

Chapter Seventeen

The wall buckled while a groan conveyed the threat of its collapse. Based on the howling in my fingers, I'd say I'd fractured a few bones, and when I retracted my fist, it left a dent behind. All proof of my foolishness.

I didn't care.

With my shoulders heaving, I spun, and at my back, Brennan—she always supported me—took a step away with her eyes widening.

Where had her spectacles gone? My mask, a defining feature of Nokoribi's bodyguard, might draw people's attention, but someone would *definitely* notice the mud in her eyes.

"It's ok, K. We'll find her," she was saying. "Right now, you should use the Neurreorg—"

"No."

As I swept around her, I recognized that the restless energy inside had incited a storm of wild fury in me, but I did nothing to stop it. Why should I wrangle it under control? I needed this fire scouring my veins, balancing me on the edge of unwise action.

It sped my steps while blinking images of the street broke through the typhoon that I'd become. It turned a pleading voice behind me into a buzz, making Brennan a bug on the wall of my awareness. It would give me the presence and force of will that I'd need to demand what I wanted.

Caution had yet to return to me when I stormed into Morihei's brothel. Its madam wasn't at her post in the foyer, so I continued deeper inside, barely feeling the curtain over the door as it slapped my neck and shoulders.

Once more in the arms of supposed temptation, I scanned the open chamber. Before I could find Morihei, a rumbling murmur, one that had to be impressively loud if it had defeated this place's thumping music, began, and it chased me as I marched across the space. My quarry, the madam, was currently apologizing to a group of patrons, still soaked from spilled drinks.

"Who is she?"

Morihei whirled in place, and at the sight of me, her lips parted.

"You're alive," she said.

Neither the people slowly forming a ring around us nor her recognition of me registered in my mind. Only one thing mattered.

"Who is she?" I roared.

Taking hold of Morihei's shoulders, I leaned on her while dragging her so close that I could hear when she swallowed.

"I can't. The emperor... our late emperor remanded her into my care years ago," she said. "He told me to guard her as if she were my most prized possession, and I won't relinquish the trust he placed in me just because he's dead."

Was she trying to *protect* an assassin?

"That girl killed the emperor!" I shouted in her face. "'ribi's *dead* because of her!"

So many people had surrounded us, something that should bother me for a reason I couldn't remember. Then, the mask I'd forgotten was knocked off of my face, right before Brennan dragged me around to face her.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "With the way this is going, all of Takanai will know you're alive by morning."

"And?" I growled. "So, they'll know! We couldn't have kept it secret for much longer."

"You're angry, otherwise you wouldn't say that," Brennan said. "We both wanted it kept to ourselves for as long as-"

"Kasai?"

Pushing through the crowd, Ide stumbled into view with a bandage covering her newest wound.

"You're alive?" she said. "How are you-?"

Lifting a hand to her mouth, she stared at me, and the storm in my core diminished in ferocity. I drifted toward her, but when she retreated, I stopped, chewing on my lip.

"I can't tell you how I'm alive, Ide, but that doesn't matter," I said. "What does is the girl I chased from this place. She's the one who committed the crime I was accused of. She murdered my best friend so gruesomely that I haven't been able to erase the image of it from my mind. So, please. For whatever we might have shared while waiting for death, tell me. Who is she? Where can I find her?"

Ide eyed me like I was a wild animal, which made me wonder if that was how I appeared right now.

"Will you hurt her?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said.

I honestly hadn't decided yet. Would I honor Nokoribi's dying wish, or would I instead take a path that might grant me peace?

Examining me, Ide shook her head.

"I don't think you will," she said. "Her name's Lin Himi. Her home's on Kunao Road."

A name. A destination. A goal nearly accomplished.

As something that had been wound tight in me unraveled, I opened my mouth to express my gratitude, but Morihei jumped into the pause first.

"I'll see that you never work again, Ide," she hissed. "I'll make you a downtrodden."

Since I'd never released the madam, the involuntary clench of my muscles on hearing that dug my fingernails into her arms, and she winced.

Ducking until only a few centimeters separated us, I said, "You will do no such thing. She'll continue working here, or if you must, you can send her to another establishment. If that doesn't happen, I will haunt you and your place of business until the day you die. Do you understand me?"

