

## CHAPTER 13

Rei followed Kamiya Hiroto in something of a daze for the minute or so the man led him deeper into the woods. Once more they didn't speak, with the doctor seemingly content to simply walk just ahead of him for a time, his head moving slowly this way and that as he took in the forest around them.

They were well into the trees, the sun cutting through the density of the leafless branches in fading rays of light across their misting breaths, when Kamiya stopped.

Then finally spoke.

"I'm going to ask you a question, Reidon. I don't imagine it's going to be an easy one to answer, so do please feel free to take your time."

Rei blinked, yanked uncomfortably from his shell shock. He stared at the man's back, gloved hands still clasped behind him, grey eyes still on the trees.

"...Okay...?" Rei got out after a second, unsure of how else to respond.

Similarly, it apparently took Kamiya a moment to form his own words.

"... What needs to be done to make this right?"

The question hung in the silence between them for a long time, echoing soundlessly in the quiet. Rei felt the anger bubbling into life again with every passing second, but eventually he forced it down, forced himself not to let the fire overcome him.

There would be time for that heat. It just wasn't now.

"I think that would depend on what 'this' is..." He drew the words out slowly, deliberately. "Wouldn't it... uh... Doctor?"

Kamiya had half turned his face to listen as Rei answered, and at the hesitation in being addressed something a little like pain passed across his features.

"'Doctor' is fine. For now at least. But yes, that's a fair judgment. I suppose I am making the assumption that you have already deduced much of the situation, based on your last exchange with Jasper."

“A deduction isn’t more than a best guess without confirmation,” Rei answered coolly.

His heart was hammering again. He wished it wasn’t. Between that and the fury he was wrestling with, it made it hard to figure out exactly what he was thinking—much less *feeling*—as he spoke.

Kamiya nodded again. “You want the truth,” he said simply. Not a question so much as a statement, but there was still a request somewhere in there.

Rei had to stop himself from yelling that he less wanted it and more had *earned* it. With blood, sweat, tears, and *years* of pain, he had *earned* it.

Instead, he decided to borrow a page from Aria’s book.

“You’re damn right I do,” he growled.

Kamiya swallowed. It seems an... odd thing to witness. From the moment they’d met Rei had had the distinct impression this man was generally one of acute inscrutability. An unyielding object who only moved when *he* decided to, and then moved with such terrifying force as to make whole planets flinch in response. And yet here Kamiya Hiroto was, clearly finding it hard to look him in the face.

For the first time, Rei began to wonder if there was more going on here than even *he* had wondered about.

All at once, the doctor turned to him in full, eyes moving to meet his again. Sure enough, there was a *will* there, an unbending, unshaking will.

And yet when the man spoke, his voice still had that edge of strain to it.

“Would you prefer I lay it out for you, or would you like to tell me first what it is you’ve already surmised?”

Rei felt his brow furrow. *There* was an offer he hadn’t seen coming. He hadn’t expected a man like Kamiya Hiroto to be forthcoming in *any* situation, much less one as delicate as this. Rei found himself, with as much a wave of confusion as renewed anger, having difficulty getting a sense of the man.

Maybe that was why the words spilled out of him before he could stop himself.

“I’m Kamiya blood.” He barely managed to keep himself from spitting out the words. “Probably your kid? By some affair you didn’t want coming out? Then again, maybe not. I thought I might have been some relative’s, some branch family’s, but I went back 200 years of public records and these—” he jerked a hand up to indicate his eyes “—seem to be almost exclusively limited only to the main line. Couldn’t find an example of them being passed on even a generation beyond those who marry out. So props there for making sure no one designs their kids without permission. At least you follow up with *them*.” He sneered at the irony.

Kamiya, on the other hand, only frowned as he listened, which was fine with Rei.

He had plenty more to say.

“I wasn’t wanted. Don’t know why, but I’ve got a guess or two. One more solid than the other, given whoever it was who left me at the hospital at least bothered to give me a *first* name before they bailed. And because I wasn’t wanted, I was forgotten. Or maybe you thought I died. Or hoped I did. I don’t know. Doesn’t matter. No one ever came back. No one ever visited, or even checked in. I was left behind, totally and completely. I was left behind.”

The tautness in the doctor’s face was more pronounced.

