

Chapter 16

“Your Majesties, Her Highness’s handmaiden, Chiharu Yamashiro,” the announcer at the door to the throne room said, and Chiharu entered the throne room.

Chiharu came before the King and Queen of Vadora and curtsied to them both elegantly in her handmaiden dress. It was a different outfit than the one Ruri had worn yesterday, this one much more conservative. She had a worried look on her face.

“Your Majesties, I’m sorry to bother you both, but I thought it best that you know Prince Kiminobu and Princess Yumisa have taken *The Kingfisher* into the battle. I am... concerned for her in that mech.”

“I would not be too concerned, Chiharu,” the Queen told the handmaiden. “*The Kingfisher* is built like a mini fortress. It would take a lot to take it down. I wish she and my son had not gone into battle, but the Nexus Suits need to fight together again. I would not worry about Yumisa’s safety.”

“It’s... not her safety that concerns me, Your Majesty,” Chiharu said. “It is her... battle lust. My lady is a bit... rambunctious, especially when it comes to mobile suits. And as I told Captain Ikehara last night... she’s sweet but psychotic with a gun in her hand.”

Queen Harukichi had to suppress a smile at that description. “Rambunctious but psycho—not a good pairing when it comes to *The Kingfisher*... and my son. That mobile suit has ammunition to spare. When the King and I designed it, we wanted to be able to replenish the ammunition of the other Nexus Suits should the need arise. We also wanted to make sure *The Kingfisher* could outlast any enemy it faced.”

“Then my lady is probably cackling her head off,” Chiharu said, suppressing her own smile. “She has always loved battle simulations in the mech trainers, but destroying things brought her a little too much joy. She’s known for killing friendlies when her blood gets pumping.”

“Oh, I hope she never finds out about The Royal Decree,” King Nakamoto whispered into his wife’s ear.

“The Royal Decree?” Chiharu asked questioningly. “Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I have sensitive hearing.”

“A weapon of last resort,” Queen Harukichi told her. “It’s ammunition remains locked away, unused for any reason, until such time as it is activated, for, say, overwhelming odds....” She turned wide eyes on her husband. “You never mentioned The Royal Decree to Kiminobu, did you?” she asked, and he could hear the warning tone in her voice.

“I would never mention that to him!” Nakamoto told her, professing innocence. “I never even mentioned it to the Royal Guards!”

Harukichi let out a held breath. “Good, then she doesn’t know about it,” she said thankfully.

“*The Kingfisher* did not show Princess Yumisa The Royal Decree, but it did show her something called The Blessed Queen,” Harukichi said. “Is that related in any way?”

Their royal eyes widened and they looked at one another.

“*The Kingfisher* showed her that?” Nakamoto asked.

“Yes, right before the battle, as a sort of... I guess an apology because it had activated its alarm to get Prince Kiminobu’s attention. It activated it only at a frequency the Princess could hear. Is The Blessed Queen a... problem?”

“It’s a weapon of last-last resorts,” Nakamoto said. “It’s a step beyond The Royal Decree.”

“Oh, then she’ll do everything in her power to activate it,” Chiharu told them. “She loves explosions and mass destruction—one reason she started our band: We’re loud.” Chiharu looked around at the throne room quickly. “Speaking of our band... is there any chance we could use your throne room for a new music video? This place would really be perfect with the right lighting...”

“Focus, Chiharu,” Queen Harukichi commanded her, snapping her fingers to draw the handmaid's attention again. “How hard will Princess Yumisa press to operate The Royal Decree now that she’s learned about it?”

“Oh, nothing will stop her,” Chiharu said. “Death itself would only delay her operating it by a few seconds. She’d raise herself from the dead to operate it even for a few moments. Are there instructions on what it can do?”

“Yes, *The Kingfisher* is pretty self-explanatory where weapons are concerned,” Nakamoto said.

“Oh, if she reads that in detail, Prince Kiminobu will have no choice but to let her operate it,” Chiharu told them. “She’ll whine for days if she doesn’t get the chance. She might even sneak into the hanger bay to operate it, even if it destroys the castle. She will not let it go. Again, how do you think we formed our band? And Emperor Sunada does not give into demands easily. But when she whines...”

All three of them sighed.

“I had better contact our son on a private frequency and, delicately, ask him if she knows about The Royal Decree and not to mention it to Yumisa if he does,” Nakamoto said. “The Blessed Queen is entirely too much. Excuse me, Chiharu.”

She curtsied as he stood up and rushed from the room.

Queen Harukichi face-palmed and shook her head. “How much of a mess is our new daughter?” she asked Chiharu. “She seems like a sweet girl, but I have to know how much of a bad influence she might be on our son.”

