Dinky

MYSTIC MOON VACATION
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Mystic Moon Vacation

I do not own Escaflowne or its characters. This is just a stupid lil fic idea that's been rattling around my head forever. So today I decided to finally write chapter one. This is my first fanfic with an OC, because in general I don't like main character OC, but whatever. This is meant to be a humorous, non-serious fanfic about Van visiting Hitomi for Christmas and New Years, and I just hope it will end up being somewhat amusing. Anyway, Hitomi (and OC Annie) are 21, living in MN, United States, and they invite Van to visit for the holidays. So, we know how Hitomi dealt with suddenly being on Gaea. I've always wondered how Van would act visiting the Mystic Moon. Oh, and Allen. Yeah, he comes along...and sorry Allen fans, but I like to make life miserable for him! Please feel free to read and review and flame. I'm just hoping this doesn't suck too bad! If so, I'll stop updating!

The Uneventful Arrival

Hitomi leaned against the hood of her car, her breath coming out in little white puffs of air. She was parked in the middle of nowhere, empty, snow-covered fields stretching out on all sides. There was no sign of human activity for miles. Which, because of the reason she stood there waiting, was perfect.
The butterflies in Hitomi’s stomach felt more like trapped parakeets trying to escape. No matter what she tried, she couldn’t calm them. She was nervous, excited, terrified, and elated all at the same time. No wonder she felt like she was going to explode.

Van was coming today, this afternoon, to spend the Christmas holidays with her. It was so unbelievable and unexpected, she still more than half expected that he wouldn’t appear. So as she stared at the leaden, grey winter skies, she was torn between hope and fear. Hope that he would show up just as planned, and afraid that she was just dreaming after all.

Huddling farther into her coat for warmth, Hitomi silently cursed, and blessed, the one who had started this whole thing in the first place. Sometimes, Hitomi wished she’d never breathed a word of Gaea or Van to Annie, her psychotic roommate and firm best friend. But Annie had a way of weaseling every stinking secret out of each person she met. And poor Hitomi had been no match for her; basically just off the plane from Japan to the United States, a college freshman in her new dorm room with her intense, insane, new college roommate, Annie Goettenberg. Hitomi spilled the beans in less than a month. And Annie, crazy, unpredictable Annie, had believed every word of it. The two became tighter than sisters.

Annie had decided, seeing as it was the first year that the two of them lived in the small, somewhat run-down house she had inherited from her grandmother, that Van must be their guest for Christmas. And when Annie decided something, it was final. Hitomi was stubborn, but Annie was an unstoppable force. And besides, Hitomi desperately wanted to see Van again.

Oh, they saw each other- in a dreamlike way. In those moments between waking and sleeping, sometimes they would meet, and it was almost like being together. They couldn’t touch, and their images were blurry and transparent, but they could talk, and see each other’s faces, just for a brief while. Every night, Hitomi prayed that he would appear, and when he did, she’d memorize every blurry line of him, to cherish until the next time they met. And they’d always talk about someday, someday when they’d meet again in person.

“Invite Van for Christmas!” Annie had demanded. And Hitomi had asked him, nervously, expecting him to immediately dismiss the idea as impossible.

“Van,” she’d said quietly, wishing as always that she could touch him, “you know how we talk about seeing each other for real again someday?”

Van scrutinized her silently and nodded. She gathered up her courage.

“Well, Annie would like to invite you to stay with us over the holiday season,” Hitomi let out in a rush. She chewed her bottom lip nervously as Van just stared at her and didn’t say anything immediately.

“It’s just…well, Christmas is a big deal here, and it’ll be the first Christmas without her grandma, and she’d really like you to come and share it with us,” Hitomi explained, wanting Van to stop staring at her with that look and say something.

“I know you’re busy, and you probably can’t, but, well, we both would like it if you could. I—I would like it if you could…” Hitomi trailed off and wondered if her face was glowing from the hot blush on her cheeks.

“When is this Christmas?” Van asked quietly. Hitomi nearly squealed with delight. He hadn’t rejected the idea outright!
“A month. Annie—I mean we—we were hoping you could come a few days before Christmas and stay until after New Year’s, which is a week after Christmas. I told her you probably couldn’t come for that long, though,” Hitomi said, trying to keep her soaring hope out of her voice.

Van studied his feet, thinking, calculating. Hitomi tried not to fidget.

“I think I could manage that,” he said, looking up with a slight smile. Hitomi stared a moment in shock, then jumped up and down a few times, laughing. Van just smiled wider.

“Do you really mean it, Van? You’ll come to Earth?” Hitomi exclaimed. She silently cursed the fact that she couldn’t hug him until his ribs cracked.

Van, if she only knew, was cursing the same fact. “Don’t get too excited yet. I have to talk it over with my council first.”

“Oh,” Hitomi said, her smile falling slightly. “But you’re the king, so you can just tell them what you’re going to do, right?”

“Sort of,” Van said, shaking his head but smiling. “There’ll be some details to work out, though. I’ll discuss it with them tomorrow, I promise.”

And true to his word, he worked out the details, and the planned arrival was set. For today. This freezing cold December afternoon, in the middle of a field, in the middle of nowhere. And Hitomi was going crazy waiting for him. Oh, and Allen Shezar. She kept forgetting that somewhat irksome little detail.

Somehow, some way, Van’s council decided it wasn’t safe for Van to go to the Mystic Moon alone. When Van had argued that Hitomi had invited him, that it would be awkward and rude to send someone whom Hitomi didn’t know with him, the council had turned around and asked Allen Shezar, of all people, to accompany him. Van was furious, and Hitomi, though annoyed, had laughed when he told her. It would make for a very interesting visit. Annie and Allen would mix like oil and water.

Hitomi glanced at her watch again, though the action was pointless. There wasn’t any way they could set a specific time, just mid afternoon. And it was mid afternoon, and she was cold, and he wasn’t here.

The iron-grey clouds above her swirled, sparkling with energy. Hitomi jerked herself upright expectantly. The brilliant blue pillar of light burst out of the clouds, so bright Hitomi had to shade her eyes. She could see two forms descending in the light, and her breath caught raggedly in her throat. She was actually going to see him again, touch him, feel him, smell him!

The figures touched ground, and Hitomi hurtled herself forward, impatient to prove to herself that Van was solid, real. Before the light had fully dissipated, before Van had gotten his bearings, Hitomi reached him, nearly knocking both of them over as she tackled him in a tight hug.

The smell of him, of rain, of green fields, filled her senses, and she could feel his strong, strong arms wrap around her to crush her to him in response through her thick winter coat. Damn those layers of clothes! She wanted to feel his heartbeat. They pulled back to look at each other’s faces, smiling. Both reached up and touched the other’s face; she forgetting that she was wearing thick gloves and he oblivious to the biting cold. They could’ve stayed like that for hours.

A discreet cough behind them broke the magic, and blushing, they pulled away and came back to reality. Hitomi looked around Van to the tall blond behind him. Allen
Shezar looked exactly the same as the last time she had seen him, standing with Celena in the Asturian Palace gardens. His long blond hair looked bright against the drab surroundings, and his crisp blue uniform gleamed in the weak light.

“Hi, Allen! It’s so good to see you again!” she said brightly, smiling. She wanted to hug him too, but she felt awkward and killed the impulse. Besides, she didn’t really want to dispel the feeling of Van’s touch just yet.

“I am happy to see you, too, Hitomi,” Allen said, smiling and bowing slightly. Hitomi quelled a giggle. His proper, chivalrous mannerisms were not going to sit well with Annie, always unpredictable and informal. Hitomi turned back to grin at Van, and noticed he was dressed in the traditional thin Fanelian clothing.

“Eep! I forgot! You’re freezing!” she cried. Van just smiled at her. “Your coats are in the car, over here.”

“Is it always this cold on the Mystic Moon?” Allen queried as she led the way to her small blue vehicle. Hitomi laughed.

“Nope, although living here it seems like it,” Hitomi replied. “Minnesota winters are long and cold, way colder than any place in Japan. Actually, today’s not too bad.”

Van and Allen gave her incredulous looks as they pulled on the layers of long sleeved sweaters, thick coats, hats, gloves, and scarves she handed them. Van looked a little like a skater punk in a coat a little too big for him and the cap pulled down over his eyes. Annie had sent along a ridiculous tasseled hat for Allen, and Hitomi had to bite her lips hard to keep herself from laughing.

“Where’s your friend, Hitomi?” Van asked after he’d struggled into all the layers Hitomi had handed him. They seemed a bit excessive, but it was unbelievably cold!

“What? Oh, Annie. Well, she was planning on coming to meet you, but then she got distracted,” Hitomi replied as she closed the trunk of her little car.

Van, who knew something of Annie from Hitomi, just shook his head, but Allen looked a little confused.

“Distracted by what?” he asked. It was clear that he would never have let something distract him from what he believed were good manners, namely, meeting the guests that you had invited.

“I think it was Christmas cookie baking,” Hitomi said, shrugging, “but I’m not really sure. She said ‘there won’t be any dancing sugar plum fairies unless I catch that damn gingerbread man’. I just hope she doesn’t end up baking only gingerbread men this year.”

Now Van and Allen both looked confused, but Hitomi didn’t elaborate further. Instead she showed them how to work the seatbelts, Van sitting next to her in the front, and Allen squeezed into the back. Hitomi knew that Van, being slightly shorter than Allen, should have been sitting in the back, but she didn’t care.

She saw Allen jump slightly in the rearview mirror as her car roared to life. It may have been a tiny car, but it made up for size in noise. Even Van looked mildly uneasy as she swung out onto the road and took off towards home. Hitomi smiled and stepped harder on the gas.

“A bit faster than horses, huh?” she asked as they hurtled down the road. She could see Van surreptitiously gripping on to the car door, and she smiled wider.
“You’re sure you can handle this, uh, …car safely, Hitomi?” Allen asked, his eyes glued to the road ahead of them.

“Of course! Annie taught me how to drive, you know,” Hitomi answered. Van gripped the handle harder and tried not to look nervous. Hitomi laughed.

“You can relax. Annie drives like a maniac, but I’m pretty safe. I promise I’ll get us there in one piece.”

Allen didn’t reply, or at least he couldn’t be heard over the roar of the engine. Van just smiled and nodded, but didn’t relax his grip and seemed absorbed in staring out the windows. Hitomi turned up the volume on the radio and sped down the road towards home.

**Laughter and Gingerbread Legs**

So, here we are finally meeting my OC Annie. I hope you like her!! This is kind of a longer chapter...hope it doesn't drag too much. Maybe it'll even be a little bit funny! So, I'm thinking this story will eventually be lime-flavored. How can you avoid it when Van and Hitomi meet again for the first time in years?! Raging hormones and all!! Yay! No microwave adventures yet...but we'll get there. Enjoy!

Hitomi slowed the car to a halt and switched off the engine. The silence felt thick after the heavy roar of the engine, and both Allen and Van turned towards Hitomi expectantly. Grinning from ear to ear, Hitomi pointed directly out the passenger side window to a little brown house standing squished between identical blue and white houses. There were barely five feet between houses, and the snow was piled up almost to the bottom of the windows.

“That’s it! That’s my house. Well, actually it’s Annie’s house, but you know what I mean,” Hitomi said happily. Both men turned to scrutinize it, and their silence made Hitomi nervous. After all, the two of them lived in palaces and estates. Well, to hell with that! She loved their little house!

“Who cleans the snow off your walks?” Van suddenly asked. He liked the brown house. Maybe it was a weird thing to think about a house, but it looked friendly to him. But there was a lot of snow piled up, and it looked heavy.

Hitomi blinked, surprised. “Well, we do, mostly. There’s this old guy down the street that shovels everyone’s sidewalks, but Annie totally freaks out when he does ours.”

“Why? Isn’t it easier to have a man do it for you?” Van asked, turning back to look at her.

“He’s about 90 years old, and Annie’s convinced he’s going to keel over and die on our front steps one day. Anyway, let’s get inside,” Hitomi replied, unbuckling her seatbelt and opening her door.

Van and Allen made simultaneous movements to copy her actions. The seatbelts didn’t move. Van tried to pull the clasp out of the buckle first, then stopped and looked down to examine it. Allen managed to push the release button the first time, but didn’t push it down far enough and got his glove stuck. Hitomi stopped climbing out of the car to look at them; Van kept his head bent and studied the buckle, feeling like an idiot.
How did it work-? Ah! There was the clasp! Van pressed it down firmly and the seatbelt whipped off of him.

“That buckle catches sometimes,” Hitomi said kindly, and Van sincerely hoped she really believed it had just stuck and didn’t realize he hadn’t known what to do. He grabbed the silver handle in the car door and swung it open as Hitomi turned back to Allen.

“Do you need some help?” she asked the blond knight.

“No, no thank you. A little difficulty with these gloves, that's all,” Allen replied, finally freeing his glove and successfully unbuckling himself.

Hitomi thought it highly unlikely that Allen, whom she had rarely ever seen without his trademark white gloves, had had difficulty with the ones she had given him, but she let it slide. Now, excited, she led the way up to the front door and ushered her two guests inside.

The inside of the house was blissfully warm, almost hot, after the biting cold outside, and the three peeled off their layers gratefully.

“This is the living room,” Hitomi said as she unwound her scarf. The two men were already eyeing the room, and she bent to gather up all their gear.

It was a nice room, with wood floors, a big comfortable looking couch under the windows along one wall, and a large, low, wooden table littered with books in front of it. Stairs led up to the left of the front door, and a piano sat along another wall. A large, arching doorway led into what Van assumed was a dining room, judging by the long wooden table dominating it. There was a perfusion of plants on every flat surface and trailing long vines down to the floor. The place looked cozy, inviting, just how he’d imagined Hitomi’s house would look.

Suddenly, sound blared out from a room beyond the dining room. Both Allen and Van jumped and reached for the handles of their swords. Music, loud, angry, clashing music, echoed off the walls and ceilings, beating against their eardrums. Van and Allen pulled their swords from their sheaths as a man’s voice shouted something in the noise, the words lost in the horrible grinding of the instruments.

Hitomi emerged from the little closet on the stair landing to see Van and Allen, swords at the ready, looking about to charge.

“Whoa, whoa, what are you doing? Put the swords away!” she shouted over the noise. She really had to tell Annie to keep the volume set to pleasantly painful instead of eardrum exploding while Van was here. Her shouts got their attention, and they turned to look at her.

“Who is that man?” Van shouted back, gesturing to where the music was coming from.

“It’s not a who! It’s a CD, just a recording. There’s no men here except you! So put the swords away!” Hitomi said, torn between being annoyed or amused at their knee-jerk defensive reaction.

“Seriously,” she continued as they obeyed her. “You can’t go whipping those things out while you’re here. Actually, you should probably just give them to me now until you go back to Gaea.”

“What?” Van and Allen said together, obviously unhappy about this turn of events.
“You can’t carry swords around here,” Hitomi explained. “You could get arrested or something for carrying a dangerous weapon. The swords are going to have to come off.”

“You mean it’s not legal to carry a weapon here?” Van asked, confused but unbuckling his sword belt and handing it to Hitomi. “How do people protect themselves?”

“I guess we figure it would cause more problems if everyone was walking around with a weapon,” Hitomi replied, taking their swords and storing them carefully in the closet. She motioned for them to follow her, and they walked through the small dining room and into a small room to the left.

The music here was even louder, and Hitomi stalked through the doorway to a small black rectangle sitting on the counter and pushed a button. Ah, silence.

Van and Allen followed her into the room and stared. The white cabinets had smears of frosting and cookie dough on them, dishes were piled precariously high in the sink, and flour dust covered the floor. The countertops were covered in rows of little gingerbread men, every one perfectly decorated down to the last gumdrop button. And every one of them was missing its legs.

In the middle of this sea of chaos, sitting cross-legged on the floor, was a girl who looked as disheveled as the kitchen. A fine layer of flour dust covered her from the top of her red-bandana covered head to the tips of her bare, multi-colored toenails. Smears of frosting and doughdecorated her face and the front of her tanktop and jean overalls. She looked up as Hitomi switched off the music.

“Oh, hey Tomi!” she said cheerfully, not moving to get up from her position on the floor. “I didn’t hear you come in!”

“No kidding,” Hitomi muttered under her breath. She turned back to Van. “This is Van Fanel, Annie.”

Annie grinned enthusiastically at him. “I’d say ‘nice to meet you’ but I feel like I already know you. You’re way hotter than I thought you’d be! I like your hair.”

Van blinked, a little taken back, but feeling complimented all the same. “Uh, thanks,” he replied, a little red in the cheeks.

“And this is Allen Shezar,” Hitomi continued. Allen bowed slightly, good manners covering up any thoughts he might have about the strange girl sitting on the floor.

Annie stared open mouthed at him for a moment. A long, painfully silent moment. Don’t tell me she’s going to fall for him, too, Van thought irritably as Annie stared at the blond knight.

And then she started laughing. A full, all-out, side-splitting, belly laugh. She laughed so hard the tears made tracks down her flour covered cheeks, so uncontrollably she was gasping for breath. Allen just stood there uncomfortably, uncertain of what he had done to cause the outburst, and certain that Hitomi’s friend was completely and utterly insane. Van’s eyes widened in disbelief, and deep inside he could feel his ego doing a wild victory dance. Hitomi, poor Hitomi, looked torn between joining in the laughter and melting into a little puddle of embarrassment.

“Oh, Tomi, Tomi, why didn’t you warn me?” Annie wheezed out finally. She shook her head, wiped her cheeks, looked up at Allen and started giggling again. Allen frowned heavily. He was used to girls giggling flirtatiously around him, but this was definitely different. It was like she was actually laughing at him.
A loud buzzing erupted in the room, making everyone jump. Annie clambered to her feet and dived towards the sound.

“Stand back!” she shouted. “It’s the last batch!”

The three watched in astonishment as she snatched up two baking mitts and pressed a button, silencing the buzz. She hesitated for a moment, then quickly swung open the oven door. Van and Allen stepped back in surprise at the blast of hot air coming from the large, white box. Van stared in confusion. He couldn’t smell, see, or hear a fire. Where was the heat coming from?

Annie snatched the tray of golden brown gingerbread men and threw it on the only open space on the counter. She tossed the protective mitt off her right hand and seized a large and wicked looking butcher knife.

WHACK!

The freshly baked gingerbread men lost their legs, just like all their brothers before them. Allen took a discrete step away from the small but scary girl.

Hitomi sighed heavily. “Annie, you know they can’t get up and run away, right?”

“Damn straight they can’t!” Annie retorted, sweeping the neatly severed appendages into a bowl filled with gingerbread legs. She waved a leg in front of a gingerbread man. “Oh, yeah, mister! Where are you going? NO where!”

Hitomi shook her head as Annie turned back to grin at all of them. Van looked around the kitchen, then back at Annie.

“Did you bake all these just to cut their legs off?” he asked.

Annie nodded. “Uh huh, I’ve got to. Gingerbread men are creepy. I have to cut their legs off, otherwise I just can’t get over the thought of them running all over the house.”

“Then why do you bake them?” Allen asked, hoping he wouldn’t start off another laughing fit.

“I can’t just not bake them,” Annie said in a ‘well, duh!’ voice. “It’s tradition! So, who’s hungry for some tasty legs?”

Somehow, even knowing they were just cookies, the thought of eating the legs killed their appetites. But Annie dusted some of the flour off her small person, plopped the bowl of cookie legs in the middle of the table and ordered them to sit.

“So, first order of business is to get you some clothes,” Annie said as she bustled around the kitchen making them all hot drinks.

Hitomi nodded. “Yeah, you both need a few outfits.”

“I don’t understand why you didn’t have us bring our own clothes, Hitomi,” Allen said seriously. There was a loud crash and smothered laughing from the kitchen. Allen did his best to ignore it.

“It would have saved you the trouble of finding us suitable clothes,” he continued. The smothered laughter got louder.

Hitomi shot a dirty look in the direction of the kitchen. “Um, well, your clothes wouldn’t really, I mean, they’re just so different from our styles that…”

“You’d look like a Halloween reject,” Annie finished, walking towards the table with four steaming mugs on a tray. Allen’s instinctual good manners took over, and he jumped up to take the tray from her. She took a step back, clutching the tray and glaring at him. Hitomi groaned, and Van watched, his mouth twitching suspiciously.
“What in the sam-hell are you doing?” she asked.
“I was only going to help you with the tray,” Allen replied, annoyed and confused.
“I think I can make it to the table” she retorted. Allen stared at her. “Sit your poofy-sleeved butt down until I ask for your help, okay? Chivalry’s dead, you know.”
“It’s not dead where I come from,” Allen shot back. “And neither are manners.”
Annie grinned at him, unperturbed. “Good manners are usually just a cover for backstabbing and deceit. I’d rather people were honest.”
“Just like oil and water,” Hitomi muttered as Annie passed out the mugs and plopped herself down in the last chair.
Van overheard her and whispered back, “I think Annie’s very interesting.”
“You just like her because she laughed at Allen,” Hitomi whispered back. Van grinned wickedly.
“So, as we were saying,” Annie said, taking a bite out of a leg, “we need to get you some clothes. Normal clothes.” she stressed, looking at Allen with twinkling, laughing eyes. He frowned and straightened his sleeves. Hitomi and Van hid their smiles behind the rims of their mugs.
“Okay, then. Van, stand up.” Annie commanded. Van’s smile died, and he looked uncertainly at Hitomi. She didn’t look concerned, so he stood up. Both girls scrutinized him until he felt like a specimen under a glass dish. He shifted uncomfortably.
“Hm. What do you think about Jordan?” Annie asked Hitomi finally. Hitomi tipped her head to the side and pursed her lips, thinking.
“Yeah, I guess that would work.”
“What’s Jordan?” Van asked nervously, but Annie was already pulling out a small device from her pocket. She flipped the top of it open and it made a strange beeping noise. Van eyed this “Jordan” warily, ready to protest, when she put the thing to her ear and began talking to it.
“Hey, man, whatcha doing?...oh, same o’ same o’ here....Say, you know that favor you owe me?...Yes you do. You totally do....whatever, you did not already pay me back....well, yeah, but that didn’t count...”
Van and Allen exchanged looks. What was going on? Did this “Jordan” have magical powers? Van couldn’t quite see how that tiny little thing was going to give him some clothes. Hitomi didn’t seem interested in it, in any case. She was just toying with her mug, chewing on her bottom lip like she was thinking about something. Van forgot all about the magical Jordan and just watched her. How long had he waited just to watch her, not a blurry dream-image. And not just watch her. He wasn’t going to pass up this opportunity, not when they could actually touch and...
“Oh, thanks so much, Jordy! You’ll really save our butts with this one! So, how soon can you bring them over?...No, today will be good, anytime. You work today?...Okay, just swing by then...Thanks! Love you!” Annie flipped the device closed again as she jumped up and did a little dance. Van dragged his eyes away from Hitomi’s lips.
“He agreed to bring some clothes over?” Hitomi asked.
“Oh, yeah. Just a little begging and he caved right in!” Annie replied happily. She waggled her finger at Allen. “So now it’s your turn, Mr. Manners.”
Poor Allen shot her an annoyed glare, but stood up to be scrutinized as well. Annie tapped her lips with her pointer finger, a wicked grin on her face. Allen eyed her nervously.

“Devine would be perfect!” she exclaimed.

“NO,” Hitomi said firmly. “What about Derrick?”

Annie sighed heavily. “Aw, Tomi, you ruin all my fun. Fine. Derrick it is.”

Once again, she flipped open “Jordan”, made some beeping noise, and began talking to it.

“Hey Derrick! How much do you love me?” she asked. Now Van was thoroughly confused. Wasn’t that thing called Jordan? Did it change from being Jordan to being Derrick? And how was it going to give him some clothes?

Allen didn’t care if that thing was called Jordan or junk. Honestly, he was starting to wish he had turned down the request to accompany Van to the Mystic Moon. Why he ever thought it might be interesting to see Hitomi in her own world escaped him. And just seeing the way she looked at Van opened up old wounds all over again.

But that was survivable. It was worth it to see her face again. Only no one had warned him that she lived with a mannerless, insane little wretch of a girl! He hadn’t been on the Mystic Moon for more than a few hours and he already could tell she was going to get under his skin. And most definitely NOT in a pleasant way.

“Yay! You’re the best ever, Derrick!! Toodles!” Annie flipped the Jordan-Derrick shut and wrinkled up her nose at him. “Well, you’ve got some clothes on the way, too. Only I hope the shirts fit, because I can’t really tell how wide your shoulders are with those poofy sleeves.”

Oh, lord help him. He had to endure almost two full weeks of this.

**DVDs and Clothes**

Okay, so this chappie is EXTREMELY boring, but I wrote it in like 15 min. I meant for it to keep going...but I think it'll be better if I start a new chapter. Next chap will be very VxH centric...yay! So I apologize for this poor, poor chapter, and I promise to work MUCH harder on humor and some romance in the next one. Please don't give up on me!!

Hitomi took pity on Allen, who looked more flustered than she’d ever seen him, and dragged both he and Van on a “tour” of the rest of the house while Annie cleaned up her gingerbread mess. Seeing as how the rest of the house consisted of the basement—which was just a big open room with a futon, a few big squishy chairs, some aquariums, and a projector complete with an 8 foot pull down screen, and the two bedrooms and bathroom upstairs, it didn’t take long. The two men barely glanced into the bedrooms, and Hitomi supposed it was considered improper or something. She wasn’t actually too sure of Gaean protocol. Well, they were on earth now, they could just deal with it!
“So, this is the fun room where everyone hangs out,” Hitomi said as the tour concluded in the basement.

“What does the screen do?” Van asked as he pulled it down. It looked like a thick, stiff cloth to him. Not very exciting.

“It’s just what the projector reflects the picture from,” Hitomi said. “Here, let me show you!”

She bounded up the steps and turned off the main lights, plunging the basement into darkness. The sun had long since set, so there was no light filtering in through the windows, even if they hadn’t been curtained off. Van heard, rather than saw, Hitomi go past him and push a button.

The projector hummed to life and shot out a bright blue light right at Van and the screen. He quickly stepped out of the path of the light and stared dumbfounded at the screen.

“See? That’s what the screen’s for,” Hitomi said. “We can play movies on it, video games, everything. I’ll never go back to a TV again!”

Allen looked thoughtful. “It does more than just this blue light?”

“Yeah, this is just the start up screen,” Hitomi replied. “Oh, I keep forgetting you don’t know what movies are... Well, what do you want to see?”

She flung open a cabinet full to capacity with what appeared to be thin books. Van and Allen came up behind her to examine them.

“These are all movies that your projector can show?” Van asked, amazed. There must have been several hundred crowded into the large cabinet.

“Yeah! Pick one out and I’ll show you,” Hitomi said cheerfully. Van hesitated. How to pick one from the multitude? Finally he reached out, grabbed one from the mess, and shoved it at Hitomi. She looked it and laughed.

“What?” Van asked, self-conscious. Hitomi shook her head, opened the book, pulled out a small, flat disc and inserted it into another of the strange Mystic Moon machines.

“Nothing. Just that you would go and pick the one movie with giant fighting robots,” she replied, still chuckling. Van and Allen jumped, wheeling around to the screen as sound flooded the room. Flashing, moving pictures replaced the blue. Van relaxed, irritated to realize that his hand had automatically gone for his missing sword hilt. He really did need this “vacation”.

Hitomi rummaged through a basket and pulled out a thin, flat rectangle covered with buttons. She pointed it at the machine with the disc and pushed some buttons, her eyes on the screen.

“What’s that?” Allen asked. His head was aching from all the strange devices Hitomi operated with uncaring ease.

“It’s the controller. It’s how I tell the DVD player what to do,” Hitomi replied.

“You can communicate with machines?” Van asked incredulously.

“Yes. And no. I mean, I can’t talk to them. I can just give it commands. Like this button tells it to go to the menu. Okay? Now I can go to chapter selection and….there. Now I can tell the movie to play,” Hitomi explained, still watching the screen. Giant robots, seemingly fighting each other, but doing more damage to a city than to themselves, erupted on the screen. Van and Allen stared, openmouthed. Allen actually went and touched the screen.
Hitomi settled herself comfortably on the futon, studying Van’s back. She was so excited and nervous to have him here, in her house, but honestly, she didn’t know what to do with him. She kept forgetting all the things he wouldn’t understand that she took for granted, like watching movies. All her silly daydreams about snuggling with him and watching a movie, or dancing to her favorite music, even just wasting time in the mall—she had to rethink them all.

Van turned around to look at her. She smiled and patted the spot next to her. He smiled back and sat down, so close their shoulders brushed. Hitomi grinned and scooted just a little bit closer. It was chilly down in the basement, after all, and it was dark…maybe she should snuggle in even more…

BRIIIINNNNG

Hitomi and Van jumped away from each other as the doorbell rang, cursing mentally.

“Hey! Annie? Hitomi?” a man’s voice shouted from the entryway. Before Hitomi could even move off the futon, there was a muffled crash followed by what sounded like several bowling balls being rolled down the upstairs stairs. Van and Hitomi exchanged looks as they heard Annie greeting the newcomer enthusiastically.

“I guess she’s handling it,” Hitomi said, settling back onto the futon.

“Shouldn’t we go upstairs and greet your guest?” Allen asked, frowning. Hitomi gave him a quick look.

“Uh, no. No, Annie can handle it,” she replied quickly. She was not going to try to come up with some excuse about Allen’s outfit to Derrick. On the other hand, they could possibly pass Van off as just a strange dresser. Why hadn’t she ever realized before how ridiculous Allen’s uniform truly was? No wonder Annie had laughed when she met him.

The front door slammed, and Annie charged into the basement.

“We got clothes!” she exclaimed as Hitomi paused the movie. “Well, Allen’s clothes at least. Jordan won’t stop by until later.” Annie stopped, apparently noticing Van and Hitomi sitting on the futon together. She grabbed Allen by the arm.

“C’mon Blondie. Let’s go get you dressed,” she said, dragging Allen up the stairs at a record pace.

“What are you doing?” Allen hissed as Annie pulled him through the main floor towards the upstairs.

“Can’t you see those two needs some ‘alone time’?” Annie retorted, looking at him as though his brain was made of soft, spongy cheese. She grabbed a bag lying by the front door and motioned him up the stairs. She smiled, looking remarkably like a shark eying a meal. “They need to get reacquainted, if you know what I mean. And you need to get out of that before someone sees you.”

The look on Allen’s face showed that he knew exactly what she meant, and that he didn’t exactly approve. The dig to his uniform didn’t go unnoticed, either.

“This uniform is only worn by the knights who have earned the title of Knight Caeli. It is a high honor to wear this,” Allen informed her, firmly keeping his annoyance and anger in check.

Annie stopped rummaging through the bag and studied him. “Hm. If I had to wear that to be a Knight Cello, I’d pass on the honor.”

“Knight Caeli. A Heavenly Knight,” Allen ground out between clenched teeth.
“Whatever. Here, put these on,” she answered uncaringly, shoving several articles of clothes at him and pushing into the bathroom.

Slowly, Allen undressed, folding his uniform with his usual care and respect. He turned to examine the strange garments he’d been given. The pants appeared to be of the same thick, blue material of Hitomi’s pants, and they appeared to be of a similar style. He slid those on without difficulty. The short-sleeve shirt was another issue. There were some words on one side of the material, but not the other. Did the words go in the front or the back? He just stood there, trying to figure out some way to tell, until he heard Annie knocking on the door.

“Hey, what’s going on in there? Don’t tell me you’ve never dressed yourself before!” she called.

Allen swung open the door. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s just this shirt…”

Annie took it from him and read the front. “What, the words? It’s just a dumb pop-culture quote, it’s nothing bad. I don’t see why you have a problem with it.” She held the shirt out to him, studying him again. Frowning, he took it back.

Realization dawned on her suddenly. “…Oohh. I see. The words go on the front. See the little tag thingie on the collar? That’s how you can tell front and back.”

Embarrassed, Allen nodded and pulled the shirt over his head. Annie just leaned back and scrutinized him. He raised a questioning eyebrow at her.

“Who’d have thought that uniform hid that torso,” she said thoughtfully. She grinned at him and handed him a small, elastic band. “Just tie your hair back and you’ll look authentically computer geekish.”

Obediently, Allen pulled his long hair into a ponytail at the base of his neck. Annie looked him over and nodded.

“Yep. Perfectly camouflaged,” she declared. “You know, you look better this way. Anyway, let’s just go tell the lovebirds that we’re going to get the tree and skedaddle.”

“What tree?” Allen questioned as he bounded down the stairs after her, wondering when she’d had time to clean up and change. Her long brown hair was tied sloppily into a bun, and she wore plain jeans and a heavy sweater. There were no traces of the flour or frosting smears.

“The Christmas tree! We can’t have Christmas without the tree, can we?” she replied over her shoulder.

Allen barely had his coat on before she pulled him out the door, still muttering under her breath. It appeared to him that Annie was trying to play matchmaker, and he was supposed to be her willing partner in crime. Something deep down in his gut squirmed painfully at the very idea. He knew exactly what he would be doing if he had the chance to be in Van’s shoes, and he didn’t cherish the thought of the younger man being the one to do it instead of him.
“What did you expect from them? Exclamations of undying love?” Allen asked, irritated, as they climbed into the car.

“No!” Annie replied, just as irritated. “But I did expect pent-up emotions and raging hormones to play a little stronger role.”

She jerked the car around and stepped, hard, on the gas. Allen scrambled to get his seatbelt securely fastened. Annie drove with reckless abandon and a lead foot; Allen thought he might die before they ever found this all-important Christmas Tree.

Annie sighed. “Look, Allen, we’ve got less than two weeks to get them to figure this out. So, it looks like you and I are going to be getting to know each other really well. Oh, joy.”

Allen began to hope he might die. And soon.

**Decorations and Desire**

Okay, I've been naughty and forgetting this: I DO NOT OWN ESCAFLOWNE. But I own the original stuff of this story, for whatever that's worth. Anyway, YAY chapter 4! An entirely VxH chapter! I hope it's not too mushy...but I do like mushy...So, let's get this hormone party started!!

Hitomi had turned off the movie and the projector after Annie had dragged Allen upstairs. She got up and switched on a lamp and the aquarium lights, feeling awkward sitting there in the hushed dark with Van. Not wishing to show him how nervous she felt, Hitomi sat back down on the futon next to him, although farther away this time.

After several moments of uneasy silence, she cleared her throat.

“Uh, I hope it isn’t going to cause problems for you to be here. I mean, for Fanelia,” she said.

Van shook his head, his eyes on the brightly colored fish in the tank. “No, it’s fine. I have to go on trips to other countries for political reasons sometimes. This is just like that.”

“Oh,” Hitomi said, quietly. Political reasons? He’d better not be here just for political reasons!

“I didn’t mean this is a political visit,” Van corrected, realizing how that sounded and mentally kicking himself. “More like a…a”

“Friendly visit?” Hitomi supplied. Van nodded. It wasn’t quite what he meant, but friendly was good. Better than political anyway. This conversation wasn’t going too well. Van wished she’d turn out the lights and put the moving pictures back on so they could go back to what they were doing before. Now he just felt awkward as they both searched for something to talk about.

The silence was broken by what sounded like several large animals charging through the house, and Annie bounded down the stairs.

“Hey guys, we’re going out to find the tree, so you two just stay here and wait for Jordan, okay? And if we’re not back by six or so, turn the oven to 350 and put the chicken in. I got it all ready in the fridge. Oh, and start the rice. But we should be back by then. Okay? See ya!” she started back up the stairs, then turned and looked at Van. “Oh, and the tags go in the back. Bye!”

Then she ran up the stairs, and the front door slammed moments later. Hitomi and Van just looked at each other, the wall clock ticking off the seconds loudly.
“So,” Hitomi said, licking her lips nervously. “I guess it’s just you and me, huh?”

“What tree are they going to find?” Van asked, scratching his head. What tags go in what back? And why had she told him that specifically?

“The Christmas tree. It’s a traditional part of Christmas. You get a pine tree, decorate it with lights and ornaments, and then you put all the presents under it until you open them on Christmas Day.”

Van nodded. It sounded like an extremely odd thing to do, but then, this was the Mystic Moon. Things were bound to be strange.

More awkward silence…

“Hey, I know!” Hitomi said suddenly, jumping to her feet. “We could get out all the decorations and have them all ready to go. That’ll save some time after Annie and Allen get the tree home.”

Van got to his feet as well, glad to have something to do other than sit there and make small talk. He hated small talk. Hitomi opened a small door in the corner of the basement and pulled a cord. Light flooded a tiny, low-ceilinged room that was packed full of boxes and miscellaneous things. It looked like an impossible challenge to get anything out of that room.

“Where are these decorations?” Van asked, eyeing the stacks and piles teetering up to his head level.

“Back there,” Hitomi said, pointing to the back corner of the room, accessible only by squeezing one’s body very carefully through a maze of haphazardly piled boxes.

“Of course,” Van muttered darkly. Hitomi was already wiggling herself through the piles towards the back corner. Van couldn’t help but to kind of enjoy watching her maneuver her lithe body around the difficult boxes. He followed her in partway through the maze.

“Okay,” she panted as she finally reached the back of the room. “I think it’ll be easiest if I hand you the boxes and you take them out.”

She passed him boxes and bags, and he dutifully carried them out into the main room and placed them in the growing pile.

“How many more decorations are there?” He asked after the sixth trip. Hitomi was bent over, giving him an excellent view of her nicely proportioned backside.

She straightened up, rubbing her forehead. “There’s just this one. But it’s pretty heavy. I don’t think I can lift it over to you.”

Van squeezed and maneuvered his way through the rest of the maze until he could look over her shoulder at the offending box. Hitomi put her hands on her hips, which was no easy thing considering the tight confines.

“Let’s switch places, and I can try to carry it out,” Van suggested. Hitomi nodded, and turned to try to squeeze past him. There was no room, and they were forced to press their bodies tightly together. Blushing furiously, Hitomi wiggled against him, trying to move past him so he could get to the box. Van tried to help by putting his hands on her waist and attempting to push.

“I don’t think this is going to work,” Van said at last, his voice sounding deeper than normal, his hands still on her waist.

Hitomi giggled breathlessly. His scent filled her nose, and the warmth from his hands seeped through her thin sweater. She looked up into his eyes, and his quick breaths
tickled her cheeks. Her own breathing was coming much faster than usual, and his
eyes, inches from her own, mesmerized her. She’d forgotten what intense, deep,
chocolate brown eyes he had. They were beautiful. Her hands came to rest on his hard,
muscled chest. She could feel his heart pounding furiously under her palms, matching
the pounding of her own heart.

Van struggled for breath. She felt so good pressed up against him, her body heat
seeping into him through his thin Fanelian shirt. His hands slid a little farther around
her waist, drawing her even tighter to him. Her green, green eyes stared up at him,
questioning, wanting. He watched as her pink lips parted as if to invite him to taste
their sweetness. He leaned down towards her.

BRRIINNNNGGGG!!

“Anybody home? I gotta get to work!” A male voice echoed through the house,
muffled by the boxes surrounding them.

Shocked, Hitomi and Van pulled away from each other as much as their tight
confines would allow. This time, Hitomi was able to wiggle past him, and she
scrambled out of the storage room.

“It’s Jordan. He’s brought your clothes,” Hitomi said to Van over her shoulder. Damn
damn damn! She thought angrily. If it had been just one minute later! I’m going to rip
that damn doorbell out of the wall!!

Van, left standing in the closet, swore violently under his breath. He had been this
close, this close, to finally feeling her lips against his, and fate just had to intervene.
He cursed his luck as he picked up the heavy box, the box that had almost given him a
taste of heaven, and struggled his way out of the storage room. He could hear Hitomi
talking to a man upstairs, and he took a few deep breaths to steady his pulse.

The front door slammed, and Van heard Hitomi call his name. Leaving the boxes and
bags where they were, he trudged up the stairs and met her in the dining room. She had
a large duffle bag slung over her shoulder.

“Jordan brought some clothes for you,” Hitomi said unnecessarily, showing him the
bag. Van just nodded, and she shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, contemplating
their ridiculous situation. Just minutes ago they were practically plastered to each
other, and now they were so awkward together that they could barely look each other
in the face!

“I guess you should try some on to make sure they’ll work,” Hitomi said after a
pause. Van agreed, and she led the way upstairs. He hesitated outside her bedroom
door when she went in and dropped the bag on her bed. Hitomi rolled her eyes.

“Look, Van, I don’t care if it’s improper on Gaea to come into a girl’s room. Here it’s
perfectly fine. Really. It’s just a room.”

Hesitantly, looking more awkward than ever, Van took two steps inside the door and
stopped. Hitomi sighed but decided she’d give him some time to adjust to the idea. She
unzipped the large duffle bag and began to rummage through it for something to give
Van to wear.

Van stood uncomfortably inside her bedroom doorway, part of him wishing to be
anywhere but there, and another, larger, part of him very curious about what she kept
in her most private room. The room itself was small, like the rest of the house, but
cozy. The walls were painted a deep crimson red, almost the exact shade of his
trademark red shirts, with a white ceiling and white trim. The furniture was all white, a
small bed tucked against one wall, a bedside stand, a white dresser, and a small white
desk. There were a lot of what he took to be miniature drawings or paintings placed in
frames all about the room. Unable to resist his curiosity, he reached out and picked one
up from the bedside table. There were four people in it, including Hitomi. And judging
by the resemblance to Hitomi between the older woman and the younger boy, Van
guessed it must be her family. But it was strange. It was too perfect and life-like to be a
painting. It was like a moment frozen in time, all of them happy and smiling.

“How did the artist get it like this?” Van asked. Hitomi glanced up at him, saw him
staring at her family photo, and came to stand at his side.

“It’s a picture, Van. A camera captures an image and prints it on film so you can see
it. I’m not really sure how it works. There’s some science behind it.”

Van looked confused, and Hitomi smiled. She rummaged through her backpack lying
on the floor and triumphantly pulled out her small, silver camera.

“Here, let me show you,” she said, turning it on and pointing it at Van. “Okay, say
cheese!”

“What?”

“Just smile!”

Confused, Van gave a half-hearted attempt at a smile. Hitomi pressed a tiny button;
there was a click and a bright flash, and Van was left blinking rapidly at the spots on
the inside of his eyelids.

“Come and look, Van. Your first photograph!” Hitomi said, showing him a tiny
display on the back of the small silver device. Amazed, Van stared at an exact,
unmoving copy of himself giving a rather pathetic smile.

“That’s a really bad smile, Van. We’ve gotta try it again!” Hitomi looped her arm
through Van’s and pulled him close to her. She held the camera out as far as her arm
could stretch.

“Okay, now smile nice!” she commanded, and the tiny machine blinded Van again.
Hitomi eagerly looked at the image on the display and grinned happily.

“Oh, that’s a good one. I’ll have to print them before you leave so you can take one
back with you to show Merle.”

Hitomi still had her arm looped around Van’s, their heads nearly touching as they
both examined the image. Now she pulled away again, a light pink blush staining her
cheeks.

“She’d like that,” Van said quietly as he left Hitomi’s family photo back in its place.
“She really misses you. I think she cried for a full day when I told her she couldn’t
come with me.”

Hitomi turned back to the duffle bag. “I really miss her, too. I miss everyone,” she
whispered sadly. Finding what she was looking for, she straightened and turned back
to Van. “Here! I think you’ll look good in these. I mean, uh, I think they’ll fit you.”

Van accepted the pants and shirts from her and headed into the bathroom to change.
The pants were the same thick material as Hitomi’s blue pants, but where hers were
form fitting, his were loose and baggy with lots of extra pockets. The waist was too big
and wanted to sit half way down his rear end, and the cuffs dragged on the floor. The
two shirts she’d given him were also big and baggy. The long sleeved shirt was a plain
black, and Van surmised that he should put that one on first, and then the red, short
sleeved one with designs on over it. But which side was the front? Frowning, he examined it for some clue, and came across some small white tags on the neckline of each.

“The tags go in the back. Thanks Annie,” he said fervently under his breath. Quickly, he finished getting dressed and headed back into Hitomi’s room.

She was sitting cross-legged on her bed when he emerged from the bathroom, staring at the picture she’d taken of the both of them. Now, at least, she’d have a picture of him. No matter what happened, after he’d gone back to Fanelia, she’d have this picture of the two of them together forever. She looked up as Van hesitatingly knocked on her door to get her attention.

Hitomi couldn’t help staring at him, hoping she wasn’t actually drooling. Dear lord, but he looked hot!! With his wild black hair and his borrowed baggy clothes, he looked a little like a skater punk. Van hitched up the pants again self-consciously.

“I think the pants are too big,” he finally said as Hitomi just sat motionless, looking at him.

Hitomi gave herself a mental shake. “They’re supposed to be big. Let me check if Jordan sent a belt along, though.”

Tearing her eyes off the incredibly tasty hunk standing in front of her, she rummaged through the bag again. After several moments of searching, she pulled out a black belt and handed it to Van.

“Thanks,” he said, and started pulling it through the belt loops. He felt a little less self-conscious when his pants were securely anchored in place around his hips.

“Better?” Hitomi asked. He nodded and she grinned, holding the camera up and snapping another picture of him. That one was definitely getting framed and put next to her bed. Smiling, she held the camera out to Van.

“Here. Do you want to try taking some pictures? It’s really easy. Just look at the display on the back, and when you’ve got what you want on the screen, push that button on top.”

Van took the small, strange device from her and examined it. The display on the back was like a window that showed a miniature version of whatever he pointed it at. He pointed it in the direction of Hitomi, still sitting cross-legged on her bed. She smiled, tipping her head to the side, and he pressed the little button down, capturing the moment.

“Did it turn out?” Hitomi asked as Van stared at the image. He swallowed. Did it turn out? She looked beautiful, smiling at him like that, her head tilted like she was sharing a private joke with him. He wanted to remember her like that forever.

“When you get this…printed,” he said, his voice husky, “can I keep it?”

The look on his face made Hitomi feel strangely warm inside. “Of course you can keep it. We just have to get them printed before you leave.” She swung herself off the bed, feeling an intense need to move. “Let’s go finish bringing those decorations up to the living room. Annie and Allen should be back with the tree soon.”

Without looking at Van, she hurried past him and down the stairs. Van set the camera down carefully on Hitomi’s desk and followed her slowly down the stairs. Whatever else may happen while he was on the Mystic Moon, he would always cherish that frozen moment in time.
Yeah, me again. Haha! Did you really think I'd let them kiss? Van's hardly been there for half a day! We've got to give them some time to be awkward and uncomfortable (VAN: "That's just mean! Let me get some action, already!")

Trees and Dishes

Hey ya'll! I'm back again with chapter five!! Can you believe it? I'm on a roll!! Anyway... still no microwave adventures, but I promise they're coming. I hope this chapter's somewhat amusing anyway. I hope you enjoy it!!

Allen glared at Annie as he stood the fifteenth million tree upright for her inspection. What was so damned important about finding the most absolutely perfect one, anyway? If she made him hold up one more tree…

“Okay, that’s the one!” Annie exclaimed. What made this tree so much better than the last few hundred, Allen would never be able to figure out. At least she was finally satisfied. Together, they hoisted the tree over to the salesman, purchased it, and carried it over to the waiting car.

“And just how do you propose we get this thing home?” Allen asked, an edge of irritation coloring his voice. The tree was bigger than the car, for God’s sake. Annie opened the trunk and pulled out a length of rope.

“I hope you’re better at tying knots than I am,” she said as she threw the rope to Allen. “Last year, Hitomi had to hang out the window and grab on to the trunk to keep the tree from flying off the car.”

“I doubt any knots will hold given the way you drive,” Allen said as they hoisted the tree onto the roof of the car. She didn’t reply as she helped him tie the it down.

With a mocking, sideways glance at Allen, Annie pulled out of the parking lot and joined the traffic flow at a pace that rivaled a snail. Allen gritted his teeth, determined not to comment. A few more sideways glances, and he snapped.

“Alright, I get it! You’re driving safely. Just get us back to your house so we can get out of each other’s company!”

Annie laughed and sped up, although she kept the speed noticeably slower than before. “Allen, you really need to take a joke!”

“Are you like this to everyone you meet?” Allen demanded.

Annie sighed. “Just people like you that don’t know how to relax. And is this how you are to everyone you meet?”

“No,” Allen stated firmly. “You seem to bring out the worst in me.”

“Let’s compromise. You try to be less stiff, and I’ll try to be less annoying. Agreed?”

Allen glared straight ahead at the oncoming road. He didn’t want to compromise. To be honest, he had no idea how to be “less stiff”. But if it would make her back off, he’d agree.

“Alright. Agreed.”

They were silent the rest of the drive home, which in Allen’s mind was an improvement. The little car pulled up in front of the brown house, and Annie pulled the keys from the admission. She turned to look at him with the most serious look he’d seen on her face yet.
“Allen, you’re not too thrilled with the idea of Hitomi and Van getting together, are you?” she asked.

Allen looked away, wanting to avoid the question. “They’re already together.”

“You know what I mean. You don’t really want it to happen, do you?”

Allen gritted his teeth. He clenched and unclenched his fists several times. “No,” he finally admitted-- to Annie, and to himself.

Annie regarded him for a few long moments, and he braced himself for an angry tirade. Finally she nodded and patted him on the shoulder.

“I see,” she said, and he was surprised at how gentle her voice sounded. “I’m sorry.”

Allen turned towards her in surprise, but she was already climbing out of the car. It took them several minutes, and a few muttered swear words, to get the tree freed from the rope and off the car. Annie brushed some pine needles off herself and grinned at him.

“I’ll go get Van to help you get the tree inside,” she said, and disappeared inside. Allen rubbed his gloved hands over his face and sighed heavily. This trip was turning out to be way more complicated than he had planned, and he had only been on the Mystic Moon for a few short hours. Annie was right– he didn’t want to see Van and Hitomi together, really together like she suggested. He’d thought he’d be fine with it, but apparently, the possibility of seeing it happen before his eyes was something more painful than he wanted to endure.

The front door opened, and Van and Hitomi came towards him. The shy smiles they gave each other were enough to make Allen want to turn away, but he plastered a smile on his face and greeted them calmly.

“Annie sent us out here to get the tree set up and brought in,” Hitomi told him. The relief he felt must have been a little too evident on his face, because Hitomi grimaced at him. “Honestly, Allen, she’s not that bad when you get used to her. You just met her at a bad time.”

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“You mean when she was busy mutilating gingerbread men?” Allen asked, more sarcastic than he meant to be. Van snickered.

“Yes!” Hitomi answered, obviously wanting them to understand. “She’s terrified of gingerbread men. Don’t you have anything you’re irrationally scared of? Like spiders? Or clowns?”

“If she’s so afraid of them, why did she make them?” Van asked as he and Allen carried the tree up to the front door.

Hitomi sighed. “Her grandma. She always insisted on making gingerbread men at Christmas because she said it just wouldn’t be Christmas without them. But she always made them when Annie wasn’t around, and she always cut their legs off. I didn’t even think about it until this morning when Annie mentioned them. I should’ve realized how important it was and made them for her.”

Allen frowned heavily. That explained the bizarre behavior to an extent, but still…“Honestly, who can possibly be that terrified of a cookie?” he demanded.

Hitomi just shrugged and handed Van a sharp saw. “My mom is terrified of butterflies. Some people just have weird fears. Saw off the bottom of the trunk.”
They dropped the conversation as Hitomi instructed them in the proper way to get a Christmas tree into the stand. The two men grunted and strained, and readjusted the tree several hundred times before Hitomi was satisfied.

“Who did this for you before?” Van asked as he pushed his hair out of his eyes. Hitomi rolled her eyes.

“We managed it all by ourselves last year. It’s not that hard.” She held the door open as they trudged past her with the tree. Thanks to Van and Hitomi’s efforts, everything was ready, and the tree was placed, rather unceremoniously, in front of the living room windows. Annie came in to inspect their handiwork.

“Perfect! Oh, wait…don’t you think it tilts a little to the left?” she said. Van and Allen groaned audibly. Hitomi stepped back, the two girls examining the tree.

“I think it looks perfectly fine,” Allen said through clenched teeth. Van nodded fervently.

“Okay, it’ll be fine,” Annie sighed. “Anyway, dinner’s ready, so let’s eat! Then we can decorate!”

Allen gave a mental shudder. If decorating this tree would be anything like finding it or setting it up, it would take hours. He pulled off his coat and found Hitomi and Van staring at him.


“So does Van,” he replied. “Hopefully, we can pass as inhabitants of your world now, Hitomi.”

Hitomi looked over at Van and grinned. “Oh yeah. You guys fit right in. Anyway, let’s eat!”

The table was immaculately set, with fine china, wine glasses, and lit candles. The food smelled absolutely delicious, reminding them how long it had been since they had nibbled on gingerbread legs.

“To celebrate the official start of your vacation to Earth,” Annie said as she set down the last dish of food.

“Thanks, Annie! This is really nice,” Hitomi said as they sat down. Annie wrinkled her nose and passed the food around.

“Just don’t expect this every night,” she said laughingly. The food was devoured in record time, and they all sat back, patting their stomachs with a contented sigh.

“So, who wants to clean up, and who wants to help me with the tree lights?” Annie asked lazily. Hitomi jumped up fast.

“I’ll clean up,” she said quickly as she carried some dishes into the kitchen.

“I’ll help you,” Van added, grabbing his plate and following her.

“Looks like you’re stuck with me again,” Annie remarked with a smirk as she looked across the table at Allen. He silently groaned, wanting to smack his head against the table. Hard.

Hitomi hummed quietly to herself as she rinsed and stacked plates, happy to have escaped the horrors of stringing the lights. The wine from supper made everything seem fuzzy and wonderful, and she smiled at Van as he carried the rest of the dishes in from the dining room.
“Thanks. You know, you don’t actually have to help with this. You’re a guest,” Hitomi remarked as he carefully placed the dishes on the counter.

“I don’t mind helping,” he replied. “Why were you so eager to do the cleaning?”

Hitomi shuddered. “You have no idea how horrible doing the lights is. I’d rather wash a mountain of dirty dishes than help with the lights.”

She smiled as she watched Van looking around the kitchen, obviously at a loss as to what to do next. She flicked some water off her fingers at him to get his attention.

“Have you ever helped clean a kitchen before, Van?” she asked laughingly.

Van considered for a moment. “Not really, but I spent a lot of time in the kitchens when I was younger.”

“I’m guessing you weren’t washing dishes,” Hitomi said, her grin growing wider as she leaned back against the counter. Van grinned sheepishly back at her.

“More like sneaking food from the larders,” he said with a shrug. Hitomi laughed, imagining a young Van sneaking food while the kitchen staff pretended not to see him.

“Well, if you still want to help, you can load the dishwasher,” she said after she caught her breath. Van just gave her a blank look, and Hitomi pulled open the appliance’s door.

“This is the dishwasher. You just put the dirty dishes in it, and when it’s full, you put soap in the soap thingie here, turn it on, and it washes the dishes for you.”

Van shook his head in amazement. The people on the Mystic Moon had machines for everything. Hitomi handed him a stack of plates, and he began to place them in the dishwasher as best he could. The logic behind how the racks were designed eluded him, and he ended up putting the dishes wherever he could make them fit. Hitomi was still humming happily as she started washing the few pots and pans, and Van spent more time watching her back as she worked than attending to his own job. Her humming was slightly off key, but it was happy, and he found himself smiling at the sound of it. This moment, right now, was perfect. No demands, no pressures, and no worries. Just the two of them.

Oh yeah. And Allen and Annie. Their heated voices grew louder, drifting into the kitchen from the living room. Hitomi turned to look at Van, pinching her lips together in a vain attempt to hide a smile.

“Well, which way did you want me to tilt it?” Allen snapped, annoyed and angry.

“To the left. Your left,” Annie replied, sounding as irritated as Allen. “How did you get to be a Cello Knight from Heaven without knowing your left from your right?”

Hitomi smothered a giggle behind a soapy hand. “Maybe we should rescue Allen.”

Van sighed. Of course, she would want to rescue the blond knight. Hitomi was too soft hearted for her own good. Van was willing to leave Allen with Annie for the rest of the trip. That would give him more time alone with Hitomi, and it just might put a few dents in Allen’s ego. In his mind’s eye, Van could see the incredulous look on Allen’s face when Annie laughed at him, and his own laughter bubbled up from his chest. He couldn’t stop it from escaping his lips, and Hitomi watched him with surprise and elation.

“Hey, you’re actually laughing, Van!” she cried, grinning madly at him. “What’s funny enough to make you actually laugh out loud?”
Van shook his head and nearly choked as he tried to compose himself. The harder he tried to stop, the harder he laughed. “Allen’s face...when she laughed at him...”

Hitomi’s lips wiggled. They twitched. Then she gave in and laughed with him, so hard she had to hang on to the counter for support. The arguing drifting in from the living room just made them laugh harder. Finally, their mirth died down to chuckles and gasps for air, and Hitomi wiped the tears from her cheeks. Signaling Van to be quiet, she snuck into the dining room to get a peek at the angry decorators.

Van followed her silently, and they both had to smother laughter behind their hands again. Allen had strings of lit lights draped over his arms and neck, their white glow illuminating his angry face. He had apparently been relegated to the task of handing the lights to Annie as she wrapped them around the tree. The glare of death that he had aimed at her small back would have been enough to melt diamonds. Annie, for her part, matched the glare whenever she glanced back at him if he wasn’t giving her enough slack in the string.

“I’ve got to get my camera,” Hitomi whispered to Van. He nodded, and she snuck through the living room to the stairs. Allen and Annie were too engrossed with their glaring to notice her creeping by, and she was able to escape unnoticed. Hitomi grabbed her camera and went back to the living room as quietly as she could. It would ruin everything if they noticed her before she had a chance to snap the picture. She lined up the shot with the perfect angle to see Allen’s death glaring, light stringed front, and quickly pressed the button.

FLASH!

The light from the camera was momentarily dazzling, and Allen reeled back in shock. There was a distinct crunching sound from under his foot, and the string that Annie had halfway coiled around the tree went dark. Everyone froze.

“You...you...JELLY HEAD!” Annie shouted. Allen backed away from her, mumbling apologies. Hitomi took advantage of the distraction and shot back into the kitchen, dragging Van with her. For the second time that day, she and Van were
laughing helplessly out loud, trying vainly to smother the sound behind their hands. Hitomi thought it must be some kind of record.

“Jelly head?” Van said when they’d caught their breath, causing Hitomi to giggle again.

She comes up with the worst insults. This picture is priceless. If I ever need a good laugh, I’ll pull this one out,” she said, showing the display to Van.

“Priceless,” Van agreed, chuckling. Hitomi was still giggling under her breath, and she leaned her shoulder into his. Van got the feeling that maybe he should put his arm around her, or maybe…

“Hitomi! You’re part responsible for this, so get in here and help fix it!” Annie shouted from the living room. Sighing, rolling her eyes, Hitomi moved away from Van to set her camera down on the counter. Van cursed his bad luck and his own hesitation, and followed her out into the living room. He had eleven days. Some how, some way, he’d get his chance again.

So...what's up next for our poor love-struck but way too slow to do something about it characters? A snowball fight...a party...trip to the mall...and hopefully a few "close encounters" winkwink Until next time!

Eggs and Showers

Hi again to everyone!! Well,this chapter is way shorter than I had anticipated, but it's way past my bedtime.This was just supposed to be the beginning of chapter six, so that's why not a whole lot happens. So, I guess I'll just have to work harder to make up for this not so great chapter next time!!

Once again, gigantic THANK YOUS to everyone who has read this story so far. I lovelovelove you guys! And I promise to work much harder to make this story interesting!

Okay! On with the show!

Van woke, momentarily disorientated, in the cool darkness of Hitomi's basement. As far as he could tell, Allen was still asleep on the air mattress on the other side of the room. Van rolled over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. He was reluctant to climb out of his warm blankets, and besides, the house was silent; he doubted anyone else was awake yet. They had all stayed up fairly late into the night finishing the tree. Van smiled to himself as he thought about it.

Once the lights were finished, decorating the tree had actually been enjoyable, at least for him. He'd spent the majority of the time sitting on the floor, unwrapping ornaments to hand to Hitomi, and then watching her find places to hang them on the tree. He spent so much time watching her, stretching to reach a high branch, or bending to place an ornament near the bottom, that she'd frequently run out of ornaments to hang before he'd unwrapped new ones for her. Gods, she was beautiful.

Van hadn't believed that he could feel this carefree or relaxed before he'd come to the Mystic Moon. His life had always revolved around his responsibilities, and though he knew they were all waiting for him back in Fanelia, he had nothing but freedom and possibility stretching out before him for the next ten days.
That thought was energizing, and Van slid silently off the futon. Allen didn't stir as he headed past him into the little bathroom at the back of the basement. Last night, Hitomi had given him towels and told him he could shower anytime he felt like it. Van wasn't exactly sure what she meant by “shower”, but judging by the towels, he guessed it was some form of bathing.

