**Arduins Calendar Year: 3015**

The Arduins.

Also known as the twin stars. Nobody really knew whether the Arduins was actually two stars situated really close together, or as a-matter-of-factly one giant faulty star. No matter from which angle you looked at, all you could see was two big spheres physically connected side by side.

It stood out as the brightest among the stars, with distinct purplish color. At a certain time, when the night was at its coldest, not one but two rings could be spotted engulfing the beautiful twin stars.

It was indeed such a magical phenomenon.

There was another reason why the Arduins was worshipped by thousands of people. It granted powers to the chosen one. And by the chosen one it meant, the noble.

Long ago, when the Earth was suddenly exploded, just slightly before it completely shattered into million pieces, an unexplained phenomena known as ‘hyper transfer’ caused several hundreds of humans to be transported into an alien world. How and why it happened was a still mystery. Among survivors was a family of nobles, the Kleins.

At that time, all hopes of preserving the mankind were nearly impossible. Until one day, the light of the Arduins shone on them. Guided by the light, which was later named as ‘The Amida’, they found themselves procuring a resourceful land, very similar to the Earth.

Recognizing the Kleins as noble, the Arduins lent its power to them to create a new kingdom, and to rule the kingdom with the used of magic bestowed by the twin stars.

Thus, that gave birth to Takahiro Empire, a top-like floating object that moves around the Arduins, much like the Earth moves around the Sun. The empire consisted of four layers, with the Kleins at the top of the hierarchy.

The rest of the floors were based on nobility status. The second level was occupied by the other noble families, the third was reserved for the wealthy families and Emperor only appointed knights, whilst the bottom floor, and hence the widest, was for the rest of the civilians.

Even the structure between the upper and lower floors was different. The bottom floor was designed to mimic the environment of the Earth. Though they lived in a close space, through the power bestowed by the Arduins, replicating the Earth was not impossible.

Meanwhile, those who lived on the upper floors built their homes like a spacecraft equipped with sophisticated technologies. It was another way of showing their superiority, by looking down on the lowest level residents.

This created a huge power gap between the bottom and the upper levels, which led to inequalities and double standard. It was not surprising a rebel group was formed to challenge the Kleins.

Caught in the midst of this power struggle was Akane Aldini. As she watched the twin stars from the window of her compact room, she made a heartfelt wish.

THE AMIDA

1

Kazuhiro Einsbert was no stranger to the Takahiro Imperial Army, an official army unit formed to maintain peace in the lowest level. Said to be the most talented protégé in Takahiro Empire history, he became a trainee at the age of 14.

That age was considered a bit old to join since most children were sent to the army training camp at the age of 12. However, Kazuhiro proved to be an exception. He caught up to his peers in no time, and stayed at the top of his class since then.

Now, at age 20, he has achieved so many recognitions from the higher ups. The most notable one was when he took down Sir Ryuu Welcht, the Emperor’s best knight who went rogue planning to annihilate the whole bottom floor, single-handedly. That had also earned him a trust from the royal family, and thus becoming Empress Hikari Kleins’ personal favorite.

Despite all the attentions received, Kazuhiro remained himself. Never once showed his emotion, he’s a man that was really hard to read. Nobody could really tell what’s on his mind, how was his feeling, sad or happy, except for his older sister, Yuina Einsbert.

Even his close friends were at a loss while with him. Kazuhiro never laughed at their jokes, only talked on a no nonsense topic, and whilst hanging out with them, most of the time he would immerse in his own world.

Yes, Kazuhiro was the man who always put logical reasoning above everything else. Yuina always jokingly said that his brother’s boyish look would one day be gone if he continued with his stoic expression.

Always in his formal army’s uniform - a white shirt and a pair of black pleated trousers, sometimes with a black coat on - Kazuhiro was indeed blessed with a boyish innocence good look (not handsome). His fair skin with dark brown, straight, tidy hair amplified his youthful trait even further. Those might be inherited from his late parents, since Yuina also shared the same features, and thus quite a beauty herself.

Despite his military prowess, Kazuhiro did not build an inch of muscle. With his height at 178cm, he looked exactly like a regular teenager. Judging from his appearance alone, nobody would have guessed that he was actually a top-notch soldier, the best mecha pilot in the entire Takahiro Empire history.

“So, what’s your schedule for today?” asked Yuina as they were having breakfast at the army’s cafeteria. Yuina herself was not a soldier, but she was in charged of administering Takahiro Second Division Unit, one of the three army’s divisions on the lowest floor, where her brother had his posting.

The unit was not just a base for the armies, but a citadel equipped with all sorts of facilities, enough to be considered as a developing town. Each army was given a quarter of their own; it was up to them to live inside or outside the base. Yuina nad Kazuhiro opted to stay outside and would only use the quarters given if they were tasked with work that required them to stay close to the base. Due to its huge area, managing the unit proved to be a challenging task to Yuina.

“I’m patrolling the Stroph Research Center tonight,” replied Kazuhiro.

“Come to my house after finishing your duty. I’m preparing your favorite dinner tonight.”

Yuina preferred for the both of them to stay together, but Kazuhiro insisted on flatting out by himself. The most she could do now was to invite him over for a meal, or pay him a visit once in a while.

Kazuhiro nodded.

“Okay, I’ll see you tonight then.” Yuina stood up, picked up her tray and waved him goodbye. She planned to finish her work early today, go to shopping and prepared her brother’s special dish. Hopefully there won’t be any irregular activity today, she prayed.

Kazuhiro watched until Yuina had completely left the cafeteria, and then turned his gaze towards his watch. He still had a bit of time left before their weekly seminar began. So, he took out his smart pad and did his usual free-time routine – studying.

2

“Akane! My beautiful Akane. You have bloomed into a very fine lady,” said Shigeo Malberg, the leader of the rebellion.

For 10 years, he had watched over her, witnessing her growth since she was just a snotty nose 8 year-old kid. He had groomed her into what she was today, whose beauty could even rival that of Empress Hikari, who was claimed to be the most beautiful woman in Takahiro Empire.

Too bad that nobody could ever notice how pretty Akane Aldini was, since her existence was kept a secret from the entire world. But that’s exactly what he wanted, to have Akane all by herself.

Born with a naturally red-colored hair, her porcelain flawless skin just strengthened her already goddess-like features. Her prominent-shaped blue eyes on a heart-shaped face, completed with a pointed nose tip and soft cherry-colored natural lips, one could not stop but to wonder how could someone like that ever existed.

Each time Shigeo looked at her, he was filled with lecherous thought. He wanted to have her right here and now. He was constantly thinking how it felt to caress that slender body of hers.

But for now, he had to keep that thought away. It was not the right time yet. The moment would definitely come when she would truly be his, forever…

Even so, he still could not resist himself from touching her soft lips, then down to her full rounded breasts. After a few moments of fondling, Shigeo let out a sigh.

“You won’t allow me the pleasure, will you?”

Akane just stood there stiffly. No reaction was given.

He brought his face closer to hers and whispered to her ear, “Act all mighty as you want. Soon you will submit to me, and only me.”

Then he walked to his desk and pulled out a brown file from its drawer. He passed the file to her.

“Your first assignment. Show me how beautiful you have become. Make your *daddy* proud.”

Akane took the file and left without uttering a word. The moment she walked out of the door, another figure came in.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Tatsuo Bronchi as he walked closer towards Shigeo.

“She has been tested hundreds of times. Each time, she surpassed *his* scores without a sweat,” replied Shigeo, full of confidence.

Tatsuo shrugged his shoulders. “But she hasn’t been in an actual combat.”

“Calm down. This will just be another test for her. If she failed, that would be good on my part too. I would love to hear her scream as I torture that pretty face…”

“You are one sick sadist,” said Tatsuo and left. There was nothing else he could say when his partner was already in his sadistic mode.

3

The moment she got back to her room, Akane threw the file on her bed and rushed to the shower. She felt so disgusted. It did not matter how many times she cleansed herself, it was hard to wash away Shigeo’s touch on her skin.

She turned on the cold water, and let the water ran on her head. The temperature was freezing but she could not be bothered anymore. It was nothing compared to the harassment she kept on receiving.

How many years had it been? When she first met Shigeo, tan-colored, square-shaped face with a big built body, she was just eight years old. At that time, he was just like any other ordinary strict, disciplined trainer. She would be punished only when necessary.

When she turned 12, Shigeo took his punishment a little too far. Sometimes even after completing her test, he would simply torture her for pleasure. Whenever she screamed, he would laugh satisfactorily.

And just three years ago, he took another step further. He started touching and fondling her whenever he had the chance. He would do anything that could turn him on but Akane had stopped screaming since then. She did not resist either. And that somehow pissed Shigeo off. A truly sadistic monster.

She hated him so much but there was nothing she could do. She was trapped in this underground secret laboratory. Looking for a way out was also impossible since her movement outside of her room was monitored 24/7. For now, the best she could give was to endure this humiliation.

There was another reason why she did not even try to escape. She was made to wear an anti-magic device that would prevent her from attempting anything. As long as she was within the lab, the device would work its charm. But tomorrow…

Akane turned off the shower. She wrapped herself in a thick towel and then sat by the side of her bed. She looked at the brown file lying beside her. Slowly she picked it up and opened the file. Her eyes were fixed on the name written inside it.

“Kazuhiro Einsbert, huh.”

4

It was about time to carry out her first mission. It would also mean the first time for her to step foot outside of the lab. Her very first real world experience.

Akane sucked in a deep breath. Though she had not been to the outside world, she had gone through the simulation of the lowest level almost every day that she could remember every single alley in it.

In fact, that was what her entire 10 years of life inside the lab was based on – simulation. Combat training, piloting a gigantic mecha, disarming bomb, lock picking and other survival skills were all done in a virtual world.

“Don’t screw up,” warned Tatsuo, who escorted her out. “Don’t ever think of trying anything funny. Shigeo might be able to forgive you as long as you fulfill his screwed head’s desire. But I won’t hesitate to end your life just like that. Pretty face or not.”

“Understood,” she answered, briefly. From the outside, she looked really composed but the truth was, her heart could not stop beating. There was something about Tatsuo that set her on a high alert. Who was he?

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Stroph Research Center was a big facility for conducting research related to The Amida. Basically it was focusing on how to increase the quality of the civilians’ life by making the light as the main source for mostly every activity.

The center was built and funded by the Kleins as a ‘give back’ to the society. But of course that was just a façade to mask the real meaning behind the generousness. The establishment of center was nothing more than the other way of saying ‘that was the best thing peasants could have, so take it and live with it’.

The royal family only concerned was to strengthen the wealth of the three top layers. There was never an intention to help the civilians to begin with. They were left to govern their own fate.

At this moment, Stroph Research Center held the highest card. Whoever controlled the center was literally controlling the lowest level. And now, the center was under the care of the army. That was why patrolling the center was their top priority, especially with the increasing number of the rebellion activities.

As usual, Kazuhiro arrived at the center a few minutes earlier to perform his duty. After punching in, he went straight to his station. Nothing was out of ordinary according to his initial checking.

However, when he was about to leave his station, he noticed a shadow lurking behind him…

5

Thanked to Kazuhiro fast reaction, he just barely managed to fend himself from his attacker’s sword thrust. Quickly he grabbed a pair of wood sticks that were always hanging on the nearby wall. Getting ready in his fighting stance, he stared at the figure in front of him, who was wearing a full head mask in a black-colored combat suit.

Without waiting for an opening, he charged towards his attacker. That was Kazuhiro’s style of fighting. If he was piloting a MechaBot, the gigantic army’s mecha, he would take a different approach. He would analyze the situation calmly before resorting the most effective action.

However, in a close combat, he hardly waited for an opening. He adapted fast enough to his opponents’ skills and would then outsmarted them through his quick thinking and improvisation during the fight.

Using his dual sword skill, he made a diagonal slash with his right hand and a half turn followed by a horizontal left slash. Then a quick straight right thrust. He kept on charging without giving his opponent a chance to counter attack.

As Kazuhiro had expected, his opponent was only defending himself. Taking advantage of the current situation, he repeated the same pattern to make him believe that those were his only moves. When the opponent started to strike back, Kazuhiro would use that opportunity to catch him off guard with his hidden handgun.

But to his surprise, his opponent could see through his plan. At first he played along with Kazuhiro’s plan, only started attacking when he thought Kazuhiro was already out of moves and pushed him back. He acted exactly as how his target had laid it out for him.

The moment Kazuhiro distracted his opponent’s attention by dropping the stick on his right hand and performed a fast handgun exchanged, at that time his opponent had already circled him to the back and chopped him bare-handedly from behind. The shocked he received was enough to topple him down but Kazuhiro quickly rolled and parried another unexpected kick from his foe.

He’s surprisingly good, thought Kazuhiro.

He needed to think fast to take down the guy before him. Judging from the current situation, it seemed like he was the one at the disadvantage. He turned his gaze towards his handgun that was dropped when he fell just now.

As if reading Kazuhiro’s mind, his opponent stepped on the handgun and kicked it away. Their eyes met.

At this moment, there was nothing more that Kazuhiro wanted to do than to look at his worthy opponent’s face. That would be the highest honor for him, regardless if he wins or lose the battle.

There was only one way for him to do. He was not really good at it but that was his best shot. Using the power embraced by Empress Hikari herself in the form of Kleins’ mark planted on his right arm, Kazuhiro casted a projection spell to create double golden daggers on his both hands. Quickly he threw those daggers towards his opponents, which were then transformed into bright lights, blurring his eyes.

Without wasting this brief opportunity, Kazuhiro applied a <double accel> technique to approach his opponents in lightning speed. By the time the lights dispersed away, he was already right in front of his face, pulling off his mask…

But what awaited him was another surprise.

Standing in front of him was a woman. An angel looking face woman.

6

Kazuhiro quickly pulled back and put a huge distance between them. He was still staring at her in disbelief. For a few moments there was only silence accompanying them.

“Why are you hesitating?” Akane finally broke the quiet tense atmosphere.

“I didn’t expect the great combatant to be a woman.”

“Are you underestimating women?”

Kazuhiro shook his head. “Not in the slightest. I’ve a female colleague who are fighting at the front line.”

Akane smiled. She pointed her sword at Kazuhiro. “There is no excuse then. Shall we finish this fight?”

She was right. There was no reason for him to hold back. But why was he still contemplating? When their eyes met, before he even knew she was a woman, he had already felt something. It might just be his intuition but those eyes were not of a killer.

Kazuhiro dropped his weapon. It might cost him his life if he was wrong about it but he just had to take the risk.

“You are not here to kill me.”

“Oh? What made you think that?”

“Your eyes. Those are the eyes of someone who has been through a lot.”

His words gave her a chuckle. “Only one look in the eyes is enough to make you an expert on my life. I expect nothing less from the Empress’ favorite.”

Kazuhiro took a step forward. “I can help if you…”

Before he could finish his words, Akane had already lunging her sword into his chest.

“I’m sorry. But I need you to die, for now.” She whispered those words into his ears.

Kazuhiro slumped to his knees. *So she uses magic too, huh*… Then he fell to the ground.

7

Yuina had her day planned really well. After finishing her work, she went shopping for ingredients. She decided to make grilled stuff quail, Kazuhiro’s favorite dish.

When she got home, she prepared the dish straight away. She wanted everything to be perfect for Kazuhiro. Since the death of their parents, she stepped up to be his guardian. Though she was only four years older than him, sometimes she acted more of a mother than a sister.

She finished cooking at almost 7.30pm. Since Kazuhiro was on duty that night, he would only come for a late dinner. Yuina put away all the dirty dishes, sat in front of TV and ate a light snack.

Nothing interesting was shown on the TV. She kept on changing from one channel to another. She was about to turn off the TV when her communication screen beeped.

“Hello, Yuina.”

“Yes, Dr. Isao. What can I do for you?” replied Yuina, recognizing the face from the other end of the line. Dr. Isao Arsten was the appointed army physician for the Takahiro Second Division Unit.

“Ahh.. how should I put this. It is about Kazuhiro…”

Yuina’s heart beat faster as she listened to Dr. Isao’s words. Kazuhiro, her very own Kazuhiro was hospitalized on an attempted murder. Without wasting a breath, she drove as fast as she could to the hospital located within the Second Division Unit.

*You better be well, Kazuhiro*, she silently prayed.

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“Dr. Isao! Kazuhiro… how is he?” asked Yuina as she spotted the physician coming out of the operation unit where her brother was put in.

“Ah, Yuina. Don’t worry. Kazuhiro is fine. Sorry I didn’t tell you earlier on the phone. It’s actually not life threatening.”

Yuina breathed in, relieved to hear the good news. “Thank God,” she said as she clapped both of her hands together.

Dr. Isao smiled and placed his hand on Yuina’s shoulder. “Go ahead. He’s waiting for you. He even asked for his grilled stuff quail that you promised to make.”

“He’s unbelievable,” said Yuina, face palming. “I better go to see him now.” She walked towards the room, but then stopped and turned, facing the physician.

“Hey Doc, thanks for always taking care of Kazuhiro. I really appreciate it,” she said, smiling and waving before disappearing into the room.

Dr. Isao just smiled. He was their father’s closest friend. Out of responsibility and respect, he had looked after the welfare of those two siblings. Though they did not know it, he who had no family of himself had always considered them as his own children.

It must be hard being Yuina, he thought. Having a well-known brother whose life is constantly targeted, she has to be very tough herself.

8

“Ka-zu-hi-ro! Do you remember me?” asked Yuina, jokingly.

Kazuhiro stared at her. “Of course I remember you. My worry-wart older sister.”

“Hey, hey! Is that how you speak to your beautiful, loving sister who only cares about you?” she pouted.

“What are you? A 10-year old kid?”

Pretended to be angry, she ruffled her brother’s hair. “Well, whatever! I’m just glad that you are okay.”

“Yuina,” he called. “Thank you for always worrying about me.”

Although Kazuhiro hardly showed any emotion, Yuina was well aware that those words coming out from his mouth were really from the heart.

“Always my pleasure,” she smiled. But then her face turned quizzical. “How could someone beat my unbeatable brother in a close combat?”

“Oh, that.” Kazuhiro turned his gaze away, as if trying to remember something. “I let my guard down.”

His answer stupefied her a little. Her brother’s letting his guard down in a fight was really unheard of. She tucked her loosely shoulder length hair behind her ear.

“Hey Kazuhiro, do you know who your opponent was?”

*She was an angel looking face woman.*

“No,” he said, shaking his head. Then he looked at Yuina. “It’s already late. Why don’t you go home and rest? You have a busy day tomorrow.”

“What are you saying? I’m staying here tonight,” protested Yuina, crossing hands on her chest.

“But…”

“No but! A little brother can’t tell his older sister what to do. Besides…” she paused, before continuing, “I miss spending time with you like this. Only the two of us.”

“ So basically what you are saying is, you miss being in charged while I can’t do anything?”

“How mean!” she pinched him softly on the cheek.

Kazuhiro finally cracked a smile.

*What a sweet smile*. Yuina stroke his hair affectionately. “Sleep well dear brother.” She kissed his forehead.

And at that moment, he just remembered something. “Ah Yuina, could you please pass my wallet?”

9

It was already past midnight. Yuina was sound asleep on a sofa by the corner of the room. Kazuhiro stared at his sister for a moment before taking out his wallet.

He slowly opened it. Nothing was missing. He searched thoroughly every pocket in the wallet. What he found was a small hairpin coiled with a few strings of red-colored hair. As he thought, he was not imagining thing.

Kazuhiro closed his eyes, remembering what happened that night. Who was she? It was not like he had fell for her beauty. He admitted that he was a little bit enthralled by her look, the same way when he first met with Empress Hikari, who was still a princess back then. But that was only it. Even if she wasn’t a Goddess-like beauty, he would still be troubled by those eyes of hers.

Those sorrowful eyes that were screaming for help.

When she pierced his chest with her sword, he swore that he would have definitely died at that time. But what actually happened was, before the sword reached his heart, it had transformed into some kind of liquid. A paralysis poison to be exact, which caused his whole body to be numbed. Even so, the poison was not meant to kill him, just to knock him unconscious.

It was then he realized that she was using manipulation magic. A civilian with a high level magic skill. Interesting, he thought.

Before he went completely unconscious, he could barely see that she took out his wallet, as if looking for something. ‘Don’t worry. You are not going to die’ was what she uttered before he passed out.

He opened his eyes. The hairpin was still within his grasp. Somehow he knew that it held the key to unlock her mystery. He had to find her again.

10

“Look! Look! He’s awake!”

“Oh! Good morning, Kazuhiro.”

“Geez man, don’t scare us like that!”

“Better treat us to dinner next time.”

The moment Kazuhiro opened his eyes in the morning, he was greeted with noisiness. Well, it was a normal scenario whenever he was surrounded by his friends. The same friends who had been by his side since he was 14.

Hayato Versen, an intelligent mechanical engineer who was in charged of maintaining and upgrading the MechaBot. Eiji Chlores, whose skill was gathering data and information, worked at the Control Tower and was responsible in providing intel during combat.

The other two were Mayu Ingrid and Kaori Larden. Mayu specialized in piloting the MechaBot, and hence she was always at the front line together with Kazuhiro. Kaori on the other hand, worked closely with Eiji. If the latter’s job was to gain information, then her focus was more on researching and processing the information gathered.

Though they were in different fields, they would always find the time to get together. Kazuhiro felt so blessed to have such good friends around him, despite not showing his gratitude openly.

“Don’t you have better job to do this morning?” asked Kazuhiro, since they were all in uniforms. The women wore a similar type of white shirt, paired with a knee-length straight skirt.

“Ah, there he goes again. Kazuhiro and his non-thoughtfulness,” sighed Kaori, shaking her head.

“Hey, hey! The Captain gives us a half-day off so we could pay you a visit. It’s not like we were slacking off,” said Hayato, with his fake offensive tone.

“Looks like we are not needed here.” Eiji joined in the Kazuhiro-teasing-scheme. He placed his hands on both Hayato’s and Kaori’s shoulders. “Let’s just go from here. Mayu can take care of our ungrateful friend.”

“Eh? You are leaving now?” Mayu’s voice was half shrieking. “But…”

However, the three of them had already left. Kaori turned for a bit to give her a quick wink and a thumb up.

Mayu sighed. She realized a little too late what her friends were doing. They purposely left her there, to be with Kazuhiro alone. Slowly she looked at Kazuhiro, while steepling her hands.

“Um…Kazuhiro. How are you really feeling today?”

“Okay.”

“Ah… okay is good. Err… is there anything you need?”

“Thanks Mayu. But there’s no need to trouble yourself. I’m okay on my own.”

“No, no, it’s not a problem at all. Since Miss Yuina has already off to work, I thought I could do a bit of favor, accompanying you here, while I still have a bit more time to spend. I mean... um…” she stared down, her cheek blushing. “I want to be here.”

“Oh, okay.”

Kazuhiro was not so dense not to realize Mayu’s feeling over him. She was a really nice woman. Her sweet feminine face suited her personality well.

But he treasured her as a good friend and did not want to lose that, so he said nothing of sort that can offend her in anyway. As long as it didn’t interfere with their work, and the harmoniousness of their friendships, he would just leave Mayu and her feeling as it is.

“By the way Kazuhiro, do you know that Empress Hikari is coming down to this floor, in a couple of days?”

11

She was already waiting in the meeting chamber, where she would be meeting with Kazuhiro soon.

Empress Hikari was known as the people’s princess. Since she was young, she had shown tremendous great qualities that weren’t even existed in the Kleins’ before her. She was so down to earth, and treated the civilians on the same equality. And an additional bonus to her quality was her extreme good look. She had a wavy blonde hair, coupled with a fair, red skin. Her eyes were considerably large and her fuller lips just made her even sexier.

She wasn’t ashamed to come down to the lowest floor to meet with the civilians. To listen to their problems. And she tried her hardest to close the gap between the upper and the lower levels, despite the protests she received from the nobles and the knights.

It was during one of her visits that she accidentally met Kazuhiro. Princess Hikari had a habit of camouflaging herself. With the magic of Arduins bestowed upon her family, it was easy to deceive her appearance in front of public. She could turn into any look she desired.

With her loyal assistant, she would stroll at random city or village, experiencing her people’s suffering with her own eyes. One day, without knowing, she went into a lawless area and was almost mugged by a gang who conquered the area.

Fortunately, she was rescued by Kazuhiro who was on duty in that area. Not revealing her identity yet, she befriended him, and since then they would meet up whenever she came down to visit.

Attracted towards his kindness and sincerity, it did not take long for the princess to realize that she had fallen in love with Kazuhiro. When she revealed her true self to him, he was reluctant to accept her feeling at first.

But slowly Princess Hikari managed to win his heart through her modesty. He finally admitted his feeling towards her but their fairy tale dream did not last long. Soon after, the empire was shocked by the news of the death of Emperor Hideaki Kleins, Princess Hikari’s father.

As the next in line, Princess Hikari was named the new Empress and by the ancient law created by her own family, she had to marry a noble. Prioritizing the welfare of her people over her own feeling, she accepted the condition and married to Lord Watari Schberg.

Even so, her love for Kazuhiro did not fade away, and that led to a forbidden secret affair. Though their relationship had continued after her marriage, Kazuhiro did not even once take advantage of her. What they shared between them was so pure. All they did was just talked. Mostly educationally.

Empress Hikari smiled whenever she thought of him. How naïve he was. They never held hands like any normal couple would do, let alone touch her. So, when she was presented with the chance to plant the mark of Kleins on him, an emblem that proved his worthiness to use The Amida in a formal ceremony, she did not miss the opportunity to embrace him with a kiss.

Those times she spent with Kazuhiro were her precious memories.

“Your highness.”

She turned to look. Kazuhiro had already arrived, kneeled on one knee.

“Kazuhiro! How many times do I have to tell not to act formal with me. We don't have that kind of relationship.”

She grabbed his hands and brought them closer to her face. “I heard of what happened to you. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Thank you for your concern.”

She held his hands still. “I miss you Kazuhiro. Do you miss me, too?”

Her question, though legit, was hard to answer. She was his first love. Of course he would feel the same way. But she was now married. And Kazuhiro did not feel right to utter those words to someone else’s wife, despite his feeling. Hence he just kept it to himself.

Empress Hikari knew very well that she would not get a straight answer out of him. She let go of his hands and looked at his face.

“Do you still remember the promise you made when I gave you my necklace? That you will use your life for me?”

Kazuhiro nodded.

“Then make sure you’ll stay true to that promise. Because your life belongs to me.”

12

“Have you found her yet?”

Five days had passed but there was still no trace of Akane. She had totally disappeared out of their radar. That really made Shigeo mad like crazy.

“The bottom level is freakingly huge. She could be anywhere. And since she knows every single there is on this floor like the back of her hand, it complicates the search even further,” explained Tatsuo.

Shigeo clenched his fist. He really miscalculated this mission. It was never occurred to him that Akane would dare to double cross him. Not just she failed to kill her target, but she had fled too. To make matter worse, she carried with her the secret of this lab. If what they did here was to be leaked out…

They could not pull an all out search for her, since technically Akane was listed as deceased eight years ago. They could not enlist the army’s help either because their mission was of top secret.

Unable to contain his anger, Shigeo threw away everything there was on his desk. He was not just miffed with the fact that this mission was an utter failure, but also because he had lost her. His Akane. His toy, whom he had invested for years to fulfill his sadistic needs.

“Shigeo, we will find her. And when we do, I’ll kill her myself. You will be content with only her corpse right?” said Tatsuo.

Annoyed by what he heard, Shigeo grabbed Tatsuo’s shirt by the collar. “You listen to me. Akane is mine. Only I can do whatever I want to her. Understood?”

“Fine,” replied Tatsuo, releasing himself from Shigeo’s grip. “Geez, you don’t have to be mad over some toy. I’ll try not to, but I can’t make any promises. I’ll take any action as I deem necessary.”

Not happy with Tatsuo’s answer, Shigeo was about to counter when his partner quickly cut him off.

“Should I remind you that we are equal partners in this? I suggest you to calm down and focus on what’s important, the completion of this mission. You don’t want to incur *his* wrath.”

Right after Tatsuo’s statement, a screen that was hung on the wall in Shigeo’s room beeped three times, denoting an incoming message.

“Speak of the devil,” Shigeo muttered. He clicked okay to receive it.

‘*Catching Akane takes the highest priority. If you can’t find her, then lure her out. Failure to do so means DEATH*,’ were what written on the screen.

13

The place that she chose as a hideout was in deep underground. It looked like an abandoned facility. There were few rooms with dusty desks and chairs. Some were already broken. Somehow it reminded her of the laboratory that she was in before. But still this place was far better. No rules. No torture. And no Shigeo.

Each time she thought of that man, she had goosebumps all over her body. To be released from his claws was like a dream come true. She wondered how long would this freedom last before she had to give it up again.

It had been a week since she ran away. So far, there was no trace of Shigeo’s men trailing her. It didn’t mean she was already out of danger. But at least, it gave her ample time to strategize her next move.

The truth was, Akane was betting on a certain someone to accomplish her objective. Therefore when she saw an expected figure roaming inside the underground facility, her hope was lifted a bit.

“If you are interested in someone, you should ask for her number. Stalking will not get you a date,” said Akane.

Kazuhiro turned to look but he did not say a word. Instead, he was just staring at her.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, pretending not to know anything.

“Is that the real you?” He pointed at her.

The one standing in front of him was a different person. To be more precise, a woman with a different look. Dark brown hair, a plum face, and … In other words, her look was a complete opposite than the angel face woman he met that night.

“Oh, are you frustrated?”

“No, how you look does not concern me at all,” replied Kazuhiro, while shaking his head. He paused before continuing, “So what do you want from me?”

Akane smirked. “Who said about wanting anything from you?”

Kazuhiro took out the hairpin that he kept inside his upper shirt pocket.

Upon seeing that hairpin, Akane flashed him a smile. “So you are using a tracking magic in order to find me. Amazing. You are not the Empress’ favorite for nothing.”

“So, why am I here?” he insisted on the same question again.

“Hmm… I guess I want to get to know you better. Our last meeting ended pretty abruptly I’ll say,” she replied, playfully.

“It wouldn’t have if you did not try to kill me.”

She stopped smiling. Somehow the guilt got the better of her. Slowly Akane walked towards Kazuhiro, but stopped before she got any closer. Her eyes were focusing on his chest.

“Is your wound healing?”

Her intonation sounded different. More concern. And genuine. At least that was what Kazuhiro determined.

“Ah-ha. But the scar stays.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but was hesitated for a moment. It was quite embarrassing for her to say, but she said it anyway.

“Urm.. could you please unbutton your shirt?”

14

“Huh??!”

Between her new downgraded look and inconsistent attitude, Kazuhiro was more surprised by her unexpected request. For a few seconds, they both looked at each other awkwardly.

Akane could feel her face was reddened due to embarrassment. Her words, sounded so dodgy. She was lucky it was Kazuhiro she spoke to. Other guys might have jumped to a terrible conclusion after hearing such a request.

“What I mean was… umm… could you please show me the scar?” she corrected herself, trying to clear the awkward atmosphere between them.

“Oh, that? Okay.”

Not wanting to let Akane felt more ashamed, Kazuhiro unbuttoned his shirt. He then pulled down his right sleeve, just enough for the scar to be visible.

Closing the gap between them, Akane placed her hand on her chest and closed her eyes. Suddenly she was engulfed in a bright purple light, and returned to her previous form.

*The Goddess of Beauty.*

She lifted her right hand and brought it closer to the scar on Kazuhiro’s chest. “May I?”

Kazuhiro nodded.

Her fingers touched the scar and emitted a soft white light. Following the movement of her fingers, the scar was slowly erased, until there was no trace of the wound at all.

“There, no more scar,” she said.

Impressed by what he just witnessed, he took a step closer towards her. But his action made her to fall back twice the distance. Realizing what he did, Kazuhiro halted.

“So, you can perform healing too?”

She shrugged. “Only if it is inflicted by magic. Or by me.”

“That’s definitely a high level magic. Who are you?”

Instead of answering, she turned away from him. She went to the closest desk and grabbed a few rubbles she could found scattered on it. What she did with them was something that Kazuhiro could not figure out. All he could see was her hands manipulating the air on top of the gathered rubbles.

“The Amida is what causing the unrest in this lowest level, don't you agree?” she finally said. “It chose the Kleins to carry its will, and thus the Kleins was given the right to select whom they favor to be embraced by its power. You should know that very well since you are one of the select few.

Whilst those selected people continue to live lavishly on the upper floors, the rest of the civilians are left to suffer. They find it to be unbearable but it is impossible to undo the current system. After all, who could challenge the God who possesses the power from the Arduins?

‘Just accept the fate’. It might seem the only probable action but there are also others who thought otherwise. Why leave it to fate? If there is a way to obtain the great power, even the chances are at 0.001%, even if it means committing a great taboo at a cost of someone’s life, they would not hesitate to do it. All for the sake of one’s selfish desire. Is it really worth it?”

Kazuhiro, who had been listening tentatively, shook his head. “There is always a better way to resolve a problem. Obtaining more power seems plausible, and sacrificing a few along the way could be regarded as just. But if is guaranteed that the dead weighs more, shouldn’t that thought be abandoned completely? We are not at the border of life and death to resort to such way. And with the current ruling, the gap between the layers is slowly closing in. It is only a matter of time.”

“You put too much faith in your Empress. Unfortunately the majority does not share your ideal.”

“What do you believe in?” he asked.

Akane smiled. “My own ideal.”

She took the rubbles and threw them high towards the ceiling. The room was suddenly filled with fireworks.

Kazuhiro watched the magic she created in awe. But as he turned to look at her, Akane was already gone.

“Ah, I forgot to ask her name,” he muttered to himself.

And at that moment, he witnessed another amazing magic happening in front of his eyes. The fireworks languidly morphed into a word before they dissipated into thin air.

It spelled A-K-A-N-E.

15

“I’ve read your report on the Stroph Research Center’s recent attack,” said Captain Iroha Mariney after she summoned Kazuhiro into her office.

A woman at mid-30s, she’s someone with a high caliber. Believing in her own justice, she would not hesitate to deny the order from the higher ups if she felt even a slight suspicious on their motives.

Of course she did not display it openly. That was why she handpicked her own members, namely the Takahiro Second Division unit, whom she could completely trust, to carry the justice on her behalf.

She put her staff welfare above others, and she listened to their opinions as well, especially if it came from Kazuhiro. Her most trusted and talented soldier.

“Is there something that needs to be off record?” she asked.

It was not a month, or a year, but he had been working under Captain Iroha for about four years now. She had requested for him ever since he was a trainee soldier. Kazuhiro was well aware that he could not hide anything related to the army from her. She would figure it out, sooner or later. But it did not bother him at all, because they shared the unspoken mutual trust between them.

“What exactly do you want to know?”

“About the attacker. I found it very unusual for you not to mention much about it.”

She was spot on. When Kazuhiro wrote the report, he deliberately did not mention about the attacker’s identity. Or to be precise he did not know what to write about her. Everything about Akane was still shrouded in mystery.

“All I could say for now, off record, that the attacker can use a high level magic. I’m talking about the Kleins’ level of magic.”

“So is that why you did not touch much on the attacker? Because you think he’s from the nobles?”

Kazuhiro shook his head. “No. It’s just... what she said.”

“She?”

“Aye.

Captain Iroha pushed her back to the seat, slouching comfortably. “Alright. I’m all ears.”

“When she stabbed me in the chest, she said ‘I need you to die, for now’ but she did not finish me off. Instead, she just applied the paralysis effect on me.”

“Maybe it was never her intention to kill you in the first place.”

“Perhaps, but it’s too troublesome. Why putting up the act of killing then? She needed me to die at that moment, as if she wanted some kind of diversion.”

“From what?”

“My guess is from who. To run away from someone. Most likely from the one who hired her.”

Captain Iroha stroke her chin. “Those are your thoughts?”

“Aye. I truly believe she was hired to kill me. I could confirm on it from the way she fought. She was familiar with my fighting style. Looks like she does her homework on me. But then she did not finish the job when it was clearly her win. I think she had it planned from the beginning, to double cross her hirer. And besides…” he halted.

She needed my help was what Kazuhiro wanted to say, but he felt it was not wise to bring up the topic just yet. That was based entirely on his instinct, and he could be wrong about it.

“Besides?” asked Captain Iroha when Kazuhiro did not continue with his words.

“Ah, never mind. It is still a theory,” replied Kazuhiro.

Captain Iroha sighed. If Kazuhiro said something was still a theory, or a work in progress, or something along the line, it meant he would not be sharing his thoughts any further. There was nothing she could do to squeeze that information out of him.

“Okay,” she said. “Once you have confirmed on that theory of yours, do let me know. In the mean time, I’ll do what I can to cover up this report so that the boss won’t get suspicious. You may go now.”

Kazuhiro gave her a salute, and left.

16

Akane.

Kazuhiro went through the database of people who had lived in Takahiro Empire from the past and present. His search returned thousands of ‘Akane’. He then refined his search to only within the past 20 years, assuming that ‘the Akane’ would not have been over 20 years of age.

The new search revealed less than 100 names. That was much better, he thought. Since there was not much work for him to do on that day, he decided to look for information on her.

There was no guarantee that he would succeed. First of all, the search only listed the name of civilians on the lowest level. He was pretty confident that Akane was from the same level. But if she, for some reason, belonged to the nobles, then information on her would be highly restricted.

Another reason was ‘Akane’ might not be her real name. If that was the case, he had nothing to go on with. A complete dead end.

Gambling on his chances, he clicked on ‘Akane’ starting from the top of the list. He checked each of them thoroughly, until he reached the last name.

Kazuhiro sighed. He hated failure. And he hated not knowing. Why did he bother looking for her, he even questioned himself that. But if he didn’t, he would not be satisfied.

Just when he was about to turn off his smart pad, he noticed something that was never occurred to him before. There was one Akane listed under the ‘deceased’ section. Promptly he clicked on it.

*Akane Aldini.*

*Status: Deceased (Arduins Calender Year: 2997-3007).*

That was eight years ago, he mumbled. He turned to look at the photo of a little girl claimed to be Akane Aldini.

Red hair. Porcelain skin. Goddess-like feature.

He sucked in a long, deep breath. There was no mistaking it. He had found her. But… deceased? What was that supposed to mean?

17

Kazuhiro went home early that evening. Since Akane was declared dead, there would not be any more information available about her on the net. He was basically back to square one.

Only one way remained – that was to track her in person. He went to the underground place where she was before, but it seemed like she was no longer there. He tried to cast another tracking magic on the hairpin she left behind, but the spell was no longer working.

Despite everything, he was far from giving up. He had already involved that much so there was no turning back. He would figure out a way. He always does.

It was almost dusk when he arrived home. Around this time of year, the Arduins set early so they had shorter days. Not that it made any difference to him.

He turned the door knob and was greeted with a great smell of cooking. Someone was in his house but he did not recall inviting anybody over. He pulled out his handgun and slowly walked towards the kitchen.

