

# Chapter Twenty

Because of the increased police presence I'd spawned across Takanai, making and preparing a plan to confront Sunada took several days. In that time, I got to know Himi better, more than I'd have liked to in fact. Many were the times that I regretted sparing her life, the fights to keep her in Zhao's house, and the moments of irritation at her oddities.

Many also were the moments when I could see why Nokoribi had spent so much time with her. In many ways, she resembled him.

She bounced back from negative experiences as quickly as he had, usually brushing off other people's insults as if they were nothing. Just like Nokoribi. How often had she laughed at Zhao's thinly veiled threats on her life?

She'd become a bright, spunky candle to light the boredom of our house arrest.

Because I'd decided to do as I'd been asked for once. Despite knowing that I could sneak across Takanai and back with none the wiser, I'd stayed in the house. I'd trusted Zhao and Brennan with finishing this part of my quest for revenge.

It was a strange feeling for me: trusting others. In many ways, it drove me up a wall, having me rake my fingernails into my skin from the worry it spawned.

In others, it had given me freedom. The fear of betrayal and watching for an attack at any moment had dropped from me, and without them, I'd been acting like a different person.

My companions had noticed this. Himi had made a passing comment on my lessened intensity. Zhao found the change... worrisome. Brennan loved it.

I'd spent as much time with her as I could recently. For most of the day, she was in Takanai, but at night, we stayed awake far later than we should, talking, before falling asleep in the comfort of each other's warmth.

On the second occurrence of this, Zhao had pulled me aside to again remind me of his warning, but I'd told him that I knew exactly what I was doing. If Himi became the empress, as I hoped, then what harm could come from me spending time with Brennan?

If I was meant to take the throne, though, then I'd enjoy every minute with her that I could get, knowing that it would have to end.

That decision, however, hadn't been made yet, not even now, when no one could deny that Himi had earth and fire's favor.

With our preparations finally completed, pulling on my disguise today came easier to me than sliding into the skin I'd temporarily discarded, but soon enough, I found my old mindset, the one where strength had been my highest ideal.

Climbing into it left me dazed. So much had changed since Alouin had reversed my timeline, but the biggest was that: my belief in strength.

Nokoribi had been right. Something about how Hiyuki defined the concept rang false, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what the problem was. So close to the truth that my friend had wanted me to find, I kept beating my head against the wall of this question, but the answer refused to be shaken loose. It made me want to climb the roof of Zhao's home and scream the question out over Takanai.

For now, it had me slamming my knives into hidden sheathes.

"Hey," Brennan said beside me, "this will work. We'll be fine."

Glancing at her, I forced a smile onto my lips.

"I don't doubt that," I said.

Snorting, Brennan said, "Convincing. Look, the only part of this plan that I'm concerned about is Himi. Are you sure we should bring her?"

"We've discussed this," I said. "She deserves the chance to confront the woman who used her."

It was an opportunity I was envious of, but honestly? If given that chance, would I want to take it? I wasn't sure.

"I know. I'm just--"

"Worried?" I said. "Join the club, Bren. Like you said, though, we'll be fine."

With his voice muffled from its climb up the stairs, Zhao said, "Are you two ready?"

"Almost!" Brennan shouted back.

"We should get down there before he murders Himi," I said.

"Or she drives him insane with her prattling?"

"Exactly."

We fell into a snickering fit with the last items meant for our pockets falling out of our hands, and when control reasserted itself, Brennan bit her lip. Before I could ask what was wrong, she'd stepped closer, rising onto her tiptoes. She slid her arms around my neck, resting her head where her lips could brush my ear.

"I'm glad I stayed," she whispered. "I'm glad I've gotten to know you. You're so much more than you first seem, Amari Kasai. I think I could learn to love you."

Her lips drifted from my ear to my cheek, impressing the pattern of their creases into my skin, and rocking away from me, Brennan tucked her hair behind her ears, blushing.

How I hoped I could keep her. How easy it was now to see that Zhao had been right.

Folding my arms behind my back, I leaned forward, stopping just before our noses could touch. When she startled, brown eyes met mine, a grin sparked an ache across my cheeks.

"I love you too, Brennan Adams."

She choked on a cough, and I danced out of reach of her flying hand.

"We really should join the others," I said. "Unless you have something more to say?"

"Bastard," she growled.

