

Chapter 11

Chiharu knocked on the door and waited for a response. None came, so she knocked again.

“Go away!” a slurred, female voice yelled. “It’s too early to get up, Chiharu!”

“Actually, My Lady, it’s almost suppertime,” Chiharu told her through the door. “Prince Kiminobu’s parents are expecting you.”

There was silence, then the sound of two people whispering, then the sound of a loud thud as someone fell out of bed. Then the rustling of feet and the closing of a door.

A moment later, a very disheveled Yumisa opened the door. Strands of her grey and white hair hung in her face, and her wolf ears were laying flat as if exhausted. The Princess held a sheet around her naked body.

“Leave me alone,” she hissed to Chiharu. “I’m exhausted!”

Chiharu tried to suppress a smile but could not. “I’m very glad you are, My Lady,” the handmaiden said. “But that does not negate the fact that you and the Prince are to have dinner with his parents tonight. Now, may I come in, or are you going to dress yourself?”

“I can dress myself,” Yumisa told her. “When I *feel* like it.” Chiharu could not miss the daggers in Yumisa’s voice.

“My Lady, I brought your clothes,” Chiharu told her. “May I please come in?”

“No. I’m enjoying my husband.”

“I’m glad, My Lady, but you still need your clothes.”

“I’m staying in here for the rest of my life with him and I don’t need clothes to do that.” She looked over her shoulder to the door Kiminobu had disappeared into and saw it was still closed. “Chiharu,” she whispered, “just leave my clothes at the door. I can’t let you in. He’s... embarrassed about how he looks. I can’t do that to him.”

Chiharu nodded. “I understand, My Lady,” she said. “I have a room below yours in the tower. But please get dressed so you can have dinner with the King and Queen.”

“Ugh... fine.” Yumisa reached for the bag and dragged it inside then shut the door. “It’s safe to come out,” she told Kiminobu. “Chiharu isn’t in here.” She waited for a response. “Nobu?” she asked again. She went to the door he had disappeared into and heard water running behind it. She opened the door and

found a bathroom with a shower in one corner, a toilet and a sink. Kiminobu was in the shower. Yumisa went over to the shower and opened the door to join him.

Kiminobu jumped when she reached around to hug him, and she began kissing his scarred back.

“Orders from downstairs—we have to go to dinner,” Yumisa told him.

“Well, we can’t spend eternity up here,” Kiminobu said “We have to refuel our energy at some point.”

“I suppose.” Yumisa reached for the soap. “So... I take it you’re happy with me?”

He turned around and kissed her. “What man wouldn’t be?” he asked her. He took the soap and began washing her small body. “You’re about as perfect as any woman can be, Misa.”

“And you’re as perfect as any man can be,” she told him. “And I’m not just saying that!” she said when she saw his face darken. “Nobu, I can’t imagine how you see yourself, but all I see is a man who needs the love any woman would be glad to give him. I don’t care what you look like. When you and I made love, I felt the need you had for my touch, my heart, my mind, and my body, and it’s precisely what I needed from you. You’re perfect to me, and I mean that with everything I have to give you. I never want you to be ashamed of the way you look.”

“I won’t stop wearing all my clothes,” he told her.

“I don’t expect you to,” she told him. “But you need to stop being so afraid. Let others in.”

“It’s just so hard after this long,” he told her.

Yumisa hugged him. “Just try—it’s all I ask.”

He kissed her deeply. “I’ll try,” he promised her. “I’ll try.”

They finished washing each other, taking far longer than they should, and when they emerged from the bathroom together they found the bed had been stripped and new sheets had been put on. Yumisa sighed and said, “Chiharu—that girl is a miracle worker.”

“Yes, she is,” Kiminobu said when he saw a clothes rack in one corner filled with dresses for Yumisa to wear. On Kiminobu’s dresser was a note, which he picked up and read. “And it seems she’s given you two of my dresser drawers,

which I was going to give you anyway. We must have been in there longer than we thought.”

“Well, we did make love two more times,” she told him. She removed her towel from her naked body and stretched out on the bed. “Wanna go for a third?”

Kiminobu laughed. “I’d love to, but I am getting hungry,” he told her. “And it is almost time for dinner.”

“Spoilsport. But if we must,” Yumisa sighed heavily. Then her stomach growled, and they both laughed.

“Is this a formal dinner?” she asked him.

“Dinner with just Mom and Dad is never formal,” he told her. “You can wear something light.”

“And easy to take off later,” Yumisa said as she looked through the clothes Chiharu had hung up for her. “Chiharu is so much better at picking things out than I am.”

“Call her up here,” Kiminobu told her. “She’s your handmaiden. She should be allowed to do her job.”

