

Chapter Nineteen

When we reached Zhao's home, the old man pulled me to the side while Brennan led Himi deeper into the house.

True to her word, that girl had been a ghost while we'd been on the street, completely unnoticeable, but as soon as the door had closed behind us, she'd ripped the spectacles off her face and resumed her incessant chatter. Most of it had been directed at Brennan, and she'd endured it while leading Himi along.

Zhao and I watched them go until they'd disappeared.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked. "She doesn't seem... stable. What if she leaves here and tells someone important where you're hiding?"

"We'll have to make sure that doesn't happen, won't we?" I said.

Clicking his tongue, Zhao said. "You're not being rational. You say this girl is *the* assassin, but I have yet to see anything more than a hyperactive teenager in her. How can you know that the information you acquired last night is accurate? And her, favored by earth and fire? It's more likely that They spoke to her last night. The fire in her eyes will fade by sunset."

Leaning against a wall, I lightly banged my head on it.

"It's her, *maiyaru*. I recognize her voice," I said. "'It's not just them in my head,' she whispered, and at her touch, vines sprouted in Nokoribi's body. It's her."

Breathing hard, Zhao clenched and unclenched his hands for a time.

"Then, why is she alive?" he eventually asked with his voice gravel. "Why is she *in my house*?"

"Now who's being irrational?" I said. "Can we get to why you actually wanted to speak with me now, please?"

Air rushed through Zhao's nose, and after several calming breaths, his flushed color faded.

"Of course, most blessed," he said. "It's about what I saw last night. Two things, actually."

Two? I'd thought for sure it would only be one.

"Yes?" I said.

“When I left the room last night, I saw you’d drawn your pistol,” Zhao said. “I hoped you’d tell me why you were staring at it with such fixation.”

So finally, we’d get to the question I’d been anticipating all day. I still didn’t know how to answer it. I’d have to try anyway.

“Last night, I determined that weakness has infected me,” I said. “I planned to eliminate it like you taught me but-”

Zhao slapped me.

“You don’t. do. that,” he growled. “Hiyuki needs you, even if you’re weak, and if you’re right about Himi being our next empress, we need you. Brennan and me.”

Confusion briefly overrode my explanation for why I’d decided against removing myself from the picture.

“Won’t my weakness weaken the empire, though?” I asked. “That’s what you taught me, at least.”

“I was wrong! Earth and fire, I wanted you to come to terms with this on your own, but that won’t happen, will it?” Zhao shouted. “The system of strength and weakness that you and the royals follow has become outdated, *ko*. Why do you think so many downtrodden people have been plaguing Takanai’s streets in recent years? No one’s eliminating their ‘weakness’, and beyond that, after my years with experimenting for ‘ribi, I think Brennan might be right. I think our definitions of strength and weakness are flawed.”

Maybe my acceptance of my own weakness had opened my mind to new possibilities. Maybe I was just too tired to resist these ideas anymore.

Either way, I mulled over what Zhao had said. Was this what Nokoribi had meant when he’d asked me to find the truth?

“How do you propose we fix them, then?” I asked.

Zhao’s mouth dropped open while he loosened from the defensive stance he’d taken.

“Fix them?” he squeaked. “I- I don’t know.”

“Maybe that’s something Himi can address if she takes the throne,” I said. “Regardless, you don’t need to worry about me. I won’t take my life, *maiyaru*. I have too much left to do. So. What’s your second concern?”

With his mouth still gaping open, Zhao shook his head.

“How have you grown so much when I wasn’t paying attention?” he said under his breath. “You were stuck in your ways for so many years.”

I might have changed, but I still hadn't addressed the one issue I needed to face if I was to truly grow: my childhood. I doubted I ever would.

How disappointed would Zhao be if he learned that truth?

"*Maiyaru*," I said. "Second concern?"

"Yes. Of course, most blessed," Zhao said.

He shook himself, perhaps needing it to regain his focus, before warily eyeing me.

"It's about Brennan."

Tensing, I said, "What about her?"