Chiharu smiled. “Princess Yumisa is truly a sweet girl, Your Majesty... she just has far more wolf in her than she likes to admit—and that gives her a lot of battle lust. As for Prince Kiminobu... I cannot say how much of an influence she will be on him, but if you raised him well, perhaps he will turn out to be a good influence on the Princess. But we, as her handmaidens, did not do right by her by letting her come with us on tour. She was a good manager, though.”

Queen Harukichi smiled. “You love her.”

“She’s our Princess—we would not be good handmaidens if her best interests were not our main concern—especially if those interests made us rich. But I will admit that our duties took a back seat once I saw how popular ZOO was. It has been the second-best part of my life, the first being my time as Princess Yumisa’s handmaiden. While I know I have to give up that part of my life, I really don’t wish to. Does that make me a bad person?”

“Not at all,” Harukichi told her. “Actually, my husband and I were discussing with Yumisa the possibility of your band playing for our troops. As for going on tour... that’s completely up to you and Yumisa. I cannot tell her what to do with her life, nor would I wish to. However, once she gets pregnant, that is when her life as Guardian must take priority. But we can find others to take care of her if you and the other handmaidens wish to continue touring. And I don’t see why she can’t stay with you until her first child is born. We don’t want her to feel like she’s a prisoner here, but she will have responsibilities to the new Empire.”

Chiharu curtsied. “Thank you, Your Majesty. And we’d be honored to play for the troops since we have our manager’s okay. Now, how about we discuss that music video I mentioned before...?”

Harukichi motioned her to come closer so they could talk.

The comms were abuzz with the screams of the dying, the wails of Shiori over her mobile suit (“*ATLAS!!!!*”), and the maniacal laughter of one Princess Yumisa Hase Takanashi as she read exactly what The Royal Decree did. Her laughter made Prince Kiminobu nervous... but in a good way.

The Prince thumbed the communications button when he saw a call coming in from the castle. “This is Prince Kiminobu,” he answered just as Yumisa cackled joyously once again.

“You told her about The Royal Decree, didn’t you?” Kiminobu’s father asked.

“I didn’t think it would thrill her *this* much,” Kiminobu said. “She’s acting like I got her a pony for her seventh birthday. I love it! But how did you know I told her?”

“How do *you* know about The Royal Decree?” Nakamoto asked suspiciously.

“*The Kingfisher* showed me. Apparently we have a lot to talk about where this mobile suit is concerned,” Kiminobu told his father as Yumisa said, “I can’t wait to see this in action!”

“Her handmaidens were afraid of this,” Nakamoto said grimly. “This situation does look rather dire, though, from what I’m seeing on the battle monitors. That command carrier isn’t moving quickly, but it’s moving. You might better go ahead and let her activate it,” he said with a heavy sigh.

Yumisa turned completely in her seat and looked at Kiminobu with pleading, puppy-wolf eyes. “Please let me activate it, please let me activate it, please let me activate it!” she said excitedly. She cut the communications. “I’ll let you do whatever you want to me tonight, no questions asked!” Her body trembled with her need to activate The Royal Decree.

“Anything I want?” he asked in confirmation.

“Anything!” she said with rising hope, a large smile forming.

He pulled the screen away from her and looked it over. “I don’t know, this could be pretty dangerous, considering it’s never been used before,” he said, his tone dripping with sarcasm as he watched her golden eyes widen beneath her helmet.

“Don’t mock me!” she warned him. She reached up and unzipped her flight suit and pulled it open to show him her naked chest. “Remember, you can do anything you want to this body. *Anything!*”

“Anything covers a lot of ground,” he warned her, staring at her naked breasts.

“I trust you,” she said. “But I do mean *anything*—as long as I can push the button.”

“Go ahead and push the button,” he told her, deciding to give in to her before she flew apart at the seams.

“I can push the button?” she asked with overwhelming excitement.

“Push the button.”

“I can push the button!” Yumisa turned around in her seat, not even bothering to get dressed again. She reopened the window with The Royal Decree instructions and skipped to the end so she could push the button to activate it, ignoring all the warnings.

“*ATLAAAAAAAAS!!!!*” Shiori wailed, tears streaming down her face. “Stupid mobile suit!” She kicked *The Atlas*’s torn off foot repeatedly. “I was going to show my stuff off in front of the Prince, and you failed me! You were beaten! How could you get beaten, *Atlas*? How? How?! I greased you, I lubed you, I oiled you, I washed you, I petted you, I armed you, and... and when the clench came... you choked—just like all of my potential boyfriends!”

She leaned against the torn leg and started bawling her eyes out. Then she started kicking the leg again. “Stupid, stupid, stupid *Atlas*! Stupid piece of junk! I hate you!”

