

Chapter 184 - Bushido

'*Bushido*,' I turned the word over internally, buying myself a half-second.

From my past life, the word had a general shape to it—something about samurai, something about honor codes, some cultural concept that got referenced in movies, games and books over and over again with varying degrees of accuracy and almost always in the context of someone either living by it dramatically or dying by it dramatically.

That was the sum total of what I'd brought through with me on the topic.

[Cultural Savant], thankfully, filled in the rest, the way it always did when the gap between what I knew and what I needed to know was relevant enough for the System to decide to bridge it. Whatever last remnants of Anima were functional inside me, were apparently enough to let this Perk function—how, exactly, that worked, I'd have to figure out someday.

Its output was... *brief* but precise: Bushido, in the Nihon cultural context of Neo Avalis, wasn't the rigid, ceremonial framework of historical texts I knew vaguely from my last life.

It was a living code—the warrior's way, but *warrior* used in the broad, inclusive sense of anyone who considered themselves one, which extended considerably further than actual armed combatants.

More specifically, it was about the relationship between a person and conflict, between a person and their own capacity for violence, between the self that existed in combat and the self that existed outside of it, and how those two versions of a person were supposed to coexist without one consuming the other.

"{I don't know much about Bushido,}" I admitted, carefully.

Takeda chuckled—a short, genuine sound, slightly uneven in the way that a lot of his sounds were uneven now, but warm underneath it. He shook his head then, or approximated the gesture with the range of motion currently available to him.

"{Bushido is not—}"

He stopped.

The pause stretched for a few seconds, the searching quality behind his eyes visible—the particular effort of finding the route between the thought and the words.

"{—not *knowledge*. It is not something you learn from the inside out.}"

His eyes came back to mine, clearer now that the sentence had found its footing.

"{It is heart. You either have it or you don't. And you—}"

Another slight pause, shorter this time.

"{—*have* it. I saw it back in the apartment.}"

I kept my face perfectly still.

"{The fire in your eyes. When you fought. The *enjoyment* of it all.}"

There it was.

I felt the internal cringe arrive in full before I could do anything about it—that specific, deep discomfort of having something you kept carefully below the surface named out loud by someone else, in a quiet room, with complete and unhurried accuracy. The part of me I'd been managing, monitoring and arguing with, and locking behind increasingly elaborate internal architecture since the first time it had shown itself again in this world.

"{I don't—}" I started, then immediately stopped, because the denial had made it approximately three words before it ran out of conviction. I tried a different angle.

"{It's not something I'm particularly proud of.}"

"{That much is obvious,}" Takeda-san simply said with a nod.

"{It's not a bad thing, Ela-san,}" he continued, and his voice had shifted into something slower and more deliberate. "{It is only bad if you—}"

The pause came again, longer this time, his jaw working slightly with the effort, his left hand moving in a small, frustrated gesture before settling back against the blanket.

"{—if you let it control you. If you fear it. If you are—e—e—embarrassed by it. Enough to push it away and not allow it to sustain itself.}"

He lifted his right hand slightly, the functional one, and made a slow, deliberate pulling gesture.

"{Like a rubber band,}" he explained. "{You pull it as far from yourself as you can manage. You think this makes it *safe*. But it only makes it—m—more dangerous. The further you pull, the harder it comes back when it slips. And it a—a—*always* slips.}"

I sat with that for a moment.

It wasn't a metaphor I hadn't encountered in some form before.

The general principle of suppression making things worse rather than better wasn't new information, philosophically speaking.

But there was a difference between understanding something as a *concept* and having a man who had watched you fight sit across from you in a Ripper's bed and apply it *directly* and *specifically* to the thing you'd been hoping nobody had looked at closely enough to name.

"{And you think Bushido is the answer to that,}" I offered. It came out flatter than I intended—not hostile, just the careful neutral of someone who wasn't ready to agree with something and wasn't going to pretend they were.

"{I think Bushido is the way of learning how to—}"

Several seconds went by, his eyes going briefly distant, his right hand making a small movement that might have been impatience directed inward rather than outward.

