
The Foes Who Make Us

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EIGANJO. TEMPLE GARDENS

Ten minutes before the attack

“Heiko, *wait*.” Norika puts every ounce of authority she can muster into her ten-year-old voice and, as always, it has zero effect on her cousin.

Ahead, Heiko pushes through the vines on the arbor to see the teahouse down the path. For the past week, pilgrims visiting Eiganjo to petition the emperor have whispered about an apparition in the tea garden. A shimmer in the air that devours birds midflight. It is the beginning of a merge, the pilgrims predict. An opening to the spirit realm.

Heiko, only eight, is not allowed to leave the family compound, and neither of them are permitted to venture all the way to the garden district, but Heiko has a way of talking Norika into adventures. And though Norika understands well her responsibilities as the elder cousin, the eldest daughter of the Yamazaki household, the more Heiko pesters her, the more she has to admit—she wants to see the merge, too.

So now she finds herself, as usual, trying to stop Heiko from going too far.

Heiko reaches a hand down and taps the backs of two fingers against the side of her leg. Their secret signal for *You need to chill out*. They both have a lot of practice giving, and ignoring, this signal.

Norika does not chill out. “Heiko get back here right”—but she breaks off because there *is* something strange by the teahouse. A glimmer in the air, like the play of light on water. And—is it getting bigger?

A branch cracks, and Norika realizes that Heiko has crept through the arbor. The slash of light stretches broader than her arm span and glows white-hot. Staring up, Heiko gives another signal. The toe of her right foot casually taps the heel of her left. *Just go with it*.

She takes a step toward the merge, one hand outstretched. The slash quivers and widens. Something is shouldering its way through the gap. A figure twice the size of a human, wrapped in ghostly robes. A sword protrudes from its stomach, the hilt buried in its back. It has no face, only a swirl of dark vapor that reaches out toward the girls. Heiko stares, transfixed.



Unforgiving One | Art by: Fariba Khamseh

The vapor condenses, spirals, becomes a vortex of shadow. The kami swoops forward, driving the vortex toward Heiko.

Norika sees the kami dive and, without thinking, flings herself forward to knock her cousin out of the path of the tunnel of darkness. She leaps, but never lands. Instead, she is suspended within a beam of pain—no thought, no muscles, no skin, no bone—and then it sweeps past. The pain is yanked from all the spaces between her cells. From now on, she will be filled with gaps, a hundred thousand papercuts that never heal.

Without seeing, she feels herself hit the ground.

SOKENZANSHI. CITY CENTER

Ten years after the attack

Wind whistles down the alley, and Heiko swears aloud as the cold penetrates her jacket. She thought she was prepared for winter, but she's realizing now that winter means one thing in the gardens of Eiganjo, and something entirely different in mountainous Sokenzanshi.

Part of her relishes the chill. Serves her right for coming alone to this city where she knows no one and nothing. Serves her right for fleeing her family the moment her eighteenth birthday arrived. But she couldn't have stayed in Eiganjo a minute longer than she had to. Couldn't bear the way her parents spoke her name like a mark of shame. Couldn't bear her relatives blaming her for Norika's injuries.

But worst of all, for a long time, Heiko couldn't bear to meet Norika's eyes. Every time she looked at her cousin, she saw Norika's still body lying in the hospital bed, as she had for nine months after the kami attack. Even though Norika was growing stronger every day, learning to use the neuroprosthesis given to her by the Imperial medics, studying for the Imperial samurai entry exam, doing all the things her family had feared she had lost. By the time Heiko found the courage to seek out her cousin, Norika

had grown distant, preoccupied with training and new cadet friends. And Heiko, so used to being in front, found herself left behind.

So now she walks the icy streets of a strange city, without even sufficient wind-repellent tech built into her clothes. And she can only half-relish the cold, because also, she's *ravenous*.



Sokenzan, Crucible of Defiance | Art by: Lucas Staniec

Around a corner, she finds the street crowded with people, bundled in what looks like all their clothes at once. They form a winding, ragged line up to a huge cooking fire set in the middle of the street. Two people ladle rice soup from a cauldron as high as their waists.

