

CODE GEASS

コードギアス

反逆のルージュ

Lelouch

STAGE - 2 - KNIGHT

of the Rebellion



Original Story by
ICHIROU OHKOUCHI / GORO TANIGUCHI

Written by
MAMORU IWASA

BANDAI
entertainment.



In this world, evil can arise from the best intentions.
And there is good which can come from evil intentions.
How, then, should Lelouch's actions be taken?
Every man has his day of judgment, does he not?
Geass.

He who uses this inhuman power will find his heart
isolated, whether he wants it that way or not. Thus, he
plummets into the abyss that lies between good and evil.
But if a man can climb out of that abyss, into the light,
then that man has the soul of a king.

 **CODEGEASS** Lelouch
of the Rebellion
2: STAGE -2- KNIGHT



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PROFILE

MAMORU IWASA

Born in 1973. Received the 4th Sneaker Award for Most Outstanding Book with his "Dancing in the Wind - Legend of the Flying Dragon."

I am an Aries, so I like to be particular about my earplugs.

Lately there are fewer people who wear a watch. It's because we have cell phones, and if we're inside a room there's bound to be a clock somewhere. But I do like people who wear fashionable watches. I think it looks cool.

CODE GEASS

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反逆のルージュ

Lelouch 2

of the Rebellion

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MAIN CHARACTERS

CODE GEASS Lelouch of the Rebellion



Lelouch vi Britannia

The eleventh prince of the Holy Empire of Britannia. He was presumed dead after the war. Currently uses the surname, "Lamperouge."



Suzaku Kururugi

The son of the last Japanese Prime Minister, Genbu Kururugi. He is a childhood friend of Lelouch and a member of the Britannian Forces.



C.C.

A girl who entered into a contract with Lelouch and gave him the power of Geass. Further details about her are unknown.

ASHFORD PRIVATE ACADEMY

ASHFORD PRIVATE ACADEMY



Milly Ashford

Student Council President and the daughter of the Director of the Ashford Private Academy.



Nunnally

Lelouch's little sister. Her legs were injured in the incident that ended their mother's life, and the trauma took away her sight as well.



**Shirley
Fenette**



**Rivalz
Cardemone**



**Nina
Einstein**

Arthur



CODE GEASS Lelouch of the Rebellion

MAIN CHARACTERS

HOLY EMPIRE OF BRITANNIA



Charles zi Britannia

The 98th Emperor of the Holy Empire of Britannia, one of the most powerful nations in the world. He is Lelouch's and Nunnally's father.



Cornelia li Britannia

The second princess of the Holy Empire of Britannia. She is Euphy's older sister. After Clovis was assassinated, Cornelia came to Area 11 to take over as Vicerey.



Lloyd Asplund

The chief of the Britannian Forces' Advanced Special Envoy Engineering Corps. He is Suzaku's boss and loves the Lancelot more than anything else.



Euphemie li Britannia

The third princess of the Holy Empire of Britannia. She is only 16 years old, but serves as the Sub-Viceroy for Area 11. She is known as "Euphy" for short.



Jeremiah Gottwald

A soldier in the Britannian Forces. After Clovis' death, he served as an administrative ruler, but was demoted after the infamous Orange Incident.



Cecile Croomy

The chief operator of the Britannian Forces' Advanced Special Envoy Engineering Corps. Her influence over Lloyd is immeasurable.

THE BLACK KNIGHTS HOLY EMPIRE OF BRITANNIA

THE BLACK KNIGHTS



Zero

The leader of the Black Knights. His face is always hidden behind a mask, and not even the other Black Knights know his identity.



Kaname Ohgi

Second in line in the Black Knights under Zero. His mellow, amiable personality makes him popular among its members. He is a former teacher.



Kallen Stadtfeld

Her mother is Japanese, and Kallen's Japanese name is Kallen Kouraki. She is the ace pilot of the Guren Mk-II.



Diethard Ried

A Britannian who joined the Black Knights. Ohgi is a little suspicious of his intentions.

UNKNOWN



Mao

He has the Geass with the ability to read people's minds. When he was young he lived with C.C., and he still adores her.



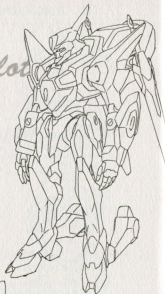
MAIN CHARACTERS

CODE GEASS: Lelouch of the Rebellion

lancelot

Lancelot

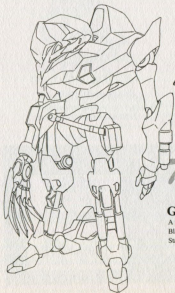
The seventh generation Knightmare Frame, developed by the Britannian Forces' Advanced Special Envoy Engineering Corps. It's still in the testing stages, but possesses great power. The pilot is Suzaku Kururugi.



Type-02

Guren Mk-II

A pure Japanese Knightmare. The main weapon the Black Knights use to fight against Britannia. Kallen Stadtfeld is its pilot.

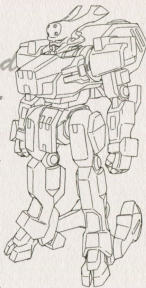


KNIGHTMARE FRAME

sutherland

Sutherland

Fifth generation Knightmares used by the Britannian Forces.



gloucester

Gloucester Cornelia Custom

The main Knightmare of the Britannian Forces. This is a custom model made for Cornelia.

CODE GEASS: Lelouch of the Rebellion

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Interval

June 2017, Area 11

There once was a king who searched for the end of the continent.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

There once was a king who hated the mighty river that swallowed thousands.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

There once was a king who suffered in the hands of a demonic woman.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

There once was a king who saw religion as absolute.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

There once was a king who spoke the will of the common people.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

There once was a king who loved to murder.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

There once was a king who destroyed the existing set of values.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

In the end, the final result does not change.

The witch exists in the shadow of the king, and absorbs his grudge and hatred with her body.

This was not what I wished for... Give me back who I was... You're the one who killed them!... I cannot forgive you in the name of God... Did you come to laugh at me?... Humans are such ridiculous creatures... If I were to drink a human's blood, I would drink yours...

She once loved a king from the bottom of her heart. She once cared for a king. She once disdained a king. She once strongly resented a king. She once scorned a king.

But in the end, nothing changes. The miserable end is always the same.

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

—Kill! Kill! Kill!

Kill the witch!

She wonders how many times she has lived through the same thing.

She wonders how many more times she will do the same in the future.

A wish she cannot give up. A worn-out hope. A dream she cannot attain.

Only for that...



A sudden feeling. It enveloped Suzaku Kururugi inside the cockpit of the Knightmare.

A floating feeling, like being thrown into a pitch black space with no footing. The flashing stars became flowing lines and zoomed by. A dim light neared.

"What the—"

He was hurled into a swirl of light. His vision twirled around him like a kaleidoscope. And then, a black shadow appeared.

"!"

It was a man. He wore a dark green military uniform—the one Japanese soldiers used to wear. He had a stocky build and a receding hairline. And his eyes were dark and void of light.

The man started walking towards him.

As if he were about to scold him. As if he were about to blame him. As if he were ridiculing him.

Suzaku's eyes widened. His pupils dilated.

The man kept coming.

And then...

The boy's consciousness flipped and the hidden past came out, flooding him.

The head trailer of the Lancelot was in confusion.

"Suzaku!? What's wrong, Suzaku!?" Cecile, the operator, screamed frantically at the control monitor.

But there was no response from the Lancelot's pilot. Actually, his voice could be heard—the screams of a boy who sounded like someone was crushing his heart.

"Aaaaagghh—!!!"

The Lancelot was shooting the VARIS in all directions, hitting the surrounding trees, rocks, and clouds in the sky. The

term "shooting spree" was inadequate to describe the situation. There was no enemy before him—no one who threatened him—but the White Knight, the Lancelot, was in a rage, as if he were about to destroy everything in sight. The burden on the machine's joints was at its limits. The gears were screeching and the main generator was about to explode.

"Suzaku!!" Cecile continued to yell. Beside her, even Lloyd's eyes were huge behind his glasses.

The trigger was no doubt what had happened earlier. Lancelot and Suzaku were able to stop the enemy Knightmare from running away and had cornered the terrorist—Zero. Capturing him was only a matter of time.

Then suddenly the girl appeared. A small, fragile girl wearing what looked like Britannia government issued clothing.

"Stop it. Don't hurt this man."

She said this in a very calm voice, standing before the Lancelot as if to shelter the masked man Zero. She didn't look like any kind of an obstacle, but when she trotted over to the legs of the Lancelot and touched the machine's surface, Suzaku had changed. The boy, who had performed calmly in battle against the enemy's new weapon—the red Knightmare—suddenly lost it.

"Father..."

They heard his voice from the communication panel.

"There's no way... You're supposed to be dead..."

At once, he and the machine turned violent, as if he were terrified of something the others could not see.

"Suzaku!"

Cecile yelled out again but voice control was shut down.

Just before all communications were lost, the boy mumbled like a small child crying.

"...Please go away. Go away. Go away... please."

The entire trailer fell silent.

Lloyd let out a small sigh. He called out toward Cecile, who was standing motionless, in a low voice. "Don't worry, it won't last

long. Of course, not because of Suzaku himself, but it's a matter of the energy lasting. To begin with, that's the machine's only weak point."

Cecile finally came to with Lloyd's words.

"He's making a lot of reckless movements. The Lancelot already uses up the energy filler like crazy; it will soon run out and he won't be able to move then. I'm guessing about a few more minutes. The enemy is already gone now, so if he only goes crazy inside the cockpit, we can handle it."

"We should send a unit to retrieve him quickly."

"Of course. Oh, and make sure to alter the records for this incident."

"?...Why?"

"Because this isn't good in many ways, especially for him."

He had gone into a violent rage just as he was about to capture the enemy commander. For Suzaku, who was in an unusual position in the military, that fact could be mortal. In extreme cases, he could be tried in a military court for treason.

"I'll take care of the higher-ups. You can't tell anybody what happened here. Got it?"

"...I understand. I'll make sure the others in the department follow that too."

Cecile finally calmed down and started issuing orders to the people inside the head trailer using the control monitor console.

Lloyd sat back in his chair and sighed deeply.



There is only so much you can do with a first aid kit.

In addition, there was a lack of light—they were in a cave at the bottom of a mountain, hidden by surrounding trees. Light from a penlight wouldn't do much good. If he were to seriously treat her, he would have to go outside and that would be dangerous.

He knew that; and yet Lelouch decided to take refuge here after escaping from the violent white Knightmare for a reason.

"She...really isn't human, is she?"

Lelouch took off his Zero mask and mumbled this to himself. Before him, the girl—C.C.—was lying on a cold slab of rock.

He had removed her clothes. He had thought that he should at least remove the pieces of debris that were stuck in her body. The white Knightmare had been shooting all over the place. Luckily, neither of them had taken a direct hit, but pieces from the surrounding rocks and trees had grazed C.C. She was shielding Lelouch, so he only received minor scratches. But C.C. had serious wounds that would be fatal—if she were a normal human.

However...

The speed of her body recovering is not normal...

It wasn't just a matter of her blood coagulating faster than a human's would. Punctures in her body were closing up as if time were going backward. Now that Lelouch thought about it, when she was shot in the forehead, she was fine and fully recovered a few days later as if nothing had happened.

C.C., as she lay on the rock, showed no traces of blood on her anymore. She was still unconscious, but her breathing was now calm. When he'd brought her in, she was breathing heavily. Lelouch figured she would wake up soon. There was only a gash of scar remaining on her chest area that looked like it was gouged with a beast's claw. It was probably there from before.

A normal human with normal senses would have been disgusted rather than surprised, but Lelouch didn't feel that way. In fact, he felt as if he were viewing something sacred. Perhaps it was because he knew that this girl had come back from the brink of death with such a matter-of-fact attitude.

Yet, he couldn't erase the suspicions that kept running through his head.

What was it that had happened earlier?

It might be ungrateful to put it like this—she did save his life after all—but actually, Lelouch hadn't considered himself to be cornered. It was true that he couldn't use the Geass on a pilot sitting in the cockpit of a Knightmare. In order for the Geass to work, he needed to look directly into their eyes. However, there were ways around that. He would just need to persuade the pilot to come out of the Knightmare. He had done that before against a Britannian Knightmare and was able to escape. As long as he wasn't killed immediately, there were options.

C.C. should have known that as well, yet, she had decided to come out this time.

"I'm just showing him shocking images. Of course, I don't know what he's seeing."

This is what C.C. told him when she touched the white Knightmare.

Shocking images—it was probably true, seeing what happened with the Knightmare a few seconds later. Of course, Lelouch had no interest in that. He didn't care what the pilot was seeing.

The problem was with what Lelouch saw.

"Now's your chance. Run Lelouch."

At that moment, he casually touched her shoulder. Instantly, a series of images came into his head. It was a vision that was obviously not present reality.

"!? Stop it! Not now!"

C.C.'s voice was panicked, in a way he'd never heard before. But the flowing images did not stop.

He had seen similar images when he met C.C. for the first time—when they entered the contract and he obtained the power of Geass—but there were some differences.

Countless people screaming.

Evil intent that enveloped the world. Sheer hatred, resentment, and curses. And in the center of it, a girl—wearing clothes like that of a nun's—praying quietly.

"Stop it...don't come inside of...me!"

She struggled to get the words out. The passing months and seasons flowed like a frame by frame playback. He saw a woman's back and there was a sense of nostalgia...

"Urgh...I'm being...opened up..."

At that moment, the images stopped. It was because Lelouch let go of her shoulder.

I should know, Lelouch thought, staring at C.C., who was lying still on the rock.

He needed to know more about the Geass, this girl, her unhumanlike body and existence. Her actions and consciousness that seemed to operate on a completely different logic than his. It was foolish of him not to think of this sooner, since this power she gave him, the Geass, was the strongest weapon Lelouch had right now. He had reason to look into the root of it, especially considering the future.

However, it was then that—

"Mmh."

Suddenly, C.C. writhed on the rock. Lelouch flinched, thinking that she was going to wake up. But that wasn't the case. She still had her eyes closed, but was mumbling something.

What is it?

Lelouch went closer to C.C. and put his ear near her lips. And then...

Somewhere, there was the sound of a water drop hitting a puddle.

Lelouch was taken aback.

"..."

C.C. was still unconscious, but was smiling brightly. It was a smile Lelouch had never seen on her before.

"..."

Lelouch watched in silence. And then, quietly, he left the girl's side, taking a piece of cloth—a towel soaked in her blood—as a sample to examine later.

He hesitated for a second; and then he threw it into the puddle in the cave.

I should know, eh?

But there were things he needed to take care of first.

She saved him. Today, before that, the first time they met, and probably many more times in the future. And he wasn't talking just about the power of Geass.

You will grant a wish of mine.

That was the agreement they had made. He would truly repay her then. She always managed to do something unexpected time and time again, but Lelouch understood that this wish was the most important thing to her. That was the only thing she asked from him.

But that was only in regards to her.

I don't know if I can do it... Lelouch said to himself, as he returned to where C.C. lay.

He could flatter as much as he wanted. Blindsiding people was his specialty. But there was one thing he was bad at from when he was young. There were times when he was sick of his twisted personality. It never went well and he would fail.

To show gratitude from the bottom of his heart in words...

Yet, there was still time. He could think of something nice to say to her, along with figuring out how to get out of here, while he waited for her to wake up. Of course, he would probably fail miserably.

Lelouch gave a slight smile and quietly closed his eyes.

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STAGE-2:1-PAST

[Noblesse Oblige]

The duty of the noble. Originally, it referred to the responsibilities of knights and local ruling families during the Middle Ages. It didn't just mean their obligation to fight in wars. The knights and ruling families bore the burden of maintaining the welfare programs and public works within the territory. In present-day Europe, the privilege system has declined and been forgotten, but among the modern democratic reform nations, Britannia migrated to the New World and retained the class society. Therefore, they remain conscious of the idea of *noblesse oblige*. In essence, tradition becomes more refined in remote societies, and...

July 2017, Area 11

1

The phone was ringing. In a shrill, noisy way, it rang dozens of times.

The girl reached for it, then stopped. She knew who it was without answering it. She knew what the person was going to say to her.

I will not allow this!

You are my daughter.

You could eventually be next in succession to the highest throne.

Yet, you decide to go to the barbaric colonies?

She was happy that her mother worried about her. But there were some orders she couldn't follow. There were things she couldn't listen to. Her older sister, who understood, had already given up on this issue in her favor.

"However..." Cornelia said with a wry face, "I will show my concern in my own way. Your position is Sub-Viceroy. I won't let you do anything without my permission." Then she smiled, just slightly.

Her strong and kind sister. She always protected her and stayed on her side. And she was doing the same this time.

That was why she decided in her heart that she would like to help her sister out as much as possible.

The ringing stopped. At the same time, the girl went back to what she was doing. She was holding a small leather bag. Most of the necessities had already been sent separately. What was left were personal, everyday use items.

She finally picked up a well-thumbed hand mirror. It had been a gift from her sister for her tenth birthday. She put it away carefully in her bag.

And said farewell to the room she had lived in for two years.



As she gazed up at the white Knightmare shining in the sunlight, she was recalling the near past probably because she was feeling guilty. The first thing that she—Euphemia li Britannia, third princess of the Holy Empire of Britannia—saw when she disembarked the VTOL was the Knightmare, Lancelot. And then the people who were lined up in front of the Knightmare. The people gave off a warmer aura than other military troops, probably because of the special nature of the department.

Of course, it wasn't as if she was giving this department special treatment. Besides, this wasn't something that Euphemia had planned. This had been an order from her sister, Area 11 Viceroy Cornelia li Britannia. A visit to the people who were fighting for the nation. Even before coming here, she had visited many other troops. And this was the last department she was visiting.

However, it had been Euphemia's wish to visit this department that wasn't originally on the visitation list. And she knew it was selfish of her.

"I give my heartfelt thanks for this visitation Princess Euphemia."

One of the officers, a lady, came forward and bowed with a smile. Euphemia had thought this when she'd seen her before, but the lady was very warm and pretty.

"I will be showing you around today. My name is Cecile Croomy. It is an honor to meet you."

"It is a pleasure Lieutenant Croomy."

Euphemia smiled, trying to hide her complicated emotions, and returned the bow.

Area 11 was regaining some of its stability as the month of July began.

Later it became known as the Narita Battle. Surprisingly, Area 11 Viceroy Cornelia didn't try to hide the details of the incident. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that she couldn't hide them. The encircling operation around the mountains, the powerful attack, and then the escape by Zero and the Black Knights immediately after that. If only the military facilities and soldiers had suffered damages and casualties, most likely the Britannian Forces wouldn't have gone public about the disgraceful battle. It cast them in a bad light and could even give a new burst of energy to the anti-Britannian factions. However, they couldn't keep the truth hidden for a reason. The landslide caused by the Black Knights reached the town at the bottom of the mountain and had killed civilians.

Civilian deaths were hard to cover up. Cornelia decided on a straightforward public announcement rather than a vague one to prevent the enemy from taking advantage of it. Of course, the asserted viewpoint of the government was that their military may have received some interference from the Black Knights, but that they had been successful in destroying that deadly terrorist group, the Japan Liberation Front.

And if you looked at it from another perspective, the incident wasn't completely negative for Britannia.

"They say that a hunter who chases a deer does not consider the mountain, but it indeed is true for Zero in this matter."

After the battle, this is what Cornelia told Guilford.

"The Black Knights caused collateral damage against ordinary citizens. This fact is important. Use all the media outlets to publicize this information. I'll crush the fantasy of those men who

pretend to be heroes. I guess this time that man was blind in trying to achieve a small win and dug his own grave."

Obviously, the Black Knights countered Britannia's statement, pointing out that the Britannian Forces didn't evacuate the people in the area and that they hadn't even planned for any such action. So the fault lay with Britannia, in failing to properly assess the situation. No matter what the era, a battle doesn't end there. As long as there is no absolute winner, once they are done exchanging hostilities, next comes the propaganda war arguing the righteousness of each side. And then that exploitation creates new tension, and leads into the next conflict.

In the end, if you consider war as a stage, those who participated all believed that they had the lead role.

A story begins with an individual as a cornerstone, and as countless individuals knit their life stories, the individual that had merely been a dot becomes a line, and in the end a large wave is created and drowns out the stage. Then, the individual cannot do anything about it. The only thing that remains is the agonized scream of the individual who was caught up in the flow. However, fundamentally, his resentment is not valid. This is because it was the individual who caused the flow. It doesn't matter whether the individual is a soldier or a civilian. The differences in strength or status are of little import. As long as humans exist and live in the world, they are responsible for the world. Those who understand that remain quiet and blame themselves. Those who do not understand are vocal and blame others. As long as there are lead roles overflowing, there is no end to this stage.

Probably the involved parties understand that; and that alone.

In any case, these kinds of occasions were merely for show.

It was an image prepared for the media with nothing substantial inside of it. Actually, it was more accurate to say that

nothing was put inside of it. The purpose was for political effect, to showcase the ruler who showed "concern for his subjects," so in a sense it couldn't be helped.

Despite her princess-like appearance, Euphemia li Britannia understood these things, so she didn't think that she was being deceitful. Actually, on occasions like this, Euphemia was optimistic. In the Narita incident only two weeks before, they were able to accomplish their mission somewhat successfully, but there had been many troop casualties. This was a tour to reward the people who worked hard in the mission. Was it deceitful of her? She didn't care. Her feelings of wanting to repay those who lost their lives or got injured wasn't a lie, and it would be great if people could feel better because of her actions. Political agendas were, in the end, outside of that.

However, in regard to visiting this Advanced Special Envoy Engineering Corps—ASEEC for short—she did feel a little sense of guilt. It was because Euphemia herself knew that she had personal feelings involved in this case.

"Increasing the usage rate of *sakuradite* in the various parts of the machine was considered difficult because of problems with the co-movement of it and the electronic parts. But thanks to success in developing a special drive mechanism, it became possible. Just from this, the kinematic performance went up about fifteen percent in our last trial computation," Cecile explained, as they stood in front of the white Knightmare Lancelot inside the hangar.

Euphemia responded by smiling and nodding, but her eyes would wander to look for him every now and then. She hadn't found him among the people who welcomed her when she disembarked the VTOL. She thought that he might be in the cockpit of the Lancelot, but he wasn't there, either. When they were returning to the hangar, the Knightmare's movements were a little awkward, and later she saw that the person who emerged from the cockpit wasn't him but a researcher she'd never seen before.

Is he not here today?

Or...

Just when Euphemia was thinking that, her eyes met Cecile's, who was explaining about the Lancelot. She felt like a child who was caught doing something bad and her heart jumped. Then, for some reason, Cecile smiled.

"We would like for you to see that kinetic performance in person, but—I'm sorry—we gave our usual pilot a special break for two days."

Euphemia felt the bottom of her stomach sink.

"Of course, this is a routine examination that all Knightmare pilots go through. The pilot insisted that it would be rude for him not to welcome your visit, but this is protocol, so I hope that you will forgive him."

Euphemia had a sudden thought and looked plaintively at the lady standing in front of her. Cecile's gentle eyes nodded so that only Euphemia could see. *Don't worry*—was said with eyes only, so that the secret service agents standing right next to Euphemia didn't notice.

"Now, I would like to show you the development site."

With that, Cecile's expression was back to normal.

It may be because I'm not used to it, but entertaining business guests is pretty tiring, Cecile thought, as she walked down the empty hallway.

One thing she was thankful for was that it was the little sister and not the older one. Her rank was high indeed but she wasn't the type to intimidate others. Of course, for those in that position, that could be an advantage or a disadvantage.

Cecile walked into the operation center, located at the center of the base, as she massaged her tense shoulder. There, her direct supervisor was waiting for her.

"Welcome back Cecile. Good job."

He was sitting in Cecile's seat in front of the control monitor. He was the department's director, Major Lloyd Asplund. He was wearing his white coat as usual, with his feet up on the console, in rather poor manners. And in his hand was reading material. It wasn't for research but only a magazine. In other words, he was bored.

Cecile cocked her head to one side and reported: "I took her to the break room. Since she looked tired, I thought she could relax better alone, so I decided to return here."

Lloyd shrugged, said "I see," and didn't look up from the magazine.

"And scheduled after this is playing around with a non-moving target, yes?"

"Yes, simulated piloting of the Lancelot. Of course, the resonant pulse for Suzaku is deactivated. It's not what she wanted, but there's nothing we can do about it. It would be too strong for her."

"Actually," Lloyd said, as he flipped through his magazine, "She's a really serious person, isn't she? Usually they would just muddle through these things and leave. And no one would complain."

In fact, that was probably what Lloyd wanted, Cecile thought. There was nothing wrong with the princess' personality, but departments like ASEEC were difficult to run with outsiders roaming around. Just as the name of the department indicated, it wasn't just a military unit but also a research facility. There were things they couldn't show even to their own country's princess. That was what classified material was about. They understood that Euphemia needed to visit the troops, but it was also true that Lloyd and Cecile couldn't get any work done today.

But Cecile had something else on her mind, and spoke up.

"I was surprised though."

Lloyd flipped another page.

"About what?"

"That you gave me the job of giving her the tour."

"You think it's *lese majeste* if the director doesn't do it?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I just thought that you would be the one to tell her on what the Lancelot could do."

On hearing this, for the first time, Lloyd looked up at Cecile. His glasses shone and he gave a big smile. "There's no point in explaining the Lancelot when she is more interested in what's inside, rather than the container."

"Well, regarding that, I agree."

"And to explain further, I thought you would take these matters into consideration, which is why I left it up to you. Because, as you know, I'm very bad at the art of conveying unspoken messages."

"I don't agree with the last part, but I see."

He's sharp when it comes to weird things like this, Cecile thought. But he wasn't wrong. Things had gone well and she was able to convey the message. Of course, she didn't reveal what she and Lloyd knew to Euphemia.

"Suzaku's test results are due in the day after tomorrow..."

Cecile mumbled. Lloyd's eyes were glued to the magazine again.

"Well, there shouldn't be any problems. Lately he seems to be okay."

"On the surface, yes..."

But that was precisely why Cecile was worried.

Cecile didn't tell Euphemia, but the examination being "routine" was only half true. There was indeed a rule that Knightmare pilots receive routine examinations. But few pilots followed this rule. It was Cecile who sent Suzaku for this "routine exam" that existed in name only.

He seemed to be okay—but in fact, that was what was odd.

That incident at Narita...Suzaku's behavior wasn't normal at all. It was different from a child screaming on a roller coaster. He was so affected that he abandoned his military duty—he

who normally had a high sense of responsibility as a soldier. And to recover from that as if nothing had happened, seemed more disturbing to Cecile.

"Oh, by the way," Lloyd spoke again, "The girl we saw on Lancelot's monitor. The verification results came back."

"And it matched someone..." Cecile started to say, then sighed. "Of course not, right?"

"Well, she is an ally of the terrorists. Besides, Elevens who aren't Honorary Britannians are not registered."

"Her facial features were closer to those of a Britannian."

"Yeah, but including Britannians, no match," Lloyd continued, as if saying he wasn't expecting anything of it anyway.

"So the key lies in the other aspect? When the girl touched Lancelot..."

"The resonance wave detected within the Lancelot? Well, we found out that it was similar to the pattern of the backlash interfusion wave that emerges when the *sakuradite* has a fission reaction, but nothing further. We would have more information if it'd happened during an experiment because the sensors equipped on Lancelot can't catch everything."

"But I think we should input the information anyway. If that was an 'attack' that penetrates even the Knightmare's armor, we need to think of a way to defend against it."

"What's wrong with the plan of just not letting her touch the Lancelot again?"

"I mean, including that, everything."

To begin with, that was Cecile's duty as the operator of the Lancelot. Battle operators, essentially, cannot have unforeseen situations happen. No matter what the situation, no matter what threat they are facing, the operator needs to give the pilot precise instructions and show him the most appropriate way to deal with it. That was her job. That was why Cecile felt so badly about what happened at Narita. She thought she had failed to give the necessary response as an

operator. Worst-case scenario, it wouldn't have been a surprise if the pilot, Suzaku, had lost his life then. If that had happened, she would never have recovered from it.

She would not make the same mistake the next time. She would never let something like that happen again—ever. That was why she needed to know what happened at Narita.

Lloyd looked up again. He smiled, looking amused.

"Another person who is interested in 'what's inside,' eh?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, it's nothing. But...hmm." Lloyd closed his magazine. He folded his hands over his legs, still propped on the console. "Let's just take care of one of your anxieties Cecile. Actually, that break room was originally a personal room to be used by the commander of this base."

"Huh?" Cecile was confused, not keeping up with the change of topic.

"When we first rented this base, I said that a personal room wasn't necessary, so we use it as a break room now. But that was how it was designed. It was made as a countermeasure to terrorist attacks. The entrance for guests is in the front, but just in case the commander needs to escape in emergencies, there is one more door that provides access outside the room."

Cecile began to understand what Lloyd was getting at.

"I do use it sometimes, you know. Like when I have to welcome guests whom I don't want others to see. It's quite useful. I'm going to have an arranged meeting with a young lady from a prestigious family soon, so maybe I'll use it then."

Cecile sighed lightly. "I think you should reconsider having an arranged meeting at the base."

"You know, counseling works better when the listener doesn't realize that it's counseling."

"If Princess Cornelia hears about this, you'll be deported to the home country immediately for *lese majeste*."

"Are you going to tell on me?"

"No. In this case, I am your partner in crime. I was made one without knowing it."

"Hee hee. You're right."

