"What if it happens again, Fate?"

Hayate's words seemed to echo deeply with the blonde enforcer. She let out a soft gulp, lifting the much smaller girl up and holding her tight for a moment. Her face attention instantly shifted to Nanoha, who had switched to an expression of both worry and confusion.

"Fate...?" Nanoha asked, staring at her with a questioning look. But, instead of an explanation, instead of giving her the answer she wanted, Fate replied with a quick shake of her head. A tiny, but obviously rather forced smile had formed on her lips. She was clearly trying to break the worry away from Nanoha... and failing, horribly.

"It's fine. I didn't think Hayate would be this bad around alcohol." Fate said, her hand moving upwards to her commander's lips and softly silencing her by patting her fingers against them. "She's just worrying about an old argument we had.... I thought she had forgotten about it." A rather forced laugh followed, doing nothing to break the worries away from Nanoha's heart.

"...Fate?" Nanoha's tone had switched to a more serious one this time around. She didn't have to say more, Fate knew that Nanoha was on to her. With how long they've known one-another, with how tight their bond was, a lie like that wouldn't do anything to disrupt Nanoha's senses. All it did... was sting a little. Why would her closest friend, for so many years, hide something that was obviously such a big deal from her?

"I'm sorry, I'll tell you later. I'm going to go bring Hayate to her quarters, so she can rest for a bit. I'll explain when I'm back!"

A pained smile formed on Nanoha's face as she looked at Fate, who had started to trail off with the much smaller Hayate in her arms. Fate probably wasn't going to tell her, was she...? Nanoha didn't think this because of a lack of trust. On the contrary, if it was something Fate had held secret for so many years... it had to be something truly important to Hayate. While she would like to know anything that bothered a friend of hers this much, she knew that some things are better left unknown...

\* \* \*

"Hayate...?" Fate whispered softly, planting her down on the couch in her quarters. A soft tint of red had set onto her cheeks. Hayate replied with a meek giggle, trying to force herself upwards into a sitting position.

"Fate dragging me into my quarters all of a sudden... What's going to happen, I wonder?"

Fate's reaction was a lot less pleasant than Hayate expected. Her hands moved forward to her commander's shoulders, gently forcing her right back down once again. "Hayate. I told you to share these things with me... Chrono told you to share them with him. Everyone, Hayate...!" Fate's tone was completely serious. Even while Hayate was drunk, she was desperately trying to push away people from helping her. The onset of the alcohol barely made it possible for her heart to reach out. And now, once more, she was trying to escape the clutches of her friends' worries.

"Fate~ I think I'm a little bit drunk, you can't honestly take someone drunk seriously, right? I'm bad with alcohol and say stupid things~!" A warm smile formed on Hayate's face as she gently squirmed around, curling herself up as if she were a little kitten. Her expression was obviously intended to be comforting, but she still had a bit of her drunk haze plastered onto her face.

"...Hayate..." Fate's tone wasn't just worried, it was a bit disapproving, too. It was obvious that Hayate had mostly regained her senses, and the first thing she did... was try to hide her own problems away. So that her friends wouldn't worry. Her purity was... problematic. "You don't have to protect us. We're here for you. What happened so long ago wasn't your fau-"

"It was!" Hayate's tone was shrill enough to hurt Fate's ears. However, she didn't flinch even slightly. "It wasn't your fault, it wasn't Nanoha's fault! It wasn't Chrono's fault it wasn't Vita's fault it wasn't Signum's fault it wasn't it wasn't..." the loud, high pitched scream cry turned into something that was more of a weak sobbing.

"It wasn't. If you weren't as strong as you are, it would've been a lot worse."

"But I should've been stronger! It should've never happened in the first place!

Fate gulped, moving her finger to Hayate's lips just once again and gently silencing her. "Please. I'll talk to you more about this when you're in a better state of mind, okay? You're too stressed out. Just... rest for a bit, and lets go back down and have fun with everyone again, okay...?

Hayate let out a soft, sobbing noise, before weakly nodding at Fate. "T-thank you." while it couldn't completely kill her worries, Fate's gentle way of speaking was enough to calm her down for now. Fate wouldn't blame her, no matter what happened... and she would always be gentle and encouraging. Right now, Fate was the strong pillar of support that Hayate needed. "Please don't tell Nanoha..."

Fate gently shook her head, giving Hayate a gentle pat on the head. "I won't. I promised you, didn't I? I won't tell a soul. Not even Nanoha."

\* Seven \* Years \* Ago \*

It all started on a cold winter day. It had been two years since the three young mages had enlisted in the TSAB. The Wolkenritter were still under rather heavy surveillance; they were still seen as criminals that had to pay for their previous deeds. Even though they got off relatively light and were even granted entry into the TSAB, their status meant that Hayate couldn't spend too much time with them. While they had much more freedom than their early 'imprisonment' gave them, they were still constantly enlisted on missions without a way to refuse.

It would've been so desperately lonely, if it weren't for Nanoha and Fate. The times that her Wolkenritter weren't around were always spent with those two. Even though the situation initially sounded so desperate, her two newest friends just dragged her through so easily. Of course, it wasn't just them! Arisa and Suzuka helped, too. But, because of the experienced the three shared, their bond was a bit different. Not only were they her precious friends, she owed her life to them.

