Without Geass, but with his friends and comrades that will help him on his path, Lelouch Vi Britannia sets out to liberate the Japanese people on his own terms, rallying those around him under the pen, rather than the blade. Nonviolent!AU, with Lelouch and Suzaku working together.
“The price per imperial tonne of Sakuradite rose 1.5% today to $182.2 per pound, as the 98th Emperor of Britannia, Charles Zi Britannia issued his final ultimatum to Genbu Kururugi, sitting Prime Minister of Japan to cede the Home Islands to his government. Following the discovery of Sakuradite-”

“Are you watching Britannian television again?”

The young boy sitting across from the television, who had up to this point been watching intently as the announcer listed the varying effects the upcoming war had on the Japanese and Britannian economies as they tooled up in the brief calm before the storm, turned to the voice, his amethyst eyes pivoting to the person diverting his focus, a tall, slender Japanese man, scowling down and addressing him with his deep growl. The child looked up, his eyes guarded by his long, jet black hair wildly falling down to his neck. He replied, not allowing himself to be intimidated by the man whose presence always seemed to fill whatever room he occupied.

“Indeed Tohdoh. Slanted information and bias in rhetoric aside, numerical forgeries are much harder to get away with in a public broadcast. More to the point, the Japanese media has just entered blackout.”

Lt. Colonel Kyoshiro Tohdoh’s scowl remained fixed as he examined the child as he spoke in his usual tone, both unapologetically apathetic and scarily intense, as he made his point, emphasising his words with the tonal control of a master. Not that this was surprising from this particular child, the child of the one who was about to destroy their peaceful lives.

Lelouch Vi Britannia. This child had been trained from birth to succeed his father as the leader of a third of the planet, and behaved as such, constantly remaining visibly reserved and yet always somewhat self absorbed, he always walked lightly yet confidently, as if wanting to leave a vague impression on any area he went, standing at the tender age of ten at four foot nothing, seemed thoroughly unimpressed by Tohdoh’s stoic show. Tellingly, it was Tohdoh who was surprised at the end of the exchange, as he replied “The domestic stations are down already?”

Lelouch obviously appreciated knowing more than the domineering man, as he quietly responded “Unless the Prime Minister has decided to stop paying his television licence, which I personally doubt.”

Tohdoh ignored Lelouch's attempts at wit, as he simply said “Get your sister and gather your things.”

Lelouch nodded, standing as he turned away to get his sister Nunnally, who had retired for the evening to her quarters, which meant a venture out from the common area across open ground, paved by loose stones and lined by native plant life in the open plan style of most traditional
Shrines that were used for habitation. The sun was just setting on the horizon, the last glimpses barely visible over the hills that lined the distant edges of his vision forward. He paused in the open, hot air to peer at the cloudless view of the light red evening, before resuming his short walk between the thinly walled traditional buildings that made up the overall Kururugi shrine proper. He stepped through the sliding shoji doors into the plainly decorated room he shared with his sister. She was sitting in her wheelchair, plain and free of redundant frills, her clothes plain and traditional Japanese, unlike his uniquely Britannian attire, with a shirt and brown khaki’s that he kept from his journey from the Mainland and maintained fastidiously, as there were no replacements. Not that Lelouch was particularly active or outdoorsy. Still, as his shoes clacked against the wooden floor, his sister's head rose up, her innocent, carefree face looking in his direction.

He instantly cringed and looked aside, as Nunnally's crippled form examined him through eyes that never opened, a symbol of why they were both here. His blood boiled every moment he looked upon that represented the open abandonment he had experienced. But even more than the hate he felt for the man who was about to disrupt his peaceful life for the second time, was the hatred he felt for the hatred. It was an odd paradigm, but in his heart of hearts he knew that anger could not rival any empire, no matter how hot it may blaze, and that he needed to think rationally to win the Long War. That was why, even as he calmed himself from his anger towards his father, it was swiftly replaced by a more bitter sentiment, an admission of his own weakness.

No, self doubt would not do either. He needed all his wits about him, especially for the next forty eight hours.

“Brother?”

If he was cross, his sisters sweet, genuine tones in stark response to his measured snark always took any venom out of his mind, as she drew him out of his internal monologue and into the present, as he approached his sister slowly, caressing her cheek comfortingly as he reached her. “Good evening Nunnally, how are you feeling today?”

She paused as she felt his slim, bony hand on her cheek. His brow furrowed, uncertain of what this meant, as she replied “You’re trembling brother… is there a problem?”

His face flashed with self directed fury as his fingers flinched back. His sister could always seem to see underneath the underneath, able to discern what his face normally hid with the way his hands and fingers felt to the touch. He sighed, as he responded “Nunnally, the time I talked to you about is here.” He had discussed it with her before, that while the elders had a plan of sorts to hide them, they would leave on their own together and be able to hide more effectively. She was hard pressed to agree, and even now she looked dubious. It was again her turn to seemingly wilt in realisation, as she herself began to tremble. “Already? But it's so soon…”

“Father was never known for staying his hand if the opportunity presented itself.” Lelouch said bluntly. Nunnally seemed to break out of her own fret, before asking “Do you have a plan brother?”

A sly grin rose to Lelouch’s face, before he guiltily retracted it, adding with some confidence restored in his voice, “Naturally. First-”

“Lelouch.”

His brow creased, taking his brief moment of pride in the fact he had gone through his eight escape plans in his mind's eye in the space of an instant and determined the most appropriate one for the scenario of a naval landing with fully functional Knightmare Frames on the East coast and turning it into a moment of frustration as the largest irritation in his life over the last few years reared its
“Evening Suzaku. Heard the news? Your father has doomed us all.”

Suzaku was indignant, responding “Would you rather he gave up?”

Lelouch did not turn to face the Japanese child, instead going over to his belongings and smarmily quipping “Fūrinkazan my good friend; In action, be swift and unstoppable, but when the situation calls for inaction, be steadfast and immovable, like the forest and the mountain.”

Suzaku paused in abrupt surprise. “Are you quoting the Art Of War? To me?”

“Yes.”

Suzaku seemed at once surprised and irritated by Lelouch’s aloof tone despite the severity of the situation, as Lelouch grabbed his valuables, a chess board folded into a carryable briefcase, before turning back. “Nunnally, we’re going now. I appreciate your hospitality Suzaku.”

Nunnally seemed torn as Lelouch began to wheel her out of the building, as Suzaku incredulously protested, shouting “Are you just going to leave us?”

Lelouch was silently delighted to be able to deliver his second flat “Yes.” of the evening to a speechless Suzaku, but it was Nunnally who gave him pause as he stepped back out into the open air, when she said “We can’t leave Suzaku here…”

Her speech was quiet, barely able to contend with Lelouch’s booming voice or Suzaku’s snappy tone, but it could pierce the both of them out of their frequent arguments with its smooth, quiet innocence. He often struggled with this, as she could talk him out of what he held to be utmost certainties, such as this plan. Bringing more people exponentially increased so many hassles. It ruled out so many methods of transportation, so many hiding places, it meant less food, and money would have to be split three ways to pay their way North, he was Japanese and therefore a liability he-

“Brother…”

‘Goddammit…’

He could think of a thousand very good reasons not to bring Suzaku Kururugi, but when Nunnally held his hand tightly and begged that side that went by what she wanted, to help her, to protect her fragile self from the world, he forgot all of them. As he turned up towards the Japanese boy, standing in the doorframe of the wooden house, he scowled, standing indecisively as he grappled with the two incompatible inputs.

“Fine.” he hissed, as Nunnally’s face perked up.

“But you carry your own luggage.”

Several hours later, Lelouch groaned under the weight of Nunnally’s body, as he carried it under the orange-red tint of the evening, with Suzaku taking up the weight of their supplies, significantly increased from his original plans, but when you took into account another mouth to feed, it made for a logistical nightmare. He had packed all their food into tailored packages, so he could easily keep track of how many days food they had, but to accompany Suzaku they had to bring more loose food, which meant he had spent the entire time since leaving the shrine trying to add apples and oranges in his mind.
Their leaving was not contested. The elder Kururugi was too busy to be notified, and Tohdoh offered only passive resistance, almost testing them to see if they were ready.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he had asked calmly, seemingly unperturbed that the two hostages and the son of the Prime Ministers were running off into the night the night war was declared, never to return. It seemed nothing could shake the mountain of a man. Lelouch knew better, but that was besides the point. Suzaku, being the one most trusted, took up their case, saying “With due respect Tohdoh-sensei, you and father will be busy defending the Home Islands. We can make it to safety ourselves, and you need not worry about us.”

Suzaku was far better at grovelling than Lelouch could ever hope to be; his ego couldn’t take it, but Suzaku’s placating tones seemed to go over well. He paused, eyes shut, considering it. “Suzaku, I have taught you since the age of 5, and you have grown into the kind of person I would be proud of in discipline, but I have no control over your deeds. I would ask one question of you. Will you regret running?”

Suzaku had no instant answer beyond a stammer, to which Tohdoh gave a rare chuckle and raised a hand “You misunderstand; Despite what my friends have said, retreat is a valid tactic. I am merely asking this. Will you be able to have the confidence to stick to your path?”

Suzaku looked like he was about to cry as he responded “Of course Sensei, thank you so much for everything you’ve done…”

That was Tohdoh’s way, Lelouch reflected; he wouldn’t stop an action, he would just make sure those undertaking it were ready. He was always aware of his own actions, quiet and rarely advising one way or the other, merely clarifying and allowing them to reach their own conclusions. Suzaku had held himself together as they walked down the hill the Shrine was built on, but he had begun to cry after arriving at the foot of the mountain. Nunnally consoled him, as Lelouch gave his best attempt, before telling him they had to move on. As he saw it, crying and wasting time would disrespect their wish for Suzaku to survive the invasion. Suzaku seemed to bristle initially, but accepted that as being rational and began to trudge behind them. It wasn’t like Lelouch couldn’t empathise. He’d had to leave everything behind, and Suzaku was doing much the same. He would never see his father again, never be able to say goodbye, and have to create a new life in a world that, if Lelouch’s educated guess was accurate, would despise him. He felt sorry for him, but made a clear mental point to not allow that to slow their course. They trudged through the miles of soft dirt and slippery mud leading down into the dense Japanese forest. Lelouch’s back and shins began to ache as they descended towards the sea. Suzaku seemed to see this, and suggested “I think we should pause, to rest.”

Lelouch responded with a grunt before letting Nunnally down by a tree and doing a little scouting. About ten meters down from the tree, there was a sharp cliff above a road parallel to the sea, the waves just disappearing below the far barrier that stopped cars falling into the Sea of Japan. “We’ve made it really far West…”

The comment came from Suzaku, who had joined him on the overcropping above the lone road. It would have been a picturesque scene if Lelouch appreciated things like that. But he was not Clovis, or even Euphemia, and thus only noted the sun setting at the edge of the visible world as proving they were on schedule. He could only ponder in a moment of calm relaxedness at that news about how Suzaku perceived the scene, before returning to his ordered manner.

“There’s no way we can get out of here, Suzaku. We’re going to have to fight our way out.”
Before the Japanese child could respond, a shout came up from across the road, short and cut short like a dog's last gasp, before a mass of cries erupted and the flurry of footsteps just beyond their sight, behind a curve in the road as a loud whirring sound filled their ears, immediately causing both boys to cover them with their palms. They looked as a horde of people, all ethnically Japanese, ran into their sight along the paved road, dropping luggage and rucksacks as they sprinted along, ignoring each other in apparent panic. The whirring noise decreased in pitch, as they saw what was causing the chaos; a pair of Knightmare Frames, like something out of a surrealist artwork compared to its serene surroundings as it scooted past the crowd, ploughing through and crushing people as they passed, bodies flailing as they were forced under the monstrosities wheels, their limbs reaching out as their lives were buried under the treads of the steel beasts.

Suzaku and Lelouch could only watch in horror as the Japanese were torn down as the gigantic machines turned on a cent, and began to hack through the crowd with a fantastic lights show, slashing large luminous blades through the crowds like pigs at a country fair, fresh for slaughter. Body parts, cut short at odd lengths flew up in lazy arcs, bleeding red hues through the sky before coming to an eerily still rest, littering the landscape with feet and kneecaps and hands, all covered in red and white. The parade was hacked down at the centre mass, as people were steamrolled into mash, torsos winnowing to flattened paper, with crunches and cries cueing the ending of lives, limb bodies and empty faces lying without limbs to complete the surreal image. The splatter and roar gave a scent of death, iron drawn from blood and fuel, traces of unburnt fuel mashing with incomplete lives filling the air with a foul stench that permeated the scene of green meeting black meeting red.

For possibly the first time, Lelouch was glad his sister was blind, as he fell backwards and emptied his dinner onto the green shrub that guarded the ledge above the coast road, as Kururugi recoiled back, pulling on his friend's shoulder to get them out of view. The rational part of Lelouch that normally ran his life barely ran on a sort of autopilot, as the pair collapsed into the forest, the horrors now only audible.

Perhaps even more unnerving than the screams of the dying was the following silence of the dead, further echoed by the winding down of the Knightmares, leaving the two boys in their quiet huddle in the brush, neither risking a word as the giant mechas slid past, much quieter than before, in low power mode. Even once they were alone, and they knew they were definitely alone as the waves below slowly sloshed back and forward, generating the loudest noise for miles around, neither boy peered over as the sea began to flood with blood.

Several hours passed until Lelouch finally stirred, not speaking and moving almost robotically, like one of those monstrosities, his motions alien to even himself. His senses were numb as he moved forward forcing himself in the manner of mind over matter to take a step forward, one after another, a conscious effort that took all his will. Nunnally was silent, seeming to sense what had happened. He didn't check to see if Suzaku was following, as he descended onto the tarmac, now suddenly 400 degrees Celsius, his feet begging him to turn heel and run, as he stepped forward towards the massacre, the blood encroaching his shoes, staining them forever.

He looked down, staring at the bodies, some cut jarringly cleanly through by the superheated particles, others mangled and crushed by the uncaring treads, organs spilling like off red prawns and spaghetti, skin giving clear way to bone, sheared and snapped at the ends, wrapped in torn, blood stained muscle and organs. The smell was atrocious too, faeces excreted as the body emptied itself of its fluids and waste, and the overpowering stench of blood filling every sense in his body. Lelouch simply stared down, thinking. He wasn't sure what troubled him more; the redundant deaths themselves, or the one sided manner in which their lives were cut short. He didn't mind death, it was a natural process, nor did he have a particular objection to murder that advanced
people as a whole, but civilians, with potential and wisdom still to give, being cut down in what seemed to be the prime of life struck him not only as fundamentally wrong, but completely counterproductive on the part of the only possible culprit; his father.

Of course, he knew the old response. It was practically a stereotype of the fearsome man, that he would declare these people weak, that if they had “won” the genetic lottery, they could outrun, outfight, or outfox their opponents and emerge champions of their environment. Those who could not would be filtered out, and society would be better as a whole.

“I swear…”

Suzaku’s footsteps encroached behind him, as Lelouch's mind raced from visions of his mother, killed for as futile reasons, to the dead assembled before him, to the thousands that were to die from here on, to the man responsible.

“I swear, Suzaku, so help me…”

Someone had to do something.

“I will one day…”

He had to.

“OBLITERATE BRITANNIA!”

Lelouch made his declaration, initially intending to say this to Suzaku, but in his anger he ended up shouting at nothing in particular, emphasised by the silence that followed his declaration. He panted, as the waves ate up the silence, before a voice behind him broke it.

“Lelouch.”

He turned, jolted by the voice that came from the Prime Minister's son, who continued “Lelouch, don’t. Please, I know what you’re thinking, and you need to stop. Where you’re going isn’t going to end well.”

Lelouch pivoted, staring the other ten year old down. “What about yours? You’d just as soon join them!”

Suzaku grimaced. “Better that than killing others. At least then you could have sway.”

Lelouch ran his hands through his messy hair, wetted by the heat and humidity, as well as the sweating brought about by stress. “What would you have me do?”

Suzaku paused. “You’re smart, smarter than me, but you miss what can be obvious. Sometimes there are other ways to win than taking the enemy king. Leaning on a bishop can sometimes do almost as much damage. All you will do is hurt others.”

“THOSE PEOPLE DESERVE TO BE HURT!”

Suzaku recoiled, before coming to a realisation. Lelouch saw it in his eyes, before a smile reached Suzaku’s lips.

“Then you will be just like your father.”

Lelouch face instantly scrunched, like it had just absorbed a foul taste, as he realised not only was Suzaku accurate but he had no retort. His eyes narrowed to diagonal slits as he practically oozed
fury towards the Japanese child.

But Suzaku didn't back down. This above all was likely his best trait. Sensing victory was near, he continued “Now what are you going to do?”

After a gap for the Britannian Prince to gather his thoughts, he said “Regardless, even if that is the case, no matter what method I must use-”

“No.”

This really surprised him. Suzaku was rarely this verbally aggressive.

“Not what you want, how you will get it. Look at me, right now, how will you do anything.”

Lelouch stammered for possibly the first time in his life, before Suzaku continued his rant. “Don’t you dare dishonour their memory by plastering it on some vague vendetta, only to get yourself killed or worse at the first turn! What are you going to do?”

Lelouch grimaced, turning to the dead bodies. Suzaku was right. His own mother's death couldn’t compare to this. He had to put it aside his own grievances. He had his own mother, but that was a drop in the ocean compared to what his father was done.

“You need to decide Lelouch. You can stick to your own selfish ends, but I won’t be staying with you.”

Lelouch stood a little taller. “I already have. Now it’s your turn.”

Suzaku’s ears pricked.

“Are you coming with me?”

The Prime Minister's son smiled. “Of course.”

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A lot of stuff happened this chapter. This fic will be taking a massive divergence from canon, particularly on Lelouch’s and Suzaku’s role in the plot. Canon events will happen, with other people causing them, but their role will be on a different playing field altogether. This chapter lays out their relationship, as well as showing the initial divergence from canon, being Suzaku talking Lelouch out of his plot of bloody vengeance as only he can.

As implied by the opening news broadcast, the first half of this story will be focusing on the economics of both fighting a war, and getting an economy off the ground and becoming functionally independent.

At least, that’s their plan. Finally, the structure. There will be 48 chapters, split into an R1 and R2 with a timeskip between them. There will be six arcs per R, with a designated opening per arc that fit the theme. Between every arc will be a flashback that also relates to the oncoming arcs theme, so in total, there will be 60 chapters. 48 story chapters and 11 flashbacks.
On a side note, my editor pointed out Lelouch never met Tohdoh before R1. This is true, that young!Lelouch never gets a scene with Tohdoh, but they are both in the Kururugi family photo. I also didn't want to add an OC for just one scene, and it also saves time having them already know each other later on. Tohdoh is not going to be important in R1, but he is almost a lynchpin in my plans for R2.

I hope to see you again. Next time, on For Hearts And Minds, Chapter 2; The Progeny and the Prodigy. Stay safe, and don’t traumatis your little sister. Please rate and review!

~Eth0
Chapter Two: The Progeny and the Prodigy

Arc One: Child Of War

Opening: "Swaying" - Soraru

Seven Years Later

Reuben Ashford was in trouble. The former Earls' Knights were dead, his Queen was trapped, and his Bishops were a ways away from the action. A sweat dropped down his bald head, stretching down parallel to the spurs of grey hair around his ears. He adjusted his thin frames for the fiftieth time in ten minutes, as he tried and failed to see his way out of his predicament while the news broadcast blared in the background. Something about a runaway truck loaded with poison gas, driven by Elevens. Not that he cared at the moment. He had to-

BEEP BEEP. BEEP BEEP.

Reuben's body visibly jerked as the man behind him spoke up.

"You're out of time. From now on you'll make a move every twenty seconds."

The noble opposing him smirked smugly and responded "Fine by me.", short circuiting Reuben and sending him into a mental panic. The man on the opposite side of the table seemed amused by this, chuckling as he spat out something he had been chewing into the carpet. Reuben could only despair.

Out of seemingly nowhere, as if the voice of god, came a whooshing sound from behind him, followed by a pair of harsh footsteps, clacking in tandem towards the back of his seat. He turned and saw his salvation in the face of his two brightest students.

"Lelouch! Suzaku! Oh thank heavens!"

Ignoring the dubious look he was receiving from his opponent and the moderator, he stood to make way for Lelouch to sit. The tall, slender teen, standing alongside his more toned Eleven friend shared a look as they entered, which confused Reuben somewhat. Regardless, Lelouch seemed to trust his friend, enough that he had let him into Ashford where he had done quite well. Reuben took a quick peek into Lelouch's eyes, and watched them flit from the board to Suzaku, then back to the board, back to Suzaku, a quick nod, then Lelouch looked down.

"Time?"

Reuben rushed to answer Lelouch's question, rushing out his watch to tell him the current time, but Suzaku, unfussed, beat him to the punch, saying "Eight minutes thirty seconds."

Reuben looked up. That was not what he expected. He meant his record time? How was he to know that? But then he realised; the question wasn't for him. The back and forth looks, were they that in sync? This Suzaku could really keep up with the boy genius?
"Very good. Any thoughts?"

"Mind the King."

"I see. Begin at mark."

Suzaku gave a slight nod, before backing off as Lelouch took the chair. The noble in the far seat looked even more incredulous.

"A student? You have so much time in your hands. Hmmph. You still have only twenty seconds per move, and no consulting your Eleven slave."

Lelouch's face turned to solid stone in a fluid motion that no one missed, least of all Suzaku, who stood back and sighed. Reuben took his cue to back off, as he almost sensed the silent fury oozing from every fiber of the former Princes being. His eyes briefly flitted to the Kururugi heir as the Britannian, sounding as if he was approaching the edge of some otherworldly patience, finally responded "I'll need seven minutes thirty." His hand slid forward, reaching and grabbing the unmoved black King between his thumb and forefinger, raising it to his eyeline.

"Hm? You start with the king?"

Reuben's thoughts echoed that of Lelouch's opponent. It was bizarre, a silly move by any metric, but Lelouch held the piece with a certainty and lack of doubt it almost seemed somewhat rational by simple association with such confident movements. Similarly, Suzaku's reaction was one of apathy, seemingly used to his colleagues' antics on the chess board.

After taking a moment to observe the piece, Lelouch laid it down a place ahead of its initial position, and responded "If the king doesn't lead how can he expect his subordinates to follow?"

Reuben's brow screwed at this trick of rhetoric, something observed by the Eleven standing next to him who silently chuckled and whispered to wrest his concerns, saying "It's a thing he does. For him, chess is a living thing he plays on instinct, as if he were a Field Marshal or something."

The comment was made at a whisper, but as Lelouch visibly enraptured himself in the game Reuben couldn't help but enquire further, asking in a hushed tone "So what's the plan?", a question which caused Suzaku to pause, before finding the words to elaborate. "Lelouch can do it by the seat of his pants. Thinking about it, I can eventually connect that isolated Bishop to the Pawn in the middle, guarding the latter with the former and the King. I can also, with a bit of thought, assume he is going for a thrust up the middle to trap the King in his castle. But he just does it as he goes, forming these plans on the fly as these things go along."

Pausing briefly to allow a few moves to pass to prove his theory, Suzaku sighed as both sides began to suffer heavy casualties. "But he'll never listen to my advice on sacrifice. He could get along so much better if he didn't trade so often."

Reuben frowned as he moved his view back towards the board, and watched as Lelouch bullied his way into the midfield, blockading routes with active trades and taxing the nobles reserves in an aggressive war of attrition, all without missing a beat if his face were the judge. Indeed, his posture was far more at home than the increasingly agitated noble, whose eyes seemed to swap between Lelouch and the board as if either was about to become more accommodating the next time he looked. Alas, neither Lelouch's subtly smug smirk, nor the rapidly degrading state of play on the board showed any signs of relenting. Lelouch's sheer relaxation seemed to play in too, presenting his opponent with a confident poker face in a bizarre take on psychological warfare. It would have been funny if it weren't having such a visible effect on the noble.
Reuben saw that Suzaku had noticed too, giving him a nod of confirmation before returning to his usual concentrated look. The narrowed brow and not-quite-pout suited his face quite well, as well as his bolt upright stance like a soldier, his body firm and at constant attention, his motions firm and deliberate added to his air of formality and practise, in contrast to Lelouch's more fluid, natural motions. Reuben wondered how much of this came from their personalities, for while he wasn't familiar with Suzaku, he knew Lelouch for the showman he was, or whether it was due to where they were, given Suzaku's social stature. On the flipside, he was the son of Genbu Kururugi…

"Check"

Lelouch's calm utterance almost allowed the reveal to fly under Reuben's mental radar, but after registering it his vision flew to the board. Lelouch's aggression had paid off, as while his only active pieces were a Bishop, a Rook, two Pawns and the King, but each one was pressing at the opponent, whose team was riddled with vicious attrition from Lelouch's scorched earth policy of aggressive trading.

Suzaku, unsurprised, glanced down as at his watch as Reuben watched play turn over to the Earl sitting opposite, who seemed as puzzled as Reuben was. Lelouch, seemingly smelling blood in the water, continued with "Twenty seconds."

Reuben felt a pang of sympathy for the Earl, then remembered how much money he was going to make off this. That did make him feel a little better.

In any case, Lelouch's opponent retreated his King into his enclave in the back corner, where Lelouch followed like a Lion chasing down a wounded Gazelle across the plains and into a corner, where Lelouch wasted no time siccing his Bishop on the hapless King following a smug declaration of "Checkmate" on the part of Lelouch. Suzaku spoke up as soon as the King fell onto its side, calling "Seven twenty two!"

Lelouch smirked, standing to shake his already somewhat shaken opponent's hand. Thoroughly embarrassed, the noble gave a hasty handshake before moving his head up and down towards Reuben, attempting to plead with him to get the two teens out of his hair. Reuben took his own turn to smirk, before raising his fingers and rubbing them together in the way that indicated getting paid. And so it was the turn of the noble to have his face turn to stone.

One hefty cheque later, Reuben, Lelouch and Suzaku departed down the elevator they entered through, descending to the tune of generic music and a spectacular view of Britannian Tokyo. The sky blue city stretched from the foot of their view to the face of Mt Fuji, a metallic white cityscape seemingly dropped on top of the land by an alien with no concept of aesthetic architecture; a fitting metaphor, when the Ashford head thought further. The glass surface of the CBD cut to an abrupt end just as his eye reached its natural resting place just below the horizon, and as he looked on he saw more traditional cityscape, with towers of firms and homes that stretched a ways to the North West. The ghettos of Shinjuku and Saitama were out of vision, being to the West of the building, and he was glad he was able to look out at the city without confronting that eyesore. Reuben was conflicted on the issue; clearly, the inhabitants were people, and deserved better, but there was nothing that could be done.

As Reuben was alone with his thoughts, and Lelouch and Suzaku possessed some manner of telepathy, the ride to the bottom of the building was a silent one. After a full minute of silence, the elevator hit the ground level, and Reuben hurried out of the enclosed glass space, before turning back to the pair.

"Thank you boys, so much." he smiled, nodding at the pair who were still standing within the glass cuboid. He reached forward with a wad of cash in hand to pass it to Lelouch. "A token of my
appreciation."

Lelouch nodded and accepted the money, though Suzaku didn't seem too pleased. Neither teen spoke, and so, feeling a little awkward, took his leave out of the lobby with a "Be back in time for class boys!"

As he walked away, Reuben took one more look at the oddly matched pair, and as he departed the building, he considered the pair in a light he had never considered. He had always pegged Lelouch for an isolated person, content to himself and not the type to let anyone in on his machinations. This connection to the son of Genbu Kururugi was interesting. Certainly, the latter had great intelligence and wisdom. And as he stepped into his waiting car, he smiled as he considered what the pair would do together.

Back in the elevator, Suzaku finally spoke, quipping "Quite a conflict of interest, principal paying off his student." This brought Lelouch into a light chuckle, responding swiftly "Let's keep our personal and professional accounts separate, mm Suzaku? Even more to the point, you know that's not why I'm doing it."

"So why did you take it?"

"Didn't say I minded some commission. Could come in handy."

"If only if we all were shining paragons of integrity as you were, Lelouch."

"Shut up Suzaku, you puritan."

The pair bantered quietly between each other as they approached the sidecar that they had borrowed off Rivalz, not in too great a shape but fine for their needs of a quick jaunt into the city proper from Ashford Academy. They continued to joke back and forth, however they were both silenced by the sudden collective gasps in the crowd around them, as the pair took a look around, and saw the screen the streets attention was directed at. The announcer's voice, now projected across the entire street, explained to them "We apologize for the delay."

As the monotone announcer read out their lines, Lelouch's brow joined Suzaku's just above the eyes in a furrowed, concerned position. These large scale announcements were rare enough, though of late they were more common.

"Now His Royal Highness Prince Clovis, third prince of Britannia, will address the nation."

Now Lelouch had a proper scowl, something Suzaku did not miss. Granted, Suzaku of all people could appreciate Lelouch's vehement dislike of the Royal Family, but he wondered how open with his emotions he would be with his other friends. It did make him feel somewhat proud, given how lonely he used to be, however he crushed this selfish sentiment quickly as he returned his focus to the screen, mounted to the side of a building, as the famous Patron of the Arts and Governor of the Home Islands took centre stage.

"Do you not see my pain? My heart was ripped from my chest only to be torn apart! The remnants are filled with rage and sadness! However, as ruler of Area 11, I will not tolerate terrorism of any kind! Because the battle we fight is a righteous one, a virtuous battle to protect the well-being of one and all. Now then, everyone! I would like you to join me in observance of the eight who died for justice, in the line of duty." As the TV directed them to a minutes silence, Suzaku became aware that nearly every eyeball on the street had swiveled towards him, drilling holes with a viciousness that made even the normally hardy Honorary Britannian uncomfortable. Certainly, the
mental connection between himself and the terrorists had been made. Evidently, Lelouch made it too, as he rushed Suzaku onto the sidecar, himself climbing gracefully into the sidepod, before nodding to Suzaku. The third turn of the key burped the old single cylinder engine into life in a cloud of oil and smoke, revving so low Suzaku could count the bangs of the cylinder going through its two stroke cycle.

"Let's get going." Lelouch hushed concernedly, breaking silence, with a force in his voice that compelled a reluctant Suzaku to pull away from the side of the street. Suzaku knew Lelouch had a protective side, born out of caring for Nunnally that after so many years had extended to Suzaku. Lelouch was extremely protective of his friend, and combined with an attitude that he could take care of everything himself led to him being a bit bossy, however Suzaku had no problem taking the fight back to him. On this occasion, Lelouch's proposition to get out of dodge was probably a good idea, given the glares they were both receiving. Even so, Suzaku felt it was a bit disrespectful to break silence, something the Britannian prince caught on to.

"It's about self satisfaction" Lelouch explained over the grunts and cries of the struggling engine. "In the end, there's nothing to be done. At least not with the pacifist in tow."

Suzaku resisted the urge to chuckle, replying "Lelouch, people have died."

Lelouch didn't respond initially, having an eye towards the screen which had returned to the news broadcast. He seemed to be thinking in a more concentrated manner, as he responded "I'll grant you that, but silence helps no one. I'd rather put my efforts into something practical."

"Furinkazan, Lelouch."

"Asshole."

The pair continued down the road at their slow pace, the sidecars frame rattling about with the vibrations of the petrol motor that dragged the metal chassis and its occupants down the once smooth tarmacked road. It was so brash, loud and uncomfortable that the pair of them completely missed the huge truck hurtling up behind them at speeds that would make Marianne Lamperouge blush until it roared its horn down at their backs into through the lobes of their ears, nearly shattering them with its proximity.

"Gah!" Suzaku cried in surprise, jerking the handlebar to the side to dodge the oncoming rig, nearly hurling Lelouch's slender frame straight out of the accompanying pod as the sidecar flew to the side of the road, crumpling the frontal zone as it bounced off the side barrier of the road and came to rest in the centre of the road, allowing its occupants to catch their breath.

The occupants of the truck were nowhere near as fortunate, as the lorry hurtled down the slip road and slammed into the side of the building below the suspended road with a massive crunch as the rear trailer hit against the side of the building and the metal gave way, buckling and warping under the pressure with a loud grinding sound.

Suzaku was the first to respond, leaping out of his seat and sprinting across the road and vaulting the road barrier to go and help without hesitation, sticking the landing on the roof of the trailer with his usual composure and effort. Lelouch, less quickly and far less gracefully, made his way down to the roof of the vehicle, by which time Suzaku had already entered through the roof. He had seen the rear get crushed, and so anyone in the rear would be highest priority, even if there may be no one there. Lelouch panted "Give me a minute here Suzaku..." as he took up the rear, clambering down with the physical sophistication of a goose. Suzaku could only smirk at his friends already disoriented state after only a few seconds of exertion, before he took a proper look at the inside of the truck. It was dark, shineless metallic and grey, with a spherical contraption in
the centre. It was very bizarre, almost like something out of eighties sci fi, complete with worn walls and a grungy texture.

"Is everyone alright?"

The call was Suzaku's, always concerned for others when he had not the faintest clue who they were. After a response of deafening and equally worrying silence, he tried again.

"Anyone here?"

Still nothing. Lelouch, coming up behind him, wheezed "Let's check the cab."

Suzaku turned to nod, but before he had the opportunity to, the rigs engine roared into furious life, and the truck accelerated forward, sending both teens flying back onto the floor. Lelouch face planted off the floor before rolling towards the back wall, as Suzaku gripped against the railing to save his forehead. As Lelouch tried to right himself, the entry from the cabin to the rear creaked, indicating it was about to open. Suzaku, now thinking these occupants may not be the most upstanding individuals, scurried out of the way under the container, as Lelouch pulled himself out of view. As the truck roared along, the hatch opened, and several voices roared over the thundering engine.

"Have you forgotten? That's what I'm here for!"

It was a female voice, brash and with a frightening fury. Suzaku creaked his neck to attempt to look at the source, but to no avail.

"Can you enter the subway via the Azabu root?"

The girl again. She likely had a radio connection of some manner to the driver, Suzaku reflected. He couldn't see Lelouch, and was now seriously worried, a sentiment reinforced by her cry of "Because that would mean a blood bath!"

It was all Suzaku could do to not leap out and apprehend the person where she stood, but the motion in conjunction with his positioning made for a terrible angle, and so he lay still, frustrated. It seemed Lelouch had reached the same conclusion, not revealing himself as the woman moved towards the back of the truck. If he guessed correctly, the truck had gone off the hard shoulder down and into the tunnel parallel and just below the road that he had seen as he had jumped down. The engine noise echoed and bounced within a confined space rather than pirouetting out into nothing in the open air. The were now almost certainly either underground or indoors.

As Suzaku tried to get another look, he got a shock, as the distinctive whirring scream of a Frame crying its way into life with a gradual high pitched squeal, sucking the air of the cabin and forcing it through the Yggdrasil drive to cool the superconducting Sakuradite at near the speed of sound, forcing the gases out the back end, sending hot, dry air into the back sending Lelouch and Suzaku into a shrivelling, arid sweat.

"A Knightmare?" Suzaku was barely able to say, before his breath was sucked from his lungs entirely. The raging red titan rose up within the small space, before pushing its way out into the boundless sky, opening the cabin up to the vacuum, returning natural air to the occupants as the Knightmare Frame earned its name, booming out in a flurry of noise and explosive speed unfathomable for a vehicle of its size and visual weight, with a certain majesty that the terrifying machine did not deserve. Suzaku could barely drag himself out in less than a few moments, as the red beast tore thunder out in the sky. The rear doors, each weighing in at the mass of a wall, had been flung open and were now swaying in the trucks wake. Suzaku's mind immediately turned to
Lelouch, who had hid in the back of the vehicle, and was in the direct path of the Knightmare as it passed through. He crawled his way to the back, elbow and knee, taking great care to not fall out himself as the truck hurtled down a dark tunnel. He slowly approached the end, butterflies growing in his stomach as he saw no sign of Lelouch. He began to panic, as he looked over the edge into oblivion and saw nothing but the darkness of the tunnel they hurtled through.

"LELOUCH?"

Chapter End Notes

It's actually quite interesting that over the course of the first episode, Rivalz was the source of most of the conversations he and Lelouch had, Lelouch being more than happy to sit quietly. Since I interpret Suzaku as quite quiet himself, it was quite tricky to get them to banter. While they may seem more casual than you may be used to, bear in mind they have been together for years at this point, and unlike Nunnally it is not an asymmetrical relationship. I would assume at this point Lelouch is no longer putting on his "Lamperouge act" like he did with Rivalz and the rest of the student council. You'll note in Episode 6 when Lelouch and Suzaku meet without preconditions, we see them both at their most casual. Extrapolating that over several years, a very casual relationship is very feasible. Of course, none of this matters if I just killed Lelouch. Which I may have done. Muahahaha.

A note on this Chapters title; I couldn't resist that alliteration when I came across it on a TvTropes page, and I crumbled. What I do find interesting is which one is which; Is Lelouch the Progeny for being a prince, with Suzaku a Prodigy for his talent and ability to maintain parity, or is Suzaku the Progeny for being the son of Genbu Kururugi, being naturally Japanese and knows the people, whereas Lelouch had to work and adapt to gain their adulation, hence Prodigy? I don't know, but I'd be interested to hear your thoughts.

Next time, on For Hearts And Minds, Chapter 3; A Farewell to Arms. Be safe, and be careful what lorries you get onto. Please rate and review, and I'll see you again soon.

~Eth0
Chapter Three: A Farewell to Arms

Arc One: Child Of War

Opening: “Swaying” - Soraru

“LELOUCH!”

The harsh, throaty voice of Suzaku Kururugi surprised the Britannian Prince, but it came as little relief as he hung for dear life from the rear bumper of the truck, his legs wrapped around the exhaust like a koala gripping a tree, his thighs gently roasting as he clung upwards, his back barely inches above the granite ground rushing past. His arms were already aching from gripped the ends of the steel endplate. Using what he could of his scattered awareness, he called back in a frightened scream “SUZAKU?”

He would never admit it to anyone or anything, but Lelouch Vi Britannia was positively terrified. His brain worked best at an arm's length, working things out from a safe distance. This was emphatically not his comfort zone, and that in and of itself scared him. He was terrified of not just his precarious situation, which did scare him, but the situation of not being in control, of having his life not in his own hands, that truly shook him to his core.

And this, hanging inches from death, was certainly life out of his control.

He remembered the Knightmare, blood red, rush towards him like a bull seeing pure rage. He didn’t think the pilot had seen him, but he felt it as it slammed into his shins and sent him spinning like a top over the edge of the precipice. It was only luck that his legs tangled on the exhaust structure. Lelouch detested luck, as an extension of not being in control, but he thanked it a thousand times as he watched the red terror zoom away from view.

His eyes drew upwards, as he saw, in the faint of light, a hand reach down from above. The hand looked muscular and worn, and while Lelouch’s vision began to fade with the gases beneath the engine wearing his breath to dust. He tried to hold on to the steel of the end of the truck, but he felt his arms give way as his eyes shut for the fall.

“TAKE MY HAND LELOUCH!”

Lelouch, consciousness fading, let go of the bumper.

Immediately, he felt a sharp pull on his wrist, as his hips snapped back from their forwards facing position to back with the momentum of the truck. His spine pulled this way and that as he flailed back.

But he didn’t fall. He was acutely aware that he should have died, should have his face mashed into the pavement, should have hit the deck at over 50 kilometers per hour, should have had his spine ripped apart as his skull splintered with the smashing impact of his disembodied head.
meeting concrete, his organs spread over a mile of tunnel.

But it didn’t.

Instead, he felt his chest meet metal, not stone, and gently, like the warm embrace of a welcoming friend who had just pulled him back from the brink of death, and he heard the sounds of soft chuckles, interspersed with tears shared between him and his saviour.

“Lelouch…”

He couldn’t respond in words for a moment, just gripping onto Suzaku’s arms. His jaw shivered, like he was cold as the arctic winter, but his shelter guarded him from the snow. He whispered, through the shivers “Thank you..”

Suzaku pulled him into a standing position, though his legs were shaking horribly. Now that his mind had reengaged, he found the whole experience somewhat embarrassing.

Life or death situations were emphatically not for him.

With the help of Suzaku, they made their way down towards the cabin of the truck to force the driver to stop, but just as Lelouch found his feet, the truck smashed to a halt down the longitudinal axis, hurling Lelouch and Suzaku to the front of the container as the floor seemed to stop, their feet being pulled out from under them. The pair of them clattered against the front wall, falling on top of each other as the dust settled.

Disoriented, Lelouch tried to right himself and work out what happened, feeling his senses return to him one by one. His vision, of grey metal meeting grey dust and more grey ground as he regained his sense of touch, the palm of his hand grating against the granite ground as he fell out of the truck. Then, his hearing, Suzaku screaming.

Then, his smell. Blood, thick and rich, like that day.

He gagged, still on his haunches, nearly emptying his stomach as he craned his neck at the cabin, wishing he hadn’t as he saw a hand sticking out of the cabin, in a position bent over backwards where an arm had no business being. He stood up, and ran over to the truck door and tried to pull at it with numb limbs, to no avail.

“Su…” he panted, as he continued to pull against the door. “Hel… get him out…”

Suzaku came to his relief, tearing at the door as Lelouch fell back and allowed himself to get some oxygen back in his system and think. With each breath, his world regained colour, and his thoughts grew more orderly, like a library of books that had all fallen off the shelf that he was replacing one by one with calm precision, satisfying his desire for clear understanding as the floor of this hypothetical mental library cleared. Now that that was cleared, he thought about the situation. The truckers were likely terrorists, and the fact they were armed with Knightmares certainly ruled out a few. They were in a warehouse somewhere, that only led out through the main doors and the tunnel, which meant this was likely the destination.

Then again, if going down the tunnel wasn’t part of the plan, they could be anywhere. A quick flash of his watch told him it was 12:31:22 by his time, about 15 minutes since they left the tower. Minus ten minutes for the sidecar, and that was five minutes down the tunnel. At the speeds they were doing, for five minutes, that could only result in around 4 to 5 kilometers travel distance. Adding to that that the authorities would have seen them enter the tunnel, all signs pointed to one conclusion.
They needed to get out of there.

Lelouch dragged himself up, seeing Suzaku dragging a wounded Japanese man out onto the floor. He was dressed like a worker in industry, clothes more likely to disguise than identify, and a pistol on his lap. Lelouch walked across, scuttling his movements with suspicious looks aside as he approached, slowly and carefully. He placed a hand on Suzaku’s shoulders, busy at work tending to the man’s wounds.

“We need to leave.”

Suzaku didn’t look up, indeed didn’t respond for a moment before he wrapped his jacket around the man’s most serious wound on his stomach. Once his attention was wrested, he responded “Of course.” Turning to the man, he asked in a soothing tone “Can you stand?”

Lelouch saw the man respond to the fellow Japanese teen, nodding and saying “I’ll try… but…”

“What?”

“The container…”

Lelouch and Suzaku exchanged looks. They hadn’t much time, but in the man’s few breaths he seemed to fixate on it. It was curious, and so Lelouch investigated leaving Suzaku to further aid the man. The container was spherical, and thick. It was far too heavy to lift, but as he slowly creeped down, laying his palms against the edge, there came a harsh hydraulic hiss, and it collapsed open.

The Japanese man, hearing the sound, screamed in terror.

However it was in vain, for as Lelouch fell back in surprise, the container opened, splitting like an egg hatching, releasing the bird inside into the cold, empty world. Lelouch looked up, and saw what it contained as the sides fell away.

It was a woman. Not a girl, the term didn't seem to fit the long, seemly body and old, weary face that seemed young, yet ageless, as if frozen in time. She had long, green hair, uncut yet still slick, with her body restrained in a straitjacket. She had fallen forward, betraying her 5’6 height to the teen who was leaning against the wall in surprise, almost to the point where he forgot their situation.

“Lelouch? Are you alright?”

“It’s… a woman.”

She squirmed indignantly as the rebel gasped in shock. Not what they expected, Lelouch noted, as he knelt down above her, Suzaku arriving moments later, placing a hand on her shoulder to pull her front into view, the light catching in her amber eyes and pale skin.

After taking a moment to wrap their heads around this, the boys regained their senses and ripped the mask from her face, freeing her lips and throat through the air, allowing her to draw lungful's of oxygen as if coming back to life. Lelouch and Suzaku exchanged concerned looks yet again as she panted, before she smirked, and barely was able to eke out “Took you long enough?”

Lelouch recoiled, responding out of annoyed instinct “You want back in the canister?”

“Lelouch!”

“Lelouch…you are Lelouch? No….?”
Both eyes pivoted instantly to the green haired Britannian, whose eyes in turn lay on the dark haired heir she had just managed to name. The stoic teen in question hardened his eyes to narrow slits as he asked “Do we know each other?”

She didn’t respond for a moment, instead choosing to adopt a thoughtful pose, before cryptically yet sardonically responding “No… no not anymore… sorry sunshine, you don’t have it anymore. Blame your boy toy.”

Both Lelouch and Suzaku practically fell back in shock. It took all of Lelouch’s patience to not go into a tirade he had practiced many times against Milly, Reuben’s zealous granddaughter about how he was not gay, but the sensible side of his head clicked back into gear.

“Either way, we can’t stay here.” Lelouch hissed, pulling her up by the back using the limits of his meagre strength to bring her to her feet.

“That’s no way to treat a lady.”

“My heart bleeds for you. Now shift.”

After poking her in the back, they moved out, Suzaku carrying the injured Japanese man and Lelouch trying to keep the woman somewhere within view, walking towards the exit like the beginning of a bad joke, which suddenly turned sour as they heard a hail of bullets and screams outside, followed by the whirs of a Knightmare Frame, sending the group running back to the truck.

“Scout, check that building!”

“Nay, I’ll do it myself.”

The flurry of voices was punctuated by two, a man and woman just outside amplified by speakers over the noise, the former gruff and commanding and the latter more eloquent, yet still carrying a ruthless edge. Lelouch ushered the other three to hide in the truck. If they saw Suzaku or the other Eleven, they would almost certainly die. His only chance was bluffing, and so he stood alone in front of the truck, putting on the appearance of terror that demeaned yet in this case aided him.

“Are you deaf? Answer me or I’ll-”

-Is the human one.

“My name is Allen Spacer, my father’s a Duke. My ID card is in my breast pocket. After you confirm who I am, I’ll request your protection.”

It came in a moment, and it worked like a charm, as she responded “Keep your hands up in the air, I’ll take out your ID.”

She disembarked, climbing down the spine of her Knightmare, revealing her tanned, long body and straight hair to the onlookers she was aware of and not aware of. Lelouch began to think of the next
step of his plan, as he heard the truck drivers gun cock behind him, stopping the woman in her tracks. Lelouch sighed.

“Really, I wish you’d stop doing that Suzaku.”

After sufficiently restraining the woman, whose name turned out to be Villetta Nu, with tying her hands behind her back and having Suzaku train his gun on her. It still irked him to no end that Suzaku, supposed beacon of pacifism and honour, pulled that little stunt, and without consulting him to boot, but he had no time to pay it mind, as they had some questions to ask. After some resistance, she told them that there was fighting throughout the Saitama Ghetto, where they were, ordered by the Viceroy.

“And where is he?”

He felt Suzaku stare holes into the back of his head even without looking, but his was a one track mind, focusing on objectives. This was one area Suzaku had it right; one needed a plan of action, and a single minded focus unique to the Japanese teen Lelouch always admired. In this case, he had to approach this issue from the top down. He had to get to Clovis.

Villetta sighed, eventually responding “In his mobile command centre.” She likely assumed they would get apprehended at the door. Fortunately, he was Lelouch Vi Britannia.

“Suzaku, given that our friend here has been so nice, I think you can agree we can leave her here. Take care of the man, I think he had a radio. I’ll contact you again once I’ve secured an exit.”

“Good afternoon to you too Lelouch.”

“Have the kettle ready for me.”

With that, Lelouch hopped into the Knightmare, a surrounding made instantly familiar by his experience in his mother’s Ganymede. The controls were electric, not hydraulic, and the levers were far stubbier, likely a cost cutting measure during mass production compared to the one off Ganymede. The UI was much more high tech, but most of the HUD was labelled.

“And they say the military is smart.” Lelouch chuckled at the label above the eject button that said ‘DO NOT TOUCH’, before somewhat embarrassedly realising his mic was on. Flipping the black switch, he fired up the forced induction Sakuradite reactor, Yggdrasil drive firing into boiling life, contrasted by his pedestrian pace out of the gate. He had no intention of crashing.

Bumbling along, he eventually broke the encirclement and reached the oversized camper van that represented Clovis’ base. Disembarking with his usual confidence, he began to search for a way in. He generally found that if you looked like you were meant to be there, he would go unmolested. The front door was not ideal, and the service entrance had a password. Prince Clovis’s personal entrance was obviously impossible, but-

Lelouch paused in thought. Why was it impossible? No one would expect it. It was almost certainly password protected, but his brother was a creature of habit. On top of that, he knew most passwords were easily guessed. It had to be six letters, so there was a limited selection. After trying “123456”, and several other common passwords, to no avail, he dialled through some people he had been close with, such as “Euphie”, “Nellie”, and in an amusing attempt to test Clovis’s hubris, “Clovis”, all failing. He thought and thought, racking his brain and growing more frustrated.

But could it be? In a moment of insight, he wondered. Everyone had forgotten him, no? He had vanished, forgotten, like a leaf, once admired then forgotten with convenience. And yet,
unconsciously, he found himself typing, slower than before “Llouch”

_Accepted_

This shocked him, and yet on some level it didn’t. It made no sense, but then it would have made no sense to think of it. It was the reverse of cause and effect, an inverse cause and effect; he didn’t know how he’d thought of it, and he didn’t know how Clovis thought of it. It made no sense. In that sense, it was almost a genius password. But it made no sense of any other kind.

But even so, the door was open, a fact Lelouch only reconnected with his situation at the last moment, hopping in as it slid closed. He was now inside.

From here, it was easy to proceed. A stolen map and borrowed conversations led him deeper inside, to a central room. Clovis, alone, looked as if he was already losing control of the situation. Lelouch couldn’t help but chuckle. From what he remembered, Clovis was never good at this game, and even these rebels could pose a challenge. But it was time plenty. He stepped into the room, and as Suzaku had already cocked the gun, he had to try look somewhat intimidating without the sound effect.

“Clovis.”

The man, to his credit, took the surprise of staring down the barrel of a gun with some good grace, not freaking out or screaming, but looking down with a grimace. He sighed. “What is it you wish, sir?”

“Well, I’d like a chat, and I have no hopes for a massacre. Though it may be too late.”

Clovis seemed torn. The thought occurred to Lelouch to ask where the hell everyone was, but priorities. But either way, Clovis needed a push. He stepped forward into the light, and heard a gasp.

Far away, Suzaku stopped for a moment, panting his heart out as the lines moved. As he leaned against the mortared brick, a shout went up as intercoms blared.

“Attention all forces! Cease fire at once!”

It was Clovis’s voice, and even as his radio fired up with confusion, he knew exactly what had happened. Gritting his teeth, he roared into his microphone, taken from the man in the truck “Wait for me at their command centre!” before he began sprinting down the battered street, brick and dust thrown up by the shifting of his feet, leaving a brown trail in his furious wake.

Meanwhile, Clovis was coming to terms with the fact his brother was not as dead as he once thought, stuttering “Lelouch… how are you alive? You weren’t at the Kururugi’s… We thought you were dead!”

“Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated. I left the Kururugi’s home the night of the invasion, and now I have returned. I must say, I can really tell how much you lamented my absence. I was surprised by that password. Still-”

But Clovis saw his out, responding “But I never forgot you! I never forgot! You were the reason I became damn Viceroy! I didn’t want to do this! I just wanted to paint! But remembering you, I wanted to do what you didn’t have the chance to! You were an inspiration for all of us! Euphie didn’t stop crying for weeks! Cornelia went into near depression!”

Granted, Euphie would cry over losing a pet doll, but Cornelia surprised him. Indeed, this tack as a
whole took him by surprise. He was expecting an appeal to power, or perhaps a threat. This whole heartfelt appeal came somewhat out of left field to the more stoic Lelouch. Perhaps Clovis was a better strategist than he’d given the man credit for. Unless he was going about it the wrong way entirely, and Clovis was just insanely lucky that sincerity put Lelouch off. Either way, Lelouch’s finger slowly departed from the trigger, as he slowly walked up further, before chuckling at himself and explaining “Don’t stop now, you’ve got me on the ropes.”

It was quite out of character, but for whatever reason he couldn’t take this situation seriously. Here he was, about to make his reappearance on the world stage, and here he was corpsing.

“Suzaku, oh how you have ruined me.” he wheezed out, before continuing. “Oh my, even Cornelia? Turns out I may yet be human. How the hell…” He had to pause again. This was so embarrassing, he was talking as if Clovis was his friend! His pure and total surrender completely disarmed him. Handling a surrender was not something Lelouch was used to. Usually, opponents had far too much pride to give in before the fight. In a sense, Clovis’ cowardice saved him. He sighed, as he resumed “I’m glad we’ve had this chat, but pleasantries must conclude. I must admit, I learned a lot, but-”

“LELOUCH!”

Somewhere inside himself, Lelouch knew, lay a patient man. Unfortunately, that patient man seemed awfully hard to find today, as his face turned to thunder and he turned around to begin yelling, only to have his fury matched by the sheer disgust oozing from every orifice, pore, and inch of flesh Suzaku had on his body like a primordial gas, going to war as they stared each other down, with Clovis cowering in the corner.

“Lelouch, stop what you're doing this goddamn instant.”

“Suzaku, he betrayed us both and he’s oppressing your people-”

“Which is why we can use him.”

Lelouch suddenly paused once again, beginning to realise today really wasn’t his day as Suzaku walked over to Clovis, now hiding under his throne. Suzaku knelt down and offered him an arm up, and standing beside him, turned towards Lelouch, looking down at him. Lelouch was fairly sure that was intentional, and it frustrated him. Suzaku began to monologue, demeaningly hissing as far short of a yell he could manage “Let me explain something. I think you seem to forget I was there that day too. I want to see justice and fairness in this world just as much as you do, but the method matters. People living to see a better life is what I consider the end goal, and killing the King at this point is completely antithetical to that. When that-”

He paused to point at the gun.

“- is what you carry with you, everything looks like a target. Remember what I told you?”

“Not what you want, how you will get it. Look at me, right now, how will you do anything.”

“Yes, I do, Suzaku. I do...”

“So look at me. What is your plan? Not to take out the King, but to achieve your goal. Never confuse the two.”

Lelouch leaned back, nearly falling against a chair as Clovis followed up with a rather pathetic “Please?” Of course, he wasn’t thinking about him. Beyond his initial pride, Lelouch was surprisingly unimaginative. He was very spontaneous, and while he could plan ahead and think
outside the box, he only thought about what he wanted to focus on, keeping his train of thought on the straight and narrow. It was not in his nature to brood, for he rarely allowed himself to slip, and so as soon as the surprise faded, he was instantly deep in thought trying to prioritise.

Justice was a pretty big issue. Spiting Britannia was up there too, and his father in particular. Safety for Nunnally. And to do it with the least casualties to keep Suzaku from exploding with righteous fury. This was an interesting puzzle. That was all there was; if you wanted to put it mathematically, he had his inputs, and his job was to design a function to create the ideal output. Clovis and Suzaku now cautiously approached, recognising Lelouch’s ‘Deep in thought’ face, though they both flinched as he asked in a far more concerned voice, “What happened to that soldier, Vilcha, was it?”

Suzaku paused, then sighed. “Villetta?”

Now Clovis looked surprised “What did you do to Villetta?”

“She’s tied up to a lamppost outside. When I told her what you were going to do, she gave me the password without a fuss.”

Both Clovis and Lelouch shuddered at Suzaku’s oft-forgotten strength, before Lelouch resumed his thinking. Military power, both symmetrical and asymmetrical, was largely put out of his means. But then again, why was that an issue? Why was that an issue when he considered the people involved, because people, when it came down to brass tax, were not rational beings. He had to appeal to a bipartisan audience, and nationalism wasn’t going to cut it. In fact, the conclusion was surprisingly simple when he put it that way.

He stood up, looking even more smug than usual, which, looking at Clovis and Suzaku, worried them. He rubbed his palms together in anticipation, before smirking.

“I have a plan.”

Chapter End Notes

He’s back.
Lelouch went through some development this chapter. Up to this point, he’s been “eh” on the whole pacifism malarkey, but now he’s all onboard. For now. Still, I’m not pleased with this chapter. Despite being the same length as the other chapters, it feels significantly shorter, and I’m struggling to make it longer without ruining the flow. Either way, from now on Suzaku and Lelouch are working together fully.

And with that, I hope to see you next time. Following on, in For Hearts And Minds, Chapter 4; The Sakura Wall. While I’m away, be safe, be ready to take on your siblings, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Four: The Sakura Wall

Arc One: Child Of War

Opening: “Swaying” - Soraru

“GUTS!”

Suzaku shook as if struck by a bolt of lightning, moving from half asleep to bolt upright like a soldier quicker than John Stapp hit 42 G’s, and it left the Japanese student in almost as shaken a state as the human natural disaster that was Milly Ashford hit him like a truck. The effect was visible even to the point that even the normally melancholic Lelouch was smirking at his misfortune from a healthy distance, while busily typing away. The excitable Rivalz complained as Shirley barely took a moment away from her staring at Lelouch concernedly. Nina was barely visible, the poor thing. Each was hard at work in their own way, though as Lelouch finished his personal joke and returned to scowling at a wall of numbers that was just within the Honourary Britannians sight, Suzaku sighed. His friend hadn’t been the same since Shinjuku three days ago.

He remembered leaving, having listened to Lelouch’s plan, and having agreed it was the best solution, and having to walk home through the streets of Shinjuku, trudging through bodies. Evidently, they had been too slow. Neither teen spoke, both oscillating between thinking and brooding, and trying to ignore the river of blood that was ruining their shoes, trying to ignore the stench of rotting flesh, brushing against their legs as they kept their heads high and noses, to the best of their abilities. It was all they could do not to gag.

Suzaku, trying anything to force his eyes from dropping to the open graveyard, took a look at how Lelouch was handling it. The dark haired Britannian, unlike his own more passive looks upwards, was passionately fixated on a point in the distance, eyes forced into the horizon through force of will.

Just don’t think about it.

It had taken every ounce of mental strength to make it out of the death zone without emptying his stomach. It was nearly dark by the time they reached Ashford, dry blood staining their legs up to the cuffs of their trousers, and a bitter scowl on both of their faces. Reuben didn’t even comment, allowing them into their rooms and bidding them goodnight. Even Nunnally seemed to sense the tension, quietly going to Lelouch’s room to try soothe him as Suzaku lay in his bed, and began to cry.

What he was crying about, he wasn’t certain. But what was undeniable was the salty streams that fell down in smooth lines down his face, growing in intensity. So much death, so much. He hadn’t seen it in such magnitudes since the day Britannia arrived.

“He’s giving me a chance to try and help change the world...”

He felt a waking hand on his shoulder, as he looked up to the concerned faces of the Student...
Council, from Milly’s genuine motherly look of concern, a break from her usual antics to allow a look of worry, followed closely by the always emotional Rivalz, who was also at Suzaku’s side trying to see what the matter was. Shirley had taken time from staring at Lelouch to join the group, and even Nina, whose racial sensitivity left much to be desired, gave a look of worry as he’d realised what had happened.

He’d began to cry.

“I’m glad... that we could all be together again. You know, like this.”

The line he and Lelouch had fed the rest of them was that they had been caught in the fighting, but made it out, to explain their trousers. Which, as Lelouch commented, wasn’t inaccurate. He hoped the line would work and hide his actual thoughts, but as he considered it, Suzaku now began to sob. He looked into the now blurred faces of his... friends, yes friends, and saw them for the valuable treasures they were, now that he was thinking of death… oh gods if they died…

He didn’t even want to posit that as a thought experiment of a consideration of a fleeting, momentary bout of true insanity. However, he was comforted by these same people, who promptly surrounded him and lavished him with support, as he gushed his heart out, just like that night.

Returning to that night, he recalled how down he had felt, emptying the wells in his eyes and lying there in silence. For however long, he knew not, he just lay, until Lelouch eventually walked in, anticipating a philosophical lecture. After all, he hadn’t spoken in hours.

“Whatever happened to the green haired woman and the rebel?”

This annoyed Suzaku, as it almost seemed demeaning, but at least it took his mind off the issue. Lelouch had spoken in Japanese, which as the language had fallen out of use had become almost a secret code between them, which took his mind astray for a moment. “I gave them back to the rebels.”

Suzaku nodded. “You mentioned you were in contact with them?”

Suzaku nodded in turn. Before Clovis had made his announcement, he had made contact and tried to organise an escape without killing anyone, and he still had the radio. He was expecting a lecture again, and unsurprisingly, once again Lelouch failed to deliver.

“We may want to get back in contact with them.”

Suzaku remembered his shock, like nothing imaginable but for the day that was in it. Lelouch noted this as he continued “Just to clear some things up, maybe get them to disarm. Their tweaking in the background will be a pain once our plan gets underway.”

It made sense, and Suzaku sighed as he resigned himself to lying back. He expected perhaps a sarcastic comment from Lelouch, or perhaps leaving him with nothing. However once again, Lelouch surprised him.

“Suzaku?”

He didn’t look up.

“It’s going to be okay.”

This made him look up, his eyes rolling back to bring the subject of his attention into view just above his fringe, his face in a half-uncertain pause.
“I know what happened… what we saw in Shinjuku…”

Now Suzaku was sitting up. Lelouch was at a loss for words, which sold the genuine nature of the speech. The slender, pale teen sighed, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“We aren’t those people. We can only look at what we are able to to do from here. We can save lives, and make them better. It will be okay in the end. You’re involved. Remember, you made this happen. Imagine what’d happen to either of us if we went our ways. Here, we have each other to count on. The world won’t know what hit it.”

Suzaku suddenly felt fuller, blown away. Lelouch’s speech wasn’t complete, or whole, like his usual. It was terribly delivered, with pauses, stutters, and looks aside to find words that were momentarily beyond Lelouch’s reach, which formed the core of its believability.

Both there and somewhere very far away, he suddenly found his eyes dry, and his gaze distant, as he heard the words of kindness from Lelouch and the student council, encouraging and reassuring his worried mind. And in both places he smiled a thousand bright, shining smiles, lips stretching across his wet cheeks that thoroughly failed to express his relief and gratitude to the friends he couldn’t thank enough in a lifetime. Once, Lelouch’s surprising placating tones, and now, the entire student council with their varied linguistic efforts to cheer him up.

“Thank you.. So much.”

Both there and far away, he caught a glimpse of Lelouch smiling with the edge of his lip, before returning to work.

However it was only in the student council room that the conversation continued, with Shirley suggesting “Perhaps we should do something to cheer Suzaku up!”

“You can’t get out of budgeting that easily Shirley!”

The orangettes only response to being called out was a disappointed harrumph, but their antics cheered him up enough to chuckle. Lelouch’s fleeting attention on the situation had already been lost once again to the computer screen. Suzaku couldn’t blame him.

He’d never had a head for the kind of numbers Lelouch was working through. Still, the council largely went unabated, with Lelouch doing all he could to evade Milly's traps.

“Just the once-”

“No.”

“Look, you just need t-”

“No.”

“Look, the suit won’t look so bad once you have it on-”

“Why don’t you go bother Suzaku?”

“Because that man has no shame! He might eventually give in if I ask hard enough, and I can’t use that for blackmail! Besides, he’s just had severe emotional trauma!”

“I’m having severe emotional trauma right now!”

“You two remember I’m right here?”
Suzaku’s query was met with a unanimous “Yes” from the both of the occupied teens that had him in stitches. Lelouch and Milly were a fearsome pair, but their unending focus on defeating each other kept the threat of a fascist coup of the council at bay.

Not that Milly needed a coup to gain control of the council.

Still chuckling, his mind shifted to the day after the Shinjuku incident. It took them considerable effort to greet the hot, bright day with any enthusiasm, but once they had showered and cleaned, an occasion that never ceased to brighten their day with active rows and shouts of who got the hot water, they got dressed and departed.

Classes that day seemed slower than usual, even Suzaku finding the lectures of an English professor all too obviously on his twelfth coffee of the day to be losing its clarity, its definition, as if he had been viewing the world through contact lenses he had forgotten to pick up that morning. Given that it had since faded, the Suzaku of the now concluded it was a lack of focus. It made sense; this meeting was playing on his mind like a musician playing in the background, drawing his attention from his work. Still, after a long, drawn out day, like a note on a violin played into oblivion, until none but dogs and Suzaku could hear it play its course, they were free. They met outside the schools front ate drawing the amused smirk of Milly and the scorn of Shirley as they departed, just fast enough to avoid a firm piece of the latter's mind.

The aging sidecar dragged them down the motorway at a speed that allowed Suzaku to watch his nails grow, as they did their best to ignore the ghetto parallel to the road. It seemed odd at the time to Suzaku, having lived in the shadow of the ghetto in the eyes of Britannia, to now be avoiding its glance like the plague. It frustrated Suzaku to no end. Lelouch was impossible to read, with eyes buried in scribbles contained within a 2x4 ledger handbook.

The meeting point was the remains of Tokyo tower, standing tall up to its open knees up to where it had been ripped from the halfway point and up, like it had been hit by a giant golf club and the top sent flying into the ocean, which on the day that was in it, filled the horizon with a brilliant blue of a limitless ocean meeting a boundless sky. A bird could fly forever.

Being a clear day, it was also a hot day. Sweat bled down his face vividly, like they were evacuating a ship, impervious to his continued swipes away. The heat was heavy, and almost impaired his ability to think about anything else.

Seeming to notice his suffering, Lelouch suggested they sought shade, something the weary Suzaku leapt on. Several trees had grown around the ruined tree, and they sat at the base of a trunk, taking shelter in the natural Sakura blossoms. Suzaku had nearly fallen asleep before Lelouch grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

There they were.

They were obscured through the branches and leaves, but there were never many people around Tokyo tower, and to see the exact number of people had said would come (Five, including the two they knew), made it almost certain. Lelouch called out beyond the cover of the pinkish-white leaves “Stop there!”

The figures instantly halted as if frozen in place, as Lelouch continued “You can send the man we met in to verify our identities. The rest of you will stay where you are.”

The figure at the rear, with a slight limp, moved forward through the hues and fabrics forming a curtain between them, eventually reaching them, still sat at the foot of the tree. Giving a slight nod, perhaps of thanks, perhaps of acknowledgment, he called back “They’re here!”
“Thanks Nagisa, come on back.”

So his name was Nagisa, Suzaku reflected. That was worth noting, as the apparent leader, a woman who hadn’t spoken yet, called out “Thank you both for your services yesterday. So what did you want to talk about?”

Lelouch placed his hands in a thoughtful pose, and began.

“What is it you hope to achieve?”

This question seemed to surprise their audience, who responded angrily “We want freedom, we want Britannia out!”

Lelouch gestured Suzaku to write this down on his notepad as he responded “No shortage of ambition. As it happens, I’m no fan of their regime either. I’d be extremely curious about what your tactical masterstroke is.”

It would be fair to reckon, Suzaku assumed, that whatever the rebels were expecting, this wasn’t it. Still, there was no signs of fluster in the woman’s reply of “We have the backing of Japan. People don’t know it can be done. In a few successes, we can grow!”

“And how did that work out last time?”

Before the group could reply, Lelouch, with a slight snarl creeping into his otherwise calm voice continued “In 2010 Britannia proved its military might. Genbu Kururugi, a man I knew well, couldn’t save this island, and nor can you. The idea that you, with a single Knightmare, can hold a candle to the economic infrastructure of the entire North American continent is absurd.”

“But its not the same!” came the reply, not angry, but frustrated. “We can fight on our terms, hitting infrastructure and important sites, and get out before they can!”

“How selfish.”

The response was a single, sharp inhale of air from the rebels.

Lelouch smirked. “What do you imagine happens? Britannia implements harsher Military police, resulting in their continued mistreatment and misery. If you wish to engage in a race to the bottom at the expense of those you supposedly wish to protect, I must seriously question your motives.”

“Then they will see the need to fight for freedom! This is a good thing!”

“Wrong again.”

“What did you say?”

It was a man this time, one who hadn’t spoken yet. His voice was grating and harsh, and quickly silenced by a wave of the woman’s hand, visible by silhouette through the tree.

“For those of you at the back” Lelouch resumed demeaningly “I said that, once again, you have been wrong in your assumptions not just of your enemies, but of your allies. You think a show of force, a ray of hope, or some demonstration that Britannia, a country that has occupied the home islands for seven years, is far worse than they have already observed, will have them up in arms? A resultant worsening of circumstances will only hurt your popularity as people begin to see you as getting in the way of their continued relative safety. What do you think motivates people?”
“People want their country—”

Like John McLaughlin, Lelouch interrupted with “Wrong again. The Hierarchy of Needs, Maslow’s unless I’m mistaken, places self actualisation as the highest rung, alongside your notion of patriotism. Someone struggling to put meals on the table will not risk it all for a motivation higher than that meal. The Japanese people are not united under the flag of patriotism. Some feel anger, some frustration, and some are trying to live with it. If you are trying to gather the Japanese people with that flag alone and think that’s going to work, I have a bridge to sell you.”

“Well what would you rather do?”

“Good question, you’re learning.” Lelouch confidently replied, causing Suzaku to silently chuckle at how demeaning he was being to the terrorists. “So, let’s reexamine. What motivates people? People like to have a better lot in life, more opportunity, and more representation. Your plan centres on retaking your country for your country’s own sake, which is why it is of limited scope and ambition. People will not join you unless you make them a better offer. Your key issue is that you promise combat, but not resolution. Any hope of military revolution was crushed 7 years ago, when the then Prime Minister refused to give in until the end, destroying any infrastructure we could have used to combat it when we reorganised. The time for violent revolution will never come. The people will not join it for anything short of a messiah. We need more. We need a Fiscal Revolution, where we actually achieve functional independence, rather than just a fancy title or status.”

He paused for dramatic effect, placing a hand on Suzaku’s knee to apologise for scolding his father.

“You claim you fight the enemy on your terms. This is not true. You are fighting an enemy at their full industrial and economic capacity, while not addressing the people you seek to represent. Fighting them on your terms would be reducing their capacity to address your threat to your level. The epitome of martial excellence isn't winning every battle, but winning without fighting, and so we must do all we can to level that playing field before making overt moves. This is why you will never win. You went with the standard, guerrilla terror tactics. You lack ambition, imagination, and any semblance of audacity, the cornerstones of revolution. I intend to destroy their economy while building ours and leave them no choice but to submit to me. I intend to leave them with no choice but to cut their losses as their colonial profits dwindle to nothing!”

Both Lelouch and Suzaku were standing now, slowly rising with the crescendo of Lelouch’s bold statements until he was nearly roaring from the edge of the leaves. It clearly pained him, that he had waited so long for his chance, now that these uppity rebels were trying to do what he once dreamed of, but Suzaku knew what side he was on. He paused once more, allowing the terrorists to swallow what they were being told as well as allowing Suzaku to appreciate the Sun Tzu reference and what it implied. He was reminding Suzaku of that day, and the agreement they had made. Suzaku nodded to show he understood. Before Lelouch concluded with an angry high.

“I will make Schneizel El Britannia himself bow in submission without firing a shot.”

And right on cue, gasp. Suaku of course knew the entire plan from when Lelouch had explained it to himself and Clovis, to promote native industries within the ghetto’s to sever the people’s ties to Britannia, while weaning Britannia off the free labour they were enjoying. Still, it did sound absolutely outrageous, audacious even, which was the point. The woman, recovering first, shot back at this idea.

“And you can do this?”
“Of course.”

No gap, no delay, it was straight off his friends tongue like he’d prepared it. The leading woman and the scratchy voiced man seemed positively fuming, Nagisa and the green haired girl seemed neutral, and the taller one seemed the most uncertain. Suzaku spoke for the first time, taking his cue to bring in a human element “We want the Japanese people to be free just as much as you do, we just feel you’re going in the wrong direction. We need to be the better people. Please, your aid would be invaluable.”

The group stood still for a few seconds, before turning into a brief huddle. After sharing a brief discussion, they turned back, and the woman said quietly, just loud enough for Suzaku to make it out, “It’s your choice.”

“You know where I’m goi-” the green haired woman responded instantly, before being interrupted by the man with the irritating voice saying “I’m staying here!”

Nagisa agreed more quietly, leaving the tall one, evidently torn. The leading woman told him quietly she wouldn’t hold it against him, which seemed to swing it, as he stood more straight, and began to walk across into the leaves. They came face to face as the tall man, ethnically Japanese with a brown overcoat lined with wool that was sending him into a fervent sweat. Even now, he looked uncertain, especially his visible reaction to the fact he’d turned his allegiance to a pair of teenagers stood at the base of a tree.

“Your name?”

“Kaname Ohgi.”

“Welcome aboard.”

And that, Suzaku mentally concluded, was why they had a wanted terrorist going through a mass of filing cabinets hauled up to their shared home detailing stock histories of Sakuradite as Milly continued to harass Lelouch down in the student council room, where reality resumed. All in all, Suzaku felt like it had gone about as well as it could have.

Which was why, given the nature of things, once things did start to go wrong, he somehow did not react with surprise. It began almost in slow motion, with Rivalz saying something amid the chaos that caught his attention for its shrill surprise. The room slowly looked towards the blue haired teen with increasing panic, their voices slurred and movements alien.

“Viceroy Clovis’s been found dead!”

Chapter End Notes

Boom. End of arc.

This whole arc has been about the growth in maturity of our leads, as the move from being affected by the world to affecting the world around them and coming into their agency. All along this arc, things happen to them such as the invasion, or the massacre. From now on, we’re going to get the full nine yards of protagatory action.

Before I continue, some points. First, I’m aware Ohgi is the leader of the rebel group,
however there were four key reasons I transitioned him to Team SuzaLulu, all centered around the plot to come. He will have a key role, especially in later arcs, as a proxy for our protagonists. The other reasons are too spoilerific to even go into here.

Secondly, you’ll notice I reused a line of dialogue when Suzaku cried, when he said “I’m glad... that we could all be together again.” In the context of the show, it is a sombre moment of Suzaku realising all he has to lose, at least if we take him at his word. Here, he is diverting away from his true emotions. I headcanon Suzaku as a compulsive liar, but not one that realises it, and this is a little nod to how he is, in spite of having a better plan in this universe, is neither perfect nor pure. While if he realises he is lying he will fret, he doesn't realise it nearly enough. Food for thought.

I saved the explanation of Lelouch’s plan till the end, as I knew Lelouch would have to explain it to the rebels, and in line with the Principle of Conservation of Detail, you must never say exposition twice. This also served to bookend the arc, which was nice. At the end of each chapter, he was asked in the beginning what his plan was, then he nearly dies due to no planning, then announces he has a plan, then explains his plan. It’s small, but its the small things that matter.

Thank you all for reading, and I welcome you all to the Beneath the Red Table Arc, beginning in For Hearts And Minds, Chapter 5; And his name was Zero, following a brief Flashback. While you wait, stay safe, be careful with your plants, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Flashback One

Flashback

“Jeremiah, is this necessary?”

“Yes, it is milord. Now please pay attention.”

The young Prince, not yet of age ten, sighed as he turned his eyes back up towards the Margrave, the heels of his hands propping his chin above his lonely desk. The older, tanned man sighed, looking down at the object of his tutelage with a certain frustration that was unavoidable in spite of his fierce devotion to both him and his mother. He sighed, and resumed his lecture.

“And so, in 1807, then Queen Elizabeth retreated to Edinburgh, where a revolutionary militia arrested her and forced to abdicate, ending the monarchy. This event became known as The Humiliation of Edinburgh—”

Jeremiah paused again, looking down at his quarry with some admitted disdain as the boys fragile attention had already broken, his eyes drooping back towards his empty paper. Jeremiah stepped over to the young man’s desk and stood, allowing the dark haired boy to draw his gaze upward before asking “What exactly is distracting you so thoroughly from this important moment in history?”

The young man took a moment to respond, thinking over his reply before answering slowly. “What makes it so important?”

Jeremiah’s eyes widened in shock, as he prepared to scorn the young lad before he raised a hand to silence his protector turned tutor. Jeremiah bided, waiting further explanation, which was provided promptly by Lelouch, who said “I recognise it was key in the forming of our nation, but explain to me its practical application?”

“It is key for understanding the cause and effect of how our great Empire functions!” Jeremiah protested, who was acutely aware he was now on the defensive. Lelouch, considering this, replied “While this is true, it pales in comparison to what can be learned from what is going on right now.”

“Do you not care about your heritage?”

“No, I don’t. I’m very glad we’ve reached the root of the issue.” Lelouch coolly responded, smirking at his minor victory. Jeremiah adopted a more curious pose, before asking “What about when it will be needed? Perhaps not in battle, or in court, but in Emperorship—”

Jeremiah caught a sneer, which he followed up on by asking “What, are you opposed to the idea of ruling the world? That’s not like you.”

This was said jovially, and Lelouch broke into youthful laughter, joined shortly after by Jeremiah, whose bellowing chuckles lasted a few moments before Lelouch appeared to consider what Jeremiah had said.

“While your… prognosis… prognosis, is that it? While your analysis of my way of thinking isn’t wrong, what with chess, strategy, et cetera presenting an image that would seem ideal as Emperor, it’s not an ideal I aspire towards. In truth, I’d make a terrible Emperor.”
This fascinated Jeremiah. Lelouch had often trusted Jeremiah more than others, but still this was an interesting insight. “So you won’t get involved in the line of succession? Why not just renounce your claim?”

Lelouch was now fully engaged in the discussion “My claim gives me some leverage about the place, and is in general just convenient. But more to the point, my personality is antithetical to being an Emperor or Regent. The thing is, I’ve often found myself thinking in terms of fighting against...something. I don’t like the term ‘establishment’ in a political context, but buying into it for a moment, I would never fit into it. I would be an outsider in an insider's role. I would never get beyond spinning my wheels. The role of Emperor fits someone like Schneizel, or at a push Cornelia.”

“So what does that make you? A rebel?”

Lelouch laughed again. “Now that won’t do, eh Jeremiah? No, that won’t do at all.”

Jeremiah saw that a line was nearing, and so backed off, before adding “Remember, not everything works out the way you intend. You may become a very different man then you are now. The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“I never had you down as religious.”

“I assumed you were, being a member of the Royal Family.”

“Admitting Existentialism in this family might not invoke the wrath of the Lord, just that of the Emperor.”

This sent Jeremiah into another fit of laughter, joined by Lelouch into the sunless afternoon.

“Again.”

From above, the Lt. Col Kyoshiro Tohdoh watched as the young Suzaku reacted to the news of his further torment, as he looked briefly incredulous, before sighing and turning back towards the tree. The Japanese child breathed in, his lungs expanding threefold as he reached for some small droplets of air, searching for some dry oxygen amidst the hot, wet day in the forest.

Having thoroughly washed his lungs clean, pressing air like a fluid through the strainer, Suzaku stood and executed a perfect kick, his leg swinging parallel to the solid dirt around on an arc centred on his hips, smashing against the saturated wood, making a satisfying ‘thwack’ off Suzaku’s leg protection. The ten year old then recoiled on muscle memory, returning to a standard fighting stance. The entire maneuver had taken under half a second, and had sent birds within a short radius flying at the sudden movement, in spite of it being a carbon copy of a move they had been repeating for over an hour.

“Good. Again.”

And so they continued, Tohdoh admitting no latitude as Suzaku continued to hit the mark, his shins smacking the limbs of the tree with repeated efficiency and power. Tohdoh simply sat and observed, as Suzaku grew more and more weary, his movements growing more unready between blows, swaying this way and that, but he refused to compromise his kicks, to the point that he would often take a moment to sit between kicks, before Tohdoh called him back up to engage, when he would use the momentum of leaving the seated position to force his kicks home.

Tohdoh sat waiting, as the tree suffered further and further, as Suzaku suffered further and further. It went on for two hours into the sweltering Sunday before Tohdoh raised a silent
hand. Suzaku paused to breath, before looking up.

“I see you have utterly failed to understand the purpose I have brought you here for.”

Suzaku looked shocked, moving forward before catching himself and retreating. Tohdoh’s face remained stoic as he inwardly sighed. Suzaku’s heart was in the right place, but a fundamental mistake was being made.

“Suzaku, why did you continue kicking? You know as well as I do about performance drop off.”

“Did I do poorly?”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Suzaku seemed to look inward, not certain of himself as Tohdoh waited for Suzaku to explain to him what seemed to him at this point obvious. He knew this would be a problem, being one he shared with his father; the boy was too damn stubborn.

“I did as asked… You said to keep… going…”

“I did that. However, that answer is again wrong. Why didn’t you point out the redundancy of the exercise, or the condition of your stamina?”

Suzaku didn’t answer, unsure of how to proceed. It was as Tohdoh expected, he didn’t have a clue. He explained slowly, whispering “I have trained you for three years now, but much like a leg thrown too many times against a tree, the value of longevity has ceased to increase. Listen, Suzaku; I am not always right. In times of crisis, all men, myself included, may lose our heads and should that time come, you need to know to keep yours. Suppose dishonourable orders came from on high, would you execute them?”

Suzaku had no answer for a moment, before responding “But how would that happen? Bad orders make bad results, and short of a mistake, intentional blunders can only lead to bad things for all involved, including the one who made it. The system makes sure of it!”

“And what if the system fails?”

“As long as there’s people inside it working to keep it on the rails, it can’t.”

Tohdoh frowned, before chuckling softly. “I appreciate the sentiment, but your logic is circular. You claim the system is infallible, because of the need for efficiency, and that people should obey orders to maintain that efficiency, however at the same time you say that the solution to an abuse of the system by an authority figure with an ulterior motive is to continue within that system?”

Suzaku clearly didn’t understand all the words that Tohdoh had just thrown back at him, but in a moment it was clear he grasped the basic concept, as his brow furrowed and he replied “Well, of course if you have a bad guy, you disobey his orders, but I know you’re not bad. I’ll know next time. But quitting out is no good, because if you’re not in the system, how can you change it, Tohdoh?”

It was Tohdoh’s turn to pause, and nearly crack his solid facade. This was thoroughly amusing, and very intriguing from the point of view of Suzaku’s emotional development.

“No, indeed no. And I trust you of all people will be keeping whatever system you latch onto on the straight and narrow.”
Suzaku beamed a toothy grin. “Of course!”
Anger. Fury. All holy hell unleashed so concisely and pointedly one would wonder whether it were a physical thing, that could be wielded like a blade, its hotness and focus slicing through all in its way, onlookers making from Lear's shaft. These were the things Lelouch felt as he made it back to his room, as he swept his arm outwards, smashing a vase filled with flowers, echoes ringing out in high pitched screams as they refracted off the edges of the vinyl walls in tiny pieces, falling and littering the carpeted floor with sharp edges and stale dirt. He roared, not loudly or grandly as was his way, but a hoarse deep groan of frustration and regret. He had held himself back, he had listened, and still nothing. He had found Clovis, he had been there, and he had reconciled with him, only for him to die.

And while it did strike him as momentarily selfish, he felt bitter. It was as if, he felt, that Clovis was his to kill, and having decided to work with him, having him die at someone else's hand seemed completely unfair. As much as he denied it, he would have loved to be the one to do it. Anyone else, any other political rival or ambitious enemy seemed inappropriate. No one had a Casus Belli like Lelouch's, and to see it stolen, on a basic level, hurt him.

Though he suspected it probably hurt Clovis a little more, given that he died and all.

This private acknowledgement drew him out of his rage just long enough to spy the legs of a silent wheelchair and the face of a terrified girl.

"Lelouch?"

His fist retracted back towards his torso, as he released an exasperated breath into the ether. He couldn't be mad, not around Nunnally. He couldn't present that face, or she would lose hope. That must not happen, and so he must put on a brave face for her benefit, no matter the consequences for him.

A more straightforward example of this came in the form of their diligent accomplice, Ohgi, rushing behind Nunnally to see what the commotion was. While he had a natural instinct to protect Nunnally, his dissonance was more practical. Ohgi, for all his uses, had not been made aware of Lelouch's heritage. Learning it would have an untold effect on his attitude, and maintaining the correct image among his subordinates, as well as for the future, was paramount. What Ohgi, and by extension everyone, felt in the long term was far more important than Lelouch felt in the short term.

Ohgi must not know.

"I'm fine." he spoke through forced teeth and a thick, contracted throat. "Just lost the rag is all. Carry on."
Ohgi looked down, his gaze betraying his initially mixed emotions, but his head nodding obediently after a moment's pause and leaving, however Nunnally approached slowly, wheeling herself up to Lelouch's waist.

"What happened?"

He sighed, casting a cross glare towards the door, before whispering to Nunnally alone "Clovis… our brother… just died."

She looked concerned, yet somewhat curious. He hated the look, as it showed understanding and depth that he would give anything to allow her to avoid. It showed perception, as did her response "And that made you mad?"

"Indeed… we had…"

He paused, not consciously but not out of his own control either… he had needed a moment to think that he had not realised was prudent, but his own hesitation granted his unknown wish.

Did he want to involve Nunnally?

Certainly, worse things could be shared. He'd reconciled with his brother, admittedly at gunpoint, but it was progress. That would be undoubtedly met with approval. His plans overall were not violent ones, certainly less damaging to open up about than designs of any kind of bloody coup. But still, she was too young. Then again, if she knew now, it would spare his worries at a later date…

His mind continued, straight as a train headed into the depths of Siberia, observing the previously unobserved as he asked himself questions he had always hoped to forestall, but Nunnally could tell he was stalling for time as he wondered whether to spill his guts to the one he loved.

"Lelouch, what happened between you and him?"

"We met."

This barebones, monosyllabic reply sent her into a brief silence with its unusual clarity, but she recovered quickly "He recognised you?"

It was hard to mistake someone holding a gun at you while otherwise alone in a room, but Lelouch let that minor detail slide. He slowly replied "Yes, myself and Suzaku met up with him yesterday."

"Did you kill him?"

It was Lelouch's turn to be caught off guard. She knew him very well, and was not far off the mark, which infuriated him given that he hadn't actually done it. What had he been doing, that when his sister heard about him meeting his brother she immediately assumed he had killed him? Here he was, assumed to have murdered someone he hadn't, but would have very much liked to. He was at once annoyed to the thousandth degree and somewhat amusedly blindsided by Nunnally's display of perceptiveness.

"No, I didn't. We met, as I said… we talked, and made peace."

The look of joy on Nunnally's face was immense, immeasurable, stretching beyond Lelouch's comprehension. He was never particularly versed in the emotions of joy, but Nunnally appeared like a perfect case study. But, as it dawned on her the other piece of news Lelouch had told her, fridge horror set in as she connected the dots.
"Oh god…"

"Now you understand. I… I'm so sorry."

He couldn't look at Nunnally. His face was buried in his shoulder, refusing to look at that which he had broken and could not be repaired. He wasn't sad at the passing, not having the capacity for reflection that entailed sadness, but furious, which seemed at this point to be his default negative emotion. It represented a personal failing, a black mark of something that should never have been etched into the girl's mind. No one should have to receive this news.

Which, thinking about it, was all part of the reason why he couldn't stop now even with Clovis dead.

His mind reengaged, gear by gear, winding back up to full capacity as one thought formed another. This was empathy, yes empathy was the word. The ability to take one's own suffering and apply it to other contexts, to other people, and understand them. While he was under no delusions of actually suffering when compared to the general population, he understood the general concept. No one ought to receive this news, which if the revolution were violent would happen at his doing.

Then again, his mind retorted, an argument from personal experience meant nothing. It was petty, Freudian at best. It was like those old villains who justified their atrocious actions by claiming childhood abuse, or the like. It seemed silly to Lelouch; one's actions should be defendable by logic, not personal background. It was not basis for anything, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound of fury, signifying nothing.

And yet he felt as he could glimpse an understanding of why they did it, and yet felt no empathy for them. His empathy was reserved for his sister, who he still refused to face, even as he accepted he owed her a further explanation.

"The thing is…"

She looked up at him.

".. we had actually worked out a plan..."

She moved her hand towards his, but he shook it off, resolving himself to continue. He couldn't see, but while this was good news, he doubted anything could cheer her up.

"... the people in the ghetto are rebelling. Violently. This is why we were trapped in Shinjuku. We found him, and made a plan. Nonviolent, of course… we will free them, and we can live in peace."

"It sounds dangerous."

"A lot less dangerous than his first plan. Still, it's going to be okay. This plan is designed so no one gets hurt."

"Thank you Suzaku, however you really need to choose your moments."

Lelouch, having turned away, hadn't seen Suzaku enter the room and interrupt his confessional. He nodded as he came into Lelouch's field of view, perpendicular to the line formed by Lelouch and Nunnally, as he said "You looked pretty stormy, I was worried you might do something rash."

"I did do something rash."

"Telling your sister that you intend to become the Japanese Lawrence of Arabia is many things,
rash is not among them."
"Look to your left."

Suzaku pivoted, and spotted the broken shards of the flower pot. He almost chuckled, saying "It could be worse. At least you're venting healthily."

Lelouch could only stare at the Japanese teen at his definition of healthy.

After taking a bemused moment to observe the petty destruction, Suzaku turned back, and reassured Nunnally "I'll be okay, we're working together. We can't fail!"

This reassured her, and while she was obviously sad, she had hope. Lelouch couldn't help but crack a smile at Suzaku being able to persuade someone better than him, something the other teen noted, however Nunnally raised a final concern.

"What are you going to do now he's dead?"

This sent Lelouch and Suzaku into a brief pause, before Lelouch began to explain "He was going to fund us. The whole idea was improving their economic situation, but that takes material and labour, both of which are expensive."

"And now we can't get it."

They sat with downward pensive looks in silence for some time, before Lelouch saw realisation dawn in Suzaku's eyes, a flicker of life, a sparkle that so endeared Lelouch to his friend.

"Idea?"

Suzaku nodded.

"Y'know… they never technically confiscated the Kururugi estate."

This brief flash of genius quickly resulted in the pair standing outside the Kururugi shrine in proper finery, taking in the forest scenery for the last time with a hint of regret. Their boots pressed into the hard mud as surveyors estimated the value of the old fabric walls and sacred land of brown and green. The pair looked around, the dry air absorbing their uneasy upward glances into unending space. They were back, and only to see it pass into Britannian hands. It was truly a tragedy, the last legacy of Genbu Kururugi, being crawled over by Britannian surveyors, insects leeching off the wooden structure.

"How long has it been?"

"I don't believe we've been back."

"That long? Ach…"

They stood in silence once more, signing forms and documents from a wooden table some way away from the Shrine, neither teen being particularly willing to return to the building proper. Genbu Kururugi was still alive, and though all his assets had been passed down as soon as he was imprisoned, the pair still felt that it was not theirs. Lelouch marked himself on the documents as Reuben Ashford, who was in no position to argue against their deal. While it was sad to see it go, both Lelouch and Suzaku knew they would likely have it back within the year. Still, on a symbolic level it felt wrong.
"You've made sure the Royal Family-"

"It's reasonably common knowledge you at least survived the war. Your name, let us not forget, as an Honourary Britannian, is on any public forum you care to browse. A son selling off the family estate for money is nothing that would draw curiosity. Britannians turned it into a pastime"

Suzaku had no reply, beyond looking at dirt, to which Lelouch couldn't blame him. This place held some depressing memories. After a while of the Britannian workers going about their measuring, they were left alone with a single official.

"Sign here."

As Lelouch did so, Suzaku chuckled. "What would Tohdoh have thought?"

A fair question, however his idea of what the man of miracles would have said was likely different to Suzaku's. He remembered Tohdoh as calm, rational, and pragmatic, willing to take one step backwards to move two forwards. Even in his closing words, his showed this in allowing them to leave.

Would Tohdoh have done this? He didn't know. Would he approve, if consulted? Lelouch thought so.

Even so, Lelouch moved forward to officiate the deal with a sense of confidence. Signing in his best penmanship, he turned to Suzaku and whispered "Here's what he'd have said. This is the counterattack. It will get worse before it gets better, but this is us sending our King into the fold. This is where the end begins."

He nodded, and as Lelouch stood up and looked back towards the sky, he sighed and whispered back, the beginnings of triumph showing on the edge of his lips, "Let's go home, Lelouch."

And so they did, several million dollars richer and with the first steps to deposing Britannia underway.

They made it home before nightfall, catching the train and lodging their earnings into Lelouch's bloated gambling account, and planned to call it a night before it was announced the execution of Clovis's murderer was about to take place. Both teens were curious to see who was responsible, and Ohgi wanted to associate more with his new comrades after days cooped up in the attic filing, and so they decided to watch it live together.

Falling onto their shared couch, a burgundy corduroy monstrosity Lelouch had been begging Suzaku to replace since they had moved into the annexe, however the Japanese teen had Nunnally on its side, who enjoyed its tactility. In any case, he grabbed a glass of water, and let the broadcast play, Suzaku and Ohgi sitting either side of him, the former anxious with anticipation and the latter at ill ease with a lack of familiarity to engaging the two in less formal manners. The announcer began to narrate the scene.

"Any moment. Any moment now. It's a sight to see… The throngs' lining the route… All of them waiting on bated breath. Waiting for the accused murderer of Prince Clovis to pass by… former Purist and Baroness, Villetta Nu."

Lelouch practically choked on his drink as the tanned woman was paraded onstage, and it was all he could do to not fall over in surprise. This was rubbish, a shot in the dark by what Lelouch now knew to be a justice system that was shooting into the dark. They didn't know who shot Clovis any more than he did. It disappointed Lelouch, who was looking forward to some justice even if it was
dispensed by Britannia. Even so, Lelouch wanted to be sure, so he turned to Suzaku and asked "Did you not hand her over to the rebels?"

"They didn't want her, so I left her tied to a lamppost outside."

"Suzaku, what the hell?"

Suzaku didn't offer much of a reply beyond a murmur and a shrug, so Lelouch sat back and watched the show, shaking his head. Lelouch didn't buy this for one instant, but even buying into the hypothetical, he still did not want to intervene in Villetta's execution. While her heart, or the heart of whoever killed Clovis, he knew was likely in the right place, he had killed Lelouch's ally, which made him their enemy.

Or was that unfair? They had no way of knowing Clovis had been turned after all, and Lelouch himself had been within a fingers' twitch of killing him prior to Suzaku's intervention.

"Food for thought..." he whispered to nobody in particular as the procession moved along.

"Voices of scorn growing ever louder. Voices bearing testament to a people's love of their prince, raining their judgement down on a terrorist. The Former Acting Consul, Margrave Jeremiah, was indisposed, and so she was treated by a representative from the upcoming Viceroy, Cornelia Li Britannia."

This struck Lelouch. He remembered Jeremiah faintly, as being his tutor and the Head of the Guard to his mother who would not have skirted duty for the apocalypse. What the hell could he be doing that was more important at this time? He didn't say anything, but it stuck in his mind.

All of a sudden, a silence fell on the room, a tense anticipation of something they didn't exactly know of, a waiting for something they didn't know was coming. They were all waiting for something to happen on the long road to the gallows.

And as if on a wish, it stopped. Halted. It ceased to have velocity relative to the road. It was so sudden it took a moment for the commentator to recover.

"This is not a scheduled stop. Could there have been some sort of accident?"

"Now this is interesting..." Lelouch mused, as he leaned forward. Given the scripted nature of procedures such as these, there was something very wrong indicated by this most benign of stoppages.

And then they saw it, rising above the dip in the road like it was emerging into light from beneath water in all its glory, a deformed monster reaching out of the ooze of a midday haze in the depths of a midnight dusk. All three men sitting on the couch were gobsmacked.

"It's..."

"It's, it's Prince Clovis' personal transport! And it's heading straight for the cavalcade!"

Indeed it was, and it stunned each man on the couch into silence. Lelouch mentally conceded that whoever was behind this was very much his kind of person. And as the clownish vehicle became clear, the figure on top did likewise.

The masked suit was a deep purple with large black streaks and golden stripes and long, wrapped sleeves. It had a high, Victorian sweeping look to it, with folds within folds that drew the eye upwards towards the ovular mask, concentrated in an absorbing, terrifying orb that formed the
visor. It made for a truly ominous figure, striking a vicious tone with a stark look and practical aura surrounding the figure. The crowd and announcers were silent, listening with rapt attention to the roars and bellows of the silent statue, standing stoically and stopping all movement wherever he could be seen.

"I am Zero."

And like that, the spell was broken. Instantly, the announcer returned from his trance, as did the soldier leading the execution procession.

"I've seen enough, Zero." she began, indignantly. "This little show of yours is over. First things first. Why don't you lose that mask?"

The masked figure in question did no such thing, rather gesturing backwards grandly, allowing the rear of the car to fall away, revealing the iron sphere from Shinjuku. All three men now all knew on some level what was happening. This Zero was likely affiliated with Ohgi's old group, and now they were bluffing the crowd, however none could work out why. Nu was a purist. If it were, say, Suzaku on the podium for arguments sake, it would make more sense. But this was like Smith in 1984; He fully understood the method, he couldn't work out the objective.

In any case, while they saw the bluff, the soldiers certainly didn't.

"You bastard!"

Zero weathered the insult, and Lelouch could imagine the individual smirking at the irony of the situation. The soldier heading the team groaned, before she continued her shouting with "Fine, what are your demands?"

"An exchange. This, for Nu."

"Absurd! She's charged with high treason for murdering a prince. I can't hand her-"

"Then let us amend this then! You are mistaken on many levels, but the first and most obvious is the fact that this bitch, while a murderer, is not the butcher of your Prince."

There was a pause, but then he continued. "That honour fell to me. Now unless you fancy joining him, hand her over."

This threw the soldier for a loop, and the mood in the Ashford annexe changed considerably. Lelouch's face turned from amusement to a fierce scowl, joined in lesser part by Suzaku. Ohgi turned to them, asking "What is it? Don't you want Britannia to fall?"

"I do. I want it more than I wish to draw another breath. Your question?"

"But… Zero killed Clovis-"

"Which is antithetical to the goal of destroying Britannia as we seek to go about it. And yet he seeks to free this Villetta."

It annoyed him on a personal level, this dissonance. While he appreciated style as much, if not more than the next person, there appeared to be no objective based thinking behind the act. Meanwhile, Zero seemed to answer Lelouch's question.

"Are you going to hesitate? Are you not going to live by your own backwards methods? Cow to the strong, mm? I am that which you aim for. You believe that you are justice, that your word is law
and all of nature must bow to you. You are wrong. Justice is not something you can wield like a Knightmare or bend like the Earth; It is objective, static, and here represented by this canister. Clovis was a criminal, ordering genocide and extermination of the Japanese; this is why he died. This whore is most certainly a criminal, but convicted of the wrong crime. It is on this basis I will take her unto myself."

Lelouch's eyebrows were fixed into a scowl, but his mind was far more engaged than irritated. Zero was objective, he just used different metrics. The exchange was made, with Zero making a grand escape from the scene with Villetta, chased by guards and soldiers. But Lelouch was far too engaged by what Zero had said before. This was a curveball, a terrorist with focus and an awareness of how to snatch precious attention that was critical in winning the Long War.

This could prove interesting.

Chapter End Notes

It should follow that this Zero will be very different in ideology and method than Lelouch!Zero. The focus will remain with our boys in Ashford of course, but it wouldn't be Code Geass without Zero. Well that and a lot of the plot from Chapters 16-20 would be made completely redundant, but you don't know that yet. Shhhh. There's quite a few other things I'd like to comment on as being interesting in my mind, but they represent significant spoilers, including why this Zero is the way this Zero is. But that's for another time. I hope to see you again next time on For Hearts And Minds, Chapter 6; Dubious Intent. Until then, be safe, be careful who you frame for murder, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Six: Dubious Intent

Arc Two: Beneath the Red Table

Opening: “Cyclone” - 12012

“Okay, just through there… just through the gap… GOD DAMN IT MIND THE CAT!”

The cat in question, a black breed they had dubbed “Arthur” that now existed as the bane of Suzaku, dodged out of the way as his nominal prey’s haphazard movements into the room, lifting a heavy screen through the narrow, rectangular door frame with Lelouch guiding him through, with increasing panic. Suzaku’s knees began to buckle as he fell forward and deposited the television onto the couch with a quiet “poof” of impact, his body sprawled across the floor and muscles worn down to sinews.

“At least you didn’t break it.”

This was of little consolation to the thoroughly broken Suzaku, who was beginning to worry that he couldn’t get up, before he accepted an arm up from his friend, standing with little certainty over the large flat screen TV, and wondering if it really needed to be that big.

Still, in spite of Lelouch’s insistence that they invest in quality, so far they had been wise in using their newfound wealth. It had all gone into their personal infrastructure, but so far they hadn’t had to go beyond their means. But as Suzaku heard a female voice cry havoc behind him, he suddenly feared this may no longer be the case.

“What are you boys up to in there?”

He saw Lelouch freeze at the moment of hearing the sound of their incoming doom, before joining him in despair.

“Nothing Milly! Nothing at all! Everything is fine!”

Suzaku, being the first to recover, instantly regretted his instincts to reassure as the monster approached.

Everything was now not fine.

Milly had come.

“Evening.” she smugly smirked as she entered, knowing she would not be opposed as she strutted through the room, looking about her shabby surroundings. “Never thought you the type to splurge Lulu, whats this? A telly? Very swish.”

Before Lelouch could get over the visible shell shock, she turned on Suzaku, who promptly retreated towards a wall.

“No dice? Hmmph. Am I going to have to out you two again?”
“No thank you.” Suzaku hurriedly replied, recalling the last time she tried that. Some female students still hadn’t recovered from the last time, though he felt little pity given that he was the actual victim. He was left thoroughly unsure of what in the world he ought to do as Milly approached, unrelenting in ferocity as she asked, cruel grin fully lit, asking “What. Are. You. Up. To?”

Suzaku was very glad he wasn’t able to see his own terrorised face, sweat beginning to drop down his darkened skin, however mercifully it was Lelouch that relented first, indignant huffing in uncharacteristic honesty.

“We’re going to abuse the Britannian economy to create a stock market crash, likely resulting in a depression which we will use to leverage Japanese workers to strike, with our supplies built up from said crash allowing them to declare independence without a shot being fired.”

Both Suzaku and Milly were briefly stunned by Lelouch’s sudden about shift, and a look at his face showed he had lost any patience he once had. Milly seemed unusually shaken, a hint of shock creeping into her rich voice.

“You’re… you’re not joking are you?” she half-chuckled, half-stuttered, as she looked towards the stoic Lelouch, who was not amused. “You’re actually… you still…”

“Yes, we are, and yes, we still.” he responded meanly, evidently frustrated he was being forced to explain himself like a child. It struck Suzaku as odd that Lelouch felt any obligation to do so, that he couldn’t just invent a reason, or deflect, but then again he’d never understood the one-upmanship they shared. It seemed odd that Lelouch, who usually prided himself on being the more impersonal of the two, would get so hot under the collar over this issue. Of course, this was understandable in the usual banter of the Student Council, but this was serious. Lelouch’s ego may have been greater than even Suzaku anticipated.

Milly on the other hand seemed to have retreated inward, surprised. “I wasn’t sure you still had that will in you…” After a hesitant moment she began to feign control. “I thought you’d grown out of that. At least you’ve grown out of the violence.”

“I have not grown out of or into anything. If violence were the most prudent course of action, I would do it with no abandon, but violence is far less frequently the optimum solution as you may initially believe. It is not pragmatic to be cruel, it is pragmatic to be kind. This is my reasoning, not some altruistic enlightenment that was somehow bestowed on me.”

Suzaku’s eyes flitted in pity towards Milly, and he mouthed “Don’t poke the bear.” as Lelouch fumed. While Suzaku still had a bone to pick with moral pragmatism, at least we was determined to stick by what he felt was practical. Milly nodded, and beginning to get it, asked “I see. That makes sense. So what can I do to help?”

If looks could kill, Suzaku would have sent Milly six thousand feet under in the split second it took him to process ‘Did she really just say that?’

Lelouch was far more intrigued, adopting a thoughtful pose and scratching his chin, and began with “As a matter of fact-”

“Lelouch.”

“Let me finish Suzaku-”

“We already have Ohgi stuck up in here for fu-”
“Who’s Ohgi?”

“A guy. Anyway, there is in fact two things you can do to make our lives much easier. First, classes can go.”

This time, Suzaku’s hypothetical eye based powers would have sent Lelouch to an early grave, though Milly found the request amusing, waving off with a shrug of “Done, you didn’t need them. And the other?”

“The other is actually to do with your father, however I’m not the one to ask him. I would really appreciate it if he started making Knightmares again. He did a great job last time around, and the community misses him.”

Suzaku hadn’t heard about Lelouch’s interest in Knightmares, and thanked Milly for saving his blushes by asking “Why?”

Lelouch didn’t respond initially, thinking carefully before speaking slowly and quietly. “Perhaps… the whole idea is reducing Britannia’s ability to fight both militarily and economically by killing its economy, especially with regards to Sakuradite…”

“What are you thinking?”

“That there might be another way to go about this.” he said, and Suzaku noticed him forward, fingers laced over his mouth like Ikari Gendo, clearly having worked something out. Lelouch’s face appeared to Suzaku to be that of someone who had spent a long time working to a conclusion he hadn’t expected, but was still okay with.

Which really did summarize what Lelouch had been going through over the last week.

In any case, Lelouch continued “Perhaps approaching it from the supply side as well as demand side may also help. Not replacing our main plan, but a two pronged approach. Say, if your fuel runs out, that’s bad, but you still have the car, and in this case the world's biggest military. You can muscle your way through it. Similarly, if your car breaks down, or it doesn’t arrive, you can kinda work around that, right? But if both happened? If Sakuradite became worthless, and the military broke down due to faulty Knightmare Frames, or ones that never got delivered?”

It was a rhetorical question, and Lelouch returned to his relaxed position. “It’s an interesting thought. It’d actually be really helpful as it turns out if he were to start making them again, hmm. I’ll have a word with Reuben later- oh hang on, that was for you Milly, right?”