Flicking his eyes away from me, Zhao shifted to his back foot, and if I didn't know better, I'd say he was embarrassed.

"When I was getting a glass of water last night, I passed by the place where you were sleeping. I noticed that she'd fallen asleep on your chest," he said. "What was that about?"

That was an... interesting thing for him to be worried about.

Shrugging, I said, "She offered her support for if things turned hostile while I was sleeping. I accepted and gave her leave to lay on me if it made her more comfortable."

Crinkling his brow, Zhao frowned.

"But *ko*, you..."

After he'd hummed for a moment, his face cleared.

"When looking at Brennan, do you like what you see?" he asked.

...Why was he asking about that?

Narrowing my eyes, I drew forth a memory of her for reference.

"Her appearance is nice, yes. For instance, the colors of her eyes and hair are fascinating. They're so different from anything found here," I said. "And her proportions are pleasing to the eye, I suppose. I like knowing she can defend herself, considering how well-developed her musculature is. Is that what you mean?"

Groaning, Zhao hid his face.

"I don't know what to make of you," he said with his voice muffled. "At the best of times, you're perplexing but when it comes to this..."

Lowering his hands, he squared his shoulders.

“One more try before I outright ask,” he said. “Kasai, why is it that when you’re near Brennan, you relax? Why do you seem to melt?”

Oh. That was an easy question to answer.

“When I’m around Bren, I feel safe. All the horrors of my life drop away from me, and I’m... home,” I said. “She touches me, and sparks dance over my body with warmth following every brush of her fingers. It makes me want to hold her closer. One time, I even wanted to kiss her, but that didn’t end well for either of us.

“So, no. I just want to be near her, to touch and be touched by her as much as she likes. I know it’s ridiculous because I’ve only known her for a few days, but I feel closer to her than I have with anyone else in my life, even ‘ribi. I loved him, yes. This is different, though. I don’t know what it is, but I like it.

“Maybe... *mai-yaru!* Do you know what it is?”

If anyone could answer this question, the one that had been eating at me for a while, he could.

Sighing, Zhao tucked his chin to his chest.

“Yes, *ko*. I know what it is,” he said. “You’re falling in love with her. Romantic love, not the brotherly type that you shared with ‘ribi, and...”

With a pained groan, he lifted saddened eyes to me.

“If you’re most blessed, like I believe,” he said, as if each word had been pulled from him like a rotten tooth, “you can’t have it.”

Falling in love?

“No... that can’t be right,” I said. “I’ve had to engage in enough sex to last a lifetime-”

“Love doesn’t have to include sex, *ko*,” Zhao said. “Sometimes, it’s just wanting to be near someone. Isn’t that what you feel when you’re with Brennan?”

“Yes but-”

Love? Me?

Really?

No. It had to be something else.

“Look. All I’m saying is that you should guard your heart,” Zhao said. “When he was the emperor, Nokoribi struggled with that part of his life. I don’t want to see the same thing happen to you.”

I'd barely heard him, too busy grappling with the idea he'd presented.

I'd never found someone romantically interesting before. Granted, I'd never had an opportunity to pursue my own desires, not with how my life had been. Certainly not like I had over the last few days. If I had the capacity for love, though, shouldn't something have triggered it before now?

Striding down the hall toward us, Brennan called, "What are you two doing? You can't expect me to watch that girl all by myself."

And there it was again. That same sense of comfort.

"You left Himi alone?" Zhao snapped.

With her hand to her mouth, Brennan said. "Oops. Guess you'd better secure her. K and I will be right behind you."

Zhao looked to me for help, but I just grinned at him.

"Good chat, *maiyaru*."

"You'll be just as difficult as Nokoribi was, won't you?" Zhao sighed.

Turning on his heel, he marched down the hall, but when I started following him, Brennan grabbed my arm.

"I caught the tail end of that conversation," she said after he'd turned the corner. "I wanted to say... I feel the same way. I also don't understand people's fascination with good looks and the like. More than that, though, being around you feels right in a way I've never experienced before.

