

VoE - (Un)fortunate Kiss

Beta-read

Von CatariaNigra

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 wonderous 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-energistic-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 *vandal*! 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.