

Chapter Sixteen

There was no security waiting for us at Taro's estate. The modest building lay quiet beneath diffused moonlight. The streetlamps' light was the only illumination splashed over brushed metal.

When Brennan and I entered the place through its front door, no one protested our invasion of another person's privacy. We trod down empty hallways while the quiet we'd found inside raised the hairs on my arms.

I'd never visited a house that was so dead before, not any belonging to a chairman at least. No matter how late the hour was, servants should be filling this place, or they should on this lower level at least, but only darkness and a lack of motion persisted here, making the whisper of our feet in the carpet loud by comparison.

Unlike Arita, Taro kept to a conventional bedroom placement: the central-most position on the lowest floor. Firelight seeped from under the room's door, and on seeing it, Brennan stepped in front of me with an eyebrow raised.

I shrugged while pulling my pistol and a knife free. She followed my example, and together, we crept toward our goal.

Plastered beside the entrance, I glanced at Brennan and after she nodded at me, eased the door open. When no surprises, whether a weapon or person, sprang through it, I skirted around the edge with my pistol leading me.

Taro's bedroom projected a cozy air with its size barely large enough to avoid a cramped status. Cloth hid its metal surfaces with so many pillows scattered across the floor that I momentarily thought I was back in Nokoribi's bedroom.

The narrow bed, tucked into a corner, quickly dispelled that illusion, though. Nokoribi had always enjoyed extra space wherever he'd slept, whether to accommodate his guests or give himself room to sprawl, and this bed had enough space for maybe one person.

A fireplace and set of lamps provided the room with a hearty glow, but even still, shadows persisted in its crevasses and corners. A desk sat opposite these sources of illumination, and atop it, a diminutive man was slumped with his face planted in his crossed arms.

I led the way to him on silent feet with Brennan keeping just as quiet, so when Taro spoke up, it froze me mid-stride, and my foot fell with a thump.

"Amari Kasai. You're finally here. I've been waiting since sundown for you to arrive."

Was this a trap?

Without me saying a word, Brennan rushed to the door, arranging herself to intercept anyone who might come through it. How had she known what I'd want from her?

No longer bothering with stealth, I finished my advance, pressing my pistol's muzzle into the back of Taro's neck. The noise of its hammer cocking seemed deafening in the room, especially with the fire's crackle accenting it.

"Sorry to have left you in suspense," I said.

"There's no need for hostility. No one will interrupt this conversation," Taro said. "Once I heard about Arita, I sent my family and the staff away. I knew I'd be your next target, and it's a good thing too. I can give you the emperor's message before you kill someone else."

Something in what he'd said should have given me pause. A whisper in me recognized this, but an image of lips left bleeding from heat while their owner gurgled a scream shot to the forefront of my mind. Revulsion—a sense of unclean—made me dig my pistol harder into Taro's spine.

"Arita got what he deserved," I growled.

"Maybe so," Taro said with a cough. "Doesn't stop me from wanting to prevent more deaths. May I please sit up, Kasai?"

I'd blow a hole through this man's neck. All the suffering he'd caused and he dared to use my name? I'd *kill him*.

Brennan rested a hand on my shaking arm. That touch was enough to still the swirl entangling me, thinning it enough for me to recognize her features. Concern was blazing from her face, but she didn't let it touch her voice.

"He said he has a message from your friend," she said.

The swap from burning fury to shock came so swiftly that it left me dizzy. Removing my pistol from Taro's skin, I stumbled away, needing space.

Nokoribi would never have given Taro a message. He'd known about my past with this man, known what would happen if the brothel guild's chairman and I had ever met without the constraints of the bodyguard role to hold me in check.

Maybe that was why he'd left a message here, though. Because he'd known the first place I'd go after gaining my freedom would be this house.

"Talk," I said.

"The emperor entrusted me with a secret," Taro said. "Laugh all you want, but it's the truth."

I had no amusement to give.

"I find that hard to believe," I spat. "What possible thing could 'ribi, *the emperor*, have wanted to give *you*?"

"His trust, for one," Taro said. "He knew a plot was brewing among the guilds, so he asked me to infiltrate its conspirators."

"You. The chairman of the guild he-"

Such rage was flowing through me, building with each moment. So, why was I flinging hysterical laughter into the room?

