

Chapter Nine

Voices fill the black, so disjointed and scattered, and I float among them.

"The crown prince has caused another scene, sir. He-"

"I told you to call me Raimie when we're alone, Oswin. What did Eri do this-?"

And another set.

"Are you sure, madam? A loyalty to one ceremony?"

"Yes, I'm sure, Lihau, and you should start calling your future wife by-"

I burn through them, knowing not what propels me, caring not what the voices might be. All I remember is that I carry a purpose that has yet to be fulfilled, and such a debt I cannot bear. Behind me lies a betrayal, an EVIL, that I cannot abide, but before me, a solution awaits. I cannot say how I know this, only that I do, and I cannot... I will not...

THEY CANNOT GET AWAY WITH THIS.

The voices fall quiet, and with a laugh layered in thousands of tones, THEY reach for me, but I will not allow THEM to touch me. THEY carry the same taint as the evil left behind, although I cannot say what it is. THEY will not infect me. I will not be weakened.

A voice I know, one that has long been beloved, whispers through the black, separating itself from those who are seeking him. It's one I long to hear.

"Find the truth, K."

Something hot and yet cold, painful and yet incredibly soothing, rips through me, leaving a hole in my heart that is filled and emptied in the time it would take me to breathe.

I should be doing that, should I not?

The voice I know concedes to the ones that wish my pollution, and I scream to override their volume.

"I'm trying, 'ribi!"

But the voices are so loud, and all I want is... is...

What?

A resolution. A fix for what has spread a wrinkle through the world at my back.

“No, no, NO! You’re not allowed-!” scream the voices.

Then, a hand of Peace, Restoration, and Truth comes at me from the side while another of Strife, Conflict, and... REVENGE approaches from the other, and what has been moving me isn’t strong enough to escape them. Taking hold, they fling me away and-

I found the breath that had been eluding me.

When I opened my eyes, nothing but blue greeted me, and for a time, I just blinked at it. Where was I? Why was I here? What had happened?

Then, my eyes fluttered closed, and a captured image of my best friend splashed into my mind’s eye. Gasping, I shot upright while memories pummeled me, but the one that lingered after the last punch struck was Arita, smirking at me as I fell to my death.

“I’ll *kill* him!” I shouted, slamming a fist, into-

Grass. All around me, for as far as the eye could see, grass stretched, but this wasn’t like the small patch found within the palace. This was a treasure trove of it.

And the sky...

What was wrong with it? Blue had replaced its typical yellow color with no haze to mar it, and at its pinnacle lay-

I averted my gaze. Whatever that tangle of black and white, dark and light, had been, it had hurt to look upon, and after what had gotten me here, I wouldn’t willingly subject myself to more pain right now.

Hesitantly, I rested a trembling hand on my solid chest. I was alive. How?

I’d died, crushed by my impact with earth’s blood while drowning in its superheated steam. I remembered it, so much worse than anything I could have imagined. Fool that I was, I’d thought I’d been prepared for it, but now, I knew better.

Who could prepare for that?

“It’s ok,” I breathed. “It’s over.”

If it was over, though...

Where was I?

After standing, I took a moment to wonder at how normal I felt. No aches or pains were plaguing me. As I crossed this impossible landscape, I could swear that I hadn’t just been beaten and tossed

into fire.

The novelty of this state faded after walking for a few hours. Or what felt like hours, at least. I couldn't tell time without a clock or an arch of light overhead.

Nothing changed in this place. All I could find, no matter which direction I headed in, was grass and sky. Even the miracle of that green spread diminished after a while.

All that remained for me were worry and fear, although I'd never show them. When I considered whether I was in Katanti, the afterlife of those that earth and fire had deemed unworthy, my hands didn't shake. When I wondered how long I might stay here, my feet never wavered in their path.

I did, however, occasionally stop, and I did, at times, tilt my head to briefly view the sky's apex, letting the clash of black and white found there interrupt my racing thoughts.