The people remind Heiko of the lines of pilgrims seeking an audience with the emperor, back before she vanished. But those pilgrims always looked grim and exhausted, while the mood here is warm despite the chill. People smile to each other in line, and children dart between the legs of the adults.

Heiko skirts the crowd, looking for somewhere to buy a meal. She is almost past the servers at the cauldron when one of them calls to her.

"If you want food, you have to wait in line!"

She is flustered. "What?"

The server shakes their head. "Nothing I hate more than a line cutter."

"Oh no—I don't need—that," she trails off.

The server looks her up and down. "You sure look like you need it."

"I mean—other people need it more. I have money. I'm just here looking for the Uprisers."

The server raises an eyebrow. "Looking for the Uprisers, but too good to eat our cooking?"

Another gust of wind snatches away Heiko's remaining composure. "Oh, I didn't mean—you?"

The server gives a small bow. "You expected all of us to be fighters?"

They have a round face and shrewd eyes. Above their head, the shades of three long-handled teapots orbit lazily in the air. Heiko is trying to formulate a response when three Imperial mechs appear at the other end of the block.

"This is an unauthorized assembly," their amplified voices blare. *"This street must be accessible to vehicles."*

They advance, forcing people out of the soup line and up onto the sidewalks. The server waves their ladle and calls to the crowd, "Stay calm! We'll relocate! Nobody needs to"—

But they are cut off by the mechs, who tower over the soup cauldron, their armor clacking in the wind. The lead mech spits out a glowing ticket from a slot on its chest. *"Unauthorized food distribution. To contest this, please report to the Imperial depot at"—*

SPLAT. A snowball hits the mech on the back of its helmet. Slush runs off white scaled armor. The mech spins around, and Heiko realizes that behind it, many of the people in line are no longer bundled in winter rags. Under their lumpy clothes, they've revealed enameled exosuits, customized and hand-made, with glowing cracks running through ceramic plates.

The mech steps toward them, spewing tickets. *"Unauthorized possession of technological augments. To contest, please report"—*

SPLAT. Another snowball hits it, this time from the opposite direction.

Heiko presses her palm to her face, trying to ease the sting from the ice ball she just threw.

"Um, I would run." The server's voice is quiet; their teapots spin very close to their head. "Now." Heiko runs.

She spends what feels like hours ducking between buildings, darting between the warm walls of armory forges until she no longer hears the clatter of the mechs tailing her. Only when she is sure she has lost them does she drag her wet, shivery, ravenous form through the doorway of the first cafe she finds.

The inside is dark with steam and breath. Pipes in the walls hold water heated by the forge, bearing warmth through the rooms. People talk over low tables with light displays rising between them. Glowing menus and news bulletins slide across the walls.

Blinking to adjust her eyes, Heiko moves to the back counter. A server is wrapping kelp rolls and dropping them into a pot. As they work, three long-handled teapots hover above the pot and pour in boiling water one at a time. Heiko gasps, "You again?"

The server's shrewd eyes crinkle. "You must be good at running."

"I've had practice."

The server's face breaks into a smile. "Earlier, I said you looked like you needed a meal, but now you *really* look like you need it."

Heiko doesn't protest. Perched on a counter stool, she inhales a bowl of steaming broth and kelp rolls, gold coins of fat shimmering on the surface. As she eats, she tries to explain herself. "Thank you. I'm sorry. I came without a plan. I just know—I'm supposed to find Risona."

The server laughs. "Everybody wants to find Risona. What makes you special?"

"Nothing, I just"—

"You don't think you're special?"

“No, but”—

“I’m teasing. You’re doing great. I’m Chiye.” They salute with their ladle. “And if you turn around”—they gesture behind her—“that’s Risona.”

In the darkest corner of the shop, a figure sits wrapped in a voluminous cloak. When Heiko turns, the figure rises and pushes back her hood. Risona is tall and grave, with red cords wound through her hair and lines around her eyes. When she speaks, her voice is warm but stern. “Throwing that snowball was a stupid thing to do.”