"But I'm not one for extended... physical interaction. I don't have a past like yours to explain my aversion. It's just a part of who I am, and it might make a relationship with me difficult. Take that as you will."

Blinking, I wondered why my mouth had gone dry or why I had to cough if I wanted to speak. What exactly was I supposed to say, though? What did I *want* to say?

"Can I hold you?" I asked. "Only for a moment."

Looking away, Brennan held her arms open, and with a pounding heart, I folded myself around her. I rested my chin on her head, and for a moment, everything that was broken in me clicked into its proper place. I was whole with the pain and guilt that was constantly jabbing me soothed.

When Brennan started squirming, though, I released her, folding my hands behind my back.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome," Brennan mumbled, tucking a strand of hair behind an ear. "Don't be surprised if I ask the same thing of you sometime."

"That's only to be expected."

As I examined Brennan's bright-red face, I didn't know if what was growing between us was love, but I did recognize the warning that my mentor had been trying to impart.

"If Zhao's right and I am to be Hiyuki's next emperor, we can't continue exploring... whatever this is," I said. "You can't be anywhere near me."

With a cheeky grin, Brennan said, "Then, let's prove him wrong."

She started toward the room where she'd left Himi, and it took me a moment to remember that I should follow her. Damn, but that woman was wonderful.

She's dangerous. One of HIS, a voice whispered.

With my hand thumping into metal, I shook my head, trying to banish the feeling that my brain had just been mushed. Earth and fire, the voices' manifestations were increasing in frequency.

What would I do if one or both of them started talking to me throughout the day? Was this what Nokoribi's life had been like?

"K?"

Standing beside a nearby doorway, Brennan eyed me like a piece of cracked glass, one that was about to shatter.

"I'm fine," I said.

I shuffled to Brennan's side while she scowled at me.

"I'm worried about you," she said. "I don't like being in the dark about the future, like this."

"I don't like it either," I said with a sigh. "So, let's get some answers."

In the room she'd been relegated, Himi had already made herself at home. The plants that she'd lugged from her home were sprinkled around the place's bare floor with a bedroll already shoved against one wall. She was darting between the pots, murmuring to the flowers and leaves, and leaning on the back of a chair, Zhao watched her with a carefully blank expression.

"Himi, we should talk now," I said. "Sit down."

Shooting up from her crouch, Himi bounced her gaze between us and the chair that Zhao had shoved toward her, and she smiled.

"Certainly."

Skipping to the chair, she sank into it before crossing her legs. With her elbows resting on her knee, she cupped her chin.

“What are we talking about?” she asked.

Earth and fire, this would be more difficult than I’d expected, and I hadn’t thought it would be easy. Already, my temper was straining against the leash I’d flung around it, and I clasped my trembling hands in front of me, scrambling for a starting point.

What question did I most need to have answered?

“I want to know why,” I said. “Why did you kill the emperor? Why did you come to Nokoribi’s chamber that night?”

Himi, whose face had started falling at the start of my questions, brightened with the last one.

“Nokoribi? You know *gidae*?” she asked.

At my back, Brennan murmured, “Hope? Why would she call your friend that?”

That was a good question. Why-?

“He let me pick it!” Himi said. “The other two wanted me to call him something else, like ‘failure’ or other bad names, but he’s always seemed so happy to me. Almost jovial. I overrode the useless ones.”

I shook my head at her nonsense.

“I don’t know why she has a nickname for ‘ribi, Bren, but she’s using an ancient word for hope, part of a language that’s reserved for titles and terms of endearment. I’m surprised you knew that word’s meaning,” I said. “Hope fits ‘ribi well, though. He was always exceedingly optimistic.”

“You do know him!” Himi chirped. “But wait. That must make you *the* Kasai. When he visits me, *gidae* talks about you so much that I feel like I already know you.”

“...‘ribi spoke about me with you,” I said as numbness spread through me. “That would mean you’ve met with him.”

When could that have happened?

“Sure! He visits me at work. Sometimes, he even brings me gifts,” Himi said. “The plants are from him. I never knew how he got them. Not until...”