Van closed the bathroom door gently behind him and slowly surveyed the small room. There was nothing resembling a wash basin as far as he could tell. The sink and toilet he could identify, and Hitomi had said that the two machines tucked against the wall were for washing clothes. So that only left the small cube-like enclosure in the corner. Pulling aside the curtains, one cloth and one a flexible, unknown material, Van examined the inside of the cube.

It was tall enough for him to stand up, but it was only a few feet in width. Several bottles and what Van guessed was a bar of soap sat on a ledge. There was also a silver handle in the middle of the wall. Frowning, Van grabbed the handle and turned it slightly. Water shot out above his head, and Van jumped back in shock. His hair and shirt had gotten soaked in the blast, and he shivered at the coldness of the water. Surely people on the Mystic Moon didn't stand under freezing cold water to bathe! Tentatively, Van turned the handle a bit farther, and to his incredible relief, the water began to warm up.

Swiftly, Van stripped off his wet clothes and stepped under the spraying water. It still wasn't warm enough to keep him from shivering, so he turned the handle as far as it would go. A moment later, he flattened himself against the wall, cursing as the water scalded his skin. A few minutes of fiddling later, and he managed to get the perfect temperature.

This, Van thought, was awesome. Better than any bath he'd ever had. When he got back to Fanelia, he'd have to talk to the chief architects about designing something like this. The hot water was relaxing, and Van's thoughts drifted back to Hitomi. Gods, it felt so good to touch her again after the long years apart. Van suddenly realized the cost of these precious days spent together. The mere thought of enduring seeing her only as a blurry dream image that he couldn't touch seemed unbearable. When the time came for him to leave, and that was all that was left to them, how painful would it become? Well, painful for him, he meant. He really didn't know if Hitomi would mind at all. He didn't know if she wanted to touch him like he needed to touch her.

Van shut off the water with a snap. Grabbing his towel, he dried himself with more force than was necessary, scowling. Somehow, he had to make Hitomi need him as much as he needed her. And if he was ever going to convince her, the next ten days were his best shot. Now he just wished he had some idea of how to go about it.

Dressed once again in his borrowed clothes, Van stole through the basement and up the stairs, careful not to wake Allen. He needed some time alone, to think up some kind of plan.

The kitchen lights flashed on, and Van jumped back, his hand automatically going for his non-existent swordhilt.

“Good morning,” Annie whispered, smirking at his shocked face. Van took a few deep breaths to steady his pounding heart.

“I didn't think anyone else was awake,” he whispered back. Annie shrugged and walked over to the counter where she began fiddling with a small black appliance.
“I heard you showering. I'm a light sleeper. So, you want some coffee?” she asked genially. She measured out some black powder and poured it into a white filter.

“Uh, sure,” Van said uncertainly. “What time is it?”

Annie pointed to some lighted markings on the stove. Van couldn't decipher them, and he looked back questioningly at Annie.

“It's 6:40,” she said, noticing his confused look. “Way too early, but I figured you or the blond freak would be up at the butt-crack of dawn. You hungry?”

Van didn't know whether to be amused or shocked at the way she talked. He decided to be amused; shocked was more Allen's style.

“Why don't you like Allen?” Van asked, the words out before he stopped to think. Annie just laughed.

“Oh, I like Allen, I like him a lot,” she replied. “He's like my own personal walking, talking joke. I love it!”

Now it was Van's turn to laugh. He reflected that he seemed to be doing that a lot more here on the Mystic Moon than he ever had before in his life. It must be an effect of feeling so relaxed. Annie just smiled and opened the fridge.

“What do you want for breakfast?” she asked. “I'm going to have me some eggs!”

Van settled for eggs as well, and Annie gave him a lesson on how to make what she called “perfect” scrambled eggs. Van had to admit that he'd never had better tasting eggs in his entire life. He could just imagine how the palace cooks would react if he sauntered down to the kitchens to make some for himself after he was back in Fanelia. Although, he pondered, these eggs might be worth it.

“So, Van,” Annie asked as they sat at the table enjoying their eggs. “You're going to put the moves on Tomi while you're here, right?”

“I'm going to do what?” Van asked, genuinely confused. Annie rolled her eyes. “You know. A little hanky panky, some lip action…”

Van suddenly caught on and nearly choked on his eggs. He could feel his face burning a bright crimson red. Holy gods, was he that obvious? And how could Annie just bring it up so casually, like it was no big deal?

“You do know about the birds and the bees, don't you, Van?” Annie asked, frowning at him. Van had never been more embarrassed or confused in his life.

“What the hell do birds and bees have to do with it?” he mumbled, mashing his eggs into pulp with his fork.

“Nevermind,” Annie said cheerfully. She reached across the table and patted Van's hand reassuringly. “I just wanted you to know that I'm rooting for you.”

“Oh, thanks,” Van answered uncertainly. This was one of the oddest conversations he could ever remember having. Annie smiled and went back to eating her eggs like they had just been discussing the weather.

Allen stumbled into the kitchen at that point, and Annie sent him down to shower while she made some more of her delicious scrambled eggs. Van debated explaining how the shower-cubicle worked, but decided it might be more interesting to let Allen figure it out on his own. A few minutes later, he was rewarded by a few muffled curses drifting up from the basement bathroom. Ah, life was good.

Deep in her warm blankets, Hitomi drifted in the world between waking and dreaming. For a few lazy moments, she wondered if Van be there, too, waiting to see
her. Suddenly, she bolted awake. Van wasn't in the dream world. He was here, in her house.

The muffled sounds of voices talking and dishes clinking reached her ears, and Hitomi jumped out of bed. Yanking some clothes out of her dresser, she practically ran into the bathroom and hopped into the shower. Good lord, it was barely 7:30! How long had everyone been up? How long had Van been up? Oh, God, she hoped Annie hadn't told him anything too embarrassing.

She could smell something delicious when she went downstairs, and she wasn't surprised to find Allen and Van eating some of Annie's cooking. Allen started to get to his feet when he saw Hitomi entering the dining room, but Annie's death glare stopped him half-way. Meekly, he sat back down and mumbled a good morning.

Van turned to smile at her, and Hitomi felt her heart doing about eight flip flops before settling back into its normal place. It was just so unbelievable to see him sitting there, eating eggs and toast like he didn't have a care in the world and smiling a good morning at her. She could get used to this.

Van was pretty sure the tips of his ears were turning crimson as he watched Hitomi sit down and start eating. He couldn't help remembering the conversation he'd had with Annie less than an hour before. But she was right. Somehow, some way, he was going to "put the moves" on Hitomi. He just hoped she'd be open to them. He sighed, and Annie glanced over at him and winked. Oh well. At least he knew she was cheering him on. Somehow he doubted Allen would be. He cleared his throat.

“So, what are we going to do today?” he asked the group. Hitomi's eyes twinkled.

“Well, seeing as it's Christmas, we thought we'd introduce you to the real holiday spirit and take you to the mall,” she said, her smile growing. “And not just any mall. We're going to take you to the biggest mall in the entire country.”

Van and Allen exchanged looks. What the hell was a mall? Annie grinned the shark grin that made a shiver run up Allen's spine.

“Ohhh, yeah. You guys are going to the center of commercialism. The Mall of America.”

**Malls and Mayhem**

Okay, disclaimer: I don't own Escaflowne or any of its characters. And I don't have a beta reader or anything, so please forgive any grammatical or spelling errors. I do try to proofread. Okay, so Van and Allen are finally out of the house! Hopefully this is amusing, though I don't think I spent enough time on all the weird things they'd see. Oh well. Can't fit everything in!

Van climbed gratefully out of the car and surveyed the seemingly endless rows of Mystic Moon vehicles. The drive had been uneventful, if you didn't count a few near-death experiences, and Hitomi grinned at him as she came up to his side. Allen slammed his door shut and glared at Annie, clearly still angry about being told he “squealed like a girl”. Annie blithely ignored him and led the way towards the distant entrance.

“Okay, somebody remember where we parked, because God knows I won't.” she said cheerfully. Van and Allen looked worried. How could anyone remember where they
parked in this sea of cars? Hitomi smiled and pointed at some marks painted on a post nearby

“Don't worry, I can get us back here,” she said reassuringly to Van. He nodded and silently hoped she was right. They hadn't even entered this “mall”, and he was already overwhelmed. Groups of people streamed constantly in and out of the entrance, and their small group joined the throng.

The air inside was warm, and Van was glad he'd taken Annie's suggestion and left his coat in the car. Hundreds of people strolled the long corridor, and their voices echoed and ran together to create an almost deafening throb of sound. There were many other unidentifiable sounds mixing in and above the noise of people, and Van's head ached trying to sort it all out. It was somehow dimmer inside than he'd expected, but the shops on either side of the hallway were brightly lit and full of strange clothes and even stranger Mystic Moon objects. Van and Allen slowed to a stop a few feet inside the doorway and just stared, dumbfounded. Hitomi looked back and saw that the two men had come to a halt.

“Are you guys alright?” she asked, coming back to stand in front of Van.

“It's just...very different,” Van finally answered slowly. Allen didn't seem capable of speech at the moment. He just stared wide-eyed at a group of teenagers dressed head to toe in goth attire. Annie turned around to see what the hold-up was, hands on her hips.

“What's going on? We haven't even gotten into the main part of the mall yet!”

That got Van and Allen's attention. This wasn't the main part of the mall? How big was this building? Annie headed down the corridor again, and Allen followed close at her heels, as if he was nervous of getting left behind and lost.

“What is in this mall?” Van asked Hitomi, still looking around him and making no move to start walking.

“A couple hundred stores, some restaurants and bars, an amusement park, lots of things,” she answered brightly. Smiling, she took Van's hand and started to pull him along. Startled out of his confusion by the feel of Hitomi's cool fingers gripping his own, Van picked up the pace to walk beside her.

“What's an amusement park?” he asked, intertwining his fingers with hers. It felt right, natural, to be walking along like that.

“Uhm, well...it's a place you go to have fun. There's rides and games and stuff-- You'll understand better when you see it,” Hitomi said, making a face at her bad discription. She wanted to sing, to skip down the hallway, maybe do a victory dance. This was one of her daydreams come true! Van, holding her hand and wasting time with her in the mall, just like normal people. Instead of skipping, she settled for swinging their hands a little more than was necessary as they walked, grinning like a mad fool. Van could practically feel the waves of joy radiating off her and grinned himself. He wasn't exactly sure what she was happy about, but he hoped it had something to do with him and his hand in hers.

Allen was not enjoying himself nearly as much as Van. For one thing, Annie had given him a mini-lecture on judging people by their appearances, and for another, he'd noticed the two behind him: Hitomi practically glowing and Van silently ecstatic merely because they were holding hands. Gods, it was painful to see.
“Well, would you look at that?” Annie asked, now walking backwards and watching Van and Hitomi. Allen grabbed her arm and whipped her around after she nearly ran into an elderly couple.

“Can you please just act normal?” he hissed out between clenched teeth. The last thing he wanted to listen to was Annie rhapsodizing about how perfect Van and Hitomi were together. Annie pulled her arm out of his grip and glared ferociously at him.

“I was just getting a better look at them! God, I thought we agreed that you'd loosen up!”

“Only if you stopped being so annoying. And what do you think they'll do if they notice you staring at them?”

Annie stopped for a moment, considering. “Oh...yeah. Okay, I'll give you this one.”

Allen just managed not to roll his eyes. “Thank you. Now where the hell are we going in this maze?”

“Uh...” Annie stopped and turned around again. “Hey, Tomi, where're we going?”

“Let's go to the middle first,” Hitomi suggested as she and Van caught up with them. Allen looked away from their intertwined fingers and Annie gave him a shrewd glance. Their group started moving again, and Allen found himself on the far side of Annie; he had to look around her to see Hitomi or Van.

“Is this place always this crowded?” Van asked Hitomi as they fought their way through the crowds. Annie and Allen kept getting separated from them as they weaved their way through the hall.

“It's Christmas in three days,” Hitomi answered, as if that explained everything. “Everyone's out getting their last minute Christmas gifts, so it's kind of mayhem all over the place. Oh, look! There's the park!”

Hitomi dragged Van over to a railing and leaned over. Van leaned over as well and stared, open-mouthed. Below them sprawled an indoor park crowded with people and bizarre machines. The noise emanating from it was incredible. People were shrieking, music was blaring, and the machines were all roaring and clanking. Van could see no real point to any of the machines. They all seemed designed to spin people around, throw them up in the air, or whip them around at high speeds. And people stood in lines to get on them for a few brief minutes, and then get off and run to the next machine. It was the strangest thing he'd ever seen.

“Hitomi, what are those machines? Why are all those people getting on and off them?” he finally asked, genuinely at a loss. He had known the Mystic Moon would be strange, but...

Hitomi laughed at his confusion. “They're rides, Van. People just get on them for the fun of it.”

“Why would that possibly be fun?” Allen asked, just as dumbfounded as Van.

“It's the thrill of it,” Annie said, standing on tiptoe and hanging as much of herself as possible over the railing. “You know. People want to feel like they're in danger, just a little bit. Except they want to be perfectly safe while they're doing it. It's an oxymoron.”

Van and Allen frowned, clearly not understanding the idea of pointless fun. Hitomi gave Van's hand a squeeze and smiled brightly at him.
“We'll go on a few of them later and maybe it'll make more sense,” she told him. Van smiled back. Whatever she wanted to do, he'd do, even if he didn't really get the point.

Allen clenched his jaw tightly. He concentrated on the whirling machines below him, trying to ignore Hitomi giving Van those beautiful smiles. She'd never smiled like that at him, not even when he'd kissed her. No, especially not when he'd kissed her. She'd seen Van, and he knew that she'd wanted to run after him. Gods, even then she had belonged to Van.

“Hey, Tomi. Let's split up for a while,” Annie said suddenly. “You and Van can go do what you want, and I'll go with Allen to finish my Christmas shopping, okay?”

Hitomi looked confused. “Sure, if you want to. But we could come along with you, too.”

“No, you can't. Unless you want to pick out your own present,” Annie replied firmly. Allen felt like jumping over the railing. Another match-making attempt by Annie, meaning he was stuck with her again. Life just wasn't fair. He listened half-heartedly as the two girls picked a meeting place and time, then followed Annie resignedly back into the crush of people.

They picked their way through the crowds silently for a long time, and Allen slowly came to realize that Annie didn't seem at all inclined to do any actual shopping. It didn't surprise him, but it annoyed him, and he wished they were five years old so he could pull her hair.

“You don't have any shopping to do, do you?” he spat out. Annie doged a very large and scary-looking woman and smirked at him.

“Of course not. I finished it weeks ago.”

“So now I have to wander around with you just to give Van and Hitomi some time alone together. Brilliant plan,” he said acidly. Annie whipped around to face him, and he was surprised at the angry glare on her face.

“That's nice. That's really nice,” she hissed. “I go out of my way to try to help you out, and all you can do is bitch at me. God, I should've just let you sit there sulking.”

Allen gave her a skeptical look. “You had us split up to help me?”

“Did you want to keep watching them being all cute together?” Annie demanded. “We can meet back up with them right now if you want. Lord knows I don't really want your company, either.”

She started to stalk back the direction they'd just came, and Allen reached out and stopped her.

“I'm sorry. I didn't realize...Thank you,” he said quietly as she scowled at him.

“Well, you're welcome,” she mumbled, still scowling. “Just stop moping and try to have some fun. If I've got to put up with you for the next few hours, then you've got to smile, Mr. Crankypants.”

“Agreed,” Allen replied, forcing a small smile. “What are we going to do for the next few hours?”

Annie tapped her chin. “Hmm... wanna get a tattoo?”

“What? No!”

“Blech. You're so boring. You have a sister, right?” she asked.
“Yes...” Allen answered warily. Annie grabbed him by the sleeve, grinning.

“Let's find her a Christmas present. Oh! And let's get some coffee. And...” and she was off, dragging Allen helplessly behind in her wake.

Hitomi watched Allen and Annie disappear into the crowd and turned to smile at Van. He still had her hand in his, and he had leaned back against the railing, the perfect picture of lazy nonchalance. He looked so happy, so relaxed, and so damn hot, that Hitomi unconsciously leaned close to him.

“So, Van, what do you want to do?” she asked, a little breathlessly. Oh, he smelled sooo good.

“I don't even know what there is to do,” he answered honestly. Their hands were loosely intertwined now, and he moved his thumb in lazy circles, enjoying the feel of her silky skin.

Hitomi felt a delicious shiver of goosebumps run up her arm at the way his calloused thumb moved across her hand. Lord, they could just stay here like this for the next few hours as far as she was concerned. But Van was here to see the Mystic Moon, not just to hold her hand and give her goosebumps.

“We could...just walk around and look at the stores for a while. I'd like to get something to send back for Merle. And we could get something to eat, check out the rides...whatever you want.”

“What kind of thing did you want to get for Merle?” Van asked, standing straight again. Hitomi took that as a sign to start moving again, and they plunged back into the crowds.
“I don't know. I want to get her something she's never seen before. You know, something that's obviously from the Mystic Moon,” she replied. “So you tell me if anything like that jumps out at you, and I'll get it.”

Van laughed. “Hitomi, everything here is like that. Merle will never believe me when I tell her about this mall-building. Even the Great Market in Palas can't begin to compare. Are there more like this?”

“Sort of. There's hundreds of thousands of malls all over the world. But this is one of the biggest. Most of them just have some stores, a few restaurants, maybe a movie theater. But no amusement park.”

Van frowned, considering. Most of the stores they'd passed seemed to sell clothing. Some sold kitchenware, and the rest appeared to sell frivolous things. This mall did not seem like the markets he was used to that were used primarily to sell necessary things.

“Do people in this country buy all their clothing in these places?” he asked. Hitomi looked surprised.

“Yeah, of course. Why?”

“There are just so many clothing stores,” Van said, gesturing. “And so many stores selling trinkets. Where is the food market?”

Hitomi looked really puzzled now. “The food...? Oh! We buy food in a grocery store. There isn't one in the mall. At least, I don't think there is.”

Van still looked confused, but Hitomi was too busy pulling him over to a vendor to notice.

“Look, Van! Ice cream! You've got to have an ice cream cone while you're here!” she cried excitedly. Smiling, Van let her drag him to the counter and pick out a flavor for him. She let go of his hand to pay, then handed him his cone, her eyes sparkling. Van looked the treat over uncertainly. A dripping, melting, white glob sat on top of a cone-shaped cookie. He eyed the black chunks in the white goo, wondering how he was supposed to eat this mess.

“Like this, Van,” Hitomi giggled, apparently reading his mind. Van watched as she licked a few drips off her cone and took a small bite out of her mutli-colored blob. Hesitantly, Van took a bite as well. Immediately, his eyes watered, and he pressed a hand to his skull. Hitomi watched him, concern and laughter in her eyes.

“Are you alright?” she asked as he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Yeah...yeah. What happened?”

Hitomi tried to stop her giggles, but failed. “You got an ice cream headache. You have to take smaller bites. Or just lick it.”

Tentatively, Van tried again. This time he only licked at the drips making their way down the cone. The stuff actually tasted pretty good when it wasn't causing excruciating pain. Grinning, Hitomi took his hand again, and they sauntered on their way through the giant mall.

The time passed quickly as Hitomi took Van into one store after another searching for Merle's gift. It was difficult, because Hitomi didn't want to get her something that needed batteries, and because they spent a lot of time just looking at things that Van had never seen before. She loved the way his eyes lit up whenever they came across something new and astonishing.
“Whoa,” Hitomi said eventually as Van watched a mechanical dog doing flips, “We've got to meet up with Allen and Annie in a few minutes.”

Van let her pull him out of the store. “Where are we supposed to meet them?”

“The Lego store, which is all the way back by the park. And we're supposed to be meeting them there in five minutes!”

When they finally reached the designated store, they found Annie bouncing up and down and Allen looking like he was fighting a massive headache.

“Dear God, did you have an espresso?” Hitomi demanded as Annie nearly knocked over half the store waving at them.

“Is that what did it?” Allen asked wearily. Annie looked apologetic.

“It was just a little one,” she said with a sheepish grin at Hitomi. “Sooooo, where do you want to eat?”

The guys didn't have a preference, and Annie couldn't stand still, so Hitomi decided they'd go to the food court.

“Mmm, yummy! Fast food!” Annie chirped as she hopped down the hallway ahead of them.

“How long is this going to last?” Allen demanded. Annie turned around and made a face at him.

“Not too long,” Hitomi told him reassuringly. “Caffeine makes her crazy for about two hours, and then she goes back to normal. Normal for her, anyway.”

Van looked from Annie to Allen, frowning. “I thought she had shopping to do.”

Allen opened his mouth nervously, at a loss for what explanation to give. Luckily, they reached the food court before he had to formulate an answer. Hitomi listed off each restaurant as they passed it and gave a brief description of the available food. Stumped by the sheer number of choices, Van and Allen both decided to eat whatever Hitomi was eating. A stomachful of hamburgers and french fries later, and they headed back towards the amusement park.

Annie ran ahead to get their ride passes. Allen rubbed his temples and swore that for the rest of this trip, he wouldn't let her near coffee, let alone an espresso. Thank the gods it was starting to wear off. Hitomi and Van were still holding hands wherever they walked, and Allen felt like an awkward third wheel. Not awkward enough to feel a whole lot of relief when Annie came back with their wristbands, though.

“What do you want to go on?” Hitomi asked Van after they'd snapped their bands on. Van just looked around and shook his head, not really certain he wanted to go on any of these machines.

“I vote we go on that one,” Annie said, pointing to the rollercoaster. No one objected, and they lined up and got into the cars. Hitomi showed Van how to work the safety harnesses, and they were off.

Van gripped the handlebar as the cart whipped around the track. His stomach dropped to the bottom of his feet and then back up into his throat as the cart twisted and plunged. Hitomi and Annie had been right. The thrill of rushing along uncontrollably gave him a pleasant rush of andrenaline pumping through his system and he found himself grinning. Next to him, he could hear Hitomi's gasps as the cart careened around the track, and he could hear Annie laughing hysterically in the seats
ahead of them. Unfortunately, the ride was over and they all tumbled out of their seats before Van really started to enjoy himself.

“Well, what did you think?” Hitomi asked him, a grin spread from ear to ear.

“I think I get the point of it,” Van answered laughingly as they walked away from the ride. Annie was having a difficult time standing upright, she was laughing so hard. Allen glared at her, his fists clenched.

“You did it again!” she wheezed out, wiping tears from her eyes.

“I did NOT “squeal like a girl!”” Allen gritted out. Van and Hitomi smothered their laughter and stayed out of the argument.

“Hey, let's go on that one!” Hitomi cried, grabbing Van's hand and dragging him over to the next ride. Van found himself laughing and enjoying himself immensely on the strange Mystic Moon machines, whether from the pure fun of it or because Hitomi was obviously loving every minute of it, he wasn't sure. Sometimes the group split up, hopping on different rides, and sometimes one or more of them would just stand and watch the others.

Hitomi refused to go on the circling swings with Annie, so Van stayed on the sidelines with her while Allen and Annie got on the ride. He didn't mind sitting that one out, since it looked pretty boring. The swings just spun in a circle, but Annie said it made her feel like she was flying. Van and Hitomi leaned on the rail, watching as their two friends were spun around and around. Hitomi turned to smile at him, and Van was mesmerized by the happy sparkle in her eyes. He reached out and brushed a strand of hair off her cheek, and watched as the pink color spread across her skin. Gods, he wished they were somewhere more private than here, with hundreds of people jostling around them.

“Hey guys! What next?” Annie chirped from behind them. They turned to see her grinning at them and a decidedly green Allen holding on to the rail.

“That's why I never go on those things,” Hitomi told him seriously as she led him to a bench. The poor man really looked like he was going to be sick.

“What a wuss,” Annie said, rolling her eyes at Van as they stayed standing at the rail.

“So, what do you think of the mall, Van?”

“It's overwhelming,” Van answered honestly. “There's nothing like this on Gaea. It's too crowded for my tastes.”

Annie wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. Four floors of materialistic decadence. It's overwhelming for us and we're used to over-the-top commercialism.”

They watched Hitomi giving Allen something cold to drink and attempting to fan him with a napkin. Annie shook her head disbelievingly.

“Good Lord, she's too nice. I can't believe he got sick on the swings. Oh well, we'd better go help before he blows chunks all over.”

They went over to help Hitomi, but after two minutes, Van decided Allen would probably get better faster if Annie was far, far away from him. He dragged her away to the next ride, leaving Hitomi with the knight.

“Feeling better?” she asked after a few more minutes. Allen took a few deep breaths and nodded.

“How do you people stand all this?” he groaned, gesturing to the crowds, the noise, the general mayhem.
“Just used to it, I guess,” Hitomi said with a smile. “Although I wouldn't want to do this every day. I'm sorry about Annie picking at you. She really is a nice person.”

“I know,” Allen sighed. He stood up and Hitomi jumped to her feet eagerly.

“Are you ready for more rides?”

Allen pulled a face. “Just not those damn swings.”

They left the mall as the stores were beginning to close down for the night. True to her word, Hitomi found their car without too much difficulty, and Annie revved the little vehicle up for the ride home. Allen still felt queasy and prayed that she would drive with a little more restraint than she had that morning.

Van leaned back in his seat, his ears still ringing from the constant noise of the mall. He had to try to remember everything: the weird gadgets, the weirder people, the crazy rides, the way the ice cream tasted. Merle would want to know every detail. But besides that, he wanted to remember for himself. He wanted to remember what it was like to be overwhelmed by something, and what it was like to just have wild fun with no expectations.

Across from him, Hitomi had leaned back in her seat as well. It looked like she was falling asleep, despite the fact that Annie was behind the wheel. More than anything, Van wanted to remember how perfect it had been to be with her today. He reached across the seat and took her hand again, and she smiled, her eyes closed. Yeah...perfection. Van closed his eyes and drifted into sleep.

Annie looked back at them in the rearview mirror and smiled.

“Aw. Looks like we wore the kids completely out today, honey,” she joked to Allen. He groaned as she swerved through traffic.

“Just get us home alive.”

**Dancing and Groceries**

Well, hello, dear readers! Welcome to chapter eight! Once again, just a lighthearted chappie with not much going on...but there is a little bit of Van/Hitomi schmoopiness at the end.

Two pairs of shocked eyes stared at Hitomi over the tattered remains of a waffle breakfast. She bit her bottom lip nervously.

“Oh, did I forget to tell you we'd be going to Annie's family Christmas?” she asked. Both men nodded, frowning uncertainly.

“Are you sure that we should be going?” Allen asked. “If it's a family affair...”

“Don't be ridiculous. Everybody's family to my family. Tell them, Tomi,” Annie called from where she was waging war against the morning dishes. Hitomi nodded eagerly.

“The Goettenbergs won't mind you coming. There's so many of them they probably won't even notice you're there. And I've gone for the last three years. I'd like you to meet them. They're my American family.” She looked at Van hopefully and he swallowed his nervousness to smile at her. She wanted him to meet her adopted family. Well, then he'd meet them. He just hoped they liked him.

“I still don't think...” Allen began, but Annie cut him off with a sharp snap from her dishtowel,
“What's wrong with meeting my family?” she demanded as he rubbed the stinging red spot on the back of his neck. “Anyway, you don't have a choice. I've already told them all about you, and they're expecting us. You want to be rude and not go? Peh. Some Mr. Manners.”

“I just don't want to impose!” Allen said, still rubbing his neck. Damn, that snap hurt! Annie rolled her eyes, and Hitomi jumped in and changed the subject.

“Like I said, we'll leave for Aunt Vera's tomorrow, so today is totally free. I've just got some presents to wrap. You have any plans, Annie?”

“Hmm, yeah. I've gotta bake some Christmas cookies, which means a grocery run,” Annie said absentmindedly. Allen glanced at her worriedly, and she snapped the dishtowel at him again, scowling.

“Oh, quit it. I only have a problem with gingerbread men.”

Allen looked doubtful, but kept his mouth shut and rubbed his reddened neck. That piece of cloth doubled as a lethal weapon in the small girl's hands.

“I'd like to see your food market,” Van volunteered. “That is, if you're okay with bringing me along.”

Annie grinned at him. “Of course. It'll be boring, but we can all go. I was planning on leaving after the kitchen was cleaned.”

“I'll help,” Van said, picking up his plate and getting to his feet. Annie looked at him quizzically.

“Are you the one that packed the dishwasher last time?” she asked. He nodded, and she took the plate from him. “Ah. Well, no thanks. I can finish this myself.”

Hitomi giggled as Van sat back down sheepishly. Smiling, she yawned and stretched lazily in her chair. It was almost noon already, since no one had gotten up until late morning. Who knew shopping could be so exhausting?

The dishes done, everyone once again bundled up and piled into the little car. The drive to the store was short, for which Allen fervently thanked every god he could think of, individually and by name. Annie led the way through the cars and people to the glass doors of a large, sprawling building. Before she touched them, the doors swung open, and she and Hitomi walked through them. Van and Allen stopped, watching the doors uncertainly. Hitomi turned to see them standing just outside the doors as Annie pulled out a cart. Allen kept backing up and walking forward, making the doors swing open and shut.

“What kind of magic is this?” he asked after the tenth time of opening the doors. Hitomi bit down hard on her lips to keep from laughing out loud. Annie had no such hesitations and doubled over laughing.

“It's an automatic door, you fish-brain!” she laughed. “It opens when you trigger the sensors. ‘Magic!' Oh, lord, I love it!”

Van and Allen looked sheepish as they finally walked through the doors and into the store. Hitomi rapped Annie lightly on the head to get her to stop laughing.

“It's an automatic door, you fish-brain!” she laughed. “It opens when you trigger the sensors. ‘Magic!' Oh, lord, I love it!”

Van and Allen looked sheepish as they finally walked through the doors and into the store. Hitomi rapped Annie lightly on the head to get her to stop laughing.

“They don't have automatic doors on Gaea, Annie,” she reminded her tightly, although she still felt like laughing a little bit herself. Annie sobered up and looked apologetically at Van and Allen.

“Right, yeah. Sorry. But it was really funny to watch,” she said, still grinning widely. Van shrugged good-naturedly, remembering times Hitomi had been surprised by what
he considered mundane things. Allen merely gave a tight nod, frowning. Annie rolled her eyes and poked him.

“Allen, you take yourself way too seriously. You should try pulling the stick out of your ass and laughing a little,” she said earnestly. Allen spluttered, outraged, but she ignored him and pulled out a shopping list. Pushing the cart ahead of her with one hand, she led the way into the store.

Van could hear her muttering things like “dozen eggs” and “green sprinkles” under her breath, but he was too busy gaping at the strange things around him to pay attention. Rows upon rows of strangely packaged foods filled the store. It looked like there was enough to feed the entire capital of Fanelia, with some left over. People swarmed the shelves, their identical metal carts full of a mind-boggling array of boxes, bags, and cans of food. But the thing that shocked Van the most was the gigantic fresh produce section.

“How can you get fresh foods in the winter?” he asked as he picked up an apple and examined it for signs of aging. It looked perfectly ripe and fresh.

Hitomi shrugged nonchalantly. “All this stuff gets shipped here from wherever it's grown. During the summer we can go to farmer's markets, which are kind of like your markets on Gaea.”

“Everyone in this city must come here to buy food,” Allen said as his eyes scanned the massive amounts of food and crowds of people. Annie looked up from her list long enough to give him a mocking smile.

“There's probably over two hundred grocery stores in the metro. It's just busy because it's Christmas Eve tomorrow,” she said before returning to her shopping. “Let's finish this fast, people. I hate grocery shopping during the day!”

“You can come here at night?” Van asked incredulously as they trotted after the cart.

“Oh yeah. I usually shop at two or three in the morning. No lines, no rude people—” Annie stopped abruptly as a chubby woman pushed her cart forcefully past, nearly running over Allen in the process. “Bah, humbug to you, too, lady! I hope you get coal this year!” she called angrily after her. She threw a few more items in her cart, scanned her list, and led the way to the check out lines.

“Why do you hope she gets coal?” Allen asked, still rubbing his sore elbow.

Annie looked at the long line ahead of them and sighed. “Because she was rude. You know, Santa brings toys to good boys and girls, and bad ones get a lump of coal. So she should get coal instead of presents this year.”

“Santa?” Van and Allen asked together. Annie stopped impatiently drumming her fingers and Hitomi turned back from perusing the magazines. Both girls stared at them open-mouthed.

“Yeah, Santa. The jolly fat man in the red suit? With the sleigh and the reindeer? You've never heard of Santa Claus?” Annie asked incredulously. Van and Allen looked at each other, perplexed. Should they know who this Santa Claus was?

Hitomi slowly shook her head. “No, they wouldn't have heard of him, Annie. Santa isn't universal, you know.”

Annie still looked shocked, scandalized even. “You don't know anything about Santa...man, that's terrible! Okay, listen up. Santa is a little, fat, jolly man with a big belly that jiggles when he laughs, and red cheeks with a big white beard. He wears a red suit with white fur trim, and he lives at the North Pole. And he's got a list of all the
good and bad kids. All year long his elves make toys for Santa to deliver on Christmas Eve to good kids all over the world. So, on Christmas Eve, his reindeer fly his sleigh all to deliver the toys. They land on the rooftops and Santa jumps down the chimney and puts the presents under the tree while everyone's asleep. Get it?"

Van and Allen stared at her for several long seconds.

“That's the most deranged thing I've ever heard. Who would actually believe something like that?” Allen finally said bluntly. Annie actually started to turn red, and Allen grinned, a wicked gleam in his eye. “You believe in this ridiculous Santa Claus story?” he demanded mockingly. Annie blushed harder and smacked him on the arm.

“NO I do not. I did when I was a kid. Everybody believes in Santa when they're little!” she exclaimed. Allen snickered, and she glared daggers at him. “You're gonna get a big lump of coal in your stocking this year, you dirty unbelieving, ...unbeliever!”

Van and Hitomi valiantly bit back their chuckles as they helped to bag the groceries. Allen was still grinning, savoring his moment. As they walked back out to the car, he could hear Annie singing something under her breath.

“Allen got run over by a reindeer, coming home from our house Christmas Eve...You can say you don't believe in Santa, but as for me and...and...me, we believe!”

Then Allen laughed for the first time since he'd arrived on the Mystic Moon. Annie stopped singing and looked up at him, surprised. She did her trademark nose-wrinkle and grinned at him over the top of her grocery bag.

“Maybe you DO have a little sense of humor hidden in there somewhere,” she said happily. “A really little one. Teeny-weeny. But you've got one!”

Allen bit back a retort and let that one slide. Maybe Annie was right and he needed to learn to laugh at himself more often. Perhaps he should try harder to be more relaxed while he was here. It might help him get through the next few days. His smile faded as he observed Van and Hitomi together. They didn't say much to each other, and they hardly touched, but it was the way they looked at each other when they thought no one was looking. Yeah, it was definitely harder to have a sense of humor watching that.

Once home, Annie corralled them into helping her with the cookies. It was an experience that Van and Allen had certainly never had before, and probably wouldn't ever have again once they returned to their lives on Gaea. Hitomi couldn't help but to laugh good-naturedly at Van's clumsy attempts at decorating. His cookies looked like they had been caught in the crossfire of a frosting and sprinkle war. God, it was so strange and wonderful to see him happy and doing something as mundane as frosting cookies. And the dap of icing on his nose really made him look undeniably cute. Hitomi vowed to thank every star in the sky for cameras as she snapped a few pictures of him.
Later that evening, Hitomi sat on the floor with her present wrapping supplies spread out in front of the Christmas tree. Van had stretched out on his back on the floor next to her, his arms behind his head and his eyes closed. The twinkling Christmas tree lights cast a soft glow over his chiseled form, and Hitomi, assuming he was asleep, paused often to study him lovingly. Annie had dragged Allen downstairs after supper to teach him how to play darts, and the sound of the music Annie turned on drifted up from the basement.

It's gonna take a lot to take me away from you
There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do...

Hitomi sang along quietly to the parts of the song she knew as she finished wrapping her last present. She looked up to find Van watching her with a small, gentle smile, the smile he reserved only for her. The song changed, and Hitomi held her hand out to Van.

“Dance with me,” she said softly. One daydream had come true wandering around the mall. Why not this one?

Van looked uncertain. “I don't really...dance.”

“C'mon, Van, it's easy,” Hitomi said, pulling him to his feet with her. She put his arms around her waist and her arms around his shoulders. “See? Now we just sway to the music. Nothing to it.”

I don't get many things right the first time, in fact, I am told that a lot
Now I know all the wrong turns, the stumbles and falls, brought me here
And where was I before the day that I first saw your lovely face?
Now I see it every day. And I know...
That I am, I am, I am the luckiest

The lights twinkled, the music played, and Hitomi rested her head on Van's shoulder. His arms drew her gently closer to him as they swayed to the soft music from the basement.

And in a wide sea of eyes, I see one pair that I recognize
And I know...that I am, I am, I am the luckiest

Van closed his eyes, his heart thudding painfully against his chest. Hitomi's warm breaths tickled his neck, raising delicious goose pimples on his skin. Her curves fit perfectly, naturally, against him. Oh, gods, she was perfect.

I love you more than I have ever found a way to say to you...

Hitomi could hear Van's heartbeat under his shirt as she rested her head against him. His hands were warm against her back, and she found herself wishing he'd let his hands drift a little further down. Slowly, she lifted her head to gaze up into Van's dimly illuminated face as the song flowed towards the end.

I'm sorry, I know that's a strange way to tell you that I know we belong
That I know that I am, I am, I am...the luckiest...

Van couldn't take his eyes off hers as she stared up at him. The twinkling lights of the tree were reflected like stars in the beautiful green pools of her irises, Suddenly, Van couldn't breath or think. Hitomi leaned in closer to him, pressing up against him. He instinctively leaned down towards her, one hand coming up to gently draw her head back as her eyes fluttered closed.
I like big butts and I cannot lie! You other brothers can't deny...

“Whoohoo! Allen! Here's a song for you! Wait, we've gotta get Van and Hitomi down here for this one!” Annie shouted from the basement.

Startled, Van and Hitomi pulled away from each other. They could hear Annie coming up the basement stairs calling for them to come join the party. Hitomi started to laugh. If Annie only knew what she'd interrupted, she'd probably beat herself silly. The look on Van's face at the song now blasting from the downstairs speakers was priceless.

My homeboys tried to warn me, but that butt you got makes me so horny!...

“What the hell?...” he gasped. Hitomi grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the basement, still laughing. Fate seemed perversely determined to keep Van's lips away from her own. Well, they still had a little over a week. If need be, Hitomi would find Fate, beat it up and hog-tie it to a stake. And then she would tackle Van and molest him.

Tomorrow they'd all be going to Annie's family Christmas, and Hitomi doubted there'd be any chance for romance while they were there. The house would be so crowded, there would hardly be breathing room, let alone someplace for a quiet, intimate moment. Oh well. Sometime in the near future she'd get her chance again. For now, she was going to whup his ass in darts.

In case you care, the three songs were: "Africa" by Toto, "The Luckiest" by Ben Folds Five, and "Big Butts" by Sir Mixalot. Until next time, ja ne!

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**Family and Mistletoe**

Hello, hello!! Welcome to chapter 9! I hope you like this chapter...it's long, slightly boring, but I hope the VxH goodness at the end will make up for it!! Okay, so I've got a lot of German heritage, and my family still speaks it some, so I put some in here for Annie's family. I apologize for spelling and grammar mistakes, I'm going off memory here!

Here's the translations (I hope I got them all!!):

- Fröhliche Weihnachten: Merry Christmas
- Ihr bösen Kinder: You naughty kids!
- Tante: Aunt
- Ja: Yes
- Dankeschön: Thank you
- Großmama: grandma (used for the great-grandma in this story)
- Sie ist ihn verliebt: She's in love with him
- Seid ihr hungrig?: Are you hungry?

The four travelers climbed gratefully out of Annie's small car and stretched their cramped muscles. Van and Allen weren't used to sitting like that for long lengths of time, and it had been slightly over four hours of driving. The two men surveyed the house as Annie and Hitomi started to unload the trunk.

Aunt Vera's house was large, tall, and somewhat imposing at first sight. It stood alone in the country, surrounded by a creek and a grove of trees. A long, steep, sloping hill
dropped down into the creek valley below the house, and everything they could see for miles was covered with a deep layer of snow. Several other vehicles, most much larger than Annie's small car, were parked haphazardly in front of the large house.

Annie loaded their arms full of the presents, cookies, and bags and ushered them into a room where two more vehicles were parked. They went through another door, and found themselves in a short entrance hallway. The sounds of people talking and laughing, dishes clinking, children running and playing, and cheerful Christmas music reverberated through the house as the four of them dumped their burdens and stripped off their winter coats.

Two little girls came into view, both dressed up in ridiculously large and tattered fancy dresses and gobs of fake jewelry. Catching sight of Annie, they started shrieking at the ear-piercingly high pitch that only small girls can reach.

“Annie's here, Annie's here!!”

Instantly, there was a sound like a herd of charging land dragons. Van and Allen instinctively took a step back. In moments, Annie was buried underneath what appeared to be a mountain of writhing, laughing children. Every few seconds, one of them would detach themselves from the pile to hug Hitomi tightly. She hugged them all back, smiling, ruffling their hair, supremely unconcerned that Annie had completely disappeared under the attacking kids.

“Ouch! Oh! Gotta breath, guys!” Annie's voice cried laughingly from somewhere beneath the pile. “Hey! Tickling's no fair! Help me, Tomi!”

An elderly woman came into view, followed by a number of other adults ranging in age from early twenties to elderly. The first woman clapped her hands sharply.

“That's enough!” she commanded, and the kids slowly detached themselves from Annie's prostrate form. Grinning, Annie jumped to her feet and dusted herself off. The woman shooed the kids away good-naturedly.

“Ach, ihr bösen Kinder!” she said, swatting a few lightly on the bottoms as they went past her.

“Dankeschön, Tante Vera,” Annie said, giving the older woman a tight hug.

Aunt Vera hugged her back before holding her at arm's length and patting her cheek. “Fröhliche Weihnachten, Annie. And Hitomi, we are so happy to see you! Ach, you are so skinny! Well, you'll eat some good German food and fatten up, ja?”

“Merry Christmas, Aunt Vera,” Hitomi said cheerfully as she hugged the elderly woman as well. Mass chaos was setting in now as the other adults greeted and hugged the newcomers.

“Everybody, this is Van Fanel and Allen Shezar,” Annie said, pulling the two men into the middle of the fray. Allen firmly resisted the strong urge to bow formally, and Van forced a weak, nervous smile. The nervousness melted away quicker than ice cream on a hot summer's day under the warmth of the family's welcome. Van found himself being patted on the back, the men shook his hand vigorously, and he got an occasional pinch on the cheek from the elderly ladies. Allen appeared to be getting the same treatment as the two men were absorbed into the large, loud, friendly family.

Besides the adults and the young children, there was also a small crowd of teenagers who hung back around the periphery, trying to look nonchalant and uninterested. Allen saw Annie pull out of the group and signal them to gather around her. He surreptitiously edged as close as he could to eavesdrop on her conversation. He
wouldn't put it past her to be cooking up some prank to play, and if that was the case, he was going to be prepared. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her pull a small plant out of her pocket.

“Okay, here's the deal, guys,” she said to the gathered kids. “This year's mistletoe target is Hitomi and Van, got it?” The kids nodded eagerly, a mischievous glint lighting their eyes. Annie handed the plant over to the oldest boy.

“But you gotta play it smart and tricksie. She'll be watching for it, so keep moving it around. And have someone on mistletoe watch all the time so we don't miss it, okay? Dirty tricks to get them under it gain extra points. Oh, and if you catch them, make sure you make them really kiss. None of this peck on the cheek stuff. I'm talking full-out kissing, yeah?”

The kids all nodded, grinning wickedly. Annie smirked back.

“Alright, you know the drill. Make me proud, guys!” she finished, smacking a few of them on the back. The kids scattered, and Annie sauntered up to Allen.

“I didn't think eavesdropping was considered acceptable for a gentleman. Especially not one as proper as you, Allen,” she said mockingly.

“Ah, but it's acceptable for a gentleman to employ some...questionable practices in order to protect someone's honor,” Allen answered lightly. “And I was correct in assuming you were plotting something. Perhaps I should warn Hitomi of this mistletoe plan of yours.”

“If you do, I will shave you bald,” Annie said in a deadly serious voice. Allen passed a nervous hand over his prized hair.

“What is mistletoe, anyway?”

“It's just an old Christmas tradition. You hang it from a doorway or something, and if two people stand under it, they have to kiss,” Annie said with a grin. “So, now that you know some mistletoe is going to be floating around, you should keep an eye out for it. I think some of my cousins would love to catch you under it!”

“Oh, really? I'm flattered,” Allen said laughingly, with a slightly self-satisfied smile on his face. Annie grimaced.

“Yeah, yeah. Think you can deflate that ego of yours enough to fit through the door and come meet my great-grandma?”

She dragged him behind her as she made her way through the crowd, collecting Van and Hitomi along the way. They entered a room with an enormous Christmas tree so covered in ornaments and lights the branches sagged. In a comfortable chair sat an incredibly small, old, and wrinkled lady holding a very young baby.

“Fröhliche Weihnachten!” she said in a surprisingly strong voice. Her twinkling eyes surveyed Van and Allen from behind her thick glasses, her broad smile an identical one to Annie's.

“Merry Christmas, Großmama!” Hitomi and Annie chimed together as they hugged the small woman.

“Aww, look at little Willem! Can I hold him?” Annie gushed as she took the infant and snuggled him, totally forgetting about Van and Allen. Even Hitomi was momentarily distracted by the little bundle. Van shifted from one foot to the other uncomfortably under the old woman's twinkling stare.
“So, you are Van Fanel and Allen Shezar,” she stated after letting them squirm for a few long minutes.

“Yes, ma'am,” Van answered, relieved. Allen once again beat down the urge to bow formally. He stood there awkwardly as his brain raced to think of a suitable way to greet someone who was obviously important if he couldn't bow. Damn! Why did things have to be so complicated here?

Hitomi and Annie finally looked up from the baby and noticed the exchange. Hitomi jumped back to stand at Van's side, and he gave her a grateful smile.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, Großmama, that's Van and Allen,” Annie said nonchalantly, now making ridiculous faces at the staring newborn. Allen repressed a sigh. If their situations were ever reversed, and Annie came to Gaea, he would give her a few stern lessons in proper manners. Not that he really expected it would make any difference. The Großmama didn't seem to mind her lack of etiquette.

“Ja, ja. It is good of you to spend Christmas with us, boys,” she said kindly.

“Not at all. Thank you for having us,” Allen replied politely, again repressing his bowing instincts. Apparently, he still sounded too formal, because Annie looked up from the bundle to pull a face at him. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“This is Van and Allen's first Christmas,” Hitomi said, blissfully unaware of the silent exchange between her two friends.

Großmama nodded happily. “Then this is even better, ja? A big family Christmas for you to enjoy.”

“I haven't been part of a family celebration for a long time,” Van answered with a small smile. Hitomi took his hand and grinned happily at him.

“Ach! There you are!” Aunt Vera said as she charged into the room. “Seit ihr hungrig? You missed lunch, but we saved some for you. Come eat, you all looked starved!”

Aunt Vera took Allen by the arm and shooed Van and Hitomi, still holding hands, out the door ahead of her. Großmama watched them go with sharp, observing eyes.

“Sie ist ihn verliebt,” she said quietly. Annie smiled as she handed the small bundle back to her great-grandma.

“Yeah, she is,” she replied just as softly. “And the best part is, he loves her right back.”

Großmama smiled and patted Annie on the arm, the same mischeivious twinkle in her eye as Annie got when teasing Allen. “You did bring the mistletoe, ja?”

“Oooh yeah. They'll be kissing by suppertime.”

In the kitchen, Van and Allen were experiencing full force of the Goettenberg hospitality for the first time. Friendly hands pushed them into chairs around the kitchen table and people swarmed around, loading an impossible amount of food onto their plates, all talking at once.

“Here, have some spetzel!--Oh, you'll love this salad!-- You must have some of Tante Olga's meatballs!”

Allen opened his mouth to protest as the mound grew to alarming proportions, and Hitomi leaned over to hiss urgently in his ear.

“Don't refuse anything! It'd be really rude!”
Allen shot her a surprised look and snapped his mouth shut. He and Van both eyed the pile of food on their plates with pained resignation.

“Don't be shy! Eat, eat!” Aunt Vera commanded, and the three picked up their forks and dug in. Annie bounced into the room to plop into a chair and start in on her own over-flowing plate. She, Allen noted with faint annoyance, didn't look at all perturbed by the daunting amount to be consumed. But then, she did seem to have a bottomless pit of a stomach. Maybe he could sneak some of his food onto her plate?

Someone placed large, foaming glasses of clear, tan liquid next to their plates, and Van took a tentative sip from his glass. His face puckered in slight surprise at the somewhat bitter, strong taste and the fizz on his tongue. He could taste a faint tang of alcohol in the back of his throat. Allen sipped from his glass and nearly gagged. This stuff was a far cry from the sweet vino he preferred. Annie lifted her glass and saluted them.

“Beer. The German drink of choice. Just be glad they didn't start you out on the thick, dark stuff,” she grinned and took a large swig, apparently enjoying the strange flavor. Van took another sip and decided he might grow to like the taste of this drink. Allen merely looked at his glass and shuddered.

“I'm not a big fan of it myself,” Hitomi whispered to him sympathetically.

One of the elderly ladies paused to assess their plates. “Something wrong, Allen? You don't like the beer?” she asked kindly. Annie stopped eating to look at him half-mockingly and half-accusingly. Allen swallowed hard and quickly picked up his glass.

“Uh, no. No, it's very good. Thank you,” he said quickly. He took a hasty swing of his beer to reassure the woman and sneezed as the fizz went into his nose.

“Gesundheit!” chorused about ten people.

“Uh...” Allen looked uncertainly around the room, wondering what had just happened.

“That means “bless you”,” Annie said, a pronounced twinkle lighting her eyes. Hitomi giggled behind the rim of her glass.

“Oh. Thank you very much,” Allen said, still confused. “Why did they bless me?” he whispered to Annie and Hitomi as the noise level in the kitchen cranked back up to deafening.

“Because you sneezed,” Annie said with a shrug, returning to her plate of food. Hitomi nodded, and Van and Allen exchanged yet another look of confusion.

A group of the older kids and young adults surged into the room then, calling for the four at the table to come outside for some “snow football”. They were hauled unceremoniously from their seats, Van and Annie taking a last big swig of their beers as they were pulled to the door. Several people were digging through a closet as others yanked on layers of outdoor clothing.

“Here, put these snow pants on,” Annie commanded as she thrust an armload of the strange clothes at Allen. He looked them over dubiously as Hitomi grabbed another pair and handed them to Van.

“What are we doing?” Van asked Hitomi as he struggled to pull the thick pants over his baggy jeans. A few of Annie's girl relatives, who looked to be only a few years younger than himself, watched him, giggling and whispering to each other. Van felt his ears turn slightly red. He wasn't used to having girls look at him the way they normally looked at Allen.
Hitomi nearly toppled into Van as she hopped on one foot, trying to get her other foot through the pant leg. He caught her and held her steady while she pushed her foot through the opening.

“Thanks,” she said, panting a little and brushing the hair out of her face. Van heard the giggling intensify and dropped his hands from her arms.

“So, uh-- why are we getting dressed like this?” he asked again, flustered.

“Oh! We're going out to play snow football. You'll like it! We play tackle football because the snow's deep enough and we're all wearing enough layers, so nobody gets hurt too badly. Usually.”

Van and Allen exchanged worried looks. The crowd was a mix of men, women, and children. And several of the men looked frighteningly hefty.

“But you split up the men and the women and children, right?” Allen asked.

“Oh, no. We all play on two teams,” Annie snorted. Just for that, she handed him the most ridiculous, bright orange tasseled hat in the closet. Frowning, he crammed it down over his thick blond hair.

“I hardly think that's safe.”

“Well, like Tomi said, usually nobody gets seriously hurt,” Annie retorted. Allen raised an eyebrow at the word 'usually', and Annie shrugged. “Two years ago, Karl broke his arm. Well, technically, I broke it, but whatever.”

Allen's mouth dropped open, but before he or Van could reply, they were swept outside by the crowd. Annie and Hitomi whispered hurried rules and instructions on how to play as the group divided into teams. Van and Annie were placed on one side, and Allen and Hitomi joined the other team.

“Maybe Van and I should just watch for a while to learn the rules,” Allen said as the four split up.

“Sei nicht so langweilig!” Annie shouted at him as she pulled Van over to their team huddle. Allen blinked at her retreating form, confused, but pretty sure he should be insulted.

“She said 'don't be so boring', Allen,” Hitomi said with a big smirk. Allen scowled as he joined his team. He was going to beat her at this crazy Mystic Moon sport. And then he was going to rub it in like lemon on a paper cut!

The teams lined up, and the ball was snapped into play. Van wasn't exactly clear on the rules, but he'd gotten the gist that his team was supposed to tackle the person holding the oddly shaped ball. Right now, all he could really make out was people running and tackling each other all over the yard. Suddenly, one of the larger, older men came charging through the line, holding the ball. Van kicked into gear and automatically lunged towards him, knocking him flat. His eyes widened when he realized what he'd done; he jumped up and nervously extended a hand to the man he'd just tackled.

“Hey, great tackle, Van,” he said, taking Van's hand to pull himself up. Van's teammates slapped him on the back, cheering. Hitomi grinned and gave him a thumbs up, and he swelled with pride.

“You sure you've never played this before?” Annie asked him as the teams lined up again. Van just grinned and shook his head, and the ball went into play again.
This time, Allen was thrown the ball. For a split second, he stood there uncertainly, not even sure which way to run, and that split second was enough. Annie, bent low and charging like a bull, slammed into his midsection. He found himself almost buried in the snow, gasping desperately for the breath she had so ruthlessly knocked out of him. Annie's face wavered into view through the stars swirling around his eyes.

“Hey, Allen, you're supposed to try NOT to be tackled, not just stand there like a tomato-brain,” she said laughingly. Allen groaned as she pulled him back to his feet. He wasn't liking this game so far.

The ball passed from team to team as the game raged on and on. Van enjoyed himself immensely, due in large part to the fact that he and Hitomi seemed to be playing opposite each other. Which gave him lots of perfectly innocent chances to grab and tackle her.

“Eep!” she shrieked, trying to dodge past him with the ball. His trained reflexes were too quick for her, even hampered as he was with the snow and bulky clothing. His arms snaked around her midsection as he yanked her down with him into the snow, laughing. She laughed, too, as he helped pull her up yet again and brushed the snow off the back of her coat.

The sun was going down, and both teams agreed to call it quits before the Aunts came out and yelled at them. Van stifled disappointment as he followed Hitomi back inside. Allen looked thoroughly relieved to be finished. Annie had made it her mission to tackle him ruthlessly whenever she could find the opportunity.

“It was a really good game,” she said now as they peeled off their sopping layers. “Only a bloody lip and a sprained finger!”

“And a few bruised ribs. Our Annie is pretty rough,” one of the men laughed, giving Allen a friendly slap on the back. Allen tried to hide a wince.

“Alright, everyone! Come and eat! The kids are dying to get to the presents!!” Someone hollered from the kitchen area, and everyone obediently trooped towards the table.

“More food?” Van asked, incredulous.

“Yeah. It's what we do. Eat, eat, drink beer, eat,” Annie said happily.

“It's amazing how much food they can eat,” Hitomi said fervently. “I'd never have believed it before I saw it.”

The family had all gathered in the kitchen and dining room, overflowing the two large tables onto several other smaller ones set up for the kids. Van watched the family laughing and joking good-naturedly together, realizing for the first time what he'd missed growing up without his family. The feeling was so warm and comfortable and...and loving. He could hardly remember ever being wrapped in a feeling like that. Perhaps, long ago, before his father had died...His thoughts must've shown on his face, because Hitomi crept close to his side and took his hand with a gentle squeeze. He looked down at her with a tender smile.

“Hey, Tomi, could you and Van stand here for a minute? I want to get a picture of the two of you,” one of the teenage girls asked. Shrugging, Hitomi and Van went to stand where she gestured, missing the jubilantly triumphant look on Annie's face and the dawning horror on Allen's.

“Right here?” Hitomi asked as she and Van stood side by side under the doorframe.
“Oh yeah, that's perfect,” the young girl said with a shark smile not unlike Annie's. “By the way, Tomi, what's that above you?”

“Huh?...Oh my God!” Hitomi cried, her face instantly flaming a bright, scarlet red. Van looked up to see a small piece of a plant taped to the doorway above them.

“What's wrong, Hitomi?” he asked with a frown, confused and concerned by her reaction to the seemingly innocuous plant. Hitomi didn't even seem capable of answering him, she was blushing so furiously.

“It's mistletoe,” she finally choked out. The whole family's attention was riveted on them now, and Van started to blush as well, even though he had no idea what significance the mistletoe had.

“You've got to kiss her, Van. It's tradition!” Annie called out cheerfully above the laughter and catcalls of the rest of the family. Van nearly fell over in pure shock. Kiss her? In front of the whole family? Dear gods. Hitomi's face had now turned a brilliant magenta, and Van knew his color matched hers. Allen bit his lip and tasted the coppery taste of his own blood. Damn that little weed!

“And no little peck, either, guys,” the girl who had tricked them commanded. “It only counts if it's a real kiss!”

“Well, who determines that?” Hitomi gasped, unable to even look Van in the face. Lord, this was the most embarrassing moment of her life. She was going to KILL Annie. In the slowest, most horrific way possible.

“WE DO,” shouted the family. “So do it right, or we'll keep making you kiss until you get it right,” Annie finished, her shark grin spread from ear to ear. Hitomi revised her plan to include reviving her and killing her slowly twice. She licked her lips nervously and noticed Van doing the same.

“Okay, let's just get this over with,” she muttered, and he gave a barely perceptible nod. After another moment's hesitation, he leaned down and she leaned up.

They bumped noses awkwardly as they both tilted their heads the same direction. Resisting the urge to laugh, Hitomi quickly adjusted and their lips met for the first time. His lips were warm and firm under her own, and Hitomi felt herself melting into him as the cheers from her American family faded into a buzz. His hands came up to the small of her back to hold her to him, warm and strong.

Time stopped for Van as Hitomi's soft lips pressed against his own, and it didn't matter any longer that people were watching them. Her mouth opened gently under his own, and his tongue softly traced hers. She tasted like mint and heaven.

“Okay, okay, good enough! We won't make you do it again!” laughed Annie over the loud cheers and catcalls, and Hitomi and Van broke away, magenta blushes still in place. The family dropped into their chairs, and Hitomi found herself between Großmama and Van. Across the table, Allen gave her his usual friendly smile, although his face looked pale. Hitomi worried that Annie might have really hurt him playing football. She'd have to remember to ask him sometime when Annie wasn't around. Right now, Annie sat next to the blond knight, beaming broader than a rainbow at both Hitomi and Van. Hitomi shot her a malevolent glare of death. Okay, so it had been awesome, and she'd finally gotten to kiss Van, but that wasn't exactly how she'd planned it. So, maybe she wouldn't kill Annie, but she was definitely going to get her back. Somehow.
Van felt almost numb with happiness. He could still taste her, feel her. There would be a next time, he would make sure of that. And it would be a lot more private, too. He caught Annie's eye from across the table, and she winked happily at him. He grinned back with a sneaky suspicion that Annie had something to do with the mistletoe. He was definitely going to have to remember to thank her.

Presents and Princesses

And this chappie is a bit heavier on the Allen-side, major apologies about that to any Allen haters (although you might like the end). Just another example that stories take on a life of their own and authors don't always control what happens!

Allen decided that Annie had inherited her sadistic love of teasing from her Großmama as he watched the old lady deliberately drag out supper to the last possible minute. The kids were crazy with impatience to open their presents, and even the adults were looking longingly towards the tree by the time she finally set down her coffee cup. Allen saw the diabolical twinkle, so like Annie's, in the Großmama's eyes as the family stampeded towards the presents. Somehow, he found himself giving the old woman his arm as a walking support as she made her slow way to her chair by the tree.

"It is good to make them wait, you see," she explained as if she could read Allen's thoughts. "It makes them so much more excited, ja?"

Allen nodded, surveying the chaotic scene he needed to navigate in order to reach the old lady's chair. Paper was flying through the air, people were tossing boxes at each other, and there was constant movement as people jumped over, crawled under, or dodged around things to thank someone for a gift. It was slow going to get to the Großmama's chair through the mess.

"Allen, come over here and open your presents!" Annie called above the hubbub when she spied him and Großmama across the room. Allen stared at her in surprise. Presents? He wasn't expecting any presents. But sure enough, there was a small pile next to Annie's much larger one. Van was already opening his as Allen helped Großmama into her chair. She patted his arm with her old, wrinkled hand.

