The Life of Female Admiral

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/4131795.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Rape/Non-Con, Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: Gen
Fandom: 艦隊これくしょん | Kantai Collection
Character: OC - Character, Shouhou (Kantai Collection), Kongou (Kantai Collection)
Additional Tags: Female Friendship, Friendship, Family, Attempt at Humor, Humor, Drama, Slice of Life
Stats: Published: 2015-06-14 Completed: 2019-04-11 Chapters: 16/16 Words: 103287

The Life of Female Admiral

by Eshtarwind

Summary

A story of a female admiral who got stationed in a small Kanmusu naval base. It tells about how she deals with the many Kanmusu personalities and her unique situations. The story is a slice of life format, with chapters loosely linked with each other. May have pairings in the future but the OC herself is a straight female, so no particular pairing for her. There are possibility of more characters than the ones on the tags because it is basically anyone I want to write about.

Notes

Crossposted in FFN with the same title.

After reading many fanart and fanfic, I find myself wanting a straight female admiral that has no love interest to the Kanmusu, so she will have a more subtle relationships with the girls. There may be pairings in the future between the Kanmusu. Updates will not have regular intervals.
Collision and Instant Bucket

At first, Admiral Tendouji Airi wasn't so sure about her job. Surrounded by males, in a status dominated by their species, being an admiral was way above she would ever expect out of her career. Compared to her co-workers, she was smaller, being a woman, though not exactly short either. Every time they had the general meeting at the main headquarter and sat at the same table, she was the only other two women there. The one other than her was an older lady, with an iron hard will that could dominate her fellow admirals. She, on the other hand, felt pretty much plain and meek with her standard and rather forgettable disposition. Perhaps the only things that stood out among the others was her long black hair. People did say that when they talked to her, her brown eyes showed 'uncommon' intelligence. Until now she didn't understand what they all meant. Even if she were to look at the mirror, all she saw was her face with her usual composure and her usual plain face. As for her track record as an admiral, she had a clean, good record. Above average, but not that outstanding either. She was deemed competent as an admiral though, and for that she had pride. Perhaps her only one.

That was why, when the order was carried out for her to move as the head of a small naval base at the outskirt of the country, she was pretty much surprised. It wasn't just another naval base as well, it was the naval base of the Kanmusu—the girls who inherit the spirit of warships. Being a normal human as herself, the idea of governing a naval base filled with Kanmusu was quite intimidating. How to address them? Will they accept her? How will they react?

"There has been a case of adultery with the previous male admiral, so we have decided that a female admiral must have been the right choice. Do your job well."

How pretty.

So that was how it was. It was new situation for both Airi and the Kanmusu. Who was her in their eyes? Superior, yes. As a fellow female? They had never had this situation before and neither had Airi.

This story is a slice of life of the female admiral, Tendouji Airi, as she fulfilled her noble duties.

"AAAAAAAAADMIIIIIIIIIRAAAAAAAL！！!!"

Goosebumps trailed the neck of Admiral Tendouji Airi immediately upon hearing that characteristic loud shout. Oh yash.

SHE was back from sortie.

Oh God save me.

"THERE!!"

The door of her office opened with a loud bang and there before the long haired female admiral, who sat frozen by her desk, came the oh so familiar face of the fast battleship Kongou--the latter's eyes lighted up with LOVE when she saw her favorite, most BELOVED admiral by her usual place. And ignoring her own battered body and torn miko clothes, the fast battleship girl leaped with a deafening cry of joy.

"BUUUUUUUUUUUUURNING LOOOOOOOOOOVE!!!
Dear fleet. If I were to die by suffocation thanks to a not so unprecedented accident involving super tight hug by a dreadnought ship, please let my ash join you by the sea.

The battleship smelled of gun powder, burnt clothes, and blood.

“Admiraaaaaaaaaaal! I miss you sooooOOOOOOOOOOoooo much DESU! CHU! CHU! CHU!”

Airi already lost all will and hope to actually resist Kongou, she just knew it would be futile. Who was she to have the ability to resist a hug and kisses (dozens of them) from a battleship. By the order of power, only battleships could pry her off. Ones most possible to be able to were obviously her sisters.

"Onee-sama!!"

Never before Haruna's voice could sound so relieving. Well, Haruna was always an angel so it wasn't exactly true. Being the relatively sane part of the Kongou-class sisters, Haruna would always understand the admiral's predicament. Especially when it involved neck breaking hugs and kisses.

"A-Admiral, please forgive Oneesama! Haruna will try her best!"

Dont worry, Haruna. As long as she doesn't accidentally kill me I will most probably forgive her.... Which won't seem likely unless you help me breathe right now.

Kongou's love could be so suffocating.

However, getting almost suffocated to death by Kongou's fierce hug was just a minuscule of common happenings in the naval base. It was just another day being a female admiral in a Kanmusu naval base... One among the many regularities.

------------Collision and Instant Bucket-------------

"... And that concludes the report on the last sortie."

Shouhou's voice soothed the intermittent headache Airi always suffered whenever Kongou arrived. She was glad she picked Shouhou as her secretary, the young woman was enthusiastic and kind. Plus, she didn't shower her with unbearable BURNING love like Kongou. Hers was a rather... calm, manageable one.

Speaking of Kongou, Haruna had dragged her sister away while apologizing all the time. They were supposed to go to the dock right away for repair but Kongou disappeared right after they arrived--certainly to an obvious place. Her power and speed sure followed her even on land. Somehow Airi regretted remodelling her to Kai Ni. She was glad she remodelled her sisters as well though.

"Shall I file the report and ask Ooyodo-san to deliver them, Admiral?"

“Eh? What?”

The admiral wasn't paying attention. Shouhou lowered the archives she had in her hand, smiling gently.

“Admiral, I think it is time for you to take a break. You have been working since yesterday.”

Hearing the remark of her secretary ship, the female admiral sighed then leaned back to her chair.
Fatigue plagued her features. Shouhou followed her movements with kind eyes.

“Shall I make you some tea, Admiral?”

Dear God, thank you for bestowing me this angel. Despite being touched by her secretary's attentiveness, Airi smiled and shook her head. Tea means staying in the room and that means no break. So finally, after so many hours sitting, she stood and stretched herself. Her shoulder felt stiff, her back hurts. Was it age---- no. No. It must be exhaustion. Yes.

“Why don't you go to Mamiya with me, Shouhou? They said there will be a new menu.”

“E-Eh?” Blush quickly spread on Shouhou's face. From how light suddenly lit up inside her eyes though, Airi knew the girl was elated. “I-Is that okay, Admiral? I-I mean, I don't mind staying here to file the reports--”

“Of course I won't let my secretary do all my job while I am taking my break, will I?” the admiral laughed, tapping Shouhou's arm lightly. “Besides, I need company. We shall get our daily sweets replenishment! Come on, let's go.”

Airi didn't need to look back to know how Shouhou beamed in happiness when she followed her. Somehow just seeing that smile was enough to made the admiral's day billion of times better and made her believe that the day would only get better.

She was too naive.

As soon as she opened the door and walked outside to breathe in the smell of the long awaited break, a voice broke out:

“Commander! Watch out!”

The next thing that she remembered, was how the ceiling of the corridor looked so bad they really need replacing... and also how she could hear her ribs cracked.

Someone had collided with her, forcing air out of her lungs and throwing her to the wall.

“ADMIRAL!!”

Ah, what a lucky day...

Merely running into someone can turn into something devastating in this naval base.

----------X----------

Sitting in one of the room by the naval clinic, Airi swore her chest was so painful she could barely breathe. Gulp several painkillers the doctor of the clinic provided, she winched in pain. She could feel the bulge of a pad below her breast, the cold of medicine, and the stinging pain of each breath she took. She really did cracked her ribs.

Shouhou eyed her movement with apparent nervousness. After her admiral finished drinking the medicine, she quietly asked, “... How do you feel Admiral?”


“No, Admiral, it's nothing,” said Shouhou, receiving the glass her admiral just finished using. Her eyes were filled with worry since her admiral seemed to not getting any better after drinking the
medication. “I did help you to get here but... should I have brought you to the dock instead?”

“No, no, that won't work for me definitely.” The idea of merely taking a bath to heal her wounds sound really tempting to try but inside her heart she knew she should be realistic. The anime rule didn't apply to her, a normal human. “Thank you, Shouhou. So what ha--”

“COMMANDER!!”

Suddenly the white cover surrounding her space was spread open in an ear-splitting creak. Ikazuchi came with a bucket of instant repair, behind her trailed a pale faced Inazuma. Airi barely remembered the moment of when she was struck but now with them here, everything was clear as day.

“Commander!!” Ikazuchi raised the bucket in her hand and shoved Inazuma to the front. “Please use this! Inazuma is very very very very sorry to have crashed to you! Inazuma! Now!”

“I... I'm very sorry, Commander!” Inazuma bowed down so deeply her head almost hit the bed. “P-please accept this instant bucket we found in our last expedition! I... I didn't meant to hit you, Commander...”

“It's okay, it's okay, lift your head,” Airi gently said, smiling. Looking at how Inazuma was on the verge of tears would melt anyone's heart. She was also worried that this much commotion would actually disturb the place. It's a clinic after all. “Are you alright yourself, Inazuma-chan? I am not angry, it's okay. Look, I am perfectly fine too.”

“Please use this bucket, Commander!” Ikazuchi again, shoved the instant bucket. “You will get better soon, like, right away! Instantly!”

“Ummmm well...” Now this was tricky. How shall I explain this? That despite being female, my body works differently? That a bucket of green liquid won't repair me instantly like it will do them in baths? Airi finally forced her smile, swallowed her pain, and tried the most vague answer she could muster with her most cheery voice. “... Well, I am okay! See? I will heal fast anyway so I don't need it, don't worry. Let's save it for our next operation!”

Perhaps that was not as clever of an answer as she thought, since Ikazuchi had her eyes sparkle and she asked, “Eeeeh? Commander heal fast too? How long will this injury take you to heal? Ikazuchi can get well from critical damage in 15 minutes, you know!”

… Ah....

Aaaaaaaaahhhhh!! The difference of healing speed! Airi suddenly felt like hitting her head to the wall from frustration, envy, and desperation. Damn it! I am a fast healer myself but the difference of our standard is too great! What should I do what should I say WHAT SHOULD I—

“Um, you see,” Breathing was painful, speaking was painful, and pretending to keep her voice high and spirited required massive amount of sheer will. “Usually for others it will take muuuch longer but for me.. I will heal in just a month or so, so don't worry! Hahahaha...”

“A MONTH?!”

Bad idea.

“Commander, I AM SO SORRY!!!” Inazuma cried right away, prostrating in front of the admiral. “Inazuma is very sorry!! Inazuma will be more careful!!”
“Um..”

“PLEASE USE THIS BUCKET, COMMANDER! PLEASE, I AM BEGGING YOU.”

“Admiral, that is worse than Akagi-san in Critical Damage! Are you really okay?”

“Commander, please forgive Inazuma!!”

“Uhh.... you see...”

So this would take a long time... and a whole lot of painkillers.

------X------

The sun was setting when Airi finally left the clinic with Shouhou, who remained faithfully by her side. Moving was painful but the painkillers did their job. The long talking she did earlier this day had enervated her energy though. She felt dozen of time more exhausted that she usually did at the end of the day. She finally explained to Inazuma and Ikazuchi (and also indirectly to Shouhou) how despite being female she was not a Kanmusu so the bath and the bucket won't do her any good, that one month was really fast for someone to heal from fractured ribs, that one should not shout in clinic, and many things. In the end, she had to spend time calming down Inazuma who cried so much while apologizing. Her white admiral uniform now had a patch where it was all damp from tears.

Airi found out that being an admiral in a Kanmusu base meant not only sortieing “ships”, but also babysitting, teaching, and be the emotional buffer of so many young girls.

Airi had left the majority of her work today neglected though thanks to this and she couldn't imagine doing overtime work with her injury. The sun was almost completely out and the night would soon set in. She wanted to sigh but it would hurt so she hold it in. Whichever she did, it hurt though.

Walking along the peers towards the office, Airi took notice how the sky turned bright red by the horizon with the sea brimming with orange lights. She then realized that she skipped lunch today.

“So... this may be a little late but... do you still want Mamiya, Shouhou?”

Might as well take a full break today. Shouhou seemed surprised by her question. She examined her commander long and carefully before finally said, “But it seems like you're still in pain, Admiral. Maybe we should just call it a day?”

“It's alright,” Actually it's more like if I don't have any distraction, it will hurt worse, Shouhou. It won't go away in a week or so anyway. Imagining being all by herself miserably in her lonely apartment suffering from unending pain while tortured by the thought of unfinished work made not only her ribs, but also her heart, hurt. She was still a single woman living alone anyway and the injury would exacerbate that notion a dozen fold. “You haven't eaten anything during the day, have you? I'm famished too. Ah, or maybe the cafetaria will be better?”

Shouhou appeared to be contemplating the options while examining her condition. After a while, she finally nodded and gave her gentle smile.

“If it is alright with you, Admiral, I will be with you all the time.”

Choosing Shouhou as her secretary really was among the best decisions she had ever made since she went to the base.
“Perfect! So, shall we go? We can just pass the dock to the left...”

The dock?

A wave of uneasiness suddenly crept up Airi’s spine.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAADMIIIIIIIIIIIIIIRRRRAAAAAAAAAAL!!”

OH NO.

“BUUUUUUUUUUURNING....”

“Oh no, Kongou, DON’T—“

“--LOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOCVEEEEEEE!”

SMACK.

“~~~~~*%@$@#$@!$$@&$#!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Admiral? Admiral!! Hang in there! ADMIRAL!”

With this, one day of Admiral Tendouji Airi had ended rather painfully.

– end of chapter 1-
Age of Expiry

Chapter Summary

Being a minority may become quite a problem. Admiral Tendouji Airi surely had to face this one head on.

Be with me for my whole life
Including all the ups and downs

Miki Dozan - Lifetime Respect

Somebody, please tell me this is a joke.

Admiral Tendouji Airi had both hands on her head as she stared at the piece of paper before her in horror. This one announcement that she just received... she desperately tried to think that it was all a bad joke.

… In order to remove the limiter of the ship girls in your fleet...

The next clause sounded like sheer nightmare.

.. all admirals are advised to have provisional marriage with feasible ship and forge an unbreakable bond of matrimony.

88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88 88

"88 FUEL MY ASS! DON'T FREAKING CLAP ON ME!"

- "Age of Expiry" -

From the very first moment Airi took on the title of admiral, or even from the very first moment she took on the navy as her place of work, she knew and understood exactly that this field was mostly the work field of males. She understood that and it was even a part of her pride that she could ascend to her current rank, to show achievement worthy of praise despite the rarity of her own gender in the field. She understood and acknowledge everything. Supposedly.

This one order pissed her off.

Matrimony is such a big word. Especially for Airi.

Was this a direct insult of her being single despite her age? Or that she had just recently broke up with her boyfriend for a rather stupid reason?

"You're with those girls too much! Do you not love me anymore?"

It was her job! Why was she getting moved to this naval base from the first place if it wasn't to take care of those so called "girls” and protect his sorry ass?
"I can pay for us both, you can let go of your job. No? So you're more into babysitting, yes? Fine. I'm not going with a woman who won't even listen and care for me."

"I AM BABYSITTING YOU THE WHOLE TIME, YOU JEEEEERK!" Airi furiously hit her desk over and over just by thinking of him and all his antics and why was he such a crybaby and a jealous little brat when all the time she had always been the one who-

The door opened with a click.

"... Admiral?"

Shouhou opened the door rather hesitantly. Instead of walking right in like she usually did, she stood by the doorstep and looked inside. Airi smiled wide and bright with her fist still clenched tightly on top of the desk and cheerfully answered, "Oh, Shouhou! You've come back! How was the expedition?"

All those smile only made Shouhou turned paler.

"Y-Yes, I am fine. The expedition ended safely as well... Rather, is everything alright, Admiral...?"

"Nope."

"Yes, don't worry! Everything is fine. Come in, Shouhou, report to me about it. Are the others outside? Come in."

Although the light carrier girl seemed to look unconvinced, she stepped in eventually, followed by the rest of the fleet, and delivered her report as usual.

Airi listened and answered, commenting if needed, then praised the fleet for a job well done, all with a smile. But her fist remained clenched hard on the table, on top of the folded letter of order from the grand marshal.

~~XXX~~

"Airi, you know my acquaintance's son is such a good looking man-"

"Airi, your high school friend is getting married next month, when will yours be?"

"Airi, I think I will be happy to have a grandchild soon."

Airi put her face inside her palm, feeling like sobbing. She could totally imagine the rage of her family if she did this one quest the upper echelon requested her. It would probably go like this:

"Hey, Mom! I am married!" *shoving one of her ships in front of her whole family. "Look at this beautiful ship! yay!"

"SHIP?! STOP THIS NONSENSE AT THIS INSTANCE AND GET OUT OF THE HOUSE!" *nuclear bomb exploding*

