

VoE - (Un)fortunate Kiss

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Prolog: Sneaky

A lazy summer breeze rippled the tree-tops growing on the school grounds of Kamakura-Kita-High. The afternoon sky was a crisp blue full of promises. Even though most of the students were still engaged in class and club activities, day-dreaming about what they would do this upcoming weekend, a second-year girl stood hidden behind a locker in the otherwise deserted school hallway.

Waiting.

Due to her coach and teacher's sudden indisposition, the girl's final class and the track practice that followed it had been cancelled for today. She wasn't actually skipping any classes, but the teachers who may catch her wouldn't know that (and her father, upon hearing about it, would be furious). She did not want to take time to concoct an excuse as to why she was tip-toeing through the school and not heading home early like a normal teen. And time was what she just couldn't seem to afford recently.

It had been three and a half weeks since her last visit to Gaia. Nearly a month! Even though she had tried really hard to not let it go longer than two weeks between visits, she just hadn't managed lately. School stuff, family engagements, and daily life had just seemed to add up and engulf her more and more of her time recently. Knowing that Van was patiently waiting for her next visit made her feel even more guilty.

Oh, right. He was certainly waiting now.

Concentrating once more on her quest lying ahead, she adjusted her hearing and decided that the teacher's trip to the toilet would take much longer than she had anticipated. It should be safe to take a chance getting to the staircase that led straight to the school's roof without being seen or heard. She stepped as quietly as possibly past the closed bathroom door and started up the stairs. She had just reached the top when said door suddenly burst open again. The fair-haired girl flinched, but pressed on. With a victorious smile, she silently opened the door outside. Not a minute later, embraced by the pillar of light like by an old friend, Hitomi vanished from the roof and reappeared right in front of the Fanelian king.

Kapitel 1: Light Pillars

Sitting behind his desk, Isamu Kanzaki snorted. Taking a small break from his straining work, he had just read the cover page in today's newspaper. Columns of light, which had been witnessed somewhat regularly throughout the coastal city of Kamakura, still lacked a proper explanation. Was it a new weather phenomenon? The end of the world? Extraterrestrials? Isamu snorted again. And this was supposed to be the most reliable paper the seaside-city Kamakura could present? What nonsense. With something like that on the front page, Isamu was quite sure the paper just wanted to distract from the most recent shortcomings of local political leaders.

But still, he had read the whole article nonetheless. Too much of it reminded him of the crap their 16-year-old-daughter had served them when suddenly coming back last year after she had been missing for nearly 13 months. He remembered her return like it was yesterday: it had been a normal evening mid-week—as normal as life could be with a missing child—and Kazumi, his wife, was cleaning up dinner, when the doorbell rang. Isamu went to answer, and there she was: still wearing her school uniform, which looked more than a bit tattered, Hitomi stood in the light of the porch with a nervous but happy smile on her face. They had all been so relieved that she was alive and home. But then she had told her story. From all the things she could have invented during her absence, she chose to tell them THAT?

According to Hitomi, she had been transported to another planet named "Gaia" and there witnessed war, experienced magic, and forged deep friendships. Then she stated that she couldn't come back until this very day when she knocked on the door. How did she return? By a pillar of light, of course. Isamu scoffed at the memory.

He had openly questioned her mental state back then, even asking if she had been on a drug trip the entire time; his daughter had nearly cried. "It's nothing but the truth," she still claimed. He hadn't believed her. And her pendant, her treasure, was gone, too. If it wasn't for Kazumi's careful observation, this little detail might have gone unnoticed, but when they had asked her what had happened to her favorite good-luck charm, Hitomi simply went very silent. Eventually, she quietly stated that she had lost it. With one glance Isamu could tell she was lying. A boy then, maybe. Or worse, an older man twice her age. Or better yet, a knight in shining armor. Isamu chuckled over his own joke.

Kazumi had done everything to conceal her story. When reporting her found to the police, they explained her absence by saying she just couldn't remember where she'd been but was fine otherwise; the two officers had just smiled patiently at her. An old friend, a psychologist, even attested their daughter's memory loss. Except for the occasional whisper of gossip from someone and the hours Hitomi spent with a psychologist every week – for appearance's sake –, life went on as if nothing had happened. Isamu had been highly surprised when she had been able to catch up with all the necessary school units, new ones and the ones she'd missed, without a further need for repeating the first grade of high-school. She even had decent results—but his daughter wasn't stupid, after all.

Isamu had observed that Hitomi had changed a lot during her absence. She was much calmer and had matured remarkably. Also, she cared more about her family, was patient with her little brother (which might have been the biggest surprise to Isamu), and concentrated on her studies without complaint.

Maybe these changes were due to her bad conscience. Isamu guessed his daughter might feel the heavy burden of guilt about leaving without a word for so long. He recognized that whatever transgression SHE might be thinking she had committed, she knew its severity and applied herself vigorously to her renewed life at home.

It only rankled the family father that his daughter seemed to sneak off from time to time. Even if she told her parents that she was going out with Yukari, leaving for a run, or going to the library, Isamu was sure she lied about her plans. He hated her having secrets. But no matter how much Isamu tried, he just couldn't find out the truth. When trying to "catch" her, she really was at Yukari's. Or the library. Or sometimes he didn't find her at all. He'd even searched her room once when she was at school, but except for a hidden box with a big white feather (admittedly strange), he hadn't found anything revealing. And when trying to corner her on this or that, Kazumi would always come to their daughters defense. Isamu just knew that something was fishy, and he would find out what was going on.

The sudden ringing of his phone propelled him back to reality. "Speaking of the devil," he thought, smiling, as he saw the pet-name displayed on his phone, "Cutie Kazootie". Hopefully his wife would never find out what he secretly called her. Otherwise an average middle-aged man, Isamu had the strange habit of inventing stupid nicknames for the people around him, especially the ones he cared about or had known a long time. He had even given the Korean lawyer, who he'd worked with for the past decade at his hospital, the nickname "Sue Yoo". Competent woman.

Picking up the phone, he heard Kazumi rattling some plastic bags in the background. She surely just came back home with the groceries for today's supper. "Isamu" she said, her voice slightly hectic, "how is work? Will you make it home earlier today?"

Isamu took a side glance at his paperwork. "Yes, should be fine." Thinking about the upcoming family dinner, he added, "I simply cannot understand why my parents don't want me to pick them up – again. They're both approaching seventy and still stubborn as mules."

The bags still rustled in the background. Kazumi started giggling, "Well, then the apple didn't fall far from the tree with you, my dear."

"Aren't we funny today. Any special reason?" Isamu retorted while looking again at his newspaper with a bored expression.

"Of course not!" Kazumi said with a pacifying tone in her voice. "But I can understand father and mother well. They both just don't want to be treated as old people. Surely, they will live to a ripe old age this way. It will keep them agile." Isamu just shrugged, although he knew she couldn't see it from the other end of the line. "But there is

another reason I called in the first place.”

“Oh, what is that?” Putting the newspaper aside, he gave his wife his full attention.

“Could you pick up Hitomi after school by chance? Then we could start dinner a bit earlier and your parents won’t need to catch the late train back home. But I’m stuck here and can’t go get her.” She started chopping something. Isamu wondered if she did that on purpose sometimes, for emphasis.

Taking a look at his watch, he answered, “No problem. Her Friday classes are over at 17 o’clock, right?”

“Yes.”

Looking back at the news article, his thoughts circled back to the light pillars. “Fine, I’ll go fetch her. After her disappearance a year ago, I prefer to keep an eye on her from time to time anyway.”

“Isamu! Hadn’t we talked about that already?” It was a statement more than a question. Isamu instantly regretted expressing his thoughts out loud. Kazumi could get quite agitated when it came to the topic, and it was really annoying to argue with her about it again and again. But his wife would continue, of course. “I just can’t imagine why Hitomi would have lied to us about it.” Well, I definitely can, Isamu added inwardly. “There are simply too many coincidences with what my mother had experienced in her youth – that, Isamu, Hitomi – did – not – know – of!” She was definitely chopping when she said that.

“Even IF she isn’t lying, Hitomi is keeping something from us! And who knows but that Hitomi just embellished that She-Devil’s story as a cover for whatever she was doing that year!”

“Isamu, I forbid you to talk about my late mother that way!!” A resounding *CHONK* told him that Kazumi had cut her poor vegetable with way more strength than necessary. Suddenly, he felt quite content with the pile of work that still awaited him here. Yielding, he tried to soothe his wife, “Of course, Kazumi, dear. I was just joking. You above all people should know that I, too, miss her deeply.”

“Humph.” Now it was Kazumi’s turn to make a sound similar to a snort. Why was it always him giving in? Isamu wondered briefly. Kazumi didn’t seem in the mood for an argument. After a short silence, she added “Just don’t forget to send Hitomi a message on LINE,” LINE was the family’s preferred messaging app. “or I am pretty sure she will just hop on the first tram home with Yukari, and you two will miss each other.”

Glad that the conversation was over, he said, “I will. See you later.”

“Thanks. Bye.” Before hanging up his phone, Isamu imagined still hearing loud cutting noises. For emphasis, surely.

Kapitel 2: Short visit

Turning her face towards the sun, Hitomi let out a pleasant sigh. The light, cool breeze blissfully played with the strands of her shoulder-length hair, and though still warm, the summer sun didn't beam as relentlessly on her head in Fanelia as it did back in Japan. Visiting Gaia, with this marvelous weather, she felt the strain of her studies lifting bit by bit from her shoulders. She hadn't felt this relaxed for quite some time now, really. It was so... peaceful. It was a new sensation in this world, something she had seldom felt here before.

Slowly letting her thoughts wander back to Van and Merle's conversation, she stretched her toes on the cozy blanket Merle had brought from the palace for them to sit on. The fabric felt a bit rough under her bare feet, but it was not an unpleasant feeling. "... And can you still remember the fuzz counsellor Rogant kicked up when the building master did not install the pipes of the west wing properly?" the cat girl laughed happily. Hitomi smiled. That was just so *Merle*, making fun of others on any occasion possible. Although her behavior and her voice were really annoying most of the time, Hitomi had grown quite fond of the lively kitten. She wondered briefly when *that* might have happened.

Guiding her focus on to the young raven-haired king, she just glimpsed his mouth twitching, to her surprise. He seemed to remember a hilarious incident. Van, normally quite solemn, seemed to be in higher spirits than usual this afternoon. Might it be because she came to visit him? Even though she didn't want to interpret too much from his actions or imagine herself being more important to him than she actually might be, she couldn't help it. The thought of him being delighted to see her made her chest flutter with warmth. She hoped he really felt that way. Or, maybe, he was just slowly adjusting to the peace his country enjoyed since the end of the Great Gaian War. If that meant Van was slowly opening up and beginning to show the wonderful person he was inside, it made her even happier.

"Of course, I remember," he said. "How could I ever forget? Even though it actually isn't something to laugh about." Hitomi raised her eyebrow questioningly at this statement. With warm twinkling eyes, he simply smiled at her. "Considering the *trouble* we went through to fix all the incorrectly installed pipes... and the horrendous costs the incident entailed." For a brief moment, the good mood of the king Hitomi had observed before seemed to falter, but then a huge grin spread across his face. Somehow, her cheeks warmed at the sight. "However, the flabbergasted face Rogant made when coming into our next council meeting, soiled from top to toe, was just priceless!"

Ugh.

What a damper.

Apparently not to Merle, who had started to giggle again. "Yes, and the clamor he made about it! I NEVER would have thought a stoic person like him could get that

agitated and red-faced over a little bit of dirt!”

“Well, it was more than only a bit of dirt, mind you,” Van stated plainly. “In fact, it might have been a piece of dirt from every person in the palace. It was a particularly big mess. Luckily for us, the West Wing could still be finished before winter.”

“And that there hadn’t been any carpets laid anywhere near it beforehand!” Merle added cheekily.

Disgusted by the topic at hand, Hitomi tuned out mentally again. From her prior visits, Hitomi knew that the king intended to modernize the Fanelian capital, using other big cities like Pallas as a model. Beginning from mapping the city’s districts and planning the reinforcement of the defensive fortifications around Fanelia, it had also been decided to put the surrounding mountains’ resources to better use in mining drag-energists. Not only to enhance the trade, but to also fuel researches for the alternative use of the dragon hearts-turned-stone. Thinking of hospitals on earth, Hitomi had suggested researching machines for medical purposes, which Van had thought brilliant.

And, of course, obviously to supply the city with a system to get fresh water into the capital, and all the filth its inhabitants produced *out*. But if Fanelia was suffering from exploding pipes in its most important building, well, there seemed to be quite the obstacles present. Although Hitomi had no idea from which country the building master causing the damage came from in the first place.

Other than that, it seemed Van was doing a great job. Under his grumpy surface, he cared deeply for his people, and they loved him back for it. Hitomi knew she was also important to him, but sometimes she wondered to what degree. Even if their love was said to be the crucial factor that thwarted the dark schemes of the Zaibachian Empire, she suddenly wasn’t so sure anymore if he still returned her feelings.

Van had always been shy towards her. From time to time, she would catch herself feeling a deep, unsatisfied longing for him, one that wasn’t always innocent (which embarrassed her as she thought about it). But the truth was, all the time they were secretly seeing each other, he had never attempted to get closer to her. They would never hold hands. And they hadn’t kissed, yet. Not once. On one or two occasions, she had thought he would try, but it was always something else: a bug on her shoulder, an innocent hug—it could have meant everything, or nothing.

