

## Chapter 12

Ruri Wakita bowed to the King and Queen as they sat in the gazebo in the garden, her arms folded in the wide sleeves of her traditional Kareneth servant's dress. Her hair was also done in a style that neither had seen anyone wear in centuries, but it looked good on her. "I bow before Your Majesties," she said in a traditional greeting.

Nakamoto looked at his wife and couldn't help but smile when he heard the traditional greeting, once used centuries ago but no longer. He looked at Ruri, cleared his throat uncomfortably, and said, "We do not stand on ceremony here, Ms...?"

"Wakita—but you may call me Ruri, Your Majesties," she said as she rose to her feet. "I am not sure how servants are treated here, so I figured it would be best to be as formal as possible."

"That will not be necessary, Ruri," Queen Harukichi told her. "At least, not as formally as you may think. We aren't tyrants."

Harukichi looked over the beautiful dress with the silk cover-up that had wide sleeves that went from pink at the shoulders to dark purple at the wrists. The gold dress Ruri wore was as silky as the cover and bound her breasts, revealing far more cleavage than the Queen would have thought possible for any woman while keeping her completely in place and revealing nothing more than it should have (or could have) while remaining just this side of decent. Queen Harukichi had seen servant dresses like that in pictures of wardrobes from millennia ago but had not seen anything like it in recent times.

"That is a beautiful dress, if I may say so," she complimented Ruri. "But aren't you cold in it?"

Ruri blushed. "Thank you, Your Majesty—actually, this was chosen by Princess Yumisa, who has assigned all of our servant outfits. She likes us looking... pretty, like porcelain dolls. It has been that way since we chose to work for her." Ruri looked down at herself. "It may seem ridiculous to you, but we do not mind because she has very good taste in clothes."

Harukichi chuckled. "So, are you Yumisa's servants or her friends... or her dolls?" the Queen wondered.

“A little of all—we serve at the Princess’s pleasure however she desires, Your Majesty. If she wants a servant, we serve; if she wants a friend, we listen; if she wants a doll to dress up, we allow her to dress us.” Ruri’s blue eyes widened as she realized how that must sound, and she said, “But we do it because we wish to, not because she demands it. We love the Princess! Her happiness means the world to—”

Harukichi held up a hand to stop her rambling. “We understand, my dear—it seems you have the same relationship with Yumisa that the Prince’s Royal Guards have with him. And that is wonderful to hear.”

Ruri bowed again. “Forgive me, Your Majesties—I did not wish you to misunderstand what I was trying to say. It seems you do understand.” She looked at the Queen questioningly. “Do not misunderstand my next question, but... does the Prince dress up his Royal Guards?” she asked carefully.

Nakamoto nearly spit out the tea he was drinking at her question as he tried to hold in a laugh. He took a napkin and wiped his lips.

Harukichi laughed and said, “When he was younger, I am sure that idea would have pleased him very much—especially where Captain Ikehara was concerned. However, no, nothing like that ever happened.”

“Forgive my impertinence,” Ruri said, bowing again.

“Please, sit down, my dear, before you fall over from bowing so much. We do not require it all the time. If you bow to us when you enter and leave, that will be enough formality. Also, while I am sure that dress is holding you in place tightly, I would rather you not have an accident.”

Ruri blushed again as she realized how easy that might be in this dress.

“Is it all right if I sit?” she asked, looking at the King.

“Of course,” Nakamoto said. “If you want something to eat or drink, please, help yourself. We have plenty while we wait for our son and new daughter to arrive.”

“I was actually on my way to dinner with the Royal Guard when I received your summons and a guard brought me here,” Ruri said. “I do not wish to stuff myself.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but you already look stuffed into that dress,” Harukichi said, seeing the amount of cleavage the low-bodiced top revealed. “And you said Yumisa designed that?”

