

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After striding through the Gateway, I'd thought I'd have a moment to prepare. Traveling between distant points usually takes time, after all.

That didn't happen. One second, I was standing with the people I loved in my best friend's creation, and the next, I'd stepped into Katanti.

Or a version of it, at least.

A hall stretched in front of me with pure, brilliant, blinding white light from outside bathing it. A shiny, tiled floor led deeper into the earth's heart, and a clear substance of some kind arched overhead.

It couldn't be glass. Not only was heat already blistering my skin here, even through Brennan's shield, but immense pressure was trying to crush me into the ground. Glass couldn't stand extremes like that.

I barely could.

"Shit, 'ribi is this what you went through?" I hissed.

Unable to move my jaw, I could barely maneuver my tongue to where I could spit those words from between my teeth.

Every time he visited, yes, Growth whispered.

And more besides, Decay added.

Right, the reason I was here.

I took a step down the hall, and as if to spite me, Brennan's shield failed. All of the skin I'd grown before entering this place was incinerated in a flash with heat working through what Growth's threads had spawned, and so many of my receptors for sensation got seared to nonexistence...

Never before had I suffered such agony that my brain had quit to save my sanity, but it almost happened now. I endured this long enough for another ring to manifest on my finger before slumping with my lungs desperate for air.

Earth and fire, if that had just been the start, then-

Don't waste time considering what awaits you, mortal, Growth whispered. You have little of that as it is.

Come to us, Decay breathed.

Oh, my head... and the energy inside that was dancing, jerking, protesting my motionlessness.

I should harness that.

I slid my feet along the tiles beneath them, unwilling to waste effort in fighting the pressure bearing down on me. I needed it for other tasks.

How much time do I have? I asked the depths of my mind.

One of the aspects might have answered me, but I didn't hear it over the sudden roar in my head. My body's second scorching drowned out all other input while the soles of my feet bubbled. I wasn't sure why they continued sliding along.

The absolute white surrounding me was tinged by a faint blue color, which had the energy inside gleefully bubbling, and with a gasp, I dragged my hand up until my finger came into view. Molten metal was drying beneath another ring with droplets of it drizzling to the floor.

What other remnants was I leaving behind? My feet, my body...

Brennan's shield didn't last nearly as long as I'd hoped it would.

Earth and fire, Brennan...

And Zhao. What would my *maiyaru* think-?

Four minutes, fifty-one seconds.

What? I dazedly asked.

Considering how heavily the beyond lies on you and how quickly you're burning through our threads, that's how much time you have left, Growth whispered. Better hurry.

Damn, that wasn't long. I needed to move faster. A good bit of the hallway was waiting in front of me before its path split into two up ahead.

Why on earth was there a hall here in the first place?

Containment measure-

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A silent scream gradually reduced to sobs, and I blessed the part of my mind that had kept me moving, even when my shielding had failed.

You can blame our bastard of a captor for you extended... trouble, Decay whispered. He built this prison with many safety precautions in place, that hall being one of them. If we somehow escaped our cells, the length of time needed to cross it, along with the resulting exposure to the heat and

pressure of a planet's core, would loosen our grip on the physical plane, weakened as we are. We'd return to our individual wholes.

Which is all we want now, Growth breathed.

Fascinating, I groaned. I'll have to thank Alouin when I...

Oh, why focus on trivialities like that?

Time? I asked.

Four minutes, nineteen seconds, mortal, Growth whispered.

So short... I'd thought...

It didn't matter. What did was how Growth...

Damnit, I was undergoing this trip through Katanti to help these aspects, and they were still treating me like a bug.

I have a name, you-

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Earth and fire, I couldn't keep this up. Couldn't-

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FUUUUUUCK!

What the *hell* had that been? Where was I? *Who* was I?

Kasai. You are Amari Kasai, someone... Decay whispered. Focus on me. That's it. Just listen to my voice.

I needed to do something. Something important. What was it? Why couldn't I remember?

My eternal enemy is guiding your body with their threads. So, don't worry about your task for now, Kasai, Decay said. Just keep your attention on me, and everything will be-

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The energy, the energy, the energy, the energy was buzzing inside and a sticky ooze coated an already pussy face while warm salt filled a singed-dry mouth.

Something about this wasn't right. I should fix it. How did I fix it? It had to do with purple and blue. I thought.

Why was thinking so difficult?

You're at the end of the hall, Kasai, the place you needed to reach, Decay whispered. I need you to surface to the conscious world once more. We can't do this part for you.

Why was laughter bouncing so viciously around me? It made me want to shiver, but I couldn't .
Why was that?

Have we lost him?

He's retreated FAR into the depths of his mind, Decay whispered, but-

Damn! I thought we'd finally managed to escape. Pity about the mortal. What a waste.

I WASN'T FINISHED! Decay roared. *I won't let such a magnificent display of strength end with a pathetic gasp. He can do this. I just need to find the right motivation to drag him forth.*

Good luck with that, numbskull.

Such laughing disdain! Who talked like that to someone else? Rudeness never got anyone-
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Somewhere far away, a child with scarlet eyes huddled in a ball with his arms thrown over his head, whimpering, and when a shadow fell over him, he flinched, cutting the noise off.