"Ach, you are a good boy," she said with a smile. "It is so good you and Van are here for this. It is our first Christmas without my Ida- Annie's großmama. It is a hard time for her."

Allen scrutinized Annie from across the room. Her face looked the same as always: full of laughter and mischief as she said something that made Hitomi and Van simultaneously turn a brilliant pink. If she was hurting, she was hiding it well.

"It's an honor to be here," he stated, still watching Annie, Hitomi, and Van. "Though I believe Annie would be fine whether or not Van and I were here."

"Ja. Our Annie is strong, but she is hurting. I can tell," Großmama said slowly. She patted Allen's arm again. "You hurt, too, I think. Maybe this visit will help you."

Allen swallowed convulsively, watching Hitomi lean her shoulder into Van's to show him one of her gifts. This trip was causing the hurt, not helping it.

"Hey, stop gawking and get your butt over here!" Annie demanded, hands on her hips. Mentally shaking himself and forcing a friendly, pleasant mask onto his face, Allen picked his way through the chaos over to her. She was bouncing up and down
like she had from the expresso, and Allen resisted the urge to clamp his hands down on top of her head to hold her still.

“Here, open this one. It's from me!” she exclaimed, thrusting a brightly wrapped package into his hands. Curious, but definitely cautious about what Annie might have thought was an appropriate gift for him, he slowly peeled back the wrapper to reveal an innocent looking box. Perhaps it wasn't a joke? He pulled open the lid.

“GAAA!” he shouted as a long tube shot out of the box and hit him squarely on the nose. He closed his watering eyes and scowled fiercely as Annie doubled over laughing. Even Van and Hitomi joined in after a moment of stunned silence.

“I'm glad you found that so amusing. Are you finished yet?” Allen asked, irritation coloring the edge of his voice.

“Allen, lighten up!” Annie demanded, managing to look annoyed and yet keep giggling. “It's called a gag gift. It's supposed to be funny!”

“Funny for who?” Allen demanded. Annie rolled her eyes and shoved another present at him before diving back into her own pile. Allen almost found her childlike excitement cute. Almost. If his nose hadn't still been smarting.

“Here, Van, this one's from me,” Hitomi said, handing Van a small, wrapped present. She looked as awkward as he felt as he accepted it from her. “It's nothing special,” she continued, watching as he removed the paper. God, she hoped he liked it. She'd been so stumped about what to get him. Honestly, what do you get a king from another world?

Van peeled off the last bit of wrapping and stared. Inside a simple, silver frame was the picture of the two of them, the one Hitomi had taken in her room on the day he had arrived. The two of them, together... Hitomi stirred uncomfortably at his side.

“If you don't like it--” she began. Van shook his head quickly to cut her off, still looking at the picture.

“No. No, I like it. Really,” he said quietly. He looked into her crystal green eyes. “Thank you, Hitomi.”

Relief and something else, something he couldn't quite define, flooded her face. She grinned and dipped her head, a pink blush spread across her cheeks. She opened her mouth to reply, but let out a tiny squeak instead as Annie glomped her.

“Oh, is that what you gave Van? That's a cute picture.”

“Get...off...me...” Hitomi wheezed.

Annie grinned, not relinquishing her hold as she leaned over to Van. “Did you open my present yet, Van?”

He eyed her, wondering if he should pry her off Hitomi or stay out of it. “Not yet,” he answered warily. “Should I point it away from me when I do?”

“Ah, I should've known that joke wouldn't work more than once,” she pouted, letting go of Hitomi. She leaned over and whispered: “Point it at Allen!”

“I heard that,” Allen said, looking as if he was barely resisting the temptation to rub his temples with exasperation. Annie gave Van an exaggerated wink.

“Do it when he's not looking,” she said in a loud whisper, then turned around to face Allen with an unconvincingly innocent face. Van laughed, Hitomi giggled, and Allen
did something decidedly un-Allen-like. He scooped up a balled-up wad of wrapping paper and chucked it at Annie. It hit her square on the forehead and dropped to the ground before she had a chance to react. Now she just stood there gaping at him as Hitomi and Van sat open-mouthed. Allen was too shocked to even apologize. He'd thrown something at a girl. Okay, so he hadn't thrown it hard enough to actually hurt her, but still-- what was this place doing to him? A slow smile pulled at the corners of Annie's mouth until she was grinning from ear to ear.

“Allen! You just threw something at a girl!” she exclaimed. “And I thought you were a Jello Knight!”

“Caeli Knight,” Allen ground out, any thoughts of apologizing rapidly dissolving.

“Who's ready for cookies and Egg Nog?” Aunt Vera called out as she and several others came into the room carrying heavily laden trays.

“Egg Nog!” the family cheered as the mugs started being passed through the crowd. Hitomi followed Annie through the chaos to one of the trays as Van carefully tucked his framed photo in a safe spot under his chair. He could see that Allen, as if to prove that his chivalrous manners were still intact, had already taken one of the heavy trays from an elderly aunt. Van moved to do the same when a small woman holding the fussing newborn Willem stopped him.

“Oh, Van, could you just hold him for a few minutes? Thanks,” she said as she handed Van the squalling infant. Before he could protest, the woman had already moved off through the crowd, and he stifled the urge to panic. He'd never held a baby before, especially not one as small as this. Cautiously, afraid he might break him, Van shifted the fussing Willem into a more comfortable position. Willem waved angry fists in the air, his tiny face red and contorted with infant fury. Nervously, Van jiggled him a little.

“Hey...uhm...don't cry,” he said uncertainly. What did mothers do to calm babies down? They sang, he knew that much. But he wasn't about to start singing any half-forgotten lullabies in a crowded room. He jiggled him again, but that didn't seem to do anything. Wait! Didn't they pat them on the back or something? Van very carefully hoisted the squalling newborn onto his shoulder and tentatively patted his small back. A few moments later, he was rewarded by a loud burp, and Willem nuzzled down into his shoulder. Van gave a relieved sigh, then felt something warm and wet soaking through his shirt. He pulled the baby away slightly to see a white, gooey mess dripping down his shoulder.

“Thanks, kid,” he muttered, switching the newborn to his other shoulder. Willem just snuggled in tighter and went to sleep.

Across the room, Hitomi stared dreamily at something she never really believed she'd see: Van cuddling a baby. She sighed softly, a smile tugging at her mouth, her eggnog forgotten in her hands. It was so unbelievably adorable.

“There's nothing sweeter than seeing the guy you love holding a baby, is there?” a voice said at her shoulder. Hitomi wheeled around to see Willem's mother smiling at her. “Just wait until it's your baby. It's even cuter.”

“I'm not- I mean, we're-” Hitomi spluttered, turning five shades of red for the seventy-fifth time that day. Then she looked at Van again and lost her train of thought. “...He is really cute holding a baby, isn't he?”
“Oh, damn. Willem spit up on him!” the other woman cried, making Hitomi jump. Hitomi watched, amused, as she grabbed a napkin and headed over to start scrubbing at Van's shirt. An arm draped around her shoulders, and she tore her eyes away to look into Annie's smiling face.

“He's super cute like that,” she said. “And it's a good thing he got puked on. Practice for his own kids, you know?”

For a split second, Hitomi envisioned several mini-Vans running around and nearly melted at the sheer adorableness of it. Then she gave herself a stern metal shake and refocused on the present.

“I don't think he's having kids of his own any time soon, Annie.”

Annie tilted her head, contemplating. “Well, I bet he's been catching some pressure to get busy with that. Produce an heir for the throne and all.”

Hitomi froze, staring at Van as he attempted to soothe the once again fussy infant. Dear lord, why hadn't she ever thought about that? Why hadn't he ever mentioned it to her? His council had probably been badgering him about that very thing for a year or two now. Did that mean-- was this trip some sort of last fling with her? Was it just to say goodbye for real? Oh, God, he was probably already engaged to some princess or other that his council picked out for him! Ooohhh, she hated that council!

Van turned to look at her and Hitomi forgot all about worrying about some fantasy princess. Van would have told her if something like that was happening. And his father got married when he was much older than Van was now, right? Hitomi smiled at him. Council be damned. Van wouldn't let them push him around.

“Omigod! Camera! Camera camera, where is it?” Annie suddenly squealed loudly. She thrust her glass of eggnog into Hitomi's hands and bolted out of the room. Confused, Hitomi looked around to see what had caused the commotion as Van came up beside her, still holding baby Willem. He was laughing under his breath as he pointed across the room.

Allen sat crosslegged on the floor with a pink plastic tea set spread out in front of him. Two small girls were putting ribbons and bows from the presents in his long, blond hair as another served him tea. He seemed to be playing along with their little game, even wrapping a bright purple feathery boa around his neck at their request. Hitomi giggled and snorted, doubling over from the effort of not laughing too loudly. She could see that Van's shoulders were shaking from silent laughter as he watched the gallant knight, one of Gaea's renowned swordsmen, playing dress-up with a few small girls.

Annie appeared beside Hitomi and started snapping pictures as best she could through the tears streaming down her face.

“Oh, I'm so glad he came with you, Van,” she gasped out, still laughing as she wiped the tears off her face. Van just shook his head, apparently unable to speak even when Annie snapped a picture of his laughing face. She handed her camera to Hitomi and took a few deep breaths.

“Here, hold this. I've got to go over there for a minute or two.”

Hitomi doubled over again with laughter as Annie made her way across the room to squat down at eye-level with Allen. He glared menacingly at her, daring her to laugh as he pretended to take a sip from his plastic teacup.
“Hey, Annie, wanna join our tea party? You could be a princess, too!” chirped one of the girls playing with Allen's hair.

“No, thanks, Gracie. I just came to see how Allen was enjoying his tea,” Annie replied, making an obvious effort not to giggle.

Gracie frowned as she pulled a silver ribbon around Allen's forehead like a crown. “He's Princess Alice now. Aren't you, Alice?”

“Princess Alice?!” Annie squeaked. She looked close to exploding from pent-up laughter.

“Don't say a word,” Allen hissed dangerously, leaning across the tea set at her.

“You know, I've got some makeup you could use in the side pocket of my bag,” Annie informed the girls cheerfully, a giant shark grin spread across her face. Allen's eyes got wider and he started stand, protesting, as Gracie took off running to find Annie's bag.

“Where're you going, Allen? Aren't you going to play with us anymore? Please?” the little girls begged him, pulling at his sleeves. Sighing, looking decidedly unhappy but apparently unable to refuse their pleading, Allen plopped resignedly back down. He gave Annie a defiant glare of death.

“Alright, girls. But just a tiny little bit of makeup, okay?” he said, earning cheers from his mini-fans. “And you-- stop giving them ideas!”

“I was just trying to be helpful, Princess Alice,” Annie replied sweetly. She stood up and patted him on the head. “It's so fun watching you get all prettied up. Right, girls?”

The little girls chorused a loud yes, covering up Allen's angry snarl, as Annie headed back over to Hitomi and Van. Allen gritted his teeth, forcing a fake-happy smile as Gracie bounded up to him with the twice-accursed makeup bag. He would get Annie back. Somehow, someway, he would make her pay.

“What the heck did you say to make Allen blush like that?” Hitomi demanded as Annie reached them, laughing so hard she was wheezing. It took her several minutes to regain her composure enough to reply.

“I didn't say anything to Princess Alice.”

“Princess Alice?!” Van and Hitomi snorted together, unable to stop the laughter from bubbling past their lips. Allen shot their group several very dirty looks as Gracie liberated purple eye shadow. Annie waved cheerfully at him and took a few more pictures. Luckily for Allen, the parents were all starting to glance at the clocks and round their kids up for bed.

“Hey, who's makeup is this? Gracie, you know better!” one of the moms scolded as she rescued Allen from a lipstick wielding Gracie.

“It's mine, Kel,” Annie called across the room. “I told them they could use it, so it's okay!”

Kel sighed and swatted Gracie lightly on the backside as she pointed her towards the stairs. “To bed with you. Sorry about this, Allen.”

“It's not a problem, really,” Allen assured her as he started to untangle his ribbon and bow bedecked hair.

“You wonderful boy,” one of the great-aunts said, pinching his cheeks and handing him a wet napkin to wipe his face with. Allen gratefully scrubbed his face, grimacing at the purple and red smears.
“What's so great about playing with the kids? I do it all the time!” Annie protested as she came up to Allen's side.

“Ach, you are always getting them in trouble, not playing!” the great aunt said as she trundled off. Annie frowned at her retreating back.

“I believe it,” Allen said with a wise nod. Annie smacked him in the arm.

“Oh, shut up, Alice.”

Hey guys...let's not forget that mistletoe is still floating around...so who's going to be the next victim? Find out next chapter!! Ja ne

Backrubs and Kisses

Okay, to make up for the last Allen-centric chapter, this one's all about VxH, with some mushy-ness thrown in for good measure! Okay, once again, tiny bit of German translation: Frohliche Weihnachten: Merry Christmas Ihr boese kinder: You naughty kids Mach schnell: hurry up/ quickly. Once again, special thanks goes to Arienhod for the help with my poor German! Thanks!!

Sorry this chapter's so short. I'm hoping the next will be longer and have more interesting stuff happen. Don't give up on me yet! Okay, on with the mush!

Van drifted languidly between dreams and waking as whispered giggles tugged at his consciousness. Something little poked at his face and arms and tugged at his hair.

“Mmrph,” he groaned, trying to roll away from the unwanted pokes so he could slide back into dreamland. The giggles intensified, and something heavy settled on his abdomen. He cracked one eye slowly open.

“WAAAAAAAKE UUUUUUUP!!” chorused a pack of kids, wailing like banshees. The two little ones sitting on Van's stomach added a few bounces for good measure, knocking the wind out of him. Hitomi sat bolt upright with a gasp on the couch above him, wide eyed and startled. Several kids latched onto her and pulled her off the couch. She landed awkwardly on top of Van and his two tormentors with an undignified squeak. Instantly, the kids jumped on the pile to pin her down and tickle her unmercifully. It was a confusing mass of hands and legs and blankets as Hitomi wriggled and laughingly tried to untangle herself. Van was pinned down at the bottom of the pile, unable to do anything but get his breath squished out of him and enjoy the moment.

“Enough, enough! Ihr boese kinder!” shouted Aunt Vera from the doorway, managing to sound fierce even though she was smiling. “Into the kitchen with you! Mach schnell!”

Obediently, the kids untangled themselves and sped out of the room. Hitomi rolled off of Van to lay next to his side, gasping for breath, while Van inhaled deeply to expand his squashed ribs. He glanced around to see Annie and Allen's empty sleeping bags. Apparently, you had to get up early in this family to avoid being attacked.

“Fröhliche Weihnachten. Now, go and see your stockings, then come for breakfast,” Aunt Vera commanded them as she sailed out of the room after the children.

“Stockings?” Van asked, turning his head to look questioningly at Hitomi. She rolled onto her side, propping her head on her hand to gaze down at him. He was so beautiful; she longed to brush the hair out of his eyes.
“Yeah, our Christmas Stockings. Didn't you notice them yesterday hanging on the wall?”

Van swallowed, mesmerized by the way she looked at him. Had he noticed socks hanging on a wall? He couldn't remember. He gave a noncommittal shrug, noticing the way the early morning sunlight turned her eyes a goldish green like new spring leaves.

“Oh. Well, traditionally, you hang up your stocking on Christmas Eve, and Christmas morning, it's filled with candy and little presents,” she said softly. Her words barely registered in Van's consciousness. His mind was absorbed with thoughts of her lips, her skin, the way it had felt to kiss her. He shifted slightly, his hands itching to reach up and pull her down to him.

Hitomi's tongue darted out to moisten her suddenly dry lips. Lord, she wanted to kiss him so badly. With a jerk, she realized she'd been unconsciously leaning closer to him, and she sat abruptly upright. Her cheeks burned as she ran nervous fingers through her hair. Good grief, he was going to think she was some crazy, hormone-driven groupie.

Van blinked at her suddenly stiff back as she sat up and faced away from him. What had happened? What had he done wrong? Sighing, Van pushed himself into a sitting position next to her, annoyed with himself. He should have reacted faster, made his move, as Annie would say. He was never going to get anywhere with Hitomi if he didn't stop acting like a nervous, insecure teenager.

The muscles in his neck and shoulders protested as he experimentally twisted his head. Hitomi turned around just in time to catch him wincing slightly as he attempted to stretch the knots out of his neck.

“Are you okay?” she asked, watching him with concern.

“Yeah. Just a little stiff from sleeping on the floor,” Van replied, attempting to massage his sore muscles. He dropped his hands in surprise as Hitomi turned him and began rubbing his shoulders.

“I told you to take the couch,” she said cheerfully, her hands skilfully working out all the tight knots. Van could feel himself relaxing, enjoying the feel of her fingers on his muscles. Hitomi worked in silence for several minutes, grateful that Van was wearing a shirt. She was having a tough time keeping the drool in check and her hands on task as it was. If she'd been touching bare skin...

“Does that feel better?” she asked, still massaging his shoulder muscles. God, they felt so nice!

Van nodded, wishing he'd taken off his shirt for sleeping.

“Where'd you learn to do that?”

“I used to give Annie's grandma shoulder rubs all the time. She said no one did it better, except maybe Annie,” Hitomi said softly, a gentle, sad, smile on her face as she remembered the old woman.

“You miss her as much as Annie, don't you?”

Hitomi massaged a particularly tight knot and contemplated Van's quiet question. “I miss her a lot. She was like family, like my own grandma. But I don't think anyone
misses her like Annie does. She was the only mother Annie ever knew, you know? It broke her heart to lose her."

“Then it is a good thing that she has you,” Van said quietly. Hitomi's hands became gentler as she gave a low laugh.

“I haven't done much. Goettenbergs don't cry. Especially not around other people,” she replied. All the knots were gone from Van's muscles, but she couldn't bring herself to stop touching him. Not yet.

“Hey, guys, what the hell's taking you so long?” Annie demanded as she leaned around the doorway.

“We're coming, we're coming,” Hitomi sighed, her hands still on Van's shoulders.

“Okay, then!” Annie said, withdrawing her head behind the doorway. A moment later, she reappeared with a humongous smirk.

“Hey, guys, what the hell's taking you so long?” she chirped. Hitomi flamed red and whipped her hands away from Van's shoulders. Judging by the brilliant scarlet of his ears, Van was blushing as furiously as she was. Annie winked at them both and disappeared around the door again. The silence in the room was deafening. Van shifted uncomfortably, and Hitomi fidgeted, clearing her throat.

“So, stockings?” she asked, unable to look at him.

“Stockings,” he agreed. The both clambered quickly to their feet, Hitomi leading the way out of the room. Good lord, she was going to hurt that girl!

They were greeted by a chorus of Merry Christmas's as they joined the family by the Christmas tree. Hitomi pulled their stockings off the wall, handed Van his, and dug in to hers with childish glee. Annie and Allen made their way over to them through the throng of people. Van gave a low chuckle as he imagined what the knight's face would have looked like if he'd heard Annie's comment about backrubs.

“So, you guys like my wake up call?” Annie asked cheerfully as she thumped Hitomi on the arm. Hitomi rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, it was great. You got up early on purpose just to do that, didn't you?”

Annie nodded gleefully. “You bet! Only I didn't get up early enough to catch Princess Alice. I found him schmoozing the Aunts in the kitchen at the crack of dawn.”

“I asked you to stop calling me that,” Allen gritted out. “And I wasn't schmoozing.”

Van glanced between Annie and Allen, his brow furrowed. “Schmoozing? What's that?”

Annie made a face. “You know, sucking up, flattery, being sugar-sweet to make people like you. What Allen keeps doing to my family.”

“I'm not doing anything,” Allen said, exasperated. Annie grabbed his stocking out of his hand with a dark glare.

“Whatever. Just go get some breakfast while I put these away,” she snorted, walking off. Van, seeing Hitomi was preparing to be nice to Allen yet again, followed the brown-haired girl back to the room they'd slept in. Annie harrumphed a little to herself as she stowed their goodies away, but was all smiles when she caught up with Van in the doorway.

“So, having a nice morning so far?” she asked, her voice heavy with innuendo. Van willed his face to stay blush-free. He was a grown man, not a self-conscious teenager.

“Not too bad,” he replied cautiously. “And you?”
“Hm. Besides Princess Alice making my family love him, I'd have to say pretty
good. Oh, and Van...” she suddenly snaked an arm around his neck, effectively putting
him into a tight headlock. Van blinked, shocked, as she planted a kiss on his cheek.
She released him with a grin and he stared at her, surprised and confused.

“Mistletoe,” Annie smirked, pointing a finger above them.

“Oh,” Van said, looking up at the innocent piece of plant.

“And your morning's about to go from 'not too bad' to 'awesome' in about thirty
seconds,” Annie continued, looking down the hallway. Hitomi was coming towards
them, her stocking in her hand. Van swallowed, about to say something, but Annie had
already moved out of the doorway into the hallway.

“Hey, guys. Breakfast is starting, so we're all supposed to get to the kitchen,” Hitomi
said as she reached them. She paused in the doorway to smile at Van, oblivious to the
plant above her.

“Oooh,  look,  Hitomi.  More  mistletoe!”  Annie  crooned.  She  grinned  at  Hitomi's
dumbfounded face and disappeared down the hall, leaving the two standing awkwardly
under the mistletoe. Alone. Hitomi licked her lips nervously.

“Ah. Well. No one's here to see, so...” she paused. “I mean, no one will know if we
don't, you know...”

Van gathered his courage and moved forward, closing the distance between them to
look down at her. “It is tradition,” he said huskily.

“Yeah. Tradition,” Hitomi echoed breathlessly as Van's hands slid around the small of
her back. Her own hands came up to rest on his chest and he tightened his grip to press
her gently against him. Her green eyes fluttered closed as he bent his head to find her
lips.

She was melting. It was the only way she could describe how she was feeling. Her
bones dissolved into liquid, leaving her no choice but to wrap her arms around Van's
shoulders for support. Rational thought flew away in every direction as her insides
turned into some form of quivering jelly. Did he have any clue what he was doing to
her? And where the hell did he learn to kiss like that?

Van didn't even bother trying to think. Too much blood had been diverted from his
brain to other important areas of his anatomy for logical thought. By the gods, why
hadn't he done this days ago?

A reverberating shout of “Hey! Lovebirds!” echoing from the kitchen jerked them
unpleasantly back to reality. Hitomi giggled, burying her face in Van's shoulder. She
could feel him chuckling softly under her hands, his own arms still wound tightly
around her. She pulled away enough to look at his face.

“So, breakfast?” she asked with an ear to ear grin.

“Breakfast,” he agreed.

**Phone Calls and Sledding**

I apologize in advance for this chapter. It is DEFINITELY not my
best, and I just can't get it to come out right. And once again, a
chapter more heavy on Allen than Van and Hitomi. Darn it. Don't
know where that's coming from, but please bear with me. Don't give up
after this chapter. I think the next ones will turn out better. For some
reason, this just...got stuck in bad land. Criticism and flames are expected and welcome.

Breakfast finished, Hitomi floated down the hallway to change out of her pajamas. Annie followed after her, watching her dreamy face with a happy grin. She shut the door quietly and turned to look questioningly at Hitomi.

“So, how was it?” she asked after a moment. Hitomi stopped digging through her bag to rock back on her heels. Pink crept up into her cheeks as she glanced over at Annie.

“How was what?” she asked innocently.

Annie rolled her eyes dramatically. “Ugh! Don't be stupid. Is Van a good kisser or what?”

“Oh, he's, uh...” Hitomi stuttered, her face scarlet now. “YES, alright?! He's an awesome kisser.”

“Yay! I knew it! Thank God for mistletoe! I told you Christmas would be a good time to bring him to Earth! So, how soon before you're making out like horny teenagers?”

Hitomi smacked her on the arm. “It was just one kiss! We're not about to hop into bed together!”

“Pity, that,” Annie stated, pulling on her jeans. Hitomi pulled a face, not about to divulge just how badly the hormone-driven part of her wanted to jump into said bed.

“What I want to know is where he learned to kiss like that,” Hitomi said quietly as she picked out a sweater to wear. “I mean, Lord, Annie, it was perfect.”

“Maybe he practiced on the maids,” Annie joked. Hitomi looked horror-stricken, and Annie snorted. “Oh, come on, Hitomi. I hardly think he's the Don Juan type. Jeez, the man could barely work up the nerve to kiss you, let alone seduce anyone else.”

“But he was really good,” Hitomi said, chewing her bottom lip nervously. “What if he thinks I was really bad at it?”

“Oh, for God's sake, Hitomi! That's not even possible,” Annie retorted. “Look, take it from someone who's kissed a lot more guys than you: Van hasn't been practicing, unless it's been with his pillow, and there's no way he could think you're a sucky kisser. Okay, so I'll admit a little skill helps to make great lip-action, but the biggest determining factor is how you feel about the guy. And seeing how much you love him, and how hopelessly crazy he is for you, you guys probably had the most bone-melting first kiss ever.”

“It wasn't my first kiss,” Hitomi mumbled. “Wait, you think he's really crazy for me?”

“How many times do I have to tell you, that awful little peck Allen gave you does NOT count. 'A peach is a peach' and all that. And yes. He's obviously totally in love with you.”

Annie swung open the door and marched out of the room, yanking her long hair into her customary messy ponytail as she went. Hitomi watched her go with a growing smile and a warm feeling spreading through her bones. Annie thought Van loved her! The distant sound of a phone ringing and ten people shouting “I got it!” jerked her back to reality, and she wandered out of the room and down the hallway.

“Hitomi, Hitomi, it's for you!” shrieked two little kids as they barreled up to her and grabbed her hands. Aunt Vera charged into the hall and smiled cheerfully at her.
“Schnell, schnell! It is your parents!”

Smiling, Hitomi ran to the nearest phone. She could hear Annie trying out her marginal Japanese on her family. Only, she was saying something about a boy in a bathroom wearing a skirt, which, unless she was joking about Allen, was probably not what she intended. Hitomi could hear her family's laughter ringing out through the phone.

“Wow. I think I totally mangled that,” Annie said in English, laughing herself.

“Totally. You need more practice,” Hitomi agreed. Annie grinned at her and waved her over to take the phone.

“Okay, well, Großmama says to say Merry Christmas from us all, and we hope you come out to see us again soon. And I'll play you on Mario Kart this week, ne, Mamoru-kun? Ja ne!” Annie chirped as she handed the phone to Hitomi. “I'll go find Van, okay?” she mouthed before she sped off.

“So, how are things at the Goettenbergs this year?” her mother asked casually after Hitomi greeted her family. “We're so sorry we couldn't come out to spend it with you.”

“Oh, that's okay, Mom. Everything here's about the same as normal, except we're all missing Grandma Ida,” Hitomi returned, switching easily to her native Japanese. She plugged her ear firmly with her finger to block out the usual early morning chaos.

“If we could have made it there, we would have,” her father said gently. Hitomi made a sound of understanding agreement.

“Especially to meet Van,” her mother added, and Hitomi choked slightly. “By the way, how are things going with him there?”

“Oh, um, alright,” Hitomi replied lamely, her brain instantly flashing back to the mistletoe moments. “I mean, really good. I think he's having a good time.”

“Oh?” her mother questioned. Hitomi didn't add anything, and she went on. “And how is Allen liking things?”

“Well...I don't know if he's having as much fun as Van. Annie's, um, being Annie.”

Her brother laughed. “Yeah, she said she was having a lot of fun this year. Man, I wish we could be there to see it!”

“Tell us about what's been happening!” her mother demanded, and Hitomi dutifully gave a detailed account. Soon, she had her family in hysterics over Van and Allen's reactions to mundane Earth things like automatic doors and Annie's driving. Hitomi actually thought her brother was going to pass out from laughter when she told them about Allen playing tea party with the little girls.

“Send me pictures. Please, send me pictures!” Mamaru begged, gasping for air. Hitomi giggled, promising to send an email as soon as they got back home.

“Can we talk to Van, Hitomi-chan?” her mother asked, and Hitomi's giggling abruptly stopped.

“Oh, yeah, sure, Mom. Actually, Annie ran off to find him. But he's never used a phone before,” Hitomi answered.

“He's never eaten ice-cream before, either,” her father reminded her.

Hitomi grimaced and choked on her reply as she saw Annie leading a confused looking Van towards her. What would her family say to him? And what would he say back??
“Relax, they're not going to bite you,” Annie was muttering quietly to Van. “All you do is hold the phone like that and say hello. And just SAY it, don't shout it, okay? They can hear you.”

“Uh, here's Van,” Hitomi said in a rush, handing the reciever over to Van. He looked at it dubiously before looking up at Hitomi. She nodded in as reassuring a manner as she could manage, considering her own anxiety, and he pressed the strange device to his ear.

“...hello?” he asked in a small voice. Hitomi chewed her nails nervously as she studied Van's face for any clue to what her family was saying.

Van listened in amazement to the voices ringing clearly through the phone pressed to his ear. He could hardly wrap his brain around the fact that he was talking to people who were somewhere thousands of miles away. Good Gods, he was talking to her parents. Hitomi's mother sounded so much like Hitomi, and her brother and even her father sounded friendly and excited to talk to him. Van couldn't help but to breathe a deep sigh of relief, even though he wondered what Hitomi looked so nervous about.

“I'm so glad we've finally got to speak to you,” Hitomi's mother was saying. “We were all so disappointed that we couldn't get out to the States to meet you while you're here. Are you and Hitomi having a good time?”

Van flushed a little guiltily at the thought of what he and Hitomi had been doing not so very long ago. “Ye-yeah. The Mystic Moon is a very interesting place.”

He answered a few more friendly questions from Hitomi's parents, and a few excited questions about guymelefs from her brother, thankful they seemed to like him. Finally, he handed the phone back to Hitomi, who seemed to have chewed her nails down to the roots, and listened while she said a protracted good-bye. As soon as she hung up, Annie thumped him hard on the arm.

“What did you guys look so nervous about? Did you think they were going to interrogate you? Must've been one hell of a good time under the mistletoe this morning!” Annie laughed to see them both flame red. “Good God, you two are way to easy to embarrass!”

“Shouldn't you be torturing Allen or something?” Van muttered.

“I'm pacing myself. Can't have too much of a good thing at one time, you know,” Annie replied seriously, staring dreamily off into space. Van eyed her, vaguely disturbed and amused at the level of enjoyment she got from teasing the knight. She suddenly seemed to jerk herself back to the present. “Anyway, Van- have you ever been sledding before?”

“I-no. I can't say that I have.”
“Well, then. Get suited up. We're going to teach you how to sled. Goettenberg style.”
Hitomi gave him a smile that was frighteningly close to Annie's shark grin. “The key
is to wear padding. Lots of padding.”

Annie laughed and pushed them both towards the doorway. “Alrighty then! A bunch
of the family's already sledding, so I'll go find the Blond Freak and meet you out
there!”

Hitomi grabbed Van's hand and pulled him after her to get their outdoor clothes on
while Annie skipped through the house in search of Allen. He wasn't in the kitchen
schmoozing the aunts, and he wasn't with the little girls playing dress-up. Annie was
beginning to get annoyed when she poked her head around a doorway and stopped
abruptly. There, sitting next to Großmama on the couch, was Allen, surrounded by
photo albums.

“Ja, see? She was so tiny, she could fit in one hand. Our little Annie was born so
early, the doctors said she could not live. But she did, I think, just to prove them
wrong.” Großmama told him.

“That doesn't surprise me,” Allen replied dryly. He jumped, nearly dropping the
photo album on his lap at Annie's screech from the doorway.

“Großmama! Are you showing him my baby pictures?!”

Großmama seemed completely unfazed by the outburst. She gave Annie a
complacent smile. “He enjoyed them. Ja, Allen?”

“Oh yes. I especially loved your school pictures. Your hair was so...interesting,”
Allen said with a giant smirk. Annie scowled darkly at him as she hastily snatched the
albums away from him and Großmama.
“Everybody's awkward at that age. And I'll have you know, that hair was very in at the time!”

“Of course,” Allen said, his smirk growing even larger. Annie narrowed her eyes dangerously.

“Well, so sorry to break up the fun, but we're going sledding now,” she snapped, shoving the albums unceremoniously as high up on a shelf as she could reach. Allen decided not to point out how low that actually was and how easily he could still get at them. He stood up and took the Großmama's fragile, old hand.

“Thank you so much for showing me all of that,” he said with a kind smile. Großmama's eyes twinkled at him and she patted his cheek.

“Ach, you good boy. You go and have fun now,” she replied, squeezing his hand with her weak strength before releasing it. “And Annie, you be nice to him.”

Annie blinked. “I'm always nice, Großmama! Schnell, Allen! Let's go!”

Allen submitted to being ruthlessly dragged along in Annie's wake as she plowed through the house. He could tell that she was bothered by the fact that he'd seen all those pictures of her, and he savored the moment.

“Did you really wear your hair like that on purpose?” he couldn't resist asking. Annie stopped short and turned to give him a ferocious glare.

“I wouldn't be the one to talk, Mr. Poofy-sleeves. And what about your hair?”

Allen frowned, running a hand through his long, blond ponytail. “What about it?” he demanded.

“That three-inch lift in the front. How do you even get it to do that?” Annie asked, tugging at a chunk of his bangs. Allen swatted her hand away as a younger boy walked up to them.

“Hey, Annie, Allen, can you guys come down to the basement for a minute? We want to show you something,” he said, looking at them imploringly.

“Sure, Mike. What's up?” Annie asked, the argument about hairstyles apparently forgotten in the space of a millisecond. Allen shook his head in exasperation.

“We just want to show you something,” Mike replied, heading off to the basement. Shrugging, Annie followed him down the stairs with Allen close at her heels. Abruptly, she stopped, and the knight nearly plowed into her from behind. He had less than a second to hear Annie's sharp intake of breath before several bright yellow objects careened towards her exposed front.

Reacting instantly, Allen grabbed her and twisted, somehow managing to pull her behind him as he turned so the missiles hit him in the back instead of hitting her. A brief second later, he realized that the yellow things were soft and barely stung on impact, while Annie was now laying on her back on the steps with a painful grimace on her face. She opened her eyes to look up at his face as he braced himself on his arms above her. The group of boys with nerf guns behind them cracked up into hysterical laughter.

“What...the hell...did you do...that for?” she wheezed out, apparently having gotten the wind knocked out of her when she hit the steps.

“I-it was just a reaction. To keep you from getting hurt,” Allen floundered, pushing himself back onto his feet and offering her a hand. Annie ignored the hand and pushed herself up, wincing.
“Huh. Yeah. Worked out great there, Allen. Ouch, good lord, I'm going to be bruised for a week!”

“I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you,” Allen said earnestly, a sheepishly apologetic look on his face. Annie sat on the steps, rubbing her bruises.

“Yeah, well, I keep telling you chivalry is dead. And for good reason. Next time, just let me get shot, okay?”

A moment later, she was back on her feet and laughing heartily with the boys over their prank, while Allen stood there silently berating himself. A few boys got hearty smacks up-side the head for calling Allen's maneuver “awesome” before they all trooped upstairs and layered up for sledding. At the whispered advice of one of the boys, Allen pulled on several extra layers for padding. There was an undeniably malevolent glint in Annie's eyes whenever she glanced at him that gave him a cold sweat.

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Sledding with the Goettenbergs, as Van had discovered, involved a lot more tackling and ramming than normal. You never simply slid down the hill and came back up. Oh no. Everyone lined up in a row at the top of the hill and raced to the bottom in an anything-goes battle to see who could actually make it to the bottom still on their sled. On his first run down the hill, Hitomi somehow managed to dive off her sled directly into him, sending them both tumbling down the hill several feet in a tangle of arms, legs, and snow.

“What was the point of that? You made yourself lose, too,” Van said when they'd come to a stop. He didn't mind, really, seeing as Hitomi was sprawled out on top of him. She giggled and pushed herself up. There were several crashes and shrieks from the bottom of the hill.

“Well, so did you. Besides, you don't really want to make it to the bottom. The only way you stop is by hitting a tree or falling into the creek.”

Hitomi took his hand as they trudged back up to the top of the hill, to be met by a beaming Annie and a slightly worried looking Allen.

“Hey, guys! What took you so long?” Hitomi asked as Annie threw down her sled and prepared to join the battle.

“Großmama was just showing me some of Annie's baby pictures,” Allen said casually. Hitomi stared at his smirk for a moment and started laughing. Annie looked up at Allen with a defiant look of her own.

“Yeah, and then Allen body-slammed me into the steps. You should see the bruises!”

Allen's smirk died as Annie pushed off and sped down the hill. Van and Hitomi turned confused faces towards him and Allen put his hands up defensively.

“It was just a reaction. They shot at us and I just reacted,” he said imploringly. “Honestly, I didn't mean to do it.”

Hitomi patted him on the arm reassuringly and she and Van set off down the hill again. Allen sat down heavily in his sled and watched broodingly as Van tackled Hitomi, crashing them into another tangled group of sledders. They laughed, the two of them staying twisted together tightly for several minutes longer than necessary. Allen felt his chest contract painfully as Hitomi brushed some snow out of Van's hair and grabbed his hand.
Allen swallowed hard and pulled his eyes away. He could see Annie emerging laughingly from the trees and start climbing the hill. He focused on her. It was so strange to think that she had ever been that tiny, fragile baby with tubes and wires all over her, the baby no one thought would survive. Allen frowned, realizing that he'd never seen a mother in any of her pictures, or a father. And not once had Großmama ever mentioned one, either.

“C'mon, Allen. You should join in the game,” Hitomi said from beside him. Allen jumped in surprise and turned to look at her, standing there next to Van.

“I think I'll just watch for a while from here,” he replied smoothly, thinking privately that there was hardly a reason to join in, since Van was the one she'd be trying to tackle, not him.

Hitomi shrugged, blissfully unaware of his thoughts. “Whatever you want. Ready to go again, Van?”

They set off down the hill again, and Allen sighed, rubbing his gloved hands over his face. He could hear Annie as she reached the top, laughing and joking with her family. He shook his head, his eyes still closed. He really hadn't meant to hurt her on the steps. Why did things have to be so complicated here? Perhaps he should go back inside.

Allen gasped as Annie slammed into him from behind, sending his sled careening down the hill. He could feel her gripping on to the back of his jacket as she knelt behind him, whooping with excitement as they headed straight for the trees. Allen leaned back hard into her as the sled missed several trunks to shoot over the banks of the creek. For one breathless second, the sled was suspended in mid-air before it crashed down into the ice below.

For a moment, Allen couldn't move. Every part of him hurt. Annie lay tangled on top of him; he could feel her shaking with laughter even through all their layers.

“Whoo, Allen. That was an awesome crash!” she said, making no move to get off him. Allen tried to shift himself away from the icy water seeping through his clothes.

“Are you insane?” he asked, irritated. He felt Annie prop herself up on her elbows on his back, still making no move to get up.

“What do you mean, Cranky McCrankerson?”

Allen pushed himself up, dumping her unceremoniously onto the cracked ice beside him. “Normal people don't do things like this. At least not on purpose.”

Annie climbed to her feet, wiping off snow and ice. “Ugh. You are such a whiner. I was actually going to say sorry about yelling at you for tossing me into the steps. But forget it. I won't try to cheer you up again.”

“You can't say no to little girls, can you?” she asked him with a wicked smile after they'd reached the top and Gracie had run off. Allen pursed his lips and looked away. After a moment, he started walking towards the house.

“Hey, wait! Where do you think you're going?” Annie demanded, hands on her hips.
“Inside to change. I'm soaking wet, thanks to your efforts to cheer me up,” Allen retorted over his shoulder.

“Oh, fine. Go dry off, you big baby!” Annie called after him. “You don't know how to have fun, anyway!”

Inside, Allen toweled off, Annie's words rankling at him almost as much as watching Van and Hitomi together did. He knew how to have fun. And if he was really, truly honest with himself, he'd admit that crashing the sled like that was a little bit fun. Just a really little bit. Allen sighed. He supposed, in her twisted way, Annie was honestly trying to cheer him up, to take his mind off Hitomi and Van. And it felt good to know someone cared whether or not he was smiling, no matter how misguided the cheer-up attempts were.

Allen wandered upstairs to mingle with the few older family members who watched the sledding from the windows. Accepting a beer with a smile and an inward shudder, he joined in the gentle small talk, his thoughts lingering on the sobering idea that perhaps Hitomi chose Van over him simply because he was too serious.

Time passed him by as he sat brooding silently under his pleasant manners, his beer untouched in his hands. What he wouldn't give for some good, sweet vino! What he wouldn't give to be back on Gaea where he belonged!

The rooms began to fill with people again as the sledders trickled in one by one. Allen moved slowly around, attempting to find a quiet place to stand, and suddenly Annie was by his side.

“Allen, you've got to stop it. Seriously,” she said earnestly. Allen gave her a guilty look. Was she reading his thoughts? Telling him to stop moping over Hitomi?

“Stop what?” he asked, deciding to play dumb. Annie looked like she wanted to stomp her feet.

“This. The schmoozing. Stop making my family like you!”

Allen stared at the brown-haired girl in confusion. This was not what he was expecting at all. “Why shouldn't your family like me?”

Annie grimaced, pulling hard on a loose strand of her brown hair. “Because. They've all practically got us married already.”

Allen choked, snorted, and out-right laughed. Annie, apparently, didn't find it at all amusing.

“It is not funny, Allen! I'm serious. You've got to understand, I'm a complete failure to them. I'm 22, not married, not engaged, and no boyfriend to speak of. So now I bring you home, and you're being all charming and they like you, and now I'll have to deal with it. Every family gathering, someone's going to say 'oh, what happened to that really nice guy? You know, the good-looking blond one?' and I'm going to have to come up with some excuse... Stop laughing, Allen!”

“Good-looking blond one?” Allen questioned with a laughing smirk.

“Oh, shut up. Look, just stop schmoozing, okay?”

Allen tapped his finger to his chin, thoroughly enjoying the moment. “Well, I don't know. Maybe I could try to stop, if you stop annoying me. No more pranks, no more teasing.”

Annie gasped. “What? That's like- that's just cruel! That's like telling a fish to breath air!”
“You know, your Großmama said she had some more of your pictures to show me,” Allen replied calmly, beginning to walk away. Annie lunged after him and grabbed his arm.

“You little shit! You're enjoying this! What if I just promised to try to tone down the pranks a little bit?”

Allen stopped, considering. “Hm. No. I think it' got to be an all-or-nothing promise.”

Annie opened her mouth to retort, but she was cut off by one of her teenage relatives. “Ooh, Annie,” he said in a sing-song voice. “Look up!”

Annie glared at the boy before looking up. Abruptly, she let out a squeak and jumped away from Allen like he was a giant cockroach. Confused, Allen looked up.

Mistletoe.

Damn that plant. Glancing around, Allen could see that he and Annie were surrounded by a tight ring of teenagers, every one of them grinning evilly from ear to ear. Two of the older boys grabbed Annie's arms and deposited her in front of Allen once again. Her face was a combination of defiance, embarrassment, and amusement as she looked around the room. Most of her family had already caught wind of their predicament and were piling into the room to watch the fun.

“You've got to kiss him, Annie. Tradtion!” shouted one of the teens, and the whole family joined in the cat-calls. Annie turned a slight shade redder.

“Okay, okay. No big deal!” she shouted back over the noise. Allen blinked in surprise as she grabbed the front of his shirt, yanked him down, and planted a hard kiss on his lips. Before he had time to react, she'd let go and pulled away.

“Boo!” shouted her whole family in unison. The ring of teenagers did not loosen up to let them out, and Annie put her hands on her hips.


Hitomi tapped her chin thoughtfully, a laughing gleam in her eyes. “Hm. I don't know. It didn't seem like a real kiss to me. 'A peach is a peach'...”

The family immediately took up the chant. “A plum is a plum! What good is a kiss without the use of a tongue?”

Now Annie flamed completely red, and Allen started laughing under his breath. She looked very close to stomping her feet and screaming.

“So open your mouth and close your eyes, and give your tongue some exercise!” the family shouted with vicious glee. Allen's blue eyes danced with mirth as he watched Annie argue futilely with her laughing relatives. So, she wanted him to lighten up and joke around more? Well, now seemed like a good time to start.

Annie squeaked in surprise as Allen grabbed her, swinging her into a deep dip that made her clutch his sleeves to keep from falling. Her mouth dropped open as she stared up at the wicked, amused gleam in his eyes.

“Allen Shezar, don't you dare...!” she gasped, her words lost in the loud cheers. And Allen leaned down and did exactly what her family had suggested. The explosion of shrieks and applause was enough to rattle the windows.

Across the room, Hitomi gasped and laughed. “I can't believe he actually did that!” she exclaimed in shock.
“I can!” Van retorted with a huge grin, clapping louder than anyone in the room. Hitomi smacked him in the arm before joining in the cheering.

Allen was taking his time, savoring the feeling of victory. And kissing Annie was not that bad, either, if he would bother to be honest with himself. It would be even better if she would kiss him back.

Annie shifted her weight, and Allen recoiled sharply as her small foot connected painfully with his shin. Wincing, he set her back on her feet as her relatives slapped him on the back jubilantly. Annie grinned and laughed along, even though her eyes were glittering dangerously. The crowd began to disperse, and Allen surreptitiously rubbed the goose-egg on his shin. Annie noticed and sniffed disdainfully.

“You're lucky that's all you got for that stunt,” she stated firmly.

Allen gave her a wicked smile. “I'm surprised you didn't bite my tongue. I think you must have been enjoying it.”

“Huh,” Annie snorted. “I only didn't bite you because you would have bled. And then the Aunts would have noticed, and I would have gotten in trouble. And believe me, you've never had a telling-off until you've had one from my aunts.”

“You're the one that told me to try to have fun,” Allen reminded her with a laugh. Annie rolled her eyes, and unsuccessfully tried not to smile.

“True. And I guess it was pretty funny. Or it would have been, if you'd done it to somebody else.”

“Really? I think you're family thought it was fairly amusing,” Allen pointed out. Annie groaned and pulled a face.

“Yeah, really amusing. Now they're going to try to hook us up more than ever, you stupid pudding brain!”

Allen shook his head, still smiling. “I think you're over-reacting, Annie.”

“Hey, lovebirds, time for lunch. Unless you're going to have another go at the mistletoe,” came a shout from the dining room. Annie gave Allen a significant glare, and he rocked back on his heels with a smirk, looking up at the mistletoe above them. Annie gave him another kick on his already sore shin.

“Don't even dream it, Mr. Grabby,” she snapped. Allen chuckled wickedly as he followed her to the dining room. He had a feeling her family would be working hard to get them under the mistletoe again. Who was he to disappoint them?

Games and Secrets

Here's a long, long rambling chapter...that I probably should've cut into two, but oh well. Not sure how you all will like this one- a few more serious bits. I worked hard to get more VxH fluffiness in, though, I really did. Let me know how well I succeeded. Or how badly I failed miserably.

How Hitomi made it through supper, she would never know. Annie, seated across the table from her, flashed her patented Ultimate Annie Death Glare in her direction whenever someone made a joke about the incident under the mistletoe. Allen, for once, seemed impervious to the bone-chilling glares aimed at him and looked as if he was whole-heartedly enjoying the meal. Hitomi picked at her food, too distracted over attempting to look innocent to eat anything.
“Ugh. I'm glad that's over,” she muttered to Van as the family scattered throughout the house again. Van gave her a confused look.

“What's over? Don't you like wienerschnitzel?”

Hitomi bit her lip, looking guilty. “No...no I like it fine. It's just...just--”

“Hey, Tomi, great idea with the mistletoe!” one of the older teens said in a conspiratorial whisper as he passed them by. Van's eyes widened with dawning realization.

“You set that up!” he said with an incredulous smile. Hitomi flushed and tried to hide a grin with a scowl.

“Yeah, well, Annie deserved it for all the pranks she pulled,” she said defiantly. “Only I feel kind of bad for Allen, since he was the only guy here to catch her with.”

“I don't think he minded it, Hitomi,” Van answered seriously, still smiling down at her, just happy to be with her and completely carefree. Something he couldn't remember feeling since he was a very small child playing in the gardens with his brother.

His brother.

A bit of the happiness drained out of him as he looked around the room at Annie's loud, boisterous family. He had nothing like this in Fanelia to offer Hitomi. Nothing but simpering courtiers, stuffy dignitaries, and a mountain of rules and protocols to bury her under. To ask her to leave all this...it was unthinkable. But so was living without her.

“Van, what's wrong?” Hitomi asked quietly, her green eyes probing his face. Van looked away.

“Why did you decide to leave your family to live here?” he asked after several silent moments. Hitomi blinked in surprise and chewed her lip, thinking.

“Well, I don't know, really,” she replied honestly. “Maybe to prove to myself that I could do it. That I could go somewhere completely foreign and make a good life for myself without my family.”

“Why?”

Hitomi shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. “I don't know. It just seemed important to me at the time.”

Van watched her intently, willing her answers to give him some semblance of hope for the future he so desperately wanted. “And did you? Prove it to yourself, I mean.”

Hitomi gave a small laugh and gestured around her. “Well, I don't really know. I met Annie my first day in the States. I never had a chance to be on my own, since the Goettenbergs adopted me almost from day one. I miss my family, but they make it easier because they're my family, too. I'd miss them the same as my own parents if I went back to Japan.”

Van's stomach sunk into his toes. This just made everything worse. He'd be asking her to leave both her families if he asked her to come back with him to Fanelia. Gods, he couldn't do that to her.

“Why are you asking me about this?” Hitomi asked, confused curiosity in her voice. Now it was Van's turn to shrug as his cheeks reddened slightly.

“Uh, no reason. I was just...wondering.”
The awkward moment was shattered by a loud bang. Annie, apparently, had knocked a chair over when she jumped to her feet.

“That's IT! I challenge you to a DDR dance-off!” she shouted at a group of her younger relations as the room went silent. “And if I win, you can't say one word, not one more word about mistletoe!”

“Deal. And if we win, we get to put you under the mistletoe with a certain somebody again,” crowed the girl who had caught Hitomi and Van. With matching shark grins, she and Annie shook hands.

“Hold on a minute,” Allen said weakly from across the room.

“Don't worry, Allen. You can play, too,” the teens said as they grabbed him and marched out of the room. Half of the family followed them, laughing, joking, and taking bets.

“Crap-olla. What did I get myself into?” Annie complained with a grimace as Hitomi and Van caught up with her in the doorway. Hitomi patted her consolingly on the head, and then steered her after the crowd.

“What's a DDR dance off?” Van asked in a low whisper to Hitomi. She looked over at him with a grin.

“Dance Dance Revolution. It's a video game where you have to use the dance pads to hit the arrows on the beat—” she paused at the growing confusion on Van's face. “Uh, you'll see. It's fun, really.”

Inwardly, Hitomi cheered like a madwoman, her imagination already painting highly amusing pictures of Van and Allen attempting to “dance”. Ah, the things she'd never dreamed she'd see...

Van and Allen stood back and watched as the game was set up and the teens explained the rules. Annie and her shark-girl counterpart would be the first up. The loser would rotate out for the next player. If Annie managed to beat all of them, they'd give up the jokes. If she lost a round, well, she'd be spending a little more quality time under the mistletoe.

The two Gaean men watched, surprised, as the music started and the two girls started hopping madly away on the mats.

“What are they doing?” Allen asked in an undertone to Hitomi. The girls looked ridiculous flailing around to the music, being cheered on by the crowd. No way was he going to do that. Hitomi just laughed, absorbed in watching the game.

“They're hitting the arrows on the mat in time with the ones on the screen, see? It's to the beat of the music. Man, Katy started with a hard one!”

Within a few seconds, Katy had lost, and Annie took on the next challenger. And the next. She didn't seem to be having any difficulties beating down her opponents.

“I think she might win,” Allen said with a small frown. Hitomi and Van turned to stare at him.

“Allen, do you actually want her to lose?” Hitomi asked after several stunned seconds. “Because you know what that would mean for you, right?”

“I do. But if it annoys her, yes. It's worth it,” he replied seriously. Van and Hitomi's eyes met, filled with identical, incredulous laughter. Van, honestly, wasn't as surprised as Hitomi. After all, Annie wasn't exactly bad-looking. And Allen's reputation was pretty clear that he didn't usually pass up a pretty girl. Even if she wasn't his type.
“Break!” Annie declared after beating a little more than half her challengers. “I think Allen and Van should have a go. They've never played, you know.”

Both men backed up with wide eyes, heading for the doorway. They didn't get more than two steps before they were dragged back to stand on the strange mats. Van gave Hitomi a betrayed look as she helped push him into place.

“It's not so bad, really!” she laughed. “Just give it a try!”

Annie nodded with a grin. “Yeah, Don't be so self-conscious. Everyone looks stupid doing it, so stop worrying. Here, let me pick a good song.”

“I really don't want-” Allen began, attempting yet again to escape. Annie scowled fiercely at him as she shoved him back onto the mat.

“Oh, just shut up and do it. If you can be Mr. Don Juan under the mistletoe, you can pull the stick out of your ass and shake your booty.”

It was obvious how badly Allen wanted to retort, but the music started up, and the competitive spirit in both men flared up. Both pairs of eyes were glued to the screen as they awkwardly attempted to stomp on the arrows in time with the music. Van was so focused he barely heard the laughter and advice from the crowd.

“Hop! Hop! It helps to hop to the beat!” he heard Hitomi say through her laughter. Obediently, he tried jumping up and down and nearly fell over. Hitomi shrieked with laughter and he couldn't help but start laughing himself. This crazy game was harder than it looked.

“Left, left, up! God, Allen. You suck!” Annie cried over the laughter of the crowd.

“I'd do better if you stopped helping me,” Allen ground out, focusing on the screen.

“What? I hit that!”

“Again! Again!” the family demanded as the screen went red and the game shouted out how terrible they were. Annie's dance-off seemed forgotten, and the two men silently cursed the short Goettenberg attention spans.

“You're gonna do this until you both pass one,” Annie said firmly as she quickly picked out another song. The Goettenbergs laughed, ate cookies, snapped pictures, and shouted out encouragement as Van and Allen failed one song after another. Their heavy sweaters came off after the first few songs, followed by their undershirts shortly after that. Van wasn't sure if his face was red from the heat or from embarrassment at the cat-calls from the younger Goettenbergs. Hitomi kept her drool firmly in check and took a lot of pictures when Van was concentrating on the screen. Lord, he was unbelievably gorgeous.

“You passed! You passed! With a D, but you passed!” Hitomi shouted when Van finally managed to finish a song. She threw her arms around him in a tight, laughing hug, and he swung her around jubilantly. He even smelled good sweaty.

Without thinking, forgetting about the family swarming around them, Hitomi planted a quick kiss on Van's smiling mouth. Her cheeks turned pink as he stared at her for a few seconds, surprised, still holding her in a tight hug. A shy smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, the smile he only gave to her. Hitomi's heart melted at the sight of it, and she nearly kissed him again just because of how adorable he looked.

“Alright, you hooligans. Turn it off before you wake the babies,” Aunt Vera commanded, breaking the spell between them. Blushing a little, they broke apart, and Van scooped up his abandoned shirts.
“But Aunt Vera, we didn't finish the dance-off,’’ one of the teens complained. Annie socked him on the arm.

“Too bad. You all forgot about it, so I win by default.”

“That was a dirty trick, getting Van and Allen to play so we'd forget!”

The family bickered good-naturedly as they trickled slowly out of the room to get ready for bed. Van and Allen headed off to shower while Hitomi and Annie went to go set up their sleeping bags for the night.

“Having some luck, huh, Tomi?” Annie asked with a sideways glance at Hitomi’s beaming face.

She flopped down on the couch and grinned over at Annie. “I think so. Did you see-”

“I saw. No mistletoe needed! Good for you, babe!”

“You don't think he's going to think I'm too, too...” Hitomi frowned, searching for the right words.

“Too slutty?” Annie supplied helpfully. She shook her head, laughing. “I highly doubt it. One teensy-weensy chaste little kiss does not make you a hussy.”

Hitomi frowned again, playing with the zipper of her sleeping bag. “Do you think I'm too...too uptight?”

“How'd your thinking go from slutty to uptight? But yeah, maybe a bit. I mean, you've only got a few days left before he goes back home. You'd better get a move on if you wanna get your groove on, know what I'm saying?”

Hitomi chuckled her pillow at her with a giggle. “I don't even know how to get my groove on. I haven't exactly done this before!”

“Just jump him,” Annie replied with a shrug. “I think he'd take over from there. Poor guy.”

“Why is he a 'poor guy'?” Hitomi demanded, sitting up and grabbing her pillow back.

“You know. All those years of pent-up male urges. I think he might explode when he sees you in a bikini!”

Hitomi eyed her with alarm. “When's he going to see me in a bikini?”

Annie gave her a smile and a wink, then waved at Van as he walked into the room. “Hey, Van! We were just talking about you!”

He looked surprised. “You were?”

“No, we weren't!” Hitomi replied a bit too quickly. “Answer my question, Annie!”

Annie shrugged. “At the hotel when we go swimming, of course! After we go snowboarding.”

“Snowboarding?” Van and Hitomi asked together.

“Yeah. Snowboarding up north for Jason and my birthdays!” Annie chirped, grinning. “Oops, did I forget to tell you? We're going the day after we get back home. There's a big group of us going, and we're going to stay overnight in a hotel and everything! Par-tay!”

“How long have you been planning this?” Hitomi demanded weakly, her own half-formed plans of a surprise birthday party dwindling away. Leave it to Annie to throw herself a party.

“Ages. Since before we broke up,” Annie replied cheerfully. Van blinked at her.

“Broke up?” he asked, confused.
Annie shrugged. “Yeah, we dated for a while last year. And since our birthdays are only a week apart, we thought we should have a big thing together this year. Jason wanted to go snowboarding, and I wanted to go swimming. So we're doing both! And trust me, Van. You're gonna love this trip.”

“...Why?” he asked warily. Hitomi suddenly looked alarmed.

“Two words, buddy. Bikinis and hot tubs! Okay, wait. That's technically three words.” Annie said thoughtfully. Hitomi pinched her lips together as a pink blush crept up her cheeks. Annie suddenly got up and bounced towards the doorway. “Well, g'night, you two. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!”

Van turned a confused face towards Hitomi. “Um, what's a ... bikini?”

Abruptly, Hitomi flamed a brilliant red and buried her face in her pillow. Van leaned over her, confused and slightly alarmed, as she mumbled something incoherently.

“What? Are you okay?”

Hitomi sat up, nearly knocking her head into Van's with the fast movement. “I said, nevermind.”

“Oh,” Van rocked back on his heels awkwardly, wondering what about a bikini upset her so much. He cast around for a safer topic. “So, isn't Annie going to be sleeping in here tonight?” he asked after several long moments.

“Oh. Yeah,” Hitomi replied, drawing her knees up to her chest and clasping her hands around her legs. “She just went out to watch for a shooting star to make her Christmas Wish. She and Grandma Ida always did that on the last night here. Sometimes they'd be out there for hours, just looking at the sky.”

“A Christmas Wish?” Van asked as he sat down next to Hitomi on the couch.

“Something you really want to happen. I went with them once. The stars are really beautiful here. You can't see the stars in the city. Grandma Ida knew all the constellations. She would have loved to see the Fanelian sky, with the Earth hanging up there next to the moon.”

“Merle likes to watch the stars,” Van said absently, his eyes on Hitomi's perfect face. She turned to look at him with her hypnotizing emerald eyes.

“Do you like to watch the stars, too?” she asked quietly.

“I just see the Mystic Moon,” he replied honestly, without thinking. The tips of his ears turned red, but the surprised smile in Hitomi's eyes kept him from turning away. Her hands slipped away from her knees as she uncurled herself, leaning towards him as he moved towards her. They met in the middle, their lips melding gently as their arms wound slowly around each other.

What was it Annie had said? Don't do anything she wouldn't do? Van thought vaguely as the kiss deepened. Well, that should give him plenty of options...

--

Allen jumped back in alarm as he opened the bathroom door to find Annie staring at him with crossed arms.

“What do you want?” he asked warily.

Annie snorted. “It's not a want. It's a sacrifice. You're going to have to come with me to watch the stars.”

“Why do I have to do that?” Allen asked, shuddering at the thought of freezing outside after he'd just taken a hot shower.
“Unless you want to interrupt Van and Hitomi’s little alone time, you don't have too many choices. Time's a-wastin'. Let's go.” Annie replied, already walking off down the hall. With a resigned sigh, Allen followed after her. He definitely did not want to walk in on whatever Hitomi and Van might be doing. But why did they have to go outside?

Silently, the two bundled up and made their way out into the dark night. Allen, carrying two lawn chairs, followed Annie's shadowed form as she led the way across the lawn. She had him set up the chairs at the top of the hill, where they had an amazing panoramic view of the incredible night sky.

