with dramatic flair, pretending we had an audience.

"Stop. You're being silly," I said.

She pushed chopsticks toward me. "Eat. We're on a roll here. Let's keep it going."

"The rice is perfect," I said, chewing.

"Thank you, my darling. I had no choice but to up my cooking skills, what with you hibernating in your bedroom."

"Thank you, Miki. I appreciate everything you've done for me. I know I haven't been the best friend?—"

"Hey, hey, hey. This isn't about me. You've been through something horrific. You're allowed time to process."

She was right. I'd spent most of my time in bed reflecting on what I'd been through. Becoming a sushi chef had always been my dream—something that would give me purpose. And if I was being honest, I thought it would fill the ache in my heart caused by my father's disappearance. But instead, the apprenticeship only brought me more

despair.

What I'd experienced—the hazing, the haunting challenges, the deaths of my fellow apprentices—it all felt surreal, like fragments of a fever dream. Even I questioned whether it had all truly happened. Surely I hadn't survived six weeks in a culinary death camp?

But it was real—every horrifying bit of it. And processing it was exactly what I was struggling with.

While my fellow apprentices and I had fought for our lives, just beyond the wall, people laughed, chatted, and dined on fresh sushi. They had no idea a bloodbath was unfolding just steps from their tables. No one in Kyoto, or anywhere in Japan, knew the horrors that had taken place. And I realized it would stay that way.

The week after escaping the compound had felt like a whirlwind of poking and prodding by two inspectors from the Kyoto Prefectural Headquarters. It was as if I were the one being investigated. I'd ask questions, desperate for answers, but was met with either silence or subtle warnings not to dig deeper. I was told not to leave my apartment, and I wasn't allowed visitors—not even Miki was permitted to contact me. The police even kept a car stationed outside to watch.

Every day, they'd stop by, and I'd have to recount what happened at the compound from day one. It was exhausting and painful to relive that experience. They didn't care—just continued taking notes, indifferent to everything. I'd never felt so alone.

Then one day Jiro had shown up at my apartment.

“Oh my God, Jiro!”

We hugged. What a relief to see a familiar face, to have human contact after the cold,

sterile inspectors.

I closed the door and peeked out the window. “Do they know you’re here?”

“Yes, they know. I’m sorry that I didn’t come by earlier. I was detained. My father finally put an end to it.”

“Wait, they put you in jail?”

“Well, they wouldn’t call it jail, but yes, I was locked up and facing the same scrutiny you’ve probably endured this past week.”

Jiro told me everything he’d been through, and I shared the same with him. We were both being treated the same way, as if we were to blame for what had happened. I couldn’t understand it. But Jiro was helpful, explaining how to talk to the inspectors—how to deal with them, essentially, so they’d be satisfied and stop with the questions. While I appreciated his help, his advice had seemed counterintuitive. His approach didn’t fully expose the nightmare we’d been through. In fact, it minimized it.

“That’s the point, Akiko,” Jiro said matter-of-factly. “The investigators know exactly what happened at the compound. This is all for show.”

He went on to talk about the world of the elite, how they controlled the narrative. Chef Sakamoto and Reina—he said they were connected to powerful people, too many to count.

I couldn’t believe it. A cover-up? Was this what I was being forced into?

I wanted to ask if that meant his family was involved, but I didn’t. This wasn’t about blaming Jiro or his family’s status.

I was dumbfounded, to say the least, but I finally understood why the apprenticeship was called a shadow school. It wasn't the NDAs that kept people quiet. Those who survived had a stronger incentive to stay silent: fear. I imagined the chefs who went on to great success had simply buried their memories, focusing on new beginnings.

But could I forget so easily?

What about Miyo, Kaiyo, Taka, Dori, Sana, and Osamu? They'd died. What about their families? Surely they had questions.

Jiro's visit had been cut short. A knock on the door, and he was escorted away by one of the inspectors. I spent a few more days talking to them, but this time, I took Jiro's advice on what to say. It must have worked because they thanked me for my time and never came back.

Miki was finally allowed to visit me, and I'd thought everything would be fine, but it wasn't. I fell off a cliff. She'd got the worst of me as I sank into a deep depression, unable to leave my bed.

"Do you want more fish?" Miki asked. "I bought extra."

"No, thank you. This is a very good breakfast."

"Um..." She fidgeted with her chopsticks, a sign she had something serious to talk to me about. "Jiro's been calling."

I hadn't seen Jiro since that initial visit because, well, I'd refused. While I appreciated his help with the investigators, I couldn't forget what Jiro revealed that final night at the compound. I was still conflicted, unsure whether he was lying or not. So much had come out that night, not just from him, but also from Kenji and Reina. I struggled to keep their stories separated.