Well, there was one other, too. Reinforce Zwei. She had been newly born only a year ago, and she retained the beautiful personality Reinforce had before she joined the stars. She was the second coming of the protective wind, and while not as destructively powerful, she was just as loyal to her beloved master. With her, Hayate's family was complete once again. It felt like it was the start of a most beautiful story...

But, that day, a day that ominously mimicked the day Reinforce finally departed, cast Hayate's hopes into ruin. She was walking down the street, enjoying a free day with Reinforce Zwei, enjoying the sensation of the cold winter breeze tickling her cheeks. This weather was special to her... while it symbolized the day Reinforce was taken away, it was also the day where she was reborn, free of worries. The same weather struck the day Reinforce Zwei was reborn. And now, this time...

Hayate's phone rang. She had been waiting for a call- Vita promised to call her when her mission was over so they could have a little chat, but it seemed like she was being late. It tended to happen, so Hayate wasn't too worried. With a single, fluid movement, Hayate grabbed onto her phone and answered it, pushing it towards her ear and letting out a happy "Hello~"

"Um, Miss Yagami?" There was a man on the other side of the telephone. It wasn't a voice she recognized... but, more importantly, the voice sounded kinda distressed. Was it someone from the TSAB? Why would they suddenly contact her...? Especially in such a tone... Hayate gulped softly, the tone for the rest of the day had already been set, without even needing to hear the situation.

A few for the worst had already set into her young mind. Hayate took a moment of silence, needing to recollect herself. "Y-yes...? This is Yagami speaking..." after a few short moments, she finally answered. I-it couldn't be Vita, right? Maybe she got hurt on a mission, maybe she got hospitalized... There's no way she would die, but what if... what if...

"It's about miss Takamachi." the voice gave a direct response. Unlike Hayate, he didn't need even an instant to recollect himself. "...She's been hospitalized after a mission. Her situation is critical. Miss Vita of the Wolkenritter asked me to call you."

Those words... wouldn't even reach Hayate's ears. When she heard about Nanoha's condition being critical, the phone slipped from her fingers and down onto the snow beneath her. Her beautiful, sky-blue eyes lost their focus, and her pupils widened with fear. "Nanoha..." her voice was broken, terrified... The young Reinforce Zwei didn't need anything else to understand what was going on. "We need to... the hospital... now."

Hayate's magic started to rampantly gather around her body and she chaotically lifted herself into flight. Reinforce Zwei quickly jumped up and fused her body into Hayate's... regulating her magical power. If it went rampant right here, she could potentially wipe out the entire city, if not more. But, all she could do was that. Regulate her magical energy. She could do nothing to deter the onslaught of emotion filling Hayate's head. All she could do was weakly and desperately wait, hoping that her Meister's worse fears were far from the truth.

After all... Nanoha is too strong, right...? She can't actually die, right!? Just because she's critical, doesn't mean she's in any danger... the TSAB has the best medics around. Nanoha will be fine, happy, and on her feet again within a week!

Hayate couldn't share Rein's positivity. All she could feel was an extreme, genuine fear.

\* \* \*

But no matter how hard she hoped, her wishes wouldn't simply change reality. On her way to Nanoha, she had only stopped at the information desk to ask for her room. She rushed to the front of the line, her hands gripping tightly onto the plastic counter. A voice of objection came from the line she had just intruded upon, but after seeing how she was shaking and how she seemed to tether off the edge of despair, they wisely held their words.

"Nanoha... Nanoha Takamachi! Where!" she cried out, staring at the receptionist. "Please... where!?" she was panicking so hard that she didn't even give the lady the time she needed to respond. Nodding and typing something in her computer, Hayate was at the edge of her patience. "H-hurry... Nanoha, she..." her head pressed firmly against the counter, and all she could do during an almost-endless wait was sob. She wanted to scream, at the top of her lungs... but, the presence of the little Reinforce just barely kept her under control. She calmed not only her powers, but she barely kept her emotions under control, too!

Reinforce Zwei's strong, tending positivity was what kept Hayate under control. Just like the original Reinforce, she had a special, soothing wind around her. A wind so strong that it could even help the despairing Hayate stand upright. It was a protective wind that kept Hayate from tumbling off the edge and falling into true despair. With the situation Nanoha was in, it was something that Hayate desperately needed...

"Room 563, fifth flo-" The receptionist couldn't even finish her reply. She tried to take a soothing tone towards the obviously panicked young girl, but Hayate didn't even stick around long enough to hear it. The instant those words came to her ears, she had already started dashing as quick as she possibly could. Her legs were still a little weak, but she didn't care. She couldn't care. She had to make it to Nanoha, she had to...

...But what she saw was worse than she had even imagined.

Nanoha was laying down on the hospital bed. Covered in bandages, hooked up to all sorts of machinery that were monitoring her condition constantly. She was hooked up to machinery that was probably keeping her alive. Vita was sitting beside her on her left, while Fate was on her right side. The both of them were clutching tightly onto her hand.

