

Chapter 15

Asa felt a trickle of sweat roll down her back as Prince Kiminobu's voice rang out across the Vadoran military channel. She heard confidence in that voice, strength that she had never heard before. Power. Control. The voice of a King. And his subjects had responded, pledging their lives to him. Her voice and those of the Royal Guard had been among them. Everything told her to tell Kiminobu to turn around, to go back to the castle with his wife, but she found herself momentarily suppressing it. The soldiers could not see their future King—future Guardian—turn around and leave them to fight for him.

Still, he was the Prince. It was her duty to protect him.

She turned on a private channel directly to the Prince's mobile suit. "*Kingfisher*, this is *Empress*," she said. No one else could hear her. "I know you feel you need to be here to support us and the troops, but I demand you turn around and return to the castle immediately. We can handle this, and no one will think less of you for it."

"We appreciate the position we've put you in, *Empress*," Kiminobu told her as Uprising mobile suits began to swarm the area, "but we're not going anywhere. This mobile suit might start acting up again if it doesn't get a battle."

"And I'll go a little nuts if I don't get to blast something," Yumisa added, unleashing a barrage from *The Kingfisher*'s hand rifle. She destroyed four enemy mobile suits instantly. "And you don't want to see me when I'm a little nuts."

"I still want you two going home," Asa said, flexing her hands on *The Empress*' controls as she tried to remain calm. She spun and struck down a mobile suit that had gotten too close. "You are the future Guardians of the world. Your child will be Emperor or Empress after you. I cannot risk your lives because you're... battle hungry."

"Asa, you saw the way *Kingfisher* reacted in battle... man, was it only yesterday?" Kiminobu asked in disbelief. "This thing is built to fight! Let it!"

Asa stopped before *The Kingfisher* and held her mech's arms out in a blocking motion. "No, Your Highnesses, my duty is to protect both of you. That machine is crazed. It nearly killed you yesterday by overheating the cockpit. Besides... it might be controlling your mind."

“It is not controlling my mind,” Kiminobu told her, and she could hear a little growl in his voice. “If anything, my mind is controlling it.”

Asa paused at that statement.

“I still think you should go back to the castle and make sure it’s safe,” she told him, remembering why she was talking to him. “Please, your Highness—I’ll be able to concentrate on this battle better if I don’t have to worry about—”

Asa’s voice went silent.

“Boy, she talks too much,” Yumisa told Kiminobu. “Is she always that bossy?”

“Did you just cut her *off*?” Kiminobu asked in disbelief.

“She wouldn’t shut up and there’s a battle happening!” Yumisa told him as she blasted more mobile suits down. “You want to talk about distracting!”

“You *don’t* cut Asa Ikehara off for any reason!” he told her, and he almost started laughing. “Oh, you’re going to pay for that once we get back to the castle.”

“After the battle?” Yumisa asked hopefully with a gleeful smile.

“Oh, of course after the battle,” he said as if she were crazy.

He piloted *The Kingfisher* into a group of Uprising mobile suits, and Yumisa started blasting them with the mech’s main gun. “So, I don’t cut off Asa Ikehara for any reason, huh?” she asked.

“Nope,” he told her.

Yumisa growled in the back of her throat and turned the communications back on.

“—the two of you getting yourselves inadvertently killed by enemy mobile suits! All it would take is one lucky hit and—Hey, where are you going?” Asa demanded as *The Kingfisher* flew past her and into the thick of things. “Don’t ignore me when I’m yelling at you!”

“So, tell me about this simulator incident,” Kiminobu told Yumisa.

Asa turned to go after *The Kingfisher* and was confronted by a large, black mobile suit that was twice the size of her own with thick, metal plating that made it look like some kind of ancient golem. There was nothing sleek about the mobile suit. It was built for combat—it was built for destruction.

“We meet again,” a familiar voice said. “We never did finish our last dance.”

“I see you’re in a different mobile suit today,” Asa said, scanning him quickly. “It still won’t do you any good. I’ll take you down just as easily as I did yesterday.”