“He wants to visit,” Miki said. “He asks daily, but I don’t mention it to you because I know your answer is no.”

Part of me knew Jiro wanted to see me just to make sure I was okay, but I also thought it might be just about wanting a chance to deepen our relationship. And I couldn’t—not then, not with my mind trapped in such a dark place, not with my feelings so vulnerable. I’d asked him for time, unsure how long I would need—or if, in the end, I would say goodbye for good.

“He says he knows how you feel about him and wants a chance to explain, to answer any questions you might have. He promises that’s all it’s about. Maybe you should hear the guy out.”

“Really? You wanted me to break up with him the entire time we dated during university. Why the change of heart now?”

“Okay, don’t hate me for this, but because he calls every day, I started talking to him, asking the tough questions. And he surprisingly has answers—ones I think you should hear. If anything, it might bring some closure for you, about what happened at the compound.”

I couldn’t disagree with Miki. I had more questions than answers. Maybe a conversation with him would help my mental state. I agreed to see Jiro.

### CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

A few days later, Jiro came over to the apartment. Miki wanted to make it a group thing—she felt I was too fragile to be alone with him. Mostly she was worried he would pull some type of dumb shit with me. I told her it wasn't necessary.

A knock on the door, and Miki invited Jiro in.

“Don't do anything stupid,” she warned him.

“I promise. Nothing stupid,” Jiro assured her as he stepped inside.

“Akiko, I'll be at the coffee shop down the street if you need me.”

Miki eyed Jiro once more before leaving.

“Thanks for seeing me, Akiko. I really appreciate it.”

We took a seat on the sofa, next to each other. I'd made a pot of tea and poured us each a cup. We didn't waste much time on pleasantries—I was eager to get answers. I'm not sure why I asked about it first, but I wanted to know what happened to the other apprentices. What about their families? Surely they had questions like I did.

“They did have questions,” Jiro said. “But it's not something you'd ever hear publicly.”

“So, they fell in line like everyone else, bullied into silence.”

Jiro was quiet for a moment. “They had small, private funerals, from what I’ve heard. Just family.”

The powerful elite were that untouchable, according to him. Everything that had happened had been swept under the rug. News reports about the burning compound faded quickly, inquiries stopped, and it became just another blip on the news cycle, forgotten by everyone except those who survived it.

It was clear to me that Jiro knew more than he let on but insisted it was too dangerous to talk about. Besides, he said, knowing wouldn’t bring me the closure I sought.

Still, he told me what he could, though it wasn’t much.

“Bodies were recovered from the wreckage, but they were burned beyond recognition,” he said. “DNA analysis was inconclusive due to the intensity of the fire—that part is true. I don’t think it’s bullshit.”

“So, everyone assumes the remains were those of Chef Sakamoto, Reina, Kenji, and Iron Face?”

“Yeah.”

“What about those mystery men the investigators never believed when I mentioned them?”

“As far as I know, they’re not in the report.”

“Figures.”

Jiro shifted in his seat. “Reina’s family demolished what was left of the compound, including the famed House of Sakamoto.”

I hadn't heard that, or maybe Miki had decided not to tell me. An empire of culinary greatness, gone just like that—vanished from the history pages and erased from the culinary guides.

“I heard all that's left is an empty lot for sale.”

The weight of the silence grew heavier between us. I knew I was avoiding the real conversation. Yes, the investigation's outcome gave me some answers, but I couldn't shake the question gnawing at me. Was Jiro's insane declaration to die for me out of love the truth? Or just a spur-of-the-moment reaction, fueled by the horrors unfolding around us?

“I know what you're thinking,” he said as he stared into his cup of tea. “I'll make it easier and just get started.”

He explained his actions during the program—the calculated cruelty, the cold indifference. It had been vital that everyone, including me, believed he hated me. If anyone discovered his true intent, we'd both be killed. Still, I was bothered by his admission and felt foolish, realizing how easily I had been manipulated.

“I joined the apprenticeship to save you, Akiko. That's the truth. When I found out you were accepted, I couldn't just sit back. It wasn't about trying to win you back. If I'd contacted you to warn you about what was coming, you wouldn't have believed me. And I knew that.”

He was right.

“The deal my father and I orchestrated with the Sakamotos—mostly Reina—was stupid and dangerous when I think back on it. She said yes on a couple of conditions. I had to make sure you made it to the end. I also had to play the game like a real player. No special treatment. I entered the program knowing full well I might not

leave.”

“Your father actually agreed to that?”

“Not initially. He was against it. But I pushed a few of his hot buttons and was able to change his mind.”

“But you could have died. What kind of father?—”

“My father isn’t the typical father. Let’s just leave it at that. I never told him the worst part. Reina insisted that if I failed on my part of the bargain, she’d see to it that I was killed.”

