

Ten Years Ago...

Andéfi is one of the top agents in the NDOA, Dézélîn's national security agency. And as such, he has been given the dubious honor of playing guard for their troublesome emperor.

Emperor Yáda Ómevéi, sixth of his name, is not an especially clever man, though he certainly thinks he is. This alone would not have condemned him; no ruler is truly meant to rule alone after all. So long as he had sense enough to heed the expertise of others, there would be no true sin in his ignorance. Unfortunately, Emperor Yáda does not like his lack of intellect to be made obvious, and so rather than listen to wise counsel, he has the annoying habit of doing the opposite of what he is told.

When encouraged to marry so as to have someone to manage his household while he deals with the tedious bureaucracy of ruling, he instead empties the royal purse into the pockets of prostitutes. When advised to auction off the lands and property that has defaulted to the crown's possession so as to pay off the crown's debts and return the land to the people, he instead hoards it for "royal projects" that do not exist for reasons no one has been able to discern. When asked to lower taxes on food imports so as to make up a local deficit that occurred mostly due a poor harvest season, he instead drafts some insane law that would invalidate nearly all foreign trade agreements in their entirety and attempts to strong-arm his advisors into signing off on it.

It was at this point that many at the NDOA thought it prudent to step in, Andéfi included, and the Inner Circle—the wise counsel that the emperor has thus far been ignoring—didn't see a reason to protest. And even if they knew the truth, they have been too alienated to care much for the NDOA true plans.

Of course, by now, the emperor has cultivated a very long list of people who wish to see him dead. Assigning a skilled guard to protect him would be more than plausible, expected even. Andéfi, however, is not particularly inspired to prevent any attempts that might occur, less so after spending a month shadowing the man.

The NDOA placing an agent like Andéfi in a position so close to the emperor could be nothing else but a warning. Albeit, a warning Yáda is too stupid to notice, let alone heed. Since his placement, Andéfi has not seen any remorse or even awareness from Yáda of how his hideous actions affect their country. In fact, he seems all too

eager to double down, adding amendment after amendment to his ridiculous proposal that would see the lifeblood further squeezed from Dézélîn and her citizens.

Andéfi even launched an investigation to try to determine who was poisoning Yáda's mind with such foolish plans, but he found no evidence that the man was being influenced by anyone. It only made it all the more disgusting that he called himself their emperor. At least if he had been being puppeteer-ed, it would have absolved him of any true evil. Instead, when he dies, the whole of their country will be hoping his cruelty isn't genetic. It is more than shameful, and yet, the man feels no shame.

And so, today is the day that Andéfi decided to put Yáda's foul spirit to rest, so as to prevent his atrocious proposal from making ti to true law in tomorrow's counsel meeting. But the man has been inordinately twitchy, foiling several of Andéfi's assassination attempts before he could even think to put them into action.

This morning, Yáda dismissed all persons from his presence—Andéfi was tasked with standing outside and relaying this information to everyone that attempted to call on him—and he locked himself inside his office. The only exceptions were Andéfi, the chef, and Yáda's personal manservant, and even then, they were only allowed in during meals, which Yáda demanded be served in the silver dishes normally reserved for feasts. The reason for this exception? He wanted the three of them to test every plate for poison. It was a waste of time for the chef (who is responsible for the making of meals for everyone in the palace) and the manservant (who is responsible for the emperor's household in the absence of a spouse) when Andéfi himself would be sufficient, not that Andéfi believes Yáda is aware of their responsibilities nor believes that he would care if he was. The moment they had finished this task, Yáda would lock them all out again, no matter what protests they presented.

Andéfi had wondered what the man could possibly be doing in his office all day because surely it wasn't work. Not only did Yáda seem allergic to work in general (unless it suited his aims, of course), but he had locked out anyone who might give him even a blank piece of paper to sign. Let alone all the reports he should have been reading. Even if he did have old paperwork piled up in there, which didn't sound *unlikely*, it certainly matter because he wouldn't allow anyone in to deliver the documents to their recipients.

Yáda ends up spending all day and much of the night in this strange isolation. It is well after midnight when he finally allows

Andéfi to escort him back to his chambers. It is also around this time that Andéfi decides to abandon subtlety and just stab the man once they are alone with minimal risk of witnesses. And then, Yáda's out of character paranoia makes another untimely appearance.

Upon arriving at his bedchambers, he orders his staff to clean the room spotless while he supervises. He has them wipe down the walls, then the floor, then the *ceiling*. He demands all the rugs be fully shampooed, all the curtains and bedding replaced with completely new and undyed linens, and all the wooden furnishings cleaned thoroughly with a damp cloth and then dabbed dry with towels.

The entire process takes *hours* and much of it is done by staff that had already been asleep. By the withering looks they are sending Yáda's way, they seem all too ready to do Andéfi's job for him.

