

Chapter Twenty-Four

In our room, Brennan threw her satchel over her shoulder, crossing her arms as she watched me gather my weapons. Was that bag all she'd need when heading into a probable battle?

"I'm sorry," I said.

Looking away from me, Brennan said, "For what?"

"For not telling you about the voices," I said. "I never should have kept any of it from you."

Brennan sighed.

"It's fine, K," she said. "I understand why you kept it to yourself."

Finished with arming, I took hold of her elbows.

"But do you, really?" I asked. "If we can't catch up with Himi, which—let's be honest—we won't, we're heading into danger. I don't want to have this conflict lying between us when that happens."

"No, I get it! I'm not mad. I promise," Brennan said. "Although... earlier, when I was trying to get us away from Hiyuki, you seemed... more reluctant than I thought you'd be, and it reminded me of something that happened a few years ago..."

Turning to me, she bit her lip with her eyes crinkling.

"So, I have to ask, K. Are you planning on doing something stupid?"

Fortunately, the door slammed open at that moment with Zhao striding inside to open his safe, giving me time to think. After retrieving a few weapons, he closed it, looking up at us.

"What?" he snapped. "If we're planning on catching that crazy girl, we need to leave now."

He swept out of the room, but before I could follow him, Brennan pinched my arm.

"Promise me you'll think hard before doing anything that might have serious consequences," she said.

Oh, earth and fire. I- I couldn't-

"Bren... I-"

"*Promise me,*" Brennan growled.

Wilting, I nodded, and taking my hand, Brennan kissed its palm before leading me out of our room.

“What’s the plan?” Zhao asked when we joined him. “Shall we try catching her before she reaches her goal?”

Damn, he’d sounded angry.

“That’s unlikely to succeed, don’t you think?” I said.

“Yes,” Zhao grumbled, “and honestly, I hope we don’t succeed with any of this.”

I could always use my *maiylaru’s* blade, no matter how much Zhao claimed his skills had dulled over the years, but putting up with his radiated disapproval over the next few hours might not be worth it.

As if reading my thoughts, Zhao said, “If this is your chosen course of action, most blessed, then I’ll follow it, no matter how foolish I think it is.”

“Oh hush, Zhao. We know how much you dislike Himi, although you’d think that would have changed, now that you know who she is,” Brennan snapped. “K, if we’re not planning to catch the silly girl on her way to the Gateway, I’m guessing we’ll intercept her there. So, where is it?”

Wincing, Zhao and I exchanged a glance.

“The palace,” he said.

Closing her eyes, Brennan made a face.

“Ok, then. How are we getting inside this time?” she asked. “Our last entry point’s no longer viable.”

“And the royal guard will be watching all of Nokoribi’s old bolt holes now,” Zhao added.

They looked to me for an answer, and I somehow stopped myself from grimacing. I knew that at least Zhao wouldn’t like what I had to say.

“We use the steamworks,” I said.

Over the last few days, I’d considered using that path as a means of ingress to the palace, all while hoping to never need it. Using it would be, after all, a last resort, but it seemed we’d entered that territory now.

“The steamworks. Of course,” Zhao blankly repeated. “That explains why you have *that* thing. I thought you were done with them.”

He pointed at the mask I was loosely holding.

“I didn’t think the steam rats would take kindly to this,” I said, waving at my face.

“This is a bad idea,” Zhao said.

Sighing, I said, “I know.”

“A *supremely* bad idea.”

“*Maiyaru*, I know,” I said, “but it’s the only one I have, and we can’t stand here, arguing about it. We need to go.”

Groaning, Zhao started double-checking his weapons, probably making sure he was properly outfitted for our new destination. Thank earth and fire that Brennan had decided not to protest the plan.

“I suppose today’s as good a day as any to die,” Zhao said under his breath.

I paused in reaching for the door with a wavering laugh shooting out of my mouth.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I said.

The trip to the closest steamworks hub didn’t take long. Zhao might not live close enough to one for easy access to its provided electricity, but still, it wasn’t a far trek.

I unlocked the hub’s access ladder with relative ease, standing back to allow Zhao the honor of being the first down the hole, but I stopped Brennan before she could follow.

“Earth’s blood isn’t the only danger we’ll find in the steamworks,’ I said. “If you can help it, Bren, don’t interact with anyone we run into down there.”