"If 'ribi knew about this plot, why didn't he come to me?" I said when I could. "I am... was his bodyguard. Rooting out conspiracies was my job."

Shrugging, Taro spread his hands.

"Who can know the mind of our once Blessed Emperor?" he said. "I can only make a guess."

I'd regret asking this but...

"What's your guess, then?" I hissed. "Go on. Give it your best shot."

If Taro had heard the scorn in my voice, he didn't seem bothered by it.

"I think our emperor didn't want to stress you with this conspiracy," he said. "Toward the end of his reign, he'd made many changes that the guilds found intolerable. You must have seen this. It's why so many assassins tried their luck with him in recent years and why your job had become so wearing lately."

"I was fine!" I snapped.

Taro looked down his nose at me with disbelief etched into his face's every place.

"Our emperor didn't think so," he said, "or at least, that's what I gathered every time he mentioned you in our communications."

"He thought I was weak," I said with my voice dead.

Why else would Nokoribi have given a responsibility that should have been mine to another person?

Turning away from Taro, I suppressed a shudder, longing to bury myself in the pillows at my feet. So when someone rested their hand on my back, it made me jump.

"Your friend cared," Brennan said. "He didn't think you were weak or incapable of handling this conspiracy. From what it sounds like, your 'ribi just wanted to ease the pressure on you in the only way he could. He acted as any good friend would."

Maybe Brennan's theory held water. After all, taking on more than one could handle didn't show strength, only foolishness. Everyone had a breaking point, and once someone reached theirs, they became useless to Hiyuki. Maybe Nokoribi had seen something in me that I hadn't, realizing I was approaching what might break me.

"She's right, and maybe that concern is what got him killed," Taro said. "He never should have trusted *me* to get the job done. I'm—"

"A villain?" I hissed.

I couldn't take it anymore. The heat that was always found while in this man's presence released a scream in me, spewing forth a host of words that I'd long left unsaid.

"You're a snake that's pretending to be human, a spirit from Katanti, hiding in a flesh sack so you can prey on the innocent."

With his arms folded, Taro wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Maybe," he said.

"*Maybe?*"

Striding to Taro, I took hold of his disheveled jacket, shaking him.

"I was *six* when your guild accepted my writ of membership. A child!" I shouted. "The brothels should never have taken me from my parents, no matter how desperate those two were, but after committing a crime like that, I should never have been put to work. Not so young. But *my fucking* eyes. Everyone wants to sleep with someone who's been so blessed by earth and fire, no matter how old they are, and the blame for it all leads to you, asshole. The abuse, the rapes, the drugs shoved down my throat to keep me complaint—"

My voice was choked off as the past surmounted the barricade I'd raised against it, and distantly, I heard cloth tearing as the lowest moment of my life ripped through me again.

Darkness rules the steamworks. I didn't expect that, and because of that, I failed to bring a lantern with me, but it doesn't matter. Lost in the haze that's cloying through my head—the dregs from my evening cocktail—I stumble and trip, hardly noticing when I stub my toe on something hot.

Why should I care about causing this body further damage? Compared to the hurt it's already endured and the inaudible shrieking of the boy I once was, a bruised knee or scraped shoulder meant nothing.

I don't understand how I escaped from them tonight. In the past, I've tried it often enough to a resounding lack of success, and of course, my victory came when I'd had no plan. I didn't put a drop of effort into it.

I can't return to learn why they let me slip free of their bonds tonight, though. Not ever. Not even if I become a skeletal child languishing in the streets, so desperate for food that I'd do ANYTHING...

No. I can't let that happen. So, I came here to prevent myself from reaching that level of desperation, a place where it might take a few days for them to find me.

Orange light laps at a wall up ahead, and when I step around its corner, heat scalds me, almost shriveling my hair. It feels wonderful.

Chains and pulleys are hanging over an earth's blood channel ahead. So much swirling orange and yellow is flowing in front of me, and I eagerly step forward, racing to the edge.

The pop and bubble of molten earth echoes more loudly than I thought it would, which is sad. I'd have liked one moment of quiet in this miserable life.

Still. Nothing for it. I have no ties to keep me glued to this stone. What waits below me looks pleasant enough when compared to where I've lived through.

"Ya don't look weak."

