

Chapter Twenty-Three

Himi didn't seem to like how much attention we were paying her. Flinching, she drew her feet onto the bench, hugging her legs to her chest.

"I guess it's my turn now," she said into her knees. "Do you remember that sphere Sunada had? The one that played music?"

When she glanced up at me, I nodded.

"It seemed like it almost... took control of you?" I said. "Is that right?"

Because that had seemed... strange. Could an object like that control a human being?

"It's that 'something from before the birth of Hiyuki' that Asshole One mentioned before, remember?" Himi said. "I asked those two about it last night. They tried to explain it, but I didn't understand much. Too many strange words, like 'operant conditioning' and 'overriding executive control'.

"But yeah. Sunada used that... thing to control me, both yesterday and- and on the day I killed *gidae*. It implanted that murderous impulse in me, made me forget about her. It also made me forget a few of the visits that I'd had with *gidae* when I was younger, and when I smashed the damn thing, all of that came back, including... including..."

Swallowing, she met each of our eyes.

"I know how to commune with the earth now."

I couldn't move. Had I heard that right? One of the problems I'd been worrying about had a solution, and it had been handed to us so easily. How was that possible?

No. Better question.

"*How do you know?*" I asked.

Had Nokoribi shared that secret with Himi when he'd visited her, part of the knowledge that she'd lost?

Before Himi could answer my question, Brennan lifted an arm in front of her, as if shielding her.

"K. Don't you think she should share *what* she knows rather than how she knows it?" she asked. "You nearly lost this information once. Wouldn't spreading knowledge of it beyond a single person be wise? Sure, that might break tradition but..."

Shrugging, she gestured at the people gathered around the table, and I slowly let out a breath. She was right on both counts. This group had already twisted so many of Hiyuki's customs that it made my head hurt. Why not break another one now, especially when doing it made so much sense? If only for that, I could put aside my other questions for Himi, at least for now.

"Go ahead," I said. "How does one calm down a world?"

"First."

Turning to Brennan, Himi laid a hand on top of hers.

"Have you heard the tale of our empire's founding?" she asked.

Nodding, Brennan said, "Yes."

"So, you know that centuries ago, Emperor Mok and his advisor met with two of Calig and Lumin's representatives," Himi said. "Well, those representatives weren't exactly... human."

Desperately clinging to her legs once more, she met and held my gaze.

"Their followers called Them Growth and Decay."

The voices. They'd been around for *that long*? How had They gone from physical representatives, as They'd been in the stories, to powerless voices in people's heads?

"God damnit."

With a groan, Brennan collapsed, thudding her head on the table's surface.

"I should have known the fucking aspects would be involved," she said.

Frowning at her, I said, "Aspects?"

"Yeah. The many different parts of Calig and Lumin," Brennan said with her voice muffled. "Because it's not enough that reality is dependent on those two cranky forces of nature to exist. No, pieces of them have to wander around the iterations too, wreaking their own havoc."

With my mouth open, I tried to follow along with what Brennan had said. Truly, I did, but...

No. I was as lost as I had been in Alouin's pocket world.

"What-?" I started.

Shooting upright from the table, Brennan clasped her hands in front of her face.

"Look. All you need to know is that your 'Growth' and 'Decay' are pieces of Calig and Lumin that have been made manifest on our physical plane," she said. "Aspects like them rarely have the power to cross into our sphere of reality, but it happens on occasion, usually in iterations that have

been in disbalance for a while. Based on the many wars in Hiyuki's origin story, I'd say this iteration once existed in that state.

"So. What I'm saying is that centuries ago, your Emperor Mok and my Alouin met up with two god-like beings, disguising themselves as representatives for their greater 'wholes'."

After a beat of quiet, Zhao said, "That lines up with the more obscure references to the tale. Remember, *ko*?"

Nodding, I focused on keeping my breathing even.

You put pieces of a GOD in me? I shouted in my head.

And for once, the voices responded.

THREADS of gods with the focus being on how there are TWO of us, Growth grumbled. *But yes.*

Aren't you lucky? Decay chirped.

Lucky is one world for it, I growled.

Wincing, I rose from the table while lifting a finger to the others around it. After refilling drinks, I placed one in Himi's waiting hands before cupping my own.

"Fascinating as that distraction was, Bren, I don't think Himi has finished with her explanation," I said. "Care to continue?"

With her feet slipping to the floor, Himi eagerly leaned forward.

"So, the official story about this meeting involves a bunch of mystical gibberish, right?" she said. "What actually happened was a fight between these representatives and the emperor's advisor, the likes of which Hiyuki's unlikely to see again.

