

Chapter Fourteen

In my dreams, two voices rattled, incessantly arguing.

"He bears the whole's touch. Can you feel it?"

"As clearly as you do, insufferable moron. It doesn't mean we can touch him."

"Says you."

"Yes. Me and the rules. You know them. We can only take one host at a time."

"But whyyyy...?"

"It's what we agreed upon."

"So? We've languished here for centuries. I want to go home. I want to return to the whole."

"As do I, but we have a plan. The last host almost freed us. I have hope that his successor will succeed where he failed."

"And if she follows in his footsteps?"

"Then, we take a new host, although I'm not so sure about this current keeper's candidacy. Can you feel-?"

"You don't like him because he favors my side."

"No, you idiot. Something's off about him. The energy that's in him... it feels like the beyond."

"Huh. Maybe you're right, but who else would we pick? He's the one who's most easily adaptable to us right now."

"It pains me to agree with you."

"You think I like it any better, stick in the mud?"

"Chaotic ignoramus."

"Inflexible bastard."

"Flighty idiot."

"Boring piece of shit."

"Destructive asshole."

"Hey! Too close to home."

"Sorry."

"Like I want your apology. I do miss that, though."

"What? The fighting?"

"No, the scintillating conversation. Of course the fighting!"

"...Me too. Look at us. Apologizing to one another. Making plans together. Agreeing with each other's opinions. We've been gone from the whole for too long."

"Obviously but... he's waking up."

"I can see that, moron. I'm waiting for you to withdraw before I leave. You're more likely to break the rules, making him a host, than I am."

"Fiiiine."

A long-awaited silence stretched for what seemed like forever before one of the voices broke it once more.

"I'm almost tempted to stay. By the whole, I need to escape this place."

Waking up with a gasp, I shot upright, slapping my hands to the mounting pain in my head. By earth and fire, where had that dream come from?

Oh, why did I care? My head hadn't pounded this badly since the last time Nokoribi had convinced me to get *thoroughly* drunk. Damn, the hangover that had come the next morning... this pain overshadowed it in totality,

I needed a cup of tea.

In the kitchen, I struggled to find a kettle. I didn't know how Zhao organized his cabinets, but it wasn't how I'd do it.

Standing in front of the stove, I tapped my foot in a rapid rhythm, and when the kettle screamed, I winced while invisible spikes impaled my eyes. With my hands in mitts, I transferred the kettle to the counter and realized, rather belatedly, that I hadn't found any tea leaves yet.

"ZHAO!" I roared before ransacking the kitchen.

The old man failed to appear, and after a while, I stumbled against a rubbish-strewn counter. Pain was shooting through me with every blink, and my feet steadily lost traction with the floor until I'd collapsed among kitchen utensils and spices.

Earth and fire, it needed to stop, needed-

Something warm filled my reaching hands, and through streaming eyes, I spied my cup—complete with steam rising from it—in them. As I took a sip of tea, the trembling in my hands splashed its hot liquid across my lap, but I didn't care. My head's throbbing eased in increments, in time to each savored gulp.

Zhao found me with an empty cup dangling from my fingers and my head resting against a cabinet door.

"What happened to my kitchen?" he asked.

"I don't know," I breathed.

After a pause, Zhao blankly said, "You don't know."

"Yes," I hissed. "I'll clean it up in a minute. Just... not so loud, please."

"I thought you said you'd sleep," Zhou grumbled, "not drink my alcohol."

Groaning, I softly banged my head on the counter's edge.

"I *did* sleep, and I had *the* strangest dream. Something about two voices arguing in the dark," I growled. "Anyway, I woke up with a raging headache, came downstairs to make tea, and couldn't find where you keep your stash of it, hence the mess. I suppose I should clean that up so we can get on with the day."

Rising with a hiss, I started collecting items, strewn across the floor, and piled them in the sink to be washed.

"Two... voices?" Zhao whispered with his voice choked.

"Indeed," I said. "Strange, right?"

"Yes. Strange."

Striding into the kitchen, Zhao returned the dishes that had spilled across the counters to their cabinets.

"*Ko?* Will you tell me if you have any more of these dreams?" he said.

"Why?" I asked. "It was random, an unconscious mind entertaining itself unless... does it have some significance?"

I didn't know how Zhao would know what a dream might mean, given how wary he typically was of anything spiritual, supernatural, or psychological in nature.

"Not as such," he said. "I'm only asking you to ease an old man's mind."

"In that case, I'll be sure to share, but hopefully, I won't have more of them," I said. "It wasn't the most pleasant experience."

Not even by the smallest margin.