When, *finally*, everything has been done to Yáda's impossible standards, the household staff is allowed to leave and only Andéfi and Yáda remain. Despite his best efforts, something of Andéfi's incredulity must show on his face because, upon glancing his direction, Yáda feels compelled to explain.

"You must think me insane," he says. Andéfi doesn't reply because the truth is he does and that would be inappropriate to admit. Yáda continues. "I am not," he declares, "I am only enlightened."

Andéfi doesn't know whether to scoff or encourage Yáda to speak more. Despite himself, he is curious to know what this man would consider 'enlightenment' and wonders briefly if something has somehow given the NDOA's plans away. He decides it is better to know for sure.

"If I may be so bold as to make demand of my emperor, how have you been enlightened, *yôn kim élm?*" Andéfi takes care to keep his voice demure and respectful when he addresses Yáda, hoping to stroke his ego.

The man does not reply immediately, occupied instead with beginning the arduous process of disrobing himself. Arduous because he insists on wearing full regalia, even when that level of formality isn't required. Andéfi supposes it makes him feel more important to require the assistance of servants to be dressed every morning. Luckily, such assistance isn't necessary to take it off, else Andéfi suspects such a job would fall to him.

Eventually, Yáda asks, "Do you keep up with the politics of the Duchies?"

This is so far from what Andéfi expects Yáda to say that it takes him a moment to even recall the answer. "...Somewhat," he says, which is a gross understatement. He works for their country's national security agency. It is not inaccurate to say keeping up with international politics is his job. He searches his memory for any significant recent events in Amarila, the country with which they share their northern border, and it doesn't take long for him to land on what Yáda must be referring to. "Do you mean the passing of Count Étoile in Valles?"

"'Passing?'" Yáda sneers, "The man was murdered."

Yes, Andéfi thinks, *He almost certainly was*. It is not in the nature of young men in good health to suddenly drop dead from illness. There are rumors of suicide, of course, but they are unfounded at best and appallingly transparent attempts of propaganda at worst. The entire thing reeks of a hasty cover-up. He is not all that surprised that even Yáda noticed.

Yáda continues, a fire lit under him now. "He was killed and most likely not by a stranger." He pauses to strip down to his bottom-most layer, a loose linen tunic with matching wide-legged pants. "Do you know who inherited his title? The only one who was eligible to do so? His sister. Count Étoile was an heir to the Duke Valles, the most popular one in fact. But if the Duke were to step down *now*, after his death, the inheritance wouldn't even go to a vote. Count Étoile's children are too young, over a decade away from legal heir-ship. The only other eligible candidate? His *sister*."

Yáda has begun gesturing as he speaks, which is very unlike him. He is of the mind that such a thing is plebeian. Despite this, he speaks calmly, rationally. When Andéfi looks closely at his face, he can see a frenzied gleam in the man's eyes. A bolt of dread shoots through him as he recognizes what he sees: conspiracy, the evil child of paranoia. Somehow, Andéfi knows, Yáda has connected the suspicious circumstances of a noble's death in a faraway land to his own situation here in the Palace as improbable as that seems. The worst part is that he is not wrong to suspect such a thing. No matter how he came upon the idea, the truth is that NDOA has been preparing his death for months now. The irony that he should thwart the without even knowing their plans!

Perhaps I have overestimated his stupidity. What a dangerous thing that would be, Andéfi muses. Aloud, he says, "Surely, you have nothing to fear from an amateur plot in a faraway place, *yôn kim élm?*"

"No, of course not," Yáda denies, regaining some of his composure. He moves to lounge on a long chaise after abandoning his silks where they lay for the launderers to pick up. "It simply opened my mind to the possibilities. Treachery does not come from your enemies but from your allies. My cousin, in particular, draws my suspicion."

Andéfi has to suppress an inappropriate laugh. The cousin in question is Yoda's heir as he doesn't have children, which he supposes is why the man suspects them, but the NDOA has already done extensive research on them. He's read the file. If the agency had found them unsuitable, then Andéfi would not have been given leave to complete his mission. As far as they can find, Yáda's heir is utterly unremarkable besides a strange fascination with women's clothing. They have no large desire for Yáda's position.

Yáda continues, oblivious to Andéfi's amusement. "He has grown to be an ever present pest in my ear." His face twists with distaste. "He calls himself speaking sense to me, but he was not raised to rule like I was. It is utter folly for him to think he knows what he speaks of at all. And worse yet, I have caught him meeting my advisors behind my back. In fact, he speaks to them more often than I do."

He says this as if it is difficult to accomplish, but Andéfi is not even sure if he knows when his meetings with his advisors are scheduled. He imagines they are meeting with his cousin in an effort to manage the havoc that Yáda has wrought, organizing relief funds and the like.

