

Chapter 13

Asa walked across the landing field toward the hangar deck where the mechs and the Nexus suits were held, her hands clasped behind her back. She was a striking figure in her uniform, which had white pants tucked into black boots, a white shirt, and a purple jacket with long tails down the back that almost reached her feet. It was not a normal military uniform since she was assigned to a special detail as Prince Kiminobu's guard. Still, everyone who saw her wearing it gave her the respect she deserved as a pilot and a Captain of the military.

She knew she should not let the words of an Unbound Uprising Captain bother her, but she could not get out of her mind what that man had said. He had contacted her directly, spoken to her directly, and told her to learn about the Fading Shadow System. But he had not said anything more than that. He had just given her a name, like it was something she should have known about. But she had never heard of such a thing.

Fading Shadow? Sounded ridiculous.

Still... why would he tell her that and then not expound on it?

Before she knew it, she was inside the hangar bay and staring up at *The Kingfisher*, the bane of her existence. That one mech had caused her no end of troubles, and she wished she could just destroy it once and for all. She did not understand why they even had it, considering the other five Nexus Suits worked very well without it. Scrapping it for junk would make her very happy, especially after today.

"That you, Cap'n Ikehara?"

Asa looked around and then spotted Pops, the grizzled head mechanic, working on a nearby military mech. She walked over to him.

"I thought you were at dinner?" he asked when she got closer. "Food not taste good?"

"The food was superb, as always," she told him. "Company was good, too. I learned a few things about our new Princess from her handmaidens."

"She's quite something, isn't she?" he said admiringly. "Prince Kiminobu certainly lucked out with her. Is it true she's part wolf?"

“Recessive gene, but yes,” Asa told him. “And according to her handmaidens, she’s a bit of a spitfire.”

“Oh, yeah?” Pops arched an eyebrow. “Probably not a good combination where *The Kingfisher* is concerned.”

“I was thinking that, too.” Asa leaned against the mech’s leg and shoved her hands into her pockets. “But she’s the Princess. I will respect her as much as I respect Prince Kiminobu.”

“Meaning you’ll tell her what to do and hope she listens,” he said.

Asa turned her head to look up at him. “What’s wrong with that? It’s kept the Prince safe. The only reason he got hurt was because he disobeyed my orders.”

“And he got into a prototype mech that wasn’t functioning properly,” Pops said glumly. “I failed him just as much as you did with that one.”

“That was his own stupidity,” Asa said, though Pops could tell by the tone of her voice that she was just putting on a brave face. He knew that, deep down, she felt more responsible than anyone for what happened to the Prince because she had not been there to stop him.

“Keep telling yourself that, and one day you might actually start to believe it,” he said. “So, what brings you to the hangar, Cap’n? Just out for an after dinner stroll?”

“I actually had a question about *The Kingfisher* and the other Nexus Suits,” she said, turning to look up at him. “I know *The Kingfisher* has its quirks—annoying as they may be—but have any of the other Nexus Suits, I don’t know, acted out or up in any way?”

Pops twisted his lips as he thought of that and stroked his scraggly beard with a grease-covered hand. “No, not that I can think of,” he said. “And *The Kingfisher* didn’t start *acting up* until after King Nakamoto lost his arm and it started staying behind in the bay when you and the other Royal Guards went out to practice. I might sound crazy, but it was almost like a child who was being forced to stay in bed because he was sick while the rest of his siblings went outside to play.”

“That does sound crazy,” Asa told him. “It’s a mech. It’s a machine. Though... it did come to the Prince like a puppy wanting its master.”

“That’s what I don’t understand is *why*—all of a sudden—it went to him when it used to balk at him even approaching it.”

“That’s another good question,” Asa said. “We have tons of questions about that machine but no answers!” She punched the leg of the mech gently.

“What’s eating you, Cap’n? I’ve never seen you act this way before. What’s going on?”

Asa looked down for a moment, but then looked at the old mechanic again. “Ever hear of the Fading Shadow System?” she asked.