"No. I imagine it wouldn't be," Zhao muttered. "Tea leaves are here, by the way."

He pulled a tin can from a cabinet over the icebox, a spot I hadn't thought to check, and after opening it, Zhao glanced at me.

"You didn't get your tea?" he said. "I'm surprised you're on your feet."

"That's the other thing," I said. "I'll probably have another... episode soon."

Looking down his nose at me, Zhao said, "Another episode."

"Yes. The bleeding from the face, searing pain, and too much energy held in too frail of a body?" I said. "An episode."

After a quick search of the kitchen, Zhao set two matching cups beside one another before pointing at them.

"You did it again?" he said. "Did you not learn your lesson last time?"

"I didn't mean to! It was entirely instinctual," I said. "Trust me. If I could, I'd never manifest another thing in my life. I don't like the cost either."

Sighing, Zhao said, "Do you have Brennan's magic stick?"

"It's upstairs," I said. "Where is she anyway?"

"Out in the city. She said to give you this when you woke up."

Zhao extended a folded slip of paper to me.

"Take care of your problem before you read it," he said. "I'll finish up here."

Making a face, I said. "Thank you. I'm sorry about the mess."

As I passed beneath Zhao's judging gaze, I felt as if I'd returned to the first months of my training, and after slinking out of the kitchen, I beat a fist against the side of my head.

"Stupid, stupid, *stupid!*"

Since meeting Alouin, so many weaknesses had beset me. I didn't think I was infected, but the symptoms I'd been displaying were concerning. All that was keeping me from carving it out of myself was revenge for Nokoribi and a final, whispered plea.

Find the truth, K.

What did that even mean? What truth should I be seeking? Something to do with strength and weakness, obviously, but other than that, I had no clue what my friend could have wanted from me.

So, as with all my doubts in recent days, I shook it off to focus on the task at hand. I could return to the question when less dire circumstances awaited me.

In my room, I stashed Brennan's tube in a pocket. Energy had yet to buzz through me, and I didn't know if using the tube before that sign had presented itself was wise, so I'd wait.

With that problem handled, I flipped Brennan's note open. On it were two words written in towering letters.

STAY PUT.

A chuckle escaped from me as I crumpled the paper into a ball. Jamming a bubble and a pair of darkened spectacles on my face, I flung a coat over my shoulders and stomped downstairs.

Zhao was waiting for me by the door.

"Oh, good," he said. "You're ready to leave."

"You know... I'm not a prisoner here. I can leave whenever I want," I growled. "I don't need someone watching my every move."

"Of course you don't, but I need help, and since I'm providing you with free room and board, I figured you owe me," Zhao said. "Or will you default on a debt, besmirching that honor you so love?"

Yes. This *absolutely* wasn't an attempt by my old mentor to distract me. Still, I grimaced, asking.

"What do you need?"

"Grab the trays in the kitchen and follow me," Zhao said.

Muttering under my breath, I trudged off to do as I'd been told.

Walking down Takanai's streets with my old mentor felt strange today. We'd done it often enough when I'd been in training, but during those trips, I'd had to stay alert for prepared ambushes and the like. I didn't think Zhao would try something like that now, just for old time's sake, but I couldn't help my heightened vigilance.

After we merged with the crowd, lightning started prickling along my body's insides, which didn't help with my unease. I wished Zhao would move faster. The energy inside of me urged me to blaze past him, to sprint between the crowd's gaps and never stop. Instead, I settled for raining a jittery

tempest on the trays I was holding.

These things might become another problem. The smells emanating from beneath their lids were making my stomach grumble, and I'd been fed recently. What would happen if someone who was low on ration tokens caught the scent?

Fortunately, our trip didn't take long. Zhao led me to a community center in one of Takanai's less well-off neighborhoods, rapping on its back door when we arrived. I stayed a safe distance from him, giving him room in case we were attacked.

The door opened on an older woman wearing a bubble. When she saw me, her shoulders drew together, and she held a furiously whispered conversation with Zhao, directing many a gesture my way.

Wary of strangers, was she? What had the old man dragged me into?

Once the woman appeared mollified, Zhao waved me forward, and we entered the community center. In its gathering space, several flimsy tables had been dragged into place while lamps barely lit the room.

People in threadbare clothing were huddled in its corners. Several had dotted scorch marks decorating the canvas of their skin, and no bubbles shielded them from the thin layer of smog that was billowing along the ceiling. When they saw Zhao, they abandoned their air of hostility, inching toward him.

Quickly dropping my trays on a nearby table, I reached for my pistol, but Zhao caught my arm before I could draw it, shaking his head with a sardonic grin.

"They're why we're here," he said under his breath.

