

# Chapter Two

No one enjoyed policy meetings, but then, who could? Everyone in the room knew that these proceedings were a farce. No matter what happened here, the well-oiled machinery of Hiyuki's governance would tick on, but tradition required that these weekly gatherings take place, and the total *waste of time* they'd become infuriated me.

Or perhaps that was the man who was speaking.

"Productivity in Takanai's east produce sector is down another two percent," Guild Chair Arita was saying. "We should cut rations if we don't want another food scare."

"And cutting rations won't do the same thing?" Nokoribi asked.

He was inspecting his fingernails as if the man who chaired Hiyuki's largest agriculture guild didn't deserve the honor of his gaze, and as usual, Arita's cheeks flooded with the red that his tarnished eyes could use.

"The people expect ration cuts, oh must blessed," he said. "If we run out of food, however..."

I stopped paying attention. Arita would continue with 'suggesting' a way to fix his supposed crisis. Nokoribi would continue making comments on it, but despite his emperor's proposed changes to his plan, the guild chairman would only do what he wanted because who could force him to do otherwise? The emperor most blessed?

If only that were so. Maybe before the guilds' rise...

That time lay centuries in the past, though. In the present day, Nokoribi held absolute power in one area alone. I didn't fully understand the specifics of that task, only when it happened, and no one was calling for it now.

So, Arita and Nokoribi exchanged barbs as if they mattered, and I did my job.

The primary threat, as always, came from them: the guild chairs, lounging around a net-draped table. Wearing vests and knee-length jackets, glistening with embroidery, they made up the throne's opposition, even if no one ever spoke such things aloud. If Nokoribi were no longer required to soothe the beast we walked upon, the guild chairmen wouldn't hesitate to remove him from office before destroying the remnants of Hiyuki's monarchy.

For today, however, they were content with the status quo. Most of them listened to the discussion with glazed eyes, but some had plunged into their books or ledgers, ignoring the honor given to them until their turn came to fake humility and obeisance. None displayed signs of hidden violence, and even if they did, they weren't much of a threat right now.

After the assassination attempt earlier today, each of the guild chairs has been thoroughly searched before attending this meeting. The only weapons they'd been allowed were the walking canes that had recently come into fashion, and I could easily counter those.

Even if they'd decided to attack, the attempt would have been tantamount to suicide.

Standing beside the earth's blood channels that lined the room, the royal guardsmen were watching for disturbances. With their leather boots and crimson tunics, they might not look impressive, but anyone smart enough to look past the surface would know differently. Even with solely ceremonial swords at their sides, Nokoribi's royal guard carried a reputation for cool and precise elimination of threats.

And preparedness. Even in the palace, where one needn't worry about air quality, the royal guard wore their bubbles, hiding the translucent film over their mouths with their tunics' collars. Only its coiled metal attachment, rising to wrap around their ears, peeked above ribbed cloth. On the rare chance that a dissident breached the palace's self-contained atmosphere, the guard could face the threat in an instant, having no need to wait for their emergency bubbles to inflate.

"-steamworks-"

The word caught my attention like an ornithopter would with a breeze. Guild Chair Sunada had replaced Arita on the open floor.

As she was the first woman to have taken over a guild's leadership, I'd spent far too long investigating her years ago, especially after I'd learned that she bore the coal eyes of the downtrodden. In my many weeks of poring over her background and activities, I'd found not a single item worthy of suspicion, but I couldn't help the itch to hold a weapon whenever she spoke.

It didn't help that she served as the chairman for Takanai's steamworks guild. The infrastructure under Hiyuki's capital city transformed earth's blood into steam, providing energy for its citizens, and because of that, it rivaled the agriculture guilds in importance. Even still, those who operated the steamworks were treated as nothing more than dogs.

Or rather, that had been the case until a few months ago, when Nokoribi had once more taken an interest in them. That spark of interest had heralded the moment that I believed my friend had contracted the disease of weakness.

"Upon your suggestion, most blessed, I've added ropes and harnesses to the places most heavily concerned with handling earth's blood," Sunada said, "and while it has prevented a few accidents, I haven't seen an increase in productivity, as you proposed might occur from lightened morale. All I've seen is a cut in my guild's profits, which is unacceptable."

Sighing, Nokoribi said, "It's only been a month. Did you expect your steam rats to believe their chairwoman suddenly cares in such a short time?"

To her credit, Sunada at least *tried* to appear chagrined at that.

“Forgive me, most blessed,” she said, “but I expected to see something I could use to justify the changes to the rest of my guild. Lessened productivity is the opposite of what I needed. Given that, I plan to return to the old ways soon, although I thank you for your suggestions.”

As she fell silent, I noted a tic starting at the corner of my friend’s mouth. I saw his shoulders drawing together and groaned under my breath.

With great deliberation, Nokoribi stood, pressing his fingertips into the tabletop.

“Funds, budgets, profits. Is that all these policy meetings are to you?” he breathed. “What about the people? When did the guild chairs... when did I stop caring about people’s lives? People who trust us...”

With his voice strangled, Nokoribi curled his hands until his knuckles were resting on the table’s metal surface.

“Get out,” he said. “I... require time to consider today’s propositions.”

The guild chairs exchanged glances until one of them cleared his throat.

“But most blessed, we haven’t-”

“GET OUT!” Nokoribi roared.

As he shot his head up, the entire room, me included, flinched from the flames dancing in his crimson eyes.

“Get out of my sight before I give Them a moment of freedom!” he shouted.