Snatching what she'd dropped off of the bed, Brennan stormed out of the room, and as the door swung closed behind her, I sighed. All my efforts made in reverting to who I'd been before and she'd destroyed them with a few words.

At least I'd had my revenge on her.

When I joined them, Brennan was checking Himi's disguise while the younger girl shuffled in place, grumbling under her breath. Zhao looked on with something that might have been amusement, which I found surprising. He'd been nothing but grumpy since we'd brought Himi here.

"She's fine, Bren," I said. "Haven't you noticed how many disguises she's worn on her escape attempts over the last few days?"

"And *finally*, I'll get to leave," Himi snapped. "Maybe They'll be quiet now."

I'd like that as well. Together, Himi and I had gone through enough tea over the last few days to supply a family for a week. When would I have the tolerance to go without that soothing substance, as Nokoribi once had?

And speaking of tea, where had Zhao gotten so much of it? Why did he have enough ration tokens to feed the undocumented people living under his roof? Had he simply been prepared, as he'd mentioned when Brennan and I had first arrived here? Or did he still have connections in the royal intelligence network, people who might have been providing him with what he'd given to us?

Who knew? Right now, I couldn't consider those questions. I had an uncomfortable teenager staring at me with her eyes pleading for help.

With an offered hand, I gave Himi a reason to duck out from under Brennan's inspection. She scurried to me, clinging to my arm, and I regarded the people around me.

A retired head of an intelligence network. A woman from another world. An assassin who would be an empress. And me, a failed bodyguard who should be dead.

What a strange group to save Hiyuki.

Because that was what this was now. While we'd been preparing, more disturbances of the earth had rocked the empire. Hiyuki needed someone to commune with the earth, if we wanted to keep it from cracking open beneath our feet, and this conspiracy that had murdered an emperor stood in the way of his successor taking the throne. It prevented her from doing an empress's job, which meant it needed to go.

So, we four oddballs in an already strange world would remove it. Or try to.

"Earth and fire, we're going to die," I said under my breath before raising my voice. "What are we waiting for? A bunch of fancy words? Get out the door, people."

After donning spectacles and bubbles, we strode into Hiyuki's toxic atmosphere.

As soon as the first raindrop spattered onto the hood of my oil-slicked coat, I drew it tighter around me, hurrying after Zhao. Foul weather had rolled in two days ago, a non-stop downpour of acid rain that had anyone who could afford to do it cloistered in their homes. People who had business elsewhere mostly relied on carriages or newfangled motorcars to traverse the city, but a few brave souls, like us, walked in it.

And of course, the downtrodden huddled in any form of shelter they could find, anywhere Takanai's police force would let them gather. Usually, not many places like this were available during a storm, hence the burn marks that were usually found on them.

Watching a pair of downtrodden crowd into a home's stoop with each of them doing their best to make room for the other, I wondered if what I was seeing might exemplify strength. Sure, acid rain left no lasting harm on the world—merely burn marks and minor destruction of food sources—but it *hurt*, a stinging sensation that drew a hiss from me whenever raindrops bypassed my coat.

Yet, every time a storm visited Takanai, the downtrodden worked together to shield as many of their people from it as they could. How many black-eyed parents let acid rain soak them to the bone if it meant their children got to stay dry?

"If this keeps up for much longer, I'll have to rebuild my garden," Zhao muttered.

He cast a quick, baleful glare at the sky before ducking his head once more.

"You might already have to do that," I said. "Himi and I may have covered your plants' shells when the rain started, but you know how quickly their sensitive roots can soak up this toxicity."

“Don’t remind me,” Zhao said with a groan. “The agriculture guild must be panicking, what with this and the recent death of their most prominent chairman.”

Arita. With my chin to my chest, I focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

I still didn’t know what to think about what I’d done to that man. At the time, my revenge had seemed justified, sweet even, but in the days since, I’d found my thoughts returning to the moment of his death, wondering why a layer of metaphorical grime settled over me with each instance of it.

Wondering whether I should have done something differently.

That man had deserved punishment. I would never doubt that, but his final words often rang in my head. Had my authority, my judgment, superseded the government’s, even given the circumstances?

A hand on my arm tugged me to the side, right as a police squad continued their patrol through the spot where I’d been striding. They were, as expected, out in force this afternoon, even with the rain.

With Brennan removing her grip, I turned aside while the tromp of their boots passed behind me. Once they were gone, though, Zhao smacked the back of my head.

