

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Himi

Kasai had vanished into thin air, taking his ingenious layering of new skin atop the old with him, and I hadn't been able to stop him.

Unable to focus, I couldn't find either of the life sparks I'd wanted, whether that of the tree trunk that had held me captive or of the verdant life beneath Kasai's feet. If I could have picked one of those from the plethora that had been bombarding me, tearing at my mind since They'd left, I might have stopped the one who'd forgiven me from killing himself.

But I'd failed.

A man I'd come to love in my own way, the fire to match mine, my last link to *gidae*, the only one who *understood* was dead, and if I'd only been a little stronger, he might be drawing breath with me now.

I'd never make either mistake again. Never would I allow anyone to burrow as deeply into my heart as Kasai and *gidae*... my father had done. Other people might stand at the threshold but never further because to open myself up to another person was to accept inevitable pain. I'd rather forego such companionship than again experience this removal of my heart and the ache it had left behind.

And I'd never fail so horrifically again.

As I sprinted toward shouts and the ring of steel on steel, I drew my fierce demeanor, the one that had intimidated Kasai, out of my wardrobe of disguises. I reached out to the delicious abundance of life around me, touching it in preparation.

Assholes One and Two might have abandoned the confines of my skull, but I could still use Their power. Would it stay with me after Kasai had freed Them?

Ahead, the trees thinned with the noise beyond them growing deafening, and I slowed down, stopping just outside of a clearing. In it, the royal guard was engaged in what must seem like an epic, righteous struggle to them.

I saw a bunch of men, acting like rage-pumped idiots. Fortunately, I knew how to deal with people like this. Growing up in a brothel had taught me a few useful skills.

While I finished getting ready, I kept an eye on Zhao. I wasn't looking forward to telling him what had happened with Kasai because he'd be understandably upset, and I was afraid of what he might do to me in his grief. With my own voice adding to the chorus that was already calling for my death, I didn't think I could win a fight against the old man, and if I had to kill him...

Well. I might be a killer, but I'd rather engage in that unpleasant activity as little as possible in the future. The last two times-

"We can examine it all later," I said under my breath. "Chin up, my dear. Time for the show."

No one paid me any mind as I stepped into the conflict. These silly men were working too hard on murdering one another to do that.

Didn't they know the toll they were willingly placing on their consciences? I did. Intimately.

And what exactly would they accept it for, here and now? Ideals and factions that wouldn't matter, let alone—if I had any say in it—exist in a few decades. It was so short-sighted of them, but then, that was how it had been for most men I'd known.

Except for two. My precious two.

"ENOUGH!" I roared.

With a push, the many sparks of life I was touching fell to Growth, and the garden moved. For a moment, plant life became like an animal, reaching with hungry hands for prey. The forest floor ripped apart with writhing roots emerging from it, and the trees and bushes whipped everything feasible to twirl and twine around human bodies.

Supple, fibrous rope bound arms to chests and legs together, lifting its many victims, screaming, into the air.

When my sparks of life began seeking openings into their prey to plunge through, I hauled them once more onto the balance beam that floated above Growth and Decay. As the forest fell still, leaving the royal guard at my mercy, I listened to their frozen, gasping silence for a moment before resting my hands on my hips.

"*What* do you think you're doing?" I hissed.

Slowly, I turned in place, meeting as many eyes as I could. Each royal guardsman inevitably averted his gaze from me, but that's what they'd been trained to do. *Gidae's* once delight in my direct stare at him made perfect sense now.

"Why is *my guard* fighting with one another?" I asked. "This behavior is what I'd expect from the guilds, their many members, or the downtrodden. *Not*. my. guard."

Oh, *gidae*. I could never thank... my father enough for our lessons together.

For the times when Morihei had closed her brothel so I could give speeches to her employees with him watching in the back. For when we'd played pretend with me trying out different roles, building my wardrobe of carefully crafted disguises. For our quizzing games on the guilds and how they infested Hiyuki, although not once had we touched on the monarchy. Its royal guard had arisen on occasion, but we'd never discussed the monarchy itself.

No matter how much he'd protested when Assholes One and Two had transferred hosts on the night he'd... died, I thought he'd known, deep down, what his daughter would become. Why else would he have prepared me as he had, making me ready to face down a pack of deadly, angry men without fear?

"Shame on you!" I snapped. "I know it took me longer than most to reveal myself, but by earth and fire, it's only been a few days! I had to make sure the affairs of my past life were in order before coming to greet my new family. Never did I think they couldn't handle this time without my presence. Some elite guard you are."

I paused, waiting for one of them to make the obvious reply, and sure enough, it didn't take one of them long to provide it.