Euphemia sat on a modest couch and drank the tea that was prepared for her.

She gathered her breath and...It wasn't a sigh, but she was surprised at how loud and deep it was.

Tired...eh? What the lieutenant said wasn't wrong. But actually, it was more like something that had been tense was now loosened up and she was relieved.

I'm glad he's doing okay.

Euphemia was one of the few who saw what happened to Suzaku that day. The Lancelot was recovered after its energy filler ran out, and inside the cockpit, the boy was trembling with his hands still on the control stick...She saw this. She didn't know what had happened. She didn't even tell her sister Cornelia the details. She knew, even without Major Asplund telling her, that if this were revealed, Suzaku's position would be compromised. And besides, she had been the one who authorized the Lancelot to sortie. She was also responsible for what happened to Suzaku. That was why she agreed to keep it a secret as Lloyd suggested, and furthermore, she was worried about him. If she hadn't relied on him, this wouldn't have happened to him—she'd spent the past few weeks thinking about it and regretting it.

But that concern had been resolved today. It was too bad that she couldn't see his cheerful face in person, but it would've been too much to ask for.

Euphemia put the teacup back onto the saucer and stretched.

She looked around the room. She'd heard that this was a break room used by the officers. It was a simple room, with leafy plants in the four corners of the room. There was a table next to

the window. With only one couch, it looked more like a reception office than a break room. She was able to see a reflection of herself in the metal sections of the door in front of her.

The door in front of her?

Euphemia was puzzled.

That wasn't the door she came in through; that one was to her right. The secret service agents, who never left Euphemia's side except in extreme circumstances, were standing outside the break room, in the hallway, guarding the room's entrance. Since they weren't outdoors and because they were at one of their country's own bases, their alert status wasn't as strict as usual.

I wonder if there is a small room connected to this one? Euphemia thought. At that moment, the door she was looking at echoed with a light knock. She had no time to flinch. With the words, "Excuse me," the person walked into the room.

She couldn't believe her eyes. Reflexively, she rose to her feet. "Suzaku?"

2

It was Suzaku who was more surprised.

"Once your examination is over, can you drop by? I have something to talk to you about in private. By the way, it's a secret from Cecile too."

Those were his supervisor's orders. He wasn't sure how serious Lloyd was, but nevertheless Suzaku followed instructions and went to the specified room, and found an even higher-ranked superior waiting for him. Of course he would've been surprised, even knowing she was supposed to be visiting the base today.

"Suzaku?"

Euphemia's dumbfounded eyes were staring back at him. She was wearing formal attire suitable for public functions. It wasn't

like Area 11 Viceroy Cornelia's formal attire, which was based on a military uniform. It was an outfit that was both elegant and classy, the look of Britannian royalty that valued traditions from the Middle Ages. Her outfit was mostly white and pink, which suited her age. These pure colors looked better on her than brighter, more glamorous colors a gentlewoman would wear...Suzaku was thinking all this when he came to.

It was not a time to be gaping. She was the third princess of the Holy Empire of Britannia, the Sub-Viceroy of Area 11, Princess Euphemia li Britannia. There was a difference of heaven and earth in their positions.

"Oh, excuse me!"

Suzaku straightened his shoulders, leaving the door open, and apologized.

"I didn't know that Your Highness was present...I mean, I knew that you were visiting today, but...I came here because Lloyd, I mean, Major Asplund told me to, and, um..."

"..."

"I didn't mean to interrupt you in any way..."

He knew that he was saying incoherent things out of confusion.

But the girl—Euphemia li Britannia—was listening patiently, with her head cocked to one side.

Suddenly, her lightly colored lips opened.

"You came here on your supervisor's orders?"

"Uh...Yes, Your Highness."

"Then your supervisor should be coming soon. Why don't you sit and wait for him?"

"Huh?"

Suzaku was dumbfounded.

Euphemia pointed to the couch with a serious face. "Couches exist to sit on."

A joke...probably not. Not from her.



"Yes, but um, I'm a...I..."

Euphemia suddenly pouted. "Or are you bothered by my presence, Warrant Officer Kururugi?"

"No, of course not, I just..."

"You don't want me here? You want me to leave?"

"No! I'm...I just..."

"What a disgrace! I have never experienced such disrespect since coming to this Area—"

"I'm saying that I—"

"I'm kidding."

"..."

And Euphemia started giggling.

"You are the same Suzaku. But really, I don't mind. It is I who is barging in and using this room on your base."

"I see."

"Or am I really being a nuisance?"

"No. Not at all."

"Then please act like you mean it."

"Yes, Your Highness. If you are okay with it."

Suzaku didn't understand this strange, mysterious situation happening to him.

At first he was hesitant, but eventually he calmed down.

In the end, it was thanks to the personality of the girl sitting in front of him, Suzaku thought. She'd been like this the first time they met. Although she was the Britannia Empire's third princess, she had no trace of haughtiness. (In fact, when they first met, she had literally fallen down from the sky.) Her attitude was similar to the students at the Ashford Private Academy. He'd heard that she was a student before being appointed to Area 11, so that was understandable. She was sociable and kind, and probably grew up dearly loved by those around her.

"Today, after my break, I am going to ride the Lancelot."

"Huh?" Suzaku flinched. "Um, really?"

"Of course, not the real Lancelot. I'll be using simulators."

Suzaku was relieved to hear that. If that was the case, then there should be nothing to worry about. Cecile and Lloyd would fiddle with the settings. It was a little rude to Euphemia but the Lancelot wasn't something an amateur could handle.

Perhaps what Suzaku was thinking showed in his expression because Euphemia made a face. "You look like you're thinking that an amateur cannot pilot the real Lancelot. But I do have training in piloting a Nightmare."

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"And one of my trainers was my older sister. I wouldn't say she's the world's best but she was a brilliant and strict teacher."

"I see."

But Suzaku was doubtful about the latter. Area 11 Viceroy Cornelia was famous for doting on her baby sister, even among the soldiers. Of course, it was a discreet rumor.

"But the Lancelot does seem difficult to pilot. I was listening to Lieutenant Croomy's explanation, but...I was only able to understand that unlike the conventional Sutherland, the Land Spinner and the Foot Torque balance are equal, but that was it."

"No, if you understand that much, I think it's enough. It's more than me, who is piloting it only with my senses."

"Huh? Do you really think so?"

Euphemia cocked her head to one side with a quizzical look. Suzaku saw that and smiled wryly.

That was when Euphemia's eyes lit up. She smiled like a child who finally found what she was looking for.

It was Suzaku's turn to cock his head to one side.

"What is it, Your Highness?"

"You finally..."

"Huh?"

"You finally smiled," The princess said in a voice that sounded genuinely happy. "I'm so glad. I'm relieved that you are really okay."

"Oh..."

"Because I was really worried about you...after..."

Suzaku gasped. Immediately he collected himself and bit his lip. He clenched his fists that were resting on his lap.

And then he looked directly at the girl sitting across from him and bowed his head deeply. In a calm tone, he said: "I'm deeply sorry."

"..."

"At Narita I was able to corner the enemy's commander—Zero—but I let him get away."

Suzaku knew that Euphemia knew what had happened after that. Honestly, it was he himself who didn't really remember. But he vaguely remembered being taken back to the trailer and the cockpit being forced open. He didn't know why she was there, but she was peering in, along with Lloyd and Cecile, with a worried look on her face. Oh—perhaps that was why she came here today, and was waiting for him. To scold him for his underachievement.

"However, that was my responsibility. The Advanced Special Envoy Engineering Corps should not be held responsible."

"..."

"If you are going to punish someone, then please do so only to me. Please spare the ASEEC."

Euphemia remained quiet as she listened to Suzaku. Suzaku couldn't see her face because he was bowing.

Suddenly, Euphemia stood up from the couch. That prompted Suzaku to look up. Euphemia's face was strict, completely different from what it had been a moment ago. She came over to stand next to Suzaku and looked down at him.

"Warrant Officer Kururugi. Stand up."

"Uh..."

"Stand up."

Suzaku stood up. When they stood next to each other, Suzaku was taller. But Euphemia was undaunted and glared up at Suzaku from below.

Then, suddenly, she lifted her right hand. It came swinging across, aiming for Suzaku's face.

"!!!"

Suzaku was about to dodge it out of reflex, but then steeled himself and closed his eyes. But the slap never came. Suzaku opened his eyes slowly. Euphemia's hand was halted just before hitting Suzaku's cheek.

"Never again..." Euphemia started to speak, still wearing a strict expression. "Please don't say those things ever again."

"..."

Suzaku didn't say anything.

Then, Euphemia smiled again. When she smiled at a moment like this, her smile was warmer than usual—Suzaku thought, in the back of his mind. It was the smile of an affectionate mother. But it didn't come as a surprise. This girl was no ordinary girl. She was responsible for the people who lived in Area 11. An ordinary pilot's burden was nothing compared to that.

"Suzaku. You protected my dearest person, my sister."

"Yes, but..."

"What more could there be? That was all I asked you to do."

"But..."

"Please don't put yourself down. When you do that, I can't even say thank you." Euphemia looked at Suzaku with pleading eyes. "Besides... You're not in the military to punish someone, right?"

The words weighed heavy on his heart.

To punish someone...

Once again, Suzaku looked into her eyes. Euphemia did not turn away, but continued to gaze at Suzaku with the same pleading look. Eventually, Suzaku felt the tension leave his shoulders.

"I'm sorry."

He said the same words, but this time with a different meaning. Just in case that wouldn't be sufficient, he also smiled.

"I have been behaving badly, Sub-Viceroy."

Euphemia smiled back happily...but suddenly gasped. Her eyes wandered to look at her hand that was almost touching Suzaku's cheek and then she realized how close she was standing to Suzaku.

"I'm sorry!"

Euphemia took a step back in a hurry. For some reason, her cheeks were slightly red.

"Huh?"

"Oh...um, for...you know, saying such arrogant things. Oh, it's already this late. I need to return to my duties."

"I see."

"Good-bye, Suzaku. I'll see you again, if chance permits."

Euphemia then left the room, as if she were fleeing.

Suzaku stood alone in the room, slightly stunned at how fast she'd gone. *She is a peculiar person*, he mused. She was like a whirlwind that came and went as it pleased, ever since the day he met her. But he didn't find this unpleasant.

No.

Actually, he was happy about her friendliness. One day, he would like to return the favor and do something for her.

Suzaku closed his eyes. He put his right hand over his chest and remembered what Euphemia had said earlier.

You are not in the military to punish someone, right?

Mysteriously, they were warm words. Not only that; they also felt good. The lump in his heart that had been there since that day seemed to melt away. To be understood is the best feeling one can have.

What she said was true.

Suzaku clenched the fist that was placed over his chest.

He wasn't here to punish someone or to subvert anybody.

That is why...

Suzaku's face turned stern. He opened his eyes.
Zero. I will never agree with your methods.



As a territory, Area 11 was considered to be in the Developing Area category within the Britannia Empire.

Just as the name implied, it meant that the Area was still in development. The conquering of the nation was virtually complete. However, there were still rebellious factions in some locations and the political situation was unstable, so it fell under that category. The category above that level was the Satellite Area category, and the one below was the Reformation Area category.

Looking at the current situation, Area 11 wouldn't get demoted to being a Reformation Area, but it hadn't improved to the point of becoming a Satellite Area either. Britannia wanted Area 11 to be promoted to being a Satellite Area as quickly as possible to keep the neighboring nation, the Chinese Federation, from invading. However, the anti-Britannia factions and their behind-the-scenes activities, including those of the Black Knights, were preventing that.

Regarding this, there was a mixed reception among the Britannians as well as the Numbers living in Area 11—the Japanese. Those who were known to display allegiance to Britannia were criticizing the anti-Britannia organizations for obstructing the promotion of Area 11. But in reality, if the Area became a Satellite Area, Britannian control would be loosened. Numbers would gain more authority, and to an extent, be allowed to self-govern. As long as they weren't particular about the name, "Japan," their lives would get much better. Of course, the other side of the argument was that it wasn't a good thing when slaves got more authority.

Either way, putting the debate among the Japanese aside, the promotion of Area 11 was the top priority of Viceroy Cornelia and her supporting staff members, Darlton and Guilford. On the

European battlefield, the EU military had become quite active. Even looking at the Empire as a whole, it was important that they establish Area 11 as a post to fend off the Chinese Federation. The requests from the home country of Britannia were ramping up as well. So they were working day and night to fulfill those requests.

It was during these days of severe work overload, five days ago on the first Saturday of July, that Guilford was called in to Darlton's office in the Tokyo Settlements bureau.

"A knight? For Princess Euphemia?" Guilford repeated Darlton's suggestion with a puzzled look on his intellectual face. Darlton nodded as he sat in an armchair.

On the table between them sat a vintage whiskey bottle and both of their glasses were filled with amber liquid. It was late at night and office hours were long over. Guilford had come to the office because Darlton said he obtained good alcohol, but it seemed that this get-together was not completely free of work.

Darlton lifted his glass and gave a hearty grin. Of course, his facial color hadn't changed a bit.

"Yes. It is the privilege of the royal court to choose an exclusive knight, although it's not something we should be meddling with. However, at times issues like these will not move forward unless the subjects nudge them a bit."

"I suppose so."

"You weren't aware of this, Guil? Your master was the same too. She insisted that she had no need for a man weaker than her to protect her and wasn't interested in choosing a knight at all."

Guilford smiled wryly. Obviously, the master they spoke of was Viceroy Cornelia li Britannia.

"Even now, I can only win one match out of three in our simulated Knightmare battles."

"Don't worry. I may sound disloyal for saying this, but our lady is a particular kind. Besides, if we went with those standards, most of the men in the country including me would be disqualified."

Darlton laughed and took a sip from his glass.

"Well, enough about the Viceroy. We need to discuss Princess Euphemia."

"It is necessary, yes."

Guilford lifted his frameless glasses with his finger. He wore a serious face.

"If she had stayed in the home country of Britannia, then it wouldn't have been a problem, but..."

"Here in Area 11, she is the most important person after the Viceroy. And lately she has been making frequent appearances as a stand-in for the Viceroy. She has secret service agents with her, but if possible, I would like one more person we can trust to be by her side."

"How does she feel about this? Does she have the will to retain a knight?"

"That is why I want you to nudge her and the Viceroy."

"Huh?" Guilford blinked several times in response to Darlton's words. "I, sir?"

Darlton nodded. "It would be better than me saying something to Princess Euphemia or Viceroy Cornelia."

"Why is that?"

"I don't want them to think that I am recommending my sons. Of course, neither of them are the type to hire someone because of that...but I would like to avoid being misunderstood."

And finally, Guilford understood what Darlton was saying.

Darlton's sons were not his biological sons: they were adopted. On the battlefield Darlton was strong, silent, and courageous, but actually in his personal life there was a surprising side to him. He had no children of his own and had taken children who lost their families in war and natural disasters under his wing. Not all of them became soldiers, but it was true that many of them did. In a sense, one could say that it was natural for the children who grew up watching their father fight to want to follow the same path.

From what Guilford saw, all of Darlton's adopted sons followed their father's teachings loyally and were brilliant soldiers. Many of them made promising Knightmare pilots. He thought that any of them were suitable for being a knight; and that was why Darlton opted to keep quiet. Even if Euphemia chose one of his sons regardless of his being Darlton's son or not, the rest of the world would not see it as such. It would be even worse if people found out that appointing a knight had been Darlton's suggestion. People would assume that Darlton took advantage of his position and pushed his sons for the job—and that was the worst thing that could happen to Darlton. But it would ruin Cornelia's and Euphemia's reputations as well. The people would despair at princesses who acceded to their subjects' unreasonable demands.

Organizations tended to break down from these kinds of things. It was an important time for Area 11 to see if it could be promoted to the Satellite Area category. Darlton couldn't let such minor issues weigh Viceroy Cornelia down. That was why he was asking Guilford to take over the matter.

"You tricked me general."

Guilford sipped from his glass and joked. But inside, he deeply respected Darlton's pureness and scrupulousness. Guilford was indeed Viceroy Cornelia's knight, but he was far from being as capable and thoughtful as Darlton.

"I came here for some good whiskey, and now, I go back with a challenge."

Darlton laughed at Guilford's words.

"Can you do it?"

Guilford nodded.

"I'll recommend it when the opportunity comes. I'm sure it would be best if Viceroy Cornelia was present too. I'll also create a list of candidates. However..."

Guilford thought for a moment, then continued.

"...I cannot guarantee anything beyond that. I have my own

personal experience that speaks for itself, but in the end, a knight is chosen by their own will."

"Ha ha. That's right. You were also not chosen off of a list. Wasn't it at the Indochina battlefield?"

"She appointed me right after she challenged me to a Knightmare duel. I seriously thought she was joking then."

Guilford narrowed his eyes in nostalgia. But he immediately wore a serious expression again. He put his glass on the table and looked at Darlton squarely.

"Putting jokes aside, I do agree that Princess Euphemia needs to appoint a knight—soon. There is a rumor going around some in the military that bothers me."

"I see..."

Darlton turned serious too. He also put his glass on the table and leaned forward.

"What is this rumor? Is it regarding Princess Euphemia?"

"Actually, no. It doesn't regard her personally..."

Guilford hesitated slightly.

"...but it may have much to do with my primary responsibility."

Darlton's eyebrow lifted up.

3

The man was really tall.

He had black hair and was wearing a black coat. He looked like a sharp man, but his facial expression appeared grim. And it probably wasn't because the area was dimly lit. He had his hands in his coat pockets, and although he was merely standing there, his atmosphere projected an aura of darkness.

His long and narrow eyes were fixated on one stone pillar. It was a cenotaph. It wasn't very tall. Because of the lighting, the

engraved writing looked blurred.

Behind the man were two shadows. One was a slim woman with short hair, and the other was a man wearing glasses. He had a large scar on his face.

Eventually, the woman spoke up.

"Urabe and the rest are late."

The man with the scar chimed in.

"But this is an ironic place to meet up. The cenotaph of the late Prime Minister Kururugi."

"He proclaimed a do-or-die resistance for this land, yet he was the first to commit suicide. He sold out his nation. He is a shame to Japan."

"By the way, his son is in the Britannian Forces right? That's what you call a chip off the old block."

That was when the man who stood in front spoke up for the first time. His voice was low but firm.

"Stop it. If you say more, you'd be insulting Major-General Katase, too."

The two fell silent.

"Each person has their own definition of how they take responsibility..." The man said to himself, half mumbling. He said nothing more, continuing to look at the cenotaph before him.

There was someone watching...

"We have found Tohdoh. We will begin tailing him."

The encirclement was slowly closing in.



Humans have the capacity to adapt in any kind of situation.

The gray and dark walls, the frosted glass that won't let outside light in, the desk with scratches all over it, and the bright light that hurts the eyes don't make such an impression the second time around. He didn't feel intimidation or danger this time at all.

Indeed, it was not the first time Suzaku Kururugi was in this room. And their treatment of him was not as bad as that time. When Suzaku was brought here for the first time he was shackled, and was even beaten. Even if he denied the charges, it was no use. False evidence was made up, and they tried to force a confession. If he refused to confess, they beat him more.

This time it was different. Before he was brought here, they asked for his consent, politely. He wasn't threatened at all. Even now, he wasn't shackled and he was allowed to hold on to his weapon.

Just based on this, the situation in Area 11 was getting better.

Suzaku was thinking that, when the door to the dim room opened.

"Why was Suzaku arrested?" Cecile was yelling angrily in Lancelot's trailer. Lloyd, who was standing next to her, only shrugged.

"He wasn't arrested. They're just asking him questions."

"But on what charges!?"

"Leaking information," Lloyd answered casually. "Based on the Narita incident last month and the recent Tokyo Bay incident, it's clear that information from this side is leaking to the Black Knights. Or else, they couldn't plan something that aggressive."

"But why would they suspect Suzaku?"

"Because he's the only Honorary Britannian who participated in the mission. Viceroy Cornelia doesn't use Honorary Britannians in those kinds of missions. That's why people, especially the Purists, were suspicious from before."

"But that's...that's so..."

"You could call it jealousy. If you look at it in a skewed way, you can come up with anything. For example, Suzaku could leak information to the Black Knights and assist in cornering the Britannian Forces. Then, he can participate in battle where he normally wouldn't be summoned. He rescues the Viceroy who is in a bind, and gets credit for it—they could claim that it was all

part of Suzaku's brilliant plan. And besides, he seems to have an old acquaintance on the terrorists' side."

"I cannot forgive this. Ever. They don't know how much Suzaku suffered in that battle..."

"Uh, please don't hit me, okay?"

Suzaku was surprised to see the man who entered the room.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Warrant Officer Kururugi."

The man had broad shoulders. On his uniform were many shiny medals. He had a fearless look that let one know that he was a soldier. And he possessed a certain calmness that came with age.

His name was Andreas Darlton.

He was the second in command of the Area 11 mandate military, the chief of staff. A major player in the military had just come into the room.

Suzaku forgot to salute and was staring at him dumbfounded, which Darlton misunderstood. He smiled wryly as he sat down in the chair across from Suzaku.

"Don't glare at me. I need to say this first, but I'm not accusing you of anything. Everything has its formalities."

He probably was going to say that these questions were just protocol. But if that was the case, they wouldn't send Viceroy Cornelia's closest aide. They could just send any officer. That fact made Suzaku imagine various things.

Suzaku finally came to and stood up to salute, but Darlton stopped him with his big hand. He motioned for Suzaku to sit, and started to explain—this was indeed a formality—that anything he said may or may not be used against him.

After he ran through the ritual, Darlton looked down at the documents sitting on the table.

"Now...I'm going to start the questions. Suzaku Kururugi. You have been charged with leaking confidential information and treason against the nation. Do you affirm these charges?"

"No, I deny them."

"I see."

Darlot flipped through the pages after hearing Suzaku's immediate response.

"Warrant Officer Kururugi. In the past, you were abducted by a terrorist who calls himself Zero. It's case number 0050, also known as the Orange Incident."

Suzaku knew they would begin from there.

The Orange Incident was the first time that Zero, the leader of the Black Knights, showed himself in front of the people of Area 11.

He had appeared when an Honorary Britannian was being taken away as the prime suspect of the assassination of the previous Viceroy of Area 11, Prince Clovis. Zero claimed that he was the true killer, and seized the Honorary Britannian who was about to be tried in military court. Actually, Zero had saved him, and then disappeared from the scene with the suspect.

The Honorary Britannian who was the prime suspect of killing Clovis and who was abducted by Zero was...Suzaku.

"There are people who connect you to Zero because of this incident."

Darlot sounded like he was just reading facts off of a paper.

Suzaku sighed lightly. "It's a misunderstanding. I can see why people would think that way, but I have no connections with Zero. That was the first time I ever saw him. I stated this clearly when I was being questioned by the military."

"I see that. You were abducted by Zero, but you later appeared at the military court by your own will. I want to ask you just out of my own curiosity."

Darlot leaned forward slightly and changed the tone of his voice.

"Kururugi. Why didn't you run away with Zero then?"

"My charges weren't cleared yet. It is the duty of a soldier to obey the rules of justice instead of running away illegally."

"You're saying that is the justice you believe in?"

"Yes."

Darlot's expression changed subtly. Of course, Suzaku had no idea what this meant.

"I see. That's noble of you. However, I have one question about your statement."

"Yes?"

"You said that you could see why people would think that way. I can take that as you're saying it can't be helped that people would see you and Zero as connected. But, why can you also see it that way?"

"That's because..."

Zero risked his own life to save him—that was a fact. However, before Suzaku could continue, Darlot pressed on.

"The military's official observation does not see it that way. That time, Zero's true objective was not you, but to put on a performance of rescuing you for the Elevens in Area 11, and to flaunt his existence. Suzaku Kururugi was only utilized as part of that objective—that's what it says here," Darlot said, as he tapped the documents at his hand.

"It's quite interesting. The investigator's reports suggest your innocence, but you are affirming the existence of the doubt. This is why the human subconscious is intriguing."

Suzaku began to get confused. He didn't understand what Darlot was saying. "Um..."

"That was only a personal observation. It doesn't have anything to do with the case at hand. I used to study human behavior a little in the past, and I was reminded of that. That's all. However..."

Darlot looked up and stared levelly at Suzaku with a stern face.

"Think about this as one possibility. When you're not conscious of it, what's in plain sight cannot be seen. It's fine to commit to an ideal, but only fools drown in their ideals. Got it?"

"Uh...Yes, sir."

Suzaku didn't understand what he was supposed to think, but he nodded anyway. Or rather, he was made to nod. Darlton's eyes were that intense.

"Very well. Now, I'm going to move on to the next question. Warrant Officer Suzaku Kururugi. Do you resent Britannia?"

"No."

Again, Suzaku responded immediately. However, Darlton's questions weren't over yet.

"Then let me ask one more question. Suzaku Kururugi. Did you resent Britannia?"

"..."

Suzaku didn't miss the difference in questions.

That was why he answered quietly. "Yes."

Darlton smiled wryly.

"You're honest. Don't you think you'll disadvantage yourself by answering so?"

"If you think I will be at a disadvantage, then you're probably right sir. But I don't think I will be."

"You're overestimating me," Darlton laughed, shaking his broad shoulders. "But you're right. Seven years ago, your home country Japan and our country Britannia were in a hostile relationship. It would be more suspicious to say that you didn't resent Britannia."

"..."

"Let me ask you something else. What changed you so much? Was it time or was it the influence of others?"

Suzaku thought about it for a minute. He looked down and after staring at the table in front of him, his head rose slowly. "I think I have a lot of reasons."

"Just one is fine. It doesn't have to be the biggest reason either."

"Yes, sir. If I were to choose one reason...I felt that I couldn't save anyone if I let my feelings overwhelm me."

"Do you mean that you would only ruin yourself if you remained fixated on resentment and anger?"

"I guess...that's how you can put it, yes."

"Is that a way of thinking that only applies to you? Or would you say this to the terrorists that you fight?"

Suzaku paused again. And then he finally answered.

"Both."

Darlton mumbled, "I see." And then he glanced at the plain clock hanging on the gray wall. The short hand indicated that it was already past five in the afternoon.

"This is my last question, Warrant Officer Kururugi."

"Yes, sir."

"Can you die for Britannia?"

There was a faint sound of something rubbing against cloth. It was the sound of Suzaku clenching his fist on his knee.

"Of course."

"Very well. Your questioning is done."

It was Guilford who was waiting for Darlton when he returned to the bureau in the Tokyo Settlements.

"How was the business trip?"

Guilford was leaning against the wall in the long hallway leading to Viceroy Cornelia's office and had his arms folded. He asked this as soon as he saw Darlton, smiling.

Darlton stopped and smiled back.

"You're missing an adjective. It was a 'pointless' business trip."

Guilford shrugged his shoulders.

"So, was it really that pointless?"

"I would say fifty-fifty."

Darlton cocked his head a little. He continued in his usual, heavy voice. "The charges against Kururugi have been cleared. But, regarding Suzaku Kururugi himself, it's still a little in the gray."

"How confusing," Guilford's smile changed into a wry one. "General. My mind is worn out from going through the documents from the Information Department. Please stop giving me puzzling answers."

"I didn't mean for it to be that puzzling. I just meant that there is a need to keep an eye on that soldier. Especially in regards to Zero."

What Darlton meant was this. It was true that Suzaku wasn't leaking information to the Black Knights. Besides, this case had had no solid evidence—there had just been rumors. And as Lloyd had said, the rumors came from those who resented that an Honorary Britannian was piloting a Knightmare, or who were jealous of the feats the ASEEC had achieved. Guilford and Darlton hadn't believed the rumors from the beginning. In a large organization, that departments would compete and try to undermine each other was a given. Especially in the Area 11 mandate military, the ASEEC—a department that was treated differently—received a lot of criticism. However, one couldn't lead an organization if he worried about each and every rumor that popped up. Even Viceroy Cornelia, who wasn't particularly fond of the ASEEC or of Suzaku, didn't consider this case important.

However...

"It is a fact that Zero and Suzaku Kururugi have something going on. Even if Zero had other objectives, he risked his safety just to save one person. That was in the Orange Incident. And at the time, Zero tried recruiting Kururugi to become an ally—which is reported in Kururugi's investigation records. Even if Kururugi is not collaborating with the Black Knights, there is a possibility that Kururugi is an important figure to Zero...would you agree?"

Darlton nodded to Guilford's question. "Yes. Well, I'm sure Kururugi doesn't know Zero's identity as of now. But I'm sure he's aware of what you just said. This is the first time I've really talked to him, but he's not a fool. Of course, because that's the case, he doesn't show his true self that easily."

"Do you think he's realized something but is hiding it?"

"I don't know. That's hard to tell. Those types use their beliefs as shields and sometimes even fool themselves."

"He's not a type you like, General?"

"No. I don't like the type of man who would doubt if they were really correct after they died. Anyway..." Then, Darlton lowered his voice. "How is the investigation on your side?"

Guilford narrowed his eyes behind his glasses.

"I think we can confirm that information is leaking. However, even though the initial leak came from inside the military, it seems that there is one more person serving as intermediary to the Black Knights. Of course, Kururugi is not involved."

"So it's the neighboring area, eh? We cleaned out the staff, but those areas are hard to get to."

"Especially those who were under former Viceroy Clovis—they have a cozy relationship with the civilians. And since they're used to that kind of rule, the reforming of the consciousness is not complete yet. I'm guessing that the information leaked through those channels to the civilians, and then to the Black Knights."

"I see..." Darlton fell silent in thought. And then, he lowered his voice further and said, "And the chances of the instigation coming from the home country?"

