

VoE - (Un)fortunate Kiss

Beta-read

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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, *nooooo*, 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.