

You're My Best Friend

"We don't have to do this, Toshiro."

The eyes of the peasants followed the two figures circling each other warily in the village square. The samurai's low voice was carried by the fish-laden wind that cut through the silent market.

"Listen for once, Shiro. The business is finished. Let it be."

"It is not yet finished. My honor will be restored."

The two men side-stepped in a narrow ring, their eyes locked together. More peasants gathered, as well as a few rōnin, to see the spectacle.

"You've lost nothing but a bad coin, Toshiro. A dead weight with no worth. Your master is dead. There is no shame on you, old friend."

"You and your plotting! You made me look a fool, Hoshi. A fool!"

"Only because you refused to listen! As you refuse now!"

Toshiro placed his hand upon the handle of his katana as Hoshi did the same. The spectators took a step back with a hiss. The peasant's eyes locked onto the warrior's swords; the rōnin watched their eyes. The pace set by Toshiro quickened a beat.

"You have always done this, Hoshi. You play your games, causing trouble. Who will accept this one's oaths, Hoshi? Who will accept this one who cannot see what passes before him and fails in his service?"

The setting sun glistened in the sweat on Toshiro's tonsure.

"Watanabe was the fool, Shiro. He and his favorites took all the money, took all the women. Pretended to be daimyo." Toshiro tensed as Hoshi reached up to scratch at his unruly mop of hair that bristled from his topknot. "We played a game, yes, and I won. You chose not to play. It is done. This..." Hoshi turned his neck in a circle. "This is a pointless game. I don't want to play with you."

Toshiro's eyes narrowed. "Watanabe was a fool. A drunkard and a whoremonger. But he was my lord and I gave him my oath." Toshiro increased their pace another beat. "I did not know that he was a thief besides."

"I told you he was. You would not listen."

"Because you lie, Hoshi! You have always been a liar. You lie to get what you want. You lie to make fun for yourself. You cut men down with your words even faster than with your blade."

The circle turned twice before Hoshi answered. "I never lied to you, Toshiro. Never to you."

Toshiro turned the circle in the opposite direction. "Why did you not call him out? If you knew this, why could you not defeat him as a dragon instead of as a fox?"

"If I could not convince my closest friend, how could I hope to convince the Shogun?"

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"You had no evidence."

"You had my word."

Toshiro picked up the pace once again. Hoshi sighed.

"You'll not be dissuaded?"

Toshiro continued to pace, eyes locked on Hoshi's. Hoshi nodded once and took a deep breath.

Hoshi stopped.

The crowd tensed. Toshiro's knuckles shone against the black silk-wrapped katana hilt. Hearts beat once, twice, three times. Still the men stood.

Toshiro's katana flashed in the setting sun. Hoshi fell to the dusty ground.

The samurai stared into the face of his fallen friend; no one could say what he saw there. He turned and walked away.

Hoshi's katana had emerged only an inch from his scabbard.