After who knew how long, I sat down. I wasn't the slightest bit tired. Despite having hiked for hours, I felt as if I'd just rolled out of bed.

No, walking merely seemed useless. Nothing about this place would ever change.

And then, it did.

From behind me, someone said, "Another one? How many of you are planning on coming here this century?"

I leapt to my feet, spinning toward the source of that noise, and when I reached for my non-existent pistol, the shock of touching its metal was almost enough to pull me out of my instinctual reaction to a threat. Instead, that honor went to the man standing in front of me.

With murky blue eyes and salted brown hair, the stranger had his hands on his hips. He was wearing a tattered suit, one that might once have been all pointed corners and sharp lines. Now, it hung from him in shreds, exposing the skin beneath its cloth, but the stranger didn't seem to care. He surveyed the green landscape around us with his lips pursed.

"You've been here for a while," he said. "Damn it. You better not have messed with anything."

When his eyes landed on the pistol I'd aimed at him, he lifted his eyebrows.

"An essence that can manifest objects here?" he said under his breath. "That's interesting."

Then, he lifted his gaze to my face and froze, stiffening with his fingers twitching. Broken from my shock, I approached the stranger while drawing my sword. I didn't know what was happening, but I'd stay armed until the threat had passed.

When I stopped in front of him, however, the stranger never moved, apart from his twitching fingers. I shoved him, but he merely rocked back upright, as if I hadn't touched him.

“What in the-?” I murmured.

Laughter—booming chortles that bent the stranger over—answered me.

“*Finally,*” he gasped.

He leaned on his knees with his body shaking, and lowering my sword—not my pistol, though—I narrowed my eyes. Laughter like this seemed like an inappropriate response to a man threatening you with weapons, especially if he was dressed like I was.

Wait. Was I wearing my mask or my uniform?

As if summoned by my thoughts, I felt metal enfolding my face. Had my mask been hanging there the whole time, only noticed once I’d needed it? I didn’t remember feeling its comforting embrace while walking, but I could have overlooked the feeling, given everything else I’d been dealing with.

The stranger slapped his knees, snapping me out of my introspection. With sporadic chuckles still flying from him, he wiped tears from his eyes.

“Millennia, I’ve sought an answer to the disbalance in Hiyuki, and the answer was staring me in the face from the beginning,” he said. “Ships, I’m not often surprised anymore, but this one was worth the struggle to find it.”

Shaking his head, the stranger strode away from me.

“Give me a moment, Kasai,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll be with you shortly.”

He knew my name, something no one but Nokoribi had known for decades. That became the last straw needed to trigger the explosion that had been rigged inside of me.

Squeezing the pistol’s trigger, I fired thrice at the stranger, and thrice, he dodged my bullets with white light spurring that impossible feat on. Turning to me, he tapped his chin, seemingly unconcerned by my barely finished attempt on his life.

“She probably won’t like the mask,” he said.

With a gesture, he shot light at me, and I tried to duck the bolt, but it was zeroed on my face, following me. It impacted my head, but rather than receiving the second death I’d been expecting, my mask flew off of my face.

“Stay,” the stranger said.

As if I could move! My mind couldn’t handle the jumbled mess coursing through it, and so, my body remained frozen.

Grinning, the stranger took another step away from me, and without warning, a woman magically appeared where he’d been standing.

With hair the color of muddied straw and eyes like that of dirt, she held her hands to either side of her full lips with freckles spread over her pale cheeks and nose.

“ALOUIN!” she bellowed. “Where are-? Oh.”

When her eyes alighted on me, she lowered her hands.

“Aren’t you fascinating?” she said.

“Bren,” the stranger said behind her.

Jumping, the woman spun in place, letting her hand fly, and it swung with unerring precision into the stranger’s cheek.

“You *asshole!*” she growled. “Why do you insist on doing this? It’s been years since I doubted whether you could see the future. You don’t have to prove it to me anymore.”

