

# Chapter Seven

When they lowered a rope ladder for me, I climbed out of the pit, rolling over its edge to lie on the stone. My body hadn't stopped protesting the damage that had been done to it, so as I caught my breath, aching hurt turned the hand reaching for me into a swirling mess of crimson and flesh tones.

I disregarded the offered help up, hauling my crying muscles into position, and when the world stopped spinning, I nodded to the royal guardsman opposite me.

"Ryoko," I said. "Sorry about the-"

I waved at the man's face where a red mark lay on a cheekbone and the beginnings of a bruise were ringing his eye.

Shrugging, Ryoko said, "I've taken worse from you before."

"Have they given you my position?" I asked.

"Yes, command-"

Ryoko broke off, lifting his eyes above the heads of those gathered.

After a moment, I said, "It's Kasai. Amari Kasai, although perhaps 'condemned' would be more appropriate."

With a swift jerk, Ryoko lowered his head.

"The guilds' chairmen have made me the royal guard's commander until an heir has been chosen," he said.

One already existed, though, and wouldn't it surprise the guild chairs to learn that their heir was a woman? When had that last happened?

For a moment, I considered sharing what I'd seen last night with Ryoko. From the years I'd spent training him, I knew the man to be a capable guardsman. He could find the assassin... the heir with minimal fuss and keep her safe until a bodyguard could be selected for her but...

She was *mine*. If I survived the day. Did I deserve to survive?

"They've made a good choice for once," I said. "Congratulations are in order."

"Thank you, command-"

Silence followed Ryoko's slip of the tongue, and I turned aside while he sought a blank face once more.

"This way, condemned," he eventually said.

The palace felt different from this side of things. Because it was no longer my home, its metal floor and steel-flecked, concrete walls cast an imposing shadow.

I'd never noticed how big everything seemed, even the halls. Without Nokoribi to steal my focus, I could examine these corridors that I'd walked down a thousand times before and appreciate why when the condemned had arrived in the audience chamber, they'd always looked so intimidated.

Unlike them, the palace wasn't what was making me want to disappear. No, that sensation came from my lack of a mask.

Without it, my brilliant, red eyes had nowhere to hide, and people stared. Of course, they might be doing that because I'd become a failed bodyguard surrounded by royal guardsmen, but instincts, drilled into me since childhood, screamed that the attention being paid to me was because of my eye color.

So, I kept them fixed on Ryoko's back.

The procession stopped at a set of double doors, beautifully carved wooden slabs from before Hiyuki's transformation into a land of volcanoes and sulfur, but when the guardsmen swept through them, I refused to move.

"This is 'ribi's..."

They wouldn't know my friend's name.

"This is the emperor's audience chamber," I said.

"And that emperor is dead," Ryoko said with bite in his words. "Until we've found an heir, it will be used as we require."

A hand on my shoulder propelled me forward, and numb, I allowed this until I stood in the threshold. Then, shaking seized me, and I wondered if my body's aching had surmounted my resistance to it until I collapsed on the doorjamb. Hacking, babbling noise burst from me, and I clung to the doorframe to keep from dropping to the floor.

"They replaced him," I gasped. "They got what they always wanted. Oh, my friend..."

"Condemned."

If that word had been meant for me, I didn't notice it. For his entire reign, Nokoribi had struggled to retain the scraps of power that he'd held, hoping to find a way to help his people, and not a day after his death, the guilds had taken over.

With my legs failing me, I slid toward the floor while my cackling noise turned to a howl, but something pinned me in place, halting my fall.

“Kasai.”

Who was trying to free me from this dip into insanity? Didn't they see? Life was defined by its futility-

Someone slapped me, although its sharp sting quickly faded beneath the dull pang that was dominating my body.

“*Commander*,” Ryoko hissed in my face. “Get yourself together. Don't dishonor our emperor with this display.”

Dishonor... Nokoribi? The laughter filling the audience chamber's foyer fell to silence, and among the royal guard, shoulders were lowered from ears.

What had that been? *Earth and fire*, what had that been?

Weakness? Had I contracted that disease?

And why should I care if I had?

Climbing up the door, I scrubbed my face clean, and at my nod, a guardsman opened a smaller set of doors, letting me step into the audience chamber.

I knew how this trial should proceed. From here, I should advance to the center of the room, drop to my knees, make my greeting, and crawl to the throne.

These, however, were anything but normal circumstances. For one thing, Nokoribi's throne lay empty, leaving four people gathered around it in flimsy chairs. For another...

For another, the emperor had been murdered.

So, instead of continuing into the room, I examined the people who would judge me. The guilds' chairmen had crowded into the room, as they always did, with only the most powerful and influential of them perched beside the throne.

The presence of Arita, the chair for Hiyuki's largest agricultural guild, and Mako, from food distribution, didn't elicit surprise from me. Any guild that dealt in the sustenance of our starving empire maintained a firm grip on power, and of them, those two had always had the loudest voices.