This actually made Suzaku chuckle. Lelouch had completely forgotten what he was doing in his own train of thought. “Welcome back Lelouch. Yes, that sounds very interesting, but we have three more televisions to drag in.”

“Get Ohgi.”

“He’s unconscious after doing three decades of filing in two nights.”

Lelouch groaned, and Suzaku poured himself a cup of coffee as Milly mulled it all over. Making himself and Milly a dark brew and Lelouch a milky coffee with the finesse of an expert, he quietly rubbed his eyes in tiredness. Zero had been playing on his mind all night.

Zero had vanished without trace, with Villetta Nu not being found anywhere and assumed to still be with the terrorist. Suzaku was mixed. While he appreciated the idea of equal opportunity justice, he despised the threat of violence, as well as political assassinations. While Lelouch was
more pragmatic, Suzaku just hated violence. Pretty much since as far back as he could remember, violence had really annoyed him as a senseless waste, especially when peace was possible and so close to hand. He was more personally invested in the cause of peace for its own sake.

Certainly, it wasn’t just Lelouch’s curiosity and Suzaku’s concern that was focused on Zero over that night. The media hadn’t shut up about Zero since the mysterious figure appeared just past midnight. Diethard Reid in particular had headed up the hype train, his remarkably punchable face frontlining a lot of the talk shows airing since the event.

“Suzaku, what are you playing at?”

“Sorry!”

He’d completely forgotten the coffee, and rushed the milk to get the mugs into the sitting room in time to catch Lelouch between impatience and frustration. Suzaku hurried in, wondering why Sayako couldn’t do this, and passing out the coffees as Milly came to a decision.

“I’ll go and ask him about it. He should prove agreeable.”

“He definitely will if he wants to keep his little chess helper.”

“Lelouch, you have a gambling addiction. In any case, I’ll go with you Milly, just to make sure he knows we’re in on it.”

“I do not have an addiction, I have a hobby. Anyway, that’s grand. I’ll have a word with Ohgi once he returns to the land of the living.”

Suzaku was surprised. “What does Ohgi have to do with Knightmare Frames?”

“His partner piloted one against the Britannians, and didn’t die. He should know their flaws and how to combat them. We can incorporate this into the project for when Reuben’s designing his own version.”

Suzaku nodded in understanding, saying “A’ight. I’ll leave you to your coffee.”, before turning to Milly and asking “Shall we?”

She nodded, and the pair left Lelouch to do whatever needed doing. They walked silently down the lined wooden halls of the Ashford Academy boarding rooms, walled by paintings woven into scenery that Suzaku had mentally termed “budget majesty”, for being quite aesthetic and grand, and yet having the hollow appearance of a beleaguered owner that really should be spending his money on other things. He kept his opinions to himself however as they passed towards the office of the Headmaster and former Earl, Reuben Ashford, who while appearing less worried than when Suzaku had last seen him, coming in from the Shinjuku ghetto incident, was still not the picture of relaxation, his tired orbs lethargically following him about the room. Suzaku was beginning to seriously question Lelouch’s wisdom, as Milly stepped forward in her usual confident style, sitting on the edge of his busy wooden desk.

“Hello dad.” she said to her father, raising her pitch at the end to indicate a continued statement, to which the former Earl, face barely able to perk in response, sighed. “What is it dear?”

She sighed, before perking up herself. “This may take a while.”

That it did, as Suzaku witnessed the unintentional systematic breakdown of a man. Reuben didn’t begin the lecture in brilliant shape, and by the end he looked ready to go to bed for 6 weeks. His wrinkles had wrinkles, and his bags looked set to pick up the groceries. Suzaku was now really
regretting letting Milly take the lead, as she beamed down at her poor father.

“Urghh…”

“I’m sorry sir.”

“And you want me to go back into the Knightmare industry after the Ganymede disaster?”

“Yes.”

Reuben rubbed his sweating forehead and sighed for possibly the thirty sixth time in the last minute, before lying back. Suzaku couldn’t blame him. The Ganymede was his labour of love, taking years and over a billion Britannian dollars, and while it served as the basis for all ensuing Knightmare Frames, which likely poured salt in Reuben’s wounds, a combination of a battery power source and the death of their main pilot, who was also Lelouch’s mother and Empress of all Britannia Marianne Lamperouge, killed the project and lost Reuben his Earldom, wealth and pride.

This could prove an issue, he thought, however Suzaku persevered, asking “Please sir, we’ll be with you every step of the way. You’ll be designing Knightmares again, and in the end of it all there’ll be freedom for the Japanese.”

Reuben seemed somewhat persuaded, shifting, but he wasn’t won over, squirming under Suzaku. He was not falling under the same ideal, and Suzaku held in a bristle. He had hoped it wouldn’t come to this.

“Reuben, I can understand your hesitation, but if this works, you will have an important role in the new Japan, and the benefits thereof.”

This was a barefaced lie in multiple ways, and it marked an annoying standard for Suzaku; he’d had to lie to execute their plans.

Lies had always been a difficult thing for him to deal with, and while he had come to accept little white lies as a part of life, he shared Lelouch’s drive towards the idea that all good ideas should be self evident, that all a good argument needed was for it to be properly explained to be successful. The mere framework that he had had to adopt to win Reuben over didn’t sit well with the teenager. He should have convinced him first time round. This was the first lie, more to himself than anyone, that he ought to do this.

Then there came the issue of Reuben’s ethics. While he had proven himself through Suzaku to be a friend to the Japanese, his response to the current issue showed where his concerns lay. While Suzaku could understand, he didn’t empathise. The fact he had responded to Suzaku’s bribe rather than his preferred teleological argument implied from how the plan was set up said a lot. Would he rather violent insurrection or change on their terms? The question, as far as Suzaku could make out, was that humanitarianism was a good in and of itself.

There were two reasons for this. First, because as far as Suzaku could tell, it was what a decent human being did. Secondly, that goodness would be paid back both directly and indirectly, which if you stretched definitions, was what he’d told Reuben. But the idea that the motivating factor for anyone to get involved was personal gain infuriated him, which was why he wanted to avoid the argument, despite its technical accuracy if you played fast and loose with your definitions. The argument from humanitarianism should have superseded any argument from personal gain.

Because of course, there was no chance in all holy hell Reuben would get any government level position above caretaker in a hypothetical where Suzaku and Lelouch founded a new Japan. Suzaku
would never stand for the implicit pay-to-play, and Lelouch held no personal loyalty to anyone beyond Suzaku and Nunnally, and so would not be taken in.

This was the far bigger lie, and it was to Reubens face, plain as day and with no opportunity for retraction. But in truth Suzaku, being aware of both, couldn’t decide whether lying to others or lying to oneself was worse.

In any case, Reuben was placated, and nodded. “Fine, I’ll look into it. I trust you and Lelouch to be on hand to help?”

Subdued, Suzaku agreed, before Milly chipped in “And hire an assistant, you look wrecked!”

Chuckling at this, Reuben nodded and replied, tongue in cheek “I’ll add it to my to do list.”

And so that, as they say, was that, and they went their separate ways, Milly back to torment whoever else she could get her hands on, Reuben to a well deserved scotch, and Suzaku to a private think out on the roof of the school as the sun descended below the horizon. The world appeared a dark purple, as light faded below his line of vision to wake the continent.

He lay back against a ventilator, not active yet, alone with his thoughts turning over slowly yet persistently, like an engine on startup that couldn’t quite get enough steam to do anything of substance. Questions of ethics and practicality flitted in front of his half-shut rich green eyes, fading with only partial answers he wasn’t quite satisfied with. He felt himself moving on into sleep, and stirred himself. He didn’t want to sleep, not like this, not with uneasy thoughts. He knew it would not be a pleasant rest.

Suzaku did get nightmares, quite often in fact. It used to be about the days following Britannia’s invasion, but after a few years that tune had played itself out, only to be replaced with dreams of paralysing uncertainty, anxious voices questioning his choices and decisions with fretful accuracy, able to leave him awake in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, tears lining his cheeks even if he’d never realised he’d fallen asleep.

It was a bizarre and terrifying sensation, having almost another side of you spring up Karl Jung style and deliver scathing blows and raise issues of self doubt that left one a prisoner of their own mind for timeless stretches. It was like a long tunnel he was forced to crawl through, his head forced firmly down to make the end seem so much further away than the morning as his doubts and uncertainties tormented him.

And that was when he woke, dripping sweat and far too hot for the night that was in it. The night was black now, and the cloudless sky seemed to swallow him up in all his surprise and fear. He swore, and kicked his extended foot downwards against the roof in frustration. He understood how Lelouch felt when he let out weakness, even when alone. Suzaku felt shaken as he tried to calm himself, feeling slight shame. How could he help people like this?

“You alright?”

This deep, elder voice sent him into shock, the sudden unwelcome breach to his splendid silence shaking him as if he were struck by lightning. His head spun round to seek the source, his emerald eyes finding Ohgi standing just over and behind him, wrapped in his fur lined brown leather jacket, looking concerned with a fatherly look down at the teen. Suzaku shook, and waved it off. “I’m fine. What are you doing up here?”

“Looking for you. You vanished for hours, I was worried. Heck, Lelouch was worried.”
Suzaku didn’t respond, instead pulling his jacket over him to which Ohgi leaned down and placed his own over Suzaku, its worn, rough yet snug texture draping over him. He sighed and accepted it, as Ohgi sat down beside him, a little above due to his natural height and age. His long face appeared thoughtful yet open, turned at about 45 degrees towards him. After a brief silence framed under the stars, Ohgi continued “So what’s the issue?”

“I…” Suzaku began, before stopping himself. He had two major problems, his concern for the lying and his worry that he wouldn’t be good enough to do his job. Really, both problems tied back to one thing.

“Uncertainty.” he blurted out, catching a nod from Ohgi before realising he ought to elaborate. “I know exactly what we need to do… hell I pushed Lelouch into it, and I know its the right thing, but.. I’m just.. Nervous. Not that there’s… Its just so huge, and I feel like, how the hell am I going to do this? It’s so damn huge, Britannia, all of it…”

His rambling thoughts petered off as Ohgi nodded again, before firming his lips, evidently thinking about a response, before slackening up, visually signalling he had a thought.

“Y’know… Me, and the others, back when we were violent rebels, we would sometimes wonder about what we would do. It was just us four, and we just went from one raid to another, and we always wondered what the hell it was for-”

“I don’t see where you’re going with this…”

“Hold on. The point I’m making is, we had no idea what we were doing. We were just drifting, hell Tamaki may have been drunk, and yet we kept it together, and just… managed. We didn’t really think about it, but we still did alright. Nothing exceptional, but that was us. We knew what we had, we knew what we wanted, but we hadn’t the first notion on how to get from A to B.”

He made like he was about to continue, before biting his lip and changing course.

“That was us. You have Lamperouge, probably the smartest lad fighting for the Home Islands with a rock solid plan, and you, who knows how to work people and isn’t afraid to stand up to anyone. If we survived more than thirty seconds, you’re fine.”

“But this is so much bigger… It’s just that its so clear and plain, that it almost seems too big now that we can see it.”

“At least you can see it. You’re the most qualified person that could possibly have been chosen.” Ohgi ruffled Suzaku’s hair and leaned back, before continuing “Everything always seems big. Do you think Oda Nobunaga thought that, before he went off to unify Japan?”

“I doubt it, he was killed by one of his Generals before he got the chance…”

Ohgi, not having the quick wit to retort, gave him a concerned look that screamed just enough of ‘Not helpful’ for Suzaku to shut up. After a moment, Ohgi seemed to find his words.

“Hm. You’ll be fine. I believe in you completely and fully.”

“Thank you Ohgi.”
Another chapter done, and not much to not that was not explicitly stated. I focused on Suzaku and his weaknesses both in this Chapter and in one's prior, and I would like to emphasise that I am going for a equal balance between Lelouch and Suzaku’s abilities. Lelouch has significant flaws, however the plot as I have planned it will not show them up in as serious a fashion as this Chapter until Arcs 4 and 5.

Other than that, there’s not as much subtext nor as many references in this Chapter, so with all said and done, I hope to see you again next time on For Hearts And Minds, Chapter 7; Ganymede. Stay safe, believe in yourself, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
The muscular system is responsible for the movement of the human body. Attached to the bones of the skeletal system are about 700 named muscles that make up roughly half of a person's body weight. Each of these muscles is a discrete organ constructed of skeletal muscle tissue, blood vessels, tendons, and nerves. Muscle tissue is also found inside of the heart, digestive organs, and blood vessels. The main function of the muscular system is movement. Muscles are the only tissue in the body that has the ability to contract and therefore move the other parts of the body.

Lelouch Vi Britannia, somewhere in the back of his head, knew this, as well as a myriad of other things. Unfortunately, all he really knew, at least in the short term, was that they all hurt. A lot. Excruciating pain massaged his thighs and constricted his waist, forcing him to take shallow, bated breaths as his sweaty brow grazed the trimmed Ashford grass, his arms begging for mercy as they held his slender body from collapsing onto the inviting green bed.

Unfortunately, he was allowed no such solace, as a deep rich voice called down from above "What the hell do you call that Lelouch?

He puffed out the air caught in his lungs, before giving way, allowing his chest to crash onto the freshly cut lawn. "I'm not cut out for this Suzaku, it's biological."

"Then we better work harder to fix that."

Lelouch sighed as he sat up, trying to ignore his aching muscles, pain stretching along the lengths of his limbs. While he had been quite proud of himself getting out of boring classes through Milly, he had not considered the implications of being left alone for extended periods of time with the hypermotivated Suzaku, who had taken it upon himself to create an exercise regimen for the out of shape Lelouch, involving extensive muscle building and runs. He had asked Milly to allow him to return to class, but she was far too busy enjoying sharing pictures of Lelouch exhausted and dripping in sweat. A conflict of interest at its finest as far as Lelouch could tell.

"Come on, another set."

"Please have mercy…"

"I could do ten of what you just did, another set."

"That is because you are not human."

Suzaku merely raised a hefty eyebrow, before chuckling as Lelouch subjected himself to further misery and pain, attempting to do an eleventh push up. He barely seemed to notice Ohgi looking on from the front entrance to their accommodation with a sympathetic smile, before the man moved along back inside to survey their investments.
It had been a little over a month since they had roped in Milly and Reuben, and in spite of Lelouch's constant abuse at the hands of his friends, things had gone swimmingly. A holding company, with the perhaps uninspired name of LL&S International, had been set up, as well as the Ashford KMF Research Association. While the latter was still being worked on, the former had been very busy, as Lelouch and Suzaku had spent their down time using their gains from selling the Kururugi estate to hoard Sakuradite. The War in Africa between the Britannians and the European-backed African Union was finally winding down as the last African strongholds in Tobruk were eliminated by Princess Cornelia Li Britannia, and the War in Europe, while inevitable, was still a long way off as the Britannian military took the time to reorganise itself and properly annex and administer their new territories. This gap in military spending had minorly depressed Sakuradite prices due to a dip in demand, and so the timing was ideal for LL&S to buy significant amounts at relatively discounted prices.

The plan, for the time being, was to hold onto their supplies until the conflict started up again, before selling it at a fixed price, a little above current market value. While the Britannians would pay a premium to obtain the Sakuradite, they would go to them because Lelouch and Suzaku would promise they would not change their prices relative to the market value. Given that the purchasing spree brought about by a new war in Europe would likely increase the price of Sakuradite, the Britannians would see it as a win-win, as their Sakuradite would be both cheap and reliable. At that point, Lelouch, Suzaku and Ohgi would intentionally destabilise the market and be able to multiply their wealth to the point that they could begin to fund a proper Japanese Bureaucracy and Currency and would then be able to effectively break away, with a now economically fragile Britannia left unable to respond after having a major Sakuradite supplier pull out and spread uncertainty.

Of course, Sakuradite bonds could only be issued by the government to those deemed trustworthy by the Britannian state, but one of the few things Clovis had given them before he'd died was his royal stock code, which allowed them to purchase the material at will. These were basically waivers, telling those looking to look the other way by Royal command. It was handy, but anyone who looked deeper at who had issued it would get suspicious. So far, there had been no issues.

By this point, the grunt work of working out the finer details of the plans with Ohgi's exhaustive notes had been done, though the significant work of distributing resources and expanding operations was still a ways away from them. As a result, all their spare time had increased, with their efforts largely centered around helping with Reuben's Knightmare Frame plans get off the ground. Results had been initially mixed, however with time and lots of coffee they had winnowed out a concept that would serve as their Trojan Horse in deceiving the Britannians into an unwise investment.

Things apart from that had slowed down. Lelouch had not lost any weight, or gained any muscle, which Suzaku attributed to a lack of effort. Ohgi had become good friends with Sayako, as it turned out they were ideologically similar, both Japanese and lived near each other for some time, as well as with Nunnally to a lesser extent. He had a fatherly instinct about him, probably from his time as a teacher, enough that Lelouch had stopped looking exasperated whenever they talked.

Meanwhile, as Lelouch finally crumpled somewhere between the eleventh and twelfth push up, Suzaku was giving him a fierce look that preluded what was coming.

"Okay, now let's get running."

Before Lelouch could mutter "Damn freak.", or some more explicit variation of that sentiment, he was saved by the arrival of their balding Principal, who was in considerably better health than he had been a mere month ago due to a newfound enthusiasm, his walk complemented with little jumps and a grin as he approached the pair.
Given that Lelouch could barely breathe, Suzaku waved and called over with "Good news?"

Reuben nodded as he approached, pausing to allow the teens leaving class to pass by without becoming privy to what they were discussing. Several who knew Lelouch and Suzaku nodded as they passed, as Rivalz asked "You up for going back out for chess on Saturday? There's a-"

"NO HE IS NOT!"

"Thank you Suzaku. We'll see Rivalz, I'm a busy man."

The blue haired teens head fell to the side, as he replied "Yeah, you are. I never see you anymore. You're leaving me out to dry man!"

After nodding him away, the rebellious teens turned back to Reuben, and the Britannian asked "So what's happened?"

"Well, our new platform had a rough start as you will remember, but that was never our biggest issue. Earl Lloyd Asplund has been developing his monstrosity, Lancelot I think he calls it, for ages, and was eyeing the same contract we were. I was terrified he was going to get it."

Lelouch was aware of the first issue, having helped with the plans, but not the second. Their platform, the GN 1-02, was nothing but a sheet of graph paper and CAD, but the formal military contract for a replacement to the Sutherland didn't require a built model to their absurd fortune, but not having a model working would be a serious mark against them. Their platform was much smaller and lighter than a Sutherland, and on the advice of Ohgi, much easier to maneuver in, with simple controls and a foolproof interior. Even the forward armament consisted of a pair of 30mm autocannons mounted in the arm, which took strain off the Sakuradite generator and allowed for yet further reduction to weight.

"Go on."

"So as it turns out, no other manufacturers bid because no one wanted to waste money running against Asplund, so it was just us two there. After a while, it turned out their pilot couldn't get the Lancelot running, and they were immediately disqualified, leaving only us."

Both Lelouch and Suzaku's mouths were agape. The noise of the environment around them was the only response that could be mustered for some time for the shock of this news. The Japanese teen recovered and responded first, replying with a simple, automatic "What?"

Reuben nodded. "Turns out it was so complicated, their top pilot, the Margrave Jeremiah Gottwalf, couldn't get it going, let alone fly it. They were rejected on the spot, and we got the contract."

After a moment allowed for the anticlimax to sink in, the pair bellowed out in laughter, with even Lelouch belting out roars of amusement.

"He couldn't…" began Suzaku amid chuckles "even start it?"

Reuben, with a grin of his own, nodded enthusiastically. "Couldn't get the engine running. It was an amazing feat of engineering, but it had possibly the worst ergonomics I've ever seen." 

"Oh that's just made my day." Lelouch finally spluttered once he was done laughing, eventually remembering "Oh, and we got the contract, excellent."

Reuben nodded. "We've been designated factories in Hokkaido to get to work in immediately."
Lelouch nodded, and thought. At least he now knew what Jeremiah was doing during the funeral; he guessed the Margrave was paid handsomely for his services as a test driver, though apparently not well enough, and now LL&S has a customer. They were responsible for the distribution of pay of their employees, so long as production itself stayed within budget. It could be he thought, of considerable advantage to hire Japanese workers and treat them well. This would mean the name "Ashford" would do well in Japanese circles, which would be extremely handy later when they led the charge. Hokkaido wasn't ideal, being so far from Tokyo, but it certainly was better than nothing. It was pragmatic to be as kind as possible, as the objective of winning back Japan could only be won on the terms of, and with the consent of its native citizens. Hence, it was in Lelouch's interests to foster as healthy an image of himself and his team as he could. After sitting back, allowing his muscles to ease, he asked "Will the Knightmares be a percentile contribution, or do we have a deadline?"

"The latter." Reuben replied. "We need 120 in 3 months."

"Excellent. All the tasks at hand have been cleared. This is the beginning of The Long War on our front."

Suzaku concluded the chat with a curt nod, before turning his head to Lelouch, who in turn looked towards Reuben as he was reminded of the torture that Suzaku had been inflicting on him over the last few days, and whose fault it was.

"Please let me back into class."

Reuben took an aside glance at Suzaku before working it out, and laughing. "Has he been working you ragged?"

Lelouch gave a nod, before an indignant Suzaku doubled down with "Well what was I supposed to do?"

Lelouch decided not to grace that ridiculous question with a reply, as Reuben shrugged. "We're running a damn rebellion against the state, you can do whatever the hell you want. You can go to class, but you won't be counted out. There's bigger things to worry about."

Suzaku tutted ironically, sardonically adding "How responsible."

Lelouch didn't mind how irresponsible it was, he could get onboard for anything that got him out of Suzaku's sadistic PE, and so after a short wait for classes to resume he found himself back in what once was a thoroughly boring classroom, examining the heads around him as the teacher at the front lectured. While he was wholly uninterested in the teachers opinions on history he'd already learned from his many years in Pendragon, his curiosity was piqued when the topic moved to Britannia and the world today. He, naturally enough, had his own opinions on this topic, but was curious to see how others viewed it. It was a social experiment, in his mind; how open was the general population to change? He'd never thought to wonder, as before he had swung between isolationist vanguardism and apathy, and neither of these ideologies had much concern for the opinions of the general population. He had gone to class to learn for perhaps the first time in his life.

The results were depressing, with responses that justified Britannia's aggressive expansion as well as going on to claim Japanese people had it better under Britannian rule. This was extremely frustrating, however he supposed it was only natural that they would repeat what they were taught. Lelouch spent the rest of the class in introspection over this, which made a welcome break from the lesson itself. He knew it was only natural, but he also knew it would be hard to break. Would these people end up being his enemies? He could barely imagine it; if only for the reason they were so
dull he could barely envision them holding opinions strong enough to act. It was a tragedy, as far as Lelouch was concerned, for there was little he hated more than ignorance or apathy.

Still, just about better than boot camp with Drill Sergeant Kururugi.

Once the class was finished, Lelouch, considerably drained, moved out of the stuffy room and into the hall, where friends and colleagues passed him by in their own bubbles. As he reflected further, he noticed a girl with bright red hair, combed down with her school uniform, standing beside him, holding a bag out as he looked down at it lamely.

"You left this behind."

She held a collection of books and sheets into the light, which Lelouch realised with widening eyes was his abbreviated collection of stock notes from Ohgi. He couldn't believe he'd left them behind, as he mind turned red with self directed fury and rage. It was a sloppy, stupid mistake!

But another thought reached him. How much had she seen?

"Thank you." he quickly said. "You're dead right, I'm such a fool. I'll be taking that."

As soon as he spoke, it was like a gun had been fired. Her eyes flew open, and she seemed to hang on every word, before she seemed to catch herself and visibly withdraw. It was a bizarre display, that drew Lelouch's once disparate attention solely on the girl, as he took another look at her with a greater degree of care.

She was three inches shorter than him at five foot seven, and had the appearance of a sheltered aristocrat. He had in fact seen her before, and recalled Milly mentioning something about her being ill. However, while her slender frame and current meek expression matched this impression, several other things did not.

While her body was slim, her constitution was rich, with a clean, bright face and healthy muscles. This did not exclude ill health, but within this context it would raise eyebrows. Then there was her reaction and far more crucially, how well she moved to cover it that may have escaped the notice of one less adept than Lelouch. This required further explanation.

"It's fine, I just saw you leave it" she finally. "My name's Kallen Stadtfeld, its... very nice to meet you."

"Lelouch Lamperouge."

He spoke curtly, unsure of exactly what was happening, and so not wanting to rock the boat too greatly. She nodded as he took back the package, and asked "Where are you heading next?"

"Back to my room after I grab lunch."

"Mind if I come along?"

Lelouch's eyes narrowed to slits, his mouth pursed briefly before he shrugged. "Why not?"

Of course, his own mind was nowhere near as nonchalant, for as he observed this Kallen, he noted out of the corner of his eye, she was also examining him, her eyes scrutinising his. At this point, she had either read the docket, or he was really in trouble of a kind he couldn't imagine. At this point, he had to work out what she knew, or if she was just innocent, which unfortunately meant spending more time with her. After a few minutes of silence, during which they each got a meal, they sat alone as Lelouch began the conversation.
"Haven't seen you around much."

"I've been ill."

"I see."

Indeed, he did, as she fell back to the illness excuse. She seemed to retreat into herself to complete the effect, but again it seemed like an act, an imitation of someone trying to appear introverted despite being otherwise. He tried not to show he was thinking as she inquired further, asking "So what was in the bag?"

This was an interesting question with regards to its implications. Had the roles been reversed, and he had seen what was in the bag, he'd have pressed the attack, naming it and asking directly about why she had it. But then again, not everyone was him, and perhaps she was trying to catch him lying, and wait to be able to present a more conclusive case before revealing her hand. It seemed like something Suzaku would do, provided she had seen it at all.

Still, he had to think of something, so he deflected. "A book."

"Oh? A novel, orr...?"

"Mm hm, the Count of Monte Cristo, by Alexandre Dumas."

It was a quick grab off the top of his head, but it worked as she relaxed. He had in fact read the book multiple times, liking Edmond for the parallels to Lelouch himself as well as what he eventually did, something Lelouch had long aspired towards. Kallen feigned a nod, recognising the book "I see. It's been awhile since I've read it. I really identified with the protagonist."

"Did you? As a matter of fact so did I."

"Funny that. I read it years ago, but a friend of mine pointed out something about heroes recently that put it in a whole new light."

Lelouch leaned back, curious. "What was that?"

"Heroes need a goal, a focusing point that they go towards. Edmond is that to a T, and I'll be honest and say it was an eye opener for myself."

Lelouch, again distracted from his initial goal, was deeply engrossed in the discussion. He was a dark, eying the gleaming silver of intellectual curiosity, responding "He is one of the forebearers of that idea, that Protagonists are the active force. It is a sad trope that Villains should be the driving force that a Protagonist should react to like a pinball."

"A Protagonist does not equal a Hero."

Lelouch smiled, and took a moment to think. This Kallen was on the ball. He had almost forgotten why he had engaged in this conversation, and pursued this line of thinking further.

"Very true, very true, but Heroes should be defined by intent, not role. Proactiveness may be a villainous trait, but virtuous causes could do with some more villainous folk in the Heroic role, both in fiction and in real life."

"Does that include Zero?"

Lelouch paused again, gathering his thoughts as he ravelled his fingers round in rings, a force of
habit. "Yes and no. Whoever they are, they are taking the initiative against Britannia, which is portrayed as villainous, but Britannia has given plenty of reason for rebellion. As to morals, it depends on your partisanship."

"And his methods?"

Lelouch didn't pause this time, instead deliberating with "From a Britannian perspective, he is a villain whether he is proactive or reactive, and likewise with his methods. I'm far more concerned with whether he will be successful."

"How heroic." Kallen retorted.

"I don't have to be, I'm not Zero."

She chuckled at him, before replying "Do you not have ideals of your own you want to be… how did you put it… proactive about?"

"I do."

Lelouch was quiet but firm in this affirmation, probably too much so. After a moment, there was a lull in the conversation, before a hand tapped on Lelouch's shoulder from behind, and as the prince turned he saw his Japanese colleague standing above him looking skeptical at the idea of him interacting with another human being.

"Afternoon Suzaku."

"I see you've found a friend."

Lelouch chuckled as he leaned over his shoulder, before responding in a tongue-in-cheek fashion "As a matter of fact I have. Suzaku, meet Kallen Stadtfeld."

After a brief pause for the exchange of formalities, Kallen's eyes suddenly widened again before she spoke, asking "Are you Suzaku Kururugi?"

"Yes."

Suzaku wasn't a fan of being recognized, Lelouch knew, as it was usually followed by negative things, and he tried to indicate this with his gruff reply, but instead Kallen nodded respectfully and, after a moments awkward silence, said "Your father... was a hero."

There was a sombre tone to her words, as she nodded and turned away without waiting for a reply, her movements rigid and conclusive, leaving Lelouch and Suzaku to look uncertainly at each other, before themselves walking slowly back through the Ashford paths to their apartment, to musings and full, closed bags, ready to resume their work.

Chapter End Notes

And the plans are set. Again, I tried to balance Suzaku's development last chapter with some highlighting of Lelouch's here. I tried to make the exposition at the beginning as readable as possible. I thank you all for reading, and I hope you continue with me in
Chapter 8 of For Hearts And Minds, Chekhov's Radio. For now, stay safe, remember to pick up all your stuff before leaving the room, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Chekhov’s Radio

Chapter Eight: Chekhov's Radio

Arc Two: Beneath the Red Table

Opening: "Cyclone" - 12012

The chromed silver rooftops of Britannian Tokyo made for an eyesore from ground level, stretching for miles in unison, and blocking out sunlight below, however it was a practical solution that saved costs and protected from earthquakes, as well as looking stunning from above. The sleek, bold sheen of the glassy surface reflecting all the colours of the city, lined by black streets creating a grid like pattern like a surrealist artwork adorned by harsh rays and lines down every axis. Cornelia Li Britannia, new Viceroy of Area 11, admired the architecture from above, the sleek surfaces forming well under her gaze.

It was now three months since her brother Clovis had died, and following a brief power spat, she had been nominated as Viceroy after her successes in Africa. While this meant she would likely miss the War in the European front, she didn't mind, as it meant she could find Clovis's killer and keep a closer eye on Euphemia, who was in the next room of their flight in.

Cornelia cared more for Euphemia than anyone had their own family, guarding her with watchful eyes and zealous hand, often scorned by the target of her affections but with a knowledge that it was well intended. Even years later, memories of their other half siblings, the long departed Lelouch and Nunnally, came back, sending her into shudders. It still felt like her own failure, having been sent away the night of Marianne's death. Lelouch, understandably, addressed their father with bold rage, and was sent away with Nunnally. This compounded her guilt and rage, as the real victim of Marianne's murder, Lelouch and Nunnally, were sent away for being brave enough to stand up to Charles, doing nothing wrong.

It should have been her, she still thought. She should have been the one to confront Charles about his carelessness, where no one else had. At times, she even wondered if any of her living siblings could take up the throne of the Emperor after he died, as an Emperor required a courage they all lacked. While Cornelia had moved past this cowardice, she didn't know that her siblings had grown past their simple urges to please power.

Still, it was neither the time or place for such reflections, as they were moving in for landing, and business was soon to be conducted. Despite her concerns for her younger siblings, she was an accomplished military commander with little tolerance for slip ups or waiting, and affected herself in this fashion while in public. She knew that if she were to push the discipline and order of her troops as she did, she had to be seen to be just as disciplined. No one followed a coward.

Who she was indoors, she wasn't certain. Her military life blended with a frustration for the system as it was, and her affections for her family complicated this. However, while who she really was was still up in the air, when out of doors and in the field, no uncertainty was permitted, both for the morale and integrity of her troops. Preparing for battle was a fine art she had mastered over many years of battle, and as they touched down and the Earls and Nobles gathered around her transport, she prepared for battle of another kind.
"Oh, my Lady, welcome. The first order of business is a welcome party we've arranged for your Highness and... Oh!"

His welcoming tones were cut short as she drew her sword and swiftly moved to hold the leading edge by his throat. This sudden escalation, combined with the narrow, sharp eyes of a woman intent on spilling blood sent the Noblemen away in a scurry, as the one under threat quivered in fear. She snarled.

"Sloppy, senile, corrupt. Where is Zero? I want the enemy of the Empire caught! Get Zero!"

As Euphemia sighed from behind her, Cornelia proceeded to roar out orders to the men in front of her to postpone the party and apprehend Zero at all costs.

Meanwhile, far away, someone arguably far more dangerous to Britannian society was not happy in the least, his dark malcontent striking mild irritation into the hearts and minds of those around him as he went about his foul business.

"SUZAKU? WHERE THE HELL IS MY COFFEE?"

"GET IT YOURSELF, I'M BUSY!"

And busy Suzaku was, watching the news coverage of Cornelias arrival on the television set, forcing the Black Prince to get off his couch and go through the motions of making his own. Not that Suzaku minded; since Lelouch had wormed his way out of his colleagues's attempt to get him in shape, he had been doing this and that to try stick it to him, though as Lelouch trudged in in slippers and a gown, he felt his friend wasn't exactly getting the message. Still, nothing would come of nothing, and so he looked on as Lelouch glared at his coffee machine for a solid three minutes, far more amused by the sight of Cornelia drawing a sword on a Noble.

"Do you see this?"

Lelouch looked over and chuckled. "She hasn't changed."

Suzaku nodded, before turning back to the television, seeing a teen their age with pink hair and an apologetic smile passing from behind. She looked pretty, but he was certainly not telling Lelouch that. Still, he watched on as Lelouch sipped his fresh drink and observed over his shoulder.

"She certainly seems to be in a hurry." he noted, and Suzaku agreed. She was not wasting any time on the paddock, almost speed walking over to her limousine down the tarmac. It was bizarre, and almost unnaturally fast.

"Odd." Suzaku commented, before shrugging and standing to check their stocks in the other room. With their constant trading through Clovis's code, as well as their substantial government contracts, their company had 20 billion in capital invested in Sakuradite, or what amounted to .2% of all Sakuradite currently in circulation. This didn't seem like much, but as he'd pointed out to Milly, once the value of Sakuradite sank, and it would sink once they sabotaged Britannia's Ganymedes, 20 billion would buy far far more than .2%, and once that floated back to a stable number, they could sell it, making enough to fund all manner of devious things.

And so, Suzaku stepped into the dark room of screens that Lelouch, Ohgi and he would spend odd hours in making calls, checks, and sells to manage their growth. The room had drawn curtains filtering in the only light, forcing Suzaku to blink several times to read their screens, blitzing out information with fully lit LED's and a terrible user interface.

Sakuradite, 140.65 Dollars per Imperial Pound.
Suzaku relaxed. That was pretty much where they'd left it, and they hadn't bought or sold anything. He yawned, stretching his arms upwards as he let out a breath. He needed some more sleep. As he began to turn, he took another fleeting look at the screen, which ticked over to a new value.

Sakuradite, 142.06 Dollars per Imperial Pound.

Suzaku blinked in incredulous shock, and stared intently at the screen as the price shot up by a dollar and a half. While at a glance this mightn't seem much, even a few cents rise or fall would be noteworthy. This was a soar in comparison, and it was due a hefty explanation.

"Um, Lelouch?"

The rich voice came sauntering in from outside, unconcerned. "What is it?"

"You may want to look at this."

Audibly irritated, Lelouch strolled in, coffee nearly empty, moaning about being dragged from pillar to post, before falling silent as soon as he saw the number, his face freezing in a confused, surprised expression, not moving at all for five seconds.

"Suzaku…"

"Ay."

"Was it not 140.62 dollars this morning?"

"I walked in and it was .65, but it just leaped right there."

Lelouch leaped- yes, leaped, much to Suzaku's surprise, into the office chair in front of the screen and began to hammer furiously at the keyboard, draining the last dregs of his coffee down his throat before beginning to explain.

"Someone's just bought a load of Sakuradite… that's why it's rising."

"Someone?" Suzaku replied incredulously.

"Almost certainly military, no private investors would do this at the moment."

"Military? But the War has just ended!"

"I know, Cornelia just arrived from Torbruk to…” Lelouch responded, before catching on, as Suzaku quickly did. Flipping open his phone, the Japanese teen looked through the incoming news, which described how Cornelia arrived, and immediately demanded Zero's head in what was, by all accounts, a very unladylike display.

"She's going for Zero."

"I see. Let's see where."

Several minutes of quiet investigation later, and they were making precious little progress, faces buried in screens as they shouted out scraps of knowledge.

"It's definitely headed to Japan, reports from Britannian Shipping are showing a diversion from several containers bound for export. They've been earmarked, and are apparently required at a moment's notice to be deployed."
"Cornelia went straight to the palace, and several Knightmares were seen going in."

"There's a few forced traffic blockages around Kawaguchi, Koshikawa, and Saitama."

Lelouch looked up after hearing Suzaku's report. "That's right in the middle of Tokyo. Ohgi, could you get in here?"

Ohgi, hearing his name called, came in, the elder Japanese man in his normal leather-fur attire, and was promptly asked "Is there any rebel presence in Kawaguchi, Koshikawa, or Saitama?"

After pausing a moment, he nodded. "The Yamato Alliance. Their HQ is right in the middle of the Saitama ghetto."

An air of silent realisation fell on the blackened room, all men in the dark. Eyes flitted back and forth, awaiting instruction from one of the others. As far as Suzaku could make out, none knew what to do. Suzaku breathed in, Suzaku breathed out. Lives were now in their hands directly, not the result of some ponzi scheme or indirect consequence, but now they held a direct authority over people surviving to see tomorrow.

Suzaku breathed in, Suzaku breathed out.

"We need to warn them."

It was Ohgi who spoke, and it merited a harsh turn from both Suzaku and Lelouch, the latter of whom spoke first.

"Have you gone insane? There's no way we can do that!"

"But they're stuck in there!" Ohgi protested.

"They are violent insurgents, and we must not make contact. It would be too great a risk."

Ohgi was dumbstruck. "They are on our side! We cannot let them die!"

Lelouch turned away, hissing "They left our side the day they picked up a gun. We will do nothing to help them whatsoever."

Suzaku stepped back, coming to a sudden realisation about Lelouch. While he had changed Lelouch's views, he had not moderated them. His paradigm was still maintained, that no latitude was to be allowed. Now that he was taking a pragmatic, pacifist approach, those who fought for the same cause in different ways were still enemies. Lelouch may change sides, but his zealotry and stubbornness of method remained. Suzaku didn't feel that was the case by definition, but was far too conflicted to support Ohgi.

"They support a free Japan for gods sake!"

"And yet they are antithetical to the completion of that goal, indirectly slandering people like us as violent. Perhaps their destruction at the hands of Cornelia will be a way to kill two birds with one stone. At least they won't be making a racket anymore, and their supporters may come to us in their absence."

Suzaku was horrified at the look of sudden bemusement on Lelouch's face, as if what he had suggested was anything other than completely deplorable. With fluttering breaths, he asked, hoping for a no, "You don't mean that?"
Lelouch looked over to Suzaku, and shrugged. "The rebels die and stop being a problem for our image, Cornelia gets the bad press, and we can say she's killing the Japanese. It's what Ohgi might call a win-win proposition, hmm?"

Suzaku's blood ran cold. The flippanthood, the disconnection, the lack of any care or regard for the lives that were at stake. Perhaps he could have made a case, on the need for safety within their operation, but it was Lelouch's callous attitude that settled the issue. It may not be logical, but their was no rational response to a man who had shrugged off lives.

Suzaku sighed, and caved.

"I'm sorry Ohgi. We can't do it."

Ohgi snapped his head round and stared at Suzaku, and was seconds from bursting out before Lelouch raised his hand in what could only be described as a smug fashion. "Democracy rules again. Besides, we have no way to contact the Yamato Alliance. I'm glad we could come to this understanding."

And then he left. Smug, and seemingly content, Lelouch just trotted off, leaving Suzaku and Ohgi in stunned silence, before Ohgi began to turn on him viciously, forcing himself up against his comrade.

"What the hell-"

Suzaku backed off, and put his own hands up, not in flippance like Lelouch had, but in a retreatful request for a moment to explain himself as he was cornered against the fridge by the older man. Ohgi bided for a moment, visibly fuming.

"Listen, he'd have never let us contact them. But that doesn't matter, we can still do it from here."

Ohgi seemed surprised, but nodded, allowing Suzaku to continue.

"We don't have the Alliances contacts, but we still have your friend's radio from when we exchanged Nagisa and arranged to meet at Tokyo Tower. We can ask them to warn Yamato for us."

"The radio you called us on in Shinjuku? You still have it?" Ohgi started, suddenly enthusiastic, as Suzaku presented it, buried under a pile of files and papers, its square, grey metal digging into his palms as it gripped it with a protective zeal. Ohgi smiled, as he turned it on. Suzaku was now dubious as to whether it would work, now that he thought about it. They were far too far from Shinjuku-

"Hello?"

-or they could work all the way from Ashford Academy, that could also be the case. Suzaku was surprised to hear the voice on the far end so clearly, with so little static or interference. It was bizarre, but there was no time to think of it, as Ohgi explained.

"It's me, Ohgi."

"It's been awhile Ohgi. How're you doing?"

"I'm fine, but listen. Cornelia is going to attack the Yamato Alliance at Saitama, can you tell them to get out?"
There was a pause, before the voice replied "Alright, I'll get in touch. Thanks for the warning."
"No problem. Say, could you-
But before Ohgi could ask anything else, the radio blinked dead. Suzaku and Ohgi exchanged dubious looks. Musing, Suzaku asked "Y'know… Zero used the container we left with your group…"
"What are you saying?" Ohgi responded quickly, seeming less than eager to think about this.
"I was just wondering how close the connection is."
"Well… Zero works alone, doesn't he? Besides, my group was never bold enough for the stuff Zero has pulled off."
"That leaves the issue of the container."
"I mean, they probably have met him. They both support violent revolution, so they're on the same side. Maybe they're helping him, with logistics or manpower." Ohgi supposed.
"Manpower?" Suzaku questioned, not fully understanding what Ohgi meant by the term.
"Yeah, manpower. He'd need some help behind the scenes."
"Oh…" was Suzaku's only response. It seemed obvious now. The rebels they'd met at Tokyo tower were far too uninspired to become Zero, and there was no motive that they wouldn't have already had before they had met to take up arms in a new way. They were silly. But Zero could use them to his ends. It was almost sad how they were being used. But putting that aside, even though Ohgi's partners were not Zero, they were associated with Zero, and should word of Cornelia's attack reach him, they could be responsible for a bloodbath.

Suzaku breathed in, Suzaku breathed out.

The pair left the room, locking it behind them and making themselves coffee as the hours ticked by, news feeding in by a trickle. It was a Sunday, and so there was sod all to do, resulting in the pair lounging about. After finding sod all to do, Suzaku eventually returned to stew in silence. Lelouch was gone the entire day, likely out gambling to pass the time. Suzaku was envious of his escapism, stuck in his 2 by 4 box. Sayako was out with Nunnally, probably for the best. He didn't want to bother them. He stewed in his thoughts about how he would confront Lelouch. He knew Lelouch had the entire annexe bugged out of paranoia, so he would have to address the issue sooner or later.

And while that was for the best, it still left him all but alone, up until long after the sun dipped below the horizon, and the door eked open, allowing light into the empty room as if by a holy decree, pulling the secrets out of the dark.

Suzaku did not turn around, knowing who it was. He sat and pouted, still waiting on the news. The visitor didn't speak either, leaving a large bag on the kitchen table, taking a load of his darkened, slender back, before sitting down. Suzaku knew he could see the radio, could see their communications, but he didn't really care at this point. He was far too tired, needing both sleep and relief from the man who was awaiting some form of acknowledgment from his equal. After not receiving it, he called out with an equal degree of irritation and snark.

"You've been busy Suzaku."
Suzaku didn't reply. After a moment's pause, Lelouch continued. "Your friends have been busy too." Suzaku, again, didn't respond, unsure what to say. The Britannian sighed, before explaining, "Radio is fast, but nothing beats street level. Zero showed up at Saitama today."

This got Suzaku's attention, as he turned to ask, in shock "You went down there?"

Lelouch cheekily smirked, responding "I had to do some stuff."

"LELOUCH, YOU NEED TO TELL US ABOUT THESE THI-" Suzaku yelled, before stopping dead mid sentence as he realised that he'd fallen for Lelouch's trap, sighted within his hypocrisy. Lelouch's smirk reached new bounds as he leaned back, seeing the defeat in Suzaku's eyes, and asked "So what have you been up to?"

Suzaku sighed, and gave in. "If you're right, I messed up. I told the rebels to get out, but they passed the information on to Zero. I'm sorry."

It was Lelouch's turn to sigh, and walk towards the balcony, leaning against it like he held the weight of the world on his shoulders, pressing it into the bars. He didn't speak for almost a minute, before Suzaku insisted "I said-"

"I know."

Suzaku blinked, before asking "Are you mad?"

After a moment, Lelouch explained. "I'm not mad. I'm not even especially... annoyed. It is inconvenient that Zero gets a reputation boost, and Cornelia gets a Casus Belli to wage war on Elevens. That in and of itself was annoying. I know, because... well, I know you, or at least I think I do, that you were approaching it from some vague semblance of 'doing the right thing'. Certainly, given that I have derived this new plan from your ideal of peaceful opposition, one could make the argument you were still right. I don't like to... ever have been one to judge with new... information. You make your decisions with what you know, and blaming it on something you couldn't know is silly, at least as far as I can see. Your heart was in the right place."

Suzaku was surprised. This was the most candid he'd ever been.

"That... being said, you cannot compromise. Once you go down the path we have agreed, any straying will destroy our argument. Perhaps our ideals have begun to diverge. Perhaps you are the constant, and I have gone from the blood mongerer, to your equal, to surpassing you in my drive for a lack of involvement with violent groups. Perhaps the convert, the replica, has gone beyond the parameters of the original. It's an interesting concept, but unlikely, given our respective motivations."

The Honourary Britannian nodded in understanding. They indeed had arrived at the same conclusion from extremely different data points, however he didn't want to interrupt Lelouch while he was being unusually honest. He could only wonder what had brought this on; did Lelouch think he had been wrong? Lelouch did not frequent the realms of self reflection, so perhaps breaking new ground had spurred a moment of weakness, of honesty. He certainly wasn't complaining, but Suzaku could only note this turn with caution.

"There is one thing that troubles me. This can only mark the beginning of it all, and waiting at this point loses us more than it gains. I am not mad at you, but this represents a deeper issue, that we must tackle, The Long War if you will. In any case, all the tasks at hand have been cleared."

Lelouch paused, drawing his full voice into a triumphant announcement out of the balcony.
"The time to strike is now!"
Milly Ashford gave an excited breath as she sighted what could be the Student Paper's best potential find in the history of its existence. Like a predator, she balanced delicately over the precipice of the roof as she sought a closer look with a pair of oversized binoculars. The night was young, with a provocative breeze and a warm, inviting grace that brought out the spirit in the President's lungs. She felt fresh, and ready to take on the world.

Of course, everyone took on the world in their own way. Lelouch and Suzaku did it financially, others made art to express their desires and values, and others provided a service to others. Milly counted herself in the lattermost category. She provided a service to all the various young lovers and singles of Ashford academy by providing them with the hope of what they could have if they tried. All she had was her camera and her subject, and she created art.

'Was that so wrong?' came the brief, quiet voice, holding little weight, ringing from memory as the question Shirley Fenette always asked, and the one Milly Ashford, Queen of Drama always had a reliable answer to.

No, it is not wrong if I do it.

And so, satisfied with her brief moral inquest, she looked on at tonight's victim, who had picked a bad evening for exercise. Suzaku Kururugi, in traditional martial arts equipment, was practicing kicks and punches, with firm, tense muscles and sweat dripping from every pore of his toned body. His thighs, tight and solid, formed a line with his shin as his whole body created art that would make any self respecting androphile excited.

The readers would love it.

She reached for her camera, complete with an extended lens for extra stalkery effect, and began to line up shots of the man in action. She could imagine the headlines. 'Tough on trees, easy on eyes'? 'Dressed to impress'? 'practise makes perfect'?

She liked the lattermost one, for as she watched it became obvious it was the case. Suzaku was not out of breath, staying within his limits, but with such fierce precision and method it was clear he had honed his skills to the millimeter.

She tried to imagine Suzaku's close friend, Lelouch, doing the same. Moving past what initially came to mind when the terms 'Imagination', 'Lelouch' and 'Suzaku' all came up in a sentence, it was a laughable notion that Lelouch would be this competent at anything physical in his life, however once again she moved on, trying to make the analogy fit an intellectual pursuit.

However the metaphor broke down, as she knew it would. Lelouch was a different animal; no effort, no study. She didn't know the Japanese teenager as well, however from what she had learned he was a hard worker, going above and beyond to do any work given and increase his ability. He was almost a force of nature when put to a task.

Heck, from a camera lens he was a force of nature right now.
No, Milly shook herself. This is not the time for that manner of thing. She was on student paper business. One must never confuse work with pleasure; she had a duty to provide a service to the deprived teenagers of Ashford.

She sighed. She truly loved her job. In any case, she resumed her inner monologue as Suzaku went for a break, noticing how he marked a timer, rapidly unscrewing a bottle of water, sipping slowly, and returning it to rest in a fluid, practised motion. Everything about it seemed rehearsed, but not in a way that suggested insincerity. Instead, it displayed a clear routine, a lack of uncertainty in motion, a sense that once he was going, he could steamroll anything with just the glint in his eyes and a lifetime’s practise. It was almost intimidating, knowing that facing off against him would not just be a one on one; Suzaku carried the weight and wisdom of everyone he had ever learned from in his life.

And boy did it make for good photos.

The next morning, the roars and bellowes of a wild animal was heard throughout the campus.

"ASHFOOOORD!"

Far away, Milly heard the scream above the morning radio, and paused to smirk. Maybe not practised enough, at least in terms of knowing when to just not bother.

"Checkmate."

Schneizel El Britannia took a little pride in the victory over his younger half brother, however he refused to show it, acknowledging that celebrating the defeat of a ten year old would be bad form, even in spite of the child’s heralded achievements.

The child, of course, was Lelouch Vi Britannia, and true to form any disappointment he may have held was hidden within layers of apparent examination and intrigue, as the child observed the near empty board. His eye was critical, darting from square to square as he examined the nature of his admittedly close loss. Schneizel wiped his forehead, more out of habit than anything else as he feigned a conciliatory gesture, "That's another one for the tally. You played well, nearly had me on the ropes."

It was for neither man’s benefit; each understood the meta and balance of how the match broke down, but again neither wanted to appear arrogant, and so Lelouch responded with "Indeed, and I nearly made a break down the centre in the midgame. Alas, I grew overconfident. Well played."

Schneizel nodded, and analysed the match. As seemed hallowed tradition, Schneizel set up defences as Lelouch forwarded pawns, which he had taken to calling 'skirmishers', to wreak havoc with his front lines as he built up his heavier units into attack positions. While the skirmishers were unpredictable and hard to trap, the long, sweeping attacks by Bishops and Rooks from afar were easy to spot and counter. While Lelouch knew how to divert Schneizel’s movements, his guile was not yet sufficient to distract his eye.

Which really was the critical thing; if the opposing half the board was obscured for both of them, it would create a fascinating fight, as Lelouch thrived off surprise and ingenuity, compared to Schneizel, who studied tactics and stratagems dating back centuries to draw upon in any given scenario. It occurred to him not for the first time that Lelouch may not even know their names, let alone that they were codified.
Which, he reasoned, made sense, he was only ten, but it spoke to a larger point. Lelouch was not an armchair strategist; he needed to feel in the thick of it and even then he seemed to make few long term plans. In his further youth, he even made a whole show of pretending to be an actual Field Marshal, dressing up in a buttoned cloak and pointy hat in what proved a thoroughly amusing, if somewhat one sided, experience. While Lelouch had dropped the act, Schneizel had little doubt that there was a lack of dissonance at play.

Ultimately, this proved worrying to Schneizel, though this he would never admit even to the worst extents of torture. If Lelouch were this competent, at this age and with this effort, would he eventually be caught?

Schneizel was not a man for self reflection, living in the perfect present with full understanding and acceptance of his life with little need for emotional pause. This was an exception, and he was left thoroughly unsure on how to proceed.

He paused to collect himself; this was unlikely on multiple counts. Lelouch’s style left little room to improve, as it had a limited ceiling and was easy to counter. Instinct was hard to develop, and while it gave a leg up, its rate of growth without dedicated learning was stunted. What he could deduce from this was that he didn’t need to worry about Lelouch.

For now.

Still, Lelouch stayed true to form in another sense, requesting another match. Schneizel chuckled and ruffled his hair, knowing it would frustrate the younger Prince as their shared half sister Euphemia, who had been watching the match, came up to cheer them.

"Hard luck Lelouch! I'm sure you'll get him next time!"

The elder blonde gave a more genuine smile as the pink haired princess cuddled the target of her affections. She always had had a special place in her heart for him.

Perhaps enough to die for him.
Chapter Nine: Black Monday

Arc Three: The Big Show

Opening: “Kikai Jikake no Cinderella” - Eliza

Pendragon crawled along slowly, feet trudging down pedestrian paths lined by heights reaching for the clear, California skies in the dry hotness of the day. From ground level, it seemed to go on forever. It was an appropriate home for the Holy Britannian Empire, full of grandeur, and the pride of generations. It served as the economic hub of the world, and for General Upson Thompson, a breath of fresh air from his life working with the Navy's new Floating Battleships. The fat, yet sharply edged man chuckled to himself. It would never catch on.

Not that he minded; so long as the government sank funds into its development, the Sakuradite rose and all was well in the world, which, given that he had stowed his livings into Sakuradite holdings, suited him nicely. War for fun and profit as it were. He had applications on his phone to monitor his funds, not that money held in the material that kept the world currency afloat needed much monitoring. Even so, Upson knew there was nothing quite like the scrum at the Stock Exchanges on St. Darwin Street, and so he headed straight there after touching down. It was a huge building, chock full of people looking up at screens and roaring and yelling at decimal points. It was a sport, a religion, it was the world.

There was nowhere else Upson loved more.

He moved up to grip the railings on the balcony overlooking the mosh pit, joining in the overall chatter as he looked towards the figures. He knew the people about the place very well, what with his close friends often competing and betting against one another in the best kind of cordial humour. Here was where, in Upson’s unhumble opinion, the spirit of Britannia was to be found; competition and prosperity in equal. The very best and brightest were exclusively represented here, unsullied by the shackles of those who were not as able, as it should always be.

“Upson!”

Upson turned to see his good friend Thomas, and shook his hand with great vigor, his stiff but wallowing movement made in both parts manly boast and welcome, as he bellowed “Hello my man! How are you?”

“Very well! Have you met my protege Jacobson? He’s third son of the Duke of Devonshire, he’s got a healthy dose of potential!”

“I can’t say I have! It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance!”

They shook hands and laughed as they placed bids on more and more, with not a care in the world as tens of thousands flew from phone to phone, page to page and tablet to tablet over a case of wine.
After a while, he was pulled aside by his assistant, with distressed skin and an even more distressed face, well liked and trusted by Upson.

“Pray, what is it Harris?”

“Sir, I noted your holdings in Ashford KMF Research, so I thought for the future notice, I’d just mention I have just heard they are reporting severe underproduction and industrial issues.”

This surprised Upson. He actually rather liked the former Earl of Ashford, with his relaxed attitude and slight maverick streak for having lost his Earldom, and so this development rather disappointed him. “Unfortunate. May I ask why?”

“Preliminary reports show that the Eleven workers are striking, and several production lines have shut completely. One demonstrator wrecked several standing units, in total putting their production back months.”

Upson’s hefty brow raised itself in surprise, as he concluded the thought. “Reuben’s Frame was meant to replace the Sutherland, correct?”

“Indeed. If I recall correctly, that’s why you put money on him.”

Upson sighed, and rubbed his rich, brown beard. The Sutherland had needed urgent replacing, and Ashford’s return to the fray with a simple model that could be quickly made the industry standard was nothing if not embraced. Recent upticks in military industries and Sakuradite prices had been predicated on the assumption that there would soon be brand new Knightmares to purchase and run. This not being the case could cause them to drop back to conform with reality. Upson sight, quickly concluding “Alright, pull the chute. What about Sakuradite?”

Harris paused, uncertain. “Sir?”

“Well if the Britannians aren’t getting their Knightmares, they’re not about to invade Europe are they? The only thing that comes out of that is a drop in Sakuradite!”

Neither man spoke for ten seconds, before Harris said “I'll divest in Sakuradite immediately, just to be safe. It’ll probably sink a tad, so let’s not be onboard for that.”

“It’s for the best.”

This rapid and decisive scene replayed throughout the building, as stockbrokers and businessmen and playboys all decided to hop off the sinking gravy train. The trickling flood of men leaving the market sent the Sakuradite down and down, as everyone got the same idea at once. Once the sinking caught steam, everyone who saw the dip fled, accelerating the descent. By the end of the day, the precious resource had dipped 28% at rock bottom. The government shut down the counters three hours after Upson dropped out, in a hurried and collective ‘Oh crap’ moment that sent the entire computer system into collective meltdown.

While the Dollar was a fiat currency, Britannian economic success was directly correlated with Sakuradite, being the biggest driver of its militaristically focused economy, and so a loss of faith in the pink rock resulted in a loss of faith in the Dollar, as people removed their investments in Britannian debt to avoid instability, which then caused it to become unstable. It was the worst kind of self fulfilling prophecy, and while it was nowhere near as bad as the crash a century ago, the gears of industry ground to a halt as the chain of cash slowed to a trickle. Everything was founded on faith, and Britannia’s infamously low rates was built on historical precedent and confidence. If a trader was told the economy was less stable than the public thought, they would increase their
rates. In this way, the supposedly invulnerable was in fact despicably fragile.

Possibly the worst hit were the Sakuradite mines themselves, now unable to even hire their own workers, as the precious mineral was just left in the ground for the simple reason no one would buy it.

All this resulted in an unprecedented disaster, as all confidence was lost. It was incredible that something so small, in a position so unassuming, could cause as much damage as it had, however what was generally attributed to idiocy was in fact an act of economic vandalism.

Lelouch, the biggest vandal in world history, chuckled gently into his coffee as he sat against a park bench with a long, woollen coat and gloves in the quintessential image of a college student who had done nothing wrong. The plan literally couldn’t have gone better. It still made him pause that 2 billion Dollars and a few whispers of uncertainty could do so much. This was to be how The Long War was to be fought, he supposed.

He sipped the last dregs of his drink, before placing the styrofoam cup in the rubbish bin and resuming his morning stroll round Ashford in the grey dusk. The weather was cold, but just bracing, with little bite to the winds bark. His collar was turned up to his back, hiding the hairs on the back of his neck from reach as he spied the gate to the school.

It was lined with picketers and angry protesters, believing Reuben responsible for the crisis. LL&S had disappeared along with their Sakuradite, but unlike the corporation that had no more substance to its existence than as a figment of Lelouch’s existence, the Ashfords weren’t going anywhere, and everyone knew it. The mob shouted fierce obscenities to Lelouch, failing to grasp the sheer irony of the fact they were in fact yelling at the real culprit, rather than just a student.

He must not laugh. Laughing now would give the game away. But oh, it was tempting.

Instead, he turned back towards the building, and resumed walking, his boots clacking off the loose concrete ground, his hair blowing back. He imagined he looked relatively badass, what with a thick, long coat and smart shoes, but he also wanted to keep a low profile, and so turned his head down. Last thing he wanted now was to be recognised.

“YOU’RE SCUM ASHFORD!”

The can was poorly thrown and landed over a foot away, but it gave him brief pause. People really were affected by this. He had to remember that. He had to provide an alternative to the Britannian economy for people to live under, and fast, as the longer it took for Lelouch to execute stage two of their plan, the longer the Britannians had to restore faith in the Dollar. This return to reality allowed Lelouch to recall another victim; Reuben Ashford, who would likely be lynched if he ever left the property, and the was a not insignificant chance he may be lynched even so. While he did nothing illegal per se, everyone and their mother knew who was responsible for their money losing so much value.

The character assassination of Reuben Ashford had been swift, thorough, and depressingly personal, attacking everything from his school to his business, even claiming he had an affair with Marianne Vi Britannia, and Reuben could not counter it. He was the scapegoat, and yet he only feigned mild annoyance, seemingly too beyond it to care. Lelouch didn't know what Suzaku had promised Reuben, but Reuben had earned whatever he was promised, performing exactly to their will.

The only thing that was in any way difficult was the hiding of the Knightmare Frames themselves. He would hate for such a potentially useful arsenal to go to waste, and so he'd had them hidden in
the premises, bribing the workers before hinting to investors the project was going badly. This in fact was illegal, but in the grand scheme of things the lesser wrong. Britannian priorities in a nutshell, as far as Lelouch was concerned.

Still, he was in an amiable mood as his stroll brought him to the school foyer, where he spied his sister and Sayako, returning from a stroll of their own.

“Clap, your hands if you believe…” he hummed to himself in light of recent events, as he approached, waving to Sayako before squatting down beside Nunnally’s wheelchair and greeted her with a “Hey there, Nunnally!!”

The crippled girl smiled as she heard her brothers deep, soothing tones, grabbing his hand in hers to confirm his presence as she responded “Brother…”

Lelouch traded welcoming glances with Sayako as he asked “How are you feeling today?”

“I'm fine big brother… but…”

Lelouch recoiled slightly in surprise, asking hurriedly “But?”

After a moment of apparent thought, Nunnally spoke slowly, choosing words carefully.

“I heard, on the news a bad thing happened, the one you were involved in. I know you want to make the world a gentler place, but it seems like people are upset.”

Lelouch placed his arm on Nunnally’s back and spoke to reassure her, whispering “We have hurt the nobility of Britannia, and they are responding using their grip on the media to fight back. They serve as the propaganda arm of the Britannian government. Make no mistake; we are absolutely not bringing long term harm to anyone who is already suffering. The nobles training horses and sponsoring hedge funds are the only ones suffering, but they have influence. It’ll be okay, I promise. I’m taking care of it.”

It was only partly true, and it set a bad precedent for Nunnally in terms of her knowledge and autonomy, but Lelouch’s priorities lay with protecting his sister. She seemed to cheer, her grip on his hand not failing as she nodded “Oh I see. Thank you. Could you stay with me up to the class?”

Lelouch smiled in turn and replied “Of course!”, as he stood up and mouthed to Sayako ‘Take the day off.’, allowing her to return home, maybe talk with Ohgi and relax. She had been overworked of late, and Lelouch hoped she could take the opportunity to rest, so that when she returned she would be better than ever.

Perhaps Suzaku was right; ever pragmatic.

Still, it made little difference, as Sayako gave a slight bow of the head to show appreciation before leaving the pair of them alone in the room. Lelouch’s eyes fell, as he returned briefly to thought. This was a major blow, but there was still work to be done. Their money had been moved away of course, converted to Euros before the Dollar lost value, then converted back once it bottomed out. Less the taxes on conversion, they still had huge amounts of money, which they could now put to work putting others to work, but time was not on their side.

At the same time, it wasn't as if Schneizel and co could just amend their problems instantly; righting their financial crisis required monetary investment to kick start it, which would not happen until faith was restored. No investor wanted to be the first to dip their toes back in the water, and that ‘Who blinks first’ mentality of greed and self preservation would hamper their progress, at least for the time being.
“Lelouch?”

He shook himself. He was lost in thought again, and forgotten Nunnally entirely. He'd have slugged himself if it wouldn't distress Nunnally further. This was totally irresponsible.

“Brother?”

“Yes? Sorry… I was distracted. Don't worry, I'm back.”

“I'm worried about you, you've been distracted a lot lately. I think you're overworking yourself. Have you been sleeping well?”

Now was an exceptionally bad time to tell Nunnally he hadn't slept in 36 hours, but putting that aside Lelouch was shocked, and furiously angry with himself. Nunnally, worry about him? This disgrace, this disappointment, the sense of every goal and aim inverted in intent and result, he was the one to look after Nunnally! He had to be strong for her, but here she was worried about him!

He sighed deeply, tipping his head back to the sky, drawing air through his lungs and nostrils slowly, channelling it down his throat and chest, cooling his flaming passions as he returned his head to rest. He opened his eyes and spoke slowly.

“Nunnally… while I have been working for you and all of us, I'm fine. I'm worried about you. Stop worrying about me, I'll be fine.”

“But I don't want to!”

Lelouch’s eyes lit up as Nunnally continued “You're always working hard for me, but I'm still worried about you! You're out there, fighting for the people, but if it goes wrong you'll go away and I'll be alone!”

“I'm fighting for you, the gentler place you talk about!”

After an awkward pause where both participants realised they were close to shouting, Nunnally replied, more quietly.

“Brother, the only gentler place I need is a safe one with you. Don’t worry about me, nothing can happen to me in Ashford. You on the other hand are out taking on the bad guys, and that scares me.”

“I’ll be fine.” he smirked. “I have a knack for seeing the better end of these things.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Lelouch bit his lip, not wanting to drag the issue on any further in spite of wishing secretly to add ‘I often am’. Nunnally was happy, and thus so was he, at least until the Britannians got their act together. The teen pushed his sisters wheelchair up to her class, dropping her off to her tutor and leaving him with little to do. He took a path down to the Student Council room, hoping to see what was occurring and perhaps catch up with friends who had grown curious as to his extended absence. His short journey brought him back to the tall, bright room that he had grown so familiar with, and yet so unfamiliar with. It had been so long since he was in the Student Council, that he was left wondering whether the roof was really that high, or the skylight letting in the morning’s off-white light was that bright. It seemed to bring in a new, unnatural light that he was not certain had ever been there. How long had he been gone?

“Lelouch?”
The Prince turned, looking to the source of the question and finding Kallen, standing in her neated uniform with distinct red hair, tied back and the world class invulnerability that had caught his attention before.

“Stadtfeld.” he addressed her plainly, before cheering. “I wasn't expecting you here.”

“I'm on the council, to be frank you are the unexpected one given your attendance, or lack thereof.”

“I've been a busy man.” Lelouch responded plainly. Britannian nobility would hardly appreciate what he was doing, however they would be very familiar with a desire to keep secrets.

“Have you now?” Kallen replied, eyebrow held high.

Lelouch smirked “Have indeed. Yourself?”

“I've been around. Trying to catch up with work, finishing projects, et cetera. I've barely had my head above water, unlike you and your antics.” she shrugged.

Lelouch smiled and gave a slight shrug in turn, as he replied “Antics is a harsh word. I prefer... making the best use of my available resources. Somewhat like your hero.”

“Eh?”

Lelouch flashed a sly, sharklike grin as he continued “Only the Nadaman himself, Zero. Quite the show he put on.”


Lelouch, while being an extremely self confident man, was well aware there were many things in this world he did not know the answer to. For example, he had no idea why Suzaku insisted on keeping their Corduroy couch. He hadn’t the faintest clue as to why the play ‘Oklahoma’ had done so well, nor had he the slightest comprehension of what manner of drugs his brother Clovis was consuming when he laid down his plans for Clovisland. That being said, if he were to claim knowledge of only one fact in this life, it would be that Kallen Stadtfeld was lying to his face.

What she was lying about, he didn’t quite know. But she was definitely lying.

“Though I'm surprised you're as concerned about him, given that Britannia appears to have its own little calamity within these very walls. In fact, I’m amazed you aren’t up in arms over that.”

“Calamity? Would that be the economic collapse or Milly Ashford?”

“Grow up.”

After a brief, slightly awkward pause, both Lelouch and Kallen broke into fits of laughter as their respective lines sank in. Lelouch leaned an arm against a white radiator to stabilise himself, as Kallen doubled over. After a moment, they wheezed themselves dry, and stood apart, as Lelouch realised that she was right; focusing on Zero probably would give the game away.

“OOOH, what do we have here? Young love?”

Both Lelouch and Kallen collectively sighed with what little breath they had left as the Council’s own force of nature entered the room, followed by her unwilling accomplices. Lelouch rolled his eyes as he responded “So am I gay, or what's the story?”
Milly gasped in a display of faux outrage. “How dare you engage in Bisexual Erasion, I’m honestly ashamed of you!”

Lelouch huffed and refused to reply, realising the best solution was to just not give Milly ammunition. She copped on to his realisation, and shook her head.

“Smart boy. Now listen. We’re heading off to the Kawaguchi Center for Nina’s award. I know that’s not your thing, but there’s a bunch of other panels about Sakuradite and new tech I’m sure you can sink your teeth into. I was wondering if you fancied going. Kallen’s already said she’s busy, and you’re the last one to RSVP.”

He instantly saw what she was on about, noting her specific mention of Sakuradite. She was likely inferring that it would be helpful, taking insights from the economic and scientific minds of his age. Besides, the next stage of the plan relied far more on Suzaku and Ohgi’s efforts in the Ghettoes, so it wasn't like he was busy.

“Sure, why not?” he shrugged, seeing no objection. Milly nodded mischievously, before the Council got down to business, balancing budgets and finding any way possible to embarrass Lelouch. Not that he cared. His mind was on other things.

Almost unconsciously, he reached down and tapped a text to Suzaku in a moment of furious inquisitiveness.

Who is Kallen Stadtfeld?

Chapter End Notes

Who is Kallen Stadtfeld indeed. This chapter focused on developing Lelouch’s relationships, as well as explaining what the Ashford rebels have actually done to strike the first blow against Britannia. The next few chapters will happen in more rapid succession as events hike up in tension and severity, with characters splitting apart and realising danger is closer than they realise, both from enemies, and the enemies of enemies.

Once more I thank you for reading, and I hope you join me next time on For Hearts And Minds, Chapter 10, If You Build It, They Will Come. Be safe, be well, don’t invest everything in oil, and rate and review!

~Eth0
"What exactly did you say you wanted?"

"We're not here to buy."

The old, poor shop owner's long, weathered face drooped yet further, leaning down towards the floor as he gave a sigh of disappointment. He shook his head slightly, before asking in his native Japanese uncertainly "So what is it you want here?"

It was Suzaku's turn to sigh. He really wasn't getting anywhere.

Not that this was anything special. He'd been bogged down from bootlegger to barterer all day, trying to communicate what seemed to him like a basic concept, but what turned out to be difficult to get his target audience to understand.

Especially given the language gap. Suzaku spoke exceptional Japanese, having learnt with literally the best teachers in the country before practicing with Lelouch for over a decade, however it seemed that dialects had grown apart. He could barely make out whole words.

The Ghetto, he supposed, must do that to people.

Indeed, it seemed as if all the Japanese were destined to come to this twisted designated home at some point, whether by force, or by a mean twist of fate. Still, as many grievances as he had in returning to this dank, cramped place that reeked of poverty and neglect, he had a job to do, and so he took in breath and persevered.

"We're here to try help. Britannia is suffering economically, and there are terrorists everywhere. Britannian money may stop working, or it may become worthless, so we're doing an initiative to try float some new money."

On cue, Ohgi displayed a collection of fresh banknotes, all new and original, and not any currency that was recognisable. Indeed, it wasn't. Lelouch, Suzaku and Ohgi had had sets designed and printed, ready to distribute.

They were restarting the Yen.

"So what is this, free money? I've never seen this before. Is this a scam?"

"No, it's not. The only reason we're giving this to you is to kickstart it. Community leaders throughout the Ghetto will be getting bundles, and distributing them to people, who will come in here and spend it."
At the mention of people visiting his store, the man perked up. "They will pay?"

"Yes, they will. Right now, people are too nervous to spend Dollars, or don't have any money at all. We're trying to fix that, by distributing Yen and getting people into local employment."

"But why? Why is this money better?"

"Unlike Dollars, our Yen is tied to Gold. If you have a little over 2000 Yen, you can get an ounce of Gold back from us at any time. With this, you can make sure your currency is safe, and with the currency more spread throughout the community, you'll have more customers. Plus, how many Dollars do you have?"

"What's the catch? Why are you doing this?"

Suzaku paused, before leaning over the counter, laying down his elbow, his forearm laid parallel to the stall and explaining "We’re not… the biggest fans of Britannia, so circulating a Japanese currency through the ghetto will hurt them, as well as help a lot of us here. You'll be able to spend a lot more on the shop, hire a few helpers, and spread the wealth through the Ghetto, improve people's quality of life, et cetera."

The man seemed satisfied with this explanation, before seeking to clarify with "So all I need to do is accept this money from customers?"

Suzaku nodded, before adding "And try to spend it throughout the town, return the favour."

The man smiled, as would anyone getting free money and a chance to spite Britannia. They shook hands, and exchanged the briefcase and nods. As they moved towards the door, the owner asked one more question.

"Wait, what do I call you?"

Suzaku turned back, and nodded. "Call us the Yuaikai. If you need one of us, I'm Akate, this is Arata, and we have a third Britannian colleague on the financial side you can call Akira."

With that, Suzaku and Ohgi departed through the scrubby entrance into the brown day.

Suzaku searched for more adjectives, hoping to find a more eloquent way to describe the streets of Nerima, the heart of the Ghetto, however it was just brown streets with brown air, brown water and brown pathways leading to dismal brown all around. It was a thoroughly depressing place, reeking thoroughly of disease and disorder.

He sighed as he stepped into the dirt stained streets as Ohgi suggested they take a break and relax for a half hour before combing the North Side. Suzaku could only thank him for a relief from the draining work, as they shuffled through the anxious crowd. Wearing older clothes and tired faces, they passed through the crowd seamlessly, making for the train line that separated the Ghetto from the city proper.

As they approached the edge of the town, the crowd thickened, and the stench and dense heat grew in ferocity, creeping under his skin and sending him into a fit of sweat, his hair clamming under the thick air. He grew uncomfortable, running his hands over his face and through the roots of his hair as they approached the incline towards the train tracks which stood sentinel between the Ghetto and the Tokyo CBD.

The trip over was arduous and more than a little unnecessarily complex due to terrible walkways with dubious design principles that left Suzaku wondering whether the effect was intentional or
borne out of incompetence on the part of Britannia.

In any case, they made it to the other side of the railway tracks, and hurried towards their apartment, rented cheaply to act as a base of operations for distributing and holding the money. It would all be moved once they began employing permanent staff to guard it, but for now it would be irresponsible to store it in the Ghetto itself. As for the gold they had bought to back up their share, that was stored in Ashford University itself. While owning some gold wasn't a prerequisite for holding a Gold Standard, it was far less complicated and risky, and also meant that every aspect of the currency could be run in house.

Entering the barren, but homely room, both Suzaku and Ohgi removed their coats before Ohgi made for the fridge. Suzaku waved off the unspoken question as he sat on the couch and tuned their small, boxy television to Britannian news. He knew Ohgi was a responsible drinker, and so let him off, but he himself wouldn't have any while on the job, even during a break. He had very little doubt this would likely amuse Lelouch, and give him plenty of fodder for jokes pertaining to his ideological puritanism, however the question of who was more averse to alcohol would have to be answered by Lelouch, who still baulked at the idea of a beer while Suzaku could enjoy one or two.

And that fact tended to finish those discussions in a real hurry. Not that Suzaku at the end of the day cared a great deal about either of his friends' opinions on alcohol. He was far more interested in the project thus far.

The basic concept was that any attempt to form an independent Japanese government would require the functional independence of its people, a Republic in all but name. If they were to declare, say, today that there was in fact an independent Japan that did not recognise Britannia's claim to the Home Islands, nothing would change. The world would take a moment to laugh in indifference, before continuing its steady spin.

However, if by the time they made such a hypothetical declaration the Japanese population had their own currency, had jobs not ruled by Britannian Lords, and could make the transition on a nationwide level without any losses, then the world would take note. Functional independence begot real independence.

This required two things. A strong Yen, used throughout Japan, and a weak Dollar people did not want to stay with nationally. The Dollar would, as of the crash, be near a standing start, so they had to make their case to the people, and make it fast. It would be a financial choice rather than a patriotic one on the part of the population.

They had a few things on their side. First, they faced a slumberly, lethargic enemy that was fighting the wrong battles: the Britannian economy. While it was tough, and it had enough industry to fight through its troubles, it wasn't recovering fast enough, and it was far too unwieldy a thing to get up to speed. On top of that, it was fighting the wrong battles. While they could produce thousands of rifles, hundreds of Knightmares, and dozens of Battleships, Yuikai very intentionally weren't fighting a military battle. Britannian economic principles focused on incentivising research and the perpetuation of the nobility. While this allowed said nobles to go wild with pet projects, such as Earl Asplund's Lancelot, it meant that poor people already felt hard done by. They could thus make the better case to the Japanese, who were all working class at best.

Ohgi sat beside him as the newscaster described in drab monotone the state of Britannian society, in fashions that even pulled Suzaku's attention elsewhere. To Ohgi, he asked lazily "How much left on the North side?"

"We should have it all distributed by Tuesday week, if my contacts hold."
Ohgi had truly been a blessing over the last few days. While store owners were easy to find, seeking out responsible community leaders to distribute the funds would not have been possible without his critical insight and knowledge, having lived there his whole life. What may have taken months, evaluating pillars of the community and distributing the proper amounts to each now only was a matter of days. Out in the middle of his internal musings, Suzaku detected a rumble, shaking hollows in his stomach. He stood up shakily, nearly falling backwards and sending Ohgi into stitches of laughter. Undeterred, he made for the kitchen, slamming two packets of instant noodles into a pot with reckless abandon. Ohgi, having craned his neck to observe Suzaku's endeavours, quipped "Noodles? Stereotypes march on Suzaku."

"Sod off."

The pair spoke in Japanese, laughing as the noodles rose to the boil, before a brief pause allowed Suzaku to return to his reverie.

The shop owner had stayed with him for some reason, beyond what was normal. He pored through the conversation in his head, pondering the reason it lingered as he flipped the sloppy mess out of the pot into the strainer above the sink, splashing hot water that stung off his hands, nearly making him drop the pot as it hit him.

"We're not the biggest fans of Britannia ourselves…"

"What was that Suzaku?"

"Nothing…" came the unsteady reply, as Suzaku returned to thought. That was it. It was the same thing that struck him so clearly after his talk with Reuben. Again, while talk of economics helped, Nationalism always had that special ring. It was, of course, natural, however Suzaku couldn't give the answer as to why it so often superseded rational arguments, leaping through the hearts of men and women, Japanese and Britannian alike. He knew Carl Sagan had once written; They should have sent a poet. Suzaku felt like he'd have done better with an anthropologist. He himself felt a little affection towards the islands that were his home, but his aims were secular of the concept of a free Japan; he wanted to free the people of Japan from the people of Britannia, not the nation of Japan from the clutches of the nation of Britannia.

And yet, the shop owner hadn't got onboard until after they had dropped that they were opposed to Britannia, and that that was the whole point. Of course, that was not the only possible explanation. It could have been the shop owner hadn't been sure they were 'on the level' until that point, or perhaps there was another reason.

Still, it didn't help his nerves. Perhaps-

Ding

Suzaku's sleek modern phone, out of place in such a shabby room, gave a slight sigh, vibrating off its wooden bed like a waking child, crying for a parents attention. Sighing, Suzaku reached over and laboriously read the contents of what proved to be a text.

"Who is Kallen Stadtfeld?"

Suzaku paused, furrowing his brows to reread the message. His own mind asked the question, who was Kallen Stadtfeld? It took him several moments to make the connection, before the answer confused him further. Why did Lelouch care about a damn Britannian noble girl? Why would he text him while they were busy about that?
An unexpected revelation struck Suzaku, as he made a connection. He had been talking to Kallen quite a bit recently, and…

"Aho!" Suzaku roared angrily at the phone, before slamming it shut and huffing. Nonplussed, Ohgi asked "Who was that?"

Suzaku sighed. "Lelouch is being a goddamn idiot. Texting me over a girl, the nerve."

"That doesn't sound like him…" Ohgi mused concernedly. "I wonder what's up."

"Join the sodding club." Suzaku moaned sourly, resigning himself to the couch once more, stuffing his face angrily, barely taking a breath to belch out "The nerve on him…"

Ohgi eased, waving it off. "Calm yourself, we can't expect him to be a twenty four seven Übermensch. Even he must take some time off."

Suzaku didn't disagree, but he found Ohgi's description of Lelouch, the word he used, to be curious.

"Übermensch? No, he's far too unscrupulous for that. Not that he doesn't have some of the qualities, but he is still… tied to some extent to reality. Not that that's a bad thing, it's just not him. His aspirations are earthly, and it's a good thing too. Perhaps an argument could be made his father i-" Suzaku replied, before catching himself in shock at how easily he had nearly let the secret slip.

Ohgi still didn't know, and he had nearly revealed it.

But he hoped too much, as for while Ohgi was not on the level of Lelouch, he was still remarkably intelligent, catching on and responding in a unconcerned, casual manner out of ignorance "His father what? Would he be someone we know?"

Suzaku breathed outwards, trying to clear his head, which concerned Ohgi. While he could lie, there would be little point. Any lie would be easily disproven, and he could get ahead of the issue and present Lelouch's side first. He began slowly, his voice a little shaky from uncertainty on how to proceed.

"Listen… Lelouch is who he is, and you know him well enough. He's genuine, and he hates Britannia more than anyone on the goddamn Earth, and… what you've seen, he's entirely-"

"Suzaku."

Running a hand through sweaty locks, Suzaku spoke in broken words, announcing each syllable with shallow breaths, saying "Lelouch... Lamperouge is not his real name. He is… his name is Lelouch Vi Britannia, excommunicated son of the Emperor."

The teen looked at the adult pensively, as the emotions flowed through his face in flashes of confusion, realisation, then sudden shock that fired up his eyes and brows, before Suzaku saw the nuance reach his lips that pursed on cue, and finally it returned to a mixed, conflicted state, the retreatful mouth contrasting the harsh eyes. It was clear he was not the least bit pleased to be working with the spawn of his enemy, however he could on some level appreciate the fact Lelouch may not be his father's biggest fan, given everything he had said up to that point. Ohgi's eyes fell low, his sake hanging from his fingers loosely.

"This is…"

"It's okay if you don't want to stay on. You've been a hero for Japan with what you've done, but if this is an issue…"
Ohgi spat onto the floor, a motion that stopped Suzaku short. It was a sudden shift in the mood of the room that left Suzaku speechless and uncertain.

"It'll take more than a royal brat to stop me working for Japan, so don't start talking like a fool." he hissed "But if you don't explain what that means in a real hurry…"

Suzaku was an expert in multiple self defence doctrines that had been drilled into him since the age of 5, with over a decade of honing backing it up, and yet he was terrified of the glare Ohgi was giving him. Trying to present his point reasonably, he explained "He was a Prince, but after his mum was killed, he confronted his father, asking why he hadn't done anything, and he was banished to Japan for defying him. He was here during the war, and we've lived together since. Ohgi, he is on our side."

"Oh"

Suzaku stopped again, confused, before Ohgi sardonically explained his sentiments "It's a Freudian Excuse."

"A what?" Suzaku replied, completely nonplussed.

"A single inciting incident experienced in youth that sets the child off on the path of crime and or death often out of proportion to the incident. I'm saying he's fighting for us because of daddy issues."

It wasn't as if similar thoughts hadn't occurred to Suzaku. Certainly, back when they had just escaped the Kururugi Estate, after the massacre, Suzaku had had to call Lelouch out on something similar, but the idea that rejection was the source of his motivation seemed to him impossible. Lelouch was a man of far greater principle than that, Suzaku thought. Angrily, he retorted "That's not the case! Granted, that didn't help, but you must have seen by now that he fights Britannia, not just its ruler!"

"What a man does and why he does it can be very different. He strikes me as a pragmatic lad, willing to do one thing to achieve a long term goal."

"Your analysis of Lelouch's personality isn't wrong, but your conclusion about his motives is. He has other motives-"

"Name them."

It was Suzaku's turn to have a thunderous face, glaring at Ohgi, but the older man didn't flinch. This seemed far too personal a demand, but there was little point in backing out now.

"He wants to protect his sister, and other people victimised by Britannia. He wants to restore Japan. He wouldn't mind in the least to see Charles Zi Britannia on the chopping block. His ideas extend far beyond the realm of daddy issues."

Ohgi mulled this over, his eyes relaxing but his mouth firming, as if reaching a new level of realisation only to be faced with further decisions. Ohgi spoke in single phonetics, making his meaning clear in his deep, accented Japanese.

"I see. While this isn't exactly what I was expecting or hoping, if your word is true, and I suspect it is, then it is what it is. However, this must be kept a secret, lest we be discredited."

"That was the idea."
Ohgi nodded in understanding. "It'll take more than any one person to stop me, let alone one on my side." He chuckled, before adding "I guess you're right."

"Mm?"

"Übermensch really is the wrong word."

It was a long time and several hours of door to door salesmanship before Suzaku made it back to Ashford to turn in for the night. Ohgi would stay to mind the money across the train line. The teen was exhausted as he approached the front gates, passing the occasional straggler breaking the silence of the eleven o’ night.

"The hell are you doing here?"

"Oh, spare us a coin!"

"The end is nigh! This catastrophe that hath befallen all we Britannians is a message from the heavens that we ought not to tolerate disobedience against their will any longer!"

Suzaku snickered at that last one. He didn't believe, and knew for a fact Lelouch didn't, but to see such a reaction from something with natural causes struck him somewhere between silly and deluded.

"What a pathetic image. Good evening Suzaku."

Suzaku spun round and saw him, Lelouch leaning against the school gate under the glare of a street lamp, coat draping down giving him an appearance befitting a Film Noir character. Suzaku smiled at seeing his friend and walked up to greet him. Lelouch smiled in turn, though more cruelly, as he explained "Ohgi said you'd be arriving about now."

This made sense to Suzaku, but what followed, a sly, yet somewhat disappointed grin, did not.

"Two months Suzaku. You made it two months without telling Ohgi who I was."

"Oh… yeah, I might've done…"

Lelouch laughed, and so Suzaku laughed in turn as they walked back, Lelouch replying "I can't take one eye off you… I swear you'll be the death of me."

Suzaku merely chuckled as they returned to the main building, Lelouch bidding Nunnally goodnight as they moved to their respective rooms. Suzaku paused, asking while he still remembered.

"Lelouch?"

"Mm?"

"Why do you fight?"

Lelouch paused to consider an answer, his face pouting in thought before he looked Suzaku in the eye.

"I fight because no one else in this goddammed country seems to know how to. Now go to sleep."

Chapter End Notes
The Mandela Effect strikes again; it is indeed If you build it, he will come, but that really doesn't fit this chapter, all about people coming together. While I am aware the Gold Standard has little meaning in this day and age of big, digitised currencies, it serves as a nice gimmick to get people onboard. Another talky chapter, but I have often found I write those best. A few notes on things that were said include "A Republic in all but name", a phrase used to describe the Irish situation prior to 1920, which I view to be in a quite similar situation prior to the War of Independence to Code Geass' Area 11, however this could be Creator Provincialism. You can search up Freudian Excuses on TvTropes, which give a much better explanation than I have. Finally, Yuaiakai refers to the first Japanese Labour Union created after the Meiji Restoration, founded in 1912 and surviving until 1940 when the Hirohito government replaced it with the Sangyo Hokoku Kai.

I wanted this chapter to be longer, to allow me to elaborate further on several themes and ideas which are mentioned in passing, as well as lay out some of the maths I did when putting the plan together, but alas. Thank you all for reading and I hope you stick around for Chapter 11 of For Hearts And Minds, So Goes The Nation. Until then, stay safe, try to keep your friends secrets a bit better than Suzaku did, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Suzaku sighed as he examined Lelouch’s chest. His eye swerved side to side, examining the images presented to him for evaluation.

“I like the blue one.”

“Of course you do.”

Lelouch threw down the grey on green tie in his left hand with disdain, before pulling the blue fabric around his neck, commenting “Probably for the best.”

“You asked.”

Lelouch and Suzaku collectively fell into a brief lull, as they both got dressed for the Convention. Suzaku was looking forward to being able to relax with his friends and watch some interesting presentations, and while he knew Lelouch had other objectives, he also knew his friend was looking forward to some time off. It was a relatively formal affair, above their normal business casual, and so the arguments over what to wear had begun in earnest. Lelouch was planning on going with a compromise look, with a single breasted one, button black jacket with purple inserts in his notched lapel, whereas Suzaku was sticking with a more traditional look, with a white and black jacket with a smooth shawl lapel. Neither was fully certain of the fashion opinions of the other, but neither wanted to ask Milly, for fear of being forced to go in a thong.

The room was littered with clothes that had been discarded in much the same manner as the dark tie had been, with the fabric floor absorbing thumps and falls as the television played Diethard Reid in half sound in the corner.

“I…” Lelouch began, reaching for a cuff link across his desk, “have a proclamation to make.”

Suzaku rolled his eyes at his friends dramatic tone, before lazily responding “Yes, your majesty?” with no lack of sarcasm.

“I, Lelouch Vi Britannia, do declare that as Diethard Reid goes, so goes the country.” Lelouch announced with no lack of grandiose and a full appreciation for the irony.

Suzaku’s response was to laugh. It was hardly a groundbreaking feat of political analysis to announce that the opinions of Diethard Reid were reflective of the Britannian society. After finishing his chuckling, Suzaku responded with “Lelouch, you’re not meant to start drinking until after the keynote speech.”
“Suzaku, I'm being serious.”

“So am I you plonker. Even Ohgi could have told me that little nugget.”

Lelouch smiled and waved a hand in a sort of surrender, acknowledging Suzaku was right, before explaining “I see what you're saying, but that's not my point.”

“I am bestilled with bated breath Lelouch.”

“The point-” Lelouch, returning to his grandiose, royal voice used for speechifying and goofing around, “-is that if Reid is at his... point, if Reid declares a line in the sand, Britannia is lost. He is the standard bearer. Thus, we need a media figure to amplify our cause.”

“Is the circus loaning performers, or will you have to do it?”

Lelouch scowled at Suzaku's lack of seriousness, before Suzaku got the last hints of laughter out of his lungs. “Perhaps I'd be less inclined to mock if you didn't sound like a parody of your father. Sure, a spokesperson on local media is something we probably should get onto, but making jokes about Maine doesn't help your case.”

Lelouch made an indignant face as he assembled his blazer, as Suzaku continued with “Speaking of, how's your end of the project going?”

Lelouch shrugged. “All right. It's going slow, but that's what happens when you want to avoid fraud laws.”

While Suzaku and Ohgi had been working from the bottom up, Lelouch had been using the wealth not poured into their currency buying up Sakuradite mines that had gone bust in the initial crash, before handing them off to Suzaku and Ohgi to staff with Japanese workers paid in the Yen. Now, they controlled not just production of some Knightmares, but the source of Sakuradite, like a tap that relied on all internal currency.

This, Suzaku declared mentally, assuming in his imagination the same grandiose posture and deep, booming voice Lelouch had just put on as he set his shoes down, was what economic independence looked like. Every part of this system, excepting the sale of produce, happened without reliance or input from Britannia. When independence occurred, the transition would be seamless, for in all but name it was already the case. At least, it would be. There was still a way to go.

“Suzaku, are you going to put those shoes on?”

Suzaku snapped out of his stupor to tie his laces as Lelouch fixed his hair, busying themselves amidst the busy room.

“So other than Diethard Reid being the new Walter Cronkite-” Suzaku retorted, concluding Lelouch’s metaphor as he finished his laces before reaching for gloves through the mess of a room, “-and the plot to overthrow Britannia going in your words ‘All right’, what else is happening?”

“Hey now, none of that, I've been doing good work for Yuaiakai.” Lelouch chuckled, feigning disgruntlement as he applied clay to his fringe. “But... actually, scratch that, in other news, I feel betrayed at the moment, I truly do.”

Fearing this to be another joke, Suzaku, arms buried in clothes called over his shoulder “Oh do you now? What went missing from the fridge this time?” in a pre-emptive attack that would make Charles Zi Britannia proud.
“Enough about the damn fridge, I've long stopped caring and just bought a cooler for my room.”

“How economical.”

“Suzaku, just look at the damn television and see what I'm on about.”

Suddenly curious, Suzaku half turned to see an image of a grumpy Jeremiah Gottwald, escorting an even grumpier Villetta Nu, which surprised him vastly.

“Eh?”

“I'm glad you share my sentiments, though ‘Eh?’ would not be my first choice of word.”

Suzaku didn't respond initially, still thinking over what this meant. Jeremiah returning as what appeared to be Cornelia’s personal assistant was hardly surprising, and even somewhat amusing with the Schadenfreude that came with the idea of Gottwald, fresh from his disgrace at Asplunds failed Lancelot project, being forced into menial tasks to restore whatever status was salvageable.

However amusing that image was though, it was in harsh contrast to the fact that Villetta was there. From what Suzaku could gather, Villetta had just been released by Zero, and had been picked up and was being returned to the palace. Jeremiah was escorting, nearly harassing her towards the building, likely for his sins.

“Curious.” came Lelouch’s final thought, which Suzaku buttressed with “You’re right. Why now? It makes too little sense. It doesn’t fit Zero.”

“Perhaps it’s not ideological. Where does it say she was dropped off?”

“She claims she was left at the Finance Office, just by the Palace. Police intercepted her moments later.” Suzaku explained, reading the banner running below the footage. “Why there? She could go anywhere.”

“Hence, betrayal.” Lelouch explained. “If Zero had done whatever was necessary, interrogation, or whatever, and wanted to release her, for whatever reason, he could have just put her on a bus to literally anywhere. This stinks of conspiracy, and I don’t like it. It sullies the cause no matter how you slice it.”

“I think that thought has occurred to the Britannians judging by the looks she’s getting.”

“Mm…”

From there, the room quieted as they completed their respective looks with finishing touches, putting on the ritz as they met by the door into the hall.

“Ready?”

“Mm.”

Lelouch pulled up his collar and swing his coat around his back, with Suzaku grabbing his phone as they went out the door. As the pair went out to meet the Council at the front entrance, hoping to avoid the mocks of Milly and the stress of work, far away someone else was looking forward to a break from the norm.

“Alright, break time lads.”

Minoru Hatake breathed a sigh of relief, swiping his brow with the cuff of his dirty sleeve as he
stood up to move from the dusty, brown room to the breakers yard outside where his colleagues were beginning to rest their backs. He saw the worn out men sharing a beer round a circular bench, cheerfully bantering. Walking his stiff legs over and planting his scrawny bum onto the wooden plank, he received nods from the tired workers, all trying to catch their energy under the hot setting sun, painting the sky purple.

After wiping his hands off his trousers, he was passed over the last few drips of the cold, sour beer, downing it graciously before joining the back and forth, his harsh, drawn skin pulling against his cheap, collarless shirt.

They were all labourers, some of them all the way back in pre-Invasion Japan, who went from building site to mine to other construction project, hoping to scrounge a few days work. While life was hard under Britannia, they were just surviving, too closely balanced between exhaustion and starvation to care about the struggle he was vaguely aware of happening just above his head between Nationalists and Britannians. He simply tried to survive, and it stood to him. In spite of his slender frame and admittedly simple mind, Minoru had the stamina of a mule, and made little fuss. He was a quiet, unambitious lad, who just wanted to live in some modicum of comfort through hard work. The classic Britannian dream. And while all had been working out at an average pace, surviving day to day with little discretionary, he managed.

Then came the downward turn, the crash he had heard it called. Suddenly, no one wanted to hire him, as places he used to help out at suddenly stopped opening their quiet, lonely gates. He grew desperate, seeking ever more degrading tasks to pacify his contracting stomach, to sparse avail.

While affairs of politics and national identity flew over his head, a lack of food flew right into his stomachs field of awareness.

He knew this to be the case for the majority of his friends, some of whom had not survived the last few months. He himself had been close to death at times, yet after weeks of brinkmanship, opportunity all but sought him out. Suddenly, industrial projects were springing up within the Ghetto itself, such as the one he currently worked at. What they did was buy waste materials and equipment, breaking them down for their constituent materials such as steel and copper, before the raw materials were sold on. What was unique was that, to Minoru’s surprise, they were not paid in Dollars. They were being paid in a new thing, called Yen after the old currency he barely remembered from youth, but nothing alike the ancient money in appearance. He wasn't certain what its worth was, but a brief investigation proved that stalls and sellers throughout the Ghetto, suddenly cleaner and brighter than they used to be, accepted it with glee.

And so began his new job, dragging out larger pieces of scrap for individual breakdown. It was hard work, but reliable, secure, and given what the Yen could buy about the Ghetto, well paid. His foreman even allowed regular breaks and time off, mentioning it led to increased performance when on the job. Indeed, he would argue it had, but for the first time in years he had time to do other things, such as relax, or socialise, drink, or just sleep. He was happy, and whoever was behind this project for the Yen and various businesses throughout the Ghetto had his blessing.

The second can of beer had finished its round, and so the break time cry chimed again, signalling a return to work. He stood up sharply, the heels of his hands pressing into his knees to push him up from his seated position as he moved back towards his task. He leaned in, gripping the end of a broken pylon with both hands and dragging it with his back and heels into the clearing to be stripped, taking a moment to stretch before beginning again.

After repeating the task for a pleasant time, the hot quiet of the day was interrupted by the arrival of an unwelcome guest.
It was a slow buzz at first, indistinguishable from the dull drone of cicadas over the summer dried slum, however it grew more intense, towards a more consistent whir that seemed to dominate Minoru’s eardrums even in spite of its smooth tune, full of dips and accelerations in pitch yet retaining a constant, syrupy buzz that grew to a roaring whir, like a jet engine absorbing all in its path.

But it was not a jet engine, as Minoru was quick to realise, for he'd heard the loud roar once before, though too many years ago to name it.

And it revealed itself, a massive, gross beast of metal, standing on legs that arched back and arms that ended in rifles and blades, easily twelve feet tall in their steel, nightmarish and real.

And the damage they wrought was just as real, as steel flew away from their kicking legs like paper fluttering about an office, coming to loud, jarring stops on top of buildings, and people, as one unfortunate worker discovered, his outstretched arm ripping off in the face of the momentum of the falling latticework.

As Minoru ran over to help his maimed colleague, a voice shot out into the chaos, female, angry, and likely amplified.

“Enough, ceasefire!”

The huge metallic beast halted, drawing its visual mass to a standstill remarkably, nearly unnervingly quickly. Its noise ran down slowly, to the point Minoru felt his eardrums might not explode. It was followed shortly after its stoppage by a series of infantry soldiers, running through the courtyard with rifles trained on the workers, including a barrel specially for Minoru that stopped him like a rabbit in the headlights.

“Away!” roared the soldier, swinging his gun to the left to signal him away from his coworker. While his English left much to be desired, he understood the simple instruction, moving away with his hands above his head as the other soldiers circled the wounded man. Meanwhile, the soldier on Minoru slammed his chest with the butt of his gun, sending him falling to the ground as a smaller group entered the courtyard, walking slowly this time. They were led by a pair of officers in high military dress, and centred around a woman, helmetless and pink haired with ostentatious bronze and purple gown lined with medals and honours. She appraised the situation briefly, her eyes swivelling from the maimed worker, to one whose shock had rendered them unconscious, to him.

“Eleven!” she roared in rich, accented English. “Where is your employer?”

Minoru weakly pointed towards a shack at the head of the yard, windowless but for the open door frame. Immediately, she kicked him over onto his front, before striding over to the building and hauling the poor man inside out by the neck, slamming him down against the steel plate wall.

Minoru could barely see and hear what was happening, his vision blackening, his ears filling with blood from wounds he couldn't feel. Life happened in still images, as Cornelia roared a question, and hit the man again. He roared out in pain, down on his haunches. A kick to the ribs. A cry.

“Yuai!"
Cornelia stopped, and looked thoughtful, thanking the man before pulling out an old pistol.

Minoru reached outwards, his tendons stretching at the bit. Ayato was his friend, who had given him a chance, had employed him, had begun his return to a functioning member of society with this job. Without him…

“Ay...a...to…”

Click.

Ayato paused briefly, before his head recoiled downwards, slamming against the dirt and bouncing back, staining the dry dirt red with little volition towards his neck. There was no loud bang, but Ayato concluded his puppet like shaking with an unnatural stillness. The Princess turned away, ignoring the corpse before conversing.

“Look into Yuaikai. This may be another upstart group, but we shouldn’t need to much at this point.”

A group of nods surrounded her, as a man, whom he had not yet seen, ran up to Cornelia and told her at just a loud enough volume for Minoru to hear, before he blacked out, a sentence he didn't understand.

“There's a problem, at the Convention with Euphemia.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry I can’t make it. I’m not feeling brilliant, but I’ll see you on Monday. I can usually shrug these off over a weekend, so hopefully I can be back in time.”

The voice on the other end of the line gave a genial agreement and encouragement, before hanging up. Sighing, Zero’s head shook, still hidden beneath his infamous mask that had captured the imagination of the Britannian media. While Zero’s public life had grown to become the most important part of the terrorists life, Zero still had to deal with the mundanities of everyday life. The most critical element of being above suspicion was the maintenance of an ordinary life, and disappearing off the face of the earth with no explanation would certainly qualify as suspicious.

However, even as the human element of Zero feigned excuses, the character had began to exert its pressures on the rebel. Beneath. Of particular note was the news of this new Yuaikai group, and the killing of several steel workers.

It was an outrage, of course, for any Japanese workers to die under the boot of the Britannians, however the matter proved far more troublesome, as their employers had been making waves within the local community, if not the press, which had fawned over the flamboyant Zero and allowed the freedom fighter to leapfrog into prominence.

Zero was not stupid. Beneath the grandeur and the showmanship, Zero and his muse cared deeply about justice in its totality, and so welcomed the initiative initially, though reservations were held on the assumption that the effort was a naive one, however as the situation developed, Zero realized that the potential existed for the Black Knights to quickly be marginalized if the situation was left unchecked.

Working with moderates fostered moderates, and Yuaikai were practically marshmallows, urging nonviolent practices and promoting an economic resolution. At this time, that idealistic approach, a siren song, could entice the Japanese, which would be a disaster, as the method would never work. The Black Knights, though yet not publically in existence, had met to discuss this problem of public support, which had been a great source of stress for Zero. It had been argued by a low
ranking officer that accelerationism was the way forward. If they attacked Britannia enough, they could get the jingoistic figures in Britannia to strike back, showing that the Britannians had to be fought violently, giving them hegemony over the Japanese resistance movements.

Zero had removed him on the spot. They were to represent justice, and if they faced difficulties in achieving the public support, they would have to use their weapons to save the innocent, not attack the guilty. What they needed was a way to reintroduce themselves as agents of justice, to get a foot in the door.

Of course, that still left the Yuaikai. They were on the same side, however their separate efforts divided and ate at each other rather than added. Yuaikai was not an enemy, but at this time they were not an ally, and Zero feared that arrangement could not last, or else the Japanese community would be too divided to proceed.

Zero took off the mask and sighed again, before taking a drink of water to ease the increasing sweat that poured through the terrorists hair. Perhaps health was more of a concern than was joked over the phone and in excuses.

“Zero? You may want to look at this, Kusekabe’s lost his mind and attacked the Britannians!”

Chapter End Notes

Teenage girls getting ready for a party. This was how a friend of mine described the opening scene to this Chapter, with Lelouch and Suzaku picking out clothes and taking shots at each other. I can definitely see it, though I've tried to keep the goofiness in character. I also noted I was using exposition a tad, and tried to use Minoru as a muse to demonstrate what was happening on the ground. A few things have been brought up over this Chapter that will not be of importance for some time, so I would ask for some patience. All will be made clear with time.

In any case, thank you so much for joining me, and I hope you'll be with me in the Chapter 12 of For Hearts And Minds, Whatever happened to the Popular Front? In the meantime, stay safe, join a Union, and rate and review!

~Eth0
“And so, I hope you will understand the importance of implementing modern solutions through Sakuradite power in our cities, and that you distinguished guests will take these lessons onboard in future projects. Thank you.”

Lelouch sat up, his tight suit holding him in place, not uncomfortable but hardly ignorable, to join the chorus of applause as the speaker concluded his half hour discourse on the potential commercial implementations of Sakuradite in transportation and infrastructure, using the Tokyo railway lines as an example. While its less militarised tone drew little love from the contractors listening for the next big revolution that could be applied to their wars overseas, it was still a well presented speech that made good points on the importance of public infrastructure, to the point he had even scrawled a few notes into his small ledger book, nearly out of pages after 3 months of being filled with his small, tight lettering.

It was the first night of the Kawaguchi Convention on Technology, and while Milly was being insufferable, Lelouch was still enjoying himself, even to the point of thanking Nina profusely for winning a prize that had gotten them tickets. He was enraptured by the breadth of the intellectual prowess on display, his focus drawn almost exclusively to the stage.

As this speaker waved back to the applauding crowd while he walked behind the curtain, they were allowed five minutes between speeches to converse, relax, and relieve themselves. Lelouch turned to the other members of their reserved row, who were all in various states of attent. Suzaku was similarly interested in the topic, though it seemed some of the dirty looks were beginning to make him uncomfortable. Milly appeared to be switching between observing the speaker and her friends, while Shirley had hurriedly looked away as Lelouch turned his head towards their row.

Some things never changed. Finally, Nina was in a similar stupor to Lelouch, though he couldn’t help but notice she had insisted on sitting on the seat furthest to the right, while Lelouch was the second furthest to the left, beaten only by Suzaku who had sat down first. He didn’t want to leap to conclusions, but it was food for thought. He certainly was in no mood for negative assumptions, particularly about his host.

Milly noted his diverted attention, smiling and asked “Enjoying it?”

Lelouch nodded, thanking her as his stomach gurgled. He chuckled, and explained “I’ll just be a moment.”

“Take your time.”

Stepping over Suzaku to enter the central row, Lelouch stepped down past the rows of seats, brass
and suits and gowns passing him by as he approached the rear of the enormous amphitheatre, lit in blue upward tones reflecting from the bottom corners of the halls against the ceiling, like the Globe Theatre in the midst of deepest Shakespeare. He enjoyed the deep hues against the dark walls, like Van Gogh’s Starry Night.