With food in her, Heiko has the strength to be indignant. “People always say that like it’s going to stop me.”

Risona laughs, grimly. “You must be a soft little rich kid, if people only try to stop you with words.”

Heiko wants to say something cutting in reply, but a voice in her head whispers, *Wait*. She swallows her retort and decides to try honesty. “My family serves the Imperial Council. But I’m not one of them anymore. I can’t be. I need a fresh start.” She looks into Risona’s eyes. “I’m hoping to find it with people who believe in justice.”

She thinks—hopes—she sees Risona’s grim expression tempered by a flicker of generosity.

“You have a good arm. You’re quick on your feet. No impulse control, but”—

“I have *some* impulse control!”

Risona sighs. “*But*, Chiye here says they’ll sponsor you.”

Chiye chimes in, “I have a feeling.”

Risona leans in close to Heiko. “This isn’t an easy life. Every season, the Imperials insist it will get better. But every season, it falls to us to keep each other alive. Is that really what you want?”

Heiko feels a warmth deep in her belly. Maybe it’s from the steaming soup. Maybe it’s the satisfaction of watching the snowball hit the mech. Maybe it’s the heat of Chiye’s smile, which she can feel even though her back is turned. She meets Risona’s eyes. “Yes.”

EIGANJO. IMPERIAL COURT

Twelve years after the attack

Norika sits in the medic’s chair, breathing deeply as small needles dart over her body and sting her skin. Her arms, legs, and back are covered with intricate turquoise designs. From far away they look like tattoos, but up close they have more dimensionality: augments laid into her skin.

After the unknown kami swept through her, she was paralyzed for weeks, wracked with pain. No one knew how or when she would recover. Then the Imperials offered newly approved neuroprosthesis to her family, and over nine months, the prosthetics grew into her like lichen. When the drugs finally wore off and she sat up, she felt euphoric. The pain was no longer a monster that shook her in its teeth but a companion to be tended.

Over the years, she lets the pain teach her about patience, and rest. She learns to value stillness as much as action. She trains when she can, and when she cannot, she reads history, poetry, botany. She learns to care for herself and tries not to think too much about the younger cousin she once tended

like her own shadow. When her flare-ups grow too frequent, she returns to the medics to update her augments.

At first, her teachers at the academy don't know what to make of this student who quotes the epics like an old scholar and is absent for weeks on end. She wins them over with her willingness to listen, and to see problems from new angles. After graduation, she is accepted as an aide to the Imperial advisor Naomi. Then the emperor vanishes. As Naomi's influence grows, so do Norika's responsibilities. She becomes chief handler of the merge in Eiganjo, the same one that once disgorged the kami that attacked her. She has held this position for the past four years.

Today, as the medical machines work on her updates, Norika contemplates her most recent conversation with Naomi. A week ago, her mentor summoned her to the strategy room, where a topographical map of the realm was overlaid with holograms of moving trains, flying mechs, flickering merge gates. When Norika entered, Naomi directed her attention to the south of the map. "The bandit problem in Sokenzanshi has gotten out of hand. I need you to take command there."



Naomi, Pillar of Order | Art by: Joshua Raphael

"Sokenzanshi?" Something tightened in Norika's stomach.

"I know, it's far. And cold. And it won't be glamorous work." Naomi paused. "But I think a change is important. It can't be easy, serving at this gate, given your history."

Norika started to protest but broke off. Her mentor was gifted at speaking the truths others tried to avoid. Norika *was* weary of Eiganjo. She was ready for a change.

In the present, the machine beeps to notify her that her updates are complete. Norika sits up. Her body feels invigorated but the tightness in her gut persists. It's not that the job will be cold and unglamorous; Norika welcomes a challenge. But she senses something awaits her in Sokenzanshi, a reckoning she can't yet name.