Her liveliness, infusing her form to this point, hiccupped, briefly letting something else through, but a quick headshake returned all of her cheer. As she pointed at the leaves and branches around the room, proudly showing them off, an unsung wail started ringing in my ears.

When visiting Morihei's establishment, Nokoribi hadn't been going to find the threat to his life but to meet with her. Why? What had made Himi so special and-?

"If 'ribi showed you such kindness, why did you... do what you did?" I asked.

Could she hear the pent-up violence in me, something that I was almost ready to unleash?

Apparently not. Frowning, Himi drummed her fingers on her chin.

"What do you mean?" she asked before making a face. "If you know what he's talking about, just say so, idiots. I don't like listening to your laughing implications."

Something similar to what had driven my hasty actions last night took hold of me, and I grabbed Himi's shoulders.

"You. *killed*. him," I roared in her face. "'ribi's dead because of you!"

With her eyes wide and her breath coming short, Himi licked her lips.

"I- I don't know what you mean," she said. "Are you saying *gidae's* dead? That's not possible. He promised he'd go with me when-"

Her face went blank again, but when life returned to her this time, she sprang upright in her chair with her body shaking.

"No. I'm not... I don't care what you two assholes say," she snapped. "No! *I'm not a killer.*"

So, she was denying what she'd done, and I might believe I'd made a mistake with her if I didn't recognize the burn in her eyes. If I didn't know her voice.

It's not just THEM in my head.

Slapping a hand to Himi's chest, I shoved into her until she winced.

"You don't remember this?" I hissed. "You don't remember a seed sprouting in your *gidae's* body while his muscles and guts became a warren for greenery? You don't remember him struggling to breathe so he could call you precious? So he could tell you he loved-?"

"He said, 'Their freedom is the only way to free us'," Himi said in monotone.

As if in recitation.

Then, her mouth opened wide with a whimpered screech coming forth, and such horror shone from her eyes that it forced me back a step. When her lungs had been emptied, she collapsed on herself, tangling her fingers in her black curls.

"What did I do? Oh no, no, no. Tell me this is a nightmare. *Please,*" she sobbed. "I called to Them, the Growth, the life in him. Why? Why would I do that? I loved him. I-"

With her head shooting up, she slid her weeping eyes over those watching her.

"I'm a killer," she whispered.

Behind me, Brennan gasped, muttering something about 'Alouin's seven', but I was much too focused on the girl to concern myself with her. I'd looked like Himi before, the first time I'd stopped an assassin. It was probably how I'd looked after murdering Arita too. I'd forgotten how much the sight of it could wrench the heart.

Absently, I stopped Zhao from drawing a knife before crouching in front of Himi. Pulling her hands off of her head, I ran my thumbs over the back of them.

"Tell me why," I said.

Himi focused her wandering eyes on me.

"I... don't know," she said. "*Gidae* told me to find him in the palace if someone ever threatened my life. He told me where I could find a bolt hole to reach a room he sometimes slept in. On the day he.... I met with a stranger. I don't remember much of what happened during that meeting, only that once I was alone again, I knew death was stalking me. I did what *gidae* had told me, but when I entered the palace-

She shook her head, wrenching a hand free of mine to bang the heel of her palm on her forehead.

"The voices," I said. "Was that the first time you heard Them?"

"No. I'd had dreams before but never..."

Pulling her second hand free from my grip, Himi plunged her fists between her legs.

"They told me to take a different path from the one that *gidae* had shown me before, and denying Them hurt so much. I did as They told me," she said. "As I was moving along, I didn't feel like I was controlling my body. It was so strange, but the voices... They fell quiet when I entered *gidae's* room. Even after that, though, I still felt like a puppet, guided by someone else's hand. I fought it, managed to shout a warning as I crept to his bed. *Gidae* woke up, and... you know the rest."

Swallowing, Himi turned away from me, and hanging my wrists from my knees, I considered her. Her distress seemed genuine, to the point that I almost believed this ridiculous story, but before I could let myself trust her, I needed one thing clarified.