Finally turning away as he entered the small corridors out of the amphitheatre towards the hotel’s international restaurant, which had been repurposed as a buffet to allow for quick eating between speeches. Fortunately, he had timed his journey well, with only one small group walking back to the hall in view. They passed by within a few feet of each other, as Lelouch, mind half engaged, surveyed the group. They were led by a young girl, about his age with a baseball cap and tracksuit, a bit informal for the event but with a face reminiscent of his favourite half sister at a glance. She appeared too old and informal for that to be the case, given that any Princess attending a place like this would be heralded and given her own booth and likely her own speech. He chuckled at the coincidence as their eyes met briefly, before they moved along.

After a moment's wait for an attendant to arrive, as he asked for a side of chilli manchow soup to keep him going, which were served promptly. Hoping to get some fresh air, he sat next to the open window of the restaurant overlooking the lake. He felt briefly guilty for leaving his friends, but it was a three day event. They could live without him for ten minutes.

He tucked into his soup, an incredibly spicy liquid that could nearly take your eye out, as he examined the lake below him. There was little wind tonight, and so the moonlight appeared flat, with little shimmer against the glassy surface. His eye fell further, towards the shoreline, as it lazily moved about.

Then suddenly, motion; his eye was drawn left by a line of movement. It wasn’t conscious, his eyes merely sought out that which was changing. The bridge, split up into multiple portions, was being raised. This raised his eyebrow, and as he finished the first roll, he looked more closely, before examining the other bridge within view of the window. Sure enough, it was rising upwards, blocking off exit.

‘Curiouser and curiouser’ Lelouch thought, as he moved along the wall, his senses on guard. Uncertain, yet suspicious, he moved back into the corridor, spoon in one hand and bowl of soup in the other. It took some time for him to patch out what was happening, but as he approached the central stairway, he heard loud footsteps banging upwards from below. It was at this moment that he realised something was very, very wrong.

Moving quickly, thinking like a chess board in the vertical, he moved behind the row of stairs, as the first few men came up. Japanese, likely terrorists, moving in groups of four with rifles. Lelouch mentally groaned. Why now, of all times? He leaned against the pillar where he hid, as a small detachment, perhaps the fourth or fifth of a dozen, moved past him. He pushed his breath inside him and hoped he wouldn’t be spotted, as the time drew to a slow crawl. One man, tall and broad shouldered, pushed by, his physique drowning Lelouch’s narrow, dark vision as the clock moved tenuously along, far slower than it should. The next man was slender, yet tall, far darker than the others in terms of skin tone. The clock marched slowly along the long road to 18:36, taking its long wandering route around the face of the white, minimalist disc. Next came a short, stout Japanese man, paler than the others with receding hair. Further, further, taking ten minutes to climb to 18:36’s narrow tip, as the last man trudged along past his hiding place, his narrow eyes shifting from wall to clock to Lelouch.

The mans shock was betrayed by his eyes, and Lelouch acted fast to avoid getting shot by a twitchy terrorist, slamming his bowl of soup forward towards his face. Chilli Manchow soup was
incredibly spicy, which suited Lelouch fine, but it also stung like nothing else if misapplied. He forced the bowl straight into the man’s face, pushing for the eyes and holding it there as the man cried out as if his feet had just been dipped in lava, grabbing the attention of the rest of his group. Lelouch pulled the bowl back, ducking down and swiping the bowl against the dark skinned man, spreading the sauce against his face before grabbing the man and using him for cover.

But his stand was short lived, as one of the rear groups fired a warning shot behind him, freezing him in place with surprise. The terrorist who shot at him, a teen barely older than him, roared in guttural Japanese “Up, dog!”, before switching to broken English “Get up, up, now!”

Lelouch obeyed, not giving away a potential advantage in being able to understand their private communications. He moved very slowly to not give the Japanese any opportunity to fire on him. No need to die for nothing. He felt a gun push into his neck, pulsing inwards, pressuring his skin into a depression. He took the hint, placing his hands firmly on his head before further pokes sent him walking down towards the amphitheatre. He received dirty look after filthy stare as he made his way down to the room. The door was manned by two rifle toting terrorists, who opened the door to a jarring scene.

The terrorists were holding down the well dressed men and women in enclosures, between 10 to 20 people huddled down in circles, chairs thrown about the place. The blue was gone, the amphitheatre was lit, and the earlier illusion was shattered, as if the mystery of a darkened haunted house was removed, only revealing a sight much more horrifying. The fear on people's eyes met the hate from the occupiers. While Lelouch was himself afraid, he compartmentalised his fear. It was selfish to feel fear right now; there were others at stake, and Nunnally too. And the plan. Fear was a paralytic, a surrender, a crutch he couldn’t afford. He tucked it far away, and began to plan.

A peek up at the clock, now visible in the yellow light of the large theatre, told him the time was 18:38. The Britannian Army would discover their captivity in 18 minutes of camera swapping, plus or minus 3. He had until then to do something he suddenly realised, as there was no way he could leave this hotel on the Army’s terms.

It occurred to him suddenly, as he saw terrified Britannian eyes flash up at him; he would be identified. Any attempt to liberate the hostages by the Britannians would be led by Cornelia, who when the hostages all went through processing would finger Lelouch on the spot.

Seventeen minutes to devise a plan.

The terrorists placed him back in his group, huddling together sharing nervous looks. Nina looked scared beyond comprehension, Shirley looked more shocked than worried, while Milly and Suzaku looked to him for some comfort, as the latter, knowing the score asked “Ideas?”

“Working on it…” he grumbled as he watched the clock rise further, past seven pm without fruit as Lelouch came to realise something was very, very wrong, even in this context. Cornelia should have attempted at the very least to breach the perimeter, given that she had never cared about casualties.

Suddenly, there was a struggle in the next enclave, as a man was being dragged out from the crowd in the tight grips of his wife. Lelouch looked over the crowds to get a better look as he was torn between the embrace of his wife and the roaring pulls of the terrorists.

“Oh God no, oh please not me!” the man cried, as the leader of the four men pulling at him hissed “Come on, you bastard! This is what we think of your Princess’ ‘negotiations’!”

Lelouch was shocked. They were no doubt referring to Cornelia, except that made no sense.
Negotiations? Cornelia didn't know the word!

Lelouch felt uncertainty creep back into his mind as the man was hauled away, weeping loudly for help which never came. Lelouch had no clue how he was meant to escape, short of revealing himself as Yuaikai, which meant if the Britannians arrived he would be killed. Another item of great concern was Cornelia staying her hand. Had Euphemia talked her into holding off? No, the teen would never be allowed near the control room, even as close as Cornelia was to her sibling.

The only mystery that resolved itself in the ten minutes following was what had happened to the husband, who was seen falling past the window screaming for a fraction of a second through the long, panoramic window on the north face. Not that the knowledge the terrorists were killing hostages came as much comfort to Lelouch.

Nor, it seemed, did it come as comfort to Nina, who was now beginning to be a worry in and of herself to the Britannian Prince, as she shuddered and jerked about the place like a puppet on an industrial line. This experience had taken the nerves off the entire group, but Nima looked set to end her fuse, as happened soon enough, for as a terrorist passed by, rifle passing too close for comfort, he heard her blurt out “Elevens…”

Lelouch cringed into oblivion, head recoiling as if it were itself a rifle. Why, why had she said that?

The man had similar thoughts, aiming the weapon at the short girl and roaring “Not Elevens! We're Japanese, dammit!”

Suzaku tried to come to the rescue, replying “Please, peace. She is upset. It is not her fault.”

“Please, as if you’d know, you filthy traitor!” he screamed in Suzaku’s face. “Honourary, as if you’d know the meaning of the word.”

‘Please, please don’t do something stupid Suzaku.’ Lelouch almost prayed, before Suzaku did something stupid, swearing with a filthy Japanese expletive and ruining it. As Lelouch sank his head further, the terrorist asked “Who the hell do you think you are? Here, I’ll show you, you’re next for the drop! Boys, o’er here!”

Lelouch jerked back in surprise, reaching out for Suzaku as he cried out in indignant Japanese “You’re making a huge mistake… dammit… I’m Yuaikai! Put me down!”

“What the hell did you say?” the man shouted as he dropped Suzaku like a hot rock, aiming his rifle at him. Lelouch was frustrated, though not as much as perhaps he would have been ten minutes ago. That had been too close for comfort. The man paused, making sure by asking “Are you being honest? What’s your name?”

Not missing a beat, Suzaku replied “Akate.”

The man's eyes widened as he backed off, while others closed in. To his credit, the man seemed to understand the need for the Yuaikai to remain private, and so he had Suzaku escorted out, though with less shouting and drama. Predictably, they returned for Lelouch, who stood willingly and maintained a dignified stance ahead of the men, refusing to be harassed now that he held the power. His eyes fluttered about the crowds, most of whom looked away, assuming he was the next to go and take the fall. Still, he kept his head bent low until he entered the corridor, shaking off his coat with a quiet “Hmph”.

Most of the Japanese fighters weren’t too keen on looking at him straight on, likely not fans of the
fact one of the three members of a prominent resistance group was apparently not only a
Britannian, but a blue blooded one. He drew some amusement as he passed a pair with blue noses,
the ones he’d sprayed with soup, who were not impressed by his rebellious credentials. Still, after a
brief conversation in Japanese, he was allowed into the room which served as the base of
operations.

It was a small room, with three couches in the middle centered around a coffee table. Suzaku was
sat on the furthermost couch from the door, while there was a lone fat man dressed in pre-War
Officer garb faced away, looking out the one way window.

“Ah, Akira, welcome. I was surprised to hear of your presence, I never imagined that I would
happen across you both here, I truly am sorry you had to be caught up in all this.”

He spoke in Japanese, and as Lelouch silently tried to piece together his identity, the Officer
laughed, before continuing as he turned around “And what news! The younger Kururugi, come to
claim his heirdom! I must ponder who he chose to join him on such a venture-”

The man stopped in his tracks as he concluded his turn, as their faces met. Lelouch wore a scowl,
teeth clenched and brows set apart scornfully. His amethyst eyes narrowed to a point on their inner
edges, while the outer edge was still flayed open at full attent.

Suzaku cleared his throat. “Akira, meet Lieutenant Colonel Kusakabe Josui, current commander of
the Japanese Liberation Front, formerly the Popular Front.”

It took all of Lelouch’s willpower to not remark something along the lines of “So that's what
happened to you.”, or “So this is what you’ve decided to do with yourself after retiring. “, instead
opting for a simpler and more diplomatic “We've met.”

And indeed they had, for while Kusakabe had not been present nearly as much as Tohdoh, he still
remembered the Officer from the man's visits to the Kururugi Shrine. It seemed that the Lieutenant
Colonel remembered him too, as he took a step back with realisation.

“Vi Britannia.”

“I go by Lamperouge these days.”

“So much for Akira…”

The pair fell briefly silent, staring at each other with shifting understanding and malice. Kusakabe
cleared his throat, attempting to heal the awkwardness as he explained “So like I said, I am sorry
you were caught up in this. As surprised as I am about how high profile you both are, you have
both proven your dedication to the Japanese cause. Whatever you need, only ask.”

Lelouch and Suzaku exchanged looks, neither certain of what they wanted to say. Lelouch wanted
to rail against Kusekabe’s tactics as, but he was still aware of the tenuousness of his situation.
Attempting to get more details, he moved away from the door and stood against the wall parallel to
the window, and asked “So what's the situation?”

“Cornelia has made limited attempts to breach through the service tunnels, however our Raikou has
been able to repel their attacks thus far. A large scale attack has not yet been attempted, and there
are few signs of a larger assault team.” Kusakabe explained before frowning. “You know her, hm?
What does this suggest to you, Lamperouge?”

“Several things, and most of them contradictory. She would charge in with a sabre herself sooner
than be passive in the face of terrorism. One can only therefore deduce she is being affected by
factors outside the tactical. Either there are strategic issues I have missed, or there is a third party in play. Still, I would nonetheless not count on us leaving anytime soon.”

Kusakabe nodded. “I suspected as much. What are your thoughts, Kururugi?”

Lelouch watched with the edges of his eyes as Suzaku paused, before explaining “I’d agree, but either way this is hardly tenable. This attack was a mistake from the start.”

Lelouch cocked a brief eyebrow, as he realised Suzaku was on his side for this, and so went and joined, quipping “I’m afraid I too think so. Violent terrorist acts are antithetical to the cause of Liberation, as you are painted as animalistic villains and cowards.”

Suzaku shot him a glare, which Lelouch didn't feel was especially unwarranted. He had waited out of uncertainty for Suzaku to make the first move, and had leapt aboard the bandwagon now the issue had been raised. Still, Suzaku apparently had enough sense to not press the issue, allowing Lelouch to continue “Terrorism as a concept is going to fade away, because faced between hard nosed opponents and a suffering population you will be squeezed out, swept into the nothingness of history! You will lose The Long War!”

Kusakabe recoiled in fury, shouting “What? You insolent… We are the ones fighting for them! We are an army, not terrorists, fighting open war, unlike… unlike you! You both, unwilling to even risk your lives!”

“The idea that not outliving your own campaign is a good thing says more about you than about us, you fanatic. The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one” Lelouch hissed, quoting Salinger fluently as he observed out of the corner of his eye that Suzaku had turned down his head at Kusakabe’s remark on cowardice and sacrifice. Still, he had to press on. “In fact-”

“Sir, we have a situation!”

Lelouch turned to see an exasperated terrorist at full attention. Kusakabe, losing the venom from his voice, said “Explain, Sergeant.”

The man seemed to have to search for the words, before spluttering “Sir… It's a member of the Royal Family.”

Lelouch could almost hear Kusakabe frown as he said “I'm well aware, he's right in front of me!”

The man at the door paled before moving aside and saying “No sir... another one.”

“Lelouch?”

The world stopped again, as Lelouch became consciously aware of the weakness in his knees. His eyes grew wide as his breath drew short, barely able to categorise each sight. The pink hair, now open and worn in buns instead of hidden inside a cap, the short, round face, with tapered, determined lips and an emotional yet somewhat stoic look that cried of years lost.

“Impossible…”

Euphemia sighed slightly. “Unlikely, brother, would seem to be the better word. I suspected it was you when we passed in the canteen, and seeing you escorted out confirmed it. What have you been doing?”

There was not a sound from Lelouch as he leaned back, face still poised in anger from the surprise,
yet his wide eyes told a story of overwhelming emotion kept within narrow frames, imprisoned for
fear they would impede the hosts functions. He had given himself away, and had no retort to the
thinly disguised accusations.

Kusakabe, not seeing Lelouch’s torn face, leapt on the opportunity to grab a member of the Royal
Family that could actually serve as a hostage, moving alongside Lelouch and commenting “So
that's why Cornelia held her fire. I told you Lelouch, these operations hold merit. I've done
exceptionally well out of this.”

“Have you.” Lelouch sourly pulsed, neither turning away or hiding his verbose cynicism. His anger
at a lack of control was still present, and he was angry at that anger to boot in an ironic cycle. He
was done addressing Kusakabe, his sparse attention drawn elsewhere.

“Need I remind us of our situation, everyone?” Suzaku reasoned. “Lelouch is… having a bit of a
moment. Kusakabe, while this is a development, it neither addresses the criticisms we raised, or
solves the central issue of how we are going to get out of here.”

Euphemia blinked, and asked “So you two aren't with them?”

“No, we were caught up in it like the rest of you. We've… been doing other things.”

She paused and smiled, moving to hug Lelouch. “I knew you didn't have this in you! You're too
smart to need to take a hotel, what was I thinking?”

Lelouch froze as his sister wrapped her arms around him, stunning him into further silence. He
could barely-

*BANG*

The unmuffled shot echoed through the walls, stunning Kusakabe and Euphemia, but reengaging
Lelouch.

“Back.” he warned, his brain coming back into gear as he called across “Suzaku, keep by
Euphemia.”

Suzaku nodded, getting up and moving across as there came a second explosion, closer this time.
Lelouch looked back, seeing Kusakabe draw his pistol before he backed away himself. Suzaku
held Euphemia back towards the couches, understanding Lelouch’s instructions fully as he asked
Kusakabe “Do you have a spare pistol?”

Before Lelouch could turn and scorn his hypocrisy, Suzaku prebutted with “Would you rather I go
without the potential to threaten? I won't use it.”

Lelouch scowled as Suzaku accepted a skeletal sidearm, before Kusakabe reluctantly handed the
Prince one. It was clear they didn’t like each other, but in the face of a potentially unknown enemy,
it was for the best.

It was several minutes before a man entered the room, dressed in the terrorist uniform and several
gallons of sweat.

“Sir… Zero would like to speak to you.”
And cut.

Man, it feels good to have the writing bug back. For the first time in a while, I have gone over my page count, all while keeping single line paragraphs to an all time low. As well, the quality of this Chapter has me beaming with pride. And it’s just in time; things are escalating, and our boys can no longer keep their dirty dealings at an arm's length. They will have to make real sacrifices, and even give up everything they have. This Chapter also marks the ¼ waypoint of the story from my plans, from the beginning to the end of R2. Wow, we have really come a long way.

A question I can imagine burning on all your minds is; Eth0, did you seriously just change the name of one of the antagonists organisations to make a half arsed Monty Python joke in the Chapter title?

Yes I did.

Still, I promise I’ll try and keep Chapter titles a tad more substantive. That aside, thank you all for reading up to the end of Arc Three, and I hope you’ll stay with me through the next Arc, Discourses With The Chairman, beginning my “better titles” streak with the Chapter 13, Paper Tiger, following a brief Flashback. Until then, stay safe, have an escape plan, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Flashback

Euphemia Li Britannia wiped away tears as she watched her brother, back held straight perpendicular to the boundless horizon, black hair and dark gown forming a contrasting line against the blue sea and white, open sky, like a vivid, expressionist artwork that moved Euphemia to tears regardless of context. And yet, in the emotion of the moment the truth of her view of Lelouch, standing alone against the pier, nearly sent her over her own precipice.

He wore a scowl well, it struck her, as his face stood still against the formidable wind pressing into his cheeks and blowing past his hair. Euphemia saw him glare the amorphous force down, as he were engaging in a standoff with nature itself.

Not that he wasn’t right to be furious. It had been a week since Lelouch had confronted their father, and the fallout had been monumental. Lelouch had lost everything, and had spent his time packing, planning, roaring at those who approached him, anything to occupy himself. Euphemia knew Lelouch did not brood, did not dwell on issues, but in this fashion he always required a task to tackle, or else he would only spin himself out. Euphemia was unsure how conscious this effort was, or how much he just did it on instinct, his own ego saving him from self inflicted torment.

The boat was still a ways away, a silent Nunnally waiting towards the dock. Euphemia watched from a distance, unsure whether to proceed. Cornelia had tried to address him, only to be rebuffed, Schneizel had protested to the Emperor in vain, and both had warned him to avoid contact with Lelouch. They recognised she needed closure on her brother, but also said that they didn’t want her last memories of him to be of an angry, vengeful, potentially irrational. She could understand their worries, but wasn’t sure if she could live with this being her last image, her brother in opposition to the boundless horizon. He looked so alone, having nobody to depend on as he balanced near the verge. She could barely live with seeing that. Slowly, but building up pace, she ran over towards the edge of the waterfront to grab Lelouch’s attention, to talk with him one last time. Her prim sandals splashed against the wet brick, spraying splashes of salty brine onto her socks and ankles with quiet flushes as she made her way towards her brother, of the same age yet seeming so much older.

“Lelouch!” she cried as she approached, finally drawing his gaze, his face turning from a Pearse-like profile to the full stare, as he still managed to somehow look down on her. With his face poised almost retreatfully, as if he were facing some curiosity, he paused, as she hung her head, weeping, in a sort of shame.

“I’m sorry…”

Then, a hand, slender and light, came to rest on her shoulder. She looked up in shock, to view Lelouch’s face again, this time in control of himself.

Unlike her other siblings reports, he seemed happy to see her. Not happy, that was the wrong word, but her presence seemed to have brought him some ease. He attempted a weak smile, for her sake, and said “You have nothing to apologise for. I do not tax nature with my fortunes, nor yourself.”

“But Lelouch… you must be so…” she stumbled, gulping as she realised it would be a really, really bad idea to finish that thought.
“Vengeful? Angry? Probably. Ultimately, emotion without action is waste, and so I am here. Emotional action can only wound, as shown in my presence here, in Cornelia, and in everything else we have wrought. I am angry, but I will not act on it.”

“Don’t hold yourself back, you have to be strong…”

Lelouch tried a smile again. “Don’t worry about me. Keep it for yourself. I’m not going to be here anymore, so you’ll have to rely on Cornelia more. You’ll have to rely on yourself a little more today.”

She paused, before preparing to shout. Be angry, be sad, care about yourself for one moment! It was as if she wanted him to be in some manner of resistance or uncertainty, so she could calm him down. It was self satisfactory.

Apparently, he could see it, as he nodded. “Be as scornful as I might, I could never be mad at you, or in your presence. You haven't deserved it. I do not want your final memory to be me in my alternate element.”

Euphemia paused, putting two and two together, now actually yelled at him “You don't need to treat me with child gloves, as if I am incapable of seeing that you are suffering! You think I can’t tell? You think if you just leave a good last impression, all will be well?”

It was obvious, upon thinking about it; he was willing to roar and bellow at Cornelia, knowing she would understand, but Euphemia? No.

Lelouch saw it too, rubbing the nape of his neck awkwardly as he attempted to explain, his chin reaching a point before he seemed to catch some idea, his eyebrow raising a curious height.

“I suppose I was wrong. You have grown, beyond what I expected. You never cease to surprise despite not really changing your approach or selfless attitude.”

Euphemia felt fit to burst, as on the third attempt, Lelouch smiled, before they embraced.

“I'll miss the hell out of you.”

Genbu Kururugi was not a thoughtful man, usually prone to long bouts of pause where he considered the world he inhabited and the course it was going down, however he had a lot of time on his hands. While the First Britannic-Japanese War had gone to show he was not the world’s best predictor, he found little personal calm in contemplating the wider world, indulging his slow attention to detail, and allowing himself a greater connection with both the present and past.

Instead, he marched forward.

It was this passion and uprightness temperament that had elected and reelected him, however it was the same slow manner of thinking that had lost him the country, shame he had yet to surmount.

He had been arrested shortly after, and sentenced to life in prison. He guessed even Britannia couldn't openly have him killed. It would lead to too great a backlash, even in spite of the fact that he had continued on far past the time when surrender was ideal. There was a tipping point he had not recognised at the time, and so the ensuing Britannian armies pillaged and razed their way through the mainland, with no tactical developments on the Japanese side with the exception of Tohdoh, who had long exhausted his supply of miracles.
Ultimately, the former Prime Minister had long concluded that this was the reason violent revolution would likely not achieve much. The people were tired of war, and would in all likelihood be divided, a possibility which depressed Genbu.

Ultimately, while his incarceration had allowed considerable amounts of time towards self loathing, he could ultimately say he both deserved his fate and would not fight it.

“Kururugi, you have a visitor.”

His son however-

“Let him in.”

The thirteen year old stepped inside, and Genbu’s heart broke. His son had aged three years since they had last met, and he had aged several decades. Genbu observed his low stare, his fixed mouth, and folded arms, and saw him still fighting, still working towards something. It was a sorry sight to see any thirteen year old in, and Genbu was aware how selfish it was to lament merely the loss of one person’s childhood, but Suzaku’s loss was closer, more real, because he had seen the rise of his life before the invasion as well as the fall.

“It is good to see you, father.”

Even in the formalities of his words lay clear deserved rejection. Genbu hung his head as he responded “Hey, Suzaku. How are you?”

“I am fine, thank you.”

He suddenly felt uncomfortable, and that he really wished Suzaku hadn’t come. This was a yet further selfish thought, but Suzaku’s presence was not reassuring, only serving to focus his despair onto one person. He attempted to engage a second time, asking “Who have you been staying with?”

“I’ve been with him, at the Ashford Academy.”

Genbu understood the need to not name Lelouch and use coded language, but Suzaku still only provided the minimum of information. Suzaku probably hated him, and given Suzaku’s temperament as an all loving hero, that took some doing. Genbu cared not, for he hated himself. However, he could only hope Suzaku at least had confidence in himself.

“Suzaku…”

The young teen looked up at his father. “Mm?”

Genbu paused, before speaking slowly.

“Don't stop because I have. I... I can't stand it, but we are not the same. I am not your limit. You need to go achieve. There is no path set out for you, no story you will fit into. So don't bother around with me and write your own.”

Suzaku stopped, and looked him in the eye for the first time, confirming Genbu’s theory. Suzaku was here because he felt obligated, because they hadn’t had a proper goodbye. This wasn’t a visit, this was a proper farewell, and Genbu finally saw Suzaku’s eyes give.

“Don't cry for me. Cry for you.”
Chapter Thirteen: Paper Tiger

Arc Four: Discourses with the Chairman

Opening: “Nightmare Parade” - Fake Type

The masked figure stepped boldly into the room, and immediately a pair of pistols confronted him, though not a triad. Suzaku and Lelouch both drew on Zero as he entered, to which the man paused and shrugged, while Kusakabe, eager to diffuse the situation, said “Peace, peace, we are all friends of Japan here! Yuaikai, and...”

Zero remained silent as Lelouch replied “That depends heavily on your definition of friend”, still having his gun aimed at Zero. Suzaku felt little guilt himself as he continued to aim at the orblike face mask, seeing it as self defence. Zero was dangerous.

So, as it turned out, was Kusakabe, who turned his gun more casually on Euphemia, saying “Look! We have good fortunes! We can use the Princess-”

“Bastard!”

Lelouch, with surprising speed and volume, swang his arms around and aimed his pistol at Kusakabe while hissing the profanity. Surprised, Suzaku, gun still aimed at Zero, used his free arm to usher Euphemia behind him, while Kusakabe looked on in awe.

“Have you lost your minds? Don't tell me you've become sentimental, Lelouch. Honestly. This is war, we must accept any cost-”

As Kusakabe began his condescending lecture at gunpoint, Suzaku saw Zero pull out a pistol of his own, to which Suzaku resteadied his aim, and called over a warning to Lelouch. Zero looked on, and aimed at Kusakabe.

The room was silent as the four armed men worked out where things stood. Lelouch and Zero were aimed at Kusakabe, who had Euphemia in his sights, while Suzaku took aim at Zero, who was the wildcard. To say Suzaku was puzzled at this turn of events was an understatement.

But the masked man explained all, as he addressed the room in grandiose tones. “Kusakabe, this development is indicative of the issues that lie at the base and heart of your conceited ideas, combining self destructive honour with utter cowardice. Hiding behind Princesses, while claiming to be the rightful military leader? Your place is not on the front lines, it is in The Hague, you unjust mongrel!”

Kusakabe, stunned, moved towards Suzaku and Euphemia, likely to attempt to stave off Lelouch and Zero, however Suzaku was having none of it, aiming his gun at the Lieutenant Colonel. Suzaku looked straight into Kusekabe’s despairing face as he hissed “Josui, back off.”

“Suzaku, she's a Britannian Princess.”

“Sir, if you pull that trigger, nothing good will come.”

“Kururugi, please see-”
“Put your gun down Lieutenant Colonel.”

“It is not-”

“If you shoot Euphemia you will be shot next.”

Kusakabe flinched at Lelouch’s voice, injected with uncharacteristic immediacy and a hint of panic, creeping in like an unwelcome smell that could not be traced, merely detected. Suzaku now began to worry. If Lelouch was panicked, then they were in serious trouble. Then again, how much was he being affected by family in danger? Suzaku did not know.

Seeing Suzaku’s uncertainty, Kusakabe raised his gun to his eyeline, lining up Euphemia and Suzaku, roaring “Back off boy!”

Somewhere far away, Suzaku heard a cry of “Kusakabe, stop pointing that gun at her!”

Then, in the next moment, stretched over what felt like hours, four things happened. First, Kusakabe fired his gun, as Suzaku shoved Euphemia aside. Suzaku saw the small lead body discharge with a small explosion, frighteningly loud and very bright, blinding him.

Second, Suzaku felt something hit his right shoulder with the force of a thousand punches, sending him recoiling back, falling in the dark. Thirdly, as he fell, someone shot at Kusakabe and missed. And as he landed, someone shot at Kusakabe and didn't miss.

This certainly changed the mood of the room in a real hurry, as Suzaku saw when his vision returned. Kusakabe was dead, the second bullet having buried itself between his eyes, Zero was standing at the back of the room, apathetic as ever, as Lelouch and Euphemia tended to Suzaku’s wounds, which felt at once blinding in and of their own painful nature and numbing, as if he was feeling a veiled reflection of the true damage to his shoulder.

He didn’t have to wonder very much as to who had killed the Lt. Colonel.

“It's time to go.” Zero concluded as the Britannian heirs raised him to his feet. “You two must not be spotted on your way out, or at the very least recognised. Euphemia, I trust you to create a diversion and prevent your sister having the opportunity to record their presence.”

As Suzaku winced under his crippling pain, he tried to think through it to understand what he was hearing. Zero was helping them escape?

Lelouch verbalised this sentiment for him, asking “Why are you doing this? Killing Kusakabe, but not...”

Zero did not move initially, looking onto the lake, before putting away Schrodinger's pistol and commenting “Kusakabe was an enemy of justice, killing indiscriminately, hiding behind women and generally acting against those he claims to protect. You two, Yuaiiaki, are acting in the spirit of justice, while the Princess has not taken up office as of yet. As the arbiter of justice, I must not act against these ideas.”

Suzaku would have protested, but he was already feeling faint, and he knew Lelouch was not idealistic enough to push the issue. True to his word, Zero organised the liberation of the hostages, while the Princess Euphemia diverted the Viceroy's attention to allow the pair of pacifist rebels to slink away into the night. In truth, Suzaku wasn’t clear on the details, given that he was focused on not bleeding out. Lelouch insisted they wait until their return to the college before seeking medical attention, and while Suzaku appreciated the need for secrecy, his shoulder didn’t.
“Here you are…” Lelouch groaned, as he laid Suzaku down on his kitchen table, before sitting back in the chair. Lelouch wasn’t fit enough to carry the Japanese teen, however the latter had leaned on his friend on the short walk back from the taxi, before Sayako and Ohgi had helped the rest of the way. The Japanese maid was now tending to his wounds with Ohgi’s help with the tougher tasks as Lelouch chugged down a bottle of water, before commenting “That was pretty damn interesting…”

Suzaku braced to deliver a snappy retort, however a surge of agony that came from Sayako’s merciless hands sent him into a fit of violent roars instead.

“Tsk.” the maid commented. “Should’ve gone to a doctor. I don’t give a damn if you’re going out saving Japan; you get shot, you go to a hospital. I’m not even going to ask how you got wound up in this.”

Suzaku moaned again, as Lelouch harrumphed. While Suzaku was dealing with his pain, Lelouch was mulling over the last few hours through his drink. Sighing, he stood up and said “I’m going to retire for the evening.”

Neither Suzaku nor Sayako responded, and so Lelouch took his leave to his room, placing down his bottle and shutting the door behind him, not looking backwards as he opened up his wardrobe. He buried his head inside, searching for his nightgown, before a gentle clap grew behind him. It was slow, but firm, each bang clear and distinct, grabbing his attention like a hand grenade. His head pivoted to the noise as if it were disembodied, and he saw him, standing behind his door, leaning against the mellow wall with one piece sunglasses, wild, pale hair and a wicked smile.

“Oh, what's this? Lelouch Vi Britannia, a Paper Tiger of the highest order! Seems the hero of Japan has a lot to think about.”

Stunned still, Lelouch saw the man suddenly leap forward, as his instincts barely took over as the man approached in a matter of moments, arms flying back before swinging towards him in a wide arc, meeting his temple in a disconnected strike he could barely react to. Lelouch was too tired, too off guard, to even recoil before he heard a shattering noise, like being inside a church bell. He fell to his knees, as the world blackened into fading nothing.

And that, as they say, was that.

Lelouch’s dreams were rarely seen, passing by in displays of muted shapes and tones. Not so this time. He dreamed of gunshots, panicked escapes and mortal danger in harsh, sharp angles, displaying Suzaku, Zero, and foremost among the large, imposing figures was the man. His body leapt about the place, inescapable, always watching with piercing, unnatural eyes.

“Welcome ba-aack!”

It had seemed like hours before his consciousness returned to him.

It was sound for the most part. He felt a force around the centre of his head, and a scratching in the top of his ears, which led him to assume he was blindfolded-

“Well done! Always rational in a crisis. I'm impressed.”

Lelouch explored his bindings, writhing his fingers around, before moving his feet around to test the waters. He was bound at the ankles and wrists, the latter of which were held behind the hard
wood chair.

“It's a pity it won't help; this puzzles’ not for your solving, Vi Britannia. That must really get you
down, I know. Mm hm. But I'm afraid you'll just have to sit and wait with me for rescue.”

Initially frustrated by his own helplessness, he was paused in his mental endeavours by what the
man had called him. The fact he knew his identity-

“And far more! Your father, your mother, your little operation, and everything in between! To be
frank, there's a sum total of nothing you can do. Still, I wouldn't worry, somebody will be along
soon.”

'Sod that.' Lelouch thought, as he attempted to ignore the growing uncertainty as he surveyed his
surroundings. The room had an echo, and smelt of a saline solution-

“Oh, so rude! You never could learn when to stay out of things, meddling, making things worse.
You got yourself and dear crippled Nunnally sent to a war zone, you got your friend shot, and lied
to all your friends for petty revenge. No one knows who you are, but I dooooo...”

Lelouch noticed his breathing rush, as he listened to the voice. He was not swayed by the content;
Lelouch was quite self assured, and if in a place of greater comfort he could probably retort the
philosophical points his captor was making, however it was too fast, and he was far too thinly
stretched mentally. The jab at Nunnally did sting, however he had long come to terms with the fact
that in the eyes of many, he would likely be judged as a person of poor moral basis. However, he
had no opportunity to engage with this line of thought, and while the man’s remarks in and of
themselves did not anger him, they panicked him. How did this man know all of these things?

“How indeed.”

The Prince was now noting his erratic heartbeat pulsing around his chest with increasing rapidity,
before his mind raced into action. He knew where he had lived, as he had been lying in wait. It was
therefore acceptable to assume he’d been watching Lelouch without his knowledge for some time.
How close-

Suddenly, laughter filled his ears, as he was aware of the voice inches from his ears which caused
him to wince. The crackled, haphazard chuckles and barks broke into silence before the voice
mocked “Look at you, all up in a fuss. You're going at a mile a minute, a mile a minute! I'll be
seeing steam soon. All it takes is for control and initiative to be yanked out of your hands, and you
turn into a nervous wreck!”

“Bullcrap!” Lelouch roared, before his head snapped away. He was giving the man what he
wanted. He attempted to clear his head, but there were too many mysteries, too many puzzles for
him to get any semblance of calm, which he suspected to be intentional.

“MAO!”

This was a new voice, and female, though it was more aggressive and filled with passionate anger
than any Lelouch cared to remember, including his own. It was tinny, and so likely over some
manner of microphone. As such, he took little relief, still struggling as the man, Mao it seemed,
laughed again and clapped. “And here's your saviour now! Do you feel confident Lelouch? Your
life is in her hands.”

He gritted his teeth, still trying to solve his issue in his head, before Mao laughed yet again, and
called over “Nothing at all! Not an ounce of faith. I'd feel insulted, Miss Kōzuki...”
Lelouch didn't recognise the surname, though he did recognise the sound of a growl, one of frustration and portraying a furious helplessness. This did not improve Lelouch's confidence. After a moment's pause, the woman asked “What is it you want, Mao?”

‘Good question.’ Lelouch silently quipped, still not seeing how he connected to any of this. Seemingly realising this, this Mao individual gasped in mock surprise. “Good lord, why should we be so rude to our… captive audience…” he spoke out, pausing at his own joke. Lelouch was almost certain he was holding in chuckles. “Lelouch, allow me to introduce you to Kallen Kozuki, half-bred Japanese, better known as Kallen Stadtfeld, favourite child of Lord Stadtfeld and masked vigilante, the one and only Zero!”

Lelouch paused in shock. All the bottled up lack of understanding, the furious anger he had felt at having the truth just outside his grasp, the lack of control that had eaten away at his own cool calm, now contrasted with the plain understanding that was at once clear and thoroughly unsatisfying.

It couldn’t be her. The gutless, indecisive girl, who read books and shied away. It was too convenient, it simply couldn’t be her. She didn’t have the temperament, the inspiration, or the health.

His mind stopped at health, as he regained his reasoning. Health. He recalled she had lied about that when they had met, as her complexion did not match her report. Thinking on the topic, he recalled their discussion. Beyond her soft, feeble voice, she had displayed interesting ideas, revolutionary if only indirectly. These were not indictments, but they did not form the instant dismissal he had secretly hoped for. He sought for evidence on the other side, examining who he had thought was Zero. He had been almost certain it was one of Ohgi’s men, however Ohgi could have easily had women on his team. In fact, he distinctly recalled the spokesperson being a woman of roughly Kallen’s height, though he had not made the connection. Certainly, comparing what the spokesperson had said to what Kallen had said, he began to form an extremely unpleasant image.

Mao, probably observing his face as it moved from anger, to contemplation, to realisation, applauded, roaring “And the penny has dropped! Best of luck Kallen, because your drop thinks you need it!”

Lelouch roared as he thrashed at his bonds, trying to release himself through the brute force of frustration. He could hardly sit and wait for assistance, especially from her. He didn't even want to consider the implications of her being Zero. He was almost distracting himself from his own helplessness, as Mao laughed into the despairing darkness.

Meanwhile, up in the annexe, Suzaku was just getting up, stretching his good arm out as his eyes explored the room. The light of the morning reached the room, softly greeting his eyes with gentle, welcoming hues. He sat up, and shifted his silent gaze from side to side, observing the empty room silently. Indeed, everything was quiet, even as he stood up unsteadily, nausea creeping through his numb shoulder, wrapped up in an arm brace courtesy of Sayako and Ohgi.

He stepped slowly across the room, pouring a small drink of water into a plastic cup, before sipping away slowly at the tasteless fluid, the room otherwise empty and still.

He still remembered being shot; with more the memory of guttural illness than injury, as his stomach weakened and he nearly retched at the recollection. It was uncanny how dissimilar his body reacted to what the injury actually was, though that might have something to do with the fact
he was high as a Dutch astronaut on painkillers.

It was for this reason he moved slowly across the room to peek out of the window at the warm, sparsely populated campus. It was a Sunday, so everyone was out doing other things. He felt somewhat bored, but he supposed it was the best for his arm.

Then, his door opened, and Suzaku turned in anticipation of Sayako’s lecturing tones, asking what he was doing up, however disaster was soon averted as he learned it was just Nunnally, wheeling herself in through the unlocked door, feeling her way through the entrance.

“Good morning Nunnally.” Suzaku cheerily whispered, still not fully awake, as he stepped over and squatted down opposite her. “How’s things?”

“I heard about your arm Suzaku…” she began, unsteadily. Suzaku rubbed the numb cast, as she distractedly continued “I was just wondering… I mean, I’ve been looking… have you seen Lelouch anywhere?”

Pausing, Suzaku used his free arm to scratch at an itch on his cheeks and thought. He'd last heard him retiring to his room, to which he ventured with the stability of a drunkard only to find Lelouch absent, bed perfectly made, and no coffee mug indicating his awakening. It was as if he hadn't slept there. He turned back, calling to Sayako and Ohgi indifferent of the consequences “Did you see Lelouch leave?”

After a brief pause, he heard Ohgi call “Not unless he got up before five!”, which was seconded by Sayako. Suzaku frowned, wondering where the hell his colleague was. He looked briefly out the window, before turning again.

“I’ll go look around.”

After a second glass of water and some half decent clothes, Suzaku sucked in his waist to ease his nausea before going out into the hall. He looked down the hall for clues, peeking towards the stairs, before a force hit him from behind, bluntly slamming into his backside and shunting him forwards, nearly forcing him to release the contents of his stomach onto the carpet. Once he returned to a balanced state, he stood round to see Kallen Stadtfeld looking more than a little stressed.

“Good morning to you too.” he grumbled, as he looked down at her barely restoring herself in her exhaustion. Somewhat disconcerted due to having bigger issues, he heard her say “Sorry, I didn't mean to run into you. I was just hoping to see Lelouch.”

“He's not here.”

“I know… I mean…”

Suzaku quirked an eyebrow before noticing she was holding a small piece of paper and commented “If you have a message, I can pass it on.”

“No, it's not-”

“Let's have a look at that.”

In spite of verbal resistance, Suzaku swiped the paper with his typical speed, bringing it into view before he felt his stomach rise up a second time. He felt a quiver in his hands as he looked back up, furious and steadied. He could barely believe what he had just seen.
“Kallen… Where did this…”

She grabbed his wrist with surprising force, as he looked for some semblance of shame or concern in her eyes. Instead, all he saw was anger that matched his own, unguarded and unveiled.

“A man named Mao took him some time last night. You want him back? Then you must help me, or he will surely perish.”

There was a ferocity in her tones, a steepness of tone that seemed several octaves beyond what had once seemed possible for a girl like her, however with the image of Lelouch, bound in a chair, blindfolded, and badly beaten in her possession, he was quickly realising there was far more to Stadtfeld than he had first envisioned. It was a startling transition, and one that briefly silenced him, before he nodded. It was interesting how she had flipped the responsibilities had flipped, and now he was answering her questions.

“What needs to be done?”

She looked at him clearly as if examining him, and commented “First, we need to leave the Campus.”
Moments later, the drinks slid across the desk, and a single note made the return trip, as Kallen Kozuki took the steaming card cups over to the table she shared with Suzaku. She sat next to the window, briefly looking out over the empty, bright plaza, a ways into Tokyo’s hot afternoon. She sighed, before looking back at Suzaku and began to think as she sipped down her coffee. She could practically feel Suzaku glaring at her, however ultimately she had greater concerns than his scorn as she thought through the potential solutions. They were a ways away from the school, and could think freely. There was one hour and twenty minutes until their deadline, however hopefully they could save time by planning ahead.

“So what are we doing here then?”

Kallen paused to finish the drink before answering in monotone “We are thinking of a plan while enjoying some delicious coffee.”

Her voice was dissonant from her worried thoughts, however even under a mask, Zero had given her plenty practise at an effective poker face. She had projected her voice and presence through fierce will and fiery rhetoric, uniting the rebel elements to bring the fight to Britannia, and now Lelouch, the key, had been captured by Mao. She could barely bare to think about it.

“And why, may I ask, could we not do either of these things in our apartment.”

“It's bugged. Here is safer, and we can sort out our approach.” she answered, before handing over the photograph. “Do you know where this was taken?”

Ideally, as much as possible ought to be figured out away from the Campus, to avoid giving Mao warning. Knowing him, he would not likely give an unsolvable puzzle. It was a shame she could not deploy the freshly minted Black Knights due to his preset rules, however Mao said nothing about Suzaku, and had not disallowed his use.

This was his big mistake. Kallen, and by extension Mao, had known what affect kidnapping Lelouch would have. Both Geass users also knew at least as of yesterday that Lelouch and Suzaku were close, however until they had been revealed to be Yuaiikai, the extent to which they were close could not have been guessed at. Add in the fact that Mao must surely have been lying in wait
of Lelouch before they had arrived back from the Convention, and one could thus presume his plan had been executed before he had any knowledge of how critical Suzaku or Ohgi would be to any rescue effort, hence he had not mentioned them in his hostage call.

This would prove his undoing, as Suzaku quickly responded “I recognise it. It's an old sewer exit near the bottom of the school. Lelouch hid there when-”

Suzaku stopped mid sentence, awakening Kallens eyebrow. It was implied from that he was hiding from something, and Suzaku’s hesitation told her it probably wasn't Milly he had been hiding from. Still, she could always ask later; they were on the clock.

“That's fine. You know the way?”

“Yes” he nodded, as Kallen replied “Excellent. Is there anyone you trust to help get him?”

After a brief pause, Suzaku nodded, before Kallen explained “Give them directions to the room, without either mentioning where they are going, at least until they arrive, or why. Lie if necessary.”

She considered suggesting this third party bring Kusakabe’s pistol, however that would give her away. Suzaku looked rightfully outraged, before Kallen silenced him. “We don't know what Mao does and doesn't know. We need to maintain secrecy until we have him caught. I'm sorry.”

He looked royally cross, however he dutifully dialled up a number on his mobile, beginning his terse discussion with “Sayako, I need your help. I can explain later, but follow these instructions.”

Kallen nodded approval, before making a call of her own.

“C.C? I need you to go get something, and stand watch for further instructions.”

After explaining the task to the unreadable witch, she hung up and returned her attention to Suzaku, who was awaiting updates from his maid, who was performing her task with great diligence. Based on Suzaku's brief explanation of Sayako's abilities and traits, she could hardly envision a more ideal person for the task. Loyal to the end, fiercely determined, and unquestioning. She was even Japanese. Kallen briefly considered recruiting her as her spy in Yuaiikai, however she quickly dismissed the idea. She was loyal to the men, not the cause.

“She's just reached the last hall.” Suzaku read from his text alert, before pausing. “There's a… turret on the roof.”

“Eh?”

“A… a turret, machine gun. It's set to fire.”

Kallen paused. Well that was certainly evidence enough they were on the right track, however it would be an issue for Sayako. That said, this did not fit with Mao’s modus operandi. Mao was more into mind games, and so he would have only placed the turret there if his game was something else entirely. It was like in a game, a wall at the end of a maze that told the player to turn back, that the real end was elsewhere. Did Mao want them to meet at a second location, with Lelouch safely out of the way? It certainly seemed that way, though she couldn’t see where the next step lay.

“Call your maid off.” Kallen moaned absentmindedly. “There's no need to-”

“Um..”
Kallen looked up. “Mm?”

Suzaku appeared to go into a brief pause, as if mentally confirming what he was about to say before clearing his throat and explaining slowly “It appears, from this preliminary text, that Sayako has in fact ran past the machine gun and into the next room.”

Well that was an alternative, Kallen thought, and was briefly stunned into silence. She wondered whether this maid a ninja or something equally absurd, before focusing. “Did she say what she’s seeing?”

“Next text…” Suzaku said, frowning into the small screen. “Ho… she sees him, she's there. Apparently, he's strapped up to several high explosives.”

At that moment, Kallen's phone rang. She fumbled to pick it up, however it wasn't giving notices. She frowned, before realising.

Mao was calling her on her ‘Zero’ phone.

She kept it in her inside coat pocket, a small brick which weighed next to nothing, and had about as many functions. It was closer to a shortwave radio than a phone. It would surely raise questions in Suzaku’s mind, an effect she had no doubt was intended on Mao’s part. Perhaps a little preemptive vengeance.

Either way, she slowly drew out the cardlike device and held it to her ear, sending Suzaku’s eyebrows into another fit of furrowing as he raised his coffee mug. She looked him dead in the eye as she answered.

“Mao.”

Suzaku choked on his drink as the mad Chinese mind reader laughed “Indeed, it's me, and while I must say I felt cheated, it's nothing compared to the shame you must feel in sending a little old maid down to rescue Lelouch, Zero.”

Ignoring the jab to avoid alerting Suzaku, she countered “Caution has never hurt anyone, and neither has a strict interpretation of the rules. I did nothing wrong.”

He laughed again. “Harsh! And oh Lord, unexpected! Spontaneous! Fresh! Truly wonderful. Alas, all good things must come to an end.”

“Where are you?”

“I'm feeling a little… sinful today, so I've gone up to the Chapel for redemption. I'm hoping for a little angel to be arriving, though I can imagine a dance with the devil to be a tad feisty, if predictable. I hope either one arrives before my time is up.”

Ignoring the halfway attempts at puns, she hung up, and grabbed a pad of ringed paper and began to scribble while Suzaku got in contact with Sayako, gathering details.

“She says he looks to have no serious harm, but doesn’t want to move him.”

As Kallen continued to write, she nodded in confirmation, before handing over the stack of cards and pausing. She had never, even in her darkest moments of Machiavellianism, considered what she was about to do. After inspiring her, she considered Suzaku and Lelouch allies, and wanted to win them over through words, and not this. It would be unthinkable, emotionally unfathomable. It was the sort of move that could only be rationalised through the most stringent ‘good of the many’
approach, which Kallen did not inherently subscribe to.

Ultimately, it could be the one thing Mao did not expect.

She looked up, and spoke authoritatively, as her Geass flashed into life.

“These are your instructions. You are to follow them to the letter, not reading ahead until you have completed your task before. You will begin immediately.”

As Suzaku stood up to leave, Kallen whipped out a pocket mirror, and hoped this would work.

Kallen stared down at the chessboard in front of her in despair. Mao had seen everything, and even in her incompetence at the game, playing wildcards and throwing everything at the wall, Mao had never faltered from his easy smile. She had always detested the game for ignoring the human element of combat, however even now-

“I’m hardly surprised you hate it, you’re worse than an infant! This is hardly fitting, your idol would be so disappointed in you. He’s rather good at chess, you know. Not that he’ll be around to learn about it of course.”

-she was being kicked from one end of the board to the other. Why was she doing this? What was the damn plan? It was such a stupid idea to try play Mao’s stupid game. She wasn’t sure whether to kick him or herself. She could barely think of a move that could turn her situation around, which would be redundant anyway. She had to-

BEEP BEEP. BEEP BEEP.

Kallen’s body visibly jerked as the man in front of her spoke up.

“You’re out of time. From now on you’ll make a move every twenty seconds.”

She didn’t fully understand why he had said that, whether he was referencing something, however it succeeded in stressing her out further, jumbling her thoughts to screaming loudness.

“Caicing hell…”

As she swore, suddenly the volume was pierced by the sound of shattering glass from above, as her mind flew about the place in confusion and stress, as she saw a flash soar through her vision and down to the floor, as the sight of Suzaku Kururugi grew clear, his face filled with fury, eyes glowing red and mouth turned down with pain, likely his shoulder giving slightly from the exertion. Kallen was shocked, having no recollection of giving him instructions.

Mao was also surprised, nearly falling over himself as Suzaku stepped up and slugg ed him hard, a harsh thwack echoing throughout the chapel as Kallen stumbled up, looking on while Mao recovered, reaching through Suzaku’s mind for something, anything, to dissuade him. After a moment of crawling away, he cried out “Kallen knows about Yuaikai! Yuaikai!”

Kallen froze in terror, however bizarrely, Suzaku was not moved, going on to slam his knuckles down onto Mao’s forehead and knocking him out, before catching his breath and pulling out his phone with a clam serenity that was completely dissonant from the scene at hand. He dialled a number before reading off a cue card “Mao is unconscious, release Lelouch slowly and carefully.”

With that, he hung up, and walked over to Kallen, looking down at her emotionlessly, as she finally saw what was happening looking into his glazed over eyes. Suzaku had been Geassed, and probably by her, which meant, given that she couldn’t remember-
“Check your phone pocket.”

Knowing what she would find, she did as she was told, pulling out her pocket mirror and staring into her own gaze, as her memories came rushing back.

“I should go to the hospital, get some rest.” Suzaku commented, speaking out his final command.


Lelouch frowned as his fragile eyes were finally restored to the light of the dim sewer, his vision briefly stolen in a rush of white light as he grasped at his surroundings. A woman, green haired and silent, was untying him from Mao’s chair, not making eye contact as she broke the cords, allowing him to stand, before his weak, stiff legs gave way and he crumpled to the floor, held up by his elbows. The green haired girl looked down at Lelouch, who was deep in thought.

Said thoughts were scattered. It flitted from Mao, to his intentions, to Kallen, to Zero, to the girl. What connection did she have to Zero? After a moment’s chaotic thought, his mind eventually settled, as he finally made the connection. This woman was the one he found in the capsule, who had been a bundle of sarcasm and cynical annoyance. She had also known his name, if only his first name. He turned around, and pointed a tired, accusing finger at her, harshly whispering “You.”

“Oh, you do remember me. I’m flattered.”

Flabbergasted, his hand fell in defeat, once again unable to respond to the casual, nonchalant attitude the woman carried around. Attempting to reach for one more answer, he asked “Are you with Zero? With Kallen?”

She shrugged, before cheekily responding “Ask her yourself.”

Lelouch turned on his hips, now lying upwards like a Roman eating dinner as he looked upon Kallen, who at once looked just as normal, and yet so terrifyingly different with context and new knowledge. He hauled himself up, and marched over to her, barely carrying himself on much else other than willpower.

“Why.” he hissed, injecting venom into his voice with little effort. “Why you?”

Kallen looked at him with a sort of pity “Both Mao and I told you why. I want to destroy Britannia, and free the Japanese. I told you at the Sakura tree, I told you at the hotel, and Mao told you over the phone. Ultimately, it is not a complex issue at all. They only speak the language of violence, and we are shouting. You on the other hand, are a silent enigma.”

Lelouch snarled “I agree, there is little complexity to the ideals of terrorists and violent thugs, dressing themselves up as Knights while working against the interests of those they would protect!”

“It is better than wearing suits to Occupy!” Kallen roared in return. “The Britannians will never compromise, negotiate, discuss! Look at their leaders; Would the Emperor yield? Would Cornelia ever attempt to negotiate?”

“No, they would use the font that has writ their victories from the nation's entre existence! They’ve won wars for centuries, what makes you think you’re different? We have to win the Long War, bring people over before we can think of winning a battle. Wasting our efforts running against the wall will bring all of us to ruin!”
“What will bring us to ruin, Lamperouge, is not demonstrating what they did was unacceptable! They will never learn without cost!”

“If that sort of vengeful, selfish thinking is your priority, you disgust me far more than the Britannians ever could.”

Kallen looked set to explode as she hissed “I don’t find that hard to imagine, you were awfully chummy with the Princess at the Hotel, and you shot at Kusakabe first. You also seem to be personally profiting pretty well off your damn Ponzi scheme! Can you not see damn well that we need to do this? What happened to audacity, to strength, to being an inspiration? What happened to proactivity? You sit in your ivory tower, not seeing what I am doing needs to be done, wasting your talents and energies on the Bridge to Nowhere! Join me, and with your organising talents we can be rid of their horrid regime, or be forgotten, thrown to the dustbin of history!!!”

Her voice had grown to a hoarse roar, as Lelouch sat back, in awe of her stunning display.

‘That’s it... ’ he thought, halfway to a grin out of sheer awe. ‘That’s Zero, right there.’

However, he noted how Kallen had recalled the instances where he had, unintentionally, inspired her, had told her things as either advice or conversation that she had apparently taken to heart, how her voice had begun to break, and there was a tear forming in her eyes, neither anger nor sadness, but an emotional overwhelment that left him at the mercy of her disappointment in his pragmatic ways.

With this, he came to a horrifying realisation.

He had done this. He had led, indirectly, to Zero’s creation. A hole opened up in his chest as he looked up in horror. He had created his greatest obstacle, with the advice he had anonymously given to Kallen, and unlike Britannia it was one that actually had some popular support, and was run at a grassroots level. While he had not made her kill Clovis, which truly would have sent him over the edge, her activities after the fact, raising the profile of Japanese terrorism, giving justification to the Purists to massacre-

Lelouch had to resist the urge to vomit. To top it off, she admired him, to the point he was good enough to serve as a kidnapping victim for her, and she wanted him to join her in her efforts to violently slog it out with the Britannians.

This time, he really did empty his stomach onto the floor, the horror overwhelming him. There wasn’t much in his stomach to choke up, not having eaten for some time, but his hollowness was much deeper.

By this point, Kallen looked apathetic in disappointment, which brought Lelouch some bitter joy. Perhaps it was petty, but spiting Zero seemed worth it, as sort of a doomed moral victor. He had very little expectation that he would survive. He knew she was more than willing to kill allies, and she knew he would sell her out in a heartbeat if he thought he could gain some advantage, and so it became less of an impasse and more of a cold calculation, something they both had the ability to do, however Kallen was ultimately the one whose job was easier.

“You will lose.”

Kallen looked away and whispered “You said that before. I see how it is.”

Lelouch paused and looked down, before he felt Kallen grab his shoulder and she whispered “Up. We need to leave.”
With little choice, he stood up, and following Kallens guidance, while his thoughts wandered again. Where was Suzaku? Was he already dead? No, it couldn’t be, he concluded; Kallen had only turned sour on Yuaikai based on what he’d just said, she couldn’t have known to kill Suzaku before arriving down here. Then, he was forced to wonder; where was he?

It certainly wasn’t the case that Lelouch himself could run away; even if Kallen was by some bizarre miracle of nature below his strength level, he was exhausted, starving, outnumbered and stiff, and was in a state of bitter resignation as Kallen led him away, up out and back into the side building. Lelouch wondered where they were going as he was led into the annexe and up to his room. He began to shiver. Was it going to be staged to make it look like suicide? Was she going to kill Nunnally? Lelouch’s breath grew rapid and unsteady as Kallen dropped him at the floor of his bedroom with a thump. He looked up at his assailant, terrified and limp.

“Please…” he whispered, as he began to cry.

Kallen looked disgusted, before she spoke down with fierce, fiery eyes.

“Kallen Kozüki commands you to forget.”

Chapter End Notes

Indeed she did, but don’t fret; I did not in fact just render this Chapter redundant with that last line, as while several insights Lelouch may have gained about Kallen are now lost to him, they are not lost to you. Character development and such. Also, Kallens views on Lelouch have now developed to the point which they are now near enemies, and while she doesn’t kill him, she makes sure her identity will stay a secret. Kallen now refusing to operate alongside Yuaikai is extremely important. Also, Lelouch may have remembered more than Kallen intended, for reasons attentive readers will grasp.

The thing is, I’m beginning to realise I’m getting optimistic with how much I’m going to be able to fit into Chapters, which I try to keep within stringent size constraints for consistency. I was meant to introduce a whole other plot point into this Chapter. While I will be able to slip it in next Chapter, the overarching point is that I will need to either tell the story more efficiently, or I will have to drop several themes and ideas from consideration, which brings me great disappointment.

Ultimately however, I enjoyed writing this Chapter, particularly Lelouch's breakdown, and I hope you enjoyed reading it too. I hope you’ll read on, in the next Chapter, Chapter Fifteen, The Plot Unravels. Until next time, be safe, try not to get kidnapped while I’m away, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Chapter Fifteen: The Plot Unravels

Arc Three: The Big Show

Opening: "Kikai Jikake no Cinderella" - Eliza

Jeremiah stood to attention, in front of Viceroy Cornelia's desk, ready to receive orders. It was extremely bizarre, he felt, to receive such sudden summons as the ones he had. He looked down as Cornelia shuffled through the papers that mounted her ornate desk.

"Margrave Gottwald." she addressed him, and he replied "Ma'am."

Cornelia scanned him with a single lazy eye, her tired, worn state betrayed by flaky dress and blackened eyes before addressing him formally with "Margrave, I have read your report into Ashford's activities, as well as the investigations of Parliament's investigative subcommittee, that there is more to this. Several companies based in and around Ashford had heavy collusions with Ashford KMF, and their stock history suggests a prior knowledge of the crash. Looking at other stocks this individual has invested, there are records of the purchasing of large amounts of gold, which may I remind you is Yuaikai's standard. Finally, tied to this individual is the reported use of a Royal Standard, from the late Clovis to be exact. I would appreciate it if you could investigate immediately, grabbing tapes and apprehending suspects at the included addresses and bring them back here for questioning."

"Is there a description of the suspect?"

She looked at him as if he were stupid, commenting "Our man's a stockbroker, and maybe even a student. Beyond his address, we know nothing. That is why tapes are needed before you move further."

And with that, he was off. It was a hurried meeting, and he felt as if Cornelia was rushing, however that was not for him to question. She had been growing aggressive in her search for Yuaikai, crawling through financial records to try and trace the pest, which had overtaken the Ghetto's. This investigation went hand in hand with the Ashford one, and Cornelia believe they were inextricably linked, even hinting they had the same masterminds. Jeremiah had his doubts, but was by no means against his task.

The Campus was quiet, being a bright Japanese weekend where the sun extended on beyond all view, dotted with a few pale clouds. Jeremiah explored the facilities, seeing the main hall and generally looking through the area before finally heading towards the Principal's Office on his grand tour, garnering feigned attention for moments at a time as he passed through, observing and yet not being observed. Within a few minutes slow meandering, Jeremiah arrived within the cheap grandiose that was the Principal's quarter. While there was no arrest warrant, as Margrave he had investigative privileges, as well as the Princess' backing.

It proved a simple matter, as Reuben Ashford in his age was not a man of strong will, handing over all tapes as soon as he asked. Reuben looked incredibly sullen, as if he had received his death
orders, which Jeremiah supposed may not be far from the truth if Cornelia's guess was correct. Taking the tapes, Jeremiah sat in the side room, began at three days ago, and began to flick through the sections where people occupied the screens, and he got his first glimpse of the suspects. Two men, of college age, one Britannian, one Japanese, talking as they got dressed, likely for some special occasion. Both teens looked bizarrely familiar, which fascinated him as he listened in, the Japanese man speaking first in his native language, followed by a reply that was similarly in Japanese.

"Speaking of, how's your end of the project going?"

"All right. It's going slow, but that's what happens when you want to avoid fraud laws."

As he sat up and watched their confession with rapt attention, complete with sound, he failed to note Reuben, who had been looking at the tapes over his shoulder, sending a text before leaving, anxious and hurried as he hastily grabbed keys, money, and other critical items that should have alerted him to the fact Reuben was not planning on coming back.

Beep beep.

On the topic of people were distracted from the obvious, Suzaku ignored the text alert, likely spam, as he tried to understand what Lelouch had just told him.

"You don't remember what Mao said?"

Lelouch shook his head, before elaborating "I remember him knocking me out, and the fact he said something, but the details…"

Suzaku paused, and thought. This whole discussion had begun when Suzaku asked in passing what happened to Lelouch while he was captured, before he had said he didn't remember. Further exploration revealed there was a wealth of things Lelouch had forgotten, and there were several gaps in Suzaku's memory to boot. Sayako had said that she remembered finding Lelouch in the cellar and being told to wait, but not much after that.

"And afterwards?"

Lelouch shrugged. "It's all a mess until I woke up in my bed, head pounding. You rescued me, do you not have any more?"

Suzaku put a finger on his chin, slowly reciting his memories. "It's like I've said, we were discussing what to do, we'd had Sayako go down to check on you, and then Mao called Kallen. After that, it goes fuzzy, but not an a weird way. It's… just unclear, like it was a while ago."

"Did we ever find out why? He kidnapped me, I mean."

"Kallen said it was blackmail for her fortune."

"And he picked me?"

"Beggars can't be choosers."

Lelouch frowned and looked downwards, deep in thought to which Suzaku could lay no blame. It was a bizarre scenario to say the least. The pair sat in silence for some time, each trying to see what was missing from their summaries, before Lelouch spoke up.
"So who brought me to the room?"

"It can't have been me, I was in hospital when I came to." Suzaku answered, remembering the point his memory cleared up. It was for his arm brace, which had broken somehow while he was in his amnesiac state. "So it was Kallen."

"Excellent." Lelouch suddenly smiled, leaping across to his desk before reaching into the bottom drawer and pulling out a small processor, plugging it into his laptop.

"So that's where you keep your CCTV feed."

"Hush now Suzaku." Lelouch chirped. "You know I'll move it before you can try anything."

He had a point, so Suzaku stopped talking and watched. It took some time to find the timestamp, being earlier than Suzaku assumed and far later than Lelouch thought, before they finally settled on the moment Lelouch entered the room. It was obvious that Lelouch was going to be under significant duress at this time, however Suzaku instantly noted his body language was wrong. He wasn't just unsteady, he was pale, terrified, and all but shivering.

Lelouch hit play, and the framed Lelouch moved forward into the room, prodded along by Kallen, who was in a state of visible cold fury as she followed him into the room. She wasn't carrying him as much as kicking him in disdainfully. This struck Suzaku as beyond suspicious, and confirmed to him that something was up with Kallen. A flash aside to Lelouch confirmed they shared this suspicion, as they hit the wham line.

"Please…"

"Kallen Kozuki commands you to forget. You are not to remember what we discussed, my identity, or anything compromising."

"What the hell?"

The last comment was not on the tape, however it was Suzaku's reaction to the sight of a teenage girl literally brainwashing his friend. Lelouch was similarly shocked, though Suzaku suspected it was more in surprise at his own sorry state. This escalated things beyond all comprehension, to some manner of Eldritch superpower. Suzaku felt suddenly out of his depth, and scared.

"Turn it off."

The command came from Lelouch, and Suzaku happily obliged, as Lelouch stared intensely at his desk, as if it held the answer to his questions. Suzaku understood he was rightly horrified at the fact his brain had been meddled with, as he slowly realised his own head likely hadn't got off scot free. This was greater and more improbable than anything they had ever imagined, and neither rebel knew what to do with this information.

Shivering, Lelouch slowly whispered "I'm… going to go get some coffee.", before standing to walk over, shaking like a leaf as he floated uncertainly down the hall and out of Suzaku' sight. The Japanese teen silently swore, before he turned off the laptop, not sure where to begin. How did one address this? Did one confront Kallen, and suffer further mind alteration? Did one simply ignore it? Or ought one to descend into paranoia?

Before he could reach a conclusion, a loud bang, accented by the sound of splintering, erupted from the hall, the crackling and fire like sparks piercing his hearing, before a second bang, and a third.

Someone was kicking in the door.
Immediately after he regained his wits, Suzaku leapt across the room, sending sudden streaks of pain into his deadened shoulder, still in its cast, ripping open his bottom drawer to find Kusakabe's gun that was no longer there.

Swearing out loud this time, he vaulted the bed before running through the door frame and bursting into the room. In the centre, he glimpsed the flash of a man hurrying across his vision towards Lelouch, backed into the corner with a butcher's knife. After a shocked moment, Suzaku recognised it as the tall, monstrous figure of Jeremiah Gottwald moving like a lion, large as life and twice as deadly as he leapt in like a swift eagle towards the back of the room, grabbing Lelouch by his lapel and lifting him up off his feet, before slamming him against the fridge.

"Suzaku!" Lelouch roared through a clenched neck and gritted teeth, to which Suzaku sprinted up behind Lelouch's assailant, leaping up as he approached and grabbing onto Jeremiah's neck, using his body weight to pull back, releasing Lelouch, who crumpled down, out of any breath or sense.

The plan was to hook around and pin Jeremiah as he spun on top. However, the plot fell apart as they fell back and Suzaku felt his grip weaken and his shoulder fall to pieces, as it became harder and harder to hold on. Jeremiah, likely sensing the weakening arm, grabbed a fixture above their heads and swung Suzaku off him in a single fluid motion, sending Suzaku flying into the oven, smashing his back before sinking to the floor.

"And there's the other." Jeremiah quietly chuckled, dusting off his gloves, before placing the heel of his foot on Lelouch's chest, who was trying to move. Suzaku could barely manage that, his back feeling shattered and all consuming. His vision was all but blinded by the pain, like fire water searing through his body. He felt thoroughly useless, as-

*Click.*

The room stopped, and even Jeremiah turned to the sound. It was a bizarrely loud turning of the lock, and in spite of this, the hall insofar as Suzaku could see was empty. Jeremiah, intrigued, paused a moment to kick Lelouch to keep him down before moving down to investigate.

Suzaku watched from a sideways angle as Jeremiah stepped slowly down the hall, looking side to side, as he stepped outside the room.

Then, there was a massive, brassy thwack, before Jeremiah's limp body fell back into view. It took Suzaku several moments to catch onto what happened, as he cried out in joy.

"Sayako!"

The maid stepped out indignantly, gripping a Kunai from the wrong end, the hilt of which she had used to knock Jeremiah out cold. She paused to sneer, before coming over to help the boys, grabbing Suzaku and sitting him up against a chair.

"Reuben warned me. Ohgi's coming, we need to get ready to go."

Suzaku didn't protest as Lelouch took slowly to his feet, moving about to regain stability as he looked over the passed out figure. "Gottwald." he chuckled mirthlessly, before going inside. Suzaku, nonplussed, asked finally "What's going on?"

"We can't stay here." she explained. "At least, us in this apartment. They'll know something's up the moment Jeremiah doesn't come back. We're going to move into Ohgi's bankhouse for now."

"What about the man himself? We can't just leave him?"
Lelouch walked back in, carrying a slim case which he placed inside a larger travel bag, asking "Where's your gun?"

"My what?"

Lelouch frowned, and explained to his confused colleague "Your gun, from Kusakabe."

"It's gone."

Lelouch looked at him as if he were stupid. "What do you mean it's gone? Did it grow legs?" It took him a few moments before he realised exactly who had it, at which point he quietly hissed "Bit…"

"Unimportant." Sayako commented. "We can just leave him here, he won't have our details to track us. For now, we need to go." She moved back into the utility room, and fetched several mops and buckets of cleanser, dumping them in the middle of the kitchen. Suzaku looked down at the huge pile of utensils and chemicals, and gave a simple, plain look at Sayako that screamed 'The hell do you want me to do?'

Sayako quirked a curious eyebrow sarcastically adding "We need to nuke this place with bleach, but that stuff's not going to leap onto the walls."

Lelouch silently stepped out of the room to gather his things, to whom Suzaku shot daggers into the back of. Speaking of backs, he felt his move with a crunch, as he suddenly realised he may be in far more serious a condition than he initially thought.

Seeing it, Sayako paused her persecution to sigh, and ease off. "I suppose the man did hurt you, mm? Certainly not what you ought to be doing with your shoulder. Ohgi'll be up in a moment to help out, try and ease your back. We'll have to do a far amount of walking."

Enjoying his brief solace, he sat down and enjoyed Lelouch's own daggers as he reentered the room and saw his Japanese friend lounging, before Nunnally came in from the hall, not fully understanding what was going on.

"Suzaku? Brother? Are you okay?"

"Fine, Nunnally…" Suzaku chuckled through the pain, on and off with his chest. The crippled girl wheeled herself in, and sighed. Suzaku felt slightly bad for her, given that they'd scared the life out of her from the Convention, him being shot, and Lelouch being kidnapped. Her face was a book, and it read of betrayal, that they had promised her their peaceful way would be safe, only for them to be in the course of danger. However, she eased, and simply asked, smiling softly "What have you two gotten yourselves into now?"

Suzaku sighed and shook his head as Lelouch passed by yet again, grabbing a mop and commenting "For a pacifist, you really can't keep out of fights, mm?"

It was intended as a joke, however as Suzaku reflected, he realised that Lelouch was absolutely right. He had asked for Kusakabe's guns, had gone for it again when Jeremiah approached, and gone one to get his ass handed to him. Beyond the embarrassing factor, his eagerness to grab a defensive weapon over words now that he reflected on it surprised even him. He felt that violence outside of self defence, or to achieve an objective, was morally wrong, and that one must, by definition, attempt pacifism. In spite of this, he was never far from a firearm. By contrast, his friend who had no qualms on principle with blowing his own brothers face off, was still more consistent on his stance.
It reminded him of the discussion they'd had after Suzaku accidentally summoned Zero down to Saitama, when Lelouch observed that perhaps Lelouch's more conscious decision to go by passive resistance led him to live by it more than Suzaku's natural assumption, in a sort of 'zeal of the converted'. This didn't give him much solace.

He groaned as he stood up, leaning on his knees with the heels of his hands to draw himself up, seizing the attention of both Lelouch and Sayako, as he swung his arm forward and grabbed a mop.

He'd not let that happen again.

Jeremiah Gottwald woke to a pounding headache and a sickly sweet scent. His vision was blurred, and his hands felt like they were about to fall off at the wrist. He shook his head, and attempted to regain awareness of his surroundings as he quickly realised things had gone badly wrong.

He was on his side, looking at a wall, lined with a white wooden skirting board and peach patterning up beyond his sight. Attempting to move, he realised he had been tied up. Furious, Jeremiah roared out, and kicked, angrily attempting to breach his bonds to no avail. Lashing out, he squirmed under his constraint, only wasting energy as his mind grew furious at the prospects of his targets escape, which only cycled him in further into a fit of rage.

Ultimately, it was that very same frustration that saved him, as when a female student eventually passed by the small hallway, he was certainly hard to miss, lying on the floor and screaming his head off. After a moment of confused shock, she ran off to get a blade to untie him, rapidly freeing him.

He stood up, shaking his sleeping muscles to restore them to aching life, before he burst into the suspects room through the battered, broken door, forcing his way into the room and looking around. At first, he was confused, as the room had been stripped bare, with paint stripping and white stains purged into the sides of surfaces and the constant smell of pure bleach. After a moment of searching, the truth final dawned on him.

"Damnit!" he shouted, kicking a hole into one of the few remaining cabinets before searching around for some clue for where the two men had gone. Taking a brief moment to peek out at the windows, painting a picture of a rich, bright night, stained an off yellow by the powerful moon. Given that it was just past midday when he arrived, they could be anywhere. He slammed his foot into the floorboards, before sprinting out to the hall towards the corded phone, an old antiquity but it would do.

Flying through the digits, he endured the operator inquiring into his identity, taking forever, a day, and considerable shouting to patch him through. Finally, he reached Darlton, who after realising the deranged madman on the far end was Jeremiah, put him on with Cornelia.

"Cornelia, thank-"

"Gottwald! Where the hell have you been?"

Jeremiah paused at her sharp, furious tone, beyond simple anger at his tardiness, before explaining, a little slower than he had been with Darlton "I found the men behind LL&S, two college students, but a third one got me from behind and knocked me out. They're gone, they're all gone without a damn trace."

Cornelia, still angry, was heard roaring down the line "Well we've found them! Get back here right now!"
Jeremiah paused again, finally asking "What's happened?"

"Your suspects are broadcasting their revolutionary ideas live on radio as we speak!"

Chapter End Notes

But what are they saying? And who's saying it? We'll see.

This Chapter represents transition in two key areas for our characters. For the YuaiKai at large, this Chapter marks a transition away from how the Revolution was run up to this point, at an arm's length from a College dormitory miles away from the ghettos, to a more direct, involved revolution, with our characters going native and getting ever closer to the action as the pressure from above increases. The Britannians are hot on YuaiKai's heels, but YuaiKai can more than combat it. In this sense, this Chapter is the halfway point of R1. Stay tuned.

Secondly, we ought to look at the progress in character on an individual level. Jeremiah, as an agent of the government, is introduced, and will be used as a framing device to display the feeling among the Britannian soldiers. We learned a bit about Lelouch and his thought process, given that I highly doubt he'd take well to being Geassed, especially not knowing all the details. However, as you may have guessed, the biggest developments came for Suzaku. While the fight wasn't the Suzaku you may have expected, he had been shot in the shoulder less than two days before, and combat isn't the focus. You can take Suzaku's curb stomp as a sign of that.

What was far more interesting to write is the escalation of Suzaku's zealotry. When I got started, I was very interested in the idea of the contrast between Lelouch and Suzaku, with regards to how malleable their ethics are. While it was always portrayed that Lelouch was the ultimate politician, a shapeshifting Machiavellian pragmatist, and that Suzaku was the Paragon. However, while I justified that characterization for Lelouch's ideas in how he reached them, I have found the rationalisation for Suzaku to reach the idea that "violence is bad", to the point it is central to his morality lacking. Up to this point, it has of course been on the agenda, but even he acknowledges he has swayed. In this Chapter, I addressed how he will fully move towards implementing this Paragonic approach on a fully zealous level akin to Lelouch.

Make sure to tell me what you think of this interpretation, and be sure to read on to Chapter 16 of For Hearts And Minds, The Wrong Games. See you then, be safe, don't break into people's apartments, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Chapter Sixteen: The Wrong Games

Arc Four: Discourses with the Chairman

Opening: “Nightmare Parade” - Fake Type

“Welcome, I’m sorry, it’s not in the best of states. You did come on short notice.” Ohgi apologised, holding open the door to his bankhouse to allow Nunnally’s wheelchair through, before letting it go to move across the room to open the brown curtain, exposing the steel gated windows forming a chequered shadow onto the dark wood floor. The place would do for a hideout for now, as while it was a hub of activity for the Japanese in the area, it was unknown to outsiders. Ohgi had been busy safeguarding the place, being the Yen’s equivalent of a Central Bank, even hiring a pair of armed guards in the opposite building. Lelouch for one felt he had been doing a commendable job, in both managing the two story building in the heart of the ghetto with the diligence Lelouch had expected of him, and managing the money at the ground level. Yuaikai under his practical stewardship had become a local economic power, all but self sufficient with limited Chinese importations. Ohgi was no fighter, but he was an astounding organiser.

And the fruits of his labours were visible. On the way down to the ghetto, Lelouch couldn’t help but note the men working on their friends’ houses, serving as aids and marketers, and going out of their way to trade and make money. The world was a circle, and Lelouch grinned at how vibrant it had become. It still had the grim dirty aesthetic of poverty, but it was busy, excited, and people were out and moving rather than suffering in silence. It had the aesthetic of hope, even in its primal state. Now that the area was flooded with money, more people could hire others, meaning more people could spend money.

This was The Long War, and it was why Britannia would lose. Ultimately, the only hope Britannia had to retain its colonies relied on the same principle that had applied since countries existed as a concept; If you occupy a place, treat its citizens better than resistance forces, or they will rebel. It really was that simple, and yet the Emperor seemed willfully ignorant of the fact his policies would result in Yuaikai gaining the loyalty of the people, and thus would replace him. Britannia had not only failed to improve the lives of the Japanese to pacify them, it actively suppressed them based on ethnicity.

It was as if Charles actively sought out instability, or perhaps he simply didn’t care about the Home Islands at all, as if his priorities were not not even worldly. After all, he suppressed ethnicities across his Empire at the cost of stability, hastily grabbing land and leaving behind with no infrastructure to maintain it, to the point Lelouch often looked twice at the state of his father's conquests to ensure he hadn’t missed any possible motive to the border gore his father had created. Lelouch couldn’t even to begin to comprehend what motives lay before his father's bizarre mind. It wouldn’t take much, and yet they had refused even olive branches, allowing Ohgi to manage a flourishing economy.

Lelouch himself was far less sure about his own work of late, compared to Ohgi’s. While he had
wrapped up most of the loose ends on the digital front to the point he could leave it all behind, the fact remains that the forces of Britannia had come tantalisingly close to ending it, escaping only the skin of his teeth, and the end of a kunai.

Still, it was far too close a call, and while he fretted, he had already compartmentalised himself towards seeking a solution as he moved towards the sink to wash his hands, asking over his shoulder to Ohgi “Are you set up to broadcast?”

“Aye.”

Clearing off the filth, he turned back properly, leaning against the metal sink holding his arms a ways apart behind him, letting his breath out as he watched the scene. Sayako and Ohgi were helping Nunnally settle in, with the kind of gentleness that reminded him that Ohgi had once been a teacher. He would have made a great principal, and would go on to make an excellent First Minister.

This was Britannia’s true crime. Instead of teaching others, Ohgi was dwelling in a boarded up house keeping half an eye on a store of gold. Similarly, instead of enjoying their lives, his former gang was now fighting violently across the ghettos.

Ultimately, it all came back to the fact Britannia ran the country on a governmental level by all but in absentia, creating the conflict. In truth, it wasn’t real. All it was was a mental trick, a spook, a separation between the Britannians and Japanese perpetuated by the perception that the Britannians were occupiers, and while they were, the occupation was skin deep. The Yen’s independence proved that. The people just needed a push to realise it.

His fingers tore into the table as his temper flared. He had been out of control of this situation long enough. He couldn’t fire a gun at the Britannian Empire, but he could certainly fire a shot across the bow. He needed to show that it was possible to just give Britannia the two fingers and go on with life. But, what would such a society need? A Dual Government, operating beyond Britannian law, which governs without its consent? One that could govern, and with Yuai Kai’s guiding hand, outpace and outshine Britannias?

That, he knew, would annoy the Emperor to no end. The self-deterministic Social Darwinist would positively boil over at the very idea of a functioning Japanese Government he couldn’t apprehend, even in spirit.

By this point, he had forgotten Kallen and that mystery in his excitement, leaping forward and sprinting upstairs to his new study, where he’d dumped his refill pads of notes and speeches written in his snaky, thin penmanship with a new vigor, excited to get going with the next stage of his plans. He could hear a hush from the others at the sight of him moving with such zeal. With his sheets clutched like a precious purse, he flung it down in front of the radio set and leaned in.

“What are you doing Lelouch?”

Lelouch paused in his mania, catching his breath before explaining “We’re going onto Phase 3.”

“Already?”

Lelouch, in the best of moods, asked “Why wait?” Suzaku made a face, before sighing. “One misstep, and I will cut you off.”

Lelouch rubbed his hands in glee, before sitting down and clearing his throat, and silently thinking ‘Charles, this is how I take my vengeance.’
“You’re live, Lelouch.”

Sipping a glass of clear water, Lelouch sat and pressed the button to begin to speak, with clear Japanese that was received by a large portion of the ghetto, and many Japanese aside. It was the first address, and so he made an effort to sound somewhat formal and proper, while injecting a populist ferocity into his tone, deep from his throat, beginning his speech with the rallying cry that would grab the nation’s attention.

“Men, and women of the as yet unrealised State of Japan!”

“Men, and women of the as yet unrealised State of Japan!”

Euphemia sat up in her bed as the radio crackled into life. Since meeting Lelouch and Suzaku several days earlier, they had maintained on and off communication, as they had gained insight into each others lives, and she had been told to look out for the broadcast where he would proclaim a Provisional Government for the Republic of Japan. While she was torn, she had been taken in by his drive for being ethical, and wanting to help the suffering people. She turned up the radio, her eyes widening at Lelouch’s sharp, aggressive Japanese tones crackling through the radio.

“For seven years, our nation has languished from our hearts, and in the light of distractions from the Empire of Britannia, our ideals and our hopes have vanished from view, our culture actively suppressed by our own reluctance to address the fact that our land has been ruled and dominated by a foreign power, uninterested in our affairs and sucking at our natural resources. I am Akira, of Yuuikai, and on this day, the 6th of June 2017, I, as acting Minister for Finance and on behalf of the new Provisional Government, the people of Japan, and oppressed minorities across the vast reach of Charles Zi Britannia’s thugs, do proclaim the Republic of Japan as the true heirs of these lands!”

Excited at the voice of her brother declaring Japanese independence, his harsh tones moderated in a stately, yet still angry voice, she thought about what he was saying. It was clear what Lelouch’s, or Akira’s position was not only the liberation of Japan, but the emancipation of the individual. This was markedly different from the rhetoric of the Black Knights, who focused on punishing the guilty, rather than helping the innocent in non military ways. It was a police force against a hospital. Euphemia was also intrigued by the fact that he had relegated himself to Minister for Finance. She listened on, as she realised there was a rush outside her room of people heading towards the control room.

“This new nation, inheriting the responsibilities of our forefathers, shall with the greatest efforts by all within its Government represent, aid, and support all within its society, whether trapped within the depths of poverty, paralysed within the binding grips of racial oppression, or bound by the unlawful prisons of a tyrant’s whims. This Government shall speak for all of us, rather than the few, whether you are Japanese, a Britannian, or any others so long as they hold honour in their hearts and openness in their minds. We have seen the Yen make strides to this effect, as individuals now may seek a functioning economic life, and can grow stable lives to be the best they can, however these efforts are useless unless they may be represented within the principles of a Secular Democratic Republic!”

Before Euphemia could consider this part, she heard Darlton call into her room from outside “Madam Euphemia, you ought to come up to the bridge.” Suspecting it was about the broadcast, she stood and followed, thinking about what Lelouch had said. She agreed wholeheartedly with all parts, though she personally found his angry tone hurtful in spite of herself. She hadn’t heard much about the Yen, however it seemed as if his key audience would. She also noted his inclusion of sympathetic Britannians as being interesting.
“You may have noticed the terms by which I refer to the thugs and henchmen of the fat slug that sits at Pendragon, that which he considers his Lords, his Government, that they believe represent him within our nation. This is not the case. They hold no authority, no right, to act as agents of the law on the Home Islands! All they have demonstrated is the ability to kill and destroy, and never to rectify or rebuild. They cite eugenics as they oppress their opposition from ever achieving the fair playing ground they claim to profess! They are the terrorists, killing for political ends, and the ends of their corporate interests!”

Euphemia finally made to the control room, headed by a furious Cornelia on the phone, shouting into her receiver “Your suspects are broadcasting their revolutionary ideas live on radio as we speak!”

Not hoping to cross her, she retired to the back corner of the room and continued listening, as Lelouch continued his verbal indictment of Britannian occupation. Euphemia at her core agreed that the Elevens were being treated unfairly, but she knew Darlton, Guilford, Gottwald, and so on. They weren’t bad people, like terrorists were. She knew they felt they were doing good, and they had told her as such. With mixed feelings, she looked down as the crackling audio moved along.

“But this is the critical question. How shall this Provisional Government deal with these terrorists? There are some within our nation that feel it is their duty to take up arms and represent Justice, citing their mandate of the removal of this terrorist Britannian state, an occupying dictatorship, however frontier justice is no such thing. Ours is not a Government based on vengeance, as such a Reactionary Government would not seek to tackle the issues facing its citizens, instead seeking to exact pain on the innocent citizens of other lands. We must never be rash, nor act in rash fashions as a nation.”

Lelouch was lying. She disliked the word, but it was clear to Euphemia at the very least that Lelouch was just telling his audience a ball faced fib when claiming that his was not a Government based on vengeance. A significant contributing factor to the existence of this whole endeavour was vengeance, and to deny it was sophistry. As much as Euphemia liked to pretty up the truth, she knew Lelouch was not altruistic by nature. Still, while this compromised his attempt at vindicating his own ethics, his point against offensive Governments was matched only by his sneaky jab at the Black Knights with ‘some within our nation’.

This was also picked up by the other officials in the room, who held in chuckles before Darlton drily commented “Now if only we could get them to fight each other, we could just watch the apes finish each other off.”

Euphemia turned her head towards Darlton with a certain surprise. Perhaps Lelouch wasn’t wrong with his terrorist comments. Still, Cornelia silenced the room as Lelouch continued.

“No, our solution is to treat them with the respect they command, and that is none. Their purpose here is naked profit, and it is a purpose we shall not allow them to pursue, either in their raping of our lands, or our whoring ourselves out to their markets! Workers of Japan, turn your shovels and your forges to us, and reject the Imperialist! Secretaries of Japan, cease your calculations for their ledgers and deductions, and lend us your talents! Farmers of Japan, share with us your crops, and we will share with you a new, and bountiful freedom! We need not fire a shot, for while they intend to inhibit our freedom to congregate, no force on Earth or Heaven can inhibit our ability to give the two fingers to their Gods and Kings! We shall exile the Empire of Britannia by ceasing to partake in it! What if, one day, everyone in Britannia stopped going to work? Every soldier decided ‘Ah, sod it.’ and called it a day. Every miner deciding they had better things to do, or better people to serve? You wouldn’t have Britannia, you’d have one elderly fool in his house in North America shouting buffoonish racism! In going to work for them, you enable them.”
This was such a marked departure from traditional revolutionary doctrine the room audibly gasped in surprise. Schools of thought on how to break Japan free from Britannia usually devolved into a dichotomy between violent revolution and internal reformism. This Abstentionist idea had been tossed around amongst the Britannian intelligentsia and Communists, however it was often held that the Elevens would never organise well enough to realise it. There was fervent discussion, as Euphemia tried to ignore her brother making less than clean metaphors.

However, Lelouch was too clever for his own good, as Guilford pointed out “Did he just say ‘Give two fingers’? I think we’re dealing with a Britannian traitor.”

“One of Jeremiah’s suspects was a Britannian student.” Cornelia nodded in confirmation, before they allowed the broadcast to continue.

“The cause of our collective liberation lies on our collective shoulders, and all who seek these aims are your Brothers and Sisters regardless of birth! Today, we are all Citizens of Japan, united by our ideas, our passion, and our will, and not by this Imperial idea of ethnic supremacy. That is the path to ruin. We must stand together in this cause, not to destroy a society, but to create a better one.”

“There it is again.” Cornelia pointed, interrupting Akira’s dominance of the room. “He’s almost certainly Britannian, he has no intention of being caught up in his own attacks.”

For once, Euphemia agreed with her sister. Lelouch was very clearly carving into his proclamation his own ‘out’, his own lifeboat to escape the consequences of his rhetoric, though she wondered how well it would hold up if his true identity were discovered.

“And so, as the First Act of the Provisional Government of Japan, I do proclaim a General Strike, within which all non-Yuaikai companies are to be boycotted, and not partaken in. Do not attack those seeking to stop you, for you represent the best of all of us. An over reliance on violence has been the bane of this Republic’s cause since it was envisioned. We have built our own system, free of the Britannians disdain for the poor, and the Black Knights’ disdain for the peaceful, which will sustain you as these occupying forces come to realise they are not welcome! Rise up, workers of Japan! Rise up, oppressed peoples of Japan! Rise up, Citizens of Japan! We are free in all but the act of seizing it!”

The broadcast ended in a brief flurry of trumpets, before regular programming resumed. The room lay in silence as the officials looked between each other, and Euphemia quietly looked inward. On the whole, she was proud of her brother’s relative restraint and peaceful solution, however there were hints at the greater, more dubious depth behind his machinations. Lelouch was very obviously attempting to annoy, frustrate, and irk his father in particular, hitting at his core ideas and all but challenging him to an indirect battle of ideas. It was a sophisticated and overcomplicated ‘Come at me, bro’.

Of course, not knowing Akira’s connection to Charles, the speculation on the part of the others was far less on the why and far more on the how. The nature of the revolution was not discussed, as was to be expected, only how to address it. Guilford advised patience, that they ought to wait and see what happened.

“At the very least, wait to see if they assemble. Akira instructed non-violence, and so if worst comes to worst, all we’ll need is riot police. We don’t need to create martyrs.”

Darlton was having none of it however, roaring “Are we to allow this unacceptable act of defiance? From a Britannian national? We ought to find him and string him out on the front gates of Pendragon for this act of riling up the filth from the ghettos!”
“To what end? To spark an actual revolution?”

“As if they could do it. They’ve already disavowed the Black Knights, they have no military power.”

‘But that’s not the game they’re playing…’ Euphemia thought, mentally quoting what Lelouch had mentioned on multiple occasions, which to his credit Guilford picked up on, saying “If we overreact, that will give justification. Cornelia, we must not act. This individual has positioned himself very well. We should wait, and do what we can once the riots start and we have the upper hand in the eyes of the public.”

Cornelia had not said anything, however before Darlton could roar a generic, virulent response, she silenced him by raising her hand authoritatively. He immediately halted, as did Guilford, ceding the authority to the Princess.

“Guilford.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are to lead the police into overseeing the protest, withholding fire-”

“Your majesty!”

“Peace, Darlton.” she interrupted, remarkably calmly, before continuing “-withholding fire until such a time that we can determine how best to minimise the bad PR.”

Darlton visibly withdrew, as Guilford went to go and organise things, before the room calmed significantly from its prior hyper state. Euphemia, sensing her welcome expiring, snuck out of the room and returned to hers, slowly stepping down the hall to think before she heard Cornelia come up behind her, ruffling her hair and sitting her down by her bed, smiling as she spoke, caressing Euphemia’s pink hair.

“Euphie, it has been so long since we have talked, I’m sorry. I’ve just been so busy recently. I’m hoping we can deal with these Yuakai scum soon, and you can finally take over here.”

Euphemia’s stomach sunk, as she came to a realisation. All that which her family had talked about, their friends had talked about, when addressing the terrorists and political opposition, all had faces. Now she knew that she was talking about Lelouch, her own brother, and Suzaku, a paragon of virtue who had taken a literal bullet for her, she realised all those degenerates Cornelia had talked about had faces, were all people who had lives and virtues.

And the opposite was also true; the people she knew very well, who Euphemia knew as humans, acted in very inhumane ways in the dark.

Euphemia was now suddenly aware she felt very, very sick.

Chapter End Notes

Interesting meta moment; Lelouch chuckling the Britannians aren’t fighting him in the correct manner, due to not understanding what he seeks to achieve, while
simultaneously not understanding the game his father is playing in conquering very specific regions of the world very quickly. I’ll grant him that Lelouch is not currently updated on Geass-based metaphysics, but the irony is still supreme.

The speech itself, and Euphemia’s analysis of it are both reasonably self contained, and don’t require much elaboration, however the strategy of economic abstentionism is certainly one that has had interesting precedents in history, most notably Arthur Griffith of Sinn Fein fame, who posited that Irish MP’s should not go to their seats in Westminster, and achieve functional independence through an illegal Dáil. It didn’t really work, and several years of violence followed, but this was a large influence on the basic concept presented.

I'm not biased at all.

Incidentally, speaking of creator bias, I really like Guilford, and I’ll openly admit to Creator's Pet that may have influenced my decision to make him the voice of reason.

This Arc has been all about exposing the weaknesses of our hero’s, and having the exterior forces bite back at their attempts to fight against the Britannians. In Arcs 2 and 3, we saw Lelouch and Suzaku build their financial machine up, and taking the fight to their enemies. Here, they face the consequences, losing their health, their friends, their memories, and their homes. It is the greatest test to see how much a character can endure and keep going, and no one aboard the Yuaikai train is packing in yet.

To this effect, I hope you will join me in Arc 5, where we see actions turn to result as Area 11 halts to a standstill, beginning with Chapter 17, There Are No Neutrals There. This Chapter shall kick off the Birth Of A Nation Arc, following a brief Flashback. Be safe, and see you then. While I’m gone, don’t forget to listen to the radio from time to time, and rate and review!

~Eth0
Flashback

Kallen Kozuki held herself upright, her back firm and straight as she led her group towards Tokyo tower. Ever since Shinjuku, she had been wondering about the other men they had encountered, the ones that had saved Nagisa and had found C.C. She was very interested in hearing from them, as C.C’s notes were as ever vague, and yet led her to wonder who she was talking about. They approached the ruined building from the front, strolling past the Sakura trees littering the perimeter, spreading pure air through their lungs.

“Stop there!”

Thus began their deliberation, as she sent Nagisa over to the obstinate pair, before they conversed, Kallen thanking them for their help before an accented Japanese voice reached across the park, asking what it was they hoped to achieve. Surprised by this turn in the discussion, she snapped back, stating the obvious “We want freedom, we want Britannia out!”

The reply of the man, who Nagisa indicated was the Britannian, was rude at best, questioning what they thought was so different about them as a group that would take down Britannia, to which she responded “We have the backing of Japan. People don’t know it can be done. In a few successes, we can grow!”

They argued back and forth, before the Britannian declared “What do you imagine happens? Britannia implements harsher Military police, resulting in their continued mistreatment and misery. If you wish to engage in a race to the bottom at the expense of those you supposedly wish to protect, I must seriously question your motives.”

Kallen could only reel. No, no this was wrong, she knew it. The Britannians were here for resources, and if those resources could not be obtained due to a revolution, they would surely cow! Even if it meant the Britannians would harshen their policies, it would show the people their true face! This man was clearly a coward, akin to the Six Houses of Kyoto and their bureaucratic nonsense attempts to democratically restore Japan. She sneered, asking half sarcastically “Well what would you rather do?”

“Good question, you’re learning.”

Kallen paused now used to the man’s insolent tone but still surprised by his confidence. She was now paying serious attention, as the man continued “So, let’s reexamine. What motivates people? People like to have a better lot in life, more opportunity, and more representation. Your plan centres on retaking your country for your country’s own sake, which is why it is of limited scope and ambition. People will not join you unless you make them a better offer.”

Hanging on every word, his lecture rocketed through her skull, focusing on key terms such as the country’s own sake, and ambition. Beyond all sense, she saw the reason in his words. Japan needed to mean something, a progression towards a better state of life, a liberation from the injustice of Britannia. It was on her, yes, on her, to show them that. The people would not rise under the nation of Japan for the nation itself. They needed to be shown that justice was as yet undelivered, that Britannia owed a debt to the dignity of humanity. To this effect, if nobody else would, why not her? Up to this point, she had thought of herself as a cell in the resistance, a cog in the resistance in line with standard terrorist thinking, however, emboldened by the Britannians talk of ambition, she could only wonder what was the issue with taking some damn responsibility? She
didn’t interrupt, as the man continued.

“You claim you fight the enemy on your terms. This is not true. You are fighting an enemy at their full industrial and economic capacity, while not addressing the people you seek to represent. Fighting them on your terms would be reducing their capacity to address your threat to your level. The epitome of martial excellence isn’t winning every battle, but winning without fighting, and so we must do all we can to level that playing field before making overt moves. This is why you will never win. You went with the standard, guerrilla terror tactics. You lack ambition, imagination, and any semblance of audacity, the cornerstones of revolution. I intend to destroy their economy and leave them no choice but to submit. I will make Schneizel El Britannia himself bow in submission without firing a shot!”

Breathless and shocked by the tour de force, she stood back. He was wrong in his conclusion that violence could never work; it had lost them the country and it could get it back. But this confidence, this sheer indifference to opposition was that leadership that would win them Japan, under the flag of justice.

Bringing her team back she could barely speak as she whispered “It’s your choice.” with not an ounce of a lie. She was herself troubled. If she was this mixed, her team deserved the chance to follow their ideals. In her present, uninspired state, she didn’t deserve to keep them.

That would change.

BANG

The JLF fighter clutched his left breast in shock, falling back over the deal he had commandeered as Kallen Kozuki, donning her Zero outfit, walked with a determined step into the heart of the Kawaguchi Convention centre. Reloading her sidearm, she pressed on, as her subordinates, her Black Knights, worked to clear the floor.

She had first heard of the kidnappings from Nagisa, before she made the connection between the incident and her friends trapped in the building. Deciding that this would be the ideal time to unveil her Knights of Justice to the world, after all, what more just a cause than the liberation of civilians? Opposing the JLF would also raise her profile, being such a surprising move for a Nationalist. It would show Zero was truly a just adjudicator.

And of course, the deed itself would raise their profile, recognising that Cornelia would not go forth, and agreeing to do it themselves. With that they were in, and immediately enacted justice, swift and true, on the terrorists occupying the building. She had determined this offshoot of the JLF, likely led by former Lieutenant Colonel Kusakabe, were acceptable targets to take the fall. They had gone below what was morally acceptable, breaching any conceived rules of war and targeting innocent civilians with wanton carelessness, and even throwing them off a building.

It wasn’t as if she couldn’t understand. Back when she was just working in a cell, she had thought she would do anything to help the cause of Japan, including to Britannian civilians if necessary. Why not? Surely, they must all be complicit in this collective atrocity?

But she came to realise that, with the lens of justice, this way of thinking was wrong. Why did Milly, Lelouch, the Britannian beneath the Sakura tree, deserve collective punishment? The issue lay with those in power, and those without were as much oppressed as Japanese. In this way, Kusakabe was as unjust as his opponents, which would not stand.

A point made eloquently as she made her announced entrance into the room, sending a man ahead before she stepped inside, in shock at the scene.
First, Kusakabe, standing opposite the door to greet her. She frankly did not care for him, and ignored him as she sighted the second item, Lelouch Lamperouge, standing ten o’clock to her with a face lit up by silent fury, as his disdain oozed over towards her. She paused, wondering what the hell he was doing here, as she spied Suzaku, and a Princess of Britannia.

Her first instinct was to joke at the improbability of the situation, however she suppressed her emotion and thought, as Kusakabe began with “Peace, peace friends! We are all friends of Japan here! Yuaikai, and…”

“That depends heavily on your definition of friend.”

Kallen said nothing, working out what this meant in her head. Lelouch being referred in the same breath as the Labour Movement was self explanatory, however the fact that said Labour Movement shared ideals with a pair of Britannian and Japanese teenage rebels she had met under the Sakura tree was not realised until moments later. She had had her suspicions since they had first met due to Lelouch’s familiar voice, however this confirmed it. Lelouch was the man beneath the tree.

Once she realised the significance of Lelouch and Suzaku’s presence, she took a new view of the situation, acknowledging but ignoring their personal connection, as she observed their back and forth.

Look! We have good fortunes! We can use the Princess-”

“Bastard!”

In spite of her earlier confusion, the situation was now clear to Kallen, who looked on. Lelouch, her inspiration in spirit, was defending the Princess sister of the Viceroy from Kusakabe, likely based on their ideas of pacifism.

“Have you lost your minds? Don’t tell me you’ve become sentimental, Lelouch. Honestly. This is war, we must accept any cost-”

If this were several months ago, Kallen would likely be on Kusakabe’s side. No, she thought, she would likely be behind him, serving facelessly with little thought. A cell, both literally and figuratively, however things had changed. Kusakabe would fail for the same reason Kallen in her earlier state would fail, if on a broader scale. Ultimately, while she had once thought that all could be sacrificed towards the cause of Japan, she had outgrown that naivety.

“Kusakabe, this development is indicative of the issues that lie at the base and heart of your conceited ideas, combining self destructive honour with utter cowardice. Hiding behind Princesses, while claiming to be the rightful military leader? Your place is not on the front lines, it is in The Hague, you unjust mongrel!”

Naivety had no place in rebellion. To that, she had Lelouch to thank, however even now she worried over what might happen if he proved an inconvenience.
The men and women lined the hills at the foot of Fuji, forming human barriers and walls of fury and flesh in a long front, stretched across the steppes and bluffs of the lower sections of the mountain. Each worker looked forward, down towards Tokyo with grim, dirty faces, none worked up, but all in quiet anticipation of the standoff to come. They stood together, blocking entry to the mines littering the underface of the ancient mountain, a united front of workers occupying the surface on the day that brought Area Elevens Sakuradite export to nil.

They were joined in heart, spirit and deed by Japanese strikers across the islands, from factory workers tossing down their tools and blockading the entrances in the south, to foresters in Hokkaido, who set aside their equipment to recognise the Provisional Government. But, as ever, Fuji towered in the middle of it all, containing a mass of the dispossessed and tired, waiting since before dawn to be finally recognised by the sun's Eastern face, and the eager eyes of the world, curious where its fuel went.

Of course, an effort that occupied such a vast amount of the native population required vast infrastructure, immense organisation and a steady, guiding hand to see it through with shipments of food, Yen, and most importantly, cycles of men to man the front lines and swap out the tired to allow them to rest and recuperate. It was in itself a factory, with ravenous inputs and almost indeterminable outputs. As such, the Provisional Government had its hands full with calls and transports, as the ghetto became awash with hurry and activity, hired hands bringing news in and MRE’s imported from Chinese Arms Dealers out and back up to the mountain. The bank was waterlogged with people, transactions trickling through as the machine Yuaikai developed creaked into life.

The Government itself had occupied a building, two stories tall and very wide, allowing the organisers and plotters to work without collectively dying out for the claustrophobia. They met in the top floor, around a series of desks arranged in a messy circle, sheets of paper and paraphernalia littering the free space. By noon, the entire new Government had met for the first time, and went about organising roles and responsibilities.

“Kaname Ohgi, you will be responsible for our armed affairs as Minister for Defence. It will be your duty to organise a group to act as a defending Militia, and train them with the Knightmare Frames we have provided, to be deployed at the acting Prime Minister's command. All those in favour raise your arm.”

The twenty or so men and three women in the room who had been selected as Representatives all raised their hands silently, as Lelouch, Minister for Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, feigned counting the votes.
“Twenty… five in favour, zero in opposition, one not present. Motion passes.”

This was their first meeting, and it had gone surprisingly smoothly for being such an informal affair. The first Government was not elected, selected instead based on the advice of the local leaders. Ideally, elections would be held as soon as possible however it simply was not viable at this time. For now, they had to organise the Cabinet, and deal with the strikers on the ground.

Lelouch looked into his papers, running through the nominations as he read out “Next item on the agenda—”

“How the Repr’ sentative from Saitama int’rject?”

Surprised at the interruption, Lelouch’s eyes rolled upwards towards the wiry man with wild hair and an unignorable tic, bemusedly responding “Our friend from Saitama is recognised.”

The man stood, tugging at his newly hewn suit as he took an aside glance towards Lelouch, who noting the disdain, silently circled his name on his list. Hayate Nokame. He briefly considered if his disdain was racial, however he brushed the idea off. Nothing would likely come of this, for now, but it was best to know the room for the future. After a moment he spoke.

“Why, I thank you, Deputy Prime Minist’r, however I must inquire for the good of procedure as to the where’bouts of your senior, Prime Minist’r Kururugi?”

Taking a private moment to smile inwardly at the irony of the phrase ‘Prime Minister Kururugi’, he replied, seemingly unflapped, “I’m afraid he is indisposed, forming a preliminary agreement with the Six Houses of Kyoto and the formal Home Rule Parliament. If we obtain their support, and I suspect we will, we will obtain vast amounts of political capital, as well as potentially an acting Senate. We are all going to be very busy over these next few days. I would hesitate to hold it against you if your duties demanded that you were elsewhere. Will that be all?”

Thoroughly humbled, the marked Representative sat down and with the mood of the room restored to Lelouch’s liking, as he proceeded along.

There was, of course, a second reason as to why Suzaku was otherwise engaged at this present time. Lelouch had long determined that while Suzaku, for reasons he had once explained to Jeremiah, would make a far more effective Prime Minister than he, however at this critical time that called for decisive action there was little time for Suzaku’s faux-principality that bordered on grandstanding. For instance, if Suzaku were present he would have likely filibustered the formation of Ohgi’s Armed Forces as being against the pacifist spirit of the Republic, in turn holding up other bills that simply needed to be passed. It would not be viable to have him present, and so Lelouch had ‘remembered’ the urgent need to contact Kyoto for political assistance.

Either way, the rest of the meeting went smoothly, nominating Ministers and passing Bills to authorise spending on items such as food, to get the system up and running, at least legislatively. It took two hours to conclude, as while the items up for voting were so unobjectionable to not merit significant debate, there was simply a flood of items to address. Still, they were out early in the day, as the various Members of Parliament went about their assigned duties, Lelouch staying behind to scribble into his twelfth ledger, which now formed a neat stack in his bedroom, scowling at the infetismely small digits, not even noting Ohgi staying behind as well until the elder Minister for Defence shook his shoulder, sending him into a fit of shakes.

After recovering, Lelouch chuckled slightly, slamming the notebook shut with the closure of his dominant hand before standing. “Did you need something?”
“Given we're both heading off to the bank, I was wondering if you'd care to join me?”

Lelouch smiled, replying with what might send Milly Ashford into a fit if she heard, “I thought you'd never ask.”

Lelouch stood to join his friend as the last few chairs were folded away, pocketing the ledger and walking alongside him down the narrow stairs, asking in front as they walked in single file “Any news from our runners on the strikers?”, asking about the men and women ferrying food and news between the ghetto and the mountain.