"Why should I fear *you*?" Morihei spat. "The city police or the royal guard will catch you soon enough, failed bodyguard. You won't escape a second execution."

She had a point, but I couldn't just let this lie. I had to fix it.

How much easier would it be to kill this woman and give her position to Ide, rather than to let the situation play out? From the way we'd left things, I knew Taro would allow the impromptu change in leadership, but Morihei had only ever tried to follow Nokoriibi's commands. She couldn't help it if those had also misled her.

How could I intimidate her, though? Everything she'd said was right, and I didn't have the time to find another way to gain her cooperation.

"I don't need your help, Kasai," Ide said.

With a slight smile, she glanced at Morihei.

"The madam forgets that she used to have me manage her long-term customers' accounts. It's the second reason I was languishing in that pit where we met. If she throws me out of her 'family', poor, downtrodden me might sell her secrets to the highest bidder. I won't give her a second chance to get rid of me without consequence."

Morihei's sharply indrawn breath curled my lips. Easing my grip on her, I took a step back.

"It seems you already have ghosts haunting you, dear lady," I said.

After a speechless moment, Morihei huffed before spinning and marching into the crowd. Ide watched her go with a smirk.

When she turned back to me, I said, "I'm in your debt once more. Because of you, I can finish what my emperor's death started."

"Please. You owe me nothing," Ide said.

"But—"

"Kasai," Ide interrupted me with a wry grin. "Attend to your lady."

After nodding to someone behind me, she sauntered away, quickly merging with the crowd.

Said crowd was staring at me. Probably because I was their dead emperor's bodyguard, who had supposedly been killed but was obviously alive.

What had I said in the heat of the moment not long ago? The secret of my existence would have to come out eventually?

Well, I could have chosen a better way to reveal it. Earth and fire, I was such an idiot.

"Bren," I muttered, "we need to—"

"Run? I know," she snapped.

A warm hand slipped into mine while the weight at my back was removed, and Brennan fired the pistol she'd just stolen at the ceiling. At the noise, the people who'd been watching us scattered, and Brennan pulled me toward the exit.

Somehow, she avoided the panicking patrons, and once we'd escaped outside, she dropped her hold on me. In concert, we reached for obscuring spectacles and bubbles, only allowing sulfurous air a few breaths to dwell in our lungs.

As we ran, heading for the concealment of a partying crowd, I absently rubbed the hand Brennan had held, trying to spread the warmth found there into the chill at my core. Foolish wrath had ducked a bow, leaving me once more in rationality's care. I had what I wanted, and if I were still listening to those wants, I'd head for Kunao Road right now.

The assassin, Himi, wouldn't go home tonight, though, not if she was smart. She had to know that her pursuer could pry her home's location out of her employers. A smart girl would, for a time, watch the place to make sure no one had followed her.

Besides, I wanted Zhao involved when I confronted her. My old mentor, a man who'd thought of Nokoribi as a son, deserved this resolution as much as I did.

And of course, I needed to address everything that was wrong with me.

The restless energy inside buzzed under my skin, threatening to rip it open, but that same sensation was buoying a body that I'd pushed to its limit. I'd gone for too long without taking my medicine. The emerging pain of bruises and broken bones, I could ignore, but I couldn't so easily put my dizziness, spreading numbness, and difficulty with catching my breath out of mind. Those symptoms indicated that my possible internal bleeding was now a near certainty. I'd need jatcha soon, if I was to survive it.

When Brennan slowed down, I briefly considered taking her hand again to squeeze it. A few more minutes at our previous pace and I'd have collapsed.

She dropped back alongside me, smacking my arm as she did.

"What were you thinking?" she hissed.

"I wasn't," I said with a sigh, "but let's save the berating for after we've reached Zhao's yes?"

Wordlessly, she watched me for a moment, leaving me in charge of forging our way through the crowded streets.

"You're limping," she eventually said.

"Astute observation."

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

With a snarling growl, Brennan left me in her dust once more, and I followed her, keeping my mind carefully blank. I didn't consider everything that had happened until we were standing in Zhao's foyer and the door had clicked closed behind us. When Zhao came to check on us, he took one look and shook his head.