Pops closed his eyes, searching his memory, but shook his head. “Can’t say that I have. What is it?”

“I don’t know—something the commander of the Uprising command carrier told me as they were slinking away,” she said. “He said I should look into it.”

“And you trust anything an Uprising soldier tells you?” he asked.

“I probably shouldn’t, but something about the way he said it made it sound important.”

“Did he tell you anymore?”

“No, and that’s what bothers me the most—he made it sound like a secret, like something the Nexus Suits have that they shouldn’t.”

“Well, everything about the mechs are in their operation manuals,” he said. “Or it’s embedded in their code somewhere.” Pops looked over at the six suits. “You know, something about the way they operate has always bugged me. *We* can never get those things to operate. It’s like they were built specifically for the Royal Guards and they won’t allow anyone else to operate them. Work on them, sure, but only basic, necessary repairs: Oil, water, filters, stuff like that. If we ever try to take them out, they don’t move.”

“Or they scream like *The Kingfisher* does?”

Pops laughed. “*The Kingfisher* is a special problem child. But it’s like the mechs only want you and the other Guards to fly them. Like they’re programmed only for you.”

“Only for us?” Asa asked. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Neither does where those suits came from,” Pops reminded her. “You found them, alone, in the Broken Lands, hidden deep in a small pocket of breathable air—a pocket that closed after you returned with the mobile suits. The five suits you took out there are still trapped there, and we’re unable to retrieve them.”

“You haven’t been able to get them back?”

“Nope. We tried, but they were so damaged by the air that getting them back was pointless—it was like the air rusted them to the point of being unusable.”

Asa looked up at him with wide eyes. “How... toxic is the air in the Broken Lands?” she asked.

He shrugged. “We can’t breathe it, but it can’t be too toxic considering we can fly through it without any problems. We don’t know about prolonged exposure, though. It may take days before anything can affect mobile suits. We couldn’t go after your old suits for a week. What are you thinking?”

“Nothing,” she said. “It was just a stupid thought, but...” She shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Cap’n?”

“I was just wondering if the air might have anything to do with Prince Kiminobu’s burns, that’s all—stupid, I’m sure.”

“I can’t say you’re not right, but his burns were just due to being caught on fire with oil all over him and there being no protective foam—if not for that Kareneth pilot getting to him first and dousing him, he’d probably be dead now. Though, it is interesting that the air didn’t seem to affect him.”

“No, it probably did, but he was put in the regeneration bath before too much damage was done to his lungs.”

“Maybe. Say, how is that new wife of his handling... things?” he asked evasively.

“I don’t know—I haven’t seen her or heard anything,” Asa said. “I hope she’s okay. I hope the Prince is, too.”

“Must be terrible having a wife that pretty and not be able to touch her,” Pops said sadly. “Or at least feel her when you do.”

“As long as he can get her pregnant, that’s all anyone seems to care about,” Asa said.

“Still, there’s more to making love than just that,” Pops reminded her. “Oh well, they’ll work it out, I’m sure.”

“And if she ever betrays the Prince, I’ll kill her myself, Princess or not,” Asa said, making a twisting motion with her fists.

“I’ll join you,” Pops said grimly. “I love that boy. He doesn’t deserve what happened to him. If that Princess ever betrays him, she won’t live to regret it—I don’t care what happens to me.”

Pops finished his work as they let that hang in the air between them for a few moments. When neither said anything against it, they realized they had a plan of action to protect Kiminobu.

“Well, I’m going to head for the library and see if it has any information on this Fading Shadow System,” Asa told him. “See you later, Pops! Keep up the great work.”

“I’ll look into it, too,” he told her. “Keep an eye on our Prince and Princess. If you need me to take care of her, let me know.”

“I’ll take care of her if you just hide the body,” Asa said jokingly.

“I have a shovel and a spot picked out,” he told her, equally jokingly. Then he cleared his throat and pointed behind her.