Then he continued: "{—coexist with it. The lust for combat. The desire to test yourself. To find—h—honor in the killing. These are not things that disappear because you decide they should not exist within you. They are part of *what and who* you are. Bushido is the framework for c—c—carrying them without being carried *by* them.}"

I simply stared at him.

'*Honor in the killing*,' I turned the phrase over with the specific discomfort of someone handling something they weren't sure they should be touching.

Because the honest problem—the thing I couldn't argue my way around—was that I *understood* what he was describing.

Not academically, no.

I, frankly, had no fucking idea what Takeda was even talking about right now, if I was being entirely honest. It all just sounded like exactly the kind of mumbo-jumbo bullshit that all the movies, video games and whatever pop-culture existed in my last life had sold as "deep."

But... Somehow, his words still managed to resonate with me.

In the bone-deep, embarrassingly direct way of someone who had *felt* it, repeatedly, and had spent a significant amount of energy since then trying to re-categorize it as *something else* or explain it away with external factors like "adrenaline" and "survival instinct" and "the particular pressures of the situation."

"{I think I understand some of what you're describing,}" I said, carefully. "{I'm just not sure that—acknowledging it is the same as endorsing it. There's a difference between accepting that part of yourself exists and deciding that it gets to have—*opinions* about your choices going forward.}"

Takeda-san looked at me with the expression of someone who found this response both predictable and, on some level, endearing.

"{Nobody is telling you to go looking for people to kill,}" he said, and there was something dry in it despite the slurred edges. "{Bushido is not—n—not *permission*. For you do not need it. It is *discipline*. The lust for combat without discipline is just—}"

He stopped for longer this time, several seconds, his eyes going distant to the point I was half-wondering if I had to call the Ripper, before coming back. "{—just a weapon with no hand on it. Dangerous to *everyone*, including the one carrying it.}"

He let that sit for a few moments.

And I found I didn't have an immediate counter to it, which... was itself informative.

"{This discipline is *not* suppression. It can never be,}" he continued, even slower now, the effort more visible but his eyes very much still present and focused. "{Suppression is what you are doing now. You I—lock it away, then it escapes, then you are ashamed and lock it away harder. I watched you do it—i—i—in that apartment. It was easy to recognize because I—}"

He stopped dead.

The sentence didn't come back for almost ten seconds, and in the gap I watched him work at it, the frustration and the patience coexisting in his face with the distinct quality of someone who had only half-way accepted that this was the new shape of certain things, yet was not going to let it stop him *now* from saying what he intended to say.

"{—because I was like you, once.}"

I had no retort. I simply continued to stare at him.

"{Discipline means knowing *it* is there,}" he said finally.

"{Knowing when it is useful and when it is not. Knowing how to—f—feed it properly so it does not starve and then relentlessly *gorge*. It means finding the right places for it. The right moments. Building a relationship with it instead of a—}"

His jaw worked hard. "{—a *war*.}"

I looked at my hands for a moment, then back at him.

"{And Bushido is how you do that,}" I concluded. It was not *quite* a question, but not a statement either.

"{No, not quite. Bushido is simply the road,}" he shook his head. "{*Not* the destination. The destination is—a—a—a person who can look at what they are, *fully*, without flinching away from it. And *choose* to embrace anyway. Every time.}"

I sat with that in the quiet of the Ripper's room, with the wind-up music box cycling its small sequence of notes somewhere further in the building, and found that I didn't have anything to say for the moment that felt adequate.

Which, given everything, was probably the most honest response available to me.

I sat with Takeda-san's words in the quiet of the room and felt the understanding of them sitting in my chest, and underneath the understanding was something else entirely that I was less comfortable naming.

Not doubt, exactly.

Not genuine disagreement with the logic of what he was saying either, because the logic was sound enough that I couldn't find a clean crack in it to push against, as much as I desperately wanted to.

Fear, probably.

If I was being honest with myself, which I was reluctantly becoming by necessity.

Because what Takeda-san was describing wasn't merely a framework for managing something difficult I was dealing with at the moment.

It was the end of a particular arrangement I had spent the better part of *two decades* constructing and maintaining and defending against *everything* that tried to dismantle it.