She would be disowned by her family for marrying a ship, that's for sure. That, and she had never seen her subordinates that way. Even though Kongou showered her with BURNING LOVE and such, she viewed all of them as her friends and for some, her little sisters or even children. Never once had she thought of them as romantic options. Even now she felt tortured, thinking of marrying girls she think as her own sisters.
Airi sighed. Maybe she could ask for a way out….

~~~ XXXX ~~~

"Tendouji-kun, it was based on study cases on the other bases, it has happened more than once with flawless consistency. It was proven."

"Sir, isn't there any other way? Like new remodelling?"

There was a chuckle from the other side of the phone. Airi had the urge to slam the receiver right when she heard it. It was fortunate how she was alone in her office again, having sent Shouhou elsewhere to deliver report, in case that happened.

"One more economically beneficial? I do not think so. It isn't such a big deal anyway, Tendouji-kun! It is just provisional marriage, just a ceremony and a cheap ring, and that is all. You don't even have to sleep with them if you don't want to. Or would you rather do so? I know other admirals dying for that."

"... With all due respect, Sir."

The grand marshal let out a booming laughter, much to Airi's chagrin. She could just imagine just how... amused the old man was.

"The other admirals are really happy with this. Isn't this something to be happy about, marrying these girls? Listen, Tendouji-kun. If anything were to happen to your naval base because your ship girls are underleveled compared with the others and get wrecked by the Abyssal, I will ask for your full responsibility. Performance record is still the only thing in your resume, isn't it? I would hate it if I should take some unpleasant measures just because of your... gender preferences."

*How sweet of you.*

"... Understood."

"Good," the grand marshal seemingly satisfied. "You are among my best admirals. I see you already have many ship girls reaching their maximum level so you have lots of options to choose. All the better, is it not? A set of soon-to-be wives! Hahahahahaha! If you will excuse me now, I am busy, Tendouji-kun. Do contact me if any real problem arose."

"... Yes, Sir."

"A piece of advice, Tendouji-kun," a chuckle was heard inside the grand marshal's voice. "Don't you go like those other admirals who are too busy with their emotions dealing with these ship girls. Do what you must to protect peace, they are your tool of justice so use them well. I'll talk to you another time."

*Use them well.*

Airi stared at the receiver, listening to the resounding monotonous dull beep it gave when the grand marshal cut off the line. A few seconds later she slammed the receiver back to its place, chiding under her breath.

What an enlightening conversation.

*My tool of justice...* Airi glanced at the ship girls archive on the desk within her grasp, right on top of the Abyssal fleet report. A sad smile curved her lips. *I bet you have never been in our shoes,*
Airi flipped the archives of the ship girls idly, staring at the numbers and graphs that showed the track record of each girls in her base. She had several girls already in their maximum level. If it was only to fulfill that dreaded quest, she could do it anytime. The small base had grown considerably after her transfer and the growth of the ship girls had been satisfactory. There had never been any sinking since she came so it was not that surprising—every girl has her time to gain experiences. The resources depot had been continuously crying though.

It's better to marry the battleships because the low consumption bonus will be a good advantage... especially for Yamato-class... If Bauxite consumption remains the same, then there won't be that much changes picking carries. Will the status increase affect carriers?

But then Kaga had been a really trustworthy confidante all these times, so was her faithful Shouhou. Kaga was an unfazed, strongwilled, logical source of reasonable insight in times of need. She had proven herself to be a formidable ally in many ways. To simply scratch her from the list because the upgrade would be unfavorable for her seems rather.. heartless.

But then...

But I can't imagine marrying Kaga! Airi facepalmed with both of her hands, suddenly feeling an immense depression. Just imagining it make her shudder because of obvious reason concerning the other carrier. Will she even consider it in the first place?! Kaga will hit me with those planes if I propose her. She will kill me before I even go up the aisle, seriously. Those glares will kill me. Or those planes. Oh God, I can feel them killing me now. Oh God, this feels so real-

"Admiral."

"Hiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!" Airi almost knocked off the chair when the oh so cold familiar voice came sooo dangerously real. And it was real, since Kaga stood in front of her desk with her eyes slightly narrowing upon seeing her admiral's reaction. "K-Kaga! W-why are you here?!!"

Without a change of expression, Kaga offered the papers in her hand.

"... the full report from the last sortie."

"A-Ah, yes!" Airi snatched the paper away from the ship girl's hand. "Yes, thank you! I forgot! Hahaha..."

Stupid. What am I doing? And now I can't look at her in the eyes and it's not like I am going to propose or anything because it isn't even decided if I will even do that quest in the first place and... and pull yourself together, Airi!

In that instance, Airi felt like hitting her head on the desk again. **MARRIAGE. PROPOSAL.** seemed written in a billboard-size sign on top of Kaga's head.

Kaga remained silent but her brown eyes followed the admiral's movement and expression. After a while, she said, "... That makes me slightly upset."

"Eh?" Chill ran down Airi's spine again. She slowly looked up, to see the cold gaze of Kaga upon her. "... Yes?"
"Am I unpleasant to look at, Admiral?" Her brown eyes turned golden when sunrise fell on them—emphasizing their power. "Or do you have something you want to discuss with me? I am fine with it."

"Well…"

_Shall I? But then..._

In that instance Airi felt like burying her face inside her palm again, which she did eventually. _My life! My first ever marriage! Can't it be like me on wedding dress with handsome man in tux before me and those beautiful white flowers and doves flying around. Why must it be with either a Carrier or a Battleship?! Okay, I can always pick destroyers and cruisers or… NO, THAT IS NOT THE POINT._

Airi unconsciously made an unintelligible sound while she lament about her life.

A sudden touch on the head made her froze. It was… a pat?

Airi slowly dropped her palm and looked up, meeting the emotionless golden eyes courtesy of Kaga. They met eyes for a split second, then as suddenly as it began, the standard carrier dropped her hand that previously patted the admiral's head to her side again. Without a change of expression, she said, "You have been doing a great work. Don't let anyone say otherwise."

"Eh?"

"If you would excuse me."

And she was out, before Airi could even collect herself and shout to halt her.

Now the admiral was frozen by her place, with her mouth wide open… and no one came to help her decipher what the heck had happened.

All that lingered was those words the standard carrier said, echoing in the now empty room.

"Don't let anyone say otherwise."

~~XXXXXX~~

The sun was setting and wind started to blow from the mountain to the sea. It was a good wind. A good time to be out and watch the sunset.

The admiral stood by the pier, watching some of her destroyers being trained by Takao. Shouhou stood faithfully beside her. Her admiral stood straight, the sunset lined up her silhouette with a rather dramatic effect. Somehow, the drama was palpable this time.

After a while, the admiral spoke.

"... I will try another group date."

"... A-Admiral?"

"There must be hope… in another group date!"

She suddenly make a fist and a drop of painful tear fell from her eyes.

"I will… persevere! Not the grand marshall nor the world can bring me down! I can do this! I
SHALL NOT GIVE UP!

Work hard, 28 years old me!

The seagulls resounded in the distance, slowly echoing to nothing just like the disappearing light of the mighty golden sun.

And thus, Admiral Tendouji Airi had decided that she would not marry any of her ship until she had married, for real, in real life, with a man of her life. From that moment on, she had added another type of suffering in her life. One that seemingly would torture her for quite a while…
The Battleship's Family

Chapter Summary

A flashback of the time when Admiral Tendouji Airi just arrived in the naval base, with an episode with our favorite Kongou, told from Shouhou's perspective.

Chapter Notes

The words Kongou said that are written in italic means that she said it that way exactly (as in, she said it in English within her Japanese sentences)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm not calling you a liar
So don't lie to me
And I love you so much
I'm gonna let you kill me

Florence + The Machine - I'm Not Calling You A Liar

"AAAAADD MMMIIIIRAAAAAALLLL!"

Shouhou couldn't suppress her giggle when she saw that familiar jolt Admiral Tendouji Airi made whenever that voice came echoing from the corridor. The admiral was looking through the window towards the pier that time, and from where the light carrier ship girl stood, she could see how the admiral's back brace for impact. Sure enough, a few seconds later the door swung open with a bang and Kongou stood as firm as she always did, with a smile so wide it was blinding.

And the LOVE. Oh, the LOVE. Flaring in her eyes.

"BUUUUUUUUURNING..." a leap, with a cry of joy. "... LOOOOOOOOOOVE!"

And the window made a creak when the admiral was sandwiched by the window and the battleship... and not releasing her super tight, suffocating hug, there began the routine shower of kisses from Kongou.

"I LOVE YOU DESU! CHU! CHU! CHU!"

Shouhou wondered how that seemed like from the pier below if anyone were to look up. Must have looked like some NTR hentai scene.

"... ah... yes, Kongou. Good morning..."

It must have been pretty interesting to see from a new angle.
Although it seemed like the level of love craze Kongou had for the admiral was something magical, the admiral's relationship with Kongou didn't happen magically. The battleship didn't get instantly smitten by the admiral in one day. Shouhou was the one who understood that the most as she watched everything happened in close proximity, being the admiral's secretary from the day she came. It was also among the reason why Shouhou complied to be the admiral's secretary and remained among her most faithful adjutants.

When the new admiral arrived in the naval base, the condition of the base was still filled with bitter negativity. There were not many ship girls but the trust between the ship girls and their commander were dangerously low. The last admiral was the real definition of an a**hole admiral. He put ships into impossible battles, pushing them all to their limit and treating them like easily replaceable weapons. To cut supply, he used destroyers like expendables and whenever possible, he rarely resupply his fleets. Lost was imminent. There was never a day where the dock was empty. When word finally got out, the admiral was stripped from his job without honor. The superiors came themselves apologizing to all ship girls on the behalf of the navy and promised that the same thing wouldn't happen anymore.

The trust to the new admiral however, was dangerously low. Everyone did have hope that the new one would be a good one but they never expected much as it was ingrained in their mind how the last admiral had treated them: they are weapons and no more. And that was what they shall be no matter who came.

It was a realistic view of the life they were in. There was nothing good about it though.

"Nice to meet you, Shouhou. I'm Admiral Tendouji Airi."

The first time Shouhou met the admiral, it was by the office. The Grand Marshal himself came and introduced the new admiral. The new admiral was around the same height as Shouhou, with long black hair that almost akin to her own, only that the admiral's was flowing down freely to the small of her back. Shouhou, for a few second, was confused and stood there dumbfounded. A ship girl?

The first thing the new admiral did upon seeing her reaction, was laughed.

"No, no, I am not a ship girl. I'm a woman though. I hope that isn't a problem?" She said as she stifled her laughter with an amused expression. The grand marshal gave a booming laughter. "I hope we will work well from now on."

The only females they have met were themselves. All the other staff, everyone that had come to the naval base, other than ship girls they were all male. They couldn't exactly pinpoint where the admiral stood.

Seeing a female admiral was a big question mark and each one of the ship girls established their understanding and adjusted to the new admiral in slow, careful steps.

Kongou was not an exception.

Originally a sanguine and confident personality, during the time of the previous commander her cheerful demeanor was altered. The previous commander was surely among her most favorite imaginary AP shell targets. She was also among the strongest causes of why the admiral got his job taken away from him pretty harshly. It was not without reason, and rightfully so. Even someone who seemed as carefree as Kongou had time when she took things into her own hand the hard way.
There was a story of why there were only two Kongou class battleships in the naval base when the new admiral came, despite all advantages the class could give to a small base: they had lost the other two in a battle. Kongou obviously didn't take that very well.

Shouhou remembered the dark cloud looming over the base that day. It was the day when they came home after a big operation with failure and loss, a huge loss.

Kongou and Haruna were in another battle when the news of the sinking of her first sister Hiei, and the next day was of her last, Kirishima, got to her. No words could describe the apparent change of personality in the battleship girl when she and her fleet arrived at the base shortly after. There were only dead silence and bitter understanding—the understanding that everything was wrong. Horribly wrong. What emanated from the eldest of the Kongou class battleship were molten fury and hatred—almost a stark contrast to Haruna's silent yet excruciating grief. Cold, cold fire burned in the eldest's eyes as she walked in long steps towards the admiral room, completely ignoring her burnt miko clothes and battleworn body. No one actually had the courage to raise their voice to greet or stop her, no one except Nagato, who hissed, "whatever you're going to do, Kongou, DON'T do it."

There was no reply from the battleship or even any sign of her listening to Nagato's words. Knowing that something bad could happen, Nagato tailed behind her—hands clenched into fists, eyes locked on Kongou's back.

Without a knock or a greeting, Kongou slammed open the door of the admiral's room.

There was a deadly silence for a while... before suddenly loud swearing was heard, along with the sound of furnitures crashing. When Shouhou and the other ship girls, who were waiting in a safe distance before the commotion, arrived at the room, they found Nagato barely holding a furious Kongou, who had one foot on the admiral's desk, ready to jump on the admiral who had fallen to the floor—blood colored his face from his broken nose.

"YOU PIECE OF SHIT!" One, very powerful tug and Kongou broke free from Nagato's grip, ripping her Miko clothes' sleeve. In a move too fast for others to follow, she leaped on top of the admiral—grabbing his collar and slamming his back the floor with a sickening dull sound. "FUCK YOUR ORDERS! WHAT DO YOU THINK WE ARE?! SAY THAT AGAIN AND I WILL F—"

"Stop it, Kongou!" Nagato grabbed her arm at the right time, right when her fist was up for another punch at the admiral's face. There was blood on Kongou's right fist. The admiral's. Rushing in, Tenryuu grabbed Kongou's other shoulder, trying to tug her off the admiral. But her grip on his collar was strong, and her strength overpowered the light cruiser. Takao came a second later to help pry her off. "Kongou, don't be stupid! Stop this!"

"YOU SENT MY SISTERS TO DIE!"

"STOP, Kongou!"

"YOU FUCKING SINK THEM! You—"

"Control yourself!" Nagato, helped by Tenryuu and Takao, finally tugged the battleship off the admiral up to a half stand—making her released her grip on the admiral's collar at that the same time. Kongou was still struggling though and it took all of Nagato, Tenryuu, and Takao, to hold her. "Stop this! KONGOU!"

"SCRAP HER!" screamed the admiral as he slowly stood up, covering his bleeding nose. Defiant eyes met him as he pointed at Kongou, who was ready to jump at him again if not for three girls
"No!" Haruna broke out of the crowd of Kanmusu by the door. At the sound of her voice, Kongou froze. Especially when Haruna put herself between her sister and the admiral. "No! Please! Please, Admiral! I'm begging you, don't scrap Oneesama!"

"I don't need a ship that defy my orders!" said the admiral. He moved his eyes to look Nagato, Tenryuu, and Takao, who were still holding Kongou in restrain but making no other move. "Get her to the factory! NOW!"

"NO! Please, Admiral—"

"I disagree with your judgment, Admiral."

Kaga's cold, calm voice was the least that anyone would expect in that kind of time. Every eye turned to look at the aircraft carrier who walked closer in slow steps, seemingly unperturbed with all the commotion. In an instance, everything stood still. Although it was true that she was the current secretary ship, which made her words weighted more than the others, strength was pushed inside her words. The admiral narrowed his eyes and hissed, "YOU as well, Kaga? You wish to—"

"Kongou-san is invaluable for this base," said Kaga, her voice emotionless as it always been. "She is your second strongest firepower after Nagato-san. With Kirishima-san and Hiei-san gone, you have only three battleships. Without her, our firepower will greatly decrease and the Abyssal will be too much for us. With the current reserve of resources, Kongou-san's resource consumption and performance ratio is critical for our advance and defense. To scrap her now for your emotional satisfaction will be no different from giving the flag of the naval base to the enemy."

"I do NOT need a ship that disobey me," The admiral's voice was a hiss: slow and dangerous. "I can make another. I don't necessarily need HER."

Not this Kongou.

A taboo that should not have been said.

A brief silence hung between them—a heavy, emotional silence. Tenryuu visibly clashed her teeth together to contain her emotions, her restrain on Kongou faltered into a mere touch on the shoulder because she would sooner punch the admiral herself. Seemingly ignoring the heavy atmosphere, Kaga continued. Her voice, for once, filled with distinct intimidation.

"No, you do need her," The aircraft carrier took a step forward. "You need her experiences, level, equipment, capabilities, judgment, and self. You will lose it all in a new ship, if, perchance, you do get a new battleship. With the current rate of construction success this naval base is having, it is quite unlikely that you will be able to construct a new good ship. In addition to that, you have several other ships need to be docked. If by any chance either me or Akagi-san were to be damaged, you will not have enough resources to repair us, even if you have enough instant bucket. With the rate you are using the destroyers, you will not achieve success in expeditions, not in the near future. They are fatigued and that affects their performance. To waste a valuable, experienced, and high level battleship for petty things such as pride will earn you nothing."

Shaking with anger, the admiral talked between clenched teeth, "Petty? Are you insulting me, Kaga?"

"I did not," there was no change in her voice. She dropped it lower. Her eyes brimmed with unshakeable confidence only she could pull. "Only because it is the truth."
Another silence hung between them. It was a silent conflict, so clear it was almost palpable, but the winner was already decided. The shaking of the admiral's hands indicated his immense anger towards his defeat. Finally the admiral straightened his stance and after throwing disgusted look towards Kongou, he turned his back.

"Take her away from here! I don't want to see her, or any of you, for now," the admiral didn't even look back as he said it. Kongou shrugged off Nagato, Takao, and Tenryuu's hold. Nagato had her hand firmly on the other battleship's shoulder though, giving the pressure that hold her friend's temper in place. The admiral glanced at Kaga, who was about to walk away like everyone else.

"You, however, stay. I need a word with you, Kaga."

The dark eyes of the aircraft carrier remained unreadable as they always were and she gave a slight nod to the admiral.

"Understood."

Kongou threw a brief look at Kaga—who returned her gaze silently—before she finally turned around and walked away. There was not a word exchanged or anything more but that was enough. Haruna bowed deeply in front of Kaga, then the admiral, before she hurried outside to catch up to her sister.

The door to the admiral room swung close.

No one other than Kaga herself knew what conversation took place behind that closed door after that.

It was among the major trigger where everyone realized that the admiral was out of the line. When the harassment happened, that was the end of any minuscule tolerance left. From then on Nagato lead them all to report the admiral to the higher echelon. Everything else that the admiral had done was disclosed and in less than a week the admiral was stripped off his job. The damage, however, had been done.

What was lost cannot be brought back and what was done could not be undone. What Kongou did will forever be written in her resume.

When the new admiral was eventually appointed, it was logical that she requested the archives of every ship girl in the base. It was the first day of work for the admiral, and the first thing the new admiral did was calling every ship one by one to the room—reading their archives and asking them questions. As a secretary ship—chosen by the navy before the admiral even came, Shouhou had to be there the whole time, writing down everything necessary and providing anything the admiral needed.

Haruna was called in. She was not the first one in, but somehow when Shouhou saw the battleship, she remembered Kongou and her feelings sank. So far the admiral had been really friendly and nice to every one of the ship girls, asking general questions and things like what they would like to be improved from the naval base. However, it was pretty different with Kongou-class. Attacking an admiral, no matter the cause, was an act to be noted. There was an obvious reason why Kongou had been used almost non stop since the incident—A punishment, and a way to prevent her from spending time in the base. It was clearly expressed. However, if the new admiral noticed it, it was admirable that she didn't show it when she read the archives earlier. On top of it all, Kongou was out on a campaign. For the sixth time of the week.

Holding the other ship girls' archives, Shouhou stood in front of the admiral's desk rather uneasily. Everything would have been written in the report. Every conduct that all ship girls did. There was
no telling of what the admiral might think about any of them and that made her uneasy.

There was no change of expression as the admiral finished the report though, to Shouhou's surprise. The admiral merely put down the archive then looked at the battleship in front of her, entwining her fingers together.

Her brown eyes were calm and there was a faint smile on her face when she looked at Haruna. The battleship answered the gaze with a rather shy, uncertain eyes.

"What are the things you like the most, Haruna?"

The question clearly wasn't something that the ship girls expected. Haruna blinked, hesitating, but it was clear that tension dissipated from her shoulder. She asked slowly, "What things, Admiral?"

Admiral Tendouji laughed and said, "Anything! What do you like the most?"

"Anything? That Haruna likes the most?" The admiral gave a nod. Haruna gave her smile and a straight, confident answer. "Of course it's Oneesama!"

Shouhou took a sharp intake of breath while the admiral raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Oneesama?"

Haruna nodded firmly, a fond smile touched her lips.

"Kongou-oneesama always leads us and looks after us, Kongou-class," Haruna's golden eyes turned gentler. She joined her fingers together. "Whenever Oneesama is around, everything seems to always be fine, that things will go well somehow. Oneesama always protects us and cares about us more than anyone else. She is so bright, so kind, so strong.. Oneesama is someone I look up to, a family I really love. There isn't anything else I like more than her."

There was silence after Haruna's words. The admiral merely watched the battleship girl before her, her eyes unreadable. Shouhou couldn't put a finger on her superior's expression but somehow there was no worry. There was nothing ominous in the admiral's disposition. After a while, a smile curved up the new admiral's lips.

"I see," she chuckled. The admiral rested her chin on her palm, smiling fondly when she eyed Haruna. "I was just asking about what you like, so that I can have an idea on how to improve the base. I didn't expect that answer."

Blush formed on Haruna's face and the girl quickly bowed down.

"I-I'm sorry, Admiral! I did not manage to answer your question! Haruna is very sorry!"

"No, no! Don't apologize! It's my fault that I didn't make that clearer for you anyway," she laughed. Her eyes softened. "On the contrary, Haruna, that was a very good answer."

"Admiral.."

A kind smile adorned the admiral's face once again.

"Family will always be a very good answer for that kind of question."

The session ended smoothly, with Haruna bowing several times before she went out of the door. The door closed with a click and somehow it was a cue for air to return breathable for Shouhou once again. The light carrier quickly turned to look at her admiral, who was flipping through
another archive. It did not seem like anything was unusual from her admiral's expression or movement.

After a minute of silence, the admiral said her first statement.

"I like that girl."

"Y-Yes, Admiral?"

The admiral chuckled.

"Reminds me of my own little sister," She said lightly. "Call the next please, Shouhou. We still have a few more girls to hear."

After a few more destroyers, the session was over. Shouhou thanked Shigure as the last one to go, then turned back to find the admiral already on her feet, stretching. The light carrier gave a nervous smile and said, "Otsukaresama deshita, Admiral."

"Otsukaresama," The admiral gracefully answered her back, dropping her arms with a huff. She tidied some archives on her desk, flipping through several more. Shouhou watched her admiral's conduct nervously from the side. She then saw one archive filled with note clipped on them. The admiral took it and went through the documents a little longer while still standing. After a while she finally glanced at her secretary ship, a smile on her face.

"Do you want to go drinking after this, Shouhou? I will pay for you."

"P-Pardon?"

Shouhou gripped the clipboard in her arms tighter, her face blazed. The admiral laughed at her reaction.

"It has been a long day for you too. Come accompany me, will you? Make it girls' night out! I am tired of drinking with old men. They say nothing but dirty jokes, how disgusting. I wonder if they forget that I am female."

"I.. Is that… okay, Admiral? I mean, I am but a kanmusu…"

"You're my secretary," said the admiral gently, smiling. "My colleague. Let's drink for the work to come, shall we? Oh, I will leave the place to you. I am new around here. You can see this as a job, guiding me around."

Colleague…

Such a concept was so foreign that Shouhou didn't know how to react. It felt surreal. Were they not mere weapons? The admiral was human. They, on the other hand, were ship girls. However, this admiral felt so similar with them too. She acted like them, talked like them, looked exactly like them without armaments, and she regarded them almost as equal. Having her as a superior was too strange….

Yet Shouhou could not help but to feel… happy. And hopeful, for once.

"Ma… Mamiya-san has really good menu, Admiral."

"Oh my, really? Of what kind?"

"Many different assortment of desserts… and I believe at night she provides some liquor as well."
"Desserts! Sweet! You know, after a hard day's work, I think…"

Shouhou didn't realize it that time because of the mixture of happiness and relief, but the admiral only put one document inside her briefcase to bring home: the one with the many clipped notes.

It would be a while later until Shouhou knew that the documents were Kongou's.

A few more days passed. The girls that had been on expedition on the first day of the admiral's admittance were called out for interview. All, but Kongou. It was because after her arrival, she would definitely be ordered for another voyage right away. At first Shouhou thought there must have been a mistake but then she understood it was deliberate. This admiral, too, would not let Kongou rest at the naval base.

The campaign were also getting progressively farther and farther away. The admiral was a kind woman but Shouhou started to think if all the smile and gentle expression were fake. After all, she could not claim that she knew many things about human. What she knew about the male species however, was unpleasant to say the least. Would this admiral, who looked a lot like them, also be the same?

Finally Haruna expressed her concern to Shouhou when they met by the courtyard, the battleship was waiting for Shouhou to pass by on her way to the office. Upon seeing the light carrier, the battleship stood up from her sitting place by the bench in the middle garden of the naval base compound. After a usual greetings and bow, she went directly to her point.

"I have not seen Oneesama for the longest time," Haruna gave a sad smile. "I know Oneesama is strong but… but I am sure that even Oneesama has her limit, Shouhou-san… Can you please inform the Admiral?"

Shouhou immediately recalled the admiral's expression and comment when Haruna was interviewed.

"I like that girl. Reminds me of my own little sister."

The light carrier smiled gently and said, "Have you talked to Admiral yourself, Haruna-san? I am sure the Admiral will listen."

"I actually just did…" Haruna trailed her words. She glanced worriedly at the window of Admiral's room. "I just did but she only said I have nothing to worry about, and that I should trust Oneesama. Ah, I know I should and I do trust Oneesama but…"

The battleship pursed her lips. She looked troubled and reasonably so. Kongou's missions were unusual. Shouhou herself had not met Kongou for a long time. As someone who lived in the same naval base, that was totally not a normal thing to happen. Haruna eventually said that she was fine, although politely adding, "if it would not be much of a problem for you, would you please kindly ask the admiral?" at the end of the conversation.

Haruna's words lingered in the back of Shouhou's mind. When she arrived at the main office and saw the admiral sitting behind her desk and flipping through documents just like usual, suddenly she felt like everything was quite surreal.

Since the new admiral's arrival, Shouhou must admit that the whole atmosphere of the naval base changed. The new admiral fixed the previously ignored problems around the naval base. The damages by the ship girls dorms, broken equipments, uneven resources distribution, low rations, or even the gardens were meticulously fixed and readjusted. Most importantly, the girls all eased up.
They were given appropriate breaks between their training and sorties. They were also being addressed gently and politely. They were treated not as assets, but as co-workers, partners.

However, things like what happened to Kongou made Shouhou wondered if all of these bliss were merely facade.

It made her so uneasy, especially since she knew she was fond of the new admiral. To feel that she had to be wary of someone she actually wanted to be close to...

When she finally confronted the admiral about Kongou's situation, the admiral's eyes turned unreadable.

"I will take care of Kongou personally after I gain my foothold, for now she is beyond my jurisdiction. Sending her far away is the best that I can do."

Shouhou was about to ask more but the admiral read her moves and continued with a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. She is strong. She will be alright. Please tell Haruna that her sister is fine."

The tone in the admiral's statement marked that the conversation was over. Shouhou knew she had to tread carefully so she didn't ask further. It was rather strange for the admiral to avoid it. To pry for it would not be good as well and Shouhou was not the type to do so.

In the end, Shouhou let it drop and informed Haruna what the admiral told her. The kind battleship thanked her, but it was apparent in her smile and eyes that she was worried and saddened.

They both knew it was all because of the incident with the old admiral. It has reached the fourth week now after that incident. For four whole week Kongou had been away. Actually she came back from time to time, but it was usually only for less than 24 hours. So far, other than her own expedition or sortie team, only the new admiral and Haruna, who shared room with her, had met her.

"It doesn't seem like this new admiral is the type to actually do underhanded method," Nagato said during one of their lunch when Shouhou expressed it. The dreadnaught battleship gave a reassuring smile. "Kongou is a good ship. She will be fine."

Shouhou sighed, suddenly feeling like lying down. She couldn't even ask to her own admiral. What kind of secretary ship is she? She hung her head low and said, "Why don't Nagato-san become the secretary ship? Nagato-san is way more suited than me..."

If she were Nagato, she would surely be able to confront the admiral right away.

"Shouhou, you have been doing a good job and the admiral seem to work well along with you," said Nagato with a laughter in her voice. "I am flattered but I am better in things other than paperwork. Hang in there."

Paperworks. Paperworks were the least of Shouhou's concern at that moment.

Thankfully, the answer to the predicament would soon come. Kongou would soon arrive after her long journey.

They didn't expect it would be THAT soon, however.

A sudden distress call came from Kongou's fleet, alerting the whole base. It was practically in the dead of the night, with the seemingly perpetual rain of tsuyu season showering the whole naval base. Despite the hour, the admiral was by the command room the next second. With her hair
tousled and her white admiral uniform unbuttoned, it was clear she rushed from her quarter. It was quite a sight to see her in her casual clothes yet still looked so alert at the same time.

Haruna was among the first to arrive by the command room. Even if she looked worried, she didn't say a thing. Ooyodo, the one in charge of the shift that night, listened intently to the admiral's direction. Meanwhile more girls arrived. By the time the admiral turned around, her ship girls were already lining up by the space behind the planning table, neatly according to their class.

She gave a nod of approval.

"Choukai, you will go as the flagship. Your team will be Ayanami, Mutsuki, Kiso, Sendai, and Ashigara. Equip the searchlight. Sendai, bring your night scout. Ayanami, load the starshell. Avoid enemy encounter as best you can. You priority is to bring the northern fleet back safely. Dismi-"

"Admiral, please wait!"

Haruna's voice cut off the admiral's last word. All eyes quickly turned to look at the battleship, who stepped forward at the same time. Her hands were clenched by her side. Shouhou felt a strange sensation when the brown eyes of the admiral seemed to know Haruna would say something.

"I request your permission to join the rescue team," said Haruna. Her voice was firm. "I am a fast battleship. I can join without slowing down the speed of the rescue team and I can contribute to fleet firepower. Besides-"

"Rejected," The admiral didn't even wait for Haruna to finish. The atmosphere changed right away as uneasiness settled firmly on them. It was unusual for the admiral to actually not listening to her ships. Haruna was about to continue but the next one to say something was, surprisingly, Choukai.

"As the flagship of the fleet, I request for Haruna-san's presence as well, Admiral," She seemed calm, but Shouhou could see her tensed muscles. "A battleship's presence will increase our chance of survival."

There was something in the several seconds of silence that told Shouhou that these survival calculation was not what the admiral was thinking. The admiral's next words were delivered in an authoritative tone, so unlike her usual way of talking.

"The rescue fleet remained the same. You will depart now, Choukai. The longer we wait, the more dangerous it will be for them."

"Understood."

Despite everything, Choukai knew not to push. She and her fleet bowed, then went out of the room. Haruna's clenched fists trembled but she said nothing else. The admiral turned to look at her and her tone suddenly dropped softer.

"I will need you and Nagato here. Your battle power is indispensable for the defense of this base. The Abyssal's movement is unusual and I will not risk the base. I hope you understand."

"Yes, Admiral."

Haruna bowed to the admiral before stepping back to her place behind Nagato. It was hard to read her expression, even if Shouhou stood by the right side of the admiral. The admiral returned her stare at the other ship and continued, "I need all of you to be alert and on stand by. The route where the distress call was coming is usually a safe route to return to the base. It seems there is
unprecedented change in the movement of the Abyssal. We need all power we have to be ready for combat at any given time. Reserve your powers until future orders. Dismiss."

"Yes, Admiral!"

The girls gave the admiral a firm salute, then bowed and broke their formations. The admiral suddenly called, "Haruna."

Haruna, who was about to go out of the room with the others, stopped her movement and returned before the admiral, just like how she was ordered to. Strangely, the admiral didn't say anything, not until the last ship girl went out of the room and the door closed-leaving only Haruna, the admiral, Shouhou, and Ooyodo in the command room.

With the click of the door, the admiral dropped her stance. A smile came to her face again and she said, gently, "At ease, Haruna."

The only change was Haruna's expression. She also brought her hands together and pursed her lips. She threw a look at Shouhou, who didn't know what to reply, then back to the admiral, who had her attention shifted to Ooyodo.

"The situation, Ooyodo?"

"They are holding off, Admiral. Two taiha, Makigumo and Suzuya-san. The rest are chuuha. The rescue team will be ready to depart in ten seconds, Admiral."

"Send them off."

"Understood."

The admiral turned back to look at Haruna, who still stood by her former place. The battleship seemed uncertain, but it was clear from the way she regained her composure every time the admiral looked at her, that her professionalism kicked in.

If there was reason for the admiral to make her stay behind…

The battleship bowed.

"... Haruna apologize for interrupting your command, Admiral. I did not mean to doubt your judgement. That was insolent of me."

The admiral didn't answer right away. She watched the battleship for a while with a rather saddened look, before she finally said, "I am not angry, Haruna. Lift your head. I do not ask you to stay to punish you."

After that reply, Haruna straightened herself. She had her hands joined together once again, quite uncertain. Her eyes were filled with questions when they looked up to meet her admiral's.

"Please, like I said, be at ease," The admiral smiled reassuringly. She then said gently, "Would you like to stay here with us? I will permit you."

Haruna looked at the admiral, then Shouhou who nodded at her.

She finally understood.

"... If I am allowed to, Admiral…"
The admiral smiled and nodded.

"Shouhou, I'm sorry but could you make us some tea? It seems like it will be a long night."

Waiting was never a comfortable thing, especially when they knew every second that went by might mean a certain death. Haruna sat straight, gripping her cup of tea by her lap. Although her line of sight seemed to be fixated on the numerous blinking lights of the big radio apparatus Ooyodo was operating, her consciousness seemed to roam somewhere else. The admiral sat beside the battleship. Her slender right index finger traced invisible pattern on the cup by her hand. She herself, seemed to think of something.

The atmosphere was heavy. Only the beeping of the machine, the rain, and occasional creaked of chairs filled the air.

Shouhou waited beside Ooyodo. In such a heavy air, she felt like her senses were heightened. She could definitely feel every jolt Ooyodo made whenever static seemed to be delivered to her headphone.

"I have two siblings."

The admiral's voice broke the silence. Everyone else slowly turned to look at her, who was sipping her tea. She rested her back on the chair. Her warm brown eyes shifted over her ships, eventually resting on Haruna's golden ones.

"I'm the oldest."

"... I see."

Haruna's gentle voice complimented the solemn mood.

Smiling, the admiral continued.

"We siblings fight a lot. My little brother can be pretty selfish, and my little sister is a cry baby. We had a time we actually quarrelled over ice cream and ramune... or who would get the grilled squid during the town festival. I'm always told to take care of them. They ask a lot, fight a lot, ignore me a lot when I talk. They can be quite a handful."

A fond smile.

"Yet, I love them."

A pause.

"... I understand how it feels to have siblings. However, I will never understand how it feels to be a fleet girl. I am sorry if I seemed to have taken lightly on your feelings. I am sorry if I seemed like I dismiss your worry over your older sister."

There was no reply from Haruna. She looked at her commander's eyes for a long while, before shifting her stare on to her tea once more.

Silence enveloped them once again.

Right when it seemed like she would never reply, however, the battleship talked.

"... We were born knowing that we're warships. We were born knowing everything needed. What we are, what we are supposed to be and everything we are supposed to do."
Shouhou and Ooyodo quickly turned to look at her in surprise. It was a strange sensation, a feeling that they were being peeled naked. This information was not usually talked about so lightly. It was a taboo, an unspoken rule. It was about them, something personal and almost sacred for them to talk about. It was a talk about the essence of their existence, a thing that reminds them of their inhumanity. Shouhou watched how Haruna slowly began to talk, raising her look from the tea on her lap to the rain battered window.

"I was born… knowing who my sisters are. I was born loving them. I was born loyal to them and to the country."

The battleship paused.

"We are born with this default personality and ship memories. Sometimes I wonder if it was alright to just sink and be reborn again, nothing will matter as I will be reborn with this default set of personality again. I will come back as "Haruna" of the Kongou Class. It was very… convenient. For the country."

Her breath shuddered. Cold? Or something else?

"However I do wonder… if I will be the way I am right now… or if I will love my sisters the way I do to them right now. I wonder… if I will be me."

There were emotions lodging in her sentences, with the end of her words dropped so low it was almost inaudible.

"The ship memories maybe reborn, but what of the memories after I was born? The one… that makes myself me?"

The pause after were bitter. It was a pause for contemplation, more for the one who talked than those who listened.

The battleship threw a smile at the admiral. It was strangely a reassuring smile.

"I know the answer, but I do not want to acknowledge it, Admiral. It will hinder my function as a weapon. I am sorry for saying such worrying thing."

Shouhou found herself clenching her hands. A very strong urge came to her, an urge to stop Haruna from saying everything. However, she could not bring herself to.

The admiral put a hand on top of Haruna's arm, giving a gentle press. She didn't say anything, merely touching her ship gently. The battleship smiled at the loving, silent gesture. She looked into her superior's warm brown eyes and continued slowly.

"Admiral, Haruna… had gone through a time… when she was left all alone. When all my sisters departed before me."

The ship memories.

"As a warship, Haruna had never been separated from Kongou-oneesama… I feel extremely uneasy when we're not together. The only time when she went away… Onesama didn't come back. Haruna was the last to survive."

Another gentle press on the arm. Smiling, Haruna touched the admiral's hand by her arm.

"I have talked too much. Haruna is fine, Admiral. I understand your decisions are for the best."
The admiral shook her head. She gave Haruna a firm stare.

"Do tell me everything. That is my duty and, above all, my will. I want to listen."

She squeezed Haruna's arm lightly.

"I thank you for telling me."

The heavy atmosphere was somehow lifted after that conversation. The silence was replaced with talks under small voices. Haruna reverted back in her warm dutiful self, answering the admiral's light questions with polite smile, gentle reply, and occasional giggle. When transmission finally came, they almost jumped from their seat.

"This is Choukai. We have located Kongou-san's fleet and the Abyssal fleet. They have not found us. Your orders, Admiral?"

The answer was definite.

"Engage combat. Northern fleet safety is a priority."

"Understood. Commencing battle! All ships, prepare for attack!"

After that, informations about battle flooded in. Kongou held her ground against many abyssals, taking the brunt of the night battle damage by drawing fire to her with her searchlight. Choukai managed to give a blow to the Ta-Class flagship hard enough that the Abyssal fleet routed-of course they did not get away without many sunken destroyers and heavy cruisers. The most important thing was, no ship girl was sunk. Although they were really close to it. Makigumo's state was nowhere near alright.

The sun was barely peeking on the horizon when the fleets came, with the rain still falling in drizzle. The admiral stood by the pier to greet them, with Shouhou and Haruna. The umbrellas they used were a homogenous shade of grey, pretty dull considering their colorful outfit. Ooyodo had been ordered to empty the dock for the injured. They only had two slots for critical damage, however, which obviously meant it was not enough.

When the figure of the fleets appeared by the horizon, Shouhou could definitely hear Haruna's relieved sigh.

Kongou sailed strong as always, despite the numerous wound. She waved at those at the dock cheerfully. The others were clearly not as energetic, although relief seemed to flood their faces upon seeing the pier. Choukai carrier Makigumo on her back while Ashigara supported Suzuya. Ooi looked especially annoyed, more than usual for obvious reasons. She let Kiso supported her. The rest were pairs of rescue teams supported the other injured destroyers: Shiranui and Kagerou.

Choukai was the first to get out of the water, going to straight to admiral's place.

"Reporting in, Admiral. The rescue mission is a success."

"Gokurousan," replied the admiral, almost nonchalantly since she turned to look at Makigumo who, upon seeing the admiral, began to cry. The destroyer had all her armaments stripped off, showing her burnt clothes and numerous wounds. Her blood stained Choukai's blue sailor uniform. However the reason of her crying was not of her wound.

"Makigumo tried her best b-but... but the torpedoes..." The little girl sobbed, brushing off big fat tears from her eyes. "Suzuya-san and Kongou-san covered for Makigumo... Makigumo burden
"What are you talking about? You did great, sweetling," said the admiral, gently patting Makigumo's pink hair. Instead of stop crying, Makigumo cried harder, which made Choukai smiled. "Hush, now, Dear. It's okay. You come back home. That is enough. Bring her to the dock, Choukai. Those wounds must have hurt a lot."

"Yes, Admiral."

With Makigumo's wail echoed further away, the other members of the fleet came in order. Suzuya made a "sheesh! It hurts a lot! That was close!" or the like, Ooi made unintelligible disgruntled noises, Shiranui remained silent, while Kagerou gave the "ahahaha… I guess we got done back there. Sorry for that, Commander!". Kongou, with Haruna by her side, said with an apologetic smile, "That was unexpected ne~! But everybody was amazing, Admiral!"

Seeing her sister's seemingly unchanged energy, Haruna's eyes brimmed with something strange.

Thanks to the many, many injured ship, the admiral eventually asked Shouhou and Haruna to go help mobilizing instant repair bucket. She interrogated Kongou for the mission report, however, so the light carrier and the battleship went to the dock with everyone, leaving the admiral alone with Kongou.

Shouhou reported to the logistic division for the instant bucket, signing the request form as the secretary ship, then waited while the logistic division guy confirmed the needs to the storehouse. It was still early daylight. Although some men were stationed, it was considerably shorthanded. The admiral was right to ask Haruna to come along since it seemed like they would need to bring the buckets to the dock themselves.

Haruna was staring off space when Shouhou returned to her side after talking with the logistic division. Some of the other men were busy mobilizing steel and fuel for the sudden flood of ships in the dock, they would indeed need a hand to carry some of the buckets.

"Let me handle the buckets, Shouhou-san," said Haruna with a kind smile. "The admiral must have needed your help for something else."

"You're exhausted yourself, it's okay."

Haruna shook her head. Something seemed to be lurking in her eyes, one that Shouhou did not understand.

"The admiral has been extremely kind to me and Oneesama. There must be a lot of report to file after this, she would definitely need your help. I have the logistic personnels and the fairies to help me, the admiral only has you."

For some reason, Haruna's words made Shouhou blushed and emotionally confused at the same time. However, she was right, so Shouhou went back to the pier. Perhaps the admiral was still there.

She was just arriving by the pier when she saw a pretty unusual sight.

The admiral was holding her umbrella for Kongou, who looked down to the floor, not meeting the admiral's eyes at all. The atmosphere seemed to be heavy so Shouhou approached slowly, a bit feeling dirty for the chance of eavesdropping yet she had the feeling that she needed this. For Haruna, and for everyone else.
It was silent other than sound of drizzle tapping the umbrella. Thus, in a still considerably far distance, Shouhou could hear the admiral's voice.

"... Let me say this again, Kongou. I am not Haruna."

She talked in normal volume, yet slower. As if spelling the words.

"There are still two more missions you need to go to until you're finally under my jurisdiction. I may not have the ability to help you there but I can listen to you. When you're in pain, tell me that you are. When you're exhausted, tell me that you're exhausted. When you want to cry, cry. There is no need for you act tough in front of me. I am not your sister. Nor will I tell her."

Her voice dropped.

"I have siblings just like you. I understand your intentions. That is why, don't hold it alone. You can tell me everything. The rain, it hurts your wounds, doesn't it? You have no need to pretend anything in front of me. I will protect your sister with you."

Silence came once again. The rain soaked the admiral's uniform now, but she remained in her position.

"If you want to cry, cry, Kongou."

Then it happened. At first it was only something akin to a cough, but then it turned into a stream of tears and sobs. The admiral caught the battleship when she finally lost her strength. Shouhou saw, for the first time ever since her construction, the eldest of the Kongou-class crying hard in the shoulder of someone else.

"It hurts...!" her voice cracked and trembled, and Shouhou knew this was also foreign for the battleship. She had never really shown weakness to anyone. Not even when her sisters sunk. "It hurts...!"

"... I know."

Like an opened tap, everything spilled. Her exhaustion, her pain, her longing over her lost sisters. Things she never said anyone. Especially not Haruna.

Shouhou finally understood the admiral's responses. There were things you would not say to someone because they were precious to you. There were things only older sister would understand and do, things they would not let their little sisters know. The admiral looked into that aspect of Kongou and understood her need. She needed someone to shoulder her burden together, something that she would not let Haruna know at all. It was an intimate place, a place that perhaps the admiral may not ever get, considering Kongou's previous experience with the last admiral.

Shouhou had no idea how long the admiral had approached Kongou before that day, nor would she ever ask. She knew though, and it was not easy for both Kongou and the admiral. Knowing the exact number of attempt was not important. This knowledge alone was enough.

After that day, all doubts for the new admiral in Shouhou's heart was erased. Shouhou knew it was the same for many of them as well, especially Kongou. If anything, the battleship was back to her former self… with an additional upgrade that the admiral, clearly, did not expect to happen.

A routine… that she would have to suffer every time Kongou came around.

"I LOVE YOU! CHU! CHU!"
The admiral had been complaining of back ache. Shouhou had little question on how it could happen, especially now that Kongou was practically ON the admiral, who had to support herself by grabbing the windowsill while resisting the countless shower from the battleship clinging on her back.

"Oneesama, it doesn't seem like a good idea..." Haruna came in, smiling apologetically. She gently touched her older sister's shoulder, to stop her from kissing the admiral. "Maybe you should-

"Oneesama! That's not fair!"

Battleship Hiei came running inside the room. Jealousy was all over her face. And soon enough she was already tugging the hem of her sister's Miko sleeve.

"Hiei too! Hiei too!"

"Oneesama, it seems the admiral is having quite some trouble keeping her balance, it might have been a good measure to get off her back, in case you inflict some kind of spinal damage on her."

Kirishima straightened her glasses, calculating the possibilities, yet did actually nothing other than being interested in the situation. Her words though, seemed to wake Kongou up. She finally looked at her admiral.

A pair of protesting brown eyes answered her golden ones.

"Oh! You're right, Desu!" Kongou jumped off the admiral, her eyes burning with her usual spirit. With that, the admiral fell to the windowsill in a "humph"-trembling while holding her aching back.

Shouhou held her laughter in, supporting the admiral to stand up again. The admiral totally would complain of back ache again after this.

Admiral Tendouji Airi finally regained her balance with the help of her faithful secretary ship then turned around to face a set of fast battleships in front of her. Kongou had a wide, shining smile on her face. And then she said, with full blown spirit:

"Kongou sisters have arrived! What are your orders, Hey, Admiral? We're ready for anything!"

Despite everything that just happened that may have angered her, the admiral showed a kind smile.

The smile of the battleship was one she earned after all.

The light was back.

- end of chapter 3-

Chapter End Notes

I was imagining angsty Kongou... and this happened. I guess I push it way too much. I have this image for quite a while though, so I wanted to pour it somewhere. Thank you very much for reading.
Weapon

Chapter Summary

Adultery case broke more than just one heart.

Chapter Notes

Dark theme after dark theme. Actually this is meant to be in this fic from the very beginning. I thought I should tell you finally, about that "adultery" case that happened in the naval base. So here it is. I split it into two parts because it turned out longer than I expected, and it would be even longer. First I would like to apologize if anything in this part of the fic offend anyone. I am very sorry.

I also change the rating into T. I apologize. I did not expect the story to be like this. Ah, dont worry, however, after all the hardships... there will always be sunshine.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of its character. I do not own any lyrics or songs or poetry I used in this fic. They belong to their respective owner and are credited as such. For songs in Japanese, however, I translated them myself.

Various things gradually get troublesome
Shall I just end it by ignoring it?
I am getting sick of being asked "Are you sick?"
can you just quietly end it?

Scop feat Hatsune Miku - Irony

"THE F-

Loud snapping sounds and sickening crunch, then suddenly someone wrapped her half naked body roughly, but protectively. Her hands instinctively clung to the body of her saviour and she lost control of her own. It shook. Uncontrollably.

Harsh breathing. Numerous whispers of her name. And strong, protective hug.

It's over.

"ASHIGARA-

Her sister's body suddenly tensed up, building power.

Another sound of impact, harder this time. It wasn't her sister's doing, since all those tensed muscles' movement were halted immediately.
Guns clicking and clanking. From the corner of her eyes, she could see a 46.1cm barrel.

"Stay, Ashigara," Nagato's voice felt like a steel that pressed down on all other emotions in the room. "Stay."

The hug tightened instead, and she could feel her sister's body shook with anger.

"Nagato-san."

"Stay."

"BUT HE-"

"S T A Y."

Her hand clung desperately to her sister. Her voice wouldn't come out. There were only tears and unimaginable layer of fear. And pain. Shearing, hot pain spreading all over her body.

"All of you ship girls… attacking superiors who-"

The guns clanked again and suddenly the admiral was silent.

"Ooyodo, call the military police. This should end."

- Weapon -

"Your station will be a bit challenging more than most, Tendouji-kun."

The Grand Marshall rubbed the tip of his nose and continued to read the document. He brushed his chin then looked at Airi, who stood on the opposite of Grand Marshal desk. Neat white moustache above his lips obscured a bit of his lips movement but Airi thought he was trying to give her a smile. He failed miserably.

"Adultery case, on top of many other misdeeds, have been committed by the past admiral. There has been signs of defiance in those ships, to no surprise. Considering some of our capital ship girl are there, we cannot scrap them. It will be too much of a controversy for us to handle."

His right index finger tapped the table.

"... Please subdue them."

Subdue.

Such "flowery" word.

Airi bowed, curling her hands into fist. She would dread reading tonight's documents.

"Understood, Grand Marshal."

XXX

Despite the air of early spring being rather cold and crisp with a tint of winter, cold sweat trailed down her neck to her white collar. Her hands were linked together tightly, trembling. She bit her lower lips harder, trying to contain herself.
To no avail.

In front of her were the steps leading outside the heavy cruiser dorm, to white stone path leading to the sidewalk with trees shading by the side. It would only be a few minute walk to the main building, whose tall tower displayed the large clock they all refer to every time and quite visible even from the port.

Admiral's room. Admiral's room. Admiral's room. Admiral-

Several men walked around the compound. They didn't look at her. Or did they?

It's only in your head. Be calm.

Her heartbeat quickened.

Is not.

Thump. thump. Thump thump

They looked at her. They talked between themselves.

Thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump

Is true.

"You're made for this. You want this."

They passed by.

Her breath hitched.

It became harder and harder to breathe. Her breathing quickened.

Her stomach churned uncontrollably.

She wanted to throw up. And to curl into a ball somewhere.

But this was her job. It was not exactly a job, too. She just had herself listed to go to the Admiral's room for the first day of first interview. However, stepping out of the dorm turned into a struggle foreign to her. The prospect of meeting human was such a daunting notion that the anxiety practically ripping her in and out. It had been so long since she went out to the open too… and so long since the last day she ventured out alone.

She knew, she knew that it would be okay. She knew it, but...

But her whole body did not agree with her. From the back of her mind something whispered. From the back of her mind something pushed all these thoughts on her, that someone may come, may hurt her, may rip her, may turn her world around, destroy her… kill her.

She hated this. She hated being fearful.

She hated herself.

A white uniformed marine just walked past the dorm. Male. He glanced at her.

"You're made for this."
She took a step back involuntarily.

No.

That split second was enough for Haguro to close her eyes, one small drop of tear fell from the corner of her right eye as goosebumps trailed all over body.

I'm okay I'm okay I'm okay I'm okay

His look alone ripped away every defenses she built around herself.

"Haguro-san."

A kind, gentle voice. Haguro opened her eyes when a hand gently touched her upper right arm. Sunlight glinted on the clean spectacle of Choukai, who eyed her with worry and kindness.

"Are you alright, Haguro-san? Don't push yourself."

"A-ah, g-good morning, Choukai-san. I am fine."

She obviously was not. Choukai only looked even more worried.

"I don't think you should push yourself to go if you are not fine. I can help file a permit for you this time. Or shall I look for Ashi-"

"No, no, please, you don't have to, Choukai-san."

Not her, of all people, please.

"Then I can file you the permit-"

"I-I am fine. I-It's only to an interview so…"

But you have never gone out of the dorm for these two weeks…

Choukai's eyes clearly shouted those thoughts loud and clear. She was not one to force herself on someone else, but for now, her grip on Haguro's arm was quite strong and demanding. Haguro found herself being unreasonably mad at herself upon finding how the touch reassured her, how the thought of shelter made her feel much better. That wasn't what she wanted.

That was not what she hoped she would feel.

"I-I..."

"Haguro!"

The familiar voice of her big sister. Haguro felt her heart sank when she saw Ashigara rushed from the stairs, worry painted itself on her sister's face.

She could not even keep her sister in peace.

Choukai let Haguro's arm go and stepped back. Ashigara cupped her sister's face straight away-her eyes falling on the faint track of tears on her sister's face-before hugging her tightly.

"I was so worried! Why did you go out of the room without telling me?"
"I-I'm sorry…"

That was not the answer Ashigara was looking for. The older woman let go off her hug. While still having both hands on Haguro's shoulders, she turned to Choukai.

"Did you help her, Choukai? Thank you very much."

"Ah, it's nothing of such, Ashigara-san. I was on my way to the main building myself."

"Did anything happen?" Ashigara turned her attention to Haguro again, who averted her eyes towards the floor. "Are you okay?"

It was among the hardest question to answer. Nothing happened, but no, she was not okay. But answering that she was not okay would not lead to the outcome she wanted. Nor would saying she was okay change anything.

She wanted to change. The problem was in her, she knew. It was no one else's fault but her.

Haguro's silence elicited a sigh from Ashigara. She gently rubbed her sister's arms. Her eyes turned softer, albeit in pain.

"Is this something you don't want to say to me again?"

Ah.

"I-It's not like that, Ashigara-neesan. I.. I…"

I am scared. I don't want to be scared. I know I should not be scared but I do. Help me.

She opened her mouth, "I-I'm sorry…"

I should not worry you even more.

Ashigara eyed her for quite a long while, from which Haguro avoided eye contact. It was not as if she was hiding something from her sister. Perhaps her sister always knew what was in her head all along. Perhaps she was disappointed at her.

"I will file your leave permit for today's interview."

"Neesan!"

Ashigara furrowed her eyebrows at her. Haguro shook her head.

"I-I.. I will go to the building, Neesan, it will be inappropriate for the Ad-"

"I will not file that permit if I believe you are healthy, Haguro," hushed Ashigara gently. She cupped her sister's face, brushing the damp track of her sister's tears on the cheeks with her thumbs."You're crying. You're not okay."

Haguro bit her lower lips. She could not lie about that. But still…

Ashigara closed her eyes. She sighed again. Haguro wanted to say something but she could not. She knew she had contributed to almost all of her sister's sighs. Normally Ashigara rarely sighed.

The older woman looked deep into her sister's eyes.
"Next time, Haguro. Not now. Please rest in our room for today."

-XXXX-

Admiral Tendouji Airi would never forget those piercing eyes.

Deviant. Stubborn. Strong.

Fierce.

The beautiful lady that looked back at her could easily turn into a beast upon provocation. Perhaps provocation was not even needed, as even now with nothing more than being told to come into the room, Airi could see tendrils of adrenalin rushed into the girl's bloodstream. Those eyes were in the battlefield.

"Ashigara. Third ship of Myoukou Class Heavy Cruiser."

I see.

The documents in front of her had written detailed data of this heavy cruiser. She had good battle record and impressive achievement. The big note on her file however, said that she could be aggressive.

Especially with what happened.

Only a complete idiot did not feel how the tension turned heavy. Airi could see from the corner of her eyes how Shouhou gripped her documents tighter. Just like how it was when it was Haruna's time of interview.

This was the sister of the victim, the one who filed for her sister's leave permit earlier today.

"Nice to meet you, Ashigara. As you might have known, I'm Admiral Tendouji Airi."

The heavy cruiser bowed as acknowledgement. A curt, wary bow.

Airi eased a smile. With Shouhou here, any kind of personal question will be inappropriate.

Let's do it as always then.

"Is there anything you would like to ask of me in order to improve the base?"

A look of puzzlement.

All of these girls gave almost same reactions. Confusion, bewilderment, puzzlement. There could be more than a dozen possibilities of what they expected out of this interview. However it seemed questions of improvement had never crossed their minds. It seemed none of them expected normality.

Something seemed to stir inside Ashigara's eyes as her mind settled onto something. Her voice was clear and firm.

"Replace all male staff in this naval base with female staff."

Oh?

At the side of admiral desk, Shouhou took a sharp breath. At times like these, Airi was glad she
had a rather placid expression most of the time.

"That is quite a serious proposition, Ashigara. I would have to assess this alongside the board. What would your official reason be?"

The reason should be pretty obvious for Airi but she had to have the heavy cruiser said it formally. In the world where law binds you, somethings must be in black and white.

_Ah I just ignited a spark._

A flame burned inside Ashigara's eyes.

"So that my sister can be at ease again."

Without a change of expression, Airi wrote it on her notebook in silence. She could feel Ashigara following her movement. There was also this prickly sensation of being scrutinized... Or even preyed on by a beast.

_I like this ship._

Right when she thought of that, Ashigara's crisp voice broke the silence.

"... You know."

"Of what, Ashigara?" Airi added a period and looked up to meet the yellow, smart eyes of the heavy cruiser.

"They must have told you what happened to my sister."

The pupils inside those yellow eyes widened. She was fighting an invisible battle.

"They indeed did._ in great detail, Ashigara, dear, in great detail._ Airi had no intention in anyway to dismiss what happened. She just felt it would not be appropriate to address it with third person around. However, since it was out…

Airi put away her pen and looked deep into the heavy cruiser's eyes.

"I am very sorry. I apologize in the name of the navy for being oblivious about him all this time. I will do my utmost to better this headquarter and make up for whatever the past admiral had done to you. I am here for that purpose."

Ashigara curled her hands into fists. She visibly grit her teeth. Those anger in her eyes, they burn even Airi's own emotions. She may never be able to understand the depth of Ashigara's anger for being there at the scene, for having the victim as her own only little sister, for all accumulation of anger, disappointment, and exhaustion. She fully understood she would never be able to, even though she had a little sister herself, or that she too, was wholly female. Merely imagining already felt so horrid and painful, that she could not imagine how it was for this cruiser and her sister. She also understood that the mental scar would also follow them even longer than any physical wounds. What happened was horrible, awful, and appalling. Airi personally was disgusted and ashamed. It could have been prevented. But they did nothing.

Slowly, she rose.

Then bowed her head deeply.

"Admiral!"
Shouhou's voice was clear, a sound of bewilderment. With her facing the surface of the desk with everything on it though, Airi could only guess what was the expression of both Shouhou and Ashigara. Not that she actually cared. All she actually wanted to do was to apologize.

*Human are foolish, selfish creature.*

There was silence.

"... I do not require your apology, Admiral Tendouji."

"A-Ashigara-san!" gasped Shouhou, clearly surprised at how explicitly defiant Ashigara's statement was.

"Apology alone will not heal my sister. And it isn't you who is at fault."

Soft muffled sound of boot stepping on carpet. Airi opened her eyes then straightened her body to see the view she figured she would see.

Ashigara had turned around and walk for the door. Her fists were trembling. It may have been more than anger inside those fists, just like what she contained in her eyes. The worst was, she might not know to whom she could direct all those emotions to.

*I am very sorry.*

"Please do come to me, when you have any request."

Although from the change of how her back straightened Airi could see that Ashigara listened, the heavy cruiser just walked out of that door without any other word said.

-XXX-

It would rain again.

Yesterday was sunny. The day before yesterday was rainy. With how the sky seemed heavy with all the dark cloud, today would be raining again.

Or tonight?

Whichever would not matter. At least not now.

Haguro took a deep breath and held it in. They said your happiness evaporated with all your sigh. She wondered if anything would still evaporated away from her anymore.

Her eyes roamed around the room. She lived here together with her sister. It was empty, despite being quite spacious. There were their working desk-Haguro's had books of naval warfare and novels stacked neatly while Ashigara's had several of her sake bottles, documents, and even cup ramen mixed together. Other than that and the chairs and table near the slide windows facing the back garden, the room was empty. At night, they slept by the floor, taking out the futon neatly folded inside the closet. Sometimes they took out the kotatsu as well. Some tangerine in winter night, with sake that her sister somehow able to bring back from somewhere.

Haguro once again cast her look at the sky.

If it rain, she would need to take out the bucket from the janitor room and placed them to contain the leak around the dorm. Previous admiral had ignored their complaint about the condition of the dorm. The ones who actually volunteered to repair the roof had been the mechanics and several
guards instead. Still, if the rain was heavy, some place would still leak.

It would be better to take precaution.

She finally stood up, placing the book that she had been staring for hours without even reading back to the table.

Placing buckets around the hall was the only thing she could contribute to the naval base for now. Perhaps she should mop the second floor as well… Last time she found one of the board looked badly shaped…

Placing a bucket under the usual leaking spot, Haguro heard footsteps and voices from the stairs. The heavy cruisers had come back.

"Oh, placing the buckets again, Haguro?" Maya was the first one to arrive at the second floor, Choukai and Suzuya only a step behind her. "My bad. Thanks as always!"

"It is my pleasure, Maya-san."

"Thank you, Haguro-san," Choukai bowed slightly to her, to which Haguro quickly replied with a, "no, no, please." Suzuya pat (or rather, smacked) Haguro's back, saying a cheerful, "Thankies, Haguro-san!" with her usual outgoing attitude. She and Maya continued their banter, walking past Haguro after friendly "see ya around!" "bye!"

Rubbing her sore back from Suzuya's pat, Haguro extended her neck.

"Where's Neesan?"

"Oh, she's talking with Takao-neesan downstairs. They will be here in a moment," Choukai took several buckets from the corner near Haguro. The youngest of Myoukou Class gasped, preventing Choukai to take more. A series of "A, Choukai-san, don't-" "No, no, please allow me to help." "You must be exhausted-" "It is alright" courteous exchange happened right away, ended with Choukai finally taking two buckets away from Haguro. Right at that moment, Takao and Ashigara came.

"Ah, Haguro, thank you," Takao smiled upon seeing the buckets lining. "Dependable as always."

I am not.

"C-Choukai-san also offers help so…"

Takao laughed. She put a hand on Haguro's shoulder.

"Come on, you should take more credit on what you do," She said kindly. Ashigara nodded. "You're always helping us like this. Be proud of it!"

Proud?

"A-Ah, no. I-I was free a-and…A-And this is the only thing I can do.."

Smiling, Takao shook her head and laughed, patting Haguro's shoulder.

"Oh come on, what are you talking about? You're a great ship, Haguro."

"N-No, I…"
I can't even walk out of the dormitory.

Takao gave her a firm grip.

"Your power, my dear. Like always, we'll be counting on you as always at the sea as well."

Sea? Like always?

Her hands, joined by the chest, gripped each other so hard it seemed like they would crush each other.

What sea?

"And besides."

What power?

I am now useless.

"... it's the only thing I can do."

Takao blinked, realizing how Haguro instead shrunk. Ashigara narrowed her eyes.

"Haguro?"

"I-I'm sorry..." Her voice sounded clearer, but unsteady. Somehow it sounded as if she was talking to no one. "But... T-This... is the only thing I can do."

Ashigara clashed her teeth.

"Haguro."

Ignoring her sister's calling, Haguro grabbed the remaining four buckets by the corner.

"Haguro-"

A swift bow.

"Please excuse me."

"Wait!"

She ran away.

Takao put a hand in front of Ashigara, halting her step.

Haguro's back disappeared by the corner.

-XXXX-

"What do you think of Ashigara-san, Admiral?"

Airi looked up to meet Shouhou's rather nervous eyes. They had been talking for quite sometime about trivial things, laughing and chatting away. Airi understood that being the first day of them working together, they were still building trust. With every exchange of words and gestures and stares, they were gauging each other.
This question was a really amiable progress. She knew her good feelings stems from things more than a handful amount of ice cream from Mamiya's best dessert.

Ashigara.

She remembered the fierce, strong eyes.

"I like her," Airi smiled. Shouhou showed an expression of surprise. "Her battle record is admirable, and I can see that she is a daring person. Most of all, she seems really caring. We will always need a strong personality."

Shouhou seemed to hesitate for her next words.

"You do not think… what she did was impolite, Admiral?"

"Well, certainly it may not seem pleasant," Airi laughed, surprising Shouhou yet again. She smiled. "But it is justifiable and understandable. I mean if I were her… perhaps I would do the same, if not more."

*If my sister were to suffer that way…*

Cold steel seemed to press down to her chest the moment the thought came to her mind. Her movement of scooping the ice cream stopped.

"She had been robbed off her rights to unleash her anger to the one she is furious at. If I don't know where I should give out my anger, Shouhou, those feelings will just stay there and rot. That, alone, is frustrating."

-XXX-

"Ittekimasu."

The door swung close with a click after the whisper.

Haguro opened her eyes. Several hours before daybreak.

She had never really fallen asleep. She knew her sister knew. Perhaps her sister also knew that she knew. She would not know. There were too many things that left unsaid between them after the incident. Too much hesitance, too much fear.

Even between them sisters, they pulled away from each other.

The only thing that Ashigara said tonight in their room was, "The Admiral is female and seemed like a good person." to which Haguro replied, "I see." and their conversation just stopped there.

Another night with silence.

They were not usually like that. Their room used to be a lot more cheerful. It was hard to believe that hardly three weeks ago they took out the koutatsu and had a drinking party with the Takao Class and Suzuya. Everyone was cheerful. Even with their unfortunate condition, they could always find ways to enjoy themselves. Even if the rain battered the window and numerous buckets lined up the hall containing leaking rain water, they could wash away their exhaustion by being together.

It just changed. Too abruptly.
It was her fault. Her own fault.

She was weak.

She shut away from all of them and they were falling apart. They were falling apart because of her. And she could not make it right. She did not know how to make it right…

_Neesan..._

Energetic, cheerful, strong, and kind... Now all that Haguro could feel from her was boiling deep hard anger.

Her sister changed. She changed her sister. She altered her. It was her fault.

Today, her big sister had left for a mission.

_Mission._

Haguro grabbed her futon tighter, finding herself curling into a ball.

The fact that she was alone in the room made her uncomfortable… and the fact that her sister left her alone for a mission made her felt left out.

They usually sortied together; Her sister checking her equipment, and she, her sister's. Without the two oldest ships of their class, they only had each other.

"I am Haguro, the last of Myoukou Class Heavy Cruiser."

She buried herself.

She was supposed to be... A weapon.

Strong and dependable.

Yet all she managed to be was something worse than scrap metal.

_Sounds of struggle. Huffing, groans. Painful moans._

_On the floor, were ripped clothes, screws, pipes, a bit of blood. Cold table pressing hard to the front of her exposed body. All his bodyweight on her, subduing her from the back. What was inside her screamed louder than her own mouth stuffed with white admiral cap._

_Rough tugging._

_Kisses._

_Bites and licks._

_Tears._

"I order you, Slut.."

_His breath quick and hoarse on her ears._

"MY order. Isn't obeying ME what you do? You're made for this."
Her body did not work as she wanted. Her strength weakening and faltering, and the scream in her head was deafening.

"You're made for THIS."

A hand between her legs. She jolted as fear jumped to her heart and muscle. A blinding explosion of anger.

"MMMH!"

He reacted. A hit to the table. Chest against cold steel, forcing air out of her lungs. She coughed into the cap, with all her tears and screams and sobs.

It hurts. It hurts.

Unfamiliar wildfire spread all over her.

And above all, pain.

"HAH! You say no but your body is honest."

Her brain screamed.

For him to stop.

"You fucking want this! You fucking like this."

For herself to stop.

"Your body wants this. You're made for this."

I am a weapon.

Help me.

"Your body is honest."

It lies.

You're disgusting.

"Your body is honest."

I lie.

I'm disgusting.

-XXXX-

"Good afternoon."

Tending the front garden of heavy cruiser dorm alone, Choukai jolted from surprise and turned to look behind, to the sight of smiling Admiral Tendouji. She stood there with her white uniform and cap, seemingly really interested in what the heavy cruiser was doing. Curiously, Shouhou seemed to be nowhere.
"Good afternoon, Admiral."

Choukai hurriedly stood up, taking off her gardening gloves and bowed down deeply.

Having only met her yesterday at the interview, it was still hard for Choukai to process that the one before her was an admiral, her superior. She looked like any of them, being female. Her long black hair looked almost akin to Shouhou, if only it did not have the slight wave in some places. Her posture was also average. Other than her white Admiral uniform and cap and the array of badges by her chest, perhaps Choukai would never be able to remember that she was her admiral.

The Admiral nodded at her with a smile.

"What are you tending to, if I may ask?"

Sweet, polite words.

This was also the reason why Choukai had a hard time reacting to the new admiral: her formality. The words she chose, they were not the imperative authoritative command those admirals used on them. She talked to them almost like talking to an equal. Like colleague.

That gave her a strange feeling of familiarity, yet somehow felt forbidden.

"Nothing special in particular, Admiral. It's some flower seeds we planted some time ago. They have sprouted."

"I see. What flowers?"

"Lilac and Snowdrop, Admiral. They say they bloom beautifully in spring."

Admiral Tendouji gave a wide smile and nodded approvingly. Her brown eyes sparkled.

"Indeed, indeed they will."

She straightened her back and observed the front garden, seemingly thinking of something. Choukai stood there anxiously, wondering what the Admiral was thinking about. Was the garden looked bad? Untidy? Unkept? Would they be punished? Had she not done her job right? Those thoughts circled inside Choukai’s head, extending the several minutes into what seems like hours.

The Admiral put her hands behind her back.

"You tend to this garden alone, Choukai?"

"No, Admiral. I usually tend to it together with Haguro-san."

"Haguro, I see… Don't we usually have someone in charge of the garden?"

"No one in particular, Admiral. The previous admiral had cut off the gardening budget for resource gathering."

Rolling her eyes, Admiral Tendouji seemed exasperated at the thought of budgeting. She raised her eyebrows, "He also cut your ration."

Choukai gave an awkward smile.

"Well… about that…"
Admiral Tendouji shook her head. She seemed really displeased. Choukai had never been to other naval base so she would not know how it was in other places. From the time she was constructed, she remembered this naval base had always been like this. Admiral Tendouji gestured towards the dorm.

"Would you mind if I ask you to accompany me around the dorm? Of course, if you don't mind leaving your work for a moment."

"Oh, certainly, Admiral! Certainly."

Dorm inspection did not sound good. Choukai could only hope Maya had tidied up their room… but she would not hope much. Hopefully at least, the ramen cups were all thrown away...

Haguro looked up from the book she was reading. Rain was falling. She watched how slowly the back garden was drenched by the rain. Early spring rain was always so calm and melancholic.

She had prepared the buckets minutes ago. The hall would be fine now.

Haguro slowly opened the window. Gentle sea breeze flowed in. It was salty. And damp.

It was familiar.

She missed the sea.

Sea was her home.

Usually there would also be the smell of gunpowder. Sea breeze on her face, splash of sea water. Even high waves felt home.

How long had it been?

Her grip on the windowsill strengthened involuntarily. Her knuckles turned white. All these emotions, they made her wanted to throw up.

Suddenly she heard sounds of conversation from the hall. Haguro tilted her head. Supposedly Choukai was the only one in the dormitory. Did they have any guest? It is strange for any of the other ship class other than cruisers to come…

"... don't think it should..."

"We have told the administration.."

"... that is not nice of them."

A female voice she did not recognize. A new ship girl? There were a handful of other ship girls not yet constructed. Perhaps the new admiral construct a ship for the first time.

A knock on the door.

"Haguro-san? Are you available?"

"Ah, yes. Wait a minute."

Haguro quickly put down her book and rushed to the door. Perhaps Choukai would like to
"Good afternoon."

Ah.


"Nice to meet you, Haguro. I'm Admiral Tendouji Airi."

Today might not turned out the way she expected it to be. A mixture of emotions burst inside her. Was it hope or desperation, Haguro did not know which they fall to.

*I had been wanting to meet you. I need to talk to you.*

Finally. An Admiral.

Finally she would be able to get the permission to be scrapped.

- To be continued -
Weapon (2)

Chapter Notes

The arc turns out longer than I expected, thanks to my pace on the 4th chapter. I assume it will be around 4 chapters long… so I guess you all should bear with the gritty angst story a little while longer.

Tendouji Airi is written 天道寺 愛莉 in kanji. 天 (Heaven) 道 (path/ways/teachings) 寺 (temple) 愛 (love) 莉 (jasmine). 天道 may mean celestial path. Yep, her surname Tendouji is a pretty grand name.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of its character. I do not own the song or poem I featured in this fic. For songs in Japanese, I do translate them myself.

Why do you end up hiding it?
Do you in truth want me to listen to you?
I won't do things like laughing at you or anything so would you like to try talking about it?

Jin feat Hatsune Miku - Hello/How are you

One thought that came into Airi’s head the moment she saw the heavy cruiser opening that door was that she had the most honest eyes Airi had ever seen in her life. It was by no means weakness. Just pure honesty and innocence.

It was broken, however.

It was to be understood though. In fact, Airi felt a great sense of awe that she could see this much kind soul and bravery despite what had happened here. They were treated badly, even enslaved, but they held on and most of them even remained as kind and just as much as other ship girl in other naval base.

This girl before her though, had gone through exceptionally horrible experience. Yet, her eyes were so clear and honest.

This girl, just like her sister, was a strong soul.

Upon seeing her, Haguro apologized, bowing numerous times at her for being so impolite, for not coming for the interview, for not contacting, and other things she fumbled in her words within her bows.

"It's okay, I understand."

I may not be able to understand what you are going through, but I understand that you need it.

"Do you mind if I go into your room, Haguro? I would like to measure the space."
"O-Of course you may, Admiral. Please. I apologize that it's so filthy."

"No, no, it isn't. Perhaps there are things needed mending? Or things that you may want to improve for your room?"

"I-I don't know for now, Admiral, b-but perhaps you would like to see for yourself?"

"Yes, yes, that would be nice."

That went rather smoothly, although she sounded like a construction worker or fussy landowner.

First thing first.

Airi had never dealt with this kind of situation, nor if she understood what she should have done. However, the situation before her told her that her help was needed.

Perhaps all that she needed to do, was just to be human.

- Weapon (2) -

The Admiral looked around the room and Haguro could only watch her nervously. Choukai was still standing faithfully by the door, waiting. Her expression said, "I don't know" when Haguro met her eyes. This was uncomfortable.

This situation was foreign for both of them. They did not know what would happen next. Their experience with previous admiral taught them that any kind of encounter with an admiral would never mean good. Even if this Admiral seemed kind, Haguro could not shake off this uneasiness in her heart, nor the fear that something bad may happen. Because it always did, in the past. Her body remembered it.

The anxiety of waiting for the admiral to say or react was torturous in a way.

"Your desk, Haguro?"

That question came out of nowhere. The Admiral was by Haguro's desk, the tidy desk with stacked books. Haguro quickly came closer.

"Y-Yes, Admiral. Is there anything…?"

"I like this one too," She tapped a book with a soft Sakura patterned cover lying on the table. She glanced at the heavy cruiser and smiled. "You have a good taste."

"T-Thank you, Admiral."

A compliment was the least Haguro thought she would get when the Admiral entered. Her room was average, she thought, and quite empty and uninteresting. It was not something worthy of praise.

The Admiral's eyes fell on the open window, showing the gentle rain outside. She went to the window, looking out to the back garden.

She put her hands behind her, then took a deep breath.

There was silence for a while, just the soft sound of the spring rain in the background.

It was rather... calming.
"Are you the one who placed the buckets by the hall, Haguro?"

The question came rather suddenly.

"Y-Yes, Admiral." Haguro gripped the fabric of her clothes by her chest. "T-That is the only thing I can do…"

Admiral Tendouji watched her for a while and that made Haguro's grip even tighter. Was she thinking of scrapping her? Discarding her like she should? *After all, there was nothing that I could do other than this. It would better if…*

"On the contrary, I think there are many things that you can do, Haguro."

*Eh?*

Admiral Tendouji gave a gentle smile, before moving her eyes to Choukai, who was still waiting by the doorway.

"You may dismiss now, Choukai. I will have Haguro to show me around."

Choukai stood straight and nodded. When she bowed, Admiral Tendouji added gently, "I apologize for taking up your gardening time. Thank you very much for your assistance, Choukai. It's unfortunate about the rain."

The expression that came to Choukai's face took Haguro off guard. It was a very friendly expression, one that would never come up to their previous admiral.

"It's my pleasure, Admiral. It was enlightening."

With that, Choukai gave a salute, nodded at Haguro, then closed the door.

Along with the click of the door, suddenly Haguro found the room turned a dozen fold colder. She returned her eyes to the Admiral, knowing exactly what was the reason of the falling temperature.

Those smart brown eyes now held a dozen meanings. It was clear that the reason she came into the room was not solely for inspection.

*Human… could be such a cunning creature.*

"I believe I haven't met you for interview," the Admiral eased a smile. Haguro, however, did not find that the least bit reassuring. Admirals were smart. They should be, considering they would be the ones devising the military plan for the fleet. The knowledge assured Haguro that whatever the Admiral would want to talk about with her, it would not solely be a talk about trivial matter. "Shall we do it here?"

*Ah."

It began again, her erratic heartbeat.

Interview.

Perhaps she would be interrogated about the incident again.

She didn't want to remember. She didn't want to say it, to mention it, to talk about it, she did not want to have a deal about it at all. She wanted it to disappear.
The more she pushed it away though, the more it pressed back.

Haguro bit her bottom lip.

Her job. This would be her first job.

*Answer.*

She was a tool. A tool should not defy the master.

*I'm okay.*

"Don't worry it won't be long or anything too specific," The Admiral gave her a smile, but somehow Haguro felt like her voice drifted further and further away. Her heartbeat was too loud. Her breath started to quicken again. "I don't have any pen, but I guess I can just jot it down after. I mean, it isn't as if…"

*I am okay.*

"... won't be that technical… under the…"

Her breath came out as a shudder. She joined her hands together and she gripped her own hand so hard, her knuckles turned white. She pushed them together, trying to hide the obvious view that she was shaking.

"... in order to better…"

*Why.*

She was her admiral's weapon.

"Haguro."

"*On the contrary, I think there are many things that you can do, Haguro.*"

She should not be… afraid of her.

"Haguro."

"*You're made for this.*"

*No…*

She should not defy her master.

"*I order you, Slut.**"

*No. No no no no no no no*

She should not defy her master.

*No, that is not why I was created.*

"*MY order. Isn't that the reason you're created?*"

*Yes.*
That is not true. That is not true. Not true. No. Not at all. No. No. No.

She should not defy her master.

"You're made for this."

I am not I am not I am not I am not I am not I am not I am not-

I should not defy-

A warm hand gently pressed on her shaking, joined ones.

Haguro gasped. Her eyes, that she did not even realized had been kept close all these times, shot open. Her body instinctively withdrew inside as she fearfully looked up, meeting with the Admiral's worried brown eyes.

Oh no.

She failed.

She failed to even listen to her admiral.

I could not even... face her.

"MY order."

She knew she should not cry but she could feel tears uncontrollably burst out of her eyes. Frustration burned her heart, corrupting and growing with every tears that roll down her eyes. The more they drip the deeper her humiliation grew... and the more they flowed. It was a devil's circle that eroded her heart. She could not control it.

She could not control herself.

She tried to speak but her throat constricted and her breath only came out as a shudder. Opening her mouth only caused her breathing to quicken.

Talk.

Apology. Apology.

Those brown eyes, were they judging her?

Apology.

Panic gripped her. She couldn't breathe. It's suffocating.

Apology.

She began to shake.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry

Stop stop stop stop stop

Talk.
The shaking wouldn't stop.

The Admiral raised her other hand and instinctively Haguro shut her eyes.

At that second she could hear her mind screamed.

**Failure.**

"... I'm sorry."

Her breathing stopped. It wasn't her who said that.

Who.

Even if she opened her eyes, she couldn't look up.

A hand ever so gently rested on her cheek, brushing the tears that continued to stream down her face.

Why.

Her shaking worsened.

"I'm so sorry."

It was the Admiral.

*She shouldn't have. She shouldn't say sorry. That is strange. That is wrong. That was not how things work. She shouldn't have. I made her said it. I made her said it. I did it. That is wrong. I should apologize. I should apologize. I should apologize. I should apologize. I should apologize.*

She tried hard to look up, to look up to meet her eyes. She should. She should. *She should.*

*I'm sorry.*

She couldn't. She tried. She couldn't. Her eyes darted off frantically. The scream got even louder.

**Failure. Failure. Failure Failure Failure Failure Failure Failure Failure**

"Thank you."

Her mind went blank.

Why...?

Both of the Admiral's hands were on hers now. Warm. So warm. So kind. The pressure pushed her erratic mind back, subsiding the screams, the whispers, the shouts.

The Admiral's voice sounded clear.

She spoke slowly, her voice soft and calm.

"Thank you, Haguro. Thank you."

Another gentle press.

"You try your best for me. Thank you."
No… No, I'm useless. Don't… thank me… The tears didn't stop, but it felt different. The tears felt different. She continued to cry but she could not understand why the furious painful burn in her heart resided. Everything didn't make any sense. Nothing made sense at all. I don't deserve a thank you. I couldn't even… look at you…

Yet, her Admiral thank her. Thank her. For trying. For trying.

She thanked her for trying.

Her breathing slowed. Her shaking subsided. Her vision got clearer.

She looked up.

Those brown eyes, they were not judging her. There was no disappointment in there, no accuse, no such thing.

All of her previous fear, all of them, were non-existent.

Instead, the moment she looked up those eyes showed a look of happiness and pride. Accomplishment. Satisfaction.

The admiral was satisfied in her.

Admiral Tendouji gave her a gentle smile.

"You did it," She said. "You look at me. You tried your best. You did it."

Ah…

"Thank you."

Ah…

Tears fell again and all the burning fire in her heart went out as if a fresh icy rain showered them. Instead, a bittersweet ache tinge her heart, clenching it so tightly.

"B-but I…" Her voice. Weak, almost a whisper, but it came out now. Also with every word she spoke, the Admiral's smile broadened and her eyes sparkled. For her. For her."... I-I can't even…"

I can't do anything.

The reassuring smile on the Admiral's face did not disappear. She gave a gentle press on Haguro's joined hands that had, without her knowing, slowly weakened their grip to each other. With the Admiral's touch, the voices, once again, subsided.

"But that is not your fault, Haguro."

Haguro's eyes widened.

The Admiral smiled then gently cupped the heavy cruiser's cheek again with one of her hand, brushing the tears that once again streamed out of her eyes.

"None of this is your fault."

But I..
The Admiral put her left hand under Haguro’s joined hand which previously shook uncontrollably then gently pat them with her right hand.

"This is not your fault."

She gently put her right hand on Haguro's left chest, right on top of her out of control heartbeat. When their eyes met, she smiled.

"This, too, is not your fault."

Her tears dropped again and the Admiral brushed away gently with her right hand thumb.

"Nor this, Haguro. None of these are your fault."

The Admiral tugged her hand, to ask Haguro to look into her. She softly spelled it out for her.

"You're innocent."

Emotions were such a strange thing. It was an abstract concept, but manifested so strongly that they might influence your every senses.

As Haguro looked down, the floor, they blurred. They blurred since tears just continued to burst, along with this unnamed emotions that had been haunting her all these times.

Haguro could not name all these emotions that exploded in her heart. She could not understand the meaning of all her tears. She also could not explain why at that moment when Admiral Tendouji talked to her, the mysterious thing in her heart which had unknowingly weighted her down and dragged her to the ground somehow felt lighter.

The voices… they subsided.

What she looked at was the Admiral's hand on her joined ones, the hand that brushed away those voices. So kind. So warm. So gentle.

"You're innocent."

Her mind turned clearer, her fear subsided.

She could breathe again.

Thank you.

This growing feeling that felt so warm yet so painful, clenched her heart even tighter. Along with that, there was this familiar feeling that she remembered. She was born with it, something that she held more than anything. It just strengthened.

Loyalty.

That one feeling told her something inevitable though, something she knew would be best.

Haguro bit her bottom lips.

"I-I'm sorry, Admiral."

I cannot return your kindness.
She looked up to see Admiral's questioning eyes.

"May I have your permission to be scrapped?"

The hue in Admiral's brown eyes changed. It seemed many, many things flooded her mind right after that sentence. Haguro felt dejected.

In these few minutes, she had given nothing to her admiral but problems.

She really was useless this way.

After a while, the Admiral finally replied.

"Even if I still need you?"

Haguro was stupefied. She looked into the Admiral's eyes in disbelief. The clear calm look in her eyes made her even more at loss. She wondered if she just misheard it.

"B-But Admiral, the way I am now, for this naval base I am useless."

Admiral Tendouji raised her eyebrows. For once, her expression showed superiority.

"Are you?" She smiled. "I don't think so."

But I am...

Haguro looked down.

She could not even walk out of the dorm. She could do nothing but made problems. She could not even do the interview.

She could not fight. What would be of a weapon if that weapon could not even fight. She was nothing more than a scrap metal right now, or even worse than that. It would be better if THIS Haguro just gone. This Haguro was useless.

Regardless of whether or not it was her fault everything happened... she was useless the way she was now.

"Admiral, I can not fight."

It was hard not to let her voice break. Not when tears began to slip through her defenses again. Admiral Tendouji's grip on her hand slightly strengthened, a pressure she now recognized.

"I can not even walk out of this dorm, Admiral."

I want to.

"I can not face the staffs. I can't do my fitting. I can't even go to the cafeteria to have my breakfast."

I want to. I want to. I want to.

"Without my ability to fight, Admiral, what is the meaning of me existing?"

She was useless this way. A ship without her memories would have been better. It would be better if she just disappeared and replaced by another her.

She looked up to meet her Admiral's eyes.
"Admiral, what is there for me to live?"

The Admiral did not reply. She stared into her eyes for a long time, before eventually pulled the ship closer.

The hug was unexpected. Being hugged by an admiral this gently was something beyond what Haguro would ever thought to happen. It was so warm. So warm it's suffocating. Suffocating yet so inviting, so welcoming, so... so kind. So kind, Haguro felt she did not deserve it.

Not her. Not the useless ship.

"Even if I need you?"

The Admiral's scent was that of spring flowers. Sweet. Kind. Calming.

Haguro choked on her sob. It was hard, really hard to not succumb to the warmth. But she felt like she shouldn't. Not when she had nothing to give or even offer.

This kindness... She might never be able to pay it back. This kindness was so beautiful, it's scary. Was this even... allowed?

After a while, the Admiral let her go again, to look at her face.

"I am not lying when I said I need you, Haguro," she said firmly. "You are not useless, and I will say that to you however many times you need. You have showed me willpower I rarely ever see from any other ship or human. I need you, the current you, and not anyone else."

Haguro clenched her fists. The Admiral took a deep breath. Her eyes looked dim, as if what she was about to say was against her own will.

"However, I do not have the rights to tell you what to live for."

Her voice remained firm in her next statement, despite the apparent pain.

"If you want to be scrapped, if you really need it out of your own will, then inform Ashigara. Only if you get her agreement, and only if she inform me of it herself, will I consider of scrapping you."

XXX

Airi hastened her steps. Her breathing turned quicker. She had to get away fast. The spring rain was still falling in light drizzle and she stride over puddles without much care. The sun was setting already. The wind turned.

She shall not cry here.

Not in the place where everyone can see.

Not in her room as well, because she knew she would burst the moment she was in and Shouhou might still be there. She was supposed to come back to the room. She was supposed to come back before sunset.

But she could not leave Haguro. Not in that condition. It was painful. It took all will in her to stop herself from actually crying. When she saw Haguro frozen and started to shake and cry, she could feel clearly how her own heart broke into a dozen pieces. This girl, she was in pain. She was in so much pain and fear she could not control herself. Yet she tried. It was visible how she tried to fight back, to address her superior like she should. She could have just fell and run and make an excuse...
but she didn't. It was painful. It was painful that it was not even the girl's fault yet she was hitting herself because of something she could not control.

Airi knew if she cried along, Haguro would feel even more awful. Haguro would feel even more dejected. She shall not let that happen. She pushed everything away, pushed all emotions just to think clear, to be able to properly answer, to try understand the silent needs Haguro had.

However, now it all accumulated, so much that she knew she had to get somewhere hidden, somewhere far away where no one else would see her.

No one shall see their admiral breakdown.

The factory should be empty. All who should have sortied already sortie... and no one else was scheduled for fitting or modernization.

It was a big metal building with mountains of scrap metals by one side of the site. Cutting through the port, Airi half ran towards it. She partly thanked the rain the fact it was approaching dinner. No one was around.

Kicking screws and gears and discarded funnel part, Airi found herself at the backside of the building, facing barbed wire of the naval base compound, with mountains of scrap metals around her, and the cold, steel wall of the factory behind her. The rain was still falling in light drizzle. Her white uniform slightly damp… her shoes soiled, her hair draping into et curtain behind her..

Breathing slowly, Airi grit her teeth and rested her back to the cold steel wall. The ache resurfaced again.

A second later, she broke down.

They were painful, restrained chokes, with tears uncontrollably overflowed to her face then down to the ground.

Those tears were for everything, everything that happened in the base. It was for the tortured soul of Haguro, for the unsolved anger of Ashigara, for Choukai, for Kongou, for Haruna, for every single ship that had shed their tears and blood for this base. These two days had been horrid for Airi's own mental health. These ships remained loyal even with inadequate living condition, remained strong and vigilant, remained so dutiful yet they were given so little credits for what they did.

Haguro's shaken figure came to her mind again and again. She was in pain. She was ill. And it was not something instant bucket could cure.

Airi's anger towards the previous admiral was in the level that she could not even think of feeling towards anyone in her life, ever. How could anyone be so disgusting. How could anyone be so heartless, so inhuman, so...

She pushed her palm to her eyes, pressing it, gritting her teeth and trying to control her sob and cry. She shall not cry too much. It would show. It would show. It shall not show.

She hit her back to the wall. Once. Twice. Thrice. Forcing air out of her lungs, huffing to let go off all feelings. The pain brought back her defenses.

Another hit. She should clear her head now. And another hit. She should-

"You will hurt yourself, Admiral. Please stop hitting yourself."
A deep voice.

Airi's eyes shot open and she stepped back, turning on her heels so fast in shock. She thought no one would be there. No one was supposed to be there.

A mechanic stood by an opened doorway, scrap metals occupied both of his hands. His brown hair was in a mess, his face rather unshaved with oil tracks by his cheeks and forehead. He had square, strong jaw covered by stubble. His warm black eyes looked at her in worry. By his chest, Airi could see his stars stitched to the dark uniform.

Lieutenant.

Feeling like a failure, Airi found herself stepping back.

Silence spanned in three seconds felt like half an hour.

He was the one who broke it.

"Uhh..." He put down some of his things to the ground to free one of his hand then pointed to the left, to a small shed near them. "... If you would like to wash your face, the tap is over there, Admiral. You can use the towel there to wipe the dirt of your shoes as well. They will not know."

Airi blinked, her eyes moving from the shed to him again. He seemed to try not to look at her too much, busying himself by taking his metal scraps again. Airi couldn't find any words to say. She was ashamed he found out yet… yet it would be a lie if she could not see the message floating in the air between them.

As he took his metal scraps, he said, "A mechanic left an untouched cup of tea by his room on the first door to the right. He was out throwing away scrap metal and left it before even drinking it."

"... And a cat somehow drinks his tea?"

Hearing her voice for the first time, his eyes glanced a bit to Airi’s face, sparkling. A small smile curved his lips.

"Yes, a cat somehow drinks his tea. The mechanic figured the cat must be cold in the rain."

He bowed.

"Good day, Admiral."

"Ah, wait."

He stopped his steps. Airi knew her face was still a mess but she didn't care less. He had seen her after all.

"Thank you," her voice came out weaker than she expected. "Lieutenant…..?"

"Kouseki Heishi, Admiral," He gracefully answered, giving a knowing smile. "And I don't understand why you say thank you. I only accidentally let a cat sip my tea."

-XXX-

The rain. It stopped.

Haguro cast a look at the blinking lights of the harbor in the distance and the numerous street
lamps lining by the sidewalk. Sitting by the chair near the window, she had a cup of tea by her hand. It was warm many long minutes ago but now it was cold within her hand.

Perhaps that tea was the one thing that signified just how long she had been sitting there alone, without moving, staring at the distant harbor, ever since the Admiral went away.

"If you want to be scrapped, if you really need it out of your own will, then inform Ashigara."

Her grip on the cup strengthened again.

Oneesan…

Her kind, strong sister.

"Well, we shall not let Myoukou-neesan be disappointed," Ashigara ruffled Haguro's hair with a grin on her face. Her grin was wide and confident. "Both of us, we'll show them what Myoukou class can do!"

She used to be the force of positivity between them, so strong and dependable, full of spirit and aggressive. Ever since the incident, however, all that Haguro saw from that back was anger…

"None of this is your fault."

Was that the truth? But then, who actually had the position to say which was her fault and which was not?

The door clicked and swung open.

"Tadaima."

Haguro turned around.

Ashigara closed the door behind her. Her eyes fell to her sister, wary, steady, even if tired. Whatever she did, Haguro knew all that she caused her sister was worry.

"Inform Ashigara."

"Okaerinasai, Neesan. Otsukaresama."

Haguro found herself rising on her feet, placing her cup on the table. A smile came to her lips just like a template program.

"Would you like to have some tea?"

All that she caused her sister was always worry.

- To be continued -

Chapter End Notes

Kouseki Heishi is written 幸関　平詩　幸 (luck, happiness)　閥 (gate)　平 (peace)　詩 (poetry)
Meltdown

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Good day. Here comes the third chapter, finally one chapter before the ending of this Arc. This Arc has been most exhausting for me lol. Well, coupled with few real life instances, I guess it does bring up the depressing vibe into a whole new level of reality to me personally as I typed this lol

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of its character. I do not own the song or poem I featured in this fic. For songs in Japanese, I do translate them my self.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The lighter that's running out of oil
The pit of my stomach felt like burning
If only it's true that everything is such a lie
it would have been better

iroha(sasaki) feat Kagamine Rin - Roshin Yuukai

"I-I'm sorry…" 

Her voice was broken, trembling. Airi stopped her steps. When she looked back, what she found was Haguro crouching, hugging herself.

Her hands and body shook so hard. Tears just flowed uncontrollably as she watched the pavement —fearful, broken looks in her eyes. What was before her eyes perhaps was not even the pavement at all. Perhaps she did not even realized the existence of the pavement, compared to the solidity of her fear. Her knuckles turned white with all the force she exerted in the way she hugged herself.

Her voice shook, almost inaudible.

"I-I'm sorry, Admiral… F-Forgive me, I.."

"Haguro."

Airi crouching in front of the heavy cruiser, taking the trembling, rigid heavy cruiser into her arms. Those whispers of apology still came between Haguro's restrained, fast breathing. Her shaking turned even more violent when Airi rubbed her back gently.

I'm sorry.

"Haguro."

"I-I'm… sorry.. I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"Sssh, it's okay. It's okay, Haguro, you've done well."

Airi's brown eyes marked the opened front door of the heavy cruiser dormitory. They were just
They only walked a few steps away before Haguro broken down. Just a few steps away from the door.

"You've done well."

- Meltdown -

"Good morning. Would you like some breakfast?"

It sounded like some kind of wicked cassette tape in their morning.

Waking up, finding Haguro on that chair, receiving that line. Every single time. It was Ashigara's every morning. She would go out in the afternoon, taking care of training, reports, and mission briefing. Scouting missions and patrol came one after another. With their small number, all available ships were used in rotation. When she was not scouting, Ashigara was patrolling. When she was not patrolling, she was scouting. When she didn't do both, she was out on an even longer and more exhausting mission of obliterating enemies alongside the battleships and carriers. She would come home too tired to even sit for dinner, even if she tried. The dinner hour would have already long passed but as always, somebody would have wrapped something up for her and give it to Haguro to give to her later. Haguro would always be awake whenever she came home no matter how late in the night or even in the morning. All with another reel of cassette recording.

"Okaerinasai, Oneesan. You must be tired. Would you like to have some meal or tea?"

All of these were wrong. Ashigara knew they were wrong. When she frustratingly told Takao of the whole matter in between the mission briefing, her best friend could only touch her arm and said gently, "One of you should break it."

How? Ashigara knew if she cross over that border she created by herself, she would explode. There was this burning feeling she knew would be the bane of her if she did not get hold of it. This feeling made her wanted to shake her sister, punch the wall, rip this unmoving plaster of time, and just leap back to the past where she could have just murdered the sh*t out of that admiral. She did not want to hurt Haguro in anyway, there was enough pain for Haguro at the moment. Yet she wonder if leaving everything this way was alright. She was losing her little sister, one part at a time, with every greeting and every broken smile. Knowing it happened, but able to do nothing but let everything slipped away felt so frustrating. And the more time went by, the stronger, the bigger this burn in her heart corroded her.

She was tired. Too tired to reach out.

Rain.

Ashigara opened her eyes, finding herself wrapped up inside her futon. The view of the pillows, the peeling plastered wall, and the wooden floor of the room greeted her.

Also rain.

The soft, gentle whisper of spring rain outside the room.

She had woken up late again. Her exhaustion always left her sleeping like a log every time she touched the futon. She had whacked the hell out of a Ne and a Wo class, while having to avoid rain of shells and torpedoes with the searchlight on her last night. Ooi and Suzuya were hit to critical damage though and the Admiral ordered them retreat. It was still awfully exhausting, mentally and
physically. Ooi had been especially bitter when they got back, which made Ashigara felt like her energy was drained away even further.

That was good, in a way. Since Ashigara knew unless she exhausted herself into a senseless rag doll, she would not be able to sleep. Not when she knew perfectly the one lying down beside her might not even have a single blink of sleep.

After the incident, Haguro used to cry in her sleep, if those really could be counted as sleep. For the first few days, Ashigara would wrap her arms around her sister, telling her that it was alright, that everything was fine. She gradually stopped crying though and she started to push her sister away, saying she was fine. Especially when the mission resumed.

It was an obvious lie. Ashigara knew it was not that Haguro got better. It was because it got worse. However, the more Ashigara asked, the more Haguro withdrew herself.

Questions turned to dead ends. Everything turned into formalities and everything turned empty. Their conversations turned fewer and fewer.

Ashigara could now count by one hand the topic of their conversations.

There was nothing that could describe this fury and anger in Ashigara's heart whenever the realization of the truth came to her. It was that wretched abomination. That poor excuse of an admiral. That man who had brought them their suffering for being such a jerk, such an a**hole, such a... She wished she had killed him that day. She so wished she had. Even though she knew she should not. Her conditioning would rip her inside out and she would be scrapped and all that but at least she would have served him what he deserved.

Now she had nothing she could do. She could not battle this condition out. She could not shot this one down. It was not something that you waged war against and just be able to win with your fist. Ashigara hoped, many times, that she were as assertive and motherly as Myoukou. Myoukou would have known what to do in this kind of situation, would have been able to fulfill Haguro's needs, whatever it was. Nachi would also wisely be able to sort the problem out, being the kind of person she was. Ashigara, on the other hand, could not. The more she push, the more she destroyed her little sister. She did not understand what to do. Haguro's own kindness was the one that push them both away from each other.

Ashigara felt like sighing. She held it in, though, because she knew every sigh she made would burden Haguro more. Haguro had enough of those things.

She eventually sit, dreading the world that stopped spinning after that incident. Usually Haguro already woke up and sitting by the chair. Rubbing her eyes, she looked right to that direction as always.

Something was wrong. There was no greeting.

Haguro was sitting by her usual chair, indeed, but her hair, they were visibly damp. Her clothes also showed that perhaps she had been in the rain, at least temporarily.

Most of all, however, she was shaking. She looked as if she would crushed her fingers together and her eyes were unfocused, shaken, in fear. She breathed fast.

Something was wrong.

"Haguro?"
Haguro jolted in surprise, quickly turning around to look at her big sister. Right at that moment, Ashigara saw something shut down in her eyes.

Her shaking abruptly stopped.

"Ah, oneesan, Good morning."

A smile. That same smile every morning.

"How was your sleep? Would you like to have-"

"Is there anything wrong?"

Haguro stopped her movement at her question. Ashigara looked to her eyes deeply and she soon found the familiar move her sister would do: averting her eyes somewhere else. Feeling frustrated, Ashigara asked, again.

"Is there anything wrong, Haguro? What happened?"

There it happened again after her question: the unease, the uncertainty, the hesitation, the pain. Watching it all coming to her little sister, made that familiar, so wickedly familiar, burn in her heart resurfaced again. *This is unfair.* Ashigara clashed her teeth together, involuntarily gripping her sheet.

"Did anyone-"

"I am alright, Oneesan."

Haguro smiled. Instead of feeling reassured, Ashigara had this heavy desperation weighted her chest right at that moment. *No, don't step in there. Don't run.*

However, before she could say anything else, Haguro continued.

"I am alright. I was just daydreaming. Ah, would you like some breakfast?"

There was a moment of silent, a quiet battle. Involuntarily, a sigh escaped Ashigara's mouth. But she knew Haguro understood.

*I understand. I won't ask anymore.*

Their world remained unmoved.

"Yes. Thank you, Haguro."

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Clashing her teeth together, Ashigara continued the sail while grabbing the aching wound by her ribs. She received a painful AP shell from a battleship earlier in previous battle, causing her a moderate damage. The rest of her fleet were quite okay, so the admiral asked them to continue a little more. It was not pretty. Darkness fell around them, they were halfway to finishing their mission. It would be good if they could just pass this area to the resources depot safely...

Within the darkness of the night, a loud boom came. Like an instantaneous switch, Ashigara could feel her whole body reacted.

"Hou 4! Both sides, full speed ahead!"
Ashigara turned 40 degree to the right quickly, which all of the other ships behind her followed almost instantaneously. Waterspouts rose from the spot they should have been if only they just stayed on their route. Ambush was never nice.

"Admiral?"

"They are after the resources as well. Engage enemy."

The admiral had spoken.

Inside her heart, she was quite annoyed the Admiral actually understood what she wanted.

"Engage enemy! All ship, full speed ahead!" As she said so, Ashigara flared her searchlight to the direction of the attack source.

Two battleships, two heavy cruisers, and two destroyers.

"Enemy on starboard! Fire!"

Sounds of guns locking resounded, but before they could retaliate, gunshots wreaked the night again. Kagerou dropped her stance and amped her rudder rotation.

"Ashigara-san!"

She cut the formation, right on the space between three shells and Ashigara.

Explosion shook the water surface. The battleships' shells hit with immense force, throwing her small body off the water surface several meters back. Ashigara could hear Shiranui releasing all of her torpedoes right after, muttering something inaudible.

There was no time to sail towards Kagerou, several wakes visibly approached from starboard.

Ashigara gritted her teeth and cut the line to portside, flashing her signal lights at the same time for her members-torpedoes came rushing right and left, barely missing. Water splashed by her sides and she stepped firmly to the water surface.

A wild grin curved her lips when the familiar click of loaded gun came from all her turrets. Her eyes glinted.

