

VoE - (Un)fortunate Kiss

Beta-read

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Kapitel 5: Happy family time

As silent as it had begun, the drive ended in the narrow Kanzaki gravel path. Embedded in a quiet and well-kept Japanese neighborhood, the house bathed in the dark orange hues of the setting evening sun. The aromatic perfume of summer gardens was heavy in the air, and it also carried the inviting laughter out of the windows of the home in front of him. Within its walls, Isamu's family members were unaware of the upcoming storm he was inwardly preparing for.

"Here we are." Isamu dryly informed the two teens on the back row. Without waiting for any kind of reaction, the middle-aged man switched off the car, got out, and slammed the door behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his daughter wince noticeably at the loud sound the impact had made. He didn't care. The trip from school back home had done nothing to lessen his anger – nor his disappointment, for that matter.

Reaching the front entrance of his house, he looked back to see if the kids were following him. He watched the boy sheepishly hold the vehicle door open for his daughter, who exited with a rather ashen complexion. *Playing the gentleman card now, are we?* The family father thought.

He could see the youngster hesitate for a moment, then – curiosity getting the better of him – discreetly eye the residential building ahead before setting himself into motion. Isamu felt his bile rise again.

By now, he was pretty sure something was wrong with this child. The outward appearance was one thing the family father knew he could have somehow dealt with. They were another generation after all. And if he was being honest with himself, there were many young people out there who looked much worse. Even his outlandishness might have been okay with him, as long as they could communicate in some way. But the little bully's lack of any social competency and his aggressive conduct definitely were out of the question! *Absolutely unacceptable!*

During his work at the psychological department of his hospital, Isamu had come across hundreds of teenagers with volatile or violent dispositions, and many of those cases didn't go well. Such behavior often spoke volumes about the surroundings

those kids grew up, too. The way this boy furtively inspected his home indicated that no matter where he was coming from, it couldn't be a fitting place for a young person to spend his childhood. And, as a hard-working member of Japanese society, another conclusion drew itself in Isamu's mind, the substantive aspect behind it all: *That fellow had never seen such a splendid residence as ours.* For him, Hitomi surely was a good catch. It would only be a matter of time until this kid would turn against his sweet and naïve daughter.

Temper and fatherly protectiveness flaring again, he put the key into the front door's lock, but nearly yelped when turning it. Isamu's glance immediately fell onto the purple and blue blooms proudly adorning his wrist, definitely outshining his home in magnificence.

This little...! He must win Kazumi over to his side only this once, no matter the cost!

All things considered, Hitomi was still too young and amidst a crucial time of her life – especially with her prior disappearance – and this boy not good enough for her, politely put. He was an endangerment of his daughter's innocence and a thorn in Isamu's flesh.

Steeling himself, he entered. The unique scent of Kazumi's traditional Japanese cooking welcomed him. For some blissful milliseconds, he forgot his negative sentiments and just enjoyed coming home. It was always his favorite time of the day, to sit with his family whenever he would finish work early and listen to them chatting and laughing, discussing how their day was.

The spell was broken when Hitomi rustled behind him, putting her bag on the sideboard, the raven-haired boy appearing by her side. Dinner would be ruined, that was for sure. Isamu registered the little punk standing there, a bit lost – though still prying around (hopefully he wouldn't *steal* anything!) – on what to do next until Hitomi whispered instructions in that stupid language of theirs. He nodded his head and followed her example by removing his footwear.

Now, Isamu was utterly confused. Was it not common knowledge, even abroad, that Japanese put off their shoes when entering a dwelling? He knew this from past visits from American and German business partners. From which star did this boy come from again? Well, he would find that out later. Now he had something more important to concentrate on.

Tidily placing his own shoes in their designated space, he grumbled "We're home." towards the kitchen. Clinking there with some tableware, Kazumi answered: "Hello, Isamu! Hitomi." His daughter immediately stiffened behind him, an anxious expression showing on her face while biting her lip. If he wanted his wife's support, it was now or never.

Isamu quickly stepped into the kitchen where he found her wearing her favorite daruma-motive kitchen apron. It sported some wet spots where she must have dried her hands before. His parents and 14-year-old son Sora had arrived before them, already waiting at the laden table. They would eat Okonomiyaki and an assortment of

salads and meats tonight. *Nice.*

No, wait! What was he thinking? No distractions! He had to be angry right now!