Or maybe, he was just giving her the space she needed to recover from the delicate mental scars she still had from their journey together, without putting too much pressure on her to choose between him or her family until she was ready to do so. Although this thought rang with truth in her head, it also left a bitter aftertaste. It reminded her that not only would she have to make a choice, but Van would also if she stayed indecisive for too long. For him, it was either waiting for her to be ready or attending to his country’s needs and eventually find a wife; she didn’t want to ponder which one would be his priority. No matter how she turned it, she was afraid. Both afraid her love would become even more platonic and unrequited over the passing of time and she would lose him – if he *really did* love her to begin with, that was – but

also afraid to make a decision that would mean leaving her family and home planet. These thoughts made her sick; her cheerful mood vanished for good.

"By the way, what will you do about the rank order next week?" she heard Merle ask Van. "I'm sure, Egzardia and Daedalus both won't be pleased if you put one of them in front for the other. They hate each other since that bomb."

Due to her gloomy thoughts, she only listened half-heartedly as Van sighed and answered. "I'm not sure yet. Guess I'll take that in for the next council meeting agenda. I don't want to risk a war only because I thoughtlessly walked on some country's toes. Maybe we should convene a meeting just for the seating order or something."

Thoughts trailing away again, Hitomi's eyes rested on her wrist watch. When her empty gaze suddenly grasped the digits' time, she let out a frustrated groan. *Crap!* Her two companions stopped their conversation and looked at her, curious. *Already that late!* she thought. *Time always flies by when I am here.* When she suddenly jumped up, Merle looked at her in bewilderment.

"What is it? Don't tell me you just had a vision?"

Though in a rush putting on her running shoes, Hitomi managed a smile towards the cat girl. "No, don't worry, Merle! Sorry if I've startled you. I just need to go back immediately." She picked up her bag. "I am sorry. Thanks for the tea and the nice afternoon, you both!"

"What? So soon?" Seeing Vans disappointed face, Hitomi suddenly felt sorry again. Avoiding his gaze when the pang of guilt hit her, she took up her bag. "Yes, my grandparents are coming for dinner tonight. I can't be late. My father is quite strict about punctuality."

"If you hadn't told us, we would have never known!" Merle chimed in.

"Yeah, yeah... come here, you noisy fur ball." Ignoring the cat girl's prior statement, Hitomi hugged her swiftly. "Good bye, Merle."

"Hopefully see you soon. Why don't you come more often? Your visits are getting rarer and rarer!" the lively cat-girl exclaimed.

"I'll try..." she promised honestly while turning towards Van to give him a brief hug, too. She seemed to recognize an emotion that might have been hurt flicker over his face, but it was gone so fast she couldn't be sure; it could have been her imagination playing tricks on her again. Letting go of him, she turned around to leave, when she suddenly felt him holding her back by her wrist.

"Please wait a moment. May I ask a favor of you?"

"What is it?" she wondered.

"In three days' time, a conference will be held here in Fanelia with all the allied nations. I remember telling you about it last time. It would be nice to have you by my side then. I am quite sure Millerna will be here, too, to represent Asturia. Her father still had issues with his health recently, and I heard Eries is in Neibara right now for important negotiations."

Knowing she had to reject his offer, Hitomi tried to look apologetic, but she cursed inwardly. Why couldn't it be a bit earlier, like tomorrow? She would have *loved* to come here to see him again so soon, and she hadn't seen Millerna for a long while now. And this time, she would have stolen herself away right from under her father's close supervision, no matter what. "I'm really sorry, but I can't! We have an important test at school on Monday that I can't just skip."

"Don't worry, I fully understand." Trying again, he added: "What about the day after that? The most important participants will stay in the city and visit the building sites as well as the finished districts. It will be less formal, if this is what you were worrying about. In the evening, there will be a banquet in the palace, too."

Taking another glance at the time, she cursed mentally again, but this time because he wasn't letting her go... if she couldn't leave soon, she wouldn't be able to catch the tram. "I can't then, either... I'll have school all day!"

"Oh, I see. Then how about..."

Growing more impatient by the second, she could only think of interrupting him. "Van, listen, I really need to go now!" Trying to free herself from his grip, she was utterly surprised when he didn't release her now either. Although he was holding her wrist quite gently, she somehow knew there would be no wriggling free from him. What was the matter with him all of a sudden? Her astonished look traveled from her wrist to his face.

"I hadn't finished talking yet." He stated firmly, resoluteness in his eyes.

"Well, why don't you come with me, then?" was the only thing that came to her mind and might provide a solution to her current dilemma. "If you want to talk, we can do so on my way home. But I really WILL miss the tram if we don't leave right now, and I will get an earful of scolding!"

"Fine. Let's go, then." Just like that, Van let go of her wrist. "Merle, please inform the council meeting of my absence today. They are to present their suggestions of the conference details by tomorrow morning."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. They will survive without me one afternoon. And please," the young king unbelted his sword and tossed it for Merle to catch, "keep my sword safe until my return."

"I will! Goodbye, Hitomi!"

Dashing away in an instant, both Van and Hitomi waved shortly at the cat girl and left for earth.

Kapitel 3: Something Tangible

Being some minutes early, Isamu was quite relieved to see that there still were some free spaces to park in right at the school gates. Pulling his Toyota Corolla into one of the spots and turning the car off, he took a glance out of the rear window to check the area for any signs of his daughter. The grounds still seemed quite deserted, but he didn't mind waiting a bit. As she had a habit of checking her mobile phone frequently, Isamu was sure Hitomi had already seen the message he had sent an hour or so ago, telling her to find him near the entrance. Now he found this was a good opportunity to finish that newspaper he hadn't had time for earlier.

Reading a sports article for a couple of minutes, he faintly recognized the chimes of the school bells in the background, as well as the thundering sound of students pouring out of the building shortly after. Hitomi should be here soon. After reading some more, Isamu had just turned the pages to study another article about the new Kamakura waste policy, when the noise of an argument reached his ears. A boy and a girl, by the sound of it. He found it quite unbelievable. Young people today really weren't able to behave themselves anymore! Quarrelling in the middle of the street, their smaller or bigger secrets for everyone on display. He wondered when this shift in Japanese society had taken place. Definitely not when *he* was young!

Not interested in this kind of real-life soap opera and neither happy about the interruption, Isamu rustled extra loudly with his paper, trying to concentrate yet once again on its contents. But it was fruitless. The argument was close by, and they were making way too much noise. And *what on earth* took his daughter so long?

Despite his initial disinterest, Isamu craned his neck in the direction of the commotion, keeping an eye out for Hitomi. The sight left him wide-eyed.

One of the arguing parties was no other than his own child. The boy besides her wore an expression of suppressed anger and clenched his fists on both sides. Isamu took an instant dislike in the brat. The unruly hair, tall and lean build, and handsome face didn't help this first impression either. Isamu decided to watch them for now.

When he saw his daughter trying to soothe the boy, Isamu was perplexed that she was actually speaking a language he didn't even recognize. This was neither English nor Korean, not even Chinese. Since *when* was his daughter linguistically talented? And except for English, he didn't remember her taking any other language classes. She seemed to speak that strange tongue quite fluently. What was going on here? Taking a closer look, the young man didn't seem to be from Japan. In fact, he couldn't place him from *anywhere*.

Isamu couldn't have possibly understood what his daughter was trying to say to pacify the raven-haired boy. But he *definitely* understood that the lout all of a sudden burst into rantings against Hitomi, who recoiled with shock or fear. Which one, he couldn't tell. But it didn't matter. No one should EVER treat his little girl that way!

Slamming the door while exiting the car, he realized they now *really* were causing quite the commotion thanks to that choleric boy. Being in midst of the schools' rush hour, Isamu could hear some of the students whisper to each other in passing, and two of them even used their mobile phones for shooting pictures or filming. During his way towards the pair, he watched as Hitomi blushed in embarrassment about something the little bugger had said to her. Isamu hadn't been this angry in a long time. But he also felt in his gut that he soon would find some of the answers to questions he has had for over a year.

As he strode closer, Isamu watched the young man's anger fizzle out all of a sudden. Sitting down on the wall behind him, he told Hitomi something in this strange tongue of his with an intense look on his face. Isamu liked this look even less than the yelling from before and sped up his pace. He recognized the expression in the boy's face, and, when Hitomi's big, green eyes glanced back to him, Isamu noticed she was clueless about what was coming. Fortunately, he was only a few steps away from them.

Sure enough, with a swift motion, the boy pulled Hitomi into a tight embrace way too indecent for the school grounds and kissed her.

Time stopped, along with Isamu's footsteps.

When his daughter responded, curling her fingers into the boy's black hair, Isamu's jaw finally dropped open.

Being left by the pillar of light on top of the school, Hitomi prayed nobody had seen them arriving. She knew it hadn't been wise to use this means of transport at the same place in one day, but with apparently none of those crazy alien worshippers anywhere nearby, the girl supposed she had been lucky again and hoped it would just stay that way. Hitomi's phone instantly made some annoying beeping sounds, rudely signaling the receipt of several text messages. Yukari, most likely, asking why she hadn't had left with her earlier that day. Not that Yukari didn't know about Van, but her travel to Gaia had been so spontaneous this time that Hitomi hadn't thought about notifying her in some way, not even in form of a short LINE message.

Well, the texts she could check on later. Better she and Van left the roof *now* and head for the tram station, before anyone decided to search for the cause of the sudden, iridescent light. Besides; although she was quite relieved that there was still some time until the school bells would ring and therefore no need to rush down (lucky again), there was no time to dawdle either. On her way home, they could talk as promised, and she would send Van back to Fanelia from nearby her home. Quite an easy solution. At least if Van would find his voice back before then, that was. She rolled her eyes inwardly. Since leaving from their picnic side, he had been silent. Always the same with him.

"Come on, let's go." Hitomi said with an encouraging nod of her head, starting to walk down. "You wanted to talk to me?" she added, trying to coax him into spilling

whatever was on his mind. She received an affirmative bob of his head, which stretched into another silence. He seemed to be brooding over something, acting weird again.

Great.

When reaching the entrance hall, the school chimes rang loudly. That was also when Van finally decided to talk to her again, scratching his neck awkwardly with one free hand. "You said you won't have time within the next few days. Shall we meet when the conference is over, then? Let's say, in eight days' time?" Hitomi was confused. Why did he take so much time to get this simple question out, she wondered? Van hadn't *ever* been shy about asking to meet her. On the contrary, he had even acted quite forcefully earlier when she had tried to leave him behind. "If I remember correctly, your world has a seven-day week cycle, so you don't have school that day, right? Don't know about your precious tests, though." He continued in an attempt of a joke.

Now Hitomi was quite impressed. Readjusting her sports bag, she pushed the doors open, asking "You actually remember?"

"Mm-mh."

Crossing the courtyard, she pondered. "In eight days, let's see..." Counting her fingers, she realized it must be "Saturday. Let me think, there was something..." Wrinkling her forehead in concentration, they already had passed the school gates when realization hit her. "No, Van, I am so sorry, but I can't. My cousin will be getting married. I couldn't possibly be absent for that!"

Hearing this, the young king suddenly became indignant. "Well, I have a solution for this *big problem* of yours – take me with you! I will definitely take some of my time to come around. It would be a good opportunity to finally get to know your family, don't you think?"

She gasped.

Although she tried to hide the panic in her eyes by looking away as neutrally as she could, she instantly knew Van had already seen it. Stopping mid-track, he caught her wrist the second time this day. "Really, Hitomi? You are still hiding me—hiding *us* from your family?"

Uh oh. It suddenly appeared to Hitomi that her recent worries about a non-existent relationship were unnecessary. Van maybe *was* just shy or trying to be chivalrous or patient with her, as she had contemplated earlier that day. Maybe it was even some kind of medieval mindset to not touch a girl before marriage, as Yukari always jokingly claimed. Hitomi wanted to react a bit more eloquently, but her mind suddenly went empty and a dumb "What?" was the only thing she managed to squeak in response.

His expression as he looked into her guilty face was horrified. He let go of her wrist in disgust. "I can't believe it! They still don't know about me? Didn't you want to take care of this weeks ago?" he exclaimed, his voice increasing in volume. Hitomi recalled

dimly agreeing for him to meet her family, she mentally scolded herself for not paying more attention to his request. He had asked so casually; she had viewed it as mere curiosity about her life on earth. Her own recent doubts about his feelings towards her had reinforced that assumption. As a result, she had just flippantly accepted. But this was different: he did not want to get to know her family as a friend – but as her *boyfriend*.

Suddenly she realized why he had been so reluctant before: he did not want to be disappointed by her. She was so stupid. He missed her, like she was always missing him. And the only thing she did was bestow him with false promises and scarce, brief visits. Her face went red. *Of course* he would get agitated! If it had been her in his stead, she would have already slapped him. Twice, at least. Now, she could only try to minimize the damage caused. When angered, Van could be quite the tinderbox.

Noticing Van was observing her, awaiting her reaction, Hitomi reluctantly forced herself to answer. "Yes, I did say that, but... there was not really a chance to tell my parents about you yet... you know, especially my father most likely would not receive that news with joy." Softly, she added "There is so much school work I have to do at the moment, it is nearly impossible to find an appropriate situation to talk to mother and father... convince them, that it is alright for me to... to see someone." An embarrassed silence followed.