"Who are you to lecture us?"

In the chaos I'd made of the garden, I couldn't see who'd posed the question, but I made a note to learn his name. In the meantime, I needed to give him an answer.

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked.

With my arms spread, I twirled before them, almost dropping the fierce disguise in favor of my bright, girlish one, the one I felt most comfortable wearing, but it didn't fit the setting. As I came to a stop, I lifted my eyes to my guard, allowing some of my pain through the barricade raised against it. This, in turn, set my eyes ablaze.

"I'm your new empress, weaklings," I said.

Mt. Teisu obligingly chose this moment to erupt. Events like this happened quite frequently in Hiyuki, hence the emergency channels through Takanai for drainage of earth's blood and bubbles to guard noses and mouth against ash.

This one, however, dazzled with its glorious display. Reports would later describe it as the death throes of the earth, mentioning how it had drawn so many of Takanai's citizens onto the city's streets.

I didn't get to see it. My focus went to dissolving the changes I'd made in the garden before anyone could get hurt, which had royal guardsmen dropping out of leafy grips in fits and starts, and all the while, a voice was shouting in my head.

Free, free, free, free!

Kasai had done it. The assholes, sequestered below the earth, could return to where they belonged, which I might appreciate more if I hadn't been fighting to stay on my feet. Earth and fire, the throbbing in my head was threatening to send cracks through my skull, and that was with only one of Them releasing Their victory cry.

Wait. One?

I will stay for a moment, Asshole Number Two said in response to my unspoken question.

“I thought you wanted to leave,” I growled.

I do. I also want to be here for your friend.

My frie-

Ah.

“That’s kind of you,” I said.

Don’t insult me, girl.

“I wasn’t...! Never mind,” I said. “Will you tell me when he...?”

I should think it would be obvious, as I’ll be leaving soon afterward, but to please you, most gracious of hosts, I’ll say something before I go, Now, focus on your surroundings.

As I retreated from the part of my mind that They’d occupied with my head pounding so badly that I saw sparks, I again almost dropped into the grass on viewing the bedlam around me. All the dull life sparks, the ones that belonged to anything that wasn’t human, tumbled from or climbed to their tightwire, leaving so many plants voraciously exploding and so much dust floating in the air.

Whatever this was, it couldn’t have begun long ago, considering that most of the royal guard had yet to regain their feet, and if this was so, I couldn’t allow it to continue for long either. The garden, confined to such close quarters, would crush everyone who’d come to visit it today.

Thankfully, I had yet to lose my sense of the sparks, perhaps because one of them was still here. So, like *gidae* had taught me, I sank cross-legged into the grass with my palms on my knees and sought my center.

Once I’d found it, I flung it over the garden, letting my steady calm cajole all life sparks caught within its sway to perch where they’d normally balance. With half an ear, I listened to people shouting with some of them eventually gathering around me, but I didn’t pay them much mind.

Maintaining calm around the garden and in myself was challenging. I’d always trended more volatile in nature, enough so that those close to me constantly expected me to erupt into emotional outbursts. *Gidae* used to tease me about that...

I couldn’t think about my father right now, not him or-

He’s gone, a voice whispered. *I made sure he went peacefully, Himi.*

My breath caught while my control on the garden wavered.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

This is the first time a mortal's thanked me. It's an interesting experience, the voice whispered. Oh, and you can relax. I'm joining Growth, running far from this place.

The sparks of life I was holding stopped resisting my control, and slowly, I pulled free of them, relieved to feel them returned to normal. In response, a swell of something delightful tried to rise in me, but I batted it down.

I wasn't finished.

Releasing a held breath, I opened my eyes. Several members of the royal guard had surrounded me with more spread in a defensive pattern over what little open ground remained. All of them looked addled, which was saying something for a group that had been trained to never show their emotions.

Slapping my knees, I flowed to my feet.

"I see my guard has decided to stop acting like idiotic children," I said.

The men around me flinched ever so barely before giving me space, and the rest quickly gathered nearby.

"I have calmed the earth, angry at the loss of her favored son," I said. "No more shall it quake, and no more should you fear spewed fire or the seep of earth's blood. This world we now stand in is to my credit and mine alone."

I hated claiming Kasai's accomplishment as my own, but I had to ensure these people's loyalty. If I survived for long enough to establish a stable reign, I'd fix the story but for now...

"Before me, I see men whose faith has faltered. Men who have forgotten their vows, and frankly, it makes me sick," I continued. "I'll give you *one* chance to redeem yourselves, and I'm only offering it to you because you may still be of use. So, tell me. To whom do you belong?"