"In the end, though, the advisor gained the advantage, and with his strange magic, he banished Growth and Decay to a prison he'd built for Them. This drained him all the way through death's door, but he'd already done his part. It was Mok's turn.

"With magic that his advisor had given him before the meeting, he stepped through the Gateway, which is a door to Growth and Decay's prison. There, he negotiated with Them.

"He quickly established that however their talk turned out, Growth and Decay would be enjoying a long-term stay in Alouin's prison to ward off Their cohorts. Maybe more of those aspects you were mentioning, Bren? The idea was that those two would stay in place until Lumin and Calig eventually lost interest in our world.

"Mok did, however, offer Growth and Decay a compromise. In exchange for Their cooperation, They could implant threads of Themselves into a person of Their choosing. Through this person, They'd

gain a taste of the outside world, and that person would, in turn, gain the power needed to visit Growth and Decay's prison.

"For, you see, in order to contain two god-like beings, Mok's advisor had chosen to build his prison somewhere that Growth and Decay would find nearly impossible to escape. In addition, it would require a vast amount of energy to maintain. So, much like we use steam to generate electricity today, he harnessed the fire in our world's heart to power his prison, solving both of those problems."

"Holy. Shit."

Again, Brennan interrupted Himi's explanation, but from how pale she'd gone, it might be for a good reason this time.

"Are you telling me that Alouin built a prison for aspects, one where they'd be held prisoner for an indefinite length of time, in a planet's *core*?" she squeaked. "Oh, hell. Oh, *hell*. How many times have I insulted that bastard? God, look! I just did it again!"

With a gasp, she ran her fingers through her hair, all while muttering under her breath.

"Ok. Calm down. Maybe he doesn't know what his copy did in this iteration. Oh, who am I kidding? Of course he does. Not that he needed to know about that detail to know how *god damn powerful* he is. Thank all that's holy that he needs me. I- I-"

Scrabbling at Himi, she clawed her way free of the table before shooting out the door, leaving us staring after her with quizzical expressions in place.

After a moment, Himi said, "Is she ok? I didn't mean to upset her."

"She's fine. I think. She did something similar once, in the week before she brought Kasai home," Zhao said. "She called it a... panic attack, I believe."

"Maybe I should check on her," I said.

Waving at me, Zhao said, "Don't bother. She'll return soon enough, wanting to pretend it didn't happen. While we wait, we should continue with this tale. Brennan can catch up easily enough; I'm sure. So, Himi, is that what communing with the earth involves? Visiting this prison?"

I wasn't sure if ignoring Brennan's obvious distress was the right call. How many times had she been there for me when I'd had a low moment? And I was just supposed to... let this go?

But Zhao looked determined to move on. Sitting ramrod straight with his hands folded in front of him, he lifted one finger out of that bundle to tap it on the table.

"Himi?"

Rapidly blinking, the girl jerked her eyes away from the door Brennan had disappeared through.

“Umm... mostly yes,” she said. “The prison also needs regular maintenance , though, otherwise our world would become unstable.”

Seemingly recentered, she rested her elbows on the table, fixing me and Zhao with her gaze.

“I don’t think you’re getting it, though. *Gidae* told me, ‘Their freedom is the only way to free us’.”

And the pieces clicked into place.

“You think he meant freeing Growth and Decay,” I said.

Nodding, Himi said, “I do. I’ll explain that more fully in a minute, but first, I have to go on a bit of a tangent.

“A few years ago, a new movement started making waves in Takanai. They call themselves For the People, and their primary objective is to establish something they call ‘democracy’, a system where the average Hiyukian can choose their leader, over what we currently have in place. Perhaps you’ve heard of them?”

Huffing, I crossed my arms.

“I stopped quite a few of their assassins from murdering ‘ribi, so yes, I know about them,” I said.

“What do they have to do with this?”

“Their leader is one of the people who’s been blessed with a night inhabited by Growth and Decay, but unlike most people, she understood their nonsensical chatter when They visited,” Himi said. “She’s made it her personal mission to help Them, and to do that, she thought she needed to remove Their warden—the emperor—from the picture. Thank goodness those two met before anything truly disastrous could occur between them. Good on you for keeping *gidae* alive until that could happen, though, Kasai.”

Absently, I nodded my acceptance of her gratitude. This part of her explanation lined up with everything I knew. While the assassination attempts made by Free the People had never stopped over the years, they’d certainly reached their peak a while ago.

And considering everything else I’d recently learned about Nokoribi, it didn’t surprise me in the slightest to find out he’d been meeting with the mastermind of those assassins.

“Over the course of their association, *gidae* came to agree with the leader of For the People, and together, they hatched a plan,” Himi continued. “During his next communion with the earth, *gidae* would free Growth and Decay, rather than performing maintenance on Their prison, as he should.

