

Chapter Fifteen

After we'd reached Zhao's home, I almost climbed to my room's window, hoping to sneak into bed. If Brennan had come home while we'd been visiting the community center, she'd know that I hadn't followed her instructions, and I'd rather not face her when her temper was riled.

It didn't help that the prospect of disappointing her rankled me almost as much as doing the same once had with Nokoribi, if in different ways.

Avoiding a confrontation like this, however, had never helped anyone. If I let it hang over my head for long enough, it would consume me, having me constantly looking over my shoulder in anticipation of what might come next, and I wouldn't let that happen.

So, I entered the house with Zahao. Once we were inside, I removed my spectacles and bubble with my ears perked, but only silence greeted me.

"Do you think she's here?" I whispered.

Shrugging, Zhao said, "How should I know? Even before she came home with you, I couldn't keep track of her comings and goings. She's had experience with the kind of work we do."

Which begged the question of where she'd learned it. Not many people in Hiyuki could sneak past an emperor's bodyguard, even one who'd been retired for as long as Zhao had been, but then again, Brennan had never seemed like a native of my world.

Considering that, where had she come from, and what must her world be like to have produced someone like her?

"I need to water my plants," Zhao said. "You handle your..."

He waved at my face and at my nod, wandered deeper into the house. Jogging upstairs, I dug through my pockets for Brennan's tube with the lamps' flames fluttering in my wake.

For the moment, taking care of my internal jitter, spawned for the second time today, took precedence over everything else, but once I'd done that, I'd look for Brennan. Hopefully, though, she had yet to return because I could use a moment of quiet to prepare for tonight's home invasion. Or to assess everything that had happened since I'd woken up.

Did either of those things *need* to happen, though? Maybe I should pop out the window once I'd finished with my given task, making my way to Taro's estate now. There had been enough of a delay in my hunt for vengeance today.

With the tube in my hand, I twisted into my room. I'd have collapsed onto my bed, ignoring my internal need to *move*, but a woman was sitting there with her legs pulled up under her. With muted light streaming through the window above her, I thought for the briefest of moments that a guiding spirit had arrived to return me to Katanti, and I froze while the scene captured me in body and mind.

Then, I recognized the woman as Brennan, and she did *not* look happy.

"I told you to stay put," she said.

Fully stepping into the room, I opened the avenue of escape found behind me while getting ready to draw a weapon, if needed. I didn't want to threaten Brennan. In fact, the idea repelled me to a degree, but her voice had sent danger signals screaming through me. I'd do whatever I must to keep her from hurting me.

"Zhao needed help with an errand," I said, "and while we were in Takanai, I went without a mask. Not many people have seen me like that."

"But some have," Brennan said.

Shrugging, I nodded, and she exhaled, a slow release of air that drooped her. Maybe she wasn't planning on attacking me?

Of course she wasn't. What had I been thinking?

"If Zhao went with you, I guess it's fine," she said. "At least you had someone watching your back out there."

"For most of the outing, yes," I said. "Do you mind? I need my bed."

While climbing off of it, Brennan let unease creep onto her face, and I wondered if I should ask her to leave the room before using her tube. With the door and window barred, I should survive my coming moment of vulnerability fully intact, especially since she wasn't planning on attacking me.

Again. Why had I thought she might?

So yes, making a request for her to leave was probably foolish, but considering how much more comfortable it would make me, I thought it was a reasonable favor to ask. How to phrase it, though?

"Most of it?" Brennan asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounded like," I said. "For a time, I walked down Takanai's streets alone. Earth and fire forbid that I do that."

The lightning storm crackling under my skin protested me lowering my body onto the mattress, and to appease it, I danced Brennan's tube through my fingers. Even with that gesture, though, I

had to shift quite a bit before I could settle into a somewhat agreeable position.

“You didn’t mention that your tube can have less than pleasant side effects,” I said. “Last time I used it, it sapped me. I’ve never felt so exhausted in my life.”

“Then, you used it for too long. Neural reorganization takes a lot from the body. I advise against doing it for too long or too many times in a row,” Brennan said. “Why’d you use it in the first place?”

“I manifested an object earlier. Since I didn’t know whether to use the tube before my... magic’s consequences presented themselves, I waited until later to do it,” I said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have, though. The resulting episode started while I was apprehending a mugger, and because I was distracted, he escaped.”

“A *mugger*?” Brennan said. “Kasai, this is why-”

“Can we wait to discuss it until after you’ve shown me how to properly use this tube?” I interrupted. “I’d love a lesson before another episode knocks me flat on my back.”

“Another...?”

Blowing hair out of her eyes, Brennan sat at the foot of my bed.

“That can wait too,” she said. “Give me the Neurreorg.”

After I’d handed the tube over, she depressed its clicker twice, which had a blip of blue imprinting on my eyes.