"It's ok, Kasai," someone said. "I won't hurt you."

The child furiously shook his head beneath the shield of his arms before clenching more tightly around himself.

"I need you to be strong for me. Can you do that? Be strong?"

Going still, the child peered above his knees. An adult was crouched opposite him with their palms resting on their knees and their head cocked.

Something was wrong with their face. It was... sagging? Skin was stretched taut over their cheekbones, giving them a skeletal appearance, and on one side, teeth were peeking from between strings of rotting tissue.

As the child watched, a dangling tooth fell out of the adult's mouth, disintegrating to dust mid-air. It left maggots crawling in its socket, and the child recoiled, falling back on his hands.

"I know. I'm not pretty to look at," the adult said., "but surely you've seen worse before."

They attempted a thin smile, and for a moment, the child was a frozen statue, but then, he flipped to his hands and knees so he could crawl forward and poke the adult's face.

After a few seconds of this, the adult rolled their eyes, plucking the child off of the ground. Resting their burden on the floor in front of them, barely within reach, they firmly pressed their hand atop the child's head to keep him from rising.

"You mortals baffle me sometimes," they muttered.

Lifting his hands, the child made squeezing motions with them, screwing his face up with the disappointment of something denied, and watching this, the adult shook their head.

“How do I get you to leave a place of peace like this?” they said. “How can I?”

As that last word emerged, they shuddered while retching noises accompanied their jaw’s hinging.

“*Damn*, I’ve been gone from the whole for too long.”

Sweeping the child into their arms, the adult settled him on a hip before pinching his waving wrists together.

“Now, Kasai, we have something we need to do together, you and I,” they said. “I’d tell you that your empire needs you to finish what you started, but in my many times of inhibiting the physical plane, I’ve found that loyalty to a nation doesn’t hold a candle to love for you mortals.

“So, tell me. Who do you most love in the world? And be honest. No one but me will remember your answer, and I promise not to tell.”

They winked, and the child frowned.

“Love,” he said.

With his face so pinched, the child almost looked like the adult he’d become, and a wide grin turned the adult’s already gruesome face unnerving.

“Yes, that’s what I said,” they whispered. “Who do you love, Kasai?”

Bouncing on his perch, the child pitter-pattered his bound hands together.

“‘ribi!’” he exclaimed.

Huffing, the adult released the child’s wrists to ruffle his hair.

“I need someone who’s still alive,” they said. “Think, Kasai. You must remember.”

Drawing his eyebrows together, the child crossed his arms. His eyes took on a faraway look, piercing through the veil of what was protecting him to the world he’d left behind.

“Br...”

“Yes, that’s it!” the adult said. “Remember her, Kasai. Remember the one who gives you the will to fight.”

The child’s lips formed an O while his bright eyes cleared, landing on the adult.

“Brennan,” he breathed.

Clutching the child to them, the adult twisted back and forth.

“Excellent! I knew you could do it! I knew-!”

The child faded into glittering smoke, dissipating until the adult was holding nothing but air. They stared at the empty crook of their arms for a moment before dropping their hands to their side.

“I need to go home.”

And the space lay empty once more.

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A name was chasing me in circles, endlessly looping until it drew near. Catching me, it wrapped its arms around my neck from behind, whispering in my ear.

“Brennan,” I gurgled.

She’d dragged me back. I was back. Where was ‘back’?

I was standing at the end of the hallway. How had I gotten here? I remembered the first few sliding steps I’d taken, trailing liquified flesh behind me, but the rest was a blank.

Never mind that. I’d reached one of my goals. Where did I go now?

Or was this it?

At my feet, a hole pierced through the tiled floor, one that I assumed led to where Hiyuki’s emperors had once performed maintenance on this prison. In front of me, the hall spit into a V with its offshoots traveling about five paces before culminating in translucent doors.

Behind these lay spherical containment cells with cots and other essentials bolted to the walls. Two people were waiting there.

On one side stood someone I could swear I’d seen before, although I didn’t know where that could have been. A cadaver walking, they lifted their hand, fluttering their fingers in a wave.

You look like hell, they said.

That was Decay, then.

Making the person in the other cell Growth. They were glowing with health, and their iridescent hair was woven and wrapped around a body that was too long and wide to be human. They tapped ridiculously long fingernails on the door with a cross expression on their face.

Do you plan on freeing us, or will you stand there, staring, until you die?

Speaking of that.

Time? I asked.

Shaking their head, Growth turned to lean their shoulder on the door.

Two minutes, forty-six seconds, Kasai, Decay murmured.

Had that been so hard?

Thank you, I said. *Now, what do I do?*

You should see a panel in front of you, Growth breathed. *Place your palms on it, and repeat, aloud, after us.*

Well. This self-imposed job just kept getting better and better.

At the junction of the hall's offshoots, the mentioned panel was hanging at waist height. Incredibly smooth, it reminded me of poured stone, if more refined and stained black.

Thank earth and fire for its low placement. I thought I could resist the pressure bearing down on me long enough to reach it.