“She was looking through fashions in Kareneth history and saw this,” Ruri said, looking down at the gold dress with see-through purple sleeves. “I don’t think she quite understood, being as young as she was at the time, how... revealing the dress was for a woman like myself. After she saw me and the others in it, she loved the dresses so much we could not disappoint her.”

“So why do you wear it?” Harukichi asked, taking a sip of her drink.

“Because it makes her happy,” Ruri said. “I think she wishes she could wear one like it, but I think she is too afraid to try.”

“For what reason?”

“I am not sure. She certainly has the body for it—no offense.”

“Kiminobu would certainly like it, I am sure,” the Queen stated demurely.

“And I am sure you know Yumisa’s body very well, if you have served her well.”

“We have always cared for her, since she was old enough to have servants.”

“And her parents...?” Harukichi asked, and Ruri could not help but hear the hint of derision in her voice.

“The Emperor and Empress have always cared for the Princess—they have given her everything they could, while hiding her heritage. I know what you are thinking, Your Majesties, but it was decided early on that no one would know what the Princess looks like. When Princess Yumisa was old enough, they told her their reasons, and while she was not happy, she understood what it could mean for the Empire. She chose to remain in seclusion.”

“Until she formed ZOO,” Harukichi guessed.

“Yes, Your Majesty. And then it was just a matter of blending in with the band.”

“And no one once questioned why the manager of a rock band dressed as the band did?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

Harukichi took another sip of her tea. “You must be wondering why we asked you here.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“We saw your band on a news broadcast where your leader—?”

“Chiharu, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, thank you. Chiharu said you were quitting for personal reasons. Is ZOO gone forever, or will you play again?”

“We certainly wish to play again, Your Majesty, but only if our duties to the Princess allow it. She will always come first in our lives.” She lowered her eyes. “May I ask why you wish to know?”

“You saw the reaction of the maintenance crew when they recognized you,” Nakamoto told her. “We are sure there are more people than just them who would love to see you perform a concert. My wife and I were just wondering if you would be willing to perform for our troops, maybe even the people of Tokyong itself?”

“We’d be happy to, Your Majesty,” Ruri answered. “You know who our manager is, so you just need to clear it with her.”

Ruri looked over her shoulder when she heard Yumisa’s voice enter the garden and smiled. “And there she is now.”

Ruri stood up as Yumisa and her husband came from around a hedge that surrounded the gazebo, and Yumisa smiled broadly when she saw her handmaiden. She let go of Kiminobu’s hand and leapt into Ruri’s arms, hugging her like a bear.

“I’ve missed all of you so much!” Yumisa told her.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Ruri said in a somewhat strained voice as Yumisa nearly crushed her. “We have missed you, too, and hoped you’ve had a good honeymoon so far.”

Yumisa released her when she heard the pain in Ruri’s voice and stepped back. Ruri indiscreetly adjusted the low-cut bodice of her dress, even though she knew it would hold everything in place without fear.

Ruri smiled when she saw Yumisa’s beaming face.

“It seems the honeymoon is going well,” she said, looking at Prince Kiminobu. “I’m so happy for both of you.”

Kiminobu remained quiet, unsure of how to respond to that.

“So, why are you here, Ruri?” Yumisa asked.

“The King and Queen wished to speak to me about ZOO performing for the troops and the people of Tokoygu,” Ruri told her. “I said it would be fine with us, but they would need to speak to you, as you are our manager.”

“You know I don’t have a problem with that!” Yumisa said. “As long as I can still be your manager and I’m not stuck being... whatever title Nobu and I will be taking once we’re officially married.” She looked at the King and Queen questioningly, almost daring them to take away the one freedom she adored.

“We would never think of keeping you from your band,” the King said. “As you said, you are their manager, even if you will be the new Guardian. Until the wedding and you’re officially announced as Guardian, you can do whatever you want. After that, we’ll have to see, but we still don’t think it will be an issue.”

“I’m glad to hear that, because ZOO is my favorite thing in the world—well, next to Nobu, of course.” She took her husband’s hand again and looked up at him. “But I can never abandon my friends.”