Guilford hesitated for a second, then shook his head.

But that was not to deny the question. His facial expression said as much.

Darlton asked again to confirm. "You're saying that we can't rule out the possibility?"

"The current situation is that we don't know. Area 11 has the following noble families—Bruckner, Stadtfeld, and Ashford—who came here for the *sakuradite*. It is true that these families are not the ones that supported Princess Cornelia or Princess Euphemia. I cannot say that they don't hope for the downfall of the two princesses, but if we lost the two of them Area 11 would be thrown

into confusion. If their objective is to gain a monopoly on rights, I wouldn't say that would be the best way to go. However..."

"It might be different for the other families that back each royal personage, right?"

Actually, this was what concerned Darlton and Guilford the most about this case.

Britannia had many royal members. And since the one who inherited the throne wasn't necessarily the oldest, the struggle for succession was fierce. There were many aristocrats and noble families backing each prince and princess, and they were constantly aiming to ruin the others. There were many dark schemes brewing behind the scenes.

Information might have been leaked to the terrorists to shroud the two princesses in darkness. Cornelia's and Euphemia's chances of inheriting the throne were not small; in fact, Cornelia had a high chance due to her achievements. For now, the strongest contender was first Prince Odysseus. After Odysseus was the Chancellor of the Empire, second prince Schneizel. But still, no one knew what the future held. No matter what anybody thought, Cornelia and Euphemia had a chance to take over the spot. But that was why the danger they were in was greater.

As Cornelia's aides, Darlton and Guilford didn't only have to worry about the anti-government and terrorist activities on the surface, but they had to be cautious about these threats as well. There were many royal court members who died early because of a mysterious "incident" or "accident." For example, there was Marianne vi Britannia, who had been killed eight years ago inside the Aries Palace.

"All in all, we need to have Princess Euphemia choose a knight as soon as possible." Darlton returned his voice to normal as he said this.

Guilford agreed. "I will arrange matters without revealing those delicate issues. Both princesses have a good heart when it comes to their siblings."

"Thank you. I'll think of a countermeasure for the information leak after I offer my opinion to the Viceroy. It may be a drastic measure, but perhaps we need to come up with a punitive clause."

"What should we do about the issue with Kururugi and Zero?"

"I would wait and see. I don't think we're at a stage to have someone follow him. Regarding Kururugi as an individual, I'll keep an eye on him when I have the time."

When Guilford heard that, he smiled again. "Are you going to rear him from an early age?"

"Hm. I would think it would be difficult to tame him."

"But he is the type to get along with you."

"Stop it, Guilford. Anyway, I don't have much to report, but I'll go see the Viceroy about Kururugi, among other things...oh."

"Yes?" Guilford gave a puzzled look.

Darlton was looking to the side with a wry smile.

"It seems that I have someone else to report the matter to first."

Euphemia was running toward them from the end of the hall with a serious face.

When Suzaku left the entrance, the sky was already tinged red with the sunset.

"Suzaku!"

Cecile came running toward him from the parking lot, waving her hand and smiling. Behind her was Lloyd, strolling casually and waving a little.

Suzaku bowed slightly and answered Cecile, then looked up at the sky above him.

The sunset was turning the entire world into crimson color.

The boy's eyes were bleary as he stared into it.

CODE GEASS
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Lelouch
of the Rebellion

Interval

July 2017, Area 11

It was not a particularly exceptional scene.

There were people gathered under a gray sky. No one was cheerful.

Daddy's big hands.

The place was called Aoyama. Even though it had changed hands from a Japanese owner to a Britannian one, what the place was did not change. It was a place where flowing tears and chanted prayers watched the spirits leave.

Daddy's big shadow.

In the past few days, the same scene had been repeated over and over. It wasn't only soldiers and terrorists who'd lost their lives. Just five days ago, the Black Knights—Zero—had caused a landslide at Narita. It swallowed up the town that was at the foot of the mountain as well, including the civilian facilities, houses, and those people who failed to escape.

Daddy's kind voice.

It would be selfish for her to think that she was the only one in pain. Britannia had done similar things against Japan in the past. She understood that in her mind. She knew that the full circle of sadness and resentment was a fact in the world of humans.

Daddy's...

But then, at least for those who were deceased, she wanted them to smile. If this world was full of sadness and resentment, she wanted serene salvation for those who were released from it. For her, this was the true meaning of prayer, as well as being her own wish.

"May he rest in peace..."

At the same time the minister finished praying, the people took their shovels in their hands. Tears fell down the girl's cheeks. The brown, merciless dirt started to cover the coffin in the ground.

That was when the girl's mother jumped forward.

"No, stop!"

It was a scream from those who were left behind.

"Don't bury him again, please!! He suffered enough! Don't leave me!"

She was held back by the others and fell to the ground.

The girl—Shirley Fenette—hugged her from behind with trembling hands.

"Mom..."

Why? Why? Why did this happen?

And then, Shirley looked behind her. There were her friends who came to offer support.

Milly, the Student Council President, lowered her eyes in pain. Rivalz, who was usually always cheerful, was biting his lip tightly. Nina was clutching the edge of her skirt. Kallen was staring at the ground as if she were enduring something. Suzaku was looking at her father's coffin with stern eyes.

And there was one more person.

The boy she was in love with.

He didn't look at her. His dark eyes seemed even darker, as if he were burdened with all of the sins of this world. He appeared overwhelmed with despair.

His eyes only saw the ground that lay in front of him.

"Are you regretting that your friend's father got killed?"

These were her first words.

She was sitting on the bed, hugging a large cushion. Her refined features, like those of a cold sculpture, looked nonchalant.

Not a trace of emotion showed in her voice. It was her usual voice, but it ticked Lelouch off more than normal today.

"You said before that you didn't intend to be tied up by idealism."

C.C. continued to throw harsh words at Lelouch, who had returned from the funeral and sank onto his couch without changing. He kept quiet.

"But just once, something goes wrong and you're acting soft. Did you think this was a game? Face it. You've killed many people up to this point. With your hands and words."

"...Shut up."

For the first time, Lelouch responded. It was a low voice that sounded like he wanted to curse to death those who heard it.

C.C. disregarded his command and went on. "Those people had family too. Lovers, friends." A jeering tone was added to her voice. "Or did you not understand that? I thought you'd be better prepared. In the end, you weren't ready..."

"Just shut up!"

Lelouch finally exploded.

"I am prepared! I was from the moment I killed my brother Clovis with my bare hands!"

C.C. neither flinched nor hesitated. "Then why do you doubt yourself now?"

And Lelouch couldn't answer that.

The girl waited a bit, and then snorted.

"Has she shaken you so badly? One kiss and you go to pieces?"

Lelouch felt the blood in his whole body turn hot.

It was true. She wasn't talking about something that happened today. It was the night before yesterday. The Student Council members had found out about Shirley's father yesterday. But it was different for Lelouch; he already knew. That night when he met Shirley, she told him personally. About her father, whom Lelouch had killed.

She was crying.

She was seeking help.

But at the same time, Lelouch's mind had gone blank. That's why, things happened before he realized it, and...

"Hmph. So despite the airs you put on, in the end you're just a cherry boy with a big mouth. It's easy to live being influenced by others. But I'll tell you something. A swollen head is how I'd describe someone like you."

C.C. was rolling her eyes, chuckling, when Lelouch jumped from the couch and pushed her down on the bed. He grabbed her so hard that a button on her top popped off. Her pale skin showed. Yet, C.C. remained calm and cold. She gazed at Lelouch with scornful eyes.

"You have no right to hesitate or turn back. The burden of the lives you took is all on you. Finish the resentment you stirred up. If you can't do that, then you can stay in this room forever, crying for your mommy with your sister. Don't let me down."

"...!!!"

Lelouch kicked the chair beside the bed. It landed on the floor with a large thud. Then he stormed out of the room.

C.C. could hear his footsteps fade down the hall. She remained on the bed, looking at the ceiling, not bothering to fix her disheveled clothes. The wall clock made ticking noises as the seconds passed.

Suddenly, C.C. closed her eyes. And then...

"Too strict?"

Mysterious words came out of her mouth.

Lelouch was no longer in the room. C.C. was the only one there. However, her words were clearly meant for someone else to hear.

"I prefer to call myself battle-hardened. These types of men cannot be spoiled when they're down. In fact, it's perfect to kick him when he's down. Besides, his ability to fight back is excellent."

C.C. continued to speak with her eyes closed.

"Stop your suspicions. I'm just hoping that he will be an adequate partner, that's all."

The clock was still ticking.

"Yeah...Anyway, unleashing bad intentions uses a lot of energy. Whether it's sincere or not...Look, I told you it's not that...Fine. Anyway, I'm tired. I'm going to sleep, so don't bother me anymore..."

...Marianne.

After a few moments, the sound of C.C. sleeping could be heard along with the ticking clock.

Lulu...forgive me.

After the funeral, when they were alone, that was what Shirley said.

It wasn't fair...kissing you like that. It wasn't fair.

On that rainy night, both drenched, they kissed.

I'm sorry to put you on the spot like that. I think...I made a mistake.

The girl forced a smile.

Okay? I mean, there's no point...it was just a kiss.

Contrary to her smile, her usually cheerful eyes were filled with tears.

I'm really sorry...

Sorry, sorry, sorry. He wondered how many times she apologized.

It was ignorant of him, but he didn't even know her feelings for him until that night. He didn't have the capacity to realize it...but that was a pathetic excuse. He wondered how much he hurt her by not knowing. Yet, it was she who kept apologizing.

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

The only place her love for him could go was into emptiness. The person she saw wasn't him: it was an illusion of him. It was

a mask that he created to betray her. The words she would say to the real person behind the mask would probably be different. It wouldn't be apologies. It would be, without a doubt, this.

Die.

His heart ached. It hurt as if it were stabbed with a knife. But that was also an illusion. It wasn't like it was a convenient daydream, that she would never say that. Whether in illusion or in reality, if she turned a knife against him, he wouldn't accept it. He could not die for her. If necessary, he would take away the knife and turn it against her.

There was no path for him to return to.

None, for eternity...

CODE GEASS
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Lelouch
of the Rebellion

STAGE-2:2-SINFUL

[WITCH]

The fundamental problem lies in their neutrality. Witches and saints are essentially of the same nature. However, that is why they are dangerous; because they could be either good or bad. One who can bless another also has the power to curse another—that was the common view of the people. It was similar to how the ancient civilizations of the East revered and feared those who used shamanism and medicine. However, in defense of the witches, they are neither black nor white. They are colorless chaos...meaning, the witches are human existence itself.

September 2019, Area 11

1

Eleven years ago, C.C. met the child.

It was on the street corner of a town where cold rain fell on them. The child, wrapped in thrown away newspapers, with no family, was trembling from hunger and the cold.

She knew from the moment she saw him that he had the "quality." In regard just to the simple ability and that alone, he might've been more qualified than her current partner, Lelouch. Even for C.C., whose time is eternal and who has no concept of time, she couldn't remember anyone who was more gifted than the boy. It was true that she had high hopes.

Geass.

An absolute power that twists the world's providence.

Her current partner Lelouch specialized in "giving orders to others." And for the boy, his ability was "perception." The power of Geass manifested in a different way depending on who she entered the contract with. It was C.C.'s duty to trigger the power, but she didn't actually give her partners the power. She didn't know why the Geass' manifestations varied. It might be because of the difference in the individual soul's genetic information, but for C.C. who didn't have a soul, she couldn't figure it out. But because she had no soul, even if C.C. had the Geass used on her by her partner, she could nullify the effect.

It was the same for the boy. His ability was perception. He was able to read the minds of everyone who lived in the world.

If there was someone he couldn't read the mind of, it was C.C. or another existence of her kind.

Perhaps the destruction had begun at that point.

Just as her first impression suggested, the boy showed a rare and outstanding ability as a Geass user.

And then, he completely shattered.

There is no value in something broken. It shouldn't exist. It's an absolute rule that cannot be reversed.

That was why she killed him with her own hands.

Eleven years later, with the hands that gave him the Geass.

With the hands that recast his fate.

Killed him, the boy named Mao.

That was exactly one week ago.



I'll return by noon.

Lelouch had said this in his bedroom to C.C., who was sitting on the bed. He threw a cell phone toward her.

"It's the third meeting with the Kyoto Group. Most of the alliance agreement is set, but there are still a few details to work out. I'll take Ohgi with me. You don't have to come along... Hey, are you listening?"

"Huh?"

C.C. was blankly gazing at the China aster in the vase on the table. She finally came to when Lelouch spoke to her, looking up from the cushion she was hugging. From the other side of the couch, Lelouch was staring at her, a frustrated look on his perfect features.

"Did you say something?" C.C. answered without thinking twice about how rude this was. Lelouch, who was wearing his personal, non-school uniform clothes, frowned in anger.

"Fine. I just need to tell you not to wander around. Stay put, here. That's all."

"I see."

Usually she would make a snide comment or two, but she didn't feel like it, so she answered matter-of-factly. And then, she noticed the cell phone lying in front of her.

"What is this?"

When she asked, Lelouch looked more disgruntled than ever.

"Time is indeed valuable, isn't it, C.C.?"

"Not really, but for you, probably yes."

"I see, you do understand. Then I wish you'd stop wasting my time."

C.C. still didn't feel like arguing, so she shut her mouth. Lelouch raised an eyebrow. Then, he picked up the bag by his feet and said in a lighter tone, "That's for you. You haven't had one until now. It's set so that you can call me without being detected. Use that to contact me when something happens."

"What do you mean by 'something'?"

"That is for you to decide." And then Lelouch, his bag in hand, started to walk toward the door.

Once at the door, Lelouch stopped and said without looking back: "If you don't rest, your attentiveness will go down. Even children know that. By the way, you are the last person I'd think of who would have trouble sleeping. C.C., if you're going to interfere with my sleep, I'll consider kicking you out of my room."

He knew.

But it was very much like Lelouch to not say it like this: "If you're tired, you can rest."

C.C. remained quiet as Lelouch left the room.

On the table, the China aster was giving off a fragrance. It was a pretty, blue flower. It was too pretty; it didn't match the aristocratic taste of the room. This flower was called *ezogiku* in Japanese and was offered at grave sites. C.C. didn't know whether it was Lelouch, Sayoko or Nunnally who had put the flowers there, but in any case it seemed profound, floral language and all. The floral language of the China aster was, "believing heart" and

"reminiscence." However, when the flower was blue, it also meant, "I believe you, but I'm worried."

C.C. blinked at the brightness of the morning sun shining into the room and fell backwards on the bed. She looked up at the ceiling.

She didn't close her eyes.

In the distance, she heard the front entrance open and footsteps leading to the outside. It was probably Lelouch.

Listening to that, C.C. mused, still looking at the ceiling.

He changed a little.

Actually, it was more like he had snapped out of something.

The Narita Incident three months ago, and the string of events that followed—of course, even C.C. didn't know if it was absolutely the just thing to do. The only thing that was clear was that if his true identity and what he had done was revealed, no one would be on his side. And he was probably prepared for that by now.

Then, what about me who was hoping for that?

C.C. continued to stare at the white ceiling above her.

It was true that it was an inconvenience.

However, Nunnally Lamperouge didn't see it as pessimistically anymore. A world with no light... But she could still feel things. Even if she couldn't see it, the light was still there.

However, that was just an overall view, and at times like this it got you into a jam. Nunnally didn't know what to do with the thing in front of her.

She slowly reached out. After it sniffed her hand, it pressed its moist nose against her. Long, fluffy fur. It was pretty big too. Its head was at the same height level of Nunnally, who sat in a wheelchair. She could hear the sound of its tail wagging.

If this had happened outside, Nunnally wouldn't have been surprised. However, this was inside the clubhouse where Nunnally lived.

She tried asking it.

"Um, where is your owner?"

"Woof!"

She knew this would be the case but the dog didn't understand her question.

Her brother Lelouch had been gone since morning. Usually, her nurse Sayoko stayed by her side but she was gone too. A relative was in the hospital, and she'd gone to visit. Nunnally was fine, even though she was alone. As long as she was inside the clubhouse, her house, she didn't require much help. Even though she couldn't see, she could grasp where she was, and she knew where most things were located.

However, it was different in regard to things that didn't belong in the house.

"What should I do?"

Could it be a lost dog? But where, Nunnally wondered, did it come in from? It had a collar so she was sure it belonged to somebody. If she could see and walk, she would go outside and help it look for its owner, but...

The problem was that the dog was a quiet one. When Nunnally scratched its neck, it snuggled closer in comfort. It sat when commanded.

It was quite cute.

Nunnally's face lit up with a smile.

"I'm sure brother will come home soon. Until then, shall we wait for him together?"

"Woof!"

It was a deal.

Once Lelouch was home, he could help look for its owner. But just as Nunnally was thinking that, the dog raised its head and stood up.

As she wondered what was going on, the dog dashed off suddenly. Not to the entrance, but farther inside the clubhouse.

"Oh, doggie!"

She couldn't stop it. She could hear the claws hitting the floor as it ran. And then...

Thud! It ran into something.

"!"

Nunnally heard someone fall over. It seemed that the dog had suddenly jumped on him or her. But in a playful way, not as an attack.

"Woof!"

"... I've been getting a lot of this lately."

Huh?

"But it seems that you know how to treat a lady better than him."

"That voice..."

Nunnally had heard it before.

"... Is it you, C.C.?"

It was a mistake to try to eat if she couldn't sleep.

As soon as she stepped out of the room, she was hit by a big blob of white fur.

"Is it you, C.C.?"

Furthermore, she'd been found by Lelouch's sister, Nunnally. But still, C.C. didn't panic. C.C. and Nunnally had met before, so there was no surprise in that. Even if Nunnally couldn't see, there was no way C.C. could wander around in this building without being noticed. When she first arrived, she'd even introduced herself. Of course, Nunnally didn't know that C.C. had been sleeping in Lelouch's room since then.

"Hey, get off of me already. I can't say hello to your master." C.C. said this to the thing on top of her. Then, whether it understood her words or not, it licked her cheek. "A Great Pyrenees, eh? I know they're guardian dogs used by shepherds and have the courage to face wolves, but I guess there are exceptions to everything."

"I knew that it was you, C.C." Nunnally's wheelchair moved closer as she spoke happily. Then, finally, the dog moved off of C.C.

"It's been a while, Nunnally. How have you been?" C.C. asked, as she picked herself up.

"Yes! It's been such a long time. When did you arrive? I didn't hear you come in at all."

"Oh, I came in the morning," C.C. said, as she smoothed the wrinkles out of her clothes with her hand. "I had something I needed from Lelouch, but he was about to leave when I got here...so he had me wait for him until he returned."

C.C. lied with ease. She didn't feel bad about it. Besides, this was for Lelouch's convenience and not hers. C.C. couldn't care less if Nunnally misunderstood her relationship with Lelouch, or the current situation they were in. However, it was different for Lelouch, so she tried to accommodate his needs.

"Anyway, what are you doing here? Don't you have school? Today is Monday."

"We're off today. Yesterday was a special church service for the entire school, so we have the day off to make up for it."

"I see."

He really needs to tell me things like this, C.C. thought to herself. She looked to the side, where the white dog was sitting. It was between she and Nunnally, wagging its tail happily and looking at each of them in turns.

"By the way, when did you get a new housemate?" C.C. asked.

Nunnally shook her head. "Oh, she's not a new housemate."

"A lost dog?"

"Yes, probably. I think it came in from outside of the school since pets aren't allowed in the dormitories."

Come to think of it, that was obvious. C.C. had never heard of a pet friendly school. There was a cat named Arthur in the Student Council room, but officially he didn't belong to the Student Council. It was a stray.

"Have you seen this dog around, C.C.?"

"No."

C.C. didn't know the dog and had never seen it. But it was clear that it had an owner. It was used to being around humans and it was clean. This type of dog with long fur would get dirty instantly if it was a stray. This dog's fur was nice and clean, as if someone had been taking care of it on a regular basis. The white, fluffy fur was incredible.

"Oh, this is a white dog?"

Nunnally sounded happier when C.C. described the appearance of the dog to the girl who couldn't see. And then, Nunnally patted the dog on the head and said, "Then your name must be Snow. Snow?"

"Woof!"

"Oh, it answered!"

C.C. cocked her head to one side. She stood up next to the dog and said, "Spot."

"Woof!"

"Tiger."

"Woof!"

"Loser."

"Woof!"

"Sister complex."

"Woof!"

"Lelouch."

"Woof!"

C.C. turned to Nunnally with a straight face. "This dog answers to anything."

"...Oh, okay. Then how about we name her Suza...er, Beth for now?"

"Your ideas are instantaneous and quite interesting, Nunnally."

Since Nunnally said she hadn't eaten lunch yet, C.C. ordered pizza for both of them.

"I can't believe your brother and maid would leave you alone like this."

"Oh, today it was supposed to be that way," Nunnally defended them as she reached for the pizza. They were eating in the dining area in the kitchen. "Sayoko was to stay with me in the morning and Lelouch was to stay with me in the afternoon."

"So everything was ruined because of that idiot being late." C.C. glanced at the clock on the wall. It was already past noon. Sayoko probably wasn't coming back anytime soon because she thought Lelouch would be home by now. "When he comes home, I can scold him for you."

"No, it's okay. I'm sorry to make you wait C.C."

"It's fine. I have all the time in the world."

C.C. continued to chat with Nunnally but she didn't forget the gaze focusing on her. She was sitting on the kitchen chair and there were two black eyes staring up at her. Every time C.C.'s hand, holding a pizza slice, went to her mouth, the large head moved back and forth.

C.C. didn't look at the dog as she said, "I'm not giving you any."

Stare.

"If you want some, you need to grab one for yourself. Only losers would wait for something they want to fall in their lap."

Stare.

"Besides, this isn't your house. A guest needs to have proper guest etiquette..."

Stare.

"..."

C.C. sighed deeply. She tore a piece off of the pizza slice she was holding and gave it to the dog.

"Woof!"

The dog barked happily and then dove into the pizza.

"Ow, calm down. That's my hand... Stop it, that's my piece."

Nunnally, sitting across the table, started to giggle. "You're a very kind person."

"Huh?"

C.C. was dumbfounded because she'd heard something unexpected.

"I'm sure animals know that. That's why Beth stays by your side."

"No, I think it's because she's just a pig."

Lelouch still hadn't come home. Of course, Sayoko hadn't either.

In the end, the pizza was finished clean between the two girls and one dog. And then, C.C. and Nunnally discussed this lost dog. In the end, they decided to wait for Lelouch or Sayoko to come home to deal with it. C.C. couldn't go out to look for the owner since she couldn't wander around in public and the same went for Nunnally. If they allowed the dog to go out on its own, it might get caught by the security guards at the school and be kicked out. It also seemed that Nunnally wanted to play with the dog a little longer.

"You like animals, Nunnally?"

"Yes. Usually I prefer cats, but I love dogs too. My brother only likes dogs though."

"Hm. I can see that."

"But lately he said that he's reconsidering cats now too."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"He said it's because cats are better than humans who are like cats. Cats may not obey you, but at least they're quiet and won't say unnecessary things, and he doesn't have to spend money for their food. If it was a human, he would want to throw the pizza he or she is eating at their face, but if it's a cat he can forgive it."

"I see."



That bastard.

When he comes home, I'll be the one throwing a pizza at his face.

"You like animals too, right?"

"Well, I don't hate them... Why do you think that way?"

"Hee hee. I can guess."

Nunnally laughed heartily, and then petted the white dog's head. After the meal, the dog was stuck on Nunnally. C.C. felt that it was indeed a piglike dog. Or perhaps Nunnally petted it better. Besides, disciplining and caring for another was not what she did. As a trainer, C.C. was sure Nunnally would far outshine her.

"Likes animals, eh?" C.C. mumbled to herself as she sat on the couch in the living room. She gazed at the blind girl and the lost dog as they played with each other.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Come to think of it...that boy liked animals too.

2

Obstacles tend to come and block you the most when you're already too busy.

Area 11 Viceroy Cornelia li Britannia thought this to herself as she sat in one of the meeting rooms inside the Tokyo Settlements bureau.

"This is the photograph of the attack on the police department that occurred recently in Niigata. The weapons used were made in the Chinese Federation—the automatic rifle, Hong Long, and the rocket launcher Zi Lei—their precision is not that high, but because of its ease of use they are often utilized when civilian soldiers are sent into other countries."

Guilford was describing what they were watching, as a video was shown on a monitor inside the dark room. This room was

located deep in the basement of the bureau. During emergencies, it was safe from air raids from the enemy and served as a temporary headquarters.

In the room with the low ceiling were Guilford, Darlton, and the staff of the Area 11 mandate military. And also in the room was Sub-Viceroy Euphemia. There were no civil service workers. The meeting was strictly on military affairs.

"And it's not just this incident. Recently in the Hokuriku region, there was information that a considerable amount of weapons are flowing in from the Chinese Federation to the terrorist factions. Maritime security is being tightened but the terrorists have many Elevens on their side and, therefore, it is very hard to detect all of the flow."

"Where are the terrorists getting their funds? I'm sure the Chinese Federation isn't giving the weapons out for free."

It was Darlton speaking with a low voice.

Guilford turned his head toward him, making his eyeglasses shine from the glare of the monitor.

"We don't have airtight evidence but we believe the funds to be coming from within the country. The EU and their allies do not have much interest in the Asia situation. And recently, their relationship with the Chinese Federation has gotten worse over the issue in Siberia. There is no way these two nations would work hand in hand to try to unsettle Area 11."

"So then...the front runner for the prospective mastermind is the NAC. The Six Houses of Kyoto, eh?"

"If that's so, shouldn't we cut off the flow of the funds immediately?" It was one of the staff who spoke up. "If we kill the roots of those terrorists, wouldn't they wilt and leave no room for the Chinese Federation to intervene?"

"It's not that simple," Darlton shook his head. "Acting without evidence is what they want. It gives them propaganda material to claim that the Britannian government follows no law or justice. Then the Chinese Federation will take that

opportunity and make their favorite 'international order' speech, and criticize us."

"However, there are rumors that the NAC has been trying to contact the Black Knights lately." A different staff member piped in.

Cornelia, who kept quiet listening to the debate among her subordinates, raised her eyebrows. Next to her was Euphemia, who listened to the men with a serious expression on her face.

"A rumor is just a rumor," Darlton said. "As long as we don't have concrete evidence, we can't do a smokeout based on a rumor. Officially, it's a fact that they're giving their blessing to the Britannian government."

"So we can only wait until the Public Safety Department can get something on them?"

"The bottom line is, yes. However, we're not going to just wait around. This is my personal opinion, but I think it's best to chase after their tails and also simultaneously look for a way to encourage their self-destruction."

"I have heard that they are not a monolith. There's a fierce internal competition between those who are deferential to Britannia and those who oppose Britannia."

"So we just have to add fuel to that division...but how?"

"These are folks who are power hungry. The key would be..."

"*Sakuradite*? But the bourgeois of Britannia are involved with that. It would be hard for us to use it at our own discretion."

"Perhaps it would be better to hint at promoting Area 11 to a Satellite Area. There should be many in the NAC who want that."

"But I wonder about flattering them too much. They might see us as acting weak and it might fuel the pro-Eleven factions."

"It just means that it's vital to use the carrot and stick wisely. That is why there is a need to show a decisive stance to the anti-government factions. That will contain them."

"So it's really about Zero and the Black Knights. As long as we get rid of them, it leaves no other organization that acts as a unifying force in Area 11. The NAC would swing toward its deferential members."

"The problem is how we are going to catch that ridiculous mask..."

Cornelia and Euphemia, sitting at the head of the table, still remained quiet as they listened to the energetic debate going on around them.

In general, in these situations Cornelia tried not to make that many statements. The main reason was that she wanted to understand what was inside her subordinates' minds as she listened to their discussions. But in addition, when the person at the top expressed her opinion at an early stage, the discussion tended to go in one direction from there, and there was a risk of the discussion ending. When that happened, she wouldn't hear the useful opinions that could come from her subordinates. On the other hand, Euphemia was quiet for a different reason. She recognized her inexperience and she wanted to listen to the opinions of others as much as she could.

"Your Highness?"

Guilford, who was moderating the meeting, gave her the cue, and for the first time Cornelia nodded a little. Not meaning that she was going to speak; but rather to tell her subordinates to continue.

Guilford understood that and glanced around the meeting room. The image on the monitor changed.

"Now, please look at this. It is recent footage of the Dalian military base brought back by one of our reconnaissance aircraft. Looking at this, the deployment of the Knightmares and ballistic missiles of the Chinese Federation are..."

Darlton and the other staff turned their attention to the monitor again. Only Euphemia glanced at Cornelia with a look that wanted to say something.

Cornelia leaned back in her chair and continued to stare straight ahead into the void.



One thing C.C. was concerned about was whether Mao's ability affected only humans.

Of course, it should be that way. As far as C.C. knew, the Geass users with the ability to affect the human mind could not affect existences that were not human. She didn't think that he'd tried it before, but the current Geass user she was in contract with, Lelouch, was probably the same way. However, the child—a seven-year-old boy named Mao—had a Geass more powerful than C.C. had ever seen. That was why one day she decided to ask him. And especially since there was a convenient existence nearby at the time.

It was a mutt named Baku, and the boy was particularly fond of it.

"Mao. Can you read Baku's mind, too?"

The small boy Mao cocked his head to one side and answered, "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I can't hear words. But I think that's because Baku can't speak our language. I can sort of tell what he's thinking."

"So, that means you can read his mind?"

