

Chapter Twenty-Five

Disgorging from the earth today brought the same mixture of elation and relief as it had years before. Zhao dragged me up the ladder's last few rungs, and without discussing it, we took a moment to catch our breath. It didn't matter how physically fit one was. A climb that long would have the body crying out for rest.

When my heart didn't feel like it would tear itself out of my chest, I checked my surroundings. We were standing among or leaning against the assorted junk that was typically accumulated by a large family or in this case, one man and his staff.

The palace. We'd made it inside. Now to reach the Gateway without the guild chairmen, staff, or royal guard murdering us.

"Quick question," Brennan said. "Did an earthquake just save our asses down there?"

At the storeroom's door, I pressed an ear to its surface while watching for shadows in the light spilling through its crack.

"The earth did quake, yes," I said, "and that gave us the distraction we needed to flee."

"But... isn't that bad?" Brennan asked. "Growth and Decay's prison causing havoc in your planet's core is bad, yes?"

"That's what I gather," I said.

Cracking the door open, I noted an empty corridor beyond before slipping into it. Both ends of the hall were clear of people, so I waved for Zhao and Brennan to follow me. On quiet feet, she hurried in the direction I'd indicated while Zhao and I lagged behind.

"This is why I'm so confused by what we're doing," he said. "If Hiyuki's destabilization has gotten so bad that its effects have stretched into the empire's heart, why are we trying to stop Himi from communing with the earth? It doesn't seem logical."

Enough was enough.

Taking hold of Zhao's arm, I spun him toward a wall with him relaxing halfway through the swing. The impact and my subsequent pinning of him made little noise, as it was a move we'd practiced many times in the past.

Getting in Zhao's face, I said, "I have excellent reasons for what I'm doing, and I would appreciate it if you stopped questioning me. *Maiyaru.*"

His questions were making me doubt myself, and doubt wasn't something I could afford right now.

"It shall be as you command, most blessed," Zhao quietly said.

"Good," I said, releasing him, "and stop calling me that."

As I walked away, I refused to examine what the look on his face probably meant.

At the end of the hall, Brennan watched us approach her, grinning like we'd performed the most interesting of tricks, and as we came closer, I could practically see the laughter she was holding in check.

"Anything?" I asked.

"Not that I saw, but I've been distracted," Brennan said with her lips twitching. "Which way do we go next?"

"Yes, where is the Gateway now?" Zhao asked. "They usually like to move it between emperors."

"And here's hoping they haven't done that yet this time," I said. "'rubi had it placed in his garden. Said the brief moments with nature beforehand helped."

"I don't remember seeing it there," Zhao said.

Ducking my head, I smiled.

"It's hidden," I said.

"Of course it is," Brennan said, rolling her eyes. "Well? Are you taking us to it or not?"

Did I have another choice?

Advancing through the palace took us an agonizingly long time. Maintaining our anonymity required it, but I longed to race ahead, find Himi, and get this over with.

Who knew how alert the royal guard would be, though, especially after the earth had so recently expressed its displeasure? Avoiding them was in everyone's best interest, including mine. Best to keep angry, heavily armed people from chasing us, yes?

I jumped when Brennan slipped her hand into mine.

"I understand now," she quietly said. "You went from a childhood that no one should experience to that horrible place below our feet to this."

She gestured at the hallway we were walking down with its many sharp edges and darkness shrouding it.

"How long was this your home?" she asked.

“Long enough,” I said.

Tugging my hand free, I peered around a corner, jerking my head back when I saw the staff member who was scurrying away from us in the next hall.

“No wonder you seemed so severe when we first met,” Brennan said.

“I’m not that man anymore,” I said.

I counted my breaths, giving the staff member plenty of time to leave the corridor beyond.

“Besides, my home was never this place,” I added. “It was just somewhere ‘ribi and I lived.”

Enough time had passed. Probably.

Glancing around the corner, I slid into the hall on encountering the emptiness that I’d expected to find there.

“Still,” Brennan said behind me. “I understand. Finally.”

I was in the middle of forming a response when several people wearing bubbles, nearly obscured by their uniforms’ high collar, barreled into view. Drawing my pistol without thought, I aimed at the man leading the charge, but something in me refused to squeeze the trigger.