Would it work? Had I intimidated them enough?

As the silence stretched long, I reached for the sparks of life that might help me escape from this place, but as I did that, first one and another and then, all of the royal guard gave their answers.

"Our empress."

Oh, thank earth and fire.

"Kneel," I snapped.

Once I could see over their heads, I swept a fiery glare over them, pausing when my eyes landed on Zhao. He was standing near the back of the crowd with his arms crossed, watching me, and the worried pinch in his eyes drove a spike into my heart.

Holding his gaze, I said, "This empire has lost its way, giving too much power to people who would abuse it. I mean to change that and more, and for these reasons, I reject traditions and expectations. I will not be a nameless ruler, hidden in the palace. I will be known throughout the land, accessible to anyone who wishes my time.

"I am Empress Lin Himi, daughter to Emperor Lin Nokoribi, and the one who will revolutionize this world, and you? You are my instruments.

"So. Your orders. I want all of the guilds' chairmen in Takanai gathered in my audience chamber. I know they're lurking nearby. Find them. I want Mistress Morihei brought here from her place of business, but for now, I want her guild chair, Taro, left alone. That's all."

Spinning on my heel, I marched away from the shifting royal guard toward a more secluded spot of churned earth.

"Imada Zhao and the commander of the guard, I require your presences," I called.

I didn't check to see if my orders were followed. I maintained a steady pace until the trees had hidden me, and then, I leaned on my knees, gasping between them. Part of what I'd been ignoring was brought to the forefront.

They were gone. The voices in my head that had been plaguing me for as long as I could remember had finally yielded to my pleas. My mind was my own.

But that meant...

A snapping twig shot me upright while I performed a quick wardrobe change, so when a strange, quite good-looking man came into view, he was greeted by his new empress, grinning like a loon and softly clapping as she bounded in place.

"That was *amazing*," I said. "I can't believe it worked.

Giving me an odd look, the stranger said, "You must be the one Kasai mentioned, the girl bearing earth and fire's full favor."

Hiding a giggle, I waved.

"That's me!" I chirped.

"I... see. In that case, I am Xie Ryoko, the commander of your royal guard," the stranger said. "If I may, most blessed, where is Kasai?"

"Yes, where's my *ko*?"

Zhao soundlessly stalked to join us, and try as I might, I couldn't read him. He presented me with a blank disguise, the one I'd had the most trouble learning how to wear when I was younger.

Grinning at him, I said, "Your student is here."

Trusting my hip to the side, I placed a finger at the corner of my mouth, and all the rage and fear that I'd known was lying beneath Zhao's empty façade broke through it. As if by magic, a knife appeared in his hand, and he'd drawn back to throw it before Ryoko stepped between him and me.

"Don't," was all he said.

For a moment, Zhao stood perfectly still, but then, the knife vanished as magically as it had appeared.

"Well, that was exciting," I said. "As I was about to say, Zhao, we can discuss Kasai in private. Let me complete my business first. Please."

"Fine," Zhao grumbled.

He slouched against a tree, seemingly content to wait, so I turned my full attention on Ryoko.

"I'm sorry about ensnaring you and the guard who are loyal to me with those you were fighting," I said. "I needed to level the field."

"Of course, most blessed," Ryoko said, "but please, you don't need to apologize to someone like me."

"I think it's-"

"Most blessed, don't apologize. Ever," Ryoko interrupted with his features flattening.

Oh. He'd been giving advice, not acting out of a desire to be polite, and his advice was sound. My hold on power was still oh-so-fragile with my loyal subjects numbering in the double digits, and those people still believed in Hiyuki's incomplete definition of strength. Until I could change that, I'd have to abide by most of the old rules, which meant never apologizing for my behavior, no matter how deplorable it might be.

"Even if the royal guard are on the same level once more, I want a list of all who betrayed their oaths," I said, as if Ryoko had never spoken. "What were you fighting about anyway?"

"The guilds-" Ryoko started.

"Ah. I see," I said. "Nothing to worry about, then. The guilds won't be causing any trouble after today. I still want that list, though. Make it subtly, mind you. I don't want to ruin my earlier efforts."

"Yes, most blessed," Ryoko said. "How else may I serve you? I could help you find a bodyguard, if you need an opinion."

"Thank you for the offer, but I've decided not to take one," I said. "For the next few months, I'd like you nearby while I settle in, commander, but after that, you may return to your normal duties. That

should be protection enough.”

The attentive guard façade that Ryoko had shown to this point cracked, letting his concern shine through.

“No bodyguard, most blessed?” he said. “But your safety... and tradition!”