The smell was getting stronger. He swore he could hear a woman’s voice, singing happily in the kitchen. Carefully, he peeked inside it. The woman, back facing him, was cooking croquettes. Lots of them. And she was red-headed.

It was definitely an unexpected turned of event. He was looking for her for a couple of days, and here she was, cooking happily in his kitchen. He put away his handgun and entered the area.

“Oh, you’re home,” said Akane, cheerfully smiled. She looked nothing more like a happy housewife cooking for her husband.

“How did you get in here?” asked Kazuhiro, a bit confused.

“How? Well, through the front door of course,” she replied, nonchalantly.

“No. That’s not what I meant…” he sighed. “Never mind. So, what are you doing here?”

Akane made a wait-for-a-minute kind of hand gesture. She turned off the stove, picked up the last cooked croquette from the frying pan and put it together with the already cooked ones. Then she took off her apron and sat on a chair, facing Kazuhiro. Her right hand was supporting her head.

“I’ve been thinking. It is so boring to live in that underground, abandoned place. There is no bed, no shower, no kitchen. That place really drives me mad! No sane people would have lived there, right? So I’ve decided. From today onwards, I’m going to move in in this house, with you.”

Surprised was not even enough to describe what he felt at that moment. She attempted to kill him just over a week ago. And now she appeared out of nowhere, acting all bubbly as if nothing ever happened between them.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Oh, no, no. It will certainly do you a lot of favor. You see, I can cook quite well. I can do house chores. I can run all your errands. You just worry about your work. I’ll take care of the house. Pretty much a win-win situation, hmm?” She gave him a puppy look.

Pretty much a win-win situation only for her, he thought. “I assume you won’t take no for an answer?”

“Nope,” she shook her head, still maintaining the puppy look.

Before he could oppose any further, his doorbell rang. Yuina’s voice came through the communication device. Kazuhiro sighed. How would he explain this situation to his sister if she ever found out?

“Aren’t you going to open the door?” asked Akane, smiling devilishly. She was holding a plate full of croquettes and then extending the plate to him.

Knowing he was completely trapped in her play, he reluctantly took the plate and brought it out to the lounge area. He gave a quick glance to the kitchen. Akane had already gone into hiding. He let out another sigh. What had he gotten himself into?

18

It was already late. Yuina had gone back home and brought a lot of croquettes with her. Kazuhiro had to give credit to Akane for her delicious cooking. Luckily his sister did not suspect anything. She was so happy filling up her tummy that she had temporarily lost sight of anything else.

Reflecting back, Kazuhiro felt like he was some sort of trouble-magnet, attracting problems one after another. Or maybe he was sugar, where ants would gather around him uninvited.

Whatever his life was similar in comparison, it was already too late to change anything. He had already made a name for himself that there was a price attached to his head. He was caught in a forbidden love affair that only God knows what would the nobles do if the secret ever leaked out.

And now, there was a very beautiful woman with an unknown motive living together with him. In his bedroom.

He stared blankly at the ceiling. This was his house so why did he have to sleep in the lounge, on a couch?

‘I’m your guest. I should be sleeping in the bedroom. And besides, you don’t expect us to sleep together in the same room, right?’ was what she said.

He sucked in a deep breath. That Akane. She really made herself at home. And very comfortably, too.

How would Yuina react when she learnt about this? What would Empress Hikari think of him? A cheater?

As his mind was constantly thinking, he heard Akane’s voice coming from the bedroom. At first it sounded like she was just sleep talking. Or perhaps crying. But the more he paid attention to it, the weirder the voice sounded.

Was she writhing in pain? The sound became more prominent that he could not ignore it any longer. Hurriedly, he rushed to the bedroom.

What he saw was Akane caught in a terrible nightmare. From the look of it, she seemed to be traumatized by something. He patted her shoulder trying to wake her up but instead…

Her eyes widened. She screamed hysterically when she saw Kazuhiro’s face. Instantly she grabbed his arm, twisted it and toppled him, face down. She then kneeled on top of him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She was panting hard. Rather than angry, she sounded extremely terrified. Tears were welling in her eyes.

“You were screaming. I was just trying to wake you up,” explained Kazuhiro calmly.

Finally regained her senses, she recoiled in fear, slowly moving backwards until she reached the wall of the room. She leaned against the wall, holding her chest, which was still breathing fast. Slowly she drooped herself along the wall, then pulled her knees closer to her chest and wrapped her arm around them. Tears were still trickling down.

“Idiot. You shouldn’t have. I might have killed you by accident, ” she whispered, but still could be heard clearly by Kazuhiro.

He just stared at her, while standing still. He did not really know how to react in this kind of situation but he knew he should at least say something. Especially when he saw Akane’s trembled body. What could really scare a capable woman like her to such extent?

“You are shaking. Let’s go outside. I’ll make you tea. It should help to calm you down.”

19

“Feeling better?” asked Kazuhiro. He filled up Akane’s empty cup for the second time.

“Uh-huh. Thank you.” Though she was already calm down a little, her voice was still wavering.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Akane shook her head. “It’s a long story.”

“We have all night.”

“Ain’t you working tomorrow?”

“I’ll manage.”

She took a deep breath. Though Kazuhiro seemed trustworthy, she hadn’t known him that well to share her personal life with. Besides, that was not the reason why she sought after him in the first place.

“It’s nothing. Really. I’ve been having this nightmare since I was 10 so it’s… normal.”

*Since she was 10*. He just remembered what he read before…

“Isn’t that when you were…” he halted, unsure how to continue on.

“Oh,” Akane turned her face away. “So, you knew.”

“Are you really ‘dead’?” Kazuhiro knew that was a dumb question to ask, but he needed to know without shilly-shallying.

“What kind of question was that?” She threw the blanket that was wrapped on her shoulder at Kazuhiro, and then pouted.

“Do I look like a ghost to you?” she mumbled, but at the same time her gaze was directed at him.

Honestly, he did not understand her at all. Just now, she looked tormented. Shaking and crying. Out of sudden she turned into a quirky and sulky woman. He had also seen her in a serious and genuine mode. Just how many personalities did she have?

“No,” he replied, then continued, “then why were you reported dead?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Only if you want to tell.”

She sighed. “Oh well, since it has come to this. I will tell you but on one condition.”

“And that is?”

“Take me to Sir Ryuu Welcht.”

“I’m afraid that might not be possible.”

He wondered what business did she have with him. To his surprise, Akane walked away from her chair and kneeled in front him.

“Please,” she begged. “Let me see him. He might have the answer to what I’ve been searching for. To who I really am.”

20

“Good morning! Your breakfast is served.”

Kazuhiro looked at the scrambled eggs prepared by Akane. The presentation of his plate was pretty. On one side there was baked beans poured on top of grilled button mushroom. The egg, on the other hand was decorated with a few drops of twirled peas puree by the side and sprinkled with chopped coriander on top of it. She really went all out just to prepare the breakfast, he wondered.

“What time you’ll be home for dinner?” she asked after sitting down to have breakfast together.

“It depends,” he briefly answered.

“Is there anything specific you want for dinner?”

He shook his head.

This current situation had reminded him of the time when he was staying together with Yuina. He had to tell her of his daily schedule, what time he would be home, how he spent his time, yada, yada.

Though it wasn’t the case with Akane since she didn’t pry much on his daily routine, still he felt a little uncomfortable. He hardly made small talk let alone staying together with a woman who wasn’t even his sister.

He finished his breakfast, and was ready to leave when Akane called him from behind. When he turned, he saw her extending a lunch box, head tilting to the side, smiling sweetly. He took a breath slowly. He had seriously gotten himself into an inescapable situation. So this must be how a married life is, he pondered.

For the first time in his life, he did not dare to think of what lay ahead of him. At least not for that day.

21

“There you are. Busy?” asked Mayu.

Since it was already lunch time, she went to look for Kazuhiro at his usual spot, the Hull as he called it. There was nothing really special about that place. It was a hull-shaped floating platform built by the bank of a man-made lake inside the Second Division Unit base.

He just liked it there, to sit out of the building enjoying the cold breeze while studying. Sometimes, the water of the lake waved and moved the platform. He read somewhere about sea on Earth. The waving lake and the swaying platform might be the closest replication they could make based on a ship sailing on the sea. Perhaps its rare characteristic was what made him appreciated the Hull more.

He turned away from his smart pad. “Not really,” he said.

“Hmm, what are you reading?” she leaned closer to him.

“The usual stuff.”

Mayu smiled. “Kazuhiro, let’s have lunch together? They are all waiting at our usual gathering place.”

After he was discharged from the hospital, he hadn’t joined the group for any activities yet. Therefore she was planning on dragging him to lunch even if he refused. She even went to prepare a special dish just for him.

“Oh, okay. Let me finish this for a bit more. I’ll join later.”

Happily, she clasped both hands together. “Ah Kazuhiro. I brought extra lunch today so you don’t have to buy one for you, okay? We can just share.”

Kazuhiro looked up. “That’s very thoughtful of you, but I have my lunch box with me.”

“Eh?!”

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

“Kazuhiro brought a lunch box today?” asked Kaori in disbelief.

The last time Kazuhiro had a lunch box on him was when he stayed with Yuina. After he moved out, he never brought one with him. So when Mayu told them about it, she was surprised. And Kaori felt sorry for her as well, since she had prepared lunch for him for that day.

“What’s so weird about it? It’s Kazuhiro we’re talking about,” said Eiji.

“That’s exactly my point. Kazuhiro doesn’t do all this stuff,” protested Kaori.

“As far as I know, he’s a good cook.”

“I know that! But he couldn’t be bothered with lunch boxes. Right, Mayu?”

“Ah? Uh-huh.”

Though Mayu didn’t take part in the argument between Kaori and Eiji, she agreed with her 100%. She was in fact troubled by it too. Most likely she was influenced by her frustration.

“Maybe Kazuhiro have found himself a good wife at home?” Hayato who kept quite all this while, suddenly made a joke.

“Then Mayu would have gone running and crying,” Eiji joined in.

“Why, you!”

Mayu was about to hit Eiji with a spoon when she noticed Kazuhiro approaching. Quickly she put down the spoon and held her hands behind her back.

“Err Kazuhiro. Come and have a seat.”

Kazuhiro put down his lunch box on a patio which was at the middle of the unit’s garden where his friends were sitting at.

“So, what are you making for lunch?” asked Kaori.

Without answering, Kazuhiro opened his lunch box. Inside, there was a big heart-shaped rice ball, together with a few smaller heart-shaped chicken nuggets. He could not believe what he saw. There were hearts everywhere. *That Akane. She had taken her prank a little too far.*

The rest of his friends were startled too, Mayu the most.

22

“So, according to the report, he survived because he applied a strengthening spell around his heart, huh? That bastard is dangerous as we thought he is.”

Shigeo put down Kazuhiro’s report and reached for his cigar on the desk. He smoked casually but when he was extremely angry or under tremendous pressure, he would turn into a heavy smoker. The cigars gave him satisfaction and relaxation, and made him forget about other stuff, especially Akane.

“Akane aside, he could be a hindrance to the success of our plan. How do we handle him now that Akane is gone?” Shigeo asked.

“Leave him to me. There are many ways to put his life on the line. For now, let’s proceed with the plan to lure her out,” replied Tatsuo.

Shigeo laughed. “So when it comes down to serious business, you’re ready to dirty your hand, huh? As expected from the general.”

“I would like to keep my involvement as minimal as possible, especially from that cunning Iroha woman. Anyway, are they ready?”

“You gonna love those babies. They are magnificent. Unfortunately we can’t activate the others without her. That damn Akane!” Shigeo punched on the desk, releasing his anger.

“I’ve said this before. And I’m going to say this again until it is registered in that thick head of yours.” Tatsuo stood up from his chair. “Forget that woman. She is nothing but trouble. Having an emotional attachment to your toy will bite you in the end.”

Without waiting for Shigeo’s response, he headed to the door. And just before he walked out, he halted.

“I’ll leave tonight’s matter in your care. Make sure she gets the message,” he said, and left.

Shigeo just watched him left. “Forget her? Not in a million years,” he muttered to himself. *Just you wait Akane. That pretty face will definitely be mine*.

23

Today was the toughest day for Kazuhiro. Having to avoid a bombardment of questions from his friends was something that he did not want to go through anymore. Because of that, he had to request for a special field assignment from Captain Iroha.

He went home directly after finishing with the field inspection. He needed to have a talk with Akane. She had to stop doing whatever she felt like. He should clearly outline the dos and don’ts for her to follow.

So the first thing he did when he arrived home was to look for her. But Akane was not in the kitchen, nor in the lounge. There was no sound of water running in the bathroom so she would not be taking a shower either. That left with only the bedroom.

Without thinking, Kazuhiro simply opened the bedroom door.

“Aaaaaahhhhhhh!”

He heard a scream which obviously belonged to Akane. Confused, he stared at her but what he saw was another unexpected part of Akane. She was barely covering her topless body with both of her arms. It was already too late to turn his gaze away.

“Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Don’t you know how to knock?” she shrieked with anger.

“But this is my room,” said Kazuhiro, still standing.

“What are you still doing there? Get out of here.” She reached a pillow with her left hand and threw the pillow at him, while her right arm was still covering her naked chest.

Catching the pillow thrown at him, he walked backwardly. “I’m sorry. I just…”

Before he could even finish his sentence, Akane had already slammed the door right before his face. He let out a long sigh of giving up. *So much of having a talk with her.*

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

A few minutes later, Akane came out from the bedroom, with a crestfallen face. She sat across him, who was lying on the couch. He quickly jerked up his body when he saw her.

“So, what do you want?” she asked, sulking still.

At least she had dressed properly in her pajama, thought Kazuhiro.

“First, could you please stop making that face? I’m sorry about earlier but I wasn’t purposely peeping on you.”

Akane gave him a glare of contempt. “But you saw *it*! That makes you equally guilty.”

Her answer made him bent down his head, giving in to her baseless accusation.

“Never mind. Let’s talk about the lunch box you prepared,” he jumped straight to the point.

“Oh, what about it?” she tilted her head, giving him an innocent look.

He looked at her in incredulity. How could she pretend to be so dense?

“Those heart shapes, they were embarrassing.”

She pouted and looked away from him. “This coming from someone who’s in the relationship with the Empress,” she murmured.

He couldn’t really capture her whole sentence, but he did hear the words ‘relationship’ and ‘Empress’. He was just about to ask when suddenly an emergency call from the Second Division Unit came in.

24

“The enemies are new type humanoids. About 30 of them have been spotted infiltrating the main city. So far there aren’t any casualties but before it happens, we need to annihilate all of them as soon as possible. Squads from the first and third divisions have been dispatched. All of you are required to regroup with them first to assess the situation before taking any action. Understood?” briefed Captain Iroha.

“Yes, Madam!” All of the members in her unit responded in unison.

Humanoids were no stranger to the army. They were the common weapons used by the rebellion each time they commenced an attack. But the new type humanoids were something they hadn’t encountered yet. Their abilities were not known of. It remained a mystery how the rebellion managed to get a hold on such valuable possessions. Regardless, the army would not consider that as a disadvantage since they used to go into battle without knowing of their enemy’s true strength.

“Kazuhiro Einsbert, you’ll lead the Falcon in this mission. Now, dismiss,” she gave her order.

Each MechaBots squad was given a codename and the Falcon was a unit dispatched from the Second Division.

In Takahiro Imperial Army, there was no rank for the soldiers except for the Captain to command the unit, and the higher ups. The commanding officer during the battle was chosen based on the nature of the battle at that time. And to go against these new type humanoids would definitely be right up Kazuhiro’s alley.

Kazuhiro gave her a salute, and then followed the rest of the soldiers to the MechaBots hangar. They need to launch out as soon as possible.

Waiting at the entrance of the briefing room was Yuina. Though she was not a soldier, she always took part in army related activities. She claimed that it was important for her to know everything that was going on within the unit since she was the administrator. But most of them knew the determination actually came from worrying so much about her brother. By keeping her eyes close on him would put her mind at ease.

Yuina gave a thumb up and mouthed a ‘good luck’ when Kazuhiro walked pass her. He replied with a nod. She then headed to the control tower where she would observe the battle up close and prayed for Kazuhiro’s safety, and the rest of her unit too.

25

“Hayato, is mine good to go now?” asked Kazuhiro the moment he arrived at the hangar.

“She’s good as gold, eager to slay down those humanoids,” replied Hayato with sheer confidence.

Though Hayato was still at junior level, Kazuhiro trusted his skill unconditionally that he had made him his personal engineer. And Hayata paid that trust with a high-level maintenance and upgrade on Kazuhiro’s MechaBots.

“Go get those bastards,” he continued with a grin.

“Will do.”

Kazuhiro jumped on the mecha’s elevated platform, transporting himself to the cockpit, situated inside its head. The size of the cockpit was not that massive. However it was designed to fit in two people comfortably inside it, just in case there was a need for a second passenger. He double-checked all systems inside it to make sure they were functioning well.

“It’s really comfy inside here.”

A woman’s voice from behind startled him. He turned to look and saw a familiar looking face.

Akane.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he muttered, “Why am I not surprised.”

“Hey, don’t be like that. You should be happy to see me here.”

“Why are you even here?” he asked, ignoring Akane’s playful tease.

“Ahhhh, you are as emotionless as usual.” Like before, she pouted. “Oh well, I can’t sleep without having a nightmare. So I thought why not experiencing the actual nightmare with you.”

*Was she for real?* “Listen, this is not child play. We are going into battle.”

Akane smirked. “Whom do you take me for? Hope you ain’t forgetting that you were almost killed by my hand in a battle.”

He sucked in a deep breath. Before he could argue with her any further, an incoming message came in.

“Falcon leader?” he heard Mayu’s voice calling for him.

“Yes?”

“Your command, Falcon leader?”

Kazuhiro was distracted with the appearance of Akane that he forgot he was supposed to give order to his team. He turned to say something but she quickly shut him off.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be in your way. Just go,” she said, waving the back of her hand to him.

Just let me lead this battle uninterrupted, he silently wished.

After checking the systems one more time, he connected the communication to all active MechaBots.

“This is Falcon leader to all Falcons. We’re launching in 10...9…8…7…”

26

“Enemy spotted at 10 o’clock!”

“Open fire!”

“Our laser didn't work. We can’t hold them any longer!”

The situation at the main city was chaotic. The army was clearly of no match to the new type humanoids. When the second unit arrived there, half of the army’s MechaBots had already been destroyed.

“This is Falcon leader. Opening a communication with Vulture leader and Harrier leader. What is your status?” Kazuhiro attempted a contact with the first and third units, respectively.

“This is Harrier leader. We are losing men, and the number of casualties keeps on piling up. The Vulture leader is badly injured, too.” A replied came in.

“Attend to the injured. We’ll take over from here.”

Kazuhiro then switched the communication to his squad. “Falcon unit. Take position. Cover for Vulture and Harrier units.”

As soon as he gave out the order, Kazuhiro aimed his fire at the closest humanoid. He needed to divert their attention towards his unit, to allow ample time for Vulture and Harrier units to retreat safely.

Unfortunately, those humanoids did not fall for his bait. They kept on attacking the other units, made it harder for them to escape.

“Falcon unit! Keep on firing!”

Even so, their effort was worthless. Not only they failed to gain the attention of those humanoids; as their comrades had experienced before, the laser had no effect on the new type.

Kazuhiro had to think fast. The life of his comrades was at stake.

“Eiji, I’m sending you a full 3D scan of the new type now. I need a complete analysis on it. And soon.”

“Roger!”

But he would not just sit around waiting for Eiji to report the result back to him. If something was not done soon, all of them might be wiped out. And the main city too.

He fired another laser. During their first encounter, he thought those new type were equipped with some sort of shield. After a thorough observation, he noticed that was not the case. The laser was actually dissipated before it even reached the humanoids.

“That means the new type is capable of disabling the laser and then transforming it into nothingness,” he monologuing.

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

Kazuhiro had completely forgotten about Akane in the passenger seat. He answered without looking at her.

“There ain’t any humanoids nor MechaBots in this floor equipped with such technology. Unless…” he paused.

“You figured out something?”

“Countering the laser like that is only possible using the magic of Arduins. But those humanoids are unmanned. Which means they are activated by someone who is able to wield the magic.”

“You came to that conclusion just by observing for a brief seconds? You never cease to amaze me, Kazuhiro Einsbert,” said Akane.

Before he could respond to her remark, Eiji’s report came in.

“As I thought,” he muttered.

27

A full analysis on the new type was displayed on Kazuhiro’s cockpit monitor screen. As he had already figured out, each new type was equipped with a central core that could store The Amida. Destroying the central core would terminate the vassal.

In order to do so, they need to get really close to the humanoids. However, that would mean an instant death. In that case, he needed to disarm the humanoids before getting to the central core. The question was, how could he possibly do that without getting shot first?

If there was only one humanoid, he could pull off his usual crazy stunt to bring it down. With 30 of them attacking at once, he could not take such risk, jeopardizing other people’s life.

There was one other way. To counter them with magic. The only problem was his magic use was still limited.

“You’re hesitating,” said Akane.

Kazuhiro took a breath. “I remember what you did to me. Transforming your blade into poisonous liquid before piercing my heart. If I could simulate that, then the chances are high to take down those humanoids.”

“But?”

“There are too many of them. With my current level, I could not possibly generate a powerful magic that could destroy them all at once. And if I were to go with one by one, it would be too late. The whole squad will be wiped out by then.”

“Or you can choose an alternative way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Use mini missiles instead of lasers. Those humanoids’ magic only reacted to objects visible within their vision. Rather than applying magic one by one, create a huge space for the missiles to go through, and coat them with invisible magic when they pass through your created space. I believe you can do that much?” explained Akane.

A mini missile carried an explosive within its armor. Its speed was slower than the laser. However, once shot, it would tail its target without fail. It’s either destroyed the target or being destroyed by the enemy.

She was definitely a master in using magic. Kazuhiro acknowledged her that much. A great ally and a formidable foe at the same time. Which side she was on at the moment was still questionable, but for now he had to trust completely that her suggestion would work.

“Falcon unit, there’s a change in plan. All of you are to retreat immediately and regroup at the top of the Main City Hall.”

The Main City Hall was a three-level building, functioned as an entertainment center to the civilians on the bottom floor. From the top of the building, a clear view of the main street could be seen. And that was where the humanoids were currently attacking.

There was one more instruction he needed to give out.

“Harrier leader, I need a favor from Vulture and your units.”

28

All of Falcon unit’s MechaBots were lining up in a formation on top of the Main City Hall. The Harrier and Vulture units had successfully lured those new types towards the Main City Hall during their escape, and were now taking shelter inside the building. It was completely up to the Falcon to finish the task.

Kazuhiro stood at the front of the formation. He had created the magic space and briefed his unit on the plan. Now he was channeling all his energy into it. He had to make this work.

“Falcon 5, are you ready?”

“Aye!” It was Mayu.

“Ready to fire on my signal.”

She locked her aim at one of the humanoids, while her gaze was focusing on Kazuhiro’s MechaBots. When he lifted the robot’s arm up, signaling to commence attack, she released her missile through the space created.

The missile was engulfed in a blue electrical charge when it passed through it, and then it turned invisible. She could only see the movement of the missile as a moving dot on her tracking screen. When the dot overlapped with the position of the targeted central core, she directed her face towards the real humanoid. As expected, it was blown up to parts.

“Target destroyed,” she reported.

Satisfied with the result, he lifted the robot’s arm once again. This time was for a synchronize attack. The moment he signaled the start of the strike, all soldiers under his command fired their missiles through the magically created space.

One by one the new types fell. Though winning seemed to be on their side, however, managing magic at a large scale like this proved to be hard on Kazuhiro to handle. Slowly the effectiveness of his magic dropped. The magic had already worn out before the missiles could even reached the humanoids, which made them easily destroyed by the enemy.

If this continued, the table would be turned. Think fast, he told himself. But before he could come out with a solution, he felt a soft hand touching his arm. The Kleins’ emblem to be exact. The mark suddenly glowed brighter, reacting to her touch. He could feel a massive energy flowing into his body.

“Do not lose focus,” said Akane, still touching his arm.

Using the magic enhanced by her, Kazuhiro strengthened the invisible spell. With Akane assisting him, he could feel the difference in the power level. What was hard for him to control before became a lot easier now. They were back on track, defeating the humanoids one by one, until none remained.

When it was confirmed that all targets had already been destroyed, Akane let go of her hand.

“Good job,” she complimented.

“How would you do it?”

“Eh?”

The way she suggested to take down the enemy worked for amateurs, that much he knew. But still, he was curious to know what kind of spell a high skill magic user like her would apply.

“How would you defeat those new types?” he repeated his curiosity.

“Oh, that,” she tilted her head while stroking her chin. “Since I’m so awesome, I could just simply negate their magic. A piece of cake.”

There, she did it again, back to her annoying self. Kazuhiro just stared at her, speechless. Why did he even bother asking?

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The whole Falcon unit was busy helping the other two units, tended to their injuries while waiting for paramedics to arrive. Akane used that opportunity to sneak out of the MechaBots and went to where the humanoids remains were.

She was searching for something that might be left for her. One of the humanoids was a message carrier. If Shigeo decided to dispatch this special messenger together with the rest, it could only mean one thing – he would release hell on this bottom floor, unless she surrendered.

Her freedom vs the lives of the civilians.

Finally, she found what she was looking for. The remained of the message carrier, a one-inch black cube that wasn’t destroyed because it was protected by a strong magic. Her magic.

Slowly she opened the cube. A small firework popped out. *So, that’s his plan*.

29

“Completely destroyed, huh? Was it him?”

“Who else do you think could pull off something like that?”

Shigeo and Tatsuo were having discussion in their usual meeting room. The new type humanoids they dispatched were utterly annihilated. But that was expected.

“I’m well aware of what that bastard is capable of. He even took down the best Emperor’s knight all by himself. What I meant was, are you sure she wasn’t there with him?” Shigeo rephrased his question.

“What made you think she would be there with him?”

“Instinct.”

Eight years of training Akane, Shigeo had monitored her very closely. Not just on her physical appearance, but also on her movement and decision making during combat. He noticed something different during her combat simulation with Kazuhiro. She seemed to be drawn towards him, especially after the defeat of Sir Ryuu.

At first he thought Akane was only focusing on defeating him, studying every move he made. But after her betrayal, he realized that wasn’t the case. She was observing him as a person. That gave him an uneasy feeling.

“According to the informal report, looked like it was all his doing. The magic used was amateurish. There was no sign of her spotted within the squad. But it can be confirmed that she was at the remained of the new types since the message box had been activated. As of your theory, or instinct as you called it, I won’t rule that out just yet. That Second Division is the most trouble-making unit. I never trust that Iroha. If it happened that Kazuhiro is helping Akane and Iroha is covering them up, then it’s good news. I could kill two birds with one stone. Eliminates all of them and disbanding the squad. All I need to do now is to catch them in action.”

“Then our next plan is the best way to flush them out.”

The truth was, Shigeo could not wait any longer to get Akane back. His sadistic life was incomplete without his toy.

Tatsuo shrugged. “Maybe. I just received disturbing news. Empress Hikari is coming down to the festival.”

30

“I’m breaking the rules by bringing you here. So please refrain yourself from doing anything inappropriate.”

After giving a thorough thought, Kazuhiro had finally decided to agree on Akane’s request, to be granted an audience with Sir Ryuu Weltch. Though that meant he would be considered as her accomplice if she turned out to be their enemy.

“How do I look?” she asked, putting hands on her hips.

The Yoshwhyte Great Prison on the bottom floor, where Sir Ryuu Weltch was imprisoned, was no ordinary jail. Visitors were restricted. Only authorized personnel were allowed to go in and out.

Even the security within the building was tight. There were cameras everywhere, and were monitored every single second.

To get to the prison was another matter. It was situated at the top of Mount Frey, the highest mountain on that level. The only accessible way was through a special teleportation gate, with an approved code. Hence, making the attempt to break in and out of the jail impossible.

Those who had tried before found themselves deep in the mountain, full of man-eating beasts. They either became prey to those beasts or ran back to the prison, if they were lucky enough.

Because of its tight security, bringing Akane in was not an easy task. Fortunately, she had the skill to camouflage herself. And the one he was staring at right now looked exactly like his sister.

“Appearance-wise, no one will doubt you are not Yuina.”

Posing as Yuina was the best disguise since she was part of the Second Division. Him being seen with her at the prison would not raise any suspicions.

Akane clasped her hands, smiling broadly. “Shall we go now?”

31

The Yoshwhyte Great Prison was exactly as described. The building was massive. From the top, only one floor was visible. The rest of the floors were built underground.

After going through the teleportation gate, they arrived at the main gate. There, a security check was performed to ensure no dangerous weapons were on them.

From the main gate, the next station was the main entrance. As per requirement, they had to undergo the second level of security check - a full 3D body scan. The purpose was to identify hidden weapons such as poison or drugs hidden under skin or nails or hair. All of their electronic gadgets were also inspected.

There was another layer of thick door right after entering the main entrance. All personnel had to confirm their identity before entering the prison. This might be the toughest part to get through.

Though Akane mimicked the appearance of Yuina really well, still she was the fake existence. She could not reproduce an identical fingerprint, nor blood type. The camouflaging was just a medium to deceive people but not to fool the sophisticated security system. She had no choice but to tamper with the system.

Kazuhiro had briefed her everything she needed to know about the security implemented at the prison. She convinced him that she had a trick up her sleeve. Now she just had to prove it.

When she placed her right palm to be scanned, at the same time, she implemented a manipulation spell. She didn’t mention this to Kazuhiro but her manipulation magic was able to hack and control electronic machines and devices. That was how she transferred The Amida inside those new type humanoids.

After a few seconds, Yuina Einsbert was written on the screen. She pulled back her hand and smiled contently. She had passed the test.

32

“Well, well, this is a surprise! Kazuhiro Einsbert, out of all people, comes to visit me. I might have not run out of luck yet.”

Sir Ryuu Weltch sat on a couch in a designated meeting room., handcuffed. As a former Emperor’s knight, he was given a special treatment compared to the rest of the jailers. A comfortable ensuite room with his own wardrobe. His own set of entertainment. A special meal three times daily. Basically he was living a lavish life even though confined in a prison. The only thing lacking was freedom.

But he did not need his freedom anymore. There was nothing left for him in the outside world. Sometimes he felt that he would be better off dead. Of course that wish was not granted. He was kept alive to repent on his sins.

“So what do you want?” he asked.

Kazuhiro sat on the couch opposite him. They were about the same age, but physically different. Sir Ryuu could be described as a well-built tall, dark and very handsome man. His golden hair shone his gallant look even further, enough to make the nobles women drooled over him. But he had his eyes set on only one woman.

“Tell me about Dr. Ichiro Weltch’s research on Madoka Orphanage.”

Dr. Ichiro Weltch was a renowned researcher, and a father to Sir Ryuu. The truth was Kazuhiro had no idea what he was asking about. Madoka Orphanage was the only name mentioned by Akane. What was the connection between Dr. Ichiro and Madoka Orphanage was still ambiguous to him. He had to figure out the meaning behind it from the man sitting in front of him, if he was generous enough to share.

Sir Ryuu glanced at Akane, in disguised Yuina form, who was leaning against the wall near Kazuhiro.

“Why do you bring your sister here? To seduce me to talk?”

“Tell me what I want to know.”

He laughed at Kazuhiro’s request. “I don’t know what kind of rumors blowing into your head, but there was nothing to tell.”

“What happened to the orphans?”

“Dead, I presumed.”

“Was that your father’s doing?”

“Whether he had something to do with it or not, it’s none of my business. And what happened to those orphans, it was out of my concern too. Anything else you want to know?”

Kazuhiro was about to ask the next question when the blue light engulfing Akane’s body stopped him from doing so. She was back in her true form. Slowly she walked towards Sir Ryuu.

“Was that why you abandoned me, because I was never of your concern?” she said.

Surprised by her appearance, Sir Ryuu jerked backwards. His eyes were staring at her, widely opened. His mouth agape.

“Akane…” That was the only word he managed to utter.

33

“You look like you've seen a ghost,” said Akane.

She was right. He could feel like his blood was being sucked out of his system. He didn’t expect to see her, alive and grown up. She had turned into a beautiful angel.

“How is it possible? I thought you were dead.” He still could not believe his eyes.

“So it would be better for you if I stay dead?”

“No! Of course not. I… It just… This is too much to take.”

“Yeah? Which part? That I’m still alive, or of the promise that you failed to keep?”

“Akane…”

He could not find the right words to say.

“I trusted you. The experiments they performed on me were unbearable. I cried every night until I didn’t have any more tears to shed. But I endured all the pains because I was clinging to your promise. To take me away from there. But I was being a fool. Of course you would not have come for me. Why would you? I’m just a mere guinea pig who has no value to be concerned of.”

*No, no, you got it all wrong*! He wanted to scream those words out. But she had already jumped to her conclusion. He doubted his words would reach her, regardless what he said.

“I swear, if I knew, I wouldn’t have…” he halted, unsure of what exactly to say. Would he really save her back then? He had no doubt that he would try. But he was only 12 at that time. What could he possibly do at that age? It was different when he went rogue, attacking the lowest floor. He had had already gained much power. If it wasn’t because of Kazuhiro…

“You wouldn’t have what? Abandoned me? Or you wouldn’t have run amok over an unrequited love and got caught before being dumped here?”

Akane’s voice brought his focus back to her. He shot her a surprised look. How would she know of his feeling when no one else didn’t?

“Your expression just confirmed it. I was spot on.”

“But how?” Sir Ryuu asked.

It wasn’t just him. Kazuhiro, who was just listening quietly all this time, was also looking at Akane, waiting for her explanation.

With all eyes were now set on her, she let out a sigh.

“You know, I keep myself up to date with the current state of affairs, especially on you, Ryuu. Ops! My bad, Sir Ryuu Weltch,” she said sarcastically. Then she directed her gaze towards Kazuhiro.

“Unlike Mr. Doesn’t-Show-His-Emotion here, yours is very easy to read. You never change. Always acting emotionally because of a woman. I guess you learnt your lesson the hard way, huh?”

Once again, she was right on target. Sir Ryuu admitted that was his biggest weakness. He was a complete opposite of Kazuhiro, his sworn enemy. His fighting skill could be said to be on par with him, but he was influenced much by his emotion during the battle. And that led to his lost.

He shook his head, and then laughed lightly. “In the end, I’m just a loser,” he said, admittedly.

Akane only looked at him without saying a word. A few seconds later, she turned around and changed back to her disguised form.

“Let’s go,” she told Kazuhiro.

“Are you sure?” Kazuhiro stood up. “You haven’t gotten the answer you are looking for.”

“He doesn’t have it,” she answered, firmly. Without waiting for anything else, she walked towards the door.

“Akane,” Sir Ryuu called out to her. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too,” she answered without looking.

Kazuhiro, who followed her closely from behind, gave him a quick glance. Something felt so dissimilar. Given his status, Sir Ryuu had always appeared arrogance. But today, Kazuhiro noticed a different side of him. A vulnerable guy who carried guilt in his heart. For the first time, he pitied him.

34

About half an hour had passed since their visit to the Yoshwhyte Great Prison. Now they were heading back to Kazuhiro’s place, but none of them were saying anything. Kazuhiro was driving while Akane was just staring blankly outside the car’s window.

Though teleporting was possible, the use of it was limited especially on the lowest floor. The gate could only be built with the authorization and activation from the Kleins. To go from one place to another, the civilians used the conventional way, either through a private vehicle or a public transport.

Kazuhiro owned a private vehicle, a car type. All vehicles in the Takahiro Empire, private or public, used sensors to navigate. The vehicles did not have tyres, but a flat platform at the bottom where the sensor was placed. This only meant the vehicles could only move on special-built roads. Driving outside these roads was impossible because the sensor would be automatically turned off.

Even with sensors, the driver still had to steer their vehicle accurately. Most of the time, Kazuhiro focused on the road in front of him. But once in a while, he glanced at her.

“Why are you keep on looking at me?” Finally Akane broke the silence, noticing his gaze.

“I don’t understand. You risked your life by coming here. Looking for an answer was just a pretext to enlist my help. The truth was, you wanted to see him, am I right?”

“And if I was?”

He didn’t answer her. It was his decision to grant her request, so he had no right to argue with her reason. At least, both of them were not caught. He could just let this one slip away, for now.

“There were 15 of us. 6 girls, 9 boys.” Akane suddenly said.

“Huh?”

“The children at Madoka Orphanage. We didn’t know who our parents were. In fact we didn’t know anything. We were cut off from the outside world. There was a keeper who provided us with clothes and food, but without a name nor face.

I think I was about 8 when Dr. Ichiro came down to the orphanage, with Ryuu and one other guy. He said he would be taking care of us from then on. He seemed nice. For abandoned children like us, there was no better news than that.

Since we never had a proper care, we had to undergo special treatment everyday. To make sure we were disease free, he claimed. Nothing was out of ordinary at that time. Ryuu would come down with him each time, to play with us, me especially.

About a year later, Dr. Ichiro started injecting us with blood. A little amount each time, weekly. Not long after, some of us began to act erratically. We were no longer sleeping in a room, but instead in a cell.

The symptom got worsened. Everyone was affected except me. Locked up in a cell all alone, and watched my friends, one by one going insane and died in the end, doesn’t matter how hard I try, those images will not go away. That’s when the nightmare began.”

Tears swelled in her eyes. She continued staring outside of the window. For a few moments, there was only silence. Only the sound of the vehicle’s engine was heard.

“What happened after that?”

She switched her look at Kazuhiro. He was focusing on the road, but his left hand was extended to her, offering a white handkerchief. She took it and wiped off her tears.

“Obviously I was the only survivor. Dr. Ichiro brought me to a secret lab where the other guy was waiting. No more playing around. I hadn’t seen Ryuu since then.

Every day, I underwent military training and survival skills. Dr. Ichiro came once in a while to check on my health. Not long after, something weird was happening to me. Out of the blue, I could invoke The Amida.

So I consulted Dr. Ichiro. He was hesitating at first, but then decided to tell me everything. They wanted to create a human weapon. And we, the children of Madoka Orphanage were their test subjects.

The blood he used on us, which caused the death of the other children, was of Empress Hikari. Apparently I was the only one having a 100% compatibility with her blood. Basically, I simply inherited everything that the Empress has.

For four years, Dr. Ichiro became my personal physician, until one day I was informed of his death. Despite what he did to me, he wasn’t really a bad person.” She halted before continuing, “Well, that’s the sad story of my life.”

The revelation of her background took him by surprise. He always had his suspicion that Akane gained that power not in an ordinary way. But carrying the Empress’ blood was unimaginable. So that was what she meant by creating taboo in order to obtain power.

“And what made you decide to share your story with me?”