Shiori sighed and let out a shuddering breath. Then she tried to put her arms around the giant leg.

“I’m sorry, *Atlas*—I didn’t mean it! I love you! You know I love you! You’re the only one for me! Please forgive me! Please, I didn’t mean to hurt you! I’ll take you home and love you and fix you—I’ll make you good as new—I promise!” She kissed the leg.

Shiori Seno leaned her head against her broken mech and cried. She cried because she was out of the battle. She cried because she could not protect her Prince. But mostly she cried because her beautiful machine was now broken and useless. As the battle raged on overhead, all she could do was stand there and watch.

Around her, hundreds of friendly and enemy mechs lay damaged, their pilots either dead or slowly climbing out of their mobile suits, some unhurt but most of them needing medical attention. Vadoran ground troops had arrived to take enemy pilots prisoner, and the medical corps had arrived to tend to the wounded and start triage. A few fights broke out between Vadoran and Uprising troops, but they were mostly to show resistance on the part of the enemy soldiers before they were handcuffed and taken back to the military prison.

“Can we offer you a ride, Lieutenant?” a Vadoran soldier asked. “We can have *The Atlas* towed back to base for repairs. Pops will have it looking good as new in no time.”

Shiori sniffed loudly and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “It’s broken,” she said pitifully. “They broke my *Atlas*!”

“Ooookay, we’ll just leave you be for now,” he said. He knew the way Lieutenant Seno felt about her mech and knew it would not be a good idea to take her away from it at this point. “That girl has issues,” he said as he returned to the troop transport.

Shiori leaned against *The Atlas* again and hugged it. “Please be okay, *Atlas*, please be okay,” she begged the machine. “I don’t want you so hurt that you can’t fight and protect the Prince anymore—” She paused and sighed heavily. “And the new Princess, too,” she growled softly. “The little *minx* who took my Prince away from me, got to sleep with him before I could, and got to see him—why am I losing *everything*?!” she demanded, and she kicked the ground in frustration. Then she turned and kicked her mech in anger.

The Atlas groaned.

Shiori looked at it with wide eyes. “I’m sorry, *Atlas*!” she said, instantly regretting her anger. “I didn’t mean it! Please forgive me!”

The Atlas began to move.

Shiori’s eyes widened more. She looked at the mech worriedly. “*Atlas*?”

Slowly, *The Atlas* began to rise into the air. Shiori looked at it, startled, as the broken arm and leg also began to rise with the body. Without thinking twice, she grabbed onto the hatch and struggled to pull herself inside as the mobile suit rose higher off the ground. She jumped into her seat and spun around before strapping herself in. She pressed a few buttons on the console and sealed the hatch.

“What’s going on, *Atlas*?” she asked. “You don’t seem mad because you didn’t kick me out, but what are you doing? You’re in no condition to fight! And how are you moving with no leg thrusters?” She thumbed her communications and heard a cacophony of voices. She switched to the private channel the Nexus Suits used. “Um... guys, what’s going on? Why is my hurt *Atlas* trying to return to the fight?”

“All of our mechs are suddenly behaving strangely,” Rumiko told her. “Princess Yumisa activated something called The Royal Decree. It’s... doing something.”

Shiori opened her mech’s manual. “Royal Decree... Royal Decree... Royal Decree...” She typed the item into the search, which brought up a blank screen. “I have nothing on that,” she reported.

“Neither do we,” Rumiko told her. “It must be something special to *The Kingfisher*.”

“Then why is it affecting our mechs?” Shiori wondered.

The Atlas jostled. Shiori looked at a diagnostic of her mech that popped up and saw that the broken leg had reattached itself and the connecting wires were repaired. Another jostle showed the arm being fixed.

“*Atlas* is fixing itself!” she said excitedly. Then she saw her mech begin to undergo a transformation. She looked as other screens popped up showing the other Nexus Suits undergoing similar transformations.

“Guys, what’s going on?” she asked worriedly.

“Um... Nobu, check out this screen.” Yumisa took a screen and turned around in her seat to show it to her husband. He stared at her through the nearly transparent bluish-green screen and could see nothing but her naked breasts pressed together by the sides of her flight suit. “Why are there two circles?” she asked.

“Well, you see, honey, when a girl turns into a woman, she develops—”

Yumisa growled. “Pay attention!” she shouted. She tapped the screen irritably. “These circles—” she said, indicating the green and dark blue circles on the screen. “—not these circles.” She indicated her breasts.

“Please get dressed,” he told her. “You’re very distracting.”

“Ugh... fine.” Yumisa stuffed herself back inside the flight suit and zipped it up. “Happy?”

