

# Chapter Five

Screams disturbed my dreams, and groaning, I rolled over, pressing a pillow to my ear.

The noise didn't worry me. The nightmares of Hiyuki's Blessed Emperors had become legendary over the centuries with the tales of them stretching back to the empire's founding.

As kids, Nokoribi and I had scoffed at those stories. What could haunt a man who was so privileged, someone who never needed to worry about hunger?

Then, earth and fire had chosen Nokoribi, and he'd learned the secret.

I never had. On the first night I'd served in the palace, my friend had started screaming bloody murder in the small hours of the morning. The last emperor's bodyguard had warned me about this. He'd told me how to handle it, but at the time, I hadn't yet absorbed everything my new role required. I'd only been a steam rat, and Nokoribi had only been my friend.

Rushing to his side, I'd seen his eyes snapped wide-open, illuminating the room's every corner, and I'd tried to wake him up. It had been one of my poorest decisions, one I'd never tried again.

Now, whenever Nokoribi woke me from my dreams, I closed my ears to the noise and tried to sleep, but inevitably, I ended up listening to my friend scream until his nightmare had loosened its grip on him. Sometimes, a pillow helped with muffling the noise.

"No, no, no, no!"

Not so tonight.

"Please, I'm begging you! I'm doing what I can! *Stay with me.*"

That... had seemed more coherent than usual. Setting my pillow aside, I sat up, swinging my legs over the edge of my cot.

"Who's talked you into this? What is Them or-?"

A yelp cut that shout short, and I snatched my pistol from off of the ground.

"I don't- I can't- *Stop screaming at me!*"

And that hadn't sounded like Nokoribi at all. Sprinting across my small room, I grabbed my mask from its hook before jamming it in place. I burst through the door, stepping into chaos.

Someone had knocked a hole in a nearby wall, leaving rubble powdering the floor, and through it, I could see Takanai, despite the smog that ever consumed it. Even this late, lights were dotted across the city, but rather than that, moonbeams, struggling to pierce the toxic fog, were what provided the bedroom with light.

Pale, yellow fingers surmounted the haze, spackling the walls and floor through a second obstacle, one that had been raised against them. For beyond the hole in the wall, a tree was standing, one that was vibrantly green. One that had distinctly not been present this morning. Its roots were spilling through the hole, taking a rambling path to the stranger in the middle of the room.

With them wearing a hooded robe and a faceless mask, I couldn't discern much about this person. Physique, gender, and all forms of weapon lay concealed beneath that cloth, but I did know one thing about them.

They were attacking Nokoribi.

A pair of knives flashed through the air, and my friend leapt away from that stab, but the stranger's arm blurred, jabbing toward his chest once more. Nokoribi spun, letting a blade bite into his shoulder rather than his heart, and at the sight of that, I was broken free of my immobility, I *moved*.

Gone was hesitation. Gone were thoughts of whether death by a knife might be a kinder fate for my friend than what was already coming. With my pistol raised, I aimed for the stranger, but before I could squeeze the trigger, Nokoribi stepped into my line of fire.

"Go to bed!" he shouted. "I can handle this!"

*Sure* he could.

I dropped the pistol, drawing my sword. If my friend meant to stand between me and my target, I'd go close range.

As I stalked forward, though, Nokoribi gestured, and a branch sprouted from the tree, shooting in front of me. While it slammed into the stranger, my friend spun on me with fire raging in his eyes.

*"I've got this!"* he hissed.

Striding for the stranger, caught in his web of splintered bark, he kicked their dropped knives into the room's depths.

"Who found you?" he asked. "I hid you well."

Wait. Did he know this stranger?

"So, who was it?" Nokoribi said. "Who told you-?"

Cutting off in a shout, he fell to his knees, clutching at his head, and while I rushed toward him, the room's light brightened, burning from my friend's eyes.

"No!" he cried. *"Please. Stay!"*

As if in response, the stranger shrieked, a high-pitched noise that mixed with Nokoribi's voice. Light poured from around her mask, and my friend's screaming denial faded to whimpers while the bonfire in his eyes was reduced to smoldering coals. *What was going on?*

Hesitantly, I laid a hand on Nokoribi's shoulder, keeping my sword raised toward the stranger.

"ribi? What's wrong-?"

Nokoribi swept my hand off of him.

"Please," he panted. "Go. Before it's too late. Leave-"

As the stranger stirred in her bonds, my friend gasped, scrambling to his feet, but then, he spun in place, shoving me away.

"Run!" he shouted.

I stumbled away from him, fighting to regain my footing, and all the while, panic threatened to rule my mind. When was the last time I'd seen my friend as anything but calm?

In her wooden prison, the stranger laid a hand on a branch, and what Nokoribi had woven into being withered to dust. As she rose from its ashes, I ran for my pistol with questions screeching in my head. I didn't have answers for most of them, but one of them was clear. Considering what the enemy had just done, close combat didn't seem wise.

After diving for my pistol, I rolled to my back, ready to take the shot, but a wall of vines sprang up in front of me. Half crawling and half clambering to my feet, I rushed toward it, poking its leafy green surface. So thickly did the vines interlace with themselves that I could barely see through them to my friend, on the other side.

"Sorry, K," Nokoribi said. "You can't hurt her."

Oh no, no, no. This was exactly what I'd been afraid of: my friend surrendering to an assassin's attack after begging me to let her live.

"Why shouldn't I?" I yelled.

My friend wasn't listening to me, though. He waved toward the stranger, which had vines trailing from the wall to close on her. Before they could wrap down her arms, however, she slapped at them, and again, they crumbled.