With a soft laugh, I said, “Did you not hear me say that I’ve rejected tradition? That wasn’t idle filler for an inspiring speech. I mean to break this empire to the bedrock of its foundation before building it up again.

“And do you really think I need protection, Ryoko? If I wanted to, I could turn every person in this garden to dust. I don’t need someone to shield me, and I certainly don’t need someone watching my every move for weakness, ready to put a bullet in my head when they notice it.

“No bodyguard. Understood?”

Besides, I doubted any of the people he could offer me would beat me in a fight. *Gidae* had started my martial training early in life, always fearful that someone would hurt me.

It was too bad that he hadn’t trained me in mental defense as well. If he had, maybe Sunada wouldn’t have gotten in my head. Maybe my father would still be alive.

“Is that understood, Ryoko?” I repeated when he’d taken too long to respond.

With his hands pressed to his thighs, Ryoko bowed, and I sighed under my breath. I didn’t mind the deference that accompanied my new position, but it could make getting things done more difficult.

Plus, it made things take longer.

“Well? Get going!” I said. “You have a lot to do, and I’ll need you back at my side soon. I’ll be fine with Zhao in the meantime.”

“Yes, most blessed.”

While Ryoko scurried away, I took several deep breaths. Up until now, the conundrum of the royal guard had served as a wonderful distraction, but that couldn’t continue with Zhao behind me. I had to confront the snarl inside of me, no matter how much I’d rather never do that.

“Please tell me the reason you’re alone is that Kasai ran off with Brennan,” Zhao said.

How could he sound so calm when moments ago, he’d meant to sink a knife into me? More importantly, though, how should I handle this?

I could lie. It would make my life easier, and Zhao would never know the difference, happy with the fantasy I’d given him.

Would it be right, though?

With that question in mind, I dropped every disguise, including the cheery one that had once most closely matched my real personality. It didn't come close to who I was today, and hadn't for a while, but then, everything had been different since Sunada had found me. When I turned to Zhao, I gave him my true self because that was what he deserved.

"I don't know where Brennan has gone. She didn't tell me before leaving," I said, "but Kasai stepped through the Gateway to free Growth and Decay. I'm sorry, Zhao."

I didn't know what I'd expected from this man on learning about his *ko's* fate, but it wasn't motionlessness with a slow blink serving as the only indication that he was still alive. Unsure what to do, I took a step toward him, lifting my hand.

"He did what?" Zhao asked with his voice dead.

Stopping, I shifted in place, playing with my jacket's hem.

"Went through the Gateway," I said. "He's saved Hiyuki."

Thinking his head against the tree, Zhao gazed through its leaves as if the sky beyond might give him a sought answer.

"He said I didn't need to worry," he muttered, "that everything would be fine."

With his feet losing traction, he slid down the tree's trunk with his limbs splayed once he'd hit the ground. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I took another step toward him.

"He did it for you, didn't he?" Zhao asked. "To keep you from communing with the earth or some such nonsense."

I couldn't breathe. The pain in my chest had swollen, crushing my heart and lungs with its strength, and I could swear bile had crept into my mouth, even if it refused to emerge.

"In part," I whispered. "It was done for me and Hiyuki."

A broken chuckle shot through my last word.

"I always knew his loyalty to Nokoribi would get him killed, saw it from the moment I recruited him," Zhao said. "Though why that loyalty extended to you, even given your tie to Nokoribi, I'll never know."

I had to breathe. Please. Whatever had hold of my heart, spreading its acid fingers through me, eat my body. Consume my mind, but please. Let me draw a single breath.

"I don't deserve what he's given me," I said.

“No, you don’t.”

Zhao lowered his head, leveling murderous eyes at me.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you,” he said. “Both of my boys are dead. Because of you. Give me *one good reason* to let you live.”

Breathe, Himi. Breathe. Don’t listen to the little girl, crying in the depths.

My fathers! I killed them both. It’s my fault. Mine, mine, mine!

Don’t listen to the adolescent who was laying her wrists open in the core.

I deserve to die. How can I even the scales after what I’ve done? It would be easier to rid the world of my existence, and look! An easy way out has provided itself.

Think of the men who’d been murdered with blood bathing their skin. Think of what they’d wanted. Think of Kasai.

For you, strength is presenting a cheerful face to the world, despite how badly you’re hurting inside. You live your life the way you want, in spite of everything that’s tried to shatter you.

Think of *gidae*.

My precious girl, you never cease to amaze me. Whatever you become, it will no doubt change Hiyuki. For that, I’ll keep fighting. I can’t wait to see what you’ll do, Himi.