"FIRE!"

It was her guns now. Familiar recoils shook her body, accompanying pain hit the wounds by her ribs right away but instead it fueled her, burned her. The pain made her focused.

She hit. The flagship battleship was thrown off the formation, fire lit up in the distance. Another explosion resounded as it seemed her ammunition burned and exploded. Roars of destroyers came from afar, followed with thunderous barrage of fire. All concentrated on her.

That was good, they did not notice Suzuya and the others.

Skillfully dodging shells, Ashigara watched as torpedoes and shells rained down on the remaining Abyssals. Thrills rushed to her veins. They were winning.

Shigure suddenly shouted.

"Ashigara-san! Watch out!"
Too late. She was about to turn to starboard when a torpedo rushed to her right from that direction. There was just not enough time to align herself. The wakes burst right before her eyes.

Today was not a good day at all.

Three torpedoes exploded.

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Ashigara opened her eyes. Pain hit her right away, making her grimace. Not only her ribs, her whole body ached so bad. Torpedo hit at night hurt more than shelling, her body knew that the most. She straightened her uncomfortable pose, as she dozed off with her head resting at the side of the healing bath tub she was in. It made her neck stiff and her sore body hurt even more. Alerted by the barrage of senses, she took a deep breath and looked around.

The bath place was empty. Kagerou had been discharged, it seemed, so that left her alone inside her miserable bath tub. Four healing bath tub were available by the side of the regular communal bath. Even if they could clean themselves at their respective dorm, a communal bath was still available alongside the "dock" or the healing bath tub. It used to be only two, but upon her transfer the first thing that Admiral Tendouji did was developing two more healing bath space. They did get patch up by medicine and other things before plunging into the bath, but still higher level and bigger ship girls took much longer time than lower level and smaller ones. The Admiral seemed really apologetic when she did not order the instant bucket for Ashigara and Kagerou when they arrived. The number of instant bucket was dwindling, she needed to order expedition and ask the central government for more supply. She saluted them for a job well done, however. If that was a job well done.

"You completely obliterated the enemy fleet," she said with a smile. "That means the resources are alright for now. We can try again next time. Good work."

Her positivity was annoying. Ashigara could not help but still be annoyed whenever she was so kind. It irrationally irritated her. She understood that the Admiral might be a good person. She understood that whatever she decided to do had been justifiable and logically acceptable decisions both in terms of naval warfare tactics and fleet morale. Heck, she even told Haguro that the Admiral was a good person—although that also partly to make her little sister less anxious, almost more than her own judgement over the new admiral.

Unfortunately, it seemed the Admiral was genuinely just a kind person. It frustrated her that she had no reason to hate the Admiral at all.

She wanted to hate her.

Ashigara splashed the warm water to her face. She should not feel that way towards her admiral, it was not right. That was not how a ship girl should ever feel about their superior.

She never told the others, but she figured they knew. She was broken. Her "devotion conditioning" was broken. It was broken the moment the incident happened, just like how Kongou's was broken the moment her little sisters sunk. Their devotion to their country faltered as their devotion to their admiral did. Perhaps one might argued that ships like Ooi and Yamashiro that clearly born quite antagonistic towards any admiral assigned to them were broken ships from the start, but their devotion to their country was as solid as any other ship. At the moment, Ashigara knew she almost did not care less about the nation.

All she cared about was her little sister. If she were to sink… what of Haguro? If she were to be
scrapped, what of Haguro? Unlike her, despite the incident Haguro was not broken. Haguro clearly still had that same strong devotion to the country and her admiral. Her loyalty remained unaltered, the exact reason why her little sister was so tortured.

Haguro was way stronger than her.

Ashigara slowly brought the warm water she gathered on both of her palms and buried her face in there.

The chemical felt nice. She might be addicted to pain.

The moment she went out of the bath, the sun was already quite high. Marines mobilizing steel and bauxite in crates passed her. The base was lively. The dorm, not quite so. She had several hours before her briefing for the next mission started, so Ashigara thought she might catch some sleep at her room. The quiet of the dorm was perfect, and she could meet her sister too. Not that she knew what to say to her though. Knowing she was okay was everything. Still feeling quite sore, Ashigara grabbed the handle of the door leading to her room. She opened it.

"Tadai- eh?"

Almost right before the door was a crouching Haguro. The heavy cruiser turned back between her sob, looking at her big sister with terrified expression and tears all over her face. Her eyes turned broken the moment she saw Ashigara.

"Haguro!" Ashigara quickly moved to Haguro's side, wrapping her sister in her embrace. Haguro's body turned rigid by her hug and her breath hitched. She curled even tighter into a ball when Ashigara hugged her, and shook even more. With the presence of her sister, she hyperventilated.

Alerted, Ashigara eventually released her hug and tried to cup her sister's face with her hands, to raise her sister's chin, wrestling away rigid hands that tried to stop her. The brown eyes averted her gaze, almost frantically trying to run away from her eyes. Haguro shied away from her, even wrestled against her.

"Haguro. Haguro, it's me. It's me, what happened? What's wrong?"

Her little sister shook her head, still trying to not show her face and block her sister's hands but within her fast, rapid, and uncontrolled breathing, Ashigara knew she tried to say she was okay. Even now, when she visibly was not... and that happened the moment she stepped in.

Then it dawned on her.

Her little sister was crying, hyperventilating, under her touch. She began shaking harder after she came.

Her sister was terrified... Of her.

Ashigara stopped trying. She rested her hands at Haguro's shoulders and stayed there, watching as her sister stayed frozen by her firm move.

Restrained sob was the only sound in the room now. Haguro was still trembling, crying, in fear.

Ashigara slowly released her grip from Haguro's shoulder then kept her hands by her own thighs, watching her little sister sobbed.

Slowly, Haguro covered her face with both of her hands.
One, two, minute passed on. It became three minutes, then four.

Ashigara did not exactly know how long Haguro was crying or her staying there watching. All that she knew was this empty feelings, a painful stab that hurt her more than any AP shell could inflict on her. The sob hurt her, the cry, the pain, everything… every fact, every single fact in the room stabbed her. And also this molten, molten fury sitting at the pit of her stomach, churning her insides.

She hated that admiral. And now she hated herself. The fact that she could not help and instead made things worse, angered and pained her more than anything. She hated herself more than anything.

So she sat there, watching and waiting, swallowing back every bitterness and hatred she had for herself and for everything, observing her sister.

The breathing slowed down.

"I'm sorry…"

Haguro's voice came not more than a mere whisper. It was almost inaudible, a mere wisp of breath between uncontrollably heavy and fast breathing. Ashigara shook her head, giving a low voice of reassurnement.

"Oneesan.. I-I am sorry…"

"No… No, I am sorry."

But Ashigara knew if she said it, everything would just shut down again. Haguro may not need her apology, even if her heart now screamed with that. She should not ask her something, when Haguro had nothing to give.

"What for, Haguro?"

It took a huge amount of will to not make her voice faltered. She shall not cry. Not when Haguro would be even more tortured by her tears.

Her little sister finally, slowly, looked up to meet her eyes. Ache that felt like a dozen needle enveloped Ashigara right away at the sight of Haguro's tear filled eyes. Her hands were_dying to brush those tears away but she could not bring herself to. Her little sister would just shut herself again with her proximity.

"For… Hurting you.. Just now…"

Ashigara clenched her fists by her thighs, swallowing her tears back. Haguro, even then, remained as kind as she always had.

"It is not your fault, Haguro."

Her will managed to keep her hands by her thighs, and her voice calm.

"It's never your fault."

Haguro's breathing caught up again. Then she cried, again. Ashigara had no idea what those tears meant, and her heart screamed even more. Her pain felt more prevalent. Her anger by her stomach, even more so.
Burning, churning.

But Haguro eventually place her hands on top of her sister's... And she slowly, very slowly, despite her quickening breathing, pulled through her anxiety.

"Oneesan, I... I asked the Admiral to scrap me."

*What?*

Something, somewhere, had shattered.

Haguro took a small breath and continued, "b-but I need... Your—"

"What did you say?"

**Burn.**

Haguro began to falter.

"I-I asked the Admiral—"

"Just what the *fuck.* did you just say?"

**BURN.**

Her movement was faster than her own train of thoughts, which had shut frozen right at that moment. She grabbed both of Haguro's shoulder with her shaking hands, drawing her close in a one, sharp tug.

"Do you *realized* what scrapping means?"

*You will die.*

"Do you realized what will happen?! ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?!"

The one shaking was not Haguro now, it was her. Steel lodged in her syllables: sharp, strong, harsh.

"This isn't like you at all! What are you saying?!

Haguro opened her mouth to talk, against her quickening breathing, but Ashigara could not notice that with all the burst of blood to her head.

"The Haguro that I know won't back down on anything! The Haguro that I know won't choose the easy way out of something! The Haguro that I know is not a coward! THIS ISN'T LIKE YOU!"

**YOU WILL DIE.**

*Don't leave me.*

"Tell me this is a joke! Tell me you're joking! FUCKING SNAP OUT OF THIS!"

Ashigara heaved heavy breaths. Burn suffocated her chest like nothing she had ever felt before and she looked down to the floor, gritting her teeth to fight against her own fury. But the screams in her head was louder—the scream that told her over and over, that this is wrong, this false, this is a lie, the world is a lie, everything is a lie.
A hand touched her trembling ones by Haguro's right shoulder.

"Unlike… Neesan… I am broken…"

Haguro’s voice made Ashigara opened her eyes, staring at the old wooden floor.

*Broken.*

"I know… I am."

Her grips on Haguro's shoulder tightened.

"The Admiral said, she would only scrap me… if I have your permission."

*The Admiral.*

"*Please do come to me, when you have any request.*"

*My permission."

"I have always been useless after that time."

There was a smile on Haguro's lips.

"As a scrap metal... I finally… won't burden you in your life anymore."

The yellow eyes shot open.

"*Would you like to have some breakfast?*"

"You will be happier, Oneesan."

SLAP!

The speed was blinding.

Haguro was frozen wide eyed—all her words and thoughts just a few moments before shattered with the sound of the backhand slap landed on her right cheek. Ashigara's left hand was still on Haguro’s shoulder, but her right, visibly shaking violently, was up in the air after the hard, fast slap on her sister's face.

"Do you seriously think I will be happier?"

Her voice betrayed all her previous defenses. It trembled, teetering at the edge of breaking. Tears burst uncontrollably from the usually brave yellow eyes. Her words shook.

"Am I not your sister, Haguro?"

Silence greeted them—washing them both with pain, question, fury, frustration, and love. A lot of love.

Finally, in a speed almost akin to the slap, Ashigara turned around and bolted out of the door, slamming the door shut behind her, and left Haguro alone their room once more.

XXX

"You are unsure on what you do, Admiral?"
At the sound of his question, she raised her shoulders, bringing her cup of tea closer to her lips.

"Sometimes you just have to question yourself, Lieutenant."

He chuckled.

"Indeed."

The tea started to lose their warmth, together with the dropping temperature caused by the slow moving spring rain cloud. They were sitting together on broken funnels under the shade of the factory, facing the view of the metal fence and mountains of scrap metal that grew ever more familiar to her now. This place was, indeed, sheltered. Other mechanic rarely, if ever, came out of the door, since the Lieutenant was always the last one to sort out the scrap metal for deposit.

Trust could be so easy to get sometimes, dangerously so. They would not wait for each other, nor would they hold up something for each other. If they found each other however, a cup of tea with some talk felt so natural to do. It was something they silently agreed on, as strange as it may seem with their ranks.

They shared wisdom. He had more experience with the ship more than her in several aspects, that was for sure.

"Admiral, ships are ships."

She glanced at him, watching him sipping his tea.

"They are not built to make their own decision. It is you up to you, the admiral, to decide. Upon finding themselves in a position where they have to decide on their own, it is more foreign to them than it is to us. It will be harder to them than it is to us. I believe… you figure that out yourself."

She did not reply and he did not wait. The admiral was relatively easy to guess. Moving his cup in small circular movement to stir his tea, he continued.

"As I repair them, remodel them, fitting their rigs and everything, I realized that even if we created them, there are way too many things that we also do not understand about them. We don't know how far the conditioning works, or how human they are. We know far too little, to even speculate about their capability and perception."

"We wouldn't know how far we are allowed to step in."

"Indeed," A sad smile formed on his face. His eyes were kind when he addressed hers directly. "That is very true, Admiral."

Her humble smile was something he had grown accustomed to. It was always an encouragement, telling him that his opinion was valued.

"Admiral, perhaps giving them the chance to choose might be really, really cruel and is a challenge to their nature. But they are your fleet, Admiral, and this is your base."

The mechanic smiled, nodding his head when he saw her eyes changed.

"Please, shape us however you want us to be."

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Ashigara spun the ballpoint in her hand, before tapping it furiously to the desk. Thuck thuck thuck
There were 6 people in the command room, sitting around a large table on one side of the room. Ooyodo continued to write on a whiteboard as instructed by the paper on the clipboard in her hand, ignoring the monotonous and obviously uneasy sound. Nagato was sitting with her eyes closed and her hands folded, seemingly unperturbed. Kagerou stole glances towards Ashigara but kept her hands under the table, thumbs moving uneasily. Shiranui did not show any expression. Choukai was clearly disturbed, biting her lower lips anxiously. Several times she seemed like she was about to say something, but then she held back, turning it into a sigh.

The silence, and the ballpoint tapping sound, continued for several more seconds, until suddenly Nagato's voice broke them.

"Ashigara."

The ballpoint tapping stopped, but the heavy cruiser's gestures clearly did not seem at all better. Ashigara merely glanced at Nagato, finding the battleship's eyes on her.

"Go out. Cool your head down."

A tense silence followed her words. Even Ooyodo stopped her writing, joining the others in eyeing how Ashigara threw a rather sharp look at Nagato. A while later, Ashigara slammed the ballpoint to the desk—making Kagerou flinched—then stood up. Without a word, she turned around, went out of the door, and half-slammed the door shut.

Another silence fell on the room. Everyone looked at each other, some rather anxiously. Nagato cast a glance at Choukai.

"Did anything happen?"

Choukai jolted at the sudden question. Her face turned pale.

"N-Not that I know of, Nagato-san, I am very sorry."

Nagato closed her eyes again. After a while she stood up.

"Then there can be only one possibility."

With that, Nagato followed Ashigara out of the room, leaving a confused silence in the command room.

XXX

"Ashigara."

Ashigara only slightly glanced back at Nagato's call. She was standing by the beach, facing the sea. She seemed to have kicked the sand around her, giving a sense that she was building some kind of moat somehow. After catching Nagato in her sight, she merely looked back to the sea. Nagato slowed down her steps, eventually standing beside the heavy cruiser. Ashigara paid her no mind.

They both did not say anything, letting the sound of the sea slowly sipping in. Seagulls cried far away, as if trying to tell the dark cloud of spring rain to go away. It would rain again soon. It had just stopped raining but it would soon begin to fall again.

"Why didn't you let me hit him?"
Nagato glanced beside her, noticing the trembling, bitter note in Ashigara's voice. The heavy cruiser was clashing her teeth together, containing all her resentment. Her hands visibly clenched into fists so hard they shook. She closed her eyes when her breathing got heavier and her voice cracked.

"Why didn't you just let me kill him?!

Nagato did not reply. She merely watched when Ashigara slowly fell to a crouch, hugging her knees and burying her face in her arms. Her body shook with her sobs and there she started to cry. Nagato stood by her place, folding her hand and listening to her teammate's cry.

A wave came close to them, receding just by Ashigara's shoes. It filled the patch of sand that she kicked, before eventually disappeared into the sand.

The crying eventually toned down, softening into weak draw of breaths.

"You see what happened to Kongou," Nagato said without even looking at Ashigara. "That rob her off the time she could have used for Haruna, who needs her desperately. I shan't let the system take you away from Haguro like what happened with them."

Nagato paused, observing the tightening of Ashigara's grip on her own arms.

"I think it is much better for you to be there for Haguro in the time she needs you the most."

Her body shook even harder, in accordance with her sobs. She heaved loudly, as if trying to contain all emotions in but failing with every breath she exhaled. Fury, pain, desperation. All that filled her figure was only frustration.

"... Does she even need me, Nagato-san."

Nagato glanced beside her. After two heavy breaths, Ashigara raised her head. She made no move of brushing the tears that flowed on her face as she looked at something that seemed even farther away than the horizon ending by the sea.

"I slapped her."

Her hand began to shake again.

"Unlike... Neesan... I am broken..."

"I slapped my sister when I was supposed to console her."

"I know... I am."

"Does my existence change anything for her?"

"I have always been useless after that time."

"Do I even have any use other than making things worse for her?"

There was no reply, and Ashigara did not need it anyway. With a bitter smile, she slowly buried her face again in her arm.

"Am I not your sister, Haguro?"

"... the one she needs isn't me..."
She could rip off her sleeve with her grip at that second.

"The one she needs... is not me."

She could kill someone at that second. And the perhaps the first one she would kill was not even their previous admiral.

- To be continued -

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I changed the chapter's "arc name" from "Weapon" to "Meltdown", since the POV, as you can see, changed
Request

Chapter Summary

"Upon finding themselves in a position where they have to decide on their own, it is more foreign for them than it is for us. It will be harder for them than it is for us."

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Actually I was writing this chapter as the last, but it exceeds 30 pages in my Google Doc as I continue it. In the end, I decided to split the chapter into two.

Tokyo 7th Sisters has amazing songs and good sense of humor. I need to play it more these days...

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of its characters, or the songs and or poetry that I used in this fic. They belong to respective owners and credited as such. However I translate Japanese lyrics I use in this fic, unless it is stated otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is fate, the fact that we are here
The tears that have been shed will be the evidence
That courage isn't a mere miracle

777 Sisters - Bokura wa Aozora ni Naru

Airi walked up the wooden stairs of heavy cruiser dorm slowly, listening to the creaking sound the panels made with every step. Her eyes scrutinized the condition of the place—noticeing holes, protruding nails and screw, creaky panels, and other signs of dilapidation. Every single time she came to the dormitory, she had this exasperated feelings. She wished the central gave her more than standard funding. She had been waiting for her proposal—which included a long list detailing the budgeting—to be approved and it would be at least next month until the fund came. She needed it fast though. For now, with the severely tight budget all that she could do is fixing the run down destroyer dormitory, which was even worse than the cruiser dormitory. There were still missions to be cleared as well so she had been pretty much squeezing every last bit of coin they had in their disposal. She wondered how this whole place could actually run with this kind of condition. It had not even been a month since her transfer and she already felt like she had been getting 20 years older than before the time she got the position.

Arriving at the second floor, Airi once again held her sigh. Buckets were left here and there, some already half full from last night's heavy rain. What kind of shelter that needs two buckets every meter? Was that even something they could call "shelter"? But they have no fund at the moment and anyway, Airi knew that if repair happened, the repair team would mostly be males. With the current condition, it is much better to proceed solving matters one by one, or for a very obvious reason Ashigara would be by her doorstep with all her guns and ready to blast her to oblivion.
Depending on Airi's own state of stress lately, getting gunned down could range from very favorable to downright sucks. Fortunately or unfortunately it seemed as the iceberg of problem this naval base had had actually shown most of its facets already, Airi would most probably tilt more on the "very favorable" side if that happened within this month.

A trip to the hospital sounds like vacation. Oh yes.

Airi finally arrived at her destination. It was still really, really early in the morning but she knew the one she was about to meet must have been awake. After all, they had been doing this every day for the past weeks. Airi knew the dog owned by the bakery by the town on the way to the naval base now identify the creaking of her bicycle.

She knocked.

- Request -

That was strange.

No reply was heard from inside the room. Airi tilted her head. It was almost impossible for Haguro to be out of the dormitory. Perhaps Ashigara was present and awake? But that was not possible since Airi had almost all heavy cruisers assigned for a mission today to make up for Haruna's absence from the fleet—she got bombed pretty bad by a Wo Class. Ashigara supposedly was sailing for a long cruise to the north.

Haguro was supposed to be in the room and alone. Airi grabbed the doorknob and turned it open.

"Haguro? I'm coming in."

The room was, as always, unchanged. Eerily so. Every single thing was still in the same position. The only difference was perhaps the breakfast wrapped by the other ships for her and Ashigara. It was still early today so that bundle was nowhere to be seen. There was also no familiar bundle of futon which was Ashigara sleeping, conveniently.

Haguro was sitting by that same chair near the window, motionless. It didn't seem like she realized Airi had stepped inside the room now. It would be really bad if she surprised her.

"Haguro, good morning."

Haguro jolted and turned back, completely surprised upon finding Airi was already in the room. She shot up immediately, bowing down several times while stumbling on her greetings.

"G-Good morning, Admiral! H-How insolent of me! I am sorry I did not notice your coming, I apologize for my absent mindedness. I am very-"

"It's alright, it's okay," Airi gave a light laughter to ease the panicking heavy cruiser. She tapped Haguro's shoulder to tell her to lift her head. "Perhaps I didn't knock hard enough. Did I startle you? I am sorry."

"N-No, Admiral, please, don't be. I am the one who should apologize. I should have been more attentive. T-This isn't good… as a warship…"

The end of her words somehow disappeared into an almost inaudible whisper. Airi watched as Haguro did what she always do when she was anxious: avoiding eye contact. As the time they spent together lengthened with their frequent meeting every morning, Airi had learned what always triggered Haguro's anxiety. Male personnel was a very obvious one, but there were also other
things. Mission, orders, duty, admiral... *Ashigara.* Walking out of the dormitory was also among them, but for a different reason. It was not the "walking out" that actually set her back, it was the purpose and the eventual activity after going out of the dormitory. The feeling that she would be on duty, the feeling that she would be used, was what set her off.

At first, it was a puzzle for Airi to crack down the reasoning behind every reaction. Haguro was defensive and extremely unstable—especially with the fact that Airi herself was on the position that could easily, really easily, trigger her anxiety. She figured it would be so, although she was shocked when she first saw the impact of her words on Haguro in the first day of their meeting. After careful elimination and observations, she eventually understood many things. Her position, more than her gender, was the one that trigger the anxiety attack. It was quite problematic. That meant regardless that she was a woman, she could still really easily push Haguro to spiral down the wrong pathway. However, that was also the reason why she could locate the trigger immediately. Airi needed to establish a place where Haguro could emotionally identify her differently with the previous Admiral. Here, her gender did play a positive part. The stark difference was helpful.

*I am different with him. I am not him. I don't ask the same out of you.*

Airi noticed how slowly, really slowly, Haguro began to open herself. For one, she did not hyperventilate when Airi hugged her.

But it was still a long, very long way from "normality". Airi had been visiting Haguro everyday to talk with her, almost always asking Haguro to walk with her out of the dorm. Every day, the progress was only a few step away from the door, then only a mere few steps further. 100% of the time Haguro would be left shivering on the ground, shaking uncontrollably. However, even if she knew it might happen, Haguro never said no. She wanted to be of use, she wanted to be what she was supposed to be, but she could not. Or at least she thought she could not. This was the problem that Airi knew she should destroy. She did identify though, that just like her, Haguro wanted to be normal again. It was the only hope that Airi cling on to.

Even if Haguro asked to be scrapped, it was not because she wanted to die. It was merely because it was the best way that she thought she could serve. Someone who was so driven by the desire to die, would not have cared enough to actually help around the dormitory or even open the door for her Admiral everyday.

"*What she said is right, though,*" Lieutenant Kouseki said one day. "*Perhaps it might be better for you and for her if she is scrapped.*"

*She felt like kicking a small screw near her right shoe. It would have relieved her a lot.*

"*I refuse to acknowledge it. She still wants to live, Lieutenant. I don't think dying was her real intention. I don't want to scrap a soul just because she feels useless. There is still so many things in life. If I scrap her, I scrapped two souls. I don't—I don't want that to happen when we can still strive for something else. Especially because I know that she actually wants the same outcome just as I do.*"

"*What if kindness hurts, Admiral?*"

Airi put her hand on Haguro's head and patted her gently, which made the heavy cruiser blushed and shyly looked at her. Haguro seemed uncertain, even if it was clear that she was happy with the gesture.

"*What if to be cruel is kindness?*"
Her eyes, they were so honest and innocent. Airi knew she was very very fond of her.

"... Admiral?"

"How are you today, Haguro?"

The heavy cruiser seemed uncertain again. She drew herself back. Airi instead took both of Haguro's hand, holding them gently. This had happened so many times and she had repeated the statement countlessly. However, she knew that repetition, was the only thing she could do.

"It's okay. It's okay, I want to listen."

The heavy cruiser looked troubled, just like every time whenever Airi asked her how was her day or her condition. They had this little promise, that for this one question, she would not lie. It seemed Haguro herself realized just how troubling actually not lying about her condition was. She was too used to say that she was fine for someone else. They were used to push themselves down for someone else.

"Would you rather not say it to me right now?"

In their promise, if Haguro said no, then Airi would not ask either. She knew pushing would not be good. Some days they only spent time sitting by the chair, enjoying tea. Haguro may or may not talk. The whole process was emotionally exhausting, something which Airi soon realized. However, she tried to be positive, also for Haguro's sake. It kept her own sanity intact as well. Every single 'how are you' count, every single step forward away from the dormitory count. All the wait and patience for everything that Haguro said made every talk felt so rewarding. Also those eyes. Those kind, honest eyes, when they sparkled, they were so beautiful. All of those, it was enough.

Today Haguro seemed to think hard. Airi patiently waited, understanding the trouble she saw in the heavy cruiser's eyes. It was never easy for the one before her.

"I..." her voice was a mere whisper, but it was clear she tried. "... I am not alright."

What happened next was not something Airi expected.

Tears. Confused tears welled up in Haguro's eyes. Those tears, they were different. Usually even if she was not alright, she wouldn't cry right away. Her tears usually happened only when something triggered her anxiety. For now, Airi knew these tears were not of anxiety. Something else happened, outside of their normality.

Airi gently put her hand on Haguro's face, which prompt the tears to flow even more freely. She noticed, other than moving her eyes down, Haguro did not pull away. The heavy cruiser welcomed her.

"Do you want to talk about it, Sweetheart?"

Haguro's hands were trembling, touching Airi's by her face. Uncertain. Again, it was question of her will, not imperative command.

"Upon finding themselves in a position where they have to decide on their own, it is more foreign for them than it is for us. It will be harder for them than it is for us."

It took more than several seconds for the answer to finally come.
Slowly, Haguro nodded.

"Should we slow down?"

Choukai had been saying that numerous times already. Their fleet had been moving through the northern waters nonstop all night, blasting through a night battle and meeting with Kongou's convoy at the predetermined location. They changed the fleet formation according to what the Admiral had told them, and now headed towards the next destination. Kaga's scout confirmed that the enemy was around the perimeter. Regrouping as a combined fleet, they sailed again in a larger convoy.

"N-Nagato-san…"

"We don't need to, Choukai," Ashigara let out a grunt, holding a wound by her stomach. The heavy cruiser shell from last night ached. She got into medium damage for shielding Nagato, who was too busy exchanging fire with a Ta-class battleship to notice that a shell from a Ne-class aiming after her. However they needed to get together with Kongou's fleet immediately and reorganize the convoy, or Kongou would have to proceed without escort fleet, and without Nagato. Thankfully they managed to get to the location on time.

Choukai looked at Ashigara worriedly. It was not only because of the wound. Ashigara seemed to be quite unfocused since yesterday's briefing. She was easily agitated and clearly emotionally unstable. No one said anything however. Or perhaps purposely avoiding the subject.

"We are five knots faster than what would have been adequate to get to the destination on the predetermined time," Choukai raised her glasses. "According to my calculations…"

"Choukai, it's okay," Ashigara raised her volume. "I am not a weakling."

There was an echo of "I will take victory" as the cruiser's signature phrase but it disappeared in her grunt. Choukai glanced at Nagato, who sailed beside Kongou and Kaga, now as the main fleet. The battleship only returned her gaze.

Choukai grimaced but said no more. She could only hope the mission did not end badly. It would be a few more minutes until they had to report to the Admiral again.

Behind her, she could hear Kagerou sighed. At least she was not the only one having bad feelings about these whole thing.

"Am I not your sister, Haguro?"

The statement went on and on in her head, repeating endlessly. Ashigara did not come back after then and Haguro was left alone, sitting on the floor for who knows how long. Ashigara had rarely, if ever, cried in front of her sister. The tears, even more than the slap, confused and hurt Haguro like nothing she had ever experienced before.

She was wrong.

She had done something horribly wrong, but she did not understand why or how to fix it. And now she was getting increasingly confused. If having herself scrapped hurt her sister that much, what should she even do anymore? Existing was wrong, erasing herself was wrong, she didn't know
what was right anymore.

All that she wanted, was for her sister to be happier.

Now with the Admiral sitting beside her, she once again did not know what to do, or even whether asking the admiral to hear her was right. The Admiral even insisted on being the one who served her tea, saying that serving tea made her relax. The tea warmed Haguro, it was delicious, but as she sipped it, she knew no amount of thank you would be enough to actually convey her feelings.

Haguro did not understand Admiral Tendouji at all. She knew the Admiral must be waking up really early to visit her every day, and from what she heard from the others she still took care of missions and everything else. Why would she even do all of this, why would she even spend time for a scrap metal like her? Even if Admiral Tendouji said that she had every intention of keeping Haguro, this Haguro, Haguro did not understand why. She was supposed to be their superior, she should not take care of… petty things such as a heavy cruiser that could not even go out of the dormitory. Yet she did. And the length of what she was willing to do for this useless heavy cruiser was beyond anything Haguro could ever imagined.

She was not a figure of an admiral anymore. Admiral Tendouji never exactly represented herself as one. She was something beyond that, something closer, something warmer. Calling her Admiral lately felt strange, because for Haguro essentially she wasn't one. At least not the admiral that Haguro knew before. Thus, when Admiral Tendouji asked her, always so gently, if she was alright, it was getting harder to not tell her the truth.

It was getting harder to not tell her everything.

The sky was turning from black to blue.

"I told… Ashigara-neesan… about the scrapping…"

Beginning always been hard. However, once she looked up and found the attentive eyes of the Admiral, her heart tightened and everything seemed like on the edge of spilling.

*Help me. Help me.*

And she told the Admiral everything. Although she hesitated if it would be alright to begin with her crying after their session near the door, she eventually decided to begin with that. The Admiral was sharp and intelligent, not telling her the truth would be futile and against what they had promised. After stumbling over the part of her crying—hesitating on describing her feelings, especially since it concerned their walking out session—everything just flowed. Her panic and the broken eyes of her sister, her sister's outburst, the slap… and the eventual words. The Admiral listened without interrupting, patiently waiting whenever Haguro needed her pause. After the statement, Haguro was left staring at her own cup of tea with her hands shaking, watching it blurred with her tears.

"I have never seen Neesan like that," The tremor of her hand worsened. There was this large, dark pit in her heart the moment she saw her sister cried. Something was broken and lost, something she never realized it existed until after it shattered. "I have never seen her so... I don't know, Admiral, I.. N-Neesan never cried. Neesan never… even for once... She…"

The tremor turned uncontrollable, with the tea almost on the verge of spilling.

"Do you seriously think I will be happier?"

*I am sorry I am sorry I am sorry"
"Am I not your sister, Haguro?"

Neesan, I am sorry, Neesan.. No I didn't mean it that way, I don't understand, Neesan, I am sorry..

She wanted to say that, but she was afraid. She was afraid even meeting her sister would only hurt her sister even more. She was afraid doing something would just make things worse. But erasing herself won't even help then what is there... She did not even know what was it in her life worth keeping anymore.

The Admiral put her hand on Haguro's trembling ones, saying nothing as Haguro looked down, shaking on the verge of tears. Gently, the admiral took the tea cup and placed in on the table. These tears were of sickening disgust she felt to herself. What kind of being had she turned into now? She had ruined everything. She even hurt her own family.

"You know, Haguro? I have a younger sister."

It was sudden. Haguro slowly looked at her admiral, seeing her smiling. The Admiral gave a reassuring press to Haguro's hand by her lap, before letting go and folded her arms. A story was coming, and Haguro suddenly realized that she knew nothing about her Admiral, who had been listening to her all these times.

"Her name is Shiori," The Admiral continued, her voice calm. There was a trace of smile in her words. "'Shio' of tide, and "ri" of jasmine, like mine. Too bad I can't show you her face now since I don't bring my wallet, but I always bring my family's photos around."

It almost never occured to Haguro, that her Admiral did have a family of her own. Human did have family they grow up with.

"My sister is kind, very kind. One day, she went back home holding her head. She was with her older brother, who is my younger brother, Shouhei. Hmmm? Ah yes, Haguro, I am the eldest of three siblings. Anyway, Shouhei also only then realized what she did. I asked her what's wrong and she said it's nothing. Only when I told Shouhei to go take bath first, that she was finally willing to show me. Do you know what I saw? Blood."

"Eh?"

The Admiral shook her head with a rather exasperated smile.

"I was shocked. There was wound by her head and she had been pressing that all these time. She fell to the ground when she was trying to get up on a pole in the park and Shouhei didn't see that happened. I was mad, really mad. But when I was fuming and about to shout at Shouhei in the bath, she said, 'don't tell Oniichan.' I was like, 'what are you saying?! I have to tell Shouhei'. And she replied, 'Oniichan was playing so happily. It wasn't his fault. He will be sad. Please don't tell Oniichan.'"

"I am fine, Neesan."

"But we can't hide a gash that big on her head, and Shouhei knew after his bath. When he knew what happened, he turned bright red and said, "Why didn't you tell me?! I could have gone home sooner!" to Shiori and looked so distressed. Shiori did not mean to anger both of us, nor if what she did was actually harming any of us. However, what she did was exactly what makes us felt angry the most. Ah, no. Perhaps anger was not the right word. Perhaps… "frustration" or "distress" were the right word."
Ah. Haguro blinked. Sudden memories flooded her and right then her throat hurt.

_Ashigara's eyes turned broken. Yet she smiled, brushing away Haguro's tears._

"Is this something you don't want to say to me again?"

The Admiral took Haguro's hand gently and looked deep into the heavy cruiser's eyes, cutting off the train of thoughts right when tears started to build in her eyes again.

"It's not that what you did is wrong," The Admiral pressed her words, tugging Haguro when the heavy cruiser shook her head and drew away. _It's wrong._ She leaned closer. "Sweetheart, wrong is not the right word, I don't think so. You meant well, just like Shiori meant well. Us siblings understand that. Just as much as Ashigara wants to protect you, you want to protect her. You know, Haguro, it's just that, as siblings, we want to help, we want to know, we want to be... needed."

"Haguro! Haguro, it's me. It's me! What happened, what's wrong?"

"That is just what siblings do, Haguro. We stick together, and when we do, we open ourselves to each other. Yes, happiness is nice to share but sadness is also something we share together, because we want to be there for each other."

"Is there anything wrong, Haguro? What happened? Did anyone-"

"I am alright, Neesan."

"That is why we're hurt when we don't know if our siblings are in pain. Just as much as you would love to help your sister, your sister wants to help you too. For a family, helping is never a burden, but pleasure. Because being together in times of needs, is exactly what brings us family closer."

"Am I not your sister, Haguro?"

"That is just what family is."

Ah.. I... I understand now...

Now everything made sense.

Her sister was in pain and it was not because she was burdened by her, but because she felt discarded off her sister's life. Because of all the push. All the secrecy. All the silence.

"I am fine, Neesan."

But what could she do?

"Do you seriously think that I will be happier?"

It's scary and confusing. Hesitation and uncertainty were all she could see over her situation.

"Your sister loves you."

"Am I not your sister, Haguro?"

"Trust her."

Trust.
The Admiral was here beside her. This Admiral was not the previous admiral... If it's her, perhaps... she would know...

_Trust._

Choking back her fear, Haguro's voice trembled when she slowly spoke, ".. then what should... I do, Admiral?"

The brown eyes turned gentle, with a glint of kindness.

Her answer turned out simple.

"Talk to her."

Haguro blinked.

"But..."

The Admiral smiled then continued, silently cutting off Haguro's question just by her gaze.

"Tell her everything. Why you're sad, why you're scared, what your sister could do for you. Ask for her help. You have no idea how happy your sister will feel just by listening to your story."

Ask... for help.

"I want to know. I want to help."

The hand that clasped hers were so warm and just by what the Admiral said, she understood another thing.

"... Just like how... you're happy... for listening to me?"

The smile that came up after her almost inaudible whisper was wide and bright. Admiral Tendouji gave a firm node and a gentle press on her hand, "Precisely."

"Even if you're not my sister...?"

The Admiral laughed heartily. She patted Haguro's head gently.

"Haguro, dear, you are my responsibility," She said kindly. "I am your admiral. I have responsibility over you, over your sister, over Choukai, over everyone in this base. I do believe, in my heart, that you and everyone else, deserve emotional security."

Emotional... security? What a foreign word. There had never been a single chance since the time of her construction, where someone told her what her rights was. Actually no one in the base had ever told them ship girls that they deserved something like emotional security, or even regarded them as having it. Now that Haguro thought about it all, what she had been confused of all these times were this things called emotions. Was it not something they needed to discard?

"Isn't that... Unnecessary? Don't you feel of it... as a burden, Admiral? Taking care of us... for these things..."

The admiral raised her eyebrows. She straightened her stance, seemingly trying to find words to explain.

"When I choose something to do, Haguro, I am determined to do my best in it," Her voice was firm
and confident. "I am determined to give my heart in it. In the end, for me, every bond that I manage to make with each of you, is a progress. A progress in my job, my capability as an admiral, and myself as a person. And that, Haguro, gives me emotional satisfaction."

She paused. The admiral slightly tilted her head, closing her eyes to think of what she would say next. After a while, she looked into Haguro again.

"Although, Haguro, above all," she smiled. "As a person, I just want to help. That is just want I want to do, and I am happy doing it. I am sure you feel the same as you lined up those buckets by the hall, as you tend to the garden, or help around the base. That same feeling of contentment, is what I pursue. That is why you can tell me anything. Tell me what is in your mind, or request me something. It will make me really happy. Did I make myself clear, my dear?"

A warm feeling spread on Haguro's heart, through to her body. The same contentment. Right, it made her felt good when she made herself useful, it made her felt rich. It made her felt that her life had meaning.

"Yes, Admiral. Thank you very much for explaining."

The Admiral's gentle gaze and kind smile were heartwarming. Everything would be alright, they somehow made her feel. No matter what happened, she would have a place to go back. She would have a place to turn on to.

"That is good," She laughed again, and followed with another head pat. The gesture now felt familiar, and it ached, so much that Haguro unconsciously gripped her hands together to contain the sudden stab in her heart. The gesture, and the feelings that accompanied it now, reminded her of something else.

Her older sisters used to pat her head exactly the same way.

"I believe for Ashigara, it will be even more of a joy if you talk to her, My dear." The Admiral's voice made Haguro opened her eyes and looked into the brown eyes again. She continued solemnly.

"After all... she is your big sister."

She is.

Haguro closed her eyes. A warm feeling enveloped her, and she knew to whom it was directed to.

Someone who was always there for her, who always cared for her the most.

She always is.

The warm feeling gave her strength, something that was strong enough to get her to admit the one thing that had always been the reason of all of her silence and pain.

For this once, she was the one who gripped the Admiral's hand.

"... T-t-time…"

The Admiral quickly turned to look at Haguro, finding the heavy cruiser trying as hard as she could to look at her superior in the eyes. Her hand suddenly shook.

"Yes?"
Realizing that her Admiral now had all of her attention on her, Haguro’s face turned paler and she jolted. Even if her hand remained shaking—even more violently, the heavy cruiser pushed herself.

"D-Do you… have a bit more t-t-time... A-admiral?"

I… did it.

A request, from Haguro. The first request ever from her that came without being baited at all. It needed all courage in Haguro to ask her superior, to be selfish for once in her life. She knew the Admiral had a ton of things to do, and that she might have asked something incredibly selfish but for this once, she wanted… to admit that she needed help.

The glint in the Admiral's eyes, however, calmed Haguro down. That glint showed happiness.

I want to know. I want to help.

Giving a kind smile and a gentle tap, the Admiral answered lightly, "Sure. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Haguro bit her bottom lips and looked down.

"I… I w-want to…" her voice came out as a mere whisper, but she tried. She had to. "I… I want to.. tell you w-what happened t-t-that day."

That day.

The shaking got even more violent. Flashes started to blur her eyes and she went back again, to that time.

"... a-and how disgusting I am, Admiral."

XXX

Lieutenant Kouseki Heishi stood by the door of the factory with scrap metals in his hands, jaw dropping. What was before him, was quite a sight to see.

Her back on him, Admiral Tendouji was kicking a funnel part on the ground over and over and over. Or more like stomping on it, making a dent on a supposedly strong steel.

Just from the sight of her back Lieutenant Kouseki knew that her face must have looked quite scary. The Admiral always seemed composed and mild most of the time. The only thing he remembered about her losing control was her crying at the first time of their meeting, when she was hitting her back to the factory wall to stop her tears. That time, the main feature that he remembered was anguish and frustration but this time, what he saw was rage. Pure, boiling rage.

With all their talks together, it was enough for the Lieutenant to know that his superior had a rather high tolerance over annoyance, anger, and even sadness. She was reasonable, calm, and rational—albeit could be quite sarcastic when annoyed. Seeing her feature in this way was quite a shock.

He would not dare stepping in when his superior was fuming with rage like this. Especially not in the morning. Like they say, when a kind person is mad, it must be something worse than what regular people could tolerate. Perhaps it really was better to just step in again and...

Just when the lieutenant was about to go in again, the admiral's familiar voice suddenly rose.
"I will propose for an amendment on the constitution!"

She spoke surprisingly clearly, in control.

She had stopped stomping on the funnel and now stood straight, both hands clenched on her side. When she turned around to face the lieutenant, her hair swung—a curtain of black that glinted under the morning sun.

There was fire in her eyes, a determination. Her breathing was slightly harsh from the exertion but it was clear that however explosive her rage had been, it had settled into whatever it was burning in her eyes.

The mechanic could not say anything, finding his body frozen under her gaze.

"The ship girls are sentient being and deserved to be protected as such."

Her next words sounded bitter.

"And I will make sure that happen."

- To be Continued -

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully soon.

Also, that story about Admiral Airi's family? It was based on a real story of an idol I admired.
"Shouhou, human are extremely greedy creature, I am included. I don't want to lose a thing. I don't want to lose a soul. Gamble, if I have to, but I cannot let myself to lose souls that I fight for."

Author's Note: Finally over. 37 pages in my GDoc for this chapter. This will be the last for Haguro's Arc.

A Japanese folk song, titled Yuuyake Koyake,夕焼け小焼け will be featured in this chapter. I think it will be nice if you can go to Youtube and hear it. While you are at it, please have a listen to Akatonbo 赤とんぼ as well, both of these songs' nuance helped the progression of the story.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of the songs I used in this fanfic. For songs in Japanese, however, I do translate them myself unless I stated otherwise.

While I didn't realized it,
Just how many times have you been crying?

If, perchance, the world came turned into an enemy and despise me,
I don't mind
I will continue on

... Tomorrow too,
I want to love you
I want to love you

Goosehouse - Beautiful Life

"Kudou-kun will need your fleet by the Ri Lanka sea, Tendouji-kun. Make sure they arrive on time."

"In accordance to your previous instruction, my best surface fleet is already on their way. They will arrive by Kudou-Senpai's place by tomorrow. I will send my transmission to his base tonight."

"Perfect. This will unofficially be your first large operation. Do it well."
"Yes, Grand Marshal."

"Very well."

He seemed satisfied with the answer. After a while he continued.

"Has Kongou been a problem?"

She had more or less expected the question that she felt like sighing. With all the talk and all the time she had spent with Kongou, it was clear that the main office had never really tried understanding these ships.

"No, Sir. She has been serving the base splendidly."

He made a rather doubtful grunt. She did not blame him. He had every logical reason to doubt Kongou.

"What of your Myoukou-class? Have you scrapped Haguro? She was rather useless last time we inspected her. Her sister also seemed very broken."

Ah.

"Ashigara-Neesan styled my hair that day, with the hairpin Myoukou-Neesan sent to us... It was my fault, that I go to fit my rigging with that hairstyle."

"... No, Sir. They have been serving the base well upon my arrival. I see no need to scrap them as per this moment."

"I see."

"He said, I seduced him. That the desire of making my hair like that, is to seduce him. He said that I was useless on the sea... but maybe my other use will be better... like the ones we are designed to do on the bed."

There was a considerable long pause.

"When he began touching me, he said that everything we were, was designed to please him. Our body included. We were designed to follow order. My body was designed to provide various options of utility. Pleasing him was an utility, and that was his order."

"... I just want to remind you, Tendouji-kun, that we must eliminate any possible threat to the nation. That is our job as the protector of the nation."

"When I refused, he said that I was broken. He said that I am useless as a ship girl, that I cannot follow a simple order. I told him that what he was asking was not right, but he told me it was right because he was the admiral and I were to follow his direction. A ship follows the admiral. That was the rule. I said it was not right, this was not a battle. He got angry, saying that... That I am not doing what I was made for. After that he started to hit me."

She gripped the phone tighter.

"Yes, Grand Marshal."

"That includes your own ship."
"He punched and slapped me… and eventually used his belt. He said, the fact that I have this body… is a proof that I am created also to please him. He said t-that I… that I want him too. Because that is what I am naturally made for."

"We have to take responsibility of our kind, Tendouji-kun," He did not stop there. "That is, including our previous comrade's deeds. Even if we have to dirty our hand."

"I told him that was not true. He said, that even if my mouth says no, my body was honest… That I reacted to him. I don't understand, everything was painful, and blurry… My chest hurt, my body hurt, and I… I feel... awful. B-but there was this fire. Which I c-can't control. I don't want... but… but is that true that my body… is created for that? If I reject, is that against… what I am created for? But if that is so, I… I am broken. Yet if I am, I… Admiral, I… my heart, I wholly believe… I don't want to used this way."

"Understood."

"I am sickening... My body is disgusting, Admiral. I am disgusting."

"... Though I must say you have been doing really well in managing the base and its available resources. I hope Makigumo is serving you well on your expeditions?"

"Yes, sir. She has been a great help."

Makigumo was given to her from other small naval base that was about to scrap her, to cut expenses of constructing another ship.

"Splendid. I look forward to your accomplishment."

"Thank you, Grand Marshal, I shall not let you down."

A laugh came. His next words did not sound as bright as his laughter, however.

"You better not, Tendouji-kun. That base is difficult, but it's strategic and precious. Please do not waste this… incredibly fortunate occasion in your part."

The line was cut off.

She stayed listening to the monotonous beeping sound for several second, before finally placed the telephone on its pedestal. A really strong urge to sigh made her closed her eyes.

"Admiral, a filthy ship like me do not deserve your kindness."

If the adultery had not happened, I would never have gotten this position… right?

I am "lucky" indeed.

"Um… Admiral?"

Shouhou's voice sounded worried. Taking a deep breath, Tendouji Airi turned around, giving a wide smile to her secretary ship. The light carrier's eyes remained unconvinced, but she did not voice anything else.

Airi smiled wider, getting up and patted her secretary's shoulder as she walked to the door.

"Calls from the superior always makes you feel energized, don't they? Let's go to the command
room, Shouhou. We got work to do.”

~ Dusk ~

"...gara!"

It's dark. It's... night time?

"... Ashigara!"

... Ah... the... stars look... strange..

"Ashigara! Oi! Ashigara!"

Nachi-nee-san would know about this... or Myoukou-nee-san..."

"ASHIGARA!"

Pain assaulted Ashigara's senses when her consciousness just snapped back, making her jolted in reaction. Her movement made the water splashed and she almost plunged her whole head inside the water. Thankfully, her own buoyancy kept her on the water. She was laying on her back on the water surface, covered in her own blood from numerous injury. Her clothes was burnt and torn, showing places where shells and shattered torpedo head had scratched and pierced her. The rest of her fleet was circling her, with Nagato kneeling on the water surface beside her.

Ah.. darn it.

She fucked up. That was the only thing she did not need anyone to explain to her about. This was absolutely pathetic. The rest of the fleet seemed okay, she was the only one hurt. It seemed they had an absolute victory though, the only consolation that came into her mind.

Against the barrage of pain, she tried to sit. A pair of hand gently helped support her back from behind. Ashigara glanced wearily behind her.

It was Choukai, looking really worried.

"Ashigara-san, are you alright?"

Am not. In more ways than one.

Thankfully, she did not need to voice it since Kongou put her hands on her hips and said, "You gotta be kidding for asking, Choukai! Of course it doesn't feel good. She got hit by three shells and two torpedoes, you know!"

"I thought you'd sink," Nagato sighed, facepalming. "I almost gave the Admiral a wrong message."

"Wait! We break the radio silence?" Now that made her felt even worse. Ashigara grimaced, since the move of catching Nagato's arm hurt a lot. "Wait, Nagato-san, the enemy ship will..."

"We already broke it the moment we saw you got hit that bad, anyway," Maya also kneeled. She shrugged. "Breaking it now ain't gonna make a difference. We killed the lots of 'em tho. Maaaaaybe there aint any ship to eavesdrop us for a while now."

This has gone from worse to worst. Ashigara covered her face. This was totally pathetic. Listening to Nagato made the transmission would make her feel a lot worse, especially with the fact that she was the only one with critical damage. She just made them break a radio silence, risking their
whereabouts. This was really not nice.

Nagato eventually finished her report to the Admiral. She moved her eyes over her fleet, stopping on Kagerou.

"Kagerou, escort Ashigara back to the base. The rest of us will proceed."

"Understood." The destroyer gave a salute, while Ashigara looked away, gritting her teeth. Nagato finally stood up, throwing one last look at Ashigara, who begrudgingly glanced at her.

"You better safely get home, Ashigara."

Only a grunt answered the battleship. After beckoning Choukai to move, Nagato and the rest of the fleet turned towards their destination. Within minutes, they were gone, nothing more than faint light in the distance. Kagerou stood frozen beside Ashigara, saying nothing as the minutes pass by. Even in the darkness, it was easy to see that Ashigara was in an extremely awful mood. Being a sensible destroyer as she was, Kagerou took the right decision of being silent.

"... I am broken huh."

"Eh?"

But Ashigara did not wait for Kagerou to ask her again and instead extended her hand and said with a grunt, "Help me up. The enemy will be here anytime soon… I don't want to sink just yet."

XXXX

"An update, Admiral."

Airi looked up from the tactical map, finding Shouhou beside her, giving her a sheet of paper. With a thank you, she wearily received it.

"Haruna-san's repair will be done tomorrow morning. However, Akagi-san will take even longer."

That is not good.

With almost all of her surface fleet gone, all that were left are damaged ships, destroyers, and the only heavy cruiser was Haguro. The only big ship would be Haruna and Akagi, with Shouhou as the only light cruiser. If anything were to happen, they only have one fleet power to defend themselves. Even if Abyssals rarely attack ground base, especially around her waters, the chances are not 0. If she could avoid it, she did not want to risk it.

"Also, Kagerou has sent a transmission. With the speed they are travelling in, they will approximately arrive at noon, the day after tomorrow."

And Ashigara was injured. Kagerou would be extremely fatigued as well with the long run of towing the injured heavy cruiser. Airi massaged her temple. Being a newcomer in this field is always harsh. If any mission was halted, she would sure still be reproached by the Grand Marshall for being unable to manage the base. However, sending all of her best ships to other base to fulfill a command risk her own base, she almost could not balance the firepower. She was glad she had a lot of heavy cruisers to make up for firepower. There was also the advantage of speed.

"You have to rest, Admiral."

The secretary ship looked really worried.
"I am okay, Shouhou. I can go home by-"

"Admiral, this is 0135."

What? Airi swiveled in her chair, looking at the many big clock on the wall, showing different time zone. Sure enough, it was 0135 for their base.

Shouhou watched as she facepalmed wearily. It would be too late to bike home. She would have to spend the night here. Hand off her face, Airi gave a weak smile.

"I can rest at the clinic. It's okay."

"But…"

"You rest too," Airi cut her off, only now noticing that Shouhou had been the sentinel all day, receiving, transmitting, reporting. With Ooyodo gone, and the destroyers still freshly constructed, she had to be in place. The secretary ship gave a doubtful expression. "It's okay, I will finish everything soon and rest."

"Shall I prepare an appropriate room, Admiral? I will ask the destroyers-"

"It's okay, Shouhou. I am fine."

Sadness perhaps was not a good way to call Shouhou's expression. Instead she looked-

"Just as much as you would love to help your sister, your sister wants to help you too. For a family, helping is never a burden, but pleasure."

Ah.

Airi couldn't hold her chuckle…. and it soon turned into a small laugh. Shouhou was totally perplexed, unsure on how to react. Especially when Airi smiled at her kindly.

Easier said than done. I do the same mistake as you are, Haguro.

"I will sleep in the clinic for tonight since it's way too late already, but maybe I will need that room for future use. Can I ask for your help on that, Shouhou?"

The lights that came into the light carrier's eyes were so bright, they were almost palpable.

"Sure, Admiral!"

"Splendid!" Airi beamed, tapping her hand on the desk. "Now let's tidy this up together. Can I have you call Inazuma to be the sentinel for tonight? Awesome. I will count on you on that!"

It was funny in a way, how saying no could actually be hurtful, and how asking for help could actually make someone happy. Distance, when measured not in metrics or imperials, can be very confusing. Measuring it needed sensitivity more than precision, and the velocity of it changes relatively differs with every individuals.

It would take some more time for Airi to get used to this base… though it seemed like everything had started to move. Hopefully to the better.

XXX

"... Ashigara-san."
Kagerou's voice woke Ashigara up from her waking dream. She first looked at her escort's face, who had been supporting her body faithfully since the night when she got taiha. She looked extremely tired, but she smiled nevertheless. Right now, her smile was brighter than the day before. Inside those smile, a huge relief.

"We have arrived, Ashigara-san. We're almost there."

They were several hours ahead of schedule.

They stopped only to rebandage her wound or eat their ration. Other than that, they had been sailing nonstop; Ashigara half-relying on Kagerou not only because of her injury, but also because of her damaged equipment. Kagerou did not complain, even if signs of fatigue slowly formed on her face. She merely continued her sail, one kilometer at a time. Obviously, the endeavour worn her out like none other. It was logical for destroyers who escort their critically damaged partner to feel extremely exhausted upon arrival, and also why despite their often petite body and low day battle firepower, they hold a respected place in the eyes of every other ship, including carriers and battleships. No other ship escort better than destroyers, no other ship willfully sacrifice themselves than destroyers, and no other ship support the naval base as a whole as good as destroyers.

Ashigara felt a feeling of gratitude towards this brunette that had been towing her for two days without complaint. Even more so since she knew Kagerou had been extremely understanding with her grudge about her misery.

Now the giant tower of the naval base was within sight. They were already within the base's vicinity. They were safe. Bath. Finally.

"Eh?"

Kagerou turned her head towards the beach, near the pier. She squinted her eyes.

"Isn't that… Commander and Haguro-san by the beach?"

What?

There was no way Haguro would be outside. *Haguro is afraid of the outside. There would be no way that she would-*

She really was there. There was no mistaking her sister's figure, even from afar. The one standing beside her, recognizable with the signature pure white uniform, was definitely the Admiral. Haguro was not supposed to be able to go out. She was so afraid of the outside world and…

Ashigara realized one thing.

The day when she saw Haguro crying, her clothes was damp. It was raining outside. *Outside.*

*Haguro would do anything if there was an order, even if that means having to crawl in fear and pain.*

Familiar gut churning burn lit up in her heart, suffocating her in a sensation all too familiar.

*All these times.*

"Did anything-"

"I am fine, Neesan."
ALL THESE TIME.

Her body started to shake, with anger rushing to her vein. Everything now came into place. The tears Haguro shed every morning, her reluctance to talk, all became extremely clear. Haguro is kind and dutiful. She would never say anything simply because… it was the request of her superior.

THIS ADMIRAL.

And as they got closer she saw it. Haguro was crouching by the beach, covering her face. Yet the Admiral just stood there watching. Watching. The white uniform made flashes of the past came into Ashigara's mind and she could not control the fire that blasted every single thought other than one, extremely strong emotion.


"Bring me there, Kagerou."

ALWAYS. THE CAUSE.

"A-Ashigara-san?"

The destroyer seemed to be quite perplexed by the grittiness in her voice. However, Ashigara did not careless. All that filled her mind was the two figures by the beach sand… and it was enough for her to not feel a single pain for all her wound.

She felt empowered.

Anger was a fuel like no other.

XXXX

"Wait! Ashigara-san!"

The moment they reached the pier, Kagerou realized that it was a bad idea. The way Ashigara threw her broken main machine and trotted to where the two figures… did not look well.


Kagerou did not have enough energy left to stop her. She could not comprehend how, with such a battered body covered by bloodied bandages and ripped clothes, Ashigara could muster enough power to actually shrug the destroyer's attempt to hold her. Kagerou knew she was exhausted but Ashigara as well, perhaps even more. Although she was the one that support most of the propelling power, she knew Ashigara tried not to burden her much by burdening most of her own weight to her only healthy main machine. That made Kagerou felt extremely pathetic that her grip did not halt the cruiser a single bit. Now she had to push herself to run after Ashigara, grimacing when her body ached.

With all the wounds, merely standing must have been painful for the heavy cruiser, and yet…

The power that held the cruiser together was almost unnatural.

The cruiser's steps as she got close turned faster, though visibly limping. And suddenly Kagerou realized what she was about to do.
"Ashigara-san! DON'T!"

Too late. It happened way too fast.

Saying something inaudible, Ashigara grabbed the Admiral's collar in one harsh, swift movement right when the Admiral turned, noticing her presence thanks to Kagerou's shout. Haguro reacted, gasping upon finding her sister had both of her hands now by the Admiral's collar, tugging her superior harshly with shaking, furious movement.

"It's YOU! YOU make my sister cry every time!"

"Oneesan!"

Haguro grabbed Ashigara's right hand from behind right when it rose in a fist, almost swinging towards the Admiral's face. The Admiral, however, remained silent, not even reacting when Ashigara shook her collar.

"Oneesan, please!"

"You and your kind! You human admirals! ALWAYS! ALWAYS YOU MAKE MY-"

"No, please, Oneesan! You got this all wr-"

"You human are the same! The LOTS of you! Just the FUCK did you-"

"Oneesan!" Using the small gap for flex when Ashigara withdrew for another attempt to punch, Haguro put herself between Ashigara and the admiral, pushing her body weight to her sister and brought her down to the ground. The sudden force and right timing released the Admiral's collar off Ashigara's grip, making the Admiral stepped back and almost lost her balance. Ashigara wrestled, but Haguro was faster, grabbing her sister's wrists and pushing them to the ground.

"Please! Please, Oneesan!"

Their struggle ripped open the bandages; blood colored the sand again as the little sister gripped her sister's hand stronger.

"ONEESAN!"

Putting all her weight to immobilize her sister, Haguro broke into tears. She pinned her sister's hands to the side, flat on the sand. Her hands shook, but her strength remained firm in holding her sister.

The tears fell onto Ashigara's face and right away Kagerou could see how she immediately faltered. It seemed she had just realized who had restrained her down. The look in her eyes however, was more than surprise. Something had shattered.

Her expression made Kagerou stopped running.

"Please…just.. just stop…"

Haguro began shaking, and her next words were nothing more than broken whispers between her tears.

"I…I will tell you everything, Oneesan. I am sorry… I am sorry…"

The heavy cruiser opened her eyes and looked straight into her sister's dark golden breath hitched. "
I will tell you everything... I will tell you everything so please... please... I am begging you... please..."

Her grip loosened, and she rested her head on her sister's chest, letting her tears soaked into the navy blue clothes.

"... Commander-san... is not the one you should be directing all your anger to..."

XXX

Airi sipped her green tea. The calming fragrance soothed her tense nerves and muscles. It released her stress. A taste of familiarity and home. Feeling the drinks warmed her stomach, she sighed.

She thought Ashigara would not arrive until noon. She took Haguro out again today, partly also because of Haguro's request. The ship made amazing progress once she had her mind set on healing her fear. To help her, Haguro no longer called her Admiral, but Commander-san, just like many destroyers. Just a simple change of nickname could change so much perspective and she began to moved away from the image she feared. It seemed to have helped her eased up, and they began their daily attempt to go out more frequently. The progress was outstanding. At least when she was not alone, she managed to control herself and to follow her admiral's walking pace. They made it one step of a time, but each progress turned into a leap as it doubled its positivity. Upon seeing the sea again, and touching the waves, the cruiser just broke down crying. Home, she said. The sea was her home. Those tears were of happiness. Anyone could mistake it otherwise from afar tho.

She could still feel Ashigara's unmistakably strong killing intent that she felt at the beach. Or perhaps rather than killing, it was a clear intention to hurt. To inflict pain.

The theory that some Abyssals are ship girls, and that some ship girls can turn Abyssals upon sinking or breaking conditioning, had long since being acknowledged, although the chances were deemed to be small. The fact that no case are actually clearly recorded, added doubts to the theory. So small was the chances and the examples, people started to consider that a myth.

"You human are the same! The LOTS of you!"

Airi knew one particular type of creature with intense hatred to human. The usually bright golden eyes were murky that time. Her voice as well, in certain parts there was this foreign undulation.

"... I just want to remind you, Tendouji-kun, that we must eliminate any possible threat to the nation. That is our job as the protector of the nation. That includes your own ship."

I wonder if that was a close call... Airi watched the reflection of the cloud outside the window from her green tea. That would have been really... unpleasant.

Thinking how close perhaps her ships were on the edge of transformation, made Airi felt this sense of anger.

The last admiral before her, just how much had he abused these girls? Did any of the girls have turned Abyssal under his command but went unnoticed?

The idea was extremely depressing and disturbing.

Airi was just about to take another sip when the door to her room was knocked. Shouhou quickly rose, seemingly worried of Airi’s condition. She knew what happened and it seemed an idea of having a guest at the time when her Admiral had just being assaulted displeased the carrier. Airi
came into the room with visible blood track by the collar. She didn't tell Shouhou directly but shortly after, Kagerou came in to give her escorting report. The destroyer naturally asked about her Admiral's condition, which prompted Shouhou to ask the chronology of the event. Shouhou clearly did not take the news happily.

In a way, Shouhou's protectiveness over her touched Airi's heart.

"I shall send the guest ba-"

"No, Shouhou, it's fine," Airi smiled at her, putting down her cup of tea. "I accept guests."

Airi increased her volume.

"Come in, please."

Shouhou seemed uncertain but she did not voice anything else. The door swung opened, and there came Ashigara. She was still in her previous wounded condition, with her bandages dangling and everything else. Moving seemed to hurt her, but she did not voice it nor grimace. She merely did the obligatory bow by the doorstep, saying, "Please excuse me." then stepped in silently. Shouhou looked hesitant, moving her eyes to Airi and to Ashigara back again. The air changed at that very moment and Airi took a deep breath.

One might think Airi would be at least wary but she knew she should not be. The aura of this Ashigara turned much… calmer… She was still upset, but it was of remorse it seemed, more than fury. There was no bubbling anger like what she had when she walked by the beach just now. More importantly, there was no previous ominous intent. Airi eased a smile at the heavy cruiser, joining her fingers together.

"I see you haven't gone to the dock yet. Doesn't that hurt? Is the dock occupied?"

"No, Admiral, the dock has been properly emptied and prepared for my repair," Ashigara answered it swift and firm. The golden eyes shone, a contrast to the rather greyish murky hue they once held at the beach. She took a deep breath. "I think this is more important right now, than my dock."

And by that, the prideful heavy cruiser, despite obvious pain, went to her knees, then bowed with her head on the floor to prostration.

Shouhou's jaws dropped open, frozen in place. Airi took a deep breath, lowering her expression with merely raising her eyebrows. However, she could not help but having to bite the inside of her lower lips-enough pain to hold her ground. She must be in pain. The heavy cruiser must be in great pain.

"I apologize for my insolence, violence, and disrespect. I have shamed my class's name and attacked someone whom I am supposed to serve with all my loyalty. I am deeply sorry for what I have done and I am thankful for your generosity of taking care of my sister."

Silence greeted them and Ashigara still had her head on the ground. Airi closed her eyes, scaling the weight of her words. But before she could say anything, Ashigara continued with her head still on the ground.

"I have heard everything from Haguro. You have given so much time and attention to help my sister. I have mistaken your generous gesture and I have done something unforgivable. I beg for your forgiveness and I thank you for all your help to my family. I will accept any kind of decision you have regarding my conduct."
It was hard to make out her expression, but Airi could feel frustration lodged in her words. Ashigara had that pride in her and that fighter spirit. To bow her head without a single bit of provocation, made Airi smiled sadly. It saddened her, how everything had come to a place where one of them had to bend their pride with a situation none of them desired. Yet, perhaps it was for the best.

The admiral let out her breath.

"I do not blame you for what happened, but I accept your apology, Ashigara. What I did is still within what I should do, or anyone in my position should have done, for your sister. Lift your head."

Ashigara remained in her position. Airi closed her eyes.

"Ashigara."

The heavy cruiser finally lift her head, grimacing when she tried to stand up. Shouhou quickly supported her, helping her to get up. The heavy cruiser looked considerably paler than normal, to no surprise with all her wounds and exertion. The golden eyes, however, looked straight into Airi's without hesitation, and Airi could not help but to smile. At least those eyes still showed that burning strength. This determination was admirable, and Airi knew as an admiral, it would be extremely beneficial to have such ship in her hand.

"I would accept any kind of punishment that you deem fit, Admiral." The heavy cruiser bowed her head slightly. "What I have done to you at the beach was disgraceful of me."

"Perhaps the reason why I will punish you, is for you to think that I will give you a punishment," Airi chuckled. The look in the heavy cruiser's eyes hardened. "I have told you, that I do not blame you."

Ashigara grit her teeth.

"But I cannot-"

"Also for not obeying my command of going to the dock," Airi tapped her pen to the table. "I thought I have said ASAP."

The heavy cruiser's lips formed a tight line of disapproval. Her next words sound dejected.

"I cannot accept that, Admiral."

She clenched her fists.

"I almost hit you and I shouted profanity at your face. Most of all, I was being disloyal to you. I cannot accept the fact that I go through all of that unpunished. I cannot accept that, not as a soldier."

Silence hung between them. That was true. If she had followed the code of conduct, she should have pushed on a harder penalty. She should have brought her on a more formal court, suing her with a long list of disloyalty. However considering everything, despite the fact that it was unwise of Ashigara to jump to the wrong conclusion, Airi could not get over her own judgement over situation. It was true she was being way too lenient. It's funny how the one she should have punished actually be the one who remind her that.

"Please, shape us however you want us to be."
Sighing, Airi rested her back on her chair and joined her fingers together.

"To a certain degree, I do agree with what you say." Ashigara kept her mouth in a tight line, and that made Airi smile. "In my own judgement, however, this spans further than merely me being stationed in this place. Thus, I believe I will need more time to assess your conduct. I will put you on probation. For now, your unofficial punishment is to stay with your sister and help her in her recovery. I don't accept a no for that. Do you copy?"

The heavy cruiser had her head down and her fists shaking. Putting force in her words, the admiral repeated.

"Do you copy, Ashigara?"

Ashigara lifted her head. The answer was swift, holding a familiar firmness.

"Yes, Admiral."

"Splendid," Airi smiled, tapping her hand once and resting her back on the chair satisfactorily. She looked into her heavy cruiser's eyes. "Is there anything else you would like to tell me?"

There was silence. Negativity seemed to have dissipated quite a lot from the room and she could see that everything had pretty much cleared up. Perhaps now she could breathe a little easier…

"When I heard… how Haguro had told you everything and asked for your help… I feel… frustrated."

Something cold hit Airi's heart. Those golden eyes. They weren't murky anymore, instead it was back to the stark bright golden eyes. However, those colors were painted by defeat. Defeat and frustration.

That was right. It wasn't just Haguro affected by the adultery.

"She told you things she would not tell me, open up to you more than she would ever do to me. Even if I asked her, she would not say anything to me. I have failed her as a sister."

That is not true.

But Airi could not say that. She had no right to say that. She knew, nothing she said would move anything. This was not the area she could prod into, nor could she say things as Haguro's mouth. This was not something she could repair.

And she understood Ashigara's feelings so much that it hurt. As a small smile curved up Ashigara's lips, Airi could feel her body turned cold.

To think that everything could heal so simply was naive of her.

"There is only one request that she has ever asked of me and I made the mistake of hurting her even more by slapping her for it. Now that I think of it, it was the only request she had ever asked. The only one she had ever said since her construction. I thought I knew what is best for her. I was way too self-centered. My sister would have known best on what will ever make her feel happy."

Slowly, she looked into her admiral again and unconsciously Airi held her breath.

No. Please no.

Ashigara bowed her head down. She spoke clearly, slowly, but without hesitation.
"Admiral, if Haguro ever asks to be scrapped again, I give my full consent on her decision."

Her bow turned deeper.

"I know this is extremely egotistical of me and that I have no place, in any kind of situation, to request you anything more with all the kindness you have given to both me and my sister. However, please, with all my heart I beg of you, to scrap me along with her. Please scrap me with my sister."

So that has come down to that.

Silence spanned for several second, extended on to what seemed like minutes. Airi closed her eyes, trying to suppress her own emotion, more than tactfully thinking of the situation. As far as military tactics goes… there was nothing wrong with the request. It was even for the best.

However, she knew very well that human hate to let go. Always so. She was only human herself. Her own desire welled up strongly inside her and for a bit she knew, she had the power to realize it. It was wholly possible to simply say a word of negation. Yet, in the end, she had to keep her promise. Although she had the feelings that she could influence them, in the end their decision was theirs alone. It was something she could not step into; especially not when she wanted to shape them like what she wanted to.

"Very well."

The shocked eyes that stared at Airi now belonged to Shouhou's. Airi rested her hands on her table, joining her fingers.

"I understand. I will honor your request."

"... Thank you very much, Admiral."

Airi nodded when Ashigara finally lifted her head. There was calm in those eyes, although she knew it did not mean the pain had mend itself. It hurt how Airi knew, she had not the medicine for this pain. Unlike Haguro's, Ashigara's pain was not something she could do something about. Not directly, at least.

Pushing heavy breath out of her lungs, Airi gave a small smile and said, "Is there anything you would like to talk about?"

Finally a smile, albeit courteous and didn't exactly reach the heavy cruiser's eyes.

"No, Admiral, that is all."

"Ah, very well then. Do inform me if you would like to inquire anything."

She bowed slightly again.

"Thank you very much for your understanding and time. Just like your order, I will mobilize to the dock. If you would excuse me."

Ashigara went out without anything else, other than a slight courteous nod to Shouhou. When the door closed, all that was left in the room were silence and gloom. Airi let out her breath, resting her chin on her right palm. Shouhou stared at the door for quite a long time, then looked at her admiral. Her Admiral raised her eyebrows and smiled at her.
"What's wrong, Shouhou?"

The light carrier seemed hesitant. Her fingers played with the hem of her kimono.

"... Is that… for the best, Admiral? I mean, Ashigara-san-"

"Who knows?"

Airi's answer made Shouhou looked at her in shock. The Admiral smiled, slowly glancing at the window.

"That is not for us to answer, Shouhou. That is what they have to answer."

The light carrier bit her lower lips. Her eyes moved to own to her own hands, still meddling with her own kimono. For a while contemplative silence bridged the gap between them, until Shouhou broke it before Airi did.

"You can… reject Ashigara-san's request. Ashigara-san is a strong ship and you have shown interest in her. Then why…"

"I can get a vessel, Shouhou. I can pour my steel and fuel and make myself a vessel. I can get them all if I want to. I can replace everything."

After a burst of statements, Airi stopped, now staring straight at her secretary's eyes. She smiled, joining her fingers into a steeple.

"Yet, I can't replace an individual."

Shouhou blinked.

"I can't replace a conscience. I can't replace experience. I can't replace memories. I can't replace a soul."

_I don't want only ships._

"… Shouhou, human are extremely greedy creature, I am included. I don't want to lose a thing. I dont want to lose a soul. Gamble, if I have to, but I cannot let myself to lose souls that I fight for."

"Please, shape us however you want us to be."

"I don't want ship, I want a Kanmusu."

XXX

The sky turned from black to blue. Birds chirped, jumping between tree branches as they talked between each other. The sun slowly peeked from beyond the mountain, casting shadow of the peaks onto the base. Haguro closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She was out out the dorm, by the doorstep, holding a watering can.

Her hand still shook slightly and the familiar prickly sensation ran through her skin. Her breathing started to turn faster. The familiar uneasiness, discomfort, and anxiety resurfaced again like an old friend.

The dormitory door felt like it beckoned her to come back inside to safety, the pavement looked like they glared at her in animosity.
"You are born with thoughts, memories, and feelings. Your essence. It is there to tell you who you are. Your feelings is not wrong. If you feel that it's not right, then it's not right, at all. Believe in your heart."

Admiral Tendouji spent so long holding her hands and spelling her everything, then spent another long period of patiently staying by her side as she tried to overcome her fear to walk out of the door. The next day she patiently guided her again.

"Just because you have this body does not mean that you are here to be used by men. I am born a woman as well. We have the same body. However, having this body does not automatically mean my existence is to satisfy anyone's sexual needs. I have my own decision, my own life, my values. Haguro, you have yours as well. That is why you are created having these feelings and judgment. You can take my word as an Admiral now, there is not a single verse in the list of your utility that say Kanmusu are there to satisfy sexual needs. That is not your job. He lied. He is wrong. He is at fault. You're innocent."

Haguro could no longer count how many times Admiral Tendouji said the same words, over and over. It sticks to her head now… and she started to say it to the mirror.

"You're not disgusting. Your feelings are not wrong. You're innocent."

Whenever she broke down shivering, the admiral would stay there beside her and hug her. Haguro now had grown familiar of that warmth… and also of the gentle pat on her arm or back her admiral gave rhythmically as she hummed or sang the same song. She remembered looking up, staring right into a pair of warm brown eyes. There would always be a smile there.

"Just because you progress slower than what you hope you do, that doesn't mean you're not progressing."

When she looked at the front yard, gripping her own arm to contain her shaking, she remembered the words that kept repeating and slowly eroding her guilt to herself, her sisters, and her admiral.

"You get this far now. You have done it. That means you can do it again, and even further."

She remembered when she saw the sea again, when she touched the waves, the sand, taking scoop of them inside her palm.

"You made it here. You're alright. You can go further, Haguro. You are alright."

Closing her eyes, taking a deep breath, for the first time in so long, alone she stepped out of the dormitory into the yard. The fear gripped her heart and body again but now she was not without shield. One step out, followed slowly by another. And another. They may be slow, but they are steady.

The flowers needed tending. This spring, she would love it if she could have flowers bloom in their yard again after a long time.

XXX

"Commander-san came every morning, she patiently sat with me, listening to me, she… she has been extremely kind, Onee-san, please do not be mad at her. All that she had been doing is trying to help me overcome my fright. I-look, Oneesan, I-I can finally get out of the dormitory again. It's because of Commander-san."
The golden eyes watched as steam rose to the top of the roof of the bath. Each molecules seemed to dissipate, disappearing into thin air.

"I… I asked her for help. She accompanied me to get here. O-Onee-san, please… don’t… be mad of Commander-san. She is very kind. She helped me. Commander-san has never done us any wrong…"

Those were the only things Haguro said before Ashigara bolted to the admiral's room. Everything went on well in the end. Haguro was feeling much better. It seemed time has moved for her again.

Everything was alright.

However, Ashigara could not erase an empty, gaping hole that replaced the whole anger that burn inside her heart. It was like a charcoal left after a burn: dark dan black, with a bit of amber deep within that harmed the charcoal more than its surrounding.

The Admiral was clearly not the one at fault for this feelings she had. Nor was Haguro. The feelings was her own responsibility.

The heavy cruiser closed her eyes as she washed her face with the chemical water of the bath. Brushing her face, she realized the one fact which made her feel so empty.

Haguro did not need her. She was not needed by the only reason for her living. Those anger she felt, it was all to herself instead of anyone else.

Perhaps now inside her request, it was not Haguro that needed scraping the most, but her.

The world worth nothing for her now.

XXX

Peace did not last long. It did not even last a day. Siren wreaked the serenity of the base as the sun climbed to noon. Airi rushed to the command room, walking in fast paced as Shouhou beside her, relaying the information she got from her Saiun.

"One Ta class flagship, accompanied by one Wo Class flagship, two Nu Class elite, one Tsu-class and a Ne-class, Admiral. They are approaching fast from north."

That is a rather heavy fleet. Airi bit her bottom lips, briskly opening the door to the command room and went straight to the mission board. And one specialized to counter back air attack while delivering good air raid. Is this a base attack?

Her brown eyes trailed the track of the enemy on the map, following Shouhou's fingers silently. They are heading to the base, indeed, and fast. It seemed to be a base raid.

Airi closed her eyes, tapping her fingers. Too rare to happen, yet it happened. At the right timing as well. What luck she had now.

The campaign we did… was it intercepted? Was that actually just a decoy? Do they intentionally want to attack the land base? Or perhaps they realized that this base is unoccupied? How far do they know the condition of this base…

But was not the problem right now. Defense. Her ships. Most of them were away.

"Available ships are Akagi-san, Haruna-san, Makigumo-chan, Shigure-chan, Inazuma-chan, and
Ikazuchi-chan. Kagerou is still recuperating. Ashigara-san is still in the dock and needed more time to heal. The fourth fleet is fetching supply."

"How many instant buckets do we have currently?"

Ashigara. She still had Ashigara.

"None, Admiral. It will take some more time, perhaps until night fall, for the fourth fleet to arrive with the supply."

Shit. Airi closed her eyes again. The toll of trying to keep Kongou in full health whenever she sent her out on the compulsory sortie organized by the central command now took its stand. She had been using the buckets for Kongou, giving her a moment of reprieve and also to keep her from sinking. She knew that was unwise of her to do so, but she just could not let the central command sink Kongou in such manner. She would not deny however, that actually doing that put her in a risky standing. Times such as this, was totally one of her biggest fear.

Stalling time against such a force with her remaining fleet will be near impossible. Perhaps not. Perhaps not. She should believe in her girls. Sorteing Shouhou with Akagi seemed like an idea… but then she would not have any recon if anything were to happen. Without strong enough escort, they were extremely vulnerable. The two Akatsuki class were newly constructed, compensating firepower by deploying any one of them seemed very risky and may not be a viable option.

"The fleet has gathered, Admiral. We await your direction."

Haruna's voice made Airi straightened her previously crouching position that leaned onto the command board. Making up the calmest expression she could muster, she turned to look at her ships. An admiral should be the last to panic. Anyway it wasn't as if she had no plan-

She couldn't mask her surprise however, when she saw Haguro standing there right beside Haruna. The cruiser stood straight, with determined face, even if Airi noticed the trembling of her fists. When their eyes met, wordless understanding flowed between them. Airi reverted her eyes on the rest of her ships.

"Haruna, you will be the flagship. Akagi, bring one torpedo and focus the rest of your squadron for fighters. Shouhou, keep us informed with your saiun and bring your best fighters. Makigumo, Shigure, bring your best anti air gun and escort them as best you can, shoot down as many bombers as you are able to. Haguro, I will count on you to sink them. Hit them hard. The rest, please be on standby."

"Understood."

If surprise were present, the girls did not show it. They gave a firm salute and turned around to go to their station right at that instance. Shouhou put her documents on the table, nodded at the admiral, then followed the others, leaving Airi alone in the command room.

After the door slammed closed, the only sound was the beeping of the command machine.

Unconsciously, Airi curled her hands into fists. She closed her eyes. Somehow she had the feeling that she should say something more to Haguro... but it would not be wise in front of the others. She could only wish everything went well.

XXX

Her breathing picked up. The familiar hallway felt as if it would crushed her in between at any
second, even as they are they suffocated her, making her hard to breathe. She would soon… take her equipment. Equipment.

That room.

Her vision turned blurry and she felt a strange sense of vertigo. Her stomach churned. She wanted to throw up.

Vivid memory of a belt whipping her body echoed in her head. One whip.

And two.

The flaring pain by her back… then a kick..

"Haguro-san."

A gentle hand took her arm, and for a while she felt like like tripping, but another pair of hands stopped her body from falling. The darkness that almost consumed her suddenly disappear when she opened her teary eyes. She almost passed out... But Haruna took her hands at the right moment, noticing what happened to her even as they ran to their station.

The one who hold her body from falling was Akagi, gently steadying her shoulder while looking at her warmly.

"A-Ah, I-I'm so-"

"The sea awaits us, Haguro-san."

There was nothing Akagi said other than that, but that was more than enough. The carrier turned and ran, followed by Haguro and the others. The presence of her comrades felt so solid, with Haruna and Shouhou beside her, Akagi's back in front of her, and the two destroyer watching her calmly from behind. She knew when she looked back she would find Shigure's gentle blue eyes and Makigumo's innocent stares.

She was not alone. The sea called them all together.

She was going home with everyone.

XXXX

The sliding door made a dull sound as someone slid it open. Ashigara turned her head, wondering who had come in. She heard the alarm resounding just a while ago. However, she noticed how the instant bucket did not come out from the slot above her, so that means it was not any kind of report about the admiral wanting her to get out fast. She still had long hours of wasting time in the bath to heal her wounds. Perhaps it was Shouhou or may even be Haguro.

None of her guess was right.

Kagerou stepped on the wooden floor of the communal bath, bowing slightly before continuing to approach the heavy cruiser alone by the healing bath.

"Kagerou?"

"Haguro-san is deploying with Haruna-san, Akagi-san, Shouhou-san, Makigumo, and Shigure to intercept enemy task force coming from the north."
Cold sensation trailed upon her skin despite the temperature of her bath water. *Haguro?*

She still remembered Haguro's trembling figure she often found by the doorstep of their dormitory. To think that her sister could now once again sortie... Ashigara did not know how to feel. Relieved, happiness, worry, and frustration all molded into one as her mind processed what Kagerou had just said. Half of her body were filled with power that wanted to just burst out of the bath and be right beside her sister, right there on the waters, while half of her are struggling to keep her inside, telling her over and over to trust her. Trust her, or to discard herself off her sister's affairs completely.

She knew nothing. That much was evident. Perhaps discarding herself from her sister's life would be the better choice lets she made yet another wrong decision.

"... Did the Admiral ask you to specifically inform me?"

The Admiral seemed to always have her own agenda, though Ashigara now felt like even if she hated it, the Admiral knew full well what she was doing. Kagerou's answer took her aback.

"No, Ashigara-san. I just thought that you ought to know."

"**Haruna, reporting. Enemy fleet has come into vision.**"

Airi opened her eyes, finding herself sitting in front of the beeping command room apparatus with her fingers joined together, pressing to her mouth. It has begun.

"Flank them. Shoot down as many planes as you can."

"**Affirmative.**"

Airi watched as her own fleet formed anti air formation on the radar. The clock on the wall ticked. Still several more hours until the expedition fleet come back. Several more long hours.

"**Main battery, FIRE!**"

Haruna's 35.6 cm guns blasted with a force that sent shockwaves to her surrounding. Planes flew overhead, sounds of machines ringing to their ear drums. Akagi and Shouhou had been releasing their whole squadron of planes, ambushing their enemies is a shower of bombs. Unfortunately the Wo-class returned fire with a swarm of its abyssal tomcats, filling the horizon with dark colors of planes.

Haguro maneuvered past shells and torpedoes, her main battery locked in a Tsu Class that prepared its anti air guns.

Even without getting shot down, Akagi showed signs that the best they could get was Air parity. A battle waited for no one.

Haguro released her shots, a force of 20.3 double barreled guns shot through the left side of the Tsu class. Some of her bullets bounced over the armor, scratching it while others shot through. Unlucky. She turned 80 degrees to starboard, barely missing torpedos from the Ne-class, while at
the same time continued her fire with her secondary battery.

A shell grazed her cheek, plunging into the sea behind her.

A second later the sound of passing planes, planes she did not recognize. Amping her rudder, Haguro turned to port, barely missing a falling bomb from passing dive bomber. Waterspouts rose all around her, the force of bomb detonating rippled the waters below her feet.

"Attack the Wo class!" Haruna brushed past Haguro, the hem of her miko singes by enemy HE shells. "I will take care of the Ta Class and draw it away! Shigure-san and Makigumo-san, protect the carriers!"

After that Haruna sped up, trailing wakes around her as she zigzagged away under showers of shells—exchanging fires with flagship Ta class. Their enemies were extremely strong. One miss from any of them, and that would be paid by hefty price.

Planes fell left and right, both theirs and the enemies. Haguro pushed on while being grazed Tsu Class shell, aiming for a critical hit at the Wo Class. She shot.

Nu-class jumped into the trajectory of the shell, with explosions following right after. The blue eyes of the Wo Class flagship lit up then the mouth of its plane-releasing head opened. Haguro did half a circle, releasing as many shots as she could while her main battery reloaded.

She was too late.

A swarm of torpedo bombers and dive bombers filled up the sky, as if trying to crush their remaining hope. Following the cue, one remaining Nu-class also opened its mouth and released its own swarm of fighters. Myriads of black Abyssal planes spread out over the horizon.

"This shall not get to the base."

Akagi's voice was unusually determined and calm. Haguro looked back, finding her fleet. Akagi was looking at the sky, it was hard to make out her expression. Behind her, Makigumo was grimacing with burnt clothes and bleeding open wound. Moderate damage, although it was clear she was bridging heavily towards critical condition.

Akagi reached to her back and took her last arrow, pointing at the cloud of Abyssal bomber. Shouhou, lightly damaged, did the same. The planes that came back to them were damaged, showing up as rather deformed arrow in their quiver.

They were still arrows however. There were still planes left.

"Be strong."

XXX

The sun has begun to set. Beautiful gradation of gold, red, and blue colored the sky. The vast sea however, littered by blood and fire. Planes wreckage sunk slowly, burning before disappearing into the deep. Haguro tried to open her one healthy eye, since her other one was caked with blood. A gash extended from her brow to her cheek, the reason why her other one was unusable. A shell from Tsu-class grazed her when she was pushing an already critically damaged Haruna off the trajectory of the salvo. She managed to grab her flagship right after, towing her away from showers of shell.

Beside her, Haruna slipped between reality and unconsciousness. Even breathing seemed like a
labour for her. It was unknown how many shells and bombs actually hit her during her attack on the flagship. She managed to maneuver away from so many of them but eventually her relentless attack was stopped after a critical hit from the Ta-class knocked her off and thus gave room for the planes to finally shower bombs on her. Haguro remembered vividly Haruna’s battered body speeding away from walls of waterspouts.

They sped away quickly, regrouping and assessing their formation.

On the other side of the sea, a moderately damaged Ta-class observed their movement. Waiting, calculating. Both of the fleet measured each other's power.

It was obvious who was losing.

Akagi was heavily damaged, almost drowning when swarms of torpedo bombers and dive bombers aimed at her, trying to disable her persistent Reppuu. Shigure managed to shield her at the right time, pushing the carrier out of the worse of the brunt that could have sunk her and shooting down more incoming planes. She maneuvered under rain of bombs while towing Akagi away, then torped a heavily damaged Ne class to sink. She took a torpedo on the carrier's stead however and now breathing heavily in exertion with Akagi on her shoulder. She had used the main battery to stop a shell, rendering it useless.

Shouhou was in moderate damage, however she broke her arm when a shell shot at her right just a split second after she released the last batch of her Reppuu. Makigumo was just like almost the rest of them, bending her body with her hands on her knees, heaving deep, painful breathing in her moderately damaged state.

The enemy still had the Wo class and Tsu Class in light damage, and flagship Ta-class and one Nu class in moderate damage. All their effort only managed to sunk one Nu class and a Ne class. All their effort only gained them air parity and this much damage.

"Haruna-san…"

The battleship was silent, only looking at the horizon. The look in her weary eyes made Haguro bit her lips. It was a look of apology. In this kind of time, it only had one meaning. She watched as the battleship eventually reached out to her antenna, closing her eyes in defeat.

"... Admiral. We can stall them here until help comes. Your permission, Admiral?"

A fight till the last. There was several second of heavy pause. A while later, the Admiral answered.

"... Retreat."

"B-but Admiral!"

"There will be no good if I lost you here. Retreat."

Akagi, Haruna, and Shouhou… they were the capital ships. Among the best ships the base had. The base would be in a deep trouble if they were lost. However retreating also an extremely dangerous situation. The base would be in danger. All that were left are several destroyer… and also the shore cannon. They had no one else to protect the base.

The base.

The answer was simple.
"Let me stall them here, Haruna-san. The rest can go back."

XXX

She somehow had a premonition that this would happen. She knew, and it was totally in Haguro's character, to say something like that. It would be a lie to say that she did not think of that option as well, and that made her feel extremely guilty. Guilty... and dirty.

Tactically, this was the best option.

With that statement, the radio suddenly loud with other ships' protest.

"Haguro-san, what do you—"

"Haruna-san, Shouhou-san, and Akagi-san are important capital ships. The expedition fleet will go back soon, there is a chance that bucket will be available. It will be better for the base."

"You're just as important, Haguro-san!"

"Makigumo stay too! Makigumo will be useful!"

"You need to tow Haruna-san. There is no one else—"

"That is too dangerous, Haguro-san! That—"

"There is no other way. I promise I will stall them here."

"That is not the point! Haguro-san—"

"You may sink! I shall not let that ha—"

"The enemy will attack soon. We should move."

Akagi's voice sound calm, but emotionless. It seemed her statement managed to stop the whole chaos, however. Shouhou's voice sounded disturbed.

"Akagi-sa—"

"Admiral? Please, your order."

Akagi's assertive and realistic side took the wheel in cold manner. Being among the oldest ship, it was clear she, too, see the situation. Of all the things that Airi had never wanted to do...

"I don't want to lose a thing. I don't want to lose a soul. Gamble, if I have to, but I cannot let myself to lose souls that I fight for."

Gamble. If she had to.

Myoukou class heavy cruiser were known as good ships. Really good ships. As she took her breath, Airi understood exactly that meaning spanned more than merely their ship specification.

"Everyone, please retreat as fast as you can. They will surely move the moment they see you leave. At that time, Haguro, we are counting on you to stall them until our forces healed."

"Commander-san, even if it's against 5 enemies, I will support you."
Please live.

Even if I have no rights to tell you how to live.

XXX

With the twilight, the sun goes down
The bell of the temple in the mountain rang

In towns in countryside, there would always be speakers every few meters. They would give announcement, warnings, and also chime in certain time of the day. In their base, their loudspeaker would be the morning march chime every morning, however when it was 5 PM it would have the same chime as the one by the town. The very same song. Haguro had never asked anyone what song that was, even if they refer it every now and then.

Let's hold hand and go home together with the crows

They knew the song as the "dusk song". It felt like saying, it would soon be dinner, let's go home.

After the children came home,
The big round moon shines

Haguro never knew what it meant until the first time the Admiral sang to her. The woman hugged her and tapped her gently, then rocked, slowly. At times she sang, at times she hummed. She would stay until the cruiser stopped crying and trembling. Every single time.

At the times when the small birds dreams, on the sky are golden shining stars.

Haguro remember looking up, straight into a pair of warm brown eyes. The Admiral would brush her tears and smile.

Why do you sing that song?

Hmm? I don't know myself. I just like it, I guess.

Shells brushed past her again, burning her sides. Her clothes ripped and her bleeding skin exposed to the night air. It felt painful… yet familiar.

It calms me down. Thank you very much.

Really? I am glad. It does to me too. Feels like going back to my childhood.

Her tired eye caught some movement in the darkness. Tsu class.

"Of course, when you can, aim at the head!" Ashigara pat her shoulder. "Nothing will work without a head!"

"That sounds cruel, Nee-san."

"Well, it's a fast death. That ain't as cruel."

Her main battery reloaded with a click and she shot, bullets drilled into the skull of the Tsu-class. The force knocked it back several meters, disappearing into the darkness of the night.

Blue eyes of the Wo class turned into a dim ghost of mirage in the distance.
Did it send an attack?

The sound of the waves felt eerie on her ears.

"You know, when they come with a whooosh! You just gotta WHOOOP! them!"

"Seriously, Maya, I don't get what the freak did you say."

"Suzuya, that stiiiiiiings! You lack passion!"

Something came. Overhead, a half mechanical hum approached.

She amped her rudder rotation and made a half circle evasion movement.

The water rippled under her feet and showers her with splashes. Maya was right about planes. She was always right about them.

A boom from afar… and suddenly something hit her square in the stomach. Pain shocked her body and she stumbled to the water, splashing, but she could hear something rushing. Blinded in pain, Haguro kicked the water and rolled to the side.

Something detonated under the water.

*It hurts.*

**With the twilight, the sun goes down**
**The bell of the temple in the mountain rang**
**Let's hold hand and go home together with the crows**

"Haguro."

Blood gushed between her fingers as she pressed the wound in her stomach. AP shell. Only AP shell could penetrate this deep into her body.

Her mouth taste like iron now.

**After the children came home,**
**The big round moon shines**

She spit blood to the sea below her and moved again. Something hit her sides now, blasting off her left secondary battery. Another missed a few inches from her head. She opened her eye, the only one that could see. All she could make out were blurred lights of yellow and blue. The hue of Ta-class and Wo-class.

She could not see anything else.

**At the times when the small birds dreams, on the sky are golden shining stars.**

The stars.

She could not see them anymore.

"Can you hear me, Haguro? Please hang in there a little more."

*It hurts...*
Commander-san.

A boom from afar, then she could feel something burning grazed her shoulder. HE shell.

She did not know why… but the pain was not from her wound. Something else, something else hurt her so much, so much that her throat constricted. Her breathing turned painful… and tears leaked.

Commander-san's voice worsened that dull ache.

"Hang in there, my Dear."

Commander-san, it hurts…

Commander-san's voice. Commander-san's request.

"Do you want to talk about it, Sweetheart?"

She had… a lot of things she wanted to say. A lot of things she wanted to remember. The warmth, the patting, the hug, the hum and singing… the days of going back from sortie and laughing at the cafetaria. Her sister's pat on her head. The cup noodle Maya gave. Suzuya's chocolate. Takao-san' rather unfunny jokes. Choukai's kindness.

Something hit her shoulder. Then her right thigh.

All physical pain turned dull.

Is this it?

"Admiral, what is there for me to live?"

"Haguro, dear, listen."

She couldn't see anything.

"I do not have the rights to tell you what to live for."

"Haguro, Ashigara's coming."

Her breath stopped. For a while it seemed as if she could open her eyes again.

Nee-san?

"If you want to be scrapped, if you really need it out of your own will, then inform Ashigara.

"Ashigara is on her way. Ashigara is here."

A sound of a plane. A… dive bomber?

If she got hit right now...

"The Haguro that I know won't back down on anything! The Haguro that I know won't choose the easy way out of something! The Haguro that I know is not a coward! THIS ISN'T LIKE YOU!"

"Please, Dear, hang in there a little bit more."
"Tell her everything. Why you're sad, why you're scared, what your sister could do for you."

My story.
She could not see but she could hear.

I haven't told her everything...
The planes came.

"Ashigara-neesan."

I am sorry.

You have no idea how happy your sister will feel just by listening to your story.

Now she understand why her chest was in pain.
She did not want to die.
She did not want to sink.
She wanted to go home.
She could hear the bombs were released.
"... Oneesan, please save me."
She wanted to see her again.

I'm sorry.

XXX

"YOU LEAVE HER?!!" Ashigara almost jumped out of the bath if it were not for both Kagerou and Inazuma holding her. "YOU FUCKING LEAVE MY SISTER TO DIE?!!"

Haruna did not say any reply. Not that she had any excuse either. The whole fleet were directly transported to the dock, all evidently exhausted and critically damaged. The absence of Haguro just made Ashigara snapped right at that very instance.

"YOU OF ALL PEOPLE!!"

"Ashigara-san, please!" Kagerou was now all wet from all the splashing. The next words. Should not be spoken.

"I THOUGHT YOU KNOW HOW IT FEELS TO LOSE A SISTER!!"

"Ashigara-san!!"

That was too far, way too far. Haruna did not say anything to reply that nor did she move her eyes away Ashigara's gaze. Her reaction angered the heavy cruiser even more.

"LET ME GO!!" The heavy cruiser struggled against the restrain of the two destroyers, trying to lift herself off the bath. "LET ME—"
The sound of bucket slot opening made everyone turned their head. Green buckets came right on Ashigara, Haruna, Akagi, and Shouhou.

Loudspeaker switched on at that instance.


The fourth expedition fleet has returned.

"We're going to save Haguro."

XXX

"DON'T YOU FUCKING DARE SINK MY SISTEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERRRRRRRRRRRRR!"

Blast of light illuminated the night. All her guns burst fire as shells showered unsuspecting Ta-Class and Wo-class. And she sped, cutting through waves right to the spot where she saw the last explosion.

Her sister was sinking.

"HAGURO!"

She reached into the water, catching her sister's hand, and with all power she could muster, tugged her up above the water again and into her arms. She didn't move. Her sister didn't move.

"Haguro," Ashigara whispered her sister's name, calling her. Her hand traced her gash, her blood, the wound on her stomach…. Fear clutched her heart. She felt so lifeless, so powerless. "Haguro. Haguro. Please, Haguro…"

The heavy cruiser caressed her sister's face, feeling how cold the skin was under her fingertips. In a wordless anguish she hugged her again, rocking as she whispered her name. Haguro. Haguro. Haguro. However the reply she wanted didn't come. Her sister didn't react.

And there she cried, hugging her sister deeper, wishing she had come just a few second sooner to let herself be the one hit by the bombs. The sound of battle echoed in afar as the rest of the fleet spread themselves over and fought the enemy, however it was none of Ashigara's concern.

It didn't matter.

Nothing mattered anymore.

"You called me…"

She had waited for it, for a request. She had been waiting all these times. All these times.

"Haguro, Haguro, you finally called me… I am here."

But she failed, yet again. She failed. Always.

She indeed, never had been the one who could ever save her little sister.

"My sister, please, please, I am begging you. Please don't leave me. Please, Haguro. Haguro."

Her voice turned to whispers, chokes, between her tears. The urge to scream, to wail and just to shot herself with her gun felt so strong she almost could not contain it. Her sister. Her only little
sister. Her only reason to live.

Please don't take her away.

"... Oneesan…"

Ashigara opened her eyes. Warmth spread all over her body upon hearing the small, almost inaudible voice.

A weak hand touched her arm, and when she looked down to the face of her sister, she saw gentle eyes staring back at her, just as teary as hers had been.

And just as thankful.

"Oneesan… I wanted to see you…"

She lived.

The tears now were not of pain anymore.

"I want to talk to you.."

She lived.

"Thank you..."

Happiness had never felt so pure.

Haguro.

Ashigara gently hugged her sister again. Not a single word coming out of her mouth, and not a single one was actually needed. The flood of emotion in her heart overflow in her hug. Her sister had not the power to hug her back but that was alright. She could hear her breathe. She could feel her warmth. She was alive. She lived.

No, I thank you.

She had not missed the only one request her little sister asked her.

You saved me.

Haguro lived.

You saved me.

"Admiral, Haruna reporting in. We have saved Haguro-san and eliminated the enemy forces. All objective achieved with no casualties. Requesting to go back to homeport."

You saved me.

Perhaps now she could learn to forgive herself.

Thank you.

XXX

"We are now beginning to renovate the heavy cruiser dormitory. Work is progressing smoothly as
of now and is estimated to finish around early summer."

The Grand Marshal, a big burly man with white moustache, nodded at her explanation. Third month's progress's inspection came rather sudden but from the look of it, the Grand Marshal seemed pleased with her works. The destroyer and light cruiser dormitory fixed, the docks enlarged, the factory running, the garden fixed. The only thing that made herself sweating would be her current available budget. Even her buckets preserve had started to grow with Kongou's penalty period ended.

With spring sun shining on them vigorously, Airi stood beside the Grand Marshall by the entrance of the heavy cruiser dormitory, looking on the activities around as renovation going on. Shouhou stood behind her, holding several documents. A few meters behind them, the Grand Marshal's adjutant looked on. None of them were Kanmusu.

Seeing how interested Grand Marshal was on the renovation, Airi glanced at the flower patch Choukai and Haguro tended. Too bad it was trampled. She could have boasted about it.

"I have read your budget proposal for this summer," the Grand Marshal had one hand smoothing his moustache. "That is quite some demand you asked, Tendouji-kun."

"Ah, yes, Grand Marshal. I have talked with the mechanics, some of the equipment need to be replaced and maintenance goods be restocked. I can arrange a meeting with the head of the engineer if you would love for one, Sir."

"Yes, yes, please. Ah."

The Grand Marshal suddenly took notice of something. He turned towards the pier.

"Is that your Myoukou class I see, Tendouji-kun?"

Airi followed his line of sight and saw what he meant. She could not suppress a wide proud smile from forming on her face.

"Indeed, Grand Marshal."

He stayed silent.

"Have you scrapped Haguro? She was rather useless last time we inspected her."

Perhaps it was hard for him to comprehend, how in three months, he now witnessed Ashigara laughing heartedly, one arm over Haguro's shoulder. Along with them walked Suzuya and Maya, joining in the laughter. Even from afar it was easy to see the bright atmosphere the four of them show as they walked by the pier towards the factory. It seemed they were going to have a practice.

"Her sister also seemed very broken."

The Grand Marshal smoothed his moustache.

"... Did you scrap then construct them recently?"

"... I just want to remind you, Tendouji-kun, that we must eliminate any possible threat to the nation."

"No, Grand Marshall."
"They were the same ship as that Jiro used?"

"Yes, Grand Marshall."

The old man went silent again. He smoothed his moustache, watching them intently until they disappeared inside the factory.

"Would you like to talk to them, Sir?"

"Ah, no, I don't need," he finally looked back to Airi again, giving a small smile. The gears on his brain though moved. "I see that they are well."

"Indeed, they have been serving me splendidly."

His grey eyes watched Airi's for quite a while. After a while he gave the young Admiral a smile, even if Airi could visibly see it didn't reach his eyes.

"You did well, Tendouji-kun. I see that I was right to have quite an expectation out of you."

She almost scoffed.

You didn't though.

"Thank you very much, Grand Marshal. I shall not fail you."

Or this nation.

When she straightened from her short bow, her smile was just as sweet as her superior's.

Or these girls.

If there was anything that she learned from her three months of being stationed in this base, it would be that sometimes human perhaps may not be as human as they seemed to be.