For once, something that Hiyuki considered a weakness served me. The group of royal guardsmen, sprinting toward me and my companions, fanned out in preparation for a fight, as they’d been taught, but before violence could tighten its grip on either group, their leader shouted for peace. With a wry grin, I holstered my weapon.

“We meet again,” I called.

In creeping steps, Ryoko left the safety of his comrades’ presence, advancing on me, but once he’d come close enough to recognize who I was, he dropped to one knee before bowing his head. Behind him, the other royal guardsmen hesitantly followed their commander’s lead.

“Most blessed,” Ryoko said, “please say you’re here to help.”

Clicking my tongue, I yanked the commander to his feet.

“I’m not your emperor. That honor lies with another,” I said, “but yes, I’m here to help however I can.”

Stepping back with a frown, Ryoko said. “I’m... confused. You bear the mark. Sure, you’re older than most emperors who are chosen, but... doesn’t the fire in your eyes alone make you the ruler of Hiyuki?”

“Yes, it does,” Zhao started.

Cutting him off, I said, "I'm merely an assistant in these troubled times. Another person bears the mark, one who truly carries earth and fire's favor. I can lead you to her, if you want."

Ryoko's face crumpled further into bewilderment, but before he could speak, the world once more shook, a rumble that had the palace creaking. The people in the hall braced while the floor's sway and shift nearly toppled us all, and when calm had fallen once more, I clenched my jaw.

That had been more intense than the last one. I needed to reach the Gateway. Now.

"Well?" I snapped. "Will you get out of the way or fight us?"

Ryoko, breathless after experiencing the earth's anger, cautiously pushed off the wall he'd been leaning on.

"How about we follow you instead?" he said. "Without an emperor's guidance, the royal guard has split. Several of us have switched loyalty to the guilds, and those bastards, idiots all, want every trace of imperial power, including the Gateway, destroyed. The order came down this morning, so that's where we were headed. To defend it."

Just... fabulous. Like we'd needed more complications.

"We would welcome your help, commander," I said. "Maybe with it, we can avoid skulking about the palace."

"Our honor to serve, most blessed," Ryoko said.

I bit back my protest while with a bow, the commander gestured to his subordinates. They surrounded me and my companions while I released a silent sigh.

I didn't need more pseudo-subjects, but if they got me to my goal more quickly, I'd endure their misguided devotion. Besides, their protection would let me focus on more important matters, ones that I'd been putting off while I still could.

You know what I want? I breathed into the depths of my mind.

We can gather the general idea of it, Growth said. Further detail is hard to understand at this level of consciousness.

Why should we grant you this favor, flesh bag? Decay said. *It comes close to breaking the terms of our agreement, a risk I'm not sure we should take.*

Do it, and I can guarantee your freedom today. Refuse, and I doubt you'll get another chance, I said, gritting my teeth. *This isn't something I can do on my own. I need your help, so come on. Read me to the fullest, assholes.*

Silence bounced in my head for so long that I wanted to scream. If I did, it might relieve the throb that was pushing my brain against my skull, but I held my metaphorical tongue until the aspects of

Lumin and Calig deigned to once more speak with my mortal self.

For us to have full access to your being, we need you unconscious, Decay eventually said.

Of course you do.

When I pulled up short, the royal guard and Zhao stopped at nearly the same time, but Brennan almost ran into me. Twisting, she avoided knocking me down, falling into the man at her side instead, and jerking free of the stranger's hold, she eyed me with everything about her bristling.

"What-?"

"I need someone to knock me out cold," I interrupted.

"What?"

Both Brennan and Zhao grabbed my arms.

"Ko, why would you ask for that?" the old man asked. *"We've almost reached the Gateway, like you wanted."*

"K-" Brennan started.

I couldn't hear what she'd say to dissuade me. Having already hooked Ryoko's gaze, I lifted my chin.

"Payback for my last gift as your commander? We can call it an order, if you like," I said. "One free shot at me. I know you've always wanted it."

An uncertain grin quirked Ryoko's face, but still, he pushed through Zhao and Brennan, ignoring the protests that rose from them.