I jump so intensely that it almost tips me over the edge. Searching for the voice that had spoken, I find it in a younger boy, perched on a rail over the channel, and when our eyes meet, he lifts two fingers in a wave.

Confused, I ask, "What do you mean?"

"Wut I said."

With a chain looped around an arm, the boy swings to where I'm standing. Brushing himself off, he lifts his coal-black eyes to me with a playful smirk tugging at his lips.

"Ya look strong," he said. "We should be strong togetha."

Stunned, I gape at the boy as he stalks past me toward the dark of the steamworks. For some reason, I don't want him to leave, even knowing how much easier my plan will become once he's gone.

"Don't you know why I'm here?" I call after him. "What I mean to do?"

Flipping to me, the boy stops with his hands on his hips.

"Sure! See it all ta time, I do, but yu're not ready fa it. Not yet," he shouts over the rumble of earth's blood. "Wut ya say? Stay strong for one more week, togetha?"

I don't know why I take a step toward the boy, letting a source of promised release fall behind me.

"I'm Amari Kasai," I say.

“Good name!” the boy says. “Lin Nokoribi, me, but you can use ‘ribi. Let’s get ya somewhere quiet, and yu can tell me wut led ya here tonight.”

Again, I don’t know why I trail after this boy, but as I trudge behind him, I know I can trust him. Nokoribi is the type of person I could follow for the rest of my life.

Now, he was gone. Dead, in part, because of the man in front of me.

With torn-free patches of his jacket clenched in my curled fingers, I growled, “You could have stopped this, all of it. It’s your fault.”

“I didn’t know about you!” Taro said. “Part of my guild went rogue, starting something I never would have approved if I’d known about it. I shut it down as soon as I learned about it but-”

And Brennan was there with her fist slamming into Taro’s jaw hard enough to topple him. As he flopped to his back on the ground, her sword flashed, leaving its point hovering above where his legs joined together.

“Claiming ignorance doesn’t excuse your behavior. I hate people who exploit the powerless,” she said with her voice cold., “but I also hate unnecessary violence. So. You have one minute to plead for your continued existence before I castrate you and let Kasai have his fun.”

Lifting himself up on his elbows, Taro might be trembling, but his gaze was steady as he raised his chin.

“I have no excuse,” he said. “You should kill me.”

Brennan swayed away from him while her sword point wavered.

“What?” she said.

Taro, however, seemed finished with her.

To me, he said, “I can’t give you the conspirators’ names. Despite my best efforts, I never met with them, but I can share that Nokoribi’s assassin is taking shelter in one of my brothels, the one run by someone you know. Her name is Morihei.

“I suspect that this is why our emperor visited her establishment so often, although I’m not sure how he knew that he might find a subversive there. I only learned about it a few days ago, and I hadn’t yet shared the information with him because I didn’t know the assassin’s identity. Perhaps our emperor learned of their hiding place through other means.

“However he found the assassin's hiding place, he wanted me to send you their way if he died. I was also supposed to tell you that you shouldn’t hurt them, and that was the last I heard from him.”

I didn't want to believe this. If it was true, it meant that the many times when I'd thought Nokoribi had been indulging in a source of pleasure, he'd instead been seeking out a threat to his life.

While I'd sat outside.

I knew it couldn't be a lie, though. Not only was a man more inclined to tell the truth when in a position like Taro's, but the behavior he'd described fit Nokoribi. *Of course* he'd used his reputation as a voracious lover to try teasing out a conspiracy.

"Shit," I murmured.

So, what now? My next destination was Morihei's brothel, obviously. When I got there, though, should I confront the owner or try finding the assassin without her knowledge?

And what should I do with Taro?

"Just say the word," Brennan said under her breath.

Her blade crept closer to Taro, but he paid her no mind.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you, but my apology is all I can offer," he said. "I know I can never repair the damage that was done to you, except perhaps by giving you my life. If it will help you, take it."

Oh, how badly I wanted to accept that offer. No matter that Taro held such guilt over my circumstances that he'd offered to die for me, my hands still twitched when considering the possibility of rending and mutilating someone who'd been such a source of pain for me.

At the same time, though, I couldn't banish the vision of another corpse I'd made, filling my eyes.

"Let's go," I said.