Allen wrapped himself up in the blankets she handed him and was surprised when she unwrapped a large thermos and a big bag of cookies from inside her own blankets. “Coffee,” she explained as she settled herself into her chair. “We could be out here a while.”

“What exactly are we doing?” Allen asked, less irritable now that he was getting warm once more, wrapped up in his cocoon of blankets. Annie leaned back in her chair, her eyes trained on the sky.

“We're waiting for a shooting star so we can make our Christmas Wishes,” she said. Allen gave her a confused look and she sighed, not taking her eyes off the stars. “Ever since I can remember, Grandma and I came out here on Christmas night to make a wish on a shooting star. Tradition, you know, in memory of Grandma's first Christmas Wish.”

“What was her first Wish?” Allen asked, interested in spite of himself.

“That I would live,” Annie replied, so quietly that even in the deep silence Allen had to strain to hear her. She stirred in her blankets. “It wasn't really on Christmas, since I was born a few days after. But the first night, when the doctors said I wouldn't live to see the sun, Grandma saw a shooting star through the hospital window. And she wished like everything on that star that somehow I'd make it. She made a Christmas Wish every year after that.”

Allen stared up at the sky, his earlier questions rising to the surface. Keeping his eyes on the stars, he asked as casually as he could, “Annie, what happened to your parents?”

“What do you mean, what happened?”

“Where are they?” he cleared his throat, trying to be as gentle and tactful as possible. “Did they...have they passed on?”

“You mean died?” Annie asked baldly. “I have no idea.”

Surprised, Allen looked away from the stars to Annie's calm profile. “How can you not know?”

Still, Annie didn't look away from the sky. “You want to hear about my parents? It's not a very pretty story,” she said calmly, as if they were discussing the weather. Allen nodded mutely.

“My grandpa got sent off to war shortly after he and Grandma got married. And when he came back, he wasn't right anymore. War does that to some people, I guess. But Grandma still loved him, and she wasn't going to leave him just because he was sick. My mom was their only kid, and she had to grow up with a dad who...well, he killed himself when mom was twelve, and she never got over that. She ran away right after she turned sixteen. A crack addict. Grandma couldn't find her anywhere. There was absolutely nothing for years, until she got a phone call from my mom. She was
pregnant and in another state, and she was in labor. She begged my grandma to come, and of course Grandma got on the first plane she could. She made it there only a few hours after I was born. Mom stayed long enough to turn parental rights over to Grandma, and then she disappeared again. Broke my grandma's heart.”

“Did your mother ever contact you?” Allen asked in a hushed voice.

“Once,” Annie said brightly. “She came home at my birthday when I was five. She said she was trying to get clean, you know? Grandma really wanted to believe her.” Annie laughed a sad little laugh. “Know why I'm so scared of gingerbread men? She woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me about the gingerbread men running around the house trying to attack her. I never could get that out of my head.”

“Ah,” Allen said, reevaluating his first encounter with the crazy brunette. “She didn't stay clean, did she?”

“No,” Annie said quietly. “She left again. We haven't heard anything since.”

Deep silence settled over them again as they stared up at the night sky. Allen watched his breath spiraling up in little clouds of smoke and felt a small prick of guilt wiggle into his conscience. Guilt for having judged her, guilt for asking her to drag up her past. He shifted uncomfortably.

“I'm sorry,” he said, breaking the fragile silence. “I shouldn't have asked—”

Annie cut him off. “Why? It's no secret, and I'm not ashamed of it or anything. My mom is sick. It doesn't make her a bad person. And you know what? I'm grateful to her, because she cared enough to call my grandma and give me a family. I don't hate her or anything. It just makes me sad. So stop being sorry, and stop feeling guilty about whatever it is you think you should feel guilty about. You carry around way too much of your own guilt as it is.”

“How do you know I feel guilty?” Allen asked, perplexed. Annie waved a hand at him, still never taking her eyes off the skies.

“Ach, it's written all over you. You really should let some of that go, you know?” she replied airily. “By the way, how's your sister doing?”

Allen gave her a quick, sharp look. “She's...how much do you know about her?”

“I think Hitomi told me everything she knew. Keep your eyes on the sky, will you? We'll be out here all night otherwise.”

“Sorry,” Allen said, quickly turning his face skyward again. “Celena is- she's doing fine.”

“Uh huh. Honestly, how is she? It might feel better to tell me about it,” Annie pointed out as she burrowed deeper into her blankets and got comfortable. Allen sat silent, debating with himself. He never spoke to anyone of Celena's problems, but then, Annie had just told him about her past, frankly and openly. And she was a stranger, someone he'd never see again in less than a week. What could it hurt?

Allen hesitated, then sighed deeply. “She's...having a hard time adjusting. I thought at first it would pass and she would be normal, but... Her mind is still that of a small child, like she stopped maturing when the sorcerers- when they changed her into Dilandau. Only she's never happy. It's been over five years, and I've never seen her smile. Not once. And the nightmares...” There was a deep, raw pain in his voice, and Annie reached a hand out from her cocoon and patted his blankets reassuringly, silently encouraging him to let it out. He drew in a deep, aching breath.
“I don't know what to do to help her. Some days, she's fine, almost normal. Other
days, she has these incredible fits of rage, so violent that no one can be near her but
me. It's like- like Dilandau is still inside her, fighting to get out. And there's nothing I
can do to protect her. And I need to protect her.”

Allen fell silent, unsure what more to say. Annie's gloved hand gave his shoulder a
squeeze, almost imperceptible through the layers of blankets and outside gear. The
deep stillness of the winter night once again crept over them as they watched the
winking stars.

“You know,” Annie said finally, in a low, hushed voice. “I was going to make a wish
for Hitomi and Van this year, but I think I'll make a wish for Celena instead.”

Allen swallowed hard past a sudden lump in his throat and nodded his thanks. He
was grateful, even if it was only a crazy, traditional Christmas Wish. She was willing
to use it for him, and for Celena. Hitomi always said the stars had power. Maybe they'd
grant Annie's wish.

“Well, I guess we take the awards for Most Depressing Conversation tonight,” Annie
suddenly announced in a bright, cheerful voice. “D'you want some coffee, Captain
Giggles?”

“Captain what?” Allen spluttered, jerked out of his melancholy thoughts. Annie
calmly handed him a steaming mug of dark liquid.

“I hope we see a shooting star before Hitomi and Van go to sleep so we can tease the
hell out of them when we get back inside. I hope they can figure out what to do after
kissing.” Annie mused. She laughed heartily when Allen choked on his coffee, the
sound ringing out through the clear, cold air.

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Van lay on his back, listening to Hitomi's regular breathing. He couldn't tell if he was
elated or frustrated. All the years he'd waited, he finally kissed her. And more than
kissed. But despite the demands of his desires, he lacked the courage to let his hands
wander anywhere...indecent. Or perhaps it was the nagging worry that Annie or Allen
could walk in on them anytime. Hitomi had worried about that, too. He could see it on
her face when she suggested they try to get some sleep. What he couldn't tell was
whether she was happy or frustrated that he kept his hands on her back, or her arms,
somewhere relatively safe. Not that he was really complaining. Gods, it felt good just
to touch her. But he wanted more, and he didn't want to push her. For the first time
since he was fifteen, he really wished he knew more about women.

Above him on the couch, Hitomi lay still and tried to breath evenly. She cursed their
lack of privacy silently as she lay there wishing she was still in Van's arms. They felt
so good, so right- now if only he'd work up the nerve to move his hands around to the
front. Or something. Abruptly, Hitomi rolled over, burying her hot face into her pillow.
She didn't even really know what she wanted from him. She just knew she didn't want
to stop when she suggested they go to sleep. And the look on Van's face told her he
didn't want to, either.

Hitomi hugged herself and smiled slightly in the darkness. They were just taking
things a little slow, that was all. They just needed a few more days together. She
burrowed deeper into her sleeping bag as she thought sleepily about spending time in a
hot tub with Van.
“Huh...Van in a swimsuit. Yummy...” Hitomi smiled to herself as she drifted off into sleep.

**Packing and Moving**

I’m so sorry, but Van doesn't get to wear a swimsuit in this chapter. Sorry, sorry! But he will in the next chapter, I promise! That being said, I hope ya'll still read this one!! I don't know where this chappie came from, and it's short and nothing really happens, but the story took over once again and forced it to come out this way. Oh well!!

The drive back to Annie's house was relatively quiet, due mainly to the fact that both Allen and Annie were tired and crabby. Hitomi's head was beginning to ache from their constant bickering by the time they'd reached home, unpacked the car, and eaten supper. When Van went downstairs to shower, Hitomi grabbed her chance to pack her bag for the snowboarding trip.

“Don't forget your bikini!” Annie said in a sing-song voice as she poked her head around Hitomi's door.

“Agh! Don't sneak up on me like that!” Hitomi gasped, whirling around to face her and clutching her chest. Annie grinned at her.

“So, did we have fun last night?” she asked mischievously.

Hitomi sighed and tossed some clothes into her bag. “Sort of. I mean, not that I'm complaining, it was really great. But we really didn't do anything. He's just so...I don't know.”

“Proper?” Annie supplied. “Hesitant?”

“Yes! How do you get a guy to, you know, make the next move?” Hitomi asked, frustration and embarrassment creeping into her voice. Annie perched on the bed with a thoughtful look.

“Hm. Well, there's lots of ways, I guess. But there's nothing I can really tell you to do, because it always depends on the situation. And besides, these Gaean guys seem pretty uptight about physical stuff. I'm guessing there's a whole lot of rules and protocols or something.”

“Oh,” Hitomi said, sitting down next to Annie. “Yeah, I suppose you're right about that. It's been so long since I was actually there, I didn't even think about it. Asturia seemed pretty uptight about it. I wonder how strict Fanelian customs are?”

They both sat in silence for a moment, considering. Annie wrinkled up her face in disgust.

“Ugh. Remind me never to go to Gaea.”

Hitomi laughed. “Yeah, I think the dating policies might be too strict for you!”

Annie shrugged and slid off the bed. “So I like boys. Or rather, I like having fun with boys. Nothing wrong with that. You should try it sometime, Tomi.”

“I am trying. It's just not going that well,” Hitomi grumbled.

“So bring your bikini tomorrow. All the rules and protocols on Gaea won't stand a chance once Van sees you in that.” Annie replied as she walked out of the room. “Trust me, Tomi.”
With a sigh, Hitomi began digging through her drawers, searching out her skimpiest bikini, the one she usually reserved for tanning, not swimming. Reluctantly, she put it on and examined herself in the mirror.

The top wasn't exactly modest. And the bottoms were pretty skimpy, too. Hitomi sighed as she poked at her stomach. Christmas meals at the Goettenbergs did not do her any favors. And- eek!- was that cellulite on the back of her thighs?

Hitomi changed quickly back into her winter clothes. No way was she going to let Van see her in that! Wadding the bikini into a tight ball, she snuck into the bathroom and hid it under the sink. She wasn't taking chances with Annie checking her bags to make sure she'd brought it along. Nope, she'd be packing her nice, non-revealing sport one-piece. Maybe she wouldn't even go swimming at all. Damn those Christmas cookies, damn them!

After a quick shower, Hitomi made her way downstairs again. Annie's music blared through her closed door and reverberated through the house, and Hitomi sighed. At least she and Allen weren't still fighting. In the kitchen, she found Van leaning against the counter, a glass of water in his hand.

“What's that noise?” he asked, jabbing a finger up to the ceiling.

“Rammstien, I think,” Hitomi answered as she got herself a diet cola from the fridge. She glared at the container full of cookies sent home by Aunt Vera. No more sweets for her!

“Does she always listen to that kind of music?” Van asked as he helped himself to a few cookies. Hitomi watched him with envy. Sure, he could afford to eat a few, with that perfect body. No fair!

“Naw, just when she's crabby like this,” Hitomi said, taking one tiny little cookie. One couldn't hurt! “Actually, she listens to all kinds of music. Except Polka, thank god.”

“Oh,” Van said with what he hoped was a knowing nod. He had no idea what polka was, but Hitomi made it sound like something to be avoided at all costs. Annie's music pounded through the ceiling as they stood there, awkwardly munching cookies. Hitomi could hear the downstairs shower running, and hoped that Allen would take his time. He was as touchy as Annie right now. Besides, it meant that she and Van had some alone time. She could practically hear Annie's voice yelling, “Jump him, Tomi!” Yeah, sure. Right here in the kitchen. That'd go over well. This wasn't supposed to be so difficult!

“So, wanna watch a movie or something?” Hitomi finally asked. Van shrugged his agreement and they trooped downstairs.

“Feel like anything in particular?” she asked over her shoulder as she looked through the DVDs and Van settled himself on the futon.

“I dunno. Whatever you think's good,” Van replied, thinking privately that he really didn't care what was playing on the screen, as long as Hitomi came and sat next to him. It was chilly, so he pulled a blanket out of the basket and draped it over himself, propping his legs up on the coffee table as Hitomi turned the projector on.

Hitomi settled herself a few feet away from Van as the movie started up, silently berating herself for being so nervous and insecure. Last night they had been all over each other! Well, sort of. But she'd already sat down, and it'd look odd if she scooted over now. She rubbed her hands over her arms and shivered, wishing for a blanket.
Van lifted a corner of his quilt, silently inviting her to move closer and share it with him. With a grateful smile, Hitomi slid over and tucked herself into the blanket, her shoulder brushing Van's. He shifted, lifting his arm as if to put it around her, when Allen walked into the room.

“Oh. Hey, Allen,” Hitomi said with disappointment as Van's arm dropped back down to his side. Damn it! Allen's eyes flicked over them, then over to the screen.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked casually, sinking down into the easy chair as he continued to towel off his long hair.

“Of course not,” Hitomi said brightly, lying through her teeth. Insensitive clod! She could feel Van heave a deep sigh next to her and wondered if he felt as frustrated as her. The movie droned on, and the three watched in silence. Hitomi felt her eyelids droop sleepily.

“He didn't fall? Inconceivable!”

“You keep on using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

Her eyelids drooped again, and Hitomi rested her head against Van's shoulder. Allen wouldn't notice. He was probably asleep anyway. She felt Van stiffen momentarily, then his arm shifted to wrap around her as he pulled her into a more comfortable position laying against his chest. Hitomi smiled sleepily and snuggled in. The sound of Van's heartbeat was slow and soothing, and she drifted off into sleep.

Allen noticed their deep, even breathing and stole a look at the couple on the futon. Hitomi was curled up, her head resting on Van's chest, smiling in her sleep. Van's head tipped at a funny angle, his mouth slightly open as he slept, too. It was a sweet picture, and Allen would have smiled at it if it wasn't for the painful stab of longing in his own heart.

With a sigh, he stood up and stole as silently as he could up the stairs. The house was quiet except for the movie playing downstairs. Allen pressed his hands against the kitchen countertop and took several deep breaths. He could do this. He could. It wasn't that he still loved Hitomi, was it? It just hurt to be so...alone.

Slowly, Allen became aware of soft music, music that wasn't in the movie, drifting through the house. Piano music. He crept quietly past the dining room and looked into the living room.

Annie was seated at the piano, her small form illuminated by the dim light from the Christmas tree. Her back was to him, and Allen slipped in, unnoticed, to sit on the couch and listen. Her fingers drifted over the keys playing a sad, beautiful tune.

The water is wide, I can't swim o'er
And neither have I wings to fly
Build me a boat that can carry two
And both shall row, my love and I

Her voice was melodic, sweet and honey-rich. Allen sat, surprised and mesmerized by the unexpected beauty of it and the way her hands moved skillfully over the instrument. She sang quietly, her voice barely audible over the music.

I leaned my back against an oak
Thinking it was the strongest tree
But first it bent, and then it broke
And that's the way love treated me
Allen leaned back into the cushions, his eyes closed. The sadness in her voice resonated with the pain in his own heart. The pain of loss and loneliness, and of love.

For love is handsome, and love is fine
And love's a jewel, when first it's new
But love grows old, and it waxes cold
And it fades away, like morning dew

Marlene. He had been so sure that he loved Marlene. But how quickly their love had faded, leaving nothing behind but regrets and a painful secret. In the end, Marlene had come to love the Duke, and he had been left alone again.

The music grew quieter as she came to the end of the song, and her voice was achingly sweet and sad.

The water is wide, I can't swim o'er
And neither have I wings to fly
Build me a boat that can carry two
And both shall row, my love and I...and both shall row, my love and I...

The music came to a stop, and Allen opened his eyes. Annie sat silently, her head bowed, for several long moments. Then she heaved a deep sigh and turned around.

“Eep! God, Allen!” she gasped in a whispered shriek. “When the hell did you get up here? I thought you were watching the movie!”

“I got bored,” Allen said with a shrug. “You never told me you could sing like that.”

Annie gave him a dirty look as she slammed the cover down over the keys. “It's dangerous to sneak up on me like that, you know. The last guy who scared me peed blood for a week.”

For a brief second, Allen contemplated how exactly she had made someone pee blood, then decided he'd rather never find out.

“What're Tomi and Van doing?” she continued.

“Sleeping. At least they were when I came upstairs. Why were you singing that song?”

Annie shrugged nonchalantly. “Because it's pretty and I like it. Why?”

“You sounded so sad,” Allen replied, casually watching her reaction. “I don't think someone who's not hurting could sound that sad.”

Annie snorted and stood up. “It's just a song, Al. It doesn't mean anything. Anyway, it's late, and we've gotta get up early tomorrow, so we'd better get the kids off to bed.”

She disappeared through the dining room, and Allen could hear her going down the basement stairs. The movie stopped, and voices drifted up from the basement.

“Wakey, wakey, lovers. It's time for bed. Unless you're sleeping down here, Tomi.”

“Huh?” Hitomi said groggily, coming reluctantly back to reality. She slowly pushed herself off of Van's chest, rubbing at her eyes. Van groaned slightly and tried to work the kinks out of his stiff neck.

“Well,” Annie said impatiently, her hands on her hips. “Are you sleeping down here or what?”
“Uh, no. No, G'night, Van,” Hitomi said, blushing furiously as she untangled herself from the blanket and climbed off the futon.

“Yeah. 'Night,” Van returned sleepily as he watched the two girls head up the stairs. How long had he and Hitomi been alone down there? And he slept through it, damn it! Allen came down the stairs then, and the two men set up their sleeping spots silently.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he'd make sure they had another chance to be alone. And tomorrow they were going on that snowboarding trip. Snowboarding and hot tubs and bikinis. It sounded ominous.

With a worried frown, Van rolled himself into his blankets. There was nothing he could do about it until tomorrow, so he might as well forget about it and get some sleep. Allen seemed to be having a hard time getting comfortable, tossing and turning in his blankets. Suddenly, his voice drifted across the basement.

“Hey, Van. How do you think you could make someone pee blood?”

Song is "The Water is Wide" by Niamh Parsons. See you next chapter!

Snowboarding and Swimming

Allen woke groggily in the dark basement and slowly opened his eyes. A pair of deep brown eyes was centimeters away from his face.

“Gah!” he exclaimed, backing hastily away before his half-asleep brain registered the fact that it was only Annie, and she was laughing at him.

“That's for sneaking up on me last night,” she said with a smirk. “Get up, lazy-bones. We're totally late.”

“What about Van?” Allen asked, irritated at being called lazy.

“Up and showered and making breakfast for everybody.”

Allen stopped digging through his clothes bag. “Making breakfast?” he asked incredulously. Since when did Van even know how to cook?

“He volunteered. It's not like he's cooking or anything. Just microwaving some instant oatmeal,” Annie replied with a casual shrug. “Just get in the shower already, and I'll pack your bag. Jason'll be here any minute.”

Upstairs, Van carefully measured out the water and poured the little bags of oatmeal into four bowls. With some trepidation, he placed the first bowl into the center of the white microwave and shut the door.
Now what? Annie said to follow the instructions on the packets, but they weren't making much sense to him. He jabbed at the buttons on the strange machine, frowning at the annoying beeping sounds it made, and pressed the start button. The microwave whirred to life, and Van turned to pull open the refrigerator for the juice.

As he poured the orange liquid into the glasses, he heard some muffled popping sounds. Curious, he turned back to the microwave and bent to peer inside.

“Shit,” he muttered at the sight of the oatmeal bubbling and pouring over the sides of the bowl. With a sudden, loud pop, the goop exploded, leaving a sticky mess coating the inside of the microwave. With another muttered expletive, Van yanked open the door and stood scowling at the burnt cereal splattered and dripping on the inside of the machine.

“Whew. Look at that oatmeal explosion,” Annie said over his shoulder, making him jump. “That's gonna be a bitch to clean.”

“Sorry,” Van said sheepishly, wondering just when she'd snuck up the basement stairs.

“Ach, everybody does it at some point. And we know how to use these things,” she said with a shrug. She grabbed a washcloth and started scrubbing at the mess. Hitomi wandered in then, yawning sleepily as she surveyed the kitchen.

“Oatmeal for breakfast, huh?” she asked, taking a glass of juice from Van. “So when's Jason showing up?”

They all jumped at the sound of the doorbell ringing through the house, and Annie banged her head on the inside of the microwave.

“Ow, shit! Right now, apparently,” she griped, rubbing her head. Grimacing, she went back to attacking the oatmeal explosion as the front door opened.

“Hey Jason!” Hitomi called. She didn't move from where she was leaning against the counter, so Van copied her actions as they watched Annie scrub the microwave.

“Yo, anybody home?” Jason asked as he poked his head around the kitchen door.

“Whoa. Who blew up the oatmeal?”

Annie gave a muffled response from the depths of the microwave, and Van took several quick moments to assess the newcomer. The man was only slightly taller than himself, but heavily muscled. Tattoos covered most of his exposed arms and neck, sloping over the twisted muscles in a clash of designs. His face had multiple piercings, the most noticeable being a large silver bullring in his nose, and his head was shaved bald. But his bad-ass appearance was almost undone by the friendly smile on his face, and the quick, brotherly hug he gave Hitomi.

“This is Van, Jason,” Hitomi said with a bright smile. Jason gave Van a half-handshake, half hi-five and a grin.

“Hey, nice to meet ya, man. Ever been snowboarding before?” he asked in his loud, burly voice. Van shook his head, liking the guy immediately, and inwardly laughing at what Allen's reaction to him would most likely be. Wait, had they ever mentioned to him that Annie used to date this strange looking guy? This might be more fun than mistletoe!

“We're running a bit late, J. Sorry,” Annie said, still bent over to scrub at the insides of the microwave. Jason stared at her a moment, a gleefully mischievous glint coming into his eyes.
“Birthday spankings!” he suddenly cried, jumping across the room to pin the brown-haired girl down and deliver a few smacks to her backside. Annie shrieked, hit her head on the microwave again, and tried to wriggle her way out of the big man's grip.

“What the hell?...”

Van and Hitomi turned to see Allen standing in the doorway of the basement stairs, confusion and something darker twisting his face into a frown. Amusement glinted in Van's eyes, but he kept his face neutral as Hitomi sighed next to him. Annie and Jason were too busy laughing and fighting with each other to notice.

“Jaa-son! Knock it off!”

“Uh uh, I've still got 19 to go, so hold still!”

Van considered it just pure good luck that Allen had chosen that moment to come up the steps. He was having a very difficult time keeping from laughing out loud at the expressions on Allen's face. Especially when the stranger swung Annie up over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, so he could finish the birthday spanks.

“Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two!” he said with a flourish. “Now you're officially older!”


Allen just stared at them, his lips pressed into a thin, disapproving frown as Jason swung Annie back onto her feet. He kept a heavily muscled arm thrown around her shoulders, and she had one slung around his waist, both grinning like mad people.

“That's Allen, Jason,” she said, waving a hand at him. Allen managed a nod.

“Hey, man,” Jason said nonchalantly, smiling his friendly smile and seemingly oblivious to the frosty frown Allen gave him in return.

“So, where's your stuff? We should start packing the car,” Annie said to Jason, pulling him out of the kitchen with her, still all smiles.

“What was that about? And who is he?” Allen asked with a chilly edge to his voice.

“It was nothing. Birthday spankings are just a stupid thing friends do to each other on their birthdays. And Jason's a really old friend of Annie's,” Hitomi replied with a sigh as she gave Van a stern look. He grabbed the dishrag and scrubbed at the remaining oatmeal to hide the grin on his face.

“Didn't Annie say they were together for a while?” he asked innocently. Allen choked on his juice, and Van could feel the heat from Hitomi's glare scorching his neck.

“Together? She was with him?” Allen asked incredulously, disdain dripping from his voice.

“Yes, Allen,” Hitomi nearly hissed. “Jason's a really great guy. And he's a good friend of mine, too.”

For a moment, Allen looked taken back. “I'm sorry, Hitomi. I was...just surprised. He doesn't seem like her type.”

Allen could have kicked himself when he realized that he'd said the last bit out loud. Hitomi stared at him in confusion, and Van stopped what he was doing to turn around and look at him.

“How do you know what her type is, Allen?” Hitomi asked with a quizzical and interested grin growing on her face. Van's amusement was growing by leaps and bounds. Allen, smooth, controlled Allen, actually looked flustered.
“What? I don't...I meant to say...I'll go get our bags.”

Hitomi turned towards Van with a confused, laughing smile on her face as Allen made a hasty exit down the stairs.

“What was that?” she asked, her voice full of mirth and curiosity. Van just grinned, shrugged, and turned back to the microwave.

A short half hour and a whirlwind of activity later, all five of them were piled into Annie's car for the drive north. Hitomi found herself squished uncomfortably between Allen and Van in the middle of the backseat, since Jason's bulk necessitated him taking the front. She sighed and wished for the thousandth time she'd taken off her thick winter coat before climbing into the car. Annie's driving was more erratic than ever, given the fact that she and Jason were too busy joking around and arguing over the music for her to pay much attention to the road.

The three backseat occupants massaged their sore arms, the muscles stiff from bracing themselves for an accident, when they finally arrived at the snowboarding park. It took a while to get fitted with the proper gear, but it was still only mid-morning by the time they were all ready to hit the slopes.

“Everyone else should be showing up in the next hour or so, I told them all to meet at the lodge around noon, so we can get some time in first,” Jason told them as he strapped on his boots. He was the only one of the three that had his own equipment and seemed to have a clue what he was doing. He led the way out to the hill and showed them how to get set up on their boards. Van was surprised to see that Hitomi and Annie appeared to need as much instruction as he and Allen did.

“I thought you'd done this before,” he said quietly to her. She gave him an adorable, sheepish grin.

“Yeah, once. But I don't really know what I'm doing. I'm better than Annie, though,” she finished proudly. As if to prove her point, she pushed off down the hill. She made it a wavering half of the way down before she toppled over in a heap. Annie only made it about ten feet before she flopped onto her butt.

“The trick is to lean into it right,” Jason explained to Van and Allen as they stood uncertainly on their boards. The burly man gave them a long list of pointers and demonstrated a few times before letting them push off down the hill.

Van wobbled and slid over half way down the slope on his first try before losing his balance and flopping onto his back. Allen, he noted with chagrin, had made it slightly farther.

“Whoohoo!” Annie cheered when they reached to top of the hill again. “You guys are amazing!”

“Yeah, that was great! I can't believe you made it that far on your first try!” Hitomi gushed, her eyes on Van as she gave him an unbelievably huge smile. Van grinned back, ridiculously proud of his tiny achievement.

Jason nodded enthusiastically. “No joke. You guys are going to get this in no time!”

By noon, Van and Allen were able to make it all the way to the bottom. Van was even trying to work on doing some turning, instead of just sliding straight down. Hitomi still wobbled her way down half of the hill before falling, but she was steadily improving as well. Jason swooped around, doing complicated moves and generally showing off. Annie was the only one who couldn't seem to get the hang of it at all.
“Dang. Who know you guys would be so good at this? I was hoping for a few wipe-out partners. I totally suck!” she said cheerfully as they trudged into the lodge for lunch. “When do we get to the swimming again?”

“This afternoon! Whiny baby,” Jason retorted with a grin. “Look, I'll try to help you out again after we get some food, okay?”

“Aww, thanks, Schmoopy-poo,” Annie quipped, nudging him with her board.

“I don't think it'll help, though,” Hitomi whispered to Van, who grinned and gave a slight nod in agreement. He was carrying both their boards, and Hitomi still had a fluttery feeling in her chest from how he'd silently taken it from her with a small, warm smile.

The only thing marring the fun day so far was a quieter-than-usual Allen. Hitomi stole a quick look at him over her shoulder as they entered the lodge. His face had reverted to a mask of indifference and slight boredom, and Hitomi felt a sharp pang of guilt thinking about everything he'd put up with since arriving on Earth. Annie, for starters, must be a real test of his patience. And he probably felt like a third wheel most of the time, or fifth wheel, in this case. Hitomi frowned. Poor Allen. She'd really have to think of some way to make it up to him.

“You don't have to worry about Allen. He can handle himself,” Van's quiet voice in her ear made her jump, and she swiveled to face him.

“How'd you know...”

He shrugged, looking around the crowded lodge. “You were chewing on your lip. You always do that when you're worried about something.”

“Oh,” Hitomi whispered, completely shocked that Van had noticed something like that, something she'd hardly realized she did. It started that warm, tingly sensation flooding through her again.

She didn't have time to fully enjoy the feeling, though, since they were quickly surrounded by the rest of the group. Van and Allen were introduced to everyone in rapid succession, leaving no chance that they'd actually remember anyone's name, but it didn't seem to matter. It was a wildly diverse group that ranged from punks to geeks, but everyone appeared to know each other, or at least, they all knew each other through Annie or Jason. Van and Allen were absorbed into the mix without a blink.

Allen felt decidedly better now that they were in a bigger group. And it didn't hurt that Annie and Jason were loudly telling everyone how awesome he and Van were doing on their first snowboarding experience.

“Seriously. They're already making it all the way to the bottom!” Jason exclaimed to a couple of guys who looked as rough as he did. Allen's grin must've been a little too cocky, because Annie wrinkled up her nose.

“Yeah, but it's just a little hill. A teeny-weeny bunny hill,” she emphasized. Allen's grin didn't falter one bit. “You can't even make it half-way.”

“Hush up, you!”

Lunch over, the group broke off into twos and threes as everyone headed to their skill level slope. True to his word, Jason stayed with the three beginners to try, one more time, to get Annie half-way down the hill. Somehow, Allen found himself alone at the top with Jason, watching Annie wobble her way into another spectacular wipe-out.
“Aw, shit. She never figured out skate-boarding, either,” Jason sighed, shaking his head as they watched her try to untangle herself.

“Skate-boarding?” Allen asked, curious in spite of his dislike of the man.

“Hell, yeah. I tried to teach her that, too. Grandma Ida made me stop after she broke her arm.” Seemingly oblivious to Allen's shocked look, he rambled on. “How 'bout you? You and Van must be skaters or something, since you picked this up so fast.”

“Uh, no,” Allen answered quickly. “We've both just had...intensive physical training. I suppose that helps.”

“That so? What kind?”

Allen faltered for a moment under Jason's curious look, wondering what to tell him. Luckily, Annie had struggled her way back to the top, and she threw herself and her board to the ground unceremoniously.

“Forget it, J. I'm just going to break my tailbone again or something, so you can stop trying to teach me. Besides, I know you want to get to the better runs.”

Jason barely contained a grin. “You sure? 'Cause we can keep trying if you want.”

“Yeah, yeah, get out of here. I'm bruised enough.” Annie waved a hand at him, and he sped off, leaving her alone with Allen. She just sat there, watching Van and Hitomi making their way down to the bottom. Oddly enough, it looked like Van was giving Hitomi pointers. Allen took his bindings off, slid his boots out of the board, and sat down beside her.

“Tired?” Annie asked, still watching the couple on the hill.

“No. Just...taking a break,” Allen answered. He hesitated for a moment. “So, how long have you known Jason?”

“Huh? Oh. Forever. His mom used to babysit me. We've even got some embarrassing naked babies-in-the-tub pictures.” Annie answered absently.

“Did you really date him?” Allen asked, blurtng the question out without meaning to say it. Annie turned to give him a strange look. He could have buried his head in a snowbank for being so stupid. It wasn't like he was interested. Just the guy didn't seem like the right type for her.

“Oh, you heard about that? That was a really weird period, you know?” Annie said thoughtfully. “J and I lost touch for a while. He got into some trouble after high school, and we didn't catch up again until we ran into each other in a bar. So it was just one of those meet up with an old friend and hook up for a while things. Anyway, we make better friends than a couple. so we broke it off. No big deal.”

“No big deal? You have a relationship with someone, and it's no big deal?”

“Oh, lighten up, Al. It's the way things are here. You date someone, it doesn't work out, you move on. And it's not like you're one to talk, anyway. How many relationships have you had?”

Allen straightened his back, frowning. “How many have you?”

“Uh...recently?” Annie asked after thinking hard for several minutes.

“Forget it,” Allen mumbled, frowning. They sat in silence, watching the snowboarders going down the slope. Hitomi and Van had reached the bottom, and Hitomi had fallen over. They watched Van try to help her up, lose his balance, and topple over Hitomi in a very compromising position. Annie giggled quietly.
“Too bad they're wearing all those layers,” she said quietly. Allen was surprised to realize he was smiling slightly. Large, white flakes drifted lazily down and he caught one in the palm of his hand.

“Yay! It's snowing!” Annie squealed, leaning back and trying to catch a snowflake on her tongue. Allen just grunted in response, and Annie stopped hanging her mouth open to give him a curious look.

“What's the matter? Don't you like snow?”

“It's better than rain,” he replied after a moment. Annie wrinkled her nose, confused.

“You don't like rain? How come?”

“Because it feels...sad. Like it's washing everything away. I've never liked the rain,” Allen answered quietly, watching as several more snowflakes landed in his open palm. Next to him, Annie flopped onto her back.

“ Weird,” she said. “I've always liked rain. I thought it washed everything clean, you know. For a fresh start.”

Allen contemplated for a moment. “I've never looked at it that way.”

“Of course you haven't, Mr. Dark and Gloomy. You're the type to think the glass is half-empty, but I'm the type to think it's always full. And it is, just sometimes there's more air in it than water.”

He quirked a rueful smile. “Complete opposites.”

“Not really. Just two sides of the same coin,” Annie said thoughtfully. Allen gave her a questioning look, and she grinned. “In actuality, we're a lot alike. We just look at the world differently is all. That's probably why I like you.”

Allen was stunned. “You like me?”

“Hell yeah! You're way too serious, you can't take a joke, you care way too much about 'the rules', and you really need to learn how to have a good time, but I still think you're a good guy,” she said with enthusiasm. “Besides, what girl wouldn't like her own walking, talking joke?”

Allen's eyebrow twitched dangerously. “Walking, talking, joke? You-”

“Relax, relax! I'm just teasing you, Al!” Annie said, laughing so hard she snorted. She sat up and stuck her hand out. “I don't think of you as a joke. At least, not anymore. Friends?”

He eyed her warily, looking for signs of a trick. Finally, he reached out and tentatively grasped her gloved hand.

“Friends.”

She grinned, jumped to her feet, and dusted the snow off her backside. Allen stood up more slowly, stretching sore muscles from his own numerous wipe-outs as he moved. He could see Hitomi and Van slowly making their way towards them.

“So, does this friend thing mean no more teasing or jokes?” he asked casually as he strapped his boots back onto his board.

“Heh. Not a chance, buddy.”

Allen admirably resisted the urge to toss her headfirst into the nearest snowbank and merely shoved off down the hill again. At least she couldn't tease him about this.

A few hours later, more than half the group was ready and willing to head to the hotel and the promise of a good soak in the hot tub. Van's muscles ached in places he wasn't
aware could hurt, even with all his training. Next to him in the car, Hitomi rubbed her sore thighs. He tried valiantly not to notice the way her finger kneaded her toned legs, sliding over areas he longed to touch.

After checking in, the group split up to find their rooms. Annie led them to two rooms on the ground floor directly off the pool area. Van and Allen surveyed the large, sunlight area with some surprise. The pool was large and curved, filled with still, clear water. A smaller pool sat a few feet away from the edge of the larger one, steam rising from it. Chairs and tables sat around the edges of the pool in clumps. The place appeared empty except for their group.

“Here's your keys,” Hitomi said, catching their attention and handing them two small, plastic cards. Quickly, she demonstrated how to work the strange locks, and they entered the room.

“Hey, look! We're connected!” Annie said gleefully, opening a door in the wall between their rooms. The rooms were small, with one queen sized bed in each, a pint-sized bathroom with a shower, and a table with a TV, microwave, and coffee maker perched on it. Annie took a running dive and bounced a few times on their bed.

“Well, looks like you're gonna have to get cozy tonight,” she said with a smirk to Van and Allen. Van surveyed the bed with slight dislike, and Allen shook his head with mild exasperation at Annie.

“So, what's the plan? Are we going swimming now or what?” Hitomi asked, her trepidation of wearing a swimming suit in front of Van completely swallowed by the prospect of seeing him in one.

“Hells yeah!” Annie shouted, bouncing off the bed and diving for the guys' bags. “Swim trunks, swim trunks...ah! Here! Put these on. And just these, nothing else, okay? We'll meet you at the pool!”

Van and Allen stared at the strange shorts she'd thrown at them as she dragged Hitomi back through the conjoining door, shutting it with a decisive snap behind her. Nothing but the swim trunks, huh? Van and Allen glanced at each other uncertainly before stripping down and pulling them on.

Van was surprised at how comfortable the shorts felt once he'd got them on. They were mostly black, with a few red stripes going down the sides, and they reached his knees. Allen's were similar, but were a sky blue with white stripes. Van couldn't help but glance nervously at himself in the mirror. Only his torso and his lower legs were exposed, but he still felt so naked.

“I wonder what girls swimming outfits are like here,” he muttered, more to himself than anything, but Allen apparently overheard him.

“Isn't it something called a 'bikini'?” he asked, and Van noticed that he was checking himself over surreptitiously in the mirror as well. “We should get out to the pool.”
Van sighed heavily, totally unsure about the whole thing, but desperately curious to see what it was about a ‘bikini’ that made Hitomi blush from toes to hairline. At any rate, there had to be less layers involved than snowboarding, and that was definite plus.

Once out of the room, they were beckoned over to the hot tub, already filling with members of the birthday party group. Van accepted a beer and struggled to recall their names as he sank into the bubbling, steaming water.

Aahhh, damn that felt good. Allen relaxed down next to him, a bottle of beer in his hand as well. So far, it was just them and four other guys.

“Wonder what's taking the girls so long,” Van muttered quietly to Allen, but the group heard him and laughed.

“Ah, you know how girls are. They gotta primp and complain and bitch about how fat they look for a half hour before they get up the courage to come out of their rooms. My girlfriend's pissed off because I wouldn't wait for her. Like hell I'm gonna sit there and listen to that!” one of them joked. Van sipped contentedly at his beer as the good natured talk washed around him, his eyes glued to Hitomi's door.

Behind that door, a mini-battle was being waged.

“Annie, I swear to God, if you took my swimsuit out of my bag--”

Annie pulled a face, keeping the bed between them for safety. “You mean your granny suit. I'm just doing you a favor. Friends don't let friends wear one-pieces. At least, not when said friend is a hottie who's trying to get some action.”

“ANNIE!”

“Just wear the damn bikini already! You look hot! You're not fat! You'll make Van--”

“DON'T SAY IT! Just stop talking. Right now!” Hitomi shrieked, flaming red. Annie tossed the skimpy string bikini at her with clenched teeth.


Hitomi threw up her hands in defeat and grabbed the offending scraps of material. Cursing under her breath, she quickly whipped on the suit and stood grimacing at herself in the mirror. Annie came up behind her to give herself a quick once-over.

“What the heck is THAT?” Hitomi screeched. Annie's bright red bikini, while not overly-modest by any stretch of the imagination, definitely had more material to it than Hitomi's.

“What? I need more support than you, ya' know. And I'm not trying to impress anybody,” Annie said nonchalantly as she adjusted the halter strap around her neck. She ignored Hitomi's outraged splutters as she craned her neck over her shoulder to make sure the bottom was covering what it was supposed to be covering.
“Besides,” she continued, “The last time I wore a string bikini at a party like this, I kept losing my top. Word of advice: don't get too rough playing pool basketball.”

Hitomi suddenly deflated, pink all over. “I can't go out there in this...”

“YES, you can,” Annie coaxed as she took her arm and pulled her slowly to the door. Hitomi's feet dragged on the carpeting, and she took a few deep breaths.

“Just think, Van in swim trunks, Van in swim trunks,” Annie chanted. That did it. Annie swung open the door, gave her a quick shove, and they were officially out of the room and into the pool area. And Van was looking right at her. No turning back now.

Van's beer bottle nearly slipped completely out of his suddenly numb fingers as Hitomi stepped out of her room. Hell, his brain went suddenly numb. There was just too much blood being diverted to a certain part of his anatomy to accommodate any sort of rational thought.

“So that's a bikini,” he mumbled, unaware that he'd even spoken out loud.

“Uh,” Allen grunted, apparently incapable of anything more complicated than that at the moment.

Some part of Van's consciousness registered the fact that he was staring, with his mouth slightly open no less, but he couldn't for the life of him look away. He couldn't even blink. He thanked and cursed every god he could think of for the invention of the bikini as Hitomi made her way towards him. He'd wanted to see her in a few less layers, but this. How the hell was he supposed to deal with this? Those tiny scraps of green material covered just enough to keep her decent, but how was he supposed to keep himself, and his hands, decent? How was he supposed to keep them off her at all?

He swallowed convulsively as she reached the hot tub and stepped into the water next to him. Thank Jichia for the clouded, bubble-frothed water. He sure as hell wasn't going to be standing up any time soon. The water came just up to her chest, the tiny bubbles swirling suggestively around the swirl of her breasts.

“Uh, hi Van,” Hitomi said nervously, not quite looking at his face. Which he was profoundly grateful for, because he was having a hard time keeping his eyes from straying down to those swirling bubbles.

“Hi,” he croaked out in response through a strangely dry throat. He took a big swig of his beer to steady himself. Neither one of them noticed the huge, triumphant grin plastered across Annie's face, or the dumbstruck look still hanging on Allen's.

“Beer, Annie?” one of the guys offered, and she nearly accepted before noticing the bottle dangling from Allen's fingers.

“No thanks, Leo. Where's the wine?”

Leaning over, she dug through the large cooler and pulled out a large bottle with a flourish. She poured herself a huge glass of the deep red liquid before sliding into the water next to Allen.

He was still too busy trying to process what had just happened to really notice what was going on around him. Hitomi, stepping out of her room in next to nothing, had been enough to shock him into a stupor as it was. But oddly, Hitomi wasn't the one that had caught his attention.

He blamed it all on the color. Hitomi's suit was a soft green, just the color of her eyes. But Annie's was a bright, vibrant, scarlet red. Yeah. It had to be the color that made him stare like that. Not the way the skimpy top showed off her more-than-
adequate curves. Not her flat stomach and toned legs. And definitely not her really fine backside. Because she wasn't his type. At all. He liked tall blonds.

“Hey, trade ya,” Annie said as she gave his shoulder a poke.

“Huh?” Allen mumbled, giving himself a mental shake to kick his brain back into gear.

“Trade,” Annie emphasized patiently, exchanging the bottle for the glass. “I know you don't like beer, so I brought this along for you instead.”

“Oh. Thank you,” he replied after a long moment. Tentatively he took a small sip. “This is... good.”

Annie wrinkled her nose. “Well, I cheated. I asked Hitomi what that Gaean drink tasted like so I could find something close to it.”

“It is. Very close,” Allen said, taking another sip. Annie took a swig of her beer and grinned.

“Good. Then maybe there's a chance you'll get plastered tonight, after all!”

Allen gave her a disapproving look. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not going to 'get plastered' tonight or any time soon.”

“Oh, relax. I'm going to. They're going to,” Annie said, waving her beer at Hitomi and Van. “We're all going to get hammered. Besides, it's my birthday, so you just have to shut up and do what I tell you. Now drink up!”

Allen frowned at her and very deliberately set his cup down on the edge of the hot tub. Annie just stuck her tongue out at him and took another big drink. On his other side, Van was rapidly finishing off his first beer, and Hitomi was right behind him with her own drink. Allen bit his tongue to keep from laughing at how they both were drinking out of sheer nerves. If he were Van, he wouldn't be needing the alcohol! He'd be working hard at finding some excuse to get her back to the room with him as fast as possible.

The pool area started to fill with more of their group now, girls mixing in with guys, and some were already diving into the main pool. The alcoholic drinks floated freely around, and the large, sun-filled room echoed with their loud laughter.

Hitomi downed the last bit of her drink, and looked over at Van. The alcohol was already seeping through her system, making her feel bolder and a little carefree. All she could see of Van's body was the upper half of his torso. And it was a really nice top half, too. She watched the taunt muscles in his tanned neck move as he took a swig of his second beer and unconsciously licked her lips. She wanted to see the rest of him, wanted to see what he looked like in just his swim trunks, wet and sticking to him. She raised herself to sit on the edge of the hot tub.

“Hey, Van, let's cool off in the pool,” she said casually, hoping he'd think the red creeping up her cheeks was just from the heat and not from the way his eyes flicked over her body.

“...Sure,” Van replied hesitantly, willing his body to cooperate long enough to get the short distance to the main pool. Maybe if he just didn't look at her?...

He stood slowly, and Hitomi watched the water slide over his firm abs and tanned skin. He was lean, but toned, and so deliciously manly, that Hitomi had a hard time remembering why he was getting out of the hot tub in the first place. The swim trunks
clung to his hips and thighs suggestively, and Hitomi could've died right there, a happy woman. Where the hell was her camera?!

“So, um, ready?” Van asked uneasily when Hitomi just sat there, dangling her legs into the swirling water.

“Huh? Oh. Right, the pool. Yeah, let's go!”

They jumped into the deep water at the same time, and Van surfaced with a gasp. It was freezing. Well, at least that would take care of his 'little problem' for a while. Hitomi giggled at his reaction and splashed some water in his face. He coughed, shook the water out of his eyes, and dunked her swiftly under the water by her shoulders.

The party cranked up as the last of the snowboarders trickled back to the hotel and joined the rest in the pool. Van saw Jason, in black and white swim trunks, pluck Annie out of the hot tub, sling her over his shoulder, and jump into the pool, bellowing, “POOL BASKETBALL!!” at the top of his bull-moose voice.

The game that ensued was complete chaos, since everyone, including Allen, joined in. They tagged in and out, spectators sitting on the side or in the hot tub, cheering their team on. Hitomi spent nearly her entire playing time holding on to her top to keep it from shifting too much, making Van useless, totally absorbed in watching her struggling to stay decent and totally unaware of what was going on.

Hitomi was grateful when they could relax on the side. She and Van sipped at their drinks-- she'd stopped keeping track of how much she'd had-- and enjoyed watching the game. They both had enough alcohol in them to relax enough to sit side by side, the skin of her thigh touching the wet fabric of his swimsuit.

“Hey, Tomi, did you know they have a sauna here?” Annie asked brightly as she plopped herself down next to them. She gave her a discreet nudge. “You and Van should check it out. It's through the exercise room, over there.”

“Oh. I don't know, we're watching the game,” Hitomi began, missing Annie's pointed look. Van appeared to only be half-listening to their conversation.

“No, I really think you should show it to Van. I think he'd like it,” Annie said, with a little more forceful nudge. Hitomi blinked, confused, for several more moments before comprehension dawned through her brain.

“Oh. Oh,” she said with widening eyes. “I think you're right. Ne, Van, let's go check out the sauna.”

Van shrugged and got up to follow her through the equipment room. He had no idea what a 'sauna' was, but he was willing to follow Hitomi anywhere at the moment. He just had to concentrate, hard, on not staring at her backside the whole time. But she really did have a very fine backside to be staring at.

Oh, gods, what was he thinking? Deep breaths, deep breaths. He needed another quick dunk in the cold water of the pool.

The sauna turned out to be a tiny room tucked into a corner, with a single bench along it's back wall. Van stepped inside and looked around curiously as Hitomi shut the door after them. He blinked to adjust his eyes to the sudden dim of the room, and his skin prickled at Hitomi's nearness. The room was so tiny she had to stand less than two feet away from him.

“So... what is this room for?” he asked into the tense silence.
“Well, you turn on the heat here, and you pour some water over the coals to make steam, and then you just sit in here and...sweat...”

An image of Van, in those swim trunks, with sweat running down his taunt abs, flooded Hitomi's imagination, and she unconsciously licked her lips.

Van watched, mesmerized, as her tongue moistened her soft, pink lips, and he knew that it was over. There was no way he could stay in control now, not locked into this tiny, steamy room with Hitomi wearing just that green bikini. Shakily, still fighting to retain whatever shred of composure he could, he reached out and traced her mouth with his thumb. Her lips parted slightly, and she grazed the pad with her teeth. He was completely lost.

Pulling her to him, one hand tangling in her hair, the other pressed against the small of her back to mold her to him, Van covered her surprised mouth with his own. He nipped gently, impatiently, at her bottom lip, and she melted, opening to allow his tongue to slip inside and explore.

Hitomi pressed herself into him, the heat from their bodies igniting a fire deep within her belly. She ran her hands over his rippled, lean, muscles, reveling in the feel of his skin under her fingers.

Van groaned deep in his throat as her slender hands fluttered over his body. His own hand wandered up her back slowly, feeling her incredible silky-smoothness before sliding down lower, lower, until his hand rested on her backside. Hitomi gave a soft moan, and his other hand untangled itself from her honey tresses to trail down to her neck, her shoulder, and beyond.

Somehow, they'd moved so the back of Van's legs hit the bench, and he sat down hard, pulling Hitomi with him. The jolt shook some rational part of his brain awake, and he pulled away far enough to look into her leaf-green eyes.

"Hitomi, I..." he began, uncertain, unsure, unwilling to hurt her in any way.

"Don't stop, Van," she whispered. That was all the encouragement he needed.

**Pizza and Surprises**

Holy crap-ola! This chapter is not what it's supposed to be!! And after the fun fluff of last chapter, this one kinda falls flat. But I have excuses! This was only supposed to be part of Chapter 16, not the whole thing! Only, seeing as how I haven't had a chance to do any writing, much less any posting, for almost a month, I desperately wanted to get something up tonight while I had the chance. So there you have it. Something to read, although I'm hoping (with fingers tightly crossed) that next chapter will be a lot more fun. Sigh. I really, really hate writer's block! Next one will be more fun with some always nummy VxH fluffiness thrown in! Anyway, enough of my excuses-- on with the story!

Allen's chest heaved, half out of breath and half in laughter, as the wild game of pool basketball finally slowed to a stop. From what he could gather, he was on the winning team. He stood still, the water up to his shoulders, to catch his breath.

“How ya doin' Al?” Annie asked as she wound her arms tightly around his neck from behind. Allen felt his already short breath hitch as her soft curves pressed into his back. A hot blush crept it's way over his ears, turning them a bright scarlet red.
“What are you doing? Get off!” he gasped uncomfortably. The contrast between the cold water and the heat between their bodies was terribly distracting. And it made him uncomfortably aware of just how skimpy her bikini really was.

Annie stuck her lip out and pouted. “No way. I'm tired, and I can't touch the bottom here.”

Her breath on his neck raised a delicious shiver of goosebumps, and Allen felt almost desperate. “Then go hang on the wall!”

“I can't make it! I'll drown, and it'll be all your fault!” Annie returned dramatically. She kicked her feet against the back of his calves. “Besides, you're more fun to hang on to.”

Gritting his teeth, Allen forced his way through the water to the nearest wall. The sooner she let go of him, the better for his sanity.

“Where are Hitomi and Van?” he asked, latching on to anything that could distract him from the way Annie clung to his back.

“Oh, they're off getting busy, if ya' know what I mean.”

Allen grunted in response. He was pretty sure he knew exactly what she meant, and the thought really wasn't helping him out in his current situation. Great Jichia, why the hell was he reacting like this to Annie? Out of all the women he'd ever met--

“Did you see the way they were oogling each other? I thought Van was gonna explode when he saw her! Wish I'd had my camera...” Annie stopped as Allen reached the wall and turned pointedly sideways. She eyed the wall and kicked his calves again.

“You getting out or something?”

“No!” Allen exclaimed, hoping she wouldn't figure out why he wouldn't be leaving the water any time soon, especially if she didn't get off of him. Unexpectedly, her arms unwound from his neck, and he let out the air he hadn't realized he was holding in a relieved sigh. He turned to see Annie hauling herself out of the water.

“Pizza's here!” she shouted as she made her way across the room to a guy in a baseball cap. Everyone climbed out of the the water and swarmed the man, relieving him of the stack of pizzas he carried.

“What is this stuff?” Allen asked Annie in a quiet undertone as he eyed the cheesy, greasy food.

“This, my friend, is pizza. Food of the gods,” Annie replied, scooping several pieces onto a plate. “You look like a Supreme kind of guy. Try this.”

Allen reluctantly took the plate she held out to him and poked doubtfully at the pizza slices on his plate. All around him, the group dug in with obvious enjoyment. Slowly, he took a small bite.

The taste was actually fairly good. But the cheese was gooey and melted, and slid off his slice and onto his chin. Mumbling a swear word, he wiped frantically at it as the hot cheese and sauce mixture burned his skin.

“Cute. Very smooth,” Annie smirked as she tossed a napkin at him. He muttered something under his breath, and she turned back to the busily eating group. “Hey guys, save some pizza for Tomi and Van, okay?”

“Oh, Jason already went to go get them,” someone replied casually, and Annie dropped her pizza with a whispered shriek. Allen took a few discreet steps away from her. He could already feel the rage radiating off of her small form.
“He. Did. WHAT?!”

BANG BANG BANG

“Yo, guys! Pizza time! Get your clothes on and get out here!” Jason shouted through the sauna door. He smirked broadly at the sound of a small shriek and some muffled curses.

“Uh, yeah... We'll-- we'll be right out!” Hitomi's flustered voice called through the door. She and Van listened as Jason laughed and walked away. They glanced awkwardly at each other in the dim light of the sauna, and Hitomi giggled a little breathlessly.

“So, uh, guess we'd better go back to the pool, huh?”

Van only nodded in reply, a little unfocused since she was still sitting on his lap. He sighed silently as she scooted off and stood up, adjusting her top slightly. How long had they been in the sauna? An hour? Less? Van wasn't sure whether to be grateful or upset that they'd been interrupted. Honestly, he wasn't sure how much longer he could have kept himself from tearing off those flimsy scraps of material. But he couldn't, he wouldn't, dishonor Hitomi like that. No matter how badly he wanted to.

Hitomi led the way back to the pool area in a jumble of tingling nerves and confused questions. If she was any sort of judge of reactions, she could tell Van wanted her. Badly. So why, why was he holding back? Sure, his hands had finally started wandering, and while she was by no means complaining, she wanted- needed- more. She wanted to feel his hands on her skin, or more precisely, on the skin her bikini was covering. For god's sake, she was wearing a string bikini. It wasn't exactly difficult to remove. So why did he keep his hands on the outside? It was all too confusing, and she was too flushed, too full of buzzing nerves, to figure it out. She still felt like she was on fire where his hot, calloused hands had touched her. Dear lord, she wanted more.

They reached the pool area to find Jason caught in a painful headlock, being beaten senseless by an enraged Annie. Hitomi grabbed some pizza, handed a plate to Van, and sat down to watch the show.

“You idiot! Stupid poo-head! I hate you!”

Jason wheezed out a laugh as Annie tightened her grip. “Naw, you're gonna love me forever. Wanna know why?”

Annie stopped pounding on him long enough to look suspicious. “Why?”

“Because. I know a bouncer at the dance club down the street. And he's gonna let your friends in without their ID's.”

Annie let go of Jason's neck with a gasp. “For real?”

“Hell, yeah. Happy Birthday, babe.” he replied, grinning and patting her head. Annie squealed and knocked him over with a bear hug.

“Whoohoo, dance party! I love, love, love you!” she shrieked. Jason just laughed at her as he set her back on her feet. Van and Allen gave each other confused looks over the top of Hitomi's head as Annie bounced from table to table, bubbling over with excitement.

“Why is she so excited about dancing?” Van asked.

Hitomi swallowed a mouthful of pizza with a grin. “Because it's fun. You guys'll like it.”
“We're going along?” Allen asked, surprised. For some reason, he'd assumed this was just something Jason and Annie were doing. Or maybe some of the group.

“Hitomi, you know...I don't really dance,” Van said, uncertainty coloring his voice. The last thing he wanted to do was make a fool of himself in front of all these people. And especially Hitomi. He swallowed nervously.

“Don't worry about it,” Hitomi said with a bright smile. “You don't need to do much, just move with the beat. You'll have fun. I promise!”

Van smiled back at her, still uneasy about it, but willing to go along with whatever she wanted. It was her world, after all. After every last crumb of pizza was consumed, everyone headed back to their rooms to change.

Annie and Hitomi stared helplessly at the two changes of clothes they'd brought along. Sweaters, jeans, pajamas-- nothing either one was too excited about wearing out to a club.

“Dammit,” Annie sighed. “The problem with guys is they never think about clothes when they're planning a surprise.”

There was a loud knock on their door, and one of their friends walked in with a small duffel bag.

“Hey, girls. I brought you some clothes to wear,” she said brightly.

“Oh. That's great, Miranda. But I don't think either of us could dream of fitting into your clothes,” Hitomi said, eying up the tall, model-perfect blond. She'd always been secretly envious of Miranda's perfect figure and long, blond hair. In fact, now that she thought about it, she kind of reminded her of Millerna- at least in looks. Wait- had Allen noticed that, too? Tall blonds seemed to be his type. Maybe she'd ask Annie to help hook the two of them up. It might make him less grumpy.

“They're not my clothes, they're yours,” Miranda replied with a smile. “Jason had us swing by after you guys left to pick some up. So hurry up and change!”

“Really? Wow, thanks, Mir!!” Annie exclaimed, diving into the bag as Miranda left the room. She flung a shirt and jeans at Hitomi and pulled out her own clothes.

“Thank god it was Miranda, She's got good taste,” she said as the they dressed.

Hitomi's shirt was a thin, shimmery green that tied over one shoulder and left the other completely bare. It molded to her curves like it had been tailor-made for her and brought out the bright green of her eyes. The light color contrasted perfectly with her dark, skin-tight jeans, and she knew she looked good. Better than good. She just hoped Van thought so, too.

Annie's halter top was bright sky-blue, with black silk edging that went perfectly with her tight black jeans. It tied around her neck, leaving her shoulders and back bare, and had a deep, plunging neckline. She grinned at Hitomi as they put the finishing touches on their make up.

“Damn, we're hot! Watch out boys! Bet Van won't be able to keep his hands off you!”

Hitomi sighed. “He hasn't really had his hands on me yet.”

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“What?!” Annie asked incredulously. “What were you doing in the sauna for an hour, then? No wandering hands at all?”

“No, they wandered,” Hitomi muttered, blushing furiously. “It's just...the clothes were getting in the way.”

Annie stared at her, completely confused. “Wha-? But it was a string bikini. Any idiot could...Oh. Oh, I get it. He didn't even try to get under it, huh?”

“No!” Hitomi cried, exasperated. “I don't get it! It's like he wants to, but he won't let himself.”

“Probably more of that damn Gaean protocol,” Annie muttered, irritated. “Guess you've gotta get him drunk enough to not care anymore. That, or just do a strip-tease.”

“Yeah...” Hitomi said moodily, not really paying attention. “Hey, what do you think about getting Miranda and Allen together?”

Annie stopped what she was doing and turned to looked at Hitomi with a confused look. “Allen and Miranda-? What for?”

“Well, you know. He's seems so unhappy about being here. And Miranda's kind of his type: tall, blond, pretty.”

Hitomi bent over to fix the strap on her shoes, oblivious to Annie's thoughtful stare. There was a knock on the conjoining door, and she called for Van and Allen to come in. Hitomi straightened up as they walked in and very nearly swooned.

Nothing could possibly beat Van in a wet swimsuit, but this was pretty damn close. Really, he wasn't wearing anything that special, just an open, black button-up shirt with a tight red tank top under it and baggy black jeans. But it was the way he wore them, the way they hung on him. He was one incredibly sexy specimen of a man.

Van didn't even notice the way Hitomi was staring at him, being too busy staring at her himself. By the gods, he was grateful he'd come on this “vacation”.

Allen stood slightly behind Van, painfully aware of the way the two of them were staring at each other. Part of him wanted to smile, and the rest of him wanted to slam his fist through the wall. Hitomi was so perfect, so beautiful, it was no wonder Van was helplessly in love with her. And she, Allen could tell just by glancing at her face, was just as hopelessly in love with him. She had never looked that way at him...

Sighing, Allen looked away to find Annie contemplating him, hands on her hips. Once again, his brain froze up as he took in her petite frame with her perfect curves and her long, brown hair, released for once from it's customary sloppy bun to cascade down her back. Her dark chocolate brown eyes regarded him seriously from her pixie-like face and he swallowed hard. He had to think fast. Gingerbread men with no legs. Decorating the Christmas Tree. The gag gift. Princess Alice. Annie wasn't his type at all.