"As you say, most blessed," he murmured.

His fist flew for my face-

"Ah. I see his plan."

"Yes."

"What? No deriding comments for it, moron?"

"Those of us who belong to my whole would never demean this. It is strength, something that we highly value."

"My whole would also find parts of his plan admirable."

"...Are you saying that we've found a source of common ground between us?"

A hush fell, diving deeper than the limits a puny human's mind could follow. It plummeted into the bedrock of reality itself, and then, rolling laughter shook it loose.

"Impossible. You really must be an idiot to suggest such a thing."

"Or maybe my thinking's more flexible than yours, stick in the mud."

"Unruly miscreant."

"Self-righteous guardian."

"Stop! We should make a decision about this before the silly spy wakes him up. Do we give him what he wants?"

"Do we have a choice?"

"...I hate it when mortals best us."

"I rather like- no. You know what? For once, I won't distract us. Let's do as he's asked, mine mortal enemy."

"After you, oh adversary most high."

The stinging in my cheek couldn't compare to the pounding in my head, but that was what dragged me back to the waking world.

With a weak groan, I batted at the hands slapping me, lifting myself off of textured metal. After taking a few deep breaths, I fought a pain that was threatening to return me to oblivion and opened my eyes.

They lit this dark hallway as if Hiyuki's misted sun was floating overhead. Thank earth and fire. My invested plunge into danger had paid off.

"Most blessed?" someone much loved said. "Are you-?"

"Fine!" I snapped. "I'll tell you if I'm not, damnit! Stop asking!"

In front of me, Zhao came into focus with his face closed off, and I grimaced.

"I'm sorry, *maiyaru*. Growth and Decay just spoke to me," I said, "but that's no excuse for my behavior. I can only beg for your forgiveness."

"You don't ever need to ask for that from me," Zhao said.

He and Brennan helped me up. All the while, she squeezed my hand, keeping hold of it, and once I was on my feet, I nodded at Ryoko.

"Nice punch," I said.

“Thank you, most blessed.”

Earth and fire, was this how Nokoribi had felt, receiving everyone’s deference all the time? No wonder he’d insisted that I stop it at times.

“Shall we continue?” I asked.

Without any further distractions, I was aware of every excruciating step left before we could reach our goal.

Would we arrive in time? We’d taken so long to reach the palace. Sure, Himi might have run into trouble while looking for the Gateway, and powering it took time, spent waiting for the steamworks to produce the energy necessary, but too long had passed since the girl had left Zhao’s home. She could have already gone through the Gateway.

As my growing group and I entered the garden, though, my worries took a momentary break. This place had served as Nokoribi’s only sanctuary while in the palace, but something new had joined the serenity I’d always found on setting foot here.

Life was burning around me.

On the way here, I’d felt intense bursts of it from nearby people, but this was a deluge of smaller sparks at every point of the compass, both above and below, coming from the roots and trees and flowers.

And all of it was waiting, poised on a tightrope. On one side lay the impetus to bud and build. To grow. On the other rested diminishment and a return to the earth. Decay.

Right now, however, all I could sense was potential, something I could tip one way or the other, if only I could touch it.

Since I’d spoken with Growth and Decay, I now could, of course, but I didn’t know how long that ability would last once I’d started using it. Such a finite amount of Growth and Decay’s threads lay in me. So, as I stepped into the garden, I might experience everything that Nokoribi had felt in this place, so long ago, but sickly flowers didn’t turn toward me, and withering leaves didn’t swell with life.

“You said that those loyal to the guilds mean to come here?” I asked Ryoko.

Stepping out from his brothers, the royal guard’s commander bowed his head.

“Yes, most blessed. I’m surprised they’re not here yet,” he said.

“But they aren’t, thank earth and fire,” I said. “When they arrive, how long can you and your people hold them?”

Stiffening, Ryoko said, “As long as you require, most blessed.”

And *damnit*, if I didn't want to smack the shit out of him.

"Don't do that," I said instead. "I need an accurate estimate for how long I'll have, so give me an honest answer, commander."

Curling his fingers into fists, Ryoko peered up at me from his slight bow.