The truth was, she was still sorting things out. The experiences she had during the war, the losses, all the blood and death and visions, had often kept her awake at night in the beginning. Amidst the busy daily schedule she now had, it was challenging to not just shut everyone out at times, or toss away whatever she was doing that specific moment, and figuratively put her head in the sand. She knew Van was coping with the same stuff, too, but he seemed to be doing a much better job of it than she. Hitomi also knew that she should feel grateful for her friends who were still alive, the achievements they all had made together. Gaia was at *peace*. And *she* had contributed. She should be proud.

For some months now, those moments of near breakdown had gotten really rare, though, and Hitomi – except for being way too occupied – felt more content with the peaceful life she was leading currently. True, it was a life caught between two worlds—literally, in her case. But everything should just stay the way it was for the time being, so she could fully heal. She was not ready to make any major decisions soon. And presenting Van to her parents *definitely* was one of those.

Van didn't look her in the eye anymore. Clenching his fists, Hitomi could tell her words had hurt him badly. She did not want him to feel that way. Even if she felt an inner unrest and confusion, her feelings towards him had always been genuine. Panicking again, she hastily tried to find a way out of the mess her speech of excuses had caused without further entangling herself. "You know what?" she said, "Let's meet the day after the marriage. I will visit you the whole day, no matter what. What do you think?"

Her words backfired.

"You don't get it, don't you?" the sudden temper he burst into made her cringe in fear.

What if she could not fix this and would lose him? Taking a step back, she was afraid to say anything else, only uttering some incomprehensible words. At once, the girl became aware of all the other students watching them more or less discreetly while passing, some whispering behind their hands. She suddenly felt quite embarrassed being yelled at in broad daylight. Hopefully her classmates and teachers she knew weren't around. But Van's next accusations made her refocus her attention on their current argument.

"All the time, my counsellors pester me to court some dumb princess and find a wife." He raved, gesticulating wildly. "But you, your visits become ever scarcer, and I've restrained myself so as not to displease your parents before they approved of me!"

"W... what do you mean?" If not so already, her thoughts now became a big muddle. First, she had thought him reserved and conservative, but his words suggested otherwise... had he perhaps only been bent on *that* all the time? If even possible, her face heated up some more, turning a darker shade of crimson than it already was. Her hearing became an indistinct humming.

She did not even register Van's other complaints anymore until he said "And then I learn that you deny knowing me. Still." As soon as it had come, his rage subsided, and he lowered himself down to sit on the wall behind him. He was now openly meeting her gaze. Behind his mahogany eyes, the girl could spot a mix of emotions lying bare for her to see: anger, disappointment, affection, and something else she could not quite put her finger on. It was as if he was also searching her green eyes for some truth only he could see. Feeling a bit calmer now, she let him do just that, steadily meeting his eyes. His lashes reminded the girl of raven feathers.

His voice as raw as his gaze, Van suddenly burst out "I cannot be your dirty little secret any more – *I need something more tangible, Hitomi!*" With a sudden, quick, and strong movement, his right hand shot up to snatch the back of her head, while the other pulled her lower body to his own, closing any remaining gap between them, as his lips captured hers in a clumsy kiss.

Taken by surprise, her body stiffened for a moment. She should have been mortified with the audience around them, but all Hitomi felt were his soft lips, shyly kissing her own, and his nervous heartbeat. He must be able to sense hers, too. Being so near him, she could smell his body scent, something in-between forest earth and fiery ash. When Hitomi stayed frozen, Van stopped in his endeavor without breaking touch. It was a question. Her mind cleared in a moment of decision.

Hitomi parted her lips for him, and Van smiled into the kiss. With a sudden urge to touch his hair, she curled her fingers into the silken strands. Now having her encouragement, Van's tongue entered her mouth to deepen the kiss. She relaxed into him, and he squeezed her tighter in response, making her fairly aware of his heated body and parts of him she would have never dared to touch. Vaguely, Hitomi heard a few students nearby giggle and some elders gasp. She didn't care. His unexpected boldness was all that mattered, and she liked the way it made her feel dizzy. She moaned in appreciation.

But why did Van push her away all of a sudden? It wasn't until a hard slap met her cheek and that she realized she hadn't been pushed, but pulled away. Moist lips still slightly apart and feeling quite dazed, Hitomi looked up into the enraged face of her father.

Kapitel 4: Bruised and tainted

“And then I learn that you deny knowing me. Still.” He said.

Van’s temperamental explosion about this recent discovery had somewhat left him worn out, so he seated himself on the stone wall right behind him. True, he was still angry with Hitomi, and part of him wanted to continue to rage on, scold her, and maybe offend her even. Only her ashamed and downcast expression kept him from doing so. Although he knew she hadn’t lied about not knowing how to introduce him to her family, the problem was she had not taken his wish seriously. *No*, his inner voice pointed out, *she dreaded to fulfill it*, which was much worse. He was a king, for Aarusha’s sake! He should be considered a good match in her world, too. Right?

What were her reasons then, he wondered?

What if her feelings for him were only a short-lived infatuation, something fickle and wavering, doomed to subside like the so-called love she’d held for Allen and that Amano guy from her school? Did she even know what this word really meant? He had no clue how the notion of love was understood in her world. What if she just tossed him away one day, not visiting anymore, and he *actually had to* marry some sappy princess because duty called? If she no longer felt the same way about him as he knew he would always for her, then she should just have the courage to tell him so. They were not only lovers, but also friends. You don’t treat your friends that way, misleading them into believing something that wasn’t true. But then, they were talking about Hitomi. Avoiding confrontation by running away was not as absurd a concept for her at all. Even if he knew deep down this was only fear speaking, his guts suddenly felt like ice.

So, instead of letting his thoughts run in circles, he searched her moss-colored eyes for something that would betray a hint of the deeper feelings for him, their special connection he knew must be in her, somewhere. The young girl from the mystic moon stood still for him, allowing him to read her.

There.

Van was pleased and relieved at the same time to find his own emotions mirrored in her now steadier and calmer gaze. Whatever was troubling her, they would figure it out together. He won’t let go of her, no matter how much she tried to wriggle away from him. Watching her still prettily flushed face, his throat suddenly went dry. Frustration. That was what accompanied him day and night, since his stupid council had started to pester him about the need for an heir from his royal line. He wanted to be more to her. With a voice that surely must sound hoarse to her ears, emotion got the better of him, again. “I cannot be your dirty little secret anymore – *I need something more tangible, Hitomi!*”

Pulling her close and pressing his mouth onto hers, his brain must have abandoned him. He immediately felt her whole body stiffen in his arms. Had he dared too much?

What was he thinking! *Imbecile*, he chided himself. Surely, she must consider him presumptuous now! Maybe she would reject him! Oh, she *so* definitely would. He had just bawled her out, after all.

Though this thought made his mind go wild and his heart race with fear, he could not stop himself from moving his lips on her petrified mouth. No matter how afraid he was, he needed to learn if their feelings were based on reciprocity not only from her eyes, but also from her very most intuitive physical response. Yet she won't be able to give an honest one if he continued to cling to her like ivy tendrils. Questionably, he stopped in his approach mid-track, giving her a chance to retreat.

When she finally came out of her stupor, opening her mouth for him and reaching for his head – longingly, with both hands! – an utmost excitement rushed his body that caused his chest to flutter with joy. Smiling, he had the sudden desire to press her closer, to caress her with his lips and tongue, deepening the experience of their first kiss. He liked the soft sounds he was coaxing out from her now with his actions.

But in an instant, Hitomi was out of his grasp. A middle-aged man had pulled her away and furiously gave her a sharp slap right into her confused face. Her emerald eyes blinked bewildered before starting to brim with tears.

Van was shocked. Never before had his reflexes been so dull.

When the attacker raised his hand once more to strike the other half of Hitomi's face, Van protectively jumped up and put the girl behind him with one arm. Catching the attacker's wrist with his one free hand, he crushed it hard with his fingers. Receiving a satisfying curse of pain, he tightened his grip even more. Van was glad his opponent was so weak, especially when he wasn't carrying his sword with him; he felt naked without it. The king knew from Hitomi's telltales that normally there was no need for the people of her country to be armed at all times, but he asked himself why the man hadn't used any weapon when attacking nonetheless.

That was a mistake. On his way reaching down for the dagger he always kept in one boot, Hitomi suddenly grasped his arm. "Don't. Oh Van, please stop," she pleaded, her voice thick with desperation. "You'll only make it worse!"

Just like that, he let go of his opponent, who immediately bent over, tears of pain in the corners of his eyes, waiting for the ache to subside. Comprehension dawned on Van. Hitomi must know this person, then. Cursing and rubbing his wrist, the elder stood straight again. From the look on his face, Van at once knew the man was appalled by him. A mutual feeling. *How dare he strike a defenseless woman!*

Still shielding Hitomi with his body and not letting the man out of sight, Van took in the assailant's details more carefully now. Even though there was not much resemblance in appearance, he should have known the only possibly conclusion in the way the man's hand had moved when slapping. "Your father?" Van asked the girl behind him. *Please*, he thought. *Don't let this be true.*

"Yes."

Weakly, she confirmed his worst fears. He could not help but groan in frustration and curse under his breath.

With a poisonous glare and between gritted teeth, Hitomi's father signaled for them to follow him and enter this horseless carriage of his.

Hell, that hurt!!

Still rubbing his abused wrist, Isamu motioned the two teens into the car with suppressed anger. He could only hope his joint was not injured, but it really throbbed!. Already Isamu could see the dark spots forming on his skin where the vicelike grip of that fella had mistreated it. Maybe he should name him Iron Fist or something. That was a first – finding a nickname for someone he didn't like the tiniest bit. At least he had not *bitten* him – Isamu was pretty sure he would have been diagnosed with rabies after it.

But seriously: What the hell was wrong with his daughter?! Choosing a brute like that for a boyfriend! No, no way! Boyfriend, never! He would nip this *right in the bud*, before it even got the chance to develop into something serious. Today even, Isamu would make sure of it! Was this the widely-known puberty every parent feared? Why, oh why, could Hitomi not just have asked for *a tattoo* or something, he wondered? Why must it be a boy? *This boy?*

Seating themselves in the car, Isamu started the engine, observing them for a moment in the rear-view mirror. After this dimwit had fumbled quite a bit with his seat belt and his daughter impatiently had to come to his aid, both teens were now looking out of the window in opposite directions.

During the ride, none of the three said a single word. It was a thick, heavy atmosphere. Hitomi was still holding her reddening cheek where Isamu had slapped her. His hand burnt where the palm had made contact with her tender skin.

Isamu had never done anything like that before. But he had been so utterly disappointed at that moment, something he had seldom felt in his life. Behaving like that in front of so many people, and one of her teachers, nonetheless... how far would she have gone if he hadn't interfered, he wondered? At least he had spared her a bigger loss of face in front of the whole school.

He had always thought he had brought up Hitomi knowing better than what he had witnessed today. *But then*, his own mocking voice softly whispered within his head, *there were all those incidents before*. His daughter leaving for over a year and coming back with a bunch of lies. Her missing necklace. Her disappearances every now and then. Keeping a stupid feather in her closet. *This*, he reasoned, *definitely was not normal behavior for an adolescent*.

After his initial shock and as soon as the traffic would allow it, he took a closer look at the little savage sitting in the cars back seat. Slim fit pants and a red shirt so short it would show his stomach when moving a bit too much, his bad company definitely would corrupt his sweet little baby girl. As much as he could tell from the tiny mirror, the boy had some thin, straight scratch scars scattered over his arms. Was he a psychiatric patient? Maybe a possible drug-addict, even? Isamu shuddered, although he knew he most likely was overthinking things. Or, at least, hoped he was.

During a particular long wait at an intersection, he caught another glimpse of the kids behind him. Although they were still avoiding each other's gaze, he could observe how the boy inconspicuously used his fingertips to reach out to his daughter's right hand resting on the grey seats, which might be meant as a comforting gesture. Isamu was very pleased to see that Hitomi pulled her hand out of his range, startled. Serves him right! The flash of pain in the youngster's unusually colored eyes made Isamu feel even more satisfied.

The boy readjusted his sitting position, now turning to the front, propping up his elbow on the transition of window and door. Irritated, he rested his cheek on his knuckles. Realizing he was being watched, he gave Isamu a calculating and disdainful look.

An arrogant little rebel, aren't we? The family father thought, meeting the younger's eyes.

The traffic lights must have switched back to green for the cars behind him had started honking, but Isamu didn't react immediately. His eyes went wide.

Could it be?

The truth he was searching for so long now finally was within his reach.

She was doomed.

Hitomi knew this from the very bottom of her heart. Even if she wasn't sure how much her father had actually seen, he certainly had at least caught a glimpse of Van yelling at her. And, of course, both of them *snogging* in front of the whole school. Her face heated up again at the thought. How could she just let herself go like that? Good heavens! If that wasn't enough already, *noooo*, Van had to act the dragon slayer out all over again, because *her father had slapped her*.

Her father had never done that before, which might be a good indicator of his actual anger. Hitomi had the strong urge to scream over the whole situation.