Psychiatrists. Psychologists. Every person I had ever trusted enough to open the door slightly and let them see what was on the other side of it, every professional who had sat across from me with their *careful* fucking faces and their stupid, *careful* language and their *carefully* fucking constructed tools and ideas—*all of them* had worked toward the same damn fucking goal. The same *exact* direction.

"Lock it away."

"Build the walls higher."

"Develop better mechanisms for keeping it contained, and better ones still when those failed, and better ones again."

"Because otherwise, you're going to jail forever. Or an insane ward. Because you are damaged in a way that nobody can ever fix and are too dangerous to live in this society."

Of course they had never said that out loud, but the implications were in every single carefully laid out word and document, every session, every conversation.

Over *two damn decades* of consensus from every qualified person I had *ever* consulted, and now Takeda was here, sitting in a Ripper's backroom bed, telling me that the *entire goddamn fucking project* had been wrong from the *very beginning*.

That it should *never* have been locked in the first place.

That I should have just—fucking *what?! Developed* some code of honor and called it managed?! Found some flimsy-ass, philosophical framework and simply *decided* that made the thing inside me acceptable, even useful, even something to be embraced?!

In what fucking world was that a damn argument?!

I felt the heat move through my blood before I'd made any decision about it.

"{It doesn't make any fucking sense,}" I said, and my voice came out with an edge that I hadn't fully planned for. "{Some—*code*. Some framework of honor that you *decide* applies to you, that you construct yourself, and suddenly everything is fucking fine? Everything is suddenly *acceptable?*}"

I heard myself accelerating and didn't stop it.

"{Just because it fucking worked for you, Takeda-san, doesn't mean it does anything for me! Or anyone! We are *not* the same fucking thing!}"

He watched me and said nothing.

"{Enjoying watching the light slowly go out of someone's eyes when your knife goes into their throat is *not*—}"

I stopped, started again, the heat pushing the words out faster than I was choosing them.

"{It's not something a person is *supposed* to feel, Takeda-san! That is not a flaw that some stupid code of honor *fixes*. That is something that is *wrong*. *Funda-fucking-mentally* wrong. With the wiring. And the answer to that is not to fucking embrace it, and wrap it in philosophy and call it Bushido or whatever, and just *decide* it makes you honorable! That is not—that doesn't fucking *fix* anything. That is just a sad fucking sob-story you tell yourself so you don't have to look at what kind of fucking monster you actually are!}"

I ran out of steam somewhere in the middle of the last sentence, the heat cresting and dropping, leaving the specific hollow quality that followed when you'd said the thing you'd been holding and it hadn't fixed anything.

Takeda had taken all of it without moving. Without flinching. Without the careful, slightly wounded expression that people usually produced when you went at them like that, the expression that then required management and apology and the whole exhausting secondary process of repairing the thing you'd *damaged* by being honest.

He just looked at me.

And the look—the recognition in it, the quiet endearment, and underneath both of those, the *pity*—hit me somewhere that the heat hadn't fully vacated yet, and for approximately one half-second I wanted to put my fist through something, and the something nearest to hand was his *face*.

Edge came in just in time, however, and the cold got its hand around the impulse before it went anywhere.

I breathed out a slow, shuddering breath.

Takeda waited until he was certain I was done.

"{I *know*,}" he said.

The same two words he'd used before, and they landed the same way—the simple acknowledgement of someone who had heard everything and was not surprised by any of it.

"{I had the s—s—s—same doubts. *Exactly* those doubts. Word for word, I think, if you had asked me at your age.}"

He shifted slightly against the headboard, the movement slow and careful, managing the asymmetry of his body's current responsiveness with the patience he seemed to apply to everything now.

"{It is not a *quick* fix,}" he said. "{I want to be clear about that. Bushido is not a—a bandage you put over the wound and then forget about. It is—a—a practice. Something you choose, *every day*. Some days it is easier. Some days it is the *hardest thing* you do that day.}"

He looked at me steadily.

"{My Bushido took me *years* to find. And even more years to truly trust.}"

There was a pause then. Not born of his medical problems, but a deliberate one in which our eyes met and I felt more of the heat go out of my body.

"{The enjoyment of killing—you named it. The light going out. I know exactly what you mean because I have *felt* it. I feel it still, every time.}" He said it without apology, without the particular shame-adjacent inflection that I had always wrapped around the same admission when I'd been *forced* to make it.