"I can't do that," he said. "I don't know how many of my subordinates have defected to our enemy. I don't know how many of them the guilds will send here or the capabilities of those they'll send. I *don't know* how long your guard can stand against them."

Pausing, he took a deep breath before forcing himself forward.

"My weakness has caused this break in our ranks, a conflict that never should have happened," he said. "If we survive this, I'll give myself over to the embrace of earth's blood, if that's what you desire, but until it's over, let me prove my worth to you, oh most blessed of earth and fire."

I bit the inside of my lip to keep from shaking my head. Was this how I'd acted before Nokoribi's death had uprooted my life? What foolishness.

Resting a hand on Ryoko's shoulder, I ducked to meet his eyes.

"You did everything you could in an impossible situation and came out of it with many of your subordinates loyal to you. Not only that but despite the hardships you've faced, you've kept to your vows, Ryoko," I said. "That isn't weakness. It's strength. In only a few days, you've shown more strength than I ever did as your commander. I forbid you from depriving Hiyuki of someone who holds such worth."

Straightening, I folded my arms behind my back, ignoring the wide-eyed confusion of the people around me. Hopefully, while under Himi's reign, they'd adapt and learn the lessons that I had over the last few days, but it was too much to ask for that now.

"I need the garden secure for as long as you can make it so, commander," I said, "but no one is to needlessly waste their life. Once this is over, the empress will need every ally, every supporter, and every source of strength that she can get."

Frowning, Ryoko bowed.

"If that's your will, it shall be done," he said.

"It is."

Those words passed through my lips, and the group of royal guardsmen snapped upright, spreading out to cover the garden's entrances. With another problem removed from my rapidly shrinking list, I turned to press into the trees around me, only for Zhao to bring me up short.

"That was well done," he said.

“Thank you.”

Why was he blocking my way?

“I’d like to stay with them,” Zhao said. “As you said, your Ryoko has performed admirably over these last few days, but I’d still like to oversee his work. Do I have your leave, most blessed?”

Oh. Oh, no. I wasn’t ready...

Fighting a burn in my throat and eyes, I dipped my head to Zhao.

“You have my leave,” I said.

With a sharp nod, Zhao strode toward Ryoko, brushing shoulders with me as he passed.

“Thank you, *maiyaru*,” I whispered.

“Make me proud, *ko*.”

As he walked away, I snapped my eyes closed, I dove into the dearth of life in front of me, ever perching above a fatal withering. For some reason, I found comfort in that.

Life, most precious, most *loved*, always existed in death’s shadow. This fight that my *maiyaru* would enter? It wasn’t any different, just a little more dangerous, and if anyone could handle danger, it was Zhao.

“He’ll be fine.”

Brennan wrapped her arm around mine, and when I pried my eyes open to suck in another glorious glimpse of her, she smiled.

“Shall we rescue Himi?” she asked.

“Yes, let’s.”

Arm in arm, we hurried through the garden that Nokoribi had created, and with every step, I fell deeper into the wonder of this power I’d gained. Every time I’d walked down this path with my friend in the past, *this* had been waiting behind a layer of reality, one that was only peeled back for a select few.

So much life flared here that I found it difficult to focus on only one piece, but Brennan made that struggle infinitely easier. She burned so brilliantly that I *had* to reach out solely to her.

Perhaps that was the purpose of an emperor’s bodyguard: to serve as a focus. Because after experiencing the world as Nokoribi had, I knew that my friend had never really needed my protection.

He would have felt every spark of life as it had come closer, could have called to the decay hosted in any hostile. But only if he'd had someone to focus him away from the distractions around him.

If that was all I'd been, I didn't mind. It didn't matter that Nokoribi had never needed my ceaseless work. I'd helped my friend in a way I could never have comprehended, and in turn, my friend had served the empire and created *this*.

Sure, the garden's sparks of life must have originally come from somewhere else, but all of them, Nokoribi had grown to what they were now. Every blade of grass. Every flower petal.

