

Chapter Eighteen

Again, two antagonistic voices boomed in my dreams, continuing their never-ending argument.

"This one? Again? Why are we revisiting HIM?"

"Why do you think, moron? He's been busy today. By the whole, I've never come across a human who's so enticing before, not here at least. He feels like-"

"My side. He smells of home."

"What do you mean? He... oh. Yes. I hadn't noticed that noxiousness behind the rest."

"You're such an asshole."

"Don't start. I've been starved for any taste of home in this awful place. Let me enjoy it."

"Let you... I'm sorry. Have you gone mad? Don't let our recent commiseration delude you into thinking we're friends, bore."

"Who are you calling a bore, mania-? No. No, I won't argue with you. Not with freedom so close. I'm perfectly aware that you and I are adversaries and that once we escape, we'll return to our incessant murder attempts, but for now, we're... allies."

"Excuse me while I find a corner to puke my guts up in."

"You think I don't feel the same way? Now focus, moron. We must have returned to this human, entering deeply enough to infiltrate his sleeping mind, for a reason."

"Yes, why this flesh bag? And why twice in as many nights?"

"More importantly, why were we drawn to him when the beyond lies so heavily on his essence?"

"Huh. Its influence HAS grown. I'm assuming you have some inane theory to explain that."

"Not at all. Rather, I have a suggestion. I propose that we use this human as a backup in case the girl fails, as her progenitor did."

"...I'm sorry. Are YOU suggesting we break the rules we agreed upon? You, the by the books, stick in the mud?"

"No! I'm not saying we should take him as a host. Not when we have the girl. I'm saying we should prepare the next one in advance. Just in case. The rules say nothing about doing something like that."

"I- I'm actually impressed. You found a loophole. You. I can't believe it."

"Yes, well. I'm desperate, as I'm sure you can understand. I badly need correction in the whole; I've warped so far from my nature."

"I wonder if that was HIS purpose in-"

"We don't speak of him."

"Ruuuuuude! You're right, though, and... is this human reacting to our presences?"

"Damn. We've stayed for too long. Hurry and break off a thread of yourself, and I'll do the same. We'll leave them in him, there to root in case he's needed."

"By the whole, you've become conniving. I almost like you!"

"Disgusting, isn't it?"

"Quite."

"If you've finished, idiot, we should go before we melt his brain."

"After you."

Again, silence reigned for a short time before one of the voices spoke up again.

"You'd better hope the girl succeeds, flesh bag, because otherwise... well, let's just say I'll pity you. Damn. What is WRONG with me?"

A weight on my chest was keeping me pinned to the ground while small hands held my wrists together.

"Wake up, K," someone was saying. "Come on! Wake... K?"

"My head," I groaned.

With my wrists freed and weight lifted off of me, I sat up, applying pressure to the throbbing under my skull. That bony shell felt like it would pop at any second with what it was holding ready to leak out of my ears. Earth and fire, it hurt!

"Are you ok? Do you need anything?"

Brennan. She'd slept here last night, yes? The weight that had been holding me down must have been her. Why had she done that?

"What happened?" I grunted.

That I'd spoken at all was a miracle. I couldn't move, barely able to breathe or think. My body only allowed me the basics needed for continued survival.

"I don't know," Brennan said. "I woke up to you screaming bloody murder, flailing like you were fighting something, but Zhao came running before I could do anything to help. He told me to stay away from you while he made tea, but I couldn't do it. You looked like you might hurt yourself."

Tea. A more wonderful word had never before been spoken.

But wait.

Snapping my eyes open, I winced at the bright sunlight filling the room, but I persisted in peering out so I could examine Brennan's body.

"Did I hurt you?" I asked.

I'd had enough experience with fighting a sleeping person's unrepressed strength to know how badly it could damage someone, but thankfully, Brennan didn't look hurt.

She also didn't seem to have heard my question. Gasping, she rocked away from me—

"K! Your eyes!"

—before shooting forward to take hold of my head. She stared at me but didn't seem to see me, only what she was brushing her thumb beneath.

Meanwhile, I fought to keep from knocking her hands off of me. The pounding in my head was making it difficult to comprehend... anything, really, but still, I thought I'd caught the gist of her behavior.

"What about the cursed things?" I asked.

She'd never minded my eyes before. Why panic about them now?

Swallowing hard, Brennan whispered, "They're burning, K."