“You should never go over ten blinks,” she said.

“Meaning I’ll have to count them?” I asked.

Nodding, Brennan said, “I know how impossible that seems. Trust me. You can do it, though, and of course, starting this process before the onset of an episode is best, even without symptoms presenting themselves. It shouldn’t hurt you.”

“But it might,” I said, picking up on that unspoken implication.

Wincing, Brennan said, “Yes, but that’s unlikely. Risking it is better than having an episode. Now, hold still, count, and tell me when you feel better.”

Raising the tube in front of my eyes, she activated it, and I watched its tip flash four times before waving for her to stop.

“You good?” she asked.

“A kernel of energy is still resting deep inside, but I don’t think that will ever leave me,” I said. “It’s been there since Alouin sent me home.”

“Good enough, then.”

Brennan shoved the tube into my hands.

“You got mugged?” she snapped. “This is why I wanted you to stay here until I was home and could help you. What’s with your insistence on going off alone?”

Help. Why did she think I needed help?

“I can handle myself,” I said with rubber lips.

“Maybe you can most of the time,” Brennan said, “but right now, you’re a dead criminal who insists on going out and about in a city that’s celebrating your execution. In a situation like that, everyone needs a helping hand.”

“Such weak thinking.”

Crossing my arms, I decided that the bed opposite me was more fascinating than the change of expression taking place on Brennan’s face. While examining its mussed state, I calculated whether I could reach the door beside it before she could stop me because now that we were having it, this conversation seemed rash.

I should find Zhao. See if he had another task for me to complete. Or perhaps I could creep out of the house so I could visit Taro’s estate.

“What’s weak about accepting help from a friend?” Brennan spat. “We humans need one another, both for companionship and *for support*. Excuse me for trying to be a decent human being!”

Damn, but she was sorely testing my resolve not to threaten her. Long-drilled practices were battling with my heart, making my fingers twitch with the need to hold a weapon. I scratched my wrist to distract myself from the feeling.

“You’re not from here, so I don’t expect you to understand,” I said. “Here, weakness—like accepting another person’s help—is a disease. It rots the body of Hiyuki, the empire that was established to steady our world’s instability. Any sign of it should be removed before it festers and spreads.”

My wrist had started hurting, but I never stopped clawing at it. Brennan’s eyes were burning to the core of me while the heat in them crisped my heart as surely as earth’s blood had once done, but I could handle that. I knew she wouldn’t accept my reality, just like the people from the kingdoms beyond Hiyuki’s borders didn’t.

...Was this was Nokoribi had meant?

"Find the truth," was what he'd said.

Spoken in reference to the discussion we'd been holding the night before his death, or so I'd thought. Zhao had insisted that Nokoribi had been questioning Hiyuki's central tenant in the years leading up to his death, though. Had my friend been infected as early as that?

If he had been, he hadn't acted like it. Up until that last week, he'd seemed as strong of an emperor as he'd always been. Which meant... what exactly?

"You sound like the Roghnaithe from Brighde," Brennan hissed. "You sound like the person I was before I left home. *God*, how I hate them both."

I'd never heard such venom from her before. Turning to her, I found her face almost as cherry red as my eyes were with tears pooling in her brown gaze, and the sight of this punched me as hard as a fist might.

"I accepted help from a brilliant woman in Vathaylia, and because I did, you're alive today," Brennan said. "When I was visiting Brighde, my best friend constantly needed my help. He encompassed Hiyuki's definition of weakness, and yet, *he saved his world*. Almost died doing it too. So, don't tell me that needing help is weak. It's not! It's anything *but* weak."

Tears were spilling over her cheeks, and I wanted to agree with her. I wanted to accept that her truth was what Nokoribi had wanted me to find, but I couldn't. What I'd known to be right for my whole life wasn't so easily relinquished.

With my fingers gouging into my skin, I said, "What do you know of Hiyuki? How can you know what it takes to survive here? Does your home teeter on the brink of starvation? Does the earth you walk upon ever threaten to erupt, turning solid ground into islands floating in earth's blood? Is that how you grew up? Were you born to downtrodden parents and sold to a guild so they could-?"

No. I wouldn't delve into that period of my life. I wouldn't join Brennan in surrendering to my burning eyes. Instead, I focused on the pain in my wrist and the skin that was curling under my fingernails.

"I won't argue about this with you," I said. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should accept help sometimes, but in this case, I can't."

"Before earth and fire chose him, Nokoribi saved my life. I was young and tired and certain that my life could never improve. I thought I couldn't escape from my misery, and so, I went to the steamworks, looking for a quiet place to die. 'ribi ran into me before I could find it. He persuaded me to stay strong and endure life for one more week. In that time, he hid me, and the two of us transferred my writ of membership to the steamworks guild. Once that was done, we'd return every week to where 'ribi had found me, and he'd ask me if I could stay strong for another one. Every time, I told him yes. Every time. Until fire blazed in his coal eyes."

