

Chapter One

An empire only stands as strong as its leader. The one above the many, the god of the masses, he must show strength in conviction, inflexibility in decisions, and ruthlessness in execution. This is known.

Weakness kills as surely as a disease. Like a rotten limb of the body, it requires excision at the moment of its discovery. If no one stands ready to perform the removal, one must do it to oneself, preventing the disease from spreading. This also is known.

These facts encompassed the reason for my current conflict.

I watched the last of today's condemned slink toward the emperor, on his throne. The scrape of his dragging feet were loud in the audience chamber's quiet. Despite his fists, clenched in cloth, at his sides and his slow shuffle, the man carried himself well, an accomplishment he should take pride in. Stopping halfway across the smoke-filled chamber, the condemned sank to his knees with dozens of glittering eyes weighing his chin to his chest.

Lifting his hands above his head, he began.

"Oh, most magnanimous one. Blessed of earth and fire..."

The words swirled through my head unnoticed, a greeting full of empty compliments I'd heard countless times before. I should be using this time to scan the condemned for signs of ill intent or weapons, missed by the royal guard, but as I had for the last week, I fixed my gaze on Nokoribi instead.

Obscured by gauzy cloth, my friend was hunched on his throne, resting his elbows on his knees with his fingers steepled in front of his face. As he had for the last week, he listened to the condemned's flattery as if it meant something. As he had for the last week, he waited once the condemned had fallen silent, as if listening to something unheard. As he had since *it*.

"Step forward, my child," Nokoribi said. "I would hear your pleas. Let us decide, together, whether the earth finds you worthy to walk upon it."

These words, a meaningless repetition much like the condemned's greeting, jerked me back to my duty. I was not to watch Hiyuki's Blessed Emperor with suspicion. Others deserved that inspection.

For now.

With his head bowed and his hands raised in supplication, the condemned approached the throne on his knees. Nothing about the man seemed threatening, and yet, I brushed the trigger of the pistol at the small of my back.

At the first step leading to the throne, the condemned pressed his forehead to diamond-plated steel, grazing his fingers along the scarlet organdy on all sides. When he drew breath to speak, the silence in the audience chamber burst as the gears above ground to life. While a distant bell chimed the hour, earth's blood oozed into the channels on either side of the room with heat and light flaring.

As the noise faded, the condemned's fingers were left trembling, and admiration once purred through me.

Good timing, 'ribi.

"You were about to speak, my child?" Nokoribi said.

"Forgive me, most blessed," the condemned stammered. "I find my thoughts scattered. I-"

Cutting his hand through the air, Nokoribi said, "I have no time to hear your excuses. State your case, or earth and fire shall make a meal of you today."

"Of course. I'm sorry. I just-"

Taking a deep breath, the condemned dared to raise his eyes.

"I have no excuse for what I did, most blessed," he said. "My family is starving. If I hadn't skimmed rations from my foreman's stash, my wife and daughter would have wasted away to nothing. They may not have the strength that the earth requires from the living, but they're mine, and I love them. I couldn't let them die."

Weakness! My fingers twitched on my pistol, and I nearly drew it unprompted. I had to cut out the disease before it spread! If this infection went too far, the Hiyukian Empire would collapse beneath the strain of it.

The condemned must have realized this because he returned his forehead to the metal beneath him, scrunching his arms closer to his body.

"But you are most blessed," he said. "Let earth and fire determine my worth."

As Nokoribi examined the man, lying prostrate before him, silence reigned with only hissing steam to break it. Eventually, he lowered his hands to the throne's arms while leaning back.

"Four years in the steamworks," he pronounced. "I see no fuel laid before me this day, only tarnished steel in need of polishing."

But... feeding this man to the fire was what he deserved. It was what the law *required*, and the emperor must uphold the law. Murmurs in the audience chamber echoed my confusion, but the relief that the condemned should have shown at his emperor's decision failed to present itself. In fact, he'd tensed and-

In a blur, the condemned leapt for Nokoribi. Just as quickly, I'd drawn my pistol, but as I leveled it, I didn't know who I was aiming at.