SOKENZANSHI. WAREHOUSE DISTRICT

Twelve years, six months after the attack

It's after midnight, and Heiko and Chiye are robbing a train. Someday, Heiko imagines, they might spend a different kind of evening together. People-watching over dinner in a restaurant, or dressing up to see a play. But when Chiye heard rumors of Imperial train cars sitting locked and full of provisions in the railyard on the outskirts of the city, they could think of nothing else. And so this night, like so many of their nights, is spent in light armor and dark cloaks, scouting around corners, keeping to the shadows as they run.

The moon is hidden, and the railyard is silent. The cargo car is secured with only a single rusty padlock. Chiye's teapots shoot concentrated jets of steam at the lock's hasp, and the mechanism shatters.

Chiye frowns. "That was too easy."

"Or, was it the perfect application of your unique abilities?"

Chiye rolls their eyes. "It was too easy."

They heave open the sliding door. The train car is packed with enough provisions for hundreds of people. There is barely room to walk between pallets of rice, bushels of flour and barley, crates marked with preserved fish and vegetables

Heiko shakes with disgust. "How dare they hoard this. When people are foraging in trash heaps for their children?"

Chiye touches her lightly on the arm. "Speeches later. Let's move fast. I heard a new administrator just arrived, really cracking down." They hoist a crate through the car door and onto the hover cart they have brought with them.

Heiko jumps up beside them and lifts a pallet. "The administrator should thank us, really. All this food just *happened* to get forgotten, and we *happened* to be in the right place to return it to its rightful owners: the hungry people of Sokenzanshi."

A voice behind them sneers, "Such dedicated citizens of the realm." There is another light touch on Heiko's arm, but this time it's not Chiye. It's a pair of automatic restraints, cinching her wrists behind her back before she can reach for her sword. Chiye's wrists are bound also. Two Imperial enforcers pull them out of the car and throw them to the ground, leaning down to hiss, "The commander wishes to deliver her thanks in person."

Cold earth grinds into Heiko's cheek. The teapots around Chiye's head whistle a constant, earsplitting shriek. Through the noise, Heiko hears light, precise footsteps and the clicking of augmented armor. The enforcers leap into a salute. "Commander!"

Heiko feels the new presence inspecting both of them. A nuanced voice says, "I didn't think the dreaded bandits of Sokenzanshi would be so unsubtle."

Chiye spits, "I'm not a bandit, I'm a cook."

The commander responds wryly. "I hear in this city, one can be both."

Something in her tone causes a twinge in the back of Heiko's mind.

The enforcers grab Heiko's and Chiye's shoulders and wrench them up. The commander towers over them in white armor edged with gold. Her helmet resembles panels of origami, folded intricately over her face and sweeping back into twin fans.

At the sight of their disheveled faces, the commander steps back. Her armored hand flies to the hilt of her sword, releases it, hovers over the pommel. When she speaks, her voice has turned brittle. “*What are you doing here?*”

Heiko is ashamed that she allowed Chiye to be captured, but the question summons back her outrage. “What are we doing here? What are *you* doing here, using food for a thousand people as a *trap*? What are you doing here, in this city where nobody wants you?” She lunges sideways, hits the ground again and struggles back upright, still yelling, “I hope you all starve to death, just so you can know”—

And then she breaks off, because the twinge in her brain is back. It pulls her attention toward the commander’s left hand. Almost imperceptibly, the commander is tapping the backs of two fingers against her armored leg.

You need to chill out.

The thought Heiko cannot think blooms then into a waterfall of questions tumbling one after another. It can’t be Norika. It can’t be. The Uprisers have instilled enough restraint in her that her face shows nothing, but her breath shifts enough that Chiye looks sharply at her.

Heiko composes herself as best she can with her arms tied behind her back. “On second thought, I have decided to become a model prisoner.” She flashes a smile at the enforcers. “Thank you for your service to the realm.”

The enforcers scoff, but the commander cuts in. “I need to interrogate these prisoners alone. Leave us.” The enforcers hesitate just long enough for the commander to bark, “Now!” and then scurry away across the train tracks.