"Hello, dear," he greeted Kazumi back. She floated over to him to peck his cheek. Apparently, she wasn't feeling resentful towards him and was in a good mood again. Only the better for him, although his wife raised an eyebrow questioningly at the sour look on his face.

His son must've already spotted the intruder as he was bluntly gaping in the direction of the hallway, his mouth hanging open a bit. Isamu's parents on the other hand either didn't notice anything out of order, or (and Isamu would go for the latter if he had to bet on it) just feigned they didn't, patiently waiting for everyone to sit down and the situation to dissolve on its own.

Wondering why her daughter didn't join them, Kazumi gently pushed Isamu aside to glance into the corridor as well. "Hitomi? ...huh?" She now had spotted the unbidden "guest" too, mild surprise written over her face. Hitomi shamefully tried to avert her eyes, while the bloke suddenly straightened himself when Kazumi's gaze shortly darted over to him again.

Well, time to deploy the bomb.

Adding a false sweetish note to his voice, he asked: "Kazumi, darling, guess whom I've found glued together in front of the school today?"

Hitomi jerked her head around, mouth and eyes wide in utter disbelief.

His son, Sora, incredulously commented from the background: "What? How did *that* happen?! In his best interest, I hope he used a ten-foot-pole instead of his lips!" Though not pleased about it, the family father let the insult pass for now. He could tell his son off later.

Even the blockhead somehow must have gotten Isamu's meaning, for his face changed color to something resembling a beetroot. *Embarrassment or wrath? Maybe,* Isamu thought, *just maybe, I can trigger him to have another outburst? Like this, it would be easier to get rid of the little berserk.* Mortified, Hitomi's face turned bright red again, too, causing her eyes to water. Normally, the sight would have melted Isamu's heart, but he was still so blinded by his own grudges, he wasn't even able to feel the tiniest bit of pity for his own daughter at the moment. *This should do the job,* he forced himself to think instead.

At least this was what Isamu had believed. With snapping her head around, Hitomi had unintentionally granted her mother a good view on her puffed cheek. Kazumi gasped, closing the remaining distance between her child and herself. Catching hold upon the girl's chin with her fingers and turning her around some more, Kazumi inspected the reddish mark with bewilderment. "Hitomi, how did that happen? Isamu, don't tell me... *was that you?!*"

Within an instant, the woman's guardian instincts were set back into motion. Seething, she faced her husband, achieving a satisfying wince. He must admit, he hadn't calculated *this* to happen. He better should have. "How dare you to strike your own daughter! What has gotten into you?! *Unbelievable*. Hitomi." She abruptly turned away again, maybe to avoid the temptation to chop his head off. "Please, for now, just go and sit down with... what's the young man's name?" Remembering her good manners, Kazumi gave the boy as dazzling a smile as she could muster under her current temper, which he tentatively returned. *First betrayed by my own daughter. Now betrayed by my own wife*, Isamu thought. Hitomi cautiously observed her mother under her eyelashes.

He needed revenge, even if it was just a tiny one. "I doubt that he has mastered our language yet, Kazumi," Isamu spat.

Did he imagine it, or did the corners of the little shit's mouth twitch for the briefest of moments?

"*Van*. My name is Van Fanel. Hitomi has taught me some Japanese. Nice to meet you, Miss Kanzaki." *Flabbergasted*. That must be the word describing his expression best right now. Why had he assumed that the boy couldn't speak his tongue? Certainly, because he had kept his silence during the whole damned car drive and afterwards, and Isamu had immediately jumped to conclusions. He hadn't been thinking straight. But this new bit of information made the cogs in his brain machine accelerate like hamster wheels.

Kazumi scowled at him again, before turning back to Hitomi. "Well, please sit down with Van. He will of course stay for dinner." She gently touched her daughter's cheek, who still didn't dare meet her mother's eyes. "I will get you some ice at once." Her voice dripped with acid. Kazumi darted Isamu another withering look before heading back into the kitchen.

