

Chapter 10

More data than he thought possible kept flashing across Prince Kiminobu's visor, giving him information on the battle—not just his mech, but how each of the Nexus suits performed and how each of the pilots handled their fights. *The Kingfisher* tracked how each of the Royal Guard reacted, showing him when their heart rate increased, when their blood vessels constricted or relaxed, and—he was uncomfortable to see—how Kii's body reacted while piloting *The Corsair*.

That girl has issues, he thought when he saw how turned on she had become.

But *The Kingfisher* also sent him information on the Wall and shield and how to make them stronger, which he sent along quickly to Wall command.

All this while Yumisa slept comfortably in his arms.

He still could not believe he was married to such a beautiful woman. In the eyes of Kareneth and Vadora, they could start having children right now. And if those children were half as beautiful as her, they would be very lucky—he just hoped they took on some of her wolfish features. Recessive genes were strange, though. And her natural skin coloring made her even prettier.

He looked down at his arm as he felt the wind caress *The Kingfisher*. He sighed at the sensation, but not enough to disturb his bride. Kiminobu was surprised she was still asleep.

“Royal Guard, we have you in sight,” Castle Command broadcast on their frequency. “Is everyone all right?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Asa told the speaker. “We're bringing the Princess in. If there's any pomp and circumstance, get it ready.”

“Yumisa.” Kiminobu shrugged her gently.

“Mmm... so tired,” Yumisa groaned softly. “Wanna sleep.”

“We're almost to the castle,” he told her. “I thought you might want to see my—*our*—home.”

Yumisa sat up in his lap and looked out of the large screens that showed the outside world through *The Kingfisher's* eyes. Vadora was a beautiful country, with green rolling hills and farms. The capital city, Tokyong, was beautiful with mostly small buildings but a few taller ones scattered throughout. However, what caught

her eyes was the beautiful castle sitting atop a hill at the back of the city with a small path leading up to it.

Unlike her home, which had a traditional look, this castle looked like a fairy tale castle, with tall spires and battlements. It looked much colder than she would have thought, even though the stone it was made from had a warm, yellow hue to it that reflected the sun beautifully. Still, she had to swallow when she thought of spending the rest of her life there.

“We’re taking the Princess on a brief tour,” Prince Kiminobu told the Royal Guard. “Transport, please take her handmaidens to the castle so they can start getting settled.”

“Roger that, Your Highness,” the transport said, and it peeled away from the Nexus suits.

“The people are very friendly,” Kiminobu told his wife. “But it looks different than you were expecting, doesn’t it?”

“A little,” she told him. “How did you know what I was expecting?”

“I felt your shift when you saw it for the first time—you didn’t seem happy.”

“No, I am,” she told him, “it’s just... different.”

“Colder, you mean.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It is colder,” he told her. “Our castle used to look much different, but the war changed things. We had to build for defense.”

“I understand,” she said sadly as *The Kingfisher* began a small sweep of the castle, showing it to her from high above. She saw people moving around the outside areas, going in and out of doors, carrying various things to various parts of the castle. In the middle of the castle there was a large garden with a glass, gilt-framed gazebo in the middle that looked very well cared for and made her smile.

“Where is your room?” she asked. “I guess I should say *our* room.”

“It’s in that tower on the southwest corner,” he told her. “Actually, I was thinking of moving now that we’re married. It’s rather small.”

“I think it’s perfect,” she told him.

“You won’t be saying that after you climb the stairs a few times.”

Yumisa laughed. “At least I know how you keep in good shape.”

“Oh, I work out with the pilots, too,” he told her. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t, but I work just as hard as my Royal Guard do.”

She fell silent, and she shifted slightly in his lap. He craned his neck to look at her.

“What’s wrong?”

“You... like them, don’t you?” she asked.

“We just got married, and you’re already jealous?”

She turned to look at him. “Have you slept with any of them?” she asked. “I won’t be mad if you have. I just want to know—I need to know.”

“I haven’t,” he promised her. “Trust me, when I was younger I would have, but after my accident... all thoughts of that vanished. I should warn you that they have spent the night with me every night since I was eighteen and... I tried to kill myself.”

Yumisa’s gold eyes flew wide. “What?” she demanded. She started beating his chest. “How could you do something so stupid? Don’t you care about your mom and dad? Don’t you care about your Royal Guards? Do you know what might have happened to them had you killed yourself on their duty? Do you know what might have happened to the world had you done it? That is the most selfish, arrogant, inconsiderate thing anyone could possibly ever do! You’re stupid to have tried it, Kiminobu! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!”