“I don’t think so,” Dietang Arnea said. “And you didn’t take me down yesterday. You’re at a serious disadvantage now, though. These suits were built to destroy your Nexus suits, and they’re programmed with our battle data from yesterday.”

“Trying to scare me?” Asa asked. “You’ll have to try harder than that.”

Dietang reached behind his back and withdrew another heavy, clubbed, spiked mace off his mech’s back with his mech’s right hand and slammed it threateningly into his mech’s left. For good measure, he started running energy through it. “Is this hard enough?” he asked. “This can damage even your mobile suit.”

“Seen bigger,” Asa said, running another quick scan. “Or are you just trying to compensate?”

“Honey, I have nothing to compensate for,” he told her with a grin. Then his grin fell. “Wait, that doesn’t sound right.”

“Sounds about right to me.” Asa drew two katana-type swords off her mech’s back and held them crossed before her. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to take care of you quickly so I can go save my Prince from doing something stupid—like listening to his wife.” Asa charged Dietang’s mech.

Shiori scanned the battlefield, keeping an eye on where all of the other Royal Guards were in proximity to herself. Mostly, though, she kept watch for *The Kingfisher* because she knew the other guards were skilled pilots and warriors. The Prince, however, was a completely different matter, and she knew Asa would yell at her if Shiori let anything happen to Prince Kiminobu.

Shiori hated getting reprimanded.

It wasn’t that Asa would do anything terrible if reprimanded one of her troops. She would just get that disappointed look that no one liked to see on her face, especially Shiori.

She came up behind two mobile suits that were battling other Vadoran soldiers and grabbed their heads, smashing the two mobile suits together until they dropped

from the sky. The two Vadoran soldiers thanked her and then flew off to find others to fight. Shiori loved cracking mech skulls. She didn't know why.

Shiori had been a low-ranked pilot in the Vadoran military when Asa called her to her Captain's office one day to talk to her. Shiori had walked to her office on shaking legs, wondering how she had screwed up. To her surprise, Asa was pleased with her piloting skills and offered her a position on Prince Kiminobu's Royal Guard. Shiori immediately accepted, mostly because she would get more comfy quarters and she'd be around the Prince—a lot. This was before his accident, but she had plans of bedding him once he turned eighteen even back then. It was a long shot, sure, but she had a body any teenage boy would want to get his hands on.

Then came the day the Royal Guards went with the King and Queen to get the Nexus suits, and she saw *The Atlas* for the first time. Kii said Shiori had heart-eyes when she first saw the mech, and Shiori did not doubt her. *The Atlas* was the greatest mobile suit she had ever seen, and she had piloted quite a few. Nothing handled like it, however. It was almost as if *The Atlas* had been made for her.

She spun her mech to avoid incoming enemy fire and launched an assault of her own that destroyed the enemy mobile suits easily. Her eyes drifted back to the IFF screen and she saw that she was getting too far from *The Kingfisher*. She spun back towards him just as she saw a large Uprising mech about to pounce on her Prince. She pulled up, aimed, and when she got a target lock, she fired.

The Kingfisher spun and brought up an energy shield on its left arm that blocked the Uprising mech's energy sword. The energy surrounding the sword struck the shield, knocking the Uprising mech backwards several feet. The pilot growled.

“Double pilot system,” he commented. “He saw me coming.”

The Kingfisher's gun came up and began firing at him instantly before he could fully recover, and he had to dodge aside, but a few shots still struck his mech's right arm. Then he had to bring his arms together to block an assault of tiny missiles that seemed to come from every part of *The Kingfisher*'s body and struck his mobile suit enough to send him flying away again, even though he braced himself for the impact. He was about to fly towards the Vadoran mech again when

he was struck from behind by another assault, and his mobile suit's head spun to see *The Atlas* heading for his position.

"He's in trouble now," Yumisa commented as she saw the Royal Guard heading for the mech. "But we can take this guy easily before they get here."

