

# Chapter Three

Returning to Takanai's confines held a particular fascination for me. From this city came the downtrodden and well-to-do. From this city had crawled an emperor and his bodyguard. From this city, an empire flourished.

Which would explain my shock every time Nokoribi dragged me out of the palace. Maybe it could also explain the memories that came with these visits.

I remembered the grime that coated every surface. I remembered the exposure to a yellow sky and poisoned air. I remembered the vibrations underfoot, produced by the steamworks.

Nokoribi's origins. Where I'd gone to die.

I hated this city.

And I loved it.

I hated the press of the crowd, allowing potential assassins to approach us unnoticed. I loved the people with their many variations in appearance and outfit, their eye colors ranging from black to russet.

I loved the energy: merchants hawking their wares, guild members hurrying to meetings, and ornithopters gliding through the air with advertisements painted on their sails' cloth. I loved the mystery of it, the gauzy fabric obscuring every corner, the gyrating forms hidden behind misted glass. I loved the sounds of grinding gears, chiming bells from passing cycles, and muffled conversations on hundreds of tongues. I *missed*-

Nokoribi stopped short as a band of shrieking children plowed through the crowd ahead of him. One of them tripped, sprawling in the gravel, and when the child sniffed, swiping at his face, Nokoribi offered him a hand up.

"Are you all right, little one?" he asked.

Whirling, the child slapped Nokoribi's hand down. He hissed at us with an uncovered mouth before running after his friends.

Uncovered, meaning without a bubble. A child breathing toxicity.

As if revealed by the boy's fall, I saw the emaciated people on the street corners, begging for food. I saw the distinctive red color staining a gear as it rose from the steamworks. I heard a wail, rising from out of sight, and I *remembered*.

I hated this city.

Staring at his rejected hand, Nokoribi said, "That was us once. Sometimes, I forget. Sometimes..."

Too many eyes were watching us, motionless in the bustle as we were. Too many frowns were being etched onto faces.

Taking Nokoribi's elbow, I guided him into an alley.

"This is why I don't like coming here," I said. "It's too much of a reminder. I can't remember my life from before I met you. If I do-"

"If I don't visit, I forget the reason I fight," Nokoribi interrupted, as if he hadn't heard me. "It's for these people. I have to free Them to free them."

Why did my friend talk nonsense like this sometimes?

"ribi..." I sighed. "You said you have somewhere to be, right?"

With a blink, Nokoribi's focus returned, and my clenched guts eased a fraction. When in Takanai's confines, one needed one's full faculties around them. We couldn't indulge in... whatever that had been.

"Right," he said. "We're almost there. A few more streets to cross and-"

"You're going nowhere."

Oh, how that voice had trembled, and as I turned toward it, I noted that its owner was trembling too. The knife that the teenager was holding flashed in his unstable grip, a gleam that was shared by his oil-pitched eyes.

A scared, desperate kid, probably trying this for the first time, and he'd picked the worst possible targets.

A laugh flew out of me before I could stop it, but Nokoribi's fingers, pinching my neck, stopped a second from joining it.

"You don't want to do this, kid."

The calm in Nokoribi's voice contrasted with the teenager's fear, and frowning, he lowered his blade a fraction.

"You haven't broken any laws yet," my friend continued. "Think about what you're doing. Is what you want from us worth dying for?"

Licking his lips, the teenager said, "Just- just give me your rations, and no one gets hurt."

With a grimace, I stepped in front of Nokoribi.

“And now, he’s broken a law,” I said.

“He’s a kid, K. Like we were,” Nokoribi whispered behind me.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “Only the weak turn to crime, and weakness must be excised.”

The silence at my back weighed heavy on me, but I couldn’t contemplate what it might mean. My focus was fixed on the teenager’s swaying stance and the weave of his blade, on how pathetic of a blade it was.

“Please,” the kid whimpered. “Just-”

“No. You’ll get nothing from us,” I said. “Now, either run home or fight.”

Why had I offered him a choice? I should have attacked without a word, but I hadn’t. Why?

Howling, the teenager rushed us, swinging his blade, and I sighed. Such a sloppy form.

Leaning away from the teenager’s thrust, I grabbed his shoulder and tossed him into a wall. He bounced off of it as if it were made of rubber. As he stumbled to regain his footing, a flying elbow caught me in the face, making my spectacles shatter. Only quickly closed eyes kept me from losing my vision, but because I couldn’t see, the kid landed a punch on my jaw.

That... had *hurt*.

Ripping the spectacles off my face, I caught the kid’s second fist, flying at me, before grabbing his wrist as he made a desperate stab. Twisting the knife free, I drove my forehead into the bridge of the teenager’s nose, and at his expected howl, I twirled him, trapping him between my body’s weight and the wall.

“ribi, I need a knife,” I panted.

When my friend stopped beside me with no steel in sight, I bit back a curse.

“Turn him to where he can see me,” Nokoribi said.

Grabbing the kid’s hair, I pulled his head off the wall, yanking it to the side. As soon as the teenager’s weeping eyes were focused on him, Nokoribi removed his spectacles, cleaning them on his shirt. When fire rose to meet the kid’s gaze, even I felt a chill from the sight, and the tears and mucus dribbling over my captive’s face increased in volume.