"The person you met with," I said. "Do you remember anything about them? Anything at all."

"Oh, come on, *ko*," Zhao said. "You can't honestly believe this 'someone made me do it' story."

I lifted a finger to him, but the damage had already been done. With tears brimming in her eyes, Himi buried her face in her hands.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want *gidae* dead," she sobbed, "and- and I should have remembered hurting him before, right? Why didn't I-? Did you two idiots do something-?"

"Himi. Focus. It's ok. Killing him traumatized you so badly that you temporarily made yourself forget it," I said. "I've seen things like that happen before."

Nodding, Himi said, "That must be it. Because I can't live like this, knowing I so horribly murdered the only person who loved me. He called me precious, you know. The most precious person in his grand empire. I didn't- didn't realize what that meant until I woke up the next morning and heard that the emperor had been assassinated. Earth and fire, I not only ripped out my heart by killing *gidae*, but I destroyed Hiyuki too."

Swaying, she almost toppled out of the chair, but Brennan rushed forward to catch the girl, holding her close. When her eyes flicked above my head, I spun in place, rising as I did, and caught Zhao's wrist before he could complete his throw. Plucking a knife out of his hand, I shoved him backward.

"I know this is hard," I hissed. "Part of me is screaming to take her head too, but if you mean to become a bodyguard again, even if temporarily, you need to relearn how to ignore your desires. You have to act solely on orders."

Zhao's eye twitched while he worked his jaw, but after a moment, he inclined his head.

"And what are your orders, most blessed?"

Slapping the knife to Zhao's chest, I said, "Wait outside."

Once he'd ducked through the room's barrier, I returned my focus to the women in the room. At my nod, Brennan pulled Himi out of a hug, and I lifted her snot-covered face with a finger.

"You have *not* destroyed Hiyuki," I said, "and with your help, we might learn who's responsible for 'ribi's death, but I need you to think. This person whose meeting with you started our troubles. Who were they?"

Sniffing, Himi furrowed her brow, but quickly enough, tears started dribbling from her eyes again.

"I don't remember. I'm sorry. So, so, so, so sorry. It's a blank. A big, fat blank," she said. "What's wrong with me-?"

Oh, for our sake. Ask us for help, humans, two voices sighed.

As if a crowbar had been slammed into the back of my head, I dropped to the floor with its steel cracking against my bones. Himi slumped against Brennan as my vision warped, merging them into one woman, and with a moan, I dove my head between my knees, willing nausea and pain to go away.

I thought these had been improving.

“Oh, what a bad one,” Himi groaned. “I need to make some tea, but those assholes have turned my legs useless. I swear. If They were real, I’d kick Them in the-”

“I could use some tea too,” I said. “Bren, would you mind?”

After a heavy pause, she said. “Will you be ok?”

“Fine, fine,” I said while flapping a hand at her.

I heard her straighten Himi in the chair, and her fingers brushed through my hair as she left. Soon after, I took a deep breath. I peeked over my knees, pleased to see that the world had started straightening out again.

No matter how horrible that last episode had been, it had at least shown me the next subject I needed to tackle in this questioning.

“So, obviously They want us to use Them to solve this mystery,” I said, “but first... what are They?”

Jerking her head from where it had been hanging, Himi winced before asking.

“You don’t know? *Gidae* told me. From the stories he shared about you, you two seemed close. I thought he’d told you too.”

Breaking off, she made another face.

“Oh, hush,” she said. “He wasn’t a weakling.”

Did the voices speak to her more than They did with me? Was that why she sometimes seemed like she was talking to nothing? It would explain a bit of her madness.

“I’ve learned that ‘ribi kept many things from me,” I said, “but I’ve known about this omission for a while. He always said he couldn’t share Their identities with me, even though I knew They existed.”

A lie, a voice whispered, but if our last host had told you about us, we might have found you sooner and used you as a host instead of this insipid girl.

Rubbing my temples, I said, “He was protecting me. Typical. ‘ribi always did love trying to take over that part of my job.”