He said it easily. Just a fact, sitting in the room, taking up its accurate amount of space.

"{It feels good. The feeling of raw *power* in that moment. That the choice was yours to end this life. That you were the one who *decided* and acted it out.}"

"{Yes,}" I whispered, before I'd decided to say anything at all.

The word came out smaller than everything else I'd said since I'd entered the room.

"{That feeling does not go away—ever,}" Takeda continued. "{Bushido does not take it from you. Nor would I trust a code that claimed it could. What it gives you instead is—a—a—a container for it. A purpose that is *larger* than the feeling itself.}"

He looked at his right hand for a moment, then back at me.

"{I am a killer,}" he simply said. "{That is *what* I am, at the center of it all. I have accepted this. It took a long time and it was not—*comfortable*, the accepting of this fact. But I *am*. And the question that Bushido answered for me was not: How do I stop *being this*. The question was: What does a killer do, with what they already are, that *means something*.}"

I stayed quiet and listened.

"{The ones who I kill *deserve* to die,}" he said and kept his eyes locked with mine. "{That is the core of my code. It is not every person who has ever wronged someone. Not everyone dangerous, or cruel, or capable of harm. But the ones my sword finds—b—b—by the time it finds them, they have earned it. I *decide* that. I *hold* that. *That* is my Bushido.}"

He paused once again then, and... I couldn't help but admit that it started sounding more sensible, the longer he talked.

'Do I want this to sound sensible though...?'

I didn't get to answer that question, before he continued.

"{And because I hold it, I do not *have* to carry what others carry afterward. Or worry about the lack thereof. The guilt. The second-guessing. The—f—f—family they might have had, the people who loved them, the version of them that might have been different under different circumstances.

"{My code protects me from that weight of what-should-have-beens. Not by lying to me about it. But by t—telling me, clearly and unambiguously, that the decision was already made before the sword moved. And I can trust that decision, because I know what I originally built it from.}"

The wind-up music box started again from somewhere down the hall, its tunes ever-so-slightly managing to break through the closed door.

"{A killer does not have to be a bad person, Ela-san,}" he said, and the slur in his speech had softened further as the conversation had gone on, as though the language itself had loosened something. "{Many who are alive deserve to die. Many who die deserve to live. The world does not balance this on its own. It never has and never will.}"

The ghost of the earlier grin moved through his expression, but far less severe.

"{People like us—we are at least capable of nudging that balance. Ever so slightly. With clear eyes and a full heart and no—i—illusions about *what* we are doing and *why*.}"

He let the silence hold for a moment, before delivering the verdict.

"{You will not fix what is inside you by fighting it,}" he concluded finally. "{You have been fighting it for—how long?}"

I didn't answer. It hadn't been a question anyway..

"{And how is that going for you, exactly?}" he ultimately asked, and the dryness in it was entirely deliberate and accurate.

A long silence followed. One we both needed.

Takeda needed it for the physical reasons—the conversation had cost him visibly, the effort of sustained speech in any language sitting on him now in the way of something that had drawn from a reserve that wasn't deep enough yet to be drawn from freely.

He was leaning heavier than when I'd come in, the asymmetry more pronounced, his right hand resting on the blanket with the stillness of something that had done its work and was simply *done* now.

I, on the other hand, needed it for entirely different reasons.

I stood there and let his words run back through my head as many times as they needed to, doing the slow, methodical work of sorting them—the things that were philosophical mumbo-jumbo, the things that were well-intentioned but ultimately just more sophisticated versions of the same approaches I'd been handed by qualified professionals for twenty years, and the things that had a different quality to them entirely.

The things that had landed somewhere below the level where arguments lived.

Yet, again and again, his last question kept coming back.

Every time I tried to move past it, the circuit completed and brought me right back.

“How is that going for me?”

I sat with the honest answer.

Not well. *That* was the honest answer, stripped of every qualifier I might've attached to it.

I hadn't died yet—that was the most favorable framing available, and even that came with a massive fucking asterisk, because the Valir situation had come close enough that not died **yet** was doing a lot of work as a success metric.

