

Chapter 8

“They’re like a swarm of wasps!” Rumiko Ogami screamed as she unleashed another barrage of bullets at the enemies surrounding her and her twin sister. “You take one down, and another four takes its place! Where is our backup?”

“Busy,” Shiori Seno told her. *The Atlas* crushed another enemy mobile suit and sent it careening to the ground below. “There are a lot of these things trying to get the Prince! We have to protect him at all costs!”

“Protect him and the Princess,” Kii said from within *The Corsair*. “We have her to protect, too, remember?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Shiori bit out. “That little wolf-eared witch.”

“I thought you’d be happy to have your favorite band living at the palace,” Rumiko teased her. “Don’t you think ZOO is the greatest band in the world?”

“They were, until I found out they work for the woman who’s taking Prince Kiminobu away from me!” *The Atlas* grabbed two enemy mobile suits and smashed them together angrily. “I never had a chance to be with him!”

“None of us did, Shiori,” Rumiko reminded her. “And trust me, Mizuko and I tried.”

There was an awkward pause in the entire battlefield as all mobile suits stopped and looked at *The Tempest*—Unbound, Vadoran, and Kareneth alike.

“Eww, get your heads out of the gutter, you perverts!” Rumiko spat. “That’s gross!”

The battle instantly continued.

“Oh, you would have done it for Prince Kiminobu,” Kii teased her.

Rumiko sighed. “I won’t answer that. Thankfully we never had to. Can we stop talking about this—it’s getting weird.”

“Not as weird as the Prince trying to explain to the Princess our sleeping with him and never—actually—sleeping with him,” Shiori sighed heavily.

“Focus on the battle, people, or explaining our sleeping arrangements with the Prince to the Princess will be nothing compared to explaining his and her deaths to their mothers and fathers,” Asa told them as her fight with Arnea continued.

“I’ve never dealt with the Uprising before,” she commented to herself. “Computer, you are analyzing his battle movements, right?”

YES

Asa glanced at the screen that had appeared. “Maybe this won’t be all bad after all. What is that noise?” she asked. “Is someone patched into the castle’s hangar so we’re hearing *The Kingfisher*?”

“Um... Boss... you *do* know *The Kingfisher* is here,” Shiori reported to her. “It seems to be blocking the transport from leaving with the Prince!”

“What?!” Asa demanded. She looked towards the transport and instantly regretted getting distracted as Arnea knocked her main weapon away. But *The Empress* was quick and caught his arm with the mace and twisted it, breaking the arm’s connection with the body, rendering it useless. Asa grabbed the mech’s shoulder and kned the mobile suit hard, jarring the pilot within and nearly caving in the mech’s protective chest plate. She tossed Arnea aside like a rag doll and boosted towards the transport.

“Keep an eye on things up here—I need to see if the Prince needs my protection!”

Shiori sighed. “He’s going to need protection all right—from her.” But she smiled to herself.

Prince Kiminobu and Princess Yumisa saw the chest hatch open and waiting as they approached *The Kingfisher*. When they were two feet away, the alarm stopped, and silence reigned over the battlefield... other than the sound of weapons-fire.

Prince Kiminobu looked over his shoulder and saw the Commander standing at the door, a sniper rifle ready to kill anyone who might emerge from the hatch. But the Commander only shook his head.

“How do we get up there?” Yumisa asked, looking at the hatch high over their heads.

“Have you ever piloted a mobile suit before?” he asked her.

“Only in simulators,” she told him. “My parents wouldn’t let me get into a real one for... obvious reasons—that, and they learned from simulator practice that I was a bit... trigger happy.”

Kiminobu arched an eyebrow. “Trigger happy?”

“Yeah. Chiharu says I’m sweet but psycho with a weapon.”

“Oh, this is going to be interesting.”

Yumisa looked at him questioningly.

“*The Kingfisher* is a dual-pilot system,” he explained to her. “One person pilots the mech and the other person concentrates on weapons. My parents were supposed to be its pilots, but after my father lost his left arm, he couldn’t pilot the mobile suit anymore. *The Kingfisher* refused to allow anyone else to pilot it.”

Yumisa gulped and looked up at him with sad eyes. He looked down at her and saw the tears shining in her golden eyes. “We’re so sorry for that,” she told him, her voice trembling. “My father...” She choked up, and Kiminobu took her into his arms. “I guess it’s all going to come out eventually, but my father sent the assassin to try and kill your father. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for that! Please know that I didn’t have anything to do with it!”

Kiminobu shrugged and forced her to look up at him. “Oh, we knew that it was the Kareneth,” he said. He released her and started toward the mech. “Our Minister of Information is very good at getting people to talk. The assassin gave your father up in about five minutes. Don’t worry about it. People do things in war that they later regret. I’m not going to hold that against you, and neither are my father and mother—after all, they’re the ones who agreed to this marriage.”

Kiminobu stopped and looked up at the beautiful machine standing before him, waiting. A cord with a hook for him to stand in had been lowered to allow access to the hatch, which stood several feet above his head. He stepped into the hook, grabbed the cord, and then pulled Yumisa against his side.