"Such treachery has no place to grow in our country," Andéfi soothes, "Amarila is a fractured nation and that is the source for many of its troubles. We are united. To act against one of us is to act against all of us."

Yáda's face turns thoughtful at that, his finger tapping against the arm of the chaise. For a brief moment, Andéfi is worried that he has seen through the veiled insult and then Yáda ruins it by saying, "It is a lovely sentiment but naive. Not all people are as loyal as you. Most do not have any loyalty at all."

And what exactly would you know of loyalty, you stupid man? Andéfi decides then that he's heard enough. His curiosity is thoroughly dead and he cannot allow this beast to live. Yáda has stopped looking at Andéfi, instead focused on collecting his cigar box from the side table. He keeps up a one-sided dialogue as he does

this, apparently set on lecturing his naive guard on the 'true nature' of humanity. Andéfi seizes the opportunity his distraction creates and, when Yáda next looks up to light his cigar, Andéfi is already behind him.

Before Yáda can turn his head to look for him, Andéfi slips a hand around to grip his chin and secure his head in place. With his other hand, he shoves a knife through the meat of the man's neck, severing the artery there. The blade was made with this specific purpose in mind, but even still, it requires considerable strength to force the skin and muscle to give way. He can feel it tearing all the way up his arm. He grimaces. It is not a pleasant sensation.

Yáda lets out an aborted shout that quickly turns into a sick sounding gurgle. Andéfi leaves the knife inside his neck, keeping his hands in place even as the man struggles in front of him. It will stem the blood flow somewhat, but he is more concerned with the mess it would make to remove it than that. Already, blood streams from the wound, slicking his hands and staining fabric. The chaise can be thrown away, but the walls and carpet would have to be washed or renovated. Yáda will be dead in minutes regardless so it is better to spare the staff that will clean in the aftermath.

"It is a shame," he says conversationally, "that you are so selfish. Perhaps if you were not, you could have foreseen this. But then I would not have had to kill you at all.

"I have a daughter, you see. She turns nine this month. She and my wife are my everything. In a world of your making, you would have them starve. So then, it is simple. If I must kill you to protect my daughter, so be it. I will feel no guilt as I do so. You are but a man to me, Yáda, and not even a particularly good one.

"Many of my colleagues are of the same mind. We competed for the honor of killing you. It had to be done by lottery. After all, it is not likely we would get the chance to kill an emperor again, especially one that has wronged us so. United in this, if not all things."

At this point, Yáda has stopped moving, though it is unlikely that he is dead yet, simply unconscious. Blood soaks Yáda's simple linen garb and it has seeped into the chaise below him as Andéfi suspected it would. He is glad to see that there is minimal mess otherwise. Luckily, the NDOA has no need to make Yáda's death look like anything other than what it is. They will simply place the blame on someone equally troublesome and get rid of them both at once.

Andéfi slides the knife out and the wound wells up with renewed vigor before receding again. He is eyeing the cigar box, as they are higher quality than any he can justify buying and his wife has banned him from smoking, when he hears a gasp from the entrance. He snaps his head up, mind already turning towards who would be easy to silence and who it would be simpler to kill. But when he looks, it is Yáda's heir, the cousin he spoke so scornfully of. He makes the split second decision to wait.

They stand completely still and silent, the door having already fell closed behind them. Andéfi notes that they do not look horrified or scared, only shocked.

"Congratulations," he says, "On your new reign as emperor."

That seems to startle a noise out of them, a disbelieving squeak almost. Their eyes, which had been glued to Yáda's cooling body, dart up to look at him. "I thought you had been sent to protect him?"

"My agency's interests lie in the people, not the emperor. This has been true since we were made independent some three hundred years ago."

"Oh, *anyôn*," they say, and then there is a beat of silence. Andéfi is startled by endearment and the not-quite grief in it, like it is a loss already well-worn. It is typically reserved for older siblings and, while not technically informal, it is a shockingly casual way to refer to the emperor. Whatever their relationship was as adults, it seems this pair had once been close.

"Empress," they say abruptly, after they've collected them-self.

"Excuse me?"

"Earlier, you congratulated me on my reign as emperor," they swallow thickly, "I was correcting you. It's empress."

Ah. "I appreciate your discretion then, Empress...?"

"Áiko. Empress Áiko."

"Empress Áiko, I suggest you take your leave as it is late and I'm sure your cousin is resting. Whatever matter you needed to address can surely wait. Perhaps you can call for him after a late breakfast," Andéfi pauses, "And of course, I never saw you here tonight at all."

Empress Áiko seems to take this dismissal in stride, despite everything. "As you say," she says, and then promptly turns to leave as if Andéfi hasn't irrevocably changed her life. It hits him then,

just how true that is. He's probably changed a lot of lives with his actions tonight, and not all of them will be quite so easy to predict.

He takes the cigars with him when he leaves.