The older woman from the door helped with arranging trays, and as Zhao and I crept to the room's fringes, downtrodden people moved forward to fill the community center's provided plates. Sitting in clusters, they enjoyed the food we'd prepared last night, laughing and chatting amongst themselves, and I turned on my old mentor.

"The garden. The extra food. It was all for this." I whispered.

Zhao nodded.

"It's *illegal*," I said. "Every bit of it."

"Yes," Zhao said, "it is."

I hardly registered drawing my pistol. Pressing it into Zhao's side, I angled my body to hide it from the others.

"I should shoot you where you stand," I hissed. "You're flaunting the weakness that you warned me against throughout my training."

Zhao met my spectacled eyes.

"Then, why haven't you shot me?" he asked.

"I-"

"The Kasai I trained would never have spoken to me first," Zhao interrupted. "He'd have been precise with his shots, given me the cleanest death possible, and left this place, regardless of the witnesses. What's changed, *ko*?"

"Nothing's changed-!"

"I suppose it doesn't matter, and in case you were curious, you don't need to worry yourself about this," Zhao said before returning his gaze to the downtrodden among us. "When I retired, Nokoribi authorized this project for me. So yes, it's illegal by the guilds' standards but not according to the monarchy."

"'ribi never said-"

"You think he shared everything with you?" Zhao asked. "He was the emperor. His job obligated him to keep secrets from everyone. Even you."

I'd known that, but hearing it wrenched at something in me, emptying my lungs.

"Put the gun away," Zhao said. "You won't shoot me."

And as I had when I was a youth, I followed my *mai-yaru's* command. For a moment, we observed the downtrodden, although the children among them soon finished with their meals and started chasing one another around the room.

Pounding energy had me shifting in place, but I fought to keep that movement to a minimum, hopefully enough so that Zhao wouldn't notice it. I should be finding a private corner where I could use Brennan's tube, but first, I had to know.

"Why would 'ribi authorize this?" I asked.

Crossing his arms, Zhao said. "He was curious. By the time I retired, he knew his time was running out, and he was questioning everything. He wanted to know if our definition of weakness was the right one, and I proposed this experiment to satisfy him."

"How could what you've done here *not* be weak?" I asked, barely keeping my voice down. "By feeding people who can't provide for themselves, you're taking from those who can. With our world's hostile environment, we don't have the resources to indulge in mercies like this."

Shaking his head, Zhao said, "By earth and fire, I thoroughly indoctrinated you, didn't I? Tell me, ko. How is giving the food that I've worked to grow and cook taking from others?"

I sealed my lips, ignoring how that had made Zhao laugh. Right now, I had no answer for him, and much as I might want to set his question aside, I knew I'd worry at it in my spare time instead, like I'd done with Nokoribi's dying wish.

Find the truth, K.

"Did you know the other kingdoms would consider this a kindness?" Zhao asked. "And to them, kindness isn't a weakness."

"What is it, then?" I said under my breath. "Strength?"

"I don't think they'd call it that either."

What an illuminating answer.

"Perhaps those beliefs are why they dwindle while our empire thrives," is aid.

"You would think that, wouldn't you?"

Before I could reply with a deprecating comment, a downtrodden child split off from her friends, racing our way so she could tug on my pant leg. Unsure what she wanted, I glanced at Zhao, but he just gestured at the girl.

So helpful.

Remembering how much I'd hated craning my neck at adults when I was her age, I crouched, drumming my fingers on my knees.

"Yes?" I uncertainly said.

"Who are you?" the girl asked. "Are you Zhao's friend?"

"I'm nobody important," I said. "Did you need something, miss...?"

As if she hadn't heard me, the girl cocked her head.

"Why are you wearing glasses inside?" she asked. "Can you see with them on like that? It's so dark in here."

That was an interesting question, seemingly coming from out of nowhere. Sometimes, I forgot what strange creatures children could be.

"You shouldn't ask strangers questions like that. It's not nice," I said. "What if I couldn't see at all?"

Smirking, the girl said, "I'm not a nice girl. Besides, if you can't see, it means I can do this!"

Before I could stop her, she snatched my spectacles off of my nose, and the room brightened for me. Squinting, I tried to snatch my flimsy shield back from the girl, but she danced away from me with a giggle.

Until she spun my way and went quiet.

As she gasped, the spectacles slipped through her limp fingers, shattering on the floor, but I retrieved them anyway. Picking broken shards out of their frame, I turned to Zhao.

“Thanks for the reminder of what evil imps little girls can-”

“You should go home,” Zhao said.

Glancing at my old mentor, I found him tense, set into a combat form that was used for defense against multiple assailants.