“Nothing we both haven't heard…” came the breathless reply from the Defence Minister as he pushed out into the clogged street, filled with people hurrying about their assigned duties as the pair crossed the dense street to the bank, sliding through brief gaps in the human quicksand.

The bank was full as well, extra guards having been pulled in at the cost of a few Yen an hour to protect the newly hired Tellers. The noise of chatter and mirth was almost unbearable, as the two Ministers wrestled their way to the side of the desk, seeking the manager, who let them through the desk and up to the second floor, a mass of records that doubled as Lelouch’s living space.

“Can I help you sirs?” the old, portly man asked as Lelouch reclined next to the northern window, resting towards the mountain. After a moment, Lelouch replied “Two items. Ohgi has authorisation to withdraw on behalf of the Government, and I'd appreciate a projected budget towards the next taxation day.”

The man nodded and headed back downstairs to fetch the details, as Lelouch turned back to face the mountain. He was incredibly anxious. They had an income of sorts, a combination of Bonds, rudimentary taxes and the sale of waste to the Chinese Federation, but they were burning through cash to fund this strike. The relevant forms were brought up, and the pair worked in silence to reduce waste, as the day wore on, the inevitable question lurking in their minds before Ohgi finally spoke.

“What are they waiting for?”

Lelouch put his pen down, and drowned out the window, replying “I'm not sure… perhaps the crowds were bigger than anticipated.”

“There's a thought…” Ohgi responded lethargically, bending over to look through the porthole window as Lelouch wondered how things were going. After a moment, Ohgi continued “When they do arrive-”

“I can promise what I suspect you are asking about will not happen.”

“With Cornelia marshalling the Military Police?”

Lelouch considered this briefly, before delivering what he knew to be an unsatisfactory answer in “Yes and No.”

Rolling his eyes, Ohgi replied “Come on.”

After spending a moment framing the idea in his head, Lelouch explained what he meant in slow, deliberate words and lots of meandering hand waving with “I don't believe she has any issues cutting down protesters, as such, and given her not insignificant racism I don't doubt that if this strike existed in a sort of vacuum that she, in all likelihood would, but there's the snag; there are other factors at play.”
“What factors?”

“The Black Knights.”

The last reply came from a new voice that drew both men away from the small window and
towards the stairs, where Suzaku stood in his best suit and most professional stature.

“P.M Kururugi, the Younger.” Lelouch sardonically introduced, before chuckling and continuing
“To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“Just off the phone with Kyoto.” Suzaku said, sounding mighty pleased with himself for having
built the Bridge to Nowhere. Not that he knew that in the strictest sense, and so Lelouch permitted
his blissful ignorance with “So what's the story?”

“While the official Kyoto line is that we're just common criminals, off the record the Six Houses
were tripping over themselves to give us recognition. As politicians themselves, I think they're
grateful someone's fighting on their front.”

“Aside from a ringing endorsement, what else did they offer?”

Suzaku shrugged. “Not a great deal. Not that there's much they can actually offer beyond moral
support and perhaps a good word with the few Japanese not already onboard. I was hoping they'd
do our legitimacy some good, but that seems a bit redundant in hindsight. We're hardly looking for
legitimacy from the top, now are we?”

Admiring Suzaku's constant ability to shoulder blame, Lelouch, out of friendly instinct, moved to
verbally comfort his friend, replying “I'm sure it'll prove handy to have them onboard. Once the
Britannians siege the strikers, having men of their stature onside could be invaluable for
smuggling.”

“I suppose so.”

Lelouch reflected on the irony of Suzaku and himself swapping positions so rapidly, before Ohgi
interrupted “You said the Black Knights?”

Lelouch frowned, trying to recall the train of thought that had led them to the topic Ohgi was
raising, before remembering. What would stop Cornelia from shooting the strikers? It was not an
unreasonable concern, especially for the Minister of Defence, however there was a simple external
factor, and Suzaku was absolutely correct in identifying it.

“I did.” Suzaku said, reclaiming his charge. “Lelouch and I talked about this the other day, and
while he holds a more cynical view of what Cornelia would do in isolation, the Black Knights
would be quick to capitalise on any violence that would erupt at the mountain. Be in no doubt that
the Black Knights are monitoring the situation with their trigger fingers at the ready.”

The Finance Minister took up the baton, commenting “The Black Knights can never attack until
the Britannians do, otherwise they'd be seen as against the striking workers, hence a General with
any sense would hold fire to avoid the fight from ever happening, that's point one. If there's anyone
the Britannians hate more than us, and would go out of their way to reduce in power, it would be
Zero, hence they won't allow him to seize the opportunity to overtake us.”

Lelouch took a moment to pause and run his fingers through his hair, before continuing “Point two,
even if they don't care about giving Zero a supposed mandate, the army in this scenario would be
sitting ducks at the foot of a mountain. You don't have to have read the Art of War to know how
that's going to go. Even if they survive the initial skirmish, an otherwise innocent striker being shot
would surely spark an actual rising, squeezing us and any other moderates out and creating a wave they couldn't stop. Shooting the strikers can only make this worse for them and better for Zero for reasons beyond the control of either party.”

As Suzaku gave him a side glance, unsure how deliberate Lelouch’s reference to the Art of War was and what it meant, Ohgi scratched his head, and thought aloud “Let’s bear in mind that Britannia might not necessarily want to promote moderates. While I agree that is what would likely happen if they shot a striker, does Cornelia know that? She buys into her own nonsense of racial superiority, she probably thinks she could take the Black Knights on their terms.”

Lelouch nodded, tapping his desk with a lengthy forefinger. “That's the key element that concerns me, that being the irrationality of their top brass. Still, I cling to the idea there is someone with a few brain cells to rub together up in Britannian command. I think she'll attempt to starve them out.”

Suzaku nodded in turn, concluding “And we've planned for that.”

Lelouch sighed, and mused aloud “It's almost a shame all the strikers are up there. If they all left, we could watch our two biggest opponents destroy each other with no negative consequences.”

“We can only dream.” Ohgi quietly agreed, as the three men looked briefly once more through the window, before splitting off. Suzaku left to organise another shipment of supplies down to strikers at the docks, and Ohgi returned to his desk in the far corner of the room to try and see who he could draft for his new Armed Forces. Meanwhile, Lelouch silently scowled at the omnipresent mountain, in anxious anticipation for the faraway showdown, growing increasingly impatient as the day ticked towards 2 o'clock.

Where the hell were they?

It was another twenty minutes before Lelouch’s internal query was answered, as his initial hypothesis was proven accurate; the Britannians in charge of managing the crowds, particularly the beleaguered Gilbert G.P Guilford, had significantly underestimated the mass of bodies that littered the mountain face. Fearing humiliation at bringing up a single Battalion in the face of tens of thousands of men to somehow ‘manage’ them, he withdrew to seek reinforcements. It took the slender, normally calm man to summon almost a whole Division to envelop the southern flank of the mountain.

The Knight himself was beginning to grow a few cracks in his patient armour, as communications and intelligence was proven sporadic and often inaccurate, as even in spite of their forewarning of the event, the military coordination was a mess, with Knightmare companies taking forever and a day to fuel up and mobilise, an indictment of the state of the bureaucracy.

Granted, as Cornelia had explained to him while he was waiting, it wasn’t the fault of the military logistics officers in its entirety. The Sakuradite market was still fragile, and their supplies were still tender before the strike, which sent waves through their ability to fuel their Frames. While he couldn’t blame them, it still frustrated him, a frustration emphasised by his hot, cramped Knightmare Frame, a personal adaptation of the Sutherland fitted for his dimensions that yet managed to still feel too small, the A pillars pressing at his cheeks and B pillars crushing his shoulders.

Removing his glasses to wipe at his wet forehead where the sun seemed to bleach, he screwed his eyes as he peered through the thick rectangular window laden with armour that made awkward maneuvering. He was leading the Division up towards the mountain, through the narrow road towards the vast mine entrance that normally hosted malnourished mine workers and that really wasn’t built to hold large armoured vehicles, and so they had to move in single file. He felt
vulnerable, as if an enemy might come out at any moment. Zero in particular worried him, as they crept up towards the strike.

However, no such strike originated as they moved towards the clearings that marked a No Man's Land of sorts, before the lines and lines of Workers, standing, sitting, crouching, and generally loitering in opposition of His Majesty. It was a bizarre sight, so ordinary and unbecoming for such a supposedly highbrow protest. The moral high ground, held by scummy unclean workers. He would have chuckled if he could spare the oxygen.

As his unit pulled up behind him, he took a moment to pop open his cabin, and prop himself up into the open air by his elbows, breathing in the June air and clearing his lungs as he got a better look at the breadth of the people present, taking in the sight of the cyborg mountain, half stone and half steel. Guilford had always disliked the landscaping for being a massive eyesore worthy of the Elephant of Bastille, yet he now briefly considered having to work here, something he doubted he’d ever have had to do if the strike hadn’t happened.

“Poor sods...” he grumbled. The air here wasn’t much better, and he opened his canister of water to soak the heat, before settling back into his seat, leaving his top hatch open as he took in the initial reporting.

None of his troops had been engaged, and while some entertained a verbal assault from a distance, none of the protesters fought either as a perimeter was established. More importantly, no alternate forces had appeared yet, such as Black Knights, or JLF remnants who might hope to capitalise. It was worth remembering there might be some crossover between workers and Black Knights sympathisers in spite of said groups apparently disliking each other, and so he remained on his guard, even as he sighed in relief that nobody had been caught off guard. He spooled down his Knightmares drive as he lounged, trying to survey the mood of the crowd. It certainly wasn’t happy, but it was more grim than angry. It seemed ready for a long, drawn out wait.

Satisfied the crowd was passive for the time being, he hooked his microphone up to the central base and got in contact with Cornelia, whose face appeared in the top half of his thick glassy screen, complete with disappointed frown and steely eyes.

“Your Majesty.” he greeted with the utmost reverence, only to be met with her typical straightforward nature, as she asked “What's the current status?”

Sighing as he tugged at the edge of his spectacles, he replied “All’s quiet. They're obviously not moving, but they're not really doing much of anything.”

“Then clear them out.”

Being patient, he replied “Ma’am, it's not so simple. Not only is it an unarmed crowd, but it's highly public. We'd have a riot.”

Cornelia, looking markedly disappointed, responded “Are you saying you can't handle that? I want them back working, by any means necessary. Fire on one of them, that will scare most of them off. They know their betters.”

Guilford sat back, before responding “M… ma’am, Princess, even as your Knight I must protest. This is not-”

“Guilford, this is an order from a superior officer. Show them what happens when they get uppity.”

This was not a marked departure for Cornelia, who angrily ended the call, leaving her Knight
alone. On the one hand, perhaps some would be discouraged. Guilford was nobody's moderate, and was well aware of his own views, which were not lenient on the Japanese as a people. He also was nobody's pacifist, having been alongside Cornelia in laying waste to North Africa and the Mediterranean Islands, and had been in Central Command for the purges of Saitama.

The microphone was next to him, and it crackled into life, with a Major asking “Orders sir?”

Guilford looked up, and that was his mistake.

He looked, and did not see violence. He saw some anger, disgruntlement, but restrained, like a sheathed sword. They carried their anger with grace, staring across No Man’s Land with hate tempered by eternal patience and an ultimate desire for peace.

He had barely thought them capable of it.

This would be the end, he realised, the genie was out of the bottle. In this cold, empty moment, free of the pressures of a real battle, came the opportunity to see if he really believed in his country's ideas independent of other factors. A Control test, to put it scientifically. But now, he bit at the Apple, and he knew it would never be the same as he realised the Control proved the assumption false.

They carried themselves like the proudest Britannians. And that memory could not be undone.

Defeated, he reached for his microphone, and whispered “Do not fire. Maintain a loose perimeter, you do not have permission to engage.”

With that, he hurled his device across the narrow cockpit in frustration, thunking harmlessly off the armoured glass before settling in his footwell, causing him to visibly huff. It wasn't just this new realisation that he couldn't sic Knightmares on people that annoyed him, it was the weakness that was implied from the fact that it only hit him once he was on the front lines. It made him feel isolated, like a child wandering where he shouldn't be. At least, he knew that would be how it was perceived, and perception led to his second key issue.

Cornelia would be rid of him comically quickly. His Princess, whom he had pledged fealty to without reserve, would break their contract and toss him aside. He would be in disgrace. He had yet to resign hope, though he could see plenty of other resignations in the near future.

But he was okay. This hill seemed fine enough to die on.

Chapter End Notes

Indeed it does Gilly, indeed it does. The strike has begun, and the first reactions have been expressed. While the second half of this Chapter served to forward Guilford's own minor character arc, it also served as a microcosm, in the same way General Upson did back in Chapter 9, of the mindset of the Officers on the front line, who are all realising that shooting civilians outside the heat of battle makes you feel a little terrible. They promised to defend the country, and Cornelia is about to realise the meaning of ‘to the letter’. Beyond that, most of what will happen can be implied or guessed at, because this disagreement isn’t going to end well for anyone.
On the topic of developments, we are seeing more beginnings of divisions between Suzaku and Lelouch, in Lelouch’s indirect removal of Suzaku from the room, among other things. In spite of this, the First Government has had their first meeting, codifying their spending and their efforts, with a greater and greater infrastructure of people performing tasks on their behalf. It has grown from three men in a college to a community, with a functioning government and currency, operating like a moderately oiled machine.

Speaking of moderately oiled machines, I’ll be having the next Chapter up shortly, and I hope you’ll read it, being Chapter 18 of For Hearts And Minds, The Trouble With Knights. See you then, and in the meantime don’t kill striking workers, and rate and review!

~Eth0
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Chapter Eighteen: The Trouble With Knights**

**Arc Five: Birth Of A Nation**

**Opening:** "Sometimes the brave man" - ROOT FIVE

Euphemia sat quietly, dressed folded neatly, as she waited in the bleached white blank hall for her sister to finish her call with Schneizel in the other room, directly opposite her plastic seating. A few servants and military types passed by now and then, however Cornelia kept Schneizel occupied as the day lagged onwards in her stuffy, insular hallway where she passed the time by recalling the events of the past few days, thinking about Lelouch and Suzaku, and occasionally stepping across the narrow room to pour herself water out of the machine.

It had been six days since the strike had begun, and the situation had slowly simmered along, an anticlimax of sorts that had drawn itself out over the week. While Euphemia was not fully aware of the situation, apparently there had been large amounts of chaos in Command following the first day when there had been disagreements, and they had been fraught with political uncertainty since. Cornelia was on the warpath, however the wheels were gummed up by indecision.

Meanwhile, from what she gathered from her occasional conversations with Lelouch, who was evidently up to his neck in paperwork, indicated in a slight weariness, which matched that of several Majors and Undersecretaries brave enough to raise the issue with Cornelia, hence her new idea. If there were enough on both sides willing to do a deal-

No, she thought, biting her mental tongue. She must not get her hopes up until Schneizel gave the all clear. Cornelia would overrule her if she went ahead, however Schneizel could easily overrule Cornelia. If she could broker a peace, she wouldn't find it in her sister, or her father, but she could find some in her brothers.

The fact she had recognised that saddened her, as her sister grew further and further from what she could consider to be in any way conscionable. Even so, the separation was sad in and of itself.

Suddenly, there came a whooshing sound of a pneumatic door opening, and as Euphemia looked up, she saw the cause of her concern step into the hall, with an angry scowl and furious eyes that matched a woman scorned, her request for martial law with Schneizel rejected. Euphemia sighed. It was Cornelia's time in the military, she determined, as a commander that made her this way, viewing all things from that way.

And yet, in spite of her obvious rebuttal, she appeared to cheer upon seeing Euphemia, her face lightening as she made a visible effort to clear her varying dark features, before she approached, gently opening with "Euphie..." as she stroked her hair.

A little uncomfortable, Euphemia shifted in her chair responding "Hey, did it go well?", playing foolish. Cornelia bought it, sighing "Schneizel is a wonderful man, but unfortunately he couldn't see my point of view. Unfortunate, but such is the way of things."
Of many accusations tacked towards Euphemia over her time as Princess, naïveté was one of the most common, and she did not necessarily agree. On one hand, she was aware, and held no shame about the fact that her beliefs were very idealistic, blowing even Suzaku off the pedestal of high belief and pure hopes. That was not only the case, she would brag about it if she were less introverted. However, she would hold that this did not translate to how she interacted with others. Naïve beliefs did not translate to social ineptitude, a mistake Cornelia made in assuming Euphemia swallowed that nonsense. However, Euphemia was reasonably competent in feigning ignorance, responding "I see… Can't be helped."

Oblivious, Cornelia nodded, before sitting beside her and replying "And at such a time too, when I need to find new subordinates, even a new Knight. We need to find one for you, you know?". She huffed lightly, leaning back.

"A Knight?" Euphemia asked, surprised. She had been vaguely aware she 'needed' one, however Cornelia had never raised the issue. Moreover, if she now needed one too, what had happened to Guilford?

Ignoring her sister's silence, Cornelia continued "But I think we'll sort you first. You need it more. I'll have a list of eligible Knights sent over. It's just a headache."

After a moment, she finally paused and in a moment of realisation, said "Oh, were you waiting? I'm sorry, you probably have things to do as well. Forgive me, I'd best be off.", and with that, she departed, scurrying away back to Command, leaving Euphemia alone to think. The trouble with Knights was multifaceted. First, a prospective Knight would very likely be a member of the landed elite, which coming from Euphemia, Princess of the Empire, seemed like a hollow accusation, however it would likely point to a more old fashioned mindset which would cause issues. What might also cause issues would be if he or she found the communications she had been engaging in, including with Britannian Public Enemies Numbers 2 and 3. While a prospective Knight would swear fealty to her, she could never know for certain.

Ultimately, it boiled down to the simple fact she wouldn't know any of the candidates personally, and it seemed to her representative of one of her other big problems with working under the circumstances she found herself in, a system of strangers that she had to try and learn and cooperate with, most of whom were conservative Lords and Ladies to begin with.

Still, it was neither here nor there, and if she acted on her plan, a sort of Home Rule, fast enough, she could be done with the secrecy before it could be revealed by other forces. Time was not on her side, but once she had Schneizel the heavy lifting could be handed off to Kanon, Schneizel's assistant and rumoured lover who had an almost inhuman ability to organise. She had only met him once, and he seemed like an entirely reasonable, trustworthy man, so it truly boiled down to how Schneizel swung. At the very least, Schneizel did not have Cornelias anger or emotional baggage on terrorism or how to handle it. As Lelouch would put it, he was far more savvy in fighting the Long War. As Euphemia thought, the door at the far end of the hall opened, and an incredibly depressed Guilford trudged through the hall, dragging bags and sacks along in a depressing display. Noting him as he passed by, Euphemia perked up, calling "Guilford, Guilford!"

The former Knight of her older sister turned back, looking absolutely miserable as he responded despondently "Hello Euphie…", to which Euphemia replied "What happened? I heard you were removed… Cornelia always was so loyal, just like you! You were always there for her, why did she get rid of you?"

After a moment of apparent indecision, Guilford sighed and sat beside her, not knowing it was where his former sponsor had been sitting moments earlier, and explained "I was, as you probably
know, in charge of the cordonning Division around the mountain, when Cornelia asked me to fire on the strikers to get them to move. I didn't, and that, as they say, was that."

Euphemia, surprised, responded "But that was the right thing to do! And she got rid of you?"

"Unfortunately…” he grimaced, before trying to restore a noble impression of what a Knight ought to be on Euphemia before she got the wrong idea, adding "However, I should have obeyed. I- I was too weak. I didn't deserve to stay."

Euphemia, in bitter disagreement, responded "You knew what was right, and that was critical. You couldn't have done a better thing in my mind.", to which Guilford replied "I'm glad you feel that way." he gruffed. "But for now, it doesn't make much difference. I'm afraid I must go. I wish I didn't have to, and I will miss you all, but my Lady has spoken."

As Guilford sighed, seeming to resign himself to his fate, Euphemia was furious, both at the Knight himself for not standing up for himself, and at Cornelia for removing her loyal Knight over insubordination, where he had been in the right. She wanted back, childishly, at her sister for her inhumanity, a slap across the face as such.

And as she sat, next to Cornelia's scorned Knight, she came across an idea.

"Guilford…"

"Yes?" came the quiet reply.

Turning to him with the sly grin of the cat that got the cream, she commented "I hear you're unemployed now, and as it turns out, by happenstance, there's a position open for Knight of the Third Princess of the Empire. Applicants with records of standing up for what's right will receive preference, as well as personal connections to the employer, who just so happens to be me. Give it some thought."

Feeling incredibly smug and filled to the brim with a new confidence, she stood to go into the booth to meet with Schneizel, feeling ready for almost anything as she left Guilford putting the pieces together.

Unaware of Euphemia's own little political maneuvering, her brother Lelouch and his colleague Ohgi stepped out of a different meeting room, having spent the last hour in discussions with Taizō Kirihara, leader of the Six Houses of Kyoto who was extremely pleased to be meeting back up with Lelouch after so many years. Ohgi almost felt as if he was intruding on their personal moment as they bantered.

Even so, in spite of a certain awkwardness that came with nigh on intruding on a personal moment between old friends, Ohgi still felt the meeting had gone extremely well. Having learned at the last minute the Six Houses met inside Mt Fuji, something that had surprised both of them, and the pair had leapt on that fact instantly, organising efforts to use the Kyoto entrance to ferry food down into the mine and out onto the front lines, rather than attempting to break the cordon. There had been an extensive debate among the Provisional Government as to whether to continue mining operations on their own in secret in such a way to export the produce to friendly nations to solve their deficit, however it had been defeated by a majority vote in spite of both Lelouch and Suzaku voting in favour. That aside, all had been going as smoothly as could be expected of an anti-government protest.

Stepping back aboard the train that had ferried them there, Ohgi sat beside Lelouch on the lonely
carriage as they descended down the north face of the mountain, going around the cordon and taking slightly longer, allowing the silence to permeate, broken only by the noises of the grinding railway line. As they reached a bluff, Lelouch pulled out his phone and began to tap text messages, Ohgi noting that it was to Rivalz, his Britannian friend from school. In spite of himself, Ohgi felt slightly guilty. This revolution was for the good of the impoverished, and it was the ultimate good over personal issues, but even so, Ohgi felt it hard to feel good about tearing apart friendships.

Spotting Ohgi's curiosity, Lelouch quirked an eyebrow and commented "Need anything?"

Retreating slightly, he replied "Sorry… I was just thinking about you. I mean, you've missed a bunch of time with your other friends, time to just relax, because of all this…"

"Why does that matter?" Lelouch commented harshly, pocketing his phone. "Rivalz will get over it."

Ohgi sighed, wondering whether to intervene further in Lelouch's sparse social life, before the Prince in question, evidently irritated by the topic and Ohgi's obvious curiosity in it by cutting him short, drily, yet aggressively, stating "I am perfectly comfortable with the current state of things. The only regrets I can fathom is having spent such time indulging my own personal life that the cause would be lost. Every moment spared to that effect is a moment I am not fighting. I go without so that others can receive, if you wish to view it that way. That is all I will say on the matter."

Ohgi didn't respond initially, put off by Lelouch's harsh, spiteful tone that matched a dual admission of weakness; it was obvious, from how he tried to deflect to what amounted to teenage edginess that he viewed his brief communication with Rivalz as weak, however the response itself made him appear isolated and somewhat desperate, the self destructive nature of such a philosophy notwithstanding. It was a case of it being bad if it were a lie, and worse if it were true.

Uncomfortable, he quietly commented, trying to get him out of his anger "You know I was a teacher, you're not-"

Lelouch grunted, evidently seeking to drop the issue as he interrupted "You're probably right. Perhaps I'm just tired. Still, it's not a critical issue. Sorry to worry you."

That was the end of that awkward conversation, and all was quiet until they reached the bottom of the hill in Kawaguchiko, not far from the Convention centre. They were the only ones to step onto the platform, forming an odd pair of a Japanese man and a Britannian teen. Still, there were not very many people on the platform as they walked towards the bottom before stepping into a small saloon car, which ferried them back down to the south and to their work, in awkward, hot silence, cicadas chirping to mark the passage of time.

It was midday by this point, and the sun had reached its unchallenged peak as they returned to the ghetto proper, leaving their car and beginning to walk back to the bank, taking in the heat of the day as they stepped past the busy crowds, too tired to actively push as they returned to the main building, sitting on the couches by the entrance.

"Damn…” Ohgi sighed, as he reclined. "It's too hot for this crap."

"You can sing that one." his colleague, having evidently calmed down from his existential strop, responded, before standing. "I'm going to lie down for a tad, wake me up for the next meeting."

"Aye." Ohgi responded breathlessly as the younger man travelled up to his squalor, likely hoping its open space would offer a more hospitable climate to the one Ohgi attempted to doze off in,
trying to get comfortable as he shifted about, the room empty but for a few people passing by, an elderly Japanese man, well dressed and groomed, a tanned Britannian woman passing by with a fast step, a pair of teens putting away their days wages-

Ohgi paused, sensing with his well tuned sixth sense something highly off. Before catching it. The Britannian. It wasn't as if Britannians weren't unheard of here, certainly there were a few, but this particular woman seemed off, too hurried, too focused as she passed through the room, with the air of a soldier-

Tripping over the word soldier, he realised, and instantly leapt out of his chair and bounded up the stairs.

Villetta Nu had just walked into their home as if it belonged to her, not a care in the goddamned world. It was astonishing to him how little she had appeared apprehensive or ill at ease, completely confident in herself. It was probably why he had missed her as she initially passed by.

He sprinted round the last set of stairs and burst into the brown, airy room and sure as the day was long, there was the returned soldier, standing over a sleeping Lelouch, knife held high above her head ready to plunge down into his chest.

"LELOUCH!" Ohgi screamed, half crying out in panic and half roaring to wake his friend as he sprinted forward to intercept the attacker. Lelouch began to stir as Villetta turned and saw him, continuing the turn as she grasped the situation and transitioning into a turning kick with the top of her foot.

Seeing the move coming, Ohgi bent his knees slightly and braced his side with his forearm and triceps to absorb the kicks energy, before pushing back and upwards with his bent legs, using them like a spring to spin her back away, then switching direction to hit her far side with his fist, which was far more exposed, and brought into range by his initial block.

However, she saw the punch coming, ducking down below his chest and performing a haphazard rugby tackle, shifting his weight back and sending him falling backwards onto the floor, as she went for the knife.

However at this point Lelouch was conscious, and kicked at her back from his less than advantageous position, distracting her long enough for Ohgi to sweep his legs around her feet and trip her, allowing Lelouch to stand and kick her again in the guts, which in turn gave Ohgi the time to stand and properly pin her, as the adrenaline rush wore down.

"That was close..." he stuttered through rapid, tiring breathing that seemed to sap at his remaining energy. The threat of death may wake one up, but it left one with a hell of a cliff to fall off, something Ohgi was beginning to realised as he struggled to contain the writhing Villetta. It struck him as bizarre, that she would continue to struggle like a woman possessed and yet not saying a word as she fought.

As he mused over this, Lelouch whipped out his phone and called the guards in the opposite building, hissing "Makoto, Byakuya, upstairs in the bank, this instant. We have an enemy combatant, at present contained. Bring restraints."

Pocketing the device, he bent down towards Ohgi to get a better look at his assailant, noting "It's Villetta Nu..."

"Indeed." Ohgi grunted, as the would be assassin remained silent, only giving the odd noise of struggle.
"She's a determined bitch..." Lelouch commented as the pair of guards stepped inside with ropes and handguns, taking her struggling body off their hands. Ohgi stood back beside the Finance Minister as she was carried away to a bemused audience. Ohgi summarised with "That was strange..."

Lelouch nodded in agreement. "Yes... First, she said nothing, not even some Britannian threat or some such... Second, why even use her, a disgraced soldier? Do they not have better assassins?"

"And, let's not forget-" Ohgi continued "We must ask why they sent an assassin at all? Why not the actual army?"

"This smells of conspiracy."

"That it does."

The pair stood in silence for a long time, before electing to raise the issue in Parliament when they next met. Still confused, they headed out to find Suzaku, who was in the Parliament Building wading through a mass of documents and files. Looking up, he waved the pair in as they moved to address him.

"Suzaku, a moment-

"-Nu, Villetta Nu-

-she tried to kill Lelouch!"

Suzaku, nonplussed, asked simply "What?", as he reached for a faraway paper among the pile. Lelouch, having taken over his own brief rush, explained what had happened.

"Now that's curious..." Suzaku noted, before they were interrupted from their musings by the arrival of a runner carrying an envelope, who passed the item over and informed them "Correspondence from the Empire, Ministers!"

"Where was this given?" Lelouch asked as Suzaku opened the letter, to which the man responded "It was given by the Knight Guilford to the Strikers, who forwarded it to the Six Houses of Kyoto and by extension me."

"It has the Royal Crest alright, same one as Clovis'." Suzaku noted, before reading out "On behalf of the Emperor as His acting representative, I propose, to resolve the Ethnic and Union conflicts, the creation of a semi autonomous region within the Empire known as the Specially Administered Zone of Japan, which while remaining within the Empire as a new Area, shall have predetermined internal policy freedoms from the Empire in its internal governance, representation, social freedoms, and internal personal taxation and wealth distribution, while still retaining Imperial Policies on external trade and military. I would invite the leadership of the Provisional Government and the Black Knights to meet to discuss the particulars of the extent of this region's autonomy, and its borders."

Suzaku put the paper down on his desk, hissing "Signed Euphemia Li Britannia."

Ohgi paused, wondering aloud "Well this complicates things..."

"Forget complicating, this makes no sense!" Lelouch grunted, continuing "They send an assassin, then propose peace, and.. Guilford! Why was he Euphemia's representative-

"-Lelouch, calm yourself." Suzaku scoured, picking up a mug of coffee before thinking "Guilford
could have been a go between, it's too soon to comment on who sent Viletta, and if this is real, then this may be the break we began the strike hoping for. It's obvious their lack of Sakuradite is hurting them. We need to leap on this."

"Cornelia would never have allowed this-"

"Euphemia wouldn't have done this if she thought she couldn't get away with it."

Lelouch nodded to concede this, as Ohgi said "So we're going?"

Suzaku nodded "It's irritating that we have to share a negotiating table with Zero, but it's a start."

Lelouch smiled as he sat back "Leave Zero to me."

Ohgi swore he could feel himself shiver.

Chapter End Notes

I for one wanted desperately to have a scene where Cornelia realises that Euphemia has stolen her Knight and outplayed her on all fronts, however I lack the full literary capacity and range to perfectly describe the face of shock and defeat personified on a single human being. Alas.

That notwithstanding, the major players are moving in their own directions, and people who are alongside strange bedfellows politically are beginning to realise that if they don't dance with the ones that brought them, they will be planted alongside extremely unsavory characters. There are no allies; only interests. Let's hope our characters, especially the more naïve or idealistic among them, remember this, as we move on to Chapter Nineteen of For Hearts And Minds, Dishonest Actors. Be safe, and keep an eye on the people entering your bank. I hope to see you again soon, so please rate and review.

~Eth0
The atmosphere was electric, the desegregated crowd filling out the stadium at once tense and excited, a mix of strikers, working class Britannians and political commentators. The nobility sat in the higher rings of the converted arena near the foot of the mountain, looking on, as Euphemia, accompanied by her freshly minted Knight Guilford, who had been recently appointed to Cornelia's bitter anger, held the stage, accompanied by Zero who had arrived shortly before the allotted time accompanied by two guards. The terrorists stood to the side, seeming to absorb the stage's energy, a black hole in the centre of the stadium; moody and unignorable like an edgy teenager at a formal gathering.

The Specially Administered Zone had made waves through the political world, with an already enraged Cornelia even threatening to filibuster the idea before Schneizel tore her down. It had been a controversial bill, with rumours that Schneizel had even had to defend the idea from his Father, who had been suspected to have taken a few moments away from whatever it was he did in his free time to scorn the idea, before allowing it, an out of character move to say the least.

The participants were of course waiting with bated breath for the arrival of the Provisional Government's Delegation. Of the three negotiating parties, this was the group that the Britannian onlookers knew the least about. Euphemia was a liberal politician, the Black Knights were terrorists, but for the Provisional Government and Yuaikai, who had been interchanged in the common media as being one and the same, very little was known. Of course, it was suspected Euphemia knew more than she let on, at least enough to organise this meeting.

It was nearly midday when the first cries of excitement came up from the back, which sent the cameras of the media back towards the entrance as a brown saloon crawled into the stadium. The message was clear; this Government consisted of serious diplomats, who were professional Representatives, which intentionally contrasted the image of thuggish terrorists, rocking up in military Knightmares. It was unclear whether Zero noticed this, however it would be surprising if he didn’t.

Either way, the car pulled up a third of the way in, before parking perpendicular to the stage, allowing the occupants of the rear seats to step straight out and face towards the stage. The door was opened from the outside by an appointed guard, and the tall yet vaguely muscular frame of Kaname Ohgi stepped onto the paddock, hair groomed back and dressed in his best suit. He received a smattering of applause from the Britannia parts of the crowd, which given his relative anonymity was to be expected, however his front and centre role in Yuaikai earned him raucous applause from the Japanese.

Next out was Suzaku Kururugi, complete with his arm in a sling, who received generous reception
from all present. As the son of the last Prime Minister, it was not a stretch for anyone to imagine that this was how he chose to busy himself. However, the last one, a black haired, scowling Britannian teen, set the crowds wondering, as Euphemia beamed on proudly.

Then, one by one, they worked it out. Guilford was among the first, spitting out the name like an unexpected bad taste. The hisses quickly consumed the stage as a name made itself clear.

“L… Lelouch! Lelouch Vi Britannia!”

For Lelouch, things couldn't have gone more as planned. In spite of an on and off Spartan philosophy and a now realised big brother complex he was now beginning to experience fresh guilt from for being so busy and unable to see Nunnally, one of the things he enjoyed most was a reputation, when people would hush in his presence and never lose awareness of him. It was an addicting feeling. He wasn't even in denial for his attempt to cultivate it with this entrance. An aura of personality was a powerful thing for all parties.

And so, when he stood to join Euphemia and his fellow Ministers, he declined the crowd but a side glance. It projected confidence and authority, two things the Britannian crowds would gobble up. As he turned back to Euphemia, he could only chuckle mentally at Guilford, having received the shock of his life, trying to hold it together.

Euphemia took this cue to man the microphone and hush the crowd, calling out “Now that all the delegates have arrived, Zero, Lelouch and I shall begin the process of negotiating the conditions of the Zone. I thank you all for your support and enthusiasm.”

The applause to this was deafening as she confirmed both Lelouch’s identity and the beginning of peace. Lelouch nodded in confirmation, more than happy to take over negotiations from his technical superior, Suzaku, as Zero, being well aware he would be the head of the Black Knights negotiations team, seemed unmoved. Lelouch turned away to retire to the negotiating room, followed by the terrorist and the Princess, as they ventured into a dark room lit by a computer screen occupying the back wall. The door locking behind them, they stepped round the table and stared each other down, Euphemia gleefully so, Zero passively so, and Lelouch stoically so. After a moment of exchanging glances, Euphemia drew first, leaning over the table and with a swaying hand, and explaining “So with the basic concept, I can’t concede much, but in terms of land available, I really think we can come to a compromise. It’s critical we get the highest amount of displaced Japanese within the Zones boundaries.”

As someone who had worked in tandem with the ghettos, Lelouch understood perhaps better than any Britannian what she meant. The most densely populated zones and most impoverished zones were very particular and splotchy, with bits and pieces across South-East Tokyo, and that was just in the Capital. To this effect, Lelouch affirmed “Aye, this is critical. Ideally, we’d have Tokyo be the Zone itself, as it’s a high density Region we can work with. It’s a relatively small area of land, but we can start housing ethnic Japanese straight off the bat, and get them working.”

Zero said nothing, which drew Lelouch's view aside briefly. What was his problem? Lelouch knew for a fact Zero had something up his sleeves, or rather two somethings, but it wasn’t time for that yet, but even so he had at least expected the terrorist to grandstand or give rousing political opinion while burning time. Because that was all both Zero and Lelouch were doing; burning time.

Speaking of which, he peaked down towards his wristwatch, reading it at 12:07 in the afternoon. After a moment of some mental calculations, he looked back up, facing an awkward silence as he became distinctly aware that Euphemia was the only one fully focused. Lelouch had a fair guess at what Zero was thinking about, but there was thirteen minutes until twenty past, and Lelouch’s plan fell into motion. Zero should still be somewhat engaged, at least for a few more minutes, but he
had fallen silent.

‘What is this guy's problem?’ Lelouch pondered, before realising he was staring as Euphemia broke the silence with “I’m not sure if we could get all of Tokyo, unless there was nothing else within the Zones area—”

“That’s not going to happen.”

Lelouch’s eyes drew back to Zero with a certain amused surprise, his narrow gaze projecting the snarky, demeaning disdain he felt coarse through him. Even though he knew it would happen, he also what was to follow would still sting to hear. Anyone threatening Euphemia would make his blood boil, even if he held all the cards. It was a base, morose instinct that fueled the thickening veins within his wrist and neck as Zero disdainfully said “I regret that while I admit that my assumptions to the legitimacy of your concern for the Japanese cause were mistaken, neither pragmatic nor born out of… familial loyalty…”, pausing briefly as he turned to Lelouch when emphasising ‘familial’, “...but while this is true, it does not change the very basic fact that this deal is still redundant. There was never going to be a success at the negotiations table, for the simple reason you both know as members of the Royal Family; there has never been a success at the negotiating table, only at the barrel of the guns of the just.”

As Lelouch scowled at the jab at his kinship to the Royal Family, Zero went the whole hog and pulled out a pistol from a hidden holster, obviously wooden and yet very deadly. Lelouch, surprised by this turn of events, stepped back, eyes widening. This wasn't part of the plan. He had set everything up perfectly in the time since they had decided to attend the Conference, with Lelouch ensuring all would go according to his plan. If he was right, there should be no need for Zero to raise his gun. What had he missed?

Euphemia was far more relaxed than her brother, lacking his intimate knowledge of the fact that this was not meant to happen under his clearly laid out plan. This was her first inkling that the talks were being subverted, and not having any machiavellian plans of her own, was far less uptight. With snark Lelouch was surprisedly proud of, she responded “What are you going to do, shoot us? As if. You’ll be dealing with Cornelia, who will go full scorched earth against you for killing me, with an insurgent group. Best case scenario, innocent Japanese suffer. To cut a long story short, you wouldn’t dare shoot me.”

Lelouch felt like his heart was about to explode with pride, having to stop himself from applauding like a parent at a sporting event. In spite of her youth, Euphemia was going places in the political world, he was in little doubt over that. She took this issue with supreme confidence, maintaining proper control like Lelouch hoped he could. However, she was wrong on two points, to no fault of her own. First, she didn’t know about the plan Lelouch had hatched, which was only natural, however it was certainly not the case that Zero had only a gun at his disposal in this instance. The second issue, which Lelouch did not know the answer to, was why Zero had drawn a gun at all. There was no need.

Zero, in typical fashion, seemed to swell in dubiously righteous anger, responding “Is that so? Well I suppose you are correct, however you are mistaken in the wider sense. You grasp the situation, you mistake the motivation, as ever. I am not motivated by hate, but justice, and I am not going to be shooting anyone.”

He glowered, and dropping an octave hissed “You will.”

Neither Lelouch nor Euphemia, the former of whom had to stop himself from chuckling aloud at the proposition. Euphemia, shoot anyone, under any duress? Perhaps he had overestimated Zero. Nonetheless, the terrorist continued “Ideally, I would have your brother kill you then shoot me,
however I have already availed of the opportunity to use him. However, either way I'm afraid you two will not be leaving this room on your own terms.”

“And how will you accomplish this?” Lelouch queried, not buying into either the premise nor Zero’s delusions of grandeur. What was Zero’s game?

“You of all people should know, Lamperouge” replied Zero demeaningly, revealing he knew his secret identity. “I open my eye slot, and say the magic words.”

Turning to Euphemia, both herself and her brother uncertain what was about to happen, as the mask slid open to reveal a blue eye, as Zero shouted “I, Zero, command you to shoot and kill your brother, then shoot me in the leg!”

And in that moment, Lelouch realised several key things.

First, he realised who Zero was. This was a bit of a layup, with the set of people with the ability Zero had demonstrated amounting to two; Zero, and Kallen Stadtfeld, and he had more than once suspected some crossover. More to the point, Zero’s command to Euphemia was all but identical in format to the recording of Kallen.

Second, he realised who had ordered Villetta to kill him, and how it had been done. What seemed to be the case for the time being was that Zero, or Kallen, having interrogated the Baroness, released her to the Britannians as a sleeper agent, with the command to obey any orders received from Kallen at a later date. This explained the seemingly nonsensical release of Nu just prior to the incident at the Convention, as well as her uncharacteristic mumness following their capture of her. She had not been acting consciously.

Thirdly and most critically, he realised he had been thoroughly outplayed. He now realised her plan in its entirety, to kill the witnesses to her treachery and achieve military victory in the ensuing chaos, rather than just his surprise from the North. He was unprepared for this, not having suspected Zero of having the wherewithal to expand on the plan Lelouch had leaked her.

And so, when Lelouch’s vision switched the the incapacitated Euphemia, the reflection in her glazed eyes of himself portrayed an image of desperation, a man who was about to die at the hands of his first love, her hands stained against her will.

It was, to his view, a disappointment above all else, not just in the waste of potential nor all the things he would never accomplish- never experience, that was selfish, but accomplish - but also how weak he was.

In the last few moments, he saw a pair of tears, one on his cheek, and one on his sisters.

“Eupie…”

“B… brother-”

Lelouch’s eyes widened as she replied, wondering how much autonomy or awareness she really had, his pupils shrinking before her arm jerked and his eyelids scrunched shut in pain as the 7mm round punctured his breast, surgically piercing through his meaty insides, worming its red hot way through his ribs and lungs, boiling the air in his chest like a pressure cooker buried in his heart as it finally left his back, having scraped through his insides like a pig being prepared for serving. It was excruciating, like lava dropped through a narrow hole in his body that was then left to permeate.

His legs stuttered as he entered shock, before his left one gave way altogether, falling back,
slamming against the wall moments before his bottom slid to the floor. He let out a gasp of air that seemed eager to escape from the bowels of his chest, bursting out like captives freed by the hole Euphemia had blown open in him.

His vision seemed somewhat more distant all of a sudden, unfocused and in a narrow frame, like a third person perspective. With the sudden numbing of his torso, it almost seemed as if he was watching a television replay of Euphemia, eyes wide in horror, turning to Kallen and shooting her leg like a marionette. To what degree was she aware of what she was doing?

To what degree was Lelouch aware? He could barely raise his hand in protest as blood spilled over his lapel. All he could do was watch disconnected in physicality as Kallen gripped the edge of her table, holding herself up to avoid leaning on her broken leg, before coming down on Euphemia with a nearby book, knocking her out cold. He gritted his teeth and braced his legs, actions which seemed to claw his vision forward to fill the frame. On this, he tensed up, and put all his effort into his elbows to push off against the wall. There was no real strategy, but it was move or slip into unconsciousness.

Meanwhile, Kallen had managed to reach a hobbling state where she could navigate the room with some difficulty. Seeming eager to leave, she briefly paused as she passed his body, now lying flat for his efforts. Hearing a sigh barely register, he struggled to make out her conciliatory words above his struggling breaths.

“I admired you. I really did. Your attitude more than anything else, a silly hang up, but as you told me, that is critical. Today, the lesson has come full circle, as it is applied on its teacher. Goodbye Lelouch, and thank you for your help. If anything, I wish you a quick death, free of much more pain than you have yet experienced. I do not hate you, but you must be gone. We must cast off all shackles to win…”

As she turned to go, even in Lelouch's now delirious state he could swear he heard her choke slightly on her last sentence. Regret? He cared not. He honestly had bigger concerns as to whether Kallen regretted having to kill her inspiration. As far as he was concerned, she could rot in hell.

As Lelouch sank lower and lower, the sadness and disappointment he had earlier felt grew to anger. Damn guns, damn plots, damn Zero, all these curses laced with plenty of expletives hurtled through his consciousness, projected towards his view of the ceiling. All this work, to die for nothing? Bloody well not.

As he grew into a frothing fury, his mind seemed to focus, as resolution returned to his mind, ironically through the passion of a single emotion, where clarity was rarely sought: rage.

Come hell or high water, he was leaving this room.

Muscles strained to tensilities even Suzaku’s training had failed to draw from him, he gripped a vertical railing by the entryway, and with all his might hailed his meagre weight along the ground, all the while concentrating on how much he hated Kallen Stadtfeld.

Hauling himself along the floor, Lelouch grunted and roared, keeping himself in the proper frame of mind as he left crimson stains along the hard black floor. He picked up some speed, though he very quickly began to feel significant strain on his heart and was forced to stop and pant.

Each breath hurt, even in his numbed state, as air rushed in to greet his tattered airways.

“No…”
He'd lost his momentum. All his energy was dedicated to the repetition of restoring air to his blood, ever increasing in pained difficulty. He could barely spare the air to cry out, a final complaint issued to the world at large, a last angry roar at the ceiling, emptying his lungs of spit and flecks of blood in a concluding expression of anger.

He was going to die here in this side corridor with empty lungs and a shattered dream.

“Lelouch!”

It was a distant voice, and tinny, like a desperate transmission over a bad radio, and Lelouch didn't twitch even as he heart skipped several beats in what he knew to be foolish hope. It was the last throes of his increasingly desperate psyche, he knew, that clung on, even inventing voices.

“Lelouch!”

Suddenly, there was a dull thud by his ear, and a blurred face obscured his vision, his eyes defiantly refusing to bring the interloper into focus. His lips pursed briefly as he became aware he was being lifted, blood splotching either side of his suit, smearing the cuffs of the man blocking the wound.

“Su…”

The Japanese teen silenced him as he manoeuvred him onto his back, combining the pressure of his own body weight with the acceleration of gravity to clot the blood flow, carrying him like a child for his sins.

“Ti… mme..”

Though Lelouch was far from out of the woods, he began to think a little more positive, not in outcome but in hope for the potential of others outside himself. Suzaku in a way reminded him that there were others within the cause who would fight, others than himself to rely on. But it would be nothing short of a moral failure to not, in his last moments of life, warn them.

“It's 20 past 12.”

Even if he didn't live, they could.

“R...run…”

Suzaku turned his head back to his passenger, uncertain of what Lelouch had meant by his statement, before the world exploded into fierce light, and Lelouch fell into uncertain sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Very touch and go. Alas, we must end it here. Incidentally, for those keeping score at home in real time, this Chapter marks a noteworthy milestone; I finally made a damn header image to go with this story. At 75000 words in.

Go me.

However, today we meet the conclusion of many plot lines. Kallen’s cover has been blown, and this time she can't Geass her way out. Villetta’s arc, dating back to Zero's
first appearance, has now been made clear, and the subterfuge of the last few Chapters has become a fight to the finish. However, while many arcs come to a close this Chapter, does Lelouch’s? What was his plan? How did it go so wrong?

All that and more will be revealed in the next Chapter, The Guns of Hokkaido. See you then, wear bullet proof armour just to be safe, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Suzaku barely heard Lelouch's last whisper, hoarse and shallow for a lack of air, before an all consuming whistling noise filled the air, followed by impossibly loud bangs above his head, crackling in rhythmic tunes like Gods firecrackers. The explosions of light and fierce noise filled his skull with stunning static, as his eardrums nearly burst. He hit the floor, collapsing under the shaking stadium as Lelouch's dead weight fell on top of him. He peeked over his shoulder, seeing Lelouch's pained yet closed face, and catching glimpses of the roof of the arena falling.

Spitting into the dark floor as a second barrage of artillery hit, this time directly in the centre stadium straight in front of Suzaku, who watched as the explosive batteries tore detonated in high pitched screams and blinding light, tearing chunks through nearby Knightmares seeking cover. Putting a hand over his face, Suzaku propped himself up on his right knee, motivated by a single thought as he balanced Lelouch, now fully limp, on his back.

'Can't stay here.'

Pushing off with his left leg, he stood up, back arched as he bore the dying Britannian Prince forward through the shrapnel, flinging by his overwhelmed ears in pops and shallow bangs as he trudged forward through the chaos. The end of the second artillery barrage gave little respite beyond a clear view ahead for a brief moment, a display of body parts at odd resting places, far away from their owners and hosts, whose inner organs seemed to have become one with the battered soil, sprayed finely as if carefully filtered by a master gardener hoping to cultivate fine soil, except one that made the bizarre decision to use intestines and blood as fertilisers. There was not a single living soul on that newly harvested field.

With that grim image painted in Suzaku's brain forever, the shelling resumed. This all reminded him too much of the day at the sea, too much. He moved on, hauling himself by strained thighs past the explosions he had grown numb to that ate at the superstructure. At this point, all he needed was cover.

Following the eternal wait for the third barrage to conclude, by which time his ears had been shattered and all he could hear was white noise, he raised his arm, still in its cast amazingly, before seeking a path through the bleachers and out the side entrance, waddling under Lelouch's mass, which seemed to grow a kilogram for every step forward. He didn't check himself for wounds as he entered the open hallway out of the East side of the stadium, determined to not lose what little momentum he had.

The light ahead was blinding, the sun just low enough over the ocean ahead to block his vision of what was in all likelihood more destruction. Then, suddenly, a black line interrupted the yellow beam, before growing, as Suzaku realised it was a man, running towards them, shouting indecipherable words, before Suzaku's legs finally gave way under his own weight. He fell aside,
Lelouch's body bearing the brunt of the impact as the man grabbed him by the shoulders and turned Suzaku by the torso to face him. As the glare fell away, he saw it was the Knight, Guilford, in the height of emotion.

"Lelouch…"

Lelouch grunted, apparently having returned to consciousness. Whether this was good or bad was beyond Suzaku's limited imagination, given his shallow, hurried breathing and look of indescribable pain. Nonetheless, a true Knight, he asked "What happened to Euphemia?", very obviously torn up about losing his charge on the first event they were out.

"Safe- as any 'us…" Lelouch struggled, pointing doggedly back towards the room they met in. Suzaku understood what he meant to be that she was safe in the secure room designed to withstand the pressure. Lelouch and himself only left to seek medical help.

Guilford, with some hesitation, finally nodded, likely believing that Lelouch would have an emotional responsibility to ensure Euphemia was safe. While this was naïve on Guilford's part, if there was ever an example where Lelouch would care for people outside himself, it was Nunnally and Euphemia.

"We need to stop the artillery." Suzaku yelled as the fourth barrage began. Guilford nodded, taking Lelouch's angry weight as they hobbled towards what appeared to Suzaku to be a budget command centre, however he didn't comment as they hauled Lelouch aboard by a inner stairwell that opened up in its hull, swallowing them up to safety. They were hurried to the Central Command room, as Lelouch was taken from out of their arms and put in the cradling embrace of a comfortable chair and a pair of medics.

"Where's Zero?" Suzaku wheezed, freshly relieved, from Lelouch's weight and now worrying about more important things. Guilford answered quickly with "He ran out with the Black Knights covering, he's working with an advance group of what appears to be the Chinese Armed Forces."

"She." Lelouch hacked out in a fit of bloody coughs, however while his note was observed, it was not responded to as Guilford explained further "It appears they made an advanced landing in Hokkaido, abetted by the Black Knights who then went south and caught us with long range artillery."

Turning to his most senior subordinate, which given the strained chain of command it took Guilford a moment to work out who it was, he ordered "Launch long range soft missiles at the artillery bases to cover our launch. You have command."

Suzaku paused, before realising what was happening and stopping the bespectacled Knight by the arm and demanding "What are you doing?"

It was Guilford's turn to pause, as he visibly realised Suzaku, as what was technically a foreign dignitary, was not within his jurisdiction to command. Realising he'd have to explain himself, he sighed and spoke firmly "I will get Euphemia out, as is my duty. Don't worry, I'll be back in a moment."

"Uncon… but fie…” Lelouch struggled, to which Guilford nodded in thanks before finally departing. As he ventured back out, the Britannian officers exchanged uncertain looks, their logic obvious. While they were uncertain about Suzaku, they trusted Euphemia, who trusted both Guilford and Lelouch, both Brits, who trusted Suzaku to some degree or another. Still, they performed their orders with diligence, spraying rockets up in bright arcs, blazing trails thrice their fuselage lengths as they hit the ground and exploded like water balloons of fire, wreaking havoc on
the exposed big guns.

With the artillery stopping to recover itself, Suzaku watched from above as Guilford ran from cover to cover and into the arena to recover Euphemia. Satisfied, he looked back to Lelouch, who looked more than a little angry on top of his near mortal wounds while being crawled over by the two doctors, tried to sit up in his chair as he hissed "Statu- chhack"

Suzaku wasn't sure how to interpret the last series of chokes and noises, however on behalf of his struggling colleague he asked "What's the status of combat?"

"There are several armoured Battalions currently engaged by a combination of Chinese and Black Knights forces."

"Spe... cif-clly.."

Somewhat put off by being instructed by a man with more hole than chest, the man in the front responded slowly "It… it appears the brunt of the fighting is in Ibaraki, with a late thrust by a second Black Knight Division in Chiba, a flank."

Now watching Lelouch carefully, Suzaku noted his focused eyes taking pains notes of the map in between winces. Lelouch was either on to something, or up to something. Perhaps both. Nonetheless, he spoke again, voice harsh like Brian Blessed after a fourth pint. "Diversion… reserve unit to Na-"

Lelouch broke into a fit of coughs before finishing "Nagano.", pointing towards the Western Province that was not seeing combat. "There.". Suzaku's eyes narrowed, as a staffer expressed concern "Our Sakuradite reserves are low, we can hardly mobilise as is. We can't send our Knightmares around on a hunch. Your strikes have sent our stocks to next to nothing, are you-"

"I know. I did it." Lelouch snarled, voice suddenly nasally, as his makeshift surgeons temporarily patched him. "But I also know Zero, and she is no chess player. Her flank… it is her plan."

Suzaku understood his friend was having serious trouble speaking, but even so, he was dubious. His words made little sense, beyond their most basic interpretation. Apparently, from what Lelouch knew of Zero, which was in itself cast into doubt by how severely the plan had backfired, it seemed to him obvious Zero would begin a pincer movement from the North West.

"I'm sorry, we can't."

Lelouch, both furious and in agony, swore several expletives shades beyond even his usual tinted language. He moved about in his chair so much that the first doctor on hand attempted to restrain him, however he calmed and said to Suzaku "Where's Ohgi?" in a mix of splutters and pauses.

Suzaku paused. Ohgi was in charge of their defence forces, and had been training Knightmare Pilots for the guts of two weeks. The GN 102's they had designed with Reuben then later committed major fraud with were designed to be simple and easy to learn, with oodles of torque and foolproof controls, and if there ever was an instance to use them, this was it.

Furthermore, with regards to Ohgi, he distinctly recalled Lelouch mention that, without his presence, it had been determined that they answered to the Prime Minister, or him. For a brief moment, Suzaku despised Lelouch for giving him that trigger. He understood why he had gone behind his back; Lelouch had likely thought that Suzaku would oppose the move on the simple basis that Suzaku hated armies. Suzaku did indeed hate armies, but countries did need them. He'd rather not be involved, and they needed to be performed ethically, but in handing off this disaster to
Suzaku, the Prime Minister could hardly help but hate the man bleeding into the chair. Not for lying, but for abandoning him with the keys to the car as it flew off the cliff.

Scowling, he pulled out his phone and scowled at it, as if his the solution to his angst might be found in it, all the while well aware Lelouch was staring at his back, likely disappointed.

At least they shared that; disappointment. Sighing, he lifted his phone and selected the second number on speed dial slowly, as if signing his own death warrant.

"Ohgi?"

"Suzaku! Praise, I couldn't get through. The Black Knights are on us, we're in the storage centres. We'll get going on your call!"

After a moment's final hesitation, Suzaku hopped off the cliff and replied "Clear them out of the streets, and then be ready to act on further orders. We have intel towards attacks from the North West."

After an affirmation from Ohgi, Suzaku hung up and put him onto the general Britannian comm, before sitting in a side chair. If he was going to lead Japan, he knew he had to get over himself, and he had every intention of doing so, however this realisation that his convictions and ambitions towards peaceful revolution had been shattered by the realpolitik of forces outside his control made him furious, and, with Lelouch bleeding out onto the seat next to him, he had his moral punching bag.

He would get Zero, and he would see her hanged.

With the reserves of Sakuradite and an eager militia, motivated by the immediate and real military threat as opposed to a long drawn out occupation, the new army burst out of the gate at just past one, having rallied to Ohgi’s summons by the stroke of one. They caught the Black Knights completely by surprise, who assumed they had the Britannians on the ropes and that the Provisional Government were all politicians with no trousers, and so they proceeded through the ghettos with little caution.

They paid for this grievous error, for as soon as the Republican Army roused itself, they were caught completely by surprise. Springing up simultaneously at strategic points throughout the ghetto, they set upon the Knightmare formations of the Black Knights from all sides in small groups of light, agile Frames numbering between 2 and 4, wreaking havoc in their communication lines and infantry support with surprise strikes over a wide area within a matter of moments.

Which, Ohgi supposed, was to be expected when one put a former terrorist leader in charge of a small military force. It struck him as noteworthy that the Black Knights positioned themselves very conventionally, cautiously advancing up a front with little depth. This was good for keeping track of front lines, which was why it was employed on strategic levels, however it was predictable. His hypothesis largely revolved around the idea that perhaps Zero was otherwise engaged, and the Chinese would thus be directing the combat. Perhaps they were saving their master strike for the flank Suzaku was warning about.

Ohgi chuckled darkly. The legitimate military were fighting like terrorists, and the terrorists were fighting like a legitimate army. He could envision in his mind's eye the depth and ferocity of Suzaku's scowl at that fact.

This was one issue that Ohgi found himself more in agreement with Lelouch; Suzaku was far too
caught up in appearances and vague ideas to fully appreciate policy, however Lelouch's near sociopathy was not exactly ideal. In many ways, Ohgi was a balancing act, a pragmatic, yet empathetic moderate, perfect for a delicate position such as commander of the military.

That unfortunate challenge aside, Ohgi's strategy of defence in depth with surprise strikes and superior initiative paying dividends as they confused and eventually encircled the opposition, forcing them to capitulate with little decisive combat due to their swift disruption of logistical lines. Ohgi left a small detachment to sort out the captured terrorists, appearing mightily disgruntled as they stepped down from their Knightmares to surrender, before taking the bulk of his force and marching towards Nagano on Suzaku's continued orders.

"Lelouch is insisting they're planning a flank. Engage them from the front and wait for reinforcements."

Ohgi affirmed his confirmation, before throttling up to a cruise and thinking. Lelouch being the brains behind strategy, particularly given the framing Suzaku presented, was not unusual in and of itself, but the way in which Suzaku expressed it, an unknowing vessel that was communicating Lelouch's ideas without understanding why concerned him. While the three of them had gone out of their way to ensure a separation of powers, Lelouch's domineering personality remained a constant presence.

Still, he had been the first to concede the need for such a government, and had been policy oriented from the beginning. Lelouch was not his father, and Ohgi felt bad for thinking of the pair in similar lights.

Lelouch was not a bad person.

"Ohgi, you're close, you're… a few hundred meters, entrench."

The Minister nodded, ordering his troops to hunker down and take fortified positions. He was in one of the rear Knightmares, and filed up behind a pair taking cover in a ruined brick building.

"They won't be expecting any resistance until they reach the city, but surprise requires you to strike as soon as you can."

"ETA?"

Ohgi overheard Suzaku confer with a concerningly distressed Lelouch, before worrying about Lelouch and the extent of his gunshot wound. Nonetheless, Suzaku hurriedly responded "Any second now, arms ready."

Ohgi relayed this order, and his team of Frames aimed their autocannons up the small hill, using it to hide in anticipation of the whirring engines that began to ramp up in volume. The cannons were light, and didn't have the punch or the rate of fire of the Luminous based cannons, but with angling they would do plenty of work against the mediocre armour. Sometimes, excesses of technology simply didn't bring the worthwhile advantages.

The first of the Black Knights' Knightmare crested the hill, and the entire entrenched force opened fire. Aiming for the normally obscured lower glacis, which were sparsely armoured to save weight and now front and centre due to being slightly below it, the 30mm cannon tore through the underplates of the opposing Frames with ease. After the first dozen fell to the surprise attack from the trough, the flow stopped, and Ohgi reported the engagement.

The sounds of triumph and smugness erupted on the far end of the radio, before an exasperated
Suzaku explained "We were right. Push your advantage now they're disorganised, you'll be relieved soon."

Ohgi acted on these orders immediately, mounting the crest and pushing forwards, using speed and maneuverability to deny the enemy the ability to counterattack effectively as they pushed north through the stone hills and fields of grass. After several hours of light fighting at range against disorganized foes, they were met at Fukushima several miles into the push by heavier, Britannian armour that could tank more damage to take over the brunt of the attack. With the modified Sutherlands at the head, the last few fortifications by the Hokkaido straits had fallen by sundown, and the white flag was raised from the naval forces that had organized the opposition forces, now trapped. It was a credit to the initiative and communication between two different forces fighting a third party, as well as an ability to maintain superior intelligence and awareness in chaotic circumstances.

Ohgi sat in his Knightmare, cockpit propped open as the prisoners were marched out of the fortifications. Though the initial chaos had limited their knowledge of what was happening, by this time most of what had gone on had become clear. The Black Knights had coordinated with the Chinese Federation to use the meeting as a distraction to achieve a military victory. While it was a good plan on their part, it was foiled by Lelouch's foresight and the Provisional Government's preparations. Now, the Black Knights were seen to have been negotiating in bad faith, they would not be allowed back into negotiations. Now, the Britannians were negotiating exclusively with the Provisional Government, who could now set the agenda.

With the exception of Lelouch getting shot and nearly dying, it could hardly have gone better for the new Government. Now, the Britannians would be obligated to resume talks, however it would just be them and the Japanese politicians, a more even playing field, and one that would not have to accommodate terrorists.

Suzaku, having sorted out a proper surgeon for Lelouch, stood on the ground beside Ohgi, surveying the line with narrow, angry eyes. Looking down from his leather seat, Ohgi saw a ferocity and bitterness in Suzaku's eyes. From the privacy of his Knightmare cockpit, his face hidden from the Prime Minister by seven inches of reinforced glass, Ohgi shook his head at his colleagues display of emotion. The Defence Minister was himself conflicted, having seen in Lelouch's relationship with Rivalz, among others, what could happen when one tunnel visioned, however he felt that Suzaku had taken this too far, getting caught up in flights of romanticised emotion.

Certainly, it was better than the tunnel vision his father had experienced.

Suddenly, just as Ohgi focused on his Prime Minister more out of curiosity, he saw the teens eyes light up in surprise, before he leapt forward wholesale. Ohgi only stood to shout "Stop!" by the time Suzaku had reached the grim marching line, such was his colleagues speed, as the teen grabbed a woman out of the crowd, red hair and Britannian skin tone. Suzaku pulled her out, and holding her by the neck, angrily shouted out at the captured Black Knight, who Ohgi suddenly recognised.

"YOU!"

Chapter End Notes
And thus, we arrive at the end of the penultimate Arc of R1, and in this chapter the stage is set for our characters to reap the fruits of their labours. However, as they are divided by differing goals, ideology and emotion, can they coordinate and work together against Britannia's greatest weapon; the diplomat? Of course, this new arena seems tailor made for our scheming head of the Exchequer, however his wound will mean he's stuck at home while his protégés go to bat for their freedom.

In terms of this Chapter, while I attempted to insert some action and combat, I have long come to terms with the fact it is not my realm of literary expertise. On a practical level, I tried to set out Lelouch and Kallen's plan as best I could from the point of view of other characters. With this, we can gain a full appreciation for the scenario in which the Provisional Government's delegation will find themselves when meeting alone with the Britannians; as being far more equal in status than terrorists could ever be. And so, we now conclude Arc 5, and move on to the sixth Arc, Definitions Of Freedom, beginning with Chapter 21, Just Like You Do, after a brief flashback to elaborate on what just happened. Until then, be safe, have a backup plan, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
Lelouch sat alone in the quiet, dark room with his phone and his thoughts, his violet eyes scanning sheets of paper as his working evening drew to a lazy close. The room was dusty in spite of frequent use, forming a decidedly brown aesthetic and sepia-tic atmosphere in his upstairs office.

However, Lelouch's mind did not match its surroundings, as the Minister found himself in an embattled state, furiously attempting to resolve his sisters latest puzzle over this Specially Administered Zone.

Leave it to her to blindside him so thoroughly, he thought. It seemed thoroughly appropriate that it would be Euphemia that dealt such an unusual hand, in perhaps a far more politically prudent move than even Schneizel could formulate. It was her specialty, like a Knight flying about the board and happening across the King, a stallion running wild.

And yet, her pure heart prevented her from tripping over her own feet, or falling into the wrong stratagem out of anything other than naivety. It was for this reason he had failed to anticipate this move, even though it was nominally the result they had wanted.

The question of Republicanism, of national sovereignty, was intentionally fudged from the very beginning. While they had declared themselves a Republic, it was understood by most in the Parliament on some level or another that, especially given the origins of YuaiKai as an entity that rejected the "My Country for its own sake." attitude held by other anti-Britannian groups, they were willing to capitulate the idea of full political independence for financial independence. And so, they had accepted a sort of Home Rule, or local Parliament while still under the yoke of Charles Zi Britannia, would be acceptable as terms for ending the strike.

He hadn't expected that to be the opening offer, that it would be made by Euphemia, or that it would happen so early. The latter, he supposed, had something to do with a shortage of Sakuradite reserves following its crash in value in the recession they caused combined with their brigading of the largest source of said Sakuradite forcing them to negotiate some ceasefire. That was the idea, however the speed with which they capitulated was nonetheless surprising, if welcome.

However, these were just preliminary talks she had proposed, and with a serious problem; the Black Knights were also invited. This was an unmitigated catastrophe, as they would undoubtedly make their own demands and Lelouch would be forced to compromise with them in ways he could only imagine.

Allowing those terrorists to perhaps form the police force of the new semi-autonomous region, or even their military, or, God forbid, be an equal power centre, another branch of Government, that was a fundamentally repulsive idea, that they should earn a seat at their table, after the things they had done, would represent the most fundamental level of cheating that must exist in this world. This 'Dvoyevlastiye' was not acceptable.

And therein lay the fundamental question to be addressed, how to remove the Black Knights from the negotiations. It would certainly require a sort of Machiavellian trick, as to demand it directly would be nothing shy of ridiculous and weak and would be laughed out with no delay, only serving to minimise the Provisional Government and their associated professionalism.
And yet, meeting with the Black Knights was still not acceptable for reasons he had already mentally laid out. Thus, a controversy had to be created that would force them to be removed by the disgusted Britannians who would then recognise the Black Knights as too abhorrent to allow at the negotiations.

It would thus be prudent for the Black Knights to engage in a new level of dirty tricks, an escalation in dastardly tactics. Getting them to do this was not an issue, as he still had Ohgi’s radio which was proven in its value by Suzaku, who had used it to confirm the link between Zero and Ohgi’s group. He wouldn’t use the same radio, but he could set a new one to the same frequency. However, while he grasped the how, he still pondered over how to approach the challenge.

What would disgust the Britannians so thoroughly they would henceforth refuse to even see them? This was a far line to reach, as even in spite of all their terrorism, they still had a seat at the table, understandably. To Lelouch, his was not a question of their objective goodness or badness, or at least he would claim. What would repulse the Britannians?

Traitorship, betrayal, dishonesty, backstabbing. Even after so many years in dedicated opposition, in dubious battle, the words rang clear and instantly in every corner of his mind as the repulsive values held by the inferiors, the numbers, et cetera. How could the perception of reach new lows? Backstabbing of a new sort?

No, not backstabbing, but more; going towards a different host, a more active rejection than a declaration of independence, which would serve as an announcement of malintent. With a fresh spring in his step, he leapt to his phone, contacting Kirihara, being the most senior of his acquaintances, hoping the man would have any contacts within the Chinese Government or Military from his time in the Six Houses.

It was a short conversation, the elderly rebel in spirit handing the details over with a little concern, which Lelouch waved off. This was fine, he promised. He wouldn't use them to betray the Government, its aims or its forthcoming events.

Someone else would.

"Hello? Who is this?"

Perfect, Lelouch thought, as he replied "A comrade in arms, a sympathiser, in China."

There was a brief pause, before the female voice rose up on the line again, asking "Is there something you want?"

"It is more a case of me having a tool to offer the greatest agent of liberation of our generation." Lelouch gushed, putting on his best act, without appearing dumb, which was tricky. If Zero took this Chinese defector for an imbecile, this conversation would go nowhere, but he had to prove loyalty to Zero and the Black Knights.

"That tool being?"

Lelouch could hardly stop himself from rocking back in his chair, pumping his fists in celebration as he explained "As I alluded to, I am currently conscripted into the Officer Corps of the Chinese Armed Forces, and have the contact details of several high ranking officials, and if I were you, I would certainly make use of such a potential ally."

"And if you were me, how would you apply this newfound capacity?"

It was all Lelouch could do to not laugh in bellowing, high pitched tones befitting a television
villain. Zero was buying into his trap so easily! But the last step was still a leap. The key was to deceive the Knight of Justice.

"If I were you, I would bear in mind the Chinese Federation is certainly no friend to Britannia, think Transamur and Sakhalin, currently occupied by Britannian Russia, and would be more than happy to help you gain a foothold. However, to achieve military victory on the... Home Islands, as you refer to them, we would have to move at a time where they do not expect attack, and have their forces tied up elsewhere."

"Supposing we launched during the peace accords?"

This was the final triumph. True manipulation, Lelouch knew, lay not in convincing your target of a point, but getting them to think of it themselves. In this, Lelouch could not envisage greater success.

"That sounds excellent. Perhaps beginning from the west, with a flank from the northeast?"

"That sounds like an excellent strategy to start with. I shall discuss it further with your superiors."

Lelouch grinned as he set the radio down beside Ohgi’s, whispering to the brown dust almost silently as the sun dipped over China, far, far away. The Chinese would leap at the opportunity to deny Britannians their panhandle, particularly with their military distracted with the opening of the SAZ. Then, Lelouch, with intricate knowledge of the plans, would lead Ohgi’s forces to victory, boosting the Provisional Government’s prestige and discrediting the Black Knights in the eyes of the Britannians, who after seeing them destroy the negotiations would recognise them for the duplicitous scoundrels they were.

"You shall."
Lelouch gritted his teeth as the surgeon wiped his chest, covered in blood and other substances with a wet cloth, clearing away the layers of foul, sticky half-liquids and exposing what had become, with a week’s treatment and surgery, a pockmark where Euphemia had shot him. For all the pain it caused him it was a humble wound, a scar that could be missed at a glance of Lelouch’s modest torso, just up and to the right of the depression between his lungs marking out his heart.

“There we are, Your Majesty.” the surgeon nodded, hiding his cloth like an embarrassing secret. “I’ll leave you be.”

“Lamperouge is fine.”

The man was Britannian, and while trained and reserved for royals and their discretion, he clearly was not sure what to think of the teen before him. Either way, the doctor nodded to confirm the statement, which Lelouch thanked him out of a bizarre respect for what was still unquestionably a damn good doctor.

Even now, with sharp painful breaths and a projected months sentence in hospital, the Minister acknowledged he was incredibly fortunate. A few inches down, a few degrees of differing aim from his half sister, and he would have perished, his scheme to tie Kallen to the Chinese for naught.

He hadn't even attempted to consider the ramifications of Kallen, with her hypnotic abilities, being Zero. All he knew was that the Provisional Japanese Government had her in custody, and there would be a legal fight over which Government got the pleasure of prosecuting her.

However, one thing he had considered very deeply over the course of his bizarre, drug fuelled week of surgeries was Euphemia. From what little information he could scrounge from his surgeon and his quiet nurses, she had recovered from minor head injuries and was eager to see him, though both Lelouch, feeling both introspective and wracked with pain, and the doctor agreed it was too early for visitors with such vigor. However, as stated he had been thinking very deeply about her and had even formed an internal theory as to how he had survived.

He had noted when Euphemia shot at him her hand jerked upwards at the last moment. It was inconceivable that a member of the Royal Family had not had some degree of marksman training, and to off Lelouch at that range would take no marksman. Thus, he concluded Euphemia, whether by some flaw in Kallens power or sheer force of will, resisted the order. His survival was owed to Euphemia’s strength. And Suzaku's, but that was a more straightforward matter.

On the topic of the Prime Minister, he had been in twice to see him in spite of protestations.
Lelouch couldn't remember much about the first instance, though apparently Suzaku was in a stormy mood. He recalled the second visit more clearly, Suzaku informing him of what happened in the battle after he had been shot, though due to Lelouch’s condition at the time, it had been a one-sided conversation. In fairness to the man, from Suzaku’s retelling it did appear he had done a bang up job executing the last stage of his plan and defeating the Sino-Black Knights coalition, ensuring the Black Knights were out of negotiations, and they had several new bargaining chips, including the fate of Zero and a debt of protection.

Which, Lelouch determined, was worth getting shot for.

Apparently, to Lelouch's amusement yet not to his surprise, the Chinese officials in the expansive Government had distanced themselves from the “rogue Generals” that “did not represent the Government, and were acting illegally.”. While it was clear they would be singing different tunes if victory had been achieved, both Britannia and Kururugi’s Cabinet were more than happy to let them stew, having their own differences to settle.

As Lelouch sat, his bare, flat front exposed to the cool air of the Royal College of Surgeons, there was a knock on his door, as a nurse slipped her head in and mentioned “There’s a pair of gentlemen insisting on seeing you Your Majesty, your elder brother and the other Prime Minister… your colleague.”

Lelouch could hardly stop himself from chuckling in spite of his tight chest, which suffocated his breath like a stuck pig. Not only did the nurse have an amusing unwillingness to address Suzaku properly, but it occurred to him both his brother and his friend both held the same technical position in their respective Governments. Both Suzaku and Schneizel were Prime Ministers. It also brought him great amusement to consider the conversations the two very different men would have in the waiting room.

“Schneizel first.” Lelouch announced, hoping to get the likely substantive visit out of the way first. While Schneizel was hardly a man stricken by sudden bursts of familial affection, it was very likely that Suzaku would want to discuss policy for the upcoming negotiations for the S.A.Z, which he could not attend himself for obvious medical reasons. Believing the more important meeting should go first, Lelouch was satisfied with his choice as the tall, blonde man stepped inside, seeming to absorb the space in the room unto himself without even intending to do so. Even more than Lelouch, Schneizel was an enrapturing figure that demanded attention, even when performing mundane activities such as examining the state of the medical apparatus by Lelouch’s bed.

“Hmm.” Schneizel quietly noised as he read Lelouch’s lifeline like a menu, his eyes practically glazed as he scanned over the doctor's handwritten notes.

“How’s Kanon?”

“He is well. Regrettably, he couldn’t see you or Euphie, though he passes on his wishes for a speedy recovery. He’s busy setting up for the new conferences you see.”

“Is father still delegating?”

“More than ever.”

Lelouch sighed as he mulled over this information. Schneizel was easily the most dangerous man in the world by Lelouch’s admittedly narrow measure, more focused and less insane than their father and less emotionally charged than Cornelia. However, he had long acknowledged that Schneizel had his own weaknesses, including a certain apathy born out of a bizarre internal nihilism that led him to be careless towards his own person. As such, he realised Schneizel could be disarmingly
open, and would react well to that in turn. Given that Schneizel had what was in Lelouch’s view a fatal disregard for the personal over the geopolitical, he made for a good acquaintance to pick the brain of. He just had to take nothing personally.

Not that Lelouch had ever had the problem of taking things too personally.

“So, how are you finding Japan?”

“Dry. A lack of investment combined with our late brother’s lack of taste created an unfortunate atmosphere. On that topic, please ask your colleague to be less trite in future.” Schneizel drily commented.

Oh, Lelouch had missed Schneizel’s uncaring tones. While the master diplomat maintained himself in public, Lelouch drew much entertainment out of the intimate knowledge of how little he cared for any of them. It would be legitimately funny if it weren’t coming from arguably the most powerful person on Earth, with presence to match. However, Lelouch was relaxed, feeling more than qualified to spar.

“It’s a habit of his, but someone has to keep our ships moral anchor in check. Its why you lost, you know.”

“I lost, like I was intricately involved.”

“I would be amazed to learn you did not see what was happening, at the very least from a distance.”

“Be amazed. I was more focused on the bigger economic picture in Britannia. I felt Area 11 was secure under Cornelia, given that at the time the terrorists were of a more traditional nature, rather than gold hoarders and Thomas Paine enthusiasts sitting in the ghetto playing monopoly.”

“I am suitably amazed. I’ll have you know Montesquieu was a far better writer.”

“No less heretical, and not of Britannian origin to boot.”

“It’s why I like him. A Frenchman, coming up with a better, more representative yet more stable form of government than you managed. It says something about supposed Britannian superiority.”

“We once owned France.”

“Your use of the past tense is telling.”

Schneizel chuckled as he tapped at the desk, before Lelouch continued, curious now they were in a more private setting “You don’t… really believe that, eh? That nonsense of racial superiority?”

“It is the position of our government.” Schneizel replied uncaringly, not even turning his pale eyes to acknowledge the question, forcing Lelouch to cheekily reply “And is it your position, o’ bastion of reason and logic?”

“Wherever is needed.” Schneizel responded without a breath, continuing to look on. “Though, in private I will admit the propagation of that idea is more important than the idea itself.”

Lelouch leaned his head back into his pillow, satisfied. He had often seen demonstrable proof in his colleagues that they were fully capable, if a little shortsighted through naivety than anything else. Certainly, on a macro level one thing that could be undoubtedly determined from seven years in Japan was that none of the impoverished men and women of the ghetto held any more or less guilt than the despairing many of Britannia’s inner cities and squalor. It had struck him as amazing
that a government, though led by a vengeful, elderly manchild, but still manned by men like Schneizel, could ignore this. The confirmation his enemy was not that stupid brought a certain relief.

Schneizel of course could disclose this because for Lelouch to know it was no danger. It hinted at the fact that the political authority he wielded was not wielded blindly, which would theoretically intimidate Lelouch, though that was a reach. At the same time, there was little practical use for the information; it was for Lelouch’s personal satisfaction, nothing more, but absolutely nothing less.

“So, if we’re doing questions, it struck me as curious you chose a position of such low seniority within your own government? To use your own words, I would be amazed to learn you were not leading much of the efforts, not to buy into the… nonsense, as you put it, particularly on the financial and planning front.”

“It serves my purposes. Why don’t you execute a coup and become Emperor? Similar logic.”

It was a slight flanderization to say it was that simple or that brief. Lelouch had aspirations towards power, but he also had policy goals he would really rather put a different face to in the long term. After a moment's thought, Schneizel responded “Watch this space, but I see your point. You’d have done well if you’d came back to Britannia. I still doubt you wouldn’t want to get even with your father, perhaps sit opposite on the table of nation states.”

Lelouch pondered this, noting Schneizel's ambition creeping in briefly in his reply as well as the proposition he put forward. While it would be extremely satisfying, it was a long way down the road, and would be little more than gratification. Eventually, he countered “Would I? A lot of my bases would be covered by either you or Euphemia, to which point I would become a Kingmaker. Interesting, but certainly less than ideal. Here, I’ve cornered the market, as it were. Rather than appeal to the Empire, I’ve segregated Japan, so my appeal may be narrower. All I’ve done here in reality is gerrymander, if you want to look at it from an egotist viewpoint. Besides, I’m not a child anymore Schneizel.”

“Yes, you are.”

Lelouch, struggling to keep at his neck at an angle to still see Schneizel standing in the back corner of the room, pitched himself over and raised an eyebrow, responding with a simple “Oh?”

“You rejected the idea of coming back because being a lynchpin caught in a coalition with no real will of your own did not appeal to you. While I understand your point, you cannot deny that the only reasonable takeaway is that you appreciate autonomy in politics, which is more befitting an Emperor than a Prime Minister. I’d go so far to say we’re both in the wrong jobs.”

“Trite. Having some will and disliking the governmental systems of Britannia, as well as laterally acknowledging I would never have won is as far is as removed from delusions of power as you are from reality.” Lelouch snarkily replied

“I guess I won’t be seeing you in diplomatic meetings then.”

“Please. I have plenty on my plate with my… trite colleague.”

Schneizel shrugged. “Colour me surprised. In any case, I’m at the very least disappointed we won’t get to do this more often. I’ll leave you to your Prime Minister, Minister Lamperouge.”

“I’m free on Fridays, be sure to call for an online match.”

“It’s been too long. Just remember; you may be winning the Long War, but I'm here now, and
eventually you are going to have to step off the horse and govern.”

With a wave, Schneizel left him in silence, as Lelouch released a breath he hadn’t realise he had been holding. Schneizel scared the hell out of him, with presence like Charles and vision that pierced even the best lies. It was very often the case Schneizel would know more about you than you knew yourself, and combined with his callous, uncaring nature, it made for an incredibly uncomfortable atmosphere. Peeking at the mirror, he came to realise he had paled dramatically. Schneizel was so disarming yet so shockingly toward he could have hardly been helped from knocking the wind out of someone for coming in to arrange the flowers.

Of course there was a purpose. It was foolish for Lelouch to ever imagine otherwise. Schneizel had no ability to communicate without purpose, and the purpose for this meeting was clear; to put Lelouch on edge. He wouldn’t be at the conferences anymore, which suited Schneizel fine, but perhaps Lelouch passing on second hand intimidation would allow Schneizel to better dominate Suzaku when it came to brass tacks. It took Lelouch several moments to organise himself to the point where he could invite Suzaku in from the hall, who stepped inside far more leisurely than Schneizel had. Lelouch couldn’t let Suzaku be beaten by Schneizel.

“Get over here.”

“Good afternoon to you too.”

Lelouch sighed and leaned back as Suzaku stepped towards the foot of his bed, his arm fresh out his his cast, and dressed very well in his conference outfit. Lelouch nodded, saying “Congratulations on the cast.”

Suzaku smiled and nodded, rubbing his shoulder gracefully as he thanked Lelouch and added “We both took bullets, eh? So much for this peaceful resistance thing being better for our health. Nunnally was furious.”

Lelouch and Suzaku shared a chuckle, as Lelouch cast his mind briefly back towards his full sister. He liked to imagine she was still proud of him, even in spite of his ventures with Kallens trickery. He was being as moral as was feasible, while still bringing her the peaceful, free nation she had always hoped to live in. That, he believed, was why Schneizel was wrong. Lelouch recalled he had once told Suzaku that he fought “because no one else seems to bloody know how to”, and while he felt that was still the case to an extent, Nunnally in his mind was a critical factor in his continued fight. More than anything else, she served as an example of the weak that had to be protected from people like Charles, who scorned them. Such rhetoric would very obviously hit closer to home if you lived with such a loving, yet weak person who would be under such a direct threat in such a nation.

“So what did you need?”

Lelouch nodded, swiftly returning to the coming fight. It was critical he warn Suzaku of the potential consequences before he went up against an opponent he wasn’t sure his colleague could take on. Propping himself up in his bed by his elbows, he waved with his right forearm to gesture towards bringing Suzaku closer, beginning “I need you to listen very carefully. I’m not entirely sure what substances I’m on, and I just got massively spooked by my insane half brother, so I need you to keep my on track.”

Suzaku, taken aback by Lelouch’s burst of nervous energy, nodded vigorously, as Lelouch noted both of their breaths tick upwards in pace and volume. He took a moment to calm himself down, before rocking his head back slightly and affirming “You’re going to the conferences in Midway, right?”
“Yes, Ohgi and I. You would have gone too—”

“I get that, but when are you heading off?”

“First thing tomorrow.”

Lelouch sighed, losing the prior need for his urgency. He felt a hollow hunger, and there was a sugary energy that ran skin deep through him. While he felt like he could run at the speed of plane on energy, he also felt like he might faint at any moment. It was a bizarre sensation he didn’t enjoy. Nonetheless, he spoke more in more measured tones from then on, explaining “Okay, very good. Again, please listen carefully. I wish I could help more, but this will have to do.”

Taking a deep breath, he spoke faster “When you are in Britannia, speak to no media sources. Try and avoid making definitive statements outside the meeting room, and make your own notes.” Suzaku understood, as Lelouch ran through everything in his head. This was simply not enough time to prepare him, which sent him into yet further depths of nervous belly fire. Attempting to calm himself, he got to his central thesis, saying “Suzaku, Schneizel is the toughest opponent you will ever face, regardless of whatever fronts or fights you choose. I wouldn't wish Schneizel on my worst enemies, though partly because it's him. Nonetheless, be on your guard, analyse every word, and do not trust any deal he promises in private. He is only as good as the word he is willing to put before Cornelia, and barely that. Hold onto every point, no matter how trivial, especially if it is trivial, inflate its perceived value to the point where relinquishing it will gain you many concessions. Fight dirty, trick, deceive, lie. Do these things I know you hate to a man and an Empire who deserve it more than anyone else. For the love of God, do us well, and stay in touch.”

With that, and a few other pointers towards policy, Suzaku departed with appreciation for Lelouch’s almost personal concern. Indeed, Lelouch was worried on a very human level for Suzaku, and hoped all would go well. However, a guilty thought did occur to him.

He could hardly be blamed for a bad treaty out of a conference he couldn't attend.

Chapter End Notes

A guilty thought. Even as Lelouch is beginning to isolate himself from the other Ministers in his ambitions, he still feels like he needs to stick by them in the overall “doing the right thing” idea he has been nominally embracing over the story. We see him use Nunnally as justification for his rebellion, and even Schneizel points out he didn't take over as PM. And yet, there is that part of Lelouch that is always eyeing the crown. Eventually, he will decide between his outer creed and inner desires, however a decision that will be made without him is how Japan ought to be released from Britannia.

I can imagine it might hurt to miss Lelouch throw down verbally with the Britannian aristocracy, but don't underestimate Suzaku’s abilities to throw out a burn, even with Lelouch’s concern that he's not ready. In terms of plot, their separation here will prove to sow more discord between Lelouch and the others, as Suzaku and Ohgi are isolated from a Lelouch who is delivering instructions from a hospital bed without a full appreciation for what's going on. Plus, Suzaku and Ohgi deserve more Chapter time, straight up. This has felt like Lelouch’s story for some time, and while his arc is central, so is Suzaku's, and to a lesser degree Ohgi’s. We need to see them being
Ministerial before the timeskip to allow for a smooth transition into running a country efficiently after the timeskip. This timeskip by the way is happening at the end of this arc. Stay tuned.

On the topic of staying tuned, stick around for Chapter 22, Not In Kansas Anymore, coming soon. Until then, be well, be nice to your siblings, and be kind enough to leave a rating and review!

~Eth0
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty Two: Not In Kansas Anymore

Arc Six: Definitions Of Freedom

Opening: “Wave” - Lily

In his life, Suzaku had never left the Home Islands or embarked on a trip longer than a day or two by car, or in one exciting instance by helicopter. He had lived most of his life in the Greater Tokyo Area, and had never really given much thought to that fact. He had no contacts outside Japan, and Ashford Academy provided plenty an international flavour for his occasional wonderings. He was not used to departures very far afield, and yet he was loving every second 20000 feet above the ocean.

Suzaku leaned back into his leather seat as he enjoyed the experience of flying while tucking into a three course dinner of chicken with white wine sauce, definitely a Britannian dish but in conjunction with the flight to Midway on the small, personal business jet, a symbol that they were being taken very seriously.

In spite of that looming pressure, buttressed by Lelouch’s warning, Ohgi seemed to be enjoying himself as well, finishing off a small, bottled beer as they received the warning to prepare for touchdown. Suzaku, surprised by how swiftly they had crossed half the Pacific Ocean on the silky smooth ride cushioned by the occasional cloud, and as they came to rest with a flare and a squeal of brakes down the short island runway, he knew there was only one person to thank for this opportunity, someone who was waiting eagerly outside the plane as they disembarked and someone who he made certain to thank as soon as his feet touched ground.

“Princess! It’s wonderful to see you again!”

“The same Suzaku! It’s so great to see you hear! I was so worried when I woke up, it scared me silly!”

The reply was quick and genuine, as Euphemia pulled him into a tight embrace around his chest, swaying him wildly as Ohgi came up behind, chuckling at the truly explosive display of affection. Similarly, opposite the former teacher stood an amused Guilford, who maintained his composure with a brief press of his glasses. Briefly gazing past Euphemia’s shoulder to acknowledge the conscientious Knight with a nod, which the slender man returned in appreciation, Suzaku separated from Euphemia’s tight grip and said “Thank you again for this opportunity, I can’t imagine any of this was easy to arrange.”

“Oh, it was no issue Suzaku!” she smiled. “I mean, you did save my life after all, from Kusakabe! It was so brave, you didn’t even know me.”

Suzaku remembered it well, rubbing his shoulder before blushing embarrassedly, commenting “Ah, it was nothing. Not like there was much choice… hurt like hell though.”
They shared a chuckle at the memory, as Suzaku struggled to find words to continue the thought. He rubbed the back of his head awkwardly, as he found in an out of character manner that he lacked the words to continue, stammering which caused Euphemia to laugh even further.

“You’re shaking Suzaku! Calm down, we can’t have you go into the hall like that. Here, sit down here beside me first and clear your head.”

Suzaku attempted to protest as he was dragged towards a set of chairs by the entrance to the small airport and forcefully pushed down onto the foamy cushion, before, grinning ear to ear with approval, Euphemia sat decisively beside him, as the two older opposites slowly followed along, sharing a smile in side eye at Suzaku’s misfortune. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister unsuccessfully attempted to ward off the concerns of the Princess.

“Euphemia, I’m fine!”

“Please, we’re friends, call me Euphie.”

“I’ll note that… oh, Ohgi, thank goodness.”

Suzaku stood again after his brief supposed rest to recognise his rescuer, at the expense of a pouting ‘Euphie’, who eventually seemed to get over it and be content walking alongside the Japanese delegation, consisting of the Prime Minister, Defence Minister, and two stenographers whom Lelouch had insisted on. Euphemia and her associates were nominally neutral, however it was clear how she swung, while Schneizel led the Britannian delegates, who were waiting in another building. Procedures were due to begin tomorrow, and the rest of the day was for rest and to allow the participants to familiarise themselves with the facilities, which, according to Euphemia, amounted to a party.

“It will be so much fun!” she exclaimed as the crossed the sparse street to the hotel where the event was being hosted. Continuing, she explained in great detail how excited she was, causing Suzaku to feel smaller and smaller by the moment to the great amusement of everyone else. At the very least, he began to recover his confidence, commenting as they entered the main hallway, “After you, ma’am.”

“Oh, calm yourself, we’re friends.” Euphemia replied, waving off the overly formal Suzaku, who was left in an internal period of questioning as to what the hell was going on with him, however his brief panic was resolved by the arrival of panic of another sort as he heard Euphemia comment “Oh, hello sister!”

Suzaku’s blood ran cold as he turned to see Cornelia Li Britannia and Jeremiah Gottwald approaching in a restrained manner, dissonant from their faces which held nothing but disgust. While he doubted he would be caught speechless in the same fashion Euphemia had managed to render him, he was nonetheless not looking forward to this encounter.

If it were any consolation, which to Suzaku it was not, it did seem that Cornelia was no more eager to recognise the opposing party, seeming to turn away after staring at Suzaku and Ohgi briefly to scorn Euphemia, before awkwardly turning again as she met eyes with Guilford. Meanwhile, Jeremiah seemed perfectly content to glare holes into Suzaku, likely remembering the instance where he was knocked out when attempting to arrest the teenager. In short, the entire situation was incredibly awkward for all parties. It took Euphemia to try break the ice, adding “You know, I don’t think you’ve met Suzaku Cornelia!”

“Jeremiah has been an excellent character reference. I know everything I need to about Suzaku.”
The man in question sighed, somewhat deflated. This represented what Euphemia and Lelouch had both occasionally referenced in regards to Cornelia, a certain ignorance beyond initial assumptions. What made it more annoying was that she was behind the curve of Britannian policy, which now recognised to a small extent the Provisional Government. This was just a personal grudge, though whether it was against Suzaku in particular or part of the overall anti-Japanese attitude she held remained to be seen.

Still, in credit to her, Euphemia tried again, insisting “I've no doubt it was a misunderstanding. I've known Suzaku to be a wonderfully nice person.”

Instantly, Suzaku wondered if she had met anyone she did not describe as such, however he did not hope to look a gift horse in the mouth. Similarly, while Suzaku was in no doubt Cornelia would be more than happy to either ignore or demean the him, it was obvious that even though Euphemia had spited her on Guilford and the S.A.Z, she still held a soft spot for her, a weakness that forced her to be mannerly. Holding her head in a tight fashion, she asked “I notice an absence. Where is your comrade Lelouch?”

“Your brother-” Suzaku responded “-is currently in hospital recovering from gunshot wounds to the upper chest, though his condition has improved.”

This certainly caught Cornelia by surprise, and Jeremiah looked outright shocked. While this proved to Suzaku they still cared about him, his eyes turned briefly to Euphemia, who displayed an excellent poker face. It surprised him that they hadn’t been told. Still, at least this seemed to open one of them up, as Jeremiah stepped forward, to the surprise of Cornelia but not Suzaku. Lelouch had mentioned that the man had once been a close confidant of his mother, and likely would feel incredibly guilty after realising who exactly he had slammed into the fridge, and while Suzaku was willing to chalk this up to another level of hypocrisy, it did appear that the Margrave was genuinely torn as he stood ahead of Cornelia.

“Pardon me milady, and apologies, but, Su- Mr Kururugi, it troubles me greatly to hear of this development. I would like to apologise for attacking you both, we had no idea-”

“Jeremiah.”

Reined in by the verbal reprimand, he seemed to briefly withdraw into himself before regaining visible confidence. Avoiding the tangent he had been going on to avoid Cornelia’s scorn, he rephrased, asking “I was merely wondering, how you three met and began working together..?”

Cornelia eased up, nodding approval. “I suppose that’s as good a place to start as any, but let’s get seats first.”

Somewhat happy that the overwhelming awkward pressure had been relieved, Suzaku followed the pair to the centre of a grandiose hall, decorated by a series of round tables, tablemats, and the whole works of decor and attendants sweeping the room with silverware and service. Uncertain, Suzaku and Ohgi shared looks as they sat at the 6 and 8 o’clock hands of the table, arranged like a half-dozen clock. Jeremiah and Cornelia sat opposite, ordering exotic wines in languages and tones Suzaku had never heard before. Settling for water, sensing beer would not do well here, he began the story, emphasising the theory and philosophy behind the rebellion and highlighting at every possible instance where the people in the ghetto’s worked towards their own freedom, hoping to subliminally infer that ethnically different people had potential to help themselves.

It made for a weird experience, as in conjunction with Ohgi he felt as if he was constantly attempting to justify his own presence to a dismissive audience who seemed far more concerned with refamiliarising themselves with the absent Finance Minister than educating themselves on.
how they had potentially lost what had once been considered a core region. It led to a great amount of frustration as he constantly had to attempt to rerail the conversation from the minor and unimportant details to the broader picture.

Eventually, a crowd gathered to enjoy Suzaku’s recounting of events. While diplomatic in allowing questions, hoping to encourage a greater dialogue, he had never in his life encountered a more vapid audience, so removed from any semblance of reality.

He supposed that was how they had won, if won was the appropriate term. Even Cornelia seemed to lose focus and interest as he described the efforts he and Ohgi led in the ghetto. However, always a believer in the idea of winning over people by speech, he persevered, finally explaining the concept of the Provisional Government and its priorities.

By this point, it had gone from a question and answer segment worthy of a morning talk show for all the substance contained in it to a more speechlike display, if lacking in volume. While it did seem preachy, Suzaku felt there was no people on Earth perhaps as in such dire need of a bit of preachiness than his audience.

Still, while some left or busied themselves with starters, his initial audience stayed the course, as Suzaku turned to Ohgi, quickly realising he’d been dominating the conversation and asking “Anything to add?”

Suzaku saw Ohgi move to shrug his shoulders on an instinct, but the normally informal man recognised what Suzaku had been doing and held himself with dignity that would normally be a poor fit on him, replying “I believe you’ve summed it up very well.”

Suzaku could tell Ohgi felt the same way he did. He felt like he was on display, a curiosity not quite amounting to much beyond a brief peek, a zoo animal. He could envisage a discussion going on behind him, something like “Oh my, would you look at that? They’re getting ideas, those Japanese. Fascinating. Another shot of brandy, would you?”

It was a stereotype, but it felt fair. The longer this show went on, the more despondent he grew, at his lowest wondering if this whole venture was pointless. Why, he would wonder, ought he or any other Japanese person worry about the opinions of these indulgent, ignorant fools? It would be almost better if they were out and out vicious, denigrating with effort rather than indifference. At least then it would be clearer.

He would ultimately come around to recalling the responsibility he held. Settling down, he sipped at his water while picking at his steak, participating in conversation in an uninterested murmur, mostly with Euphemia and Ohgi, both of whom were almost as uncomfortable as him. Still, while they did manage to engage in self contained small talk where Euphemia got to know the other two better that in isolation was enjoyable, the mood was soured by interruptions and questions, which came to a head when Cornelia, having been talking with her Deputy Chief Of Staff, asked over the open table what had happened to Zero.

The table fell into silence, as Suzaku took a moment away from Euphemia, who had been telling a joke, to deliver a side eyed glare to Cornelia, before announcing “We have Zero in custody.”, being careful to not refer to gender.

“You have him?”

“That is what I said, yes.”

“And his identity?”
“Perhaps not over dinner.”

“I insist.”

Suzaku’s scowl did not move, as he tried to push back. “I must insist to the contrary. All will be learned tomorrow over preliminary negotiations.”

Cornelia, in a terrifying manner, suddenly scowled back, with gargolic features morphing with arched brows and a piercing glare. It nearly threw Suzaku off in how sudden the transition for an unconcerned casual demand to outrage. It legitimately seemed to him that a reasonable denial was out of order.

Just another reminder of what lay beneath the lap of luxury, as far as Suzaku could tell.

However, before he could decide on a dignified response, having the lower symbolic position, and not having the perceived authority to be disrespectful, Schneizel stepped over and stood in the space between Suzaku and Ohgi, with Euphemia further to his left, symbolically backing them up.

“Cornelia, please. These gentlemen are here on behalf of their people, representing them. I’d imagine they deserve more respect than that.”

The Princess was taken aback, unsure as to how to counter. Now, she was facing what she considered a legitimate authority, and was thus unsure whether to side with racist instinct or the hierarchical precedent. Her indecision resulted in her quietening, and all but looking away. After a moment, she suddenly recalled she had something extremely important to attend to, and was off. Jeremiah, not having been as disrespectful due to Lelouch apparently having respect for Suzaku, stayed behind, and allowed Schneizel to sit beside him.

While Suzaku was somewhat comforted by the arrival of someone who he could approach as more of an equal, Lelouch’s warning rang in his head as Schneizel spoke in an approachable manner.

“It’s wonderful to see you again. So how was the trip over?”

“Fine.”

The Britannian Prime Minister continued to exchange small talk with the Japanese bloc for the evening before they went up to their rooms. He had been incredibly polite to them throughout, and made every effort to ensure they were welcome, as would be expected of a dignitary. Suzaku feared that due to the low standards presented by Cornelia and others that Schneizel, in providing the normally accepted niceties, would be seen due to the poorly framed comparison as being in some way on their side.

And Suzaku knew that Schneizel was in no way on their side.

Still, they reached their rooms in full comfort, with Suzaku and Ohgi getting suites that, upon his entry, only proceeded to make him feel small and isolated. Every gilded surface and silk seat only served to remind him of his discomfort. It was neither homesickness nor his usual aversion to indulgence, but the fact that this was simply not a room for one person, regardless of how individualistic the Britannians imagined themselves. It was a room for a family, ten, twelve people. One person could not fill such a room unless their head had grown very large.

It took him twenty minutes he elected to move across to Ohgi’s room, who welcomed the company on much the same grounds.

“Sit wherever you want. We're spoiled for choice.”
Ohgi’s words rang true as Suzaku explored the cavernous room for a seat, eventually settling on a two person couch, sinking deep into its plump frame as Ohgi passed over a drink.

“You look like you could use some.” Ohgi explained tonelessly, before lounging opposite on a sofa, sighing. “That was a mess.”

“And we’re negotiating with them. A brick wall.”

“You’re telling me. At least we’ll be dealing with Schneizel.”

Suzaku sat back, uncertain. “I wouldn’t put too much stock in him, he may have helped us out with Cornelia, but he’s their top negotiator. He probably had a reason for intervening…”

“I’ve no doubt, but I’d rather deal with him than those others.” argued Ohgi, to which Suzaku countered “That’s probably what he wants.”

“Then he’s welcome to it.”

Ohgi seemed well willing to put an end to that circular discussion, clearly caring more about how they had been treated than even Suzaku. Not that Suzaku could blame him; it was scandalous. However, Ohgi was surprisingly more cynical than he was.

It did serve to remind him of the major difference between the two; while Suzaku had lived for almost a decade as son of the Head of the Japanese State, and then another near-decade under the sponsorship of the Ashford family, Ohgi was born and had lived the first few years of his life in a working class home, enjoying a brief career as a teacher before being forced into the ghettos. Suzaku could only imagine what perspective that would lend.

After chatting for awhile, they made their evening call to Lelouch, who upon hearing of their treatment offered an apology and a congratulatory note for their patience and good grace. He seemed frustrated that the Britannians were so ignorant at such a high level. Following that, there was a discussion of policy, led and directed by Lelouch, before he bid them a good night and departed.

Ohgi sat back and chuckled, which surprised Suzaku, especially given the dry discussion that had just occurred. He voiced this with a simple “What?”

“I’m not sure who’s the Prime Minister anymore.”

Suzaku turned in surprise, an expression somewhere between outrage and shock leaping onto his face. Ohgi backed off slightly, raising his hands to explain, which after a moment Suzaku paused and allowed him to do.

“Lelouch is pushing all these policies, you know that. And I'm not saying he's not on our side, he's more viciously against Britannia than either of us, but I worry about him.”

Suzaku was now curious, and replied “Go on.”

“For example, that incident with the Chinese. He knew exactly where they would be, and where to get Zero. As well, he's always the one planning and directing everything we do. I'm not saying he isn't competent, and for now he's only in the Finance Ministry, but there's a precedent developing and it worries me.”

Suzaku frowned and looked down, recognising the point for what it was. The worse part was the Prime Minister found it impossible to argue against. It would entirely typical of Lelouch’s nature to
try and overbear, which in spite of its good will would nevertheless threaten the type of Japan both Suzaku and Ohgi wanted to build. It was in his nature to consolidate power, as in his words he fought ‘because nobody else seems to know how to.’ Suzaku knew Lelouch would sacrifice ideals for results in a heartbeat. Still, he wanted to defend his friend, and weakly commented “He has our back…”

“Yes, but I fear he's holding it up with a knife.”

Comparisons between Lelouch and his father came together too easily.

“If we kept him in the Finance Ministry…”

“That would work, for now. Let him use his skills to get the nation on its feet, and keep the head seat out of his reach.”

“So long as we agree.”

Suzaku nodded. While he was effective in organising and understanding what needed to be done, his dictatorial tendencies had to be kept in check, for the sake of a healthy democracy.

The pair leaned their heads down, as they clinked glasses to agree on their first act of betrayal.

“Lelouch must never become Prime Minister.”

For the good of the nation.

Chapter End Notes

I believe that Chapters, like Paragraphs, exist to segregate ideas, and to highlight them in sequence in order to emphasise their importance to both the plot and theme. For example, the first Chapter in isolation tells us the turning point for Lelouch choosing to join Suzaku, and provides an initial insight into how he thought as a child. Here, there was much the same, with one critical point towards plot and one critical point towards an overall idea made in this Chapter.

First, the racism. While it was downplayed in the show, given what little we were shown it is unfeasible that Suzaku and Ohgi would be treated with anything short of aloof ignorance. While this sets the atmosphere within which our heroes shall be working - that being highly uncomfortable - it also informs the attitudes the two affected Japanese men will take in the future on Britannian policy, as they get this not-inaccurate image of Britannian policymakers.

Meanwhile, Lelouch’s machinations and trickery are now beginning to have consequences which alongside Euphemia getting to know Suzaku and Ohgi is the major plot implication of this Chapter. This schism Lelouch has been vaguely aware of and grasping at has been recognised by the others, as they plan to restrict his potential political power, while Schneizel, who if you have noticed is sowing his own seeds of discord, laughs away.

Still, though it breaks me up, it’ll make for good drama, which will all unfold in the following Chapters, starting with the beginning of peace negotiations in the next
Chapter, Rules Of Engagement. I’ll see you then. In the meantime, don’t conspire against your colleagues, stay safe, and please rate and review!

~Eth0
The meetings opened at ten o’clock sharp the next day to the sound of a cock’s crow and the smells of wood and leather.

The firm, polished wooden doors were opened on cue by unspeaking servants from the colonies, allowing Ohgi to step into the dry room, which seemed to suck in all the air as he entered as if it had been mummified for an era. He gingerly stepped towards the first armchair, before being beckoned to sit by an attendant, who poured him a decanted beverage of some foreign description. Suzaku followed shortly after with their two personal assistants, resting his arms along the raised curves to his elbow, resting his chin on his thumb and forefinger. The various aides and assistants set up the room and stood at attention at points with such decisiveness that Ohgi could hardly believe it hadn't been practised at length, to the point it was intimidating.

After a moment's wait, Schneizel, Cornelia, Euphemia, and Guilford entered with clacking boots against the oak floor, taking various seats throughout the wooden, eighteenth century room, as the fireplace flickered into life.

“Let's begin.”