“Are you sure?” Yumisa turned to look at him and saw him fully dressed in a white shirt, slacks, socks and shoes, and he was pulling on his gloves. He had covered his scarred body perfectly. “I guess you’re sure. How do I reach her?”

“Where is she?” he asked.

“She took a room in this tower below us,” Yumisa told him.

“Computer, contact tower bedroom one,” Prince Kiminobu instructed.

“Yes, Your Highness?” Chiharu asked, and her picture appeared on a screen before him.

“Yumisa wants your assistance,” he told her. “Would you mind coming up?”

“Of course not, Your Highness—if you’re sure you want me up there.”

“You can come up whenever you need to,” he said. “Just make sure I’m dressed before you do.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Tell Princess Yumisa I’ll be right there.”

The screen vanished, and a few moments later Chiharu knocked on the door. Yumisa opened it. “I need help finding an appropriate dress!” the Princess told her, bottom lip trembling.

Chiharu saw Yumisa's naked state and said, "In the future, Your Highness, if you are going to answer the door, please at least wear a robe. What if I had been anyone else?" Chiharu slipped inside and closed the door. "Hello, Your Highness," she greeted the Prince, seeing the black suit he was wearing. "You look very nice."

"Hello, Chiharu—and thank you."

"That color is completely wrong on you, though—with your permission, I'll order up new clothes for you."

"What's wrong with black? Everyone looks good in black," he said, looking down at himself.

"You are not everyone," Chiharu told him. "You are the Prince of Vadora and soon to be the Guardian of... whatever your father and Emperor Sunada decide to call your united nations. You must look the part at all times."

"Is she always this bossy?" Kiminobu asked Yumisa.

"Hey, don't knock her fashion-sense—she came up with ZOO's outfits."

"Those are iconic," he agreed.

"Where are the others?" Yumisa asked her as Chiharu started going through the clothes she had hung up while Yumisa and Kiminobu had been showering.

"Getting a tour of the castle from the Royal Guard," Chiharu said. "I will learn the layout later, after I have attended to you and gotten you through dinner." She looked at Kiminobu. "What would be appropriate at this kind of dinner, Your Highness?"

"Anything," Kiminobu said. "There is nothing formal about this. If my mom shows up in her nightgown, I would not be surprised." He looked at the window. "Take a look outside. We'll be eating in the garden. My mom and dad might be there waiting for us."

"A garden dinner?" she asked. "Gazebo or not?"

"Glass with gold inlays and frames," he told her.

"Thank you." Chiharu pulled out a nice, white summer dress with large yellow flowers on it and handed it Yumisa. "This will be appropriate."

"Chiharu, it's... thin," Yumisa said.

“Yes, Your Highness, and you’ll be warm out there,” Chiharu told her. Then she looked at the Princess and sighed. “Yes, a slip,” she decided. “I guess you can’t be as... free as you used to be. We’ll go underwear shopping tomorrow.”

“You don’t have underwear?” Kiminobu asked in surprise.

“Yes, I have underwear... just not everything I might need,” she told him evasively. “All right, I didn’t see the point considering no one ever saw me in the castle at home other than my parents and my handmaidens. And when I was out with ZOO, I generally wore a kimono.”

“I take it you have clothing stores in town, Your Highness?” Chiharu asked.

“Of course,” he said.

“Then we shall take Princess Yumisa out, with permission, of course.”

“She’s not a prisoner,” Kiminobu said. “And if anyone dares say anything about her mixed heritage, they’ll answer to me.”

Yumisa threw herself into his arms and hugged him.

“Your Highness, please get dressed before you make your husband late to dinner,” Chiharu told her.

“I love you,” Yumisa told him. She leaned up to kiss him.

“I love you,” he said, returning the kiss.

Yumisa dressed and turned to find a mirror to look at herself to make sure she was presentable, but she saw nothing. Her heart and stomach clenched when she remembered why her husband might not have any in his room.

“You look beautiful, Your Highness,” Chiharu told her. “Though I should run a brush through your hair.”

“Yes, please,” Yumisa said, holding her hands like a begging puppy. “I love it when you brush my hair!”

“Your Highness,” she said to Kiminobu, “you may wish to watch so you can brush Princess Yumisa’s hair later. If you do it right, she will be putty in your hands.”

“Chiharu! Don’t tell him all my sec—oh, wait—yes, please tell him all my secrets!”

“Yes, please do,” Kiminobu said. “I want to make my wife very happy—as happy as she has made me.”

“You’ve already made me very happy,” Yumisa told him.

“All right, Your Highness, we have to hurry,” Chiharu warned her. “Sit down so I can get working on making you more devastating than you already are.”

Yumisa let out a little squeal of delight and sat down in an offered chair.

