

VoE - (Un)fortunate Kiss

Beta-read

Von CatariaNigra

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.