“Even if I don’t, you would still dig up my story, right? So I’m just saving you from future troubles.” She punched him lightly in the upper left arm. “So what’s for dinner tonight?”

He shrugged. “You’re thinking about eating at this moment?”

Another punch landed on him. “What’s wrong with that? I’m starving and you’re buying.”

“You are unbelievable.”

She punched him again. This time, a bit harder.

“Ouch! Stop that.”

And that was how the situation took a drastic turn. She easily switched her mood from sad and serious to carefree. But it did not bother him in the slightest, because he started to understand her. The reason behind those sorrowful eyes.

35

No matter how hard he tried closing his eyes, he still could not sleep. His meeting with Akane earlier had really affected his emotion. Sir Ryuu’s memory from 10 years ago was flowing into his mind.

He still remembered that day clearly. On his 10th birthday, he received an unusual birthday gift from his father. A visit to the bottom floor. He wasn’t that thrilled. A lot of stories related to that world were chiseled hard onto his head. But still he accepted the gift.

To go down to the lowest level, they had to use the teleportation gate. The only entrance on that level was at the Stroph Research Center. When they arrived at the center, there was a car waiting. Not luxurious, but it was okay to do the job of transporting them.

The ride took about two hours. Finally they reached their destination. But to Sir Ryuu’s surprise, it was an underground building. Old and smelly. Inside it was a number of children.

Seeing those children was like encountering ghosts for him. So he hid behind Dr. Ichiro’s back, but his head was poking out a little.

“Why are you hiding? Are you scared?”

He heard a voice of a little girl asking from behind. When he turned to see, his eyes were widened, mouth agape. It wasn’t a ghost that he saw, but an angel.

That was how it started. Since the encounter, Sir Ryuu never failed to visit each time Dr. Ichiro went to treat those children. He befriended them, and was charmed by Akane. She was a sweet and gentle girl, always made him laugh. In return, he taught her how to read. She was a fast learner.

For almost two years he frequented them. But then something strange started to happen. They were locked up in a cell and weren’t allowed any visitor, except for Akane. He could still meet her in a special room. Even so, she wasn’t her usual self. There was hardly smile on her face.

From her expression, he could tell that she cried often. After insisting, Akane told him of her pain, from the treatment received. But she didn’t say anything about the other children. Out of sympathy, he made a promise to take Akane away forever from that place. And that was the last time he saw Akane’s smile.

With a strong desire to save her, Sir Ryuu who had reached 12, confronted his father. He told him of his intention to bring Akane out of that place, only to incur his wrath.

Disobeying his father’s order, he ran to the teleportation gate but was caught. As a punishment he was locked up in his own house. For two months he wasn’t allowed to go out or meet anybody. He didn’t even know where his father went.

Until one day, Dr. Ichiro came back and delivered the bad news. All of the children at Madoka Orphanage had died of an unknown illness.

Sir Ryuu was so depressed. Drove by his failure to save Akane, he immersed himself in a training to become the Emperor’s knight. Four years later, he was appointed as one.

That’s when he met Princess Hikari and grew closer to her. His life changed dramatically. Slowly Akane disappeared from his mind, and was replaced with the memory of the princess.

He strived hard to be the best so that one day he could marry her. But his hope was betrayed when he found out about Kazuhiro and the princess. Drove by jealousy, he swore that he would destroy him, and yet here he was, lost to him in a one-to-one fight.

Akane was right. He let his emotion consumed him. This was his price to pay for not being wise. He had accepted his fate and moved on. However, the angel he thought was dead was very much alive and had grown beautifully. It might be the best time for redemption but when he remembered Kazuhiro was here with her, his emotion quickly took over.

Angrily, he clenched his fist and thrust the wall.

36

“Your Highness! I insist that you reconsider your decision.”

Lord Gorou Arabasque voiced out his concern towards Empress Hikari’s intention to take part in the Takahiro Annual Fireworks Festival. He came from the Arabasque noble’s lineage who had been serving the Kleins family as the royal advisor since the establishment of the empire.

“What’s wrong with it? The festival will be well protected. Besides, the Emperor’s knights will be guarding me. Don’t you have faith in your own knights?”

“Lord Gorou bowed. “It is not of my intention to look down on our own knights. With the recent attack at the main city, it isn’t the best timing to make your appearance down there. Furthermore, your visit might just spark the opportunity for them to eliminate you, the source of their hatred.”

“Then there’s the more reason for me to be there during the festival. Closing the gaps. Reducing the hatreds. Those are my responsibilities. And I will perform my duty without fail even if I have to expose myself to danger,” Empress Hikari’s decision didn’t budge an inch.

“But Your Highness…”

“No but, Lord Gorou,” she cut him off. “I totally understand your concern. But this is something that I have to do.”

“There’s no other way to convince you, Your Highness?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid not. Is there anything else?”

Giving in to her order, Lord Gorou bowed once again. “No, Your Highness. I shall see to it that only the best Knights escorting you.”

Those words made her smiled. There was already the best knight protecting her down on the lowest floor. Her knight of shining armor. Kazuhiro would not let anything to happen to her. That she was sure of.

37

Three days had passed since their visit to Yoshwhyte Great Prison. Nothing out of ordinary happened within those days. Like any other days, Kazuhiro had already dressed in his uniform, ready to go to work.

He sat at the table, having his breakfast when he noticed Akane was in her camouflaged form. The chubby, unattractive lady.

“Why do you look like that?” he asked.

“Why, you asked? Today is the Fireworks Festival. Of course I’m going. And you, mister, are coming with me,” she winked.

“I’m on duty today,” he answered, continuing eating his breakfast.

“Oh, no you’re not. This Daiki Ramond guy has taken over your shift. So you’re basically having a day off today.”

Upon hearing that, he put his cutleries down. “But it’s not possible. I didn’t request to be off duty.”

Akane tilted her head as she normally did. “You didn’t? That was surprising.”

“I have to contact the unit to correct this.” He stood up and walked towards the communication screen.

“Hey, you know what?” She called out to him. “Mr. Daiki is actually having a little bit of difficulty in his life so he needs the extra shift. If you take that away from him now…” She didn’t finish her sentence.

Kazuhiro shot her a suspicious glare. “This was all your doing, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t answer but smiled devilishly.

There was no need for an explanation. Only Akane would do something crazy for such a trivial matter.

“Akane?”

“Yes?”

“Next time, if you need or want to do something, just tell me? Don’t do anything ridiculous behind my back.”

“Yes!”

He went back to the table to finish his breakfast. Akane was still standing there, smiling. It might just be his imagination but somehow she looked very content.

Curiously, he asked. “Did I say anything amusing?”

“No,” she shook her head. “That was the first time you called me by my name. I know it doesn’t mean anything, but… for some reason it made me happy.” She clasped her hand. “Okay, I’m going to prepare the lunch basket for our picnic.”

“Eh? What picnic?”

But she was already gone, leaving him wondering alone.

38

“Oh my gosh! This is so huge! Look! Look at that gigantic *wheely*!”

The gigantic ‘wheely’ Akane was referring to, was a tube in a wheel shape that made a 360o horizontal turn. The riders could enjoy several different views of the bottom floor while riding in it.

“Let’s take a ride,” she said, pulling his arm.

Kazuhiro sighed. He had never been in a situation where everything was out of his control. Not even with the Empress. But Akane, she was on a different league. She acted on her whim. She did thing as she pleases. She invaded his personal life. And today she changed his shift just to make him accompanying her to the festival while carrying the lunch basket. She was definitely worse than Yuina. His sister was far more reasonable than this.

Before he could refuse to her request, someone patted on his shoulder. He turned to look, then sucked in a deep breath. His nightmare for today was about to begin.

“Kazuhiro! I didn’t expect to see you here. I thought you were on duty today?”

It was Hayato. And behind, the whole gang was approaching.

“Hey Kazuhiro!” Mayu waved at him. “Why didn’t you tell us you are off duty? Otherwise we would have invited you to join along together with…” she halted.

“Kazuhiro, who is she?” Apparently she just noticed of Akane’s appearance.

All eyes are now fixed on Akane. He knew that eventually he had to explain about her, especially when she was still comfortably holding his arm.

“Ah! She’s the heart-shaped lady!” said Kaori, in a high pitch. Her index finger was pointing at the lunch basket in Kazuhiro’s hand.

“It must be it,” seconded Eiji.

Now all faces turned to Kazuhiro, demanding an explanation. How could he explain who Akane was?

Knowing that Kazuhiro would not be able to provide the answer, Akane let go of his arm, and curtsied in front of his friends.

“Nice to meet all of you. I’m Akane. Currently I’m staying with Kazuhiro.”

“What?????” said the four of them in unison.

“Who’s staying with who?”

There was someone else asking from behind Kazuhiro. Someone with a very familiar voice.

“Yuina,” he said, half-heartedly. Unfortunately for him, this matter would get worse from here on.

“What’s the meaning of this Kazuhiro? Why is she claiming that she’s staying with you?”

“Because she is staying with me,” replied Kazuhiro.

“Kazuhiro! This is not funny.”

“Ah, Miss Yuina. How do you like the croquettes?” asked Akane, flashing her best smile.

Yuina’s eyes widened, while her hand covered her mouth. “You cooked them?” Her voice was toned down.

Akane nodded. Her smile had not disappeared yet from her face. Seeing that, Yuina let out a small sigh. She turned back to Kazuhiro.

“You better explain everything to me. I want to know why my innocent little brother is staying together with a woman.”

“We demand an explanation too,” Kaori joined in, putting hands on her hips.

“Do I have to?” protested Kazuhiro.

“Yes!”

“Of course!”

The way Yuina and Kaori responded to Kazuhiro’s reluctance made Akane chuckled. “Why don’t all of you join us for a picnic? I made a lot of sandwiches.”

39

They were all heading together to Xylens Garden, one of the most popular picnic places in that floor. It was situated within the festival area, which was perfect for them.

Though they walked in a group, the atmosphere surrounding them was an awkward silence. No one was saying anything.

After several minutes of awkwardness, Hayato slowed down his movements and poked Eiji from behind. Fully understood his intention, Eiji slowed down as well and pulled Kazuhiro to the back.

“Are you sure about this?” Hayato whispered, just enough for both Eiji and Kazuhiro to hear.

“What are you talking about?” Kazuhiro didn’t quite understand what he was referring to.

“If you asked, I’ll say Mayu is a better choice,” said Eiji, without really answering his question.

“Oh, that.”

Kazuhiro started to get the gist of his friends’ intention. They were wondering about Akane. No, actually their concern was more on Akane’s look. Her fake disguise. If they were to see her actual angelic face, Kazuhiro had no doubt that they would go gaga over her.

But for now, he just let them think what they wanted to. Akane was already too hard for him to handle. He did not plan to add them to the list. Glancing at those women walking in front of him, he noticed that they were keeping their distance from each other.

What was the point of having a picnic together if they would not be talking to each other? And why did he have to be in the middle of this ridiculousness?

Before he could figure out what to do to break the awkwardness he was in, a parade of vehicles drove pass them. One of them was big and luxurious. Though he could not see through the tinted windows, he knew too well who rode inside it. Empress Hikari.

Kazuhiro inhaled slowly. As if he hadn’t had enough trouble already for that day.

40

Colorful flowers were planted in several semi-circles, enhancing the look of the green fluffy grasses. Those different shades were the reason why Xylens Garden was popular among the lowest floor residents as a recreational spot.

Though a lot of people were enjoying themselves at the garden, the same could not be said with Kazuhiro’s group. The awkward silence was still accompanying them.

They were sitting in a circle where the lunch basket was put in the middle. After saying a prayer, they helped themselves with the sandwiches. Despite not talking, it was showed on their expressions that those sandwiches were really good, especially Hayato. He could not stop himself from having second, and then third.

Akane was not exaggerating when she said she made lots of sandwiches. The amount she prepared was more than enough to feed the whole group. That made Kazuhiro pondered if she had done it on purpose.

“Did you plan for this to happen too?” He who was sitting besides Akane, whispered to her.

“As flattered as I am, unfortunately I’m no God. But if I must say, I did expect this to happen, so I was prepared for it.”

He knew it. There was no such thing as coincidence when Akane was around. How she pulled the trick, he would have to figure it out one day.

“You shouldn’t have invited them.”

“Oh, why not? I thought it might be fun. Besides…” she glanced quickly at Mayu. “It is interesting to watch *her* reaction each time she is looking at you and me.”

“Yuina?”

“No, the one who has a crush on you.”

“Oh, Mayu.”

Akane looked at him, and smiled mischievously. “You do know. So, why don’t you return her feeling? I think she’s quite cute. Or is it because the Empress gets in your way?”

That was the second time she mentioned the Empress to him. Her tone was different than usual. Though she didn’t say it directly, definitely she knew something was going on between him and Empress Hikari.

Ignoring the rest of the group, he took Akane’s hand and pulled her away, to where he could speak to her in private.

41

There was a huge tree nearby their picnic spot. Kazuhiro chose to have their conversation under that tree.

“I think this is far enough for them to hear,” he said.

“Ah, but they still can see us. In fact they are watching us right now.” She head-pointed them.

“There was nothing for them to speculate if all we did was just talk.”

“True. But if you keep on holding my hand like that, it will give something for them to talk about.”

“Oh,” Just realizing that he was still holding her hand, quickly he let go of it.

“So, what’s so important that you have to drag me here?”

“How do you know about the Empress?”

The wind suddenly blew strongly. Old yellowish leaves fell, dancing in the direction of the wind. She picked up the one which landed on her arm, and threw it in the air.

Turning her face away, she replied to Kazuhiro’s question. “You didn’t even try to deny it.”

He had no time to waste on denying the fact. What more important was to extract the information from her. Without saying anything, he was just staring at Akane, waiting for an answer.

Thoroughly familiar with the expression he made, Akane let out a sigh. “Okay, fine. I went through your stuff in the closet and found a necklace with a ‘HK’ pendant. That ‘HK’ is an emblem belongs to only one person, the Empress. It wasn’t so hard to put all of the pieces together.”

Relief. That might be what he was feeling at the moment. Akane discovered his secret coincidentally. But that did not mean he was okay with her prying on him.

“Is it normal for you to look at other people’s stuff?”

“Only when I need an insurance.”

“So, you’re going to threaten me with this?”

Akane placed her hands behind her back, and then she circled behind him. “If I were, would you be scared?”

When he turned his face to look at her, she was smirking. Whether she was flirting with him or meant what she said, he could not really tell. But for some reason, he doubted she would use that secret against him.

“Let’s go back to the group,” he said, finally decided to leave his curiosity unanswered.

42

In approximately 30 minutes, the day would turn to night. Then the fireworks would be lit. However, unbeknownst to the visitors, there would not be any fireworks in the sky that night. Instead, the festival would be replaced with gunfire and lasers. At least that was what planned by the rebellion.

Of course Akane knew about this stratagem. She received the message from the destroyed humanoid clearly. That was the reason why she was so eager to go to the festival. Shigeo wanted her to surrender by using the civilians as sacrifices. But she wasn’t there to stop the attack or protect the civilians. She was no saint.

If a war were to break out due to her selfishness, so be it. She had had enough becoming someone else’s tool. It was time to send Shigeo a message of her own. There was no way she would surrender without a fight.

First, she needed to slip away from Kazuhiro without being noticed. However, it was not so hard to do. Earlier, she had created misunderstanding by showing up with him and acted overly clingy. That was enough to keep him occupied answering Yuina and his friends’ curiosity.

When they got too immersed in questioning Kazuhiro, she took that opportunity to distant herself from the group. There was a collection of big rocks forming a natural fence at the edge of the garden. Behind those rocks were thick bushes. No one would go near those bushes since nothing could be seen or done there. Hence it served as the perfect spot for her to observe and make her moves.

Soon, when the fireworks show was about to begin, Empress Hikari would be called to the stage to inaugurate the event. If the rebellion wanted to strike, that would be the perfect timing. That much she was pretty sure of.

But something had been bothering her. From where would they appear? A battalion of armies would be easily spotted. Before they could reach the place, the Imperial Army units would have crushed them first.

So, it must be from somewhere least expected. But where could it be? From underground? Or perhaps from above. She looked up.

The sky.

*Of course*, she face-palmed. Why didn’t she think of it before? That was the most brilliant, unimaginable way to penetrate the enemy and attacked from within. Now that she knew, the next thing to do was to come up with a ploy.

Before she could plan any further, she heard footsteps of someone approaching.

43

“What else are you hiding?” asked Kazuhiro.

Upon hearing his voice, Akane clenched her teeth. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“So do you.”

Why didn’t she just finish him off when she had the chance, Akane questioned herself. She knew he would be the biggest hurdle in her plan, though at a lot of times he had proved to be of great help to her, indirectly.

“Aren’t you going to tell me?” he insisted when she didn’t give any respond.

“No, I ain’t tell you anything.”

All his life, he had been observing people rather than talking. Hence, he had developed a tremendous deducting skill. Based on the coincidences that happened just for that day, he strongly believed Akane was up to something. And judging from her action, him being at the festival, not as a soldier, was necessary.

“First, you pulled me off duty. Then you invited my friends and Yuina to join along when you know you’d be the most inconvenience one. You heard about the Empress coming. All these were perfect to keep me distracted. From what? What is about to happen here?”

There was no way to fool Kazuhiro Einsbert. She should have known that better.

“Smart. That’s why I dislike smart people. They always get in the way,” she snorted.

“I can’t help if you aren’t being honest with me,” he ignored her remark.

“Funny, I don’t recall asking for your help.” Her usual banter continued.

“Your action speaks by itself.”

His statement made her scoffed. “You might want to recheck your dictionary. That, my friend, isn’t asking for help. That is just merely using you. Now, if you excuse me.”

Without wanting to engage further in the conversation, Akane turned to leave. But before she could do so, her left hand was cuffed. Suddenly she was engulfed in blue light, returning to her original form. Realizing what had just happened, she looked at him, totally flabbergasted.

“What do you think you’re doing, using a spell-binding chain on me?”

“That’s my insurance.”

There was a note of sarcasm in his voice.

Akane scanned her surrounding. Edginess was flashed on her face. “I cannot be seen like this, not with anybody, especially you.”

“Then I suggest you start talking.”

44

Kazuhiro listened attentively to Akane’s explanation about the message and the festival. When she had finished telling him what she knew, he removed the spell-binding chain, but then replaced it with a normal handcuff.

“Is that really necessary?” Akane asked, feeling a little annoyed.

Of course she could take the cuff off easily with her lock picking skill. But she would not do that just yet. Not while his focus was still on her.

“How do you plan to stop them?” Instead of answering, he replied with another question.

“I don’t plan to stop anybody. For all I care, Shigeo could destroy this floor or do whatever he pleases. I just want him to know, regardless of what he’s doing, he won’t get me back. Not while I’m still breathing.”

Those sorrowful eyes, which drawn him to her, were back, thought Kazuhiro. He could feel her strong resolve, but that didn’t mean he would agree with her approach.

“Even if the whole civilians were to be sacrificed in the process?”

“Yes, even if they were to be sacrificed. Their lives meant nothing to me.”

He studied her expression. She was not angry, but resentful. The whole not-concern-about-other lives were just her emotion talking.

“No, you do care about them,” he said.

“What made you said that?”

“You spared me.”

Akane shook her head. “I spared your life just to piss him off. Don’t think too highly of me.”

He could go on convincing that she wasn’t the kind of person she thought she was, but there was other important matter to settle first. Right now, he needed to prevent the attack from happening.

“I’m going to stop the rebellion and you’re going to help me.”

“Aren’t you listening? I’m…”

Before she could finish saying her thought, an announcement made from the stage interrupted her speech. It was time for Empress Hikari to make her appearance on the stage, and hence initiated the main event that evening, the launching of fireworks.

Kazuhiro’s attention was also diverted towards the stage. Seeing the opportunity she was waiting for, Akane swiftly unlock the handcuff and distant herself as far as she could from him.

“That’s your cue. Go protect your Empress,” she uttered.

It was already too late for him when he realized it. The moment he directed his gaze back to her, she was already gone.

45

Crowds cheering. Hands clapping. Audiences whistling. Those were the kind of reception she received when Empress Hikari walked out to the stage. She was clearly the people’s favorite.

That was to be expected. Apart from her bewitching look, she was also treated as Godsend – a ruler who would change the fate of the lowest floor’s citizens. At least, she wasn’t faking it. That was her true desire, to improve the situation between the haves and the have-nots.

As she walked towards the center of the stage, with Lord Watari by her side, she made a hand wave, the Empress style. The upper arm was bended up in 90 degrees, while turning the palm back and forth.

She flashed her best smile, and at the same time her eyes were seriously scanning the crowds. The one she was looking for was the love of her life but he was nowhere to be found. He wasn’t even on the list of duty today. Where could have he been?

There was no way he would neglect her. He must have something more important to do. That’s her conclusion. After all, she trusted him and believed he would come to her rescue when she needed it. For now, she had to do her best. To win over the heart of her people.

“Look at them. They love you. If this continues, your ideal will be realized,” said Lord Watari.

Though it wasn’t a love marriage, he didn’t harbor any hard feeling towards her. Since he was a kid, he had been prepared for this situation. A situation where he would be ascended to the throne by being the Kleins’ pet.

Like the Empress, he shared her ideal. He was leaning towards a better nation. And he would support his wife wholeheartedly.

“Thank you for supporting me.”

“You know I would give the world to you.”

“I know,” she muttered.

There was no need for evidence to prove his words. She had had known him since she was little. And she was well aware of the laws imposed by the Kleins related to political marriage. Lord Watari was among the possible suitors and the Kleins first choice due to his gentle nature.

Even with all the laws already set in stone, her heart was still something she could not control of. By giving it all to Kazuhiro, despite knowing there would be no future for them, she had betrayed her family.

Holding the title of Empress was not just about governing the empire. She had to make sure that the Kleins lineage continued. But how could she give birth to an heir which was not conceived through love?

It was unbearable for her to think but she would not run away from her duty as an Empress. The people’s happiness was hers to bear. That was the vow she made, to change the inequalities created since the establishment of the empire. The number one reason which caused the uproar in the lowest floor.

She glanced at her husband next to her. If it wasn’t because of Kazuhiro, she might be able to love him…

“Your Highness?”

The event manager’s voice brought her back to the present. She threw him a smile.

“It’s time.”

The day had already turned to dark. It was time to light the fireworks, celebrating the birth of the Takahiro Empire. She went to the first one, a gigantic tree-shaped firework, and activated it using The Amida.

Once lit, it glowed for a few seconds before thrusting itself up in the air. All faces were following its movement, waiting for the ‘leaves’ of the tree to fall and formed colorful lights.

What happened right after that was an unforeseeable turn of event. There were no colorful fireworks. Instead those thousands leaves turned into spears of lights, randomly shooting down to the ground. In only a few minutes, the area surrounding the main stage was covered in huge fire.

46

Chaotic was not enough to describe the situation at the festival. Children were separated from their parents. Couples lost their love ones. They were in complete mess.

Empress Hikari was fazed with what she saw with her own eyes. Was it her fault that this happened? She was the one who activated the firework but it was beyond her knowledge that her magic would act as the catalyst to these weapons.

“Your Highness! My Lord! Watch out!”

A stray spear of light was heading towards them, but it was quickly disposed by Lord Watari. He wasn’t just the Empress’ husband but he was also trained as a knight. In an emergency situation like this, he was to use himself as a shield.

“Hikari! We need to get you out to safety fast.”

With Empress Hikari still frozen in disbelief, he had no choice but to pull her away. Led by the event manager, they headed to an exit door on the left side of the stage.

Just before she went through the door, she saw Kazuhiro in the middle of the chaos. As she thought, he was seeking after her. Their eyes met for a brief moment. Somehow something felt different. He was definitely looking for her, but not to save her. As if he just wanted to make sure that she was safe.

Then he turned around and walked away.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

When the spear of lights bombarded the main stage area, Kazuhiro was on the other side, searching for Akane. By the time he rushed back there, everything was already caught in fire. He was a little too late.

An attack directly after the initiation of the event was brilliant. He admitted that. No one would have thought of it, especially when a high-level of magic was involved. It reminded him of the new type humanoids, which also used a high-level spell.

Only one person came to his mind when he observed these two separate events in more depth – Akane. She was the most logical explanation. Judging from her behavior, he strongly believed that she played some part in these, though little. That’s why he had to find her first before the situation got any worse.

From where he stood, he could see the Empress on the stage, heading to an escape route. He just needed to make sure that she could go out safely. Though he promised to be the one to protect her, in this calamity, he had to prioritize what’s important – the live of the civilians.

Hence he decided to leave the Empress in her husband’s care. Furthermore, she had more than qualified knights accompanying her. That should be enough to keep her out of imminent danger.

Before he could continue searching for Akane, he saw a boy lying on the ground not far from him. Quickly he went to check on him. There was a pulse. He lifted him and carried him on his back.

“Kazuhiro!”

He heard Hayato’s voice calling for him from the right. The others were not with him.

“Yuina and the others are helping with the evacuation,” said Hayato, understanding what’s playing in his friend’s mind. “We’ve been called to check in. Enemies are approaching. We can’t fight them without our gears.”

This was bad news, Kazuhiro thought. Regardless, he had to find Akane before anything else.

“Hayato, take this kid and bring him to safety. I’ll join all of you at the base later. There’s something that I must do first.”

“What do you have to do?” Hayato asked, confused. Then he scanned around, noticing something was missing. “Hey Kazuhiro, where’s Akane?”

But Kazuhiro had already rushed off from there.

47

*Think, Kazuhiro, think! What would I do in her place?*

Desperate. That’s how he felt at the moment. Wherever Akane was, he had to get to her fast. She didn’t want to surrender, but she didn’t plan to fight either. How would she relay her stand loud and clear to the leader of the rebellion then? Simply showing herself with a message in front of the enemies would not be an option.

Someone with her caliber must be using a subtly method. Something that could reach the enemy’s eyes without attracting too much attention. Something that could only be understood by the intended recipient. So, what could be possibly done from a place like this?

A rebel leader like Shigeo definitely had a way of monitoring this whole mess. If he could figure out what it was, he had a pretty good chance of guessing Akane’s next move.

Could it be from the ground, or up in the sky? *Come on, come on, think*. The clock was ticking. He was already at the edge of letting go when suddenly he remembered what she told him about the attack at the main city.

An envoy which carried a message to her. Why didn’t he think of it before? He used a third party to communicate since he didn’t know where she was. And she would employ the same way because she didn’t want to be found. Which medium would be used, he could not really tell. But one thing he was sure of, the third party chosen was something both Akane and Shigeo were familiar with.

His best bet? There would be another messenger within the enemy’s armies. One that would instantaneously deliver a report on the field situation, so they could make an analysis out of it and plan the next move.

In order to plant the message to the carrier unseen, Akane had to be at a high place where she could see the enemy, but close enough where she could identify the messenger.

Where could that be? While scanning his environment for a possible location, his eyes spotted a still probe up high. Of course! That made perfect sense. Her behavior explained everything.

She did not stop the attack for this sole purpose. To execute her plan, the main stage area had to be bombarded, and then left unoccupied. This would give her the chance to control the operating room, where she could manipulate the probe freely.

Kazuhiro looked at his watch. There was not much time left. He had to get back to the Second Division unit as soon as possible but not empty-handedly. At least not without Akane.

48

So far, everything had proceeded as she wanted. From the several transparent screens in front of her, Akane could see what’s going on within the festival area. The fire that broke out. The Empress on her escaped. The evacuation of the civilians.

But none of those were of her concern. Her focus was at the perimeter of the area. Soon the rebellion troops would arrive. She needed to identify her target, shoot it with her own message and get herself out of there right after that.

At least, that was her plan, until Kazuhiro appeared before her. Once again she was exasperated by his presence. Actually by his constant unwelcomed action.

“It was you who planted The Amida inside the core of the new type. And the modified fireworks, it was your magic too, am I right?”

“Haven’t I told you that I hate smart people?” she said, trying to contain her infuriation.

“Yes, they get in your way.”

Akane bit her lip. That part of Kazuhiro, being able to respond like that in a straight face, sometimes irritated her much.

“If you know that very well, then why are you still here?”

“To help you.”

Again, his answer made her wanted to snap. Couldn’t he read between the lines that his intervention was not needed? She heaved a sigh.

“It’s too late now. The rebels are almost here. And your Empress…” she directed her gaze towards the screen that was displaying the Empress’ image. “She needs saving. You see, there’s no room for you be meddling with me.”

For a brief moment he glanced at the display, but no sign of worry was shown in his face.

“From what I see, there should not be any problem for the Empress to get out of here safely. Unless if someone were to tamper with her escape route, intentionally.” He shot her a serious glare. “Or is that your plan all along, to put her in danger in case I was in your way?”

“You’re being sharp-witted again,” she made a witty remark.

“If you think I would fall for such a scheme, you are underestimating me. My actions are based on rationality. I would never allow the emotion to cloud my judgment.”

Very reassuring especially when it came from a no-nonsense guy. Perhaps she did underestimate him a little. That was a mistake on her part.

“So what does your rationality say now?”

“You’ll see.”

He head-pointed to the screens. Naturally, she turned to look at them. What happened next was not part of her plan. One by one, the screen went blank. Furiously, she grabbed his collar.

“You blew up all the probes? How am I supposed to find target?”

“Don’t have much choice now, do you?”

*Click.*

Completely overwhelmed by anger, she exposed herself to an opening Kazuhiro had been waiting for. Her left hand was cuffed to his right.

“Lesson number 1. Never lets your emotion gets the better of you.”

Another sarcastic remark from Kazuhiro. Akane shook her head in disbelief. Being caught off guard like this was unthinkable. But for some reason, she wasn’t feeling vexed anymore. Instead she let out a giggle.

“Okay. You win. So, what are you going to do with me?”

That was too easy, he thought. But whatever she’s planning on doing next, he’d worry about it later. For now, he’d do what he had to do first.

“You are coming with me. To our base.”

49

“Uhm Kazuhiro, why is she here?” asked Yuina.

As expected, all eyes were set on Akane, in disguise form, as she walked into the briefing room, handcuffed to Kazuhiro. Ignoring Yuina’s question, he went straight to one of the guards on duty.

“I don’t have time to get into the details, but could you please keep an eye on her? Just make sure she doesn’t leave this place.”

He unlocked the handcuff and seated her on the chair.

“Seriously? You need to do more than that to keep me…”

Her sentence was abruptly halted when she looked at a picture framed on the wall. She knew that face really well. “Never mind, I’ll stay,” she said, almost whispering.

Noticing her sudden changed of behavior, Kazuhiro stopped to ask but an instruction from Captain Iroha prevented him from doing so.

“Falcon Unit is to be dispatched as soon as possible. Enemies have already invaded. On Empress Hikari’s directive, the Emperor’s Knights will also be assisting. They will handle the enemies. Falcon, focus on evacuating the civilians. Keep the number of casualties as minimum as possible. Understood?”

“Yes, Madam!” They answered in unison.

“Kazuhiro, lead the team.”

“Aye!”

He dashed straight to the hangar where the MechaBots were kept. Following closely behind him was Mayu. As she ran pass Akane, she stole a glance at her. What was Kazuhiro thinking?

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

“I don’t know who you are, or why are you here. But just do me a favor, and try not to do or touch anything. Am I clear?” said Captain Iroha.

Akane nodded. Even without the Captain telling, she would definitely keep herself under the radar. The framed-picture she saw just now really kept her chained to the seat.

General Tatsuo Bronchi.

Who would have imagined that Shigeo’s partner was the most powerful man in the lowest floor? That lecherous Shigeo wasn’t much of a threat to her. But Tatsuo, his presence was enough to make her shivered. There was something about that man that spelled dangerous.

On a second thought, being placed in a military control room while all eyes and ears were dead set on the battlefield, served as a perfect opportunity for her to dig more information on Tatsuo. For now she just had to sit tight and then seize the opportunity when the moment came.

50

Cruising the sky above the main stage area was the Falcon Carrier, transporting MechaBots led by Kazuhiro. From above, the ground looked like a pool of fire. Looking for survivors and evacuating them would be harder than thought.

On the other side of the area, near the entrance to the festival, the Emperor’s knights were busy keeping the enemy from progressing. Backing them up was the Harrier units. The Vulture didn’t take part in this todays mission since they suffered a heavy loss during the battle at the main city and were still recuperating.

Though the Emperor’s Knights were considered as soldiers on a different league, without their proper, customized equipment, they were at the disadvantage. They had to rely completely on the army’s MechaBots which features were not really familiar to them.

While waiting for the right time to launch, Kazuhiro glanced at the knights’ battle from above. The enemies must have thought about this possibility thoroughly. They knew the Empress would be coming down, escorted by her best knights. And yet, they still launched this attack. There had to be something else that contributed to their confidence. Something that would at least make Akane showed herself.

Kazuhiro looked directly below him. They had arrived at their landing spot. Checking his equipment one last time, he opened the communication channel.

“Falcon Unit, ready to launch,” he reported to the carrier’s pilot.

“Falcon Unit, prepare to be launched,” the pilot responded.

Right after that, the carrier’s platform was pulled down, dropping the MechaBots to the ground one by one. Then it flew away, circling the sky on a standby.

Kazuhiro scanned its surrounding area. After confirming there weren’t any enemies nearby, he started giving out order.

“Falcon 1 to Falcon 5. Guard the perimeter. Alert any peculiar movement. Falcon 6 to Falcon 8. Put out the fire. Falcon 9 to Falcon 16. Look for survivors. Civilians’ lives are the top priority.”

“Roger!”

All the members of the Falcon Unit dashed to their designated post. The festival area was quite huge, so each MechaBots had to cover quite a large space by itself.

The fire had spread to Xylens Garden. If they were not fast enough, there wouldn’t be anything left of the gardens to be enjoyed by the visitors. The assigned Falcon unit was hastily putting out fire by spraying a huge amount of carbon dioxide.

The evacuation unit, on the other hand, was going through the remnants of building, looking for possible survivors under the ruin. There was a baby within the arms of his dying mother. Siblings were hugging each other in fear, surrounded by dead bodies. The situation was gravely disheartening to look at.

Within 10 minutes of operation, Falcon unit had found over 20 survivors and nearly 50 dead bodies. This was the worst disaster since the rebellion was formed. They had to increase their speed in locating the survivors, in case the knights and the Harrier were having difficulty in keeping the enemies at bay.

Kazuhiro was in the middle of clearing the remnants when a distressed call came in. It was from Mayu.

“Falcon 5 reporting. There was an unusual tremor just now and a movement was detected within the ground.”

“Can you send me the visual?”

“I’m streaming it to you and the Second Division now.”

When the visual became online, Kazuhiro observed the situation thoroughly. There was definitely something moving from within the ground, which caused the shook.

Not long after, another tremor occurred. But this time, something finally came out from the underground, which was enough to make those who were watching the stream terrifyingly speechless.

51

The chaotic situation the army was facing at the moment gave a huge advantage to Akane to sneak into the database room easily. Nobody was paying attention to her; more accurately her presence was forgotten.

From the room, she could still see the visuals of the battle sent via various probes displayed on transparent screens. What happened out there was out of her concerned. For now, she needed to get out of the Second Division fast, but not before copying all information on General Tatsuo.

Only authorized personnel could login into the smart mainframe but that posed no problem for her. Hacking was a piece of cake. The files she was looking for were already laid out on the screen.

Akane searched on the desk, and inside the desk’s drawers, looking for a memory chip that she could use to transfer the information into. Once in a while, her gaze was directed at the screens outside.

Just when she found an empty memory chip, her eyes caught something on one of the screens outside. Everybody in the briefing room was rendered speechless, staring at that horrible object.

A gigantic mole was wreaking havoc where the Falcon Unit was operating.

It was hard to believe what she saw. Shigeo really meant to unleash hell on this floor. At this point, no one could stop the monster. Not Kazuhiro. Not even the Emperor’s Knights without their proper mechas.

The mole did not become big on its own. It was genetically modified in the secret lab and was experimented with The Amida. The reaction it gave to the light was of a drug. The animal behaved erratically and would destroy everything within its sight.

But that exactly what the rebellion wanted. A weapon of massive destruction that would obliterate without prejudice. To make matter worse, the mole was not their only experiments. There were few others, of different types, that were kept hidden.

Akane knew this much because it was her who activated the core that contain The Amida inside them. Which meant she was the only one capable of bringing that monster down. She heaved a sigh. Being caught in the middle of this war was the least in her mind, but letting that monster continued with its rampage was also not an option.

Furthermore, Kazuhiro was out there, fighting her mess. As much as she hated to admit it, he had been nothing but a great help. It was heartless for her to leave him be.

If she were to destroy that monster, she had to act now. Looking at Tatsuo’s files and the visual of the attack interchangeably, she bit her lip. There was no time to copy the files, so she took out the main memory out of the mainframe. Fortunately its size was no bigger than a man’s thumb, made it easier to hide.

While all eyes were still focusing on the monster, Akane took that advantage and sprinted to the hangar where the MechaBots were kept. She did not need the robot. A fighting jet was enough for her.

The situation at the hangar was chaotic as well. She could see Hayato and other engineers were busily calibrating the MechaBots with proper software. On the other side of the hangar, the sky carrier had just landed, transporting the survivors evacuated by the Falcon Unit. Waiting nearby was Dr. Isao, preparing to tend to injured people.

For the first time, she felt angry for other people’s sake. The length Shigeo was willing to go just to get her back was unforgivable. Innocents were hurt. If she didn’t stop him, there would be nothing left of the lowest floor.

With that thought in mind, she rushed to the nearest available fighter jet. But her attempt was spotted by Hayato who tried to stop her midway.

“Kazuhiro’s friend or not, you are not allowed to go there,” he warned her.

“Sorry for doing this,” said Akane,

In a flash, she toppled Hayato down, head facing the floor and quickly proceeded to the jet. Others had started to realize what was going on and were chasing after her. However it was already too late. Akane had already climbed up into the jet. Within a few seconds, she launched herself out to the battlefield.

52

“Falcon 5! What’s your status?” asked Kazuhiro as he was rushing to where Mayu was.

“The monster is barely scratched. Neither laser nor ammo works,” she reported.

Continuous shooting sound was heard through the communication channel, followed by a growl. Was it from the monster worm? Kazuhiro wondered. It must have been fully mutated if it made that kind of sound.

“Keep that thing busy as long as you can. Falcon 1 to Falcon 4, back her up. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

Kazuhiro gave out his order. It was impossible for Mayu to handle that monster on her own, and he was still at the main stage area. Based on the current position, those who guarded the perimeter were closer to assist her.

How could he defeat the monster? That’s what playing on his head. The worm was about three times bigger than the size of MechaBots. Logically it seemed impossible to take it down with just lasers and ammunitions. He had to infuse the attack with the use of magic. But what would work on that thing? How would Akane utilize her magic?

“Falcon leader. Hurry up! We can’t hold it any longer!”