"I knew I should have come with you," he said. "Oh, well. Let's get comfortable, and we'll discuss it."

"I'll join you in a moment," Brennan said.

She hurried up the stairs with Zhao and I watching her go.

"Does she know?" he asked.

His tone of voice told me *exactly* what he was asking about.

Wincing, I said, "My past came out while we were speaking with Taro, yes."

"And she's acting like it's not a big deal. Good girl," Zhao said. "Come on, *ko*. I can't wait to hear this debrief."

He led me to the gathering space where I'd spoken my declaration of revenge scant days before. While Zhao lit incense sticks and poured drinks, I lowered myself as gracefully as I could into the pillows, but the maneuver became more of a tumble than a controlled drop.

With a sharp glance at me, Zhao raised an eyebrow, but I waved the unspoken question away. There was no need to worry him yet.

When Brennan entered the room, she tossed me medicine, and I nearly dropped those hypos in my haste to use them. This earned me another glance from Zhao, but I could hardly blame him for that.

How must I look to him? An unwilling junkie returning to a discarded habit?

In the weeks following his discovery of my lingering addiction, soon after I'd begun my training, how many nights had Zhao sat at my bedside, guiding me through fever-soaked dreams? To him, it wouldn't matter that the drugs I was taking now weren't the same as the ones they'd forced on me as a child. Zhao would see me jamming a needle into muscle as a dip into an old dependency, no matter how much it wasn't.

Flopping to the floor beside me, Brennan pointed at my pocket.

"And the Neurreorg," she said.

"Later," I said. "The energy's helping me focus, and I need that focus if I'm to give a proper report."

"That can wait until morning," Brennan said. "Did you get any sleep last night? You were tossing and turning every time I got up to use the washroom."

Ignoring that question, I said, "No, it can't wait. We have to share what happened tonight while its details are still fresh."

"It's one of the basics of operative work," Zhao said.

He dangled drinks in front of us, and accepting mine, I took one sip and no more. Staying awake to give my report wouldn't do any good if I got drunk in the process. So, I played with my glass until Zhao had gotten comfortable.

Once he had, I said, "I have a name and a location, which is all I need to get this assassin. Given that, I'd call the evening a success overall."

"He failed to mention that in the process of obtaining this information, he revealed his living, breathing state to several dozen people," Brennan added.

And I winced. I'd meant to share that detail with Zhao, of course, just in a slightly less worrying way.

Predictably, Zhao snapped, "You did *what?* Ko, you needed that anonymity-!"

“Did I? Why? To add another layer of security to my safety?” I asked. “Because no one knows where I’m hiding, and the guild chairs and operative network will need at least a day to learn my location. By that point, I’ll have apprehended the assassin, and her confession should be enough to buy our freedom. Plus, I can move about Takanai like a ghost, if needed. You know that.”

“I thought you were planning on killing the assassin,” Zhao said. “Isn’t that how you were getting your revenge?”

There it was again. The quandary that had plagued me since a hooded and masked girl had laid a hand on my friend to unfurl a tangle inside of him.

Ever since I’d learned about the conspiracy, its participants’ fates had never been in question but the assassin? The tool in their hands? Nokoribi had used the last moments of his life to protect her, and he’d pleaded with me to save her. Could I negate that by carving into the girl, as my heart cried to do?

“I’ll have my revenge,” I said, “but I don’t know if I must claim her life to do that. I need more information. I need to know *why*, and then, I’ll decide.”

Zhao released a coughing fit into his suddenly raised fist while Brennan smiled at me. What on earth had made them react that way? More importantly-

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked.

“No reason, K,” Brennan said. “Just... it’s nice to see you considering how you’ll respond before you do it.”

Did she really think I was *that* impulsive?

“I can’t help it that I usually have an answer for most of the questions people ask me or a response to the things they do,” I said.

“Oh, stop sulking,” Zhao said, rolling his eyes, “and tell me this evening’s story. In its entirety, please.”

As requested, I launched into the tale, and for a brief moment, I returned to the time of my training. Zhao listened without comment as I relayed every pertinent fact that I’d observed or overheard on our outing, but all that filled my thoughts as I spoke was a boy, stumbling through his first debrief, with his distracted teacher standing over him. Those days had long passed, but still, the image stuck in my mind until I’d finished talking about the last of the day’s activities and fell silent.