~~~~~ End of Myoukou Class Arc ~~~~~

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: This took so long. I went on writer's block, so I guess some of the part may not be satisfactory but I am just glad it is over.

About the loudspeaker and the chime: in Japan, you will have them around on almost every town. It is a part of disaster prevention program. The reason why they play the song is also part of daily check in case any of the speakers malfunctioned. The chime can be heard usually at 12 PM then at 4-6 PM. The songs differ between hours, and also between town. Yuuyake Koyake is one of the songs usually played on 4-6 PM, which also function as a reminder for children to go home after playing. This gives the song a nostalgic feeling for many people, of dusk when they came home during their childhood.

夕焼け小焼けが日が暮れて
山のお寺の金がなる
お手々繋いで皆帰ろう
カラスと一緒に帰りましょう

子供が帰った後からは
丸い大きなお月様
小鳥が夢を見るころは
空にはキラキラ金の星

Yuuyake koyake de hi ga kurete
Yama no otera no kane ga naru
otete tsunaide mina kaerou
karasu to isshoni kaerimashou

kodomo ga kaetta ato kara wa
marui ookina otsukisama
kotori ga yume wo miru koro wa
sora ni wa kirakira kin no hoshi
Chapter Summary

There are many forms of gratitude and many ways to express them. It may be one sided or mutual, and both are equally right.

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Another looooong chapter but this time, it is pretty much RANDOM, jumpy, with strange pacing thanks to being made in split. But well, I hope you enjoy.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of the songs I used in this fic. I do translate Japanese lyric myself unless stated otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If I give you some obstruction
be it in the form of mind, or morality, or law
if you just go around the high wall
look, "Hello"

T-Pocket feat Hatsune Miku - 1925

Sounds of pen scratching paper filled the main office. With the window all wide open, sunlight showered into the room, giving early morning warmth into the relatively empty office. It lighted the outline of papers stacked on one side of the Admiral's desk, the Admiral's body, and a teacup by the other side of her desk. Within the room, there were only the Admiral's desk, two shelves, and a secretary ship desk. A cuckoo clock hanged on a wall right behind the admiral. The strip of wall was pretty narrow, as it was sandwiched by tall windows on either sides. There was a considerable space in front of the admiral's desk, designed as such so that when the fleets reported there were room for everyone. Two rusty shelves filled the wall by the right, and on the opposite side of the wall was a map of waters around the naval base and also secretary ship's working desk. No one was sitting there now though. The only things there were some stack of folders and documents.

With all the space and the lack of any living being other than the Admiral, it did look quite lonely.

It was only the fourth month since Admiral Tendouji Airi's transfer to the small naval base. Autumn was coming, signified by the browning of the leaves and the decreasing temperature. Along with the new season, came different needs and readjustment of expenses. The ship girls dorms and cafeteria were at least patched up for now in preparation of incoming winter but they should ready some stock of fuel for heater as well. The cafeteria budget coming from the cooks also slightly changed. The Admiral should also take into account the possible needs of warm garments for the ship girls. Thus, all the recalculations of budgeting.
Oh, also Akagi and Kaga's rations.

Somebody knocked the door twice. The door clicked opened.

"Excuse me."

"Ah, Shouhou. Okaeri."

The light carrier bowed slightly before stepping in. Airi smiled at her, putting down her pen. Her secretary ship had a bundle of documents in her hands, but what she gave directly was just a rather thick brochure.

"The main office furniture catalogue for this month has arrived, Admiral. Perhaps you will be interested."

"Oh, thank you."

Airi took it, resting her back to the chair. Her other hand took the teacup, finding warm green tea ready for her to sip.

**Monthly Furniture Catalogue**

"Oh, it's pretty thicker than usual."

"Because the season has changed, Admiral. It seems they have some new items in."

"Hmmmm~"

Airi flipped open the catalogue, sipping the tea as she did so. She wasn't usually interested in these new furnitures, merely because she thought there was no need for that. There were more pressing matters at hand and allocating coins just to beautify her own main office, which was already functional in the first place, was a waste of money. The only thing she purchased since her transfer was an additional shelf and a better version of Shouhou's working desk. Other than that, despite how there was a closet down the hall, the closet remained relatively empty and the whole main office remained just like how it was, only a bit tidier.

Times like these, Airi suddenly wondered if she would turn out to become a strict frugal mother in the future that invest more for her children's insurance and education than entertainment.

"I think it maybe a good time to purchase something for the main office, Admiral," said Shouhou gently with a smile. "Maybe something to indulge yourself between work?"

"Do I even have the time for that," Airi laughed. "If I slack off even more than this, I will be fired."

"I highly doubt that will happen, Admiral. You have been working diligently every day."

"So do you. There is nothing special of what I do that gives birth to a need to congratulate myself."

Shouhou was about to say something to continue their courteous banter, but rushing footsteps came from the corridors. A second later, the door flung open and there came a tiny girl with pink hair and oversized white shirt. The sparkly eyes flew to the Admiral.

"Commander-sama! Commander-sama!"

Airi couldn't resist the urge to smile. She put down her catalogue and cup, eyeing the little girl who ran with her small feet to the other side of the table where Airi sat. Makigumo gave a wide smile
then flung herself to Airi's lap, hugging the Admiral's belly.

"Commander-sama~~!"

"What's wrong, Makigumo? You're really early."

"Makigumo joined Kagerou-san and Shiranui-san in their shelling training this morning!"

"Ooh! Good girl!"

"Makigumo wants to get stronger!"

"Um! That's the girl I know. Admirable!"

Airi lifted Makigumo to sit on her lap, smiling when the small destroyer nuzzled to her chest in that instant. If anything, this one destroyer was so cute it was diabetic. She was a transfer like Airi as well, given to the small naval base for training when the other naval base said they had "too many destroyers" to handle after "failed ship construction attempts". Since the small naval base only had a small number of destroyers thanks to the previous admiral's hobby of not resupplying them and using them as meat tanks, Airi gladly accepted the small cute destroyer to her naval base to cut off expenses and avoiding scrapping her. However, she was the only Yuugumo class in the fleet.

Without her beloved Yuugumo-neesan, at first Makigumo spent most of her time alone, looking at destroyer groups from afar or something. That was why Airi let her come to the office from time to time so that she didn't feel alone. There was usually nothing exactly important but seeing the destroyer brushing away her own tears was enough as a reason to pause her work once or twice in a day. Her frequency of coming getting fewer and fewer progressively however, since the destroyer slowly blending in with the others. For Airi it was a good sign. She did feel a bit lonely though.

After a short while of nuzzling and getting patted on the head, Makigumo took notice of the brochure on Airi's desk. She took it and peered at the title, raising her glasses.

"Furniture…. catalogue….?"

"Ah yes! I was looking at this when you came."

Airi swiveled the chair to face the desk again. She guided Makigumo to put down the brochure on the desk so that they both, and also Shouhou, could look at them together. Still sitting on the Admiral's lap, Makigumo looked into the list of furnitures.

Airi watched the expression of the little destroyer and asked gently, "Which do you think will be good for this main office, Makigumo?"

Makigumo tilted her head, destroyer turned to look at Airi.

"But this is Commander-sama's office," she said. "Commander-sama should be the one who chose them! What does Commander-sama like?"

Airi sighed. She rested her chin on her palm.

"I don't have any particular preferences... I like this office enough, I guess."

"Heeeeee… Commander-sama doesn't want to change anything?"

Airi nonchalantly examined the catalogue again. She saw a particular item then chuckled.
"Maybe this is the one that I will want the most," she said, placing her finger on a picture of a soft pink futon. Shouhou raised her eyebrows, putting down the documents she brought on the desk and bending her body to look closer. "Because if I have this, I can sleep here in case I work over time."

"Admiral, I don't think you need anymore items that will make you work harder…"

"Makigumo can sleep here too!"

"M-Makigumo-chan!"

Shouhou was the only one who seemed opposed to the idea. Airi herself laughed and patted the destroyer's head.

"If you don't mind sharing one futon with me. I think we should buy one more pillow for you too, don't you think?"

"A-Admiral!" Shouhou practically had both of her hands on the desk now. She seemed a bit panicking. "Admiral, that is too much!"

Confused, Airi turned to look at Shouhou.

"Eh? Why is that? It isn't like it's anything bad. You know you have times you don't want to sleep alone, especially in her age."

At least for Airi, when she was in Makigumo's size, she would crawl to her parents' futon to sleep with them when she had nightmares or feeling lonely. Eventually she ceased to do that though, because then her brother and sister were the ones crawling into her futon whenever they have nightmares.

Even though these ship girls somehow were born the way they are, but they sure exhibit the personality and mental capacity of girls their apparent size. At least most of them.

"It's not…" Shouhou struggled with her words. She seemed agitated. Makigumo blinked, watching her while covering her mouth with her small hand, seemingly afraid that she had said something wrong. "It's just… we're only…. your ship girls. We're not supposed to be.. taking your space."

Airi raised her eyebrows. These ship girls sure were always worried about those kind of things. Of course it was not a problem, not an important one at least, and very understandable. However Airi did wonder about how they viewed themselves. She also wondered how they viewed her. This formality wall was bothersome.

"I will leave it all up to you then, Shouhou," said Airi finally, grabbing her pen and wrote on a memo. She ripped the memo in one yank and gave it to her secretary ship. "Go talk with the others."

"A-Admiral?" the light carrier looked at the memo and back to Airi then back again, making sure she didn't read it wrong. "W-What…"

It was a written permission to her secretary to use all coin in their possession for room modification.

"I have nothing in mind for my office anyway," Airi shrugged. One of her hands patted Makigumo's head. "All of you may think of something to add here. Or if you don't want to, there is an empty room beside this office, also several other rooms in the building. If you and other ship girls needs any kind of room, you can use and modify it however you want. I think you are the ones
who know what you really need."

"B-But this is for Admiral's..."

"It is still under my discretion," Airi moved her attention to Makigumo, who was now peering intently at the brochure. "Pick whatever you all think suitable. I think you better discuss with the others since I don't know what you need. I leave it all to you."

Shouhou's eyes were unreadable. But she didn't say anything else other than, "Understood, Admiral."

"Hmm, will you be going out again after this? If you would, perhaps I can ask your help to send these other documents to Ooyodo?"

Airi pushed a stack of documents towards Shouhou, which she had just reviewed and approved since last night. Shouhou nodded then took them. Airi's face lightened when she saw the documents now in Shouhou's hands. Somehow whenever that happened, this sense of accomplishment always came to her heart, the same satisfaction like marking a to do note for a job done.

Shouhou's presence was always like a walking billboard saying "Work" and now she got reminded of one other thing.

"Oh, also.. I haven't given the list for our first training this month, have I?" Airi snapped her finger. She almost forgot such an important thing. Her secretary ship nodded. Airi nodded at her silent reply, said 'right' under her breath, and took out a piece of paper she had been ignoring for the whole week. She glanced at Makigumo. "Makigumo, do you want to go for some vacation?"

Lights seemed to flare inside the destroyer's eyes at the mention of the word.

"Vacation?"

"This month's training will be at Yokosuka so we're gonna go there for about a week," Airi chuckled. Makigumo beamed.

"Makigumo will be in training team too?"

"Yep, why not? With Nagato and Choukai. You don't mind Ooi, do you? No? Haha don't make such a face, Makigumo. Ooi won't bite you out of the blue. Aaand Ooyodo and Maya in," She scribbled their names as she said them. "Alright, you're in! Here, Shouhou."

The light carrier took the memo with both hand, bowing.

Another work done.

"Okay, then!" Airi straightened up right away, smiling when she revert her attention to Makigumo on her lap. She swiveled away from the desk then give Makigumo a gentle push. "Off you go as well, sweetling. I need to do my job."

Enough cute and idling for now. She still had that budget planning to do after all. A bit of Shouhou and Makigumo were all she needed for a bit of work motivation boost.

"Gotta get these all done before vacation!"

~ Gift! For the Admiral! ~
"Excuse us, Admiral."

Shouhou bowed and closed the door, bringing with her some documents she had to send, the brochure, and also the Admiral's memo for the futon order. Walking away from the main office, Shouhou let out a long sigh.

"... Makigumo said something wrong?"

Shouhou glanced beside her, meeting the big round eyes of the destroyer. The look of fright on Makigumo's face was adorably heart melting and Shouhou found herself patting the destroyer's head before she knew it.

"No, you didn't, Makigumo-chan. Nothing was wrong."

"But Shouhou-san sounded angry back then..."

Obviously the destroyer didn't believe her. Shouhou lightly laughed. She heaved a deep sigh, throwing a look outside through the windows that lined up along the corridor. The leaves were changing colors outside. Some were falling, gently following the mild breeze.

"I just felt that the Admiral should distance herself a bit more from us, given her position. Maybe I am just being paranoid."

Makigumo titled her head.

"Shouhou-san doesn't like Commander-sama?"

Upon hearing the question, Shouhou pinched the destroyer's cheek.

"Awawawawawa! Shouhou-san, that huuurts!"

"Why would anyone dislike Admiral Tendouji."

Makigumo turned even more teary eyed.

"T-Then Shouhou-san doesnt like M-Makigu- Awawawawawawawawawe!"

It was even harder this time.

"Of course not, Makigumo-chan."

"B-But Shouhou-san sounded angry..."

"I wasn't angry. I was hesitant."

"Of what?"

"... You won't understand."

"Eeeeh! That's mean!"

Another pinch.

"Awawawawawa! Awwww, Shouhou-san!"

Shouhou couldn't hold her giggle. Makigumo was indeed, heartmeltingly adorable.
It wasn't exactly a "problem" per se, quite the contrary. However this proximity was foreign and Shouhou was uncomfortable with it. It was not only the issue that the Admiral was a human and they were ship girls, it was also because of their position as superior and subordinate. The Admiral clearly had the best intention to blur the gap between them. It was a kind gesture from her part but still… somehow Shouhou got the feelings that it was not supposed to be so. They were supposed to be the one who treated her good, not the other way around. All these times, it was always the Admiral who "served" them, not the other way around.

"Makigumo likes Commander-sama." Makigumo muttered, rubbing her sore cheek. Shouhou glanced at her. The little destroyer glanced up beyond her oversized spectacles. She suddenly seemingly realizing something when looking into Shouhou's eyes. She beamed. "Ah! Not just like, Makigumo loves Commander-sama!"

Love.

It was a big word, perhaps too big for both of them to really comprehend. However, Shouhou found herself smiling. There was nothing in the meaning of that word that she understood at that second that contradict the warm feeling in her own heart.

She patted Makigumo's head.

"I do too."

"Un!"

xxxx

"TONIGHT, THERE WILL BE NIGHT BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAATTLEEEEE!"

"Sendai, no shouting in cafeteria!"

Nagato's voice came reverberating over the numerous chatters of the girls. It was lunch time, almost all ship girls were present inside the spacious cafeteria. Benches lining up neatly, taking most of the space. Counters lined up on one side of the wall opposite of the window. It was filled with ship girls only, being located by their dormitory area. Human personnel had their own dorm and cafeteria. Congregation between human personnel and ship girls was quite uncommon especially in meal time. Admiral Tendouji had been meaning to devise one large common room so that they could have a meal together but so far she had put it on hold and instead opted to better the facilities around the base. Besides, they would still interacted during fitting, regular check up, maintenance, and so on.

"It had only been several months," Admiral Tendouji said one day to Shouhou, when she casted her look over the base from the rooftop of the main building. Construction sounds came from various places, the base was healing. Far away by the sea, gunshots echoed as several ship girls had their drill. Shouhou remembered the way the Admiral leaned to the railing, her black long hair moved with the mild sea breeze. "There are still time. We have a lot of time to know each other. Let's not rush it."

Shouhou understood how the Admiral wanted to mend the broken trust between ship girls and their human partners. The previous admiral left an obvious bitter taste that would sure lasted long in the girls' memory and crawled deep under their skin. For some, the wound lied even deeper. Shouhou herself knew that the girls accepted the new Admiral incredibly fast. Even inside the deep distrust that lied between ship girls and their admiral, the new Admiral took their hearts incredibly easily.
Her gender alone took them by surprise, giving them uncertainty upon meeting. Shouhou herself knew half of her was ready to reject the moment she was in front of the main office on that first day, but then the stark contrast from the previous admiral took her off guard. Her gender alone was shocking, her personality was even more. The surprise made her pre-made defenses crumbled before everything began, replaced by curiosity and expectation. Shouhou knew it was the same for many of them.

The military clearly knew their ground. It was sly of them to station her strategically like that. However, that same cunning granted them arguably the most compassionate admiral. Shouhou understood that she had never been under any admiral other than the previous admiral and Admiral Tendouji. However, it was hard to think of any other admiral as kind as her.

What kind of admiral would let their ship girl do whatever they want with room renovation coin? Shouhou sighed.

"You seem pretty dispirited today, Shouhou," Nagato, who sat in front of her, took her miso soup bowl and stirred it with her chopsticks. Shouhou gave a weak smile while staring at her own rice that was half eaten. Still having the same expressions, she took some meat from her grilled saba fish. "Is the food that bad?"

"No… It's really delicious."

The food tasted superb compared to the usual sweet potato ration they used to have during the reign of the previous admiral. Lunch time turned so enjoyable once the new admiral was there. She tasted their meal, and berated the chef, saying, "If it is not something that we would like to have, it is not for them as well!" After that the meal made a jump in food quality and the ship girls now had their meal in glee. Being fair as she always was, the Admiral also inspected the human staff cafeteria, finding deplorable condition, and in the end allocated more for both cafeterias than what the previous Admiral would have ever do for their staff. Draining the last bit of the budget, all that Admiral Tendouji said was, "A meal is the beginning of every action."

With many ship girls going here and there, the cafeteria was really lively with chatters. So were Maya and Choukai who sat beside her, and the destroyer team on the benches around them. She could also hear Akagi's delighted laughter and Kaga's polite comment from somewhere behind her. However somehow Shouhou felt pretty much down.

"Is it about the Admiral again?" Nagato sipped her miso. She smiled when she saw Shouhou's exasperated expression. It seemed every single trouble that Shouhou had, always been something to do with her job as the new secretary and her overly kind Admiral. "What is it this time? I think the Admiral won't give you impossible work."

"Well, she just did," Shouhou stuffed her mouth with rice. Nagato raised her eyebrows. "She just told me that we can do whatever we want with all coins allocated for room renovation."

Nagato put down her miso soup.

"Whatever we want?"

"She said she doesn't know what to do with it so she let us do it since we are the know who knows best about what we want."

"Isn't this about Admiral's office?"

"Yes, but she said she liked it enough and have no idea what to add. She said we can use it also for
the empty room beside Admiral office or anywhere else to our liking."

Nagato took her bowl of rice, titling her head a bit.

"Hmmm… but those coins are still for her office. She should use it for that, else she will have to file the report to the higher echelon."

"Yes... she only said she wanted additional futon to sleep, in case she worked overtime again."

The battleship chuckled.

"That is our Admiral for you."

Shouhou smiled.

"Our Admiral indeed."

The two of them ate in silence for a while. Nagato finished her meal first, clasping her hands before her and said, "Gochisousama."

She watched Shouhou eat her meal silently, sipping her tea.

"So, when do you think we should gather around to discuss about this?"

Shouhou groaned.

"We're going to?"

"It's still an order."

Shouhou sighed. Nagato's straightforward attitude was something she wished she had. How many times again she wished for Nagato being the secretary? Of course that did not mean that she hated her job. She just felt... unworthy at times.

"I just don't think it is right to use it for our cause."

"Who said that we're going to use it for our cause?" The battleship smiled. Shouhou blinked. "I am sure the others would want to give something to the Admiral as well."

Nagato put down her tea.

"Everyone! Gather around, Shouhou has an announcement!"

"Na-Nagato-san!"

Everyone had heard that though, and the chatters died down almost instantly. Everyone's eyes now fixated on their direction. Nagato smiled at Shouhou.

"We all have things we want to say thanks for to the Admiral, Shouhou. I am sure everyone will agree with me."

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Upon hearing that they would give something to their Admiral, every ship girl has her eyes glinting with excitement. From the gentle smile Haguro gave, to the confident grin courtesy of Maya, Shouhou understood there was a story behind every expression. After all, she was personally there
for some of them, watching first hand the gentle ways of how the Admiral helped them get up again from the abomination that was their previous Admiral. There were many kind of pain, and equally numerous kind of medicine. However, it was clear that among the strongest medicine, was kindness. The Admiral had that aplenty. In these few months she slowly cured what was otherwise had been lost. Gratitude was the sentiment they all shared.

There was but one problem, however.

"Tea table!"
"Bar counter!"
"Whiskey rack!"
"Koutatsu!"
"Oh come on, new desk!"
"Wait, that desk is expensive!"
"Isn't that what money is all about? To be spent!"
"I need to talk seriously to you about that, Suzuya."

"W-Whaa, Takao-san. I don't think I get what you meeeeaaan~"

Who said it would be easier if it was all of them. Shouhou was pleasantly surprised when everyone was so enthusiastic in making it a gift for the Admiral. However they all have different ideas on what they want the office to be and it dragged on so long without finding one agreement. Right now, the destroyers started to go against the cruisers again. Kongou looked at the commotion with a grin on her face, saying things like, "everyone is lively ne!" while Nagato massaged her temples.

"E-Excuse me…"

Haguro's voice turned out nothing but a muffled sound. Ashigara, who was arguing with Sendai, turned to look at her little sister, who was struggling to raise her voice. Her sisters seemed to have something in her mind.

"E-Excuse—"

"HEY EVERYONE!" shouted Ashigara; so loud, her voice swallowed everyone else's and echoed throughout the whole cafetaria. The staffs who were tidying up the counters looked up at her for her booming shout and shook their heads. "HAGURO WANTS TO SAY SOMETHING!"

"O-oneesan!"

"What? You do, don't you?"

"Y-Yes, b-but…"

It was very very unusual for Haguro to say anything. Just by that sentence, everyone fell silent and looked at Haguro, who panicked right away. Nagato, sitting on the bench with her arms folded, said, "Haguro?"

"A-Ah! U-Umm... I'm s-sorry..." the heavy cruiser cowered, one hand grabbing Ashigara's sleeve. She seemed like she would love to hide under a rock or down a bunker if she could. Originally a
very meek girl, her personality got even worse during the time of the previous admiral. Shouhou remembered how she practically disappeared after the incident with the previous admiral, unable to get out of the dormitory for months. Shouhou had heard from everyone else though, how Admiral Tendouji helped her to heal from the emotional wound. Haguro herself expressed that Admiral Tendouji had helped her and Ashigara beyond any kind of words could express. She was still jumpy, and still needed company especially in places with many males, but there was progress. At least she could normally go to the cafeteria to eat and sortie regularly. She still had problem going to the factory however. "I-I didn't mean to cut off t-the conversation..."

"It's okay. Let us hear your thoughts."

Ashigara gave a gentle pat at her sister's hand by her sleeve. After receiving a reassuring smile from her big sister, Haguro shyly looked up.

"I-I j-just thought we should stop thinking of what we want it to be a-and... and thinking of.. what the Admiral would have wanted it to be."

Everyone went silent. Haguro saw everyone's change of expression and quickly hid behind her big sister, saying, "I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry to have said something irrelevant..."

"No, Haguro-san, I think that is exactly the way we should have discussed it," said Choukai gently, smiling. She straightened her glasses. "What you said was true."

"But what?" Sendai folded her hands. "It isn't like Admiral said anything, right? Maybe something for night battles?"

Kiso made a rather disgruntled voice at the sound of "night battle", prompting Sendai to glared at her. With the two cruisers now glaring at each other, everyone somehow decided to act like nothing was happening.

"She did say she would like to have some futon to sleep when she worked overtime..." Shouhou smiled. Murmurs quickly came in the form of a buzz, something along "oh no.." or "sheesh". "But a futon doesn't match the office..."

"Weeeeeeell, we can always use the room beside the office," Suzuya shrugged. Everyone now looked at her. She grinned. "Who said we can't bring the wall down?"

"Good idea, ne!" Kongou gave a thumbs up, eyes beaming with expectation. Choukai sighed in exasperation.

"Please don't bring destruction in..."

"On the contrary, it may work."

Kaga's low and emotionless voice turned their focus to her. Akagi beside her gave her famous kind smile and said, "We can connect the two room. Let's design a room where our admiral can rest now, shall we? It seems that is what she most desired. Let us think of what our admiral would have liked to have, and what can calm her down."

"But what? What does she like?" Kagerou looked at everyone. She eventually looked at Shouhou. "Shouhou-san, do you have any idea?"

Sadly, Shouhou shook her head. She slowly answered, "... All I know is that she loves green tea..."

Since the Admiral always asked for green tea and she always seemed really content whenever she
sipped them. She also properly look at the state of the tea, commenting how Shouhou was really good in making them, and that it was her favorite, every time she was about to take her first sip.

"Well, that's one clue," Tenryuu shrugged. "Anyone?"

Silence. Some looked at each other, some looked down to the ground. Shouhou suddenly felt a pang of guilt. The Admiral always asked about them—what they were thinking, what they liked, what they would like to have. What they told her, she believed and considered. What they didn't say, she understood. Yet them, her ship girls, knew almost nothing about her, who had given them so many things. It was... sad.

"She once said she loves garden patches," said Choukai suddenly. She pursed her lips. "I... I don't know if this is an important information but she once said that to me when we were by the garden. She said she loves flower patches, because flowers speak to you about season and time... Maybe we can have a small hanging flower."

"That's two," Takao smiled. "I guess any information will do. Is there anything else that you know about her?"

And then they began to share their respective story—some, Shouhou knew, were a patch of their respective personal moments with the Admiral. All the infos were nothing more than fragments—mere fragments of information about the Admiral's brother and sister, the small garden she used to have, sunshine on her futon, a dog. They were the pieces she said to them in between their conversation, between drinks, between the space of one facility to another—something that they otherwise would think as unimportant. One by one, they said their reasoning of specific furniture, musing, discussing. Before they knew it, it was already way past lunch time. And what Shouhou thought was impossible, was now already right before her eyes.

Haruna finished writing everyone's ideas behind her white handkerchief by using one of the staff's pen for absentee and to do note plastered on the wall. She looked at everyone's expression—a mixture of nods and thumbs up or nonchalant raise of eyebrows. The battleship then passed her handkerchief to Shouhou, smiling.