“What was that?” he hissed. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Sorry, my mind was elsewhere,” I said. “I’m with you now, though.”

“You’d better be, *ko*, because we’re almost there.”

Zhao took off with Brennan on his heels, but before I could follow, Himi took my hand.

“Was it Them?” she asked. “I can hardly hear anything but those assholes today.”

After moving her hand to the crook of my elbow, I started after the others.

“Really?” I said. “Are They arguing again?”

Wrinkling her nose, Himi said, “Only all the time. You’re lucky. I wish I had moments of quiet like you do.”

With a lump in my throat, I patted her hand.

“You’re a strong girl, Himi.”

And at the end of this, I’d feed her to the wolves. I hadn’t yet found the courage to tell her what her burning gaze meant, if she didn’t already know it.

Could she handle everything that a life as the empress would entail? And why did I care? More importantly, why had it begun to take so much effort to continue hating this girl?

*Too much of a resemblance between her, you, and the man who once gave your life meaning,* the voice of Growth whispered.

With a wince and a faltered step, I set such concerns out of my mind. I couldn't get lost in thought. Not again.

I recognized the street we'd turned onto. I'd walked it countless times before with my friend at my side, and now, others were striding down it with me. The gut-punch of another example of Nokoribi's absence only started to fade when we turned into a yard with a familiar home waiting for us to enter.

Abandoned, the place was quickly filled with the echoes of our footfalls, ringing on its floor, and we passed empty rooms without a glance. Even Himi's chatter, diminished while we'd been outside, fell to a hush in the face of this place's lost potential. No family would ever dwell here.

Near the back, I stopped a heartbeat before Zhao, as both of us were well acquainted with this route. When he pressed an indentation hidden behind a gas lamp, something below us clunked, and a floor panel lifted from out of the ones beside it. Electric lights illuminated a staircase that dove into the earth.

Zhao, Brennan, and Himi filed into the stairwell, and once I'd descended several steps after them, I pulled a lever on the wall, which had gears lowering the raised panel back into place.

As we continued on, the length of our descent soon started to affect Himi. The girl had tensed, drawing her shoulders together, and she nervously scanned the stone walls, even knowing as she must that they wouldn't change in appearance.

Brennan seemed unphased to be surrounded by rock, which I found interesting. I'd known Zhao would be fine with how deep into the earth we were delving. Both of us had made this trip many times in the past, but I wasn't sure why Brennan was comfortable with it. Most people didn't enjoy being in such close quarters.

Maybe she'd acquired a taste for it during her travels? Or perhaps her home was made up of places like this.

Right when I'd decided to ask her about it, the staircase reached its lower landing, and the narrow corridor we'd been descending expanded into a more reasonably sized chamber. In it, several downtrodden were sprawled, waiting, and even changed as I might be, I couldn't help but bristle at the sight of them in a place that should be secure.

A woman sprang to her feet from their midst, edging toward Zhao with wary eyes fixed on me and Himi.

"We did as you asked. The passage is clear," she said. "What else would you have us do, Zhao?"

“Make sure no one sneaks up on us from behind,” Zhao said. “Other than that, take advantage of this shelter from the rain.”

Nodding, the woman was making to rejoin her companions when Himi rushed forward to seize her hands.

“Thank you,” she said. “Without you, I wouldn’t have this chance to atone. I’m in your debt. All of you.”

She flung her arms around the woman, and for a moment, the downtrodden froze before stiffly patting Himi’s back. With a laugh, the girl released her captive, soon skipping into the tunnel in front of her. The group of downtrodden watched her go with bewildered expressions in place.

“Is she the next empress?” the woman asked.

Before I could confirm her suspicions, Zhao said, “That has yet to be determined.”

He nodded toward me, and shaking my head, I ignored the eyes on me, setting off after Himi. Her voice, prattling to Growth and Decay, pulled me along, blessedly filling a silence that would otherwise have begged for Nokoribi’s sarcastic jokes. Watching Himi’s curls bouncing ahead, I decided I liked her derisive quips almost as much as I had my friend’s.

“Forgive me, ‘ribi,” I murmured.

Because no matter how quickly she’d wormed through my fading hatred, no matter how important Nokoribi might have found her, Himi had still killed him. I might have come close to forgiving her for that crime, but I didn’t know if I’d ever forget it. I certainly would never forgive myself for making comparisons between the two.