There was that mysterious 'Them' again, the mention of which always prompted fear in everyone who heard it. I still didn't know exactly who or what 'They' were, mostly because I didn't much care to find out. All I needed to know was that mentioning 'Them' was a sufficient threat to stop the guild chairmen's protests.

Hastily gathering ledgers and pens, the guilds' chairmen filed out of the room, and I signaled for the royal guard to follow them. They’d keep an eye on the enemy until this outburst had cooled.

Once the last of them had disappeared behind a closing door, Nokoribi hurled his chair to clatter along the table’s length. He pressed one hand to his eyes, so hard that I worried they might pop, and curled the other into a fist, battering at the side of his head.

“Shut up!” he hissed. “Shut up, shut up, *shut up!*”

I watched this, holding my pistol’s grip. I’d never seen my friend so unstable before. Was it a progression of his disease? Or was it simply frustration: him banishing the guild chairs before they could see it?

With a final cry, Nokoribi lowered his hands to his sides, and the snarl on his lips returned to a neutral line.

“Sorry, K,” he said. “They get so loud sometimes and I-”

He shook his head.

“I’ve needed to commune with the earth for a while. I’ve meant to do it but…”

He cocked his head as if listening, and I rushed to fill my expected role.

“You’ve been busy,” I said.

“Busy,” Nokoribi said, drawing the word out. “Yes.”

While he watched, I collected the thrown chair, righting it in its relegated place. Setting my feet shoulder-width apart, I folded my arms behind my back.

“My emperor, where shall we go next?” I asked.

Nokoribi hid his eyes.

“I keep telling you to stop that,” he said. “We’re alone. You can treat me like your rebellious minion, like you did when we were kids.”

“Forgive me, but I cannot,” I said. “I’ll relax to a degree when we’re alone, but ‘ribi, those kids? They died when earth and fire chose you.”

For a moment, Nokoribi crumpled on himself, but when he took a deep breath, he expanded again.

“Fine,” he breathed before clearing his throat and trying again. “Fine. I have somewhere to be, but we’ll need new outfits first.”

Today’s meeting had taken place not far from the emperor’s bedroom. When we arrived there, Nokoribi waved off the servants who came to attend him. He moved through the organza hanging around the room, wading through pillows until he reached his bed.

Kneeling, he reached under it to withdraw a chest, and after rummaging in it for a bit, he tossed a bundle of wadded clothing at me.

“Change,” he said.

Unfurling a buttoned-up shirt, suspenders, and plaid pants, I groaned.

“This again?”

“K. Change,” Nokoribi said.

Mumbling curses under my breath, I undressed.

While I might serve as the commander of the royal guard, I wore a different uniform from them, all part of my duties as Nokoribi's bodyguard. My clothing was more akin to what the guild chairs wore, but it came with three differentiations.

For one, a cloak was always hanging from one of my shoulders, and as I removed its heavy cloth, I rolled sore muscles. The metal fibers woven into its cloth had kept me alive through numerous assassination attempts, but at the end of the day, taking it off always came as a relief.

The second piece was my mask. Removing it left me feeling vulnerable. Sure, its monster-like appearance had been molded to my face, which usually gave assassins a split-second pause, but it also hid the one feature I most hated about myself.

Black painted Sunada's eyes, and people derided her, despite her status as a guild's chairman. Rust tinged Arita's, and most citizens ignored him. Rubies, set aflame, had replaced Nokoribi's, and he was the emperor.

My eyes were cherry red. No, that description didn't quite cover it. If someone took freshly spilled blood, mixed it with scarlet, and infused it with fire's luster, the resulting color would match the shade of my eyes. They *hurt* to view, and often times when I was unmasked around the emperor, people mistook me for him.

I *hated* that. By a stroke of luck, earth and fire had chosen my friend, not me, and I needed no reminders that it probably should have gone the other way.

My pants, vest, and shirt hid the mask from view, and I reluctantly removed my last concession as Nokoribi's bodyguard: my pistol.

Except in times of war, I was the only person who was legally allowed to carry this fantastic weapon. Others owned one, of course, getting their hands on the weapon through the black market, but severe punishment lay in wait for anyone found with a pistol in their possession. Such people were fed to fire with no period served as a condemned and no appeal made to the emperor. They were merely doused in earth's blood, usually shrieking all the while.

I never took this privilege for granted. The gun, hanging at my back, reminded me of my responsibilities. As the emperor's bodyguard, I was to protect his blessed personage from harm, both that of the physical and of weakness, and if I detected disease in him...

With my fingers twitching, I watched my friend button his shirt, and once he was finished, Nokoribi twirled to face me.

"What do you think?" he asked.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "I think we're missing a few things."

"Oh, right."

After once more digging through the chest at the foot of his bed, Nokoribi tossed said items my way, and I hung a bubble over my nose and mouth while perching darkened spectacles on my nose.

Once he'd followed my example, Nokoribi said, "Better?"

"Much," I said. "I don't know why you insist on these disguises. You know that people will see through them, right?"

"Of course they will, but they'll *pretend* that they haven't noticed us," Nokoribi said. "That's what Hiyuki values the most, right? Ignorance of all things strange?"

With a sigh, I said, "You know I've never liked philosophy, 'ribi."

"Too true," Nokoribi said, chuckling all the while. "Well then, my faithful vassal. Shall we be off?"

Without waiting for a reply, he headed for his bedroom's secret exit, and together, he and I snuck out of the palace.

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