“Apparently no one is up there,” he said, holding her close. “If there was, the Commander would have fired. Shall we see what’s going on?”

Yumisa buried her face against his arm and held him tight. “I hope this doesn’t leave my stomach behind,” she said, but when the hook began to rise, it rose very gently yet quickly. When they were even with the open hatch, Kiminobu helped her off and then joined her.

“Glad I took my shoes off,” she told him as she looked at the ground far below and felt how slick the inside of the hatch was. She turned and looked into the open cockpit, seeing that it was completely empty. Lights of various colors blinked

within the darkness. Then she looked at the two seats that were resting on the hatch door's inside. "Which seat is yours?" she asked.

"The back seat," he told her. "You take the front." He helped her into her seat and gave her a helmet. "Controls are basic. If you used a simulator, you should be able to handle this." He slid into the seat behind her and pressed a button so the chairs slid back into the deep cockpit, and the chest hatch closed.

A screen appeared before each of them.

WELCOME PRINCE KIMINOBU TAKANASHI
WELCOME PRINCESS YUMISA TAKANASHI

"We aren't married yet," Yumisa told the computer screen before her. "I'm still Princess Yumisa Hase."

The computer deleted Takanashi and replaced it with HASE.

"All right, we're here—what's going on, computer?" Kiminobu asked as he began flipping switches and turning things on. "I tried to pilot you earlier and you rejected me outright."

YOU WERE NOT COMPLETE.

Kiminobu stared at the computer screen before him. "I wasn't...?" Kiminobu nodded his head. "I wasn't married yet, in other words. I'm still technically not married yet."

HER DNA AND YOURS ARE MIXED
YOU ARE COMPLETE

"What does it mean *mixed*?" Yumisa asked as she turned on the weapon systems. "We haven't consummated our marriage yet."

"We kissed," he said. "Maybe that's all it needed."

"You have a creepy mobile suit if it came to you knowing we kissed," she told him. "What's it going to do tomorrow morning, make a nursery for us in the

cockpit? Ugh, this control stick is going to be a problem in this kimino,” she told him. “There are no flight suits?”

“Not in the mech,” he told her. “You usually put those on before getting in. Had I known we were going into battle, I would have brought some. But we should be safe back at the castle. I guess *The Kingfisher* has other ideas, it seems. Um... what are you wearing underneath your kimono?” he asked.

“Not much,” she said suspiciously, wondering what he was thinking. Then her gold eyes went wide and she turned to look at him. “Oh no!” she protested, suddenly realizing what he wanted to do. “I’m practically naked under this! You know kimonos are just a covering with underwear underneath! I’m not helping you pilot this thing in just my undies!”

“No, that would not be a good idea,” he said. “Besides, I would hate to destroy that beautiful kimono of yours. It might be bad luck to destroy a kimono on your wedding day—I’ll have to look into that.”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Not in the least. Now put your helmet on. I’m taking off.”

A green light flashed, and Kiminobu pressed a button.

“What is that thing doing here?” Asa Ikehara demanded irritably, landing *The Empress* next to *The Kingfisher*. “And why isn’t it screaming it’s head off anymore?”

“It wanted Yumisa and me,” Kiminobu told her. “Apparently it’s ready for a fight.”

“Well, it’s not going to get one,” Asa barked at him. “If that thing wants you as a pilot, fine, but fly it back to the castle and away from the battlefield. We’ll handle things here.”

“We can help you,” Yumisa said as she flipped through screen after screen of *The Kingfisher*’s weapons capabilities. “This mech seems seriously overpowered!” She pressed a button to silence their end of the communication. “No wonder my parents and ancestors couldn’t conquer you,” she told Kiminobu.

“My duty is to get you two back to the castle so you can make little princes and princesses who will eventually rule a united world,” Asa told them. “You are not—I repeat *not*—going to get involved in this battle!”

Dietang's REAPER mobile suit landed on the ground across from Asa on the other side of *The Kingfisher*. Two more landed and pointed guns at the massive mobile suit's head.

"You're right," Dietang Arnea told Asa, "they're not going to get involved in this battle because they're coming with me. Prince Kiminobu, Princess Yumisa, please disembark the mobile suit and get in the two mobile suits on either side of you. They'll protect you on the journey back to Shezar. Or you can just be stubborn and watch that mech's head and chest get torn to shreds by our lasers—along with your, hopefully, pretty new wife. Your choice."

"*Hopefully?* I'm gorgeous, you jerk!" Yumisa told him hotly.

"Devastatingly," Kiminobu added, looking at his controls for an answer.

A screen appeared before him.

HELMETS

Kiminobu looked at the screen and then quickly looked around for his helmet. "Put on the helmet beside you," he told Yumisa.

She picked up the helmet and looked at it. "Why do I get a pink visor?" she asked.

"It's not pink," he told her, strapping his helmet on; "it's light red."

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Light red *is* pink," she told him irritably.