"Hmm. Nah, I don't think so. Because, look."

The boy petted the brown dog's head and laughed. The dog nudged its nose against the boy and wagged its tail.

"When Baku is happy or sad, he uses his body to communicate. So maybe I look at that to read his mind."

In the end, C.C.'s question wasn't answered, but she did find out one thing.

Of course Mao would like animals.

Animals didn't lie. Even if the dog was well trained, its actions would show whether it was happy or not. Those who could tell

would know. And in the end, it meant that animals didn't show anything that contradicted what they felt inside.

That was why animals were existences that put Mao at ease. Unlike humans, they didn't put up a front. Unlike humans, they didn't have an inner self that they hid.

Perhaps Mao learned that the most when Baku died...or rather, was killed.

Baku died from being hit by a car. When the driver stepped out of the car, Mao lashed out at him. It wasn't like the driver's attitude was particularly bad. In fact, he sounded very sorry and kept apologizing to Mao and C.C. However, Mao was infuriated.

That time, C.C. knew exactly what was in Mao's mind.

Damn it.

I've gotten myself into a mess.

Besides, it's this stupid dog's fault for running out into the street suddenly.

What bad luck.

Will I get fined for running over a dog?

Well, I'm dealing with children.

I can con my way out of this. There's no way I'm going to pay a fine for one stupid dog...

Understandably, the driver turned pale when Mao recited what he had been thinking. He got confused, became furious at Mao and tried to hit him, when C.C. stopped him. Of course, C.C. hammered him completely, but Mao was scarred forever.

"I don't want to listen to this. I don't want to listen to any of this, C.C...."

It was bad timing that Mao's Geass was getting stronger at that time.

This is something she'd told her current partner Lelouch: the Geass gets stronger the more one uses it and, in the end, it swallows up the user. And in some cases the user cannot control when he or she wants to turn it on or off. In the case of Lelouch, who gave absolute orders to others, his words would constantly be taken as

an "order." And Mao's ability was reading others' minds. But to not be able to turn that off meant as long as there were people around him, Mao could hear voices. No matter how foul and lewd those voices were.

Again, his range of power was increasing. At first he was only able to read at a radius of forty meters, but by that point he could read the minds of people three hundred meters away.

"Shut up! Shut up! Just shut up!"

The only mind he couldn't read was that of C.C. But that didn't mean she didn't have feelings inside that she kept from him.

"Help me, C.C...."

C.C. granted his painful wish.

She took him to a land far away from civilization and they lived alone. It was a world where there was no one around, no strangers mumbling.

However, now that she thought about it, that decision had been the wrong one to make.

"Ready..."

"Go!"

The two of them started spinning a top on an "arena" that was slightly slanted. It was a peculiar top that was shaped like a fat human being. C.C. found out from Nunnally that they were called sumo tops. Each player spins their own top on the arena and the one that stays spinning longer wins. It was a traditional toy that children had played with in the former Japan.

The red top that Nunnally spun was spinning strongly at the center of the arena. The blue top that C.C. spun inched closer to it.

After they hit a few times, C.C.'s top eventually got knocked over.

"Urgh..."



"Which one won?"

"Honestly, I'm pretty mortified. I lost," C.C. answered. Nunnally's face lit up. Next to her, Beth—that was the dog's new name—was lying on the floor.

"You're pretty good, Nunnally."

"Hee hee. I'm actually good at these. I can even win against Sayoko and Lelouch too."

"I don't know about the maid but Lelouch looks like he would suck at these types of games." And he would probably be a sore loser about it, mumbling about 'games that don't use your brains.'

"I'm sure if it's a card game, he would be unopposed."

"That's true."

Nunnally nodded, still smiling.

"If it's Bullshit or Asshole, Lelouch can beat anybody. But Milly is the best at Sevens."

"I see. I'm good at Sevens too. I'm good at stopping the numbers that others are holding."

"Kallen is the best at Old Maid. If it's Blackjack, Suzaku is unusually good... Oh, Suzaku is one of our friends, and..."

"Yeah, I know of him."

"Oh, okay. Yes, so when they start hitting, Lelouch and Milly are better, but Suzaku gets Blackjack immediately. Milly always complains that he's cheating though."

"So it means that he's really lucky at drawing the right cards."

C.C. thought that perhaps it was very like him, in a way.

But Suzaku Kanurugi, eh?

C.C. repeated the name inside her mind as she took her top in her hand.

The name had a deep meaning to C.C. But not because she was directly affiliated with him. He was only of concern in regards to her current partner, Lelouch.

Lelouch is naïve.

She really thought so.

She recognized that he was more or less prepared for the path he followed. However, even so, C.C. still had issues with his approach.

Take this academy, for example.

Lelouch was currently still attending this academy as a normal student, even as he led a double life, wearing a mask and acting as Zero, leader of the Black Knights and their rebellion against Britannia. In C.C.'s eyes, it was ridiculous. A double life? What was the point of that? If he really wanted to overthrow Britannia, what he should be prioritizing was the activities of Zero and the Black Knights. His life as a student was nothing but a hindrance.

In fact, C.C. once asked Lelouch why he wouldn't leave the academy.

"You're not going to tell me that you haven't realized it yet, are you?" C.C. said.

Lelouch fell silent.

"You already have the power to protect yourself. You have Geass and the Black Knights. Of course, I know that you attended here to hide your identity as a Britannian prince before you met me. Ashford...was it the Student Council President's family? They hid you here, right? But you don't need such protection anymore."

Lelouch said nothing; but then finally mumbled an answer.

"Nunnally is here. If I leave here, what will happen to Nunnally?"

"You just need to prepare a separate place to hide Nunnally. I'm going to say this one more time, but you have the power of Geass. You also have an organization, the Black Knights. It would be much easier to keep your little sister safe than to start a war with Britannia."

Besides, C.C. thought, it was much more dangerous to keep Nunnally here. If Lelouch continued his rebellion against Britannia, in the process Area 11 would throw off Britannia's control. There would be an upheaval. When that happened, who would protect

the Ashford Academy, which was a Britannian school located in a Britannian city?

"I'll protect it. I will not let anyone touch this academy."

"What I'm saying is..." C.C. was exasperated. "If you're going to go through all that trouble, you can just protect Nunnally. I'm going to be clear, Lelouch. As long as you use Geass and continue your rebellion against Britannia, the people near you will get caught up in it and experience pain. Something you will regret is bound to happen. Did you forget that I said the power of the king will isolate you?"

For the first time, anger showed in Lelouch's eyes.

"Are you talking about Shirley?"

C.C. answered coldly. "I'm sorry, but I have no time to be sentimental. Unlike you, I am used to being called a villainous witch. I don't care what you think of me. That is why this is a separate issue. I'm saying this as your partner in crime, Lelouch. You are too naïve."

Lelouch fell silent again.

Eventually, in a low voice, he said: "I just want to protect Nunnally."

C.C. began to protest again, but Lelouch cut her off.

"Listen, C.C. To Nunnally right now, this place is necessary. Nunnally started to laugh more when she began attending school here. I can't take that away from her. And I can't leave her side, either."

"You're going to use your sister as an excuse, even at this point? Besides, what you are doing is exactly what might take away Nunnally's place. Do you understand that?"

"I know that. However, as long as the country of Britannia exists, Nunnally and I cannot truly live in peace. That is a fact. We were forced to live like this for a long time. That is why I'm going to obliterate Britannia. It's not for anyone else, but for Nunnally's sake."

"That is absurd. If that's the case, then both of you need to leave this school immediately. Why are you so fixated on a temporary residence?"

"It's not temporary, C.C. At least not to Nunnally... If I'm only to think about Nunnally's safety, you're right. I should keep Nunnally in a place where no one could reach her until I obliterate Britannia. But I can't do that. You should know firsthand what happens to a person when they are placed in a world with no one else."

C.C. flinched.

"Listen, C.C. I'm not staying at this school for myself. I'm staying here because Nunnally needs this place. Of course, in the end I know what I'm doing is going to take that away from her. But I can't do it now. It's not a matter of safety. I can't give anything equivalent to this place to Nunnally yet."

C.C. wanted to sigh but she held back and asked again.

"I want to confirm something."

"What is it?"

"I understand your absurd reasons to continue living at this academy. So from now on, I'm talking facts. The 'place Nunnally needs' that you speak of is currently on the side of your enemy, Britannia's side. That means if you continue your activities as Zero, you are going to have to destroy this place with your own hands. That's a possibility. Even if you don't mean to, it may happen as a result of other circumstances."

"I guess that is possible, yes."

"The friends that you have here at school, the people who are 'necessary' to Nunnally might become your enemies. Even though you may do all that it takes to prevent that."

"It could happen."

"What are you going to do then?"

Lelouch closed his eyes, as if to block out C.C.'s sharp gaze.

"I said it's for now. But I can't die. I can't give up my objectives. That leaves me with...you know, C.C."

But C.C. didn't want to know.

He anticipated what was going to happen but he wasn't doing anything to deal with it. 'Now,' he says? How could he do something later when he can't do it now? Life held no guarantees.

Finally, C.C. understood. Watching Lelouch made her very irritated, and now she knew why.

He was a lot like her.

Until the very end, they couldn't discard someone. They delayed the decision. This school and that boy named Suzaku Kururugi were both dangerous elements to Lelouch. Inherently, they were a place and person on the enemy's side. But still, he could not discard them. He would hold on to them until the very last moment. It wasn't as if he was oblivious to the consequences. He was a coward regarding only that, even though he knew what would happen.

This is for now. I'll deal with it later.

But that delay in decision making invites tragedy.

C.C. knew that better than anyone.

White, lacy curtains; a large, wooden desk; a fitted closet; a fluffy carpet; and a tester bed.

That was Nunnally Lamperouge's room. There were no little items that would be found in an average young girl's room, perhaps because she couldn't see. No matter how used to it she may have been, there were limits to what she could do. In order to prevent unforeseen accidents, there were very few pieces of furniture or tools that required complicated manual procedures, or ones that would get in the way. Of course, anything with a sharp edge or unevenness had been removed.

However, even though the room looked bare, it had a warm atmosphere, probably due to Nunnally who lived in it and her maid, Sayoko. Even though there weren't that many things here, there was heart. The heart to care for others was soaked into each and every interior accessory.

"It's a relaxing room," C.C. said, and Nunnally smiled happily.

"I can't serve you anything, but please come in."

"No, it was I who wanted to see your room. I don't want to inconvenience you with my presence."

The table at the center of the room was clamped to the floor and there was a potted plant on the tabletop. It wasn't cut flowers in a vase like in Lelouch's room, but the flowers were also China aster. However, these were white. The floral language associated with it was, "please believe me."

"By the way..." C.C. glanced to her side. "Was it okay for this one to come in, too?"

The large white dog wandered about the room, sniffing.

"It's going to shed all over your carpet."

"But it would be mean to leave her out. It's okay. When Sayoko comes home, I'll take the blame."

"I think there's a problem with that too, but..."

"I'll help her clean too."

"I see."

C.C. felt that she shouldn't say any more, if Nunnally insisted.

She walked over to the window. The school building could be seen from Nunnally's room. The building itself wasn't old, but the exterior had a nostalgic look. It emerged from the greenery surrounding it, with a clear blue sky behind it. Since school was out today, there were no students.

A place necessary for the sister, eh?

C.C. looked out at the school with calm eyes, then noticed the desk nearby. There was something peculiar next to the Braille books. It was a machine of some sort, shaped like an egg. It looked like a cell phone, but bigger.

"What is this?" C.C. asked.

Nunnally responded, "Yes?" and cocked her head, but instantly her expression changed. "Oh, you shouldn't touch that. That is..."

"Huh?"

But before Nunnally could stop her, C.C. had pushed the small panel at the top of the machine.

"September 9th, Sunday. Today, Lelouch bought me cookies. I was really happy, but I am a little lonely. Lately he seems to be busy again. I would rather have him home than to have cookies. But I don't want to make him worry by saying selfish things, so it is a secret that I feel lonely. What's more important is the situation between Shirley and Lelouch. I wonder if they had a fight? But in this case, I am a little upset at my brother. Shirley just experienced a tragedy..."

The machine continued to play the monologue. It was Nunnally's voice.

And after a small peeping noise, the monologue ended.

Silence.

"Umm..."

C.C. was awkward about what had just happened. Nunnally was in her wheelchair, blushing and looking down.

"Is that your journal?"

"Yes," Nunnally answered in a tiny voice. "Since I cannot write a normal journal, I have to..."

"Yeah, of course." C.C. nodded, and sighed. "I'm sorry Nunnally. I didn't mean to listen to it."

"No, it's not your fault. It's mine for leaving it there. Oh, but, um..." Nunnally finally looked up at C.C. "Could you keep it a secret?"

"Of course," C.C. nodded firmly. "I won't tell anyone. Especially not Lelouch."

Nunnally heard that and finally looked relieved. She smiled and said, "Thank you, C.C."

"..."

What a cute girl, C.C. thought. She is good-hearted and she adores her older brother. She is disabled but not pessimistic about it, and accepts the fate given to her. But on the other hand, C.C. also thought, *there is also something fragile about her too...*

Actually, it was more like she reminded C.C. of someone. On the surface they were very different. But there were similarities.

With whom?

Of course, Mao.

Nunnally couldn't see. But C.C. heard from Lelouch that it wasn't something physical, but mental. Nunnally lost her sight when their mother was killed. But if you looked at it from a different perspective, it meant that Nunnally was closing her eyes of her own will, not wanting to look at the world around her. This sad world filled with pain. She unconsciously sought to be isolated from it.

And in that sense, it was the same with Mao. He heard the evil hearts of the people around him and eventually rejected that world. It was ironic. Nunnally lost the ability that normal people had and rejected the world. Mao obtained the ability no one else had, and because of it he rejected the world. In the end, did this world reject people unless they were like everyone else? Those who were different, was it their fate to be forever excluded?

C.C. understood why Lelouch worried so much about Nunnally. Rejection often leads to ill intent. Those who reject, or who have been rejected will eventually mock the world and focus on diminishing it. Once that happens, that person cannot go back.

Like Mao.

3

Life with just the two of them, Mao and C.C., lasted longer than she expected.

They lived in a small cabin that was surrounded by lush mountains. There was no electricity or plumbing. There was no one who came to visit. But that was ideal for Mao. There was no

one around to mumble to themselves inside their head, no tainted thoughts looming around the boy.

Basically, they had to live off the land. They carried water from the river, fuel was provided by cutting trees and storing firewood, and they grew vegetables in the fields. Since Mao wasn't even ten years old then, most of the work was done by C.C. She was actually able to perform more tasks than the average person. In the present, she stayed in Lelouch's room and spent her time just eating and sleeping, but that was only because there was no need to do anything else. If it were necessary, she didn't complain about moving about.

The days passed by peacefully.

Mao had become calmer, probably because there were no other humans around. During the day he would work in the fields or fish in the river with C.C., and at night he would go to bed while listening to C.C.'s stories. Mao preferred fairy tales, so C.C. always recited those as he went to sleep. It was the most peaceful time in the world when Mao fell asleep next to C.C.

But on the other hand, C.C. didn't keep their lives completely secluded from the outside world. For example, she would take Mao to the town at the base of the mountain to buy food, seasonings, and other necessary items. Or she would take him when they sold rare herbs from the mountain or surplus farm products. Of course, all of these things could've been done by C.C. alone without Mao, but she didn't do that. She took opportunities to bring Mao down from the mountain. Mao didn't like it but he understood that it was necessary.

That's right. It was necessary.

One could not forget.

Just as in her relationship with her current partner Lelouch, her relationship with Mao was based on a contract. The Geass was sought by Mao and C.C. offered the catalyst to obtain it. The small boy who was trembling at the corner of town wanted power to live. A contract was made then. But now that C.C. had given something, she needed him to do something for her in return.

You will grant me one wish.

As long as he couldn't meet that requirement, no matter how strong his powers were, he was inadequate as a partner. That was why C.C. expected Mao to change. Because at that point, she knew that Mao wouldn't be able to accomplish his part of the contract. In order to change him, C.C. couldn't leave Mao comfortable in a peaceful existence. A human cannot change in lukewarm water. C.C. knew that and felt that stimulation was necessary.

As soon as C.C. took Mao to where people were, Mao would clam up.

Mao's Geass was perception of the mind. Even if he covered his ears, he could hear what the people around him were saying inside their heads. It might be a normal scene for C.C., but for Mao it would be no different than a whirl of ambient noise. He would grip C.C.'s hand tightly and his face would look pained. And he would ask C.C. repeatedly to say something. Listening to C.C.'s voice probably distracted him from the "clutter" that swirled around him.

Eventually they would finish their duties and return to the cabin. Then, Mao would suddenly lighten up. He talked more and would want to play with C.C. He would stay up late and ask C.C. to tell him fairy tales.

Then one day, something happened.

"Mao, what is that? Where did you find it?"

C.C. was talking about the watch that Mao was wearing as he poured out the fertilizer in the fields. A watch cannot be found in the mountains, and C.C. didn't remember buying it for him, either. However, as she looked at it carefully, the watch was broken. The hands weren't moving at all.

"When we went to the town last time." Mao answered with a smile.

"The town?"

"Yeah, I found it in the river on the way back. It was on the banks."

"I see."

It concerned C.C. a bit, but she didn't ask about it any further. Mao was a child, so she figured it wasn't surprising that he liked to collect shiny objects.

Two days later, C.C. took Mao to town again.

She loaded a cart with wild vegetables and other items and they headed to the market. The man who always sold her salt wasn't there.

C.C. went to a different store and the owner there grimaced when C.C. asked about him.

"Oh, that man," the man whispered. "He died. Just the other day."

"What?"

"You really didn't know? Well, I don't know the details but I hear it was a murder-suicide. Something about not being able to pay off his loans." Even though the man claimed he didn't know the details, he seemed to have a lot of information.

"I knew that he was working to pay off debts, but..."

"Oh, so you do know. Yeah, I heard about it from the old man himself. He seemed pretty lighthearted about it when he told me."

"..."

C.C. had a bad feeling. It wasn't logical, but that's what she felt. That was why she asked the man. "You said murder-suicide. What kind?"

The owner of the store grimaced even further. He probably wondered why she was asking about uncomfortable things. But he answered anyway.

"The wife was found in the house. I think she was stabbed. probably by the old man."

"And the old man?"

"He was found in the river."

C.C. gasped and turned around. The boy was standing behind

her, quiet and grumpy as he always looked when he was in town. And on his wrist was that broken watch he claimed to have found in the river. But as she looked closer at the watch, she thought she remembered it now. Yes, on the wrist of the man who used to call out to people at his store.

"Mao..."

But C.C. stopped herself. Perhaps it wasn't that much of a big deal. A man died and was found in the river. The watch he was wearing broke and fell off, and a boy found it. It's true that the boy took someone else's belongings, but in the end, he was a kid. Besides, he didn't take it from the man's wrist. It was on the riverbank. That is, if she believed what the boy told her.

"..."

"Hey. Let's stop the depressing talk and discuss business. How much do you need today?"

Even though C.C. was listening to the owner's voice, she kept looking at Mao's face.

And then...

That was the first incident.

Later, Mao wiped out an entire town.



"I'm sorry for this, C.C."

"Not at all. You're really light."

Nunnally was being carried by C.C. Nunnally looked like she felt bad about it, but was also surprised.

"C.C., you're pretty strong even though you're thin."

"My body is made pretty extraordinarily."

"Did you work out before?"

"I don't know. When I realized it, I was like this."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Actually, you're too light. I understand about your body but you need to eat more." As she said this, C.C. put

Nunnally on the bed and laid her face down. She stretched the girl's legs out.

"Like this?"

"Yes. Thank you and I'm really sorry about this."

Nunnally apologized again and blushed. She then folded her arms above her head, and stretched. She then reached out farther, as if she were pushing the pillows at the head of the bed. She stayed in that position for a while, breathing in and out many times, then relaxing. She repeated this many times.

Then, she finished and got up using only her arms. She turned and faced C.C., who was watching. Of course, Nunnally couldn't see, but she sensed that C.C. was watching her and blushed even more.

"I'm sorry to have to do this in front of a guest."

"Don't worry about it. It's necessary, right?"

"Yes. My doctor told me to do this everyday."

What Nunnally just did was stretching. Nunnally spent most of her time in the wheelchair. It wasn't a healthy thing for a 14-year-old to do. And sitting in the wheelchair made her body logy, so it was necessary to stretch out the muscles in the body several times a day.

Nunnally, now sitting up, moved to the edge of the bed and leaned forward. She started to massage her immobile legs.

"You're increasing circulation?"

Nunnally nodded. Her hands kept moving.

"Yes. It's also part of my physical therapy. I'm sorry for all of this..."

"Stop apologizing, Nunnally. Actually, do you want me to do it? Usually you have your maid do it, right?"

"No! There is no way I can make you do this."

"But we're both girls."

"It's not that..."

I guess she's right, C.C. thought, and continued to watch as Nunnally massaged her legs.

After Nunnally was done, she sighed in relief and relaxed.

"Are you done?"

"Yes."

"Okay, here we go." C.C. lifted Nunnally in her arms again. She carried her to the wheelchair and helped her get seated in it. Nunnally sighed deeply once more and bowed her head.

"Thank you so much C.C."

"No problem."

Actually, C.C. was enjoying all of this.

Ever since she entered her contract with Lelouch, C.C. had been spending her time being inactive. She was fine with that even though she might complain about it at times, but being useful to someone felt pretty good too. It may have been something small but being thanked by this girl made her feel calm.

"Do you think I can take over the duties of your maid until she returns?" C.C. asked, and Nunnally had a surprised look on her face for a second. Then she smiled.

"Definitely. Actually, you seem to really be comfortable with it. You show no hesitation."

"Well, that gives me confidence," C.C. laughed.

They could hear the birds chirping on the other side of the open window. The afternoon sun coming in made the white China aster on the table glow even more. It was early autumn. The noisy cicadas that could be heard during the summer were scarce now.

Nunnally fixed her hair that had become disheveled from stretching and massaging. She then remembered something. "By the way, where is Beth?"

"Oh, her?" C.C. answered. She turned around. Under the desk next to the window there was a small space. In that space was a white, furry clump.

"She's sleeping under your desk. Sleeping soundly, actually."

"Really? In that tiny space?"

"I think she likes it. Maybe it reminds her of her doghouse."

"I see." Nunnally said to herself quietly, and then she grew thoughtful.

"What's wrong?" C.C. asked, but Nunnally was still deep in thought. Then suddenly, she lifted her head up.

She was wearing a bright smile.

"C.C.?"

"Yes?"

"If you'd like, would you care to join me?"

"Where?"

The greenhouse was located near the clubhouse balcony.

The building was lined with glass and it looked like a showroom of some sort. The weather vane on the roof was twirling around in the wind.

"I see." C.C. raised a voice of admiration as she stepped inside with Nunnally. It was spacious inside with various flowers of many shapes and sizes. There were amaryllis, bellflowers, violets, and nerine. They were all beautiful but there was one that stood out above the rest.

Yellow petals that glowed. A shape like the rising sun. Its name came from that too. The sunflower.

Nunnally was holding a watering pot in her hand as she said happily, "This greenhouse is a place the Student Council members and I take care of. Some of the flowers are used in school events too."

"I can see that. They have so many varieties of flowers here." Caring for them must be a lot of work, but C.C. figured that aggressive Student Council President was probably in charge of it.

She was standing in front of the blooming sunflower when Nunnally moved her wheelchair closer.

"A sunflower, right?"

"You can tell?"

"Yes, by the scent." Nunnally nodded, and then reached out toward the sunflower. "This is only my opinion..."

"Hm?"

"...but my image of you is this flower."

"The sunflower?" C.C. was surprised. She thought it was exactly the opposite of how she was like. The sun? At bright noon? She was more like the moon and night. A dire black lily was more like her. Or perhaps because Nunnally couldn't see, this was how she imagined her to be.

Oh, but...

"The floral language might describe parts of me."

Some of the floral language of the sunflower was "false wealth" and "fake coins." False, fake...never truer words. The power of Geass seems to be useful at first, but actually it is pretty troublesome. And she was the witch that enabled that power. It looked like a good fortune charm, but was actually a demon's curse...

"But the sunflower also stands for 'adoration' and 'respect,' too." Nunnally shook her head and pointed out.

"You know your floral languages, Nunnally."

"You do too."

"I just had the opportunity to learn many things, that's all." C.C. then smiled. "Did you look them up yourself?"

"That too, but Sayoko is very familiar with it. And for some reason, so is Rivalz."

"...The maid I can understand, but that guy as well?" *I guess he has other hobbies outside of tweaking motorcycles*, C.C. thought. Although it was biased to be surprised about men knowing about flowers.

C.C. looked at the sunflower that Nunnally was touching, and asked, "By the way, Nunnally,"

"Yes?"

"How about the others? If you were to choose the flowers that represented them, what would you choose? For instance... Lelouch."

"My brother?"

Nunnally hesitated. And then she cocked her head.

"Let me see," she mumbled and moved her wheelchair away from the sunflower.

"I know I favor him because he is my brother, but how about this one?"

Nunnally had wheeled herself next to a pink, bright flower. The petals folded over and looked like a beautifully decorated brooch. It was the garden dahlia. A long time ago, there was a man who rose to the position of emperor after being a commoner. His wife had preferred the garden dahlia.

"Its floral language is 'splendid and elegant.' I see."

"There is also 'unsteadiness.'"

"And I guess that fits him, too."

"That's true. My brother is usually poised, but sometimes when something unexpected happens, he gets very agitated." Nunnally said it so matter-of-factly that C.C. laughed.

"True. How about other people?"

"Suzaku would be Scotch Broom."

"Humility and purity."

"Milly would be sea lavender."

"Surprise and playing tricks."

"Kallen would be peony."

"Shy and modest."

"Shirley would be tulip."

"Compassion and declaration of love."

"Let's see, who else is there?" Nunnally cocked her head thoughtfully. C.C. walked past her and stood in front of a bed of flowers.

"I think this would be you."

"Huh?"

Nunnally came closer. It was not a flower that stood out. There were many small flowers that bloomed everywhere on long stems. It wasn't a flower that would be the center of a bouquet.

but rather would support the main flowers from the side. It wasn't self-assertive, but its humble and adorable looks were liked by everyone.

Nunnally smelled the flowers and reached out to touch them.

"*Oncidium*?"

"The floral language is 'pretty, neat, and please stay as a bud.'"

"In Japan it is compared to cute sparrows."

Nunnally blushed lightly.

"Thank you, C.C. I brought you here to thank you for taking care of me today, but it seems that you've given me a gift again."

"No, I really enjoyed this greenhouse. It doesn't hurt to do something like this once in a while."

C.C. laughed and looked around the whole greenhouse. It was indeed an incredible one. She hadn't enjoyed flowers like this for a very long time. Especially in the past few months, she'd been staying indoors because that idiot would nag her about her going outside being dangerous, an inconvenience to him, and in the way.

Nunnally moved her wheelchair away from C.C. and started watering the flowers. She was humming to herself and seemed to enjoy it. She looked like she was doing this more for fun than as part of her work for the Student Council. Even though Nunnally couldn't see, she could enjoy the scent of the flowers. She could also touch to feel the shape of the flowers. And finally, the floral languages. The visual is not the only appeal that flowers have.

After watching Nunnally water the flowers, C.C. glanced over the greenhouse again. There was a pile of bricks next to the wall, probably for building a new flowerbed. She sat on that and rested her chin on her hands.

By chance, her eyes fixed on one point. It was at the edge of a flowerbed. Among the elegant flowers, the small white flower didn't stand out. Actually, the flower was known more for its leaves than for being a flower.

A clover.

Floral language, eh?

In that case, Mao would've been the clover.

The floral language of the clover was "promise" and "I want you to remember me."

And if it was a four-leaf clover, there were further meanings.

"Good luck," and...

Become mine.

For example, let's say there is a man who has a secret he doesn't want anyone to know about. If you can find out the details of that secret, it would be easy to control that man in any way you want.

Let's say there is a man who hates someone so much that he wants to kill that person. If you can find out the details of that hate, only a few words can make that man commit a murder.

Let's say there is a man who has an abnormal sexual propensity. If you can find out the details of that, it would be possible to manipulate a situation just a bit to make that man act upon his fantasies.

That was what Mao did.

"That man deserved to die," Mao proclaimed, as he smiled.

"He had a wife, but he would look at you and think nasty thoughts. Looking at my C.C."

That is why you killed him? No, you drove him to death?

"Yeah! But it wasn't him who committed suicide. That man wasn't that repentant. The wife killed herself. After she killed the man. But it's not like I made her do it. She always wanted to. Something about him having life insurance. I guess she wanted money."

So Mao used that fact.

"But that wife was bad too. To do that to someone she loves. That's why I made her commit suicide. She killed her husband but her mind was all messed up. So I just poked at that, and she easily fell apart."

But it didn't end there.

"You might not know this C.C., but everyone in that whole town is nasty. They put on the front of being hard workers, but inside they're all tainted."

But that is something that cannot be helped. There is no person in the world who is perfect and faultless. There is no person who is pure, stark white. Even if there were such a person, that person would probably be an existence you couldn't call human. Every human being has a personal dark side they cannot show to others.

However, that was something Mao could not accept. He couldn't acknowledge it. Perhaps it came from his juvenile innocence. However, the real reason Mao acted the way he did was explained next.

"If you go to a town like that, you'll get tainted. My clean C.C... I don't want that to happen."