In exchange for allowing him to participate, the Sakamotos would gain access to his father’s valuable contacts and influence. He had taken all the risk while they stood to reap all the rewards.

“Did Reina say why she wanted me to make it to the end?” I asked before taking a sip of my tea.

“She never said. From what I gathered, I think she wanted you to believe you were going to win only to tear you down at the last minute. It’s sick, I know. Can you think of a reason?”

“The only reason I can think of is my father. He and Chef Sakamoto were best friends. She mentioned my father more than once while I was there. Enough to make me believe something happened between the three of them.”

“Do you think she knows what happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, my voice hollow. “But I’ll never find out now.”

In the end, Jiro had agreed to everything Reina demanded. He entered the program knowing he had six weeks to find a way to save both of us without revealing his true intentions.

I accepted that full closure would never come and thanked Jiro for being as honest as possible.

“About us...” he started.

“Jiro, I’m sorry, but right now, my focus is on myself and my recovery. I hope you can understand that.”

“I do. You probably think none of this bothers me, but it does. I’m not immune to it.”

We talked a little more about how we felt and how we were coping. Jiro was making better progress, though much of it was due to his overbearing father riding his ass, as he put it. As far as his father was concerned, Jiro had had more than enough time to get over it. It was time to move on.

At some point, the conversation stalled, hovering in the space between what we had been and what we were now. We had to address what happened between us. I thought about the night we spent together—the heat of it, the intensity. It hadn’t been a mistake, but it also hadn’t changed anything.

Jiro must’ve been thinking the same thing because he let out a slow breath and said, “I know I messed up. But that night we were together... It wasn’t a lie. For me it was real. It meant a lot...to be with you again, like that.”

I nodded, acknowledging the truth in that, even if I wasn’t ready to give him more. “I need time right now. Small steps, okay?”

He smiled at me. “Of course.”

“Miki has been a blessing,” I said, wanting to change the subject. “She hasn’t left my side at all.”

“I know. I practically talked to her every day. Never ever saw that coming, with our history.”

I chuckled. “I’ve heard.”

I told Jiro how the charred remains of the Sakamoto compound haunted my dreams every night, making it hard to move on. “It’s like the events of that night play over and over in my mind. No matter how hard I try to bury it, I can’t shake the memory.”

“I have nightmares too. But I have to believe it’ll get better. Time heals all, right?”

It was cathartic to talk about this with him—he understood. No explanation was needed. He’d lived through the same thing. Before he left, I agreed to keep talking over the phone; it would help us both.

That conversation marked the start of my true recovery. Day by day, things improved. I ventured out with Miki for walks, shopped at the markets, and even began to smile and laugh regularly. But the one thing I still couldn’t bring myself to do was cook. The kitchen triggered something inside me. It was my last block to overcome.

But one morning I woke up and made a decision: Enough was enough. I couldn’t keep moping around in self-pity. I needed to reclaim who I was—the Akiko who was vibrant, determined, and destined to become the greatest sushi chef.

And it began with a step back into the kitchen.

### CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

#### ONE YEAR LATER...

The soft hum of voices filled the air, mingling with the gentle clinking of glasses and the sizzle of fresh fish on the grill. The restaurant wasn't big, just ten tables and a small sushi bar, but it was mine. Ono Omakase had become my pride and joy, a dream I had almost abandoned.

With the help of my best friend, Miki, I pulled myself together and got back on my feet. She was my biggest cheerleader, hyping me daily and encouraging me to become the chef she knew I could be. "You are destined to own a Michelin-starred restaurant," she would always say, followed by, "And I hate my job. So, for the love of God, save us both with your incredible cooking!"

I didn't have a Michelin-starred restaurant yet, but the early reviews from the critics were favorable. Positive word of mouth spread, causing my reservation list to grow longer and further out. Opening the restaurant was the hardest thing I'd done, both emotionally and financially, but it had also been the most rewarding. I couldn't have been happier, even if I was in debt up to my eyeballs.

Through the kitchen window, I watched Miki, now my *maître d'*, gracefully greet guests as they arrived. She had been my rock from the early stages of planning to opening night. Seeing her flash one of her dazzling smiles at a guest made my chest swell with gratitude.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without Jiro. Yes, Jiro .

Our phone calls had turned into visits, visits into dates, and dates into a relationship. He'd come back into my life because I realized I wanted him back. And I'm glad I did. Our relationship quickly grew into a loving partnership, though the beginning was anything but smooth sailing—mostly for him.

When Jiro's father learned that his entire reason for entering Chef Sakamoto's apprenticeship program was to win me back, he was furious. But Jiro's decision to abandon politics truly pushed him over the edge. Instead, Jiro told his father, he was opening a restaurant—with me.