“I can’t believe you let Taro live,” Zhao breathed.

All the bad things in my life—my past and the murder I’d committed—ran through me like earth’s blood through its channels, and I held perfectly still.

“That’s the first topic you want to discuss?” I asked. “Not that we know who killed ‘ribi and where she lives?”

“Yes, that also surprised me,” Zhao said. “Why did you come back here? Why aren’t you watching Himi’s home for her return instead?”

Shrugging, I said, “I thought you’d want to join me, *maiyaru*. I know what ‘ribi meant to you.”

With a loud sigh, Zhao shook his head.

“What *both* of you do,” he said.

“You say that, and yet, you don’t see the real reason he returned here,” Brennan said.

Glaring at her, I begged for her to keep her mouth shut, but of course, she ignored my silent wishes.

“He needs rest,” she said. “His injuries have finally surmounted his stubbornness.”

With flint eyes, Zhao faced me.

“*Ko...*”

I’d never wanted to see such worry on my old mentor’s face, not again.

“I’m fine, *maiyaru*. I promise,” I said. “I can handle the hardships that I’ve been given. Weakness isn’t mine. I don’t think.”

Wasn’t it, though? I hadn’t killed Taro, my greatest enemy. I’d let emotions control me at Morihei’s establishment. I’d done that *willingly*.

And of course, I had no clue what was happening to me when I was around Brennan. Despite my many denials, was it possible that weakness had infected me?

“Ok. I can’t resist asking anymore,” Brennan said. “Why is Hiyuki so obsessed with strength and weakness?”

“What sort of question is that?” I asked, pulling away from her. “Strength is all that matters-”

“*Ko*. You’ve talked quite enough for tonight,” Zhao said. “You will lie in those pillows, take care of everything that’s wrong with you, and listen until I say otherwise. As your *maiyaru*, I command it. Unless you want to challenge me?”

Damn. Zhao hadn’t invoked his right as mentor in years, especially not in such a rebuking tone. Surprise and engrained obedience had me pulling the Neurreorg from my pocket while I laid down.

As I let blue and purple light flash into my eyes, Zhao told a story as familiar to me as a smog-covered sky.

“To understand Hiyuki, Brennan, you must look to the empire’s founding. In ages past, our world wasn’t as volatile as what you see now. Mt. Teisu and other such summits didn’t produce earth’s blood like they do in present day, our air could be breathed without bubbles, and we could grow crops without much effort. Famine, which is ever-present today, was a word so rarely spoken that most considered it foreign. I know a world like this seems impossible, but I tell you. At one point, it existed.”

Brennan lifted a hand to cover a snort, but when Zhao gave her an odd look, she waved for him to continue.

“Although my proposed world might seem like a paradise, problems afflicted it to, and many would consider them worse than our current troubles,” he said. “Across the many kingdoms, two warring factions threatened life in our world. Their fighting brought humanity to the brink of extinction time and again, a conflict that both sides justified as necessary because it was required by their gods-”

“Let me guess,” Brennan interrupted. “Sgaradh and Gléidhteachas? Or maybe Calig and Lumin?”

“I’ve never heard of those first two but the others... how did you know?” Zhao said. “I thought you weren’t from Hiyuki, and the other kingdoms don’t hold this tale in high regard.”

“I’ve heard a similar story somewhere else, but for now, that doesn’t matter,” Brennan said. “I’m assuming something happened to banish Calig and Lumin’s influence here, otherwise you lot would still be fighting their War. How on earth did your people get those ornery forces of nature to leave you alone?”

I loved this part. Despite my instructions, I couldn’t stay silent for it.

“We don’t know,” I said, “or at least, we don’t know the details about it.”

I snapped my mouth shut at Zhao’s glare, but then, he resumed the story.

“Over the ages, fledgling kingdoms struggled to stop these factions. They tried negotiation, containing the gods’ followers on separate landmasses, and at one point, exterminating everyone from both sides. Nothing worked. Every time the problem seemed solved, followers of Calig and Lumin would rise again. Then came Hiyuki’s first emperor, Mok.”