The Britannians proposed a document first, which would grant the Provisional Government internal control of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area as being part of a new Area, while the rest of Area 11 would remain as it had been. Zero was to be handed over to the Britannian authorities, and while internal economic and labour matters could be decided by the Provisional Government, any instance of this which threatened “the integrity of the Britannian economy” could be overruled by the Emperor's representative. Furthermore, neither the partitioned Area 11 or the new Area would be recognised as states, rather Provinces that were granted autonomy under Britannian sovereignty. In other words, Japan on a world map would still read “Britannia”.

This was rejected out of hand by both Suzaku and Ohgi, as a matter of course. It was ridiculous to accept any deal like this, especially so early into negotiations. They had to haggle.

As a part of this, Suzaku put forward the Japanese counterproposal, prepared some time before. In it, it was declared that Japan would become a sovereign state, encompassing the entirety of the Home Islands, including Sakhalin and Okinawa. As an independent entity with no Britannian oversight, the Provisional Government under a new Constitution drafted by the Japanese would retain the exclusive right to legislate policy.

Furthermore, the new nation would have exclusive rights to all minerals and resources within its borders, would prosecute Zero under its own legal framework, and Britannia would sign a
nonaggression treaty and disarm its Pacific bases to prevent any threat to the new nation.

This, as a matter of course, was rejected.

With the Overton Window firmly established, the negotiations proper began, as both sides tried to trade policies to get as good a deal as they could.

The sovereignty of Japan was probably the biggest issue of contention, with the borders of what seemed to be an inevitable concession of land to the Britannians being close behind. Suzaku insisted on the point that for any nation to claim the name “Japan”, it would require its core territories. Schneizel then went on to respond that this Zone was a subadministration to allow better ethnic freedoms in general, rather than an ethnocentric Japanese state.

This led to a more philosophical discussion of what the new Area was for, which Ohgi and Euphemia led, talking about the importance of ending the discrimination in both social and labour policy and encouraging cooperation between all within it, though Ohgi did note that while they shared an egalitarian theme, Euphemia’s points seemed more racial, and Ohgi’s more socioeconomic, which he found a little amusing. After an hour or so compiling points, they put it to Schneizel that this new Zone, regardless of its level of autonomy, would be functionally a Republic which would allow everyone within it an equal opportunity under it, and provide a safe haven for those who had been oppressed under Britannian rule.

Schneizel mulled over this before countering that Japan had been technically under an Emperor of some kind for a good majority of its history, and that the concept of a Republic may be alien to the Japanese heritage that they ostensibly hoped to preserve.

This struck Ohgi as a bizarre argument, even from a Britannian who had some funny ideas on ethnicity, though as he looked aside, he noted a look of concern growing on Suzaku’s face, likely thinking about Tohdoh and his colleagues, who represented this idea of the “old Japan”. After some thought, Ohgi responded that they were not necessarily attempting to replicate the old Japan, but create a new state on behalf of them with new, modern values.

This earned him some side eyed glares from Suzaku, who was still evidently mulling over Schneizel’s point of the traditional Japan never actually reflecting the values they were espousing. Still, Schneizel spoke over Suzaku’s silent scorn, commenting “So, if you are in fact starting from scratch ideologically, why even have a connection to Japan at all? It's not an ethnically exclusive state, shares very few of its values, and has a different form of government with arguably its most important figure removed. Why would you need to keep the Japan name at all? What would be wrong with any new name, if you are able to fill out its meaning and values yourselves? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, surely.”

The Minister was surprised by this turn in logic, and looked down to work through it as Schneizel leaned back and sipped at his drink, his work done for now.

Ohgi should have known better than to expect this to be easy.

After this, a resting period was announced to allow the two sides to craft new proposals. Ohgi retired to his hotel room, followed in swift step by an angry Suzaku and a concerned Euphemia, the former of whom erupted as soon as the door was shut.

“Don't EVER do that again!” he hissed, rounding on Ohgi and backing him up against the wall, before continuing “I warned you, we need to be careful of Schneizel. He is not our friend. He will use anything we say to pin us. It is nothing short of irresponsible to try and speak out of turn, without giving a damn thought to who you are speaking for, you foolish ba-”
“Suzaku!”

Suzaku stopped, flinching as his tirade was forced to an abrupt end by the shrill but forceful voice of a furious pinkette. As Ohgi looked up from his retreated state, caving inwards in the face of Suzaku's sudden rage, he saw the Prime Minister's arm extended far above his head, looming and ready to fall onto Ohgi. His face did not betray any shame, and even as he withdrew back to a more nominal state, his face only shifted back in degrees of anger.

At the same time, the arms Ohgi had covering his upper body retreated, as he stood up to his full height, some inches above his superior. After several seconds, the power dynamic had shifted to a more even footing, as Ohgi saw much of the angry energy leave Suzaku's face. He had half a mind to counterattack, before Euphemia intervened.

“Enough, both of you! Don't be stupid. Sit down, and calm yourselves, you damn imbeciles.”

Surprised by Euphemia’s vicious tone, Ohgi stepped back towards the chair, watching Suzaku visibly wilt under Euphemia’s glare. They sat at opposite ends of the room, as Euphemia stood over them and proceeded to lecture.

“Now listen. If you had something to add, Suzaku, we did have an hour long discussion, but you seemed more than content to leave us to it. I’ll grant you Ohgi walked into that—”

“Hey!”

“-but it's not like either of you had a cohesive message planned ahead of time. Now all of us are going to sit here and determine what to do about every point raised, and we won't stop until we're finished, come hell or high water!”

Ohgi could swear he felt himself sink several inches into his chair, and saw Suzaku do much the same. This was going to be a long night.

They briefed Lelouch, with Euphemia standing behind the two seated men as the Finance Minister mulled over the progress, evidently frustrated but not as angry as either Suzaku and Euphemia had been. Ohgi had for some time suspected he had been fiddling with his morphine, but he had never raised the point with Suzaku or Euphemia.

This, he reflected, was their fatal weakness. Lelouch had his own machinations going, Suzaku and Ohgi were planning to restrict his power, Suzaku was, in Ohgi’s eyes, now feeling insecure in his ability to remain in charge of everything, and now he was wondering whether his Finance Minister was high. Of course Schneizel, who ran Britannia through his pocket book, would run circles around them.

Leaning forward as Lelouch delivered his final thoughts, he surmised his own thoughts.

“Let's go get this prick.”

That set the determined tone of the evening, as they drafted no less than three counter proposals and hammered out any rhetorical question that could be feasibly imagined, even bringing a bewildered Guilford in to poke holes in their points from a more conservative Britannian standpoint.

Not that it ultimately mattered, as the next morning they were told they had a day to rest before the next meeting, by the end of which Euphemia made them wish they could escape back to the meeting room. However, when they came in with their stack of papers, they were a bit annoyed to learn that Schneizel insisted on reading his proposal out first.
In it, he proposed the formation of a partitioned substate, with Kantō and Chūbu forming “The Japanese Protectorate”, however Britannia would retain a lease on both the port in Tokyo Bay and Mt. Fuji for 99 years. The region would have control of the internal social and labour policies, but not trade, military or Zero’s prosecution.

While the name was an unexpected bonus, and the expansion of the borders was welcome progress, the plan was rejected for being insufficient.

One quick edit later, Suzaku proposed the Republican Protectorate Of Japan, which they insisted was definitely what they had initially planned to propose, and not a hasty alteration in the slightest, which would, while being a sovereign state, enter an economic and military pact which would be, in all likelihood, preferential to Britannia, however it was in all likelihood a moot point, as on a practical level this “association without integration” as the Japanese delegation phrased it, would have few differences compared to being an internal Zone. As well as being a small loss to Britannia in the grand scheme of things, granting national pride to the people living there would encourage greater national unity and productivity. In turn for this, they would give up claims on the Sakhalin and Okinawa islands.

After some haggling, Schneizel proposed the Representative Protectorate Of Japan, which had the same tones to it without having what he termed “the ugly word” in it. This was deemed acceptable by both sides, and marked progress for negotiations, which had them all in a good mood as they went onto the topic a sovereign Japan created; the role of the Emperor. Part of the issue with the idea of a Republic, apart from giving the Daily Mail several heart attacks, was that it was contradictory to being under the divine sovereignty of the Emperor. Suzaku blinked to make sure Schneizel had really just said that with a straight face, and sure enough, the Prince’s serious demeanour withheld the uttering of the phrase “divine sovereignty”. After several seconds of looking at shoes and a brief pause for tea, they staked out their positions on how the Emperor should be represented.

Suzaku and Ohgi declared that the Governor would represent the RPJ to the Emperor and Britannia at large, and thus ought to be elected by the population, while Schneizel maintained that the Governor, selected by the Emperor and his Cabinet, would represent him to the Provisional Government. In a mutual agreement, they wrote that the Governor would be nominated by the ruling Party of the RPJ and approved by the Emperor, with his or her role left intentionally ambiguous, in essence a go-between. In this way, both sides could claim they had got what they wanted.

With this new momentum, Suzaku and Ohgi implemented these changes into their previous proposal and presented it, only for it to be rejected again.

The three remaining issues, Schneizel explained, were the borders, the leasing of Mt. Fuji, and who should prosecute Zero.

The first and last issues made sense, at least to Ohgi, but, with permission from his superior, he was forced to ask what was the necessity beyond just getting every last bit of possible resources, for a lease on the mountain.

“You control trade. We can just export it.” the Defence Minister argued, to which Schneizel replied “While that is ideal, there are a lot of private vested interests in not only the mountain, but the infrastructure surrounding it and various buildings and machinery. This lease ensures that transitions are as smooth as possible, and there isn’t a sudden drop in total available jobs as you are forced to start from scratch.”

After some quiet deliberation, Suzaku, on behalf of the delegation asked “How long is it until the
collective investments break even with the overall profit?”

This caused some discussion among the Britannians, and after some consulting with an aide, they replied “A little over four years, combined with the eight we have been there.”

Suzaku tapped his forefinger against the desk, and spoke, which surprised Ohgi, given how angry he had been just two days ago for him speaking without consulting. Still, it was visibly evident he’d had an idea, and was caught in the moment.

It was still annoying.

“I propose a compromise.”

“Go on.”

Suzaku tapped his finger a second time and spoke carefully, saying “You could keep the lease on Mt. Fuji for seven years, if, after that lease is complete, control of trade returns to us. You will have profited handsomely, and you will still be able to trade with us on new terms.”

This surprised Ohgi, if only on the principle of making such a bold offer, but practically, it made a lot of sense, though not to Cornelia, who was left looking utterly puzzled.

“Why seven?” she asked, as Schneizel laughed, and eventually managed “Kururugi, you are a far better politician than I assumed.”

After a confused glare from his half sister, the Prince explained his reasoning, stating “Not only does this make a good compromise, with some trade options after seven years, but in eight years, there will be, I assume, a General Election, where our good friend here can run on getting independent trade.”

Suzaku said nothing, and looked on in a blank manner, which confirmed Schneizel’s hypothesis. Cornelia also said nothing and returned to her usual pouty demeanour, as proceedings were called to a close for the day.

There was little discussion that night, and after a while Ohgi even asked if he could just rest with the room to himself. He was indulged, and after some time resting, he decided to see what Euphemia has been on about the night before when discussing the media.

It made for grim reading. While Schneizel was being praised as a great statesmen, the Japanese delegation was at the very least sidelined. Lelouch was still receiving opinion pieces despite being nowhere near proceedings, though views were highly divided. The real victim was Euphemia, who was suffering dogs abuse. Not a sentence went by without a pronouncement she was a traitor.

Not for the first time, Ohgi felt the sinking feeling of hopelessness. The propaganda campaign against them was huge, and their main bargaining chip, the Fuji strikers, were being forgotten, to some extent even by Ohgi and Suzaku.

Which was why, after explaining how he felt to his colleagues, he determined that they should take a stand.

“We will not compromise on the border.”

This was their pronouncement come the next day, and it caused Schneizel’s brow to raise to extremely amusing heights. After several seconds of him looking incredulous, he cleared his throat and blankly commented “I see. Well, if we're doing this, then we will not compromise on Zero.
Negotiations don't work like that."

"Beyond being a general pain, which I can relate to, what is it about Zero that stakes her so highly?"

Schneizel stared at Suzaku for several seconds, as Cornelia was once again confused, asking quietly "Her?"

The blonde man cleared his throat and spoke, in a quiet, slow manner "The significance of Zero, or, as she has now been revealed to be, heiress Kallen Stadtfeld, is... a valuable intelligence asset. We would like to be able to use her to apprehend more terrorists."

He was choosing his words extremely carefully, as if they should know something they didn't. Ohgi exchanged uncertain looks with Suzaku, before looking back to Schneizel, who appeared to have come to a realisation, leaning back and thinking. Ohgi knew that Zero was a sticking point for Suzaku, who now held a burning, passionate hatred of the woman and wanted her hanged. However, there was an opportunity, a chance to, on a practical level, achieve a united Japan. They just needed to let go of one symbol, and that would be it.

They could trade Zero for no border.

"Can we have a few minutes to discuss an issue in private?"

Schneizel nodded, answering Ohgi's question with a simple "By all means."

Ohgi gestured Suzaku into a private room, where he explained "You need to let Zero go. We can get everything."

"No."

Ohgi glared at his colleague. Even now, he was being stubborn. He approached, looming over him by a few inches and whispered "We can get everything. We can even rid ourselves of this whole mess. The only thing stopping us is your bloodlust."

Suzaku paused, and looked on in a moment of horror. Ohgi hated being manipulative, but he remembered very well how Suzaku describing how he had viewed Lelouch's initially militaristic views. To have that script flipped on him must have felt horrible, but it needed to happen.

"Suzaku."

"Sod off."

Ohgi groaned as Suzaku turned heel and ran his knuckles against his teeth, hissing "Suzaku!" As he gripped the Prime Minister by the shoulder. "Imagine it. We can get the entire Home Islands, and never have to hear from that woman again. On top of that, can you imagine what people would think? People still admire her, even in spite of all she's done. If we executed her under our Government? There would be riots! Let it go, let them deal with her."

Huffing, almost to clear himself of the angry air built up in his lungs, he waved Ohgi's arm off, hissing back "Do what you want!"

Ohgi was thoroughly disappointed as Suzaku attempted to calm himself. It was very obvious he did not like the decision he had just made, but had resigned himself to it. He had hoped to convince him by simply being right, rather than pulling him into it simply due to insistence.
Something about this struck Ohgi as being very familiar.

Nonetheless, he still had one more question. Schneizel had been playing some manner of game when discussing Zero, and Ohgi did not like being left out of the loop, asking “By the way, what was Schneizel trying to hide there?”

“Mm?”

“About Zero? There was something he wasn't telling us…”

Suzaku nodded. “It's weird, and you won't believe it at first, but we oughtn't to discuss it here. Trust me, there’s far more to Kallen Stadtfeld than you can imagine.”

Ohgi nodded, and followed Suzaku out to see Lelouch's promise affirmed; Schneizel would bow to them.

Chapter End Notes

Man, Suzaku is just not having a good week. He was just beaten on by all sides, from Ohgi noting his hypocrisy, to Lelouch snapping at his heels, and Schneizel using his superior debating talent.

And like this, while he has had to sacrifice some land and prestige, Schneizel has split his opponents up emotionally, and has ensured the apple carte will remain mostly upright. He has always been an incredibly fascinating character to me, and I do feel a little slighted at his characterisation in the last few episodes. He’s dynamic, unflappable, inviting, and will kill your entire family while offering you tea.

But this is not his story, or even his Chapter. Ultimately, this Chapter reads more like a highlight reel, as if we are reading about it in a history book or report, which while not the sole aim, as seen by some of the more personal moments with Ohgi trying to drag an emotional Suzaku through the process, was a large part of it. I wanted to demonstrate the rationale behind how the RPJ was formed, and some of the reasoning behind the specifics of its governmental function.

Zero, as happened in canon, will be handed over to the Britannians for reasons that while I am sure you are aware of, our protagonists are not. It is not a large leap of the imagination to imagine how that plot element will play out.

However, what will be far more interesting is how the RPJ will respond when that element returns to the forefront, and there isn’t much longer to wait; the next Chapter, Solidarity Forever, is the final Chapter of R1, before an extensive timeskip.

I hope you’ll be there when it happens. Until then, be well, be a reasonable negotiator, and rate and review. I’ll see you soon.

~Eth0
Chapter Twenty Four: Solidarity Forever

Arc Six: Definitions Of Freedom

Opening: "Solidarity Forever" - Pete Seeger

"Thank you for all your help."

"It was never a problem. I hope you never have to undergo such unpleasantness again, Your Majesty."

"Mr Lamperouge is fine, Doctor."

"I see. Good day then, Mr Lamperouge."

Shrugging his shoulders upwards to swing his long, Gannex raincoat over his shoulder, Minister for Finance Lelouch Lamperouge nodded to the elderly Britannian attendant before turning heel and stoically stepping out into the rain flooded streets of Tokyo, sighing as he raised his umbrella over his shoulder and began to shoulder his way through the crowd.

While he knew what he ought to do, make his way back to the Ghetto with the utmost speed and return to take his seat in the Legislature, he also knew they were not missing him. The Government would not have another critical meeting until after the Treaty at Midway was negotiated, and so he was left aimless, wandering the streets of the wealthy Central Business District where he had been healing from his gunshot wound.

The clouds, leaking heavily late into the day, did not allow an ounce of sun onto the busy streets, and the faces of all the passers by were hidden behind coats of various social classes. Lelouch did not enjoy not having anything to do, finding the time spent mulling about the various crossings and pedestrianised zones selling anything and everything dull and agitating.

Lelouch was well aware he did not have a great capacity for self reflection or pause, considering himself a forward thinking, proactive person that enjoyed the security of goals and objectives to abstract, lateral thinking. Even so, it took him several minutes of wandering to remember he in fact did have something important to do.

He hadn't seen Nunnally in days, and she was waiting in their room in the Ghetto. She had called on the hospital phone to roar at him several octaves higher than he had assumed possible, but beyond that she had been unable to see him. Even as he occupied himself with a brisk pace through the valleylike streets that wept at their walls, he found himself feeling the slightest guilt over his sister. She was ostensibly his motivation, and he had been ignoring her entirely. While he had been able to justify or ignore the problem while buried in work, now that he was no longer working or high these memories of his sister and other commitments and the things he used to do, before he had leapt onto that lorry.

He passed by a Royal Society. He wondered who was in there, whether they would be good at chess. The question was moot, as he would be recognised at the door as a Prince, which took the
fun out of it.

"Woe is me." he hissed sardonically to himself, attempting to inject as much venom as possible into the voice that only he could hear. He hated the idea of self pity, especially over something as trivial in the grand scheme of things as his own ability to recreate. Ultimately, there were far greater injustices to fuss over, and so he would scold himself for what he perceived to be weakness. If anyone ought to be held to a high standard, it would be him, he reasoned. He felt he should not expect anyone else to put themselves into strenuous circumstances but the one person he could trust to do it properly; himself.

It was a productive way to turn guilt and longing for rest into pride that would motivate him, even if Ohgi would occasionally express concern over it being unhealthy. The question of it being unhealthy was irrelevant, as if it was, it would merely factor into his own sacrifice, to abuse the word which he had found too aggrandising and big for how he viewed what he was doing.

These were the various thoughts plaguing him as he trudged through the mud, eyes cast down before a middle aged Britannian ran into him centre mass, the man's own face buried in a phone as they collided. Lelouch recoiled back several steps, falling back on his rear heel as the weightier man recovered quicker, wobbling slightly before growing aggressive, roaring "Watch where you're going, dumbass!"

Not wanting to get into a fight, he waved it off with an apology and tried to move on, but the muscular man grabbed him be the chest and pulled him forward, roaring "Hey, I'm talking to you!"

Lelouch sighed, and leaned his head back, uncovering his violet eyes from beneath his long fringe and staring the man down, who suddenly visibly realised upon recognising Lelouch's distinctive features that he had made a truly terrible mistake.

Immediately, he dropped Lelouch like he was a piece of molten steel and stepped back, which drew further attention to the scene, as the onlookers caught on piece by piece to what had happened. Lelouch continued to stare at the man, arching his chin upwards to increase his perceived height while briefly flitting his eyes to observe the crowd which had gathered around him. They definitely recognised him, and reactions were mixed.

For most, seeing Lelouch was a source of confused emotions, as they were likely unfamiliar with the exact details of how he was related to the Royal Family. Still, they understood him to be important, likely recognising him from the television appearance and the various talk shows that had discussed him thereafter, though their other feelings were likely varied. Some were respectful, some were excited, quietly squirming with glee, and some, having formed the not inaccurate opinion that Lelouch was a traitor, were angry.

Whatever the case was for his crowd, the poor man who had picked the wrong moment to get in a fight quickly fell and grovelled, whimpering "I'm sorry Your Highness, I didn't mean- I mean I didn't know, that you were-"

He began to trip over his own words in a truly pathetic display as Lelouch looked on, hoping he would be absolved by the sheer penal power that was Royalty. He likely hadn't had a personal encounter with Royalty in his life, and could only rely on the image of the Royals that he would be familiar with; absolutist rulers who held the power of life and death.

But Lelouch was neither of these things, and so as the man put himself at Lelouch's feet, the Minister moved a foot back, calling down "Get up.", with as little scorn as he could manage for addressing such a pathetic man.
The man obeyed, cringing over as he stood himself a head below Lelouch with a bent back and cowering expression.

"I'm sorry, sir..." he spoke, words broken with shivers and hesitation, as Lelouch hissed "Stand properly!"

Upon receiving the instruction, the man gingerly carried them out, as Lelouch stared down his nose in apathy for his worry, until they finally drew to level height. Lelouch sighed, and gave a more neutral face before saying "Be more careful in future, we wouldn't want to run into someone important, mm?"

The man nodded as he realised he was being let off, nodded hastily and vacated at superluminal speeds, leaving Lelouch surrounded by a crowd of onlookers.

"Don't bash into anyone else now." he drily commented to the vacant air, which drew a laugh and relieved the tension from the atmosphere.

The human perimeter now seemed to shuffle slightly, allowing the uninterested commuters by while closing in on Lelouch, eager to see him, though uncertain as to what to say.

In general, those with the most polarised opinions spoke first, as he heard a cry of "Feck off back to the Ghetto!", however the shouter was put down with shaking heads and the occasional "Bad form."

Lelouch attempted to move along, however the crowd had other ideas, keeping him to a few paces a minute. He couldn't push, for the same reason he had treated the man who had hit him with courtesy; he had an image to cultivate.

Still, it appeared it would take awhile for him to get anywhere, until the large screens lit into life, drawing people's attention upwards, including Lelouch's.

After some static, the wide image cleared to display the face of the Viceroy, Cornelia. Aware he was being observed, given his public opposition to his own family, Lelouch looked upwards with further neutrality, silently hoping a deal had finally been signed after almost two weeks.

"Dearest Citizens of this corner of our Empire, I greet you from the Island of Midway, bringing news of the fate of Area 11."

Lelouch's eyes widened in silent excitement, as those around him realised what was happening, and delighting at the opportunity to see the live reaction of one of the people who had pushed most for change.

"After meeting with the Representatives of Yuaikai and the Provisional Government standing for the Fuji Strikers, issues regarding the sensitive nature of the status of the Japanese Islands, we have reached an agreement that will satisfy all parties, and ensure the highest level of economic and civil representation within the state for all citizens. This new agreement, the Cooperative Imperial Protections and Commonwealth Act, hopes to enact these changes, as agreed by Prime Minister Suzaku Kururugi and Defence Minister Kaname Ohgi in their capacity as representatives to the Provisional Government, Schneizel El Britannia as Prime Minister of the Empire, and myself, Cornelia Li Britannia as Viceroy, witnessed by Euphemia Li Britannia, who spearheaded the concept of a Specially Administered Zone of Japan."

Lelouch finally cracked a confident grin, as he saw the boxes tick away off his own mental list. It appeared that his friends had, in the words of Cornelia, "in their capacity", performed their duties.
Now, he could only wait to see if they had done it properly.

"As such, the Britannian Territories in Area Eleven are to be reorganised into the Representative Protectorate Of Japan, which shall constitute the area of the Home Islands, excepting the islands of Sakhalin, Okinawa, and Kamine."

This was par for what Lelouch had been expecting, though the fact that Britannia had insisted on an island as small and unimportant as Kamine to be explicitly excluded was noteworthy.

She continued, "This state shall be a representative democracy under the Empire's sovereignty, legislated by the elected officials within the local Government and managed by the Governor, to ensure the highest level of both security and protection of individual rights and equality."

While Lelouch recognised that the Britannian heavy crowd was not representative of his constituents, the reception was mostly positive, though he feared how the Black Knights' sympathisers, who opposed Britannia in concept, would react to a compromise bill that kept Japan under the "yoke" of the Empire.

After all, practicality was not their strong suit.

"In return for a new, representative state free of the discrimination that marred Area 11, and in the interests of maintaining the flow of labour, Britannia will retain a seven year lease on Mt. Fuji and its facilities, and a twenty three year lease on the ports at Tokyo, Nagoya, and Nagasaki."

While he was amazed she had been capable of saying the word discrimination without a visible tic, it also confirmed she was reading a script, which did not surprise him. What did surprise him was the extent of the leasing, which he worried would be an actual issue for future voters rather than just one over symbols and feelings. It would, if mishandled politically, become the case that all that would change in this new state would be the skin tone of the employers and the colours on the flag.

Of course, that was the worst case scenario, and he was Minister for Finance, so he likely could work around it.

Nonetheless, she resumed "Following a transition period, a General Election shall be held to determine the Representatives of the new State, who shall select the Governor, and I shall step down."

Far away, Lelouch imagined the sound of Japanese men and women cheering. For them, and for him, that was the wham line, the moment where months of work came to a head, and he realised that they had won.

He grinned, and performed a subtle fist pump about his waist as the broadcast concluded, before realising he was in the middle of what was becoming a mass interview.

"Did you do that?"

"Obviously not, he's here!"

"Why didn't you go?"

"Wasn't he shot?"

As the questions fired up to the rhythm of the camera phones Lelouch stood back, recognising his job as a public official started today.
His angsting could wait. He had work to do.

Unfortunately, his colleagues had left him with a challenge. He could hardly claim to know enough about the Bill to be wholeheartedly supporting it, but it was the Bill his team agreed to. On top of that, it was worth noting the compromise aspects of the Bill could turn politically toxic. He had to be careful in how he responded, as the noise lulled to allow him a response.

Nothing he couldn't handle.

"While this is the first I have heard of the agreement formally being signed into law, having been intricately involved in its crafting and being in close contact with both Ministers representing the Provisional Government, I can say I am ecstatic to hear a deal which promotes the wellbeing of the Japanese workers who gave us our mandate while not infringing on the rights of Britannians has been reached. I fear to imagine what may have happened if the Black Knights succeeded in sabotaging the deal. I can only hope that all people of the RPJ, regardless of background, can rally behind this deal. This is the first step, but it is several rungs, and for that, I am very pleased."

It was an unscripted opening statement, but Lelouch always preferred it that way, as he stepped forward towards a new future, one safe for Nunnally, for Suzaku, and for himself.

Satisfied, he moved forward through the crowd, balancing persistence with manners as he heard his name hollered at increasing volumes.

"Lelouch!"
"Lelouch!"
"...Lelouch?"

The lattermost cry was different from the others, in a higher, younger pitch and sounding of confusion, rather than excitement. He turned back into the crowd for a moment to spy the tips of sharp blue hair that were unmistakable.

"Rivalz?"

"Hey buddy- dammit, get outta my way- hey there!"

Lelouch looked on with a certain admiration in the face of a determined Rivalz, who pushed himself to Lelouch with earnest, his greeting breaking off slowly and dimly, as if he had already run out of things to say. Not that Lelouch could blame him; their lives had drifted so far apart there was hardly common ground. Lelouch's life was now in the public domain, and Rivalz's seemed trivial in comparison. Even as he closed up to the Finance Minister, Rivalz' face fell as he realized that he looked rather foolish in front of the crowd, creating a scene for both himself and Lelouch.

For a moment, they stood apart awkwardly. Rivalz looked down, a little ashamed, as Lelouch thought of Ohgi, before coming to a decision.

"So what have you been doing?"

The younger teenager looked up in surprise as Lelouch displayed uncharacteristic interest in him. It didn't cost him anything, and while he was unconvinced he deserved it, Lelouch was willing to indulge himself for once. Their met eyes briefly, Rivalz's mixed with excitement and confusion and Lelouch's with invitation. After an awkward moment, Rivalz replied with eagerness.

"Just more school! We need you to catch up with the Council again. It's been empty without you,
hell Shirley hasn't recovered, but we've been doing fine. Milly hasn't had to do go on any blind dates because her granddad's' on the run, and I'm gonna try ask her out on Friday!"

"Nice! Best of luck. And I'll certainly give it a try." Lelouch affirmed, not surprised by most of the news beyond his friend gaining some confidence. Perhaps it was banal, but there was certainly appeal in celebratory relaxation.

"Tell you what, I'm certainly not doing anything today, as you could probably guess, so do you want to go out and do something?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone. This has been an emotional experience, nearly seven months of writing to bring our characters to where they are now, with their guile allowing them to prevail. For Hearts And Minds will return, following a timeskip, both in story and in real life. Thank you again, and I bid both you, and R1, adieu. I'm taking a short break for awhile in lieu of this, but I'll be back on Wednesday 27th of December! In the meanwhile, I'd really appreciate a review, especially from the ~40 or so people who follow this story Chapter by Chapter and don't really offer their thoughts! That'd be a lovely Christmas present!

~Eth0
"Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome to the stage a man who needs little introduction. For months, he has laboured right under our noses to bring drastic change to the Areas within Britannia, starting from scratch after being exiled at the age of ten. For all his divisive opinions, I would ask you all to give a warm welcome to the man who mainstreamed the radical labour movement and former Prince of the Empire, Lelouch Lamperouge!"

The crowd exploded into noise right on cue. To say it was applause would not be accurate, given the not-insignificant boos, but there was a significant amount of good natured cheers from Diethard Reid's live show crowd, about as liberal a Britannian crowd as the guest could hope for. Lelouch settled on calling the reception 'passionate'.

He stepped onto the stage with a bold step, waving an open palm up as he stepped across to shake Diethard's hand, gripping it intensely. They both wore wide grins, playing up the idea that the whole interview was a little cheeky and taboo, which the audience loved. They enjoyed feeling like they were breaking the rules by associating with Lelouch, and Diethard, a true media man, knew how to capitalise on that.

After that interesting moment, he sat down opposite Reid on a lovely leather couch, as Diethard began the interview, watched by many millions of Britannians clamouring for a glimpse of the elusive Prince.

"Welcome to the show Lelouch. Now, first of all I'd like to congratulate you on your victory in the first General Election of the RPJ, you and most of your affiliates won dominantly, for those who haven't heard."

"Thank you very much, though I think name recognition may have helped there."

This earned a healthy chuckle, as Diethard responded after a moment "I wasn't sure that running as a former Prince would do you well, especially among a community that just tried to chuck us out."

Lelouch cringed slightly at the 'us', but he let it go, folding it into his answer of "Look, I like to think I've earned my stripes in Japanese circles at this point, and I'd also like to think that the people who voted did so on matters ranging beyond my skin colour."

The interview continued in this fashion, with Diethard asking fair, yet perspectived, questions and Lelouch offered brief answers that made excellent soundbites, doing his best to canvas on behalf of republicanism with his spotlight.

The one exception to this was the final question, which Diethard gave definite weight with his tone, selecting his words very carefully.

"This has been a fascinating interview, but if you'll permit me one more question-"

"I do."

Another laugh, as Diethard pressed on with "Over the past week or so you've been going around the press, and there's a phrase you've used that I'm not entirely sure as to its meaning. The Long War, to be specific, it's almost your catchphrase at this point."
Lelouch moved about in his chair and found the words, albeit slowly, to explain his closely guarded concept.

"The Long War was a model of sorts. I began to conceptualise it before I left for Japan, but it was only after the invasion and I saw how the country was being run that it took… form, if you will. It's about the battle to win over a country's population following a conquest and make it your rightful clay, in the local's eyes."

Diethard nodded his understanding, and Lelouch continued.

"Naturally enough, it follows after a Short War of Conquest, there is a Long War to secure your gains by winning over the local population. In any modern war, it's almost certain you'll have to contend with some manner of insurgency, and how you respond, how you conduct yourself in the eyes of the local population is key. They have to want to support you over these insurgents if you're to win, and in this instance Britannia has lost."

Diethard nodded, before producing a paper and pen for what Lelouch expected to be a comedic bit, which came promptly.

"So…" Diethard began, adopting a playful tone, "for next time, what should we do differently?"

Lelouch and the audience laughed, as he pointed his index finger out and said "Point one, maybe don't try again.", which similarly elicited a laugh, before he waved it off.

"If you'll permit me a needless analogy-" Lelouch began, before Diethard invited the proposal with "Oh, please do!", allowing him to resume.

"Imagine you're running a restaurant chain. The Long War can be put down as a question of marketing. The people whose land you… own, occupy, or whatever, they are your market. If you alienate them, you're not going to be able to build any market share. When you act against local concerns violently, you hurt your brand, that's just bad marketing. It's like the golden rule in business of 'Don't attack your customer base.' Punitive punishment is one thing, but when you discriminate… indiscriminately, if I can butcher my grammar, you can't then expect the population to not support a rebel element. If I were to summarise my advice, don't be a *head when you invade other countries."

The world would never hear the full version of Lelouch's sage advice, as the broadcaster censored his last sentence, which sent everyone present into a fit of raucous laughter.

"I think…" Diethard attempted, before laughing again, "-I think your message may have been lost on some of the Royal Family."

"Nothing out of the ordinary there, they've been missing it for the better part of a decade."

"Yes, indeed." Diethard smiled, as they shook hands again and stood up, grinning at each other. It was genuine enough; Lelouch found Diethard to be a reasonably sharp man, and Diethard was generally amiable to his guests.

However, Lelouch could only be cynical about the audience. They enjoyed the feeling of the sanitised rebel who they could watch and feel connected to, but they were only for the twenty or so minutes he was in their spheres. They were part time subversives who enjoyed how seeming outside the norm felt, like wearing a Che Guevara tee shirt, while not giving a damn.

He smiled at them anyway.
"Lelouch Lamperouge everyone!"
“Today in brief, Prime Minister Kururugi will visit the Fuji refineries to begin the transition of the facility back into the hands of the Protectorate Government, Prime Minister Kururugi is to give a short speech to commemorate the occasion before the handover goes underway, and in election news, this turnover has given the ruling Ameliorate Party a 4% increase in their small lead over the Revanchists.”

Kallen Stadtfeld yawned as she leaned over her bed to turn off her bleating alarm, half listening to the news broadcast in the next room. Standing up and stretching in her night clothes, she eventually slaved on more practical attire before going about the various procedures to prepare herself for the day. Finally, with considerable gusto, she broke into the living room, calling over the couch facing away from her “Morning!” with her usual cheer.

To her announcement, the figure on the chair stood up from the news broadcast to greet her, turning around with a genuine, familial grin across his face, the same he always wore.

“Good morning Kallen!” greeted Rolo, her younger brother, giving a slight wave before bringing across a plate of eggs and toast, explaining “I had some earlier, there's plenty left over.”

“Thanks!” Kallen replied, placing the plate down on the table opposite his as he asked “So are you working today?”

“Yeah.” she answered as she bit a chunk off the corner of the bread. “It’s a pain, but Clarke wants everyone in today. Apparently the Revanchists are holding a big party meeting today.”

“In the Babel Tower? Hardly home turf.”

“My thoughts exactly, but I’m not going to question it. I’m in enough hot water as is.” Kallen answered, as she recalled the unfortunate incident of her spilling a glass of wine on an Ameliorate Representative as Rolo sat back and sighed, obviously tired.

Kallen, who was gathering her things to get going, didn’t question why Rolo was tired. He had had work himself the previous night after all. She had admitted to him that she didn’t know why the Revanchists, nationalistic Japanese who would normally shun a venue such as Babel, were visiting on that day, as well as why it had been demanded that she be there.

To this effect, there was a great deal Kallen Stadtfeld did not know. She did not know the reality of the fact that the arrival of the Revanchists and her being requested to work that day were inextricably linked, as well as the fact that she was virtually unfirable, regardless of who she dropped wine on; her real job at Babel was an unknowing one.

Furthermore, as little as she knew about her own job, she knew even less about Rolo’s. Her stories of Japanese nationalists holding a conference in Babel Tower and her being asked to work that day was all old news to him, having heard it the night before from his employer at the OSI, who had themselves been directing Kallen’s work environment very closely.

Of course, this whole arrangement went far above her head as she waved Rolo goodbye, who gave a half wave as he used his free hand to text the full details of Kallen’s morning to whatever government bureau wanted it. The redhead herself, unaware of this, stepped out onto the bright, vibrant street of Shibuya, in the heart of Yamanote, the hilly, affluent region that was but eight years ago on the fringe of the ghetto, if not quite in it proper. Today, while it was still a higher percentage Britannian than average, it had significantly improved in both quality and equality.
She hopped onto her bicycle, swinging her change of clothes and bits and bobs onto her back before rocketing down the road, accelerating down the huge hill just by her house and blasting past the Yamanote Rail Crossing at full tilt, flying back up the far side of the hill with the momentum carrying her to the crest, where she could see the entire of Tokyo.

It was certainly a sight to behold, especially when compared to how it had been eight years earlier. It perhaps lagged behind the pre-war aesthetic, but that was no criticism; given what the had been left with, the Ameliorates under Suzaku Kururugi had done an excellent job turning surplus, enthusiastic low skilled labour into a massive urban renewal project that was now hotly tipped to serve as the new model for infrastructure projects across Britannian slums, though the Homeland Government itself was still not onboard for authorising the payments. It was very modern, yet still homely, with very stringent size regulations that allowed for order and yet modular variety, like a row of pastels flying by.

One unfortunate problem with this low rise European model of the revitalised Tokyo however was that there was very little lead up to the Business districts in Koto and Minato, leading to rather intimidating towers near, if not adjacent to lovely colourful town area. The wall, rising for hundreds of meters as she approached at breakneck speeds, almost seemed to swallow her up as she passed through the first few grey buildings, complete with grey suits and grey people all around.

Kallen blasted on for several more blocks before arriving at her workplace in the Babel Tower. Like most of the business high rises, it was built during Pendragon rule, and felt like it. It was a large, imposing building that seemed to be in contest for sheer imposition with all the buildings around it. The lobby, adorned in black and red, seemed alien, even with four years working there. Still, after stepping behind the counter to change into company sanctioned attire, she stepped back out into the hall.

Clarke, as ever a man to set your watch to, stepped out into the same hall exactly seven minutes later, directing the assembled staff to their duties.

“Kallen Stadtfeld, you will be working with Marika Soresi in Hall J for party 6.”

Kallen nodded, and moved over to stand beside the ginger woman of the same age before reading over the assignment.

“Go figure...” she chuckled as she realised they would be looking after the Japanese party she had been wondering about. She shook her head in mild surprise at what she assumed to be amusing coincidence, before moving on to Marika, whose brother had been a Purist back in the day, and commented “This is going to be interesting, eh?”

She grunted, and started walking, which frustrated Kallen somewhat. They had been paired probably more than any two employees, and yet she could barely seemed to stand Kallen, only just about putting up with her, as if obligated. It confused and annoyed Kallen to no end to be a victim of constant glares and side eyes, as if her colleague was keeping tabs on her.

But she put on a good face as she set about laying all the tables and preparing all the fineries, in time for the League's arrival at eleven, which she and Soresi stood abreast for at eleven on the dot as the doors opened.

First to enter the room with visible authority was Representative Kyoshiro Tohdoh, followed closely by his recent fiancée Chiba Nagisa. Both wore the most formal kimonos, as they did almost everywhere, presenting the image of the Revanchist League as promoting a more traditional Japan. In truth, it was mostly a party of former Black Knights affiliates who had not been charged with crimes, as well as the more jingoistic elements of Kyoto who walked about with the faint tint of gunpowder that they could never shake off, though they were nonetheless popular, scoring between 30-40% on average in polling, and holding a moderate amount of seats in Government. A reputation as being the political wing of the Black Knights, it seemed, was not quite enough to render one unelectable, which spoke volumes for the Japanese populace. While she was no Purist, she had lived in Japan long enough with her mother and maid to know that they were hardly the greatest group of people. She was of the belief, just like her new mother, the RPJ would not last much longer, and would be torn apart by the viciousness of their own kind.
In any case, following Tohdoh and his fiancée came the rest, about 20 or 30, filling the room with kimonos and high dress as they quietly filtered out, spreading across the hall. Kallen could only help but notice at some point or another they all took glances at her. In truth, she found the half veiled Japanese gunmen incredibly intimidating up close, even as she performed her duties distributing food while they talked through formal Japanese language in formal Britannian ways, aloof and snooty.

Hoping to impress Clarke and Marika, she moved towards a crowd of four to offer delicacies. Each of them seemed to recoil slightly before staring through narrow eyes, which only served to put her even more off. This set the tone for some time. The only event of more was, following some silent discussion by the crowd, Tohdoh stood on a platform to give a stump speech. It was short and to the point, explaining how he was glad to see such a showing from them, and how he wished them well in their future endeavours.

With that, he hurriedly departed with all party attendants who were Representatives, leaving only unelected party members. This was most certainly not on the itinerary, which meant Kallen could only assume something drastic has changed since their arrival. But what could it be, as there was only Mariko and her attending them, and phones were not allowed? This struck her as extremely bizarre, but that notwithstanding the party went on very smoothly, concluding at 2 with no other real noteworthy events. The guests filtered out very quietly and in an orderly fashion at the allotted time, leaving Kallen and Marika alone to clean rather anticlimactically considering the upset Tohdoh’s departure had caused.

Afterwards, Clarke came and dismissed them, allowing them to return home for the day, visibly deflated, which confused Kallen even more. ‘Had something gone wrong?’, she could only wonder.

Still, it meant she could head home, so she headed back through the dimly lit halls to the changing area, stepping along the narrow corridor with relaxed shoulders. She was looking forward to the rest of the day to relax with Rolo, before maybe going out for tea. However, as she lazily marched down the hall, she did not see a slender hand grab her from behind until she felt its sharp tug, which then pulled her back viciously.

She barely had the opportunity to cry out before the arm yanked her back into a fire door, and the door was hurriedly shut behind her. After a moment's struggle, she was finally pinned back, before finally allowed to see her captors.

What she saw was nothing if not bizarre; kidnapping her, or at least stuffing her in a fire exit, was a Japanese man and a young, black haired girl with a jaunty grin. It was about this point that she mentally put the probability of someone kidnapping her in this fashion at above a 50% chance of being a bizarre fever dream.

“You've really let yourself go.” the woman snarkily commented, increasing Kallen’s percentage to 60% for the sheer bizarreness of the remark.

“What-” was the only word she managed to get out before a loud banging erupted on the far side of the door.

“What's going on in there?”

In response to the insistent, but not yet angry voice on the other side of the door, Kallen attempted to call out for help, however the man blocked the cry in her throat with a quick jab before the woman pulled out a pistol and emptied it through the door, silencing the concern from the far side.

“We need to get going, our airlift arrives in ten minutes.”

The Japanese kidnapper, seeming to act on command of the woman, lifted Kallen to her feet and pulled a gun of his own, pointing her down the narrow fire escape. Reluctantly, she followed the woman down the path as she heard more shouting all around her in rooms and corridors the escape route passed by.

After several minutes of running, they reached an end, marked by another fire door which the woman shoved open.

“Shōgo, you have ammunition.” she explained, gesturing her accomplice to head out first. He
nodded, and after some inspection, stepped out into the hallway.

“All clear.” he invited, and Kallen and the other woman followed him out, before they continued moving through the open corridor towards another door, before announcing “Through here.”

With that, he threw the double doors open with great gusto, before his body jerked backwards in several quick but individual movements, invisible gut punches in rapid succession that sent the kidnapper to the ground in moments. There had been no sound, even as ‘Shōgo’, looking positively shocked as his life left him, wheezed out his last. Even so, it took Kallen little time to realise he had been shot, as he began, almost posthumously, to bleed across his torso.

Kallen tried to back off, unsure why this Shōgo had been shot with such prejudice and whether said killer was a friend or foe, being out of sight beyond the door, however as she moved backwards she hit against the woman, who seemed quite calm in spite of her colleague meeting a sticky end, and Kallen fell to her knees just in time to see the would be saviour round the corner, silenced pistol in hand.

It was Mariko, sporting her pistol in tandem with a triumphant grin as she looked upon the two other women, raising the odds to 85% that Kallen had lost her mind. The other woman tried to move out of the line of fire, however all she got was two bullets to the forehead for her trouble, their trajectories flying over Kallen’s grounded frame, and sending the woman straight down onto her back in a matter of moments.

Kallen, assuming for now Mariko by some miracle had come to save her even as doubts as to the unlikelihood of that sank in, moved forward, transitioning from her back to a crouch, saying “Thank you so much Mariko, I couldn’t-”

Her rushed explanation of her gratitude was abruptly cut short by a boot to the face, which caught Kallen, who was sent back to the ground with no delay, off guard. She felt stunned as she attempted to recover, feeling her bloody nose and now sore head with confusion. Mariko was now standing over her with her pistol pointed down demeaningly as Kallen tried to comprehend what was happening. Nothing was making sense; terrorists were kidnapping her, and her co-worker Mariko was now shooting up people and holding a gun on her.

This had to be a fever dream, she shook. There was no way it could be anything else. She was now dripping a cold, uncertain sweat out of panic and the sheer alien events that were unfolding.

“What… what are you doing?” she panted as Mariko continued what seemed to be a mental victory lap, almost savouring the moment of having Kallen at gunpoint.

“Say that again.”

Kallen’s eyes narrowed in astonished confusion, before asking through her bloody nose, more angrily than before out of confusion, “What the hell are you doing?”

Mariko chuckled as she seemed to come to a realisation, before explaining in cryptic fashion “Oh, oh she hasn’t told you yet? You don’t remember?”

Her laughter broke gently, as if appreciating a subtle pun known only to her, before slowly growing to a triumphant maniacal crescendo.

“She didn’t-” Mariko began, before having to stop herself out of laughter. “Want to hear a secret? Mm? Before I send you off?”

The gun toting ginger paused for a moment, before kneecapping Kallen to prevent her escape, which sent excruciating pain shooting through her leg as her knee shattered at the bullet impact. She roared out in pain, rolling onto her side and gripping her thigh with both hands. Seizing the opportunity, Mariko planted her foot on Kallen and rolled her onto her side, pinning her.

“Oh, that looks painful.” Mariko chuckled, briefly distracted “But I’m tight for time, so I’d better make sure you hear this before you kick the bucket”

She leaned in, enjoying every moment as she whispered “You were Zero.”

Kallen took several seconds to understand what Mariko had just said. Zero, the founder of the Black Knights, renowned terrorist, and killer of Shirley’s father… was her? This made no sense. While it was true nothing seemed to make a great deal of sense today, this took the cake. Naturally enough, Kallens own thoughts proceeded in a far less orderly fashion, to the point she could only manage a furiously shaking head in desperation.
“Oh reeeally? Or perhaps you just don’t remember. You were Zero, the damned Eleven terrorist, and you killed my brother Kewell at Narita.”

Mariko’s voice grew harsh as she revealed her secret, but Kallen was hardly listening. It wasn’t possible. Zero had been executed following his last stand at Hokkaido, as part of the independence agreement. Moreover, how could this be? She could only just get past living with them, the idea that she would lead a revolt was absurd. Kallen couldn’t stop shaking as panic took hold. As she tried to make some verbal sense of this, she suddenly felt a hand grip her ankle from behind, sending a bolting shock up through her broken knee and striking her chest with cold energy. She recoiled outwards along her spinal axis, as if trying to expel something deep within her, as she suddenly was transported deep within her in what she imagined an acid trip to be like.

“What the hell…”

“Do you desire power?”

The voice was obscure, and directionless, but Kallen grabbed onto it, shouting “Yes!” through her mind.

“You already possess the power you seek. It’s merely imprisoned within the cage of amnesia. Remember...Remember who you really are...the power of the king. Now let the seal be broken!”

It was already a bizarre out of body experience, but it grew even more unusual as she felt a sudden awakening, as if her brain were being reprogrammed. She shook, as she woke to Mariko, who had concluded her venting.

“I remember…”

Mariko turned back, obviously choked up over her brother, the cropped ginger Purist she now remembered killing during Narita. He had been an unpleasant character who hung around with Jeremiah Gottwald and Villetta Nu, the latter of whom she had Geassed to kill the current RPJ Prime Minister, , whose Finance Minister Lelouch Lamperouge… no, Vi Britannia, she had herself had shot, even after saving him from Mao and Kusakabe, who she had shot herself. She remembered everything.

“Tell me…” Kallen began hoarsely, trying to not further harm her knee as, in her sudden enlightenment, the situation became far more clear to her and she calmed, “…how long were you waiting?”

“For my chance? Oh, you mean you remember now?”

Kallen didn’t speak, saving strength, nodding which seemed to satisfy Mariko, who replied with great zeal.

“Eight years. Eight goddamn years, seven of which I spent within a few metres of the one bitch I wanted to kill, that I had to keep alive until she showed up. Well, she’s here, and-”

“I think that’s quite enough. On order of Kallen Kozuki, cease all movements.”

Mariko’s eyes widened in her last moments of freedom, realising too late she had been had, before they glazed over, a thin veil over the panic Mariko must be feeling under her statue frame. In the meanwhile, Kallen took her time propping herself up on her good knee, hopping over to the far wall to retrieve Shōgo’s gun.

“You want to see me in hell? You waited eight years?”

Mariko couldn’t answer, but she didn’t need to.

“You’ll have to wait a little longer. Tell me what it’s like when I make it.”

With that, Kallen shot Mariko repeatedly in the chest until the bullets ran dry, at which point her good leg gave way. However, as she fell, she felt a pair of arms pull her up. She smiled, as she recognised the welcome face.

“Thanks for getting me C.C. Took you long enough.”

The witch chuckled, before explaining “The cavalry is going to arrive any second, so we better get going. How’s that knee?”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty Six: 51% Permanent Majority

Arc Seven: Reawakening

Opening: “I’ll be back” - Da-ICE

“In conclusion, it is in my view a summary of all we have gained, both physically, symbolically, and in opportunity, that today we can claim such a site of natural heritage as Mt. Fuji back for ourselves, and that we may have it for our own as part of our still young gift of self determination. This mountain stands in opposition of those who complain with closed eyes, and claim that the world is static. Time continues to pass on, and it does so in favour of all of us, not those who would seek to be exclusionary or insular. Deals can only be made between two partners, as it’s pretty easy to agree on things when it’s only you at the table. To them, this mountain bids a challenge, but to you, I bid a very gracious thanks, and farewell for now.”

The crowd of a thousand or so civilians interspersed with journalists, both Natives and Britannians, all erupted into applause, with minimal booing even in spite of the rather direct assault on the political opposition towards the last few seconds, as Prime Minister Suzaku Kururugi bowed to conclude his speech and stepped down from the stage, followed shortly by the various Ministers who had come to attend the event, including Minister for Finance Lelouch Lamperouge, who had given a far shorter speech earlier in the day, to a far less decisive reception.

Not that he minded; as Lelouch gave a slight wave to the crowd, he wore his slight yet shameless grin as he stepped down from the stage. After a brief meeting confirming everything, proceedings were concluded and the attendants dispersed to their various affairs.

Lelouch himself took a few minutes to ensure the finer details of the ledgering was all in order, meaning that it was a good ten minutes before he left to return to Parliament, stepping out into the back exit where a familiar face awaited him.

“Afternoon Jeremiah.”

It had not been easy by any means, and he had had to wait for several months until no one was looking until he could bring Jeremiah back from the Homeland. Jeremiah had always hinted to Suzaku that he had wanted to work with Lelouch again, and Lelouch liked Jeremiah, and so he had been quietly brought in as Lelouch’s Chief Of Staff. Lelouch didn’t have many close allies that were not already in a very high position in Government, and enjoyed both Jeremiah’s counsel and company.

“Good afternoon sir. I trust the venture was productive?”

“Naturally enough.”

“Wonderful.”
Of course, there was a very good reason Lelouch didn’t have many close allies. Beyond the fact that he was easily the most divisive Representative in Parliament, something he secretly took a guilty pride in, he also had a second role within the Ameliorates that went without saying. While Suzaku was a huge fan of trying to persuade and compromise with party members who got cold feet before a vote, Lelouch swore that the young Prime Minister enjoyed referring them up to “The Finance Minister’s Office” for the Stick to Suzaku’s Carrot. While he was on a very short leash in these instances, and it didn’t help with his internal popularity, there were few things Lelouch enjoyed more than playing the party whip.

In truth, he preferred the way things were; the Black Sheep, the Phantom Of The Opera, prowling about the place ensuring all was in order. While he operated under Suzaku’s strict control, there was something fundamental in Lelouch’s nature that abhorred being in power. He loved to challenge it, being the thorn in the side of whoever was in charge, but he had learned that Schneizel’s curious comment that he would have to eventually get off the horse and govern was far wiser than he had once considered.

And, he knew now, that he had indeed inherited the mind of a great revolutionary, but no Governor.

This was not to say he did not do well in his position. He had a head for numbers and finance, and putting on a cape and rattling sabres, whether in an aggressive speech or in a private chat with a Representative who wasn’t toeing the line every once in awhile, and it kept the job engaging. Being Kururugi’s pitbull was perhaps not the most dignified of roles, but he wallowed in it.

The question of Kururugi himself was far more complex.

However, it was a question he could, as ever, put off, as they arrived at the Parliament building, at which point Lelouch returned to a businesslike state of mind in a snap. Nodding to Jeremiah as he left the car, he grabbed his briefcase and stepped up and into the building.

It was far nicer than their first Parliament building, a blend of classical architecture in its construction with just the right blend of modernism in its shape to avoid it looking out of place in the heart of Tokyo. Lelouch appreciated it as a place to work, and was intricately familiar with its backwards routes and halls like an old quirky friend; two lefts, down two floors by stairs, up three by escalator, then a third left to the dark, brown office of Prime Minister of the Second Governor of the Representative Protectorate of Japan, Suzaku Kururugi.

“Go grab a coffee, this shouldn’t be too long.” Lelouch explained to Jeremiah, who seemed fine enough to take his leave, before Lelouch turned to tug at the door handle, only to discover it locked.

This struck him as highly bizarre. Suzaku had rarely locked his door even when they had lived together, and there was no way he was out; Lelouch was the last back from Mt. Fuji due to his having to crunch numbers, and Parliament was not currently in session. He gave his signature quad knock on the door, before shouting in.

“Suzaku? What are you playing at?”

His cock eyed question shouted through the wooden door seemed to evoke a shuffle on the other side, initially jerky but eventually more coherent, before he heard a voice respond “Sorry Lelouch, one sec!”

Wondering what government official in their right minds would say “One sec” to the supposed Lord of Darkness Lelouch Lamperouge, he was swiftly answered by the pink blur that was his
sister, Euphemia, who had been Suzaku’s Secretary since the Commonwealth act was enacted. Somewhat startled, but more than capable of containing himself, he looked down at the 27 year old with some confusion, still wondering why the door was locked, a sentiment he had no issue voicing.

“Oh, it’s fine!” she perkily waved off, before explaining “Just a few private calls to be made to Governor Sumeragi, not the sort of thing you want others walking in on!”

Lelouch paused, before nodding. The explanation made sense, as for legal reasons Kaguya could not actually enter Parliament, and thus no noting was required.

Lelouch kept extensive notes about everything and everyone. These ranged from memos on meetings to observations andproofings of almost every Representative in the party, all filed accordingly. The huge filing cabinet behind Lelouch’s desk was a frightening object for many, as several scandals could easily come to light if he were to ever get itchy fingers near that cabinet. It was all part of the show, part of the act he put on when people were sent up to his office, though the damning notes were very real. While Lelouch would never release them preemptively, he would hate to be caught with his pants down if someone got uppity.

Still, that was still firmly in the “As yet unneeded” category of things he had at his disposal, and so he entered the room following Euphemia’s enthusiastic invitation, as he asked “So how is Kaguya?”

“Fine enough, though I suspect she is growing bored.” Suzaku explained. “Meeting with the Britannians combined with relative isolation will do that to you.”

Lelouch nodded. Kaguya Sumeragi had been a rather inoffensive pick for Head Of State, being well respected among moderates and Britannians and beloved by Revanchists, even in spite of her own moderate views that were closer to Suzaku’s if nothing else. She acted as a go between for Suzaku and the Emperor, and was by all accounts quite good at it, being very perceptive and sneaky for her age.

“So what did you need?”

“Your blessing. I just did out all the numbers for the budget, and I’m going to pass it all through the system downstairs in a minute.”

Suzaku gave an “Mm” in understanding as Lelouch fished his columnar scribbles out from his briefcase and passed it across the desk, before Suzaku chuckled.

“Imagine what Milly would think; we’re still just doing budgets.”

“I try not to focus on what Milly might think; that tends to lead to very uncomfortable places.”

Appreciating the joke, Suzaku gave the paper a once over and passed it back saying “All seems to be in order. You have it in Bill form?”

Bristling slightly, Lelouch responded “Yes, it’s a standard budget amendment, but do you not want to read it?”

“It’s a standard budget amendment. I’ve got slightly more important things to get on as Prime Minister.”

There was a tense moment as they stared at each other, Suzaku sat behind a desk and Lelouch leaning in from above. From aside, Euphemia pulled at Lelouch’s shoulder to try and back up
Suzaku. Lelouch looked between the pair before sighing and shrugging.

“You’re the Prime Minister.”

Suzaku nodded, as Lelouch took back the papers and continued “Make sure those things go well. We’re all relying on you.”

Suzaku looked down for a moment, a slight downward flit of the iris at most, before smiling and responding “Of course!”

Lelouch paused uncertainly, before again leaving it be and moving to depart with a wave, before Euphemia asked “Oh, and how is Nunnally?”

“Oh, she's fine.” Lelouch affirmed with a sudden smile. “She's actually finishing college in a few weeks, Music Theory. She's over the moon.”

“Ah, wonderful! Congratulations to her from me!”

“I'll make sure to pass it on.” Lelouch replied to Euphemia as he turned away to leave, shutting the door behind him ambivalently, before continuing down the hall towards his own office to transcribe his notes into something that Parliament could vote on, while mulling over Suzaku.

Suzaku was his superior, and Lelouch, having been central to the formation of the Government, had the utmost respect for the need of proper order, unitary executive doctrine, rule of law and various other buzzwords like that, and understood what he ought to do bureaucratically, and was not against it in principle.

However, all these legal arguments seemed to flake away whenever Suzaku would do his downwards, uncertain looks and quiet mulls of indecision. Suzaku had an uncanny ability to draw sympathy and market himself as a peacemaker, and all these things had been true back when they worked out of Ashford. However, what had also been true was the other aspect of Suzaku’s imperfection; a lack of confidence in himself and his ideas, and a constant need for Lelouch to push him to do anything dramatic, which would only serve to draw scorn from Suzaku and Ohgi. It was incredibly frustrating to witness Suzaku’s personal thoughtfulness, which was admirable, hurt them again and again, dating back to instances such as when he accidentally called Zero and leaked Cornelia’s attack in Saitama.

Which was a shame, because even in his distraction Suzaku was far from unlikeable, and they still enjoyed what Lelouch at least considered a good friendship. However, Lelouch could only worry as to his method of ruling, and in turn Lelouch was acutely aware of Suzaku’s lack of trust in him, for reasons that Lelouch could guess at. Lack of sound ethical structure, a willingness to do less than moral things, and general fixation on achieving the task at hand. Lelouch didn’t see what was ultimately wrong about that, so long as it was contained, but even he knew Suzaku was not a fan.

As he returned to his office, considerably more modern than Suzaku’s with a leather couch hauled up by hand to spite Suzaku and his corduroy monstrosity that still resided in the lounge after all these years, which he sank into lengthways with his locally produced laptop, flipping it open to his draft amendment, which he always kept in an open tab, with a live broadcast of Parliamentary proceedings which had just begun playing in another tab into his earphones.

As he swapped in digits, the faraway buffering cleared and Lelouch’s ears were greeted with a grating voice, speaking grating English in an angry tone that took Lelouch aback for a moment. While it was certainly allowed, it was rare to hear anything but Japanese on the House floor. It took him a moment to recognise the scratchy voice of Claudio S. Darlton, and it made much more sense, as Lelouch was forced to sigh in irritation as the second adopted son of Andreas Darlton.
continued his speech.

“It is in my view a shame to see these attitudes expressed, that we would forgo the protection of the Empire that has provided for us, and spit in the face of the many favours they have granted this Government and pursue a policy of independent mobilisation. To me, and the constituents I represent, it seems clear that this is an attempt by the jingoistic, flag-waving forces of patriation and backwards chauvinism to seek further separation to the continued pain of the common Britannian citizen, whom regardless of birth ought to be united under the grand united alliance felt among all peoples to go towards a brighter future, rather than the divisive, separatist policies this government is partaking in.”

He could go on, and he did, as Lelouch eventually tuned out. Claudio would more often than not deliver some variation of this speech whenever his turn came round. He represented the Unionist Party, hovering at about a tenth of the population which almost exclusively made up of Britannian natives, compared to the half and rough third between the Ameliorates and Revanchists respectively. While they were good for the occasional laugh, he did wish the Unionists would put up a slightly more imaginative candidate, as Claudio was certainly not picking up any Japanese voters, and the only people who hated him more than Lelouch were the Revanchists. Still, he got his 10% of the vote from the leftover Britannian nobility, cashed a paycheck at the end of the month and continued to pass go on behalf of Britannian interests.

One of Lelouch’s many fears was the prospect of a Revanchist-Unionist Alliance. While they seemed fundamentally opposed, their actual fiscal policy as well as Reactionary belief in the “old ways” had kept Lelouch up at night more than once. Another fear was the jingoism of the Revanchists, with some actively encouraging violence against the state.

Lelouch was often worried these days, and he was often worried about being worried. He then would proceed to worry as to the reasons why he was more worried than he ever had been. He had not fretted back when they were escaping the Kururugi residence; he had a plan, and he was in control, even for his age. But that explanation made no sense; Lelouch had plans oozing out of his ears, ranging from campaign stratagems for the upcoming Third General Election to his files of personal secrets. He knew he hadn’t worried even when running a literal insurgent campaign of strikes and fraud against the Government; so why now?

The reason, as far as Lelouch could figure, was twofold. First, he had lost the initiative; he was no longer on the forward foot, pushing his plans and machinations in secret among an enemy he could approach at his leisure. Instead, he was static, waiting to respond to issues there was a half chance he would never predict. This uncertain waiting and inability to act had not sat well with Lelouch, who had lived since exile as an active rebel in some form or another. In a sense, he hadn’t had the time to worry in the past. Right now, all he could do was wait in anxious silence.

Secondly, he had vastly more to lose now. Back in the day, it had been him, Nunnally, and Suzaku, the latter of whom could look after himself and the former of whom was covered by so many contingency plans that it could almost qualify as funny.

However now the world he had been talking about where Nunnally could live safely was a lot less hypothetical, and its size and fragility was now clear for him, perhaps better than anyone else, and he felt a responsibility for it that caused great irritation whenever he felt duty was being neglected.

Which neatly returned him to Claudio’s speech, which was wrapping up. The content, if one were to subject oneself to analysing it, represented a far greater threat than Lelouch’s quote unquote forward approach to politics ever could. Hell, some Revanchists were even hinting at a need for their supporters to take up arms against an illegitimate Government! If there were ever a threat,
these terrorists turned politicians represented it wholesale!

Alas, Suzaku remained a weeping fortress.

Not that he could comment.

“Are you alright?”

Lelouch paused to look up from his internal musings to see Jeremiah, coffee in hand, standing over him evidently concerned. Lelouch smirked up, before removing his headphones and replying “Fine Jeremiah, just a little worried is all.”

Jeremiah, who knew Lelouch about as well as it was possible to, displayed uncertainty, which certainly seemed to be a theme today, before commenting “Unlike you. Are you well… perhaps a visit to the doctor…?”

“No!” Lelouch responded angrily. He had enough problems, and abdicating them to visit a doctor was irresponsible. Still, he took a moment to breathe in, and ask “So what news?”

The elder Margrave appeared momentarily uncertain, before clearing his throat and moving on. “So you've probably heard Claudio have his go, and I’ve booked us a slot for tomorrow so you can submit that.”

Lelouch nodded, before shutting the laptop and adding “Shameful carry-on.”

Jeremiah nodded in turn as Lelouch stood up, still shorter even after having finished his growth several years ago and replied “Aye. Did you hear him go after Guilford?”

Lelouch had, recalling the tirade from a talk show the other day. Guilford, who had combined a healthy image with military prowess to become Marshal of the Japanese Protectorate Army, and had recently called for more independent investment, which Claudio had railed against. In truth, it was far more likely true that Guilford and the Darltons had never really recovered from their fight during the 2017 strike, and Claudio hoped to engage in some vengeance by proxy.

“Such a pity. Anyway, anything else?”

Jeremiah looked briefly thoughtful, before adding “There were several OSI members reporting to Suzaku earlier that there is a firefight in process at the Babel Tower. Apparently Black Knight remnants were hoping to intercept a package, and the OSI members were asking to take command from the local counterterrorist unit.”

“Bizarre.”

“Agreed.”

“I assume you still have… contact with Guilford? I mean you used to work together.”

Jeremiah paused uncertainly, before responding “I do… why?”

Lelouch paused, before peering out the window at the far side of the room and answering “I don’t like this one bit. They’ve been too quiet for this not to be important, and the OSI confirms it. If it’s not too much trouble, try talk Guilford into having Ohgi send in the Army. That should tie the OSI into enough of a bureaucratic mess for our lads to have a good idea of what’s happening. If we hurry, we may even be able to seize them ourselves.”
“It will be done.”

“Just don’t tell Suzaku.”

Chapter End Notes

Milestone; first chapter I rewrote from scratch. Initially, it was from Suzaku’s point of view, and was meant to portray how uncomfortable he was in his position as PM, as well as his paranoia over Lelouch. In that draft, Lelouch was far more confrontational, and arguably more malicious, which was significantly out of character, to the point where I scrapped two weeks work to amend this.

Lelouch, as I have made plain, isn’t power hungry for its own sake, which was a major problem for writing this chapter from Suzaku’s perspective. Lelouch, if he were to… stretch ministerial authority let’s say, would do so to in his eyes help the country. I don’t tell Suzaku about this one thing? Greater good. I start this new side project? Greater good.

It is very hard to explain this if you are not Lelouch, and assume he’s just like his father.

In any instance, I like this version much more, as it shows a more playful and less evil Lelouch. This chapter is more of a “Day in the life” than a plot chapter, though it is that too, and attempting to begin with Lelouch coming into real conflict with his superior would send the message that they have been doing so for 7 years, which they absolutely have not. One could copy paste this Chapter of seven years and still get a decent ideas of the running of the RPI, which would not have been the case in the original version, with bitterness, fighting, and anger. I hope I better portrayed the fact that Lelouch has nothing but love for Suzaku, though he still holds some reservations over how he governs, which is not new news in any sense of the word. What may be news is SelfAware!Lelouch, but hey, I’m a sucker for exposition. No literally, send help.

So yay me. So glad I wrote this all in bulk, or I would be facing some pitchforks for lateness. Still, I must subject you to further waiting until we get Chapter 27 of For Hearts And Minds, Fall From Grace, so until then, all the best, rate and review, and don’t forget to follow regular Parliamentary order.

~Eth0
Chapter Twenty Seven: Fall From Grace

Arc Seven: Reawakening

Opening: “I’ll be back” - Da-ICE

“Can you walk?”

Kallen groaned, before nodding. “Just about, though I’m not exactly fit to man the front lines.”

C.C chuckled, as various bodies passed busily by carrying rifles and bombs, unfamiliar sights to Kallen Stadtfeld but the fundamental essence of all Zero was. The red haired woman sat on the edge of a makeshift seat with the immortal witch attending her wound as various Japanese faces that shot back memories with every second of glance, them in turn taking a private moment to peek at the face of Zero, whom they had followed religiously.

As she sat below them immobile she paused to wonder what she was to them. Even having her memories returned, it felt like an alien, bizarre environment she was expected to leap into.

That she needed to leap into.

She had regained her memories and reason to fight with them, but the added context of seven years of complacency left her feeling lost and confused, and in a sense undeserving. She had been so far away for so long while the Black Knights had been forced to ground. How must they feel about that? Did they feel she was a charlatan, stepping in at the last minute to claim the glory? A liability, recaptured for morale?

Did they blame her?

They mightn’t have been wrong to. She had hopped onboard the Chinese plan to take out Yuaikai and Britannian occupation in one fell swoop with a southward thrust, using the convention as a distraction. Instead, Zero was blamed with ruining everything, shooting both other participants and turning public opinion against them.

She had ruined the Black Knights, and here they were, offering her back the keys to the kingdom, or what remained of it. She looked up at the brief faces and silently asked them whether she was trusted, but their steely eyes refused to answer, as they seemed to be busy asking their own questions.

None of this was reassuring.

She then directed her gaze into the back of the mask of Zero, held at its bottom hinge upright like a mirror, and reflected on what she now remembered after her failure, which was atrocious for differing reasons.
“You going to put it on, or have we wasted our time?”

Kallen looked up, craning her neck to the characteristically blunt C.C who was now standing with a demeaning smirk as she dropped her medical equipment and grabbed a rifle.

Kallen looked down and took a deep breath. She still believed that Britannia was an oppressive force, and that one should always act on those beliefs.

She hooked the mask around the top of her head, before pivoting it into position with a satisfactory click as it wrapped flush around her chin.

Zero was back.

Or at least as back as her leg allowed, as she and C.C fashioned a makeshift brace for it before they began to follow the armed Knights. Kallen fell behind the first few, not leading like she normally would from atop a Knightmare, which certainly didn’t help her confidence in her own right to take back command.

Still, they carried on, much slower than before with armed escorts, numbering about a dozen with submachine guns checking each corner. Dressed as a limping Zero, she followed with C.C attempting to drive her insane.

“So what happened when you were over there? How was Charles?”

Her mask hid a great many things, but C.C could always tell how to best go about winding up Kallen, and could always tell when she had succeeded.

“I’m serious.”

She harrumphed. She recalled her brief meeting with the Emperor very well. Suzaku, the traitor to his nation, his father, and nearly everything that Kallen could mentally list that wasn’t a swear, was also present. While she hadn’t been able to appreciate it at the time, she now knew with hindsight that Suzaku handing her over was part of the conditions of the Commonwealth Act.

Just another one of his betrayals. It felt more personal with Suzaku, as even though she had had a greater stake of hope in Lelouch, his actions almost hurt less in comparison to Suzaku’s. He was foreign, and didn’t have a natural appreciation for Japan as she ought to be. He was calculating, and while he had miscalculated and gone against her, Suzaku ought to have known better. Suzaku had been born here, son of the Prime Minister, and certainly a being of more emotion than Lelouch.

That made it sting that little bit more when it was him to drag here, complete with a straitjacket, to Charles Zi Britannia. The fat buffoon seemed to smile, the edges of his stony lips twitching more than anything else. Kallen stared in righteous fury, which Charles’ eternal eyes matched coolly.

“Let her go; she cannot move freely after all.”

Like the subservient whore he was, Suzaku followed his orders, standing before Charles. As furious as she was, trying to squirm out of her binds, it was nonetheless fascinating to watch their body language.

Suzaku was very formal, but not subservient, his back held straight but his head held high, with a slight frown as he was demanding a similar respect from his opposite, which the Emperor would not yield. As such, there was a brief stare off, with the eternally prideful Emperor unused to the concept of respecting anyone, and Suzaku feeling that he was owed his dues as the new Prime Minister.
Suzaku blinked first, bowing his head slightly, which seemed to satisfy Charles. It struck Kallen that it was a test of Suzaku’s fitness to serve; if Suzaku were in any way independently minded, there may be trouble.

This was another key issue with the Yuaiikai model; as long as they were under the yoke of Britannia, Japanese democracy would be limited by Britannian interests. They could be free, but never too free. It was freedom only so long as Britannia would allow it, which was not freedom at all, if the Japanese people were to voice an unorthodox opinion.

Still, Suzaku passed whatever test of subservience that Charles’ ego demanded, and so they both relaxed somewhat, before the Emperor spoke in a grandiose tone that seemed to shake the room.

“So this is the man who thinks he can govern better than I have.”

“And has, in spite of overwhelming odds, had an opportunity through hard work to wrest said functional governance away, in the true Britannian spirit, would you not agree?”

“That was not my question. Your father demonstrated a complete inability to handle his affairs, to the point that I was forced to take over to prevent his stubbornness over a few Pacific Islands such as Kamine to ruin the state of geopolitics.”

Kallen had actually laughed in the outrageous display of audacity on the part of the Emperor, before an Imperial Guard silenced her with a jab to the-

“He said Kamine Island specifically?”

Kallen blinked back to reality, as C.C interrupted her story over a minor detail.

“Yes, he did.”

C.C paused, checking a corner, before nodding, permitting her to continue as the progressed through the building, now eerily empty.

In any case, following Kallen’s reprimand, Suzaku responded to Charles’ point with “Lelouch and his doings represent your ideology as much as my father's political skill represents mine.”

Charles once again seemed satisfied with that response, and following some chat over policy, Suzaku was released with the elder Zi Britannia’s dubious blessing, and Kallen was left alone with the towering figure.

“So. The two bit performer turns out to be the half-bit spawn of a no wit Duke. How appropriate.”

Kallen swore, before roaring “You vile war crim-”

This earned her further prodding at the end of a guards stick, as Charles sneered “Do not insult my intelligence by acting in a manner unfitting of yours. I have a limited patience, please use it wisely.”

“You disgusting piece of shi-”

The jab was significantly harder this time, as Charles looked on. She gritted her teeth as he seemed to sigh and look briefly away, contemplative behind his hard exterior.

“Very well.” he grimaced, before staring her down.

“I, Charles Zi Britannia do rewrite your memories, and replace old with new!”
Kallen finished her story as they reached a stopping point where several men with heavy munitions needed to break down a bolted door, as C.C looked contemplative. As they had a minute, Kallen leaned up against the wall to rest her legs, as C.C finally responded.

“I think he was disappointed.”

Kallen didn’t respond for a moment, thinking over the comment before enquiring “How so?”

“I think he was expecting a better conversation. After all, you did gain a certain… notoriety as the thinking man's terrorist. More philosophical and intelligent than the generally more savage image they see. You’ve certainly gotten some zingers across in your time, and I’m in no doubt he was curious.”

“Good for him.” Kallen snorted. That certainly made sense, given the mind games she had seen him try on Suzaku, and while her substandard tone was more as a result of her anger, she was more than happy to disappoint him, if nobody else. If he felt let down by the fact that she was at the time allowing her angry emotions to control her, then more power to him, if that was possible.

The fact that her angry emotions were not a brilliant method through which to dictate one's actions was mentally brushed aside by Kallen as they broke through the door.

“Up these stairs, we’re halfway-”

“Q1, are you online?”

Kallen’s ear exploded into crackles that betrayed the poorly adjusted receptor, as she banged the side of her helmet to try get it to an audible level, before gingerly responding “Aye, here.”

The voice, now much clearer, continued in a desperate fashion which concerned Kallen, as she tried to get a grasp of what was going on on the far end, as the brief clarity was ruined by loud bangs and tinny explosions.

“We’re under attack- Earlier than anticipated, earl- the OSI is backi- now they’ve RPJ markings-”

With that less than uplifting news partially transmitted, the brief conversation duly ended, leaving Kallen with partial snippets to guess with. Taking initiative, hoping to restore her reputation as the fearless leader that was always in control, she announced “Stop here!”

The team instantly fell to one knee and pivoted their heads towards her, well used to her bold pronouncements in the tone she had adopted for the purposes of Zero, and picked up from the dredges of memory to inspire the illusion of confidence. It had once been remarked that one ought not to trust a convert, as they have far too much to prove. To slightly abuse the phrase, Kallen, in a moment of reflection, caught herself in a moment of self awareness, as she realised she was now acting far more aggressively than ever to prove herself to her subordinates. She had to calm herself.

However, as she concluded this mental dialogue, she realised she had paused just as it had seemed she was about to give orders, creating exactly the sort of awkward situation she had been hoping to avoid.

Kallen became acutely aware of the fact C.C was chuckling behind.

To recover the situation and thanking her mask for disguising her embarrassed features, she made as if she had made a decision, announcing further “Squad 1, report.”

The voice of the bespectacled Shōgo Asahina came clear through her earpiece, responding “We're
ahead, ready for your command Zero.”

“Our transport may have just been attacked, scout ahead, but be careful. Squad 3?”

“Indira, reporting in, a little behind.”

“Entrench and cover us. We need to wait for Shōgo. Everyone else, take up defensive positions here.”

With startling efficiency, they did so, covering all potential positions rapidly. Kallen herself took up a firing solution on a rear door with her pistol, with C.C beside her as they waited for news, which was swift in coming.

“Zero?”

“Here.”

Shōgo sounded briefly lost for words, struggling to find a way to explain himself before finally stuttering “It's gone… the airship has been taken out. The OSI doesn't have this sort of firepower, they're an intelligence group.”

“Which means the Japanese Protectorate Army is onto us.” Kallen concluded, before quietly swearing “Damned Ohgi, hurting us even now.”, in reference to their former comrade turned Yuaikai founder turned Minister for Defence.

After another moment's thought, she announced “The only way out is down!”, as their airborne exit was now out of the question. They would have to storm their way to ground level and disperse into the city.

They filed out in sequence, with Squad 1 ahead and to either side allowing for a hasty flank should the need arise, with the Zero Squad behind but centre, ready to bear the brunt of a frontal assault. Shōgo and his team were watching their backs and ready to reinforce, as well as using their intelligence to warn against threats.

They were five floors from the bottom before they had to avail of this, as the whole detachment heard the announcement “Scanners indicating hostiles straight ahead.”

Immediately, the Zero Squad hunkered down and took defensive positions as the 3rd Squad flanked the threat, which revealed itself right on cue.

“Contact!”

With that, the unit of five or so men dressed in full combat gear attempted to raise their guns to their eyeline, but it was too late, as Squad 3 enveloped and cut them to pieces along a large arc from behind, as they tried to hit the Zero Squadron who were in full cover.

With that, they moved on, the Zero Squad muddying their boots in Japanese blood as they continued their path to ground level, refusing to look down as they rejoined 3rd Squadron.

However, this success was short lived, as the threats came along thick and fast. The unsecured roof allowed for a small unit to helicopter down and pinioning their rear. However, as Shōgo moved to engage and delay these forces, Kallen's push to the streets hit vicious resistance as they reached the third floor, as an entire company held down the entire stairway system with suppressing machine gun fire.
As Kallen began to realise they were trapped without Knightmares, a Commander grabbed her by
the shoulder and asked “What's the plan?”

Before she could answer, a mortar shot up and rocketed into the ceiling, shaking the ground and
knocking Kallen off her weakened feet.

It took her a moment to reach her feet again, as she attempted to regain control of the rapidly
unfurling situation. Shouting around her, she instructed “C.C, push back with the heavy machine
gun! Ready the explosives!”

Rallying to her more than clamorous orders, the Black Knights readied their prepared ordinance for
Kallen's signature victory through superior explosions, or something to that effect depending on
how dramatic she felt. Hell, she had once collapsed a mountain on an entire Britannian Division.

As such, the well practised tactic took little time to prepare. Kallen would have preferred
Knightmares at least at the front for a bit of stopping power, but an Infantry charge would do.

“Ready!” she roared, lengthening the ending syllable to a higher pitch to amplify herself, before
beckoning a mass of detonations.

Of course, detonating high explosives, as well as moderate explosives and most other sorts, is
generally not recommended inside tall, narrow buildings, but Kallen possessed both the daring and
vision to give two fingers to the Britanno-Japanese Structural Planning Authority, having, in the
brief time it had taken C.C to brace Kallen's knee, ordered tactical explosives to be laid in the
building’s superstructure.

The effect was dramatic. The rear half of the building's support columns collapsed in a cacophony
of thunderous noise, as the entire top half fell down to the north, due to a lack of support on one
side. From afar, it might resemble a Jenga tower collapsing at its halfway point like a broken
domino.

Being inside the centre of the building, if a bit below the pivotal point, was quite an experience. In
the mass panic of the building collapsing, the gunfire stopped, as over two decades of practicing
earthquake drills came good with people grabbing onto whatever they could.

“Hold firm!” Kallen roared over the noise. “Reman the machine guns, do not allow them through!”

With the steely determination that defined the Black Knights, four men stayed as a detachment to
man the stairs while the remainder seized the moment provided by Kallen’s tactic of rigging the
building, which now revealed its purpose.

It was obvious that without some serious piercing power lent through Knightmares, they could not
force their way through the military opposition head on, let alone with the flank from above.
However, now with the building on its side, they could escape through the newly formed openings
while the opposition were now on the wrong side of the building to block their escape.

And like water flooding out of a cracked glass, the two dozen or so Knights withdrew, running
along the sides of walls that were now leaned on their far side. Kallen was a bit behind, ensuring
her entire team was escaping, before-

“Look out!”

C.C's warning from ahead came too late, as Kallens leg fell into a thin, shattered window twenty
feet above the tarmacked road below. She fell hard onto her good knee, as her bad one slipped
through the gap and trapping itself in a dangling position. Kallen looked up in panic, shouting
“Help!”

However, as C.C ran back to help, Kallen could only watch helplessly as a pair of masked soldiers rounded the corner at the other end of the hall, and put a pair of simultaneous bullets through C.C’s head.

“Keep on the green haired one!” the first rifle toting man roared at the top of his lungs, his own gun trained on Kallen’s masked head, as more soldiers came into view. As he approached, and saw she was stuck, he chuckled, and reached for his radio.

“Guilford-sama, we’ve got her.”

Chapter End Notes

In the vein of my recent trend of trying to gain a greater psychological understanding of our protagonists, I feel that within this context, the Zeal of the Convert or some alteration thereof would be highly appropriate for a patriotic and yet guilt filled Kallen who feels she is being held up in spite of what she perceives to be shirking her duties. It’s clear in her characterisation that she would love little more than to do all she can, in the same way Lelouch angsts over “abdicating his responsibility with a doctor’s visit.”. Things like these show the similarities between the two, who are arguably the most dichotomised enemies of the story.

Still, things are to take a turn for the fiddly, as, in the vein of this story, wits are far more critical than combat skill or military vision, and table side discussions will be the order of the day. No matter what though, Kallen will not be doing much with that knee.

Either way, all that is to come, as, in Chapter 28, Hatred, Fire meets Ice. I’ll see you then. Be safe, have a better plan than “Blow up the building and run.”, and leave a rating or review.

~Eth0
Chapter Twenty Eight: Hatred

Arc Seven: Reawakening

Opening: "I'll be back" - Da-ICE

Lelouch Lamperouge scowled as he tugged at his collar once again, his reflection in the mirror growing a filthy frown line across its forehead. Sighing, the Minister took in a deep breath, before running cupped hands filled with water through his hair, attempting to cool himself as the drops trickled down his face and fell onto his plain shirt, suit jacket long abandoned.

To say he was exasperated was an understatement.

He had been running around all day since hearing back from Jeremiah as to what had really happened at Babel Tower. While he had had no part in the initial decision to release Kallen to Britannia, and had been nominally in favour of it, he certainly was not going to pass up an opportunity to get a few answers off of her now that he could.

It had not been an easy process; Guilford, through his weaknesses in Jeremiah and Euphemia, had taken some convincing to allow Lelouch to speak to her, as well as a promise to fund his new Knightmare innovation program in the next budget readjustment, and then to go against the Homeland Intelligence forces, as well as to then detain the terrorists under RPJ jurisdiction rather than handing them over to the overarching Britannian forces. Lelouch guessed it would take a few hours for the OSI to work their way through the paperwork to request a prisoner transfer, which would be plenty of time.

Of course, these political transfers and trades were all in anticipation of the main event, and Lelouch was now beginning to feel agitated in that same anticipation. They had met twice before in knowledge of their respective identities, and they had hardly been civil affairs; Kallen had wiped his memory of the first meeting, and the second meeting had ended with his sister shooting him in the chest.

He glumly looked up at the ragged person facing him in the mirror with shaggy, wet hair and a sweaty shirt and grimly chuckled "Third time's a charm."

With that, he briefly hopped into a toilet stall to swap into his third shirt of the day before stepping out and adopting his typical hard, scornful posture, complete with the aloof frown reserved for those who most displeased him.

Outside the bathroom Jeremiah waited patiently, who nodded as he stepped back into the prison hallway, commenting "You could have waited until we returned home, the facilities here are… suboptimal."

"While your premise is correct, it couldn't have been helped. I needed a moment to freshen up."

"For a criminal?"
Jeremiah phrased it neutrally, however his furrowed eyebrows betrayed a skepticism for Lelouch's perverted interest in Zero, whom neither of them were eager to name.

"For Zero, though they are not mutually exclusive."

The former Margrave paused, before he shrugged dismissively, as Lelouch was directed to the holding cells Guilford had arranged for the unexpected guests. They were by no means a shambles, but they looked plenty uncomfortable enough for Lelouch's standards, with minimal frivolity and a concrete setting.

"Through here, Prisoner T12/78. Guilford will have a cost summary on your desk tomorrow."

"Thank you very much, I'll take it from here."

As the aide retreated, Jeremiah gave a foreboding look, a final caution against going in, however Lelouch ignored it, and stepped inside.

The room struck him immediately as what he had expected a cell to be like; dark, plain, and walled with steel bars that segregated him from his audience of one. It took him a moment to spot that redheaded audience, curled up in the corner massaging her knee.

"Have they examined your kneecap?" Lelouch pondered aloud, to which he was afforded no response. Being the first instance of their meeting where he was reasonably certain he held all the cards, he took some pleasure in chuckling "I guess not. You've no sympathy from me."

"I didn't ask for your damn sympathy…"

"Well there's a thing we can agree on. I'm so glad we can really come together and be bipartisan on this issue."

He enjoyed getting a rise out of her, especially after her literal mental manipulation and being a major source of stress for weeks at a time. He loved to see her eyes stripped of her usual masks, rending hatred. He welcomed it, as it reinforced his childish notion of victory after so long.

After staring for some time, she finally growled "What do you want?"

"Good question, you're learning. Sharp as ever."

He envisioned a knife, coolly plunged into Kallen's side pinning her, which he would twist with reminders of their various prior meetings, here the Sakura tree where he had made that same quip, first denounced the terrorists' doctrine, and stolen Ohgi from their group.

"First, I'm here to be smug, and I think I'm doing an excellent job of it, and while it is fun, I do actually have a few practical concerns."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

"People should shoot you more often, it has seemed to put you in a very agreeable mood."

"You seem to have a lot of men under you who would be willing to do it for being a pacifistic coward. Besides, you getting shot hasn't seemed to make you any more likeable."

"Touchy, touchy. Still, not quite true. I'm accountable to my constituents in my capacity as a Representative, and I like to think I'm a lovely person."

"I'm sure you do, what with interrogating me from the far end of a dingy cell."
Lelouch smirked, leaning against the bars as Kallen looked aside. He enjoyed her sharp wit as much as he would love to cut her on something equally sharp. Still, that would have to wait, as he slapped his palms together as he responded "Unlike you to be so practical; usually you're all about the irrelevant frivolities. Seeing as you're so cooperative, I'm sure you'd be so gracious as to explain what the hell you did to me back at Ashford."

She turned back to him, sniffing vulnerability in his question. He turned his chin up to reject her opportunistic advance, as she replied "Has that been troubling you?"

"Somewhat. Perhaps I may even arrange for a doctor to come around if you're a little more direct than usual. You haven't much to lose beyond a few pints of blood."

Kallen made a face, before smirking. "You wouldn't believe me."

"I'm in a charitable mood."

"Aren't you ever. Nonetheless, I think even you, in all your Augustine kindliness, may struggle with this gem."

"You managed to erase my memory using your voice. Persuasive as you may be, that's a little beyond a few lessons in rhetoric. I think my standard for the suspension of disbelief has been deftly altered."

He seemed to choke over the last few words, the veins in his neck swelling as he spat out the end of the sentence, sarcasm drooling from every syllable.

Kallen meanwhile seemed unaffected, enjoying in her own way Lelouch's scorn, which he quickly withdrew as he saw her sly eyebrow rise in amusement. He wouldn't allow her to enjoy this.

"Just get on with it."

She seemed to mull it over, before coming to a realisation, and quickly hiding it. While Lelouch was certainly concerned by this display, Kallen placated him by speaking to his questions as he turned his back to her in thought.

"It's called Geass, the power of Kings manifested in the eyes."

That was the beginning of her testimony of sorts, as she explained her understandings as to the origins of Geass, how it related to C.C, and how hers manifested. Throughout, Lelouch constantly tried to trip her up over her story and catch her out, but, to his surprise, she was genuine. He could only guess at what she was getting at, but, in the interest of advancing his understanding, he asked "Does anyone else posses this ability?"

"Mao, the man who kidnapped you before who has since been dealt with, a wealth of Britannian operatives under a 'V.V', and your father."

Lelouch snapped round, his face pressing tight against the bars as he focused his gaze on the air in front of Kallen, insistently demanding she elaborate.

She seemed to smirk at his sudden aggravated display, as she went on to explain "He has the specific ability to rewrite memories. Limited, but I've no doubt he's put it to good use over his political life, covering up stories and hiding secrets."

Lelouch's mind immediately raced to his mother's murder, and the apparent wall he had run into attempting to garner information. The bastard had likely erased all witnesses, he thought, as he
grew increasingly angry considering the implications of this news, to the point his renewed hatred of his father overwhelmed his dislike of Kallen.

"Dammit…" he hissed, turning briefly away. He was more aware than anyone of the faults of his father, but for them to be brought back to the forefront, and for this else itch abomination of an ability on top was untenable.

Still, Lelouch was still calm enough to compartmentalise. He could move against his father later, but for now he needed all the information and assets he could conjure. He made a mental note to get back to the whole roaring rampage of revenge malarkey at some point or another, before carrying on once he had caught his breath.

"One more question. What happened that day where you erased my memory?"

Kallen's eyes narrowed in thought, as if strategizing, before she answered, selecting her words carefully.

"Mao, having the ability to read minds, wanted to capture C.C, someone he couldn't read, and live alone with her. She was under my protection, and so he kidnapped you and proposed an exchange. Given that you were to have no idea of Geass or my real identity, which he revealed to you, I was forced to wipe your memory."

Lelouch scowled. While her logic was sound, he could only scorn the use of such an ability. It was unnatural, cheating in a sense, to use Geass in this manner, against an opponent that could never even conceive of it. Lelouch doubted he would ever consider using it if offered. He abhorred it in concept.

"I see." he growled. "Well I'm glad we've gotten this out of the way. Here's to never having to see you again."

He finally moved to depart the segregated cell, as Kallen cried "That's it?"

"Yes."

"You'll hand me back over to that bastard Emperor? The whole point of his gambit was to get C.C, and you'll hand us both over to him to do whatever mythical abominations he plans?"

Lelouch paused, frowning over the challenge presented. Who did he hate more? He could not guess; all he could really do was frown at the floor, refusing to answer the question.

Sensing an opportunity, Kallen seemed to coyly comment on his hesitation "I guess you really are his puppet. I mean, you did sign an agreement with him."

The nerve! Lelouch swore as loudly and disgustingly as his throat would allow, growing hoarse with fury as he turned around rapidly, ready in his already agitated state to unleash a wealth of vitriol on Kallen before his loose, swinging knuckles against struck the steel bars, sending him into blinding pain. He withdrew his arm to deep within his figure, and resigned himself to glaring at her.

"I told you at the Sakura tree, I am no friend of that man, and that remains true. I despise him, detest him, and any other clause you care for. We were given an opportunity, no we created an opportunity for him to offer us concessions. Would you steal an enemy's ammunition supplies if he offered them to you?"

Kallen nodded, and spoke again "And if I offered my ammunition?"
Lelouch was taken aback, standing upright in visual shock at Kallen's simple sentence. The neat phraseology that had defined her career as Zero aside, he was at once appalled and admiring of her gall. If she was lacking in many traits, audacity, the same trait he had lectured to her on, was no longer among them.

"Did you just…"

"Perhaps."

After a moment of slack jawed silence, Lelouch finally responded with "While I admire your… candidness, why in the world would I take on such a risk as you?"

He became acutely aware that his outrage at Kallen's use of Geass and his hatred of Kallen herself seemed to tumble away as his brain cooked up ideas and opportunities it could never have imagined before.

"Because you can't do it on your own. I'm not going to doubt your intent, you've demonstrated that fine enough. But if you want to go against your father for all he's done to both you and Japan, you've a funny way of going about it."

Lelouch grimaced. The other development that had occurred since his inauguration was the exposure of his personal story. Diethard Ried had already done a feature documentary 'Lelouch Of Japan', detailing his life following his exile in full detail, which certainly was less than modest. His relatively Freudian excuse, his dislike of the Royal Family, and his personal life in Ashford were all now a matter of public record, and he hated it for this reason. Kallen now had a greater understanding of his history and some of his motivations than she had any right to.

"You have been complacent, you have lost your aim. You may say you still want to get rid of him, but what are you going to do? What is your plan?"

Lelouch scowled bitterly at her for some time as he mulled over her familiar words. They weren't familiar because Kallen had said them; this sort of direct demand for specificity had usually been the other way around, however Lelouch was very used to hearing that manner of argument from Suzaku.

He paused in a moment of quiet thought. While he remained unconvinced terrorist tactics could amount to much, and he recognised the risks, the idea of someone with Kallen's talent and connections operating under his direct control was extremely tempting, particularly with her former associates running about like gangsters threatening conflict as well as the news concerning his father.

"What… capacity would you be willing to operate under?"

He heard Kallen shift, though he couldn't see for looking away, as she incredulously responded "Whatever was needed…"

Lelouch paused as he weighed his options. It was thoroughly illegal, though that didn't concern the rebel within Lelouch. What concerned him a little more was how this may undermine the values of the RPJ, including but not limited to accountability.

On the other hand, there were plenty of other threats abounding. Kallen was in a unique position to quell the rebellious element for good, and turn it into a weapon that he could use to return to where he worked best; on the offence. He would now have initiative, and would no longer be waiting in paranoia. In fact, this was the best opportunity to gain influence in the rebellious factions that
threatened the stability of the nation. After all, it would be impossible for anyone to enjoy hypothetical liberties, the idealistic goals he had railed against, unless they enjoyed practical security that he now could provide.

It was for the good of the country, he determined. This minor undercut of oversight would serve the interests of protecting the Japanese people from Civil War and Geass-based subjugation.

"Before we go any further-"

"I'll do whatever I am instructed to. You've come out on top on this one, and I owe you some help for the pain I've been. It's you or the Emperor, and we both know how the latter choice ends. You're not like Suzaku, I know you at least care about the Japanese people."

Lelouch guessed she was lathering on the praise heavily to try to win him over, but she showed no hesitation in becoming second fiddle which reassured him. While her kind words fell on deaf ears, he definitely was liking the substance of her answers. It was a risk, but as long as the leash was small, the gains could be massive. Lelouch briefly envisioned a Japan that was united under one goal, to rid itself of the despotic Emperor, with Lelouch rallying the Ameliorates and Kallen consolidating the Revanchists. It was a glorious dream.

He smiled, and turned back to face Kallen.

"And I get to track your movements? Just to be sure?"

"Aye, all fine."

"Well, you certainly took my advice on boldness to heart. I think we may be able to make this work."

He would have to betray his country to protect it. He could definitely live with that.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is my favourite Chapter of the story so far. The emotions ran about as high as they ever have, with our two arguable arch rivals displaying a vast range of feelings and reactions. I may be useless at writing action or combat, but damn if I don't love some dramatic arguments.

If I could make a cursory note to direct your thought, which ideally my writing should do on its own, wonder how things may have progressed had Lelouch decided to not bother himself with Kallen. Would he have worked his way out of his bored, yet agitated state alone? Would it have been a healthier stress release than conspiracy with Zero? Food for thought.

Now the plot of R2 is underway, and will not mirror canon R2 as much as R1 did, as demonstrated by this Arc’s fresh approach to the tower incident. Said Arc now draws to a close with our coalition finding its dubious roots. Following a brief flashback, the eighth Arc, Killing With Kindness, can underway with Chapter 29, Yes Minister. Join me then. Be safe, try to compromise with those you don't like, rate, and review. ~Eth0
Flashback

“To Lelouch and Suzaku!”

The bottle of champagne, compressed to its bubbly limits, popped its cork as it was shook, flying across the decorated room as the foam spilled over the glass room. To the sounds of cheers, the first half dozen glasses were filled hurriedly, the first already filled with Lelouch’s preferred water as the various participants took up their glasses and drank.

“And to a happy wedding!” cried Milly with a cheeky grin, using her position as the only one without drink in her throat to steal the momentary silence as she placed down the bottle.

As if on cue, both men choked on their drinks, causing uproarious laughter, not least from Nunnally, who had come to appreciate Milly’s rather cruel sense of humour in her own perceptive way, in spite of Lelouch's protests that his 15 year old sister remain innocent.

It had several weeks after Suzaku returned from Midway, and exactly a week since the preliminary constitution had been drafted. Up until this point, the two men had been working day and night to get the RPJ up and running, and, once Rivalz and Milly invited the pair and Nunnally over, they accepted with eagerness, though the eagerness was beginning to wear, as they both shook their arms in rejection of Milly’s bold statement.

“One of that.” Suzaku wheezed, finally regaining some control. “We’re not the romantic couple here.”

Rivalz, emboldened, responded “At least I was open and asked!”, playing along with Milly’ game. His request had been successful, as while their status was still uncertain, they had gone out twice together. Suzaku looked indignant, while Lelouch simply sighed and said “I am more than happy being single at this time. I could hardly imagine having to manage a whole thing like that right now.”

Nunnally could only agree, as she heard Milly top up Suzaku’s drink. The last few weeks had been a mad rush, with an instance like this, resting in the Student Council room, being a real rarity.

Of course, even if things had changed, particularly with Suzaku and Lelouch growing more formal and aloof, though whether this was emotional growth due to stress or them simply being more genuine was open to interpretation, some things remained the same.

Shirley was still fawning over Lelouch, which his new, mysterious and rebellious celebrity factor only brought up to eleven. Nunnally could only wonder how her oblivious brother missed it. Nina was even more muted than usual, and while she disliked making bad assumptions about others, Nunnally could only imagine the whiff of sulphur and ghetto didn’t sit well. Rivalz and Milly were in cahoots to hijack the visit, while the two Ministers defended themselves from their friends’ lighthearted attacks while getting in some snark edgewise every now and again.

“You’ll find someone Suzaku!” Shirley encouraged heartily in her usual way, though Suzaku audibly waved it off. Of course, in the Council’s absence and Lelouch’s general obliviousness, they hadn’t noticed that Suzaku did indeed have someone in mind, and, having talked to Euphemia quite
often, knew the feeling was very mutual. They hadn't said as such, but it was widely acknowledged that Nunnally was very perceptive.

Still, she was hardly in a position to play matchmaker, and she didn't want to make Suzaku even more uncomfortable that he already was, so she did not say anything.

Suzaku, after concluding his sip, responded “Thank you Shirley, I would hope the same for you.”

Shirley didn't respond, likely preoccupied with rather unfortunate thoughts, as Rivalz spoke up with “Man, you three were hard to get in without a crowd. You're practically urban legends around here.”

“It's been great for applications!”

The last comment came from Milly, before Shirley, seeming to remember a concern, asked “So hey, Nunnally, and... Lelouch? Are you guys really royalty? Like, like it says on the news?”

Lelouch simply hummed “Mm hm.” in confirmation as he himself drank, a point Nunnally elaborated on with “We had to hide for years after Lelouch angered... the Emperor, and he invaded Japan. With Suzaku, we lived in the Academy. To all intents and purposes, we weren’t royalty.”

“Furthermore-” Lelouch began, picking up from where Nunnally left off as he finished his water “-we were not exactly the biggest fans of him following this.”

“Most people tend to protest with signs and marches.”

“Milly, did you dare compare us to most people?”

“Calm, Lelouch, we want to leave without your inflated head forcing us to remove the door frame.”

This sent laughter around the room, as Nina, at once curious as to the apparatus of state and seeking reassurance as to her more judgemental side, asked “So what is it you actually did, or do... Sirs?”

Lelouch, perhaps meanly from Nunnally’s perspective, barked out a quick laugh, as he responded, sounding short of breath “Sirs... my Lord, I didn’t realise public service could be so taxing. Look at this Suzaku; I’m being addressed formally!”

Alone in his laughter, he eventually subsided and gave a more serious answer with “First, it’s still Lelouch. We’re still friends, we’re still the same, for the most part.”

“And Suzaku...”

“Yes, he’s still Suzaku. Above me by rank in fact.”

“I see... so he’s going to be Prime Minister of the new country? The leader, at least for laws.”

“That’s a way of putting it.”

Nina seemed somewhat satisfied with that, seeming to hum to herself as she recalled the various kindnesses Nunnally knew that Suzaku, with his heart of gold, had shown her. The gathering proceeded as such for a while thereon; lighthearted banter, many accidental “Your Majesty”’s and “Sir”’s that seemed to annoy Lelouch far more than Suzaku, and the occasional policy
question and demands to the politicians to recount their rebellious exploits, only to be disappointed that most of it consisted of staring at computer screens and getting shot at.

“One could say it was quite the shot in the arm.” Suzaku once joked, to many groans.

Still, Lelouch and Suzaku’s poor jokes were certainly not the end of the world. In a sense, it was the beginning of one, as Nunnally, though blind, saw the masks her friends and family wear for eight years drop away. They talked and joked as friends, with no secrets, no plots, and only dreams of a bright future with pens rather than guns dictating the agenda.

It was, to Nunnally, a perfect world.

Suzaku looked up through his fringe, waving it away and smiling “Hey, Euphie!”

The former Princess stood opposite his desk and smiled with closed eyes in her cute manner, with a minor wave and a “Hello!”

“Did you bring those files down?”

“Mm hm! Ohgi thanked me and moved right along.” she explained, as Suzaku stood up and came around the table, smiling his thanks. Euphemia looked lovely today, with a simple white frilly dress and her trademark smile that always served to relax him.

“Thanks for that, it’s been such a pain recently to sort out.”

“No problem at all. All good up here?”

“Yeah”, he whispered as he drew closer. “Just a little tired. And lonely. Your trip to Britannia took ages.”

Euphemia chuckled, sitting on the side of his desk as he laid a gentle palm over Euphemia’s fingers, stretched open over his files. Her skin was as smooth as anything imaginable, contrasting his own uneven skin. His downward eyes looked towards his own fingers, exploring the expanses of her carpals and small knuckles, just bumps if anything, before he retreated, his fingers curling back in a sort of guilt.

His chest became heavy as the guilt reached a more conscious level. He had long come to terms with loving Euphemia, and had been overjoyed to hear that she loved him in turn, but it had hurt them both. It was impossible for them to be in any way public; the Ameliorates were already believed to be too close to Britannia, and for the party leader to want to pursue a relationship with a former Royal Family member would be a bridge too far, not to mention the somewhat unfortunate image of a national leader dating his secretary.

Moreover, their secret relationship did have a few personal implications. Suzaku had been put more than a little on edge whenever he was in polite company and Euphemia was mentioned. Even further, he had been placed in swings between longing from afar and uncertainty that was accentuated by his high office. In these intimate moments, he would face thoughts over whether the risks were worth it, concerns over ethics, and a paralysing panic that beat to the same rhythm as his fluttering heart, which was only driven to greater eminence within his chest as Euphemia’s now lonely fingers chased his across the desk.

Erecting to ignore his concerns, he laced his fingers, phalanges arched upright, with Euphemia’s,
knitting a union between them as he leant in to kiss her on the cheek.

It was a light brush if anything, but Euphemia, the more forward of the two, took Suzaku’s advance for all it was worth, wrapping the base of her free hand on his shoulder, and as he concluded his brief peck she drew closer to embrace him fully, kissing him on his lips.

Not to be taken, Suzaku responded, swinging his arms round her back and welcoming her into them, as their respective passions flared to violent life. They shared a single kiss tight like a secret murder, held so close as if to prevent anyone else from seeking a glimpse.

It took some time for the initial spark to break apart, but the fire was thoroughly lit, as they repeatedly kissed in a variety of fashions and passions for some time, before a rapping noise was heard on the far side of the office door, four taps in all before a shout.

“Suzaku? What are you playing at?”

The pair immediately broke apart, explosive energy spurring them into motion like an atom splitting. Euphemia, rushing to tidy herself as Suzaku rushed back to his desk, called back “Sorry Lelouch, one sec!” to the unmistakeable tones of the Finance Minister. Euphemia raced forward to the door in her energetic fashion, unbolting it and beckoning Lelouch inside, as Suzaku leaned back to his seat, sharing his tiredness with its compliant springs.

Euphemia and Lelouch shared small talk as the latter passed along a budget proposal for his blessing, though when looking down at the paper, it was more for shame than reading the thing. He felt like he’d let his colleagues down, and passed it back. Lelouch apparently had a better handle on things than he did.

Lelouch protested, and Suzaku gave half hearted answers. His mass of energy had gone, and as Lelouch commented “Make sure those things go well. We’re all relying on you.”, he suddenly felt inadequate to the nth degree. He looked down once again, not having the luxury of hiding in sheets of paper, and could only just manage “Yeah...”
"Vermillion is lovely this time of year."

"I assume you've been?"

"Three times, though not in the past century. It's taken a turn for the gaudy, though Luoyang West Street is always good to visit."

Lelouch swallowed his spoonful of soup and nodded, as the green haired immortal accomplice of Kallen's, who went by C.C, continued to make small talk with him over their Ji-Yu, which she had heartily recommended. The fish-based milky-white substance went down well with both of them as they chatted into the night in the heart of the Vermillion Forbidden City, in Henan's Yellow River Valley.

