The palace was ostentatious.

This wasn't the first time Zuken Banksi was entering the Asukan Royal Palace, but it left him impressed. It always did. The citadel was gargantuan. By Earth, the outer courtyard alone could fit in five Banksi Mansions and have room left over for a lawn or two. The grandness of its architecture was more than enough to leave terramancer architects green and salivating, and the sheer grandness of its design and ward scheme could leave even the strongest of garrisons feeling insecure about their own junk. All of those things were awe-inspiring individually, but it was the realization of *where* they were that really got to the visitors.

This was the home of the Emperor.

The Lord and Ruler of the Empire.

The first-born of the Great Goddess Amaterasu herself.

Demigod. Warlord. Wielder of a Thousand Skills.

Emperor Asuka.

He looked over his shoulder at the people that had accompanied him so far. Shogun Naowa, a member of the Holy Eight and the Shogun of Haviskali. Behind them stood ten or so guards, paladins of the main palace, and half a dozen onmyōji. Despite the enthusiasm in their steps, Zuken could almost *taste* the feeling of unworthiness that exuded from the crowd. They all sensed keenly how small and insignificant they were, compared to the being that resided there. Their impression of the current Emperor was so colossal that it could hardly be described.

…This could be a real problem. How am I supposed to get their support if they are too busy quaking in their boots?

He couldn't blame them. By the Goddess, barely six months ago, he'd have shared their mentality. He might not have gone ahead with the entire genuflecting, but he'd have understood where they stood.

But then he met Lukas Aguilar.

A demigod by his own right.

And everything changed.

I wonder how they'd react to the truth.

A borderline, self-deprecating smile on his face, Zuken traversed through the walls, keeping his thoughts to himself. He didn't put a lot of faith in Destiny, but one did not become a successful entrepreneur without acknowledging the role Luck and Risk played in daily life and business. And something told him that both Tanya and Lukas Aguilar were cards that could massively change his plans for the future.

Idly, he crossed the spacious, rectangular hall splayed out in front of him, supported by columns of Maluscian stone, the finest white marble one could find in the entire Empire. Zuken had tried his luck at dealing with the stone quarries a few years back, only to realize that he'd be making the Royal Palace his competitor. While growth and expansion had their benefits, the risk to reward ratio was too great to ignore. But give or take a few years with Aguilar and Tanya and Iylaerion—

He paused that line of thought while he could, distracting himself with the veins of gold and silver that crisscrossed the floors. Marble steps at the far end swept up a balcony that circled the entire place, which was supported by more white marble pillars that matched the floor. There was a quiet waterfall at the far end of the hallway, running down into a pool, surrounded by a garden of trees and the chirping of the occasional bird.

As he traversed through the entire length of this colossal atrium, Zuken found himself facing a massive door, with elaborate carvings in every direction. The one on the right depicted the rise of the Great Goddess Amaterasu, a trident of glowing light in her hand and a flaming sword in the other. *The Glorious Ascension*, as scholars put it, the Rise of the Jade Empress to become the Leader of her Pantheon at the End of the Yokai War.

The engraving on the left depicted Amaterasu again, this time wielding a lance of Eternal Light, removing the Mists from the World. *The Bath of Illumination*, according to Asukan texts. A third engraving existed, perfectly positioned above the meeting line of the doors, depicting the Sun Throne with the Goddess's sigil on top. And finally at the bottom, separated by the line dividing the doors, were the svartalfars on the extreme left, dokkalfars on the extreme right, and wraiths, whom Zuken translated to be yokai— in between, occupying the lowest rung on the social ladder.

A perfect statement of Asukan domination in their world.

The Gate of Might, Zuken recalled. The main doorway through which one entered into the Throne Room. The seat of power of the Asukan Theocracy.

And then, as if sensing their presence, the massive doors swung open, despite no one touching it.

Someone gasped. No, not one person or even two. Probably more than half of the crowd behind him. That they were shaken was proof that they weren't prepared. It was a manifestation of their desire to flee. No doubt they were hoping the door wouldn't open.

It was a stark reminder of the truth that for all the worship and genuflecting they did, it was no secret that the Ruling House of Asuka ruled through *fear*.

The inner chamber that came into view was huge. The walls were primarily white with ornamentation done mainly in gold and precious jewels. The magnificent chandeliers that hung from the ceiling were crafted out of rainbow jewels and cast a dreamy, sparkling light. On the walls, hanging from the ceiling down to the floor, were large flags, adorning the Rising Sun— the Crest of the House of Asuka.

A throne room indeed, Zuken mused.

A large, ostentatious red carpet ran down the center of the room. Along either side, stood soldiers— all of them Silver Ranked spiritists— members of the Cobalt Army that answered the Emperor's command. Zuken couldn't bring himself to count them.

And then he saw Him.

Seated on a magnificent throne of crystal, a trident of pure Light in one hand, sat the Demigod himself. Easily seven feet tall, with the proportions of a professional rōnin, and the noble features of a warrior king. His hair was crimson and swept back from his face in a mane that fell to the base of his neck. His beard was equally crimson, though marked at the chin with a single streak of silver. His eyes…

Zuken jerked his gaze away from those stars of radiance before he could be drawn into them. He had heard that people beyond a certain class and authority had powerful eyes, but hearing it and experiencing it were two different things. His stomach twisted, and suddenly he had to fight not to throw up. Or fall down. Or start weeping.