“So, you like tall blonds, huh?” Annie stated suddenly. Allen jumped guiltily, wondering yet again if she could read his mind.

“I- what?” he stuttered, Annie just snorted and turned to leave the room.

“Forget it. C'mon, let's go before everyone leaves us behind.”
Anyway, this is to hopefully make up for the rather blandness of last chapter. There's some nice VxH semi-smut in this one! Yay! Just a warning, in case you're too young or easily offended by such things.

The dance club was only a few minute's walk down the street from their hotel, and they went together in a loud, happy group. The thumping bass was audible even before they pushed open the doors and stepped into building. Two large men in black guarded the doorways, and one waved them over. Jason greeted him enthusiastically and introduced him to Annie. Even standing directly behind them, Van and Allen couldn't make out what was being said over the pounding music. Eventually, they filed past the man, who grinned and stamped a green mark on all their hands, and entered the main part of the club.

It was dark inside, and the group took several minutes to adjust their eyes and look around them. Van and Allen stared disbelievingly at the packed dance floor, trying to make out what was going on through the flashing lights and smoke. Annie was already bouncing to the music, and Allen resisted the now-familiar urge to clamp his hands down on her head to keep her still.

“Birthday shots!” someone called out, and several people charged up to the bar to get the drinks. The rest of the group made their way to several open tables along the wall next to the dance floor. Soon, the others joined them and handed around the shots.

“Cheers!” Annie shouted, holding up her glass. “C'mon Al, Van, drink up!”

They did, grimacing. Whatever they were drinking was a lot more potent than vino! Another round was passed out, and both men picked up their next shot with trepidation.

“No worries. This is Goldschlager. Tastes like cinnamon,” Annie shouted to them as they eyed their glasses doubtfully. She knocked it back like it was water, and the men followed suit. It wasn't quite as shudder-inducing as the last drink.

“See? Not so bad, and it gives you nice breath, too,” Annie beamed at Van. “So when you and Tomi are getting busy-- ow!”

Hitomi had given her a well-aimed kick and glared daggers at her. She was surprised that she wasn't blushing scarlet, but with all the drinks back at the hotel and the two shots here, she was feeling decidedly fuzzy. Van must've been feeling the same way, because he just grinned a small, goofy grin at her, like he was the happiest guy on the planet.

The music changed slightly, hardly noticeable over the thumping bass, and Annie squealed and grabbed Hitomi's arm.

“Good song! Let's go!” she shouted, pulling Hitomi with her to the dance floor. Hitomi clamped on to Van's hand and dragged him into the crowd behind her. Half the group poured out onto the floor with them, and they formed a tight, always moving circle on the edge of the dance floor.

The multi-colored strobe lights flashed, and the occasional burst of white fog enveloped them as they moved to the beat. At first, Van stood still, feeling incredibly uncomfortable as the group danced around him. Hitomi grabbed on to his hands, smiling at him and moving to the music. Van watched her, mesmerized, until she'd closed the distance between them and pressed her body up against his. His hands
settled on her hips, feeling the way they gyrated to the beat, and his own hips began to move in time with hers. The flashing lights, the throbbing music, the hazy air, made everything seem so surreal that he found himself drifting as if in a dream. A dream where nothing mattered but the beat of the music and the feel of her body under his hands, pressed up against him. He forgot about the people dancing all around them. He forgot that they were out in public and he shouldn't be touching her like this. It didn't really matter anymore.

Hitomi turned around in his arms and pressed her back flush against his hard chest. Van's hands slid across her stomach, and she leaned her head back into his shoulder, still moving steadily to the beat. Her hands came up to tangle in his hair as he trailed light kisses across her exposed neck and shoulder, leaving behind a trail of fire on her skin.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Hitomi registered the fact that they were still out on a public dance floor, but for once she didn't care. Maybe it was the two shots, or maybe it was just Van's touch alone that made her feel so reckless, but she wasn't going to stop. Thank god their hotel was only a few minutes walk away. Now if only there was some way to get one of their rooms to themselves for the night...

Allen could see the group from his seat at the table. A few of the other guys sat near him, drinking and watching the dancers.

“You just gonna watch, Al?” Jason shouted as he walked up to the table carrying several beer bottles. Allen simply nodded and caught the beer tossed at him.

“Your loss, man,” Jason said with a shrug as he headed off to dance. Allen watched him reach Annie and hand her a beer. He cracked open his own bottle and took an enormous swig, pulling a face at it's bitter taste. He didn't really care right now what he was drinking, if it helped distract him a little. For a moment, watching Van and Hitomi dancing, he'd had a crazy urge to challenge Van to a duel for dishonoring her. He felt like a complete idiot for even thinking it, since what they did together was none of his concern. Besides, from what he could tell, Hitomi had been the one to start it in the first place.

And then he'd looked away and seen Annie dancing, and he'd forgotten all about Van and Hitomi. She danced liked she lived: wholeheartedly, wildly, openly. There was a certain primal sensuality to the way she moved that he was doing his damnedest to ignore and failing miserably.

The shots must've been affecting him more than he thought, because he kept wondering what it would be like to be out there, moving along to the beat. More specifically, what it would feel like to be dancing with her. How her hips would feel under his hands, or the feeling of sliding his hands along the silky fabric of her shirt. Just like that guy was doing.

What the hell-? Allen's brain jerked back to reality as he sat abruptly upright in his chair. Annie was dancing with some stranger, some muscle-bound hulk of a guy who had his beefy hands all over her! Okay, not quite all over, but it was obvious he was enjoying it, and Annie didn't seem to mind. What the hell was she doing?

“Check Annie out,” one of the guys at the table said, pointing in her direction. “Wonder how long it'll be 'til Jason pulls him off her?”

“Dunno. Looks like they're having some fun, anyway. Lucky bastard,” returned another. He stood and stretched. “I'm gonna get some more beers. Need one, Allen?”
Allen glanced down at the bottle in his hand and realized he'd already drained it. “Yeah, sure,” he replied, shrugging. What the hell. If he was going to have to sit here watching Van and Hitomi, and Annie, dancing all night, he'd rather not be sober.

Giving himself a hard mental slap, Allen tore his eyes away from Annie and stared aimlessly out across the dance floor. His eyes settled on a leggy blond from their group. What was her name-? Marissa? No, Miranda. Yeah, he was pretty sure her name was Miranda. He vaguely recalled noticing her at the pool and thinking how much she looked like every other woman he'd ever been interested in, except Hitomi. But then, his attraction to Hitomi had been an emotion that he had never been able to clearly define. Watching this Miranda felt safe, comfortable, like watching something he'd seen a hundred times before. She reminded him of Marlene, as did all the others before her, so he could rationalize any attraction he felt towards her.

Only, he realized with dismay, he felt no attraction at all. Not one shred. To his utter horror, he found himself comparing her, unfavorably, to Annie, of all people. Not Marlene. Certainly, her hair hung in perfect, golden curls, but it wasn't as long or as thick and silky-looking as Annie's. And yes, she had long, exquisitely shaped legs, but her hips were a bit too wide, and her feet were too large. As hard as he tried to admire something about the girl, there was always some flaw, something lacking, something that just couldn't compare.

It terrified him. He had to get up, do something to stop the crazy direction of his thoughts. Taking his beer, he got up walked around the edge of the dance floor. He wondered if it would be horribly rude to get his coat and walk back to the hotel by himself. Hitomi and Van were occupied- very occupied- with each other in a dark corner of the dance floor, and Allen didn't think either one would be noticing the world around them any time soon. He didn't think Annie would leave before she had too, either. All he could hope for was someone else from the group wanting to leave early.

“Hey, Blondie, how come you aren't dancing?” Annie suddenly shouted in his ear. Allen jumped and spun around to stare at her. Her hulking dance partner was nowhere to be seen. She grinned and grabbed his beer.

“Oh, thanks. I'm dying of thirst,” she said before taking a swig. Frowning, Allen grabbed the bottle back.

“Don't you think you've had enough to drink?” he hissed, and Annie scowled fiercely at him.

“Well, you certainly haven't, Grumpy-butt. I saw you sitting at the table, looking all pissed-off at the world. What's your problem?”

“I have no interest in this kind of 'dancing', if it could even be called that,” Allen retorted haughtily. “Shouldn't you be getting back to your dance partner?”

Annie wrinkled her nose, looking confused. “My what? Oh, you mean that guy. No, why should I? That's how it goes, you know. Find a hot guy, dance a little, have a little fun, move on to the next one.”

“Do you have any sense of decency? Morals?” Part of him wanted to wring her neck for being so blatantly casual and indifferent. Like she didn't care who she was with as long as she was having fun. Kind of like him, after Marlene left...

“God, Allen. It's not like I'm making out with them or taking them home!” Annie exclaimed, her eyes blazing. “If you don't like it, you know how to fix it, don't you? Just come out and dance with me yourself.”
For a moment, Allen was too shocked to speak. Did she know, had she somehow guessed, that that was exactly what he'd been wanting to do? No. No, she couldn't have. She was just teasing him again. His pride took over, and he silenced the voice in his head shouting "fine, then, I will!" and forced his mouth into a disdainful sneer.

"No, thanks. The thought's just not attractive enough for me."

The moment the words were out of his mouth, he wanted to catch them and shove them away in a dark corner where Annie would never hear them. But her expression never faltered, not even for a second. In fact, she leaned towards him with wide smirk.

"Whatever, Allen Shezar," she retorted, slowly, deliberately. "I am the hottest damn woman you will never have."

Allen couldn't come up with a reply, and watched silently as she turned and sauntered back out onto the dance floor. He finished the rest of his beer in one gulp, trying to drown the little sniggering voice in his head telling him that she was right. She was right, and he'd just made a very big mistake.

Hitomi never wanted to come back to reality. Van's hands felt too good; their warmth burned through the thin fabric of her shirt and set her nerves tingling. Her own hands moved restlessly over his torso, feeling the rippling, lean muscles under his tight tank top. She wanted their shirts off now. She needed to feel skin-to-skin contact. Their private hotel room was calling loudly.

But her bladder was calling even louder. With a sigh, Hitomi broke their movement to lean up and shout into Van's ear.

"Let's take a break!"

He nodded and followed her out of the crowd to their tables, one hand still intertwined with hers. On the way, they collected Annie, who was dancing with yet another new guy. She left him behind with hardly a backwards glance to catch up to Hitomi and throw an arm around her shoulder.

"What's up, babe? Having fun?" she said, just loud enough for Hitomi to hear.

Hitomi nodded. "Come with me to the bathroom, okay?"

"Why? You gonna fall in?" Annie asked with a laugh, but she waited while Hitomi told Van where they were going. He sat down with the few guys left at the table and accepted the beer they handed to him while the two girls started to make their way through the crowd to the bathroom.

"So...why'd you need me to come with you?" Annie asked as they entered the slightly quieter bathroom.

"You've got to help me," Hitomi pleaded. "I want to get back to the hotel. You know, to one of our rooms..."

"Oh...gotcha. Right. Okay, well, give me your key, and then tell Van you don't remember what you did with it. And I'll take care of Allen, so you guys can have the whole night, alright?"

"Really? That's great!...Do you think Van'll be suspicious when I don't have my key?" Hitomi asked nervously. Annie laughed outright.

"Tomi, I don't think he'll care. Especially if you try my strip-tease idea!"

Hitomi blushed scarlet and tried to hide a grin. "Thanks, Annie. I really owe you one for this. Hey, where is Allen, anyway? I didn't see him at the tables."
“Who cares?” Annie said with a shrug. “Probably off shoving the stick further up his-”

“Whoa! Okay, now I'm not so sure I should let you stay in the same room with him tonight. What'd he do this time?” Hitomi asked, cutting her off.

Annie frowned. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing besides just being his prissy self. Maybe I will try to hook him up with Miranda after all.”

Hitomi gave her a thoughtful stare as they exited the bathroom. What had Allen done to get her riled up? Usually it was the other way around. Hitomi shrugged it off. Whatever it was, Annie didn't want to talk about it, and that was that.

Half-way to their tables, Annie got pulled into a small group of their friends. Hitomi laughed them off and moved on through the dance floor towards Van. Really, it was almost scary how single-minded she was about getting them back to the hotel.

Hitomi tried to make her way past a group of young men, intent on getting to the tables. She recoiled sharply as she felt one of the men make a grab at her. He snaked his arms around her hips, and she could smell the alcohol on his breath as he tried to get her to dance with him. She attempted to pry his sweaty arms off her waist with very little success.

“Wassa matter, baby? Doncha wanna dance with me?” the man slurred.

“No,” Hitomi replied firmly, still trying to pull away from him. How was it Annie could wander around, dancing with who knew how many guys, and she was alone for one minute and got grabbed by the drunkest guy in the club? God, she had the worst luck ever. Honestly, if he didn't get the hint in the next two seconds, she was going to kick his 'family jewels' so hard...

A lean, tanned hand suddenly clamped down on the drunk's shoulder.

“Beg your pardon, but you want to let go of her right now,” Van said calmly, but through gritted teeth. The man kept a tight grip on Hitomi and glanced angrily over his shoulder. He caught sight of Van's face and released her, putting his hands up defensively.

“Hey, sorry man. Didn't know she was with you,” he muttered before hurrying off through the crowd. Hitomi nearly laughed out loud at how anxious he was to get as far away from Van as possible.

“Are you alright, Hitomi?” Van asked sincerely, and Hitomi fought back laughter again at how concerned he seemed. It wasn't like she couldn't have handled the guy, even though Van had made it much easier. Oh wait- maybe this would be the perfect excuse to get him to take her back to the hotel! She feigned her best 'distressed damsel' look.

“Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine...but,” she bit her lip and tried to look helpless. “Can we go back to the hotel now?”

Van blinked, surprised. Hitomi wasn't one to get easily rattled by things like this, but she did look a little shaken. He frowned, concerned. He wasn't that sure how long she'd been fighting with that guy. He'd just looked up and seen him grab her, and immediately jumped up to rescue her. Dirty bastard. He should've taught him a lesson.

“Sure, if that's what you want. Should we find Annie?” he asked gently. Hitomi had to hide a smirk again, confident that he'd bought her act.
“Oh, no. We'll just tell whoever's at the tables, and they can let her know,” Hitomi replied airily, then remembered she was supposed to be playing the distressed damsel. She gave a very small pout. “I just really want to get out of here, you know?”

Van looked concerned again as he quickly ushered her towards the tables. Hitomi had to swallow a tiny pang of guilt at using his protective streak like this. But she thought—she hoped— he wouldn't mind once they got back to their hotel room.

Hitomi was eternally grateful that the hotel was just down the street from the hotel, because she surprisingly unsteady on her feet. She couldn't tell if it was from the alcohol or nerves at what she doing. Van wasn't walking a perfectly straight line, either, although that might have been because he had an arm around her to help her walk. At any rate, it felt good to snuggle into his side and hold on to his coat as they walked.

“Are you sure you'll be alright by yourself?” Van asked as they stood outside her hotel room door.

“Um, yeah...” Hitomi answered distractedly as she made a show of searching through all her pockets for her 'missing' key. Silently, Van stood patiently watching her.

“I can't find my key,” she finally stated after searching all her pockets three times. “I must've left it in the room or something.”

“Oh,” Van said, shifting uncomfortably from side to side. It wasn't like he minded. Actually, he had really hoped something like this would happen. The only problem was, he didn't trust himself alone with her at the moment. He could tell that he'd had a bit too much to drink, and dancing with her had put him so close to the edge, he wasn't sure how well he could control himself. Hitomi looked up at him with her brilliant green eyes, and Van's resolve cracked and fell apart.

“We'll just wait in my room until Annie gets back,” he said in a husky voice. Hitomi nodded and followed him into his room, shedding her coat as she went inside. Van closed the door quietly behind them, his eyes on the slender curve of her neck and her bare shoulder. Slowly, he removed his own coat and the black button-up shirt.

Hitomi caught her bottom lip in her teeth when she turned to see him standing there in just the tight tank top and baggy black jeans. Dear lord, had any man ever been this unbelievably sexy in the history of either of their worlds? She toyed nervously with the tie on her shoulder, vaguely wondering if she actually had the guts to try a strip-tease. Anything to get Van to take his shirt off and show her his perfect abs again.

“So, um...” Hitomi began, chewing on her bottom lip again. “Do you have a t-shirt or something I could borrow?”

Van moved like an automaton to his duffel bag and pulled out a t-shirt. Did she have any inclination what she did to him just by toying with that little knot that was the only thing holding her shirt up? Or how he couldn't take his eyes off her mouth when she bit at her lip like that? Hitomi went into the bathroom to change, and he took several deep breaths to try to calm himself down.

Safely behind the bathroom door, Hitomi stripped off her shirt and pulled Van's over her head. It was the one he'd worn earlier that day, and it smelled like him. Like wind and fields and freedom. It was long enough that it came down to almost mid-thigh, and Hitomi paused for a moment, considering. She wasn't brave enough to do a strip-tease, but maybe...It might have been Van's lingering scent that urged her on, or it might have been the alcohol, but whatever the reason, Hitomi suddenly made up her mind.
Quickly she stripped off her jeans and walked out into the room wearing nothing but the t-shirt.

Van had stretched out on the bed with his back propped against the headboard when Hitomi had gone into the bathroom. Now, he turned his head to look at her as she walked into the room and was eternally grateful that he was already laying down. When she'd asked for a t-shirt, he'd assumed she just wanted to change her top, not change into just the shirt. The hem barely came down low enough to keep her decent, and he couldn't keep his eyes off her long legs as she moved towards the bed.

Van wondered if his heart could explode from the sheer pressure of it's own beating as she climbed onto the bed to settle herself next to him. Was she doing this on purpose? Did she know how close he was to pulling her onto him so he could slide his hands under that shirt to find out what, if anything, she was wearing beneath it?

She snuggled into his side, resting her head on his chest- could she feel how wildly his heart was beating?- and wrapping an arm around his waist. Instinctively, Van wrapped an arm around her and pulled her in tighter.

“I'm so glad you came to see me, Van,” Hitomi sighed. Her breath sent goosebumps racing along Van's skin, and he only trusted himself to nod in response. Stretching up, Hitomi planted a soft kiss on his jaw.

Groaning deep in his throat, feeling more helplessly lost than he had in the sauna, Van turned his head to catch her soft lips with his own. His hands moved of their own accord as they pulled her on top of his chest. They moved up the silky skin of her thighs, straddled on either side of him, and the slight, shivering moan that escaped her lips drove him to the edge. Even so, he hesitated when he reached the hem of her shirt. Hitomi pulled back far enough to look deeply into his dark, fathomless eyes.

“It's alright, Van. Really. I'll tell you when to stop.”

Still he hesitated, shaking slightly from the effort of it, and Hitomi never loved him more than she did at that moment. No words he could ever say could compare with the amount of love he was showing her right now. She leaned down and kissed him, one hand gently guiding his upward.

Then Van took over, and she felt like she was floating away.

**Truth and Karma**

Warning!! This is an entirely AxA chapter, so if that bores you, you've been warned! I'm actually really nervous about posting this chapter, since there isn't any VxH in it at all...I apologize to all of you who are looking for that. I promise more fluff with them next chapter. Anyway, it is what it is. Feel free to lambaste me with flames if you wish.

On with the story!
Allen's head throbbed with the reverberating bass of the strange Mystic Moon music as he edged around the crowded dance floor. Hitomi and Van had disappeared back to the hotel almost an hour ago, from what he overheard at the table, and he only caught random glimpses of Annie as he circled the dance floor restlessly. He felt agitated and unsettled, such totally foreign emotions to his natural calm that he found himself pacing relentlessly. He couldn't even put his finger on why he was feeling that way, and that only made it worse. Part of it stemmed from guilt about his conversation with Annie, but it went deeper than that. Something he just couldn't define...

A slender, perfectly manicured hand curled around his arm and brought his pacing to an abrupt halt. Allen turned slightly to see a pair of brilliant aquamarine eyes just inches away from his own.

"Hi there, Allen. Remember me?" the tall, blond girl questioned with a wide smile. Allen had the fleeting thought that two weeks ago, he might have found her beautiful. Now, he just noticed that she looked slightly drunk.

"Um, yeah. Miranda, right?" he replied politely. He wished she'd unhook her arm from his and stop leaning on him so much.

"That's right," Miranda giggled. She started to pull him onto the floor. "C'mon and dance with me. You haven't been dancing all night."

"Oh, I really don't dance," Allen began, searching for a polite way to get her to let go of him. Miranda laughed and tightened her grip.

"I'm not gonna give up that easy. You're one of the best looking guys in here."

There wasn't much room out on the floor, and Allen found himself wedged up tightly to Miranda as she moved to the beat. He felt awkward and uncomfortable as she pulled his hands across her waist and pressed her back against his chest. But he couldn't deny she'd given his ego a little boost, and dancing with her felt a lot better than pacing aimlessly. Besides, Annie had been the one to tell him it was just meaningless fun. He grooved along in time with the blond girl in his arms, living in the moment. Tomorrow, maybe, he'd regret this, but he supposed he could chalk it up to the alcohol flowing through his veins.

Miranda was a bit too tall, and not as good a dancer, but if he just closed his eyes, he could pretend she was...NO!

Allen snapped his eyes open resolutely. He was not going to think of her like that. Not Annie. Not the girl with the loud mouth, mischievous eyes, and a penchant for laughing at him. Never mind that she was honest and sweet, that she sang like an angel and danced like a vixen. She was just too...crazy. And she was Hitomi's closest friend.

The crowd around them shuffled as two people pushed their way through the throng of dancers. Jason moved people out of the way as he led Annie, one arm wrapped protectively around her shoulders, off the dance floor. Her face looked white and pinched, and she was struggling to breath.

For a moment, Allen stood still, shocked, before plunging into the crowd after them. Miranda gave an indignant squawk, but he ignored it as he worked his way through the seething mass of people. Jason was moving fast and had Annie off the dance floor and over to the coat check before Allen could fight his way over to them. He could pick out Jason's bull-moose voice as he got closer.

"...happens every time. You're scaring the shit outta me, Annie," Jason was ranting at her. Annie just nodded as she put a small device up to her mouth and inhaled. Her face
was still deathly pale, but she seemed to be breathing easier. Jason held up a syringe, and she pulled a face as he plunged it into her upper arm.

“What's going on? Are you alright?” Allen demanded as he reached them. Annie looked over at him, surprised, then waved a hand airily.

“Oh, it's nothing. I'm fine,” she wheezed out.

Jason looked ready to explode. “Fine my ass! You have a full-blown asthma attack in the middle of a crowded dance floor, and you say you're fine?”

Annie rolled her eyes, but took another puff from her inhaler before speaking. “If it was a full-blown one, we'd be heading to the hospital right now. Stop being so dramatic!”

“Maybe you should go back to the hotel,” Allen suggested. He had no idea what an asthma attack was, or how serious it could be, but Annie looked pale and he could see that she was still working hard at breathing. It looked almost painful, and Allen had to resist the urge to pick her up and carry her outside to the cleaner, fresher air.

“What? No way!” she exclaimed through her wheezing.

Jason scowled and shoved her coat at her. “Quit whining and put your coat on. I'm taking you back. You can't dance anymore, anyway, and you need to get out of the smoke in here.”

“But you said you were going to hang out with your bouncer friend after closing,” Annie protested. She paused to catch her breath. “I can get back to the hotel by myself.”

“I'll tell Brendan shit came up and we can catch up some other time,” Jason said firmly. Annie set her mouth into a stubborn line and refused to put her coat on.

“Nuh-uh. I'm not gonna screw up your plans, J. I'll be fine.”

Allen listened to them argue for a few minutes before he decided to step in.

“Look, I'll go back to the hotel with her,” he said to Jason, ignoring Annie's dark glare. “Van and Hitomi already went back, so we'll just go meet up with them in our rooms. Alright, Annie?”

Annie glared at him a moment longer before agreeing that he had a good plan.

“I still think I should go back with you. What if you have another attack?” Jason argued. Annie flung her coat on with a growl.

“You're going to give me one if you don't shut up,” she wheezed angrily. “Hitomi'll be there if anything happens, so just stop worrying and go party. This is supposed to be for your birthday, too, you know.”

The matter seemed settled, even though Jason didn't look very happy about it, so Allen grabbed his coat and made his way outside with Annie. She stopped for a moment out on the pavement and took a few shallow breaths. Allen frowned as he looked her over. Her brown eyes looked huge and dark in her pale face, and she was still wheezing slightly.

“Are you sure you're alright?” he asked quietly, concerned.

“Yes, dammit. Jason always overreacts like this. Like he thinks I'm inches away from death or something,” Annie muttered with a scowl. “C'mon, let's get moving. Cold air isn't so great for me to be breathing right now.”
Allen watched her take a few wobbly steps, then glanced up the street towards their hotel. It wasn't a very long walk, but still...He stopped in front of her, turning around and gesturing for her to climb onto his back.

Annie eyed him with suspicion. “What do you think you're doing?”

“I'm going to carry you back to the hotel,” Allen explained slowly, like he would to a child. “It'll be faster and easier for you this way.”

“You've got to be kidding. How drunk are you?” Annie asked incredulously. She made no move to get onto his back, and Allen sighed in exasperation.

“I'm not drunk! Just get on and quit wasting time!”

“No way. I don't need your help, Allen,” Annie wheezed as she crossed her arms defiantly.

Allen turned his head to look her squarely in the eye. “You don't have to pretend to be so independent all the time. It won't hurt to let me help you.”

Annie puffed out her cheeks, scowling heavily. She tapped her foot and looked pointedly away. Allen remained patiently still, waiting. Annie glanced back at him, and he raised his eyebrows mockingly. Finally, she threw her hands up with an exasperated sigh.

“Alright, fine. You win,” she exclaimed as she walked over to him. “Don't you dare drop me. I know you're about as sober as I am.”

Allen grinned as he set off with her securely attached to his back. He was content to celebrate his small victories as he weaved his way down the sidewalk towards their hotel. And he was even more relieved to hear Annie's breathing returning to near-normal by the time they reached the doors.

“See? That wasn't so bad,” he pointed out as he walked them inside and let her slide to the floor. Annie whacked his arm lightly, and he was glad to see a slight blush creep over her pale cheeks.

“Shut up. If anyone saw that, I'll beat you until you look like a bowl of pudding. Were you weaving on purpose?”

Allen had the grace to look sheepish. “Ah, no. Sorry.”

“S'kay. I just thought you might be trying to make me motion-sick or something,” Annie replied easily, grinning as she pulled out her room key. She swiped it through and pushed her door open.

“So, what do y- Allen! What are you doing?!”

Moving faster than most ninjas, Annie snatched his room key out of his hand just as he was about to swipe it. Before he had time to react, she'd grabbed his arm, yanked him into her room, and shut the door with a snap.

“What the hell-?” Allen stuttered, blinking at her in surprise. He was dismayed to hear her wheezing slightly again.

“Holy crap, Al! Do you have any idea what you almost walked in on?” Annie exploded in a whispered shriek. “For the love of all that's holy, what part of 'Hitomi and Van went back to the hotel together' did you not understand?”

Allen was slightly miffed. “Yes, but Annie, they've been here for almost two hours...”

“And they've got a lot of lost time to make up for. Lemme spell it out for you: Do Not Disturb. You and I are just gonna have to be best friends tonight.”
“That's ridiculous. I'll just- wait, what?” Allen choked as her meaning soaked in. He looked around the room with it's solitary bed. “No. Absolutely not. No.”

Annie rolled her eyes and pushed past him into the room. “Oh, relax, Al. I'm not going to violate you in your sleep. But I will knock your front teeth out if you even think about disturbing you-know-who.”

“It's still not pro- GAH! Annie! What are you doing?!” Allen slapped both hands over his eyes and wheeled around. Annie, her back to him, had started to untie her halter top.

“I'm putting my pj's on. What does it look like I'm doing?” she snapped in a muffled voice as she pulled her shirt over her head.

“Shouldn't you be doing that in the bathroom? Or at least told me to turn around first?” Allen demanded, both hands still firmly clamped over his eyes as he kept his back to her.

“Why? You're not gonna look. Nothing attractive enough to get past your prissy manners. Where the hell's my shirt?”

Allen winced visibly, like he'd just bitten through his tongue. “About that...I apologize for what I said. It wasn't true, and I had no right to say it.”

“No kidding,” Annie replied from somewhere at ground level. “It's bad karma to insult a girl on her birthday.”

“Bad what?”

“Karma. Like, you have good karma for being a nice person, or vice versa. And good karma means you get to come back as something better in your next life. Ah ha! Here it is! Thought I was gonna have to go topless tonight!”

Allen's imagination kicked into overdrive at her frivolous statement, and he swallowed a groan. Sharing a room with Annie, especially a somewhat drunk Annie, presented more complications than he cared to think about.

“You gonna push your eyeballs out the back of your head or what?” she asked. Frowning, Allen turned around to find her watching him, one hand on her hip and the other holding the partially-full giant wine bottle. Apparently, her idea of pajamas was a tight, spaghetti strap tank top that stopped just above her belly button and a pair of very short shorts. Allen gulped nervously. Complications? This was going to be way more difficult to handle than he thought.

“We've got to finish this up tonight. It's gonna get skunky by morning,” she informed him as she plopped herself down on the bed.

“You gonna push your eyeballs out the back of your head or what?” she asked. Frowning, Allen turned around to find her watching him, one hand on her hip and the other holding the partially-full giant wine bottle. Apparently, her idea of pajamas was a tight, spaghetti strap tank top that stopped just above her belly button and a pair of very short shorts. Allen gulped nervously. Complications? This was going to be way more difficult to handle than he thought.

“Should you be drinking more after your attack? I thought you were supposed to rest,” Allen said, desperately seeking a way out of his dangerous situation. If he could just convince her to go to sleep, then he could try to make himself comfortable on the floor...

“Can't sleep now. My meds are stimulants, so I'm gonna be pretty wired for a couple hours.”

Allen said a few magnificent curses under his breath as she eyed the remainder of the deep red wine in the bottle.

“You're probably right about the wine, though. Which means now you've got an obligation to drink, because the more you drink, the less I will.” She patted the bedspread next to her and held the bottle out to him. “Bottoms up, Al!”
For several long, uncomfortable moments, Allen stood frozen as she jiggled the wine at him. When he didn't take it, she rolled her eyes and took a long drink straight from the bottle. Growling, he crossed the short distance between them and snatched it out of her hands.

“Great Jichia, don't you have any common sense?” he demanded harshly.

“Again with the bad kharma! You're gonna get reincarnated as a cockroach.”

Allen gave up. What was the use of fighting when she was more stubborn than him and determined to get her way? He drained half the wine in one swig and flung himself down on the bed next to Annie's cross legged form.

“By the way, thanks for coming back with me. Sorry you had to ditch Miranda,” she said lightly. “I'm sure you could hook up with her again tomorrow if you wanted.”

“S'alright. I wasn't really enjoying it, anyway,” he answered honestly. He took another long drink and lay back on the mattress, his eyes closed.

Annie propped her chin on her hand with a mischievous smirk. “Oh really? Because it looked to me like you were having a great time.”

Allen opened one eye a crack to look at the smile on her face. He was disturbed to realize how much it rankled him that she didn't care that he'd been dancing this close to one of her friends. She waggled her eyebrows laughingly at him, and he decided to change the subject.

“Why didn't you tell me about your...asthma?” he asked, dredging the name up from his somewhat foggy brain. Annie frowned, but answered readily.

“Didn't see the point. I don't get attacks very often, but when I do, they're usually bad. I only get them when I'm over-emotional, or I'm being way too active, or weird stuff like that.”

Allen frowned. “So what brought it on tonight?”

“Geez, what is this? Are we playing Truth?” Annie muttered, grabbing the bottle from him. He grabbed it back before she could take a drink.

“What do you mean, playing truth?”

“Truth or Dare, without the Dare. We take turns asking questions and we have to answer honestly, no matter what,” Annie replied, making another dive for the bottle. He held it out of her reach easily, and she crossed her arms and pouted.

“Fine, Mr. Greedy. It's my turn, then. What's your deepest, darkest secret?”

Allen choked on his mouthful of wine. “What? That's not a fair question.”

“How would you know? So c'mon. Spill!” she demanded.

Allen eyed her silently, uncertain. His darkest, most shameful secret was one he'd only willingly shared with one other person, Hitomi. It had almost been like he had to tell her, to give her the chance to turn tail and run. But he didn't want Annie to know, he didn't want to see how she'd look at him after she knew what he had done. But another part of him wanted her to know, and he couldn't explain why.

Telling the truth was the rule in this crazy game. It may have been a lame excuse, but it gave the part of him that wanted to be honest the edge to gain dominance. Annie watched him intently, and he fiddled with the long neck of the wine bottle. Finally, he heaved a deep sigh and began to speak.

“When I was younger, just making a name for myself in the Asturian army, I met the eldest daughter of my king. Her name was Marlene...”
Annie listened silently, wide-eyed, to his long, painful story. Allen's voice filled with self-loathing and regret as he came to the bitter conclusion of his ill-fated love affair. He studied the pattern of the bedspread intently, unwilling to look into Annie's eyes and see how she felt now that she knew everything.

“So then...Chid's your kid, huh?” Annie finally said, her voice gentle. “God, that must be really hard to know and never be able to tell him.”

“No more than I deserve,” Allen gritted out, his voice hoarse.

Annie rolled her eyes. “There you go again, carrying around cart-loads of guilt.”

Allen angrily pushed himself up into a sitting position and glared at her. “Yes, I'm guilty! I had no right to touch her! And then I just left her to face the consequences of my actions alone. The Duke could have sent her back to Asturia in disgrace! He could have exiled her, even killed her and her child for it! And I did nothing. Nothing!”

“Alright, Drama Queen, that's enough,” Annie snapped. Allen glared at her, and she glared just as fiercely back. “You know what my grandma always said? It takes two to tango, so unless you were forcing her, she's half responsible.”

Allen refused to back down. “Even so, I still let her face the consequences alone!”

“Did you know she was pregnant before she left for Fried?” Annie demanded. “Did she tell you before she'd worked things out for herself? Did she ask for your help?”

Allen's face looked slightly ashen. “...no. I didn't know until later, after Chid was born. I got a short letter from her explaining what had happened, telling me not to say or do anything, because the Duke had claimed Chid as his son. The Duke...the Duke loved her enough to cover up her indiscretion.”

“And what would you have done if she had told you? If she'd asked for your help?”

Allen's spine stiffened and his eyes flashed. “I would have done anything, everything, to save her honor. I would have said I raped her, if necessary, to spare her and the child.”

“In other words, if you'd known, you wouldn't have let her face it alone,” Annie concluded. “I think it's time to let go of the guilt, Al. Everybody makes mistakes, and you can't change the past, and all those other annoying cliches. Marlene wouldn't like you beating yourself up over it, either.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Allen grumbled.

“It is simple, Al. It's pretty black and white,” Annie retorted, poking him hard in the chest. “You both screwed up. It happens. Not to sound harsh, but get over it already! You've milked that guilt train for long enough.”

Allen rubbed the spot she'd poked and grimaced. “I don't like to feel guilty, you know.”

“Yeah. Sure. Except that you feel guilty about Marlene and Chid, you feel guilty about your sister, you feel guilty about your father...”

“What do you know about my father?” Allen demanded, surprised. Annie just looked at him with wide, innocent eyes.

“Just the little bit Hitomi told me,” she answered readily. “What a waste of a question.”

“A question-?”

Annie rolled her eyes and poked him again. “Truth, remember? You asked, I answered, so now it's my turn!”
“That question didn't count-” Allen began, but Annie cut him off.

“Did too. So...hmm...what's your wickedest looking scar? And you gotta show me, too!”

“Showings not part of the game,” Allen grumbled. She made grab for the wine bottle again, this time successfully, and took a long drink.

“Just quit whining and do it, Al. It's good karma!” she said in a sing-song voice. Allen sighed, gave her a dirty look, and pulled his shirt off. The logical part of his brain reminded him that he could've just pulled it up to show his scar, but it was warm in the room. And Annie wouldn't mind. He certainly didn't mind the way his nerves tingled with goosebumps when she ran her fingers over the rough, scarred skin on his abdomen.

“So that's where you got hurt saving Hitomi, huh?” she asked in an awed voice. “Damn, that must've hurt. Okay, your turn!”

“Uhm...”

Over the next hour, Allen found out her favorite color was green (“no, wait! Pink!”), she wanted to see a dragon, she always wished she'd learned ballet, she'd pierced her own belly-button, and her favorite thing to do was run around in the rain and jump in puddles. They'd also finished off the wine and a beer or two each. Annie giggled at him as they relaxed side by side on the bed.

“I can't believe you fell off the bed like that,” she said, kicking her legs up and examining her multi-colored toenails.

“That was your fault. How was I supposed to know if I was ticklish or not? I'd never been tickled before,” Allen muttered half-heartedly. He was too busy watching her bare legs to retort as strongly as he normally would to her comment. She flopped her legs back onto the bed and turned her head to look at him with a frown.

“That's sad, Al. Really, really sad.”

He shrugged and returned his gaze to the ceiling. Was he spinning or was the room? Beside him, Annie pulled the covers back to snuggle under them, curling into a ball on her side. Part of him was grateful for that, because now she'd stop showing so much skin. He might actually have some success getting his brain off the other thing people did in beds.

“It's your turn,” Annie said sleepily, her voice muffled by her pillow. Allen racked his foggy brain for a good question. He supposed he could ask her why he was just sitting there in his boxers, since he couldn't remember what question had necessitated him taking his pants off. That would be kind of a waste, though. Hmmm...

“What's your type?”

“You mean in guys?” she asked. “Guys like Jason, I guess.”

Allen frowned, thinking how very, very different he was from Jason. “So, you like guys with tattoos and lots of muscles?”

“Mmm, muscles...” came the sleepy reply as she snuggled deeper into the blankets. Allen put his arms under his head and closed his eyes, supremely comfortable.

“And is the bull ring in the nose a requirement, too?” he teased.

Annie rolled over and shut off the light. “Hey, I like the bull ring. Whenever I'm torked off at him, I can grab it and get him to do anything I want. That thing's great.”
Allen cracked an eye open to look over at her small, curled-up form. “You're kind of sadistic, you know that?”

“Mm. My turn. Why're you sleeping on top of the covers? And if you say anything about being “proper”, I'll hurt you.”

Allen opened his mouth, thought about it, and shut it again. He hesitated, searching for a plausible reason that didn't involve the word “proper” and didn't make him look like a hormone-driven pervert.

“You're gonna be cold, so just give it up and use the covers. I'm not gonna bite you,” Annie stated. He hesitated for a long minute before giving in and sliding between the sheets.

“That's better. G'night, Al,” she said, satisfaction in her sleepy voice. She rolled over and turned her back to him, sighing with contentment.

“Good night,” he replied, resolutely turning his back as well. It wasn't long before Annie's regular breathing assured him that she was fast asleep, and he congratulated himself on his spectacular self-control. He contemplated following his original plan to sleep on the floor, but he was too warm and comfortable to move. Allen ignored the logical voice in his head telling him he'd regret it in the morning and drifted off to sleep.

How awkward could waking up in the same bed with Annie be?

Mornings and Musings

Alrighty, then! VxH fluff is back, and I hope you all will enjoy! I swear, this story is writing itself without my consent or approval. Stupid thing. Anyway, this felt like a difficult chapter to write for me, but it's done and here it is! It's not quite as fluffy as I originally planned, but I think it turned out okay, anyway. I'm going to try harder to get more VxH moments in the next one, though. I promise!

Hitomi snuggled closer to Van as she slowly drifted away from her dreams into the waking world. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest told her that he was still sleeping, and she was careful not to move and disturb him.

Van's arm felt heavy but incredibly comforting wrapped across her stomach. She sighed as she snuggled just a tiny bit closer, the heat from his bare chest seeping into her back through her shirt. It was like a little slice of heaven, lying there, although she wished she dared turning over so she could see his face. She wanted to watch him wake up.

Oh, she'd seen him wake up before. But all those times, sleeping on the ground, paranoid of attacks or just worn out from being on the run, those times just didn't count. This would be the first time they'd wake up like this, just the two of them, no worries and no regrets.

Well, no regrets on her part, since there wasn't much to regret in the first place. Oh, they'd spent plenty of time doing all sorts of things that would make Annie cheer and pat them on the back, but that was as far as they'd gone. Hitomi simultaneously blushed and squashed a breathless giggle as memories from last night paraded through her mind and made her skin tingle. She may not have experiences to judge it against, but she was willing to bet her breakfast that last night was incredible.
She was also willing to bet her breakfast, and her lunch, too, that they'd gone as far as Van would or should go. Hitomi could sense the restraint in him, the line he wasn't willing to cross. It had probably been ground into him the moment he hit puberty. Honestly, she didn't really mind. Not having any experience herself, things already felt confusingly too slow and too fast at the same time.

Besides, came the nagging little voice in the back of her head, he was going back to Gaea on the day after New Year's. It might be another five years before they could touch each other again. If ever.

A sickeningly heavy feeling settled in the bottom of Hitomi's throat at the thought. Her hands curled over Van's arm and pulled it tighter against her body, willing herself to stop thinking about the future and just live in the moment. Van was here, now, lying so close to her she could feel the steady thud of his heartbeat through her shirt. She wasn't going to waste a second of it.

Van shifted slightly behind her, and she seized her chance to roll over and face him. Sleep-fuzzed chocolate brown eyes blinked sleepily at her.

“Good morning,” Hitomi whispered, so happy and content she was physically weak. A lazy smile quirked up the corners of Van's mouth, and his eyes drifted shut again. His arm tightened around her, and Hitomi lay her head on his chest with a small, content sigh. She loved to see him like this, lazily drifting between sleep and awareness. Five years ago, during the war, he'd always snapped instantaneously awake, as if he'd hardly been asleep at all. Which, she thought with a rueful smile, had most likely been the case. She had never seen him as relaxed as he was now. She knew in her heart that most of it had to do with her, and the thought made her tingle all over.

Or maybe the tingling was coming from that wandering hand...

“Hey, Van,” she began, laughingly protesting as his other hand joined the first. His eyes were still closed, but his lazy smile had grown broader. Hitomi opened her mouth to mock-protest farther, but burst into a fit of giggles instead as he found her most ticklish spots. Before she could find her voice again or even catch her breath, his warm lips had covered her own, and all her protests had turned to tiny sighs.

If he always says good morning like this, she thought muzzily as his mouth trailed down her neck, I could wake up next to him forever...

Allen came awake slowly, completely disconcerted. He had been dreaming about Marlene and Chid, only there had been Annie's voice in the background, laughing at him and telling him to let it go, let it go.

Waking up wasn't any better than his dreams. His legs were tangled up with someone else's, and it felt like he his hand was resting on--

Allen's eyes snapped open and he froze as he stared at Annie's sleeping face. Dear gods, his leg was trapped between the smooth skin of her thighs, dangerously close to areas he had no business touching. And his hand- great Jichia! His hand was resting a little too far down to be her lower back. How the hell had they wound up like that?!

Slowly, slowly, so as not to disturb her, Allen started to pull away to put some distance between their bodies. He froze again as Annie grumbled in her sleep and snuggled in even closer to him. Good gods, now what was he supposed to do? He was terrified to imagine what Annie might do if she woke up!

At least he could safely move his hand. Gently, he pulled his hand away and watched, bemused, as it seemed to take on a life of it's own and carefully brushed a
few stray hairs off of her face. It was surprising how peaceful she looked while she slept.

Allen jumped in surprise as someone pounded on their door. Annie groaned and rolled onto her other side, freeing his legs. The knocking came again, loud and insistent, and Annie curled into a tight ball with the covers up over her ears.

Sighing, Allen swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. A vicious headache stabbed through his brain and a wave of nausea crashed over him so hard he nearly sat back down. The persistent knocking came again, and he staggered across the room to fling open the door, forgetting for the moment that he was only wearing his strange Mystic Moon undergarment.

“Oh. Sorry, Allen. I thought this was Annie's room.”

Allen squinted hard into the horribly bright light, trying to make out who the intruder was. It was Jason, smiling his easy, friendly smile.

“This is Annie's room,” Allen replied without thinking. Damn, his head really hurt. Jason looked past him into the room where Annie made a small lump under the covers, then back over to him again. For a very brief second, Jason's friendly smile faltered.

“Ah. Uh, hey, sorry to interrupt, man,” he said, taking a step backwards. His usual grin was back in place, but Allen could see that it didn't quite reach his eyes. He blinked, confused, before realization poured through his aching, hung-over head. There was Annie, dead asleep in a heap on the bed, the bed he had so obviously just crawled out of, wearing only his boxers. This did not look good!

“Wait. This isn't what it looks like-” he began, but Jason cut him off before he could explain.

“Whoa. It ain't none of my business what you're doing,” he laughed. A rustling noise made them both look back towards the bed. Annie blinked owlishly at them as she sat up and pushed the covers away. Allen could have groaned out loud. Now things looked worse than ever, with her in her so-called pajamas showing off way too much skin and looking deliciously disheveled.

“Jason, what the hell are you doing waking me up at the butt-crack of dawn?” she demanded.

“Just checking to see how you're doing,” Jason replied, genuine concern in his voice.

“I'm fine. I feel great,” Annie replied with a scowl. She stood up, looking prepared to charge forward and give the bull-ring a good hard tug, but her face went pale and she sat back down.

“Oooh. I feel like hell,” she moaned. "How come you never get hang-overs, J?"

Jason shrugged, smirked, and turned to leave. “I'll be back with some coffee.”

Allen winced as the door slammed shut behind him, and Annie flopped back onto the bed. He resisted the urge to go lay back down next to her and took a few deep breaths to calm his nausea. He couldn't ever remember feeling this horrible after a night of drinking in his life. Annie looked like she felt as terrible as he did.

“Are you alright?” he finally asked after he got his stomach under control.


“You can't blame me for this. If you had any sense of moderation, neither one of us would be this hung over.” Allen retorted quickly.
Annie cracked one eye open just far enough to glare ferociously at him. “I see your ass-stick is firmly shoved back into place. Fun.”

He ignored her and staggered into the bathroom. This wasn't his fault. She'd been the one who insisted that they finish off that enormous bottle of wine last night. And did she really need to be so vulgar? Allen splashed cold water on his face and flung his wet hair back from his forehead. He was starting to feel marginally better, but really all he wanted to do was lie back down and go to sleep. Preferably next to Annie.

Wait. No. He had not just thought that. The girl couldn't even keep a civil tongue in her head. Scowling, Allen snatched up a small object from the sink and marched back to the bed. He tossed it at her, and it landed with a small thump next to her startled face.

“What the hell? Soap? What's this for?” she demanded, picking it up and examining it.

“So you can wash out your mouth,” Allen retorted, crossing his arms. “It's not proper for a lady to swear, you know.”

Annie stared at him, the packaged hotel soap dangling between her thumb and forefinger like a piece of tissue. Suddenly, she burst out laughing and rolled onto her back.

“Ouch! Shit, Al! Stop making me laugh!” she finally gasped out. Allen still had his arms crossed over his chest, but he was losing the battle of keeping his face serious. Really, Annie had the most infectious laughter he'd ever heard.

“I wasn't really joking,” he replied. Annie's hysterics settled down into sporadic giggle-fits, and she chuckled the soap back at him. He caught it and frowned as he watched her sprawl out on the bed.

“I think Jason believes we were, erm, that we, ah...” Allen began, his usual eloquence deserting him as he attempted to explain their situation to her.

“What? That we got a little 'busy' last night? Ha! We weren't that drunk,” she replied indifferently.

Allen frowned deeper, stung. “Doesn't it bother you that he thinks so, though?”

“Nope, not at all. What do you care? It's not like you're some blushing virgin, anyway,” Annie retorted, dragging herself to her feet and glaring at him.

“And I suppose you're not either, so it hardly matters. Is that right?” Allen returned nastily.

“Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. That's none of your damn business!” she nearly shouted at him. They both winced from their headaches and she lowered her voice. “God, Al. Can you be any more of an arrogant bastard? Does it bother you that much that Jason might think we did something together?”

“Maybe it wouldn't, if you weren't such a foul-mouthed, annoying-”

“Whatever. Forget it,” Annie cut him off and brushed past him to the connecting door. She pounded on it, hard. “HEY! Tomi, Van! Quit making out and get moving! We've got to check out in less than an hour!”

There was a thump suspiciously like someone falling out of bed, and Annie smirked.

“Okay! Yeah! We're awake!” came Hitomi's flustered voice floating through the door. She pounded on it, hard. “HEY! Tomi, Van! Quit making out and get moving! We've got to check out in less than an hour!”

There was a thump suspiciously like someone falling out of bed, and Annie smirked.
reached Allen's ears, and he rubbed his hands over his face, sighing. What the hell was that fight all about, anyway?

Hitomi opened the connected door, and they slid past each other into their rightful rooms. She blushed a bright beet red and muttered an incomprehensible good morning to him before shutting the door in his face. Van was already rummaging through his duffel bag, and he paused long enough on his way to the bathroom to give Allen an uncharacteristically cheerful greeting. Allen merely groaned and flopped himself back down on the bed. Gods, he prayed that Van wasn't going to start singing in the shower or anything. The morning had already been weird enough.

Hitomi hummed to herself as she and Annie finished getting ready and packed up their few things. Or rather, she packed up their bags while Annie lay on the bed, nursing her hangover.

“Tell me you used protection,” Annie finally piped up as Hitomi did a goofy, happy twirl in the middle of the room.

Hitomi stopped and blushed scarlet. “No, we didn't. And I don't think we'll be going far enough to need it, either.”

“Your choice or his?” Annie asked after studying her carefully for a few moments. Hitomi shrugged.

“Both, I think. Van would feel guilty about it, I just know it, unless we were married. And I... well I'm not sure I'm ready for that, either. It would just feel like such a...a...”

“Commitment?” Annie supplied, and Hitomi nodded eagerly.

“Exactly. I think. I mean, he's leaving again in just a few days. I think it would just make it so much harder to let him go. Not knowing when or if we'll ever be together again,” Hitomi ended, sadness creeping into her voice. She sat down on the edge of the bed next to Annie, all of her previous bubbly spirits gone.

“Hm,” was all Annie replied, looking up towards the ceiling. Hitomi took a deep breath and forced a giant smile onto her face.

“But that doesn't really matter, right? I've just got to enjoy what I've got while I've got it. And thanks for taking care of Allen last night, Annie. How'd that go, anyway?”

“Blergh. What the hell's taking Jason so long with the coffee?” she whined as she burried her head under a pillow.

“That bad, huh?” Hitomi asked sympathetically.

“He's a self-centered prick,” came the muffled reply. Hitomi squashed a laugh, and Annie pulled the pillow off her face and grinned. “Hey, did you know he's ticklish?”

“Seriously?”

Annie's smile morphed into her trademark shark grin, and she tucked her arms behind her head with a very satisfied air. “Yep. You should've seen his legs go up over his head when he fell off the bed.”

Hitomi suddenly got a very bizarre mental picture of Allen tumbling backwards off the bed. She giggled, then gave in and laughed so helplessly that tears ran down her face.

“What's going on?” Van asked from their connecting doorway. Hitomi whirled around to face him, wiping the tears off her face and choking back the last bit of her laughter.
“I just told her how ticklish Allen is,” Annie chirped, her shark-grin still firmly in place as Hitomi burst into a fresh fit of giggles. Van turned around to look questioningly at Allen, who glared over his head at the girls on the bed. He couldn't tell if he was turning several interesting shades of red from embarrassment or fury.

“So... what were you doing last night?” Van asked under his breath, loving the chance to make a jab at Allen.

“A lot less than you, I expect,” Allen muttered back through clenched teeth.

Van felt the tips of his ears go red at the other man's insinuations. Not that he had anything to be ashamed about, he thought glancing over at Hitomi. While perhaps their behavior hadn't been exactly...proper last night, he hadn't done anything that could dishonor her in anyone's eyes. He had a feeling that things on the Mystic Moon were much more relaxed, that even Hitomi might have no problem with doing everything before marriage, but he just didn't work that way. It would just feel...wrong. And he didn't want anything to feel wrong with Hitomi. Ever. Because she deserved so much more than that.

Van watched her try to smother her laughter and soothe the irritated Allen and longed to have her to himself again. They had such a short time together that every minute spent in someone else's company felt wasted. Jichia above, how was he going to be able to say goodbye and leave her behind on the Mystic Moon? After all they'd done, how could the insubstantial dream world, a world in which they couldn't even touch, possibly be enough?

Jason arrived then bearing cups of steaming coffee. Van watched, amused, as Annie simultaneously treated him like a hero who'd just saved her life and berated him for taking so long to do it. Hitomi handed him a cup, their fingers brushing in the exchange. Her eyes smiled so warmly at him that it melted the frozen knot of worry in his chest, and he smiled back. He'd figure something out later. For now, it was enough that he was here, with her.

But they only had five days left.

Five days?! EEK! Can they really only have five days left to be together?!

Words and Realizations

Okay. I tried my best to get this out before Labor Day, and wouldn't you know it? I got it out exactly one hour before midnight! Yay me! So, there's some serious VxH fluff in this one, for all you VxH fans out there. Let me know how I'm doing with it, please! It's tough to write a believable fluffy Van, since he's kind of the silent, stoic type. Ah well. We all know what a romantic sweetie he is underneath it all, right?

“You're driving,” Annie stated firmly as she shoved the keys into Hitomi's hands.
Hitomi laughed. “You're that hung over? Seriously, how much did you drink last night?”

“Too much,” she moaned, and Allen nodded in miserable agreement behind her. “I'm never going to have another alcoholic drink again.”

“Hm. I feel fine,” Van said, amusement glinting in his dark chocolate eyes. Hitomi bit down hard on her lips to stop herself from giggling at the uncharacteristically sheepish look on Allen's face. It was definitely a strange, and rather amusing, expression for him. Annie just glowered and muttered something incoherent. Hitomi thought she should change the subject, before Annie's very short fuse ran out.

“Where's Jason? I thought he was coming back with us.”

Annie shook her head, then looked like she deeply regretted the motion. “Naw. He wanted to snowboard some more, so he's hitching a ride back with someone else tonight. Why the hell doesn't he get sick? I mean, he drinks more than me, stays up all night...”

Hitomi thought it best to just let her rant as they loaded their few bags into the car and started for home. Van had taken the passenger seat next to her, and Allen and Annie had climbed into the back. It wasn't long before silence reigned in the back seat, and Hitomi glanced behind her to see both of them passed out.

“Thank God,” she said with a grin at Van. “Maybe they'll sleep off some of their crabiness.”

“Never thought I'd see Allen with a hang over,” Van smirked. Hitomi giggled as quietly as she could so she wouldn't wake the cranks in the backseat.

“Seriously, though,” she said when she regained control. “I don't know if I should feel sorrier for Allen having to spend time with Annie, or Annie having to spend time with him.”

“I think they're good for each other. Annie doesn't seem to mind it.”

“True,” Hitomi agreed. “Besides, she's the one who said she'd take care of Allen last night so we could...”

She turned beet red as she realized what she'd just let slip. Van turned in his seat to stare at her and she squirmed under his intense scrutiny. Surprise and elation leaped through his senses, and he did his best to keep his face calm. Was last night a planned effort on her part, or was it just a stroke of luck? He hoped it was because she planned it. He couldn't help thinking how cute she looked, blushing and nearly wriggling with embarrassment.

“Really?” He asked, trying to sound casual. “Why would she have said that?”

Hitomi could have died. She wanted her seat to close up like a Venus Fly Trap and swallow her whole. She couldn't tell him she wanted to get him back to the hotel room because she wanted to jump his bones! Or that she'd put a lot of thought into figuring out how to get him to go just a little bit farther. Oh, lord, she wished he'd stop staring at her like that!

“Um, well, you know,” she stuttered, biting her lip. She took a deep breath and finished the rest in a rush, “I just wanted to spend some time alone together. That's all!”

Van grinned. He just couldn't help it. He knew he probably looked like a doofy, sappy, fool, but the fact that she admitted to wanting to spend time alone with him
made him feel like he could fly - without his wings. Love, he supposed, did weird things like that to a person.

Hitomi stole a glance at him, embarrassed, needing to see his reaction. He was still staring at her, with a goofy smile on his face to make it worse! She blushed so hard that it physically hurt. Was he laughing at her? Well, even if he was, that stupid grin made him look so incredibly adorable that she didn't really mind.

“What are you staring at me for?” she mumbled. Now it was Van's turn to blush and search frantically for an explanation. How could he tell her that he thought she looked beautiful in the early afternoon light pouring through the windows? Or that he'd never felt this way before? He wasn't very good with words.

“I was just thinking that you look...” he hesitated. “It's strange to see you operating this machine.”

Hitomi blinked at him, confused, and Van wanted to smash his head through the windshield. Good gods, he was as hopeless as he was when he was fifteen. Basically, he'd just told her she looked weird driving a car. He braced himself for the slap he knew he deserved for messing up so completely, right after she'd admitted to wanting to spend time alone with him no less!

It slowly dawned on Hitomi that he was talking about her driving the car, and for a moment, she didn't know what to say. Was that really what he was thinking about? After she just told him she'd purposefully tried to get some time alone with him? Her hands tightened on the wheel. If that was true, then did he ever deserve a good, hard slap!

She looked over at him and noticed the goofy smile was gone, replaced by a disheartened and disgruntled look. Her hands relaxed and she smiled gently. Poor Van. She didn't know what exactly he'd wanted to say, but she knew in her heart that he hadn't been thinking about her driving. He was just plain horrible with words. The action part...now that, he was good at. Hitomi's nerves tingled remembering his touch.

“That didn't come out right,” Van muttered beside her and she smiled lovingly at him.

“It's okay, Van. Really.”

His eyes flickered to her face, and her smile made him visibly relax. The disgruntled frown was slowly replaced by a tentative smile that warmed his brooding eyes. Hitomi found herself wishing she wasn't driving so she could lean over and coax his mouth back into that goofy grin with a kiss.

Annie poked her head between the two, effectively breaking the moment. “As scintillating as your conversation is, I'd rather not be hearing it. Can we have some tunes, already?”

Hitomi glanced into the rear view mirror as Annie made a grab for the ipod. Allen was awake, too, staring silently out the window. For the second time, she wanted to melt into her seat. What exactly had the two of them overheard? It was all innocent, right? Oh god, had Allen heard the bit about Annie keeping him out of their way last night?

The tips of Van's ears turned a painful red when Annie paused in her search for appropriate music to give him a withering glare. Apparently, she'd heard his verbal screw-up. There was no doubt in his mind that she'd corner him later and give him a
scorching earful, and possibly the slap Hitomi had refrained from giving him. She finally picked a song and flopped back into her seat.

It's a critical solution, and the East Coast's got the blues
It's a mass of confusion- like the lies they sell to you-

Allen grimaced and looked over at Annie, singing along to the song. “Can't we listen to something less...violent?” he asked, just loud enough for her to hear.

“Just deal with it, princess,” she snapped without looking at him. He sighed and closed his eyes.

“Please?”

Annie flicked a glance at him, annoyed. He turned to gaze unseeingly out the window again, and her expression softened. Abruptly, she dived between the front seats and grabbed the ipod, ignoring Hitomi and Van's confused looks as she searched through the list of songs.

When you try your best, but you don't succeed
When you get what you want, but not what you need
When you feel so tired, but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse...

Annie settled herself back into her seat and stared out of her window, singing along softly to the words. In the front seat, Hitomi and Van glanced at each other often, sharing secret, shy smiles that made Allen's already sensitive stomach twist.

And the tears come streaming down your face
When you lose something you can't replace
When you love someone but it goes to waste
Could it be worse?

Jichia above, Annie had a knack for picking songs that poked a lyrical finger right in his most raw, open wounds. Why would she choose such a sad song? It hardly inspired the romantic mood he thought she'd be trying to foster in the two in the front seat. Not that they appeared to need any help with that. Actually, he was shocked that she'd interrupted their conversation in the first place. Not that he minded that, either.

Tears stream down your face
When you lose something you cannot replace
I promise you I will learn from my mistakes

Allen turned to look at Annie. He couldn't help it. She sang so softly, but with such an intensity that it overshadowed the actual singer in the music. She shifted, and her deep, mahogany eyes locked with his.

And I will try to fix you.

It sounded like a promise, the way she nearly whispered the last line. In the front seat, Hitomi laughed at some remark Van made on the passing scenery, and the song switched. Annie swung her gaze back to the window, breaking the moment. After a moment, Allen took a deep breath and shook his head. It was silly to think any of that had any meaning. It was just a song, after all. His hangover must be making him melodramatic.