"Probably," Kiminobu said, shaking his left arm to erase the numbing from the impact of the energy mace against *The Kingfisher's* shield.

Yumisa saw five enemy mobile suits heading for them, and she pulled the trigger. The gun in their mech's right hand fired and blew them away quickly in a single sweep of its weapon. She howled delightedly as the enemy suits fell from the sky.

"Down on your left," Kiminobu said as he watched for the mech's next attack.

"I see them." She launched a deluge of missiles towards them from *The Kingfisher's* left arm. "Wow, this thing is packed with weapons!" she admired. "How are you holding up? Are you okay piloting this monster now?"

Kiminobu held up the shield arm to ward off another missile attack from another group of Uprising mechs that were coming to help their leader. He grunted as he felt the impact on his own arm again. "Feeling with this thing isn't as much fun as I had hoped it would be," he told her. "In fact, I'm pretty sure I don't want to feel with this helmet ever again. Missile strikes are like wasp stings."

"Gotta take the bad with the good," she told him, but she was glad to hear that he was seeing the bad in what he had wanted from *The Kingfisher*.

Kiminobu looked down at his arm and saw that it was smoking slightly from the missiles' explosions. "Yeah, tell me about it."

"Your Highness, are you all right?" Asa asked worriedly. "That was quite an impact!"

"A little singed but fine otherwise," he responded. "How are you holding up?" he asked as Asa confronted Dietang's mech again.

"Me?" Asa chuckled. "This guy is nothing. Look, I want you and the Princess to start making your way back towards the protection of the castle. There's a lot more enemy mobile suits than I was expecting, and we need to keep you two—"

Her voice fell silent as Yumisa cut the communications again. "Whether she likes being cut off or not, her voice is very distracting during a battle," she said.

“And we’re not leaving,” she told Kiminobu. “They need us. *The Kingfisher* is more powerful than the other Nexus suits put together! This thing is *making* replacement ordinances as we’re fighting!”

“What?” Kiminobu asked with wide eyes. He looked at his heads-up display.

“We started the fight with a thousand missiles,” Yumisa told him. “We still have a thousand missiles. I don’t know where your parents got this mobile suit, but it’s simply amazing!”

“It can’t replenish itself,” he said, looking at her through the HUD. “That’s not possible.”

“It’s either that, or the count is broken,” she said with a shrug. She fired more rounds from the mobile suit’s machine gun. “At least I understand how laser blasts can replenish themselves, but not missiles!”

“Well, just don’t go too wild with the missiles... for now,” he told her. “Concentrate on the gun. You seem really good with that,” he said as she picked off another mobile suit in flight. He turned the communications back up so he could hear the battle.

“But missiles are more fun—and destructive!” she said gleefully, launching another dozen or so from *The Kingfisher*’s chest. More enemy mobile suits fell.

Yumisa’s cackling laughter filled the communications channels of every mech in the area, Vadoran and Uprising alike.

“Somebody shut that woman up!” Dietang growled as Yumisa’s voice filled his comm channel. He boosted back, away from *The Empress*, who was confronting him.

“Trust me, I’ve tried,” Asa told him. “It isn’t going to happen.”

“I heard that!” Yumisa barked at her through the outside speakers.

“Just making sure you hadn’t cut me off again,” Asa told her. “Lieutenant. Seno, get over here!” she told Shiori on a direct line. “You take his left, I’ll take his right. If we can take him down, the other mobile suits might fluster.”

“You go protect the Prince,” Shiori told her. “*Atlas* can handle this guy all by itself—though, honestly, I don’t think the Prince needs much protection,” she said as she watched more missiles fly from Kiminobu’s mech and annihilate a few dozen more Uprising soldiers.

“Only from me if he doesn’t do as I say,” Asa said, making sure the Prince heard her warning. “Are you sure you can handle this guy? I think I do need to go knock some sense into that wolf-eared little trollop.”

“Go, I’ve got this guy,” Shiori said confidently.

