

Chapter Eight

I waited for what was coming, both needing to escape it and wonderfully, blissfully relieved that I couldn't. Too many royal guardsmen were standing between me and freedom, ready to incapacitate me if I tried.

So, I lay on the floor with one arm thrown over my eyes and waited for something to happen, for someone to retrieve me for death.

I found it interesting how little my impending demise bothered me. Ever since earth and fire had chosen my friend, which had soon had me volunteering to serve as his bodyguard, I'd known I would only outlive Nokoribi for a few days.

And that had been fine. When we were children, Nokoribi had stopped me from killing myself in the steamworks, as I'd planned, and after that, he'd saved my life countless more times before fire had ignited in my eyes. It seemed only fair that a life saved would become forfeit when the one to whom it was owed had died.

Rolling to my side, I closed my eyes to stop their burning, only to be greeted by an image that I'd never scrub out of my mind. Would this be the rest of my life? Would my final view of Nokoribi be summoned every time I so much as blinked?

How fortunate, then, that it wouldn't last long.

The door was swept open, but I felt no need to move. It fascinated me what the promise of death had stripped from my mind. What point was there in rising to my feet or showing respect to my visitor?

"Can I get you anything?"

Unless the visitor was him.

Chuckling, I got off the floor with every spec of me crying at the effort, and stumbling, I caught myself on a wall. The consequences of my beating had revealed themselves soon after I'd been left here, hence why I'd been lying on the ground. Doing anything else hurt, but I'd manage that pain to meet this man on equal footing.

"Don't you have better things to do than indulge the whims of a condemned, commander?" I asked.

Chewing on his lip, Ryoko examined me for a moment.

"No," he drawled, "I don't think I do."

Gritting my teeth, I tried standing on my own, and when I managed that, I limped around the room, dragging my finger along steel-flecked concrete.

“They haven’t made a decision yet?” I asked.

“Unsurprisingly, no,” Ryoko said. “They’re bickering like children.”

“What’s there to argue?” I said. “This is a clear-cut case.”

“If you say so.”

Before I could snap a reply, an imperfection in the wall caught on my finger, nicking it, and pausing, I watched blood well from the cut. How sad was it that a human’s body suffered from its owner’s decisions? Mine would soon burn because I couldn’t do my job.

“Are you hungry?” Ryoko asked. “I could get you something from the kitchen.”

“Why waste the food?”

From far away, I watched myself press my finger into poured stone, and when I pulled it away, a splotch of crimson, one decorated by whirling lines, marred its porous white surface. My mark. There until someone scrubbed it clean.

“Please, Kasai. You must want something.”

Sliding sticky liquid across my skin, I held my laughter in a death grip. I wanted so many things. The assassin under my control, about to receive her just reward. A way out of the palace so I could find her. More time.

Nokoribi alive.

“My mask,” I said instead. “I’ll cause enough of a stir, just by being who I am. Let’s not add my cursed eyes to the mix.”

“Probably wise,” Ryoko said. “I can easily accommodate that. Anything else?”

Casting back through the years, I sought anything that I’d left unfinished, anything that I might still have time to complete, but I came up empty. Nokoribi’s murder had snapped every tie that I had left except...

She hums a nonsense tune, one that sweeps me away from my pain.

“There’s a woman in the dungeon. Ide,” I said. “When her time for supplication comes, she’d have a better chance at surviving if Arita weren’t present.”

I wasn’t sure why I’d spoken those words, and when silence answered me, I knew how they must sound. My first request would advance the empire in some small way. By wearing my mask when

they escorted me out of the palace, the crowd that was surely waiting wouldn't see my eyes and therefore, question the guild chairs' decision. I'd stop dissent before it could begin.

This second request sounded like a plea for mercy and not one that I'd made for myself.

I knew better. Ide had helped me when I'd most needed it. With this request, I was merely clearing my debt to her, even if I wasn't sure if I needed to, but I couldn't explain that to Ryoko.

Stopping in front of the new commander, I stanchied my finger's bleeding on my clothes before meeting his gaze, and as expected, Ryoko flinched.

"Let me give you some advice for your new role," I said. "Don't do that. No matter how unnerving your enemy is, don't flinch in front of anyone. Be a rock, immovable and implacable. Something the emperor's foes will shatter upon. Never show them your sweaty palms or racing heart because if you do, even once, they won't take you seriously."

I paused to make sure he'd heard me before continuing.

"And honor dead men's wishes when you can. You never know when your positions will be reversed."

Drawing himself up, Ryoko said, "I'm not afraid of you."

A faint tremble still rested in the new commander's hands, but I smiled despite that. There was no need to push him harder. Ryoko would learn.

"Good," I said. "Make this who you are at all times."

Ryoko's lip twitched, and with a hand on my chest, he backed me into the far wall.

"I'll get your mask," he said.

After striding across the room, he paused with his hand on the door.

"And I'll help your Ide if I can."

The door clicked closed, and I dropped, boneless, to the floor. If that short of a time on my feet had turned my legs to water, then the next part would be fantastically *fun*.

It took quite a while for anyone else to visit, and when they did, I waited for them to approach me, conserving my strength. Whoever had entered the room didn't bother to come closer. Something thumped on my chest, and lifting it into view, I took in the visage that I'd worn for twenty-one years.

"Get up."

A royal guardsman stood nearby, toying with a set of shackles. He didn't look happy, but with a bubble covering his nose and mouth, reading his exact expression was difficult.

"Are those necessary?" I asked, tilting my head toward the shackles. "I've been nothing but cooperative."