Van's thoughts were floating somewhere above the clouds while he helped unload the car. He and Hitomi had spent the entire drive talking, just idle conversation about
mundane things. As far as he could remember, they'd never done that before. Their

time had always been limited, forcing them to be brief. In truth, Hitomi had done most

of the talking, but Van was more than content to listen and watch her. He wondered if

she knew that she used her hands almost as much as her mouth when she talked.

“Thinking about how strange Hitomi looks, Vanny-dear?” Annie asked in a sickly-
sweet voice. Van jumped as his thoughts crashed back down to earth. He'd been too
distracted to notice that somehow he'd ended up standing outside with just Annie.

“That wasn't what I meant. I'm not very good with things like that,” he replied
defensively.

“You mean like with compliments? No kidding,” Annie returned with a smirk. “That

was one of the most pathetic things I've ever heard.”

“I didn't know what to say. It was the first thing I thought up.”

“An untrained monkey could've thought up something better,” she muttered. “How

about, 'You look pretty, Hitomi' or 'I want to spend time alone with you, too, Hitomi'? Anything.”

Van hunched his shoulders and scowled at his feet. “Words just don't come that easily
to me. Hitomi knows that.”

“Let's hope so,” Annie said, giving him a withering glare as she slammed the trunk
closed. “At any rate, so long as you're making up for your lack of verbal skills with

your nonverbal ones, she might not mind too much.”

Van hoped he could blame his red face on the cold as he hurried inside after Annie.

He found Hitomi in the kitchen, preoccupied with putting something into the

microwave. Van gave the whirring machine a distrustful look. The only time he’d
touched the thing, there had been an oatmeal explosion.

“I hope you're okay with Cup Ramen for supper. Annie's not up to cooking, and I'm

pretty hopeless at it,” she said apologetically. Van shrugged and accepted the steaming

cup she handed to him. She motioned for him to follow, and they wandered up to her

room. Once again, Van found himself hesitating just inside the doorway out of

ingrained habit. Hitomi rolled her eyes at him.

“C'mon, Van. We just spent the night in a room together. This isn't any different.”

Van looked sheepish. “I know. I'm trying. Things are very different here.”

Hitomi was immediately contrite. “Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. You're doing a

great job fitting in here. Really.”

“Hm. I have a better appreciation for how difficult it must have been for you on

Gaea,” Van replied with a shrug. He came and sat next to her on the bed, and she

beamed at him.

“Yeah, but I didn't stick out too bad there, did I?” she said proudly.

“Huh. I wouldn't say that,” Van replied, staring into his cup of noodles.

“Excuse me? What does that mean?” Hitomi squawked.

Van looked up at her with a surprised blink. “Well, your hair was short then. And

your clothes were obviously not Gaean.”

“Why not? What was so weird about them?”

Van gave her a completely innocent look. “Your skirt was indecently short.”

Hitomi made a move to punch his arm, and he dodged out of the way.
“I liked it,” he added with a wicked grin. Hitomi had to laugh.

“Okay, so how about when I wore that Asturian dress?”

Van got a dreamy look on his face. “Yeah. I remember that. You ripped that skirt indecently short, too.”

He looked so happy about that fact that she had to swallow a giggle to keep her face serious. “I ripped it so I could run fast enough to reach you in time, you ungrateful jerk.”

“I wasn't complaining about it.”

“Men,” Hitomi sighed, shaking her head disparingly. She scooped up a few noodles with her chopsticks and blew on them to cool them down. After a moment, she looked up to discover Van fumbling with his pair of chopsticks, frowning.

“Here. Like this, Van,” she said. She held up her pair and showed him how to position them correctly. After several tries, he finally managed to scoop up one noodle.

“Why would anyone try to eat with two sticks?” he demanded as the noodle slithered back into his cup with a sad plop.

“Chopsticks are the traditional eating utensils of my country,” Hitomi replied with a grin. “Eating with them is an art. It's much more refined than using something shaped like a shovel to get food to your mouth.”

She slurped up a few noodles and grimaced at the splatters she left behind on her shirt. Van's mouth twitched as he hid a smile.

“Hm. So I can see.”

Hitomi ignored him and concentrated on eating her noodles as delicately as possible. After a few more fruitless attempts with his chopsticks, Van resorted to drinking the noodles straight out of the cup.

“We should see if anyone posted some pictures from yesterday,” Hitomi suddenly exclaimed. She jumped up and grabbed a flat, rectangular item from the top of her desk and flopped back down on her stomach on the bed. Van watched, amazed, as she opened it and a screen blinked to life.

“What is that thing?” he asked, pointing at it.

“Oh. It's a laptop. A portable computer,” she explained. Van looked baffled, but she couldn't figure out a way to make it clearer for him. Instead, she searched her friend's pages for recent pictures.

“I knew it! Alecia's got some up already!” she squealed as she opened the files. She prayed someone had gotten a few good shots of Van in his all his sexy swimsuit glory. She'd been too busy staring at him to take very many pictures of her own.

Van lay down next to her and propped himself up on his elbows to get a better look at the screen. They laughed together at the pictures of the pool basketball game, and Hitomi secretly drooled at a few particularly hot pictures of Van.

“Are you able to see more pictures on this, erm, laptop?” Van asked when they'd come to the last file.

“Sure! Wanna see my photos?” Hitomi asked eagerly. Van nodded, and she quickly clicked onto her own page. Here was a chance to show him a little bit more about her life!

Van listened intently to every story she told behind each picture. There was an entire album devoted to the trip Annie had taken with her back to Japan. There was another
one for her friends, and another one for her college achievements. Her life appeared full and happy, and realization suddenly hit Van like a punch from a Guymelef.

He'd come here with the unconscious desire of asking her to return to Gaea, and a deep-rooted hope that she might say yes.

Now, looking at these frozen scenes from her life, listening to her, he didn't think he could do it. He couldn't ask her to make that choice. Besides, it was ridiculous to think she'd choose him over her entire world.

He watched her talking, memorizing the swing of her honey-colored hair, the gentle curve of her smile, the way her eyes crinkled in the corners when she laughed. He could have cried from his need for her.

“Id like to see your school,” he replied through a dry throat to her casual mention of the possibility. He didn't, really. He wanted to burn it to the ground for taking her away from him.

Hitomi rolled onto her side and reached up a hand to tenderly brush a stray lock of hair away from his eyes. Her fingers lingered on his face, gently caressing his cheek, as she stared deeply, invitingly, into his eyes.

Van fought a war within himself. He wanted to touch her, to explore the warm silk of her skin and show her exactly how much he needed her, but the logical part of his brain screamed at him to stop. This woman could never be his. He had no right to touch her.

Then Hitomi leaned up to kiss him softly, and he no longer cared what was logical and right in this situation. If all he had was now, he would make the most of it.

His hand slid down to her hip as he deepened the kiss. Hitomi pulled him down on top of her as she lay herself back onto the mattress, her tongue eagerly meeting his in a wild dance. There was a controlled urgency in his touch that she responded to instinctually.

Van moved his hands slowly up, working his way under the thick fabric of her shirt. She made a breathless, eager sound and moved to accommodate his questing fingers. Her own hands found their way under his shirt, and he shivered at the tingling her fingernails caused as they raked over his skin.

It felt more intimate, somehow, here in her room, than it did last night in the hotel. Perhaps it was because they were surrounded by the evidence of Hitomi's life, of everything that made up bits of who she was. Her sweet scent, of wild flowers and fresh air, filled his senses and her sighs of encouragement drove him on. Van drew her shirt off with one fluid movement, and she followed suit moments after as she tugged his sweater over his head. His mouth moved down slowly, trailing from her earlobe to her collarbone, her fingers tangled in his hair.

There was no room now for logic or guilt or sorrow in Van's mind. There was only the two of them, drowning in the feeling of being together. They would be like this in Van's memory forever, with no regret and no need to make a choice. It would have to be enough.

Later, much later, when the urgency of their need for each other's touch was satisfied for the moment, Hitomi rested her head on Van's chest. His heartbeat was loud in her ear, beating in time with her own. Van's hand moved gently through her hair as the lean fingers stroked the honey-colored tresses. They could hear Annie coming quietly up the stairs and shutting the door to her bedroom.
“I should probably go downstairs,” Van said, his voice rumbling under her ear. Hitomi tightened her arms around him.

“Don't go,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper. “Stay with me tonight.”

There was a long pause before Van spoke again. “I don't want Allen to think that we're-”

“I don't care what Allen thinks,” Hitomi cut him off. “You and I both know what we are and are not doing, and it's none of his or anyone else's business. But...if it bothers you...”

“No. It doesn't, if you don't mind,” he said, shifting his head so he could see her eyes. “But I don't want you to be dishonored in any way because of me.”

Hitomi could have laughed at his misplaced concern. She could have cried at his honest intensity. She did neither. She leaned up and kissed him lovingly instead.

The two songs are "Garden of Eden" by Guns 'n Roses, and "Fix You" by Coldplay. Ja ne!

Ranting and Hope

Heew. Chapter 21, written and posted. Unbelievable! This chapter is mostly dialog, and honestly, not much happens. Just an in-between chapter to get Van to re-think his decision not to talk to Hitomi about coming back to Gaea. Well, mostly, it's about Annie's ranting about how stupid she thinks he's being. Oh, well. I wrote this very quickly, so please forgive the blandness and grammatical/spelling errors.

Van wasn't sure how long he'd been watching Hitomi sleep. The morning sun had yet to rise; he could only make out the vaguest of features as she lay cuddled up to him. Van's thoughts chased themselves around in circles, and he wished he could've slept longer to avoid the nagging pit of doubt and sadness in his mind.

Curse his internal clock! Fanelians rose with the dawn to work in the cool morning hours, and apparently he couldn't fight a lifetime of habit. Sighing, he pulled himself up to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Where're you goin’?” Hitomi muttered into her pillow groggily, wrapping the blankets tighter against the sudden chill from the absence of his body heat.

Van shrugged. “To take a shower. You should go back to sleep.”

She snuggled deeper into her cocoon, already more than half asleep, and he eased himself silently out the door and down the steps. He needed time away from her to clear his mind and come to terms with reality. When he was around Hitomi, the truth of their doomed relationship just didn't matter. But now, he knew for certain that he couldn't ask her to share her future with him, and he just didn't know what to do. Every time he thought of his looming departure, of touching her for the last time, his throat was gripped by such an intense desperation that he almost physically choked. He had to pull himself together.

Van crept around the corner of the dining room and stopped short at the sight of Annie seated at the table. Her face was illuminated by the glow of another one of those laptop-things, and she sipped on a steaming cup of tea.
“Does everyone on Gaea get up insanely early?” she demanded. “Al was clattering around in here almost an hour ago already. Why didn't anyone ever teach you the joys of sleeping in?”

In spite of himself, Van lips quirked into a tiny smirk. “A wise man once told me that the first cow gets the best grass.”

“Yeah, but the second mouse gets the cheese,” Annie retorted. “And if you're heading for the shower, don't bother. Allen's apparently the first cow today, Mr. Second Mouse.”

Van sighed and sank into the chair across from her. “So what cheese am I getting, then?”

“You get to spend time in my awesome company. Oh, and a warmed-up bathroom, I suppose.”

“I'd rather be the cow.”

Annie sniffed disdainfully. “Just for that, you can get your own cup if you want tea.”

Something hot sounded good in the chilly light of pre-dawn, and Van obediently got himself a cup. The tea was a bit to hot to drink, and he stared unseeingly at the curling steam rising from his cup, lost in his melancholy thoughts. It was nearly cold by the time he shook himself back to reality to find Annie watching him thoughtfully. Her penetrating gaze made him squirm uncomfortably in his chair.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“That's what I'm wondering. Something bothering you? 'Cause that didn't look like a ‘I'm in a happy place” zone-out.”

“It's nothing,” Van returned quickly. He took a sip of his cooled tea and pulled a face. Annie reached over and took his cup from him.

“Oh hy,” she said as she walked to the sink and dumped it out. “Are you feeling guilty about spending the night with Hitomi?”

“No- yes... It's complicated.”

Annie handed him back his refilled cup. “How so? I mean, you are planning on marrying her, right? So what's the problem?”

Van's stomach twisted, and for a moment he felt physically ill. The blood drained from his face, and he looked evasively away from her eyes. Annie set down the teapot carefully, watching his face intently.

“Van, you are going to ask her to come back with you...aren't you?”

Van felt a fist close over his heart, tight and hard. “I...can't” he forced out through a dry throat.

Annie stared at him with impossibly huge eyes. “Van, I think that may be one of the sweetest, most selfless things I've ever heard anyone say. And it's definitely the stupidest.”
“Wha-?”

“I mean, how dumb are you? Don't you gotta get married and produce an heir and all that? And have you ever had even a passing interest in another woman since you met Hitomi?” When Van shook his head dumbly, Annie continued her rant. “Well, neither has she. I mean, ya’ know, with a guy. Or a girl, whatever. She loves you. She loves you, you brainless idiot! How the hell do you think it's gonna sit with her someday when you've gotta marry some other woman? I'll tell you how! It's gonna break her damn heart, and it's gonna tick her off, too! I mean, didn't you love her enough to want her to be the one you do that heir-producing thing with? Or wasn't she good enough 'cause she's not royalty?”

Van sat listening to her wild rant, his mouth hanging open. Annie looked like she was about to throw the teapot at him, scalding tea and all. He thought it might be safer to keep his mouth shut and let her tell him off. Her words sparked off a tiny glimmer of hope deep in his veins.

“Van, listen to me. It's gonna to be a hard thing for her to go through, but you've got to at least give her the choice. I know you're just trying to protect her, but you're making the decision for her. And it's the wrong one.”

Van gave her a hard glare. “How do you know that?”

“Something like what you two have doesn't come around very often. Maybe once or twice in the history of the world, no matter what Hollywood wants us to believe. And it's worth fighting for, Van,” Annie returned earnestly.

“I'd be asking her to give up everything. What can I possibly offer in return?”

“That's not enough,” Van replied bluntly.

“It will be,” Annie insisted, her face intent. They could hear Allen coming up the stairs then, and she gave his hand a quick squeeze. “Just think about it, okay?”

Van gave a terse nod as Allen came into the dining room and Annie stood up to make more tea. Gratefully, he slid silently downstairs and headed for the shower. His thoughts swirled so wildly that his head ached. What if Annie was right? The tiny spark of hope had grown to a roaring fire that raged through his very bones. Was it possible that Hitomi might want to go back to Fanelia with him?

Upstairs, Allen watched Annie uncertainly from his seat at the table. She paced furiously around the dining room, occasionally muttering under her breath and cracking her knuckles. She was beginning to make him too nervous to enjoy his tea. On her fifth pass around the table, he reached out and grabbed her arm, effectively pulling her to a halt. She turned to glare menacingly at him.

“Did something happen when I was downstairs?” he asked. “You were relatively normal before I showered, and now you're...” he paused, searching for a delicate way to say 'scary'. Nothing came to him, and he just left the words hanging.

Annie threw her hands up in exasperation. “He's not going to ask her! Can you believe that? After all the effort I put into it, he's not even going to ask her!”

“Who's not going to ask who what?” Allen asked, hoping his assumption for what exactly she meant was wrong. Annie gave him a look to shrivel his skin.
“Van, obviously, you squid-brain. Van is not going to ask Hitomi to go back with him, because the stupid moron thinks he just can't ask her to give up everything for him. Ugh! I mean, it's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!”

Allen frowned. “Not really. He doesn't want to hurt her. In his own way, he's merely trying to protect her.”

“Yes, I figured that out for myself, thank you,” Annie retorted. “This is another one of those 'chivalry' things, isn't it?”

“I- I suppose you could call it that.”

“So, apparently, chivalry makes you stupid,” she huffed as she resumed her pacing.

“It does not,” Allen ground out. “Van's decision is caring and honorable-”

“It's dumb,” Annie cut in. “Allen, it's just dumb, and you know it. And it's wrong, too!”

“I think it shows how selfless he is when it comes to her. He's putting what's best for her above his own desires.”

Annie gestured wildly. “Oh, is he? She loves him, Al! I mean, she really really loves him. If he asked her, I'm know she'd give up everything for him! To stay with him-”

Annie stopped at the flash of pain that crossed Allen's face. He looked quickly away, and she paled slightly.

“Oh, god, Allen. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have- lord, I'm such a bitch!” she wailed, smacking herself on the forehead.

“It's alright, honestly.”

“It's my big mouth. I'm always talking and not thinking...” she bit her lip. “I didn't mean to be cruel. Really.”

“Annie, you weren't cruel,” Allen replied evenly. “It's not about Hitomi. At least, not specifically. I want them to be happy. Truly happy.”

“Oh,” Annie replied uncertainly, clearly not fully understanding his explanation. She chewed on her bottom lip again, and Allen sighed.

“So, you think it would be wrong of Van not to give her the choice?” he prompted. He'd rather see her pacing and furious again than looking awkward and sad. Besides, the fact that she felt so bad for possibly causing him pain had started a warm feeling spreading through his chest. He wasn't altogether certain that he was comfortable with that, or how he'd had the impulse to reach out and smooth away the worried wrinkle on her forehead.

“Huh?” Annie blinked twice, and then swung back into full-force indignation mode. “Oh yeah! Of course it's wrong! He shouldn't decide for her. Or is that another chivalry thing, making decisions for people?”

“In order to protect someone, yes.”

“You can't protect someone from everything,” Annie persisted, resuming her pacing. “And this is just gonna end up hurting both of them in the long run. This is so stupid! After all the work I did to get them back together! They're gonna screw it up! The whole trip, wasted! A complete waste!”

Allen frowned, irrationally stung by her comment. “I wouldn't say that. Wait- Annie, are you wheezing?”
“No!” she responded instantly. Allen gave her a look, and she wrinkled her nose at him. “Alright. A little. What do you expect when Van drops this bomb on me?”

“Shouldn't you be taking your medicine?” he asked, concerned in spite of her seeming nonchalance. “And we shouldn't talk about this until you've calmed down.”

Annie rolled her eyes, but she headed out of the dining room. “Yes, ma'am. You'll make a good mother someday, Princess Alice.”

Allen resisted the momentary urge to punch something. She wasn't going to let that embarrassing episode die, was she? He sipped at his tea through tight lips. For Jichia's sake, he was merely concerned for her health! He didn't want to see her looking like she did the night of dancing, so pale and struggling to breath. It just didn't sit right with him.

Hitomi wandered into the room, rubbing her eyes and yawning. He gave her a polite good morning, and she smiled sleepily at him.

“I'm always the last one up, aren't I?” she said as she plopped herself down across the table from him. “What was going on down here, anyway?”

Allen schooled his features into a polite but bland mask. “What do you mean?”

“It sounded like there was an argument,” Hitomi replied with a shrug. “Was Annie being impossible again?”

“We were...disagreeing over the merits of chivalry,” he answered after several moments of quick thinking.

“Again?” Van asked, catching the end of their conversation. Hitomi turned to smile at him, and he felt that glimmer of hope leap up and bang against his chest. Could there be something more for them? Could he see that smile from her every day of his life?

But what if Annie was wrong? It was too good, to big to hope for. Van moved like an automaton through the motions of getting breakfast ready as his thoughts swung back and forth. Did he risk knowingly causing her pain now by asking her to make a choice? Or did he say nothing and possibly cause her pain, and definitely cause pain to himself, sometime in the future?

“Van? Van,” Hitomi waved a hand in front of his face to get his attention. “Is something bothering you?”

Van snapped back to reality. He really had to remember to school himself so he wouldn't give away his inner turmoil. He gave her what he hoped was a convincing smile. “No, nothing's bothering me. I was just...wondering what we're doing today.”

“I declare this our official "lounge around and do nothing useful day". Any objections?” Annie exclaimed as she entered the kitchen. “Dear lord, you're not letting Tomi cook, are you?”

She rescued the pancake batter from Hitomi before showing Van how to keep the bacon from turning into little crispy pieces of ash.
“And you're going to spend some time thinking about what I said, right?” she said in an undertone to Van after Allen and Hitomi left the room. Van gave her a sharp look.

“I'll think about it,” he muttered back. “But I don't expect to change my mind.”

Annie smirked. “Oh, I think you will, Van.”

Hitomi came back in to grab a few plates, and Van couldn't help but watch her. He'd always watched her, even back when he was a gawky, angry, fifteen year old boy that didn't have a clue how he felt for the strange, green-eyed girl from the Mystic Moon. He'd gone five years without seeing her when she'd returned home after the war. But then, he'd always believed they'd be together again somehow, sometime. Could he live with the knowledge that he'd never be able to watch her just going about her life again?

Annie gave a knowing nod. “You're definitely going to change your mind, Van. No doubt about it.”

**Fights and Snowmen**

Chapter 22? Holy crap! How long can this story get? Oh, well. It can't be too much longer, since there's only THREE DAYS LEFT! At any rate, this is a bit longer chapter, so I hope you all enjoy it. I swear this thing is writing itself.

Van realized that he had never, not even as a child, spent an entire day doing absolutely nothing. He and Hitomi had spent the majority of their time lounging on the futon together, eating popcorn, watching movies, and listening to Allen and Annie pick at each other. He decided right then that he was going to have to do this more often in the future. Even kings deserved a day off once in a while, he supposed. Especially if Hitomi returned to Gaea with him. He could see them spending the whole day alone in his chambers.

Those were dangerous thoughts, and Van did his best to beat them into the back corner of his mind. For her own happiness, he'd made the decision not to make her choose. Hadn't he? Oh, it was ludicrous, and terrifying, but the hope Annie'd planted refused to die. A future without Hitomi was becoming increasingly too painful to contemplate. He needed her.

“I think I've started to mold,” Annie piped up from her nest of blankets and pillows on the floor as their third movie in a row ended. Hitomi turned off the screen, but made no move to untangle herself from Van's arms. Allen stood up and stretched, looking like he'd just woken up from a long nap.

“What?” he asked, eying the hand Annie held up to him quizzically.

“Jeez, what happened to your all-important chivalry?” she demanded mockingly. “My muscles have atrophied, you gotta help me up.”

Sighing, shaking his head, he grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. Reluctantly, Hitomi stood up and began to help them clean up the mess of pillows and blankets.

“I got it!” Annie suddenly squealed, making everyone jump. “Let's make a snowman!”

“A what?” Allen asked as he exchanged a confused look with Van.

Hitomi's eyes sparkled. “Oh, I haven't done that in years. C'mon, you guys!”
The two girls had bounced up the stairs excitedly before Van even had time to stand up. He and Allen exchanged another uncertain look, shrugged, and followed them up the stairs.

“So, what exactly is a snowman?” Allen asked once they were outside. Annie dropped the ball of snow she was forming, and Hitomi gawked at him.

“You mean… you've never made a snowman before?” she asked in a shocked voice. Both men shook their heads, and her eyes grew even larger. “Neither of you?”

“What about snow angels?” Annie demanded. Allen and Van glanced at each other, and Annie's voice rose to a squeak. “Snow fights?”

“Fanelia doesn't get snow, except in the mountains,” Van explained placatingly. Not that he'd have ever had the chance to play in it if Fanelia had oceans of it. Playing was not something he'd really been allowed to do, except in his very early years.

Hitomi's face suddenly broke into a grin. “Well, we've got plenty of snow here. We can make as many snowmen as you want!”

“Oh, oh! Contest!” Annie shouted. “Me and Allen against you two! Who can build the best snowman?”

“You're on!” Hitomi shrieked. “Wait- who's gonna be the judge?”

Annie shrugged. “We can call Jason or something. Not like it matters anyway, since we're gonna win!”

“Not likely,” Hitomi retorted as she and Annie both scooped up snow and began rolling it furiously into a ball. Van and Allen gave each other yet another confused look as the girls began racing around rolling up snow. After several minutes, Van shrugged and followed after Hitomi as she pushed her growing snowball around the yard.

“Allen! Get your lazy butt over here and help me!” Annie demanded.

“Help you with what, exactly?” he retorted as she stopped the ball she was making at his feet.

“Here. Roll this around until it gets big. Huge!” she panted. When he didn't make a move to start, she rolled her eyes at him. “Stop looking at me like I'm insane and just do it. Unless you want Van and Tomi to win.”

Personally, Allen didn't care who won this ridiculous, childish contest, but he realized it was probably safer for him just to do what Annie demanded. The four of them rolled, patted, smoothed, and fought over the “perfect arm-sticks” until the dim winter afternoon faded into a Grey twilight.

“Well, would ya look at that?” Annie stated proudly, looking over the army of snowmen scattered over the front yard. “Me and Al won. Definitely.”

Hitomi pouted good naturedly. “Okay. The snowman pushing over another snowman is good. But ours is the biggest.”

“I think it's a tie,” Van interjected with an uncharacteristically happy grin on his face. Who knew wasting an afternoon behaving like children could feel so good? The only problem was, he'd been so involved with helping Hitomi that he'd stopped trying to come to a decision about his dilemma. He was no closer to an answer than he was this morning, since all he really wanted to think about was finding innocent reasons to touch her.

Beside him, Hitomi giggled and pointed at Annie. The brunette was taking aim at the back of Allen's head with a large, well-packed snowball. It slammed into it's target.
with a resounding thwack, and Allen staggered forward. Hitomi and Van burst out laughing as he swung around to give Annie a dark glare. She put her hands up innocently.

“I didn't throw it!” she exclaimed. “Must've been those darn neighbor kids.”

A muscle visibly twitched in Allen's jaw as he glared silently at her for several long seconds. Unperturbed, Annie smiled sweetly at him until he finally turned away and began walking towards the house. Quick as a flash, she scooped up another snowball and chucked it at his retreating form. Just as quickly, he spun around to catch her in the act. Perhaps he'd turned a bit too quickly, because the snowball caught him square in the face.

“Oh shit...” Annie gasped under her breath, but she was grinning madly from ear to ear, as if that couldn't possibly have gone any better. Everyone froze as the snow slid off his face and hit the ground with a sad little plop.

“Annie,” Allen said, his eyes still closed and his expression calm.

“Yeah?”

“I would hide behind something quickly if I were you.”

His face was still a mask of deadly calm, and for a split-second, Annie eyed him with confused amusement. Suddenly, he yanked the head off of one of the snowman and threw it straight at her.

“Holy crap!” she shrieked, diving out of the way. “I thought you couldn't hit girls, Al!”

“The code of chivalry would make an exception in your case,” he snorted, packing a snowball as quickly as he could. Hitomi and Van stared disbelievingly at the two of them, mouths hanging open. Allen declaring a snow fight? With a girl?

Annie grinned wickedly. “Alright! Get ready to be humiliated by a girl, Al, 'cause you're gonna be crying by the time I'm done with you!”

Hitomi stood there next to Van, completely bemused. Part of her wanted to join in, while the other part felt like pulling up a chair and some snacks to watch this historic event from the sidelines. The inevitable stray snowball smacking into the side of her head decided the matter for her; she scooped up a snowball and chucked it at the unsuspecting Van. She had a fleeting glimpse of surprised maroon-brown eyes before she ran for cover.

It wasn't long before he had her pinned down, out of ammo and reduced to attempting to shield her head from his relentless shots.

“Surrender?” he called when she curled up helplessly in the fetal position.

“Yes, yes!” Hitomi gasped out between fits of wild laughter. Van pulled her to her feet and helped dust off some of the snow clinging to her coat and hair. She loved the way he looked now, so happy and carefree. The lines of care and worry that creased his forehead had been smoothed away and he finally looked his age. Like the college student he could have been, if he had been born here instead of on Gaea.

Impulsively, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him hard. She could sense his initial surprise, but his cold lips warmed quickly under her own and his arms found their way around her waist. If only she could keep him like this forever...

“Annie! Did you just throw a rock at me?” Allen's outraged voice slammed them back into reality, and they pulled apart enough to look over at the still-fighting pair.
“It was just a teensy little ice-chunk. Whiny baby!” Annie retorted, then quickly dived for cover again from a volley of snowballs careening towards her exposed front.

“How long do you think they're going to keep this up?” Van asked Hitomi in an undertone as the two fighters whirled, dodged, and threw as furiously as they could.


Van contemplated the fight seriously for a long moment. “I'd say Allen. There's a lot of pride at stake here.”

“Ha, ha, Allen! Say your prayers!” Annie taunted as she advanced on the blond with an armload of snowballs. Allen was out of ammo, and Hitomi gave Van a very pointed 'told you so!' look.

“What the hell-?” Annie shrieked as Allen suddenly darted forward and tripped her. She landed on her backside, her armful of snowballs flying every direction as Allen heaved his shoulder into a small snowman. Her breath was knocked out of her in a loud whoosh as the mound of snow toppled directly over her helpless form, effectively burying her. Van turned to give Hitomi a distinctly smug smile.

“Surrender?” Allen asked, standing over Annie menacingly with one of her dropped snowballs. She was struggling to hard to catch her breath to be able to answer him for a full minute.

“Yes, holy shit! You win!” she finally gasped out. “Dirty rat-cheater!”

Allen knelt down to start digging her out of the pile, looking superior. “Hardly. You would've done the same thing.”

“I would've tried to do the same thing. Don't think I could've pulled it off, though,” she said with a beaming smile. She let him help her to her feet and brush the clinging snow off her coat. By then, night had fully set in, and the yard was illuminated only by the orange glow of the street lamp.

“Hey, I wanna get dry and warm again. I'm going in,” Hitomi announced. Everyone trooped back into the warmth of the house and stripped off their sopping coats.

Van felt the weight of his thoughts settling back onto his shoulders as he and Allen headed downstairs to change into dry clothes. His smile slid into a frown as the worried lines in his forehead reappeared. He changed slowly, distractedly, because he knew the moment he was back in Hitomi's company nearly all his rational, objective thoughts would desert him.

“Van,” Allen said quietly, catching his attention. Van snapped his head up to meet his sharp blue eyes. How long had he been lost in the storm of his thoughts?

“It's not my place to bring this up,” Allen began slowly, uncertain of what he should say. He settled his face into a carefully controlled, blank mask and continued.

“I know that you've decided not to ask Hitomi to return to Fanelia with you.” Van's eyes widened, surprised, and Allen held up his hand to stop him from interrupting.

“Annie was... a bit upset about it. Van, I wanted you to know I understand your decision, and I think it is both noble and strong.”

Van clenched his jaw and silently looked away. Allen thought he was making the right decision. So, that was it then. He'd have to go through with it, no matter the cost to himself. The little spark of hope in his soul fluttered, sighed, and went out.
There was a long, heavy pause before Allen spoke again. “But Van, for the first time I find myself wondering if doing what is noble will be the right thing. Perhaps it is not even noble to make such a decision for her at all.”

Van swung his head slowly back to look at the blond knight, too confused and shocked by his words to be able to make any response. Allen gave him a ghost of a smile.

“Annie is Hitomi's closest friend. And while she may not be...sane, I believe she is loyal. It would be foolish to disregard her advice. I don't think she'd ever knowingly let someone hurt Hitomi, unless there was a greater purpose for it. Remember, Hitomi chose you. She came back to Gaea once already for you. You may never have a chance like this again, Van. Don't waste it.”

Allen started up the stairs, and Van watched him go with a mixture of dazed confusion and uncertain elation. He thought- Allen Shezar thought- that he should ask Hitomi to return to Fanelia with him. Van had always had a deep respect for the Caeli Knight, even when he'd thought he'd lost Hitomi to him. There had always been an intelligent and kind man under the irritating arrogance; his opinion weighed heavily with Van.

The ashes of his dead hope rekindled into a blazing inferno as Van bounded up the stairs to rejoin the group.

In the kitchen, Hitomi handed him a steaming mug of hot chocolate and motioned discreetly for him to follow her upstairs. They slid past Annie, who sat cross legged on the floor in front of the Christmas tree tuning her guitar, up the stairs to Hitomi's room. This time Van didn't hesitate in the doorway. He followed her inside and shut the door quietly behind them, watching the way she smiled at him. They settled themselves side by side on the bed with their legs stretched out in front and their backs propped up on the headboard.

“Tell me about Fanelia, Van,” Hitomi said as she snuggled herself a little closer to his side. Van watched the way she wiggled her toes in her socks and warmed her hands on her mug.

“What do you want to know?” he asked. “You know about everything that's been happening with the rebuilding.”

“No, no. Tell me the interesting stuff. Tell me about the people, the customs, the food. The way you live there. I hardly got to spend any time in Fanelia when I was on Gaea. I guess I just want to know more about your life.”

Van didn't know what to say. The simple fact that she wanted to know more about his country, his people, made him want to jump up and do a crazy, happy dance. Or better yet, pin her down and kiss her senseless. Hitomi looked at him expectantly, and he thought hard for something to tell her.

“Once a year, we have the Festival of the Dragons. It's similar to your Christmas celebrations. Without the tree, which I still think is a strange thing to do,” he finally said.

Hitomi blinked. “I guess it is, when you really think about it. So, no tree. Do you give presents and stuff?”

Van happily explained, in detail, all the old traditions of the Fanelian holiday as he watched her face. She listened with rapt attention, demanding to know about other customs after he'd exhausted his knowledge of the Dragon Festival. As he talked, his
mind raced with sudden clarity. He was going to ask her. He was going to ask her to share his life as a Fanelian with him. Annie and Allen were right. This was worth fighting for. He had to at least try. She deserved to know that his deepest desire was, and had been since she had left him standing at the base of Escaflowne, to have her back in Fanelia, with him.

Hitomi launched into descriptions of similar Japanese traditions, and Van studied her cheerful face carefully. She loved him. He could see it in her eyes, even if they had never really said the words out loud. But was it strong enough for her to give up everything she had for him? He had to know.

Van suddenly leaned down and kissed her deeply, effectively silencing her in the middle of an explanation. She didn't seem to mind being interrupted and relaxed into his arms as he explored her mouth. He could taste the chocolate on her hot tongue before he moved away to explore the sensitive skin below her ear. She sighed happily, her hands twined in his unruly black hair, goosebumps shivering over her from his kisses. Their touches were gentle this time, and slow, with none of the controlled urgency of their earlier intimacies. Both took their time just exploring the other, and it was many long minutes later when they lay side by side, twining their hands together.

Everything felt right, and Van knew he couldn't ask for a better opportunity. He watched Hitomi examine his calloused hands for several blissful moments before gathering his courage and taking a deep breath.

"Hitomi," Van hesitated, uncertain of his next words. She turned to look at him expectantly, and he stared fixedly at a point on the wall.

"Yeah, Van?" she asked after the silence stretched on a little too long. Van licked his dry lips.

"In three days, I have to go back to Fanelia-" he began. He stopped in surprise as she abruptly wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed so hard he winced.

"Don't. Don't talk about it, Van," she begged, her voice muffled as she pressed her face into his chest. "Please. I just- don't want to think about it yet, okay? Let's just forget about it and enjoy right now. Please?"

She sounded slightly desperate, and Van wrapped his own arms around her tightly. He knew that he should insist, that he should keep talking while his mind was made up, but he couldn't ignore the pleading in her voice. Tonight, he could do what she asked and pretend that things could just go on like this indefinitely. Once he asked her, he knew things would change forever, one way or the other. He'd waited so long, one more night couldn't hurt.

"Okay. We'll forget about it for now," he murmured into her hair. She rewarded him with a dazzling smile, and just for a moment, everything was perfect.

Downstairs, Allen found himself seated on the couch, drawn there by Annie's music like a rat to the Pied Piper's flute. She played the guitar as skillfully as she played the piano, and he listened in silence. The only light came from the sparkling Christmas tree, and the soft glow made the atmosphere feel surreal.

The whole situation made Allen extremely twitchy. And that, in turn, thoroughly ticked him off. He shouldn't like the fact that she'd left her hair loose to tumble down her back in a shining curtain of deep mahogany. He shouldn't even been thinking the word “mahogany” in relation to her hair. It sounded so much more unattractive, and therefore so much safer, to just call it brown. And he shouldn't be noticing how long
and thick her eyelashes were when she closed her eyes and hummed along to her music. Or that the way her nose turned up just that tiny little bit at the end made it so much cuter than anyone else's nose he'd ever seen.

Why was it, again, that he'd ever preferred tall blonds?

He couldn't stop himself from staring at her, admiring everything about her petite frame, no matter how hard he tried to find fault with her. It made him so angry with himself, and so uncomfortably on edge, that he felt ready to snap. Abruptly, he stood up to leave the room. He just couldn't take his inner war any longer.

Annie's hands stilled the guitar strings and she turned to look questioningly at him. “What's up, Al?”

“Nothing,” he bit out shortly. Annie waggled her eyebrows and gave him a slightly mocking smile.

“Not feeling guilty about tripping a poor defenseless girl, now, are you? Or perhaps you're just embarrassed that you had to resort to such dirty tactics to beat me, eh, Princess?”

Allen swung around to face her, fury twisting his handsome face. “Stop calling me that.”

“Oh, lighten up, Al. It's a joke,” Annie retorted, rolling her eyes with annoyance. He had a sudden, violent desire to snap her neck.

“It's always a joke with you. You never stop! From the moment I arrived here, you've tried to turn everything I am, everything I stand for, into some ridiculous joke!”

“Maybe because it is ridiculous!” Annie returned, on her feet now, glaring up at him. “All your fake manners and your damned, pretentious chivalry. You're just using that stuff as a shield to keep people from seeing you. All you want people to know is the perfect knight in his perfectly poofy-sleeved uniform. You're like a kid playing make-believe!”

“That chivalry, those manners, that is what I am. It's what I was raised to be, the highest ideal of my society. At least I command respect, unlike you. Annie, the eternal child,” Allen sneered.

“I would rather people despised me for being who I am than earn someone's respect for being what I'm not,” Annie hissed. “And I would rather be an eternal child and be happy than let my life turn me into a bitter, lonely adult like you.”

“What would you know about it? What kind of hardships have you ever had to face in your perfect, coddled life? You have not seen what I have. You have not lost like I have. And yet you think you have the right to condemn me for how I have chosen to live my life? You are nothing but a silly, naive, little girl.”

If he had been saying those words to Hitomi, or Millerna, or even Merle, he would have seen tears sparkling in the depths of their eyes. But not Annie. Her deep brown eyes regarded him coolly in the dead air of the room.

“And you are an arrogant, pig-headed, bastard,” she returned evenly. The chill emanating off of her clashed with the boiling anger pouring off of him as they faced each other mere inches apart. Suddenly, all Allen could think about was how easy it would be to bury his hands in her hair and kiss her until her icy rage melted into a fiery passion. That was really what he was so angry about in the first place, anyway. He wanted her, damn it, and all she did was laugh at him. His hands twitched, moving up towards the thick cascade of her hair on their own.
There was a pounding knock on the front door, and both of them turned their heads to see Jason walk in the room. He looked up to catch them standing toe to toe.

“Ah...sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt anything,” he said quickly. Annie gave Allen one more icy glare, then stepped away.

“Naw. It was good timing, actually. What're you doing here, J?” she replied calmly.

“We're playing tonight at Mully's,” he answered after a swift glance at Allen. “I just swung by to see if you wanted to come and watch.”

“Hell, yeah. Just lemme change first,” she replied, not even bothering to look over at Allen's mask of forced friendliness.

Jason turned towards him questioningly. “What about-”

“Oh, he doesn't want to come,” Annie interrupted, giving Allen a hard glare. “It wouldn't be his thing. You know, the loud bar, the dancing...”

Allen glared back at her with narrowed eyes. “Yeah. Not my 'thing' at all. Sorry, Jason.”

“Hey, no problem, man,” Jason said carelessly. He was either ignoring the strained atmosphere or oblivious to it. Either way, there was an uncomfortable silence between the two men after Annie ran lightly up the stairs to change.

“So, uh, where're Tomi and Van?” Jason asked after the clocked ticked away several long minutes.

“Upstairs,” Allen answered shortly. For all his friendliness, he did not like the tattooed, pierced man. There was something in the way he looked at Annie, an underlying possessiveness, that set Allen's teeth on edge.

Annie bounced back down the stairs then, and they hustled out the door as fast as they could. Allen could have pulled all of his hair out by the roots and burned it. It was his fault Annie'd run out the door without a backwards glance at him. And looking like that, too. If he hadn't been such an ass, if he'd been able to handle the fact he found her attractive, maybe she'd still be sitting in front of the Christmas tree with her guitar.

Allen laid out his bed in a fury of self-directed anger. How could he have behaved like that to her? Why did he have to say those things to her? Thank the gods Jason had interrupted them when he did. His now-rational brain shriveled at the thought that he had almost tried to kiss her. There was no doubt in his mind how she would have reacted, and it wouldn't have been to melt into any kind of passion, unless it was to passionately try to kill him. What the hell had he been thinking?

He tossed and turned, dozing fitfully until he heard her quietly entering the house in the very early hours of the morning. Somehow, he was going to have to try to salvage the mess he'd made of their tentative 'friendship'. He just hoped she'd be willing to forgive him.

**Plans and Cakes**

Well, here's chapter 23, and it's a doozy. Longest one yet, and I think I should've broken this one up into at least two chapters, but oh well. I wrote this one in parts randomly and put them all together, so I hope it flows okay. Honestly, I'm too fed up with my stupid writer's block to sit on this and re-do parts of it, so I'm posting it as is. Please, let me know what parts to fix, cut out, change, etc.
Van knew he was being a coward by slipping quietly out of Hitomi's room before she woke that morning. He knew he should stay, that he should watch her eyes drift open and then make her listen to what he needed to say, whether or not she really wanted to hear it. He didn't want to think about leaving any more than she did, but they had to talk about it.

Van simply didn't know what to say to her. He hated himself for running away, for grasping at any excuse, every excuse, to put it off just a little longer. His time was running out fast.

The Christmas tree lights were on when he came down the stairs, casting a dim glow over the cozy living room. Van was surprised to see Annie curled up on the couch, fully dressed in clothes similar to the ones she'd worn to go dancing. He tried to sneak past without disturbing her, but the old floorboards creaked loudly under his feet. Her eyes shot open and she sat up rubbing her eyes.

“Morning, Van,” she yawned. She stretched, reminding him a little of Merle after a nap, and pulled a face. “Blech. Waking up in jeans sucks.”

Van studied her curiously. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Huh? Oh. No, just didn't feel like actually going to bed last night. Anyway, what're you doing up so early? Are you still trying to decide whether or not to ask Tomi to go back with you?”

“No,” he replied quietly after a slight pause. “You were right, I need to ask her. I just hope it's the right thing to do.”

Van nearly fell over when Annie jumped off the couch and hugged him so tightly he lost his breath, once again reminding him of Merle. It was surprising how much he missed her affectionate glomping.

“Well, holy shit, you had me worried for a while!” she cheered. “What're you doing down here, then, if you haven't asked her yet? Shouldn't you be up there, you know...asking her or something?”

Van shifted his eyes uncomfortably away from her penetrating gaze. “I haven't decided what I want to say yet.”

“Are you serious?” Annie demanded. “Van, you've only got three days left! You've gotta give her some time to think about it, you know. You can't ask her at the last second and rush her into a decision!”

“I know that! I'll ask her today. I will,” he stressed at Annie's disbelieving snort. She gave him an exasperated look over her shoulder as she headed into the kitchen.

Van didn't care. He had just realized that although the heavy weight of indecision had been lifted from him, now he had to face the ludicrously terrifying prospect of actually asking Hitomi. Honestly, how would he even start? Maybe he should just trick her into coming to Gaea for a short vacation, and then somehow convince her never to leave. Or tell her the pendant was broken, and since he couldn't send her back, how about getting married? It might work...

“Dammit. Tomi hid my coffee again!” Annie's frustrated voice broke through his ridiculous contemplations. He looked up to find her standing on the counter to rummage through the top shelves.

“Uh, does she do that often?” he queried.
Annie hopped lightly down and scowled. “Only when we have guests and she wants me to behave. Dammit! I need some caffeine this morning!”

Van tried his best to look sympathetic, though he couldn't help mentally siding with Hitomi. He'd seen Annie on espresso, after all. But he kept his mouth shut as she heated water, muttering things like “freakin' herbal tea” and “coffee grinch” under her breath. Suddenly, she set the teapot down with a clatter and gave him a thoughtful look.

“Say, Van, maybe you should call Tomi's parents. You know, ask their permission to marry Hitomi and all.”

“I-what?” Van's face turned ashen white as all his blood puddled into his toes.

Annie tapped her chin pensively. “Yeah. You really should talk to them first. So, I guess it's a good thing you haven't asked her yet.”

“But...why? Annie, is this a joke?” Van asked weakly.

She stared blankly at him. “Don't you have any traditions like that? Getting the parents' permission before asking some girl to marry you?”

“I- I suppose we do,” Van replied helplessly, feeling his blood-deprived heart flopping around madly inside his chest. Maybe he should put his feet in the air to get the blood drained out of his toes and back where it belonged.

“So, what's the problem?” Annie asked, clearly confused at his hesitation.

“In Fanelia, permission to marry is granted by allowing the courting to take place at all, so I just assumed...I really have to ask their permission now?”

“I guess your system makes more sense than ours, huh? I mean, why bother letting them date if you're not going to let them get married? But that's the way it works here, so- yeah. You should really ask them now,” Annie nodded slowly. Van swallowed convulsively and licked his dry lips with an even drier tongue.

“Alright. If that's what's expected, then I'll do it,” he intoned in the voice of someone agreeing to his own execution. Grinning, Annie unplugged her phone from its charger and flipped it open. Van had seen enough people use those devices to be able to clue into what she was doing.

“What, now?” he asked, his voice careening higher than it had since he'd hit puberty.

Annie looked up at him with large, surprised eyes. “Well, yeah. The time difference, you know. Didn't you just say you'd do it?”

“I didn't know you meant right now,” Van replied, forcing his voice down the two octaves to his normal speaking voice. He was not going to show her how panicked he felt. He could be calm, in control. Allen would never have lost his cool charm over a little something like getting parental permission to whisk their daughter off to another world.

Apparently, Annie saw right through his attempts at appearing calm and collected, or perhaps his squeaky, pre-pubescent voice gave him away. Whatever the reason, she stopped searching for the number to reach out and squeeze his arm sympathetically.

“Van, if you're going to do this, you kinda have to do it now. C'mon, how hard can it be? I mean, you've rebuilt an entire country, haven't you? I think you'll be able to handle talking to Tomi's parents. What's the worst that can happen?”

“They'll say no?” Van retorted swiftly with a grimace.
“Well, yeah,” she hesitantly agreed, chewing her lip. She squared her shoulders with a frighteningly determined look in her eyes. “But they won’t. Look, just consider this practice for having the real talk with Tomi.”

Van wanted to crush the cell phone into infinite tiny pieces that could never be put back together again. Annie's “encouragement” really wasn't helping him at all. But if he was going to ask Hitomi to return to Gaea to be by his side, then he wanted to do it right. Clenching his fists, he willed himself to be strong like the king he was, rather than a coward like the fifteen year old boy he had been. He gave Annie a tight nod and she dialed the number.

Van heard her speaking to Hitomi's brother, asking him to get his parents on the phone, while his mind raced desperately to plan what he was going to say. All his planning was useless, though, because his mind went perfectly blank when Annie handed him the phone. She gave him a double thumbs up, mouthed 'good luck' at him, and discreetly left the kitchen.

“Hello? Van, are you there?” Hitomi's mother's voice echoed gently through Van's ear. She sounded so much like Hitomi that it was disconcerting. Van gave a silent prayer to every god he'd ever heard about before clearing his throat.

“Yes. Yes, I'm here,” he replied slowly.

“Is there something we can do for you?” Hitomi's father asked with calm curiosity. Van took a deep breath. This was it.

“Actually, I have a question I need to ask you, sir. All of you,” he added. Closing his eyes, he gathered his courage and forced his voice to sound normal.

“I would like your permission to ask Hitomi to return to Gaea with me. As- as my queen.”

The silence on the other end was deafening. After several moments, he pulled the phone away from his ear to look at the screen, wondering how to tell if he was still connected to Hitomi's family or not. Should he take the silence as a definite 'no'?

“I knew this was coming,” Hitomi's mother finally said quietly, more to herself than anyone else. “Since the day she came back from Gaea, I knew this was coming.”

“I'm sorry,” Van replied simply, instinctively responding to the sadness in her voice. He ached deep inside with the knowledge that he was the cause of her hurt. There was no pain in the world worse than a mother's loss. He knew that from experience, from watching his mother wither before his eyes when Folken didn't return from the Dragon-Slaying. And now, if Hitomi chose him, he would be bringing that same hurt to another mother. It made him feel sick.

“You don't need to apologize, Van,” her mother said gently. “No one gets to choose who they love, or when or where they fall in love. You shouldn't feel guilty for something beyond your control. I knew Hitomi would leave us again someday to go back to you. She needs you, Van. Ask her, with my blessing.”

Van had not cried in years. Not since the day his brother died. But his throat was thick with unshed tears now from the pure, gentle, motherly voice. It was like his own mother picking him up after he'd made a mistake, soothing away his worry and pain.

“Thank you,” he managed to say in a husky voice when he trusted himself to venture to speak.

“Will we be able to see her sometimes?” her brother piped up suddenly in a quivering voice.
Van hesitated, wanting to be completely honest with them. “I don't know.”

There was a heavy silence, and Van found himself holding his breath. Hitomi's mother had given her permission, but her father had yet to say a word. Van lamented the fact that the remarkable Mystic Moon device only allowed him to speak to her family, but not to see them. He felt uneasy and lost not being able to read the older man's physical cues as he waited for a response.

“I suppose no father is ever ready for this,” the man finally sighed. “Ultimately, the decision is hers. All I've ever wanted for her is that she has a good life. Do you think she'll be happy on your Gaea?”

“I hope so, sir. I'll work hard to give her a good life,” Van answered promptly.

“I know that. For what it's worth, you have my permission to ask her,” he replied gruffly.

Van was suddenly buoyed up with a relief so profound he wondered if his head was touching the ceiling. Certainly, his feet couldn't still be firmly planted on the ground. He hardly knew how their conversation ended, or what else he said before closing the phone. Her family had given him permission, even their blessing, to ask Hitomi to return with him!

“Annie, you can stop pretending you weren't eavesdropping and come back now,” he called out. She slunk sheepishly around the door, but the grin on her face was even wider than his.

“So? What happened?” she asked gleefully.

Van crossed his arms over his chest. “You were listening the whole time. You tell me.”

“I only heard your side of the conversation,” she defended herself. “Just a lot of pauses and thank you's. What did they say?”

“They gave me their permission,” he replied evasively. He wasn't going to repeat everything word for word to anyone. Ever. Well, maybe to Hitomi someday, if she ever wanted to know.

Annie just shrugged. “Fair enough. At any rate, now you can't change your mind again. You've gotta ask her!”

She hummed happily to herself as she pulled out mixing bowls and ingredients and piled them haphazardly on the counter top. Van got the peculiar feeling that he'd just been tricked.

Hitomi shivered slightly and drew the blankets closer around her curled form. Van was gone again, and the sun wasn't even up yet. It was surprising how quickly she got used to his body heat next to her in the bed. He was like having her own giant hot-water bottle, only he was a lot more snuggly and sexy. She grinned and buried her face in her pillow just remembering the feel of his hot skin on hers.

But last night, he'd wanted to talk about his leaving. Hitomi's grin melted into a troubled frown as she rolled onto her back. Why had he brought it up? And why had she stopped him?
Deep down, she knew it was because it struck a chord of panic that reverberated through her whole being. What if he was going to tell her that this was the last time they could see each other? He was a king, after all. He had responsibilities, duties, rules he had to follow that she couldn't even begin to imagine. Van loved her, she knew that with unwavering certainty, but she also knew that his country was more important than anything else to him. Including her, in some ways. So many people depended on him that he had no choice but to put Fanelia first.

But what if he'd wanted to tell her something else? This trip had changed their relationship completely. Hitomi knew that. Going back to the way things were, pretending nothing was different, was just plain stupid. What else could they do, though? Their options were limited.

She rolled out of bed with an unhappy sigh. The last thing she wanted to think about was what was going to happen when Van had to return to Fanelia. They still had time. There was no reason to put a dark cloud over what was left of their days together by talking about it. Hitomi prayed fervently under her breath as she got into the shower that Van had forgotten whatever it was he wanted to bring up last night. Today, they were not going to think about anything but enjoying each moment.

Van was lounging against the sink eating toast when Hitomi made her way into the kitchen. He gave her a distracted smile, and she suppressed a groan. It looked like whatever was on his mind last night was still bothering him. He could be persistent, she knew, when he thought something was important. Well, she could be stubborn, too. Besides, she knew about ten different ways to distract him without having to think hard about it. She'd turn him to putty in her hands, literally, if he tried to bring up the end of the trip.

“Morning, guys. Hey, did I actually beat Allen getting out of bed today?” she asked cheerfully.

“Mm,” Annie replied as she slid two pans into the oven. “Tomi, where's my coffee?”

“The coffee I hid? I'll give it back next week. Are you going somewhere?” she asked, eying the brunette's outfit. She leaned over to look in the oven. “And why are you baking a cake?”

“I felt like baking something this morning. And I went somewhere last night and just didn't go to bed. Soooo,” Annie turned to survey the two of them leaning against the sink with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “What are your plans for the day?”

Van swallowed hard and choked on his toast. He whooped and coughed while Hitomi pounded him on the back and Annie stifled her giggles and put on an unconvincingly concerned face.

“Are you okay?” Hitomi asked, peering anxiously into his red face. He coughed a few more times before taking a deep, toast-free breath.

“Oh, yeah. I just swallowed wrong,” he answered, glaring daggers at Annie when Hitomi went to pour him a glass of juice.

“We haven't got any plans today,” she told Annie as he took a drink. “Unless you have any, Van.”

Annie couldn't hold in her laughter when he choked and half his mouthful of juice went up his nose.

Allen lay still, reluctant to give up the warm comfort of his blankets to face the morning. He could hear the other three talking and laughing in the kitchen as he stared...
up at the basement ceiling. The sound of Annie's laughter made his stomach twist up into an unpleasant knot just remembering their argument.

If he closed his eyes, he could see the icy anger darkening her dark brown eyes to an eerie black. He'd behaved so inappropriately, wrongly taking out his frustrations on her, that the thought of facing her this morning made him cringe inside. He was going to have to make it up to her somehow.

With a long, heavy sigh, he dragged the covers off his body and made his way slowly up the stairs. Annie was the only one in the kitchen, though he could hear Van and Hitomi talking in the dining room. His luck didn't seem to have improved since the night before, Allen thought ruefully as he stood in the doorway awkwardly.

Annie glanced up to see him there, and her lips thinned into a straight, white line. She glanced away too quickly for Allen to be able to read the emotion in her wide, dark eyes. He noticed that she'd never changed out of the clothes she'd left in last night, and he wondered if she'd slept at all. Their long moment of strained silence was broken by the oven alarm, and she busied herself getting the cakes out to cool. Allen smoothed his hair nervously.

“Uh...good morning?” he said hesitantly. Annie, her back to him, merely gave him a soft “Mm” in reply. He frowned slightly, uncertainty tainting his clear blue eyes. This might be even more difficult that he'd thought.

“Oh! Good morning, Allen!” Hitomi chirped as she caught sight of him. She gave him a cheerful grin, completely oblivious to the tense atmosphere in the room.

“Good morning to you, Hitomi,” Allen returned. He smiled his most charming, brilliant smile at her, determined not to let on that anything was out of the ordinary this morning.

Hitomi blinked a few times. When Allen decided to turn on the charm like that, the effect was still sort of devastating. He really had a seriously handsome face and...

Van's arm brushed her shoulder, and she forgot all about Allen's smile. Honestly, the man had nothing on Van. When Allen smiled, she got a little dazzled, but when Van smiled, her very bones melted into a puddle. It was a sad shame that with all his charm, looks, and kindness, Allen had no one who felt for him what she felt for Van. It was too bad, really, that he and Annie didn't get along. Hitomi almost laughed at the thought of Allen trying that smile on Annie. She'd probably ask him if he was feeling sick.

“Um...Van and I were just talking about going to see my school. Annie's not coming, but do you want to join us?” Hitomi asked Allen when she'd collected her wits. Part of her really wanted him to say yes, since there was a little, nagging, worried voice that kept wondering what Van had tried to talk about last night. If Allen was around, she wouldn't have to worry about it. But she also wouldn't get to spend one of her last precious days with Van alone together. Darn it! Today was supposed to be happy, not complicated!

Allen gave Annie a swift, discreet glance. A very pointed 'don't you dare!' look was written across her face as plainly as if she'd painted it on with black ink.

“Thank you for inviting me, Hitomi, but I think I'd rather stay here today. I... need to write some observations for Lord Dryden about this world,” he lied quickly, slightly proud of himself. He'd never been any good at lying, not having had much practice at it, but Hitomi seemed to buy it. He'd just ignore that skeptical look on Van's face.
“Great. Well, I'm off to bed, then. 'Night,” Annie yawned. She poked a finger threateningly at Hitomi as she passed. “Don't touch my cakes, Tomi.”

“Normal people sleep at night,” Hitomi called after her.

“So why would you expect me to?” drifted the sleepy reply from the stairway.

Hitomi dragged Van out to the bus stop as soon as they'd had breakfast. Van shoved his frozen hands as deep into the pockets of his coat as they would go. How could anyone live in this frigid place?

“Why are we taking this, er, bus instead of Annie's car?” he asked Hitomi after they'd been waiting for more than ten minutes.

“Well, I forgot to ask Annie if she wanted to car today for anything, and parking around the U is impossible. Besides, public transportation is definitely something you should experience while you're here,” Hitomi reasoned. She didn't tell him that her main reason was because they wouldn't be alone enough to have a serious conversation.

The bus roared to a halt in front of them, and Van took a step back with wide eyes. The door was flung open, and Hitomi grabbed his hand to haul him up the steps into the relatively warmer interior. Van's head swiveled in every direction, taking everything in, as Hitomi pulled him down into the seat next to her.

It was loud, louder than any of the other vehicles he'd seen on the Mystic Moon, and he hung on to the seat in front of him as it swayed and lurched down the road. Van wrinkled his nose in distaste at the peculiar smell in the air: a mix of body odor, stale smoke, and cologne. More than half the seats were empty, and he cast doubtful glances at a few of the seedier men hunched over in their spots.

“You ride this thing alone?” he demanded after one of the men spat onto the floor. Hitomi gave him a half-exasperated, half-amused look.

“It's perfectly safe, Van,” she insisted. “It's waiting at the bus stop that can get a little scary sometimes.”

Well, that certainly didn't make him feel any better! One more reason to get her off this world to someplace safer. Specifically, someplace like Fanelia's palace, where he could protect her. He frowned heavily, his face becoming serious.

“Hitomi, when I leave-” he began, but Hitomi suddenly sat up straight and pointed out the window, as if she hadn't heard him.

“Look! There's the apartment Jason used to live in. See it? That brown building over there,” she exclaimed. “Oh, and there's the mall we usually shop at...”

Van dutifully looked where she pointed with a sinking feeling in his stomach. That was two times Hitomi had stopped him from bringing up the end of the trip. Did she somehow know what he was trying to ask her? Was she purposefully stopping him from bringing it up? Or was it just that she hadn't heard him over the roar of the bus?

Yes, that was probably it. She just hadn't heard him because she'd been too busy looking out of her window. Besides, he thought ruefully, this was hardly the place to bring the subject up. Van knew he wasn't very good when it came to romantic gestures, but even he could come up with something better than this. The right moment would come along eventually. He'd just have to be ready when it arrived.

Hitomi heaved an enormous mental sigh of relief as she prattled on about mundane buildings and unimportant landmarks. Van had almost ruined everything by bringing
up the looming end of their time together. It was like a big, black splotch of ink on the perfect white page of her happiness. Why couldn't he just forget about it for another day or two like she wanted to do?

All her babbling had made her mouth dry by the time they reached their stop. Van looked grateful to be out of the bus and back on solid, non-moving ground, and Hitomi grinned, excited to show him around her campus. He stared disbelievingly around at the buildings, the busy traffic, and the bustling crowds as the two of them headed off down the sidewalk. Hitomi reached out to take his hand, and his fingers gripped hers through their thick gloves with gentle strength.

“Is it always this crowded?” he asked, a tiny amount of awe coloring his voice. Hitomi surveyed their surroundings thoughtfully.

“Actually, it's usually a lot busier than this,” she stated seriously. “A lot of students are home for the holidays, and there aren't any classes going on right now.”

Busier? Van's mind boggled at the thought. How did more people even fit on the sidewalks? He was beginning to feel claustrophobic as it was, but Hitomi moved through the crowds with uncaring ease. She pointed out buildings, took him through a maze of connecting tunnels, and showed him the dorm she and Annie had lived in their first year. Van's brain ached with the complexity of it all by the time they settled at a small restaurant table for a late afternoon meal. Life in Fanelia was much simpler, much slower, than what it seemed to be here. Would Hitomi be bored with palace life?

“The Village Wok has some of the best food in Minneapolis,” she said to him now as she looked over her menu. “So, what do you think of the campus, Van?”