“New dance partner,” Asa told Dietang, “but don’t worry, I’ll be back soon enough, if there’s any of you left. You’ll have to excuse me, but I need to go spank my Prince.” *The Empress* flew away from Arnea’s mech.

“How much trouble is your Prince in?” Arnea asked as he sized up his new opponent.

“Eh, he’ll be fine,” Shiori told him as she scanned his mech.

“Good, because I need to take you out. You’ll have to forgive my brashness, but my father always taught me to take down the biggest kid in the yard if you wanted respect—and you’re the biggest here—well, second-biggest, at any rate. *Kingfisher* does seem to dwarf you by quite a bit.”

Arnea’s mech moved with surprising speed, and he gut-punched Shiori’s mech, rattling the pilot within. Shiori moved to grab him, but he slipped from her grasp and punched the mech twice between the legs. Shiori groaned as her helmet transmitted that feeling straight to her, and she felt like crossing her legs.

What was *that* sensation?

“You felt that one, didn’t you?” he asked. “So the rumors are true.”

“What... rumors?” she asked as her eyes uncrossed. “That you’re a bastard for hitting a woman where it hurts?” *And why the heck did that hurt?* she wondered.

She tried to find him and found him suddenly behind her. Arnea grabbed the leg of Shiori’s mech and twisted it, breaking the knee joint before he tore the leg away with an ease that surprised her. Shiori felt her leg go numb for a moment and she screamed with the pain, but then the feeling returned a moment later, as did her mobility

“You broke my mech!” Shiori screamed at him. She grabbed his mech quickly in a headlock and started pounding it with her fist.

Arnea broke the hold and boosted away. “You’ll have to do better than that,” he told her as he spun around her dizzily. “This mobile suit was built to win wars—by itself, if necessary. We were going to mass produce them, but the metal

required to build this is nearly impossible to find. We were lucky enough to plate this one and those with me.”

He stopped and punched *The Atlas* in the stomach, denting the armor like it was bread dough. Shiori coughed as she felt the air get knocked from her, but then she shrieked when she saw red lights starting to coat her mech.

“Stop denting my mech!” she yelled. “Get this jerk off me!” she ordered her friends.

Rumiko and Mizuko arrived quickly and fired at the black mech.

“That thing’s huge!” Rumiko told her as she and Mizuko fired everything they had at the mech. “And it and it’s companions are armored like turtles! What are we supposed to do?”

“GET HIM OFF ME BEFORE HE DESTROYS MY PRECIOUS *ATLAS!*” Shiori screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Keep them busy, boys,” Dietang ordered the Uprising soldiers who had arrived to support him. “I’m having too much fun with this one.”

He grabbed *The Atlas*’s right arm and broke its shoulder before ripping the arm off. He turned slightly and threw it across the sky towards *The Kingfisher*.

“I’m coming, Your Highness,” Asa told *The Kingfisher*. She got no response. “Your Highness?” she asked again. Her green eyes narrowed. “That little bitch cut me off again!” she screamed, pounding her right arm command console. “Here I was hoping she was going to be a good influence on the Prince, but apparently not! That little bushy-tailed nihilist!” She growled. “If she gets my Prince killed, she’d better die, too, or I’ll murder her myself!”

Asa tried contacting *The Kingfisher* again but still got a busy signal. “Answer, Highness, answer!” she screamed.

“Hi there!” she heard Yumisa’s overly cheery voice say. “You’ve reached *The Kingfisher*! Prince Kiminobu and Princess Yumisa are busy kicking butt and taking names right now, so please leave your message after the bark! WOOF!”

“DAMN IT! HOW DID I GET AN ANSWER MACHINE?” Asa cleared her throat and calmed down. “Hello, Your Highness, this is Captain Asa Ikehara with Vadoran Command. You might remember me from the castle because I AM YOUR PROTECTOR! If you happen to get this message before you *die*, please

know that I will be bringing this breach of protocol before the King. Please call me back when your new wife releases your balls. Thank you!” she said in a sweet, sing-song voice.