“Not really, but I’m definitely less distracted now,” he told her. He looked at the screen she was showing him. He could see *The Kingfisher* in the middle of a green circle that was rather large. He tapped on a dot at the edge of the circle and brought up an image of the transforming *Empress*. He tapped on another and saw *The Atlas*.

“Rumiko,” he told the pilot of *The Tempest*, “can you move out and back a little bit?” he asked her.

“What?” Rumiko asked in confusion. “Your Highness, I don’t know what’s going on with my mech, let alone if I can maneuver it! I can try, though. What’s going on?”

“Just an idea,” he said. “Try to move out near the command carrier—beyond it, if you can.”

“You do realize that’s a *command carrier*, right?” she asked irritably.

“Just do it, please.”

She sighed. “Come on, Mizuko,” she told her sister, “you can protect me.”

“Actually, I need Mizuko to move away from the command carrier,” he said. “Sorry, but this might be important.”

A screen popped up before him with a message from *The Calamity*.

WHY?

Mizuko had typed the message.

“I want to get as many of their mobile suits within a circle of our Nexus suits as we can,” he told them. “Leave the battle to the other soldiers.” He pressed a button. “Commander of the Vadoran mobile suit forces, this is Prince Kiminobu Takanashi,” he broadcast across the Vadoran channels. “Please have your men continue their assault on the mobile suits. The Nexus Suits are moving outside of the battle radius for an experiment—hopefully a profitable one.”

“Your Highness, we need the Nexus Suits to take on these black Uprising mobile suits,” he said. “They’re too powerful for our suits alone!”

“All right, we’ll see what we can do,” Kiminobu said. “Royal Guard, as you’re moving, see if you can take a black mobile suit with you.”

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?” all of the Royal Guards shouted, and that message popped up on five screens from Mizuko.

He cancelled the screens and closed the communications.

“Why is Mizuko typing?” Yumisa asked, having seen Mizuko’s name attached to the screens with her response. “She’s also very quiet during battle.”

“She was born mute,” Kiminobu told her sadly. “No one knows why, and the doctors haven’t been able to cure her. We’ve just gotten used to it—I apologize for not telling you about her.”

“No, it’s all right—you had no reason to mention it before. The poor thing. Was she born without vocal chords?”

“I believe so, but Rumiko has never mentioned it. We never pressed to ask because it’s none of our business. Mizuko is just... Mizuko, and we accept her as she is.”

Yumisa smiled. “I’m glad—that you accept her, I mean. I’ll make sure my handmaidens know not to press the issue.”

“Thank you. Oh, and Misa?” he asked.

She looked at him.

“Open your flight suit again—you got to push the button.”

She smiled. “As Your Imperial Highness commands,” she said and she unzipped her flight suit down past her stomach. “This better not wind up in *Girls ‘n Mechs Magazine*,” she warned *The Kingfisher*.

“What are you up to, Your Highness?” Asa asked herself as she continued her battle with Dietang Arnea. Her mech was suddenly becoming hard to control. It was sluggish, as if it wanted to do something she did not want it to do.

“Having a problem with your mech?” Arnea asked her. “Or are you just getting tired?”

“Of fighting you?” Asa scoffed. “Never!” She thrust her sword at his mech’s chest, but something pulled it towards the shoulder. “Damn,” she swore. “What’s wrong, *Empress*?”

Suddenly, *The Empress* dropped the sword, which fell to the ground with a loud crash as it crushed several Vadoran and Uprising mobile suits. Then *The Empress*'s hands withdrew into its arms as it started its transformation.

"*Empress*, what's going on?" Asa demanded.

THE ROYAL DECREE HAS BEEN ACTIVATED

"What does that mean?" Asa asked.

UNKNOWN

"What do you mean *unknown*?" Asa spat.

THE ROYAL DECREE IS KNOWN ONLY TO THE PILOT
AND GUNNER OF *THE KINGFISHER* IN CASE OF CAPTURE
NO RECORDS ARE IN OTHER NEXUS SUITS

"Why is there a record in *The Kingfisher* but not the other suits?"

THE KINGFISHER WILL SELF-DESTRUCT AUTOMATICALLY
IF CAPTURE IS IMMINENT

Asa's eyes widened. "Why was I never told about this?"

YOU DID NOT NEED TO KNOW

"Yeah, I kinda did," Asa said. "And how does *The Kingfisher* know if it's about to be captured so it knows to self-destruct?"

Silence.

"Will it eject the Prince and Princess before it *does*?"

Silence.

Asa slammed her hands on the consoles. "Piece of garbage!"

THAT IS NOT VERY NICE

“Screw you!”

