

Chapter 7

King Nakamoto and Queen Harukichi sat in the throne room, holding court for the people who were coming to them with requests, trying hard not to grimace through the ear-shattering, window-rattling siren that permeated the castle grounds. After leaving the hangar bay and the screeching *Kingfisher*, they had hoped for a quiet day. That had not happened. If anything, the keening sound had followed them, and they had been miserable. They had shut the doors to the throne room in the hopes of quieting the sound, but it seemed to be coming from everywhere, and distance did not seem to quiet it.

King Nakamoto motioned to the man who was trying to talk to them and asked him to come forward. The farmer seemed hesitant, but he did as his King bid and approached the throne.

“I am so sorry,” the King yelled into his ear so the man could hear him. “We are having a problem with one of the mechs. I can’t hear anything you’re trying to tell me from that far away!”

The man cupped his hand to his mouth and screamed, “Your Majesties, that noise is scaring my cattle!” he yelled into Nakamoto’s ear.

“You can hear it that far away?” Nakamoto asked. He looked at his wife, who was oblivious because she hadn’t heard a word. “No one outside the city has ever heard it before, and it always gets quieter the further from the castle you are!”

The man indicated the others who were in the throne room, all of them holding their ears as they tried to silence the noise. One woman had a large spool of cotton in her ears and a cloth wrapped around her head to hold them in place.

“We’re all here to complain about it—haven’t you been listening?” the man asked him.

“Listening?” the King demanded. “We can hardly hear over that noise!” He waved the man away. “Go! We’ll take care of it somehow!” he promised the man. “We had no idea it was reaching that far! Please tell the others!”

The man backed away and motioned for the others to follow him out.

Nakamoto looked at his wife.

“We need to talk to Pops,” they both yelled at the same time.

As the King and Queen re-entered the hangar bay, a member of the maintenance crew handed them a pair of headsets that they slipped on. Instantly, the noise of the alarm ceased, leaving them both in deafening, blissful silence. They turned the headphones' communications on.

"As you can tell, we can't get that thing to shut up!" the crewman said, his voice coming through the headsets. "We still have no idea of why it's doing this, so we can't get it to stop."

"It's scaring the animals out in the countryside," the Queen informed him, quieting her voice when she realized she was still screaming. "The people need that noise to stop."

"It can't be reaching that far," the crewman said. "It's loud, but..." He paused as a thought came to his mind. "Oh, blast it," he said. "It might be reflecting off the shield," he told their querying expressions.

"The shield?" the King asked. "It's never done that before!"

"It's never acted like a spoiled brat child this badly before," the crewman said. "It might have changed it's frequency to reflect off the shield so we pay more attention to it. If it is, that noise is going to be all over Vadora! The only way to stop it is to turn the shield off!"

"No!" the King and Queen both said.

"That shield has to remain up for our protection," the King told him. "The Prince is gone."

"What have you tried to stop the noise?" the Queen asked him. "It normally stops after you do maintenance!"

"We finished the maintenance and it just kept going. We tried opening the cockpit to see if the instructions could tell us anything, or if there was even a FAQ, and *The Kingfisher* just screamed louder," he said. "We had to take Pops to the infirmary because he took a bad electrical shock when he touched the button to open the cockpit. Whatever's going on with that thing, it ain't happy. No offense, but you need to scrap that mech as soon as you can. It's been nothing but trouble since you lost your arm, Your Majesty."

"The sound is driving everyone in the castle—and apparently the *kingdom*—crazy," the Queen said. "Let my husband and I try again. We had *The*

Kingfisher built for us—hopefully it will react kindly to us. Maybe we just did something wrong earlier.”

The crewman pointed to the mech. “Do what you can,” he said. “We won’t stop you. Good luck.”

He turned off his communicator and shouted aloud to himself because he knew no one could hear him, “I hate these mechs!”

The King and Queen approached *The Kingfisher*, and the mech turned its head to look at them skeptically. The King and Queen took a step backwards, and *The Kingfisher* looked away again. They took another hesitant step forward, and the mech turned to glare at them both.

“Well, that’s not good,” the Queen stated to her husband.

Nakamoto held his hand before her to stop her. “Let me go first,” he suggested. “I don’t know why, but maybe it will only allow me to approach for some reason.”