A call from Falcon 1 brought him back to the current situation. From where he was, he could see the worm up-close. Its gigantic size was not the only issue here. Its skin was hard as steel. Sharp fangs covered its mouth. Based on its attack, there was no doubt it could crush their MechaBots with just a bite.

“Control Tower, what have you found about the monster?”

“Nothing much. We are still analyzing it,” Eiji’s voice was hard from the other end. “But from our initial scanning, there is a similar core found on the new type embedded inside the monster.”

Judging from the initial report, it was safe to assume that the worm was not there coincidentally but was released purposely by the rebellion. This was bad news. The enemy kept on unleashing more and more powerful weapon.

The most logical solution was to destroy the core. But from the report sent by Eiji, the core was planted deep inside the body, and was too small a target. Furthermore the worm was moving erratically, making it even harder to aim.

Still, he needed to try. Using the same magic casted on the new types, he fired the mini missile. It flew to where the core was, but dispersed before it could even reach the monster.

Unsure of what happening, he fired another mini missile, without coated with magic. This time it hit the worm’s body but as experienced by his squad, it didn’t give any effect. Kazuhiro fired another one with a spell, just to be sure. The result was the same as his first try, which made him inhaled deeply.

There was only one explanation to what just happened. The monster was protected by a magic barrier, created using a high-level spell. This was an enemy he could not handle by himself.

“Falcon Leader! What should we do?”

This time it was Mayu who screamed for an order. His squad was already in a pinch. Though the situation was dire, Kazuhiro was still able to remain calm. There was no problem without a solution. The monster must have at least a weakness.

Since his magic would not be able to counter its barrier, he needed to focus on penetrating its skin in order to destroy the core. A full analysis from the control tower unit would be of great help but that had yet to complete. What was possible for him to do now was to weaken it.

The monster, though big, must be able to feel pain. That was what he deducted. So his first step was to shoot its eyes. Kazuhiro aimed well at the targeted area and fired a mini missile.

Upon hit, the worm growled angrily. Rather than writhing in pain, it went berserk and swinging its huge body left and right. His first theory had failed completely.

He knew where the core was located. If nothing can get through the skin from the outside, an alternative was to reach the core from the inside. In order to do that, he had to get into its body, and the only way in was through the monsters mouth, fenced with sharp-crushing fangs.

Just when he was about to execute his second hypothesis, a report from the control tower came in. To summarize the report, the worm was a mutant whose gene was modified that led to it a steel hard skin. None of their current ammunitions would be able to penetrate that.

The core which contained The Amida planted in it acted as drug that caused its erratic behavior, and would be greatly amplified if its pain nerve was invoked.

Great, thought Kazuhiro. He just contributed to that nasty reaction. The last part written in the report was that it sensed movement through heat. It could detect if any of them were to go closer.

That last sentence posed a great problem if he were to execute with his theory. Still, he had no choice but to get inside its body no matter what. That was the only logical solution. So how could he get into the monster without being crushed first?

53

“Falcon 5. Cover me,” Kazuhiro gave out his order.

Despite the disadvantages on his side, he still had to try. The fate of the lowest level was up on his shoulder. He could not wait for the Emperor’s Knights assistance. They were busy keeping the enemy from progressing. Besides, without their proper equipment, they would not be of much help.

“Huh? What are you planning to do?” asked Mayu when she saw Kazuhiro ran straight towards the worm.

But he did not answer. His thought was already set on finding the right timing to jump into its mouth. It should be when its mouth was wide open. There was one way to ensure that.

“When I give the signal, shoot its eyes,” he said.

The distance between the monster and him was closing in. Since it could detect human’s heat, the worm would definitely be attacking him once he got really close. That would be the perfect time to…

“Now!” Kazuhiro shouted.

As Mayu’s fire reached its eyes, the worm growled loudly. Like what he had predicted, its mouth was opened widely. Kazuhiro was ready to jump in when out of sudden, a laser was fired right in front him, halting his movement.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

That voice. A very familiar voice. He looked up and saw a fighter jet cruising up above him. Didn’t he tell her to stay inside the Second Division unit? On a second thought her presence might improve their chances of winning.

“Have you got a better idea?”

He had already kept a distance between him and the monster, so did Mayu. From the other side of the communication channel, he could hear a sigh.

“Your decision to get inside that thing was not a bad idea at all. However, the core itself is also magic-protected. With your level, you would be long dead before ever reaching it. The only way is to undo the magic.”

“Can you take it down?”

“Just who do you think I am?”

It was hard to justify Akane’s intonation. Was she a bit annoyed by his question or perhaps simply arrogant?

“I’m counting on you,” was all he said, not wanting to drag her banter any further.

He then commanded the Falcons nearby to retreat. Regardless of Akane’s attitude, he knew that she would carry out this task without fail.

The jet piloted by her was still circling the monster. It seemed like she was looking for something. A few moments later, the jet descended low enough that it almost touched the ground.

All fighter jets as well as the other flying machines worked similarly like the ground vehicles. They used sensors which would prevent the machine from colliding with the ground in a cruising mode, even if it flew low enough. Climbing up from the current height was also made easy by simply turning on the anti-gravity mechanism.

Kazuhiro observed her action very carefully. Though she didn’t tell him what her ploy was, he could figure it out already. To undo the magic barrier, a high-level spell is needed. When she circled the worm earlier, what she did was actually plotting an incantation circle.

Once activated, there would be a huge magic reaction. At that moment, the worm would be distracted, and wouldn’t be wary of its surrounding. Within that window of few seconds was his best chance to sneak into its mouth, and hence destroying the core.

As if their minds were in sync, Akane flew the jet closer to Kazuhiro and started climbing up. Without the need to exchange any words, he shot a magnetic hook at the bottom of the jet, allowing himself to be carried by it.

“Falcon leader! What do you think you’re doing?” Mayu cried out loud, trying to stop him.

But Kazuhiro’s mind was already set. The risk was big, it was inevitable. However with Akane fighting on his side, victory was almost certain. If and only if he did not get crushed first.

54

“I believe you know what to do?” asked Akane as she flew the jet higher.

“Yes,” answered Kazuhiro.

“Upon taking down the magic barrier, the reaction will make the monster goes berserk. That means I can only drop you from this altitude. The rest will depend on you.”

That was the most logical move, given the situation. At least, by dropping him from above and landing on the monster itself, he would have a better chance of sneaking his way into its body.

“You don’t have to worry about it. As long as the barrier is no longer in the way, I’ll manage,” he said, confidently.

“That’s pretty convincing. There’s one more thing. Do not ever cast a spell while in it. Otherwise you’ll get tangled up in the web of magic reaction.”

“Noted.”

Magic was not his strong suit so he was better off without it. From above, he noticed that some sparks had started to emerge, denoting the reaction between two colliding spells. Carefully he observed his options.

In only a few seconds, the sparks became more prominent, literally fabricating a web of purple charges. As in the color of the Arduins.

“Are you ready?”

“Let’s do this.”

Akane made a giant circle before speeding up the jet to where the magic reaction was formed. Upon reaching the most suitable position, Kazuhiro released the magnetic hook. Though the MechaBots were not made to fly, it was equipped with a pair of folded mechanical wings which caused friction to happen once expanded, hence slowing down the fall.

As anticipated, the worm was caught up in the magic reaction that it didn’t notice Kazuhiro had already landed on its back. Taking advantage of the situation, he quickly darted towards its head. The moment it opened its mouth broadly, he jumped into it.

*Yikes!*

The inside of it, more accurately, the pharynx, was dark and slimy. Luckily he was in the MechaBots, which was fully supplied with necessary equipment. After switching on the robot’s eyes to light up the way, he activated spikes at the bottom of its leg to prevent it from slipping when walking through the slime.

Guided by a hologram map of the worm’s internal structure which he received from Eiji earlier, he sauntered to where the core was planted. It was not that far from the hearts. Yes, a worm has five hearts to help pumping blood all the way along its lengthy body. Though mutated, it did not change the structure of the organs within.

In only a few minutes he was already in its esophagus. Not far from where he stood was what seemed to be the core which contained The Amida. Unlike the one planted in the new type, this one was huge, almost the same size as his MechaBots. Was it really possible to destroy that thing?

From the look of it, the core was made of sturdy glasses. With his equipped weapon, breaking it was not really a problem, but somehow he had a bad feeling about it.

Regardless, taking down the monster was the top priority. The consequences of destroying the huge core, if any, was something to be dealt later. So far now he had to finish what he was set out to do.

Without wasting any more minute, he fired his laser gun towards the core. It didn’t take long to shatter the glasses. And following that action was an enormous explosion of bright lights.

55

“How are you feeling?”

When Kazuhiro opened his eyes, the first face he saw was of Dr. Isao. He was looking at him. A broad smile was painted on his face. A fatherly smile as Kazuhiro had labeled it.

Soon, other faces appeared one by one. Yuina, Hayato, Eiji, Mayu, Kaori, as well as Captain Iroha. But one face was missing. Kazuhiro turned to Dr. Isao.

“How long have I been unconscious for?”

Before Dr. Isao could answer, Yuina had already jumped to the bedside and hugged Kazuhiro tightly.

“I’m glad. So glad that your are unharmed.” Tears welled up in her eyes.

Amused by Yuina’s affection towards her brother, Dr. Isao placed his hand on her head.

“Now, now. There’s no need to worry. He is perfectly fine.” Then he switched his attention back to Kazuhiro.

“You’ve been unconscious for merely a few hours. What actually happened back there?”

*Right. He was still inside the monster when he lost consciousness.* After a deep inhaled, he answered briefly.

“There was a big explosion after the core was being destroyed. That was the last memory I have. What happened after that?”

“Something very strange.”

It was Captain Iroha who answered him. She had already walked closer to his bed. Then she continued.

“The explosion blew the monster to smithereens. Somehow, the magic charges on the outside reacted to the explosion, and ignited a bigger one. That’s when a peculiar phenomenon happened. From within, a bright purple light appeared, and languidly transformed into hundreds of hands, sucking in the explosion. It functioned like a black hole. In the end, only that purple light remained, before finally disappearing into thin air. Then we saw you lying on the ground unconsciously. At least that’s how I saw it from the screen. Mayu was there. Did I miss anything?”

“It was exactly like what Captain Iroha described,” said Mayu.

“Could it be that your magic skill had gone up a few levels?” Kaori wondered.

Given the circumstances, that would be the most logical assumption. But Kazuhiro knew very well who was responsible behind it. Without Akane, they would never stand a chance to defeat the monster. He did not respond to Kaori’s question, but instead…

“Where’s Akane?”

His question made Hayato and Eiji looked at each other. Something must have had happened then, otherwise those two guys would not be making dubious look.

“We found the fighter jet she was piloting, but it had been abandoned. We searched the area high and low but she was nowhere to be found.” Finally Hayato opened his mouth, then directed his gaze at Eiji.

Fully understood what his expression meant, Eiji continued from Hayato’s last sentence. “We have all the reasons to believe that she had purposely run away. There’s something you need to see.”

56

The briefing room was silence. Only those who visited Kazuhiro at the unit’s infirmary were there, focusing on the big screen. A recorded video of what happened at the unit previously was displayed on it.

There was Akane sitting in the database room, hacking into the smart mainframe. Since the camera was blocked a little by her body, it was hard to determine the kind information she was looking at. Or did she deliberately obstruct the view of the camera, knowing that she was being watched?

The video continued with Akane searching for something, and finally stealing the main memory itself from the mainframe. Then the video progressed to the hangar where she was seen tackling down Hayato and ran away with the fighter jet.

“How do you know her?” asked Captain Iroha right after the video had finished playing.

How would he answer that question without revealing the truth about her, Kazuhiro pondered. This was quite serious since Akane just made herself an enemy of the Second Division by stealing information. A military information which made it even worse.

“By accident. Then she came to my house and stayed with me for a while.” That wasn’t far from the truth.

“You mean you don’t really know her but allow her to stay in your house?” Yuina’s voice was an octave high.

By the sound of it, Kazuhiro could deduce that she was angry. But that was so Yuina. She would be over reacting when it came to Kazuhiro’s welfare and he wouldn’t blame her for that. Since their parents’ death, it was Yuina who took care of him, putting aside her interest.

“I could accept it if she is a pretty girl but…”

Hayato made an unnecessary remark but halted halfway after Yuina shot him with a deadly glare. Slowly he drew back behind Eiji, while covering his mouth.

“This is completely unacceptable. I know you always act on a whim but to be this irresponsible?” Yuina continued on with her lecture.

“Yuina, could you please calm down?”

Despite Yuina’s anger, Kazuhiro managed to keep his composure. Then he turned to face Captain Iroha.

“I know that you think Akane is guilty as well after watching the video. But there must be a reason behind her action. It would be unfair to judge her based on the video solely.”

“Kazuhiro, how could you say…”

“Yuina, that’s enough.”

Yuina’s protest was cut short by Captain Iroha. Though deep down she believed Akane was an enemy, her personality did not allow her to dismiss any possibilities. As a leader to the Second Division unit, she had to show her capability to rule the unit fair and square. And that includes an equal chance to defend oneself.

“If there’s anything we need to know about her, this is the time,” she said.

But before Kazuhiro could place his arguments to defend Akane, there was a knock on the door. After a couple of seconds, an officer came in.

“I have two messages for Kazuhiro Einsbert. First is a decree to have an audience with Empress Hikari. Second, a request to meet by Sir Ryuu Weltch on an urgent matter.”

57

The call from the Empress actually saved him from having to deal with Akane’s problem. Not that he was running away from it, but he needed time to think of the best way to handle the issue without revealing much about her.

For now, answering to the Empress would be his top priority. He wondered what this meeting was about. From Captain Iroha’s brief report, the imperial army together with the Emperor’s Knights had achieved victory in chasing away the rebellions with little casualties.

Probably she just wanted to see him. That would be believable because she’d done it several times already. Of course he was happy to see her but at the same time he didn’t want the others to get suspicious of their relationship. Especially Lord Watari.

Kazuhiro had met him on several occasions. A very humble noble indeed, worthy of marrying the Empress. Each time Kazuhiro thought of him, guiltiness would wrap his conscience.

Frankly, there were times that he thought of ending this secret affair. However, whenever the Empress came to see him, his heart decided differently. And just like that, their affair continued.

For how long would he continue to live in guilt like this?

“Are you thinking of me right now?”

The Empress’ voice. He turned to face her, and bowed.

“Your Highness.”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to be too formal with me?”

Empress Hikari heaved a sigh. Suddenly she brought her face to his chest and wrapped his body with her arms. Surprised by her action, Kazuhiro just stood still, not returning the hug.

“Your Highness. I don’t think you should be doing this. If someone sees us like this…”

“I don’t care,” she cut him off. “Why didn’t you come to my rescue?”

*Why*? Akane’s face appeared before his eyes. He cleared his throat. It was true that he went to search for Akane instead of escorting the Empress to safety, but he had a valid justification for the decision he made.

“I had to prioritize the lives of the civilians.”

“Even if my life is in great danger?”

“Your Highness, at that time you were out of danger. With the greatest Emperor’s Knights by your side, including Lord Watari, your safety was almost guaranteed.”

“Is that your only reason?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do I hear there was an unappealing woman by your side?”

Did he just notice a misplaced jealousy in her voice?

58

It was a hectic day for Kazuhiro. Since the attack at the festival, he had only a few hours of sleep, courtesy of being unconscious. The moment he regained consciousness, he had already been presented with a problem related to Akane. Then he was called by Empress Hikari and once again, Akane’s name popped up.

Now, here he was at the Yoshwhyte Great Prison, with a requested meet up by Sir Ryuu Weltch. Though he did not know the actual reason of this meeting, he could guess who the subject of interest would be.

Akane.

There was no two ways about it. Sir Ryuu clearly had a history with her and only a few days ago they went to visit him. What kind of unfinished business did he still have with Akane?

When Kazuhiro thought deeper, his life had been a series of mess since the appearance of Akane. Not even his secret affair with the Empress had caused this much trouble. In fact, there was no difficulty at all, only guilt.

*Creeeeak!*

The door of the visiting room was slowly opened. Walking in was Sir Ryuu, handcuffed with an anti-magic chain. Though prisoned, his gallant style was still presence.

“Where’s Akane?” Sir Ryuu asked when he noticed only Kazuhiro was in the room.

“What business do you have with her?” He was straight to the point.

“What are you? Her knight?” Sir Ryuu snorted with sarcasm.

They both glared at each other, gravely. What was started as an undisturbed atmosphere had turned tensional. Clearly, they could not meet eye to eye without getting at each other’s throat.

“I’m asking you again. What business do you have with her?” Kazuhiro repeated his question.

“My business is with her, and her alone. It is of no concern of the military’s hero.” Sir Ryuu did not want to back down either.

Realizing that this meeting would never achieve a desirable result, Kazuhiro stood up.

“In that case, don’t waste your breath requesting for a meeting with me.”

Concise and austere with his point of view, he then walked towards the door. For a few moments, Sir Ryuu’s eyes were just tailing his steps. Several encounters with the Imperial Army’s best soldier had given him a glimpse on Kazuhiro’s hidden personality.

A no-nonsense and stoic, those were well known fact about Kazuhiro. His military prowess was also an open book. What’s inside his head was a mystery to most people. An emotionless guy like him was easily misunderstood for not caring much for an opposite gender.

But Sir Ryuu knew better. He fought with Kazuhiro over a woman. Empress Hikari. That was enough to convince him of the soft spot within Kazuhiro’s heart. And at this moment, he could tell that he was worried about Akane. *So something must have had happened.*

“She’s gone, hasn’t she? And you have no clue where she is.”

Upon hearing Sir Ryuu’s remark, Kazuhiro halted. No response was given but he didn’t move either. It was like he was frozen in time.

“So you came here hoping that I would spill something of use. I have my reason to see her, and you have yours. I’ll say we work together.”

Instantly, Kazuhiro turned to look at him.

“I don’t need your help.” Easily, he dismissed his words.

But Sir Ryuu had already predicted that reaction. A countermeasure was already planned in his head.

“Are you sure? Would you be able to suppress your curiosity about her? Don’t you want to know where and how she spent her time for the past eight years?”

What he did was similar to catching fish. An intriguing bait was used to catch his attention, which seemed to work effectively.

“I’m listening.”

As if winning was already his’, Sir Ryuu grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“Here’s my proposal.”

59

It was already late evening when he arrived home. Normally when he opened the door, a delicious aroma from the kitchen was blended into the air he breathed, and a voice of someone singing cheerily was absorbed into his ears.

But tonight was different. The house was dark and quiet. It felt like all the great energies residing within the house had been sucked out, and what left was loneliness. Why did he feel that way?

Slowly he went into his room, which he hadn’t slept in for quite sometime. After switching on the light, he lay down on the bed, thinking and reflecting his life since Akane came into picture.

Did he miss her company?

Just when he was about to close his eyes, he spotted a familiar object on his mirror desk. Quickly he jumped out of the bed and rushed to the desk. It was Akane’s hairpin.

*So she left it there on purpose, huh?* Kazuhiro could not help but smiling. Definitely she’s one of the mysterious people he had encountered in his life.

What he went through just for that day really tire him to the bones. His eyes could barely open anymore. Still grasping the hairpin tightly, he dozed off cozily on the bed.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The sound of pots clanging woke him up from his doze. Who would have been cooking in his kitchen in the middle of the night? Could it be…?

Hurriedly he dashed to the kitchen. Who else would have come and gone whenever she felt like it, if not Akane. So she has decided to come home after all. This time, he would give her a piece his of mind.

Just when he was about to call out her name, his action went completely frozen. It wasn’t Akane who occupied his kitchen, but…

“Mayu, what are you doing here?” Startled. That would be the best word to describe his feeling at that moment.

“Oh, you are awake. Starving?”

Suspicion surrounded his mind. Frankly, he was starving from not having anything since leaving the unit. But to think Mayu would come this late to cook for him was unthinkable. How could he confirm she was Mayu, and not Akane playing prank on him?

“How did you get in?”

“The door wasn’t locked, and you were already asleep. I did not want to wake you up. Are you mad?”

Without answering her question, Kazuhiro just stared at her. Disguising as someone else would be a piece of cake for Akane. However mimicking that person’s personality, was out of her talent. By now he was 90% sure that the one standing in front of him was Mayu.

Noticing Kazuhiro’s sharp glare on her, Mayu grew conscious and blushed. “Ummm… would you like something to eat?”

Mayu’s action just confirmed his suspicion. Akane would never blush. Instead, she would act innocently by tilting her head while asking question. With that, he let out a sigh of relief. Or was it frustration?

“Kazuhiro?”

“Ah… yes, thank you.”

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The bowl of rice served with crispy fried chicken on Kazuhiro’s plate was almost finished. Still, no words were spoken. His mind was busy thinking about the awkwardness surrounding them.

“Second?” asked Mayu when she noticed his plate was nearly empty.

Mayu’s cooking was delicious but somehow he did not feel like having a second helping.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” he politely refused.

Putting up the best smile on her face, she grabbed a jar of water and poured it into Kazuhiro’s glass. Suddenly her eyes spotted something within his left grasp. That just made her realized that Kazuhiro had been holding something since he came to the kitchen.

“What are you holding in your hand?” She could not contain her curiosity anymore.

“Oh, this is… Akane’s.”

Flabbergasted by his answer, her smile completely vanished from her face. Realizing her mood had changed slightly, Kazuhiro quickly put away the hairpin in his pocket, and then stood up, holding the dirty dishes.

“That’s okay. I’ll clean up. You go ahead and rest. I’ll prepare breakfast for you tomorrow,” said Mayu, taking the dishes away from him.

“Are you staying?”

“Yes, but don’t sweat it. I’ll just stay in the lounge area.”

*Bad idea*. Clearing his throat, he searched for the right response to give.

“Mayu, you don’t have to do this.”

“No, I want to.”

How could he make her understand? There was no other way but to be franked with her, before it’s getting worse.

“Mayu… this is not gonna work.” Finally, those words were uttered from his mouth.

“What do you mean?” Her voice was almost unheard.

“You know exactly what I mean. You and I. It is not going to happen. I’m sorry.” Though hard, he had to say it.

Tears were running down quickly. She could not contain her sadness anymore. For so long, she had been by his side, supporting him. Why did he have to break her heart without giving her a fair chance?

“You’re a horrible person. Do you like her that much?”

For the fourth time, Akane’s name was brought up, by four different people. Was today a let’s-gang-up-on-Akane day?

“Akane has nothing to do with this.”

“Liar! I saw how you look at her. Your eyes were different. They gleamed, the same way you look at the Empress. And even now, you wish for Akane to be here, instead of me. Am I right?”

When a woman was not in her right mind, it was better to leave her alone. Comforting a heart broken woman, if was not done properly, might just add more fuel to the fire. And sweet-talking a cry woman was definitely out of his forte. There was only was logical action he could think of in this situation.

“Mayu, let me send you home.”

But she had already rushed out, leaving him wondering of his fate, being surrounded by complicated women.

61

Sometimes when the night was longer than the day, women on the lowest floor loved hanging out with friends, having pajamas party and chit-chatting about their love interest. Laughing at one’s funny encounter and sharing each other’s secret, these were basically the must do activities during the hang out.

However, the situation at Yuina’s house was different. There was no laughing or trading story. Only a sob of despair was heard. That night, all attention was solely on Mayu.

Crying hard on Kaori’s lap, there was no need for her to explain what had happened. Both Yuina and Kaori were fully aware of the cause of her sorrow. But none of them said anything.

Comforting words were not necessary at this stage. What Mayu needed was time to let out her feeling, though it might mean to cry out the whole night, until she felt better. Then only they would talk.

Since it would be a long night for them, Yuina had prepared flower tea to be served with spicy muffins. When she brought out the dish to the lounge area, Kaori was seen stroking Mayu’s hair, very gently.

A smile was crafted on Yuina’s face. Those two without a doubt was really close. They had been together since enrolling in the military program. Some recruits even nicknamed them the ‘non-identical twins’ sister.

Deep down, Yuina really wished for Kazuhiro to open his heart to accept Mayu in his life. Apart from her personal liking towards Mayu, she was worried about him. Though her brother did not say it, she knew to whom his heart belonged to.

Undeniably, Empress Hikari was beautiful and kind-hearted. She represented the symbol of love and peace in the eyes of the civilians. But she did not deserve her brother’s heart, at least that’s what she believed.

To begin with, it was an impossible affair, especially when the Empress had already married to someone else. Even if she hadn’t, there was no way she could marry a civilian. Why could not Kazuhiro see it? Why could not he notice a better woman in front him?

Seeing Mayu crying over her brother like that really touched her soul. If only she could change his heart. But she knew him extremely well. His stubbornness was not easy to deal with.

Yuina heaved a sigh. For now, all she could do was to support Mayu, easing her misery.

62

The Earth. Once was known as the blue planet with rich resources. Being in the middle of a forest, Kazuhiro looked at his surrounding. The lowest floor was said to replicate their home planet, based on the memory of the early survivors. Was this how the Earth looked like?

Green grasses. Big trees. Several streams converged, forming a big river. What was unique about each stream was its structure. Since they were flowing down from a higher place, rocks were arranged in a ladder-like pattern, creating a small waterfall along those streams.

The river was more flat, but the water ran extremely fast. From where he’s standing, he could see the river flowed downward, creating another huge waterfall. So he must be on a high cliff.

*Interesting*. When he drove to that place earlier, he could not recall climbing up a hill. Though there was no track for the car to move on once he had arrived at the forest, and he had to continue his journey on foot, still the road he took was flat. How could there be a lower ground for an already leveled surface?

More importantly, how did Akane find out about this place? His hand was holding Akane’s hairpin, firmly. When he casted a trace spell on it, he was pointed to this place, but there was no sign of her being there. So where was she hiding?

“Could not find what you are looking for?”

As if reading his mind, Akane appeared right behind him. Since his enrollment in the military, he had been training himself well to be aware of his surrounding. To be able to detect the unseen enemy. But still, she managed to approach him unnoticed. How did she even do that?

“Where did you come from?”

“Is that how you speak to a woman you’re stalking?” She just loved teasing him.

“What do you need me for this time?” Rather than responding to her flirt, he threw another question.

“Oh? Aren’t you the one coming, looking for me?”

“You won’t leave your trace behind if you did not want to be found.”

“Clever.” She giggled.

Leaving his question unanswered, Akane walked closer the river and sat by the bank. Different varieties of fish were swimming freely between rocks within the crystal clear water. Somehow she felt jealous of those fish. They possessed the freedom which she longed for.

“Have you caught fish, fresh from the river?” she asked, completely changing the subject.

“What does catching fish have to do with our meet up?”

Frolicking on the water with her feet, she turned to look at him, flashing her cutest smile.

“Nothing. Let’s have some fun.”

Instantly she stood up and jumped into the river. Shocked by her sudden appearance, the fishes swam away from her, towards the center of the river. Ignoring the strong current at the middle of the stream, she followed those fishes closely.

“Akane…”

Kazuhiro called out to her. There were so many things that he wanted to ask and talk about. Of his meeting with Sir Ryuu. Of her action while in the Second Unit. But she was such a carefree woman which made it hard to have a serious conversation with her.

“Come on. Over here.”

Definitely she was having a fun time playing in the river. Waving her hands at him, while at the same time chasing fishes. Where did all her troubles go? Before he could figure out the answer, an unexplainable phenomena suddenly occurred right in front of his eyes.

The strong current morphed into a snake-like shape, coiling Akane’s feet, and pulling her under the water. Instantaneously she was washed away towards the end of the stream, where the waterfall awaited.

63

Overcoming his stupefied feeling with what just happened, Kazuhiro rushed to the river bank. There was no head bobbing. Only her drowning hands were seen flailing for help.

“Akane!” he shouted.

Of course there was no reaction from her when her whole body was already sank. Without a second of hesitation, he dove into the river. All he could think of at that moment was to bring her out of the water alive.

Through the strong current, he swam across it to where Akane was. The torrential water proved to be the biggest hindrance. Using all his might, he propelled his body towards the center of the river.

But Akane had been washed away even further. He could no longer tell where she was. Not even her drowning hands were visible anymore. *This was getting worse.* There was only one more thing left to do. He had to search for her underwater.

Holding his breath, he submerged. Thanked to the crystal clear water, he could see clearly what’s underneath it. Interestingly, the current underwater was as calm as millpond. As if there were two layers making up the river.

Roughly 50 meters from his position, he saw an object slowly sinking. There was no mistaking the shape of it. That was definitely Akane’s!

Since everything moved in slow motion under the water, he managed to reach her in just a short time. Panic clouded his thought the moment he grabbed onto Akane’s lifeless body.

Quickly he swam up to the surface, while carrying Akane. She needed to be given first aid really soon. But once they had emerged on the surface, they were caught in the strong current again.

The waterfall was just right in front of them. With one hand holding Akane, while the other was keeping them afloat, there was nothing else he could do, except to leave their lives to fate.

The current showed no mercy. Everything caught in it was thrown at the waterfall, which in turn hurled them down into a deep turquoise pond below. Tightly, Kazuhiro held her body.

Since they were free falling from the top of the waterfall, it was only a matter of seconds before they hit the bottom. Just when he was about to think of the possible ways to save themselves, the snake-like water which coiled Akane’s legs previously reappeared. This time, it curled around his body, thus slowing down the fall.

Once they had fallen safely into the pond, it fused with the pond water and vanished. Slowly Kazuhiro swam towards the edge, towing her behind him. After pulling her out of the water, he was ready to perform a CPR on her, when he heard a giggle coming out of Akane’s mouth.

Did she just regain her consciousness? Somehow, it seemed a little off. She was supposed to be coughing out water, but instead she just let out a laugh.

“Are you alright?”

“Were you worried?”

Akane had resorted back to her flirtatious self. No sign of panicking detected from someone who had just nearly drowned. Suspicion started to get into him.

“Don’t tell me… this was all your plan?”

“Wasn’t it fun?”

She still hadn’t stopped laughing. Without responding to her idea of fun, Kazuhiro just stared at the beauty who was enjoying herself while still lying on the dry land. Everything started to make sense now.

The water turning snaky should be dubious enough. A woman with such a high capability like her would not be easily drowned. It was staged well, and he fell for it. Simply because she wanted to have fun.

Kazuhiro opened his mouth to say his thought on this, but Akane’s sudden jerk halted him from doing so. What was it this time?

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“Akane, if this is another prank of yours…”

Kazuhiro’s words didn’t even get through her ears anymore. Something was moving inside her body. Instantly she took her cardigan off, leaving only her singlet.

A bloodsucker!

Of all places in her body, that leech chose to cozily feed itself out of her left breast’s blood. And what made it even harder to remove was because the leech was filling up at the lower part of her breast, near the breasts’ gap. How could she remove it?

Finally grasping the situation, Kazuhiro walked towards her. They were in a rainforest, so it was natural to attract leeches as these worms live in freshwater as well. Furthermore, Akane’s clothes exposed her skin a little bit, hence increasing her chance of being ‘chosen’.

“Do you want me to remove the leech on your neck?” he offered his assistance.

Wait… there was another one on her neck? She rolled her eyes in exasperation. Was this a payback for going overboard with her prank? Slowly, she slipped a sigh out and turned to look at Kazuhiro who was standing behind her.

“Yes, please.”

When undergoing his military training, for quite a number of times they camped out in different rainforests. Handling leeches had become a normal routine at that time.

“I assume being bled by a leech wasn’t part of your training before?”

“Nope, but bleeding you to death was.”

“Do you have to answer everything sarcastically?”

“Could you just please take the sucker off?”

“Okay, it’s done,” he said, and throwing it back into the pond.

Luckily the leech was just started to feed on her blood so the bite did not cause much of a bleeding. After cleaning the bite with clean water, he plucked a ripe melastoma fruit which grew wildly in the forest, squeezed its juice out and applied on the wound to stop the bleeding.

“The bleeding should stop soon, and there’s no need to worry about getting infected,” he said once he was done with the treatment.

“Kazuhiro…”

Should she ask for his help? It was the most embarrassing thing to ask from a man but she was feeling squeamish by just thinking of the leech sucking her breast, and how fat it had expanded.

“There’s ummm… another one.”

“Oh? Where is it?”

Reluctantly, she directed to where the leech was with her gaze. Easily understood where she pointed at, he approached her real close.

“I’m afraid you will need to take off the remaining clothes.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Her voice was half-shrieking.

“Otherwise you can wait for it to get its fill so it will drop off on its own after 20 minutes or so.”

To wait for another 20 minutes while watching the sucker expanded itself was not even an option. Pursing her lips while having a short thinking, she finally made up her mind.

“Remove it. I don’t care how you do it, but the clothes remain.”

65

Hearing her answer almost made him facepalmed. Why did she have to complicate this even further when it was already complicated to begin with?

“It will be better to take off the clothes.”

“Are you so eager to see a naked woman?”

Something was off about her intonation. No, it was not anger, but he got the feeling she was a little traumatized by the thought of taking off her clothes in front of him. Perhaps in front of men?

Not wanting to drag the matter any further, Kazuhiro decided to give in to her request, though technically it was ridiculous. Languidly he pulled down her singlet, including the undergarment until he could see the already fat leech.

“I’m taking off the leech now.”

He thought it was better to warn first before touching her breast. Since she did not give any response, he simply proceeded, with hope she would not react unnecessarily. Gently he lifted up her breast with his left hand until he could see its head and sucker clearly.

His other hand was placed next to the sucker, and by using his pointy fingernail he slid underneath the sucker. Before the leech could reattach itself, he quickly flicked it off.

As expected, profuse bleeding was unavoidable. Like before he used the melastoma fruit to reduce the bleeding. Then he covered her breast with a clean handkerchief, which he carried with him all the time, to prevent her undergarment from being tainted with blood.

“Do you want me to check your whole body just to be sure there aren’t any more leeches?” he asked.

That question came as a surprised. As genuine as it sounded, she could not shake off the thought of Shigeo’s harassment. The disgusted feeling each time he touched her was still living in her memory.

But Kazuhiro was different, wasn’t he? Though he had the chance, he didn’t take advantage of it. His action was more gentle and cautious, as if he did not want to add more to her fear. Maybe she would not mind if he wanted to examine her whole body…

*Hold that thought!* Why did she even think about it in the first place? And why was her heart beating so fast out of sudden? To make matter worse, the thought had turned her face red.

“Are you blushing?”

Kazuhiro’s next question felt like a slap on her face. For the first time, she was at a loss for words.

“Of…of course not! Why would I be blushing? Do you think you are hot enough to make a woman blush?”

“Why are you so upset?”

“I’m not upset! It’s just…” How could she explain what she just felt? “Ah, never mind. If they are anymore leeches on my body, then just let them fill up and drop off on their own.”

She picked up her cardigan and then put her hand in her pants’ right pocket. When she pulled her hand out, there was a small object held between her fingers.

“You came here for this, wasn’t it?”

It was the main memory she stole from their unit’s database room. The technology they used to build computer memories prevented the objects from being easily damaged. Their waterproof feature also came in handy, with absolute guarantee that no data were to lose in the event of flooding or similar.

But what’s with the awkward vibe he picked up from her? Somehow she seemed very timid. Though weird, he didn’t ask anything, but simply took the main memory and watched her walked away in silence. Even so, he couldn’t help himself from breaking into a smile, finding her sudden vulnerability to be really amusing.

66

Years of preparation. Millions of investment. Children sacrifices. And it only took one miscalculation to ruin their plan.

“How long is she going to play her little cat and mouse game?”

If everything was according to plan, the lowest floor should have fell onto their hands by now. It was a common practice to have Plan B, and even C, if the main strategy didn’t work out.

What they didn’t expect was the betrayal of their most important tool, and unfortunately they did not have any back up plan to balance the loss. The unexpectedness definitely stirred their effort by much.

Tatsuo glanced at Shigeo’s face whose expression was clearly disconsolate.

“They claimed it was Kazuhiro’s doing. But we both know that wasn’t true. She was definitely there.”

Focusing on smoking the cigar, Shigeo inhaled deeply before smoothly blowing the smoke out of his mouth. For a fraction of second, he felt relieved.

“My hands are itching for actions. We need to get her back as soon as possible,” he said, repeatedly opening and closing his right hands.

Though clearly understood what Shigeo meant, Tatsuo could not find himself agreeing with his thought.

“You want her all for the wrong reason. Don’t forget what she has caused us. She needs to be taught well for biting on her masters.”

“Don’t you worry. I’ll teach her real well this time.” Shigeo grinned from ear to ear, immersing himself completely in his lecherous mind.

Unfortunately Tatsuo couldn’t share the same excitement. He was raised to be a great soldier, and to gain military might had been his one and only objective in life. However at this moment, he had no time to waste on correcting Shigeo’s lewd personality. They had to make the plan works by hook or by crook.

“We have lost a lot of our valuable weapons. We can’t afford to lose others too. It is time to change strategy. We will enlist the military’s help to capture her. And turn the civilians into her enemy. Once she felt cornered and trapped, she will have no choice but to show herself.”

“What if he interferes?”

“I’ve put that possibility into consideration. If he was found to have some connection with her, which I hope he does, then it gives us the upper hand. With that, we will be killing two birds with one stone. There’s nothing more that I want than to get rid of our biggest obstacle as soon as possible.”

“I leave the plan to you then, partner,” said Shigeo, smiling, as if they had already won the war.

67

The firewood was lively burning, warming the cave where Kazuhiro and Akane were in. A few stick of fishes were lined up to be grilled by the firewood. Fortunately the pond housed a lot of fish, including those who were thrown out from the waterfall. The crystal clear water made it even easier to catch them.

It was already nighttime. Since they were deep in the jungle, the environment was almost pitch black. Lights from the stars hardly reached the ground. Only the sound of waterfall could be heard. Once in a while they could also hear cicadas’ singing.

The inside of the cave was a different story. Apart from being lit by the firewood, its ceiling was glowing colorfully, as if thousands of stars were shining upon them. This unrealistic phenomenon was definitely magical, and he did not need to second guess who was responsible for it.

Speaking of the magic caster, Akane was awfully quiet. Sitting by the corner of the cave with her arms wrapping her legs, she seemed to be lost in her own thoughts. After taking the main memory, he was supposed to go back to the Second Division but he could not bring himself to.

It was the same reason as to why he let down his guard during his fight with Akane. The very same reason that made him sought after her, even after she left. Her sorrowful eyes were something he could not turn away from. Somehow he wanted to know what lies behind those eyes.

Realizing that she was constantly being stared at, Akane removed herself from her deep thoughts. Then she walked towards the firewood, and sat opposite of him. Taking the grilled fish that was extended to her, she ate it without vocalizing a single word.

After finishing her dinner, she went back to the corner where she was sitting at previously. Leaning herself against the cave wall, she stared blankly on the ground. For a few moments, none of them were saying anything, nor exchanging glances.

“I’m sorry for going overboard with the prank,” finally she broke the silence. “Just so you know, I didn’t do it for fun.”