No more.

I hacked at the greenery in front of me, cursing my blade's dulled edge as I did. I'd surmount this, and even if it meant defying my orders, I'd protect my emperor, my friend. No other option remained for me.

"I know it hurts, precious," Nokoribi said. "I know They're loud. They're shouting for your attention, and it's hard to ignore Them, but that's what you have to do. Listen to my voice. Calm down so I can help you."

"Lies!" the stranger cried.

She wildly swept a hand across the room, and a wooden battering ram sprang from out of the tree, arching toward Nokoribi. He leapt away before it could slam into place, making metal creak and buckle, and wood snaked through the breach it had created.

Good. Maybe the royal guard would see it and come help.

"One of you is *lying*, and I can't- I don't-!"

Wailing, the stranger pounded on her head as she fell to her knees, and I knew what my friend would do. He'd never listen to what I'd next say but-

"ribi, don't!" I shouted anyway.

Shooting a glance my way, Nokoribi gave me a sheepish smile before approaching the stranger. Holding his hands to either side, he kept his fingers spread wide, and with their every twitch, creeping vines trailed behind him. Crouching in front of the stranger, he pulled her fists off of her head, keeping one of his hands free at all times.

"I've listened to Them talking in my head for twenty-one years," he said. "I can teach you how to ignore Them. I can teach you how to live with your curse, and when the time comes for you to commune with the earth, I'll go with you for your first time. Please, listen to me, precious. I only want to keep you safe-"

The stranger lifted her face, covered by a mask, and while two, sharp inhales filled the room, the blaze behind that mask and the glow in Nokoribi's eyes met, two flames taking each other's worth.

And as I made my first hole in the ivy wall, I prayed. To whom, I couldn't say, but still, the plea was flung toward anyone who would hear it and intervene. I couldn't say what I was begging for, only that it involved my friend surviving. For no one to get hurt.

"It's not just Them in my head," the stranger said.

She shot her hand out, resting it on Nokoribi's chest, and he opened his mouth, as if to ask a question. All that emerged from him, though, was a choked gasp.

He bowed his body over her palm while something writhed under his skin, and I watched with a closed throat as slicked vines burst free of their fleshy confines, as if it were soil. Twisting, leafy

strands snaked out of my friend's chest and arms and neck. One even sprouted from the dying ember of his eye while another sprang from out of his mouth. Slowly, they forced him upright with blood sheeting from each point of their departure.

All the while, a roar permeated the bedroom, drowning out all other sound.

With each swing of my sword, the hole in the wall widened, but I didn't think I could squeeze through in time to help.

What, though, could I do to save my friend now?

My roar was silenced, and with my teeth gritted, I continued beating on plant life.

On its far side, the stranger snatched her hand off of Nokoribi's chest.

"What...?" she breathed.

She flipped her mask between her hand and the mess she'd made of a man, landing on her palm with its fingers spread wide.

"No..." she slowly said. "Please. What-? *What have I done?*"

Struggling against what was pinning him in place, Nokoribi reached for the stranger with a whine wheezing through his lips. He knocked her mask aside, but all I could see beneath her hood were fiery eyes.

So like Nokoribi's...

A choked sob accompanied my friend's brush of the stranger's cheek.

"It's all right," he coughed with the words sloshing over the vine in his mouth. "It's all right, precious. Don't cry."

The stranger shot to her feet, tilting her hood down to Nokoribi as if etching the image into her mind. She spun to flee, but his voice held her in check.

"Remember," he gasped. "Th... Their freedom is... the only way to... free us. I... love-"

The stranger took off, and finally, the hole in ivy had opened wide enough for me to slip through. When I did that, though, I didn't pursue the assassin, as I should have. Instead, I ran to Nokoribi's side, tossing aside my mask as I did, and it skittered to bounce against the stranger's.

As I dropped to the ground beside my friend, I said, "What do I-? How do I-?"

"Help me," Nokoribi groaned.

He reached for the vines riddling him, and I guided his hand to one. At the brush of his skin against it, plant life shriveled with its ash dusting us, and he coughed a plume of it into the air, one that

was illuminated by flickering flames, before falling into my arms.

“K,” he mumbled. “Sorry.”

“Shut up, ‘ribi,” I said. “Your guardsman will be here soon, and we’ll- we’ll fix this.”

Whistling laughter preceded a pained grunt.

“Stop,” Nokoribi said. “Hurts. All of me.”

I didn’t want an image that would stick like a splinter in my mind, but despite my desires, I ran my eyes over my friend’s body. Gaping pits dotted every inch of Nokoribi’s exposed skin. I could only imagine what his insides looked like.

“Run, K,” Nokoribi gasped. “Don’t want... Th... They can’t have another...”

A rattle had taken hold of his lungs, and I clutched my friend to my chest.

“I won’t leave you, idiot,” I said. “Not even if you order it.”

“Defiance.”

A smile pulled at honeycombed cheeks.

“Save her, K.”

“I don’t know if I-”

The fire in Nokoribi’s eyes died in full, and he feverishly grasped at my arms.

“Find the-”

And he was gone.

“Truth,” I whispered. “I’ll try, ‘ribi. I-”

A sob split through the apology that I needed to utter, but after one was unleashed onto the world, more followed. Shaking, I folded myself around my emperor. The man I should have protected. My friend.

A howl was flung over slumbering Takanai, and in the city, people rolled over in their beds, oblivious to one man’s pain or the chaos it inevitably heralded.

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