Harukichi shrugged and held her hand out towards the machine. “Go ahead, but if you fall on your butt, I’m laughing before I help you.”

Nakamoto’s dark eyes widened on his wife.

He took a step towards the mech, and *The Kingfisher*’s black eyes began to glow red warningly. King Nakamoto quickly returned to his wife’s side, and the machine’s eyes turned black again, and it looked away.

“Y-You go first,” he suggested.

“My hero,” Harukichin said, and she took a step forward. *The Kingfisher* looked at her, and then it returned to its normal position as if ignoring her. Harukichi looked at her husband and shrugged. She took another step forward and then another, but the mech continued to stand there even after she stood directly beside it. She could still feel the vibrations of it’s alarm through the deck plating, though, so she did not dare take her headset off.

“It likes me more,” she told her husband. “Now that I’m here, maybe it will like you, too.”

King Nakamoto took a step forward, and *The Kingfisher* immediately turned red eyes on him again, and the sound of the alarm suddenly burst through even the noise-cancelling headphones. King Nakamoto took a quick two steps back, and the frequency changed back to where the headphones worked again.

“At least this is progress,” Harukichi said. She hesitantly pressed the button on the hatch, and it slid easily open for her. A cockpit built with two seats slid out for easy access. Harukichi pulled the headphones away from her ear a little bit to see if the noise had stopped, but it had not. It was still loud as ever.

Harukichi sat down in the front seat and waited for something to happen, but nothing did. She pressed a few buttons, took hold of the weapons control, and pressed a few more buttons, but nothing happened. She let out a frustrated breath. “What is going on with you?” she asked *The Kingfisher*. She pressed a few more buttons, and a display appeared. “That’s more like it,” she said. “So, why are you going crazy?”

Another display appeared showing the cockpit, and the two pilot chairs flashed.

“But my husband and I are your pilots,” she murmured gently. “Why have you turned against him?”

The back pilot’s seat flashed—then the left arm flashed a different color.

Harukichi sighed. “Oh, he can’t pilot you because he lost his arm,” she deduced. “But why is your alarm going off?”

The front and back pilot seats began to flash again.

“You want two pilots?” she asked. “You’re not going to stop the alarm until you get two new pilots? Is that what you’re telling me?”

The alarm blared again, changing pitch so she could hear it again, and Harukichi screamed briefly until the alarm changed tone again.

“Please, we’ll get you pilots, but we need you to turn that alarm off! You’re disturbing everyone!”

The alarm continued. Then a message appeared on a screen before her eyes.

GET OUT

Harukichi looked at the display that appeared before her with wide eyes.

NOW!!

Harukichi looked at the second display screen that had appeared in front of the first. Without a second’s thought, she jumped out of the cockpit and climbed

quickly down to the deck below. She rushed to her husband's side and turned to watch as the double seat retracted inside the cockpit and the hatch closed. *The Kingfisher's* eyes came awake, it looked at them both for a moment, and then the mech pushed the restraining walkway from it's chest on its own, not damaging it but still getting it out of the way. It took a few steps forward, popping thick wires attached to it that were giving it power, and looked at the ceiling above. Its back jetpack flared to life and blasted *The Kingfisher* through the roof. Once away from the hanger, it took off by itself into the sky, heading in the direction of the Vadoran delegation.

The King and Queen watched with slackened jaws.

“Bombard that shield—don't let it back up!” Captain Braunleaux Lorenn ordered his men. “Just keep firing! Launch everything we have! We must have a victory today!” he cried.

The Vadoran Wall's shield had been tougher than any of them had imagined it would be, as was the Wall itself. Since launching the initial assault, it had withstood everything the command carrier and its mechs had thrown at it, but once indicators began to show that it was, indeed, weakening, the command carrier's assault continued until that egg broke.

“Send out the REAVERS to deal with the Nexus Suits,” he ordered. “Keep up the assault on the shield! Taking that and the Wall down are our top priorities at the moment! After that, we must capture the Prince and the Princess at all costs! They must be brought before the High Emperor!”

The screens were filled with green dots indicating Uprising mobile suits heading for the approaching enemy mobile suits while a much smaller number of Vadoran and Kareneth mobile suits were shown as red and yellow. Within moments, their clash had begun.