Cocking her head, Brennan said, “You know I’ve been in your steamworks before, right? When I first arrived in Hiyuki?”

“And how many people did you see there before you reached the surface?” I asked.

Brennan’s expression grew troubled.

“None,” she said.

“Exactly. It’s probably why you survived.”

I gestured for her to enter the hole before me, and once she had, I donned my mask before mounting the ladder.

Descending it brought back so many memories I’d rather forget. The dread that had come after a once-a-month visit to the surface. The determination to escape from my keepers in the brothel. The fear of missing a rung and slipping. The numbness found in what I’d thought would be my final escape.

The climb down seemed to last forever this time, a steady descent into the earth's depths. Into Takanai's underbelly.

I'd forgotten what it was like. How the narrow shaft's walls seemed to breathe and draw ever closer to crushing you, or how the burn in your arms and calves signaled the halfway point.

I hoped Brennan wasn't too unnerved by the experience. She'd seemed fine while we'd been in Nokoribi's bolt hole, but this descent would take us deeper even than that. It had to if we were to reach the source of the steamworks' power.

A steady glow began lighting the patches between the shaft's sporadic gas lamps, and when I noticed this, my mood brightened as well.

I'd hoped that this ladder would lead to an active earth's blood channel. Finding one in the steamworks' many abandoned paths would have been both time-consuming and potentially hazardous. Those dark tunnels were a favorite ambush site, ones that were only avoided with experience and care.

After springing off of a final rung, I massaged my arms while checking on Brennan's state. She seemed unphased by the climb down, although sweat had soaked her clothes, making her skin glisten.

I was sure I looked much the same. Heat was oppressive in the steamworks, but what else should one expect when in such close proximity to earth's blood?

"Oi, fresh meat in the spiff getup! Ya new foreman here."

A beefy man, rippling with muscles, was sauntering toward us, scanning each of us in turn with coal eyes.

"Gah! Slim pickins I'm given. Uh, geezer, uh biddy, 'nd uh-"

When he saw me, he cut off with his eyes widening, not that I could blame him. While Zhao had secreted his weapons in various hiding spots across his body, I'd openly displayed mine.

This combination was the best one to use when entering the steamworks: one person to ward away anyone who was looking for trouble and another to serve as a surprise for those who risked making trouble anyway. That, plus my mask, led to only one conclusion for a knowledgeable steam rat.

"Ya not fresh meant," the foreman said.

"Give ta man uh prize, ma friends," I said. "Smarta than he looks, this one."

Slipping back into steam rat slang had come easier than I'd expected, like pulling on old shoes. The rush of nostalgia that accompanied it surprised me, though. Why would I miss anything about this place?

In front of me, the foreman had turned to stone with his fingers twitching.

“Wot’s ya biznis?” he stiffly asked.

“Ya guild chair got offed,” I said, as if that would explain everything.

“Ai,” the foreman said with a nod, “but let it stahp the engine? Not us. Work ‘til we drop, us rats.”

“I remember,” I whispered before switching to slang again. “Guilds want nu chair. My job ta see who best fills it. I’d like tu walk ta place, get ta rats a boss tu help them fa once.”

The foreman considered me as if unsure whether to believe what I’d said, let alone grant my request.

“Ya know ‘tis dangerous, yeah?” he asked.

With a chuckle, I said, “Steam rat me, years ago. I know ta rules.”

After one more scan of me, the foreman stepped aside, extending his hand toward the source of the glow around us.

“Me tu stahp uh guild rep?” he said. “Neva.”

Inclining my head to the foreman, I continued into the steamworks, but before completely passing the man, I asked the question that was most critical in this place.

“Source is?”

The foreman pointed, and raising my hand in thanks, I led my companions onward with them clustering around me.

“Source?” Brennan asked.

“Mt. Teisu. Getting lost is easy down here, so we use the mountain, the source of Takanai’s earth’s blood, as a reference point,” I said. “Any self-respecting steam rat should know what direction the source lies in once they reach a channel, but it’s a good idea to ask as soon as you finish your descent as well.

“Now, please, Keep your eyes open. I doubt anyone will harass us yet, but it pays to be prepared.”

As I’d said, no one bothered us as we approached the glow ahead, the only source of light beneath the earth. Plenty of steam rats stopped their work to stare as we passed, but those poor souls, nearly all of them black-eyed, quickly returned ot what they’d been doing once their fascination had faded.