Most importantly, though, he'd nurtured *her*, a girl who'd been so carefree that it had lightened the heart of a terribly broken man. A girl who chatted with pieces of gods as if they were comrades. A girl who'd been so lost, so damaged, that it had stopped me from taking my revenge on her, and how glad was I that she had?

She'd drawn me here, far off of the garden's paths to an enormous tree, and magic had parted its trunk to reveal the Gateway within it.

Himi had powered that awful thing up. A circle of loose wires, wide enough to accommodate a human, floated a handsbreadth above a smooth, wooden floor. Barbs jutted from these wires like spiked teeth, but in the air that this conglomeration circled, nothing seemed different. The inside of a tree's trunk filled a wiry frame.

I'd always found the Gateway unnerving, not least because when it wasn't powered on, its wires formed a tangled mess on the floor. Those same wires undulated while making the Gateway's frame.

Without someone knowing differently, it looked like an unearthly portal to Katanti, and how many times had I watched Nokoribi step through it, disappearing as he'd done so?

Himi was standing in front of this with her slack hands at her sides, which meant Brennan and I had made it just in time. Now, we needed to persuade the girl to back away from danger.

Before either of us could speak, the earth again decided to pitch a fit. The world shuddered with the ground rippling in tiny waves, and a rumble, mixed with the groaning trees and screeching metal, assaulted the ear.

Except at the Gateway.

Here, the tree that engulfed us granted an eerie quiet. There was no movement to topple us and no shaking to jar the eye. Even still, Himi stiffened, tilting forward as if to take a step.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Stumbling, Himi almost fell through the Gateway, but she caught herself at the last minute, spinning toward us. I bit my lip on seeing the smears of kohl and rubbed-raw red around her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” she cried. “You shouldn’t- I need to-”

She glanced over her shoulder at the Gateway, and I covered the distance between us to wrap my arms around her. Screaming, she fought to escape, and I endured her kicking and elbows to the face with gritted teeth.

“Stop, Himi!” I shouted. “You’re right! Someone needs to commune with the earth and quickly. We just want to talk first.”

As Himi calmed down, the earth echoed her. The rumble outside of our refuge faded, and she drooped in my arms.

“Only a talk?” she whispered.

“Only a talk,” I murmured in her ear.

I released her in increments, sliding one hand down her arm until our fingers were intertwined. Leading her toward the opening in the tree, I arranged her beside Brennan, leaning her against the trunk.

“What do you want to talk about?” Himi dully asked. “Shall we speak about how I’m a murderer of the worst kind? How I can never redeem myself?”

Brennan opened her mouth to speak, but I overrode her.

“I want to talk about strength,” I said.

Whipping her head toward me, Brennan hissed, “Strength? Really? We’re back to this.”

Ignoring her tore at me, but I did it to focus on Himi, the only person who might understand.

“When your father died, he left you with words,” I said. “He did the same for me. ‘Find the truth,’ he said, and I believe with all my heart that he meant the truth about what strength means.”

Himi, having blanched at the mention of Nokoribi, pressed herself into the tree. She'd done it so hard that it was the only thing keeping her upright, and glancing at her, Brennan clicked her tongue.

“How is this helping, K?” she asked.

But I merely watched Himi until she licked her lips.

“You’ve found this truth,” she said. “So? What is strength?”

And by earth and fire, if that wasn’t a question that had defined my life. For years, I’d thought I’d known the answer. Now, I wasn’t sure if the conclusion I’d reached was the truth, but I’d speak it regardless.

“Showing strength is different for each of us. After all, we each have our own problems to fight, and I believe the purest definition of strength is found in the people who face these struggles, despite their fear. People who might, in time, overcome them,” I said. “For you, strength is presenting a cheerful face to the world, despite how badly you’re hurting inside. You live your life the way you want, in spite of everything that’s tried to shatter you.”

“What are you talking about?” Himi snapped. “I’m not strong. *Gidae*... I killed my *father!*”

“And yet, you haven’t bowed beneath the pressure of that terrible mistake,” I said. “You came here, looking to heal the harm you caused, no matter how much you weren’t to blame for it. You meant to carry a responsibility that you should never have been given, and let me tell you, Himi. As someone who knew him well, I can say with certainty that your *gidae* would have been proud of you for that alone.”

