

Chapter Four

When we returned to the palace, Nokoribi requested that his dinner be brought to his room, but the kitchen staff knew what that really meant. At these times, they always slipped extra food, meant for me, onto their given trays, never knowing that what they provided for their Blessed Emperor alone was enough for us both.

And neither of us would ever tell them. No one upset the people who made their meals.

Today's spread of food put a stone in my stomach, a hand that reached into my intestines and yanked on them. There was so much of it: sweet junom flesh with its drizzling juices; rakshan ribs, honeyed and seared to perfection; kakan shells, ready to be cracked.

Piles of succulent fruits, meats, and nuts were sitting in front of us, and the people of Hiyuki starved. Famine spread its fingers throughout the empire. As always.

"Try the rakshan, K. They spiced it exactly right," Nokoribi said. "Yasuda must be overseeing the kitchen this evening."

He sucked on syrupy fingers, seemingly ignorant of my tension.

"You said we'd talk," I said.

Maybe that explained the knot in my belly. Maybe it wasn't a boy's face, glazed in snot and tears like honey had with the rakshan meat. Maybe the coming conversation was causing this pain.

As if he hadn't heard what I'd said, Nokoribi scooped a junom fruit from among its brethren. Flicking a switchblade out from under his sleeve, he sawed through the fruit's chitinous skin.

"I wonder what happened with that kid from earlier," he said. "Do you think he mugged someone else? Will he come crawling toward me in the audience chamber next week?"

Beneath the table, I clenched my hands around the pistol I was cradling, finding a comforting rhythm in brushing its metal.

"We need to talk," I said, trying again.

Flinging himself into the pillows, Nokoribi stretched before biting into his peeled junom fruit.

"I probably will see him. Hunger makes people do stupid things," he said. "Do you remember, K? You and I ran so many rackets on other steam rats before They... before fire bloomed in my eyes."

Our past. The boy today. Was my friend trying to give me an ulcer?

“Please,” I whispered, “we-”

“Would that earth and fire had never chosen me,” Nokoribi said. “I’d give anything for a return to those simpler times. My best friend and I against the-”

Jerking my hands into view, I slammed my pistol atop the table.

“ribe! We need to talk!” I roared.

Lifting his head out of the pillows, Nokoribi peered at me over our piled-high food.

“I thought that’s what we were doing,” he said.

At that, I could swear that the flames in my friend’s eyes had been transferred to me. If I opened my mouth, I was afraid fire might spew forth to eat through the meal laid between us, and as Nokoribi barked a laugh, slapping at the pillows around him, it only grew hotter.

I lost time. One moment, I was sitting on the ground opposite my friend, and in the next, I was standing over him with a pistol aimed at his forehead.

Sighing, my friend gazed up at me with the flames in his eyes reduced to coals.

“Sit down,” he said.

A simple command. Like so many others I’d followed.

And with my legs giving out from under me, I fell. Fortunately, pillows cushioned my impact with the ground.

When Nokoribi extended a hand, I laid my pistol in it, and once he’d set the weapon on the table beside us, my friend crossed his arms.

“So. We’re having this conversation whether I like it or not,” he said. “Fine. You called me weak. That’s a serious accusation to level at an emperor. So, why did you make it?”

“I already told you,” I whispered.

Did Nokoribi not feel this vice, squeezing my heart to a pulp? How could he be acting so calmly?

“Because I didn’t have you execute the people who came to kill me,” he said. “You’ve been wrestling with this crisis for about a week, then. Does that sound about right?”

With the pain in my heart crushing the air out of my lungs, I breathed, “Yes.”

“And in that week, you’ve done nothing,” Nokoribi said before cocking his head. “Doesn’t that make you the weak one?”

I shook my head.

"I couldn't know for sure if you were infected," I said. "Not until today."

Humming, Nokoribi nodded.

"Why today?" he said. "When I let that boy go, did it harden your certainty?"

I didn't want to answer that question. If I did, it became truth and...