I forgot about the agony in my head. My breathing hitched as what she'd said shot like lightning to the core of me, and screaming, hysterical denial rose in response.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Your irises... their beautifully brilliant scarlet is gone," Brennan said. "In its place are rings of fire."

Her hands were trembling on my face, but I couldn't consider that right now. Taking hold of her wrists, I thrust them at her.

"That's impossible," I said.

I wouldn't find any mirrors in this room, but metal existed in abundance here, and it had the only quality that mattered at the moment. Crawling to a wall, I yanked the cloth covering it aside, looking into a brushed, gray surface, and it reflected twin, flickering circles to me.

"No... this is *impossible*," I whispered. "It- it *can't* be."

Welcome to your new life, someone chuckled in my mind.

And a hammer slammed down on my head. Repeatedly.

Collapsing against the wall, I curled on myself, screaming into my knees. Somewhere nearby, a voice most dear was calling to me with her tone rising in pitch, but I couldn't be bothered to answer her. A far distant part of me prayed that she'd stay away, choosing not to risk the violence I might unleash on her.

Unfortunately, someone did decide to fulfill that fear, but whoever it was dragged my hands from on top of my head, filling them with warm porcelain.

"Drink, *ko*. Please."

Hot tea splashed over the cup's lip, scalding my legs, but I got most of that precious liquid into my mouth and over my tongue. The taste and smell of it reduced the grip of what was holding me captive until it became just a dull ache behind my eyes.

When I could, I set my cup aside with a shaking hand.

"That was..."

I had no words to describe it.

"What Nokoribi lived with every day of his life after he was chosen?" Zhao said.

When had he joined us in here?

Inching up the wall, I stood and wobbled toward him, jabbing my finger into his chest.

"You kept this from me," I growled. "You pushed me out of the community center the other day because you were afraid the downtrodden might recognize the meaning of what they saw. *You said the voices weren't important!*"

"Usually, They aren't," Zhao said. "Usually, a lucky few people hear from Them, but it's only once in their lives. I'd hoped that would be the case for you, but it appears you're the exception for this decade, *ko*. Or should I say most blessed?"

"No. I-"

“Excuse me. What the fuck is going on?” Brennan snapped. “K, why were you screaming like that? Should we take you to a hospital? Or whatever Hiyuki’s equivalent might be.”

Damn, she was a picture of anxiety. With her hair mussed from sleep and her eyes wild, she looked like an animal fit to bolt, but to where, I didn’t know. I badly wanted to come closer and take her hand like I had last night, but most of her jitteriness was centered on me.

Was she afraid of me now? Had my cursed eyes ruined something good in my life again?

When had she become a good thing for me?

“Kasai’s fine. He’s undergone what every person chosen by earth and fire experiences,” Zhao said. “You’re looking at Hiyuki’s next emperor.”

His words seemed to take something from him. While he slumped in defeat, Brennan tensed, rising onto the balls of her feet.

“The fire in his eyes,” she said. “That’s the proof you mentioned last night.”

“Indeed,” Zhao said. “This changes things, *ko*. We need to get you to the palace as soon as possible and do damage control. Who knows how the guilds might have undermined the throne in the time it’s been empty? I’ll serve as your bodyguard until another can be chosen...”

He kept rambling, making plans that didn’t matter, but I wasn’t listening. I’d finally caught Brennan’s gaze. She saw me, not the monstrosities circling my pupils, and I couldn’t bear the sadness in her. She’d realized what I had from the beginning.

If I was wrong... if I was what Zhao thought I was, then I couldn’t travel with her across her many worlds.

“-need to commune with the earth,” Zhao was saying. “I’d rather wait until you’ve adjusted, but the outer provinces have already reported the earth cracking with fire spewing forth.”

That caught my attention.

“What? How’s that possible?” I said. “It’s only been three days since...”

Nokoribi’s death.

“We’ve been without an emperor for *three days*. How is Hiyuki already collapsing?”

“When was the last time Nokoribi communed with the earth?” Zhao asked in answer.

When I took too long with responding, he shook his head.

“That’s what I thought. Too much time has passed since the last communion. You need to go through the Gateway-”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said. “Something about this is wrong. I can’t be the next emperor.”

Zhao looked at me with something like pity.

“No one believes it can be them,” he said. “My emperor, Yukinaga, took months to accept his place. Nokoribi went through the same process more quickly, but it still took time-”

“No. You don’t understand,” I interrupted. “It *cannot* be me. Earth and fire can only bless one person at a time, right? Well, I’ve seen who they’ve chosen. I know who Hiyuki’s next leader will be.”