Silence fell as we gave our respect to the only emperor whose name the common people knew, the only one worthy of that honor.

“Our first emperor began his campaign against the two factions knowing that the peace he forged would be temporary,” Zhao eventually continued. “Still, he fought and bled and committed terrible crimes because he believed peace, no matter how fleeting, would be worth the struggle. You see, with each reprieve the world gained from Lumin and Calig’s conflict, humanity had a chance to rebuild, climbing out of the certainty of our extinction.

“So, Mok showed strength. He waded through the horrors of war, understanding that the further into that depravity he swam, the longer it would take Calig and Lumin’s followers to recover. For

this, we honor him as much as we vilify everything he did.”

“May his name live on,” I murmured.

“His story a cautionary one for us all,” Zhao added. “May we never need to make the choices he did, and if we must, may we have the strength needed to take the path toward Hiyuki’s advancement.”

Again, quiet ruled the room, and after a moment, Brennan clicked her tongue.

“That’s it?” she asked. “I guess you’ve answered my question about Hiyuki’s fixation on strength, but your story can’t end like that. I’m a writer. I know you can’t leave as many threads hanging from a tale as this one has.”

“Patience, young lady,” Zhao said. “If you write, then you should also know that a story must follow its proper flow. Respect this one’s.”

As Brennan’s face reddened, I smiled. I hadn’t seen her embarrassed before. It was a good look on her.

“Soon enough, Mok reached a point where he believed he’d pacified Lumi and Calig’s followers as thoroughly as possible,” Zhao soon continued, “which left him with the question of what to do next. Should he establish a kingdom, as so many before him had? Should he impress upon the younger generation the importance of vigilance for the enemy’s return? Because despite knowing his established peace could only last for a few decades, he strove for more, as do we all.

“At that point, someone gained Mok’s confidence. Although we don’t know much about this man, we do know that he became the emperor’s advisor. This happened after he convinced Mok that he could permanently drive Lumin and Calig out of our world.”

Smacking her face, Brennan released a disgusted sigh while I shot out of the pillows.

“That’s where I’ve heard his name before!” I said. “I ran across it in ‘ribi’s books on obscure history. In one of them, the author claimed that the advisor jokingly called himself ‘Alouin 2.0’.”

“So, one of the bastard’s copies,” Brennan sighed before continuing at my confused look. “Alouin can copy his essence and put it in new bodies. He has an iteration dedicated to the production of empty vessels like that.”

With a confused frown, I said, “I didn’t understand any of that.”

Zhao broke in before I could finish my thought.

“Who is Alouin? And why did you feel the need to interrupt my story again?”

Crossing her arms, Brennan said, “Alouin is a sociopathic bastard who loves to mess with people, but he’s also trying to save several worlds from a calamity, so I give him a pass. For now. From

what I hear, his copies aren't so bad."

Zhao's eye was twitching, which was a sure sign that his temper was fraying, so I gave him an explanation he might understand.

"He's who I met while I was dead, *maiyaru*, the one who rewound my timeline."

After a beat, Zhao said, "And you think this godlike person was our first emperor's advisor?"

"Alouin isn't a god," Brennan snapped.

But she shut her mouth at our glares.

"I think it's possible," I said, "And if that's true, I'm glad he didn't kill me when I attacked him. Tell Bren why I've said that."

For a moment, I thought Zhao might not catch the hint to resume his tale. His eyes had glassed over, and he was limply splaying his fingers on his knees, but I understood why he was so shocked.

Before I'd returned to his life, he'd only believed in what he could see, deriding people's worshipful beliefs about earth and fire, but over the last three days, so much proof of the supernatural had been dumped on him that he must feel drowned by it.

Like a wild animal, Zhao shook himself, shrugging off what had frozen his mind.

"Mok's advisor helped him establish an empire that spanned most of the world, the boundaries of which have changed little to this day," he clearly made himself say. "Some of the people closest to the emperor requested freedom to pursue their own ideas for healing our world, disillusioned by their friend's increasing reliance on his advisor, and Mok gave them leave to establish the kingdoms that currently languish on Hiyuki's periphery.