YOU'RE NOT MY TYPE

“Captain Arnea, this is *The Vengeance of Desire*—what is happening with the Nexus mobile suits?” Captain Lorenn asked.

“I haven’t a clue,” Arnea said. “*The Empress* is transforming, and its shielding has increased. I can’t lay a finger on it anymore!” He pounded the mech once more with his mace with no effect.

He swore that his cameras showed the armored plating of *The Empress* opening, and Dietang suddenly found himself staring at thousands of tiny missiles that covered the inside of *The Empress* like the scales of an ancient reptile. He was about to order his men to increase their attacks when his comms were overwhelmed with reports from his men stating that the same thing was happening to the other Nexus Suits. And then someone told him that *The Atlas* was rising from the ground, completely whole again.

Dietang panicked.

“Shields up!” he ordered his men. “Do everything you can to block the incoming attack!”

His fingers flew over the controls, and he moved his mech’s arms in front of his body to protect his mech’s head and cockpit. He saw his men do the same thing a second before *The Atlas* joined the others, it’s entire body covered with missiles just like the others. A second later, the transformed Nexus Suits began to spin and launched every missile they had at the Uprising mechs, along with firing every gun. The assault was brutal, and all Captain Arnea could hear over the sound of missiles and weapons-fire impact was the sound of his men screaming... and dying.

He watched his monitors through the assault, and he watched the number of his men blip out as the Nexus Suits annihilated them. Then he turned his attention to his own mech’s monitors and watched as his shields began to rapidly vanish. Moments later, the armor of his mech began to weaken as millions of missiles

struck it. Arnea did everything he could to undergo the attack, but even he began to sweat as he saw the damage his black mech was undertaking. He would survive this, but he was not sure how much he would be able to move afterward. The attack was damaging his armor in a way that it was going to interfere with his ability to operate.

And then he felt himself falling.

His stomach lurched as gravity kicked in. He pushed his thrusters to their limit, but the damage happening to them was too great. The impacts against his mobile suit lessened as he fell out of the field of battle, and then his entire body jerked as his mech crashed to the ground. He tried to get his thrusters going again, but they were completely out of commission.

“Blast it!” he swore when he looked at the monitor and saw nothing but red dots on his IFF screen. Every Vadoran mech had survived the onslaught. None of the Uprising mechs had. Arnea’s monitors showed nothing in the air above him except *The Vengeance of Desire* and the six enemy mobile suits.

He slammed his hands against the controls in frustration.

“*Vengeance of Desire*, fire at those mechs!” he ordered the carrier. “Destroy them while you can!”

“We sustained heavy damage from that assault, Captain Arnea,” Captain Lorenn told him. “We were not prepared for such an assault. We had no idea those mobile suits were capable of such... pinpoint destruction. All of our targeting and weapons systems are down! I’m honestly surprised we’re still in the air! I hate to say it, but you’re on your own for now, Captain. Can you fly at all and get back to the ship?”

“No,” Arnea said grimly. “My mobile suit’s thrusters did not survive the assault. I barely did! Did *any* of our forces survive?”

“Not a one,” Lorenn told him. “Only those who were shot down beforehand and were captured. Everyone else was obliterated by that attack.”

Arnea shook his head. His eyes looked at the monitor again. The six Nexus Suits had not moved.

“Why aren’t they coming after you?” he asked. “Or me, for that matter. They’re just hovering there.”

“I wish we could tell you, but nothing’s working,” Lorenn told him. “We’re just trying to make sure our engines don’t give out!”

“Get out of here, Lorenn!” Arnea told him. “That ship is our biggest assault carrier, and we’re going to need it repaired if we’re going to attack the castle again! The mission is over! They won! We were not prepared for such an assault, and we’re going to need our best minds knowing about that assault so they can work on a way to stop it next time! Get out of here! You may be Captain of that carrier and think you outrank me, but you know I’m right about this!”

Lorenn was quiet for a moment before he said, “Be safe, Captain Arnea. Don’t tell them anything. Death before dishonor. *Vengeance of Desire* will retreat... for now.”

Arnea watched through the monitors as the ship limped away, and his heart burned with anger. *The Vengeance of Desire* was supposed to have obliterated Vadora off the face of the planet. Instead, it had almost been struck down by six mechs that were small enough to fit inside its launch bays. He slammed his hands against the controls again.

And why weren’t the mobile suits launching an attack to take it down the rest of the way?

Princess Yumisa Hase Takanashi groaned and came awake as the loud beeping started growing louder and faster. Her body was drenched in sweat from the heat overwhelming the cockpit. She tried to move, but her body felt like lead.