There was no response given to her sudden confession, but Kazuhiro had moved himself closer to her. Though he did not directly say, it was understood that he was giving the woman in front of him his full, undivided attention.

Akane slipped a sigh before continuing. “All these while, I have to think of the consequences for every action I made. One wrong move could be fatal. For every second, I have to be alert of my surrounding. Who would they send to get me? Will I be ambushed while asleep?

This fear is eating me inside. I want to be free from this insecure feeling. That’s why…” she halted. Her eyes were directed away from him.

“That’s okay. You can act carefree while I’m around. I’ll protect you.” As if understanding what she was trying to convey, Kazuhiro shared his honest thinking.

A smile was painted on her pretty face. With lights from the ceiling reflected on her face, she looked even stunning. If that moment were captured on a painting, it would worth millions of money.

“You are a really nice person. I’m glad to have spared your life.” She meant it from the bottom of her heart. “Hey Kazuhiro, would you accompany me tonight?”

“I would spend a night here, even if you didn’t ask,” he replied, with a smile crafted on his face which completely took Akane by surprised.

“So you do know how to smile. If you keep on smiling like that, a lot of women will fall crazy in love with you.”

Immediately the smile was retracted from his face. “That’s not even a compliment.”

“Alright! I’ll make it as a personal mission, to make you smile all the time.”

“Akane…”

But she was already lying down, back facing him. Since he had told her that she could act unworried while he was around, she would use this chance to the fullest. Completely ignoring what he was about to say, she shut her eyes and sent herself to the realm of dreams.

Kazuhiro just watched her action in silence. If she really meant what she said, he could imagine more pranks and surprises coming his way. But he also meant what he said. Hence whatever her future deeds were, they would be well tolerated. As long as there was a spark of happiness in her sorrowful eyes, he wouldn’t mind being utilized by her.

He gazed at her for a few more seconds. Confident that she was already sound asleep, he covered her slender body with his jacket, and then went to find a suitable place to lie down his weary body.

When he woke up the next morning, Akane had already left, and his jacket was put back on his body.

68

The briefing room of the Second Division was packed with all staff, regardless of their position. Soon, there would be a live telecast by General Tatsuo, to address the current state of affairs to all three divisions.

Theories were already spread among staff, guessing and betting on a possible issue. It was a rare occasion where all staff were invited as audiences to General Tatsuo’s announcement. Normally only the soldiers were called.

“As the most observant man on this planet, what would your guess be, Kazuhiro?” asked Hayato, while waiting for the broadcast to happen.

“We’ll just wait for the general to announce it himself.” It wasn’t his style to take part in speculating an unknown issue.

Hayato shook his head while putting a hand on his forehead, pretended to be frustrated. “Man, for once, could you get excited like a normal person would do?”

“I’m more worried about those two. Why aren’t they sitting with us?” Eiji suddenly cut in.

‘Those two’ were referring to Mayu and Kaori. Whenever there was a briefing, the five of them would sit together in a group. This time, the two of them chose to split apart, which caused a curiosity to other people, except Kazuhiro. He knew very well what made them acted that way.

Before Hayato and Eiji could share their opinion on the matter, the voice of General Tatsuo shifted their attention towards the main screen. Sitting comfortably in the audience chamber, the general began speaking.

“I believe most of you are wondering why you are all being summoned to this meeting. What I’m about to reveal is extremely important and I need all of you to take part in it.”

His speech was paused while his assistant uploaded an image on the screen. What was shown caused quite a stir among those who were watching the live telecast. It was an image of a very beautiful young woman. Most of them were actually charmed by her look, but Kazuhiro was totally flabbergasted for a different reason. How did the general know about Akane?

“This woman is known as Akane Aldini. She was reported as deceased in 3007 but was actually kept alive. Our intel has revealed that she is part of the rebellion and was the mastermind behind the recent attacks at the main city as well as during the festival. She is also believed to be guilty of the attempted murder of Kazuhiro Einsbert of the Second Division.”

All eyes were now on Kazuhiro, whose gaze was fixed on the general, but at the same time maintained his composure. Something was clearly not right. Who was his intel?

“Therefore I decree that capturing Akane Aldini alive is the top priority that must be carried out without fail. However I must warn all of you that this will be a risky task. Akane is confirmed to be a magic user. And there is more to it. There is a mole among us who has been aiding her all these while. Hence our second goal is to draw out the mole and bring him to justice.

To all Captains, get your armies ready. Once the preparation has been made, I will brief on the mission. The faster we get these two culprits, the easier it would be to deal with the rebellions.”

That ended the broadcast. Everybody had started discussing about Akane’s gorgeous look while at the same time cursing the mole. This latest development was definitely unexpected. If nothing were done quickly, Akane would be caught in this trap. There was only one way that he could think of. He needed to convince Captain Iroha to disobey the general’s order.

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“Captain, may I have a few words?”

Kazuhiro stepped forward. Before the captain made her decision, she had to learn his side of the story first.

“Great. I want to talk to you too,” Captain Iroha replied, already expecting him. Then she turned to the others. “The special squad stays, plus Dr. Isao as well. The rest of you are dismissed, for now.”

One by the one they emptied the room, leaving only the special team - whose members were Kazuhiro and his other four friends - Dr. Isao and Yuina. When Captain Iroha issued an order for only the special team, it goes without saying that the mission would center around Kazuhiro, and those four were crucial to make the mission a success.

“I guess you know by now why you are called to stay. This mission is a challenging one. Put the mole aside, we are also dealing with Kazuhiro’s possible attacker. If she by herself managed to stop Kazuhiro, that makes her a difficult opponent. I need the four of you to provide a necessary backup for Kazuhiro. So we need to lay out a plan and devise a strategy to bring her down by using Kazuhiro as a bait.”

“I have a different proposal to make,” declared Kazuhiro.

“Yes, I would like to hear your thoughts on this, since you are the only one having a first hand combat experience with her.”

“Instead of capturing her, I reckon that we bring her to our side, and place her under protection.”

It was very usual for Kazuhiro to step up and direct the strategy for the Second Unit’s missions. However this was the first time he proposed something totally opposite of Captain Iroha’s order. Definitely his proposal caught everybody by surprise.

“What are you thinking, bringing the enemy in?” asked Yuina, still shocking by her brother’s unexpected suggestion.

“She’s not the enemy. She never was,” he answered her question calmly.

“Have you forgotten? She tried to kill you!”

If there was one thing that could make Yuina felt irritated towards her brother, that would be his capability to forget all of his near death experiences. The fear that she had to go through each time she received a call on Kazuhiro’s life threatening situation was something that she could never shake off from her mind.

“But she didn’t. You are over reacting, Yuina.”

“I’m not over re…”

“It’s as Kazuhiro said,” Dr. Isao cut her in. “When they brought him in, his condition was far from danger. There was no killing intent in the paralysis potion she used, just enough to immobilize Kazuhiro.”

With Dr. Isao backing up Kazuhiro’s argument, there was no way Yuina could win the debate. For now, she just had to let the matter go by putting her emotion aside, and listen to the wild suggestion he had yet to say.

“Hmm Akane…,” Captain Iroha muttered while stroking her chin, as if remembering something. “Her name is similar to the woman you brought in the other day.”

“You mean that unattractive woman?” asked Kaori in distaste, then quickly covered her mouth after she was elbowed by Mayu, who stood beside her.

Ignoring Kaori’s remark, Kazuhiro came clean with the answer. “Yes, both of them are the same person.”

As if Kazuhiro just dropping a huge bomb, Hayato jumped in surprised. His mouth agape, trying to believe what he just heard was indeed true.

“Are you saying that you live with that insanely pretty woman all these while?”

“Is that what you are concerned about?” Kaori asked, a bit annoyed with the immaturity of her friend.

“You would never understand a man’s feeling,” replied Hayama, with Eiji nodded in agreement.

“Idiot,” she mumbled to herself. Then she turned to Kazuhiro. Dissatisfaction was shown on her face. “How is that even possible?”

“That’s because she uses a high-level magic, camouflaging herself.”

It was Captain Iroha who answered Kaori’s question, remembering Kazuhiro’s explanation on his attacker during the Stroph Research Center’s incident a while back.

“Then, does that mean she’s a noble?” asked Yuina, still hard to believe.

“No, according to her record, she was born and raised on this floor,” Kazuhiro clarified.

Though Kazuhiro was her most trusted soldier, Captain Iroha still had doubts in her mind. Before she could make any decision, she had to be 100% sure of the truth.

“But from the way I see it, she might just be manipulating you into thinking that she was a victim. You said it before. She knows everything there is need to know about you. She was well prepared. It is possible that her action until now, getting close to you and gained your trust, was part of her plan in order to infiltrate and steal the military’s information?”

From the moment he decided to bring her into their side, he knew it wouldn’t be an easy task. Hayama and Eiji could be swayed easily with just Akane’s good look, but Yuina, Mayu and Kaori who harbored enmity towards her would not accept his proposal easily. Captain Iroha on the other hand, would need proof in order to be convinced, while Dr. Isao always held a neutral stand.

Of course he had no solid proof to justify Akane’s innocence, but his instinct leaned towards saying she wasn’t the enemy. It was true that her action could be deceiving – in fact he had fell into her deceptions quite a few times – but there was no way those sorrowful eyes were lying. That he was sure of.

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“If you are concern about the main memory she stole, here it is.” Kazuhiro took the main memory out of his pocket, and placed it on top of the desk. “I won’t say that I don’t have doubts, especially not knowing what she’s after. But I can vouch for her innocence, and she wasn’t the mastermind behind the last two attacks. In fact she’d saved us all in those two incidents.”

“She saved us, how?” Captain Iroha demanded an explanation.

“Those two battles required a huge consumption of magic, which was not possible for me to cast at my current level. She opened the path, I just completed the task.”

“Are you sure you are not making up this because you were charmed by her good look?”

Kaori was still refused to believe, mostly for Mayu’s sake. Her best friend just kept her thoughts to herself and not saying a word in the meeting. But she understood exactly how Mayu felt. It would be awkward to have the two of them together under the same roof.

“I’m not like those two over there,” Kazuhiro replied, nonchalantly.

In an instant, a soft hit landed on his head. It was Eiji.

“Now, now. Give us some respect. We are not a perverted duo.”

“Huh? You’re not?” Kaori snorted, pretended to be surprised.

Their banter caused Dr. Isao to laugh, while Captain Iroha shook her head hard. This was what happened when only the special team got together to discuss. Somehow she forgot that they were still young adults.

“I hate to interrupt your friendly fight, but we need to come to a conclusion soon,” said Captain Iroha, then switching her attention back to Kazuhiro. “What’s your theory on the mole?”

“I doubt there is one. Even if there is, the mole could not be on her side. Instead…” He halted.

Why didn’t he think about it before? When he brought Akane in, she acted weirdly after looking at something. Or rather someone. Quickly he directed his gaze towards where Akane might be looking at. Could he be…?

“The general. It struck me as odd that he knows so much about Akane. And it also doesn’t make sense considering how easy she obtained all information related to my military ability. Eiji, could you check the main memory and trace the information she had accessed into?”

Eiji took the main memory and brought it to the database room to reconnect it. Then he shared the information on the network so it became accessible in the briefing room where the others were. It took him only a few seconds to trace the information needed.

“It was as you said. She only copied General Tatsuo’s files. All of them.”

So, his suspicion was correct, though he still could not find the connection between the general and the rebellion. From Akane’s shocking expression, it could be assumed that she herself had no idea that the general was part of the military.

“If he’s truly behind this, then the whole situation is worse than I thought. This is a trap not only to capture Akane, but to expose her associate as well. In that case…”

“The mole he was referring to is actually you,” Captain Iroha completed his statement.

Kazuhiro nodded in agreement. “Captain…”

“You don’t have to say it anymore. Since it has come down to this, we’ll proceed with your proposal. I never like that old geezer anyway.”

This would not be the first for Captain Iroha to disobey the general’s order. Even before this, she always had disagreement with his orders, though she didn’t express it openly. If the general was in fact having some sort of connection with the rebellion, this would the best chance to dig out the truth. And by having Akane on their side, if and only if what Kazuhiro claimed was true, it would provide them with that opportunity.

“So this has turned into a rescue mission. How do you plan to do it?” asked Dr. Isao.

“Getting her to our side would not be easy especially now that she knows her enemy is our very own general. And with the general’s eyes dead set on me, I cannot aid her directly. We need to get someone that she can trust without a second thought, who isn’t part of the military.”

“And just who do you have in mind?”

Kazuhiro looked at the curious Captain Iroha and answered her confidently. “I know someone who is willing to take the responsibility.”

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How long had he felt this way? If Lord Gorou could recall correctly, from the moment he was told about the history of their family, his heart was already filled with resentment. The Arabasque family was no stranger to the Kleins’. They were once coming from the same lineage.

When their families were transported to this place, the Arduins only recognized the Kleins, and hence appointed the family as the ruler. They were granted power that could not be rivaled by anybody. And that made his bitterness towards the Kleins grew even more.

What was so great about the Kleins that they were chosen over the Arabasque? From the story passed down to him, these two families stood on an equal ground when they were on Earth. But here, in Takahiro Empire, his family had to serve them. The highest recognition given to them was as the royal advisor, and under the courtesy of the ruler, they were embraced with the power from The Amida. But only a small portion of it.

And now, the current ruler of Takahiro Empire was Empress Hikari, a young incapable woman from his point of view. The worst of them all. She dared to propose an equal treatment between the nobles and the civilians, to close the gap that was created by her ancestors. Who would spout such nonsense?

I should be the one to rule, not that day-dreamer-Empress, he said to himself.

With Lord Watari by her side, supporting her ridiculous vision, his anger towards the Kleins could not be contained any longer. Fortunately he wasn’t the only one in the Arabasque family who felt that way. His father, and the fathers before him bore the same grudge. The very same feeling that was instilled in his heart.

For generations, they conducted a research on The Amida to find another mean to acquire the power and one day that opportunity came to them unexpectedly. Upon the establishment of the Emperor’s Council, the Emperor at that time decided to disclose the prophecy they’d been keeping for long. Though it was the Kleins who had been given the power of The Amida with the absolute right to rule this world, it was foretold that there was another one.

The one with a tremendous power that was enough to shake off the entire empire. The one known as *The Accursed.*

Lord Gorou snorted when he thought about it. The Kleins might think that this secret was safe within the council, but unbeknownst to them, the Arabasque had made their move. And they found another interesting fact too – The Accursed one was said not to come from any lineage.

Based on the fact alone, the Arabasque family started the search of the said person, focusing on orphans on the lowest floor whose identity was unknown. For years they had been collecting young, abandoned orphans, gave them name and shelter, and finally tested them with the blood of the royal family.

The royal blood should not have any effect on The Accursed. For decades, the search had been in vain, but a report sent by Dr. Ichiro changed everything. An orphan named Akane Aldini showed a tremendous compatibility with Empress Hikari’s blood, as well as demonstrating an unbelievable talent in magic.

By then he knew that he had found his way to the throne. Millions of money had been invested to create a secret facility just to train her, to be his most faithful retainer. His dream was within grasp until a small unaccounted incident ruined his almost perfect plan.

Furious was not enough to describe how he felt. How much longer did he need to serve the feeble empress? After years of sacrificing their honor, he would not let his effort in nurturing Akane to go into waste. The time for him to rule was now.

Lord Gorou pressed a virtual “ON” key which was implemented in his secret room. In only a couple of seconds, a window appeared and General Tatsuo’s face was seen on the screen.

“Do whatever it takes to get her back. I won’t tolerate anymore failures.”

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Stars were shining brightly up above the sky. Of course, the Arduins were the brightest among them. Reflecting lights at night, while becoming the source of warm and heat during the day, the twin stars were indeed mysterious.

And so did her very own existence.

Why was she the chosen one, Akane couldn’t care less. All she care about was to be free, to live a normal life, and to have friends.

*Who am I kidding?*

She snorted at her own thought. There was no way those dreams of hers could become a reality, wasn’t it? Even if she managed to defeat Shigeo and General Tatsuo, there would be others that would come for her ability. Her fate was already set in stone.

There was no freedom for her inside this empire, except to become someone else’s tool. Akane was well aware of the plot to capture her alive. Since she knew that Tatsuo was actually the military’s general, she kept an eye on the military’s movement and managed to intercept his broadcast three days ago.

That’s why she had decided to self-destruct herself, but not until she had accomplished what she was set out to do. It was the only way to be free from those power-greedy people.

*It is now or never.*

This was the point of no return. She started this war and there was no turning back. Win or lose did not matter anymore. Though the odd was against her, she would give her all to at least take down Shigeo.

*This war is personal.*

For three days, she had to lay low, not because she was hiding but she was occupied with preparations for the battle to come. Tomorrow might mark a new history in Takahiro Empire, depending on which side the fate was leaning on. One thing for sure, everybody would be made known of her existence.

This battle was definitely unavoidable. It was meant to happen sooner or later. The moment the new day appeared tomorrow, everybody would be turned into her enemy. Kazuhiro was no exception. She could only hope that the time wouldn’t come for her to take his life for real.

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The curtain of dawn was raised the moment the Arduins’ heat reached the lowest floor. As Akane had planned, it was the time to openly declare a war with the Empire. Her resolved was firmed.

To begin with, she needed to guide the enemies to her prepared location. This fight was unfair to begin with. To increase her chances to take down the enemies as many as possible, they had to fight her indirectly under her terms.

Of course, that was no easy task, especially if the enemy was Kazuhiro. He would instantaneously read her plot and jeopardize her plan. That’s why she needed those three days, to prepare for various backup plans just in case the situation turned to her disadvantage.

The alarm she set on her watch finally went off. *It’s show time*. With an unwavering resolution, she came out from her hiding. The place she chose to make her public appearance was the Stroph Research Center.

The center was the army’s strongest stronghold. To boldly challenge them there would definitely raise their anger. But if she could destroy the center, the military power would be paralyzed, thus keeping General Tatsuo occupied and giving her more time to track down Shigeo.

Between those two guys, she rather not faced the general as the opponent. Though she hadn’t seen him in combat personally, somehow he emitted an extremely dangerous vibe that could even make a capable woman like her to cower in fear. Furthermore, his personal record, which information she stole from the Second Division, was enough to prove his exceptional prowess in war.

If it came down to it, where the general would stand in her way, she would not run from her fight. But she’d only worry about that when it had happened. For now, she needed to execute her first step without fail.

Everything was already set in place. Nobody seemed to notice that she had penetrated the center. Without a second of hesitation, she pressed the small button in her palm, which caused the main entrance to detonate. But that wasn’t enough. She stood behind the fast falling rubbles, making sure that her silhouette was clearly visible.

Yes, that was exactly her plan – to make a grandiose appearance on her maiden war.

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The news of her attacking the Stroph Research Center was spreading faster the speeding bullet. By now, every unit had received their orders to launch their squad.

Captain Iroha had also assembled her team, but put the launching order on hold. Since their objective was different from what was directed, the execution must be well planned to avoid suspicion.

“What do you think?” she pointed her question at Kazuhiro.

“That’s a very bold move, to attack the strongest stronghold where she doesn’t even stand a chance to win, unless it’s meant for a diversion.”

“Can you read guessing her move?”

“Pretty much. Eiji, could you open up the map surrounding the center?”

“Aye, aye!”

The map was displayed and enlarged on the big screen. Kazuhiro scanned the area thoroughly, looking for a possible secret passage.

“Bingo,” he said, after finding what he was looking for. “Her true purpose is to lead us to this abandoned facility.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Her actions up until now are all well-planned. After the attack at Stroph Research Center, she hid in that facility. I believe that was not a coincidence. There never was,” explained Kazuhiro.

“Even her staying with you?” asked Kaori out of the blue, which caused all heads to turn towards her.

But Kazuhiro chose not to answer that question, instead he continued with their briefing. “All of us will head to the center, except you.” He turned to the man standing beside him. “Wait for her at the abandoned facility. Proceed as plan.”

“You can count on me,” he replied.

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The entrance into the research center was heavily blocked by the ruins caused by the explosion; thus making it harder for the military to get in. There were no MechaBots nearby to take care of the debris, which Akane had taken into consideration when she planned the attack. Those armies underestimated her, as expected, really worked in her favor.

Besides, the research center being the most important facility in the lowest floor also served as an effective shield for her, though temporarily. They would not dare to recklessly destroy the building just to get her – that fact alone had already given her ample time to proceed with her next plan.

For now, she just had to deal with the armies and personnel within the center. But they did not pose any threat to her at all. Every single one of them was easily taken care of. Though from their point of view she was the villain, it was the general who planted the idea in their heads. Because of that, she decided to spare their lives, unless she had no other choices.

The layout of the center was vividly engraved in her memory. From where she was currently standing, it took several more automatic blast doors to pass in order to get to the central atrium, where the energy from The Amida was kept. If the energy were destroyed, the whole lowest floor would be paralyzed. Then she just need to ‘lead’ the whole armies to the abandoned facility and trapped them there while she tracked down Shigeo.

Passing through the blast doors would require Akane to hack on the system, which she considered as a piece of cake. After almost 30 minutes of hacking and neutralizing the armies at each door, she finally reached the last one.

Even so, passing through the last door was not easy. As expected, the security was the highest there. And not just that, guards were started swarming around her, this time, twice the number than before.

But that was counted into her consideration. As long as the rubbles were still occupying the main entrance, time was definitely on her side. She turned to face her enemies. Every single rifle held by each of them was pointing towards them. However, this situation didn’t even bother her at all. She was well aware of the general’s order, that she had to be captured alive. Those rifles wouldn’t shoot actual bullets but sedatives.

Not giving the enemies the chance to attack, she charged towards them. When she sneaked in earlier, she stole a good quality sword which was hanged on the wall at the main lobby. This current situation was perfect for her to make good use of the sword. In just a blink of an eye, all of the rifles were cut into half.

Surprised by her quick attack, those guards stepped back a little. Confusion was clearly displayed on their faces. With no doubt, they weren’t told of her ability. But Akane did not blame the general from not doing so. He could not risk exposing his involvement in the illegal experiment to the public, especially when he held the highest rank on the lowest floor.

Taking advantage of this confusion, Akane launched her second charge. This time, her aim was to knock them unconscious. Since they were considered as small fries, she took them down solely using combat.

After confirming there weren’t anymore guards coming, she quickly hacked into the system to open the final blast door. After taking down several firewalls, finally the door was opened.

The central atrium was a huge open space that took up several floors high. The energy from The Amida was stored in a huge glass tube. Breaking the tube would not be as easy task. But she has to be extra careful. The energy must be transferred safely into another container. If she were to blindly destroy the tube, the energy would be spread out and endanger those who happened to have contact with it directly. The lives of the innocence would be affected, repeating the tragedy that occurred at her orphanage that ended with the death of them all.

The traumatic memories from back then revisited her mind. Each time she relived the moment, her heart boiled in anger. Destroying the energy would be the right choice. Though the civilians would be suffering if their only main resource were to be taken away, they were better off without it. As long as The Amida remained there, this madness over power would not cease to end.

Once the one and only power source on the lowest floor had been taken down, she would destroy the teleportation gate. Any means of restoring the energy should be prohibited. Furthermore, the nobles were the one who started this mess. It was logical to completely cut off the communication between the different levels.

As she thought of the best way to destroy the tube, footsteps of many soldiers were heard approaching. Before she could turn to look, a voice, firm and clear, spoke from behind her.

The command was simple. He asked her to surrender without resistance.

She breathed in deeply. That was the voice she knew too well.

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The moment he was told of Akane’s location, Kazuhiro had already laid out in his mind how the “rescue mission” should be. He had yet to play the hardest role ever; rescuing her but at the same time pretended to be on the general’s side. Akane could never know he was indirectly helping her and at the same time he had to lift off the general’s suspicion towards him by going all out on akane.

Before deploying his squad to the research center, he had already been briefed with the situation. Currently the main door was heavily damaged by the explosion set off by Akane earlier, blocking its only entrance. The communication within the personnel inside the center had also been cut off. There was no way of telling what was happening within the building.

Outside, the soldiers were struggling to remove the rubbles by the entrance. Without proper equipment, what should be a simple task seemed almost impossible. Adding further damage to the already destructed entrance was no option. They had no choice but to wait for help to arrive.

The fastest way was of course to use the MechaBots. However, transporting the mechanical robot would take some time because the Stroph Research Center was a forbidden area for any MechaBots. To prevent an ambush from happening, the center was protected with a force field strong enough to cause any of the bots within its vicinity to be automatically jammed.

To bring one in would require an authorized permission where the jamming would be temporarily disabled for that particular bots. With the communication completely cut off, it was impossible to obtain one.

There was another way Kazuhiro could think of. If Akane purposely destroyed the main entrance to prevent the soldiers from coming in, logically, there wouldn’t be any way out for her as well. Unless there was a secret passage that no one knew off. The passage that would lead her directly to the abandoned facility.

The only drawback of using that passage was it might cause Akane to change her plan. Using the only way to get in meant that her plan was already found out. He couldn’t jeopardize this mission.

Then it left him with one last possibility – to bring about another damage to the building. Captain Iroha had personally approved on this method, and she would take responsibility after this mission was over. So together with his squad, they carefully create a hole in the wall without causing any more rubbles to fall.

Once in, he simply followed Akane’s trail, which led them to the central atrium where he found her staring at the gigantic tube.

“This building has been completely surrounded. There’s no way for you to run. If you surrender now, the military will only charge you with a minimum offense,” Kazuhiro stated the military’s stand.

Running away from fight was never part of her plan. Regardless how dire the situation was, she would fight till her last breath. But with the crowd in front of her, there was no need to go all out.

Turning herself to face them, she replied to Kazuhiro’s request. “Oh, don’t worry. I won’t run, but all of you should consider running away, while it’s still not too late.”

“Akane Aldini, this will be your last chance to surrender. If you still refuse, we will have to take you down forcefully.”

His final warning didn’t even scare her a little. Instead, she just snorted at his remark. “Then, come and get me, if you can.”

Right after challenging them to come towards her, Akane lifted her right hand parallel to her shoulder. A purplish light was slowly emanating from her palm.

“Are you kidding? She’s a magic user!”

One of the soldiers voiced out his fear.

“My, my, cowering before a fight? You know what, it’s not worth to use high-level magic on cowards. In that case, I’ll give you all a handicap. I’ll fight you bare-handed with only half a strength.”

“Why, you cocky woman!”

Her remark was a great insult to those holding the title of Imperial army. Unable to contain his anger, he charged towards her, followed by other soldiers.

“No, don’t!” Kazuhiro shouted, trying to stop them but it was already too late.

That was exactly what Akane had wanted. She purposely triggered their anger and made them charged towards her at once so it was easy for her to take them all in one swoop. It worked exactly in her favor. In only a mere few minutes, the soldiers were already down unconscious.

For someone who was trained as a “special weapon” for years, her specialty was not only in one-to-one combat, but in one-to-many as well. Rather than engaging herself in a long battle, she utilized her skill by targeting their pressure points.

“Anybody else keen enough to take on me?”

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Mayu, who took part in this mission, just stared at the fallen soldiers without blinking. Akane’s movement was lightning fast. There wasn’t enough time for her to see what actually happened. In just a blink of an eye, all of them were already down, unconscious. For years Mayu had been training and fighting alongside Kazuhiro, and for the first time in her life, she witnessed someone who was far surpassing Kazuhiro in terms of combat ability.

How was it even possible for someone to have such agility?

But before she could even think of the answer, Kazuhiro had already dashed to where Akane was and went into an attacking mode straight away. Since he had experience fighting her one-on-one before, he did not seem to hesitate with his attacks.

Prior to coming to the research center, Kazuhiro had briefed his ‘special’ team on what action to take when they confronted Akane. Since he could guess what she was after, and predict her next move, he had decided to stop her current plan, which was to destroy the only source of The Amida on the lowest floor. If that succeeded, she would be pushed to leave the center and headed directly to the abandoned facility.

However the task to secure the source of The Amida fell on Mayu’s shoulder. She had to lead the other soldiers while Kazuhiro would buy the time for them to do so. What she had to do was to place the anti-magic crystals around the source’s tube and activate them. To make the anti-magic barrier work, she had to make sure that all the crystals were in sync before entering the activation phase. Otherwise, the barrier would not be up correctly.

Once in a while, she glanced at the fight between Kazuhiro and Akane, which seemed very intense. They fought with an intent to take each other’s out. Her heart beat rapidly, worrying of an unexpected outcome. Kazuhiro had lost in the fight against the same opponent once. Judging from the current fight, the advantage clearly was on Akane’s. Or was it because Kazuhiro was holding back a little?

The success of protecting the source of The Amida was their first priority, as briefed by Kazuhiro, regardless of what was to happen to him. But in this situation, it was hard for Mayu to focus on her task when Kazuhiro was fighting with his life. She wanted to scream to Akane, to tell her to stop, to let her know that Kazuhiro was just protecting her.

But she would never get the chance because her worst nightmare had just been realized. What she saw almost made the crystal held in her hand to slip. Luckily there was another soldier by her side who managed to hold her hand, and prevented the crystal from falling.

“Falcon 5, don’t lose focus,” he warned her.

“Aye!”

Tears welled up in her eyes. Though it was tough, she managed to place the crystal on the tube. Together, they activated the anti-magic barrier around five-meter radius from the tube containing the source of The Amida. With the barrier up, Akane would lose her chance to destroy the tube.

Why did Kazuhiro have to go that far to protect that woman? She could not hold back anymore, even if it meant to disregard Kazuhiro’s order. Without concerning her own safety, she dashed towards him, who was now on his knee, holding in the pain.

Kazuhiro, please be safe, she prayed.

77

If given a chance, Akane would have avoided the fight. Going up against Kazuhiro was the least she had in mind but he left her with no choice. Charging towards her like a hungry beast made her went all out as well.

Something felt different when she fought him. The Kazuhiro she knew would analyze his opponent properly before counterattacking. This time, he went straight into striking. Was he underestimating her much or was there something else up his sleeve?

Whatever his reason was, she could not let it mess with her plan any longer. She had to end the fight as soon as possible, even if it meant taking Kazuhiro’s life with her own hands.

As if reading her mind, Kazuhiro continued thrusting his sword towards her, without giving her the chance to think of a strategy. All of his attacks so far were by the book. After thrusting, he would follow through with slant and then horizontal slashes. There was no special move used which added to her curiosity to his true motive.

She could not stop but wondering about his actions. Were all those attacks meant to harm or he was planning to psychologically corner her? If it was the former then it was obviously not working since she could easily deflect them all. But if it was the latter, he might have succeeded slightly because she had started doubting this fight.

So which path she should follow? Switch off all of her emotions as she was trained to do and just finished him off, or to listen to her instinct, to let Kazuhiro led the outcome of this fight?

Like before, Kazuhiro was not generous enough to allow her to think and before she knew it, he had already knocked her sword away. Only a few centimeters of distance separated him from her, with his sword comfortably placed on her neck.

“You’re hesitating,” he said.

“You think?” she snorted with a light smile on her face.

The fight turned out exactly as Kazuhiro had wanted; she had to hand it down to him. This was his plan all along, to plant a doubt in her mind, and to mess with her mind so she would let her guard down.

*If that’s how you want play it….*

“Are you sure you want to leave such a huge opening like this?” she asked.

But before Kazuhiro could answer, she had already projected a small knife in her right hand and stabbed the left side of his waist. Since she applied magic to it, the knife went into his body and disappeared. The impact made him down to his knees.

She turned to look at the rest of the soldiers who were busy planting the anti-magic crystals around the tube. Her eyes met Mayu, who was staring at her in disbelief. If she wanted, she could have destroyed their formation while Mayu was distracted and prevented the anti-magic barrier from being activated. *But*…

After looking at the now pale-faced Kazuhiro, she decided to leave the center straight away and headed to the abandoned facility through a secret passage that no one knew about. But for this purpose, she wanted the soldiers to follow her. So instead of dashing, she pretended to seek for the way out, giving enough time for them to pursue her.

When she was pretty sure that all of the soldiers were tailing her - except Mayu who had stayed behind to tender Kazuhiro - she led them to where the entrance to the secret passage lied. It was a decent air hole within a wall at the outmost right wing of the research center.

The passage was really small and dark. If one of the soldiers decided to shoot her right there and then, there was a possibility to hit her. But a wise soldier would not resort to that, especially when the surface of the wall was flat and hard. They would not risk any fired bullet to be ricocheted off and hit them back, knowing pretty well by now that her agility was too much for them to get a clean hit.

It took her slightly more than 15 minutes to actually arrived at the abandoned facility. The plan was to trap those soldiers within, to give her enough time to track down Shigeo. However, with the interference from Kazuhiro, everything became out of place.

Definitely she could just proceed with her backup plan whenever thing turned to worse, which was to destroy the research center completely. But each time she thought of that, her mind kept on switching back to the image of Kazuhiro, who was most probably still inside the center due to injury. She shook her head off. How soft has she become?

One by one the soldier came in. In less than a few minutes, what was previously empty and abandoned were now full of men, armed and determined to take her down. For days she had made preparations just for this scenario, but for some unexplained reason she found herself hesitating.

Maybe this was one those times where she had to completely discard all of her plans and go with her instinct. Even so, her instinct told her not to run from this fight and proceed with what she had planned to do. If it came down to this…

Out of sudden, a figure wearing a mask jumped down from the ceiling, firing gas at those soldiers. In an instant, the facility was covered in white, thick gas. Though vision was obstructed, Akane could still sense movement from her surrounding. As the mysterious figure approaching, she was already in her fighting stance, but then retreated from it when she heard him say, “Come with me”.

“You?!”

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“How did you…” before Akane could even finish her question, he grabbed her by the hand and ran to the outside. Along the way, he sprayed more gas to make sure those soldiers would not be able to follow them.

“Get in!” He opened the back of an old van which was hidden in a nearby bush, and commanded her to hop in. It was a huge gamble to blindly follow him without knowing how he escaped from the prison in the first place and what was his objective, but for now she decided to trust him. Worst comes to worst, if he happened to trick her, she could always resort to what she did best – immobilizing her opponent.

The journey to the unknown destination seemed to be taking quite long. Though she could not see anything from within the windowless van, judging from the path he was driving, she could tell that he was making quite a detour. Most probably the reason was to throw the enemy off their track.

Sir Ryuu Weltch.

Why did he come to rescue her? And how did he know she was going to be in the abandoned facility? The only person who could figure out her plan was Kazuhiro. It would make sense if those two worked together. However, they had been at each other’s throat for so long. Was it even impossible to find a common ground between them now?

She didn’t have to wait long to find out the answer. The van had stopped moving, and she hopped off in the middle of a hangar, surrounded by MechaBots. As she had guessed, she was in the Second Division unit. Not only a familiar surrounding, but familiar faces were also present. Kazuhiro, his friends, Yuina, the Captain, the doctor and Sir Ryuu.

“My, my, are you that eager to capture me?” Then she turned to look at Sir Ryuu, before switching to Kazuhiro. “I’ll take it that you two are best buddies now?”

“I’ll say we’ve found a common interest,” Sir Ryuu immediately answered her remark.

“Oh, and that is?”

Holding his pain, while being supported by Hayama, Kazuhiro walked forward. “I think you know by now why you are brought here.”

“For another human experimentation, perhaps?” Akane continued with her tease.

“Akane…”

“Fine. I get it. I can’t believe you were actually agreed to this,” she said, directing the comment to Sir Ryuu.

“I’ll do anything to right the wrong, to atone myself for leaving you behind.”

Akane pursed her lips, lifted her head to look up while rolling her eyes. “You practically kidnapped and then caged me within this anti-magic barrier. How is this ‘right’?”

“This is unavoidable, to make sure you won’t cause any harm to my team.” It was Captain Iroha’s turn to interfere.

As if a bad joke was just being presented to her, Akane gave Captain Iroha an are-you-kidding-me type of expression. “Do you seriously think that this weak barrier can hold me?”

“At least it can prevent you from using magic.”

“Wanna bet?”

Before anybody could answer that, Akane dashed off to the nearest soldier, grabbed his knife from his waist, and threw the knife directly to her right. Since her action was so fast, no one could actually follow what she was doing. The only thing they knew was a loud sound of an object shattered was heard coming from the direction she threw the knife to.

“There, I’ve proved my point. I just destroyed one of the crystals. No more ant-magic barrier. And I don’t even need magic to take on you lot.”

“Then what we did at the center…” Mayu did not finish her sentence.

“Yes, it was pointless. It seemed like Kazuhiro just wanted to send you out of his way,” Akane replied.

“But then, how …”

“The only way to stop me from using magic is to chain me to the anti-magic device itself.”

“You are not that smart, are you? Revealing your weakness to us?” said Kaori.

Akane smiled. “That my friend, is what I called underestimating my opponents.”

“You are such a cocky…” Kaori was about to burst out her anger, but held it back when Kazuhiro suddenly fell to the floor.

“Kazuhiro!!” shouted Yuina, who instantly ran towards him.

All focus was now shifted to Kazuhiro. Unconsciously lying on the floor, he immediately set the mood in the hangar into chaotic.

“Dr. Isao, is Kazuhiro going to be okay?” asked Yuina, tears running down her cheeks.

“He’s just unconscious, not a life threatening. But there seem to be something embedded in his body which is impossible for me to take out, unless…” he halted. His eyes were sharply stared at Akane.

“It was your doing. You tried to kill him, again!” the angry Yuina could not contain her feeling any longer.

Upon hearing Yuina’s harsh accusation, she sighed vaguely. “If I had wanted to kill him, he would be dead by now, not lying there unconscious.”

Slowly she took her steps towards Kazuhiro. Kneeling down both knees beside him, she tuck out his shirts slightly. Placing her right hand on his left waist, she pulled out the magically conjured knife that she put inside him and destroyed it. Then emanating the light on the same hand, she performed another rare magic usage to cure his internal wound. Everybody who witnessed it was gaping in awe, having seen the magic up close.

“There, he’s all patched up,” she said once she’s done with the healing process.

“If you could easily disable the anti-magic barrier, then why didn’t you destroy the source of The Amida?” Captain Iroha voiced out her curiosity.

“He sacrificed himself so I could be saved. I can’t be heartless, can I? The best I could do was to play along with his plan.”

“So you knew his intention all along?”

“For years I sparred against the simulated ‘Kazuhiro’. Do you think I won’t notice when he put up a crappy fight like that?”

“Then why did you have to stab him?” Mayu cut in. She was still unhappy with Akane’s action, which she found to be unforgivable.

“Because if I didn’t, it would’ve jeopardized his position.”

“How could you trust him so much when you barely know him?”

“I’ll say we have achieved a mutual understanding with each other.”

Right after she said that, Kazuhiro slowly regained his consciousness. When he opened his eyes, the first face he saw was Akane, who was still kneeling by his side.

“Hey soldier, welcome back!” she greeted him, flashing her best smile.

To everybody surprised, the normally stoic expression Kazuhiro responded with another smile.