"Years passed, and Mok's empire grew in strength, but his advisor had yet to make good on his promise. A tipping point came, beginning a confrontation between them, but before it could become violent, the advisor asked Mok for one more private audience. No one knows what took place behind that meeting's closed doors, but when the emperor emerged from it, he was changed.

"He began the construction of something he called 'the Gateway'. It became his new obsession while his advisor vanished to the far corners of the world.

"Signs of Calig and Lumin's return rose across Hiyuki, but Mok, who'd ever encouraged watchfulness from his subjects, did nothing to quell the enemies' growing numbers. His attention and therefore, the empire's resources only went to his new project. Soon enough, the two factions threatened war again, and the emperor's once-loyal citizens grumbled about whether their leader had lost his strength.

"That was when Mok's advisor returned. He negotiated a meeting between the emperor and the leaders of Lumin and Calig's followers. They met at Mok's recently finished Gateway, and because

the emperor insisted upon keeping that meeting private, the details of what happened there have been lost to history.

“What we do know is that at the start of the meeting, darkness, light, and mist consumed their meeting place, and when these phenomena had cleared, the three sides had reached an agreement.

“As part of that, Mok walked through the Gateway, vanishing into it. The advisor laid his hands on Lumin and Calig’s leaders, and at his touch, they dissolved into thin air, leaving nothing behind. After they’d gone, the advisor approached the Gateway and reached into it. When he pulled his arm free, Mok came with it, and together, they fell to the ground.

“Once a group of soldiers had reached the emperor, his advisor was dead, and unable to rise from the ground, Mok lay still, bearing what we now recognize as the proof of earth and fire’s favor.

“He told his soldiers, ‘I’ve made the sacrifice. Look for the next person it’s demanded of, and by everything you hold dear, pray that they’re strong. Please, let them be strong enough.’

“With those words, he died, and the old world perished with him. For weeks afterward, people cowered in their homes, certain the earth they walked upon would shake them into the void above. Certain that the world’s outpouring of earth’s blood would melt humanity in its heat.

“When the world quieted with its transformation complete, people rebuilt, as we always do. Another man bearing earth and fire’s favor succeeded Mok as the emperor. His communions with the earth calmed it, and thus, Hiyuki has persisted with an emperor ever-present to hold the world together. Not a trace of Lumin or Calig has been seen in the ages since.”

Closing my eyes, I enjoyed what this story had never failed to impart to me: pride in the empire, a desire to hold myself to a higher standard, awe for my home’s founding. I experienced all of these at the retelling of Hiyuki’s founding.

“Your story has as many holes in it as Swiss cheese,” Brennan said, “but it certainly explains this iteration’s twisted definition of strength.”

And... she’d ruined it.

“What do you mean” I asked. “Strength can’t have multiple definitions. It doesn’t work that way.”

“If you consider strength as a concept instead of a word, it can,” Zhao said. “I think that’s what Brennan meant, no matter how rudely she put it.”

Sighing, Brennan said, “You’re right. I could have been more diplomatic with that. I’m just so frustrated with this part of Hiyuki. I’ve listened to your explanations and tried to understand. Truly, I have, but why make *strength* a society’s highest virtue? And what’s so wrong with weakness that detecting it in someone is the same as handing out a death sentence? That’s not even touching on what your people consider weak. Accepting a friend’s help? Showing mercy to an enemy? Where I’m from, those are considered moral strengths.”

Showing mercy, like I had with Taro, as a strength?

A snicker became a chuckle, which turned into howling laughter. With my limbs sprawled, I let hilarity stave off the realization I'd reached for a moment longer, and when I could, I fought to reach my feet before stumbling out of the room.

Clinging to a wall outside, I acknowledged a truth that I'd tried to reason away since Nokoribi's death. The moment I'd held my friend's corpse in my arms had marked the moment when weakness had crawled into me. I was infected, which meant I needed to remove the weakened limb that I'd become.

But... if I was weak, why did I feel the same as before?

With his voice muffled by the room's barrier, I listened as Zhao said.

"Forgive him, Brennan. He didn't mean to offend you. As I'm sure you've noticed, Kasai takes Hiyuki's principles much more seriously than the rest of us do. That's mostly my fault. When I was training him to replace me, I went overboard on those lessons because my emperor's death was influencing me more than I care to admit, but I also think he uses them as a coping mechanism.