Himi’s breath caught, and like a fountain, sobs started burbling from her. She slid to the floor, sprawling against the tree’s trunk.

“Fantastic. Now, she’ll be useless while we’re fleeing,” Brennan said. “Help me get her on her feet-”

“Your strength is found in how you support those who don’t deserve it, Bren. You help people, even knowing that they’re likely to scar your soul in the process,” I said. “Without you, I’d have drowned in my anger and grief. You saved me.”

Brennan froze, and with a grim smile, I watched sickening suspicion spread its fingers through her.

“What are you doing?” she breathed.

With a shrug, I spread my arms, presenting her with my palms.

“As for my strength, I’m not quite sure what it is,” I said. “Perhaps it’s loyalty to the people I love or stubbornness in the face of impossible odds. Perhaps it’s how picky I am about the people I’ll sacrifice for my world. How much I’m willing to give for that same cause. I don’t know.”

Brennan reached for her satchel, but before she could touch it, I grabbed the life around me, tipping it into growth. Tendrils, which had been creeping toward her for quite some time, sprang forth, wrapping Brennan in a wooden cocoon.

Meanwhile, the trunk’s surface near Himi reached hungry arms around her, enfolding her before she could lay a finger on it. Without the focus of touch, she could never hope to wither her prison to the point of freedom. Not in time at least.

Both ladies bucked for their escape, and when they realized how trapped they were, they snapped their heads to me. One’s eyes filled with growing fear while the other’s showed only confusion.

“What are you doing?” Brennan repeated with a waver in her voice.

As a frown cleared from her lips and brow, Himi gasped.

“Are you why I can’t hear Them?” she asked. “I thought Their silence was because of the Gateway’s interference but...”

“We made a bargain, of sorts,” I finished for her. “I’ll commune with the earth, freeing Them in the process, and you’ll never have to do the same, gaining limited freedom from Them as well.”

“Ah.”

Himi jerked her head in a nod.

“That makes sense, I suppose,” she said. “If They’ve given you all of Their threads, I couldn’t hear-”

“They haven’t,” I said. “It’s like you said earlier, Himi. With the totality of Growth and Decay in me, Their prison would never let me free Them. So, I only have the threads I’ll need to accomplish my task right now.”

“But...” Himi whispered. “Without Their full power to protect you, you’ll...”

Blood drained from her face so quickly that I thought she might faint, and silence fell, one that was oppressive in its weight. Somewhere far distant from us, steel clashed together with shouts rising above it. The royal guard had begun its fight, which meant I should finish this. Quickly.

But I couldn’t move.

“Not again.”

Brennan’s eyes, bright and vicious, bit into me.

“I’ve had someone die for ‘my own good’ before,” she said. “I won’t let it happen again.”

At that, something snapped in me.

Taking a step toward Brennan, I roared, *“It’s not for you!”*

At her flinch, though, the snapped piece in me was repaired, and I sighed, striding forward to hover my hands on either side of her face.

“It’s for my best friend’s daughter,” I said, “but mostly, it’s for Hiyuki. My home. I’m sorry I couldn’t find another one with you.”

Before she could speak, I took hold of her head, imprinting a kiss on her forehead.

“I’ll love you forever,” I murmured against her skin.

I took a step back, and my heart, tethered to her, lurched to escape its flesh and bone prison.

“I’ll see you where we met, Bren.”

Spinning away from her, I raced for the Gateway. Behind me, Himi and Brennan cried protests and pleas. I pretended I couldn’t hear them. I focused only on the spark of life inside of me and my need for a device that I’d recently seen below the earth.

At those prompts, both an aspect of Lumin and the restless energy, ever inside of me, responded. A thin strip of metal encircled my finger while a sheen of fuzzy blue obscured my vision, and something wet spread across every surface of my skin.

And the Gateway loomed in front of me.

Only as I lifted a foot to cross its wires did I drop my self-imposed deafness.

“Please! I love you too!” Brenna sobbed. *“Don’t go!”*

Then, I left Nokoribi’s garden and... her behind.

Revision #1

Created 26 December 2024 22:40:12 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:48:39 by FatalisticFable