With a sigh, I shook my head.

“Well. They know about me now,” I said. “So, tell me about Them, Himi.”

Shrugging she said, “They’ve never told me Their names, so I call Them assholes number one or two-”

You never asked for our names, foolish child! a voice snapped. If you had, you’d have learned that you’re speaking with Growth—

—and Decay.

“Can you please shut up?” Himi groaned. “At least until our tea gets here?”

Chuckling, I rubbed my eyes.

“I don’t think acting defiant with something like Them is wise,” I said, “although They seem to have honored your request this time.”

“Yes. Occasionally, They remember the frailties of us mortals,” Himi said. “Oh, this headache-”

“I know,” I said, switching back to rubbing my temples. “Tell me more about Them. Maybe we can distract ourselves with that while we wait.”

“That’s a good idea! I don’t know much more about Them than what I’ve already said, though,” Himi said. “I know They provide the power for what we can do. The fun part of this horrid situation.”

With an impish grin and a flick of her wrist, the branch of a plant on the room’s periphery shot toward her, but when it touched her, it crumbled into powder.

“I can’t do that, or at least, I don’t think I can,” I said. “I haven’t tried it. How does it work?”

Slumping in her chair, Himi raised her hands to either side of her at shoulder level before making a silly face.

“It’s instinctual. Living matter just responds to what I want,” she said. “It’s great! For once, I can do something without having to practice it. Makes up for all the icky bits sometimes.”

Sticking her tongue out, she crossed her eyes, and a faint smile crawled across my face.

Hmm. From what she’d said, these powers probably weren’t something I could use, but that made sense. If Growth and Decay were preparing me to be a host rather than making me one, as my recent dreams would imply, I wouldn’t have access to everything They gave Their hosts yet. Hopefully, I never would.

“You said living matter, yes?” I asked. “Including humans?”

Himi’s shoulder rose while her voice went terse.

“Don’t know. Never tried.”

She lifted her eyes over my head, and I knew that topic was closed.

“*Gidae* only shared one other item of note with me. Apparently, whatever these voices are, They’re needed for an emperor’s communion with the earth, but he wouldn’t tell me how he knew that or what it meant,” Himi said. “I don’t think he even planned to tell me about that fact at first. When

he shared the information, it seemed like it had been dragged out of him, and I always wondered how he knew one of the imperials' secrets. It makes sense now, though... Wait. All this time, the *emperor* was visiting me?! What the fuck? I wonder whyyyyyy--"

Breaking off, she panted for a moment before clearing her throat.

"*Damn,*" she said. "I wasn't asking *you two.*"

The voices must have spoken to her again, poor girl.

Hang on. Why had I just thought about her with any form of sympathy?

"Do you know anything else about communing with the earth?" I asked.

I never could get Nokoribi to explain why he returned so drained from those trips through the Gateway.

"No clue," Himi said. "It's supposed to be one of those imperial secrets I mentioned, something only shared between the emperors and their bodyguards. Shouldn't you know that?"

If she was telling the truth, we'd better hope Zhao knew more about the process than he'd implied. Otherwise, we'd have to send Himi in blind for her first time communing with the earth.

... Did that mean I'd decided not to kill her? While sitting in this girl's presence, rage was still simmering in me but... but...

I didn't blame her for what had happened. Why was that?

"Tea, as requested," Brennan said from behind me.

Soaring into the room, she handed Himi and me cups before setting a tray with its kettle between us.

"What did I miss?" she asked.

"Nothing of importance," I said. "We just chatted."

As I sipped from my cup of liquid nectar, I placidly met Brennan's disbelieving gaze. For some reason, I didn't want her to know about the voices. Maybe I was trying to keep her from worrying.

Withholding this information from her was pure selfishness on my part, I knew. Brennan could handle anything I threw at her, but if the voices were as temporary for me as I hoped They'd be, what harm was there in keeping details about Them to myself?

Once I'd finished my tea, I scooted forward to refill my cup.

"I'm ready whenever you are," I said.