The steamworks' chairman, Sunada, also barely raised my interest. Even as a black-eyed woman, her position had guaranteed her a seat on the dais. The steamworks were too important in the empire's cities for it to be otherwise.

The last of the four, Taro, raised my eyebrows, though. He led the guild that controlled Takanai's various... pleasure establishments. As one of the weaker guilds, their chairman had never pulled much weight, which I'd always celebrated.

If that man had come to the forefront more often than he had over the last few years, how much conflict would it have spawned? How much acid would have eaten at my guts? Would I, in a fit of unreasoning dislike, have damned Taro to Katanti? Thank earth and fire that the man had never claimed significance back then.

Because of that, though, I had to wonder. Why had the other guilds honored him now?

"Commander?" Ryoko whispered at my elbow.

Glancing at him, I murmured, "That's your title now."

But I took the prompt for what it was. Gazing at my lifelong enemies, I puffed out a breath and walked forward.

Nothing skittish lay in my stride. I marched across the metal tiles like I had as the emperor's bodyguard, giving tradition not a flicker of acknowledgment. Only when I reached the dais did I stop, folding my arms behind my back.

"I assume I'm here to give my report?" I said.

A rustle spread through the chamber, and the people in front of me shifted in their chairs with one of them going red in the face, which made me smile. I'd always wanted to smear that mottled shade across Arita's face like Nokoribi once had.

"Kneel before us, condemned," he spat.

Sparing him only a glance, I said, "No. I have an appointment with earth and fire today. I'm sure you'd rather take my report before then. So. Am I here to give it or not?"

Sputtering, Arita shot forward in his chair, but before he could speak, Mako snapped his hand out, gripping Arita's thigh.

"Remain poised," he said. "Remember your place."

Still red in the face, Arita sank into his chair with his rust-tinged eyes biting in their glare, but I didn't feel it, not with everything else I'd suffered over the last day. I merely waited for someone to answer my question.

When a response came, however, it emerged from the person I'd least expected.

"Are you sure you want it to go this way?" Taro asked. "I admire your strength, but as you can tell, it won't curry you any favor now."

Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees with his fingers steepled in front of his face, a pose that Nokoribi had so often assumed that seeing it here squeezed my heart. Facing him, I forced myself into a short bow before speaking.

"Your concern is appreciated, but I've made my bed. May I give my report, please?"

Sunada's sigh emerged long and loud and exasperated.

"Men," she said under her breath before raising her voice. "I, for one, want to know how our most blessed emperor met his fate. So, unless someone else would like to raise his useless voice?"

She raked the room with her black eyes, and when no one spoke, gestured for me to begin.

This proved harder to do than I'd expected. While waiting in the dungeon, I'd rehearsed what I'd say, but now that I was standing here, those words seemed limp... weak, and while replaying them in my head, images from last night danced between the guilds' chairmen and an empty throne.

Well. It was empty except for the ghosts.

Nokoribi leaned over the throne's arm, beckoning me closer with a smile. Nokoribi listened to a condemned's supplication as if the task was the most serious one in the world. Nokoribi sagged in defeat, hiding his eyes with one hand.

With vines ripping through his body, my best friend bled out while reaching for me.

"I saw weakness in my emperor," I said, forcing the words out.

It hadn't sounded like me, though. That croaking rasp, weighted down by unshed tears, had twirled in a halting cadence from me, but I couldn't change it, knowing that no amount of coughing would banish the stranger who'd taken residence in my body. Instead, I listened from a distance as that alien voice continued.

"In the last week, several assassination attempts were made on my emperor, as I'm sure many of you have heard. You saw one of them yesterday morning, but there have been more, and in many of these cases, once I'd immobilized the assassin, my emperor let them go with no warning or punishment given. Instead, he gave freedom to those who'd tried to kill him."

From behind me, the guild chairs flung gasps and titters into the air, and I gritted my teeth as I moved on.

"I saw this weakness and delayed with what I needed to do. I watched. I hoped. I begged earth and fire for me to be wrong because he..."

As Nokoribi leaned forward in his throne, blood dripped from him, vanishing before it hit the floor, and his gentle smile requested more of my story. The teeth, painted red, behind it prompted a choked sob instead.

“It kept happening. Again and again and again and I knew. Weakness had infected my emperor. So last night, I did my job. I cut off the diseased limb.”

Shaking his head, Nokoribi collapsed into his throne, and I hoped he knew how sorry I was. If I survived this, I’d fix the story but if not...

“What about the mess we found in his room?” Mako asked.

Shrugging, I said, “He fought me.”

Not entirely untrue. How wonderful that felt on a tongue coated in lies.

“And his body?” Sunada asked. “Its riddled state doesn’t seem like something you could do. No offense.”

“None taken,” I said. “In the end, my emperor showed strength. He recognized the weakness in himself and turned his blessing on his body. My emperor cured his disease.”