Miss K's training sessions, and what had nearly happened to Kenzie before Miss K had intervened.

The specific, recurring pattern of my own reluctance to commit to killing until necessity had removed every other option entirely—not out of any logical framework, but out of the ongoing, exhausting project of being somebody I'd *decided* I was supposed to be.

‘It's not been serving me well at all, has it?’

No. It hadn't.

And the thing that made that answer difficult to sit with wasn't the answer itself—it was what the answer was *directly* at odds with. Over *two decades* of work.

Every professional who had ever tried to help, every framework they'd offered, every tool constructed carefully and in good faith to help me function in a society that had never particularly needed me and had never gone out of its way to make that fact less obvious.

All of it built for a world that no longer existed.

That had never, if I was being precise about it, existed for me in any way that mattered.

“We are capable of nudging that balance.”

He had said it almost like a purpose.

Like the specific shape of what was wrong with me had an actual application. Like people built the way I was built had a *reason* for existing beyond being a *problem* to be managed.

'It had been needed in the old world too,' I thought, slowly. 'All the wars, all the catastrophic decisions made by people who would never face consequences, all the deaths that accumulated while everyone looked away or wrung their hands or wrote think-pieces about the tragedy of it all. The tools had been missing. Or the will. Or both...'

Incredibly slowly, something coalesced inside my mind.

Not an agreement to what he had said.

Not the casting off of everything I had worked for, for decades.

But a simple question, which needed answering more and more: *"What if he was right?"*

"{If one were to pursue this,}" I said, into the silence, and had no idea whether a minute had passed or four hours, "{Bushido. How would one start with that stuff, exactly?}"

Takeda's face did the thing it had done before—the grin arriving broad and genuine and reaching all the way to his eyes, the delight of a man who had made a *long* bet and was watching it pay out in real time.

He lifted his left hand from the blanket and gestured, a small but unmistakable motion, toward the chair and then toward the space beside his bed.

I picked up the chair and moved it.

And then he began to talk...

—

We spent a long time on it. Half an hour at minimum, probably more.

I'd half-expected the others to come check on us at some point. They never did.

By the time we'd worked through it—Takeda laying out the fundamentals as he understood them, as he chose to convey them, and me turning each piece over and finding where it sat and where it didn't—what we'd arrived at was... *unformed*. Rough-edged and incomplete, more like a pile of materials than anything resembling a structure.

But that, I'd understood somewhere around the fifteen-minute mark, was *entirely* the point.

It wasn't something being handed to me, like before. It was pieces being presented, and the assembly was *mine* to do, into whatever shape *actually* fit the specific and inconvenient thing that I was.

No professional had ever offered me that. Every prior framework had come pre-built, pre-shaped, *"here, put this on, it works for most people like you. Now if you ever make trouble again, you will have serious issues."*

'That's... considerably more agreeable than anything I've dealt with before on this subject,' I admitted to myself.

As I stood up, and moved the chair to return it to its corner, Takeda-san's voice stopped me.

"{Ela-san.}"

I turned back.

My eyes went wide before I'd consciously processed what I was looking at.

He was holding out the katana. Sheathed, blade inside, extended toward me with his left arm—the functional one, and even that was visibly costing him to hold the position.

"{Take it,}" he said. "{I can no longer w—wield it. I have l—I—lost what is required to work on the *balance*.}"

I moved toward him slowly, reached out, and took hold of the sheath.

He didn't let go.

'*Here it comes*,' I thought.

"{I must ask one last thing, Ela-san.}"

His voice had changed registers entirely now. The warmth was still there underneath, but the surface of it had gone very still, *very* serious, in a way it hadn't been even during the most weighted parts of the conversation we'd just finished. "{Assist the rest of the crew in taking out the Scrapwrights. They d—d—deserve death for what they have done. To all of us. To *me*.}"

His eyes held mine, steady and clear. "{You can keep the b—blade, as payment. Higgins told me you did well with it already... I will not need it again.}"

He closed his eyes.

Drew a long, careful breath.

"{And I want you to use it for the first time as my *Kaishakunin*.}"

[Cultural Savant] began to move and I waved it off internally before it got started, because this one I already had.