Asa turned and saw Chiharu standing there, glaring at the two of them, surrounded by the other handmaidens and the Royal Guards. Chiharu stormed toward Asa and said, “Princess Yumisa will never betray her husband! How *dare* you disparage her name!” She slapped Asa across the face, drawing gasps from the handmaidens and Royal Guards.

Asa lifted her hand to her stinging face but smiled. “I get that you’re here to protect your Princess, and that’s fine. But she had better keep herself in line. If those legs of hers open for any man but my Prince, I’ll cut them off and feed them to her! I was hoping I could like you, since we’re both protective of our charges, but no one strikes me.” Asa balled her fist and struck Chiharu across the cheek, staggering her and causing her lip to bleed.

The handmaidens went to Chiharu’s side as Chiharu looked at the Captain. “You wanna fight, huh? Well, I’m ready—”

“What is going on here?!”

Everyone looked up when they heard Yumisa’s voice, and they saw Prince Kiminobu and his wife standing nearby. Yumisa’s face was blood red in her anger. She stormed over to Chiharu and asked again, “What is going on here, Chiharu? I thought you were making friends with the Royal Guard? You aren’t supposed to be attacking them!” Then she looked at Asa. “Or are you having a problem with

my handmaidens? Spill it! Either of you!” She looked back and forth between them. When neither said anything, she said, “I heard something about my legs opening for anyone other than Nobu, and I’ll tell you that isn’t going to happen—ever! If you don’t believe *me*, then you’ve got issues you need resolved!”

Asa fell to her knee before the Princess and said, “You’re right, Your Highness, please forgive me for striking your handmaiden.” She turned and knelt before Prince Kiminobu, but this time she got down on her hands and forearms. “And you, Your Highness—I threatened to have the Princess killed should she ever betray you. I don’t know if you heard that or not, but I did it, and I should not have. Your happiness means the world to me, and I never want you to go a day where you might think she has betrayed you. Can you both forgive me?”

“And I was just defending your honor, My Lady,” Chiharu said, also bowing to Yumisa.

“Get up, both of you,” Kiminobu commanded irritably. “Not that it’s any of your business, but... Misa and I have been *extremely* happy with each other for the past few hours. She’s accepted me for the way I am, and she’s the first person I’ve felt comfortable being around. Neither of you have to worry about her betraying me, and *I* don’t have to worry about her betraying me.” He looked at Yumisa. “And if she ever does, I at least know someone has my back in the matter.”

Yumisa narrowed her eyes on him. “And what’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“It means, my beautiful wife, that we are never going to betray each other, and I’ve known that since the moment I met you.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “Well, yes, I’ll never betray you under any circumstances.”

“Is there anything we can help you with, Your Highness?” Pops asked, hoping to head off any further potential arguments.

“We came looking for Yumisa’s handmaidens,” the Prince said. “She had a question for Chiharu.”

“Yes, Your Highness?” Chiharu asked, still groveling on the floor.

“I was wondering where you put my bathrobe,” Yumisa said. “I can’t find it anywhere!”

“It might be with my things, Your Highness—I had to pack it last minute. I’ll check my room.”

“Thanks, Chiharu.”

“If a robe is so important, I have one you can wear,” Kiminobu said, wrapping his arms around her waist. He kissed the back of her neck.

“Baby, you ain’t seen anything until you’ve seen me in this robe,” Yumisa told him, snuggling against him. “I bought it especially for you!”

“She did,” Ruri told him. “We went out looking for the perfect robe for her to wear after her baths after she married you.”

“Then I can’t wait to see this robe,” Kiminobu said, hugging her.

“You bet you can’t,” Yumisa said with a sly smile.

“I’ll find your robe and bring it to you, Your Highness,” Chiharu said.

Yumisa turned to look up at her husband and smiled. She traced her finger down his chin, his neck, and stopped at his chest. “Maybe not tonight, Chiharu—bring it in the morning.”

Kiminobu lifted her in his arms and carried her out of the hangar bay.

After they were gone, Asa looked at Chiharu. “I guess we all need to talk,” she said. “Girls, let’s take a bath.”