But she couldn't, because they were entering the car to drive *home*, and her dad

already thought she was crazy enough because of all her “lies” about Gaia. No need to underpin this unfair opinion by having a hysterical fit in the family Toyota. Well, she had to tell him at some point that she was not only still travelling frequently to her so-called imaginary planet, but he now had to add a not-so-imaginary *boyfriend* from that strange world to the list. She wondered how he would explain *that* to himself? *Oh. Good. Gods.* She had a boyfriend, and he was about to meet her parents. Well, at least he still had to meet the uninjured parent. And never forget her brother and grandparents were most likely about to witness her father giving her a nasty piece of his mind.

Instead of becoming hysterical, she swallowed down her emerging emotions.

After entering the vehicle first, she sat down on the right back seat, Van following. It was such a strange feeling, having him sit in the family car with her. Absentmindedly, she registered that Van was not able to connect both parts of his seat belt properly. Hitomi could tell he must be in inner turmoil, too. He looked like an idiot. Growing unnerved by each passing second with his fumbling, she quickly snatched the clasp from his hands and buckled him up, then decided to ignore both Van and her father for now. Fortunately, the males kept mute. And she desperately needed the silence to calm herself.

She really did not know how to feel at the moment. Her emotional life was a lopsided kaleidoscope, a jigsaw with pieces that didn't fit together at all. All the contradicting emotions kept swirling and humming inside her like a bee hive.

Where her father had slapped her, her cheek stung and she was sure it had started to swell, but her lips were swollen, too. Hitomi could still taste the first kiss she and Van had shared just a few minutes ago on her lips. For some blissful moments, she had felt perfect. Whole. Hitomi always had imagined this kiss as a happy experience. But now, this memory would be tainted and she could only revel in dread, because it couldn't have gone worse. How would she ever be able to fix this? And how would her mother react, when she learned that Hitomi had kept *this* kind of secret from her for so long? Every time her father had accused the girl of lying, her mother had fought to defend her like a lioness. She undoubtedly had deeply trusted her daughter. Her face burned again. *She was a liar.* She was so afraid what they all would think of her now. Her parents, her brother, her grandparents. *It was all her fault.* Her eyes moistened again. Maybe she should have told them after all, when she still had the chance to do so.

Trying to divert herself, Hitomi finally decided to take a quick glance at her phone. She could not believe her own eyes when she found the message from her father, telling her he would pick her up after school.

Stupid! She had been so stupid, stupid, stupid!! This would have been the best warning she could ever have hoped for! Why didn't she check her messages earlier again? Oh, right. Because of Mr. Brooding. Or, now come to think of it, why hadn't she even thought of travelling somewhere else with the light pillar, nearer to home? This way, it might even had been unnecessary to take Van along with her, because she would have had more time on Gaia and they would have settled their argument there. Why hadn't she considered all of this earlier? Her father wouldn't know about Van yet,

and everything would have stayed the way it was. Her peaceful status quo. There could have been so many ways to handle this more smoothly and to avoid all the drama she and Van were facing now.

Of course, it might have been not all that bad if Van hadn't attacked her father. She definitely was angry with him for that, although she knew he had only wanted to protect her. Really, calling Van irritable was a huge understatement. But her anger was also intermingled with something else. She could not quite define it, and she wouldn't go so far as to call it mistrust – on the contrary, she doubted that any of her classmates had yet formed a bond as deep as Van and she had during their travels. They had experienced so much, had suffered together, and only survived because of each other. But it might be a mix of sudden uneasiness and the idea that she might have been taken advantage of because of her feelings. What did he mean, saying he needed "something more tangible"? Was he really that type of guy? Not that she didn't harbour a similar longing for him, but she would have never used their then still platonic love as an accusation. She was anxious about the purity of his motives for kissing her in the first place – that was it.

Suddenly, she could feel Van's fingertips tentatively brush hers. Hitomi felt jolts the contact sent up her hand and arm. Like lightning. Pictures of black wings, pools of old blood and long-gone battlegrounds flashed before her mind's eye. As fast as she could, the girl instinctively pulled herself away from the Fanelian king. She knew she hurt him with her behavior and Van would overthink it, but she was too unsettled at the moment to consider his feelings.

The truth was, she felt cornered. Cornered by the impending interrogation of her father. Cornered by Van's sudden approach towards her. Cornered by her own inability and fear.

The truth was, she wished now that kiss had never happened.

Kapitel 5: Happy family time

As silent as it had begun, the drive ended in the narrow Kanzaki gravel path. Embedded in a quiet and well-kept Japanese neighborhood, the house bathed in the dark orange hues of the setting evening sun. The aromatic perfume of summer gardens was heavy in the air, and it also carried the inviting laughter out of the windows of the home in front of him. Within its walls, Isamu's family members were unaware of the upcoming storm he was inwardly preparing for.

"Here we are." Isamu dryly informed the two teens on the back row. Without waiting for any kind of reaction, the middle-aged man switched off the car, got out, and slammed the door behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his daughter wince noticeably at the loud sound the impact had made. He didn't care. The trip from school back home had done nothing to lessen his anger – nor his disappointment, for that matter.

Reaching the front entrance of his house, he looked back to see if the kids were following him. He watched the boy sheepishly hold the vehicle door open for his daughter, who exited with a rather ashen complexion. *Playing the gentleman card now, are we?* The family father thought.

He could see the youngster hesitate for a moment, then – curiosity getting the better of him – discreetly eye the residential building ahead before setting himself into motion. Isamu felt his bile rise again.

By now, he was pretty sure something was wrong with this child. The outward appearance was one thing the family father knew he could have somehow dealt with. They were another generation after all. And if he was being honest with himself, there were many young people out there who looked much worse. Even his outlandishness might have been okay with him, as long as they could communicate in some way. But the little bully's lack of any social competency and his aggressive conduct definitely were out of the question! *Absolutely unacceptable!*

During his work at the psychological department of his hospital, Isamu had come across hundreds of teenagers with volatile or violent dispositions, and many of those cases didn't go well. Such behavior often spoke volumes about the surroundings those kids grew up, too. The way this boy furtively inspected his home indicated that no matter where he was coming from, it couldn't be a fitting place for a young person to spend his childhood. And, as a hard-working member of Japanese society, another conclusion drew itself in Isamu's mind, the substantive aspect behind it all: *That fellow had never seen such a splendid residence as ours.* For him, Hitomi surely was a good catch. It would only be a matter of time until this kid would turn against his sweet and naïve daughter.

Temper and fatherly protectiveness flaring again, he put the key into the front door's lock, but nearly yelped when turning it. Isamu's glance immediately fell onto the purple and blue blooms proudly adorning his wrist, definitely outshining his home in

magnificence.

This little...! He must win Kazumi over to his side only this once, no matter the cost!

All things considered, Hitomi was still too young and amidst a crucial time of her life – especially with her prior disappearance – and this boy not good enough for her, politely put. He was an endangerment of his daughter's innocence and a thorn in Isamu's flesh.

Steeling himself, he entered. The unique scent of Kazumi's traditional Japanese cooking welcomed him. For some blissful milliseconds, he forgot his negative sentiments and just enjoyed coming home. It was always his favorite time of the day, to sit with his family whenever he would finish work early and listen to them chatting and laughing, discussing how their day was.

The spell was broken when Hitomi rustled behind him, putting her bag on the sideboard, the raven-haired boy appearing by her side. Dinner would be ruined, that was for sure. Isamu registered the little punk standing there, a bit lost – though still prying around (hopefully he wouldn't *steal* anything!) – on what to do next until Hitomi whispered instructions in that stupid language of theirs. He nodded his head and followed her example by removing his footwear.

Now, Isamu was utterly confused. Was it not common knowledge, even abroad, that Japanese put off their shoes when entering a dwelling? He knew this from past visits from American and German business partners. From which star did this boy come from again? Well, he would find that out later. Now he had something more important to concentrate on.

Tidily placing his own shoes in their designated space, he grumbled "We're home." towards the kitchen. Clinking there with some tableware, Kazumi answered: "Hello, Isamu! Hitomi." His daughter immediately stiffened behind him, an anxious expression showing on her face while biting her lip. If he wanted his wife's support, it was now or never.

Isamu quickly stepped into the kitchen where he found her wearing her favorite daruma-motive kitchen apron. It sported some wet spots where she must have dried her hands before. His parents and 14-year-old son Sora had arrived before them, already waiting at the laden table. They would eat Okonomiyaki and an assortment of salads and meats tonight. *Nice*.

No, wait! What was he thinking? No distractions! He had to be angry right now!

"Hello, dear," he greeted Kazumi back. She floated over to him to peck his cheek. Apparently, she wasn't feeling resentful towards him and was in a good mood again. Only the better for him, although his wife raised an eyebrow questioningly at the sour look on his face.

His son must've already spotted the intruder as he was bluntly gaping in the direction of the hallway, his mouth hanging open a bit. Isamu's parents on the other hand either

didn't notice anything out of order, or (and Isamu would go for the latter if he had to bet on it) just feigned they didn't, patiently waiting for everyone to sit down and the situation to dissolve on its own.

Wondering why her daughter didn't join them, Kazumi gently pushed Isamu aside to glance into the corridor as well. "Hitomi? ...huh?" She now had spotted the unbidden "guest" too, mild surprise written over her face. Hitomi shamefully tried to avert her eyes, while the bloke suddenly straightened himself when Kazumi's gaze shortly darted over to him again.

Well, time to deploy the bomb.

Adding a false sweetish note to his voice, he asked: "Kazumi, darling, guess whom I've found glued together in front of the school today?"

Hitomi jerked her head around, mouth and eyes wide in utter disbelief.

His son, Sora, incredulously commented from the background: "What? How did *that* happen?! In his best interest, I hope he used a ten-foot-pole instead of his lips!" Though not pleased about it, the family father let the insult pass for now. He could tell his son off later.

Even the blockhead somehow must have gotten Isamu's meaning, for his face changed color to something resembling a beetroot. *Embarrassment or wrath? Maybe*, Isamu thought, *just maybe, I can trigger him to have another outburst? Like this, it would be easier to get rid of the little berserk.* Mortified, Hitomi's face turned bright red again, too, causing her eyes to water. Normally, the sight would have melted Isamu's heart, but he was still so blinded by his own grudges, he wasn't even able to feel the tiniest bit of pity for his own daughter at the moment. *This should do the job*, he forced himself to think instead.

At least this was what Isamu had believed. With snapping her head around, Hitomi had unintentionally granted her mother a good view on her puffed cheek. Kazumi gasped, closing the remaining distance between her child and herself. Catching hold upon the girl's chin with her fingers and turning her around some more, Kazumi inspected the reddish mark with bewilderment. "Hitomi, how did that happen? Isamu, don't tell me... *was that you?!*"

Within an instant, the woman's guardian instincts were set back into motion. Seething, she faced her husband, achieving a satisfying wince. He must admit, he hadn't calculated *this* to happen. He better should have. "How dare you to strike your own daughter! What has gotten into you?! *Unbelievable.* Hitomi." She abruptly turned away again, maybe to avoid the temptation to chop his head off. "Please, for now, just go and sit down with... what's the young man's name?" Remembering her good manners, Kazumi gave the boy as dazzling a smile as she could muster under her current temper, which he tentatively returned. *First betrayed by my own daughter. Now betrayed by my own wife*, Isamu thought. Hitomi cautiously observed her mother under her eyelashes.

He needed revenge, even if it was just a tiny one. "I doubt that he has mastered our language yet, Kazumi," Isamu spat.

Did he imagine it, or did the corners of the little shit's mouth twitch for the briefest of moments?

"*Van*. My name is Van Fanel. Hitomi has taught me some Japanese. Nice to meet you, Miss Kanzaki." *Flabbergasted*. That must be the word describing his expression best right now. Why had he assumed that the boy couldn't speak his tongue? Certainly, because he had kept his silence during the whole damned car drive and afterwards, and Isamu had immediately jumped to conclusions. He hadn't been thinking straight. But this new bit of information made the cogs in his brain machine accelerate like hamster wheels.

Kazumi scowled at him again, before turning back to Hitomi. "Well, please sit down with Van. He will of course stay for dinner." She gently touched her daughter's cheek, who still didn't dare meet her mother's eyes. "I will get you some ice at once." Her voice dripped with acid. Kazumi darted Isamu another withering look before heading back into the kitchen.

With her head lowered, his daughter passed him quickly to finally join the rest of the family for supper, this *Baan* or whatever it was he called himself following in her wake. As he walked past, the head of the family could actually *feel* the dark emotions he held for Isamu radiating from his body like venomous vapor, though it seemed that he didn't want to show any openly and kept them to himself instead. It should be Isamu holding animosities, not this kid! He was the one being hurt most, especially after Kazumi's unexpected reaction. It made him feel like a jerk. *Which he wasn't!*

Meekly and in a hushed voice, Hitomi introduced the boy to her grandparents. They greeted him in a neutral manner, remaining impartial. "Pleased to meet you," his father said. His own father, too, eh? *Darn*.

It took Isamu a moment to recover from the initial shock of everyone apparently turning their back on him, but Isamu finally followed Kazumi into the kitchen. He, at the very least, must win his wife over to his side. "Kazumi!" he whispered frantically. "Did you hear what I tried to tell you? This *schmuck* yelled at Hitomi! And then they'd kissed! In broad daylight and the middle of the street, directly in front of the whole school! You should have seen the looks on the faces of the passersby - even one of Hitomi's teachers was there. *On top of it all, it was her math teacher, Kazumi. Math!*"

His wife was clearly trying not to explode. Taking two deep breaths through her nostrils first and with all the patience she could muster, she finally answered him as if she was talking slowly to an ill-bred child. "Given the experiences gathered throughout our marriage, Kanzaki Isamu, I am quite sure that you must have imagined at least half of it. Fortunately, Hitomi's grades in math are *excellent*, so I am sure she will recover from anything Mr. Honda might – or might not – have seen. Now, sit down already, *before I forget myself*." With that, she just left him standing where he was, dumbstruck, as she balanced the last remaining plates and a wrapped ice bag in her arms and marched to the table to take a seat.