This one had come through from the other life, intact and utterly unambiguous in nature.

Seppuku. The ritualistic suicide. A samurai's final act of agency, of choosing the manner and the meaning of their own end—with honor.

And *Kaishakunin*—the second, the assist. The one who stood beside them and, when the commitment had been demonstrated, ended it *cleanly*. One swift strike.

That was the entire point of the role: To make the death what the samurai had chosen it to be, rather than what it might become without assistance.

I looked at him for a moment.

"{What happened to Bushido?}" I said. "{Helping your crew. Being there for the people who need you. Doing the things they can't do.}"

I held his gaze. "{Now you're just bowing out?}"

He chuckled—short, genuine, slightly uneven at the edges.

Shook his head as much as he currently could.

"{*Look* at m—m—me, Ela-san.}" He tried to lift both arms, the demonstration making the point more clearly than any words could have—his left responding slowly and with effort, his right barely registering the instruction at all, not even clearing the blanket. "{Medicine could potentially fix this. *Maybe*. But t—the cost. T—the crew does not make that kind of Credits. You *heard* their plan. You honestly believe they can do it? Gig after gig after gig, every one of them clean, nobody making a *single* misstep, for however long it t—takes?}"

The words landed with the unpleasant weight of someone echoing your own private doubts back at you verbatim, in the exact phrasing you'd used internally, as though he'd been in your head the entire time.

"{I am doing t—this to save *them*,}" he said. "{Not for myself.}"

I stood there and held the sheath and didn't say anything for a moment.

"{This is the last thing I can ch—choose for myself,}" he said, quieter now, the seriousness of it settling deeper. "{This is not I—*living*, Ela-san.}"

We held eyes for a long moment, both of our hands still on the blade's sheath, neither of us moving.

I wanted that blade.

It was a *very* good blade. I'd felt that the moment I'd picked it up in the foyer.

And Takeda was, technically, a nobody to me. A crewmate on a single gig.

That was the full extent of it on paper.

Which was, I was fairly certain, *exactly* why he'd chosen *me* for this.

He knew I wouldn't carry the guilt of it.

He'd soul-read me well enough in the last hour to be certain of that, which was probably half of what that triumphant grin earlier had been about. He couldn't ask anyone in his crew—Higgins, Reina, Kaito would carry it forever, and he knew that too.

So he'd found the *one* person in the room who was built differently in that specific regard, and he'd played it cleanly.

He'd satisfied every condition of his own Bushido in one move: No guilt passed onto people he cared about. The framework passed on to someone who could carry it forward. Balance maintained, by his accounting.

'Damn you, you stubborn fucking idiot...'

And he was right about the crew. That was the part that sat the worst.

There was no realistic path through the math—fix Higgins, stabilize Reina and Kaito, run enough clean gigs to accumulate the kind of Credits that Takeda-san's reconstruction would require, find the right contacts, execute it *all* without a single additional catastrophe along the way...

It wasn't impossible in the way that things were technically impossible.

It was impossible in the way that things were *practically* impossible, which was way, way worse, because *practically impossible* was the kind of thing people talked themselves into attempting anyway and then dying for it.

The rest of the crew was still very firmly in the denial phase.

They'd be there for a while. Probably long enough for the attempts to generate new issues.

We were the only two in the building willing to look at the actual numbers.

"{What about *their* Bushidos?}" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment.

Then he laughed—short and genuine, the uneven edges of it doing nothing to undercut the warmth. "{Their g—goals, you mean? Their hopes?}"

He shook his head slightly. "{I would rather not i—i—invalidate them. But this is my life. My Bushido. My c—choice. If this interferes with theirs... I am sorry. But it has to be done.}"

I stood there with the sheath between us and turned it over for another moment.

Then I let out a breath that came from somewhere deep and tired, and nodded.

He released his side of the sheath.

I pulled it toward me.

"{I have s—seen your knife. Back then,}" he said, and the resignation and the elation were both present in his voice simultaneously, braided together in a way that shouldn't have worked yet did. "{It is very sharp. Would you l—lend it to me, for this?}"

I looked at him.

And then I looked at the whole situation—the sheath in my hands, the room, the man in the bed, the entire *shape* of what was being asked—and felt something crystallize.