Remember them, and take a-

Sucking in a breath, I shouted, “*NO!* Don’t you *dare* blame me for their deaths! yes, I had a part to play at the ends of their stories, but their blood isn’t on my hands. It’s on Sunada’s head, a woman who manipulated me into *killing my own father*. It’s on Kasai’s for deciding my fate without consulting me, for being who he was and doing what was right. It’s *not my fault!*”

Good. Now, believe it.

“I... know that,” Zhao said, looking away. “I just need someone to hate for it. I need a reason for what’s happened, besides how cruel the world is, because if I have neither of those things, I have to accept that I failed them. I couldn’t protect...”

Slowly, he drew his knees up, hiding his face in them. His shoulders started shaking, and I found another point of interest while he wept for his lost sons.

When he eventually calmed down, I said, “Kasai wanted me to be the empress, and I know what he really meant by that toward the end. I will fulfill his wish, no matter who or what stands in my way, and I could use an advisor to help me with that, someone much wiser in the ways of the empire and throne. Someone I can at least marginally trust.”

Zhao lifted his head to peer over his arms.

“You want me to help *you*?” he asked.

“No, I want you to help with realizing Kasai’s hopes for Hiyuki,” I said, “and while we have history, I believe we’d make a good team, Zhao. Come with me to confront the guilds?”

He blinked at me for a moment before climbing to his feet.

“I won’t call you most blessed,” he said.

Giggling, I flapped a hand at him.

“Nor would I dream of asking you to,” I said. “After all, I would be your student, in a way. Maybe someday, once wounds have healed, I’ll call you *maiyaru*, and you’ll call me *ko*. But that day’s not today.”

“It most definitely is not,” Zhao snapped.

He closed his eyes while his shoulders rose and fell.

“But maybe,” he continued. “Someday.”

I gave him a minute. I needed time to find the empress disguise once more.

Locating one of those after I’d closed my wardrobe and let my true self free always took a while. Once I had it, though, my demeanor shifted.

“Shall we go?” I asked.

It hadn’t sounded like a question, though.

I led the way into the clearing, trusting that Zhao would follow me. Once we were there, a small contingent of royal guardsmen with Ryoko among them flowed around me, and as a group, we entered the palace.

Thankfully, I didn’t need to take the lead. I only knew how to reach one room in this maze, and it wasn’t my new audience chamber.

As we walked, Ryoko said, “Takanai’s a mess, most blessed. What you shielded us from in the garden has wreaked havoc in the city, and people are... not happy.”

Hooray! Another complication.

“I will deal with it,” I said.

And no one questioned me. My control of these people must be firm indeed.

More members of my royal guard were waiting for us in front of the audience chamber, but before they could open the room's strange doors, I stopped.

"Only Zhao, Ryoko, and two guards of the commander's choosing will join me for this meeting," I said. "The rest will wait here in case the guild chairs decide they won't see things my way."

While Ryoko made his choices, Zhao pulled me aside.

"I don't know what you have planned, but you should know that the guilds long ago lost any respect they might have had for the throne," he said. "If you mean to regain it, you'll have to be ruthless."

"I'll do what's needed. Trust me," I said, "and Zhao? Once this is over, you should go home for the night. Do what you must to recover because I'll need you here, totally focused, in the morning. Both of us can properly mourn after Hiyuki's stable once more."

"I thought I was the one doing the advising here," Zhao stiffly said.

Chuckling, I said, "Oh, you will. Soon enough."

"Most blessed?" Ryoko called from among his subordinates.

Releasing a slow breath, I flexed my hands.

"Right. Let's do this."

The inner doors into the audience chamber banged open, echoing in its cavernous confines, and as I entered, conversations from the people across the room choked and died. I strode through them with the guild chairs stepping out of my way, and a murmur to replace their babbled chatter rose behind me.

When I reached the throne, I showed no hesitation. Mounting the stairs up to it, I flopped into its seat while draping my legs over one of its arms. As my guard and Zhao arranged themselves behind me with many a frown, I looked out over what I'd traversed.

So, this was the view my father had seen every day. How dreary. No wonder he'd always seemed so reluctant to leave Morihei's brothel and therefore, me.

The guilds' chairmen were facing me with almost all of their eyes popping, meaning I had their attention.

To work, then.

"You're probably wondering why you're here, and since I'd rather dispense with flowery language so we can get on with the business of running the empire, I'm just going to tell you," I said. "I've gathered you in this place to inform you of changes that will soon be taking place throughout the empire. I've also gathered you to exact punishment for every attempt you've made to subvert my

reign over the last few days, and finally, I've gathered you to remind you of why you should fear the throne."

Inspecting my fingernails, I waited for one of them to speak.