There hadn't been many occasions when Kazumi had talked back to him like that. In fact, maybe there had been this one time ten years or so ago, when he had been drinking too much for a while, because he couldn't handle all the pressure at the hospital. It had been a tough year; not so much because of the long hours he had to work every day, but more though that so many pediatric oncology patients had died. With two children of his own, Isamu had been distraught beyond his tolerance level. On top of that, he was unable to speak about what was bothering him, so he had just bottled everything up, literally, by avoiding reality with *Kirin*-beer and diverse *nihonshu* outside the working hours instead. He and Kazumi had nearly divorced due to it. Thankfully, he had been able to get a grip on himself, he told her everything, and gradually, he made peace with himself. After that, both his marriage and career had skyrocketed.

But this time, Kazumi wasn't angry with him because he had kept things to himself. This time, it was all this little scum's fault! He would pay *dearly* for it.

Interrupted in his grumbling by the loud rumble of his stomach, Isamu decided that food was the best course of action for the moment. *Wouldn't keep him from glaring angrily, though.*

He sat down beside his wife, directly opposite the two older kids, who both looked like the personification of the term "heap of misery". His son and parents sat to his left and right. Isamu's whispering to Kazumi must have been louder than he had suspected, as his mother, who had sported an admirable silence and a flawless poker face during the whole ugly exchange, suddenly piped up: "You know, Isamu, if Tōsan and I spilled everything *you* had done in the light of day – and sometimes in public areas, heaven forbid! – I am quite sure anything our little Hitomi here has done today would be considered perfectly chaste. Virtuous, even. She would be so *jealous* of you." Unapologetic, grandma Kanzaki added some fresh tea to her cup, blowing the steam away with her wrinkled, slightly whiskered lips.

"Oh, yes! This statement I can personally attest to," his traitorous wife added, zoning out as if she was lost in a reverie of her own memory. The look on her face was enough to make all the young people present blush ferociously.

Okasan... you too?

This was definitely a conspiracy! *When* had anything they were asserting happened, anyway?! He'd been a good boy! *A good one!* Some images flashed in his mind, but he repressed them quickly. Altogether, their accusations had taken the wind out of Isamu's sails. For the moment, he was even more at a loss for words.

"I don't think I want to expand on this topic any further..." Hitomi mumbled, which made Kazumi chuckle.

Addressing their *guest*, she encouraged him: "Van, just take what you want to eat. We share everything on the table." Humbly nodding his head in comprehension, Isamu could see the boy considerably easing up. Observing the shiny dark hair, Isamu

thought of the word *blackhead*. Might do for a better nickname than iron fist for this annoying individual.

Oh, right! His own bruises. *Don't make yourself feel too much at home, buddy*. Isamu grinned inwardly while placing his blueish wrists as unobtrusively onto the table as he could. No one heeded them – or him – any attention. The only exception might be his daughter, who was still fearfully glancing at him every once in a while and had worriedly noticed his recent action.

Following the example of his family, the pimple picked up his chopsticks, but it was obvious that he was clueless about how to use them. Slightly panicking, he watched Sora's hand movements as he dug in. *What a fool*. Was there really anyone left out there oblivious as to the use of *chopsticks*? Kazumi seemed a bit puzzled about it, too, but tried to conceal it.

And yet again it was *her* helping the twit out of his misery. And smiling! "Look, you just hold them between your fingers like this."

"Is this right?" the teen asked, repeating the motion she had just shown him.

"Yes!" Kazumi exclaimed enthusiastically. "And then, you try to pick up the food with the pointed ends."

She is enjoying this! Isamu realized. He felt an irrational pang of jealousy at this special treatment.

Hitomi observed the exchange and relaxed somewhat, too, as he tried to copy the correct movement again, but failed. "No, no." Sora held his own sticks in the air and clicked the ends together. "More like *this*. These are *chopsticks*, not *ten-foot-poles*. We don't want to have any more accidents here, do we?" he stated helpfully, referring to his joke about their kiss.

Hitomi nearly choked on her food. "Will you stop it already?" she hissed at her little brother, who just made a face at her.

"Sora, please." Kazumi admonished him. Her voice trembled slightly, betraying a hint of amusement. She discreetly gave Isamu a mocking side-glance.

Very funny, all of you. Isamu's lips formed a thin line in remembrance of today's incident. He wished he could just erase it from his mind.

"Okay, okay... I'll be quiet," Sora grumbled in response, while the oaf hid his face in embarrassment behind this impossible hair mop. He again tried to pick up a piece of Kazumi's delicious pancake and was successful this time.

"Yes, just like that," Kazumi praised.

"Thanks for your help, Miss Kanzaki," shithead politely buttered his wife up.

Warmth twinkling in her brown eyes, she responded, "You're welcome." Kazumi then turned and addressed her daughter. "Where did you find such a courteous *friend*, Hitomi?" she teased good-naturedly. A hue of pink appeared on Hitomi's cheeks, but the girl only smiled silently at her mother, then devoted her attention back to her plate.

Polite? You call him polite? That maggot abuses your husband's wrists, sticks his tongue into your daughter's mouth, eats our hard-earned food, and YOU talk about courteousness?! Isamu thought. That's simply ridiculous!

Now, his family started to ask blackhead questions. Maybe he would give away something Isamu could use against him later. Isamu would listen attentively.

He took a sip from his beer, when Kazumi asked: "Van, my husband earlier implied that you are not from Japan. Where do you come from?"

Indecisive, the chimp looked back and forth between Hitomi and Kazumi. "Well, it's not that easy to explain..."

But Hitomi already had interrupted him. "Can we skip this for now? I will tell you everything about it later. After dinner," she said, signifying to her mother with meaningful eyes that she wanted to wait until the grandparents had left.

Suspicious. Isamu had already made a mental note. Priding himself on having the memory of an elephant, he definitely wouldn't forget to ask about it.

"Of course," Kazumi said. With her chopsticks, she put more bits of food onto blackhead's plate.

"Thank you" he muttered. "It's really good." Kazumi smiled at him again. It was so obvious that she liked him. Isamu felt like throwing up at the sight.

Grandma Kanzaki exclaimed in a theatrical way, "Oh, a secret we cannot know about! Won't you rather tell us something about your family? What do your parents do for a living? Do you have any siblings?" Hesitating again, the youngster briefly knitted his brows while considering his answer, then said: "An adopted sister. My father, mother, and elder brother passed away a long time ago."

If everything Isamu knew about the boy by now wouldn't suffice already, no! This kid had to be an orphan, too. *Fantastic.* Maybe blackhead had picked up his daughter wandering the streets somewhere. That might be why they acted so secretive all the time. But more importantly, not only would this explain his bad manners, it would also definitely inspire sympathy from his family.

In immediate answer to his thoughts, Kazumi placed one hand on her mouth to swallow the sound of a gasp.

"Oh, I am so sorry, I really put my foot in it, I suppose." Grandma Kanzaki said. "I didn't know I would step myself in blunder with such a simple question. My sincerest

apologies.”

The boy openly smiled at Isamu’s mother. “How would you know? And besides, it’s no secret, so please don’t worry about it.”

“Poor boy.” Kazumi muttered to herself and shoveled even more food onto the plate of the whining creature. As predicted a few seconds ago, the little showman had his whole family wrapped around his little finger now.

“But say, I had thought you and Hitomi to be of the same age. Aren’t you attending school? I don’t see you wearing a school uniform,” Isamu’s father asked.

Oh! Good point! Skipping classes, aren’t we?

“No, I don’t?”

“Awesome!” Sora called out.

Before realizing it himself, Isamu had jumped up from his seat and put one foot onto the table, exclaiming with triumph: “Aha!” He had known it from the beginning! This bugged was an uncivilized little ragamuffin with no education, and now he had confirmed Isamu’s theory himself! Even Kazumi must see the boy’s unworthiness now! And how he could corrupt their son, too!

Everyone stared at him, bewildered by his sudden action.

“Ugh... Isamu, is everything alright?” Kazumi asked, aghast. “Could you please come down?” With a swift pull, she hauled him back onto his seat, hissing “What’s gotten into you? For heaven’s sake, do you want to disgrace our whole family?” Isamu could hear his blood pulsating in his ears, but not because of embarrassment or anger. It was excitement. Soon, he would be able to debunk this urchin for the fraud he was.

Grandpa Kanzaki cleared his throat self-consciously. “Well, where was I? ...Oh, right. If you’re not going to school, you must be older than my granddaughter. Do you work already?”

“I...” the boy started, but stopped mid-sentence. Hitomi had discreetly stepped onto his foot to keep him from talking, but the sound hadn’t eluded Isamu’s attentive senses.

Okay? This got more mysterious by the minute.

Yet again it was his daughter who answered in the guttersnipe’s stead. “Van... Van works in a government building.”

“Oh, really?” Grandpa Kanzaki said. “That sounds promising.”

“As cleaning dandy, I suppose.” The insult slipped from Isamu’s lips.

The lump met his glare, stating coolly: "Someone shouldn't extrapolate from oneself to others, you know. Especially if *this someone* has no clue about anything concerning this other person."

Incited like a hornet, Isamu's foot was suddenly back on the table, his fingers pointing at the insufferable scoundrel. "What did you just say to me?" he roared. "I am the director of a hospital! You impudent, little..."

"Oh, sit down already!" Yet again, he was back on his buttocks, blinking baffled and still pointing. Kazumi's face was red all over. "Gods." His father seemed embarrassed, too. "Really, Isamu," he said.

After that, dinner had continued quite uneventfully.

Still fuming about the impertinence of this kid, Isamu had kept sulking throughout the conversation following his outburst. Kazumi had now started to clear the table, little cheese ball over there passing her some of the tableware. In his actual state of grumpiness, it was oblivious to Isamu that his own children were doing the same thing.

"Thank you for the delicious dinner, Miss Kanzaki," the boy said. *Phlegm*, Isamu thought.

"Oh, you're welcome! Hitomi, keep your seat, I'll do this on my own." Kazumi instructed her daughter, who was about to get up and help her mother with the dishes.

"Oh. Thanks, Mum. But let me at least bring the plates over." Both women left for the kitchen. Although Hitomi now seemed somewhat relaxed on the outward, Isamu could feel an awkward tension between her and the boy, and he assumed that it was for this reason she'd fled the table. Interesting. Now thinking of it, this stiffness had been there since they'd been in the car. Isamu still feverishly racked his brain about what it was they'd argued about so hotly.

"May I ask you something?" Sora directed blackhead, using his sister's absence. "From aaaallll the fair and beautiful women in the world, why the hell did you choose my dense sister?"

The boy looked at him, puzzled. "Why shouldn't I? She has a good heart. And she isn't *dense*." Raising a skeptical eyebrow, Sora left it at that without further comment. *Now he even openly talks about my daughter's breasts – this willy!*

Isamu wouldn't watch this any longer, enough was enough. Time to finally shine some light into the darkness – and cut their ties.

Kapitel 6: The dragon's eye

Please! Whatever deity there is in the heavens above or down on the earth, don't let this be true.

He still wished he could just wake up from this nightmare. Or bury his head somewhere, at least. But all his prayers so far had gone unheard, and instead the melef-resembling chariot trundled through ever-narrowing streets, indicating they might arrive soon to wherever they were headed. Supposedly Hitomi's home. Some hours ago, the thought would have delighted him. *But now?*

Being the arrogant thick-head he was, Van did not care much about the judgment of others. But he definitely cared for the opinion of Hitomi's family. He was sure he'd left a *wonderful* first impression.

Actually, he had laid out this first encounter in his damned love-crazed brain for weeks now. Ever since Hitomi had agreed to acquaint him with her parents, to be exact. He had thought up every possible way he could to make them immediately feel at ease about who was courting their daughter.

Van would have welcomed them in his city like royal family – *his* royal family. Not with the shallow unnecessary pomp the young king had had the doubtful pleasure to witness at the Asturian court, of course. Just enough to give everyone a rough picture of *whom* it was he might be accompanying through the streets of Fanelia, straight to his palace. He briefly wondered how his pesky council would have reacted to such a statement? Him, a *cursed-blooded king*, displaying his love for the *witch from the mystic moon* to the whole nation? If his actual situation wasn't so precarious already, he might have laughed out loud at the idea.

Under the council members' gawking eyes, he would have done anything to make Hitomi happy – beginning from pleasantries like presenting her parents the recently finished city parts like the main market place; the regional culture; cooking and crafts; scientific research, if they were interested. For the palace gardens, unfortunately, it would have been way too early, since it won't be restored until all the necessities are completely finished. But he would have shown them the palace forests – which miraculously had survived the destruction of Fanelia – with its ancient trees and permanent inhabitant, *Escaflowne* – the guymelef that had guided and protected him and Hitomi throughout the war. And, of course, impeccable behaviour befitting his position. No bad temper, no mean words, only honest hospitality.