With her head lowered, his daughter passed him quickly to finally join the rest of the family for supper, this *Baan* or whatever it was he called himself following in her wake. As he walked past, the head of the family could actually *feel* the dark emotions he held for Isamu radiating from his body like venomous vapor, though it seemed that he didn't want to show any openly and kept them to himself instead. It should be Isamu holding animosities, not this kid! He was the one being hurt most, especially after Kazumi's unexpected reaction. It made him feel like a jerk. *Which he wasn't!*

Meekly and in a hushed voice, Hitomi introduced the boy to her grandparents. They greeted him in a neutral manner, remaining impartial. "Pleased to meet you," his father said. His own father, too, eh? *Darn*.

It took Isamu a moment to recover from the initial shock of everyone apparently turning their back on him, but Isamu finally followed Kazumi into the kitchen. He, at the very least, must win his wife over to his side. "Kazumi!" he whispered frantically. "Did you hear what I tried to tell you? This *schmuck* yelled at Hitomi! And then they'd kissed! In broad daylight and the middle of the street, directly in front of the whole school! You should have seen the looks on the faces of the passersby - even one of

Hitomi's teachers was there. *On top of it all, it was her math teacher, Kazumi. Math!*

His wife was clearly trying not to explode. Taking two deep breaths through her nostrils first and with all the patience she could muster, she finally answered him as if she was talking slowly to an ill-bred child. "Given the experiences gathered throughout our marriage, Kanzaki Isamu, I am quite sure that you must have imagined at least half of it. Fortunately, Hitomi's grades in math are *excellent*, so I am sure she will recover from anything Mr. Honda might – or might not – have seen. Now, sit down already, *before I forget myself*." With that, she just left him standing where he was, dumbstruck, as she balanced the last remaining plates and a wrapped ice bag in her arms and marched to the table to take a seat.

There hadn't been many occasions when Kazumi had talked back to him like that. In fact, maybe there had been this one time ten years or so ago, when he had been drinking too much for a while, because he couldn't handle all the pressure at the hospital. It had been a tough year; not so much because of the long hours he had to work every day, but more though that so many pediatric oncology patients had died. With two children of his own, Isamu had been distraught beyond his tolerance level. On top of that, he was unable to speak about what was bothering him, so he had just bottled everything up, literally, by avoiding reality with *Kirin*-beer and diverse *nihonshu* outside the working hours instead. He and Kazumi had nearly divorced due to it. Thankfully, he had been able to get a grip on himself, he told her everything, and gradually, he made peace with himself. After that, both his marriage and career had skyrocketed.

But this time, Kazumi wasn't angry with him because he had kept things to himself. This time, it was all this little scum's fault! He would pay *dearly* for it.

Interrupted in his grumbling by the loud rumble of his stomach, Isamu decided that food was the best course of action for the moment. *Wouldn't keep him from glaring angrily, though.*

He sat down beside his wife, directly opposite the two older kids, who both looked like the personification of the term "heap of misery". His son and parents sat to his left and right. Isamu's whispering to Kazumi must have been louder than he had suspected, as his mother, who had sported an admirable silence and a flawless poker face during the whole ugly exchange, suddenly piped up: "You know, Isamu, if Tōsan and I spilled everything *you* had done in the light of day – and sometimes in public areas, heaven forbid! – I am quite sure anything our little Hitomi here has done today would be considered perfectly chaste. Virtuous, even. She would be so *jealous* of you." Unapologetic, grandma Kanzaki added some fresh tea to her cup, blowing the steam away with her wrinkled, slightly whiskered lips.

"Oh, yes! This statement I can personally attest to," his traitorous wife added, zoning out as if she was lost in a reverie of her own memory. The look on her face was enough to make all the young people present blush ferociously.

Okasan... you too?

This was definitely a conspiracy! *When* had anything they were asserting happened, anyway?! He'd been a good boy! *A good one!* Some images flashed in his mind, but he repressed them quickly. Altogether, their accusations had taken the wind out of Isamu's sails. For the moment, he was even more at a loss for words.

"I don't think I want to expand on this topic any further..." Hitomi mumbled, which made Kazumi chuckle.

Addressing their *guest*, she encouraged him: "Van, just take what you want to eat. We share everything on the table." Humbly nodding his head in comprehension, Isamu could see the boy considerably easing up. Observing the shiny dark hair, Isamu thought of the word *blackhead*. Might do for a better nickname than iron fist for this annoying individual.