This was complete and utter *bullshit*.

The most historically dramatic, narratively convenient, absolutely classically Japanese TV-drama bullshit I had ever fucking seen: The experienced warrior, felled by circumstance, passing on their knowledge to the newly found pupil in a final act before asking to be honorably released.

I had watched this *exact* scene play out in countless variations across a previous lifetime's worth of media consumption and I had *always*, every single time, had the same thought sitting in the back of my head.

"*Why not just stay alive and keep spreading it to others? Why stop at one?*"

Takeda-san had been right about nearly *everything* in the last hour.

Uncomfortably, precisely, almost insultingly *right* about it all.

But he had been wrong about *one* thing.

One specific, very important thing.

"{No,}" I answered.

He recoiled like I'd physically reached across and slapped him.

The expression on his face was so *completely* unprepared for the word that it would have been funny under slightly different circumstances.

"{W—What?}"

"{You asked me for *two* things now, Takeda-san. Not *one*, as you requested.}"

I held up the sheath between us. "{Help the crew kill the Scrapwrights, and be your Kaishakunin. *Two* things. Your blade buys you the first.}" I met his eyes. "{But with the second, you've made a mistake. This is not *your* choice. It is *mine*.}"

He stared at me, visibly shaken. His mouth was slightly agape, but no sounds came out.

"{I will not be your *Kaishakunin* today,}" I said. "{You will live, and you will keep helping me understand this Bushido thing properly—all the way through, *not* just the fundamentals. All the while, the crew will work on getting you back to where you're supposed to be. If, by the time I no longer need you, the crew hasn't managed it, and the outlook is the same as it is right now, and your commitment to this hasn't changed—}" I held his gaze. "{*Then* I will be your *Kaishakunin*. Not *one* day before.}"

I took a step closer to the bed and dropped my voice slightly.

"{It might not be in your Bushido to ignore the wishes of your friends and your crew. But it is in mine. Rule one: If a death you cause would knowingly make people you care about grieve more than otherwise necessary—*don't*.}"

The silence stretched out between us for what felt like considerably longer than it probably was.

Then Takeda exhaled, long and slow, and started shaking his head.

I'd been bracing for anger.

What I got instead was laughter—boisterous and unguarded, from somewhere genuine, before it tipped over into a coughing fit that took a while to fully resolve.

When it finally had, he looked at me with the eyes of someone who had just been thoroughly outplayed and found, to his own apparent surprise, that he didn't entirely mind.

"{Well...}" he said. "{It seems I h—have miscalculated after all. You are s—simultaneously wiser than your years would suggest, and m—more emotional than your wisdom should allow, Ela-san.}"

He laughed again at that, shorter, and I felt something tug at the corner of my mouth that I didn't fully suppress.

'He really does know how to read people. Have to give him that.'

"{Your conditions a—are fine by me,}" he said, settling back slightly. "{Not that I have much ch—choice in them... But know this, Ela-san: If the crew risks their lives, again and again, and it goes wrong—}"

His eyes were steady on mine. "{—it will be on your c—conscience. And you *will* still have to cause m—more grief fulfilling your oath to me as well, to prevent further deaths of theirs.}"

I nodded. Once, slowly, and with the full weight of understanding what I was accepting.

That agreement, I could live with.

"{Haaa...}" He muttered, something shifting in his expression into the specific sheepishness of a man who had just remembered something very inconvenient... and embarrassing.

"{This will be very a—awkward, then.}"

"{Why?}"

The sheepish expression resolved into something that was, unmistakably, devious around the edges, and I felt the instinct to retract the question approximately half a second too late.

"{Because I t—told Higgins that you would kill me at the end of our t—talk. At my request.}"

He let that sit for exactly as long as it needed to, then added, with the grin of someone who had found a silver lining they were genuinely enjoying:

"{At l—least I will not be the o—only one having awkward conversations now. You will have to explain why you decided to eavesdrop on t—them earlier, Ela-san. They know I can no longer speak common. And you have been in here for over an h—hour.}"

I simply stared at him, my eyes widening slowly at the realization that he was absolutely fucking right.

'Oh, fuck...'