Often, he had imagined becoming familiar with Hitomi's kin on the mystic moon in his head, too, learning about the ways they all lived, although his mind's eye could only reproduce what she had told him so far. The girl had promised him that before as well, to show him her home world someday. Well, his wish apparently had come true now – *in the form of something that resembled a drive to the gallows.*

In his wildest fantasies, he would even wander off at times and talk about his

marriage intentions to Hitomi's imagined parents, while in the meantime, a likewise imagined Merle would divert his dream-spouse-to-be. They – of course – would've joyously agreed to have such a *fitting son-in-law*.

Van sneered mentally at his own daydreaming idiocy. *This*, he thought, *definitely won't happen anymore*.

Though really nervous, he had looked forward to this first meeting the whole time he was under the delusion Hitomi *really* was going to present him to her family. When she'd visited him today, he was so cheerful at the thought they might even settle a date for that, he had grinned like an oaf all afternoon.

Until she had left without saying a single related word, that was.

But, of course, she hadn't *even realized* what he was talking about – or *trying* to talk about, retreating like a coward and inviting *her* instead – throughout the entire argument that had followed, shortly before they got caught by her father. Very likely, she had never intended for him to get to know her family in the first place, or at least not with the introduction he would have wished for. It still stung.

He really was a fool. Back then, he'd been a fool when he had thought he would stand a chance against this flesh made philanderer strolling the alleys of Gaia – *Allen Schezar*. Now, he had been a fool to believe Hitomi might come back to him forever someday, just because she'd responded to a *kiss*. It wasn't even her first. Van always stood in second place; second to the caeli knight, second to the Mystic Moon, and second to everything that belonged to it. Though he couldn't fully blame her – it surely was a wondrous world, and her *home* –but Van secretly asked himself if it might have been different if her father hadn't interrupted them today, how it all might have evolved.

Contrary to all the things he'd pictured in his head, everything had just gone wrong. After giving Hitomi a dressing down, he had then acted like a *wild dog in rut jumping her!* Heat crawled up his neck again. He was so sure the older man in the front seat had seen it all from the beginning. Otherwise, her father could never have been *that* furious. Right? And if that wasn't bad enough already, he had gone on to hurt said man. Van had shamed them both – himself, and the girl sitting beside him.

Van knew Hitomi must be seriously angered by him because of everything that had happened today. She didn't look his way even once, only giving him her cold shoulder. He wished he could just apologize to her properly, or at least attend to her swollen cheek, to slightly lessen the emotional and physical ache she was suffering from, due to him. But with her pissed and watchful parent around, he didn't dare say a word. Let alone touch her in any obvious way.

It had pained him most when he had reached out to her with his fingertips to comfort her the only way he could think of, and she had rejected even this tiny gesture. The pejorative look her father had given him then through the tiny mirror in front, from where he had secretly watched them during this exchange–like he was some dirt under his shoes or as if he knew about something Van didn't–had made sitting in this

strange machinery nearly unbearable for him from then on. His pride was the only thing that gave him the strength to not break eye-contact with the man.

Van should be angry with Hitomi, too, for obvious reasons. But, *yet again*, he couldn't bring himself to be while seeing her so miserable. Hitomi had wanted to go home from the very beginning, from the first time he'd unintentionally brought her along with him to Gaia. To be honest, she'd never made a secret out of it. *Who was he to question her decision?*

The truth was, he had forgiven her deep inside as soon as he had heard her half-true mumblings about not knowing how to introduce him, even if he had felt the need to let some steam off afterwards. When a girl and a knight had kissed on a bridge, unaware of the boy watching them from a hidden spot, he had forgiven her back then, too. And even long before that, when a running girl bumped into a prince. It might be he always would.

Somehow, he had to try to compensate for all the distress he had caused her, for his own sake as well as for Hitomi's. It was the least he could do. Seeing her like this, resembling a curled-up hedgehog, it was highly likely that he would lose her today for good. Suddenly, his eyes started to burn, but he blinked the sensation away quickly. A tingling numbness crawled under his skin instead.

The grounds under the wheels of the vehicle gave a crunching sound, startling him, and the carriage eventually came to a halt in front of a small house. *I am afraid*, Van finally admitted to himself. What was lying ahead of him?

Hitomi must feel the same, as her skin tone suddenly turned the color of chalk.

He couldn't contain the small movement of the corners of his lips. *He just couldn't.*

It had slipped, the slight smirk. And it was totally ignorant of the thin ice his owner was standing on since the past half or so hour. *Get a grip back on yourself, Van Fanel.* And luckily, Van did. He hoped Hitomi's father hadn't registered the tiny change in attitude, but this man was too observant. *So, no chance in that.* Van felt himself being watched all the time, like back at his own coronation. Only on this occasion, the sensation was much less pleasant.

On the other hand, Hitomi's mother had asked a question, so her father *couldn't possibly* see him answer it as a provocation. Right?

"*Van.* My name is Van Fanel. Hitomi has taught me some Japanese. Nice to meet you, Miss Kanzaki," he answered as politely – and meekly – as possible.

The face the elder then made was *just too good*. Van felt an odd satisfaction at his confusion, but this time, he thankfully was able to hold his facial features in place. As it should be. Sometimes he was deeply grateful for the political training he'd received during his childhood, since his whole family had vanished from his life one after another and he'd unexpectedly had to take over the role as a ruler. Even though it hadn't gone without sacrifices, said training had proven its benefits to him one time or another (when he'd chosen to act on it, that was). If Hitomi's father hadn't been so shocked himself, he might have even noticed the brief flash of astonishment in the girl's expression, which she immediately covered up again. She must be really perplexed, too. *No wonder*.

Van had realized it earlier, when her father had shoed them into his so-called "car": *he had understood what the man had said*. And though Van hadn't lied at all about Hitomi teaching him *some* Japanese – it wasn't the full truth either.

In actual fact, he had only been able to recite some short greetings and one or two sentences he had learned after especially asking her, back then when he'd still thought her family would soon visit his kingdom. During the brief times they'd spent together, learning much more than platitudes wouldn't have been possible anyway, but he'd, sure enough, wanted to impress them. And that aside, he merely considered it good manners towards foreign guests. But Hitomi's father hadn't taken into account that he *might* be able to speak his tongue, apparently. His sudden proficiency in Japanese, Van traced back to the pendant he wore. Even now, it felt warm on his skin.

The rise of temperature had occurred suddenly, shortly before the ride, though it hadn't been accompanied by the light pinkish glow it sometimes emitted on its own. It really was the first time it did this. At least since it had come into his possession.

Before, during their travels, Hitomi had been able to understand his world's languages without barriers: Fanelian, the Gaian common tongue, and even the old Atlantean inscriptions. Originally, he'd thought it was all thanks to her mysterious powers, especially when this linguistic knowledge had never left her afterwards, not even when she'd left Gaia for the first time after the war, nor when she'd given her precious pendant to him.

But after today, this belief was deeply shaken.

He'd suspected the pendant to be some kind of pocket-sized fate altering device ever since Hitomi had told him about the power of wishes it held. Maybe somehow it was able to change some abilities when needed, or if wished for hard enough – like could it make possible the travel between worlds? He would talk to Dryden about it, when he would have the chance to meet the itinerant merchant next time. Maybe his vast knowledge would confirm his suspicions.

If he would come out alive from here, that was.

Seriously; from the looks of it, he would either be killed by Hitomi's father or by the girl herself. None of those prospects appealed to him very much. He didn't want to

imagine whose wrath would be worse.

His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by the spiteful tone with which Hitomi's mother indirectly addressed her husband, when telling her daughter that she would bring her some ice for her cheek. Between wondering where she would find *ice* this time of the year (it was *sweltering hot* outside?!) and his re-arising disgust at seeing the red splotch on Hitomi's face, he mostly felt highly surprised about her mother's attitude. How could she take her daughter's lying towards her family and her immodest behavior so lightly?

Not for the first time, Van wondered about the moral standards of this world. The way people dressed here (especially the women, gods forbid the thought!), for instance, had startled him before. On the other hand, though admittedly far too forceful for his taste, the reaction of Hitomi's father hadn't surprised Van at all, actually. If it would have been *his child* instead, he definitely wouldn't be pleased either (even if he would never have raised a hand against it in the same situation). But her mother seemed only to be upset about the fact that her father had slapped her, not for her behavior per se. Was this her way to show her revulsion for her husbands display of violence, or did she actually take sides with her daughter? *And therefore, indirectly, with him?*

But seeing the concern in her eyes, it most likely must be motherly protectiveness, self-sufficient and unspoiled by any concept of thought or morals. As much as he'd felt an instant dislike for Hitomi's father since they'd first laid eyes on each other, he just as suddenly felt a deep fondness for her mother. She somehow reminded him of his own, no matter the difference in appearance and nature.

Although Van felt a small shimmer of hope by the way her mother expressed her gentleness towards her eldest child, Hitomi was still evading everyone's eyes. And, more or less, still ignoring him. This troubled him the most. When they entered the house, she had condescended to tell him to follow her lead, but that had been the only time she'd acknowledged him. At first, he'd hoped that she might have begun to forgive him, but now he recognized it was more likely so that he wouldn't behave like a total jerk again.

He took a brief glance at the wrist of her father. Van still felt very much afraid of what her family might think of him due to his brutish response. If they found out about it – and this would happen sooner or later, he knew – would they still treat him with cordiality, or neutrality, or whatever this was? If Hitomi's mother was already angry with her own husband, how would she react about such behaviour from a stranger towards a family member? *I've only ever wanted to protect Hitomi*, he thought, again, in a fruitless effort of mental self-defense.

Now, with a lowered head and a fast pace, Hitomi walked away (maybe from him), to join the less hostile part of the family for dinner. For a moment, he felt left behind drifting in midair, not sure on what to do next. But Hitomi had signaled for him to follow her actions before, so the only logical thing was to do just that: follow her and hope that everything might miraculously take a turn for the better.

On the other hand, Van thought, *if it wasn't for the stupid overreaction of her father, he*

wouldn't have attacked him, and he and Hitomi might have not been in this predicament in the first place.

Van was well aware of his own misdoings. But at this very moment, a sudden rush of cold hatred threatened to overwhelm him, an anger so strong that he could feel it radiate from his skin, causing the hair on the back of his neck to rise like the need to blame someone else. He'd felt Hitomi slipping away these past weeks, even though he didn't want to admit it to himself, but never as fast as during this short afternoon, since he'd abruptly fallen into disfavor with one of her parents. He'd fought so hard to gain – and keep – her affection; and now, his efforts felt like a delicate cord about to be cut by this insufferable man.

Thinking all this while walking past Hitomi's glowering father, it took all his self-control to not express his loathing. He'd sworn to himself to recover the losses for Hitomi, no matter the outcome for himself from this disastrous day, and showing his worst side *again* definitely wasn't an option. He must stick to his choice.

Now catching up with her, he thankfully felt his rage subside as suddenly as it had come. In the background, Van could hear Hitomi's father pursuing his wife into the kitchen, telling her who-knows-what lies about his bad personality.

When he'd reached the table, the girl was already introducing him to her brother and grandparents. From the things she'd told him, Van knew that her maternal grandparents had passed away quite a while ago. So, this must be the parents of her father, then. *Not good.* He could just hope her father's eccentricity was something quite unique and nothing he had *inherited* from them. Dealing with two or three of that kind would widely surpass his near to non-existing diplomatic prowess.

But yet again, he was surprised by a polite and respectful encounter. And Hitomi had indeed introduced him to them. Perhaps this was a good sign? At the moment, he was grasping for every straw of hope that was presenting itself to him.

After they'd both joined the family members at the table, he took a brief glance in the direction of the kitchen, where Hitomi's parents seemed to be fighting in hushed voices. Anew, he felt ashamed about the damage he'd caused. He could see her mother angrily grab the last remaining plates and something that he supposed must be the small bag of ice she'd mentioned some minutes ago.

Before her mother and her father made their way over, and as everyone kept their silence, Van had some brief moments to divert himself from his anxiousness by looking around and sucking in all the new sensations of a home on Earth.

The first thing he'd realized was – even though he knew Hitomi did not descend from a family with noble bloodline (she'd always claimed to be just an average girl in her world) – that the people from her country couldn't be poor. Despite its modest size, he could tell the house must fashion some rooms, – and Van did not deceive himself by the simplicity of furniture and decorations, as the dwelling and the things Hitomi's family possessed seemed all to be made of good materials and maintained well (only the purpose of some of their belongings totally eluded him). He couldn't detect any

big class differences between Hitomi's family and the people he'd seen on the streets so far, either, and he wondered if there were any. Many of them even seemed to be in possession of a carriage of their own.

The eating room they were now sitting in was directly connected to an open kitchen, but there was no smell of a smoky fire for cooking, so it wasn't unpleasant. Beside the dining table, there were some comfortable looking sitting options as well, adjoined by a smaller table and a big flat black object in front, which might be some kind of decoration. Or, now he pondered about it, perchance, a bigger home version of the communicator Hitomi was always carrying around with her since the time she'd left Gaia two years ago, as they looked quite alike. On the walls, there were a lot of frames with what he knew already to identify as photographs of the family, and one or two paintings. He heard an indistinctive humming present in nearly every room, but he couldn't distinguish a definite source or function. It was an odd sensation that left him even more uneasy.