And waited.

"Who are you to-?"

There it was.

"You see, previous emperors have tried to work with you," I interrupted. "They've followed your laws and catered to your whims. They were good men, men who should be honored for how much they sacrificed to avoid bloodshed.

"I, however, am not good."

And again, I paused to give the guilds' chairmen a chance to surmount their outrage and say.

"I'm sorry. Who-?"

Swiveling in my seat, I slammed my feet to the floor while lounging into the throne.

"You've forgotten the power that the people who've been blessed by earth and fire claim, and because of that, you've relaxed when it comes to respect, playing fast and loose with Hiyuki's laws," I said. "You have no clue what every emperor you've treated with scorn saw when looking upon you or the temptation that they repressed every day. As I said, they were good men."

I pushed myself out of the throne, shifting what would seem like liquid flesh and bone to stand.

"I'm not them. I'm the empress Hiyuki needs in these troubled times, and I would remind you of my power over you."

Because even though Growth and Decay had left this world, I could feel every bright spark of life in front of me.

So. If I was a killer, then let me be a killer.

Taking hold of those sparks of life, I pushed some at random into Decay, and across the audience chamber, several of the guild chairs shrunk on themselves. Water was sucked from them until they collapsed with their ashes dusting the ones left standing.

For a moment, shock froze the room into a snapshot, much like the one I had of my parents, and before that quiet could break, turning into a panicked stampede for the door, I sighed. Shivering in feigned delight, I swept a burning gaze over the survivors.

"I am your empress. From now on, the guilds do exactly as I say, and earth and fire help you if you disobey," I said. "Now, get out of my sight."

Once they'd filed out of the audience chamber in a daze, I collapsed into the throne... my throne, and started trembling, but this wasn't one of faked pleasure. This was something else.

"That was..." Zhao breathed.

"Not enough? I know," I said, "but it will keep them docile until I can get the army under my thumb. By 'protecting the border' against kingdoms that want nothing to do with us, they've become complacent. They'll better serve me here."

"How did you-?" Zhao sputtered. "When did that cheerful, crazy girl I met start thinking so far into the future?"

With an incredulous stare at him, I snapped, "Zhao. You should know I'm not that girl, especially not after I smashed that sphere of Sunada's. Besides, I'm not making plans. Right now, I'm operating on instinct."

Because when would I have found the time to plan?

Even still, I sincerely hoped that Zhao would remember himself and who was standing around us. I'd expected that my performance here would elicit shock from him, but I'd forgotten how loose-lipped that sensation could make people.

"And Morihei?" Zhao asked. "Why did you summon the leader of For the People?"

And I winced. He hadn't heard my warning.

"Everyone but Zhao and Ryoko out," I barked. "Ryoko, I'll need some space."

The royal guardsmen left the audience chamber, drawing their shoulder blades closer together with every pile of ash they skirted. Of them all, Ryoko seemed the most troubled, even as he took up position in a corner. After my display, they'd need soothing, but first, I had to handle Zhao.

"With Growth and Decay gone, I'm likely to be the last person blessed by earth and fire, and that means no one will rise to take the throne when I die," I said. "I'd rather if the guilds or someone equally as corrupt didn't take over when that happens, so I'm meeting with Morihei to discuss different ways that we might be able to establish her democracy over the next few years."

"That might put you out of power more quickly than you'd like," Zhao cautiously said.

"And I'll happily accept that and everything else that would come with it, if it's for the betterment of Hiyuki's people."

Kasai wasn't the only one who could die for his home.

For quite a while, Zhao said nothing, and while waiting, I idly watched Ryoko. The commander fidgeted under my gaze, which had me suppressing a smirk. Maybe he and I could have some fun together in the future, granted I could reassure him that I wasn't the monster he might assume I was right now.

"I'm beginning to see what Kasai saw in you," Zhao eventually said. "May I go home now, Himi? It's been... a day."

"I told you that you should go once this meeting had concluded," I said. "Will I see you in the morning?"

"I wasn't sure about this arrangement at first but... yes," Zhao said, "I think you will."

I heard him pad away, probably to use a secret door I didn't know about yet, and soon enough, I was alone. Or as alone as the head of Hiyuki's monarchy could get, at least.

Then, a much-hated voice had to go and ruin that.

Nicely done with your enemies, girl.

What-? Oh. Oh, no.

"Decay?" I whispered.

Oh, you're deigning to use my name now, are you?

This couldn't be happening.

"I don't... understand," I whispered with a whine in my voice. "You- you made a deal!"

