

Chapter Six

I fought when they pulled me off of the body. I remembered that much. The rest of the night was a haze with grief clawing thought away from me, but I remembered the arrival of the royal guard.

I remembered their foreboding quiet as they'd ducked through the vines, such a contrast to the sobs that had been wringing me dry. I remembered one of them taking my arm before I'd yanked it free. I remembered the two who'd come next, wrapping their elbows under my shoulders while I'd thrashed and snarled. I remembered freeing myself and punching a man I'd spent years training.

Memory turned red after that with its accompanying blood and wrath coming as a welcome relief.

When clarity next returned to me, I wondered why I'd fallen asleep in the palace's dungeon. Considering how many people I'd sent here, doing that didn't seem like the wisest of choices...

Everything rushed into place, and shouting, I shot to my feet and punched the wall.

"Nonononononono!"

I screamed and lashed out until my knuckles had nearly broken, but then, I sank to my knees, resting my abused hands on top of my head. Nokoribi was-

"That's the best reaction I've seen yet."

Finding the person who'd spoken almost wasn't worth the effort, but still, I twisted in place, setting my neck creaking. A skinny woman whose body rippled with scars was leaning against a wall with her arms crossed. When my eyes landed on her, she grinned, lifting her fingers in greeting.

"Welcome to the ranks of the condemned," she said. "What got you tossed in here?"

In answer, I had so many reasons I could give, but only one mattered.

"I killed my best friend," I said.

"Oo. That'd do it," the woman said, making a face. "Me? I stole from one too many clients. Morihei took notice, and... here we are."

Morihei. I knew that name. How did I know that name?

"I'm Ide," the woman said. "Who are you, Mr. Best Friend Killer?"

Flinching, I mumbled, "Not looking for new friends."

I climbed to my feet, surveying the dungeon. It was a pit dug beneath the palace with the only way out coming from rope ladders, lowered by the royal guard as needed.

During exchanges like that, the grates dotting the pit's walls were what ensured prisoner cooperation. Behind each of them lay a pipe that led to the steamworks and at the pull of a lever above, earth's blood would flood this pit, incinerating everyone within it.

Currently, that included a dozen people, which was a much lower number than usual. Still, I recognized some of them, faces I'd sent here as part of my duties. Why hadn't they attacked me yet?

"Hey!" Ide snapped. "Just because you've got emperor eyes doesn't mean you can act like a bastard to me."

Ah. That explained why I wasn't curled up in pain right now. Nothing was hiding my face, which meant no mask, and no one here had seen me without it.

I rubbed the burning itch in my eyes, wincing when my fingers came away wet. What I'd become last night? I couldn't reach that state again. Not here.

"You're right, of course," I said. "I'm sorry. I-"

How was I supposed to act without Nokoribi to guide me?

"The name you mentioned distracted me," I said. "Morihei? I've heard it before, and it's not that common of a name."

"Oh! Perhaps you've visited us, then," Ide said.

Fluttering her lashes, she lowered herself toward the floor, taking a pose that accentuated her every curve. She trailed a finger along her hip before whipping it to her lips and licking it.

Noticing it took me much longer than I'd like to admit, but when I realized she was trying to entice me, I took a step back.

"Huh," I grunted. "You're a..."

"Uh-huh. Never seen you before in my workplace," Ide said with a grin, "but I suppose that makes sense. My visitors tend to enjoy certain... kinks."

She ran a finger over a scar while something between a smile and a grimace crossed her face.

"I never indulged in the many entertainments that Morihei's establishment provides," I said. "That was more 'ribi's thing."

I squeaked to a stop with my voice stolen from me, but no matter where I looked, I couldn't find its thief.

“Is that why you killed him? Your friend, I mean,” Ide said. “Was it over one of us?”

Lifting my hands, I watched my fingers twitch.

“Oh, no. You’ve misunderstood me,” I said.

Before I could continue, a gong reverberated in the pit, and across it, the condemned scrambled for hiding spots. Didn’t they understand that nothing could conceal them in here?

Content to stay still, I looked toward the pit’s edge, far above. Royal guardsmen had made a line along it, although none of them looked down. None sought out their commander.

It was just as well. They no longer answered to me, not after last night. Who claimed their loyalty now?

A diminutive woman with coal eyes parted the royal guard’s ranks, and almost beneath my notice, my bearing straightened. Never show weakness to an enemy.

“Guild Chair Sunada,” I said.

With her toes brushing the edge of the pit, said woman leaned over, squinting down at me.

“Hello... I don’t know what to call you after what’s happened,” she said. “I’m sorry. You look so small down there. It’s quite a change.”

...Had she come here only to gloat?

“What do you want?” I snapped.

Sunada rocked back on her heels.

“You think I’m here to make fun of you,” she muttered before shaking her head. “No, I don’t have time for that. I need to know what happened last night, and you need to tell me.”