Asa cut down three mobile suits that tried to surround her. They exploded and rained metal on the ground below. She barely had to stop her in pursuit of *The Kingfisher* in order to take them out.

“That little Princess’s ass is mine when this is over with,” she swore. “I’ll mount her tail on my wall!”

“What the what?” Yumisa barked as *The Kingfisher* dodged aside, *Atlas*’s arm barely missing *Kingfisher*’s left arm as it flew past. She saw in the viewport a mobile suit that had been moving forward to attack them, and she cackled gleefully as the arm smacked it in the head. The mobile suit flailed and fell several meters down. She blew it away with gunfire.

“That’s what you get for trying to take us on!” she told him as more enemy mechs began to buzz around them like bees. “Die, Uprising dogs!” she screamed as she fired at more mobile suits, picking them off one-by-one with the pulse rifle she had discovered among *The Kingfisher*’s numerous weapons. She had grown bored with the mech’s regular weapon and had pulled it out of a compartment in the mobile suit’s leg; once free, it had unfolded to its full length. Once she started using it, Prince Kiminobu was surprised to see what an excellent sniper she was.

“Die! Die! Die!” she said with each shot that took down an enemy mech. She pulled the trigger with abandoned glee. The heads-up display of her helmet tracked with her eyes, and wherever she looked, a pulse blast would go. She trembled with excitement with each shot she fired.

“How are you such a good shot?” Kiminobu asked her curiously. He was glad she was at weapons and not him. “I mean, I know the helmet helps but... seriously, you’re good.”

“For my fifth birthday, my parents took me to a fair—one of the few occasions they let me out,” she said with a tone of bitterness Kiminobu knew he would have to ask her about later. “Being five, everyone thought I was wearing a wolf outfit, which is the only reason my parents dared let me out into public. Anyway, you know that game where you shoot the balloons and win a prize?”

“Yeah,” he said, having played it a few times himself. He was never good.

“I took home the large stuffed tiger—and it wasn’t just because my father was the Emperor,” she told him, cutting off his coming comment. “The man behind the counter said he’d never seen anyone shoot as well as I had—and it wasn’t just because I was the Princess,” she again cut him off.

“I didn’t say anything,” he said, turning *The Kingfisher* to face more enemies.

“Sorry,” she said as she blew another mobile suit away. “Most people do. *Poor-little-Princess-can’t-do-anything-on-her-own* type stuff. I’m sure you’ve dealt with it, too.”

“Only in terms of ruling,” he said, remembering an incident with a townsman when he was fifteen. It had happened on the day his father and mother were away getting *The Kingfisher* and the other Nexus Suits.

Kiminobu spun away from some enemy fire. He found the responsiveness of *The Kingfisher* admirable. Asa had been right: Very minor movements of the controls took the mech wherever the Prince wanted, but he was sure the helmet had a lot to do with it, too.

He smiled down at his beautiful wife, who was firing joyfully. It was nice not having to worry about the weapons so he could just concentrate on keeping both of them safe and out of the line of fire. But even the enemy ammunition he was not able to avoid were reflected by *The Kingfisher*’s shields with very minor damage to the mech and himself.

“On your right,” he told her, and he turned to face some more targets, which Yumisa quickly dispatched.

“I love this gun,” she said happily.

“Be careful,” he reminded her; “it should have a power limit—though nothing seems to have limits in this suit.”

“Oh, we’re good,” she told him. She pressed a button, and some panels on *The Kingfisher*’s body opened before spewing forth another array of small missiles that took out even more mobile suits. She looked around for more enemy suits to destroy and watched as more and more poured out of the command carrier. She growled in the back of her throat. “What did they do, send their whole army for little ol’ us?” she asked. “Well, I’m glad these new guys showed up. I was afraid I

was going to get bored or have nothing to kill—though, taking on a command carrier might be interesting...”

“We are *not* taking on a command carrier,” he warned her. “I may be dumb, but I’m not suicidal—well, at least not today. On your right!” he warned.

She fired as the words left his mouth. “I saw him.”