“Bren-”

“What happened?” the woman continued over the stranger. “When I arrived in the antechamber, you weren’t there! That was our deal, wasn’t it? That you’d be there?”

“Bren-”

“No. Shut up. I shouldn’t have to find you, Alouin. Stop being so rude and-”

“Would someone please explain what’s going on?”

With my chest heaving, I fought to keep my pistol from quivering. It had been a long time, if ever, since danger like this had breathed down my neck, and it was certainly the first time I’d experienced this depth of terror.

The woman turned to me with her eyes wide and her mouth forming an O.

“I’m sorry!” she said, taking a step forward. “I should have introduced-”

A bang cut her off while a bullet rustled her hair as it passed overhead. She, wisely, stopped short.

“Stay where you are,” I barked, “and someone start talking.”

“Rude,” the woman muttered.

Really? That was how she responded to a threat like mine?

“You’ll have to forgive him,” the stranger said while touching the woman’s elbow. “He’s just died, after all.”

“What?” the woman shrieked.

“How do you know that?” I said on the tail end of her shout.

Sighing, the stranger shook his head while cracking his knuckles.

“Sorry, Bren,” he said. “It’s his turn now.”

In the next instant, light flashed, and with it following him, the stranger rushed me at an impossible speed. I got two shots off before he stepped inside my guard, and the next thing I knew, air was rushing from my lungs while an unnaturally blue sky stared down at me.

The stranger eclipsed this, wagging my weapons overhead, and when he pointed at me, shadows cascaded over his fingers. That dusky bolt shot to a spot beside my shoulder, spraying dirt all over my face.

“Show off,” the woman grumbled.

Ignoring her, the stranger offered me a hand up.

“If I wanted to hurt you, I’d already have done it,” he said.

Strong. That was all I could think. Finally, I’d found something I could understand.

Taking my weapons from the stranger, I accepted his help to my feet.

“It’s been a while since someone’s bested me,” I said. “Thank you for the reminder of my limitations.”

Shaking his head, the stranger sketched a quick bow, which made me feel awfully disconcerted.

“It is I who should thank you,” he said.

“Why would you say that?” I asked with a frown.

I’d done nothing to deserve his gratitude.

“Oh, ignore him,” the woman said. “He’s always saying cryptic bullshit like that. It’s rather annoying.”

She stopped beside the stranger before extending a hand.

“I’m Brennan Adams. Pleased to meet you.”

Shaking her offered hand, I said, “Amari Kasai.”

Still holding my hand, Adams whipped her head toward the stranger.

“I thought you said he was dead!” he said. “He feels solidly alive to me.”

"I'm also curious about my current state," I said, "but first, may I know the name of my superior?"

Learning that and showing him proper respect would be in my best interest.

"Certainly," the stranger said.

Sliding into a more solid stance, he bent toward me, keeping his eyes locked on mine while he was vulnerable. With his arms spread wide, light and shadow—his weapons, presumably—appeared in one hand apiece.

I could only blink at this display, worse than the one from before. The stranger was honoring me with a bow that was only given to the worthiest of heroes, those whose strength and sacrifice had proven crucial to the empire's survival, and he'd just bested me. Why would he-?

"I'm Alouin," the stranger said, "although I've gone by several names in your iteration, so it wouldn't surprise me if you don't recognize that one."

I did, though. Vaguely. It was an itch at the back of my mind that I couldn't quite scratch. Something to do with the empire's founding.

"Great. We've all introduced ourselves," Adams said. "Can we return to the 'he's dead' subject now? He doesn't look or feel like it."

"I am, though. I think," I said. "My emperor died, so I was condemned to feed earth and fire. I fell, and earth's blood consumed me. That's the last thing I remember before waking up here. Wherever here is."

If someone could illuminate me on that, I'd appreciate it. This generalized sense of confusion had become... irritating.

"It's his pocket world," Adams said, jerking a thumb at Alouin. "What's earth's blood?"

What was earth's blood? What kind of question was that?

"Lava," Alouin said.