“Ow,” he said, and he gently took her arms to stop the beating. “I like that you’re more upset about that than the fact they’ve shared my bed for five years—fully clothed, of course.”

“Oh, we’re going to talk about that, believe me,” she said, turning around in a huff. “But they were fully clothed?”

“Pajamas, underwear, the works,” he assured her.

“I’m sure they still looked gorgeous,” she groused bitterly, crossing her arms sullenly.

“No one is as beautiful as you,” he told her.

Yumisa snuggled against him. “Wanna land so we can start enjoying the benefits of getting married?” she asked.

“Slowly,” he told her. “Besides, you did just beat me up.”

“Sorry,” she told him. “I was just upset you tried something so idiotic!”

“Stupid question, but don’t you have a tail?”

“Yup—helps me keep balanced.”

“Aren’t you sitting on it?”

“No, it moves out of the way on its own whenever I sit down—I will have to have special chairs, though, at dinners and such.”

“I’m sure we can accomodate you,” he told her. “We’ll do everything we can to make your life here as comfortable as you want.”

Yumisa hugged him. Then she winced. “Actually, my tail is kind of uncomfortable in this kimono now that you mention it.” She pushed herself up and reached underneath her skirt to adjust it. Then she sat back down.

Suddenly, fireworks began to explode around them in brilliant colors. Yumisa squealed delightedly, having not expected a second glorious display.

“Your Highness, we should land,” Asa said through the comms as the fireworks display ended. “We’ve been hovering for ten minutes.”

“Roger that, Captain,” he said, and he pulled *The Kingfisher* out of it’s holding pattern and followed the other mechs into the hangar bay.

As *The Kingfisher* parked, a platform closed in front of it from two sides to hold it in place. The hatch opened, and Yumisa jumped out followed a moment later by her husband. Kiminobu took a deep breath of the hangar bay air and felt his skin prickle at the cold within. He unstrapped his helmet and took it off. As he did, the sensation died.

He looked back at the mech questioningly.

“Thank goodness you’re back safely.” Before he could acknowledge who spoke, his mother and father both took him into a hug. He hugged them back.

“We’re fine, Mom,” he told her. “*The Kingfisher* helped with the battle.”

“You’re never getting into that machine again,” his mother told him. “You never should have gotten into it this time!”

“It didn’t give us much choice,” Kiminobu told her.

“And I didn’t get to shoot anything,” Yumisa said sadly.

Queen Harukichi looked at the young woman who had spoken, then she hugged Yumisa. “Welcome to Vadora, Yumisa. I’m so glad you’re here!”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Yumisa said.

“Forget the formalities, young lady—we’re your in-laws now—call us Mom and Dad,” King Nakamoto told her. He put his right arm around her and hugged, lifting her off her feet.

“Sure... Dad,” she grunted. “Could you put me down now?”

“You’ll have to forgive Nakamoto—he likes new people,” Harukichi said. “Now, let me take a good look at you, child. I want to inspect my son’s new wife.”

“You don’t seem surprised to see that I have a wolf’s ears,” Yumisa said. “That’s usually what people make fun of first.”

Harukichi’s eyes narrowed. “If anyone *dares* make fun of your ears, they’ll have a nice conversation with the Minister of Torture,” she assured Yumisa.

Yumisa’s golden eyes widened. “You have a Minister of Torture?” she asked nervously.

“That’s what people call my mom,” Kiminobu told her. “It’s a title she’s grown quite fond of.”

“Y-You... torture people?” Yumisa took a step away from her.

“Of course not, Child—I just harangue them until they wish I had.” Harukichi stepped around Yumisa, looking her over from head to toe. When she was behind her, she lifted Yumisa’s kimono just enough to see her tail before putting the hem down again. When she got back around to the front, she looked at her son and said, “I don’t think I’ve seen a woman more beautiful than she is. Lovely hair, beautiful face, and her ears and tail just complete an already perfect package. You, my son, lucked out in this arranged marriage.”

“Yes, yes I did,” Kiminobu agreed.

Five sets of footsteps beat a rapid staccato to where Yumisa was standing, and a woman with red hair said, “Your Highness, thank goodness you’re all right! We were so worried!” The woman threw her arms around Yumisa.

Behind her, several of the maintenance crew were taking pictures of the women and the new Princess. The girl wearing Yumisa’s kimono could hear them talking, wondering if they were ZOO.