“What’s the problem?” I whispered. “You can’t expect me to leave you-”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” Zhao said. “Go home, *ko*.”

Damn, he’d sounded insistent, but the energy inside was screaming for action, and I was prepared to oblige it. I’d half-turned toward the downtrodden, catching a glimpse of their gaping faces, before Zhao jerked me around.

“They can’t see your eyes,” he snapped. “Go!”

“Ok...”

I edged toward the community center’s exit with Zhao at my side. What was wrong with my eyes, besides the usual? Maybe I was bleeding from them again. With how much I’d refused to indulge it, the energy inside of me had been ramping up in intensity.

Maybe it was something else, though. Who could say? I’d have to ask once we were free of this place.

While Zhao and I had been watching the downtrodden eat, someone must have lit more lamps in the corridor leading outside. When entering the community center, I could barely see where I was going, but now, while exiting, I could walk with confidence, clearing the last of the broken glass from my spectacles.

Enough of the lenses remained to partially hide my crimson gaze, so I shoved them into place, momentarily dazzled when the broken edges reflected a glister into my eyes. I should remember to avoid direct light sources until I could find another pair.

Once we were under a smog-heavy sky again, I rounded on my mentor.

“What was that about?” I hissed.

When Zhao met my eyes, he flinched. It was barely perceptible, but I still saw it. What on earth could make him react so violently to meeting my gaze, especially to the point that he felt he must conceal the response?

“They’re downtrodden, and your eye color marks you as wealthy, even if you’re not,” he said. “Those two groups don’t get along well, as you know. I didn’t want to fight anyone unless we had to, and how do we dispel a fight before it begins, *ko?*”

“By removing the stressor,” I said with a sigh.

“Exactly. Now, go home, and keep those eyes hidden!” Zhao said. “I’ll be right behind you, but first, I have to explain why I brought you with me today.”

Making a face, he plunged back into the community center, and for a second, I considered following him, despite his given advice. I curled my hands into fists, longing to crack noses and bash ribs, but how could I know whether that desire was coming from me or my new... magic?

Was it magic?

Shaking my head, I hurried to find a concealed corner where I could calm down my restless symptoms, which didn’t take me long. Since Zhao’s community center stood in one of the city’s less wealthy neighborhoods, abandoned buildings towered around me, and few people cluttered the streets.

In a nearby alley, I leaned against a wall, although my trembling arms soon buckled to where my forehead rested against it instead. Silently berating myself, I dug through my pockets for Brennan’s tube. I shouldn’t have waited this long to use it.

Before I could do anything with the tube, though, someone’s footsteps crunched to a stop behind me.

“Give me your money if you want to live,” he snapped. “I’ve got a knife.”

Was that...?

I froze with my body shaking until I couldn’t contain it anymore. As I flung my head back, my laughter boomed in the alley.

“You, kid, have the worst luck,” I gasped.

“What are you laughing at?” my assailant said. “This isn’t a joke!”

Something was pressed into my back, and I maneuvered myself around until I was facing the knife’s wielder: the teenager who’d tried to rob Nokoribi and me just a few days ago. A kid my friend had released without consequences.

“Did you not learn your lesson the first time?” I asked.

The kid lowered his knife with his pitch-black eyes widening, apparently recognizing me.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” he said.

“Yes. I am.”

I swung at him, and as my punch sent the kid reeling, the energy inside of me crowded at the sight of it. I ripped my spectacles off of my face, remembering the last time I’d subdued this teenager, but once he’d recovered from my blow, the kid didn’t try fighting me, spinning to flee instead. Perhaps he knew what would happen if he stayed.

I didn’t let him get far. With each of my leaping strides, a buzz rattled through my legs, zinging down my arms as I caught the boy and shoved him. He skidded along the cobblestones, and when I flipped him to his back, it revealed the short blood trail that he’d left behind. A weeping face, skinned raw, received the brunt of two blows before fire lanced into my side, where the kid had stabbed me.

Earth and fire, that had hurt.

Hauling the boy to his feet, I twisted his blade-laden hand behind his back before plucking the weapon from it, and as in our last fight, I pinned him to a wall.

“Please, most blessed!” he whined with a cough.

I slammed his face into the brick.

“Don’t call me that,” I growled. “You save that honor for the emperor.”

For Nokoribi.

“But your-” the kid started.

Slamming his face into the wall again, I was gratified by the silence that followed it.

What was I going to do? This boy knew who I was. He knew Nokoribi’s bodyguard was alive.