Brennan stared at me like I'd switched bodies with a stranger. Somehow, she managed to look like I'd taken a promised toy from her as well.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

No, I wasn't. Sparing Taro, which would be akin to letting an enemy go free, was a *terrible* idea, but all I could see was an image of Arita's tortured face, and bile clawed up my throat. I couldn't increase the weight of my guilt.

"Just because he's a human stain doesn't mean I have to become one too. I won't let him add to the filth that's already on my hands," I said. "Come on, Bren. We have a brothel to visit."

As she sheathed her blade, Brennan wrinkled her nose.

"Fantastic," she grumbled. "Well? Lead on."

Before leaving, I nudged Taro with my boot tip.

“You won’t tell anyone you saw me, will you?” I asked.

“Saw who?” Taro said.

“Good. I’d hate to make a return trip here.”

Once we were on the street, Brennan took gaping strides to stay by my side. I didn’t pay her much mind. I saw her casting significant glances my way, yes, but I was too busy fighting an internal war to acknowledge them.

After a moment, she said. “I won’t press you any further about what you said back there, but if you need me, I’m here. I’ve heard that talking about trauma is good for you.”

It was bad enough that she’d learned about my greatest weakness. I wouldn’t explore it further with her.

Still.

“You *hear* it’s good for you?” I asked. “Haven’t tried it for yourself?”

Making a face, Brennan said, “Yeah, yeah. What do you know? I’m a hypocrite. Maybe it’s something we can tackle together.”

“Maybe.”

“But not right now?” Brennan asked.

“Such talent for reading context,” I said.

“Wow. Sarcasm? I didn’t know you had it in you, K.”

She skipped ahead, and while I kept half an eye on her, I also scanned our surroundings.

Takanai showed a different face at night. The wealthier neighborhoods might persist in a serene silence, but elsewhere, the daylight hubbub of commerce yielded to entertainment, meant to tempt the eye and mind.

Loud music marked sporadic buildings as dance clubs, and games of pechet spilled out of gambling dens and onto the street. At the end of alleys, people beckoned potential clients closer to examine their wares. Brennan had probably gotten our drug supply from a vendor like that, although healing aids didn’t come close to touching the variety of goods that one could find in darkened side streets.

And of course, there were the brothels. As I led Brennan through a decorative, stone garden, I thanked earth and fire that Morihei’s establishment was one of the more well-maintained ones. The grime found in others could be disgusting at times, but fortunately, we wouldn’t have to deal with

that unpleasantness tonight.

I only remembered that Morihei could potentially identify me as I stepped through the place's door. She'd be the first citizen I'd approached who'd known me from before my death.

Snatching Brennan's hand, I drew her closer in a clumsy attempt at a disguise, which quickly had my palm sweating against hers. Thankfully, she played along, although she did give me an odd look.

We needn't have bothered. Morihei, barely clothed as always, looked us over without recognition.

"Greetings, new additions to my most joyous family! How may I assist you on this fine evening?" she chimed. "Perhaps you'd like a massage? Or would you prefer something more daring?"

Lowering her eyes, she coyly smiled, and my stomach twisted. Still, I opened my mouth to speak before pausing. If I said a word, would she recognize my voice?

Thankfully, Brennan saved me from this conundrum.

"Things have been getting boring in the bedroom lately," she said. "We were hoping to spice it up tonight."

Giggling, she twisted in place, holding our clasped hands to her chest, and while my jaw clenched against a renewed need to shudder, I stared at her. With her performance, an interrogation strategy had gone out the window, at least for now. What was Brennan doing?

"We can certainly help you with livening things up," Morihei said. "If you'll leave a deposit with me, you're welcome to browse the choices available to you. Once you've made a decision, I hope you'll enjoy your time with us, but please, remember to return here once you've finished. My family's big brothers don't look kindly on new members who forget to pay."

A deposit? Shit. I didn't have a payment method on me. Since earth and fire had chosen Nokoribi years ago, things like that hadn't crossed my mind, and even if I had thought of it, I hadn't had a chance to find a source of income yet.

So, my eyes widened when Brennan dug in her jacket's folds and slapped a few ration tokens in front of Morihei. When had she found the time to procure that?

"We'd never want to disappoint our family," she said, giggling again.

She pressed into my side, and I frowned as the foreign thrill from earlier today zapped through me again, intermingling with the acid on the back of my tongue. What on earth had gone wrong with me lately?