BROKEN DOLL

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Two days had passed since the rescued. The situation on the lowest floor was not yet calmed. The search for Akane was still on-going. For safety purposes, all armies from the Second Division were ordered to stay within the base.

Since the soldiers were chosen by Captain Iroha herself, she was pretty confident that none of her soldiers would betray her trust by revealing Akane’s whereabouts to the General. Even so, she would not dismissive of that possibility, especially when humans were such a fragile creature. That’s the more reason to enforce them with the order of staying inside the base, so she could monitor for any abnormal activity.

Akane was given a small room within the unit. Though she was allowed to walk freely within the base, she spent most of her time in that small room, reading books. Only during meal times she would show her face, but still she would avoid contact with people.

It was hard for her to be around the crowd without feeling wary. They were all attracted to her gorgeous look as Sir Ryuu would say. Even so she wasn’t comfortable to be stared at like that. Besides there were three pairs of eyes which emitted an angry vibe towards her.

If possible she would want to steer clear of them but given her condition, especially now when she had been summoned to the ‘special team’ meeting, there was no way but to face Yuina, Mayu and Kaori’s deadly stares.

When she arrived at the meeting room, all of the team, including the newly addition – Sir Ryuu – were already present. As usual, all eyes were on her as she walked in.

“Doesn’t matter how many times do I look at her, she’s still extremely beautiful,” Hayama voicing out his thought to Eiji.

“Shhh… Kazuhiro can hear you,” replied Eiji.

“They live together for quite sometime. Do you think…”

A soft punch landed on Hayama’s back before he could even finish his sentence. Kaori looked like she wanted to chew off his head; her fist was still clenched.

“Boys will be boys. Always with your stupid imagination.”

“But if you think about it logically. Having such a beautiful angel right in front of you…” he halted halfway. A chilly sensation spread through out his body when he noticed Yuina’s fatal glare. He could feel that his heart would be ripped out if he were to say another word.

A small greeting from Captain Iroha to start their meeting cooled off the atmosphere before it could turn to worse. They paid attention to what she was saying. After explaining what outcome to be expected from the meeting, she turned to Akane.

“To ensure that this mission is a success, I would need your intel on this.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything related to the General, the rebellion and the experiment they performed on you.”

“So you can really use a high-level magic after they mixed in the Empress’ blood with your system?” Dr. Isao threw his curiosity out.

“I believe that’s what I had told Kazuhiro.”

“But that’s not entirely true, am I right?”

“I’m not quite sure what you are implying?”

“I run a test on your blood. Those who were embraced with the light from the royal family would have an additional cell in their blood structure, which is used to carry the light itself. But your blood structure is completely on a different level. The number of those cells far exceeded the red and white cells. Even more than the Empress’ herself.”

Instead of being surprised by the revelation, Akane just smiled and directed her gaze towards Kazuhiro. “And here I thought you are the smartest one.”

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“You knew this all along,” said Kazuhiro.

Akane simply shrugged her shoulder in respond to Kazuhiro’s statement. Indeed she was hiding the fact from Kazuhiro, but she had no reason to tell him either in the first place.

“Does that mean the experiment had somehow modified her blood structure to that level?” asked Captain Iroha.

“No. It means that she was born with the ability to use the high-level magic.” Dr. Isao was a 100% confidence with his answer.

“Is that true?” Captain Iroha turned to Akane. Her expression said it all; she demanded the truth, and only the truth.

“I guess there’s no point in hiding it anymore.”

“If that’s the case, then what’s the purpose of performing the experiment?”

“To awaken the beast inside me.”

“Care to explain?”

The ‘question and answer’ between Captain Iroha and Akane had gained much attention from the whole team. Everybody was listening very attentively, like some sort of interesting trial between a lawyer and a witness. They wanted to know as well, the secret behind Akane’s magical ability. Surprisingly, it was Kazuhiro who provided them with the answer.

“It is as Dr. Isao said. Akane was born with the ability to use a high-level magic. But since she’s not from the noble family, the light remains dormant within her. In this case, they used Empress Hikari’s blood as a catalyst to trigger her ability.”

“Are you saying that anybody, outside of the royal family, is possible to have this ability?” Rather than curiosity, it was more of hope that twinkled in Kaori’s eyes.

“There she goes, hoping for the miracle to happen to her,” commented Eiji, and quickly defended himself from getting a hit from Kaori.

Dr. Isao shook his head. “I hate to crush your dream, but that is highly impossible. This was the first I heard of, a non-royal family with a pure ability to use a high-level magic.”

“One day, someone with a tremendous holy power will appear…”

Those words came out from Sir Ryuu’s lips, who had been quiet up until now. He didn’t mean to say that out loud, only recalling what his father used to tell him.

“What did you just say?” the curious Captain Iroha asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. There was this story that my father used to tell before putting me to sleep. More like a bedtime story. The story of The Accursed one, who was kept a prisoner by a group of bad people who wanted to use her ability to overthrow an empire…”

Somehow, he could not bring the sentence into completion. The scenario sounded very familiar, which scared him much. He looked at Akane.

“That wasn’t just a bedtime story, was it?”

All eyes were now switched to Akane, who calmly listened to their conversation related to her existence. There was no expression showed on her face; she wasn’t even surprised by it.

“This isn’t news to you because you already knew.”

Kazuhiro didn’t even need to second-guess. Everything made a perfect sense now. It made him wonder what else she was hiding.

“If it’s true that she has this tremendous power in her, then what’s with The Accursed? Shouldn’t it be The Blessed one?”

“You made a good point Hayama,” pointed Dr. Isao, “but that’s not how this corrupted world works. Of course from a certain point of view, someone with a greater power should be considered a blessed. However at the same time there are also people who considered this as an opportunity to grant one’s desire. Because there are more people who would wish for their own selfish reason, this coveted power, instead of being embraced, becomes a curse to its vessel.”

“That explained why Dad told me that Akane was dead. He worked in total secrecy. I could not believe he was involved with something as inhumane as this.”

“If you must know, Dr. Ichiro was the only one who treated me like a human, despite what he was made to do. And because of that, he lost his life...”

“But I was told that his cause of death was a prolong exposure to The Amida?”

“That was just a cover up. The truth was far crueler than that. He was murdered. The light that was planted in his body, tortured him for days. Until one day his veins exploded, and blood splattered everywhere. That was such a horrible sight to be witnessed by a young girl, don't you think?”

“You saw everything that happened to him?”

Sir Ryuu couldn’t control the quiver in his voice anymore.

“I was made to watch him suffer every single day, as a warning. If I have the slightest intention to run from them ever again, they will not hesitate to kill anybody that is associated with me.”

“So are you saying that Dad was actually helping you to escape?”

“Defying Tatsuo was a suicide by definition. Dr. Ichiro knew that very well, but he did it anyway. There was no way we could outsmart Tatsuo at that time so we were caught immediately. Because of me, he was…”

Tears were suddenly spilling out, though she remained expressionless. The image of the doctor’s suffering flooded into her mind. Just when she was about to continue, Sir Ryuu came closer and gently placed her head towards his chest.

“Akane, it’s not your fault. I promise, from now on, I’ll carry on his wish. I’ll protect you.”

“*When I’m gone, take this pocket watch as a memento so you’ll forever remember me*.”

Akane quoting Dr. Ichiro’s exact words to Sir Ryuu really took him by surprise. It was his father’s favorite line, which was repeated to him over and over again when he was still alive.

“How do you know those words?”

“Those were his dying words, to be passed on to you, if you still have the same resolve like when you were 12. The pocket watch isn’t just his memento. Embedded in it was the detailed experiment performed on us, if you want to get to the bottom of it. But what you’ll find will be bigger than what you can bargain for. Do you still have the resolve to carry on his will?”

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The team had been dismissed except for Kazuhiro, Sir Ryuu and Captain Iroha. There were still some matters needed to be discussed among the three of them.

“So, where is the pocket watch now?”

Captain Iroha knew very well that the watch was not in Sir Ryuu’s possession. When he was put in the prison, all of his belongings were taken away and the pocket watch was not one of them.

“It is my father’s heirloom so I hid it in a safe box in my house. The problem is, the house has now been seized by the Empire. With my current status, there’s no way I would be allowed to go back there.”

Indeed, that was the major obstacle for them. When Kazuhiro requested to bail out Sir Ryuu from the Great Prison, Captain Iroha was initially disagreed with the idea. The former Emperor’s Knight had been deemed as a traitor, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. There was no way his request could be granted.

But since Kazuhiro insisted and she was fully convinced with his idea, which could be the best way to expose the General’s misconduct, she went along with it. Fortunately, Dr. Isao volunteered to perform a “psychological experiment” on Sir Ryuu as his principal subject. Based on that reasoning and his convincing argument, the former knight was released on parole.

Though somehow she managed to make it work, this time it was different. To request for a temporary visit to Sir Ryuu’s house was beyond her authority. No civilians were allowed to step foot on the upper floor, and definitely not someone who had been labeled as the traitor.

“There’s a way.”

Finally Kazuhiro broke the frozen atmosphere.

“Don’t tell me you are bringing Hikari into this?” protested Sir Ryuu.

Of course, he did think of that option in the very first place but he was too embarrassed to face the Empress. It wasn’t just because of his treacherous action, but the reason behind it as well. To destroy the lowest floor because of an unrequited love made him look so dumb when he thought back of it.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

There was no bad intention emitted from his voice; Sir Ryuu was fully aware of that and yet, why did he feel so angry when he heard those words? Was it because he lost to Kazuhiro in both war and the Empress’ heart?

Sensing the tense aura coming from both men, Captain Iroha let out a small cough. As the captain of the unit, she had to ensure the success of this plan, and that meant these two fighters had to get along well with each other, regardless of their differences.

“I agreed with Kazuhiro. Enlisting the Empress’ help would be the best solution. My only concern is, what are we going to tell her?”

The question was directed specifically to Kazuhiro. The captain and Sir Ryuu were both waiting for his answer. In this situation, there was only one thing to tell.

“The truth. But Akane won’t be happy once she realized that she has to be the *tool* to realize this mission.”

82

Bringing up the subject of The Accursed one might cause a stir on the upper floor. With her extreme power, which was said to be beyond The Empress herself, Akane might be seen as a threat. To get The Empress’ full cooperation would require them to request the matter diplomatically.

Five of them – Captain Iroha, Dr. Isao, Kazuhiro, Sir Ryuu and Akane – were present in the audience chamber, waiting for the Empress to make her entrance. Of course, the task of proposing would fall on Captain Iroha’s shoulder, while Dr. Isao and Kazuhiro would serve as her right hand men.

At any time, The Empress would walk into the audience chamber. There was no pressure felt by Akane but she could sense restlessness coming from Sir Ryuu, who was standing right beside her. Given his history, she could understand why he would feel that way.

Being in the same room with the woman he loved, who did not return the same feeling, was not a situation one would like to be in. And with the present of the other guy whom The Empress gave her heart to, it definitely dropped the comfort level for him even further.

Having said that, Kazuhiro looked pretty calm, as if nothing ever bothers him. But that’s just Kazuhiro. After all, nobody knew what’s playing in his genius mind. Maybe she should just crack open his head and see what’s inside it, thought Akane.

Her thought fall short when Empress Hikari walked in with Lord Watari by her side, guarded by a number of Emperor’s Knights. The men bowed while Captain Iroha curtsied – at the same time she shot a glance at Akane, hinting her to do the same – to show their respect to the ruler of the Empire.

Empress Hikari responded to their respect with a nod and a smile, getting ready to greet them when her gaze suddenly landed on Akane, who stood in between Kazuhiro and Sir Ryuu. In an instance, her smile faded; her heart ached with jealousy.

When she was contacted by Captain Iroha, she was told briefly of the reason for this meeting. But what she didn’t expect was the subject of this meeting was such a beautiful woman. Even she could feel her knights were all staring at Akane without blinking.

“I believe you are the subject of interest for this meeting?”

“If that’s how you regard me, then yes, I am.”

“Pardon me Your Highness, it would be of best interest if we could proceed with the important matter.”

The interference from Captain Iroha was necessary since it was obvious the two of them had already off with a rough start.

“I couldn’t agree more,” seconded Empress HIkari, her eyes were still fixed on Akane. “So what is it that you want to know?” she asked, finally turning her gaze away and faced Captain Iroha.

“We heard that there is a prophecy regarding The Accursed one.”

“And from whom did you hear such a rumor?”

This time, she looked directly at Sir Ryuu, whom she guessed the most likely person to be their source of information.

“We could be wrong about the prop… rumor, but what drove us into this conclusion is the fact that Akane, a civilian, possesses a capability to use a high level magic like the nobles.”

“You share the same opinion?”

It was now Kazuhiro’s turned to answer her.

“If I’m not on the same ground, I would have opposed to this meeting.”

“Very well. Before I tell you how far true the rumor is, I need her to prove that claim first.”

The Empress’ voice was firmed. The subject of The Accursed was not to be taken lightly. The nobles were well aware of the threat that could be created if the news of The Accursed was leaked to the upper floor. Though since the establishment of Takahiro Empire the Kleins had been the rightful ruler, there was always a secret sect formed to throw a coup d’etat. Having The Accursed one on the wrong side would just accelerate the war with the Empire.

“How would you propose that?”

Empress Hikari’s request made Captain Iroha slightly wary of what the outcome might be.

“Show me your true power.”

Upon hearing that, a smile was painted on Akane’s face.

“My pleasure.”

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It was a big mistake on Empress Hikari’s end to demand such a request, thought Kazuhiro, but it was too late to voice out his opinion. Akane was so quick to accept the proposal and didn’t wait long to launch her first strike towards the Empress. Luckily the fireball she threw was barely intercepted by Lord Watari, and that was enough to burn his right hand.

“Not bad,” said Akane.

“How dare you attacked Your Highness!”

That voice came out from one of the knights, who wore the Captain badge on him.

“Didn’t she asked for it?” replied Akane in a pretentious voice.

“You who commit a sin towards the Empress shall not be tolerated. In the name of the Emperor’s Knight bestowed upon me, I will punish you myself!”

No longer able to contain his anger, the captain charged towards Akane with all his might, but she remained calm. Her lips seemed to move, as if she was chanting. With just a lift of her right arm, palm facing the captain, he fell down to his knees, unable to move.

Surprised by the easy fall of their captain, the rest of the knights attacked synchronously but was met with the same fate. Their movement was halted halfway while Akane stood tall in front of them, barely doing anything at all.

“What did you do to them?”

The show off of Akane’s ability had really sent shiver to Empress Hikari, down to her spine.

It wasn’t just the Empress. Everybody presented there was struck in awe; Kazuhiro, Captain Iroha and the rest of her team were no exception. The ability she just demonstrated was far beyond their imagination.

Taking advantage of the current situation, Akane dashed to the Empress. In just the blink of an eye, she had already cornered her, pointing a blade, which she just grabbed from one of the knights, from behind her neck.

“Checkmate.”

Everything happened so fast that no one was able to do anything. The knights were still unable to move, while Lord Watari was left helpless.

“Any last word, Your Highness?” asked Akane.

“Don’t tell me this is your plan all along, to assassinate the Empress?” said Lord Watari, as he watched his wife held hostage. “I won’t allow you.”

“Then, do something.”

Akane was really good at provoking, smirking at the helpless man before her.

“You’ve proved your ability, Akane. You can drop the act now.”

It was Kazuhiro who decided to finally interfere with her ‘fun’.

“That’s ridiculous,” opposed Lord Watari. “Detain her at once for trying to murder the Empress.”

“No, she’s not. If she’d wanted to, all of you would be dead by now.”

“I can vouch for his words,” Captain Iroha stepped in. Though Akane did cross the line, she did not sense any ill attention from her. Furthermore, Kazuhiro did not even fret, and she trusted his intuition.

“If what you are staying is true, then she should keep her distance from Your Highness. Unharmed.”

“As you wish.”

Akane dropped the blade she held on the floor. A whisper caught her ear as she slowly walked passed the Empress.

“If you think you can win his heart over me, you should try harder.”

Her movement halted. Without looking at Empress Hikari, she whispered back. “I’m sorry to disappoint you but winning his heart has never been my goal. However, if you insist, I’ll gladly take up on your challenge.”

With that declaration, she resumed walking to where Kazuhiro and the rest were, ignoring the knights who were still immobilized.

“Akane.”

Kazuhiro’s voice was a bit stern. She turned to look at him, and heaved a sigh.

“Ah, whatever. It’s not like they can do anything to me.”

By just a flick of a finger, the spell on the knights was undone. The knights glanced at each other. Surprised was clearly spelled on their faces.

What just happened also made Captain Iroha pondered; if Akane possessed this massive ability, why didn’t she use it to destroy the research center? Definitely it would be an easy task for her. Curiosity overwhelmed her thought but she could not bring herself to raise up the question.

“I’m sorry for the misunderstanding. Though she over did it a little bit, her capability was clearly demonstrated.”

Before Captain Iroha could say anything, Kazuhiro had already apologized on their behalf.

“How could this even be ‘a little bit’? She almost wiped out the entire knights!”

Obviously Lord Watari still wasn’t happy with Akane’s action.

“Don’t you think that's an overstatement? I understand your concern but this much is necessary to show her ability, per requested.”

Sir Ryuu, who kept himself silence all this while, finally decided to speak up.

“A traitor like you has no place to…”

“That’s okay Lord Watari. I accepted their apology. After this, I will hold a meeting with my council and decide how to best handle this issue. Regardless of The Accursed being true, what she just demonstrated is not something that could be dismissed easily.”

Empress Hikari cut in. There was no need to sentence Akane right here and then. The council would have to decide whether she’s a threat to the Empire, and came up with the right decree once the decision had been made.

“Your Highness, if you may, there’s another request we would like to make,” said Captain Iroha.

“And that is?”

Captain Iroha looked at Dr. Isao and nodded to him to proceed with the request. Nodded back, the doctor stepped forward.

“Currently I’m carrying out the research left by Dr. Ichiro on The Amida, which might have the answer on Akane’s ability. In order to do that, I need to have access to all his data, which should still be in his old mansion. But such a file can only be retrieved by Sir Ryuu.”

“What would you do with the findings?”

“It is merely to satisfy my hunger for the truth. If you wish, I would gladly share with you the result of the findings.”

The answer given seemed enough to convince The Empress.

“Allowing Sir Ryuu to set foot on his homeland would be a betrayal to my people. Nevertheless, I’m willing to overlook this matter if you can come out with the answer I, myself, would very much like to know. However I will agree on two conditions: that Sir Ryuu must be heavily guarded by my Emperor’s knights, and he will be accompanied by your best soldier, Kazuhiro Einsbert.”

“We gladly accept those conditions.”

Captain Iroha bowed before the Empress.

“We will be in touch soon,” said the Empress, before taking her leave. Following her closely were Lord Watari and the rest of the Emperor’s Knights. Though there shouldn’t be any more threats coming from Akane, they could not stop but staying on guard, especially after learning about her true capability.

Halfway through, the Empress stopped and directed her gaze towards Sir Ryuu. “I will grant a permission for you take whatever belongings from your home. In return, you are no longer allowed to come back to the upper floor. I hereby declare that you are to be a permanent resident of the lowest floor.”

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“Why did you do that?” asked Kazuhiro when everybody had left the audience chamber.

Akane stared at him, pretending not to understand his simple query.

“Wasn’t that what I’m supposed to do?”

It was true that she had to demonstrate her ability. He could be wrong but…

“You purposely tried to annoy the Empress, didn’t you?”

“I’m impressed that you even noticed the smallest detail like that. You must have loved her so much that nothing could even escape your perceptive eyes.”

“Akane…”

“Why did you even do that?”

“..?”

“You used me in order to get her attention.”

“Is that why you attacked them? To get back at me?”

“Good job on figuring that out.”

He smiled upon hearing her response. Despite her tough training, she could be immature sometimes. No, it was actually most of the times.

“I’ll make it up to you, for the trouble I caused today.”

“Huh? Where does that come from? And why did you smile? Did you hit your head hard somewhere?”

“No, but I notice that you are enjoyable to watch.”

She opened her mouth to counter his remark, but her voice did not come out. Instead, a feeling of warm rushed through her face.

“By the way, you’re blushing,” said Kazuhiro, and that just sent Akane to the world of embarrassment even further.

84

The next day went peacefully as before. There wasn’t any sign that Akane’s hiding place had reached the General’s ears. As per agreement, Kazuhiro had went up to the above floor, accompanying Sir Ryuu to retrieve the pocket watch, to further unlock the mystery of the true bearer of the Amida.

There was nothing much to do at the base so Dr. Isao took this time to work on his research. Not many knew of his work since it was of high secrecy. The current development had increased his curiosity even further. But unlike the rebellion, the result of his research would be used to improve the life of their people.

“That’s a dangerous toy you are playing with.”

He was so immersed in his work that he did not realize Akane was sitting on one of the desks in his lab.

“When did you come in?”

“Oh, don’t look so surprised. It’s pretty normal for me to come and go unnoticed.” Akane jumped down from the desk and walked towards Dr. Isao. “So, what are you working on?”

“What can I do for you?” he asked without answering her question.

“It depends. Can you be trusted?”

“I’m a physician cum therapist. I keep all of my patients’ records confidential.”

“That’s pretty reassuring.”

“Why don’t you sit down and tell me what’s on your mind?”

“That’s the problem. I don't really trust anybody. I couldn’t tell what they will do once I let my guard down.”

That was how she had lived her life so far. Being raised as the rebellion secret weapon had made her to be on alert at all times. Now that she had become a fugitive, her alert level increased exponentially.

“Do you seriously believe that I would stand a chance against you, who took down our best soldier in history, not once, but twice?”

To Dr. Isao’s surprise, Akane burst out a laugh on his honest statement. “So did he whine to you about him losing to me?”

Somehow, the topic of ‘Kazuhiro had changed Akane’s mood from serious to cheerful. Dr. Isao, who was also on alert all since he did not know Akane’s true motive, suddenly released a relieved sigh. At least he could assume that she did not have any ill intent towards him.

“Unfortunately not. He was very tight-lipped about it. But it wasn’t hard to see why he could lose to someone of your caliber.”

“You do know that flattery won’t work on me.”

“Of course not. Why don’t you tell me how did he lose to you?”

“I would love to, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Then, what could be the reason for you to visit this old man here?”

It wasn’t easy for her to reveal what’s on her mind, but since Kazuhiro trusted the doctor, it should be okay for her to trust him too. That was her conclusion, which led to the favor she was about to ask.

“I need you to perform a full body scan on me.”

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“Is this what I thought it is?”

What he found inside of Akane’s body was really unexpected. He had practiced medicine for so long but this discovery was unacceptable. At least not from a doctor’s point of view.

“Yes. Can you remove it?”

“I believe so. But judging from the condition, if I were to remove it from your body, there’s no guarantee…”

“I’m fully aware of the risk.”

“What did Kazuhiro say about this?”

“He didn’t know and he doesn’t need to know. In fact, nobody should know about this.”

The sound of her voice was very firm. That was the very reason she chose to go straight to Dr. Isao, and not Kazuhiro, for help.

“But Akane…”

“Can I hold your word doctor? Doctor-patient confidentiality?”

The principle that he’d been proudly holding on to as a physician finally bit him. She was good at manipulating the one rule that he could not break; otherwise he would lose the trust of people. This was one of the times where he wished he could discard his principle and follow his instinct.

Reluctantly, he answered her with a nod.

85

“Hey Akane! Why don’t you come and join us?”

A familiar voice was calling from behind which made her turned to look. At the corner of the base’s café sat Hayama, whose arm was flailing, calling for her, together with Eiji, Mayu and Kaori.

“Why are you suddenly getting all chummy with her?” Kaori asked, not happy with the sudden invitation.

“Kazuhiro isn’t around so she must be lonely.” At least Hayama’s response sounded sincere.

That was true. Kazuhiro had not yet back from his mission. Furthermore, it had been only a couple of hours since Akane had the surgery. Through The Amida technology, a simple operation she undergone was cut short with only a minor side effect. She obviously felt a little under the weather, but that was not enough to stop her from moving around.

“I agree,” seconded Eiji. He did not see any problem in letting Akane joined them for the meal.

“I can’t believe it! You even call yourselves our friends?”

Upon saying that, Kaori’s eyes were directed at Mayu, who just sat quietly, head facing the food on the table. Like Kaori, she did not want Akane to join them for her own personal reason. Not just jealousy that she felt, but she was also angry towards her for hurting Kazuhiro.

Not sharing the same thought, Eiji sighed. “This is the problem with women. Always emotional.”

“Furthermore, it’s Kazuhiro’s choice, ain’t it? And who would blame him for choosing her? Any man would do the same.”

Hayama’s statement finally ticked Mayu off. Angrily, she stood up. Without finishing her plate, she dashed out of the café.

“Mayu!”

But Mayu was too immersed in her emotion to respond to Kaori’s call. The rest of her friends were just watching, a little surprised by her action. Perhaps they did not expect her to react in such a way.

“Happy much?”

Though Akane practically just stood there, passively listening to their bickering, it was towards her Kaori’s question was directed.

“Why are you blaming her?” Obviously, Eiji became more and more confuse with Kaori’s behavior.

“Because it’s her fault. She stole Kazuhiro from Mayu and now she’s tearing us apart.”

“Eh? Since when Kazuhiro and Mayu an item?”

Hayama understood extremely well Mayu’s feeling towards Kazuhiro, but he was also well aware that it was an unrequited love.

“Why are the two of you taking her side?”

“We’re not. You are just not making any sense,” justified Hayama.

Unable to counter her two friends anymore, Kaori switched her attention to Akane. “I see what you’re doing. First, it was Kazuhiro. Now these two idiots. You can rally all the men to your side, but we, women, won’t be swayed by your deception. Just so you know, there’s no place for you in here.”

“You’re done with all your drama? Because I would like to go back to my room now.” Akane, who kept quiet all this while, finally voiced a respond.

Her remark was of course lit the flame even further.

“How dare you acting all high and mighty where you don’t belong! Just you wait. I’ll show how tough your life in here would be.”

“I’ve been through hell and still living in it. You wanna show how tough your ‘world’ would be? I doubt it is any close in comparison to mine. If you don’t have anything else to say, please excuse me.”

Without waiting for a response, Akane quickly left the café. She was used to emotional torture so this was nothing new. Normally she would just brushed off the feeling and completely forgot about it. But this time, the sad feeling lingered in her heart. Tears had also well up. What was happening to her?

87

The mission to retrieve the pocket watch at Sir Ryuu’s old mansion was a success. Apart from the watch, a handful of Sir Ryuu’s belongings were also brought back. Starting from today, he was an official resident of the lowest floor, befitted his status as the fallen knight.

As his appointed patroller, it was Kazuhiro’s responsibility to make sure that Sir Ryuu’s abode by the law. Though he was confident that the former knight was really sincere in helping Akane, he still could not trust him fully. That was why he observed his action through out the mission from start until all the stuff were carried to Sir Ryuu’s special room.

Once he had satisfied with everything, he left Sir Ryuu alone to sort out his belongings with a gentle reminder that he had to attend the group meeting later that evening to unlock what was hidden inside the pocket watch.

On the way to Captain Iroha’s office to report on the latest development, he dropped by Akane’s room. After several knockings on the door weren’t answered, he used his authority in the army to bypass the door code, unlocking it from the outside. What he saw when he stepped into the room was Akane lying on her bed while staring blankly onto the ceiling.

“Don’t you take a hint?”

“Huh?”

“I did not open the door for a reason.”

“Is it because you are crying?”

“What? No! I’m not crying. And stop pretending that you know everything about me.”

Her response was followed by a pillow flying right towards Kazuhiro, and was easily caught by him.

“Akane…”

“Kazuhiro, please? Just leave me alone. You, being here, would make matter worse.”

Her melancholic voice wafted through the room. Though he could not really understand what suddenly got into her, it was not hard to realize that she was miserably down. What could have happened while he was away on the upper floor that made her acting out of character?

But he did not want to pry on her privy feeling uninvited so he decided to let her be. He just quickly mentioned that she would be informed once the message inside the watch had been decoded and left the room.

Even so, he found himself unable to let this uneasy feeling went away. Akane’s claim was spot on. When he thought about it, still not much was known about her apart from the fact that she was a trained assassin due to her possible status as the true bearer of The Amida.

What about Akane as a person?

“Kazuhiro Einsbert. Don’t you have a report to give?”

The sound of a familiar voice made him stopped. He turned to look at Captain Iroha who was standing in front of her office door, arms crossed.

“Yes, I do.”

“And yet you walked passed my office.”

*He did, didn’t he?*

“I’m sorry. I was lost in thought.”

“You? Lost in thought? That doesn’t sound like you at all.”

That was exactly true. He was hardly distracted by anything, but this time, Akane’s emotion got the better of him.

“So Akane really works you up to the max, huh?” continued Captain Iroha since Kazuhiro did not answer.

“What do you mean?”

“How long have I known you for? Never once you put anything else above your work. But after she showed up in your life, you’ve started to change yourself, to the point where she has become your top priority. Am I wrong?”

“No, you are not.”

His straight answer made her sighed. “So, how’s the progress with our new ‘friend’?” Without delving any further into his personal matter, Captain Iroha quickly changed the subject.

“If you’re concerned about his loyalty, betraying Akane’s trust would be far from his objective. So for now it is safe to assume that he’s our ally.”

“So, as long as Akane is on our side, Sir Ryuu would be a valuable asset to us.”

“I believe so.”

“Can you do it?”

“…?”

“Keeping Akane on our side?”

“Is it not what I’m doing right now?”

Instead of responding promptly, she gave him a serious look. Her best soldier wasn’t that naïve, but obviously he was inexperienced when it came to dealing with women. What had happened at the café earlier proved that he wasn’t aware of the consequences of his action. But she had no intention of meddling with anybody’s personal affair. As long as their performance was not affected, she’d keep herself out of it.

“I hope so. What about the watch then?”

“It was in Sir Ryuu’s safe keep, untouched. I will pass the watch to Eiji soon for him to analyze it.”

“Good. Keep me updated once the message inside the watch has been decoded. You’re dismissed.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Right after he turned to make his way out of the office, Captain Iroha stopped him. It was not her intention to get involved but giving him a little push in the right direction was a just thing to do, in her opinion. *For the sake of this mission*.

“By the way Kazuhiro, I heard a rumor related to Akane and your friends. You might want to verify on that.”

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“Yuina! Would you stop this already?”

“My, my, are you embarrassed being showered with love by your sister?”

After giving the short report to Captain Iroha, Kazuhiro headed straight to where Eiji was waiting, and found himself trapped in what Yuina called as the ‘sisterly love moment’.

“Everybody is looking.”

In fact, all of his friends were present, and stared at the siblings without blinking. Everybody knew how much Yuina cared for her little brother, but seeing Yuina showing off that side of her in front of them had never happened before. She was always acting professionally, but today she discarded that, hugging her brother tightly from the back.

“I don’t care. I miss my little brother. Each time I see you, there’s always ‘someone else’.”

“Yuina, that ‘someone else’ has a name.”

Upon hearing that, Yuina quickly let go off her hug. Dissatisfaction was clearly shown on her face.

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

“Why? Why do you –“ he switched to Mayu and Kaori, “- hate her? She hasn’t done anything wrong to you at all.”

“She hurts you.”

“Don’t you think she’s the one who’s hurting the most?”

The simple truth that was just spouted was enough to generate silence in the room. They all knew her past by now, and what drove her action, but for different reasons, it was hard for Yuina, Mayu and Kaori to accept it.

“I can’t. I’m sorry, but I just can’t like her.”

Yuina’s rejection was not because she wounded Kazuhiro, as what she claimed before, but the cause had rooted deeper than that. To her, Akane was no different than Empress Hikari. They both put her brother in an emotional torture where he could never escape. She would never forgive them.

“I’m not asking you to like her. At least, give her the life that she deserves.”

“Okay.”

“Mayu!”

“As long as I don’t have to befriend her, I’ll gladly give her some space.”

“Fine. If you say so.”

Obviously, Kaori was not happy with Mayu’s decision, but as her best friend, she would stand by her decision. After all, her hatred towards Akane was purely based on Mayu’s feeling.

“You have my thanks.”

“Umm, I hate to break your heart-to-heart talk, but I think I’ve decoded the message.”

In an instant, all eyes were now looking at the screen where the content of the pocket watch was successfully projected. Kazuhiro walked closer towards Eiji, placing hand onto his shoulder.

“Good job. Now we can get to the bottom of this.”

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“Ryuu, if you ever see this, it means I’m no longer in this world. I’m sorry for not telling you the truth sooner. I don’t want to get you involve in this, the way I did, but if I failed in this mission, I have no one else to place hope on except you.”

It was a video blog, recorded secretly by Dr. Ichiro. The pocket watch wasn’t just a mere apparatus to keep track of time; it was equipped with a hidden camera which made it possible for him to record highly classified experiments unnoticed.

At first, the footage was just made for his own research purposed. Later, as guilt slowly took over his conscience, he saved the videos to serve as his path towards redemption. Though he could not bring those children who were brutally murdered by his own experiment back to life, at the very least, he could still help Akane to live a different destiny.

Dr. Ichiro’s confession began from the first day he was appointed to be part of Madoka Project, as it was called. Only selected few were chosen, with a declaration that the project would be for the benefits of the mankind – for the people to be able to use The Amida to support their life.

At first, those children were just undergoing health check up and normal treatment. As they grew a year older, a drop of the Empress’ blood was tested on them to examine their immune system.

Those whose body could not withstand the test were quickly pulled out from the project and quarantined. The rest were tested with another dose of blood. The process was repeated until they were no more survivors and a new batch of children was brought in.

After six years of failing, finally he found a success in a small child named Akane. She showed an unbelievable response towards The Empress’ blood. Hope began to rise, believing that the finding would bring a bright future to the mankind, not until Dr. Ichiro realized something did not add up quite right. Rather than answers, he was flooded with more questions.

From her frequent check up, he discovered that The Empress’ blood did not fuse with Akane’s system at all. That was not the only mystery. Since that single ‘success’, the rest of the children were completely abandoned, left to die.

Desiring to know the truth, Dr. Ichiro dug deeper and that was when he found out about the prophecy on The Accursed. ‘For the benefit of the mankind’ was an utter lie – the true objective was to overthrow the empire. Refused to take part in this rebellion scheme, he demanded a way out; however with a threat pointed at his only son, he had no choice but to comply.

After years of conducting an immoral act, Dr. Ichiro could no longer bear the guilt. With the help of his close friend, he enlisted Ryuu as the young apprentice of the Emperor’s Knight. Soon enough, he would carry on with his plan – to get Akane out of there.

“… Ryuu, I’m sorry to put such a burden on you, but you are my only hope. You have to help her before it is too late. Bear this in mind. Trust no one. Make sure nobody else knows. This isn’t just the rebellion we are dealing with, but this whole project, for years, is funded by a noble…”

That was the last of his video, which was recorded a night before he was caught; and after that he kept the pocket watch in the safe box back at his mansion.

“Play the rest of the videos as well. I want to see all of their misconduct. Maybe we could discover this so-called noble who without shame put so many lives into misery,” instructed Captain Iroha.

Words could not describe how angry she was with what she just witnessed from Dr. Ichiro’s videos, especially when the leader on the lowest floor was also a part of this cruel experiment. She could see clearly how the children were wrongly treated and then died due to complication. Their scream proved their pain and suffering.

Just when she was about to express her thought on the subject, a sudden loud sound of a falling object coming from the back of the briefing room halted her intention, shifting everybody’s attention towards the cause of it.

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A couple of chairs were lying down on the floor. Behind those chairs was Akane, sitting at the corner of the room, knees up with both hands on her head. She was shaking, traumatized by something.

Captain Iroha took a few steps forward.

“Akane?”

“I can’t get them out of my head.”

“Who?”

“They were crying for help, but I…” she wept, “…I just watched them die.”

“There was nothing you could do.”

“I could not do anything. I’m so useless.”

“Akane…”

“Go away! You are no different. Soon you will abandon me too. I should just take my life before you do.”

She kicked the chair in front of her real hard that it went to the direction where Captain Iroha was standing. Then she quickly stood up, grabbed another chair by her side and hit the glass wall with it. The huge force applied to the collision caused the glass to be shattered into pieces.

Picking up a piece of medium-sized glass nearby, she tried to cut her wrist. Before it could go deeper and reach her vital vein, Kazuhiro had already rushed to her side and pushed her hand away.

Instead of stopping, she charged towards Kazuhiro, with the shattered glass still within her grasp. But her movement was straightforward and weak; easily deflected by him. Without giving her the chance to charge again, he grabbed her wrist and twisted it, causing her to lose grip on the shattered glass.

Akane put up a bit of fight, trying to break free but in her traumatized condition, she was no match to Kazuhiro at all. Now he had grabbed both of her hands and pushed her to the wall, locking her movement.

“Let go off me!”

“I can’t, not until you’re back to being yourself.”

“I don’t want to go back there.”

Her voice quivered, followed by tears falling.

“I won’t send you back.”

“Liar! You always do. All of you are.”

He did not know what had gotten into her that caused this bizarre behavior. One thing he was sure of, she was in pain, and he did not want her to go through that any more.

Gently, he released his grabbed, and wrapped her in his arms.

“Akane, I will never let you go. I promise. From now on, you don’t have to worry about anything. I’ll protect you.”

Akane tried to push herself away, but Kazuhiro held her real tight. Unable to counter his strength, she finally gave up, and let out a wail, wetting the uniform he’s wearing.

He let her cry to her heart content. That was the only thing he could do to calm her down. Once he had confirmed that Akane was no longer out of control, he gave Dr. Isao a nod.

Slowly, the doctor approached them. Held in his hand was a tiny gun that he carried all the time, used to sedate his patients. While Akane was still clinging to Kazuhiro, Dr. Isao used that chance to apply the sedative on her.

In only a few seconds, she lost her consciousness. Languidly, Kazuhiro lowered his position - until he was completely sitting on his knees - to support her motionless body. Rather than putting her down on the floor, he held her firmly to his chest.

“What just happened?” asked Captain Iroha when everything had calmed down.

“She’s broken more than I thought.”

“What is that supposed to mean, doctor?”

Dr. Isao heaved a huge sigh. How should he explain it without breaking the doctor-patient confidentiality?

“It means she’s no longer useful in a combat. Though physically she’s capable of doing so, emotionally she has reached the limit, where she could break down again at anytime without warning. The faster she’s put into protection, the better.”

“Is this what father meant by ‘before it is too late’?”

“Who knows. Anyway, we need to get her to the infirmary for further check-up. I’ll call the medical assistant to carry her in.”

“There’s no need for that.”

It was Kazuhiro. He still held Akane tightly, refused to hand her over to anybody else. Just a little while ago he made a promise to take care of her, so it was his responsibility to do so.

“But Kazuhiro…”

“Captain, with your permission, I request to be dismissed early from this meeting.”