“And you never should,” Harukichi said. She stood up and walked over to Yumisa. She took the Princess into her arms and hugged her. “You are so precious.” She scratched Yumisa’s ears, and Yumisa snuggled against her.

“Mom, please stop petting my wife,” Kiminobu said.

Yumisa stuck her tongue out at him. “She can pet me all she wants,” the Princess told him. “You get to pet me differently, though.”

Ruri cleared her throat and then leaned in to whisper something quietly into Yumisa’s ear.

Yumisa’s gold eyes widened and she said, “Oh, yeah...” She looked up at the Queen. “Sorry, Mom.”

“It’s all right—at least we now know you two are getting along and don’t hate each other,” the Queen said as she stepped back. She looked Yumisa over and said, “That is a cute dress.”

“It’s all I had that wasn’t completely formal—I hope it’s all right.” Yumisa looked down at herself. “I have more clothes coming from Sae tomorrow.”

“It’s perfect for tonight. Turn around for me?” The Queen made a twirling motion with her finger, and Yumisa spun around so the Queen could take the summer dress in. “Do all of your dresses have a hole for your tail?” she asked.

“Yes, Ma’am—otherwise my balance would be off.”

“Then we’ll have to make sure the tailors know that when new dresses are made for you,” Harukichi noted.

“We have all of Princess Yumisa’s measurements, My Lady,” Ruri told her. “We’ll see they’re given to the tailors. But she has quite a wardrobe coming from Sae, I am afraid.”

“But what about when she’s pregnant?” the Queen asked. “She’ll be needing new clothes constantly.”

Ruri looked at Yumisa, who looked up at her. “We... hadn’t considered that,” Ruri commented. “Still, our measurements will be a good base for the location of her tail, if nothing more. She may grow rounder, but she will not grow taller.”

“This is true,” Harukichi said. “Still, I have to wonder how her mixed heritage will affect her pregnancy? Do you have any idea, Yumisa?”

“No, Your Majesty, though the doctors in Sae did tell me that there’s a possibility that things could be different. They don’t think I’ll have any problem getting pregnant—you don’t have to worry about that—but how long it might take or how long the pregnancy will last, they can’t be sure.”

“We’ll send for your doctors when the time comes,” the King told her. “They know you better than our doctors will, so it might be more comfortable for you.”

Yumisa curtsied to him. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said. “I mean *Dad*.”

“You must be hungry, you two,” Harukichi said, taking her seat again. “Please, sit down and eat! I hope hamburgers are okay—we never do anything fancy when it’s just family.”

“Hamburgers?” Yumisa swallowed nervously. “I’m sorry, Mom, but... I’m a vegetarian.”

Harukichi’s black eyes flew wide at this statement, and Yumisa saw her face go visibly pale. She cleared her throat and said, “We can have a salad brought out immediately—it was foolish of us to just assume—”

Yumisa laughed softly and said, “I’m kidding, Mom! I’m a wolf—of course I love meat! I just wanted to see your reaction, and it was priceless!”

Harukichi laughed uncomfortably and said, “Oh, well... we still shouldn’t have just assumed. If there are any dietary needs for you or your handmaidens, please, let us know!”

“This looks perfect—I don’t know if I could have handled anything large tonight.” Yumisa sat down in a chair next to the Queen and her stomach rumbled

hungrily. Kiminobu sat down at the end across from his mother and next to his father. Yumisa started building her hamburger.

“I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” she said after her stomach growled again loudly. “Then again, I can’t remember the last time I ate. I was too nervous about the wedding to eat this morning, then there was the battle—you have a strange mech, by the way—then, of course, the start of our honeymoon.” She cast loving eyes at Kiminobu. “So, yeah, I’ll probably eat far too much right now.”

“We have plenty,” Harukichi told her. “How... does Kiminobu look?”

“Mom!” Kiminobu hissed.

“We haven’t seen you without your entire body covered since you were fifteen, Nobu—I want to know how you are!” she told him.