“I’m fine, Chiharu,” Yumisa told her handmaiden. “Kiminobu protected me.”

Chiharu let her go and then bowed to the Prince. “Thank you for protecting our Princess, Your Highness.”

“And who are these lovely ladies?” Harukichi asked, admiring the five women who had approached.

“Your Majesties, these are my handmaidens,” Yumisa said. “I hope it’s okay that I brought them.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Harukichi asked. “A woman of your stature needs her handmaidens. You are also the band ZOO, yes?” she asked.

“We are, Your Majesty,” Chiharu said. “How did you know?”

Shiori stepped forward. “I... let her read your really nice letter to me,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Why would we mind?” Chiharu asked. “It’s not like we put anything in the letter to tell who the Princess was.”

“Ah, but you did,” the Queen told them. “You did tell us exactly who the Princess was, even if you did not mean to. However, we did not tell my son.”

“So you guessing me was... completely innocent?” Yumisa asked him.

“Completely,” he told her. “I knew from meeting you that you were the real Naoki because of how your ears twitched and moved. Your band has great costumes, but their ears don’t twitch.” He reached over to touch her ear, and it twitched happily under his finger. “See?”

“You can touch my ears as much as you want,” she told him. “Just be gentle. And you can stroke my hair as much as you want. I really like it!”

“She’s precious, Nobu—absolutely precious!” his mother said. “May I, Yumisa?” she asked, reaching out for Yumisa’s head.

Yumisa threw herself into Harukichi’s arms and hugged the Queen. “Of course, Mother,” she said. “And please, call me Misa. Family does.”

Harukichi hugged her and stroked Yumisa’s hair and then she reached up to scratch her wolf ears gently. Yumisa purred softly, and Kiminobu had to wonder if she was part wolf or part cat? But when she started snuggling against Harukichi, he grabbed her arm and pulled her away.

“Mom, please don’t pet my wife—it’s weird,” he said. “If anyone’s going to pet her, it’s going to be me.”

Yumisa turned and stuck her tongue out at him, but then she realized what he said and immediately pulled it back in. She snuggled against him instead.

“Sorry, Mom, but my husband does have priority,” Yumisa said.

“As he should,” Harukichi agreed. “As long as he doesn’t mind sharing.”

“Mom!”

“I’ve never had a daughter, Kiminobu, and she has very soft hair and ears—I’m going to spend as much time with her as she will allow!” Harukichi held her hand out to Yumisa, and Yumisa took it. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, Mom,” she said. “I’d like that.” Yumisa looked at Kiminobu sadly. “I think I’d like to see our room now,” she told him. “Would that be all right?”

“Yes,” he said, pulling her against him gently.

“Lieutenant. Seno, would you take Princess Yumisa’s handmaidens to the head of the castle’s staff and see they are given proper rooms?” the Queen requested. “May I ask who will be paying their salaries? We need to make sure things are coordinated properly.”

“We serve Her Highness out of love, Your Majesty,” Chiharu told her. “And the Princess has given us more than enough money to keep us going for a while through residuals from record and merchandise sales. You do not have to worry about us.”

“Are you sure?” Queen Harukichi asked.

“All we ask is a place to live and food to eat, Your Majesty,” Chiharu told her. “And perhaps permission to play for the people of Vadora.”

“That is up to your manager,” Harukichi said, looking at Yumisa.

“You’re not going to make me stop managing ZOO?” Yumisa asked in surprise.

“My dear, you will soon be a guardian of a new nation—you can do whatever you wish in the meantime.” She looked at her son. “Isn’t that right?”

“Whatever she wants,” Kiminobu said. “As long as I get to tag along?”

“You and your... bodyguards?” Yumisa asked, looking over her shoulder at the five women who guarded the Prince. “And their mechs?”

“We can be roadies,” Shiori said. “Every band has to have roadies!”

“Roadies?” Asa, Rumiko, and Kii asked. Mizuko signed the word with a very emphatic question mark at the end.

“You’ll love it!” Shiori said, putting her arms around Asa and Rumiko’s shoulders. “It will be a blast! We get to hang out with the band backstage, go back to their rooms with them—”

“And carry all their equipment!” Rumiko protested.

“We’ve been carrying it ourselves for years, performing, and then carrying it back!” Ruri reminded her. “It might be nice to have a little help.”

“Sounds like everything is settled then,” King Nakamoto said. “As long as everything remains covert.”