Before Dr. Isao could even voice out his concern, Kazuhiro had already cut in, as if he could read his mind.

His answer was of course enough to send shock to everybody in the room. Never once Kazuhiro requested to be excused from an important meeting, especially when they just discovered a new lead.

“Are you sure you want to …”

“Kaori.”

Captain Iroha stopped Kaori from saying any further. Kazuhiro’s wit was crucial to this meeting but there was no point in keeping him here if he could not give his maximum focus to the cause. Furthermore, since the issue was centered around Akane, he would definitely not going to let this go easily. And knowing Kazuhiro, he would not waste any second to get to the bottom of this.

“Permission granted. But I expect you to be on your maximum capability once you’ve taken care of her.”

“Understood.”

Gently he lifted her up, and walked out of the briefing room. They watched until he had left completely with Dr. Isao, then exchanged glances with each other.

“Is it just me, or Kazuhiro looked super worried?”

Hayama asked, still confused with the rare sight showed by his friend.

*No, it isn’t a worry*, Yuina thought to herself. *He is emotionally affected by her pain.*

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The infirmary had only one patient at the moment – Akane, already dressed in the white patient gown – who was sleeping soundly on the farthest bed by the window. Staying beside her was Kazuhiro, waiting patiently for Dr. Isao to finish with his analysis.

Deep down, he knew he wasn’t just imagining it. Since yesterday, Akane had behaved a little differently. It was subtle for most people but was obvious through his sharp observation, especially after spending so many days together with her.

“How long are you gonna stare at her?”

Dr. Isao was already standing right behind him.

“This wasn’t the first time I’ve seen her like this. Frequently she would have a nightmare, but whenever she woke up from it, she would revert to her old self. But today, she was conscious and yet she behaved as if she was experiencing the nightmare.”

“Kazuhiro, she is like a walking bomb. At anytime, it can tick off. It’s bound to happen.”

*Bound, or was set to happen?* Kazuhiro would like to take the doctor’s words at the face value but his analytic skill deducted differently. From the moment Akane reacted towards those videos, he could see Dr. Isao’s expression clearly. It wasn’t much of a surprise; he might have anticipated that behavior. And from the very same expression he could tell that the doctor knew more than what he revealed.

“I don’t know what make you hide the truth about Akane from us. You might have your reason, and I will respect your decision. But doctor, at least tell me what can I do to lessen her pain?”

*That was Kazuhiro for you*, thought Dr. Isao. Not even a single strand of lie could escape his sharp observation. It was as Kazuhiro said – he had his reason for not telling them the whole truth but he could still indirectly lead Kazuhiro to the cause of it, in his own terms.

“For an eight year old girl to go through that hellish experience and survived without breaking down is not something that a normal human can handle, don’t you think? For so long, she endured the pain by herself. Putting a wall in her heart had created that tough personality. But what you didn’t know, as she opened up to other people, the wall that she worked so hard to build was steadily collapsing. Rebuilding it would be impossible. The one lying down in front of you is now just a normal woman, like Yuina, and the rest of your friends, not the superwoman that you used to know. I believe you understand the weight of the promise that you’ve made, which you have to carry on your shoulder?”

Kazuhiro understood pretty well the responsibility he had to bear. When he made that promise, he wasn’t saying it just to calm Akane down. Those words really sincere, coming from his heart. Until Empress Hikari had made her decision, he would make sure that Akane was unhurt, both physically and mentally.

And he knew exactly what he had to do after she had woken up from her slumber.

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The next morning, Kazuhiro received a text from Dr. Isao, informing him that Akane had already woken up, showing no symptom of breaking down. But before he could visit her at the infirmary, there were a few things he needed to settle first, especially his appointment with Captain Iroha related to Dr. Ichiro’s last message.

When he arrived at the infirmary, Sir Ryuu was already there, chatting cheerfully with Akane. She was back to her normal self, as if nothing had happened. Dr. Isao was also present.

“Ah, Kazuhiro, you’ve arrived,” said Dr. Isao when he spotted him.

Kazuhiro walked in. “Morning,” he greeted Dr. Isao, and then nodded at Sir Ryuu. He grabbed a chair and sat next to them, looking at Akane. “How are you feeling today?”

“Okay, I guess, though I’m not really sure why I’m here.”

What happened last night was still hazy, but she did not want to give any further thought to it.

“Can she be discharged today?”

“She’s free to leave at anytime.”

“You haven’t made any arrangement with her, have you?”

This time the question was directed at Sir Ryuu.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Good. If you haven’t known yet, today is the Marry Festival, to celebrate the establishment of the Second Unit. I’m planning to take Akane out, on a date.”

Upon hearing his straight-and-honest intention in a flat tone, all three faces turned to look at him in unison. They were all startled, each with their own thought.

Akane, being the most surprise of them all, could not believe what she was hearing. As far as she knew, Kazuhiro had never been on a date – maybe secretly with The Empress – but never out in the open. *Did he hit his head again?*

Sir Ryuu was thinking on a slightly different matter. Out of all people, he was the only one who knew Kazuhiro’s dark secret; of his forbidden affair with The Empress. They fought a deadly match over Empress Hikari, and here he was, asking another woman out on a date. *Did something happen between Kazuhiro and The Empress while he was prisoned?*

Dr. Isao almost face palmed himself after hearing those words. He knew exactly what drove Kazuhiro to ask her such an unexpected question. Partly he was to blame for ‘misleading’ him. When he told Kazuhiro to keep his promise, he meant for him to keep her from being hurt, not to create another problem by giving her a false hope. *What was he thinking?*

Unaware of the awkward situation he put everybody in, he continued dropping another explosive news – “Starting from today, you don’t have to go back to that small room. It would be better for you to stay at my place instead,” – making the already surprised trio to be more speechless.

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The conference room on the highest floor had already been populated by all members of the Emperor’s Executive Council to discuss the special request made by the Second Unit of the lowest floor. The council consisted of 15 members from various expertise, with Empress Hikari at the top of the hierarchy. Also part of the council were Lord Watari and Lord Gorou.

The members were seated around a long table, each equipped with an artificial intelligence tablet that was capable of interpreting and analyzing complex data in just a mere picoseconds.

“I’m sure you know by now why all of you are summoned to this special gathering without an early notice.”

They were all nodded almost in unison. The rumor of The Accursed had been circulated among The Knights, and reached their ears.

“Is she the real deal?” asked one of the council.

“Based on the ability she demonstrated, it is impossible for her to be a fake. We have also analyzed her blood sample obtained through Dr. Isao Arsten, and what we discovered was truly terrifying. You can have a look at the data itself.”

Right after Lord Watari’s explanation, a sequence of raw data emerged from each tablet, twirling in a twisted pattern, and finally morphed into a 3D blood system.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Is this even possible?” another member asked.

“She is too dangerous if we were to leave her alone.”

“I reckon that we terminate her at once.”

“No, she would make a good subject for experimentation.”

The room was suddenly filled with voices of the members of the council, simultaneously throwing out their opinions. Empress Hikari shared the same concern with the rest of the council. After witnessing Akane’s ability, she could see the fate of the empire if she were to turn against them. Also for a personal reason, she would wish for Akane to disappear. However, as a righteous ruler, she had to make decision based on what’s best. After all, she did not want to betray Kazuhiro’s request.

“She is a threat, yes, but I do not wish to see her terminated just because she’s The Accursed one.”

“She’s not a noble.”

“Her power is.”

“But Your Highness, with this immense amount of The Amida inside her, there’s no telling what she would do to us.”

“Still, she could be of use. What’s your opinion on this Lord Gorou?”

“It is as you said Your Highness. She is definitely a threat, but she could also become a valuable asset for us if we could bring her to our side.”

*I mean, to my side*. Lord Gorou laughed at the thought of it. This news could not get any better. His ultimate weapon was within reached. All that was left to do was to convince the ignorant Empress to take full custody of The Accursed.

“How can we guarantee that? From what I’ve seen, she’s not easily controlled.” Lord Watari stated his concern.

“She can be controlled. She would listen to *him.*”

“By *him* you mean Kazuhiro Einsbert?”

Empress Hikari bit her lip. Though it was hard for her to admit it, Kazuhiro might be the only way to get Akane on their side. She nodded to Lord Watari’s question.

“It’s settled then. We’ll bring her up to this floor and put under a close watch. Lord Gorou, you’ll be in charge to see it through.”

The appointed advisor nodded in agreement, smiling contently.

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Later that day, the message – “*Target found. Action is to be taken on the suggested date and time.*” – was received by General Tatsuo.

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*Was this the right thing to do?*

The thought occurred to Akane several times. Kazuhiro’s date invitation came as a surprised. After the incident at the café, she was reluctant to be seen together with him. But he kept on doing action that was making it harder for her to avoid him.

All her stuff had been carried to Kazuhiro’s room, which was of course bigger than the small, compact room she was assigned to. The room came with a personal bathroom and small kitchenette.

On top of that, he had bought her a new kakuya – a one-piece ankle length traditional woman’s cloth – which was normally worn at the festival. The kakuya was made from a very soft material, sewn in a loose, straight cut design with a pair of long, tiny scarves hanging by the side, used to tighten and shape the kakuya by the waist. Perfected with a loose hair bun while letting a pinch of hair strands draped on both sides of her face, she looked undeniably sweet. This was justified by every pair of eyes who walked pass her, without failing to turn around at least twice.

Apart from being displeased with the enormous unwanted attention given to her, she also rejected the idea of going out on a date with him. And yet there she was, already at the festival, standing by Kazuhiro side. None of them had been on a date before, so for several moments, they just stood still, thinking to themselves.

“What do we do now?”

Akane finally broke off the silence.

“Maybe we should hold hands for a start? I believe that’s what most people on a date do.”

Slowly, they grabbed each other’s hands. For another moments, none of them moved nor say anything. Each of them was facing a different direction.

“Okay, this feels ridiculously weird.”

“Agreed. Shall we let go of our hands then?”

The grasp of their hands was quickly released, and yet, they still did not look at each other.

*Why did I ever agree to this?*

The weirdness between them was too much for Akane to take. Something had to be done, or else she might succumb to another breakdown.

“Kazuhiro, why did you ask me out?”

“Given the circumstances, I believe this is the best course of action.”

An honest answer, as expected from a straight, naïve guy.

“Do you truly believe that? Or are you so full of yourself, thinking that every women wants to go on a date with you?”

Akane could not stop from expressing herself. Obviously she understood fully Kazuhiro’s intention – he did not want her to worry about anything. But asking her on a date, assuming that she would be over the top and completely forgot about her problem was definitely an overstatement.

“I’m glad that you’re finally back to being yourself. And your tongue hasn’t lost its edge at all. It seems that my worry is groundless.”

Though he said it in his usual flat tone, it was enough to make Akane bit her lower lip, silently protesting his remark.

“See? We are more suited to arguing than playing couple. So now let’s just ‘un-date’ ourselves and have real fun!”

Without waiting for his reply, she started walking towards the first booth by the entrance. Since he was responsible for her safety, he followed her closely, like a guard looking after a spoiled princess.

He could not stop but thinking how complicated women were. Undoubtedly to him, Akane was extremely gorgeous, and with her in that kakuya, her beauty had moved to another higher level. But why did her attitude did not match with her angelic face? Compared to Empress Hikari, who was also beautiful, and kind and smart and…

He shook his head. Why would he need to compare those two women? They were different individuals with own personality. But still…

“Ka-zu-hi-ro!”

“…”

Akane’s voice stopped his mind from wandering further.

“I know that we just un-date ourselves, but you are still paying, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Awesome. Let’s go on that ride.”

The ride she was pointing to wasn’t that much different from the classic Ferris Wheel innovated by their Earth ascendants. The wheel spun at each round, and at the same time its support was also moving up and down. Since it was built in the middle of a deep lake, for the first few rounds, the support was retracted until the whole wheel sunk underneath the water surface, with aqua life forms as the background. When it resurfaced, the wheel would be about 100 meters above the lake level, presenting the riders with the nice view of the lowest floor.

After the ride, she dragged Kazuhiro to the nearest photo booth. Considering himself more as a committed soldier than the social type, taking a photo at the booth was definitely out of his consideration. Why would he embarrass himself with several different poses? But since he had vowed to dedicate that day for Akane’s happiness, though reluctant, he allowed himself to be the subject of her amusement.

Akane realized that fact as well. Without holding back, she completely messed him up for each shot taken, five times to be exact. When the photos were printed out, there wasn’t any good shot with them in it,but somehow it portrayed how much fun they had. She put one copy inside Kazuhiro’s pocket, and kept one for herself.

They went on from one place to another, until it was already time for the main event - the lighting of lanterns. For this, everybody gathered by the lake front, each holding a lantern. The tradition was to light the lantern, make a wish and then release it onto the lake.

Since this was the first for Akane, she was excited to be a part of it. After making her wish, she carefully placed the lantern onto the lake.

“What did you wish for?” asked Kazuhiro, when he noticed that Akane was so immersed in the tradition.

“If I tell you, it wouldn’t be a wish anymore, would it?”

“I guess so.”

In just a few minutes, the edge of the lake was already full with various types of lantern. The release of the lanterns had to be done within a specific time because the lake was set to wave at a certain interval hour, and by that time, all lights would be turned off.

At the occurrence of the wave, those lanterns were slowly shipped to the middle of the lake. The feeling was similar to the sending off of the deceased – quiet and peaceful. Once they’d reached the middle, those lanterns popped, vomiting out the lights in the form of fireworks.

Watching the fireworks in total darkness was definitely fascinating. Not a single voice was heard. Everybody took this time to appreciate the life that was given to them, as it was symbolically represented by the lighting of the lantern.

Kazuhiro did not miss the moment either. This was one of his rare times where he would stay quiet and reflecting on his life so far. As he was appreciating the moment, he felt a soft skin holding his left hand. Surprised, he turned his head to the left, where Akane was standing. Through the light lit by the fireworks, he could see her face clearly, enjoying the view presented in front of her.

*She must have subconsciously held his hand, in the spur of the moment. What a peculiar woman she is*. The thought made him smiled. At times, Akane could be annoying and troublesome, but there were times where she was sweet and innocent, like at this moment. Gently, he squeezed her hand.

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The fireworks lasted for several minutes. At the end of it, all lanterns were completely dissolved without leaving any debris, and lights were back on. Different expression could be captured from those who participated in that main event, mostly hoping for their wish to be granted.

“So, I assumed the date is going really well?”

A familiar voice caused both Kazuhiro and Akane to turn their head, almost in sync. Hayama was standing right behind them, grinning while signaling at their held hands with his eyes.

Together with him were Eiji, Mayu, Kaori, Yuina, and even Sir Ryuu, which had finally made acquaintance with the special group. Bumped into the group while she was together with Kazuhiro, left an uncomfortable feeling inside Akane’s mind. Quickly she tried to retract her hand, but was held firm by Kazuhiro.

He believed that running away was not the solution. All the dramas that occurred between the women had to be cleared without further hard feelings. Unfortunately, before they could exchange any more words, Juroyu, the official lowest floor song was played.

Upon hearing that, those who were there rapidly paired themselves up. When the song was played, they would dance to it – not just any dance, but the special Juroyu moves. Everybody knew the movement, since they were made to learn both the song and the dance.

For an obvious reason, the group was just standing there. Yuina stared at her little brother, who projected a sudden upset look. Before she could open her mouth to console him, Akane had already pulled Kazuhiro’s hand.

“Feeling guilty is normal for a human. Acknowledging it is what makes us a better person. Even if you still can’t overcome that feeling, it doesn’t mean you are weak. The time will come when you can leave the past behind. At least, that’s what I believe in. For today, let’s just call it off.”

“Akane…”

“I told you, didn’t I? I know everything there is to know about you, including the ‘Blue Moon’ incident.”

Her answer took everybody – except Sir Ryuu – by surprised. The ‘Blue Moon’ incident was a subject that was never brought up in front of Kazuhiro. Though it happened almost a decade ago, the scar left was still deep within him.

It was the incident that took their parents away. Once in every 50 years, the twin planet of Arduins would emit a blue light, which was a rarity. The citizens of Takahiro worshipped the Arduins, and with the occurrence of the rare blue light, the occasion was treated as an extreme holy night.

When the Blue Moon reappeared 10 years ago, the <official> ritual was performed and at the same time, a taboo was also committed. During the ritual, it was forbidden to activate <> but the curious 10-year old Kazuhiro accidentally broke the <> and caused the whole ritual to fail.

As stated in the <>, those who committed crimes during the Blue Moon ritual would have to pay with their own lives. Since the crime was committed by a child, Kazuhiro’s parents had to be sacrificed to atone his sin.

And Juroyu dance was the last moment he had with them.

Akane was ready to leave, but was pulled back by Kazuhiro. All this while, he always thought it was wrong to run away from problems. Even at this moment, he tried to make Akane faced hers. How irony it was, when he himself kept on running away from his own guilt.

“You are right. Let’s dance.”

Once again, the others were stunned with the sudden changed of atmosphere. They just watched as Kazuhiro led Akane to the dance area.

“We should go too, don’t you think?”

Sir Ryuu extended his hand to Yuina, who still could not believe what she just saw. Blushingly, she accepted his hand.

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For once, Kazuhiro felt like a heavy guilt had been lifted from his heart. He never knew he could enjoy this moment fully. All thanks to the woman in front of her, who had slowly healed his long, wounded scar.

She was truly an angel working a miracle on him.

The Juroyu song had just ended. One by one left the area as the festival had come to an end. But Kazuhiro was still standing there, staring deeply into Akane, emotionally confused.

*What was this strong feeling?*

Unable to sort out what the emotion was, he decided to give in to it. His hands started to move on their own, wrapping Akane’s waist and pulling her closer to him. Before his mind could reflect on his action, he had already sealed her lips with a kiss.

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It was already morning but Yuina still hadn’t moved from her bed, instead she simply stared blankly at the ceiling. What she saw last night was still vivid in her eyes.

She was dancing with Sir Ryuu. Hayama and Mayu, and Eiji and Kaori were there as well. Since last night was a joyous occasion, they decided to be on a ceasefire – for just that night, they would put the ‘Kazuhiro-Akane-on-a-date’ issue aside.

When the dancing was over, they planned to regroup with the pair, only to be presented with another surprised. Kazuhiro, who never even hugged a woman, or even bother to return one, was nonchalantly wrapping Akane in his arms and sharing a kiss!

Watching everything that had happened between Kazuhiro and Akane on a front row made it harder for her to forget. What drove Kazuhiro to act like an immature guy who was attracted to a beauty right before his eyes? The Kazuhiro she knew would never do anything like that.

She wanted to believe it was Akane who tricked her brother into kissing her. But each time the scene was replayed in her mind, obviously, the act was initiated by none other than Kazuhiro himself. Akane was as much surprised as they were, enough to send her off running

Bleep…bleep…bleep.

The message alarm went off, notifying that she had been summoned to another special meeting today. Since Akane had ‘joined’ them, the frequency of this meeting was twice than usual.

Kazuhiro would be attending as well. It's time to have a sibling talk with him.

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Captain Iroha just received a memo from the representative from the upper floor – Empress Hikari had made a decision. The special team was called to gather at the briefing room for this purpose.

However, something was a little bit off for today. The normally energetic team who loved to bicker among themselves was unusually passive. Everybody seemed to be lost in their own thought. Did something happen yesterday, something she didn’t know of?

“What’s with this awful mood?”

“…”

“Well…”

“Uhm…”

No one actually knew how to respond to Captain Iroha’s simple question. What happened between Kazuhiro and Akane was not really a big deal; the only problem was their own interpretation to it. And none of them – except Hayama and Eiji – shared an approval feeling.

“Kazuhiro, care to explain?”

Kazuhiro shot a quick glance at Akane, who averted her eyes the moment he turned towards her.

“Nothing of an impact that can put this mission in jeopardy.”

“Good, because today we might receive another important task related to this mission. I don’t want all of you to lose focus over some trivial matters.”

Her intonation was enough to convey the message that she was serious. The team in front of her was the one she trusted with her life. They never let her down no matter what the situation was. Even so, since Akane was added to the equation, the dynamic of the team was slightly off, and that worried her much.

Youth and in love – these would either strengthen the team or set them apart.

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Once the connection was established, the upper and lower floors were connected through a HoloDisk, a platform engineered by the power of The Arduins which made a two-way holographic communication possible.

This type of communication was never used by the Second Unit before. First, Empress Hikari preferred to come down to the Lower floor herself. Second, the Second Unit did not have the privilege to make a direct contact with the Nobles. This privilege was only granted once due to the high secrecy of this matter.

The ones who stood in front of them now – in projected holograms – were Empress Hikari, Lord Watari and Lord Gorou.

“Greetings.”

Empress Hikari paused while the audience before her bowed, before continuing – “I will make this short. We have come to a decision. The existence known as Akane Aldini, undeniably is a threat to The Empire. Left unchecked, she might bring demise upon all of us. To ensure this future mishap from happening, we, the Nobles, will take her into custody.”

The news wasn’t what Captain Iroha expected. Since Akane was not noble by birth, she had eliminated the possibility of her being taken to the Upper floor. For the Nobles to decide as such…

“What will happen to Akane next?”

“After the hand-over, her well being is no longer of your concern. All connections she has with the Lower floor will be thus, severed.”

“But…”

“Are you perhaps disagree with our decision?”

“No, Your Highness. We shall obey by your command.”

Though Captain Iroha was in utter disagreement, there was no way she could go up against the ruler of the Empire.

“We shall not delay this any further, hence I commence the hand over to take place tomorrow noon, at the audience chamber.”

Before the communication was disconnected, Lord Gorou gave a quick glance at Akane, smiling contently. Finally his secret weapon was within his grasp.

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“That was unexpected,” mumbled Ryuu.

Dissatisfaction could be detected from his voice, though he said it subtly. He knew very well what it meant to hand over Akane to the Nobles. Inequality in ranks was intolerable. She would never be treated as one of them, but as their subject of interest. How did that help from her current predicament?

“She’s better off up there than down here.”

“How could you? After what you did to Akane, how could you say such thing with a straight face? Doesn’t she mean anything to you at all?”

It was hard for Ryuu to contain his anger any longer. Kazuhiro’s words were like a knife cutting off his furious cable, triggering the ‘bomb’ within him.

“I only think of what’s best for her.”

“So you’re saying it is the best course of action to kiss a woman and send her away right after that?”

With both hands grabbing onto Kazuhiro’s collar, Ryuu was just a step away from resorting to violence.

The others were just looking without interfering, mostly because they didn’t know which side to pick on. Feeling the situation was getting out of hands, Captain Iroha stepped towards the two men.

“That’s enough!”

She separated them up by pushing them away from each other. This was what she had to deal with the most when working with youth – immaturity.

“I understand your concern Ryuu, since I felt the same way. But this is something that can be settled with fists, especially not when Akane is…”

A loud bang of a slamming door stopped her sentence midway. Everybody’s gaze was directed to the door, before looking at each other. One person was obviously missing from the group – Akane.

Realizing that Akane had left the room, Kazuhiro quickly run to the door, only to be stopped by Dr. Isao.

“Whenever something troubling Akane, you are usually the first to react. Under normal circumstances, I would allow you to. But this time, it’s best to leave her to me.”

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When she ran out of the room, she went to Dr. Isao’s room straight away. For some reason, she felt calm to be in the doctor’s office.

“I know I would find you here.”

Dr. Isao’s instinct was on the spot too. He didn’t look anywhere further but at his own office. As expected, Akane was already lying comfortably on the therapy sofa.

“How are you feeling?”

“I hate him.”

That was not hard to guess. “Is it because he kissed you,” from what he deduced based on Ryuu’s speech earlier, “…or because he easily agreed to hand you over to The Empress?”

“Both.”

“Tell me about the kiss.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Akane, you are here to talk to me, am I right? So talk to me.”

Akane heaved a long sigh, and closed her eyes. The scene from the festival was replayed in her mind. Every moment of it, she remembered. After all, it was the first time she’s being kissed.

“It happened so fast. I should have pushed him away, but I didn’t. I was so mad at myself for letting it happened. What was he thinking? And this morning, I was ready to let it slipped, but he had to push my anger to the limit. Whenever it has something to do with The Empress, he had to go weak at the knees. Argh, I’m so angry!”

“Do you, perhaps, harbor any feelings towards Kazuhiro?”

Her body jerked upright at Dr. Isao’s question.

“Well, yeah, if you haven’t noticed, I hate him. I-HATE-HIM!”

Dr. Isao let out a small laugh. “There, you said it twice. Though your action heavily hinted the opposite.”

“Are you saying that I’m actually in love with him?”

“You tell me.”

It was true that each time she thought about the kiss, her heart pounded rapidly. But that did not imply that she was actually in love with him, wasn’t she? She pouted at her own thoughts, then turned and put down her legs on the floor. After a few seconds of battling with her inner conflict, self-convincing that her heart pounding was nothing more than just a temporary pleasure, she stood up.

“Thank you doctor for lending me your ear. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re leaving? We still haven’t talked about tomorrow.”

She cracked the faintest of smile on her face.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, does it?”

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Tomorrow, the hand over would be taking place at the audience chamber. Obviously the decision had stirred the team spirit. It wasn’t easy captaining a team. Apart from it, Captain Iroha had just learned the unexpected event the night before.

*Maybe handing Akane over to the above floor was the right thing to do.*

As for the escort team, she had decided to have only Kazuhiro, Dr. Isao and her. Ryuu was still rejecting the decision; there was no telling what he would do if he were to come along. The rest of the units – their presence could lead to other unnecessary outcome, so they better stayed.

Actually, she was contemplating of having Kazuhiro in the team as well. After what happened between him and Akane, it might be wise not to have him near her. But if Akane – out of the blue – decided to go berserk, she would need her best soldier by her side, though in reality he had lost to her twice already.

She looked at the gloomy faces in front of her. How could they turn into dispirited beings? *Hopefully after the hand over tomorrow, the atmosphere would get back to how it was before.*

“One part of the mission has already been resolved. We don’t have to concern with protecting Akane anymore. After the hand over, our sole focus is to expose the General’s crimes. Any other question?”

Silence.

“You are dismissed for today.”

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Yuina didn’t talk much during the meeting; in fact there was nothing to talk. The decision had been made, they just had to carry it out successfully. During the whole meeting, her eyes were only on Kazuhiro.

Her brother said that was the best decision for Akane; but then why did she spot sadness in his eyes? Other people could have not realized it. To them, he was just an emotionless guy.

They were wrong.

She knew her brother really well. Unlike Ryuu who could speak up his feeling openly and get emotional about it, Kazuhiro was lacking of that ability. He wasn’t able to show how he truly felt; he could only express based on one’s logical thinking, without emotional involvement.

That’s why she needed to have a heart to heart talk with him, to make him understand that rationality alone was not enough, that he needed to understand the feeling of everyone’s around him.

After the meeting was dismissed, she went straight to him.

“Kazuhiro, do you have time? I need to talk to you.”

She signaled him to wait until everybody had left the room before proceeding with the talk.

“So, what is it you want to talk about?” asked Kazuhiro when the room was already empty.

“Why do you always put yourself in a complicated situation?”

Straight to the point. There was no need for her to dilly-dally what’s on her mind.

“What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean. First, the Empress, and now, Akane. Why can’t you just settle for a normal woman?”

*Not this again.*

“Yuina, you’re overthinking things.”

“You really think I don’t know? That you are in love with The Empress? I can tell from the way you look at her. You sneaked out to meet her secretly. Even after she’s married, you still continue with your relationship. Am I wrong?”

“…”

“That’s already too big a problem for you if the Nobles found out, and yet you get yourself into more trouble. Why do you have to play a hero? Do you have to save everybody you met along the way?”

It was never occurred in his mind to play a hero but when he thought about his first encounter with Akane, those eyes of her, how could he leave her be?

“Akane needs my help.”

“Is that so? Was the kiss also part of the ‘help’ she needs?”

“That is your emotion talking. Your dislike towards her is clouding your judgment.”

That was the truth – she disliked Akane, not only because she was trying to kill him, but she had also affected Kazuhiro emotionally. But that wasn’t her real concern. What her brother did to Akane – bringing her on a date which ended with a kiss, when he had already given her heart to someone else – was simply wrong, regardless how honest he was in helping Akane.

“*Give her the life that she deserves* – weren’t those your words before? But from what I see, you are the one who’s hurting her the most. And together with your Empress, you’re taking away the only freedom she has. I don’t know where do you stand in this, but you ought to clean up this mess before she goes.”

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That kiss was a mistake. Kazuhiro knew that very well, even without Yuina telling him. It was never his intention to hurt Akane’s feeling. His action on that night was on a spur of the moment, led by an overwhelming emotion he felt at that time.

But how could he explain that to Akane without hurting her even further? When he told Mayu the truth about his feeling, their relationship took a different turn and created an awkward atmosphere each time the group got together.

With Akane’s current emotional instability, the situation could become worse if he wasn’t careful enough with his wordings. As Yuina said, he had only tonight to clean up this mistake so he could send her off tomorrow without any regret.

So there he was, standing in front of his room – where Akane was currently occupying – knocking on the door.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

There was no answer. Was she already asleep? He gave another try but still, there was no respond from the occupant.

Negativity started to fill in his mind. Thinking that Akane might have done something irrational to herself, he bypassed the door code, and forcefully opened the door. The room was dark. He turned on the light but she was not on the bed. Where could have she been?

Apart from his footsteps, there was nothing else heard from within the room. It was really quiet. There was only one place left to check – the bathroom.

Slowly he slid open the bathroom door and turned on the light. On the floor, Akane’s garments could be seen scattered around. His heart pounded. Could it be…?

Quickly he opened the bathroom curtain in front of him. As expected, the almost full bathtub bore Akane’s naked body which could be seen clearly underneath the water. Her eyes were completely shut, no air bubbles were coming out of her mouth either.

*Akane, what have you done?*

Without wasting any more time, he grabbed a bathrobe that was hanged by the wall. Then gently he took her body out of the water and lay her down on his laps. Surprisingly, her body hadn’t turned cold blue. He checked on her pulse. It was beating normally, with no sign of deteriorating.

“Akane,” he called softly, brushing off the wet hair that covered her face.

Her eyes were slowly opened, as if responding to his call.

“Kazuhiro?”

A tone of confusion was detected in her voice, but only for a few seconds. When she realized the condition she was currently in, her eyes became wide open and in still a hazy state of mind, she pushed him away.

Holding tightly to the bathrobe that was covering her body, she looked at him. A shocking expression was clearly displayed on her face.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I should be asking you that. I thought you were drowning.”

“Me? Drowning? I was just… clearing my thoughts.”

“Inside the water?”

“Well, I can hold my breath for 15 minutes, max. Not that it can do me any harm.”

Grateful that it was just a misunderstanding on his part, Kazuhiro breathed a sigh of relief.

“I thought I’ve lost you.”

“Why do you even bother…”

“Akane, I’m sorry that I did you wrong.”

Not planning to drag the issue much longer, he let out the feeling he’s been holding up inside his mind for the past few hours.

“Out of all places, you choose this bathroom to apologize? You really know how to surprise a woman.”

“That night, I didn’t have any intention to…”

“Kazuhiro, I don’t need to know.”

She cut him off quickly because she knew exactly what he was trying to say, and it would definitely take a toll on her emotion if she were to let him finished his sentence.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Then, can you undo it?”

He shook his head slowly. Unfortunately, he didn’t have such power to undo what was done.

“No, I truly regret that it happened.”

That honest answer of his was enough to pierce the already broken heart. The tears that she tried to contain for so long were finally drizzling out.

“Akane, I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? I already knew. I knew you are a kind man. I also knew even the kindest man could only have one heart. If anybody is at fault, that would be me. I know from the very beginning to whom you’ve given your heart to, and yet, I’m still falling for you.”

The confession that came out of her mouth was totally unexpected. It was obvious that she was flirting with him sometimes, but at most times she was as cold as ice, and just using him for her own agenda. There was so much more that he didn’t understand about woman.

“I didn’t know…”

Before he could complete his sentence, Akane had already thrown herself at him, wetting his chest with her tears.

“I don’t care if you love The Empress. I don't care if you don’t return this feeling. But just let me stay by your side. Don’t send me away.”

Her wish was genuine, he could feel it. He wrapped his arms around her body.

“Akane, I’m sorry. I wish I could but I can’t.”

Though hard, it was the only thing he could say to her.

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It was almost noon, which meant the time was almost up for the hand over. Kazuhiro stared at his own self in front of the mirror. Was this the right thing to do?

Last night – Akane cried until she fell asleep. They were still in the bathroom, so he had to carry her to the bed. At first he was just wanted to leave straight away, but seeing Akane in her vulnerable state made him changed his mind.

So he stayed instead, to make sure she was okay but somehow he ended up sleeping together on the bed. When he woke up a few hours later, she was cozily positioned just a few centimeters away from him, while his arms found their place around her bare skin.

Her sleeping face looked very innocent, like an angel whose beauty knew no boundaries. He touched her face and rubbing it gently, wondering what her life would be if she wasn’t born as The Accursed. Would their fate still intertwine?

In the quietness, he could hear the sound of his heart pounding. The feeling was the same as the night of the festival, but this time stronger. He felt the sudden urge to kiss her tender lips, again. Quickly he let go of Akane – but still gently as not to wake her up – and get out of the bed.

After saying all those words to her, he should not repeat the same mistake so he left, back to Hayama’s and Eiji’s room. He could not shut down his eyes after that, partly due to the confusion he felt in his heart.

He glanced at his watch. The time was seriously moving fast for him to say goodbye to Akane for good. Repeatedly, he convinced himself that putting Akane in the hand of The Empress was the right thing to do. Even so, why did his chest ache so much?

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The escort team was all set to go to fulfill their mission, readying themselves by the unit’s main entrance. The rest of the special team was also present, but since no one really had a close relationship with Akane – except for Ryuu – there were no goodbyes exchanged between her and the team.

Dissatisfaction was still clearly showed on Ryuu’ face. But as he was currently, there was nothing much he could do. He was already branded a traitor once; rebelling against The Empress’ decision would mean another treason committed under his name.

In order to carry out his late father’s will, he could not react emotionally. Though Akane might be safe up there, the mastermind of the coup d'etat – the one who murdered his father – was still out there. Uncovering the identity of the culprit was as important as protecting Akane.

“Take care of yourself.”

Ryuu whispered those words gently as he gave Akane a final hug. Though not directly, he could feel Kazuhiro’s gaze piercing them. What he really thought at this moment, he would never able to figure it out.

“It’s time,” said Captain Iroha.

Reluctantly, Akane walked towards the transport by the entrance that was prepared specially to carry her to the audience chamber. Walking side by side with her was Dr. Isao, while Kazuhiro and Captain Iroha led the escort.

With Kazuhiro acting as the driver, they seated accordingly; Dr. Isao’s at the front passenger seat, and the women took the back seat. As the engine started, Kazuhiro looked through the rear mirror, watching at Akane’s reflection. He would be lying if he claimed not to understand Akane’s wish, but what choice did he have?

Burying his guilt deep within his heart, he pressed the “open” button on the car remote. Slowly the main gate opened but what appeared before them was definitely unexpected – a huge army of the New Type were lining up, full armed.

It didn’t take long for him to realize what it meant.

“Get down!” he shouted and accelerated the car backward, back into the garage where the car was parked previously. Together, they ran inside, to the briefing room.

“Are we under attack just now?”

It was hard for Captain Iroha to process what she just saw a few seconds ago. Given the size of the enemy, it was impossible for them not to pick up the enemy’s signal when they were approaching.

“This is unbelievable. Our system has been hacked completely. There is no way to contact the HQ or other branches for reinforcement.”

They were too focus on Akane that they failed to notice the subtlest changes to their security system. Judging from the current situation, surviving this attack was unlikely. Without a complete control on the system, they could not even activate the battle suits. To make matter worse, the occupants within this unit were still out there, most likely unaware of the situation they were in.

In the midst of confusion, the display screen was suddenly turned on. Behind the screen was the face of the most wanted person, the leader of the rebellion – Shigeo.

“How are you doing, my fellow enemies? As you have noticed, we are taking control of your unit now. Not just that, there are quite a handful of hostages with me at the moment, screaming for help. Can you hear them?”

He wasn’t lying. All of them could hear really well the sound of people crying, begging to be rescued.

”Don’t expect help to come, especially not of those Emperor’s Knights. They will not sully their hands in a matter not related to them, not when Her Highness is not in danger at all. But I can be reasonable, you see. I’m willing to let them go if and only if you return what you’ve taken from me. Yes, I’m talking about my beautiful Akane. Don’t you miss me, sweetheart? Anyway, I’m a very patience man. I’ll give you time until tomorrow morning to make up your mind. The fate of your beloved people is in your hand, Captain.”

The video went off. Everybody’s attention was now shifted to Captain Iroha.

“For them to cripple us completely like this. Definitely this is an inside job. And there’s only one person who have the ability to interfere with our system entirely – The General. There’s no doubt he’s behind all this.”

“What shall we do now?”

Since joining the military, the battlefield had been her playground. Mayu had confidence in her team, but right now, she felt that the odd was against them.

“What’s there to think? It’s me he wants. Just give…”

“That’s not an option.”

Whatever Akane had in mind, it was quickly discarded by Kazuhiro.

“What option do you have? Without the battle suits, there’s no way to defeat them. This is one war you cannot win.”

“You never know until you try. Eiji, can you set one battle suit to be independent of the system?”

“I surely can, but I need to be able to connect with the chip embedded within the battle suit. It’s impossible to do it remotely without them noticing.”

Usually the activation of the battle suits was done centrally to make it easier to the unit to keep track of their status and to warn them of any possible dangers, as well as fixing any parts that was damaged during the battle remotely. To set the battle suit to be independent of the system would mean to send the soldier out there without any assistance. It was a huge risk since they would never know the soldier battle status once the battle suit had been deployed, but for now, that was the only way for them to turn the table around.

“I’ll sneak in into the hangar and make the connection for you.”

Kazuhiro turned to leave the room, when suddenly his left arm was grabbed from behind.

“Why do you need to risk your life for other people? This is suicide. Please… I’m begging you, for once, think about yourself, and those who care about you. Just let me go. I’m not worth protecting.”

Rather than her usual calm and confident expression, Akane’s face was wet with tears. Everything she said was what she really felt deep down inside. On several occasions previously, she did put Kazuhiro’s life in danger, but she was there to back him up. But this time, she would not be able to provide the support he needed, and that really scared her.

Seeing her crying face before him torn his heart. Kazuhiro took a deep breath, and then wiped her tears. He wanted to stay by her side, but if he didn’t go, they would take her away. That was something that he would not allow to happen, no matter what.

“I want you to know, regardless of what opinion people have on you, I would not hesitate to risk my life protecting you, even if I have to do it hundreds of times.”

“I won't forgive myself if anything ever happened to you.”

“I’ll come back. I promise.”