Brennan did her best to remain attentive. I could tell, but several times, I caught her gawking at our surroundings.

To someone like her, this place must seem mesmerizing. The tubes running across the ceiling and floor with cables attached to them, the vats with their tapered tops, the wheels and gears. It must look like an intricate system of mysterious design.

I knew what each of them did, of course. Prepared steam traveled down the tubes, and the force of it was transformed via the pinwheels inside of them to electricity. Cables along the tubes carried that energy to Takanai above.

The vats stored water; the first step of the process having been built alongside the last. When someone opened their valves via wheels, pipes beneath these vats carried that water to converters that were hovering over the earth's blood channels.

All known. All handled or repaired by me when I'd worked here and therefore, boring.

When we reached the channel, I stopped short. Between the pipes, tubes, and converters, earth's blood peered at me with its sluggish flow a coy wave at its once victim, and while letting it fill my eyes and mind, I found myself torn.

On the one hand, I remembered dying in that awful substance as the hunger of it had burned through me like a flame through paper, and I wanted to turn on my heel, marching away until I reached the surface.

On the other, its deadly allure—what had first brought me to the steamworks, calling to me every year I'd worked here—still whispered my name. It was the feeling of standing on a cliff with one's toes dangling over the edge, what urged one to leap into the abyss. A kernel deep inside of me desired a second dip in the embrace of earth's blood.

I clung to this kernel, knowing I'd need it as the day progressed.

"Ko?" Zhao said beside me.

When he rested a hand on my back, I shivered.

"I'm fine," I said. "The source is that way. Since the palace rests on Mt. Teisu's slope, that's the direction we'll take for now."

I'd have to hope I could remember the steamworks' warren as well as I thought. Once we reached the mountain, too many channels would be crossing one another to determine a direction from them alone.

That was a problem for later, though.

As we followed along our current channel, I kept us at a light jog. We needed speed if we wanted to reach Himi before she did anything stupid, but if we took too fast of a pace, the steam rats would take notice.

Now, most of the people who worked in the steamworks kept their heads down, did as they were told, and caused no trouble. Unfortunately, a guild that most people wouldn't voluntarily join had its fair share of more disreputable members in its ranks as well.

These were the people who would jump you in abandoned channels, steal anything of value from you, or just beat the shit out of you for fun. Many were the 'accidents' here where one of these people had happened to be standing not a meter from where a poor soul had fallen into a channel.

I stayed on high alert for them. If it could be helped, avoiding them entirely was for the best, but usually, that wasn't possible.

We followed quite a stretch of our current channel before it crossed another one. Stopping, I met Zhao's eyes, and he groaned.

"We can't follow the new one?" he asked.

"It heads back into Takanai's heart," I said.

Glancing between us, Brennan said, "So, what? We have to cross this one?"

Obviously lost, she frowned.

"Why is that a problem? Isn't there a bridge nearby?"

Her display of innocence shoved a lump into my throat.

"Bren..." I said. "Why would steam rats need bridges when they can cross the channels on those?"

I pointed at the pipes and tubes that spanned the channel, none of which were larger in diameter than a small dinner plate, and glancing at them, Brennan quickly snapped her attention back to me, simmering with a fire that seemed as real as what was swirling in my eyes.

"Are you *kidding me*?" she spat. "How can something like this exist here? Did no one think, 'Hmm. Maybe we should implement a few safety measures in this extremely hazardous workplace'?"

"Some have tried to change practice in the past," I said, "but replacing personnel and providing patchy padding at crossing points to shield their feet from the heat is cheaper than building bridges that would need to be replaced as often as everything else here. And to the guilds, money is everything."

Screwing her face up, Brennan hissed, "That's barbaric."

There was that word again, but on this utterance, I wasn't sure I disagreed with her.

"I don't like it either," I said. "Trust me. I do not want to make a crossing like this again, but I'll do it if it gets me to Himi before she enters the Gateway."

“Would someone mind explaining why we’re doing that?” Zhao asked. “She has what she needs to commune with the earth, something that needs to happen. Soon. So, why are we trying to stop it?”

I had my reasons for that, none of which I had the time or desire to share, so...