“That’s when we get the present, though.” Rei couldn’t help the fury from leaking out into his words, now. “That’s when we get to the *fun* part, Doctor. See... I made it. With the help of one *really* good friend, and then a couple more. I *made it*. I’m one of the lucky few, and the lucky *fewer* who did it missing two arms and leg, figuratively speaking.” His words were coming through clenched teeth. “I started getting a name for myself. I started to gain some notoriety, little as it might be. People are beginning to know my name. Who I am. Not really sure how I feel about that yet, but it’s irrelevant. It’s happening. I have a future. For the first time in my *damn* life, I *actually* have a future. One with potential. One with promise. One *without* pain.” He grinned, then, a hard, angry leer tainted with the twisted hilarity of it all. Lifting an arm, he jerked the sleeve of his black-and-golds back with with other hand, revealing Shido and the scars that decorated his skin in an ugly pattern of faint slashes and faded dots. “*That* was a change, I have to tell you. I got good at not showing it, but these...” he patted the exposed arm to indicate the scars, “these *hurt*, Doctor. And a hell of a lot less than what they were *fixing*.” He dropped his arm, the sleeve slipping down to hide the skin and his Device again, relieved to let the man openly hear the disgust in his words at last. “And then—and *only* then, by some *incredible* coincidence—did *Kamiya* decide to show their

face. Amazing. Miraculous, actually.” He glared at Kamiya. “Almost like I wasn’t worth your time until there was something to be gained from acknowledging I exist...”

He let the last words hang, let them ring into the quiet of woods. For a long time, the pair of them stood some 10 feet apart, Rei working to bring his temper back into check while Kamiya’s face was a grim shadow that darkened his eyes almost to black. The man didn’t meet his gaze, though.

He was staring, instead, at Rei’s arm, taking it in like he couldn’t look away.

After almost a minute, Rei decided it was time to speak again.

“How’d I do?” he got out in a tone of mock-pleasantry. “Did I hit close to the mark, Doc?”

Kamiya started, seeming to stir from some deep place with a wince. His jaw tightened, but when he spoke, whatever anger was woven into his words seemed hardly aimed at Rei.

“Jasper had you right from the start,” he got out hoarsely. “It appears I *did* go about things every way but the right one, didn’t I?”

Rei frowned at this, but the doctor was already continuing with another sigh.

“I cannot say you are wrong, Reidon. About any of it. There are some things you have misunderstood, but I can hardly blame you for any of that given what we—no,” he corrected himself with a real hint of frustration, “given what *I* have put you through.”

“I don’t know about that,” Rei growled, shoving his hands into his pockets in an attempt not to give away the shock of adrenaline the man’s subtle confirmation had brought with it. “It’s been eighteen years. That’s a *lot* of time to have missed seeing *anything* that would suggest I’ve ‘misunderstood’ so much as a minute.”

“Yes. Hence my... irritation...”

Kamiya’s voice was quiet—almost like he hadn’t meant for Rei to overhear him—but there was a resonance within the words that once again took him aback. The surprise was different, this time, though. This wasn’t an odd expression, or a strange look he hadn’t expected. This was... something else.

*Power*, Rei realized, his eyes dropping immediately to where Kamiya’s own hands—for once—were the ones in fists by his sides.

For the first, he saw the gleam then. The hint of multi-colored steel, black and a deep, blood red.

A Device.

“You’re... a User...?” Rei muttered, unable to keep the astonishment from the question.

It took a second for Kamiya again to rouse from whatever place his thoughts seemed to have taken him, but when he did he looked down. Then, lifting an arm, he too tugged the sleeve of his coat back to reveal the band in truth. Rei wasn’t surprised he hadn’t noticed, then. The vysetrium was usually the thing that stood out, but against the dark steel Kamiya Hiroto’s gems were an onyx-grey, their thin lines seeming almost more intent on sucking the light from their surroundings than they did to shine.

Even Chancery’s truly black gems didn’t glow like that...

“Is that so surprising?” the doctor asked. “I would have thought you might expect as much.”

“I didn’t find anything about that.” Rei was studying the CAD with a frown. “It’s not in your bio. Not in your history either...”

“Ah, well... Yes. That’s true.” Kamiya covered the Device again, and his hands returned to their clasped position behind his back as he seemed to regain a little of his composure. “My work... I don’t think you’ll be surprised to know that much of it is classified. Even within the ISCM. For that reason—and my own personal desire—my presence on the feeds is... sterilized, shall we say.”

“Uh huh...” Rei only just heard the man, studying him intently now, taking him in with a different interest. That infallibility. That presence or power... If he had to guess, Kamiya Hiroto wasn’t just *any* User. He didn’t feel like an S but... high As, maybe...?

“I... did think you were dead, Reidon.”

The statement brought Rei back with the force of a lightning bolt. Immediately he forgot his momentary distraction, the reason why he was there—standing in the woods with a total stranger—snapping back into place all at once.

“... Sorry?” he asked quietly.

“I did—No, rather, to give myself *some* credit—I was *made* to think you were dead.” Kamiya’s face was still grey, but he seemed to be forcing himself to stand straighter, now, forcing himself to stand tall. “You were close with that guess, at least. Very close. However... you are *not* my child.”