Based on his past behavior, he’d no doubt run for the nearest authority if I released him, selling the information he’d gained for a reward. Whether the city police would believe his story was iffy, but on the off chance they did, I’d rather not deal with a manhunt on top of the many other difficulties I’d run into recently.

So, what would I do with this kid? Kill him?

Nokoribi wouldn’t have approved of that, but his decision to let the boy go last time had led to my present circumstances. Obviously, whatever potential my friend had seen in this kid didn’t exist.

“Most bl-” a raspy voice said before pausing. “Are you ok?”

I chuckled at the boy's concern with salt lying heavy on my tongue. If he was checking me for possible weaknesses, perhaps he did have potential, but whether he'd use it had yet to be determined.

Considering that, maybe I should restrain him before leaving him here, in the dirt. Let him be found later today. It would give me time while also honoring my best friend's memory.

"Mister?" the kid hesitantly said. "I- I think you should see a medic. You're... bleeding. A lot."

What? I felt fi-

Wait...

Oh, shit. I couldn't see, and the buzz inside of me had swollen, reaching a tipping point. Stumbling away from the boy, I frantically searched my pockets, hardly aware of the teenager's retreating footsteps. I closed my fingers around Brennan's tube, and my buzzing energy transformed, becoming a vibration strong enough to shred my muscles. I should know. I'd experienced that sensation in the past, unfortunately.

The ground hit me hard, or perhaps I hit it? I couldn't say because beyond what was lighting my body up with pain, I knew nothing.

Nothing except for escaping from it. With a feral roar, I forced my paralyzed body to move, dragging Brennan's tube toward my eyes, and fumbled for what would activate it, and as sanity made its first attempt at flight, something nearby clicked.

The world became oscillating blue and purple colors. Hypnotized by them, I stayed sprawled in the dirt while voices rose around me, although they quickly faded.

People who'd come to help? How must I appear to them? Did they see an addict, strung-out in the alley's detritus?

NO.

My muscles screamed when I used them, but somehow, I got myself upright. I sat against a wall with Brennan's tube returned to a pocket, and for a while, I couldn't manage more than that. Unlike the first time Brennan had dragged me back from the brink, the energy inside had run away, as if repelled by my body, and this had left me a wrung-out rag.

Closing my eyes, I leaned my head against the wall's bricks and tried not to think, letting time slip by without comment.

"What happened?"

Wow. I'd never heard my *maiyaru* so upset before.

“A punk jumped me. I had an episode halfway through restraining him,” I said. “It was different this time, though. I don’t know if I can move.”

Someone—probably Zhao—poked and prodded at me, searching for wounds. He winced when he found the gash in my side, but it must not be serious, considering how quickly he moved on from it.

“Open your eyes,” he said.

I cracked one to peer at him, and he slumped, rubbing his face.

“One problem managed for now,” he murmured into his hands.

“What’re you talking about?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it, *ko*,” Zhao said. “Can you stand?”

Hmm. Could I?

“Doubtful. I *did* just say that I couldn’t move,” I said. “Can you carry me home?”

Zhao just laughed at that idea.

“Well, we can’t summon a cycle or a buggy, not with the rumors that have surely been started by this... incident,” I said. “Ok. Time to try something unconventional.”

“What are you...?”

His voice faded from my awareness as I focused on how much I needed spectacles to hide my eyes. Because of them, people had been giving me stranger reactions than usual today.

What if they’d seen? What if they knew? My childhood would come to haunt me, and I *couldn’t*. Not again.

Wires settled over my ears and nose, and I let out a breath, relaxing.

And that slight movement hadn’t taxed me. It had worked!

A sting splashed against my cheek, whipping my head to the side.

“*Amari Kasai!*” Zhao shouted. “Are you *trying* to kill yourself?”

“No,” I grumpily said, rubbing my cheek. “I solved a problem. Like you taught me.”

I leapt to my feet, nearly head-butting my old mentor in the process.

“Oh. Use the cost of manifesting to your advantage,” Zhao said. “That’s clever.”

“I thought so,” I said.

“Well, aren’t you the smart one?”

With a snort, I said, "Yes. Isn't that obvious?"

Grinning at Zhao’s glare, I backed down the alley with my arms spread. The entire time, he eyed me like I’d gone crazy, but I couldn’t blame him for that. I didn’t know why I was acting so...

Honestly, I didn’t know how to describe the way I was acting.

“You’re welcome to prove me wrong at any point,” I said.

“...Asshole,” Zhao said after a moment.

“I’m that too,” I said, flourishing a bow, “and right now, this asshole wants to go home. Shall we?”

Growling insults under his breath, Zhao swept past me, and together, we joined the flow of Takanai’s foot traffic.

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