True, and we will honor it, Growth said, but the deal only gives you limited freedom, mortal. You still have our threads in you, ones we cannot take back, and while we may be returned to the whole, we can't regain our full strength unless we visit you from time to time. It's rather inconvenient.

Worth it for our freedom, though, Decay snapped. Besides, what's a mortal lifespan to beings like us? An eye blink?

Still annoying, Growth grumbled.

It wanted to say something, but speak my mind, but... I couldn't utter a single word.

You're an ungrateful asshole but... stop. Let's not fight here. Because of us, the poor mortal's likely to expire before her time, which we all know is bad form, Decay said. Himi? I promise you. We'll only visit when it's necessary, but you will hear from us at times. I'm sorry.

Did you just APOLOGIZE? Growth said. *Clearly, you haven't been home long enough. She's just a mortal, a host to be used-*

And clearly, you haven't been home long enough either, Decay interrupted. *We have what we need. Let's leave her be. For now.*

Fine...

I clutched at my head while the world spun around me. With slow, deep breaths, I kept myself from screaming until the glass shards in my brain stopped abrading its every surface. When a dull pound replaced this, I found the strength for something more than containing pain.

Such as considering that They weren't truly gone from my life. The freedom I'd thought was mine, that Kasai had in part died for, had been smoke and mirrors, a trick, a hoodwink.

Which meant I would have to listen to Them arguing in my head for the rest of my life.

Screaming, I shot out of the throne. I needed something, anything to- to distract me from...

Hauling back, I smacked myself, lifting a cry to the heavens all the while. When that proved unsatisfactory, I tried again, punching myself in the gut, and as air rushed out of me, my palm once more rang on my cheek, sending me stumbling this time. I tripped on the stairs, landing on my back, and my resumed shriek was cut off as swirling ashes settled in my mouth.

I was lying in the remains of a guild chair, someone I'd killed.

Jerking upright, I scrambled free of this flattened pile, jumping to my feet with my eyes fixed on it, and with a dry mouth, I turned to the rest of the room.

In his corner, Ryoko was watching me with a hand on his sword's hilt, obviously unsure what to do, but then, that matched my uncertainty about whether I could let him live now.

With this display, he'd seen weakness in me. Would he spread that story?

Only a tiny portion of my mind was concerned with him, though. The rest took in how many clumps of ash were lying between us. I counted them, and once I was done, I gasped.

I backed away from it, both the knowledge and the sight, retreating until the backs of my legs hit the throne, and collapsed. So many people were dead by my hand, and I hadn't committed these murders for justice of because I'd been coerced this time. *So many people* who'd been breathing not long ago.

I'd become a killer in truth.

Was this what *gidae* had wanted for me? Had Kasai imagined me as this monster?

They were gone. They'd been the only people I'd loved in my life, and I'd never see them again. Never hear their words of encouragement. Never see the *knowing* in Kasai's eyes or his understanding of the screaming damage inside, something I couldn't truly describe. Never know that my father loved me, no matter what I did.

Would *gidae* love me now? Could Kasai understand this?

It didn't matter. They were dead.

With my elbows on my knees, I dropped my face into my hands and wept.

Months sped by in a fugue. In that time, I had so much to learn and do that it almost muted my grief. It at least lessened my pain, and Zhao was there to find me privacy, any time I needed a moment to *unleash*.

Sometimes, he joined me in that.

By the time I'd gotten a handle on being the empress, I found, to my surprise, that my wounds were on the mend. It helped that much of what I'd wanted to accomplish had come to me with little difficulty.

So many changes had been rendered throughout the Hiyukian Empire in such a short time that considering them made my head whirl and my heart race. Unfortunately, no one would budge on the abolition of the one practice I might hate the most.

As someone whispered the crimes of the next condemned in my ear, I tried to focus, but the image of the last person's face as I'd sentenced him to feed Hiyuki's fire held my attention.

I hadn't had much of a choice with him. By the time the city police had caught him, a history of muggings had trailed the boy. Having so much crime attributed to one's name came with a guaranteed fate once one had been apprehended, and I'd had to comply with that expectation. If I hadn't, my enemies would have seen it as a weakness they could exploit.

Maybe, however, I could weasel my way out of doing the same to whoever was coming next.

So, what was the crime I'd soon be making a ruling on? Something about killing a guild's chairman?

Personally, I wanted to congratulate this condemned. The guilds had recovered far more swiftly from my initial attack on them than I'd have liked.

As the empress... I'd do what I could for this condemned.

The audience chamber's doors opened with the condemned shuffling through them, and on seeing him, I rocked to my feet.

"I would speak with this one alone," I said.