Morihei gestured to a curtained entryway, and I focused on the strangeness that was me passing through it this time. It was better than acknowledging the ache that spawned when Brennan pulled away from me.

Then, I was standing in my friend's domain, a place I'd never visited before, and that curious sensation fell out of my mind.

Week after week, Nokoribi had returned to this place, and from an initial inspection, I could see why. It exuded wealth.

A single, self-contained atmosphere was wrapped around it, allowing patrons to discard their bubbles while also giving employees the freedom to unveil their lovely faces. Their glistening red, yellow, and orange-smeared lips never broke from a smile, whether flirtatious or innocent, and the theme of earth's blood coloring continues in their flowing outfits, all of which barely covered their bodies.

Rooms along the chamber's perimeter had bulky men guarding their entrances, and a middle ring of open space held pillows and chairs, arranged around raised platforms.

The place's centerpiece, though, was in the middle of the room. Clouded glass enclosed that space, and indistinct figures writhed within.

These things, Nokoribi would have enjoyed. Even still, I saw a problem here, mostly in the form of the employees. Those people were beautiful, of course, but they couldn't hope to match what an emperor had thrown at him on a daily basis. The increase in the quantity and quality of people begging for my friend's attention had been the only benefit he'd enjoyed about becoming the emperor.

Or at least, I thought it was so. I also remembered mornings when I'd found Nokoribi in bed with people that most would consider plain. So, maybe what I'd thought was avaricious lust was actually... loneliness.

Regardless, my friend wouldn't have approved of the men guarding every room or the brothel's relative openness. He'd liked his privacy, and this place catered more toward those who liked to watch and exhibitionists. If I'd ever bothered to follow him inside, maybe I'd have figured out that something besides the expected had been taking place during our visits here.

Brennan tugged on my sleeve, and blinking, I realized I'd been staring for quite a while.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

Why wouldn't I be?

Even as I thought that question, though, I realized where her concern was coming from.

"There's nothing wrong with sex or with people who buy and sell it, although I've never understood the fascination. My problem is when unwilling participants get involved," I said. "Plus, this doesn't bring back memories, thank earth and fire. Morihei keeps her establishment clean, and she's very generous with her employees. I spent my childhood somewhere..."

As I glanced over the chamber, my mouth twisted while a burn wound itself around my heart.

“Somewhere much more squalid than this,” I whispered.

“Well, I don’t like it,” Brennan said. “So, can we please find this assassin?”

She did look quite uncomfortable. With her arms crossed, she’d hunched her shoulders together, so much so that they’d risen toward her ears, and at the sight of this, any plans I might have had about splitting up flew out the window.

“We’ll try this way first,” I said.

I didn’t comment on what I’d seen in her. Not only was doing that rude, but in a way, I could relate.

When Brennan bristled on hearing a cry of completion, my own skin prickled. When a man came to speak with us, brushing his fingers along our arms, the only reason I didn’t shudder came from a lifetime of hiding such reactions.

Brennan didn’t have my control. She slapped the poor man’s hand away.

All in all, making our prowl around the brothel gave neither of us pleasure, or at least, it didn’t seem to. Why was that, considering how many people here seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves?

As we passed a room toward the back of the chamber, a woman yelped, but that wasn’t what drew me to the place’s curtained door. I’d heard that voice before.

“May I?” I asked the man beside the entrance.

When he shrugged, I pulled the curtain aside, just enough to peek. Inside, a woman had been bound to a four-poster bed, and another, half-clothed woman knelt over her with a bloodied knife grazing her midriff. I bit my cheek as she applied pressure, drawing a crimson line over the bound woman’s scarred skin, before ducking back outside.

A few steps away from the room, I leaned on a wall, fighting the need to return to that room and start a scene, and after a moment, Brennan joined me.

“Is that what you’re into?” she asked.

Why had she sounded curious? Why no outrage or disgust?

“Most definitely not,” I said.

I didn’t know what I ‘was into’, whatever that meant, but seeing what I had...

“I know that woman. Ide,” I said. “In my darkest moment, she was there. I guess Ryoko made good on his promise to help her, but I never thought she’d return here or that Morihei would take her back.”

“Do you want to help?” Brennan asked.

I shook my head, and with my breathing getting less ragged, I pushed myself off the wall.