“Are any of your Royal Guards coming to escort you, Your Highness?” Chiharu asked Kiminobu as she started brushing Yumisa’s hair.

“No, we’re really safe in the castle,” he told her. “I usually don’t see them too much during the day.”

“Only at night when they slept with you,” Yumisa breathed softly.

“Nothing happened, my love,” he told her. “Don’t be jealous.”

“Yes, Princess, jealousy has never looked good on you—green is not your color,” Chiharu told her playfully.

“If you weren’t doing such a good job with my hair, you and I would have words, Chiharu,” Yumisa told her.

“Then I’ll have to keep doing a good job with your hair,” her handmaiden said. “Now, with a dress like this, I suggest putting your hair up.” She brushed Yumisa’s hair a few more times and then started putting it up and pinning it with the expertise of a hairdresser. When she was done, she pulled Yumisa to her feet and showed her to Kiminobu. “What do you think?”

Kiminobu swallowed hard when he saw his bride, and he found himself at a loss for words. He had thought Yumisa beautiful when he had met her; he had thought her gorgeous when they had married; he had thought her stunning when she had been naked beneath him as they made love for the first time; but now... now no words could describe the beauty of the woman before him, and all he could do was stare at her.

“Nobu, are you all right?” Yumisa asked him worriedly.

“My job is done,” Chiharu told her. “He’s fine, Your Highness—loss of words was what I was going for.”

Yumisa stepped forward and took her husband’s gloved hands. “Nobu?” she asked.

“You are a goddess,” he told her. “There is no other word for you, Princess Yumisa Hase. And even goddesses would be jealous of you.”

Yumisa’s brown and grey features grew red, and she looked away in shame. “You flatter me too much,” she said.

“I can never flatter you enough,” Kiminobu told her. “In fact, anything I say about your beauty would never be enough.”

“Careful, Your Highness, you’ve only been married a few hours,” Chiharu warned him. “You have years ahead of you yet. Don’t run out of platitudes this early.”

Kiminobu smiled. “I don’t think I can ever get enough of Yumisa.” He pulled his wife to him. “Can I take a picture of you as you are now?” he asked. “I want to capture this moment forever.”

“Only if you take the picture with me,” she said.

“Do you have a camera?” Chiharu asked.

“Computer, camera access for Chiharu...?” He looked at her, not knowing her last name.

“Yamashiro,” Chiharu told him.

“Camera access for Chiharu Yamashiro,” he said. “My room only for now.”

A screen appeared before Chiharu, and she saw that it was a camera with a lens focused on the wedded couple. She went around to them, positioned them with his arm around Yumisa’s waist, and then went back to look at the picture again. Satisfied, she took the picture and then showed them the screen.

“Happy?” she asked Yumisa and him.

“We look so good together!” Yumisa exclaimed happily. “Do you like the picture?” she asked Kiminobu.

He nodded. “It’s the first picture I’ve seen of myself since the accident,” he said. “I never let anyone take any of me before. I look good because of you.”

“You look happy because of her,” Chiharu told him. “I hope this will be the first of many pictures of you, Your Highness.”

Kiminobu looked at the picture again and smiled. He typed something on the screen, and the sound of something being sent was heard. Yumisa looked at him.

“What was that?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he told her mysteriously. “Come on, my mom and dad are waiting.”

“*Our* mom and dad,” she reminded him with a smile. She looped her arm around Kiminobu’s and let him lead her to dinner.

“These are nice rooms,” Takē Kimura said to Kohana Kaiba. Takē was lying on Kohana’s bed, kicking her feet in the air. “I still miss my room in Sae, though.”

“Yeah, it’s going to take some getting used to,” Kohana said as she put the few clothes she had brought that morning with her away. “But at least Princess Yumisa seems happy.”

“I’m so glad Prince Kiminobu is nice,” Takē answered. “I was *so* worried he’d be mean. You never know what someone is like from news articles and interviews—not that he’s had many, poor thing. But I feel so much better knowing our precious Princess has a good man—she took to him instantly!”

“She’s always been a good judge of character,” Kohana said, closing the drawer. “I wonder if her wolf nature has anything to do with that?” she asked thoughtfully.

Takē sat up on her knees. “You mean like how an animal knows whether to fear a person or not? Huh. I never thought of that before.”

“Is your room nice?” Kohana asked.

“Oh, yes—it’s almost too big for one person, though.”

Kohana looked around her room. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I guess these rooms were meant for married couples, not single girls like us.”

Takē went over to a window and looked out. The countryside surrounding the Vadoran castle was simply gorgeous, with green hills and fields filled with flowers for as far as she could see. “I can’t wait to explore the town tomorrow! We’ll have to buy a whole new wardrobe for the Princess!” she said excitedly. “And new underwear for her to wear for her husband!” She laughed girlishly.