The people who'd gathered to observe the proceedings murmured at that pronouncement, but no one protested as royal guardsmen led the condemned out of the audience chamber. They'd started getting used to the eccentricities of their new leader.

Still. I'd probably have to deal with more of their nagging and spies than usual in the coming days, but... that was for later.

When I strode into the room where they'd left the condemned, he flinched, especially when Zhao followed me inside.

"Leave us," I told the people guarding him.

They complied, all of them except for their commander, and I stood still as a statue, keeping my eyes on the condemned until Ryoko nodded the all-clear. Then, ice melted away from me as I shed the empress disguise, and I slung myself into the seat across from the object of my fascination.

"Taro," I said.

I'd been looking for this man for months, as he was one of the few people who could seriously damage my position, but he'd been lost in the grips of an intelligence network that had refused to switch their loyalty to the daughter of their founder. For weeks, I'd thought he'd somehow been lost to the guilds or someone equally as despicable, but here he was, sitting in front of me. How on earth had he come to be here?

Cringing, the condemned said, "Most blessed."

With a snort, I waved at him.

"Oh, there's no need for that here," I said. "You're only in this perilous predicament because of my crime, aren't you?"

Oo, really? a voice whispered in my mind. *Which one?*

Not now, Decay, I whispered back.

"I don't know what you mean," Taro said. "It's my fault that Sunada's dead."

...Interesting.

"Is that what you told the intelligence network after their operatives found you?" I asked.

"Of course," Taro said. "Because it's the truth."

Stepping forward, Zhao leaned on the table.

"And that story's never changed?" he asked. "Not once in the months you've been missing?"

Frowning, Taro swung his head between the old man and me, and I nodded for him to answer the question.

“No. Why would it?” he said. “As I said, it’s *the truth*.”

“Hmm.

Balancing on the back legs of my chair, I glanced up at Ryoko and Zhao. My commander merely shrugged, but my advisor took a long time considering my unspoken question. Eventually, though, he inclined his head.

With my chair’s legs clattering to the floor, I folded my hands under my chin while displaying a pleasant grin above it.

“Congratulations, Taro! You’ve been selected to play the part of rebellion leader,” I said. “Welcome to the team.”

With his frown deepening, Taro backed as far into his chair as he could without toppling it.

Licking his lips, he said, “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, it’s quite simple,” I said. “To advance my goals, I need a rebellion to rise within the next five years. You, Taro, will work closely with your former employee, Morihei. The two of you will organize the downtrodden and any others the monarchy has marginalized, and when I give the signal, you’ll riot in the streets, go on strike, and otherwise cause anarchy across the empire.”

“With my other option being you feeding me to fire, I’m assuming,” Taro said.

Even tense as he was, he managed to exude a sense of calm and self-confidence. He’d do well in the role I’d selected for him.

“What do you think?” I asked, all smiles.

“Why would you...?” Taro muttered to himself before shaking his head.

When he didn’t immediately accept my offer, I wondered what could be holding him back. Did he *want* to die?

“It’s what Kasai would have wanted,” Zhao said.

Oh. Of course.

With his lips parted, Taro lifted his eyes to Zhao before clearing his throat.

“Then, I’ll do it,” he said. “May I ask...? I heard that he’d died. Will you tell me how?”

And the hurt that I’d thought buried resurfaced with a roar, although its noise had somewhat lessened.

“He died saving us all,” Ryoko said.

Thank earth and fire that I’d shared Kasai’s tale with the commander after a particularly impassioned evening together weeks ago. I didn’t think I could have answered Taro’s question, and I knew Zhao couldn’t. He still locked up when he imagined what might have lain behind the Gateway for his son.

“Ah. Yes, that fits. He always did put the people he loved far above himself,” Taro said. “If I may, why would he have wanted to stage an uprising?”

“In all honesty, I’m not sure he would have,” Zhao said, finding his voice, “but in those last few days, he changed. Drastically. And I wasn’t there for most of it. Others were.”

“He means me,” I said, wriggling my fingers in a wave. “I didn’t know Kasai for long, but from what I do know about him, he wanted Hiyuki as strong as it already is but also better.

“I don’t know. I’m probably not clearly capturing what I’m trying to say. You’ll just have to trust me when I say that he’d have approved of my plan.”

“And what is that, exactly?” Taro asked.

Rising from my chair, I leaned over the table with my fingertips pressing into it.

“Quite simply, I, Empress Lin Himi, mean to destroy Hiyuki’s monarchy.”

And as Taro’s features morphed into an expression of surprise and delight, I let it unwind the snarl, ever threatening to consume me, a tiny bit more.

Revision #1

Created 27 December 2024 01:01:18 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:48:39 by FatalisticFable