“N-Nobu?” she asked, her voice weak. She reached down for the water bottle next to her seat and grasped at it weakly. She wanted to go to sleep, but she knew doing so would be the wrong decision. She grabbed the water bottle and pulled it up. She opened it and dumped the contents over her head, dousing her grey and white hair, along with her ears. She shook her head, sending water flying all over the cockpit. Then she took a long drink from the bottle before capping it.

“Nobu, are you all right?” she asked.

There was no answer.

She shucked off her soaking flight suit, unable to stand the feeling of the wet material against her skin. She sat up and turned around on shaking knees to look at

her husband. Knowing it was probably not a good idea, she pushed the suit down to her knees so she could cool off.

Her husband was laying limply against his seat, his helmet's faceplate so foggy that Yumisa could not see his face. She kicked off her shoes then removed her suit completely before she crawled over the back of her seat and straddled his body. She undid his helmet and pulled it off. Kiminobu's eyes were closed, and he was breathing erratically.

Yumisa shook him gently. "Nobu, wake up," she told him, patting his face gently. "Please wake up."

"Is everyone all right?" she heard a weak voice ask over the comms. "Is anyone else there?"

Yumisa touched the controls on Kiminobu's seat. "This is *The Kingfisher*," she said. "I'm all right, but Prince Kiminobu seems to be passed out. The cockpit is so hot, we're burning alive in here!"

"Vent the air," Asa told her. "It's the red, flashing button. You should cool down quickly."

Yumisa found the button and pressed it. The air inside the cockpit hissed as it began to circulate and exchange with the air outside. Within seconds, the cockpit was cool again.

"What was that?" another voice, Shiori, asked. "What just happened? I didn't know our mechs had that kind of capability! And I'm so dizzy!"

"It was called The Royal Decree," Yumisa told them as she patted Kiminobu's face gently. "Nobu called it a weapon of last resort. I had no idea it was capable of something like that. But why isn't *The Kingfisher* acting like it's active? Most of the lights and controls are dead other than basic functions!"

"None of our mechs are working, either," Rumiko told her. "That attack seems to have exhausted every bullet *The Tempest* and *The Calamity* had, and I didn't think we'd ever run out. I'm completely defenseless!"

"My mech also has no power," Asa told them. "Kii, how are you?"

"I can't dance," Kii said with a sad, trembling voice. "My sword doesn't have any power, either."

"Why hasn't that command carrier attacked us?" Rumiko asked. "We seem kind of defenseless."

“I think our attack damaged it,” Shiori told her. “The Prince was smart to move you out past it. They’re probably trying to recover, so expect an attack any second.”

A monitor appeared inside *The Kingfisher*. Yumisa turned partially around and reached for it, and she managed to tag it enough to pull it around in front of her. She looked it over quickly. “Guys, I’m looking at a monitor that just appeared, and it says something about a Perfect Royal Decree. It’s showing... that robot I saw earlier, that got me so excited.”

“P-Push... the button...” Kiminobu slurred before passing out again.

“Was that the Prince?” Asa asked worriedly.

“He’s in bad shape,” Yumisa told her. “I don’t know why he passed out, but he’s very hot.” She touched his face and almost had to snatch her hand away. It was so hot. She thought about it for a moment before she took his shirt off to cool him off. “He’s got a bad fever or something—he’s burning up! He told me to push a button.”

“Push the button,” the four Royal Guards told her, and a message from Miziko popped up with the same response.

Yumisa looked at her husband worriedly for a moment, then she pushed the button.

“Sir!” someone aboard the slowly retreating command carrier shouted to Captain Lorenn. “There’s something else going on with the enemy Nexus Suits! They’re all... moving closer to each other.”

“What?” Captain Lorenn asked. He pulled up a monitor and touched it before opening his hand to enlarge the picture. He saw the five Nexus Suits moving toward *The Kingfisher* rapidly just as the Lieutenant had said. “What is going on now?” he asked. “If it’s anything like that last assault, we might not survive it.” The comment was made more to himself than his crew. He touched a device in his ear. “Engineering, can we get any more speed out of the ship?” he asked.

“We’re taxing the engines as they are, Sir,” the chief engineer told him. “This is the best I can give you right now!”

Lorenn pressed his lips together grimly before announcing shipwide, “Everyone... brace for impact!”

The cockpit of *The Kingfisher* began to rotate, and Yumisa jumped back into her seat again and strapped herself down, unsure of what was happening. She really wished she had gotten dressed again as the straps pressed against her naked flesh. She pulled a screen up in front of her and watched as *The Kingfisher* began yet another transformation. She pressed a few buttons on the screen, and images of the other mechs belonging to the Royal Guard appeared, and she watched as they began similar transformations as well.

“What is going on?” Shiori asked worriedly. “What’s happening to my *Atlas*?”