He studied his menu with interest. What the hell was Moo Goo Gai Pan? It sounded like something an infant would babble.

“It's much larger than I expected. It's very impressive,” he conceded as he closed his menu, deciding to let Hitomi pick out their food. “It feels a bit lonely, though, like no one cares about anything but their own affairs. I guess I'm just used to everyone knowing who I am, and here I'm just another face in the crowd.”

“That's true. It's easy to feel like you're a faceless nobody here. Just another number in the system,” Hitomi agreed thoughtfully.

The restaurant was mostly empty. They were seated at a small table for two tucked against the wall away from most of the other customers. The lighting was dim, the low murmur of voices was soothing, and the warm atmosphere had relaxed them both. Van studied Hitomi's face as she stared into the tea cup she twisted around and around in her hands. Her green eyes looked thoughtful, but a tiny smile pulled up the corners of her soft, pink mouth. Her honey-colored hair was tousled from her hat and the cold wind, and her cheeks had a radiant, healthy glow. He couldn't imagine a more beautiful woman than her.

He leaned forward suddenly, capturing her slim hands between his calloused ones. She looked up, startled curiosity in her bright green eyes, and he took a deep breath. Now was the time to tell her.

“So, what can I get for you two today?”

Van and Hitomi jumped at the waiter's cheerful question, and Van whipped his hands away from hers to smooth his napkin uncomfortably.

“Oh! Um, we'll have the General Tso's,” Hitomi replied quickly, flustered. “That's okay, right, Van?”
He nodded with what he hoped would pass as a normal smile. Stopped again! Fate seemed perversely determined to keep him from asking her! The silence that stretched out between them after the waiter walked away was slightly awkward, but Van couldn't bring himself to try again just yet. Hitomi fidgeted for a moment before launching a conversation about their favorite foods, and he willingly followed her lead.

The right moment was just going to have to wait until he could make sure they were completely alone.

The house had been strangely silent after Hitomi and Van had hurried out the door. No sound drifted down from Annie's room, though Allen had strained his ears listening for something. He'd sat on the couch, staring out at the snowman war zone from the evening before with lonely eyes. If he hadn't started that fight with Annie last night, what would they be doing now? Eventually, he'd given up waiting to hear any signs of life from her room and headed back downstairs.

He came awake slowly in the dark basement, completely disorientated for a moment. He hadn't meant to fall asleep on the futon after his shower, but he supposed his lack of sleep and the oppressive silence wore him down. The clock told him it was late afternoon as he stretched the kinks out of his neck. Sighing heavily, he made his way upstairs to see if Annie was awake and willing to listen to him yet. The dining room lights were on low, and he walked slowly into the room.

There on the table was Annie's cake. Blue frosting covered it's round form, decorated with delicate white icing. Allen came closer to look at it and blinked in surprise. Written on the top, with painstaking calligraphy, was “Happy Birthday Allen”. What in Jichia's name-?

“Hey, Al. I baked you a cake,” Annie said softly from the living room. She moved towards him hesitantly, watching him with uncertain brown eyes. It was so strange to see her acting unsure of herself; Allen didn't like the way it made his conscience squirm uncomfortably. He cleared his throat.

“Thank you. It's- uh, it's beautiful,” he replied carefully. “It's... not my birthday, though.”

She grimaced and wrinkled her nose. “I know that. But it's just...I don't think you've ever had one before. You know, with everything that you've been through. And I just wanted to make one for you, because everyone should have birthday cakes. And- and I think you really deserve one.”

When he just stared at her, confused and bewildered, she tugged self-consciously on a loose strand of her dark brown hair.

“I didn't mean to make fun of who you are. I just don't like to see you hiding behind something you're not to try to make people like you. I mean, sure, you're not perfect, but neither is anybody else. And sure, people respect you for being the perfect Jello knight—”

“Caeli Knight,” Allen corrected automatically. He could have decapitated himself for interrupting, but Annie merely flapped a hand at him and continued.

“Whatever. My point is, they may respect you, but that doesn't mean they like you. Not really. I kind of tend to go to far, you know? I laughed at you because I want you to drop the act and just be happy. So I baked you a cake, because, you know, cakes make people happy. And I guess I just... wanted to make you smile for real.”
Allen just stared at her as it dawned on him that she'd baked him this cake as some sort of bizarre apology. She wanted to see him smile. It was the strangest thing anyone had ever done for him. And the sweetest.

“It's okay, though, if you don't want it,” she added when he merely stood there looking at her, saying nothing.

“No! No, I think it's wonderful. I'm really-” he paused and took a deep breath. “Annie, I'm sorry for what I said last night.”

She raised her eyebrows and half-quirked the side of her mouth into a smile. “Yeah, but it was true, wasn't it?”

Allen frowned. “No, it wasn't. Not completely. My behavior was unacceptable—”

“There you go again, being all stiff and proper,” Annie griped, rolling her eyes at him.

“And there you go, acting like I'm being ridiculous when I'm only trying to apologize!”

They eyed each other warily for a long moment before Annie broke into a huge grin. “So, wanna have some cake?”

She wrinkled her nose at him comically, and Allen found himself laughing gently.

Their relationship was one of the strangest and most volatile he'd ever been a part of, but it was fun. She was fun.

They brought the cake back into the kitchen to cut it, and Allen marveled at how the tension between them had completely disappeared, like they'd never argued in the first place. But then, he reasoned, Annie didn't do things by halves. Either she was angry at you or she wasn't. Grudge-holding wasn't a part of her character. He'd never been able to forgive and forget so easily, and he admired that about her.

He also admired her really, really great curves. Even in fuzzy pajama pants, her back view was incredible. Her tight tank top stopped a few inches above the waistband, and for some reason, he couldn't stop thinking her belly button piercing was incredibly erotic.

Annie cut the cake into huge slices, and Allen decided he'd been missing out for years dating tall women. His height gave him a huge advantage at getting a casual glance down the front of her top. He should feel guilty, he supposed, as he surreptitiously eyed her chest, but she was the one always telling him to loosen up and enjoy himself.

“Van's going to ask Tomi to go back with him,” Annie said through a mouthful of cake. Allen exaggeratedly chewed and swallowed before answering her.

“Of course he is. I told him to do it,” he replied matter-of-factly. Annie stared at him, her fork poised half-way to her mouth.

“Why would that make you sure he was going to ask her?” she demanded.

Allen concentrated on his cake, a smug smile tugging at his mouth. “Van's always respected my opinion, so naturally he'd listen to me about something like this. I have a lot more experience than he does with women, after all.”

“Yeah, 'cause your track record's spectacular,” Annie snorted.

“Well, what makes you so sure he's going to ask her?”
Annie shrugged nonchalantly, but she looked like she was trying hard not to burst out laughing. “Oh, I talked him into calling Tomi's parents this morning to get their permission.”

“He actually did it?” Allen sounded shocked, and Annie's laughter bubbled up as she nodded in answer. He shook his head, chuckling, imagining Van trying to keep calm.

“I wonder what kind of weird wedding traditions Tomi's gonna have to do,” Annie said when she'd stopped giggling.

“What made you think of that?”

She waved a hand at the decimated cake. “The cake. At American weddings, there's always some kind of wedding cake. The bride and groom have to cut it and then feed it to each other.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Here, I'll show you,” she said, grabbing two frosting covered chunks. “We have to link our arms, like this. And then we take a bite of each other's piece. Like this.”

She took a careful, little bite of the bit Allen was holding, and with a grin, he did the same to hers. He supposed, in the back of his thoughts, that the mischievous twinkle in her eye should have been a clue to step away from her as fast and as far as he could.

Without warning, she smushed the rest of her piece onto his surprised face. He pulled back sharply and wiped the frosting out of his eyes.

“What the hell-?” he spluttered.

She grinned her infamous shark grin. “That's the other part of the tradition.”

Allen stood there, torn between laughing or tearing his hair out in frustration. Annie licked some frosting off her fingers, and suddenly he lunged across the room. She shrieked in surprise as he smeared his sticky piece across her face, laughingly twisting out of his reach. There was a tense pause as they stared at each other's cake-coated faces before diving at the remaining pieces.

Blue and white frosting flew everywhere as they breathlessly battled an all-out cake war. Allen laughed as he grabbed her wrists and pinned her against the counter, slipping and sliding on the messy floor. She struggled futilely in his firm grip, weak with giggles, as she tried to smear one last piece into his hair.

Before he knew what was happening, before he realized what he was doing, Allen leaned down and kissed her sugar-coated mouth.

It was true that Annie never did anything by halves, and this was no exception. The kiss under the mistletoe had nothing on this, Allen thought dazedly as their tongues wrestled together and his hands slipped from her wrists to her waist. Somehow, he wasn't sure if he'd lifted her or if she'd jumped, she'd ended up sitting on the counter top without them breaking the dizzying pressure of their mouths. Her legs wrapped tightly around his waist as his lean fingers pressed into her hips. For once, he didn't care about what was proper or how he should be acting when her frosting covered hands wound themselves through his hair.

It was electric, it was exhilarating, and it was terrifying- because his hands were creeping up the bottom of her shirt, and she was pulling him even closer with those legs of hers, and neither one of them was about to stop.
A sudden banging of the front door and a murmur of voices slammed Allen back to reality, and he jerked away from Annie like she was a red hot coal. He backed away hastily as she blinked and rubbed her mouth with one frosting covered hand.

“That wasn't what I- we shouldn't have-” he stuttered incoherently. His foot slipped on a bit of frosting, and he suddenly found himself flat on his back, his breath knocked completely out of him. Annie raised an eyebrow at him from her perch on the counter top.

“Watch out for that frosting, Al,” she said dryly, as if nothing abnormal had just occurred.

“What the hell happened in here?” Hitomi screeched as she and Van stopped dead in the doorway. Two pairs of confused eyes stared down at Allen's grimacing face. Van's mouth twitched suspiciously at the sight of the frosting-covered knight.

Annie shrugged with a grin. “Cake fight. He lost.”

Hitomi knelt down to help him up, and Annie shot an expectant, hopeful look at Van. He scowled and surreptitiously shook his head. Annie rolled her eyes and sighed as she slid off the counter top and moved to wash the frosting off her hands. Allen joined her, and if she noticed that he was being careful not to touch her, she didn't show it.

“Ugh, I need a shower,” she groaned, and he agreed silently. He could definitely use a cold one.

Later that night, Van lay watching Hitomi sleep as a pale ray of moonlight illuminated her peaceful face. She'd kept them downstairs with Annie and Allen the entire evening, helping clean the kitchen, hanging around talking about nothing in particular. It seemed as if she hadn't wanted them to have time alone to talk. He berated himself for thinking that of her. It was most likely his insecurities and fears making her innocent actions look like more than what they were.

He could've found a way to ask her tonight after they'd gone up to her room. He should have tried harder, but she'd kissed him so passionately the moment her door was shut that he couldn't do anything but respond.

Could it hurt to wait one more day? He hadn't been able to bring himself to ruin what they had right this moment, not yet. His fingers brushed over her sleeping face tenderly before he pulled her just a little closer to his side.

As his eyes drifted shut, he promised himself that no matter what, he would ask her tomorrow. For now, he would have one more night of heaven.

**New Year's and Needs**

Remember how I said last chapter was long? ...Yeah... This one's even longer. And it, too, was written in chunks. Stupid writer's block! I know there are parts I should've taken longer with- I planned on going into more detail- but it just didn't happen. Maybe someday I will go back and fill in and break this up into two chapters, like it originally should have been. Oh well. It's long, but some pivotal stuff happens, so I hope you don't get burned out before the end.

Hitomi couldn't believe her luck when she woke up to feel Van's breath tickling her neck. His face was tucked into the hollow between her head and shoulder, and his hand rested possessively just above her belly button. She loved the feel of his strong, lean
legs tangled up with her own. She had no idea that two people could fit together so... comfortably. Idly, she ran her hands through his thick, wild, black mass of hair and sighed with contentment. She didn't care if she woke him up; in fact, she kind of hoped she would so she could see his beautiful, intense eyes. No one in either of their worlds had eyes like him.

Lord help her, she loved him.

She loved being here with him, like this. She loved the gentle way he held her, like she was so precious that he couldn't believe he dared to actually touch her. She loved the private, adoring smiles that he gave only to her, and she loved the way his eyes said sweeter things to her than any sappy love poet ever could have imagined. She loved his calm, his quiet strength, the way he carried himself with understated dignity. Leave the flashy shows of eloquence and chivalry to weaker men. Van out-shined them all.

He shifted to bury his face deeper into her neck, and she shivered at the goosebumps running over her as his lips brushed her sensitive skin. Deep in her gut, she longed for him to wake up and actually finish what they ached to do, but never completed. It was so frustrating, but so perfectly them: that bit of heaven always out of their reach.

The goosebumps sent her nerve endings into such a state of high alert that she could feel the callouses on his fingertips on the soft skin of her stomach. Damn, she really wanted him to wake up.

Van felt her slim fingers sliding through his hair and cursed himself mentally. He'd been awake long before she'd stirred, but he kept his eyes closed and his breathing slow and deep even as electric spikes of desire coursed through his blood at her gentle touch. He prayed she didn't notice the slight hitch in his breath or the increased pressure of his hand on her skin.

Oh, gods. He'd sworn to himself last night that he would ask her today. Heaven help him, he was too petrified by the thought to even face her this morning. His mind was blank except for the urgent desire to run away, but his treacherous body fought back with its own ever-increasing desire.

He just wanted to feel her one more time, show her how much he needed her, before he potentially lost her forever. If the growing insistence of her hands in his hair was any clue, she wanted it, too.

His lips moved to trail hot, teasing kisses down the smooth skin of her neck as his hand slid slowly upwards. He heard her gasp and felt her come alive under his questing fingers. His lips curved in a small, possessive smile as he heard her moan softly

Dawn crept slowly over them as their hands said what neither of them could put into words. Van twined his arms around her slim waist, his eyes closed and his forehead resting against hers in an embrace so sweetly gentle it brought tears to her eyes. Hitomi cradled his face in her palms as he lay there still and silent, just holding her.

“Hitomi...” he breathed, his voice so quiet that she barely heard it even in the deep, serene silence that wrapped over them like a blanket.

She traced his high cheekbone with one gentle thumb. “What is it, Van?”

Van concentrated on breathing. In, out, in, out. His entire existence had narrowed to this moment in time. The feel of her soft fingers caressing his face. The smoothness of
her skin under the callouses of his hands. Her sweet, beautiful scent, like wind and wildflowers.

“Hitomi... There's something I need to... something I want-”

Hitomi drew away from him just slightly, and that tiny fraction of an inch shattered his courage. The words just weren't coming out right! Suddenly, he was fifteen years old again, standing with his back to her in that dusty windmill, holding himself rigidly just to keep himself from shaking as he thoroughly mangled what he really wanted to say. He could almost taste the sour piscus juice on his tongue.

“Do you still have visions?”

He wondered vaguely if she was going to slap him again. That question- it just fell out of his mouth. Gods, could he just set back the clock about fifteen seconds and have another try?! 

Hitomi blinked at him, confused. Abruptly, she sat up and drew her knees to her chest, pushing her fingers through her golden-brown hair.

“No, not since- I stopped telling fortunes after I came back,” she answered in a low voice. She shifted her gaze away from him, her face embarrassed and a little sad. Van hated himself, hated himself, for screwing things up so royally. Uncertainly, he sat up and touched her arm with a gentle hand.

“I'm glad,” he murmured, and she turned confused green eyes towards him. “Your visions, you hated seeing all that pain. I didn't like it.”

Hitomi couldn't speak. Van's face blurred and wobbled as her eyes misted over with unshed tears. It was silly, and stupid, and embarrassing that his simple few words could make her want to weep, but they absolutely did. Because he was honest, and sweet, and it made her feel so warm to hear him say that he didn't like to see her unhappy.

Van saw the tears gathering in her eyes and panicked. He knew he was bad with words, but to make her cry?

“I didn't mean it was bad that you had visions. I just meant it was hard for you...” he back-tracked frantically, trying to figure out what exactly he'd said wrong this time. Suddenly, her arms wrapped around his waist and she buried her face in his shoulder as she laughed through her tears.

“Van, you idiot. I'm crying because what you said was so sweet. Thank you.”

“Oh,” he returned lamely, utterly confused. Bewildered, he awkwardly patted her back and sighed silently. Talking to a girl was just as complicated now as it had been when he was fifteen.

“It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day in the neighborhood! Would you by my, could you be my...” they heard Annie singing as she flung her door open and headed down the stairs. “Won't you please? Pleeeaaaaase, won't you be... my neighbor!”

Hitomi giggled into Van's shoulder. “Sounds like someone's in a good mood today.”

“Hm,” Van answered, his face turning thoughtful. Hitomi pulled away from him and surreptitiously wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands.

“I guess I'll grab a shower,” she mumbled as she slid off the bed, her cheeks still pink with embarrassment. She practically ran out of the room, not waiting for his reply. Oh, lord. Van was going to think she was some kind of hormonal, psychotic watering pot.
Van watched her leave in stupefied silence. Women, he decided, were completely, nonsensically, unpredictably confusing. He spent a few moments mentally beating himself into a bloody pulp for his disgustingly botched ‘proposal’ before he headed downstairs to find Annie.

He needed some advice, and she was the only person he could ask. He'd be damned to the deepest level of hell before he'd go to Allen for it.

“So, any luck?” Annie questioned the second he came into her view. Van sighed and rubbed his hands over his face.

“No. That is, I tried, but it didn't come out right,” he admitted.

She frowned heavily at him, her hands on her hips. “What do you mean, it didn't come out right? What happened?”

“I made her cry.”

“You...made her cry? Cry how?” Annie demanded, obviously exasperated with his less than detailed explanations. Van shrugged uncomfortably, regretting this discussion already.

“Um... she said it was because I was, erm, sweet. She seemed embarrassed, though,” he mumbled, the tips of his ears turning a brilliant red.

“Okay, why don't you tell me what exactly you said,” Annie said in the most soothing, motherly voice she could muster. “Just, you know, leave out the squicky parts.”

Van frowned darkly at her, but he figured it was a bit late to back out now. His face burned red as he quickly mumbled through his disastrous attempt.

Annie's lips twitched with suppressed giggles. “Good lord, Van. You suck. How can you rule a country and not be able to ask a simple question?”

“Thank you. You're being very helpful,” Van snapped sarcastically. “I know I'm not good at...this sort of thing. Can't you give me a little more direction than 'you suck'?”

“What do you want me to do? Make up some cue cards and hide in the bushes while you propose?”

By now, Van was blushing so hard he'd turned an interesting shade of eggplant. “No. Just...just tell me how this is done on this world.”

“Well, there's all kinds of ways,” Annie replied after a moment's thought. “There's the traditional get-down-on-one-knee and declare your undying love like a sap way. Or the romantic candlelit dinner put the ring in her champagne glass way. Or the-”

“I can't. I can't do any of that stuff,” Van suddenly broke in. His heavy blush had faded away into a sickly ashen green, and his face was twisted into a panicked grimace. Annie rolled her eyes.

“Okay, don't do any of it, then. But you've got to do something. Anyway, how come you aren't asking Allen this? I mean, he's got experience with-” she stopped and grimaced. “Oh, wait. Don't ask him. All he's ever gotten is big, fat no's.”

Van laughed out loud. He just couldn't help it. He sobered up quickly, though, since her mention of the blond knight had reminded him of another question.

“Annie, this isn't my business, but- last night, when Hitomi and I came home, what were you and Allen doing? Besides the cake fight,” he asked cautiously.

“Oh, nothing much. Just making out like teenagers,” Annie replied flippantly. Van gaped at her, opening and shutting his mouth several times as he groped for words.
wasn't surprised at her admission- he'd figured as much from Allen's stiff awkwardness last night- but he hadn't expected to hear her say it so bluntly. How the hell did the man do it? Even girls who considered him a walking, talking joke apparently ended up on his lap.

“Uh- I think I should warn you that Allen's got a reputation-” he began, but Annie cut him off with a smirk.

“Of being a player? That's pretty obvious, Van.”

“Oh. Well, I thought you should know...” he trailed off lamely. He just wanted to make sure she knew what she was getting herself into with Allen.

Annie gave him a half-mocking, half-amused smile. “So I don't get hurt? Van, as sweet and amusing as your misplaced concern is, you don't have to worry about it. I'm a big girl. Besides, it really didn't mean a thing. It was just two people having a bit of a good time. Okay?”

Van frowned uncertainly. Things were never that simple, but Annie really seemed to think they were. She poked him in the ribs with a smirk.

“Anyway, you've got bigger things to worry about than that today,” she reminded him, and he paled for the second time that morning.

Allen didn't want to face the day. He feigned sleep long after Van had showered and gone back up the stairs, tightly rolled up in his pile of blankets. What was he going to say to Annie? How could he explain away what had happened between them?

More than half of his problem was simply that he just couldn't stop thinking about it- and more in a “great Jichia that was amazing” way than “that was a regrettable mistake” way. Honestly, if he had the chance to kiss her again, he didn't think he'd be able to pass it up.

But that was beside the point. Whatever had led up to it, however amazing it was, he had to make sure nothing like that ever happened again. Annie was off limits. Period. And he wasn't going to think too hard about why, either. He'd just have to make it through the next two days with civil friendliness.

“Good morning,” he greeted the three of them when he'd finally made his way upstairs. Breakfast seemed long finished, and Allen supposed that's what he got for hiding downstairs like a coward. Which was incredibly stupid, he reflected, since Annie wasn't treating him any different than usual. In fact, she seemed happier than she normally was without caffeine.

“So, how come you're in such a good mood?” Hitomi asked her when she started tuning her guitar, humming to herself. Allen snapped his head up quickly, a hint of wild panic in his eyes. Oh gods, don't let her blurt out what they'd done!

“What? Because it's New Year's Eve,” Annie replied dismissively, still tightening the guitar strings. “You should always be happy on the last day of the year, or else you'll have bad luck in the new one.”
Hitomi looked like she was going to argue, but Allen jumped in before she could speak.

“So, what are the plans for today?”

“Hm, party at Miranda's apartment tonight,” Annie said vaguely.

Hitomi groaned. “Oh, crap. I forgot all about that. Do we have to go? She won't even notice if we're not there. She always invites to many people to fit in her place anyway.”

“Nope, sorry. She called yesterday to make sure we're coming- especially you, Al,” Annie smirked in his direction. Allen thought hard for a few long moments.

“Have I met her?” he finally asked. Annie burst out laughing, and Hitomi looked like she was trying hard not to giggle.

“Um, yeah, she was at the hotel, remember? Tall, blond, really pretty?” Hitomi prompted. Allen rocked back on his heels, nodding. Yes, he remembered her. The Millerna/Marlene look-alike that had talked him out onto the dance floor. Oh, crap.

Annie tried unsuccessfully to pull her laughing smile into a serious face. “Just...don't tell her you forgot you'd met her. We'd get kicked out!”

“But that party doesn't start until tonight, right? What are we going to do until then?” Van asked, thinking that he could be nice just this once and help Allen out.

“Al and I are going to go hang out at the mall today, maybe catch a movie or something,” Annie replied, giving a deadly, pointed look at Allen. He stared uncomprehendingly at her for a second.

“Oh! Right. Yes, we'd agreed to that,” he agreed hastily when he'd finally caught on to her scheme. Another ploy to get Hitomi and Van alone together, huh? Must mean the man hadn't worked up the courage to pop the question yet. He grimaced when he thought of spending the day at the mall, remembering his one trip to the Mall of America. Van was going owe him big for all this.

“Oh! We'll come with you,” Hitomi chirped cheerfully, and Allen nearly laughed at Annie's disgruntled expression.

“Don't you and Van... I mean, wouldn't you rather...uh,” she stuttered desperately, looking at Allen with pleading eyes. He smiled back innocently and said nothing.

“We don't have anything else planned, right, Van?” Hitomi asked brightly, turning towards him with a huge grin. The only thing he could muster was a shallow nod, but apparently that settled the matter. They were going. Hitomi ran upstairs to grab her bag, and Annie threw up her hands in exasperation.

“Gah! Well, that totally backfired! Allen, why didn't you back me up?” she demanded angrily. Allen gave her his most charmingly innocent smile.

“If I have to spend the day at the mall, so do they.”

Van turned a brilliant shade of magenta and muttered something inaudible as Hitomi bounced back down the stairs.

Allen and Van were immensely relieved when Annie parked the little blue car in front of a much smaller, but still huge, building than the infamous Mall of America. Still, the stores swarmed with people as they wandered through the hallways, and Van started to get that now-familiar feeling of claustrophobia from too many bodies packed into one small space.
“Let's get the boys an outfit to take home,” Annie suggested suddenly. “I'll go with Allen, and you can find something for Van, okay, Tomi? We can meet at the movie theater at six. See ya!”

“Yeah, sure, Annie. I- never mind,” Hitomi sighed, as Annie hauled Allen quickly out of sight. Not that she minded, really. Spending time alone with Van was what she wanted, right? Besides, the thought of dressing Van up in all kinds of clothes- you know, so they could pick the best outfit- practically had her salivating. He just stood silently next to her, and she turned to him with a smile.

“So, I guess we're going to find you some clothes. And we never did find something for Merle...”

Allen ground his heels in and dragged Annie to a stop next to him.

“This is stupid, Annie. He's not going to ask her in a place like this.”

She pulled a face at him. “Wanna bet? That guy's got the romantic charm of a rock. Anyway, your styles are completely different, so we'd be going to different stores no matter what.”

“We could've gone together...”

“Geez, Al. Sounds like you just can't stand to be alone with me,” she laughed. Allen frowned hard.

“Annie, we have to talk about what happened last night,” he stated more firmly than he felt. Really, he didn't want to talk about it at all. It'd just be nicer to pretend it never happened and keep it tucked away like a vague memory from a dream.

“Oh, don't get all serious and stiff on me, Al,” she said, rolling her eyes. “We both know it didn't mean anything. It just...happened. So what?”

“How can you be so flippant? We can't just ignore-” he began, but she cut him off.

“Allen, are you thirteen? Is this your first kiss?” she demanded, and he gave her a dirty look. She poked him hard in the chest. “Then stop acting like it. We're both adults. We've both done something like that before, and we both know it's not a big deal!”

Allen crossed his arms tightly over his chest. “It was still a mistake.”

“Fine! You made a mistake. So it won't happen again, end of story! Can we drop it now? We've got some shopping to do,” she huffed and started off down the hallway again.

After a moment's hesitation, Allen followed after her, schooling his face into a calm mask. The truth was, their little make-out session did make him feel like he was a teenager again, kissing a girl for the very first time. It scared the hell out of him. He swore, right there, that he would keep his hands- and mouth- off of her for the rest of this trip.

Van waited with Hitomi outside of the movie theater, one hand entwined with hers and the other idly swinging a full bag. He shuddered mentally as he thought back to some of the things she'd made him try on. Black leather pants? Totally not his style. Thank the gods she was in tune with him enough to figure out when he was really starting to lose his patience and settled on a normal, baggy pair of jeans, a tight black t-shirt, and a loose button-up red shirt with the sleeves rolled up. From the way Hitomi stared at him, he figured it must look pretty good.
Annie and Allen wandered up then, and the girls had to pull everything out of the bags and examine it. The pinched, frustrated look on Allen's face was uncharacteristically comical, and Van almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

“So, had a fun afternoon?” he asked the blond man in an undertone.

“Only if you consider hell to be enjoyable,” Allen muttered back. He scowled darkly at Annie's bent head as she folded the clothes and shoved them back into the bags.

Hitomi studied the movie list. “Do we want to see “A Christmas Wedding” or “Jingle Hell”?”

They ended up flipping a coin, and it landed on 'Jingle Hell'. Allen had to hold Annie down to keep her from running out of the theater after only about ten minutes of the movie, turning every frightening moment into a bizarre wrestling match between the two of them. Van couldn't figure out what was supposed to be scary, but he didn't care too much, since Hitomi clung to his hand and buried her face in his shoulder once or twice.

They filed out slowly after the credits, Allen still laughing quietly under his breath the entire time. Annie punched him, scowling.

“Shut up. Those elves were creepy. God, I'm never going to sleep again!” she wailed.

Allen only laughed harder. “I'm sorry. I just can't see how something like that could possibly be frightening!”

“You should've seen her when we watched 'The Ring','” Hitomi said, rolling her eyes. “She went hysterical. Literally.”

“Scariest movie of all time,” Annie mumbled with a crazed look in her eyes. She stayed jumpy the whole drive back to the house, and even dragged Hitomi upstairs with her when she went to change for the party.

Van went downstairs with Allen to change into their new outfits. The day had been fun, he guessed, but he'd spent the entire time trying to figure out a way to finally ask Hitomi the burning question that was lodged in his throat. He trudged upstairs to wait for their taxi, hoping desperately he'd get his chance at this New Year's party.

The party was exactly as Hitomi had predicted: loud, crowded, and crammed full of boys and girls who looked like they were just waiting for an excuse to tear each other's clothes off and go at it like bunnies. The four of them squeezed through the door and wiggled their way through the crowd.

“We can leave right after midnight,” Hitomi said into Van's ear, and he wondered if his dislike of the place was that obvious. Allen had a pinched look on his face that reminded Van of how someone looked after taking a big mouthful of piscus juice, and even Annie looked vaguely disgruntled.

“There you are. You guys are so late, it's almost midnight,” Miranda chimed out in her clear voice, grabbing Allen's arm possessively. He looked down at her with a surprised look, but he was too polite to pull himself out of her firm grip.

“My fault. I forgot to reserve a taxi,” Annie said cheerfully, the fact that Miranda had clearly claimed Allen for the night apparently not bothering her in the slightest. Allen mentally kicked himself for even looking for any other kind of reaction.

“Annie, you'd better go talk to Jason,” Miranda said in a low voice, leaning down a little to get closer to the small brunette. “He's high as a kite, and getting completely smashed on top of it.”
A spasm of anger and worry crossed Annie's face. “Shit. He's been clean for so long this time, too. Where's he at?”

Miranda pointed through the crowd, and she disappeared before Allen could pry himself loose to follow. Van and Hitomi had already drifted off to a less-crowded corner, and he looked around helplessly. Miranda's glittering, beautiful eyes fixed him like a bug on a specimen tray.

“I think you owe me a dance since you ran off in the middle of one last time, Allen,” she purred.

“Um...” he stalled. He should have known that stupid mistake would come back to haunt him.

Van's ears rang with the noise as he and Hitomi huddled into a corner to get out of the crush. Most of the room was taken up by people dancing, although at least half of them looked like they should be taking their business to a private room. He looked pointedly away from a particularly enthusiastic couple and shifted uncomfortably.

Hitomi glanced at her watch. “I'm gonna go find us some drinks. Just wait here, okay?”

She moved off through the crowd before Van could stop her, and he shoved his hands into his pockets, scowling. What a complete waste of an evening. They could hardly even hear each other, much less have a serious conversation. All Van could think about was finding someplace private to say what he needed to say and get it over with. He was starting to get touchy and agitated from the stress of it hanging over his head, so when a drunk, giggling girl tripped and stumbled into his arms, he set her abruptly back on her feet with an unfriendly growl.

“Jerk,” she muttered before weaving her way towards another guy. Van merely snorted with annoyance and wished that it was after midnight so he and Hitomi could get out of this stuffy, over-crowded apartment.

“Here, Van,” Hitomi said suddenly from beside him as she handed him a bottle. “It's just beer, but at least it's cold.”

Van nodded his thanks and drained half the bottle in one swing. The heat in the room was almost stifling, and he was grateful for the cold liquid sliding down his throat. Hitomi crowded closer to him to avoid getting pushed over by the moving throng.

“Where are Allen and Annie?” Van shouted down to her. Hitomi shrugged and picked at the label on her beer bottle.

“I saw Annie over by the kitchen arguing with Jason. I don't know why she's bothering, though. He gets really mean when he's on drugs. I can't even stand to talk to him.”

Van frowned, trying to think of any time he could remember Jason as anything but friendly. “Does he get like that often?”

“He used to, but he was clean for almost a year now. It's just so stupid,” Hitomi shrugged. She had a dark scowl on her face, and Van thought it might be a good time to change the subject.

“Have you seen Allen?”

Hitomi's face changed from a scowl to a grin in record time. “Yeah. Miranda's dragging him around, but I don't know how happy he is about that.”
The crowd suddenly shifted, and they had a clear view of Miranda clinging onto a bland-faced Allen.

“Wow. She's like a human squid,” Hitomi said seriously, tilting her head to see them better.

“Hm,” Van agreed, an amused smile twitching the corners of his mouth. Oh, the joys of seeing Allen looking uncomfortable.

“Ten seconds, people!” someone shouted, and the whole crowd began the countdown. Van froze, completely confused. What the hell happened when they got to zero?

“.three...two...one...HAPPY NEW YEAR!” everyone shouted, and mass confusion reigned as every person started kissing whoever was standing next to them.

“What the-” Van began, but he was cut off by Hitomi grabbing his shirt and planting a hard, hot kiss on his lips.

“Happy New Year, Van,” she said seriously when she pulled back to stare at him with her soft, emerald eyes. Around them, things began to calm down as people laughed started dancing again.

“What was that all about?” he asked dazedly. Hitomi laughed, and the sound was sweet and gentle and happy.

“Just a New Year's tradition to kiss someone at midnight,” she told him, and then gave him an innocent glance. “So...wanna get out of here?”

Van nodded fervently, and they quickly made their way to the door. He glanced back into the crowd as he shut the door behind them and had to fight a laugh. Apparently, Allen had gotten a taste of this strange New Year's tradition, too, if Miranda's arms around his neck and the look on his face said anything. If ever Van had seen the knight wanting to squirm, now was it.

The only light came from the Christmas tree as they let themselves into the quiet warmth of the little brown house. Van stayed silent as they pulled off their coats, listening to Hitomi's happy voice as he formed a desperate plan.

Hitomi headed towards the stairs, but Van kept standing by the tree, determinedly studying the sparkling glass ornaments, his hands shoved deeply into his pockets. She turned to look at him, her smile slipping off her face as she took in his serious, chiseled features shadowed by the dim light. Part of her wanted to run and lock herself alone in her room, away from the words she knew she couldn't stop him from saying any longer. The rest of her was lost in silent adoration of the lean, dark-eyed, wild haired king that she loved with every fiber of her being. His deep, mahogany red eyes captured her sparkling green ones, and she took a slow step towards him, wanting to reach out into the depths of his beautiful soul.

“Hitomi,” his rich, musical voice floated over to her, and she took another step towards him unconsciously.

“Mm?” she breathed, memorizing his gentle, perfect face. There was a hint of desperation hidden in the depths of his eyes and a small, worried furrow creased his forehead, but before she could reach out and smooth it away, he started to speak.

“I'm not much good with words, or...or saying the things I should to you. I'm sorry. You deserve better,” he began huskily.

Hitomi gave him a soft, confused smile. “Van...”
“I don't want to hurt you,” he continued, “I hate asking you to choose. But the fact is, I can't leave Fanelia, but I hate the thought of leaving you.”

“Van, what are you-” Hitomi whispered, panic bells ringing loudly in her ears.

“Hitomi, I want you to come back to Fanelia. I'm asking you to stay with me, by my side, for the rest of our lives. As Fanelia's queen.”

Hitomi went pale, frozen, unable to speak. This, this was what he had been trying to say all the times she'd stopped him. Oh, god. She hadn't expected this. Or maybe she had, deep down, and hadn't wanted to hear it.

Van swallowed hard. “I know how much I'm asking of you. I know that you'd have to give up everything, and that you'd only have me in return. I wish I could change that.”

Still, Hitomi couldn't find her voice. Silently, her eyes implored him, but whether she was begging him to stop or continue, neither knew.

“I never wanted you to leave. And now, after this, being together, I can't leave without asking you to come with me. I...love you, Hitomi.”

Hitomi wanted to cry. Did he realize that was the first time he'd ever said those words out loud to her before? In a simple world, if they were a normal couple, she could've just shouted 'yes!' and jumped into his arms. But things between them had never been simple.


He watched her, his face twisted with hope and dread, looking so much like the uncertain fifteen year old boy she had fallen in love with. But there was a grown man there, too, one who had become a king, a ruler of a country she knew nothing about. She panicked.

“Van... I don't think I can be the person you need,” she finally choked out through the tears crowding her voice. “You need someone who can help you, someone who knows Fanelia-”

“I need you.”

His voice was so certain, so final, so heartbreakingly desperate, that Hitomi couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face. It was the closest he had ever come to begging, and it was because of her. She wanted to say yes, she wanted more than anything kiss away the pain in his eyes and tell him she'd go back to Fanelia with him. But she couldn't, she couldn't. Or could she?

The pain, the fear, in his eyes was too much for her to stand. She dropped her green eyes to the floor, unable to look at him, and still he waited for something, any kind of answer from her.

“I... I need some time to think about it,” Hitomi finally forced herself to whisper hoarsely. Van gave a tight nod, and it almost broke her heart to see the way he turned away, exactly like he had after he'd seen Allen kiss her on that bridge in Palas. She itched to reach out and comfort him, but the only comfort he wanted was an answer she didn't know if she could ever give him.

Slowly, silently, she made her way up to her room. She closed the door gently behind her and crumpled to a heap on the floor, sobbing.

Oh, god. What was she going to do?
Allen finally managed to pry his arm away from Miranda's grip long enough to scoot away to look for Annie. He was pretty sure he'd seen Jason pull her out of the main room towards the kitchen, and he headed towards the swinging door. Voices drifted out to meet him as he neared it, and he strained his ears to listen.

“When did you start this crap again, J?” Annie demanded, exasperated irritation coloring her voice.

“It ain't no thing. I'm just having some fun tonight,” Jason growled back.

“Yeah, right. It's never just a one-time thing with you. Are you completely stupid?”

“Loosen up, babe. And what the hell are you doing with Blondy, huh? Not your usual type.”

“Ha. Shows what you know. I'm not with him anyway. We're just friends-”

“Pansy-assed pretty boy.”

“Jason, shut up. God, I hate dealing with you like this.”

Allen had heard enough. He wasn't about to barge into their conversation, but he wasn't going to stand there and listen anymore, either. He wandered through the crowds, looking for somewhere relatively private to put his thoughts back together. Surprisingly, he found a small, empty room and shut the door quietly behind him. It looked like it might be Miranda's bedroom, but at the moment, he didn't care. He just wanted some peace.

It bothered him, somewhere deep in his gut, that Annie dismissed him so lightly as 'just a friend'. He knew it was ridiculous, because in truth, that's all they were. If their relationship could even be called friendly. Borderline animosity was perhaps a better description. But still, the fact remained that it bothered him.

And stupidly, it bothered him worse than being called a pansy-assed pretty boy. That man was just itching for a fight, and Allen hoped he'd be the one to give it to him.

The door opened behind him, and Allen flinched, praying it wasn't Miranda.

“Geez, Allen. What're you doing hiding in here? The party's out there, you know,” Annie said as she wandered into the room and let the door drift shut behind her. She caught sight of his face and frowned. “Hey, what's up? Something wrong?”

“No- nothing. I was just worried you were Miranda,” he replied without thinking.

She gave him an amused look, one eyebrow quirked.

“Worried, huh? And here I thought you were having fun with her.”

Allen pressed his lips into a thin line. “And I thought you'd be spending the party with Jason.”

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“Not when he's like this,” she said with a grimace. “He turns into a completely different person when he's high.”

Allen nodded his understanding, but his brain had already taken a sharp turn and was heading down another, totally dangerous direction. Here they were, shut in this quiet room, alone, and he couldn't stop thinking about the way it had felt to kiss her. He wanted so badly to show her how very not 'just friends' they were. But he couldn't. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't, but oh, that was getting to be a difficult promise to keep.

“We should...get back to the party,” he said, his voice husky and low. Annie just smiled and took another step closer.
“Hm. Probably. But I didn't get to wish you a Happy New Year yet,” she breathed. Her small hands took hold of the front of his shirt and pulled his lips down to meet hers in a smoldering kiss.

Allen supposed he really should have resisted, should have at least tried to keep the kiss platonic, but logical thoughts had taken a flying leap out the window. There was no way to keep himself from spearing his hands through her hair, or pulling her so close she was molded to him, or going back for more after they'd both come up for air.

“What the hell is this shit?”

They jumped guilty apart at the furious roar reverberating through the room. Jason stood in the doorway, his bloodshot eyes wild with rage, the veins in his neck bulging horrifically.

“Oh, crap,” Annie groaned, but she lifted her chin and stood her ground stubbornly as the burly man advanced on her.

“What's your problem, J? Get off the drugs, man. They're making you crazy!” she shot at him. Allen had to admire her courage, because it looked like Jason was inches from wrapping his hands around her neck and squeezing until it snapped.

“What the hell- 'just friends' my ass!” he shouted right into her face, and she flinched back just the tiniest fraction of an inch. “Shit, Annie! With Pansy-boy?”

“That's none of your business,” she ground out, her voice dangerously low. They had attracted a crowd by now, but neither of them noticed or cared. One of Jason's friends pulled at his arm.

“Hey, man, cut it out,” he demanded, but Jason shrugged him off. He tried to grab the front of Annie's shirt, but Allen caught his wrist in a vice-like grip first.

“I think it's time for you to stop,” he warned in a deceptively quiet voice.

“Allen, don't-” Annie cautioned, but it was too late. Jason swung his free hand at him, hard, and Allen blocked it with his arm. For the next confusing seconds, everything was a blur of flying fists, shouted curses, and shrill shrieks from from the watching crowd. Jason may have been more heavily muscled, but Allen had the training and the speed. Jason, drunk and high and blinded by rage as he was, was no match for him. Allen dodged and blocked the rain of punches, looking for an opportunity to knock the other man out cold.

For less than a fraction of a second, Allen felt Annie's hands on him, pulling him, before Jason threw a wide punch. His fist slammed into the side of her head, and she staggered back with a strangled cry. Allen twisted swiftly and caught her before she stumbled to the ground.

“Are you alright? Gods, Annie, are you alright?” he demanded frantically.

“Shit...'sokay, Al. Ow...really, it's okay,” she whimpered, hands on her head. Miranda grabbed her then, supporting her with the help of several other girls, all of them worriedly looking her over as they shouted angry insults at Jason.

Allen wheeled back to face him, red fury coursing through his body. He didn't care if it was just an accident. He was going to turn Jason into a bloody smear on the carpet for hurting Annie.

But Jason just stood there, white faced, all the rage gone out of him, and Allen cursed silently. He couldn't punch him now, not when he knew the man would merely stand there helplessly, no matter how badly he wanted to.
“God, Annie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hit you. I'm sorry. How bad is it?—” Jason moved towards her, but Allen stepped in front of him with narrowed eyes.

“Get out,” Allen hissed, and for a moment he thought he might get the chance to beat Jason up after all when the man glared menacingly at him. Unfortunately, two of Jason's friends grabbed him and hauled him roughly out of the room.

“We should get you some ice,” Miranda insisted worriedly as Annie pushed their concerned hands away and took an experimental step. Allen resisted the urge to reach out and help, knowing she'd just slap his hand away anyway.

“I'm fine, Miranda. Really,” she sighed. “Lord, this is embarrassing. I'm really sorry—”

Miranda shook her head. “Don't be. It's not your fault Jason turns into a real ass when he's using. He was looking for a fight all night.”

“Yeah, well,” Annie shrugged helplessly. She looked over at Allen with shadowed brown eyes. “I think we'd better just go home.”

It took a while for them to get their coats and get to the door with everyone crowding around asking about the fight. Allen scanned the room constantly, but there was no sign of Jason or the guys who'd dragged him away. If they were lucky, he'd be long gone by the time they got outside.

“I called a taxi for you. It should be here any minute,” Miranda told them when they were finally at the door.

“Thanks, Mir,” Annie breathed with a grateful smile. “I'm really sorry about this.”

Miranda hugged her. “Like I said, don't worry about it. And Allen, if you're ever in town again, make sure to give me a call.”

Allen wasn't sure what polite answer he gave to that because he was too busy following Annie out the door. The cold, fresh air was a pleasant shock after the stuffy warmth, and he took a few deep breaths. Next to him, Annie pulled out her inhaler. Immediately, he eyed her worriedly.

“What's wrong? Are you having an attack?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “No. This is just kind of a... precaution. Relax.”

The taxi pulled up, and they gratefully climbed inside. Allen's glance strayed over to Annie as she stared listlessly out the window.

“Are you sure you're alright?” he finally asked quietly when he couldn't stand the heavy silence any longer.

“Yeah. It's really no big deal, Al.”

Her casual indifference twanged at his nerves, and he balled his fists in frustration.

“No big deal? So, what- next time you see him you're going to act like nothing happened? You're not angry with him at all?” he seethed.

“Of course I'm angry. It's just...that's the way things are when Jason's using. Tomorrow he'll call me, and I'll tear into him for being an ass. And I'll tell him not to bother calling me until he's clean. He will anyway, but that's the way it is. I can't just drop him, you know? He's like my brother.”

He doesn't think of you as a sister! Allen wanted to shout, but he ground his teeth together and kept silent. It wasn't any of his business, and besides, he was leaving the day after tomorrow.
The house was dark and silent when they slipped quietly inside the front door. Annie headed towards the stairs as Allen slowly stripped off his coat and gloves with a heavy frown. She paused partway up to look back at him, her expression concealed in the shadows.

“I'm sorry about tonight, Allen,” she said softly. “Jason's a good guy. Really.”

He sighed. “I know. Let's just forget about it, agreed?”

Annie gave a small nod. “Thanks. Happy New Year.”

She sped up the stairs and was gone before Allen could reply, and he ran frustrated fingers through his hair. Everything had gone wrong the minute they'd stepped into that party tonight, including his resolve to keep his hands- and mouth- off of her. If Jason hadn't interrupted them, what would have happened?

Allen stopped short at the bottom of the basement stairs in surprise. That lump of blankets on the futon had to be Van.

“Shit,” he muttered uncharacteristically under his breath, resisting the urge to punch the wall. Knowing he wasn't the only one stuck with a bad ending to the night just made him feel worse. From the way Van kept his back rigidly turned towards him, Allen figured his night had probably been a whole lot more unpleasant than his own.

And they only had one day left to fix it.

**Songs and Choices**

So... this isn't the final chapter. Just thought I'd say that up front. BUT... there is only one more to go. Yep, almost done, people! This one starts out a bit AxA, but don't worry, the focus is mostly VxH... you'll see. Hope you enjoy this (once again) long and sort-of angsty chapter.

I love all reviews
Reviews are so wonderful
They are fan-fic crack
Thank you! And please, give me my fanfic fix...

Allen was ripped back to semi-consciousness by someone banging loudly on the front door. Light footsteps tumbled down the upstairs stairway, and the low murmur of voices drifted down to his ears. He sat up groggily, straining to catch the muffled words as he swiped his long hair away from his face. Van sat on the edge of the futon, his dark eyes unreadable, and Allen had serious doubts whether the man had been to sleep yet at all. There was a defeated, hopeless slump to his shoulders that made Allen look uncomfortably away.

The intensity of the voices rose a notch, and Allen rose smoothly to his feet.

“I'll go see what's happening,” he said quietly without looking over at Van. He wasn't surprised that he didn't receive an answer as he made his way up the stairs and through the dark kitchen. The voices were clearer now, and Allen's hands balled into tight fists of anger. Jason- no more sober than he was earlier- was arguing with Annie. Gods, hadn't the man done enough damage for one night? There he was, just inches from her face, and she glared back at him stubbornly, arms crossed tightly against her chest. Allen eased himself into the shadows of the dining room, unwilling to break into their argument unless he had to.
“I ain't stupid. There's no way you two are just friends,” Jason slurred angrily. “I saw the way you looked when Miranda was all over him. Like you were gonna rip her eyes out.”

“I did not,” Annie denied firmly, but all the color had drained out of her face. “There's nothing going on. We're barely even friends—”

“Bullshit. You're friends enough to suck face every chance you get,” he snapped cruelly, and Annie looked like she was fighting the urge to slap him.

“Quit being an ass, Jason!”

“Quit being a slut, Annie,” he drawled. This time, she hit him. The sound echoed through the dark room as his head snapped to the side.

“Is there a problem, Annie?” Allen asked in a calm, detached voice as he moved slowly to her side. She swung surprised brown eyes to meet his questioning blue ones, but Jason spoke up before she could answer him.

“Sorry, was I keeping her out of bed too long? Getting bored all by yourself, Pretty-boy?”

Allen stared disdainfully down his nose at the shorter man's unfocused eyes. He could hardly believe this was the guy who'd shown unending patience teaching them all to snowboard, always smiling, always friendly. That man didn't exist right now.

“I think you need to be taught the lesson I didn't get to beat into you earlier,” Allen ground out between clenched teeth, his muscles taunt and ready. Jason sneered at him as if to dare him to try it, his own meaty, tattooed hands curling into fists.

“Okay, enough testosterone-flinging. Just... leave, Jason,” Annie ordered stepping between them quickly. In the dim light, the dark shadow of the bruise on her temple stood out on her pale skin, and Jason winced at the sight of it. He backed off slowly, keeping an angry eye on Allen's face as he stepped away.

“So that's it. You're gonna kick me out over him. Some pansy-assed uptight prick that you hardly know,” he bit out. Annie sighed, looking strained and hurt.

“That's not the way it is, and you know it, J. I can't keep doing this. I can't. I told you last time that I'd never go through this again. You've got to go. Don't call me. Don't come over... not until you're clean. I just want you to go away.”

She turned her back to him, her arms still crossed tightly against her body. He took a halting step towards her, but Allen moved between them and gave him a menacing glare.

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“Fine. But you'll want me around. After this asshole's moved on, you'll find me,” he stated confidently.

Annie shook her head but didn't turn to face him. “Not this time, J. Take care of yourself.”

Jason glared at her back for several long, tense moments before he stumbled out of the house, slamming the door behind him hard enough to shake the walls. Allen turned slowly to look at Annie. She'd dropped her hands to her sides, her shoulders slumped and her head bent down.

“Hey, Annie,” he said quietly as he put a hand on her shoulder to gently turn her around to face him. Her long, dark hair curtained her face from him as she continued to stare at their feet.
“I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have told him to go away,” she muttered hoarsely, and Allen frowned heavily.

“Why not? I'd say it's less than he deserved.”

Annie shook her head, her long hair rippling in the dim light, and Allen tipped her chin up so he could see her face. Her doe-eyes brimmed with worry and pain.

“I'm his oldest friend. We've always... but now I just dropped him like nothing. What if he never gets clean? What if he just disappears?” she choked on the word and flapped her hands helplessly. With a groan ripped right from the bottoms of his feet, Allen pulled her into a tight hug. He stroked her hair with his right hand, surprised she didn't push him away. If anything, she pressed her face a little harder into his chest as she stood there rigidly in his arms.

“You don't understand. It's my fault he's like this, because, you know, he thinks he loves me. Only I don't... And he just can't let it go, and he says it's my fault he's gotta get wasted to deal with it. So I can't just tell him to go away,” she whispered, and Allen had to strain to hear her. A strong urge to dissect the other man jolted through him again. How dare he pin his inability to deal with his own problems on her? Allen unconsciously tightened his arms around her.

“Annie, it's not your fault. Jason makes his own choices, and you aren't to blame for them. And you can't be the source of his problems if you're not around, right? He's got to fix this for himself.”

Her small hands came up to grab fistfuls of his shirt. “What if... what if I need to save him? What if I've got to do it for me?” she asked, a desperate twinge to her whisper.

“You can't save him from himself,” he said in a low, soft voice. “And you can't save your mother by trying to save him, either.”

He could feel the shudder run through her stiff body, but still she didn't push him away.

“I know. I know. But still,” she mumbled, her voice muffled by the thin shirt he was wearing. Allen didn't reply. There was nothing more he could say. He didn't know how long he stood there like that, just holding her, stroking the long silk of her hair, before she gave a shuddering sigh and stepped back.

“Thanks. Sorry. I kinda went psycho for a minute there. But, well, I guess that'll happen at four in the morning, huh?” she said with a shaky, fake smile. Allen glanced at the clock, following her lead to change the subject.
“I thought it felt like I'd only been asleep an hour or two,” he said casually. Annie's smile turned apologetic.

“Yeah... sorry you got woken up.”

Allen shrugged easily. “You were woken up as well.”

“Naw, I couldn't sleep-” she began before she caught herself and put on an unconvincingly casual face. An imp of mischief, probably born from spending too much time around her, reared up in him. That wasn't a little blush creeping over her cheeks, was it?

“Really? Why's that?” he prompted with a gleam in his eye. Was it possibly because she was thinking about him? Or their interrupted kiss? She avoided his eyes, the blush deepening, and he leaned down to catch her muttered words. All he managed to hear was “didn't want to turn off the light” and “creepy noises”. His eyes widened as a smirk grew on his face.

“Wait- you weren't still too scared by that stupid 'Jingle Hell' movie to be able to sleep, were you?” he asked incredulously, trying hard not to laugh. The crimson blush went from her collarbones to her hairline now, and she scowled darkly at him.

“No, I wasn't!” she insisted, then looked even more sheepish than before. “Okay. I was. Shut up. Seriously, I can't get those awful, creepy elves out of my head!”

Allen laughed so hard, he had to wipe the tears away from his eyes for the first time in his life. He couldn't even remember laughing that hard as a child.

“Yeah, yeah. Glad you think it's funny. Are you finished? I'm going to make some hot chocolate,” Annie finally said sternly before she flounced off to the kitchen. They leaned against the counter together, sipping at their mugs and talking about nothing in particular. Neither of them mentioned Jason. Some things were better left alone.

“I suppose we should try to get some sleep,” Allen said as he set his empty cup in the sink.

“Yeah,” Annie agreed. She fiddled with her mug, staring into the dregs of her hot chocolate. “Um, Allen? Can I ask a really huge favor?”

He turned back to face her, keeping his face blandly friendly. He'd hoped by now she'd know she didn't have to ask him not to tell anyone about the episode with Jason tonight, or their conversation afterwards.

“Do you think you could maybe just sleep up in my room for the rest of the night?” she asked, looking up hopefully with her trademark nose wrinkle.

“Uh... what?” he stuttered once he'd mentally picked himself up off the floor. That one had hit him completely out of nowhere.

“Look, I know I'm being a total chicken-wuss, but I really can't help it. I might be able to fall asleep if you're there,” she muttered, blushing again.

So, that was it. Allen rocked back on his heels as he mentally chided himself letting his imagination take a nose-dive into the gutter.

“Annie, I don't think this is such a good idea,” he warned quietly.

“You don't have to worry about it being proper or whatever. Friends spend the night all the time. Please? I really don't wanna go back upstairs by myself,” she replied. She lifted pleading brown eyes to his, and Allen knew he was in big trouble. Honestly, there wasn't much any man could do against those eyes or that pout. Besides, there was something else to her request. Something deeper than just a ridiculous fear.
“Well, I guess this could fall under the code of chivalry,” he finally answered, rubbing the back of his head. He was rewarded by the relieved smile spreading across her face.

Kicking himself mentally for agreeing to this very, very bad idea, he followed her quietly up the stairs. Her room surprised him. Somehow, he'd expected it to be completely trashed, like a roomful of toddlers had been let loose to tear it apart, but it was surprisingly neat. Not perfectly clean, like his room always was, but the bits of clothes here and there and the occasional haphazard pile only made it feel comfortably lived in, not chaotic. Every light in the room was on, and Annie hastily scooped a pile of papers and a large book off her bed. Allen groaned silently. That bed was a single. The two of them would never fit on that thing without a whole lot of intimate touching.

“Well, get in,” Annie prompted, climbing under the covers and fluffing the pillow. Allen swallowed hard. Couldn't she at least wear something more than that tight tank top and those super-short shorts? Keeping his face as bland as possible, he slid stiffly between the sheets. Annie smiled at him and snuggled in, closing her eyes.

“Oh, shouldn't you put out the lights?” Allen asked, grinning in spite of himself. Annie cracked an eye sheepishly.

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“Watch it, buddy, or I'll steal all the blankets.” Allen stifled another laugh and turned his back to her, balancing himself on the edge of the bed to keep as little physical contact between them as possible. This could be okay, if they both just stayed like this...

Fifteen minutes later, he was still groggily awake. Every time he was about to doze off, Annie would shift again. Every little noise made her jump, and it was starting to get on his nerves. Abruptly he rolled over to face her as she twitched yet again when the stairs creaked.

“Annie, you're not going to fall asleep if you don't relax,” he whispered. She flopped onto her back next to him.

“I can't help it! It's the curse of an overactive imagination,” she moaned. Sighing, knowing he'd probably regret it in the morning, he reached out and pulled her small body into his.

“There. Now you're safe from the creepy elves and we can both get some sleep,” he muttered into the top of her head, firmly telling his sleepy brain to ignore how well they fit together.

“Well, at least they'll get you first,” she mumbled back as she snuggled a little deeper into him and relaxed. Allen smiled into her hair and fell asleep.

The first weak rays of the dim winter sun filtered into Hitomi's room as she groggily struggled to open her scratchy eyelids. Her head felt like it was full of cotton wool and her nose was stuffy and swollen. The hazy thought that she was coming down with a cold drifted through her sleepy brain as she reached out to find Van's warm, comforting body.
He wasn't there. Her hands stopped searching abruptly as full memory flooded her aching brain. He wasn't there, warming the bed, because of what he'd asked her. He wasn't there, holding her with his strong, loving arms, because of what she couldn't answer him.

She buried her face in her hands and willed herself not to cry. Not again, not anymore. She'd cried so long last night her sobs had turned into dry, hacking gulps. Why did he have to ask her? Why did he have to ruin everything? At that moment, she hated him for asking her to make this choice. But she hated herself more, because she was the one who'd asked him to come here, and that had broken everything.

It was impossible for her to go back to Gaea with him, didn't Van realize that? She belonged here. Here, with her families, her friends, here at her job and her classes. Not on Gaea, not a queen in Fanelia. He was asking her to be something she couldn't possibly be.

But, oh! To be without him- her soul ached at the thought. She knew she would never see him again if she didn't go back with him to Fanelia. It would be too painful, for both of them.

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself. Dear god, she could almost feel his arms around her, the callouses on his fingers on her tender skin. It was too much, too much. She stuffed her fist into her mouth, biting down on the knuckles to keep from whimpering out loud.

The pain in his eyes, the slump of his proud shoulders when he'd turned away- she'd hurt him. Oh, how she'd hurt him, and she hadn't even given her answer yet. She was a coward, and a fool, because she knew she would break her own heart by breaking his if she refused him.

She needed to talk to somebody. She needed to talk to Annie. No- she need to talk to her mother.

Sniffling, she snatched up her cell phone and dialed her home number with shaking fingers. Two rings, three, four...

“Hello?” her mother's voice said sleepily from half-way around the world. Hitomi took a deep breath.

“Mom? It's me...” she choked out hoarsely.

“Hitomi? Are you alright?”

Hitomi tried valiantly to hold back the tears that streamed down her face, but it was no use. What she wouldn't have given to be able to fall into her mother's comforting arms at that moment. “Oh, mom,” she wailed. “I don't know what to do!”

Her mother listened patiently while she poured the whole story out in halting, gasping sobs. Long moments of silence crossed the phone line as Hitomi wiped her eyes and gulped back her tears when she'd finally finished.

“Hitomi-chan, why can't you go with him?” her mother asked quietly, gently. Hitomi slammed her fist onto her bed angrily.

“Because, Mom! It would be crazy! I'd have to leave everything, everyone, behind! And I'd be expected to be this great queen. I can't be queen! I haven't got the first idea how to be royalty!”