Rei could *feel* his heart, now, could feel it hammering against his chest and the blood flowing and drawing from his very fingertips.

“Then... whose am I?” he got out, not so much as hearing the croak in the question.

To be fair, Kamiya’s voice wasn’t much more stable as he answered.

“My son’s. Keiji. I am not your father, Reidon. I am, however...” The man had to pause, taking in a shaking breath before trying again. “I am, however... your grandfather.”

It was like the world itself had forgotten to move. One moment Rei thought his entire body would break apart, would shatter under the nervous, thundering force of his heart. The next, though, there was nothing. There was only electric emptiness, a numbing buzz that rang in Rei’s ears. He didn’t feel his own breath come on in uneven, throaty hitches. He didn’t feel his school bag slip from his shoulder as his body tensed, nor hear it fall to the frozen stone of the path with a *thud*. There was nothing *to* feel, nothing *to* here.

There was only Kamiya Hiroto.

His... grandfather...?

“You’re... sure?” Rei heard someone gasp weakly through the fog. It took him a second to realize the question had come out in his own quavering voice.

Hiroto’s words, on the other hand, reached him like a horn in the night.

“I am. I had Abigail run the test three times. Three different labs. Then I had two more run it without telling her. As you get to know how much faith I have in my steward, I think that will tell you how certain I needed to be.”

Rei started returning to himself slowly, his words a little more conscious as the shock drew away little by little.

“But... how? Where would you... How would you get the—?”

“The material? It was provided to us by certain members of the ISCM.” Hiroto frowned again, his own voice becoming a little stronger. “There was... incentive applied, I admit. The military keeps a record of the physiological makeup of its assignee hopefuls. The successes and failures alike.”

“My... The Assignment Exam...?”

“Indeed. I think you can understand why it’s valuable data to have on hand.”

Rei nodded numbly. Of course it was. If anything, keeping tissue samples and genetic material was probably *invaluable* to the ISCM. It would allow them to compare the physical makeup of failures to successes, the changes over time to their Users, and even the—

Rei wrenched himself back to reality, unwilling to let his tumbling mind flee from the truth that stood before him.

“You’re... my grandfather.” He forced himself to say the words with conviction, like getting them out would make the easier to believe. I... I’m... *your* kid’s... kid.”

It was Kamiya’s turn to nod, but he did so solemnly.

“You are.” His words were tight again. “Though I admit I have some discomfort claiming that title. Even less calling Keiji your father.”

The anger returned in a flare.

“And why is that?” Rei growled, readying himself for the worst. “Not something you would want publicized, I—?”

But Kamiya held him up with a raised hand.

“It is nothing of the sort, Reidon,” he said quietly. “My hesitancy come purely from the fact that my inaction resulted in the life you’ve had until now, Reidon. That... and the actual *actions* of my son.”

Rei’s mouth fell open then. Not so much due to the doctor’s words, though.

Rather, Rei’s surprise came as Kamiya Hiroto bowed, then. Bowed, with legs straight and body dipping towards the ground, so low that his head fell below the level of his waste. It was deep, deliberate movement. There was something... sad about it, too. Something heavy. It was... heartfelt, Rei thought?

Heartfelt... and heartbroken.

“I am so sorry, Reidon. Truly. For my failures, and for those of my son’s.”

Kamiya didn’t lift his head as he spoke, his straight hair hanging down till it nearly touched the ground, his narrow frame—thin, but strong for a man his age—unmoving.

It took a long, long time for Rei to find his voice again.

“What... *did* happen?” he asked at last, finally getting out the one question—that one *essential* question—that he had hoped would be heard today.

Before him, the doctor straightened slowly. When he stood tall again, Rei was somehow unsurprised to find the man’s eyes redder than they’d been a moment before.

“The details... are not kind, Reidon. Are you sure you want to know?”

Rei hesitated. He hadn’t expected too, and it took him aback. Here they were. The answers he needed. He hadn’t *wanted* them, somehow. Hadn’t for years, now. It had been a long, long time since Rei had made his piece with the bits of his story Matron Kast and the other staff at the Estonian Center on Astra-2 could tel him. It had been a long time since he’d made peace with his last name.

But then Kamiya had come knocking... and the possibility of the truth had been a tempting thing. So tempting, in fact, that he hadn’t been able to admit it to himself, much less anyone else.

And yet now... he was hesitating.

For some reason, in that moment, he thought of Viv. Aria would have been kind, had she been there to read his thoughts. Aria would have been gentle and encouraging, wanting him to be careful, to be *alright*, no matter what else.

Viv, on the other hand, would have told him to get over himself even as she shoved him across the lines with both hands.

Rei could almost feel her standing behind him as he answered.

“Yes. Tell me everything... Please.”