"Zuken, Heir of Banksi," The Demigod rumbled, "Be welcome in my Abode."

"..."

Zuken exhaled harshly. It took him every ounce of self control not to burst out coughing. He had the feeling that had the eye-contact continued for one more second, he'd have been asphyxiated or worse. Those vibrant, golden eyes that seemingly took the entire world in at the same time, felt like endless black holes that could swallow him, his thoughts and his entire existence into them if he gave them the opportunity to do so.

But the moment the Emperor had said those words, it was like an extremely heavy weight had suddenly vanished from his shoulders.

"Lord Naowa, and the rest of your compatriots are welcome as well."

Now that he thought of it, the Emperor's voice was more normal— bremetan— than he had expected. He relaxed ever so slightly. Yes, he had a chance at reading the emotions contained in those words.

"I am here to answer your summons," Zuken replied, bowing his head slightly as a show of respect. He was, after all, an Heir to one of the Holy Eight. While in no way comparable to the Emperor in strength, skill or power, he was technically— *very technically*— within the same social circles as the man.

In the same way that a phytoplankton shared living habitats with a great-white shark.

"Ah yes," said the Emperor, "Some recent events in your… town, sparked my interest. Doubly more so, when I realized it involves members of the Holy Eight."

Zuken frowned. Was this about the Anomaly? Had the Emperor realized the game Shogun Naowa had played against Cyffnar? Was that what this was about?

No. No that couldn't be it. Information traveled fast within the Empire, especially when Lords and Nobility were concerned. If things had devolved so much that it attracted the Emperor's eye, then Haviskali should have garnered far worse reactions from Cyffnar and the Eaborid Kingdom first. No, that wasn't it.

That only left—

"Apologies, my Lord," Zuken bowed his head a second time, "I should have known better than to allow things to go out of hand in the contest. I understand seeing a pair of Unbound kami in action could be… shocking to the general populace."

The Emperor's golden eyes gleamed, almost as if he had been suddenly given a gift he hadn't known he wanted in the first place. "That's very interesting to hear, Heir Banksi. It seems Haviskali is playing host to a great many events worth my interest."

Oh yeah, Zuken thought with a chagrin. *That*.

Still, he couldn't help but feel a tad disappointed. Somehow, the idea of the Demigod inserting himself into regional politics seemed wildly off character.

He was going to have to watch his step very, very carefully here.

"Apologies, my Lord," He replied after a pause. His voice quavered only a little. "I'm a little behind the times. I'm exactly sure which events you speak of."

The Emperor looked mildly amused. "I speak of the strange energy signatures that have been spotted within your town's vicinity. The first and the largest one, from the Desert a few months ago, and two more, from Haviskali proper. Within close proximity to your own mansion as well."

Zuken looked at him, confused.

He did not like being confused.

"Indeed," said the Emperor, "My Feelers tell me that a certain unknown energy signature spiked within close vicinity to your own mansion in the last month. Twice in fact. Energies that are foreign to the Empire's Energy Spectrum."

"..."

Oh.

Oh.

Shit.

He really hoped this wasn't going where he thought it was.

It wouldn't end well for anyone if it did.

Either way, his mind began to run through a worst case scenario and make assumptions on what it could mean as fast as he could. He could barely pay attention to the looks he was getting.

Then it happened.

"In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd have called it outright *divine."*

They were getting dangerously close to territory he really didn't want anybody to know about. Unfortunately, it was still merely toeing the edge of the cliff. If he spoke up now, it would only show weakness.

"Divine?" Naowa blinked in surprise. He wasn't the only one that was curious if the looks in the room were any indication.

"Indeed," said the Emperor, "My Feelers and I were also suspicious of that as well. An unusually abnormal energy reading to be sure. However in hindsight, it does make sense. Banksi's infamous *Iylaerion* currently plays host to various organizations and species. But I'd have thought that an Heir of one of the Holy Eight would have exercised more rigidity at allowing inferior species from exercising their Arcane Skills inside the Land of Eternal Light."

Zuken's stature did not change immediately. It took a few moments for him to slowly realize what the Emperor was talking about, and what he was alluding to.

It took twice as long for that realization to sink in.

Arcane Skills. The power to utilize the Truth of a God or Goddess and incorporate it into an otherwise normal skill. Greater Skills were boons granted only to priests of the highest ranks. Given the number of species Iylaerion had entertained in the past few months, it was not unbelievable to think that the energy signatures had been from one of them.

Sigh.

A narrow save. Now only if he managed to get himself out unscathed.

Exhaling as imperceptibly as possible, Zuken looked up at the Emperor, centering his gaze somewhere beneath the tip of the man's nose.

"My Lord—" He began.

"Wait," Ordo Bergott stepped in, "This wouldn't have anything to do with that Aguilar brat he keeps parading around, would it? The Ifrit-tamer?"

Zuken's lips twitched.

And things had been going so wonderfully too.