Asa sank down into the stone lined bath and let the steaming water cover her body completely. She let out a deep sigh as her body relaxed for the first time in days. She opened her green eyes and watched as the others sat down, the Royal Guards quickly because they were used to the water’s heat, the handmaidens more gently as they let their skin get used to it.

“We need to clear the air between us, and the best way to do that is having no secrets from each other,” Asa said. “I want to say I’m sorry to Chiharu—and this time I mean it sincerely. She was right—I had no right to project my fears the way I did. Prince Kiminobu means the world to me—he always has. I’ve known him since he was eight and I was eleven. I am one of his best friends, and I’ve seen him through so much of his life.”

Asa spread her arms languorously along the back of the pool and laid her head back.

“I once thought I could love him,” she admitted, and they could see her swallow hard with the admission. She looked at them again. “But I knew I couldn’t—he was a Prince and I was nothing but his guardian. The closest I ever came was when the Queen started asking us to stay with him at night, and even then nothing happened. There were nights I wanted it to, don’t get me wrong, but I didn’t want to pressure him.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Chiharu asked.

Shiori moved closer to Asa and put her arms around her friend.

“I want you to know how much the Prince means to me,” Asa said. “I want you to know that if the choice comes between his happiness and your Princess, his happiness will always come first to me.”

“To all of us,” Shiori said.

The other Royal Guards nodded their agreement.

“But as long as Princess Yumisa remains loyal to him, I will not have a problem with her. But the second I find her in another man’s bed—*if* I ever find her—I’ll put a bullet in her head. Make no mistake in what I’m saying—her children will all belong to the Prince, and if even one of them comes out with DNA that’s not his, her life is over instantly.”

“Asa...” Shiori said, frightened by her tone.

“You don’t have to worry about Princess Yumisa.” Chiharu moved closer to Asa and knelt naked before her, looking her in the eyes. “She will never betray your Prince. Never. She will be loyal to him until the day either of them dies. It is not in her nature to leave someone she loves. If they have fifty children, all of them will be his. And I can tell by the way your Prince cares for Misa that he will never betray her—even with any of you, as beautiful as you all are.”

“We can’t help that training to be mobile suit pilots keeps us in good shape,” Rumiko said.

“Oh, what you have no training can give you,” Ruri said with a small smile. “You weren’t picked for your... piloting skills, grand as they certainly are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kii asked. Even though she was just as naked as everyone else, she kept her arms crossed over her smaller chest and kept her knees drawn up and together.

“It means, my shy dear, that every single one of you is a woman any man would find himself lucky to have—even you.”

“Why did you choose them?” Chiharu asked Asa. “You could have picked any pilots.”

Asa shrugged. “They were skilled, and I had been keeping my eye on them for awhile. They all got along well with each other. The Prince was also... friendly with them.”

“He liked them,” Kohana interpreted.

“He... like them,” Asa agreed.

“I’m... confused on something here,” Takē said, raising her hand. “Did you or the Queen decide on who was going to be his guards?”

“It was... mixed,” Asa told her. “Have you ever had a feeling someone might try something stupid but you pray deep down in your heart that you’re wrong?”

“You hoped Prince Kiminobu would never try to kill himself,” Takē guessed. “But what made you even consider staying with him at night should he try?”

“That was... supposed to be a short term deal should the need arise,” Asa told her. “But we... started to enjoy it. Well, most of us, anyway.”

The Royal Guards all looked at Kii.

“What?” she asked, drawing further into herself.

“Kii, however, did not really enjoy her nights with the Prince.”

“I didn’t *hate* them,” she said. “I just... didn’t see the point after awhile. And...” She drew her legs up further and hunkered down a little bit. “I wanted to spend my nights... in *The Corsair*.” She shrunk up further.

Rumiko and Mizuko sat down on either side of Kii and hugged her.

“And now you have lost your jobs because he doesn’t need you to guard him at night anymore,” Kohana said sadly.