It was his first official state holiday in seven years, and, naturally enough, it was a working holiday. In the technical sense, it was an official diplomatic visit, in which he would spend the first day of his week long stay meeting with Chinese dignitaries and generally improving relations on behalf of the RPJ. Lelouch, believing firmly in avoiding wasting any time, was nothing if not enthusiastic for the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

The Tianzi Empress was very pleasant, showing respectable intelligence and a passable understanding of policy, while still being extremely personable. Her personal aide, Li Xingke, was similarly respectful, though certainly less amiable, constantly seeming suspicious, though Lelouch supposed that was his job. Interestingly, he learned that the Empress was closely related to Governor Kaguya, which led to a very interesting conversation on her. Apparently they knew each other well, though they had not spoken in some time.

That being said, Lelouch, ever observant, could not help but observe any question pertaining to how the Chinese Federation would act in future would be deferred to the Eunuchs, advisors in the background who spoke in the commanding tones and condescending voices of half-men. He could only conclude she was a puppet, which was certainly rather unfortunate for any practical agreements that Lelouch could hope for.

However, beyond diplomacy, the real reason they were in China was that Lelouch was paranoid.

Lelouch loved being paranoid more than anything else in the world. It focused him like a razor on a problem solving mentality. Suspecting everything around him made him alert and forced him to make detailed, proactive plans, rather than waiting in a vulnerable cave. In a perverse way, betraying his country was working wonders for his mental health. He had organised a trip for himself to a faraway territory in a densely populated area in neutral territory, while also shipping
out this C.C character, with heavy disguise including a black wig, in order for them to sort out the Black Knight's Order Of Battle, as well as to establish more permanent communication channels, away from prying eyes.

He would have preferred someone a little less bizarre than C.C to handle the business end of things, but Kallen was out of the loop from her time away, and he obviously couldn't let the members of the Black Knights who were also Revanchist Representatives know Lelouch was now in on the plot. This limited the people who knew enough to help him learn about the Black Knights while not also being politically compromised to one, very annoying witch.

However, Lelouch was for once comfortable relaxing. He was safe in the knowledge that his plans were enacting themselves as fast as he could make them, and there was little he could do to rush them. This knowledge gave him the ability to actually enjoy his damn holiday, while also picking the brain of the oldest person on Earth, which was in itself an enjoyable experience.

For all her sarcasm and forward, inappropriate nature, full of suggestive jokes and crude comments, she was certainly full of intrigue that did fascinate Lelouch enough to divert to world history and related topics, in spite of her mocking tones and his desire to focus on the task at hand.

"You were at Yorktown? For the battle?"

She nodded. "Washington was certainly a bold leader, but that does not a good strategist make. I struggle to imagine a scenario where he could have defeated Britannia. I escaped to France shortly after."

Lelouch chuckled "Out of the frying pan…"

"Tell me about it."

They clinked glasses, water against wine, as following their finishing Lelouch pulled out a thick pad of documents, to which C.C groaned "Really? It's only day 2..."

"Which means we can get plenty done." Lelouch smirked, as he placed the lined paper across the table, all over their menus.

"You're just like her."

Lelouch looked up from the mass of unfilled documents with a puzzled look on his face, simply responding "Eh?"

C.C chuckled. "You're both so caught up in the moment, the cause, or whatever. You're both so afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Time."

Lelouch swore he felt a fretful tingle as she spoke those words, which, while he had no understanding of her meaning, were spoken with such severity it could only make him shudder. She laughed at him, and said "What's wrong? Your face has turned blue? It was just a comment. Maybe I'm getting old."

Lelouch stared confusedly, before he nodded to dismiss the matter, somewhat exasperated, and then his phone rang. Given their location in the heart of Totalism, the only calls that could get through were government calls, which only meant one thing.
"Oh Suzaku, how are you?"

"Fine enough, just erm… just wondering if I could ask you something."

Lelouch, absentmindedly assuming it was about the budget, replied "The answer is yes."

"I have some gentlemen from the OSI here, wondering if we've seen the escaped Black Knights members from the Tower. Apparently there are some high profile people still at large. I called Ohgi, then you, as we were the ones most involved."

"In light of new information, I amend my previous statement; the answer is no."

Both C.C and Suzaku laughed at this rapid fire backpedal, as the latter explained over the wire "Well that's that chaps, we've got nothing. We'll keep you posted."

Lelouch hung up, and smirked. "We'll keep you posted alright.", before clicking open a pen and continuing "So, let's go for the organisational structure first. Commanders and their unit size should be a good start."

C.C yawned, before going over them for the course of the dinner. There was a litany of names to go over, but to her credit, C.C remembered them all, down to the Head of Military Operations.

"Kyoshiro Tohdoh."

Lelouch once again looked up from scribbling to ask surprisingly "Really?"

"Absolutely. Probably the second most competent soldier we have, and has been in every battle he could get into."

Lelouch laughed triumphantly and rocked in his seat, pumping fists as he grinned like a madman. After calming somewhat, he hissed silently "I knew it, I knew he was in on it. The damned head of the Revanchists was a paid up subversive."

"You were a 'paid up' subversive."

"At least I've never lied about it. He was going the full course about how he has no affiliations with the Black Knights, on and on… this is brilliant."

Lelouch wallowed in the Schadenfreude, before C.C blankly interrupted "Are you done?"

"Pretty much, yeah. That was just too good." Lelouch explained, still smiling as he scribbled down the former Lt. Colonel's name with great satisfaction.

"So, for all the lecturing between you, Kallen, and the P.M about 'plans', what's yours?"

"For this project?"

"Let's go with that."

Lelouch sighed, and looked to either side before going on to explain his overall strategy. "It's twofold.", he began, "First, and more importantly, I want to try and use Zero's status to convince the Revanchists to calm down and stop threatening bloody civil war. Furthermore, this influence can be put to good use later, if need be."

"Very democratically proper."
"You've been in and out of revolutions since the third century, so-"

"Would you relax? I've been in and out of revolutions since the third century and you're still the most uptight out of the bunch."

"Compliment accepted. Anyway, the other part I'd like to get on is a military application of the Black Knights. For now, the Geass... Directorate, I believe you called it, would make a lovely target. From there, we can begin a campaign of sorts against Britannia, indirectly, perhaps with a long term goal of integrating them with the RPJ Army."

"Suzaku won't stand for it."

"Good for him, that's his problem."

C.C gave a slight detached chuckle, as if she found him entertaining rather than his comments, though Lelouch didn't much mind how she found her amusement. To put it another way, 'Good for her.'

That was an end to that discussion, and they resumed a discussion of history, which led to a further discussion on the mechanics of Geass, which Lelouch, in light of his new subordinate's position, he was eager to discover the limits of.

"And you can give them to multiple people?"

The immortal witch nodded, which gave Lelouch further information to mull over. While Mao was very, very dead, this certainly bode poorly for the future crusade against the Geass order, which could potentially have hundreds of Geassed up tyke bombs lying in wait.

Sighing, he finished the last dregs of his soup, washing it down with a glass of water before frowning slightly. He did have one more question, but it was almost not for asking, being a question more for introspection. Furthermore, asking it had bad implications.

"Well if that's that..." C.C announced, standing to go, and leave him with the bill, which caused him to hesitate over a word, something she noticed.

"Cat got your tongue?"

Lelouch paused, looking down as he briefly wondered. He would have hated it, but it would have been so useful. It could have opened up an avenue where Zero was successful from the start, with proper organisation.

"Why didn't you pick me? That day in Shinjuku?"

"Oh, has that been playing on your mind?"

"Just wondering what qualities you thought I lacked compared to Kallen when you made your all important judgement."

C.C smirked knowingly, before explaining slowly, the sentences forming as she reasoned "I suppose you have most of the prerequisites, though it's not set in stone. Thing is, I really doubt you would have had the... will to complete your end of the contract when the time came. Geass is a two way exchange, and my demands are... emotionally taxing. What with Suzaku, you were too attached to this world to have ever given it up."

This held some interesting implications. C.C's demands must have been severe, life altering, to the
point that an emotional connection could jeopardise it. It was also interesting that it was his connection to Suzaku that saved him, even though he had let it wane so severely. He could only ask "And Kallen will?"

C.C paused, before nodding. "I believe so."

"Then here's hoping she completes my contract before she completes yours." Lelouch responded gravely.

"Thank you, thank you very much, I appreciate the help. Don't forget to vote next month. Of course, thank you."

Ohgi waved past the modest crowd to various whoops and cheers as his minor rally drew to a humble close. His was not a contested District; the 10th District of Toshima and Nerima was solidly Ameliorate, combining a middle class appeal with a moderate image.

However, while he was under little threat from the insurgent Revanchists, his party members, especially in more rural areas, were, and so everyone was out and busy, even in this relatively early phase of the campaign. It was only the third election the country had experienced, and the first where there was clearly defined parties and campaign infrastructure. Of course, the campaign trail suited some of the Representatives with more… bombast, such as the war hero Tohdoh or the enigmatic Lelouch, but Ohgi still managed an earnest image of an Everyman looking out for the little guy.

As Minister For Defence. Well, everyone had their calling in life he supposed, as he began to move back towards his car while the press asked various questions of him in the general hustle, which he attempted to answer as best he could.

"Yes… with regards to the incident at the Babel Tower, the area is now secured and belligerents have been apprehended, however an investigation in coordination with the police and Marshal Guilford is underway to fully understand how these terrorists brought such heavy ordinance into a building that was so apparently secure, and were able to use these clear shortcomings to cause the deaths of both Britannians and Japanese, showing their disregard for even their own so called principles. It is clear they are nothing short of common criminals, and will be treated as such."

While knowing he had been one demeaning speech on the part of a college student away from actually being one of those criminals made him a little uncomfortable, he could only imagine he would likely have left after the violence had escalated. Still, it was a very good answer by most metrics, combining healthy responsibility with a promise of future action. It satisfied that particular questioner, and he answered a few others as he went along before finally reaching his car, where he was beckoned inside to escape the flashing lights. The driver slammed the door shut, finally isolating him from the vast noise.

"Goddamn…"

"Rough day?"

Ohgi looked to his side to spot Lelouch sitting opposite him, having waited in the car for him. He jumped in surprise, not having seen him when he sat in, which seemed to amuse the Britannian greatly. As Ohgi caught his nervous breath, he joined in Lelouch's light chuckles before commenting "Welcome back. How was China?"

"Quite a nice change of pace, though it got too humid towards the last few days for me," he explained, and Ohgi nodded. He was just glad Lelouch had enjoyed himself for a change, and
Lelouch's more casual tone told Ohgi that he had vented his stress healthily, which pleased him greatly. He vocalised this, replying "Good to hear."

Lelouch looked out the window briefly, before asking "So what have I missed?"

"Well the Election is underway, but you knew that. What I have noted that is bizarre is that there hasn't been any major activity since the attack on the Tower, even compared to beforehand. If it hadn't come off the back of such a massive attack, I'd be celebrating."

Lelouch gave a thoughtful look to the floor, and pondered aloud "Perhaps they drained themselves a bit further than they anticipated."

"Perhaps." Ohgi agreed, as Lelouch, after a moment, began "Perhaps…"

"Perhaps what?"

Lelouch paused again, as if contemplating whether he ought to verbalise his thought, before suggesting "Perhaps, if they are weak, this could be an excellent time to negotiate a proper ceasefire, get a political settlement."

Ohgi blinked in surprise. Being the least zealous of the original three, he had proposed that the Government rid themselves of this thorn in their side and come to a peace settlement. Suzaku had all but ripped his head off, and Lelouch had said nothing, but indicated he would vote against it. He responded "Really? What made the difference?"

"Well first off that attack raised the urgency, and this potential weakness is the best chance we've had. I think it can be done, and there's the political will to do it."

Ohgi nodded, and smiled in relief. Finally, this affair may be drawing to a close. He thought briefly of Kallen, likely dead by this time, and hoped she could finally be at peace wherever she was, knowing her homeland was. He bowed his head slightly, before nodding. He was a little concerned with the precedent of Lelouch undercutting Suzaku, but Ohgi knew he could keep Lelouch in check.

"So there." Lelouch concluded, sinking into his seat opposite Ohgi. "At least we can bring an end to that menace."

"Might as well tell him we're coming if that's the case."

Lelouch nodded, as picked up his phone to call Suzaku to inform him of their soon coming, but as he pressed the first name on his speed dial, the tone merely rang on to Suzaku's dull voice answer.

"This is P.M Suzaku Kururugi, unfortunately you've caught me at a bad time and I can't answer your call at the moment. Please leave your name and number after the beep and I'll be back to you as soon as I can."

"The devil is he playing at…"

Ohgi could only guess. It was early in the day, and Suzaku had no meetings on that morning. Lelouch ran his hand through his hair and sighed.

"I'm meeting with Diethard for an interview in a few minutes anyway, so I'll check on him afterwards. You can get back to campaigning."
See you in the next Chapter, Made For Love and Revolution. Until then, stay safe, rate, review, and take a holiday.

~Eth0
Suzaku let out a breath of exhaustion as Euphemia sat down opposite him, worn out from a spate of affection. Everything about her excited him like they had just met, and continued to do so even as he spent his hours outside addiction hoping to kick it. He would fret at home and love at work.

"Are you alright Suzaku?"

Suzaku suspired, releasing the heavy air from his lungs before perking up. "Yeah, ready to get back to work."

That he was. His hormonal habit of procrastinating had gone on for long enough, and the arrival of reports from Babel Tower seemed like as good an excuse as any to return to work. Sure, he could hardly think of anything else when she drew near, but that was not excusable. This could not remain the status quo, where he would spend his time in service of the public on personal matters. He would have to find some distance, but distances could have humble beginnings.

He looked back up as he shuffled his papers to an upright position as Euphemia stood opposite. She seemed to recognise what he was hoping for, and said "I'll be off then and leave you be. Perhaps I can see how Nunnally is doing."

"That would be nice, yes." he smiled, as he began to cheer somewhat as his spirits returned. Euphemia grabbed her coat and things from his desk and moved towards the door, opening it slightly before pushing it shut again. She whispered "One more before I go." into his ear before pecking him on the cheek.

"And for you..." he replied, brushing her cheek with his fingers as he pushed his lips onto hers, embracing her fully, sharing the kiss as fully as possible to last the time they would be apart with his new outlook. It was-

"As to that- the hell is going on in here?"

Suzaku and Euphemia broke apart in a moment of panic as they both pivoted to the outraged voice, which transitioned from droll to shrill as quick as a flash. At the foot of the now open door stood an enraged Lelouch, tailed by a surprised, but more neutral Diethard Ried. It took a moment for Lelouch to move beyond his angry, shocked posture while the lovers were stuck, like deer in headlamps.

Finally, Lelouch turned on Diethard, and said, sounding on the teetering edge of patience, whispered through grated teeth to him "I'm terribly sorry, I'll have to defer that last question, something's come up."
Diethard, uncertain of what was to happen with him and when he could call back to conclude their discussion, began "But-", however Lelouch was having none of it, roaring "Scram!" at the first sign of questioning, something Diethard promptly did, before Lelouch slammed the door shut behind the fleeing journalist.

Suzaku watched Lelouch take a moment to glare into the door, head depressed slightly exposing his nape for a moment before he stood tall, and, refusing to share his face with either of them, began to walk around the side of the room, exploring the perimeter for reasons Suzaku could guess at. There were minor observable motions that he could not quite conceal, including the edges of a shaking head and twitching fists in Suzaku's portrait view of his subordinate. After several moments, Lelouch had made his circuitous way to the opposite side of the room, standing beside the windows to the city, which he shut with slow, yet stiff movements of the arm. With that, he finally turned to face the two lovers, stepping forwards a step until he could rest his arms on Suzaku's desk, which Suzaku and Euphemia stood in front of. Suzaku was now acutely aware that Lelouch was on the Prime Minister's side of the desk that sat between them.

After another moment's search for words, Lelouch finally looked up and simply said "Explain to me what I just saw."

Suzaku could only look at shoes. This was just his luck; as he resolved to get better, to find some balance, he was finally caught, and all his bottled uncertainty meant his only reply was a guilty look. However, Euphemia, with far less responsibility at stake, was less intimidated by Lelouch, replying "You saw enough. I doubt you need a full breakdown.", defending her and Suzaku. She obviously had enough pride to not want to incriminate herself, pride being something Suzaku lacked in his shame.

"I saw more than I ever wanted to, thank you." Lelouch hissed, unleashing a fraction of his clear venom.

Hating to see Lelouch act in such an ugly fashion towards his sister, Suzaku extended an arm and tried to calm him, beginning "Lelouch, please-

"Shut up!"

The room was silent again, before Lelouch began his rant proper, hissing "How could you both be so irresponsible? If I could walk in here and be greeted with you two doing whatever the hell that was, could you imagine if someone else did? I had Diethard with me for God's sake! He's a reporter!"

"I'm sorry!"

Lelouch paused at Suzaku's apology, before, in a more even tone asked "Are you? Being sorry means understanding what you've done wrong, and I'm in no way convinced of what might happen once I leave this room. Do you understand, or do I have to lay out the reasons why this is inappropriate?"

Suzaku swallowed what little he could to clear his throat, before doing what Lelouch wanted, knowing he was in the wrong. "It... it is wrong because... because the imbalance of personal power could lead to a situation where I could take advantage of your sister. She is my secretary, and I control her employment status, and I could, if I so desired, behave unethically. I would never let that happen, but I apologise for allowing the circumstance to-"

Lelouch sighed, and wiped at his forehead before gesturing indecisively with his right hand, as if reaching somewhere in front of him for words to express his sentiments. After a moment, he spoke
again, though he was tripping over his own thoughts.

"You… seem to be labouring under the… tragic misconception that I would, without context, give a damn about my… friend… Suzaku being in a relationship with Euphemia, or his secretary, or both. So, I'm… I'll ask again. Why should I have not seen what I saw?"

Suzaku, growing frustrated at Lelouch's indirectness, commented "You seem to know."

Lelouch looked increasingly horrified, as he hissed "You could have been seen. How the hell would you have been elected dog catcher in the prairies if three weeks before the vote if someone… if Diethard, or Tohdoh walked in instead of me? Have you no shame?"

"Are you saying…" Suzaku said, putting two and two together, "That your objection is based on our relationship making it harder for us to get elected?"

Suzaku was furious at Lelouch's shallowness, but Lelouch responded in kind with his own fury, explaining "I am saying that my objection is based on you selfishly risking over eight years of struggle on the part of yourself, Ohgi, me, and throw it away? We are in a position to restore Japan's economy and people, and you value that possibility below your own satisfaction. Do you not understand the consequences this would have beyond yourself?"

Suzaku paused to think of a counter argument before Euphemia provided one, asking "Well what would you rather we do? Live apart, ignore each other?"

"Yes."

Suzaku was initially sympathetic to Lelouch's concerns, and was willing to concede a lot, but his patience for Lelouch's impersonal demands that had at once nothing to do with them personally and needlessly punitive results was now thinning.

"And what if the shoe was on the other foot? What if I asked you to never see Nunnally again, if that meant your struggle was safeguarded?"

The scowl Lelouch grew in response to that question was a sight to behold. It was vivid and terrifying, with lines drawn down his brows in black like an inked in comic character. His mouth and nose twitched and morphed slightly, eventually arriving at a tight, narrow arrangement befitting the mother of all sour tastes, an unholy creature that sought to destroy all that which was in its wake. It took him a moment to spit out "There is no comparison… at all. How… however… if separation were to bring about her… security, I would imagine."

Lelouch ran out of steam, as Suzaku could barely respond. He came to realise he was out of breath, and Lelouch, for his heavy, deep breaths, looked to be much the same, leaving both of them only able to express their distaste for the others standpoint in glares.

And while Lelouch had been glaring something fierce, Suzaku was now properly angry. Lelouch's response to the question on Nunnally was truly shocking to Suzaku after all that Lelouch had said about her being so important.

But Euphemia was still hopeful, begging Lelouch "Please, we will be more careful, we'll even stop being close as often, or keep it to personal hours. Please, for me."

Lelouch cringed in a moment of visible weakness. His sister's words could bend him yet. However, after what appeared to be a moment of genuine introspection on the part of Lelouch, Suzaku watched as his eyes narrowed in some manner of realisation.
"How… how often do you do this? How much time have you spent in this office..."

Suzaku's vision was suddenly reacquainted with his shoes as he suddenly looked down, which was all he could do. While he appreciated Euphemia's effort to reach a compromise, it had exposed the other part of this whole affair that he was concerned with.

His silence was met with more horrified silence from Lelouch, and even Euphemia could not rescue the moment. After some time, Lelouch elected to step aside from behind the desk, walking out towards the door, the clacking of his stiff soled shoes echoing throughout the office. He stopped at the door, not turning around but simply calling back "Do whatever you deem best, Prime Minister."

Kallen Kozūki chuckled from behind her mask as Tamaki concluded his extraordinarily convoluted and, in truth, rather unfunny anecdote, however the sound of his voice after so long was enough to sweeten the average joke to, to invent a word, chuckleworthiness.

For the remainder of the Black Knights, for whom Tamaki's novelty was long past, a groan or something to that effect was the only response Tamaki was afforded, to his great visible disappointment. Still, he would eventually go on to get over it, before resuming his usual duties of ruining the Black Knight's budget.

In the meantime, they all went about their various businesses, waiting for Kyoshiro Tohdoh to return from Parliament and meet the returned Zero for the first time, as it had taken some time for Lelouch and his bloc to smuggle Kallen out of jail. In the intervening time, Lelouch had been away with C.C to arrange communications, consisting of several Chinese made flip phones and back channels, which she had brought back earlier that morning.

The other benefit of her new colleague beyond not being handed back to the Empire was the sudden influx of heavily laundered money, courtesy of the former stock tycoons leftover holdings from eight years ago, which had been helpful in reasserting hegemony within the organisation. After years of living on a shoestring budget, the hard core of the group was very pleased to have some sort of creature comforts, as well as the restoration of regular pay. When asked, she claimed that, being legally dead, she was now able to use a greater amount of her family's money.

The money was badly needed beyond just keeping the rebels smiling; Kallen's departure had led to a severe shortage of supplies, to the point that there had been no Knightmares to field at the Battle of Babel Tower. Kallen made a mental note to find Rakshata Chawla again, as the Guren had been an excellent flagship model, and she was keen to work with the Indian once more.

As she considered this, she felt a vibration in her pocket, which took a moment for her to identify as her new cheap phone going off in silence in her pocket. After a moment of staring at the screen blankly, she eventually caught on that it would probably be a bad idea to take this call in sight or sound of the others.

"One moment, I need to take this call." she explained, and she was nodded off by Tamaki, who seemed engaged in something likely unrelated to his duties. She stepped out of the lounge area and up into her private study, where she removed her mask and answered the phone.

"Lelouch?"

"When on this line, use Akira if you wouldn't mind."
Kallen caught the reference back to the name that he used as a rebel, and appreciated the subtext of him returning to it after all this time, but also acknowledged the more substantive part of the point, that being Lelouch's need for secrecy. Taking a moment to clear her throat and sit down, she began again.

"Of course, Akira. What do you need?"

"What are you doing at the moment?"

"Waiting for Tohdoh to get back."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, probably Lelouch looking through his various Parliament notes to see where Tohdoh ought to be. This hypothesis was confirmed as he replied "You'll be waiting a while, he should be in a meeting with party donors about now, so we have some time."

Kallen briefly shuddered at how many meetings and bureaucratic affairs both Lelouch and Tohdoh must surely deal with on a daily basis, before Lelouch continued "So what will you do when he arrives, a debriefing, speech, or?"

"Ah, yes." Kallen replied, finally understanding his overarching point. Lelouch was very keen on reducing the more terroristic elements of the Black Knights, or at least repurpose it. That began with controlling Zero's message. While she wasn't over the moon about it, it was hardly like she was in a position to relitigate that. Even if things did get out of hand, she could still withdraw and escape at any time. It wasn't like Lelouch had any way of enforcing their deal, besides snitching. While she wasn't convinced he was above that, it wouldn't do much good once she was at large. That said, she didn't want to look the gift horse in the mouth too soon. After this brief introspection, she answered his question.

"Once he's back we'll be having a word in private, before I give a speech to his men that have been away for the last few days after escaping Babel."

Lelouch made a noise of affirmation that was blurred over the phone line, before commenting "And the crux of the discussion?"

Kallen briefly ran over her mental notes. It required some sophistry on how to view the RPJ, which was a contentious issue within the Black Knights themselves. Some thought the RPJ was worth nothing at all, and they ought to treat it the same way they did Area 11, with contempt, while others thought they could focus more on Britannian implements while subverting the freedoms the RPJ did afford. Explaining this to Lelouch, she laid out what she was going to tell Tohdoh.

"Like you said, focusing on the Geass Order and ridding the RPJ of the Britannian agents and away from harming the RPJ, though-"

"Let's not forget, vague terms. I'm not exactly keen on knowledge of the nature of Geass being disseminated amongst your colleagues."

"Fair enough." she answered. While she wanted to trust her comrades, knowledge of Geass would be a bridge too far. They would deem her insane or worse.

"I'll trust you then to handle tactics for our strategy. I'll expect a full report through our channels on material losses."

Kallen shook her head in amusement. He was still a stockbroker even after all this time. She could only pity his maid Sayoko and all the paper she would have to contend with throughout Lelouch's
various filing adventures.

"Anything else?"

Lelouch paused for a considerable period of time, to the point where Kallen had to check to see if he was still on the line. It was clear he was coming to some manner of decision, which became evident, when, with great hesitation and audible anxiety, he spoke again.

"When you are speaking with Tohdoh, mention to him in isolation that you have it on very solid grounds that Prime Minister Kururugi is in fact seeing his Secretary, the former Princess Euphemia in an… intimate fashion."

Kallen paused in turn, realising the implications of telling Tohdoh this. This was a marked departure from the Lelouch of pre-RPJ days, who had stayed by his friend, and it surprised her to no end that he was throwing Suzaku under a bus in this way, even after all this time.

She could only wonder what Suzaku had done to incite his wrath.

"Will… will that be all?"

Lelouch was silent for a third time, before exhaling deeply and answering "Yes, I think that is everything. I wish you well."

She was about to hang up, before the phone gave out one last sentence, though she suspected Lelouch didn't want hear to hear this segment, particularly given its implications.

"Ah, Diethard, welcome back, sorry about sending you off earlier, I actually wanted to discuss just that issue for a moment."

She heard no more before the line went dead, and Kallen was left alone, feeling for the first time in her life that she had been outflanked by Lelouch in terms of things she would be willing to do to achieve her goals.

Chapter End Notes

Look forward to the next Chapter, Silent Answers, on Wednesday. Stay safe, don’t get distracted, and please rate and review. I’ll see you all soon.

~Eth0
Chapter Thirty One: Silent Answers

Arc Eight: Killing With Kindness

Opening: "Carousel" - Nico Touches The Walls

"On the European Front, the Austrian 6th Army has been engaged at the Romanian city of Râmnicu Sărat by Sir Gino Weinberg's 3rd Royal Hussar Division. Fighting has been ongoing since this morning following two weeks of entrenchment by Imperial Forces in the flanking hills overlooking the city, and it is anticipated to be a Britannian victory."

Diethard Ried took a deliberate pause to punctuate the report as he looked neutrally into the camera across from his desk. The Romanian Offensive seemed to be winding to a close, as did the entire War in Europe, and he would be glad to be done with it. It was an entirely dull affair to report on, being entirely one sided with the overwhelming Britannian technology that had vomited across the European plain over the last five years. However, if this story was dull for a lack of engaging content to sink his teeth into, the next story was anything but.

"Now to Japan, where their election continues to proceed, however over the last few days an interesting story has developed with regards to Suzaku Kururugi’s future as Prime Minister following the election. A story I discussed on yesterday's show from the Sankei Shimbun has come out alleging that he is not seeking a third term as Prime Minister, and several tabloid outlets made various guesses to that effect. In particular, the Daily Mail led with a story accusing Kururugi of being romantically wayward. While these are easy to dismiss, in the day since, several surrogates and high profile supporters within the Ameliorate Party who handle PR and controversy began appearing across various cable broadcasting stations, which leads to tonight's final story."

He could only thank Lelouch for the in depth understanding required to tell this story in a cohesive fashion. There were several moving parts in this, and being granted the honour, no, the pleasure, of recounting it was a joy Diethard could hardly comprehend. He had always enjoyed the intricacies of personalities in conflict and their respective machinations, and from the start Lelouch was clearly a treasure trove of content. To be trusted with all this information, particularly from someone so… interesting, was one of the highlights of Diethards professional career. Indeed, during their private conversations Lelouch admitted to having mentioned to Suzaku that, apparently, "As Diethard Ried goes, so goes the nation."

That certainly helped his ego.

"Those of you who watched the show two nights ago will remember Kaname Ohgi coming onto JNI and making some curious statements that I commented on, which I will return to. However rumours first emerged from the opposition. Two days ago, Kyoshiro Tohdoh mentioned to a reporter at JNI that he would not be at all surprised if Kururugi had withdraw and be replaced at the last minute for a compromising personal matter. In isolation, this would seem like regular election tarnishing, however now we can return to those Ameliorates in the business of covering up bad PR. One of those is former Representative Hayate Nokame, speaking to the Japanese affiliate for the BBC Rupert Hayes."
The show promptly switched away from Diethard to a clip of the former Representative in an interview, where he explained how the stories were nonsense, while consistently diverting away from the question of Suzaku's tenure. This thirty second break allowed his to grab a sip of water before he was back on again. After a moment's transition, the clip played over the screens of the viewers, showing the narrow face and accented voice of the Japanese politician, talking to the Britannian.

"At present it seems the Revanchists have made it a priority of theirs to take down Kururugi. He has come out, as you know, and refuted these claims, however it is clear that the opposition has no intention of engaging on policy grounds. Whether Suzaku has been doing anything, and it is obvious he has not, he has been a capable Prime Minister for eight years. I trust his judgement in what he chooses to do."

Finishing his drink, Diethard looked back to the camera as it returned to him.

"Hayate has become well known in his time since leaving Parliament as the sort of disposable character the Ameliorates keep around to divert away messes, which can certainly lead one to assume there is a mess which is soon in coming, however again, in isolation, this is a minor story. However, now we have Kaname Ohgi coming onto the national media, and making some bold claims, such as the one I reported on yesterday where he discussed how he would work as Prime Minister. I didn't put much weight on it, before this clip emerged earlier today."

Once again, they cut away to a clip of Kaname Ohgi speaking during a rather impromptu walk-and-talk with various television outlets. As a result, the audio was patchy, however the discussion was clear enough.

"Representative Kaname, sir?"

"One mo- yes?"

"Sir, you mentioned a hypothetical future as the next Prime Minister-"

"Ah yes. It's likely nothing, just speculation. It'd leave a massive hole in the Defence Ministry, which is less than ideal. I'd consider someone like Guilford if need be."

"Now this is interesting." Diethard continued as the clip came to an end. "In any other context, why would we care who Ohgi would pick to replace him at the Department of Defence, if he replaced Kururugi as Prime Minister? Unless, it was not an if? To perhaps clear things up, aides to high ranking Ministers do not accidentally bump into major reporters and casually leak stories about who they would pick. It seems clear enough that they are floating this story and getting us used to the idea of a Prime Minister Kaname Ohgi."

Diethard paused for effect, reflecting on the clip that had just been shown. Lelouch was playing a delicate game; explaining the plot to a reporter had required more than a little audacious confidence, but to get Ohgi to turn against Suzaku had likely required something more than balls.

Diethard could only imagine Ohgi was doing this with great reluctance.

"So why are they doing this? As I have said until I am blue in the face, these things do not happen by accident. Kururugi, along with Lelouch Lamperouge are the two people who the Nationalist sorts despise more than anything else in the world. It seems that they are attempting to get ahead of any stories that may come out over the next few days."

Diethard had been set on broadcasting since a young age. He had always been captivated in the
great public characters that filled his fuzzy, six by four world out in the Midwest, and had always wanted to get closer, to have the apparatus and platform to examine them for himself.

However, when Diethard had first arrived in the then Area 11, his illusion had been let down. Clovis had been altogether human with human foibles, and Diethard had been charged with maintaining his deification. He had grown cynical and resigned.

However Lelouch was not human. He was a force of nature, and while Diethard had been absorbed by his inhumanity, the Prime Minister didn't stand a chance with such an oncoming storm, which Diethard had been more than willing to fan the flames of at the request of his idol.

"Suzaku Kururugi, if you're watching this, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but your days are numbered."

"Don't come in here telling me my days are numbered!"

The Prime Minister's complaint to the room was absorbed by its population, far more densely filled than usual, consisting of the entire Cabinet packed in the rectangular space in front of Suzaku's desk. Ohgi stood at the head of the group, with Lelouch withdrawn in the back rows, scowling his happiness.

Alongside the two original rebels, twenty four other eyes peeled down at the exasperated Japanese politician, who was realising too late he was being couped.

"The issue has been settled. There is no need for this kabuki theatre, this is just Revanchist fearmongering like the Reactionaries they are."

Lelouch was not moved, and neither was the crowd. He was in no doubt that Euphemia had left in the days since he had discovered them, just to hide more than anything. It wouldn't save him, the Britannian had made sure of it.

"I'm afraid their fear mongering has latched onto something real for once." responded the Minister for Labour, an Ayame Takaya from Nara. While only Ohgi and, naturally enough, Lelouch were privy to the specific details of the case, she knew plenty to be none too impressed.

However, Suzaku was equally unimpressed. "Their fear mongering is, as ever vague and unconvincing. This is just as likely to embarrass them as me."

Lelouch shook his head, invisible near the back of the crowd, as Ohgi raised a hand to silence the discussion.

Getting Ohgi to cooperate had been a curious case of having the unlikely truth on your side, as Lelouch had approached him in earnest concern for the future of the Party. He still recalled the conversation, a brief exchange of niceties before Lelouch explained what he had seen and how he was concerned. When Ohgi raised doubts, Lelouch invited Ohgi to ask Suzaku, knowing the Prime Minister's ability to lie about something he felt such apparent guilt over would be laughable.

He still recalled Ohgi's sardonic quote after returning from a brief meeting with the PM, where the latter had apparently told Ohgi he had done nothing wrong.

"He's the guiltiest man I've met since Kyoshiro Tohdoh."

That had set the tone for proceedings to follow, as Ohgi agreed that this was far too great a risk to be allowed continue. This turned the three way balance of power in his favour, with two of the
three of the founding members now firmly against the third, which allowed him to begin to move
with greater impunity.

His original plans with Kallen had not accounted for any of this. Initially, he planned to keep the
status quo within the RPJ and use the Black Knights to resolve issues beyond Lelouch's own
capacity as a politician. Lelouch knew well enough he had few ambitions to power for powers own
sake.

However, Suzaku's reckless behaviour had forced his hand. The selfishness and disregard for the
risks he was undertaking on behalf of everyone in Japan frustrated Lelouch to no end. While he had
no personal ambitions to power, someone like that could not be allowed. And if that meant taking
power himself, so be it

Sometimes if you wanted something done properly, you had to do it yourself.

Of course, the latter few sentences had been redacted from the concerns Lelouch had raised to
Ohgi, but the central thesis of Suzaku's irresponsibility had been more than sufficient to get Ohgi to
work with him.

Said Minister for Defence now took over the discussion, explaining "What you did or didn't do,
only you will ever know. However, we are not here to discuss your personal life, we can do that
with much less grandeur. We are here to discuss your future within the Party."

Suzaku didn't look at Ohgi, instead opting to briefly glare at Lelouch in the back row, before
settling on staring at his papers, replying "Well crack on."

Ohgi moved slightly, before going on. "The specific truth, whatever it may be, is not yet in the
public eye in any great capacity. However, Diethard Ried has commented to a limited extent, and it
is widely acknowledged that something is afoot."

Lelouch made no visible motion, but smiled inside at his belated prophecy. Even before the
Kawaguchi Convention he had made notions to the effect of the benefits of having a friend like
Diethard in the media, and now it was being used against the person he suggested it to. The irony
was rich. Still, Ohgi, not knowing any of this, continued to speak.

"Now, you can do what is right now, before the story breaks- and I fear it will- and step down after
two successful terms with pride intact, an ability to live your own private life, and a good legacy
secured. In turn, we will be able to secure a majority for the next four years."

This was the carrot, and it was delivered with far more tact than Lelouch could ever have managed.
Ohgi could always spin the positive outcome, while Lelouch would remain stuck on the negatives
while lecturing. Ohgi's days as a teacher had served him well, as Lelouch saw Suzaku respond well
to this out.

"Now that is the win-win proposition. There is also a lose-lose proposition. You can decide to hurt
all of us here and stay on, risking that whatever damaging stories may be out there may come out
in the next three weeks. Here, we would almost certainly lose control of the country to Tohdoh and
his cabal, and you would be publicly humiliated for whatever has occurred."

This possibility was a lot less hypothetical than Ohgi put it, but then the Minister for Defence had
no way of knowing the underlying threat in what he had said. Lelouch had complete control of
whether the story would leak or not, and while he doubted he would ever need to pull that trigger,
the Minister for Finance was uncharacteristically relaxed, knowing that trigger was in safe hands.
Moreover, Lelouch guessed Suzaku also knew where the real underlying threat lay, and who it came from. He wasn't stupid.

Just selfish.

"I'd advise you take the win-win proposition, not the lose-lose proposition." Ohgi concluded, awaiting a response.

Suzaku gave an ugly look, shaking his head before sighing. He eventually whispered "I don't negotiate with a gun to my head."

He sounded somewhat bitter, as if he didn't deserve what he was getting, but Lelouch found his metaphor curious. If anything, Suzaku was the one holding the gun to his own head, and they were the ones trying to talk him down. Lelouch suspected that Suzaku saw this as a power grab, not realising that leaving someone who had neglected duty, endangered the body politic and had put personal desires above the common good had to be removed, no matter who came to replace him, even if it was Lelouch himself.

Besides, it wouldn't be. Ohgi would be keen to have the spot, and Lelouch would welcome it. In Lelouch's eyes, Ohgi at least had a grasp of the concept of responsibility, something that eluded the younger Japanese man, just as it had his useless father.

Lelouch let out a breath he hadn't realised he had been holding, as Ohgi responded "We are not forcing you into anything. You have done extremely well in your two terms, and are a hero of Japan. You have done enough. Perhaps it could be a good precedent for the future; you could say that leaders shouldn't stay for too long, otherwise they become authoritarian, or out of touch. There are a thousand good ways for you to spin this, but only one result if you try to fight this."

Suzaku mulled over this possibility, his hands wrapped in front of his mouth in the style of Ikari Gendo, clearly conflicted.

The Defence Minister looked back briefly at the eager crowd, all anxious for their seats in Parliament, and in his first act as Party Chairman, Ohgi leaned over his new desk and told Suzaku "Just take a rest. You'll be more than welcome to show up for future events, but you've done enough."

The Prime Minister hung his head as Lelouch nodded from afar. Suzaku had lost.

It certainly had been tricky, requiring Lelouch to think on his feet, but as Ohgi tried to console Suzaku Lelouch could only marvel at how the idea of Suzaku leaving office had mutated. An attempt to preemptively save face had sparked a discussion on how it was Suzaku's time to go. While Lelouch didn't appreciate his central issue, the risks Suzaku had taken, being lost among the praise for Suzaku's tenure, it certainly wasn't inaccurate. He had rebuilt a country, a task enough for any man.

And sure enough, Suzaku nodded his peace, before whispering "Alright, I'll make the announcement tomorrow."

After some somber nodding, the Representatives filed out, as Lelouch hung around the back of the room until it was empty, leaving him alone with Suzaku's scowl, which quickly vocalised its bitter sentiments as soon as its owner realized who had betrayed it.

"Of course it was you."

Lelouch was in an aloof mood, not biting on Suzaku's sour mood, instead chuckling "I hope you're
not surprised."

"Just immensely disappointed."

"How does it feel? Disappointment? I'll admit that learning my Prime Minister was skiving off was a bit disappointing," Lelouch responded, letting his emotions run a little, before relaxing again. "You can skive off all you want now. Still, for all of what has been said I'd much rather this had never happened at all."

"I can tell, you're really broken up over all this."

Lelouch shrugged, not able to find within himself the energy to get himself into a fuss over such a small man, before rubbing the back of his neck and chuckling "Well, I've work to do. Budget adjustments, the usual. Real work. I suppose I'll see you at next year's Party Congress?"

"I should have…"

Lelouch turned, not hearing what Suzaku had said, and asked "What did you say?"

Suzaku shook his head and looked down, before standing up and speaking.

"Even though I thought I could help… I was convinced I could show you… but even so, you continue to prove me wrong."

Lelouch frowned as Suzaku moved alongside him and whispered into his ear as he went to leave a simply harrowing quote that scared Lelouch.

"You always were like him, and always will be."

With that, Suzaku stormed off, leaving the Parliament building with inhuman speed and fury. Lelouch did not cease to shake furiously until he reached the canteen and slugged two coffees in an unholy rush to restore power to his knees.

Chapter End Notes

Perspective is a curious thing. One rarely appreciates their own biases even when confronted with them, and Lelouch has more than a few biases in his worldview and how he views himself. Given that throughout this fic I have attempted to give an in depth approach to perspective through various third person singular angles, however writing what amount to lies due to perspective is a tricky line to walk. About as tricky as the line Lelouch is walking.

I hadn't planned to draw the plot thread from Chapter 11 regarding Diethard all the way forward to 20 Chapters in the future, but I suppose that is the way of things. I really enjoyed writing Diethard's program, somewhere between AM radio and Late Night Talk television. Fun fact, Râmnicu Sărat is an actual Romanian town that experienced major combat in WW1 at about the time the Battle of Verdun was winding to a close. Many thanks to Indy Neidell for educating us all, one Austrian moustache at a time.

Another great thanks has to go to all of the people who continue to read this fic. Your continued support is appreciated to a degree you cannot fathom. I hope said support is continued on into Chapter 32 of For Hearts And Minds, It Can Happen Here! Until
then, be safe, pay attention to the news, rate, and review.
~Eth0
"Urgh… Kami this stinks. Which one is this?"

"Which? Oh- Ah, hell. God damn it that's disgusting. What happened to his face?"

"A forty millimetre High Explosive Anti-Knightmare Round happened to his face. Can you tell who it is?"

The younger Black Knight, who went by the name of Daichi, had to take a moment to gag at the state of the dead child's body before going to his list, provided by Zero's green haired witch, of everyone in the facility. After a moment of staring at dead eyed faces, his dark eyes reached one that resembled the body his partner Tsukiyama was cradling, minus the massive hole torn into the side of his head, lined in semi solid pus that curdled Daichi's already small nose.

"Rolo Haliburton?"

Tsukiyama nodded answering "Looks like him.", before standing with the body of the child in a bridal carry, bringing the deceased 'Rolo' to the pile of bodies, all children, dumping it on the mound with a grunt, before swearing and sitting opposite, breaking out a cigarette as Daichi reached down behind himself to the hips, attempting to clear the pain in his back from logging the bodies across the huge cavernous facility.

The battle had been brief and decisive. Without Knightmares or even any piercing weapons, the defenders had crumpled quickly, with the facilities few adults cut off in retreat and killed after a brief exchange of fire. Standard fare for a Britannian facility, though it was a bit out of the way; this operation had required a huge, 13 hour airlift. It was a little irritating, as it was Election Day tomorrow, and they would miss it. Though Daichi's district, the same one Kyoshiro Tohdoh sat for funnily enough, was the safest seat the Revanchists had, he still enjoyed the process of participating in democracy, even as tainted by Britannian fiddling as the Government actually was. In spite of this, Zero had recommitted to fighting Britannia at large and not the RPJ, with the idea being not harming innocent Japanese and fighting the real enemy. Some were disgruntled by the pass Zero seemed to be giving the RPJ, but the logic was sound enough, and with her unifying presence everyone was looking forward to the job at hand. With Zero's return, morale was initially very high.

That had been how it started.

Once the armed defenders had been wiped out, the orders had come down that all within the facility who were not Black Knights were enemy combatants, and had to be eliminated on sight. This was a bizarre order in itself, as Daichi and Tsukiyama at the very least came to realise that everyone else was a child.
Not young conscripts; the oldest had looked 15 or so; but genuine children that one might envisage as their nieces or nephews attending Primary school, or the like. Even Natalists may have struggled to reason why they were all here, in this Britannian facility, but Zero had not, and thus the Black Knights did not.

But Daichi did, wondering why in the world they were in this supposed research facility at all. According to their limited briefing, this location combined a strategic point with a key area for biological research for the Empire, but that did not seem to be borne out by the facts.

"Alright, a few more and we can light up this pile."

Daichi nodded in response to Tsukiyama, before standing alongside him and walking down the cavern to retrieve the bodies. After some exploring, they found a pair underneath a ledge, crushed by a falling boulder, baby faced and peaceful in death. Reaching down, the two Knights pulled the rock off the children they had killed before pulling them up into the walkway and putting them on their backs like a pilgrim's rations, hauling them to the pile of the dead on their spines.

"Ah, god damn it."

The expletive was sighed in a display of exhaustion by Tsukiyama as the two bodies were dumped. Daichi shook his head in dismay as several other Black Knights added their trophies to the pile, before petrol spilled over the top from a utility Knightmare Frame, carrying the fuel in a vat.

After a moment's ensuring that nobody important was within close distance, the pile of bodies was set alight, something Zero had insisted on. A Viking burial for their troubles, a tribute to the apparent damned. Daichi could imagine no other reason for the young ones to receive such treatment.

Speaking of Zero, she had off and vanished shortly after the operation began. The detachment that had gone for the mission had been small, only thirty men in all, and yet the woman with a presence that ordinarily the roof of the cave would struggle to contain was nowhere to be found.

"Where the hell is Zero?"

The question, asked by someone else who Daichi could not see, was almost lost as the pile grew into violent, orange life, flickering in outrage at its fuel, throwing angry light over the dim cavern, but Daichi just about picked it up as the fire reached its passionate adolescence. After a moment's frowning in thought, briefly interrupted by a lick of flame reaching concerningly close, he turned to Tsukiyama and repeated the question before the melting corpses.

Tsukiyama shrugged, responding "Haven't seen her.". Some others mentioned seeing her head off down the facility, but no one could say they had seen her after fighting had concluded.

After a moment of thinking, a voice from above and behind them, perched over a railing, spoke up. Belonging to Nagito, their Company Commander, he explained "I think she said she had to go deal with another issue."

"And leave us to the children." Daichi finished glumly. Where the hell could she have gone? It has hardly like this facility had been a tough nut to crack, and it all stank far too much of the ivory tower stuff she herself kept banging on about in her various speeches. Hell, she hadn't even made one, even in spite of it being a staple of hers.

It made no sense, but today was that sort of day. Slaughtering kids... what was the point? What did this act do in furthering Japanese autonomy? What was it about this group of kids that Zero
believed would finally force the Emperor of Britannia to finally throw in the towel?

"What the hell are we doing here?"

He finally spoke the begged question, unfortunately no one present seemed quite able to answer. It was a question that high command had been eternally mum on since they had set off.

And it was a question that would in due course have to be answered, sure as the fire blazed on into the timeless cavern.

This course of action was nothing short of illogical. It did not hurt the RPJ, surely the first port of call for any Japanese liberation group, and did not seem to even hurt Britannia. Hell, there was no Britannian insignia in sight, just an odd W sign plastered everywhere. Something was very wrong. It seemed a bizarre choice of target for Zero, in the long line of odd choices, as if her priorities had fallen askew. There was something up with Zero. Daichi shook his head.

"Something's not right here."

"You can sing that one. Smoke?"

"And to you Rupert."

"Thank you, Ellie. I'm standing outside the Japanese Parliament right now, it's just past midday, but you could hardly tell for the clouds, it's bucketing down rain as you can see. The exit polling for the General Election is just coming in as I speak, and it appears that in spite of the Revanchists gaining either 12 or 13 seats, depending on how Nara swings, the Ameliorate Party has retained its majority. All this is in the wake of former Prime Minister Kururugi stepping down, apparently hoping to set a precedent for his successors down the line. Unless something has gone very wrong, his replacement, current Minister for Defence Kaname Ohgi will be sworn in as his replacement once the final vote is tallied. This marks a defeat of the anti-Britannian sentiments that have proved troublesome in this part of the Commonwealth, though its rise should concern any Britannian back in Pendragon. Back to you in the studio Ellie."

At this, Lelouch turned off the television at the far end of his office. He could always rely on Britannian broadcasters to get the news to him quickly, but to stick around for their analysis was an exercise in finding the patience to not throw the remote control across the room from his couch.

That said, their excellent fortunes had improved Lelouch's mood to the point where the remote could probably rest easy. The storm had been weathered healthily, with only the losses of two Cabinet Ministers, Suzaku and the Minister for Energy, an elderly Sakuradite magnate from Hiroshima whose only defining characteristics were his truly incredible beard and family connections. His was not a great loss to anyone.

All in all, while the Revanchists had done rather well, the Unionists had in turn done quite poorly, meaning the balance of power remained within Ohgi's hands, though it did mean Lelouch's whip would grow more stringent. They were not out of the woods yet.

Of course, it wasn't like there weren't other issues to go about solving; a new Minister for Energy would have to be found, as well as one for Defence. Certainly not a herculean task; the new Ministers would not be burdened with great expectations, given the uninspiring nature of their predecessor in the former case and the lack of much to do in the latter, though Lelouch in particular was keen to expand it, what with his private understanding of Britannia's movements and that of the Black Knights, who together seemed to be forming a slow motion train crash before his unique
He set his mind to his more legal pursuits, wondering who would do best as Defence Minister, as he trawled through the news sites on his laptop, all now catching up to the BBC's announcement. The new Representative from the 12th District of Tokyo, a young but energetic Saburo Okawachi who had been one of the two challengers to steal Unionist seats, seemed like a good contender, with a background in literature and political science, with his thesis on foreign relations, according to Lelouch's file on him, which he had brought up on his computer.

As he scrolled over the man's face, a door opened right behind him, and he turned to face it as he heard the sound of inhuman panting, symptomatic of massive exhaustion.

As he spun round, he caught sight of Kallen collapsing onto his couch, drenched in sweat. It took the shocked Minister several moments of shocked staring to comprehend the sight of the Japanese rebel, dressed in an unusual display of a loose vest and shorts, before he began to roar in anger at her presence, a massive, catastrophic risk beyond even Suzaku's Pale.

"What in the name of all that's holy are you doing here? Oh my Lord, what if you were seen? The whole spying apparatus of Britannia is looking for you, forget the presses! How inane can you be, you fool?"

His face had swelled red, and his now veiny arms had arched up and over his head, fingers spinning outwards as if ready to slap her for her idiocy.

"I'm sorry, I wouldn't have come if it wasn't... oh my..."

She fell backwards limply, her eyes widening as her body collapsed down. Lelouch watched as she tried to speak, but couldn't.

Thinking on his feet, he moved quickly across the room to his cooler, brought over from back at Ashford and still working after eight years, and grabbed a bottled water. Turning, he chucked it at her with the passiveness of a hand grenade, and with about as much mechanical sympathy for the recipient. As she moved to chug the liquid, he rushed to the large windows and hurled his curtains shut with great gusto, before holding two fingers of gap to allow a slit of light through so he could peer out onto the street below.

Had she been seen?

"Is that Saburo Okawachi?"

Lelouch frowned, turning briefly away to his laptop, which had the new Representative's narrow face blown up in full, before nodding and asking "Yes. Do you know him?"

"I remember he tried to join the Black Knights, I think in and around the time of the Battle of Narita. I turned him down, thinking he was too reactionary, too extreme."

Lelouch baulked, then shook his head and moved to shut the laptop before sighing "Well, guess who's definitely not going to become the new Defence Minister..."

"Did I just torpedo his career?"

"Somewhat. In any case, you have not answered my two questions. What are you doing here, and why couldn't you just call me? You could have been seen!"

"I think... this particular situation justifies my... hasty, actions. I've not exactly had a relaxed last
twenty four hours, or however long it's been. When was the mission to the Directorate?"

Lelouch frowned, confused at this turn in the conversation as he returned to the window, and responded "It was three days ago, I believe."

He didn't hear a response, only a beleaguered sigh, followed by a murmur of "It felt like forever… the World of C…"

Lelouch's eyes had by now narrowed to puzzled lines, as he asked "What has happened, Kallen?"

"After… there was a gateway, of sorts in the facility. The Director- the other Geass giver, he was like C.C-"

"Was?"

"He was killed in the fight."

"That doesn't sound very much like C.C at all."

Kallen batted her palm at the air, exhaustedly attempting to explain how that worked "Charles, the Emperor, came and took his Code, his source of eternal life, and escaped. It… got a bit weird from there, but he's dead now."

Lelouch nodded. "One giver of Geass is dead. It is indeed a great day, though I'm still not sure why you had to come up here in broad daylight."

For looking away through the curtain, he could not see her shake her head until she finally stood, her energy returned, and placed a hand on his shoulder, sending him recoiling around and staring at her in absolute uncertainty.

"What is it?"

"Lelouch… I didn't just mean the Director. I mean, he is dead as well, but that's not the important part. I killed your father. The Emperor. He was part of some metaphysical attempt to subjugate the world, we fought, and he was killed."

It took him a moment to connect the dots in his mind between the Geass Directorate and the Emperor, and a moment further to compute what she had said as his face mysteriously drained itself of all its blood, and for reasons he couldn't understand, his knees collapsed below him.

"Oh hell…" Kallen hissed as she moved to catch him as he fell down against the window. He felt his back bang against the window blinds, spreading them briefly apart before he was pulled up and moved over to the couch in the centre of the room. It was some time before he asked "Are you sure?"

"He dematerialised in front of my eyes."

Lelouch took in several deep breaths, his chest swelling and cresting rapidly before all the air in his body seemed to rush out. The man who had posed such a danger his whole life, who had thrown him out and chased his every waking moment…

He had to be sure. He grabbed his mobile, and dialled the one person who would know. After a moment's tone, the polished voice he was all too familiar with spoke up.

"Ah, hello there Lelouch. I didn't think our match was until tomorrow morning, I was just heading
off to bed."

"I'm sorry Schneizel, I will have to put that on the long finger for the time being. I was just calling to ask if you had seen father?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, as Schneizel digested this. "I haven't, not for a few days. I believe he's on a retreat. What's wrong, can I take a message?"

"Oh no no." Lelouch reassured. "Just a constitutional query, it can wait. Paperwork and such."

Schneizel simply hummed, and after a moment of silent speech Lelouch couldn't quite discern, he said "Alright, I'll let him know. Should I get him to call Mr. Ohgi, or have you fallen victim of a sudden fit of familial affection?"

"Have a good night's sleep Schneizel, you could really use... it."

He hung up, tripping over the 'it' and falling back onto his couch in a fierce, frozen ball of sweat. He shuddered, and spoke again, a whisper of "He's actually..."

The figure, inhuman in the mutations of Lelouch's private memory that had chased him in shadows across the Pacific, looming behind the inspections and second looks of Britannian guards that adopted his fiendish figure in a bizarre mental transformation that curdled the fingers that guarded round Nunnally's arms throughout his early teenage years. While he had matured enough to feel somewhat comfortable in his surroundings, he was never safe. His only birthright, the only royal inheritance owed to the Black Prince was insecurity, with colonies of caution and a capital crown of chaotic rebelliousness and resentment, the maelstrom fuelled by the unending, looming presence of the man who owned a third of the planet.

Who was now dead and gone, never to be able to pose a threat, to rile up the vast filth he garnered in support from the reactionaries of the world, to raise his foul hand to give decrees hailed by the many millions of conscripts who would be more than willing to kill him, or Nunnally. He was no longer alive, he was ashes, particles, still matter. He had shuffled off this mortal coil, with a hefty shove on the part of Kallen.

It was a weight he had never fully appreciated while his father was alive, as if he had just discovered atmospheric pressure, and was feeling his innards wanting to burst out from his ribs for a sudden relief of pressure. All he could do was let the air escape his throat at a pace enough to pacify the difference in pressure.

Charles was dead. Charles remained dead. And Kallen had killed him. Lelouch could only wonder how to comfort himself, in his constant complaints that his opponents lived in reactions to their enemies rather than as proactive entities realising he himself had been doing much the same.

He shook. No, he was bigger than his father. He was as much defined by his father in his goals as his frame. He still had responsibilities; he still had to defend Nunnally, his work, and the nation of Japan, who had nominated him to do so.

He took a final deep breath before picking up the phone again, and dialling a different number before speaking into it, his voice still recovering.

"Ohgi? You're in a meeting? Sorry, sorry. I was just- When are you free next? Okay... Fantastic. Could you meet me in Room 622 then? In private, it's something critically urgent. Constitutional crisis actually. Thank you."

He put down the phone and smiled. Kaiserlos, they may have an opportunity here. This could be
his one shot to liberate Japan fully, break ties to Britannia, and stick it to the Revanchists once and for all by taking away one of their core platforms. Any bills the Parliament passed had to be reviewed by Kaguya, who would consult the Emperor. If there was no Emperor to consult, then they could pass anything they wanted, and with a newly minted majority too.

Rubbing his hands together, he looked to Kallen and explained "We have two hours before I have to go. Change into new clothes, get a hat and don't leave by the exit you came in."

His curiosity at the past he had been absent for was still aching even as he sat in contemplation of the future, and as Kallen went to leave, he couldn't help but stop her.

"Wait… hold on, is your head okay?"

He pointed to a small, red gash, barely visible across her forehead, and she waved it off. "I just bumped my head while I was making my way here. Nothing critical."

He paused, before submitting to his curiosity.

"So… you killed him? What was it like?"

Chapter End Notes

Yes indeed, what? Fortunately, you'll be able to find out in the next Flashback, for this is the end of the Arc. I'm very pleased with how it's turned out, but by this point that's not a bold statement. You want a bold statement?

Every plot element that will factor into the ending of this story is now in place. Some may be less obvious than others, but we have definitively reached the stage where the story stops giving us things and begins to take them away.

Of course, that doesn't mean the fun is over; I'd argue it's only beginning, as our characters all get their just desserts. Stick around to see it happen, starting with Chapter 33, The Late Republic, after a brief Flashback to answer Lelouch's question.

Until then, be safe, rate, review, don't make your subordinates mad, and enjoy yourselves.

~Eth0
Kallen ran a thumb over the forehead of the dead giver of Geass, which for her long experience with the phenomenon almost seemed a contradiction in terms. C.C was the implacable nightmare and ally, and to see her opposite in this state took some confirmation for her to take seriously.

Sure enough, the mark of a Geass giver, the Code C.C had called it, was absent, his forehead far cleaner than the elderly conscience the half-boy would leave behind. She could only hope it was all he had left behind, as she scoured ahead for traps.

All she came across was a vast wall, not dissimilar in design to the site underneath Kamine Island, if grander in scale. Given Schneizel’s reported obstinace over that godforsaken spit of Pacific island it did not surprise her to discover that it was involved intricately in whatever designs the shadowy Directorate possessed.

It took twenty minutes of cautious approach to allow her fingers to glance the wall, a mere swipe, however among the varied things she had anticipated, the wall striking back was not among them.

It was a bizarre experience, the wall seeming to wrap at its edges and pull itself around her, placing her in a cocoon. What followed was a bizarre psychedelic experience that defied any reasonable explanation. Any attempt to grasp at its quantities or rationalise any one dimension would cause irreparable change to all others in what seemed to be a drug fueled interpretation of the Uncertainty Principle, as she watched a colour palette vomit over her eyes while she fell, and fell up.

This process continued for some time, time being difficult to measure in this context, however she was eventually placed on a stone floor with considerable vigour, faceplanting in front of a set of stairs.

After what was not the most graceful of entrances, Kallen attempted to prop herself up onto all fours and springing up into a running start position, and then on into a combat stance as she looked up and around at the bizarre setting she found herself in. For one, it was certainly an improvement in terms of lateral stability, as the Romanesque platform of steps and pillars was at the very least still relative to Kallen's feet, which was a positive, however the surroundings, a twilight, cloudy evening surveyed by Jupiter, as not as easily explained as the 'night on acid' experience that she had gone through to get here.

Once she had her bearings, and was certain there was nothing behind her, she charged forward, heading up the steps with great vigor towards a sight that convinced her that whatever wall-based drugs had brought her this far were still in effect; C.C was standing next to the Emperor of Britannia, calmly chatting next to a large faux-double helix that spanned the entire horizon that could be seen. After a moment's gawking, she indignantly roared "C.C!", after deciding that her witch being here was more bizarre than the Emperor, if only on the basis of blatant treachery.

The pair turned to Kallen, who was pointing accusingly like a pariah, and after a moment they finally spoke, the Emperor Charles filling the infinite stage with his vast voice.

"Ah, your leftovers have arrived C.C." he announced, sporting the grin of the snuggest man to ever live. Kallen could only sneer as C.C, feigning a caring motion, called over "Oh hello there. Sorry I
"The hell you have!" Kallen shouted, before pulling out a pistol, skipping past Geass, and firing the entire capacity into Charles's chest. To her dismay, the Emperor only recoiled, maintaining his upright stance and chuckling.

"That would have killed me ten minutes ago. Did you not see what happened to Victor?"

Kallen hesitated, uncertain as to who this Victor character was. Noting this, the Emperor laughed "Surely you saw him, on your way in; my brother, cursed to the eternal life of C.C. I was able to set him free, bless his soul, just as I will set you all free."

The rebel remembered the boy well, though as V.V, and not a person with a name. He had not been a person with a name; he had been a problem. The Emperor seemed to know this, and asked "Do you even know your sponsor's name?"

He smiled triumphantly as Kallen tried to hide her frustration, before he laughed again and spoke her name to address her, asking "Well what do you think of that? Mm?"

Kallen now sensed she was losing whatever advantage she had, and attempted to shift the discussion, and distract herself from the undying woman's real name, which had seemed to make the witch at once uncomfortable and prideful. After a moment, she asked "What the hell are you planning?"

"What is my incentive for revealing my designs to you?" Charles sneered, defying the trope of villains revealing their plans at the last moment, however C.C muttered "We're both immortal, what can she do?"

Charles shook his head, but still sighed and said "Do as you wish, the Sword of Akasha, with your help, is nearly ready."

Kallen moved to grab the razor out from her boot, however the green haired Geass giver stopped her, asking "Are you really going to keep trying?"

"Damn right I am!"

She tried to move forward with the blade, however the immortal woman held her back, simply saying "Don't..."

Kallen shook herself in frustration, asking "Why the hell should I not? That's the damn Emperor!"

"I'm more than aware." the witch answered, before continuing "But in this instance, there is nothing to stop."

"She is right." came a voice from behind. Kallen turned around to face a black haired woman, who, after examining Kallen's apparent confusion, explained "I'm Lelouch's mother Marianne, it's nice to meet you Kallen."

After briefly wondering whether she had wandered into a bizarre interdimensional family reunion, she waved aside and roared "Nevermind that! What is going on here?"

Marianne shook her head, but in more of a pleasant fashion than normally typified the action, like a parent explaining something to a child while silently acknowledging how cute the situation was, and then began "The Sword of Akasha was Charles and Victor's big idea since they were very young. My husband came to power among a court of lies that had killed his own mother, and the
siblings swore to use their new power to create a world without lies."

As the skyline began to darken, Marianne continued. "At first this just meant political power, in the same way our son has tried in Japan, but just as he is now seeing, they saw that without extreme measures, this sort of transformation is impossible. However, at the same time Victor not only discovered Geass, but earned a Code. With these, they realised that a world without lies could indeed be crafted. This is the purpose of the Sword of Akasha: Instrumentality."

Kallen was now catching on, asking "You’d put that sort of world on everyone by force?"

"Towards the end of a better life." Marianne countered. "All the lies and secrets that divide us, gone. How much pain has been caused by our selfish, petty hidden thoughts? How much has my dear Lelouch isolated himself? How has Suzaku Kururugi, bless his soul, lost his deserved position as Prime Minister? How have you lost the trust of the Black Knights, your closest comrades? These are the lies that divide us; paranoia through distrust, affairs, and yet more distrust."

Kallen was by this point suspecting that this Marianne character had some manner of supernatural awareness of the world, however the rebel was still shocked as to its extent, dropping her knife. To say Lelouch was paranoid was not a feat of deduction, though she had been unaware of the real reason for Suzaku’s resignation. All that said, it was the revelation of the Black Knights distrust of her that really put her off. What had she done? She could only guess. Lies were integral to her identity; at this point she could well say she was made of a collection of lies. She doubted she could get two people to ever agree on who Kallen Kozuki really was, which suited her just fine. But the Black Knights, according to Marianne, seemed to be disagreeing a little more than was ideal, which worried her greatly.

Seeing Kallen’s uncertainty, Marianne leapt, continuing "Everyone will win. We can all see each other for who we are, the dead can reunite with the living, and your friend can finally reach her own end; mortality."

Kallen then turned on the green haired immortal, who was looking solemn, and asked "That was what you wanted? To die?"

"I've been alive since the third century. I think I've done plenty."

Kallen felt utterly defeated. The elderly witch had had enough, and in believing Kallen would not be able to fulfil her wish, had thrown her lot in with the not just the empire, but Charles’ own harebrained scheme. It was a desperate state of affairs that grew more desperate as the floating double helix behind them began to expand, shouting with voices that drowned each other out.

However, the voices in Kallen’s head were far louder. This plot hit her from out of nowhere, from so far beyond her realm of thinking it took her several moments to catch herself, in which time Marianne and the witch both walked past her, the latter snarkily commenting "Enjoy your private musings while you can."

Kallen shook her head, her forehead sinking lower as she was left alone, facing away from the light. She was initially uncertain; the lies that surrounded her had cost her a great deal, and Charles’s random imperialism seemed to now have merit, however the more she thought, the more she realised these were not wholesome actors.

She now thought beyond Japan, a new realm for Kallen, but a necessary one. For the first time her self-given responsibilities dwarfed that of her countries, and yet included them. The stakes were so vast they drowned her.
But she knew, if the people of Japan relied so much on the little secrets to enjoy individuality, then surely all people of the world must? What made them different?

Suddenly, her outrage grew. Who was this man to make decisions for all the people of the world, especially on an issue that would inherently remove their ability to make private decisions? More specifically, what authority did he have to do this for anyone outside Britannia? They at the very least recognised him as their leader, but he did not rule the French, the Germans, the Poles, the Turks, or the Japanese.

This was just an extension of his imperialist games.

"Damn it..." she hissed, bending down to her knee and sliding up her knife quietly. She couldn't kill him, but she could distract him long enough. If she didn't spend every conscious moment doing all she could, it would be a moral failure to Japan and to the world.

"Stick to ruining your own damn country!"

Shouting this at the top of her lungs, she turned heel and hurled the knife into the back of Charles' forehead with all her might, before shoving the green haired witch out of her way and throwing herself at the mercy of the spiral.

"I don't know who's listening... but please, stop this now! I command you, stop it now!"
Kaname Ohgi's office was a mess. He did not enjoy it this way; he preferred order and calm about his rooms, and would normally spend an hour or so each day filing his documents under headings and sub categories to ensure he could, at moments notice, pull up any file or folder that had crossed his desk over the last eight years. He took great pride in his system of columns and rows, which was, to his dismay, now scattered across the fabric floor of the room.

What frustrated him even more was that he had just made the transition into his new office after Suzaku's resignation, which meant that the week or so of reorganising after the election was for naught, with almost everything scattered across the floor. However, he was still in far too an excitable mood for issues like filing to dampen his spirits. He could wallow in the papers like a pig in straw for all the difference it would make, such was the dissonance from what he would normally be upset over, and how distracting his current glee was.

"Do you have the official letter for Governor Sumeragi?"

"It's on top of my briefcase, I just signed it." Ohgi answered, looking back and forth between his laptop, abused charging cable strung along the floor to the other side of the room, and sample letters to help him write what would be an unprecedented declaration. He sat on the floor in his socks opposite Lelouch, who was similarly behaving unprofessionally due to the bizarreness and intensity of the task at hand. He hadn't eaten since the night before, and hadn't slept for a time past that.

"Thank you…” Lelouch replied, extending the last syllable until he placed his hand on the private missive. Ohgi turned to watch Lelouch draw his ballpoint pen like a sword and dramatically signed his name to the treasonous document.

"Stop goofing off, this is serious business." Ohgi joked, sitting with crossed legs, on the floor, surrounded by scribbles and bits and pieces of legal treatise.

"No need to stop now." Lelouch absentmindedly answered, bringing the letter over to Ohgi, who then put it in a basket titled "To Gov Sumeragi [A](D.I.O)". The 'A' labelled Kaguya's party, with D.I.O meaning Deliver In Order, a detail critical to their plans.

Lelouch had summoned Ohgi to his office now three days ago in the height of anxiety, and had explained that he had determined through a private meeting with his sister Cornelia that the Emperor of Britannia was dead, and after moderate amounts of celebration, the Finance Minister had suggested they use the lack of a Britannian sovereign to sneak concessions through Kaguya, which would be allowed due to the technical way in which the Commonwealth Act worked.
Kaguya acted as a go between for Ohgi and the Emperor, who would present any Bills passed in the Japanese Parliament to the Emperor. If he said no, then the Bill would die.

But he had to say no within thirty days.

Confident that Britannia would take longer than that to litigate the inevitable competition between Schneizel and Cornelia, Lelouch posited they seize this opportunity to grab full independence, and together they hashed out a plan to snatch independence while Britannia wasn't looking. They had already shotgunned the necessary paperwork through Parliament proper using every ounce of Ohgi's deals and Lelouch's blackmail, which would allow them to send the letters.

"Are you sure they're the right ones?"

Ohgi looked up from the mess to Lelouch, and replied "I'm pretty sure, you can check if you want."

Upon receiving permission, Lelouch dug his slender fingers into the shallow pile and drew out the first letter. After a cursory glance, Ohgi saw a small grin grow on Lelouch's face as he read to the end. Ohgi could only crack a smile himself as Lelouch reached the end, and began to adopt the pose that preluded a grand speech.

"Do you mind?"

Ohgi shook his head, finally chuckling and waving "Not at all."

With his excuse lined up, Lelouch broke into a grandiose voice, pronouncing with the booming tones of Shakespeare "On this day, May 3rd, in the year of our Lord 2024, I, Kaname Ohgi in my capacity as Prime Minister of the Representative Protectorate of Japan would humbly request your thoughts on the Constitutional Renewal Act, Bill 22 of this year, passed by a majority of 461 Representatives to 14, with respect to their impact on the Holy Britannian Empire in accordance with the Cooperative Imperial Protections and Commonwealth Act of 2017."

As Lelouch concluded, the office phone rang, and Ohgi moved to raise the handle from its mount. After listening to the caller, a Parliamentary Aide looking to inquire about procedure, he arranged a meeting for after dinner before returning to the whole betraying Britannia thing.

Ohgi really did enjoy governing. He found great satisfaction in the machinations of organising and governance, the effort and gratification of corralling votes and writing sound legislation, to not even mention the great feeling of helping people. That was a slight layup, however there was an undeniable fulfilment to be found in working Parliament and compromising with others to arrive at the best possible solution.

This served as an instance to demonstrate what Ohgi saw as the critical difference between his counterpart that had drawn Suzaku to such concerns; Ohgi enjoyed and appreciated governing in and of itself while Lelouch saw it as an unfortunate obstacle that had be overcome by hook or by crook that he begrudgingly accepted as part of the cost of implementing his plans to improve the country. Suzaku, if Ohgi were to suppose, had the understanding of why governance was necessary but not the energy to carry it out, having the opposite of Lelouch's problem, to use a reductionist term.

Taking the example of the letter Lelouch had just recited; the Bill it referenced gave Parliament more powers to alter the 2017 Constitution, with an end to severing ties with Britannia. During the brief negotiations with the other Ameliorates, who Ohgi suspected were over the moon to see their main goal presented to them by their party leadership, Lelouch had broken out his filing cabinet and started handing out threats like sweets, even when a more restrained approach could prove
more productive.

It was a habit of Lelouch's, at least from Ohgi's understanding, to view those not immediately onboard as an enemy regardless of degree. In certain instances, this worked out for the best, such as with General Kusekabe at the hotel, but this depthless thinking didn't work well in the nuanced realm of governing, where Lelouch's preferred tactic appeared to be brute force, with no respect or patience for the process.

Ohgi considered himself, in contrast, to be a man of nuance, and one of those nuances was his thoughts on Lelouch. He had no doubt that Lelouch loved and cared for Japan, but he could not begin to suspect Suzaku, wayward as he was, may have been right.

"Second letter."

Lelouch swiped up the second sheet as Ohgi shook his head. It wasn't that big a deal. Lelouch wanted his way, and was forceful about it. It was not as if that was unknown, or uncommon. Besides, his heart was in the right place.

After clearing his throat, Lelouch read out in his best impression of an Emperor "On this day, May 3rd, in the year of our Lord 2024, I, Kaname Ohgi in my capacity as Prime Minister of the Representative Protectorate of Japan would humbly request your thoughts on the repeal of the Foreign Relations Act, and its corollary, the First Amendment to the Japanese Constitution together as part of the Independence Act, Bill 23 of this year, passed by a majority of 459 Representatives to 16, with respect to their impact on the Holy Britannian Empire in accordance with the Cooperative Imperial Protections and Commonwealth Act of 2017, which we just repealed anyway, so there."

The last part was not included in the letter, just Lelouch stating the obvious in his oblivious, mocking voice that caused them both to split their sides. It was amusing how disingenuous they were both being sending these letters to Kaguya knowing they would have no chance in hell of passing and a good chance of getting them fired in normal circumstances, such as if the Emperor had not passed away and left Kaguya with nobody to report up to.

It was almost as if Charles had not expected for the RPJ to last this long. Whether this was hubris or there had been a scheme Ohgi was unaware of was beyond him.

In any case, Ohgi was thankful Lelouch had only had the opportunity to scare the living daylights out of Ameliorate Representatives. He had made sure Lelouch had some paperwork to do when inviting Kyoshiro Tohdoh up to his office to hash out the details.

It had taken three attempts to make Tohdoh realise the extent of the scheme, and a fourth to convince him that this was not a trap, gimmick, or political ponzi scheme. This was real, and even as Tohdoh added his suggestions, tripping over himself at the unexpected earnestly behind Ohgi's proposition, it was clear he was still coming to grips with the fact that Ohgi had presented it, as it went against everything Tohdoh likely assumed about the Prime Minister.

"And all mentions of Britannia struck down?"

Ohgi could remember the look on his face now as he had nodded in response to Tohdoh's question, the man's narrow, triangular face attempting with great effort to maintain its stoic demeanour, which in credit to him it did indeed manage, at the expense however of making every vein in his face clearly visible as he tried to respond as slowly as he could.

"I must admit, I did not anticipate… an offer like this from the office of the man who signed the Midway Treaty."
"The party line is a strong but narrow tightrope."

Tohdoh seemed to relax, and nodded as Ohgi laid the blame thick and fast on his predecessor for the lack of movement on this issue, using his absence to present a pinyata

Being good did not necessarily mean being nice.

"Well, I certainly cannot complain about… this proposal being handed to me by the opposite party. I misjudged you Ohgi."

"I like to offer people win-win propositions sir, not lose-lose propositions."

Tohdoh nodded as he poured them each a small glass of Yamagata Whiskey, which Ohgi graciously accepted as he silently acknowledged his lie. Ohgi did not believe bureaucracy and policy was ever a zero sum game, and rejected those who thought it was as simple as that, however there was a wrinkle; Ohgi introducing this Bill inherently took some political power away from the Revanchists, as their base saw the opposition do what their party leaders promised to do themselves.

Of course Tohdoh, the 43 year old former Lt. Colonel who was now head of a major political party had not failed to recognise this, asking "And this will be a bipartisan Bill in both policy and publicity?"

"So long as we get Guilford's Military Reform Plan through afterwards."

The Revanchists had been blocking it up to this point in lockstep with the Unionists, however Tohdoh was too silently ecstatic to be obstructionist right now, and reached forward with eagerness, querying "I suppose we'll need some firepower of our own now we aren't going to be suckling at the Britannian teat. Then I guess we have a deal Mr Ohgi?"

"I think we have an excellent deal, Mr. Tohdoh."

From there, they briefly settled into small talk, leading to Tohdoh's upcoming marriage to Chiba Nagisa. Ohgi wished the two Holy Swords well, and then inquired about the date.

"We were hoping to do it by the end of the year, though with this is may have to be after. Still, we have it under control. In any case, I was examining the new budget, and I was wondering how this might change your forecasting."

It was clear that for all Ohgi's efforts, Tohdoh did not enjoy mixing his personal life with his coworkers or with his work in general. Ohgi couldn't help but note a colleague on his side of the aisle who lived in a very similar matter, and it was emphatically not Tohdoh's former student.

Said emotionally stifled colleague drew him out of his memories with a cheeky smack to the back of the head with a rolled up newspaper, reminding him they had to clean up the mess all over Ohgi's office. He nodded his apologies as all memory of the meeting with Tohdoh evaporated.

In any case, with the head severed, the body of Revanchists fell into line. Reportedly, there had been an internal meeting where Tohdoh had corralled the other party officials into voting Yes on Bills 22 and 23. Ohgi wondered what it was like inside. Did Tohdoh reign like him or like Lelouch? The Prime Minister could only wonder as he placed all the notes on a neat pile on his desk.

"Alright." Ohgi announced, rubbing his palms together. "Let's get those three letters downstairs before anyone catches on."
Lelouch nodded, as he took the basket into his arms, explaining he'd bring it to Jeremiah to send across to the Governor's mansion,

Of course, Lelouch had not read out the last letter, not out of forgetfulness but out of wilful ignorance, one Ohgi could not blame him for. The last letter was not a triumphant one, or a nice one, but a concluydory one, made as short as possible to spare the pain of its author and receiver. Kaguya Sumeragi was a lovely young woman with boundless heart, but she was now associated with Britannian cooperation and rule, which Ohgi was trying to shake. Whether she was pleasant or not, she had to go out into the harbor along with the tea.

Good did not mean nice.

"On behalf of Prime Minister Kaname Ohgi, I regret to inform you that the ruling party has decided to end your tenure as Governor."

They had no need of a Governor; they needed a President, and he could only hope she could understand.

Now alone, he moved towards the window overlooking Taito, perhaps the most renovated area of the city, with vast social works programs helping rapidly bring Japanese society back up to snuff, and Ohgi was aware that it was Britannian trade that had made it possible. There was a Socialist argument that Britannia's Lords and Ladies had sold them the rope they would use to hang them, but Ohgi was not that cynical.

He had no intention of making enemies; only equals. A Republic of Equals.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and I hope you stick around for the next Chapter, This Mortal Coil. Until then, stay safe, pay your taxes, rate and review. I'll see you all soon.
Kyoshiro Tohdoh had looked out in pride, the thirty days falling away as the crowds gathered to celebrate the founding of the Republic of Japan. It was an immensely emotional moment for the deadline to close and for the Britannians to have to relinquish their grip on his people's rightful clay. Decades of struggle was now realised, and it was all the old war horse could do to stand behind Ohgi as the Prime Minister gleefully recited their declaration of true independence.

In the beginning, Britannia brooded, too embroiled in the realisation that their Emperor had vanished off the face of the Earth to do much to Japan beyond staring from a distance. This status quo lasted for some time, however, on a wet June morning some time later, Tohdoh's office phone rang out trumpeting the arrival of an odious spectre to Japan. He picked up the phone and listened attentively as the whispering speaker reached him.

"Mr Kyoshiro Tohdoh, this is Schneizel El Britannia. I am making a state visit next week, and I would be overjoyed to have the opportunity to arrange a private meeting."

There was never a good context for someone with Schneizel's reputation to be contacting you privately, but given Japan's recent activities, even the stoic Tohdoh was forced to hold a breath. After a moment, he replied nervously "Would you not prefer to meet with Prime Minister Ohgi?"

"I'm sorry, I should clarify. I'm not hoping to meet with you in your political capacity, I was hoping to meet with the Head of Military Operations for the Black Knights."

Tohdoh physically recoiled in shock, losing his cool as he roared back "What in the world? How dare you accuse me of-"

"When we took in a… Kallen Kozuki as part of the Midway Treaty, we intercepted documents she had on her person at the time that incriminated you. Given that Kallen was the only member that the Ameliorates agreed we should prosecute ourselves, we decided not to pursue you."

The soft voice interrupted the force of the former Genrō's roars with no effort, and the substance of the reply caused Tohdoh to pause for some time afterwards, realising he was cornered before he quietly asked "Does the Prime Minister know?"

"My answer depends on whether you could spare the time to see me next week."

This sequence of events was how Kyoshiro Tohdoh wound up alone in his office with the Crown Prince of Britannia, which was a ludicrous idea on any other face. Fortunately, Tohdoh had used the week in between to prepare, acknowledging that at least he had some time to not be taken by surprise, as he had been during the phone call. It was important to be aware and alert, as he knew Schneizel's reputation, with his victories at the negotiation table being far more noteworthy than any achievement on the field of battle.
"My condolences for your father." he began, electing to try something safe, however Schneizel waved it off and replied "None of that. In truth, I found him a somewhat unpleasant character, and his vulgar sentiments against those of other nationalities never struck me as rational. I believe it was Mark Twain who said 'I've never wished a man dead, but I have read some obituaries with great pleasure.' I appreciate you having me; I promise I'll try to be quick. I'm sure you have many things on your plate at the moment."

The 2024 Olympics in India were not for another month, but already Schneizel, as far as Tohdoh could see, was already getting into the spirit of things, practicing his verbal contortions and mental flips with the skills of a master gymnast, dodging the tightrope and bending over backwards to accommodate Tohdoh with kind words and the gentle assurances, however false, that he was in fact secretly in favour of Tohdoh all along. Tohdoh, keen to not expose a rhetorical flank, remained silent and allowed Schneizel to continue.

"As I mentioned in my call, we took over management of Miss Kozūki, who you know as Zero, as part of our spying apparatus in order to capture C.C, I believe another colleague of yours. This plan did not work, and she escaped our surveillance at Babel Tower. I believe you had met her earlier that day if my report is accurate."

Tohdoh nodded, as indeed he had. It had been a bizarre experience, seeing her out in the environment to the point where he had been shaken for some time, wondering whether it was really her. After confirming his suspicions with his colleagues, he had left to allow the Black Knights to retrieve her.

"This is where I get to my reason for seeing you, as in my research I noticed several troublesome issues. First, several of your colleagues were captured in that Battle, I believe either 15 or 16, and while I have the names of most, one name was redacted."

"Who redacted it?"

"I don't have that information in specific, but there are several other incidents that lead my suspicion in a certain direction. It was definitely a Cabinet Minister. However, the unnamed person was removed for the prison altogether two days later. Guards that my agents have spoken to claim it was a woman in her early twenties, and that there was significant pressure to keep quiet. In those two days, the only Cabinet Minister to visit the prison was my brother Lelouch Lamperouge, and reportedly he only saw one prisoner."

Tohdoh silently mulled over this information. If Lelouch had met with Kallen, he could easily have persuaded Kallen to work for him. He certainly would hold the power in this situation, and there was a wealth of reasons he had to do it. Quell the rebellious element to bring peace? Control the political opposition to bring power? It depended on how cynical you were, and Tohdoh was fairly cynical.

"The second incident was what confirmed my hypothesis. Does this person look familiar?" Schneizel asked, handing over a photograph of a woman sprinting across a street to Tohdoh. Schneizel had never seen Kallen in civilian clothing except for the incident at Babel Tower, though he had seen her in her Zero costume without a mask. That said, it was very easy to recognise her stark, red hair and fierce green eyes.

"This is Kallen." Tohdoh responded, answering the rhetorical question, as Schneizel continued "This was taken about forty days ago, two days after an attack on a Britannian research facility in Amur, Siberia. That day was notable also because Lelouch called me that same day in a panic asking about the state of the Emperor. For reference, he had been gone two days at that point, though it had not yet been deemed noteworthy. It was a stroke of luck more than anything on the
part of an agent of my fathers, who followed her to the Parliament building where he was forced to stop chasing her to avoid appearing suspicious. However, while he was initially disappointed he was eventually able to capture this shot ten minutes later."

Schneizel handed over a second photo, and this one shocked him. It was a low, Dutch angle, obviously rushed as the photographer realised what he was seeing. It was of a window on the side of the Parliament building, with a black haired man leaning back against the window, almost in a seated position but for the lack of a chair with his back pressed tight against the glass, and there was a red haired woman, clearly Kallen, standing opposite holding onto him by the leg and shoulder in a suggestive fashion that made the conservative leader cringe slightly. She looked exhausted.

It did not take much imagination to realise who the black haired man was.

Tohdoh recoiled as he realised what must have happened. Kallen had been making bizarre strategic choices of late, and had intentionally been avoiding confrontation with the RPJ Government back when it had existed. And to think that the head of the Black Knights was acting only on the authority and directives of Lamperouge, not to mention whatever they were doing together in that final photograph, Tohdoh could barely contain his anger.

"I do not know what my brother is attempting, but I fear it may have adverse affects for the stability of your country. It is no longer my role to say what Japan ought to do; you have made that desire for freedom clear, however as a fellow statesman, I would recommend you do something about this. Conflicts of interest and blackmail have no place in any functioning Government. I will leave this at your feet to deal with as you see fit."

Tohdoh pocketed the photographs and thought. This was beyond the pale, a betrayal of the Black Knights and Japan. Lelouch's actions were fundamentally against the spirit of the Japan he preached about, but he could wait; his agent in the Black Knights was the more immediate issue. He needed to do something immediately before Lelouch made a decisive move, starting by consolidating his side.

Running an organisation centred around restoring Japan may have been unethical back when they were still a Dominion, but it was necessary. This proved to Tohdoh the Black Knights were still necessary, with or without their founder. Someone with that attitude, that they had the authority to spread their influence and control like a web, was a danger to Japan herself, and Tohdoh could not abide that. The Black Knights were still needed to provide security to Japan, and it was his duty to bring that security about.

He would have to betray his country to save it.

"Thank you for that Mr El Britannia, I will have to investigate this further myself."

"Not at all; I just felt you ought to know."

Kallen breathed out slightly as she slid on the mask of Zero. It was the same one she had made eight years ago, and in a move that lacked foresight, she neglected to built in foam to add some leeway in terms of size the way a crash helmet did. Her cheeks were pressed against cold steel, and her forehead was grated by the plastic ring that mounted the coil designed to pull back her eye cover and allow her to Geass people with the press of a button behind her ear. It was an ingenious system that made the best use of the available space inside her mask, but it was more than a little uncomfortable.
In any case, she could live with that. She slipped on her gloves before taking a brief look in the mirror, before finally leaving the bathroom and stepping out into the hallway.

Picking up a roster, she began to sort out who was present and absent, noting that Tohdoh and several Representatives were away, however her eyes faltered at the ‘C.C’ at the very bottom.

It had been some time since she had last seen the witch, who had thanked her for helping her realise the flaws in her way of thinking before heading off to a new adventure. It had been when they left Kamine Island when they had parted ways. She said she had gotten what she had wanted out of their arrangement, and would go on one final adventure in Britannia with a fresh perspective.

Kallen would miss her, but she supposed that would be the way of things. Such an existential change as a glance with mortality would surely make anyone want to change things up, even someone who had lived centuries. Hell, Kallen could argue her friend had aged several hundred years from the time she left C’s world to the time they parted ways. Their parting conversation had been brief, but fraught with emotion.

"You have more than fulfilled my contract, but not in the way I had imagined. I cannot thank you enough. In millennia, I don't believe I have met anyone else like you."

It had taken significant effort on Kallen's part to not cry. The woman who had made all her dreams of a free Japan possible was now thanking her, having found new purpose in life in a skirt with death.

Of course, as the green haired woman departed Kallen was forced to ask herself similar questions to what she imagined her former colleague must be asking.

The green haired woman must surely, Kallen assumed, be asking herself what to do now after such a long period spent adrift, seeking her death. For Kallen, this question was represented in the Republic of Japan. What was the role of Zero, the symbol of seeking Japanese independence, in a free Japan?

Eight years ago, the question would be easily answered. Zero stood as the lone symbol of justice, standing in solidarity with Japan's oppressed in the face of her enemies. However, as Japan recrystallised as a nation it became increasingly clear that that role fell to public servants like Tohdoh or Lelouch, rather than an unappointed masked vigilante.

Again, eight years ago she would likely have tried to fight the encroach of her own irrelevance, however the departure of her biggest beneficiary had lent her new perspective. Japan was free, and while she had helped, it had only been through her Geass, her friends, and her allies. To have ever thought that her skills in a Knightmare or tactical proficiency could have won without the aid of others was laughable. She didn't intend on kidding herself like this again. She would need Lelouch, Tohdoh, and all the rest of Japan's people to work together to cultivate their new Japan.

The time may well have arrived to start enjoying that new Japan, she acknowledged. Sure, she would do Lelouch's errands and keep an eye on things, but she had a very long life ahead of her, and unlike her pizza obsessed friend, she hoped to make the most of it from the get go.

She moved towards her office and unlocked the door, stepping inside with the gentle but lonely clacks of her boots marking the way. It was early in the evening, and with no active missions today most people had turned in. The room was cluttered, needing some attention, however she was too emotionally drained to make the effort.

However, as she approached her desk from the opposite side, facing away from the door, even she
noticed something had been added, though it took some time for her to spot the offenders; a pair of printed photographs which she moved to inspect, placing her fingers on their tops to separate them.

Suddenly, she felt the narrow, short blade of a Hira Tantō bristle against her clothed neck. She froze up, her survival instinct still in place after 24 years of mortal life, as she tried to turn around to see who was threatening her, however she could barely move her lungs to breathe, let alone her neck to turn. Panicking, she could only hush out "What do you want?" after her heart had returned from a state of near cardiac arrest.

"Would you care to explain these photographs?"

The voice was deep, accented with a conclusory snarl that forced her to look down and examine them, and she quickly realised she had been caught.

Annoyingly, there was little she could really say in her defence. The two pictures made it look like she was secretly colluding with Lelouch, because that's exactly what she had been doing.

Nonetheless, she gave it her best shot, beginning "We were meeting to discuss… terms of a ceasefire. He and I know each other from before the rebellion, from school-"

"Funny you never mentioned such good news to any of us, that there may be a ceasefire soon. Incidentally, was your meeting with him two days after Babel in your prison cell also about the ceasefire?"

Kallen was silent again, as she realised the depth of her doom. It was Tohdoh's voice, and he was none too pleased. Now that she realised it was her second in command who was betraying her, she panicked and said "Wait!"

"To think, you would have the gall to betray the virtues you preached; justice and integrity, to go behind our backs and lead us into the arms of the Britannian in Japanese clothing!"

Tohdoh was getting worked up now, for possibly the first time in his life. This terrified Kallen even more, as an angry Tohdoh was so rare as to be beyond comprehension. He had always been a stoic man, with almost boundless patience that left her terrified as to what lay beyond that wall.

On an instinct that was characteristically human, she spoke out, louder "Please, wait!", raising her off hand and trying to face Tohdoh to calm him.

This was a move out of panic, but it was the wrong one, as Kallen wasn't the only person in the room with muscle memory and a temper.

The blade flew away from her shoulder as she realised her mistake, swinging back before making heavy impact with her neck. Kallen felt no pain for a moment beyond the sensation of blunt force impact forcing her suddenly numb neck muscles to cave in, before her head finally exploded into the most horrendous of agony, akin to the migraine of Gods choking out the air from her brain. Her knees fell away like sand as she collapsed against her desk, her head feeling broken and her neck feeling battered.

"Did you think your song and dance about justice while you pervert it with Lamperouge would end any other way, Kozuki? This is justice! This is what is prescribed for the collaborators, and the treasonous! I am the justice you describe!"

As she sat upright, with her legs sprawled and her back propped up against the desk, her muscleless neck fell away, the swipe of Tohdoh's blade having removed its function, forcing her face down towards her Zero costume, which was now a filthy, thick, heavy red in colour. It was funny, she
could have sworn it was black when she had made it.

It took her some time to realise that she was bleeding rapidly from the neck, Tohdoh's blow having punctured her neck muscles and causing her blood to flow healthily down her lapel like an oil well, the red gold seeping away in its thick, abnormal gushes. As a fighter who had killed many dozens of people, she knew that this was normally fatal, causing deoxygenated blood to soak the brain within a minute.

Unfortunately, Tohdoh had not received this message, as he stabbed her a second time in the gut, twisting away at her intestines as he placed his off hand onto the top edge of the desk and kneeled down to deliver his final words to her.

"You betrayed us at the Conference, and you have betrayed us again to Lamperouge, allowing him to subvert the nation to his own imperialist ends."

Kallen now could not see, her brain beginning to run dry of its needed supply of air, and Tohdoh's voice was now more of an internal whisper, a voice in among the darkness that reminded her of what could have been. It was not alone; as Kallen's consciousness drained away, she swore she could, even at this juncture, still hear her green haired witch snarkily comment "Surely it'll take a bit more than that to take you out?"

However, this had no bearing on reality, as Tohdoh concluded "And I... will make him pay, for what he has done, just as you have! Japan will be free in more than name! Free from corruption, from your moral bankruptcy!"

Two stabs later, he came to realise Kallen was not moving, Tohdoh removed the dagger from her belly, drawing out with the slow delicacy of a butcher, before announcing "Good riddance!"

With this, the other Holy Swords who had been waiting in the wings stepped in to join Tohdoh in his coup, if only in spirit, as the Lt. Colonel had by far the dirtiest shoes.

"Dump her in the harbour with some concrete at her feet. I don't care to see her again."

A parting gift, Kallen remembered.

Chapter End Notes

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How's that for filler, mm? Your psychotic fake brother can't save you from being stabbed if you've killed him and burnt his body. [Taps head knowingly while smugly grinning.]

See you soon for Chapter 35, Impermissible. Stay healthier than Kallen did.

~Eth0
“Kozuki report, answer me at once.”

Curious, but concerned, Lelouch placed the phone down onto his desk, only to pick it up ten minutes later with great, yet sudden urgency.

“Where are you?”

Growing heavily concerned, Lelouch made it fifteen minutes before picking up the phone again to contact the leader of the Black Knights.

“Kozuki, this is Akira, what are you playing at?”

Now seriously frustrated, the Minister only made it another five minutes before picking the mobile back up a fourth time in anger, now seriously worried what had happened to his operative.

“KOZUKI!!!”

By now, Lelouch was in between the horseshoe ends of rage and panic, rushing to his laptop and booting up his maps application. Naturally enough, he had made sure to implement a tracking system into Kallen’s helmet to prevent her doing anything unfortunate, however it did not take long for the results to confuse him; Kallen was in the Tokyo Bay. Not next to the bay, or at its perimeter - in it.

Wondering what in the world she could possibly be doing there, he eventually elected to take the risk, put on his coat and take a walk to Koto.

Hopefully, he would be able to scout out what was happening without making it obvious he was involved. The harbour in Koto wasn't that far away from Parliament to begin with; he could just say he felt like stretching his legs. After dialling the details into his phone, Lelouch left his office and began to walk down the Tokyo Metropolitan Area.

What made this instance so bizarre to Lelouch was how reliable Kallen had been up to this point. With the exception of her adventure with his father, she had consistently returned his calls within five minutes, obviously recognising the importance of pleasing your largest benefactor. The location was bizarre too, as the Black Knights headquarters were far more inland, almost out of the city and towards the northern mountain ranges compared to Koto.

However, he was forced to bury these thoughts as he arrived at the port and a sudden realisation; the docking station where Kallen was meant to be had no boat present.
Lelouch stood still at the stations edge for some time, looking down into the grey waters for some clue as to why his phone told him Kallen was here. It was not until several minutes later, when he saw a pair of fishermen pass him by that he had a productive thought.

“Would you mind awfully if I borrow your rod?”

They did not, and after five minutes of angling the hook came across something heavy. Testing the waters, Lelouch pulled back the rope which freed whatever was lodged in the bottom of the harbour, and weighed the object as it floated to the surface, where Lelouch saw what it was, and suddenly felt his innards freeze.

It was Zero’s mask.

He pulled it in as fast as his his pathetic muscles could manage, and hauled it up into the light to examine, holding it opposite his face like Yorick’s skull staring back at him. His first thought was that Kallen had double crossed him, Lelouch being a very suspicious character. However, holding the mask closer revealed that the base of the mask was splattered in blood that had dried before it had been dumped in the harbour.

Quickly realising what must have happened, Lelouch called Jeremiah in a panic, asking “Where is Kyoshiro Tohdoh?”

“He's long gone, went off in a rage after meeting in private with someone. I can’t emphasise how furious he was.”

Lelouch, as Kallen had before him, only now realised the full extent of the disaster he now found himself in the centre of. He figured out very rapidly that someone may have seen Kallen and him together, or perhaps C.C and him from in China, but either way they had told this to Tohdoh. He could only thank Tohdoh’s desire for immediate physical vengeance for the fact he still had a job. He had to move quickly, and prevent Tohdoh from blathering to his comrades before word of Lelouch’s illicit activities got out to the wider public.

Fortunately, Tohdoh wasn’t the only one with dirt on his political opponent, and unlike him, Lelouch had the Prime Minister’s ear.

“Jeremiah, get Ohgi to my office immediately, we have a serious problem on our hands.”

It is generally agreed that the four day period referred to as “The Tosa Crisis” began on the afternoon of the 12th of June, 2024, though reports differ as to the time at which events happened. Some make the argument that it began when, after three exasperated sessions with the Prime Minister, Minister for Finance Lelouch Lamperouge successfully lobbied for the application of military action against the Black Knights in a series of back to back closed door meetings that ran into the late afternoon. He came with evidence that he claimed to have obtained through his personal security apparatus that Kyoshiro Tohdoh was a leading member of the Black Knights, presenting to Ohgi an internal Black Knights document that implicated the Revanchist Leader, as well as other Representatives.

Ohgi’s secretary has since mentioned that the document’s signer went simply by “C.C”.

Nonetheless, Marshal Guilford supervised a small force of two Infantry Companies with an attached Knightmare support section in a scouting mission to a Black Knights base in Tosa, whose existence had been rumoured before they had been confirmed by Lelouch’s documents. Once at the site, a set of grey, molted pillboxes buried among the woods, the team engaged in some speculative searches before being engaged from inside the pillboxes by small arms fire.
As soon as the Japanese Government forces recognised they were being fired upon, their training, which had been paid for and overseen by Britannian military officials, kicked into action, as they rapidly entrenched and responded with precise rifle fire at the brick windows to suppress the Black Knights as they called for reinforcements.

At the same time, six of the Knights, who had not anticipated a fight, attempted to hold down the attackers with spurts of machine gun fire while the others proceeded to burn all documents in the forts and facultated the retreat of the Knights who were then engaged in increasingly one sided combat as the Government's Knightmare support brought heavy ordinance to the equation. A set of old concrete bunkers were not good defensive positions, particularly from a material disadvantage. By sunset fighting had mostly subsided but for some exchanges of sniper fire in the localities surrounding Tosa, where Black Knights who had been taken in by sympathisers attempted to strike back at the withdrawing Republican forces.

In all, the bodies of twelve Knights were recovered, and three Government soldiers were reported dead, as well as one civilian killed by a stray grenade.

While the first phase of hard combat in Tosa had subsided, the continued attacks in the area, as well as a large illegal shipment of towed anti-Knightmare guns being intercepted in the Britannian leased port of Nagoya made some within the Cabinet lean towards implementing Martial Law, an effort led by Lelouch Lamperouge. While the Prime Minister, with whom the final authority lay, leaned towards a peaceful solution, those hopes were dashed when an attempt to survey a second Black Knights posting, this time near Hiroshima also ended in combat, with ten Knights and two Government soldiers succumbing to gunshot wounds. The bulk of the Black Knights forces escaped into the nearby towns where they began to seek revenge on the dispersing military forces, who could only take cover. Twelve soldiers died before the morning of the 13th, when Ohgi finally caved, and gave Marshal Guilford authority to pursue the suspects as enemy combatants.

As the sun rose, the citizens of Japan awoke to no rail services, no telephone, and no internet, all seized by their respective Departments, as the Tosa Incident went into full swing. While it did not get anywhere near the oxygen it likely hoped for, Kyoshiro Tohdoh gave a speech to a small crowd of Knights in Kyoto. The details are lost, as those attendees were drawn into combat shortly after. No records survive of what was said. It is very likely he intended to broadcast this speech, but was unable to.

After this, he rallied all the support he could with his limited communications, and, with forces amounting to roughly 3 Divisions, moved out from Kyoto, claiming the Ameliorate Government was not legitimate, and that they had engaged in spying on their citizens unconstitutionally. Evidence to this effect has not been found In light of this, but nevertheless he proclaimed a new Government and state, with the Black Knights as its sanctioned Army. Tohdoh moved rapidly, quickly gaining control of the southern half of Honshu Island, which itself constituted about half of Japan’s total land mass.

The Government forces met the Rebels for the first time since Martial Law had been declared in Komono, in the swampy flatlands to the East of Mt Gozaisho, and it was far bigger than any of the battles before it; four Government divisions, facing off against two Rebel ones. Using Kameyama, the narrowest point in the centre of Honshu Island, as a choke point, the Black Knights entrenched in the slopes below the mountain and allowed the Government Knightmares to approach from the north into the path of their heavy guns.

The battle, while not decisive, ended in a Black Knights victory, with over 50 Government casualties, and 120 soldiers taken prisoner, compared to 23 and 6 respectively, after a hasty scuffle where the armoured Government forces advanced into howitzer fire, forcing their organic support
back, before the Guilford's Knightmares were set upon by enemy infantry, forcing the main force to retreat with heavy losses in men, but especially in equipment, with most of what was lost being seized.

That Battle, known colloquially of the Battle of Shiga, demonstrated the importance of an unencumbered, mobile force, as while the Government forces possessed a significant advantage in equipment, particularly Knightmares, it was hindered by a large supply chain which could not be reliably hooked up on the battlefield.

The second aspect of that, mobility, was able to be proved again, as during the Government’s retreat to Nagoya the Black Knights, not bothered with heavy logistical challenges, were able to nip at their heels all the way up to the city, where the Government forces dug in and second major battle of the Tosa Incident began.

With the Republic's forces in a state of disorganisation, it seemed apparent that the Black Knights could push through the attempt to halt their momentum and initially this seemed to be the case, as the Black Knights pressed the advance to prevent the Government troops from being able to stop and reorganise. After using a reserve cordon to delay the advancing Black Knights, the Government forces were able to establish a defensive line in the city centre, however they were stretched thin attempting to evacuate civilians and establish a supply chain.

The situation looked dire, as it seemed as if the line would fail which would leave the Black Knights knocking on the door of Tokyo. Indeed, once the reserve cordon fell back to behind the defensive line, a reportedly fatalistic attitude fell over the troops.

However, what they had no way of knowing was that they were about to be blessed with the most bizarre miracle in Japanese military history since the Mongolian invaders were sunk twice in a row by tornadoes in the 13th century.

As if summoned from the ether, Zero stepped onto the battlefield.

He approached from behind the Government side, beckoned by a sudden quieting of the shouts demanding reinforcements and ground support, to the point that you could nearly hear the masked man's boots as he approached the front lines. As he did, shots subsided in shock of the sight, and once he reached the point at which the Black Knights could see him across the street, all action stopped in Nagoya.

He stepped out past the hasty trenches to about ten meters in front of the Government line, where he drew from his waist a large, one armed sword to waist level, and, connecting to the city's PA system, proceeded to deliver a passionate defence of the Republic. The tapes have been recovered, and we play them for you now.

"Black Knights! Hear me now! You stand opposed to what you have sworn to me, all of you, to seek and defend, a free Japan with justice and good governance at its core! And yet here you stand, taking up arms against the elected Government, against the very Japan you swore to uphold! They are not Britannia, they are not the enemy! They are your brothers and sisters, and you are the ones hampering and holding back Japan in her moment of glory! Hear me now, and if you have ever been a follower of mine, I would ask you follow me now!"

Once Zero had finished his speech, he lifted his sword high above his head before dropping it and charging the Black Knights' front line by himself.

The effect, according to Republican soldiers who were there, was immediate. They had been spurred on by Zero, what with his rhetorical flourishes and support and confidence in them,
restoring morale immediately.

As soon as he charged forward, they followed.

He had had the opposite effect on the Black Knights, who were shell shocked to see their idol, their hero, stand and give a scathing speech against them. When he charged, they could barely believe it enough to raise their rifles.

Zero fell behind towards the latter half of the charge in a moment of self preservation, however the bulk of the Government forces reached the Black Knights in what proved to be a slaughter, with 416 Knights killed to 72 Republicans, with an untold amount of Knights either changing sides or being taken prisoner.

Nagoya was saved, and with it the road to Tokyo was closed to the Black Knights, though this victory, while significant, did not have the same domino effect the loss in Shiga had. The Black Knights remained at the gates of the city until the morning of the 14th.

Once the sun rose on June the 14th however the jig was up. The Government had been able to finally bring heavy artillery down bases from Hokkaido and Nara due to the lull in action, and proceeded to pave the way back to Kyoto in High Explosive 162mm shells. With fresh reserves and Zero walking the front to motivate the Republicans and Black Defectors, the Second Battle of Nagayo began on 10 am sharp, supervised together by Marshal Guilford from the rear, and Zero from the front. Using Knightmares as infantry support, the Republican forces pushed, at admittedly a slower pace than they themselves had been pushed the day before, back towards the Knights’ stronghold in Kyoto.

The Second Battle of Nagayo was pretty poorly named actually, as it was in fact a series of several battles over two days, only one of which actually took place in Nagayo itself. After pressing home the material advantage out towards Yokkaichi, where a brief clash of street fighting took place at about 4 o’clock, and lasted until dusk, at which point the Republican upper hand had grown more apparent, but they were forced to resupply, allowing the Black Knights to resupply in turn.

However, it should have been obvious to any onlooker that the Republican Government would clearly have the upper hand in this sort of battle, as they simply had deeper pockets. Kyoshiro Tohdoh seemed to understand this too, launching an attack into Yokkaichi at one in the morning of the 15th however it was not successful, beyond forcing the Republicans to delay their offensive until 8 o’clock, at which point, now within sight of Kyoto, blasted through the defensive lines with an uncharacteristically aggressive attack, reportedly influenced by Zero’s more aggressive combat doctrines.