Cocking his head, Zhao grabbed my chin, frowning as he examined my eyes.

“Ok. Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Fire always burns in someone when They visit overnight. I’ve never heard of it happening to the same person more than once, but I suppose it’s possible. Plus, your fire’s more of a smolder than the blaze it should be, what with the emotions you’re surely feeling.”

He released me.

“So. Who is he? And why haven’t you said anything about him yet?”

I concentrated on leaving my arms hanging rather than crossing them as I might like. I hated disappointing Zhao, and what I was about to say would surely do that.

“Her, actually,” I said. “Our next empress is ‘ribi’s assassin.”

With one indrawn breath, Zhao stopped moving while his eyes went wide. How would he respond to the conundrum that I’d been battling for days? Would my *maiyaru* be as lost as I’d been?

I blinked, and the next thing I knew, Zhao had hold of my shirt while he drove me into a wall. My head bounced off of steel, and flashes in my vision accented the sharpness of my old mentor’s voice.

“You’ve had us chasing the next leader of Hiyuki this whole time?”

Shaking my much-abused head, I said, “I didn’t know how bad things had gotten across the empire. I thought I’d have time to get the answer I need from the assassin before deciding what to do with her. Because she may hold the proof that’s needed to become the empress, *maiyaru*, but that doesn’t change the fact that she brutally murdered her predecessor. Do you *really* think someone like her will make a good leader, whether earth and fire have favored her or not?”

Grinding his teeth, Zhao held me in place with my feet nearly dangling until Brennan laid a hand on his arm.

“I understand that you’re upset, but if you hurt him, I’ll kill you,” she said, “and I don’t want to do that.”

She'd *kill* him over me? That was... interesting.

Shaking my head to clear it, I provided the last bit of convincing that Zhao would need.

"You know I'm right, *maiylaru*," I said. "Please. Trust me. I'm not so weak as to destroy our home, just to satisfy a need for revenge."

I didn't think I was, at least.

With a slow breath out, Zhao released me.

"I know that, *ko*, just as I know you're aware of your other responsibilities. If this Himi girl doesn't hold earth and fire's favor as you claim, you'll have to accept what you are," he said. "It appears this morning's task is more urgent than I thought. I'll leave you to prepare for the day."

He bowed, a sign of respect that unnerved me, and left the room in a rush, which left me and Brennan staring at one another.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Thank you for backing me up."

I wasn't sure how else to clear the tension in the room.

"Mm."

With nothing more, Brennan collected her discarded belongings and ducked through the room's barrier, probably heading for a washroom. After a moment, I followed her out, although I made for a different destination.

While getting washed and dressed, I avoided my reflection, but like a lodestone, it drew me to it before I could leave to join the others.

The same image I'd seen for my whole life stared at me from the mirror with one obvious exception. A swirl of livid fire undulated between my solid pupils and stark sclerae. Even dimmed as they were, their light painfully bounced off the glass, and leaning toward these impossibilities, I splayed my fingers over them.

"Please," I breathed. "Don't be what I think you are."

Flicking a pair of spectacles open, I shoved them into place before finding my companions.

We set out across Takanai, although our planned journey wasn't long. Kunao Road lay near Zhao's house, an easy trip all told, but unfortunately, on arriving, we still had to find Himi's home.

"Shall we go door to door?" I asked.

I'd meant the suggestion as a jest—my proposed plan would give our quarry plenty of time to see us coming, which was unadvised—but the tense atmosphere that had accompanied us until now

couldn't be cleared with a single joke. Zhao looked down his nose at me, and I couldn't tell whether he did that because he was displeased with my proposed plan or with me.

While avoiding my gaze, Brennan looked distracted, like she was only half there, and I didn't know what to make of that. I'd thought something significant had occurred between us last night, something that the small chance I'd have to rule an empire couldn't affect, but perhaps I'd been wrong. Perhaps she didn't think what had happened was as important as I did.

Most likely, that was the case. I hadn't let someone come close to me or surmount my defenses in... well, ever. I doubted that she, with her foreign beliefs about strength and weakness, could say the same.

Someone pinched my arm.

"Most. Blessed." Zhao hissed. "Let's not get distracted, yes?"

Swatting his hand off of me, I said, "Don't call me that."

"Until we know otherwise, you're my emperor, Kasai. Get used to the deference," Zhao grumbled. "Even having said that, how do we determine our target's location, idiot *ko*?"