When they are gone, the commander bows her head, and removes her helmet. Even in the darkness, Norika’s eyes are just as Heiko remembers them, though now they look out of an adult’s face. Norika meets her gaze, and for a second, Heiko is hurled back to the image of her cousin motionless in the hospital bed. Again, her breath catches in her throat. Next to her, she can feel Chiye working to assemble information. In answer to the silent question, Heiko says, “This is my cousin, Norika Yamazaki. We were children together.” She hopes Chiye can hear all the unspoken things that go into those last four words.

Chiye is silent for a long moment. Then: “So, I take it pigheadedness runs in the family.”

Norika laughs. She draws a glyph in the air, and the restraints spring open.

Heiko stands and helps Chiye to their feet. She looks everywhere but her cousin’s face—at her armor, her boots, her gleaming, unblooded sword. “Looks like you got everything you wanted.”

“Not quite.” Norika’s voice sounds almost joyful. “I would have picked a better location for a reunion.”

Sensation rushes back to Heiko’s hands and, with it, her anger returns. How dare Norika laugh? “I wasn’t joking, you know. Asking why you’re here, when people are starving”—

“I know.” Norika cuts her off. “You’re right. I don’t want anyone else to die. I’m here to fix this. And when I saw you, I realized—Heiko, this is an opportunity.”

Norika’s smooth transition to diplomacy fills Heiko with more rage. “I’m not a *collaborator*.” The word slices through the quiet night.

Norika’s expression tightens. “We grew up in an Imperial household.”

“Yes, and I left.”

“And now you’re acting like a child.”

“Actually, she’s acting like an Upriser,” Chiye interjects. “Maybe you’ve heard? The Uprisers take everyone. No matter how *unsavory* their origins.”

Norika smirks. “Oh, I’ve heard plenty about the Uprisers.”

Heiko feels nauseated. This is why she left. Nothing could ever be easy between them. Every word spoken only makes things unravel faster. She rounds on Norika. “Are we your prisoners?”

Norika steps away. “I would never do that to you.”

“What a gift.” Heiko spits. “Let’s go.”

“Heiko, don’t walk away from me.” Norika sounds desperate. “Not this time.”

“You don’t get to command me.”

“I’m asking you. Please. *Heiko, wait.*”

This sentence makes Heiko freeze. It hurts. And it hurts to admit it hurts. The way those words echo back across years. Heiko takes a deep breath and turns to Chiye.

“You should go. Find Risona. Tell her it’s a trap. Tell her I’m okay.”

Chiye grabs her shoulders. “No way I’m leaving you alone with an Imperial commander. I don’t care whose cousin she is.”

Heiko cups Chiye’s face. “And that’s why I love you, but please, trust me.”

“That’s why you what?”

“I mean—you need to leave now.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you, now *get out of here.*”

Chiye saunters up to an inch from Norika’s face. “Did you hear? That person over there just said she loves me. Now, I haven’t told her yet, but I love her, too. And if you harm a hair on her head, you see these teapots? Their steam can melt the flesh off a human face in one and a half seconds. You understand?”

On the far side of the tracks, they blow a kiss to Heiko, then vanish into the shadows.

Norika looks back to Heiko. “You’re really one of them now.”

Heiko can’t help the bitterness in her voice. “My real family didn’t want me.”

Norika’s mouth curls. “Most people rebel against their families, but they don’t rebel against the entire realm.”

“You didn’t care how I felt then, and you don’t have to care now.”

Norika closes the distance between them and grabs Heiko’s shirt. “Don’t you dare say I don’t care about you. Don’t you dare.”

Heiko’s heart pounds. She sees tears on the rims of Norika’s eyes. She mumbles, “I didn’t say—I didn’t mean that.”

Norika lets go. She wipes her eyes as quickly as she can. “You still know how to get to me.”

Heiko’s eyes narrow. “You knew I was here, didn’t you? That’s why you accepted this position. You thought I could help you.”

Now Norika drops her eyes. “I didn’t know for certain. I had a feeling. And my feelings are usually correct.”

Heiko steps back. “I hear stories about you. Your ambition. The poet-warrior of the realm. Am I just another stepping stone in your rise to power?”



Norika Yamazaki, the Poet | Art by: Magali Villeneuve

“What about you? You would starve your chosen family out of pride? To spite me?”

