

VoE - (Un)fortunate Kiss

Beta-read

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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.