“You said that being the emperor means keeping secrets, *majiyaru*. This is one of my secrets,” I said. “Now, give me whatever unnecessary, subservient line you feel you have to give, and make your crossing.”

I jabbed my finger toward the channel’s opposite side, and with his features souring, Zhao kept his lips sealed. With a short bow, he sprang onto a pipe before sprinting across it.

He made something that most steam rats approached with caution look easy, and once he was on the other side, he turned, crossing his arms. I responded with a bow to match the one I’d received.

“You expect me to do *that*?” Brennan squeaked.

“Probably several times, yes,” I said. “You don’t have to go as fast as Zhao, though. I’m pretty sure he was showing off.”

Sputtering, Brennan said, “I- I can’t, K. I’m not some graceful warrior. I fight dirty, as I was taught, and I’m one of *the* clumsiest people I’ve met. There has to be another way across.”

Ah, look! An opportunity to gain something I needed. Why did the idea of taking advantage of it, manipulating her like this, hurt so much?

“There isn’t, unfortunately. You could stay here if you like. No one would blame you for it, and if you wanted to wait for us, we could come back this way on our return trip,” I said. “Or maybe you have something in your magic satchel that could help. Something that could make you fly? Or perhaps something that could let you survive in earth’s blood, if you happened to fall?”

I cracked a smile at that last bit, but when Brennan gasped and started digging through her satchel’s depths, that smile fell.

“I’d forgotten about this!” she said. “Well... more I didn’t think of it in this context. I hope it still has a charge.”

With an excited yelp, she withdrew a ring from her satchel, displaying it for me.

“This should help,” she said. “During my time in Brighde, we used this in Teine to survive extended periods of time spent next to the town’s hot springs. With such an extreme difference in the temperatures between here and there, I doubt this would give me more than half a minute in lava, but that’s time I could use to reach safety.”

“Sounds great,” I faintly said.

Brenan slid the ring onto her middle finger, and a blue sheen settled over her body and bag. Numbly, I forced my lips into a smile at her expectant gaze.

“You’re exceptional in all things. You know that, right?” I said. “You’re brilliant, capable, supportive-”

“I thought you didn’t need my support,” Brennan said with a grin.

When I glared at her, she laughed, nudging me.

“You go ahead and cross, K,” she said. “I’d rather go last.”

“As you like.”

I stood on the channel’s edge, remembering all the times I’d done this before and how easy it had been then. It would be just as easy now, yes?

How had I managed it in the past?

Right. Those stupid games that Nokoribi and I used to play. This would be fun.

Grinning, I folded my arms behind my back and stepped forward.

I almost lost my personal game the second I landed. With my feet alighting off-center on the pipe, I wobbled while something crushed my throat closed. Almost, I flung my arms to either side to regain my balance, but I managed to do that without that source of help.

Glancing up, I noted Zhao’s drained demeanor, which had laughter nearly toppling me off my perch again, but once I had that under control, I started my trek across the pipe.

The point of this game was to take as much time as possible with crossing while never using your arms for balance or looking at the surface you were walking upon. While playing it, many had been the times when Nokoribi or I had teetered toward a fall only to have the other person catch us, sending us both crashing onto the tube or pipe. Many had been the teasing jabs afterward, when Nokoribi had inevitably won our game.

Earth and fire, I missed those times.

So, as I made my crossing, I did it in a slow saunter, never once pausing and with my head held high. By the time I reached the other side, the soles of my feet were burning, but even still, I took my time while making the final leap to safety.

For the briefest of moments, I tilted backward on landing, but after rocking to solid footing, I turned to face the channel, and only then did I lower my hands to my sides.

“I win, ‘ribi,” I whispered.

While Brennan unsteadily lowered herself to the pipe, Zhao came to a stop at my side.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he asked.

Cocking my head, I narrowed my eyes at Brennan. Was she *crawling* across the pipe?

“If I were trying to kill you, you’d already be dead,” I said.

“Maybe,” Zhao said, “but I was talking about your reckless behavior, *ko*. So many times, you’ve nearly given me a heart attack since coming to my home, especially today!”

“I knew what you meant,” I said.

My own heart lurched as Brennan flattened herself to the pipe, hugging it. When she shakily started forward again, that fragile organ resumed its normal beat.

“What do you have planned? I know you’re scheming something—I’ve seen that face often enough in the past—so don’t try to deny it,” Zhao said. “Just tell me if I should be worried.”

