

Chapter 12: Punishment Framed as Consequences

Kase

I hadn't known what to expect from Yosai on returning to the citadel. I'd thought he'd launch into a lecture, or if I was lucky, he'd be too preoccupied with making sure I was ok to consider all the risks I'd taken this morning. As I stepped into the atrium with Jhi and Aiko behind me, many possible scenarios flashed through my head, and I did my best to ignore them. They could be helpful at times, but for the most part, speculation was far inferior to analyzing one's circumstances as they presented themselves.

So, I saw Yosai waiting for us outside the hidden door that led into the citadel and took it in stride. With a wry grin, I started toward him, ready to play my adventure outside off as simply that: a harmless escapade, but as soon as he'd caught sight of me, he turned on his heel, leaving the atrium without a word.

That... was unexpected. Huh.

What was I supposed to do now?

Follow him, apparently.

I knew we'd entered the citadel when Jhi gasped at my side, curling over on himself. Aiko helped him continue walking. When she surreptitiously glanced my way, I nodded. For now, we should get him somewhere private, a place where observant eyes wouldn't notice the child's sudden weakening.

So, when the next turn-off came, my thralls took it, but I continued after Yosai, concerned by his behavior. Yes, it was late for me. Yes, my exhausted body and mind were crying out for sleep, but I *didn't like it* when people acted completely out of character, like Yosai had done by *ignoring me*.

Eventually, I recognized where we were going and couldn't stop myself from freezing in place. It wasn't a reaction I could allow myself, not when one of my keepers might spot it, but even with an internal voice yelling at me to *get over my silly fear* and *keep walking*, I couldn't help but display every anxiety I had about this place.

It, after all, was where my keepers stored silencers. What I'd done this morning had been reckless, sure, but I hadn't thought they'd disapprove of it this much...

When Yosai came back out of the room he'd entered, he raised an eyebrow at me.

"If you keep standing in place like that, you'll be late for your lesson."

...Lesson? I hadn't thought one was scheduled for this morning. Usually, this time of day was considered late for something so demanding.

As Yosai resumed his trek down the hall, it freed me from my frozen state. Much as I might want to run after him, demanding answers, I forced myself into a calm walk, speaking not a word once I'd reached Yosai's side. Better to let him speak first.

After a moment, he said, "I apologize for springing this on you, Kase, but you were nowhere to be found in the early hours this morning. We received a letter from Governor Guo last night. After his visit last week, he's insisted that we revisit some of your earlier training, nervous that you might have forgotten what you've learned. I thought it best to comply with his request."

Well. It seemed that man hadn't liked the letter I'd written to him by proxy. Still, my earlier training?

Forcing my voice into neutral, I said, "Of course. Keeping the governor appeased is in our best interest. May I ask which lesson he wants me to revisit?"

"The same ones he found you lacking in when he visited, but with a twist," Yosai said. "You and I may know that one weakness alone wouldn't be enough to overcome your *liiaresim*, but the governor hasn't had enough time to learn to appreciate your gifts."

Stopping, he turned to me with a soft smile, squeezing my shoulder.

"Don't worry, Kase. He'll get there soon enough."

After patting my shoulder once, he stepped through the door at our side, and while I might hesitate for a split-second, I was quick to follow him.

The training room we entered was similar to many others I'd occupied in the past. Around us, electric lights lit a small staging area, and on beside the door, a table held many different types of weapons on it, which made me want to cringe. It was further evidence that my keepers meant to use a silencer on me today.

Beyond the staging area, the rest of the room was dimly lit and cavernous in nature. Unlike with other training sessions over the years, the landscape my keepers had set up here didn't look overly complicated. A couple of medium-sized platforms had been raised off of the floor with lashed-together planks serving as temporary 'walls' and 'floors', and a few barrels and other such objects were scattered across the ground, there to serve as cover.

"What's the scenario?" I asked, keeping my focus on the room's contents rather than the man at my side.