Narrowing my eyes, I said, “Shouldn’t you already know?”

“Yes, yes. You failed in your job. The emperor’s dead,” Sunada said, flapping her hand. “I’m sure all of Hiyuki knows that by now.”

All of Hiyuki except for the condemned. The people in the pit shifted, flicking their eyes between the guild’s chairman above us and me.

“I’m interested in last night’s details,” Sunada continued. “Since you were there, I thought you might share them with me.”

Was she trying to get a leg up on her fellow guild chairs?

“You’ll get them at my trial, along with everyone else,” I said.

For a long while, Sunada gazed down on me while the condemned shuffled in place.

“I don’t think you appreciate how serious our situation has become, nameless bodyguard,” she eventually said. “Without an emperor to commune with the earth, Hiyuki’s ecosystem will go haywire. Vents will release steam, mountains will spew fire, and the earth’s blood that powers our world will become uncontrollable. We need an heir. In the hopes of finding one, I’ve been scouring our late emperor’s records since his death, hoping he might have overlooked a clue about his successor, but I’ve found nothing. So, I’ve come to you. Did you see anything in last night’s attack that might lead us to our next leader?”

Fire’s light seeps around her mask, transferred from my friend’s eyes.

“Save her,” Nokoribi begs.

No. That bitch was *mine*.

If I lived. Did I deserve to live?

“As I said,” I called to Sunada, “I’ll reveal last night’s details at my trial.”

Resting a hand on her hip, Sunada said, “I’m only trying to help, but I understand your hesitation. After the last few hours and considering everything you have yet to experience... well. I’m sorry, nameless bodyguard. My fellow guild chairs and I will see you soon.”

The royal guard closed behind Sunada when she turned away, following her out, and not one of them glanced my way.

“You’re...”

I dropped my gaze to the bottom of the pit where Ide was gaping at me.

“You killed the *emperor*?” she squeaked.

“That’s what I was saying before Sunada came to visit,” I said. “I didn’t kill Nokoribi, but I might as well have. I wasn’t strong enough or fast enough or smart enough-”

Breaking off, I lowered my eyes to the floor. The stone beneath my feet made a fascinating portrait, after all. Each grain of sand on it was a freckle while each pit in the rock was a hole in flesh. Each splash of fallen moisture was a blood streak.

“You’re why I’m in this mess!”

Lifting my head had become too much work for me. Instead, I rolled my eyes toward the man who was stalking my way.

Why had I condemned this one? Oh, yes. He’d assaulted a woman on the palace’s staff.

“He’s the bodyguard? He doesn’t look like much without a mask to hide those simpering eyes.”

That woman had tried to steal rations from the palace’s kitchen.

“Oo... this’ll be *fun!*”

And that man had climbed out of the steamworks to try killing Nokoribi. I’d caught him before he could disturb my friend’s day.

More of them flocked to me, and I stood ready to accept their vengeance. I meant to take every blow they’d rain upon me without complaint, but when the first punch was sent flying, instinct had me dodging it, and I caught the man’s fist before he could retract it. With a twist and a crunch, I broke his wrist bones, and he howled.

Damnit. Now, they’d be incensed.

Screaming, they fell upon me, and I defended myself as best I could. I tossed away the next person to reach me and flung the one who came after him into the wall, holding her there while jabbing my fingers into another man’s eyes. I kicked a third man, but too many were rushing me at once. A pile of bodies dragged me to the stone floor.

They didn’t care whether they hurt one another. Despite the blanket of people covering me, fists and feet slammed into my sides, but the men and women on top of me didn’t seem to mind that abuse. They clawed and bit at me just as fiercely, and my world became nothing more than an animalistic struggle.

When the condemned got tired of raining their anger upon my body, I lay where they’d left me, too tired to move. Too tired to finish assessing the damage done. Too tired to care.

“You pissed them off.”

I peeled my eyes open to find Ide standing over me.

“Would you like to add to their gifts?” I asked.

“I’m good, thanks.”

With a single skip, Ide flounced to a seat at my side.

“So, you failed to protect the emperor,” she said. “That’s why you say you killed him.”

A pain sharper than any that the condemned could have imparted pierced me, turning into glass shards that rubbed against my guts.

“Yes,” I grated out.

“And he was your best friend?” Ide asked.

Was. The word acted as salt in my every open wound.

“Yes.”

Ide stayed silent for a time, leaving me floating between my pain and the comfort that her benign presence was giving me.

“You know you’re dead,” she eventually whispered.

“Yes.”

“They’ll feed you to earth and fire.”

“Yes.”

Again, there was a pause before Ide continued.

“Do you know what you’ll say when they come for you?”

Did I?

“Yes.”

Ide had nothing more for me, just a quiet, melodious hum. As her voice wrapped around me, I listened to my body’s weeping rather than that of my mind. It hurt less.

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