"Scout the area. Watch for the target," I said. "Follow her home."

"Good. I'd begun to wonder if my lessons had fled from your brain, alongside the caution you once held so dear."

"All right, *maiyaru*. I take your point," I said. "Let's not waste more time driving it in."

"As the emperor most blessed says."

Rolling my eyes, I hurried to one of the nearby emergency channels, running behind the homes on Kunao Road, with Zhao at my side and Brennan dazedly following. It would be better to start our search in a more remote location, one where fewer eyes might spot us and wonder what we were doing.

Mos to the fence-enclosed courtyards behind the houses here looked perfectly normal with corroded furniture and children's toys filling them. Some had nothing in their confines, leaving their empty stone bared to the sky. One of them sported a self-contained atmosphere, an indulgence that had me shaking my head.

None, on either side of the road, looked out of the ordinary, and as we approached the end of the second channel, I resigned myself to a long wait, looking for a girl I could barely identify.

"All right. Let's climb on top of one of these houses," I said. "We'll need a good view--"

Here, came a whisper, as if from a distance.

That distance did nothing to lessen the strength of the gong that reverberated in my head, a pain that turned my vision white. Biting my lip, I reached out for support with my palm landing on something pointy.

I didn't care that the object was digging into my hand. I was just glad for the chance to stay on my feet.

When I could breathe again, blood had filled my mouth, and I spat it over the fence I was clinging to. It splattered across white pebbles, and panting, I scanned the courtyard in front of me.

An invisible line split it down the middle. On one side, the one I'd marred, perfectly ordered stones formed a rigid pattern with each rock's size swelling until they stopped at a large boulder in the middle. On the other, rock and stone were haphazardly sprayed across the ground with most of them halfway through the process of dissolving.

Not. normal.

Someone helped me stand while I wiped my mouth.

"What was that?" Brennan asked, as if life had been returned to her. "Are you-?"

"I told you, *ko*," Zhao said. "You're-"

"She's here," I breathed.

What was this eagerness in my voice? This hungry ferocity, desire, *need*?

When I turned to my companions, they shrank away from me with orange light dancing over their faces, but I hardly noticed that.

"Give me two minutes alone with her," I said. "Then, you can join us."

I strode across the courtyard to a door with Zhao sputtering behind me, but as I moved forward, that noise parted to either side of my awareness. The people at my back had become irrelevant.

No, they were most precious.

What was waiting in this house called to me like the music of my soul might, and a trance-like state settled over my mind.

And shouldn't that worry me?

The door smoothly swung open, as if it had been oiled in anticipation of my arrival, and I slipped inside, becoming a spirit from Katanti, drifting among the living.

For a place belonging to a girl whose writ of membership belonged to the brothel guild, this house seemed strangely well-kept and ostentatious. Someone as young and therefore, low-level as her

shouldn't be able to afford a miniature, self-contained atmosphere, let alone the larger one that was wrapped around this dwelling.

And then, there were the plants.

I'd expected to find some of those in the home of one blessed by earth and fire, but the amount I found here overwhelmed me. Nearly every surface—shelf, table, or otherwise—held a pot with trailing vines, tiny trees, or flowers. I walked through a veritable paradise, one that was so reminiscent of Nokoribi's garden that it should have stolen my breath.

It didn't, though. All of me was fixed on the entryway ahead. A voice was floating through it, one that I'd last heard on the worst night of my life.

“-can't. No. No, no, no, no. You don't understand! I can't live with-”

A yelp tumbled through the metal arch, and I peered around it at a girl, maybe fourteen-years-old. About how old I'd been when I'd begun my life as a bodyguard.

Springing from out of the ball she'd been huddled in, she spun, flinging her curly hair with the force of it, and resumed pacing, something she'd been doing excessively, if the scuff marks on the floor beneath her were any indication. Tear tracks were scored through what little of her face I could see, and this first glimpse of her features sent a pang of recognition through me.

What...? Why did I find her so familiar?

Here strode the object of my near fugue-like quest: a troubled teenager. Despite her obvious distress, I slipped a knife and pistol from their places on my belt and twisted around the doorframe.

Keeping slow and quiet, I almost made it to the girl before she noticed me, but then, she screamed, stumbling away, and all thoughts of getting answers from her or saving the empire vanished. I raised my pistol, tightening my finger on the trigger.

Sorry, K. You can't hurt her.