“Sir, Nexus mobile suits are approaching from below!” someone else reported. “They're firing on us, Sir!”

Explosions rocked the command carrier as enemy fire breached the failing shield. Firing at the same frequency as the barrier, their ammunition was able to get through the part that had not collapsed while the enemy's could not. Still, they

could only use their lasers as anything more would damage the shield. The enemy mobile suits were safe and able to combat the Uprising forces... for now.

Another crack in the shield came, and then it collapsed under the weight of the assault and flickered out of existence. Captain Lorenn smiled, even as the Nexus suits switched to their missiles.

“Blow those mobile suits out of the sky,” he ordered his troops.

The command carrier rocked, knocking Captain Lorenn off balance. He grabbed a nearby rail to keep himself from falling. Another blast rocked the vessel. “Get those shields back up!” he ordered.

“They are up, Sir!” a bridge crewman told him. “Those blasts are just massive!”

Lorenn grimaced. “Must be *The Atlas*,” he commented. “Concentrate fire on that mobile suit! Take it down!”

“REAVAR Squadron will handle the mobile suits, Captain,” Dietang Arnea said, broadcasting over the bridge’s comm system. “Just concentrate on taking down the Wall’s defenses and helping our troops that way.”

Lorenn gripped the railing and snarled but said, “Aye, Captain Arnea—take care of those Nexus suits!”

“Consider them taken care of.”

Shiori Seno unleashed another blast from her mech’s shoulder cannon and laughed as the command carrier rocked again. With each blast, she could see the shield surrounding the command carrier weaken more, and it would just take another couple of blasts to bring it down completely.

“We’ve got incoming mobile suits!” Asa Ikehara told her troops. “Shiori, take that shield down. We’ll protect you the best we can!”

“Got it, Boss,” Shiori said, unleashing another powerful blast at the command carrier.

“Everyone else, let’s take care of those mobile suits. Troop carrier, why haven’t you left with the Prince and Princess yet?” Asa demanded.

“We’re leaving now,” the carrier commander replied. “It’s just hard getting the women strapped into their seats because of their dresses.”

“Roger that,” Asa said irritably. “Get the Prince—and *Princess*—home safely. We’ll keep the enemy off your back as long as we can. Forces from the castle are heading your way. Command five of the mobile suits to escort you back.”

“The Prince and the Princess are in good hands, Captain,” the commander told her.

“They’d better be, or I’ll report you to the Minister of Torture.”

The commander gulped. “Not a scratch, Captain—promise.”

“Watch the hands, Soldier,” Chiharu Yamashiro said as the soldier tried, again, to adjust her kimono so he could lock her into the seat. “You’re getting awfully close to a place I don’t want people touching unless I want them to.”

“Sorry, Miss, but your dress isn’t really made for these seats,” the soldier told her, irritably looking at the seat.

“Why do I have to be strapped in?” she asked.

“For your safety,” he told her. “If we get attacked, this carrier isn’t exactly the most stable vehicle in the military. It can take hits, sure, but it’s not for pleasure cruising.” He growled and stood back. “I never realized how cumbersome those connectors were. They don’t look like they would be.”

“It’s meant for flight suits, not formal wear.” Chiharu stood up and turned to look at the seat. The seat was not meant for comfort, being hard and completely unyielding, with two out-croppings on either side of the head to protect a person’s head from being jostled around too much. Two shoulder harnesses came from the top and formed a V that connected to a buckle that rose between the occupant’s legs. Chiharu’s dress was preventing that from happening.

“Do you have any extra uniforms we can change into?” she asked. “That will definitely solve the problem.”

“We don’t have time,” he told her. “Besides, we don’t have a place you can change privately.”

“I’m not concerned about that, but—” She looked down the row to where Prince Kiminobu was trying to strap in Princess Yumisa. “—I can’t embarrass the Princess that way.”

The soldier's eyes had followed Chiharu's down toward the Princess. He had never seen anyone as beautiful as her. "Is she really part wolf?" he whispered to Chiharu, looking at the Princess' wolf ears twitching in irritation.

"Yes," Chiharu told him. Then she looked at him staring at the Princess. "And if that's a problem, you and I are going to have a problem," she told him, folding her arms.