"You now know what happened to him as a child. He's never confronted that part of his life, hiding behind the ideas of strength and weakness, duty to Nokoribi, and revenge instead. I wish he'd face it instead of letting it control him, but that's not something anyone can force on him."

"Even if confronting his past would be the 'strong' thing to do?" Brennan said.

"Even so."

Was that what Zhao thought? All this time, he'd considered me weak? And knowing that, he'd let weakness survive.

Well, I'd correct that mistake.

Drawing my pistol, I held it in my open palms. I knew how to ensure a kill with this weapon. I'd done it to particularly careless assassins before, but for the life of me, I couldn't copy those movements. I couldn't lift the weapon to my head, staring at it instead. Light bounced off of its surfaces as my hands shook.

If he could see this pathetic display, what would Nokoribi think of his bodyguard now?

Ha! What was I thinking? I already knew. With me unable to eliminate the threat, the emperor would have pulled the trigger on me himself.

Did that matter, though? Rather than as a misbehaving tool, what would Nokoribi have thought of me, as his friend?

Find the truth, K.

What, by earth and fire, was the truth I was supposed to find?

“Damnit,” I whispered.

I couldn’t eliminate my weakness yet. Justice for Nokoribi came first.

Holstering my pistol, I turned to rejoin the others and nearly ran into Zhao in the process.

“Maiyaru...”

What could I say to explain what he’d surely seen?

Zhao stared at me with nothing in his eyes before marching around me without a word, and after he’d entered another room, I released a held breath. He’d be a fun companion tomorrow.

When I strode toward her through incense smoke, Brennan glanced up. She ran her eyes over my body, and under her scrutiny, I suppressed a squirm.

“You look better,” she said.

But her eyebrows rose, and I heard her unspoken question.

“I feel terrible,” I said.

While her eyes sprang wide open, I fell into the pillows. Did a display of weakness matter when I was already infected? I wouldn’t surrender the illusion of strength when around other Hiyukians, as doing anything else was too dangerous, but Brennan wasn’t from the empire.

Slapping at the pillows, I searched through them until I found her fingers and claimed her hand. I didn’t know why holding it made me feel as if the world had gone right, as if Nokoribi was alive and I’d introduce Brennan to him soon, but whatever that reason might be, I needed this comfort now.

Unlike before, Brennan didn’t seem to mind my touch, which mirrored how my typical revulsion had diminished with her. She shifted a bit, but once she’d gotten settled, she pressed her fingers into the back of my hand.

“I’m sorry if I upset you,” she said.

“You did, but from what I heard, I did the same thing to you,” I said. “Besides, what you said made me realize something important, something I needed to know.”

“Which was?”

I rolled toward her.

“I’d rather not share, if you don’t mind,” I said.

“Why would I?”

Taking slow breaths of the incense around us, I watched Brennan finish her drink. I barely knew this woman, had considered her a threat mere days before.

So, why did I trust her now? I'd given her my dominant hand, and her hold of it gave her a distinct advantage over me, if she decided to attack. I'd accepted that risk, though, tossing safety to the wind. Why?

Was it merely the result of our circumstances? Harsh situations could draw people together more quickly than day-to-day life; I knew, but our bonding seemed accelerated, even with that fact. A wary acquaintance becoming someone I trusted as much as I had Nokoribi within a few days? The change gave me metaphorical whiplash.

No matter how illogical it seemed, though, this switch in affection had happened. I could only hope that this hastening of my trust didn't end in disaster for either of us.

Forget my trust of her, though. Nothing was keeping Brennan in Hiyuki. In fact, she didn't seem to like my home very much. So, why had she stayed?

"K, can I ask you a troubling question?" she said.

Why didn't her use of Nokoribi's nickname upset me?

"Only if I can ask you one as well," I said.

"Fair enough," Brennan said with a laugh. "In that case, please let me finish speaking before you answer my question, all right?"

Stifling a yawn, I said, "I'm sorry. The day's catching up with me. But sure, I'll keep my mouth closed."

Squeezing my hand, Brennan pulled her own free before folding both of them in her lap.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" she asked.

On hearing a question so similar to my own coming from her, I tensed, but Brennan quickly moved on.