...What was lava?

Whatever it was, Adams seemed to know the word.

"Oh," she said before smashing a hand to her lips. "Oh my god. That's horrible! Barbaric! I'm- I'm so sorry."

Barbaric? I could see how the process of feeding earth and fire might come across as cruel but from ages long past? That seemed like an excessive descriptor.

"It's how it's done," I said. "Forgive me, but who are you two? You must have come from outside the empire if you've never heard of our practices, and your appearances are strange. I've never seen hair so light before and your eyes... Have earth and fire not seen fit to bless you?"

Flushing, Adams crossed her arms while Alouin laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Careful. That's a—" he started.

"What do you mean *we* look strange?" she interrupted. "I've seen a lot of weird shit while traveling, but you're the first person I've run across with red eyes."

"—sensitive subject," Alouin finished with a groan.

The woman's words pierced through me, and I resisted the urge to check whether my mask was hanging in place. Given that Alouin had knocked it off earlier, it couldn't be there.

So, when metal abruptly brushed against my cheeks, I barely suppressed a yelp. Adams made the noise for me.

"What's that?" she shouted. "Where did it come from?"

Despite its imparted comfort, I yanked the mask off of my face, tossing it into the distance.

Unnatural. It had appeared from *nowhere*. Not even the emperor's powers could do that.

Alouin's exaggerated sigh ripped through the sound of my thundering heart. With one arm wrapped around his chest, he was pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Would you two please stop? If I could get a word in edgewise, I might be able to explain," he said. "Ships, you young people are excitable. Sit down."

Without question, I followed my orders. Alouin was the stronger man, and there was no way that I'd ever challenge someone who could move so fast.

Adams didn't seem to understand the danger she was in, considering she stayed on her feet.

"You'll explain something without me incessantly pestering you beforehand?" she asked, suspiciously peering at him.

Pointing at the ground, Alouin said, "Just... sit down with me."

Once everyone was situated, he folded his hands in front of his face.

"Amari Kasai *has* died, executed by his people," he began, "but as you know, Bren, when someone dies, their essence goes to the space between realities for a time. They're supposed to wait there until I can usher them on."

Already, I had questions. What was this 'space between realities'? What were essences? Where did Alouin usher them?

For the moment, however, I put my need for answers to the side. If required, I could ask them later, and I certainly wouldn't interrupt someone who might be about to explain himself.

"Our friend here," Alouin continued, pointing at me, "decided to be impatient. He was zipping about the space between realities so fiercely that he drew the attention of the major players. Calig and Lumin imposed upon *their* domain, giving our friend the push he needed to arrive here."

Calig and Lumin? As in, the gods from centuries past? What did they have to do with what I'd experienced? Earth and fire, had I met those evil beings? If I had, how terrifying! At least they were something I could understand, though.

"Wait a minute. Calig and Lumin worked together?" Adams said. "Isn't that... I don't know. *Impossible?* Diametric opposites and all?"

I didn't know what to make of this woman. She'd interrupted a man whose power dominated over everyone here. Did she not understand that she should defer to him?

"Their collusion happens on rare occasions," Alouin said, "but it's only in the direst of circumstances."

...And he'd answered her questions. Perhaps Adams held more power than him, then. I couldn't be sure. This whole conversation was making my head whirl.

"Which is why I need to ask a favor of you," Alouin continued.

Flinging her hands in the air, Adams shook her head while leaning away from us.

"No. Oh, no," she said. "The last favor you asked of me nearly saw me dead."

"But you *didn't* die," Alouin said. "Plus, you'll like this one. Trust me."

"Like hell I will, you sociopathic maniac!" Adams said. "You'd let someone torture me to death if your agenda required it."

"Then, let's be grateful that it doesn't," Alouin said. "Look at him, Bren. He'll ask me to help him no matter what I say otherwise, and I'll oblige him. I'll send him home, and if you're not there to save him, he'll die again. In the same manner."