“Same thing that’s happening to our mechs,” Rumiko told her. “They’re changing!”

“Into what?” Asa asked. “Princess Yumisa, what’s happening now?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Yumisa told her.

“What happened to *The Kingfisher*’s arms?” Shiori asked, watching her outside cameras.

“What happened to its legs?” Kii asked.

Yumisa looked at the monitor and saw that *The Kingfisher* had changed. Instead of a robot in its own right, it looked more like just a torso now than a mech. It also seemed to have somehow gotten bigger, like the metal plating had moved to increase its bulk. Also, its arms and legs had transformed into some kind of joints.

Just like the picture *The Kingfisher* had shown her in the hangar.

Suddenly, the transformed *Tempest* and *Calamity* joined *The Kingfisher* at the shoulders, becoming giant robot arms with black hands that were surrounded by gatling guns. Then *The Atlas* and *The Corsair* joined *The Kingfisher* at the hips, turning into giant robot thighs and legs. Finally, *The Empress* transformed into a beautiful, decorative chest-piece and a new head for the giant one-hundred and twenty-foot robot the six of them had become.

Full power returned to the six mechs now that they were joined, and everyone looked around their cockpits in amazement.

“Heh,” they heard over the comms from Yumisa. “This robot is called *The Blessed Queen*. Bite me, Captain Ikehara.”

“What kind of abilities does it have?” Asa asked, ignoring the comment.

“Special ones,” Prince Kiminobu said, coming awake finally. “Sorry for leaving you all, but... there was an unexpected side effect to The Royal Decree and Perfect Royal Decree.”

“What happened?” Yumisa asked. She released the straps holding her against the seat and looked at her husband. She shrieked, and the Royal Guard all tensed with the shrillness of it as the sound reverberated throughout the joined robot and their communications. Then she screamed again. “Nobu, what happened?” she asked, and they could hear the terror in her voice.

Prince Kiminobu smiled at his wife weakly. He held up his arms, and Yumisa began to cry as she saw that he was now attached to the seat through small electrodes that were now penetrating his flesh, blood running down the wires from thousands of wounds.

“I think I discovered why my father could not operate this thing with only one arm,” he said, teeth gritted against the pain. “It seems I can operate *The Blessed Queen* like a puppet master. Boy, I really wish I was wearing a flight suit now.”

He screamed as his chair pulled back and away, and he found himself suddenly suspended in the air behind her chair, his body held up by the tubes and wires. Yumisa screamed again when she saw him like that. Another wire came up behind him and placed his helmet back on his head.

“Princess Yumisa, what’s going on?” Asa asked. “Is the Prince all right?”

The giant robot took a stumbling step forward when the Prince moved his leg. Yumisa’s seat grabbed her, turned her around, and the straps reattached automatically to hold her against the seat so she could not move. Kiminobu moved the other leg, and the robot took another step.

“Stop it! Stop it, Nobu!” Yumisa yelled at him. “You don’t have to do this! We can disconnect the others, go back to the way things were!”

“We’d have no power or weapons,” he told her as he fought the pain. “Right now, we do not have conventional weapons anymore, and our power is being provided by the chest shield *The Empress* has become. We cannot change back until we are allowed.”

“Allowed?” she spat angrily.

“What is going on?” Asa demanded. “Princess, please tell me what’s happened to the Prince!”

“It’s... hard to explain, but... Prince Kiminobu is controlling the robot. Wires are connected to his flesh. He... He’s bleeding... he’s being cooked alive! He... He *is* the robot!”

“My Prince!” all of his Royal Guard yelled.

“I’ll be all right,” Kiminobu told them, though they could tell from his voice that it was a blatant lie. “I’m just having to process a lot right now. Give me a minute to get used to this.”

“You won’t survive a minute!” Yumisa told him as she covered her nose against the smell of burning flesh. She tried to unstrap and go to him, but her seat would not release her. Her helmet’s visor suddenly covered her face completely, protecting her from the smell of her husband dying.

“What kind of monstrosity did your father build?” Yumisa demanded as tears streamed from her golden eyes.

“A weapon of war,” he told her. “A weapon not meant to be used except in extreme circumstances.”

“Sire, the command carrier is firing at us!” Kii reported.

“I feel it,” Prince Kiminobu told them as explosions rocked *The Blessed Queen*. “It’s like... gnats biting me.”

He raised the robot’s arms in sync with each other, and *The Empress* began to glow. A second later, a pulse blast ran along the arms and fired at the command carrier, blowing out its weapons system. Kiminobu grunted with the effort that took.

“Let me go, you machine!” Yumisa screamed as she struggled to free herself. “I need to get to my husband!”