Whether Zhao would ever understand my decision to spare Himi also eluded me. Since I’d made that choice, it had lain as an unspoken point of contention between us. I felt it now, walking beside him, and I didn’t know how to resolve it.

“*Maiyaru?*” I said. “I’m sorry to have disappointed you. When it comes to Himi, I did what I thought was necessary. I wish it caused you less stress.”

Zhao glanced at me before facing forward again.

“You haven’t disappointed me, *ko*. In fact, I think you made the right decision,” he said. “I’m just having a hard time with letting go of what she did, but... I’ll get there, I think, even if it’s the hardest thing I’ve done in my life.”

That was understandable. I hadn’t found it any easier.

The first few days of my voluntary house arrest had seemed like ones spent in Katanti. It had taken all of my control to do nothing more than snap at Himi when her oddities had become overwhelming.

“Perhaps forgiveness should become part of Hiyuki’s definition of strength,” I said.

“That’s... actually not a ridiculous idea,” Zhao said. “Don’t let the concession give you a big head, though.”

“I would never,” I dryly said.

Shaking his head, Zhao said, “Your idea might not be silly, but that’s how you’re acting, yet again. Pay attention. We’re here.”

Indeed, the tunnel’s slope had leveled off with a metal sheet cutting off our passage ahead. Beside it, Brennan and Himi were curiously looking for a switch to remove that blockage. With a dry mouth, I approached them.

“Would you like to do the honors?” Zhao asked, gesturing toward the metal sheet.

No.

Still, I laid a hand on the edge of the tunnel and pushed it open, as if it were a normal door. Chuckling, Brennan strode past me with Zhao on her heels, but I couldn’t make myself step forward.

Taking my hand, Himi squeezed it, looking up at me. Pain pinched her eyes, creating wrinkles in an otherwise youthful face.

“I know,” she said. “Together?”

I nodded, and we stepped into Nokoribi’s bedroom.

Or the remnants of it, at least. Vines had been cleared from its gauzy hangings and the pillows on the floor, but one of the walls still had a hole in it. A tree with wilting leaves still stood outside of that hole, and one of its limbs was still making an arch that brushed along the ceiling until it punched through the floor.

And dried blood still formed a splotchy circle in a place that I could never forget.

“It will haunt me for the rest of my life,” Himi said. “Until the day I die, I will hate myself for what I did here.”

I had no words of comfort for her. How could I give them to this girl when I had none for myself?

“They left it the same,” I said in a raspy voice. “No one’s come to clean up. No one...”

In a daze, I strode forward, leaving Himi behind. I crouched outside the perimeter of a rust-red circle, hesitantly reaching for it.

This was all that remained of my friend. They'd have burned the body days ago, which meant that this, what I was spreading my hand over, was it. Nokoribi had left nothing else behind.

Any policy changes he'd snuck past the guilds would soon be overturned. Even his name, sacrificed for the position of emperor, would be forgotten. *He* would be forgotten.

A small hand rested beside mine on the floor.

"*Gidae...*" Himi breathed with a tremble in her voice. "Oh, *gidae*. I'm so sorry."

Without knowing why, I turned to her.

And crouching beside the blood of the one who'd been murdered, the emperor's bodyguard embraced his charge's assassin.

I held her close, rocking her. We had no more tears to spill here. We had no useless words. All we had was our pain, and it didn't matter who the person who shared it was or had been. We had to ease the hurt we saw in one another, using the oldest expression of human comfort.

It wasn't enough. It would never be enough to fix what was broken, but as I clung to Himi, something I'd clasped to myself like a father would with an endangered son gave way, and I could breathe again.

"Is this how it will be forever?" I said into Himi's hair. "Will I think I'm cured of grief, only to be overwhelmed by its unexpected attack? Does the pain ever fade?"

"It does."

Releasing Himi, I rose to match Brennan's height.

"Over time, the hurt lessens," she continued. "As for grief's return, I don't know if those will ever stop. Someone will use the same snarky tone that he did, or I'll smell something that reminds me of him, and the pain's there again, just as sharp."

She looked away, and as I wondered who she'd lost, Zhao joined us.

"I choose to see those memory flashes as a way for the lost to persist," he said. "They live on in our memories and our hearts, of course, but the pain of their absence is another of their marks, an expression of how much we loved them."

"That's incredibly insightful of you, Zhao," Brennan said.