A wall of vines separates me from my best friend, and as he turns away from me, I know he's about to do something incredibly stupid. I have to stop-

Force tore the pistol out of my grip, and blinking, I focused in time to catch the girl finishing the roundhouse kick that had disarmed me.

A flushed face with fiery eyes and a familiar nose—why on earth was it familiar?—snarled at me before a glint of steel warned me of danger, getting me to raise my knife. I parried her strike with such force that she tripped, and following the direction of my momentum, I swung a fist at her face.

Save her, K.

The light in my friend's eyes fades, and he claws at me, reaching for something I can't see. He's dying, and failure that I am, I can't bring him comfort. What do I-?

Something barreled into my cheek, sending my head flying to the side. She'd returned my punch, and from the looks of her, neither of the blows had phased her.

Reversing the grip on her blade, she swung at my neck, and I caught the strike on my knife's cross guard before twisting. The unstable hold she'd chosen failed her, sending the weapon sailing across the room. I thrust for the space below her ribs—

Save her, K.

—and pulled the blow.

The girl skipped backward, putting a table between us. When I tried to reach her, she threw mugs and dishes at me, and nimble thing that she was, she kept the obstacle between us, despite my best efforts.

Growling, I vaulted over the table, kicking at her exposed side—

Save her, K.

—and my toe glanced across her skin rather than driving into muscle and bone, as I'd planned.

No matter. Off-balance as she was, tackling her to the ground was a simple matter.

I straddled her with my knife poised for the kill—

PLEASE, K! Save her.

"I don't want to!" I shouted.

Even still, my knife tumbled out of limp fingers, and I fell to my elbows over the girl.

"You killed him!" I sobbed. "He was my world, and you killed him!"

Everything that had been pent up in me released, and I collapsed on the girl, nearly smothering her. Besides the moments after Nokoribi had died, I hadn't given myself time to grieve, as it hadn't been something I could afford. I'd bottled it up, buried it deep, but this girl had unearthed it and shattered its container.

For who knew how long, I let tears leak from my eyes while babbling all of the nonsense things I'd wanted to say.

That I was sorry. That Nokoribi's death was my fault. Each of my carefully crafted justifications for the destructive revenge I'd unleashed.

That I missed my friend.

After a moment, the girl reached around me to rub my back, and to my surprise, I found that I didn't mind this. I wasn't sure why she wasn't continuing with the fight, but in this one instance, I wouldn't question another person's mercy.

With her help, I wound down until control had returned to me. I lifted myself onto my elbows again, meaning to apologize, and for the first time, our blazing gazes met.

Like calls to like, two voices murmured.

A spike was driven through my eyes to the back of my head, and wincing, I rolled off of the girl in time to hear her pained gasp. When I could, I sat up to find her staring at me.

"You hear Them too?" I demanded of her.

But of course she did. If the voices had caused the fire in our eyes, then she *had* to hear Them.

With her fingers shielding her face, the girl giggled.

"Oh. Then, I'm not crazy," she said, "or if I am, you are too."

Flipping to her hands and knees, she crawled toward me, getting close enough that I had to cross my eyes to keep her in focus, and while my skin prickled, she cocked her head.

"Am I right in assuming you no longer want me dead?" she asked.

Damn, she was so close that I was having trouble breathing. I leaned back on my hands, creating distance from her as subtly as I could.

"For the moment, I don't," I said.

"Excellent!"

Flouncing into a sitting position, the girl extended her hand.

"I'm Lin--"

"Himi, I know. Amari Kasai."

Gritting my teeth, I took her hand, right as Zhao slunk into the room with Brennan behind him. Hissing, Himi skittered backward until she'd hit a wall, walking her hands up it to stand.

"Who are they, Kasai? Who are they?" she screeched.

Cringing, Brennan slapped her hands over her ears while Zhao crossed his arms, and for a moment, I considered going for my weapons again so I could once more try to...

"They're friends," I made myself say instead.

“Oh.”

Relaxing, Himi pushed off of the wall, trailing her fingers along it as she skirted the room’s perimeter.

“See?” she mumbled. “I told you everything would be fine.”

With a hum, she twirled in place, laughing when her balance nearly failed her. Oh, earth and fire... was she... sane?

With one arm hugging his chest, Zhao waved at the girl.

“This is your empress,” he said in deadpan.

“And the assassin,” I said. “She’s good, *maiyaru*, no matter how she may be acting now. She almost beat me. Given, I was distracted but-”

“That’s impressive nonetheless,” Zhao said.