“I think you would learn,” her mother replied, still quiet, still gentle. “Van loves you. I'm sure his people would, too.”
“But I’d lose everything if I go. I’d lose you,” Hitomi whispered despairingly.
“You’ll lose Van if you stay. Can you live with that?”
Hitomi covered her eyes with one hand, forcing herself not to start sobbing again.
“Mom, you're making it sound like you think I should go back with him! Don't you get what that would mean? You might never see me again!”
“Of course I realize that. I know that I would lose you...” her mother's voice cracked, and Hitomi could hear her taking a few deep breaths. “But Hitomi, more than anything, I want you to be happy. You never truly came home from Gaea. I could see that right away. My little girl had left something behind there, and I knew in my heart that someday you'd have to go back and be whole again.”
“But... I'd have to give up everything. I don't think I'm brave enough,” Hitomi admitted in a broken whisper.
“What was it that your grandmother always told you?”
“The stars will give you the last of their strength, if you wish hard enough,” she replied slowly. How long ago that seemed, sitting on the back porch with her grandmother when she gave her the pendant. Hitomi wanted to rewind her life to that evening when everything was still simple and happy.
“Whatever you decide, your father and I will always love you,” her mother said gently into her ear, and Hitomi felt as warm as if she had reached out and hugged her.
“Thanks, Mom,” she whispered.
Van stared unseeingly across the empty basement. Allen hadn't come back down after... whatever it was that happened upstairs. Maybe he should talk to the man, warn him not to get involved with girls from the Mystic Moon. Because there was only one way things could turn out, and this was it. Unable to sleep, staring at the walls in a dark, freezing basement while you nursed your broken heart and your battered pride.
He should have gone with his first instinct. He should have known better than to give in to hope. He shouldn't have ruined the little bit of happiness they had actually had. Damn Annie and Allen for telling him to ask her. And damn his own heart for listening.
It was early morning; he could tell by the pale sunlight creeping down the basement stairs. He rubbed one tanned hand across his worn face and sighed. This wasn't the first night of lost sleep because of Hitomi, and it wasn't likely to be his last, either. The only thing he wanted now was for today to be over so he could escape back to Fanelia and let her get on with her life.
Van yanked off the blankets wrapped around his shoulders and pawed roughly through his dufflebag. One more day. Just one more day to get through, though it wasn't going to be easy. They were all supposed to be going to another of Annie's family gatherings, he recalled with relief as he headed towards the shower. The more people around to be a buffer between himself and Hitomi, the better.
Turning the shower on full-blast, he stepped under the scalding water and let it burn it's way over his skin. Maybe it could burn away the memory of her touch. He snorted mirthlessly and rested his forehead against the shower wall. Ha! Not likely. Nothing he tried could ever make him forget that. Gods, what had he done?
Allen woke in the dim morning light of Annie's bedroom as she stretched slowly in his arms.
“Morning,” she mumbled at him with a sleepy smile.

“What? You mean we both survived the night? No attacks by murderous elves?” he teased, opening his eyes wide in mock-surprise. Annie rolled onto her stomach and propped her chin on her elbows to regard him with laughing brown eyes.

“Joking so early in the morning? Your sense of humor must be more developed than I thought,” she replied seriously. “You know, if you're really sneaky, you could probably make it back downstairs before Hitomi and Van crawl out of their little 'Bed of Love'. If you care, that is.”

“It wouldn't matter if I did care. Van spent the night in the basement.”

Annie gaped at him, opening and shutting her mouth like a fish until she managed to stutter out a few words. “Van? In the basement? But, wha- ... How bad did he look?”

Allen grimaced, recalling the shadowed, drawn face and the defeated slump of the king's shoulders. “Pretty bad,” he answered in a major understatement.

“Oh, god. He must've finally asked her,” Annie whispered, chewing on her lip nervously.

“I thought that was what you wanted. Do you think she said no?”

Annie paled, but she shook her head. “No. At least, I hope not. She probably just... needed time to think about it. Yeah. That's all it is. Poor Van.”

“I hope you're right,” Allen said darkly. He pushed back the covers and stood up quickly, before the sight of her sleep-tousled hair and her worried pout made him do anything stupid.

“I guess I'll go take a shower,” he mumbled, but all he got was a distracted “hm” from Annie. Torn between relief and disappointment, he pulled open the door and stepped hastily out into the small hallway, nearly colliding into Hitomi as she made her way to the bathroom.

Allen, who had never been known for blushing, felt himself going crimson from top to bottom as she gaped incredulously at him.

“Uh... good morning,” he said hesitantly. Her eyes looked swollen and red, as if she'd been crying half the night. If he hadn't been feeling so incredibly awkward, he would have hugged her. Now, he merely shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“Goo- good morning...” she stuttered back, blushing a little bit herself before she dodged into the bathroom and shut the door quickly behind her. Allen closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. This was a very, very bad start to his day.

He found Van folding and refolding the blankets with exacting precision when he ventured downstairs for his shower. It was a little unnerving to watch how he lined the corners up perfectly, only to do it all over again with a frown on his face, like the blanket was his mortal enemy. Allen snatched the first bits of clothes his hands touched in his dufflebag and hurried towards the bathroom. Now was probably not the best time to ask Van what had happened the night before.

“Allen,” Van said suddenly before Allen escaped through the door. He stopped and turned back hesitantly.

“Did you need something, Van?”

Van kept folding the blanket and didn't look up at him. “You do remember that we are returning home tomorrow morning,” he stated in a hollow, monotone voice.

“Of course,” Allen returned cautiously.
“You should keep that in mind before you get too involved.”

Allen wanted to laugh out loud bitterly. Van was the last man who should be handing around advice like that. He smiled a tight, uncomfortable smile.

“Thanks, but don't worry. There is nothing between Annie and I,” he said firmly. Van didn't respond and he quickly disappeared into the bathroom.

Van threw the blanket down on the futon in disgust. How stupid did Allen think he was, anyway? Any fool could see what was going on between those two. He growled in frustration, running his hands through his already spikey, messy hair. What did it matter? Let the idiot do what he wanted. Maybe a broken heart would teach him a lesson or two. Van knew it had taught him things he'd never wanted to learn, like how fast he could swing from numb despair to irrational anger.

“Um, you okay, Van?”

Van whipped around to see Annie watching him from the bottom steps, a worried frown on her face. He gave a bitter laugh. “Wonderful. Never better,” he snapped sarcastically.

“So... what happened?” she asked gently, staying where she was on the steps.

“What happened? I was stupid and took your advice,” he snarled. “I should never have asked her...”

“Did she- did she say no?” Annie whispered, her face white in the dim light of the basement.

“Yes. No, not exactly,” Van moaned, sinking down onto the futon. He buried his face in his hands as he leaned his elbows on his knees, his anger replaced by despair so quickly he felt physically weak.

“Not exactly? What did she say?” Annie questioned as she moved slowly to sit next to him.

Van shook his head. “She needed time to think about it. But we both know she meant no, she just didn't know how to say it yet.”

“Or maybe 'time to think about it' just meant she needed some time to think about it. Honestly, you didn't expect her to immediately say yes, did you?” she said. Van gave her a withering look, and she tapped him on the head. “It's a really big choice. I'd be more worried if she wasn't thinking it over. I mean, this way at least she won't regret a spur of the moment decision, right?”

“Yeah. This way she'll be absolutely certain she wanted to say no,” he spit out bitterly.

Annie rolled her eyes. “Okay, Mr. Pessimist. You're going to feel like the prize idiot when she says yes.”

“Annie, stop. Just- stop. You didn't see her face last night. You don't know...” he trailed off, then turned his head to give her a hard look. “Don't talk about it anymore. It's done.”

“Fine. But I reserve the right to a huge 'I told you so' if I'm right,” she declared, standing up and heading towards the stairs. Van crossed his arms and growled under his breath. That stupid, irritating, loud-mouthed... he could think of a lot of words to describe her right now, and none of them were very friendly. He sighed and stood to follow her up the stairs. There was no point in hiding out in the basement.
Breakfast was a silent, awkward meal since Van glowered at his barely touched food, Allen was stiffly polite, and Annie was unusually quiet. Hitomi never came down the stairs, and her empty place at the table merely highlighted their discomfort.

“We should probably leave soon,” Annie said abruptly. Neither of them responded, and she stood up with a frown. “Okay. Well, I guess I'll go talk to Tomi, then.”

She stalked up the stairs, muttering under her breath the entire way. What a crappy start to the New Year. She rapped lightly on Hitomi's door and poked her head inside the room.

“Hey, Tomi. We've gotta leave for Aunt Lolli's soon. Are you going to come along or what?”

Hitomi looked up from a photo album spilling across her lap with startled green eyes. “Oh. Oh, I'd forgotten about that. Maybe I should stay here today. I've got some stuff I have to...”

“Hitomi, you can't hide up here until Van leaves,” Annie said gently. “You've got to talk to the poor guy.”

Hitomi grimaced. “I know. I just... Wait. Do you know what happened last night?”

“Sort of. Enough to know this is really, really hard on you,” Annie replied, watching her face with concerned brown eyes. She sighed and sat down next to Hitomi to give her a hug. “I know you're hurting, but you can't just hide away up here...”

“I'm not 'hiding away'!” Hitomi exclaimed. “I've got a lot I have to think about. There's so much I need to...”

“You need to talk to Van. Come on, get up. You're coming with us to Aunt Lolli's,” Annie commanded as she pulled a resisting Hitomi to her feet.

“Why?”

"Because moping around up here alone all day isn't going to help you. If you cry any more, your eyes will swell shut. You need some cheering up, and you know us Goettenbergs can always make you laugh.”

“I look terrible. I can't face him, Annie,” Hitomi moaned. Annie smiled at her reassuringly.

“Sure you can. You look fine. Here, put a little concealer on and no one will be able to tell you've been crying,” she said. Hitomi gave her a withering look. “Okay. So your eyes are a little red. Just... tell people you're getting a cold. It'll be fine. Really.”

“Why do I always let you talk me into stuff?” Hitomi asked plaintively as she let Annie drag her out of her safe, secluded bedroom. Annie threw her arm around her shoulder and gave her a comforting squeeze.

“Because I always know what's best for you. That, or I'm as stubborn as a bulldog in heat, and you know it.”

Hitomi couldn't even look at Van's face as they put on their coats silently and climbed into the car together. She suspected that Annie picked a fight with Allen just to cover up the awkwardness permeating the air with their unending squabbling.

Across from her in the backseat, Van stared unseeingly out his window, hunched down deeply into his thick coat. Hitomi stole nervous glances at him from time to time and wished futilely that things could have turned out differently. That she could have given him the answer he wanted, so he could be sitting there, holding her hand and smiling that small, beautiful smile at her. Now, the cord of tension and unease between
them twisted and pulled so tightly she wanted to scream. She knew she should've stayed in her room today.

Aunt Lolli's house was on the other side of the city, but traffic was light and the drive was short. Relief poured through Hitomi as she slid out of the car and up to the front door. Van, she realized, was working just as hard as she was to keep as much distance between them as possible.

All four of them were swept inside by a tidal wave of Happy New Year's and hugs from Annie's family. If anyone noticed that Hitomi's smile was brittle or Van's face looked like it was chiseled out of marble, no one showed it. They edged through the front entrance into the crowded living room and looked around.

“I thought you said only half the family from Christmas would be here,” Allen hissed into Annie's ear.

“It is only about half. Aunt Lolli's house is way smaller than Aunt Vera's, though,” Annie replied innocently. “Oh! Leftover Christmas cookies!”

She gave Hitomi a glare that shouted “talk to Van!”, grabbed Allen by the arm, and dragged him across the room. For the first time since she'd run away from Van's question, Hitomi found herself alone with him. Well, as alone as two people could be in a crowded room, anyway. Van's face was hard and unreadable as he stared at the far wall, and Hitomi shifted uncomfortably.

“Hey, guys. Looks like you had too much fun last night or something,” a teenage cousin of Annie's chirped, winking at Hitomi as she passed by the two of them. “Too bad we don't have any mistletoe left over to cheer you up, huh?”

Hitomi felt her mouth go dry as she forced a high-pitched laugh. Van merely looked away, his eyes blank. She felt physically sick to her stomach.

“I... I think I'll go see if the Aunts need help in the kitchen,” she mumbled without looking at his stony face. He didn't even have time to reply before she stumbled off across the room.

Van ran a hand through his hair, frustrated and wishing someone would punch him to take his mind off his mental anguish. He could do this. He could. Jichia above, he'd thought he had better control of himself than this. He'd thought he could be mature about it, friendly even, not silent and hard and bitter. Gods, how she must hate him for this.

He looked up and caught Allen watching him with piercing blue eyes. Angry and embarrassed, he turned away. The Caeli Knight would never have behaved this way. He hadn't behaved like this when Hitomi had turned him down. The thought that Allen was a better man than him ate away at Van's already demolished pride.

A light tap on his shoulder forced him to turn around. He found himself face to face with baby Willem, who looked surprisingly chubbier in the one week since he'd last seen him. His mother was holding him out towards Van with a friendly smile.

“Van, you were so good with him at Christmas. Would you mind holding him just for a bit while I go have a few minutes of freedom?” she asked cheerfully as she placed the baby in Van's arms. Van stuttered out a few words, unable to think of a good excuse, and the woman seemed to take that as a yes.

“Thanks! Just find me or hand him off to someone else when you want,” she called over her shoulder as she headed towards the kitchen. Van heaved a sigh and stared down at the bundle in his arms. Willem stared back at him with big, slate-grey eyes,
studying him solemnly before his eyes crossed. Van gave a tiny smile in spite of himself.

“Alright, little man. You can stay with me for a bit. Just don't spit that white goo on me again, agreed?” he said quietly as he shifted the baby into a more comfortable position and studied the tiny face. He'd never realized holding a baby could make a person feel so... fuzzy.

The image of himself cradling his own baby flashed through his brain, and suddenly all the fuzzy feelings were gone. Someday, he was going to have to produce a son, an heir to the Fanelian throne, and now Hitomi would never be the one that gave him a child. Someday, some woman would have to be found to take Hitomi's place by his side, though never in his heart.

Van stared down into Willem's now sleepy face, wondering about the baby he would never see: their baby, his and Hitomi's. Would he have had green eyes like his mother? Black hair like his father? Or if they had a daughter, would she have had Hitomi's sweet beauty?

His throat closed up and he swallowed forcefully. Those thoughts were stupid and self-indulgent. Van hoisted Willem onto his shoulder and forced the stony, indifferent mask back onto his face. Somehow he'd learn to take his future as it came, and he would do what was best for Fanelia without hesitation.

On his shoulder, Willem suddenly squirmed, grunted, and filled his pants with a loud, squelching explosion. He settled his head back down with a dreamy, contented smile as Van stared in horror at the spreading brown ooze leaking through his outfit.

Once into the bustling kitchen, Hitomi began to wonder if she'd been better off standing awkwardly next to a silent Van. The Goettenberg women's glances were sharp, and her reddened, slightly swollen eyes didn't escape their notice for more than a few minutes.

“I'm just getting a cold,” she lied quietly when the inevitable question was asked. She ignored the skeptical looks and smiled unconvincingly when someone asked about Van.

“Yeah, he's going home tomorrow morning. I don't think we'll see each other again,” she managed to say with an effort. There was a loud chorus of disappointment from everyone in the room, and Hitomi did her best to shrug casually.

“That's really too bad,” Großmama said, reaching up from her chair to pat Hitomi's arm. “The two of you seemed so... well, we all thought you were going to get a husband before our Annie.”

Hitomi choked and felt the blood drain from her face. She felt like she was drowning in a bucket of ice water.

“What? And break our solemn oath of bachelorette-hood? My Tomi would never do that to me!”

Hitomi swung wide, grateful eyes to Annie as she sauntered past her through the kitchen. She snuck a taste from one of the overloaded trays and winked broadly at her with one sparkling brown eye. Großmama swatted her hand like a naughty child.

“Ach, Annie! When I was your age, I was already married with a baby! And you can't even find yourself a husband!” the old lady exclaimed, shooing her away from the food, her eyes twinkling in her wrinkled, old face. All the rest of the the elderly
aunts nodded their heads in agreement, all talking at once about how they'd all either been married or engaged by then, too.

“Find a husband, find a husband! It's like they've never heard of feminism,” Annie muttered as they headed to the dining room to start setting the tables. She suddenly put down her stack of plates and looked up at Hitomi with a curious, worried look on her face.

“Tomi, you didn't mean what you said, did you? About not seeing Van again?”

Hitomi kept setting the table like an automaton as tears clouded her vision. Fork, knife, spoon. Napkin folded just so. Annie came around the table to put a hand on her arm gently.

“Tomi, talk to me,” she begged. Hitomi flapped her hands frantically and blinked rapidly to keep the tears from falling.

“I don't know. I don't know what to do,” she squeaked out in a panicky voice. “I just... I can't. I don't want to talk here, not now. Please. Let's just pretend everything's normal!”

“Okay, okay,” Annie soothed. “Everything will be alright in the end, Tomi. You'll see. When you can think it all through, everything will be alright.”

Hitomi forced a laugh through her tears. “What, you can see the future now?”

“That'd make it easier, wouldn't it?” Annie replied quietly as they started setting the table again.

“Yeah. Times like these, I wish I still had visions,” Hitomi returned just as quietly. They both looked up as the door swung open and Van walked in, gingerly holding baby Willem. At the sight of him, Hitomi flushed bright red, then paled. His eyes quickly scanned the room, and after seeing just the two of them, he looked like he wanted to turn tail and run.

“Did you need something, Van?” Annie asked curiously. Van hesitated a moment, glancing uneasily at Hitomi before holding Willem out with a grimace.

“Yeah. He's, erm, leaking.”

Annie tilted her head, looking the baby over. “Ooh,” she said as she caught sight of the spreading brown stain and grinned. She made no move to take Willem from Van and instead propelled him out the door with her. Hitomi caught the slightly panicked look on his face and gave a watery giggle as Annie's voice drifted out of the room with them.

“You ever changed a diaper before, Van? No? Well, this should be very educational for you...”

Allen felt like his stomach was going to explode. Seriously, no normal human being could eat like a Goettenberg did and still survive! He was eternally grateful that the New Year's dinner was done, and not only because the thought of taking another bite made him break out into a cold sweat. Even with all the loud talking and laughing and general happiness around the table, seeing Hitomi's strained, pale face and Van's stony expression had completely killed his appetite. Even watching Annie literally squirming with embarrassment over her family's blatant attempts to try to hook the two of them up didn't help. What if he'd encouraged Van to do the wrong thing?

An elderly aunt came around with a tray of steaming mugs, and Allen groaned to himself as he forced a polite smile and accepted one. Annie sat nearby on the piano
bench, playing silly duets with some of the little kids and generally adding to the overall racket. Van was nearby, pretending to join in a conversation with a few of the older men as he covertly watched Hitomi where she sat on the floor near Großmama playing with a small toddler. Allen had the sudden urge to pour his scalding drink over Van's head and shout at him to swallow his pride and beg, plead, whatever it took to make Hitomi realize that she needed to go back to Gaea.

“Can you sing something for us, Annie? Please?” begged one of the little girls. Annie pinched her little cheek gently, and wrinkled her nose with a shake of her head.

“Do it, Annie. Sing us something pretty,” Großmama said from her chair as she rocked baby Willem. Annie pursed her lips but reluctantly agreed, running her hands over the keys thoughtfully. Hitomi smiled softly to herself as she watched the kids crowd around the piano for a song as the rest of her American family drifted in to listen. The tune Annie began playing was slow and sad, and Hitomi drew in a breath sharply when she recognized it.

I know there's something in the wake of your smile
I get a notion from the look in your eyes
You've built a love, but that love falls apart
Your little piece of heaven turns to dark
Listen to your heart when he's calling for you
Listen to your heart, there's nothing else you can do
I don't know where you're going
And I don't know why
But listen to your heart
Before you tell him goodbye...

Hitomi closed her eyes and focused on breathing. In and out, struggling to keep a blank mask on her face even as her pent-up tears threatened to fall.

Sometimes you wonder if this fight is worthwhile
The precious moments are all lost in the tide
They're swept away, and nothing is what is seems
The feeling of belonging to your dreams
It was too much. Hitomi pressed her way through the small crowd, slipping out of the room unnoticed.

(Listen to your heart...)

There was nowhere she could go to escape Annie's voice. She didn't want to think about it, she didn't want to listen.

(Before you tell him goodbye...)

Oh, god. She couldn't hold back the tears any longer. They fell in slow, searching tracks along her cheeks as she pressed her hands over her ears.

And there are voices that want to be heard
So much to mention, but you can't find the words
The scent of magic, the beauty that's been
When love was wilder than the wind
Listen to your heart when he's calling for you
Listen to your heart; there's nothing else you can do
I don't know where you're going
And I don't know why
But listen to your heart
Before... you tell him goodbye...
Hitomi heard the family clapping and she slowly dropped her hands to her sides. She didn't bother to wipe the tears off her face. What would be the point?

“Hitomi? Are you alright?”
Hitomi spun around, swiping an arm across her face hastily at the sound of the frail old voice. Großmama leaned on her cane and scrutinized her red-rimmed eyes.

“Oh, I'm fine. It's just... that song always makes me cry,” Hitomi lied quickly. Großmama quirked an eyebrow, obviously completely unconvinced. When Hitomi only forced a shaky, fake smile and said nothing, the old woman turned around and headed back towards the piano room.

“Annie!” she called as she moved slowly through the doorway. “You play such sad songs. Can't you sing us something happy?”
Annie jumped and looked a little guiltily through the doorway where Hitomi stood in the shadows. She tugged on a piece of her dark brown hair, managing to look thoughtful and apologetic at the same time.

“Okay, you want a happy song? I can do that. Hey, Karl, lend me your guitar!”
She tuned the strings for a second before glancing up and waggling her eyebrows mischievously at Hitomi. Allen, seeing it, frowned heavily. That sort of look was usually followed by trouble. Or at least something completely inappropriate. Annie began to play, grinning.

When I was in my teenage years, I did just what I should
I listened to my mother and I was kind and sweet and good
And my friends and I did rituals, and I prayed with all my might
That this would be the evening that she'd stop along her flight.
Well, that was several years ago, and that chick's long overdue
And it's time I came to terms with something plainly clear to you...
She looked up and Allen swallowed a groan with a big mouthful of his drink. That twinkle in her eye could not be good.
The Boob Fairy never came for me!
No, the Boob Fairy never came for me!
Okay, I'm spunky, and I'm cute, and I've got a great personality-
But the Boob Fairy never came for me!
Allen wiped the hot chocolate he'd sprayed off the front of his shirt as the room erupted in cheers and laughter. Completely inappropriate was right. Not to mention completely untrue, he added mentally as he secretly eyed her front.

Still I harbor hopes she'll come for me- I know she will!
I'd get them done myself if she'd agree to foot the bill...
The Boob Fairy never came for me!
No, the Boob Fairy never came for me!
Look, I wasn't wanting melons, just a cute curvaceous B,
But the Boob Fairy never came for me!

Great Jichia, the girl had absolutely no sense of decency. Where the hell did she even learn a song like that? Allen pressed his lips together disapprovingly. Okay, he'd concede that it had worked. Hitomi was actually laughing, and even Van's stony mask showed mild amusement and surprise. Großmama gave Annie a light smack on the leg with her cane.

“That's enough from you, young lady,” she said sternly, but her eyes sparkled with laughter. Annie handed over the guitar and slid over to Allen's side.

“How about that one? I even made Van smile. And nice hot chocolate spray, by the way,” she giggled, eyeing his splattered front.

“Yes. You're very talented,” Allen muttered dryly with a strained, long-suffering expression. He just barely managed to stop himself from rolling his eyes at her.

“I think we should get going, though. Those two have got to talk sometime, and it's not going to happen here,” she said thoughtfully, looking out the window at the late afternoon sun already fading into dusk. Allen nodded, and it wasn't long before the four of them were once again packed into the tiny blue car speeding back towards home.

Hitomi wasted no time retreating to the safety of her room once the tense drive was over. She dropped face down on her bed, mentally and emotionally drained, and she still hadn't figured out what she was going to do. She couldn't leave tomorrow with Van, and she couldn't bear the thought of living without him.

She wanted everything to stop. She wanted to drift away and become nothing. She wished she'd never heard of Gaea, or Van.

She heard her door open and shut gently and felt the bed shift as someone sat down. For a wild, brief second, she thought it was Van, but it was Annie's voice that spoke quietly.

“Tomi, in the three years we've known each other, I've never seen you run away from something because you're scared. I can't stand the thought that you're going to lose Van now because you're too afraid to go back with him. He loves you, Tomi, but more importantly, you love him. All the family and friends in this world aren't going to be able to replace him, and deep down, I think you know that. I don't want to watch you turn into an empty shell because you let your fears get in the way of your heart.”

“I can't! I can't go back with him!” Hitomi sobbed into her pillow. “I can't be what he needs, I can't be a queen! I'm just a girl, an ordinary girl that doesn't know anything about that kind of thing!”

“Isn't a queen's duty to get pregnant and have babies? I know you can figure that part out,” Annie joked, and Hitomi threw her spare pillow at her and sobbed harder. “Okay, that was bad timing for a joke. Sorry. But honestly, I think you'd make a very good queen. Anyway, Van would choose you over some perfectly brought-up, well bred princess hands down, but he's not going to have that choice if you say no. Someday he's got to have children. Are you okay with that?”

Hitomi felt like she was going to throw up. Behind her eyelids, she could see a scene of Van with his perfect-princess wife and their perfect little children with sickening clarity.
"But I can't... Annie, I can't just leave with him tomorrow. I'd never even get to tell my family goodbye," she whispered despairingly. Annie gave her a small half-grin and smoothed a few strands of hair off of her tear-stained cheeks.

"Well, why would you have to go tomorrow? Can't you go in a month or something? When you're done saying goodbye and getting your life in order?" she asked matter-of-factly. "I mean, the guy's waited what- six years? I'm sure he'd be willing to wait just a little bit longer."

Hitomi stared at her, her big emerald eyes full of uncertainty. Annie stood up and gave her a gentle look.

"Listen, Allen and I are going to leave for a while. Think about what I said, okay, Tomi?" She turned to leave but paused in the doorway. "Talk to Van. Don't wait until tomorrow to work this out."

Hitomi heard the front door slam and the roar of Annie's car as it drove away. She sat in the heavy silence of the empty house for a long time, wishing for a clear answer. It wouldn't come, no matter how hard she wished. Abruptly, she stood up and headed downstairs, thinking that maybe if she just saw Van again, if she talked to him, she'd finally know what she was supposed to do.

The main floor was deserted, and she eased herself silently down the basement stairs. She wasn't surprised to see Van practicing slow, methodical movements with the royal sword she had confiscated the first day he'd arrived. He had always had a habit of doing that when he was under stress. He was concentrating so hard that he hadn't heard her coming down the stairs. His back was mostly turned towards her with his shirt off, his muscles moving under his tanned skin as he swung his sword. God, how she wanted to reach out and run her hands over that skin.

"Van," she breathed quietly, and his sword stopped in mid-strike. He stood there, motionless for a long second before his arm slowly dropped until the tip of the blade rested against the floor. He didn't turn to face her.

Now. Now was the time to give him her answer. Because she finally had one. Hitomi licked her lips and drew in a breath.

"Van, I can't go back with you tomorrow."

Um... don't kill me. Remember, there is one whole chapter to go, and if I'm dead, it'll never get finished. Yes, it's partly done, so hopefully I'll update a bit sooner this time... So, the two songs: "Listen to your heart" version by DHT (piano version) and "The Boob Fairy" by Deirdre Flint. Toodles!

**Beginnings and Endings**

Well, here it is. The final chapter. What started out to be just a short little nothing ended up being 26 chapters long! Thanks to everyone who has stuck this story out to it's ending, and especially thanks to everyone who has reviewed- It really means a lot to me, and I deeply appreciate it. So, this last chapter is dedicated to all of you! Uh... sorry for the horrifically long delay... computer issues, and then just plain bad writing issues. I just can't get this chapter right. Sorry if it's a really disappointing ending! Please leave me a review telling me what to fix... Thanks, and I hope you enjoy!!
“Van, I can't go back with you tomorrow.”

The words hung in the air between them as heavy as death. Van didn't move, the taunt muscles under his tanned skin as cold and rigid as the blade of the royal sword he gripped in his hand. Hitomi took a hesitant step towards him, hand outstretched, wishing he'd turn and look at her so she could see his eyes.

“You have to understand. There are so many things, so many people to say goodbye to. I can't just walk away from everything- from my life- tomorrow and go back to Gaea with you. No matter how much I want to stay with you.”

Still, he wouldn't turn to face her, standing there like frozen stone, and suddenly Hitomi couldn't stand it any longer. Slowly, her outstretched hand brushed against the skin of his back, and she could feel the already tense muscles tighten under the touch of her hesitant, shaking fingers. Her other hand joined the first, and she slid her arms around his waist to press herself flush against his back, resting her cheek between his shoulder blades. And still, he never moved.

“I don't want to live without you,” she whispered brokenly. “I don't want to watch you leave tomorrow knowing that I'll never be with you again. I'm scared, Van. I'm scared of leaving everything behind, I'm scared that I won't be able to be what you need. And more than anything, I'm scared of losing you. But I know, deep down, that when I'm ready to go back to Gaea, you'll be with me, and somehow everything will be okay.”

Van felt like he was drowning and had just been thrown a lifeline. He held himself as rigid as a granite slab, every muscle tight to keep from shaking. He wouldn't, couldn't, allow himself to hope.

“Hitomi… ” he finally rasped out through an achingly dry throat.

“I'm asking you to wait for me, Van. I want to go back to Gaea, I want you to bring me home to Fanelia, but I can't go tomorrow. I just need some time. Please,” she begged.

Van wanted to turn around. He needed to know if he'd heard her right, if she really meant what she'd just said. Gods, it couldn't be… and yet-

“How long?” he breathed, unconsciously holding his breath for her answer. How many years would they be apart this time? Her arms tightened around his stiff waist, her body pressed tightly to his back.

“A month- maybe two,” she whispered hesitantly. “Just long enough for me to say goodbye…”

Under her cheek, she could feel Van's shoulders begin to shake with silent laughter. Confused, she loosened her grip enough to pull away and stare uncertainly at the back of his head.

“Van?...”

He shook his head, overwhelmed by such an incredible wave of pure joy and relief that he couldn't stop his helpless, silent laughter. A month? That was all?

“If that's too long…” Hitomi began slowly, but she stopped in surprise as Van wheeled around abruptly to take her face in his hands.

“Too long?” he gasped incredulously. “Hitomi, you know I'll wait as long as you need, if you say you'll come to Fanelia.”
She gazed steadily into his deep mahogany eyes. “Well, I am saying I'll come to Fanelia. And I only need a month-”

Van cut her off mid-sentence with a deep, lingering kiss. He hadn't really done it on purpose, but when his brain had finally grasped her words, her meaning, he couldn't stop himself. It had only been a day since he'd last tasted her sweet gentleness, but gods, it felt like he'd lived a lifetime of pain between then and now.

Hitomi sagged against him her bones doing that melting thing they did so often around him.

“I can definitely be ready in a month. Maybe less,” she sighed as their lips parted slightly. Van rested his forehead against hers and she leaned into the warmth and security of his embrace.

“Hitomi,” he breathed. “Are you sure? You'll really-”

She smiled up at him. “Yeah. I'm sure. Are you? Will your people be okay with this?”

“Fanelia will be deeply honored,” he stated seriously, and Hitomi swallowed a giggle at his intensity by giving him a quick kiss.

“And waiting a month or so...?”

“Hm. I think my council's hoping you'll show up with me tomorrow morning, but as long as they know Fanelia will have a queen within the year, they'll be fine,” he answered distractedly, thinking more about how much he wanted to kiss her than answering her questions. A disturbing thought floated through his preoccupied mind and he grimaced.

“Gods, they're going to use the extra time to plan some huge elaborate ceremony,” he groaned before he could stop himself and Hitomi gave him a quizzical look. He cleared his throat. “Not that a big ceremony's bad, if that's what you want...”

Hitomi had to laugh at his worried face. “That's not really my style.”

She laughed again at the obvious relief flooding his face, and the sobering thought that she knew absolutely nothing about marriage ceremonies in Fanelia hit her with full force. She'd never been big on traditions before, but the thought that she probably wouldn't even get to plan her own wedding was suddenly a little depressing. She rested her head on Van's shoulder and buried her face in his neck so she could breath in his scent of wind and fields and freedom. Everything was going to be alright.

“Van... what would you have done if I wouldn't come back to Gaea?” she asked quietly, the words out before she stopped to think about them.

“I don't know,” he answered simply. “I couldn't stand to think about it.”

Her mouth twisted into a wry grimace. “Me neither. I probably would've ended up as one of those crazy old cat ladies.”

“Cat ladies?” Van asked, obviously trying to picture Hitomi covered with fur and a tail. Hitomi laughed out loud and pulled away enough to look at his confused face.

“Not like Merle, Van! I meant just a normal, crazy old lady with fourteen cats that she treats like her kids!”

“Ah,” he replied slowly, still trying to wipe a disturbingly fur-covered Hitomi from his mind's eye. Some things were just too weird to imagine. And besides, he kind of had a thing for her soft, smooth skin. Her soft, bare-naked skin. Lots and lots of it.... What were they wasting time talking about again?
His lips brushed hers, and she responded eagerly, her slim hands fluttering through his wild black hair to deepen the kiss. There was no tension anymore, no unanswered questions lingering in the back of their thoughts, no misunderstandings to separate them. There was no longer any sense of urgency, only pure, loving need.

And tomorrow no longer bothered them, because it would be the first day of the rest of their lives together.

Driving through the long night

Trying to figure who's right, and who's wrong...

“Where exactly are we going?” Allen asked over the music with an edge of exasperation coloring his voice. They'd barely been home for a half an hour before Annie had loaded up the car, pushed him out the door, and sped off down the road again. Not that he really minded getting out of the tense atmosphere in the house or spending a little more time alone with her, but it was damn cold outside, and besides, she was paying even less attention to her driving than usual.

“We're going to an ice-fishing house of my uncle's. Eventually. Right now, I'm just gonna drive for a bit,” she replied absently as she turned up the music and stared out of the windshield at the forlorn road passing by under the orange glow of the street lamps. Allen frowned as he covertly studied her face in the half-light. Her dark eyes held no trace of their usual laughing sparkle, and the brightness he'd become so familiar with was dimmed. They were empty. Sad. Lonely. And he realized she wasn't getting out of that house for Hitomi and Van's sake, but for her own.

And I might be more a man if I stopped this in it's tracks

And said, Come on. Let's go home.

But she's got the wheel-

And I've got nothing except what I've got on

“Annie, you know you can talk to me if something's bothering you,” Allen said gently after he'd watched her tug on a strand of hair distractedly for a few minutes. She blinked and turned her head to look at him, dropping her hand back down to the steering wheel.

“Nothing's bothering me,” she stated cheerfully, but he knew immediately that it was a lie. Sure, the smile she gave him flashed her dimples, but it didn't make her shine the way she usually did, like life itself was one big joke to her. Allen narrowed his eyes at her, silently challenging her to stop hiding behind her fake grin and forced cheerfulness. The smile slipped off her face as his blue eyes pierced hers, and she turned her gaze back to the road with a sigh.

“Really, it's nothing. Nothing that I didn't already know for years now,” she finally said quietly. Allen waited, but she didn't say anything more. Why wouldn't she talk to him? He wanted her to confide in him, let him know what was hurting her so he could stop it. He shook his head at the absurdity of his own thoughts.

When you're driving with the brakes on
When you're swimming with your boots on
It's hard to say you love someone...
And it's hard to say you don't
“Tomi’s going to go to Gaea, you know,” Annie said quietly, surprising him. Allen turned to look at her, at the unconvincingly blank mask on her face, the way her mittened hands gripped the wheel tightly.

“Wasn’t that your whole plan? The reason you asked Van to come here?”

Her face contorted into a helpless grimace. “Yes. And I knew it would work if the two of them got enough pokes in the right direction. Seriously, they're so clueless it's almost painful.”

“But now you think it wasn't such a good idea to play matchmaker?” Allen asked, confused.

“No! It's just- “ she sighed again and bit her lip. “I have a big family, but I've got no one. No brothers or sisters, like everyone else. It was just me and Grandma, and a mom I met once in my entire life. Jason was sort of like a brother, but...” she trailed off, and Allen could sense that she was forcing herself not to think about the middle-of-the-night fight. She took a deep breath.

“When I met Tomi, I just knew that she was someone special, the sister I'd always wanted. And then I knew, the first time I heard her say Van's name, that I'd have to give her up. Because she didn't belong to me, or my family, or even her own family anymore. I knew it would be hard to let go. I've known it forever. But I guess I'm more selfish than I thought, because sometimes it gets really hard to keep smiling and telling her to choose Van.”

Allen felt sick. This entire time, every single moment that Van had been on the Mystic Moon and for countless days before, Annie had planned and hoped and schemed to get Hitomi realize what was in her heart, all the while hiding her own hurt so well that no one would even suspect it.

“Annie, nobody could think you're selfish,” he finally choked out huskily. She gave a humorless laugh and forced a smile.

“Well, I guess it really doesn't matter anyway. Pretty soon she'll be gone, and that'll be that,” she glanced over at him and frowned. “Stop looking at me like that, Al!”

He blinked, genuinely startled. “Like what?”

“Well, I guess it really doesn't matter anyway. Pretty soon she'll be gone, and that'll be that,” she glanced over at him and frowned. “Stop looking at me like that, Al!”

He blinked, genuinely startled. “Like what?”

“Like I'm some poor, helpless thing to be pitied. I told you I knew this was coming a long time ago. And I'll deal with it just fine, so you can stop feeling sorry for me.”

Irrationally, Allen wanted to snap back at her for being stupid, and at the same time hug her and tell her everything would be okay. In the end, he couldn't make up his mind, so he stared out the window and said nothing.

“You know what? We need some happy music. And we need to find a parking lot,” Annie suddenly declared. She grabbed her iPod and fiddled with it while Allen gave her a confused look.

“A parking lot? What for?” he asked warily as she pulled off the main freeway and the little car reverberated with a techno beat.

“For this,” Annie answered as she shot into a deserted lot and slammed the gas pedal to the floor. Allen pressed his back into his seat hard with a surprised gasp as the car sped across the icy pavement. Suddenly, she jerked the wheel to the side, sending them careening wildly out of control. He hung on to the dashboard with all his strength as they spun madly, narrowly missing a light post by mere inches as they past.

“That,” Annie declared, breathless from laughter, “was awesome! Wanna go again?”
Allen gaped at her. “Are you insane? You could have killed us both.”

“So... that's a no, then?”

“Of course it's a no!” he shouted. “I don't share your apparent wish for death!”

Annie laughed, long and hard and sincerely at his fuming face. “I don't have a death wish! But, you know what? When I die, I wanna go sliding into my coffin sideways with a big-ass grin, shrieking 'Whoa, baby! What a ride!'”

There was a long, heavy, silent pause as Allen stared blankly at her grinning face.

“You,” he finally stated solemnly, “are by far the strangest person I have ever met.”

“Well, maybe you won't forget me then, so I guess that's something,” she murmured without looking at him, and Allen wasn't sure if she was talking to him or herself. She glanced back at him with a brilliant smile. “Wanna learn how to drive?”

Allen, momentarily dizzied by her quick conversation change, pursed his mouth apprehensively. “Uh, no thanks. I'm not really interested...” he trailed off lamely as Annie gave him a mocking look.

“Oh. Well, okay, if you're too nervous to try it,” she said flippantly, her brown eyes laughing at him. “It's probably more complicated than your giant robot thingies-”

“Guymelefs,” he ground out between clenched teeth. “And I'd love to try driving.”

He ignored Annie's triumphant grin and the nagging voice in his head asking him just when he'd become so easy to manipulate as they switched seats.

Ten minutes later, the two of them stood in the frigid air of the parking lot, surveying the damage a light post had done to the side of the car. Allen was too embarrassed to say anything as he picked up the mangled chunk of metal that was once the passenger side mirror and looked it over helplessly.


“I'm sorry, Annie. I don't know how I could've-”

She grabbed the mirror out of his hands and chucked it into the backseat with a casual shrug. “I said it's no big deal. I'll get Jason... uh, I'll find someone to fix it later. Let's just get to the ice house.” She wrinkled her nose and grinned broadly at him. “But I'm driving.”

Allen felt too sheepish to do more than grunt one-word replies to her lighthearted conversation for the entire drive. He wondered ruefully how she could go from quietly depressed to nearly giddy in the space of an hour. At least she was smiling again.

Annie parked the car, and the two of them trudged through the almost knee deep snow, loaded down with all their gear for the night. Allen looked around curiously at the large, flat expanse of land, dotted here and there with tiny shacks.

“These are ice houses? What are they used for?” he asked incredulously. Most of them looked hardly big enough to hold more than two people.

“Ice fishing,” Annie replied. She pointed up ahead to a somewhat larger one. “That's ours. Some of my uncles and cousins stay there over a weekend to fish.”

Allen thought hard, completely confused but not wanting to sound stupid to her. Growing up near the ocean, fishing was definitely something he knew about, and any complete idiot knew that you can't fish without water. And all he could see was vast, empty, snow-covered ground.
“Uh, where exactly do they fish?” he finally asked after straining his eyes searching through the black night air.

Annie frowned at him. “What do you mean, where? They just drill a hole in the ice and fish.”

Allen suddenly stopped and swallowed hard. “Drill a hole?...”

“Well, yeah. They set up the house in the middle of the lake, so there's good fishing... Hey, something wrong, Al?” she asked, turning around and noticing his pale face.

Something wrong? They were only standing on top of a lake, with nothing more than a little ice between them and freezing, deep water. He suppressed a violent shudder. He'd heard, somewhere, that it was possible for entire lakes to freeze over in the coldest regions of Gaea, but he'd never seen it for himself.

“It's perfectly safe, you know,” Annie told him reassuringly, once again making him wonder if she could read his thoughts. She readjusted her armload of stuff to grab his hand and start leading him toward the ice house. “People drive trucks out over this stuff. Haven't you ever ice-skated?”

“No. Asturia doesn't get cold enough to freeze anything. And I'm not worried,” Allen replied defensively. Annie gave him a laughing, unconvinced smile, and he frowned heavily. “I'm not! I was just... surprised. That's all!”

“If you say so,” she chirped lightly. She didn't let go of his hand, though, and Allen was secretly glad about that.

They crunched their way through the frozen snow to the door, and Annie let go to dig through her pockets for a key. Allen stepped gingerly into the house, trying to ignore the nervous worry that their added weight would send the whole thing crashing through the ice as Annie fiddled with a large Grey box.

“Close the door, Al,” she commanded distractedly. “Once I get the heater started, this place'll warm up fast.”

The heater kicked in suddenly, and she stood up with a satisfied grin. She eyed Allen as he stood with one hand on the door knob, looking ready to bolt at the first creak of the ice beneath them, and laughed.

“What? I'm just being... cautious!” he said defensively as she doubled over and wiped the tears off her face with her mittened hands.

“You look like a scared little rabbit!” she giggled. “It's perfectly safe. See?”

Allen gasped in horror as she started to jump up and down, grinning maniacally at him. He dove across the room and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to stand still.

“I can't believe you're so freaked out about this!” she laughed.

“It's a lot more reasonable to be worried about falling through the ice than to be scared of some non-existent, murderous elves,” he growled, still not taking his hands off her shoulders. Annie rolled her eyes, still smiling.

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, I won't jump around anymore. But seriously, we're not going to fall through the ice. I promise.”

Allen eyed her skeptically for a long moment before slowly lifting his hands and taking a step backwards. When she didn't start jumping again, he let himself relax slightly. Annie rummaged through a bundle and pulled out a bottle of wine triumphantly.
“I thought you said you were never going to drink again,” Allen said questioningly as she opened it and took a sip.

“That was the hang-over talking,” she replied cheerfully. “Besides, I only brought one bottle and no beer. Want some?”

Allen eyed the bottle she held out to him for several long moments. It was hard enough to keep his hands off her when he was sober. It wouldn't be the smartest thing to do while the two of them were miles from anything. But then again, if anything did happen, there wouldn't be any Jason to come in and start a fight. And it was his last night here...

He grabbed the bottle and took a huge swig.

Four hours later, Allen was nearly asleep with his head on Annie's lap as she put little braids in his hair. The empty bottle lay discarded next to him, and he smiled a little to himself. As much as the firmly ignored part of him had wanted to do other things with their mouths, they'd spent the night talking, and it felt good. For once in over five years, he'd been able to really pour out all his worries and his pain about his sister without holding anything back. And the best part was that now he was here, supremely comfortable with her fingers sliding through his hair, drifting to sleep as he listened to her singing quietly to herself.

He'd never met anyone like her before. She laughed at him, she argued with him, and most importantly, she listened to him. How had he ever thought he didn't like her? He couldn't remember any more. The sudden thought that it would be difficult to leave her in the morning floated through his sleepy brain, but he was too lethargic to say anything to her about it at the moment. Besides, he'd rather listen to her singing.

You have my heart
And we'll never be worlds apart...

For the first time in his life, Allen fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Morning came far too soon for Hitomi. She rested her head on Van's shoulder as they watched the dawn creeping slowly through her bedroom window together. They hadn't wasted any time sleeping. There had been too much to say to each other, and there was a whole lost day of intimacy to make up for, too. But the clock ticked slowly, inevitably forward, and their time together was nearly over. Hitomi fought the occasional urge to throw her alarm clock across the wall and beg Van to stay just a little bit longer because she knew it wouldn't really do any good anyway. For now, it was enough that he had his arms around her, and his cheek on her hair, and he loved her.

The front door slammed, and the low murmur of voices told them that Annie and Allen were back from wherever they'd spent the night. Van shifted, but was reluctant to let Hitomi go just yet.

“I suppose they'll want to know what our plans are,” he sighed against her silky, honey colored hair.

Hitomi pressed herself deeper into his arms. “They can wait a little bit longer. I don't want to move yet.”

Van didn't reply, but the way his arms tightened around her was as effective as saying “me neither”. She closed her eyes with a small, gentle smile. She was getting better at understanding him, though she supposed it would still take some time. But that was something they would have, right?
“Van, you're absolutely sure about this?” she suddenly questioned, anxious for him to kill any lingering doubts she had left.

“About what? You coming to Gaea?” he replied, and she nodded slightly against his shoulder. “Hitomi, I've wanted you back since the moment you left. There's nothing I'm more sure about.”

Hitomi smiled and turned to kiss him- and was stopped by the knock on her door.

“Hello? You guys decent?” Annie whispered from the other side, and Hitomi couldn't help but laugh.

“You can come in,” she called, and laughed again at the look of bursting curiosity on Annie's face when she poked it through the doorway. “Just couldn't wait to find out what happened, could you?”

Annie grinned sheepishly. “Hey, if curiosity can kill a cat, what do you think it could do to me? So...” her eyes twinkled merrily. “Do I need to help you pack and write a long letter explaining things to your family or what?”

“Nope. I'm not going back to Gaea,” Hitomi stood up and stretched before grabbing her clothes and heading towards the shower.

“You forgot to add 'today','” Annie said with a smirk. “Nice try, though.”

Hitomi heaved an exaggerated sigh, trying to suppress a smile. “Yeah, well... You're no fun.”

“You can always try it later on Allen,” she replied soothingly as Hitomi shut the bathroom door. She whirled around and gave Van the most ridiculously huge smirk he'd ever seen. He scowled ferociously and stood up.

“Don't even say it.”

“Oh, no way, buddy! I reserved the right, remember? I TOLD YOU SO!!” she gloated, poking him in the chest a few times for good measure before she turned to leave.

“Yeah, yeah. You're very smart,” he muttered, rubbing his bruise with a grimace. “And Annie-” she looked back at him and he smiled. “Thanks. For everything.”

“My pleasure, Van Fanel.”

Hitomi laughed silently at her surprise that the open, frozen field looked exactly the same as it did when Van had first arrived. It was only natural, she supposed, that she'd think everything would be different somehow, since her entire life had changed in less than two weeks. In a strange way, it was sort of comforting. In a few weeks, she could leave Earth behind and nothing here would change.

She clung tightly to Van's hand as they walked a short distance away from the beat-up, little, blue car. Annie and Allen followed a few steps behind, but they might not have been there at all for all Hitomi noticed. She only saw Van, walking silently beside her, looking lost in deep thought. Suddenly, he stopped and turned towards her, his deep, mahogany eyes searching her bright, sparkling green ones.

“Hitomi-” he began, and she could sense that it was her turn to destroy his doubts.

“Van, I told you I'll be coming back to Fanelia to be with you,” she reassured him gently. “I'm not going to change my mind. Spending the rest of my life here without you would be like hell. The next few weeks will be hard enough to get through as it is.”
Van nodded, silently agreeing with her. The two of them just stood there, staring at each other for long, long minutes, reluctant to say even this temporary goodbye. Suddenly, Van tugged on her hand and pulled her into a tight hug.

“We'll still be able to see each other, just like before,” he murmured into her hair, and she fought tears as she nodded.

“I know. I wish I could just go back with you now,” she mumbled, her words muffled against his chest. “But I can't leave without saying goodbye to my family...”

“Hitomi, I understand. There are things you need to do, and I'll wait until you're ready.”

She leaned back to look into his dark eyes through her tears. “So, I guess I'll be seeing you in my dreams.”

“I'll be there,” Van assured her with that gentle, private smile he gave only to her. They leaned in for one last bone-melting kiss until they met again on Gaea.

“Good Lord. You'd think they were planning to go another 6 years without seeing each other or something,” Annie grumbled under her breath to Allen, rolling her eyes with a grin. He just gave a vague nod in reply, distracted by his thoughts as he stared unseeingly across the empty fields. For whatever unknown reason, it seemed incredibly important that he cement all his memories firmly in his brain. Watching the sunrise over the frozen lake that morning wrapped up in a blanket with Annie— for warmth, of course— the good natured squabbling, the crazy victory dance she'd done when Van and Hitomi weren't looking, the way her brown eyes smiled at him...

Allen looked down in surprise as she thrust a big, wrapped present, complete with a ridiculously huge, floppy bow, into his hands.

“It's a Christmas present for your sister,” she said casually when Allen frowned and looked it over cautiously.

“Should I make sure she points it away from herself when she opens it?”

“If it were that type of 'present', don't you think I'd be giving it to you?” she asked cheerfully. “This one's a real present. I'm hoping it'll get a smile out of her, anyway.”

“Oh,” he replied after a long moment. Suddenly, he didn't know what to say to her anymore. He was aware of something, some feeling that wanted to be shared, floating around his heart, but he just couldn't pull it forward and figure out what he wanted to say.

Annie gave him a light punch on the arm and a small grin. “You know, I'm really glad I met you, Allen Shezar. I had my doubts the first time I saw you in that poofy-sleeved blue horror you call a uniform, but you turned out to be a really great guy. Maybe we'll meet again in our next lives. If you don't come back as a cockroach, that is.”

“Next life?” Allen echoed, jolted out of his silent thoughts. “But- aren't you going to come to Gaea with Hitomi for her wedding?”

Annie watched Hitomi and Van, lost in each other, for a brief moment. “No, I don't think so. That'd just complicate things for her. And make it harder to say goodbye for both of us. No, it'll be better if she just says goodbye to everything here when she leaves.”

Allen felt like he'd just been drop-kicked in the stomach. He opened and shut his mouth like a gasping fish a few times, totally at a loss. Great gods, he hadn't
considered the possibility of never seeing her again. And now, he was about to leave, and she was just standing there smiling at him, and there was something really important he needed to say to her, only he didn't know what it was.

“Annie-” he began, and his hand started to reach out for her. Next to them, Hitomi and Van finally broke apart. Annie glanced at Hitomi and nodded.

“Take care of yourself, Al,” she said, slowly backing up with Hitomi as Van moved a little closer to Allen. The air suddenly felt alive with electricity.

“Wait” Allen whispered, but Van was too intent on memorizing Hitomi’s face to hear him. The blue light exploded around them, momentarily blinding them as their feet were slowly, irresistibly lifted off the snowy, frozen ground. Allen caught a brief glimpse of Annie, one arm around Hitomi's shoulder as she waved solemnly at him, before he was swept up into the clouds and disappeared.

Hitomi stared up into the sky for long minutes after the blinding pillar had vanished, fighting tears. It didn't matter how much she reminded herself that she was the one who didn't want to go back with him today, that it would only be a month or so before she was with Van again. She wanted him back now. Why couldn't he have just stayed here for a few more weeks?

“Well, that's that,” Annie murmured, and Hitomi took a deep breath and nodded. Annie gave her shoulders a squeeze and grinned, wrinkling up her nose. “If you're ready, I'm freezing. Plus, I brought a bunch of junk food, so we can do some serious mope-eating on the way home. And I rented one of those really sappy, tear-jerker romances, too, so we can veg out in our pajamas, eat ice cream right out of the carton, and generally feel sorry for ourselves all day.”

Hitomi laughed, finally pulling her eyes away from the sky and climbing into the car with her best friend. “Oh, Annie. You always know how to cheer me up.”

“Chocolate cures everything,” Annie declared as she revved her beat-up blue car to life and headed back home.

The two men were immediately enveloped in the warm, spicy air of Fanelia as the pillar dissipated around them. Neither spoke for long, silent moments, both lost in their private thoughts. Van stared up at the Mystic Moon, reminding himself that the emptiness flooding through him was only temporary, that he had an entire life with Hitomi to look forward to after this last, brief separation was over.

Allen stared blankly into the lush greenery around them, floored by the sudden feeling that he'd lost the chance at something precious, something he was only vaguely aware of wanting. Annie's gift for his sister weighed heavily in his hands.

“Lord Vaaaaaaaaaaan!”

The familiar ring of Merle's devoted, somewhat anxious voice pierced the peaceful air around them, and both men turned to give each other a rueful look.

“Back to real life,” Van muttered as the crew of the Crusade, Merle and Gaddes in the lead, charged into view. Allen forced a smile as Merle glomped the helpless king with a loud, happy, shriek.

“It's about damn time you two showed up,” Gaddes growled. “That cat's been downright scary for the last hour, and I've got some scratches to prove it. Have a nice vacation, Boss?”
“Nice? Yes, I suppose it was nice,” Allen said. He rolled the word around his thoughts, pondering it. Nice seemed much too bland a word to describe it, but he really didn't want to think about it. Van's wrestling match with Merle suddenly seemed much more interesting to watch.

“Of course I smell weird, Merle! I've been on the Mystic Moon for almost two weeks!” Van exclaimed in irritation as he tried unsuccessfully to pry the cat-girl off of him.

“Where's Hitomi?” she asked, apparently finally able to notice something other than just her precious Lord Van. She and the rest of the crew of the Crusade peered around as if they expected Hitomi to pop out from behind a tree and shout 'boo'!

“Why would Hitomi be here?” Van asked calmly, laughing secretly to himself as Merle and the crew gave each other sheepish looks.

“Oh! No reason. We just thought, ah, that maybe, um...” Merle stuttered, her cheeks turning as pink as her hair under her fur. Van hid a smirk and swung his small bag over his shoulder as he strode towards Fanelia's castle.

“It'll take her at least a month to get things in order before she returns to Fanelia.”

Van figured that he only had himself to blame when Merle tackled him from behind in a hug so ferocious that it knocked him flat onto his face.

“See what I mean? Scary,” Gaddes muttered under his breath.

Van's personal rooms felt familiarly comforting when he finally made his way through the heavy wooden doors. He sighed wearily, but with a faint smile, as he dumped the few contents of his bag onto his bed. His council had certainly been pleased with the news of the impending royal marriage. Van smirked to himself at the memory of their contradicting disappointment that the wedding couldn't take place for at least a month and their complete panic about planning the celebration in only a few weeks. 'Simple' was not something that penetrated their thoughts. He was going to have to warn Hitomi about that.

Van frowned as he found a small, brightly wrapped gift tangled up in his small pile of clothes. He unfolded the piece of paper attached to it and was surprised to see it was written in Annie's handwriting.

Dear Van, it said, Here's a little wedding present for you to enjoy. I know it's a bit early, but I thought you might want to look through it before the actual day. Enjoy!

Love, Annie.

PS: Check out page 65! How is that even possible?

Curious now, Van ripped off the wrapping paper to reveal a thick, leather bound book.

“The Complete Kama Sutra?” he muttered with a frown, and flipped open the cover.

“What the-?!”

The book fell out of his numb fingers onto the bed, and Van could feel his face turning a glowing red. He glanced around his empty room quickly and thanked every known god that he'd opened the 'gift' in private. What in the deepest level of hell had Annie been thinking? Although...

He picked it up and quickly thumbed through it to page 65.

“Whoa. How would you do that?”
Allen breathed in the fresh sea air of Asturia as he patiently answered all of the questions being flung at him, Millerna's enthusiastic and Eries' typically properly polite. As long as he didn't think too deeply about things, it felt good to be home. Although, if he was honest with himself, his uniform did seem a bit constraining and a little ridiculously pretentious after the comfortable, simple Mystic Moon clothes.

Celena seemed happy to see him, the little upturn at the corners of her mouth as close as she ever came to a real smile as she sat silently by his side. Allen searched her face surreptitiously, looking for any sign of improvement, and stifled as deep sigh when he found none.

“Celena, this is for you. It's a Christmas present from Hitomi's friend Annie,” He said, gently drawing his sister's attention to the brightly wrapped present with it's ridiculous, floppy bow.

“Oooh, something from the Mystic Moon? Open it so we can all see it, Celena!” Millerna prodded excitedly. Celena was already pulling at the wrapping paper, gently tugging it to cause the least amount of ripping. Allen's mouth twitched, remembering Annie's family tearing into the presents, paper and bows flying everywhere. For an instant, he was back in that crowded, loud room with Annie's brown eyes laughing at him as he opened her 'present'.

“What is it?” Celena asked, bringing Allen's thoughts back to Gaea as she stared down at the large, strange looking book in her hands. The princesses leaned over her shoulders to get a better look.

“Look, here's a letter. Maybe this'll explain it,” Millerna said, smoothing the piece of paper open.

“Dear Celena-

Thanks for letting Hitomi and I borrow your brother for the holidays. He generally takes himself way too seriously, so I thought you might like to see some pictures of him having some fun- or at least some pictures of him looking funny. Enjoy!

Annie

“Celena, we should be getting home,” Allen said desperately, making a shrewd guess about what kind of pictures might be in that book. Naturally, the three girls ignored him and opened it eagerly to the first page. Allen found himself cursing the rules of etiquette and chivalry that forbade him from grabbing it out of their hands.

There were pictures from almost everything he'd done on the Mystic Moon, all with captions like “Rides at the Mall of America! (Allen got sick!)” and “Snow Football! Me tackling Allen- again!” Oh, what he wouldn't give to take that book and shove it down Annie's throat! An entire world apart and she was still laughing at him! Millerna pressed a hand against her mouth, desperately trying to stifle her giggles, and even Eries seemed to be biting her lips in an effort to keep them straight. Allen could feel his ears turning hot, and he imagined every sort of horrific torture possible to do to Annie- if he ever got the chance to see her again. Chivalry and etiquette or not, his hands twitched to reach out and grab the book away from Celena, preferably to burn it so no one could ever see it again, when he noticed the miracle.

Celena was smiling.

A real, genuine, laughing smile. She stared at the pictures intently, her smile growing with every page she turned, and suddenly Allen couldn't care less how ridiculous Annie's pictures made him look. He watched his sister's face, memorizing her smile
through the sudden mist of tears that he hastily blinked away. Gods, how he wished Annie could've been there to see her Christmas Wish coming true.

“And last but not least, the highlight of the whole trip and my personal favorite...” Millerna read out loud, jerking Allen out of his thoughts as she flipped the last page. Great Jichia, Annie wouldn't have-

“Princess Alice?!” shrieked Millerna and Eries together. Allen flamed red from his collarbone to the roots of his impressive hair as the two of them dissolved into gales of laughter that even the stoic Eries couldn't stop. He glared up at the Mystic Moon, grinding his teeth together silently while the two princesses fought to compose themselves, only to fall into another fit of giggles every time they looked at the picture of Allen in all his ribbon-bedecked, eye shadowed glory. Good gods, Annie was damn lucky she lived on another planet.

Celena shut the book finally, a huge grin still stretching her mouth from ear to ear. Ignoring the still giggling princesses, she hugged her brother tightly.

“This is the best present I've ever gotten,” she said quietly, her voice muffled by his uniform. Allen hugged her back, all his embarrassment and irritation melting away underneath her happy smile.

Maybe he could forgive Annie for that last page after all...

Hitomi drifted in a gentle dream world somewhere between waking and dreaming, searching through the mist for a familiar face. Van hadn't even been gone a whole day yet, but already there was a painful ache of longing growing in her soul.

And suddenly, there he was. The lines and edges were blurred, but she could still see his beautiful, sweet smile as his eyes met hers.

“I miss you,” she blurted out, and his smile got even bigger.

“So... does that mean you'll be here in less than a month?”

Weak ending, I know. Please forgive me! Or... at least let me know if you're interested in me trying to redeem myself. Yep, I'm thinking about writing a sequel- but ONLY if there's interest. Personally, I think it'd be great fun to see Hitomi and Van trying to figure out marriage- although I won't lie. I'm thinking Annie and Allen have a lot of unfinished, barely started business to work out. And Allen's gotta get a chance at some sweet, sweet revenge for everything he had to put up with on the Mystic Moon. OH! And let's not forget everyone's favorite Esca character (no, not Dilly, sorry!!-- DRYDEN! Yep, I'd love to stick some good ol' Dryden wooing in there- because, even though Millerna's kind of a ditz, he's totally crazy for her, and I want to see him win her over!! So... any takers? Please let me know! Just send me a message or a review with a big fat YES or NO. Please? THANKS FOR READING MMV!!! Oh, yes. The two song quotes are: "Driving with the Brakes on" Del Amitri and "Umbrella" Rihanna.