“I don’t know who’s more excited for this wedding—you or her?” Kohana sat down on her bed and then laid back tiredly. “I can’t believe we survived that fight this morning. I can’t believe our Princess got into that mobile suit!”

“Oh, the Captain of the Prince’s Royal Guard certainly wasn’t happy about that,” Takē said. “I wasn’t too happy, either. What if something had happened to our Princess?”

“Princess Yumisa can take care of herself,” Kohana said. “Oh ye of little faith.”

Takē reached for a pillow and threw it at her friend, who caught it. “I had faith—Princess Yumisa can handle anything!”

“We’re going to have to let her go out in that *thing* again,” Kohana said. “You know once she gets an itch, she’ll never be satisfied.”

“I don’t think that itch is on her mind right now,” Takē said with a smile.

“She’s got other itches to worry about.”

“And a nice husband to scratch them,” Kohana said with a grin.

They both laughed.

“When are we supposed to be picked up for dinner?” Takē asked. “I’m getting hungry. I skipped breakfast this morning, and then lunch was missed because of the battle.”

“If you didn’t eat lunch, that’s your fault,” Kohana said. Her stomach rumbled. “Though I guess I didn’t get anything, either.”

“I guess we can’t just wonder how food is served around here,” Takē said.

“Why don’t we find someone and ask where the kitchen is?”

Kohana sat up. “That’s a good idea!”

They headed for the door and opened it to find Shiori Seno standing outside, fidgeting. The Lieutenant did not seem to see them at first, and she was about to walk away when Kohana said, “Lieutenant Seno, are you all right?”

Shiori jumped at her unexpected voice but turned to look at her. “I wasn’t sure... if you’d want me to come see you or not,” she said. “I was scared to knock.”

“Why would you be scared to knock?” Takē asked.

“Lieutenant—Shiori—we’re going to be living together. I would like us to be friends.”

“But... But... You’re ZOO!” Shiori said, her hands moving around wildly.

“No, we *were* ZOO—now we’re just servants to the Princess and Prince,” Takē said. “You don’t have to be afraid of us.”

“Are you sure?” Shiori asked.

“Yes, we’re sure.”

Shiori seemed to visibly relax. “Sorry, I guess I’ve still got a little bit of fandom going on. I don’t know when I’ll be able to shake it.”

Takē came over and put her arm around Shiori’s shoulder. “Why don’t we get some food and maybe that will help,” she said. “Kohana and I are starving.”

“Who’s Kohana?” Shiori asked.

Takē laughed. “Oh, right—you only know our stage names. Well, I’m Takē Kimura, and this is Kohana Kaiba—Tora is Ado Murano and Panda is Ruri Wakita, and of course our leader is Chiharu Yamashiro. She’s also Princess Yumisa’s head handmaiden. Does that make things easier?”

Shiori nodded. “Yeah. Actually, I was sent to find all of you, but I’ve only found you two. Where are the others?”

“Chiharu is probably with the Princess getting her ready for dinner, if she can pry Princess Yumisa away from your Prince—as for the others, if they aren’t in their rooms, I don’t know where they are. Why were you looking for us?”

“Captain Ikehara wanted to invite you all to dinner,” Shiori said. “She figures that if we discuss our duties, we might not end up stumbling over each other while trying to protect the Prince and the Princess.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Kohana commented. “But why can’t we all be friends? Why should we worry about stumbling over each other?”

“How... *close* are the Royal Guards to the Prince?” Takē asked Shiori, arching a slim eyebrow.

Shiori’s face grew red.

“Wow, this place is huge!” Yumisa commented as Kiminobu led her down yet another hallway. “It’s like a maze!”

“My ancestors built it this way to confuse anyone who might break in,” Kiminobu said. “We’re trying to figure out how to make it less so, but if you remove one wall, the entire castle could collapse.”

“Designed that way?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“Of course,” he answered.

“Gotta love war,” she said sarcastically. “There’s a map of this place for me to learn my way around without you to always guide me, right?”

“Give it a month and you’ll be running around this place without getting lost once,” he told her.

She looked up at him askance. “A *month*? You have so little faith in me?”

“We passed Asa’s room a little while back—remember me pointing it out?”

“Yes,” she said slowly.

“Can you take me back there?”

“We just passed it—of course....” Yumisa thought about it a moment and then wilted. “Okay, I’ll give it a month.”

“There are guards posted everywhere—you need anything, just ask them,” he assured her. “Or ask any servant you see walking around.”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Yumisa said in a small voice.

Kiminobu stopped her and leaned down to kiss her. “You’ll never be a bother,” he assured her. “That’s what we pay them for.”

Yumisa hugged him. “How far are we from the garden?”

“Not too much further,” he assured her. “Come on.”