"Here, the result of the discussion, Shouhou-san."

The handkerchief was soft. Somehow, it made Shouhou felt strangely calm... and touched.

"Onegaishimasu."

It was their gift. For their Admiral.

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They have decided that to make it a surprise, they should wait until the Admiral was out for a long time from her office: the training session. Thankfully, because of the amount of work she had to do she seemed to forget everything about room renovation. "I want to go to vacation without any work to do!" she said once to Shouhou. How a training session became a vacation, Shouhou didn't want to argue her on that. It was the Admiral's first ever training. Since her transfer, she was busy with all the work she had to do to repair the base and the military gave her three months to settle in. This was her fourth month, so finally the documents for training session came in. It was totally understandable that the Admiral was that hype.

During the previous admiral's time, training sessions were the only time they could get a "break". Although they would always be scolded for messing up, not meeting his expectation, or for making...
him look bad in front of his peers, at least in between training session they would get proper meal from the host and also at times meeting with their sisters from other base. Thanks to the amount of pressure and workload he gave to his ships, it was no surprise that none of them managed to give their all or being focus at all. Not that they wanted to at the very least.

On the day of the training, Admiral Tendouji was ready with her suitcase and wide smile, waiting by the gate of the naval base with her selected ship girls ready behind her. Shouhou felt a mixture of both giddy and loneliness. This will be the first time for her to be separated from her admiral for a long time, although it also meant their gift will begin construction today. She had to stay to take care of things while the Admiral was away; a big responsibility. She sure would ask a lot to Kaga, the secretary ship before her, during this one week.

When the military wagon finally drove off down the lane with the Admiral and the training team, Shouhou sighed. She could feel how the fairies jumped out of the bushes behind her. One fairy jumped to her shoulder, tying his small towel around his head. Shouhou smiled.

"Shall we begin, then?"

Even the fairies were excited.

Yokosuka Naval Base was among the biggest naval base the nation had. Housing not only ship girls but also warships—something that had now becoming a thing of a past, Yokosuka had always been the nation's base for almost everything concerning naval warfare. Numerous admirals from all over the nation gathered around Yokosuka once every three months, bringing their ship girls for a training session and also for gathering. Most of them brought along their new ships, hoping to increase her experience in warfare and also let her learn right away from the higher level veteran ships. It was also a common occurrence to meet admirals bringing only their two highest level ships, usually their provisional wives.

Makigumo seemed so very thrilled going to the new place. She was transferred from one small naval base to another so it was her first time getting to a big naval base. They were standing by the large field right after the gate of the naval base, facing the main building. Here and there admirals with white uniforms and their ship girls went about their way. There would be a banquet every night. The mood was a mood of gathering. It may have been a dark time for humanity but that did not mean they should lose the feeling of gratitude and festivities.

Makigumo's eyes sparked and she looked up at her admiral in enthusiasm.

"How many ships are there?" she asked, looking around in excitement. Admiral Tendouji folded her arms and answered lightly, "This is my first time to participate in the training, but I see that admirals can bring from one to twelve ships... so the answer is.. many, hahahahaha."

The Admiral's answer was far from satisfactory and her humor made Ooi narrowed her eyes in disapproval but that didn't seem to affect Makigumo's excitement.

"I-Is Yuugumo-nee-chan here?"

Admiral Tendouji squinted her eyes, looking around.. She smiled at the little destroyer and said, "She may be here. I need to meet the Grand Marshal now, would you like to come with me? Maybe we meet Yuugumo as we search for him."

"Un!"
After telling the rest of her fleet that they were free to roam the place until the time of gathering, the Admiral went off with Makigumo at her side, holding hands. The two looked like a jolly mother and daughter, despite the pretty much offset setting. Watching the two walked further away, Maya folded her arms and clicked her tongue.

"Now what are we gonna do?"

Ooi made some unintelligible disgruntled noise that somehow sounded like "and Kitakami-san isn't here again..." while Choukai only gave a weak smile. Nagato sighed. Being the only battleship in the group, somehow she felt a latent leadership responsibility.

"Well, I guess we can only go around and talk with the other ship girls. Maybe we can meet our sisters."

She did feel a small desire to look for Mutsu. In the end for several minutes they only stood there, not sure whether going left to the sea will be good or maybe to the facilities. As they mused, two admirals walked passed them in slow steps, talking between themselves. At first none of the ship girls paid attention but Maya was the first to turn silent, raising her eyebrows when she heard of tactical conversation between the two.

"I bet Admiral Kudou will win most of the fight for this session again."

"He always has his submarines, those three submarines are a pain. Especially that i-198 wife of his."

"I heard he only brings one this session. He's bringing his aviation battleship along though."

"That man sure rules over submarines."

"Swimsuit, dude. Who doesn't love swimsuits."

One of them chuckled.

"That woman maybe."

His friend laughed, loud enough that Nagato and Ooyodo now ceased their talking as well.

"Hahahaha, you're right, that woman. Is that woman really here now? Does she even know how to assign ships?"

Choukai glanced quickly at their direction, noticing the topic. Her eyes moved right away to look at how Maya turned rigid.

"Perhaps she is the kind that put 46 cm guns on all of her fast battleships!"

"Hahahaahahaha, or pull an all battleship and heavy cruisers on submarines. I know at least three stupid new admirals doing that on their first run. I can totally imagine a newbie."

"She's from Tendouji main family lineage, right? I bet as heck she's using her family as stepladder."

"True enough. Why would a female become admiral anyway, they can't even tell the difference between destroyers and cruisers!"

"We can entertain her with baby dolls. Hahahahaah!
"Dude, dolls? I bet as hell she will be more entertained by our "torpedoes"."

"Or maybe she became admiral by playing with higher up's "torpedoes"!"

"That's it," Maya dropped her folded arms and was about to turn around and shut the two admirals up, when Nagato caught her shoulder. The heavy cruiser grabbed the battleship's strong grip on her shoulder, trying to shrug it off. "What is it, Nagato-san?! They talk shit about Admiral! You just let them go?"

"Let them be," said the battleship, her lips formed a tight line of displeasure. "Let them talk."

"Are you fucking serious?!" Maya's reply bordered violent. She turned around so fast, her pivotal force made Nagato released her grip. "Saying shits about our Admiral right beside us, and we don't say a thing?! I will—"

"Let them know in battle."

Nagato's eyes turned hard. The rest of the ship girls looked at her upon hearing her steel cold voice.

"Let them know in battle. We'll show them who Admiral Tendouji really is."

"Ah, there you go, Tendouji-kun!"

The Grand Marshal gave a wide, delighted smile when he saw Airi walking closer as he stood in the middle garden of the compound with several senior admirals. Airi bowed down when she got closer, then approached the group, gesturing Makigumo to trail after her. The small destroyer hesitated but eventually trotted behind her shyly. There would be a banquet on the first night, then followed by series of general meetings for report strategy and evaluation in the following nights. This formality gathering is only part of the week-long practice. Other than these troublesome meeting, Airi sincerely hoped she could catch some sleep. Because those meetings were scheduled, Airi was quite confused why the Grand Marshal specifically asked to meet him upon arrival. It wasn't as if this was Airi's first time coming to quartal training practice, even if it was the first time for her to participate in the spar. Admirals, even if they had not been stationed yet, was included in the meetings after all. There must be something else he wanted to talk about.

"I believe you have brought your best ships?" the Grand Marshal smiled, but his eyes evidently fell for Makigumo for a while. Airi gave a polite tug of her lips.

"Yes, Grand Marshal. I bring those that I believe will benefit from the trainings."

"I see. Splendid." You sound pretty pessimistic though. Makigumo was not known as a "good ship" for her record in history, that much, Airi knew very well. Leveling Makigumo was not a favorable conduct most of the time. The Grand Marshal turned his attention to his group of senior admirals, who now had their attention on Airi. It seemed they were having a small conversation, which stopped when Grand Marshal noticed Airi's coming. One relatively young one among them, with a tidy goatee and moustache, smiled and raised a champagne cup he had in his hand.

"I believe you have brought your best ships?" the Grand Marshal smiled, but his eyes evidently fell for Makigumo for a while. Airi gave a polite tug of her lips.

"Yes, Grand Marshal. I bring those that I believe will benefit from the trainings."

"I see. Splendid."

"Admiral Tendouji, Miss, thank you very much for your help in the past campaign," Deep and handsome voice smoothly came from the man. His grey eyes twinkled when Airi gave him a rather confused expression. "I'm Kudou Soujiro. I am pleased to be able to meet you in person. The precise command you gave to your fleet have granted us great victory. I commend your prowess,
Admiral. It was terrific."

"Ah, thank you very much, Senpai, thank you."

*So this man is the famed Kudou Soujirou*. Admirals in her years often talked about him, about "Kudou Senpai" and his particularly strong and stealthy submarines. Being a tactful person, Admiral Kudou ranked up really fast and in a short time stood among the senior admiral rank right under Grand Marshal. Airi knew him from ears only. This was the first time she met him in person and he—rather surprisingly—looked kind more than dominating or cunning. She had received Admiral Kudou's letter of gratitude so it was quite surprising how he still said that to her personally. Hearing Admiral Kudou's remark, the other admirals seemed to have taken more interest on her. There was one particular man with greying hair and goatee examining Airi with a lot of interest. He looked at the Grand Marshal, who in turn nodded at him.

"Ah yes, Tendouji-kun, the reason I am calling you is because Admiral Fukumoto would like to have a word with you," The Grand Marshal gestured towards the old man. "I believe you have not met each other? Admiral Fukumoto is the Field Admiral in charge of the southern waters."

Airi had never really touched Southern Waters since her station, that was quite strange.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Admiral. I am Tendouji Airi."

"Ah, no, no, Dear, no need to be so formal," The old admiral laughed and waved his hand. "My secretary ship would love to talk with you, is all, so I asked Izumo about you. Well, Izumo, I will be leaving with this young lady for a while, if you would?"

"Sure, sure, Fukumoto, we can continue next time." The Grand Marshal nodded. He smiled at Airi. "Just be careful not to end up as one of his wives now, Tendouji-kun!"

Airi could not even decide what expression to give upon those statements although Admiral Fukumoto laughed it off, walking while gesturing Airi to walk with him. After bowing at the Grand Marshal and the other senior, Airi caught up to Admiral Fukumoto. Makigumo trailed behind them and finally could not hold herself from grasping Airi's hand as she walked. Her Admiral gave a gentle grasp back, warmly holding the destroyer's hand as the three of them walked along tall column of pillars heading towards the main building. Admirals and Kanmusu alike passed them by, the compound was lively with so many people. Other than the factory and utility building near the port, the buildings were pretty much tall western buildings, with many inner gardens. One of the reason why this compound was chosen a lot as a place to congregate was simply aesthetic. It can house many people yet still appear really pleasing and comfortable.

They passed another inner garden in silence, with Admiral Fukumoto walking in front of them.

"Please do not mind Izumo, Dear. He is a steel hearted man, and has always been so since he is young. That makes him a good objective leader, however."

Airi only gave a "yes". Grand Marshal perhaps that kind of person indeed. His words and actions could be manipulative and more often than not it was hard to feel emotions in his conduct. However, he was not a bad man. At least that far, Airi understood. Airi had nothing against him, but she sure knew that behind those "warm" gesture, there are always tactical consideration. She had known him long enough to understand how heartlessly tactical the man was.

It was quite a curious things what he said though…

"I married a lot of my ships," Admiral Fukumoto chuckled. "In fact, I married all of my ships."
"Ah, I see."

Provisional marriage. It was not rare to find admirals marrying more than one ship, thanks to the advantages the marriage could give for the base. However marrying all ships still sounds pretty outrageous. A whole fleet of married ship was just too hard for Airi to comprehend, especially with her current thought of marriage. Admiral Fukumoto watched the changes in Airi's face and chuckled again.

"But for me, there is only one wife among all of them," he said, suddenly slowing down. They arrived in a room with tall windows and he walked straight to the door heading towards the foyer. "My secretary ship. It was her who requested me to be able to meet you. I cannot say no to a wife's request, can I now?"

A wife. So it was real marriage between this admiral now.

Airi had been wondering how would a ship and their admiral's marriage would have been. The first thing in her mind would be... life span. Admirals would get older and eventually died, but ships remained. Thus, Airi had always thought that the idea of provisional marriage is extremely emotionally heavy for the ship, perhaps more than the Admiral. For one, the ship would have outlived their husband. That sounded way too cruel. This was one of the reasons why even if she had a maxed level ship, she may still refuse to marry them.

Thankfully, being a woman, Airi had more than one reason to not marry her ships.

"Ah, there she is."

Admiral Fukumoto's voice turned bright after he opened the door to the foyer.

"Dear, I found Admiral Tendouji."

The wife certainly made Airi understood right then why she was called.

Standing near the railing of the foyer overlooking the pier, the nameship of Myoukou class was, if she had to find one word to describe, elegant. She did not have a striking beauty or breathtaking gorgeous feature, but she had this aura about her that showed gracefulness and professionalism. She gave a gentle smile when she saw Airi and she bowed, honoring an admiral like any ship would.

"Admiral Tendouji. I am Myoukou, the first ship of Myoukou Class Heavy Cruiser. As you know, I am Ashigara and Haguro's oldest sister. Thank you very much for taking care of my sisters."

"Ah, no, please, they are the one who has been supporting my fleet."

The ship's brown eyes turned gentler when she heard Airi's reply. She seemed to think of something else.

Myoukou looked at her husband, who nodded. Admiral Fukumoto spread his arms and said, "well, Makigumo-chan, do you mind walking me for a second?"

"Eh? Aaaa," Makigumo flustered, looking up at Airi. "And Commander-sama?"

Airi smiled, patting the destroyer's head gently.

"I will be here to talk with Myoukou. Go ahead with Admiral Fukumoto. I will see you later, sweetling."
"Un!"

Makigumo nodded, releasing her grip on Airi's hand. She bowed deeply towards Admiral Fukumoto and said, "I will be under your care!"

"Ahahaha yes, yes. Come here, I have something I wanna show you. Come, come."

"Un!"

Makigumo gave a beam and bounced towards Admiral Fukumoto. Both Airi and Myoukou watched the two of them walking away, further until they weren't within earshot range anymore. Suddenly a sigh came.

"... I have told him, to find a human wife."

Airi quickly turned to look at the heavy cruiser, who still had her eyes watching her husband tenderly. She gave a sad smile and unconsciously touched her own belly.

"I cannot grant him children, being who I am."

Ah.

It was hard to comment on that statement. Even harder, when Airi realized she had been taking her own body for granted. This was another issue from human and ship marriage. There had never been a case of ships getting pregnant, in fact it was proven they could not get pregnant. It was for the best, perhaps, because other issues will surface about the child. The military find it to be a convenient feature and decided to never expand anything to "trivial" matter such as pregnancy. There was also issues of ethics, rights, and welfare.

Yet, as a woman, Airi could feel that ache. The desire to give birth. To have children. To make a family.

Myoukou found her expression then smiled while bowing apologetically.

"Ah, I am sorry, Admiral, for making you feel uncomfortable."

"No, no, I..." These words, they turned out they remained true in so many situation. However this time, it felt so painful that her words dropped into almost a whisper. "... I want to listen."

The gentleness in those eyes were so deep, Airi felt like she could drown in them. Hearing her reply, the heavy cruiser's smile widened and she said, "I see now why you have the ability to help my two sisters, and I can understand why they speak of you so highly in their letters."

Breeze blew past them, and the heavy cruiser turned to look at the pier.

"I have been extremely worried of the two of them, especially when the news got to me about what happened in that base. In the past, it was hard to contact them. There was a period where I could not contact them at all. The period after the previous admiral was convicted and news got out, even Ashigara stopped sending me letters. I already asked my husband if there is a chance for us to come to your base. However, Grand Marshal has forbid us to."

Myoukou took a deep breath.

"I thought I lost them. 'Perhaps they have been scrapped.' was what I thought. To be honest, a part of me know that perhaps would have been the best for themselves. Also it was not as if I would"
lose my sisters, they would definitely be constructed again. In a way, I will never be able to lose my sisters. There is always a chance for them to come back again. Yet, I understand that their self will be erased."

The heavy cruiser turned to look at Airi once again. She smiled.

"However if they get reborn, I know precisely I will love them still. They will still be my sisters and no facts can change that. Admiral, we do wonder if our feelings and our devotions are merely conditioning. We wonder at times if any of these feelings are even ours, if we even have free will in the first place. We do at times wonder why do we have no other will but to fight for you, to devote our lives for you, to expel the Abyssals from the waters. Are emotions even real to us, as real as it is for you?"

She touched her wedding ring, then looked in Airi again.

"I feel so much gratitude to my husband, and I know without these memories I have with him, I would have been a different vessel. Even if we are born with a set of personality, who we turned out to be could be different. When the letters finally come to me again from Haguro, whom I had almost sure would have been lost, I never knew that I would feel this relieved and happy that my sisters survived instead of scrapped. And I see them changed before my eyes. I see them learn and I see them growing, and I feel myself loving them in each phase of their life. This means, this same change would have been true to myself as well. And I realized that yes, indeed, these feelings are real, ourselves are real, these are not conditioning. I could look into my husband and tell him firmly that I love him."

She smiled. Airi found herself holding her breath, clenching her fists, when Myoukou continued her words slowly.

"I am extremely grateful that you would give so much time and effort on my sisters. Memories are indeed precious, you remind us that it is worth keeping and it is worth living. That is why I would like to thank you personally, Admiral Tendouji, for everything that you have done for us. Thank you very much for saving my sisters. Even if it cost you your time, your energy, you give my two sisters and I precious memories and lesson. You gave my sisters chance. You thought us the value of living. Thank you very much, Admiral."

The heavy cruiser bowed deep and somehow Airi felt extremely guilty. She did not deserve gratitude when all she did was actually trying to make up for her own species' faulty decision.

"No, that is… that is my responsibility. You don't have to thank me."

The heavy cruiser smiled. She extended her hand, taking in between them Airi's right hand. Her hands were warm.

"A sense of responsibility that is born out of compassion is still kindness, Admiral. If you feel that you do not deserve this, I beg of you, please accept this selfish expression of gratitude. At least, please do believe in the existence of this feelings and please allow us to express it to you. I thank you deeply, Admiral. Thank you very much for saving my sisters and I. Thank you very much for giving value on our existence."

No.

She grasped it tighter.

"The sin of your people is not yours. Your kindness is yours. Please don't burden yourself with
guilt. I will say that to my husband every morning and I would say that to you as well. Instead, thank you for letting us exist and create us. Thank you for showing us compassion.

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The training session were divided into several slots where the admirals will be pitted against each other. They would have five battles each in the course of eight days, where their performance would be rated. The rating itself was beneficial more for the fighting admiral rather than the military because some admiral brought along their ship-in-training instead of their veteran ships. It was hard to actually measure fighting power of each admiral objectively with that in mind. Some admiral purposely sent their lower level ships. Lower level ships are usually accompanied by higher level ones so that they can gain experience. Still, an admiral that made clean sweeps on all of his or her battle would gain considerable recognition. To be able to bring lower level ship into the spar yet still wins, talked a lot about the ability of the ships and their admiral, especially concerning ship composition and strategy.

In a way, it was a game of who gains more experience than the others, rather than a game of win or lose. Admiral Tendouji was clearly among those who took advantage of the system. All that she said to her ships before the spar began was, "Watch and learn. Leech their knowledge as much as you can." but her fleet could not help but wanting to win.

They were born fighters after all. Even if their shells and torpedoes changed into mock shells and torpedo logs, a win was still a win. Besides, they had other reason why they wanted to win.

"All guns! OPEN FIRE!"

Waterspout rose, along with the sound of explosions and a shriek of a ship girl. Splinters of flight deck flew and splashed into the sea water. Shoukaku, fifth division aircraft carrier, could not regain her balance and fell onto her knees with a splash. She grimaced then looked up at the view of her fleet.

The rest of her fleet were in the same condition, down on the water surface—some of them struggled to stay afloat with broken main machine. Before her, Nagato stood strong with all her guns at them and the rest of the battleship's fleet by both of her sides. Makigumo and Ooi made wide circles somewhere around them, it was their closing torpedoes that hit the rest of Shoukaku's fleet.

A loud horn blew in the distance.

"End of day battle! Complete victory for Admiral Tendouji's Fleet!"

Nagato let out a long exasperated sigh. With this, finally all five battles were over. It had been a long one week...

The eight days considerably felt longer than usual for the ships, at least for Nagato. During the first few days of training, every evening banquet after battle turned into a fight for self control. Nagato had lost count of how many times she stopped Maya from jumping out at some random admiral who gossiped about their admiral. Choukai seemed to be getting tired of telling her sister the same thing every night as well.

At the end of the banquet on the first night, she sat with the rest of her training fleet to calm them down before they part to their respective lodgings. Even the usually uninterested Ooi seemed even more displeased than usual.
"They should not treat you like that, Admiral!" Maya was usually the first one to jump out with the intent to kill and it was no surprised she was the one who voiced her disapproval the loudest. "You are admiral just like them! You—"

"What they say about me will not affect me, Maya, calm down," The Admiral's voice sounded calm as she patted her heavy cruiser's arm. Maya scoffed, folding her arms and looked away. "They all need to adapt. I need too. Being angry will accomplish nothing."

"They have no right though!"

"That maybe so," The Admiral only smiled. She gently brushed off tears from Makigumo's eyes, who sat beside her. Makigumo looked like she would cry even harder instead and nuzzled into the Admiral's arms. "I apologize that you have to go through this when it should have been a refreshing week for you."

"They are the one who should apologize!"

All the high note from Maya's voice made the Admiral smiled again. She chuckled. "Your feelings alone already makes my day much better, Maya. Don't worry about it. Come on now, I am alright, see? You all don't have to worry about it. Makigumo, Sweetling, you too."

They spent several more minutes talking about their displeasure on some of the other admirals' attitude towards her, which she quietly listened to. She did not say that they were wrong nor did she say they should do anything about it. She was merely there listening to them again. At the ship girl lodging, Nagato told them to brush off all condescending words about their admiral. It was not funny how their Admiral was the one apologizing to them.

"In the end she was the one patronizing us," Choukai straightened her glasses with a sigh. "The more we seemed disturbed, the more uncomfortable she would have felt..."

"That means we should just mind our own business," Ooi said, turning around. Her voice was bitter. As she began to walk, she added, "We can just torpedo everyone else away anyway."

As nonchalant as she was, even Ooi was upset.

In the end they endured those words. Thankfully, the majority of admirals were good people. Still, those little bitter pricks inside the whole stack was an annoying pain.

All those pent up anger paid off, however. Even if it wasn't a complete win for three of their five matches, but they scored an all win. For a newcomer, that was still something. After their first clean sweep win (which was partly thanks to their anger), their morale was boosted. With each win they did, the bad words considerably plummet down in every night after. It was a huge boost of motivation and self confidence. At the last day of training, they were at their peak.

"Commander-sama!"

Makigumo threw herself right into Admiral Tendouji's awaiting open arms. The Admiral spun her around, eliciting a laughter from the destroyer. The ship girls who watched the scene could not help but to smile, even the defeated Shoukaku fleet.

The aircraft carrier looked beside her, to Ooyodo, and said gently, "You seem to have gotten a good admiral, Ooyodo-san."

Hearing Shoukaku's gentle words, Ooyodo gave a genuine smile and answered, with certainty,
"Indeed we have, Shoukaku-san."

"I see," She chuckled. Her eyes flew to her own admiral, a young man with white admiral cap who walked to them with a kind smile. When she returned to look at Ooyodo again, her tone changed. "We won't lose so easily next time. We too, want to give victory to our admiral. That is the only gift we can give them for their kindness."

*Gift.*

She was reminded of those back at the naval base right away, and their small surprise. Suddenly she understood, the many layers of emotions that enveloped the world and the dozens of possibilities it poses, what an abstract concept human heart really was. The cruiser smiled.

"Perhaps it is... but I am sure there are other things we can give them as well. Just like how their kindness comes in different shapes, I am sure our gift is the same. It must not always be victory, Shoukaku-san."

Shoukaku raised her eyebrows at Ooyodo's reply. Her lips tugged into a gentle smile.

"I see you have found a good admiral indeed, Ooyodo-san."

XXX

The first thing that Airi felt during the last moment of closing ceremony, was relief. Finally the arduous one week of training and meetings and training and meetings was over. She met her old friends and seniors from the academy, those were okay, but the little pricks, the small number of admirals not liking Grand Marshal's decision about her station, were enough to irritate her. She did not mind getting called this and that behind her back, but she did mind finding her ships disturbed by ugly rumors. These were old rumors, she knew it circulated since the Grand Marshal began calling her to come to his room personally and talked about her stationing. They said that she slept with the Grand Marshal (oh seriously, even if Airi were to dance naked in front of him perhaps he would only scoff), that she bribed him, that her family let her in. The last one annoyed her the most. "Ignore them, Tendouji."

Admiral Kudou came to her in one of the nights' banquet with some campaign and words of consolation. He said he originally wanted to talk to her about surface fleet composition and her
battleships, especially Kongou, but the bad words that spread about her irked him and he apologized for approaching her with that topic as an opening. He had nothing to apologize for, however. Being an influential man, his presence around her keep those people away like a bug repellent... although she knew the rumor would get worse somehow.

Being with the Kanmusu were better. They accepted her as admiral and that was that. They had no need to see her background or her family, nor would they inquire her about that. Her own ships' anger towards the rumors touched her heart. Even more when she saw how hard they tried to win for her. Admiral Kudou and Admiral Fukumoto expressed that they would be watching her training expectantly, which was both a really great gestures from them, as much as it was a pressure. Watching her fleet swept all five battles with victories, made everything worthwhile. Her ships made the whole week worth everything.

"We are born to fight for you," Myoukou said that gently to her during the time before they part. "That is their answer to your compassion, Admiral Tendouji. I wish you great luck."

It pained her how simple act of common sense and humanity was this much rare for the Kanmusu in many base. It should not be like this. They had heart.

She learned a lot in the whole week, of gradients of admirals that exist in the base. There were those who, like the previous admiral in her place, the sex offender Jiro, see them nothing more as weapons. There were also those who loved their ship, like Admiral Fukumoto. Then there were those who saw them as partners. Then lastly, there was the constitution.

Ship girls or Kanmusu are biomechanical female organism infused with the Soul of Warship for the purpose of defeating Abyssal Fleet.

Organism is such a wide wording. The constitution then listed their purpose, their specification, how to put in their existence log, but none of those actually say anything about their emotional capacity.

"We have our psychologist, our clinics, our research studies, to support our health," Admiral Fukumoto said to her during one of the banquets. He had his wedding ring on all times. "These ships, they only have us. And even then, some human still refuse their rights, and the navy did not even acknowledge that to defend them."

The old man turned to look at her and smile.

"Young admirals such as you and Kudou gave me hope. I know there is no need for me saying this to you but... when you get back to your base, hug all your girls and say thank you to all of them. We are just a family. Us human live too short, might as well do our best to thank them in our short span of life."

To thank them in our short span of life.

What Airi brought home in her suitcase after the week was determination. Renewed ones.

When she bowed then waved goodbye towards Admiral Fukumoto, she knew she was not alone.

XXX

"Uwaaaaaah so this is how it turns out to be!" Suzuya peeked from the veil. She looked back at Shouhou, her eyes sparkling. "I wanna nap in here too later!"

"This is for the Admiral, Suzuya," Takao sighed. She smiled. "Although I am sure she would let
"You come and sleep in if you asked."

"Yeeessssssshh!"

"At times I am wondering about your true motive, Suzuya-san," Kagerou said under her breath.

They peeked into the veil one by one—reactions ranging from "heeee" to "Waaaaa! This is amazing!" came from the girls. Based on the news, their admiral would arrive today at around dusk. They had begged the cook for some feasts, bargaining part of their salary. Kanmusu did not get paid as much as human personnel, only enough for some cup ramen or books, but times that with the number of the whole Kanmusu in the base, it was quite a nice bargain. That said, the cook did not mind if it was for the Admiral. After all she was the only admiral to amp up cafeteria budget. They then split their jobs. The battleships and carriers and the light cruisers would take care of the food while the rest of the heavy cruisers, destroyers, and Shouhou (being the secretary who is familiar with the room) would decorate the office room.

The office room turned stuffy since most of the Kanmusu wanted to see how the new place, connecting through a door near the shelves, would look like. The furniture fairies even jumped up and down trying to hold them off frantically. The room had just finished installing its refurbishment. Plus it would still be a while for the Admiral to-

The door suddenly clicked open.

"Shouhou, tadaiiiiaa~!—eh?"

All chatter died down into a shocking silence. All eyes turned around in horror, finding the source of the familiar voice.

Admiral Tendouji was standing by the doorstep with a suitcase in her hand, a look of confusion filled her expression. She blinked at the number of Kanmusu in her room.

"Uh…. What is happening?"

Eyes looked at each other, uncertain on how to react. She arrived several hours too fast. And now all the surprise are foiled. Scattered on one side were stack of papers they actually would use to decorate, then they had a box of pop. Eventually all eyes moved to Shouhou, who turned red.

"Why are all of you here?"

"W-Well…"

"WHOOAAAAAAAA! IT HAS FINISHED?!!"

Maya peeked behind the Admiral, her shout made the Admiral jolted. She came in with excitement, practically bouncing. Everyone now turned to look at her, while Choukai visibly looked frustrated, hissing, "Maayaaaaaa!" as she tried to catch her sister.

"LEMME SEE! LEMME SEE! WHOOOO!"

"W-what has finished? Eh? Eh?"

The Admiral walked inside slowly, confused. Maya stopped her jumping and looked at everyone then the Admiral then back to the others again. Realizing the mood, she scowled.

"Awwww man! You guys are no fun! Where is the hype?"
"W-well, we actually on the way for it but…"

"You haven't finished yet? No way!"

"W-We thought the Admiral would arrive by dusk so…"

"Sheesh, man, you're hopeless for this kind of things! I thought Suzuya would take care of it."

"Eh, what? Now it's my fault?"

"I mean, duh, aren't you the party goer?"

"Well, I GO to party, not making it!"

"What kind of excuse is thaaaaaat!"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait a second," The Admiral stepped in between the heavy cruisers, stifling a laughter. "Can anyone here actually fill me in? What is finished? What party? What's happening? Why are all of you here?"

"Ah."

Maya seemed to have just realized it. She hit her fist to her palm.

"Oh yes, you don't know about this, Admiral."

"Well… obviously I don't?"

"Sorry, sorry! It's a surprise for you anyway. Of course you don't know!"

"... eh?"

Several facepalms, but Maya was oblivious as always. She grinned.

"Yeah! A thank you gift! We're making a new room for you!"

XXX

What? For a while it felt as if her mind froze. Thank you gift? Her ships? A new room?

Shouhou eventually stepped forward.

"Yes, we… first I would like to apologize that we did this without informing you first, Admiral," She began, bowing slightly. "The coins you gave to us, we decided to use it for something that would be useful for you, so we thought about this new room. The construction began right when you went away for the training. W-We don't know if it is to you liking but…"

"We talked a lot with each other for this, Commander-sama!" Makigumo suddenly bounced inside, jumping up and down. "It will be suuuuper awesome! Makigumo wants to see it too!"

"It might be a bit random, though," Kagerou gave an awkward grin. "I mean, all of us had different ideas on how it should be, even after Haguro-san said it will be better if it is made with you in mind. Sorry for that, Commander."

"But we made up our mind together!" Ayanami flustered. She beamed. "And most importantly, it is finished!"
"We wanted to throw a surprise party and all, but you come home too fast," Suzuya sheepishly grinned. "Surprise failed? I guess?"

Ah.

Airi did not understand how to react. She had never gotten any surprise for such a long time. And this was the least she would have thought she would get upon arrival. Now that explained all the papers stacked on one side of the wall, and why everyone was here. And the veil she did not recognize near the shelves everyone was trying to hide from her. She walked towards it, and everyone made way for her. The construction fairies bounced around, jumping straight to her shoulder when she smiled at them.

Slowly, she opened the veil.

"This is.."

A room with wooden wall and elevated tatami floor, greeted her. The entrance was wooden, with proper wooden shoe box lining by the side, before the flooring turned into newly placed tatami mat. Wide rectangular window was on one side, by the sill were flower plants, still having a sense of smer instead of autumn. The bamboo blindfold was rolled up, showing the pier and the sea. A small low table situated near the window, while on the other side of the room was a small alcove, with sitting pillow, a hanging scroll with "Welcome home" written on it. Two small shelves lined up the wall on the opposite side of the door, and beside them, a small slide door.

"Is that the closet?"

"Yes, Admiral. On the top shelf will be your futon, while the lower shelf will have koutatsu for winter. We also have tea ceremony set in there, in case you would like to have it."

Airi blinked. Slowly she stepped in. She noticed the small wooden side cabinet by one side, a small potted plant on top. It was "empty" but at the same time full. Or perhaps it made her feel full. This felt… extremely like her home.

Her home back in the temple. The small space she used to be during her childhood. A square tatami room, with low table for her to study and shelves, potted plant where she kept her flowers by the window, the bamboo blindfold, the alcove. Even the lamp was the same one she had in her home. Airi walked up to the middle of the room, feeling the tatami under her feet. This was awfully familiar. The smell, the vibe, everything.

Slowly she turned to look at the group of Kanmusu by the door, finding nervous or expectant glances of her ships.

"How do you know?"

Her voice sounded strange even to herself.

"How do you know how my home looks like?"

The ships looked at each other. Nervousness evidently had melted between them but it seemed each felt someone else would be more suited to tell their admiral. Ooyodo finally spoke.

"We discussed between ourselves about anything that you have told us about yourself. None of us actually know anything about you more than just a statement or two, but together we know a bit. You once said to me at the destroyer dormitory how you prefer tatami than marble flooring
because that was how you house was. Or to Choukai that you love flower. So we gather them and this was what we eventually agreed on."

"We thought that if you want some place to rest, maybe you would like it to be something that is a bit like your home," Shouhou continued. "We... realized we know almost nothing about you, while you always asked about us. We just hope this room can be a place for you to rest. I mean, we cannot give anything back to you. We want to give our thank you, for all your kindness."

"No, you..."

**To thank them in our short span of life.**

"You all really don't have to thank me."

"But we want to," Maya said in a matter-of-factly manner. She shrugged. "Maybe we don't have to but we want to. You've been good to us."

*We created you to fight for us.*

"... this is all still my responsibility."

"Your effort and kindness is b-beyond... just responsibility, C-Commander-san," Haguro's voice came up, surprisingly. She still looked nervous, but her eyes were firm. "You go beyond what is required for all of us."

"Anyone in my place will-"

"Oh, come on, Admiral. It isn't that hard to accept, right?"

*The sin of your people is not yours.*

Airi sighed. She could not help but to smile at Maya's daring return. Perhaps it was indeed that simple. Perhaps it was her who was wrong all along.

"Your kindness is yours. Please don't burden yourself with guilt."

Airi looked at all her ships then eventually spread her arms.

"Can I give you all a hug one by one?"

The ships looked surprised at her words.

Once she surrendered to her deluge of emotion which she rarely ever touched, everything just burst. She had never smiled this wide before in front of them.

"I love you. All of you. Come."

The looks her ships gave were priceless.

Makigumo was the first to run to her, gleefully jumping into her arms, and in a split second everyone surrounded her in a chaotic group hug. Everyone's talks mixed into one that they were unintelligible, but with all the suffocation, laughter, weight, and cacophony, everything meant two things. *Thank you. I love you. Thank you.* Suddenly the door slammed open and a familiar voice went, "UNFAIR DEESU! I was in the cafeteria, you didn't tell me Admiral is here deesu!"
"O-Neee-samaa! W-Wait!"

Even the bulldozer-strength bump Kongou did to the mass only made them laughed harder. It continued for some more minutes, receiving and giving gratitude, and sometimes kisses on the cheek and or forehead. Airi did not know how long it lasted until she hugged Shouhou as the last one, patting her face gently, before then she looked back at her full squadron of ships—those in the cafeteria had come. They were laughing at each other, happy because the surprise, although it seemed like everything was foiled, still worked. The second batch seemed disappointed at the same time though after hearing the story from the first batch. They expressed them in scowls, then additional hugging to their favorite admirall.

They appeared... wholly human.

"Admiral! Let's have party at the cafeteria!"

"Cafeteria? Oh, then I will-"

"Don't worry, we pay! We pay!"

"Ahaha you all really planned this ahead, didn't you?"

"Of course, Commander-sama! It's for you!"

They were capable of emotions. Of sadness. Of love.

"Okay, then, to the cafeteria!"

They really did deserve to be treated and regarded better.

"Oooouuu!"


~ To be continued ~

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: The new names are:
Grand Marshal Izumo Takeshi: 出茂 武
Admiral Fukumoto Satoru: 福本 悟
Admiral Kudou Soujirou: 久道 宗次滝

Respective names with respective roles *nudge*
Changes are rarely comfortable. The worst thing is, no one would know what would happen until it took place.

You know, at first Shouhou was NOT meant to be Airi's secretary in the original form of this fic.

Just because I am virtual,
please don't push me away
I still want to drown in your sound

GigaReol feat Hatsune Miku - Hibikase (Resonance)

Tuck tuck tuck

Stack of paper hit the common room table. Other than Asashio who stacked and did her report just now, the common room was empty. Kagerou, Shiranui, Inazuma, and Ikazuchi were out on an expedition while Ayanami, Mutsuki, and Makigumo was off to their fitting. Shigure was supposed to be around the dorm. As it was mid summer, most probably the Shiratsuyu class was out taking care of their small garden or something. When the Admiral gave them a small patch of land, Mutsuki and Shigure decided that perhaps it would be good to plant vegetables. Ikazuchi had been saying to "count on her more" on watering them every day but so far she had always forgot. Inazuma and Asashio had usually been the one doing it for her. Mutsuki and Shigure would not be mad of it at all, it would be great for Ikazuchi to remember watering it on her shift. The small patch of land turned to their garden now anyway.

"Ah, Asashio," Shigure showed up by the common room door. She took off her dirty garden gloves as she peered at the common room. "You have yet to meet the Admiral?"

"Yes, I was about to report now. Maya-san forgot to tell me her observation in last night's sortie."

"I see. She will be worried. Perhaps you better hurry."

The Admiral asked Asashio to come report to her every morning. It had always been like that since her launching. Even if she was not the flagship, the Admiral would still ask her to come visit her after every expedition and after every sortie. The other destroyer eventually remembered as well and now Asashio had the whole dormitory remembering her to go meet the admiral if she hadn't for the day.
"Oh yes, before you go..." Shigure seemed to look for something in the common room shelf. She pulled out a fabric bag from one of the drawers. "Please bring some of the vegetables for the Admiral. I just harvested our vegetables before snow comes in. After the others are back, let's have Nabe party."

~ Blank Spirit ~

Asashio walked down the sidewalk towards the main office building, looking at the sakura trees devoid of leaves. It was almost winter, if not officially here already on the calendar. Most of the trees lining the road were sakura trees. It made the whole walkway seemed barren with them losing their leaves.

The fleet girls dormitories were located in a cluster separated from main office building. They were two storied building, the upper floor being the rooms and the lower floors being the common room. Asashio heard that before the current admiral, the state of the dormitories were pitiful. The only ones having real place to sleep are the battleships and carriers. The new admiral was the one standardizing the dormitories into what they were now, fixing or even completely renovating the whole place. She joined the carrier and battleship dormitories, saying they would not have more ship than the ones they had now; then added space for garden and other outdoor spaces. The light cruiser and heavy cruiser each have their own building, thanks to their rather large numbers. The Destroyer Dormitory was closest to the main building, only passing a small garden and the fork that leads to the pier. Asashio heard from Mutsuki that the place used to be the most rundown, with broken panels and even crumbling walls in one of the rooms, but then the current admiral renovated them. Now they had good healthy panels, clean beds, humane space. Asashio had no idea how it looked like before though. The other destroyers rather reluctant to remember the past as well.

"Asashio-chan! Good day!"

"Good day, Private!"

Several navy walked pass her, moving crates of supplies as she went. The navy personnel in this base were friendly with the fleet girls. She had heard that some of the heavy cruisers were taking it far from just partners, but Asashio would rather not comment. There had been rumors of the cafetaria going to be merged between fleet girl and human personnel. To be honest, Asashio did not see why it should be separated until now. With how close they were with each other at the moment, having one large cafetaria sound like a good options to boost space utilization.

Saying more greetings to some personnel (and fairies) tending on gardens left and right, Asashio walked inside the main office building. She took the stairs, hearing her shoes made quiet sound on marble floor. The Admiral beautify her own office and also the main building last. Supposedly it is already over half a year since the Admiral being assigned to her station but she just began the renovation on main building recently. Asashio could still smell fresh paints, thinner, and other smell of construction. A construction fairy walked passed her carrying a small saw, running in its tiny legs and jumping over stairs. Perhaps even now it had not properly finished yet.

The door to Admiral Office was a tall, sturdy oak double door. Asashio sighed when she realized both of her hands were occupied, one with her report, one with the bag filled with fresh vegetables Shigure asked her to bring. Placing the vegetable bag on the floor, she knocked.

The door opened without so much of an answer. Usually the Admiral would say, "Come in." or something along the line...

True enough, Shouhou was the one opening the door.
"Ara, Asashio-chan. Here for the Admiral?"

"Yes, is she around?"

"Aaaaah... unfortunately she got company just now and is off the office."

Company? Asashio looked down to her filed report and down to the vegetable bags. Shouhou followed her eyes.

"Why don't you search for the Admiral around the base?"

"Eh?!" It was extremely unusual for Shouhou to suggest anyone to disturb the Admiral in her duty. "But isn't she escorting someone-"

"It is not a formal visit. The Admiral did say that she wants to meet you today. I think it will be okay."

It would always be okay, somehow Asashio knew. The Admiral never EVER be mad at anything. She was always incredibly kind and receiving. If anyone would like to run rampant Asashio knew they could but no one would. Everyone loves her. And that was also exactly why Asashio wondered if she should not go disturb her Admiral.

"Perhaps I should just go back later..."

"Even I dont know for sure if the Admiral will be back to the office," Shouhou smiled. "Don't worry, I think the Admiral would like to meet you too. Are those vegetables for the Admiral?"

"Ah, yes," Asashio showed the bag. "Shigure said that we are having a big harvest and may have a nabe tonight. This is for Commander."

"Oh, then you can go ahead and deliver that to her. I will take your report."

"Eh?"

"That is your sortie report, right? Just drop it here and deliver the vegetables to the Admiral yourself."

"Isn't that the other way around, Shouhou-san...? Shouldn't I deliver the report myself and drop the vegetables here?"

Shouhou laughed. She took the reports from Asashio's hand.

"Asashio-chan, the reason why the Admiral always wants to see you is not mainly because she needs your report."

"Eh?"

"Go on, she will be happy to get some vegetables from her destroyers."

The light carrier smiled but said nothing else as she closed the door.

XXX

The saying "Go search her around the base" is so easier said than done. The base is huge, despite "small" compared to other base. It still has basic facilities such as the factories, dormitories, and sport areas complete with running track, a pool, and a gym. That was excluding the pier, training
ground, cafeteria, clinic... So many place to look. Asashio stood at the front of the main building, sighing. With a vegetable bag in one hand, she wondered where she should go.

The pier sounds like a good idea. You would probably take a guest to the pier for some sightseeing. Or maybe the dock and the factory. Usually you would like to boast about the facilities.

The Admiral would always come back to her office before she come home, or at least inform Shouhou. There was only a really really small chance that the Admiral would just come home without notice. If she could not find the Admiral, she could always wait in the Admiral room. Of course, it was not Asashio if she did not try to search in every nook and cranny before giving up and went to the last resort.

In a short while, she found her self by the factory. The factory was empty but the engineers. They seemed to be working on a new equipment with the fairies, so Asashio did not bother to come over further. Both of the two development rooms were busy... however there was no sign of the Admiral.

"Asashio? Is there anything you need?"

Deep, calm voice of Lieutenant Kouseki turned Asashio around. The engineer bowed down his big body as he tried to get rid of oil from his hands by rubbing it hard with a cloth. After a compulsory salute and greetings, Asashio showed her vegetable bags.

"I am looking for Commander Tendouji to report and give these."

"Vegetables?"

"Shigure-san harvested our garden. We have more than we need, so she thought of giving some for the Commander."

The Lieutenant gave a crisp laughter.

"That will definitely make her happy indeed," he said as he put his now rather dirty cloth to his back pocket. He straightened his body that quickly towers over Asashio, and squinted his eyes as he looked outside. "The Admiral was here a while before with her friend. Supposedly she hasn't gone too far. Perhaps either the pier or the dock."

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant."

Pier. She would have to walk along the shoreline.

Lieutenant Kouseki observed the destroyer's expression.

"You don't seem as enthusiastic as you usually do, Asashio. Is there something wrong?"

Lieutenant Kouseki was in charge of their fitting, fixing, and overall maintenance. It could be said that he was their equipment and overall condition doctor. Thus, he interacted with them a lot and has always been a kind presence to have. He had this aura that made people want to rely on him.

The destroyer suddenly felt like sighing. The worry that had been weighing her was finally out.

"I wonder if I am not good enough for the Commander that she has always wanted me to report to her directly."
The lieutenant raised his eyebrows. Asashio continued, hugging the vegetable bag.

"She always asks me to come to her room. I wonder if my progress has been unsatisfactory that she wants to observe me more closely. I know that the other destroyers have better experience than I do since I am recently constructed. I wonder if there is anything that I should have done even more..."

But the Admiral never said anything about that. She usually just sit there behind her desk, watching her with those brown eyes. Sometimes she would ask her to come sit with her at the tatami room, or walk her to the pier while she asked her many things about her sortie, her training, her fitting, and everything else. Asashio wondered if she had been inadequate, if the Admiral was worrying about her more than the other destroyer. There was this weight she felt, one was because she was the nameship of Asashio class so she had this feeling of responsibility to set a good image of her class, and also the fact that she wanted to be a good ship for her Admiral. Kind as she always was, Asashio wondered if there were thing the Admiral did not want to tell her, or to ask of her, even if she wished for that something.

Was it my build? Should I train even more to finally be on Kagerou's level? Or maybe there is something else I should do?

"Do you not want to meet the Admiral every day?"

Lieutenant Kouseki's question made Asashio looked up and flustered.

"O-Of course that isn't what I meant, Lieutenant! I have never thought of such a thing! I just thought that, perhaps... perhaps she was worried... of me... or something..."

There was something in the way Lieutenant Kouseki looked at her, that told her he must have known something. He did not voice it, however. Instead he folded his arms.

"Asashio, has the Admiral ever told you that she was dissatisfied?"

"No."

"Has she ever reprimanded you about something?"

"No."

"Has she ever commented about anything wrong in your report?"

"She did give comment about a thing or two from my report, but she never exactly said it was wrong..."

"Then you don't have to worry,"

If only it was that easy. Asashio bit her lips. She knew, but...

"The Admiral is not someone who con others," Lieutenant Kouseki put his large hand on Asashio's head. He smiled. "Her reasoning has always been simple, straightforward, and honest. You don't have to worry. If she doesn't tell you, then it simply mean there is nothing from her to tell you."

He patted her gently. His eyes shone knowingly.

"Also, she has always been proud of her ships. Always. Each and every one of you. She can't stop talking about you even in her breaks. I have never heard of her complaining about any of you, ever."
"But then why...:

"Perhaps you should ask her directly," said the lieutenant, laughing. His eyes glinted as he smiled. "I really believe her answer will be a lot simpler than what you think."

XXX

Asashio found the Admiral not long after she said goodbye to Lieutenant Kouseki. What the engineer said was right. The Admiral was by the pier, together with a seemingly same aged brown haired woman wearing a casual peacoat. The two of them seemed to conversed merrily, since even from afar Asashio could hear the Admiral's laughter. The Admiral sounded so happy. Disturbing the admiral's relaxing time with petty thing like delivering vegetables seemed so absurd that Asashio stood by her place for quite a while, thinking hard about various options that would best fit the situation. Perhaps she should wait? Maybe tail after her? Or maybe...

"Asashio, Dear, what are you doing over there?"

"Ah!"

Asashio jolted, gasping. A few meters away from her, by the edge of the pier, the Admiral was shouting at her. When the destroyer looked up to see her in panic, she gave a warm smile then gestured her to come closer.

"Come here, Sweetling. Is there anything you need?"

"Ah, No, Commander! I.."

"Come."

"Yes, Commander."

Asashio obediently walked to her Admiral's place, griping the vegetable bag tighter. She bowed to both her Admiral and her friend, then walked closer. Her eyes briefly swept her Admiral's friend, whose eyes followed her in interest, but eventually locked on her Admiral firmly. The Admiral calmly and kindly observed her, a smile never left her face. When Asashio finally right before her and gave her a firm salute, she gave a knowing smile.

"How are you, Asashio?"

"I am in perfect condition, Commander! I am ready for any mission at any time!"

The Admiral's smile widened.

"Splendid! And your report?"

Asashio nodded, then started to tell her in a format she knew by heart. The Admiral always asked her the same kind of question, with the same order. How many enemy encounters, how many rounds of shelling and torpedoes she released and how many hit, how was her damage, is there any significant injury... also if she any problem with any of the ships, if she had her breakfast and if the meal was good around the cafeteria, then overall destroyers' condition. The last part of her report eventually brought about the time to show her vegetable bag.

"Also, Shigure asked me to give you this, Commander, from our garden. It may not be of to your liking but we sincerely wish that you will kindly receive this humble gift."
"Ooohhh! This is really awesome!' The Admiral's face instantly lit up when she took the bag. She turned to her friend. "Look, Kanon! Veggies! Let's have some nabe and beer in my place tonight, what do you think?"

"Sounds awesome for me," The Admiral's friend, Kanon, gave a chuckle. "I don't know your ships can produce crops too."

"My ships are all geniuses," No one can mistake the proud tone the Admiral had. She patted Asashio gently on the head, then gently guiding her closer to her body with a gentle push on the back. "They always give me more than I ever ask for. These veggies are going to be awesome. Thank you very much, Sweetling.'

Her face practically by the Admiral's side belly, Asashio could not express anything but blush. She was so warm, so kind, Asashio could feel something hot welled up inside her whenever she met her Admiral. It was something more tender than just loyalty, but she did not know what to make of it. This was among the reason why she was agitated lately. It was increasingly getting more... normal for her to let herself actually... receive such kind gesture. Was it even allowed for a destroyer to be so spoiled? Should she resist? But then it was not as if it was wrong either. Asashio was utterly confused. She felt like there was this wall, that if she got over she may not be able to get back to. She did not even know if she could have just crossed it over. She did not know if feeling these thanks to her frequent meeting with the Admiral was okay. The Admiral did not give her order in this one, she did not know what to decide. It was not as if she hate it, not at all. She may not understand the burst in her heart but she knew exactly it was not anything near hate or even dislike.

Her superior's body... was comfortable. She had the fragrance of spring flower. And she was warm, just like spring.

The Admiral talked while rubbing her back gently. Only when she said thank you, was the time she looked down at Asashio by her side. Seeing her destroyer's beet red face, she immediately let go. "Ah, I am terribly sorry. I did not mean to."

The destroyer quickly took a step back, but instead of looking up to meet her Admiral's eyes, she looked down to the ground. Her face felt hot.

"No, Commander." She clenched her fists together tightly and mustered enough courage before she looked up. "Asashio is honored. I am glad you like the gift."

The Admiral's eyes were dim as if they were thinking about something, but she still smiled. She gave Asashio a pat on the head.

"Of course, all of you cared for this garden. Thank you very much."

The destroyer nodded. She still stood straight ready for order. The Admiral talked a bit to Kanon, giving her friend the bag while saying something in low voice. She looked back at Asashio after a while, still finding the destroyer in her previous position.

"Is there anything else, Dear?"

"Ah! No, Co... Um."

"Perhaps you should ask her directly."

The Admiral raised her eyebrows. Usually Asashio would answer with a firm straight no, in which the Admiral would then proceed to dismiss her. It was unusual for Asashio to stutter. She would
always without fail, follow orders and refrain from asking unnecessary question.

"Yes?"

_M-May I should stop._ Asashio suddenly felt uncertain. A weapon should not question their superior. It was not as if it was wrong for the Admiral to ask her anything either. A report is necessary to monitor the base.

_But then..._

"Is there anything that's bothering you?"

"N-No, Commander! I just..."

The Admiral suddenly kneel, leveling her eyes with her destroyer. Asashio gasped, her face reddened right away.

"C-Commander! You will soil your pants, you don't have to-"

"It's okay, I want to listen. Tell me anything."

Now she did not have another choice. At this moment, a part of her regret that she actually hesitated. As they say, a few second of hesitation was all you need to lose a momentum.

Now she had to answer.

"I... I am just wondering if there is anything inadequate about me, Commander. If I do, please, tell me. I will do my best."

The Admiral seemed surprised. Asashio clenched her fists and tried to keep her eyes steady on her superior's gaze, waiting for an answer. Anxiety gripped her. There might have been a long list of things the Admiral would want to talk to her about, considering how the order was practically reporting every day. Silence spanned as both of them waited for one another to begin. And then the Admiral chuckled.

"Sweetling, I think I need an explanation," she said in genial expression. "I don't understand, you have been performing flawlessly. Why do you have such an idea?"

"B-Because..." Is this allowed? But she did not have any other choice. "Because you always asked me to come report to you every day and after every sortie. I wonder if there is anything wrong in me that you are worried about me. I wonder if there has been anything unsatisfactory about my performance."

Understanding painted itself on the Admiral's eyes right at that moment. The change encouraged Asashio to continue.

"Do you not want to meet the Admiral?"

"I did not mean to say that I dislike your treatment," She quickly added, remembering Lieutenant Kouseki's question. "I am not against it at all. I am just wondering, because... because I don't want to take up more of your precious time. You have seen so kindly looking after me. I know you have been busy, but you gave your time for me. If there is anything I can help you with, even if just a little bit easing your worry, please I will try my best to meet your expectation."

A second silence followed.
The first thing she received was a head pat. Asashio bit her lower lips, feeling the hot feeling crept to her face again. Her heart jumped when she identified how the Admiral looked sad.

"I am so sorry, Sweetling."

"Eh?" Goosebumps crawled to her skin immediately. "N-No, Commander! Don't be! I just want to ask..."

"I am sorry that I make you feel that way, I did not mean to make you feel inferior with the others, really I did not."

No, you did nothing wrong. Asashio panicked. Just as she feared, this took a wrong turn. However, she could not say anything because the Admiral seemed to have not finish her statement.

"Well, that is my fault after all for not telling you," She smiled sadly. "After all, all I want is just to meet you every day."

Eh?

"You are always so formal and hesitant that unless I order you, you will not come to me. I want to talk more with you. So I thought of just make it a mission for you to come see me every day. I did not mean to make you feel that way. I should have known better than trying to push myself on you. That was really insensitive of me. I should have been more perceptive, I apologize, Sweetling."

"N-No...I..."

Suddenly it all made sense.

"Asashio-chan, the reason why the Admiral always wants to see you is not mainly because she needs your report."

"Her reasoning has always been simple, straightforward, and honest. You don't have to worry."

The Admiral put her hand down on her lap and smiled.

"I apologize. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to. No, Sweetling, you have never done anything wrong, nor if your performance has been unsatisfactory. You are good ship and you have performed very, very well. I am really sorry that I make you feel uncomfortable. From now on, you don't have to..."

"I... I do not hate it!"

Her voice went off louder than what Asashio thought it would. What was control, she had none even with her own reaction. The Admiral rubbed her destroyer's arm gently.

"Dear, you don't have—"

"I enjoy talking to you too, Commander!"

"Unless I order you, you never come to me."

"... because I dont want to take up more of your precious time."

Even if it was not an order, it must be fine now... isn't it?
"After all, all I want is to meet you everyday."

"If that is alright with you, I..." Asashio did not realize her fists now trembled. "I will continue my report! Commander, please allow me to meet you every day!"

The Admiral now the one who blinked in surprise.

"Also, I..."

"Ah, I am terribly sorry, Sweetling. I did not mean to."

"... I do not dislike your treatment to me at all." It was her limit. The destroyer now could only look down at the concrete ground of the pier, feeling her face turned bright red again. "I instead apologize if I seem to give to the wrong reaction. I just do not know yet what is the right conduct to take. I hope you do not mind, Commander... B-But I will try my best."

Asashio closed her eyes tightly.

No. I shall be brave. I should look firm and proper and...

A chuckle.

Then a laugh.

When the destroyer looked up, what she saw was her Admiral laughing, even though she knew it did not sound like she was laughing over a joke. Still having a chuckle, she gently cupped her destroyer's face. She did not say anything, just her brown eyes observed her girl. Wonder, love, curiosity, everything flooded in those eyes. Asashio did not know what to do, so she just silently answered the gaze. Eventually the Admiral drew her to a gentle hug.

The destroyer closed her eyes tightly.

This feelings again. This warm, warm feeling that burst in her heart.

Asashio involuntarily grabbed her Admiral's white sleeve by one hand, burying her face in the older woman's shoulder. She somehow wanted to cry. This feeling, once again, strengthened. Now it was so overwhelming that she knew it would burst one day. This felt so foreign yet so familiar. It was a feeling of... longing. Asashio did not even know if she longed for something. She had never realized longing even existed, or that she identify this bittersweet feeling as one of such thing. However it welled up so strongly inside her heart that now she could not say it was anything else.

It felt as if... her heart was trying to identify her superior as something else. Something else beyond the wall.

Commander...

"Commander, I am sorry... that I don't know how to... return..."

… What is this?

A gentle rub on her back.

"You don't have to try so hard. Do what you want to, Sweetling. In this case, what you want will always be right. You don't have to worry."

The destroyer's grip on the sleeve tightened.
Will it... really always be right?

She wanted... really wanted to identify her Admiral as something else she was not at this moment.

"Asashio, I am still learning as well. I can be wrong. Tell me if there is anything I do that makes you uncomfortable, okay?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Is this alright with you?"

'... Yes, Commander. Thank you very much."

The Admiral eventually let go of her hug. She was surprised though, upon finding tears on her destroyer's eyes. She quickly cupped her cheeks, brushing the tears with her thumb gently. They still flowed, but somehow Asashio did not know why.

"What's wrong? If you don't like it you can tell me, Sweetling. I am sorry."

"No, Commander. I am just... I am just so happy... and relieved."

… The wall is broken, Commander.

"Thank you for taking care of me. I will try my best."

Can I acknowledge you as my mother?

The Admiral smiled and gently kissed her forehead.

XXX

"I think you push yourself on her a bit too far there, Ai."

They were watching Asashio walking back to towards the dormitory, unable to actually move from what had just happened. Airi understood what her best friend meant.

After all, perhaps this best friend of her understood the Kanmusu more than herself.

"I noticed. I cannot help myself."

Airi felt like apologizing to Asashio. Indeed, to be just another normal admiral would have been easier for both of them. She could not contain her own desire however.

"Well, it's not like I can tell you what is right or wrong anyway," Kanon put her hand inside her coat pocket. She gave a smile. "This is a new research field. Any research to this field has been suspended since a long time ago in exchange for other military interest. But anyone can tell that destroyer is confused."

"Yes, I know. I am sorry."

Kanon laughed. She pat her best friend's back.

"Ai, I am not the one you should apologize to. Beside, I don't even know if you should apologize to anyone at this rate. No one knows, really."

No one knew. They were treading the unknown. By science at least. Airi rubbed her hands
together, then faced her best friend.

"Can you help me knowing where I go, however?"

The brunette grinned.

"Well, I can consider it."

She lifted the vegetable bag she still held in her hand.

"I got a free nabe meal and beer. Is this what you are offering me for my service?"

Airi laughed, tapping her best friend's hand that was still by her shoulder.

"If you take that as my first bargain, that is incredibly cheap."

"That's my point, Ai. You gotta push on something more valuable."

"You want something expensive? I can give you a voluntary win in Shogi if you wanna, Non-chan."

"Goddarn it. Just you wait, I will DEFINITELY win over you one of these days."

"I am eager to meet your frequent tries."

Making a playful grunt of annoyance, Kanon hugged the admiral then strengthened her grip so tightly the admiral laughed and finally admitted her defeat. They laughed for sometime, until the mood died down again.

The waves crashed. The sun would soon set.

"... You watch her grow yourself, Kanon."

Airi still remembered the white room, the tube, the strange lights. She remembered touching a metal steel.

"She is my first construction. I created her. I can't help myself. She is technically my daughter."

Her best friend closed her eyes and sighed. All admiral had been taught the basic of construction. The steel, fuel, bauxite, ammunition would create the medium for these ship girl, and the core brain of their machine. The cell, would be the purified stem cell of Abyssal that has been used since the first ever successful Kanmusu construction. Calling the soul of warship would be the admiral's own soul. If Airi had called on the soul of Asashio from the pool of warship soul, then Kanon had watched Asashio grew from one cell into her form. After all, she was one of the scientists in charge of research and development. She developed Ikazuchi and Inazuma for Jiro, who did not even see his destroyers being completed before he was stripped off his place... and just recently she developed Asashio for her best friend's first construction. She had witnessed many birth. Asashio was just one of the many copies.

"You made her choose, you give her free will, when what us scientists have been trying to eliminate is options. It is natural that they are extremely conflicted. What you are creating here in your base is a huge experiment."

"I believe they are pure. So far they have never shown anything against that. They are capable to function outside of orders for a good purpose. They need respect."
Kanon chuckled.

"Most of the military do not think so."

"Most of the military is being apathetic."

"You sure, Ai? We are swimming in a different military, I think."

Airi turned around, facing her best friend. Her eyes burned.

"I believe in the good heart of people. Anyone with common sense can see these girls have hearts. Most of the admirals in the navy are just being complacent. We only need to push them enough."

"The military will not like that. Us scientists are pressured to create a more "efficient" weapon with an obvious reason."

"I am not trying to change or alter them. All I want is for them to be acknowledged, and thus given constitutional protection. This is surely not against the military."

"Depending on those protection, you may limit the scope of our research. That is a potential threat in itself. You wish to change a whole military's perspective."

"I wish to change the current accepted majority's perspective."