"Hiyuki isn't the only world, you know. Other iterations run parallel to it," she said. "I'm from another one, and I have a way to travel between them, something that's powered by rips in the fabric of reality. Takanai has a rip like that in an abandoned segment of the steamworks. If you want, I could take you to it. We could visit other iterations until we find one where you might be more comfortable. What do you say? Would you like to leave Hiyuki, where you're a wanted criminal, and start a new life somewhere else?"

Other... worlds. That could explain some of the oddities I'd recently encountered, namely Alouin and his pocket world.

And her.

Could I leave Hiyuki behind? Here was home. Here were those... I...

No one was tying me here. Much as I might respect Zhao and love him as a father figure, I wouldn't risk staying in Takanai, much less Hiyuki, for him.

And.

Brennan had provided a way for me to remove my weakness from the empire without me having to die.

"I need to see this through," I said. "In the morning, we'll visit Himi, and I'll get my answers. I'll finish rooting the corruption from Hiyuki but then..."

By earth and fire, what was filling me now? This bubbling buoyancy that curled my lips and almost erased a friend's broken body from the back of my eyelids? Was this weakness? If it was, why did it feel so good?

"Then, Brennan Adams, I'll explore these iterations with you."

Her answering grin cracked my smile so wide that I was afraid I'd beam this wonderful sensation through her, obliterating her with its strength.

"It's a good plan. If we're going to fulfill it, we should take advantage of the nighttime hours we have left," Brennan said, "but first, you had a question, right?"

Oh. How strange. I'd forgotten I'd had one but since she'd asked about it...

"Why are you helping me?"

Brennan turned away, lifting her eyes to the ceiling, and my stomach dropped.

"At first, it was only because Alouin asked. No matter how contrary I am with him, I follow that man's suggestions because... well, because he's powerful and he takes the time to help me anyway," she said with a shrug. "Soon enough, though, I was staying because it seemed necessary. You might not want to admit it, but you're floundering, K, although you do seem better right now."

She briefly ran her eyes over me before resolutely returning them to the ceiling.

"Now, I-"

Clicking her tongue, Brennan met my gaze with the intensity in her eyes stinging mine.

"I'm helping you because I want to see you happy. You deserve happiness, K."

Oh... hell.

With my eyes burning, I rapidly blinked to banish the annoying sensation. Crawling to sit with my knees against hers, I brushed my hands along her cheeks, stopping when my fingers grazed her ears. Brennan had become a statue, and trying to keep her calm, I slowly lowered my head until our foreheads met. I stayed there, fighting the revulsion of another person's touch, while she relaxed.

Once she had, Brennan hung a hand from my wrist with the other one hesitantly matching my brush of her face. There, we stayed for a time, just breathing, and the world no longer mattered. The assassin no longer mattered. My best friend's murder no longer mattered.

And I didn't know why.

I didn't know why when I touched Brennan, an unexplainable need to be closer to her drew me forward, but here, I sat, cradling her face, until I remembered what I'd meant to tell her.

"Thank you."

My words broke the spell. I slid my hands off of Brennan's skin, but for the longest moment, she kept hers in place. Again, without knowing why, I leaned into her palm, and with a nervous chuckle, Brennan snatched her hand to her chest.

"We should get some sleep," she said in a squeaky voice "Race you upstairs?"

Hmm. With the contentment swimming through my veins and everything physically wrong with me, could I reach my feet without help right now?

"I think I'll sleep here," I said.

"Oh. Umm."

With her hair flying around her face, Brennan scanned the room.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" she asked. "To- to watch your back, of course."

Why... was she acting so strangely? Had I disturbed her that badly? I knew she didn't like other people touching her. I'd caught the hints, but still, that's what I'd done. How could I fix that mistake?

Maybe if I acted as I normally would, she'd do the same.

"You're welcome to stay with me if you want," I said, "but I don't think danger's likely to find me in Zhao's home. Not anymore."

"Still. It'd like to stay," Brennan said. "To be safe."

"Whatever you want."

Settling into a more comfortable position, I stretched my arms to either side.

“Feel free to use me as a pillow, if you need it,” I said.

With a choked chuckle, Brennan started leaning against me, but by that point, I’d fallen asleep.

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