Ha!

“You don’t need to worry, *maiylaru*,” I said. “Everything will be fine in the end.”

Technically true.

“All right, then,” Zhao said before clicking his tongue. “This’ll take forever if she’s always this slow.”

“Maybe one of us should carry her at the next crossing,” I said.

“If you want me to do it, you’ll have to order it from me, most blessed,” Zhao said. “Otherwise, the job’s all yours.”

“You’ve been very choosy about when I’m your ‘emperor’, you know,” I said. “If I didn’t find the whole thing ridiculous, I might be insulted.”

Snorting, Zhao said, “You haven’t taken the throne yet. I should get in as much rebelliousness as I can now, yes?”

Rolling my eyes, I helped Brennan clamber up to a solid surface, and she collapsed onto it, gasping.

“That was awful,” she said. “I don’t know if I can do it again.”

Exchanging a glance, Zhao and I pulled Brennan to her feet.

“Great work, and don’t worry,” I said. “You’ll never have to crawl across a channel like that again.”

When we reached the next crossing a few minutes later, Brennan shrieked while I scooped her into my arms. Any struggling she initially started, though, stopped as soon as I dropped onto a tube. After that, she buried her face in my chest, whimpering until we'd reached the other side.

I didn't mind it, no matter that I felt bad for her. Having her so close felt nice, and that helped calm down my frazzled nerves.

Over the many crossings we made, I never let Zhao take responsibility for Brennan, and eventually, the frequency of them pulled her out of her curl against me. She ended up cautiously glancing around us.

Eventually, we reached a point where earth's blood channels started making a ridiculous number of connections. Here, the steamworks guild had shelled out the ration tokens needed to build bridges, if only to speed up the rate of the steam rats' work.

Not far ahead of that point lay another hub, a place where a conglomeration of pipes and channels met like a wheel's spokes. While jogging here, we'd passed a few more hubs, but this was the one I'd been looking for since we'd descended.

Or at least I thought it was.

This close to the source, the heat down here had become almost unbearable with anyone who stayed in it for more than a minute soon slathered in sweat. For that reason, the bare minimum of steam rats needed to work this hub were here. In places like this, heat exhaustion felled many a worker, and their guild didn't like paying the exorbitant fees needed to haul so much water this far in.

As we strode among them, the few steam rats manning this hub gave me and my companions odd looks, but again, ignorance of such oddities was the prevailing practice among them. Standing beneath a mess of pipes and tubes, I slowly spun in place with my eyes fixed above.

"This hub powers the palace," I said, "Which means we need to go that way.'

Into the only darkened channel that led away from here.

"Just great," Brennan said with a sigh.

I took a lantern from where they were resting against the channel's entrance, again earning us strange looks, but after lighting it, I entered a darkened maw.

Maybe it was because I was so worried about Himi and whether we'd reach her in time. Maybe other concerns had laid claim to my focus, but I, the one who'd given so many warnings about staying on our toes, was the one who led us into a trap.

The hub had long ago fallen behind us, and I'd begun wondering if I'd chosen the wrong path when a giant of a man appeared on the edge of my lantern's light, nearly making me fall while slowing down. Before I'd stopped, I'd drawn my pistol with its muzzle almost touching the big man's nose,

and behind me, I heard more weapons being drawn from sheaths.

Slowly, I backed toward my allies, and with every step I took, more steam rats ambled into the light.

“Guests for ya, boss,” the big man called.

Another steam rat, a slight woman with rust-colored eyes, entered her companions’s circle, looking us up and down with a wrinkled nose.

“Wot’re fancy toffs like ya doin’ here?” she asked.

“Wotsit matter?” I snapped back. “Outta ta way, sissa.”

The woman seemed taken aback by my use of steam rat slang, but she pressed on regardless.

“Awful purty flash hangin’ from ya to be one’a us,” she said. “No ‘ssassin either, else yu’d know tu leave ta toll way back where.”

So, this was a regular route for assassins, was it? Interesting. I hoped Zhao was taking notes.

Tilting my head, I ask, “Summun in ta palace worth ‘ssassinatin? Emperor’s dead, na? Who else ta kill?”

“Ya daft?” the woman scoffed. “All guild chairs squabbling above an’ no one worth offin’? Already two gone. More sure ta follow.”