"No, no, that's not what I meant," he said. "I actually think it makes her prettier, and she seems really nice. Honestly, I've never seen the Prince smile so much. It's good to see considering what happened to him." He looked at Chiharu and her fox ears. "So... are you... part fox?" he asked hopefully.

Chiharu removed her fake ears and showed them to him. "Sorry, just part of the costume."

The soldier seemed slightly disappointed but only shrugged. "Was the Princess a part of your band?" he asked. He sat down in the chair and tried to figure out if there was a way to jury-rig something.

"No," Chiharu told him. "We love her to death and would die for her, but... the poor girl can't carry a note in a sack."

The soldier laughed gently.

"Well, this wasn't meant for a woman in a kimono," he told her and the others as the ship began to take off. "Just grab the supports hanging from the ceiling and hold on tight. We'll give you as smooth of a ride as we can."

"Thanks for trying to help," Chiharu told him.

"Listen, the guys at the base would love a picture when we get back," he told them. "Would you and the others mind?"

"We'd be happy to," she told him, and other members of ZOO nodded.

The soldier returned to his post.

"This isn't going to work in your dress," Prince Kiminobu told Yumisa while the soldier was trying to help Chiharu.

"I'm not taking my dress off," she told him. "I'll only take my clothes off with you and when we're alone." She smiled down at him, and he smiled up at her. Yumisa leaned down to kiss him, and she touched his chest. Kiminobu pulled away from her hand instinctively. She sighed sadly. "You're going to have to

show me eventually,” Yumisa said. “And I just want to touch you. You will be my husband soon.”

Kiminobu shook his head. “I’m just not ready,” he told her quietly. “I thought I was, but I’m so afraid to show you my scars—no one has seen them since I got out of the hospital when I was sixteen. The only thing anyone has seen are my hands—” He held up his gloved hands. “Even then it’s only when I’m putting my gloves on.”

“So, are we to make love with your clothes on?” she asked. “It’s doable, but it might not be that comfortable.”

He let out a deep breath and kissed her smooth, brown hands. “Just... give me some time,” he begged her. “I promise I won’t take forever. I just need to get used to the idea.”

Yumisa nodded her head. “I won’t pressure you,” she said, laying a hand on his cheek. “I have my own issues I have to deal with.” She pressed her lips into a thin line. “I guess we’re both broken, aren’t we? We’ll have to mend together.”

“Sounds like a good love ballad,” Chiharu said as she and the other handmaidens approached. “It looks like we’re going to have to stand during the trip to your castle, Your Highness. The crew expects a smooth ride, however.”

“I was wondering if you’d have to,” Prince Kiminobu said. “I can hold Yumisa in my lap, if that’s all right?” he asked the Princess.

“That will work, as long as we have a smooth ride,” the Princess said. “What about my handmaidens, though?”

“We can handle take off,” Ruri assured her. “We’re more concerned about your safety, though. I’m just glad we left our instruments behind in Kareneth—they’d probably be damaged if we get bounced around too much.”

“We’re taking off, Highness,” the commander reported. “Everyone, just hold on as best you can.”

The troop carrier started away from the fight.

“At least if we get married at the castle, your parents can witness,” Yumisa told Kiminobu. “Or your father can even marry us!” she said happily. “I just hope they like me and can accept me.”

“They’ll love you,” Kiminobu told her. “Because I love you. Now, we need to get you as protected as we can.” He took a flight helmet and put gently on Yumisa’s head.

“Ow,” she whined as the helmet settled on her wolf-like ears and pressed them down against her head. “I’ve never liked hats because I can’t hear well,” she told him. “Though at least that whining is a bit more muffled.”

“It will only be for half an hour while we travel back to the castle. Can you handle that?”

She nodded. “If I have to. But what about you?”

Kiminobu sat down in a seat next to hers and strapped himself in. Then he pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her protectively.

“Hold on,” the carrier commander told everyone. “We’re taking off.”

“Commander, how many mobile suits is the castle sending?” the Prince asked.

“Enough,” the Commander told him. “More are coming from other parts of the Wall, but we have a large-enough border to protect, so we have to be careful in case this isn’t the only attack. With the shield down, we can’t leave the castle defenseless. I think there were plenty of volunteers wanting to get away from *The Kingfisher*’s screaming.”