I wanted this to be over but...

But eyes full of embers were boring into me, and so, I spoke: a croaking voice that uttered a single word.

"Yes."

There it was. The conundrum that had plagued me since that day in the garden had been solved.

Of course, as soon as that had happened, Nokoribi threw doubt on my resolve.

"Why was that weak?"

I rocked away from him, almost toppling to the floor.

"Be- because the law states that anyone who assaults the emperor must die," I said. "The emperor must uphold the law, and you didn't, sparing the boy instead. Weakness."

Snorting, Nokoribi said, "And what is that law's purpose?"

Wasn't that obvious?

"To protect you, of course," I said. "To dissuade further assassination attempts."

"And how well has that worked?" Nokoribi said under his breath before lifting a hand. "No, don't answer that. Instead, tell me. Why should I be protected?"

Why should he be-?

"You've been chosen by earth and fire!" I said, sputtering. "You're-"

"Hiyuki's Blessed Emperor," Nokoribi said, rolling his eyes. "Yes, I'm well aware. We'll get to that in a moment. I'm asking why I, as Nokoribi and not the nameless emperor, deserve protection. Why does sparing an assassin instead of killing them make me weak?"

Leaning back on his elbows, he pressed his fingers together, resting them over his heart, and begged me to give him a decent answer to his question.

Hell, if I wouldn't try.

“If you show mercy, it encourages other people to come for your head,” I said.

Lifting an eyebrow, Nokoribi said, “And?”

“And I can’t fend them all off, ‘ribi,” I said. “Eventually, one of them would get through me.”

“And?”

“And the way you are right now, I’m not sure whether you’d fight them off or let them kill you.”

For a moment, Nokoribi didn’t reply, merely staring at me with the fire in his eyes flaring and dying in bursts. For a moment, I thought I might have cured his weakness.

Then, my friend ruined it.

“If I didn’t resist them,” Nokoribi said, “would that be such a bad thing?”

This, more than anything else, stoked my temper. As it erupted from me, my own, personal earth’s blood felt like it had roasted my insides.

“Of course it would be, you fantastically idiotic asshole!” I bellowed. “You’d be dead!”

Nokoribi’s lips twitched, even as he otherwise kept them in a flat line.

“Why is my life more important than our would-be assassin?” he asked.

“Because-!”

I couldn’t mention my friend’s position as the emperor. For the moment, that subject had been set aside.

“Because...”

I couldn’t use our friendship as a reason, no matter how much I might want to. Logically, that only made Nokoribi’s life more important to me.

So, I fell back on the first maxim taught to young Hiyukians.

“Preservation of self is most important, ‘ribi. You know that,” I said. “It doesn’t matter whose life counts more. All that matters is preserving your own, no matter how badly you might harm others to accomplish that.”

And the question I was coming to hate flew from Nokoribi’s lips.

“Why?”

I’d had enough. Grabbing my pistol, I lunged over my friend with the gun’s muzzle pressed under his chin. My vision blurred as I said.

“This is pointless. You’re weak, and a weak emperor leads a weak empire.”

Nokoribi must not have been listening. Death was staring down at him from above, and he *laughed*, clapping his hands.

“Congratulations, K! You got further along than I thought you would,” he gasped. “You’re close to the truth, so close it makes my heart ache. I wish I could be here when you find it.”

Where earth’s blood had once filled me, something new and foreign replaced it. It was the feeling experienced when the downtrodden fanned the well-to-do on especially hot days. The sensation found in the steamworks’ abandoned channels: deep below the surface, where earth’s blood no longer flowed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said.

“What it sounded like.”

What he was suggesting hit me like one of those newfangled motorcars. I dropped my pistol from Nokoribi’s skin, and rubbing my suddenly prickling eyes, I sank to my knees.

“How long?” I whispered.

“I suspect it’ll be soon. In fact, I doubt I’ll return from my next communion with the earth,” Nokoribi said. “That’s why I’ve been delaying it for so long. I’ve been getting my affairs in order.”