The Blessed Queen landed. It reached down with both hands to grab Dietang Arnea’s wounded Uprising mech. Prince Kiminobu lifted it into the air, at the same level as *The Blessed Queen*’s new head.

“Do you still want to fight?” Kiminobu asked, his voice weak. “I’ll be glad to crush you now, if you’d like.”

“What kind of monstrosity is this?” Arnea demanded, echoing Yumisa’s question unknowingly.

“One capable of defending Vadora and the Kareneth Empire from the Unbound Uprising,” the Prince told him. “I’m going to let you and your wounded command

carrier go so you can warn your people about us. Don't attack us again. Don't come after my parents or my family again. The Empire will leave you all alone if you leave us alone."

"The Kareneth has to pay for what they've done to us!" Arnea shouted.

"They've destroyed our homelands, they've enslaved our people!"

"They won't any further," Kiminobu told him. "You can dissolve and set up whatever governments you want as long as you do not come after us again. If you do, you'll get worse than you got today."

"You don't sound very well, Prince Kiminobu," Arnea told him. "I think you're bluffing."

The Blessed Queen crushed the black mobile suit's left arm and tore it off. "Do you think I'm bluffing now?"

"This isn't over, Prince Kiminobu," Arnea said. "But we'll retreat... for now."

"Leave us alone. Tell your people to leave us alone or we'll conquer you again just to put you in your place. This is your only warning."

He dropped the mech to the ground and then kicked it tens of miles away. Arnea passed out from the exertion placed upon him as he flew uncontrolled. His mobile suit crashed into a forest of trees and skidded to the side of the lake, where it lay, crushed, unable to move.

Kiminobu then raised *The Blessed Queen's* right arm and fired a few warning shots past the command carrier's stern as it limped away and eventually disappeared from Vadoran airspace.

Then he collapsed, and *The Blessed Queen* collapsed to its knees on the ground, no longer able to move. The wires holding the Prince up finally released him, and the straps holding Yumisa released her. She leapt over her seat to catch him before he could fall and hurt himself. She yanked his helmet off and checked his body. He was burned again, his flesh torn open and ripped by the electrodes that had penetrated him so violently. Blood flowed everywhere and over Yumisa's chest, arms and thighs.

He was dying.

She held Kiminobu close and rocked his body gently as he fell unconscious.

"Is it over?" Kii asked.

“It’s over,” Yumisa told her. “What a wretched machine this is. Kiminobu is dying!”

“What?” Asa asked. “Hold on, I’m coming in. I think I see a hatchway between our mechs now.”

“Don’t,” Yumisa told her. “I’m not... dressed. Just call the castle. Get a doctor here *now!*” She hugged Kiminobu to her naked body. “Stay with me, Nobu—stay with me. My body is yours, remember? You have to do whatever you want to do to it! You let me press that damn button!”

A monitor appeared before her with a single word:

DISENGAGE?

She pressed YES, and the parts of *The Blessed Queen* began to pull away from *The Kingfisher* and transform back into their normal mech forms. Even *The Kingfisher* returned to normal. When Captain Ikehara opened the chest and climbed aboard to check on them, Yumisa and the Prince were sitting in his seat, his blood coating the inside of the hatch. Yumisa looked up at Asa with tear-filled eyes.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, crying gently.

“Just hold him,” Asa told her. “*The Empress* can attach cables and take *The Kingfisher* home. Princess... I’m sorry I yelled at you earlier. I had no right to say the things I did, and I expect you to bring it before the King.”

“I don’t care about anything except saving Nobu,” Yumisa told her. “You were just looking out for your Prince, something I should have also been doing. I admire that about you, Captain... Asa.” Yumisa hugged Kiminobu.

“We’ll get you both back to the castle. We have a few prisoners, too, that we can question.”

“I don’t care about anything except getting Kiminobu home to the doctors. Please hurry!”

“Right away.”

Asa climbed out, and the hatch closed, sealing Yumisa and Kiminobu in darkness briefly before the monitor lights came back on. Yumisa looked at

everything, hoping there was something she could press to make the Prince better, but she saw nothing. Then a screen appeared.

HELMET. HE WILL BE SAFE BECAUSE I HAVE POWER.

“Why should I trust you?” Yumisa demanded. “You killed him!”

HE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN HARMED HAD HE BEEN WEARING HIS
FLIGHT SUIT
NOW HE CAN HEAL.

“Shut up. Don’t speak to me ever again.” But Yumisa pulled the helmet back on. Kiminobu did not respond.

Yumisa screamed and beat the controls helplessly as she felt *The Kingfisher* lift off the ground. She started to cry as she thought of how long the journey back to the castle was.