In all, the Republicans sustained a little over twenty losses by the time they reached Kyoto. We unfortunately don't have numbers for the amount of Black Knights dead beyond this point, but 47 were confirmed captured.

At this point, a little intrigue emerged among the Republicans. Guilford, the head of the Japanese military, wanted to wait out the rebels and capture them, particularly the ringleader Tohdoh, and prosecute him for treason. Zero was vehemently opposed to this idea, and insisted they press the attack, and slaughter the rebel leaders.

This conflict went on for some time, with Guilford, being top dog, having final say. However, after several hours of not getting his way, Zero, in a… simply outrageous move, went outside the chain of command, rallied together about two Battalions of Black Defectors, seized the artillery themselves and began to fire on the rebel headquarters without authorisation.
Guilford now had a crisis on his hands. Ought he to reprimand Zero in accordance with military code, or follow him into battle? He wasn't a member of the military though. But martial law was in place! Zero had created a mess, and perhaps intentionally so, as his gambit worked; Guilford, who likely didn’t want to make an enemy of someone who had such a visible influence over his troops, followed up Zero’s assault and provided fire support, while Zero led the troops into the compound.

The ensuing firefight lasted until twilight, during which time Zero actually took a bullet to the gut himself, though he survived, with fierce resistance felt throughout Kyoto well into the night, however an official surrender was issued after Tohdoh and the Four Holy Swords were killed defending Nijō Castle. They themselves were reportedly not given an opportunity to surrender, however once news had circulated of their passing, the already poor morale of the Black Knights collapsed, and the bulk of their forces either capitulated or dispersed.

In total, the death toll for both sides and civilians amounted to at least 3,800 people dead or missing, more than even in the Boshin Wars.

The material losses were not insignificant either. Large amounts of the Shiga and Mie Prefectures suffered extensive damages to farmland and infrastructure, amounting to tens of billions of Yen in cost borne by Ohgi’s Government.

This conflict, though brief, set in motion several key events that would define Japanese policy for months to come, and the return of Zero as a pro Government entity marked a pivoting point for the administration, as they faced ruined landscape and thousands of deaths with only one question.

Why?

Excerpt taken from Part One of Dean Needell’s award winning internet Documentary, The Road To War. Credit for footage goes to Britannian Pathe.

Chapter End Notes

Trying out some new tricks with the more documentary style of writing. Combined with dramatic irony, things the readers know that the narrator does not, you can do some really fun stuff, like reintroduce a dead character that isn’t actually the same character. Let me know if you like it as a style, as there is content coming up in Arc 11 that could really do well with this style, as my more traditional, ‘in the moment’ attempts at writing combat are hit and miss. If you want a little spoiler, note that that was only Part One of a documentary titled “The Road to War.” It will get worse before it gets better.

Hopefully that will not be the case for my writing however, which continues in Chapter 36, Knives and Ambitions. Stay safe, don’t take up arms against your elected officials, and rate and review. I’ll see you again soon.

~Eth0
Chapter Thirty Six: Knives and Ambitions

Arc Nine: Shining City On A Hill

Opening: "Heart Of Steel" - Takahashi Hiroki

"Kyoshiro Tohdoh was a patriot, though perhaps not in the sense you or I might be familiar with. He was loyal to the idea of Japan in concept, borrowed from his time in the pre-war administration. His time spent fighting for what must have, for him, seemed to be the last glimpse of Japan and her autonomy cemented a romantic view of her, one he felt deeply for. If he saw Japan hurt, he himself hurt."

Lelouch winced silently as he finished his sentence, with his right hand, formerly on the pedestal but now sliding down to his stomach, pressing against the gunshot wound buried deep in his waist. He tried to hide the action as best he could, before sighing, playing the moment off as a dramatic pause.

It would be really awkward to be revealed as the second Zero during the funeral of his main enemy due to a shared injury.

In truth, all had been going well up until that point in the incident. His bluff against Guilford had worked excellently, and Lelouch had been well on his way to destroying all the evidence against him. And then he received a bullet in the gut. A ricochet, according to Sayako, who had patched him up once he had made sure Tohdoh was dead and unable to incriminate him. He had insisted on seeing only Sayako, as every doctor in Japan knew Zero had the exact same wound Lelouch would have shown them. She was not pleased, but she saw to it he was fixed up as quickly as possible. He had seen Nunnally briefly, who had been quite reserved for reasons he didn't understand. Sayako mentioned that they had seen Suzaku the other day, and that it had not ended on pleasant terms. He attempted to enquire further, however he was grumpily stabbed by a sewing needle as Sayako continued the stitching, and he remained silent. He was fixed up quite quickly after that.

At least, to an extent, as even now, giving the speech at Tohdoh's funeral, he still was caught by sharp pains in his intestines that threatened to expose his darkest secrets. Undeterred, he continued to spill his guts.

"Let us not be wrong in our words, but let us not also be cruel in our memories. He loved Japan like a father a son, and while that paternal instinct ended in tragedy, it was undoubtedly a well meaning love. I had the honour of serving alongside him in Parliament, and I can say I have never met a man who cared more for the ideals of a nation, even at the unfortunate expense of her people. I would ask you to remember a life's work, not one moment's error."

Concluding his stream of blatant lies, Lelouch gave a slight bow of the head to the blacked crowd before stepping off the podium, holding in his breath to brace his abdomen as he walked back towards his seat, in the front row of the funeral and next to Shinichirō Tamaki, which was incredibly awkward to say the least. The normally loud man had spoken before him, uncharacteristically muted, and had given a solemn, if genial speech.
Lelouch, through Kallen, was aware that Tamaki was an incredibly fanatic supporter of Zero, and was likely conflicted even now, several days after the end of the Tosa Incident, where Zero had come out against him and the other rebelling Knights. Then again, demoralisation had been the point in resurrecting Zero; in a war for hearts and minds, a hero was always a good selling point. There had been a risk that Tohdoh would tell his subordinates Zero was dead or a traitor, but that would have meant admitting that he had killed her, which would not have worked in his favour in the eyes of his subordinates.

In truth, it had been a true act of desperation to dress up in such attire and take to the front lines; the bullet to the waist hammered home the point that Lelouch was better suited to desk work. However, the stakes, both personal and political, were too high, and the line had looked set to break open in front of Tokyo's southwestern frontier, and so he relented; using a cache he was told about by C.C, he put on a spare Zero uniform, and for the first time in his life, stepped onto the frontlines, breaking his promise to Suzaku.

Lelouch felt that, all in all, he was okay with that.

Still, it had worked; the battle was won, his name was saved, and the Revanchists, as poor taste it was to admit, were blunted both politically and electorally; while casualties were not terrible, Lelouch's final charge had intentionally killed as many higher ups within the Black Knights as he could get away with. This was to prevent anyone who could have possibly known about him and Kallen getting out, but this had the side effect of killing a disproportionate amount of Revanchist Representatives, who held disproportionately high positions in the Black Knights, on average.

Not the worst of side effects, though he would never admit it to a living soul.

In any case, Naomi Inoue, the Revanchist Representative from Shizuoka and new provisional leader of the scarred party stood to give her speech, the last of the day. She took the stand, and briefly crossed eyes with Lelouch. It was unavoidable; he was seated front and centre, and was drawing glances from all directions. It was to an extent natural; he was one of only three Ameliorates present in a sea of weeping Revanchists, and felt somewhat boxed in and alone.

Which was not a bad way with which to describe his state of mind. For all his heroics on the front line, Lelouch was positively devastated to see the sort of destruction that had been wrought upon Japan. It showed him more than anything that their new Republic faced all manners of threats. It proved to him the need for alertness, and how, even now, he was surrounded by enemies.

Perhaps it was a bit more literal now, as it would probably be easier to name funeral attendees who were not Black Knights. That included Naomi Inoue, whose speech continued even in his mental monologue.

"Tohdoh was an inspiration to all of us, in his strength of will, patience, and breadth of wisdom. Lelouch mentioned that he loved Japan as an idea, but he sold it short. I remember…"

Naomi stopped briefly, before shaking her head slightly and concluding "... I remember when he announced he would get married, we were all shocked he could move past his love for the country. For him, its safety and prosperity was worth any sacrifice."

His attention caught, Lelouch looked up as she concluded her brief speech.

"He was willing to betray his country to save it."

Lelouch suddenly felt very uncomfortable.
The funeral, set in the cold morning just as the sun glanced the burial site, didn't last much longer, the harsh blues and oranges bidding a final peace to Tohdoh. Most talked alone, isolating themselves in pairs and threes to share their grief privately. Lelouch didn't fully relate, oxidising his isolation as he realised he really didn't have a great emotional feeling inside him. It was unfortunate to have Tohdoh die, after knowing him so long, but it needed to happen for the good of the country. How do you tell a funeral audience you don't really care a great deal? His speech, like any good political speech, had been lies. Everything felt muted, and yet cutting, like the cold, sharp morning wind in its contrast between him and his surroundings; together, yet incomparably different.

"Mr Lamperouge?"

He turned around, seeing Naomi in a frame, an image put up to brace against her emotional dam. He wondered how it felt to mourn an enemy of Japan as if he were its hero, but he kept that to himself.

"Yes, Ms Inoue?"

Naomi seemed to hesitate, before moving forward with commendable emotional precision "You knew Tohdoh, back when you first arrived here? Back in your youth?"

Lelouch grimaced. He really didn't want to talk to anyone here, but he tried to be polite in answering "Yes, he was always a guiding figure back then. My former colleague Suzaku trained under him for some time. It truly is a… loss to Japan."

"Why did he do it?"

Lelouch was caught off guard, gave no answers beyond stutters lost in the noise of the biting wind, almost frosty for being the height of summer. He obviously knew the answer, and would have had no issue articulating it if he so desired, but the surprising nature of the question gave him a plausible excuse to remain silent.

"Why did he… when even Z-"

She caught herself, but it did no good; Lelouch knew the word she held back from saying. Moreover, knowing why Tohdoh did what he did made the irony of this conversation far more cynically personal.

He drew near, standing a little shorter than Naomi but dominating the conversation with a chin tilted far higher than it had any right to, and whispered into her ear "You were there, weren't you? You were with them, you were a member."

Naomi froze, realising she had been caught, before Lelouch looked aside and waved his hand slightly to relax her, as she whispered back "Lelouch… I didn't know he would…"

She sounded apologetic, as if trying to explain her guilt away, but Lelouch said nothing, the emotional torque spinning up slowly as he was acutely reminded that this had in part been caused by him.

Not just Tohdoh's death; Lelouch could rationalise that, but his role in creating the disaster was only hammered home by the desperate, unknowing cries of a grieving admirer, who could only wonder at a cause for Tohdoh's irrationality when no cause that could approach the reality had the ability to cross her mind, due to its all too dark nature. She would question like this as long as she mourned, for an answer Lelouch planned to keep very deep inside, buried behind precautions and future plans that would prevent such darkness ever being needed again.
"It's okay…" he lied, trying to comfort the woman who looked increasingly like she would go into an outburst of emotion. Lelouch was not a man of great affective empathy, recognising pain but uncertain how to respond to this hot, loud potato, that had been dumped on his lap.

However, his cognitive empathy was attuned enough that when she responded with "I… I didn't ever mean…", he could relate to the inability to fully form words in the face of the guilt they secretly shared.

"Please… I know I cannot… but please, forgive us."

Lelouch could only look in shock as she bowed slightly, apologising on behalf of the Revanchists but also hiding behind them, combining the feeling of good from moving past a past wrong with the diffusion of responsibility.

Rentai Sekinin was the term, Lelouch recalled. Collective Responsibility. Tohdoh had taught him it. Perhaps it was true enough. A party who preached violent reclamation of their nation's birthright could hardly disown several of their higher members trying to violently reclaim their nation's birthright. However, Lelouch knew the truth for both Naomi and himself were not that simple. Lelouch's deceit was straightforward; for the safety of the nation, he had assumed the role of Zero, first by proxy and then in person, and this plan had prevented the takeover of violent Reactionaries, just as he had planned. More people died than had been ideal, but the concept has proven sound.

Naomi's conceit was more obscured. Lelouch wasn't certain how much she cared, and how much she wanted to save face on behalf of the terrorists, who still possessed their knives and ambitions. In speaking for the Revanchists, and apologizing on their behalf, she spread her personal sin across a wide canvass, so that the scorn on her herself might be that bit less. She would now shrink to a cell, an inkblot, and weather the storm through her smallness.

Looking into her eyes as she rose again, he saw no depth, just two inkblots. She apologised as a formality, and expected that forgiveness to restore the status quo. The question was how to respond to this.

Of course, the answer was not to be found in Lelouch's distaste for Naomi's crocodile tears, but in his responsibility as a Representative, which had called overtime for the Britannian.

He tried to back off, and whisper "It is not in my power to forgive you. It is in your power to be better people, and Japan may forgive you."

It was a banal answer that was only partially honest, but the objective, to instill a conservative shame that was both rightful and long due was necessary. Perhaps this could persuade them to act better, but Lelouch remained cynical.

She nodded, taken aback by his honesty but not to such an extent that would offend. That thin line, like the sharp blades of wind that cut between them as the sun took pride of place in the sky, casting the dirt Tohdoh lay under with the solitary stone that marked him.

He would lie there forever, remembered as a warrior for Japan, a patriot. While Lelouch knew from over a decades familiarity with the Lt. Colonel that his heart was in the right place, however heart did not mend houses, or feed the hungry. For these reasons, Lelouch had never been big on heart, valuing actions and more specifically results over intentions or philosophy. This had been one of Suzaku's problems, caring too much about the heart compared to the effects on the population.

But just as Tohdoh was down in the dirt, Suzaku was out in the woods; politically dead, and irrelevant. However, if the arc of history had any justice, it would weigh the actions of insurrection
and betrayal above a heart of loyalty and patriotism.

However, the Reactionary forces would secure Tohdoh's legacy, which proved their power through people like Naomi. Of course, he had his own part in this charade, a collective effort to commemorate the sinul dead; his own speech had played its own role, and it had to to be within several time zones of tasteful.

He shook his head as he walked away from Naomi to return into himself, angry at his own partalking, and the fact it was necessary at all. He knew that even now he would still have to fight the forces fighting within the Home Islands to destroy them and all the progress that had been gained.

More than anything else, Lelouch felt very alone, like he was looking through one way glass at a vehicle going off the cliff, and wondering if he was the only one noticing.

The funeral wound down, the false emotions and crystallised formalities of forgiveness wore at Lelouch, with the private understanding of just how off base both the legitimately tearful and the people who seemed to only care to justify themselves and their admiration for Tohdoh, the traitorous fool who acted rashly on dubious information, killing his superior and engaging in a rebellion against the state, actually were.

He should have been dropped in a ditch for all the respect he deserved as far as Lelouch was concerned. The fact that this commemoration had been anything other than an abject condemnation showed there was still plenty of work to be done. Tohdoh had crossed the third rail, and in spite of dying, had survived, something that disgusted Lelouch. He ought to have been electrocuted and run over by a societal train, and yet those supposed patriots venerated him.

He maintained his cool all the way back to his office, where he proceeded to kick the living daylights out his couch until he collapsed on top of it in exhaustion.

Tosa would never happen again. Lelouch swore he would not allow it; he would grasp whatever apparatus, use whatever means, and seize whatever opportunity he could to ensure this massacre would be the last. That began with gaining the relevant powers, and that began with the Ministry for Defence.

Chapter End Notes

Decided to slow down a bit after a Chapter worth four days of conflict to return to the personal, and I must admit that I enjoyed writing this Chapters visceral emotions greatly. Most of this was written on my weekends trip up to Kirkistone, so perhaps a few laps is what I need to get the blood pumping properly. Obviously, most of this Chapter was static explanations and elaborations, which is why I can't do Chapters like this as much as I'd like. In the words of Grosse Point Blank, a wicked rippin' shame.

A wicked rippin' shame also being an excellent euphemism to describe the sardonic fashion Lelouch views Tohdoh's death, in all his insincere political double talk, however his reaction to Tohdoh's supporters may be a bit more severe than a few words. These actions will not go unchallenged however, as not even Lelouch cannot avoid being flanked, what with all his own private machinations, however as Lelouch accumulates power it may prove too late.
The transition from the building of private power in this arc to the building of public power and legal authority begins here with the Nanshin-Ron Arc, which kicks off with Chapter 37, As Far As I Could Throw Him. Before that, there'll be a brief flashback to meet our colleague out in the woods, who is not pleased at the last few Chapters' developments.
Until then, be respectful at funerals, rate, review, and stay safe. See you all again soon.
~Eth0
"I'm sorry about the mess Nunnally, I've been trying to clear up all afternoon." Suzaku explained exasperatedly, trying to clear away the stacks of snapped timber from the kitchen table as the crippled woman wheeled herself forward into the airy brown room, waving the point off.

"It's fine, I don't imagine you've had much time to clear the house up. It wasn't too bad down here, was it? The artillery?"

Suzaku cringed at Nunnally ever having to use the word artillery as he would her saying death or any other word that had no business anywhere the vocal chords of someone as nice and, in spite of being her in her early twenties, seemingly innocent, but that was the world they lived in.

The world they lived in had not proven kind to the house he lived in, a small traditional house consisting of narrow wood and fabrics not unlike the Kururugi shrine, but much smaller, reflecting both his reduced needs and reduced means. The attached natural property was extensive, allowing Suzaku to partake in long, reflective walks unmolested.

It was prime country land, settled in a picturesque valley between the mountains Amagoi and Gozaisho, the woodland being the ideal place to retire at the ripe age 24, though recent events proved that not having neighbours could by troublesome if two political enemies rocked up nearby with hundreds of artillery pieces.

Being buried in the Shiga mountains, Suzaku's house had been a little to the North of the Black Knights' advance through Komono, and a little to the North-West of the Republican advance back to Kyoto, and had suffered for it. Euphemia had been out of the country at the time, visiting her sister to help Cornelia win the succession race with Schneizel, though the effort was moot, as Schneizel became Emperor a few days after the Tosa Incident. While he was several miles away from the front, Suzaku was for once glad of Euphemia's then absence, as several of the Black Knights and Republicans had proved rather liberal in their use of artillery shelling. Two shells had hit the house, and several dozen had rendered new holes in his hilly gardens.

Over the ensuing week Suzaku had been going about his business fixing the roof and walls of the central room, when Nunnally paid an unexpected visit with Sayako. He was a little abashed about the condition of the house, but he wouldn't have turned Nunnally away, pleasure as she was to have near, if the place was on fire.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"Water, if there's any?"

Sayako, who had been standing in the door attentively, moved forward to pour it, however Suzaku waved the maid off, and said "You did everything for us for the better part of a decade, I'm sure I can manage a drink. Would you like some?"

Sayako, pleasantly surprised, nodded and smiled as Suzaku cleared his sink, soaked in dry sawdust, before pouring two small glasses of clear water and passing them round and sitting opposite Nunnally, who was eager to talk.

"I'm glad you're okay. I was in Tokyo studying, and I could hear the bangs."
Suzaku briefly looked down and shook his invisible head, before explaining "I'd rather not go over it. How did your final exams go?"

Nunnally paused for a moment, before smiling and answering "Brilliant! Masters in Musical Theory, all wrapped up last a few days ago! The ceremony is tomorrow week."

"I'll be sure to be there." Suzaku smiled with pride, over the moon at how much Nunnally had managed on her own. His memory and perception of Nunnally, even now was of her childlike younger days, evidenced by his cringing at her talking about supposedly grown up topics such as the brief conflict in Tosa, but she had just finished University and was now technically more educated than him.

"So what have you been up to?"

It was Suzaku's turn to pause, as he thought the question over. While Euphemia had left to help her sister, there wasn't very much substance he had to answer with. He took long walks, scowled at the ever more depressing news, and had tried to learn woodturning, something Tohdoh had tried teaching him before the war, until Tohdoh's rebellion and death soured his memories of pretty much anything to do with him. Combined with a sour resentment that was perpetuated by loneliness, Suzaku was left a bitter man, once again not something he enjoyed telling Nunnally.

Even now, she had to be protected.

After thinking it over, he eventually arrived at the conclusion that he really wasn't doing much of anything, and decided that was as good an answer as any.

"I'm not getting up to too much, just a few walks and setting up some of the land for crops. I'm taking it easy for a while."

Nunnally nodded, and gave a sort of piteous smile that clued Suzaku to her upcoming topic before she began it.

"You've really changed Suzaku, since I last talked to you. Are you feeling okay?"

Suzaku frowned at this question, before Nunnally reached across the table and rested a palm on his, and added "You used to be so active, all the time filled with enthusiasm. Eight years must be tiring, mm?"

Suzaku felt a breath escape him as Nunnally dug at his hidden shame like a bandage being ripped off by a passer by, endeavouring to do well. She seemed to pick up on this, commenting "I can feel you shaking, you seem worried, but... you're also angry, your breathing you see. Are you sure-"

"-Nunnally, for... I'm fine."

His signs, as one might put them, that Nunnally had picked up on, accelerated as Nunnally pulled her hand back just as he squeezed his into a fist, almost as if he was trying to squeeze his insecurities with a single clench, only finding air. He looked away, shaking his head briefly as the woman sitting opposite him stared without eyes, though in spite of that Suzaku felt exposed and open, like her sibling had left him before.

"Let's change the subject."

Grateful, Suzaku nodded "Aye, lets."

Nunnally nodded back, smiling as best as she could manage before speaking again "So have you
talked to Lelouch? I think he may be having the opposite problem, he said he couldn't even make it to the graduation! Talk about busy..."

"Prick…"

"Suzaku!"

Suzaku looked up to see Sayako having taken several steps forward, and Nunnally looking surprised at him, taking him aback in her suddenly fierce lines as he realised her elbows were now much further forward than before, propped on the desk invading his hegemony.

And she was winning, as her approaches caused him to retreat inwards, feeling contrite as he managed to say "I'm sorry, I just… he and I didn't leave on good terms."

Nunnally looked at him quizzically, before sighing "Suzaku, if that's what this is about, I'd reckon you were both under a lot of stress. I'd hate to see you fall out, and perhaps if you just met with someone and you two sorted it out with-"

"No!" Suzaku hissed, banging his veiny forearm against the table. Quickly realising how he must look, he stood up and visibly tried to calm himself before continuing "No, there's no need. We met with plenty of people, and they were very clear. Besides, I don't need any help. They've got plenty more needy people out there."

Suzaku was bitter, but he wallowed in his bitterness. That was hardly an illness, or ailment, just an indictment, but that didn't make him wrong. The mess he was in was his fault, and it was his burden to bear. He didn't need anyone else reminding him of his failings, and he had plenty of pent up knowledge of his former friends failings. He was just one person, he could rot in silence.

Nunnally shook her head and said "That's absurd. I don't know what happened, but there's no reason to be holing yourself up like this."

"No, no, I… am fu… bloody well fine Nunnally! Please just leave me alone!"

"Suzaku!" Nunnally cried in outrage, before she wheeled herself back and round to meet Suzaku at the side of the table. He felt his hollow breath well up in his stomach, weak and filled with nerves. "Don't you tell me to stop, or go away, not when you're in this sort of state! Clearly, you're not thinking in any way clearly, but that is no excuse for your absurd behaviour!"

"Damn it, Nunnally!" Suzaku roared, his hands wrung out above his head as Nunnally almost stood only a foot away from him. "How many different ways do I have to explain for you to stay out of it!"

"Don't shout at me, you childish fool!" Nunnally responded, her own voice rising in turn, swinging her own arms around as if to fill the space her wheelchair bound frame left empty. "I don't know what has happened to you, but you're a shell of who you used to be! If this is your state of mind, I'm not surprised Lelouch saw fit to be rid of you!"

Suzaku bellowed a "Gah!", as he swung his hand back, missing Nunnally but recoiling backwards and hitting against a wooden pillar placed against the table behind him with his flayed knuckles, sending the propped up timber collapsing down with a bang, sweeping down the cutlery before sending a pile of metal hinges on the kitchen cabinet down after it, clinging and clanging as they rained to the ground, each bang pressing against Suzaku's psyche.

Looking down, he shook his head free of sawdust that clogged and suffocated him, and took a brief look away to examine the damage he had caused. The planks of wood swirled around his feet, as
he let out a breath. He couldn't think with all the people there, especially not Nunnally. She was just like him; only concerned with herself.

"Get out of my house... please."

He could feel Nunnally glare holes into his exposed back and neck as he visibly tried to restrain himself, as she whispered "Let us go Sayako, while our friend here recovers his senses."

He would not follow, not now. He needed time. It was not his time to insert himself back into the narrative, not after his graceless exile. He was not wanted after all, that, the world hard made very clear.

But he was nonetheless angry, and would remain so for some time.
As Far As I Could Throw Him

Chapter Thirty Seven: As Far As I Could Throw Him

Arc Ten: Nanshin-Ron

Opening: "Sweet" - SID

"What about Taizo Kirihara?"

Kaname Ohgi, fingers wedged between files entrenched in the mother of all filing cabinets, looked back towards the Labour Minister and Representative from Nara, Ayame Takaya, who held the picture of the leader of the Six Houses of Kyoto, now a powerful lobbying group, up for him to see.

Nonplussed, Ohgi asked over his shoulder "What about him?"

"For President?"

Ohgi, realising the question Ayame was asking, pried one hand out of the mass of files and folders, while using his off hand to bookmark where he had been prowling to grab a look at the picture Ayame had flashed. The picture wasn't flattering, but then again neither was the reality, as Taizo had faced significant medical challenges in 2020 that degraded his state considerably.

Since they had gotten rid of Kaguya Sumeragi as Governor and declared a Republic, the Ameliorate Government had wrestled with the issue of picking a new Head of State for the new country. They had a wealth of candidates for the largely ceremonial position, however upon closer inspection many proved to be less than ideal.

"I mean, he's certainly got the credentials to be President, but wasn't he quite close to Kaguya? We don't want to send the message that nothing has changed. Also, what if his heart conditions play up again?"

Ayame ran her hand through her smooth, brown hair and pointed towards the picture before commenting "It's funny you make that point; my only worry was that he was seen as too close to the Revanchists."

Ayame didn't have to elaborate on why that was a problem; Kyoshiro Tohdoh had done a good enough job himself. Ohgi shook his head, and with his free hand threw the photo into the rubbish bin.

"Back to the drawing board."

Ayame went back to looking for suitable candidates, as Ohgi continued to flick through the files in his drawer, half thinking about what had transpired in the last two weeks since the Tosa Incident. There had been significant effort put into rebuilding central Honshu, as well as attempts, led by Zero, to reconcile many of the disaffected Black Knights, and bring the men, many of whom were full time terrorists, and integrate them and their knowledge of combat into the Republican Army. This had led to a dramatic increase in their manpower and supplies, but Ohgi, though not in
opposition to seeing their stable transition to peacetime living, was still wary of both this plan and its sponsor.

Was Zero a Cincinnatus or a Caesar? It seemed obvious to Ohgi that this Zero was not Kallen, but that gave him no insight into who this new Zero was. Was this Zero truly in favour of the Republic, or an opportunist? The new Zero, like Lelouch Lamperouge, existed in a space in a mind where he did not trust them any further than he could throw them, but was willing to let them prove their worth, though Lelouch was approaching the latter end of his band of patience.

Suddenly, there was a banging on the door, and Ohgi, paw still trapped in the filing cabinet, could only shout across the room from his position sat like a toddler on the floor "Come in!"

The knob on the oaken door turned rapidly as new Representative Saburo Okawachi burst into the room, looking out of breath and clutching a newspaper. Ohgi didn't know Saburo that well, though he did recall a memo from Lelouch that simply read "Do not select Rep. Saburo [A] for M.o.D.", though the reason as to why Lelouch had sent that to him was beyond his knowing, such as many things the Minister for Finance got up to these days. He had replied by saying that Lelouch might be able to help him pick a new one if he really wanted, and the conversation went on for a while via post-it notes.

Still, Ohgi believed in making friends, and so asked "Are you alright Saburo?"

The man shook his head, before chucking the newspaper held under his arm onto Ohgi's desk and asking "What did you say to Lamperouge?"

Ohgi began to worry, only able to guess at what his increasingly emboldened colleague had done now, responding "I haven't said anything; we exchanged a few memos that didn't have much conclusive substance. What's he gone and done?"

Saburo raised an eyebrow worthy of Suzaku Kururugi, before commenting "There must have been heavy subtext in those memos; he claims you offered him the position of Minister for Defence."

Ohgi frowned, and replied aggressively "I did no such thing."

Saburo shook his head again as Ohgi abandoned the cabinet entirely, folders flopping on top of each other as he departed, to scoop up the newspaper on his desk. Highlighted was a paragraph near the bottom of the front page, which Ohgi read aloud.

"Chief of Staff to the Finance Minister Jeremiah Gottwald commented earlier today that he and Lamperouge had been in discussions with the Prime Minister over him taking the reins of the Defence Ministry during this critical time, and that Lelouch, while concerned over the pressures of managing two Ministries at once, was quote 'More than happy to do whatever was needed of him'."

Ohgi threw down the paper in disgust, commenting "In discussions to take the reins my ass. I told him he could help pick a new Minister for Defence, not that it was him!"

"In his defence, he did pick one; he just picked himself." Ayame joked, as Ohgi shook his head dejectedly. He saw her realise this was probably a bad time to be fatuous, and she continued "Still, perhaps he's switching out? It's not necessarily the case that he wants two at once…"

"But that's the thing." Saburo countered. "It says in the quote that he was concerned at the pressures of running two Ministries."

The room fell silent, as Ohgi clenched his fists. This was the downside of Lelouch. He knew how to handle himself politically, and had given the country enormous amounts of credit, bringing the
new nation to financial and political prosperity while handling all the paperwork himself.

He had always insisted on doing all the paperwork himself.

Which, Ohgi supposed, was symptomatic; Lelouch likely felt as if only he, blessed with the white man's burden, could be the only one to take care of the nation, as no one else could possibly suffice, and had encroached on the duties of others at the expense of the separation of powers. While Ohgi had been aware of it before, and had deemed the problem manageable, this action had in its brash publicity proved that a response was necessary.

Unfortunately, it was its brash publicity that made it such a good strategy.

"So why not just not give it to him? Tell him to jog on?"

The question came from Ayame, and Ohgi had already passed by that train of thought, and was several stops ahead, however Saburo was more than willing to fill in the gaps.

"It boxes us into a corner, see. It forces us to publicly go out and reject this, as he claims Ohgi has already offered it to him. If we don't want him to get the job- and we don't- we would actively have to go out of our way and say 'No, Lelouch is lying.' Remember, he has his own base of support, and he likely thinks that it would be too politically damaging to us to go out of our way to reject him, as they'd sour to us and think we betrayed him."

Ayame frowned, not fully understanding, before asking "So...why would this work? How does this work? If Lelouch, your subordinate, starts making up conversations in his head about how you offered him the Minister position, how does it do anything else other than hurt him for acting like such a fool?"

Ohgi nodded, and waved a finger at Ayame to emphasise her point "You are right, in that if we call that bluff he will lose support, and a lot of it, however what he thinks, what he's betting on, is that we will also lose support from his base. He knows he'll lose, and he knows he'd probably lose more than us, but he's betting we'd lose just enough to not try it at all, because his supporters will dislike us for making him look foolish. It gives us a whole heap of trouble we didn't need, rejecting him, and relitigating everything in the press, it'd be a mess. He's betting on us not being willing to step into that mess."

Ayame nodded, catching on quickly. To demonstrate this, she framed it in an analogy with "He's playing poker. That's all it is. If we try to call his bluff, we both lose money. That's the lose-lose proposition."

Ohgi, appreciating his appropriation of his favourite personal saying, continued it with "Then, in his mind, there's the win-win proposition. In his mind, he gets the position, and we get an excellent Minister for Defence."

"And a healthy dump on democracy."

Saburo had concluded with the thought Ohgi had been harbouring, though perhaps with a little more undiplomatic bitterness than Ohgi's angry disappointment.

Ohgi could guess at Lelouch's motivations. Like a true technocrat, he felt that things could only be handled by him, or they would be done improperly

They now all knew the problem, but the silence throughout the room was the only solution they could find.
They needed to find a way to appease Lelouch and avoid the trap he had laid for them, while also limiting his power permanently. Ohgi would not stand for this any further; he wanted to be rid of this issue forever, to never have to face Lelouch's uppityness ever again. To do that, he would have to offer Lelouch the win-win to end all win-wins, an offer he couldn't refuse that would place the Britannian high up on a shelf, above everything else but functionally irrelevant. It was time to do something.

Fortunately, that line of thinking, wanting a path for Lelouch that was prestigious enough to not be rejectable and powerless enough to not be troublesome, Ohgi happened upon the solution, bounding upwards and walking across the room with fresh zeal that drew the attention of the entire room.

"Idea?" Saburo asked, as Ohgi swiped a phone off his desk and spoke into the handle.

"Get Lelouch Lamperouge to my office immediately."

Slamming the phone down, Ohgi rubbed his palms together and waved his two colleagues to come round to his side of the desk as he whispered his plan.

"When he comes into the room, congratulate him in unison."

Ohgi saw them frown at his plan, which he felt was nothing short of genius, and while he was eager to share his spark of inspiration with them, he feared Lelouch walking in in the middle of his explanation.

He wanted to see the surprise and defeat in Lelouch's eyes in real time.

It took three minutes for Lelouch's quad knock to strike the office door, at which point Ohgi called across the room to invite the Britannian inside. Saburo and Ayame stood behind him, uncertain of their Prime Minister's plan but familiar with his intention, and confident in his ability as a politician. They knew what to do.

Lelouch turned the knob and stepped inside, where he was immediately bombarded with cries of "Congratulations!", as Ayame and Saburo stepped forward from behind Ohgi's desk to shake Lelouch's bewildered hand. It was lovely to see the look of confusion on his face, but even as he acknowledged that, Ohgi shook his head privately. He would not be like Lelouch. This was to protect democracy, not to pursue a vendetta.

After Lelouch had been thoroughly muddled, Ohgi stood up, though he did not move out from behind his desk, and extended his hand. Somewhat befuddled, Lelouch accepted the handshake as Ohgi joined into the rounds of "Congratulations!", before offering Lelouch a seat on the opposite side of his desk.

"Well, Lelouch, I'm glad to be able to congratulate you on this. You've been chomping at the bit for something new, and I'm so happy to be able to offer you a very prestigious position"

Ohgi watched as Lelouch's eyes narrowed in a fashion that made his thoughts plain. He had no idea what was coming, and was desperately attempting to figure it out. Fortunately, Ohgi was more than willing to enlighten him.

"You would, if you accept this, become the First President of Japan."

Ohgi delivered the gut punch with falsetto innocence, as if he was offering the greatest of honours, which he technically was, but you would not know it from the face Lelouch put on at this news. It was the look of someone just realising their critical error, and receiving a healthy dose of reality,
but Lelouch wore the look with a unique silent outrage, a bitter realisation of defeat.

"I see… so the Presidency?"

Ohgi nodded, as he watched Lelouch do the mental maths. He couldn't reject it, as it was a position of recognition, and to reject it would be seen as calculating and petty, and that damage would fall on Lelouch, and not on the party, as it was Lelouch's personal decision whether or not to accept it. He would have little power, only the ability to refer Bills to the Supreme Court and nominal command of the military. He would also be unable to hold a Cabinet position while President.

Ohgi had to stop himself from smiling as Lelouch's face relaxed, his maths reaching the same conclusion Ohgi had. In his reach for a higher position in Government, Lelouch had made it to the top, and was about to discover just how lonely it was up there.

"Yes. There were a lot of candidates, but your recent conduct and communications have proved to me that you belong in that position more than any other."

Lelouch now wore a more neutral face now, the shock having worn through him and his lizard brain engaged, but Ohgi was fairly confident that he had an airtight plan. Lelouch now understood why Ohgi was doing this, and the blank stare hid so much fury, the Prime Minister knew. Judging by the smug faces of Saburo and Ayame, visible behind Lelouch, he was onto something, as they stood behind the panicking Britannian holding in chuckles in their collective Schadenfreude.

Ohgi ignored them, and went to look Lelouch in the eye as he said "It was a tough call, but I really feel that nobody deserves that role more than you."

Lelouch tried a half hearted attempt to escape his fate, replying with an undercurrent of sarcasm "I would be honoured, but I'm surprised you couldn't find someone better, perhaps with more experience as an Executive. In my time as a Legislator, I have-"

"Oh no, as soon as you came to mind, I was convinced. Remember, you've been so eager to expand your work, and I can't imagine anything more expansive than representing your country on the international theatre."

Lelouch's face was solid as stone, long having stopped finding the joke funny. He obviously needed a bit more encouraging, and so Ohgi took the knife and twisted it a little, clarifying things for his subordinate.

"Of course, it'd be an awful shame if you weren't feeling up to it. One would have to wonder about your priorities, why you turned it down after having been so eager to be Defence Minister. Needless to say, people would talk. I'd advise you take this win-win proposal, where you retain some dignity, and avoid the lose-lose proposition."

Ohgi guessed Lelouch knew better than to fight this, and his hunch was correct. For all his flaws, Lelouch was probably within the three smartest people Ohgi had ever met, and could see what had happened very well without Ohgi laying it out.

"Well, I suppose, when you put it that way, I would be honoured to accept this position."

Ohgi, revenge exacted, extended an arm to greet his new President, who returned the gesture with great vitriol, if not glee. The handshake was akin to a bear ripping at your arm, or the annoying man at your workplace wanting to communicate how little he thinks of you. But Ohgi didn't care. Lelouch wouldn't be a problem anymore.

The vote to appoint Lelouch was a close one, but not for the reason it should have been. Lelouch,
being renowned as a snakelike, toxic character would have been roundly defeated in a normal political climate, however here, the fight was not with the opposition but with the quorum. So many Revanchists had died or resigned in shame that filling the chamber with enough members to vote for a President was a challenging feat, however Lelouch was officially inaugurated on the 29th of June, to great fanfare.

The ceremony was held in the height of summer at Chiyoda, a set of old palaces isolated in greenery in the heart of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, with a great many dignitaries in attendance. Beyond the politics of forcing Lelouch upstairs and out of the way, it was a big event along the path of Japanese independence.

Ohgi, who had the dubious honour of swearing the Britannian in, was nonetheless still quite proud of himself. He had stood for something when it counted, and had nipped the growing ambitions of a potential tyrant in the bud. While he knew his colleague had good intentions, he also knew Lelouch's Japan was an authoritarian one, and the Prince's forced departure from Parliament was, in Ohgi's mind, his greatest achievement.

Chapter End Notes

Take that Lelouch!
This comeuppance has been in the pipes for so long, and I'm so pleased to do justice to my imagination. The cherry on top was the messenger Ohgi, who continues to be a joy to write.
I was also pleased to be able to make use of two minor characters I introduced earlier, the Minister for Labour and the rejected Black Knight, to give the Parliament environment some cohesiveness. While Saburo is not an OC, Ayame is, and I believe is one of the only significant ones in the story. To my memory, the only other OC's with names are Minoru and his colleagues, the metalworkers in R1, and Daichi and his colleagues, the Black Knights from the Geass Directorate. I've wanted to keep things authentic, so please be sure to let me know how that line between breadth of world and familiarity of canon is being handled. The last thing I want to do is throw around names for their own sake.
Also, while I don't normally address Flashbacks, the most recent one centring on a character who has left the narrative, in his words, was not accidental. I don't just ditch characters who have been around for half the story lightly. Unless their name is Kallen Kozuki. Hehehe. I'm still not sorry.
In any case, I hope to see you again soon for the next Chapter, Decision Maker, which is Chapter 38 of 48. In the meantime, be safe, don't bite off more than you can chew in front of your boss, and rate and review.
~Eth0
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty Eight: Decision Maker

Arc Ten: Nanshin-Ron

Opening: "Sweet" - SID

Lelouch frowned as he adjusted his tie, which in spite of all his frustrated efforts always appeared too tight every time he passed a mirror. Shaking his head, he gave the bottom of the noose a light tug to tie his reflection in the hallway glass back into proportion. Satisfied for the time being, he returned to his more upright posture that he forced himself into when around foreign dignitaries and began to walk towards the conference room across the way.

Not being one for mulling over challenges with a great degree of sullenness, Lelouch had taken decidedly enthusiastically to his new role after the first few days of annoyance at his reduced power. In his mind, time spent complaining about a situation was time that could have been spent solving it, and so while he had been furious at Ohgi for his lack of vision and sheer obstinance, he had resolved that while he was Commander in Chief, he would do his damnedest with the tools he had at his disposal.

Which, in spite of Ohgi's hopes, were not as insignificant as they first seemed, and he was making hay with what he had. First and foremost, this position as Head Of State was manifested in an aggressive campaign of improving foreign relationships. Lelouch, now being in civilian control of the Japanese Armed Forces as well as having an understanding of the Black Knight's who had now filtered into the official military in Reconciliation on the advice of his alter ego, Zero, understood that it was in need of rapid modernisation, and that they needed to become friendly with their powerful neighbours.

This aggressive campaign of making friends had began in earnest the moment Lelouch was sworn in, with this meeting between Japan, Britannia, Australia, and the Chinese East Indian Dependencies over trade and transport being the third such meeting in what now was exactly a month of Lelouch as Head Of State. He would not be caught slacking, and if this was all he could do, he would do it better than anyone else.

In his earnestly, Lelouch was the first to arrive in the conference room, and took his seat with ten minutes to spare, electing to enjoy a drink of water and take the opportunity to mull, but before he could he received a text, indicated by a buzzing sensation buried in his trouser pocket.

Pulling out the Japanese marque, Lelouch read the brief message from Jeremiah.

"Item 2 secured in 0010."

Lelouch grinned, replying his thanks. Item 2 was the Zero suit, and a significant part of the reason he could still exert influence beyond his station. While Zero held no elected office, he had a massive bully pulpit, the ability to have his message spread and heard across the country. Lelouch himself had the pulpit of the Presidency, and so could coordinate the messaging as he pleased to pressure Representatives, if less directly than he once could.
For example, the Reconciliation of the Black Knights had been made much easier and much more peaceful by him controlling the pushing and the pulling. Without Zero, many former Black Knights would have gone on to become criminals and gangsters, what with military experience, criminal records, and no job opportunities. Without Lelouch in office, the army would have not accepted them and tried to arrest them, leading to more bloodshed. With his guiding hand, Lelouch had personally ensured the most peaceful outcome for Japan, while also increasing her military strength. If Ohgi had just allowed him to-

"Is this seat taken?"

Lelouch, shocked like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, turned upwards while pocketing his phone to see his brother Schneizel standing over him, somehow even taller than when they had last met. After recovering from the surprise, Lelouch nodded up "You're fine to sit here if you wish."

Schneizel, not being one to wait for a second chance, pulled out the chair next to Lelouch and sat into it, making Lelouch immediately uncomfortable with his proximity. His brother had always put him on edge, mostly due to his sheer depth of unpredictability and unreadable nature. He had proved to not be a hindrance eight years ago, but that had played into his own politics.

However, Lelouch had a job to do, and it would take a good deal more than discomfort for him to not do what he could. That said, the meeting had not started yet, and Schneizel insisted on small talk.

"Interesting seeing you here, I recall you saying you'd rather avoid a leading role." Schneizel commented innocently.

"It would have been my first choice, yes, but Japan is not Britannia. I don't get to make all the decisions."

The Emperor smirked and replied "It seems bizarre that you would be hoisted up into a position you felt no love for."

"The situation has changed, Schneizel."

Lelouch could only sit in frustration as Schneizel rapidly approached a key issue that was supposed to be secret. If he knew there was discord in Government, he could get away with all manner of tactics centered around dividing and conquering. It was for this reason more than any other that Lelouch was so furious at Ohgi for allowing disunity to take hold, and had been looking into ways to regain some tangible control of the party, to no avail. He could talk, but he could not act.

Still, if all he could do was talk, he would be hard pressed to shut up.

"So how is Kanon? I haven't seen him here."

Schneizel appeared surprised by Lelouch's forwardness, however he was well able to answer the banal question with ease.

"He's working with the new Prime Minister, Calares to sort out domestic affairs in my absence. The War in Eastern Europe now drawing to a close, managing the newly formed Areas, et cetera. I need to be in contact with them at all times, though I'm told that you don't have as direct an influence on Japanese policy as I do on Britannian, mm?"

Sensing that Schneizel, from his position of both national and international prestige was poking fun at the Japanese system, retorted "We have an elected Parliament."
"But you were not elected, at least not to the Presidency."

Lelouch, who had been engaging in this discussion without facing Schneizel, feigning disinterest through looking away at paper or sipping at his water now turned to look at his brother, who maintained an innocent look about him as if his questions were anything other than needling. Indeed, it took several moments for Lelouch to parse out an answer.

"Then perhaps that's why I don't have that much power to legislate."

Schneizel shrugged, as more people began to filter into the room and their discussion, nothing short of inappropriate in this context, was cut short. Not that Lelouch minded; the frivolous conversations allowed him to relax and think, which unfortunately only served to make him angry, as he reviewed the last minutes discussion.

Schneizel, as was common knowledge, was not a man for purposeless banter. Very little of what left his mouth was permitted to leave it without several layers of meaning or implication, which here was not difficult to grasp. His cavalier tone and casual demeaning of the Japanese method of governance was to reinforce the idea that Japan would be the junior partner in any agreement that would be reached today, and that Lelouch, being weak, should seem so.

But Schneizel was no Goneril, and Lelouch was no Lear, or even a Cordelia. Lelouch felt no familial connection for the snake who sat next to him, just as, even in spite of Schneizel's warnings, he felt no deference to his policies.

It took another five minutes for the other dignitaries to arrive, by which time Lelouch was ready to stick it to Schneizel, and began that in zealous fashion once everyone had been seated.

While the meetings were chaired by an independent overseer, a passive Italian who defeated the stereotype by being the most quiet, feckless individual Lelouch had ever dealt with. Lelouch wondered whether this had been intentional, as Schneizel had walked all over him from the get go, rendering the supposed equality of the negotiating platform a sham.

Most of the other dignitaries had been cowed by Schneizel, but once the game became apparent to Lelouch, he began to speak with intentional forcefulness, breaking into the circlejerk with as much ambition and enterprise as he could maintain over a three hour conference. While his actual policy achievements were few and far between, Lelouch felt a private victory every time a dignitary looked downwards in doubt at his reasoning, or nodded in the middle of one of his tirades as chipping away at Britannian hegemony and putting Japan on the map as a serious player. If these third parties wanted a new trading partner who would not be pushed around, Lelouch would give it to them.

Once the allotted three hours had passed, the attendants began to slowly filter out, as Lelouch sat in his own little world, contemplating his schemes. In particular, he was keenly interested in securing a sphere of influence with some of the Protectorates and Dependencies to increase both Japan's stature and strength. What with Ohgi and his supporters attempting to lock him out of the political process, it was all he could manage to do to keep Japan safe on the international stage.

"Pardon me, Lelouch?"

Not holding out any incriminating texts, Lelouch was far more calm this time turning back towards his brother who again demanded his attention in the midst of thought. Not feeling inclined to make an even greater enemy of the world's greatest superpower yet, he responded politely with a simple "Yes, Schneizel?"
The elder Britannian smiled and asked "Might I trouble you for a game of chess? We haven't played in over a month."

Lelouch looked at his brother quizzically, frowning for a brief moment before shrugging "I suppose there's no reason not to. I could use some practise."

Schneizel smiled like an alligator, gladly responding "Excellent, I've had a board set up on the balcony."

It struck Lelouch as concerning, yet unsurprising, the degree of certainty with which Schneizel had assumed Lelouch would join him. Still, chess was harmless.

Lelouch almost burst out laughing at that. Of course it wasn't. Nothing was.

Of particular note was their informal language. They did not use each other's titles, partly because of the absurdity of using such terms after years of knowing and disliking each other, but also because of the intimacy of their games.

"Want to play white?"

"If you don't mind playing from a disadvantage."

Schneizel smirked. "It doesn't seem to ever bother you."

This chess game was a good microcosm of their activities as statesmen. Both of them weren't personally concerned with the actual third parties beyond their functional use, the names of most of whom had already escaped Lelouch. He would talk with Schneizel, and use his name, because it was just them in unfriendly competition, like always.

"Pawn to E4."

Lelouch grabbed the pawn between his knuckles and placed it down in the centre of the board, beginning play, as Schneizel responded "Pawn to C5."

Lelouch briefly wondered over his next move, looking for an overall direction to take his strategy, before Schneizel interrupted "You were very… vocal during the negotiations."

Lelouch ignored him and simply whispered "Knight to C3", blocking Schneizel's pawn in the midfield.

Schneizel shook his head, responding "Knight to C6", giving support to the threatened pawn before explaining "I guess you always did need a little extra warning, you were never keen on those. I'll try again. We gave you freedom, so don't get uppity."

"Don't think I'm saying something I'm not; I got the message to shut up, Schneizel, I just chose to ignore it. Knight to F3."

Schneizel's eyebrow reached new heights as he digested both Lelouch's correction and his move, the latter of which secured the centre of the board from two directions and the former of which did little beyond spiting him. After acknowledging this, he replied "Pawn to G6", clearly deep in thought.

Lelouch responded with "Pawn to D4.", before Schneizel took the pawn and Lelouch's knight concluded the trade. Schneizel pursed his lips, before raising a finger.
"Perhaps I ought to give you a little extra incentive. Bishop to G7."

Not fully understanding, Lelouch moved his bishop to E3, as they continued to position their pieces on the frontline. After some time of Lelouch not replying out of concentration, Schneizel smirked, and continued his point without prompt.

"You see, the thing is, you always understood the importance of keeping perspective. Agreements such as these are not zero sum games, and if we work at it, they may be mutually beneficial for Japan and Britannia. Knight to D4."

Lelouch looked at the board, now a skirmish in the centre with the corners fortified. Feeling the need to counter, he answered "We won the ability to determine our own trade through vicious strikes and protests. We are not about to submit our resources back to you. Knight takes Knight."

"Knight takes Pawn."

"Knight to F5."

Schneizel looked at the board before deciding enough time had passed to continue his point. "But that sounds more like you're opposing me for the sake of it. Knight takes Knight."

Lelouch scowled, deciding to play more aggressive as he answered "Queen takes Queen. Untrue, it's just that our priorities are different to yours, because we are a different country. Even if it were for its own sake, that doesn't alter my ability to do it anyway."

Looking surprised at Lelouch's sudden aggressiveness, as the young President's Queen swept down the length of the board, the boldest move of the game so far, Schneizel took a moment to think, before smiling.

Suddenly, Lelouch felt very cold as Schneizel's smile grew from an upstart smirk to a full blown private celebration Lelouch and his shivering spine were emphatically not invited to. After a moment, Schneizel announced with a sudden cheeriness that was positively terrifying "That's an awful shame. Do you recall, I met with Suzaku and Ohgi, during the negotiations? This was before you declared a Republic, remember. While I've been told you've since left Suzaku in a ditch somewhere out in the woods, Ohgi struck me as a thoughtful character. He had a saying, and I feel like appropriating it somewhat. You have just rejected my win-win proposition, and I regret to inform you that I have been forced to offer you a lose-lose proposition."

Lelouch could only furrow his brow, before Schneizel cleared his throat and looked aside, before commenting "It's bizarre. We have been dealing with so much recently. One must wonder why Tohdoh acted so rashly in his last few days of life. You can only sit and contemplate what he must have learned to so suddenly take up arms. And then Zero turned up, right in time to save the Government, especially since our suspect for Zero, who has since gone missing, was released from prison by a high ranking Japanese minister. Isn't that curious, Akira?"

Lelouch frowned at the beginning of the statement, before its ending shocked him. The world, exposed over the balcony, seemed to swallow him up in tightness and suffocating suddenness. His veins solidified, freezing him in his seat. It had suddenly plunged his heart into the vast depths of his frozen bowels, as he realised many things with one word. Schneizel knew he had worked with Kallen, knew his secret, had told Tohdoh, and was prepared to spill everything if Lelouch didn't toe the line.

As Lelouch visibly recovered from the bombshell, Schneizel the bomber remained aloft, looking out of the balcony, preferring to not look at his brother go through shell shock.
"I'll leave you be. Will we call this a draw?"

Lelouch didn't respond, stuck looking forward in terror as he realised the man who had supplied Tohdoh with whatever information that had sent him into a rage was even sitting opposite him, and more dangerous than he had imagined. Schneizel sighed, and said simply "A friend of mine is a photographer, and he was in Japan recently. I think you might appreciate some of his pictures."

Leaving a pair of images on the chessboard, he departed, leaving Lelouch alone. It took him several minutes to do anything of substance, to examine the photo's and to see Kallen running to his office and meeting him in his office, with an angle that made it look like they were in the throes of passion.

Lelouch felt sick, as the full implications of what Schneizel had told him set in. Schneizel wanted his colony and its natural wealth, and he would get it back by hook or by crook. Lelouch would take the fall, and Japan would be defenseless.

Unfortunately, Schneizel miscalculated. After all, sunk fish swim sideways. Lelouch did not back down when threatened, or blackmailed. He did not know the meaning of the word retreat, backpedal, or bend. Schneizel had made his designs clear in a bold and aggressive fashion, and Lelouch was more than willing to respond in kind. If cornered, he would become a rattlesnake, and right now, Lelouch felt the heat, but was more than willing to turn the wick up. He would have to do something serious to eradicate this clear threat to the nation, and quickly.

He had an enemy; now he needed a plan.

Chapter End Notes

"My job, is the job to, uh, make decisions, I'm a decision ma- I mean, if the job description were whaddaya do... it's, uh, decision maker. And I make a lotta big ones and I make a lotta little ones." - Then U.S President George W. Bush speaking to a town hall in Tipp City, Ohio, April 19th 2007.

While Dubya's characterisation is a ways removed from Lelouch, the amusing Bushism is actually a pretty good summary of what the President actually does, if also outrageously hilarious. It's also worth noting Lelouch has actually far less power than the American president, as the post, in a wild fit of sheer imagination on my part, is more closely akin to the Irish model of Presidents. Go me.

Quite often writers will go out of their way to reaffirm the belief that in spite of appearances their characters are rational, in control, and are not hypocrites, and that any moment where this seems untrue is part of a long con. In a new twist, I will say this to Lelouch's actions; he is a hypocrite, and this is intentional. In the beginning, he followed the Enlightenment principle of fighting for Japanese prosperity rather than Japanese liberty, and expressly demeaned those who wanted to spite Britannia for the sake of doing so. The fact that his perception has become so warped that he in fact is now pursuing the latter at the expense of the former is not incidental. He is the rebel he always hated.

This is emphasised in how angry he became with Schneizel, and his determination to defeat him. He masks threats to him, which are entirely his fault, as threats to Japan, giving himself justification. All this is happening because he decided to work with Kallen.

The risks Lelouch took were calculated, but man is he bad at maths.
So while I'm away, be sure to stay in school, stay safe, and I'll see you soon for Chapter 39, And Pass The Ammunition. In the meantime, please rate and review.
~Eth0
And Pass The Ammunition

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty Nine: And Pass The Ammunition

Arc Ten: Nanshin-Ron

Opening: "Sweet" - SID

The rain banged against the wooden rooms bulletproof windows, like demanding fists begging for some entry. It set a cool ambience against the warm, firelit office filled to the brim with one occupant and many hundreds of pages of paperwork. The man, a fortress, sat with furious hands, gripping onto his pen with a chaotic desk, his dozens of phones buried among hundreds of folders. In the heart of the Japanese night, one of these phones rang out with shrill, demanding pitches, filling the Presidential Office with an insistent scream.

Lelouch swore in annoyance as he wrung out his hands clear of their cramp, having spent considerable time abusing them, pressing wells of ink into paper as if he was crushing those who displeased him under his forefinger. He was a pen pusher in the best sense of the term, however a day of scribbling memos and scrawling signatures transformed his slender, robust fingers to the claws of a crab, that struggled to pick up the ringing phone that had disturbed him from his work.

Looking briefly at the green, windowed screen of the ancient handheld, Lelouch saw the screen read out the number of Diethard Ried's new private cell, bought in the midst of Lelouch's panic over security within his circle of colleagues. After Schneizel had casually mentioned Akira as if it were nothing, Lelouch had had several heart attacks and bought a dozen new handhelds for himself, with only one or two contacts on each which were all recycled regularly. He had also insisted on Diethard buying a second phone for him, which was the one the newsman had called him on.

"Good morning Julius."

Silently acknowledging his pseudonym, Lelouch answered in a manner atypical of his usual self, but entirely typical of the character he had created to throw off the scent of anyone listening in on Diethard's calls, "Hey, Diethard, how's things? It's the middle of the night over here. Please tell me you're getting me a cameraman or some kinda host out to this hole, I'm getting pretty damn lonely!"

Diethard, familiar with the facade, answered "I have the team you requested coming into Kyoto Airport on the 10th. I wouldn't leave you out on your own, would I?"

Lelouch took a moment to jot that down on a pad of paper, before asking "And yourself? We're pretty damn outnumbered in this country, we Brits, we need all we can get!"

"Mr Kingsley, I will be staying right where I am thank you very much. Unlike your little sideshow, I actually have a reputation to uphold. I'm not leaving the homeland for love nor money"

Lelouch sucked his teeth and answered in a folksy voice "Well ain't that a shame. I'll talk to you soon then?"
"Aye. Remember, your guys are a bit desperate to make it big, so you shouldn't have any issue keeping them in your orbit."

Lelouch thanked Diethard, before ending the call and thinking. While Diethard was willing to help him in return for exclusive access to scoops from the most notorious head of state on the planet, he had his own reputation to consider, and couldn't help directly. Lelouch didn't mind, as if he had his legitimacy would be challenged and his efficacy would be whittled down to nothing.

Lelouch didn't like false flag operations. They were tacky, overblown, and carried too much risks for the potential reward. That was why he wasn't going to do one. However, there was something to be said for the idea of spreading so many absurd stories via Diethard's team arriving in Japan that any attempt by Schneizel to spread the story about him being associated by Zero would be dismissed as another one of those fake stories. These would be spread by Diethard's lackeys.

If everything seemed like a false flag, then people would become convinced nothing was, and Schneizel would be unable to shake the fabric of Japan by spreading his malicious information, and would be unable to blackmail public officials into submitting to his will, whether it was for trade today, or land tomorrow.

However, this was an extremely short term solution, and an unreliable one at that. It depended heavily on the perceptions of the public, and a heavy dose of chance. All it could do was buy him time to implement a more long term solution. Britannia would always try to win back its hegemony as long as Schneizel, the consummate conqueror, was at its head. There would only ever be short term solutions as long as Britannia still existed. Japan would need to protect itself from his brother's vast empire, preemptively if necessary.

This was the latter purpose of Diethard's media men, who would quickly begin their work in Japanese news shows and political talk circles, directing the narrative. Diethard himself would invite on more imperialistic guests to his show to talk smack about Japan, which would encourage the antagonistic worldview among the Japanese who saw it, while also providing Diethard the out of 'It wasn't me that said it, it was my guest!'

Going to war is very difficult, and very few people take the leap without great incentive, especially in the modern day. Going to war against public opinion is a very excellent way to get ousted, and so while Lelouch understood the threat Britannia posed to Japan's very existence, he would need to educate the public, directly and indirectly, to bring them to the level of understanding he would need. This was the other purpose of Diethard's men, a source of information and jingoism within the popular media.

He would also need a great deal more than just a bloodthirsty population; just as he had provided a chicken in every pot while Minister for Finance, he would have to put a gun in every hand. And to that end, his next meeting would be much more productive.

Unfortunately for Lelouch's sleep pattern, it came several hours later, and required him to leave the comfort of his house and head to the barracks in out in Ota.

He roused himself to go with great zeal, preparing himself to go with no lack of clatter and noise, coordinated as ever in the short time he had to get ready. Fortunately, he didn't wake anyone, as he lived alone now; Nunnally had moved out a few weeks ago with Sayako for a studio apartment.

He had been irate when she broached the idea, beside himself with worries about what could happen if she left his careful watch, however she had been insistent, causing a very ugly row. She had eventually gathered up her things while he was out and left, leaving only a note that she wanted to live on her own terms, without Lelouch's overbearing control, though he could still visit if he
wished.

He had burned the note, though he had indeed visited. The atmosphere had been decidedly frosty, with Lelouch still implying it would be best if she returned to live with him. He had a legitimate worry for her safety with her so far away, and while he trusted Sayako, he felt that Nunnally could only be safe with the added security of his watch.

He was not asked back.

Returning to the present, he had changed into a heavy, three buttoned suit with a firm, sharp shoulder structure and regal overtones, hidden within the subtlety of the black fabrics many sharp angles. It was also incredibly uncomfortable, and so by the time he had been driven south, he was somewhat disgruntled, and did not have much patience for the small talk of former Field Marshal and present Minister for Defence Gilbert P. Guilford.

"How is Madam Euphemia? I've heard she was living with Suzaku-"

"What did you want Gilbert?"

Guilford bristled, before inviting him into the warehouse they stood in front of and out of the street-lit neon rain. The new building was even brighter, lit by streams of fluorescent lighting hanging off a grey, corrugated ceiling that was as tall as it was wide. The bland, vast room was as featureless as it was vast, however it contained two things that improved Lelouch's mood considerably.

The first was a few dozen exotic Knightmares, in six columns that stretched down the length of the warehouse, all armed to the teeth. They were painted in a blood red, with fierce, modern lines and vast, sweeping panes streaking out of the back, marking them out as the cutting edge Guren Mk.17-CiiX.

The second thing that cheered Lelouch up was the presence of their designer standing at incredible ease in the corner admiring her creations, the Indian Rakshata Chawla, complete with loose fitting lab coat and long pipe stuffed with tobacco, the hot gases of which floated about the area lazily like a spectre.

Rakshata had been one of the unexpected blessings of Lelouch's connections gained from C.C in China. She had done excellent work on earlier Gurens, which had proven incredibly tricky to combat. The saying went that their biggest design flaw was there was never enough of them. Fortunately, given the limited Japanese manpower relative to Britannia, quality over quantity would be the order of the day. The Britannian war machine was an unstoppable monster that threatened the very survival of their small islands, and they would need to be ready for the inevitable fight.

Eager to secure her services for Guilford, Lelouch stepped forward and extended his arm out for a handshake, beginning "Thank you for coming, I can't imagine-"

"Hmph."

Lelouch, hand still extended, dumbly frowned as she made the prideful yet aloof noise, somewhere between her clearing her throat and a muted chuckle. Taking a moment, in the face of the two surprised men she exhaled the last of her smoke before rapping the end of her pipe off Lelouch's outward knuckle, fixed in a stunned space.

"So eager. Are my babies that exciting, that you're tripping over yourself in awe?"
Lelouch's eyes fell in mild annoyance, but was able to hide it well enough, though he withdrew his hands behind his back. That pipe hurt something nasty, and he had no intention of being hit again. Hoping to be diplomatic, he shook his head and replied "Just enthusiastic to see you Ms Chawla. People with your talents are rare in the extreme, and given your history in Knightmare Design I would be extremely enthusiastic to continue to contract your models, after first surveying them of course."

She smirked. "I've been supplying the Japanese cause long enough, I may as well make it official."

Lelouch frowned again as she turned to walk over to the rows of Knightmares. His comment on her history was supposed to be tongue in cheek, a subtle nod to her work in making the Black Knights so implacable without compromising her in any public records. As it turned out, either the concept of subtlety eluded her or she didn't care, taking refuge in audacity. Neither of those things were encouraging, but Lelouch, aided by Guilford's obliviousness, moved on as she began talking them through her creations.

"The Mk.17 is my most recent design, a twelfth generation model built from the ground up to perform above and beyond the specifications of Asplund's eleventh generation potato. The CiiX is designed to be easier to produce in larger numbers, and, perhaps more importantly, repair. You can take any part out and put a new one in within the hour. That's engineering, that is. You need more than just performance, designing ergonomics takes just as much talent. I'd like to see that Lloyd build something half as useable. I'll tell you, he doesn't have the talent. He just straps lasers on it and calls it a day. No tightness, no actual engineering, no clever solutions, just more bloody dakka!"

As Rakshata began to get worked up, Lelouch gradually faded her out as he examined the Knightmares. Minimising losses was the key to victory, especially in the Pacific, which sapped at supplies and ate infrastructure. They were ideal, however his enthusiasm was dented when she labelled her price, which was almost as great as the budget for Knightmares as a whole, just for construction rights.

Guilford was similarly unamused by her proposal, though he, being the more emotional and extroverted of the two, vocalised this immediately, explaining how outrageous the sum requested was. Lelouch watched the one way exchange as Rakshata replied to Guilford with a look of wry amusement at what was an entertaining display, if one removed what Lelouch considered the dire context.

Realising that Guilford's angry approach, one borne out of many years of being in the military where commands were obeyed without question, was not working, Lelouch shook his head and turned away to think, while examining the red Frames. They were beasts containing the beauty and poise of a clear design philosophy. Not an ounce was spared or wasted.

Which, Lelouch supposed, fit in with what Rakshata had said. He recalled his own, second hand encounter with Lloyd, who had at some point or another earned the ire of Rakshata, when he had propped up the GN-102 project to bait the markets. Lloyd had entered his own creation, piloted by his own secretary Jeremiah Gottwald of all people, and was deemed too impractical.

All of which gave Lelouch two ideas. Begging and pleading only encouraged Rakshata to snicker and chuckle, not really caring much for the rank they held. To be impressed, she would need to see someone who she respected the talents of, someone who he had known well for over a decade, and someone whose granddaughters phone number he had on his speed dial.

One text later, Lelouch adopted a stern, authoritative pose, still turned away, to try his hand at his second idea.
"So these will beat Lloyd's Frames?"

Rakshata seemed intrigued by this turn in the conversation. "Unquestionably, you'd only be buying heaps of junk off him compared to these."

Lelouch, face obscured, smiled, as he realised she hadn't caught on as to why they were purchasing Knightmares. She likely assumed they were for suppressing insurgent elements, and that she was in competition with Lloyd for Lelouch's money. Realising she could yet be enlightened, he hinted "Have you had the opportunity to compare his models with yours?"

"I haven't. He's quite a secretive man, though I can't understand why. It's quite clear from the leaked photos he's trying to work on a new squash head shell, but little does he know how behind the curve that whole realm of cannon design is! In any case, I haven't had the opportunity to actually test against his designs physically. I'd love the opportunity to though, just to imagine the look on his face once his precious Lancelot is sliced up."

That was his in, his hook, his wedge in the door that he could slink in with. She responded so overwhelmingly well to the idea of spiting Lloyd on the battlefield he almost forgot his other ace in the hole, which showed up soon after, in its usual bumbling, tired state.

"Gracious God Lelouch, you do have a nasty habit of summoning me at the worst of hours."

Reuben Ashford, still dressed in his slippers, entered the warehouse with a glum resignation on his face, followed by his granddaughter Milly, who age had gifted both a greater shrewdness, a mature cynicism and a career as a lead news broadcaster on Japan's national television station. This had some potential for use, but right now Reuben was the man he needed to crack Rakshata.

"I.. Is that who I think it is?"

'Presto.', Lelouch thought privately, as Rakshata opened up once she realised she had the literal inventor of the modern Knightmare Frame in her presence. Hoping to use that leverage, Lelouch commented "Reuben is an old friend of mine, he took care of me after the war. His knowledge of Knightmares is certainly superior to mine, so I've asked him to see what he thinks. I just want to take a moment to give him some pointers if that's alright with you?"

Rakshata nodded, eagerly replying "By all means."

Lelouch smiled, inviting Reuben into a side room. Shutting the door behind him, he turned to explain.

"Rakshata doesn't respect Ministers or Presidents. She doesn't give a damn about people outside her lane, other than when they pay her. Guilford could stand there for a decade and she'd just laugh at him. What she respects is a Knightmare Designer who has proven his chops. She'll talk with you and listen to you. I'm already sold on buying these, but I need the prices to go down by at least 30%.

"So you called me."

Lelouch nodded. "If I could give you one piece of advice, diss Lloyd Asplund. It'll put her in an excellent mood. Talk about how you beat him at the contract 8 years ago. Explain, in as vague terms as you can, that these will see combat against Lancelot's very soon."

Reuben looked concerned at the last sentence, cottoning on to its implications impressively quickly. Lelouch, sensing the man needed one last push, explained "You've been thinking about retiring for a while, haven't you?"
Reuben frowned as Lelouch continued "Perth is a really nice city. Neutral Australia, surprisingly cool, and out of the way. Given how big the defence appropriations are for this, I'm sure I could procure a finders fee for you down the back of the couch, just to get you rolling."

Reuben's eyes widened as he realised what was being offered. A retirement fund that could get him to a cool, isolated place in the South, as far away from the fighting as conceivable.

"I'll get you your discount."

"Thank you Reuben."

He nodded, and went on his way. The elderly man had no doubt remembered the promises that Suzaku, the snake, had made with regards to a cabinet position back in the day, however with an escape to a peaceful retirement within his grasp, it seemed he was willing to help out one last time.

And he would pull it off, Lelouch was certain of that. Rakshata's respect for Reuben and her eagerness to smash Lloyd's hopes and dreams would secure it.

Suddenly, he received a text, which he scanned silently, revelling in the good news. It read "Good evening sir, it's Philip Lawless, part of the team Diethard is having sent over. Just wanted you to have my number for when we touch down."

Lelouch pocketed the phone and smiled. They were going to war with Britannia, they just needed to convince the country of it. He would have Philip and his men on national television to feed the justification for war into the general awareness. Next, he needed a route into Japanese media. Fortunately, he had that covered too.

"Milly? Could you come in here for a moment?"

Chapter End Notes

I'd make a joke about Judith Miller and Milly Ashford, but that would certainly be getting a bit controversial for me. Down with that sort of thing.

Indeed, I'd argue that for once the plot here isn't as crucial to this Chapter and its purpose in the overall narrative as much as Lelouch and his characterisation. Here, I've tried to compare his attitude towards the Japanese Government to other things, both inside and outside the story itself. The idea to have Nunnally leave wasn't mine, and wasn't ever planned for until I wrote it, but it certainly lends a bit of perspective, as well as tying in the element of 'obsessed big brother' he had in the show. As it turns out, it was just one facet of his overall authoritarian personality that we saw in the lighter moments of the show.

The second comparison I made, perhaps less obvious, was to OTL Japan's attitude to America in the Interwar Period, an existential threat, against which they would have to commit everything, and rally under those who could protect Japan. They militarised very rapidly, acted aggressively, and everything worked out for them. Probably. Then again, they didn't have our Lord and Saviour, the immigrant President Lelouch Lamperouge leading an army of giant mechas.

But Lelouch is not Emperor, and he actually has to convince people to follow him to war. In particular, he has to get what eluded Hamilton for so long; Parliamentary approval, from people who hate his guts.

But that is for the next chapter, Diplomacy with Britannian Characteristics. In the
meantime, stay safe, rate, review, and don't talk smack about your rivals. I'll see you again soon.
~Eth0
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty: Diplomacy With Britannian Characteristics

Arc Ten: Nanshin-Ron

Opening: "Sweet" - SID

The headlines were nothing if not dramatic. 'International tensions flare over Kamine Island dispute.', 'Japanese diplomats expelled over Presidential rhetoric', and 'Britannian support for strike on Japan at an all time high over claims on Pacific Islands.' made the rounds over the course of a week, which brought great disquiet to Ohgi and his colleagues. On the Japanese side, the Britannian Milly Ashford, who Ohgi had actually met back in the day, had begun to invite all manner of hawks onto her program, which had legitimised their opinions and had gotten them invitations across Japanese media.

As well as this, the amount of both anti-Britannian stories out of Japanese sources and absurd rumours about Japan out of Britannian sources had increased dramatically, intensely polarising opinions across the nation. One particularly absurd rumour claimed Lelouch was Zero, something that gave Ohgi a brief laugh.

That was before, following questions being raised over the legitimacy of Britannian control over Kamine Island, which had been handed over in what was now a nullified agreement, the Commonwealth Act, several dozen Japanese diplomats were expelled from Pendragon. Almost before Ohgi had worked out what had happened, Lamperouge had publicly called for the powers of war to return Kamine to Japanese rule and restore the diplomats, as, according to him, the legal basis for Britannian rule over those islands had been repealed.

Lelouch did not have the ability to declare war on his own; rather, he had to have Parliament lend him that ability by a majority vote. Even so, Ohgi was anything but confident that he wouldn't get it. All he could really do was wait until judgement day, the 4th of September, when Lelouch would sit before a Parliamentary hearing, and then the vote would happen. The three days in between the announcement and the hearing were the most anxiety driven than any Ohgi had experienced. His gambit to force Lelouch out of the political process had failed, and now he was coming back with a vengeance, being the only man in Japan, with the arguable exception of Guilford, with control of the military and its policy.

Ohgi could only wait and watch, and pray to whatever Gods might exist that Lelouch would be stopped at the vote, as he could not imagine any more likely recourse, even as he took up his seat in the front row before Lelouch arrived on the big day.

He looked around the vast room, built to fit 500 people but not holding anywhere near that due to the recent deaths among Representatives, which made the room feel empty and haunting, with the ghosts of Kyoshiro Tohdoh and Chiba Nagisa observing from afar with their eternal grim looks, to name a few. Of course, his discomfort went beyond morbidness, as he had very worldly concerns, most of which were contained within the 26 year old President, whose arrival was preceded by the Chairman of Parliament calling for order, and a show of recognition. Alongside his colleagues, Ohgi stood up to acknowledge Lelouch as he entered, dressed in regal fineries and his chin held far
higher than it had any right to sit.

Ohgi watched as the man crossed the room at complete ease, exuding strength like a body odour, all of which sent further fret to Ohgi's thoughts. The balance was thin enough as it was, and what with most of the Representatives finding themselves scared out of their minds, a display of strength could convince them that he could save them.

After some Parliamentary proceedings had gone underway, the Chairman invited the Representatives to ask questions of Lelouch within regular order, beginning with the minority leader, Revanchist Naomi Inoue.

"The Minority Leader Naomi Inoue, R, Shizuoka, has recognition for five minutes."

"I thank the Chairman for the time. President Lamperouge, as you know the procedure for gaining war powers has not yet been used, and indeed the ink on the Constitution is still wet. What exactly is your cause to move towards military action, and have you exhausted all diplomatic solutions?"

Lelouch, standing in his lectern, coughed before leaning into his microphone to answer with a serious face "I thank the Minority Leader for her question, and while I will go into our reasoning, I would first point out that a diplomatic solution is hard to reach when Britannia expels our diplomats."

This would have earned a small chuckle from the crowd, but the occasion was too serious for much beyond that. After a moment's pause, Lelouch continued.

"At this time, the central issue is the restoration of order to our claims in the Pacific, which were handed over to Britannia in an agreement which has since been wholly repealed with the establishment of the Republic. However, we were willing to meet with Britannian officials to reach a compromise, before they removed our diplomats and began adopting jingoistic rhetoric. It is my opinion, as well as that of those within the national security apparatus, that Britannia intends to aggressively expand into this region, culminating into an expansion of political influence on Japan. We need to take steps to restore a status quo, and avert the rightward shift of Britannian foreign policy."

Ohgi didn't shake his head, but he internally rejected this line of thought. Lelouch had talked about this very tactic before with Ohgi back during the early days of Yuaiikai, shifting the conversation and the realm of respectable discussion. He portrayed himself as a hapless man who had done all he could, and made the argument that everything was the fault of Britannia. Now, rather than having a discussion as to whether Lelouch had lost his mind, they were discussing whether Britannia was acting aggressively, shifting the goalposts well past where they ought to be.

However Naomi didn't seem to catch it, asking "How urgent do you deem this threat? We are facing an internal period of vast reconstruction and reconciliation. We struggle to make quorums, and we have a divided population in desperate need of relief. Is this course of action the best for us at this time, rather than spending the vast sums of money this war would surely consume our efforts to strengthen the Japanese State?"

Lelouch frowned before sipping at his drink and pausing briefly. Ohgi watched intently as he eventually answered the question with some hesitation over his first few words, as if remembering something.

"I... am more than aware of the... damage reactionary forces have caused to Japan than anyone. We lost many thousands of people to the various instances of civil strife, and as you have made plain the wounds are still fresh. I would not dare to ask all those who have suffered for one final push to
protect us from Britannian aggression unless it were necessary. Naomi, I know you well, and I would ask; what if they make good of their aggressive rhetoric and attacked while we licked our wounds? What if, in our negligence, we lost what had only just been reclaimed. What would those who came after think of those who stepped in the way of our one opportunity to prevent that? Naomi, I would argue that Japan may never forgive you."

Naomi wavered as she took in the reply, before her eyes widened suddenly as he finished. Ohgi watched as she seemed to retreat into herself, before shaking her head and explaining "No further questions, I relinquish my remaining time to the pool."

"Understood."

Ohgi sat back as he thought over what had happened. The effect of Lelouch’s statement 'Japan may never forgive you.' seemed to send an electric shock through her system to the point where she withdrew, and would in all likelihood vote with Lelouch. While he was disappointed, Ohgi had not expected a vast amount of Revanchists to join him against Lelouch. Their bloodthirstiness had found company in the President's words, even if he apparently knew something Ohgi didn't.

The remaining Revanchists came and went within half an hour, largely cowed by Naomi's display of submission and more than willing, in their politically weakened state, to just follow the party line. Of course, they were not the only ones worried about a party line.

"The Representative from the 12th District of Tokyo, Saburo Okawachi, A, is recognised for 7 minutes."

Ohgi held his breath as Saburo organised his papers, the Prime Minister being intensely nervous. He had hoped to render Lelouch useless, however now that he had played his hand, Ohgi wasn't even confident he could secure his own base. Apart from the conspirators Saburo and Amaye, the Ameliorates didn't know the real reason Lelouch had been assigned to the Presidency, as they would have, if told, perceived it as a coup by Ohgi against his rivals. While it had worked in the short term, the majority of Ameliorates now perceived Lelouch as being on their political 'team', a fellow Ameliorate, and were inclined to support his policies as 'the party line', rather than Ohgi's.

At least he could rely on Saburo, who finally began his period of questioning.

"President Lamperouge, in spite of the previous months rhetoric from both yourself and the mass media, support for a preemptive war tops out at 31% among the Japanese. How can you, in your capacity of representing the people of Japan internationally support a policy that over half of the population rejects?"

Ohgi nodded. Saburo was dead on, repeating the anti-war talking points he and Ohgi had been pounding in their public appearances in the time between the announcement of the testimony and the testimony itself. However, Ohgi worried that even within their own party he was losing. He had had more than one Ameliorate Representative come to him and said that they did not want to be seen contradicting the President.

This did not fill him with any confidence, confidence being something Lelouch had in abundance today as he answered Saburo.

"I understand that war is not something that many people ever want to go into. It is a vast commitment of resources, and when prolonged can create tragic consequences. However, I would counter that facts are not subject to public approval. The popular opinion many centuries ago did not stop the Earth being round. Similarly, while I acknowledge that this may seem like an arduous challenge, I cannot overstate what a necessary one it is."
Saburo nodded, before continuing "While nobody is disputing the roundness of the planet, I would question your sources. As the saying goes, extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof, and this body has yet to hear much beyond rumours of grapevines and 'the intelligence community'. This is simply insufficient, would you not think?"

Ohgi smiled, and felt control briefly fall back into his hands. Saburo was aggressive and assertive, traits that Lelouch liked to keep reserved to himself. If this were a sporting event, and there were members of the public who did feel that way, the fiery Representative would have just scored a goal. Saburo sat back, satisfied, and ready for a fight.

Ohgi, being more reserved and quiet, silently cheered his colleague from the sidelines as Lelouch shrugged his shoulders, before responding "Look, I'm aware of the concerns you raise about ensuring our information is valid. Hell, some pretty bizarre stuff has crossed my own desk. I even saw some stuff about Members of Parliament such as yourself. One even claimed you tried to join the Black Knights back in February 2017. I have looked into it, worried, and luckily enough there is no need for worry, but it serves as a good example of the false information out there. I can assure you that my information on Britannia is valid."

Saburo suddenly stopped dead, Lelouch's reply eliciting a similar reaction to Naomi's as Ohgi finally realised what was going on. This was Lelouch unleashing his bag of tricks on everything that vaguely resembled an opponent, which was not out of character, but he was literally doing it on the floor of Parliament. He was doxxing them in public. The level of brazenness was worthy of comedy. He didn't know anything about Saburo's past, but the way in which Saburo said "No more... no, I relinquish all my time to the pool.", led Ohgi to believe that it was compromising. He wondered how long Lelouch had known.

Ohgi was not the only one who noticed, as the Prime Minister saw the Chairman frown slightly at Saburo's visible wilting, but was willing to move along.

"To conclude today's proceedings, I give the remaining time to Prime Minister Kaname Ohgi, Ameliorate Representative from the 10th District of Toshima and Nerima."

Ohgi sighed. He had lost the Revanchists, he had lost the Party, and he had lost his attack dog. But all was not yet lost. He had 12 minutes to save his country.

"Mr. Chairman, I do not think any Member of this body disagrees that Schneizel El Britannia is a tyrant, a man who has utilised his international muscle to get his way, and a man who has plenty of interests that rival ours. He is clearly not a friend or an ally. This testimony is not to determine whether we like Schneizel El Britannia or not, whether we should warm relations, or whether we would like a beer with him. The question is whether he represents an imminent threat to the Japanese people and whether actively leaping into the most sure sign of diplomatic failure is a productive course of action towards anything at all. The question-"

"With- with respect, Mr. Prime Minister, this is a question and answer, not an opportunity to filibuster."

Ohgi gritted his teeth, before replying "With respect to you, Mr. Chairman, my preamble has the most critical of relevance that seems to have eluded this session."

"In all the hubbub that the President has stirred over the past month, the evidence for a need of an urgent resolution has certainly escaped my notice. In particular, I have not seen anything that has come close to resembling evidence of the urgent need for a yes vote this week. Lamperouge, you"
have seemed almost insistent to strike without even the pretense of peeking through the fresh dust, and go forward without even consulting any international bodies or making recorded contact with any Britannian officials."

"Mr. Prime Minister-

Ohgi groaned, now becoming more frustrated as he hissed with an increased volume "One moment Mr. Chairman. Mr. President, I must be the bearer of some bad news; the Britannians have access to TV. The BBC is covering this testimony live. You could, if you were willing to improvise, conduct a peaceful negotiation from where you sit now. There are many ways that this could be resolved short of an armed conflict, yet you insist that the absence of diplomats renders you entirely useless. I know for a fact that you have Schneizel's phone number, so-

"Are you going to ask me a question?"

Interrupting him this time was not the concerned, stuttering voice of the Chairman, but the carefree, wry tones of a President who was amused, but arriving at the ends of his patience. Ohgi froze briefly, caught in the motion of pointing a finger at the President, in the pose he suspected would make the front pages the next day. Frustrated, Ohgi decided to go for broke, speaking more softly and earnestly.

"I fear that your aggressive pushing of a policy of war is not grounded in any pragmatism, and is motivated by personal gain. Is this true?"

Lelouch snickered. "What am I to answer to that? My stances today bring me no joy, as no joy can come from what I propose. We can only hope to commit to the task at hand, with the spirit, persistence, and resolve, that we may see this task of tasks through with our national character unblemished. In these dire international circumstances, I have been forced to request what no one would ever wish to request of a nation, that being to follow him into war with another. I have repeated on many occasions today the clear threat that Britannia poses to us on an existential level, the evidence of their single minded intent to once again subjugate our islands, and the status of our forces in their strengths and their abilities. Prime Minister Ohgi, I am sure-

"What is it that you are sure of?"

Lelouch scowled at Ohgi, and stood to his full height as he closed his eyes briefly, taking in a deep breath, and spoke to the House.

"Sir, I am sure I can save this country, and no one else can."

There was a finality to that statement that stopped Ohgi in his tracks for some time. How could one respond to such certainty? It took him several seconds to attempt to, not even addressing the point.

"I see. Well, I can only ask my fellow Representatives who are voting today on the most important Bill of our generation-

"Mr. Prime Minister, your time has expired."

Ohgi felt his heart collapse in despair as he protested "But-

"Please observe regular order."

Ohgi's eyes grew wide and fell down, as he slumped back into his seat. Lelouch, out of view, was surely grinning as the Prime Minister faced a decision.
He could go on and break regular order, speaking beyond his time. It would take ten minutes to summon the Sergeant At Arms to remove him, and he could probably win a few more votes in that time. However, that meant breaking the rules, and given that he was the only one of the three original Yuai members not knee deep in activities of dubious ethics and rule breaking, he hesitated. He had railed against Suzaku breaking rule regarding to abuse of power, and abuse of power and a disregard for democracy was the entire reason why Ohgi opposed Lelouch so vehemently. To start disregarding Parliament rules now would be hypocritical, even if it were morally right.

He despised himself.

"I… I will observe regular order." Ohgi sighed, as he bowed his head in shame.

Lelouch had won.

Even though, for the sake of national security, the result of the ensuing vote was not to be made public until next week to prevent enemies getting an advantage, Ohgi still knew he had not held enough ground by the solemn faces he passed on the way out, a sentiment confirmed by Lelouch, who had the results, smiling too toothily as he passed, stopping for a moment to whisper a simple, but shattering sentence.

"Thanks for doing the right thing."

Ohgi felt the shame well up in his chest, consuming all the dry air into a wall that blocked his throat and made him unable to say anything. He had failed.

Chapter End Notes

This Chapter, as well as culminating the completion of Lelouch's return to power, thus ending the Arc, also saw the resolution and payoff for some other cool things. Kallen exposing Saburo back when she had an intact neck and stomach, Naomi spilling her guts at the funeral, as well as Ohgi's struggle as a Lawful Good character, arguably the only one of such in the fic.

And now for something completely different; actual bloody warfare, shooting, bombing, attacking, sieging, all the sorts of Code Geass things I have yet to do in any real capacity. For that, I welcome you to the The Pacific Arc, detailing the war against Britannia, beginning with Chapter 41; Tora! Tora! Tora!, after a brief Flashback.

Until then, observe regular order, rate, review, and be safe. I'll see you soon.

~Eth0
Schneizel stood at the top of the Palace hall with the pride of a nation and, seemingly, four extra feet of height from when Cornelia had last seen him. He just looked so pleased with himself up on that lectern, and he couldn't quite fit the smile back inside his normally moulded wax face.

It has been a week since the man had been named Emperor ahead of her, plenty of time for the Japanese to loophole their way out of the Empire. She was not pleased in the least, but Euphemia, while she had been present, had tried to smooth things over.

Cornelia smirked. Her sister had always known how to manoeuvre around her, and was quite crafty in how she framed herself. She liked to think of it as her own influence, but her earnestly made her points that bit more sonorous, to the point that Cornelia could almost understand her brothers objectives in Japan as being similar to hers in Britannia.

However, as Lelouch was reportedly realising, people had a tendency to throw agenda ridden spanners into your own works, as agenda filled as they themselves might be.

"I thank you all so graciously for your support and trust in granting me the honour, of in this harrowing juncture in our history, allowing me to take the seat of Emperor, and guide us back to our rightful place in the world. In the truest Britannian tradition, the death of the incumbent have way to spirited competition, with the best ideas proving triumphant."

Cornelia's face remained stoic in spite of that unsubtle reference to their rivalling campaigns to take the Emperorship. He had won the support of more nobles by a considerable margin, but it was not by virtue of his ideas, which were incredibly similar to his fathers, with less religion and more nihilism. It was this system, a popularity contest amongst the rich and isolated, that promoted this circular firing squad of feeble eunuchs. As a woman who had served in the Military for years, she knew that these pathetic Lords could not comprehend merit if it invaded their properties and held them hostage. They knew only profit and politics, and would always vote as such.

Smedley Butler had once claimed war was a racket. Whatever this was was leagues beyond that. A Democracy of Monied Interests was as dangerous as any Democracy.

Which was why it puzzled Cornelia as to why Lelouch had leapt headfirst into creating a Democracy, and then a Republic. He had a base of support among Japanese he could have used to wield Japan like a fine blade far better than any other Prince or Princess could, and had achieved this unique status by his merit, by winning the true Hearts and Minds of the people. What with a strong Britannian at the helm of the revolution, handing it back to the weak, indecisive mob seemed like taking a bizarre step backwards.

And, with the rhetoric Schneizel was spouting, steps backwards would be punished severely.

"Charles Zi Britannia oversaw the New Britannian Century, and will forever be heralded as the man who brought that project into reality. However, in his waning years his issues waxed, as much as he retreated into himself, Britannia retreated out of the world. Regions which were once staples of our Empire have been lost to revolutionaries and communards. All of you Lords and Ladies have surely felt the stings of these losses. I promise you that my first action as Emperor will be to restore
our place in this world, not the next!"

Cornelia clapped politely with the crowd, eyes held at fixed points in the distance. It was the only
way to make the whole affair palatable. Schneizel becoming Emperor was the worst case scenario.
Euphemia somehow receiving the honours instead would have actually been a marginally better
outcome. The truth was, Schneizel scared her.

Cornelia came from an absolute world of order, the military empire. All rules and orders had clear
reasons and objectives. There was not a shred of redundancy, which allowed for a pure
understanding of the why that lay within everything they did. It was free of politics and ideology.
As far as Cornelia was concerned, the military ruled okay.

Schneizel was a far more opaque being, hidden within layers of subtext and motivations beyond the
stated, shrouded in ideology and ambition. Cornelia had met people like him before in her time in
the army. They got people under them killed.

The trouble was, military rule could weed out people like him as ineffective. Democracy
empowered them, allowing them to talk of both sides of their mouths.

"This drying up of our colonial reach has dried up our supplies of Sakuradite, the resource that
rules the world. I promise to each and every one of you that we will see that pink ore back on our
shores with no delay!"

Corporate interests were always interested in short term gain. They cared about quarterly returns
over the general health of their companies. In this sense, the captains of industry had picked the
perfect Emperor. Schneizel had no depth, no subtlety. He would always reach for the largest
hammer at his disposal at the mildest of provocations, and had no patience of any kind. If a
difficulty arose, he would immediately go to the quickest solution, regardless of the potential losses
in the long term.

And he had that single minded, shallow gaze set on the Home Islands. Cornelia could not imagine
this ending well. He would burn the place down if the thought occurred to him, and that could
have disastrous repercussions for the people of Britannia.

As well, Cornelia could not afford to be nationalistic. During her attempt to stop Schneizel, she had
asked Euphemia to help smooth out her abrasive image, who had stressed the importance of
empathy and compassion. Cornelia initially rejected these traits as being antithetical to the proper
running of a body; time spent weeping was time that could have been spent resolving the issue, but
Euphemia insisted that she needed to consider the emotional needs of others, like she would for
Euphemia herself.

Because as abrasive and insensitive as Cornelia knew she was, at least she believed in the Geneva
Conventions, unlike her brother, who believed in nothing.

URGENT - The Republic of Japan has formally declared war on the Empire of Britannia STOP
Significant naval maneuvers are reported in the Philippine Sea, air raid suspected in North Pacific
STOP Hawaii is being evacuated STOP Naval bases are to be on full alert until further notice
STOP The Pacific Fleet is authorized to engage all ships and Knightmares flying the Japanese
insignias or colours on sight STOP Shoot to sink STOP This is not a drill STOP All Hail Britannia
STOP

- Radiogram sent to Admiral Lawrence Hugh by Prime Minister Calares announcing the Japanese
declaration of war.
Many thanks to MORTTheDivineBeing, Patjeeson, SpheresofLonging, TitanFire999, and MMBrowsing, for reviewing this arc!
"Yō 9301-3, pull in a little, you're drifting out of formation."

"Confirmed, Yō Leader. Adjusting course now."

Air Captain Fumio Yoshimura kept a close eye out the left side of his cockpit as his Squadmate, Lieutenant Fuyuhiko Abe, banked over and began to drift back into a parallel flight path, as they sat between the clouds above and the sea far below.

"Excellent. Approaching target, beginning climb to 6000 meters, follow after on 80% throttle."

After announcing the move, Fumio pulled back on his Knightmare's controls, pitching up his elevator and bursting upwards, converting speed into altitude with terrifying efficiency. He levelled out above the clouds, restoring his airborne Frame to level flight as he waited for his colleagues to follow him up.

Unfortunately, they were wont to complain, as his other Squadmate, a Shinkiro Tamaki, moaned "Why can't we just attack them already?"

Fumio shook his head as he saw them rise to his flight altitude in his mirror. Tamaki was a former Black Knight, and like many of those brought into the military during Reconciliation, he didn't take well to the military's strict hierarchy and structure, having experienced extreme amounts of autonomy under Zero. Frustrated, Fumio answered "We need to wait for the all clear, should be a few minutes."

"We've got all this firepower, for the love of-"

"Tamaki, unless you have technical issues, keep this line clear."

Fumio shook his head again as he focused back on the task at hand. Keeping a hand on the central stick, he reset his text input, which received codes from the Ikaruga, an overhauled Black Knights floating airship that had proved one of the few upsides of Reconciliation that was providing support from the rear. After resetting, a message read out that finally gave Fumio something to smile about.

"Confirm strike. Target 1-4. 1400. Go for surprise attack immediately."

Returning to the radio, Fumio announced "We have our go to attack. Keep right on me until we see hostile air forces. Prepare to roll over and dive on my mark."

He heard a pair of quiet affirmations, before they all rotated their Knightmares onto their backs, facing their cockpits down towards the clouds before dipping back down, picking up huge speed as
they swept down to survey the target, the Hawaii Naval base.

Hawaii was a ways into the Pacific Ocean, far further than many other Britannian Pacific bases that had been considered for a first strike. However, the Fleet Dock at Hawaii was chosen based on several factors. It's distance meant it was far less likely to be fortified compared to closer bases like Guam, as they would expect those to be attacked first, and it held a lucrative prize; the Third Pacific Fleet was repairing, with two Flying Battleships ripe for commandeering.

As they flew by, surveying the area as they boomed through, Fumio caught sight of the main target, two vast hulks of steel parked in the harbour. The plan was to provide air cover for the Ikaruga to deploy ground troops to seize the metal beasts. Given the military's supply situation, they couldn't afford to destroy such a potentially large source of firepower.

"Vision on target, level out and scan for hostiles."

With that order, the three pilots pulled back on their sticks and returned to level flight about 500 meters above sea level, having picked up so much energy in the dive that they were nearly supersonic.

It didn't take long for the enemy to find them.

"Contact, Lancelot above us!"

The callout came from Abe, and after briefly peeking in his mirrors, Fumio saw the white beast above and behind them, low on airspeed for having climbed so rapidly from its takeoff.

"Pulling left!" Fumio announced as he rolled over into his side and pulled down on the stick, pitching his Knightmare on a knife edge and turning it with the elevator. Holding the turn in spite of the immense G forces that came from such a sharp turn at high speed, Fumio began to spiral upwards behind the Lancelot as it began to dive down on Tamaki, who had simply kept his Knightmare on the deck and gunned the throttle, to gain both speed and a target.

"Aw, crap, he's on my tail!"

However, by the time the Britannian pilot had pulled up behind Tamaki, Fumio had completed his banking spiral climb, was now above and behind the two Knightmares and had excess speed to boot. It seemed neither a hard turn or a climb seemed to scrub much kinetic energy from the new Guren.

"I'm now coming up on him, hang on!"

Starting from a higher speed than the Lancelot had, Fumio's Guren displayed wicked acceleration in catching up to the chase, however as that rate of closing shrank, Fumio realised the Lancelot had a higher maximum speed, something Tamaki realised too, though he put it a bit more vociferously.

"Ahhhh no he's bloody catching me! He's gonna get me!"

Annoyed, Fumio unloaded a few speculative shots down range that amounted to very little, before he went back to thinking. The Lancelot could outpace them by virtue of thrust, but it was also heavy, and lost energy fast. He remembered the Lancelot after its initial climb, slow and out of kinetic energy. This gave him a plan.

"Tamaki, pull back on the stick and climb. He'll stall before you will, and I'll sweep him up."

Understanding the plan, the former rebel pitched his nose up towards the sky, baiting the Lancelot
into a race to the sky. Fumio followed after, and grinned as the Lancelot shedded speed in the climb.

"Gotcha..." he whispered as he fired the dual 40mm anti-Knightmare cannons at the nearly stationary target, blowing it in two.

"Area clear."

Wanting to get a bit of altitude back, Fumio kept his Knightmare's vector pointed firmly upwards until his own stall warning came on, levelling out at 3000 meters.

With the brief lull in combat, Fumio was able to reevaluate the state of his Knightmare and the battle plan. Water temperature was nominal, engine temperature was in the amber, and fuel was fine. The Ikaruga was ten minutes away, and could have troops down in fifteen. Once the runways were taken, Britannian air superiority would crumble.

But not before.

"Two targets above me, about to engage me!"

With Fumio and Tamaki up at a moderate altitude, the callout came from Abe, who had kept his throttle open at sea level in the hopes of getting back some speed and therefore kinetic energy after the last engagement, however now he had isolated himself from the group.

Fumio watched carefully as the two Knightmares streaked across his windscreen as dots, roughly five kilometres away. These two had likely taken the time to get to altitude safely, unlike the first victim, and now held both speed and altitude over all three Japanese Knightmares. Well, they would have to do something about that, wouldn't they?

"Okay, okay. Abe, hold your speed and do a gentle climb in their direction. Once near enough, turn to either side. We need a deflection shot."

Understanding what was being asked of him, Abe turned his vehicle towards the two Knightmares, facing the enemy head on and picked up huge amounts of speed as he began a shallow burst climb. Wanting to get over to cover Abe as quickly as possible, Fumio switched up to War Emergency Power, running his engine at full capacity. Overheating could prove an issue, but he didn't have time to worry about that. Both of the enemy Knightmares, a Lancelot and an upgraded Sutherland, began a shallow dive in towards Abe, cannons aimed down his bowels, before Abe dipped down to throw off their aim and pulled as hard as he could to his left.

Fumio winced watching his friends Guren pulling impossible G forces, as the Britannians attempted to turn to their right, inside of Abe's own turning radius, still hoping to catch a slow moving target. The Britannians swooped past the lone Guren before pulling up, hoping to dive back down on their prey at the slowest point in their turn where such maneuvers are most efficient, having completed a right banking turn to follow after him.

However, Fumio and Tamaki had been closing fast, and the former managed to get a shot off as the Sutherland approached the slow top of its arc, the HEAK shell puncturing the relics leg.

"Confirmed hit, no damage." Fumio groaned as he rolled his Guren onto its back to invert and pulled down to chase the Britannians, who had now gained some speed in the dive and were chasing after Abe.

However Abe still had some tricks up his sleeve, deploying his waist high air brakes as he performed a wide arcing barrel roll, hoping that the manoeuvre would shed enough speed to cause
the Britannians to speed past him. Fumio watched as the Sutherland did so, flying in front of Abe for being unable to slow down as quickly, however the second Knightmare, the Lancelot, turned away slightly and began to run, not fancying his odds in a close quarters turning fight.

Fumio smiled as he swept up from behind Abe to catch the Sutherland who had overshot his friend, who began to manoeuvre with his ailerons and elevator extremely aggressively, seeming to want to try an overshoot manoeuvre of his own. However, using the Guren's strong air brakes Fumio was able to arrest his speed and claim a second kill with a heavy salvo of 40mm rounds.

However, he was now at low speed, and needed to get his kinetic energy back up, which would require some time at high throttle. Having spent 30 seconds at War Emergency Power, his engine temperature gauge was now firmly in the red.

However, there was little time for this, as now threats were coming thick and fast. Tamaki was being engaged by another Sutherland, and there was a Lancelot carrying vicious speeds up in the mother of all burst climbs towards Fumio, who sat about 1000 meters above sea level. At least Abe was apparently heading out to pick up speed.

Out of instinct, Fumio pulled up, before his slow Knightmare began to wallow in the sky. Realising he was close to stalling, he decided to use it to his advantage and jerk his controls to one side, sending his Knightmare falling out of the sky in a completely different direction to the way his nose was pointed, throwing off the Lancelot's aim and sending him flying past.

Pushing his nose down towards the sea, Fumio regained control of his Frame and built up speed. He had already witnessed the lacklustre turning abilities of the Lancelot, and used that too to his advantage. As the Britannian Lancelot pilot began to haul his heavy beast around to chase Fumio, he had a brief window to try to engage Tamaki's pursuer in the Sutherland, who was one kilometre ahead and closing fast.

"Hold on Tamaki." Fumio requested as he approached the chase from a slight angle, volleying a few rounds as he passed, however they did not converge on the target, forcing Fumio to turn in towards the chase, and bleed precious speed in a rough manoeuvre.

Still, now he was directly behind the pursuit, and fired several times up range to no success and increasing frustration. Hitting from the rear, against a target who only exposed their feet and heels, was an exercise in wasted time.

Time, unfortunately, was not a luxury Tamaki had, as the Sutherland unleashed its weaponry, a pair of laser cannons, on the former Black Knight. Though their impact damage was low, they maintained a constant firing, unlike the autocannon, allowing the Britannian pilot to target and break Tamaki's wing.

Fumio swore, but it was nothing compared to the string of expletives Tamaki unleashed onto the radio, ranging from "Aw, crap, it's always me dammit!" to more unfortunate comments about the Britannians mother.

However, as Fumio passed over the carcass of Tamaki's Guren, he saw the loud man's ejector seat fly off in a blur of red. It appeared all that had been injured was the man's pride, something that was apparently not an irregular occurrence.

"Chute confirmed, he'll live." Fumio sighed, as he returned his focus to the Sutherland in front of him.

Its pilot, evidently satisfied with a job well done, had now cleared for altitude and was booming out.
of the combat area, or so he thought.

In pulling up, the pilot had increased his profile relative to Fumio as he pitched upwards, presenting the Japanese Ace with a silhouette of the entire vehicle in vertical, rather than just the narrow rear diffuser.

Two squeezes of the trigger punished that mistake. Third kill.

"Caution: Engine Overheat Warning. Increase airspeed or decrease throttle."

As if on cue to ruin the good news, the automated warning presented a new problem. The Sakuradite Generator exposed incoming air to the pink ore, heating it rapidly and causing it to expand and leave the exhaust as thrust. The trouble was that such a system ran hot, requiring vast amounts of air per unit Sakuradite to be stable. At higher speeds, cool air rushed in so quickly and in such vast volumes that heating was not an issue, but at low speeds the Sakuradite began to melt itself in its casing.

And, with the Guren handling better at low speeds, and the Britannian Frames having generally higher top speeds, fighting at high speeds wasn't really a realistic possibility, especially now that the Lancelot he had dodged earlier had completed its turn, and had turned the wick up in chase.

Fumio now faced a decision. There was a sufficient gap to the Lancelot for him to be able to break out of combat range and cool his engine off, but then-

"All, this is I1. The Ikaruga is in range, ready to deploy Parachute Units!"

Fumio swore something vicious and foul. He had to protect the Ikaruga, at any and all costs.

"This is Yō Leader, copy I1! Abe, I could use a hand!"

"Sorry Fumio, I'm engaged right now!"

Fumio shook his head. He had to deal with this himself. The Lancelot had speed, and it had altitude. To win, Fumio would have to remove at least one of those from the equation. As the lasers began to whizz past his cockpit from the approaching Knightmare, he rolled over hard and tugged down, feeling the beginnings of a stall come over the tips of his control surfaces as he brought the Knightmare onto its belly and faced it down. It now accelerated rapidly towards the sea, before he levelled out just above the waves. He actually felt his Knightmare bottom out against the wake and rough air of the Ocean, but he had left himself just enough room.

The Lancelot, who had dived after him, was now carrying so much speed in that dive that he was forced to pull out and go for altitude, at the expense of getting a shot on Fumio. The Japanese pilot now had a few seconds to gain some speed before the Lancelot dove back down after shedding excess speed to prevent it flying straight into the ocean, unable to pull out of the dive.

Not needing a second opportunity, Fumio gunned the throttle and ignored the overheating warnings as the Lancelot reached the top of its climb, before it flopped back onto its nose in the stall and began to dive back down on Fumio. As soon as the Lancelot turned back down, Fumio's Guren pulled up harshly, nearly going vertical as the two Knightmares traded places in the sky like a carousel.

However Fumio did not stay in this state for long. Rather than see his climb through as far as the engine would allow it, he cut back on the throttle and deployed his air brakes. This killed valuable kinetic energy that wasn't exactly in abundance, but it caused his Knightmare to shed speed rapidly, sending it into an aggressive stall that forced his nose down far faster. This allowed him to turn
deeply inside the Lancelot's arc, and have a brief shot on target, however the angle was less than ideal, and the shot went wide by quite an embarrassing margin.

The Lancelot pilot brought his Knightmare up into a reverse Immelmann manoeuvre as Fumio fell downwards, aggressively turning back upwards to follow the Lancelot in its climb. As the Lancelot rose, it rapidly lost speed, and that had the potential to make him overshoot and fly in front of the Gurens cannons. As well, turning back up into him had the potential to make the Britannian pilot panic and turn away, rather than completing his climb away.

The gambit brought Fumio's speed to nearly nothing, but it worked, as the Lancelot began to wing over to the left and begin a wide arcing roll around Fumio in an attempt to fall in behind him, however the manoeuvre had killed any speed the Britannian had had and the Lancelot was visibly stalling, white streaks forming on the wing tips.

The Guren, with a lower stall speed, simply had to keep its air brake open to stay on the tail of the Lancelot. The Lancelot couldn't physically go any slower, or it would fall into the drink, it couldn't accelerate at low speed like the Guren, and the massive stalling of both wings meant he had little control over his craft.

It was a simple matter for Fumio to claim a fourth kill.

And that was when a streak of red ran across the back of Fumio's Guren, damaging it from head to toe.

Fumio didn't understand what had happened until the culprit flew past; another Lancelot, one of the last ones left, had tried to come to the aid of his comrade, attacking while Fumio was low on speed and distracted. While he had not come in time, he had successfully crippled Fumio's Frame, and was now booming out of the area.

"Ground forces have taken the base! Repeat, ground forces have taken the base!"

And there was the reason why. What with Japanese forces gaining control of his ground support, the pilot wouldn't have wanted to stick around any longer than he had to.