“He’s...” Yumisa looked at her husband. “He’s healthy,” she answered diplomatically. “But I can understand why he covers himself. I’ll work on that, promise.”

“Well, at least he’s wearing less clothes than he used to,” Harukichi said. “He used to wear so many shirts that he looked puffy.”

“When I saw him after the concert, I was afraid I was going to have to put him on a diet!” Yumisa laughed. “But he’s definitely in good shape, considering what happened to him. He told me the full story of what happened to him,” she told the King and Queen. “I couldn’t imagine going through all that.”

“I really don’t want to go over it again,” Kiminobu said. “I just want to concentrate on our honeymoon right now—not that we actually have much of one.”

“Well, we’ll have a proper one after the big ceremony,” Yumisa said, reaching over to take his gloved hand. “Right, Mom and Dad?” she asked hopefully.

“Definitely,” Harukichi told her. “We’re sorry you couldn’t have a big ceremony today and do things properly, but it would take forever to coordinate everything—especially with the Unbound Uprising trying to kidnap both of you!”

“I’m married to the most wonderful man I could imagine—I have no regrets,” Yumisa said, looking at Kiminobu again. She squeezed his hand, but he withdrew his hand from hers. “Nobu?” she asked worriedly.

He sullenly took a bite out of his hamburger and tried to smile to show he was okay, but Yumisa did not believe it.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Tell me!”

“He can’t feel you,” Harukichi told her. “It’s the thing that breaks his heart the most.”

“The nerve damage,” she remembered. “It’s really that bad?”

“The doctors said he would never feel again,” Harukich said. “And it’s been so long—”

“That modern medicine can’t even help,” she finished, remembering what Kiminobu had told her. She reached over to take his arm and she pulled his glove off, revealing his scarred hand. He pulled it quickly into his lap, but she reached over and held it again. “Don’t be afraid to let me touch you, Nobu,” she told him. “I’ll feel for both of us!” She kissed his hand and saw the pain on his face before he looked away. She let go of him, and he slipped his glove back on. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“You did nothing wrong,” he told her. “It’s just who I am.”

Yumisa returned to her food, not knowing what she could say to make him feel better. It was a private pain he had carried for the last eight years of his life. It was a pain she would never understand. How could she?

Then she stood up and sat down in his lap, and she kissed him gently. “I will always love you, Nobu,” she promised him. “And we’ll figure this out—I promise you that!”

He hugged her and kissed her back.

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“Ruri!”

Ruri turned around when she heard Chiharu’s voice and waved to her friend. Chiharu approached slowly. She was never one to rush around, especially wearing an outfit similar to Ruri’s.

“On your way to meet the Royal Guards?” Ruri asked.

“Yes,” Chiharu said. She turned to the guard who had been walking with her and said, “Thank you for taking me this far. I’ll go with Ruri and her escort the rest of the way, unless you wish to come?”

“I need to get back to my position,” he said. “Otherwise I would say yes. You have been a most charming companion.” He saluted her and then turned sharply and walked off.

“Admirer?” Ruri asked coyly.

“He’s the VP of our Vadoran fan club,” Chiharu told her as they started off again. “And what man wouldn’t admire a woman in an outfit like this? How are you and the others managing in our new home?”

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to the halls, but we seem to be doing okay,” Ruri said. “I just had a meeting with the King and Queen, and they’d like us to perform for the troops at some point. I told them to talk to Princess Yumisa.”

“That’s why she’s the manager—but it would be great to have our hiatus shortened,” Chiharu commented. “I never realized how much I was going to miss performing until we said goodbye the other night.”

“How is the Princess doing with her new husband?” Ruri asked, arching a slim eyebrow. “To me, she looked like she was doing very well.”

Chiharu looked at their escort and said, “I’ll tell you later when we’re alone. But as you saw, she’s fine. She’s... our little princess. Nothing gets her down.”