Oh, right! His own bruises. *Don't make yourself feel too much at home, buddy.* Isamu grinned inwardly while placing his blueish wrists as unobtrusively onto the table as he could. No one heeded them – or him – any attention. The only exception might be his daughter, who was still fearfully glancing at him every once in a while and had worriedly noticed his recent action.

Following the example of his family, the pimple picked up his chopsticks, but it was obvious that he was clueless about how to use them. Slightly panicking, he watched Sora's hand movements as he dug in. *What a fool.* Was there really anyone left out there oblivious as to the use of *chopsticks*? Kazumi seemed a bit puzzled about it, too, but tried to conceal it.

And yet again it was *her* helping the twit out of his misery. And smiling! "Look, you just hold them between your fingers like this."

"Is this right?" the teen asked, repeating the motion she had just shown him.

"Yes!" Kazumi exclaimed enthusiastically. "And then, you try to pick up the food with the pointed ends."

She is enjoying this! Isamu realized. He felt an irrational pang of jealousy at this special treatment.

Hitomi observed the exchange and relaxed somewhat, too, as he tried to copy the correct movement again, but failed. "No, no." Sora held his own sticks in the air and clicked the ends together. "More like *this*. These are *chopsticks*, not *ten-foot-poles*. We don't want to have any more accidents here, do we?" he stated helpfully, referring to his joke about their kiss.

Hitomi nearly choked on her food. "Will you stop it already?" she hissed at her little brother, who just made a face at her.

"Sora, please." Kazumi admonished him. Her voice trembled slightly, betraying a hint of amusement. She discreetly gave Isamu a mocking side-glance.

Very funny, all of you. Isamu's lips formed a thin line in remembrance of today's incident. He wished he could just erase it from his mind.

"Okay, okay... I'll be quiet," Sora grumbled in response, while the oaf hid his face in embarrassment behind this impossible hair mop. He again tried to pick up a piece of Kazumi's delicious pancake and was successful this time.

"Yes, just like that," Kazumi praised.

"Thanks for your help, Miss Kanzaki," shithead politely buttered his wife up.

Warmth twinkling in her brown eyes, she responded, "You're welcome." Kazumi then turned and addressed her daughter. "Where did you find such a courteous *friend*, Hitomi?" she teased good-naturedly. A hue of pink appeared on Hitomi's cheeks, but the girl only smiled silently at her mother, then devoted her attention back to her plate.

Polite? You call him polite? That maggot abuses your husband's wrists, sticks his tongue into your daughter's mouth, eats our hard-earned food, and YOU talk about courteousness?! Isamu thought. That's simply ridiculous!

Now, his family started to ask blackhead questions. Maybe he would give away something Isamu could use against him later. Isamu would listen attentively.

He took a sip from his beer, when Kazumi asked: "Van, my husband earlier implied that you are not from Japan. Where do you come from?"

Indecisive, the chimp looked back and forth between Hitomi and Kazumi. "Well, it's not that easy to explain..."

But Hitomi already had interrupted him. "Can we skip this for now? I will tell you everything about it later. After dinner," she said, signifying to her mother with meaningful eyes that she wanted to wait until the grandparents had left.

Suspicious. Isamu had already made a mental note. Priding himself on having the memory of an elephant, he definitely wouldn't forget to ask about it.

"Of course," Kazumi said. With her chopsticks, she put more bits of food onto blackhead's plate.

"Thank you" he muttered. "It's really good." Kazumi smiled at him again. It was so obvious that she liked him. Isamu felt like throwing up at the sight.

Grandma Kanzaki exclaimed in a theatrical way, "Oh, a secret we cannot know about! Won't you rather tell us something about your family? What do your parents do for a living? Do you have any siblings?" Hesitating again, the youngster briefly knitted his brows while considering his answer, then said: "An adopted sister. My father, mother, and elder brother passed away a long time ago."

If everything Isamu knew about the boy by now wouldn't suffice already, no! This kid had to be an orphan, too. *Fantastic*. Maybe blackhead had picked up his daughter wandering the streets somewhere. That might be why they acted so secretive all the time. But more importantly, not only would this explain his bad manners, it would also definitely inspire sympathy from his family.