All in all, it looked like an aristocrat's private suite in a castle to him. It had never occurred to Van that the average citizen could have the same living standards as a noble, but maybe his country was too poor to afford something similar. Abashed, he thought he should consider working on that next, after the restorations of his city.

Before, he had been too occupied with his tension and the accompanying sweaty hands when entering to get in all those new impressions. Now he needed them desperately to not go ballistic with all his nervousness. Especially, when he noticed her parents approaching this very moment.

Just when he nearly started panicking again, Van almost jumped out of his seat when Hitomi's hand hesitantly closed around his own. Otherwise, she did not move, nor look at him, nor let anyone know about this small movement in any other way. A thin line showed between her lightly furrowed eyebrows and her facial features expressed something between fear, confusion and... *an angry pout?* Her fingertips were slightly trembling and felt as cold as ice due to her inner turmoil.

Suddenly, he knew what was wrong. She wasn't evading him, *but afraid of taking sides*. That must be why Hitomi had rejected and ignored him before, trying to not reveal her feelings and enrage her father even more than they already had. How could he have been so blind?

Mirroring her by curling his fingers into hers for some brief seconds in the shadow of the wooden table, he also tried to put as much comfort into this little gesture as he could. Van could feel the tension of her fingers loosen a bit. Just like that, he became much calmer, too.

Hitomi's mother eventually sat down at the head-side of the table to Van's right – which left the last remaining seat for her husband *right opposite of himself, dammit* – putting down two more plates containing fish and some greens before handing her daughter the small bag he'd correctly identified as ice. She only held it to her face for a split second, but put it down again before her father joined them.

Shortly after everyone was seated, Van couldn't believe his own ears when Hitomi's grandmother used the first opportunity at hand to unsparingly remind her son of his own lewdness during his younger years, hinting that she'd been indeed intently listening to the whispering in the kitchen Van had zoned out from before. *The women in this family really are something*, Van thought a bit flustered, wondering if this was a good thing – only to be even more caught off guard by Hitomi's mother, who confirmed allegations against her beloved husband, yearningly gazing into the distance.

Her expression, somehow, uncomfortably reminded Van of the look Hitomi had given him during their kiss, causing him to flush even more. He could literally *feel* Hitomi beside him wishing the ground to open and swallow her up, and once again felt a sudden rush of sympathy for her. "I don't think I want to expand on this topic any further..." she mumbled.

At least it seemed they weren't totally without support in this mess. Contemplating this, his mood lifted some more, and though he was deeply grateful Hitomi's father was too speechless for a retort at the moment, Van was sure that he would be the one to eventually pay the price for this mockery later. Judging by everything that had happened so far, the family head surely would blame Van again for his misery.

"Van, just take what you want to eat," Hitomi's mother addressed him. "We share everything on the table."

He nodded thankfully and felt the last bit of tension leave him. Somehow, this woman made him feel at home. But the smile that was about to form on his lips froze when he saw the eating utensils, innocently lying there on the table. Taunting him.

He would embarrass himself.

Hadn't Balgus hammered him that one of the basic principles on diplomatic missions was to show you've engaged yourself in learning the good manners of the country you visit, including proper table manners? Hadn't he mastered all kinds of cutlery, beginning from fish forks and soup spoons to his bare hands? Then, what in almighty Gaia's name were these?

Don't lose your nerves again now, Van thought as he felt the mocking stare of Hitomi's father on his forehead and the panic taking shape again in his chest. He tried to copy the correct movements by observing the family members, but it didn't surprise him that it wasn't as easy to use the wooden sticks as it looked. He dropped everything he tried to pick up and could feel the puzzlement of everyone around him. By now, his cheeks burned, and the good-natured teasing of Hitomi's brother, even though directed at his sister, didn't do anything to cast him in a more favourable light. He must look totally out of place again, and he wondered whether this cutlery was used for eating only in this country or actually on the whole planet.

How should he explain this lack of common knowledge? He was not sure whether Hitomi wanted to introduce his origin as of yet, so he better keep it to himself for the moment and try to use the sticks with his best effort. And besides, her family would

either think him barbaric if he just started to pierce his meat with his sticks, or, if he wouldn't eat at all, incredibly rude. *Both, of course, impossible.* Perhaps he should just brave it and ask Hitomi if they had forks? She had proven to be familiar with them before, at the Asturian court. *Surely, they must use something similar somewhere in this world, then,* he pondered.

Just as Hitomi started to stir beside him to show Van how to properly use the devious little twigs, lady Kanzaki preempted her and came to his aid once again. After her simple instructions, it was quite easy to pick up the food (which was delicious), and he couldn't help but smile this time, even if the jealous glare—or whatever the look Hitomi's father gave Van meant—nearly burnt itself into his forehead.

He wouldn't get himself provoked *this time*.

Van still wished he could somehow make Hitomi's father waver in his abhorrence for him and show him that he wasn't the bad person he judged him to be after their catastrophic first impression. But all that occurred to him was to not address him altogether for as long as he could, and as long as it was polite. He didn't want to drop any more bricks, as this was likely his one and only chance to make sure to become somewhat part of Hitomi's family, to earn her forgiveness (all given she would still have him), and maybe even her father's, and he knew what was at stake if he screwed up today.

After the passing of his parents and brother, he'd unexpectedly become the only descendant of the Fanelian line, the only heir to a whole nation, so the high council of his country had concentrated on preparing him for crown and throne. Balgus always had been like a second father to him, both in advice and heart. However, Van's training definitely was no bed of roses, and Balgus had always kept at least a minimum of formal distance. After Fanelia had been burnt to ashes, fighting a war and protecting his legacy and people had been the young king's sole priority for a very long time. The great war had finally ended, and Van had to rebuild his country, which, alas, continued still and would do so for many years to come. There had never been much *time* for any sentiments, and Van was a bit overpowered by his feelings now.

It felt good being teased and treated by Hitomi's family members in a friendly manner. For a very long time, he had forgotten how this felt, laughing together, being taken care of by someone like a mother, the pleasant presence of grandparents (which he'd never known), or even the companionship of a brother (the father, sadly, couldn't be taken into account) – and he hadn't known how much he'd missed it until this very day.

Of course, he still had Merle, who was like a sister to him, in heart if not by blood, and nobody could ever replace his own kin. But Van already felt himself getting entangled with the shining warmth of this family. He loved the way Hitomi flushed at the jests of her little brother, the way it made her nearly furious. The indirect kindness between them. The way they backed him up, smiled at him, even if they didn't know him, and even if he was the intruder.

"You're welcome," Hitomi's mother replied, when Van had thanked her for her help

with the chopsticks. She then turned to her daughter with a mischievous smile on her face. "Where did you find such a courteous *friend*, Hitomi?"

The young girl's cheeks turned pink again, but this time not from embarrassment, and she gave her mother a shy smile. Van was delighted to see this sudden change.

The expressions that, again, started to show on the face of Hitomi's father were not so delightful. The older man obviously didn't feel enthusiastic about the praise – and hence, the indirect approval of Van – his wife had just expressed.

She continued to inquire, "Van, my husband earlier implied that you are not from Japan. Where do you come from?"

Of course, it had been just a matter of time before they asked him about his origins. He should have prepared an answer for this by now. He cursed his procrastination, as the only thing that came to his mind was to stammer, "Well, it's not that easy to explain..." He glanced over to Hitomi in search of help.

What response would be alright *in her opinion* and would leave the least harm to her already damaged reputation within her family? Maybe he should let her handle this, even if it puts more pressure on her? He wasn't sure if it would be helpful for him to invent something which might contradict anything she'd told them previously, and he definitely didn't want to return their first question with a *lie*.

As if in reply to his thoughts, she answered in his stead, almost enthusiastically. "Can we skip this for now?" she said. "I will tell you everything about it later. After dinner."

He hoped that meant she would tell them the truth after her grandparents had left. This he would very much approve of. He'd never liked to play *hide and seek* with anyone, not in politics, nor in private matters. And, especially, not with one's own kin. This was one of the main reasons he'd gotten so angry earlier when he'd found out Hitomi had kept him a secret from her parents for all this time. He wished, by any chance, that they might set this right at some point.

Nonetheless, Van now became a bit uneasy again, as Hitomi's father was now openly watching him. Alertly, and vigilantly. Actually, Van found it rather rude to be eyeballed in such a way, but certainly he knew better than to say so. He wouldn't get incited by this man again, but knew he shouldn't irritate him either.

Thankfully, Hitomi's mother didn't seem to mind the rejection of this first question, as she shoveled more food onto his plate, and he thanked her with as much gratitude as he could muster.

Only Hitomi's grandmother pitched into the conversation, saying, "Oh, a secret we cannot know about! Would you rather tell us something about your family, then? What do your parents do for a living? Do you have any siblings?"

Again, this was nothing too easy to answer, but he would this time. He neither wanted them to think him a liar nor did he want to reveal too much of his life until they'd

talked in the evening, so he pondered his answer carefully. "An adopted sister," Van replied. "My father, mother, and elder brother have all passed away over the last dozen or so years." He hoped this didn't sound too melodramatic or make the family members feel bad for asking.

His hope was fruitless. Hitomi's mother immediately put her hand onto her mouth to stifle the sound accompanying her dismay, and her grandmother eagerly expressed her apologies for asking. Van managed an honest smile at their compassion. "How were you to know?" he said. "And besides, it's no secret, so please don't worry about it."

He felt a mite awkward though, when lady Kanzaki – again – served him more food, mumbling "poor boy" under her breath.

Throughout this exchange, he hadn't failed to notice that Hitomi's father seemed to grow even more disgusted by him– if that were even possible– and now glared at him as if he were looking at vermin. *What had he done NOW?* This man really was an enigma. Van hadn't expected any sympathy from him (not that he wanted it), but logical reasons for this opposite reaction eluded him. Van could see the man turning red as he worked himself up.

Thankfully, the rest of the family continued asking him more questions, and this time it was Hitomi's grandfather, "But say, I had thought you and Hitomi to be the same age. Aren't you attending school? I don't see you wearing a school uniform."

Yes, no and no, he thought. Hitomi's father's glare turned even more intense. Would it make any difference if he said he wasn't? He knew from Hitomi's tales that receiving an education at her age was the common thing to do here, not working.

"No, I'm not?" He answered faithfully, hoping it wouldn't seem too strange again.

"Awesome!" Hitomi's brother cried out immediately in delight. Maybe school was something horrible, then...?

He couldn't finish the thought. Hitomi's father, mere seconds after Van had answered, had jumped onto the table with one foot and a crazy gleam in his eyes, cheering loudly. "Aha!" *He pointed his finger at Van*, as if he'd just solved a crime. Everyone else, Van included, became quiet immediately.

Van looked up at him in shock. *THIS*, he thought, *is the strangest thing that has happened to me in a very long time – interworld traveling included.*

"Uh... Isamu, is everything alright? Could you please come down?" Hitomi's mother asked tentatively, plainly horrified, before Van in his perplexed state could even *think* of an appropriate reaction. In another instant, she regained her composure and pulled her husband down onto his buttocks again, complaining to him in a low voice. He didn't seem to hear her though, apparently trapped in his own fantasies. The madness wasn't fully gone from his eyes either, and he seemed kind of excited.

Yes. Well. I will just try and pretend this didn't happen. Maybe it will just pass... Van thought bewildered, hoping it would indeed pass and wasn't just the beginning.

Apparently, Hitomi's grandfather had the same thought, as he also acted as if everything was as normal as normal could be. "Well, where was I?" he said, a trifle too absent-minded. "...Oh, right. If you're not going to school, you must be older than my granddaughter. Do you work already?"

Still a bit disturbed, Van was about to start to answer the question without due thought just as Hitomi stepped onto his toes. He stopped talking at once and entrusted her to answer a second time. "Van... Van is working in a government building," she said.

Hitomi apparently wanted to hide the fact that he was a king, which puzzled him. But, knowing her, it was probably that she believed her family might not believe them, either because there normally weren't many *kings* to begin with (and the odds she actually *knew* one was tremendously low), or it was because most countries on Earth weren't ruled by kings and queens anymore, as she'd told him on one or two occasions. Considering this, the latter might be more likely, depending on how much she'd revealed to her parents about her journey to Gaia.

Van thought she had talked with them about what had happened, as she'd mentioned as much, and she had to tell them *something* about her disappearance. But possibly she'd withheld quite a few facts. Given that in his own world there were actually many legends and folktales about the Mystic Moon, he was uncertain it wasn't the other way around on Earth. Gaia was nowhere to be seen, so it must have been a hell of a story for them, shaking the foundations of everything they knew. Had they believed her? He thought he remembered her saying that her mother and brother had, but her father hadn't. Van hoped that wasn't another lie from her, but now, after making acquaintance with her father face-to-face, it was most likely the truth. Hitomi wasn't a notorious liar, after all.

"Oh, really? That sounds promising," Hitomi's grandfather said in an attempt to politely keep the conversation going.

Her father interrupted them again. "As a cleaning dandy, I suppose," he spat.

Van couldn't trust his own ears. This was such a blatant insult that he would have challenged him to a sword duel to take his words back under normal circumstances, but Hitomi had discreetly kicked his shin under the table. It wasn't too hurtful, but the message was clear: *Don't get yourself provoked*, it said.