That was the final straw. His father issued an ultimatum: Give up his "foolish dream" or be disowned.

Jiro chose me. He walked away from his inheritance, his trust fund, and his family.

"They bring no value or joy to my life," Jiro told me. "My father wants me to be just like him, but that's the last thing I want. You've shown me I can be better. I don't have to follow their path. And if cutting them and their money out of my life is what it takes, I'm okay with it. I'm happier and more than willing to start over with you. My life will be richer than it could be with their money."

And just like that, he left it all behind.

"We'll live in a tiny apartment together for as long as it takes," he said, "even if that ends up being forever."

At the sushi bar, Jiro was in his element. He wasn't a chef—not yet, anyway. But he had become a master of charm. He chatted effortlessly with the diners while pouring them sake, the picture of warmth and hospitality. It was a side of him I hadn't seen before, one that made me love him even more. Plus, the guy was great at managing the business end of things.

If Miki was my rock, Jiro was my safe place, ensuring I never had to face anything alone. It helped that he fully understood what I'd been through; he had endured it too. We still talked about those dark times occasionally; it was unavoidable. And it wasn't just me who needed to vent—Jiro did too.

Rekindling our relationship was the best thing for both of us. Even Miki approved, which surprised me. She had been fiercely protective at the start and hadn't trusted Jiro at all. I was skeptical, too, at first, but I figured I'd never know unless I tried.

Jiro didn't win me back with words—he showed me through actions every day. He proved he was a new man, not by telling me but by being someone I could depend on, someone I could trust, someone who would always put me first. We might have been wrong for each other at university, but now, we were exactly what the other needed.

“Chef!” Miki's voice snapped me out of my pleasant thoughts. She peeked her head into the kitchen, her face lit with excitement. “Chef Takahashi just left us a five-star review online!”

I arched an eyebrow while wiping my hands on a towel. “Takahashi? As in the famed chef who owns the Kaiseki Table Takahashi?”

“Yes! That Takahashi!” Miki nodded eagerly. “He said you're one to watch, a rising star in the sushi world!”

I pressed a hand to my chest, my heart racing. A year ago, I never would have thought this would be possible. I had always believed I could be the chef I wanted; I needed to be trained by the best. Clearly, I hadn't won Chef Sakamoto's apprenticeship, but that's what made Chef Takahashi's words even more warming. My success was based on my own will and talent. Not because I'd completed a fancy apprenticeship. I had carved my own path and enjoyed the fruits of my labor.

“Soon, every celebrity in Japan will be fighting for a seat here,” Miki said. “Mark my

words.”

“Thank you,” I said, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, though. Let’s focus on pleasing the guests we have here tonight.”

Miki grinned and disappeared back into the dining room.

After closing, I sat alone in my office. Miki and the staff had already left. Jiro was checking our inventory in the walk-in fridge. Hitting up the morning markets with him had become my favorite pastime. I loved bouncing new menu ideas off him, and he loved being my guinea pig.

I took a quick look at the reservation book. We were now booked a month and a half out, something I’d never imagined would be possible. But people were telling their friends, who told their friends, and so on. Each name felt like a small victory, proof that my little restaurant was gaining traction and I was on my way to earning that coveted Michelin star.

Suddenly, my heart jumped as my eyes froze on a name: Reina Sakamoto.

For a long time, I just stared at the name, convinced my eyes were playing tricks. But it was there, clear as day, as though she had never perished in the flames.

It had to be a mistake.

A cruel joke.

Someone playing a sick game.

The reservation was for tomorrow night, at 7:30. A table for one. According to the book, it had been made a week ago via a walk-in.

There should still have been security footage saved in the hard drive. My fingers trembled as I tapped at my computer and launched the application.

I navigated to the time stamp, but my mouse hovered over the play button, paralyzed. What if it really was her? The past had already stolen so much from me; could I bear to face it again? But I had to know. I pressed play.

The grainy black-and-white footage showed the front door swinging open. A woman entered the restaurant, her movements fluid, purposeful. I leaned closer to the screen.

Her hair was long, cascading down her back in loose waves. Her outfit was nondescript but luxurious. It didn't scream Reina, but it could have been her. Unfortunately, her face was obscured by oversize sunglasses as she approached the host stand. But the leveled chin...the straight back...the graceful steps... They were all eerily familiar.

I paused the video, focusing on the figure frozen on the screen. Reina Sakamoto was supposed to be dead. And yet her name sat there on my reservation list, like a whisper from the grave.

Jiro poked his head into my office. "Hey, you ready to get out of here?" I looked up at him, and his smile faded. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen the devil himself."

"It's worse than that."

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