“In that case I’ll go with you.”

After remained silence for quite a while, Ryuu spoke up. Watching Akane in a vulnerable condition like that affected his emotion as well. After all, he had promise to protect Akane both physically and emotionally. If he had to play the role of ensuring Kazuhiro’s safety, he would be happy to take up on it, as long as it would ease Akane’s misery.

Kazuhiro turned to look at him.

“No, I shall go alone. I need you here. If something were to happen to me, you have to protect Akane, in my stead.”

And then, he left.

99

With no sensor to detect the enemy, Kazuhiro had to rely on his instinct. Not knowing where the enemy was reduced his chances by half, especially when the enemy could clearly see his movements through the cameras attached inside the building.

If he were to disable the cameras, then that would obviously give away his location to the enemies. The best strategy he could think of was to create a few seconds of ‘blind spot’ for each camera using magic.

Now, how many cameras are there, and where?

Though he had been working at the unit for several years already, these were among things that he took for granted. Relying too much on their ‘impenetrable’ security system, he forgot to put into account the unexpected possibilities.

After finding out the truth related to General Tatsuo, he was still confident that Akane was well protected by their side. But his over confident caused the enemy to breach their stronghold, and put her life in grave danger. This half-hearted job of his was something that he could not accept and it was his responsibility to make amend of it, even if he were to use himself as bait.

Kazuhiro scanned the hallway in front of him thoroughly, spotted the cameras within his field of view. This would be tough but he had no other choice but to go through with the plan.

Taking a deep breath, he dashed into the hallway, casting an invisible shield to wrap himself with. Since the shield would only last for a few seconds due to his insufficient magic, he had to cast the spell continuously before the shield wore off.

The distance towards the hangar seemed infinite with all the running and casting of spell done concurrently, so when he saw the entrance of the hangar, he breathed a sigh of relief. The next hurdle was to get into the hangar undetected, or so he thought.

Once again, he made a critical error on his part, by solely focusing on the cameras and neglecting the other ‘eyes’ – the flying drones powered by The Amida that would appear randomly within the unit. And it could not pick a better time to appear before him, when he was so close to entering the hangar.

It was already too late for him to avoid the situation. Since the system had been overridden, he was now an intruder from the drone point of view, and an alert message had been issued.

There was no point in lurking anymore. Since the hangar would soon be swarming with enemies, Kazuhiro quickly destroyed the drone and entered the hangar. He needed to get to one of the suits fast but what awaited him on the inside was too much for him to handle.

Since the alert message had been circulated, more and more drone had appeared, guarding the suits. He wasn’t just surrounded by them, but had also fell into the trap set by the hangar internal system.

There was no way out this time. Within the hopeless situation, all he could do was just waited for Shigeo’s army to arrive, with an almost certain outcome – he had failed in this mission.

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“*Intruder alert!”*

*“Intruder alert!”*

Hearing the alert warning obviously made everybody in the briefing room tremble with uncertainty. Only one thing came to their mind, but nobody was willing to say it out loud

“So he has been spotted, huh.”

Finally, Captain Iroha broke the silence.

“But it could be possible that it isn’t him that they found, is it? This is Kazuhiro we are talking about. He would not be caught easily, right? Right?”

Mayu’s effort to increase their positivity was not well received. Instead she was shot with a knock-it-off glare, causing her to revert to silence.

Since nobody knew exactly Kazuhiro’s latest status, they just kept their thought to themselves. But not Akane. She was restless the moment Kazuhiro walked out of the room. And now with the intruder alert message issued, she felt shiver down to her spine.

Unable to wait any longer, she went straight to the door. Before she could push the door open, she was stopped by Captain Iroha.

“Akane, where do you think you’re going?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to look for him.”

“You are not to go anywhere.”

She heaved a sigh. That was not the answer she wanted to hear.

“Then, are we just going to abandon him?”

“No, not until we know exactly what happened, we will not take any drastic action. If you were to charge out blindly, and then something happened to you, then all of Kazuhiro’s efforts will be in vain.”

Captain Iroha had a point but still, simply waiting for Kazuhiro’s status would drive her crazy. Akane was about to voice out her thought when the display screen was suddenly turned on again. As previously, Shigeo’s face was filling up half of the screen.

“Now, now Captain. That was really foolish of you to send out your best soldier to his death. Put that foolishness aside, what can he do by himself? Do you think he was enough to take my entire army down? You must be hallucinating.”

“Where is he?”

Shigeo could be bluffing on the matter, so Captain Iroha needed to verify his claim by seeing Kazuhiro’s body herself.

“Oh don’t you worry Captain. I’ll deliver his dead body straight to your door. This should serve as a lesson to all of you, to not do anything stupid anymore. And my dearest Akane, doesn’t this bring back memory? Everyone closed to you died. Why don't you just crawling back to me so that no one else need to die? I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

The screen went off.

“Captain?”

“Yes, verify that bastard’s claim.”

Quickly Hayama pushed open the door, followed by Eiji. Not long after, they were back, carrying Kazuhiro’s lifeless body.

“Kazuhiro!” cried Yuina.

Kaori, upon seeing Kazuhiro’s condition, cover her mouth with her palm. “What a cruel thing to do,” she mumbled to herself.

His uniform was covered in blood caused by a gun wound on his chest. From the look of it, he fell without giving a fight at all. Most likely, the enemy had shot him while he was caught inside the hangar security system.

“It’s faint but he’s still breathing. We need to bring him to the operation room now.”

“But… wouldn’t we get shot if we go out of here?”

It wasn’t Kaori intention to leave Kazuhiro in that state without doing anything, but after seeing him in that state, nobody would blame her if she got a little scared. After all, their best soldier fell so easily showed how helpless they were at the moment.

“They can do whatever they want. But I ain’t staying here and do nothing. Not while I can still save his life.”

That was Dr. Isao’s determination.

And out of sudden, the whole room was shaking, at first slowly, and then picking up the speed. This tremor, Dr. Isao knew exactly what it was; or to be more precise, the source of it.

“Akane! Pull yourself together!”

“Akane, don’t!”

Of all people, it was Yuina who actually went to hug her tight. She wasn’t sure how effective her action was, but at that time, she felt that was the most appropriate thing to do.

“Don’t blame yourself. Kazuhiro made his choice. Let us pray for his safety.”

100

It has been several hours since the enemy’s ambush. Nothing much happened within the time frame. Kazuhiro’s condition had stabilized, though he remained unconscious.

Gloomy wasn’t even enough to describe the atmosphere the team was surrounded in. Everybody was unsure of their fate. The confidence they held really high before was instantly vanished after Kazuhiro had easily fallen; as if hope was no longer possible to be clung on.

Among them, Yuina was the one affected the most, since Kazuhiro was her only brother. But because of that, the team had been down in the dumps, so she had to play her part right. As a sister, and as the administrator of the second unit, this was no time for her to be emotional, but strong.

After getting an update regarding the current situation from Captain Iroha, she went to where Ryuu was. Next to him was Akane, who was asleep after being calmed with sedatives. She sat down right beside her.

“How is she doing?”

“Better than the time when she broke down.”

“What a poor thing.”

Those words coming out from Yuina really took Ryuu by surprise. He looked at her, who was gently rubbing Akane’s head.

“You don’t really hate her, do you?”

She heaved a sigh.

“Honestly, I don’t know exactly how I feel. But seeing Akane like this, even I could tell that she’s suffering inside. I’m not that heartless not to feel anything. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You like her, don’t you?”

*Who, in his right mind would not be bewitched by her?* Ryuu let out a small laugh, directing his gaze towards Akane.

“I do, but I’m not stupid. Akane is out of my reach. She cares a lot about your brother, and even I could not rival that. For me, it’s enough if I could get back the smile on her face.”

Those were the most romantic words she ever heard coming out from a guy, thought Yuina. Though they were not meant for her, still those words warmed her heart.

“You really are a good guy. If you can put your differences aside, you’ll be a good partner for Kazuhiro.”

“Speaking of Kazuhiro, you just made me realized something. We’ve been in and out of this room since the incident. They should be alerted already, but no actions have been taken so far. Don’t you think it’s weird?”

Indeed, she thought of the same thing. Even Captain Iroha had raised her concern regarding this. There was only one conclusion they could come out with.

“The enemy is looking down on us. They only see Kazuhiro as a threat. With him down, there is no one else to take his place. And that Shigeo guy most probably knows that Akane won’t take any action on her own, otherwise he won’t be bold enough to let us roam freely like this.”

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How long had she been asleep? It was already evening, and Kazuhiro was still unconscious. Yuina scanned her surrounding. Both Ryuu and Akane weren’t there. Maybe he brought her somewhere to ease her mind.

9.00 pm was flashed on her watch. They had yet to decide on what action to take the next morning. Everybody was shaken by the fact that Kazuhiro had lost, but knowing them, they would not back down without a fight.

Tomorrow, another hurdle would have to be overcome. With the future uncertain, it was best to let them be for tonight. And she could also use this time to spend time with Kazuhiro. Who knew this might be the last time spent between them.

So she headed to the infirmary, where Kazuhiro was treated. To her surprise, Akane was there, lying by Kazuhiro’s side on the bed, with her head on his chest, while her hand held his.

“I allowed her to.”

Before Yuina could even respond to it, she heard Dr. Isao’s voice from behind. She gave him a slight nod, followed by a smile.

“Do you think Kazuhiro will be okay?”

“I’ve done what I could. Let’s just pray for the best.”

If there’s a temple to pray to the Lord of The Arduins, she would have done so. She would do anything in order to extend the life of her brother.

“I’ve always prepared for the worst. Knowing him, this was to be expected. But still, it’s hard for me to except if … “

The tears could not be stopped from falling anymore, regardless of how tough she was trying to act. She had lost her parents when she was still young, and to lose another family member would be something she could never bear.

“Yuina, you should go to rest. Tomorrow will be another hurdle for us.”

There might not be tomorrow, she thought. She wanted to stay by Kazuhiro’s side, but with Akane there, she decided it was best to leave them alone.

“Please Dr. Isao, do whatever you can to save his life.”

Yuina turned to leave, but was stopped when Dr. Isao placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Yuina, I just want you to know. Akane… she’s not a bad person. She would never do any harm to Kazuhiro, not if she could help it.”

She nodded. “I know.”

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“Remember when we first met? You might not believe it but I was looking forward to seeing you. Battling ‘you’ for years have made me curious, what sort of person you are. I wanted to know more about you. And after seeing the actual you for the first time, I knew I could rely on you. That’s why I took the risk, using myself as a bait, and you didn’t even hesitate to fall into it, though you knew very well I was just manipulating you.”

It was a very quite night, only Akane and Kazuhiro were there. She still hadn’t moved from Kazuhiro’s side, comfortably sharing her story with him, even though she knew her story would not reach him.

“Spending my time with you was the best thing that ever happened to me. You will forever be in my heart. I just want you to know, whatever happened to me, it isn’t your fault. All my actions are on my own will. From now on, live your own life.”

“Akane, it’s time.”

Dr. Isao’s almost-whispered voice calling her from the door signaled that the time given to her was already up. It was unfortunate that this was the only way out, but she could not burden anybody else anymore with her problem. She had to settle this once and for all.

Reluctantly, she climbed down the bed, and gave Kazuhiro a final look.

“I guess this is goodbye. I love you Kazuhiro.”

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The assigned nurse was doing her usual routine, checking up on Kazuhiro’s condition when his eyes were suddenly opened. Surprised by the unexpected development, she quickly reported it to Dr. Isao. And just like that, ‘a hero who came back from the dead’-news had spread. Within mere minutes, Kazuhiro was surrounded by his teammates.

“Kazuhiro, it’s a miracle that you woke up.”

Mayu could not hide her happiness. For a whole night, she prayed for his safety. She wasn’t the only one; everyone else was also grateful to learn that Kazuhiro had cheated death.

Ryuu scanned his surrounding, looking for someone.

“Where’s Akane? I haven’t seen her since last night.”

“She… has left.”

It was Kazuhiro who answered.

“What do you mean she’s left? To where?”

Kazuhiro looked at Ryuu, who still hadn’t grasped the actual situation, then switched to Dr. Isao, before finally answering the question.

“The fact that she healed and paralyzed me at the same time, isn't hard to figure out. She surrendered to the enemy and prevented me from going after her.”

“Captain, do you know about this?”

The revelation came as a surprised, not even Yuina could believe what she heard.

“Unfortunately, I just found out about it myself. That Shigeo guy contacted me this morning. Apparently Akane made a deal with him, to leave us, the whole Second Unit, unharmed.”

“But that… suicide…”

“If I knew, I would have stopped her.”

As long as she’s able to fight, Captain Iroha would never let anybody, under her care, to commit a selfish act. What Akane did, surrendering herself so the rest of them could live, was against her policy.

“Are we just gonna sit back and do nothing?”

With Kazuhiro in that condition, Ryuu wasn’t really sure the direction Captain Iroha would take. But if he must, he would rescue Akane, even if he had to do it alone.

“I will get her back.”

Though immobile, Kazuhiro was full of confident, as always. Hayama looked at him in disbelieve. Under usual circumstances, his words would make sense, but at this moment, for him to utter such things nonchalantly…

“How are you going to fight in your condition?”

“His paralysis can easily be undone by another high-level magic user.”

“You mean, The Empress?”

Ryuu nodded. As a former Emperor’s Knight who had been blessed by the power of The Amida, he understood the subject very well. Though the paralysis was casted by Akane, it wasn’t a specialized magic that can only be undone by her. The paralysis was just a common spell used in a high-level magic.

“Even if you go after her, she won’t be coming back.”

Nobody knew for how long Dr. Isao had been standing there, listening to their conversation. But one thing for sure, his expression looked completely serious.

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Yuina.

“Before you board on your suicide mission, there’s something that I need to tell about Akane, something that I’ve been keeping to only myself. Akane… she’s dying.”

“…?”

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“When I performed a check up on her body, I found this…”

Dr. Isao took something out of his lab coat and placed on a small table beside Kazuhiro’s bed. It was an object that was familiar to all of them.

Though she knew exactly what it was, Yuina could not help but asked the obvious question. “Isn’t that…the core?”

“Yes, it was planted in her body. For a normal human, this core would cause an instant death. Within an animal, it would be turned into a monster. Apply this to machines and they would become deadly. However, with Akane, whose blood already contains The Amida, the effect is even worse. It turns her into an ultimate human weapon. The more she uses magic, the less human she becomes. Apparently that is the goal of the rebellion.”

“What a cruel thing to do.”

Captain Iroha went closer to the table and reached for the core. After looking at it for several seconds, she looked at Dr. Isao. I-need-more-explanation expression was clearly spelled on her face.

“If this is the core found in her body, doesn’t that mean you have successfully removed it?”

“I have, but unfortunately, not without a drawback. The core has been planted in her body for so long that she has grown dependent on it. In other words, it has become her life support. Taking it out means reducing her lifeline. And not just that, it also breaks her emotional barrier, as you witnessed with her sudden breakdown.”

“That explains why she didn't use her full capability when it was clearly obvious she could beat everybody easily.”

“If you knew this much, why didn’t you plant it back?”

It was Mayu’s turn to ask.

“Akane knew this from the very beginning, and yet she still insisted for the core to be removed. Her wish is to die a human. And now, by healing Kazuhiro, she reduced her lifeline even further. She doesn’t have much time to live.”

Ryuu clenched his fist, trying to suppress his anger. What he just heard was totally unacceptable. How could the rebellion do such an inhumane thing to Akane?

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

It was the kind of question he got asked frequently, and he would always answer it the same.

“Doctor-patient confidentiality. Akane doesn’t want anybody within the unit to know about this, especially Kazuhiro.”

“So why are you telling us now?”

Dr. Isao heaved a sigh. It wasn’t his policy to reveal his patient’s information after pledging to secrecy, but in this case…

“Because you need to know what you are getting yourself into. Even if you send out the entire unit to rescue her, she won’t be coming back. Akane… has made her decision.”

“As I thought, you are the one who let her go.”

“I would stop her if I had another choice.”

Somehow, Ryuu could no longer control his emotion. Grabbing Dr. Isao by his collar, he pushed the physician to the wall.

“What’s more important than saving her life?!”

“Ryuu! Unhand him!” ordered Captain Iroha.

The situation within the infirmary turned chaotic. Everybody was on alert, in case Ryuu went berserk like when he was trying to destroy the whole lowest floor before.

“This isn’t like you doctor, to let your patient sacrifice herself for other people’s sake. You would always try to save, no matter what.”

Upon hearing Ryuu’s words, Dr. Isao cleared his throat. There was no mistake in what he said. Under normal circumstances, he would stop Akane no matter what.

“She confided in me about everything. Don’t you think I would want to see her go? But…” he choke on his own words, “…she gave me an option that I could not resist. She would save Kazuhiro in exchange of her life. When I heard that, out of emotion, I chose to become a father than a doctor. I can’t bear to lose my son. I’m sorry.”

His words were sincere. Even Ryuu could not fully blame the doctor for his decision. They both chose to save Kazuhiro’s life. Finally he released his grasp, and turned to Kazuhiro.

“She did this for you. Only you can decide now on what to do.”

“What I want to do now and what I had planned to do remain the same. I will bring her back. Then, as a father, would you help your son to save the life of the woman he loves?”

Tears gathered around Dr. Isao’s eyes. Slowly he nodded.

“You can count on me.”

Kazuhiro took a soft, deep breath. Saving Akane was his resolve, and his alone. It was him who brought Akane in, and dragged the Second Unit into this mess. It wouldn’t be fair if they got involved any further.

“Captain, I will treat this as my personal mission. Please release me from the unit so you won’t be held accountable for my future action.”

Ryuu and Mayu, upon hearing Kazuhiro’s request, responded in unison.

“Are you kidding me? This is my late father’s will we’re talking about. I’m not going let you go by yourself and hog all the glory.”

“Me too. She sacrifices herself for us. I won’t let her die before showing my gratitude.”

Not just them, but Captain Iroha also felt the same. All actions taken by the Second Unit was under her responsibility.

“She’s practically a part of the team already. I won’t let my soldier die, and I won’t definitely let The General has his way. We are all in it together whether you like it or not.”

There was nothing else he could say to stop them from taking part in this fight, except, “You have my thanks.”

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The rescue plan had been formulated. Since this might be a point-of-no-return mission, Captain Iroha decided that it should be a covert operation – the members would consist of the special unit only.

Every member had been briefed of his role. Now that was left to do was for Kazuhiro’s paralysis bind to be undone. A request for an audience with The Empress had been made. Kazuhiro was put in a wheel chair, and pushed to the briefing room. There, he waited for the connection to be made, thinking of how foolish he was, not realizing his own feeling.

“I was informed of what happened. I’m sorry that I could not provide any support at that moment.”

The Empress’ voice interrupted his thought. There she was, standing right behind him. Though it was just her projection, there was no difference compared to her flesh and blood form, with only one exception – no physical contact is possible.

“It was better this way. It wouldn’t do us any good if you were to be caught up in our affairs.”

Empress Hikari looked at the paralyzed Kazuhiro, her heart thumped achingly. She wanted to hold him and console him badly but her projection form wouldn’t allow for it to happen. If, and only if she could personally go there…

“Kazuhiro, what can I do to help you?”

“I need you to undo the spell that Akane had put on me. That shouldn’t be a problem for you, I believe?”

“Of course not, but what would you do after that?”

“I’m going to rescue her.”

“Why would you go that far for her?”

Kazuhiro opened his mouth to say something but he could not find the right words to utter. Among many questions thrown at him, that was the hardest yet to answer.

“Kazuhiro, tell me honestly. Are you… in love with her?”

If he were to be honest with his heart, then that would definitely hurt Empress Hikari’s feeling, but there’s no way he could lie about it.

“I’m sorry, Hikari.”

For someone who was very much in love, hearing such words really put a toll on her heart. He had never called by her name before, since she became the empress. For him to call her name like that, did it mean he wanted to end thing between them? Tears broke out of her eyes.

“Do you forget that you belong to me? Do you want to break that promise you made?”

Kazuhiro cleared his throat. This was one of the reasons why he tried avoiding women. Be it The Empress, or his over protective sister, or a mutant-born beauty, or his very best friend, when it came to emotion, they could be hard to reason with.

“Hikari, please. She will die if I don’t go.”

“Don’t you even care about me any longer?”

“What do I have to do for you to grant my request?”

He had made his decision, and Empress Hikari knew that very well. His heart could no longer be swayed by her charm, but even so, that didn’t mean she would let him go.

“You would still insist even if I strictly ordered you not to go, am I right? Very well. In that case, I will help you but with two conditions. Once this is over, you are to return to me. Second, she will be permanently under my custody with no contact from the lower floor. Are you willing to fulfill these two conditions in exchange of saving her life?”

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“Hey, there you are. What’s troubling you?”

It was the night before the strike against the rebellion, which meant it had been two days since Akane left them. The spell put on Kazuhiro was already lifted. All that was left to do was to make sure all preparations were according to plan.

Right after the final briefing, Kazuhiro left the room without saying a word to anybody. That was unlike him, but since everybody assumed that he needed a time for himself, they just let him be. But Yuina knew her brother too well to leave him just like that.

She straightaway headed to Kazuhiro’s favorite spot, the <placename>. As expected, he was there, staring at the twin planets. He turned to look at her when she sat right next to him, and forced a smile on his face.

“Yuina, all these while, I made decision based on what’s possible and what’s not. Never once I regretted making those decisions because I would never allow sentiment to get in the way. But now, for the first time, I question my own resolution. Am I making the right choice?”

Yuina placed her head on Kazuhiro’s shoulder.

“It’s very rare to see you being indecisive like this, but that just proves you are a normal person. There’s nothing wrong in basing your decision on emotion. The risk is still the same even if you opt to base on the logic like you normally do.”

“Then, why am I contemplating?”

“That’s because you love her. Ask your own heart, what does it say?”

Kazuhiro closed his eyes, breathing in slowly before letting it out.

“My heart says that I should save her, there’s no doubt about it. But I’m scared of what yet to come. Her future, and mine – they are uncertain. I’m chained by an old promise. It was Akane who made me realized that what I feel towards the Empress was not actually love. It is an admiration; led by her strong will.

Akane, on the other hand, she is undeniably pretty handful, I’d say, but at the same time, she brought out the other side of me. I don't know when I’ve started falling for her. Each day, this feeling gets stronger and deeper. The thought of not being able to be with her, even if she was saved, hurts me. Yuina, what should I do? Sometimes I think it’s better just to leave her at her own fate. But if I were to do that…”

There were no more words that can be expressed when the emotion had clearly taken over his judgment. Yuina lifted her head from his shoulder, and cupped his face. She looked him in the eyes; her expression was solid.

“Are you going to give up just like that? That is not the Kazuhiro I know. That Kazuhiro would do anything within his capability to make the right thing. So don’t think about the future that has not yet happened. For now, do what you must. Bring Akane home safely, and then we’ll think about the future, together.”

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*Tick! Tick! Tick! Tick!*

The alarm ticked, denoting that the water in the boiler had reached the desired temperature. Mayu poured the hot water into a pot, brewing the green tea leaves, which can be found in the hilly part of the lowest level.

Awaiting her by the coffee table was Kaori. Both of them would take part in the all out war against the rebellion, so they decided to spend the night drinking tea while reflecting the lives they had been through together. After all, this might the last tea for them.

They chatted, and laughed over silly jokes. Not Mayu nor Kaori touched on a sensitive matter. If that night would serve as the last night for them, it should be spent wisely to the fullest.

After hours of chitchatting, both of them lay down on their bed, each at the opposite side of the wall. Light was already turned off, but none of them could actually fall to sleep.

“Hey Mayu, why are you joining in this battle?”

Kaori suddenly decided to ask the sensitive question, but it didn’t throw Mayu off an inch. In fact, she answered the question calmly.

“I don’t want to leave any regret behind.”

“What do you mean?”

“Akane – I’ve done her wrong, so many times. And yet, she sacrificed herself to save us all. She’s dying, I know that, but at least she could choose a better place to die, like here, by Kazuhiro’s side. I would be heartless if I still harbor such ill feeling towards her. So I guess joining this battle is my path to redemption.”

Kaori nodded in agreement.

“Now that I think about it, none of us actually really despise her. Don’t hate me for saying this, but after everything that had happened, I’m actually rooting for them.”

“I totally get what you’re saying. I feel the same way. Have you ever seen two people in love fighting for the sake of the other half, by sacrificing themselves? I thought my love for him was strong enough, but hers is purer. She’d do whatever it takes to save him, regardless of her own life, and Kazuhiro is the same. I could never top that. As the saying goes from our ancestors, if you can’t beat them, then join them.”

They both laughed, thinking back all the selfish acts they did to Akane.

“Mayu, whatever it is, promise me that you’ll come back alive. If Akane is back too, then we should all have drinks together.”

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*This is it – the moment of truth, which will decide their fate, and Akane’s.*

Kazuhiro looked at the final preparation before embarking on what could be the hardest war they had ever faced. Of the six of them, only three would be fighting on the front line, against the rebellion armies. He needed to make sure that the victory would belong to them. To keep on reminding himself of his ultimate purpose, he brought along the photo of him and Akane, taken at the festival.

“I’m leaving the command in your hand, Kazuhiro.”

It was not an easy decision to make but Captain Iroha could not simply abandon the Second Unit. If the covert mission were to fail, she had another role to play – that was to lead the evidence away from the Second Unit, even if it meant placing the blame on Kazuhiro entirely.

“Don’t put too much pressure on yourself, Captain. You know that I would still go, regardless of your decision. I’ll be happy to take full responsibility on this mission.”

“I pray for your success. All of you.”

Yuina, who was standing right beside Dr. Isao, could not hold off her tears. Having to choose between her brother and the lives of the residents of the Second Unit really torn her apart. Like Captain Iroha, she too had to play her part in protecting them.

“Don’t cry Yuina. I’ll definitely come back. After all, cheating death is my specialty.”

As he hugged her, he made that promise. Since their parents’ death, Yuina had been by his side through good and bad times. And he was planning to let her continue performing that duty for a longer time.

“I’ll prepare a grilled stuff quail. Make sure you come back for it.”

“I would not miss it for the world.” He let go off her, and turned to Dr. Isao, who proudly watched his two kids. “I’m counting on you doctor.”

The doctor nodded.

“Kazuhiro, everything is set. We are good as gold to go. Just give us your word,” shouted Hayama from the open door of the sky carrier.

Thanks to the private research made by Dr. Isao years back and the battle against the New Types, the sky carrier was modified to contain the stealth ability, powered by The Arduins. He managed to extract the essence needed from Akane’s core, which contained a huge amount of The Arduins, and transferred it into the vessel.

The battle suit was also equipped with new abilities, embedded with The Arduins to enhance its features. Hayama was responsible with the maintenance of both suits and vessel, Eiji would be on the support, analyzing data during battle while Kaori served as the navigator, flying the carrier through out the mission.

Ryuu and Mayu were already on a standby, waiting for Kazuhiro’s order. After giving salute to Captain Iroha, Kazuhiro turned back and walked towards where his comrades were waiting. His expression was dead serious.

“Let’s raise some hell where the rebellions are.”

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The sky carrier flew slowly as not to attract attention. It did not take long for them to approach their destination. To avoid an unwanted greeting, the stealth function was turned on to hide it from the enemy’s radar.

The rebellion base looked like a normal village; no one would suspect the everyday-looking settlement actually housed dangerous people and equipment. Most of the experiments were conducted underground, which drove away the suspicion towards the base.

The only reason Kazuhiro knew exactly where the base was because of Akane. For some reason, after she transferred her ‘lifeline’ into him, he could sense her, as if they were connected through The Arduins.

“Kazuhiro, something is not right.”

Since taking off, Eiji did not once take his eyes off the computer screen. He needed to be on full alert, either from the enemy’s surprised attack or when breaching the enemy’s security. Somehow, his detection tool did not pick up any outside signal, though they had technically entered the rebellion’s aerial area.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not picking up any hostility from the host. It’s like the area is clean, with no security system. Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Akane is definitely here.”

“Such confident enemies we have here, but still they shouldn’t let their guard down,” commented Hayama.

“I don't think that’s the case. It looks like we are walking right into their trap.”

The enemy wasn’t stupid, thought Kazuhiro, especially with General Tatsuo on their side. Not having security system at all was really amateurish, that was definitely not something The General would do.

“You think so too, huh?”

Apparently Ryuu shared the same thought as Kazuhiro. He, too, could tell that the no-security-system was just a set up.

“You mean, they knew we are coming?”

Mayu sounded a little bit confused.

“I’ll say they anticipated it.”

“Yeah, of course. This is Kazuhiro we are talking about. Everybody knows he won’t back down quietly. Definitely they’ve predicted he would do something this much, at least.”

Though Hayama’s justification on Kazuhiro’s claim seemed like a joke, as a matter-of-factly, they knew it was the truth. General Tatsuo was not an outsider to Kazuhiro’s action; of course he had thought of this possibility.

“Should we turn back and reevaluate our strategy?” asked Kaori. In fact she was ready to steer the carrier away from the current path.

“No, we proceed as planned. Since they’re expecting us, we might as well just go through the front door. Ryuu, Mayu, get ready to activate your battle suit. We’re descending now.”

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As expected, there was no guard or whatsoever awaiting them. The hallway was empty. Only one route was lit with lights; the other areas were dark. It wasn’t hard to guess that they needed to follow where the lights led them. Kazuhiro could feel it that Akane was there, at the end of the route.

Since them being there could be considered as the ‘enemy’s invitation’, Kazuhiro was confident that there wouldn’t be any surprised attack. He simply followed the route without giving it much thought. Apparently, Ryuu and Mayu also shared the same thinking. They followed him closely.

After walking for more than 10 minutes, they arrived at the end of the route. What stood in front of them was a thick steel door, tightly closed.

“What now?”

The moment Mayu addressed her concern, the door was suddenly opened. There was nobody inside it, except for Shigeo, sitting on his lazy chair, cozily smoking a cigar.

“What’s taking you so long? I grew tired of waiting.”

“Where’s Akane?”

“Oh, what’s the hurry? We’ve got plenty of times before the party starts.”

“Where’s Akane?”

“You are an impatience young man, aren’t you? If you must know, my beautiful Akane is getting ready for our special ceremony.”

Clutching his hand in anger, Kazuhiro was about to charge at Shigeo, but his movement was abruptly stopped, his legs were glued to the floor. Ryuu and Mayu were affected as well. They were trapped in the *jamming* *field*.

“Hahaha, do you really think I invited you in without precaution? My Akane has given us crucial data regarding your battle suit, enough for us to jam your movement. Ain’t she a useful tool?”

Ignoring Shigeo’s provocation, Kazuhiro restlessly tried to escape from the jamming area, but his struggle was pointless. He barely moved an inch.

“Kazuhiro, this isn’t like you to be reckless.”

Mayu tried to carve some sense back into him. Never in her life she witnessed Kazuhiro acted emotionally. He’s always been the brain of their operation.

“She’s right,” seconded Ryuu. “We need to calmly think this through. Ideally we could turn this suit off, unfortunately, he even jammed our devices.”

“Hahaha, having fun much? Now let’s jump straight to the main event. Behold my dearest Akane.”

In less than a couple of seconds, the wall behind Shigeo opened, revealing Akane, dressed in tight sleeveless top and pants, meant for a combat. Her hands were cuffed with an anti-magic material.

“Akane!”

No respond was given to Kazuhiro’s calling. Her face remained expressionless.

“It’s pointless. She won’t listen to anyone but me. Before I send her to crush all of you, why don't you witness how I made her faithfully mine?”

“Don’t you dare lay a finger on her!”

Shigeo paid no heed to Kazuhiro’s warning. Slowly he walked towards Akane, walking his fingers on her body. He had longed for this moment, to stain her purity. And he could not help but to choose this moment to do so, right in front of Kazuhiro, to punish him for hiding Akane from him.

Just looking at her body aroused his inner beast. Before he could successfully pull her top down to reveal her smooth skin, he felt a sharp knife pointing at his stomach. His eyes widened when he realized what actually happened.

“Akane, what are you doing?”

“Surprised?”

“Impossible. You are programed to listen to me, to do as I say. I command you to submit yourself to me!”

She smirked upon hearing Shigeo’s words.

“You seriously think that all those ‘hocus pocus’ were working on me? No hard feeling, but I simply played along with your stupid game.”

“What can you possibly do with your hands chained?”

From Shigeo’s troubled faced, Akane’s gaze travelled down to the anti-magic cuff that coiled her hands.

“Oh, this? Consider me giving you a handicap.”

She threw away the knife that was in her grasp. To prove her point, she would take down Shigeo bare-handedly. Though he was the leader of the rebellion, and her trainer, he was no match for her.

“You’ll regret this!”

He attacked her, she dodged. Each of Shigeo’s attack was countered with her leg. She waited for him to be in his blind spot, positioned herself behind Shigeo’s back. Flipping her body – supported by her hands on the floor – she grabbed his neck by means of legs. Putting her all her strength on her two legs, she twisted his neck to bring him down on the floor.

The leader of the rebellion struggled to free himself though he knew his effort was fruitless. Akane’s legs’ gripped was so tight that he could hardly breathe.

“Goodbye Shigeo. See you in hell.”

With one last twist, she broke Shigeo’s neck, taking his life out of his body.

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The enemy had already fallen and the jamming was undone. However the atmosphere surrounding them was quiet as the grave. There were, of course, several reasons contributed to it.

First, it wasn’t a secret that Akane was a well-trained combatant and it was also a known fact that she hadn’t killed a single soul before. Seeing her consciously killed Shigeo, though understandable, was still surprising.

Second, just a couple of days ago she was completely broken, up to the point where she could not even defend herself. The one standing in front of them right now, had her entire personality flipped by 180 degrees, turned her cold as ice.

And finally, for some apparent reason, everything seemed to be staged by Akane. The moment she appeared in front of Kazuhiro, everything had been according to her plan. What made it any different this time?

“I got to hand this one to you. You played us right to your cards.”

It was Ryuu who broke the silence. If he had to be honest, he was actually impressed with her ability to bend everything to her will, especially when she did it naturally.

“Is it true Akane, this is… part of your plan?”

Unlike Ryuu, Mayu felt a little bit betrayed if the claim was true. All of them were willing to fight for her sake; she just had to ask for it.

“If anybody were to be impressed, that would be me. I expected for Kazuhiro to come, but it was beyond my thinking that the two of you would tag along as well.”

There was no denial coming out of her mouth. Everything was said with a straight face. Even so, it didn’t bother Kazuhiro at all. He turned off his suit. Grabbing the key hung on Shigeo’s broken neck, he walked towards Akane and took the cuff off of her.

“So, what’s new? This is always the Akane I know. You manipulate and you deceive to achieve your goal. But you made one critical error in your planning, that is, human emotion. You assume everything will follow the logic you believe in. How does it feel when your own heart disobeys your thought? When you plan the next move, you think of only how I would respond to your action, but it never occurs to you that the others would take action as well.”

“It doesn’t concern me the slightest.”

“Is that so? Then why are your eyes showing the opposite?”

Akane bit her lip. Why did Kazuhiro have to make it harder than it already was? Everything was properly planned, she could not have him jeopardize this.

“Look Kazuhiro, I don’t know what you’re getting at. But I ain’t have time for this. You have to leave now. The clock is ticking.”

“She’s right Kazuhiro. We have to move now. Our radar is picking up the enemy’s signal.”

Without wasting a second, Mayu quickly agreed with Akane’s suggestion. The longer they stayed, the harder to leave, especially with the enemy approaching.

“You heard her.”

“You’re coming with us.”

“I’m sure you are aware of the truth by now.”

“Dr. Isao will find a way.”

“We both know very well that the only way is to replant the core inside me. I can’t go back to being that monster.”

Kazuhiro could not find himself countering that fact because he too, knew very well that for now, that was the sole solution to save Akane’s life. Still, he did not want to give up hope, certainly not wanting to lose her as well.

The moment of silence between the two had made Ryuu grew wary. He could not shake the feeling that an unknown danger was lurking closer and closer.

“Uhm, I don’t mean to interrupt but save that chit-chat for later? The enemy is approaching. If we don’t hurry…”

“Do you think I would let you rats leave this place alive?”

It seemed that his wariness had come to reality, which shocked Mayu the most.

“General!”

Akane walked forward, facing General Tatsuo. This part of war was unexpected; she would prefer to avoid him at all cost. But since he was already standing in front of them, she had no choice but to proceed, and at the same time opening a path for the three of them to escape, unscathed.

“I’ll buy time. Take this opportunity to retreat.”

“We’ll take him down, together.”

“Aren’t you listening? You can’t beat him like this. He’s not who you think he is.”

“What do you mean?”

There was no point in hiding it anymore. Akane took a deep breath.

“He’s like me, another mutant.”

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“The General himself is already bad news. Why do we have to hear another one?”

“Now that you know my secret, you are not going to live to see another day.”

“If you are a mutant, why don’t you acquire the power yourself? Why must you use Akane?”

“It is as he said, a secret to keep. Besides, his ability is no match to Akane. He’s a mutant, but normal.”

“Indeed, a very great deduction. I expect no less from you Kazuhiro. In our world, mutants are rare. However, among this rarity, a few are tremendously unique, like our Akane here, whose power is beyond imagination. Some even called them The Amida itself. But with great power comes great disability. They aren’t meant to live a long life. In a way, what I did actually prolong her life. You should be grateful, rather than making a big fuss over something so trivial like freedom.”

Akane attacked Tatsuo, followed by a huge explosion of light. The three of them were transported out of the room.

went hiding. Kazuhiro and ryuu went to face again, mayu left to take care of akane. but akane left and told amyu to take care of kazuhiro. Unbeknownst to everybody, kazuhiro was akane’s trump card to win against the general. But here’s a catch – she has to die in order to activate kazuhiro’s full power.

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akane joined the battle and sacrifice herself

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“Akane’s gone!”

she left a note, stating her reasons. She overheard the conversation between kazuhiro and the empress, and told kazuhiro not to look for her anymore.

“I’m sorry for being selfish. My action may cause you a trouble but I have to go to a place where I won't be reminded of you. I need to identify my purpose of life.”

final

how long has it been since Akane left us? Three years? How are you holding up?

“she has all the rights to hate me. After all. I made her live out of her free will. I was willing to surrender her to the Empress. And on top of that, I forced her to become someone she doesn’t want to be.”

“Despite all those, your love towards her hasn’t withered an inch.”

“I heard of the new government. Good job. The people are in a better condition now.”

“Yeah, Governer Iroha is doing a great job.”

“What about you? It must be tough. With this separation…”

“Akane, you are the only one for you. So yes, it’s tough without you in it.”

“Urm.. I’m sort of lost while looking for a way home.”

“Welcome back.”

“It’s good to be home.”

“You’re not going to leave again, right?”

“If you’re holding me this tight, I won’t be able to.”

“Then I won’t let you go.”