In the silence, Nokoribi peered at me from beneath the hand that was shielding his good eye. So much disappointment lay there that I wanted to run for the nearest bathhouse so I could scrub myself clean, but I made myself watch as my friend straightened in his throne. I forced myself to read Nokoribi’s lips.

*Find the truth.*

“I know,” I said under my breath.

*Save her.*

“I can’t.”

With his face twisting, Nokoribi pointed at me.

*You did this to me.*

“I know. I’m so sorry, ‘ribi.”

Snarling, Nokoribi turned to smoke, and I was left with several guild chairmen staring at me. Would they see through my lies and press me for the truth?

Because if they did, I wouldn’t give it. If I escaped this situation—if I deserved to escape—I would take my knowledge about the assassin away from this place. I’d use it to find her, and *I would make her suffer.*

If I couldn’t escape, I’d give no one else a pleasure that should only be mine.

“It seems we don’t have a case of a failed bodyguard, merely one who fulfilled the less reputable side of his role,” Taro said.

"It carries the same sentence," Arita grumbled.

"Should it, though?" Sunada said. "For centuries, that law has been begging to be overturned. Why should an emperor's bodyguard be punished for acting on an observation of weakness, completing his role's most difficult task as a result?"

"If doing it didn't carry a death sentence, we might have more bodyguards claiming that their emperor carried weakness," Mako said. "The law is in place to dispel the temptation for a bodyguard to become an assassin."

"But surely in this case--"

"If we make an exception here, we'll prove that our laws are intractable," Mako said. "I don't want to uphold this one either, but if we don't..."

"If we don't, other arrogant pieces of shit like him will think they can get away with their crimes," Arita growled.

Sighing, I crossed my arms. I'd find no escape here, not that I'd have deserved it. Still, I made one last attempt to invoke their pity.

"If I may, I'm not looking for mercy or an exception from the law," I said. "For my whole life, I've lived in service to my emperor, and I'll die in service to him too, if need be. Do whatever you must to keep Hiyuki stable."

For a moment, I thought I might have them. I'd mentioned the many sacrifices that my role had demanded from me to play on their emotions, and guild members had ever let those drive them, more so than imperials. That could be seen now.

Sunada and Taro had already seemed to be in my camp while Arita lay on the opposite side. Only Mako had acted somewhat undecided, so as honeyed words had fallen from my tongue, I'd watched him, noting his twitching fingers and his grimace.

It was with some surprise, then, that I heard Sunada's voice once I'd fallen silent.

"He's right," she said. "We find ourselves in perilous times, gentlemen. Food scarcity is at an all-time high, and we have no emperor to commune with the earth while Hiyuki already rumbles beneath us. We can't afford the political upheaval that would come from sparing this bodyguard's life. We must feed him to earth and fire."

"Agreed," Arita said as soon as she'd finished with her pronouncement.

"Agreed," Mako quietly added.

Only Taro hesitated. He gazed upon me with struggle evident on his face, but soon enough, he clenched his jaw, speaking through gritted teeth.

“Agreed.”

“Wonderful! The rest of us should confer, but I think we already know our decision,” Arita said, chortling. “Commander! If you could take the condemned elsewhere for now?”

I listened to his seeming triumph with half an ear. Nokoribi’s ghost had appeared again, glowing with health this time. He stood close enough to me that I could touch his incorporeal flesh if I reached out.

*Save her, K.*

“Looks like you’ve gotten what you wanted,” I murmured. “Again.”

Frowning, Nokoribi cocked his head, and that movement came with a tug on my arm, coming from an outside source.

*I never wanted you to die with me.*

“Then, I’ll defy you to the end. I’ll die as I deserve.”

As my friend’s frown deepened, the tugging on my arm increased in insistence.

*No one deserves to have earth and fire eat them.*

“I do,” I whispered.

*Oh, K...*

Nokoribi shot his hand out, sending a ghost of pain stinging across my cheek, and vaguely, I became aware of someone in the distance barking orders at me.

*That was the shittiest attempt to escape that I’ve ever seen from a condemned,* Nokoribi said.

“How else did you expect your bodyguard to fare in a game of rhetoric?” I said. “You were the one with a silver tongue.”

*Because I practiced hard for YEARS to gain it. Don’t you dare distract me, though.*

*You need to escape. You need to save her. This attempt fell flat. Try again.*

“How?” I asked.

“AMARI KASAI.”

With my given name ringing in the audience chamber, I blinked, and Nokoribi vanished. Standing at my side, Ryoko was hauling against me, but he was getting nowhere. The poor man had never made me budge, even during his training.

Dismissing him, I let my eyes slide to the throne, now and forevermore empty of my friend.

“Goodbye, ‘ribi,” I said.

Only then did I let Ryoko tug me outside. Only then did it fully hit me that I was going to die.

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