"I try my best," he said with a shrug. "Come, *ko*. Leave this depressing site. I need your help with preparations."

"And I could use you, Himi," Brennan said. "Could you shape this tree limb so that it blocks...?"

Her words got garbled as she guided Himi toward the hole in the room.

“What do you need from me?” I asked, grateful for the distraction.

“Clear our potential battleground,” Zhao said. “You may have learned how to fight with so many tripping hazards littering the floor, but the rest of us haven’t.”

“Make the pillows vanish,” I said. “I can do that.”

Hopefully, I could do it without letting emotions take over this time.

I piled pillows in the room’s corners until the stacks threatened to topple. Then, I started heaping them on the bed.

Where Nokoribi had slept. Where so many versions of his brand of fun had taken place. Where he’d had his nightmares.

*‘ribi’s screaming, thrashing like a wild animal in his sheets. I vaguely recall Zhao mentioning something about this, but right now, I’m not that cranky man’s student. I’m a friend, here to help a boy who’s floundering in his new life.*

*At Nokoribi’s bedside, I shake his shoulder.*

*“‘ribi!” I shout.*

*He snaps his eyes open, and as they often have in recent days, the burn in them compels a flinch from me, but with his expression blank and his face slack, he doesn’t see me. When I shake him again, something wraps around my wrist, and as that snakes up my arm, I’m soon adding my scream to his.*

*It flows over my body, securing me in place, and to my horror, my cage of fibrous ropes tightens.*

*“‘ribi!” I screech.*

*The vined noose around my neck clenches, and my throat becomes a reed-thin tube, allowing barely any air through it. Panic aids my thrashing, giving it almost enough violence to snap myself free, but more ropes soon slither and mesh with what was already holding me in place.*

*“‘ribi, help!” I rasp.*

*I don’t know why that repeat of his name wakes him up, but he shoots upright, whipping his head around to take in the room. When he sees me, he unleashes the most colorful string of curses I’ve ever heard while diving forward to touch what’s holding me.*

*Just like that, I’m free, clutching at my throat. Before I’ve recovered, Nokoribi wallops my cheek with his palm.*

*“Didn’t Zhao say that you shouldn’t disturb my rest?” he shouts.*

*He’s angry, SO ANGRY, and those fiery coronas have illuminated the room in its entirety.*

*“I only wanted to help,” I wheeze.*

*Nokoribi softens, pulling me to him for a quick hug before thrusting me away again.*

*“I know, K, but you can’t help with this,” he says, “and while I’m sleeping you absolutely CANNOT try to wake me up. Not for anything.”*

If I’d possessed the full range of Growth and Decay’s powers, Brennan might be dead right now. Her attempts to hold me down, days before, would have ended with her bound in plant life. Given that, thank earth and fire that I had only a remnant of those two’s power.

“I hear them coming,” Zhao hissed from the door.

I hurriedly finished what I’d been doing before joining Himi and Brennan in their hiding place behind one of the tree’s errant branches. Soon enough, I too heard voices approaching.

“-me here? What possible reason could you have for holding a private meeting in *this room*?”

Sunada. Whereas other parts of the old skin I’d donned caused me nothing but struggle, the cold rage that this woman summoned easily came to me.

“Trust me. I have a reason. A good one. Please, I know you’re already indulging me, Sunada. Grant me this last request, and everything will be made clear.”

Taro. How I wished we could have avoided involving that man in our plans.

My conflict over the brothel guild’s chairman had yet to stop prickling my skin or invoking nausea in me, but we’d had no choice. If Zhao had made a move to draw Sunada out, the operative network would have grown suspicious, which would have had our hideout discovered soon afterward. Besides that, we’d wanted Sunada on ground of our choosing when confronting her.

Hence, using someone she trusted to draw her to it. Hence, Taro.

The guild chairs glided into the room, and where Sunada’s face was pinched with annoyance, Taro had done an admirable job with hiding the tension he must be feeling.

“All right. We’re here,” Sunada said. “Why have you-?”

Zhao closed the door behind them, standing in front of it with knives in hand, and after directing a warning glare toward Brennan and Himi, I hung my mask in place before emerging from hiding.

Himi would get her chance at confronting Sunada. I wanted to make sure this woman had no surprises on her before letting the girl join me.

And I wanted to enjoy Sunada's reaction when she realized what this was.