But it wasn't true. The only reason C.C. seemed clean to Mao was because he couldn't read her mind.

"I've been thinking about this for a long time C.C. Thinking what I can do to keep you clean. Then I figured it out. If there is something that might dirty you, I just need to get rid of it!"

Incidents began to occur one after another in the town.

Arson, murder, burglary. Many of these incidents happened because the darkness inside the human's mind came outside. But if someone hadn't triggered them, the incidents wouldn't have happened.

"At first I thought it would be too much trouble. Just because I could read people's minds, it's pretty hard to manipulate them. But after a while it became easy. It's funny. Everyone's heart turned uglier as soon as an incident happened near them. They started accusing their neighbors, or started thinking maybe they could commit a crime because someone else did too."

Paranoia whirled through the entire town. There was suspiciousness and the absence of moral values.

"Yeah, but I didn't need to kill everyone or have them commit suicide. I was fine as long as that town was clean. Besides, when something bad happens, there are many people who want to flee. Hee hee, there were some people who thought it was a curse or the wrath of God."

And that is how the town slowly died. There were those who died because of the incidents Mao started, and those who left because they were scared or sick of the events. When there are no people, the town can't function as a society. The remaining people would give up on a dying town and leave.

"But there were still people who stayed stubbornly. So that's why..."

In the end, he "got rid of them" all at once. C.C. didn't know where he got it, but he took a poisonous organophosphorus agent and mixed it in the water storage tank.

"And the town became clean."

Mao was smiling with an angelic expression. An expression that showed no repentance. An expression of one who kept seeing the ugliness of the human heart, and because of it disdained the world the humans lived in.

"Now we're finally alone, C.C. There is nothing dirty anymore. The town is gone, so you won't be tainted anymore."

C.C. realized at that moment that it was hopeless.

C.C. didn't judge Mao about the killing. In the end, she was a witch. There was no point in discussing ethics or good and evil. Besides, if killing was absolutely wrong, then her current partner Lelouch was much worse. How many people did Lelouch kill at Narita? There were at least over five thousand killed, just counting the soldiers. Even more with the civilians.

But still, C.C. approved of Lelouch as a partner. She couldn't approve of Mao because of one thing.

"I only need you, C.C. If you stay clean and never leave my side, that's all I need."

Mao's world was completely shut off.

He ran away to the existence called C.C. and didn't try to engage with the world around him. He had no will to do anything with the world. In that sense, he was completely different from Lelouch. At least Lelouch didn't shut out the world. In fact, he was trying to change the world around him, for his sister Nunnally. He would never run away to a witch named C.C. and hide.

A person who runs away cannot fulfill the contract.

Actually, it wasn't even clear if Mao still had the consciousness to fulfill the contract. Mao was focused on himself and he was trying to fit the existence of C.C. in there, by force. Like an innocent, foolish child. His world consisted of only the two, and there was no space for outside elements to get in. That wouldn't do. That would not grant C.C.'s wish. Ever. Why did this boy obtain the ability to read others' minds? If it was a different power, perhaps he could've fulfilled the contract. He had that much potential.

But now was not the time to rant.

If he couldn't grant her wish, if he could not fulfill the contract, then she only had one option...to discard the person. That was what it meant to be C.C. That was the reason for her existence.

But...

"You're leaving me, C.C.?"

C.C. hesitated when the boy asked with innocent eyes. She couldn't do it.

I need to ease him.

A partner who lost his qualifications needed to be ousted from the stage.

She couldn't do it. On top of all that...

"Okay! Then I'll wait. It's a promise, C.C. If you obtain what you want, you'll come back here. It's a promise!"

A promise that would never be kept.

Just as Mao couldn't fulfill the contract, C.C. couldn't keep the promise. But if one asked which was worse, it was no doubt C.C.'s. Because she knew when she made that promise, she wouldn't keep it.

A witch.

C.C. imposes one thing upon herself.

That is, when her partner hates her from the bottom of his heart, it was to accept that hate with her body. She had done much to deserve it, and has done much thus far. There was no room for excuses. Her body couldn't be destroyed by injuries but she could feel the pain. The pain of death. If the partner wished for that, it was her pride as a cold and villainous witch.

She'd been burned with fire before.

She'd been pierced by countless spears before.

All of the bones in her body had been crushed.

She'd been hugged by a doll made of blades.

She'd been trapped in dark, filthy water.

All of her skin had been peeled off.

It was not atonement. She cannot atone. Then, she would be the witch that the people hated. The people who had the potential to be king, but could not become a true king. If they were to hold feelings of resentment as humans, then she should bear the brunt of that.

That was why she thought that it would be the same with Mao. She betrayed Mao. She disposed of him like an old rag, the boy who relied on her, saying she was all he needed. Then, the hate that arose from that should be directed toward her. Since she was the only existence, she was the world to Mao, he would detest her from the bottom of his heart. That is what she thought.

However...

It didn't turn out that way.

It happened exactly one week ago.



"You think you've beaten me, Lelouch?"

Of course, C.C. didn't know how the situation had come to be.

Regarding it, C.C. was not the central player. She didn't ask Lelouch about the details afterward either. There was no point in it.

However, C.C. fully understood the reason why it happened and she could imagine what made him act like that.

It took place in the small chapel inside the school.

Usually, it was a place where one prays in silence. But now, the hateful scream of Mao can be heard. It wasn't the voice of the young boy C.C. knew. It was the same Mao whom she'd deserted in the past. It was the same Mao who'd been waiting for C.C. to come back. But he couldn't continue to wait, and after eleven years, he came after her.

But what Mao saw was a C.C. who wasn't his anymore.

Lelouch vi Britannia.

It was a new Geass user who C.C.—who left Mao—made a contract with.

That was why Mao raged against Lelouch and not C.C. He regarded Lelouch with jealousy. As the enemy who stole the only world he needed.

"Stop it."

The voice belonged to Lelouch's friend, Suzaku Kururugi. C.C. didn't know why he was there. But to the Lelouch who didn't wear the mask of Zero, he was the friend Lelouch trusted more than anyone. Lelouch had probably asked for his help as the trump card to corner Mao. Of course, he probably kept the Geass a secret.

"I'm going to arrest you."

Suzaku Kururugi was holding Mao down. Mao didn't have any abilities other than the Geass. He didn't have amazing physical abilities or any skill with weapons either. Against a genuine soldier, he was like a powerless baby. However, that was only if it was a matchup of just brute strength.

Mao still had a way to corner Suzaku Kururugi.

"Let go of me, father killer!"

"!!"

He had the Geass to reveal what others were hiding inside. Mao used that to corner others. He would mock and manipulate them.

He tried to do the same with Suzaku Kururugi, without knowing it would be the trigger to end his future. Even though he could read minds, Mao still could not know the future.

"You murdered your own father seven years ago."

"Uh...uh..."

"You thought killing him would stop him from resisting Britannia? Hah! A foolish thought. You're just a murderer."

"No! I was...I was..."

"Aren't you glad no one found out? All thanks to the adults who lied for you."

"Uhn..."

Lelouch also spoke, shocked at the revelation. "So, the story about how the prime minister committed suicide as a protest to the military..."

"It was a lie. All of it."

"I...had no choice! If I didn't do it, Japan would've..."

"That's how you justify it? Is it, Mr. Death Wish?"

"!?"

"You want to save people? It's your own soul that you want to save. Heh heh, you want to sacrifice your life, don't you? That's why you keep risking yourself!!"

"!!!"

Suzaku Kururugi's scream echoed inside the chapel.

"Your good intentions are just for your own self-satisfaction! You're just a naïve boy who wants to be punished!"

"Mao!!"

Lelouch was outraged. Mao did something he never should've done. Suzaku Kururugi was the next most important person in his life, after Nunnally. He would never forgive Mao for trying to hurt him.

"Never speak again!!!"

In that moment, Mao lost. Lelouch's final words were Geass. It was an absolute order. Mao would never speak again. Even if he knew the deepest secrets of others, he could no longer toy with them and delude others to his advantage.

There was a stomping of feet, like someone was running.

"Hold it!"

"..."

Mao ran away and dashed out of the chapel.

C.C. was waiting outside, quietly.

Even in this situation, once Mao saw C.C., he smiled happily. There was no hatred, resentment, sadness or anger in his eyes.

Memories of the past flashed in C.C.'s mind.

"C.C..."

The child who slept in her arms at ease.

"...you're warm."

C.C. didn't shake off the memories. Nor did she forget them. They were etched in her brain.

She took out the gun she had in her pocket.

Until the moment she pulled the trigger, until the life faded away from his eyes, Mao was smiling.



"Sorry, Nunnally! I ran late..."

As soon as Lelouch dashed into Nunnally's room, he stopped dead in his tracks. The bag he was holding dropped to the floor with a thud.

"Welcome home, Lelouch."

Nunnally smiled. Next to her, C.C. sent a silent signal to Lelouch with her eyes that everything was fine.

Lelouch narrowed his eyes slightly. And then, C.C. said: "You broke your promise, Lelouch. You said that you'd be home earlier, so I was waiting for you. And you left Nunnally all alone."

"Oh, that's right. I'm sorry, Nunnally."

"I'm okay. But make sure you apologize to C.C."

"Indeed." C.C. agreed with Nunnally's words.

Lelouch lowered his brows. C.C. could tell he was extremely upset. Lelouch didn't like it when C.C. made contact with Nunnally. If Nunnally wasn't here, he probably would've yelled his head off at C.C.

That was when the other visitor in the room approached Lelouch from the side.

"Woof!"

"Huh?"

Lelouch turned around with an inquiring look. It was the white dog, energetic as ever, even though it had been fast asleep a moment ago. Perhaps it was happy that there were more people, for it was wagging its tail.

But Lelouch's response was different from what C.C. and Nunnally thought it would be.

"Oh, Sebastian. You were here all along?"

"Sebastian?" C.C. and Nunnally both asked at the same time.

"Yeah," Lelouch nodded. "It's Ms. President's dog."

"Milly's?"

"She was looking all over school for him. She left him to play on the school grounds since it was a day off and he disappeared."

After answering Nunnally, Lelouch turned to the dog.

"Sebastian."

"Woof!"

"See? He answers to his name."

C.C. looked at Nunnally. Nunnally probably wanted to say the same thing and she looked towards C.C.

And they started laughing.

"What? What is it?"

Lelouch didn't know what was going on.

The two continued to laugh.

"You better not have said anything to Nunnally."

"Don't worry. Besides, do I look like I would make such a mistake?"

"Is it not a mistake that she found you when you were wandering about because you were hungry?"

"I see. I guess that's one way to look at it." C.C. nodded, impressed.

Lelouch grumpily snorted. But he didn't scold C.C. any further, and took out casual clothes from his closet and started to change.

The sun was about to hide behind the mountains outside the window. The sad sun in the west was giving off its last light in Lelouch's room.

"And how was the meeting? The Kyoto Group didn't deceive you with fair words, did they?"

"Do I look like I would make such a mistake?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Men like you think you may be using someone, but actually you are the one who is being used. I've seen many cases like that." C.C. said with nonchalance.

Once Lelouch heard that, he stopped his hands that were unbuttoning his shirt and cocked his head to one side. He looked at C.C., who was sitting on the bed.

"You seem to be your usual self again."

"Do you think so?"

"Yeah, unfortunately."

And then Lelouch resumed unbuttoning his shirt. He was mumbling to himself. "And I thought it was peaceful the past few days..."

C.C. was watching him and took a nearby pillow in her hand. As soon as Lelouch was finished changing, she threw the pillow at his face.

"Ack! What are you doing!?"

"You should be thankful that it's not pizza. Who are you calling a hellcat?"

"Huh?"

Lelouch didn't understand. C.C. ignored him and got off the bed.

"Anyway, I should be going now. You don't have to see me out Lelouch."

"Going? You mean..."

"I came over because I needed something from you. Well, if you don't mind, I can tell Nunnally that starting today I'll be living with you two."

"Urgh..."

"That's what I mean."

The story she started needed to be finished. Of course, after C.C. said goodbye to Nunnally and left the house, she would return to this room.

C.C. took the bouquet of flowers that were on the table. They were clovers. Nunnally had given them to her, saying that it was okay because they didn't belong to the Student Council.

But are you sure you want those? If you like, you could take these salvias that I've been growing... Nunnally had suggested other flowers, but C.C. wanted the clovers.

Flowers in hand, she walked past Lelouch and toward the door.

Then, she remembered something and stopped. She turned around.

"Lelouch."

"What?"

"I know it's late in the game to say this, but..."

C.C. focused on Lelouch with quiet eyes.

"I'm going to affirm this. I am going to take advantage of you until the end."

Lelouch's brow twitched. His inquiring eyes looked at C.C., who was standing in front of the door. His handsome face showed a cynical smile. "Hmph. That is mutual, isn't it?"

"No. You don't fully understand that point. The quality of me taking advantage of you is completely different from the quality

of you taking advantage of me. I will use up every inch of your existence. Furthermore..."

"..."

"Even after all this, if my wish is not granted, then I will become a true witch to you."

A cold breeze came in through the open window. It made their hair flutter in the wind.

"I want to say this is your chance if you want to turn back, but the truth is, there is no road for you to run to. From the moment you took my hand... That is why I want to tell you now. That you made a contract with the devil."

The clovers' white flowers were moving at C.C.'s chest.

Eventually the wind died down and all was still.

C.C. and Lelouch regarded each other. Lelouch leveled an evaluating stare at C.C.

And then, Lelouch turned his head to the side. "It really is a late confession." He gave a sideward look to C.C. "I don't know what happened, but if you're going to say that much, then I'll say this too. C.C., you also made a contract with the devil. However..."

"..."

"I'm going to grant my wish. But at the same time I'll also grant your wish. I said so back then. That this is a contract from me to you."

"..."

"I don't care if you believe me or not. But C.C., you're forgetting something important. Devils are essentially greedy. How could we not grant our wishes when there are two of them? There is no way we wouldn't. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to call ourselves devils. Am I not right?"

Then, Lelouch smiled chillingly.

C.C. smiled too.

"That's true."

"If you understand, then stop discussing worthless things."

"Fine."

After nodding, C.C. turned on her heel and left.

I heard it's a legend from northern Japan.

That was what Nunnally said in the greenhouse.

Clovers are flowers that express 'lovers.'

Really?

Yes. Sayoko told me. However, it's a sad story.

How so?

Umm... I think there were lovers named Aki and Iroha. But Aki gets caught up in a storm on his way to visit Iroha, and drowns in a lake.

Only Aki's corpse reaches Iroha. So Iroha, in grief, ties herself with chains to Aki's dead body and jumps into the lake along with the clovers that they liked. Then, the next morning, the shores around the lake were filled with clovers.

A tragic love story, eh? For a plant that is a symbol of good luck, it's a pretty ominous flower.

That's true. But Sayoko said that it's an anecdote expressing how deep love can be. That's why the clover is a flower for someone you care the most about.

I see.

Then, this flower didn't suit her at all, C.C. thought. Someone to care about... C.C. had no such person. She wouldn't create someone like that. She wouldn't include emotions in a contract. There was no need to. That was why she shot Mao in the end. She had been able to pull the trigger.

The night advanced.

C.C. climbed on top of the roof of the clubhouse and looked at the sky above her. The night sky was filled with stars.

In her hand were the clover flowers.

The many years she spent with her co-conspirators... There were men and women. There were kind people and there were sad

people. Mao and Lelouch were just few of the many. Mao lost his qualification and Lelouch hadn't lost his yet. That's all there was to it. That was enough.

But, still.

Lelouch.

I wonder if you can become "special" to me.

Can you stop me, the witch, the one who has trampled down all co-conspirators before?

Hopefully—

I would like you to.

For the boy who was trembling at the edge of town, and for him who was sleeping in my arms soundly, and for him who disappeared without hating me...even at the end.

"What an arbitrary woman," Lelouch would probably say in disgust.

That is right. I am C.C.

I am not a fake, but a true witch.

I will stay by your side with tenacity like the devil. I will continue to haunt you.

Until you break.

C.C. closed her eyes.

The clover petals hovered, then disappeared into the night.

CODE GEASS
コードギアス
反逆のルージュ
Lelouch
of the Rebellion

Interval

Perhaps he should have stopped him sooner.

"Let go of me, father killer!"

Maybe it would've been better, or maybe it wouldn't have been.

Suzaku was his friend. When they were sent to this country, formerly known as Japan, he was the first friend he made. The only person other than Nunnally whom he considered human.

However...

"You murdered your own father seven years ago."

"Aren't you glad no one found out? All thanks to the adults who lied for you."

"You want to save people? It's your own soul that you want to save. Heh heh, you want to sacrifice your life, don't you? That's why you keep risking yourself!!"

There was a feeling of strangeness. The boy Lelouch reunited with was so different from before. But as they spent their days together at the academy, the strange feeling went away. His roots were the same—that was what Lelouch came to realize. It was true that when he was a young boy Suzaku was more violent and self-centered, but he had a strong feeling of justice and the spirit to help those weaker than him. He was not a coldhearted boy. Besides, if that were the case, they wouldn't have become friends.

"Your good intentions are just for your own self-satisfaction!"

You're just a naïve boy who wants to be punished!"

A scream.

With it, Suzaku slumped to the floor. His inner feelings, his past, were exposed by the power of Geass.

It was only then that Lelouch came to.

He couldn't hear any more. He couldn't let him speak any further.

Or else...or else, Suzaku would never return to him!

"Mao!! Never speak again!!!"

But still, Lelouch wonders.

Was he really supposed to stop him? Was it the right choice to shut Mao up?

Was it okay not to listen further?

Would not listening to the rest of it cause something irreversible later?

The morning sun.

Lelouch saw the back of the person on the road leading to the school entrance and, for a second, he hesitated to say hello.

Instead, the person turned around.

"Oh, Lelouch. Good morning."

Suzaku was smiling. Of course, now that they were facing each other, Lelouch didn't show the emotions that were churning inside of him.

"Good morning, Suzaku. You're early."

"That's my line. You better come to school more regularly, Lelouch."

"Now that is my line."

"Mine is work."

Suzaku smiled wryly. Lelouch also smiled.

However...

Was this smile really from the heart?

CODE GEASS
コードギアス
反逆のルージュ
Lelouch
of the Rebellion

Stage-2:3-KNIGHT

[The Sword of Mercy]

Also known as Edward the Confessor's sword. It was used in England during the Middle Ages for the coronation of the king and queen. The tip of the sword is squared, as a testament to mercy. The blade remains to represent the attitude of the king as being both a good warrior and scholar.

September 2017, Area 11

1

I had a dream.

It was a dream of when I was really young. The world was small and calm, and sadness and agony were surrounded by scenery that was filled with the smell of sunshine. It was a time when all I needed to do was smile at the warm hands that were reaching out to me.

"Nellie."

I couldn't say her full name so that was what I called her. That's what I've been told, at least. I don't really remember.

But I do remember her back. I kept chasing my sister's back in the villa filled with greenery. We were ten years apart. I could never catch up. Even so, when I stepped on the edge of my skirt and fell, she would come and pick me up.

"I'll protect you forever, Euphy."

The arms that held me tight. That was my world. I didn't need anything else.

That is why I think sometimes...

Since when did I become so greedy?

I used to be happy just being protected. When did that become not enough for me?

She twisted the faucet with sleepy eyes. Then, for some reason, hot water came out.

"Eek!"

With a small shriek, Euphemia—Area 11 Sub-Viceroy Euphemia li Britannia—jumped out of the shower. She was in a spacious bathroom. Where she jumped to was right in front of a mirror, and she came face to face with her naked self. Urgh...her hair looked horrible. She usually tied it and covered it up. She was pretty embarrassed about her unruly hair when she was young, perhaps because many of her half-sisters and brothers had beautiful, straight hair. She often wondered why she couldn't have hair like them.

I like your hair because it's soft and curly.

She remembered her sister's words, probably because of the dream she was having right before she woke up. Euphemia smiled. She adjusted the temperature on the touch panel and got back in the shower again.

The hot water splashed on her face. Her mind began to clear and her cheeks started to turn pink.

By then, Euphemia wasn't smiling anymore. She moved under the shower and opened her eyes, taking her wet hair in her hands. If she didn't tie it up, it went down to her hips. Euphemia was amazed at how long it had grown. When she was a child she wanted to cut it because she didn't like it, and caused trouble to her mother and sister. But now it was at this length. And that meant that she wasn't the child who was protected by her mother and sister anymore.

Yes.

She should have understood that.

That she left the small world a long time ago.

But Euphemia thought that only recently had she finally realized that.

"How about appointing a knight?"

"A knight?"

Euphemia repeated the words of her sister's knight Guilford.

"Yes," Guilford nodded. "If we appoint a knight to protect you, we can organize a Royal Guard unit around him or her. As a member of the royal court, Sub-Viceroy Euphemia, you already have the entitlement."

Euphemia was surprised at this unexpected topic when her sister mumbled next to her.

"Hm...I see."

"Cornelia..."

Euphemia turned to her sister. There, she saw the profile of her sister's thoughtful face. Darlton was off to the side, standing silently.

Cornelia noticed Euphemia's gaze and turned to face her. Her beautiful face smiled gently.

"It is something necessary, Euphy."

"But..."

"Of course, I'm not going to force the issue. It is our entitlement as members of the royal court to choose a knight. Whether you decide to take advantage of the entitlement is up to you. However..."

"..."

"Personally, I would be relieved if there were someone who had the same wishes as me by your side. Just remember that."

"..."

The same wishes as Cornelia...

Euphemia turned the faucet off and stepped out of the shower.

She put a towel to her wet hair as soon as she stepped out. If she were in the homeland, in her mother's villa, a maid-in-waiting would rush to aid her. In fact, one would've been in the bathroom with her. It was always a maid who washed and dried her off. But

Euphemia never found that embarrassing. In this regard, Euphemia was a genuine princess. The environment she grew up in was clearly different from that of a person on the street.

However, there were no maids-in-waiting for Euphemia here in Area 11 to take care of her. Cornelia tried to assign her some, but Euphemia refused.

Why?

Because she hadn't done anything yet.

It was fine as a child to have had a blessed environment and to be protected. She never questioned it then. But as the years passed, Euphemia began wondering why she was protected so much. Why did so many people give so much to her?

She thought it was unjust. She hadn't done anything. She hadn't given anything. Yet, she received. She was protected.

Why was this allowed?

The answer was right by her side.

Her sister, Cornelia. She was someone like her—someone protected and someone who had received. But her sister also protected and gave to the people who protected her. Even though she was the second princess of Britannia, she went to the battlefield and piloted the Knightmare to protect many.

Euphemia realized then that if she were to be protected, she needed to protect in return. She needed to give in return. She was in a privileged position, but to accept that meant to bear the burden of responsibilities that came with it. She was someone who could wear beautiful clothes, eat delicious food, and be taken care of by others. That inequality was only allowed if that person could give as much.

That was why Euphemia thought that she hadn't done anything yet. She didn't have the right to receive. She came to Area 11 to help her sister. She wanted to protect Cornelia just as Cornelia had done for her; she wanted to give to the people as much as they gave to her. That was why she came here. But she still hadn't reached the ideal she pictured. It was still far away. She wasn't even sure what she needed to do.

Euphemia dried her wet hair and body carefully and left the bathroom. She put on a robe and sat down in front of the mirror in her room. Her hair was down. She had grown it long for her sister who said she liked it. Because Cornelia had given her so much, she wanted to thank her for it in the ways she could.

"A knight..."

That meant to choose someone to replace her sister, who had protected her until now.

To be protected meant at the same time to protect. She wasn't a child anymore in her sister's arms in the beautiful garden. She couldn't take advantage of her position as someone who only received. If someone was giving her something, she needed to give in return.

Then what kind of a person would her knight be?



It was towards the end of September, and the season was turning to autumn.

Lelouch was working on restructuring the Black Knights. Ever since the Narita Battle in June, the Black Knights had absorbed the remaining members of the decimated Japan Liberation Front and had grown as an organization. It also helped that they had formed an alliance with the Kyoto Group, or NAC. But as the organization grew larger, a new hierarchical structure became necessary. Sheep without a shepherd would not be able to carry out Lelouch's will. The situation had changed from when they were a resistance group rebelling against Britannia in the corner of the ghetto.

During this restructuring, Lelouch selected a certain person to join the group. His name was Diethard Ried, and he had been providing Britannian Forces information to the Black Knights since the Narita Battle. He'd originally worked for the national TV network, and was obviously a Britannian. But if he was a republican who opposed Britannia's imperialism, his

being Britannian didn't necessarily rule him out. In this regard, it became a problem between the Black Knights' executive officers, and there were many who claimed that they couldn't trust him. It was understandable since a Britannian was trying to join an organization that was anti-government toward Britannia.

But in the end, Lelouch ignored those opinions. A useful person has value to utilize. If he were to betray the organization, all Lelouch needed to do was to make the first move to prevent it.

Besides, even though he didn't want to admit it, lack of staff was the source of his headache. In the Black Knights, perhaps because of their ideals and principles or because it was a new organization, the average age of the members was quite low. That was good because it brought energy to the organization; but on the other hand, there was no one who could bring together the growing organization. Ohgi, Zero's right-hand man, had a good personality and was reliable as well as trustworthy, but he wasn't the type to be called sharp. Kallen, Inoue, Yoshida, Minami, and Sugiyama; the older members were competent as pilots and operatives, but they were not fit to be commanders. Tamaki was out of the question. There was no one like Darlton or Guilford on the Britannian side. That was the background for hiring a proselyte like Diethard.

"I would at least want someone who can command on the battlefield in place of me," Lelouch said.

C.C. laughed at that.

"If there were that many people you could use, Japan would've been independent from Britannia a long time ago."

It was true.

"Or would you like me to help?"

"No, thank you. I wouldn't mind leaving negotiations to you, but a pawn that doesn't move the way you want it to on a battlefield has no worth."

But still, obtaining brilliant manpower was Lelouch's top priority. The fact that he obtained the support of the Kyoto Group

meant that he was able to get more funds and weapons. All he needed were the people. So far, structurally, the organization relied too much on its head, Zero, for planning missions and leading the group. If that remained the case, the organization would not grow. Even though he had a supernatural power called the Geass, there was a limit to what Lelouch alone could do.

It was during these days when Lelouch got a call from Ohgi, who was hiding out in the Shinjuku Ghetto.

He wanted to talk about Kallen and her Knightmare, the Guren Mk-II.

"She says that there's something not right ever since the Guren came back from having its broken right arm repaired."

Ohgi explained this to Lelouch, who wore Zero's mask, as they walked down the hallway of a hangar with rows of mass-produced Burais on both sides.

"She said that each individual movement doesn't fit in perfectly to where she aims for. Those were her exact words."

"Hm," Lelouch mumbled, and asked through his microphone inside the mask. "What is the operator Inoue's opinion?"

"She says that the margin of error could be ignored, but since she's not the one piloting it, she cannot deny the claims that Kallen makes, either."

"I see."

Eventually, at the end of the hallway, they reached an enormous open area. This hangar was originally used as an underground shelter during the war seven years ago. After the war, it was abandoned and the Black Knights converted it into a Knightmare hangar. Not only did it hold Knightmares, but there was also space to practice simple movements as well.

In this space stood a red Knightmare. Of course, it was the Guren Mk-II in question.

Next to the legs of the Guren was its pilot, Kallen Stadtfeld. She was wearing the uniform of the Black Knights. Once she noticed Ohgi and Lelouch, she ran toward them.

"I'm sorry, Zero, for having you come down for this."

"It's fine."

Lelouch shook his head and answered dryly. It wasn't that he hated Kallen. But he needed to switch his conscious mind when speaking to Kallen while leading the Black Knights. Kallen, of course, didn't know that Zero was Lelouch. He couldn't show even a hint of the attitude he showed when talking to her at school.

"Don't worry about it. I had a few questions I wanted to take care of too."

"I hope so..."

"And besides, I can't have our top pilot having difficulties. I need you and the Guren to be at the battlefield."

For a moment, Kallen's face lit up. She was probably happy over the words, "top pilot."

Of course, Lelouch simply continued on. "Can I borrow the activation key?"

"Huh?"

"You said there are movements that cannot be measured by the computer. Then I want to ride it and see for myself. Perhaps I can understand your senses a little."

"Oh, sure. Here you go. The energy filler is already in."

Kallen hurriedly gave her key to Lelouch. Lelouch accepted it, went up the ramp and got into the cockpit of the Guren.

The cockpit of this Guren was different from the Burais which were altered Glasgows of the Britannian Forces. The pilot sat in the cockpit as if riding a motorcycle and would lean forward to maneuver the control stick.

Lelouch inserted the key and the main monitor flashed. A series of figures came up. It was all in Japanese. It matched the Guren in the sense that it was purely made in Japan, but when Lelouch saw this, he was overcome with feelings of cynicism.

Such a pointless way to show love of your country.

The language used in Knightmares all over the world was Britannian. It shouldn't matter if this Knightmare was made in Japan or not. Lelouch wasn't saying it was wrong to set the language of the starting screen to Japanese, but this tendency to avoid Britannia in the smallest details was overkill. Of course, it hadn't been the idea of the developer, who wasn't Japanese. It probably wasn't the desire of the pilot, Kallen, either. Even though Kallen had Britannian blood in her, she had a strong sense of being Japanese. But she wouldn't focus on something only for show like that. So it must've been the wishes of the Kyoto Group who ordered the development of the Guren. Lelouch thought they would have more important things to do than emphasizing "Japan" here. Of course, for Lelouch what was important was the Guren Mk-II's specifications. It didn't matter what point the Kyoto Group imagined they were making with this.

