

# Chapter Twenty-Two

When I eventually returned home, I stopped a frantic Zhao from making an unnecessary trip to find me before deciding that following him through his front door wasn't a good idea. Better to avoid Himi right now. She was no doubt hurting and could use the company but...

For once, I chose to be completely selfish, taking care of my own issues before tackling someone else's.

The climb to my bedroom window took almost no effort, and hanging from its sill, I finagled a thin piece of hooked steel between glass panes until its latch came undone. Climbing inside, I frowned. The creak of my bed's slats was all that warned me to duck.

Something whistled over my head, and I scurried to reach the more stable footing of the floor. A blur followed me with its fingers jabbing into my unprotected side. Whirling, I slapped that hand down and smiled on seeing a familiar form in the dark.

Brennan swung at my face, a quick one-two punch combination that I easily countered. In the faint glow of moonlight and flames, I spotted the resulting upturned corners of her mouth, and her approval warmed me. I delivered my own punch toward her chest with another fist flying for her jaw, but she stepped back, avoiding both blows.

Pressing my advantage, I continued pushing her toward the bed. Once or twice, she tried to dart around me, but I was always there to stop her, always a step faster, and having seen her move before, I knew that shouldn't be possible. It was like she *wanted* me to herd her right now.

The backs of her legs hit the side of my bed, and with a dramatized 'oops', she toppled onto it. I dove after her, pressing her into the mattress, and with no small amount of surprise, I found myself drawn forward, if not by her hands.

Our lips touched. I froze.

What was I doing?

Still, no revulsion sprang from the depths of me, although the desperate need that most people insisted came with a kiss didn't plague me either. Instead, comfort flowed through me, one that was slightly different from when I conformed my body to hers. Even still, it was just as pleasant, and I relaxed into it.

After a moment, Brennan tapped on my back, and I sprang onto my elbows.

"Oh, hell. I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what came over me-"

"It's fine, K," Brennan said with a soft laugh. "I liked it. Just went on for a bit too long."

"Oh."

And... why exactly was I having so much trouble with my words right now?

Shaking myself, I said, "Shit! I can get off of you if it's too much--"

She folded her arms around my waist, stopping me from moving.

"It's ok, and you're ok," she said. "For once, my skin's not crawling. I must have gotten comfortable enough with you for that little curse to quit."

"Still. I'll just--"

Escaping from her hold, I rolled to lie properly on the bed with Brennan crawling to rest her head on my shoulder.

After a moment, I asked, "How's Himi?"

"Not great. She's using her new quest to stave of... everything," Brennan said.

Her new quest.

"Did she give you any clues about what she means to do?" I asked.

"Not a one. She's been very quiet," Brennan said, "but we can deal with that in the morning. How was your chat with Taro?"

I'd known that question and everything it implied had been coming, but still, I didn't have an answer for it. I couldn't easily put what had happened into words, but sharing it with Brennan had been all I'd wanted to do since descending from a rooftop.

As she massaged my scalp in a soothing, repetitive manner, I gathered my thoughts, struggling to put them into order.

"It didn't fix me like I'd hoped, but looking at it now, I don't think that part of me will ever fully heal," I said. "It is, however, a part of me, one I shouldn't deny anymore, and acknowledging that has given me more peace than I've experienced in a long time. So, I guess it helped."

Brennan spread her hand on my chest, and I watched it rise and fall. Proof that I was alive.

"I'm glad to hear that," she said. "I know how hard it must have been."

Wincing, I set aside the memory of me on a roof, too caught in my pain to scream.

"It wasn't pleasant," I said, "but in the long run, I know that what I've gained from it will be worth the pain it caused."

We were quiet for a long time while yellow moonlight mixed with the fiery glow splashing over us from my eyes. Drifting in safety and warmth, I almost fell asleep, but when Brennan propped her head up on her hand, I dragged myself out of my exhaustion.

“So, K, once nameless bodyguard to a nameless emperor. Your revenge is complete,” she said. “How does it feel? And when would you like to leave this wacky iteration?”

I hadn’t considered it fully, but she was right. I’d accomplished everything I’d set out to do.

Shouldn’t this make me happier? And why hadn’t the thought occurred to me until now?

“I’m glad that a threat to the empire has been eliminated, but that’s all I feel,” I said. “I never expected revenge to cure my grief or send me over the moon with happiness. That’s just naïve but this...”

Brennan let me think, resting her chin on my chest so she could watch me with glittering eyes.

“I suppose at some point, what I sought became not so much vengeance or justice for ‘ribi but securing my home from what was threatening it,” I continued, “and yes, finishing my part of that quest gives me a sense of satisfaction, but my part was only a small piece of the whole, Himi’s quest will encompass the rest, and... I can’t leave Hiyuki until I’ve helped her reach its end.”

Shifting, Brennan asked, “Why are you so concerned about that girl? Not too long ago, you wanted to rip her limb from limb.”