It was quite disappointing, actually. The guild chair's coal eyes widened a fraction when I came into view, and she glanced toward Zhao and her closest means of escape, but then, she centered her attention on Taro.

"How did you know I was leading our cabal?" she asked. "When I sent letters to the others, I left no hints about my identity."

"He told me," Zhao said, inclining his head toward Zhao. "I have no idea how he found out."

"And you'd choose the old ways over what I'm offering?" Sunada asked in a hiss. "You know my plans and how I mean to advance Hiyuki. You'd discard that to embrace subservience once more?"

Drawing himself up, Taro said, "I never stopped serving the emperor. I was his agent in your little conspiracy and Sunada! Your plan's insane! You must see this."

Sunada pursed her lips with a hum of irritation emerging from them. After several moments where she glanced between the room's occupants and the guarded door, she clicked her tongue.

"You should have moved away from me when you had the chance," she said. "That's poor tactics, Taro."

When she thrust her hand beneath her jacket, Taro stumbled away from her, and as she lifted a pistol into view—where were all these guns coming from?—I took off toward the guild chair. Even as I sprang to knock him out of the way, a distant part of me wondered why I was doing it.

I was too late anyhow. A bang rattled in the bedroom's confines, and Taro doubled over with a hand to his chest.

A lung. She'd hit a lung.

With blood oozing between his fingers, Taro crumpled to the ground, and Sunada swung the pistol toward me. I had a moment to wish for my metal-lined cape before Sunada squeezed the trigger once more.

But the pistol only clicked. A misfire.

With a feral grin, I grabbed its muzzle, yanking down on it before slamming my palm into Sunada's chest. She lurched back and with the pistol making an arch toward the door, I twisted my hold at its lowest point, applying pressure to her wrist. As soon as she released the weapon, I lifted it to drive its grip into her face, and she retreated from me, clutching her nose.

"You're not going to ask why I'm here?" I growled, tossing the gun to Zhao. "How I'm alive?"

"I know the answer to the first," Sunada snapped, "and the second doesn't matter. You're my one mistake, and of course, it's come back to bite me."

“You’ll have to forgive me for ruining your plan,” I said with a sneer. “What is it, by the by? Did you mean to condemn Hiyuki to an explosive death by fire, or was there another reason for removing the empire’s only way of controlling the earth?”

Lowering her hand, Sunada bared her bloodied teeth at me.

“Are you asking me why?” she said. *“Why did you have my emperor assassinated? Why did you ruin my life, destroy my reputation, order my execution?”*

Her voice twisted into a whine with the last question, and snarling, I pinned her to the tree branch that was invading the room, pressing my drawn knife to her throat.

“I never cared about myself,” I said. “All that mattered to me was ‘ribi.’”

Searing heat was humming in me, a horrible urge to open her neck that was only tempered by the thrumming ‘why, why, why’ in my thoughts. Himi hadn’t adequately answered that question, but then, how was a tool supposed to know the reasoning of its master?

As if oblivious to her peril, Sunada huffed, rolling her eyes.

“I suppose I can share, not that you’ll understand,” she said. “Hiyuki was dying before I did anything. Cities and towns across the empire, including Takanai, rely on the power provided by the steamworks. It sustains every industry, supports every self-contained atmosphere, and even provides the average citizens with their everyday comforts. Without the steamworks, Hiyuki can’t function, which is quite unfortunate.

“Because my guild can’t keep up with current demand. We don’t have enough the equipment needed to replace easily broken machinery or the steam rats to operate it, and most importantly, we don’t have enough earth’s blood to produce the steam we need.

“I brought our late emperor my guild’s problem, and he did what he could to help, to be sure, but that help came too slowly. All the while, the steamworks threatened to grind to a halt.

“I don’t think the emperor realized how much he was contributing to the problem, even as he strove to correct it. Making the transfer of membership writs between guilds easier saw people fleeing from the steamworks as soon as they could afford to do it, and the criminals that the emperor sent to replace them weren’t enough.

“If you’d like I could continue listing our emperor’s follies, but trust me. You’d rather if I just told you what pushed me into forming my cabal and the drastic actions we’ve taken.

“To put it simply, I needed more earth’s blood, a lot more, and every time our late emperor communed with the earth, my supply dwindled.

“So, yes. I convinced the other guild chairmen that Hiyuki no longer needs its outdated system of monarchy. I proclaimed myself the leader of an underground social movement, but all I wanted was to keep the steamworks and therefore, the empire running, even if it meant Hiyuki had to live

through a period of environmental trouble as a result.”