“You’re just like our family. You think I’m supposed to spend my whole life in debt to you because of the accident, no way to ever escape it.”

Their faces are inches apart. Norika speaks icily. “If that’s true, it’s just like I have to spend my entire life remembering that moment, in every nerve of my body. I don’t get to escape either.”

At her words, Heiko feels a stab of pain she can’t bear, so she transmutes it back to anger. “Get off me.” She pushes past Norika, but her cousin blocks her again, this time with her sword barring Heiko’s chest. The glint of steel makes Heiko snarl and draw her sword. Norika spins and leaps in her way a third time, and Heiko attacks in earnest, flame rippling along her blade. Her anger makes her wild, and she leaps for Norika’s throat.

But Norika, with perfect form, feints, disengages, and knocks Heiko away with one blow. Heiko lands hard, her cheekbone hitting the train track. She tastes iron. She feels blood run down her face.

Norika springs on her, pressing her sword to Heiko’s throat. “You idiot.” She is breathing hard. “I didn’t come here to make you pay. I came here to forgive you.”

The pressure of the blade disappears, and the sword clatters on the tracks. Norika stands, and Heiko scrambles up into a crouch. She holds her expression rigid as a mask. If she speaks, she will cry.

Norika backs up, hands spread at her sides. “Cousin. Let the guilt go.”

“I’m not”—Heiko chokes—“I’m not who I was.”

Norika shakes her head. “Neither of us are. But give me a chance, Heiko.”

Heiko resists. "This isn't a game. You know it as numbers in ledgers, models you push around a map, but there's a whole world here you don't understand."

"Then show me?" Norika stoops, eyes still on Heiko, picks up her sword, sheathes it. "Show me Soken-zanshi?" Her cool, even voice is shaped by years of diplomacy training.

Heiko can't help but imagine the possibility she proposes. A city with enough food for everyone. A winter where no one dies. But then the vision winks out. "I can't walk around here with you." Heiko pauses. It is easier to think about the problem at hand than to comprehend the larger tides shifting inside her. "Keep your sword out. Act like I'm your prisoner."

Norika looks skeptical. "If I were an Upriser, looking out a window, and I saw an Imperial holding my beloved Heiko at sword point, I would shoot a projectile out that window."

"That could happen to you either way."

"Then maybe we both take a risk?"

It's Heiko's turn to look skeptical. "You never take risks."

Norika's wry smile returns. "It might surprise you, cousin, but I have also changed in the past twelve years."

They leave the railyard and walk together to the heart of the city. The streets are quiet. Heiko knows they are being watched. Her heart jumps—Risona could cast her out for this. Chiye could leave. Her second family could reject her as easily as the first.

They pass blocks of tightly packed wooden buildings. Laundry hangs from balconies and snow boots line up in doorways. Heiko points to them. "These apartments house farmers who lost their lands. Families with no homes. The Uprisers keep them heated, manage water and power. Over there is the food hall where we serve breakfast. Up that hill is a school we're running for the children of displaced families." *So they can learn more than Imperial propaganda*, she stops herself from saying.

Heiko realizes with irritation that she keeps checking Norika's reactions, wanting her cousin's approval. Norika listens closely, asking perceptive, logistical questions. "How do you organize harvest donations?" "Who coordinates cooking labor?"

They round a corner, discussing how geothermal wells power the forges, and Norika breaks off with a gasp. Risona holds an axe to her throat. Upriser warriors circle around them.

Risona growls, "The walking tour is over." She shifts Norika's collar with her axe. Heiko glimpses a flash of turquoise under her cousin's breastplate.

Chiye runs to Heiko and pushes back her hair to scrutinize the abrasion on her temple. They turn to stare daggers at Norika. "One and a half seconds, Commander, remember?"

Heiko chooses her words very carefully. "It's okay. Risona, Chiye. The commander and I are coming to an understanding."

"Heiko," Risona reprimands, "Imperials talk in circles. They will trap you with words."