"It says *Chair 1* on it," he told her, trying not to sound irritated. "You're in Chair 1. Deal with it. It was my mom's helmet."

"Fine." She pulled the helmet on. "Not meant for my ears," she yelled, her voice sounding muffled to herself.

Suddenly the visor before her turned dark red and the helmet morphed to adjust for her wolf ears, extending even in the shell of the helmet. Yumisa turned to look at Kiminobu with surprise. "Are you seeing this?"

"Yes, but I have too much going on to worry about it right now," he said. "I'm getting a lot of data scrolling across my visor."

"How can you read all that?" she asked, seeing what he was seeing but in reverse. Then it started scrolling across her visor, and she had to close her eyes as it almost overwhelmed her.

“I’m not sure,” he told her, his eyes rapidly flickering back and forth. “Hold on....”

“I’m waiting,” Dietang transmitted through his mobile suit’s speakers. “Oh, and don’t even think of rushing me,” he told Asa. “I can get off a shot that will kill them both before you can get around this mech of theirs.”

“I won’t do anything,” Asa assured him. She had contacted Wall Command for support, but they told her that they could not guarantee they could hit the enemy mobile suits without also hitting *The Kingfisher*. She told them to not even try if that was the case. “But I must know, why do you want them so badly? Are they that much of a threat to the Uprising?”

“The Shezar Union,” Arnea corrected her. “And with them, we can get Vadora and the Kareneth to surrender to us. You want world peace, it will be under our terms, not yours.”

“I know you’re pissed off at the way Kareneth began their conquest—believe me, I feel the same way—but is conquering the world your way any better?”

“We liberated countries from under the Kareneth thumb,” Arnea told her, “and they willingly joined the Union. We’re heroes, not villains!”

“You seem villainous to me right now,” she said. “You’re threatening two people who haven’t even fought in this war!”

“We don’t intend to harm them,” he promised her. “We’ll release them once a treaty has been signed and the Emperor of the Kareneth Empire faces charges for his family’s crimes against humanity. If he’s a good man at all, he’ll give up his life to protect his daughter.”

“But what about Prince Kiminobu? His family has been fighting the Kareneth longer than most of us have been alive! Why are you kidnapping him?”

“We’re not *kidnapping* him,” Dietang said. “He is going to be a political prisoner, nothing more. And if Vadora has been fighting for so long, why are you suddenly siding with the enemy? Why not join us?”

He took a step forward and placed his mobile suit’s gun against the back of *The Kingfisher*’s head. “I’m tired of waiting, Your Highnesses. Come out now or I swear I’ll blow you away!”

“We’re surrounded,” Yumisa told Kiminobu, but she didn’t sound nervous or scared. “What are we going to do? You know *The Kingfisher* far better than I do.”

“Actually, this is my first time being inside it,” Kiminobu told her. “I know it just as well as you do.”

Her face appeared on a screen in front of him, and she did not look happy. “Are you kidding me?!” she yelled at him. “This is your first time being inside this mech?”

“First time being inside a mech since I was fifteen,” he said. “I haven’t even been able to use simulators since I was sixteen.”

Her eyes went wide, and she wilted. “I’m going to die. I’m going to die without ever having been with a man. I’m going to die thousands of miles from my home, my mother, my father, and my siblings. I’m going to die in one of the most powerful machines ever built because my *husband-to-be doesn’t know how to operate it!*”

“Hold onto your helmet,” he told her as he took the controls. “I’m going to try something stupid.”

“I guess you don’t really care about your new bride,” Arnea said. “Too bad.” He pulled the trigger.

The Kingfisher’s hand shot up and grabbed the gun with precision and jerked it up just as Arnea fired. The shot rang out, and the bullet disappeared into the air. Before Arnea could pull away and fire again, *The Kingfisher* twisted the gun from his hand and spun with a roundhouse kick that knocked Arnea’s mech to the ground. The black mobile suit skidded across the dirt, gouging a deep rut in the ground.

The Kingfisher threw the gun at one of the mobile suits Arnea had guarding the Vadoran mech with enough force to penetrate its shell. *The Kingfisher* fell quickly to the ground with the grace of a dancer, barely missing a bullet from the last mech of the three that would have shorn *The Kingfisher*’s head off. *The Kingfisher* spun and kicked up, catching the second mobile suit under the chin and knocking its head clean off. The Uprising mobile suit collapsed to its knees as *The Kingfisher* leapt up and landed on its feet. *The Kingfisher* grabbed the mech and tore it in two, tossing the pieces in separate directions.

The Empress fired two shots into the chest plate of the first mobile suit that had the gun sticking out of its chest, and the suit crackled for a second before exploding.

“What was that?” Asa asked Prince Kiminobu as she moved to train her gun on Arnea’s mech. “I’ve never seen a mobile suit move like that before! I didn’t think a mech *could* move like that!”

She got no response from Kiminobu or Yumisa.

“Your Highness?” she asked.

There was no response.

“Your Highness, is anyone there? Princess Yumisa? Hello? Answer me!”

Still there was no response.

“YOUR HIGHNESS!”