

VoE - (Un)fortunate Kiss

Beta-read

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Kapitel 1: Light Pillars

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

"Humph." Now it was Kazumi's turn to make a sound similar to a snort. Why was it always him giving in? Isamu wondered briefly. Kazumi didn't seem in the mood for an

argument. After a short silence, she added "Just don't forget to send Hitomi a message on LINE," LINE was the family's preferred messaging app. "or I am pretty sure she will just hop on the first tram home with Yukari, and you two will miss each other."

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

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