“It’s still that bad, huh?” the Prince asked.

“Last I heard, it had gotten louder. I’ve heard it’s affecting animals in distant parts of the kingdom.”

“It is,” Yumisa said plaintively. “It still hurts!”

“You can still hear it?” Kiminobu asked.

She nodded. “Yes, and it’s getting louder the further in we go.” She pulled the helmet further down over her ears, even though it hurt them, but doing so did not help any.

“Actually, I’m hearing something now, too,” Ruri said, looking around. “What is that?”

“Sire, incoming troops to help the Wall,” a woman at communications reported. She paused as if listening to something. “And they say... *The Kingfisher* is coming up behind them fast. *The Kingfisher* is still screaming, for whatever reason, they say. Yes, I can definitely hear it now. Sire?” she said suddenly in confusion. “There’s a message coming in for you. Text only.”

“Text only?” he asked, looking at Yumisa. “Who is it from?”
“It’s from... *The Kingfisher*.” She opened a screen and pushed it over to him.
Kiminobu grabbed the screen and looked at it.

I AM COMING FOR THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS
READY THEM NOW

“The Prince and Princess?” Yumisa asked, looking at him.
The screen cleared and then another message appeared.

ALARM WILL ONLY STOP ONCE I HAVE THEM

“Is it threatening us?” Kiminobu glared at the screen. “How is it threatening us? How is it even here? I don’t like this.”

The transport came to a sudden stop, nearly throwing everyone standing off their feet and nearly sending Yumisa to the floor. Kiminobu looked out the front of the transport’s viewport and saw *The Kingfisher* blocking the transport’s path, the mech’s two eyes glaring bright red.

A message appeared on every screen in the transport, and a few dozen more were created.

GIVE ME THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS

The Kingfisher reached to its side and pulled out a cylinder from a hatch there. It ignited a blazing sword threateningly.

Then more screens appeared in the troop carrier—almost completely filling it—with one word in very large letters:

NOW

Captain Dietang Arena boosted towards *The Empress*, Asa Ikehara’s Nexus suit, with every intention of cutting the mech’s head off and blinding the pilot inside. He knew he was going to appear on the pilot’s IFF screen, but if she was

busy with three other attacks on the mech from the front and sides, he knew he could sneak up from behind and blindside her. Some might look on it as cowardly, but he believed in winning by any means.

As hoped, the enemy mech was engaged with three other Uprising mobile suits while the other Vadoran Nexus suits were similarly occupied. If he could just take out their leader, this fight might not end quickly, but at least the Nexus suits would be in disarray.

When he was certain she could not see him on her physical camera, he went in for the kill. He extended the blade that was part of his mech's arm plating and moved quickly to slice off *The Empress*'s head.

Only *The Empress* caught his blade with its hand, stopping the blade from slicing into its neck. A moment later, the three mechs that the mobile suit had been fighting exploded in a shower of metal and sparks.

"Trying to sneak up on me?" Captain Ikehara asked through her mech's external speakers. "That's not very sporting—it was smart—don't get me wrong—but not sporting."

"I had to try," Captain Arnea told her, as he tried to pull his arm back. "Are you going to release my arm, or are we going to stand here like this for the rest of the battle?"

"Oh, I'm just sitting here trying to analyze what your armor is made of," Asa said as *The Empress* scanned his mech; "just to see if I can break your assassin's blade."

The Empress snapped the blade in two, and Dietang was able to push off and back away from his enemy. *The Empress* turned to look at him.

"It seems I can... easily," Asa told him, and he could almost imagine her smirking mouth.

Dietang laughed.

"That's quite a machine you've got there," he said, looking at his display to see what kind of damage he took. Nothing too serious, he noted. "It lives up to its name."

"*The Empress* is the crown jewel of the Nexus Suits," she told him. "I dare say it's probably even more powerful than *The Kingfisher*." *And I can only say that*

because it's seen more battles than The Kingfisher, she thought. As she said that, she started hearing a familiar ringing noise reverberating through her mech.