Without a word, the guardsman rested a hand on his sword's hilt, which had me pulling my lips thin. Rolling to my belly, I strained to reach my knees, and perhaps impatient with how long something that simple was taking, the guardsman hurried forward to jerk me to my feet. I muttered my thanks while he shifted from foot to foot.

He could wait. I had a mask to reapply.

On donning it, vulnerability was swept away from me, relaxing my muscles as it left. Then, steel clicked into place around my wrists.

So. This was going to happen. Unless I saw an opening, I'd be dead within the hour.

Why did that thought buoy me so much?

The guardsman tugged me into the hall with several others falling in at my sides, and we headed in a direction that I'd rarely traveled while living here. When Nokoribi had wanted to leave the palace, we'd taken secret bolt holes to reach Takanai. The only times we'd used the main entrance were doing Hiyuki's few festivals or when a proclamation needed a royal touch.

That was where we stood now, though, with the massive doors flung wide, and as I stepped outside, I fluttered my eyes closed while my skin soaked in the sun's warmth. I almost clenched my teeth to activate my emergency bubble, but why should I bother with it? Without one, each inhale might carry the acrid stench of sulfur and other toxins, but for some reason, knowing that I was breathing poison felt freeing. Finally, nothing stood between me and the empire I'd long served.

Or its people.

As the royal guardsmen forced me forward, I fully registered the hissing buzz that had been flitting about my ears. I'd thought it was the product of the steamworks, but after opening my eyes, I knew better.

A sea of people blanketed the incline between the edge of Takanai and the palace. Thousands of faces were lifted toward me, and even with bubbles concealing them, I could read their muted fury and murderous intent. It was what I'd sought in every person around me for two decades, and here, an overwhelming tide of it was directed at me.

Hell, if it didn't feel right. I'd been Nokoribi's bodyguard, after all. My job had been to draw hatred like this away from my friend. It seemed I was still doing that.

Ryoko's gift of my mask indeed proved itself fortunate. If these people could have seen the sloppy grin hiding behind it, they'd have become a mob. They'd have torn me and the royal guard to

shreds, and the next empress would need every protector she could claim.

If they found her.

As we made the trek up Mt. Teisu, I kept a vigilant eye peeled for anything that might give me an advantage. I had no qualms with fighting my way to freedom if I could, but not if it ended with me dead. What would be the point?

The longer we climbed, however, the more I stumbled. My beaten body was begging to surrender, and the crowd never once wavered in following us. A cloud of hissing growls trailed the royal guardsmen, who showed no sign of relaxing their attentiveness, especially where I was concerned.

I found it flattering. Did they think this wobbling, panting, weaving, lurching, pain-wracked, *pain!*

A hand cupped my elbow, steadying me.

“Almost there,” the guardsman at my side said.

He continued to help me, and I let him. I’d fall without him taking some of my weight, and when we arrived, I’d have to resume standing by myself. So, I let the man help for now.

Lifting my eyes off of the ground, I found Mt. Teisu’s peak not far ahead with people waiting there: the guilds’ chairmen who’d come to observe the proceedings. They’d come to gloat, thinking they’d won, and at that, I couldn’t help a laugh from flinging forth.

I’d kept her from them. Even in death, she’d be *mine*.

Familiar faces were watching me, expressionless or bored. As was their wont.

The only one who was watching me with anything approaching sorrow was Taro, and I didn’t know how to feel about that. As a child, I’d fled to the steamworks, hoping to die, in an attempt at escaping that man’s guild. So when I stopped at the edge of Mt. Teisu’s smoking crater, why did the anguish in Taro’s eyes twist my own heart? Was it weakness?

Another chuckle ruffled unease through everyone who could hear it. Even now, that question plagues me. Why?

Why was I... why was *Hiyuki* so concerned with weakness?

Did it matter?

“Do you have anything to say?”

Sunada. That woman was standing apart from the others with her coal eyes isolating her.

With my brow furrowed, I cocked my head.

“Why would I?” I said.

Without invitation or command, I teetered my way onto the balcony that was jutting from the summit, but when my toes were hanging over the edge, I stopped. Far below, earth's blood bubbled and stirred in its swirl of orange and yellow while steam rose to sting my eyes. Even this far from it, heat slicked sweat over my skin, making my clothes stick to me, and my mask was seared to my face. How much hotter would it be there?

"Something you should know."

Jerking my gaze away from what would kill me, I turned to Arita, who'd come to a stop at my back. What more could that noxious man want?

"The lies you gave the rest? They were much appreciated," he said. "Now that the girl's served her purpose, we can kill her at our leisure."

His grin bit into me, seeping numbness through my body.

The girl. Who'd served her purpose.

"She wasn't working alone. Of course not. What competent assassin does that?" I said. "But *you*? I didn't think you had the balls for it."

Creeping one foot toward solid ground, I shifted my stance to something more stable, although I kept a foot hovering. Arita had exposed himself. If I looped my arms around him and pitched myself backward, I'd eliminate a threat to Hiyuki.

My job completed.

"We, not me," Arita said.

Growling, I lunged for him, but the guild chairman was faster than I'd expected. When my balance was most compromised, Arita sent his hands speeding for my chest. He shoved me, and I flew into thin air.

It shrieked around me with earth's blood coming far too quickly for me, but all I could see was Arita, leaning over the platform's edge and beaming. He was the man who'd sent the assassin, the man who'd killed my best friend, and that...

NO. YOU WON'T GET AWAY WITH IT.

My fall halted with a petulantly oozing plop, breaking bones and popping vital organs, and as something unimaginable howled through me, my skin was incinerated while my bones were blackened in an eyeblink. I inhaled to scream, and the steam from earth's blood flooded my lungs. As it ate me from the inside out, one idea fixed itself in the center of my dying mind.

Revenge.