"You are being extremely specific there, Ai."

"I have faith in people, Kanon," Airi pushed her tone. She stepped forward. "I believe in humanity. People only need to be ushered away from their complacency. We only need to move, just a little, to overturn status quo."

Kanon raised her eyebrows... then eventually sighed. This one best friend of hers, perhaps it was thanks to her upbringing, or maybe something else, but since she was a small little kid, Airi was extremely kind and can be a tad bit naive. She was too kind for her own good, unfortunately.

"How was Admiral Kudou's reply?"

"Senpai is extremely receptive. I will meet him around next week. He and Admiral Fukumoto have been in this struggle longer than I am. They have their Kanmusu protected in their base, that is their way to defy the constitution. For me that is not enough. I won't be able to retire peacefully if I don't know whether or not my girls will be treated with the same respect once it is given to someone else. That is why I want the constitution to change. That is why I need your help."

"To convince Grand Marshal?"

"Yes, and also to steer me if I in case I accidentally step on a wrong direction."

They met eyes. Kanon almost smiled. Her best friend, although naive, was not stupid. Airi took a deep breath and continued.

"I don't say that how I treat them is right for every Kanmusu. You know more than me about their nature. I need your insights."

The scientist tilted her head. Airi smiled at her.

"You have seen my base, my ships, my staffs. Kouseki-san and I will help you gather your data. I will lend you my ship at anytime you wish. Kudou-Senpai and Admiral Fukumoto would also be
open for your proposal, if you ever wish to see their ships. All I ask for is an objective research. What I want is a better future for my ships. I want to know if what I do will harm them or not.”

"You are just as scared as they are."

Airi laughed at her best friend's statement. She raised her shoulder.

"Perhaps I am. I am clueless. I am but a green Admiral, Kanon."

Naive, but intelligent and gutsy.

"You need power."

Kanon's dark green eyes sparkled. Airi knew that one fact since the first time she said what was in her mind behind the factory, in front of Lieutenant Kouseki.

"I need power."

"This will be long, Ai."

"I know."

There was no elevator on this military rank ladder. She needed to establish her place. She needed to earn the respect of her peers. With her current fame, it would not be easy.

However, she had her trump card.

"I have my fleet, though, Kanon."

What was in the Admiral's eyes were solid trust.

"I believe in my fleet."

The firmness of her words, coupled with unshakeable belief, made Kanon sighed. Airi had always been that kind person that no one usually pay attention to in class, unless it was about wealth, because everyone would accuse her of having so much. She did not, however. Kanon knew first hand how the Tendouji barely gave their kids anything nice or above ordinary despite their wealth. Airi was the kind that usualy went in the background fixing tables and chairs unknowingly, giving rabbits feed when others forgot. She would never get any credit for what she did, nor would she ask to be acknowledge. For her to actually take the first step to something to huge and take the spotlight, there must be something that had affected her so.

That alone, was enough of a bargain.

"... I will take the nabe and the beer. As long as you cook."

The sparkles in the brown eyes of the admiral, were unmistakably bright.

"I will cook for you, merely because I am worried of gastronomic catastrophe."

"Ai, can't you even be a least bit lenient on me?"

"Now THAT is even more expensive than the Shogi, Non-chan. You should have taken that one bargain."

"Your sarcasm is beyond me, really."
"You will have plenty of those as we have our dinner tonight."

"... I will look forward to it I guess."

Their banter continued, as the sun slowly setting in the west. The nabe tonight would be lively. At least Airi would not be having it alone this time.

They would have one long talk, beyond their nabe and beer.

~ To be Continued ~

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Hakurei Kanon is written 白霊 佳暖

Yes, Asashio was actually the original supposedly secretary ship.
Chapter Summary

Being an adult can be a very lonely thing. However, let's not dwell on that and forget the many beautiful kindness we let slipped past.

Chapter Notes

This is the end of my vacation... So I thought I should fool around with this fanfic a bit... This will be another ? chapter. Very pointless. Thank you very much for all your kind reviews. I apologize for not being able to answer you. I am using proxy. I am very sorry for any grammatical error that may hurt your eyes. More often than not, my chapters are unproofread, I deeply apologize.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of the songs I used in this fic, they are of their respective owner. Unless otherwise stated, the translation of the Japanese lyrics are made by me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hey, look at how the seemingly mundane everyday life
right now is dyed in blue like they want to change
That second it was reflected by puddle
I only want to see it for just one time

GigaReol feat Megurine Luka and Kagamine Rin - drop pop candy

"Good morning, excuse me."

Shouhou opened admiral's office door, muttering her greetings.

Only empty air answered her back. As expected, no one was in the office. Admiral Tendouji still had not arrived. Looking at the cuckoo clock hanging on the wall behind the admiral desk, Shouhou smiled. She must be having breakfast around this time. If only she could be there to see her expression. The Admiral always looked happy when she ate. She said it was a piece of heaven on earth, and that to waste or to not be grateful of any meal on the table would be extremely impolite to those who had prepared the meal, including farmers and fisherman, and the nature that provide them. The look of her clasping her hands before her chest before eating and prayed, each time, somehow invoked a sense of serenity.

"Itadakimasu."

Whenever she said that, Shouhou knew the Admiral meant every word of it. For Shouhou, the
Admiral always seemed like one who appreciate the small things in life, including those people usually overlooked.

~ Chicken Soup ~

The curtain blinds were still down and since it was winter, the sun was still relatively low outside. Combination of both factors made the room considerably dark. Not bothering to switch on the light switch, Shouhou stepped into the dim-lit room. She walked to her admiral's desk, looking at its unchanged state since Admiral Tendouji left it yesterday. The "mail in" box still had some documents. She had been working overtime yesterday for the last sortie reports. She spared the afternoon to talk with her ship girls and inspected the whole base. Only after that she did her desk work, saying that time was too short to see everything. Shouhou always thought if she cared about all of her ship like this all the time, it was no surprise how time would never be enough for her. Working overtime had now become her usual working hour. Shouhou had turned quite concerned of it too, but the Admiral only laughed and said it was her job. She definitely did more than what her job required though. Among the reason why Shouhou always made sure she had prepared warm tea for her admiral was so that she did not catch a cold or dehydrate herself.

Copying the Admiral's own words, it seemed as if work never subsided. There would always be new mission whenever transmissions from the central comes. Shouhou was a new addition to the fleet by the time when things got extremely bad around the base with the previous admiral. Thus, although she was programmed to know how to combat and what to do, basic administration differ with each base so she had to learned about administrative work manually. She had no idea how it actually was as a secretary or admiral. During the time when the admiral was away for training, she knew the extent of things admirals supposed to do. She was glad Kaga was there, despite being rather silent and thus quite anxiety inducing. As work piled up by the admiral's desk during her leave, Shouhou remembered roughly counting the amount of things she could help: equipment development report, expedition scheduling and report, following Admiral's direction on base expansion, regular inspection... but then those were everything. She could not help the Admiral on a dozen other things that slowly piled up in mere week.

Providing tea was the least she could do.

After fastening the curtain and let light to finally flood the office, the secretary ship went to check on the small drink table near her desk. They almost run out of tea. The Admiral preferred unground tea leaves, or sencha, instead of powder tea, matcha, for every day drink, saving the better grade matcha for some occasion where she would relax by making it herself in the tatami resting room. The Admiral occasionally invited her ships to come join her in a tea gathering, where she would be the one to serve them. It first began when the Admiral beckoned Shouhou to come sit with her for some tea in the room in one afternoon. It was a casual invitation, just another day sitting with tea, but Shouhou remembered the different aura when she sat there in seiza posture by the tatami room, watching her admiral made some tea for them both.

Sunlight turned the room into a kind of orange hue that day, since the sun had titled to the west. She remembered how the light fell on her Admiral's eyes, turning them golden. Her Admiral might not have most beautiful irises. They were brown, more of dark brown than light, but for Shouhou the way those eyes turned lighter, or golden, under the sun and the gentleness they showed whenever she looked at her, made her thought she had the most elegant, motherly eyes Shouhou had ever seen. Shouhou remember the graceful way her Admiral handled all the tea equipment, the quiet sound of water being pour, the sudden shift of atmosphere. The rush of the day melted as if it took a pause. The tea itself was tender, humble, and also kind and friendly, served in low bowl. It may not be a tea ceremony. It was not even any kind of tea gathering. However it was at that moment when Shouhou thought her Admiral indeed, had so much aspect in her that took the
principle of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility, beyond mere formality.

"There is beauty in simplicity and quiet," the Admiral once said. "Simplicity let us appreciates things in its natural state, things in their imperfection. The world can be deafening in all its adornment."

Shouhou learned that it was her Admiral's idea of rest. A moment of silence away from worldly issues and pressure. Thus, she eventually understood why the Admiral always prefer her resting room to be bland, or to put it into word, unspecial.

That said, Suzuya often mistook "tranquility" as "drowsy". She said the room was best for afternoon nap—which unsurprisingly, the heavy cruiser often did. The Admiral seemed to find that amusing and let her did as she please. Although to put it fairly, she let anyone did as they please in the room as long as it caused no harm.

Shouhou opened the said room, looking at its tidy and empty state. She could not hold her smile. The room the Kanmusu made together for their Admiral. Soon as it went to noon, there would definitely be some Kanmusu coming to lounge around there, especially the destroyers. It was their room, in more meaning than one.

After finishing opening windows to let air circulates into both room, organizing some files and mails for today's work, Shouhou brewed then served a cup of steaming hot green tea to cool by the Admiral's desk. By schedule she would be here in several more minutes and by then the tea would have been sufficiently cooled. These routines were almost muscle memory for her. Today, too, they would work hard as always.

Finishing everything, Shouhou sat by her chair and waited with her own cup of tea. The clock ticked closer to 8 AM.

Today would be another day...

The telephone line on Admiral's desk suddenly rang. That was unusual. It was still really early and it was not official work hour yet. If the central phoned the admiral, it would always be working hour. It must be an emergency.

Being second in command, Shouhou quickly answered the phone.

"Good morning. This is Admiral Tendouji Airi's secretary, Light Carrier Shouhou. Is there anything I can help you?"

At first there was silence. A while later a voice so weak it was almost a whisper, answered.

"... ah. Shouhou?"

It sound familiar, yet not at the same time...

"Shouhou, this is me, Tendouji... I am sorry but I don't think I can go to the office today..."

XXX

People said, being an adult is a very lonely thing. Usually Airi never really thought of it that way but times like this she finally understood that yeah, it can be extremely lonely. First off, usually for most person you have your classmates, yearmates, mates in any meaning, around you doing the same phase, same journey. You go to the same class, aiming at the same thing, even when you want to go somewhere you usually turn to your friend and ask, "hey, wanna hang out somewhere
“together?” or around that line. Even when you are alone, at the very least you can look around and see people doing the same phase of life just like you. Then suddenly upon stepping on adulthood, you went your own way. Your choices would be your own, you pay your own bill, and you don't have that feeling of having someone in the same situation as you. Things got worse if you live on your own. And now Airi felt more than awful.

Being ill as a single adult living on your own totally felt lonely. Unless you have a spouse, no one would ask you how you are doing every 10 minutes, cook you some soup, and be there to change the cooling cloth. All that were around you were your room, your futon, your fever, and your neglected responsibilities. All of a sudden Airi felt like she had been taking her family for granted.

Yesterday she went home a bit later than usual for doing the reports. After that, when she went home she bumped into some of the staff and eventually went drinking together with them. She did not drink that much in fear of bad hangover and the fact that she ride a bike, but then she woke up with a really bad fever and pain all over her joints.

Well, catching a bad case of flu may not have anything to do with sake but overworking perhaps took its turn in the worst way. At least from her talk last night she knew that some admiral in eastern seas caught cheating with his ship by his wife.

Shivering, Airi drew her sheet closer to her body. The futon suddenly felt like it did not warm a single bit. Curse everything as well, suddenly she wondered if she had refilled the kerosene in the heater. If she hadn't, then woe to her, her life, her job, the world, and everything in it.

At least she had taken her day off by phone. For now... perhaps... a bit of sleep...

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Airi did not exactly know how long she passed out. Her fever was so bad she could barely recall time and even hallucinated about her brother just a bit. Ah, that said Shouhei did say he would open a bakery... He always loved cooking. Like that one time when... oh! Shouhei, Father will be extremely mad and... Fathe- ah, I am not at home.

Perhaps she needed to be prescribed a stronger medicine, this much trouble for just some random flu was unheard of. Her throat felt like being rubbed with a barbed stick. It hurt so bad she had to force herself gulp down her medicine and water and after that gave herself a minute of lamenting the darn pain.

Then opened another pack of medicine.

*Kami-sama, thank you for giving me health, I have been extremely ungrateful. I am an ingrate, I am sorry.*

Fuck. She was supposed to dilute the powder drug she already had in her mouth. Water. Gargled. Wrong choice. It was stupid.

Another minute of lamenting the lingering, gag inducing bitterness.

Apparently having a fever made your IQ harshly dropped as well.

Crawling into her futon again, Airi just realized that she had not opened her curtain at all. She lazily reached out of the futon to the curtain that draped over her glass sliding door leading to the veranda. Perhaps she would need sunshine. The sun was setting. Never mind then.

Making herself into a sushi roll with the blanket, Airi heaved a deep sigh. Her fever had gone up again. So much... for the medicine.
Just when she was about to spend another long hour drifting between unconsciousness and delirious wake, the bell rang.

... Strange. She believed her parents did not send her anything needing delivery. And her body ached. Ah well... Sighing, Airi forced her aching body to rise up from her comfortable futon, crossing the tatami room over to the entrance. Even with this much jacket she shivered.

Next time those staff inviting her to a drinking party, she would learn to say a kind no...

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"Is this okay, Lieutenant? I..."

"It's perfectly fine, Shouhou-san. I want to go as well, so don't worry about it."

Griping her paper bag, Shouhou bit her lips. She tidied up her winter kimono, feeling how the temperature dropped even lower as the sun set. Lieutenant Kouseki towered beside her, wearing a black navy jacket that made him looked like a giant. He was normally big and tall, but the clothing made him looked even more burly. Glancing at his navy watch, he pressed the bell of a room in an old apartment by the town.

They met each other at one of the small garden connecting the main office, the factory, and the dormitory. The lieutenant was going home that time when he saw Shouhou sitting by the bench alone. He asked her what happened and if there was anything he could help. Shouhou's problem was quite simple, the Admiral was ill.

Perhaps the Lieutenant saw her distress, or that she looked uneasy and troubled. He offered to escort her to the Admiral's home.

Ship girl was not allowed out of the base unless there was a human personnel of Lieutenant and higher rank to accompany them. Ship girls that are officially married to Admirals were given special privileges, yet even then the Admiral would be fully responsible of everything. Most ship girl had no problem with the law, because most of them did not exactly have time or interest to go out of the base since it basically has everything.

The Lieutenant's offer caught the light carrier off guard but she could not say no against herself. She was worried. She had never heard the Admiral sound as weak as she was in the phone. For as long as Shouhou remembered, the Admiral lived alone. There would be no one to serve her tea, or to cook for her. Perhaps there would be a thing or two that she could do to help her Admiral. Or anything. Anything, somehow.

… She just wanted to meet her. And made herself sure her superior was alright.

In the end, she accepted Lieutenant Kouseki's offer.

The human world, the town, if Shouhou were to say her impression, was unexpectedly barren. Shouhou was constructed at the end of the late admiral's time so she had never been to training practices to at least see human world from inside the transportation like the other ship. She did not know what to expect, but she was still quite surprised. She thought human world would be much more exuberant and lively. She thought that there would be more human. However what greeted her outside the base was a small humble town.

The road they walked were mostly empty, except for occasional people on bikes or pedestrian. They were mostly elderly as well. The road was small, with both sides being either home or small private shops. The taller ones were usually tavern, or an inn, or just a small shop with storage.
Several small shrines scattered around the town, some of them at the second story of some of the houses, looking out towards the road. Most of them had offerings, and these are almost the only evident proof that there were actually more people living around the place. Some kept dogs, which barked at them as they passed by. Perhaps other than the cawing of the crows, the dog barks were the only living voice around them.

The Lieutenant did not talk much, being a rather quiet man as he always was. He only said that they could walk to the Admiral's place, as it was quite close. The Admiral herself usually use her bicycle, and at times left it at the base if she felt like walking. The lieutenant took Shouhou to a small shop, accompanying her as she made a quick grocery stop. The elderly woman who attended the shop was friendly and kind, commenting on how Shouhou looked extremely lovely with her kimono. The lieutenant paid for the groceries, smiling and saying kindly that she should keep her wage for something to indulge her instead if she had time.

"This is part of indulging myself, Lieutenant."

"The same as I," replied the man. His smiled turned gentler. "Please allow me to pay for you in your first purchase outside the base, Shouhou-san. For my indulgence."

In a way, the Lieutenant has the same way of replying like her Admiral.

After that they crossed over a river, to another side of the town which was mostly rice field and farm field. There were vegetables even in the small spaces between houses. Sakura trees lined the river bank, looking lifeless without their exuberant leaves. A group of wild ducks swam away from them, making ripples on the river water that reflected the setting sun. The houses came back, denser this time. Just about the time for Shouhou to ask with it would be a little further away, they arrived at the house, a room in the second floor of a two story apartment building.

From the outside looked unexpectedly generic. The whole apartment building itself seemed kind of old, even if strong. The whole town were indeed filled with old simple buildings, with most of everyone there worked as fishermen or farmers. Other than the base, there were no large building in the town. There were few apartment, and thus this building towered over smaller homes around it. In her nervousness Shouhou glanced over roofs of nearby house, to the direction of the naval base that was easily distinguishable with its tall buildings, towers, turrets, sentinel posts. Gauging the distance roughly by sight alone, it was clear that indeed, they were not that far away from the base. Two crows passed by, cawing to the now orange sky.

"If she did not answer... what should we do...?" Shouhou looked up to the Lieutenant after he pressed the bell. The man seemed to think. He smiled.

"I will assume she is sleeping... we can go back in another hour I guess. I can take you around to see the town during that time."

Shouhou bit her lips. She did not want to think that somehow the Admiral passed out without anyone to help her. She did not exactly fond of the idea of walking around town with the knowledge that her Admiral was ill, no matter how interested she was of the human world. She understood, however, that she was fully under the Lieutenant's command. She was in no place to bargain anything. Looking at the view of the small town, over to the mountain, something strange hit her heart. There were more human over the mountain, over the town. The town was foreign, the whole surrounding was foreign, by law there were so many things she could not do.

Her world, and her Admiral's world, were vastly different.

The door suddenly made clanking noise as the key was turned from the inside. Shouhou quickly
turned to look at the steel door, feeling this anticipation welled up inside her, putting her on edge.

Would it really be her Admiral?

The door opened with barely a creak to the inside, and even if Shouhou could not see the one who opened the door thanks to where she was standing and that the person who opened the door did not step outside, there was no mistaking that familiar voice, even if it was more coarse and weaker than usual.

"K-Kouseki-san?"

Feelings of relief, happiness, longing, everything all burst in Shouhou's heart that she felt like jumping into the voice right away. However instead, she found herself locked in her place as Lieutenant Kouseki bowed and answered the Admiral's surprised remark politely.

"Good day, Admiral. I heard that you are unwell from Shouhou-san and so both of us thought of giving you a visit."

"T-That is... w-wait, both? Shouhou?"

The light carrier's grip on her luggage strengthened.

"She is really worried about you so I took her here. If that is alright with you."

The Lieutenant gestured Shouhou to present herself. Shyly, Shouhou walked closer to the door.

Indeed, it was the admiral behind the door. Her figure broke Shouhou's heart. She was extremely pale and evidently ill. Her hair tousled and untidy, and she wore numerous jackets on top of a visible pajama. Her brown eyes widened in surprise when she saw her secretary right there in front of her door. Her lips, cracked and dry, parted to voice something but nothing came out.

"Good afternoon, Admiral. I...bring some supply...perhaps some soup or porridge will be good for your body?"

Admiral Tendouji was evidently too surprised to say anything, or even do anything, or perhaps it was because of her fever. Lieutenant Kouseki slowly put his hand on the door and broke the silence by saying, "It would be extremely bad to stand here too long for your body, Admiral. If our visit is against your liking and disturb your rest then..."

"No, no, Kouseki-san, not at all," The Admiral gave a smile, weak as it may. The lieutenant's voice seemed to break her out of her trance. She opened the door wider and took a step back to let them in. "Come in, please. I really appreciate this. I'm just so sorry that my room is really untidy... I haven't tidied the room since yester— ah..

If it were not for Lieutenant Kouseki's swift reaction of grabbing the Admiral's waist and pulling her against his body as she fell, she would have hit the kitchen table that was right after the entrance of the door. The lieutenant kept his balance by keeping his grip on the door handle, gently shifting the admiral's point of balance to him to steady her.

"Please forgive my intrusion," The lieutenant said quietly. The Admiral steadied herself by having her hand on the wall. She seemed to reply the Lieutenant's words, however Shouhou could not hear it clearly. It's quite frustrating how she could only watched as she was stuck between the door, the wall, and Lieutenant Kouseki's body. If the Admiral was so weak that she could not even hold several minutes by the door before actually collapsing, a tidy room should definitely be the last of her concern.
The lieutenant suddenly had his hand on Shouhou's paper bag, while his other hand still half-supporting the admiral. Quietly, he gestured for Shouhou to change position with him. The light carrier quickly moved, supporting her admiral by taking one of her arm over the shoulder. The admiral made a gasp.

"S-Shouhou!" Even her struggle was weak. "I am fine, I was just feeling a bit lightheaded..."

"Please, Admiral, let me help you," The Admiral's body was burning, even with all the jackets. "Don't push yourself. I will help you get to your futon."

The admiral said nothing anymore and Shouhou could feel she slowly shift her weight to her secretary a bit. They slowly stepped on the elevated wooden floor towards the kitchen area. It was a modestly sized apartment. Right by the entrance was the kitchen table with stove and sink by the wall in the right, and bathroom by the left wall. The first room was separated by a wall and a sliding door towards an 8 tatami room, with a glass sliding door to the veranda covered by a curtain, an alcove and closet by one side, a kotatsu, and a futon. A shelf rested on opposite side of the alcove. Other than that, the room was empty.

A futon laid out near the glass sliding door, evidently still newly occupied. Shouhou supported the admiral to her futon against her protest. Her superior wanted to just sit, but the light carrier practically pushed her admiral to lie down and covered her with the sheet.

"I am okay, Shouhou. I need to serve the drinks and-"

"Your body is burning and you are shivering," It was beyond Shouhou how her superior always wanted to serve others. "Please don't mind us, Admiral, we are here to help you if there is anything you need and.."

"You are my guest, Shouhou, how come I do not.."

"You are ill, Admiral, and we are not here to be served by you. Please, just rest."

The Admiral opened her mouth to say something again but Shouhou cut her off by saying, "Please, Admiral, I am begging you, please let me serve you."

The admiral finally did not say anything else. She eventually rested herself on the futon, drawing the sheet closer to her body. She was practically shivering. If she was in a better condition, Shouhou knew her admiral would begin to argue but now she was visibly too weak for anything. Knowing that made her extremely sad. Easy enough for one to see she had overworked herself. It would be good if the Admiral had more time to sleep and rest.

"Is this your first time out, Shouhou?"

The admiral's voice was weak. Hearing her talk instead of sleeping, Shouhou sighed.

"Yes, Admiral," quickly she continued. "But please, just rest."

"I am," the Admiral chuckled. She let one hand out of her futon and tapped Shouhou's thigh. "I am... Your voice calms me. Please, now tell me everything. How was it outside the base, dear? What has Kouseki-san showed you?"

Shouhou looked behind, to the Lieutenant who was standing by the paper sliding door that separated the tatami room and the kitchen. He gave a smile. His presence somehow normalized the situation, even if Shouhou did not understand why.
The light carrier took the Admiral's burning hand in hers, and she began to tell her story.

"Shouhou-san. I will leave the katsudon here."

"Yes, thank you very much."

Even if she replied, there was not a single sign that she would move from her current place. Knowing it would not make anything better to coerce, Heishi did not say anything else. He merely placed a bowl of katsudon on the table, and took his own. It was way past dinner now. When he arrived after going out to find dinner, Shouhou had not moved from the Admiral's side. The only time she left was when she made her chicken porridge, and that too only after the Admiral drifted to sleep. The light carrier had not eaten anything, nor did she drink the tea she had prepared herself for the three of them. It was just sitting there on the table, long since lost its warmth.

For what Heishi remembered, Kanmusu also got sick from time to time. They called it organic illness, illness that happened to their organic, rather than machine, self. Since their body composition differ, there were not that many illness from human that could contract them. In the case of overworking, Kanmusu can get rid of their fatigue moderately by taking their medicated bath. That was why unless within the selected number agent of the disease which actualy could contract Kanmusu are especially strong, Kanmusu were unlikely to get sick. Perhaps it was that understanding that caused Shouhou to become so worried about the admiral. That, or maybe the stark difference of Admiral Tendouji's usual strong, energetic self, compared to this fragile ill patient. That said, Heishi knew the woman was away from the definition of "fragile ill" person.

It was still quite surprising for him how light the Admiral's body was. Those eyes with burning bravery that always talked of constitution reform and all those things anyone dozens of kilograms heavier than her barely wanted to touch were owned by someone so light. Heishi knew if he wanted he could lift her effortlessly right there and then. His huge respect over her, and also his knowledge of her personality, was the things that forbid him. Admiral Tendouji would never have wanted to look weak, especially in front of her own Kanmusu. She perhaps would have prefer for her Kanmusu to never see her in this condition, but there were things a male simply could not do. Besides, if there were anyone who could and would take care of the Admiral better than anyone else, it would be Shouhou. If only she would take care of herself better though. That applied to her Admiral also. The two of them were really meant for each other in that sense.

Also, perhaps he really should persuade the secretary ship further. She had not budge even a bit.

"Shouhou-san, the Admiral will be angry at you if you do not take care of yourself."

This time, this seemed to take effect.

"You haven't eaten or drank anything."

Indeed it worked. Shouhou finally turned towards Heishi, although glanced at the admiral several more times, then settled herself on the opposite side of the koutatsu. Meeting Heishi's eyes, the light carrier suddenly bowed.

"I deeply apologized for seemingly ignoring your call, Lieutenant."

"It's alright," They were programmed to follow orders. In a way Heishi felt it was really sad how perhaps she came because her conditioning moved her. "Please, do eat. Lets not have you fallen ill as well. The base needs you as well, Shouhou-san. Especially now when the Admiral is absent."
The light carrier looked into his eyes upon hearing that, realization drew itself in her eyes. Perhaps she had even forgotten how she actually was the secretary ship with work to do tomorrow. She bowed down again.

"I am sorry..."

The lieutenant smiled at her reply.

"It's okay. Let's just eat for now, shall we?"

She merely nodded.

They ate in silence, each drown in own thoughts. Heishi could hear the clock on the wall ticked, slowly. It was quite late already. Soon enough, it would be better for Shouhou to spend the night in this house... but then it would mean leaving his responsibility over her. Although of course, he could also spend the night in this place. That sound quite wrong and he knew the Admiral would be bothered with the need for extra futon and those other thing. Perhaps he could just go home leaving Shouhou with the Admiral and come back the next morning. Those were several options. However, whichever he took, he would definitely get the brunt of rumor anyway tomorrow, with Shouhou not returning for the night. The rule was reporting every 24 hour, not exactly "not spending a night outside” so he did not break any rule. However, it was also the way for higher ranking officer who has affair with the Kanmusu to spend the night together somewhere. It was almost a public secret, an unspoken knowledge. Heishi did not mind rumors over him. He would sure mind if it would hurt Shouhou's image.

Thanks to the previous admiral, there were barely any Kanmusu out of the base for prolonged period of time. This would be the first for this base for a long time. It would definitely cause a stir...

"Do you often come to this house, Lieutenant?"

Having Shouhou being the first to actually strike a conversation surprised Heishi rather delightfully. The question, however, was quite tricky to be answered.

"I... cannot exactly call it "often" but I have been here several times, yes."

It was the safest answer. Perhaps for others, their friendship would seem to be out of nowhere. Although around this time others could see them having frequent conversation about anything surrounding the factory, Heishi understood that perhaps it was not enough to explain why Admiral Tendouji was friendly towards him, a mere lieutenant. They did work on something else more than about the factory. However, saying that they worked on something other than formal work would rise suspicion and that was unfavorable. Of course, telling people about their frequent conversation at the metal graveyard would give even more unnecessary suspicion. That, and also Heishi would rather that be a secret that only both of them knew. He was not sure if Admiral Tendouji also did not tell anyone about it, but looking at how things were, it seemed to be so.

In a way, Heishi took some pride in that part. He could not help her in administrative work or something that was not involving engineering, but he could help listening to her. It did not matter if the Admiral did not think of their time as special, as long as it made her felt better then that was all that Heishi wished for.

Shouhou looked unconvinced with his rather grey answer. She politely backed away.

"I am sorry if I sound intrusive... I just thought that you seem to be very familiar with the house."

"Ah, I did help around a bit when she had guests."
For example Admiral Kudou, or Admiral Fukumoto and his wife, or her researcher friend Hakurei.

With Admiral Tendouji being the mastermind of their plan, also the one with the closest house to the base, this particular place had been used as their base for quite a while. The fact that Admiral Tendouji always kept the place simple and easy to navigate around made the house the most favorable place to congregate. "Discussion" seemed to not be a perfect word for their meetings. It was more like "bonding"-with their beer and meal and chatters. They did, however, talked about the concept of what they would want the constitution to be.

Shouhou seemed to take the answer at face value and kept more to herself. Perhaps there were a dozen other questions in her mind that she did not say for the sake of courtesy. Heishi did not mind. Knowing her devotion to Admiral Tendouji, the secretary ship would not say anything that might hurt her superior's name. Whatever it was in her mind, it must be nothing harmful to the Admiral. Heishi knew their interest were the same in that case.

"... There are so many things... that I don't know about the Admiral."

Her voice sounded distant.

"This house, the neighborhood... Even now I don't know what I can do for her when she needs help. If anything were to happen, I don't know how to function, or what kind of conduct I should take. I do not know how human world works... Our worlds is way too different. Everything is so foreign. I don't know how to be of help being who I am at a time like this."

Perhaps that was what she had been thinking of as she sat there for a long time. Kanmusu were not designed to be able to blend with the community. It was not within their pre-installed memory. They had to learn about society while being bound to their status as a Kanmusu. They were not made... to choose.

"You have been helping her a lot, Shouhou-san," said Heishi slowly. "You cooked her dinner, you stayed by her. That is a part of helping, I suppose?"

"Those are the only thing that I could give."

"Those are exactly what she needed." Despite what he said, Shouhou seemed dissatisfied. "You did the best you could, Shouhou-san. The most important thing is that you did them. Many people can do something yet they don't. The fact that you did, means a lot. I am sure Admiral Tendouji would also feel the same way."

Shouhou looked down to her now half empty bowl but said nothing else. Heishi understood her feelings, that desire to be able to do more than what we currently could for the one you love. It was human to feel that, as it was also human to not be able to fulfill that because of one's own limitation. One should accept one's self, even if it cannot be perfect with all its limitation.

To love something with all its imperfection.

That sure remind him of a particular someone.

"Can I join in the conversation?"

Admiral Tendouji's voice came up rather suddenly. Shouhou quickly turned around, finding the Admiral propped herself up to one side by leaning on her arm. She was still pale, but colors had considerably returned to her face. Her voice sounded hoarse and low in volume but other than that the energy came back.
"Admiral! Admiral, please be rested!"

Admiral Tendouji chuckled when Shouhou panicked. She gestured that she was fine, then talked that she wanted to sit. Shouhou finally settled down sitting in seiza beside her admiral, who was now sitting while covered in a bundle of sheet. Her hair seemed to go all over the place and she was, of course, without a single bit of makeup on, however a slight tint of color back to her face and just a slight bit of that energy back to her eyes, were all she needed to look as energizing as she always did.

"Are you feeling better, Admiral?" Heishi asked, more of formalities. The admiral smiled back at him, nodding.

"A lot better, Kouseki-san. Thank you." She turned towards her secretary ship, placing a hand on Shouhou's lap. "Thanks to both of you. Don't tell me that you can't do anything. I do not accept apology from you for being yourself. I am extremely thankful that you are you."

Shouhou only bit her lower lip, lowering her gaze. The Admiral's words weighted more than anything Heishi could say, and even then the light carrier still had a hard time coping. They could do nothing now but let herself solve her puzzle.

Admiral Tendouji only tapped her secretary's thigh again, then looked at the clock on the wall. She cringed. Heishi knew exactly why. Her eyes flew towards Heishi in a knowing look, which he answered with a simple smile.

*You're screwed.*

*I am.*

Thankfully Shouhou did not catch that.

"I guess it is time for dinner for me too," The Admiral chuckled, throwing a look at their bowl. Shouhou seemed to be awoken from her trance. "Is there any left for me?"

"I have prepared some chicken porridge for you, Admiral," The light carrier blushed. "Shall I.. um, would you like to have some? I heard it is good for you."

"Oh, that will be splendid. Thank you, Shouhou."

The light carrier actually beamed in happiness. She nodded and rose, and quickly disappeared to the kitchen. After watching her went away fondly, the Admiral shifted her attention back at Heishi. Her rather playful demeanor shifted.

Her voice dropped lower, in its already low volume.

"I'm in a much better condition now. I can go to work tomorrow, Kouseki-san. She can go with me."

"No, that will not be necessary. I believe you will need more rest."

Having her go to work tomorrow would beat the whole purpose of bringing Shouhou here.

The Admiral seemed to understand that there was no choice. She glanced at the sliding door separating the kitchen and the tatami room. Her eyes turned distant.

"... I have... two more futons. It was my siblings'. If that is more convenient for you."
He took a sharp breath involuntarily. Privates had their mess and dormitory, but officers that had been stationed longer, most had their own house around the base. As he had been stationed for over four years in the same base, with his promotion, he bought a house of his own. His house was two train station away, on the outskirt of the town near the mountain. At this late hour, there would not be anymore transportation to that place.

He could not get back to the base either, not without Shouhou. However taking Shouhou to walk back to the base at this hour was not viable either. It would be even more wrong than bringing Shouhou back tomorrow to the base.

If he were to spend the night at the Admiral's house, he knew too well that perhaps he would not get even a blink of sleep. For various reasons.

"I... Can I borrow your bicycle instead, Admiral?"

The Admiral looked almost angry at the idea.

"Kouseki-san, this is winter and—"

"It will not be a problem. It is not that far away."

"I cannot allow that. You may catch a cold."

"My jacket is especially strong against the night wind, you don't have to worry."

"Not the night winter wind while riding on a bicycle."

"I believe yes."

"Show me the tag saying that."

"I am still well now. That is enough of a tag."

"Not on bicycle. You usually use train. I won't let you make the same mistake that I did."

"You... You catch a cold because you biked at night?"

Her face reddened.

"... No. At least, I don't think so. But don't change the topic, Kouseki-san. I still will not give you my key."

She could be pretty stubborn. He should have known that by now.

"Then I can walk home."

The way she bit her lower lips frustratingly... made Heishi clenched his fists way too tightly while holding his breath.

This was exactly the reason why he shall not spend the night in her house.

"... It's the white one." Her voice sounded defeated. "The one nearest to the stairs. You can find the key dangling by the calendar in the kitchen."

Smiling politely, Heishi lowered his head.
"Thank you for your understanding, Admiral."

He would deal with her getting upset later.

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A bell on the door, a new morning. And suddenly it was time to part.

"Thank you very much for your hospitality, Admiral."

Shouhou bowed to her Admiral at the front door, already nice and proper for work.

"What are you talking about now, you took care of me all night," Airi laughed heartedly. Lieutenant Kouseki had come to pick her up early in the morning. The sun was still newly up at the horizon, shining on them with its kind ray. It seemed it would be a rather warm day today. She still had a jacket draped over her pajama-clad figure though. She was still in recovery. "I am the one who should say thank you to you. Look at me now, much much better thanks to that soup of yours."

The blush in Shouhou's face and the way she bowed down several time to thank her of her good words, made Airi smile. Shouhou really should not be that humble. She was always ready to wake up whenever Airi was in need of something. Airi tried to not feel bad at that, knowing that would not help Shouhou... She found her secretary looking extremely happy when she asked her something.

Anyone would feel happy if they knew they are needed by someone else.

"Also..."

Lieutenant Kouseki raised his eyebrows when Airi turned to look at him. He seemed fine at least, not down with cold, which was a great relief. He returned her bike intact as well. Not that Airi actually had forgiven him for besting her in a game of wit last night.

She reached out inside to her kitchen table, taking out two bentou box wrapped neatly in Japanese patterned cloths... then nonchalantly shoved them one to Lieutenant Kouseki and one to Shouhou.

The light carrier flustered and quickly tried to shove it back to her.

"A-Admiral! Admiral, I can't! This is too much! When did you—"

"You were sleeping so soundly this morning that I did not dare to wake you up," Airi laughed, gently patting Shouhou's reddening face. "I know you have been up all night looking after me. Thank you."

"But you're still ill! You should not—"

"I had plenty of rest yesterday and I will have more today," said Airi, pushing the bentou back. "I was bored, so don't worry about it. Instead I should say sorry if those may not be of to your liking. It's just some simple omurice. I could make better ones next time, but I guess for this time this will do."

Shouhou still tried to say something, but Lieutenant Kouseki only bowed down.

"Thank very much, Admiral. I really appreciate this."

If it were any other time and Shouhou was not there, Airi knew it would not be the end of his
"You both can return the box later when you come back to my home later today."

Shouhou quickly looked up. Her eyes showed that she seemed to not believe her superior’s words. Airi smiled, pushing the box to Shouhou's arms. She took out a letter from her pajama's pocket then handed it over to Lieutenant Kouseki.

"I am sorry that I would have to trouble you even further, Lieutenant, but I need your assistance," Airi smiled at the look the Lieutenant threw at her. Even wider when those looks showed silent understanding. "Please hand this over to the Human Resources office. Tell them I need official assistance from my secretary ship today as well after work hour is over."

She gave a wink at her light carrier.

"...Especially for the case of chicken soup. That is extremely urgent and vital for the well being of the base."

"Indeed it is," Lieutenant Kouseki nod firmly, shoving the letter into his jacket. "I will make sure that the mission is flawlessly conducted, Admiral."

"Very admirable. Thank you, Lieutenant."

The look that Shouhou showed was enough for everything.

"Ah, also, please take your time when you go back," said Airi, almost forgetting one of the most important things. "It seemed to be a nice day today. Enough of a reason to enjoy a good walk in the morning."

Although Lieutenant Kouseki actually bowed to show affirmation, Shouhou only stood there puzzled listening to her. Wasting time was never an agenda in military.

"Shouhou, knowing what you protect is as important as protecting itself. Please, enjoy the town as you walk back. See what you had missed yesterday. Remember it well. Then when I meet you again tonight, tell me about it. Tell me of this town you help protecting."

The morning chime was heard from the speakers spread around town, a song different with the one in the base. The townspeople would definitely be up and about in a short time. It would be lively again with the kind people she met everyday. The kind people she wanted Shouhou to know. The kind people she wanted Shouhou to feel a part of... or felt belong to.

"Please tell me everything," Airi said, smiling. "I want to listen."

Perhaps fallen ill was not all that bad. Other than earning that cheating gossip, she now realized the big hole she needed to teach to her Kanmusu, and also the big mistake she felt when she was down with fever yesterday.

She was definitely not alone. Being single was not the reason to feel miserable. After all, all she had to do was ask.

"Please come back again tonight."

~ To be continued ~
Author's Note: I had writer's block when I want to enjoy writing, whaaaaat. hahahaha. With this, my vacation is over...
Chapter Summary

During summer, Shigure had a little taste of human world

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: I really appreciate reviews, any kind of reviews. I really welcome critics. I do understand that my English can be painful to read, or that I should have been able to explain better in my fic and cleared out confusion. That is why, for every review, thank you very much. Please let me hear your thoughts.

Anyway, about why this fic suddenly turn into a roller coaster… well.. I have no excuse for that. I am a pretty random author, both in updating frequency and also in storyline. I write what I want. And well, it doesn't always come up satisfying everyone (nor do I expect it to be....). I will be extremely happy if this fic can humor you even just for a little bit however.

Also, although the setting is, roughly, Japan, this is not extrapolating our current known world. The places, like bases and other, may or may not be the same with human world. It will not be 100% based on real world, nor would it be totally bogus.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Someday we will become the light for someone else
so that we can hand over the height of our feelings
the baton that connects me to you
I feel like I can go anywhere
If we look up, there's the blue and the gigantic column of clouds

777 Sisters - FUNBARE RUNNER

Admiral Kudou Soujirou walked briskly away from the meeting room in Yokosuka Naval base main office building. He almost slammed the door, something he did not do in the end since he knew other admirals would go out as well, and just stormed out of the place. The documents on his right hand rustled by the wind of his movement. Some of the documents barely remained inside a blue colored folder he was holding. Just after passing the first garden, light footsteps appeared beside him.

"You seem angry, Commander."

Soujirou did not need to look beside him, to know his I-168 tiptoeing by his side. She seemed to have been waiting by the inner garden, then sprung to her feet the moment she saw him storming outside the meeting room. Her ribbon fluttered in the wind, going up and down with her movement.
"Another unbelievable mission?"

Her words were greeted by silence. He still walked in fast, long strides, which she could match only by half-running. Passing countless pillars and inner garden, they finally arrived at the outer garden, which connected to a viewing platform overseeing the sea.

Finally his strides slowed down.

The sea breeze blew comfortably. It was still before noon. Even the sun was being kind today. Imuya stretched and took a deep breath. When her Admiral was mad, he always went to the sea. That was among the part that she liked about him, the one that was so alike with them Kanmusu. Maybe that was why he relates to them easily?

Imuya's purple eyes peered at her Admiral, watching the familiar handsome face when he sighed.

"... That old man actually proposed for a ludicrous strategy. Even more ridiculous how it is being favored."

One hand rubbed his mouth, feeling the rough texture of his moustache and goatee. Soujiro's grey eyes were fixated on the sea.

"Ludicrous?"

Imuya tilted her head.

"... Inhumane."

"Oh."

The submarine chuckled, having both hands behind her. She was especially accustomed to such treatment, also for being a submarine-the lowest cost, economical sacrificial lamb. Until Admiral Kudou, at least.

"Isn't he always like that, Commander?"

Feeling his goatee, Soujiro did not answer. Seeing him so upset made the submarine chuckled and leaned to him. Her kind Admiral.

"Imuya doesn't worry. Commander will always find a way."

He glanced beside him, to Imuya who observed him with innocent eyes. He looked at her for quite a while, which made her eventually asked, "What is it, Commander? You need something?"

"... I may... " He turned back halfway, thinking. His eyes rested at the main office building. "... I may have an idea. I think it can change the current mission strategy..."

He turned to look at his secretary ship again, seemingly in a considerably better mood.

"But for that, we need a strong surface fleet. I guess I know who to call."

~ Lemon Soda ~

"... Me? Escort?"

Shigure looked incredulously at her Admiral. The Admiral only replied with an "mhmm" while writing a memo. Shouhou waited patiently beside her for the memo to be given to the Kanmusu
Administration Office.

"Is that alright with me, Admiral? Isn't someone better in either land combat or administrative work will be a good option?"

"I think you are capable enough," the Admiral smiled at her destroyer, giving the memo to Shouhou. She said a word of gratitude, then looked back at Shigure. "It is only a short visit to another base. Kaga is on a long sortie so I need Shouhou to be here to man the office. Besides, I believe I haven't taken you outside yet. When was the last time you were outside the base?"

"That was… several years ago, during Admiral Jiro's time…"

During that time, she was taken for training practice, being only one of the three destroyers actually survived the onslaught of mission and expedition without sinking. The only other ones were Kagerou and Shiranui, who were then chained to another mission. Shigure remembered that time she was brought equipped with depth charges and sonar, to fight against "Kudou-bastard"'s submarines. In the end they still lost, thanks to low morale, and he berated Shigure and Sendai during that time, for being "useless drag" or something. Calling him "Admiral" out of habit suddenly sound wrong. He was never quite an admiral, and now he was fully out of that title.

"Then that means, this is the perfect timing, is it not?" Admiral Tendouji said with a smile. "Just take this as a chance for you to let go off steam and check out places other than this base."

"I see. I understand."

Everyone in the fleet was now accustomed to the way Admiral Tendouji run things. At first they would question her motive, wondering if there were anything else behind her seemingly simple command. Turned out all of her commands were just that, simple. She often took them for a walk around or perhaps having tea. She taught them how to slow down. Perhaps it really was a good time to relax. Lately all Shigure had been doing was expedition to gather resources in faraway seas.

"Just bring some change," the Admiral nodded at her secretary once the deal was established. "We will be there for two days at least."

"Is it far, Admiral?"

"Not quite," Admiral Tendouji chuckled. "It's just that the meeting may take quite some time."

A meeting. Shigure had never escorted anyone to a meeting. Usually it was the secretary ship's role. Admiral Jiro only had Kaga in station and never anyone else. Perhaps Haruna, when Kaga was away. Easy to read that Admiral Jiro extremely disliked destroyer for being "flimsy", "weak", and "only good for expedition and as meatshield".

"Do I need to bring anything else?"

"Maybe swimsuits?"

"Eh?"

She was asking about something along documents or equipments. Swimsuits and meeting naturally did not match each other. Admiral Tendouji laughed.

"I will be mostly busy with the meeting, so you have a lot of free time."

Somehow her smile seemed to mount a thousand meaning.
"The beach there is really nice. You will love it."

Shigure nodded rather hesitantly. Even if she knew the Admiral meant well and had always been genuine in her request, things like this needed time to get accustomed to. A good beach?

"Where are we going, Admiral?"

"Oh, that is a nice question," the Admiral laughed. "Another base. Admiral Kudou's base."

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The packing seemed to mean more than just meeting, however. Shigure helped around when they moved things inside a black military van they would use, finding out that their luggage were more than merely the Admiral's and Shigure's luggage bag. Big metal equipment boxes also came along, and with them, Lieutenant Kouseki. In fact, equipments took up most of the cabin's space that Shigure eventually put her small luggage bag on the seat beside her, near the Admiral's. From the size of the boxes, it seemed they brought along something as big as the 46 cm guns from the sheer size of it. Exchange of equipment between bases did not seem that strange, but it was not often done. Usually the central would be the one to conduct research on weapon, even if it was not strange for individual base to have their own research factory. They had to constantly report their finding though. It was among the schedule in periodic training. Research was a drain in budget and resources. Admiral Tendouji was among the very small number of admirals who actually spent resources on research. Since Admiral Kudou seemed like one of those admirals as well, perhaps they would want to exchange information or maybe having a program of their own research. Shigure knew both admirals were in really good terms with each other. Admiral Kudou often visited their place, even if Shigure herself never really met him after that training session years ago with Admiral—well, ex-Admiral Jiro.

With the van getting quite packed, Shigure wonder how many would tag along. Shigure thought that a private would be the one driving, like always, but instead Lieutenant Kouseki was the one sitting behind the wheel. That means it would be the three of them, and a bunch of equipment. A very small number of people. Not a single escort van or a human adjutant.

Perhaps it was quite strange for a military personnel to go around with such a small number of escort—even almost none. However, for admirals of Kanmusu naval base, there was little danger to be had on land. They were the first and most possibly the only protector of everything concerning sea security and humanity against Abyssals. There was no reason for any sane human to actually want to attack the navy. Of course, some perhaps wanted to steal equipments for whatever reasons (although Kanmusu equipment were actually useless to be used by human) or perhaps weird dark Abyssal cult may sometimes come up, but for 98% of the time, in land the navy were protected by many… for their own safety. Thus, many navy officers, especially those in Kanmusu division, felt that escorts for safety are merely formality.

Shigure was not surprised. After all she herself was there only to fill up Kanmusu escort position and to play on the beach, right?

Before departure, the Admiral changed her clothes into casual getup and so did Lieutenant Kouseki. They surprised Shigure when they appeared from the main building together along with Shouhou, ready to depart.

"Should I change my clothes too?" Shigure asked when the Admiral arrived beside her. The Admiral looked… extremely ordinary on casual clothes. She wore a simple blue pastel loose short sleeve Tshirt and jeans, awfully plain with no accessory. With summer's hot weather, it seemed fashion is not among her concern. That said, the Admiral did not seem to be one to fuss that much
about fashion in things other than formal occasions. Admiral Tendouji laughed upon hearing Shigure's question.

"Ah, you can wear anything you feel comfortable really. Your clothes already looked ordinary enough. You won't draw attention when we stop by for drinks and gas. But if you have anything you would like to wear, you definitely can."

Stop for drinks and gas. Usually when they went for training, they went in the form of military convoy, so even if they stop by for gas, they did not jump off the van or truck unless it was in another base. It took almost half a day from their base to Yokosuka, the usual base for training, so they did stop by several time along the way, however never in regular rest area. Now that they actually went in small group, with a ordinarily painted van, camouflaging as ordinary people doing ordinary things seemed logical.

Shigure looked down at her own uniform. The Shiratsuyu uniform only looked like just another uniform from just another high school, although after her second remodel Shigure did receive a few more changes in her uniform/armor. She wondered if she should take off her gloves. Perhaps she should, when they arrived at some public place for gas and lunch. Besides, even if she wanted to, she did not have that many change.

"Do you want to stop by for some clothes?" asked the Admiral when she saw her destroyer's expression as she looked down on her clothes. "I am sure there will be on the way, we will be passing by some city."

Even if that seemed to be interesting, Shigure really did not think that would be necessary. She would only spend her days in the base after all.

"That's unnecessary, Admiral. My swimsuits are still in good condition and I will be using my uniform most of the time in the base. I have no need for clothes."

Admiral Tendouji raised her eyebrows.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I know Suzuya would definitely jump and hug me with a huge yes if I were to ask her that."

"... Suzuya-san is... a different case, Admiral."

Admiral Tendouji laughed, patting Shigure's head. No one can deny Shigure's statement.

They drove away with just Shouhou sending them out. Lieutenant Kouseki, wearing simple shirt and short pants, sitting behind the wheel while the Admiral in the passenger seat beside him. Shigure sat behind the Admiral, looking out through the window during the drive. Most of the time She saw how the small town the base was in did not change since the last time she went out for training. They were as humble as ever, with small number of people and loads of farm fields. The view changed into mountains, covered by cypress and cedar forests. The more they drew away from the sea, the more uneasy Shigure usually felt. Sea was the place where she was strongest. Being away from her home, did make her feel strange. However, she found the world... beautiful, as always, and she did not dislike the world outside her base and her waters. They were foreign, but not ominous.

For one, the sky above them remained the same. If she ever felt discomfort, she could just look up at the sky and felt "at home again". She was still under the same sky.
Occasionally they passed bigger cities. Cities always fascinated her. Perhaps because she was launched and lived in the same naval base, the same old small town, all her life, she found big city's robust human activity interesting. There were more people than she had ever seen, more cars, and buildings as tall as the main office, or even more. She usually felt, how few Kanmusu are compared to these people. Each and every one of them has his or her own life, most probably own family. They may or may not ever actually sail on the sea. Perhaps they did not even realized the existence of Abyssal, or may never seen one in their whole lives. Such a different life they are living… How much different were they with herself, Kanmusu?

They stopped once in a rest area by the mountainside highway. Shigure had never stepped out of the car before in any rest area, but the Admiral said she should, to stretch her legs out after two hours ride. There were some stores and restaurants in the rest area. While Lieutenant Kouseki filled their tank, the Admiral left for the convenience store to get some supply. She asked if Shigure would like to come as well, but the ship hesitated upon seeing the number of people around the store. People do travel a lot on summer, so the rest area was packed. The Admiral seemed to catch her discomfort quickly, gently telling Shigure to just sit by the bench under a canopy beside the vending machine. Shigure got some cold canned lemon soda as well from the Admiral, who bought it to show her how vending machine worked. Shigure had seen those around big cities and even in her own town as they drove by but had never used them before. She watched with eyes of curiosity when the Admiral put in some coins. Since the lemon soda looked really appetizing in the heat of the day (which was nearing midday), when it came out cold Shigure was amazed. Human were so resourceful.

Sitting by the bench, Shigure opened the can with a pop and drank some of it. The lemon soda tasted delicious.

"Good day, young lady."

A friendly elderly voice came up from beside her. Shigure quickly turned to her side, finding an old man wearing a colourful shirt and long trousers standing beside the bench. He was a bit hunched, probably because of his age. A friendly smile lighted his face and he pointed at the empty part of the bench beside Shigure.

"May I sit here? I am waiting for my grandson to finish shopping."

"Of course, Sir. Please."

Shigure politely smile and moved a bit to the side.

"Thank you very much, Dear."

"You're very welcome."

He sat with a huff.

One of the things that Kanmusu watched from human was… how fast they aged. Kanmusu did not grow old. They did grow from purified Abyssal cell line into their current form, but it was limited until their "matured form" and they would stop growing then. It was their machine self that be the limiter. That was why, sometimes they could only grow after remodel, but even then they would not grow old. It was… sad. The Admiral would grow old as well. Time could kill her. It got her thinking that, everything would be lost one day. The sea could claim her Kanmusu comrade's lives just as easily with every mission, but not even the human around her would stay. People come and go in life and constantly changing. Did human understand just how fast they actually change? When time flow differently between you and the person beside you, sometimes it felt… extremely
lonely. Asking them to stay was like trying to grip water.

Looking at her lemon soda can, Shigure remembered the Admiral's kind smile. The Admiral once said to her, "One time, one encounter. Life is so fast and unpredictable... Every encounter may be the last, so we have to treasure them. We have to be kind." Seeing how fast human age and change... made Shigure felt like she really should treasure her time more with the Admiral. Now she felt like she had wasted her two hours ride. She was pretty silent along the way, only the Lieutenant and the Admiral talked with each other, occasionally including her, though she did not exactly engage in it. Perhaps she should use this time to get closer with her Admiral.

"Are you with your family, Dear? Waiting for them to shop?"

Shigure jolted at the sudden question. She faced the old man again, who smiled at her, then suddenly hesitated. *Family...? I am with my superior...* but of course she could not say that. It was extremely hard to lie, she just hoped that the man did not realized her nervousness.

"Ah, y-yes...I am waiting for my family."

*For my Admiral.*

The old man nodded at her statement.

"It is quite rare seeing a girl your age sitting in the heat like this, usually they prefer to go inside and shop."

"... I am not that fond of crowd, so..."

"Ah, I see. Yes, that can be a hassle. I wait for my family too for the same reason. Also in my age, walking is such sport."

The old man laughed, tapping her cane. He jested... about his age and his predicament. Was it not a big deal? To grow old, have wrinkles, have difficulty walking, etc, was it not something to be afraid of? Was it something to so lightly be laughed about? Knowing that you would imminently have your young body comfort being taken away... was it something... so trivial? Shigure did not understand that. If she were to be in such a body, perhaps she would be afraid everyday. Perhaps she would wish that time would not change in every second of her life.

She wondered how it felt for human, to see someone old like this. Did they feel afraid? Did they wonder how they would eventually end up like this? Just thinking that her Admiral would eventually turn weak and fragile that simply walking would be so hard, made Shigure grew afraid... Suddenly it occurred to her how fleeting these human were.

"Where are you from, Dear? If you don't mind me asking."

*My past self... was from Sasebo...*

"Aoya-shi, Sir."

"Aoya... Aoya...?"

"Umm... Tottori prefecture."

"Oh, Tottori! The sand dunes?"

*Sand dunes?* Shigure titled her head, that brought more question to the ship perhaps more than the
old man's curiosity itself. She politely answered, "We don't live near the sand dunes."

"Ah, I see."

That seemed to be the right answer to take.

"Have you ever been to the sand dunes? They said it's great."

"No, Sir. I haven't seen it myself," what sand dunes? Now Shigure decided she should really ask her Admiral later. "I... I have never been outside of my town..."

Well, she did go to another naval base, but not really outside of naval base. She only had vague idea of how it was outside of the base.

"Eh, really? You don't travel much?"

"Y-yes, my family don't... I guess..."

If she were to include all Kanmusu in the base as family, no they did not. They spent most of their time practicing, on expedition, on sortie, and other schedule. They had all their necessities inside the naval base, and they actually did not have any real interest to go out... Land were foreign for them Kanmusu, so they had little inclination to venture on land. They did often want to explore the waters around the base, however.

"That is really too bad," the old man seemed to sympathize her. "Travelling is good for you. I am from Kyoto myself, going to Shimane. Really long drive for someone as old as me. We can't let age conquer us, eh? Hahahahaha!"

Can't let age conquer us... Perhaps that was why... Shigure smiled. She began to understand the energy of this old man.

"Do you go to Shimane for vacation, Sir?" Shigure finally felt it was appropriate to be the one asking herself. She had never been to Shimane. The old man smiled broadly.

"I am visiting my granddaughter," he said fondly. "I always go around to famous places in the prefecture though. It won't do if we don't know our own country, right? Besides, Dear, meeting other people is always a pleasure. Like meeting you here."

Meeting other people... Shigure was not sure if she had that sentiment. In her memory, almost everyone that was with her left her and now as with the realization of time, she knew that more would. Meeting is the beginning of goodbye. Why, why would people still wanting to meet others? If it would only give them the pain of goodbye.

"You know, Dear, life is short," the old man continued. He seemed to see that Shigure was thinking. "Life is too short to experience everything in the world. But by exchanging stories with other people, visiting as many places to meet as many people you can, you actually can live a part of their lives through their words and the places they lived. When you meet other people, you take a part of their experience as well. You extend your life to others. That is why, Dear, meeting others will always be a pleasure."

... I see.

Do you want to talk about something? It's okay, I want to know. I want to listen.

Suddenly the familiar, awfully familiar statement resurfaced. The words the Admiral always kindly
said to them. That she wanted to know, that she wanted to listen. Shigure understood now, it was
precisely because life would mean leaving that meeting others was so precious. It was because
there was never that much time in life to experience everything, why each encounter means a lot.
Perhaps it was because the admiral treasured encounters so much, because she treasured other
people so much, that was why she wanted to meet, to know, to experience other's lives.

Without her knowing, in her silence Shigure's grip on her lemon soda can tightened.

"Shigure."

Admiral Tendouji's voice came so close to her, that Shigure felt like being plunged back to reality.

The summer heat, the sound of people talking from afar, the sound of cars by the highway… and
Admiral Tendouji, standing beside her now. She had her usual smile, with additional shopping bag
by her right hand.. Her eyes moved toward the old man, who smiled at her back.

"A-Admi-"

"Good afternoon, Sir. Thank you for accompanying her."

The Admiral bowed politely at the old man, who returned the bow and the greetings. He chuckled,
following how Shigure rose to her feet.

"Ah, you're this lovely lady's mother, dear? I shan't believe you if that is so, you're way too young."

"Ahahahaha, no,no, Sir, I am her sister."

That came out of the Admiral's mouth way too smooth. So smooth and so matter-of-factly, that
Shigure found her heart skipped a beat and blushed came into her face. Especially since Admiral
gently, naturally, pat her head as she said so.

"Of course! Hahahaha! Both of you are very lovely. May I ask where you're heading, Dear?"

"Kure, Sir. We are visiting a friend of mine. Shigure rarely goes out so I figured I will take her
along."

"Aah, that is splendid." The old man smiled gently at Admiral Tendouji. "I hope you have a
pleasant trip."

"Thank you very much, Sir. Same to you."

Admiral Tendouji turned her head to check on the van, which parked a few meters away, near the
exit. Lieutenant Kouseki was waiting. She looked back at the old man.

"It seems my companion is ready to go. It's unfortunate that we should continue our drive. I shall
bid you farewell."

"Oh, please, sure," the old man nodded. He looked at Shigure and smiled. "I had a pleasant time,
Shigure-chan. Thank you."

"No, Sir. The pleasure is all mine."

"Oh, before you go…" the old man suddenly seemed to remember something. He put a hand on his
pocket, grunting a bit, then took out a bunch of keychain. He took one of them, one with the
emboss of a pavilion in gold, then offered it to Shigure. "Here, from Kyoto."
"Eh?"

Shigure turned her head to look at the keychain, then to the Admiral, then to the Keychain and the old man, and back again. The Admiral gently pushed Shigure and said, "it’s okay, go on. Take it."

Hearing her push made Shigure even more flustered.

"I-Is that okay? I mean, r-really? I…"

"Just take it and remember to visit Kyoto someday in the future, Dear," the old man chuckled. Shigure bowed deeply as she took the keychain with both hands, saying thank you numerous times, and he just laughed. "I always bring a lot for occasion like this. Have a safe trip, Shigure-chan."

Shigure still looked at that old man sitting by that bench, even when the car slowly drove away from the rest area. She just realized that she did not even know his name. The keychain was warm in her palm now, and she looked at it in silence, at the golden pavilion. When she looked up from her palm, she found the Admiral smiled broadly at her, and Lieutenant Kouseki kindly observing her from the rear mirror. Her emotions were a mix of so many things. Everything felt so overwhelming that she felt like she would burst, something that she very rarely felt. She did not know what to say, or what to tell, or if it was… actually interesting. All that came to her heart were a mixture of warmth, of heat, of wonder. Upon finding the Admiral's eyes, however, she remembered the very core of their conversation and, while still feeling extremely exhilarated from everything, the destroyer talked.

"May I ask you something, Admiral?"

"Hmm? Sure. Anything, Sweetheart."

She gripped the keychain tighter, resting her hand on her lap.

"Is there a sand dune in Tottori?"

And from then on, the rest of two hours of their ride were spent by exchanging stories, a lot of them.

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Wearing usual Admiral attire, Airi watched over a tall window, over to a beach where she saw the submarines running around laughing, pushing each other into the wave. She brought her cup of tea closer to her lips and took a sip. She could see Shigure sitting under a parasol near there, accompanied by Mogami.

Footsteps drew closer. A few moments later Admiral Kudou stood beside her, one hand in the pocket while the other one holding a cup of coffee.

"I apologize that both Fusou and Yamashiro aren't around this time," he said. Airi smiled. "I know they would have loved to meet her too. They should be around in three days though. Perhaps you would like to extend your time of visit, Airi?"