“He’s got a point,” Yumisa said, looking at her husband sadly. “Everyone knows who you are, and it won’t take them long to put two and two together regarding me. Right now, I’m still unknown.” She looked at her new parents. “Then again, once we’re married, the whole jig is up.”

“We’ll figure things out, Your Highness,” Chiharu assured her. “ZOO will make a grand comeback!”

“Of course they will!” Harukichi said. “After all, you have to keep the... what were your fans called? Oh, yes, the Vets! You have to keep your Vets happy!”

“Mom, Dad, I think I should show Yumisa to our room and help her start getting settled,” Kiminobu suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” his mother said. “Yumisa looks tired.”

“I’m fine,” Yumisa said. “But I would like some alone time with my husband.”

“Your Majesties, may I have a word with you?” the Lord Chamberlain asked, and Yumisa jumped at his unexpected voice.

“Where have you been hiding?” she asked.

“I was admiring the Nexus Suits,” he told her. “But now I need to discuss the treaty plans with His and Her Majesties, if I may?”

“Can it wait until tomorrow?” Nakamoto asked. “It has already been a long day, and we have to finish holding court.”

The Lord Chamberlain bowed. “Of course, Your Majesty,” he said. “I will find a room and wait for your summons.”

“Then all that’s left is to say that we expect Nobu and Misa for dinner tonight at the usual time in the garden,” Harukichi said. “Until then, you two are on your own. Nakamoto, it is time we return to our jobs as rulers.”

“Just what I was thinking,” Nakamoto said, taking his wife’s arm. They walked off together, everyone bowing as they left.

“I want to see your room!” Yumisa said, and she grabbed Kiminobu’s hand, dragging him after her even though she had no idea of where she was going.

The High Emperor sighed and turned off the combat film. He reached over for a small glass of whisky and found it empty when he brought it to his mouth. He snarled and slammed it down on his desk.

“This is accurate?” he asked Captain Lorenn as he filled his glass. “It’s not doctored in any way?”

“No, High Emperor,” Lorenn said. “Captain Arnea can testify to that.”

The High Emperor let out a low breath. “I want confirmation,” he said. “I cannot accuse King Nakamoto of this before I have absolute proof. It would not be good for the Shezar Union.”

“We’ll get the proof, Emperor,” Lorenn assured him.

The Emperor huffed. “I was also assured that Prince Kiminobu and Princess Yumisa would be standing before me now,” he said. “Instead, they’re in Vadora probably creating the child that will lead the world into a new era of Kareneth rule. Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Captain Lorenn. You are dismissed.”

Captain Lorenn saluted and left.

After he was gone, the High Emperor opened a communications screen. “Your REAPERS failed us,” he told the shadow on the other end. “The Nexus suits crushed them like grapes in a wine press.”

“Your pilots are incompetent, as is your military. Elvish weapons are not that strong.”

“They are if they have the Fading Shadow System inside them,” the High Emperor said.

The other voice laughed gruffly. “Well, technically, the Elves died before signing that agreement, cunning little.... But if you don’t want that, we can’t help you. We will only give you what you ask for.”

“I will not stoop to breaking the law,” the Emperor said.

“Up to you. We’ll see what we can come up with on our end. Call back in a week.”

The screen went blank.

The High Emperor went back to his papers, putting the losses of the day behind him so he could concentrate on future wins.

Kiminobu stumbled back as Yumisa pushed him into his room, and then he tripped and fell flat on his back on the floor. Yumisa pounced on him and began smothering his face with kisses, ending with a large, wet kiss on his lips.

Kiminobu smiled up at her.

“That was nice,” he said.

Yumisa frowned. “Just nice? Buster, if you want to keep your wife happy, everything she does had better be extravagant or better!” She kissed him again and moaned into his mouth as his arms went around her and he pulled her against his body.

“That was delightful,” he whispered into her ear.

Yumisa smiled. “That’s more like it,” she told him. “Now that we’re married, I wanna get you naked and I wanna get naked for you,” she said as she started unbuttoning his shirt.

But he stopped her hands and then pulled his shirt closed.

“No,” he said. “No, I’m not ready for you to see me.”

Yumisa growled and sat back on her haunches, straddling him. “Nobu, I know you’re hurt—I don’t care! As long as you can give me a baby, nothing else matters! It may seem strange that I love you after only knowing you for a few hours, but I don’t care! I love you and I want to be with you! That’s all I want!”