"Assassination of an entrenched army's commanding officer," Yosai said. "As part of your infiltration, you have made a false surrender to one of the man's lieutenants. In a few minutes, he'll be coming to search you and place you in restraints, just like you'd experience if this scenario were real. Once that's done, you will have approximately ten minutes to find your target, eliminate him, and get out undetected."

All right. So far, this training session seemed simple enough. Given its parameters and the 'terrain' in front of me, I'd already planned out several ways to accomplish my goal, which made this seem... too easy. There had to be a catch.

When Yosai turned to fully face me, I knew I was about to hear whatever that catch might be.

"Just before this point in our supposed campaign, your identity was exposed," he said. "Given this, the man who's captured you will have taken appropriate measures to keep you under his control."

I had half a moment to internally wince at Yosai's not-so-subtle critique of my recent behavior of course he'd see my jaunt into the city as nothing more than a risk of exposing myself before he pulled his hands out of his pockets, bringing them in front of front of him. When I saw what was in them, my thoughts abruptly stopped.

"You promised that I'd never have to wear one of those again," I pushed from my numb mouth.

Nodding, Yosai said, "And you won't! Not for long anyway. It will only be on for this training session. Governor Guo wants to make sure you remember how to work through all the complications this device presents for you."

That... made sense.

Licking my lips, I said, "And it comes off after the training session?"

"As soon as we're done here, yes. I promise, Kase," Yosai said. "Trust me. I know how badly a silencer affects you. I don't want you to deal with it any longer than you have to."

Only for a training session.

Only for a training session.

"Ok."

Only for a training session.

"Good."

Dropping the hand holding a terrible—evil, *shouldn't exist*—device to his side, Yosai stepped toward me, hesitantly resting his other hand on the side of my neck. He hadn't touched me like that in a while.

With a faint smile, he said, "You can do this, Kase. I wouldn't ask you to unless I knew you could."

Why did you have to ask me in the first place?

As I breathed out, I tried to leak the freeze I was trapped in and my stress out with that breath, and it worked. Mostly.

I stepped out from under Yosai's attempt at comfort, taking gulping strides to the closest table. Leaning on it, I focused on the weapons in front of me, picking out which ones would be the most useful in the scenario I'd soon be working through.

"Get it over with," I heard myself say in the background.

As I ran through different ways I could conceal a small blade on my person, I distantly felt someone brush my hair to the side. As I eliminated which of my tools would be too big or unwieldy for an infiltration method, I absently noted a thin sheet of cold metal and adhesive being pressed to the back of my neck.

My entire system jolted into a faint sense of electric *attention* when a multitude of wires sprang upright off of that strip, quickly creep-crawling their way into place beneath the base of my skull. I bit the inside of my lip in preparation and...

A spread-out pattern of pricks along my skin. No pain. Never pain. A foreign invasion of... *something*—lines? strings? webbing?—in my head that I'd never been able to describe.

The pseudo-wires stopped moving through my brain, settling into place.

And the song cut off.

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An exaggeration.

Roughly, I shook my head, reaching for a knife with a trembling hand.

That had been an exaggeration. The song was still there. It *had* to still be there, and I could... hear it. A little. I was pretty sure I'd die if I were ever fully pulled away from it. Even still, this was bad enough.

Because I couldn't sing. I *couldn't sing*.

HOW DID ANYONE LIVE LIKE THIS?

With a jerk, I brought the knife to my thumb, pushing the edge into the top of it until a pinprick of blood appeared.

It was enough. Slowly, I inhaled. Slowly, I exhaled. I straightened and faced Yosai.

"One final warning. The governor has insisted that we make this scenario as similar to the last war as possible," he said. "So, you might encounter one or two... oddities that you've never seen before."

I didn't know how to respond to that, not when I could barely parse his words in the first place. Aft4er a moment, Yosai merely nodded, presumably accepting that I'd understood what he'd said.

"I'll let you get ready," he said. "Five minutes, Kase."

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