“Unfortunately for us all, he forgot something essential that would prevent him from acting on his plan, something that would vex him for years. As Growth and Decay’s host, They’d placed threads of Themselves in him, yes? Not only was that part of Their original agreement with Mok, the only tolerable part of Their imprisonment, but to survive standing in the Assholes’ prison, he needed those threads as well. If he’d held anything less than what he had of them over the years, he’d

have been incinerated within seconds of his first communion with the earth.

“And this was a problem because despite how advanced Growth and Decay’s prison is, it has one flaw. It identifies its prisoners by detecting traces of those beings’ ‘essences’, and that includes the threads They place in Their hosts. So, while he could walk around in the prison, perform maintenance on it, and eventually leave the place after each communion, *gidae* could never hope to open the locks on Their cell doors because the prison would register it as Them trying to escape.

“It was a conundrum, one *gidae* puzzled over-”

She continued speaking, but I couldn’t hear her over the sudden ringing in my ears. I watched Himi talk, watched Zhao listen to her, and badly wished that Brennan had been here too because knowing what I did now, I needed the simple comfort of holding her hand.

After a painfully drawn-out moment, that ringing lessened, letting Himi’s voice crawl back into intelligibility.

“-Morihei,” she was saying.

Shaking my head, I said, “Sorry. Could you repeat that last part for me, please?”

“Sure!” Himi said with a grin. “I said that Morihei leads For the People. Is that so surprising?”

Chuckling, I dropped my face into my hands, rubbing my temples with my pointer fingers.

“Not at all,” I breathed.

It made perfect sense, even. No wonder she and Nokoribi had always been so friendly with one another, more so than he typically was with the people who assisted with his... nightly activities. No wonder she’d been so reluctant to help me on my path of revenge, refusing to give up Himi or her home’s location.

“See?” Himi said. “Now, like I was saying, *gidae* and Morihei came to trust one another over the years of their mutual struggle. So, when I was born, he brought me to her.”

This was enough to drag me out of lingering lethargy.

“Wait. No offense, Himi, but why would ‘ribi have had anything to do with you, especially as a baby?” I said. “That doesn’t sound like him at all.”

He’d never enjoyed being around kids and... I still hadn’t figured out why my best friend had spent so much time with Himi, a seemingly random girl living her life in a seemingly random location. Sure, she was a piece of the conspiracy he’d been investigating, and yes, he must have learned that she would be his successor soon after meeting her, but everything Himi had shared about her ‘*gidae*’ implied that their relationship had been rather more complex than one between either an emperor and his potential assassin or him and his heir.

Shrugging, Himi said, "I'm not sure either. Maybe I was one of his friends' kids? A child is a vulnerability, right? One that someone's enemies can use to threaten an emperor with. I always assumed I came from someone who was too close to the throne because of that."

That... could be it but-

"Nokoribi didn't have any friends, especially after earth and fire favored him," I said. "Well, except for me."

And I most definitely wouldn't have had the chance or inclination to procreate over the years.

In the doorway, Brennan sighed, long and loud, and I barely kept myself from slumping into the bench. She was ok...

"Oh, come on. I thought after last night..." she said before shaking her head. "Are you telling me that you, his best friend, *still* haven't figured it out?"

Stroking my hair as she passed, Brennan stopped beside Himi. I tried not to wince once she'd removed her touch.

"There's a simple reason why your friend was concerned with a seemingly random child," she said before nudging Himi. "Show him the photo, sweetie."

"Photo?" Zhao said with a wrinkled brow.

"It's a new technology, like your motorcars," Brennan snapped. "Now, hush."

Reaching into her coat, Himi withdrew a folded piece of stiff paper. She smoothed it on the tabletop before sliding it to me.

When I saw the drawing on it, my breath caught. A perfect representation of Nokoribi was staring up at me, and with a closing throat, I brushed my thumb along it.

A familiar woman was sitting beside my friend, someone I'd snuck into the palace far more often than I should have in years past, but her presence beside my friend hardly registered. I hadn't seen Nokoribi since...

"Whe-?"

Clearing my throat, I tried again.

"Where did you get this?"

"Gidae gave it to me," Himi said.

Why... would he do that?

Gently taking the photo from me, Brennan held it up beside Himi's face.

"Notice anything?" she asked.

As I darted my eyes between the photo and the girl, my frown flattened while my eyes went wide, and seeing my reaction for the realization that it was, Brennan snapped the photo closed before handing it to Himi.

"That's right," she said. "She's his daughter."

Halfway through tucking the photo back into her jacket, Himi went perfectly still, and through my steadily encroaching brain fog, I latched onto a single question. Had she meant to keep this secret from us? How- how could she-?