Eventually the startup screen changed, and the main monitor displayed the area outside the Knightmare.

"I'm moving it. Watch out."

Lelouch used the exterior microphone to warn Ohgi and Kallen, who looked on. He then moved the control stick. The Guren started to step forward. At that moment, Lelouch made a face.

Of course, Lelouch didn't do anything out of the ordinary. He didn't make the Guren run or jump. He'd just made it step out. But still, for Lelouch, who had trusted Kallen with the Guren from the beginning, the sensation was spectacular.

Damn.

Lelouch mumbled inside his head as he continued to carefully grip the control stick.

I can't believe she can control this unruly horse.

The feedback that came from the control stick was completely different from other Knightmares. It responded to the slightest movement made by the pilot and moved accordingly. It was

understandable now why it moved the way it did on the battlefield. But on the other hand, this Nightmare chose its pilot. The response was so sensitive that controlling it was difficult. Even though the pilot might not intend it, the unit moved in excess. Even just moving one's eye line inside the cockpit relayed senses to the fingertips that gripped the control stick, and the path of the unit would change in response.

A seventh generation Nightmare is this different from the previous generations, eh?

Of course it probably made a difference that this Nightmare was custom-built, but Kallen's competence as a pilot was significantly above average.

There is no use...

Immediately, Lelouch made a decision after riding the Guren. Only Kallen could understand the senses on this Nightmare. That meant that there was a need for someone who could understand Kallen's senses and wishes to give precise maintenance to the unit. There were people who could maintain Nightmares in the Black Knights, but they couldn't possibly handle the state-of-the-art needs of a specifically made Guren.

So this is about manpower too.

Lelouch sighed. He made one more round around the space and returned the Guren to its original position. He disembarked the machine and walked toward where Ohgi and Kallen were waiting.

"How was it?" Kallen asked with a cautious tone.

Lelouch shrugged.

"Unfortunately, with my skills I cannot understand your senses."

Kallen looked despondent.

"But I'm not going to ignore your concerns. It just means that we need a specialist for the Guren. Someone who understands your opinions as a pilot and could deal with it."

"But is there such a person?"

"I have someone in mind. I hear she's hard to please, but I'll give it a try," Lelouch said, as he turned to look back at the Guren.

"There is an enemy we need to face that requires the Guren."

Kallen looked up at him with sharp eyes.

"That white Nightmare..."

Lelouch nodded.

"For now, the only one who can face that Nightmare is you."

"Yes, sir."

"Of course, to create a situation where it's going to be one-on-one would make me a bad leader, since this isn't a boxing match. But still, it is necessary to keep the Guren at its best condition."

Then, Lelouch turned to face Ohgi.

"Ohgi, contact Kyoto immediately."

"Got it."

"I don't want to ask for favors from those old men, but I guess I have no choice."

It was a hassle, but Lelouch had to take care of problems one by one.

Indeed, there were still many hurdles he had to clear. The road to cornering Britannia was long. But he couldn't hesitate at the height of the mountain. If there was a way, they needed to trek it step by step.

It wasn't just about the Black Knights.

It was also about Suzaku.

2

The audience in the music hall was moved by the exquisite chords.

As might be expected of the National Symphony Orchestra, visiting from mainland Britannia, it was a grand performance. The first violins playing the melody, the horns and cellos supporting the violins, the oboes expressively playing the solo parts, and the

trumpets sounding out the orotund fanfare were nothing short of perfection. Milly Ashford, granddaughter of the Chairman of the Ashford Private Academy and the Student Council President of the same school, was close to being an expert on classical music and she found no flaws to criticize. If she had been here simply to enjoy the performance, she would have been completely blown away by it.

In the silence between the first and the second movements, Milly glanced sideways at the person who sat next to her. In his dimly lit box seat, he wasn't sleeping, contrary to what she had expected. His eyes behind his glasses seemed to enjoy the moment. He just didn't look like he was simply enjoying the music. She didn't know why.

In fact, this was not her first time meeting Major Lloyd Asplund. That had been two weeks ago. He'd sent a car to pick her up and the place where she was to meet with him, to her surprise, was a military base. It wasn't rude for Milly to think that he might be insane. This wasn't a school field trip. It was probably the most unromantic place for a meeting, especially for an "arranged introduction" type of meeting.

Milly wasn't the only one who felt this way. People around him had thought the same thing. He had told her in a recent telephone call, "Ha ha, my staff got mad at me for actually having you come to meet me there. Don't you remember that scary lady?"

She remembered her very well. That lady gave her a wonderful cup of tea in the room that had nothing but computers and monitors. She was a female officer with intelligent and calm composure, and she was gentle rather than scary, Milly thought.

"She told me, 'Why in the world did you bring your personal guest to the Operation Center where we have restricted confidential information?' I thought she was going to kill me. She didn't like how I treated you, either."

That was understandable, considering that he had proposed to her three minutes after they first met. He had done it in front of that lady too. To make it worse, the reason for his fast marriage proposal to Milly was, as he had stated, "No need to waste time to get to know each other." And then he'd said, "So, shall we get married?" Actually, the proposal had been put on hold for now.

"She was furious at me for not having the right attitude toward women. She told me to make it up to you."

So, they were doing something Milly liked today.

"This week happens to be Art Week. Would you like to go listen to a classical music performance?"

When Milly asked him this on the phone, he'd said, "Sure, of course, that's fine with me." She couldn't figure him out. It would be easy to say he was eccentric, but his words and behavior didn't really bother her. But she thought that Suzaku was probably having a hard time working for him, in many different ways.

So, they were in the middle of their second arranged meeting. She wouldn't call this a date. It was actually very rare for Milly to go out with the same guy twice in her arranged meetings. In most cases, there was no second meeting. On the first date, she would make her prospects reject her. She wouldn't dare to reject them, for many reasons. The only way for her to get out of the whole thing was to convince them to reject her. How she did that...well, she had many ways.

The second movement began.

A moment after that, Lloyd Asplund stopped watching the stage for some reason and, instead, glanced at the audience. Then, he looked up at the high ceiling of the music hall. He also surveyed the walls that had been layered to promote good acoustic effects.

Aha, thought Milly.

The restaurant was pretty crowded but they were seated right away because they had made a reservation. They ordered very common Britannia course meals. The waiter who brought their drinks looked at them curiously for a brief moment, but that was

only to be expected. This restaurant didn't require that men wear ties or be denied service, but it was no cheap restaurant. The other customers around them were dressed in fancy clothes. However, Milly and Lloyd weren't dressed any differently than usual. Lloyd was in his white military lab coat and Milly was also dressed in the clothes she would wear to go out with her friends on weekends. She had worn more formal clothing for their first meeting, but after being treated like that, she felt silly dressing up for him. If he didn't like it, that was too bad. As she had thought, or expected, Lloyd didn't seem to care at all.

When she ordered a custard pudding for dessert after the meal, Lloyd lifted his chin as if he wanted to sigh.

"The performance was without a flaw but the hall didn't serve them well."

She knew he would point that out.

"I heard that type of hall was not suited for a symphony orchestra. Now I realize the sound was echoing too much. It would have sounded differently if they'd used different material for the walls," Milly said, and then Lloyd happily whooped. "Aha! How well you know. Now I remember—it used to belong to your family, that hall, didn't it?"

"No. We were just a sponsor. It was my grandfather's hobby."

The Ashfords.

A famed family, formerly aristocrats of the highest peerage, known throughout the Empire for their considerable wealth.

The beginning of the family's decline was eight years ago, when someone assassinated Marianne, Empress of Britannia, whom the family supported. The young prince and princess whom Marianne left behind also "died" in the midst of the subsequent war fought against the former Japan. Then, after repeated failures in her grandfather's business, the family of noble tradition suddenly declined. Now, deprived even of its peerage, the family saved its

pride by means of the school business and other businesses started with the assets that had survived.

For half of her life thus far, Milly had witnessed her family's decline firsthand and understood the chagrin of her father and mother quite well. However, understanding was one thing. But to take it upon oneself was a different matter. Milly wondered if things really were wrong as they were now. They did not lack daily necessities and many people were forced to live more miserable lives. After all, Milly thought, perhaps they had been too used to the luxuries that came with being aristocracy. She wanted very much to identify with something more important, something they had overlooked while indulging in reminiscences of days of lost glory. Of course, she had been made painfully aware of her station. She was just a student who knew too little of the world to be able to criticize her parents with any authority.

This *omiai*—an arrangement for marriage—was also a condensation of such regrets harbored by her family members, including her father. Lloyd Asplund was a major in the Area 11 mandate military. Her father and others in her family were not, however, interested in his modest military rank. What mattered was the fact that he was an Imperial aristocrat, an authentic Earl, and that the Asplunds were currently backing second prince Schneizel, the tireless frontrunner in the race for the Britannian throne. It would be a political marriage as plain as a cloudless sky. In short, Milly was being offered in marriage to Lloyd in service to restore the family name. Expectations were high indeed among the Ashfords, when they learned that the other party were the Asplunds. This time, it seemed it would be tough for Milly to employ her usual break up technique lightly. These circumstances were part of the reason why this second meeting was taking place.

They continue to converse with their aperitifs in front of them and some antipasto arrived at their table. Carpaccio of venison. The meat itself wasn't, as one would expect, a product from home, but it didn't taste bad.

"You are engaged in research on Knightmares in the military, aren't you, Earl Lloyd?"

As the meal continued, when Milly asked questions, Lloyd would reply, "Yeah, uh-huh..." in his usual happy-go-lucky tone.

"Is that the wish of His Highness, Chancellor Schneizel, as one would expect? I hear that you are very close to him."

"Very close...eh?"

Lloyd cocked his head while twirling the meat and vegetables around his fork, as though Milly's words interested him.

"The only person very close to His Highness is the Emperor, I suppose."

"But..."

"I guess we just have common interests. We have had very little private conversation. Who knows, he could actually really hate me, ha ha." Lloyd laughed off pitch, while Milly, on the other hand, did not laugh at all.

Hmm, she thought in her heart.

This man was actually interesting, Milly thought. Most of the men whom she had met—no!—she had been forced to meet for marriage, became excessively eloquent and boastful once the conversation extended to their families. Their families had a relationship with this duchess' family, or they were seeing a lot of that Empress...they would begin a lengthy monologue. They would then finish by sticking out their chests as if they were great, though none of it had anything to do with their own ability. Such men Milly made it a rule to break up with, no question. No way! Enough—that was her feeling.

Of course, Milly was ready enough to be married to someone sooner or later, regardless of her own desires. She was, after all, a young lady from a former aristocratic family. She knew the implications of living for one's family, and not for oneself. For better or worse, she had been born into such a family. That very fact, she acknowledged, sometimes made things very easy for her, and even comforted her. She also felt obliged to repay her parents

for bringing her up. Once in a while, in a film or novel, she would encounter a cheap story of a princess who ran away with a man of low status against her parents' wishes, and she would find this disgusting. To live in luxury and leisure, and then act like a self-intoxicated tragic heroine? That was ridiculous, she felt.

On the other hand, Milly thought she had some right to choose, and that dictated her posture in situations like this. She never refused to see anyone, but she had her own choice as to whom to pick. She would decide. First, men who had nothing to boast about but the prestige of their families, even before considering the romantic angle, failed to meet her parents' expectations. Lacking a spirit of standing on one's own two feet would cancel out any expediency sought in the marriage.

In that context, from Milly's viewpoint, the man named Lloyd Asplund was definitely different, but all the more intriguing. It was hard to describe, but she sensed that he was hiding a core of inner strength underneath his outward frivolity. He was different from the ordinary extravagant aristocrat with an empty highbrow air. If he weren't, he wouldn't have volunteered for the army and gotten involved in the development of the Knightmare. At least he wasn't an aristocratic preppy just spouting hot air.

"By the way..." Lloyd, picking at his *sauté* of sole, spoke again. "Your father runs the school that Suzaku goes to, doesn't he?"

"Ah, yes. That's right."

"Suzaku admires you very much. He is very grateful. He said he could be accepted by others at the school because of your..."

"I haven't done anything special." Milly smiled faintly. "Rather, I'm bossing him around, involving him in Student Council business."

"You are the President of the Student Council, I hear?"

"I am."

"Hmm..."

Then, Lloyd peeked at her from behind his eyeglasses, his eyes showing amusement.

"I have the definite feeling that spanking someone's backside into motion is more your style than working under someone, isn't it?"

Milly wondered what that meant, but refrained from pursuing it any further, because she was afraid that she might hear something she didn't want to hear if she asked.

They finished the rest of their meal uneventfully. Lloyd arranged for her to be taken home by cab. Of course, if they had been a typical couple, they would probably be heading out to a club or bar next for a drink, but they weren't to that point yet. Besides, Milly was still underage. But it wasn't as if she didn't know what alcohol tasted like.

Their conversation continued in the cab.

"Oh, Princess Euphemia is going to be choosing a knight?"

"It's just a rumor, but I wonder who is going to be chosen."

"Won't it be one of the people from the knighthood rank?"

"That would be the case, if it all went normally. But Princess Euphemia is kind of different. Didn't you say you were acquainted with her?"

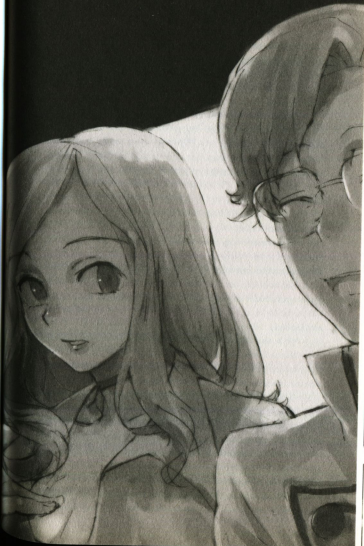
"I don't know if I could say that we are acquaintances. During the hotel hijacking incident at Lake Kawaguchi..."

"Oh, right. You were taken hostage together. I think Suzaku might have mentioned that story."

"Princess Euphemia rescued a friend of mine. Even though she knew that it was dangerous to reveal her identity, she told them her name."

"I heard about that. That reminds me. The other day..."

Their conversation unfolded rather smoothly. In one sense, the topic of the conversation was too safe, Milly thought, as she sat in the cab as it drove through the night. Then again, this was probably how most arranged meetings started out in the beginning, though it was a strange feeling.



I thought that this person's motive was not me, but "it."

Besides, it struck Milly as odd that that someone would be looking for a suitable marriage partner from the out-of-power Ashford family. Milly had no delusions about her own appearance or personality.

Though she was one of the popular girls at her school, she was, after all, just a high school student. If they continued to converse, her immaturity was bound to reveal itself. Or, if Lloyd had a fetish for such things, then that would explain his interest; but Milly did not detect that in him. In fact, from the moment of his marriage proposal, she sensed that he didn't really treat her like a female.

He must have his reasons in the same way that I have my reasons. That's all there is to it.

While these things were on Milly's mind, it struck her as odd that Lloyd didn't bring up the issue during their conversations. But perhaps this was what it was like to hang out with him. After all, it was only the second time they had been with each other. Then again, Milly thought, maybe he's indifferent to such things. Or maybe he's quiet today because that scary woman soldier had scolded him.

"Ahh, the school festival."

"Yes. I know it's a little far in advance, but if you have time, please come. I'm expecting Suzaku to help out. Oh, and the main event this year is to make the world's largest pizza."

"Ha ha, that definitely sounds interesting!"

Winding its way through the roadways of the night, the cab entered the campus neighborhood of the Tokyo Settlements. The Ashford Private Academy and Milly's house were both located in this district. At home, Milly's father was probably waiting for her. Most likely, he wanted to hear about tonight's outcome. Truthfully, Milly was dreading the avalanche of questions.

When the car finally stopped at the front gates of the Ashford home, Milly told Lloyd that this would be fine. "It's very close."

"Really? Well, thanks for today. Sweet dreams!"

"Yes. Good night."

Smiling, Lloyd waved his hand until the very end. The cab door closed shut and the cab sped off. Feeling unsatisfied for some reason, Milly watched the taillights disappear.



An image of the crimson Nightmare appeared on the monitor.

It cradled a gigantic silver-colored claw as its right hand. The Nightmare began running on the ground at a speed that shook the image on the monitor, and then took off. If the model had been the fifth generation Sutherland and not the seventh generation Lancelot, it would have been over at that moment. They'd been able to fend it off, however, because of Lancelot's abilities, and most of all because Suzaku was the pilot of it.

In the operation center at the base, Cecile Croomy was deep in thought as she watched combat footage between Lancelot and the red Nightmare. When the images on the disc finished, she replayed them from the beginning. Midway, she stretched her hand toward the console and magnified one portion of the footage. She wasn't looking at the claw. She had already analyzed that over and over again. What Cecile was focusing on this time was the way the Nightmare moved. The sound of the LAND SPINNER and the corresponding flexible movements of the red Nightmare's legs. Cecile raised her brows slightly. Then, she heard somebody call her name from behind.

"It's based off the Ganymede. No question."

"Aahhhh!" Cecile cried, as she leapt out of her chair. She turned around quickly. There he was, peering from behind his usual glasses.

"Hey! I am back."

"What do you mean that 'you're back'?"
It's not like this is his home, Cecile thought.

Clad in his usual lab coat, Lloyd gently leaned forward from Cecile's side, unconcerned by what she was thinking. He focused on the footage which Cecile had just been looking at, the magnified leg area of the red Knightmare.

"You know, the Lancelot also utilizes the same part. The structure provides the right amount of flexibility and rigidity that are necessary in combat. Well, actually, it was originally developed for walking implements using medical cybernetic technology. Oh, but that doesn't mean that the Sutherland and the Glasgow are inferior—just differences in application. After all, when the Glasgow was in operation, it was a time when the other countries didn't even have one Knightmare model."

Meaning, that they couldn't even imagine combat between the Knightmares at that time.

"Yes, I know." Cecile finally felt at ease when the conversation turned back to technical matters. "I believe they used it for the Glasgow to a certain extent."

"Only to a certain extent, though. One portion of the balancer. But compared to the Sutherland, its combat capabilities are a vast improvement. It's a really impressive achievement. Whoever developed this is amazing."

As he said this, Lloyd extended one of his arms forward and ran his finger along the console. A light appeared on a different monitor. The image stood on its feet. It was a Knightmare. But, compared to the Lancelot or the Sutherland, which was the Britannian Army's current main weapon, it was rather old-fashioned—it had no head.

"It's a third-generation Knightmare Frame, the Ganymede. In fact, it's the model that Marianne the Flash herself piloted. It was just a little ahead of its time! Essentially, when Empress Marianne passed away, it was dropped from the next generation of models."

Then, small print appeared in the right-hand corner of the screen. It was the name of a certain noble family in Britannia that had fully financed the development of the model—Ashford.

At seeing that, Lloyd had a huge smile spread across his face behind his glasses.

"Yeah, well, it's gotten quite interesting. I'm not just talking about that one part of the leg structure. I'm also talking about the fact that Lancelot, which uses the Ganymede prototype, and the new Knightmare model of the Black Knights which also probably uses the same leg part, are in head-to-head combat. We have already paid royalty fees to the Ashford family, but I wonder if the Black Knights did."

"I highly doubt that...but you didn't go to meet with her to talk about that, did you?"

"No, of course not. This is a confidential matter. Besides, I doubt that she knows about such details. Nonsense."

"Oh, I see. Well, that's good."

Cecile nodded, but in the back of her mind she thought it was a ridiculous conversation. Having spent a lot of time with Lloyd, she knew all too well what kind of a person he was and didn't think it was worth her while to say anything. Still, as a woman, Cecile was annoyed by Lloyd's inability to recognize members of the opposite sex as *being* the opposite sex. She felt sorry for Milly. Of course, Cecile did have the vague realization that they both must have their own motivations for the engagement.

Whether aware of Cecile's feelings or not, Lloyd again lazily opened his mouth. "But, it did seem like she was completely aware of what I wanted. Like you said, she is a pretty smart kid. Whether marriage is on the plate or not, I think we would get along."

"Oh, I see." Cecile was unamused by his comments.

After turning off the combat footage, Cecile removed the disc. Then she reached for the coffee cup that was placed on a nearby table.

"Hey. Are you done working overtime, Cecile?"

"Yes. I have to get up early tomorrow too."

The contents of the cup were completely cold.

"Are you going to stay?"

"Um, yeah. A little."

"Then please don't forget to lock the place down when you leave."

After saying this to him, Cecile took the disc and coffee cup and left the room. She was tired. Earlier today, she had run the shield test for the Lancelot and, truthfully, she didn't feel like being Lloyd's conversation partner.

As Cecile was about to leave, Lloyd said, "The problem is..."

"Yes?"

"The number of human beings who could design this is limited, you know. It's not about Ashford."

This caught Cecile off guard. She stopped and turned around.

Lloyd stood there with a distant look on his face. It was as if the smile he had had on his face just a moment ago was a lie. His eyes were still glued to the Ganymede on the monitor.

Cecile thought for a moment and slowly said, "So, are you saying that the Ashford family itself had nothing to do with the development of the red Knightmare?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I think the girl that I am engaged to is a good girl. But there has always been a lot of gossip surrounding her family." After adding that that was "typical of the aristocracy," Lloyd sat down in the chair which Cecile had been sitting in moments before.

"Still, notwithstanding, there is the issue of the Knightmare..."

"..."

"I don't think that our first impressions were incorrect."

Rakeshata Chawla—it was a name that neither of them would ever forget.

Lloyd removed his eyes from the monitor and looked up at the ceiling.

For a brief moment, Cecile stood there motionless.

3

Area 11 was celebrating Art Week.

There were concerts, art exhibitions, operas, and plays being performed all over the Settlements. Former Viceroy Clovis la Britannia had created Art Week so the people living in the territory could have something to do. There were rumors that this year the festivities would be canceled. Clovis had been into literature and the arts, but the new Viceroy, Cornelia li Britannia, was more a soldier than anything else. Furthermore, disruptive incidents were still occurring in Area 11. It had been less than a year since Clovis had passed away, and there were some who thought the festivities should be put on hold to respect his death. But it was the other princess who dispelled the rumors and opinions.

"Clovis did not like to dwell on sad things. And if we want to commemorate him, I think it's important to keep the traditions that he left us."

The Britannia Empire's third princess Euphemia li Britannia answered so, when her sister asked for her opinion. Cornelia agreed. Besides, politically it wasn't a bad idea either. It would say to all within the country and those outside as well that Area 11's political condition was stable, even if the actual situation was quite different. One wouldn't call it a bluff exactly, but ostentatious display was necessary when ruling a colonized area like Area 11.

Still, Cornelia knew that she wasn't good at events such as this, and didn't feel like taking the initiative to promote it. That she left to her sister Euphemia. So because of that, even though the rest of the Area was excited that week, Cornelia's day-to-day activities did not change much.

"These are the pictures that were taken in Ishikawa. They were sent by our intelligence agent who infiltrated a terrorist training camp."

Cornelia looked over the pictures from her knight Guilford in her office in the Tokyo Settlements bureau. Her eyes widened. In one grainy picture was a gray giant.

"A Gang Lou, eh? I didn't think they had Knightmares here too. Did this come from the naval route between the Chinese Federation and the Hokuriku region?"

"Most likely. The biggest faction in this region is slightly different from the late Japan Liberation Front and the Black Knights. It's the High Integrity Party. They're based on the Far-Left Activist Group of the former Japan, so I am assuming that their ties to the Chinese Federation are from before the war."

"Hmph. So their objective is not the independence of Japan, but taking over Japan, eh?"

Cornelia laughed coldly as she threw the pictures to the side.

"To prefer to be another country's puppet...they're aiming low, aren't they? At least the Black Knights are aiming for liberating their country and I can respect them for having a backbone."

Of course, the group in Hokuriku wasn't supported by the Japanese as strongly as the Black Knights were. There were only a few who hoped for a "revolution" that would change their ruler from Britannia to the Chinese Federation.

"What shall we do? In the last meeting there was an opinion to let them go for a while to find a connection to the NAC."

"I think we've passed that stage now. If they have Knightmares, I can't let them be. What is the status on finding out the headquarters?"

"The agents researched a good portion of the hierarchy of the camp site and the basement facility. But what concerns me is the movement of the Chinese Federation. If the repression lingers and there's harm to civilians, they might make a move saying that it is 'humanitarian support.'"

"They made noises after the Narita incident too," Cornelia answered in a bad mood. She thought for a while.

The truth was—just as Guilford said—Area 11 couldn't act on its own to irritate the Chinese Federation. This issue had come up in a meeting they had recently, and as a basic policy the staff agreed on looking to the home country of Britannia for instructions. Facing down another nation was quite different from demolishing an anti-government faction within the Area. Besides, at present, Cornelia's mother country and the Chinese Federation were not at war. One couldn't say they were on friendly terms, but on the surface they were not in opposition. The EU had been on the move lately and probably didn't want to antagonize the Chinese Federation, and Cornelia also had no intent of doing that. Even though they were a nation that they would eventually need to deal with later, now was not the time.

Still, as Area 11 Viceroy, she could not neglect the Hokuriku issue. Area 11 already had a bomb to deal with known as Zero and the Black Knights. Cornelia had information agents trying to figure out the organizational chart and the headquarters of the Black Knights, with no strong leads as yet. They had located tail end facilities but nothing more. And lately, Cornelia had been thinking that their obstructiveness as an organization was more robust than ever. Just as Cornelia was doing a lot on the surface, Zero was probably doing a lot below.

Personally, Cornelia wanted to destroy Zero and the Black Knights first, as they had damaged her pride. But she wasn't foolish enough to place her pride on a scale with her duties as Viceroy of a colonized Area. It was disappointing but she had no choice but to take the roundabout way. Another chance would come to settle the score. What was important was to create a situation where other nations or anti-government groups wouldn't be able to interfere when the time came. In order to do that, there was utility in completely demolishing those who were uprising because of some cheap tactic used by the Chinese Federation.

"I'll go."

That was Cornelia's decision.

"I'll use my direct unit and we'll attack the terrorist headquarters in one breath. The Chinese Federation couldn't possibly move directly against a force led by a Britannian princess. Unless they're looking to make this into an international incident, that is."

Guilford, who was standing in front of Cornelia's desk, cocked his head to one side.

"Actually, I was thinking if you would allow General Darlton and I to take care of this..."

"I'll leave Darlton here in the Tokyo Settlements. Euphy is quite busy. Simple counsel could be given by a civil service official, but there's a chance that Art Week will become a target for terrorist attack. Darlton can protect her as well as command the maintenance of security."

"However..."

"What, Guilford? You want to achieve glory with Darlton that badly? You're not happy going with me?" Cornelia said kiddingly.

Guilford laughed wryly.

"Please do not play with me, Your Highness. I will gladly accompany you."

"Good."

Cornelia nodded with a satisfied look. But immediately she wore a serious expression again.

"There is the Kyoto issue too. If possible, I would like to use this opportunity to bring Hokuriku under control. I will not allow a defeat like Narita again, my knight Guilford."

"I will swear with my body and life." Guilford saluted. "Incidentally, Your Highness. I have one report to make that is related to the Narita Battle."

"I see."

Cornelia narrowed her eyes dubiously.



The white table sat in the center of the roofed balcony.

Somewhere, birds were chirping. This was the Ashford Private Academy where lush greenery filled the landscape. During the summer the students had found a large stag beetle on the school wall. The junior high school students happily tried to catch bugs then.

At the table sat a boy with chestnut-colored hair and a girl in a wheelchair. It was Suzaku Kururugi and Nunnally Lamperouge. They were having a fun, lively conversation.

"We had a pond at the Kururugi Shrine too. It was little, but I'd catch *zarigani*, I mean crayfish, all the time."

"You'd catch crayfish?"

"It's easy. You attach a string to a *kaeni*'s leg to do it."

"Huh? 'Kaeni'? As in frog? The things that go 'croak, croak'?"

"Yeah, although in Japanese they go, '*kero-kero, kero-kero*.'" Suzaku imitated a frog with his voice and Nunnally laughed.

"There is a song too. 'Frogs are singing a song'—like that."

"Japanese songs have funny lyrics. Like the '*den-den, mushi-mushi*.'"

"The snail song."

"Yes."

There was one more boy who was watching the two from a little distance. It was Nunnally's brother, Lelouch Lamperouge.

He was leaning against a pillar that held up the roof of the balcony, thinking about something else.

If things keep proceeding according to plan... Lelouch thought to himself, as he watched Nunnally and Suzaku singing... *I won't be able to stay with Nunnally anymore.*

Lelouch had answered "not now" to C.C.'s question, but in fact, he was prepared for being separated from Nunnally. Now that

the Japan Liberation Front was no more, and the Black Knights had secured the assistance of the Kyoto Group, it was about to become the largest anti-government organization in Area 11. And even that was not the final goal for Lelouch. That would be to obliterate the nation known as Britannia. Moving forward, he was sure the battles would get fiercer and the situation would become more complicated. He couldn't continue his double life as a student forever. Eventually, he would have to put all of his time and energy into being Zero.

When that happened—what would become of Nunnally?

It was fine as long as the academy was here. But as Lelouch continued to make inroads on his goal, just as C.C. said, Area 11 would throw off Britannia's rule. Of course, Lelouch had no intention of hurting his friends such as Milly and Rivalz. He didn't care if he was criticized for mixing in personal feelings. When the time came, he intended to do whatever would be possible to keep them safe. But, as Lelouch continued to succeed as Zero, it was a fact that this academy wouldn't be able to stay the same.