"I know. Listen to me. The commander has agreed to leave us the contents of the Imperial storehouse. They will stop pressing the farmers for Imperial taxes."

Risona looks Norika over, her face full of disdain. "Is this true, administrator?"

Norika is quiet for a long moment. Desperately, Heiko taps her right toe against the heel of her left boot. *Please, just go with it.*

Norika takes a deep breath, hampered by Risona's axe still pressing into her throat. "I will honor these agreements."

Heiko feels a wave of relief, but Risona snorts. "It is not enough. Imperial sluggishness will continue to let people die. Patching cracks on the dam does nothing, we need the dam to break"—

"You do an impressive job providing for a city, but it's not the same as ruling a realm." Norika speaks calmly. "The Council must make decisions to care for everyone, not just the people in front of us."

Heiko finds herself admiring Norika's composure, and hoping her cousin will shut up before Risona slices her open.

Risona counters, "If you let people make decisions themselves, you wouldn't have to rule them."

Norika says, "You are a respected leader. Thousands look up to you. I'm sure you know, it's never that simple."

"It could be that simple." Risona's mouth is grim. "Imperials are the ones who insist on complication."

"Let them leave us alone, then," Heiko interjects. She feels frantic that the argument not escalate, but she tries to keep her voice as level as her cousin's. Looking to Norika, she says, "The Imperials will no longer enforce restrictions on technology here. You will let us deal with thieves in our own way. Sokenzanshi will be a free city."

Norika watches Heiko with deep, unreadable eyes. "It might be easier to consider these conditions without an axe at my throat."

Heiko nods, and to her surprise, Risona sheathes her weapon.

Norika massages her clavicle. "I can take your proposals to Naomi and the Council. My word has no force without their approval."

Chiye breaks in with a laugh. "See? More talking in circles. How do we know you'll argue in earnest?"

Now Norika gives Chiye the full force of her gaze. They regard each other for a long moment. Finally, Norika says, "I know enough about pain. I don't want to see more of it than I have to."

Chiye's teapots halt in the air. They nod. "We're in agreement there. Theoretically."

Risona steps between them. "Even if you keep your word, which I doubt, it will not quell the revolt. The Imperials have caused more suffering than you can hope to make up for."

Heiko steels herself, but Norika bows. "I only hope, then, you'll remember I was honest with you."

"I have yet to see that." Risona gestures to the warriors around her. "We'll be watching you closely. Heiko, escort the administrator out of our territory."

They retrace their path out of the snowy city. The warm lights of the forges shine through the windows around them. Heiko watches her cousin as they walk. She can see the wheels turning in Norika's mind. Committees to speak to and proposals to write. Bargains to offer, deals to make. Experts to query, technologies to evaluate, regulations to draft.

"You really believe in it, don't you?" Heiko asks.

Norika considers this. "Not the decisions we make, not always. But I do believe we're on the right path."

"Even if it leads to rebellion?"

Norika watches a snowflake melt on her fingertip. She turns to Heiko, and her eyes brim with grief and love. “Even then.”



Heiko Yamazaki, the General | Art by: Magali Villeneuve

They reach the Imperial outpost. Enforcers mill about the entrance along with mechs and drones. Norika signals them to stand down. Her gestures are graceful, decisive. *She looks like a hero in a story-book*, Heiko thinks. *Soldiers rally to her. Politicians give way. Even her enemies have to respect her.*

As though she has heard this thought, Norika’s eyes sharpen. “Do you think we’re enemies, cousin?”

Heiko’s response is the truest thing she has ever said, though, she did not know it until today. “No.” She stops after that single word. There is too much more to say. There is a decade of life bearing them in opposite directions. Their secret language from childhood holds no gestures to name the distance now between them. Heiko chooses her words carefully. “But I don’t yet know if we’re allies.”

Norika nods to this. “I agree.”

They clasp hands. They do not embrace. Norika walks through the ranks of enforcers who salute her as she passes. Heiko watches until all the soldiers have followed her inside and the courtyard has fallen quiet. Then she turns and starts back up the slope, toward the firelit city where she knows her family awaits her.