The mech went down with a giant hole in its shoulder.

She opened a screen that appeared next to Kiminobu, and he saw her looking at him. “So... our first real battle as man and wife is going well, don’t you think?” The image fuzzed for a second as *The Kingfisher*’s shields activated to deflect an enemy’s attack. Kiminobu winced as he felt the impact. He turned toward the source of the attack with a snarl on his face and she fired. “So, any particular reason you like being called Nobu? I like it, personally!”

He shrugged as he watched the IFF screen. “My family calls me Nobu,” he told her as he boosted towards some mobile suits that were trying to sneak up on *The Corsair*. “So you might as well since you’re family, now, too.”

“That’s awesome! No offense, but your name is a bit long to keep repeating.”

“Trust me,” he said, twisting his lips in annoyance as *The Corsair* easily defeated the mechs he was going after. “Imagine having to spell Prince Kiminobu Takanashi every time you have to sign something.”

“Yuck!” Yumisa destroyed another mech that got too close.

“In Kanji,” he added. “Trust me, my name takes awhile.”

“You’ll have to show me sometime soon,” she said dreamily. “We don’t use Kanji in the Empire. We might have a long time ago, but we got away from it.”

“We have, too, except on formal documents,” he told her. “Your name would be beautiful written in Kanji, with a few modifications to make it work.”

“Modifications?” she asked, giving him a quizzical look.

“Technically, your name would have to be Yumi sa Hase Takanashi to work, but it wouldn’t change anything. I’ll show you when we get home.”

“Sweet!” Yumisa smiled at him again. “Oh, and my middle name is Wakui, after my mom. As for nicknames, I know I told you to call me Misa, but I would much prefer you call me Your Imperial Highness when we’re in bed.” She winked at him on the screen.

“As long as you call me Your Imperial Highness, as well,” he said with a grin.

“As Your Imperial Highness commands,” she replied with another grin.

“Thank you, Your Imperial Highness,” he returned. He looked around for a moment as if something didn’t seem right. “This is a quiet battle. Where is the comms traffic?”

“Oh, I turned it off awhile ago,” Yumisa told him. “It was distracting me. Your Captain is *cranky*.”

Kiminobu’s eyes widened as he looked up and saw *The Empress* in the main screen, tapping the side of it’s head. “You turned it off completely?” he asked, and the world shattered around him. He flipped the communications back on quickly.

“...ANOTHER THING THAT REALLY TICKS ME OFF—”

“Sorry, Captain Ikehara,” he said into the mic, “but we had a little technical difficulty with the receiving part of our comms. It’s fixed now!”

“That’s bull and you know it!” Asa told him. “Unless that wolf-eared little trollop chewed through the wiring! But we don’t have time to discuss it now—but believe me, we *will* discuss it! I want you and that little dog-eared wrecking ball to high-tail it back to the castle like you were supposed to do a while ago, and I don’t want to hear anything about you outranking me, got it? Your safety is my top priority, not her little kill-fetish! We’ll deal with the situation here. Now get going! No excuses! I have to go help Lieutenant Seno.”

She boosted away back towards where Shiori’s mech was being slowly torn apart. She stopped in front of Dietang’s mech, and Dietang stopped his demolition of *The Atlas*.

“Ah, you’re back,” he said with a pleased tone to his voice. “I was hoping we’d meet again.”

He released *The Atlas*, which began to sink to the ground below with the loss of its leg boosters. He knew *The Atlas* was no longer a threat. “One down, five to go,” he said, turning his attention to his real prize.

“You’ll pay for that,” Asa told him, attacking him with her sword. He managed to block it easily with his energy mace. “Lieutenant Seno loves that machine. Because you hurt her, you just gave me reason not to let you leave this battlefield.”

The Empress kicked away from him, dislodging their weapons with a sonic boom that was probably heard for miles around. *The Empress* turned to block the attack from another green mobile suit and spun to the left before she grabbed its

arm and threw it down—crashing—into the ground below, enough to rattle the pilot but not really hurt the machine too much. Then she was on Arnea again almost before he could blink, but he dodged his mobile suit aside with the grace of a dancer. *The Empress* boosted to the same level as him in the sky and they stared at one another.