"I owed my friend everything, and when he needed me, *I failed him*. The only way I can live with myself is if I bring his murderers to justice, and I can't accept help while completing that task. I

have to finish this alone.”

After a long silence, a sigh answered me. Capturing my scratching fingers, Brennan lifted my bloodied wrist to her mouth, sucking on the furrow in one, and despite how much my jaw had clenched with my teeth grinding and how badly I needed to squirm, a thrill also shot through me. Jerking my head toward her, I watched her pull bandages from a pocket and wondered why my mouth had gone dry.

Brennan wrapped gauze around my self-inflicted wounds.

“I understand the need to accomplish something alone,” she said, “but will you try to understand that other people might need you to succeed as badly as you do? Please, Kasai. You don’t have to accept my help if the idea of it runs so anathema to who you are, but don’t stop me from coming with you when you leave this place. Let me do what I must to bolster my own strength.”

Come with me? She wanted to be at my side. That... I actually *liked* that idea.

As I collected her hands from my arm, my heart painfully thumped against my breastbone.

“You only had to ask,” I said.

And her eyes lit with a sunrise blooming in their rich brown. And her full lips twisted with mischief and mirth. And my fingers played through her hair as I brushed it over her shoulder. And her face became the world.

When had I gotten so close to her? By earth and fire, *why* was I so close?

Alone and tired and cold, I lie on the floor beside the bed, hoping she won't wake up before I can leave. Praying...

Her breathing hitches, rising to a waking rhythm, and my mind cries out as she leans over the bedside. Her face hovers centimeters from mine, coming closer.

Closer.

NOT AGAIN.

I’d become stone with my position reversed from the one I’d taken, so many years ago, and Brennan was looking at me with the same wide eyes that I’d once worn. The same enduring stillness inhabited her, and with my guts churning, I pried my itching fingers off of her shoulders. Like a wooden marionette, I rose from the bed before marching out the door for a washroom.

Once there, the turmoil in my head metamorphosed into an outpouring of acid and bile, and over my coughing, I heard Brennan’s footsteps approaching. When she soon retreated from me without a word spoken, I silently blessed her. Perhaps she’d absorbed some of what I’d said about weakness.

When I returned to the room, I stopped in the doorway.

"I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable," I said. "It wasn't my intention."

Although I had no clue what I *had* been meaning to do.

"Don't worry about it. You caught me by surprise, is all," Brennan said. "I'm not the best at noticing interest that runs in *that* direction."

Cocking my head, I said, "What direction?"

Instead of answering me, Brennan hummed with her face wrinkling.

"Never mind," she said. "Why don't we refocus on what we were discussing?"

I'd rather figure out why I'd been acting so strangely around her lately. What was this peculiarity that I'd experienced while around Brennan, starting shortly after we'd met? I'd never craved someone's presence before, not like I did with her at least.

It wasn't like my need to be near Nokoribi had been. That had come as a requirement of my job. The same need existed with Brennan, but she needed no one's protection, least of all mine.

If left uninvestigated, this want in me could become a problem, but Brennan seemed determined to drop the subject. Perhaps if I indulged her in that desire now, we could return to it later.

"We were talking about having you accompany me outside of Zhao's home, yes?" I said.

"That's right," Brennan said. "From now on, will you promise that you won't head off without me, at least until things have calmed down a little more?"

Would I let another person come with me on my quest for revenge?

...What could it hurt?

"As much as I can, I won't run off alone," I said. "I can't promise to wait for you if something time-sensitive comes up, though."

"Nor would I expect you to," Brennan said, "but no more randomly leaving while I'm sleeping or in Takanai. Say it."

"As much as possible, I promise to bring Bren with me when leaving Zhao's' house," I said. "Satisfied?"

Delight morphed Brennan's features into a pleasing pattern, and again, a shock cascaded through me from head to toes. What was that?

"Very much so," she said. "Now, while I was in the city, I heard that your first target, Arita, met a gruesome end last night. Your doing, I presume?"

Nodding, I buried resurgent memories of wax, drying around scorched lips.

“And Zhao mentioned that you have a new target,” Brennan said. “So, who is it? If you’re lucky, I might have some useful information for you now.”

How could so much vindictive joy come from the answer to one question?

“Taro, the chairman of Takanai’s brothel guild,” I said. “I’d like to pay him a visit tonight, barring unforeseen circumstances.”

“What good luck that I made myself look into that guild today, then,” Brennan said. “Come. Sit.”

She patted the sheets at her side, and striding to her, I dropped into them. With my eyes closed, I rested my folded hands on my chest while Brennan’s soothing voice gave me the details I needed to outline a plan.

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