As I lifted my hands, a glint caught my eye. A metal sheath had encased my ring-laden hand with droplets of liquid running from the source of Brennan's shield.

A sight like this should probably alarm me, and maybe it would have if the rest of my body wasn't covered in open, weeping burns. I didn't know how I was still alive. This should have...

I should be long dead.

Instead, my overworked brain raised feeble protests as I pressed my palms onto the panel, and they melted against its surface.

Gritting my teeth, I asked, *Is it supposed to do that?*

It should be fine, Growth whispered. *If you're ready?*

My tongue felt like lead, and my jaw was uncooperative at best, but still, I made myself speak.

"By the strength of my will, I declare—"

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Speak, mortal, Growth was screeching, drawing a wince from me. *Keep going! You can't-!*

MY NAME... is KASAI.

After a pause, Growth said, *Of course. My apologies. Will you please continue?*

I would have if the throbbing headache that a certain aspect had induced hadn't driven the words out of my mind.

As Growth exploded on me once more for my perceived stubbornness, I coughed a wet chuckle. I really didn't remember how to finish.

Thank earth and fire for Decay's patience.

With them leading me along, I mumbled, "-my world free of disbalance."

Great. That was done. Had it worked?

When I checked, I caught a glimpse of Growth striding through their door, still closed. Apparently, it had. Calig and Lumin's aspects were free-!

In their haste to leave, Growth jostled me in passing, and that small addition of force tumbled me to a burning floor, tearing my hands off of the panel with a squelch.

My exhausted brain found a source of strength from somewhere, shrieking at the agony of open burns further frying and bones that had been snapped. This place's ridiculous pressure must have increased the force of my impact with the floor to a ridiculous degree.

I tried to open my mouth, releasing this pent-up, tortured scream, but I couldn't. Nothing was working right: my lungs with the hitch in them, my voice box with its worn-thin strings, my throat rubbed raw, my diaphragm stunned by the fall. I could only watch as Growth burned to nothing in the hallway.

What a bitch.

It's a selfish request, but try not to blame them, Decay whispered. They're not usually so harmful, and I'm not usually so... well, kind.

Why are you still here? I groaned.

I'm here because you are, Decay murmured. Unlike my enemy, I'll honor what you've done for us. In fact, if you want it, I can offer an alternate fate than what you'll surely receive here. With your permission, I can use my threads in you to decay your brain in a nanosecond, and unlike what you'll find in this prison, you'd feel nothing before you were gone.

Oh, I wanted that. Erath and fire, an end to this pain? It sounded delicious.

Or I thought it did. Maybe I could accept the offer if a name would stop circling through my head.

Time? I asked.

Climbing to all fours, I almost passed out with black laughing at the edge of what I could see, but with a silent roar, I scared it off. For now.

One minute, fifty-two seconds, Decay murmured. What are you doing?

Isn't it obvious?

In fits and starts, I started crawling toward where the Gateway had dropped me into Katanti.

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This will never work, Decay whispered after a time spent in limbo.

I know. I have to try, I said. *Time?*

One minute, thirteen seconds.

And I'd only crossed a quarter of the distance. I wouldn't make it, but what else was I supposed to do? That name in my head demanded that I never surrender.

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Blood was flowing from my eyes and nose again, and it wouldn't be long before the energy inside stole my sight like boiling heat had between each failure of Brennan's shield. Thank earth and fire for Growth's threads, still in me, that had regrown my eyes between each of those painful bouts. I didn't know how I'd continue once I'd been rendered blind.

I don't understand why you're doing this, Decay breathed.

And the name was given voice.

"Brennan," I said.

You'd go through more of THIS for her? Decay said. *Why?*

It's not for her. It's for me, I said. *I want more time with her. I want to explore more worlds at her side, and I love her. I can't leave her alone. Time?*

Fifty-four seconds, Decay said. *Please, I understand the drive that love can give a mortal. I do, but I'm begging you to let me make this easier for you. I can't...*

They fell silent, and I wondered what could have shut them up so effectively. Such a secret would have been remarkably useful days ago.

You can't what-?

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I couldn't see.

Was my body still moving without me to guide it? I couldn't tell, couldn't feel anything beyond my magic's cost, doing to my insides what my exterior had already suffered.

Thank earth and fire for my previous two experiences with this. It left me with enough awareness for limited conversation.

Decay, why are you helping me? I mumbled. *Aren't Calig and its aspects supposed to be... I don't know. Evil? That's what I was taught, at least.*

After a pause, Decays whispered, *We are necessary. True, mortals typically don't like our effects on their worlds, but reality wouldn't run without us.*

As for why I'm helping... I like you, Kasai, and that's rare among mortals. Would you like to know how much time is left?

Oh, I muttered. Yes, that would be nice.

Twenty-nine sec-

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I needed something. What did I-?

Oh.

Time? I groaned.

Twelve seconds, Decay whispered.

How far had I gotten? Was I close enough to the Gateway yet? Could it whisk me away at the last second? I couldn't want to see the look on Bren-

I can't watch you die like this, something vastly... kind said.

The thread that had been holding me aloft dissolved, and I fell with the dust of its remains.

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