In immediate answer to his thoughts, Kazumi placed one hand on her mouth to swallow the sound of a gasp.

"Oh, I am so sorry, I really put my foot in it, I suppose." Grandma Kanzaki said. "I didn't know I would step myself in blunder with such a simple question. My sincerest apologies."

The boy openly smiled at Isamu's mother. "How would you know? And besides, it's no secret, so please don't worry about it."

"Poor boy." Kazumi muttered to herself and shoveled even more food onto the plate of the whining creature. As predicted a few seconds ago, the little showman had his whole family wrapped around his little finger now.

"But say, I had thought you and Hitomi to be of the same age. Aren't you attending school? I don't see you wearing a school uniform," Isamu's father asked.

Oh! Good point! Skipping classes, aren't we?

"No, I don't?"

"Awesome!" Sora called out.

Before realizing it himself, Isamu had jumped up from his seat and put one foot onto the table, exclaiming with triumph: "Aha!" He had known it from the beginning! This bugger was an uncivilized little ragamuffin with no education, and now he had confirmed Isamu's theory himself! Even Kazumi must see the boy's unworthiness now! And how he could corrupt their son, too!

Everyone stared at him, bewildered by his sudden action.

"Ugh... Isamu, is everything alright?" Kazumi asked, aghast. "Could you please come down?" With a swift pull, she hauled him back onto his seat, hissing "What's gotten into you? For heaven's sake, do you want to disgrace our whole family?" Isamu could hear his blood pulsating in his ears, but not because of embarrassment or anger. It was excitement. Soon, he would be able to debunk this urchin for the fraud he was.

Grandpa Kanzaki cleared his throat self-consciously. "Well, where was I? ...Oh, right. If you're not going to school, you must be older than my granddaughter. Do you work already?"

"I..." the boy started, but stopped mid-sentence. Hitomi had discreetly stepped onto his foot to keep him from talking, but the sound hadn't eluded Isamu's attentive

senses.

Okay? This got more mysterious by the minute.

Yet again it was his daughter who answered in the guttersnipe's stead. "Van... Van works in a government building."

"Oh, really?" Grandpa Kanzaki said. "That sounds promising."

"As cleaning dandy, I suppose." The insult slipped from Isamu's lips.

The lump met his glare, stating coolly: "Someone shouldn't extrapolate from oneself to others, you know. Especially if *this someone* has no clue about anything concerning this other person."

Incited like a hornet, Isamu's foot was suddenly back on the table, his fingers pointing at the insufferable scoundrel. "What did you just say to me?" he roared. "I am the director of a hospital! You impudent, little..."

"Oh, sit down already!" Yet again, he was back on his buttocks, blinking baffled and still pointing. Kazumi's face was red all over. "Gods." His father seemed embarrassed, too. "Really, Isamu," he said.

After that, dinner had continued quite uneventfully.

Still fuming about the impertinence of this kid, Isamu had kept sulking throughout the conversation following his outburst. Kazumi had now started to clear the table, little cheese ball over there passing her some of the tableware. In his actual state of grumpiness, it was oblivious to Isamu that his own children were doing the same thing.

"Thank you for the delicious dinner, Miss Kanzaki," the boy said. *Phlegm*, Isamu thought.

"Oh, you're welcome! Hitomi, keep your seat, I'll do this on my own." Kazumi instructed her daughter, who was about to get up and help her mother with the dishes.

"Oh. Thanks, Mum. But let me at least bring the plates over." Both women left for the kitchen. Although Hitomi now seemed somewhat relaxed on the outward, Isamu could feel an awkward tension between her and the boy, and he assumed that it was for this reason she'd fled the table. Interesting. Now thinking of it, this stiffness had been there since they'd been in the car. Isamu still feverishly racked his brain about what it was they'd argued about so hotly.

"May I ask you something?" Sora directed blackhead, using his sister's absence. "From aaaallll the fair and beautiful women in the world, why the hell did you choose my dense sister?"

The boy looked at him, puzzled. "Why shouldn't I? She has a good heart. And she isn't *dense*." Raising a skeptical eyebrow, Sora left it at that without further comment. *Now he even openly talks about my daughter's breasts – this willy!*

Isamu wouldn't watch this any longer, enough was enough. Time to finally shine some light into the darkness – and cut their ties.