While Adams regarded me, I did my best to hide my confusion. At some point in the conversation, I'd gotten lost, despite my temporary recovery, and now, I'd fallen far beyond where I could recover its thread.

Whatever Adams saw in me made her jaw bunch, and she hissed through clenched teeth.

“You’ve seen this in your future?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“How long would I be there?”

“A month at most,” Alouin said, “and then, we’ll get back to finding your home.”

Closing her eyes, Adams emptied her lungs, which relaxed her tense frame.

“Fine,” she said. “Which door?”

“My unlocked memory says it’s two to the right from Brighde’s,” Alouin said. “And Bren? Best to leave Ailig at the rift this time. UV light’s sparse there.”

“Great,” Adams drawled. “Anything else I should know?”

“Not that I can share at this time,” Alouin said.

“Which means I’ll be facing all sorts of difficulties. Shit.”

Clapping her knees, Adams flowed to her feet.

“I’ll be off, then,” she said. “See you soon... Amari Kasai, right?”

She turned her brown eyes on me, and for a moment, my mind stalled. I could speak now?

“That’s right, although not many will know me by that name,” I said. “To the Hiyukian Empire, I’m merely the emperor’s bodyguard.”

“Oh, goody,” Adams muttered. “That means Hiyuki’s a primitive society, most likely. At least it’ll be different.”

And she disappeared.

Much as I might like to, I didn’t rock back from this phenomenon. That would show weakness, but then, so would me rubbing my temples, as I was. I snatched my hand free of my skin, diving them into my lap, but the damage was done. Alouin was watching me with an amused smile.

“You’re confused,” he said.

I refused to open my mouth, matching my red eyes to his blue ones.

“You won’t admit it, even though your confusion is warranted,” Alouin continued. “I’d be surprised if you understood that conversation, given Hiyuki’s isolation from other iterations, but hiding confusion... ‘weakness’ is part of your culture. Ah, well.”

He examined me as if evaluating my character.

“You don’t need to understand,” he eventually pronounced. “You’ll do what you will do, even if you’re ignorant of your action’s consequences. All you need to know, Kasai, is that you have a choice in front of you: I can usher your essence to what waits beyond. If you took this option, you’d be at peace. Or I can return you to your body. You’ll get your revenge, but you will also find pain on that path.”

My thoughts had caught on the word ‘revenge’, making the first choice a non-option. I couldn’t take it, even if I’d wanted to, but...

“How?” I asked. “How can you give me life after my body has been destroyed?”

The smile tugging on Alouin’s lips widened.

“You show wisdom,” he said. “Most people would jump on their heart’s desire without regard to how it might affect themselves or others.”

Snorting, I said, “‘ribi always thought I was unusual. ‘Better than most’. His words, not mine.”

I’d certainly argue that assessment.

“Perhaps your friend was right,” Alouin said with a shrug. “As for the answer to your question, I can rewind time, to a certain extent. I can reverse your timeline to a point before ‘earth’s blood’ melted your body, but if I do, it will carry a cost. Fortunately for you, the price won’t be high. It won’t hurt me, and the benefits I’ll reap from it would far outweigh any detriments I might gain.”

“You sound like you want me to go,” I said.

“That’s because I do.”

Alouin’s smile vanished, and with its loss, I found myself sitting across from a monster. His cold eyes, analyzing me, sent shivers across my body while the lack of... *anything* in them was the most unnerving sight I’d beheld in my life. Should I follow such a creature’s design?

But like a magnet, revenge tugged on me. Nokoribi deserved justice for his murder, and I would get it for him.

“What do you need from me?” I asked.

The coldness in Alouin’s eyes spread across his face while a self-satisfied smirk bloomed.

“Just your wrist,” he said, “and a promise that you won’t panic when you return to the living world.”

“I won’t panic,” I said.

When I offered him my wrist, Alouin took it with his fingers playing at the air.

“That’s what they all say,” he said under his breath.

He poked my forehead, and I fell through the grass and into the darkness beyond.

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