They left the castle proper and walked a short distance to a grey building nearby. The escort took them inside and down another short hallway to a room marked as “Captain’s Mess.” He led them inside where they found the Royal Guard and the other handmaidens waiting for them around a long, rectangular table. The escort saluted Asa Ikehara and then left.

“Welcome,” Asa greeted, looking at the five handmaidens, all of whom were now dressed very similarly in old-time, revealing outfits. “You’ll have to forgive the arrangement, but we don’t normally eat here. As this is more of a meeting to get to know our assignments where the Prince and the Princess are concerned, we figured to keep it informal.”

“That’s fine,” Chiharu said. She looked at Shiori and smiled at the Lieutenant. “We don’t need to be stepping on each others’ toes. May Ruri and I sit down?”

“Please. Since you are the leader of ZOO, I figured you’d sit down at the other end, and your companion can take the seat across from Shiori.”

“Chiharu is also Princess Yumisa’s head handmaiden,” Ado said. “She takes care of the Princess a bit more than we do for personal matters.”

“We all tend to her equally,” Chiharu said, not wanting to seem more important than the others.

“And yet you’re the one who chose to have your room in the tower below Their Highnesses room,” Asa said.

“I was her first handmaiden,” Chiharu said. “I’ve known the Princess the longest. It made sense for me to be closest to her.”

“How did you all come to be her handmaidens?” Rumiko asked.

Chiharu smiled. “You know, the Princess is like... gravity. Things just seem to come to her when the time is ready, like they circle around her for a while, and when the time is right, they just fall into her orbit.”

“Like Prince Kiminobu?” Asa asked.

Chiharu laughed. “Precisely. And all of you.”

“Us?” Shiori asked questioningly.

“Oh, the Princess was very jealous of you, Lieutenant,” Chiharu told her. “And when she saw all of you with the Prince this morning, I thought she was going to rip all of your throats out in a rage of jealousy over your beauty.” She laughed when she saw their looks of surprise. “She smelled all of you on the Prince, I’m sure. Oh, she has much more of a wolf inside her than you might think—than even she likes to admit. I’m sure she smelled you, Lieutenant Seno, on the Prince from your time next to him during the concert—and I’m sure she smelled him on your clothes.”

“He bought those for me at the concert,” Shiori said innocently. “It’s not like I did him in the bathroom or something—though I... tried.”

Everyone looked at her.

“You know I love him—we all do!” she barked angrily. “Don’t act all coy and shy!”

“But nothing has happened,” Asa said, glaring at her. “Right, Shiori?” she asked between clenched teeth.

“No, nothing,” she said sullenly, quietly folding her arms and sinking down into her chair.

“Why... does he have five women as his guards?” Takē asked. “Isn’t that unusual? I mean, I don’t doubt your fighting abilities, but why not have a mixed group?”

“Because no male guards wanted the job of sleeping with the Prince,” Kii said. “After he tried to kill himself, he needed twenty-four hour protection.”

“He tried to kill himself?” Kohana asked in surprise.

“One night, when he was seventeen, about six months after he got out of the hospital for his burns,” Asa said. “He had moved to the tower because he wanted to be away from everyone—he didn’t want anyone seeing what a *freak* he had become—his words, not mine,” she said, throwing her hands up defensively. “We didn’t think much of it at the time, we just wanted him to get better. Shiori had gone up to see him, see if he needed anything, and she found him... standing in the window, getting ready to jump.”

“Oh no!” the five handmaidens gasped, horrified.

“It was the only time I’ve seen him,” Shiori told them. “He was shirtless, and his body...” She closed her eyes and shivered. “How he possibly survived that fire is beyond me. But he pushed himself out, and I grabbed him. It took everything I had to drag him back inside. He fought me the entire way, yelling and screaming for me to let him go. I guess something finally clicked in his mind about how far the drop was, and he let me pull him back inside. I was exhausted by the time I did, and he was a crying, blubbering mess. I stayed with him that night and let him cry on my shoulder.”