Vita was crying her eyes out, clinging to Nanoha's hand and holding it tightly to her face. It was completely unlike her ordinary reliable and strong personality. Even though she could get a bit childish at times, she was never one to cry, no matter how harsh the situation was. She clung tightly onto the strength of her heart, and never let it go.

Fate, however, had gone completely silent Those red eyes of her had gone completely soulless. Instead of shining as bright as red jewels, they were empty. She wasn't crying at all, she was simply staring down at Nanoha's fallen body. All she seemed to be able to do was gently clutch her hand and mutter "Nanoha" weakly.

But the most devastating part of it was seeing one of her closest friends in the same position she was a few years ago. Bedridden, unable to move... wired to all sorts of medical equipment to make sure she couldn't just die. Constantly supervised, to make sure the hope of her survival would never fleet. "Vita, Fate... What happened?" Hayate spoke, slowly stepping closer to the two. However, neither of them could respond. Vita couldn't even hear Hayate's voice over her own tears, while Fate had just completely lost sync with reality itself.

"Nanoha... had an accident."

Shamal had entered from the doorway behind the three, her doctor's gown on. "Vita and her were ambushed on their mission... Nanoha overexerted her body and couldn't fight back. Vita brought her back to base just in time... I managed to keep her alive, but..." even Shamal seemed to be uncomfortable in taking these words to mouth, letting out an audible gulp and taking a deep breath before continuing. "...I don't know if she'll ever be able to get out of bed again... let alone use spread her wings and fly. She's going to have to fight just to survive."

With those words, the entire room fell silent. Vita's sobbing stopped as she just looked at her fallen companion. Fate had stopped moving, not even muttering Nanoha's name anymore, Shamal's gaze was simply weakly moving through the room, as if trying to avert both Vita and Fate's eyes. For a few moments, the room was completely silent...

"Ahaha, what's this negativity about?"

Hayate was the one to finally break the silence. Her words caused everyone's eyes to fall upon her. They were all uncomfortable by what she had said, but Fate seemed almost angry by how casually she spoke up. "This is Nanoha we're talking about! She's the reason we're all here now!" Hayate forced a smile onto her face, sitting down on the foot end of the bed and drawing both Vita and Fate towards her, quickly yanking them closer by their arms and into a tight hug.

"Fate, Vita? I promise. She'll be okay. She's the strongest person I know! Something like that... to Nanoha, it's just a minor setback! When she wakes up again, tomorrow, she'll grab you by the nose, Vita, telling you you know how strong she is! She'll pat you on the head, Fate, telling you she didn't mean to scare you! That's how Nanoha is! Something like this won't stop her!" a quick peck went to the foreheads of both Vita and Fate, hoping to calm them down a little as she continued to speak.

"I promise, okay? She won't die. She'll wake up and show us all how strong she is! She'll push through, like she always does."

Hayate's confident words seemed to calm both Vita and Fate just a slight bit. The colour seemed to return to Fate's eyes and face both, showing she had returned to sanity at the very least. At the same time, Vita had recovered enough to tightly wrap her arms around Hayate's body, gently sobbing into her side.

"...Meister..." But, the young Reinforce in Hayate's heart could see that Hayate wasn't nearl that confident. She could feel her emotions, she could feel how she was merely holding herself strong for her friends. All the words she said- she wasn't just trying to keep her friends strong and convince them that Nanoha was safe. She was trying to convince herself, too. "...Please, Meister, you don't have to hold your heart back. You don't have to stay strong after something like this..."

But even though her unison device begged her, Hayate wouldn't show even a shred of her tears. Not in front of her friends, those who needed someone to keep strong the most now. Fate and Vita both needed someone to remind her everything would turn out okay. Shamal had the responsibility, as a doctor, to not sugar coat reality and be honest about Nanoha's condition, all three of them knew it. But, just maybe, Hayate's words could take the pain away a bit, or at least numb it just a bit.

"Meister, if you want to cry, please don't keep it inside. You're just hurting yourself..." But Hayate simply shut out her unison device's comforting words, showing the both of her friends a warm smile to hopefully snap them out of their current fears... or, at least, ease them a bit.

"It'll be just like me, okay? It's a bit scary now, but she'll pull herself back together. It is Nanoha, after all! Really. If I could do it..." Hayate just kept on talking. Trying to keep her own fears at bay. She had to be strong for her friends, there is no way she could succumb here as well! If she could just grit her teeth a little while, Vita and Fate would be so much happier...

...Were it not for the both of their half-broken states, they'd definitely notice Hayate's. Her eyes, normally a pure blue in her unison, had gone darker and empty. They seemed a bit purplish as her pupils just shook with sadness. The slightest amount of tears had formed in her eyes, enough to fog up her vision but she never let it be enough to spill out. Her skin had gone from her usual skintone to a deathly pale.

"Meister. Please, please listen to me... We all know you're hurt! Seeing you keep it in like this, it isn't helping anyone...! Meister, Meister Hayate...!"

But, Rein's voice couldn't even reach her Meister anymore.