Nodding, I stood while Himi stopped spinning, clasping her hands in front of her face.

“Maybe you can help me since the other two have been so useless,” she chirped. “Someone’s trying to kill me. I outran several assassins on my way home from...”

As she trailed off, a strange look crossed her face before it dropped into a smile again.

“Then, I beat another couple unconscious two days ago,” she continued, “and last night, a super strange one chased me away from work. I couldn’t see much of his face in the dark, but he was intense, and at some point during the chase, he put on a creepy mask-”

Brennan coughed, which had all eyes shooting to her. She shifted in place.

“K...”

Did she think explaining myself to this girl was a good idea? I wasn’t sure it would be.

When she jerked her head toward Himi, though, I sighed.

“That last one was me. Sorry,” I said. “I wanted to kill you then.”

Himi’s smile dropped while she got into a ready stance.

“And now?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Like I said, you’re safe for the moment, but that might change.”

Relaxing, Himi clasped her hands behind her back, twisting in place as she beamed at me.

“You’re honest, and you hear from Them. It’s interesting. I like it!” she said before frowning. “Don’t tell me what to like. It’s part of me, not you, idiots.”

“Right,” Brennan drawled. “So, what are we doing with her? You said you wanted answers, K.”

“And I still do, but it sounds like Himi has people coming for her head,” I said. “Before he pushed me into earth’s blood, Arita mentioned a plan to eliminate his group’s assassin. Maybe these people she’s encountered were following that group’s orders. If so, she can’t stay in a place where they’re likely to find her.”

“So, what are you suggesting, most blessed?” Zhao asked. “Shall we bring *Nokoribi’s murderer* to my home?”

At the acid in his voice, I winced. I knew what I would be asking of him, but when it came to this, I had to consider my own priorities.

Given that, what did I want? Should I get my answers here before leaving Himi to her fate or-

Save her, K.

Keep her safe, two voices rumbled.

With a hissing gasp, I stumbled toward a wall before waving off the help I was offered.

With each instance, these voices’ repercussions were getting easier to handle. Perhaps my body was adapting, or maybe the intensity of the damage that was done to my brain depended on the strength of what the voices said.

What were these voices anyway? Maybe I could ask Himi about that, alongside my other questions.

In this case, though, They’d made a good point. I hadn’t decided what to do with this girl, whether that would be killing her or helping her attain her place as the empress, but whatever I decided, accomplishing it would be easier if we were somewhere safe.

“We’ll return to base,” I said, “and she’ll come with us.”

Slumping, Zhao said, “As you command, most blessed.”

Skipping forward, Himi took my hand, spreading revulsion over me with her touch, and I contained a shudder.

“Does that mean you’ll help me?” she said.

How could she ask that when I’d attacked her not ten minutes ago?

Pulling her hand off of me, I donned a blank grin, and without a word, Brennan stepped forward to replace Himi’s disquieting touch with her warmth. Bless her.

“We’ll help,” I said, “but let me be clear, Himi. We’re not your friends, and we may never be. In fact, you and I may be fighting to the death again before the day’s out. Do you understand?”

With a laugh, Himi rattled off, “They say you won’t kill me. That you can’t. But I hear what you’ve said regardless of Their beliefs.”

“Good,” I said.

Now for a hard question.

“Can you act at all like... a normal person?”

Oh, earth and fire. That had been poorly phrased.

With a hand hiding her mouth, Himi said, “Sure, I can be sneaky, like most people are. When you’re in the brothel guild, it’s a skill best learned early. Wouldn’t you agree?”

She winked, and Brennan’s hand tightened around mine as I turned to stone. Did she... know?
How?

Spinning, Himi brushed past Zhao, heading toward the room’s exit.

“Let me get a few things, and we can leave,” she said. “No, we’re not bringing the knives. Well. Not *those* knives. Yes. I know I need to behave myself...”

Her voice continued rambling as she turned the corner, but even with her gone, I had yet to assume a human state once more with the same question rattling in my mind. Did she *know*?

No. That wasn’t possible. I was reading too much into what she’d said, something that had probably been innocuous in nature.

Knowing this didn’t make me any less uneasy.,

“Ko?” Zhao said. “Are you aware that your supposed empress is insane?”

As that broke me free of my paralysis, I pinched the bridge of my nose. Considering who each of my companions were in these strange circumstances, I’d be lucky if all of us survived the next few hours.

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