“We’ll adapt and change,” Asa said.

“We all will,” Chiharu said brightly.

“How’s your lip, Chiharu?” the Captain asked.

“I’ll go to the doctor after we finish our bath,” she said. She touched her lip and found it tender and swollen. “You have a mean right hook.”

“And you need to learn to duck. I phoned that punch long-distance. I didn’t expect to actually hit you.”

Chiharu laughed. “Well, I hope you feel guilty for awhile.”

“Trust me, that *will* bother me for awhile.”

Asa stood up and stepped out of the bath. “Well, I hope we’ve settled everything between us. This bath is open all the time, so enjoy it when you wish. I need to go to bed. I have some research I have to do tomorrow, and I’ll need a clear head to do it with.”

“You’re leaving?” Shiori asked.

“Keep them company as long as you want,” she said, wrapping a white towel around herself. “I don’t plan on doing any training tomorrow. In fact, everyone, take tomorrow off. We’ve had a rough day.”

“Yes, Captain,” the Royal Guard said.

Asa went through the curtain to the room where they had placed their clothes before entering the bath and began to dress. When they heard the door to the bath close, everyone returned to the edge of the pool where they could relax again.

“You call her Captain all the time?” Takē asked the Royal Guards.

“That’s what she is,” Shiori said. “She doesn’t seem to want us to call her anything else.”

“That’s terrible,” Kohana said. “Are you friends?”

“That’s... hard to say,” Shiori said. “I mean, I like to think we are. She takes baths with us, which I don’t think she’d do if she was just our Commander. Then again, as you just saw, she left before us. One thing I like about ZOO is that you’re all friends first, band mates second.”

“Actually, we’re handmaidens first, friends second, band mates third,” Takē said. “Yumisa is our priority—always has been, always will be.”

“Always,” Chiharu agreed. “But we’ll also take responsibility for Prince Kiminobu—as much as all of you will allow. What are your duties where he’s concerned?”

The Royal Guards looked at each other. “Guard him,” they said.

“If he goes *anywhere*, we go with him,” Shiori said. “I mean, when we came to the concert, *all* of us came along to guard him. He goes into the city, we go with him. He goes into the country, we go with him. Now if he goes anywhere in Kareneth, we go with him. Our only job is to make sure he doesn’t get kidnapped and held for ransom.”

“Now you’ll be doing that for two people?” Kohana asked.

“More than likely,” Shiori said. “I doubt he’s ever going anywhere without the Princess being with him. He’s very insecure right now. I could tell it by the way he held her in the hangar bay.”

“That was insecure?” Chiharu asked. “It looked to me like a husband who just didn’t want to stop touching his beautiful wife.”

“You don’t know Kiminobu very well. But why should you? We’ll work on his insecurities—we just have to make sure he has nothing to be insecure about.”

“Yumisa will never betray him—her wolf nature makes her very loyal.”

“She’ll love him until the day either of them dies,” Shiori said, repeating what Chiharu had said earlier.

“And she will—honest.”

Shiori sighed. “Then we’ll protect her just as much as we’ll protect Kiminobu. You have nothing to worry about.”

Chiharu leaned her head back and sighed. “That’s good to know.”

Kiminobu listened to Yumisa’s quiet breathing as she slept in the aftermath of another session. She had been right: He hadn’t seen anything until he’d seen her in that robe. No piece of art in the world had been as beautiful as her naked body in that robe. No sunrise or sunset could compare to it. No natural wonder in the world looked half as glorious.

She still wore the robe as she slept. Kiminobu would not let her take it off.

He reached over to stroke her hip, then his hand trailed down her back to her tail, and he gave it a gentle stroke. He felt nothing, but Yumisa yipped a little and then started running in her sleep, her arms and legs going wild. Kiminobu put his arm around her and she instantly calmed down.

“I love you,” he whispered into her ear. He pulled her body against his. “I love you so much.”

He pulled gently away so as not to disturb her and stood up. He dressed quickly, and with a final look at her sleeping form, he left his room.