Frowning, she crossed her arms.

“Ya haven’t answered ma question,” she said. “Wot’re you doin’ here?”

“Not tellin’,” I said. “Rob us anyway is ta plan, yeah? We fight with pieces on both sides, suma yurs’ll git shot. So. Les do this works’ style. Blades and fists. Wot ya say?”

The woman considered for a moment before shaking her head.

“Ya seem reasonable, so why fight?” she said. “Toss yur flash here, and we both walk.”

I bit back a sigh.

“Give ya wot I can,” I said. “Yu’ll have tu fight for ta rest.”

Slowly and surely, I emptied my pockets, rolling anything of value her way. To me, this ‘offering’ was nothing, maybe enough for a meal, but I remembered how much this small amount meant for a steam rat. What I was surrendering should see some of these people’s foremen paid off for the next week, keeping them off of their team’s more dangerous duties.

I could hear Zhao and Brennan following my example, tripling what I'd handed over. An amount like that might make a gang like this back off.

Their leader, however, took one look at our offering before kicking it into the darkness.

"Ya think that's 'nuf?" she shouted. "Look at ya. Spiff getup, shiny blades, a purty piece, and that mask.."

Earth and fire, I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this.

"Ya want ta mask?" I called. "Take it."

Ripping it off of my face, I tossed it at the woman's feet, and while she stared at it, I watched her gang shift with realization spreading through their ranks. When their leader looked up and saw my eyes, she shrieked, stumbling backward into the big man.

"Yur- yur-" she stuttered.

"Ta big man on ta purty chair? Ta fancy-ass fool? Oo! Ma personal favorite. Ta worthless chump," I said. "Yeah, yeah. I got ta eyes. Ya fight 'cause of it, or ya git outta ma way, sissa?"

The woman said not a word, merely flicking a switchblade into her hands, which was about what I'd expected. Hatred for the throne ran deep in the steamworks.

The rest of the gang was quick to display weapons as well, and holstering my pistol, I drew a dagger and knife.

"Try not to kill them!" I shouted.

A tongue click answered me, but then, the steam rats rushed us.

If they'd come at us one at a time, these people would have been easy opponents for me to counter. They had no training, flailing about with their weapons like amateurs.

Coming at me as a group like they had, however, was a problem.

Fortunately, my companions and I had already been standing near one another when the fight had begun, and Brennan had apparently had enough combat experience to know what she should do when fighting greater odds. With our backs to one another, the three of us kept each other free of injury, but I didn't know how long that would last, especially with Brennan refusing to use a weapon.

She punched and chopped and kicked her opponents into oblivion while every strike against her, whether armed or not, glanced off of a viscous substance, covering her body.

Not that I had much time to watch her fighting. My own struggle occupied me.

Most of the steam rats were focused on me. They piled toward me, which wouldn't have been a problem except that it gave me no room to maneuver, especially not with a weapon like a knife or dagger.

Conversely, they had to rely on items that were best suited for extremely close combat, but they, unfortunately, had these weapons in abundance. Switchblades sometimes swiped for my neck and chest, but mostly, they were jabbed at my face. Now, when I no longer wanted them gone, my eyes were in the most danger of being gouged out.

As always, time stretched when in combat, but after a drawn-out minute of fighting, I knew I wouldn't escape it without at least a wound. All the steam rats needed to do was continue crowding me, and eventually, a debilitating blow would land. I'd get overwhelmed.

Then, the channel started shaking with vibrations lurching the ground beneath my feet. With my many years of experience with fighting on easily shifting floors, I stayed on my feet, but the steam rats fell, one by one, and Brennan tripped into me. Her clinging hands nearly had me toppling as well, despite my experience.

Within a few seconds, this rumbling fell still, and even reeling as I was, I herded my companions over a pile of steam rats, ignoring how many of them were already stirring. Grabbing our miraculously intact lantern, I shoved it at Zhao before pushing him and Brennan onward.

When I glanced back, some people in the gang had untangled from the others with their leader among them. As if dazed, she stumbled forward with her hand to her head, but when she noticed me watching her, she cringed.

"Was that...?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Not me," I said. "Ta earth is angry. Tu give it rest, I go."

Snapping her mouth closed, the gang leader gave me a single nod before turning to help her companions, and I ran after Brennan and Zhao.

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