“Our scientists have always wondered how you developed those suits,” Dietang said, pulling a large, spiked mace from his machine’s back. “After all, you brought the Kareneth to the table because of them.”

“These and other things,” Asa replied, analyzing his mace. She could see electricity flowing through it and knew it might be trouble.

“I guess if I take your mobile suit back to headquarters, they can learn everything.” He moved towards her. “Or whatever pieces I can pick up off the ground.”

He attacked.

“Troop carrier, this is Wall Command,” a voice came over the speakers. “Why haven’t you left yet? This battle is getting serious!”

“Wall Command, we’re having a problem,” the carrier commander responded, staring into the threatening eyes and blazing sword of *The Kingfisher*. “We’ll get back to you if it gets resolved. Cutting communications because of alarm feedback.”

GIVE ME THE PRINCE AND THE PRINCESS NOW

More screens appeared, if possible. There was now not a single part of the inside of the troop carrier that was not covered in threatening messages from *The Kingfisher*. Even though the screens were holographic, everyone inside was still acting like they were being crowded by the things. Everyone except Prince Kiminobu.

“Whoever is piloting *Kingfisher*, I want to talk to you verbally,” Prince Kiminobu said into his headset. “I don’t know how you got control of my parents’ mech, but—”

NO PILOT

NEED PILOTS

GIVE ME THE PRICE AND THE PRINCESS NOW

“No pilot?” Yumisa screamed above the alarm, staring at the screen that was in front of her face while another was half-way through her head. “How is that possible?”

“It’s not,” Kiminobu shouted to her. He pushed her over into the next seat and released the straps holding him in. “Stay here. *Kingfisher*, this is Prince Kiminobu Takanashi. I am coming over. I want to speak to whoever or whatever is in control of you.”

WAITING

“Sire, you could be killed,” the commander said. He was about to take the Prince’s arm to stop him but knew how much the Prince despised being touched. Instead, he stepped in front of the door. “I cannot let you do this—and not just because Captain Ikehara threatened to turn me over to your mother, the Queen, if anything were to happen to you. This could be a trick.”

Kiminobu smiled. “I appreciate your concern, Commander, but right now, your only priority is to get my fiancée and her handmaidens back to the castle unharmed! That is a direct order from your Prince, who outranks everyone in the immediate vicinity! I’m going over to that mech to see what is going on! If someone has control of a mech that only my parents could ever use, then I need to see who they are and what they want. Now land the carrier!”

The commander stared at the Prince for a moment and then said, “Aye, Sire. Land the carrier,” he ordered his men, who did so immediately.

“And I wouldn’t mind someone covering me with a sniper rifle,” the Prince added.

“I’m going with you,” Yumisa decided, taking his gloved hand.

“No, you’re not,” he said, turning to look at her. He took both of her hands and brought them to his lips. “This isn’t some macho thing, Yumisa—I’m really about as unmacho as you can get. But something’s going on, and I don’t want you hurt or taken captive. Our relationship with the Karenth is still tenuous, and if they think we took you captive, it might reignite the war.” He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned in to kiss her again. Her lips were soft, warm, and so full. “It

doesn't make sense that I've grown so fond of you in such a short time, but if anything were to happen to you, I'd never forgive myself."

She put her arms around him and pressed her head to his chest. "And I'll kill you if anything were to happen to you without me," she told him. Yumisa stepped back. "As husband and wife, we're to take things together, aren't we—even if we aren't officially married yet? Whoever is controlling that machine wants both of us, and I don't think they can handle both of us together." She flexed her arm. "I say we face it as one. This wolf-girl has teeth!" She bared her teeth at him. They were normal, human teeth (with slightly longer incisors), not ferocious wolf teeth, but it still made him smile.

"Is she always this stubborn?" Kiminobu asked Chiharu.

"You'd better get used to it, Your Highness," Chiharu told him. "This is one of her gentle days."

He grinned. "Together, then?" he asked the Princess.

She gave a firm nod of her head.

"I still don't like this, Your Highness," the Commander said, "but that's just me giving protest so I don't have to get yelled at by the Queen if anything happens to you two. Good luck to both of you."

Kiminobu stepped off the troop carrier and helped Yumisa down, then they both walked hand-in-hand towards the waiting *Kingfisher* as the battle raged around them.