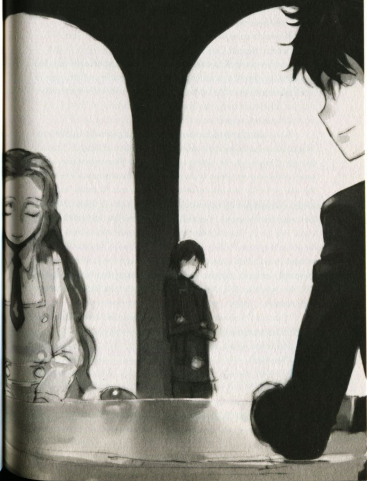
Suzaku and Nunnally were singing.

"Where is your..."

"...head?"

He could not keep Nunnally by Zero's side. If it were only to protect her, that would be one thing, but he could never include Nunnally in Zero's world. Lelouch wasn't that overconfident. He had no intentions of losing his battle against Britannia, but only a fool would deny that the worst could happen. If Zero fell at Britannia's feet, then those involved with him would be executed. If Nunnally were there, she would suffer the same fate. That was the worst case scenario. Even if he were to lose and to die, he couldn't let Nunnally get caught up in it.

That meant that he would need someone to protect Nunnally in his place. Someone who more or less knew their situation,



someone both he and Nunnally could trust, and someone far away from the Black Knights and Britannia—but there was no one like that. Even Suzaku was an Honorary Britannian now, and in the Britannian Forces.

But even so...

"Huh? What?"

Suzaku noticed Lelouch staring at him and glanced up. He was smiling kindly. Lelouch saw no hint of anxiety or struggle in Suzaku's expression. But there was no way to be absolutely sure that his smile was from the bottom of his heart.

I'll make him quit the military.

Mao said that Suzaku wanted to die. He probably hadn't been lying since he could read the deep psyche of others. *Ridiculous*, Lelouch thought. *Did you join the military so you could die? There must've been a good reason to kill your own father.* It must've been around the time just before the war ended seven years ago, when Lelouch and Nunnally were put in the Ashford family's custody; when the death of Prime Minister Kururugi hit the papers. Lelouch had regretted that he and Nunnally could not be by Suzaku's side then. But, Lelouch thought, he could do something now. If Suzaku was hung up on his father's death and wanted to be killed, Lelouch just needed to give him a reason to live. He would convince Suzaku that he was someone that was needed. In fact, that was true. To Lelouch and Nunnally, he was indeed someone they needed.

"Suzaku." Lelouch began, straightening his body from the pillar. "The truth is..."

However, it was at that moment...

"Suzaku!"

Lelouch turned around. There was a slim lady running toward them.

"Lloyd says it's urgent!"

"Who's that?" Lelouch asked.

Suzaku gave a wry expression and answered in a low voice.

"A soldier."

The lady was already beside them before he finished saying this. She was out of breath as she glanced toward Lelouch and Nunnally.

"Friends of yours?"

"Yes," Suzaku answered. He was already up from his seat. The lady, for some reason, looked surprised for a second, and then smiled happily. "I see. You've settled in well at your school."

"Yes. So, what is the urgent business?"

"Oh, that's right. I don't know the details either." As she said this, she turned not to Suzaku but to Lelouch and Nunnally. "Sorry, but I need to steal Suzaku from you for a bit. It's work."

Work. Lelouch and Nunnally could not complain. Lelouch nodded, and looked at Nunnally, who followed suit.

"I'm sorry you two," Suzaku looked genuinely regretful.

"Don't worry about it."

"Come again, Suzaku."

"Okay, I'll see you again tomorrow."

Suzaku trotted down the balcony after waving his hand in their direction and followed the lady.

Lelouch hesitated, then called after him.

"Suzaku!"

"Huh?"

Suzaku stopped and turned around. He had his usual, carefree smile.

"You're coming to school tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, I plan to."

"Then...there's something I want to discuss with you. It's important."

Suzaku, still in his school uniform, receded into the distance as he walked away toward the entrance of the school.

It was Nunnally who mumbled, "Suzaku is really needed by them."

Needed.

Lelouch repeated the word in his mind. He shook his head.
But it was the same...

"Nunnally."

"Yes?"

"How do you feel about Suzaku?"

The question was abrupt, Nunnally looked surprised. But immediately she smiled. "I love him."

For a moment, Lelouch was the one who was surprised.

"Of course, I love you most of all."

"..."

After a few seconds, Lelouch smiled back at her. It was a genuine smile. It was the smile of a person who knew his decision was correct.

That's right.

There was someone who truly needed Suzaku here. Only Suzaku could replace him and protect Nunnally. It had been that way from when they were young. Nunnally was able to recover from the incident eight years ago—her mother's death—because Suzaku was there. If she had not known Suzaku, even when she came to this academy, she wouldn't have been able to smile. In the past, Nunnally's world only contained Lelouch. It was Suzaku who opened the closed door.

He should've known this from the beginning.

A knight.

Lelouch did not like the Britannian institution but the only person he could see as Nunnally's knight was Suzaku.

And if Nunnally could now become the hope for Suzaku to live...

"Lelouch?"

"Huh?"

Lelouch cocked his head to one side.

"You like Suzaku too, don't you?"

"Let's see..." Lelouch shrugged. "Honestly, I get irritated because he is so rigid. But I like seeing you with him. As I did

in the past."

"Hee hee. You used to fight with him all the time."

"Don't tell him what I told you."

Everything was to be determined tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I'll talk to him about this.

Lelouch had tried once to convince Suzaku to quit the Forces as Zero. That time, Suzaku didn't listen. But this time it would be different. It wouldn't be as Zero. He would speak simply as Lelouch, like they did in the past.

I believe that he won't say no this time.

But before that, I have to...



"Kyoshiro Tow-dow?"

C.C. was sitting on the bed as usual, hugging a large cushion as she mispronounced the name.

"What kind of a name is that?"

"It seems that your ears are stuffed C.C."

Lelouch sat at the desk in his room in front of his computer. He turned around as he spoke to C.C.

"I think your pronunciation is the problem Lelouch," C.C. snapped back. "So, who is this man?"

"Kyoshiro Tohdoh. He was a Lieutenant Colonel in the former Japanese military, stationed at the Itsukushima base. He took command in the battle called the "Miracle at Itsukushima" seven years ago. There, he was able to—and he was the only soldier to do so—fight off the Britannian Forces that invaded the base. He became known as "Miracle Worker Tohdoh."

"That is an embarrassing name."

"I'm sure he feels the same way. Besides, the battle at Itsukushima wasn't a miracle. It was a victory won by tactics. Do you want to see?"

"Huh?"

C.C. looked up. Lelouch was pointing at the screen on his computer. On the screen were curved lines that looked like a map and there were radiant dots scattered on it. They were indicating allies or foes.

"This is the Miracle at Itsukushima."

"You recreated it?"

"Of course not. There are many people on the Internet who have a lot of time on their hands. You can search for these easily."

C.C. got off the bed and moved toward the desk. Lelouch scrolled the screen with his mouse. On the bottom of the screen was the ocean, with Britannian war vessels. And on the land were blue dots indicating the Japanese military.

"People have this misunderstanding but..."

Lelouch clicked on an arrow on the screen, and the dots started to move, representing how the respective military units moved at the time.

"The real reason that Japan lost the war seven years ago was not because they did not have Knightmares. It was mainly due to the overwhelming amount of material Britannia had."

"I'm sure that was so."

"Immediately after the war began, the Japanese air force suffered a huge defeat to the invading Britannian Forces and lost command of the skies. It was the same with the naval battles too. Britannia's new weapon at the time, the Knightmares, came in after that. The final battle on the mainland, the ground war—well, if the equipment on both sides were equal in strength, this would've been the most troublesome task."

The headquarters-like region of the Japanese military in the middle of the screen was receiving bomb attacks from planes and gunfire from the naval vessels.

"At the time, the Britannian Forces took the same tactic in almost all of the regions. It was a blitzkrieg operation that combined aerial warfare and the use of Knightmares. Japan didn't

have the means to oppose this. So in fact, the result of the war was decided even before the Knightmares were deployed. All the Knightmares did was shorten the time of the ground war, since the normal ground weapons Japan had at the time would never have made a case against the Knightmares."

The dots that indicated Knightmares were launched from the airlifts and landed on Japanese soil. They started to inch in on the Japanese military headquarters located at the edge of the ocean.

However, then a surprising incident occurred.

The Knightmare dots that reached the headquarters region got wiped out at once.

"Hey, what's going on?"

C.C. mumbled this as she stared at the screen. Lelouch smiled.

"Of course, the Japanese military blew the headquarters up using a large amount of liquid *sakuranite*. That was one thing Japan had a lot of."

"That's crazy."

"Actually, it's not. Watch carefully, this is the important part."

Just as Lelouch finished his sentence, more abnormalities occurred, this time with the naval vessels. The vessel dots that were firing at the headquarters region also began to disappear, one after the other.

"It was a trap that was set undersea."

"The one you used before in Tokyo Bay?"

"Probably something similar. Look, there's more."

The next attack came from a direction that was completely unexpected. There was a small mountain not far from where the land met the ocean, right by the Britannian vessels on the sea. From the summit, missiles started to rain down upon the Britannian ships.

"What the—"

C.C.'s eyes widened. Lelouch was chuckling next to her.

"The headquarters was bait to begin with. Actually, the mountain itself *was* the headquarters. They prepared a separate building beforehand and the necessary equipment was set up under the mountain. It was Britannia's fault for not having the information, but I credit Tohdoh who commanded everything, including the advance preparation."

The Britannian vessels started to retreat. The surviving bombarding planes also left the area as they were shot at from the mountain. It was a complete defeat of Britannia. If one were there, one probably would've heard the Japanese military shout *hanzai* three times.

Lelouch moved the mouse again and closed the window. C.C. caught her breath. "I see. I understand what kind of a man this Tow-dow is."

"Tohdoh."

"But this was seven years ago. Does he have anything to do with you now?"

"Very much so. After the war, Tohdoh joined an anti-Britannia resistance group, the Japan Liberation Front. Of course, that organization is long gone."

C.C. raised her eyebrow.

"He has already been captured by the Britannian Forces. It seems that he was taken prisoner by Britannian information agents while hiding out in the ghetto after the Narita Battle. An official military trial was held the day before yesterday. The judgment was obviously the death penalty. He is scheduled to be executed tonight."

"Hey, are you planning to..."

"His subordinates came to the Black Knights for help, with information about the facility in Chofu where Tohdoh is being held."

"If they have the information, why can't they take care of it themselves?"

"I told you that the Japan Liberation Front is long gone. They don't have the power to do it themselves, which is why they

came to me. Of course, this is a lucky break for me. I was using the Black Knights to locate Tohdoh after the Narita Battle too."

"You plan to rescue him and use him as a pawn?"

"He has that much value. He read my plan at Narita and supported the Black Knights. It would be a waste to see someone so talented militarily die. He is especially needed in the current Black Knights. If I can have one man like him, I can do more strategically on the battlefield."

Lelouch was talking in a straightforward manner. But then, for some reason C.C. peered into his face from the side. Her inquiring eyes stared deeply at Lelouch.

"Is that really all?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's just that you haven't rescued an individual since the Orange Incident, that's all."

"Ridiculous. There's nothing odd about securing a beneficial resource."

Lelouch covered up his moment of agitation.

Damn, she's sharp as always with this kind of thing.

Lelouch turned off the computer and stood up. He picked up his bag that was sitting nearby. "Well then, Ohgi and Kallen should be waiting for me at the scheduled place."

"What? You're going yourself?"

"The preparations are already set. The plan itself is easy enough that it doesn't require me, but this is scouting C.C. The top leader should show his face." Lelouch smiled coldly and looked at C.C. "Did you want to come too? The Black Knights know about you since the meeting with the Kyoto Group. I wouldn't mind if you joined me."

C.C. didn't smile.

She looked away from Lelouch and glanced out the window. The afternoon sunlight was shining in.

Then, she answered dryly, "If I feel like it."

Lelouch left the house after telling Nunnally and Sayoko that he would be home late.

It was already past four in the afternoon. But the blazing sun was still strong. The voices of the students yelling in their club activities echoed loudly across the school grounds.

Lelouch was deep in thought as he walked the path from the clubhouse entrance to the school gates.

Suzaku.

He was remembering seven years ago.

He was the son of Japan's last Prime Minister, Genbu Kururugi. At the time, the Kururugi family was one of the wealthiest in Japan, and even though Suzaku was violent, he was a kid from a good family. However, even so, Lelouch didn't remember him being too happy. He didn't seem to have friends his age and was alone in the house a lot. His relationship with his father especially did not look positive.

Yet, he still had one person he was attached to.

"Tohdoh-sensei!"

Whenever Suzaku called that name, he looked happy and proud. He repeated that name so much that Nunnally would get jealous when they were first getting to know each other. But that was how much Suzaku was attached to the man.

Suzaku.

What Britannia is trying to give you is this...

You think you are needed by the Britannian Forces? In return, this is what you're rewarded with. The death of a man you were close to. Why won't you realize that Britannia is only trying to take advantage of you?

Of course, in that sense, it may not be different with me. I call you my friend, but I am trying to take advantage of you for Nunnally's sake. However, I will not just use you. Did you forget the promise we made as kids? Mutual cooperation. If you would protect Nunnally, then I will rescue Kyoshiro Tohdoh, someone important to you. If you will use your power for Nunnally and me, then I will use my power for you. Think about the

pros and cons. Are you better off on the side of Britannia or with us? You should know the answer already.

However, Lelouch actually failed to realize...

Pros and cons. Vested interests.

Sure, there were many people who would act upon those things. In fact, humans who were desperate to live—actually, to live and achieve advantages in life—they would take different interests into account to do so.

However—for someone who was hung up on death, pros and cons might not have much meaning.

Would benefits and advantages needed to live be worth it for someone like that?

C.C. quietly watched Lelouch from the clubhouse window as he walked away.

4

The grand opening of the museum coincided with Art Week.

To commemorate the museum's opening, a painting contest was being held—the results of which were to be announced during the opening ceremony. The name of the final decision maker on the selection committee was Euphemia li Britannia, the third princess of the Britannian royal family. The artistic merit of the winning painting was not important. What was important was to make a public statement about the fact that Sub-Viceroy Euphemia, i.e., the government of Area 11 was involved in the opening of the museum. It was essentially a political show for Britannian cultural promotion.

"The press conference is scheduled at eight o'clock. The location is the main entrance hall. Afterward, we would like Princess Euphemia to announce the grand prize."

"Do I place the bouquet on the painting in front of the cameras?"

"Yes. The official presentation ceremony is scheduled for tomorrow so this will be all that is required for today."

"I understand. By the way, regarding the official presentation—"

"Ah, yes. That will involve a presentation of the celebratory messages. Do you see the large monitor inside the hall? This is something that we installed temporarily but it has a satellite communication function. This is so distinguished individuals around the world can send messages of congratulations about the museum in real time..."

While reviewing the schedule and floor plan of the venue, the publicity official and Euphemia held their final discussion about the ceremony in the waiting room.

Right next to them stood Andreas Darlton, the chief of staff of the Area 11 ruling military force.

Of course, these functions were not normally Darlton's responsibility. However, the Viceroy of Area 11, Cornelia li Britannia, was currently away from the Tokyo Settlements, and when Cornelia wasn't present, the person whom Darlton pledged to serve was the young girl wearing the pretty dress standing to his side. In addition, Cornelia had instructed him to act as an advisor as well as a military guard in case of unforeseeable circumstances. Naturally, if Euphemia had her own knight or bodyguard that person would likely have assumed such duties, but there was no use in bringing this up now.

In fact, Darlton himself didn't mind these duties. Instead of viewing it as a bother, he actually enjoyed it. It might be seen as disrespectful, but indeed he thought of Euphemia like a father protecting his adorable, youngest daughter.

Darlton's association with the princess sisters Cornelia and Euphemia was not a superficial one. In the past, he had been employed as the knight on guard at the palace inhabited by the princesses' mother. From that time, he came to know both of them well.

The strong-minded, valiant Princess Nell, and the cheery, kind-hearted Princess Euphy. He had watched them play together inside the palace. Whether it was because their own father was Emperor and they were unable to interact with him like normal children, the princesses gravitated toward Darlton who was close in age to their father. He had helped Cornelia with her fencing training and he had played horse with Euphemia. As the years passed, the two of them grew up, with one of them becoming the Viceroy of Area 11 and the other Sub-Viceroy. Still, even today, the image of the two sisters teasing each other in the gardens of the palace was burned in Darlton's memory.

Time passes so quickly, Darlton thought, as he stood next to Euphemia, glancing at her profile. The young princess who was once a little girl was now the Sub-Viceroy of Area 11, and was fulfilling her official duties with dignity. That innocent little girl was gone.

Still, he was a little concerned that he didn't see the usual radiance in Euphemia's face. It wasn't that she looked ill-tempered, but even as she continued her discussion with the museum representative, there was something lacking in her spirit. Her voice also sounded subdued.

Could it be because of that? She had to announce the results of the painting contest at the opening ceremony. The painting that won the grand prize was to be "selected by Euphemia." However, in actuality, the painting's selection was not to be decided by Euphemia at all. The winning painting had been painted by the scion of a certain noble family. The decision to select that painting had already been made prior to Euphemia even viewing the paintings entered into the competition. Essentially, it was rigged. And incidentally, the noble family in question had provided a large sum of money to establish the museum.

Not only did this happen often, but there was not even any point in throwing a fit over it since the prize had little merit

in and of itself. Still, for Euphemia, it must have been hard to reconcile. Although she was all too familiar with such political drama, this situation was more blatant than usual. Besides, it was Euphemia's name and no one else's which was being used in this rigged competition. Truthfully, regarding this matter, Darlton also viewed it as something distasteful. He understood the situation, but he couldn't help but feel that it would be offensive to the princess.

After the meeting ended and the representative left the room, Darlton casually offered his opinion to Euphemia.

"There's no need to be pushed around by the whims of others, you know. Princess Euphemia, you are the Sub-Viceroy. The only person who can order you around is the Viceroy. At least in this Area."

Sitting on the sofa, Euphemia raised her face and glanced at Darlton who stood next to her. Immediately, her refined face looked down and she laughed weakly.

"Yes, that's true. However, I can't disturb the museum representatives because of my own selfishness. Besides, it's also true that I'm not fully confident in making that judgment for myself."

"..."

"It's all right. Thank you, General. I'm sorry for making you concerned about my situation."

"It is no trouble Sub-Viceroy."

As he responded, Darlton drew a breath inside.

No confidence in herself...

Those were probably Euphemia's true feelings. Darlton knew that at least in one region of Area 11, there were those who secretly said such things about Euphemia.

The figurehead Sub-Viceroy.

It wasn't an incorrect statement. Regarding the governance of Area 11, it was indeed Cornelia, the Viceroy, who handled most of the pragmatic aspects of ruling. There was very little that could be decided under Euphemia's authority. But to

Darlton, however, this wasn't Euphemia's fault. It was the decision of Cornelia to construct such a system.

In all seriousness, Darlton had never thought of this girl as "incapable" of being a ruler. It was absolutely true that she lacked experience but he believed that she possessed truly gifted qualities. A case in point was what happened at Narita some time ago. At that time, Euphemia chose the best option in response to Viceroy Cornelia's being cut off by the enemy. It was something that she thought of herself without the counsel of others. Had she not done that at the time, the damage to soldiers and civilians would have been even greater. That decision was not one that anybody else could have made. If Darlton had been in a similar situation at Euphemia's age, he wasn't sure if he would have been capable of making the same decision.

Well, there's no need to sweat about this... Darlton reminded himself. Besides, Euphemia was only in her teens. She would have plenty of time to make up for her lack of experience. Still, he knew that this was the opinion of someone with experience like himself, and that youth would likely not allow for such a laid-back stance. After all, Euphemia had already ascended to the position of Sub-Viceroy. It was only natural that she wanted to swiftly become a person worthy of her position.

"By the way..." Suddenly Euphemia, who had been silent, opened her mouth. "My older sister...I mean, I received a list of eligible candidates for the position of being my knight from the Viceroy. From Ishikawa, right before the Viceroy's departure."

"Is that so," Darlton said briefly. Regarding this matter, he wasn't prepared to put in his own two cents.

Then Euphemia looked at Darlton with a somewhat surprised look and laughed in her usual manner.

"I see. The Viceroy was right."

"What do you mean?"

"Regarding the matter of my own knight, you were the person who first brought this up, weren't you, General?"

Darlot raised his eyebrow slightly and did not respond.

Euphemia's face broke into a huge smile.

"The Viceroy had mentioned this. Guilford is a smart man but he is not one who thinks of such things like a caring person would. The Viceroy said that you made such a fuss when she chose her knight as well."

"Well..."

"By the way, I am also of the same opinion Andre."

Andre—that was the name Euphemia used to call him when she was much, much younger.

Darlot finally gave a smile.

"If possible, I would like to keep that matter just between the two of us, Princess Euphemia."

Euphemia slowly nodded her head.

Truth be told, that matter was one of the things that bothered Euphemia.

A knight.

In all honesty, Euphemia still hadn't come to grips with how she felt about that issue. Her feelings aside, those around her were heading in that direction full force. They were rushing her to make a decision from the candidate list.

Naturally, Euphemia had no intention of blaming those around her like Cornelia who was pursuing the subject, or even Darlot. They were all doing so with Euphemia's best intentions in mind. She understood this. However, truthfully, she wanted them to wait a little.

Choosing a knight—this was not a light matter for Euphemia. The knights who were dedicated to the royal family had to vow a lifetime of absolute loyalty. A lifetime. This meant that, when Euphemia chose someone to be her knight, she would have decided his life for him.

Did she have the right to do so?

If she were her sister Cornelia, she would say yes she did, because they were the royal family. If she were her sister, Euphemia

thought, she would be all right with it.

To be protected and at the same time to protect. To be given somebody and, at the same time, to give to that person.

Cornelia had already experienced this. She was fulfilling her duty. She had the right to be protected and to be given such a person.

But did she?

Had she been properly fulfilling her duty?

Was she really worth that much—?

Euphemia was still troubled by this, even as the ceremony began.

When she took her seat for the press conference, she was inundated with questions regarding this matter from the journalists who were gathered there.

"There are rumors that you will soon be selecting your knight."

"Uh—yes. A knight...I...well..."

Unable to dodge their questions skillfully, Euphemia was uncertain how to respond. Then, from the back, the museum representative interrupted the journalists.

"Please. We are only allowing questions pertaining to the museum."

The journalists then stopped asking their questions and Euphemia breathed a small sigh of relief.

Soon it would be time to announce the grand prize for the painting competition.

The museum representative, acting as moderator, spoke loudly into the microphone in his hand.

"We will now request that Her Highness, Princess Euphemia, select the winner of the grand prize. The painting on which the princess places this bouquet will be the grand prize winner!"

"..."

The museum had a large entrance hall as part of its vaulted two-story structure. The paintings entered into the competition

were placed on the wall at the top of the stairs. Each and every piece of art was a tour de force. They were all waiting for Euphemia to place the bouquet on the winning painting. The decision, however, had already been made with no consideration for Euphemia's own opinion.

Euphemia trudged up the stairs with a heavy heart and stood in front of the painting which had already been chosen as the grand prize winner.

The subject of the painting was Euphemia's father. It was a portrait of the Emperor of the Holy Britannian Empire, Charles zi Britannia, delivering a resounding address on a stage.

"..."

In truth, the problem didn't lie with whether the painting was good or bad. Euphemia possessed no discriminating aesthetic taste. However, putting that aside, she was not drawn to this painting. There was something aggressively pushy about the scene it depicted. There was nothing that stirred the emotion. There were actually several other paintings there that had touched her heart. In that sense, this painting could "give" nothing to those who viewed it. *Is it acceptable that something that does not give, is given the honor of winning the grand prize? Can I really choose this painting? Is this really the right thing to do?*

"..."

"Princess Euphemia?"

While she stood there in silence, the museum representative called out to her in a small voice. Next to her stood Darlton, who never left Euphemia's side.

"..."

I really can't—

And then, it happened.

Some people in the audience abruptly began to stir. *What's going on*, Euphemia wondered, as she turned around.

In contrast to the glamorous setting, a man dressed in a rough military uniform with a tense look in his eyes came forward. But the person he was heading toward was not Euphemia.

It was Darlton.

The approaching officer whispered something in Darlton's ear. Darlton's face immediately turned grim.

"At Chofu?"



"Urabe and Chiba, I'm leaving the security unit to you two. This is a mission to save your superior so I expect you to work hard for it!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I know!"

"Kallen and Guren Mk-II, come with me. Tohdoh is being held in a cell located at point A9. We're going to force our way through and secure him quickly!"

"Yes, sir!"

Lelouch's Burai and Kallen's Guren Mk-II rushed to the building in the midst of the ringing alarm. On the way, a Sutherland—probably the enemy's security Nightmare—jumped out from the side. Lelouch's Burai used its ASSAULT RIFLE to break its LAND SPINNER, then Kallen's Guren Mk-II quickly blasted the enemy unit using its Radiant Wave Surge claws.

Damn... Lelouch made a face in the cockpit as he drove his Burai forward. *Their security is tougher than the information I received.*

Of course this was understandable since Tohdoh was involved. Lelouch, or rather Zero, had only become a hero to the Japanese living in Area 11 in the past six months. Tohdoh had been a hero to the Japanese since the war seven years ago. Especially among the soldiers in the Japanese military, Tohdoh and the miracle he carried out at Itsukushima had many followers. It was predictable that someone would come to rescue him, and Britannia was probably prepared for it. Furthermore, today was the scheduled execution date. It would be the last chance for anyone to rescue him. Lelouch figured this extra security had been on Darlton's instructions.

If that was the case, Lelouch couldn't waste any time.

"Kallen, break the wall using the Guren."

"Huh? B-but..."

"If it's at this angle, there shouldn't be much damage done inside the cell. Do it."

And if Tohdoh lost his life because of it, then that just meant he didn't have the right luck.

"Y-yes, sir!"

The Guren, which arrived at the building first, used its left fist—the one not equipped with the Radiant Wave Surge—to punch into the gray concrete wall. The wall crumbled with a loud roar, creating a huge hole in the building. There, wearing prisoner's clothing and sitting in the center of the space, was one man.

Lelouch grinned and opened his cockpit.

Among the concrete bits scattered around...

There was a tall man sitting on the floor with a man in a mask looking down at him from on top of the Nightmare.

"Zero, eh?"

It was Tohdoh who spoke first. His body had received no injury, Lelouch saw that and thought, just for that luck, he could call Tohdoh a man of miracles too.

"Kyoshiro Tohdoh..." Lelouch called out his name using the microphone inside the mask. "The only man who brought a defeat to Britannia in the war seven years ago. The last star of hope for Japan."

"The Miracle of Itsukushima, eh?" Tohdoh's fearless facial features showed an expression of self-mockery. "Are you seeking a miracle from me too, Zero?"

"That was not a miracle," Lelouch denied flatly. "It was a strategic victory you achieved from collecting information

beforehand, analyzing the enemy's tactics, thorough preparation, and leadership that maintained morale in your subordinates. That is why I want you."

Tohdoh's eyes stared intensely at Lelouch.

But immediately the eyes looked away. Tohdoh sighed. "It's an honor. But it doesn't matter anymore. General Katase, the man I pledged my loyalty to, is dead. I want to die as well..."

Lelouch lost it at those words.

All of them are just...

An image of his friend's smiling face came up in his mind. That was understandable, since this Tohdoh had been his friend's teacher when he was younger. A great influence. Perhaps it was no surprise that they had similarities to each other.

But still... No, it's because of that...

How could you men think so lightly of your lives?

Do you think death is going to save you, idiots?

"Don't be a fool!" Lelouch yelled. Tohdoh looked surprised at the tone of his voice and turned back to him.

"You must take responsibility, Tohdoh! Responsibility for the miracle you made!"

There is something Lelouch thought about often.

Here in Area 11, compared to the other territories of Britannia, the resistance movement was more intense. Why was that?

"It's simple. Seven years ago, Japan lost the war with capacity to spare. Not in military power, but psychologically. There were many who thought at that point they couldn't beat Britannia. But one day, when they obtained power...! I wonder who implanted that idea in their heads, Tohdoh?"

"I!"

"Many Japanese still have the dream. That one day they can escape Britannian rule. Yes, they want to continue the dream called the Miracle of Itsukushima!"

"You're saying that it's my fault?"

"That's correct. Tohdoh, the dream you showed them hasn't ended yet. The Japanese are still holding on to it."

"..."

"Keep struggling, Tohdoh! To the very end, beyond all that's decent, and then die. Until the name of Tohdoh of Miracles has grown ragged and tattered."

"Are you saying only then the Japanese people can accept defeat? That is how I am going to take responsibility? To end the dream that I helped to create?"

"That is necessary for the people. They still fight against Britannia and are aggrieved. If their dream ends, if they completely accept the fact that they lost the war, their suffering will end. However..."

Then, Lelouch laughed arrogantly.

"That is the dream you showed them. It has nothing to do with me. I don't dream. I only create one thing, a result called a miracle."

Tohdoh stared at Lelouch's mask again.

Eventually, his mouth turned upward into a smile.

And then he asked in a low voice.

"I want to confirm something, Zero."

"What is it?"

"Many Japanese looked to me for a miracle these past seven years. And now, in the same way, many are looking to you for a miracle."

What I created was just a dream, a frail illusion...

"But your miracle, how long will it last? How far would it climb?"