“After that, I talked the three others into spending the nights with him to keep him from doing something stupid again,” Asa said. “Shiori’s the only one who’s ever seen the Prince, though. He’s always been fully dressed—gloves, socks, the works—when he went to bed. He... learned to live with his disability.”

“I can’t imagine having to live like that at such a young age,” Chiharu said. “The poor man.”

“We’ve done what we can for him, but... he’s our Prince. And while we consider him a friend...”

“Decorum,” Ruri said sadly. “I guess it was easier for us because the Princess was a girl and we could be girls around her.”

“And the Queen felt that the Prince might feel threatened with men around him, guarding him like he was a prisoner. We tried our best not to make him feel that way.”

“How long was it before he started leaving his room again?” Chiharu asked.

“About a year,” Asa said. “His mother and father would come to see him, of course, so it wasn’t like he never saw them. But eventually his father told him he had to start learning how to rule, and the Prince accepted that and did his duty.”

“He buried himself in his work?” Takē asked.

Asa nodded. “He tried to. Sometimes he succeeded... most times he didn’t.”

“And he’s never been inside a mobile suit since?” Chiharu asked.

“Not until today,” Asa said angrily, and she clenched her fists. “Then that *Kingfisher* had to come for him like... like a puppy wanting its master! Now we’ll never be able to get him out of it.”

“How do you know?” Ruri asked.

“Because I know the Prince—he enjoyed it! If there’s another attack on Vadora, you can bet he and your Princess will be leading the charge!”

“Princess Yumisa won’t want to get into a mobile suit battle...” Kohana began, but then she rolled her eyes and said, “Oh, yeah, this is Yumisa we’re talking about. Never mind.”

Asa looked at her. “Is there something I need to know?” she asked.

“Princess Yumisa is a very sweet girl,” Chiharu told her. “However, she goes completely psychotic when she gets control of a weapon.”

“Excuse me?” Asa asked, green eyes wide.

“You have mobile suit simulators, yes?” Chiharu asked.

“Of course. For new pilots.”

“Princess Yumisa snuck into one when she was fourteen. Out of a thousand enemies, she killed a thousand and twenty without taking a single bit of damage to her mobile suit.”

“Wait... how could she kill a thousand and twenty if there were only a thousand enemies?” Kii asked. “And why would anyone take on that many enemies at once?”

“There was collateral damage—friendly fire,” Chiharu told her.

Everyone’s eyes widened.

“And the Princess wanted to prove herself. As I said, sweet but psycho.”

“She is *definitely* not getting inside *The Kingfisher* again,” Asa determined. “Our mechs have weapons to spare. It’s probably a good thing she never got a chance to unleash the weapons systems this morning—none of us might be here.”

“What about the IFF indicator?” Shiori asked. “Wouldn’t that keep her from killing friendlies?”

“The IFF indicator only *shows* you who’s friendly, but you can still attack them,” Kii said. “Wow, she killed her own people?”

“She does suffer a blood lust, due to her wolf nature,” Chiharu said. “It’s why we’ve kept her away from flight simulators and have *definitely* kept her away from real mobile suits.”

“I did not need to hear this,” Asa said, pushing her food back. “Ugh! This is just what we need.”

“But what about *The Kingfisher*?” Rumiko asked. “It only stopped shrieking once the Prince and Princess climbed aboard to pilot it. It probably won’t let them not pilot it again.”

“You make it sound like *The Kingfisher* is alive,” Takē said.

“It might be,” Asa said softly.

“Excuse me?” Chiharu asked.

Asa shook her head. “Nothing,” she said evasively. She stood up suddenly. “I need to go talk to Pops, our head mechanic. Please finish your dinner, and the others will escort you back to the castle and your rooms. It was nice meeting all of you. We’ll do this again.” Asa left the Captain’s Mess in a rush.

“What was that about?” Kii asked.

“I don’t know,” Shiori said as the door closed on its own.