An explosion ripped through the air, and the condemned's body jerked with half of his neck gone. The only things holding him aloft were Nokoribi's finger on his chin and the hand around his raised wrist.

A wrist with a knife lifted above it.

The emperor dropped the body, but not before I noted a blackened splotch on it, spreading from my friend's touch, or the ash flying from it as it collapsed. Nokoribi glanced at me with a frown ghosting over his face, and only then did I lower my pistol.

"How exciting!" he said. "A nice finale for today's events. Who sent this one before me? I must make my thanks!"

Around the audience chamber, the guilds' various chairmen shifted in place. When not one of them spoke up, Nokoribi waved them off with a laugh.

"No matter. We can discuss it alongside policy later," he said. "In the meantime, I have other claimants of my time. Leave me."

As it had for the condemned's supplication, silence accompanied the guild chairmen's file out of the audience chamber: Nokoribi's unspoken enemies fleeing from him. My friend only kicked at the corpse once we were the only two people left in the room.

"They've gotten bold recently," he said under his breath.

Maybe because of what happened last week.

The words curled in my head, but I refused to let them loose. Until the emperor said otherwise, I'd play my part.

Twisting in his throne, Nokoribi rested his elbows on its armrest, cupping his chin.

"You let me touch him this time, K," he said. "Dare I suggest that you've fallen down on the job?"

"A bodyguard's job is to protect your blessed personage, my emperor," I said. "Nowhere does it say how soon I must fulfill that task."

Nokoribi winced.

"Stop it," he said. "You shouldn't treat me like some sacred being, manifested by the earth. I get that enough from everyone else."

"Fine."

Striding through the scarlet film of the cloth surrounding the throne, I pressed my fingers into the failed assassin's withered jaw. Starting at his chin, wrinkles were spreading from his quickly disintegrating flesh, skin and bone crumbling into powder.

"Why did he get so close?" Nokoribi asked.

Leaning out of the throne, he trailed the back of his hand along the assassin's chin, but he kept his eyes fixed on me.

How should I answer that question? Could I tell my only friend that I thought weakness lay in him? Could I share that I daily considered excising that weakness from Hiyuki, even if it would mean forfeiting my life too? Could I say that these thoughts had been lingering since last week?

Better to save it until I knew whether Nokoribi was infected.

"I got distracted," I said. "It won't happen again."

Nokoribi narrowed his eyes at me, letting them scream his disbelief, but he said not a word. Instead, he turned his blazing gaze away, and while I breathed a sigh of relief, my friend rose from his throne, stretching.

"We have an hour or so before I'll have to listen to the guild chairs fake groveling again," he said. "Shall we visit the garden until then?"

The garden. Where *it* had happened.

"I don't get much choice in the matter, do I?" I said. "As your bodyguard, I'm tied to you, wherever you go."

"Like that's stopped you from expressing an opinion before."

Stepping over the assassin's body, Nokoribi headed for the concealed door at the back of the audience chamber, the one he made his 'miraculous' appearance through every day. As we clanked down the empty corridors behind it, I tried to focus, keeping my eyes open for threats, but they kept returning to the mop of curly, black hair, bouncing in front of me.

After what I'd seen last week, I should press my pistol into those long locks. I should whip my ceremonial sword to rest against Nokoribi's throat before pressing and dragging it to the side, but... I couldn't. What I'd seen... I couldn't say whether it had been weakness, not for sure, and I wouldn't kill the Blessed Emperor of Hiyuki, *my best friend*, unless I *knew*.

So, I followed him to the palace's garden, ignoring the questions nibbling at me.

This place, in all of Hiyuki, made the last claim to natural greenery. Plants existed elsewhere, of course, but over the years, they'd taken on a chitinous appearance, something more adapted to the realm's volcanic landscape.

Here, delicate leaves waved in the breezy with waxy greens and diaphanous pinks dotting twigs and branches. A mass of wealth was displayed here, solely for pleasure, but why shouldn't that be so? Its creator was striding within it.

Wherever Nokoribi walked, the garden took a deep breath, as if inhaling his presence gave them life. Drooping vines straightened. Wilting flowers regained their color. Yellowing leaves stiffened with green. Nature took respite from the sulfurous air around it.