After checking, Fumio realised that while could still perform a sort of glide, sustained flight wasn't really an option for very long, and he would have to ditch the Guren. Fumio chuckled. He was frustrated being taken out, but he'd done well enough, protected the Ikaruga, had taken four kills, and would live to fight another day. It seemed fair; it was his fault for being careless, and he'd learn from it.

He was still chuckling as he pulled on his escape pod lever.

"Caution: Metal fused due to heat damage. Cannot deploy pod."

That shut him up in a real hurry. He still had some engine power, but he was rapidly decelerating and had no real kinetic energy for a sustained glide back to any runway or platform.

He swore. It couldn't have been the Lancelot who had fired and fled that did it; their lasers punctured, they didn't weld. It would surely have passed straight through.

It took him some time to realise what had killed him, as it announced itself with no sense of irony.


The Sakuradite in his engine had run so hot that it had conducted its heat through the metal frame
and welded the canopy to the escape pod, trapping him. In his own persistence, he had forged his own tomb.

Fumio swore again, loudly and furiously, again and again into his five foot steel box, kicking against its sides and punching its window. He had stayed to help the Ikaruga, and was now paying the price for his decision.

He was not stupid. He had joined the Knightmare Corps after completing a Bachelors in Engineering to pay for a Masters in Aerodynamics, a degree he'd never complete, and he knew the Knightmare that came home could be used again, and was infinitely more valuable than the one that was sacrificed for the tactical moment. And yet he had stayed, watched his fate in slow motion.

He was a fool. He wondered how many people in this fight were fools, and how many of those fools were leading this fight. By his guess, too many.

As the ocean drew near, his altitude gauge now reading in moments to death, and he felt so damn hot, even though people always said death was cold, and he wondered if his cat would be okay, because she was alone now and he had left her with-

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Pacific.
This Chapter was very much two halves, which is a bit unfair as one half is only about 10% of the actual Chapters length. The 90% was really fun to write, was engaging and new, and allowed me to incorporate elements of combat I'm actually comfortable working with, rather than the Jeremiah vs Suzaku and Nu vs Lelouch/Ohgi nightmare I put you through.
Then there was the 10%, an unpleasant, unnecessary gut punch that takes all the stuff given to it by the 90% and squanders it.
I feel like there's a metaphor here.
In any case, I hope I eased you all into the atmosphere and environment I'm going for in this arc, and that you'll join me for Chapter 42, Victory At Sea. Until then, rate, review, be safe, remember to keep an eye on hot materials, and I'll see you soon.
~Eth0
While the first phase of Operation Tsunami experienced a huge success in taking Hawaii and seizing its vast military assets, there was no way the Japanese could hold the archipelago, nor would they attempt to. Hawaii was too close to the Britannian homeland, and too far beyond Japan's bases of power projection. As soon as everything of value was taken or destroyed, the plan was to withdraw to a more defensible position somewhere between there and Taiwan, which was certainly nothing if a lot of legroom.

However, the Britannians were not going to give up a chance to blast a significant chunk of the Japanese military while they were stuck trying to get off an island. While the seizure had gone quickly, it had not ended by the time the Britannian Second Fleet was upon them, trying to find their convoys and starve out the men on looting on Honolulu.

Fortunately, the Japanese now also had a Fleet. Commanding the Light Cruiser JRNS Kitakami as part of the effort to secure the landing group an escape was Captain Yuri Ryuga, currently stood at the head of his ship, looking up at the sky, and frowning confusedly.

"Where in the bloody hell are all these Knightmares coming from?"

At present the Kitakami, as a small, quick screening vessel by the standards of the open seas Fleet, was at the head of the Fleet proper, and was thus the first target for incoming aerial attacks, but the number of attacks were surprising, given how far away they were from Britannian air bases. The Britannians travelled in four men air squads, dropped bombs from range, and vacated. It was a consistent pattern, and one that left Yuri and his fellow sailors baffled.

Keeping a close eye on the horizon for targets, he added "I mean, the transport logistics must be absurd to travel this long in this many small, repeating groups.", to which his First Officer Shu Yamagata commented "I'm not sure about that. A big horde of Knightmares leaving at once doesn't sound like a joy to organise. Sending them out in batches could have been easier"

Yuri pondered this, absentmindedly replying "You could be right."

However, he wasn't certain if this was the case. He made a mental note to keep an eye on where these Knightmares were coming and going from.

At present they were still within sight of their own Heavy Cruisers and Capital ships, who were mostly back to the South West, who were largely unwilling to risk the archipelago's shallow waters without knowing where their targets were. Yuri didn't mind being left without heavy support; more chance of him getting the glory.

Yuri had joined the Japanese Navy as soon as he had left Secondary School, as his family had done for several generations. His father had died in the first week of the 2008 war against Britannia, and
in spite of having a snowball's chance in hell Yuri applied to join the Britannian Navy through the Honourary Britannian system, though all he got was misery for his efforts. Yuri cared deeply about the naval traditions, and was up for a fight.

"Sir! Target ahead, slightly to starboard!"

And one had found him. The captain, alert, returned his focus to the water, and saw the foe immediately, sat between a pair of small islands slightly to their right, another Light Cruiser that was accelerating out from the menagerie of islands into open waters.

"Fire on target, LC, about 20 degrees to starboard!"

The array of naval guns swung round and his word and began to unload high calibre explosive round downrange. The range was too great for reliable hits, but the volume of fire was more than sufficient to harass the enemy boat, which was pretty much their role at the point in the fight. However, it did not take too long for the cruiser to return fire on the Kitakami, at which point it was forced to snake about to evade the enemy shells.

"Captain, Knightmares incoming!"

The shout came from Shu, and Yuri didn't have to hear twice. A good deflection shot from a Knightmares could end the battle a little earlier than ideal, and so he gripped the controls of the craft and hurled the Kitakami to the left as the world exploded into vast noise.

It was enough, as the hard turn presented a bad angle for the aerial attack, and the bombs and missiles flew into the drink. The tough g-forces had forced his head down, however as the boat stabilised he was able to catch a parting glimpse of their attackers.

Four Knightmares, all white, booming out of the area to the North East.

He paused to watch as they flew out of the area passed the island to the far side of the Britannian Cruiser. He frowned at them, and asked "Are... are those the same four Knightmares?"

Shu was a bit distressed to respond initially, but as he restored himself he replied "That soon? Where in the hell did they resupply from?"

Yuri paused, considering Shu's point. They were firing 400 millimetre anti-shipping missiles, which took up considerable space and would have to be restocked after firing, hence the one-and-done nature of the attacks. There wasn't an enemy supply base anywhere nearby, so how could they get more missiles if they were the same Knightmares going back and forth?

Yuri however, was unconvinced. "Keep an eye out for them. We have bigger fish to fry"

And so they did. With the ship now stabilised, the gun crews resumed their duties of sending absurd quantities of high explosive down towards the opposing Cruiser, who following a collection of hits was looking a little worse for wear. Judging by his heading, which had changed while the Kitakami was busy finding its feet, it was making a break for the North Eastern island, which parallax eventually revealed to be a pair of islands in a line parallel to the Kitakami. It appeared that the captain was hoping to lick his wounds before lurking in the darker realms of the archipelago ready to flank the approaching Grand Fleet.

Yuri was not planning on letting that happen, and after barraging the top deck a lucky strike detonated the Cruisers ammunition storage, creating a spectacular explosion that disabled the craft. He smiled with satisfaction before complimenting his gunners on good shooting and scanning the waterline for a slightly more meaty target.
It didn't take long to find one, as the islands opened up with the movement of the Kitakami towards the interior of the array of islands, now arranged in a square around them. The main Fleet, still outside the low waters and now far to the West, and they were now being engaged by a Battleship and several Destroyers. Yuri's first instinct was to leap into the battle and aid the Fleet, whom he had separated from in engaging the Cruiser from before, but something in his gut told him to pause and think.

Yuri trusted his gut like he trusted his wife, his lawyer, or his social media feed. There was, in his opinion, a fundamental element within all good sailors that told them when to chase after the tides, and when to wait for a better wind. While things have scaled up here, Yuri still believed in that fundamental principle.

And his patience was quickly paid off, as a Destroyer came into view, slinking out from behind the North-West island to go around the battle and flank in towards the Japanese fleet. Unfortunately for him, he wouldn't go much further, as Yuri yelled out "Focus fire on that Destroyer, 15 degrees to Port!"

The Japanese Cruiser unleashed a volley on the Destroyer as it turned to Port, swinging its nose West, to bring its guns to the broadside, which was just as well, as it appeared the Britannian vessel had brought a friend.

"Captain, there's a second Destroyer!"

Yuri smiled, and ordered the rear gunner to suppress the second craft as the first caught fire. Sensing an opportunity, he then ordered Shu to unload the torpedo's on the first destroyer as it passed by, its crew still trying to put out the fire. Unable to maneuver, the Britannian ship went down in flames, leaving the second to quietly realise its doom as the entire armament of the Cruiser swivelled round towards the smaller boat.

"FIRE!"

The Destroyer was not long for this world after a few high explosive shells hit home, and detonated from an internal explosion after four or five volleys. However, there was trouble on the right hand side, as another Cruiser, much heavier visually than the first one the Kitakami encountered, sped through the water to their right, separated from its fleet by the Kitakami.

And it was evidently none too pleased about this development, as it began to lob some high explosive of its own towards the Japanese ship, with two shells striking the front portion of the Kitakami. There was a cry of "Hull breach!" from down below, but Yuri was focused on the target, ordering his gunners to load AP with no degree of sympathy, mechanical or otherwise.

This transition took a moment, and in that moment the enemy Cruiser was able to unload another salvo, again focused on the nose of the craft as Yuri had pointed the Kitakami directly at the meaty side of the Britannian cruiser as it turned broadside to present all its guns a target.

Fortunately, Yuri had a plan, as he fired both throttles up to maximum and ploughed through the waves straight towards the other boat.

"Sir, they're firing again-"

The voice was Shu's, shouted up from on deck, to which Yuri replied "I know what I'm doing, Shu, forward!"

"But they can't miss from this range!"
Yuri could almost laugh. That was the point. While he knew little about the Cruiser he was facing, there was one thing that was evident from one look at its flat, grey sides, and that was the fact it sure as hell did not contain sideways firing torpedoes. Neither did the Kitakami, however Yuri had made sure the Cruiser was faced towards its target.

"Fire Torpedo tubes one and three!"

Facing broadside against an enemy was a double edged sword. Due to ships being longer than they were wide, exposing your sides could allow you to present the full array of your armament to a target, exponentially increasing your firepower. Unfortunately, you also exposed your rather large hull to shells and torpedoes.

And, at such close range, lethal but slow torpedoes that could normally be avoided had a very low chance of missing, and everyone onboard the Kitakami breathed a sigh of relief as the two submerged lances pierced their target and detonated from within, engulfing the Cruiser in flames. They were so close in fact that Yuri could feel the physical heat all over his body.

With the sector now wholly clear, Yuri hoped to swing back in towards the battle and flank the Britannian Battleships now engaging the rest of the Japanese fleet, however he was interrupted by the very loud, very familiar whirr of air being compressed at near supersonic speeds.

"Knightmares overhead!"

Yuri ducked for all the good it would do, but the noise carried through to the end of the Doppler effect, indicating that the Knightmares had found something more interesting to harass. Following them with his eye, now relaxed for being out of danger, he saw them proceed towards the Battleship Nagato and fire four pairs of missiles in a row down the centre spine of the Capital Ship, lighting it up in fiery explosions, though it didn't appear as if the hull was significantly breached.

While Yuri's initial instinct was to help, the Kitakami was extensively damaged from engaging the Heavy Cruiser, and would need a patch repair to halt the flow of water into the bow. Due to this, he was given an opportunity to watch the Knightmares streak across the sky, and took careful note of their heading, as it almost seemed they were drawing a line in the sky that read 'Follow me!'

He reached for his binoculars to examine them more closely as they crossed the sky. Looking in, he got a clear glimpse of their form; white, with green streaks and labelled BF 45, with numbers 8 through 12 finishing the visual callsign. Their missile pylons dangled empty as they retreated from the Battleship they had just assaulted.

"Sir, what now? Should we turn in towards the battle?"

Yuri didn't answer Shu, instead following the Knightmares with his eye as they passed over an island to the North East that was still in Japanese hands and disappeared from view below the islands horizon. After a moment, he answered "How long until we have full power?"

"Thirty seconds, we're clearing flooding."

The Captain grimaced, before announcing "Set a course to the North East, we're following those Knightmares!"

"What?"

Shu sounded ready to continue his objection, but he fell over in the wake and was forced to take a moment to right himself before joining the Captain on the bridge. After finding his feet, Shu raised a finger in anger and proceeded to complain.
"Sir, with respect, we have to help our Battleships!

"But this could be our chance to take out their air cover! If we just take this risk-"

"Listen to me for a second!" Shu roared. "That Fleet needs us now! Not after you take a jaunt round the side of an island to check if there might be a few Knightmares there, they need us now!"

Yuri paused as he digested this point, before looking over. The Nagato was taking a pounding from a pair of Britannian Battleships, and if they entered combat now they could possibly relieve pressure from the flagship, however Yuri still hesitated. The possibility was too great to eliminate the source of the enemies Knightmare support.

This was an opportunity to prevent the enemy from keeping air superiority. It was the duty of a good sailor to take the risk and initiative in a situation like this. However, the extreme situation warranted more evidence for him to make a decision. Yuri looked away from Shu off the stern to see if the Knightmares could still be seen.

However, the Knightmares that had passed by the Kitakami seconds earlier were nowhere to be seen, in spite of having been buzzing the Cruiser moments earlier. As Yuri looked around for an explanation, it arrived in the unconventional form of four Knightmares, with wing mounted missiles freshly attached, rising up over the island, barely moments after the last set had disappeared from view.

And the lead one was labelled BF 458.

"They're there! They're right bloody there!"

There was a very high chance that some manner of floating runway was parked on the far side of the North Eastern island, now separated from its Fleet. They had been flying back and rearming within a stone's throw of the battle, which allowed rapid resupplying, however it had allowed Yuri's ship to catch it napping.

Before Shu could say anything, Yuri gunned the throttles towards the island and swung round as the form of a massive, floating rectangular platform, fit for landing Knightmares and with next to no defensive armament grew into vision.

He grinned, and ordered its shelling, the Kitakami's 20 cm cannons turning towards the meaty carrier and opening fire on it, detonating satisfyingly against it's smooth, flat surfaces, with service crew abandoning ship by the dozens as spots, barely visible as they splashed against the water.

While it took a while to finish off, it didn't put up much of a fight, with the supply of bombs for Knightmare landings eventually detonating within the hull.

However, Yuri's decision had had consequences.

The Second Battle of the Hawaiian Coast concluded early on September 12th as the last Logistics Officers and Supply Managers left on the evacuation boats, and with them Operation Tsunami finished. The objective, to pirate Britannian military equipment to springboard their arsenal, was achieved, as four Battlecruisers and eight Light Cruisers were successfully commandeered, as well as a number of small Convoys, battle plans, and a wealth of Britannian ammunition. This success was partly due to the fact that Knightmares could no longer attack shipping vessels with ordinance once the carrier had been sunk. However, the evacuation effort was marred by the loss of the Battleship Nagato, one of only three Japanese capital ships.

Several distinguishing honours were handed out, however of note was one dishonourable
discharge, that of Captain Yuri Ryuga, for not coming to the aid of the Nagato and leading to its eventual sinking at the hands of the HMS Mendel. While the affect his decision had on the war to come has been tossed back and forth by historians, who contrast the value of a carrier with a battleship, he faced vast ostracism among his circle of colleagues, and would die several weeks later, killed in Tokyo by a violent street gang who were suspected to have profiled and stalked the disgraced Captain. His funeral was poorly attended. In spite of widespread community criticism, close friends later mentioned how he bitterly still felt he had done the right thing.

His body was dumped in the sea, as per his last will and testament.

Chapter End Notes

This Chapter is the other side of Tora! Tora! Tora!, with not just the conclusion of Operation Tsunami and its sub-Arc with the raid of Hawaii and subsequent evacuation, but the approach from the sea up compared to the sky down ties the two together. While I'm not as pleased with Victory At Sea as I was its predecessor, it serves to blend the micro with the macro of the War, with a focus on a personal decisions combined with real effects for the rest of the war. As ever, thanks for reading, stay safe, and keep an eye on the heading of your enemies. You may be able to sneak up on them if you pay enough attention. See you for Chapter 43, Wait For It, and please rate and review.
~Eth0
Chapter Forty Three: Wait For It

Arc Eleven: The Pacific

Opening: "Sarishinohara" - Rib

Following the Second Battle of Hawaii, the Britannian High Command was left in a state of shock. Their prime Pacific Fleet base had been raided in what was essentially broad daylight, and the Japanese had made off with a significant portion of the Order Of Battle, as well as scuttling everything that couldn't be sailed away or carried. It sent a wave of surprise through the Britannian Senior Staff and a wave of jubilation through the Japanese Army. However this week, the Empire strikes back, and the fate of Japan finds itself at the feet of one man.

With the Pacific Fleet in disarray and the Atlantic Fleet on the wrong side of the Panama Canal, Japanese landing forces made beachheads in Guam and Wake Island, seizing them to use as forward operating bases for Knightmares and naval operations. While there was little resistance, the military knew from the start it would be difficult to maintain hold of the atolls, and there would not be much material benefit beyond use as a staging point for further attacks. However, President Lamperouge insisted that in spite of this that these gains were of key strategic importance, noting in a memo to Guilford September 17th that "The enemy command is not a united front, and the Emperor's will to obtain both control of his military and a swift victory shall be his undoing. The Short War favours us, and the longer this engagement lasts the more our enemies industrial might shall envelop us. Fortunately, Schneizel El Britannia's temperament is one of immediate gratification, and thus all efforts must be put into keeping our line of sovereignty as close to Britannia as possible, so that it might become a line of opportunity once his haste takes grip of him. He will throw all his might with great focus as soon as he grows irked, a behaviour we can exploit."

While in retrospect it seems quite audacious for Lamperouge to go around accusing people of wanting control of their military, his point was not proven incorrect, as this week brought significant conflict among the varying Chiefs of Staff. Admiral Lawrence Hugh, who was relieved of his duties as Chief of Staff of the Navy on the 15th, was replaced by Douglas Griffith, who with Schneizel demanded an immediate naval attack on the home islands. He was told to pass on a memo to Princess Cornelia Li Britannia, in charge of ground troops in the Pacific Theatre, instructing her to prepare troops for an immediate amphibious landing in Nagasaki and Kochi, however the memo he eventually sent told her to hold, as he planned to force Tokyo Bay with an entire Fleet of Battleships, parking them right outside of the Japanese capital and causing absolute panic that would grind the Japanese war effort to a fault, without the Army getting involved and stealing Hugh's thunder.

George Goff, Britannian Foreign Minister and a former Naval Officer, upon hearing of this plan from Hugh in private, endorsed it publicly, musing that it was such a good plan that it may even cause a coup in Tokyo if it were successful, and a new Unionist Government would restore Japanese neutrality.

While Cornelia was furious at the exclusion of her forces, the Emperor was silent, and gave Hugh
the tentative approval he needed to begin his plan to end the war without a single troop landing on Japanese soil.

A flotilla, consisting of the Battleships Mendel and Watson as well as six Battlecruisers, was arranged and sailed to the Sagami-Nada sea, forming a naval blockade around the Sagami Bay and at the neck of the Tokyo Bay, parking themselves in tight formation and firing upon any convoys that attempted to leave.

At first, the plan seemed to have its desired effect, as a Parliament meeting was cancelled for an emergency meeting between the Cabinet, the President and the military. It seemed that martial law may be declared again, which would tank the Government’s popularity even further.

The first meeting dispersed without resolution. The major issue lay in the fact that the Open Seas Fleet was out in the open sea, with the only armed ship in Tokyo port being the Light Cruiser Kitakami, returned when its captain received a dishonourable discharge earlier in the week. The only Admiral on the Home Islands was Katashi Inafune, the most junior of Japan's four naval authorities. It certainly seemed like there was nothing to be done, until, on the afternoon of the 18th, Inafune announced that he had been in a private meeting with Zero, and had a plan.

The pair had come together in private, and announced to the government their intention to clear the blockade within the hour. While the Cabinet was accustomed to bold promises from Zero, Inafune reassured them that they could break the encirclement.

And just in case anyone gets this mistaken, that encirclement needed to be broken. Not only was a significant amount of Japanese civilian shipping crippled, but the Japanese ground forces and Fleets couldn't be supplied, and were starving from Taiwan to Hawaii.

Immediately, Inafune conscripted all the fishing vessels and large convoys in the bay, and sailed out on the Kitakami at its head, stood in broad daylight at the sten alongside Zero in that famous photograph that was published in the Asahi Shimbun the next day of the pair staring coolly off the edge of the Light Cruiser towards the flotilla of capital ships.

However, this frankly awesome display had its practical benefits; with Zero and an Admiral clearly visible, the Battleships did not fire on the makeshift armada of moderately sized craft, believing the pair were coming to negotiate a ceasefire.

That was not how things progressed.

Instead, the group of two dozen ships pulled up in front of the much bigger battleships, before Zero hurled a dull grey object, almost rock-like, into the bay like a defiant stone throw.

The men and women in the civilian boats around the Kitakami all roared and cheered in support, before throwing all manners of objects into the harbour in what seemed to be a spirited, if bizarre, display of bravado. Compared to the raucous atmosphere of the drafted Japanese vessels, the mood aboard the Mendel and Watson was jovial and light, as they looked on and pondered what the fuss was all about.

Their confusion, much like their boats, were not long for this world, as they quickly discovered what the fuss was about, as it was not a rock, boulder, or any other such symbolic or political item that was dumped in the harbour. Rather, the flotilla had dropped a series of depth charges to a seafloor rich in volatile Sakuradite.

The first signs of this plan achieving results were shown in the surface of sea bursting open in ripples and pops, before a vast wake of choppiness struck the bottom of the boats. Prepared, the
Japanese boats linked together with ropes to weather the turbulence as a single unit, something the Britannian capital ships, in their sluggish lack of manoeuvrability, could not do. In spite of their heavy weight stabilising them initially, they began to sway in a serious manner, before small dislodged chunks of Sakuradite rose to the surface and exploded upon contact with the hull of the battleships, which didn't help their condition.

Within a half hour, the Mendel was on its side and the Watson was signalling for rescue from the Japanese. Zero stayed behind to handle the surrendered Britannians, while Inafune left with the Convoys to supply the troops out in the Pacific, safe in the knowledge that there would be little opposition across his ocean path. In the end, 3500 Britannian sailors either surrendered or were captured.

This was a major disaster, and it fractured the already divided Britannian senior staff into what became serious internal hostility. Emperor Schneizel head lent tentative support. Hugh had failed to break the Japanese spirit, siege the Home Islands, or end the war. It was plain that without a major shift, the war would not end within the foreseeable future. One side effect of the Humiliation of Sagami was Hugh being demoted back to Admiral, however this was not the only activity within the Britannian High Command now that it was apparent there was no shortcut to winning the war.

Emperor Schneizel could not fire and replace his Chief of Naval Staff himself, only his Cabinet and Officers could, which was a problem as he felt that the only way to win was for control to be centralised, however in a letter prior to his demotion Hugh warned Prime Minister Guinevere of Schneizel's desires, something the ambitious half-sister of the Emperor opposed due to her own desires to the throne, as well as warning her about the slow nature of the war. However, while Guinevere was eager to undercut Schneizel, she still believed that overwhelming force could drive the Japanese into submission.

Uncertain, she travelled to see her sister Cornelia, the Field Marshal in charge of the Pacific ground forces, to seek counsel. Upon hearing of Hugh's letter, she had this to say.

"While the man is a fool, there are no written laws against fools hitting the centre of the board with a blindfold. I dare say it suits them all the better, as without direction they at least have the good grace to not toady about. If this is true, it worries me greatly, however I would advise against any rash actions when considering our brother. Have patience in both politics and the war, and victory shall present itself in both instances."

While there was more to it, Cornelia concluded that while she disliked her brother, an open secret at this point, she would not be willing to oppose him yet, and advised her half-sister to wait.

Guinevere, emboldened by her sisters dislike of Schneizel and undeterred by her warnings, raced back to Pendragon and began to talk up the idea of replacing Hugh with Andreas Darlton, an ally of Cornelia. This political move was designed to appeal to Cornelia, earning Guinevere an ally in both the Army and Navy for the price of one, as well as taking power away from Schneizel.

However, Schneizel saw through the pretty apparent subterfuge, and the plan went about as badly wrong as plans can, as after a brief inquiry, a court headed by Schneizel loyalists found Guinevere insane, and she was executed the next day. With the Cabinet cowed, Knight of the Realm Dorothea Ernst was voted in as Chief of the Navy, and on top of that, Bismarck Waldstein replaced the Chief of Staff for the Army. In their capacity as the most senior Knights, they were people Schneizel could fire, and thus control. With his hands now solidly at the reins of the military, Schneizel could now have the quick, decisive war he desired.

The 90 millimetre cannon belted out into the vast Pacific sky, the narrow shell piercing up as if to
protest its blueness, its hugeness, or its emptiness. The loud, short bang of the mechanism quickly gave way to the soft whistle of the artillery cartridge as it streaked up, before beginning its long journey down towards the curved horizon, several islands down the chain.

"Can't be much longer before they try to land here."

Akihito turned to his colleague, whose screwed eyes seemed to be insistently fixed on a point in the distance, searching for the invisible. He turned back to the islands ahead, stretched out to the edge of the Earth, before turning aside and explaining "We better head back."

The man took a moment away from what seemed to be his life's goal of fining down the horizon like a blade and nodded, following Akihito back and up the sand ridges that gave the island dimension. The slow, short walk would ordinarily have been a simple stroll, but the Japanese endurance was beginning to show, as the supply of food and resources had slowed to a trickle. It seemed after several weeks of this that every step up the grass-knotted sands took a vast quantity of breath out of him, such that the top of the mound sent him into hits of apparent asthma.

They trekked back to the makeshift base on the heart of the island, and relayed the miserable news.

"That was the last shell."

Akihito watched as his commander absorbed the news, as well as several breaths. They were, all of them, drunk on oxygen, and gulping at the bit. It seemed as if the world could not contain all their needs. Certainly, the supply lines couldn't.

Still, once they had had their fill, the commander sighed and scribbled that into his ledger, before closing it with an air of finality. He shook his head and replied "So that's it. We've got nothing more to stave them off before a resupply arrives."

Akihito looked down and nodded. Without artillery cover, the Britannians could be upon them within the hour. "I'm… afraid so sir. The east appears clear for now, however we must assume they are preparing. What a bloody disaster."

"So that's it? We just hang around for them to start shooting at us? We just sit here and let it happen?"

The commanders sardonic questions went unanswered. While Akihito found them unhelpful, their underlying premise was not correct. They were waiting to be killed.

"Well, not quite. Let's not forget we can shoot back. Wouldn't be any fun otherwise."

Akihito turned to see the bedraggled, but still confident figure of Admiral Inafune, a constant reassuring presence since he had arrived two weeks ago with a cruiser and some fishing boats with his head held high as if he was captaining the Battleship Yamato. It was his style to carry himself was such confidence that somehow avoided foolhardy stupidity that was so endearing, a fatherlike, reassuring quality. If Inafune was here, everything was alright.

Of course, that was a sentiment seemingly reserved to Akihito alone, as the commander, though junior to Inafune, could only ask "What do you mean? Our artillery is gone, and they're coming!"

Raising an eyebrow, the Admiral turned to the side and grabbed a single shot rifle mounted on the wall, and tossed it across the desk with a smooth backhand, the polymer caseless gun landing square on the desk, nearly falling into the commanders lap.

"Can't have been that long since you've had practice. Now hop to it, didn't you say they'd be here
any minute?"

The commander sat in shock as Inafune turned with the youth and energy of a teenager and jogged out of the pillbox as if not completely deprived of food and nutrients.

Of course Akihito followed him.

The remainder of their Company would follow in time, but Akihito stayed as close to the Admiral as he could, noticing how he could keep up as they walked round towards the east beach, and that his eyes were faced up, rather than unstoppably down, and he was able to observe what he had missed on his journey from the beach to the pillbox, such as the two surviving fishing boats that gave the surrounded islanders food, and the beached cruiser that had been cannibalised for parts, metallic panels littering the otherwise flawless white sand.

They eventually reached the eastern flank and hunkered down for the inevitable Britannian arrival, which after an hour was pronounced with the emergence of a pair of grey landing boats from behind the crest of the next island.

"Here we go!" announced Inafune, immediately firing a shot at the boat as it came into view. Akihito, as well as the other soldiers who had assembled to repel the attack, waited for a result, before a shot was fired back, burying itself in the sand.

"They didn't like that very much!" Inafune crowed, ignoring the fact that he had just been shot at. "I think that's an invitation, and it'd be rude to decline! Fire away!"

Emboldened, Akihito and the rest of the company opened fire on the boats, which while largely armoured, had people leaning out to fire back, and thus a target. There was a prolonged exchange of fire, however in spite of the satisfying sight of bodies falling out of the boats, they continued forwards, undeterred. Once again, they were all just waiting for it to arrive, just with greater context. Nothing had changed.

And then things got worse.

"Ah! Damn, I- oh, bugger!"

Akihito looked aside just in time to see Inafune take a bullet to the neck, having just been shot in the knee, and could only watch as he fell onto his back. Immediately, Akihito moved out of his position below the ridge to attend the Admiral, who was in the midst of gargling out swears as Akihito dragged him back to safety.

"Blughy ghell, he shod me!" Inafune attempted, before giving the softer half of a chuckle as he was dragged into cover ""Hang-khs A'hi-ho… hangs for hel'hing…"

"Please try and save your breath sir, your signs are really bad-

All this earned was another round of chuckles, and a loopy, unforced hand resting itself on Akihito's thigh interrupting him.

"Don' worry… the Bri'tss are coming, an' there be'er be someone ou' lea'ing the company who has a pair. Go on, I'm Navy anyway."

It would be here on this worthless atoll, far below his station as an Admiral of the Navy and Hero of Japan, that Katashi Inafune would die, surrounded by a Company far beneath him. And yet, as he breathed his last, he was smiling, and nodded, as if to affirm his faith in Akihito. Even as he was dying, he was doing his best to ensure those around him held strong.
It struck Akihito as thoroughly unfair that a man so selfless would be wasted on this spit of sand, on this group of soldiers, or on him. Certainly, his death here was a waste.

Akihito growled and clutched his gun. He despised everything about this place in which he found himself, but if Inafune was to be wasted, then he would be damned if he didn't make the most of it. These Britannians would pay for what they had done.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the choppiness, I really didn't "feel" this Chapter like I normally do. In the end, I mainly just tried to get across the character development I'd assigned here and move the plot along by hook or by crook. Given that this story is written out of order and that this is the second last Chapter I write, excluding edits, I can definitively promise this is as bad as it gets. Moreover, I was able to do something neat with this Chapter in using Katashi Inafune, who deserved an Arc of his own if I'm being emotionally honest, and his effect on people as a reflection of the Zero effect, though it may have been lost in my attempt to ham-fist this Chapter through. I apologise. In any case, there was some plot development here, so its got that going for it. At the very least, that is the end of the Chapters of war, so I can get back to my comfort zone, with a talky chapter set in a car. That's a bit more my speed, wouldn't you agree? So if you're looking forward to that, stick around for The Long Minute, Chapter 44, the last one I will write in terms of real time, stay safe, rate, review and stick to what you're good at. I'll see you soon.
~Eth0
Rivalz repeatedly tapped his forefinger against the wheel of his coupe with great force and frequency, eyes locked dead ahead as the four cylinder engine ticked over, rocking the suspension from side to side in the hopes that such motion would keep him awake. He had long upgraded from the sidecar that had seen its day the moment it had driven out of the factory door in Italy. The car was much more comfortable, if uncomfortably large in the dense, impolite Tokyo traffic. He was exhausted, and could not wait to get back home to sleep.

A knocking on the window woke Rivalz from his self induced stupor, his absent-minded focus translating to a burst of shock that sent his whole body into a spasm as his heart rate caught up with his bodies quickly expelled pressure, built up like a spring. As he gathered his gulping breath, he turned back towards the passenger side window to see Milly, bending over to wave at her boyfriend, asking him to unlock the car with hand motions. With a few years off the end of his life, he reached over to unlock the side door, and the blonde newscaster hopped into the passenger seat, and shook her head.

"I thought you were going to leave me out here in the dark for a second." Milly teased.

"I'd never do such a thing. I'd be too terrified of the consequences. Anyway, how was he? Your father, I mean?" Rivalz asked, blushing somewhat.

Milly shrugged as she fastened her seatbelt and eventually responded "He's certainly glad to be retiring, but he's not a big fan of planes."

"Can't blame him, with the war going on. Mustn't be the safest time to fly, even if it's to the south."

Rivalz paused and narrowed his eyes as he slipped the two seater into first gear and gently released the clutch, rolling the car out of the airport parking space with great, uncharacteristic precision before he continued "Still, it can't be helped. Where do you want to head?"

"Back to the news station, I have a broadcast at twelve." Milly announced, which surprised Rivalz.

"That late?" he asked.

It was Milly's turn to shrug. "Can't be helped, mm? Besides, Lelouch is making a statement up in Kyoto, about the Company that was killed alongside Admiral Inafune in the Pacific. Have to cover that, see."

Rivalz nodded as he indicated to turn into the motorway into Tokyo city proper, adding grandly "Broadcast station it is." He pulled out of the one way city lanes and up onto the Motorway, hoping to cut across the city as he opened up the throttle. After reaching a sufficient speed, he relaxed, and, having heard his friends name, inquired further.
"Have you talked to Lelouch? I remember you did a few interviews before the war, but he's been so busy I've hardly seen him."

Rivalz had to keep his eyes on the road, but a brief silence concerned him greatly, even once Milly finally responded with a noncommittal "Yeah…"

To this, Rivalz asked "Yeah what?"

Milly sighed, and explained "I helped him win over some people on the war, but he's become more and more snowed under, putting himself under immense pressure. Last I saw of him was after Schneizel executed his sister Guinevere, and he was really really worried. He thinks Schneizel is impatient, and has drawn all the Japanese forces back to defensible positions in anticipation of a new offensive any day now. He's a little paranoid if I'm honest."

Rivalz nodded, and sighed. That would be typical of Lelouch to isolate himself and take on the entire workload when faced with a challenge, and while there was a legitimate concern for Lelouch's health, as ever Rivalz's overwhelming emotional response was the feeling of distance between himself and his friend. Lelouch had always been busy, running trade unions and strikers as Rivalz sat and wrote unreplied texts, or aspiring to political offices as Rivalz hankered for attention that had once been shared.

As selfish as it sounded in the wake of such a time, he just wanted to hang out again, but Lelouch had busied himself, and if Milly was right, crippled himself. In truth, he missed the entire gang. Nina had left to study particle physics, Shirley had returned to Britannia, Kallen was probably dead, and Suzaku had vanished off the face of the Earth. They were scattered to the wind, sweeping at Rivalz's feet. They had all had a place in the narrative, the same narrative that had left him behind.

And, at the same time, this sentiment came with some shame. It was, as Lelouch might say, selfish to waste the time of people so important with something so petty. He certainly wasn't important.

"Are you alright?"

Rivalz turned aside for a moment to match eyes with Milly briefly before he was drawn back aside. Everyone had been drawn apart by the events of the last decade, and while it had seen much individual success, their separation had resulted in them facing their demons alone, ranging from Lelouch's paranoia to Suzaku's open secret of depression. It was easy to imagine things being worse, such as a Britannian crackdown back in 2016, or the Black Knights beating Yuaikai in 2017, or the Tosa Incident resulted in a victory for the Reactionaries, but it was impossible to wonder what could have been if only they had tried that little bit harder to keep it together.

Still, it was never too late to start valuing what you had, as Rivalz knew he had one shard still in his life.

"I… I love you."

Milly paused, and scoffed incredulously as she looked across the car at the nervous driver "What's bringing that on? Is there something you need to tell me? Are you seeing someone else and having doubts?"

Rivalz choked on air as Milly began to roar with vicious laughter that shook the whole car.

"Christ you're easy to panic! Calm down, I was only messing. Seriously though, polygamy is not a problem if you-"
"Thank you Milly, but I'm fine, I wouldn't…"

His reply began with his mouth moving at motorway speeds in earnest, but the tumbling words began to slow until he finally stopped, admittedly in mid sentence which was not an ideal place to stop, but Rivalz had more weighty issues than grammar on his mind.

As he thought, he looked aside briefly to see Milly wear a cruel smirk, prompting him to ask, throat dry "What?"

Chuckling, she explained "You're so easy to wind up. Don't worry about it."

It was Milly's way. Rivalz reflected, to joke and trivialise as a response to challenge. While she was good at defusing serious situations, some situations deserved weight, which Rivalz had to force onto it as best he could to explain himself.

Milly shook her head, and laughed "Seriously, sometimes I think you-"

"Can you please listen?"

Milly paused, and with unusual gravity asked "What is it?", realising something was wrong.

Rivalz took a breath, and tried to order his thoughts before speaking again, with slow, deliberate words and sentences.

"Listen… I'm just thinking, see… Remember everyone else, how we were all so close? I just worry, that you might go like they have. Everywhere, there seems to be suffering, and no reassurance, and I can never do anything. Even when I try to stay in contact, they become isolated in their affairs. I don't want to be isolated."

Milly didn't respond for a time, thinking hard as Rivalz pulled the sports car off the motorway and navigated towards the CBD, before the long wait was ended by Milly being genuine, something worth waiting for.

"Is that what you're worried about? Well don't. I understand what you're saying, completely. Sure, weren't you the only one not in the hotel when the terrorists held it hostage? The truth is, I do miss our group. We had great fun, doing mad stuff like crossdressing day or cat day."

Rivalz listened closely, nodding along as Milly continued her recounting of events. A sense of nostalgia washed over him as he recalled the time they had spent together, having fun with consequences no greater than embarrassment. Of course, embarrassment could be a pretty big consequence outside of a school environment; it had ruined Suzaku's career, to say nothing else.

"But it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Lelouch and Suzaku were already doing their things on the side, and Kallen was already halfway to a prison sentence. We played childish games with childish stakes, but we all have to grow up eventually."

Rivalz frowned as he thought about it. From that line of reasoning, the innocence of the fun days back in Ashford had never been real. They had always been marred by the dark activities of its members that clashed with the appearance of the bright student council room. Mulling over this, he did not respond, even as he pulled aside towards the Broadcast building, stopping in the parking spot reserved for Milly in collective silence, which Milly eventually broke.

"Besides, it's not necessarily a bad thing. You're going to find a bunch of people in editing who think like you do, and you'll make new friends, and keep old ones to boot. I know I have, and look at me; I'm still here with you."
"Promise?"

Milly paused again out of comedic incredulity, staring at her boyfriend with a look of bemused shock as he pulled off the main road down towards the car park, before she chuckled "I'm not that untrustworthy am I? There'd be no fun in that. Still, I'll be sure you're always in good shape. I can't have the last member of my council look so glum now can I?"

"I suppose not." Rivalz chuckled, as he waited for Milly to open the door and leave. She did not do this, seeming content to allow a grin grow across her face, as Rivalz heart sank to somewhere down in his pelvis in sudden realization.

"You didn't think I'd let you away that easy, did you?"

Rivalz felt inordinately small as Milly chuckled again, more softly and subtly than before, as if crafting a devious plot, an assumption that could be well within the mark, as she continued to speak.

"If I'm making a promise, you're sure as hell making one."

Rivalz sighed, and glumly asked "What do I have to wear? I-"

He stopped, as he saw Milly, though still smiling, shake her head. She took a moment, and explained "We're not children anymore."

Rivalz was now absorbed, having fully turned towards Milly who now had a hand on the car's door handle, in a position to head off, but not before she finished her thought.

"I'm not going anywhere, but that's no excuse for you to start slacking. I demand nothing but the utmost dedication from my comrades! You're so worried about losing others, I want to be sure you just don't lose yourself."

Rivalz smiled, and overdramatically replied "I promise!"

Milly nodded, and replied "There's a good lad. Don't wait up for me, I'll probably be awhile in here.", before opening the door and waving behind her as she dashed off, the door slewing shut behind her as she ran off, enthusiastic and ready to take on anything in her path, the world if necessary, and stood a good chance of winning.

Smirking, Rivalz slipped the car into gear and pulled out of the parking slot, riding the clutch up until he was up to speed, and re-entered the traffic leaving Tokyo. It was about an hour and a half's drive from Nerima to their mountainside home in the village of Kiyokawa, Aikō, just a few minutes outside the Tokyo Prefecture, and so settled down for the long haul. It was almost midnight, and had no intention of having an accident.

It took him until Yokohama, after forty five minutes of intense, single minded focus to the road, for Rivalz to finally relent and reach across the cabin to put on the radio to occupy his mind, exhausted after a day of work and a night of concentration. The radio waves were dominated by Lelouch's speech, and while it had ended, analysis of it went on ad nauseum. Apparently, it had been an unusually genuine speech where Lelouch had been anxious and twitchy, and expressed concern for a breach of war statutes. Typically, Rivalz would not hear Lelouch's voice.

However, the spirit of analysis put Rivalz into a thoughtful mood. Milly had mentioned Lelouch being worried about Schneizel's impatience, but he hadn't seen any evidence to this effect beyond the killing of a small group on an atoll. Furthermore, Lelouch had a bit of a reputation for being paranoid.
The only movement on the front over the last week had been a mass increase in Britannian Knightmare support over the Philippine Sea, weeks after the Kitakami’s sinking of a prototype carrier near Hawaii. While there had been sparse aerial bombing, there had been no evidence it was going to escalate beyond that. However, even though Lelouch was paranoid, that did not erase his impressive track record on being right about this sort of thing. What could Schneizel escalate with?

Rivalz rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. He couldn't wait to finally sleep.

He finally pulled up at his house, on the side of a hill overlooking the Tokyo area, and relaxed as he looked out over the city, wondering further about what was being waited for.

The first clue was loud, and unseen as it passed at high speed through the dark sky. Bombers weren't rare, but this one streaked by with a high pitch and great speed that caused Rivalz to wince as it flew north, looking down which was what saved him.

Immediately after the noise had passed, a second noise blasted up towards Rivalz, bending him over with its volume and forcing him to screw his fists into his ears and look away. Its all consuming blast forced Rivalz to bury himself as it burned through his skull.

Then came the heat, blitzing his exposed nape as it roared across him, disappearing as suddenly as it arrived.

Even once it had passed, it took him a whole minute to peek back North to see what had happened, and what he saw puzzled him before shocking him.

In a bizarre, Daliesque display of visual absurdity, Rivalz looked over Tokyo with a perfect sphere, about a half mile in radius, carved into the city.

He blinked furiously to ensure it was real. With his states of alertness, it was entirely possible that it was a trick of his mind, however neither blinks or self inflicted slaps warded off the scoop taken out of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area.

Tokyo's Business District had been almost completely destroyed in a matter of moments. Rivalz's first instinct was to duck for cover, in case another detonation occurred, however after 10 minutes spent underneath the sump of his car, he realized there were no more coming. He stood again, and looked over the devastation with a new eye. He realised it must have been some manner of new weapon, wondering briefly if this was Lelouch's prophecy of Schneizel's supposed impatience, however a far more important thought surfaced.

What had happened to Milly?

Rivalz looked again to the blast radius. From his vantage point, he could see the Parliament building, narrowly missed, but not the Broadcast Centre two blocks to the North of it. Milly worked until 4 am, bless her, doing her very best, with the situation out of her control, with no way of knowing-

The blue haired editor bent over and retched, his throat attempting to clear an empty stomach out of horror at the thought. There was no way she had survived.

Rivalz collapsed to his knees as his chest constricted further. He felt so small, as if his mouth could not fit air into it to breathe, and he could not cry out, only wheeze in agony as he suffocated on his emotion.

Somewhere, he knew he had made promises, but they would be very hard to keep. Her absence made the whole exercise moot, as it did many other things. What was one to do? All Rivalz knew
was that someone was screaming, and that it was him.

He would have to be strong, like he promised he would be, or else he would fall into despair.
You will remember us, will you not?

Do us this much, as you pass us by on this wild, Pacific evening.

As you carry your rifles and cameras and wounded,

From isle to isle, tip toeing through archipelagos, through graveyards,

Hoping to not step on our skulls as you pass over.

...

You will remember us, do us this.

We peek out from the slits of buried, wooden homes you borrowed,

Interest accrued, rent ignored, hosts unapppeased,

As the next island, the next front is found in feet and inches,

As feet stick out from sand, moved past over time.

...

You will remember us, you owe us this much.

For emptying our wells, and entrenching our beaches,

Your toll for our atoll shall pass along,

To those who come after your gunships with rowboats,

Wondering where we have gone.

...

You will remember us, as you shall all your sins.

In burning memories like the burns you deserved,

Like the burning crops, meagre wheat,

In proportion, barely enough for a Company,

But barely enough for us.

...
You will remember us, for all you have done.

While you would like to ignore, to focus on your pains,

Wounds cannot compare to scars,

While you scamper for pity, for aid, for blame,

We have no mouths to beg.

...

You will remember us, to this you are sentenced.

In the Long Court of your Long War,

Longer than any crime ever before,

This verdict, unwritten, shall be carried down,

And shame to all those who ignore!

...

~Published Anonymously, likely a Pacific Native displaced during the Second Pacific War.
The surreal rubble that littered the vague, broken streets that were once valleys of straight edged concrete and steel seemed as otherworldly as it was endless. Outside the immediate blast radius, itself seeming to be borne of a bastardised idea of a black hole, carved on the centre of the city in a perfect sphere, the shockwaves of air escaping the vast heat of the central detonation had rended down whole buildings and tore up the brickwork of central Tokyo, as if to provide some temporary resting place for the poor souls who were unlucky.

But someone had to collect their bodies left behind, a toll for having stayed alive.

Euphemia Li Britannia had rushed for Tokyo as soon as she heard the news. She had always sought to help others, and now had the agency to do so. She left as soon as the dawn broke to catch the first bus into the city, having packed a rucksack of supplies overnight. Before she had left, she had checked on Suzaku, sat alone in a dark room watching 24 hour news.

"You've got a few missed calls from a Rivalz Cardemonde, he sounded pretty desperate…"

Suzaku ignored her, and she sighed. This behaviour was nothing new.

"I'm going to help." she had explained, though she again earned no response beyond a bitter "Damned Lelouch…"

He wasn't going to be of use. She had to help by herself, something reinforced by the lonely bus ride to Tokyo, with the bus driver visibly surprised by someone travelling towards the capital rather than fleeing the destruction. He even went as far as to quiz her before letting her on the trip through anonymous farmland and mountainside towards the city, towering and imposing as it always had been but decidedly deader today, even in the neglected suburbs, ignored by the FLEIJA's wake of bizarre, smooth, terrifying destruction worthy of science fiction.

It took a while for the grey empty towers to give way to hints of destruction, starting with makeshift hospitals stiffed into the back of vans, and vast lorries shuffling boulders out of the city centre, Euphemia's bus moving alone towards the heart of the city, shrouded by a mist of dust, that with proximity grew to harsh pebbles that threatened all but the hardest of tyres, to boulders, to chaos. At first, it seemed to appearances like a minor disturbance based on the quantity of aid workers, however the density of medical stations and shelters increased by an order of magnitude as the bus approached what was once the business district.

The bus stopped some ways before the apex of the chaos, unable to travel further due to the deteriorating road conditions. Thanking her driver, Euphemia stepped out onto the haunted streets, ready to help.

Fortunately, rescue operations were short on manpower, and were enthusiastic for any aid that presented itself. As a potential heir to the Empire of Britannia, she had been taught skills in first aid
and communications that she could put to good use.

"Okay, can you handle Yaraichō street? We think there's a few people trapped in rubble, as it runs perpendicular to the blast radius. We have a team down there now, but they're understaffed."

"That's putting it mildly." remarked an assistant, busy hauling barrels of water, before the lead woman continued "You've got supplies, just take a radio for if you get lost. Good luck."

The radio turned out to be a blessing, as what had once been familiar streets had become rows of rubble segregated by taller piles of rubble that proved as challenging to navigate as they were to travel. It took her ten minutes to arrive at her street, two perpendicular to the edge of the massive, flawless sphere of emptiness created by the bomb. People caught on this street would have been lucky, but it would take a great deal more than luck for them to survive much longer.

After meeting up with the beleaguered team, Euphemia set to work with great haste, searching through the mass of rock for bodies, signalling them out to the rest of the team so they could lift any obstructions together. The work was laborious and taxing, requiring a lot of manoeuvring around and heavy lifting, combined with spontaneous moments of rushing to fetch life support equipment if they were lucky, and body bags if they were not.

They were not lucky very often.

This cycle of adrenaline and exhaustion saw her through four lunches by the time the sun was setting for the day. The bodies had racked up, with chances dwindling as the people trapped under rubble were forced to wait longer and longer.

"Ma'am, we're pitching a tent!"

"Very good Kuki, I just want to finish this section over here!"

She was met with a nod as the distant aid worker went to attend to food, as Euphemia went to finish off her cordon. She nearly got off scot free, until a familiar smell rose up as she approached the last boulder like bugs scurrying out of a shaded place. Her heart sank, as it seemed likely that she would be proven unlucky again.

A peek confirmed her worst fears, and outmatched them. Killed, likely instantly by the pair of structural pipes falling cleanly through his back like a knife into butter, lay the body of Unionist leader and long time friend of Euphemia, Claudio Darlton, arms laid out ahead of his face down body as if he was reaching ahead in his last moments.

"One more here, he's dead!"

An awareness of there being no hope to save his life, as well as a lack thereof of the fact that Euphemia knew Claudio extremely well, meant that the workers took their time freeing the Britannian soldier turned politician from his piped prison, laying him among the other dead bodies, to be sorted at an indefinite later date, though they all made it back to their tents by sundown. Euphemia was glad of the break, as she doubted she could have continued without time to pause.

She was neither a fool nor a sociopath. She felt untold empathy for everybody she came across, and believed that she ought to be as concerned for all of them, as they all had stories and families and lives, and to put one over another was cruel and selfish. And so as she lay down, silently mourning Claudio after knowing him for years as a spirited, kind young man with a heart of gold, realising she was crying, she could only acknowledge how unfair she was being. She wanted to love everyone, but sometimes it was just so difficult in the face of her overwhelming immediate
emotions based on personal connections.

Hoping to at least do something productive in her grief, she fetched her phone and dialled the second number on her personal contacts to contact Darlton via her sister Cornelia.

The phone took a while to connect over the Pacific, and then some more time for it to acknowledge that she was not a spy, but eventually the line cleared.

"Hello?" she spoke into the silence, before there was an eventual answer.

"This is Ciaran Forsyth speaking, who is this?"

"Hello Ciaran, it's Euphemia, I was hoping I could speak with Cornelia." she replied.

"Hey Euphie, it's been too long! I'll put you right on, she's coming back now."

Ciaran's positive attitude had always made him incessantly likeable, which lightened the mood somewhat before Cornelia arrived on the line with the concern of a parent.

"Oh, Euphie, thank heavens you're alright! When I saw the news, I was so worried about you, after I heard the news."

"Cornelia, I'm fine." Euphemia interrupted.

The Princess caught on to her younger sister's tone quickly, and asked "Are you… alright? You don't sound…"

Euphemia sighed, noting the slight reversal as she explained formally "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but Claudio Darlton was killed in the destruction following the bombing of Tokyo. He did not suffer, and his body was preserved."

Cornelia paused, before swearing vehemently and shouting over the line "I knew it! Goddamnit, I knew he shouldn't have done it! What a fool! What a bloody disaster."

Euphemia sighed as Cornelia wore herself out of breath with angry ranting at the flaws in Schneizel's doctrine of immediate gratification. It took some time for her to calm to allow Euphemia to continue.

"I would appreciate it if you passed this information onto his father Andreas whenever you deem appropriate. I'm sorry."

Her professional duty done, Euphemia took a moment to breathe, as her phone-side front began to fade, her hands trembling. She felt a vast urge to apologise to Cornelia for her failure to save Claudio, as absurd as that was on all faces of it. Her desire to comfort Cornelia and Andreas was met with only frustration at her inability to do so.

"I'm… so sorry…"

Euphemia began to cry at her helplessness, but she quickly felt the comforting hand of her sister reach across the ocean and stroke her shoulder.

"It's okay. It wasn't your fault, you didn't kill him. Where are you now?"

Euphemia took a moment to breathe again, grateful for her sisters reassurance, and explained "I'm helping the rescue effort. I couldn't sit around all day long just waiting for news."
Cornelia sighed. "And that's how you found him. You'll never change Euphie."

There was a silence on the line, as if both parties were reluctant to say more for fear of harming their beautiful, rare harmony.

Euphemia was pleased that her sister was proving as loving as she had ever been to her a reassuring presence. However, in the back of her mind there was the memories that proved that live and empathy did not extend far beyond her own family.

"We-"

"I-"

They halted each other in their speeches, each somewhat hesitant to begin at all and in no hurry to again now that awkwardness had set in. It took some time for Cornelia to speak up.

"At least you're alright. I'll let Andreas know. Thank you-"

"Wait!"

Cornelia paused again as Euphemia spoke up to her elder sister. Euphemia did not enjoy leveraging her sisters one weakness, but if it was her way of ensuring that all the dead, not just those she knew, would enjoy some form of consolation from her deeds, then so be it.

"Wait a moment, Cornelia. This whole affair cut quite close, and I can only ask you as a person in power why it occurred? I could well have died myself. Is brother Schneizel that callous?"

Euphemia was not naive. Of course he was. To be so childish to have not realized that would be stupid, and to assume that someone else was so childish was characteristic of the credulous Cornelia. However, having helped Cornelia with the bid for the Imperial throne, Euphemia was also aware of the wedge between Cornelia and Schneizel. If she could amplify it by forcing Cornelia to acknowledge how wrong deploying the FLEIJA had been, she could force Schneizel to end the war due to internal pressure, or possibly face Cornelia's wrath. It was all she could do.

Cornelia, assuming wrongly Euphemia was still innocent and without agenda, didn't see the trap for what it was, and answered too honestly.

"I don't know. Schneizel and I don't agree on everything. This issue is one of those. You remember, don't you?"

The one downside of Cornelia's affection was her inevitable trait of speaking down to Euphemia even as the younger Princess was well into her twenties, assuming Euphemia was foolish and politically inane, however she brushed this demeaning aspect aside and commented "But that isn't a small issue. Thousands have died, and I was nearly one of them. You acknowledge it was to no end, so why put up with such a waste of noncombatant life?"

Cornelia was evidently persuaded somewhat by this line of reasoning, particularly Euphemia's manipulative appeal to Cornelia's concern for her younger sisters safety, but it would take another push for her to act against Schneizel's madness.

"Please just think it over. For me. I think you know what is right."

The General still seemed uncertain, but Euphemia was confident that she had at the very least planted the thought in Cornelia. After another pause, Euphemia asked "Will that be all?"
"Euphie..." her sister began, before seeming to sigh, and continue with greater resolve "Let Guilford know. I know we weren't on the best of terms, and he and Claudio had grown antagonistic, but they had been close before, and he deserves to know."

"I'm not sure-

"Euphemia." Cornelia interrupted, voice harshening with insistence. "He is our first line of communications with the Japanese government. If I have to lobby our politicians, you have to lobby yours."

Euphemia sighed. "All right. I'll talk soon."

Hanging up, the pink haired woman shook her head before calling her former Knight, thoroughly displeased over the prospect of sending another person close to her into mourning. But she knew she had to.

"Hello? Madam Euphemia?"

She took a deep breath as Guilford addressed her in his usual deference that even now put her off. After a moment, she finally began.

"Hey, Guilford."

"Are you a-"

"Guilford, I'm fine." Euphemia replied, before realising that she was being brittle in repeating herself after talking with Cornelia and being unfair to Guilford, who couldn't have known. She apologised immediately before Guilford could even react, citing a stressed day.

Guilford verbally waved it off, replying "Haven't we all. I've been from pillar to post trying to work out what's been happening. So much of our infrastructure is gone. It's a catastrophe."

"So many dead..."

Guilford, likely realising how his perspectived comment sounded in light of how many people had died, backed off, and said "Absolutely, yes. It's horrid. Right in the middle of a population centre, I can't believe it. So many people lost."

"The thing is-" Euphemia began, before stopping herself briefly. She was about to seriously go against her brother Lelouch, who in spite of recent events Euphemia still believed to be sound of heart. He had been unnecessarily harsh in his treatment of Suzaku, but he had his reasons for doing so. However, no matter what they were, Euphemia knew the truth of the results of his reasoning, and whether he was sound of heart or not, his war had to end.

However, it was not that simple. Guilford had a job to do managing the repair operations and keeping the lines of communications open to prevent more people from dying. Did she want to burden him with knowledge of one individual death that might hamper his valuable work?

But then, how valuable could the work be if people would just continue to die if or when the next bomb came? Guilford had followed Lelouch as much as any cabinet member, excepting Ohgi, and this was where they had wound up. Some perspective could do him some good, even if it did cause him pain.

"The thing is, I was just calling from the rescue effort. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Claudio Darlton is among the dead. I... I know you didn't get on but I... I thought you should
know."

The line was silent, and after a while Euphemia had to affirm he was still there with a querying "Hello?"

"Yes, yes madam, one... moment."

So even after such divisions Guilford still cared about his close friends son. Euphemia was both pleased about the affirmations this made about her personal views of Guilford and the ability of people in general to forgive, but the fact that it took a death to affirm this rendered the whole exercise sour at best, and morbid at worst. She had maliciously inflicted a wound, and was aware of it, but she couldn't stop now.

"Guilford, you know this has to stop."

The man paused again, for a different reason then before. She could almost see him scratch the back of his head for an out, muttering the beginnings of "I have to… er-"

"Guilford."

He sighed, and told the truth, explaining "Madam, I cannot. I have a duty to President Lamperouge, as I once had a duty to you. I need to follow it through to the best of my abilities."

Euphemia sighed. He was telling the truth, it was at least trying to. He had always had a hang up about his personal duty, a distinctly Britannian trait, but Euphemia knew for a fact it had its limits.

"What about Mt. Fuji? Was that the best of your abilities?"

Guilford paused as the memory of that event returned to his consciousness, the time where he disobeyed orders in the face of a massive population of civilians. He mumbled, trying to find his feet through his jumbled words, but Euphemia cut him off aggressively.

"Don't act like this is different. Innocent people are dying en masse, and while you do not hold the trigger like before, you have the ability to stop the bullets. The question is are you going to be consistent, or will you allow Lelouch to sacrifice innocent lives like my sister once wanted to?"

Euphemia now felt hopelessly hollow. In her quest to end the fighting and offer the dead some peace of mind, she was disowning and condemning her own living family with every breath. As she went on, she began to feel herself welling up as she indicted the people who meant the most to her in pursuit of the greater good. There had never been anything more central to Euphemia than the bonds of family, and now she voluntarily shredded them to convince someone else to go what she wanted. She would abandon them, throw them under a bus, for the sake of the many thousands of dead. She began to feel sick as she continued to speak in vehement opposition of the brother she loved for his past, and despised for his present.

"If you do, don't ever forget them, because believe me, is down at the aid sites and I promise they will not forget you, and nor shall I. Do not forget why I chose you to help me back then. You showed courage. I need you to show it one more time."

She finished her plea and fell to a sitting position, thoroughly worn by her own passionate ranting. She felt breathless and alone, having forsaken almost everyone she held dear for her ends. Those ends may be good, but those methods were still contrary to Euphemia's view of the world, and it felt wracked for her efforts.

Still, at least Guilford was salvageable, as he responded "I understand. I'll be sure to… bear all that
in mind when making decisions. I promise that to you, my Princess. I will."

Euphemia smiled even as she cried. He would keep that promise. She had forsaken many people close to her in her pursuit of the broader good, but, as she moved to hang up, she realised she had not in fact forsaken every single one of them.

"Guilford, if I could just ask one more thing, have you talked to Suzaku?"
"I see Guilford… Yes I understand. I know-"

Ohgi sighed as the Minister for Defence exasperatedly continued, sounding increasingly desperate and hollow, as if his heart was fading away to air as he aired his many grievances.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore. This is too much, even for me. He has crossed a line."

"I'm aware. I tried to warn you, remember?"

Guilford sighed, before replying "Yes, you did. I hoped… I hoped that he was earnest, that he would be satisfied."

"His problem is not a lack of earnesty, I would argue he's far too earnest." Ohgi replied, a harsh snarl coming back into his voice. He was in no mood for apologetics on behalf of the President, who was himself a major source of anger for Ohgi. He wondered if this, an anger at the reckless disregard for death caused by someone he knew, was the same anger Lelouch himself claimed to have felt back when Britannia first invaded Japan.

"But he will never be satisfied."

Guilford's voice carried a weight with it over the line, which was borne out by the events that had transpired that day, that Ohgi had just learned before Guilford's calling.

Apparently, in the early hours of the morning, three days after the bomb had been dropped, Cornelia had staged a military coup of Schneizel's Government, which Ohgi had just seen on online news before Guilford called to give him more specific information than the press was allowed to reveal. Guilford claimed he had no idea why Cornelia had done this, but Ohgi has his suspicions, which he dutifully kept to himself.

Guilford had relayed preliminary reports of fighting in Pendragon as well as the official statement by Cornelia's Junta that they had killed Schneizel and held the loyalty of a majority of the officer corps. At first, Ohgi was ambivalent, but then the second half of the story had sent his silent rage boiling, like an acidic puddle demanding tribute.

"After the fighting had mostly subsided, Cornelia sent a message to me, which I relayed to the President." Guilford had explained. "She said that in the face of all the death and destruction, she would be willing to sign a white peace, ending hostilities and restoring the diplomats that Schneizel had exiled."

Ohgi had had a brief flash of hope, a moment of naïveté before the horror set in. This was Lelouch Lamperouge, who was vindictive and single minded.
"He didn't take the offer, did he?"

Lelouch’s selfish perseverance and bloodlust were depressing realities, but for them to be prefaced by an offer of peace made the whole affair more despicably gut wrenching.

Guilford had confirmed his sad realisation by elaborating "He claimed there could be no long term peace while Britannia was an imperialist force in the world that could threaten Japan. Apparently, Britannia by virtue of its own existence manifested a threat to us. The bombs have only seemed to set him firmer in his ways."

Ohgi recalled hearing Guilford recounting Lelouch's reply to Cornelia's offering of peace and shivered. He sighed, and finally answered the waiting Guilford in the present.

"No, he will never be satisfied. It's not in his nature."

The two men sat together in silence miles apart, the quiet buzz of the phone line drowning out the noise of the cleanup outside, bodies still being dragged out of the rubble a week after the FLEIJA had been dropped.

News of Cornelia's coup had reached the online news sites shortly before Guilford had called him, though it was too late in the day for the print press to catch it, but Ohgi had not had enough time to read very much in depth before Guilford had explained everything. News of Cornelia's offer of peace had certainly not made the press, as it would have been on the headlines. Instead, reports and speculation seemed to centre around the coup itself. A hot topic of speculation, from what little Ohgi had actually seen, revolved around why Cornelia had done this.

Of course, the initial and prevailing school of thought was that Cornelia simply desired the throne and that this seemed as good a time as any to take it. Some others claimed that Cornelia's Junta were worried about public backlash to the FLEIJA, or that Cornelia had a heart and didn't want to see Japan wiped off the face of the planet.

Ohgi, having conversed with Cornelia for far longer than he would have ever cared to, knew this was all nonsense. Perhaps the second hypothesis could have weight, but emotionally, Cornelia did not give a damn about Japan. There was only one small, pink haired force on Earth and Heaven that moved Cornelia Li Britannia emotionally, and Ohgi suspected that on some level, Guilford knew this as well.

"So what are you going to do now?"

The silence was broken by Guilford, evidently looking to Ohgi for a solution, seeing him as a leader, a ludicrous proposition at its face. In truth, Ohgi wasn't sure what to do. He still felt the shame of sitting when the Chairman had told him to. Even in his moment of taking a stand, his moment where he promised himself that he would stop Lelouch, he buckled, and hundreds of thousands of people had died. The decision had had a solid rationale, but that didn't stop him from feeling terrible inside about it. He felt he didn't deserve the role after such a failure.

However, he knew that he was as Prime Minister as powerful as he ever would be, and if he believed that Lelouch was wrong, which he did, leaving the stage now would be in itself selfish. He had to do all he could while he was here.

And then he would immediately resign. He was not going to continue the cycle. But first, he had work to do. He may as well exercise his power while he had it.

"Guilford, I need you to help me gather as many Representatives as you can grab a hold of and get
them to Hall 1B as soon as we finish here. Keep it quiet."

"I assume you have a plan."

Ohgi did not have a plan. He had a lot of guilt, a desire to set things right, and a vague understanding of how Lelouch operated, which he hoped to combat with a bit of group therapy. In spite of this, he simply replied with a reassuring "Yeah."

"One more thing Ohgi."

"Go on?"

Guilford paused, before continuing "Have you spoken to Suzaku recently? I was just off the phone with Euphemia yesterday, and apparently he's become quite depressed, reclusive. I don't think watching what Lamperouge has been doing on telly is helping him one bit."

Ohgi frowned. He had not been expecting this turn in the conversation at all. He answered honestly, if somewhat bluntly with "In truth, I really have bigger things to worry about than my old colleagues mental state. He's an adult, he can find a doctor if he's having trouble I'm sure. He'll get over it."

Guilford sounded unconvinced, but didn't protest when Ohgi asked him to go about the task he had set him. Ohgi felt bad for Suzaku to be going through rough times, but the sour memories of their departure combined with a full plate of things to deal with rendered his empathy remote at best.

Still, the tangent was not redundant, as Guilford had said more than he'd meant to. In particular, he had mentioned, likely not thinking, that he had in fact been on the phone with Euphemia, which was significant, at least in Ohgi’s eyes. Up until this point, Guilford had been very silent on the war, instead just dutifully fulfilling his tasks, however a call from Euphemia later and he was expressing grave concern. How much had his former charge influenced him? Ohgi could guess.

Still, just as was the case with Suzaku's health, he had more important things to think about.

To that end, he immediately retrieved his coat and began to type.

"Meet me in Room 1B immediately."

Sent out as a mass text to all the Representatives who he had in his contacts, which was regrettably not all of them, Ohgi hoped that this combined with Guilford asking around would get him a quorum of his own.

In the end, Ohgi ended up with more than he expected, with the room designed to host caucus and committee meetings ending up nearly full. He had to drag in a podium in order for the meeting to proceed properly.

"Okay everyone, first of all thank you for coming on such short notice, I promise this is important."

Unfortunately, Ohgi's opening statement was lost to the general noise of the crowd, inattentive and preoccupied with gossip, and so he was forced to speak up and, while retaining a measured tone, shout forcefully to have himself heard with an announcement of "If I could just have your attention for ten minutes I promise I'll make it worth your time."

The room reluctantly quietened, and Ohgi stood a little taller, pleased to have its attention.
Out of the corner of his eye, Ohgi saw Guilford come in through the side door and nod at Ohgi before closing it behind him. Everyone was here.

"So… so as I was saying, I want to thank you all for coming. Unfortunately, I cannot say I am here to discuss a pleasant matter. I just got off the phone with Minister for Defence Gilbert Guilford, who had some tragic news for me that I feel you all ought to know."

Guilford looked down as about a hundred Japanese politicians turned to stare at him, which couldn't have been pleasant. Hoping to take a bit of the pressure off the Britannian, Ohgi continued "I am sure you are all aware by this point of the military coup of the Britannian Government by Cornelia Li Britannia, who has implemented martial law in an attempt to oust her brother permanently. What has been kept a secret is that she sent us a missive offering a white peace, which Lelouch rejected this morning, saying he desires to continue the conflict."

The crowd took the news in a subdued fashion, with bleak sighs and eyes set firmly down at shoes being the order of the day. Ohgi took a moment to allow the news to sink in, before continuing "He needs to be stopped."

This statement may have come across as banal if delivered badly, but it instead filled the room with a quiet acknowledgement of the truth, even if they remained reluctant to address it. Unfortunately, Ohgi had to spoil his good will, but no matter how much he did so he was pretty confident he would have plenty more to cash in than Lelouch ever had, such were the advantages of not being a universally disliked, blackmailing schemer.

In the Britannians twisted words, it was not pragmatic to be cruel, it was pragmatic to be kind.

"The truth is, we had an opportunity to put his ambitions for war, which has been proven by today's refusal to end the conflict in the Pacific, but we all know that, and must live with that in our own ways. I'm not going to dwell on it here, but we would all do well not to forget it."

Ohgi was now earning a few glares, which certainly concerned him. He hadn't even gotten to the hard part yet.

"That said, we do have an opportunity. During the next time Parliament is in session, a majority of the Cabinet can summon the President, and following a hearing, we can vote to remove war powers, but with all the missing Representatives we're going to have to be nearly unanimous in opposing him."

Ohgi could only watch as the crowds faces continued to droop, refusing to air them as if the lights on the ceiling would burn them.

This was the Lamperouge effect at work. Each person was so individually afraid to oppose the man with the vast filing cabinet of secrets that any opposition was pointless. This was what needed to be settled before they made any attempt to challenge Lelouch's hegemony over Japan.

"To this end…" Ohgi continued, raising his voice slightly to restore the attention of the room, "...I feel that we need to acknowledge and work past the subterfuge that President Lamperouge has engaged in to try and intimidate us. His closet full of skeletons doesn't work if the closet is empty. If we can all move past them together, owning up to our secrets for the good of the country, his threats will be empty, because we will not be moved by the guilt and the shame."

"That's easy for you to say."

The protest came from Naomi Inoue, the skulking head of the Revanchists who had come out from
behind the crowd to sourly question Ohgi. He rubbed the back of his head, feeling his fuzzy mane bristle under his harsh, rough fingers, and commented "I don't know what you could possibly mean."

Naomi gave him a sceptical look, scoffing "You're going to have to do better than that. Try as you might to ditch your President, you'll not pull your games on us. You just want us to incriminate ourselves to position yourself for after he's gone and you need to scrape back any hope of beating us."

Ohgi looked down at the suspicious woman with disappointment. People tended to judge others by their own standards. Lelouch, who was suspicious of his own shadow, believed everyone else was as ruthless as he himself was, and in that same vein, Naomi assumed that every issue raised by others was about politics over policy, because that was how she would act. She would only be convinced by something pretty extreme that he was being earnest.

He sighed deeply, stood a little taller, and with eyes fixed on Naomi, began to speak more broadly.

"Before the invasion, I think most of you know, I was a secondary school teacher. I wasn't the most outgoing person, but I did alright enough. My only real close friend in the world was Naoto Kozúki."

Naomi's eyes widened in realisation as he continued "We were close enough, but after the invasion, I lost my job and was forced into the ghetto, where we became very close. Eventually, we grew frustrated, and agreed to fight back. With his younger sister we began to attack Britannian military fortifications and kill soldiers, though we were dealt a major blow when Naoto was killed. We carried on for some time, however we lost our only Knightmare after the Shinjuku Incident, which we were involved in. However, it was then that we met YuaiKai, which was just Suzaku and Lelouch at the time. I went with them, leaving behind my only friends."

By this point, Naomi and the other Revanchists were looking at him in a new light, as he took a brief pause, before continuing.

"Time went on. I think you are all aware of what happened to Naoto's sister Kallen, who I enabled. That's a skeleton for you. In addition, I removed Lelouch from the Finance Ministry to hamstring his political power and restrain him, subverting the will of the voting public. I have killed, stole, deceived, and worked with terrorists."

His point of explaining how Naomi was not the only one with secrets was quickly turning into a public confessional. He felt that if he could just convince everyone of his intentions and convince them to move past the secrets Lelouch held over them, then the embarrassment of his foolish past would be nothing in comparison to that victory for Japan.

He ran quiet as his breath ran short. The room was even quieter, as his audience digested what they had just seen, certainly not what they likely expected.

"I would just ask you, to please consider the bigger issues." Ohgi pleaded, hoping he had done enough, for once in his life.

For the first few moments, Ohgi feared that he had not, as the rooms population seemed to be far more invested in awkwardly examining their shoelaces than volunteering any similar stories, or even acknowledging what Ohgi had said, and he began to silently despair, his head dipping down.

"I…"
Ohgi's head jumped up, as he heard the hesitant beginnings of a sentence, and his heart jumped pridefully in tandem as he saw the man who was beginning it.

"I… I don't exactly have a brilliant record myself, and the President knows it."

Saburo Okawachi had stepped forward in a heartwarming display of bravery as far as Ohgi was concerned. Now that he had some verbal momentum, Saburo continued on, with all eyes on him.

"I finished my degree in Literature in Igusa University in the same month of the invasion. I was already a… more right leaning sort of guy, but I had been looking forward to a good, well paid career and a nice stable life, and then to be thrown down into the ghetto with no job at anything else, I was furious. Over time, my hatred grew and grew, until I became one of the most spiteful of my circle of friends, a bitter racist."

This fit right in with Yuaiakai theory, Ohgi silently noted. People who had not fallen on hard times were far less likely to become radicalised towards nationalism, and the reverse was true as well. He was only glad Saburo had had the chance to salvage his life.

"Of course, when Zero, or Kallen Kozuki, rose to prominence I leapt at the chance it offered. I was ready to kill the Britannians that I believed were putting us down. That, to me, meant all of them."

Ohgi slid an eye over to the Unionists who were still left after an abysmal election showing for the late Claudio Darltons party, who collectively tugged at their collars awkwardly.

Saburo evidently saw them too, and managed a hoarse chuckle "Don't worry, I've calmed over the years. As much as I wanted to just pick up a shiv, they turned me down, probably for that reason, and rejection like that really caused me to rethink a few things. It wasn't long before the Commonwealth Bill passed, and I could use my degree after eight years. Suddenly, all the facilities I could have wanted were available, and I sorta mellowed. Initially I voted Revanchist, but after getting a job in a library with government support I began to have a change of heart, and decided to try run for my local seat to help out others like I had been helped. It was a bit of an ugly journey, and one Lamperouge tried to use against me during the last hearing, but I am now who I am now, not who I was then."

Ohgi couldn't have been prouder, and it turned out Saburo's solidarity had loosened a fair few lips. While there wasn't really the option for the hundred plus Representatives to all air that which Lelouch used against them, enough could that the message was clear; Parliament would form a united front against Lamperouge.

Ohgi felt nothing if not satisfied as he returned to his office to begin the legal end of ending Lamperouge's reign as Emperor of Japan, when he realised Saburo was walking in the same direction, his own office being close by. Ohgi turned and beckoned the younger man aside to a side hall to thank him.

Saburo waved it off. "Don't you bother yourself thanking me, I owed you that much."

Ohgi frowned. "After the last hearing? You were hardly the only one affected by him-"

Saburo's hand raised in a flat, open palm to silence the Prime Minister, before the junior Representative explained "No, not that, though I certainly shouldn't have buckled there. No, I owed you for getting me a job back after signing the deal. I don't want to think about what I'd have done had things gone differently."
Chapter Forty Seven: Wolf In Wolfs Clothing

Arc Twelve: Downfall

Opening: "World End" - Flow

Lelouch was furious, but then that was not a new emotion for him. It seemed as if everything existed to prick at his consciousness or irritate him with an increasing degree of frequency that could only leave the lone President distrustful and apprehensive towards everyone around him.

The most recent of his many stress points was the Prime Minister Kaname Ohgi, who after stepping out with his tail between his legs after his colleagues saw, with some convincing, the necessity of the War with Britannia, was now calling for another hearing to remove war powers from him at this critical juncture.

It was unbelievable, as far as Lelouch was concerned. Not only had Britannia unleashed a FLEIJA warhead, an act that demanded retribution, but following his half-sisters military coup d'état, they now had the perfect opportunity to strike back now that they were in a state of disorganisation, but Ohgi instead would rather relitigate this war of survival, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

The truth was these politicians and bureaucrats had neither the time, the training, or the inclination for strategic thinking.

And so when he took the stand, he was in no mood to play around.

"The Prime Minister Kaname Ohgi, A, 10th District of Toshima and Nerima has recognition for five minutes to open the discussion."

Lelouch's eyes shifted to the treasonous target of his scorn, who now stood to speak, seeming pretty scornful himself by his frown, etched into every inch what could be termed his laughter lines if one assumed for a moment their harsh, rigid forms were good for anything beyond scowling viciously.

Lelouch wondered briefly if Ohgi would glare at a Britannian politician in that way. Of course he wouldn't; the traitor would submit and prostrate himself, only serving the strong, and never the weak.

"I thank the Chairman for my time, and would remind him that I intend to first lay out the purpose of this meeting before we begin the questioning period."

"Of course." Lelouch replied, who was certainly eager to learn what had so radically changed from the last meeting that the Prime Minister would drag him away from his vital duties of conducting the war in the Pacific, a duty that held the lives of the entirety of Japan in the balance.

True to form, Ohgi stood righteously as he spoke, with voice laced with self important faux-heroism filling the room "I have brought you here today President Lamperouge to address what I deem to be critical elements of your testimony on September the 4th that have not been borne out by the facts of the events that have occurred in the month since, and then vote to rescind war powers from you in the face of your reckless irresponsibility."
These were unquestionably very strong words to be throwing around in public, particularly by Ohgi, but Lelouch was by no means thrown, having far more vociferous vocabulary in mind to describe the reckless irresponsibility that Ohgi was displaying by calling this meeting. This insubordination only served to delay the opportunity of a lifetime to humiliate Britannia and safeguard an independent Japan. However, Lelouch was biding his time, and allowed Ohgi to continue.

"Items which have come to light include a refusal to agree to a white peace offered by Cornelia's Government, which directly contradicts your statement that Britannia sought to reestablish a protectorate here."

Lelouch frowned, realising Guilford had told Ohgi of the message. He sighed, as he reached for the small glass of water next to him. As someone intimately involved in the war effort and familiar with Britannian foreign policy, Lelouch had expected Guilford at least to stand by him.

Instead, his Minister for Defence had joined the Prime Minister in opposing him, as it seemed everyone was. Indeed, Lelouch was aware of at least two Field Marshals preparing reports advising against continuing the war. It seemed everyone in the Japanese Government were insistent on saying no at this critical juncture.

But his hope for Japan was not yet lost. He had faced worse odds than this in his time.

"Is this true?"

Lelouch stopped glaring at Guilford to return to glaring at Ohgi, and answer him.

"If you are referring to the informal memo Guilford provided last week that showed that we are knocking on the doors of victory, and are close to permanently dispatching the threat Britannia poses in the long term, then yes, I saw that memo and rejected it."

Lelouch's tone was clerical and calculated, as was expected of him, but he was internally furious. Cornelia seeking a peace could only mean that they were close to being overcome, and then Japan could establish a permanent state of security.

Even though he would never acknowledge it, as it was greatly detrimental to his point that there may have been other reasons that combined with Cornelia's need to stabilise her political situation, such as Euphemia being in Japan or a rare show of empathy after her brother launched a weapon of mass destruction on a civilian population. This was entirely possible. However, the threat Britannia posed was bigger than one Emperor. It existed in the entrenched interests of Lords and Dukes. It was an imperialist attitude that, unchecked, would continue its attempts to spread an Empire where it wasn't wanted. Even with Schneizel gone, even with Cornelia in, Britannia remained the same, and he would not pass up this opportunity to obliterate them, as he promised himself he would.

However, Ohgi understood none of this, responding "This was certainly not the impression I got from Guilford. It seems to me as if my previous understanding of things has been proven out by what has occurred."

Lelouch bristled. "Well I think you and I both know you have certainly had some funny understandings of things over the years which could call into question your judgment right now. Indeed, I can recall very specific instances of this. I believe that my views have been borne out by the series of events since before the beginning of the war, as Britannia's only attempt to make peace has been when they are at their weak point."

Lelouch would prefer it if Ohgi understood the danger his country was in, just as he would if all
the other conspirators that stood behind him realised the rightness of his concerns, but Lelouch knew that any hope of that was fading if it was not already lost, and in the interest of protecting the nation in the present, he would earn their complacency with the secrets he held. The stakes were too high for any other way.

The President's intent was not lost on Ohgi either, as Lelouch watched the man frown in thought, before things took a turn for the confusing, and the Prime Minister began to smile.

"I was wondering when your cabinet was going to show up."

Now it was Lelouch's turn to frown in thought. It was certainly well within the bounds of reason that Ohgi had guessed ahead of time that Lelouch would try to blackmail Ohgi with information about his connection to Kallen, Lelouch wasn't honestly certain what Ohgi could do about it beyond a sort of counter-blackmail, a move that was distinctly un-Ohgi in its optics. Eventually, having no real response, Lelouch eventually replied "I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean.", hoping to avoid being baited into a trap.

"Lelouch, you are not a man who changes easily. I know Suzaku certainly gave it his damnedest, but he is gone, lost somewhere to the dustbin of history. Your box of tricks isn't as extensive as you like to think it is, and I can say with great confidence that this body has seen enough of them to understand what you really believe, Lelouch. An authoritarian, in many ways cut from the same cloth as the nobility you rail against. And these authoritarian strategies will die today."

The room was now completely silent. This was as antagonistic as Lelouch had ever seen anyone on the Parliament floor, as it seemed all camity had been thrown out the central window behind him, scattered into the evening.

"I have spoken to each and every Representative you have attempted to silence, and I have, unlike before, ensured that they will not be beholden to you."

"Like you were beholden to Kozuki?"

Ohgi was not moved, not even flinching as he replied "Yes, like I was nine years ago while we were under occupation and a majority of the people in this House were unemployed, I, like many, made mistakes. We are not here to discuss my mistakes from a decade ago, we are here to discuss your failings today."

Surprised by this turn of events, Lelouch called what he believed to be Ohgi's bluff, responding "Well I can't say I'm surprised that you would want to ignore that, given the company you keep."

"Are you referring to members of Parliament?"

Lelouch smiled. Ohgi could be as brave and forward as he wanted, but the President remembered how quickly the rest of the Ameliorates had buckled, and was confident they would let him do his work once again.

"It was not an exclusive statement."

"I just wanted to be sure whether you were addressing Saburo, Naomi, or any other of the fine men and women you have attempted to corral?"

For this first time, Lelouch began to panic. This wasn't just Ohgi throwing caution to the wind, which was within character, but to pretend to speak for others was either the bluff to end all bluffs, or a sign that Lelouch was in serious trouble.
Hoping for the former, Lelouch commented "I'm sure they are well able to speak for themselves, and would rather not be dragged in to star as exhibits in your grandstanding."

In spite of Lelouch's hopes though, Ohgi remained static, answering "I'm glad you asked, because I did in fact make sure before I summoned us all here that no matter what you may have on them, their service today would be infinitely more valuable."

"I think that that may change if you knew the finer details."

"Fortunately, they told me all of it, just as I told them all my history. What you have failed to understand, because you cannot comprehend it, is that I trust my colleagues, and they trust me."

Lelouch was in a full blown state of amazement. He couldn't believe that this many people had banded together, in spite of their hidden demons, and had ignored them, no, aired them out for all to observe. It flew in the face of what he thought he knew about people.

And over what a cause. He could not imagine ever rallying people like this at the best of occasions for the most ideal of goals, such as saving the nation from military destruction, but opposing the work of the only man who could seemed as natural to them as breathing. As Lelouch looked around at the conspirators, they all stood in lockstep with Brutus.

However, it appeared he had forgotten his knife.

"So that is how you wish to do things…"

Ohgi, now appearing to indignantly look down on his superior, continued, having not heard Lelouch's aside "So is there anything else you would like to add before I relinquish my time?"

Lelouch grimaced, before nodding.

"As a matter of fact there is."

Ohgi sat up and replied "Well let's hear it.", obviously anxious to get to a vote before Lelouch tried something.

Unfortunately for him, it was too late for that, as Lelouch called over to the Chairman for his attention.

Evidently having not expected to be called upon, the meek man from Hokkaido took a moment to respond with an uncertain "Yes?"

Lelouch sighed. He certainly acknowledged that this would be a very radical move that would have negative impacts, but the stakes were too vast for any latitude to be admitted. Britannia had to be taken care of ahead of any other priorities.

"Summon the Sergeant At Arms to arrest Kaname Ohgi on suspicion of terrorism, theft and facilitating the destruction of property, as well as Saburo Okawachi and Naomi Inoue on the same charges."

"What the hell?"

Lelouch stayed sitting as Ohgi stood up from his seat, banging the heels of his hands off his wooden desk in anger. The Chairman was thoroughly unsure as to how to proceed as Lelouch spoke again.
"Did he not offer a probable cause to us all here? He just admitted to associating with a leading member of the Black Knights prior to his election. Arrest him at once."

"This is illegal! You cannot do this!"

Lelouch smirked. "I think it is you who is in trouble with the law sir."

Ohgi began to shout, joined by more than a few others who vocally protested this breach of order. The Sergeant was standing uncertainly at the door, thoroughly unsure of what he was supposed to do as the Chairman called for order.

Lelouch sat quietly as everything exploded around him, sipping his water in silence, mulling as the wheels of bureaucracy clanked along. He could only wonder what better things he could be doing with his time, rather than answer to fools.

Finally, there was some action, as the Sergeant at Arms finally went to remove Ohgi, who was certainly not impressed.

"Get your damn hands off me!" the Prime Minister roared indignantly, before the Sergeant began to get more physical, grabbing Ohgi's arms and handcuffing him. Helpless, Ohgi was left only able to shoot vehement daggers at the bemused Lelouch.

"I would advise against working with terrorists, if you plan to have a long career."

"I couldn't agree more!"

This voice was new, and boomed in an artificial fashion that neither Ohgi's scraping snarls or Lelouch's deep, condescending tones managed, causing the entire room to pause to try and find the source of the announcement.

"Up there! By the clock!"

Lelouch turned his neck around and pitched his head up, trying to get a view of the clock, which was directly behind his seat in the centre of the Parliament hall, which fell up and away from him to a point as it swept back from its low, wide front end. The room was shaped to draw itself towards the clock, but now all eyes were on the person below it, stood as a pure shadow against the narrow back window that was bathed in the evening sunlight.

However, even if the colours were bleached by shadow, there was no mistaking the long cape or the tipped helmet.

Zero had arrived.

Lelouch, feeling his heart drop down into his pelvis, instantly understood the gravity of the situation he was in, and yet could only gape at the impossible costume. There was only one left in existence as far as he knew, and it was in his possession, which meant that whoever this was knew what Lelouch had done.

But who? Was this a backup plan of Ohgi's? A breathless glance back to the Prime Minister, bent over a desk and gazing in confused awe busted that myth in a real hurry. Was it Guilford? No, he was here, picking up his glasses after having dropped them in shock. Taking a moment to fling his gaze from side to side showed no significant absences, only confusion.

He finally turned his body to face the vigilante, stood stoically in black against the window, stained in red by the sun forming an apocalyptic palette.
"Who are you?"

The figure shifted slightly, leaving Lelouch confused again until he heard the hollow click of a pistol cocking, and no one breathed.

"I am Zero."

Lelouch took a step back, his waist falling against his desk as he tried to steady himself. Was it a Britannian agent? They had a lot of details about Zero, and could probably replicate a suit if they tried. That theory had weight, as they had incentive to end the war for now and rebuild their army for a later invasion, which Ohgi would not be able to stop.

But Zero spoke again, with the invisible gun still aimed straight down the centre of the Parliament hall at Lelouch, with his words stopping all rational thought in Lelouch's brain in fear.

"I have been watching you for a very long time Lelouch, longer than you can imagine. I must say that I had hope, but that hope is long gone. You started to become too much like me, and have neglected to follow any semblance of your promise, and this is the final straw. You were the original sin of this nation. I suppose, after all this, we are both long due a retirement, and yours shall be no more voluntary than mine. I swore to protect this Republic, as did you, but you have forgotten that promise, just as you forgot me."

Lelouch blinked as his breath grew more rapid, palms pressing hard into his desk. Someone he had known? Lelouch had no friends, he knew it well. He had sacrificed them for power, that had proved so fleeting, oh Lord, he did not want to die...

"You have often asked what justice is over your life, a life where you have evaded it, defiled it and have even attempted to mimic it. Consider your question resolved; Zero is justice, and it has an overdue sentence for you."

Lelouch's desk finally gave way, collapsing under his trembling weight. He fell back, severely off balance, landing between the two chunks of furnished wood. His heart was thumping, desperate to escape its prison be near the ribcage, banging and pleading with the silent Lelouch, who could only look up at his divine judgement.

"Goodbye Lelouch."

Lelouch was about twenty degrees below Zero, and was laid out on his back and heels, arms extended back out behind him, chest exposed with only a fluttering shirt and tie to defend it.

Lelouch heard a loud bang echo through the room, and moments later felt the pain tear through his body, this time his upper right breast. He felt each piece of cartilage and flesh tear through the many layers of lung contained within the narrow cross section of his body like a vicious stab with a piece of bloody glass, sending red spilling across his shirt. It felt like the worst sort of burn, a burn that buried itself inside him and dug at his organs like an oxidiser.

He felt, not for the first time, like he was being burned alive.

He had been shot three times now, all in the torso, all having some connection with Zero, and all in an instance where he had been outflanked by an unexpected enemy.

His arms now gave way, and he lay flat on his back in terror. What was going on? While he could not escape his boiling pressure cooker, he was in the centre of Parliament! There should be a doctor somewhere!
But, as his head flopped to the side, he saw a portrait reason as to why he was so very alone. The people in their pews watched, and watched in horror, but none came to aid him.

He screamed a vicious scream, pain mixed with anguish. He did not want to die, he had so much he needed to do. He mustn't die, no, it was not to be! He couldn't! He had to take care of them, he had to help them, Nunnally, oh Nunnally, he couldn't leave her behind, he had to protect her. Who else would? Back in the day, perhaps, before Suzaku had made such a fool of himself and had forced Lelouch-

The dying man paused his mental workings, oxygen slowly leaking from his brain, as it slowly processed this new idea like an old calculator, one that filled up a basement and took a half hour to add single digits.

Like the ancient Enigma, Lelouch coded the pieces of Zero's speech together hint by hint, and with his dying breath, hissed his dying hate.

"You!"

There was quite a bit of subtext to that 'You!', but Lelouch was pressed for time. 'You', for lack of a more nuanced final shout, represented Lelouch's surprise at who Zero was, his anger at this man's now obvious reasoning, and his desperation at having been shot by him.

Of course, this would be lost on the crowd, but it would not be lost on the man who had known him for 16 years, knew his habits, knew where he hid important things, and had watched his ascent.

The crowd remained unmoving, still in a state of shock, or perhaps of complicity, as Lelouch heard the sound of glass breaking. Of course Zero would escape, get away with his crime.

Nobody could outrun Suzaku Kururugi.

It seemed most everything was red now. His energy was now leaking onto the wooden floor, alone, betrayed by all on his own Ides of March, but there was only one wound, delivered by his oldest friend, his second oldest enemy, whom he had left alone, and now left him alone.

Alone. Oh, so alone. And cold, cold wrapped up the pain and consoles it, a blanket that isolated him from his senses. He didn't want to die, he still had work to do, people still needed him, even now. He still had a responsibility to his fledgling utopia.

Even if it was alone, like it always was, please, if only someone could just help, could save him. He would… he could save himself.

Geass. Yes, if he had Geass. He would give anything, as words failed, to have a chance to see that witch again, to take her offering. He could make them save him, he could.

But she was not here, and after his thoughts finally faded, Lelouch Lamperouge died from blood loss.
Life went on from then, is it was wont to do, even when it seemed like it was content to stop forever at a moment in time that was distressing or worrying. Rivalz had called back again, apparently he had found stability in his life again after Milly had died, and Suzaku could only wish him well. He envied that ability to carry on, and wondered how the Britannian had done it.

Kaname Ohgi kept his promise, and did not run for reelection in the first General Election that the post-independence Republic had experienced, however it would be a foolish error to assume that the man rested on his substantial laurels for the three months he remained Prime Minister. Ending the war with Britannia and signing a permanent resolution was a key achievement, as well as keeping his Government in order after the unifying threat of Lamperouge had passed. He left office a hero, something his predecessor Suzaku Kururugi noted with irony as he sat alone, gazing out into the countryside by his house with a dull sense of emptiness.

It had been unofficial gospel among the Japanese political circles that the Ameliorates would not survive the third General Election, and sure enough they lost nine out of every ten seats they held to either direct losses or to splintering. Saburo Okawachi, riding off of high publicity and wicked charisma formed the largest post-Ameliorate bloc with Ohgi’s blessing, the Japanese Labour Party, currently the junior partner in a coalition with the Constitutional Democrats, a centrist party who ran on restoring stability and swept the stakes while the two previously main parties competed to see who was liked less. They nominated a new President who kept his opinions to himself in the wake of his predecessor, and eventually, things almost returned to normal. Almost.

Sometimes, the differences were almost ignorable, if one wanted to ignore them, something Suzaku deeply desired, such as the reference to people he was once close to in the past tense, or faint references or background jokes such as when someone said something controversial and another person would respond "Careful, or Zero'll have to come out of retirement!"

Fortunately, there was little risk of that; Suzaku was more a danger to himself than anyone else, because sometimes the memories were not so quiet or ignorable. Sometimes they ignited like the fiercest of flames, and drenched Suzaku in oils and sweats and questions about what he could have done better.

Initially, Suzaku was unprepared for this, unwilling to seek help for what he deemed was ultimately his own fault and unable to deal with it healthily. He had a tendency in the months after Lelouch’s death to become snappy and aggressive, and then fall into fits of paralysing guilt. Those who knew him believed it was still about him failing to stop Lelouch and being removed from office by force, but then, if they knew the truth he would be dealing with the truth in far less comfort than he was.

A prison cell, perhaps, if there was a Prosecutor willing to convict him.
The execution of Lelouch Lamperouge sparked a controversy into who this Zero was, and while the investigators, no friends of Lelouch's, didn't investigate too hard, they had certainly sparked a good few conspiracy theories online. In his more sardonic and meta moments, Suzaku had even browsed through some of them. A leading theory centred around Lelouch having three bullet wounds in his chest when the record stated he had only been shot twice; one bullet at the Convention with Euphemia, and one bullet in Parliament. While Suzaku credited the author with noteworthy observance, the site then went on to claim there was in fact a second shooter in Parliament, and the whole affair was a Cabinet level conspiracy to off the President disguised as Zero seeking justice.

Of course, it would be impossible to even guess what the third bullet wound was without knowledge of the fact that Zero had been three different people over the course of a few months, and that one of those people had been Lelouch himself, shot while chasing Tohdoh in the Tosa Incident.

Suzaku had learned this, and a great deal else, on the day after Euphemia went to help the bombed areas of Tokyo. Feeling hopelessly guilty as everyone around him worked hard, Suzaku decided to at the very least observe the damage his former friend had caused first hand. At this point, his depressed mental ravings had already formed the beginnings of a plan for revenge, however it was not until later that afternoon that they fell into place.

After a day of walking, an already drained Suzaku was exhausted, and upon recalling that Lelouch still owned the safe house on the edge of Tokyo where they had stored their Yen eight years ago, he decided to sleep there, safe in the knowledge nobody would bother him. However, when he entered he discovered a Zero costume hidden within floor panels where they had hidden their bank notes, and everything fell into place.

Lelouch was Zero. He had caused the deaths at Tosa. Even more than Suzaku had already known, Lelouch was responsible for everything, and would continue to exert his will beyond what was right. Very quickly, Suzaku's plot for vengeance transitioned quickly into a plot for justice, if one believed there was a significant difference.

After Lelouch was dead, new uncertainties compounded themselves on top of old ones to cripple Suzaku. Killing Lelouch to end the war, while the right thing to do, left him with such unbearable guilt, to the point that he sometimes wonder how he did anything at all under its immense weight. However, just as everyone else learned to cope with the ten tonnes of atmospheric pressure enveloping them, Suzaku too moved along.

It was slow, and not all days were progressions. Perhaps one day he would talk a jog around the local countryside, and another he would lie in bed wondering how his feet worked, how his hands worked, how his fingers managed to pull on the trigger of Kusekabe's pistol, given to him at the hotel, stolen by Kallen and then returned by the Britannian legal system and finally used for the first time against Lelouch.

It had not been fired again, instead having been locked away in a safe under his bed and the key flushed down the toilet. He didn't trust himself with it anymore.

All he had left from back then, beyond his fragile relationships, was the mask. The costume, a basic combination of fabrics, burned in a remarkably satisfying fashion that provided Suzaku great personal relief, but the mask survived, warped and blackened, but still recognisable.

After a while, Suzaku began to identify with it. It now lay alongside him in this quiet moment as they gazed out into their countryside together. He heard a rustle behind him and panicked, before realising what had made the noise.
"Prrrrrr…"

One of Euphemia's plans to raise Suzaku's spirits was to give him things to do, not just household duties but personal obligations that could ease him back into independent living, and so she had purchased a cat, knowing full well how much Suzaku adored the creatures. Suzaku had once shared ownership of a cat with Lelouch of all people, back in Ashford; a black cat called Arthur that passed away in 2019. This one, Claudio, was a far more withdrawn beast, certainly not wont to the aggressive scratching of his predecessor. It, like Suzaku and the mask, was content to sit and watch the sun go down. The three of them formed a row, like suspects lined against a jail wall, all silent witnesses to the events of the last two decades.

The new silence lasted for some time, as Suzaku fell deeper into thought. Arthur may as well have belonged to a different universe, such was the difference between then and now. Back then, Lelouch was malleable, and Suzaku even dared to say good. It was impossible not to vilify him, dehumanise everything about him, or else Suzaku would crumple. However, being honest, it was impossible to ignore how Lelouch had once been; a fierce force for good, even if there were reservations.

Fortunately, Suzaku was quite skilled at lying, even to himself.

"It's funny… It once seemed…"

He spoke the beginnings of the memory out to nobody in particular, though as his senses returned he saw Claudio turn towards him inquisitively. Chuckling, he finished it for the cat.

"When we worked together, there was nothing in the whole world we couldn't do…"

He winced as he concluded "Right Lelouch?"

Sixteen years of memories was a long period over which to retroactively smear someone. Even now, he felt impossible pangs of sadness that in turn angered him more. Why ought he be sorry? He was by all accounts in the right, having prevented Lelouch from arresting Parliament. He did not regret his actions, nor did he want to, but he felt chains draw him back into a sea of overwhelming anguish and guilt he felt he didn't deserve.

He threw the helmet, reaching across and giving it an almighty hurl down the hill. This wasn't working. Back to square one.

At this point, the doorbell rang. The house was largely open plan, with several wooden buildings about the complex, so ringing doorbells were played over an intercom. Glad of the fact that he'd disposed of the mask of Zero, at least temporarily, he took a moment to tidy his mysteriously wet face before answering the door, and looking into the eyes of his father, now shorter than him.

They stared at each other for several seconds. Suzaku could only wonder what he was doing here. They had met once during the military occupation, with Suzaku visiting his father in prison. While he had been released in the first agreement he and Ohgi signed, they had not met since, Suzaku not particularly caring to reach out to the father who had lost the nation and then proceeded with the war for far too long after it was lost, the worst of both ends.

After a while, the elder Kururugi began "Hey, Suzaku."

"What do you want Genbu?"

Suzaku's father winced slightly, but braved his sons harsh tones to continue "I just wanted to have a quick chat."
Suzaku stared for some time attempting to figure the man out, but after a while he lost interest and decided to invite him inside.

"I'll put the kettle on." Suzaku announced as Genbu took a moment to examine the inside of the house. It had very similar air to the Kururugi shrine, something the elder man was surely noting as Suzaku made drinks. He recalled his father took two sugars in his tea, while his time in Ashford had turned Suzaku into a coffee addict. As he brought the two mugs inside, Genbu, having taken it upon himself to sit on Suzaku's favourite corduroy couch, explained "I just wanted to check on how you were doing is all."

Suzaku nodded as he passed his father the cup of tea, before sitting opposite on the leather sofa. They sat in silence, as they drank their mugs empty, before Genbu asked "Are you still active? You look as if you've put on a little weight…"

It was Suzaku's turn to wince, as his father continued "I've been worried about you, a lot."

Suzaku's head fell a little, before his father's nose wrinkled demeaningly, a tic he had never shaken off. "A lot of people are. Don't doubt that I've had more than a few phone calls over the last few weeks. No matter what has happened, I'm still your father."

He held a breath that may have betrayed his anger. So people were worried about him, and had asked his father. He could only wonder how they thought behind their good intentions. Did they believe he enjoyed wallowing in his home like a pig? Did he strike them as the sort that wanted to be in the foul condition he was, that their pity would restore him? If a cat, if a lecture would restore him, then he would leap up back to his own two feet just as surely as he was sitting!

Furthermore, they had chosen the wrong messenger. Genbu spoke the word 'father' as if it held weight, as if it conferred a status above, or intricate connection to Suzaku as a person. Suzaku had seen enough of Euphemia to compare to Lelouch, or Schneizel, to know that the bonds of family extended no further than any other bond. There was nothing in Genbu's invocation of 'father' that made the man any less fat, any less foolish, or any less insensitive to the realities of Suzaku's life. Their bond was a weak one, plenty capable of being bent, snapped, or broken no matter what favour Genbu thought it conferred him.

But it could also be mended.

The question was now whether he wanted to mend this relationship that was in some need of work. In spite of himself, Suzaku could not help but dislike the man, not just for his material faults but something further, that took a great deal more anonymous small talk for Suzaku to arrive at.

Putting his mug down on the glass table with a degree of decisiveness to signal the end of the immaterial discussion, Suzaku began "The thing is… I have been…"

"Yes? What is it son?"

Suzaku winced again, but carried on. "Why did you do it? Why did you continue the war against Britannia when there was no winning?"

Genbu paused, evidently thrown by this turn in the conversation, before responding, likely eager for the opportunity to engage with his son on his son's terms, with "I guess… I was deluded. I thought even to the last moment that surrendering to the Britannian menace was simply not an option. It would have been a dereliction of duty to allow my nation to fall to such a force. In my attempt to save the nation I hurt its people."
Suzaku nodded. This was in line with what he had expected from him, though the added regrets certainly ended a comparison that he had established in his mind.

"Could anything have stopped you?"

Genbu suddenly looked very grave. "This is about Lelouch, isn't it?"

"I don't know… whether what I did…"

He certainly couldn't tell his father that he had assassinated the President, especially having just compared the two men out loud. It would be like pondering if he should kill his father, which was, if nothing else, rather impolite. However, with some framing he could ask the question from a different angle.

"I don't know whether I should… have done more…? I mean, I had had suspicions, but further actions would have been illegal. It's just…"

Instead of asking whether he should have acted against Lelouch from the perspective of having done so, he asked from the perspective of not having done so and wondering if he could have. Genbu seemed to buy it, and after a moment, began to respond.

"I don't know if I could have been swayed, at the time. I… I was in a state of delusion Suzaku. I regret it now, having lived long enough to be proven wrong."

Suzaku frowned, shaking his head invisibly. So he regretted it, would take it back. This ruined his analogy. If he could have gotten Lelouch to stop without killing him, perhaps he could have regretted his actions with time. He certainly shared traits with Genbu; a stubborn insistence on staying the course, an assumption of power over others, and a constant frown.

Would he have killed his father? Moreover, would he have regretted it?

He wasn't sure if he regretted killing Lelouch. The upsides and downsides made arguments as similar as Venus and Mars, that tore at him by virtue of their incompatible nature.

"He always acted with such decisiveness, and I'm here, just… so damn stuck by my own uncertainties it's painful."

Suzaku's head had descended to new lows. He felt so weak for being split, a weakness that was his failing at everything he had ever engaged in.

"That isn't the worst problem to have Suzaku."

Suzaku looked up in sudden surprise at that statement. What did he mean, Suzaku could only wonder. He was stuck and unable to get started again, a rather significant issue if the younger Kururugi said so himself. He could only gape as his father continued.

"Do you think Lelouch ever stopped and thought over what he was doing? Did he ever pause and correct course? I didn't. The only reason I came around was eight years alone in prison. You are a good person Suzaku, who thinks about the consequences your actions have on others. That's a trait a good few more people could do with, myself included."

Suzaku blinked. He vaguely remembered Ohgi making this point, or something like it a million years ago on the roof of Ashford, long before everything spiralled out of control. Suzaku was certainly more than capable of reflecting on his mistakes to a painful degree, but as ever, framing was everything.
"Whether you did or didn't act against Lelouch has past. Nothing you can do will influence that. However, with your ability to reflect, I have no doubt that you can learn from it better than certainly I could, and return to the world."

Suzaku was stunned into silence. The condescending authoritative figure he had expected was not present in the slightest. Instead of tearing him down with comparisons to the past, Genbu was actually praising him for the traits that depressed him, something not even Euphemia, bless her heart, had thought to do.

It was almost as if his father cared about his son. Given everything that had transpired, Suzaku was surprised at this.

"I-"

Genbu smiled as his son began to crack. He waved it off, before continuing "Give it some time. I've got a nonprofit working on rebuilding infrastructure destroyed in Tokyo, and we could use a man with proper critical thinking skills and connections in government to get our permits to start helping people. I think taking the win-win proposition here would be a wise choice that you'll look back on with pride."

He left shortly after, as there was not much else to say. Genbu had certainly not cured Suzaku's deep anxiety and sadness, nor was there a realistic possibility that he could have done so. It was not possible, nor in any way feasible, for a single meeting or conversation to suddenly relieve what was an illness, and to expect it to do so was degrading. However, it helped. It was not a single battle with a hope of decisive victory, nor was anyone going to fight it on his behalf. Time, and possibly some medication, would be Suzaku's main aid. However, his father had lent perspective from a place of real empathy, and made clear that it was okay to wait until he was ready. Suzaku had borne a heavy burden, one his father, Prime Minister before him, was well capable of understanding. He had waited eight years, and was wiser for it,

But Suzaku was tired of waiting. He was not better, mended, or saved. He did not know if he ever would be, if there would always be days where the shadow of his past loomed large. He would certainly never forget it.

But at least he knew what to do better next time.

Fin

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