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Zhao growled opposite me. "That irresponsible little... I told him-"

With a huff, he took his turn with storming out of the room, but I barely noticed this. I was floating somewhere outside of my body, waiting for the next blow to land. I'd been so happy this morning, and now, I was- I was-

Enough with the personal drama, the voices boomed in my head. You know what needs to happen now. Come free us.

Enough force had lain behind those words that I crumpled to the tabletop with a groan. I heard Brennan hurrying off with a curse, but my world had become the matching, fiery gaze lying opposite me, the one whose owner had committed patricide. For someone who could commit such a heinous crime, Himi looked strangely... empty.

Brennan helped me sit up, placing a cup in my hands, and as she did the same for Himi, I sipped from my tea. What would I do with this girl? Could I still forgive her, knowing what I did now?

"That one must have been bad," Brennan said.

"It was just Growth and Decay, demanding Their freedom," I said. "Their voices rang like a discordant bell, They were speaking so loudly."

Himi still hadn't moved, not even to drink her soothing tea. Was something wrong with her?

Did I still care?

"Voices?" Brennan shrieked. "No. Wait. Growth and goddamn Decay? *That's* why you've been having those headaches lately?"

Oh... no.

"Yes," I said, turning toward her.

Before I could finish moving, though, my head shot to the side with my cheek stinging, and when I managed a glare at her, Brennan was rubbing her palm.

“I get why women do that in TV shows back home now,” she hissed, “but that’s not important. You didn’t tell me about this? Why? And for the love of God, you’d better not say it was to protect me, K. I will go ballistic on your ass.”

“Why would I protect you? You don’t need it,” I said. “No, I thought the voices were a temporary problem. Why would I bother you with something I thought was so trivial, especially when it should have lasted a few weeks at most?”

With her foot rapidly tapping, Brennan was glaring daggers at me, and I could swear that I saw steam rising over her head. Why was she upset? Did she think I couldn’t handle this alone, as I’d already done? Or was she just worried?

“Change of plans. We’re leaving now,” Brennan said. “Hiyuki can sort itself out, which it can do just fine without you, K. Maybe if we get you far enough away from this iteration, Growth and Decay will lose interest in you.”

I couldn’t let that happen, no matter how much refusing her would break my heart.

“Why the rush?” I asked. “Surely one day’s delay won’t make a difference.”

Brennan swooped to get in my face.

“The last time I was so cavalier about a situation involving Lumin and Calig’s aspects, my best friend nearly froze to death after having to eat the corpse of a man I deeply respected,” she hissed. “Yes, a day, an *hour*, makes a goddamn difference.”

Raising my hands, I waited for her to give me space.

Once she had, I said, “All right. At least let me say goodbye to Himi and Zhao.”

Maybe I could sneak away while doing that...

“Where’s Himi?” I asked, after scanning the room.

Her place at the table was empty with all traces of her gone. Had she disappeared while Brennan had claimed all of my attention?

When she shrugged, I slapped my hands to my face, rubbing it.

“Zhao!” I shouted.

At that, the old man came running.

“Most-?” he started.

“Have you seen Himi?” I interrupted before he could get that annoying title out.

“Sure,” he said. “She just walked out the door, muttering something about freedom and worthlessness.”

“And you didn’t think that you should *stop her*?” I asked.

Shrugging, Zhao said, “There seemed to be little point. No matter that she’s Nokoribi’s daughter, she still killed...”

I tuned him out the moment before Brennan growled at him. Earth and fire, Himi meant to go through the Gateway! That must have been her plan yesterday as well.

Why would she do that, though? She couldn’t free Growth and Decay, not when she was already Their host. And even without considering that, the Gateway was in the palace. She’d have to go through that hostile place again, and after yesterday, she knew how difficult getting past the royal guard would be. She’d probably die in the attempt. So, why would she try something so hopeless?

Unless the ‘worthlessness’ Zhao had mentioned her saying had been directed at herself. Why would she think-?

For the second time today, my thoughts screeched to a stop.

“She didn’t know,” I mumbled.

Of *course* she hadn’t. Here, I’d been thinking she was a horrible person for what she’d done and-

“What was that, *ko*?” Zhao asked.

Still numb, I said in monotone, “Himi didn’t know that ‘ribi was her father.”

Any argument that might have been taking place between Zhao and Brennan came to a full stop, and I met her eyes.

“We just told her that she murdered her dad,” I whispered.

With her jaw setting, Brennan rushed past Zhao, marching for the door, and I was quick to follow her.

“Where are you two going?” Zhao called after us.

“To save an innocent killer,” I shouted over my shoulder.

It took a few seconds to come, but I smiled when I heard an exasperated groan chasing me out of the kitchen and up the stairs.