“Do you know who I am?” Nokoribi said.

“Please, most blessed,” the kid whimpered. “I was just hungry. I need food.”

“I care not for your plight,” Nokoribi snapped. “I care only that you’ve attacked my most sacred personage and in so doing, threatened Hiyuki’s stability. Do you know what would happen if I died

with an heir yet to be found?"

The kid nodded, ripping tufts of his hair out of my fingers.

"The earth rises up, fire scours the world, earth's blood spews into the clouds and sky," he said, reciting an age-old school lesson.

"Hiyuki dies," Nokoribi finished. "Do you know the punishment for attacking me?"

Hitching sobs jumbled any reply that the kid might have made, and warm liquid splashed on the pavement from beneath his pant leg.

Calmly, Nokoribi said, "I asked you a question."

He seemed completely unaffected by the sight in front of him.

"D-death," the kid managed to stammer.

"In whatever manner I see fit," Nokoribi said. "Good. I'm glad you understand."

And I waited for the command. However Nokoribi decided to dispense justice, I'd comply with it because that was my role, just as it was my friend's role to give the order.

"Let him go," Nokoribi said.

I kept pinning the teenager to the wall because I couldn't have heard that right. That order...

"K. Let him go," Nokoribi repeated.

And suddenly, someone else was controlling my body. *I would never willingly back away from a person who'd threatened my emperor and friend. I would never stand with my hands like leaden weights as that person sprinted into the crowd. I would never turn on my friend and want to strangle him, but that state wasn't because Nokoribi had just conclusively shown that he was infected.*

Oh, no. I was nowhere close to considering that fact. An inferno was blazing in me that I extinguished with difficulty, but once I had, the truth hit me like that kid's elbow had to my face.

"Weak," I breathed, staring into coronas of fire. "That's twice now. . Two, separate people who've tried to hurt you, and *you let them walk away*. I should kill you where you stand."

My best friend. Dead by my hand. And the agonizing fate that would await me.

I couldn't take it.

Hanging his spectacles off of his ears once more, Nokoribi said, "We'll discuss it over dinner. For now, I have somewhere to be."

...What?

"What?" I shouted as I ran after my friend.

"I have somewhere to be," Nokoribi repeated, "and we're almost there."

"No, no, no," I said.

Rounding on my friend, I spread a hand on his chest.

"I just said I should *kill you*," I said. "You can't-"

"And I said we'd discuss it," Nokoribi muttered while rummaging through his pockets. "Put these on. Your eyes are drawing... well. Eyes."

He slapped another pair of spectacles into my hand. Of course he'd had another pair on him.

Struck dumb, I numbly followed my friend for several blocks. What...? How could he be so *calm* right now?

After several minutes of this, Nokoribi spun to face me.

"Don't get mad," he said.

"More than I already..."

Trailing off, I realized why this street felt so familiar. I'd walked down it before. Several times. With Nokoribi.

"Again?" I hissed. "You've dragged us out of the palace's safety for..."

I turned to the side, scrunching up my face with displeasure and disgust, before continuing.

"For *this*. Again. How many times will this visit make?"

"Over the last week? Four," Nokoribi said. "And on each visit, a good time was had by all."

"Except for me!" I growled. "Do you know how difficult these visits make my job? Not that you'd care!"

Huffing, I threw my hands over my head.

"Why come all the way out here for this?" I asked. "You could have whatever and whomever you want sent to the palace for your enjoyment."

"I don't want just anyone, though," Nokoribi said, "and the one I want to see will only meet me here."

He turned into a small establishment, sliding its door to the side as he went. I stiffly followed, promptly turning into a statue once I'd passed through the threshold.

In the entrance, a scantily clad woman glanced up from her book, smiling when she saw us.

"Gentlemen!" she said. "So nice to see you again."

"Same to you, Morihei," Nokoribi said. "Is she in?"

"Indeed. Shall I let her know you're here?"

Chuckling, Nokoribi said, "There's no need. She's expecting me."

"I see," Morihei said with a smile. "And your friend? Anything for him this time?"

As if oblivious to my indignation, Nokoribi turned to raise an eyebrow at me. He'd made the same offer on our first visit here, and at the time, I'd definitively refused it. I had no problem with these sorts of businesses, so long as they were well-maintained and their employees were treated properly. My problem had never lain with that.

No, it lay with how to protect my friend if this place's provided entertainment were to distract me, and *that was all there was to it*.

I gave the same answer today as I had back then. Folding to the ground, I crossed my arms, all while glaring at my friend.

"I'll take that as a no," Morihei said. "It's his loss, but I do hope that *you* enjoy your time with us, good sir."

"I'm sure I will," Nokoribi said with a chuckle.

Before he could vanish behind a nearby curtain, I stopped my friend.

"That discussion," I said. "We will have it, right?"

"Yes," Nokoribi said, softly smiling. "I promise."

He left me with a scantily clad woman and my thoughts, and I did my best to ignore the moans coming from behind the curtain that had hidden him. I ignored what my friend must be doing. I ignored what Nokoribi had become.

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Revision #1

Created 1 December 2024 04:21:25 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:48:39 by FatalisticFable