Airi laughed at Admiral Kudou's usual way of inviting. After almost one year of knowing each other, slowly they drew closer. From calling last names, into dropping suffix completely, now hearing her own first name called was not as foreign anymore. In the past it would still make her flustered, but now it felt familiar. It still made her quite… proud ad touched to be among the small number of people Admiral Kudou actually regarded genuinely as friends, not just acquaintance or mere work colleague.
"Thank you, Senpai, but I think my base will need my presence."

"Ah, that is unfortunate. I think my base also needs to be graced by your presence a while longer."

Airi laughed. Among many things, Admiral Kudou could become quite a tease. He squinted when his words did not seem to work, then said, "Hmmm… if that did not work, then… what about, "Shigure will definitely be extremely happy to meet Fusou and Yamashiro if you wait for a day longer"."

"Aaaagh now, that is really a hard one."

Airi groaned, scowling. It really was a hard one. When it comes to something that could possibly make her Kanmusu happy, Airi almost always jump on the wagon. The man beside her raised his eyebrows, smiling expectantly.

"So it is a yes this time?"

"Aaaaaaaaaaahm… Unfortunately it should be no, but I really wish I could have said yes to that. Shigure can stay however."

"Ah." The man realized what Airi meant. He chuckled. So he still lost the admiral still. "Well, if you want to let her stay longer, I can definitely provide for her. I can return her along with the gun prototype."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Airi, smiling. "Is that really okay for you, Senpai?"

Her handsome companion shrugged, returning her smile.

"Of course. Don't worry about her. We have half of Nishimura fleet. They will be very glad to have her around as well. What excuse would you like me to say to her?"

Excuse…

Like mission. Airi found that some Kanmusu usually felt uncomfortable if they did not receive a mission, even if she actually just wanted them to relax. Like Asashio, although Asashio turned much freer than she usually was. Airi observed the beach for a while, sipping her tea.

"... that will be no need. I will tell her that I will give her time to have reunion with the rest of Nishimura fleet."

Admiral Kudou raised his eyebrows.

"Will that be fine?"

"I believe so. Either way, I think my Kanmusu already understand me," Airi chuckled. She remembered Asashio… then Shigure on the way coming to the base. She turned silent, observing the beach. Admiral Kudou followed her eyes.

Silence crept between them. A rather comfortable one.

"... Can I ask you… to take her around while she is here, Senpai?"

Admiral Kudou raised his shoulder.

"Sure. Any particular place you want her to visit?"
"Mmmh… Not really. You can pick any place you want. Just… let her walk around."

Airi sipped her tea.

"Is meeting other people really alright for us, Admiral?"

"Knowing who she protects will be a good experience for her."

Admiral Kudou chuckled. He took a sip on his own coffee.

"Indeed."

Another silence came to them. Airi still watched her destroyer, then the submarines playing. Admiral Kudou silently followed her eyes, then observed her from the side. Her eyes, whenever she looked at her ships, were always filled with love and affection. However sometimes, there was a tinge of sadness to it. As if she was always apologizing on something.

Not that Admiral Kudou did not understand her feelings.

"Are Nagato, Kongou, Kaga, and Maya enough?"

Suddenly Airi's voice broke the silence. Admiral Kudou seemed to think for a while. He rubbed his moustache and goatee.

"Would your base be alright with that?"

"I still have Akagi, Haruna, Shouhou, Choukai… many more. You don't have to worry."

Admiral Kudou chuckled at the confident answer.

"I see. Then yes, I will take them."

"And the destroyers?"

"Hmmm… I need drums. Can I ask for your Asashio? Or will that be too much for you?"

Asashio. Airi took a deep breath. Asashio was a different case. If she could, she did not want to be too far from her, or to let her go under someone else's command. She knew it was not ideal for her to keep such a view but she could not shake it either. Admiral Kudou smiled upon seeing her expression.

"Don't push yourself. I will take the others."

"... I don't mean it like that. Although her remodel is scheduled for before the date, she still needs some training…"

"Airi, I understand," Admiral Kudou chuckled. He sip his coffee again. "Don't worry, I really do."

"I don't doubt you. I really don't."

The woman really looked a bit frustrated, and seemingly mad at herself. She had always been one to be way too hard on herself. She did not want to hurt Admiral Kudou's pride, nor was she able to convince herself to let go of her daughter. He returned her statement with a gentle reassuring smile.

"I know. That is why I trust you, and your ship. Don't worry."
Airi bit her lower lips. Her companion was always too kind. Even if he fully understood the reason of her hesitance, he did not inquire.

"... I guess I still need more time and adapt myself. Asashio needs to learn to be under someone else as well. Just give me more time."

Admiral Kudou laughed. He patted Airi's shoulder lightly.

"Don't make it such a big deal. You really don't have to think too much about it. Well, what about your Ayanami and Mutsuki, then? Are they free?"

"Ah, I can organize both of them, sure."

"Then I will be counting on you."

"Yes."

Another silence stretched between them. Admiral Kudou watched how energy was still not back inside those brown eyes. He put a hand on Airi's head and rubbed it rather roughly. She immediately shrunk.

"S-Senpai! My hair! My hair!"

"Let me rubbed those stupid thoughts off you now, come on!"

"Okay, okay! Please, Senpai, I yield, I yield!"

"Shall any stupid thoughts come upon you again, this mighty hair ruiner hand of mine will definitely descend to deliver you... your hair of dooooooooom!"

"Senpaaaaaai!"

Finally it ceased, leaving a pouting Airi with her hair tousled. She groaned, walking back inside the office to look into a mirror that hang by the side of the currently empty secretary desk. Admiral Kudou chuckled when he followed her, watching her trying to tidy her hair back.

"Feel better now?" he said, stifling a laughter as he stood behind her, looking at the mirror. Two angry eyes returned his gaze from the mirror's reflection.

"In a way, worse, Senpai."

"Whoa, scary."

She sighed. When she returned her gaze at her hair, though, a small smile returned to her face.

"... but thank you."

He seemed satisfied. He gave a wide smile, then returned to his desk. He took a document up, flipped it, and returned it again, before glancing at her companion.

"So I can send to the central the proposal tomorrow. Is that alright with you, Airi?"

"Certainly, Senpai. If we could finish the documents tonight, I could stamp it before I go home tomorrow."

"Totally possible. We can get it done tonight if we do it together."
"Splendid."

Admiral Kudou sat on his seat, resting his back. He watched as Airi finally got her hair looked better again. A small smile curved his lips as he observed her. She looked… heartwarmingly adorable when she let her guard down.

If only people know how strong she bites.

"Just a little bit more honor point, Airi. Hang in there."

To gain her a foothold, she only need a little more push. The younger admiral smiled sweetly at him.

"With you and Admiral Fukumoto's endorsement…. Thank you very much, Senpai. I don't know how else I can express my gratitude."

"Ahaha, all my pleasure, lady, all of it are my pleasure."

He sighed, watching as she rechecked her hair back by the mirror. His eyes, however, turned dim when he said his next words, which barely came as whispers.

"If it makes you happy, then it is all worth it."

The younger Admiral turned towards him. She raised her eyebrows, tilting her head.

"Senpai? Did you say something?"

"What, you did not hear what I said? That is very impolite, Airi. Tsk tsk tsk."

"Oh, excuse me. I am not the one whispering."

"Underclassmen shall not use that way of talking. Know your ground, O' Peasant!"

"... Uhh, Senpai, sometimes I really do wish I could record that and blackmail you with those recording."

"Eh, I thought that is among my charm."

"... I am not sure about that."

With occasional laughter, they jest some more, while collecting the documents needed to write their proposal. To finish it tonight perhaps they would have to work way after working hour but that was alright. Both had the same goal in mind.

Outside, the Kanmusu continued their play, laughing and splashing water with each other.

I-168 looked up, observing the window of her Admiral's office. She could not suppress a knowing smile, before then continued playing with the others.

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"What do you think of her?"

"I think she is a good person."

"That is all?"
"Imuya does not understand your question, Commander."

Admiral Kudou sighed, resting his body on his office chair. I-168 chuckled at his reaction.

"I don't think my opinion matters anymore anyway," said the submarine with a giggle. She leaned on to the desk, grinning when her admiral glanced at her. "I mean that is totally your choice, Commander."

Her Admiral did not answer right away. He cast his eyes to the ceiling. Perhaps scenarios were playing before his eyes, Imuya would never know.

Suddenly Admiral Kudou chuckled.

"If it is any other situation, asking your wife about other woman is weird, don't you think?"

Imuya laughed.

"One of your wives."

"That too. Wives."

The submarine giggled. Admiral Kudou gave his rings to all of his submarines. She leaned to the desk even more. Her eyes sparkled.

"I understand that your affection to us never change. Imuya does not worry."

Her Admiral's kind eyes, the affection in them, the way he raised his hand and gently patted her… Imuya loved them all. She knew she was not the only one and she knew everyone in the fleet would have answered him the same.

"If she is your choice, go for it, Commander. Simply by that reason, everything is worth it."

~To be continued~

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Well, a woman can't hold her otomegokoro going wild I guess. :c I guess I slipped.

And yes, there is a sand dune in Tottori Prefecture, by Tottori city. You can just google Tottori sand dunes. The keychain is easily the famous Kinkakuji, Golden Pavilion, in Kyoto.

一期一会 (Ichi go ichi e) One time, one encounter is a 4-kanji idiom or Yojijukugo (四字熟語), often found written on scrolls in tea ceremony room. The concept originated from a tea master and often linked with tea ceremony. It means to treasure every meeting as the last, or that every meeting is a one chance encounter, as it is impossible to be recreated exact in the future.
Kurogane

Chapter Notes

It has been a while. Thank you for reading and the kudos! University can make you really negative at times.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of its characters. I translate the Japanese song translation I used in this fic, unless it is credited to someone else and will be written as such.

The footsteps of lost children disappeared
in its place, a song of prayer
It would definitely turned into a flame there
the guiding light of those continuing the path

Bump of Chicken - Zero

"Go..."

Blood splattered on Kagerou's vest. Fire hissed from a 35.6 cm barrel gun, dangerously so. The ammunition could explode at anytime. Cracked glasses dirtied by blood reflected Kagerou's own pale, battered face. She looked... mortified, on those glass. So unlike the usual her.

The eyes beyond those glasses shone, despite the tears flowing down the wearer's face. Blood caked lips parted, with a smile.

"Live for us."

Behind Kirishima, despite losing half of her right arm, Michishio gave a small smile and turned around.

"No... NO!"

Tenryuu grabbed Kagerou's shoulder, half-shaking her.

"Let me—"

"Please, Tenryuu."

That was the last thing the battleship said as she turned around. A while later, Kagerou could feel Tenryuu's motor's roar as the light cruiser tried to tow her away.

"MICHISHIO! KIRISHIMA-SAN!"

"Retreat, Kagerou! Hurry!"

"NO! No! Kirishima-san! Kiri-"
Kagerou...

"Tenryuu's main machines were way too strong for Kagerou's broken ones to fight. The two figures drew farther away. Kirishima's damaged 35.6 cm gun moved forward, toward a yellow eyed Ta-class in the distance. Her singed clothes fluttered in sea breeze."

"MICHISHIO!"

"Kirishima..!"

"KIRISHIMA-SAAAN!"

"Kagerou!"

"KIRISHIMA-SAAAN!"

Blinding white light of neon lamp illuminating 3x3 meters bedroom Kagerou and Shiranui lived in assaulted Kagerou's retina the moment she opened her eyes. Instinctively she quickly closed her eyes again, seeing white spots exploding at the back of her eyelids. Somebody still shook her worriedly, rousing her to open her eyes again.

Shiranui had both of her hands on Kagerou's shoulders. The sensation of Shiranui's strong grip was unusually vivid as Kagerou was drenched in cold sweat, so much that her pajama stick to her body. Shiranui looked extremely worried. She, too, was sweating. Perhaps it was from the small workout of shaking Kagerou's body rather violently.

The latter felt very sore. Maybe Shiranui did excessively shake her to wake her up.

Shiranui still had both hands on Kagerou's shoulder, her eyes seemed as if she was searching for something inside her partner's mind. Although she was usually impassive, this time she looked disturbed.

Tonight must have been quite... bad.

"I'm okay now, Shiranui... You can let me go."

Seemingly only realized now that she gripped Kagerou too hard, Shiranui eventually released her. She also moved to the side, letting Kagerou bend her body to a sitting position. The clock on the wall behind their study desk showed 3 AM. A bit more before day break.

Kagerou let out a sigh, before turning around to see Shiranui, who sat on the bed leaning to the wall. The other destroyer answered her wordless glance.

They both knew what each other had gone through, they were together from the day of their construction. They did have several battles where they were not together but being a destroyer during the late Admiral's time was enough to understand each other.

Slowly, Kagerou settled herself beside Shiranui, close enough that they shoulder touched each other. She cast her eyes on Shiranui’s empty bed, then to the ceiling. The neon light. It was too bright.

Breathing slowly down to normal, Kagerou silently waited the world to turn bright with Shiranui by her side.

~ Kurogane ~
Lieutenant Kouseki bend over a 12.7 high angle gun on a desk, checking for loose screws and joints. Kagerou patiently waited, standing near a shelf showing stacks of guns of different sizes, barrels, and components. She had been in the factory numerous times, but Lieutenant Kouseki’s workshop had always been the most... stuffed. Especially lately. It seemed the Admiral gave him some job. Today, too, Kagerou came for fitting and to take her gun for a test run after a new apparatus was installed. She was called in after Shiranui, and saw Tenryuu and Kiso at the entrance before she got in. It seemed to be "performance evaluation". Lieutenant Kouseki said he installed performance measuring device in their equipment and would like to test if any liability happened with it installed. Why now? Kagerou felt like asking, but decided not to. She trusted the lieutenant enough to understand that anything he installed would always be harmless. Her eyes observed the shelves, finding familiar parts which were supposed to come from her guns and funnels. It was always interesting seeing these components, since she felt them like they were her limbs whenever she put them on. It felt like looking at your own arm dissected or something.

"How have you been, Kagerou?"

Lieutenant Kouseki’s low voice made Kagerou turned her attention back at the mechanic. He was still examining some part and had his back on the destroyer, so Kagerou looked at the shelf back again.

"Good as always!" answered the destroyer cheerfully. "How're you, Lieutenant?"

"I am very fine," the Lieutenant let out a chuckle. "The boys are back after being ill last week, so I am feeling pretty good."

"Sweet. I heard the flu was bad."

"Yes. Admiral Tendouji also issued general checkup for the soldiers and inspection on the overall living condition around the barrack. It was quite an outbreak."

Kagerou tilted her head. The new Admiral did seem like she was the kind that would take utmost care on her subordinates. Kagerou’s first impression on the new Admiral was that she did not have any special trait, but now as time went by Kagerou found a trait of the new Admiral. She governed like a concerned mother. A stark difference with the last lieutenant, who governed like a slave master.

"Glad you're okay, Lieutenant."

"Ahahahah, likewise. There. Come here, Kagerou, I am done."

"Sweet! Thanks, Lieutenant!"

Virtually nothing seemed to change from her usual funnel and gun. Lieutenant Kouseki continued his talk while mounting the funnel on Kagerou, hearing the clicks and hiss of gears as it turned on, recognizing its wielder. Kagerou tilted her head. Once she put them on, she immediately felt that "thing" inside them, feeling them like some kind of foreign object in her own body. It was not painful or anything like it, it was just... alien. And a bit uncomfortable.

"I added the recorder inside so you can't see it. It is small enough that it won't hinder any function but just in case any gears- can you move that? Oh good. Now all I need is to download data from you and set the configuration by normalizing the value, then we are done."

Kagerou only nodded, not exactly understanding the terms. Kanmusu were born knowing how to combat but they were not born to repair themselves—except the legendary repair ship Akashi.
Lieutenant Kouseki meddled with a computer at the side of the room, inputting necessary data. Finally Kagerou could not hold her curiosity, since she could feel the "foreign object" analyzing her somewhat.

"What is this data gathering for, Lieutenant? For weapon improvement?"

The lieutenant did not answer for a while. He stopped typing.

"Hmmm... kind of like that."

"Kind of?"

"Hmmm..."

"Is this classified information?"

"Well, I cannot say it is."

"What do you mean?"

The typing continued.

"I don't know if Admiral Tendouji will appreciate me disclosing it."

"... I see."

Kagerou tilted her head but said nothing more. That Admiral did not look like someone that would do something bad enough it needed to be kept as a secret. And this is Lieutenant Kouseki speaking. It would not be something bad... wouldn't it? Finally Lieutenant Kouseki finishing inputting data and turned to face Kagerou again, smiling.

"Everything is done. You can take it off again now. This afternoon, if you have time, please have a test run."

"Kay, sure." Kagerou nodded, letting the Lieutenant helped her taking off the equipment. Usually they have automated machine helping them during launch. Several fairies jumped off the equipment or came up the table seemingly ready to begin check up. Kagerou smiled at them, especially when they gestured at the Lieutenant to see some part.

During the late Admiral's time, Lieutenant Kouseki, the fairies, and some of the staffs, were the only place Kanmusu can confide in. Lieutenant Kouseki had been especially helpful. He had helped them from behind, giving moments of reprieve by faking equipment failures so that the destroyers could have some rest. He housed overworked and tired Kanmusu in his room, letting them catch some sleep while he worked overtime and lend them his coat, even his rundown sofa. If there were anyone in the base they believed in the most it would be the Lieutenant.

"I don't know if Admiral Tendouji will appreciate me disclosing it."

Kagerou wondered what could have made this Lieutenant said that. She definitely saw how the Admiral and the Lieutenant had really good relationship with each other. They worked really well together and unlike with the previous Admiral, Lieutenant had always been supportive of Admiral Tendouji's decisions. This must also be among them. But what?

"Shiranui said that you have been having nightmares lately."

The lieutenant suddenly said, breaking Kagerou's daydream. Shiranui, you... Kagerou sighed.
"Ah, well. It's just usual nightmare. Shiranui was exaggerating."

"It isn't in her nature to exaggerate, though."

Kagerou did not have any good reply to that. The Lieutenant smiled gently. He took a napkin and cleaned his hand.

"Kagerou, if there is anything bothering you, perhaps it would be better to talk about it."

Kagerou raised her shoulders and smiled.

"I don't particularly have any problem, Lieutenant. After Admiral Tendouji came, I don't think I have any issue whatsoever."

It was the truth. Admiral Tendouji never pushed them, never ordered them to have suicidal sacrifice, never sent them on excessive expedition. There was nothing Kagerou would like to inquire.

The Lieutenant seemed to think a bit longer. He finally gave a defeated smile.

"If you say so, then. I will appreciate it though if you go talk to the Admiral when anything bothers you."

"Eh~ I can just talk to you," Kagerou laughed. She folded her hands. "I mean the Admiral is busy and all."

"Well, she rather enjoys talking to her Kanmusu and loves to know more about all of you. I think she once expressed to me how you and Shiranui rarely interact with her."

There was just no need for that usually. They were rarely flagship, only occasionally during expeditions. Also those times when they escort back someone. Those seems to the only times they would be talking to her at the office. Kagerou did not particularly have any kind of resentment or dislike on the new Admiral. She even mildly liked her. She just did not see it as particularly a necessity.

"Did she ask for an audience? I mean, should I report on anything?"

Lieutenant Kouseki laughed.

"Not really... but I think... if you would, it will be good to tell her about your nightmares."

"I have told you it is nothing to worry about, Lieutenant. It's nothing bad~ People all have nightmares anyway."

"Shiranui thinks it is important enough to be informed."

"She is exaggerating."

"Perhaps, if you so vehemently push," the Lieutenant gave out a little laugh. Kagerou felt like scowling. She knew it was futile to say that same argument, which could easily be countered by merely remember how Shiranui was. "... but I guess it still be good if you talk about it. She might have a way out of it."

Kagerou sighed.

"How could I talk to her anything that I won't even talk to you about?"
On that statement, Lieutenant Kouseki raised his eyebrows. Kagerou felt like clicking her tongue. She slipped.

"So it is indeed something that you don't want to talk about?"

Kagerou gave a laugh. She did not know why but she could feel nervousness came to her heart. Would anyone even feel comfortable to talk about sinking.

"Haha, don't trip me, Lieutenant. Really, it isn't important enough anyway. There is no need to be way too worried."

Lieutenant Kouseki now sounded like a worried father. Kagerou tapped his strong, bulky arm.

"Chill, Lieutenant. I am fine, see?"

"Well..." Lieutenant Kouseki looked at her equipment and the fairies. He looked back at the destroyer. "That device, you want to know?"

That was a pretty fast change of stance. He said he did not want to clarify what that was a while ago. Kagerou raised her shoulder.

"Sure."

"It's for welfare improvement."

_Welfare?_

Kagerou tilted her head. She had her fist touched her lips, thinking.

"I have never heard of that...?"

"Kanmusu welfare, your welfare," Lieutenant Kouseki’s smile widened. His eyes turned softer. "Admiral Tendouji would like to ensure that even after retirement and even beyond the border of her base, all Kanmusu are treated humanely. So she had this idea of Kanmusu welfare."

"Hoooooooo~" Kagerou nodded. Now that is pretty interesting. Perhaps her rather meek appearance hide some kind of political potential? "That's interesting. Great, I think. I support it."

"Yes, so... I just want to say that, the Admiral genuinely cares about you. Don't hesitate to talk to her about anything. She will listen to you. Or rather, she wants to listen to you. It might also help her in making this welfare act come true."

_The Admiral..._ Kagerou's most vivid memory about her was only when Ashigara almost punched her. That time, she stood unfazed even under such condition. It seemed as if, she would even gladly receive that punch if Haguro did not hold her sister back. Which was quite surprising, since she was rather small compared to Ashigara. She seemed to look quite calm as well when Kagerou met her not long after that. Haguro also told everyone how the Admiral helped her to go out of the dormitory and helped her. Kongou loved her so much as well. Kongou, who was so driven by rage she practically broke the last Admiral's nose and whose trust to the navy was so broken, it altered her personally for a while.

That said... Kagerou was sure she had no problem as big as that of the Myoukou Class. Perhaps the Admiral was indeed just a sincere person but it was not as if anything was wrong with Kagerou anyway.
It was just some nightmares. People have nightmares from time to time don't they?

"Well, I will think about it, Lieutenant." She gave a reassuring smile and nodded. The Lieutenant did not seem to find that satisfying enough. "Don't worry, I trust the Admiral."

Her last words seemed to ease the Lieutenant the most. She gave him their usual fist bump.

"I will talk to her if I find any problem. Really."

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Kagerou watched the cloud moved slowly up above her. The wind blew so hard down here, but up there it seemed as if all those moisture just crawled slowly, leisurely, taking their time as they glide over their base. It's both calming and annoying. The sky always had a schedule of its own, regardless of what happened on the surface of the earth below it. Like now, it felt like the sky was taking a slow, relaxing stroll.

It's not fair, you know.

"Kagerou, can you move that barrel a little to the right?"

Asashio's voice broke Kagerou's thoughts. They were just arriving at the dock with a dozen barrels filled with various resources after their expedition. After arrival, all the barrels and Daihatsu must be loaded to a conveyor where the machine and human staff would then allocate them to the right storage. Kagerou smiled broadly and answer, "Yup!"

With a grunt, she moved a huge barrel a bit to the inside of a conveyor, which runs into the huge storage building. Asashio, Shiranui, Ayanami, Mutsuki, dan Inazuma were lining up alongside the conveyor, just finished dragging huge barrels onto it, away from the waters. Expedition was not much of a mission and it was rarely dangerous, but it's exhausting.. and boring. Asashio seemed to be the only one always on fire on every expedition. Especially after her Kai Ni. Watching her being so energized every time she was out on a mission can have two different effect depending on Kagerou's mood. It can be energizing, it can be annoying. This time it kinda fall into "Annoying".

Kagerou felt like lazying around by the veranda of the dorm. And close her eyes for some time.

When it's summer... she always had difficulty sleeping, which made her almost all time exhausted. At least the expedition was over now. Knowing the Admiral, she would definitely grant them some off days...

"Good work everyone."

A voice came from the path leading towards the pier. Everyone turned, finding the Admiral standing there with Shouhou slightly behind her. She was wearing a white shirt, whose sleeves folded up to her elbow. She raised her cap with a smile.

"Working hard, I see."

"Good afternoon, Commander!" Asashio was the first one to greet her properly, standing straight up and saluting her. Ayanami, Shiranui, Mutsuki, Inazuma, and Kagerou followed a bit after her. Asashio approached the Admiral almost right away as well, which earned her a rather bright smile. Yes, among all of the destroyer, Asashio sure was among the ones the Admiral loved the most. Perhaps it was not right, but none of the others felt it was a bad thing. Asashio was, after all, the Admiral's first construction. Plus... being loved by the Admiral seemed like a burden more than a break. The reports. Man, the reports the Admiral would ask.
Asashio began to deliver her report, with the Admiral tentatively listened to her.

Kagerou absentmindedly watched them. Asashio has grown taller with her Kai Ni and now the Admiral only bend her body. She used to kneel in front of the destroyer. A faint smile curved up the Admiral's lips as she listened. She looked happy with just the sheer concept of listening. This woman really did love Asashio.

Perhaps it really was true, what they said about her mission. Perhaps it really was true that she ordered Asashio for the report actually just to listen to her.

Looking closely at the Admiral's feature, Kagerou just realized it has been quite a while since the last time she met the Admiral personally. Of course, she did not go to meet the Admiral after his talk with Lieutenant Kouseki around a week and a half ago, and even before then she did not really have any chance to meet her.

She looked... changed. Perhaps in general nothing seemed to largely change, but as a starter her hair seemed to have grown quite a bit... and her face looked a bit more tired. Perhaps she had a lot of work... as if everyday was not "a lot of work". Her eyes looked less guarded as well. Kagerou remembered, in the past her eyes would be more impenetrable. There were thoughts in there, like her gears constantly moved to calculate whatever it was in her mind. Although those eyes were always kind since the time she came, in the past she was more careful with them and now she dropped those completely. Now they were a lot more expressive. Or perhaps because it was Asashio she was talking to... Those were not the gaze of an "admiral".

Overprotective mother figure indeed.

"Kagerou? Will you come to the main middle garden after this?"

Suddenly the Admiral shifted her attention. Kagerou, having her small mind detour redirected, nodded awkwardly and said,'Yes, sure, Admiral."

"Great, I will be waiting for you there."

Her smile, Kagerou always wondered what magic she used to keep that on all the time. She had never seen the Admiral angry. The closest to anger she had seen from the Admiral was silence. Perhaps she just was not the type to show her anger in front of her shipgirl. Admiral Tendouji's silence was eerie though, like you did not know what kind of actual burning, seething, awful anger inside. Somehow Kagerou felt the "lashing" type would be more convenient.

Well, she would meet her later anyway. Hopefully it wont be that bad.

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The middle garden was located between the dormitory, the pier, and the main office buildings. It was the largest of all garden around the base, even though to call it "large" will be an exaggeration. At least it had a small fountain in the middle with benches surrounding it, shaded by Sakura trees. In the past, the small patches of flowers were nothing more than patches of mud and grasses. Now they were neatly organized flower and small bushes. There were also additional small little pond or pot ponds, with colourful fishes swimming around. It looked a tad bit too pretty for Kagerou, especially since the place was essentially a military base, not a woman dormitory. She did not voice that aloud though.

Sitting at one of the benches, Kagerou watched a distant plain white winged butterfly flew by. It was white, and had no other color. Flying seemed to look difficult for butterflies. How could they
even manage to survive evolution, that was beyond Kagerou's understanding.

"Sorry I'm late."

Kagerou sprang to her feet the moment she heard the Admiral's voice from beside her. Half-expecting Shouhou to be there, Kagerou was quite surprised to see the Admiral alone. She was even more surprised that the Admiral was carrying an open cardbox all alone, which seems a bit big.

"Oh, let me help you, Admiral!" Kagerou quickly got up on her feet, holding out both of her hands to get the cardbox. The Admiral very, very carefully handed the cardbox to Kagerou, which made Kagerou unable to resist the temptation to look inside.

She instantly gasped.

A dark coated Shiba Inu puppy looked straight back at her with big round eyes.

"How cuuuuuuute!"

Kagerou brightened up right away. She put the cardbox in the middle of the bench then took the puppy out, finding it wagging its tails right away as she lifted it up. It was so small, barely four weeks old, that wagging its tail shook its whole belly. The small yelps and barks were heartmelting and Kagerou could not help hugging the small creature into her arms. It was actually he.

The Admiral sat on the other side of the bench with a warm smile on her face. Her smile merely widened when Kagerou finally approached her but she said nothing.

"What's his name, Admiral? Oh my, where does he come from? Is he yours? He's so cute!"

He was SO. VERY. CUTE. The dog wagged his tail and gave a bark. The wagging was endearing and every word Kagerou said seemed to made him even more excited. Hugging the dog earned Kagerou a loving licking on the face and such a small ball of fur gave Kagerou a burst of feelings right after.

The onslaught of question and statements made Admiral Tendouji smiled brighter. She patted the puppy on Kagerou's arm gently.

"A friend of mine had her dogs gave birth recently and unfortunately she could not take another so she has been looking for people to adopt the litter."

"How lucky! Oh, so this is yours? He's so small, what's his name?"

"Well..." The Admiral smiled, raising her shoulder. "Why don't you decide? It's not mine, it's yours."

Kagerou's movement paused.

"Excuse me?"

The Admiral's face looked so matter-of-factly it was absurd.

"Yeah, it's yours. I am giving him to you. Just name him whatever you want him to be."

A pause.

A bark.
The birds chirped and in the distance, sound of gunfires echoed. The heavy cruisers were having their training...

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!

Kagerou's shout could have beaten those though.

The Admiral smiled gently and nodded.

"Yes. Go on, named him. He is yours."

"... In our room?"

Shiranui stood like a statue on one side of the bedroom. Her dark eyes followed "Kurogane", the dog, as he ran around the room wagging his tail in glee and sniffing every corner. Kagerou went back home with this dog, saying that the Admiral gave him, and that it was now their noble duty to take care of it.

Why a dog?

Why Kagerou?

And why their room?

Kurogane turned to Shiranui and sniffed her, looking up then wagged his tail.

_This is a problem._ Shiranui... could not exactly say no. Not under... those... rather... unfairly... _CUTE_ eyes.

"The Admiral said that someone has to take care of him since she is too busy,"

Well, she was busy. But what a convenient answer.

"But why you?"

Kagerou tilted her head. Kurogane ran to her again, which prompt the destroyer to kneel, letting the small dog put both of his front paws on her knees and straightened up to be closer to her face.

"I don't know... she only said I seemed like someone good in taking care of things."

Shiranui did not voice her thoughts again, watching Kagerou embraced the dog gently. Again, it was such a convenient answer...

"Are you not happy with Kurogane here, Shiranui?"

Kagerou's voice suddenly changed. Shiranui shifted her eyes to her sister's face. Lead suddenly weighted her whole heart and body upon seeing Kagerou's expression.

"N-no. Of course I don't mind."

The broken, shattered expression quickly turned into a bright, illuminating beam beating that of a battleship searchlight. As if feeling his owner's mood, Kurogane gave out a yelp and an energetic wag of his tail.
"Shiranui, you're THE BEST!"

"It is quite rare for you to ask for a walk to town, Kagerou," Lieutenant Kouseki brushed sweat beads from his forehead with his small towel. His white short sleeved army uniform was damp with sweat. He towered beside Kagerou, walking with rather sluggish steps beside the rather chirpy destroyer. Kagerou went to the Lieutenant office suddenly, saying how she "urgently" needed to go out to the town. Since the destroyer rarely ask for something and since she already had the Admiral's Permit slip memo—which the Lieutenant seemed to look quite curious about—they went out at that instant.

The sun was still high though and right after going out of the comfort of factory's air conditioner, Lieutenant Kouseki had his sweat glands gushing liquid out of his body. Kagerou felt quite a bit of remorse for that, but that couldn't be helped. Her destination closed at sundown, if what one of the privates said to her was right.

"And at this hour? Is there somewhere you specifically want to go?"

Kagerou nodded firmly. She took out a small piece of paper with a map drawn on it.

"The small bookstore near the canal, Lieutenant. I think it is close, according to the map."

Lieutenant Kouseki raised his eyebrows, glancing at the map himself. He smiled.

"Oh, I think I know where it is."

Kagerou quickly looked up at the Lieutenant, eyes gleaming with delight.

"Really, Lieutenant?! Come, let's hurry then! I also want to get out of this hell quick!"

They walked in fast paced after that, walking across old houses towards the bookstore. Kagerou walked in rather light steps, almost tiptoeing. She was quite nervous if her salary could actually buy the book she wanted, but walking outside was also quite refreshing after quite a while. The last time she walked outside was with Admiral Tendouji in late autumn last year, to help her carry some kind of box from her apartment. That time they walked leisurely and Kagerou had all time in the world to look around. The air was also a lot more comfortable and the sun was kind. Now, under the blazing hot sun, Kagerou had little interest for sightseeing, even if it was still quite interesting to peer into human world once in a while.

They arrived at the bookstore in just a few minutes. The bookstore was small and old, set up in a small two storied wooden Japanese house. Outside, a small advertisement was set up, displaying how "Dazai Osamu" and "Akutagawa Ryunosuke" (if she read the kanji right) books were on sale. Several magazine was set up on a rack in front, along with newspapers. Beyond the glass door Kagerou could see stacks of books neatly organized beside tall wooden shelves. It was air conditioned. God bless the owner.

A bell rang when Kagerou slid open the glass door, along with a brush of cold air. From the back, a deep sound of an old man greeted, "Welcome."

There were to many shelves to make out the figure of said voice's owner, however. Kagerou half wanted to actually look for him, as a matter of courtesy, but the smell of paper and the shelves took her attention. It really might be faster to see the owner and ask for the book herself, but she could not help looking at the shelves.
She might not be as fond of books like Haguro, Choukai, or Ooyodo, but there was something alluring about browsing shelves of books, even if she would not actually read them.

"You don't strike me as someone fond of reading, Kagerou. I am kind of surprised."

Lieutenant Kouseki smiled beside her. He looked like he was very much relieved to have been free of the sun. Kagerou felt really sorry now to have asked him to accompany her. She knew several other Lieutenant, like the one manning the warehouse and the command room, but she was not as acquainted to them as much as she was with Lieutenant Kouseki so she had no other choice. Kind of.

"Ah, no, no, Lieutenant, you aren't wrong about that," Kagerou quickly said. The lieutenant chuckled at her reply. "I am looking for a book. A manual."

Lieutenant tilted his head a bit. His sympathetic eyes gleamed.

"Shall I help?"

That would definitely make things go faster.

"Sure. It's... dog keeping manual."

A rather amused smile bloomed on Lieutenant Kouseki's face. Kagerou felt her face reddened.

"D-Don't tease me!"

He gave a short laugh. His eyes turned gentler.

"I'm not teasing you, I am just relieved."

He put a big hand on Kagerou's head, patting her gently.

"Let me help you. You go browse around, I will ask the owner."

"Whoa, thanks a lot, Lieutenant!"

The man only smiled.

The bookstore surprisingly housed a LOT of book despite its rather small exterior. Kagerou was soon lost into one of the corner, finding herself opening books about types of hand guns when Lieutenant Kouseki approached her again. In his hands were a stack of books, ranging from "How to Take Care of a Shiba" up to "Hachiko, A Dog Story". Kagerou quickly put down the book in her hands, almost jumping towards the books when Lieutenant Kouseki put the down on the floor for her to see.

"Lieutenant! This is... This is so many!"

"Well, you don't specifically said the title so..."

But Kagerou was not exactly listening to him after that. She was busy looking into the books with obvious interest, eyes sparkling as she moved from one book to another. Sometimes she commented on a book, raising it for Lieutenant to see while saying things like, "look Lieutenant! This one look EXACTLY like Kuro-chan!" "Lieutenant, look at this one!"

There were so many good books on dogs, Kagerou never knew. At the time she was done browsing through all the titles Lieutenant Kouseki brought for her, she just realized she sorted almost all of
them into her "want to buy book", ridiculously so. Kagerou flipped one of the books to see the price at the back cover.

3000 yen.

The others must have been not so far from that, if not higher...

"You want those?"

Lieutenant's voice made Kagerou quickly turned around. He eyed the stack of books and Kagerou's face, and she realized what might be in his mind.

"O-Oh, ah, no, Lieutenant! I was just sorting which might be relevant! I-it seems most aren't so. Where shall I return the books, Lieutenant?"

"The owner said to just return it back to him. Let me—"

He offered a hand to take the stacks of book back but Kagerou gallantly took them all in a huff. She grinned.

"Ah, no, can't do, Lieutenant! It is a soldier's job to take the muscle work!"

Lieutenant only laughed. He let the destroyer carried the whole book, watching her warmly from behind.

"Oh my, Ojou-chan, surely you can just ask your father to take them back here?"

The old owner—a man with greying hair and spectacles—gasped when Kagerou hefted the whole stack to the counter herself. She laughed and pat her arm proudly. Those weight were nothing for her Kanmusu muscle.

"Can't let my superior take all the load! What kind of soldier am I, then?"

"Oh!"

The owner's eyes twinkled even brighter. He straightened his spectacles, eyes moving from Lieutenant Kouseki and back to Kagerou's bright smile. A smile bloomed on his face right after.

"Kanmusu?"

"Yes, Sir! I am!"

Upon hearing Kagerou's bright and proud answer, the owner's smile turned even brighter.

"I can't believe one came to me again," he said with a chuckle. "It has been years since I last saw one. Thank you very very very much for your everyday hard work, Ojou-chan. I know you work hard keeping the peace around the seas everyday. I can't tell you enough how thankful we are."

"Again?"

So there used to be other Kanmusu coming? Kagerou knew Choukai, Ooyodo, and Haguro loved to read, but what she knew they still relied on naval library and even if they did come, it would not have been "years" since Admiral Tendouji would have let them go out...

"Yes, yes, years ago," He laughed. "She looked much older than you, and wore glasses. Her clothes was rather peculiar so I remember her very well..."
Kagerou tilted her head.

"Peculiar?"

"Yes," He smiled. "She came with Admiral Kumazaki that time. Being so young, you might not know Admiral Kumazaki though. Although Lieutenant-san there might know... Sir?"

"Yes, he... was in station when I was first admitted ten years ago," Lieutenant Kouseki nodded, smiled. He answered Kagerou's questioning eyes. "He was in station before Admiral Jiro."

Kagerou made an "O" with her mouth, nodding in acknowledgement. A part of the owner's statement made her curious though.

"Do you know her name, Sir?"

"I sure does. How could one forget a name of a Kanmusu just like that? Especially with her rather gaudy clothes hahahaha."

gaudy?

"If I remember right, her name was Kirishima."

Ah.

"Is she still working in the base? It has been years, she must have already retired, eh."

She thought she was prepared, but she was not. Kagerou was really not prepared with those statements.

"Yes, she unfortunately retired a few years ago."

Lieutenant Kouseki's voice sounded quite far away. Retired? RETIRED?

"If you can't fucking stop them with your useless bullets thanks to your inept shooting skills, fucking stop them with your useless vessel!"

She was not RETIRED.

"At least be useful by not wasting my buckets."

She was—

"Which of these book would you like to have, Ojou-chan? I believe it isn't all of them?"

"O-Oh, yes!"

The words snapped Kagerou back. She hurriedly separated the books, taking the ones she would like to buy. In the end, she could only take two books, which are dog keeping manuals. Trying hard to take her eyes off the books, Kagerou pushed the two books she wanted towards the owner. He smiled, nodding.

"These, I see? That will be... 9750 yen."

Kagerou understood why the cruisers rather read books available at the library now. Handing her hard-earned money to the bookshop owner, Kagerou received the paper bag with the books inside. Feeling how it was for Kurogane, made it not so painful. Well, a bit, but she had to consider the
dog’s meal and all that and she COULD have bought more if only she did not waste it for the chocolate cake she bought a week ago but... ah well...

"And those will be 27000 yen, Sir."

"What?"

The statement made Kagerou turned her head quickly to her side. Lieutenant Kouseki was buying the stack of books Kagerou was looking on previously, handing over 30000 yen to the bookshop owner. The destroyer quickly held Lieutenant Kouseki’s right hand.

"W-Wait a minute, Lieutenant! Those are—"

"What's wrong, Kagerou?" He smiled, his other hand placed on top of Kagerou's on his right. "I want to buy these."

"B-BUT!"

"Would you like to read them?"

Her face reddening, Kagerou shook the Lieutenant's hand even more vigorously.

"I-I don't!"

"Have Shiranui told you that you're bad in lying yourself?"

He instead chuckled and the destroyer got even more flustered.

"Don't tease me! That isn't a reason to have you pay for them! Are you crazy?"

"I think that is enough reason though."

"I-I won't accept them!"

"Then I will keep them," he smiled, turning back at the owner. "You can borrow them from me when you want to read them."

"Lieutenant!"

She lacked words. She lacked words... power... and resources to stop Lieutenant Kouseki from spending for her. Kagerou could only watched in a mix of emotions when the exchange took place, feeling rather... ashamed and helpless. When the huge paper bag was given to the Lieutenant, he turned to see Kagerou all red with tears welling up in her eyes. Lieutenant Kouseki smiled and squatted to level his eyes with hers. Gently, he pushed the paper bag to Kagerou's chest.

The destroyer did not take it.

He smiled, especially when a tear fell on Kagerou's face. With the same gentleness he brushed it away. Kagerou briskly brushed her tears away right after.

"You're evil."

Her statement hissed between clashing teeth. The Lieutenant only smiled at that.

"Why is that?"
"I feel bad."

"Well, you don't have to. I want to do this. I am feeling really good right now, Kagerou."

The destroyer grimaced.

"If you already buy it and I don't take it... I will make your money more of a waste. You put me in a difficult position, Lieutenant."

He laughed at her words. The Lieutenant put his hand on Kagerou's hair again, smiling wider when that prompt more dangerous glare.

"Well, you put me in a rather difficult position too. Admiral Tendouji would have been mad at me if I don't cater your needs."

"Those aren't "needs", Lieutenant. And don't make an excuse. She does not have anything to do with this."

"Oh she does," He chuckled. "She will be very mad at me if she saw you right now. I will get scolded really bad."

"You did it yourself."

"Perhaps," He smiled, brushing more tears away. "I apologize then."

Oh, how Kagerou hated him. With rather emotional tug, Kagerou took the paper bag and hugged it. The books... they were heavy.

"... Thank you very much, Lieutenant Kouseki."

She did not see him, but she could feel a smile in his reply.

"Anytime, Kagerou. Anytime."

XXX

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to her, Admiral?"

"Should I? I would rather not push if she did not feel like talking to me."

Admiral Tendouji sipped her tea, still having looking outside the window. Her hair was like a curtain draping her back. Heishi, standing in front of her desk, watched her in wonder.

"You... were much stubborn when it was Kongou, Asashio, and Haguro. They too, did not actually approach you in the beginning, did they?"

The woman took a deep breath and seemed to think quite a bit. She tilted her head to the side, though still not turning around to see the Lieutenant behind her. Even without seeing her face, Heishi could see what kind of face she was making. She must have pursed her lips... with a bit of a frown on her face, perhaps closing her eyes as she did so.

Watching her straightening up again, Heishi knew she got her answer... and most probably about now, wet her lips before the reply.

From the look of it, Heishi knew he was right.
"They... did not exactly confide to anyone, that's why."

"And Kagerou is different?"

"She has you."

Now it was Heishi who struggled.

"She... does not exactly talk to me, Admiral."

"She is comfortable with you enough to not deny how she has worries."

Admiral Tendouji finally turned around. Her brown eyes replied Heishi's gaze kindly. The Admiral has this thing about her which calms people down, consoling them. She always felt like she could be trusted. Lately Heishi felt how sly of her to have always appeared that way.

She always made him felt like letting his guard down.

"Unlike Haguro and Kongou, she is a lot more open to Shiranui as well. However that also mean that space was not a vacant place for me to take. I think a more indirect approach would have been the better option. Letting her be more open to those she already trust is an easier and less invasive way."

As always, she had her point. Heishi nodded and bowed slightly in understanding. He could feel the Admiral still watching him. Perhaps...now with her usual tantalizing way.

"Are you, perhaps, against it, Kouseki-san?"

She smiled as she said that. Heishi could not help replying with the same mood.

"Do you believe that I will be?"

She chuckled and put her tea cup back to the desk. As always, her smile was beautiful.

"Even if you are, as your superior I would demand your cooperation. I can be pretty mean when I want to."

You already are right now.

"I can see that," Heishi replied. That made her laughed. "I will be careful."

She was still chuckling when she took her seat again. She folded her hands then looked up towards Heishi. She was smiling. An open, kind smile.

Now you're being mean again.

"May I ask you something, Admiral?" Heishi could not exactly hold himself. She seemed quite interested at Heishi's curiosity and answered lightly, "Sure."

"Why a dog, suddenly?"

"Does answering with 'Kanon had her dogs giving birth and I just want to help adopting' not suffice?"

In a way, Heishi was flattered that she mostly be in this playful mood with him almost most of the time.
"I am led to believe that someone claiming capable of being mean, won’t have such an innocent answer."

She laughed again. Her eyes turned gentler.

"Dogs are.. a great listener."

She smiled.

"And most importantly, they will never tell your secrets to other humans. What beats something that love you unconditionally, care for you unconditionally, and at the same time will lock away all your fears? They are guardians in a wide array of meaning, even when the one they guarded did not realize that."

XXX

"I won't die."

The sea was dark. They had left the fire way behind them. Along with their two comrades.

"I won't sink."

Blood tasted like iron in her mouth. Pain and anger burned in her heart deeper, heavier, stronger than any other emotions she had ever felt.

"I will prove him wrong."

Tears fell like waterfall on her face, but hatred settled deep in her heart.

"I will fucking live and prove him wrong."

Her defiance.

Her last defiance. Like how dying was Michishio and Kirishima’s last.  

~To be continued
Chapter Summary

Needing help to research the condition of her ship, Airi called upon her most trusted researcher, Kanon. It was a streak of luck that the researcher had her eyes on Kagerou, or was it? Meanwhile, the truth of what happened during the sinking of two Kongou class battleship started to come out.

Chapter Notes

I experienced writer's block for this one and I am sure the amount of words that I erased reached over 1000 words for later half of this chapter alone lol. I actually wanted it to be a two-chapter story but it got way too long so I decided to make it a three chapter. This Arc actually was a kind of an "accident" lol

I have terrible ability in planning. No wonder my Professor is very worried about my research...

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection, or any of the songs lyrics I used in this script. However, I did translate the Japanese lyrics my self, unless stated otherwise.

I realized, that by chasing after someone's back
the thing that I hold in my hand is someone else's possession

but now what the spring breeze is blowing over,
even if it's empty, it's "me"

4U – Hello My Friend

"No... no... NO!"

Something wet on her face broke Kagerou off her nightmare. Lightning fast she moved, grabbing what had woke her up with battle trained reflex. The nightmare brought her adrenaline into to its peak, turning her senses a dozen fold stronger than usual. Her eyes focused, her body tense, her breathing ragged and rough.

But what she caught in her hand was totally not what her body was prepared for.

Within the dimly lit room, a pair of eyes and a snout greeted her, way too close to her face.

Then a whimper.

"... Kuro-chan...?"
The dog snuggled to her with the call of his name, then lifted its head and licked a tear off the side of her face.

Was she crying?

Kagerou touched the other side of her face, feeling a rather unfamiliar wetness.

She was.

A whimper came out of Kurogane's throat again. The dog put its head on Kagerou's neck.

I see...

The dog, who had been sleeping at her foot, came closer to her face.

Slowly, Kagerou hug the dog. He felt warm. His heartbeat thumping against hers, strong and sure. Without Shiranui, who was out on an expedition, there was no breathing other than theirs. Kurogane's presence was solid in her arms. Warm. Strong. With her increasingly lowering heartbeat, Kurogane began to wag his tail again.

He whimpered.

"I'm okay."

He tilted his head.

Even the dog was not convinced.

A small smile appeared on Kagerou's face and she hugged the dog closer. She was not alone.

"I'm okay now, Kuro-chan."

The dog answered her. And the tail wagged. Surely this time.

Like normal days. Like under the daylight.

Inadvertently, she smiled wider.

"I'm okay."

With the dog in her arms, her waiting for morning call slowly brought her back to slumber. Calmer this time.

Dreamless, after a very long while.

~ Escort ~

Kanon spun a blue armband she usually wore on her right wrist with her index finger. She was sitting on a sofa at one side of Admiral Office, near the door to Airi's "lounge" room made by her Kanmusu. She came after a while to the base, having some time off after a workshop in Hiroshima and decided to drop off at Airi's base in Tottori before going back to Nagoya, the research center's place. It had been quite a few months since the last time they met, there were many things they could talk about, especially about the research.

Airi had conveniently asked Shouhou to go deliver some request to the cafetaria, saying it was a special feast for "my old friend Kanon"-all to make room to have some time alone... and also to
piss the researcher off. Airi could drop any kind of formality and any kind of bomb without Shouhou around. She just HAD to, by the way, for her amusement. Of course with Shouhou there, Airi could not exactly drop her sarcasm in full power. That would spoil her fun. Kanon knew that all too well.

By her desk, Airi looked into the list of Kanmusu present in the base at the moment. Kanon just requested for a "brief" conversation with one of the older Kanmusus, as preliminary studies before she launched a more serious study on their psyche. Every Kanmusu had different experience and distinct personality. Each of them also has her own past memories, which may affect how they cope with situations. It would be kind of hard without a control group comparison but she would somehow make do with what she had. For that, she needed to see first hand how bad was their mental health. Of course, she could kind of rely on secondary data coming from Airi, Lieutenant Kouseki, or other reliable sources, but she still had to have some first hand samples. Random sampling would take too much, since they did not have that many people to help around. Thus, she would have to do a case study and determine which Kanmusu with "presentable" mental condition. Taking samples from other base would be great... but at the moment it did not seem likely, unless it was strictly in their niche, like Admiral Kudou's or Admiral Fukumoto's. She rather doubt there would be any stressed Kanmusu there though.

Thus, the best sample would definitely be in Airi's base.

Yet even then...

Kanon massaged her temple. Would this really work? Would the military be convinced?

Numbers were all they wanted. Qualitative study did not seem to matter to them...

"Is Lieutenant Kouseki around?"

"Oh, Kouseki-san is always by the factory if you need anything. If he doesn't come for any kind of reason he will inform the office."

"Kouseki-san", eh. Kanon suppressed a smile.

"Yeah, I will need to check on the readings of that device I told him to install. It might mean something."

Measurements on overall kanmusu performance was critical. In the end, what the military wanted were proof that will benefit them. If they can prove that better welfare equals better performance, the military would definitely be more likely to implement whatever proposal they might have. There might also be abnormal readings if trauma or hesitance kicked in. That could also be a kind of proof to be used.

The problem was, IF that actually happened. And IF there was a reading she would be able to rely on as a standard measurement.

"Oh, good then. You can go ahead to the factory and tell him, Non-chan," said Airi rather nonchalantly.

"... Wait a minute, Ai. You won't take me to the factory?"

"You already know the place, right? Why should I?"

"Eh, seriously? I am your guest! Your "Old Friend Kanon", and you don't escort me there?"
Airi laughed. Kanon still remembered when they were children. She was playing to Tendouji household's manor and actually got lost into a sermon hall when she was supposed to meet Airi at the dining room. She had to sit through an hour full of sermon and got out with cramps all over her legs. When she got out, all Airi said was, "May you reach enlightenment." coupled with a roar of laughter. It was all simply because Airi said, "You've been there before, right? I don't have to fetch for you." the day before so she did not escort her friend around the manor.

Airi definitely overestimated her best friends' spatial ability.

"Of course I cannot just blow your cover like that," the admiral chuckled, giving her a copy of the list she was reading. She seemed to remember their past, enjoying the memory. Airi might be kind, but there was this other side of her that certainly can be quite sadistic and sarcastic. "Let's have dinner together at my place today so that you can leisurely talk to him about it. I will cook something too."

Of all things that Kanon liked about Airi, was that she could cook decent meal. Being the first of three siblings whose both parents frequently away, Airi had been taking care of her two siblings since she was a child. Perhaps that was among the things that shaped her assertive and dependable personality. It also gave her a lot of housework ability. She may have power in her hands to order someone else around ever since she was a child, but she was the kind of princess that would clean her own toilet.

...if such princess even existed by the way.

"Ah, Haguro and Ashigara are free today. Do you still want to interview them?"

"That will be perfect. Please."

Kanon had been wanting to interview the two heavy cruiser since Airi talked of her idea. However...

"But for Haguro and Ashigara I would like to be more... acquainted," Kanon suddenly added. Airi looked up from her documents, giving a questioning look. Kanon looked into the time table again. "It is written here... that they will be free for like... three days? This week? Can I have more time to get to know them? Or maybe can you arrange it like that somehow?"

Airi bit her bottom lip.

"Well, I can try... though I cannot guarantee that they won't somehow know you are actually interviewing them."

That would be tricky indeed. Kanon figured that perhaps Haguro would be a bit defensive. Ashigara perhaps even more. Presenting herself as an ally and not a researcher from the central seems like a tricky business. Actually, making herself being identified not as a researcher would be even more of a problem. So far, Airi had been introducing her as her "doctor friend", not as a "researcher". It was true that she was a human doctor, even if she was not an active practitioner for years now. Sooner or later they would definitely know what was her real job. No one liked to be analyzed or to be treated as a research object. It would naturally placed them on a defensive stance. Natural behavior would be hard to examine.

Being Airi's friend meant it would be easier for her to establish a rather close and personal relationship with them though, if possible. Given time, if it worked, that would make even knowing her as a researcher would not be much of a problem. It would take longer time... but the study would be a little bit more reliable.

Actually she had no other choice. It would be a waste thinking about that.

Plus, she had time. Unlike her other research, she was not really in a hurry.

"I will take what I can get I guess. Is Haguro still having her anxiety problem?"

"Ashigara has never told me about it anymore for quite a while," Airi furrowed her eyebrows, trying to remember. "Well, she can go around the base alone pretty much fine lately."

"I see."

Kanon looked into the document in her hand again. Airi had written the name of ships available beside today's timetable. The researcher's eyes swept the names, one index finger still twirling the armband.

"That means she will be fine meeting me, no?"

"I believe so. She will stutter from time to time but she always does anyway with everyone."

"Even with you?"

"Even with Ashigara."

"Heee~~"

Airi chuckled. Her eyes turned distant and a fond smile curved up her lips.

"She's a really good girl, you will like her."

Kanon believed so. The kind of good girl people would use.

Wasn't that exactly why she had this problem now?

The exact reason why Kanon was never quite... the "good girl".

"Ashigara will be against her going with an outsider alone, so I cannot have her escort you around," Airi pushed the back of her right fingers to her lips, thinking. Kanon raised her eyebrows. Ah, that hot blooded sister of hers. "Hmmm..."

"Well, if you pushed on having her being an escort it would also seem quite odd so I guess lets just forget having a time just for the two of us," Kanon sighed. She did not want to appear analytical from the very beginning. She should genuinely establish a relationship with the ships if she could, and that meant having unrelated chit chat most of the time. Being fishy from the very start will make data gathering difficult. "Is there any other ship you can ask to escort me today, then?"

"Oh."

Airi seemed like she just remembered something important. She scoffed at herself, which made Kanon furrowed her eyebrows.

"Ai?"

The Admiral laughed. She tapped her fingers on the desk.
"Why am I so stupid," She giggled. "There is exactly one very suitable escort for you."

"Oh?"

"She is..."

Suddenly a knock was heard from the door and a brief second later it opened. Shouhou was back. Their eyes meeting each other, both admiral and researcher knew their time was up.

"Admiral, the cafeteria would be ready by lunch. The chef said there would be no problem for the menu."

"Splendid! Thank you, Shouhou."

Airi smiled broadly at the light cruiser. Her eyes flew briefly to a stack of documents on the "mail in" box of her desk then to her best friend sitting by the sofa.

"Well... there is still sometime until lunch. Would you like to spend it at the resting room, or..."

"Nah, that will be boring," Kanon caught wind of Airi's track of mind. "I think I will just walk around a bit."

"Sure. Do you want to be escorted?"

"You will let me go in this huge base alone, Ai? With my spatial ineptitude? Seriously?"

Airi laughed. Her smile contained a dozen meaning.

"Of course not. Shouhou, call Kagerou. I think Kagerou will also enjoy some conversation with the owner of Kurogane's parents."

The destroyer she saw was not the one coming from her laboratory. It was always quite interesting to see the look of ships she had not seen developing. Kagerou class, like they all said, was quite a class of their own. Having better armor, better build, better guns, Kagerou class were the first of the group of elite destroyers. Kanon had seen Yukikaze before, a cute bubbly girl with beaver-like feature. She was charmed by her personality and also, of course, her utility. The Field Admiral of Okinawan seas treated the destroyer like a princess, with an obvious reasoning. And now what she saw in front of her was the nameship of said class, Kagerou herself.

As expected, she had sure eyes and rather easy going yet steady disposition. She was rather tall for a destroyer, just like most of the destroyer of her class, a very good build. Lean and athletic. The armor looked good as well. A vest always looked good. Kanon would have loved to have Kagerou class's armor style as her high school uniform if she could. Too bad she and Airi instead shared bland sailer uniform in junior high and an equally bland easily deliquent-looking senior high school uniform. She had never really worn them right, unlike Airi who would always look proper. She would always look like a deliquent, and Airi like a class president. If only these people just know how Airi could have been once she take down her "good person" look... but of course no one would believe strange girl Non when she said things... Ironically no one except Airi.

Airi's smile when she said, "have a nice trip around, Non-chan!" as Kagerou escorted them both out of the office, kind of want to make Kanon capture it and put them in a billboard sized warning poster.

"Is there anywhere you particularly would like to see?" asked the destroyer, smiling. She was
walking in light agile steps. Her hand, covered in white gloves, lightly touched the railing of the stairs as they walked down. Kanon put her hands inside her pocket, like she used to do when she was wearing her lab coat, and answered lightly, "where do you suggest?"

"Mmm.. The main garden?"

A reasonable guess, and pretty common.

"In this heat? Nope."

The destroyer laughed.

"I hate this heat too," She said openly. It seems easy to strike a conversation with this girl. "The only other options are the dormitory, the cafetaria, and the factory. The cafetaria is pretty bland... but I can't take you to the factory so..."

"That reminds me," An opening. "Ai said you have one of my pups."

The last statement gave immediate reaction. Kagerou's eyes lightened up immediately. Sudden burst of excitement and energy came from her. She stopped her steps and turned around.

"You're the one who gave Admiral Tendouji Kuro-chan?"

*I guess that works really well. Noted.*

"Yep, although actually—"

"OMG NICE TO MEET YOU, SENSEI! Thank you sooooo much for the puppy!"

"Don't thank me, thank Ai, really. How's the pup?"

"He's really fine!" Kagerou practically almost bouncing with excitement. "You want to see him, Sensei? He's by the dormitory!"

"Oh, I sure does!"

*Perfect. Here goes.*

"The weapons ran well, right, Shiranui?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Very good."

Heishi smiled, plugging in a cable into a port by Shiranui's gun. The destroyer was just back from a mission with the battleships. It was a good timing, since they arrived back right when Hakurei-sensei had her visit. Heishi definitely could see Admiral Tendouji inviting them for a late night meal again, with some discussion. That meant he should gather all data from the machine and compile it for the researcher this afternoon. He wondered if some reading was good...

"Lieutenant."

Shiranui apparently had not dismissed herself. Heishi turned back immediately. It was quite strange for Shiranui to be the one striking conversation. The destroyer was originally very quiet and only talked when necessary. The only one Shiranui actually really attached to was Kagerou, and it was
mostly because they could understand each other almost without talking at all. Thus, this must be really important.

"Yes?"

The destroyer was visibly thinking, beyond those glass eyes. A while later she finally found her words.

"What's Admiral Tendouji planning?"

No animosity lodged in that question but Heishi could not help but feel guarded. He had received the same questions from the other ship as well, mostly during the measuring device installation. Tenryuu commented that it made her feel like being spied, Choukai said it made her feel like wearing a seethrough clothes. They only said it was slight, but of course anyone would want to know the purpose of such device. Heishi said there was "no problem" before to Admiral Tendouji since initially they all said so. Perhaps he should revise that since it seemed the girl find it quite uncomfortable during battle.

Heishi was still thinking for an answer when Shiranui continued.

"Kagerou never said anything about that day."

"That day?"

The destroyer cast a look at her gun, although her mind seemed to be elsewhere. The sound of the other mechanics, clanking of steels, and roaring of the machine passed them by unnoticed. It took her a while before she finally talked again.

"... The one meant to sink in Shiranui's fleet was not Hiei-san."

The purple eyes slowly drifted back, looking at Heishi.

"In Kagerou's, they were most likely not Kirishima-san and Michishio."

That end of winter failed siege. It was true that the report was never really out. Kongou's assault also brought the importance of that report to its end quickly, as her aggression was more important that time than the "usual sinking of kanmusu in duty". It was unmistakable that the late Admiral did let the battleships and destroyers sunk. However no one other than the fleet that time and Kaga, as the late secretary who read the original reports, really knew what happened. No one bothered to talk about it either. Everyone tried to move on from such events quickly. The kanmusu were programmed to brush that as another risk in their line of work. They could be "reborn" anytime. Sinking was not much of a problem, if that was really required. No one would think of having their mind erased each time happily of course. The present them would disappeared. There would also be loss of construction.

There were emotional burden. Undeniably so. And there must be something more in Shiranui's words, but she did not continue.

Feeling how Shiranui did not wish to further disclose what she had implied, Heishi watched Shiranui drifted to a place in the back of her mind again. The destroyer seemingly trying to find the pieces she had carefully organized to hide. After a while of sorting out her mind, the destroyer talked again.

"Shiranui wants to help if what Admiral Tendouji has in mind will help Kagerou."
Her eyes turned dim.

"Is it, Lieutenant?"

The serious tone of Shiranui's question made Heishi asked her instead of answering. It was not accusing nor finger pointing, just a genuine question.