Kiminobu looked away but said, “Are you sure you really want to see me? I’m not pretty. I’m nowhere close to pretty.”

She put her hands on either side of his head and forced him to look at her. He stared up into her gold eyes as she said, “I... don’t... *care!*”

He nodded. “All right. But lock the door. I don’t want anyone walking in on us.”

Yumisa stood up and headed for the door. “So no one has ever seen you since that day?” she asked.

“Just doctors in the hospital,” he told her as he went over and sat on the edge of his bed. “And my tailor. But not my parents and not my guards—I’ve generally been careful to keep everything hidden.”

She leaned back against the door and looked at him. “You poor thing.”

“What about you?” he asked, looking her over as she slinked towards him in her kimono. “Anyone ever seen you naked?” He grabbed her as she got close and tickled her sides, making her laugh.

“Just my handmaidens,” she said. “We used to take baths together.”

“My guards do that, too,” he told her. “There’s a hot spring bathhouse beneath the castle, created long ago. Used to be more popular with the women servants until indoor plumbing became a thing. Shiori found it a few years ago and somehow convinced the others it was a great way to build bonds.”

“Hey, it works for us,” she told him. “You see a friend naked, there ain’t much they’re going to hide from you after that.”

He smiled. “I guess I never thought of it that way.”

“Now I want to see you naked,” she said. “I want to make sure you don’t hide anything from me, either.”

She opened his shirt the rest of the way and pushed it off his shoulders with his jacket, then she lifted up his undershirt and involuntarily pulled back when she saw his body. Whatever she had been expecting, what she saw was far worse. She had seen burned people before on television and in movies, but nothing could have prepared her for the real thing. His body looked like a three-dimensional topographical map of a desert wasteland, full of crags and valleys but without a single smooth surface. Yumisa swallowed hard against the bile rising in her throat.

Kiminobu took his shirt from her hands and pulled it gently down. “I don’t blame you,” he said. “Actually, I’m flattered that you didn’t run screaming.”

“I’m sorry,” she told him, looking into his black eyes. “I just... I’ve never seen... I...” She looked at him, at a loss for words.

“Why don’t we take things slow?” he suggested. “Why don’t we start off just taking a nap together and work our way up?”

“No,” she said, taking his shirt off. “No, I won’t be a shrinking violet when it comes to you. If you can love me as I am, I can do no less for you.”

She leaned down to kiss his chest but felt no response to her lips. She licked him with her tongue, feeling how course his flesh was. Still nothing.

“My nerve endings were fried,” Kiminobu told her. “Not even the regenerative baths could fix them. Nothing could.”

“Our technology could have,” she told him sadly. “Where Vadora might be ahead of Kareneth when it comes to military vehicles, we’re ahead of you in the ways of medicine. Our doctors said they might be able to help you now that we’re allies.”

“It would be nice, but I’m not going to get my hopes up,” he told her. “Our technology has increased, too, but the doctors say it’s been too long—my body has gotten past the point of being helped.”

Yumisa laid her head on his chest and hugged him. “I’m so sorry, Nobu.”

“I’ve learned to live with it—I’m just afraid you’ll have to, as well.”

“I will always love you,” she told him. Then she looked at him. “And I’ll *never* betray you. *Never!* That is one thing you *never* have to worry about!”

He pulled her close and buried his nose in her hair. “I was worried,” he told her. “I guess I always will be.”

“You don’t trust me?” she asked fearfully. Then she laughed softly. “Stupid question—you barely know me.” Yumisa sat up and wiped her nose with the back of her hand and then she wiped her eyes with her palms. “Oh, Ruri is going to kill me if she sees my makeup running!”

She turned away from him, unsure of what to do now, but Kiminobu sat up and wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m sorry, Misa,” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset you or disparage you. I’m just scared. It would kill me if I ever thought of another man being with you. I love you so much. You are everything to me! I never want to be with another woman other than you!” He rolled them over so that he was on top, and he kissed her. His hand moved down her body and caressed her, and Yumisa squirmed underneath his touch. “If you promise me, right now, right this moment, that you will always love me and you’ll never betray me, I’ll believe it forever.”

“I will always love you, and I’ll never betray you, Nobu,” she told him. “My body is yours and yours alone. No other man will ever see me naked as long as I live—now, my handmaidens might be another matter, but...”

He laughed and tickled her again. “They are the only ones I will allow,” he told her.

“Help me take my kimono off,” Yumisa pleaded with him. “I want to be naked with you... forever...”