Rendered silent, I could only gape at Sunada. I could, in a way, understand her logic but-

“You had my best friend killed and doomed an empire to a clinging existence in a volatile world to *improve how your guild runs?*” I said. “What happens once you have enough earth’s blood, Sunada? Do you have a way to turn off the tap, now that you’ve broken the faucet off of it?”

Shrugging, Sunada said, “I told you. We’ll learn how to live in our new world, and if it becomes too hostile for life, an heir will come along soon enough, someone who the guilds can bend to their will. That someone will commune with the earth, and everything will go back to normal, if needed.”

“You idiot,” I breathed. “What if she doesn’t know how to commune with the earth? What if you killed the only person who did?”

For the first time, Sunada looked ruffled with a frown as her singular expression of self-doubt. Before she could speak, however, Zhao laid a hand on my arm.

“We have little time left,” he said. “Whatever else you need from her, take it, most blessed.”

“Most blessed?” Sunada gasped.

“Perhaps.”

Removing my mask, I gave it to Zhao before extending a hand.

“Himi?” I called. “If you have something you want to say to her, you should do it now.”

The girl came to my side, and with both of our fiery gazes turned toward a studiously blank-faced guild chairman, Himi flicked a knife from out of her sleeve.

“I’d like a moment alone with her.”

Glancing at Himi, I almost refused her. I didn’t want this girl anywhere near something that might tempt her to violence, but over the last few days, I’d learned what drove her, and unlike what I’d thought during our first meeting, it didn’t seem to be vengeance.

Himi was too flighty and cheerful to have something dark festering in her, and I knew from personal experience that she could defend herself. I didn’t need to worry about keeping her safe.

So, patting her shoulder, I said, “Don’t take too long.”

With that, I turned to Taro, hoping he was still breathing, and found Brennan kneeling over him with Zhao at her back.

“Will he live?” I asked, striding to them.

"Maybe," Brennan said. "I placed a patch over the wound, but he'll need a chest tube inserted to drain any blood that's filled his lung and-"

A tinkling melody, ringing as if from another plane of existence, interrupted her, and it took me a moment to remember why something like this should worry me.

*Save her, K.*

***PROTECT HER!***

The force of the voices' roar nearly knocked me off my feet this time, never to rise again, but instead of letting that happen, I chewed a chunk out of the wall of my cheek, flipping toward the girl I'd just left behind. All the while, a malevolent god beat on my brain as if it were a drum.

Through sparks, I saw Himi standing like a broken toy in front of Sunada. The guild chair was holding a black ball, covered in a delicate mesh, in front of her chest, and when she squeezed it, the tinkling music that was cloying at me reduced in volume.

"Keep them away from us," she said, pointing at me and my companions.

Spinning in place, Himi gestured at thin air, and interwoven plant life sprang out of the tree, forming a green barrier between us.

A wall of vines. They'd trapped me again, and again, danger was hovering on the other side.

"Not this time," I growled.

How would I get through, though?

Opposite me, Sunada murmured something, and Himi pointed toward the tunnel entrance that we'd used to get here. They started toward it with Himi withering the tangle of tree limbs she'd grown not long ago, allowing their passage.

Vaguely, I noted that Brennan was screaming. She was repeating my performance from days ago while Zhao checked his weapons, preparing for when we inevitably clashed with the royal guard.

After all, Himi had blocked us from the only viable exits from the room, trapping us, and when they showed up, the royal guard would need a moment to notice my burning eyes before they'd surrender. No matter how good they were, they were also only human.

Those events, however, lay on the periphery of my awareness. My focus had turned inward.

"A few days ago, you left threads of yourselves in me," I whispered. "Can you give me more? Enough to get through this obstacle?"

*...You understood that conversation?* the voice of Decay asked.

*Stop your idiocy, dullard. The human asked a question, the voice of Growth said. Unfortunately, mortal, we can't relinquish more than we already have, not without breaking the-*

"Rules, I know," I breathed with a wince, "but you've already cheated them, at least to a degree. Why not do more?"

*Cheated?* Growth sputtered. *I'll have you know that I-*

*We'll consider it if you run into something you can't handle on your own, Decay interrupted. For this, though, don't you have a simpler way of incinerating this barrier?*

Oh.

Massaging my forehead, I shouted, "Everyone stand back."