Every time I joined my friend here, I fought to contain my awe, watching for threats in the matted trees and brush instead. Every time, the wonder of it distracted me in one way or another, but after last week, I'd resolved to never let that happen again.

With unnerving precision, Nokoribi led us to where *it* had happened, and here, he folded to the ground, gesturing for me to join him. Did he know what I'd been considering since last week?

My heart felt heavy as I sat, tucking my legs under me, but rather than voicing an accusation about my possible suspicions, my friend fell back into the grass. Digging his fingers into the soil, he ripped fistfuls of dirt free, lifting them so the granules sprinkled on his face.

"Why do I keep doing this?" he said. "To my people, I'm a figurehead, useless unless they're condemned, and for what? Despite what I was promised, our world has yet to heal. I should stop pretending. I should..."

I listened without judgment. Every leader must have one person they could express their doubts to, and I served in that capacity for Nokoribi. When those doubts became manifest, however...

That was when they became a problem.

"I'm sorry, K. I shouldn't say these things to you," Nokoribi eventually sighed, as he always did.

"I don't mind," I said.

I was only half-listening anyway. Moving my head on a swivel, I kept my eyes roving. The last time I'd relaxed while here, *it* had happened. The last time I'd let myself be solely a friend...

A woman drops out of a tree, rolling to a stop over Nokoribi. I'm lying on the ground beside my friend with no way to reach my weapons in time, no way to throw myself in front of the blade.

Nokoribi gasps, scrabbling in the dirt, but unlike me, his distress sends vines toward the woman, and within seconds, they're holding her in a tight embrace. They stop her dagger's plunge a breath from his flesh.

I'm used to impossibilities like this from him. After all, Nokoribi is blessed by earth and fire, but my inability to protect him is an anomaly. As I spring off the ground, I yank my pistol out of its holster on my back, pivoting it toward the assassin-

"Stop!"

The command freezes me and subsequently, my weapon's swing, bringing its muzzle as close to the woman as her strike had come to my friend. He's finagled himself from beneath that blade, kneeling beside her dangling form, and all the while, my gun strokes her skin with each of her inhales.

"Why?" Nokoribi asks.

For a long while, the woman says nothing, flicking her eyes over our surroundings. Looking for an advantage, no doubt.

"You know why," she eventually gasps.

An answer like that would normally enrage my friend. This time, it makes him droop. He draws breath to speak her death, but something makes him hesitate.

"Whose side?" he asks.

"THEIRS," the woman hisses.

Nokoribi squeezes his fiery eyes closed, digging the heels of his palms into them.

"You tried to kill me," he whispers. "I should kill you, no matter that I've switched sides. The illusion of strength..."

He sighs, and the vines around the woman loosen. She collapses, skittering backward. Really, she should simply flee this place, but when foliage eventually brushes her shoulders, she pauses, glancing back.

"Leave!" Nokoribi growls.

She blends into the green brush around her, disappearing as if she never existed.

He let an enemy live. For our empire's leader, that was the definition of weakness, and Nokoribi had displayed the symptom.

It didn't make sense. I'd known my friend since we were children, from before earth and fire had chosen him. Nokoribi had always been the toughest, strongest kid in our channel, and that spirit had carried over into his reign. What had changed?

Beside me, Nokoribi grumbled, "You'll sit there, brooding, the whole time we're here, won't you?"

"Sorry, 'ribi," I said. "I have a lot on my mind."

I swept my eyes over the trees, listening for aberrant noises. I wouldn't give my friend the chance to display weakness again.

With a groan, Nokoribi sat up.

“You’re the worst person to meditate with,” he said. “Since you refuse to relax, I’ll have to find a task to drown out the roar of your worry, but that should be easy enough. They pile up so quickly.”

Climbing to his feet, he brushed dirt off his clothing and on noting me already standing, rolled his eyes.

“That sense of duty,” he breathed before once more walking through the garden.

Following my friend, Hiyuki’s Blessed Emperor, into the palace, I wondered if I’d have to kill him.

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