Lelouch's eyes narrowed slightly behind the mask. His gloved right hand was placed on his chest. His cape flapped in the night breeze.

"Of course, until I drive Britannia into the ground."

"Fine. I shall give you this empty shell of mine."

Tohdoh stood up.

The Knightmare was called "Gekka."

It was based on the Guren Mk-II that Kallen rode. However, it wasn't equipped with a Radiant Wave Surge. The physical ability was slightly inferior too. Basically, it was a mass-produced Knightmare. It was easier to produce, but in return the specifications were not up to the same standard as the Guren. However, compared to the Burai and Burai Custom the Black Knights were using before, it was far more superior.

Standing before Tohdoh, now released from the restrictions of the prison, was a Gekka. It was jet-black, as if it were about to melt into the night. Around it stood four other Gekkas. Those were gray in color.

So he brought a unit made exclusively for me, eh?

Tohdoh laughed wryly as he looked up at the black Gekka. It was something Zero had prepared for him. And that was while Zero rode an inferior Burai. It was probably a message to tell Tohdoh to take command at the battlefield.

I wonder what he was planning to do if I wasn't convinced? Tohdoh thought, as he called out to the Gekkas surrounding him.

"Asahina, Chiba, Urabe, and Senba, sorry to cause you trouble."

"Colonel!"

"Welcome back, Tohdoh."

"It was nothing sir."

His subordinates answered him with cheerful voices.

"Cooperate with Zero! No need to linger here. We'll eliminate the remaining forces at once and escape."

"Yes, sir!"

All four answered at once to Tohdoh's orders. Tohdoh was already in the Gekka.

Lelouch was listening using Burai's sensors. He smiled coldly inside the cockpit, satisfied.

"Now all the conditions have been cleared. Nunnally's knight has also been chosen. That just leaves..."

However, at that moment, an alarm went off inside the cockpit. A black shadow appeared on the side screen. It was a sharp claw that shot through the air, aiming for Lelouch's Burai. It was a SLASH-HARKEN, shot from a Nightmare.

It wasn't Lelouch who responded, but Kallen's Guren Mk-II next to him. It kicked the asphalt ground and leapt in the air. It used the STUN-TONGPHER and flicked the HARKEN away.

The HARKEN floated in the air for a millisecond, before it was wound back into the Nightmare. In the distance was a familiar enemy machine, coming straight at them.

The white knight.

"What's he doing here!?"

Lelouch heard Kallen's surprised shout from the communication panel. However, he didn't panic at all. In fact, he laughed heartily.

"Well, well. The remaining problem has come here on his own!"

5

The murmur in the hall had grown louder.

This site was pretty far from the prison in Chofu, where the incident was taking place. Yet, those who were in the hall were quick-eared journalists. They'd probably gotten the information from their respective sources.

The Black Knights were attacking.

In the corner of the now rowdy hall, in a place where people couldn't overhear him, Area 11 military chief of staff Andreas Darlton was using a dedicated communication line to speak to military headquarters.

"Their objective is most likely Tohdoh. Then close all main roads in the area. Yes, it's military post number 19. Have the airborne unit that was on standby head there too."

Darlton was calm as he gave instructions to deal with this unusual incident. He needed to be. Viceroy Cornelia had left him in charge while she was gone.

"I know. The security forces at the prison just need to hold out. And...the ASEEC should be there now, correct? I'll allow them to... Oh. They've already launched? No, it's fine. It's an emergency, after all."

Nearby, Euphemia was standing with a pale face. She was holding the bouquet for the competition tightly in her hands, listening to what Darlton was saying. She was the only one allowed to hear his conversation.

"I need the details of the site. Connect me to the security headquarters of the prison. I need them to report... What? A plane from the TV network? Why is such a thing there?"

As he asked this, suddenly there was a loud roar in the hall. Darlton flinched and turned around.

Near the ceiling area of the hall was a large monitor. It was enabled for satellite communication—which meant that it could pick up the live footage that the television network was running.

And the footage that was shown on the screen was a breaking story. Flames and smoke were coming from the Chofu prison.

"Who authorized this!?"

The museum staff scrambled away to the equipment room. Darlton saw them off, clicking his tongue, and returned to his communication with headquarters.

"Yeah, we confirmed it on our side too... An outdoors concert? So the television network was flying in the area to cover that, eh?... No, there's no need to control the press. Now that it's been aired, controlling the information is useless. Besides, I can get information on the site from it too. Let them show the footage. I'll get communication from the airborne unit as needed..."

Darlon ran through the instructions, then hung up. It was then when Euphemia spoke to him with a shaky voice.

"The plane flying in the area is a civilian one, isn't it? We should have them evacuate..."

Darlon shook his head.

"They're taking the footage from a super telephoto camera. It's not that dangerous."

"But..."

"Besides, they're the ones who are choosing to stay. Of course, if they're in our way we will make them evacuate, but for now it shouldn't be a problem."

Euphemia opened her mouth to object further, but stopped. She figured there was no use in arguing with Darlon, a specialist, regarding military matters.

Darlon glanced at the princess, who was staring at the floor, and cleared his throat.

"With your permission, I would like to announce a second-degree alert in all of the Tokyo Settlements, Sub-Viceroy."

"I will allow it."

"Thank you very much."

"However, I would like to ask you one thing before that."

Euphemia lifted her face and looked at Darlon sharply.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"General, you stated earlier that the ASEEC was in the area."

"..."

"Why were they? Their base is in the opposite direction. There is no reason why they would be there."

"..."

"Please answer me. No, this is an order as Sub-Viceroy. I request the disclosure of this information from the mandate military."

Darlon could not keep quiet after that. Even if she was called a figurehead, she was still second in line after Viceroy Cornelia in Area 11. Darlon held back his sigh and opened his mouth to speak.

"It was the Viceroy's orders. Kyoshiro Tohdoh was to be executed today. A soldier of the Advanced Special Envoy Engineering Corps, Suzaku Kururugi, was assigned to be the executioner. Major Lloyd Asplund and Lieutenant Cecile Croomy were there to see it through. They weren't told to bring the Knightmare, but that was decided between them and me. I allowed for it since I had noticed restlessness among the anti-government organizations around the Settlements."

Euphemia turned paler.

"Executioner?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I believe that man...Tohdoh...is a close acquaintance to Su...I mean, Warrant Officer Kururugi. They were close as family..."

"..."

Darlon fell silent again. Euphemia's body wobbled.

"Oh my God... Was this the military testing him, General?"

Euphemia's voice grew louder. Several people turned away from the monitor to look at them.

"That is what it means to show loyalty to Britannia, Sub-Viceroy."

"..."

Euphemia bit her lip.

It was then that the hall once again roared.

The live footage captured the image of the white Knight, Lancelot, charging against the Black Knights.

The white Knightmare's movements were as extraordinary as usual. Even without Lelouch, who had eventually backed off, between Kallen's Guren Mk-II and the five Gekka under Tohdoh, a six on one battle, he still didn't back down. As he dodged the Guren's Radiant Waves, he clashed with the many swords of the Gekkas coming at him left and right, still attacking at every chance he got. No other enemy was this persistent.

There was another set of eyes viewing this feverish determination.

"I see."

There was a trailer sitting not too far from the battle site. Inside sat the members of the Black Knights, who aided and supported those on the front line such as Zero, Kallen, and the others. Their duty was to secure an escape route or intercept the enemy's communications. However, among them was an unfamiliar group of people wearing white coats.

In the center was a single woman. She stared at the monitor that depicted the situation on the battleground. Her age was around late twenties. On her lips was dark red lipstick, and in her mouth was a long Japanese smoking pipe.

"Is that it? The 'white helmet' that's been giving Zero such trouble?"

Inoue, who was sitting in front of the radio responded, "Yes."

Rakshata shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"Well, it's amazing he's been able to maneuver such a reckless machine. You know, that's not something a human is supposed to ride."

The members looked at each other.

"Well, if you're going to say that, then the Guren is also..."

"Don't be stupid. I may order high-priced parts, but only if I can afford them. I understand that regular Knightmares are said to be made for operation by weak people, anyway."

Though, she thought, I do have some interest in what's inside that machine. She laughed. Her name was Rakshata Chawla and she had developed the Gekka and the Guren Mk-II. This was her first time getting involved with the Black Knights, acting as their maintenance supervisor.

Tohdoh dodged the SLASH-HARKEN shot by the white

Knightmare. The calm voice of Tohdoh came through to Lelouch who had been watching from afar.

"Zero. There is no point in continuing this petty battle. I suggest activating the chaff smoke and retreating. We are not here to face this enemy."

"I want to agree. But that Nightmare's given me a sour taste in my mouth too many times. I want to end it here," Lelouch exaggerated for effect.

"Do you have a plan? You do understand if we prolong this, we're going to have to face the reinforcements from the Britannian Forces."

"It looks like the air force is already on its way. But we still have seven minutes before they reach us. It's enough."

As he spoke, Lelouch ran his fingers across the cockpit console. He sent data to Tohdoh's machine and to all allied Knightmares.

"Whoa..."

"Is this..."

The surprised murmurs could be heard through the receiver. Lelouch smiled. "Do exactly as I say. All units, take distance. Get to your calculated points. Its movements follow a predictable pattern. The data I just sent is a simulation of his moves. Match it with the coordinates of this building. Kallen, you open the attack."

"Okay, got it."

The place was for the storage of airplanes. It wasn't big enough to land commercial planes in, of course. It was made for the take off of personal VTOL planes. The ground was flat asphalt, a great place to move with maximum speed. The perimeter was lined with several storage hangars.

Following Lelouch's orders, Tohdoh and the five other Gekkas spun off their LAND SPINNERS and at once put distance between themselves and the white Knight. Kallen's machine was

the only one that stayed back, making it seem as if she was delayed in her movements. Of course the white Knight didn't miss this chance, and with all his power he closed the gap between himself and Kallen. His speed exceeded that of a Gekka.

"Its speed and maneuvering abilities are truly astonishing. Nevertheless..."

The pilot was, at least, merely a human. Which meant that there were certain habits to his movements. Lelouch had studied and dissected those movements and had conquered them.

That Knightmare had ruined his plans many times before. Initially, Lelouch hadn't thought of the white Knightmare as a problem, even with its excellent mechanical abilities. After all, it was only one weapon. In a large battlefield, it was only one dot. In the end, what determines winning or losing a battle are strategy and tactics. There is only so much one soldier can do. That was common sense. However, that white Knightmare had demolished that "common sense" many times before against Lelouch. In Narita, Shinjuku, and other battles, he had appeared right before Lelouch, made a clean sweep and took it away. His plans for overthrowing Britannia had been delayed many times because of that Knightmare. Cornelia wouldn't have gotten away at Narita if it wasn't for him.

I'll acknowledge it.

Lelouch didn't know who the pilot was. A pilot who could maneuver that great of a Knightmare must be a high-ranking Britannian knight. For reasons unknown, the Britannian Forces did not reveal the pilot's name. However, that didn't matter to Lelouch. What was important was that that Knightmare, both the pilot and the machine, had the potential to sway a battle situation with only one unit. Lelouch had to acknowledge that. However, to acknowledge meant at the same time to be prepared for it.

I'll crush both the Knightmare and the pilot.

Lelouch knew from watching Kallen and the Guren that there weren't that many people who could control such a sophisticated

Knightmare. Even if they crushed the machine here, it would be rebuilt. However, even Cornelia or Darlton would not be able to find a suitable replacement for this pilot. And as long as that pilot was gone, the white Knightmare would not be that threatening.

The white Knightmare charged with full speed and the Guren turned at the center of the battleground.

His movements follow a predictable pattern.

His initial attack is always from the front. He never uses a feint.

Just as predicted, the white Knightmare slashed at the Guren's midsection with his sword. Kallen and the Guren would be the only ones who could avoid that first blow. If this was a Burai, it would've been broken in two at this point. It would've been dangerous for a Gekka as well.

The Guren raised its speed, as though going through a pace change in a game of basketball. Backing away from the enemy's sword, she put distance between them.

Yes, and if this attack is avoided...

He will immediately move to avoid the counterattack. The direction he would move in would be determined by the landscape and obstacles. The white Knightmare jumped after failing to hit Guren at two o'clock. There was a hangar there. He would use the obstacle to shield himself from the enemy and to avoid the counterattack. It was a justifiable move. But that made it very predictable.

The Gekka jumped out from the side of the hangar that the white Knightmare had selected as his shield. Facing the opponent that landed, he charged with his sword aimed to pierce. It would have been so simple if this alone could have ended it, but of course, nothing was that simple. As the enemy landed, he unleashed his RIFLE with unbelievable speed on the Gekka. Blade and barrel clashed. But the Gekka had the advantage, with its surprise attack. The RIFLE flew high up in the air. Losing one of his weapons, the white Knightmare bent its knees slightly.

In this case, the next action is...

He would move back and gain some distance. Here, again, he would consider the obstacles and search for a location he could use as a shield. However, again, because it made sense, it was easy to read and to plan against.

The white Knightmare leapt again, heading to another hangar. However, another shadow appeared from that area. It was the Gekka that Tohdoh was piloting, its sword in the ready position. It wouldn't miss this time. The white Knightmare had no time to dodge.

Inside the Burai cockpit, Lelouch raised his chin and laughed.

"This is...*checkmate*."

Tohdoh attacked the white Knightmare like lightning. Once, twice, the enemy barely dodged—but not the third time. The Gekka's sword sliced through the top of the cockpit.

The enemy was still alive. Even facing feverish battle, he ducked the last blow, avoiding a hit to his core and death. The center and energy filler were undamaged. The blade only sliced off the top of the cockpit. It did not stop the machine.

"Damn."

Lelouch clicked his tongue.

Fine. If that's the case, I'll keep attacking. The first damage is done. Next, I'll...

And that's when it happened.

The white Knightmare lost the top of its cockpit. Of course, without its shield, the inside was in full view. The inside where the pilot sat.

The white Knightmare raised its body and stood up. As it did so, the pilot's face appeared on Lelouch's monitor.

Soft, tousled hair.

Wide eyes that still reflected some childhood...that face. It wasn't the soft smiling face that he so often had. It was the serious face, the face that Lelouch knew so well; the face he'd seen many

times. It could only be one person. Suzaku Kururugi. Lelouch's eyes opened wider than ever before. His collected face in an instant turned pale.

"It can't be..."

"!!!"

The moment Lancelot clashed with the black Knightmare's sword, Euphemia held her breath. She was watching the live footage at the museum. She fought to stop the scream that threatened to escape her throat.

Suzaku!

Yet, both Lancelot and Suzaku were still standing. The only thing that had been destroyed was the top of his cockpit and a small image of the pilot appeared on the screen. Without realizing it, Euphemia let out the breath she had been holding.

However, it was at that moment...

"Hey! Isn't that an Eleven?"

The voices of the spectators in the museum began to rise. Euphemia tensed up.

"I've seen him before. Yeah, who was it... Oh yeah, Suzaku Kururugi."

"The one that was arrested for being a suspect in the assassination of Prince Clovis?"

"That can't be, an Eleven piloting a Knightmare?"

"No way! That can't be allowed!"

"What is going on!?"

The commotion grew louder. Darlton, who was standing behind Euphemia, clicked his tongue. Of course, there was no law stating that a non-Britannian couldn't pilot a Knightmare. But this could become an emotional issue. A conservative Britannian wouldn't want a Number in a position a knight could hold and

garner respect in. This was why Cornelia and Darlton had kept Lancelot and Suzaku away from the public. How could it be that this was revealed in this manner? There was only a one in a million chance that a Nightmare would not be destroyed in battle and just have the inside of its cockpit exposed.

"That's enough."

Immediately, Darlton headed toward the communication device which was still connected and started giving orders.

"Order the TV crew filming this to evacuate now... I know. There's nothing we can do about what's already been broadcast. That was my error."

There were several ways to eliminate this *ex post facto*. However, whichever method he chose, he could not allow any more footage of Suzaku and Lancelot to be shown.

"Calm down. It's not your fault. The air force... I see. That's fine, as long as they are on their way as scheduled."

After hanging up, Darlton walked to the middle of the venue in long strides. Facing the museum employees who were milling about in agitation, he shouted, "Stop the broadcast! Any more would be..."

Just when Darlton raised his voice, a sharp voice that cut through even his deep voice arose in the hall.

"Please wait!"

"What..."

Turning around, Darlton saw the visage of the beautifully-dressed third princess of the Britannian Empire, Princess Euphemia li Britannia.

"I want to see it through...no, I have a duty to see it through. General, for you and for me."

Her pretty face, which just a moment ago was clouded with anxiety and anger, had changed into a calm, steely reserve.



Lelouch was not the only one in shock.

"So, it's Suzaku..."

Kyoshiro Tohdoh stared at the screen inside the Gekka's cockpit. Seven years ago, his opponent had called him "*Sensei*," and today...he was supposed to kill this boy with his own hand.

He's the pilot of the white Nightmare.

The image of Suzaku moved on the main monitor of the Gekka. With a tense look on his face, Suzaku appeared to be glancing around him. But he was actually looking at the inside of his cockpit, confirming his surroundings. Then, as if he had concluded that the machine could indeed withstand combat, he turned the control stick and the previously bent-over Nightmare stood up.

Almost mechanically, Tohdoh plunged the Gekka into the white Nightmare, but not to destroy it. The opposite was his intention. The white Nightmare stopped the lunging Gekka with both of its hands and the two machines interlocked. Both forces balanced against each other in equilibrium. Because of this, the machines stopped moving for just a moment. Tohdoh opened the cockpit door of the Gekka and leapt out. In the blustery wind, he shouted.

"Stop! Suzaku!"

Suzaku's eyes grew wide as he saw who it was.

"Tohdoh...!"

But the boy quickly regained his composure.

"Tohdoh. Of all people, such an act of lunacy because you fear death! Are you trying to survive at the expense of your principles?"

Though Tohdoh's blood had begun to boil, those words were enough just for a brief moment to calm him down.

In that moment, he saw Suzaku's face, and even though they were on a battlefield, Tohdoh began to reminisce about the past. He was remembering a time when Suzaku had called to him, "*Sensei, sensei*." Whether he fought on the side of Britannia or the

Japanese made no difference. Tohdoh had begun to think that this boy, Suzaku, was capable of stopping the fighting through his own skills of persuasion.

But that was a dream from long ago.

Ah, yes, Tohdoh muttered to himself, as he returned the gaze of this dignified young man.

Suzaku and he were already walking different paths. Tohdoh had stopped being his master a long time ago.

On that beach—

He submerged those memories deep into the recesses of his brain. Tohdoh laughed. *If that's the case, then this conversation is merely between two opponents.* That is, their conversation that would begin now. *After paying some respect to their mutual past, they should probably clarify their respective stances.*

"Are you disappointed, Suzaku? If so, why don't you execute me as planned?"

"What?"

"What's wrong? Didn't you come here with those intentions? To think that you have crumbled into a mere rascal because of the current circumstances."

"There's no point in denying the state of the current society. To have the strength to acknowledge and change that..."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course!"

Hearing him respond without hesitation, Tohdoh again felt a smile coming on. Even if they had different paths, even if he was no longer being called "sensei," and even if he had already lost that right, a master is someone who delights in the growth of his student. No matter what form that takes.

Thus, Tohdoh declared: "If that's the case, then take that path!" "Huh?"

Suzaku's facial expression looked as if he were caught off guard. And in that moment, the equilibrium between the interlocked Gekka and white Knightmare crumbled. There was a

metallic sound, a clashing of machines, and then a gap appeared between the two Knightmares. Even then, Tohdoh kept on.

"Whether you win or lose, you gain nothing unless you give it your all! It's the same whether it's a country or an individual.

"Draw your sword and show me that you're prepared!"

Again, Suzaku's eyes grew wide.

Then, the young man gave his clear response. It was the same straightforward voice from long ago.

"Yes, sir!"

"Zero! Do you want to capture him? Or... Zero!?"

Kallen's confused voice was shouting through the communication device. It was somebody she knew from school. Even though she had prepared for the possibility of facing this situation, it had come on all too suddenly. Although Kallen strongly objected to Britannia, it wasn't as if she were a cold, heartless girl. If anything, her passionate nature merely reflected her deep emotions about things. Even if reproached, she trusted Zero whom she relied on completely to make decisions when she was shaken, confused and wanting to escape.

But now, Zero was in no position to make any decision.

...Why?

Why are you there?!

It's not possible. It can't be possible. Are you really the one who thwarted every move I made? You, you who I believed was going to protect Nunnally with me. Over and over and over again! You backed me into this corner. I won't acknowledge this. This can't be. This definitely cannot be. You can't be there. Can't be there.

You...you...should be by Nunnally's side—!

Another Gekka rammed into the white Knightmare, now separated from Tohdoh's machine. Kallen shouted again.

"Wait! Zero hasn't given us instructions yet!"

But the Gekka wouldn't stop. This was to be expected. This moment was its chance. Although it had been six to one until now, the enemy Knightmare which had caused so much trouble was now disabled. They couldn't miss this chance.

As soon as he saw this, Lelouch immediately returned to himself.

"Stop! Not now!"

They couldn't hear him. There were four machines, including Tohdoh's machine, bearing down on the white Knightmare from all four directions. But then, something unbelievable happened. Four SLASH-HARKENS snaked out from the white Knightmare in their midst. That alone wasn't extraordinary. It had simultaneously launched all the SLASH-HARKENS that it possessed—that was all. But the amazing thing was their trajectories. The catapulted HARKENS raced through the air and shattered the swords that the four Gekkas were brandishing.

"What!?"

Tohdoh was surprised. Rather than the skill of the pilot, this had more to do with the mechanical function. *Auto-homing*. There were Knightmares that were equipped with this function, but being able to accurately target four machines simultaneously as they moved at high speed was way above normal. Who knew that it possessed this secret weapon?

The Gekkas didn't remain still. They immediately changed course and once again tried to surround the white Knightmare. At that moment, Lelouch screamed.

"Stop!!!"

This time, they heard him.

The Gekkas, including Tohdoh's machine, then hesitated in their movements.

"Stop the fighting! No more!"

If he had given this order with the current situation remaining unchanged, Tohdoh and the other subordinates, not to mention Kallen, would likely not have obeyed it willingly.

However, fortunately—or unfortunately—the situation turned. There was an urgent message from Ohgi and the others. The Britannian Air Force was fast approaching.

Struggling to compose his shaking body, Lelouch stated the order as if he were throwing up blood.

"Our objective this time...has been achieved. Use Route 3—Retreat immediately!"



The gigantic monitor at the ceremony showed the image of the Black Knights' Knightmares disappearing from the site, scattering smoke in their wake.

In hindsight, it could be called "escaping." However, Lancelot and Suzaku had fought hard. In adverse circumstances, with it being one against seven, they had been able to hang on to the location until the air force arrived. The time that they bought was not in vain. The pursuit now would depend on those forces, not on the injured Lancelot.

Amazing job, Suzaku.

Euphemia held her heart that had finally started to beat normally and thought this. But it was at that moment—

"Damn, why won't he go after them?"

Hateful voices started popping up in the hall.

"Because they're Elevens, like him."

"Ah, I get it."

"Besides, the enemy's movements were strange to begin with."

"Of course! I thought one against seven was a little too much to be real!"

Vicious comments were being whispered. Disdain. Hatred. Euphemia clenched her white teeth.

That's what it means to show loyalty to Britannia.

That was what Darlton had said just a moment ago. Of course, once Euphemia regained her cool, she had to acknowledge Darlton's words held reason. Actually, he had only stated what was true. Suzaku was in the Britannian Forces. As long as you are part of the military, your power will be used to kill the enemy. Euphemia still didn't understand choosing Suzaku to execute someone who had been close to him, but she knew that what she had asked Suzaku to do in the past was not that different. At Narita, Euphemia asked Suzaku to rescue her sister Cornelia. But if you looked at it another way, she'd asked him to get rid of those who were threatening harm to her sister. As a result, he fought and he might have killed someone, someone who was Japanese, like him.

Euphemia couldn't imagine how painful that would be. It would be as if someone told her to kill Cornelia or Darlton. The unreasonableness was so piercing; her emotions could not catch up. Furthermore, after making him do that, what her side, what Britannia was giving him was this. They wouldn't approve of him. They showed no consideration. In fact, they showed maliciousness and blatant hatred. And it wasn't just today. The Orange Incident, and the information breach a few months ago...it had been for a long, long time. No matter how much pain he must be in.

She knew it was presumptuous of her.

She understood that she was one of those Britannians. She knew there was nothing more hypocritical than making him do his job and showing him cheap affection.

But, still...

"Everyone!"

Euphemia's voice was dignified. Everyone in the hall turned around.

Euphemia looked at all of them and stood up straight.

"I would like to answer the question you asked me earlier. You wished to know who I'd decided on as my knight, correct?"

To be protected, to receive.

"My knight shall be the man you see before you!"

But at the same time to protect and give...

"Warrant Officer Suzaku Kururugi!"

The hall once again filled with clamor.

Euphemia didn't care. She gazed calmly at the Lancelot and at the knight she had chosen on the screen.

Suzaku.

Protect me.

And I will use every power I have to protect you.

Even if that does not truly save you.

Even if you do not wish for it.



"Zero won't come out of the Burai?"

"No. I called him but he won't answer."

Kallen and the other Black Knights had escaped and were talking near the trailer. Suddenly, they heard a voice.

"Heh heh heh heh..."

There was laughter coming from the external speaker of the Burai.

"Heh heh heh heh...ha ha ha ha...hahahahaha!!!"

It was the voice of Zero—a young man named Lelouch vi Britannia—laughing like a maniac.

There was someone watching from a land bridge nearby.

It was C.C., observing with cold eyes.

"I told you Lelouch. You cannot turn back anymore..."

Then, her hair flowing in the wind, she turned her back on the trailer.

CODE GEASS
コードギアス
反逆のルージュ
Lelouch
of the Rebellion

Afterword

My computer broke so I bought a new one, but I guess my printer isn't compatible with Vista, because I keep getting error messages. Do I have to get a new printer too?

So, hello again. It's been a while. This is Mamoru Iwasa, the writer of the "Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion" novel series. The special advance screening of Code Geass just took place the other day. How is everyone doing?

Speaking of the special advance screening, I was invited to the one in Tokyo. I am very thankful to the staff for that. There, the voice actors talked about the behind-the-scenes happenings regarding the anime, and I had to smile. For example, how the story changed in episode 6.

Actually, since I write the novels, I receive all the materials such as the scripts and background settings beforehand, and among them was a "phantom episode" that didn't air. Even for the episodes that did air, they were slightly different. So it was like they let me peek backstage at this process of making a high quality product, and I learned a lot from it. It is connected directly to my work, after all. Of course, then I have the problem of which script to refer to for the novel, the script before the changes or after the changes (laugh).

I would like to talk about this volume, Stage 2.

Some circumstances forced me to have to cut out a part of the story that was aired in the anime. Basically, as director Goro Taniguchi mentioned in the previous volume, the concept of

this novel was to show more of Suzaku's side, so if you could understand that I would appreciate it. The incidents that occur are almost identical, but if Suzaku is not that involved in it, it won't be depicted that much. Of course, Lelouch is still the main character. (Oh, but the other novelization series is all Kallen...)

Finally, I would like to thank the anime staff, everyone involved, and of course, you the reader who picked up this book.

I hope to see you again for Stage 3.

September 8, 2007

Mamoru Iwasa

CODE GEASS
コードギアス
反逆のルージュ
Lelouch
of the Rebellion

Commentary by Yoshitaka Kawaguchi, Producer

It was a hot summer day last year when I asked Mr. Iwasa to novelize "Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion."

I had Mr. Iwasa come to the studio where we were working on Code Geass, and we had a meeting with director Mr. Goro Taniguchi, series writer Mr. Ichirou Ohkouchi, Mr. Iwasa and I. I remember being surprised when I first saw Mr. Iwasa. That was because I expected him to be a skinny, metrosexual-type of man, judging from the books I had read by him. But the man who appeared before me was a tall, handsome, dark man.

He accepted the assignment of novelizing Code Geass, but I am sure he had trouble with it because Code Geass is a tricky show. Even I as a producer have a hard time explaining it. One of the reasons is that the main character, Lelouch, is very picaresque, romantic, and not a typical anime main character.

He doesn't care what sacrifices are made as long as the final goal is met. The result takes priority over methods. But because of his decisions, he hurts and wavers. That is Lelouch. And the man opposite him, the man who shines opposite to Lelouch's darkness also has darkness in his heart...that is Suzaku. We, the staff of this show, chose these figures as characters who can represent the current age.

However, when we met Mr. Iwasa, the show wasn't completed yet. We couldn't feel what the characters sounded like. A novel is a medium that can tell the time, space, and even the psychology of humans. I'm sure Mr. Iwasa thought over and over about what

the novelized version of Code Geass should be like. And what he decided to do in the end was to talk about Lelouch and Suzaku's past, about when they were younger and start from there.

"The sword is already drawn. Unless that sword sees a conclusion—blood—neither side will back down." And later: "It's up to you what you choose. How you want to take responsibility for the blood you've shed, and the blood you're going to shed in the future." These are my favorite lines of Kirihara in Stage 0 (Entrance). The story that Mr. Iwasa tells of Lelouch's and Suzaku's heart has a different taste from the anime. I am also curious to find out how this sword will be sheathed.

Oh, and by the way, the commentary the director wrote in the previous volume is total fiction. I hope the readers understand that fully...

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コードギアス
反逆のルージュ

Lelouch

of the Rebellion

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