No. Nononononono!

“But you’re only thirty!” I said. “You should have at least another five years left!”

Nokoribi gave me a sad smile.

“Come on, K. You know that thirty-five is the *average* lifespan for someone who’s been blessed, and I’ve never been average,” he said. “They’ve burned through me quite quickly in comparison.”

That fucking vague word again...

“And who are They?” I asked, slamming my hand into the pillows. “You talk about Them all the time, scream about Them in your sleep, but you’ve never explained.”

“Because I can’t.”

Pulling himself upright, Nokoribi massaged his forehead with a wince.

“I wish I could, but I *can’t*,” he said. “You haven’t considered the worst of it, though, K. *We haven’t found an heir yet*. No one has been chosen or at least, no one I can bear to...”

Biting his lip, he looked away, and I wondered what he could have meant by that.

"In a way, I'm glad," Nokoribi eventually continued. "I wouldn't wish this curse on anyone, even if Hiyuki needs it-"

Squeezing his eyes closed, he punched the floor, making me finish what he'd started.

"Needs it to survive."

I couldn't think about that part of the problem right now. Instead, I'd focus on 'ribi and how much he needed me. I'd focus on the fact that he was... dying.

"That's why you granted them mercy. The assassins, I mean," I said. "Why kill them when their success would only have accelerated what's already happening?"

Nokoribi gave me an odd look.

"No, K. That's not why," he said, "but if it will help you sleep, you can believe that's the reason. If it'll help with..."

He waved at his body, the one that seemed as healthy as it had on the day he'd first been chosen. Then again, it would always look like that.

Until it didn't.

"I'm sorry, 'ribi," I said. "I just..."

What did one say to a dying man? As I scratched my head, I banged my forgotten pistol on it, and after a pointed glare, I holstered the weapon.

"So, you won't excise the weakness you've found in me?" Nokoribi asked.

Shrugging, I said, "It's not like it can spread far in the time you have left."

With a hiss, I winced. *Why* had I put it like that?

But Nokoribi simply chuckled.

"You're a hypocrite, you know," he said. "You claim self-preservation, at all costs, is the definition of strength, but how many times have you nearly died while protecting me?"

"Well, yeah," I said. "That's my job."

The knot in my guts had uncurled, letting hunger take up howling residence in its place. Scooting to the table, I snatched a set of rakshan ribs from their platter, and when its flavor hit my tongue, I fluttered my eyes closed. Nokoribi had been right. They had spiced these perfectly.

"How I hope you'll find the truth."

I didn't pay attention to that whisper, and when Nokoribi joined me at the table, I ignored the fact that the person sitting beside me, my best friend, was a dead man walking. Like someone dangling from a cliff, I clung to what I had.

"Game of pechet once we've finished here?" I said. "Or maybe some time in the garden?"

"You think that just because I'm dying, *you* get to decide what we should do next?" Nokoribi said while cracking a kakan nut open. "I should have known this would happen. You complain about never getting to choose often enough."

"Fine, *most blessed*," I said. "What shall we do after this? I ask as your humble bodyguard, only wanting a chance to plan for your safety."

Humming, Nokoribi crunched on the kakan nut while tapping a finger on his chin.

"A game of pechet sounds fun," he eventually said.

With a groan, I said, "Of course it does."

I lost myself in our banter, lost myself in the food, lost myself in the game, when it came. I threw myself headlong into every second with my friend because who knew when the next would see blood spilling from Nokoribi's mouth or nose or eyes? Who knew when Hiyuki would next demand that he commune with the earth, a task that might have him permanently disappearing through the Gateway? Who knew when I'd have to perform the final duty of every emperor's bodyguard and end my friend's suffering?

Until that moment arrived, I'd put how close I'd come to killing Nokoribi out of my mind. I wouldn't consider that a failing body had been my friend's salvation.

Only one thing required my attention: my childhood friend that I'd spent decades beside.

Only Nokoribi.

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