How could I explain away that change? How did I justify why Himi continued to breathe while Sunada, the only reason I’d left the girl alive, was dead?

It couldn’t just be because I hoped to have her fill a role I didn’t want. That didn’t explain how much I was worrying about her now, as she dealt with a murder on her conscience, or why I, in a way, had tried to dissuade her from taking the throne earlier. So, what did?

“It’s ok if you don’t know,” Brennan said.

“No, I do. It’s simply not the most logical reason in the world,” I said, “which isn’t like me.”

Chuckling, Brennan said, “You’ve been doing a lot of things recently that I’d never have expected from the man I first met.”

“True,” I said. “Ok. Someone told me earlier today that Himi reminds me of ‘ribi and myself, and she does... or did. That cheerful demeanor that you’ve found so annoying over the last few days? It matches my friend’s temperament, and besides that, there’s just something about her...”

I didn’t know how to explain it. When I looked at Himi, something spawned a sense of familiarity. Recognition of Nokoribi.

“And someone used her in one of the worst ways possible, like me,” I said. “I understand what that’s like. The self-loathing and questioning of how you could let someone do that to you. The shame. The intense desire to repair the damage done. Her pain resonates with mine, and for some unexplainable reason, that negates the fact that she killed my friend. It makes no sense whatsoever, but when I think of Himi, the word ‘murderer’ doesn’t spring to mind. Instead, I want to protect her. I want to help her escape the pit she’s trapped in and...”

“Earth and fire, listen to me. I’m not making any sense.”

Straddling my waist, Brennan took hold of my head so I couldn’t break her gaze.

“You’re making perfect sense, Kasai,” she said. “This, looking past people’s crimes to who they truly are and *forgiving* them? That is one of the highest forms of strength, and I love you for it.”

“Then, why are you crying?” I asked.

Wiping a spattered droplet off of my cheek, I raised my finger toward her, and she laughed, rubbing her eyes.

“Because I’m happy, silly,” she said.

“This is the strangest way of expressing happiness that I’ve ever seen.”

When I rubbed my fingers together, Brennan swatted my shoulder.

“Oh, stop.”

She rolled to her former position with her head on my shoulder and her body nestled against mine.

“I understand why people back home get so obsessed with romance now,” she murmured.

Unsure what that meant, I made no reply, but Brennan didn’t seem to mind. I lay beside a woman I could touch, soaking in the most fulfilling sense of contentment that I’d experienced in my life, and quickly fell asleep.

For the first time in days, I slept without dreams while Growth and Decay ceased their yammering in my head. For the first time in days, I woke up without a mashed-to-mush brain, and my screaming didn’t Brennan out of her dreams.

Instead, she was lying in the same position as she had been last night, drooling on my shirt. Biting my lip, I somehow kept from laughing at the sight of her, watching her until my pins-and-needles arm insisted that I relieve it. Slipping it out from under her, I headed downstairs.

When I entered the kitchen, I mumbled, “Morning.”

Covering a yawn, I trudged toward the kettle and cups, only to find that tea had already been made. After pouring some, I joined Zaho at the table before lifting my cup.

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” Zhao drawled with a frown.

For a moment, he stared at me, clearly wanting to say something, and after a single, aborted attempt at it, he managed to speak up.

“You seem... different.”

“Happy, you mean? Yes. It’s been so long that happiness feels strange. I don’t know what to do with it,” I said. “Anyway, where’s Himi?”

Zhao looked like he wanted to discuss my aberrant behavior further, but fortunately, he let it go.

“She’ll be here,” he said. “When I woke her up this morning, she said something about needing our help before slamming the door in my face. I gather that she’s preparing for the day.”

“And you don’t think she might have lied to you?” I said. “She tried that tactic often enough when I was acting as her warden.”

“Forgive me, most blessed, but does it matter?” Zhao asked. “If she leaves us and gets herself proclaimed empress or killed, it’s to our advantage, and if she stays, well. That’s another chip to play in this high-stakes pechet game.”

Wincing, I lowered my cup to the tabletop.

“Too hot,” I said under my breath, “and stop it with the ‘most blessed’ thing. It’s too early in the morning.”

“As you say.”

Rolling my eyes, I scooted toward the end of the bench.

“I’ll check on Himi anyway,” I said. “Whatever you may think of her, I want her with us. So, excuse me while I make sure she hasn’t run off.”

“No need.”

After turning to the kitchen door, I ducked into a lower profile, going for my pistol, because what I’d seen there was clearly a threat. My hand, however, only encountered air—had Brennan removed my weapons while I’d been sleeping?—and the woman in the room’s threshold grinned, one that was so predatorily cold that it made me shiver.

In the next moment, however, I recognized the woman as Himi, which let me relax to a degree, but she’d changed. She’d cut her hair to fall at her jawline, shaping it into a severe hairstyle that accented her sharp features, and her typically plain shirt and loose pants had been swapped for something else.