“I’ve cleared my debt to her. What she chooses to do with her life is her decision,” I said. “I won’t interfere.”

Even if I knew she didn’t want that knife. I remembered how much she’d trembled when discussing that part of her work, and oh, how I could relate to enduring something unwanted, but the only way she could be lying in that room was if she’d chosen to do it. Morihei wouldn’t allow anything else.

“You can only help someone so much,” Brennan said.

She gave me a sad smile, and I wanted to pull her close and tell her that everything would be fine. That Ide would be fine.

But I knew better.

“We still need to search half of this place,” I said. “If that turns up nothing, we can return in the morning to question Morihei.”

“Good plan,” Brennan said. “The sooner we leave this place, the better.”

On that, I could agree. With every room we’d passed, Brennan had gotten increasingly fidgety with her face tingeing green in the low light. She’d shown such strength already tonight, enduring something she so clearly hated. Maybe we should cut tonight’s work short and make any further visits to the brothel brief.

She’d said she could handle this, though. Why was I doubting her about that? Did I think she was weak?

No. Definitely not that.

I was so focused on Brennan that I nearly missed the girl. Since we’d entered this place, several teenagers had been running around the chamber, carrying trays of drinks and snacks to patrons.

As was custom, these young ones wore masks to cover their faces, indicating they were unavailable. I’d often longed for one of those when I was a boy, the second reason I’d worn one as Nokoribi’s bodyguard.

By chance, I glanced up from another inspection of Brennan when one of those girls, standing beside a nearby table, tossed her head back, probably laughing at what a patron had said, and I saw it. Barely distinguishable, even in the brothel’s dim light, a glow was seeping from around the edge of her mask.

Just like *that night*.

My vision narrowed. The brothel faded; its bared skin and sickening grunts gone. All that remained was *her*. That girl. The one who'd killed my best friend.

Something alerted her to my presence. I didn't know what, nor did I care.

She shot upright from serving drinks, dumping their contents in a few of the patrons' laps. Ignoring their angry curses, she stared at me with her blank mask facing my exposed features, and how I wished I could change our states.

How I wished she was seeing my monster mask, the visage of the man who'd screamed and begged for her to *stop*. Whose howls she must have heard while fleeing from the murder she'd committed.

As hoped, metal wrapped itself around my face, and on seeing it, the girl stumbled into another teenager, knocking a tray out of his hands.

Shattering glass and startled shouts popped in the air like gunshots, and with a distraction provided, the girl took off.

As I chased her, I leapt over tables and ducked around people, bursting through a far door that a heavy curtain had hidden. The girl who'd become the center of my world raced through her fellow employees. She toppled clothing racks behind her, forcing me to batter them out of my way.

The shouts left in my wake and the slap of feet behind me registered in a silenced portion of my mind, one that had been drowned by the need to catch my prey and the thrumming energy inside, which was pressing my legs ever faster.

I shot through another door and into the open air, and sulfurous air greedily invaded my lungs. Almost, I pressed my back teeth together to release my emergency bubble, but if I did that, I'd have to remove my mask, and I couldn't drop this false face. That girl needed to know fear.

She ducked around a corner, probably realizing these empty streets were a poor means of escape for a short girl being chased by a man.

As I barreled after her, I never checked for traps that she might have set. Maybe if I'd been thinking rationally, I would have, but caution lay far behind me, alongside my heart and Nokoribi's plea.

I would make this girl suffer.

It didn't matter in any case. The alley that the girl had chosen ended in a home's sheer wall, and as she reached it, she glanced over her shoulder.

I smiled behind my mask. Trapped. Had panic begun squealing in her yet?

Then, she gestured, and the cobblestones beneath her feet crumbled. A vine shot for the sky with its tip wrapping around the girl's wrist, and as it grew thicker, it lifted her into the air. Once she'd alighted on the rooftop, she placed a finger on the greenery she'd created.

Cursing, I managed to touch the vine before it withered into paper-thin, dried plant matter. A faceless mask glanced once more toward the ground before the girl disappeared.

She was the next empress. How had I forgotten?

She'd also done the impossible by scaling this unclimbable wall, and I couldn't follow her. By the time I'd circled around this building, she'd be gone. I'd lost her.

Screaming, I let the energy inside of me guide my fist, punching the wall that was blocking me from what I most desired.

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