“Are you asking if *I’m* ready to learn who manipulated me into murdering *gidae*?” Himi snarled. “Ha! Let’s do this.”

Damn. I might have run across someone who was just as vengeful as me.

After she’d left her cup on the ground, I leaned back on my hands, preparing for the inevitable aftermath of the voices’ words.

“Well?” I asked.

And as prompted, a voice said, *We’ll keep this short. Several more people are involved in your conspiracy, but only one of them matters when it comes to dismantling it. The rest can’t function without her. They’ll just fall back into the squabbling that’s so typical for you flesh bags.*

“And? Who is she?” I said through gritted teeth. “A high-level guild member? A downtrodden who’s gained the chairs’ trust?”

Without hesitation, the voice said, *A chairwoman with black eyes.*

At that utterance, my brain might have exploded with fireworks. A grunt might have escaped from my lips. If those things happened, I didn’t notice.

“Sunada?” I growled. “I vetted her, though! Investigated every detail of her life! She had nothing to hide.”

Maybe so. She, however, has access to things that you never will. While burrowing beneath the earth like the insect she is, she found something from before the birth of your infant empire. It can-

Abruptly, another voice interjected, What are you doing? We’re not supposed to interfere in human affairs like this!

I didn’t see you stopping me earlier!

“SHUT UP!”

My teeth were screeching as I ground them together, and as heat filled my lungs, burned my throat, scorched my mouth, Brennan—wonderful woman that she was—gave me more tea.

Sunada had always been a supporter of the monarchy. If she’d had a problem with Nokoribi’s policies, she should have known that he’d have listened to her concerns, helping her until both sides of their potential conflict had reached a peaceful resolution.

But she’d chosen the solution of assassination instead. She’d influenced a young girl into murdering a loved one. She’d chosen to risk Hiyuki’s destruction.

“Zhao, we have a target,” I called.

"I heard," he said from outside. "Shall Brennan and I set out for initial reconnaissance?"

"Please," I said, hissing the word between my teeth.

How I wished I could join them, but I'd risked enough with this morning's outing. Tales of my survival must have spread to those in authority by now. They'd be looking for me.

So, I set my wrath aside, there to be retrieved when I needed it. I slumped into the pillows, trying my best to recover from the voices' influence.

Before leaving, Brennan crouched in front of me, and I somehow summoned the energy to meet her gaze.

"I'm trusting you with Himi's life," she said. "After what we've learned, I don't think you'll hurt her, but I'll emphasize this anyway. Please, don't kill her. I believe she's necessary if reality is to have a chance at surviving Alouin's coming calamity."

Reality surviving? What was she talking about?

Even confused as I was, I said, "I'll behave."

Nodding, Brennan took her leave, and soon, a closing door indicated my solitude with the girl who'd killed my best friend. She'd returned to the grief-stricken child from before. With her feet drawn up on the chair, she'd buried her face in her knees. How simple would it be to put a bullet in her head right now?

Sighing, I got to my feet, collecting a tray and our cups. In the kitchen, I'd almost finished washing dishes when Himi padded to a stop beside me.

I'd noticed her entering the room and seen her watching me, so once I'd finished scrubbing the kettle clean, I handed it and a towel to her. She stared at both items for a moment before starting with her new task.

"Why haven't you killed me yet? It's your right," she said before glancing to the side. "It is. You two can't stop him from doing what he wants."

I didn't know how to answer her, mostly because I didn't have a good reason to give. Was my failure to enact justice another symptom of my weakness? Did I need her to become the empress so I wouldn't have to take the throne?

I opened my mouth to give her one of those reasons, but something else entirely tumbled forth.

"I know what it's like to be used."

Where had that come from? When had I been used before, apart from when I was a boy...?

Oh.

Whimpering, Himi threw her arms around my waist, but her touch didn't prompt disgust in me, and my skin didn't start crawling. With my hands still dripping water, I lowered one onto Himi's head, tugging her closer with the other.

Dishwater merged with her tears, soaking my clothes, but I didn't mind. It masked that I was weeping with her.

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