“You’re definitely good,” Asa told him. “You handle that machine well.”

“Well enough to destroy you and your companions,” Dietang said. “I’ll admit, you got the jump on me earlier, but that’s going to change now.”

“So far, you are down several hundred—” She heard Yumisa’s cackle again and winced. “—maybe thousand—and we have only lost *Atlas* and a handful of our own pilots.” She checked her monitor and saw Shiori’s mobile suit was still trying to get back into the battle but just couldn’t make it. “And even she’s still trying. But I understand why you’re fighting, and if I were in your shoes, I’d probably be doing the same thing.”

“Why did Vadora choose to side with the Empire it had spent two centuries trying to defeat instead of helping us?” Dietang asked. “If you had just joined us, perhaps we wouldn’t be trying to arrest your King and Queen for crimes against humanity!”

“Crimes against humanity?” she asked. “That’s going a bit far. I still don’t know what this computer system you all are so afraid of is about, but I still intend to find out. As for you, I don’t ask questions, I just kill whoever my King, Queen, and Prince tell me to kill. Today, that is you and your soldiers.”

The Empress shot forward, and Dietang’s mech blocked her sword strike again. Asa kicked in the boosters and pushed his mech back a little ways until she pushed him into another Uprising mobile suit and crippled its back thrusters. The second mobile suit collapsed, and the sound of the pilot screaming as he fell towards the ground was heard across all of the enemies’ comms.

Asa slashed across the black mech’s mace twice quickly and boosted back before attacking again with one strike and then another and another.

“Why am I having so much trouble with this guy?” she asked quietly. She looked at the monitors and saw that the others were doing okay keeping enemies away from Prince Kiminobu, and even *The Kingfisher* was handling itself well.

“Get out of here, Highnesses,” she told them again. “I don’t want to have to order you again! I’m in charge of this battlegroup, not you!”

Asa flipped a couple of switches and turned her mech to avoid a kick from her opponent. As the black mech flew past her, she put away her mech’s sword and quickly clasped its hands together and brought both elbows down hard on the black mech’s back, hoping to damage its boosters. No luck. She grabbed the black mech and punched it hard across the face, sending it spinning away. She jumped after it.

“Let’s see how you handle hand-to-hand combat,” she said as she went in for the kill.

“ATLAS!”

Kii cringed as Shiori’s shrill cry came over the comms. “Your Highnesses, get back to the castle, please,” she told Prince Kiminobu. “I don’t want to have to explain to Captain Ikehara why you got yourself hurt if something happened to you.”

“You do realize that’s a command carrier up there,” Kiminobu told her. “We’re not leaving you alone to deal with it!”

“They haven’t fired on us yet,” Kii said. “Then again, if they did, they’d probably hit their own people before us considering they sorta outnumber us. But you and Princess Yumisa—”

“That bushy-tailed nihilist!” Asa cut in angrily.

“—have to get out of here now! You know Captain Ikehara is going to have a cow if you don’t!”

“You’ll be overwhelmed!” Kiminobu told her. “You can’t possibly destroy them all, even with the help of the military!”

“We won’t be able to destroy them if we’re trying to protect you!” Rumiko told him angrily.

“Then let us protect you for a change!” he yelled determinedly. “Misa, ready The Royal Decree!”

“Ready the what?” She looked over her shoulder at him.

“It’s something *The Kingfisher* told me about earlier,” he said. He pulled up some information on a screen and sent it down to her. Yumisa read it over quickly,

and her ears began to twitch excitedly in her helmet. Her golden, almond-shaped eyes widened as she saw the image on the screen before her.

“Roger that!” she yipped excitedly. “Hold on, everyone,” she transmitted to the other Royal Guard; “this is going to get nasty!”

She punched in some codes that were written on her screen, her heart beating so fast she thought it was going to burst from her chest.