She was wearing a coat with its paneled tails falling to the back of her knees while its collar reached for her cheeks. Keeping it closed over her shirt, a gold-embroidered belt rested at her waistline, and badges, fairly accurate copies of what soldiers in Hiyuki's army wore, capped her shoulders.

Beneath the jacket, loose pants hung from her hips, flaring over boots that had clearly once been a steam rat's, but in this context, they looked less work-appropriate and more.... fierce.

And everywhere, I saw buckles, so many that I wasn't sure what they could be securing. The ensemble might have looked ridiculous if it hadn't been on her.

Because despite her attention-garnering clothing, Himi's eyes were still what captured the breath and mind. With kohl outlining them, they were blazing—a fire that somehow chilled—with a look of detached disapproval that I'd only seen from one other person before.

They distracted me so much that for a moment, I missed the dagger she was holding. For a moment, she ran her fingers on the flat of its blade. Then, she swatted it against her palm before entering the kitchen, and as she joined us, I forced myself to stay still.

"For shame, Kasai," she said. "One should never go unarmed, not even in a safe place like this."

She slammed her dagger's point into the tabletop, meeting each of our eyes, and I licked my lips. This, the picture of Hiyukian strength standing in front of me, was exactly the sort of person I was most afraid of Himi falling toward.

When her fingers slipped off of the dagger, however, the girl spun with a giggle before resting one hand on her hip.

"What do you think?" she chirped. "Last night, I spent hours gathering the pieces and practicing the right tone. Decay helped with that. It's the first time that asshole's been useful. So? Will it work as a disguise?"

"A... disguise?" I repeated.

My mind couldn't handle the image of the bubbly girl I knew in the clothing of the severe woman I'd just met.

"Of course, silly," Himi said.

Leaning on the table, she poked my nose while popping her lips.

"If I *am* to become the empress, I should learn how to play the part," she said. "I know that question has yet to be answered, but I needed something to do last night to keep my mind off of things."

She made a face.

“So. How’d I do?”

“Uh...” I managed to say.

So eloquent but I couldn’t seem to marshal my tongue.

“Himi! You got new clothes!” Brennan exclaimed from the door.

Scampering to the girl, Brennan took her shoulder, turning her this way and that to get a better look. After a quick scan, she twirled her finger.

“Spin for me.”

After Himi had done so, Brennan gave her a sharp nod before spreading an invisible skirt in a curtsy.

“Most blessed,” she said.

“So, it looks right for the role?” Himi asked.

“Oh, most definitely,” Brennan said. “While you’re wearing that, no one will question who you are. Right?”

She glared at me.

“You do look like an empress,” I said.

So, why was my stomach sinking into the earth’s depths?

“If you lot wouldn’t mind, we have a lot to discuss this morning,” Zhao gruffly said. “So, get some tea if you want, ladies, and sit down.”

Trust the old man to keep us on track.

Brennan and Himi made themselves tea or breakfast, as was their preference, before returning to the table, and once they’d gotten settled, all of my companions swung their gazes to me.

“What?” I said. “Is something wrong?”

“No, K,” Brennan said with a smile. “Only, you’ve taken the lead on our adventure to this point. You can’t abandon ship this far into it.”

This comment shifted the focal point to her.

“Abandon... ship?” I asked.

Groaning, Brennan said, “Right. Lava world. Probably doesn’t have large enough bodies of water to warrant ships, although that raises the question of where your empire gets enough water to

survive.”

“Brennan.”

I loved how distracted she could get sometimes, but now wasn't the best time for it.

“Ah. Yes. Sorry,” Brennan said with a cough. “What I meant by the phrase was that you can't relinquish the role of leader yet, K.”

Of course I could, but I wasn't planning to. And they knew it.

Taking a long sip of my tea, I ignored the eyes on me, enjoying a last moment of peace before assuming my responsibilities again. A sigh accompanied my cup's trip back to the table's surface.

“I started all of this with the sole goal of getting revenge for 'ribi's death, but over the last few days, that goal has shifted,” I said. “As I told Bren last night, I want to see our empire stable again.

“To that end, we've already accomplished a lot by defeating the conspiracy that killed 'ribi, but we still have several problems to address. If they aren't already doing it, the guilds will soon use their newfound freedom to better their individual causes without thought to Hiyuki as a whole, and the restless earth needs someone to calm it.

“If someone takes the throne, it would resolve those issues, even if that person will have to go in blind when it comes to communing with the earth. Ultimately, that's our goal, and this morning, we'll discuss our plan to achieve it.

“So, let's start with Himi. You said you know what 'ribi meant when he said 'Their freedom is the only way to free us'. Care to explain?”

With my speech done, pressure was released from me. It, along with everyone's' gazes, turned instead to the girl among us with burning eyes.

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