As Zhao and Brennan did as they'd been told, Himi stopped short on the other side of the barrier, roughly shaking her head. It took Sunada a moment, but when she realized the girl had stopped following her, she barked a command over her shoulder.

I could probably have understood her words if I'd listened more carefully, but right now, I had more pressing concerns. I needed this barrier gone, and I had a way to quickly demolish it, if only my damn magic would work.

It had to work. I *would not* watch helplessly as another person I cared for came to harm. Not again. The frustration and despair of the last time I'd stood here *would not* be mine again. I needed to reach the girl who was under my protection. Please. Another failure to protect couldn't be-

Along the ceiling, a line of swirling orange and red appeared above an ivy wall. As if suspended by the disbelief of the people viewing it, it hung there for what seemed like forever before splattering to the floor, and where it hit greenery, earth's blood ate through it, melting it as if it had never been.

In a few breaths, that seemingly insurmountable obstacle was erased.

Leaping over cooling molten earth, I raced for Himi, a girl I... cared for?

With her hackles raised, she was advancing on Sunada, who'd been stunned by my magic, and when she placed her finger on the older woman's cheek, it snapped the guild chair's attention back to her.

"You don't control me," Himi said. "You might once have, making me a killer in the process, but not anymore. I am my own."

That pose with a finger on someone's cheek, so similar to what Nokoribi had done days before, jolted me. A sense of déjà vu slammed into me so hard that my sprint nearly ended in a tumble, but Himi quickly ended that disconcerting sensation.

In a flash, she moved her hand from Sunada's face to a firm grip around the older woman's jaw, lifting her chin so that those wide, black eyes couldn't focus on her, and with her face twisting, a carefree teenager became a monster.

"Enjoy the work of your hands," she snarled.

She tightened her fingers, and a gray splotch crept out from beneath her palm, progressing into Sunada's chin and chest. Everywhere it went, flakes fell from it. Slowly, a person dissolved into ash, and Sunada's thrashing arms only quickened it while her clawing fingers only made its instigator smile.

When only a husk remained, Himi tossed the body to the side before lifting her hands in front of her eyes.

"She made me this," she whispered. "She did. I never wanted to be..."

Having become a statue, she waited for someone to move her, and I approached her with caution.

"Himi, will you look at me?" I said. "Come on, precious. Break free of what's captured you."

"I am free," Himi said in a dead voice.

And she stomped on the sphere Sunada had been holding, silencing its music. Over and over, her foot flashed, and when the device lay in pieces across the floor, Himi jerked her head up, flinging a gasp toward the ceiling.

When Brennan touched my shoulder, I jumped. With Himi having become my world, I'd forgotten about her and Zhao, but she dragged me after her with her mouth set into a grim line.

"Follow my lead," she said.

After stopping in front of Himi, we examined her. Glassy eyes, parted lips, listless motions. All symptoms of shock, something I didn't need Brennan to show me how to fix.

I met her gaze, this woman who shared my aversion to intimate touch, and taking a deep breath, we held Himi between us.

While I might have grown comfortable enough with Brennan and Himi to endure contact like this with them separately, doing it with them both had my mind screaming 'too much'. So, I sought out Zhao as a distraction.

The old man had lifted Taro over his shoulders, and nodding to me, he trudged toward our escape route.

We were done here, for now. If Growth and Decay were right, Sunada's conspiracy would fall apart without her, and when it was appropriate, I'd tell Himi about what her fiery eyes meant before escorting her to the palace. The guilds and royal guard could take over from there.

All of which meant I'd fulfilled my final obligation in Hiyuki. Nokoribi had his justice, something I was still too numb to ponder, and I could leave with Brennan. It was the perfect ending to the hell my life had become over the last few days.

With a whimpering gasp, Himi returned to herself, squirming in between me and Brennan. When we released her, I half-expected her to start weeping, but with her jaw set, she marched toward the room's exit.

The wrong one.

Racing after her, I pulled her to a stop.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "We should return to base and wait for things to calm down--"

"Their freedom is the only way to free us. *Gidae's* last words to me," Himi dully interrupted. "I've been mulling them over in the days since I heard them, trying to figure out what he meant. It seemed so nonsensical. Redundant."

When she lifted her head as if she was dragging it through mud, her bleak gaze raised a flicker of fear in me.

"I know what it means now," Himi said. "I know what I have to do."

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