He wouldn't. Instead, Van took a deep breath to calm himself, but he still couldn't help at least making a retort. "Someone shouldn't extrapolate from oneself to others, you know. Especially if *this someone* has no clue about anything concerning this other person." Van glared at the elder instead of inviting him to a duel, which he thought was quite generous of himself.

The old ape was already back on the table, pointing and raging. If Van hadn't seen it

before and hadn't focused on calming himself already, he would have been startled out of his chair as well. Hitomi, however, flinched at her father's sudden movement.

"What did you just say to me? I am the director of a hospital! You impudent, little..." he thundered before being hauled back down again by his now openly infuriated wife.

"Oh, sit down already!" Lady Kanzaki scolded, her face the colour of a strawberry. She wasn't the only one. Her father-in-law also berated him, unable to look directly at Van. His son on the other side was too stupefied about this sudden change in events. He'd even forgotten to withdraw his pointing index finger and sat blinking bewilderedly.

Van took a deep breath to constrain his annoyance. He wondered briefly who of them both was the adult and made a mental note to *never* get ill or injured in front of this insufferable man so he wouldn't need to be treated at his hospital. Whatever hospital *that* might be.

When he took a side glance at Hitomi, he realized her tension had fully returned. She was knitting her eyebrows again, eyes shining with insecurity. Carefully, to not startle her, Van enclosed her hand in his once more in a gesture he hoped would calm her. Unfortunately, her anxiety didn't pass that easily.

He should have known.

In the life of Van Fanel, there was no such thing as an effortless trial. *Dragons, guymelefs, pyropaths* – he had seen them all. But no glorious fight, no diplomacy mission, not even a fate alteration machine, would have ever prepared him to confront an insulting (and insulted), livid, potential father-in-law. Who, alas, more than clearly, didn't want to be just that: his future in-law.

As Van had contemplated before, he just couldn't wrap his head around this man's way of thinking. In fact, it totally eluded him. He'd seldom seen such an unforgiving person, except perhaps the one looking back at him in the mirror every morning (deciding not reflecting on that more than necessary left Van with a slightly bad conscience), and he didn't know what triggered this more-than-strange behavior Hitomi's father had shown all evening. It was as if the elder was *completely* entangled in whatever twisted trains of thoughts he had been fostering.

Mercifully, after his last outbreak, the man hadn't said another word, sulking like a five-year-old (oh, *goodness!*), and they'd finished dinner in polite but awkward silence, with only the occasional question here and there. Van had also worriedly noticed that Hitomi had stuck to her stiffness the entire time.

Dinner was over eventually, and the younger generation cleared the table together, Hitomi bringing the plates into the kitchen while the boys remained on their designated seats, talking a bit. Hitomi was trying hard to create a feeling of normalcy,

but couldn't fully cover up her unease. More than once she'd secretly glanced at her father. Van also got the ominous foreboding that the man wasn't finished with them yet.

After talking amongst themselves for a while (except the notorious grumbler – Van started to wonder if this was his only facial expression, though Hitomi had stated that her father actually was capable of smiling, though it had been some years ago, when they had camped in the middle of nowhere; maybe he had unlearned it at some point?), Hitomi came back to the table with some refreshments – fruits and different drinks – while her mother remained in the kitchen to wash the dishes. Van, a tiny bit wiser than before, didn't dare touch any of the strange small and shiny silver- and grape-coloured containers before anyone else did. He had no idea how to open them, let alone what they contained and what he was allowed to choose. Fortunately, Hitomi opened a green bottle with a brownish liquor in it and handed it over to him. It was some kind of unsweetened cold tea brew, which didn't taste bad at all. He smiled at her.

Maybe that smile was the straw that broke the camel's back. Hitomi's father was nipping on his own brown-silver bottle when he, too, began *smiling at his daughter*.

Van did not buy it, the smile was way too sly, though Hitomi was obviously just happy about this sudden change in her father's attitude, addressing her now, *unexpectedly praising Van*. Still, she sat upright and alert.

"Tell me, Hitomi," he said with a smirk, "Isn't Van's Japanese quite acceptable! I didn't expect that. How long has he been learning? He speaks so fluently."

Van wanted to warn her, but it was too late already – he'd hesitated a moment too long to decide whether to tread on the toes of a gentlewoman or not, and the feint had worked.

"Two years, maybe," she answered cautiously.

Now her father's grin turned wicked. "And didn't Van just tell us today that *you* taught him?" he asked. Everyone fell silent once again.

Quod erat demonstrandum, old gobermouch. Van racked his own brain on what to counter, but there was nothing he could think of.

At this moment, lady Kanzaki came back from the kitchens, drying her hands on a towel. The silence only seemed to incentivise her husband to continue arguing, openly showing his fake, sweetish smile. Or was it a triumphant one?

"Oh, come over here, Kazumi, dear," the vicious man continued. "Isn't that a *beautiful pendant* Van is wearing around his neck?"

Suspiciously, she observed her husband for just a split second before darting her eyes off in search of said piece of jewelry. Her mouth dropped when she spotted it.

"Though it was most likely intended for young girls," he continued with sadistic pleasure. Then, demonstratively waving a hand, he added, "But the young *boys* nowadays like to sport themselves with more feminine wear, so never mind that."

Think. Quick. Please. Van begged himself, but his head remained as dumb as ever. Unconsciously, he closed his hand around the pinkish stone. The necklace must have slipped out from under his linen shirt at some point. Only one thing was drag-energist-clear: *he couldn't get himself provoked again.*

"But... Hitomi! Isn't this your grandmother's necklace? Didn't you say you'd lost it?" her mother exclaimed in disbelief.

Now the triumph on Hitomi's father's face was undeniable, and not for the first time this evening the room went as silent as a grave despite the number of people in it.

Where there had been only tension before, Hitomi's face now went white in horror. Although Van wanted to shield her from the coming storm, he really didn't know how, as his mind was as blank as hers.

"Okāsan, I..." Hitomi eventually began to stutter. Her hands were shaking.

"I KNEW IT!" Hitomi's father roared in a sudden outburst of anger. "It was him, all the time it was *him* you'd run away with, isn't it?"

Hitomi's pleading voice trembled, "No, Tōsan, it wasn't like that..." She couldn't finish. Her voice broke and her eyes began to water.

"DON'T YOU DARE LIE TO ME EVER AGAIN! Do you really think anybody actually *believes* this ridiculous fairytale of yours, about a planet named Gaia and your travels to the stars?"

"I do!" Hitomi's mother and brother stated in unison, but her father didn't pay them any heed.

"Travels to the stars? What do you mean by that, Isamu?" Hitomi's grandmother dared to ask, eyes wide. "Didn't you and Kazumi tell us Hitomi had lost her memory about the time she'd gone missing?"

In the upcoming chatter, Van could only think of one thing he could do, even if it was fruitless, as Hitomi's father would never believe him. He raised his voice a bit, so that he would drown out the state of turmoil unfolding itself in front of him and they could hear what he wanted to say.

"I come from Fanelia." Van spoke as calm as he could possibly bring himself to, getting everyone's attention. "Fanelia is both the name of the capital and the name of the country I am from. If you have never heard of Fanelia, your *lordship*, there is only one logical consequence to be drawn: that your daughter *indeed* has not lied to you, and that this country is nowhere to be found on any map of Earth. As a matter of fact, it is located on Gaia, the twin world of this planet. I more than gladly invite you to visit my

home country.”

Total awkward silence, again.

Van could hear the drumming of his heartbeat pulsating in his ears, and was already preparing inwardly to be the man’s next target. By now he could see his face change colour from lightly red to dark purple, and so he steeled himself. *He couldn’t get himself provoked again.* At least, he’d gotten the attention away from Hitomi, he thought.

“Are you kidding me?” Hitomi’s father suddenly roared, on his feet again. “You’ve thought up this whole story together, admit it!!” Van hadn’t even realized he’d gotten up to his feet as well.

He shouldn’t get himself provoked again.

“Did you seriously just call me a *liar*?” he yelled into the man’s face. They were now only mere inches apart from each other.

“I’ll call you what I want!!” Hitomi’s father spat. “I’ll even call you an ill-mannered, shameless and cheeky little bastard, who tries to ruin my daughter’s life! For whom no means is too bad to do so!!”

Van’s jaw just dropped. Since Dilandau, there had been no one, literally *no one*, who had dared to speak to him this way! This opinion was so unjust that it floored him. He could feel Hitomi’s little hand sheepishly begin to pull on his shirt to remind him to stay calm, but his blood was rushing through his veins into his head.

He really shouldn’t get himself provoked.

Her father continued, now directing his tirade at Hitomi, whilst pointing at Van once more with his index finger – poking it right into his chest: “Back then, when you went missing, in truth, you’d eloped with that *vanda*! Do you have any idea how worried we were?”

Hitomi was now near sobbing, and Van’s own worst-case-scenario was taking shape in front of him.

“But now, he wants to snatch you away again, but you don’t want to go because he treated you badly before, isn’t that it? That is why you have both argued today!”

“Tōsan, now you are exaggerat–” Hitomi began, but was reduced to silence by Van immediately.

“And you, you are a stubborn, *nitwitted* old man, who can’t distinguish black from white! Who isn’t capable of logical thinking!” *That was his shin again, alright.* “Why, do you think, would we have thought up something *together*, something that would have concealed Hitomi’s disappearance, if I didn’t want her to leave me to begin with? On the contrary–”

"Van, please—" Hitomi was begging him now.

He really shouldn't...

But Hitomi's father had really crossed a line there. "And do you know what?" he said, not bothering to stop the sneer that most certainly overtook his face, "She visits me quite often." *Overstatement.* "And just for the record," Van continued, the grin vanishing from his face now, "I do not treat Hitomi badly. Why, do you think, would she give me her precious pendant as a present, if I did?"

Watching Hitomi's father's face turn that shade of green made it worth it. Van knew he shouldn't go any further, knew he shouldn't say the following words without Hitomi's consent, but he just couldn't stop himself anymore and he let his words fly. "It makes me sad that I'll have to call you father one day." Yes, it felt *good* to get that off his chest.

At least for the first couple seconds. It was as if he'd pulled a knife from his thigh and tossed it away, only for it to cut Hitomi in the tossing. Now, though he no longer had the discomfort of the knife, he'd only made things worse.

Hitomi, red-faced and wide-eyed in disbelief, dropped the tip of his shirt she'd been pulling. Finding her voice, she was now beseeching him. "Oh, Van, please! Just stop it already!" she begged.

Her mother, seeing her husband's face turning red as well, said instead in a more direct voice, "Isamu, I warn you!"

Coming out of his stupor, Hitomi's father was now somewhat near the explosion. "F...father?! You WISH!!"

"YOU BETTER EXPECT IT!" Van countered loudly, the nose tips of the males now nearly touching each other. They were like two dragons going berserk, ready to kill each other.

BANG!

It wasn't just the men who jerked around in surprise at the loud noise Hitomi's hands made when she smacked the table. Her hands and arms supporting her, she bent over, looking directly at the wood, her hair shielding her.

"Thanks for popping the question, Van," she sarcastically said through clenched teeth. "But maybe I have something to say about all that as well?"

Now it was Van's turn to become red-faced. *He had done it again.*

"Hitomi, sit down immediately!" her father bellowed. "This is something between me, and that one!"

"No, it isn't!" she cried out, holding back her tears. "Not only have you spoiled our first kiss and beat my face, no! Ever since we entered through that door," she pointed at the entrance, "you have been constantly picking on Van! You haven't heard one word he said to you. Do you listen, Tōsan? No! Not to one single, damn word!!"

Her father was so surprised that she'd talked back to him, that he was lost for words. For one brief moment, Van just was glad she was defending him after all he'd done wrong that day.

That was until she directed her accusing gaze at *him*. "And YOU!! You- I-" she tried to continue, but her voice broke and the tears in her eyes did also break, leaving wet trails on her face. His eyes wide in shock, he could only stare. "I... I think I need some fresh air," she mumbled, more to herself than to anyone else.

"Oh no, you stay here!" Hitomi's father called after her, but his wife was holding his arm, while Hitomi had already turned around on her heels, and, without even grabbing any footwear, ran out the front door. "Hitomi, come back here immediately!" her father was still yelling.

"Isamu, calm down!" Hitomi's mother scolded her husband. "Now, just give her some time to compose herself after this debacle, will you?"

A wave of guilt was now hitting Van after the immediate shock. "Hitomi!" he also began calling after her, running to the entrance. "Hitomi, wait, please!"

"Ooooh no, I *definitely* won't leave you both alone EVER again... You little... OUCH!" It seemed he'd received a juicy smack on the head from his wife, but Van only registered it faintly as he left the house, picking up her abandoned shoes and collecting his own, dressing in them, jumping on one foot while leaving the door at the same time.

But Hitomi wasn't there. Of course she wouldn't wait for him. She was already gone, the alley in front of the house deserted and empty. Not even a stray animal was anywhere to be seen, and eerie street lights cast long shadows on the walkway. Van felt his breath speeding up spasmodically. He was on the brink of hyperventilating. He turned his head left, he turned it right, but nothing.

Where was she?

Where should he search for her now?

He squatted down, pressing his knuckles onto his forehead, into his eyes, trying to think, trying to breath, trying to suppress the anxiety forcefully emitting from the center of his stomach, spreading into his entire body. Mumbling, he cursed himself.

He'd done it again.

Now, his eyes, too, started to water. He had allowed himself to be provoked again.

He'd poked right into the dragon's eye.