"Do you not trust Admiral Tendouji, Shiranui?"

Shiranui did not react to his statement. She merely stared back, her eyes unreadable. The question hung for several seconds. The destroyer answered with calm, sure voice.

"Shiranui does not."

"I see."

That was unfortunate. And coming from Shiranui, Heishi knew there was not a speck of lie in her words. That also explained her rather distant disposition towards the Admiral, which was almost strictly formal. It was, however, to be expected. After being used as disposable and blatantly being called so, it would be hard to trust anyone in that position. Heishi knew trust was not something he could just create. It was established naturally and he could do nothing if Shiranui already said so. It was unfortunate. The mechanic smiled and raised his shoulder.

"Well, if you said so— "

"Why do you though, Lieutenant?"

The question made Heishi straightened his back and raised his eyebrows. Shiranui did not take off her eyes from Heishi's, following his when he averted his gaze elsewhere. The question itself was simple, but the answer was not. Why? It was pretty obvious for Heishi.

Pretty obvious.

Why is it... obvious? Heishi felt like something clung to his tongue, but he could not voice what it was. Since she was sincere? How did he know she was even sincere? Her attitude?

He took a deep breath and smiled at the destroyer.

"Why should I not, Shiranui?"

The destroyer seemed quite taken aback by the question. Heishi knew for her, not trusting was the one that was obvious. Yet she herself could not voice it, like how he could not. Heishi could pretty much figure out why, though. The long time she served under Admiral Jiro accumulated distrusts and hate, and anyone would have a hard time coping and changing the feeling of being threatened by the same authority. No one could change right away. Ashigara needed quite some drastic measure to finally at least try to trust Admiral Tendouji. The others cope with varying degree, no matter how subtly.

Perhaps they just dont know each other well enough for now.

"Maybe... you should talk to her more? I think she will appreciate your company and would love to have some conversation with you."

"No one said that to Shiranui before."

Heishi laughed.
"I bet Kagerou did?"

"She said it felt like having a monologue."

"Ahahahahahahaha, Kagerou can be pretty mean."

A small rare smile finally came to Shiranui. Kagerou could be, indeed. With all her bright and chirpy teasing.

Remembering her older sister, she looked down. Her slightly amused smile turned sad. Heishi stopped his laughter. The change in Kagerou must be something serious enough that it affected Shiranui. Gently, he put a hand on Shiranui's head and pat her.

Rather surprised eyes silently questioned him. He smiled back.

"Kagerou is strong. She can get through this. Don't let everything bring you down."

Shiranui did not answer. Her eyes turned distant again. Emotions filled her eyes, something more than just worry, sadness, or pain.

"She reminds me of myself."

The destroyer's lips made a tight line.

"Have Shiranui been wrong, Lieutenant?"

Something more hid behind her words. Heishi withdrew his hand, observing the destroyer. He waited until Shiranui finally looked back to him again, and smiled. Slowly, he said what probably was the echo of that certain person. What she would definitely say in this situation.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

---

Sitting by her working desk, Airi flipped an old report file folder. She took her warm tea and sipped it, savoring its taste and the calm it brings. The clock behind her ticked steadily, occasionally distant sound of guns from the pier where her heavy cruisers currently training cut of the monotonous silent gap. It was still several more minutes until lunch at the cafeteria with Kanon, and even longer hours before their meal at her home. Perhaps she should have thought about the ingredients for the meal she would cook tonight, but after meeting Kanon she was reminded on something she always forgot to backtrack. After sweeping through some files, she found what she was looking for.

She took another sip of her tea and settled.

Suddenly knockings came from the door, and it opened a while later after her answer. It was Shouhou.

"Admiral, I have Kaga-san just like your request."

"Oh, right on time. Please come in, Kaga. I have something to talk about. Thank you, Shouhou. Oh, maybe you can check on the cafeteria for now? I am sorry to make you go back and forth..."

Shouhou gracefully bowed, understanding her silent request.

"Understood, Admiral. Please excuse me."
The door closed behind Kaga, the standard carrier, who merely glanced back at the door before looking back at her admiral. If she was confused, her face looked amazingly placid, as usual of Kaga. Airi smiled, gesturing at a chair she had prepare in front of her desk across her.

"Please, I think it will be quite long."

Thoughts obviously ran through the carrier's head now, but she said nothing. After she was seated, finally she talked.

"What would you like to inquire to me?"

Airi smiled. She showed the folder she was holding. Understanding seemed to fill Kaga's eyes a while later. The admiral settled the book in front of her and joined her hands.

"I would like to ask... about the time when Hiei, Kirishima, and Michishio sank. I think you as the secretary would have known what happened."

Kaga's eyes fell on the file folder.

"I do not mind," her voice was incredibly flat and emotionless. Her eyes looked up back at her admiral. "Would it not be faster if you ask the fleet members of that campaign, Admiral?"

"Maybe it would, but events like those usually left some scars... which I would like to be able to predict before I approach those who were really there," Airi smiled. "You filed the report, and was supposedly there with Admiral Jiro when he commanded the campaign. You are also an objective observer. I would like to know your side of the story."

"Very well."

The standard carrier closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they gleamed golden.

"Where would you like me to begin, Admiral?"

"Eeeehhhh~~ the Admiral used to have a dog before?"

The destroyer widened her eyes. Kanon laughed.

"Actually mine is from her too. Airi is extremely knowledgeable when it is about dogs."

"Heeee~ I never knew~"

They were by the back garden of the dormitory watching Kurogane running around chasing invisible rabbit. They had been talking about dog keeping, dog stories, and other things, and finally Kanon told her that she could have just asked everything to Airi, being a dog owner for over 20 years. There seemed to be more questions floating in the destroyer's mind, but she mostly just show surprise. Kagerou was still being careful. This will take time.

As silence now span between them, the destroyer fondly watched her dog, a small smile always present on her face.

"I don't know why Admiral Tendouji gave me Kuro-chan... But whatever the reason, I am really thankful she did."

Kanon only smiled.
"...maybe I should drop by and say thank you some time..."

Exactly as planned.

"YOU SHITS CAN SINK FOR ALL I CARE!"

He punched the command board, so hard that the planted table shook. He looked into the map with manic eyes and hissed.

"I dont need you small fries."

The microphone was still on, sending the message over to those at the seas.

"You all fries can sink, just fucking get my battleship back here. You dont worth my buckets "

To be Continued
Some pain are deeper than others, and some are so deep, they don't even show anymore

Protocol 8

Chapter Summary

Some pain are deeper than others, and some are so deep, they don't even show anymore

Chapter Notes

Writer's block. Real Life Assignment. Many other things. I am sorry that this one is pretty much ended up prematurely. Tbh I am not satisfied at all, but I guess this will do for now... Thank you very much for your continuous support. Thank you for liking and reading this fic.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of the song I used in this fic. I did translate Japanese lyrics into English myself.

_Underneath the corset of your mystery_
_Piece by piece undress you from your history_
_I'm sleeping with seclusion in sweet disarray_

**Heavy - Holly Brook**

"What do you think of Ai, Kagerou? Has been doing her work fine?"

The destroyer smiled jovially, holding her beloved pup as she sat by the grass. Kuro tried to lick her face while she held him tenderly. Half laughing thanks to her dog's gleeful reaction, she answered.

"Admiral Tendouji is a good Admiral. Ahahahaha Kuro-chan, come on. I think she did good."

What an extremely neutral answer.

With no eye contact.

"Really? Glad to know. Airi can be really naive and emotional."

"I see."

~Protocol 8~

"Seriously, why don't we just report him and ditch all of his orders already?" Kagerou grumbled, the pain of several hits from Abyssal destroyers days ago made her body sore. A bespectacled woman, the last of Kongou class, sailed beside her as flagship. She looked at the destroyer.
"Based on my calculation, he does make a lot of ridiculous measures," She said correcting her glasses. As she did so, a ring gleamed on her right hand's finger. She should have taken it off. Their old Admiral had passed away many months ago, replaced by their current Admiral. However she did not take that off. "But he still thinks for this nation."

She smiled.

"Kagerou, although we might hate this Admiral, we shall not betray our nation. That is what makes us Kanmusu."

XXX

She still chose to stand near his desk, as if saying that she could walk through that door at any time. As if she had not fully surrender to her own decision of talking to him.

Heishi waited patiently by his place, resting one of his big hand on his working table. One gun fairy stared at Shiranui, tilting her head. She then jumped onto Heishi's hand and climbed to his shoulder. Shiranui's eyes flew to the door then back to Heishi, seemingly thinking of just cutting the talk off and go away. She also had not really answer if she would like to talk about it or not.

"Talk if you feel like it, Shiranui. You can even stop in the middle of everything if you feel like you are not ready to talk about it. I won't push you to it."

She seemed to really think about it. A while later she shook her head. Her dark eyes looked a bit more emotional than usual when she said in a low tone,

"Shiranui will. For Kagerou."

Heishi smiled.

"And for yourself?"

"..."

A rather amused smile appeared on her face.

"... Kagerou's happiness is Shiranui's happiness as well."

Her eyes turned distant again. She looked at the window, staring into something far away in her past. When her eyes moved back to Heishi, she added quietly.

"If Kagerou finds her answer, maybe Shiranui will as well."

XXX

"Did Ai tell you anything about dog keeping?"

"Hmmm~~ not at all. She only told me to take care of him."

Kurogane rolled on the ground. His wagging tail and overall round body spread the feeling of both relaxation and serenity.

Today's sun was bright and the clouds spread thin over the sky. Kanon took a deep breath and looked up. Still a bit more time until lunch... and she did not make any progress with Kagerou, she knew.
At the corner of her eyes, she saw the destroyer started rubbing the little dog's belly.

"How are you, Kagerou?"

"Eh?" the destroyer looked up, at the scientist. Amused, although confused, smile appeared on her friendly expression and she said, "I am fine? Is there anything wrong?"

Oh, yes.

"Oh, naaaaah~~ I just wonder about Kanmusu job. Aren't they supposed to be pretty heavy? You seem to be in a holiday."

"Hahahahaha-- No, no, not really. Admiral Tendouji gives holiday regularly to each of us after missions."

Are you really fine?

XXX

"This siege will be the biggest siege this small base has ever done in years."

A man of his mid thirties, Admiral Jiro is a tall, rather muscular man. His hair was cropped on the side, his facial hair shaved clean. He had that habit in him to tap his right fingers by his pants when he was impatient. That same hand could easily flew to someone's face in the form of a slap or a punch.

Whichever, Kagerou had tasted them all.

"You midget brains understand what that means?"

He always gave them condescending nicknames. They silently took it most of the time, even though Maya or Kongou would snark at him once or twice.

"That means, you have to win. I don't care who will sink, I NEED that win."

He pointed straight at them.

"Fighting for me is why you are born. If you can't do even that, I can just scrap the shit outta you."

XXX

"The winter siege was a part of the military's large operation. During that time, Admiral Jiro was promised a promotion if he was able to stall the northern enemy long enough for the south squad commanded by Admiral Fukumoto managed to destroy an Abyssal base."

Kaga began with a rather long introduction. Her eyes remained placid when she returned Airi’s gaze.

"Admiral Jiro had been using the destroyers for continuous expedition to gather resources for this specific siege. He also sorted the cruisers to gather resources. Most of the ships in the base were fatigued. By the time of the siege, there had been many destroyers casualties. That is why Admiral Jiro constructed destroyers almost constantly at the very end of his working days."

Airi remembered Inazuma and Ikazuchi, Ayanami, Mutsuki... they were the destroyers that had
just finished constructing when she came. The only "older destroyer" who had really gone through much of Admiral Jiro's commanding days were only three: Shigure, Kagerou, and Shiranui. Being close with Shigure was much easier than it was with the two Kagerou class, for some reason. The only difference between the three was that the Kagerou class was in the winter siege, while Shigure did not. There was something different about the Kagerou class and Shigure. Although Shigure evidently disliked night battle and seemed to have the melancholy of "departure" in her, those personality more or less persisted in her every recreation. Kagerou-class, however, somehow the two destroyers seemed to be way more distant than the others.

Something must have happened during the sinking of the two Kongou class and Michishio. Kaga dropped her gaze on the folder in front of the admiral.

"Hiei-san and Kirishima-san were picked as the flagship of the two sortie fleet, because Haruna-san, Kongou-san, and Nagato-san were to be deployed under the command of Admiral Fukumoto and joined the southern forces. During the siege, many of the ships were drained of their stamina and suffered damages because of fatigue. At night, after they sunk their supposed objective, Abyssal reinforcement came."

"Michishio, hang in there!"

Pain. Kagerou remembered shocking pain all over her body as she draged Michishio up from the water. They were all exhausted and Michishio was badly injured. She lost her right arm. Kagerou could feel Michishio stirred, then her rather weak, "This is nothing. You worry too much."

Blood gushing out of her cut off right hand did not seem like something to just brush away as mere flesh wound.

Kirishima beside her breathed heavily. She steadied her cracked glasses, calculating the presence of lights far away. Choukai, grimacing, circled their perimeters. Her main machine started to hum rather too loudly.

They were edging at the brink of their limit.

"... A Light cruiser demon princess is with them, Kirishima-san. What should we do?"

The cracked glasses hid Kirishima's eyes with its glint. The transmission with Admiral Jiro happened quietly. The reply, however, was not.

"How many times should I repeat your mission? Stop contacting for every single goddamn shit, you will reveal loads of thing, can't you even digest that much?"

"We need your permission to retreat, Admiral, we—"

"There is NO retreat until everything is over!"

"Most of us are critically damaged, Admiral, if we continue..."

"Are the stupid destroyers and cruisers damaged again?"

Kirishima visibly gritted her teeth. Tenryuu spat to the sea while Takao and Choukai were
visibly upset. Michishio, however, was way too annoyed to hold her tongue anymore.

"It is your goddamn fault, you asshole!"

"Michishio!"

Tears welled up in her eyes and she shouted at the transmission.

"Stop calling us idiot, moron, stupid, weakass... you are the one who don’t fucking know how to use your ships!"

"How dare you talk back to me like that! While getting your own ass killed you blame ME?!
Blame yourself for being born flimsy destroyer! Now go stop those forces like you used too and make yourself useful rather than merely using up my precious resources! It's cruisers and destroyers like you who take up my space and being useless everytime!"

"WE ARE NOT-"

"Michishio."

Kirishima sounded tired, but in her words, and her grip on Michishio's shoulder, stopped the destroyer's words.

"Admiral, the base will lose much of the firepower if we sink here. According to my calculation, it is better in the long run for us to retreat for now."

It really did not matter.

"Which of the word "no" you don't understand, idiot?"

To this man, whether they lived or die it really did not...

"Fight until Tenryuu, Michishio, and Kagerou sunk. After that, Kirishima, Choukai, and Takao you go back to base."

Kirishima visibly gritted her teeth. Choukai's face turned dark. Takao sighed and hit her own transmission button.

"Admiral, they are as valuable as—"

"I DON'T NEED weak ships."

Choukai closed her eyes.

"The only thing they are good as is meat shield. They aren't even worth scrapping."

XXX

"Sacrifice yourself for the battleship, Admiral Jiro said."

Her purple eyes turned dim.

"No matter the state of our damage, the only important thing was for the mission to succeed and the battleship to go back."
Haaaa... haaaaaaa...

It hurt. Everything hurt.

Michishio's weight turned heavier in her shoulder. Kagerou had busted her own gun, so Michishio who could no longer sail with her main machine, used hers as propellers. She saw Choukai came out of black smokes after shielding Tenryuu, gritting her teeth in pain but said nothing. An explosion a while ago blew her glasses off and hurt her face but, again, she said nothing. She had been silent the whole while, taking blow after blow without a word.

Takao did the same.

She sailed without saying anything, circling around Kirishima as they tried as hard as they could to shoot down enemy's Wo class's rampaging bombers.

Kirishima, also, said nothing.

No one needed to, actually.

They were losing. Everyone knew.

Sink.

The Light Cruiser Demon also said it, with grin and glowing eyes.

Sink.

"You shits are better sinking than wasting my bucket."

Is that... their only worth?

Wet tears started to roll down her cheeks.

Their hardwork, their sailing, all of these experiences... were all of this... for nothing? Did they mean nothing? Their presence was nothing but dust compared to the battleships? Then why were they born?

The night... was unusually silent, even with all the explosions.

"... Based on my calculations..."

Kirishima's voice suddenly came up.

"The Admiral's decision is faulty."

Her back looked so distant. Her Miko clothes fluttered in the wind. She stood strong, despite smoking funnel an burnt clothes. She looked back, half smiling. Choukai moved closer, breathing heavily, but was silent. So were Takao.

Tenryuu folded her arms.
"I am ready either way you pick."


"I missed him dearly."

The destroyer blinked.

"Kirishima-san, what..."

"It is better... if the highest firepower is the one holding them back. There will be better chance of stalling the enemy force and for the rest to run away. I will stay. All of you, please go back safely."

XXX

"If there is anything Admiral Jiro hated the most, it would be if he lost his firepower," Shiranui said slowly. "Hiei-san dropped the original plan and went against his wishes. She stayed while the rest of us go back because she knows it would be what the Admiral be most angry of."

The dark eyes turned impenetrable, seemingly drowning in her own memories. It seemed she had been burying the memory for so long and so deep, and letting them to resurface made her fall to an almost trance-like state.

"Hiei-san also said, she had enough of having her friends sinking for her."

The voice dropped lower.

"This is my selfish wish and I am sorry,' she said. 'Let me do this for you.'"

The purple eyes moved to meet Lieutenant Kouseki's. Deep and dark. Then something else, Heishi realized, was contained in the destroyer's eyes.

"But it was not her fault."

Anger. Pain.

"It was not Hiei-san's fault."

Hatred.

No. Heishi curled his hand into fists. No, Shiranui.

"Shiranu—"

"It's the human's fault."

XXX

Kurogane jumped to the grass, standing up straight. He barked loudly. Kanon raised her eyebrows. Kagerou herself stopped what she was doing (fiddling with a grass flower) and looked at the condition of her little dog.

"Kuro-chan?"

The dog suddenly snarled.
"Kuro?"

… and ran away.

"Kuro-chan!"

For some reason he did not heed his mistress's voice and keep running away. Kagerou eventually had to bolt after him. And Kanon after them.

"KURO-CHAAAAAN!"

His breath stuck in his throat. What stared back at him were two different eyes of one destroyer he thought he knew well. One eye gray while her other ones remained purple, Shiranui returned his gaze emotionlessly. The fairy on Heishi's shoulder started to jump up and down, panicking. The other fairy seemed to stuck stunned on the table.

Taking deep breath to keep his voice composed, Heishi called her slowly.

"Shiranui."

Her gaze answered. She was still herself, at least partially. Or perhaps she really was still herself, Heishi did not know which. Those eyes however, clearly answered her. Saying something silently he did not understand. Did she ask him to listen? Or ask him for help? For understanding? Or just simply telling him that it was HER in front of him? … or all other way around?

"It was Admiral's fault. It was his orders."

No. No, stop. But he could not say that. He knew that her voice was his only cue to know just how much she had changed. The foreign change in her voice, the sudden change of pitch in her syllables... He could use that as an indicator.

Yet recalling the past was what brought her storm of emotions and caused her this change. He did not know if agreeing or making her talk about it would be the best way.

Those mismatched eyes watched his movement and Heishi could see at the very same time the destroyer was judging him, measuring him. They both gauged each other, if they were still friends or foe to each other. Or none of that at all.

Finding him slowly rising up, Shiranui, not moving, continued her statements.

"Human continue to litter the sea with their greed."

Heishi took a deep breath.

"Shiranui..."

"It was not Hiei-san's fault. It was not Kirishima-san's or Michishio's."

"Shiranui, please."

"It was his. So our lives are his punishment."

The greyish color now spread to both of her eyes. Slowly, really slowly, Heishi could see tendrils of black crept into her irises.
"We live for our hatred."

XXX

"I see, so that was what happened."

Kaga solemnly nodded, finally ending perhaps the longest ever monologue in her entire career. Airi pushed her fist to her lips, thinking. She had a pretty clear picture of why things were the way they were at the moment. Although she did not know exactly what could be running in the mind of the survivors of the failed winter siege's fleet. Especially Kagerou. Or Shiranui.

"Is there anything in your mind, Admiral?"

Kaga's brown eyes brimmed golden. Airi looked back at her, finding the carrier silently analyzing her. She smiled.

"Why would you say that?"

"It has been one year since your placement. If you would like to only inquire about the incident, you could have just asked me when you transferred."

But you didn't.

Airi smiled. As always, in her calm, silent composure Kaga was extremely perceptive.

"Well... I have several reasons," Airi began. She smiled. "One of them is about the base. I have plans on my own."

She raised her index finger.

"I would like... to construct Hiei and Kirishima again."

XXX

A bark broke their silent battle.

Shiranui turned back, towards the door. Right there, barking loudly, stood Kurogane. The dog did not lounge at her, it just barked. And barked. Its bark echoed throughout the factory. Heishi knew in a minute the other engineers would come and that would mean really bad. He knew exactly Protocol 8 on Containment would commence and...

"Kuro-chan! How many times should I... huh?"

Heaving from exertion, what came into view next was Kagerou. Her breath came to a halt when she saw her little sister, golden eyes widening. Blood drained from her face when she saw the gray eye stared at her back, and also the familiar purple eye.

"Shiranui?"

The gaze answered hers silently, much akin to what she did when Heishi called her. Kagerou's expression, however, turned into a mixture of so many thing it was hard to make out. She only stood there by the door, with Kurogane barking by her leg. Behind Kagerou, Heishi saw Hakurei-sensei. They met eyes, but he could see what she meant in hers.

Protocol 8 on Containment. Especially when the engineers, attracted by the relentless barking of Kurogane, came. Beyond Kagerou's shoulder, he could see her ordering them, whipping out her ID
card she kept hidden in her pocket most of the time. As much as Heishi wanted to stop her...

He had both Shiranui and Kagerou between him and Hakurei-sensei. Whether the Protocol would commence or not, Shiranui was still only partially changed...and she still communicated. But Kagerou's presence for some reason strengthened whatever it was in her, that Heishi could see even her shadow started to shift.

"We only sailed to hate him."

Kagerou's mouth closed into a thin, tight line. Her lips trembled.

She, however, did not object what her sister said.

"We lived to prove him wrong for our hate."

The first ship of Kagerou class destroyer closed her eyes tightly, curling her hands into fists. She gritted her teeth. A while later she opened them, and she looked back at her little sister. She seemed to have bitten her inner lips, containing emotions of her own. Slowly she answered her sister firmly.

"We did."

Kagerou closed her eyes again tightly.

"Yes, we did."

She agreed. That they both hate.

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"He hurt us."

"He did."

"He hurt you."

"... Yes, he did."

She had been slapped, with hand, with belt, she had it all, sometimes for reasons as simple as a mere success expedition or if they did not manage to bring back buckets because the station was empty that time. She knew she was not the only one who gone through it. She was not the only one facing all the pain, the unfairness, the abuse.

Shiranui had been there all the time as well like her.

They all hurt. They all had their loss.

And she did, one and a half year ago, said that very same words. Perhaps with the very same... expression.

"We were born to sink. And reborn to sink again."

"I can just scrap you then."

Kagerou closed her eyes tightly, feeling all the storm of memories came to her.
"Everything is his fault."

"It is."

She opened her eyes eventually, watching how her vision blurred with tears.

"They didn't see it as fault."

Kagerou's fist trembled. Her breathing turned harsh and fast. She knew these lines.

"They promised him promotion. We sink, and he got promoted."

These were hers.

"This is their fault. Human's fault."

These were the very same words she said when she got back from that campaign. The very same word she talked to Shiranui.

Black tendrils now almost completely enveloped Shiranui's sclera.

"Human... is always the cause."

A step forward from Shiranui, towards her. Kagerou recognized those eyes, she had seen them before. Those eyes stared back at her when she looked at the mirror, at times golden, at times grey. When they were grey she would smash the mirror to smithereens. She knew of this perhaps better than anyone.

She saw the same tendrils of black when she watched Ashigara trotting to hit Admiral Tendouji. She identified them, recognized them very well. The simple reasoning of why she informed Ashigara of Haguro's first sail was simply because she identified the same pulse. They were hurt... and they hate.

Hate, so much. So much it fueled them life.

"I hate him. I hate him so much I live for that."

So much, she repressed them to live. And to continue hating. That was literally, the only real fuel for her existence.

"... and then I was lost."

Shiranui stopped her steps. She stared back at Kagerou, her eyes questioning silently.

The older sister looked up straight now, firmly, her fists curled tighter.

"I hate him. And I hate those behind him."

Lieutenant Kouseki stared at her and she replied him.

"I hate how no one say anything. Their silence said he was right. That he was right to hit us, to sink us as he pleased and construct us as he pleased. Everyone's sinking was right. Kirishima-san, Hiei-san, Michishio, Nattori-san, Wakaba, Hatsuzuki, Hayashimo, Shirayuki, Hatsuyuki, Kuroshio, Yura-san... Their sinking was right. No one said it was wrong. No one make a voice. I always. Always. Hate human."
Shiranui stirred. Grey eyes lit up. Kagerou knew something behind her move. Perhaps a crowd came. Perhaps the other staff came, but that was not it.

By the leg, Kurogane barked.

"You are right, Shiranui. Yes. Those are my words and those are exactly what I said."

Tears fell from Kagerou's eyes, and along with it, everything she had contained.

"But I was wrong."

The eyes lit up.

"You were not."

"I was."

Kagerou turned to look at Lieutenant Kouseki, standing near his working table. His big burly body, yet gentle heart. The sight of him working very late at night to take care of all of their armor, faking equipment malfunction to grant them a day off, marshmallow and hot chocolate at night, and that sofa he bought but never used because it was always, always used by one of them when they were exhausted. His gentle smile, and genuine kindness.

Kagerou remembered the weight of the book when he pushed them to her chest that day.

"... It was not... the fault of Lieutenant Kouseki."

Shiranui stirred, but now not from the same reasoning.

"That was enough of a reason to stop calling it all humanity's fault."

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"They... did not exactly confide to anyone, that's why."

"And Kagerou is different?"

"She has you."

He never did anything worth noting, or anything worth mentioning, but Kagerou's words touched his heart more than anything. To be a reason of change, it was not just what anyone could hope to be involved as.

The destroyer turned to her little sister, whose shadow now somehow crept to her soles, and smiled.

"You are here because you believed he will listen. You trust him."

"She...does not exactly talk to me, Admiral."

"She is comfortable with you enough to not deny how she has worries."

"Is he not a human?"

Shiranui did not reply.

"I just thought, Shiranui, that maybe... maybe I was wrong," The destroyer continued slowly.
"Maybe we were wrong. And seeing you like this, seeing the Lieutenant like this... I... I realized I was wrong. I am not sure what is right but... but hating was wrong. It burdens you, corrupts you... It makes you live miserably. That is all I know."

"Your hate was true."

"It was."

The tears streamed down now, and Kagerou did nothing to brush them off.

"I hate him so much. The only reason why I did not want him die was that he was the reason for me living. I want him to suffer every pain possible. That was the only reason I lived. I was dead after that mission. I sank with Michishio and Kirishima-san. When he was gone, I was at a loss. My existence... I have nothing to hold onto anymore. My hatred was short lived. I was loss... Now I sailed only because I sailed. I am too in pain to sink, yet too burdened to live. I hate too much to love, and too distrustful to believe."

The destroyer brushed her tears briskly with her arm, smearing tears all over her face. She struggled, but she continued.

"... Had we been wrong, Shiranui? Is it possible, to find meaning in living as Kanmusu?"

Kagerou's eyes fell on her dog, then back to her sister again.

"I don't know how life will be, I don't know anything other than fight and be sunk. But as I got Kurogane, and those books... I realized that maybe, Shiranui, maybe we can find something else to hold onto. Something other than hate."

Shiranui stirred. Her eyes gleamed, but Heishi did not know what it meant. She was not back into her former self and she said nothing as Kagerou talked. However, it must meant something. The words, must have moved her. To which gradient, he did not know.

Kagerou moved forward.

"I am sorry... I did not listen to you, Shiranui. I am sorry I was never there for you."

"No."

Shiranui moved back. The grayish hue in her eyes flickered.

"I was so occupied by my own hate that I did not ask you how you felt after that time. I did not realized that I was not the only one hurting. I did not think that I was not the only one having nightmares. You woke up because you never slept, didn't you? But I never asked you. I never talked to you."

Kagerou extended one of her hands... Which Shiranui avoided. The former stopped, and looked into her little sister. The tendrils of her shadows pulsated.

They looked into each other when Shiranui said, slowly,

"Has my feelings been wrong, Kagerou?"

Kagerou's firm answer made Heishi felt his heart sank.

"No. Your feelings will never be wrong."
"I hate him."

"I know."

"I hate human."

"...I know that too."

A drop of tear fell from Shiranui's eye, and finally, Kagerou reached her. Her big sister squeezed her arm gently. She smiled.

"Shiranui, I choose to give them a chance. I don't know how it will turn out and I don't even know what to life for from now on... but I... I decided to... to believe, even for a bit.. that maybe..."

Kagerou slowly turned around. She immediately saw blue guns of numerous officers pointed her and her little sister, and the Admiral that stood in front of them. Her raised hand and her body were the only things between the gunshot and them both.

"... maybe human... aren't all bad, and that our hatred are misplaced."

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Airi stood there in front of her staff, staring right back at Kagerou and Shiranui. All the guns were ready to fire, she was the only reason they did not. If she were to abide to Protocol 8 on Containment, she would have eliminated both destroyers. It was compulsory. All conduct taken on Protocol 8 would be deemed as military necessity.

Yet upon arrival, Airi told them to hold. Even now, she did not say fire. From the conversation, it was clear that both had fallen. Both destroyers merely housed their Abyssal tendency. Even Kagerou, despite her words, could potentially only hide her infections. She was the one who confessed how it was in her already. She was the one who confessed that she, too, had broken her conditioning.

Kanon did not need a magician to tell her what Airi would do, however.

"Lower your guns."

"But Admiral, it's—"

"She was right."

Airi lowered her hand. Her back was straight and she looked right into Kagerou's golden eyes.

"Silence kills. Silence hurts. Everyone of us that stay silent despite the knowledge of his undoing, are responsible. We tolerate it, turning it into a norm. We are a part of the society that build the problem. We criminalized those in pain because of that, but did not point gun at ourselves. We should be ashamed."

Silence came. Airi took a deep breath and looked into Shiranui.

"Shiranui, dear, you have two choices. If you completely convert, I will have no choice but to put you down, regardless of any other judgment I might have. Or, you can revert back. I know you have the ability to. You haven't completely gone yet."

Shiranui's eyes glimmered.
"You can hate me, if you must."

The destroyer's eyes widened.

"I cannot tell you what to live for, but I will be willing to help you find it."

Shiranui, however, and she looked straight at the Admiral.

"I do not trust you."

Her words did not seem to reflect any kind of complete reversal. Yet Airi nodded.

"I acknowledged. If you have anything you disagree, tell us."

"I might betray you."

"The fact is that you have not. That is all I need to know."

One eye turned purple.

"Why?"

Airi smiled.

"Because I trust you."

What a strange answer, especially in the face of betrayal. From her eyes, it was clear that the destroyer thought the same.

"I can't hope for you to trust me back, if I don't trust you first. You have my back. If you deem me unworthy of it, I am willing to take your hate."

Silence came, long and tense, and Shiranui closed her eyes.

when they opened again, they were purple. Clearer than how they used to be.

"Very well."

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"How am I not surprised."

Kanon yawned, taking her glass of beer. Around them, other people passed as if nothing had happened a while before. Just as Airi hoped for.

When Shiranui's case happened, a staff quickly informed the Admiral. Every other private took the blue gun special for Containment and had readied themselves for shooting had Lieutenant Kouseki or Kanon herself gave the command. In Protocol 8, every elimination were to be done quick and quietly. Every single Kanmusu present must be eliminated as well, or scrapped after interrogation. It was supposed to be the procedure of the containment. However, none of those happened.

Airi repelled the Protocol. Although she sterilized the vicinity and asked for Shiranui to be attended to a bit longer, she did not allow anyone to touch both Kagerou and Shiranui. Everything should be kept secret between the staffs—although this was mere formality rather than something that Airi believed would happen, and she took all responsibility of the decision. Kanon knew even for now, perhaps her best friend had her head full with a dozen kind of excuses if she were to face the court.
They were now having a regular meal. A "feast" like Airi had said, at the cafetaria. As if nothing happened. As if they had not betrayed the law.

Airi raised her eyebrows at Kanon's words. She chuckled, taking her share of soba.

"You haven't finished, Kanon."

"I haven't. I need to drink first. That is how much I am in disbelief at how predictable you are."

"Hmmm~~~ Really now."

The researcher drank with a gulp. She put down her can with a clank then continued to eye her friend, who sat composed in front of her.

She might have already known. She might have already assumed both Kagerou and Shiranui had broken their condition many long times ago. Perhaps even the dog was merely a preventive measure.

Still, releasing Shiranui even after that...

Kanon could not help but to grin.

"Ai."

"Yes?"

With the Admiral now facing her, the researcher raised her beer.

"I look forward to researching those data you have for me."

Nothing like obtaining data no people had seen before. Nothing like discovering knew facts. Nothing like it at all.

Her best friend's base sure was more interesting than she previously thought.

Airi's eyes glimmered at her words. Her smile, however, as cunning she always was.

"For some dinner?"

_Seriously, goddamn it, I actually wanted to it for free. If you hadn't said that._

"Deal. Tonight? Yakiniku? Full course?"

The admiral laughed.

"You pick the menu."

"THIS is why you're my friend, Ai. You're the awesomest."

_And this why I stick with you._

_Your road is way too risky to be left alone. Please don't die soon._

~~~ _To be Continued_ ~~~
The Promise

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Kantai Collection or any of the songs whose lyrics I featured in this fic. I did, however, translate Japanese lyrics into English myself.

How long has time hid me away?
Even the faint light continue to remember pain

Somebody, please, I beg of you to tear off my wings
If it is freedom that I cannot choose
then I want to live my entire life without it

*Amano Tsukiko – Torikago*

Accompanied with a long deep sigh, Heishi put down his screwdriver on the table. Slowly, he folded his arms on the table and leaned on to them, staring at a 12.7 cm high angle gun in front of him.

"We were born to sink. And reborn to sink again."

The engineer had his eyes on a small scratch on one of the gun's barrels. A scratch. It might have hit something hard enough to have that deep scratch. That was battle though. They battled with real shells, real gun, real enemies who were out to kill them.

"They promised him promotion. We sink and he got promoted."

Ten years. He had been working in the base for over ten years. He was young back then when he came, a fresh graduate from nautical engineering. He came to the navy merely because there was job vacancy. Before he knew it, he was stationed here in the small Kanmusu base, under Admiral Kumazaki until his passing. He watched Kanmusu come and go. He had experienced many sinking... He did not realized he, too, thought that it was something that could not be helped.

One hand idly taking his screwdriver, he made it stood on its pointy end.

"We criminalized those in pain because of that, but did not point the gun at ourselves."

Times like these makes him wondered why he even there in the first place.

"I figured you have not had your lunch."

A paper bag was suddenly placed at the edge of his table. Knowing the familiar voice, he quickly made a move to stand up, but a hand touched his shoulder, telling him to remain sitting. By the order of rank, Hakurei-sensei had higher rank than him, being the central researcher.

"Thank you very much."

She gave a nonchalant smile then leisurely sat on a sofa near him. The researcher then took a
nearby destroyer shell, examining the sleek appearance. She did not say anything else and merely sitting there. A while later she took off her armband and began to spun them.

Heishi, of course, remembered his job. He stood up to approach his computer.

"I will print Shiranui's—"

"Some things we can't change. Other people among them. We are all selfish little shits."

Was it melancholy in her voice? Heishi could not identify. She did not continue her words though and merely looked up at the ceiling. Silence dawned onto them both while Heishi went to his computer and searched to print and file Shiranui's data. Shiranui had finished her examination a while ago, done by other engineers, under Admiral Tendouji's own eyes. Heishi remembered when she was finally released. Shiranui passed his place that time. He could not understand the thoughts inside those purple eyes, though it seemed she had found what she was looking for at the time she went to his room.

"If Kagerou finds her answer, maybe Shiranui will too."

*Was that the answer she was looking for?*

He did not even know the question the destroyer had.

The printing machine made clanking noises as the cartridge went left and right writing the data. For a while that was the only sound between them. The papers went out rather slowly, printing numerous graphic... and mostly graphs. It was a raw data of everything, not even interpretation was printed. Hakurei-sensei herself asked for it when they talked about it last time they had a phone call. Not that Heishi could actually interpret the whole thing as well. At least, he knew, not as deep as Hakurei-sensei could.

"Airi..."

Heishi moved, looking back to find the researcher looking at the ceiling. Her eyes fell on Heishi's eventually, and she continued, catching her armband in her hand.

"Have Airi told you anything about her plans?"

"... which one?"

They talked a lot. By the metal graveyard, they conversed about so many things, even random ones like how her brother when he was young would love to have a horse of his own and almost sold his bike believing he could afford one with that much money. Admiral Tendouji talked to him of her aspirations and dreams, what she hoped the base would be and what she hoped the military would do. With those are also considered to be "plans"...

"That she would construct the Kongous again."

Now that he did not hear. At least not in detail. She did say that she was thinking of getting a boost on her firepower and her surface fleet so as to support Admiral Kudou better, but he did not know it would be both of the Kongou sisters. Perhaps he was just late for this.

Looking at his expression, Hakurei-sensei raised her eyebrows. She raised her shoulder then walked towards the printer, taking the paper that was already out and examined them. She took a brief look at them and moving her lips a bit as it seemed she saw something she had predicted would appear.
"Perhaps she would have a long talk with you about that."

With that, the printer, too, had finished printing. She took the papers then nonchalantly waved them before she went for the door. Right at the door, she stopped.

"Oh yes... one more thing."

Heishi turned to look at her, nodding politely and asked, "Yes?"

"I suggest you start calling her with her real name."

"... I'm sorry?"

_Her who? Admiral? Which of her name was not real?_ He called her Admiral Tendouji, like anyone did. _Wasn't Tendouji her name?_

Seeing his expression, Hakurei-sensei sneered.

"I just figured it would be appropriate, considering she did not see you as "Lieutenant" anymore."

_Not as..."

"... W-Wha-"

"See ya later, Lieutenant Kouseki."

With that, Hakurei-sensei disappeared from his sight.

~~ The Promise ~~

The sun shone high by the battleship and carrier dormitory, the only dormitory that was mostly unchanged from the day of Admiral Jiro. Unlike the other dormitory, which was made in mixed western-eastern style two-story building with white painted porches and white fence separating the garden and the public walk, the battleship and carrier dormitory was a one story, distinctly Japanese styled building. Its roof slanted with distinct curved at the end, its blunt end decorated with intricate carving of mythical creatures. The front door was a polished black wooden door on elevated porch with stone steps leading to it.

Surrounding it were low stone fence with roofed top. The road towards the main door were smooth stone slabs on beautiful green grasses. Assortment of flowers bloom at the side of the fence, courtesy of Haruna and the privates. Haruna tended to the flowers every time she could in between her tight sortie schedule as a mean to relax herself, much like Haguro. The privates, being avid fans of Haruna—like many other staffs, would tend to the garden when she could not. Being a naturally friendly, kind, and gentle person, Haruna easily was the base's population's princess. Almost no one would say no to Haruna's request. Kongou at times commented that Haruna could practically made the whole base her kingdom. The girl herself, naturally, denied such a thing happened.

Going to the battleship and carrier dormitory always made Airi felt that small pang of homesickness. Her own home being a mansion that housed both her family and the temple disciple, was made in almost similar fashion, just older and considerably larger with it connecting to the temple it self. While the dormitory garden was just a beautiful small patch with small pond and assortment of flowers lining the side with beautiful moss covering much of the patches, her own home had its own patch of stone garden. Stone garden was not among her preference, as it reminded her of her religious ancestry, so she was much more fond of her family's moss garden at
the other side of her mansion. The battleship and carrier dormitory gave the same vibe, albeit a bit different with all the colorful flowers decorating the edge of the garden.

Airi arrived by the front door with a sigh. She rather disliked summer in the base. The sea made the air filled with salty odor and humidity which sticks to skins, something she extremely and utterly disliked. Growing up in Kyoto's dry summer climate did not help her dislike at all. Tightening the hairband at the base of her high ponytail, Airi then took the doorknob and turned it around.

The front door opened with a small creak and a ring of bell hanging on its top, opening to a small front room which leads to elevated tatami matted room. At the side were small wooden rack for shoes with guest slippers and the residence's distinct slippers. The only slippers still by the rack were Akagi and Nagato's, as both were out on a mission in other base for a few days, and also Kaga's, who seemed to have not been back after talking to Airi earlier today.

A board with the name of the residents plastered on the wooden wall with hanging wooden tablet giving info of their whereabouts. The same board was present in every dormitory.

As expected, Kongou and Haruna were present.

A sliding door that led to the inner hallway opened.

"Ah, Admiral?"

Haruna came from inside the house, seemingly coming thanks to the ringing bell. A gentle smile quickly came to her face and she bowed deeply. Airi returned with a small bow, progressing to the elevated floor with Haruna's friendly, "please, please come in! Thank you for coming, Admiral."

"I see that Kongou is here too."

"Oh yes, Oneesama and I were enjoying tea inside. If you would, please join us for a while. Oneesama had her black tea, but I can make you some green tea, if you prefer to, Admiral."

"Please, that will be really great."

She had no qualms about black tea, but she sure loved green one better especially with the atmosphere of the whole dormitory. Haruna led her to the common room, which passed small patch of hallway sandwiched by formal living room and library, to an open space of the beautiful inner garden. Surrounding the open space were rooms with paper doors. One room housed two personnels; with Akagi and Kaga in the same room, Kongou and Haruna in another one, and finally Nagato having one room for her own alone. Other rooms were the common room and an empty room which previously was occupied by Kirishima and Hiei.

One of them was opened, the one Airi identified as the common room.

"It has been a while since you came, Admiral," Haruna said as they walked. Airi smiled at her remark. It was true. She should have spent more time with her bigger ships. The battleship's eyes brimmed with curiosity, which was softened with her always present silent understanding. As always, the beautiful battleship was very sharp. "Is there anything in particular you would like to talk about with me and Oneesama?"

"Indeed I do."

There was no need to hide anything to them. They were her precious main firepowers... and the sisters of whom she would like to construct.
"I need your permission for something."

Walking under the bright sunlight, Kanon squinted her eyes reading the papers she just got. Some of the graphs seems unchanged but as expected, some of them—

"Ah."

The engineer who escorted her and led her way towards the main building halted his step when they arrived at the middle garden. Kanon moved her eyes from the papers to see what made the engineer stopped. A while later she gave a knowing smile.

Shiranui stood in by the middle fountain and by the bench, Kagerou sat waiting. The purple eyes of the standing Kagerou class moved to Kanon and stayed there. Silently, Shiranui lowered her head. Kagerou, standing up, did the same.

That was a bow to a superior.

Kanon extended her hand and patted her escort's shoulder.

"I guess you may dismiss yourself and go back to the factory, bro."

"But—"

The researcher smiled.

"It seems I have others to escort me around. Thanks for your help."

Erasing Kongou's lipstick from her face, Airi got reminded why she did not wear make up today. In front of her, circling a low table in the middle of tatami room, sat obviously sparkly eyed Kongou and apologetic Haruna. She had just received her share of kisses and loving from the nameship of Kongou class, as always whenever she met the battleship, and finally the charade was over.

"So, Admiral, what is it that you would like to talk about?"

With her previous excitement finally died down, Kongou asked with her serious voice—although the tone still had the tilt of her high spirit. When Airi met her the first time, those eyes had totally different light in them. The first she met her, what she met was fire. Black, burning fire with overwhelming distrust. Kongou, however, was more calculating than hating. That was the only thing that gave Airi enough conviction to try and approach her, until she finally gained the battleship's trust.

Airi sincerely felt blessed she was loved, but she sure hoped Kongou realized just how powerful she was as a battleship, really.

"I want to ask for your permission, Kongou, Haruna."

Kongou raised her eyebrows, tilting her head. She folded her arms.

"Permission?" Her confusion was well founded. No superior asked their own subordinate for permission.

"You know, I have a vision that I would like to realize," Airi began, placing one of her hand on the
wooden low table and beginning to make circulating pattern. "I will need strength. Firepower. And speed."

Both seemed to have understanding printed on their eyes. Airi smiled.

"Yes, I would like to ask for your permission to let me construct Kirishima and Hiei again for this base."

The expression that came to Kongou and Haruna's faces were quite indescribable. After a pause Airi continued.

"I believe they are the right battleships to be made to further advance this-"

"What if we refused?"

Kongou's voice made Airi froze. Haruna also turned her eyes on her sister, but she said nothing.

Airi looked into Kongou's dark blue eyes, finding hard, solid gaze. The return was not what she expected, although she did think there was a possibility it would come up.

Her voice so much different with the one she used to greet the Admiral, Kongou asked again,

"What if we denied? Will you still push regardless?"

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"I did not expect you both to meet me so early," Kanon said, resting her back to the bench's back. Kagerou sat beside her, did not say a single thing. Shiranui sat on her other side remained silent. Yes, this other Kagerou ship definitely was not a good escort for guests. The destroyer pointed to her back pocket.

"Your badge."

_Ah. She saw that, huh._

It was not surprising. Kanon did flash it right in front of Shiranui's eyes a while ago. She had that bit of hope that Shiranui did not see though.

"Are you a researcher from the central, Sensei?"

Kagerou's voice had a tint of disappointment in them. Kanon sighed.

_Blew the cover, I did. Sorry for that, Airi._

"I am, yep." She answered lightly. Kagerou's eyes flashed with something but she did not voice whatever it is. Kanon continued quickly. "But it is true that I am Airi's best friend, you know. You won't find anyone closer to her than I am! Really."

_Well that might be debatable but that was true. I guess._ Kagerou tilted her head and Shiranui remained silent.

_Bah. So much for trying to gain trust._

Kanon sighed.

"Kay, kay, what do you want to know?"
Kagerou scrutinized her face rather openly. Kanon did not mind. She did "trick" them a bit.

"Are you... called to spy on us?"

"Spy?" Kanon laughed. "Spy is such a negative word now, isn't it?"

Beside her, Shiranui silently pointed at the stack of data on Kanon's lap. Until now, both of the destroyers did not make any attempt to talk of the stack of data. Kanon smiled. She raised them then gave some of them to both of the destroyers. Both took them with confusion—at least Kagerou's face showed confusion. Kanon had completely dropped the hope of trying to understand Shiranui at this moment.

"Would you like to hear the long story or the short one?"

Lifting her eyes from the graph, Kagerou looked into Kanon's eyes. She seemed to calculate some things.

"... Long...?"

"I see." Kanon nodded. She furrowed her eyebrows. "When I was in the kindergarten..."

Kagerou's face quickly changed.

"Um, not that long."

"Then from primary school?"

"Eh? N-not that long either."

"Highschool?"

"Mmmmmm..."

"Okay, then university!"

Kagerou sighed. She put the data she had in her hand on Kanon's lap again.

"From here, please."

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Airi took a deep breath. She looked into Kongou's eyes.

"... Yes, I will."

Something changed in the battleship's eyes, something that stirred a cold feeling in Airi's heart. The battleship's voice sounded light, but there was that cold in it that made Airi clenched her fists.

"Then you have no need for our permission, ne."

"Technically I don't. Indeed."

"If you would just do what you think is right regardless of our answer... there is no need for this meeting. Nor for our answers. You have every right and power to do that."

And you are no different with the others.
Somehow it felt as if that statement lingered in the air. Airi could almost taste it coming. Kongou stayed silent, waiting for the obvious explanation from Airi. The admiral closed her eyes then opened them again.

"Perhaps I worded it wrong. Perhaps I should have said I wished for your understanding."

"Will that even change anything?" The words came in a fast, matter-of-factly manner. Kongou's eyes remained impenetrable. "Would that be to your advantage?"

"It will be," Airi answered confidently. She smiled. "Tremendously. It will be. The main reason I come is to explain and to beg for your understanding."

When Kongou was in this side of herself, especially on the presence of her sister, Airi was always reminded about who she really was as a warship. She might always goof around and become the ice breaker in many occasion, also added tints of humor and lightheartedness, but she was more than capable of being serious. Kongou was also more than capable to be assertive and decisive. She was, after all, the sister Haruna both loved and respected.

"Although I know I am the command in this base and that I have the authority to assert whatever decisions I made, I would like to hear your opinions and insights, especially in things that I believe will directly affect you as well," Airi began slowly. She looked into Kongou's eyes. "I will explain to you the reasoning that I have, and why I think it is essential. It is also true that it might be because I have my own personal goal and idea. It is also true that regardless of any personal emotional feelings I might have it will not change the very fact that I am the absolute voice of this base and that I will not hesitate to use it for things I believe is right."

A change finally came in Kongou's eyes. Airi smiled and continued.

"However, I would like to be given a chance to ask for your understanding and to hear your opinion. Although explaining may not mean much, but I hope that you will come to understand my motives and wishes. I do not wish that any of you will think of yourself as insignificant. I wish that by this, your understand that your opinions matter to me and thus is why I seek them. As powerful as I am being the command of this place, I would like to establish understanding and cooperation between us in my every decision."

The silence after spanned for what seemed like an eternity. What came to the Kongou class battleship's face was, unexpectedly, a very gentle, very loving expression.

Airi felt like a knot in her insides untied itself. She find herself raising her eyebrows at the radical change.

Kongou broke a grin.

"That sounds a lot better, Admiral. Ne, Haruna?"

"Ah, indeed," Haruna, although did not seem to thought she would be referred by her sister, agreed. She smiled at the Admiral. "I think I would prefer this as well."

*Prefer.* Airi raised her eyebrows. She looked to Kongou, who still had that grin on her. The battleship changed the grin into smile.

"'Permission' sounds like you are lowering yourself. That saddened me, Admiral. I am proud to be your ship. You *gotta* show your own pride too! You worth much more than that. You better make everyone know your place and theirs, Admiral. It's ambiguity is unsettling."
Ah.

The battleship grinned again, leaning towards Airi. She winked.

"We are all your ship! We need your command. We need you to always be our head. We need you to always see us from above. You can see better than us, and let us believe it so, Admiral. You have no need to ask for permission to us."

Her eyes turned into a gentle glow, Kongou continued.

"Don't lower yourself to be in the same level as us. We should never be."

Well. So this was her purpose.

From the very beginning, Kongou had no intention to oppose her on anything. She merely tested her, pushing her to regain her greater foothold.

It is very embarrassing to say, but she was being lectured by her own battleship. Sighing, Airi went back to her original purpose.

"So, do I have your words?"

"On?"

"The construction."

Kongou laughed. She raised her shoulder while folding her arm.

"Eh, Admiral, I thought it is pretty clear. You don't need it too, no?"

Airi scowled.

"Can't you at least make me feel better, Kongou?"

The battleship gave her crisp, lighthearted laughter. She smiled gently. Briefly meeting eyes with her little sister, she looked back at Airi.

"Admiral, Haruna and I have complete trust in your decisions. Of course we agreed. We both want to meet our sisters ourselves."

She paused. Her eyes seemed to go back to somewhere far for a while, then back to Airi again. She smiled.

"But that intro you did took my interest."

"Intro?"

"About that plan you said," Haruna finally took her turn. She smiled. "If you do not mind to disclose it to us, it would be our honor to hear of what you have in mind, Admiral."

XXX

"I have heard of that from Lieutenant Kouseki."

Kagerou raised her index finger when Kanon finished her story about the welfare constitution. It was supposed to remain a secret until the time Airi disclosed everything to all of her ships. It seems
their Lieutenant already let it out.

*So much for secrecy, Kouseki. So much for that.*

"So you are researching for this? But why must you not tell us?"

"So that I can keep other feelings away from alluding the research," explained Kanon. "People will talk more when they don't feel suspected. If you feel like you are being researched, anyone would naturally set up a defense. Like, 'I am not ill' or 'I am okay' or anything like that. You will then naturally try to hide any kind of inkling to that path. I try to not let that happen. That is why I never present myself anything more than a mere... doctor."

Kagerou's face changed into understanding. She must have felt that way as well. The girl closed her eyes and sighed.

"That isn't nice though, Sensei."

"That isn't," Kanon shrugged. "But necessary. At least me and Airi believed so."

"It could have been better if you explained it to us all."

"It might be, it might be not, Kagerou," Kanon grinned. Kagerou furrowed her eyebrows. "There is hardly anything really right or wrong in this world, really. We just do what believe are the fastest, most objective way to gain data. At least what *I* strongly believed in."

Airi had said the same thing Kagerou said, but she eventually said that she believed a researcher's words on research. Kagerou did not reply back. It appeared that she found everything made her displeased but she seemed to not find any reason to further be mad either.

Unlike her sister, Shiranui remained silent all the way. She seemed to listen to every word, observing every movement. Kanon had no telling what she might think. With her previous near-transformation incidence, this silence turns increasingly unnerving but Kanon had nothing else she could do but pray.

*This turns so. Very. Troublesome.*

Although she wasn't one to follow every single order there were in the world, Kanon still was someone who would like troublesome people stay clear from her. One of the reasons she befriended Airi was because Airi was the least troublesome among other girls. Airi did not comment on her fashion sense. Airi did not comment on her queer liking of books and interest. Airi did not rub her the wrong way on whatever those unimportant things most people would tell her. To be honest, this was the first time Airi caused her trouble—well that's a lie. When she was in her prankster mode Airi caused her a LOT of intentional trouble but to be fair, not those emotionally burdening ones at least.

*For your friend, Kanon, come on. .... Ugh. Or at least for science, Kanon. Science. Hang in there.*

"Why do you agree?"

Shiranui's voice made Kanon almost jumped. It was so sudden, and so right when she was daydreaming too.

*That poker face. Man, can this destroyer be even more intimidating?*

"Well..."
"Why do you help?"

That was pretty hard to answer. Why?

Kanon sighed. She scratched her non-itchy face with her index finger, looking up to the sky.

*Man, it was such a bright day today. But damn, this girl beside me is so damn colder than my lab's air conditioner.*

"... Maybe because it is Airi?"

Shiranui narrowed her eyes upon hearing Kanon's answer. The researcher smiled.

"You know, Airi very rarely... take a wrong judgment on something. Although she looks like that, she is a very just observer. When she is mad, it must always be for a very good reason."

"Mad?"

Kagerou looked surprised.

"Admiral can be mad?"

"Well, surprisingly enough, she can," Kanon laughed. "What kind of super saint that can't be mad? Airi is more than capable to be mad."

Kagerou seemed to disagree but she did not voice her opinion. Perhaps she had never seen her best friend showed her anger.

"It was not adultery, Kanon. It is obviously not adultery."

*Her voice trembling with rage, Airi continued with barely contained anger.*

"It was rape. They merely said that because they dismiss any kind of opinion the Kanmusu might ever have. THAT far. THAT far they are disregarded."

"It's just that, when she was mad, she always have a good reason. And I have never seen her more furious than when she talked about what all of you Kanmusu had been through."

"If I were to one day died or retired... I want my girls to be protected."

Kanon shrugged.

"I may not look like it, you know, but I believe in some of Airi's naive opinions. She can be an extremely stupid and naive person, but she has never been anything but a kind person for as long as I know her—and that is pretty long, mind you. You might not believe me, Shiranui, but your current Admiral has nothing but good will."

Shiranui did not reply. Nor did anything seem to change from her eyes.

*This girl... and her poker face seriously.*

Kanon sighed.

*Well, I give up. I'm never much of a talker anyway.*

She gave Shiranui her smile.
“Just know that you have someone extremely furious for your sake. At least, I would like to help such person.”

XXX

“So both of them accepted?”

“Yes. I think we can continue now.”

The voice on the other side of the phone sounded delighted.

“That’s good news,” The older admiral laughed. He paused for a while then said softly, "How do you feel, Airi?"

How do I... feel?

Airi closed her eyes. She could not tell him about what happened this afternoon, not on the phone. She had a lot she wanted to tell him, and for once she extremely wanted his insights and guidance. He had been an unbelievably strong ally and a reassuring presence. His opinions were always sound and rational, and he taught her so many things for these whole months they knew each other.

Shiranui’s case weighted heavily in her heart. As she talked to Kongou and Haruna about her future plans, Shiranui’s grey eyes knocked the back of her mind over and over. Kongou’s earlier reply did not help either.

"Don’t lower yourself to be in the same level as us. You should never be."

Kongou was undeniably right. Airi thought so as well. It still hurt, however.

What if one day... she would have to betray her own Kanmusu for her plan? What if one day... she became who she never would want to be?

Power is such a delicate, troublesome thing. It makes you able to do what you want yet the responsibility weights heavily. It lures you to your desire, so very strong, and its light could easily blind you. No one is free from mistakes. Thus it makes power even more dangerous.

Yet it is also what she needs. Every ounce of it. For her ideals. For the future she wished to make come true.

"Airi."

Kudou Soujirou’s voice gently called her.

Airi opened her eyes. What she saw was a row of books. Naval warfare books and also folders. There was also her files, documents she had not finished.

"Always believe in yourself. No one will believe in you if you don’t believe in yourself first."

She closed her eyes again. Yes, that is true but...

"And believe in us and your ships."

There was a smile in his words. And gentle affection.

"We will be with you. Don’t worry, you are not alone. If you think you are led astray, ask us. We will get this through together. Hang in there. The big operation might be extremely daunting but
It's also a chance. If we work together, we can get through it."

"... I am just afraid that.."

She could not say it. What if...

His voice on the other side of the receiver sounded restrained. She knew if he were there with her, he would have already had his hand on her head and just ruffled her hair silly. What was she thinking? She shouldn't have...

"Airi, just as you are motivated by your love to them... so are they."

Love.

Chills ran through her... and somehow, she could see her vision blurred.

"Will that even change anything?"

"Believe that your ships do love you back."

His voice dropped softer.

"Don't worry. None of you will betray each other. You won't. We'll look after each other, okay?"

"... yes."

"We sink. And he got promoted."

"Airi? Are you there?"

"Yes."

"This is their fault. Human's fault."

"I hate how no one say anything. Their silence said he was right."

I'm so sorry...

"... Airi?"

"Admiral, Haruna and I have complete trust in your decisions."

"A thank you gift! We're making a new room for you!"

I'm so very sorry...

"... Airi, Sweetheart, are you alright?"

Pushing her sleeved arm to block her tears, she curled herself.

"We sink. And he got promoted."

"It is also true that regardless of any personal emotional feelings I might have it will not change the very fact that I am the absolute voice of this base and that I will not hesitate to use it for things I believe is right."
She did not need to say it, she knew he understood. He let their call lasted without a word being said. All she heard was his breathing at the other side of receiver, and she knew he only heard her restrained cry.

"Please, shape us however you want us to be."

"You are just as scared as they are."

"The sin of your people is not yours."

Their responsibility.

This was their responsibility.

Slowly, Airi opened her eyes. She rubbed her face with her sleeve, looking down at her unfinished documents. She would not let a single drop of tear fell on her documents.

Not her documents.

"Please don't burden yourself with guilt."

"Believe that your ship do love you back."

"I'm sorry, Senpai. I am okay now."

"... Are you sure?"

"That is their answer to your compassion, Admiral Tendouji."

"Oh, come on, Admiral. It isn't that hard to accept, right?"

"Yes. Yes, I am alright."

He may not completely believed her, but he unmistakably trusted her. His voice was firm when he gave his last statement before they cut their call off.

"I see. I will see you at the meeting then, Airi. Best of luck to both of us."

They would meet each other at the admiral general meeting next month. The day when the big operation would finally, officially, commence—Their last chance to make the Grand Marshall change the now-officially implemented plan with sacrificial fleet to the north.

XXXX

"What do you think?"

Kagerou glanced beside her, to observe Shiranui's face. Her little sister did not said a single statement after they escorted Hakurei-sensei back to the main building. She seemed to have a lot in mind and her mind seemed to be elsewhere.

That was to be expected.

Shiranui had a lot to sort.

Her little sister took a considerable time to answer, that Kagerou thought at first she would not reply. They were just arriving by the destroyer dormitory's garden when she suddenly opened her
mouth.

"... She has not betrayed us for now."

Kagerou stopped her steps and looked back. Shiranui looked up, meeting her sister's eyes. Her eyes moved down then back again to her sister's. Uncertain.

"If you deem me unworthy of it, I am willing to take your hate."

"... Is trying enough, Kagerou?"

She was scared. Just like Kagerou herself. They were both scared of expectation. They were both scared of letting go. They were both scared of the future. Giving a small smile, Kagerou extended her hand, taking Shiranui's inside hers.

"More than enough, Shiranui. I am too. I am trying too. We're the same."

Shiranui returned her grip.

She might not be able to express it like the others, but Kagerou understood that for a while her purple eyes turned softer.

From inside the dormitory, barkings could be heard. Kagerou quickly turned around, breaking into a smile as the small body of Kurogane bolted towards them from an opened door. Shigure was the one opening the door to let the dog out—a knowing smile on her face. She shook her head exasperatedly, but did not seem to mind the hassle at all.

Scooping the small pooch into her arms, Kagerou could not hold her laughter when Kurogane started to try licking her face. The little boy's excitement at the mere thought of having her home flooded her with an overwhelming warmth. This dog did not care less about who they were. This dog loved her and that was that. That was all.

Kurogane turned his brown eyes towards Shiranui. For a while it seemed like he froze. Shiranui as well, for a while, just looked at the dog in Kagerou's arms.

This dog barked at her when she was almost converted. He unmistakably could feel the darkness they held.

And yet, now his tail... wagged for them.

The dog barked.

A while later, Shiranui smiled.

Kagerou had never seen her looked so serene in these recent years. She watched as Shiranui gently patted Kurogane and let the dog licked every finger in happiness. The purple eyes were clear when they met her own golden ones.

"Tadaima."

I'm home.

Kagerou smiled, tightening her hug on her dog. That's true. She was just back from expedition.

"Okaeri, Shiranui."
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